

## **Preverbal Negation in Esan Language**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study sought to find out the position of verb particle in negative sentences in Esan language and to find out whether her genetic nature, being member of Edoid, reflects the language universal validity about negative marking. Negation is a denial of an assertive proposition or a predication that a proposition is untrue. Different languages employ different method of marking negation. Different languages are typified based on their negation marking strategies. Some of the strategies include; the use of negative particles, affixation, independent lexical item, prosodic melody (tone and intonation). Every human language possesses some formal ways of expressing negation. While the conveyed meaning and functions of negation are relatively uniform, the formal devices employed exhibit a considerable degree of variation across languages. A negative sentence must have a negative operator in form of affix or a full fledge word. Other distinctions that have been made when talking about the scope of negation are sentential versus constituent negation and nexal versus special negation. Sentential negation takes the whole sentence in its scope whereas constituent negation only applies to a particular constituent. Based the copious and relevant empirical data, the study made the following discovery amongst others about the preverbal negation in Esan language.; that there are two verbal negators in Esan language: “i” and “bha”; that the morpheme i on the last syllable on the subject in negative sentences is a negator in imperfective sentence. One of the recommendations made was that preverbal negations must be addressed in order to give linguistics beforehand knowledge on its usage and application, considering the fact that every language exhibits a device to reverse the true conditions of a sentence and that natural languages show a surprisingly large range with respect to the syntactic and semantic behaviour of negative elements.*

**KEYWORDS: Homonyms, Modal Auxiliary, Clause Structure, Preverbal Negation, Esan language**

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### **Introduction**

Negation is defined by Lyons (1977:768) as a “denial of an assertive proposition or a predication that a proposition is untrue”. Different languages employ different methods of marking negation. Dahl (1979) typifies different languages based on their negation marking strategies. Some of the strategies include; the use of negative particles, affixation, independent

lexical item, prosodic melody (tone and intonation). Every human language possesses some formal ways of expressing negation. Löbner (2002:61) notes, “It is no surprise then that all languages have systematic means of the polar contrast of a sentence.” While the conveyed meaning and functions of negation are relatively uniform, the formal devices employed exhibit a considerable degree of variation across languages.

This process, first described by Jespersen (1917) involves elements which were introduced into negative clauses in order to strengthen the negation being reanalyzed as the primary markers of negation. He argued that, there is a tendency to place the negative first or as soon as possible, often immediately before the word that is being negated. He goes on to claim that its position at the beginning of the sentence makes it more likely than elsewhere to weaken phonologically (Jespersen 1917: 6). In another development, Anagbogu (2005:19) suggests that “a negative sentence must have a negative operator in form of affix or a full fledged word.” Other distinctions that have been made when talking about the scope of negation are sentential versus constituent negation and nexal versus special negation. Sentential negation takes the whole sentence in its scope whereas constituent negation only applies to a particular constituent (Miestamo 2009: 209). The objective of this study is to find out the position of verb particle in negative sentences in Esan language and to find out whether her genetic nature, being member of Edoid, reflects the language universal validity about negative marking. Esan populations from which data are taken for this work are concentrated within the South-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria, within five Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Edo State (Webster and Ogbomo 1997: 345) of which Ekpoma dialect of our study is a part.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A universal property of language is that every language is able to express negation. Every language has some device at its disposal to reverse the truth value of a certain sentence. However, languages may differ to quite a large extent as to how they express this negation. Not only do languages vary with respect to the position of negative elements, also the form of negative elements and the interpretation of sentences that consist of multiple negative elements are subject to broad cross-linguistic variation. Preverbal negation is restricted in its distribution, occurring more frequently in spoken context and tending to avoid verbs with relatively longer syllable length, unless they are compound verbs with linking suffixes (-e or -a). This study therefore seeks to find out the position of verb particle in negative sentences in Esan language and to find out whether her genetic nature, being member of Edoid, reflects the language universal validity about negative marking.

