Palenquero vs. Spanish negation: Separate but equal? Taxonomy: Morphology, Syntax

John Lipski

The Pennsylvania State University, 442 Burrowes Building, University Park, PA 16802, United States

Abstract

The Afro-Colombian creole language Palenquero is characterized by predominantly clause-final negation, a typologically rare configuration. Contemporary Palenquero speakers—all of whom also speak Spanish—occasionally exhibit Spanish-like pre-verbal negation, raising the question of whether pre-verbal negation has always been a pragmatically available alternative or is a more recent accretion. The present study offers an indirect probe into the development of Palenquero by examining the relative processing efficiency of (Spanish) immediately pre-verbal NEG vs. (Palenquero) unbounded clause-final NEG. The results of a series of experiments conducted with Palenquero-Spanish bilinguals suggest that pre-verbal negation is quite efficiently processed, while processing of clause-final negation is degraded under increased cognitive demands. Contextual and pragmatic cues ameliorate the processing of clause-final negation in likely negative utterances, while in ambiguous utterances clause-final negation is more vulnerable. These results, while not excluding the possibility that Palenquero has always allowed for pre-verbal negation, provide an alternative scenario, in which contact with Spanish facilitated the development of multiple configurations of negation.

1. Introduction

Among the world's creole languages—and especially those deriving from contacts between African and European languages—there is considerable convergence in basic syntactic patterns (Holm and Patrick, 2007; Winford, 2008). This includes major constituent order, invariant verbs combined with pre-verbal tense-mood-aspect particles, and lack of grammatical gender. In most creoles, sentential negation is expressed by one or more items immediately adjacent to the verb or clause-initial. A notable exception is the Afro-Colombian creole language Palenquero, whose most common form of negation is clause-final, a typologically uncommon configuration found in only a few small clusters of languages worldwide. Pre-verbal negation is also occasionally found in Palenquero, under circumstances to be discussed below, and since all Palenquero speakers also speak Spanish—and this biliingualism may have existed for two centuries or more—some have attributed Palenquero pre-verbal negation to interference from or partial convergence with Spanish. It has also been claimed that both pre-verbal and clause-final negation have characterized Palenquero from the outset, with pragmatic conditions determining the choice.

E-mail address: jlipski@psu.edu.

A fundamental obstacle in the diachronic reconstruction of Palenquero is the lack of sufficient time depth to assess possible developmental trajectories. The oldest speakers for whom reliable data exist were born around the turn of the 20th century, at which point the Palenquero language did not differ significantly from what can be heard today. As a consequence, any reconstruction of earlier stages of the language must be carried out through extrapolation from contemporary patterns, supplemented by knowledge of more general phenomena of negation. In that spirit the present study will present experimental data collected from Palenquero-Spanish bilinguals and reported here for the first time, that demonstrate a significant processing disadvantage for clause-final negation as compared with Spanish-like pre-verbal negation. The magnitude of the disadvantage increases significantly among younger, Spanish-dominant bilinguals. Contextual and pragmatic cues ameliorate the processing of likely negative utterances, while clause-final negation is more vulnerable in ambiguous utterances. These data in themselves do not resolve the chronology of Palenquero negation—in particular whether pre-verbal negation has always been a fundamental component of the language—but they do underscore the typological markedness of a regionally confined negation system, and provide an alternative scenario in which contact with Spanish facilitated the development of multiple configurations of negation.

2. Placement of sentential negation items

Typologies of negation frequently center on the relative placement of the negative element(s) with respect to the main verb root, with the principal division being (often immediately) pre-verbal or (again often immediately) post-verbal (e.g. Dahl, 1979; Swart, 2010:7; Dryer, 1988). A number of languages have dual negation elements on either side of the main verb, typified by French *ne* + V + *pas* constructions. For languages with prevailing V-O word order there is a strong tendency for negative elements to be placed pre-verbally (Dahl, 2010:22; Dryer, 1988; Swart, 2010:8; Payne, 1985; Tesnière, 1969:219). Among the languages surveyed by Dryer (1988) nearly 90% place NEG immediately adjacent to the verb, with pre-verbal position holding a 3:1 edge over post-verbal NEG. This is consistent with the observations of Jespersen (1917:5, 1924:297) as to the desirability of placing negators before the negated constituents.

In addition to the prevailing NEG + V and V + NEG patterns, a relatively small number of (mostly V-O) languages places NEG clause-finally, e.g. V + O+ [. . .] NEG. Languages with V-O word order and clause-final negation are largely clustered in central Africa (Dryer, 2009), including languages from the Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, and Afro-Asiatic families, and therefore likely to reflect an areal feature, a hypothesis supported by the comparative studies of Idiatov (2010, 2012, 2015).[1] A second cluster is found in Papua-New Guinea (Reesink, 2002; van der Auwera and Vossen, 2016; Vossen, 2011; Vossen and van der Auwera, 2014). Thompson (1998:328) also acknowledges the exceptional status of clause-final negation, including Palenquero (p. 335, fn. 17). If Jespersen's consistently insightful observations have empirical consequences in the case of NEG placement, then the cross-linguistic preference for NEG elements to be in the immediate proximity of main verbs (including preferred pre-verbal negation in V-O languages like Palenquero) is presumably linked to relative sentence processing efficiency, and potentially to production as well. The Palenquero-Spanish bilingual interface provides a unique research opportunity for experimentally testing the relative efficiency of (Spanish) pre-verbal vs. (Palenquero) unbounded clause-final negation, which in turn will inform the discussion on the diachronic pathways of Palenquero negation.

3. Negation in Spanish and Palenquero

Palenquero, known simply as *Lengua ri Palenge* '[the] language of Palenque' by community residents, is a Spanish-lexified creole language spoken in the village of San Basilio de Palenque, a community of around 3500 residents some 70 km to the south of the Caribbean port of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia. Grammatical descriptions of Palenquero include Escalante (1954), Bickerton and Escalante (1970), Lewis (1970), Friedemann and Patiño Rosselli (1983), Megenney (1986), Schwegler (1996a), Schwegler (2013a,b), Schwegler and Green (2007), Cásseres Estrada (2005), Pérez Tejedor (2004), Simarra Obeso et al. (2008), Simarra Reyes and Triviño Doval (2008). The village of Palenque was evidently founded between 1655 and 1674 (Navarrete, 2008; Schwegler, 2011a, 2012) when enslaved Africans fled Cartagena and established fortified communities to the south, and the Palenquero language may have emerged early in the 18th century. Although Palenquero and Spanish are not mutually intelligible, most of the Palenquero lexicon is cognate with local vernacular Spanish (Cásseres Estrada, 2005), and the two languages share SVO word order, post-nominal adjective placement, head-first subordinate clauses, and prepositional phrases.

Spanish sentential negation is marked with *no* in immediate pre-verbal position as in (1).

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[1] In colloquial American English *not* can be placed clause-finally to give a sarcastic rejection of a proposition (e.g. Sheidlower and Lighter, 1993). In these cases, however, *not* is preceded by a pause and is pronounced emphatically, leaving little doubt as to how the utterance is to be processed.