

Negative Concord in L2-Russian

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1. Introduction

Much work has investigated how second language (L2) learners acquire negation, mainly focusing on clausal negation (Dimroth, 2010; Bernini, 2000; Snyder & Bar-Shalom, 1998; a.o), polarity (Gil et al., 2017; Marsden et al., 2018; Seaman et al., 2023) and Negative Concord (NC) (Alexandrino, 2010; Yamada, 2022). This study further examines the last. Broadly speaking, the term ‘negative concord’ is applied to instances of multiple elements associated with negation generating a single negative interpretation, as in (1) (Giannakidou, 2006). Some languages allow NC, while others, including Standard American English (SAE), do not, as shown in (2). Interestingly, there is evidence suggesting that SAE speakers possess an unrealized, latent NC grammar (Blanchette, 2017; Blanchette & Lukyanenko, 2019a, b). This can be seen in the marginal acceptability of a negative interpretation in (3) in the given context.

- (1) *Nikto ne xočet est’.*
n-body NEG wants eat.INF
Negative reading: ‘No one wants to eat.’ [NC: Russian]
- (2) #No one doesn’t want to eat. [#NC: SAE]
- (3) He was so full from dinner yesterday that he didn’t eat nothing today.
Negative reading: ‘He didn’t eat anything today.’ [Latent NC: SAE]

Previous work on L2 acquisition of NC has found first language (L1) transfer effects, such that structures not present in the L2-learners’ L1 are more difficult to acquire (Alexandrino, 2010; Yamada, 2022). However, this work failed to account for possible influence from a latent L1-Non-Strict NC grammar.

In this study, we explore L2 acquisition of NC and how a latent L1 grammar may affect this, examining L1-English L2-Russian learners’ acquisition of Strict NC. In section 2, systems of negation are overviewed. NC variation in English is discussed in section 3. Section 4 reports on previous experimental work on Strict NC, while section 5 examines prior L2 acquisition studies on NC. Section 6 outlines the current study, including experimental design, tasks, and procedure. In section 7, we discuss the findings and in section 8, we conclude the paper.

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2. Systems of negation crosslinguistically

Building on the work of Jespersen (1917), Klima (1964), and Labov (1972), Laka (1990) made significant contributions to the study of NC, coining the term 'n-words' for pronouns associated with negation that often start with *n-* in Indo-European languages (e.g., Russian: *nikto* 'nobody', Spanish: *nada* 'nothing'). They are also referred to as Negative Concord Items (NCIs), defined by Giannakidou (2006, p. 2) as the following:

- (4) α is an NCI iff:
- α can be used in structures containing sentential negation or another α -expression, yielding a reading equivalent to one logical negation; and
 - α can provide a negative fragment answer (i.e. without overt negation).

NC languages are divided into two categories: Strict and Non-Strict. In Strict NC languages, NCIs must be accompanied by a negative marker regardless of sentential position, as in (5), for a single negative reading; an NCI used without a negative marker results in ungrammaticality. In contrast, Non-Strict NC languages prohibit subject NCIs from co-occurring with a negative marker (6a) and require object NCIs to be accompanied by one (6b) to produce a single negative reading. Such languages also allow Negative Spread, wherein subject and object NCIs co-occur in a clause without sentential negation, as in (6c); cf. (5c).

- (5) a. *Nikto* **(ne)* *el* *ed-u*.
 n-body NEG ate food-ACC
 'No one ate food.'
- b. *On* *nič-ego* **(ne)* *el*.
 he n-thing-GEN NEG ate
 'He ate nothing.'
- c. *Nikto* **(ne)* *el* *nič-ego*
 n-body NEG ate n-thing-GEN
 'No one ate anything.'
- [Strict NC: Russian]
- (6) a. *Nadie* **(no)* *comió comida*.
 n-body NEG ate food
 'No one ate food.'
- b. *Él* **(no)* *comió nada*.
 he NEG ate n-thing
 'He ate nothing.'
- c. *Nadie* **(no)* *comió nada*.
 n-body NEG ate n-thing
 'No one ate anything.'
- [Non-Strict NC: Spanish]

Non-NC languages such as SAE are termed double negation (DN) languages; when a sentence contains two negative phrases, or else a negative phrase and sentential negation, the two negative elements logically cancel each other's

negation to generate either a universal or an existential reading. In (7a), if the negative subject scopes over sentential negation, a universal reading results; for the opposite scope configuration, an existential reading results. The reverse is true for the configuration with a negative object, as in (7b). In a sentence with two negative phrases, such as (7c), both scope readings result in two different existential readings. However, such DN readings are very difficult to parse and will not be discussed further (cf. Giannakidou, 2000, 2006; Giannakidou & Zeijlstra, 2017).