### **Preverbal Negation**

Languages differ as to the particular syntactic position which the negative markers assume in any given grammatical sentence. Syntacticians and typologists have carried out a cross-linguistic study of the syntactic position of the negative marker with respect to the verb in a given sentence. Greenberg (1966) and Dryer (1988, 2006) are well-known examples of such studies. They claim that there is an overall tendency for the negative marker to precede the verb. Jespersen (1917:4) in his study of the patterns of pre-verbal/post-verbal negation, identifies a strong tendency to place the negative first, or at any rate as soon as possible, very often immediately before the particular word to be negated. Also, there are studies that presents the placement of negative marker in relation to the three main clausal elements of subject (S), object

(O) and verb (V) in a worldwide sample of 345 languages. He submits that SVO languages are commonly SNegVO. In other word, SVO languages place their negative markers pre-verbally, occurring at the position before the main verb. The sections below discuss the various syntactic positions occupied by the negative markers in some natural languages.

### Negation in Esan

There are two negative particles used to negate verb in Esan language. They are “i” and “bha” in general; these particles are immediately placed before the verbs they negate. Most of the current works on sentential negation have adopted what is known as “the Neg.P Hypothesis”, which indicates that lexical as well as functional categories can be projected (see among others, Pollock (1989), Kayne (1989), Zannuttini (1990), Chomsky (1991) Laka (1994) Haegeman (1995) and Radford (1997). This hypothesis is adopted by Brustad (2000) and Benmamoun (1992; 2000), in their works but this work; however, descriptive approach which is one of the possible ways of ‘doing’ linguistics (Kennedy 1998:7) would however be applied. For this paper, some respondents were interviewed in the Sabon Gari area of Kano State with useful data for the work.

This work on preverbal negation would be discussed under two broad headings: perfective case and imperfective case

### Negation in Perfective Case

In Esan, a declarative sentence is negated when the negative markers *bha* or *i* are sandwiched between the subject and the verb phrase. The negation of perfective verb form is marked by *bha* particle which occurs before the perfective verb form. In this case *bha* is not an affix bound to the verb form rather it is an independent morpheme like the English negative operator not

#### a. Negation in Homonyms

- 1a Bha'      **bha`**    li    ebae    ɲon    ribhi    oeriɛ      **Accusative**  
 (You(2Ppl Neg. Do    eat    food    Rel    Prep kitchen)
- b. Bha` **bha'**      li    ebaɛ      ɲon    ri bhi    oeriɛ?      **Question**  
 You did not    eat      food    that is    in    kitchen

In Esan, there is an extra-high tone level, which is strongly linked with the marking of negation in case of the sentence1 above. To identify the negating *bha* in the sentence, there is need for tone separation. The H tone is on the Subject *bha* (glossed as you) in sentence 1a because the sentence is in the accusative and the emphasis is on the subject and not the negator. *Bha* (you 2Ppl) being accused of not eating the food in the kitchen. The negating *bha`* low tone is the only indication of negation in the main clause '*bha bha' li ebae*' (glossed as 'you did not eat food') before the dependent clause *non ribhi oerie*. Note that in the structure of Esan, the auxiliary *do* is embedded in the negator *bha* as seen in the above sentence. In sentence 1b there is a swap in the tone. The negator *bha* bears the H tone in (1b) because the emphasis is on 'it not eating the food in the kitchen' while the Subject takes the L tone and it occurred before the relative clause *non ribhi oerie* (glossed as that is on the table). Observe also that the negative marker occupies the position of the tense (past) in the two sentences 1a & b above.

- 2a. ɲon      **bha**    yo      **bha**    len      ba    mien' (sentential negation)

Who Neg. did go Neg know what happened

- b. Ọnọn **bha'** yo **bha** len ba mien (a declaration)  
Who Neg.did go Neg know what happened

Miestamo (2009) talks about the scope of negation: sentential versus constituent negation and nexal versus special negation. Sentential negation takes the whole sentence in its scope whereas constituent negation only applies to a particular constituent. The examples 2a and b above, demonstrate the basic distinction: (2a) is sentential because the whole sentence is negated by the H tone on the final syllable of *mien* (glossed as know) the first *bha* is a negator preceding the pronoun *ọnọn*

But observe that the neg *bha* precedes the verb *yo*. The second *bha* also precedes the verb *len*. (2b) has same structure but the difference is in the tone though it is Constituent negation because the emphasis is on the *bha* with H and *yo* (glossed go). Though the negators appear before *yo* and *len*, it is constituent because it is negating the pronoun *ọnọn*.

There is a noticeable semantic difference between examples (a) and (b) above. While also dependent on context, these two clauses do not encode identical information and can be used to communicate different implications. The (2a.) entails an assertion, while the (b) could be a conclusion on an argument

- 3a. Bha' **bha** li ebae ọn ribhi oerię  
You didn't eat food in the kitchen
- b. Ebaę ọn ribhi oerie, bha` **bha`** le  
It is the food in the kitchen that you didn't eat.

