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A grammar of Nchane: A Bantoid (Beboid) language of Cameroon
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Chapter 15

Negation

Negative constructions in Nchane display a fair amount of variety, which presents a challenge for description. This chapter attempts to capture the generalities that have been observed, as well as point out some of the finer details which appear to be related to motivating different negation construction strategies.

Negative clauses utilize one or more negation words, which are summarized in Table 15.1. The negative marker **gē** ‘NEG2’ appears in all negative clause constructions, usually in clause-final position. Note that the tense and aspect “contexts” for the negation markers **bá** ‘still’ and **á** ‘NEG1’ as provided in the table are approximations and not absolute, since the actual situation is more complicated. More details are provided in §15.2.

Marker	Gloss	Context
gē	NEG2	multiple
bá	still	preverbal (+PAST, -PROG)
á	NEG1	clause initial (-PAST)
kéŋē	VET	clause initial (+IMP)

Table 15.1 Summary of Nchane negation markers.

Negation constructions may be divided into two types, depending on the target or scope of the negation. Constituent negation is described in §15.1 and clausal negation in §15.2. Triply marked negative constructions are presented in §15.3. The final section (15.4) deals with negative commands, which are designated as “vetitive” constructions.

15.1 Constituent negation

Negative constructions, in which the target of the negation is a clausal constituent, utilize a discontinuous marker consisting of two instances of **gē** ‘NEG2’. The first **gē** immediately precedes the negated constituent; the second **gē** occurs at the end of the clause. The NEG2 marker is usually realized in clause-final position with a L tone. Note that it has the alternative pronunciation of [kē], particularly in non-clause final position. The framing construction is summarized in Figure 15.1.

gē x...**gē**

Figure 15.1 Formula for Nchane constituent negation constructions.

The ellipsis in the formula represents any elements which canonically follow the negated constituent “x”. This includes the verb complex, in the case of subject negation. Presumably, any clausal constituent may be negated utilizing this strategy. Examples (15.1)-(15.3) demonstrate subject, object and comitative oblique negation respectively.

- (15.1) **gē** fy-ē: fī-mī nùmè yú
 NEG2 c19-thing c19-some COP(N) on.it
 fí yàg-é bvù-gù fēnē fè-kū **gē**
 c19REL surpass-PROG c14-marriage here c16-down NEG2
 ‘...no other thing exists that is greater than (lit. surpassing) marriage here on earth.’ Marriage.3.1
- (15.2) mū-jǐ gè nǎ-á **gē** bà-ŋkè **gē**
 c18a-bird P3 give-PROG NEG2 c2-song NEG2
 ‘Birds were not singing.’ (lit. giving no songs) Lake.6.1
- (15.3) nò wù gè bé **gē** bé bvù-ŋgà **gē**,
 like.that 3SG P3 ^PCOP NEG2 with c14-power NEG2
 ‘Although he was very weak...’ (lit. as he was not with power) Lake.6.5

The text data also provide examples of negation of complement clauses, as in (15.4).

- (15.4) kī-fē shégé, wù gē jā wé, wù ɲũ gē
 c7-time small 3SG P3 stand up 3SG COP(N) NEG2
- nò wú yéné gē
 like.that 3SG breathe NEG2

'Sometime later, he awoke, unable to breathe.' (lit. *he being not like that he breathe*) Lake.4.3

15.2 Clausal negation

As with constituent negation, the negation of clauses also involves discontinuous negative marking. However, unlike with constituent negation, clausal negation is sensitive to TAM expression, resulting in two distinct negation strategies, which are summarized in Figure 15.2. For the sake of convenience, I refer to the first strategy as the “**bá**-strategy” and the second strategy as the “**á**-strategy”.¹⁰⁰

- S **bá** V_[core]...gē (clauses with [+PAST], [-PROG] verbs)
á S V_[complex]...gē (elsewhere)

Figure 15.2 Formulas for Nchane clausal negation constructions.

The **bá**-strategy involves the auxiliary **bá** or **bá:** ‘still’, which immediately precedes the verb core and does not allow subject agreement to intervene between it and the main verb, although it is itself marked with subject agreement when the subject is 1SG. Tense markers, when present, precede the negative marker. For these reasons, I consider **bá** as belonging to the verb complex. Data is lacking that would establish the ordering of **bá** and preverbal TAM markers other than tense.

In the **á**-strategy, the negative marker **á** ‘NEG1’ occurs in the clause-initial position. A suitable candidate for the source of NEG1 has not yet been identified. As Figure 15.2 indicates, the **bá**-strategy is used only with past, non-progressive constructions and the **á**-strategy elsewhere. The NEG2 marker **gē** occurs in the clause-final position in both strategies.