- (7) a. No one didn't eat food.
No one > *Neg* (Universal): No one failed to eat food. =
 Everyone ate food.
Neg > *No one* (Existential): It is not that case that no one ate food. =
 Someone ate food.
- b. He didn't eat nothing.
Neg > *Nothing* (Existential): It is not the case that he ate nothing. =
 He ate something.
Nothing > *Neg* (Universal): Nothing is such that he didn't eat it. =
 He ate everything.
- c. No one ate nothing.
No one > *Nothing* (Existential): No one is such that they ate nothing. =
 Everyone ate something.
Nothing > *No one* (Existential): Nothing is such that no one ate it. =
 Someone ate everything.

Following Zeijlstra (2004, 2008), we treat NCIs as non-negative indefinites. They are distinct from negative indefinites in DN languages, as the latter independently express semantic negation while the former do not. We use the term 'no-words' to refer to both NCIs in NC languages and negative indefinites in DN languages throughout this paper, for ease of comparison.

3. Variation in the English system of negation

Although English is typologically classified as a DN language, several dialects allow NC, including African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Green, 2014; Labov, 1972), Belfast English (Henry, 1995), Southern English dialects (Feagin, 1979; Foreman, 1990), and Appalachian English (Blanchette, 2015).

Non-Strict NC is also observed in judgments of speakers of SAE, despite lack of NC production. In Blanchette's (2017) study, object no-word constructions (8) in a NC-biased context (8a) were rated as significantly more acceptable than those in a DN-biased context (8b) in an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT). Conversely, subject no-word constructions (9) were rated significantly lower when in a NC-biased context (9a) than a DN-biased context (9b).

- (8) Object no-word: He didn't take nobody on the trip.
 - a. NC Context: John went on vacation all alone.
 - b. DN Context: Mary said John went on vacation alone, but Mary's wrong.
- (9) Subject no-word: Nobody didn't help patients on that day.
 - a. NC Context: The hospital was closed because of the storm.
 - b. DN Context: All the doctors treated patients at the hospital.

Blanchette & Lukyanenko (2019a) built on these findings, comparing SAE speakers' acceptability and felicity judgments of double-negative sentences. They found that while object no-words under sentential negation (e.g., "The loud music didn't bother nobody during dinner, so the friends are gonna stay for a drink after they've eaten.") were not rated as acceptable, they were rated as felicitous.

These findings suggest that speakers of SAE are more predisposed to accept and interpret constructions with sentential negation and an object no-word (8) as an instance of NC than those with a subject no-word (9). In opposition, they more readily accept and interpret constructions with sentential negation and a subject no-word (9) as DN than those with an object no-word (8). This subject-object asymmetry matches that of Non-Strict NC languages, despite not being observed in SAE production. We refer to this as latent Non-Strict NC.

Blanchette (2015, 2017) asserts that speakers of SAE do not produce NC due to social pressures and prescriptivism. It is unlikely that their latent Non-Strict NC is the result of contact with NC dialects, such as AAVE, which exhibits *Strict* NC (Labov, 1972).

Latent Non-Strict NC in SAE underscores the difference between ungrammatical and unrealized structures, as proposed by Barbiers (2009). In this framework, realized structures are a subset of grammatical structures in a language. DN and Non-Strict NC may both be grammatical structures in SAE, however the former is realized, while the latter is not.

