

Free variation and the acquisition of English negatives in one beginner L2 learner

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines the role of free variation in one beginner learner's acquisition of English negatives. It differs from other studies in that unique criteria were employed to claim free variation: 1) relative infrequency of use 2) relative proximity of utterances 3) relative randomness and 4) relative functional sameness. Data were collected as unplanned utterances. The study is longitudinal in nature and employs frequency analysis as one tool. All examples identified could claim free variation using the criteria listed above. The study concludes with a recommendation for further research in order to validate the results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1) Frequency Analysis

This study employs frequency analysis as one criterion to treat the data. "In frequency analysis, the analyst computes the frequency with which each of these devices is used by individual learners. "By comparing the devices used at one stage of development with those used for the same linguistic feature at another time, it is possible to describe the developmental route that learners follow" (Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005). Ellis and Barkhuizen also state two advantages in using frequency analysis: 1) learner language is examined in its own right and 2) it reveals the gradual development of a learner's interlanguage over time. The former advantage avoids what is known as the **comparative fallacy**, which 'ignores the fact that learners create their own unique rule systems in the process of learning an L2' (Ellis 1994 via Bley-Vroman 1983). The latter advantage gives the audience a longitudinal versus a cross sectional view of the learner's negative utterances. Being longitudinal then, we are able to explore the *acquisition of* forms 'while the large cross-sectional studies can only work with *accuracy of*

forms' (Cancino et. al. 1978) It is important to note here that 'frequency analysis serves as a tool for describing learner language and the sequence of acquisition. It does not provide an explanation' (Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005). We must consider that, from this point of view, frequency analysis has no advantage over obligatory occasion analysis. Frequency analysis will be the first criteria I use to determine free variation in the acquisition of negatives. I must add that, at the level of explanation and in the discussion section, frequency analysis is no longer reliable (evident in the discussion).

2) The Acquisition of Negatives

In this section, I will attempt to justify the negative devices I employ in terms of the negative device schemes in Cancino et. al. 1978:

Our attempts to write rules for the negative proved fruitless. The constant development and concomitant variation in our subjects' speech at any one point made the task impossible. The technique to which we turned was to catalogue the various negating devices (no, don't, can't, isn't, etc.) and for each sample to determine the proportion of each negating device to total number of negatives (including negated adjectives, nouns, adverbs, etc.) used by our subjects. We limited our analysis, however, to proposition negating utterances. By this we mean the negative of a verb within an utterance. Thus we are concerned with the use of the negative particle and its relation to the auxiliary system, but not with the indefinite and indeterminate forms of the negative.

Cancino et. al. were 'concerned with the use of the negative particle and its relation to the auxiliary system'.

In this study, because the learner is nearly a complete beginner, I will be concerned, not only with negative particle/auxiliary, but also with negative particle/non-verb, which I consider as the most basic form (outside the negator + 0 form, such as "Not!"). Further, I do not use the analyzed 'don't' form for reasons mentioned in the method section below.

3) Free Variation with Negatives

"Free variation is held to occur when it can be shown that two or more forms are used randomly to perform the same set of functions"(Ellis 1994). It refers to 'internal variation' versus 'external variation': the latter gauges variation in relation to the target language (e.g., error analysis and performance analysis) while the former refers to 'variation in the learner's L2 system that is

independent of the target language' (Ellis 1994). The idea is controversial. 'Many sociolinguists consider that free variation doesn't exist', while others 'have, however, argued that free variation constitutes an important mechanism of development' (Ellis 1994:135).

Ellis sets strict parameters 'in order to claim' free variation: it is necessary to demonstrate that there is no feature of the linguistic (my comment: influence of words surrounding the negatives) situational (my comment: the teacher-student-observer relationship and classroom environment) or psycholinguistic context (my comment: planned versus unplanned utterances) that exerts any probabilistic pull on the use of one form in preference to another (Ellis 1994). There is no indication that systematic variation occurs in the examples (see the results section) in this study. I will name this condition 'relative randomness'.

The classic example of free variation in negatives comes from data collected from the same learner ('J'—a 10-year-old Portuguese boy) this paper examines:

'No look my card.' then, in close proximity, 'Don't look my card.'

The 'don't' form was used randomly to perform the same function as the 'no + V' form, and the 'don't' form was the 'single instance out of 18 spontaneous negative utterances during the first month of study' (Ellis 1994). One criterion then must be 'relative proximity of utterances'. Because the utterances in this study were selective and because the subject/learner rarely speaks in succession about the same object or event, I will consider free variation viable when functions are similar (once again, see the results section) and will name this 'relative functional sameness' this especially holds true if the utterances in question exhibit the same illocutionary act (describing, telling, correcting and explaining, etc.)

