

The Acquisition of English Negation 'No' and 'Not': Evidences from an Indonesian Child in Non-Native Parents Bilingual Program

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Abstract

Every child is born with an innate endowment by which (a) language(s) acquisition is possible. This view emphasizes the role of universal properties every child is born with to acquire (a) language(s). This paper presents the acquisition of English negation 'no' and 'not' by an Indonesian child brought up in Indonesian – English Non-native Parents Bilingual Program (NPBP). The analysis is directed to reveal the pattern of 'no' and 'not' use as the evidence that a child still acquires a targeted language despite the poor targeted language input s/he is exposed to. The result of the analysis shows that the acquisition of English negation 'no' and 'not' by an Indonesian child in Indonesian – English NPBP also has a pattern which falls into syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic cases. To some extent, it supports Universal Grammar frame, but there are some which provide new insights on this issue.

Keywords: *language acquisition, English negation, Indonesian child, bilingual, non-native parents*

1. Introduction

Children's language acquisition is a magnificent phenomenon regarding the fact that children only receive limited formal language teaching and even in some cases they only receive very limited language input, such as children raised in a bilingual program in foreign language. In fact, language is a very complex system composed by the interface of phonetic, semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic rules which are related to each other and interwoven into a single unity. However, despite their limited formal language teaching and poor language input, children are still able to acquire a targeted language or targeted languages. In other words, it is magnificent because they are able to acquire by their own cognitive endowment the very complex language system. Such phenomenon raises an assumption that there must be an underlying mechanism by which children's language acquisition is possible.

It is the underlying mechanism of children's language acquisition which constitutes the inquiry of language acquisition studies conducted by linguists as well as developmental psychologists. Chomsky (1986), on the basis of the Universal Grammar (UG) theory, raises two basic questions pertaining to what underlies the children's language acquisition. Those are (i) what constitutes knowledge of language, and (ii) how knowledge of language is acquired. These questions, based on the belief that every child is equipped with innately given Language Acquisition Device (LAD), basically try to



reveal aspects of language which are persistent across languages (the term 'universal' is derived from) and those which vary from one language to other language (the term 'typology' is derived from). Attempts to answer these questions are directed to postulate that there are universal properties that need not to be 'learned', although they may require linguistic input and/or biological maturation to be fully observed (Wexler 1999).

This view emphasizes the role of the innate set of rules about language in language acquisition. Two arguments are proposed in favor of the significance of Universal Grammar (UG) in children's language acquisition. First, children are only exposed to very little correctly formed grammar, and secondly, children do not simply copy the language they hear around them, rather they deduce from it. This view of language acquisition, therefore, de-emphasizes the role of language input and indicates that the poverty of language input will not affect the process of language acquisition by children.

If the role of language input is only to trigger the UG that every child is endowed with since (s)he was born, every child in the process of acquiring English will certainly grow up with the same language performance. In fact, it does not occur in that way. Every child poses different language acquisition development specifically attributed to her/him, though many studies have shown that they pass through the same route in language acquisition (Ellis 1985, Lindfors 1980). The question is why children have different phases of their language development. Is there also a minimum required language input to trigger UG so that it can fully operate as required by the targeted language system?

This paper discusses the acquisition of English negation 'no' and 'not' from a case of an Indonesian child to answer the above questions. The evidences are taken from two-months observation of Ridho's English negation at the age of 2.9 years old in natural situations. Ridho is an Indonesian boy who has been exposed to Indonesian and English language in Non-native Parents Bilingual Program (NPBP) (see Romaine 1989 for types of bilingual program) since he was born. His father is Javanese and his mother tongue is Javanese but he mostly speaks Indonesian everyday. He is the only one who consistently speaks English to Ridho. Meanwhile, his mother cannot speak her mother tongue (Mandailing) well and she speaks Indonesian all the time at home. However, sometimes she also speaks English to Ridho, particularly, when he is being engaged with his father.

