Phases in L1 Acquisition of Negation: A Comparative Study of Cairene Arabic and English

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This paper examines and compares the acquisition of negation by children acquiring Cairene Arabic and English as first languages. It was found that the development of this syntactic marker goes through three comparable stages in both languages. My analysis shows that the acquisition of negation matches the complexity of the negative syntactic formations at each stage. Moreover, I argue that the frequency of the input hypothesis does not provide an accurate explanation for the progression patterns. Overall, the observed parallelisms indicate that there is a cross-linguistically uniform line of acquiring syntactic structures.

Keywords: first language acquisition, negation, complexity hypothesis, Cairene Arabic, English

1. Introduction

Children acquiring a particular grammatical structure in a variety of native languages pass through a uniform course of development, even when this structure is expressed through quite different morphosyntactic means in their respective languages. The acquisition of negation is a relatively well-known case, on which a number of cross-linguistic comparative studies have been conducted in favor of this unified path of L1 acquisition (see e.g., Wode 1977; Déprez & Pierce 1993; Meisel 1997, among others). This short paper will focus on the steps in which children acquire negation in Cairene Arabic (henceforth CA) and in English, and will argue that the development of this syntactic marker is roughly parallel in the two languages, taking negation patterns in adult language as a reference point.

Child data from CA are drawn from two different sources, which turned out to display significant overlap and complementarity. The first is data collected in Cairo, Egypt in November 2004 from five children between 2;0 and 4;2. Two one-hour sessions were held with each child. Negated utterances/responses were elicited in the course of spontaneous conversations with the children in the presence of close family members, and notes were taken whenever needed. This will be labeled as 'personal data', and the child's name and age will be displayed next to each example. The other source is Margaret Omar's (1973) study of the acquisition of Egyptian Arabic in a south Egyptian village (transcriptions slightly adjusted to account for CA). Omar's data were elicited through what she calls *negation tests* in which the children were given some affirmative sentences and then asked to repeat them in negated form. Since many of her examples lack contextual information regarding the child's age, they will be presented here as is. The English data are mostly taken from Klima & Bellugi (1966).

The analysis and discussion of these data aim to answer the following questions: How does negation function in adult CA? How does negation develop in child CA and English? Is there a systematic pattern of this development? How do the developmental stages correspond in the two languages? What implications does this have for language acquisition in general?

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 offers some background information about the nature of negation in CA adult language – but assuming the reader is familiar with negation in English, I will not discuss negation in adult English. Sections 3 and

4 outline the basic stages through which children acquire negation in CA and English, respectively. Section 5 discusses parallelisms in these developmental stages in the two languages and argues that this progression is based on the complexity of the syntactic system. Finally, section 6 summarizes my conclusions.

2. Negation in adult Cairene Arabic

The negation system of CA is not significantly different from other dialects of Arabic in that it comprises three particles. One is the free interjection la2, which is similar to the English no. The other two particles are the non-discontinuous mis (sometimes mus) and the discontinuous ma—s (Brustad 2000; Woidich 2006; Soltan 2007). For these it is possible to assume a single morpheme ma—s, with two allomorphic realizations: the free allomorph mis and the bound allomorph ma—s, which are associated with predicate negation and verbal negation, respectively (see Brustad 2000). In this section, we look in some detail at all three types of negation and the environments in which they primarily occur and are relevant to children's acquisition of negation.

2.1 Interjectional negation

The free interjection particle la? is used to give a negative response to a question or express disagreement to a statement, but it does not seem to negate a proposition made by the speaker herself. Just like English no, it reinforces the following negation, but unlike no it can also be followed by an affirmative sentence. Thus in response to the yes-no question $inta\ ma-ru\hbar ti-š?$ 'You didn't go?' one could say $la?\ ru\hbar t$ 'Lit. No, I went', which is equivalent to the English Yes, I went. Both $aywa\ ma-ru\hbar ti-š$ 'Yes, I didn't go' and $la?\ ma-ru\hbar ti-š$ 'No, I didn't go' are possible for a negative response, the second being somewhat emphatic.

