‘Let alone’: A typological perspective

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One construction that has traditionally been neglected in the typological study of clause-linkage is that built on ‘let alone’ (e.g. *the baby can’t even talk, let alone walk*). The present study explores ‘let alone’ constructions in a convenience sample of 47 languages. There are languages in which ‘let alone’ clauses appear not only with a clause-linking device, but also with a standard negative marker that can be omitted without affecting the interpretation holding between clauses. In (1), the negative marker *amo* is optional and can be omitted without affecting the ‘let alone’ interpretation holding between clauses. Moreover, there are languages in which standard negation is forbidden in the ‘let alone’ clause (2).

Huasteca Nahuatl (Uto-Aztecan/Aztecan)

(1) *ach-kin-kuah-ki tama-li*,

neg-3pl.obj-eat-pfv tamal-abs

‘He did not eat tamales,

***ni menos*** *(****amo****) ki-kuah-ki sopelik*.

neg less neg 3sg.obj-eat-pfv candy

let alone candy.’

Hungarian (Uralic/Ugric)

(2) *a fiú sétál-ni se sétál a park-ban*,

the boy walk-inf not.even walk.3sg the park-iness

‘The boy would not even walk in the park,

***nemhogy*** *fusson benne*.

conj run.subj.3sg iness.3sg

let alone run in it.’ (Veronika Hegedűs, pers. comm.)

The question is: why are standard negative markers forbidden, or optional in ‘let alone’ clauses? Here it is shown that optional standard negative markers have an expressive-evaluative layer of semantic interpretation or a mirative function. When the standard negative marker appears in the ‘let alone’ clause, the proposition should be characterized as surprising. On the other hand, when the standard negative marker is absent from the ‘let alone’ clause, the proposition does not involve surprise. As for forbidden standard negative markers, I argue that the presence of a negation in the building blocks of the conjunction might be a reason for disallowing a standard negative marker in the ‘let alone’ clause. For instance, in Hungarian, the clause-linking device *nemhogy* originated in two morphemes: the negative marker *nem* and *hogy* ‘that’ (Veronika Hegedűs, pers. comm.).

The paper also investigates whether the analysis advanced for ‘let alone’ clauses can also be generalized to other semantically negative adverbial clause-linkage constructions: ‘without V-ing’ clauses, ‘instead of V-ing’ clauses, and ‘before’ clauses. It is demonstrated that in these adverbial clauses, standard negative markers may be forbidden or optional. Interestingly, there are languages in which standard negation may be obligatory. In this scenario, the ‘without V-ing’, ‘instead of V-ing’, and ‘before’ meanings are compositionally encoded by a standard negative marker together with a general marker.