

# The Desemanticization of the Negative Morpheme *ko* in Dondo

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the desemanticization of the negative morpheme *ko* in the Dondo language, spoken in the Republic of Congo. The work is based on two main approaches, Chomsky's Minimalist Framework and Sangeet Khemlani's Theory of Negation. The study reveals that, semantically, *ko* is selected by simple declarative clauses or sentences to denote negation. It is argued that, semantically, when the negative morpheme *ko* reduces its negative reading impact on a phrase, the phrase it negates undergoes movement. It moves from the final to the initial position of the sentence since it does not negate the entire sentence; it just governs a part of a sentence which can move, as a constituent, from one position to another. However, it derives from the discussion that *ko* can also be used in any sentence type (namely simple or complex declarative and imperative sentences) to express insistence. The contextual meaning of *ko* can be paraphrased or disambiguated either by the exclamatory words *eh!* /*inh/hum* or the morpheme *kwa* (only). Next, it comes out that intonation plays an important role in the understanding of the contextual meaning of *ko*. Generally, the high intonation shows that the insistence expressed by *ko* encodes obligation, angeriness, whereas the low intonation expresses supplication, happiness, or politeness. Hence, the desemanticization does not emanate from grammatical class change; it is rather determined by intonation. It is also demonstrated that *ko* may be duplicated in some contexts where the former expresses the negation and the latter lays emphasis on the supplication.

**Keywords:** Dondo, Desemanticization, Contextual, Semantics, Neg, Ko, Intonation

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## 1. Introduction

This paper aims at analysing the ambiguity or desemanticization of the negator *ko* in Dondo, which is a variety of Kongo language spoken in the south part of the Republic of Congo, particularly in Boko-Songho district located in the Bouenza region. According to Guthrie [1], Dondo belongs to the group H (Kongo language) classified as H17a. The scrutiny sheds light on the pragmatics of *ko* by paying particular attention to how it forfeits its negative meaning from one context to another. For this purpose, the analysis addresses the following questions: 1) What are the semantic features of *ko* within the structures in which it occurs? 2) In which kinds of structures is *ko* sensitive to express a contextual meaning? 3) Is the desemanticization of *ko* due to its delexicalization? 4) Does intonation influence

the contextual meaning encoded by *ko*? Focusing on Chomsky's [2] Minimalist Framework and Khemlani's [3] Theory of Negation, the paper is characterized by two sections: the theoretical background and the desemanticization of the negative morpheme of *ko*. Data are mainly taken from Mpambou Moukembo [4].

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Dondo Language

Dondo is a dialect of Kongo spoken by the Badondo people located in the south-east of the Republic of Congo, particularly in the Bouenza region within two districts, namely Boko-songho and Mfouati, and in a very limited part of the Pool department around Kimbedi (Bakala [5]). Kongo, also known as Kongo dia Ntotila, was among the

most famous kingdoms in central Africa. This kingdom occupied the current regions of the northern part of Angola, the western portion of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cabinda, and the Republic of Congo (Mpambou Moukembo, [4]). The author argues that from 1575, the Portuguese established a colony in Luanda (Angola), just close to the south of Congo, and some governors used the position to launch raids into Kongo to gather slaves or in an attempt to take tracts of territory. In 1622, a full-scale Portuguese invasion from Angola was eventually beaten off. Yet, in 1665, Kongo suffered a serious defeat at the battle of Mbila, resulting in the death of King Antonio I and many of his nobles (Mpambou Moukembo [4]). Kongo was plunged into half a century of civil war, which included the abandonment of the capital. That abandonment caused many Kongo people to leave their native area to live in many different areas, which are a bit far from their invaded native area. Today, these different foreign areas give rise to different ethnicities and/or dialects of Kongo, namely Sudi, Vili, Kamba, Bembe, and Dondo, to quote but a few. Under these circumstances, Guthrie [1] linguistically classifies Kongo in the group H. It H subsumes the Dondo variety, classified as H17a. However, this study is based on Chomsky's minimalism program and Khemlani's theory of negation.

