Why Not? in Child English and its Theoretical Implications

Koji Sugisaki
Mie University

Keywords: neg-initial sentences, VP-internal subject hypothesis, why not?, child English

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the Principles & Parameters approach (as well as within the current Minimalist framework), it is widely assumed that the subject noun phrase is base-generated within the maximal projection of the verb (e.g. Fukui & Speas 1986, Kitagawa 1994, Koopman & Sportiche 1991, Kuroda 1988, among many others). In languages like English, the subject undergoes movement from this VP-internal position to the specifier position of the IP in the overt syntax, as illustrated in (1).

\[
\text{[CP [IP T [VP Subject V ... ]]]}
\]

An influential study on early child languages by Déprez & Pierce (1993) argues that children’s neg-initial sentences indicate that children go through an early stage of acquisition during which subjects may optionally stay in their original position located within VP.

The goal of this small study is to re-evaluate the evidence provided by Déprez & Pierce (1993) for the existence of VP-internal subject stage in the acquisition of English. More specifically, building on the syntactic analysis of the collocation *why not?* by Merchant (2006), I will present evidence from child English against their fundamental assumption that children’s sentence-initial *no* is a marker for sentential negation.

2. NEG-INITIAL SENTENCES IN CHILD ENGLISH

It has been observed at least since Bellugi (1967) that young English-learning children produce negative sentences in which the negative element occurs to the left of the subject noun phrases. Some relevant examples are given in (3):

\[
\text{(3) Nina: Some Nonanaphoric Negatives (Déprez & Pierce 1993:34)}
\]

a. No Mommy doing. David turn. (2;00)
b. No lamb have it. No lamb have it. (2;00)
c. No lamb have a chair either. (2;00)
d. No dog stay in the room. Don’t dog stay in the room. (2;01)
e. Not man up here on him head. (2;02)
According to Déprez & Pierce (1993), an examination of the conversational context in which these utterances occur suggests that each is an instance of nonanaphoric negation: That (3c) is not intended to mean “No, the lamb does have it” is illustrated by the mother-child dialogue in (4):

(4) Context of Utterances (3b-c):
Mother: Can you put it on the floor?
Nina: No have it, Mommy.
Mother: You don’t want me to have it?
Nina: No. No. No lamb have it. No lamb have it.
Mother: You don’t want the lamb to have it either.
Nina: No lamb have a chair either.

Under the assumption that children’s no in (3) is a form of sentential negation, Déprez & Pierce (1993) proposed that children’s neg-initial sentences have the structure as in (5), in which the subject noun phrase remains in the base-generated position within the VP.

(5) Structure of the Child’s Utterance in (3b):

\[
[CP [IP [NegP no [VP lamb have it]]]]
\]

In order to account for why the subject is not forced to raise in child English, Déprez & Pierce adopt the proposal by Koopman & Sportiche (1991) that the configuration for nominative Case assignment has parametric options: Nominative Case is assigned either (i) via the specifier-head relation with Infl, or (ii) under government by Infl. The latter option makes it possible for the subject to obtain nominative Case directly within VP, which leads to the phenomenon of free inversion in languages like Spanish. Déprez & Pierce maintain that nominative Case assignment under government by Infl is an initial option in the child’s grammar, and hence subjects are licensed to remain in-situ even in child English.

Déprez & Pierce’s (1993) analysis of children’s neg-initial sentences, if correct, would constitute a very strong piece of evidence for the VP-internal Subject Hypothesis, since these utterances directly manifest the base position of the subject noun phrases. Yet, in light of its huge theoretical significance, each of the assumptions in their analysis needs to be well-motivated empirically. Thus, in this study, we re-evaluate their fundamental assumption that children’s sentence-initial no is a marker for sentential negation. Our re-evaluation relies on the syntactic analysis of the collocation why not? by Merchant (2006), which is summarized in the next section.

3. **WHY NOT?: MERCHANT (2006)**

In English, when presented with a negative assertion, one can ask for the relevant reason with the elliptical question why not?, as shown in (6).

(6)  a. Speaker A: Anna is not leaving.
    b. Speaker B: Why not?

(= Why isn’t Anna leaving?)

