

BUCLD 45 Proceedings
To be published in 2021 by Cascadilla Press
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Parents' and Children's Production of English Negation

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1. Introduction

Previous research has proposed several stages for children's production of negative morphemes (Klima and Bellugi 1966; Wode 1977; Cameron-Faulkner, Lieven, and Theakston 2007; Thornton and Tesan 2013). For example, Cameron-Faulkner, Lieven, and Theakston (2007) proposed that *no* appears before *not*, and *not* before the contracted form *n't*. Klima and Bellugi (1966) proposed that negation appears as a sentence modifier (outside the sentence) before it moves between the subject and the verb. They also proposed that *can't* and *don't* are learned as unanalyzed wholes before their positive auxiliary variants. However, comprehension studies have not produced any evidence for such stages yet (Austin et al. 2014; Feiman et al. 2017; Reuter, Feiman, and Snedeker 2018). This discrepancy can be explained in two ways. First, the lack of evidence may be due to limitations in comprehension studies. Second, it is possible that the proposed stages are limited to production and cannot be generalized as stages in comprehension as well. This paper presents two corpus studies that support the second possibility. The results suggest that some previous stage hypotheses do not hold generally across children and may have been limited to a few children. Furthermore, for stages that do hold across children, there is evidence to suggest they are limited to production and may not generalize to comprehension. In the following section, we explain the previous stage hypotheses proposed for the development of negation. Section 3 presents our first study that investigates the relative frequency of *no*, *not*, and *n't* in parents' and children's speech. Section 4 presents our second study that focuses on the first and second stages of Klima and Bellugi (1966)'s proposal. We summarize our findings and discuss future directions in Section 5.

2. Background

Klima and Bellugi (1966) provided the first and most influential account of negation development. They used fortnightly recordings of mother-child conversations for three children in the Brown (1973) corpus: Eve (18-26 months), Adam and Sarah (26-50 months). They divided child utterances into three stages and suggested that in Stage 1, the syntactic category of

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negation (NEG) includes *no* and *not*, produced before or after a sentence “nucleus,” i.e. noun and verb phrase without tense or inflection (NEG+S or S+NEG). Examples include: “No singing song,” “No the sun shining,” “No money,” “No play that,” “Wear mitten no,” “No fall!” and “Not a teddy bear.” It was hypothesized that auxiliary negatives like *don’t* and *can’t* are not produced or understood at this stage. In Stage 2, children add *can’t* and *don’t* as unanalyzed wholes to their list of negators, and move negation inside the sentence, between the subject and the verb phrase (NP+NEG+VP). The main evidence for *can’t* and *don’t* being unanalyzed wholes in this stage was the absence of positive auxiliary variants like *can* and *do*. Typical examples at this stage include “I can’t/don’t see you,” “I don’t want it,” “There no squirrels,” “He no bite you,” and “I no want envelope.” In Stage 3, auxiliary verbs like *can’t* and *don’t* are re-analyzed as AUX+NEG, additional negative auxiliaries like *won’t* and *isn’t* are produced, and positive auxiliaries like *can* and *do* are produced for the first time (NP+AUX+NEG+VP).

However, further investigations proved the first stage to be controversial. Bloom (1970) studied another three children (Kathryn, Eric, and Gia) between 19-27 months and did not find evidence for a sentence-external stage of negation (NEG+S / NEG+S). Children started with isolated *no* and once they produced multi-word utterances, they mostly combined *no* and *not* with noun and verb phrases (*no/not*+NP/VP). Nevertheless, Bloom (1970) reported that Kathryn produced some instances of sentence-internal negation with *no* such as “Kathryn no like celery.” Lord (1974) studied her own child Jennifer (19-26 months) and found no instances of sentence-external negation or sentence-internal *no*. She reported that her child started with single “no” utterances before 24 months and between 24-26 months started combining *no/not* with nominals, and *can’t/don’t* with verb phrases (*no/not*+NP and *can’t/don’t*+VP). Her conclusion was that the development of negation varies in children and not all of them go through the stages described by Klima and Bellugi (1966).

Wode (1977) used crosslinguistic data to support and expand Klima and Bellugi (1966)’s account. He compared productions of two German children (19-26 months), a Swedish child (20-42 months) from Lange and Larsson (1973), and English-speaking children from Bloom (1970) and Klima and Bellugi (1966). He proposed four stages: 1. one-word stage with only *nein*, *nä/nej*, or *no*; 2. multiword anaphoric stage where the single words from stage 1 are used as a response to a previous utterance followed by other words (e.g. “no, outside!” or “nein, Milch”); 3. multiword non-anaphoric stage where a single-word negative like *no* is used sentence-externally instead of sentence-internally (e.g. “nein sauber” for “I don’t want to be cleaned” or “no close” for “I can’t close the box”) 4. multiword intra-sentential negation where negation has moved inside the sentence (e.g. “Kathryn no

like celery,” “I can’t open it,” or “ich habe nicht geschlafen”). In response to this proposal, Park (1979) argued that Wode (1977)’s account relied on insufficient evidence given that it used only 13 examples and no proper distributional analysis. Park (1979) presented data from three German speaking children around 21-25 months that did not match Wode (1977)’s developmental stages.

de Villiers and de Villiers (1979) suggested previous studies provided little empirical evidence to support a general sentence-external stage. They investigated productions of Adam (27-31 months), Eve (18-22 months), and their own child Nicholas (23-29 months) and found very few sentence-external negatives with overt subjects that allowed for assessment of sentence boundary. They pointed out that even among these instances, many could plausibly be anaphoric. Despite these arguments, Déprez and Pierce (1993) used examples from children’s productions in English, French, and German to provide a novel syntactic analysis for presentential negation in child language within the Principles and Parameters framework (Chomsky 1993). They argued that instead of negation moving from outside the sentence inside as Klima and Bellugi (1966) suggested, it is the subject NP that fails to move outside, from inside the VP. They suggested that child data is in line with the VP-internal subject hypothesis in adult grammar (Koopman and Sportiche 1991). However unlike previous studies, they had counted utterances with omitted subjects as instances of presentential negation (or rather VP-internal subjects) as well.

