Negation in Middle Hittite: corpus study

What is Hittite?

Hittite is a dead Indo-European language of Anatolian branch attested in cuneiform on the clay tablets of 18-16 cc. BC.

Negation markers in Hittite

- *natta*/NUL.GAL (negative of assertions)
- *lē* (negative of prohibition)
- *nāb* (negative with the meaning ‘not yet’)
- *nāman* (or *nāwān*; negative of wish or potential)
- *nēkhu* (‘not… somehow?’)

Negative pronouns in Hittite

Hittite negative pronouns always represent a negation marker plus (commonly) indefinite or (rare) relative pronouns.

- *natta*/NUL.GAL, ‘no one’ (nom. com.)
- *natta*/NUL.GAL, ‘no one’ (acc. com.)
- *nōn* (‘nothing’; nom. neut.)
- *nātto*/NUL.bītu, ‘no one’ (nom. com.)
- *nātto*/NUL.bītu, ‘no one’ (acc. neut.)
- *nātto*/NUL.kuiski, ‘no where’
- *nātto*/NUL.kuiski, ‘no reason’
- *nānātto/nānākī* (‘nothing’; nom. com.)
- *NUL.GAL.kuiski, ‘no one’ (nom. com.)
- *līt* (‘no one… nom. com., verb in imper.)

Methods

Philosophical analysis of Middle Hittite texts applied here to understand the scope of negation and information structure of the clause. Corpus approach helps us to find all entries with negation and to carry out the quantitative analysis. All clauses for the analysis are taken from a corpus project database annotated against negation (negation pronouns marked up separately). Certain syntactic and information structure features have been annotated as well in the database. The work, therefore, is based on a proven material and is quite comprehensive — in the limits of corpus that contains now more than 2000 clauses from the Middle Hittite letters and instructions.

Hittite Corpus: ongoing project

The research is being conducted within the project of the syntactically annotated corpus of Hittite under the supervision of Dr. Andrej Sidlowski at the Anatolian and Celtic languages department of the Institute of Linguistics (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow). For the time being, the corpus covers Middle Hittite letters (Hoffner 2009), Old and Middle Hittite instructions (Miller 2013) and contains 2212 clauses.

The global aim of the project is to get quantitative data on syntax and information structure of the Hittite clause. One particular goal of the work is to analyse the position of the negation in the clause and the scope of negative pronouns, in order to find out more about their nature and the conditions of their placement.

What is interesting about the negation in Hittite?

The preverbal position is canonical for the Hittite negation markers with the wide sentential scope. If negation markers are fronted, information structure of the clause is commonly the reason. The classical Hittite grammar (Hoffner, Melchert 2000) suggests that the negation fronting is limited to rhetorical questions and in general to emphatic assertion. Corpus approach and quantitative analysis will help us to prove or modify this suggestion and, hopefully, to resolve some other questions concerning negation in Hittite, including the following list.

First of all, the scope of the Hittite negation markers should be looked at. Wide or narrow scope in each case? How often in the corpus do negation markers have wide scope (over the sentence) and what are the list of examples where it has narrow scope (over a single word)?

Secondly, our research covers negative pronouns. The question is: are they proper negative pronouns (like English nothing) or NPI (like English ‘not anything’)?

Thirdly, information structure is interesting. Does negation have information structure status of its own or is part of the wide focus? If a negation marker is in the narrow focus, what kind of focus is it? Negation, by its nature, is closely connected to polarity, and contrast might be mixed up in just informative focus in case of negation. Last, but not least, we will explore the syntactic position of negation markers: what other positions, besides the canonical preverbal one and a clause first/initial, are attested in the corpus and with what frequency?

Preliminary considerations on the corpus data

Among 2212 clauses annotated so far on the material of the Middle Hittite letters and instructions, there are 163 clauses with *natta* or NUL.GAL (negative of assertions), 34 clauses with *lē* (negative of prohibition), 3 clauses with *nāwā* (‘not yet’). No material attested for *nāman* or *nēkhu*.

Negation marker in the clause:

- in rhetorical questions might be fronted as well as not fronted,
- fronting is attested only in rhetorical questions.
- the canonical preverbal position is attested in the vast majority of clauses (160 cases), but negation fronting seems to be a regular strategy in 14 cases.
- the negation fronting might be connected with the information structure of the clause, but not in the case of emphatic assertion.

In the annotated part of our corpus, only 27 entries contain negative pronouns. Still, this quantity is quite enough to see the trends. It is well expected, that the most common position of a negation pronoun is preverbal, but there are 4 good examples of fronted negation. As is shown with the examples, negation marker in most clauses tends to have scope over the whole sentence. If the negation marker is fronted, as in (9), it can be detached from the pronoun itself. This means that, most probably, the Hittite putative negative pronouns should be treated as negation marker plus NPI, like English ‘not anything’. Negation marker in this case need not to be adjacent to the pronoun (which is obvious from the case when it is fronted). More data and a proper quantitative analysis of scope of negation should give us some needed information about the nature of these complexes.

References


