

You Can't Not Learn: Exploring the Acquisition of Negative Concord in L2 Spanish Learners

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1. Introduction

Sentences containing two negative expressions exhibit significant cross-linguistic variation in interpretation, depending on the structural configuration in the language. In particular, the key distinction is between Negative Concord and Double Negation languages.

Negative Concord (NC) refers to the grammatical system in which multiple negative elements co-occur within a clause to yield a single semantic negation (Giannakidou, 1997, 1998; Zeijlstra, 2004). Within NC languages, a distinction can be made between Strict Negative Concord and Non-strict Negative Concord. Spanish is a prototypical instance of a non-strict Negative Concord language. For instance, when the n-word *nadie* ('nobody') is postverbal, the clausal negation *no* must be present in the sentence (1); while in sentence (2), the clausal negation is not allowed when the n-word is preverbal. (According to Espinal et al., 2016, p. 150, while it is commonly asserted that preverbal n-words are incompatible with the sentential negator *no* in Spanish, certain spoken varieties in Paraguay, Argentina, and Chile have been reported to allow *no* following an n-word.)

(1) *(No) vino nadie. [Spanish]
NEG came nobody
'Nobody came.'

(2) Nadie (*no) vino. [Spanish]
Nobody (*no) came
'Nobody came.'

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- (6) Ta meiyou mei chifan. [Mandarin]
He NEG-PFV NEG eat food
'It is not the case that he did not eat.'

Due to the typological differences between Mandarin and Spanish, with the former being a Double Negation language and the latter a non-strict Negative Concord language, this contrast is expected to yield interesting patterns in L2 acquisition. In this paper, we investigate how these systems are acquired by L2 learners, focusing on how Mandarin-speaking learners of Spanish interpret sentences containing two negative expressions in their target language.

2. Background

2.1. Acquisition of Negative Concord and Double Negation in L1

In this section, we provide a brief review of studies on the interpretation of sentences containing two negations in first language (L1) acquisition.

Thornton et al. (2016) examined how English-speaking children interpret sentences with two negative markers, building on the Negative Concord Parameter proposed by Zeijlstra (2004, 2008). Zeijlstra (2004) analyzes Standard English as a DN language, treating *not* as an adverb and the contracted element *n't* as being part of the lexical item *didn't*. This follows Zwicky & Pullum, (1983), who note that *n't* attaches only to negative auxiliary verbs. In contrast, many linguists, including Adger (2003), argue that *n't* functions as a syntactic head. If this is correct, Standard English would be an exception to Zeijlstra's (2004, 2008) typological generalization. Zeijlstra (2004, p. 145) acknowledges this possibility, describing Standard English as "a DN language that shows NC-like behavior and can be considered a pseudo-NC language". Building on the assumption that *n't* functions as a negation head form of negation, Thornton et al. (2016) explored how the presence of this head, which presupposes a NegP projection in Standard English, influences children's grammatical development. In their experiment, 20 English-speaking children aged 3;6–5;8 (mean age = 4;7) and 15 adults (controls) were presented with potentially ambiguous test sentences containing two negative elements, such as (7). The study revealed that adults consistently interpreted the test sentences as Double Negation (82% of the time), treating each negator as semantically independent (as expected from the grammar of Standard English). In contrast, children predominantly assigned NC interpretations (75% of the time), treating sentences with two negative elements as conveying a single negation.

- (7) The girl who skipped didn't buy nothing.

In addition, control sentences featured two negations in separate clauses, as in (8), expected to yield unambiguous DN interpretation since in this case the negation and the negative quantifier are clause-separated and therefore do not trigger NC interpretation. Both children (84%) and adults (94%) performed similarly, confirming children's grasp of the negative force of *nothing* and ruling out possible misanalysis of n-words (i.e., interpreting *nothing* as *anything*).

(8) The girl who didn't skip bought nothing.

The control item results also rule out an alternative computational limitation account, which posits that children's NC preference arises because interpreting two negations exceeds their processing capacity, leading them to default to a single negation interpretation. In these control items featuring two negations but lacking the syntactic configuration that licenses NC, children accurately interpreted both negatives separately. This performance casts serious doubt on the processing account, demonstrating that children can handle multiple negations when the grammar requires it. In sum, the results by Thornton et al. (2016) suggest that children begin with a grammar where the contracted form of negation *n't* appeared to be a head, and therefore, NC was licensed through agreement. Therefore, these results suggest that children acquiring Standard English initially have a grammar that licenses NC, even though such a grammar is not reflected in the adults' grammar.

