

THE PATH OF ACQUISITION VS. LEARNING OF ENGLISH NEGATION

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Abstract: *The paper analyses the errors made by adult L1 Romanian and Bulgarian speakers learning English in the field of negation in the context of the debate regarding the existence of universal constraints in the process of second (L2) language acquisition and the source of such constraints. We review some of the proposals put forth in the literature regarding the properties of the interlanguage in the process of L2 acquisition and the accounts for the deviations from L2 grammar, particularly regarding the availability of access to Universal Grammar principles. In the second section we present the process of first (L1) language acquisition of negation by native English children, focusing on the early deviations from adult grammar and possible explanations for these apparent errors. The third section analyses sentences produced by adult L1 Romanian and Bulgarian speakers, comparing the errors identified both between the two sets of L2 speakers, contrasting the findings to other studies available in the second language acquisition literature, and to those reported for L1 English speakers. We provide arguments for the existence of similar constraints that guide L2 learners, showing that the errors present in both corpora show similar patterns of deviation from L1 grammar. While there are similarities between L1 and L2 errors, the analysis shows that the L1 and L2 acquisition of English negation is not a uniform process, certain errors being characteristic to L2 learners alone. These errors are, nonetheless, shown to be consistent with UG.¹*

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1. Second language acquisition and Universal Grammar

With the advent of generativism and the proposal that there is a genetic base for the process of acquiring one's native language, an ability referred to as *the language faculty* (Chomsky, 1965) or *the language instinct* (Pinker, 1994), and the positing of a series of innate constraints that guide children in the process of language acquisition, subsumed under the concept of Universal Grammar, there was a surge in the interest of identifying similar universal principles in

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the process of learning a foreign language, or second language (L2) acquisition.

Among the first studies exploring the possibility of a set of universal constraints in the process of L2 acquisition are Adjemian (1976), Corder (1967) Nemser (1971), quoted in White (2003:18), who have shown that the errors made by L2 learners exhibit similarities which were analysed as being indicative of a set of similar constraints guiding the process of second language acquisition. One of the most prominent studies is Selinker (1972), who introduced the concept of *interlanguage* to describe the intermediate stages that L2 language learners go through in the process of learning the foreign language. According to Selinker, these intermediate stages represent bona fine languages, governed by systematic rules, which may be different from both L1 and L2 rules. He proposed that the interlanguage is characterized by over-generalization of L2 structures, as learners do not simply imitate native speakers, transfer of L1 structures and rules and fossilization.

While the notion of interlanguage and the existence of a set of principles constraining second language acquisition have been adopted by several linguists, there is disagreement regarding the nature of these principles and the origin of the deviations from L1. As White (2003:20) points out, the problem of the source of knowledge in the process of L2 acquisition is, sometimes, recast as the *poverty of the stimulus* problem (Chomsky 1965) invoked by the nativist theory as an argument for the innate basis for language acquisition: the input is not informative enough to account for the knowledge that L1 learners possess, i.e. the acquisition of certain constructions requires information about language-specific structure-based rules which is not apparent in the input. This has led certain linguists to assume that the same constraints that are active in the process of L1 acquisition are also at work in L2 acquisition. The accounts assuming a similarity between L1 and L2 acquisition are subsumed under the *Fundamental Identity Hypothesis*. Ellis (1994), quoted in Farahani, Mehrdad and Ahghar (2014:299) claims, along the lines of Selinker (1972), that the L2 learners' grammars, i.e. the interlanguages, are not random, wild grammars, but they observe the main principles of natural languages, being subject to similar constraints.

There is variation among the *Fundamental Identity Hypothesis* accounts regarding the role of UG in L2 acquisition. Epstein et al. (1996:751) and Flynn (1996), quoted in White (2003:20) argue that the first interlanguage stage is represented by UG, with all the functional categories and features values in place. Under this hypothesis, L2 learners never resort to L1 in the process of L2 acquisition, all deviations from L2 being accounted for as UG-L2 mismatches. Similarly to the analyses within the Strong Continuity Hypothesis for L1 acquisition, such proposals must face the problem of accounting for the presence of errors that are not supported by the theory.

At the opposite end is the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis, proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1994, 1996), quoted in White (2003:27). According to them, the initial interlanguage stage borrows from L1 syntax, while deviating from it and being constrained by UG, in the sense that the learners' hypotheses and errors are based on functional categories and accounted for in terms of feature strength, in minimalist terms. The linguists argue that, even though learners may not attain L2 competence later, the deviations represent options allowed by UG. Self-correction involves the resetting of parameters/feature properties triggered by the L2 input, similarly to the process of L1 acquisition. Other accounts assume a more moderate position: Farahani, Mehrdad and Ahghar (2014:300) mention that proposals such as Flynn (1987) assume that "principles not applicable to the second language learner's L1, but needed for the L2, will constrain the L2 learner's interlanguage". Under these accounts there is parameter resetting triggered by sufficient exposure to L2 input.

