Acquiring the Features of Negative Indefinites

A comparison of Catalan, Spanish and Italian with West Germanic

Núria Bosch nb611@cam.ac.uk

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

NegLaB Negation in Language and Beyond

Paper

Acquiring Negative Concord = 'easy'?

Is Negative Concord (NC) developmentally 'more default'?

Some evidence from comprehension...

- German and English double negation (e.g., Thornton et al., 2016; Nicolae & Yatsushiro, 2022).
- Japanese NPIs (Sano et al., 2009).
- Artificial language learning (Maldonado & Culbertson, 2021).
- Fragment answers in NC-languages (Moscati, 2020).

And production...

- Errors of overproduction of negative markers in German, English and Dutch (Thornton et al., 2016; Driemel et al., 2023).

Some questions

1. **Production-comprehension mismatch – significantly lower error rates in production:** sufficient to justify a *grammatical* NC-stage? How do these error rates compare crosslinguistically?
2. **Crosslinguistic generality?** Data comes primarily from Germanic and DN languages.

Main take-aways

- First acquisition study on Catalan and Spanish NC.
- ! Romance-Germanic comparison shows no evidence that NC is acquired earlier or more easily.
- Results align best with analyses where NC is syntactically derived (Zeijlstra 2004).

A crosslinguistic corpus study

A comparative case-study on the acquisition of negative indefinites:

1. **Romance data:** 43 children (CHILDES) – 14 Catalan, 20 Spanish, 9 Italian.
   ↪ All Non-Strict Negative Concord languages.
2. **Germanic data:** 44 children (Driemel et al., 2023; CHILDES) – 11 German, 17 English and 16 Dutch.

Coding:

- NCI type: nothing, nobody, etc.
- Structure: Negative Concord/Doubling, Fragment Answer, Error.
- Position: pre/postverbal (if applicable).

Data sample: 550 child Romance utterances; 4431 child Germanic utterances (Driemel et al. dataset).

	Error		NC			
Language	Pre-V	Post-V	Pre-V	Post-V	**NFA**	**Total**
Catalan	0	0	5 (9.3%)	49 (90.7%)	32	86
Spanish	0	15 (100%)	39 (16.4%)	199 (83.6%)	131	384
Italian	0	11 (100%)	1 (2.4%)	42 (97.6%)	26	80
Total	0	26 (100%)	45 (13.4%)	290 (86.5%)	189	550

Table 1. Counts for Error, NC and NFA by Language.

Against Negative Concord as developmentally default

1. Comparable error rates

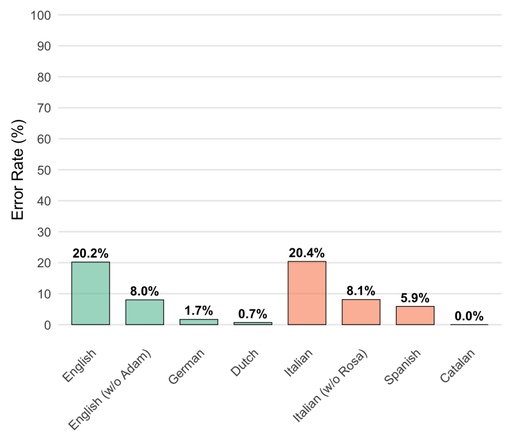

Figure 1. Error rates (Proportion Error/NI) by Language.

2. Qualitatively distinct errors

- **Romance**: Errors of *omission* of compulsory negator postverbally → 'DN-like' errors.
  - *Es* ***nadie*** 'He/she/it is nobody' (Sp., Magín, 1;09)
  - *Decía* ***nada*** 'He/she/it said nothing' (Sp., Carla, 3;00)
  - *Questo fa* ***nulla*** 'This is doing nothing' (It., Rosa, 2;07)
- **Germanic**: Errors of *overproduction* of negator pre- and postverbally → 'NC-like' errors.
  - ***Kein*** *Gewitter kommt* ***nicht*** *heute* 'There's no thunderstorms coming today' (German, Leo, 2;03)
  - ***Nobody****'s* ***not*** *drying him* (English, Fraser, 3;00)
  - *En Rosa mag* ***niet geen*** *spelletje* 'And Rosa may not play a gameyi' (Dutch, Daan, 3;00)

3. Restrictions on error types

- **Romance**: absence of errors in preverbal contexts (Table 1) → they do not entertain Strict NC.
- **Germanic**: *highly restricted* errors in German and Dutch:
  - Majority (73%) from one child (Leo), whose errors are restricted to *kein* 'no'.
  - Errors in Dutch are also *geen* 'no'-driven (4 out of 6).
  - Significantly more widespread in English → hybrid NC status (Zeijlstra, 2004; Tubau, 2008; Blanchette, 2015).

