The Use of English Negation by Spanish Students of English: a Learner Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract

This paper is based on a research project by the same author, in which the acquisition of the English negation system is investigated. This is a preliminary account and it is corpus-based. Two learner corpora were used: the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) Spanish subcorpus and the Santiago University Learner of English Corpus (SULEC). The former is a sample corpus –it is finished– and it contains written argumentative essays of Spanish speakers. The latter contains both spoken and written data –oral interviews and argumentative texts– and it is a monitor corpus, new data are continuously being added. The Spanish subcorpus of ICLE contains over 125.000 words; whereas SULEC contained over 350.000 words at the moment of the research. A native English corpus was also used in order to contrast the learner and the native use of English negation.

1. General Introduction

This study consists of a description of learners' *interlanguage* (IL) with special attention to negative constructions in English. It aims at analysing the use of negation by Spanish learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). It is based on data extracted from two learner corpora: SULEC (*Santiago University Learner of English Corpus*) and ICLE (*International Corpus of Learner English*). The purpose is not to identify developmental stages in the acquisition of negation, which has already been done by several authors such as Milon (1974) or Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann (1978), who contrasted their findings with native speakers' data. This is a cross-sectional study focused on the use of the different negation types in English by Spanish learners in order

to analyse their interlanguage and see the difficulties they encounter when dealing with negation.

2. General Framework Used

As this study follows a corpus-based methodology, it is necessary to account for its major traits. *Corpus linguistics* (CL) can be defined as the study of language based on bodies of texts (corpora). In turn, a corpus can be defined nowadays as a large collection of texts stored on computer. CL studies the language as used by its speakers and writers. Its goal is to identify and analyse the grammatical and lexical patterns that speakers and writers use, and not what is grammatically correct in the language.

In the last few years, attention has been paid to CL in the field of language acquisition. This fact also helps the appearance of *learner corpora*, linguistic material from second language learners. They are usually compiled for language teaching and learning research (course programming, curricular design, acquisition stages, learning difficulties, etc.) There is a great amount of learner corpora but I will present only three of the most important ones. ICLE is the most ambitious and relevant of all of them. It has been compiled at Louvain University under the direction of Sylviane Granger. It contains data (argumentative essays) from advanced learners of 19 different language backgrounds. ICLE also contains a control corpus of argumentative essays from British and American university students, with similar characteristics: the *Louvain Corpus of English Essays* (LOCNESS) which allows comparative or contrastive studies between linguistic forms used by native speakers and those typical of learners. The *Hungarian EFL Learner Corpus* carried out since 1992 by Professor József Horváth at Janus Pannonius University is also limited to written samples of learner language. The *Cambridge Learner Corpus* (CLC) is also important. It contains more than 15 million words of written essays from EFL learners of 180 different countries. New data are constantly being added. It contributes to the elaboration of didactic material.

I work here with learner corpora in order to analyse learners' interlanguage, particularly, the difficulties learners encounter when using negative structures.

In the elaboration of this research project I took into account SLA theories such as *Selinker*'s theory of the Interlanguage. Selinker (1972) defines IL as "a separate linguistic system based on observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a target language norm". This idea is based on the assumption that a second language learner uses a language system which is neither the L1 nor the L2 in his/her learning process. It is a third language with its own grammar, lexicon and so on. We, as teachers, need to understand the learner's language as a system of its own right.

I have focused on the use of *negation in English*, thus, it is important to introduce at this point the various negation types submitted to discussion. I have selected three negation types from the different existing classifications (Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 1999; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002):

a. *Clausal negation*: The negative element affects the whole clause as in *He never drinks coffee*.
b. *Subclausal negation*: Only one constituent of the clause is negated, e.g. *He saw Jane not a long time ago*.
c. *Affixal negation*: Negating a word by means of adding negative prefixes (*un-*, *in-*, *dis-*) and suffixes (*-less* and *–out*, which only occurs in *without*), e.g. *It is unfair*.

3. Literature review on the acquisition of negation in English

Negation has been analysed from many different perspectives including the field of SLA. Most of these studies were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s. The vast majority of studies on negation in the area of language acquisition concentrate on the acquisition of English negatives by second language learners –such as immigrants– or on the acquisition of negation in English as a first language (L1), as is the case of Klima and Bellugi (1966). These authors identified three stages in the acquisition of negation in English as a L1 (stage 1: the negative particle is sentence-external; stage 2: the negative is placed within the sentence and *don't* and *can't* appear; stage 3: full realisation of the auxiliary).

