

# 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 ever eaten oysters. ×  
b. I have not ever 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).

I'm arguing for a (small) wrinkle to the idea of kids as NPI rock-stars, which is difficult to detect in tasks focused on licensing environments for NPIs: that they **first misinterpret *not...any* (generally: *not... NPI*) as a type of negative concord**, in alignment with a general cross-linguistic preference for concord in child language.

## Existing corpus work

Tieu (2013)'s corpus study reports all contexts in which *any* is used in environments that do not have an overtly pronounced 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.

%com: negative meaning  
\*MOT: you don't want any !  
%par: laughs  
\*CHI: no.  
\*CHI: xxx baby .  
%alt: I not baby.  
(Transcript 33 Line 410)

It **does** show children understand the right semantic environment for *any*, but it **doesn't** show that they understand the respective contributions of *any* and sentential negation. What if they are basically ignoring sentential negation, and hypothesis *any* as the primary source for negative meaning?

Also: a puzzle why there are so many such "errors" without sentential negation, given that sentential negation is produced by them (Bellugi 1967, Bloom 1970, Jasbi et al. 2020 among many others) and the same children use sentential negation elsewhere (2).

## Existing experimental work

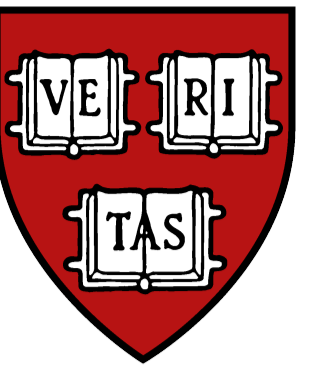
Supporting evidence from experimental studies on comprehension of negation: children have a bias for concord interpretations (e.g. *not... no* interpreted as a single negation).

- Thornton et al. (2016) show that in English-speaking children's interpretation of double negation (DN) vs. negative concord (NC), children prefer the NC reading (3)b while adults (sharing their same dialect) prefer the DN reading (3)a, based on a Truth Value Judgement Task.

- (3) The girl who skipped didn't buy nothing.  
a. The girl who skipped bought something. (DN reading)  
b. The girl who skipped bought nothing. (NC reading)

- Sano et al. (2009) show that in the acquisition of negation sensitive items in Japanese, negative concord is the "default value" children first assume for words which in the adult grammar can be both negative polarity items and negative concord items.

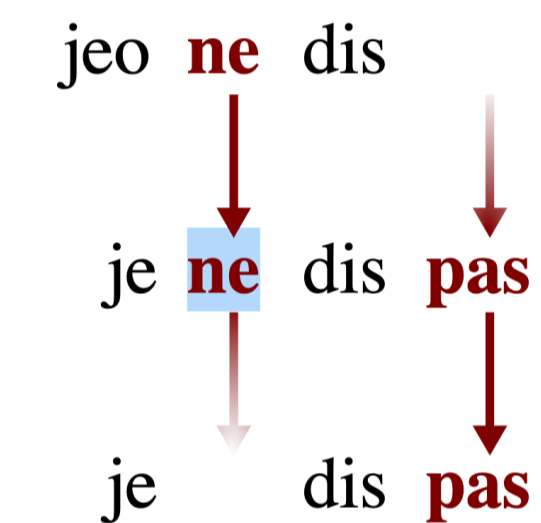
→ English-speaking children who comprehend *any* in negative contexts are following a known acquisitional path in hypothesizing that it forms a concord relationship with sentential negation.



## 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 misanalysis and innovation (Cournane, 2017), English may follow French in a well known pattern of semantic change:



**"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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