Similar findings were reported for Standard German, which, like Standard English, is recognized as a Double Negation language. Nicolae & Yatsushiro, (2020) investigated how 26 monolingual German-speaking children aged between 4;2 and 6;5, and a control group of 10 monolingual German-speaking adults, interpreted sentences containing two negative elements, such as (9).

- (9) Der Hase hat kein Gemüse nicht gegessen. [German]
 The rabbit AUX NEG vegetable NEG eat.PTCP
 'The rabbit did not eat any vegetable.'

Target sentences were tested in two experimental conditions: 1) a Double Negation Context, in which the animal ate all the vegetables and the sentence should be judged true only under a DN interpretation, i.e. the adult German interpretation; 2) a Negative Concord Context, in which the animal ate none of the vegetables and the sentence should be judged true only under an NC interpretation, but false under a DN interpretation; and 3) Control-False Context, in which the animal ate some but not all of the vegetables and the sentence should be judged false under either interpretation. The adult participants performed as expected: they showed a 92.5% acceptance rate of test sentences like (9) in the Double Negation Context and only 15% acceptance in the Negative Concord Context. In contrast, most of the child participants accepted sentences such as (9) in the Negative Concord Context at a high rate (around 75%) and were far less likely (close to 0%) to accept them in the Double Negation Context. The authors took these findings to suggest that Negative Concord represents a default stage in early child grammars, even in languages like German, where the adult grammar is characterized by Double Negation.

An overextension of NC interpretation is also attested in Italian, a NC language. Moscati (2020) reports that Italian-speaking children aged 4;6–6;3 prefer a single negation interpretation of two negative elements in contexts (i.e. fragment answers) where adults typically opt for a Double Negation interpretation.

Evidence from child language corpora provides additional support for the early adoption of a Negative Concord grammar. Researchers have identified spontaneous productions by German-, English-, and Dutch-speaking children that contain multiple negative markers but express only a single semantic negation (Driemel et al., 2023; Hein et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2012; Nicolae & Yatsushiro, 2020). These utterances are consistent with the idea that children acquiring a DN language pass through a developmental stage in which their grammar treats negative indefinites as Negative Concord items. By contrast, if children's comprehension errors were solely due to processing limitations, one would expect them to avoid producing sentences with two negations altogether. However, Bill et al. (2024) found that German-speaking children aged between 3;1–6;2 (mean age = 4;9) behaved like adults, in that they did not produce Negative Concord instances.

Zhou et al. (2014) investigated whether Mandarin-speaking preschoolers understand Double Negation (DN) constructions such as (10), building on prior findings that children this age generally lack DNs and interpret them as single negation (Jou, 1988; Jouie, 1995). Results showed that 5;6- to 5;10-year-olds accepted the DN reading (i.e., two negatives yielding affirmation) at a mean rate of 86.67%, whereas 4;2- to 5;5-year-olds did so only at 20%, revealing a clear developmental shift. An elicitation task in the same study showed that six-year-olds produced DN structures at rates similar to adults (children: 76.92%; adults: 80%).

- (10) Mei-you-ren mei qu canjia shengri juhui.
 NEG-have-person NEG gojoin birthday party
 'Everybody went to the birthday party.'

2.2. Acquisition of Negative Concord and Double Negation in L2

This section briefly reviews studies on the interpretation of sentences containing two negations in second language (L2) acquisition, which are rather scarce.

Yamada (2022) explored L2 acquisition of Spanish NC by English speakers, as already mentioned a DN language, using a structured oral elicitation task with 71 U.S. university learners. Higher-proficiency learners more accurately combined preverbal *no* with postverbal *nada* (English: *nothing*) or *nadie* (English: *no one*), approximating native NC patterns, while lower-proficiency learners often omitted *no*, producing English-like errors due to L1 transfer.

Alexandrino (2010) tested L1 transfer in NC acquisition by comparing four learner groups (L1 English L2 Spanish, L1 English L2 Portuguese, L1 Portuguese L2 Spanish, L1 Spanish L2 Portuguese) via grammaticality judgment tasks. The results showed that learners whose L1 already includes the NC system (i.e. L1 Portuguese L2 Spanish and L1 Spanish L2 Portuguese learners) were more accurate in acquiring NC in the target language than English-speaking learners, indicating positive transfer in L1s.

