

Sharing the load - the interplay of verbal and gestural negation in Savosavo

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This talk presents preliminary work on the interplay of the verbal and gestural domains to express negation in Savosavo, a Non-Austronesian language spoken by about 3.500 people on Savo Island, Solomon Islands (<http://dobes.mpi.nl/projects/savosavo/>).

Much of the previous research on gestures associated with negation focused on identifying the usage contexts and semantic core as well as the range of possible form variations of relevant gestures and gesture families, usually for better-studied languages such as English, French, Italian or German (e.g. Kendon 2004, Harrison 2009, Calbris 2011, Bressemer and Müller 2014). Some also looked at utterances where both negation gestures and explicit verbal negation co-occur and studied their temporal alignment (Harrison 2009, 2014). What has not been addressed, to our knowledge, is the question of when and why gestural and verbal negation do indeed co-occur. In this talk, we will present our preliminary results regarding this question for verbal and gestural negation in Savosavo.

Based on a corpus of about 6h of video data we studied the relation of verbal and gestural negation from two perspectives. First, we analyzed the patterns of use of one particular gesture associated with negation, the “sweeping away” gesture (flat hands moving outwards as if wiping away crumbs from a table), and noticed a strong tendency of this gesture not to occur with explicit verbal negation, i.e. negative morphemes like *ghoma* ‘no’ or *sika* ‘don’t’. Instead, it is found mostly with utterances containing implicit (lexical or pragmatic) negation, i.e. for example with lexemes like *zui* ‘end’ or *tabu* ‘forbidden’, or utterances that only implicate or presuppose a negation. We then looked at explicit verbal negation, checking every occurrence in our corpus to see if any kind of gesture associated with negation is present, including head movements. Our results show that most instances of explicit verbal negation are indeed not accompanied by any gestural negation, confirming the pattern observed with the “sweeping away” gesture. We then discuss potential factors that could explain those cases where they do co-occur, as well as general implications of these findings with regard to the question of how the verbal and gestural domain interact and collaborate in communication.

References:

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