## 2.2. Minimalism Program

The Minimalism Program (MP) is the recent version of Chomsky [6] Transformational Generative Grammar. Two main reasons prompted Chomsky to introduce this grammar: (i) the presence of multiple rules or principles that render the analysis of languages difficult in the previous grammars; and (ii) the introduction or modification of technical terminologies. As a matter of fact, MP aims at minimizing the principles required for the description and accounting of structures with the impulse of further developing the ideas which involve the economy of derivation (Chomsky [6]).

Accordingly, Obiamalu [7] argues that the general assumption in the MP is that there are just two interacting systems in the component of the human brain dedicated to language - the language Faculty. These two interacting systems are the articulatory-perceptual system (A-P) and the conceptual-intentional system (C-I). The Phonological Form (PF) is connected with the A-P system, while the Logical Form (LF) is connected with the C-I system. Apart from these two interface levels PF and LF, there are no other levels of linguistic structure, specifically, no levels of D-structure or S-structure as we have it in the standard GB framework.

Obiamalu's [7] assertion means that among many representations (Deep and Surface structures, Logical Form and Phonetic Form), MP keeps two main representations, namely the conceptual-intentional system (C-I henceforth) well known as Logical Form (LF) and Articulatory-perceptual system (A-P) also known as Phonetic Form (PF) (Chomsky [6]). Between Deep and S-structures, the only representation which remains usable is the S-structure

technically known as Spell out (Chomsky [6]). That is, the concept Deep structure which existed in the previous theories, is erased in MP since according to Zwart [8], D-Structure is eliminated in the sense that there is no base component applying rewrite rules to generate an empty structure which is to be fleshed out later by 'all at once' lexical insertion. Instead, structures are created by combining elements drawn from the lexicon, and there is no stage in the process at which we can stop and say: this is D-Structure. The approach leads to a unification of insertion (merge) and movement, which differs from merge only in that the element to be merged is contained in the target of merger.

It comes out from the above quotation that, in MP, a given structure does not go from D-structure to S-structure to be derived or transformed. What is remarkable is that derivation does not involve only movement. In fact, derivation occurs when words drawn from the lexicon, via numeration or lexical array are combined or merged to form a structure. In Obiamalu's [7] words, MP claims that derivation has no starting point per se in the sense of D-structure analysis, but rather involves the merging of lexical items drawn from the lexicon to build up constituent structure. There are various possible derivations that have to compete for convergence and all these derivations have access to the same lexical resources. In that sense, MP derivations start from a set of lexical resources [...]. Computation involves putting lexical items together and competition among derivations involves comparison of computations on the same set of lexical items.

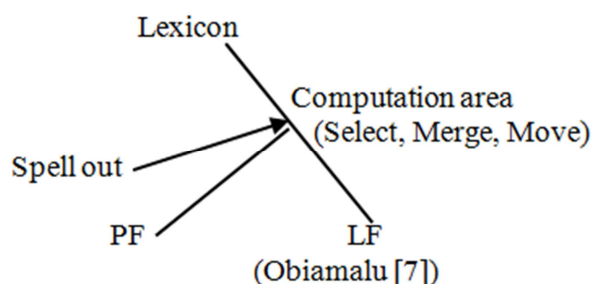
It results from this assertion that Derived structures are obtained when merging lexical items are drawn from the lexicon. Indeed, within MP, words are fully formed in the lexicon, i.e., they are equipped with their affixes denoting number, gender, tense, and case, to cite but a few. As it is argued above, the features of one word compete with those of another word at the moment of merger. Consider:

(1) Kids like toys.