Apart from L1 studies, most of the research done on the acquisition of English negation is based on second language learners as opposed to foreign language learners. Besides, most of these studies

focus on the identification of acquisition stages, contrasting their findings with those of Klima and Bellugi (1966). Some of these studies read as follows:

Milon (1974) analysed the speech of a seven-year-old Japanese boy learning English in Hawaii. He found strong similarities between Ken's speech and native speakers' speech. He discovered a developmental pattern similar to that described by Klima and Bellugi (1966).

Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann (1978) questioned Milon's findings regarding the existence of the first stage in the acquisition of negation in English as a Second Language (ESL) by studying the speech of six Latin-American Spanish speakers. They found a clear developmental pattern for the negative and interrogative structures: stage 1→ *no V*; stage 2→ *don't V*; stage 3→ *auxiliary-negation*; stage 4→ analysed *don't*, disappearance of *no V*.

Wode (1981) identified five stages in the acquisition of English negatives by his own German-speaking children: stage 1→ anaphoric sentence external; stage 2→ non-anaphoric sentence external; stage 3→ copula *be*; stage 4→ full verbs and imperatives with *don't*; stage 5→ *do* forms.

There are some other studies on this topic which are worth mentioning but for reasons of space, I will not deal with them in detail here. These are: Cazden, Cancino, Rosansky and Schumann (1975); Butterworth and Hatch (1978); Collin and Holec (1985) and Alonso (2005) among others.

4. The study

4.1. Objectives

Using the theoretical background briefly presented above, and with a special interest in describing the actual use of negation by Spanish learners of English, I aim at analysing their IL paying attention to their use of the three negation types already mentioned.

I will analyse the use of negation made by FL learners as the studies in FLL (Foreign Language Learning) –as opposed to SLA– are very scarce.

I will calculate the frequency of the negative forms and the different uses that the Spanish learners make of them and the difficulties they have to overcome for a correct use of the FL. I will also analyse their IL focusing on its particular features. I will do a qualitative analysis of the data in order to see the extent to which negation plays an important role in the students' IL.

I expect to contribute to the identification and better understanding of the weaknesses and difficulties found by students when dealing with negation in English.

My *hypotheses* for this study are the following:

1. The negation types used by non native and native speakers do not always coincide (i.e. frequency).
2. The main differences between native and non-native speakers' data may be due to two different factors: a) language transfer, b) limited knowledge of the FL.
3. There exists an IL system in the non-native use of negation.

4.2. Method

In order to conduct this study, I extracted data from argumentative texts taken from two learner corpora: SULEC (University of Santiago de Compostela) and the Spanish subcorpus of ICLE (Louvain University). The former contained over 350.000 words of written and oral data from Spanish students of EFL at the moment of the elaboration of this study. The latter contains 2 million written words produced by learners of 19 different language backgrounds. The Spanish subcorpus contains 125,550 words. I also used LOCNESS as a control corpus to draw comparisons. It consists of 324,134 words of native speakers' argumentative essays.

4.3. Data analysis

The data included in this study were submitted to rigorous selection. Not all the examples were suitable, some of them were instances of Spanish *no* and could not be included, witness the

following: *No sé cómo se llama esta parte* (SUL.SP-543).[1] To classify the examples into the different negation types, a close analysis of the data was required.

Corpora data have been analysed from two perspectives: *quantitatively* (using analytical software and statistic calculation) and *qualitatively* (manually, identifying particular features of the learners' IL contrasting them with native data).

5. Results and discussion

This section deals with the data extracted from the learner corpora and classified into three negation types: clausal, subclausal and affixal negation. For reasons of space, I will focus mainly on the use of *no* and *not* as negative markers in clausal negation as it is the most frequent type. I will also mention some other especial uses of them, such as **no-* and **not-* as prefixes.

This section is divided into four main parts: part 1 deals with the quantitative analysis of the data (frequency); part 2 deals with the difficulties learners encountered when using negation in English; parts 3 and 4 show some special uses of *no* and *not* as negative markers/prefixes.

5.1. *Frequency of the negation types studied:*

Regarding the distribution of the different negation types, clausal negation is the most recurrent type in the corpora, as figure 1 shows:

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[1] An identification code is used to refer to each of the examples included in this work. The first abbreviation between brackets stands for the name of the corpus from which the example was extracted, that is, SUL: SULEC; ICLE-SP: ICLE, Spanish subcorpus. The second group of initials refers to the mode of expression in SULEC (WT: written; SP: spoken); and to the Institution in ICLE (UCM: Universidad Complutense de Madrid). Finally, the last number in the series represents the document number as it is in the corpus.