The acquisition of NC and DN has also been explored in an artificial language learning experiment (Maldonado & Culbertson, 2021). The authors found that English speakers, who are native speakers of a DN language, struggled more to learn artificial DN systems than NC systems. Therefore, these results suggest that learners of artificial languages exhibit a bias in favor of NC interpretations.

3. Our study

The learnability of NC versus DN remains an open question, particularly in L2 contexts where learners' L1 may or may not align with the target language's negation system. This study extends evidence on the L2 acquisition of Negative Concord and Double Negation systems by focusing on typologically distinct languages: Mandarin (systematic DN, with independent negations) and Spanish (non-strict NC, where multiple negatives yield single negation). The main research question is whether Mandarin-speaking learners of Spanish interpret sentences with two negative markers as instances of Negative Concord, as expected in Spanish, or whether they exhibit transfer from Mandarin, a Double Negation language.

3.1. Participants

Thirty adult L1 Spanish speakers (age range 21–59; mean age = 3; gender = 11 females) and twenty adult L1 Mandarin speakers who learned Spanish as an L2 (age range 19 – 23; mean age = 21; gender = 14 females) participated in the study. The L1 Spanish speakers were recruited in Madrid, Spain, and participants who also had Catalan, Basque, or Galician as a first language were excluded during recruitment. The L2 Spanish participants were recruited from the Department of Spanish at Zhejiang University. All L2 participants self-reported an advanced proficiency level in Spanish (equivalent to C1–C2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and were instructed learners residing in China.

3.2. Procedure and Materials

The experiment was programmed using the Labvanced platform (Finger et al., 2017) and conducted on a researcher's laptop. It began with a background questionnaire where participants provided demographic information, their L1, and any additional languages they spoke.

All participants were tested individually in a quiet environment. Prior to the experiment, they signed an informed consent form. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee (CERec) of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (reference number CEEAH 6766).

The experiment was a Truth-Value Judgment Task (Crain & Thornton, 1998) that began with an introductory story to provide the background of the task. For L2 learners, the introductory story was accompanied by a Mandarin translation to help them understand the task background, while, for L1 speakers, it was

presented only in their native language. Only the introductory story included the translation for L2 learners; the rest of the experiment was conducted entirely in Spanish.

In the main task, participants evaluated the truth value of 24 pseudorandomized trials, following two training trials. The experimental context simulated a dialogue between two characters, Juan and María. In each trial, the characters first watched a scene; then one asked a question and the other responded. At the beginning of each scene, a brief descriptive sentence introduced the setting (e.g., “three people on the street” or “several children are in the room”), followed by the depiction of individuals performing various actions. Both the descriptive sentence and the dialogue (i.e., the target sentences) were presented orally. When the target sentence finished playing, the video ended, and the written question *¿Lo que recuerda es verdadero o falso?* (“Is what he/she remembers true or false?”) appeared below the display, along with two response buttons. Participants judged whether the sentence they heard accurately described the scenario. If they judged it as false, they were prompted to provide a written justification.

The task included 18 target sentences and 6 fillers. Examples of the question and target sentences are provided in (11). The 18 target sentences were divided into three groups of six, corresponding to three conditions: 1) the *ALL* condition, in which every individual performed the action described in the sentence (e.g., a scene where everyone was crying). When presented with the target sentence in (11b), this scenario was expected to elicit a *false* judgment. 2) the *NONE* condition, in which no individual performed the action described in the sentence (e.g., a scene where nobody was crying). When the target sentence (11b) was uttered, it was expected to be judged *true*. 3) the *SOME* condition (serving as a control), in which some individuals performed the action while others did not (e.g., a scene where only one person in the scenario was crying). In this case, the target sentence (11b) was expected to be judged *false*. The six fillers were designed to be judged as true, correctly matching the scenarios shown in the videos. This ensured a balanced ratio of true and false responses, given that the control condition *SOME* was always false.

(11) a. ¿Alguien lloró?
 someone cried?
 ‘Did anyone cry?’

b. No lloró nadie.
 no cried nobody
 ‘Nobody cried.’

The dialogue structure was identical across the three conditions, varying only in the verb. Six intransitive verbs were used in the trials: *saltar* ‘jump’, *dormir* ‘sleep’, *llorar* ‘cry’, *reír* ‘laugh’, *caer* ‘fall’, and *trabajar* ‘work’.