(Mpambou Moukembo, [4])

In this example, the author explains that the plural noun *kids*, for example, is not analysed separately at lexicon level within MP. The noun *kids* is listed together with all its grammatical features as *kids*. However, within the previous theories, *kids* is listed as *kids* (+ plural, + male/female, etc.) (Nweke, [9]). As word merger is computational, it is clear that the LF and PF do not depend on each other since the sound-meaning link is described as a derivation, taking a single array of lexical elements as its input (the numeration), and the two interface representations PF and LF as its output (Mpambou Moukembo, [4]). As such, the two interface representations are different, and one is not derived from the other. The point in the derivation where the computation splits is called Spell Out, formerly called S-structure. The derivation from Spell Out to LF is just a continuation of the derivation from the Numeration to Spell Out, with the exception that no new elements can be added from the Numeration. Thus, the grammar in MP is organized in the schema below:

(2)



This version is important in the carrying out of this paper in the fact that, unlike the previous versions of TGG, the Minimalist Framework allows additional functional projections between Verb Phrases and Complementizer Phrases. Such projections include TP, AspP, and NegP Mpambou, [4]. This allows us to analyse negation as a functional projection (NegP) in Dondo. Likewise, the choice is also motivated by the fact that MP advocates the morphosyntactic features of lexemes. Obviously, in Dondo, negation is not only syntactically, but also morpho-syntactically based, specifically in the case of negation in imperative sentences. However, the Khemlani theory of negation is the second approach chosen to carry out this study.

### 2.3. Theory of Negation

The Theory of Negation, developed by Khemlani [3], is a theory which explains the way negation can be understood and interpreted. In this theory, based on the notion of scope, negation is interpreted syntactically (grammar), semantically, and pragmatically. According to him [3], we begin with grammar, because negation is one of its elements. But negation has an important effect on meaning. The model theory, as we have already described, postulates that individuals use the meaning of an assertion to envisage the possibilities to which it refers: each distinct possibility is mentally represented in an iconic model of what is common to the different ways in which the possibility can occur. The theory postulates that negation refers to the complement of those models to which the corresponding affirmative assertion, or corresponding affirmative constituent, refers.

It comes out from this assertion that the interpretation of negation begins with grammar, namely syntax. This syntactic interpretation will establish a correlation between the assertion meaning (presupposition) and its corresponding negative sentence.

In addition to syntax, other domains are also very important, namely semantics and pragmatics. Yet, in the analysis of negation, the main factor which implies the three linguistic domains is the notion of scope. Syntactico-semantically, the scope is an important element which seeks to show which constituent of the sentence is negated, i.e., either the Neg operator negates the phrase or the entire sentence. In other issues, when the sentence has more than one clause, Khemlani suggests two types of scope, namely a

smaller scope and a larger one, in the analysis of such a sentence. He considers the following:

(3) It is not the case both that the election is next month and that people are registered to vote.

Mpambou Moukembo [4] asserts that this sentence is made of many clauses. To identify the negated clause, one has to proceed by smaller or larger scope analysis labelled as Not E or Not R, or neither E nor R. From this, Khemlani [3] proposes the following possibilities:

(4) a)  $\neg E \neg R$

b)  $\neg E R$

c)  $E \neg R$

In (5) above, E stands for “the election is next month”, R for “Viv has registered to vote”, and  $\neg$  represents a Neg word. As such, (4a) illustrates that the two clauses are negated by the Neg positioned in the ForceP. (4b) demonstrates that the negator (Neg) in the ForceP affects the first clause (*that the election is next month*). Likewise, (4c) shows that the scope of the Neg is limited to the second clause (*that people are registered to vote*).

Next, negation can also be interpreted based on the presupposition of conservation or cancellation. In this context, a smaller scope is used in the interpretation of the negated sentence, which says some states of affairs (syntactic and semantic implication to talk about presupposition conservation). While a larger scope is implied in the interpretation of a negated sentence, which does not assert some states of affairs, pragmatics implication is to talk about presupposition cancellation, desemanticization, or functional change, wherein we take into account the social dimension of negation (Wallage [10]). Let us consider the following example from Cruse [11]:

(5) The present king of France is not bald.