Other proposals involve a weaker theory of UG access. Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994), quoted in Prevost (1997:16), put forth the Minimal Trees Hypothesis, similar to the Truncation Theory proposed for first language acquisition. They argue that the initial interlanguage stage contains no functional categories, only lexical ones, based on the L1 grammar. They assume that L2 functional categories are acquired gradually, in a manner similar to L1 acquisition. A similar approach is assumed by Prevost (1997). Another theory assuming an underspecified initial interlanguage is the Weak Transfer Hypothesis proposed by Eubank (1992, 1994), quoted in Prevost (1997:131), which claims that, while the initial stage is based on L1 lexical and functional categories, the associated features are unspecified. According to the proposal, this accounts for some word order variations observed in the L2 learners' interlanguage.

The opposite view is the *Fundamental Difference Hypothesis*, according to which innate mechanisms and knowledge are only operative in L1 acquisition, L2 learners relying on general cognitive skills in processing the input.

"The function of the domain specific acquisition system is filled in adults (though indirectly and imperfectly) by this native language knowledge and by general abstract problem-solving system. I shall call this proposal the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis" (Bley-Vroman's 1989: 50, quoted in Farahani, Mehrdad and Ahghar 2014: 299)

Lack of access to UG is grounded by some linguists in the differences between the interlanguage and L2. Schachter (1989, 1990), quoted in White (2003: 24), interpreted L2 learners' errors related to wh-movement out of island

constructions in English as evidence for the inoperativeness of the related UG principle in L2. However, as many linguists have argued, L2 convergence is not a prerequisite or a diagnostic criterion for access to UG, since the variations may, nevertheless, be constrained by UG principles.

Failure to acquire L2 properties may nevertheless involve acquiring properties different from the L1, properties of other natural languages, properties that are underdetermined by the L2 input. Such failure does not necessarily entail lack of UG. (White 2003: 25)

The approach to L2 learners' errors goes beyond the UG debate. From Selinker forward, a plethora of studies, supporting or rejecting UG access, have argued for the independent treatment of the interlanguage as a true natural language with its own principles which may diverge from both L1 and L2, not just a distorted version of L2.

2. The L1 acquisition of English negation

In one of the first studies on the acquisition of negation in English, Klima and Bellugi (1966), quoted in Gilkerson, Hyams and Curtiss (2004: 175), investigating a longitudinal corpus comprised of naturally occurring utterances produced by three English children (Adam, Eve and Sarah), propose that English children go through three stages in the process of acquiring negation:

- a. an external negation stage, when they use both the negators *no* and *not* in sentence-initial or sentence-final position, exemplified in (1);
- b. a second stage, when the negative marker appears mostly inside the clause, in the standard adult English position, but auxiliaries are mostly absent, as in example (2);
- c. the third stage, when auxiliary verbs are consistently produced, child negative sentences resembling adult language.

- (1) a. **No** the sun shining. (Adam)
b. Take it...**no**. (Adam)
- (2) a. He **no** bite you. (Sarah)
b. He **don't** want some money. (Adam)
- (Thornton 2020: 602)
- c. He **not** little, he big. (Gilkerson, Hyams and Curtiss (2004: 175)

According to the two authors, during the first stage, the negative marker is outside the clause. Some studies challenge this analysis assuming either that the examples in (1) represent metalinguistic negation (Drozt 1995, quoted in Thornton 2020: 602) or that they do not differ from adult English in the position of negation but in the position of the subject (Deprez and Pierce 1993).

As Thornton points out, the position of the negative marker in such examples is hard to determine due to the fact that during the first stage children use both *not* and *no* to express sentence negation and the sentences consist of few words, frequently lacking the subject, although studies on sign language appear to support Klima and Bellugi's analysis of examples (1) as sentential, not metalinguistic negation.

During the second stage, children continue to use both markers, *not* being more frequently employed, their position being clause-internal. Deprez and Pierce (1993) argue that this is a consequence of children resetting the subject parameter and thus no longer producing clauses with VP-internal subjects. During this stage children start producing the first negative auxiliaries, *don't* and *can't*. Klima and Bellugi and later studies analyse these forms as frozen, i.e. children do not decompose these negative auxiliaries into inflection and negation morphemes but treat them as negative adverbs. Thornton (2020: 606) accounts for English children's delay in acquiring adult-like sentential negation in terms of the difficulty of determining the status of negation, as head or as adverb, both forms of negation being available in English. According to the linguist, children start with an adverbial status of negative markers, which they must reset to a head status in order to produce adult negative constructions. Thornton and Tesan (2013) argue that this is dependent on the correct analysis of negative auxiliary forms such as *don't* and *doesn't* as contracted auxiliary+negation forms. Thornton and Rombough (2015), quoted in Thornton (2020: 607), designed an elicitation experiment and found that half of the tested children, aged between two and three, produced non-adult negative structures, using either *not* or the form *don't* as negative markers.