4. Prior experimental research on Strict Negative Concord

Espinal, Puig-Mayenco, Etxeberria, & Tubau (2023) investigated the nature of Strict NC in an experimental study with native speakers (NSs) of three Strict NC languages: Greek, Romanian, and Russian. Participants rated the acceptability of sentences containing no-words in subject and/or object position in the presence or absence of sentential negation. Stimuli were presented aurally and visually in tandem. After providing an acceptability judgment, participants heard the aural stimulus a second time and were asked to select which of two pictures best depicted the sentence in a Picture Matching Task (PMT). The two depictions were: a negative reading (i.e., no one doing the specified action) and a non-negative existential reading (i.e., one person doing the specified action). Espinal et al. found that while NSs did not accept no-words unaccompanied by sentential negation, they interpreted such sentences to have a negative reading. Researchers extended these findings to assert that no-words in NC languages inherently express negation, challenging Zeijlstra's (2004, 2008) Agreement Approach.

The validity of researchers' claims is weakened by methodological flaws in the study. Firstly, metalinguistic awareness of the experiment topic was likely widespread among participants, due to absence of fillers and distractor items. This may have resulted in participants using conscious strategies and/or metalinguistic analysis to complete tasks. Secondly, participants were given limited possible picture interpretations; it was essentially a forced-choice task between a negative and an existential reading. Participants' preference for the negative reading of ungrammatical sentences (in which a no-word was not accompanied by a negative marker) does not conclusively indicate that this was their actual interpretation of such sentences. Rather, the negative reading was the more reasonable of two limited options. We based the methodology of the current study on Espinal et al.'s design, with several significant modifications discussed in section 6.

5. Previous research on L2 acquisition of Negative Concord

L2 acquisition of NC is dominated by work on L1-English speakers' acquisition of Non-Strict NC. Alexandrino (2010) compared L2 acquisition of a Non-Strict NC language (Spanish) by NSs of a language with a similar system of negation (Portuguese) vs. a language with DN (English). L1 transfer effects were found, such that the L1 system of negation affected acquisition of the L2 system. L1-English participants struggled more in acquisition of Spanish Non-Strict NC than their L1-Portuguese counterparts. However, Alexandrino failed to control for or measure L2 proficiency, or to collect information on participants' exposure to or study of additional languages. Finally, there was no baseline L1-Spanish or L1-English group tested. English and Spanish are known to have dialectal variation in systems of negation (Blanchette, 2015; Cuervo & Mazzaro, 2013); generalizations in the literature cannot be assumed to account for all speakers of a language. Still, despite these limitations, L1 transfer effects are clearly evident in this study.

Yamada (2022) expanded on the topic with a study on L1-English L2-Spanish learners' production of NC constructions with an object no-word. Participants completed an oral elicitation task, wherein L2-Spanish learners produced ungrammatical sentences with an object no-word unaccompanied by a negative marker significantly more at lower than higher L2 proficiency levels. Such sentences are grammatical in English, indicating L1 transfer effects at lower proficiency. Yamada also gathered data on L1 English speakers' production of NC constructions in English in an oral elicitation task; none of their utterances featured NC. Like Alexandrino (2010), this study did not include NS Spanish participants as a baseline group.

6. Current study: methods

Previous work suggests that L2 acquisition of a system of negation is prone to L1 influence. NC constructions consisting of an object no-word and sentential negation have been found to be challenging for L1-English speakers to acquire in

an L2 (Alexandrino, 2010; Yamada, 2022). Little is known about how SAE speakers' latent Non-Strict NC may affect their acquisition of subject vs. object no-word constructions in an L2 with NC. Russian is an ideal L2 for these purposes as a Strict NC language.

We also examined the effect of L2 proficiency on L2-learners' acquisition of the L2 system of negation. A clear relationship between L2 proficiency and L2 acquisition of NC has yet to be observed in the literature. Alexandrino (2010) did not control for L2 proficiency. L2 proficiency effects were found in Yamada's (2022) study on L1-English L2-Spanish acquisition of Non-Strict NC. However, participants' latent Non-Strict NC tendencies were not controlled for and may have contributed to target-like production of NC constructions (Yamada, 2022, p. 511). The use of a Strict NC language as well as testing of L2 proficiency address these issues.

- (RQ 1)** Does an L1 latent Non-Strict NC grammar affect L2 acquisition of NC?
Does L1-English L2-Russian learners' acquisition of subject vs. object no-word constructions differ?
- (RQ 2)** Do L2-learners' interpretations of NC constructions become more native-like as proficiency grows?