In sentence 3a the H tone is on the *bha* (glossed they) denoting confirmation that they are the ones that didn't eat the food in the kitchen. In 3b, the *bha bha* took the L tone after the post modified clause: *ebae non ribhi* (glossed as the food in the kitchen) as the structure is in the language but the nagator is negating the verb contrary to 3a where the subject is negated. In 3b also, notice that as the subordinate clause takes the theme of the sentence, the verb succeeding the neg *bha* changed to *le* as opposed to *li* in sentence 3a according to the structure of the language

### Transferred Negation

Quirk and Greenbaun (1973:345) observe that there are several ways in which 'indirect speech' involving mental activity "(*he thought*)" verbs differ from that where the reporting verb is one of language activity "(*he said*)". They observe that "the important difference is negation"

- 4a. Ọ **bha** wẹ ghe Itohan ha mon ose  
(S/he not say that 3sg was have pretty)
- b. Ọ wẹ ghe Itohan **bha** ha mon ose  
S/he said that 3sg not was have pretty

In sentences 4a the negator *bha* is negating the Subject Ọ (glossed S/he) and not the entire sentence. *bha* occurs in the noun clause negating Ọ the Subject of the sentence before the agent

*Itohan* being reported about pretty. Observe that in 4b, the negation transferred to the reported speech that is the relative clause negating *Itohan* as not being pretty. This made the two sentences entirely different. In Esan the word *wẹ* (glossed as say/said) has same form in both present tense and past tense of the word *say* but *ha* (glossed as was) is the past tense of *is* as seen in the two relative clauses in 4a&b.

5a. Men **bha** lo wẹ Ọ se ha le  
(I neg suppose say s/he has.yet paid)

b. Men lo we ghe Ọ **bha** se ha le  
(I suppose say that/see s/he neg has.yet paid)

The transfer of the negation can be seen in sentence 5a&b with the non-assertive *se* (glossed as (has.yet) appearing in the subordinate clause even when the verb is not negated. In 5a, the subject *men* (glossed as I) is the word negated in the sentence and not the entire sentence that is constituent negation because the negator *bha* is immediately put after its relevant constituent. (Horn, 2010a, Potsdam 1998) observe closely too that in 3b, in the subordinate clause *ghe ọ bha se hai* (glossed as that s/he has not paid) the *bha* is negating the immediate constituent *Ọ* but preceding the auxiliary and the verb. Also note that *ghe* in the Esan could mean *that* and *see*

### Negation in Demonstrative Sentences

A number of studies such as Beyer (2009), dryer (2009) and Devos and van de Auwera (2013) remark some typologically striking properties of negation marking in languages of different parts of Africa. Dryer (2009) focuses on “neutral negation” meaning obligatory and productive (general) negation marking patterns in declarative verbal main clauses expressed by negative markers that are words. He demonstrates that SVO languages in an area in central Africa [stretching] from Nigeria across to Central African Republic (Dryer 2009:307).

Beyer (2009:222), in the same volume on negation patterns in West African languages {Cyffer, Ebermann and Ziegelelmeyer 2009) as dryer (2009) point out double negation marking for “sentential marking” in a large group of West African languages but largely centred on the Volta River basin. Examples are drawn from Esan below

6a Ọ ni ebhe khoni non **bha** de  
(That goat is.the that Neg fall)

b. Ọ ni' yi oni ebhe non bha de  
(That.Neg is Det goat that neg fell)

Devos and van der Auwera (2013) survey cases of multiple negation in Bantu languages which is usually double but that some exuberant examples triple and quadruple negation marking are also attested; so Esan cannot be said to be alone in multiple negation as in Example 6b

In the demonstrative sentences above, 4a&b, the neg in 4a precedes *non* the relative pronoun (glossed that) before the verb *de* (fall) in the post modified clause *ọ ni ebhe khoni non* (glossed as that is the goat) but in 6b, *ọ ni'* took a H tone denoting neg followed by auxiliary verb *yi* (is) before ‘that goat that did not fall.’

