NOTE

Negative commands in Spanish-speaking children: no need for recourse to Relativized Minimality (a reply to Grinstead, 2000)*

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In a recent commentary, Grinstead (2000) argues against Bates & Goodman's (1999) claims that the development of grammar is contingent on developments in the lexicon, and that, therefore, there is no need for an independent grammar domain. Citing data on the acquisition of negative commands in Catalan and Spanish, Grinstead argues that beyond grammatical elements that are linked with lexical items, there must also exist independently a computational component, which includes grammatical constraints. He argues further that these constraints are observed from the beginning of acquisition. The purpose of this note is, first, to challenge the evidence Grinstead brings to bear in support of this position and, second, to argue further that the acquisition of negative commands in Spanish is better understood in terms of item-based learning combined with low functional load.

In support of his position, Grinstead cites Spanish- & Catalan-speaking children's failure to produce negative commands early in development. (We will focus attention here on Spanish.) They fail to do so, according to Grinstead, not because they do not have available the linguistic resources to put together what would be a logically possible immature form of a negative command, but because production of such a form would violate a constraint of UG.

Spanish affirmative imperatives are formed from the verb root plus the characteristic vowel for that conjugation – e.g. *mir-a* 'look', *com-e* 'eat'. In contrast, the negative command is formed with *no* plus the subjunctive form of the verb (the verb root plus the 'complement' of the characteristic vowel, plus the relevant person/number (second/singular) affix) – e.g. *no mir-e-s* 'don't look', *no com-a-s* 'don't eat' (see Gathercole, Sebastián & Soto, 1999). The two forms differ in clitic placement: in the affirmative, any clitic would be attached at the end (*míralo* 'look at it', *cómelo* 'eat it'), whereas in the negative, any clitic would appear pre-verbally (*no lo mires* 'don't look at it', *no lo comas* 'don't eat it').

Grinstead notes that young children do not produce forms like *no mires* and claims that they cannot do so until they have acquired the subjunctive morphology on which such forms are based. Until such time, however, Grinstead argues, a logical alternative construction that children COULD produce for a negative command, based on analogy with affirmative imperatives like *míralo*, would be as in (1).

(1)   ¡Mira no lo!

However, children do not produce such a structure, Grinstead continues, because such a construct would violate RELATIVIZED MINIMALITY (Rizzi, 1990), which ensures that 'elements of the same "flavour" cannot move over one another' (p. 738). In the case of forms like (1), the two elements of the 'same flavour' are the verb form and the negation. Critically, to form an (affirmative) imperative like *míralo*, the verb must move higher up in the clause, above clitics (compare this with declaratives, in which the verb does not move up; there clitics occur pre-verbally – e.g. *no lo miró* 's/he did not look at it'). If there were a negative element in such a structure, Relativized Minimality would block the movement of the imperative verb up past the negative, with the result that structures such as (1) are not possible. Since children do not produce such constructs, Grinstead argues, they must have (and are respecting) Relativized Minimality from the beginning, even before children produce constructions that Relativized Minimality regulates (p. 739).

Grinstead's evidence rests on two primary claims:

(a)   Before children learn subjunctive morphology (for all but one of the seven CHILDES subjects examined, this period lasts up to 2;2 to 2;8 [for one, it ends at 1;8]), they do not attempt negative commands; they simply use *no* 'not' and 'are prevented from giving further grammatical form to their intention' (p. 739).

(b)   However, children do use both affirmative imperatives and negation in declarative utterances, so these are available for potential use in

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structures such as (1), and 'there is no general problem with using clausal negation or with producing utterances with an imperative illocutionary force' (pp. 739–740).

There are several problems with the argument, however. The major problems have to do, first, with contradictory evidence, second, with the serious theoretical issue of productivity in the child's grammar, and, third, with the claim that children have available the necessary elements to produce a structure like that in (1) above.

