# The universality or locality of syntax in Persian speakers' production of L2 negation

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## Abstract

This paper investigated the developmental sequences of negation sentences in Persian speakers' production of formulaic structures in their generating of English sentences. The hypothesis of this study is that Persian speakers are going to transfer the linguistic features of their native language (Persian) to a foreign language situation (English). To this end, two kinds of elicitation tasks were given to Persian speakers to find out the patterns of negative structures as they are local or universal. The first elicitation tool was a production test which was given to speakers through writing and they were required to write about the topic in which making negation sentences was a prerequisite. Another test was a multiple-choice test in which negation structures were tested. The results showed that Persian speakers' developmental sequence of negationis different regarding the way they accomplish comprehension and recognition tests. Through these findings, it was revealed that Persian speakers show different stages in negation irrespective of what the literature proves. We can conclude that negation may not be distributed equally to all proficiency levels universally.

**Keywords :** Persian speakers, Syntactic Systematicity, Interlanguage, Developmental Features, Negation.

## 1. Introduction

It has been advocated that grammar is developed in stages and each stage conforms to specific rules and regularities (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993). That is to claim that language acquisition takes place in a creative way. Persian speakers create a general rule from the input they receive and they regularize it through different stages. According to Selinker's interlanguage (1972), the process of language learning is of transitional nature which has its own features. This dynamic system of learner language accounts for the variability in L2 Persian speakers' linguistic production which is in contrast with the linguistic system of native speakers. This interim grammar put emphasis on the phenomenon of backsliding through which it can be deduced that the linguistic features observed in Persian speakers' language, is not random or towards the speakers' language system (Selinker, 1974). The behaviorist paradigm advocates that Persian speakers' error were regarded as a sign of imperfection and any attempt was done to prevent Persian speakers from making errors. This view originated from the fact that language learning is a process of habit formation and if Persian speakers are allowed to make errors this will result in internalization of errors (Lightbown & Spada, 2003).

In the optimistic side of the issue, which is viewed from the perspective of interlanguage, errors are the window through which it is possible to investigate linguistic patterns characteristic of Persian speakers' developing interlanguage (Ellis, 1988). Interlanguages are then systematic languages which are constrained by the same principles which are characteristic of human languages. The nature of interlanguage is defined by three facts (Ortega, 2009). The first one is that the input Persian speakers receive from the environment is not able to

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account for the variability in learner language. The second fact advocates that errors committed by the Persian speakers are not for the sake of differences which exist between the two languages, namely L1 and interlanguage. The third "striking fact is that many interlanguage solutions are also attested in the production of children acquiring their first language" (Ortega, 2009, p. 83).

With emphasizing the developmental patterns of Persian speakers' language, the role of universal mechanism is highlighted which in turn provides support for the nativist paradigm. Therefore, many researchers conducted research to find out the developmental sequence of certain grammatical morphemes. For instance, Brown (1973) investigated native speakers and came to the realization that some grammatical morphemes are acquired in a predictable order. Studies have also taken into consideration the developmental patterns of syntactic elements. The scope of these studies has been extended to second language acquisition as well (Butterworth, 1972; Milon, 1972; Ravem, 1968; Wode, 1978).

## 2. Systematicity in Interlanguage

The first studies done on systematicity in interlanguage come back to 1970s. Larsen-Freeman (1976) investigated inflectional morphemes and ordered them according to frequency and saliency. Other studies which conducted after the initial classification advocated the accuracy of the classification and provided empirical evidence about the order (Goldschneider and DeKeyser, 2001). As it is mentioned by Ellis (2006), the systematicity of interlanguage development reveals those properties of language input which are related to frequency and salience.

There have been researches conducted on systematicity of a given function in L2 which is obtained through specific forms (Schumann, 1987). The concept of systematicity has been developed to consider syntax too. One of the areas which has been a topic of investigation in L2 is negation. Many studies are done to find out the stages of L2 English negation (Cancino, Rosansky & Schumann, 1978; Stauble, 1978) and some researches have also considered the negation in other languages.

It can be posited that "these negation stages reflect internal grammar representations that Persian speakersbuild and gradually revise as they are better able to approximate the target system" (Ortega, 2009, p. 88). Stages are in a way that more accuracy is achieved as the learner develops. The new stages that the Persian speakers approximate are a sign of more convergence with the rules of the target language system. As Ortega (2009, p. 88) puts it, "pre-verbal negation is the first stage not only for L1 Spanish Persian speakers whoseL1 is consistent with that solution (no + verb) but also for other L2 Persian speakers whose L1, just like English, only allows post-verbal negation." Therefore, it can be concluded that L1 linguistic system is going to have some effect on the development of stages. Languages such as Italian, Greek, Russian, and Spanish have pre-verbal negation as a grammatical norm. Thus, these speakers remain longer in the first pre-verbal stage than a Japanese speaker who has a post-verbal grammatical norm for negation (Schumann, 1979).