(Cruse [11] & Vojnić [12])

Traditionally, based on philosophers’ logic, a negative sentence is univocal; i.e., it must refer to an assertive sentence, which asserts some states of affairs. The Neg *not* must semantically reflect its natural meaning, not the social or connotative meaning (Mpambou Moukembo [4]). In so doing, Vojnić [12] writes that one has to consider how the logical operator for negation reflects the use of the word ‘not’ in natural language. In order to formalize certain sentences, we have to consider the rules of logical connectives and how they interact with each other. It seems fairly intuitive that to provide an opposite truth value to a certain proposition, we have to employ the negation operator [...] The narrow view of a ‘formal’ operator concerns only those cases in which the logical operator mirrors what can be formalized in the natural language in those instances where the word ‘not’ is present. Here, negation is viewed strictly as a logical form.

With reference to this assertion, Mpambou Moukembo [4] explains that the Neg *not* must be semantic. It ought to be used in sentences where it expresses a natural negative meaning. This natural use of *not* will establish a logical link between the assertive sentence, and its negative counterpart sentence since negation, for logicians, implies presupposition preservation. As such, the Neg *not* must play, according to

Ndongo Ibara [13], the role of exclusion and contradiction; it must mirror the reality badly reported by the speaker in the background information. In this context, this point of view puts aside the sentence (5) above. This is so because when one applies the logic of presupposition preservation, no one can guess what the sentence “*The present king of France is not bald*” in (5) can refer to, as the actual political regime of France does not fit for a king ruling. Obviously, it is argued that the way *not* is used in this sentence, violates the Law of Contradiction (LC) and the Law of the Excluded Middle (LEM) (Mpambou Moukembo [4]).

Accordingly, for Brandtler [14], the first requires the positive and the negative sentence not to be true or false simultaneously, and the latter stipulates that between two opposite propositions, one should be true. When we render this sentence positive, we realise that the two sentences are false. In fact, one of them must be true (by virtue of LEM), and the other must be false by virtue of LC.

In other words, Brandtler [14] argues that if the subject denotes an entity that does not exist, the positive and its corresponding negative sentence must be false since it is not possible for a dead or a nonexistent man to be or not to be bald. In this context, in order, for an assertion or a sentence to be either true or false, its presupposition must be true or satisfied. In this case, Brandtler reminds us of Aristotle’s original claim, stipulating that every proposition must be of subject-predicate form to be (semantically) well-formed. The subject must name something which exists in the discourse of the universe.

Yet, as negation is used from one context to another, Khemlani [3] suggests that “*negation should be explained under the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic fields*”. That is, if semantics finds (5) ambiguous and not relevant to be syntactically and semantically analysed, pragmatics does not. As a matter of fact, by asserting in (6) what the speaker believes to be false, he violates one of the four maxims of Grice’s [15] cooperative principles, in occurrence the maxim of quality. At that time, there is the emergence of implicature that is decoded by the hearer through inference. Accordingly, Ngapoula [16] claims that the recognition of the role played by inference in the understanding of a discourse is prompted by the requirement of understanding the distinction between “what is said” and “what is meant”.

Therefore, inference will help the audience understand the speaker’s intended meaning. Probably, the *present King of France* refers to the present leader or president of France. He is exclaimed the King of France because of some of his decisions that France’s inhabitants find too rigorous (Mpambou Moukembo [4]). So, based on Chomsky and Khemlani’s theories, let us examine the desemanticization of the Dondo negation *ko*.

### 3. The Desemanticization of *ko*

This section subsumes two subsections, namely the syntactico-semantic and the contextual or pragmatic features of *ko*.

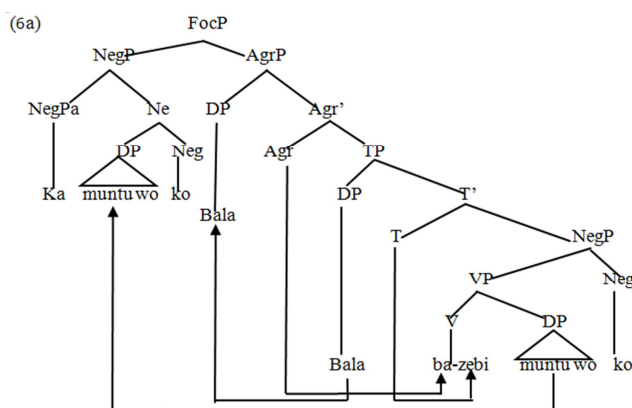
#### 3.1. The Syntactic and Semantic Features of *ko*