- (3) a. He **not/ don't** fit.
b. He's **not/ don't** fit.
c. He **not/ don't** fits.

Examples (3b) and (3c) are indicative of the children's failure to decompose the form *don't* into the auxiliary and the negative marker, as they attach the morpheme *-s* to the lexical verb *fit* (3) or the subject (2) and not to the auxiliary verb *do*. Further evidence for a negative adverbial analysis of the form *don't* comes from sentences such as (4) which appeared in 40% of the negative questions elicited by Guasti, Thornton, and Wexler (1995), quoted in Thornton (2020: 609), in an experiment testing children with the ages between 3;8 and 4;7.

- (4) What kind of bread **do** you **don't** like? Rosy (3;10)
Guasti, Thornton, and Wexler (1995:228), quoted in Thornton (2020: 609)

Thornton and Tesan (2013) also found that children fail to decompose the form *don't* even after they have acquired the auxiliary verb *do* and started using it correctly in affirmative sentences. According to them, children stop producing such deviant clauses once they start analysing the form *doesn't* as a syncretic aux+agr+not.

Another type of error found in early child negative structures involves negative concord sentences, i.e. multiple negative words interpreted as a single semantic negation, in contexts where adult Standard English would require a double negation reading, the negative items cancelling each other.

- (5) a. I **didn't** do **nothing**. (Adam 3;5)
b. Because **nobody didn't** broke it. (Adam 4;5)

Thornton, Notley, Moscati and Crain (2016:8)

Thornton, Notley, Moscati and Crain (2016:6) adopt Zeijlstra (2004)'s analysis of languages in which the negative marker is a syntactic head as negative concord languages and languages in which negation is an adverb as double negation languages as well as the proposal that the default value of negation is that of adverb and test the implications of this theory for the acquisition of English negation, namely that, once they correctly reset the value of negation as a syntactic head, English children should assume that English is a negative concord language. They designed an experiment involving judgement tasks and tested children aged 3;8 – 5;8 whose primary input was a double negation variety of English against a control group of adult English speakers. The results indicated that the adults assigned a double negation interpretation for 82% of the sentences involving multiple negative words, rejecting even negative concord interpretations that were correct in the given scenario. Children accepted double negation interpretations in 25% of the cases, showing a marked preference for negative concord interpretations. The findings thus support the initial hypothesis that the head status of negation is correlated with negative concord interpretations. To account for children's preference for negative concord interpretations while also accepting sentences with a single negative marker, the authors propose that children's grammar allows for both values of the negative concord parameter, so children can, in principle, assign both interpretations, but show a preference for negative concord due to the higher processing complexity of double negation interpretations.

3. The process of acquiring English negation by L1 Romanian and Bulgarian adult learners

In this section we analyse the errors made by adult Romanian and Bulgarian speakers of English. The L1 Bulgarian corpus is extracted from Grozdanova

(1988) and consists of sentences produced by adult learners of English during the initial stage of a study carried out by the G.A. Nasser Foreign Language Centre, while the Romanian corpus consists of test answers provided by adult learners with late or insufficient exposure to English. The choice of age group is motivated by the fact that adult learners show a more gradual development of language skills and thus provide more evidence for the progression of interlanguage levels compared to children, who, when exposed to sufficient input at an early age, reach native-like competence fast.

The corpus analysis has revealed that the errors made by Bulgarian and Romanian L2 learners of English follow the same pattern as those identified in the early stages of English L1 acquisition of negation. Grozdanova found that some adult Bulgarian speakers use simultaneously the markers *not* and *no* to indicate sentence negation.

- (6) a. I have **no** much money.
b. Ask him whether he will go or **no**. (Grozdanova 1988: 52)

Example (6a) may, in fact, involve the quantifier *no* and be due to overgeneralization from the phrase *no money*, the learner not being aware that the two quantifiers *no* and *much* cannot co-occur or that phrasal negation is marked by the marker *not* in English. The position of the negative marker seems to prompt such an analysis, although post-verbal insertion of the negative marker is found in other examples in the Bulgarian corpus. Example (6b) unambiguously involves sentence negation. As Grozdanova notes, such errors may not be due to transfer (Bulgarian employs a single negative marker) given that they are encountered in the first two stages of L1 acquisition of English negation as well, and, thus, may be analysed as part of the developmental path. Such errors were not found in the Romanian corpus but are mentioned in Sanchez and Austin (2020: 677) for both child and adult L2 learners.