In response to Déprez and Pierce (1993), Stromswold and Zimmermann (2000) studied negation in five German-speaking children (Julia, Inga, Andreas, Kathrin, and Nicole) between 17 and 29 months. They found that out of 689 examples of negation, only one could plausibly support the hypothesis that at an early stage the negator can surface to the left of the subject and pre-sententially. Drozd (1995) provided a similar but large-scale analysis for English. Using data available from 123 children in CHILDES between the ages of 11 and 40 months, the study looked at utterances beginning with *no*, *not*, and *never* and used the available linguistic context to classify them as anaphoric or non-anaphoric. The study found a total of 456 instances of pre-sentential negation, out of which only 31 (6.7%) could be classified as instances of non-anaphoric pre-sentential negation. He argued that the best explanation for such rare distribution of presentential negation is that they are meta-linguistic uses of negation. In other words, the child’s “no the sun shining” is similar to the adult version “don’t say the sun is shining (that’s wrong),” and not some stage in the development of negation.

Two relatively recent studies have focused on Klima and Bellugi (1966)’s second stage, where children are reported to produce non-adult-like infinitival negatives with *no*, *not*, and *don’t* (e.g. “He no/not/don’t bite you”). At this

stage, children are hypothesized to not differentiate these forms and consider all as variants of negation. They are also hypothesized to not analyse *don't* as auxiliary plus negation and rather consider it as an unanalyzed whole. The evidence was considered to be the absence of positive auxiliary forms like *do*. Schütze (2010) provided a quantitative analysis of negation in the speech of five children (Abe, Adam, Sarah, Nina, Ross) between 2 and 5 years of age. He showed that the non-adult-like infinitival negatives are quite rare, never exceeding 5% of children's total productions. Instead he found that the only common error reaching about 10% of productions is non-agreeing *don't* in sentences with third-person singular subjects (e.g. "He don't bite you"). He proposed a grammatical account that could predict such errors.

Thornton and Tesan (2013) disagreed with Schütze (2010) and following Klima and Bellugi (1966) contended that children at the second stage have not yet identified *n't* as a separate form of negation. To explain this stage, they proposed that children start with the hypothesis that negative words like *no*, *not*, and *don't* are adverbs, thus producing sentences like "He no/not/don't bite you." Later in the third stage they realize that negation can also be a separate syntactic head showing agreement with subjects as in "He doesn't bite you." This analysis was inspired by Zeijlstra (2004)'s proposal for Negative Concord which divides languages into those with adverbial semantic negation and those with syntactic negation. Thornton and Tesan (2013) provided elicitation data on negative sentences with third-person singular subjects from four two-year-olds who had been recorded for about a year (Tesan 2005). They found that in line with their proposal, children produced *not* (e.g. "This not fits in here") before producing *n't* (e.g. "this does not fit in here"). A similar finding regarding the order in which negative morphemes emerge in English was reported by Cameron-Faulkner, Lieven, and Theakston (2007). They investigated the development of multiword negation in the speech of Brian (2;3-3;4, MLU 2.05-3.1) and reported that negative morphemes followed a *no*<*not*<*n't* trajectory, mirroring their order of frequency in parents' speech. Earliest multiword negation strategies were described as a combination of *no/not* with different types of phrases (*no/not*+XP), with *don't* and *can't* being the first contracted forms to emerge.

To summarize, previous research has suggested that English-speaking children learn to produce negative morphemes in a *no*<*not*<*n't* order. Among negative auxiliary forms, *can't* and *don't* are learned first and before any positive auxiliary form including *can* and *do*. Klima and Bellugi (1966) argued that children's production of English negation becomes adult-like after two non-adult-like stages: one in which they produce negation before a sentence and never inside it, and another in which they produce it within

the sentence but do not use the right negative morpheme (e.g. “He not little” instead of “He isn’t little”). There has been an active debate over each of these stages. With the exception of Drozd (1995), previous studies have mainly relied on data from a few available children often including the original data from Klima and Bellugi (1966). Given that over the years much more corpus data and computational tools have become available, it is important to revisit previous proposals and assess their current status.

3. Study 1

The aim of this study was to assess the overall production of negative morphemes *no*, *not*, and *n’t* in parents’ and children’s speech. The study addresses the following questions: 1. Does the overall production of negation in children follow a *no*<*not*<*n’t* cline (Cameron-Faulkner, Lieven, and Theakston 2007)? 2. Do children produce negative auxiliary forms such as *can’t* and *don’t* before their positive variants, suggesting that the negative forms are learned as unanalyzed wholes (Klima and Bellugi 1966)?

3.1 Methods

For samples of parents’ and children’s speech, we used the online database *chilides-db* and its associated R programming package *chilidesr* (Sanchez et al. 2019). *Chilides-db* is an online interface to the child language components of TalkBank, namely CHILDES (MacWhinney 2000) and PhonBank. Two collections of corpora were selected: English-North America and English-UK. The dataset contained 14,195,967 tokens from 571 children, after necessary exclusions. We ran a token-based analysis of the corpora as well as an utterance-based analysis that could take utterance length and context into account. All data and analysis are available in the study’s online repository³.

In our token-based analysis, all word tokens were tagged for the following: 1. the speaker (parent vs. child), 2. the age of the child when the word was produced in months, 3. whether the word was positive or negative, and 4. the type of negative morpheme produced. Here we report on the following classes of English negative morphemes in English: the forms *no* and *not*, all instances of negative auxiliary forms with *n’t* as well as their positive forms without *n’t* as controls. Unintelligible tokens were excluded (N = 402,117), as well as tokens that had missing information on children’s age (N = 1,057,287). Third, tokens outside the age range of 1 to 6 years were excluded (N = 542,304) since children did not produce much outside this age range. Given these measures, data from 100 children were excluded from the final token-based analysis. Similarly, in our utterance-based analysis, each utterance was tagged for the following: 1. the number of tokens in the utterance 2. the speaker (parent vs. child), 2. the age of the child, 3.