Quite relevant is the role *la?* plays in adult speech, and certainly when addressing children, as a prohibition. An example would be *inzil xud-hum* 'Go down and take them' – *la? ma-tinzil-š* 'No, don't go down'. Uttered separately, *la?* warns children against doing something forbidden, much like *no no* in English (Omar 1973: 124).

Another use of *la?* in adult CA is to emphatically negate a proposition that stands in juxtaposition to another (see Woidich 2006: 346). The other, positive, proposition is often explicit as in (1a–b), but it may be imagined as in (1c), where the implication is 'anywhere else is okay'. The neutral way to negate these utterances would be to use verbal or predicate negation, e.g. *mafīš mayya* 'there's no water' (1b) or *miš hina* 'not here' (1c).

- (1) Utterance $\Leftrightarrow \neg$ (Utterance + la?)
 - a. ana axattat bass, lākin anaffiz la?.'I only make plans, but realize, no!'
 - b. A: *fī mayya?* 'Is there water?'

B: *mayya la?*. *fī šāy*. 'Water, no. There's tea.'

c. A: aħuṭṭa-ha hina? 'Should I put it here?'

B: hina la?. 'Here, no.'

2.2 Predicate negation

The free negation particle *miš* is used in four environments. The first is *equational* (verbless) sentences in pre-predicate position, exemplified in (2a–b). Equational sentences are those in which the predicate is either a noun phrase, a prepositional phrase, or an adjectival phrase. This is the simplest type of predicate negation in CA, and it conforms to the negation of the English verb *to be* (which is usually null in CA). It is, therefore, common in adult input to children from an early age.

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(2) Subject + Predicate ⇔¬ (Subject + miš + Predicate)
a. il-walad da tawīl. il-walad da miš ṭawīl.
the-boy this tall the-boy this NEG tall
'This boy is tall.' 'This boy is not tall.'
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b. huwwa lasīb kōra. huwwa miš lasīb kōra.

he player football
'He is a football player.' he is not a football player.'

The second environment is nominal and verbal sentences in pre-verbal position (3), i.e. when the verb is prefixed with the $\hbar a$ - future marker (obligatory), or the b- progressive marker (optional). This usage, an exceptional form of verbal negation, is particularly relevant to the acquisition process because it creates the kind of generalizations that children apply to all verbal sentences, resulting in negation errors as will be shown later.

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(3)  ħa- /b- + Verb ⇔¬ ( miš + ha- /b- + Verb )

māma ħa-t-ʔakkil-ak.  māma miš ħa-t-ʔakkil-ak.

mum will-F.SG-feed-you  mum NEG will-F.SG-feed-you

'Mum will feed you.'  'Mum won't feed you.'
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The particle *miš* is also used in pre-imperfective-participle and pre-modal position, i.e. to negate the participle or the modal, as shown in (4a–b).

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(4)
       Participle / Modal + Verb \Leftrightarrow \neg (mi\check{s} + Participle / Modal + Verb)
       a.
               rāyiħ
                        iš-šuyl
                                 badri.
                                                     miš rāyiħ
                                                                    iš-šuyl
                                                                              badri.
               going to the-work early
                                                     NEG going to the-work early
               'I'm going to work early.'
                                                     'I'm not going to work early.'
               il-bint lāzim ti-zākir.
                                                     il-bint miš lāzim ti-zākir.
       b.
               the-girl has to F.SG-study
                                                     the-girl NEG has to F.SG-study
               'The girl has to study.'
                                                     'The girl doesn't have to study.'
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Finally, Brustad (2000: 306) notes an interesting use of the predicate negation particle in embedded subjunctive clauses. In her example, cited in (5a), the negation carries the force of an imperative or reprimand to a child. This use can be extended to address an adult as in (5b).

- (5) a. **miš** ti-sallim-i? **NEG** you-greet-F.SG

 'Shouldn't you say hello?'
 - b. **miš** ti-t?akkid il-?awwil? **NEG** you-verify the-first
 'Shouldn't you make sure first?'