- 7a. E ni ibhokhan kheni ne **bha** yi isikulu  
(Those are children that did neg go school)
- b. E ni' yi enibhokhan ne **bha** yi isikulu  
(Those neg are *children* that neg go school.)
- c. We **bha** li ebae  
(You neg eat food)
- d. Oi yi uwe khon non bha li ebae  
3Sg.neg is you do that neg eat food
- e. Oi yi Odion non **bha** tan  
S/he.neg is 3sg that neg long

In example 7b, the *yi* (not) preceding *enibhokhan* (children) is an auxiliary verb (is) , but the *yi* before *isikulu* (school) is a verb (go). In all the examples above, the negating particles and words come before the verb. Observe that in Esan just like in English, *bha* (not) in perfective sentence is an independent word, neither suffixed nor prefixed.

We (you) is being accused of not eating food. Only one NEG *bha* in the demonstrative sentence of 7c but in 7d, in the finite clause, double NEG appeared before the relative clause: *khon non bha li ebae* (that did not eat food)

### Negation in imperfective case

#### *The Negative Particle “i”*

One of the negative particles used to negate verbal sentences in Esan language is the morpheme “i” which is suffixed on the last syllable of the nominal. The suffix /i/ denotes negation which is the instruments for achieving the action or state expressed by the verb or verb phrase though attached to the subject. This instrumental suffix is not peculiar to Esan. Elimelech (1976) and Egbokhare (1990) attest to this in Emai and Etsako languages respectively which invariably applies to Esan.

- 9a. Oi kpa  
S/he not.aux vomiting

In (9a) above, the *oi* glossed (S/he) is a negative verb stem succeeded by the lexical verb *kpa* (vomiting)

#### *Negative imperative*

Imperatives cross-linguistically very often utilize a basic or reduced form of a verb, and often occur without an overt subject. In Esan, however, in negative imperatives, the general negative pronoun *ai*, (it/he/she/you/) glossed (don't) is often found in subject position. This can be understood as following from the requirement of an overt subject

- |     |              |          |                    |
|-----|--------------|----------|--------------------|
| 8a. | Ai           | gbon     | <b>Negative</b>    |
|     | S/he/you.neg | write it |                    |
|     | Gbon         |          | <b>Affirmative</b> |
|     | write        |          |                    |

- b. Ai gbɛn  
S/he,you.neg write
- c. Bhai gbɔn  
2Pl.You.Neg write it
- d. Bhai gbɛn  
2Pl.You.Neg write

From the above examples (8a –d) the negative imperative or prohibitive is marked by *ai* and *bhai* in Esan. This negating element prefixes a verb stem, and is hosted by a lexical verb. In 8a, *ai gbɔn* is glossed as (don't write it). *Ai* is a verb stem followed by *gbɔn* (write it) the lexical verb. Same applies to examples 8b, c, and d.

### *Progressive Negative Sentences*

- 9a Odionii' yi sikulu  
(3sg.NEG go School)  
Odion does not go to school
- b. Sikulu o le Odionii' yo  
School 3sg is 3Sg.Neg go

In sentence 9a above in the progressive negative, the negative particle *i* is attached to the subject *Odion* with a H tone to negative the sentence that Odion does not go to school but in 9b, the negation appeared in relative clause with the negator still on the subject *odion* with a H tone denoting that it is school that Odion does not go; the emphasis is on school. It is observed that the negative marker precedes the subject DP that is negated in the sentence. The subject DP is moved to sentence-initial position and is followed by the focus marker *yo*. The DP leaves a copy in the form of a trace at its extraction site and the trace forms a chain with the DP serving as the head of the chain.

Sentences 10 and below become ungrammatical because the negating particle “*i*” is detached from the subject. It makes no meaning in the position it presently occupies after the object though before the verb. In Esan language, the progressive negative sentence bears its negation on the subject

- 10a \* Obehi ibolu i gbe  
(obehe ball fut.Neg V.play)  
Obehi ball not play

### *The particle “i” in Pronouns*

- 11a) Qi li ebae edede  
(S/he.Neg eat food daily)  
'S/he does not eat everyday'
- b. Qi yi edede o re li ebae  
it.Neg is everyday S/he that eat food

In the progressive sentences above, 11a, the negative particle still behaves itself attaching to the subject *oi* (she/he is not) before the lexical verb *li* (eat). The object (food) follows before eventually the adjective (everyday) but in example 11b, the neg is at the verb stem *oi* (it) taking the position of the subject of the verb though the real Subject is almost at the middle of the of the sentence, the adjective *edede* (everyday) before the Subject of the sentence *o* (S/he) of course before the lexical verb *li* (eat). In the structure of the language under study, the real subject of the sentence cannot co-occur with the negator in the same clause. The negator appeared in the main clause while the Subject in the relative clause.