First, there is the claim that children speaking Spanish and Catalan do not attempt primitive versions of negative commands before they have developed subjunctive morphology. An examination of three children's verbal development in Spanish (Gathercole *et al.*, 1999; Gathercole, Sebastián & Soto 2000a, 2000b) reveals that, while negative commands are rare at very early stages, they are not totally absent. The following forms were used with the illocutionary force of a negative command:[1]

(2) Juan
    1;11.8   [J and his mother are taking pens from a box, using them, then putting them back. His mother goes to take something out from one side of the box, and J gets angry:]
        J: **no toca ahí** (adult form: *no toques ahí*)
          'don't touch there'
    2;1.13   [J and the experimenter are playing with some dolls. One of the dolls falls down.]
        J: ¡Cae!
          'It's falling!'
        E: Se cae. Ston, no te caigas, hombre.
          'It's falling. Ston, don't fall, guy.'
        [J and E play further. E sets another doll down on the floor.]
        J: **No cala**. [for 'no caiga' (adult form: *no te caigas*)]
          'Don't fall'
  María
    2;0   [M and mother and experimenter are playing with some dolls. E asks M the name of the doll.]
        E: ¿Este se llamaba?
            'This one was called …?'

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[1] The data from these children were in many respects comparable in quantity and quality to the CHILDES data examined by Grinstead. Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that these children's speech was in any way precocious – in fact, we have argued, on the basis of data from these same children, that productive command of verbal structures in Spanish generally comes in much later than some have previously assumed – see Gathercole *et al.* 1999, 2000a, 2000b.

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M: [ignoring E; to doll:]
       No caga [for 'no caiga' (adult form: *no te caigas*)]
       'Don't fall'
Mo: No caiga, no. [imitating M's form.]
       'Don't fall, no.'
2;2.11 [M and mother are pretending to be preparing and eating a
       meal. M is preparing 'chicken' on a plate, and she goes to feed
       some to her mother:]
M: No – pollo sí. [extending spoon towards her mother's
       mouth]
       'No. Yes, chicken.'
M: **No cupeh** [for 'no escupes' (adult form: *no escupas*)]
       [pretending to wipe her mother's clothes]
       'Don't spit'
Mo: Si no escupo.
       'But I'm not spitting.'
M: ¡Ay!
       'Oh!'
Mo: Es que no me gusta.
       'It's just that I don't like it.'
M: **No cupeh. No cupeh**.
       'Don't spit. Don't spit.'

Miguel
1;10.18 [M and experimenter are playing with several dolls.]
E: Sí, mira cuántos tenemos ahora, pero los vamos a guardar
       Miguel xx aquí. [picking up a bag to put dolls away]
       'Yes, look how many we have now, but we're going to
       put them away here, Miguel'
M: **no guayes** [for 'no guardes']
       'don't put away'

Thus, it is incorrect to claim that 'in the absence of the adult-like means to
express negative commands … [Spanish-speaking children] simply say 'not'
(*no*) and are prevented from giving further grammatical form to their
intention' (p. 739). These examples show that they can either use the
indicative form or pick up a rote-learned, possibly phonetically reduced
form.

Second, Grinstead claims that children cannot produce negative com-
mands until 'subjunctive morphology is actively used' (p. 742). To examine
this claim, one must establish what 'active use' is. A critical theoretical issue
on which rests much of what one can conclude about what a child knows is
the serious question of what 'counts' when attributing knowledge to the
child. Can the mere presence of a form constitute evidence for the child's

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acquisition of that form (as appears to be the assumption in Grinstead's work)? Or does it matter whether the child has some productive command of that form (rather than, e.g. more item-specific or rote-learned knowledge)? We have argued elsewhere (Gathercole *et al.*, 1999, 2000b), as others have done for Spanish (e.g. Hernández Pina, 1984, Fernández Martínez, 1994) and for similar inflectional languages (e.g. Pizzuto & Caselli, 1992 for Italian), that Spanish-speaking children's early knowledge of verbs and verb forms is lexically specific. Thus, for example, even though Spanish-speaking children use (affirmative) imperatives very early on, even a minimal criterion for productivity (that there be at least two verb types used in the imperative and that at least one of them also be used in some other verbal form) reveals that imperative formation is not productive until well after many imperatives have occurred in the child's speech (see Gathercole *et al.*, 1999). The same goes for the use of clitics (see below).

