Semitistik

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In the framework of predicate logic, negation is an operator that reverses the truth-value of propositions. Negation from this perspective has one semantic function, and it always operates in the same way. Negative expressions are, then, taken as the forms that provide information about the truth value of the root proposition (the proposition without the negation), i. e., they reverse it. Accordingly, it is expected that natural languages will have a single form to mark negation and that the only difference between a negative statement and its affirmative counterpart will be the appearance of a negator. However, as has been extensively noted by Horn,[1] natural languages do not follow these expectations. In fact, it is not even clear that the semantics of negative expressions always represents this logical operator.[2]

In reality, natural languages have a variety of ways to express negation, and different forms are used in different syntactic contexts while exhibiting variation in meaning. Moreover, not uncommonly is there asymmetry between affirmative and negative statements: negative statements come with their own morphology and syntax, and they are demonstrably not the root proposition with only an additional negator. Occasionally, one even encounters expletive negation, where the negative expressions do not change the polarity of the proposition expressed, and the semantics of the sentence, in terms of its truth value, is identical with and without the negator.

The fact that negation in natural languages does not follow the expectations logicians have rests on the foundation of a very rich literature on the typology of negation.[3]

Typologies survey the kinds of negative expressions that can be found cross-linguistically, and there are countless studies which aim to capture the syntactic and semantic aspects of the rich inventory of these expressions. Among these discussions, some focus on the origin of negative expressions, as it is often assumed that the history of specific expressions may shed some light on their synchronic peculiarities. This is, to a large extent, the background for Sjörs' detailed and thoughtful study on negation in Semitic languages, which provides a comprehensive study of the negative expressions in one language family.

This book provides a careful survey of the expressions of standard negation (following Miestamo's definition of the term)[4] in a long list of Semitic languages (Old Assyrian and East Semitic; Ugaritic; Biblical Hebrew; Phoenician; Aramaic, Deir Alla, and Sam'alian; Quranic Arabic; Minaic, Sabaic, and Ancient South Arabian, Jibbali and Modern South Arabian, Tigre and Tigrinya, Amharic and Harari; Gafat, Kistane, and Peripheral Western Gurage), selected from different typological and genealogical subgroups within the Semitic family. It also explores how the expressions of standard negation differ from other expressions of negation of verbal clauses (Chapter 14 provides an overview of this survey). Moreover, this survey leads to an answer to the question of the relation between affirmative and the negative statements and to an explanation of cases of asymmetry (Chapter 15 provides a summary and overview of the topic). These topics are often treated from a historical point of view, an approach that leads to a very detailed study of how the negative expressions in the Semitic languages are historically related to each other (for a summary of the results, see Chapter 16). Other topics are also spread throughout the book, such as the issue of expletive negation (or pleonastic negation, the term used by Sjörs), which is repeatedly treated in the discussions on specific languages (p. 75, 88, 139, 164 among other places.) Thus, while this book deals with the Semitic languages, it provides important data and analyses for central topics in the study of negation in natural languages more generally.

Broadly speaking, this book stands in the intersection of comparative Semitics and typological studies on negation. Perhaps a more accurate description is that this is a study in comparative Semitics guided by fundamental questions raised in the typological literature on negation. That comparative Semitics stands at the core of the book

1 Laurence R. Horn, *A Natural History of Negation*. Stanford, CA: CSLI, 2001.

2 Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, "The case for external sentential negation: Evidence from Jewish Babylonian Aramaic", *Linguistics* 53 (2015): 1031–1078.

3 For the most recent literature, see the various papers in Viviane Déprez, and M. Teresa Espinal, *The Oxford Handbook of Negation*, Oxford: Oxford University press, 2020, and more specifically in this volume, Karen De Clerck, "Types of negation," and Johan van der Au-

wera and Olga Krasnoukhova, "The Typology of Negation," pp. 91–116, in this volume.

4 Miestamo Matti, *Standard negation: The negation of declarative verbal main clauses in a typological perspective*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2005.

can be seen from the fact that the book is organized around specific Semitic languages and that there is an exhaustive review of the literature about negators in Semitic (starting from the work of Walker from 1896[5] and then with careful and impressive citations from the last 120 years of research) followed by comments on the literature from the last few decades in linguistics. Thus, the topics reviewed from the typological and theoretical linguistic literature were selected according to the various phenomena in the Semitic languages treated in the book.