3.3. Predictions

We hypothesized that, under a Negative Concord (NC) interpretation, sentences containing two negative elements would be understood as expressing a single negation. Consequently, participants were expected to accept the *NONE* condition, reject the *ALL* condition (and reject the *SOME* condition, which was a control condition). Under a Double Negation (DN) interpretation, however, the same sentences would yield a positive meaning; participants would therefore reject the *NONE* condition and accept the *ALL* condition (with the *SOME* condition also rejected).

If Mandarin-speaking learners of Spanish interpret sentences with two negative markers in line with the NC pattern, as Spanish native speakers do, no difference is expected between the L1 and L2 groups. Conversely, if they show transfer from Mandarin (which as mentioned above is a Double Negation language), significant differences are predicted between the L1 and the L2 groups.

3.4. Results

Participants were required to correctly answer at least 75% of the filler items to be included in the analysis. All participants in both the L1 Spanish and L2 Spanish groups met this criterion and were included in the data analyses. Fillers were judged correctly 97.22% of the time ($SD = 16.47$) by L1 Spanish speakers and 98.33% of the time ($SD = 12.85$) by L2 Spanish learners.

The mean acceptance rates for the target sentences across groups for the three conditions are shown in Figure 1. L1 Spanish speakers exhibited a ceiling effect, rejecting the *ALL* condition 100% of the time. They accepted the *NONE* condition in 98.88% of cases ($SD = 10.51$) and rejected the *SOME* condition in 98.34% of cases ($SD = 12.84$). L2 Spanish learners showed a similar pattern: they rejected the *ALL* condition at a mean rate of 95% ($SD = 21.88$); they accepted the *NONE* condition at a mean rate of 99.17% ($SD = 9.12$); they rejected the *SOME* condition in 93.34% of cases ($SD = 25.05$).

The *SOME* condition served as a control and was therefore excluded from the main analysis. Generalized linear mixed models assessed group differences across the two experimental conditions. Analyses were conducted in R 4.4.1 using the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2015). Group and condition were sum-coded as fixed effects Group (L1 Spanish = +1 vs. L2 Spanish = -1) and Condition (All = +1 vs. None = -1) (Brehm & Alday, 2022), along with their interaction. Items and participants were included as random intercepts. The dependent variable was coded as binary, 1 for a ‘true’ response, and 0 for a ‘false’ response (Formula: `glmer(response ~ Condition* Group + (1 | Item) + (1 | Participant))`, family = binomial). A main effect of Condition was found, showing the *ALL* condition was significantly less accepted compared to the *NONE* condition ($\beta = -13.51$, $SE = 4.13$, $z = -3.26$, $p < .001$) in L1 Spanish and L2 Spanish groups. The main effect of Group was not significant ($\beta = -0.41$, $SE = 1.66$, $z = -0.25$, $p = .8$), indicating that overall acceptance rates did not differ significantly between L1 and L2

speakers. The Condition $\times$ Group interaction also was not significant ($\beta = -0.27$, $SE = 1.65$, $z = -0.16$, $p = .09$).

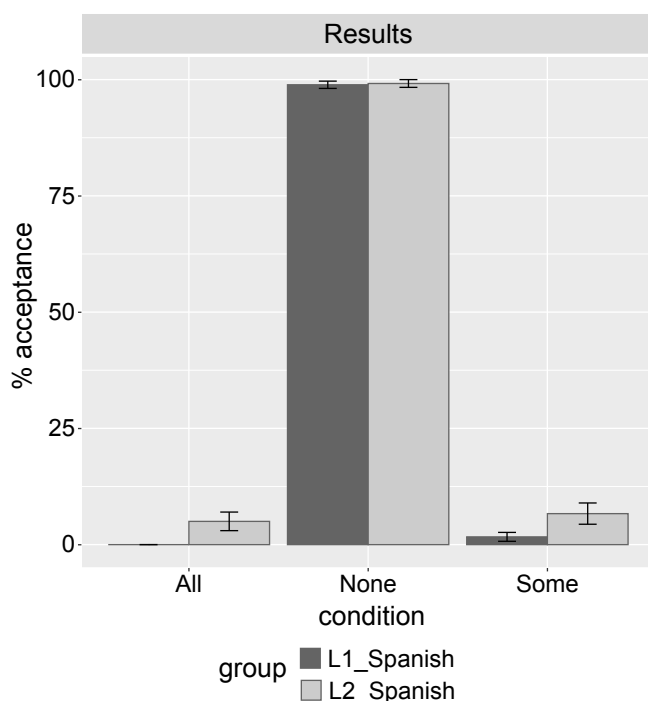


Figure 1. Proportion of target sentence acceptance by condition in L1 Spanish and L2 Spanish. Vertical bars represent standard error.