³You can access the repository at https://github.com/jasbi/negation_production

whether the utterance contained *no*, *not*, or *n't*. Unintelligible utterances (N = 177,804), utterances with missing information on children's age (N = 551,196) as well as those outside the age range of 1 to 6 years were excluded (N = 99,069). The final collection contained 3,729,241 utterances from 584 children.

3.2 Results

We first look at the proportions of different categories of negation in parents' and children's speech (Figure 1). The most frequent form in parents' speech was the contracted auxiliary negation *n't*, followed by *no*, and finally *not*. In children's productions and between the ages of 12-18 months, almost all negative forms were instances of *no*, with some contracted auxiliary negatives like *don't* and *can't*. As children grow older, the proportions of *not* and its contracted form *n't* increased while the proportion of *no* decreased. Similar to Cameron-Faulkner, Lieven, and Theakston (2007) we find that children start producing *no* earlier than other forms. However, we do not find evidence that the full form *not* is produced before its contracted form *n't*. The results in Figure 1 suggest that children start producing *not* and *n't* around the same time, if not slightly earlier for *n't*.

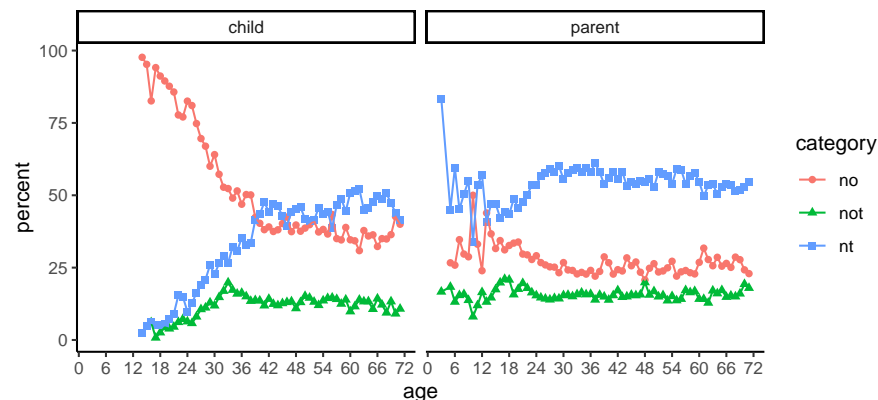


Figure 1: Proportion of different categories of negation in parents' and children's speech between 1 to 6 years of age.

Figure 2 shows the relative frequency of the morphemes *no*, *not* and *n't* per thousand words in the speech of parents and children. Children start producing *no* between 12-18 months and they immediately surpass their parents' rate of production for this morpheme. Between 18-42 months children produce two to three times more instances of *no* than their parents. This rapid increase and high frequency of *no* may be partly because parents ask many yes/no questions from children in this age range. After 42 months

the frequency of *no* reduces substantially and gets closer to parents' level of 10 per thousand. For the negative morpheme *not*, children start their productions between 12-24 months and by 30 months of age, they are producing *not* at the same rate as their parents (5 per thousand words). After 36 months children's rate of *not* productions stay similar to their parents. Finally for the contracted form *n't*, children's productions start between 12-18 months and by 24 months they reach a rate of 5 instances per thousand words. They keep increasing this rate until they reach their parents' rate of 15 instances per thousand words at 36 months. It is important to note that for all these negative forms, children reached an adult-level of production (in terms of relative frequency) by 30 months of age.

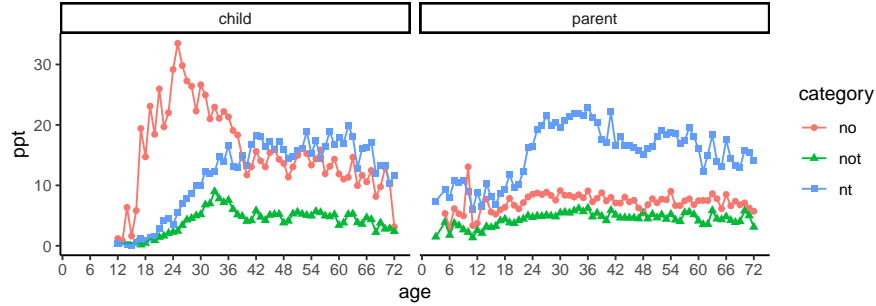


Figure 2: Relative frequency (parts per thousand) of the response particle *no*, verb phrase negation *not*, and its contracted form *n't*

Stromswold and Zimmermann (2000) found that in German-speaking children, the word *nein* was produced before *nicht* and discussed three potential causes for this order of production: input frequency, phonetic complexity, and syntactic complexity. They explained that input frequency cannot be the cause because in German-speaking children's input *nicht* was more frequent than *nein*. Similarly, English-speaking children hear more instances of *n't* than *no* so input frequency cannot be the cause in English either. With respect to phonetic complexity, German *nicht* has a voiceless palatal fricative that can potentially be hard for children and delay its production. However, English *no* and *not* are quite similar and do not contain phones that are known to be particularly hard for children. This leaves us with syntactic complexity which is an obvious difference between isolated one-word negators like *no/nein* and multiword negators like *not/nicht*. Given that children start with shorter utterances (typically one word) and produce longer ones as they grow up, they may produce *no* earlier than *not* and *n't* simply because *no* can appear as a single word utterance. In other words, even a hypothetical child that comprehends all negative morphemes may produce *no* earlier due to production limitations. We call this the

“production bottleneck” hypothesis.