## 3. Research on Negation Sequences

Proponents of generative linguistics advocated that language is a universal phenomenon with fixed procedural function which is widely similar. As it is the case, negation structures have been the concern of most researchers to the date and many interesting findings have been proposed by the research projects. Gass "firmly believe[s] that it is only through a multiplicity of approaches to IL studies that we will begin to fit the pieces of the IL puzzle together" (Davies, Criper, & Howatt, 1984). Evidence of beginning studies show that the interlanguages are similar from one person to the next and that variables are influenced by learner factors and learning environment.

Most of these studies included only children as subjects; thus, lower stages in negation were observed more often than the higher stages that are closer to accurate L2 negated structures. The reason for using children as subjects was so as to compare L1 acquisition to L2 to see if the developmental sequences are the same.One of the main advantages of group work is the enhancement of individual accountability. When children are divided into groups, they took responsibility for their own and their friends' learning. They figure out that the

teacher is not like a television screen that they should watch without saying anything. The classes that are conducted in group work, help children to increase their performance to a considerable degree, especially in vocabulary leaning and memorizing conversations for a longer time. In group works, children can transfer information to their friends and this would help them to make it more meaningful since they have transferred information and retell it in their own words. It should be mentioned that the teacher should be aware of quality and quantity of learners' talk. Learners should use the target language most of the time and they should also talk about the points which are wanted to accomplish not about something else. The advantages are not only reduced to linguistic elements; as Brown (1973) put it, group work increases learners' motivation and the sense of security among children. Therefore, group work is beneficial to both cognitive and affective domains of the learners.

A number of studies ensued investigating the stages of development in negation and question formation for English as Second Language (ESL) Persian speakers. The informants for these studies had various L1s, and the majority of them were learning English naturalistically, i.e. "in naturally occurring social situations" (Ellis, 1988). With two exceptions, Felix's (1981) study whose informants were English as Foreign Language (EFL) students in a classroom in Germany and the Ellis 1982 study (reported in Ellis, 1988) of three adolescent ESL students in London, the subjects of these studies were not receiving formal English training. The fact that most of the studies were done of naturalistic Persian speakers makes sense, given that many used the first language acquisition research for comparison purposes and that research is based on naturalistic learning. However, the nature of the linguistic input for naturalistic Persian speakers and instructed Persian speakers is quite different and might influence the acquisition process. This, together with the fact that the 'applied focus' of this research is language teaching (Ellis, 1994), seems to provide a reason for more research of instructed Persian speakers to see if these sequences occur in their interlanguage.

## 4. Research Questions

1. Do we have a universal pattern for learning negation?
2. What is the difference in the use of negation in Persian speakers' comprehension and production ?
3. How is the difference between elementary and intermediate Persian speakers in the use of negation?

## 5. Methodology

The process used to show the development of negation in the EFL learnersof Persian in elementary and intermediate levels is explained. First we begin with a description of the participants of the study which consist of 15 Iranian high-school students in elementary level of English proficiency and 16 Iranian university students in intermediate levels of English proficiency. Then we tried to perform a cross-sectional study in investigating the developmental stages for negation in both writing and multiple-choice tests. Finally, we will spell out how we collected and analyzed the tests and its results which are the basis of the research.

## 6. Results

In studying the developmental stages for a question arise that what are the developmental stages for EFL Persian speakers. Based on Cancino, Rosansky, & Schumann, 1978; Stauble, 1978, developmental stages for EFL Persian speakers have four stages. The four stages found for L2 English negation are summarized in the study.

But it just was a starting point for me. Hyltenstam (1987) suggests the first stage may be related to the fact that, across languages of theworld, pre-verbal negation is a more common grammar configuration than postverbalnegation, but here we should know that mother language has significant effects on L2 learning negation. In Persian we see that we don't have pre-verbal negationbecause of the word order in Persian(SOV) we use negation mark just before the verb at the end of the sentence.In a test we preparedthe students in elementary level and saw that their answers differ significantly in production and comprehension tests.

### 6.1. Elementary Students using negatives

A multiple-choice consisting of 18questions is the comprehension test of testing negatives. A first group is elementary students of high school. there is a surprising result and we concluded that about 50% of answers is DON'T ,but most of them are not corrected.30% of the students' answers is NO,and 20%  answers WILL NOT .here the number of analyzed DON'T were used by student is about 5%.

In tests of writing we tried to have a good title for students and made them to use more from negative sentences. It is difficult to write some sentences for some of them, but 11of the elementary students participated in the writing test. It is obvious that use of NOT is more than DON'T in this level, but using DON'T although common here. About 35% of the sentences consist of DON'T. We have seen some significant differences between Persian speakers' comprehension and production. We see that in comprehension questions they supposed that the best answer is pre-verbal negation with DON'T.

