

Unravelling the knots of not: Exploring lesser-known negative patterns in Bantu

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The expression of negation and the genesis of verb-internal negative markers from periphrastic negation have received ample attention in Bantu studies (Kamba-Muzenga 1981; Güldemann 1999; Nurse 2008; Guérois et al. 2024; Devos 2025). Other negative markers are shown to take part in cyclical change, like the cross-linguistically well-studied Jespersen (Devos & van der Auwera 2013) and Negative Existential Cycles (NEC; Bernander et al. 2022), as well as less-known ones such as the nondum ('not yet') cycle (Veselinova & Devos 2021). To this, we may add studies on prohibitives (Devos & Van Olmen 2013), and on the use of erstwhile lexical verbs for a broad array of negative functions (Bernander et al. 2023).

Despite this substantial body of work, there are still many linguistic domains where negation strategies remain largely unexplored. The aim of the present workshop is to **examine lesser-known negation patterns in Bantu languages**. To study their origins, we are particularly interested in **linguistic variation** – language-internal, between closely related languages (micro-variation), across one or more branches of Bantu languages or even across the whole Bantu family – whether identified in primary or secondary data, through diachronic or synchronic investigations, and framed in various theoretical perspectives.

We especially encourage contributors to consider **the effects of language contact on change in the expression of negation**. For instance, post-verbal negative markers taking part in Jespersen cycles have been described as *Wanderwörter* while simultaneously showcasing complex patterns of both convergence and divergence (Bernander et al. 2022). Some (post-verbal) negators have developed negative functions even though the corresponding source forms in the donor languages did not carry any negative function (Bernander 2025).

Below we provide a **non-exhaustive list** of types of negative expressions that we believe deserve more attention from a descriptive, historical/comparative and/or contact-oriented perspective:

NegCa: Possessive constructions in Bantu languages typically mark the possessee in the same way as the accompanee in a comitative construction (Creissels 2024). Although negative comitative/possessive constructions have received some attention in the context of NEC, they are less well studied and this is certainly the case for the overarching category of *caritives* including both *abessive* constructions where the missing referent is a noun phrase and *anti-circumstantial* ones where the absentee is a full clause. We invite papers on all kinds of expressions of 'without' in Bantu languages (see Bernander et al. 2023 for some preliminary observations).

NegCo: How do Bantu languages negatively connect phrases or clauses? Are dedicated conegatives like English 'neither ... nor' as rare as suggested in Devos et al. (2025a) and what about contrastive negative conjunctions linking a negated element with its affirmative alternative? Since (negative) conjunctions are easily transferrable from one language to another, contact-oriented studies also seem promising in this domain.

NegIn: Despite the idea that 'nobody' merely involves a generic noun for person and main clause negation, its exponents can be quite diverse typically involving pragmatically strong modifiers. Moreover, 'nobody' often occurs in constructions known to play a role in the expression of focus (Devos et al. 2025b). We welcome further studies on Bantu 'nobody', 'nothing', 'nowhere' and 'never' focusing on both exponent and construction types.

NegMo: It is well known from the typological literature (de Haan 1997) and from ongoing work on Bantu languages that negation and modality interact in highly distinct ways. We welcome studies addressing this intricate relationship, including those on the currently topical category of apprehensives ('lest'-constructions), which have received little attention from a Bantu perspective.

Other possible topics include: the expression of **metalinguistic negation** (Horn 1985), the relationship **between negation and focus expressions**, **negative complementation**, the effects of **negative asymmetry** in non-standard contexts (Van Olmen et al. 2023).

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