Given our dataset, we can test the production bottleneck hypothesis in two ways. First, we focus on children’s multiword utterances. Is the main contributor to the high frequency of *no* in children’s speech the single-word “no” utterances? To answer this question we removed single-token utterances like “yes,” “no,” and “oh,” as well as utterances that combined such elements in a repetitive way like “no no” or “oh no” from children and parents’ speech. If early appearance and high frequency of *no* is mainly due to short and repetitive utterances produced by children early in their development, it should disappear once we focus on multiword utterances. As Figure 3 shows, this is largely what we found. While the frequencies of *not* and *n’t* in multi-word productions were similar to their overall frequencies seen before in Figure 2, the word *no* lost its large advantage in frequency and early occurrence, showing a very similar production trajectory as the other two negative morphemes.

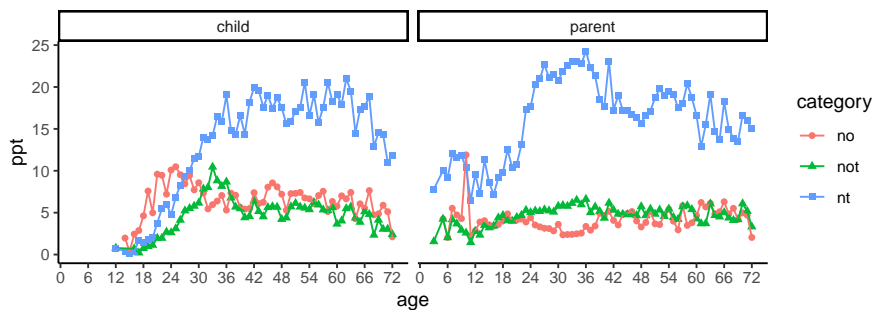


Figure 3: Relative frequency (parts per thousand) of the response particle *no*, verb phrase negation *not*, and its contracted form *n’t* in multiword utterances

The second way to test the bottleneck hypothesis is to artificially impose a production limitation on parents’ speech. To achieve this in our dataset, we grouped utterances into monthly age bins and sampled parents’ utterances in each age bin based on the utterance lengths produced by children in the same age bin. This way in each monthly age bin, we only included adult utterances that matched those of children’s in length. This approach limits parents’ speech to be shorter earlier and longer later, mimicking children’s productive development. The result of this artificial bottleneck on parents’ production of negative morphemes is shown in Figure 4 side by side with children’s negative productions. While previously parents produced *n’t* more frequently than *no* and *not* throughout children’s development (Figure 2), after introducing the bottleneck parents show a higher relative frequency for *no* than *not* and *n’t* in younger ages similar to what is seen in

children. As children’s age increases, the relative frequency of *no* decreases and those of *not* and *n’t* increase in a way that mimicks the pattern seen in children’s production. Later and around 40 months, the order of production reverses and adults produce *n’t* more frequently than the other forms in this artificially induced bottleneck.

Taken together, the two tests indicate that the earlier emergence and high frequency of *no* in children’s speech may be largely due to children’s limited capacity in producing longer utterances and not necessarily earlier acquisition of this morpheme. Therefore, the question “which form is acquired earlier” may be better addressed by careful comprehension studies in the 12-24 month age range. It is important to note here that both Figure 3 and Figure 2 suggest the 12-24 months age range as a period where all three negative morphemes may receive their early form-meaning mappings. In order to better understand such early mappings of negation and their development we need more comprehension studies in this age range.

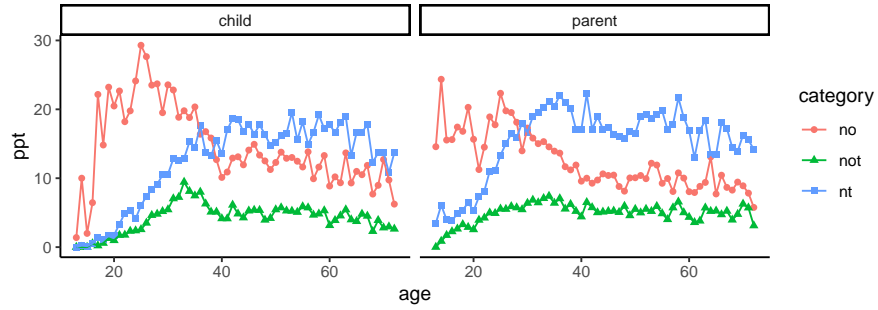


Figure 4: Relative frequency (parts per thousand) of the response particle *no*, verb phrase negation *not*, and its contracted form *n’t* in children and parents’ speech with an artificial bottleneck imposed on parents speech in each age bin

Moving to the second question: do negative auxiliaries appear before positive ones? Figure 5 shows the relative frequency of positive and negative auxiliary forms in the speech of children and their parents. Our results show that overall, children start producing the positive and negative auxiliary forms around the same time and produce the positive forms at a higher rate than negative ones. This is also true for individual auxiliary words such as *do/don’t* and *can/can’t* which are produced earlier than others. Therefore, the claim that negative auxiliary forms are produced before their positive counterparts is not supported by the available production data and consequently production data does not provide support for the hypothesis that auxiliary negative forms are learned as unanalyzed wholes.

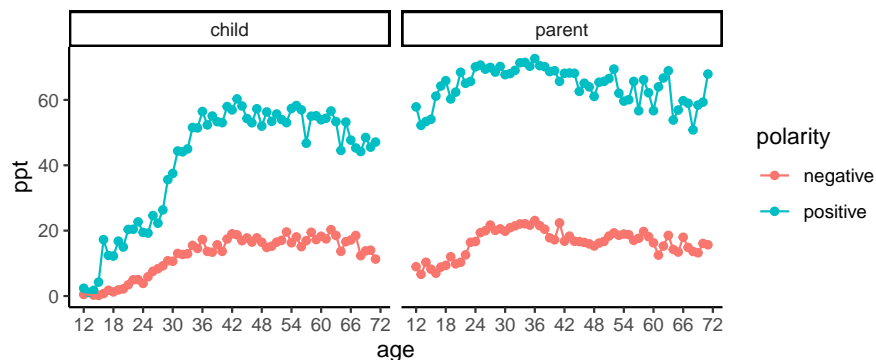


Figure 5: Relative frequency (parts per thousand) of positive auxiliary forms such as *do*, *are*, and *can* as well as their contracted negatives in the speech of parents and children.