Figure 1. Distribution of negation types across the three corpora analysed.
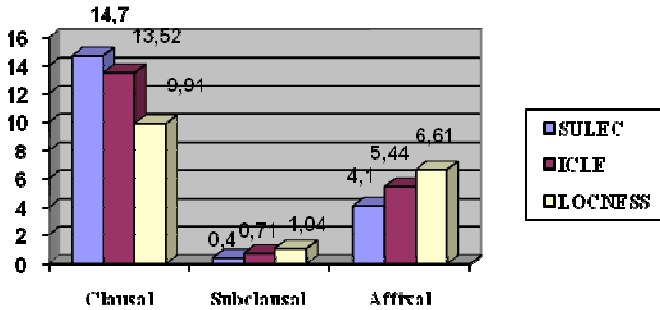
Both SULEC and ICLE data share high frequencies in clausal negation. This result was expected as clausal negation is usually the most frequent negation type used in speaking and writing. The following table shows the distribution of the studied negation types across the three corpora:

Table 1. Distribution of clausal, subclausal and affixal negation in SULEC, ICLE and LOCNESS

NEGATION TYPE	SULEC			ICLE	LOCNESS
	WRITTEN	SPOKEN	TOTAL		
CLAUSAL	16.64	9.65	14.7	13.52	9.91
SUBCLAUSAL	0.58	0.09	0.4	0.71	1.04
AFFIXAL	5.61	1.02	4.1	5.44	6.61

In table 1, a higher frequency of *clausal* negation in non-native than native speakers' data, can be appreciated. Learners seem to approach the negation system used by native speakers when using clausal negation, although they tend to make an almost excessive use of it (as table 1 shows, clausal negation is not so frequent in the native corpus). This could be regarded as a case of overuse of clausal negation by learners.

Subclausal negation is the least common type of the three and is also less frequent among the learner data than in the native corpus. This

could be regarded as an underuse of this negation type by learners and it may be due to the learner's limited knowledge of the FL. In fact, learners may not feel sure about its use and prefer to avoid it using another structure instead (clausal or affixal negation).

Regarding *affixal* negation, I have also noticed certain tendency to avoid the use of negative prefixes, using the structure *Not*+Adjective instead. This could be regarded as a case of underuse of affixal negation due to the learner's limited knowledge of the FL.

5.2. Difficulties learners had to overcome for a correct use of negation in English:

I have identified several problems faced by students regarding different aspects:

a) *The distinction between No and Not*: Learners seem to use them indistinctively on some occasions. This may be due to linguistic transfer as in Spanish (their L1) such distinction does not exist.

b) *The use of auxiliary verbs* to form negative structures: Learners have problems with the use of auxiliary verbs in the negative form. Sometimes, they omit them as in **the people that not smoke have the right to...* (SUL.WT-32). This may also be due to the interference from the L1 over the FL, as in Spanish & Galician no auxiliary verb is needed to form negative structures.

c) *The use of polarity sensitive items*: Learners encounter difficulties in the use of items such as *any* or *either* since they seem to forget about their sensitivity to polarity and use them in any context. This fact leads students to produce instances of double negation such as **There is not nothing to do.* This could be regarded as a case of interference from Spanish/Galician as in these languages these structures are quite common (e.g. *No hay nada*).

d) *The use of negative prefixes*: I have identified some problems students have with the use of Saxon prefixes (such as *un-*) which do not exist in Spanish/Galician, e.g. **unjustice*. This may be due to an overgeneralisation of the prefix *un-* which is very productive in English (it is the most recurrent negative prefix in the native corpus). I have

also identified some problems with negative prefixes coming from Latin, such as *in-*, e.g. *inconsciously. This may be due to the influence of the L1 over the FL since this prefix is very productive in Spanish/Galician (it is the most recurrent negative prefix in the learner corpora).

5.3. *Special uses of no and not as negative markers:*

I found that EFL learners use the different negative markers (*no*, *not* …) in different situations. I will focus on the use of *no* and *not*.

Regarding *no*, there are some uses which can be regarded as special or particular because they are not typical of native language use. I consider them characteristic features of the students' IL and they are mentioned below:

I. *To answer yes/no questions*: Learners tend to simplify language. In this case they reduced a whole sentence, such as *No, I didn't* to the minimum by just saying *No* in order to express rejections and refusals, as in (1):

(1) *<B>² but are you in any team? <A> No . no . just running* (SUL.SP-540).

This could be due to interference from the L1, as in Spanish/Galician there is not an auxiliary system like the English one and it is not necessary to repeat the auxiliary verb in short answers.

II. *No? as a whole question* in oral speech, meaning *Really?* or something similar to it, as in:

(2) *<A> No I think it's not difficult <B> no?* (SUL.SP-557).