According to Merchant (2006), a number of languages have the collocation that corresponds to why not?, but this expression is subject to an intriguing cross-linguistic variation: While a group of languages use the word for not, the other group of languages employ the word for no. Merchant’s cross-linguistic survey is given in (7) and (8).

Merchant (2006) argues that this cross-linguistic variation follows from the phrase-structural status of negative markers: If the sentential negative marker in a given language is phrasal (an XP, generally adverbial), it will occur
in the collocation why not?; if it is a head (an \(X^0\), generally clitic-like), it will not. In the latter type of languages, the word for no is used, which is (presumably) a phrasal negative adverb.

(7) a. English:  
    why not? *why no?

b. German:  
    warum nicht? *warum nein?

c. Dutch:  
    waarom niet? *waarom nee?

d. Danish:  
    hvorfor ikke? *hvorfor nej?

e. Icelandic:  
    hverfor ekki? *hvarfor nej?

f. French:  
    pourquoi pas? *pourquoi non?

  g. Tsez:  
    shida anu? *shida ey?

(8) a. Greek:  
    *giati dhen? giati oxi?

b. Italian:  
    *perché non? perché no?

c. Bezhta:  
    *su-d -esh su-d gā’ā

d. Russian:  
    *pochemu ne? pochemu njet?

4. WHY NOT? IN CHILD ENGLISH: TRANSCRIPT ANALYSIS

We have seen in the previous section that in English, why can and must be followed by not given that (i) not is the marker for sentential negation, and (ii) it is phrasal (as well as no). Let us now recall the proposal by Déprez & Pierce (1993) for the sentence-initial no in child English: Children do not distinguish between not and no, and use no (as well as not) for sentential negation. If children’s no is really an instance of sentential negation as envisioned by Déprez & Pierce, it makes a certain prediction for children’s why not questions: There is a stage in which English-learning children should produce why no?, as well as why not?

In order to determine whether this is actually the case, I analyzed the spontaneous speech data for seven English-learning children available in the CHILDES database (MacWhinney 2000). This analysis included only those files before children reach three and a half years old, since children’s neg-initial sentences with no typically disappear by around that age. The corpora examined in this study are summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Age Span</th>
<th># of Files Analyzed</th>
<th># of Child Utterances</th>
<th>Collected by</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abe</td>
<td>2;04:24 - 3:07:28</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>14,944</td>
<td>Kuczaj (1976)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>2;03:04 - 3:05:01</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32,479</td>
<td>Brown (1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>1;06 - 2:03</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10,626</td>
<td>Brown (1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>1;02:29 - 3:04:18</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>13,233</td>
<td>Sachs (1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>1;11:16 - 3:03:21</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>30,408</td>
<td>Suppes (1973)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>1;09:08 - 3:01:20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22,580</td>
<td>Bloom (1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>2;3:05 - 3:07:23</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>14,279</td>
<td>Brown (1973)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: English Corpora Analyzed
The CLAN program KWAL was used to identify all the children’s questions with why. I then counted by hand the number of utterances in which why was followed by either no or not.

The results of my transcript analysis are summarized in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Why not?</th>
<th>Why no?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abe</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Results of the Transcript Analysis

Among the seven children analyzed, four of them produced the relevant expressions. All of these utterances took the form why not?, and the erroneous expression of why no? was never observed. The examples of children’s why not? questions are presented in (9) – (12).

(9) Abe (abe113.cha, 3;06:26)
*FAT: hey don't touch the caterpillar .
*CHI: why not ?

(10) Adam (adam14.ch, 2;09:18):
*MOT: no (.) he doesn't have any teeth yet .
*CHI: why not ?
*MOT: he's too small .

(11) Naomi (n82.cha, 3:03:26)
*CHI: why ?
*MOT: because (.) that's one of those questions I can't answer honey .
*MOT: I can answer why when you ask me some things but +...
*CHI: why not ?
*MOT: other things are just very hard to answer that question .

(12) Sarah (sarah049.cha, 3;02:16)
*GLO: we're not going to use this microphone today .
*GLO: because the machine is broken .
*CHI: why not ?
*GLO: and it's being fixed .

During the same period of development, these children also produced a number of why-questions independently of why not?, which would undermine the possibility that they regard why not as a purely ‘lexical’ item.