In Dondo, the selection of a NEG depends on the type of sentence. In this subpart, we are going to examine some examples wherein the Neg *ko* is sensitive to negating either a phrase or a sentence. Consider:

- (6) a) Ka muntu wo ko Bala ba-zebi  
NegPa person that not he-knows  
“Not that person, children know”  
b) Ka miti mia miwo ko ka-kwengi  
NegPa trees of all not he-cut  
“Not all trees he has cut down”  
c) Bala ba-zebi muntu wo ko  
Children Agr-knew person that Not  
“Children do not know that person”  
d) Tata ka n-keti ko mu dimanga di na-le-dia  
Father NegPa I-beat not for mango that I-Neg-eat  
“The father did not beat me for the mango that I have not eaten”  
e) Ka-dia-andi Ngazi zi  
He-eat-Neg Nuts these  
“Tell him not to eat those palm nuts”

It comes out that the Neg *ko* is usually selected by phrases or simple declarative clauses. The examples in (6a) and (6b) illustrate phrasal negation. As a matter of fact, the Neg *ko* post specifies the noun *muntu* (person) as in (6a) or the quantifier *miwo* (all) as in (6b). Semantically, when *ko* reduces its negative reading impact on a phrase, the phrase it negates undergoes movement. That is, *ko* moves from the final to the initial position of the sentence since it does not negate the entire sentence; it just governs a part of a sentence which can, as it is a constituent, move from one position to another.

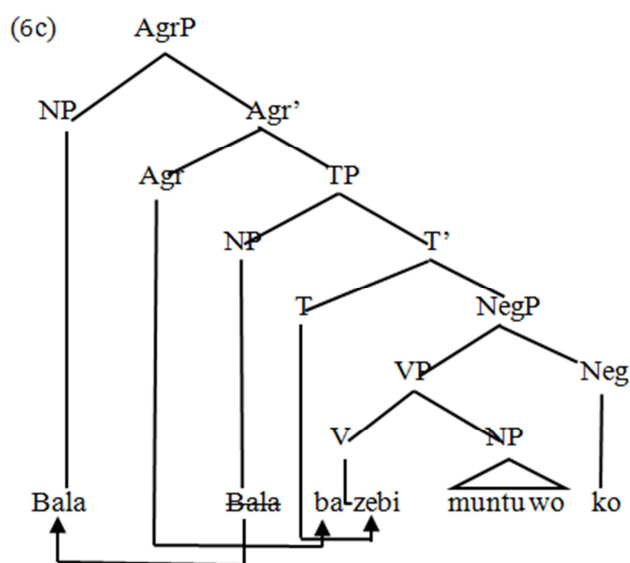
Besides, the issue worthy of attention is that, the presence of the negative partitive (NegPa) *ka* in 6a, 6b, 6d, and 6e justifies the narrow negation scope of *ko* which discontinuously co-occurs with it (*ka ...DP (muntu wo)...ko*). In fact, in Dondo, the fundamental word order is SVO. However, the OSV order is constrained by the presence of the NegPa *ka*. That is, the object is fronted because of the morpheme *ka* which always participates in the negation of a phrase, as schematized below:



In addition, (6c) exemplifies sentential negation. Basically,



the Neg *ko* does not need the NegPa *ka*, when it entirely covers a sentence. It is mostly selected by a simple declarative clause, or sentence. The CP selects the morpheme *le-* prefixed to the verb as in (6d). Accordingly, there are situations in which the matrix and the lower clause are negated at the same time. The matrix selects the Neg *ko* and the lower (or infinite) clause the negative morpheme *le-*. Yet, it is proved that the occurrence of a Neg in one clause does not mean that its negation affects both the matrix and the lower (or infinitive) clauses. Negation in (6d) is clause based. The imperative is negated by the bound morpheme *-andi* suffixed to the verb. Let us consider the following skeletonized declarative sentence:



From the above example, Mpambou Moukembo [4] demonstrates that this bound morpheme cannot semantically co-occur with the Neg *ko* which, otherwise, has pragmatic features.