The contribution of general linguistics discussions to the studies in this book can be seen, for example, in the treatment of dedicated forms for prohibitions (p. 43–44) or in the explanation of how the historical background of negative expressions with additive elements sheds light on the origin of the form *ulā* in Old Assyrian and its uses (p. 71–81). Sjörs recognizes, among other things, that *ulā* is used as an additive to a preceding constituent ("also not") as well as with minimizers – contributing the sense that all alternatives in the scale are negated as well. The phenomenon of forms with additive uses which are also used with what are informally called "emphatic negations" (the use with minimizers) is well documented cross-linguistically. In addition, Sjörs demonstrates more broadly that univerbations of negative elements with focus particles are well attested for similar functions among the Semitic languages (p.388–394).

This combination of the two approaches in linguistics, comparative linguistics and typology, is most welcome. It provides fresh analyses and new solutions for old problems in the diachrony of the Semitic languages. In addition, the awareness of questions and solutions from other language families leads Sjörs to recognize new topics about Semitic forms by asking questions that were not previously asked among Semitists (especially with regards to the phenomenon of renewal of negation). These advantages are evident in every discussion throughout the book. In this context, I would like to comment that it is only a bit regretful that the author seemingly had only Semitic scholars in mind, and not typologists more generally, who could benefit a lot from this book. For example, in most parts of the book, the author does not provide morphological glosses, and thus the data is inaccessible for a broader community of researchers. In fact, even for scholars of Semitic languages, it would have been helpful to gloss each word in the examples from the various languages.

That being said, as a book that is first and foremost a work in comparative linguistics, it offers excellent studies in this area of research. It collects data from all branches of the Semitic languages in order to reconstruct the original forms and also provides detailed studies about the origin of specific forms in individual languages. For example, the discussions on the etymology of the biblical forms *hălō* (the marker of negative polarity questions) and *lama* "lest" in Biblical Hebrew (p. 164–165) present very elegant analyses. And, of course, one has to mention the insightful discussion about the historical relationship between **lā* and **ʔal-*, which is repeatedly discussed throughout the book and to which Chapter 16 is dedicated.

In other instances, Sjörs nicely combines classical philological work with tools from diachronic semantics. The discussion on *bl* in Phoenician is a good example of this kind of work (p. 173–181), where the author presents a nice comparative study of the use of this form throughout the Semitic languages, and along with this, he discusses its etymology as a preposition. Subsequently, he examines how this preposition turned into a verbal negator. Without defining it as such, he seeks "bridging contexts" (in fact he calls this process "grammaticalization," but I am unsure of what sense this could indeed be called grammaticalization) in which a sentence consisting of *bl* with an abessive/privative meaning ("without") would likely be interpreted as a standard negation of the main predicate – and such a bridging context could motivate a semantic reanalysis. Other cases where forms in Semitic languages have been reanalyzed as negators are summarized in Chapter 14.

In the discussions about the sources of the negative expressions, one source that is repeatedly mentioned for new negators is interrogative pronouns. The proposal is that they were interpreted as negative markers in the context of rhetorical questions (p. 394–396). It is worth mentioning that Brockelmann[6] already proposed that the negative form of the existential predication in Hebrew *'en/'ayin* derived from the locative interrogative form *'ayin* "where", used in rhetorical questions.[7]

Sjörs also proposes rare cases of contact-induced changes where languages borrow a negative element from other languages. This phenomenon is very rare with negative elements as negative words are believed to be part of the core of the language's vocabulary where borrowing

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5 Dean Walker, "The Semitic Negative with Special Reference to the Negative in Hebrew". *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 12 (1896): 230–267.

6 Carl Brockelmann, *Hebräische Syntax*. Neukirchen: Erziehungsverein, 1956, p. 29.
7 See Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, "Notes concerning the emergence of negation words in the Semitic languages", *Leshonenu* 79 (2017), 44–46, for a possible bridging context, where this change could take place.

normally does not occur. This is why the case of *ču* in Neo Aramaic (both in the East and in the West) is of special interest (219–223). It has long been claimed that this is a case of influence from Kurdish. However, it must be noted that, at least according to the data Sjörs provides, the form in Kurdish itself does not function as a negator, unlike its use in Neo Aramaic. In fact, he believes that it was borrowed as an indefinite pronoun ("something") and was limited to a scale reversal item (what is known in the literature as an NPI = Negative Polarity Item). According to this, it is indeed not the case that *ču* was borrowed as a negator, but that it was borrowed as an indefinite pronoun, and the shift from an NPI to a negator took place in Aramaic. Sjörs does not mention this, but others have proposed that this form is related to the Old Aramaic use of *šum* "name", used also in a similar way. Sabar,[8] for example, proposes that this form can be traced equally to Kurdish and Old Aramaic "due to coalescence in form and meaning".