As proposed earlier, the discussion is directed to reveal only what underlies Ridho's production of 'no' and 'not' as the realization of his negation. Are 'no' and 'not' randomly used or systematically patterned? We need to raise this question because Ridho's English is acquired in an environment in which English constitutes a foreign language. In other words, how are his English negation 'no' and 'not' produced on the basis of his poor targeted language input? Other negation forms which have also been produced by Ridho such as 'don't' and \emptyset or 'null negation' are not discussed in this paper unless they are related to the discussion of 'no' and 'not' negation.

2. How is the realization of 'no' configured?

'No' besides 'not' is the negation word which is frequently produced by Ridho to realize his negation as in (1).

- (1) a. There is no fan (feeling hot and sweating in the bed room)
- b. The boy has no mommy (looking at a boy on TV crying)

In terms of its function in communication according to Bloom (1970) in Lindfors (1980), 'no' is used by Ridho to state nonexistence, rejection, and denial. Nonexistence is concerned with the absence of an object the child has to refer, while rejection and denial is more concerned with interlocutor's proposition the child has to refer. This referential difference motivates two patterns of 'no' use (Kusmanto 2003) as shown in table 1.

Table 1. Pattern of 'no' use in Ridho's negation

Motivation	Function	Realization
Absence of Object	Stating its nonexistence	There is no fan
		The boy has no mommy
		Huh? No sound, daddy!
Interlocutor's Proposition	Rejecting it	No, it's broken (rejecting the tape recorder given to him)
		No, Ridho already take a bath (rejecting to take a bath)
	Denying it	No, Ridho is a good boy (denying the utterance 'Ridho is a bad boy')
		No, Adik ¹ (denying the utterance 'who wrote this on the wall? Ridho did this?')

The obvious difference is that the realization of 'no' to state a nonexistence of an object does not stand by itself in his utterance and is always followed by a noun phrase (NP). This indicates that the construction 'no + NP' derives from '(existence) + NP' and he just simply adds an affix 'no' to negate it. This type of 'no construction' in English is syntactically bound by the presence of NP which cannot be omitted though the interlocutor shares its reference as in (2).

- (2) Father : It's hot. There is no fan here. Where is the fan, Ridho?
 Ridho : Over there, no fan here daddy.

The acquisition of construction 'no + NP' in English, therefore, relies much on its syntactic and semantic cue rather than on its external reference. 'No + NP' construction seems to be the extended version of his early negation form which falls into the 'pivot construction of an object's absence'. The fact of his inability to produce a negative construction as in (3) supports the idea that children have problems with movement construction (Musolino 1998).

- (3) a. The boy has no mommy (1.b.)
 b. The boy (does) not have mommy.

This also affirms that children interpret the difference in meaning on the basis of word position (Fisher 2002).

Different from 'no' used for the absence of an object, 'no' used for rejection and denial always takes place at the beginning of his utterance and sounds like an exclamation as in (4).

- (4) a. No, it's broken (rejecting the tape recorder given to him)
 b. No, Ridho already take a bath (rejecting to take a bath)

¹ Adik 'little sister' is the way his little sister (1.5) is usually called



- c. No, Ridho is a good boy (denying the utterance 'Ridho is a bad boy')
- d. No, Adik (denying the utterance 'who wrote this on the wall? Ridho did this?')

If 'no' used for the absence of an object is bound by the NP presence in his utterance, 'no' used for rejection and denial is bound by the interlocutor's utterance. It cannot be explained by looking at its syntactic relation to the rest of his utterances. This suggests that discourse competence infringes on syntax in children's language development though, to some extent, it also occurs in adult state (Grinstead 1998, Hyams 2001).

The construction of this negation is 'no + (interlocutor's utterance), the argument'. The omission of interlocutor's utterance is not caused by his inability to negate it as in (5.a). Rather, we assume that it is purely from his discourse competence which, we believe, is the earliest frame acquired by children as in (5.b). This excludes the Moratsos' (1974) in Grinstead (1998) idea about incomplete cognitive development which precludes children to produce a language system correctly.