6.1. Procedure

The study reported here was part of a larger bidirectional study with L1-English L2-Russian and L1-Russian L2-English learners. It was an extension of Espinal et al.'s (2023) experimental study, with substantial modifications. We tested L2-learners and NSs of a Strict NC language, while Espinal et al.'s study solely involved NSs. Experimental conditions were changed to more effectively compare subject and object no-words. Unlike in Espinal et al., our task contained distractors and fillers.

Both Russian and English versions of the experiment were implemented. Here, we focus on the Russian experiment, completed by both L1-English L2-Russian learners and Russian NSs. In order to examine the effects of L1-transfer, we also report on how the L2-Russian learners performed in their native language in the English experiment, which was administered approximately two weeks after the Russian experiment. Participants were offered monetary compensation for their participation.

The Russian and English experiments each included a PMT on the interpretation of negative sentences and an Acceptability Judgment Task (AJT) on the naturalness of sentences with vs. without NC. Due to space constraints, only PMT results are reported here.¹ The learners of Russian additionally completed a

¹ The AJT results showed quite target-like performance on the part of the L2-Russian learners: like Russian NSs, the learners gave higher ratings to sentences which contained sentential negation alongside subject and object no-words, and lower ratings to corresponding sentences without sentential negation. In the English experiment, English

Russian cloze test (Luchkina et al., 2021) and an exposure to AAVE questionnaire (Venderink, 2020). The latter is not reported here. All participants also completed a brief language background questionnaire. The study was conducted online using Qualtrics, an online survey creation and data collection platform (Qualtrics, Provo, UT).

6.2. Participants

Twenty-three L1-English L2-Russian learners (13 female, 9 male, 1 nonbinary) completed the Russian version of the experiment, and 17 of them completed the English version.² They had intermediate-to-advanced Russian proficiency, having studied Russian for an average of 5.3 years and scoring an average of 67.3% accuracy on the Russian cloze test (ranging from 37.9% to 93.1%). All were born and raised in the US, mostly from the Midwest. The majority of these participants had studied an additional foreign language as well as spent time in an immersive Russian-speaking environment. Demographics and language background were highly similar between the L2-Russian group that completed the Russian experiment and the subset that completed the English one.

Twenty L1-Russian participants (16 female, 5 male) took part in the Russian experiment as a baseline group.³ All were born and grew up in a Russian-speaking country. Most had studied at least one other foreign language. Participant background information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant information.

	L1-Russian	L1- English	
Experiment	<i>Russian</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Russian</i>
<i>n</i>	20	17	23
Gender	16 F, 4 M	10 F, 6 M, 1 NB	13 F, 9 M, 1 NB
Age (mean)	37.8	22.7	22.3
Age (range)	19 to 69	19 to 30	19 to 30
Birth country	Belarus (1), Kazakhstan (2), Russia (11), USSR (5), Uzbekistan (1)	US (17)	US (23)
Country of residence	US (13), Serbia (7)	US (17)	US (23)

NSs performed in line with assumptions about SAE and latent Non-Strict NC, rejecting sentences with multiple negative elements and rating double-negative constructions with object no-words higher than those with subject no-words.

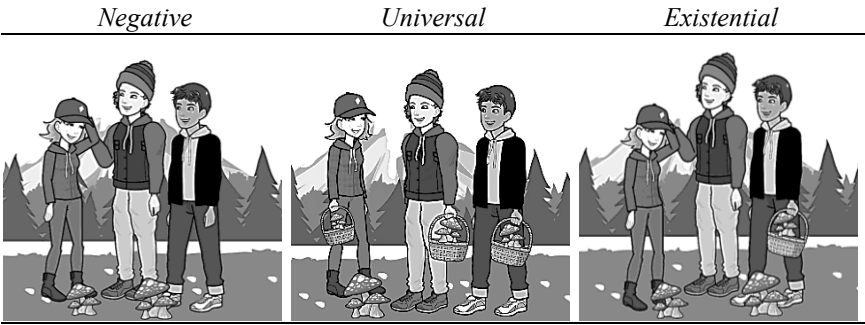
² Four additional L1-English L2-Russian participants were excluded due to being heritage speakers of languages with NC (2 Russian, 2 Spanish).