3.3 Conclusion

Study 1 looked at the overall profile of negative morphemes *no*, *not*, and *n't* in children and parents' speech. Children produced *no* earlier and more frequently than *not* and *n't*. We did not find strong evidence for *not* appearing before *n't* and the general trends suggest that they appear around the same time. While earlier emergence of *no* in production may be due to its earlier acquisition, it is also possible that early emergence of *no* is due to children's limitations in producing longer utterances. The morpheme *no* can be produced on its own, while negative forms *not* and *n't* require composition with other words in longer utterances. We called this the "production bottleneck hypothesis" and provided two types of evidence to support it using our data. First, we found that when we consider only children's multiword utterances, the early emergence and advantage of *no* largely disappears. Second, we introduced an artificial bottleneck on parents' speech by selecting parent utterances in each age bin that matched children's productions in length. The results showed that after introducing such a bottleneck, the frequencies of negative morphemes in parents' speech roughly mimick those of children: higher level of production for *no* earlier in development. Taking all the evidence together, the production data does not suggest a strong order or stage hypothesis in children's comprehension or acquisition of negative morphemes. We believe it is more appropriate for future comprehension research to adjudicate this matter. The study also investigated whether negative auxiliary forms such as *can't* and *don't* emerge before their positive counterparts such as *do* and *can*. Previous research had cited such a phenomenon as evidence for the hypothesis that negative auxiliary forms are first learned as unanalyzed wholes. Contrary to previous

reports, our data showed that the positive auxiliary forms emerge around the same time as the negative ones but produced much more frequently. Therefore so far, production data has not provided evidence for negative auxiliaries being learned as unanalyzed forms.

4. Study 2

The aim of Study 2 was to use utterance-based analyses of children’s and parents’ speech to assess several hypotheses relating to Stages 1 and 2 of Klima and Bellugi (1966)’s proposed framework for negation acquisition. Specifically, the study sought to address the following questions: 1. Do children go through a stage during which their negative utterances consist of a negative morpheme (*no* or *not*) either before or after a complete sentence? 2. Do children initially treat the negative auxiliary *don’t* as an unanalyzed whole negator? And 3. Do children undergo a shift from use of *not* to use of *n’t* that would imply a shift from adverbial semantic negation to syntactic negation?

4.1 Methods

The initial dataset contained 1,337,478 utterances from 747 children, as well as 1,667,576 parent utterances. Untranscribed utterances and utterances missing part of speech tagging were excluded ($N = 246,485$ for children, 71,166 for parents), and unintelligible words were removed. Additionally, due to a large number of coding irregularities, utterances whose number of words did not match the number of part of speech tokens were excluded ($N = 57,552$ for children, 78,331 for parents). This was necessary in order to ensure that each word uttered was mapped onto the correct part of speech. After processing and exclusions, the dataset contained 1,033,441 utterances from 709 children, and 1,518,079 utterances from their parents.

Each utterance was binned by child age in months and tagged for number of tokens in the utterance, the speaker role (parent vs. child), and whether the utterance was negative or positive. Negative utterances were further coded for the presence of *no*, *not*, and *n’t*, as well as for syntactic position of the negator. There were 101,786 negative child utterances in the data, and 190,293 negative parent utterances. Repeated instances of *no* (often coded with a single part of speech tag) were condensed to a single instance. Single-word negative utterances were removed, as well as utterances in which the negative was combined repetitively with extra-syntactic particles (eg. “ah no,” “no oh oh”) ($N = 53,969$ for children, 32,966 for parents). After all processing, the dataset contained 47,817 negative utterances from 462 children, and 157,327 negative parent utterances.

4.2 Results

The first question we examined was whether children go through a stage

during which their negation is realized externally to their sentences, as proposed by Klima and Bellugi (1966). We used CHILDES part of speech tagging to divide the syntactic positions of children’s utterances into several categories. Cases where *no* or *not* combined externally with a full sentence (containing an NP and a VP) were marked as [NEG + S] and [S + NEG]. Utterances where *no* or *not* occurred either before or after an utterance not satisfying the definition of ‘sentence’ above were marked as [NEG + X] and [X + NEG]. Finally sentence-internal negatives were split into a simple [NP + NEG + VP] category and a category for all other internal negatives. Figure 6 shows the syntactic distribution of children’s multi-word utterances of *not* across these categories between 18 and 36 months. There were very few to no multi-word negative utterances in any age bin younger than 18 months.

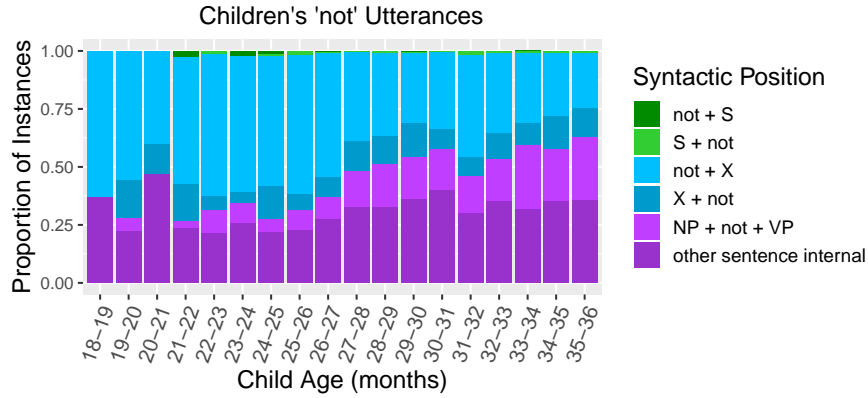


Figure 6: Syntactic analysis of children’s *not* utterances between 1 and 3 years of age.