This use of *no* is ungrammatical but it is very frequent in spoken language. It is not only used by students, but also by teachers. This may be related to the fact that teachers tend to simplify their speech in order to ensure learners' comprehension. This phenomenon

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² The letter between <> refers to the speaker. In our examples, <A> stands for the student and <B>, for the teacher or interviewer. When other letters appear, they stand for other learners taking part in the interview.

could then be considered as a feature of *teacher's talk* (Ellis, 1994: 582-3).

III. *No? as a question tag* as in (3), due to language transfer because the Spanish and Galician languages have a simpler way to express this kind of questions (i.e. *¿No?*, *¿Verdad?)*:

(3) <B>*… you said you liked drawing . no?* (SUL.SP-559).

IV. *No instead of using not*:

(4) *…on their own probably they will no be using English.* (SUL.SP-514).

(5) *... to have money is very good, why not, but no very much because...* (ICLE-SP-UCM-0037.3).

These examples may show interference from the L1 as in Spanish and Galician there is only one negative marker.

Regarding the use of *not* as a negative marker in the learners' IL, I found some characteristic features that are worth mentioning:

V. *Not followed by polarity sensitive items* as in:

(6) **But not someone gives better advice* (SUL.SP-637).

This example shows the difficulties learners have regarding polarity sensitive items.

VI. *Not in the wrong word order* as in:

(7) **There will be not children...* (SUL.WT-1132).

The learner seems to be trying to reproduce the V+*No*+noun structure so typical of spoken English. It seems to be an intralingual feature, due to the limited knowledge of the FL.

These are intralingual features that can be justified by the learners' limited knowledge of the FL. They do not have a good command of the use of these negative markers and their order in the sentence.

5.4. Special uses of no and not as negative prefixes:

VII. **No- as a prefix* used instead of *non-*:

(8) *I understand the no-smokers opinion, the tobacco is very dangerous* (SUL.WT-54).

VIII.   *Not- as a prefix*:

>   (9)   *Despite, if they can smoke we can have our not-smoke-places* (SUL.WT-976).

On the one hand, these instances of IL seem to be due to interference from the L1 over the L2, as in Spanish/Galician the word *no/non* is also commonly used to form opposites, e.g. *no fumador*.

On the other hand, they can also be regarded as intralingual features, due to limited knowledge of the FL, since in English, the prefix *non-* is also used. By analogy to this prefix, students expand the use of *no* and *not* to that of negative prefixes.

6. Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

Regarding the conclusions derived from this study, the analysis of the data seems to show the existence of a non-native IL negation system. In general, native and L2 learner data follow similar tendencies in the use of negation. However, despite the similarities, native and non-native speakers still differ in the use of negation. There are an important number of particular features of the learners' IL that are worth mentioning. Some of these uses are due to the influence of the L1 over the L2 (cases of *interference*). Another group of uses are due to the learners' limited knowledge of the L2 (*intralingual* features).

Regarding the distribution of negation, from a quantitative point of view, I found that the frequency of the different negation types in the learner corpora was slightly different from that in the native data. Clausal negation was the most frequent negation type in the three corpora; subclausal negation was the least common. The latter showed similar percentages across the three corpora analysed with a slightly higher percentage in the native corpus. Affixal negation is also less frequent in the learner corpora than in the control corpus. It occurs more frequently in written than in spoken language. A qualitative interpretation of the data shows some relevant features such as overuse of clausal negation, underuse and even avoidance of subclausal and affixal negation.

Regarding the difficulties learners encounter while using negation, I identified problems distinguishing between the uses of *no* and *not* –learners sometimes use *no* instead of *not* and vice versa;

problems in the use of auxiliaries –omission; and also problems in affixal negation –confusion of negative prefixes influenced by the L1. Sometimes they use *no- and *not- as negative prefixes. I also found that learners have problems with the use of negative polarity items which occur in negative contexts but are not negative in themselves (e.g. *any* and its compounds, *either*).

These results may contribute to SLA theory by providing answers to some unresolved issues concerning the exact role of transfer.

With the limitations of this study in mind, I recommend that future research on the role of transfer consider the exposure to the L2 and a comparison of data from learners with different L1s.

The findings of my study may have, in my view, relevant implications for the teaching of English. Firstly, I identified different problems and difficulties Spanish learners encounter when dealing with negation in English. These data illustrate the learning process and are helpful for teachers as they should know the difficulties their students have in order to be able to anticipate them in their explanations and carry out an effective programming. Secondly, this research may also help to develop new pedagogical tools and classroom practices to deal with the particular needs and difficulties of Spanish learners of English.

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