- (5) a. Mother : Ridho is a bad boy
Ridho : No, (Ridho is not a bad boy) Ridho is a good boy
- b. Father : Ridho, take a bath first!
Ridho : No, (Interlocutor's utterance) Ridho already take a bath

If we take a look at its underlying construction, we find that 'no' is directly followed by what is being negated from the interlocutor's utterance. This construction is exactly the same with the negation 'no' used to state an absence of an object. Therefore, we can assume here that the meaning configuration of a construction is interpreted and acquired by children on the basis of its immediate constituent both in terms of syntactic and pragmatic realization. In other words, we have to bear in mind that the interpretation of meaning relation by children starts from the closest constituent which may be overtly or implicitly realized.

3. How 'not' differs from 'no' negation

Interestingly the realization of negation 'not' takes place in a different environment and has different syntactic role from 'no' in his utterances as in (6).

- (6) a. Daddy not going to work
- b. The man can not move
- c. The drink not hot
- d. It's not raining
- e. Not like this daddy
- f. Not this one daddy

The realization of 'not' is concerned with the predication of his utterance. In other words, the realization of 'not' is in the scope of Verb Phrase (VP) construction. However, the realization of 'not' across his utterances varies and this needs thorough explanation. As 'not' is in VP construction, the analysis of 'not' will start from the internal VP construction.

In general, there are three types of predicate negation in English declarative sentences. First, 'not' is affixed directly to an overt auxiliary and modality without any movement as in (7.a); second, it is affixed to a slightly overt auxiliary with a movement as in (7.b); and third, it is affixed directly to the verb itself as in (7.c)

- (7) a. The boy will not (won't) take the book
The man cannot (can't) drive a car
b. The boy does not (doesn't) take the book
The boys do not (don't) take the book
c. The boy is not (isn't) a student
The boys are not (aren't) students.

Mostly, Ridho's predicate negation is not complete, particularly one which deals with a slightly overt auxiliary such as 'does', 'do', and 'did'. This fact is in line with his language development regarding Subject – Verb agreement and tense markers. We will analyze the realization of 'not' in relation to the predicate which 'not' negates. As what happens with 'no' negation, 'not' negation is also immediately followed by the constituent which is semantically being negated. Therefore, though realization of 'not' seems to be related to the Verb (V) presence, the role of the verb is weak to be realized when semantically it does not violate the understanding of the utterance. This is true with the realization of copula such as 'is' and 'are' in (6.c, e, and f). This also affirms the finding that children acquire pre-verbal negation at their early development across languages despite the fact that some languages have post-verbal negation (Ellis 1985).

The assumption we can raise regarding this phenomenon is that this sort of construction is the extended continuation of Ridho's earlier acquisition, particularly when he was in the phase of two-word utterance in which he started producing pivot construction. Instead of relating the presence of negation to verb position, we prefer to use the concept of predication which constitutes the nucleus of an utterance. It means that pivot construction basically consists of 'predicate' and 'predicate's argument'. Our preference on the concept of predication excludes the pivot construction 'not + constituent'. Therefore, when he starts negating the predicate, he will assume that one of the constituents is the predicate and add 'not' to negate it.

The above assumption consequently will question the concept of verb 'be' in English as the predicate of an utterance. Is the omission of copula in Ridho's negation (6.e and 6.f) caused by the pre-verbal negation stage of his language development or by the unclear status of the copula in such utterances? If copula in such utterances constitutes the predicate and the nucleus, it will play a major role and can not be omitted. We assume that copula in such utterances is not the predicate and the nucleus. Therefore, in some languages like Indonesian such utterances do not require a verbal phrase as in (8). Such construction is named 'nominal sentence', a sentence which has NP as its predicate.