4. Timing of emergence of errors

- Romance = *earl(ier)* emergence.
- Germanic = *late* emergence.

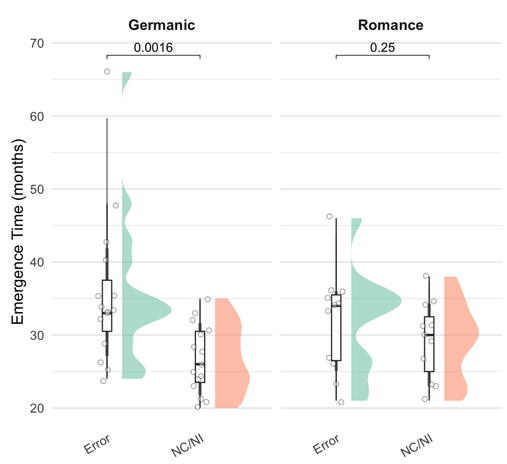

Figure 2. Emergence of Errors vs. NC/DN by Language Group.

Overall

- Systematic L1-conditioned differences from earliest stages.
- NC-acquisition is also error-prone, but in distinct ways.

↪ Unexpected if NC were the developmental 'starting point'.

Bonus empirical asymmetry!

A Germanic-only pattern: expressive uses of *isolated* (ungrammatical) NIs to indicate negative flavours (rejection, disapproval, etc.) *before* producing grammatical uses of NIs.
Not attested in Cat/Sp/It.!

MOT: Do you remember David? CHI: No. ***Never*** *David.* (Adam, 2;03)
FAT: Is lekker, he? ('It's tasty, huh?') *CHI:* ***Niks*** *papa* (lit. 'nothing, dad') (Dutch; Abel, 2;10)

Proposal: Negative Concord is a derived system

A feature-based and *non-negative* analysis of NCIs (i.a., Giannakidou, 1997; Déprez, 1997; Zeijlstra, 2004).

↪ **Zeijlstra (2004)**: Agree-based approach to NC

Double Negation system		Negative Concord system	
Negator	Indefinite	Negator	Indefinite
[NEG]	[NEG]	[iNEG]	[uNEG]

- *Flexible Formal Feature Hypothesis:*
  semantic [F] (default) → 'doubling effects' in input → postulation of [i/uF].

→ **It predicts:**

1. **Low error rates for Germanic**: no [uNEG] postulation.
2. **Correlation between *age* and *type* of errors**: errors of omission ('DN-like' errors) should be produced early, before a NC system is established.
3. **Errors only being widespread in English**: [uNEG] can only be cued by 'doubling' effects in input → English as a 'hybrid' NC system.
4. **Absence of preverbal errors in Romance**: Strict NC is developmentally more complex ([uNEG] on both negator and NCI).
5. **Absence of early 'isolated' NIs in Romance**: a link to lexical semantics → only Germanic NIs are semantically negative.

Conclusions and outlook

Comparative *production* data shows little evidence for 'NC as default':

- Error rates in Germanic ≈ Romance.
- No clear evidence for a distinct NC-like stage in Germanic.
- Error patterns align if NC is derived and NCIs are non-negative (predicted error types, timing, absence of unattested errors).

Questions for the future:

- Other NC systems: e.g., strict NC, Afrikaans (Biberauer & Zeijlstra, 2012; see White et al., 2022; Biberauer & van Heukelum, 2025ab).
- Interaction with bilingualism and language contact: typologically distinct language pairs.
- How to resolve the production-comprehension mismatch? Processing burden? (e.g., Jou, 1988; Zhou et al., 2014, cf. Illingworth et al., 2025)

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