A negative concord stage in negative polarity acquisition
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Acquisition of negative polarity items
Expressions that are restricted in the semantic environments in which they can appear include negative polarity items (NPI) like any and ever which can appear in negative declaratives, questions, and other downward entailing environments, but not positive declaratives:

(1) a. I have eaten oysters. ×
b. I have not eaten oysters. ✓

Children starting at age 3 are surprisingly great at understanding the licensing conditions for NPIs (Tieu 2015):

• Children produce NPIs overwhelmingly when expressing negative meaning and questions, with few errors of commission using NPIs with an intended positive meaning (Tieu 2015)
• Children 4 years and older understand the scopal relationship between negation and any (Crain & Thornton 1998)
• Children 4 years and older understand the domain widening properties of any early, before free choice reading (Tieu 2013).

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Existing corpus work
Tieu (2013)’s corpus study reports all contexts in which any is used in environments that do not have an overtly pronounce negation or other indication of downward entailing/nonveridicality.

• Very few (21 total) of these are true errors of commission in positive environments.
• More (27 total) are actually in environments that are intended to have a negative meaning (proportionally much higher, given that sentence with negative meaning are more rare), as in (2)

(2) Sarah (Brown corpus, age 2:10)
*MOT: that’s to make orange juice (.) squeeze the oranges for orange juice for babies.
*CHI: me?
*MOT: yeah .
*CHI: I want any.

Implications for diachrony
Children (mis)interpreting any as a negative concord item doesn’t equate to allowing any to provide negative meaning on its own (in “strict” concord languages sentential negation is required), but it does follow a known path in adult language, namely the negative meaning of concord items without sentential negation in “flexible” concord languages like French.

• Zeijlstra (2004) reminds us that English is typologically unusual in having negative elements interpreted as double negation despite other signatures of negative concord languages.
• If children’s observation of this instability leads to regular mis-analysis and innovation (Courmane, 2017), English may follow French in a well known pattern of semantic change:

jeo ne dis
je ne dis pas

“Jespersen’s Cycle” (Jespersen 1917): Emphatic negative elements (e.g. pas, originally “[not] a step”) become reanalyzed as concord and eventually as sentential negation

Next steps: Test comprehension not... any vs. any in children at earliest stages of NPI production, examine broader crosslinguistic evidence for bias of concord versus double marking of negation.

References

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