³ Three L1-Russian participants were simultaneous bilinguals of Russian and another Strict NC language (Chuvash, Kazakh, Uyghur). One additional L1-Russian participant identified as a native speaker of both English and Russian and was excluded.

6.3. Materials

We created English and Russian versions of the PMT, with slightly different designs to avoid highly unacceptable conditions. In both experiments, each test item consisted of a single written sentence and a choice of three pictures, presented simultaneously on the computer screen. For the target sentences, the three pictures corresponded to three different interpretations, depicted in Figure 1: *negative* (no one doing the action), *universal* (everyone doing the action), and *existential* (someone doing the action). Participants were asked to select the picture that best matched the sentence.

Figure 1. PMT picture interpretations



The English PMT consisted of a 3x2 design with no-word position (subject, object, none) and sentential negation (presence, absence) as factors. In a partial Latin square design, the items were distributed across three experimental lists. Each list contained 48 target items (eight items for each of the six conditions) and 48 fillers. A sample token set is provided in (10). For control conditions (10c-f), only one interpretation is possible in English. The conditions of interest are (10a-b), which, while not grammatical in SAE, are still expected to be interpretable. Given prior literature, if SAE speakers have a Non-Strict NC latent grammar, they may allow a negative interpretation of (10b), but not of (10a). Interpreting (10a) logically, with the two negative elements cancelling each other out, would most likely result in a universal reading (*no person* > *Neg* = There is no person who fails to gather mushrooms), though the existential reading may be possible (*Neg* > *no person* = it is not the case that no person gathers mushrooms, at least one person does). Interpreting (10b) logically results in the reading where it is not the case that the people are gathering nothing, i.e., they are gathering something, which is most compatible with the universal picture in Figure 1.

(10) English PMT sample stimuli

- a. **Subject no-word, object DP, negative marker:**
No person isn't gathering mushrooms.
Intended interpretation: Universal

- b. **Subject DP, object no-word, negative marker:**
The people aren't gathering nothing.
 Intended interpretation: Universal or Negative
- c. **Subject DP, object DP, negative marker:**
Two people aren't gathering mushrooms.
 Intended interpretation: Existential
- d. **Subject no-word, object DP, no negative marker:**
No person is gathering mushrooms.
 Intended interpretation: Negative
- e. **Subject DP, object no-word, no negative marker:**
The people are gathering nothing.
 Intended interpretation: Negative
- f. **Subject DP, object DP, no negative marker:**
One person is gathering mushrooms.
 Intended interpretation: Existential

The Russian PMT had a 2x2 design, crossing subject type (no-word, definite DP) and object type (no-word, definite DP), all with sentential negation. Since NC is obligatory in Russian, NC-violating sentences were not tested. The items were distributed across four experimental lists in a full Latin square design, with 24 targets (six for each of the four conditions) and 48 fillers per list. The three critical conditions in (11a-c) had intended negative readings for Russian NSs, while the control condition (11d) had an intended existential reading.

(11) Russian PMT sample stimuli

- a. **Subject no-word, object no-word, negative marker:**
ni odin čelovek nič-ego ne sobira-et.
 not one.NOM person.NOM n-thing-GEN NEG gather-3SG
 Intended reading: 'No person is gathering anything.'
 Intended interpretation: Negative
- b. **Subject no-word, object DP, negative marker:**
ni odin čelovek ne sobira-et grib-y.
 not one.NOM person.NOM NEG gather-3SG mushroom-PL.ACC
 Intended reading: 'No person is gathering mushrooms.'
 Intended interpretation: Negative
- c. **Subject DP, object no-word, negative marker:**
ljudi nič-ego ne sobira-jut.
 people.NOM n-thing-GEN NEG gather-3PL
 Intended reading: 'The people aren't gathering anything.'
 Intended interpretation: Negative
- d. **Subject DP, object DP, negative marker:**
dva čelovek-a ne sobira-jut grib-y.
 two person-GEN NEG gather-3PL mushroom-PL.ACC
 Intended reading: 'Two people aren't gathering mushrooms.'
 Intended interpretation: Existential