If we limit our criteria to strict sentence-external negation, defining a sentence exclusively as a noun phrase followed by a verb phrase, then the case of *not* utterances is clear-cut: children produce almost no instances of strict sentence-external *not* ([not + S] or [S + not]) at any age. If we expand our definition of ‘external’ to include utterances of the form [not + X] or [X + not], where X is some expression that does not fit our strict definition of a sentence, the story becomes slightly more nuanced. Instances of this utterance-external *not* occur quite frequently, and in fact account for more than half of all multi-word *not* utterances in several younger age bins. However, as discussed above, if a [not + X] utterance does not include an overt subject and predicate, it is impossible to determine from corpus data whether the *not* was external in the underlying form, or whether a production-related mishap (eg. dropped subject) simply caused the *not*

to appear utterance-external. In addition, it is worth noting that many utterances of the form [X + not] are grammatical in adult speech (eg. “why not,” “no it’s not”). Furthermore, even if some of these apparent external utterances are indeed instances of sentence-external *not*, it is still the case that as soon as children begin to use ‘not’ in multi-word utterances, they are already also using it frequently internally to their utterances, making an initial stage of sentence-external *not* appear much less likely given the available corpus data.

Turning now to children’s early uses of *no*, Figure 7 illustrates the syntactic distribution of children’s multi-word *no* utterances between 18 and 36 months. Figure 8 does the same for parents. Again, due to potential elisions, utterances where *no* combines with a full sentence [S] are the most convincing contenders for true sentence-external *no* utterances. We can see in Figures 7 and 8 that the number of [S + no] utterances is trivially small at all ages for children and adults. Utterances of the form [no + S] do occur with non-trivial frequency in child speech, but two considerations contribute to the conclusion that this is not strong evidence for a pre-sentential stage.

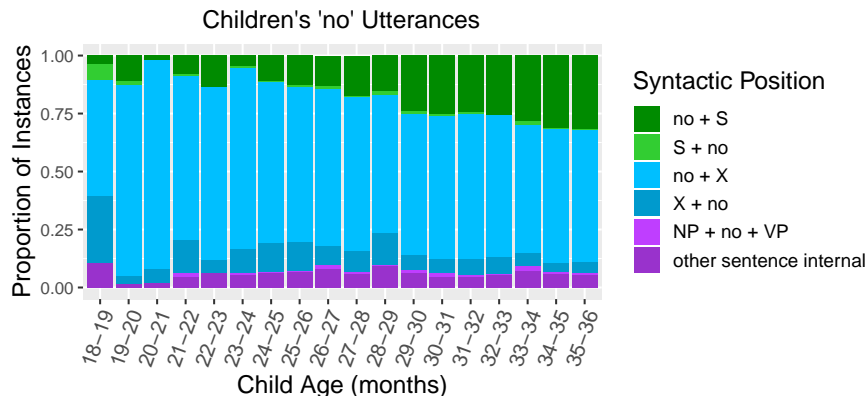


Figure 7: Syntactic analysis of children’s *no* utterances between 1 and 3 years of age.

First, [no + S] utterances account for between a quarter and a half of all parental multi-word *no* utterances. Because these apparently *no*-external utterances appear so prominently in parental speech, which is assumed to be grammatical, the existence of them in child speech is not in and of itself evidence for an ungrammatical, pre-sentential stage. Furthermore, the pattern that reveals itself in children’s [no + S] utterances— low initial levels, increasing gradually to adult levels around 36 months— is more consistent with a simple increase in utterance length and complexity over time than with a stage that children eventually grow out of.

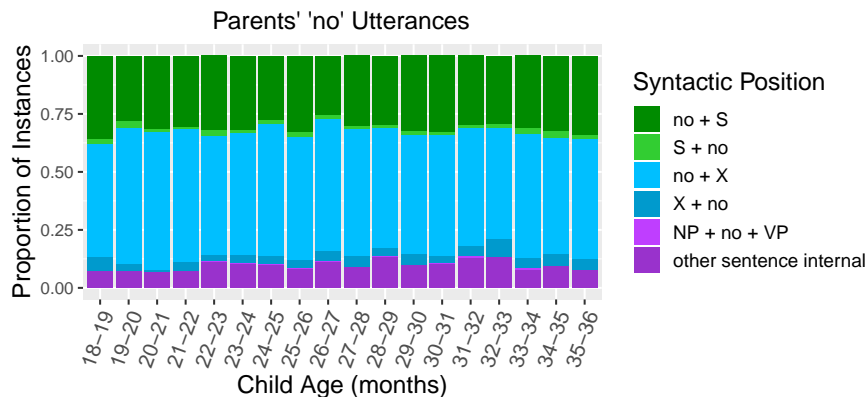


Figure 8: Syntactic analysis of parents' *no* utterances to children between 1 and 3 years of age.

Second, there is reason to believe that many of these [no + S] utterances in both parents and children are in fact anaphoric in nature—that is, the initial *no* actually negates some previous utterance or event, not the following proposition Drozd (1995). For example, in the hypothetical exchange: “You want milk?”; “No, I want juice!” the utterance-initial *no* is clearly not negating the proposition “I want juice,” but instead rejecting the previous offer of milk. A more fine-grained analysis of utterances of the form [no + S] in our data provides further evidence for this claim. Figure 9 shows the breakdown of these utterances by children and their parents into cases where the proposition being negated by the initial *no* is itself negative in polarity (eg. no I didn’t), and cases where the proposition being negated is positive (eg. no I run).

