

When 'No' Goes Astray: A Blind Alley Development in the Early Acquisition of Polish Negative Sentences

This study investigates a previously unobserved Blind Alley Development (BAD) in the early acquisition of negative sentences in Polish, offering novel insights into the interplay between positional salience and syntactic development in young children. BAD is defined as an ephemeral developmental pattern that diverges from parental input and is eventually abandoned when persistent corrective feedback is provided (author et al. 2020). The investigation draws on two primary data sources: detailed mother's diary and longitudinal recordings of typically developing Polish-speaking children. The complete dataset comprises observations of two boys and two girls, aged between 1 and 3 years, providing a naturalistic perspective on early language acquisition. Notably, the only previous study on Polish negation by Sopata (2010) focused on verbal finiteness and did not address this phenomenon.

We distinguish between strong and weak BADs. Strong BADs have no basis in the general target structures of the language or in parental input, as is the case with the syntactic BAD observed in this study, e.g. *ja chce nie* ('I want no') instead of the target form *ja nie chce* ('I don't want'). In contrast, weak BADs emerge from the input but then diverge from it (e.g., *bring*, *brang*, *brung*). Our analysis identifies a strong syntactic BAD characterized by the repositioning of the unstressed, preposed negative particle *nie* ('no'). In this pattern, *nie* is shifted immediately after the verb and receives stress, thereby enhancing its prosodic and positional salience relative to the expected Subject-Verb-Object order with an unstressed negation marker.

Our data reveal a distinct developmental trajectory in which children initially produce negative sentence constructions that systematically deviate from canonical Polish input independently of the linguistic input provided by caregivers. Although the mother's diaries offer valuable, albeit limited, insights into the phenomenon, the longitudinal recordings allowed us to document over 250 instances of using negative constructions. A particularly distinctive phase, referred to here as the BADs occurs approximately between 2.3 and 2.6 years. Although the timing of its occurrence may vary, every child in our dataset has passed through this phase. Examples include *hy nie* (target: *nie <jest> zimno*, 'it's not cold'), *ciuciu nie* (target: *to nie jest pociąg*, 'that's not a train'), *to łóć nie* (target: *to nie łódź*, 'it's not a boat'), and *to jiba nie* (target: *to nie <jest> ryba*, 'that's not a fish'). These instances demonstrate that while the child clearly grasps the concept of negation, its syntactic integration remains unstable, with *nie* frequently occurring in non-standard positions. Later, between 2.6 and 3 years, marked improvement is observed as negative constructions become longer and increasingly align with adult Polish.

In contrast to previously documented morphological BADs in French, German, Greek, and Russian, the syntactic BAD presented here shows no correlation with the input. Instead, it appears to reflect an internally driven reorganization of grammatical structures, guided by innate preferences for salience and markedness—a central tenet of Natural Linguistics. This approach, emphasizing cognitive and semiotic underpinnings in language acquisition, provides an alternative explanation to conventional usage-based and generative nativist models.

Word count: 500

References:

Sopata, Aldona 2010. The acquisition of negation in Early Child Polish. *Linguistics Applied* 2,3, 153-173