We then examined individual results. Participants' responses were categorized according to their acceptance patterns across test conditions. Acceptance of *NONE* combined with rejection of *ALL* was taken to indicate a Negative Concord (NC) reading, where both negative elements jointly contribute a single negation. Conversely, acceptance of *ALL* together with rejection of *NONE* was interpreted as a Double Negation (DN) reading, where each negative element contributes independently to the sentence's meaning. Response patterns that did not clearly fit either category, such as accepting both conditions, were classified as mixed. Given that there were 6 items per condition, response patterns were considered consistent when participants showed a consistent NC or DN interpretation on at least 4 out of 6 trials. The individual results indicate that all 30 L1 Spanish speakers showed an NC interpretation, as expected. As for the L2 Spanish speakers, 18 out of 20 participants showed an NC interpretation and 2 showed mixed results.

4. Discussion

The present study investigated whether Mandarin-speaking learners of Spanish interpret sentences containing two negative markers (*no* and *nadie*) as instances of Negative Concord (NC), as expected in native Spanish, or whether they transfer the Double Negation (DN) interpretation characteristic of their L1 Mandarin. Spanish, a NC language, treats multiple negatives as reinforcing a single semantic negation, whereas Mandarin, a DN language, interprets each negative element independently, yielding positive meaning when combined.

We found that Mandarin-speaking L2 learners of Spanish demonstrated high accuracy on NC sentences, nearly matching the L1 Spanish control group. They reliably accepted sentences in the *NONE* condition while rejecting those in the *ALL* condition, confirming a preference for an interpretation where two negative elements jointly express a single negation. The individual results indicated that 18 out of 20 L2 Spanish speakers responded consistently across test items, suggesting that their judgments were systematic and stable. Importantly, no evidence of L1 transfer was observed.

These findings extend patterns observed in child L1 acquisition, where English and German children, who are native speakers of DN languages, initially prefer NC interpretations of multiple negations (Nicolae & Yatsushiro, 2020; Thornton et al., 2016). This developmental preference appears universal and suggests an initial bias toward NC interpretations. The rapid acquisition of Spanish NC by Mandarin speakers challenges strong versions of the *Full Transfer Full Access Hypothesis* (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996), which predicts persistent L1 influence on structures absent in the native grammar. Instead, our results align with accounts positing NC as accessible initial state in both L1 and L2 acquisition. Therefore, our results are in line with the *Full Access without Transfer Hypothesis* (Epstein et al., 1996); L2 learners are not expected to transfer grammatical structures from their L1 when acquiring a second language. Rather, they draw on Universal Grammar (UG) as the primary source for building the L2 grammar.

In sum, our findings reveal parallels between L1 and L2 acquisition, suggesting that child and adult learners share universal interpretive biases when processing sentences with multiple negations. The persistence of NC interpretations across learning contexts implies that certain semantic preferences, such as treating multiple negatives as reinforcing a single negation, represent a default option in language development, regardless of age or L1 background.

One limitation of the present study is its relatively small sample size. Future research should employ larger samples to increase statistical power and generalizability. Remaining questions include the role of proficiency: L1 transfer effects may emerge at earlier acquisition stages among lower-proficiency learners. Future studies could also examine production data to determine whether learners who correctly interpret complex structures can also produce them spontaneously. Equally important is investigating the reverse pattern, how speakers of NC languages like Spanish acquire DN structures in languages like Mandarin, a study currently in progress.

Despite these limitations, the current findings open promising avenues for cross-linguistic research on the acquisition of negation across development and language typology.

5. Conclusions

This study examined how L1 Mandarin L2 learners of Spanish interpret sentences with two negative elements in a Negative Concord (NC) language. In NC languages like Spanish, multiple negatives reinforce a single negation; in Double Negation (DN) languages like Mandarin, they cancel each other out, yielding positive meaning. Twenty advanced L1 Mandarin L2 Spanish learners and native Spanish controls completed a truth-value judgment task across contextual conditions. Our results show that L2 learners mirrored native performance, demonstrating early acquisition of target NC patterns with no L1 transfer. These findings align with L1 acquisition and artificial language learning research, suggesting that NC appears to pose no challenge for L2 learners.

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