- 12 a) Ei khian yi otue  
(3Pl.Neg Neg.Fut go church)  
'3Pl will not go to church'
- b. E kha yi otue/ Ea yi otue  
they will go church/they'll go church
- c. Qi yi otue ei' khian  
it.Neg is church they.Neg Fut.neg.going  
it is not church that they are not going

In (12a), the sentence indicates future action. The *ei* (they not) makes the subject of the sentence followed by future Neg (*khian*). The negative element *i* is attached to the syllable final of the subject and the modal *kha* in the affirmative in 12b changed to “*khian*” in 12a bringing it to double negative. As a result, there is a fusion between the negative marker and the future tense marker, such as: *kh + i* (neg element)+*an*=*khian*. The occurrence of future tense in a negative sentence is not uncommon in African languages. Dryer (2009: 315) asserts that it has been demonstrated in Central Africa that there are “languages in which the normal construction for negation is a double negative, with one morpheme preceding the verb (possibly prefixed) and one following the verb (possibly suffixed)” from the above examples, this assertion does not only apply to Central Africa but also in Niger Congo languages

### Modal Auxiliary and Negation in Esan.

Moreover, Esan permits the co-occurrence of modal auxiliary *sabore* “can” and a negative marker *-i* in a negative sentence. However, the negator *-i* is attached to the nominal. As can be seen in the examples below:

13. a) Qa sabore yo  
(S/he Modal go)  
'S/he can go'
- b) Qi sabore yo  
(3Sg. Neg Modal go)  
'S/he/ cannot go'
14. a) Ea sabore yo  
(3Pl Modal V)  
'They can go'
- b) Ei sabore yo

(3Pl.Neg Modal go)  
'They cannot go'

In (13b) and (14b) the negative markers (*oi* s/he not) and *ei* (they not) precedes modal auxiliary *sabore* (cannot) respectively. Observe that, in Examples (12) and (14) above, the morphemes *Oa* and *Ea* in the subject positions changed to *Oi* and *Ei* respectively in negative. Facts from data presented in above examples clearly show that it is possible for two or more items to co-occur in a sentence; and all the negating elements are before the verbs.

### Esan clause structure

The earliest statement about universal tendencies in placement of negation could be traced to Jespersen (1917:5) which says "... there is a natural tendency also for the sake of clearness to place the negative first or at any rate as soon as possible. Very often immediately before the particular word to be negated (generally the verb)"

From Jespersen's observation, we may abstract the hypotheses of negation placement in Esan structure as follow:

Neg tends to be placed before the verb

Neg tends to be placed immediately or before the verb.

The syntax of Esan distinguishes grammatical relations, as has been discussed in various studies (Nichole 2010). The language has Subject and Direct Object Word Order. The language is strictly SVO, with very little variation. Constituents generally are head-initial, and there is very little morphology in the language. This analytical structure corresponds to a number of independent functional and lexical positions within the Esan syntax, which are syntactically independent from one another.

### Conclusion

Based the copious and relevant empirical data, the present study has made the following discoveries about the preverbal negation in Esan language.; that there are two verbal negators in Esan language: "i" and "bha"; that the morpheme *i* on the last syllable on the subject in negative sentences is a negator in imperfective sentence; Also, negative markers which occur in negative declarative sentences are SVO order. Apart from the morphosyntactic operation, we also observed that negation provokes changes in tone in the language and that the negating particle in perfective is not the same as that in imperfective case. These are some of the different ways of expressing negation which negate not only the verb but the entire sentence.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is therefore recommended that:

1. Considering the fact that every language exhibits a device to reverse the true conditions of a sentence and that natural languages show a surprisingly large range with respect to the syntactic and semantic behaviour of negative elements, preverbal negations must be addressed in order to give linguistics beforehand knowledge on its usage and application.

2. The distribution of the negative marker suggests that negation should no longer be thought of as an operator that applies to entire sentences. The data from Negative Concord languages opens up the possibility that negative elements, markers and quantifiers, may be semantically non- negative.
3. The expression of negation in language exhibits a large range of variation, which deserves perhaps even more attention than it has received thus far. Further exploring this variation may shed more light on the syntactic and semantics properties of negation in language.

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