Brustad concludes that predicate negation is unmarked when it is used to negate non-verbal predicates (equational clauses), and marked when negating verbal clauses with the future marker, the progressive marker, and the modals.

2.3 Verbal negation

The basic function of the verbal negation particle $ma_\check{s}$ is to negate a non-prefixed verb form: the perfective obligatorily (6a) and the imperfective optionally (6b). In the latter case, the choice between the allomorphs $mi\check{s}$ and $ma_\check{s}$ is a matter of sociolinguistic variation.

(6) Verb (perfective/imperfective) $\Leftrightarrow \neg$ (ma- Verb (perfective/imperfective) - \check{s})

a. Hāni ?akal ruzz. Hāni ma-?akal-š ruzz.

Hāni ate rice Hāni NEG-eat-NEG rice 'Hāni ate rice.'

b. Hāni b-yākul ruzz. Hāni ma-b-yakul-š ruzz. Hāni PRES-eat rice 'Hāni is eating rice.' Hāni is not eating rice.'

ma—š may also negate the second constituent of a verb phrase, where the modifier is a modal. Compare (7) with (4b) above. Decisions about which negation particle is used to negate a verb or a modal constituent are very complex, and we can only expect them to be acquired very late.

(7) Modifier + Verb ⇔¬ (Modifier + ma- Verb -š)

il-bint lāzim ti-zākir.

il-bint lāzim ma-t-zakir-š.

the-girl must F.SG-study

'The girl must study.'

the-girl must not study.'

These examples and many others represent unmarked patterns of negation. The main exception to this rule is the negation of the future form $\hbar a$ - + imperfective (3), which is always negated with $mi\check{s}$, typically the particle of predicate negation (Brustad 2000: 307).

While $mi\check{s}$ is used in equational sentences to negate a prepositional phrase, ma— \check{s} is used to negate certain prepositional phrases which usually carry the meaning of a verb. These pseudo-verbs — such as $f\bar{i}$ 'in / there is' and fand 'at / have' — pattern with verbs in that they appear flanked by the discontinuous negation particle, as shown in (8).

(8) Subject + Predicate $\Leftrightarrow \neg$ (Subject + ma- Predicate - \check{s}) ir- $r\bar{a}gil$ Sand-u $b\bar{e}t$.

the-man with-him house

'The man has a house.'

Subject + ma- Predicate - \check{s}) ir- $r\bar{a}gil$ ma-Sand- \bar{u} - \check{s} $b\bar{e}t$.

the-man NEG-with-him-NEG house

'The man doesn't have a house.'

In addition to negating past and present verbs, ma— \check{s} is also used to negate the imperative, by adding the prefix ma- and the suffix - \check{s} to the imperfective form of the clause underlying the change (Hanna 1967). Note that ma— \check{s} is used only with direct prohibitive, while $mi\check{s}$ is used where a negative subjunctive indicates an imperative.

(9) Verb (jussive) ⇔¬ (ma- Verb (jussive) -š)
 ma-ti-t²axxar-š!
 NEG-M.SG-be late-NEG
 'Don't be late!'

3. Stages of negation in child Cairene Arabic

In CA, the three negative particles *la?*, *miš*, and *ma—š* are acquired gradually, and only older children (around 3;6 and older) can use *miš* and *ma—š* correctly in their proper syntactic environments. I argue that the development of negation as such corresponds to exactly three stages of acquisition (see also Omar 1973), which are outlined as follows:

3.1 *Stage I: la?*

The earliest and simplest form of negation usually heard from children was the free form la? 'no'. This discourse negation marker informs us, succinctly and expressively, about the truth of a proposition uttered by someone else, as perceived by the hearer who reacts on it. As such, it is used very frequently in everyday speech and, therefore, is an important input for children in the first stages of learning how to say no/not. Furthermore, it is frequently used as a prohibition or a negative command to children (see §2.1).