¹⁰⁰ The neighboring Beboid language Noni makes the same distinction, with +PAST, -PROG clauses utilizing the negative marker **bá** ~ **bá:** in the preverbal position, and +PROG clauses utilizing the negative marker **ké** in clause initial position (Hyman 1981: 57, 60). The nearby Yemne-Kimbi language Mungbam also makes a distinction between two categories of clauses in negative clause formation. However, in this language, the distinction is Realis vs. Irrealis, and differentiates the two by utilizing different negative markers for each distinct type, with comparable syntax in each (Lovegren 2013: 417).

The association of ‘still’ in negative constructions aligns with the notion of “phasal polarity expressions”, where the negative counterpart of the “still” expression is the “no longer” expression or the “not yet” expression.¹⁰¹ Löfgren (2019) shows that it is not uncommon for Bantu languages to utilize such phasal polarity expression systems, where at least one positive term appears with and without negation markers to establish such a contrastive set of expressions.

The two strategies for clausal negation constructions are illustrated through an elicited TAM paradigm presented in Table 15.2, with the phrase “Nji catches (k̄ḡḡ) termites (ḡḡḡ)” serving as the base. It can be seen that the object in the **bá**-strategy obligatorily occurs in the immediately-before-verb position, although not in triple negative constructions (see §15.3). Presumably, this allows NEG2 to occur in the immediately after verb position associated with canonical focus. Meanwhile, the object appears *in situ* in the **á**-strategy.¹⁰²

Tense	Example	Gloss
P0	ḡḡḡ bá ḡḡḡ k̄ḡḡ ḡḡḡ	‘Nji didn’t catch termites.’
P1	ḡḡḡ bé bá ḡḡḡ k̄ḡḡ ḡḡḡ	‘Nji didn’t catch termites.’
P2	ḡḡḡ chí bá ḡḡḡ k̄ḡḡ ḡḡḡ	‘Nji didn’t catch termites.’
P3	ḡḡḡ ḡḡḡ bá ḡḡḡ k̄ḡḡ ḡḡḡ	‘Nji didn’t catch termites.’
PROG	á ḡḡḡ k̄ḡḡ-è ḡḡḡ ḡḡḡ	‘Nji isn’t catching termites.’
FUT	á ḡḡḡ k̄ḡḡ ḡḡḡ ḡḡḡ	‘Nji will not catch termites.’
HAB	á ḡḡḡ tó wù k̄ḡḡ ḡḡḡ ḡḡḡ	‘Nji doesn’t catch termites.’

Table 15.2 Clausal negation strategies illustrated through a TAM paradigm.

Note that the position of the object in negative clauses is slightly different from object defocalization observed in affirmative clauses. In negative constructions, the object occurs between the negative marker **bá** and the main verb, while in affirmative clauses the defocalized object precedes the entire verb complex. See §16.3.1 for more details.

¹⁰¹ Nchane uses the same term “still” for both, “not yet” and “no longer” expressions, a phenomenon observed by Kramer (2017: 6) for some languages.

¹⁰² It appears that future tense marking in the future example in Table 15.2 is neutralized. Regardless, this clause may not be confused with an immediate past reading, since the corresponding P0 clause utilizes the negative marking associated with the **bá**-strategy.

Example (15.5) is a text example illustrating a preverbal object in a non-progressive negative construction.

- (15.5) Ø-lá chí-mī, bā gè **bá:** fy-ē: fó búse **gē**
 c5-compound c5-some they P3 still c19-thing there remove NEG2
'In the other compound, they did not remove anything.' Fire.22

As mentioned above, clauses with progressive verbs utilize the **á**-strategy, as in (15.6).

- (15.6) **á** jíjì chí kũŋ-è Ø-nà **gē**
 NEG1 N. P2 drive.away-PROG c1-cow NEG2
'Nji was not driving the cow away (yesterday).'

The Progressive suffix is realized with a low tone, just as in constructions with a preverbal grammatical high-toned element, such as Hortative and Durative, which was discussed in §§9.1.2 and 9.2.

Although it is typical for non-progressive past clauses to utilize **bá** rather than **á**, there is at least one exception worth noting. Examples (15.7) and (15.8) both show the **á**-strategy being utilized with non-progressive past clauses. However, both clauses are focus constructions. Example (15.7) is a postverbal agent focus clause with the pronoun **wù** in focus and example (15.8) shows focus on the applied object **shī lē** through the use of the focusing copula **ŋũ**.

- (15.7) (ŋgáŋ), **á** bvũ-lē: bé **ŋá** wù shī lē **gè**
 no NEG1 c14-fufu P1 give 3SG c9.chicken APPL NEG2
'(No), HE did not give the chicken fufu (someone else did).'