A child uttering the word *no* followed by a negative sentence ([no + S_NEG]) is very unlikely to be using the initial *no* as a non-anaphoric pre-sentential negator. Such a use would require the child to compute double negation, a high-cost operation even for adults, in order to communicate a positive concept. There are, of course, pragmatic reasons that cause true double negatives to occur occasionally, but for children who are only just beginning to use negatives in multi-word utterances, this is a tall order. It is much more natural to conclude that a *no* preceding a negative utterance is instead an emphatic anaphoric negator. Furthermore, the strongest form of the pre-sentential hypothesis proposes that children go through a stage during which all of their negatives are utterance-external. An utterance of the form [no + S_NEG] is not compatible with this hypothesis, as the S_NEG itself exhibits already sentence-internal negation. To account for the many early [no + S_NEG] utterances under the pre-sentential hypothesis, we would

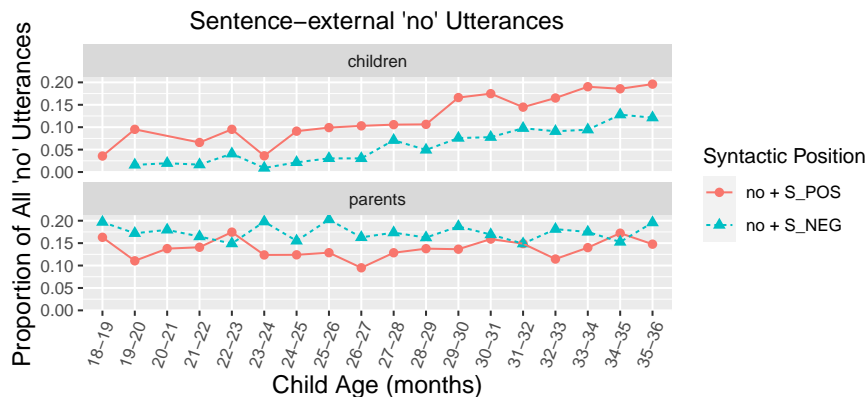


Figure 9: Parents' and Children's [no + S] utterances.

need to posit a long period of co-existence between pre- and intra- sentential negation, which is not consistent with an initial pre-sentential stage.

These observations do not allow us to unequivocally reject Klima and Bellugi (1966)'s hypothesis of an initial sentence-external stage of negation, but they do make clear the insufficiency of the current evidence in support of the claim. It is, of course, possible that the entire sentence-external stage begins and ends before children acquire the combinatorial abilities to realize it overtly (ie. before they are producing sentences with a subject and a predicate). If this is the case, it will be impossible to differentiate between pre-sentential negation and constituent or intra-sentential negation using corpus production data, so the question is left to future laboratory work.

The second question we sought to answer with Study 2 was whether or not children go through a stage during which they treat negative auxiliaries such as *don't* and *can't* as untensed, unanalyzed whole negators, akin to *no* and *not*, as proposed in Klima and Bellugi (1966)'s Stage 2. One prediction generated by this proposal states that children's uses of negative auxiliaries ought to be distributed without reference to person or number Schütze (2010). To test this prediction, we separated children's utterances of *don't* and *doesn't* after a pronoun into third-singular contexts (where *doesn't* is correct), and non-third singular contexts (where *don't* is correct) (Figure 10). If negative auxiliaries were truly untensed, we would expect to see similar levels of *don't* and *doesn't* use respectively in both contexts. However, what we find instead is a clear asymmetry in the pattern of errors. Children's uses of *don't* are distributed across both contexts, but *doesn't* appears almost exclusively in the third-singular context, where it is grammatically correct. This asymmetry indicates that at least *doesn't* is analyzed as an element

that agrees for person and number from its earliest uses with pronouns.

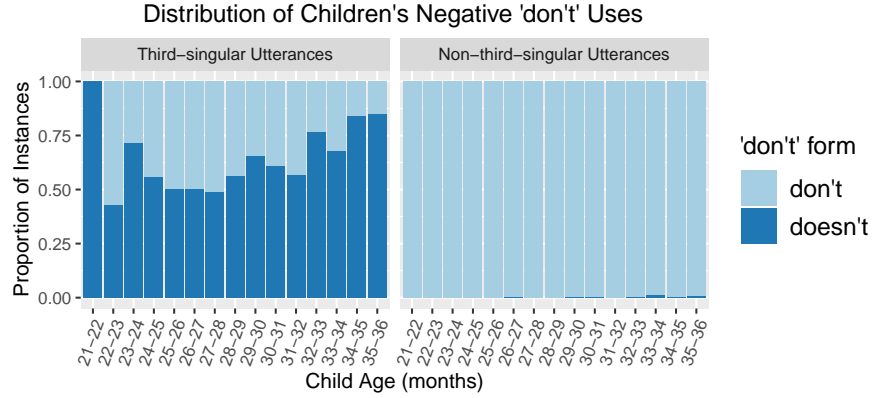


Figure 10: Children’s utterances of *don’t* and *doesn’t* before 3 years of age.

At first glance, the fact that children use *don’t* in both correct non-third singular and incorrect third singular contexts might appear to support the claim that *don’t* is not correctly analyzed at this stage. However, precisely the same pattern reveals itself in children’s positive utterances containing *do* and *does* — children again produce *does* almost exclusively in correct third-singular contexts, but produce *do* in both correct and incorrect contexts (Figure 11). Thus, the incorrect *don’t* utterances that we observe in Figure X are in fact expected under the hypothesis that children are already at this age parsing *don’t* as consisting of an auxiliary attached to the clitic *nt*, and their mistakes can be simply explained as mistakes in calculating agreement for the auxiliary *do*. These results converge with the findings of Schütze (2010).