Based on the collected data, younger children (around 2;0 to 2;6) negate nominal and verbal sentences with la? placed at the end of the sentence (or initially in yes-no questions) without making the necessary morphophonemic changes. In adult CA, this structure is only used for emphatic negation (where there is juxtaposition), as in (1) above. Children appear to overgeneralize the pattern of la? negation since the particle occurs in more restricted contexts in the input they receive from adults. As shown in (10a–b), the children in Omar's (1973) study appear to have established a simple pattern of negating their short utterances. We may classify this type of negation as Stage I since it was never heard from older children.

(10) Utterance ⇔¬ (Utterance + la?)

a. il-bitt di darab-it-ik? Child: hiyya la?.

the-girl this hit-she-you.F.SG she NEG

'Did this girl hit you?' 'She no.' (Omar 1973: 125)

- b. mam-tik hina? Child: hina la?.
 mother-your.F.SG here here NEG
 'Is your mother here?' 'Here no.' (ibid.)
- c. Hanīn (2;2): inta ?imši la?.
 you go-M.SG **NEG**'You must not go.' (Personal data)

3.2 Stage II: miš

The other type of negation observed in the youngest children's speech is found in use of *miš*, as shown in (11). This one-word negation pattern is not, in principle, any more complex than Stage I. Nevertheless, its usage entails that the child has the pattern for predicate negation in place (see §2.2). The overgeneralization of *miš* to verbal negation here is often accompanied by the use of incorrect verb forms (in connection with tense, aspect, and person agreement). Interestingly, Benmamoun & Albirini (2013) report that Egyptian heritage speakers in the US prefer to use the continuous negation particle *miš* for verbal negation due to their "incomplete acquisition of the syntax of verb movement and its interaction with negation".

- (11) Utterance ⇔¬ (miš + Utterance)
 a. Mother: tant xarag-it?
 auntie left-she
 'Did auntie leave?'
- Rīm (2;8): **miš** tu-xrug. **NEG** she-leave.PRES

 'She didn't leave.'

 (Personal data)

b. Child: humma miš kal-u. they NEG eat-PL 'They didn't eat.' Adult: humma ma-kal-ū-š they NEG-eat-PL-NEG 'They didn't eat.' (Omar 1973: 125)

This pattern is used as predicate negation in adult speech and is highly frequent, as mentioned earlier. Omar notes that it is unclear whether this negation pattern actually develops after the pattern postulated as Stage I; it is just as simple and strongly recurrent in younger children's speech. However, there is evidence to treat it as Stage II. Based on observation of the subjects and of my own children, this pattern develops later, and rarely before 2;8. Moreover, children who use this pattern at a later stage do not continue to use the *la?* pattern presumed as Stage I (Omar 1973: 126). It goes without saying that there is no clear-cut border between the various developmental stages, and that there is considerable overlap.

3.3 Stage III: ma—š

Omar (1973) postulates the acquisition of ma— \check{s} form of negation as Stage III because the younger children in her study were not heard using this form of negation. The ma— \check{s} type of negation involves the complexity of attaching both a prefix and a suffix to the negated word, and the word may undergo further morphophonemic changes, such as a change in final vowel length or in primary stress. At Stage II, most errors involved the use of the $mi\check{s}$ form where

ma—š was required, or placed miš in the wrong position in the sentence (ibid.; 126). It seems that around the age of 4;0 and sometimes earlier children reach a semi-mastery of negation in CA. The examples in (12) indicate that using the discontinuous negation particle ma—š accurately coincides with using the correct verb form.

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(12) a. Mahmoud (2;9): Dūdi ma-?akal-š.

Dūdi NEG-eat-NEG

'Dūdi [referring to himself] didn't eat.' (Personal data)
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b. Seif (4;2): ma-\(\frac{1}{n}\)raf-\(\bar{u}\)-\(\bar{s}\).