7. Results

Data were converted into binary format, such that for critical conditions (those with no-words), negative interpretations were coded as 1, and universal and existential interpretations as 0. For control conditions (those without no-words), existential interpretations were coded as 1, while universal and negative interpretations were coded as 0. Responses were analyzed using the *glmer* function (Bates et al., 2015) with *bobyqa* optimizer (Powell, 2009) in R, a language and statistical computing software. Fixed effects of no-word position and sentential negation were used in the model for the English PMT, while fixed effects of subject type and object type (as well as participant group and proficiency when appropriate) were used in the Russian PMT models. Random effects of participant and item were implemented for both the English PMT and the Russian PMT models. The results of the English experiment are given in Figure 2.

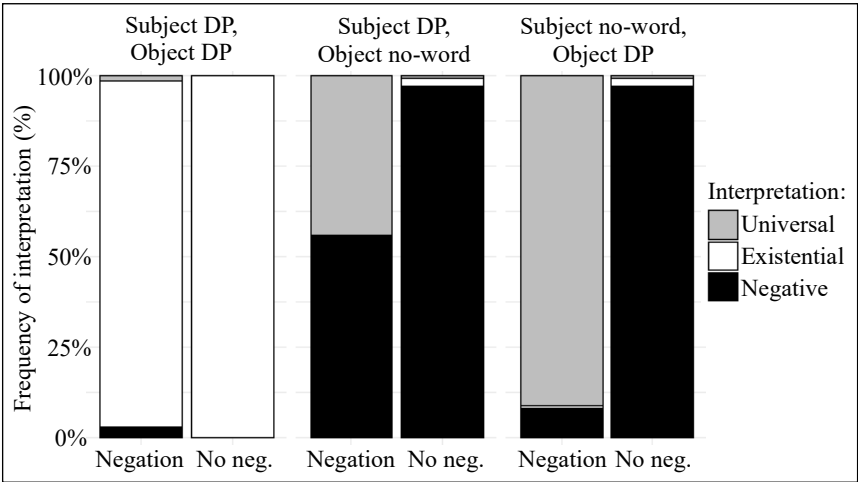


Figure 2. L1-English responses in English PMT

The control conditions (without a no-word) were excluded from statistical analysis of English PMT response, resulting in a 2x2 design: no-word position (subject, object), sentential negation (presence, absence). Latent Non-Strict NC tendencies were observed in L1-English L2-Russian participants' semantic judgments in the English experiment (Table 2). Position of no-word (object vs. subject) ($z=-7.04$, $p<.001$) as well as presence vs. absence of sentential negation were found to be significant main effects ($z=6.58$, $p<.001$). The interaction between these two factors was significant as well ($z=3.02$, $p<.01$). A pairwise comparison (*pairs*) (R Core Team, 2025) of estimated marginal means (*emmeans*) (Lenth, 2020) with the Bonferroni correction revealed that participants were significantly more likely to give the negative interpretation to double-negative

sentences with an object no-word (10b) than a subject no-word (10a) ($z=7.04$, $p<.001$).

Table 2. *Glmer* output for L1-English English PMT data

Coefficients	Estimate	SE	z-ratio	p-value
No-word position	-2.63	0.38	-7.04	<.001
Sentential negation	3.45	0.52	6.58	<.001
No-word position : sentential negation	2.04	0.67	3.02	<.01

In the Russian experiment, L1-Russian participants were highly consistent, interpreting critical conditions as negative and the control condition as existential (see Figure 3). A subject-object asymmetry was observed in L2-Russian interpretations.