Zeijlstra (2004) analyses both Bulgarian and Romanian as strict negative concord languages, the negative markers *ne* (не) and *nu*, respectively, having a head status and appearing in pre-verbal position. Hence, errors such as (7a,b) for L1 Bulgarian and (8) for L1 Romanian may be analysed as cases of transfer, the order of the constituents matching the Bulgarian/Romanian one.

- (7) a. He **not** is a student.
b. I **not** saw John. (Grozdanova 1988: 53)
(8) They **not** believed the whole story.

The examples above may also be interpreted in terms of parameter setting, as involving verb raising, under the influence of L1, in line with the proposal put

forth by Schwartz and Sprouse (1994), being constrained by UG. Variation in the relative positions of tense and negation in case of L1-L2 mismatches are mentioned by Sanchez and Austin (2020: 671). An analysis in terms of different parameter setting, or feature value, not construction transfer, is supported by the sentences (9a,b) involving post-verbal negation. Such examples may not be assumed to involve transfer, given the pre-verbal position of the negative marker in Bulgarian, but as examples of independent features of the interlanguage, different from both L1 and L2. Such constructions do not violate UG, though, since they obey natural-language constraints, such an order being available in French, where the verb raises to a position higher than negation.

- (9) a. *They droven't to the Black Sea coast. (Grozdanova 1988: 54)
b. *I hear not good. (Grozdanova 1988: 57)

The errors that are most frequently encountered in the Romanian L1 corpus involve the wrong use of tense and agreement morphological features.

- (10) a. The Romans does not built that aqueduct.
b. The Romans do not built that aqueduct.
c. The Romans did not built that aqueduct.
d. The Romans don't build that aqueduct.
e. The company didn't sent a warning message last week

Such sentences may be analysed as involving frozen auxiliary forms, the Romanian learners failing to interpret them as syncretic forms comprised of tense and agreement morphemes and, consequently, attaching the past tense morpheme to the lexical verb alone (10a,b), attaching it to the lexical verb while also using the past tense form of the auxiliary (10c,e) or leaving tense unspecified (10d). In most cases, these are not haphazard uses of auxiliary verb forms, but systematic uses of frozen forms, as shown by the fact that the same learners produced the following interrogative structures involving the same forms of the auxiliary verbs and inflected lexical verbs.

- (11) a. Does the Romans built that aqueduct?
b. Do the Romans built that aqueduct?

While in some cases there is variation between a tensed and a bare/agreement form of the auxiliary, the lexical verb is systematically inflected in all cases. As Newport (1990:23) notes, such “whole-word, unanalyzed signs ... produced in contexts where morphologically constructed forms are required” are frequently encountered in the early interlanguage stages of adult L2 learners.

However, adopting the proposal of White (2003: 30), we assume that “even in the absence of appropriate inflectional morphology, functional categories and their feature specifications are present in the grammar and function in ways appropriate for the L2”.

Unsurprisingly, given the different setting of the negative concord parameter in English and Romanian/Bulgarian as well as the preference for the negative concord value exhibited in L1 acquisition, the corpus contains examples of multiple negation sentences with a negative concord interpretation, disallowed by Standard English.

- (12) a. *I never don't buy expensive cloths.
b. *Nobody hasn't told me nothing about that.
 nobody not me has told nothing about that
c. *I couldn't find no one. Grozdanova (1988: 55)
- (13) That question wasn't raised by nobody at the meeting.

Grozdanova argues that certain cases of multiple negation cannot be due to transfer from Bulgarian, given that the equivalent Bulgarian sentence contains only the negative marker *ne* (*not*). She contends that, in this case, the negative transfer concerns the rule of negative concord rather than the Bulgarian construction. We propose that all the examples show either transfer of the negative concord parameter value from L1 or a default setting.

Further research is necessary, however, to determine the exact cause of the deviations, particularly in cases where default values match the L1 values and to investigate possible variations in the path of development. While Romanian and Bulgarian belong to different language families, they are included in the same class of negation in Zeijlstra (2004)'s classification.

Conclusions

The paper has investigated the errors made by adult Romanian and Bulgarian learners in the process of acquisition of English L2 negation, both in terms of deviations from the target structures and in contrast to errors reported for L1 acquisition of negation by English children. The corpus analysis has shown that the erroneous sentences produced by the two groups of learners exhibit similar deviations from L2, a fact that can be accounted for in terms of the similar syntactic properties of negative constructions in the two languages and other parameter values, as well as invoking a similar path of acquisition, especially in the light of studies identifying similar errors in L2 acquisition of English negation by speakers of other languages. I have shown that the failure to converge on the L1 grammar is not indicative of absence of UG constraints and that lack or improper use of morphological forms should not be associated with lack of functional projections or lack of access to UG.

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