NEG-know-him-NEG

'I don't know him.' (Personal data)
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An exception to the earlier division is the acquisition of the negation of the stative verb $ma.f\bar{\imath}.\check{s}$ 'there isn't / aren't'. Despite this exhibiting a seemingly advanced stage of negation, $ma.f\bar{\imath}.\check{s}$ is used by even the youngest children in the two-word stage. Since it is used as an early pivot word before it is contrasted with the affirmative existential $f\bar{\imath}$ 'there is/are', Omar (1973: 127) argues that this item is first learned as a chunk.

4. Stages of negation in child English

Children acquiring English as their native language pass through three major stages in the acquisition of negation. According to Klima & Bellugi (1966), Bloom (1970), Wode (1977), and Capdevila & Llinás (1995), these can be summarized as follows:

4.1 Stage I: one-word negation

In this early stage, children tend to use a negative marker (NEG), usually *no* and sometimes *not*, at the front or at the end of an affirmative utterance (U). Thus, we see utterances of the form: NEG + U or U + NEG. Klima & Bellugi (1966) noted that first productions of negation varied considerably from child to child. One of the three children in their study began as early as 1;6 and the others did not begin until around 2;6. Some examples are given in (13).

- (13) a. No Mommy go.
 - b. *Not a teddy bear.*
 - c. Wear mitten no.

4.2 Stage II: multi-word negation with NEG in external position

The child now uses the negative markers – both *no* and *not* – utterance internally with verb stems and modals, and less in utterance-initial position (Wode 1977). Auxiliary verbs can be seen in combination with the negative marker, as in *don't* and *can't*, but not in questions or declarative utterances at this stage (Klima & Bellugi 1966: 194). According to Steinberg (1993: 15), utterances at this stage are still of a rather crude nature and negative imperatives are as poorly formed as in the previous period. This is exemplified in (14).

- (14) a. I don't want it.
 - c. Don't leave me.

- b. We can't talk.
- d. He no bite you.

4.3 Stage III: clause-internal negation

At this stage, the child has a good idea of when do must be inserted and when do is not inserted. She makes placement errors but seems to grasp the basic notion that do is not added when there is a modal like can't or will, or when be is the verb. See the examples in (15). After this period, it is only a matter of months before most of the problems in negative making are successfully dealt with (Steinberg 1993: 16). Klima & Bellugi (1966) found that all three children in their study took six months to pass through the three periods, with some individual differences.

- (15) a. Paul can't have one.
 - b. No, I don't have a book.
 - c. Don't put the two wings on it!
 - d. You didn't caught me.

5. Analysis and Comparison

The development of the negation system in Cairene Arabic first language acquisition bears a close similarity with that in other Arabic dialects reported in the literature (see Smadi 1979 and Abu El-Haija 1981 on Jordanian Arabic; Aftat 1982 on Moroccan Arabic; Mohamed & Ouhalla 1995 on Palestinian Arabic; Al-Buainain 2003 on Qatari Arabic; Al-Jenaie 2008 on Kuwaiti Arabic). All of the above studies – together with Omar (1973) on Egyptian Arabic – report a rather uniform line of acquisition for the negation system with *la?* appearing first, then *miš* (Jordanian/ Palestinian/ Kuwaiti *mū*, Moroccan *māši*, and Qatari *mob*) followed by ma—(\check{s}) (Al-Kulaib 2010: 202). This line of development seems to conform to that observed for English, as discussed in some detail below.

Stage I in English acquisition of negation (one-word negation) closely corresponds to Stage I in CA acquisition of negation, with the exception of the position of the free negative markers: *no* in English and *la?* in CA. While in English children place *no* at the front or end of an affirmative utterance, in CA children always place the negation marker *la?* at the end of the utterance. This discrepancy aside, simple rules like those in (16) are expected to mark the beginning of the acquisition of negation. It is unclear at this stage whether the child uses one or two negation particles interchangeably, namely *no / not* in English and *la? / miš* in CA.