As surveyed in the book's introduction (pp. 11–22), there are already numerous studies in comparative Semitics about negation.[9] Sjörs' book, however, provides by far the most detailed and exhaustive study of the topic, and it will definitely stand as a major contribution to the field for many years. It will be of use for both scholars interested in phenomena related to negation and, at the same time, for linguists and philologist who work on the languages that are covered extensively in the book.

I will conclude with a few minor comments.

The general linguistics literature which Sjörs interacts with consists mostly of the typological literature, and his discussions almost never interact with the logical aspects of negation as seen in the semantics literature. This is why, for example, differences between internal and external negations are not directly treated.[10] Similarly, the book

under review does not enter into the issue of NPIs and to the restriction of their appearance in downward entailing environments (Ladusaw 1979).[11] This is a legitimate theoretical choice to not interact with the more formal logical literature. However, given such a choice it becomes somewhat of an obstacle for the readers when the author uses these terms without the required background and not in a systematic way which clarifies the roles of these notions in the explanations (see, for example, the use of "external negation" on p. 44, 59, and the use of downward entailing environments on p. 88–89).

As noted earlier, in various discussions about specific phenomena in individual languages, Sjörs notes cases of pleonastic/expletive negation. A comparison to other non-Semitic languages would have revealed that the contexts where the superfluous negation appears in the Semitic languages, for example as a complement of the verb to "fear" (p. 88–89) or in temporal clauses with the conjunctive "until" (p. 139–141, 164), are very common cross-linguistically.[12]

Finally, in the discussion on *bal*, the author notes that in Hebrew and Phoenician the negator is used as a preposition before a noun phrase and as a conjunctive before a verbal phrase, both cases being used with the so-called abessive function ("without") (p. 176). It is possible, however, that in both languages *bal* functions in this context as a conjunctive. In fact, Bar-Asher Siegal demonstrates that several prepositions with the privative meaning "without" in Semitic languages, such as the Syriac *dlā*, originated in bare existentials, i.e., existential clauses that lack an overt existential predicate and thus include only the NP whose non-existence is being asserted.[13] Accordingly, cases that Sjörs considers as examples of a preposition before a noun with the meaning "without", can still be analyzed as a conjunctive, and the main existential predicate is expressed covertly.[14]

8 Yona Sabar, *A Jewish Neo-Aramaic dictionary: dialects of Amidya, Dihok, Nerwa and Zakho, northwestern Iraq; based on old and new manuscripts, oral and written bible translations, folkloric texts, and diverse spoken registers, with an introduction to grammar and semantics, and an index of Talmudic words which have reflexes in Jewish Neo-Aramaic*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002, 13.
9 To this list one could also add various important books which are dedicated to comparative grammars of the Semitic languages more generally, such as Carl Brockelmann, *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen*. Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1913.
10 For a review of the literature about this phenomenon, see Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, "The case for external sentential negation, and Bar-Asher Siegal and Bar-Asher & De Clercq 2019. Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal and Karen De Clercq. "From negative cleft to external negator". In Breitbarth, Anne, Elisabeth Witzenhausen, Miriam Bouzouita & Lieven Danckaert (eds.). *Cycles in Language Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 228–248.

11 William Ladusaw, *Polarity sensitivity as inherent scope relations*. PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1979.
12 See Yanwei Jin and Jean-Pierre Koenig, "Expletive Negation in English, French, and Mandarin: A Semantic and Language Production Model", *Empirical Issues in Syntax and Semantics* 12 (2019): 157–186 and Yanwei Jin and Jean-Pierre Koenig, "A cross-linguistic study of expletive negation", *Linguistic Typology* (forthcoming), where one can read a review of the literature on this phenomenon and also a new account as to what all triggers of expletive negations have in common.
13 Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, E. A. "From typology to diachrony: synchronic and diachronic aspects of predicative possessive constructions in Akkadian", *Folia Linguistica Historica* 32 (2011), 78–82.
14 For Sjörs' summary of the rare cases in which borrowing may explain the historical changes, see p. 399–401.

These comments are not meant to be read as a criticism, as this is an excellent book. This is merely a list of issues where future studies on negation in Semitic languages can develop further. It is my hope that this excellent book will open more lines of research on this topic among Semitists and that typologists and linguists who study other languages will benefit from the synchronic and diachronic data the Semitic languages can provide.