In speaking with some of the Students,we conclude that the use of NOT is prevalent, but the use of DON'T is although common for them. Actually most of their use of DON'T were grammatically not correct.

### 6.2. Intermediate Students using negatives

In the previous section we examined the kind of negatives used by elementary EFL Persian speakers. We presented the data that consist of intermediate Persian speakers. Here again there are 16 intermediate participants for continuing the research. In this part we see that Persian speakers using more complex negative sentences, using more auxiliaries beside the correct sentences. Again in this part the major kind of negative utterances used by the Persian speakers is DON'T. Here we see some minor differences in using negation .The percent of using DON'T were decreased, but it doesn't mean that using NOT is increasing. Instead you will see that DON'T (DIDN'T) is the main for using or choosing negative utterances and the use of other auxiliaries plus not increased here. In Persian speakers' writings we observed that noticing to time have increased and using DON'T, DIDN'T, DOESN'T, again is more than using NOT or NO. In this section the analyzed form of negation is used

more than previous group. For example in the first question in the test that is :

Ali ………………eat the dinner.

a) no, b) don't,  c) will don't,  d) none of them

About 90% of the elementary students' answers is DON'T, it is an example of unanalyzed kind of using DON'T. Intermediate students' answers consist of about 55% of the Persian speakers have chosen the option D,which is the analyzed use of DON'T (doesn't).

Persian speakers have chosen DON'T more than other alternatives. In this multiple – choice test that is the same as the test had used already for elementary EFL Persian speakers, we tested the comprehension of negation in the university students (whom they have gone to English class before) as the intermediate Persian speakers for the study. Here the percent for unanalyzed DON'Tdecreased in relation to elementary Persian speakers, but still it is the answer that have chosen by the most students. 40% of the answers is unanalyzed DON'T, but here you see that 25% of the answers is analyzed don't. It increased five times greater than analyzed answers in elementary Persian speakers. 20% of the answers is NOT (no) and 15% is WILLNOT.

In tests of writing,there were 11 participants and we repeated the previous title we had given to elementary students (talk about the thing you dislike). In these writings the use of NOT or NO decreasedin comparison with the elementary Persian speakers. DON'T are more analyzed than the elementary Persian speakers and using NO is decreased in wrong positions.The data shows some examples of these sentences have written by the elementary EFL Persian.

### 7. Discussion

In the previous part we outlined some information about the data had been gathered from elementary and intermediate EFL Persian speakers, gathering data were based on measuring Persian speakers' comprehension and production. In this part we look back to the research questions : 1) Do we have a universal pattern for learning negation? 2) What is the difference in the use of negation in Persian speakers' comprehension and production? 3) How is the difference between elementary and intermediate Persian speakers in the use of negation?

Using the results of the research that was outlined in the previous chapter, we answered these questions. Moving beyond the research questions, we discussed how this study is related to other researchersdone in this area and suggested areas for future research.

### 7.1. Do we have a universal pattern for learning negation?

It may be the most important question in the study. Up to now we have seen that some scholars (Cancino, Rosansky, & Schumann, 1978; Stauble, 1978et. al) have claimed that learning negation for L2 Persian speakers of English follow a kind of distinct route. These negation stages reflect internal grammar representations that Persian speakers build and gradually revise as they are better able to approximate the target system (Lourdes Ortega, 2009).

In the previous section we tried to analyze the way EFL Persian speakers use the negative marks, how they acquire negation and which kinds of negative sentences they use more. The results show that using negation is different in different levels and across both comprehension and production. Based on the data, it is proved that EFL Persian speakers have some unique patterns for distinguishing negation in close tests and comprehension questions. The data show us the use of DON'T is much more widespread than NO/NOT in elementary Persian speakers. Even in their speech they use more DON'T for making negatives. There is a universal pattern for learning negatives. It means that among EFL Persian speakers this is universal and most of the Persian speakers learn and use English negative in a same way. But the results of the experiments show that most of the Persian speakers have chosen the option DON'T. It is obvious that most of the time they prefer DON'T in alternatives, even though these are not the correct answers and we called them unanalyzed DON'T.

We should notice on the differences between comprehension and production when we analyze the data gathered from EFL Persian speakers. Based on the information, in these pieces of writings the focus is that these Persian speakers use NOT more than DON'T when they are asked to produce a piece of writing. But again we see that the number of DON'T is too high. In intermediate Persian speakers they use DON'T more than NO/NOT even in their production. The major difference here is increase of analyzed DON'T plus use of auxiliary in their negation.

We tried to find that do we have the same universality, and whether the universality exists like this. It is so complex to answer these questions, but after analyzing some findings it was concluded that in Iran we do not confirm to this universality, it means that we have a local pattern for learning negatives, it may relate to Iranian first language in which there is no pre-verb negation like Spanish or Japanese speakers.

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