(13) a. Abe (abe019.cha, 2;07):
why you doing work at home ?

b. Adam (adam12.cha, 2;08:16):
why you (s)miling ?

c. Naomi (n69.cha, 2;08:14):
why we reading Connecticut ?

d. Sarah (sarah026.cha, 2;08:25):
why need them more ?

To summarize, the results of my transcript analysis revealed that young English-leaning children only produced the adult-like expression of why not?, and never produced the incorrect form of why no?. This finding cast doubt on the possibility that children’s no in neg-initial sentences is a maker for sentential negation. This finding of this study poses a problem to the proposal by Déprez & Pierce (1993) that there is a developmental stage in which English-learning children do not distinguish between no and not, using no (as well as not) for sentential negation.5

5. CONCLUSION
In this study, we re-evaluated the status of sentence-initial no in child English. Evidence from children’s why not? questions suggests that
the sentence-initial *no* is not a marker for sentential negation: The absence of *why no?* in early child English runs counter to the view by Déprez & Pierce (1993) that there is a stage in child English in which children do not distinguish between *no* and *not*, using *no* (as well as *not*) for sentential negation. Thus, the finding of this study seriously undermines the empirical basis for the proposal that English-learning children go through a developmental stage in which the subject noun phrase remains in their base-generated position within VP.

Then, a question arises as to whether there is any (other) evidence that the subject noun phrase originates and comes from inside the verb phrase even in child English. One recent attempt to answer this question can be found in Sugisaki (2012), which adopts Chomsky’s (2012) minimalist analysis of subject-auxiliary inversion and analyzes children’s *yes/no* questions in their spontaneous speech. According to this study, the absence of ungrammatical *yes/no* questions as in (14b), in which the nominal element in the subject noun phrase (rather than the auxiliary) has undergone raising, indicates that the subject originally occupies a structural position that is lower than the auxiliary even in child English. See Sugisaki (2012) for details.

(14)  
   a. Can young children ____ write stories?  
   b.*Children young ____ can write stories?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
I would like to thank Ken Hiraiwa, Keiko Murasugi, Miki Obata, Hajime Ono, Yukio Otsu, and Noriaki Yusa for valuable comments and suggestions. I am also grateful to Taku Yamada for his help in analyzing children’s corpora. The usual disclaimers apply. This study was supported in part by a JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) (Grant number: 25370550).

NOTES
1. The base position of the subject noun phrase might be located not within VP but within vP, as widely assumed in the recent syntactic literature. Since this distinction does not affect the main proposal of this study, I will simply ignore that difference in the following discussion.

2. This study focuses on the children’s error in which children place *no* in the sentence-initial position. Another mismatch between children’s and adults’ negative utterances is the observation that children initially use *not* or *no*, whereas adults use negative auxiliary verbs (*don’t*, *can’t*, etc.). See Thornton & Tesan (2013) for a detailed discussion and analysis of this type of error in child English.

3. This finding is in line with the one made by Stromswold & Zimmermann (1999/2000) for child German. Their study analyzed the negative utterances produced by five German-speaking children, and found that these children systematically distinguish between *nicht* ‘not’ and *nein* ‘no’: The results of their transcript analysis indicated that children used *nicht* exclusively in sentence-medial position for sentential negation and *nein* exclusively in sentence-initial position for anaphoric negation.

4. If children’s *no* in neg-initial sentences is not a marker for sentential negation, a question remains as to the exact nature of this negative element. Various attempts have already been made to answer this question. For example, Drozd (1995) analyzed the neg-initial sentences produced by 10 English-speaking children, and found that most of their negative sentences can be
paraphrased as exclamatory negation, like *No way Leila have a turn*. Based on this observation, Drozd (1995) argues that children’s pre-sentential negations are not sentential negatives but an early form of *metalinguistic exclamative negation*, which is the use of idiomatic phrases like *no way* to express objection to a previous utterance.

5. A potential problem remains, though. Children’s neg-initial sentences tend to appear (slightly) earlier than *why not?* questions, and hence it might be the case that the children analyzed in this study have already stopped using the sentence-initial *no* when they started to use *why not?* questions. Investigations of a larger number of children’s corpora may find a child who uses neg-initial sentences and *why not?* questions during the same period of development, a task which I have to leave for future research.

REFERENCES