Under such a criterion for productivity, only one of the three children cited above developed productive negative commands during the course of our studies (up to 2;1.13 for Juan, 2;6.0 for María, and 2;2 for Miguel). Negative commands became productive (and correctly formed) in María's speech at 2;3.11:

(3) María: J, no limpies la cara   'J, don't wash your face'
             J, oye, no comas   'J, listen, don't eat'
             ¡Eh, J, no toques!   'Hey, J, don't touch'
             ¡No toques esto más!   'Don't touch this again!'

María also developed productive subjunctive morphology, for first person singular and third person singular present. However, these became productive at 2;6.16, three months AFTER negative commands were used productively (see Gathercole *et al.*, 1999), contrary to the sequence expected under Grinstead's position that negative commands can only develop after 'subjunctive morphology is actively used' (p. 742). Some might argue that the forms in (3) DO constitute use of subjunctive forms. While technically, as far as the adult grammar is concerned, this may be true, it is vacuous to claim that a child has developed the subjunctive if negative commands are the only context in which such subjunctive forms are used. María did not have productive use of subjunctive forms outside of the negative command context until 2;6.16. Thus, Grinstead's second claim regarding the development of negative commands is not supported.

A third claim made by Grinstead is that children only need negation and imperatives to produce the forms in (1) above (see p. 740). There are two problems. First, the mere presence of a form does not guarantee that a child will be using that form frequently (or, of course, that it will be productive, as noted above). Second, the forms in (1) require that the child have knowledge not only of negation and imperatives, but also of clitics. Again, an

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examination of our data reveals that (a) negative commands are unlikely to occur frequently in everyday conversations and that (b) Spanish-speaking children have not necessarily mastered clitics before negative commands enter their speech.

With regard to the first point, one can gauge the frequency with which negative commands are likely to occur in natural child-directed conversations on the basis of mothers' speech. In the speech of Juan's and María's mothers in 10 minutes out of two sessions each, they produced a total of 140 imperatives, but only a single one of these was a negative command – i.e. only 0·7 % (Gathercole *et al.*, 1999: 182). In the case of each of the three children (even prior to productive use of negative commands), the proportion of negative commands surpassed this: Juan 9·5 % (2/21), María up to 2;3.11: 3·3 % (4/121), Miguel: 1·1 % (1/93). Thus, although the children used negative commands infrequently, they were using them as often as or more often than the mothers. This suggests that the children's (infrequent) use of negative commands was entirely in keeping with what might be expected in normal everyday conversations. (Even if the mothers had used an extensive number of negative commands and the children did not, one must also consider the possibility that children might not be in a position to make demands of their caregivers (see Budwig, 2000), or might have distinct communicative goals in using such commands (Narasimhan Bhuvana, Budwig & Chaudhary, 1999).)

Furthermore, not all of these children had productive command of clitics. One can find early forms such as *dame* 'give me', but these were initially the only forms used for the given verbs, indicating that the forms were not productive, but rather unanalysed, rote-learned units. In fact, Juan did not use clitics productively at all during the period studied (from 1;8.5 to 2;1.13). María used *dame* 'give me' by 1;7.24, *quédate* 'stay', *quítate* 'get away', and *siéntate* 'sit down' by 1;10.17, and *déjame* 'let me' at 2;2.11, but none of these verbs occurred in any other form until later. She began to have productive use of third person singular clitics (*lo*, *la*, *le*) only at 2;3.11 (the same session in which she showed productive use of negative commands), and, in fact, none of these occurred with an imperative, either affirmative or negative. Productive use of *me* and *se* (third person reflexive) did not occur until the following session (at age 2;4.22). Miguel showed productive use of third person singular clitics and *se* at age 1;10.18, of *me* at 2;0.20, and of third person plural at 2;2.1. By then he was also using the third person singular present subjunctive productively.