In a similar study, Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann 1978 'found that their subjects made use of a variety of forms to express negation at each stage of their development' (Ellis 1994:136). One learner used two forms at the outset ('no' + V and 'don't' + V) and later began to use two more forms—totaling four (an auxiliary + negative and an analyzed/non-formulaic 'don't'). As Ellis goes on to point out,

'Cancino et. al. were unable to write rules to account for the use of the different forms, suggesting that they were in free variation'. I will refer to this as 'apparent free variation' (free variation with no apparent source). I will not use this criterion in the present study.

The criteria for identifying free variation in this study then are four: 1) relative infrequency of use 2) relative proximity of utterances 3) relative randomness and 4) relative functional sameness.

HYPOTHESES/RESEARCH QUESTION

The following hypothesis is tested: Free variation plays a significant role in the sequence of acquisition of negatives in one beginner L2 learner.

THE STUDY/METHOD

Learner:

The learner is a boy (henceforth 'J') 10 years old at the start of data collection and 11 upon completion. Portuguese is his L1. According to the researcher, Rod Ellis, 'The learner had arrived in England knowing no English whatsoever and was placed in a local primary school. However, after a month he was transferred to the Language Centre. To all intents and purposes he was a complete beginner. He knew a few English words (probably less than 30). He had not studied English in Portugal prior to arriving in London.

Data Collection:

The researcher took notes and recorded the sessions to check the 'pencil and paper record'. Frequency was one or two lessons a week. Everything was noted 'verbatim together with contextual information'. The data provided is a 'representative selection of the total data collected' (as described personally by the researcher/observer).

Data Analysis:

'The speech was almost entirely unplanned... Most of the utterances were initiated by 'J' (the learner)' and prompts/elicited responses are 'made clear in the contextual information' (as described by the researcher/observer).

Structures:

In the process of acquiring an L2, a 'more or less' complete beginner makes use of negation by means of the following linguistic devices: 1) no/not + Non-Verb (NV), 2) no/not + Verb (V), 3) don't/do not and 4) negator + auxiliary (including isn't/is not, can't/cannot and hasn't got/has not got/not got). I consider the no/not + NV utterances as preceding no/not + V utterances in most complete beginner learners' patterns of development (e.g., 'me no' before 'me go') and appeal to logic if not observation to support this idea (although it is ultimately not essential to establish this fact in the present study--see 'future research questions' below).

For the purposes of this study, unfinished contractions such as 'don' will *not* be counted separately from the proper form as the error is considered phonological and not relevant to the form and function in question. I have also included 'hasn't got/has not got/not got' in the *negator + auxiliary* category as a unique form in contrast to a category within *don't/do not* (haven't got is synonymous with don't have). Further, I found no reason to include an analyzed *don't/do not* form due to the fact that a determination as to whether the learner had fully internalized the form was not self-evident and outside the scope of this study (again, see 'future research questions' below).

Finally, I eliminated utterance 13 in Period One (P1:13) 'I don know' as formulaic as it stands out as grammatically correct in relation to all other utterances in Period One. Also, we cannot determine if the answer to the question prompt, 'Where might he be going?' is a proper response or an indication that the learner is confused.

RESULTS

Devices as mentioned earlier were applied to learner utterances. See the table:

Device	Period One: Frequency/Rank	Period Two: Frequency/Rank	Period Three: Frequency/Rank
no/not + Non-Verb	12 (52%)/ 1	8 (42%)/ 1	7 (29%)/ 2
no/not + Verb	5 (22%)/ 3	4 (21%)/ 2	3 (13%)/ 4
don't/don	3 (13%)/ 2	4 (21%)/ 2	6 (25%)/ 3
negator + auxiliary	3 (13%)/ 2	3 (16%)/ 3	8 (33%)/ 1
outlier	1-formula		

The devices themselves and frequency have little to say in relation to the research question, yet their significance should not be underestimated in terms of the first criteria. Although frequency/infrequency is the weakest indicator of free variation (emergent forms are not predicable, nor are they describable) it has its place in the complete beginner's process. By **P3** the learner has command of several forms and has obviously progressed (this fact, is beyond the scope of this study).

ANALYSIS:

Examples of Free Variation:

The criteria I used are as follows: 1) relative infrequency of use 2) relative proximity of utterances 3) relative randomness and 4) relative functional sameness (all as described above).

Please note: **P1** = Period One (P2,etc.) **P1:1** = Period One, Utterance One (**P3:17** = Period Three, Utterance Seventeen). **E1** = Example One **E2** = Example Two, etc.