### 3.2. The Contextual or Pragmatic Features of *ko*

This section is devoted to the exploration of the contextual meaning of the negator *ko* within a structure. Let us consider the following dialogue between B and A:

(7) a) A: *Mazono kusala kwingi na-siri, m-fatikiri buabu, yiza wu m-bakisa*

Yesterday work much I-did, I-tired now, come to me-help

“Yesterday, I worked so much; I’m tired now, come and help me”

b) B: *Ah! Meno mpe m-fatikiri kuani hein, ok! Kinga bo*

Ah! Me too I-tired me hein; ok! Wait for

“Ah! I’m tired too, hein; anyway! Wait”

c) A: *eh! Kueri wari*

Eh! Where are

“Eh! Where are you?”

d) B: *Meno yando, ah m-fatikiri*

Me come, ah! I-tire

“I’m coming, ah! I’m tired”

e) A: *Ah! Yiza/yiz-eti ko/ Ah! Yiza/yiz-eti ko*

Ah! come/Ah! come-you, please!

“Ah! come!”/ “come, please”

f) B: *Ah! Ah na-yiz-ani ko ko, oh!*

Ah I-come-me not please!

“Ah! I won’t come, if you please!”

g) A: *ale bo-dia mpe*

and you-eat then

“And will you eat?”

h) B: *eh! Na dia ko*

eh! I-eat yes

“Of course, I will eat?”

i) A: *eh! Matondo*

eh! thanks

“eh! never mind!”

It is argued in (6) that *ko* is semantically selected by simple declarative clauses or sentences to denote negation. However, it comes out from the dialogue above that the morpheme *ko* can also be used in any sentence type (namely simple, complex, bound, and imperative clauses or sentences) to express insistence, an emphatic sentence, or a contextual meaning. In (7), the Neg *ko* occurs in imperative sentences as in (7e). Indeed, we notice in the first part of the utterance, the use of a high tone, expressing an order or command. For this speech act to be successful, one of the felicity conditions has to be observed, the speaker must have authority over the hearer. In the subsequent part of the utterance, however, with the use of a low tone, it consists of a request. Following Austin [17], the perlocution excepted by the speaker is the fact of coming on behalf of the hearer.

Moreover, in nonassertive declarative sentences, as in (7f) “Ah! Ah na-yiz-ani ko ko, oh!”, in assertive declarative sentences, as in (7h), the locutionary force is the insistence expression. Thus, *ko* occurs in such a context to lay stress on the performance of the action, which denotes supplication, hopelessness, sadness, politeness, angeriness, or sometimes happiness.

As such, the example in (7e) illustrates that speaker A called Speaker B who did not accept as quickly as possible speaker A’s call, as in “yiza wu m-bakisa” *come and help me* in (7a) and in its counterpart “Ah! Meno mpe m-fatikiri kuani hein! Kinga bo” *Ah! I’m tired too, hein; anyway! Wait*. The answer of Speaker B in (7b) does not satisfy the desire of Speaker A, since he (speaker A) needs a little help from speaker B. To show how much he is angry and wants his hearer to react quickly, he uses the morpheme *ko* in “Ah! Yiza/yiz-eti ko” *Ah! come*. In (7h), the hearer is neither angry, sad nor hopeless. He uses *ko* to confirm that he is hungry and shall eat. In this context, *ko* is not used to express negation; it rather means “of course”.

Based on Allan’s [18] delexical verbs and the degree of desemanticization, the desemanticization can be determined by the grammatical class change. Indeed, in (7), the NEG *ko* always occupies the same position, wherein it expresses sentential negation or insistence. The issue is that the contextual meaning of *ko* in (7) does not emanate from the words that surround it.