These data suggest, then, (i) that Spanish-speaking children DO attempt negative commands early on, (ii) that productive use of negative commands can emerge before productive use of subjunctive forms, (iii) that the low production of negative commands is in keeping with low incidence in mothers' speech and is not unique to child language, and (iv) that children do

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not always have available the productive use of clitics at this early period, and, so, cannot be expected to produce forms like that in (1), or even correct forms like *No lo mires*, for that matter.

One might still want to argue that it is still necessary to explain why children never say constructions like that in (1) to give negative commands. If we are to pay attention to any structures that children do not produce because they are 'as important as what they do produce' (Grinstead, p. 741), then we must add the forms in (4) to the list of structures that COULD be used to make negative commands but are not. Neither of these forms occurs in the data from our three subjects' speech (although Juan did use *no mira*, without the clitic).

(4) a. ¡No míralo!
     b. ¡No lo mira!

Form (4a) could be constructed on analogy with the affirmative imperative, (4b) with negative declaratives. Form (4a), according to Rivero & Terzi (1995), is outlawed in Spanish because the imperative verb form must raise to the C position (which contains an imperative feature), to the left of the negative, but it is blocked from doing so by the negation, which acts as a minimality barrier; thus, the imperative feature in C is not licensed, ruling out (4a). The same applies to form (4b) if *mirar* is marked for imperative morphology. It should be noted, however, that form (4b) is possible with indicative morphology, which the child might intend for use with imperative illocutionary force. That is, since the imperative form is homonymic with the third person singular present tense indicative, it would be difficult to discriminate a child's use of such a structure with indicative vs. imperative force.

Apart from these constructs that are outlawed by UG, it is important to note that there are also other structures that ARE allowed under the relevant principles of UG (see Rivero & Terzi, 1995: 304, footnote 3), but which children also do not use. Two types are shown in (5):

(5) a. No mirar.   'not (to) look'
         No mirarlo.   'not (to) look at it'
     b. No mirando.   'not looking'
         No mirándolo. 'not looking at it'

Our subjects did not use the *-ndo* forms of verbs (as in 5b) very often, but they did use infinitives quite extensively (see Gathercole *et al.*, 1999, 2000b). Despite this, the only occurrences of a negative with an infinitive were the following:

(6) Juan   2;1.13   yo no jugar   'I not (to) play'
                      no jugar   'not (to) play'
     María   2;0   a coger esto, no   'to take this, no'

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Thus, the incidence of negated infinitival forms was extremely low, as low as or lower than the incidence of the negative commands used during this period, and the incidence of negative infinitives with clitics was zero. In all likelihood, infinitival forms like those in (5a) do not occur in children's speech for reasons similar to those we have argued for in relation to the absence of (1): To be specific, all evidence supports the position that (a) children's earliest uses of verb forms and of clitic forms are item-based and rote-learned; that (b) children are NOT using clitics productively at early ages – with imperatives (including affirmative imperatives), with declaratives, or with infinitives; and that (c) the incidence of occasions on which a child wishes to use such forms – either to make a negative command or a negative infinitive – will be low, just as the incidence of negative commands in mothers' speech is low.

In summary, the development of the productive ability to produce negative commands with clitics and the absence of forms like (1) in young children's speech is not a matter of Relativized Minimality. The development of negative commands with clitics depends crucially, at least in part, on the development of the child's productive control of verb forms and of clitics. This brings us back to the original Bates & Goodman position, which argues for the interdependence of lexical and grammatical knowledge. While this note is not directly concerned with that issue, it does make clear that one cannot examine children's grammatical knowledge without also examining their knowledge of the lexical items in question. Grinstead's arguments fail to make the case that the acquisition of structures like the negative command in Spanish necessitates UG principles such as Relativized Minimality, instead of being contingent on the grammatical knowledge embedded in the lexical items participating in those constructs.

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