Period One: E1

P1:15: a man no one leg= Describing a picture of a man vanishing through a wall

P1:16: foots no front walk= Describing a picture of a boy with feet pointing back to front

Period One: E2

P1:18: a door no downstairs= Describing a picture of a house with the front door in the upstairs part

P1:19: no writing on the book= Describing a picture of a man reading a blank page

Period Two: E1

P2:09: me no play =Telling the teacher he wouldn't be playing football at break

P2:10: me no stay= Telling the teacher he wouldn't be staying after school

P2:11: sir don't sit in that one chair=The teacher was about to sit on a chair covered with chalk dust

P2:12: me no stay= Telling the teacher he wouldn't be staying after school

Period Two: E2

P2:13 : bicycle no pedal= Describing a picture of a bicycle with no pedals the bicycle has no pedals (Same)

P2:14: hasn't got any pedals=Repeating after the teacher

P2:15: the man is can't read it the book=Describing picture of a man reading a blank book

Period Three: E1

P3:1: don't say that= Telling Mariana not to say something

P3:2: no speak Portuguese, only English=Telling Mariana not to speak Portuguese to him

Period Three: E2

P3:4: it's not= Correcting something pupil had read

P3:7: She don't understand= A pupil had given wrong answer

Period Three: E3

P3:13: no fruit= Correcting an answer after T had queried it

P3:14: not climbing= Correcting his previous statement about some boys climbing

P3:15: is not the tree all right =Correcting another pupil

DISCUSSION

This study set out to determine if free variation was evident in a beginner learner's use of English negation. Each example proposed in the results section will now be examined and discussed to claim that free variation plays a significant role in this beginner's acquisition of negatives.

Both examples in **P1** compare no/not with NV versus with V; the frequency is 52 to 22% respectively; they are proximate, random and use the same function (describing). Free variation is claimed.

Although the frequency is the same in example one (**E1**) in **P2** for no/not + V and don't/don (21% each) there is evidence the don't/don utterances are semi-formulaic in two cases (P2:17 'sir, *I don't know* that big one' and P2:19 'that one *I don't know* versus the utterance in P2:E1, 'sir, *don't sit* in that one chair'). The two cases mentioned also come at the end of the period. The function is 'telling'. The other criteria are met. **E2** is interesting in that free variation occurs after the teacher prompts the student for a correct form ('hasn't got any pedals'). Frequency is 42 to 16% and function is 'describing'. The other criteria are met.

In **P3**, an interesting shift is evident in **E1** and **E2**. The no/not + V and don't/don devices seem to be used interchangeably and although our criteria for 'relative infrequency of use' is not met, the two devices are used proximately for a single function ('telling' in E1 and 'pointing out incorrectness' in E2) in a random manner. Free variation is claimed in both examples. **E3** puts three devices in free variation: no/no + NV, no/not + V and don't/don. The first criteria is indeterminate for frequency (all that can be said is that they are similar). In spite of this, they share the same function ('correcting') are proximate in a progressive manner (as if the student is 'experimenting' with different forms) and are random as output. Free variation is claimed in all three examples.

I found no other studies that used similar criteria to determine the use of free variation.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that free variation plays a significant role in the sequence of acquisition of negatives in one beginner L2 learner. Further research would be required to validate this claim (see the 'future research section' below).

It is self-evident that we can only gather information about learner competence (and by extension, the transitional processes involved) by examining performance and we may not always see 'the whole picture'. Via Tarone and Preston, Ellis (1994:138) points out that 'it is always possible that what appears to be free variation is, in fact, systematic (variation) and that the researcher has simply failed to uncover the factors that make it systematic'.

On the other hand, it seems that opponents of free variation don't trust the possibility that small increments of implicit knowledge can gradually be created and/or restructured by noticing and processing input and that consequent cognitive processes may thus transform a learner's interlanguage. Free variation is just such evidence that processes in transitional competence occur independently of both L1 and the target language.

If acquisition is an 'all or none' proposition and variability is relegated to performance alone, in my view, the sceptics must then be proposing a 'leap mentality', where learners 'all of a sudden' acquire a chunk of language. This seems inconsistent with nature in general and specifically with the acquisition process of grammatical forms in L2 learners.

If variability exists at the level of transitional competence and some forms of variation are unsystematic, then free variation is plausible. Further, free variation can then be described as a universal principle in variability and in the interlanguage continuum by extension.

FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. One could further study the complexity of utterances of J. and other beginners in terms of the *no/not+NV* and the *no/not+V* forms focusing *only* on these two categories and including variables such as: 1) the number of words in the utterances 2) the relative complexity in terms of lexicon of each utterance and 3) the frequency of their use over time.
2. One could further study the degree to which *don't/don* becomes analyzed/internalized as 'native-like' speech with further investigation along the same lines as the present study.
3. Using the criteria in this study, further research in identifying free variation is possible by different researchers and with different language/grammatical forms. The way different researchers treat the same data in terms of free variation may also be of interest.

REFERENCES

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