- (15.8) **á** wù bé **ŋá** bvũ-lē: **ŋũ** shī lē **gè**
 NEG1 3SG P1 give c14-fufu COP(N) c9.chicken APPL NEG2
'He did not give THE CHICKEN fufu.' (he gave it to THE DOG, for example)

Therefore, to the elements characterizing clauses which utilize the **bá**-strategy, we should add that any kind of formal focus marking is absent. Note that no examples of a clause with a Progressive main verb utilizing the **bá**-strategy appear in the data.

Sometimes, the initial negation marker is omitted, as in (15.9) and (15.10). However, the high tone associated with the negation marker usually remains and is realized on the subject element preceding the verb.

- (15.9) bá-mí gè jèm-é gè
c2-person.NEG P3 talk-PROG NEG2

'No people were talking.'

Lake.6.11

- (15.10) n̄-tēm-è gè
1SG.NEG-strong-PROG NEG2

'I am not well.'

This phenomenon suggests that the language may be in the early stages of losing the initial negative marker, as predicted by the Jespersen cycle (see Jespersen (1917), and Devos and van der Auwera (2013) more specifically for this phenomenon among African languages), which is also relevant to the following section on triple negation constructions.

15.3 Triple negation constructions

Clauses with three negative markers are neither common nor rare in the text data. They always consist of the non-progressive negative marker **bá**, a NEG2 marker preceding a negated constituent and a clause-final NEG2. Examples (15.11) and (15.12) are given to illustrate.

- (15.11) n̄sá y-é chē-ē gè **bá**: yēyè gē
c10.friend c10-3SG.POSS c10-ANA1 P3 still learn NEG2

fy-ē: fī-mī gè
c19-thing c19-some NEG2

'Those his friends did not learn anything (from the man's death).'

Greedy Friends.1.7

- (15.12) wù gè **bá**: yēŋ gē bī-bāgē lé gè,
3SG P3 still see NEG2 c8-wound APPL NEG2

'He saw no injuries...'

Lake.6.3

Note that the Object in these triple negation constructions remains *in situ*.

15.4 Vetitive

Prohibitions or negative commands utilize the clause-initial vetitive marker **kéḞ**, as in (15.13)-(15.15).¹⁰³ In addition to the clause-final NEG2 marker, a second-person pronoun is always present and realized with a high tone. As with the **á**-strategy clausal negation constructions, the progressive suffix in Vetitive constructions is realized as low.

- (15.13) Ø-jwā:, **kéḞ** wó fān-è fy-ē: **gē**,
 c1-husband.1SG.POSS VET 2SG fear-PROG c19-thing NEG2

m̄-bà: lé yú
 c6a-soup COP on.it

'My husband, don't fear anything, there is soup.' (lit. *soup is with it*
(fufu).) Jealous Husband.2.2

- (15.14) wō wú Ø-mwā wú Ø-kwēsé, wō né lé
 2SG c1REL c1-child c1REL c1-woman 2SG if COP.COND

wō lē: fē Ø-lá chī Ø-jwēḡsé lē,
 2SG enter at c5-compound c5AM c1-man APPL

kéḞ wó lās-è bā-mī bā-ā **gē**,
 VET 2SG lose¹⁰⁴-PROG c2-person c2-ANA1 NEG2

kéḞ wó wā:d-è bé Ø-chíjī Ø-jwḡ:
 VET 2SG quarrel-PROG with c1-father c1-husband.2SG.POSS

mò Ø-bwē Ø-jwḡ: **gē**
 RES c1-mother c1-husband.2SG.POSS NEG2

*'You the girl child, if you enter into your husband's compound don't
 look down on those people, don't quarrel with your father-in-law or
 mother-in-law.'* Marriage.6.6

¹⁰³ The term “vetitive” is derived from the word “veto”, and follows its use in the nearby language Mungbam (Lovegren 2013).

¹⁰⁴ This verb can also mean “minimize” or “make small”.

- (15.15) **kéḿ** bḗŋ jḗŋ-ì bḗŋ ság-è wù ā-lā
 VET 2PL walk-PROG 2PL judge-PROG 3SG c6-compound
- ā bā-mī lé **gè**
 c6AM c2-person APPL NEG2

'Do not go around, gossiping about her (lit. judging her) in people's compounds, ...' Marriage.6.4

The vetitive marker is likely a grammaticalized contraction of some sort. The **ké** portion of the word is possibly a form of **gḗ** NEG2, which is sometimes pronounced as [**kḗ**] as pointed out in §15.1. The high tone could represent a negative grammatical high tone associated with the other preverbal negative markers **bá** and **á**; or perhaps it is the high tone associated with Imperative or Hortative constructions.

Two possibilities are noted for the source of the **fḗ** element. The first is that it comes from the verb **fḗ** 'make, do'. A more likely possibility is that it is derived from the locative class 16 prefix **fḗ-**. Indeed, the same form is seen in some rare cases acting like a conditional introducer. Further, the development of the class 16 locative affix into a negative marker is observed in other African languages (see Devos & Van der Auwera 2013: 237).