This amounts to saying that the presence of *ko* to express meaning, which has nothing to do with negation, is not enough. That is, without the intonation, no one can guess that the morpheme *ko* forfeits its negative meaning. The intonation strongly desemanticizes the natural meaning of *ko*. Thus, through intonation, we infer the meaning intended to us by the speaker. That is the reason why Ngapoula [19] asserts that an inferential theory of communication, such as relevance theory, is an essential requirement in our everyday communication. In this perspective, let us note that, the features of supplication, obligation, anger, sadness, politeness, or happiness depend on whether the intonation is high or low. Basically, the features obligation, anger, and sadness are denoted by *ko* are high intonation dependent.

However, the features of supplication, politeness, and happiness are expressed by *ko*, when the intonation is low, as is the case in the nonassertive imperative sentence in (7h). Dondo speakers use the low intonation to pamper someone who is ill and does not want to eat, for instance. In other contexts, the low or high intonations depend on the socio-cultural relationships of the participants.

The only case, which can help us identify *ko* as an assertive item expressing insistence without a great impact of intonation is, when it is used in a nonassertive structure as in (7f) above and in (8) below.

(8) Ah! *wiza/yiza-andi ko*

Ah! Come/come-not, please!

“Ah! don’t come, if you please!”

It is certain that the co-occurrence of *andi* and *ko* expresses neither double negation nor negative polarity item licensing. That is, *ko* does not alter into an assertive item or any word to pick its negative features from the negator of the imperative sentence, *-andi*. Likewise, *ko* can be duplicated within the sentence wherein it is selected as a negator, as in (7f) above. In this circumstance, the first *ko* expresses negation, while the second does not. This does not also mean that the second *ko* alters into an assertive word to pick up its Neg features from the Neg *ko*.

In addition, in declarative sentences, Dondo speakers often use exclamatory words such as *eh!*, *hum!* or their paraphrased meaning encoded by *kwa* (only) to disambiguate the contextual meaning of *ko* as in the following dialogue between A and B:

(9) a) A: *yiza wu m-bakisa*

come to me-help

“come and help me”

b) B: *Na-yiz-ani ko*,

I-come-me not!

“I won’t come, sorry!”

c) A: *mulemvo-aku!*

Pardon-you

“I beg you!”

d) B: *eh!/inh/hum! na-yiz-ani ko, oh!*

eh!/inh inh/hum! I-come-me not please!

“eh!/inh inh/hum! I won’t come, please!”

e) A: *Ah! Yiza/yiz-eti kwa*

Come/come-you, please!

“Come, please!”

f) B: *kilendi ko*

arrive not

“Never”

The paraphrased meaning expressed by *kwa* (only) and the exclamatory words *eh/inh/hum* also bear a high intonation, which is not so pragmatically stronger than what *ko* bears. Generally, when the hearer uses *ko* to show how much he dislikes the speaker’s insistence, there is often a very bad social atmosphere between the participants since the speaker, after the hearer’s reaction, cannot keep on insisting.

## 4. Conclusion

Simple declarative clauses or sentences in negative form are essentially what select the morpheme *ko*. Yet, it is argued that *ko* can occur in any sentence type (even in imperative sentences and CP) to express not only the negation but also the insistence. This insistence has a value that denotes obligation, supplication, anger, politeness, or happiness. The desemanticization of the negator *ko* operates thanks to the implication of intonation (the extra linguistic/prosodic features), which can be either high or low. Hence, the contextual meaning of *ko* is intonation-dependent. When the intonation is not implied, the speaker selects exclamatory words or the morpheme *kwa* (only), which unfortunately does not demonstrate the delexicalization of *ko*. Thus, the desemanticization here does not derive from the shift of the grammatical category; it is rather prosodic. The desemanticization of *ko* can also be analysed in ghost negated sentences and/or negative Concord. However, this study does not deeply deal with the impact of the use of the negative particle *ka* and the bound morpheme *andi* in the expression of the negation in Dondo. Future research work in this language should particularly focus on their co-occurrence with the morpheme *ko* and the negative polarity items such as *kinioko* (anything) and *kani* (not/any) in order to check whether the negative concord attests the Neg criterion.

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