- (16) a. English: Utterance $\Leftrightarrow \neg (no + \text{Utterance}) \text{ OR } \neg (\text{Utterance} + no)$
 - b. Cairene Arabic: Utterance $\Leftrightarrow \neg$ (Utterance + la?)

During Stage II, children use *don't* extensively in English (as well as *can't*) and stop using *no* to negate utterances, and this corresponds to children's use of the predicate negation marker *miš* across the board in CA and simultaneously dropping *la?*. The lack of auxiliary verbs in adult CA may lead to the assumption that negation is more complicated for children acquiring

English. However, the fact that children only manage to use don't in English without tense or person agreement at this stage maps into overgeneralizing the use of mis to verbal negation in CA, also without tense or person agreement. This supports characterizing the mis - don't stage as an intermediate period in the acquisition of negation in both languages.

In Stage III, children acquiring English are able to make correct judgments about the insertion of *do* and also about when *do* is not added (after the copula and modal verbs) – the final and most complicated stage in the acquisition of English negation. On the other hand, children acquiring CA manage to use the complex negative particle ma— \check{s} correctly within certain tenses and pseudo-verbal clauses without using $mi\check{s}$ in its place, which also concludes the acquisition of CA negation.

These strikingly similar acquisition patterns require that we entertain two possible analyses that are well known in first language acquisition research: *the frequency of the input* and *the complexity of the syntactic system*. Below I briefly examine the (in)plausibility of both hypotheses.

Two pieces of evidence seem to support the frequency of the input hypothesis. The fact that *miš* is extremely common in adult input to children raises the question of whether or not children acquire this negative particle first because they hear it very frequently from adults. This is possible, of course. However, if we look at Stage I in which children place *la?* at the end of an utterance, a construction limited to emphatic negation in adult CA and hence infrequent in the input, it becomes clear that input plays little role at this stage. Another evidence in favor of the frequency of the input approach is an utterance like (5a) above (repeated here as (17a)), a grammatical subjunctive clause that serves as possible adult input. (17b), which is very similar on the surface, is ungrammatical in adult language, though very probable in child language. In fact, it looks exactly like the kind of negation errors that children make in indicative clauses. To claim that such errors are the result of some input is questionable since subjunctive clauses are generally infrequent as adult input to children.

- (17) a. **miš** ti-sallim-i? **NEG** you-greet-F.SG

 'Shouldn't you say hello?'
 - b. * il-bint miš ti-sallim. the-girl NEG F.SG-greet 'The girl doesn't say hello.'

The complexity of the syntactic system hypothesis predicts that a developmental sequence follows patterns of increasing complexity. This can be justified straightforwardly for the case in hand. First, placing the negative marker no - la? before or after an utterance is the simplest form of negation one could hear. McNeill (1970) claims that children everywhere seem to do much the same thing as they begin to learn negation. During the later stages, the child will cut down on overgeneralization by gradually developing specific distinctions for using a newly acquired negation particle. One can also make a complexity distinction between the negation patterns in stages II and III. In CA, ma— \check{s} is a complex particle consisting of a prefix and a suffix and has more elaborate uses than $mi\check{s}$. In English, although don i seems to be frequent in the input, correct use of the auxiliary with negation is complicated and requires the prior acquisition of other syntactic categories, and therefore it is acquired later. I, therefore, argue

that the increasing complexity hypothesis provides a solid explanation for the analogous acquisition paths of this syntactic marker in the two languages.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigated the stages in which children acquire negation in Cairene Arabic and in English. It was shown that children pass through three comparable stages for acquiring this syntactic marker in both languages. The developmental pattern justifies an analysis based on the complexity of the syntactic system rather than on the frequency of the input. I argued that the latter approach does not account for the structures that children produce, but that are infrequent in the adult input. On the other hand, if the correspondences are viewed in the context of the adult syntactic negation systems, the progression pattern then matches the complexity of the different negative syntactic formations at each stage. These obvious crosslinguistic parallelisms signify not only a systematic, but also a uniform path for the acquisition of syntactic structures regardless of which particular language children acquire.

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