- (8) a. Ini buku
This book
'This is a book'
b. Ini bukan buku.
This not book
'This is not a book'

If the verb 'is' is really presence, the verb 'is' derives from 'be + present tense marker'. It means that it will become (9) in the negative sentence

- (9) a. This is a book
b. *This is not be a book.

Conversely, the verb 'copula' as in (10) also has to be realized in Indonesian.



- (10) This will be a book.
 Ini akan Ø sebuah buku
 *'Ini akan sebuah buku'
 'Ini akan menjadi sebuah buku'

The obligatory 'be' in (10) is caused by its meaning which indicates a process and plays a major role. That is why Indonesian realizes this 'be' as the verb *menjadi* 'become'. In English itself, the verb 'be' in (10) may be replaced by the verb 'become'. Meanwhile, we can not replace 'is' in (9) with any verb, otherwise the meaning will change. A thorough discussion of this matter based on the data of children's language acquisition will require a separate lengthy paper specially addressing this issue.

The construction of 'be + not' as in (6.d) only occurs in the construction "it's" as in (11), even though Ridho's "it's" sounds /is/. This can be proven by the absence of copula 'is' in (6.e, 6.f, and 12) as those utterances are not supposed to be with "it's".

- (11) a. /is/ not good, daddy (repeating his father's utterance "it's not good, honey")
 b. / is/ not dark outside, daddy (rejecting his father's utterance "It's dark outside")
- (12) a. Ridho : Draw a man daddy
 Father : Say what if you want me to do it?
 Ridho : Daddy, would you please draw a man for Ridho, pleeaassee?
 Father : (Drawing a different man from the one he is used to drawing)
 Ridho : Not like this, daddy! (*The man is not like this*)

It indicates that /is/ is the item learned "it's". When the sound /is/ takes place before 'not', it should be understood that /is/ is "it's" which he cannot produce correctly. Therefore, these data do not rule out the previous explanation of predicate negation, i.e. 'not' is used to negate the word which comes after 'not' as the predicate and it is not used to negate the copula which comes before 'not'.

One for sure is that the presence or the absence of verb in Ridho's negation does not lie beyond the semantic consideration of the utterance. The utterance (6.c) does not realize the copula 'is' because the meaning of the utterance will not be different whether or not the copula 'is' is realized. It is the same case with utterances (6.e and f). One which is missing is the tense information of the utterance. Again, this will question syntactically the presence of copula in (9) whether or not it constitutes the nucleus of the sentence.

4. Conclusion

The number of words he acquired at his age may be much less than English native speakers already acquired at the same age. However, despite the fact that Ridho has been exposed to the very limited English input so far, to some extent, Ridho shows the syntactic pattern of English negation development as children acquire English as their mother tongue in English environment. Based on the work of Klima and Bellugi (1966) in Clark and Clark (1977) and that of Klima and Bellugi (1971) in Lindfors (1980) who have discussed extensively the developmental sequence of English negation in terms of their position and syntactic relation, Ridho's English negation development basically

does not show much difference. However, the studies of Klima and Bellugi missed much the explanation of negation in use.

The pattern of negation 'no' and 'not' cannot be explained exclusively in terms of their position or their syntactic role. The explanation should be simultaneously based on their syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic analysis. Otherwise, the explanation will present a partial development. The negation 'no' as shown by the data cannot just be explained that it occurs at the beginning of children's utterances; neither can the negation 'not' that it occurs when verb is presence. The negation 'no', as a matter in fact, is the realization of different communication functions, so is the negation 'not'.

Ridho's English negation development shows that 'no' is used to realize different syntactic and pragmatic functions and that 'no' is different from 'not' in terms of their syntactic role in his utterances. It shows that Ridho's English negation 'no' and 'not' are not random productions, but systematically patterned production. Unquestionable finding is that Ridho also acquires pre-predicator negation as having been shown by other works.

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