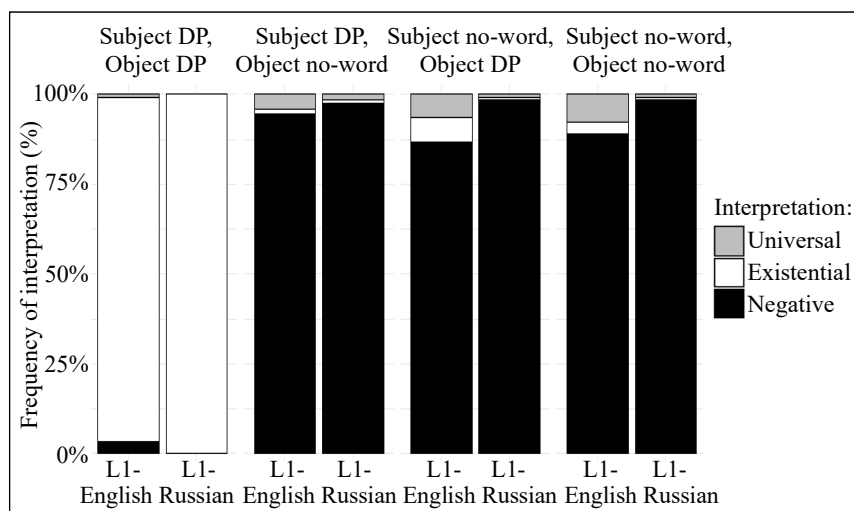


Figure 3. L1 and L2-Russian responses in Russian PMT

For the statistical analysis of L1 and L2-Russian responses, multicollinearity between subject and object type was a concern (Variance Inflation Factor=4.25). To increase statistical power, we implemented participant group as a non-interacting fixed effect. As shown in Table 3, subject type was found to be a significant main effect ($z=-3.05$, $p<.01$), as was participant group ($z=2.68$, $p<.01$).

Table 3. *Glmer* output for L1 and L2-Russian Russian PMT data

Coefficients	Estimate	SE	z-ratio	p-value
Subject type	-1.70	0.56	-3.05	<.01
Object type	-0.76	0.59	-1.28	>.05
Participant group	2.39	0.89	2.68	<.01
Subject type : object type	0.98	0.73	1.34	>.05

An additional analysis of L2-Russian PMT responses with proficiency as a fixed effect (see Table 4) similarly found subject type to be a significant main effect ($z=-2.69$, $p<.01$), while object type was not ($z=-0.53$, $p>.05$). Russian proficiency, represented by cloze test score as a continuous variable, was not found to be a significant predictor ($z=1.94$, $p>.05$).

Table 4. *Glm*er output for L2-Russian Russian PMT data

Coefficients	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>z-ratio</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Subject type	-1.71	0.64	-2.69	<.01
Object type	-0.36	0.68	-0.53	>.05
Cloze test score	0.06	0.03	1.94	>.05
Subject type : object type	0.62	0.85	0.73	>.05

8. Discussion and conclusion

This study investigated the effect of L1-English speakers’ latent Non-Strict NC grammar on their L2 acquisition of Strict NC in Russian. In alignment with Alexandrino’s (2010) and Yamada’s (2022) work on L2 acquisition of NC, we found L1 transfer effects: L1-English L2-Russian learners experienced difficulty interpreting structures absent in their L1. Moreover, a subject-object asymmetry indicative of Non-Strict NC was observed in their responses, in both English and Russian. They were somewhat challenged to interpret Russian subject no-word constructions in a native-like manner, while showing signs of mastery with object no-word constructions. In other words, the latent Non-Strict NC grammar found in participants’ L1 influenced their acquisition of an L2.

There are several limitations to address. No proficiency effects were found, likely due to the limited range of L2 proficiency. Additionally, participants’ literacy and high level of education may have prescriptively suppressed Non-Strict NC tendencies. The implicit formal register of the experiment may have similarly influenced participants’ responses (Rotter & Liu, 2024). Lastly, certain prosodic patterns are biased for an NC interpretation, while others are DN-biased (Blanchette et al., 2018). The written modality of stimuli did not control for silent prosody.

Further research with a wider array of L2 proficiencies could uncover more L1 transfer effects. An elicited production experiment in the mold of Yamada (2022) could examine the influence – or lack thereof – of a latent, unrealized L1 grammar on L2 acquisition in production. Additionally, a comparison of German and English systems of negation could advance the study of latent grammars and their sources, as both languages have regional NC-producing dialects, while standard varieties are categorized as DN.

In support of Barbiers’ (2009) assertion that grammatical structures may be either realized or unrealized, we have found evidence of a latent (grammatical, unrealized) Non-Strict NC grammar in the judgments of SAE speakers. Furthermore, we have shown that this latent grammar plays a role in L2 acquisition of NC.

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