Another pattern that has been cited as evidence for the theory that negative auxiliaries are initially unanalyzed in children’s lexicons is a sharp transition in children’s third person negative utterances from the use of *not* (eg. “It not fits”) to the use of *don’t/ doesn’t* (eg. “it don’t/doesn’t fit(s)”) (Thornton and Tesan 2013). As an explanation for this pattern, Thornton and Tesan (2013) proposed that children learning English initially hypothesize that all negation is adverbial— ie. the negative appears as an adverbial adjunct on the predicate. During this stage, children would be forced to coerce negative auxiliaries into an adverbial system as well. Adverbs in English do not vary under tense or person, so the use of words that adults analyze as negative auxiliaries within the adverbial system would result in failure to mark these words for tense and agreement. Thornton and Tesan (2013) hypothesized that children only later learn to add a negation head to their syntax. This addition would allow the negative morpheme *nt* to interact at

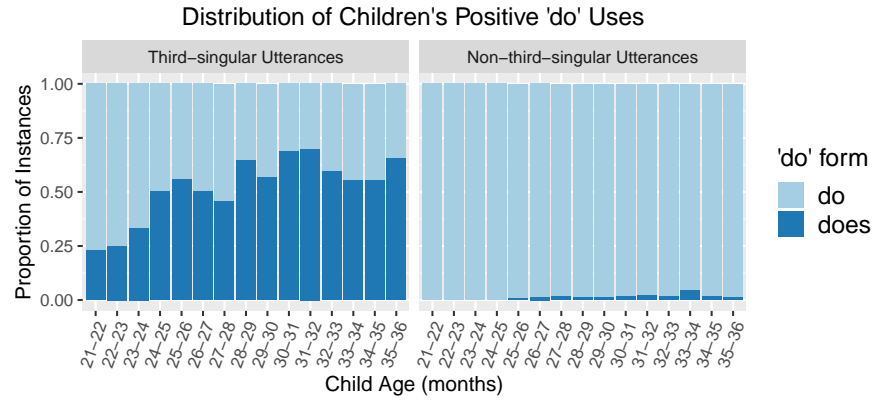


Figure 11: Children's utterances of *do* and *does* before 3 years of age.

least semi-productively with the auxiliary system, and thus would pave the way for children to correctly analyze and use negative auxiliaries.

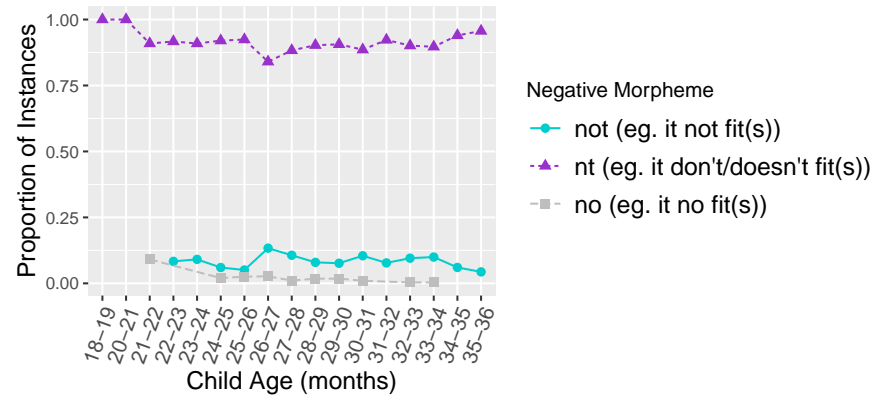


Figure 12: Breakdown of children's negative utterances after a third singular subject (and composed with a lexical verb) between 1 and 3 years of age.

The motivation that the authors provided for this theory was evidence that children transition sharply from using *not* to using *don't* and *doesn't* in third singular negative utterances. They hypothesized that this moment of transition was the moment that head negation was added to the lexicon. Our attempt to replicate this finding is presented in Figure 12. Instead of a transition, we found constant, relatively high levels of negative auxiliary use in third singular contexts, and constant, relatively low levels of *no* and *not*. These results, while not necessarily strictly inconsistent with a shift

from adverbial to head negation, do provide a point against that account, as the distribution of children’s third person negators remains virtually constant throughout the acquisition period, and does not show any sudden transitions or changes that might be indicative of a paradigm shift.

It is worth noting that the data cited in Thornton and Tesan (2013) were the result of a longitudinal elicitation study; it is possible that some task-specific element of that study led to the stark difference between our data and theirs, and further study will be required to determine the source of the difference.

4.3 Conclusion

The first question we asked was whether children go through a stage during which their negations are realized externally to their utterances. We found that, while children do produce a number of apparently sentence-external negatives, as predicted by Klima and Bellugi (1966)’s Stage 1, the vast majority of these utterances use *no* instead of *not*, and specifically are of the form [no + S]. Instances of this form do not swell early and then dissipate, as would be expected of an early stage of production, but rather are initially infrequent and slowly climb to adult levels. Furthermore, many of the propositions following these apparently pre-sentential *nos* are in fact negative themselves, making a true pre-sentential reading much less likely. We claim that these findings are not consistent with a sentence-external stage of negation development, and join Bloom (1970), Wode (1977), and others in proposing that our observations are more consistent with an analysis of [no + S] utterances as largely anaphoric, with the negator negating some previous event or statement.

The second question we examined was the claim that children initially treat negative auxiliaries as irreducible units (Klima and Bellugi 1966). We found that children discriminate their uses of the words *don’t* and *doesn’t* by the person and number of the subject from their earliest multi-word uses of the words, and in fact that the distribution of children’s *don’t* and *doesn’t* utterances is remarkably similar to the distribution of their positive *do* and *does* utterances. Furthermore, we failed to replicate the findings by Thornton and Tesan (2013) that children shift from using *not* to using negative auxiliaries in their third person utterances. Instead, we found relatively constant proportions of each negator throughout the age period below 36 months, making a sudden paradigm shift in children’s understanding of negation, such as a shift from adverbial to head negation, appear much less likely. Both of these findings add to the evidence against an initial stage during which negative auxiliaries are treated as unanalyzed whole negators. Children do attend to person and number when deciding which form of “don’t” to use, and they do not exhibit a sudden transition in negator use that might be indicative of shift away from unanalyzed negative

auxiliaries.

5. Discussion – Results supported early productions of *no* (stage 1) before *not* and *n't*, but no evidence that *not* is produced before *n't*. We did not find support for robust non-anaphoric pre-sentential negation (stage 3) or contracted forms like *don't* and *can't* as unanalyzed wholes (stage 4). The results suggest a great degree of variability in children's productive development (de Villiers & de Villiers 1979). Our findings are compatible with simultaneous development of frequent negative forms with a production bottleneck that favors shorter utterances like *no* to appear earlier.

6. References

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