# The comprehension of negation in the L1 acquisition of Afrikaans

**20 minute presentation**

Negation is a complex linguistic construction which is largely language dependent, inasmuch as its syntactic structure differs from language to language. Even though 'no' is one of the first elements that a child acquires in the one word stage, as early as 12 months of age, this does not necessarily mean all concepts related to negation have been mastered. While many studies have focused on the production of negation, there are not many which investigate the comprehension of negation, and there are as of yet no data for first language (L1) acquisition of Afrikaans negation. The study reported on in this paper set out to fill this gap by determining the age by which comprehension of Afrikaans negation structures has been developed. Afrikaans has unique syntactic properties with regards to its negation system, especially as it is a negative concord language. Negative concord entails that more than one negative element occurs in a construction while the interpretation remains negative. The negative concord system in Afrikaans allows the expression of negation with two different construction types; by employing a negative indefinite along with a negation marker *nie*, or by using two instances of the negation marker *nie*. The analysis of the data is undertaken within the framework of minimalist syntax, specifically, in this paper we present a possible analysis of the structure of negative sentences in Afrikaans (Oosthuizen, pc) which informs our analysis of the elicited data. It is postulated that, in sentential negation (SN) constructions, $nie_1$ originates under the VP as a negative element. This negative element, which functions as the head of NegP, is valued for the negative feature [Neg]. Moreover, the $nie_2$ originates under the CP as the head of a Force phrase, which has an unvalued negative feature [u-Neg]. The unvalued [uNeg] feature of $nie_2$ is then valued by $nie_1$. In the case of the negative indefinite constructions (NI), negative determiners such as *geen* 'no' and *niks*

'nothing' act much the same as the *nie*$_1$. These negative determiners are valued for [Neg] and therefore value the unvalued [uNeg] feature of *nie*$_2$.

The study discussed in this paper examined children's comprehension of both the SN and NI construction types, in Afrikaans. In this study three central questions were addressed: 1) Is there a difference in comprehension scores when alternative NI words are used in the NI condition? 2) Will one negation structure, SN or NI, be acquired more easily, and therefore earlier, than the other? 3) Will children be able to interpret constructions as negative concord, or will the child assume both negating elements are valued for negative features, thus causing a double negation interpretation? In order to answer these three questions, a test for the comprehension of negatives was designed and was directed at young children acquiring Afrikaans. Participants were 70 typically developing children between the ages of 31 and 63 months of age. Results showed that children's comprehension scores were lower overall for the NI condition than for the SN condition. Children between the ages of 31 and 53 months (Younger group, n=33, mean age 45 months) scored significantly lower on both conditions than the Older group, which included children between 54 and 63 months (n=37, mean age 58 months). Furthermore, no difference was found between the NI constructions that used the different NI words *geen* and *niks,* in either age group. These outcomes indicate that processing costs are higher in order to comprehend NI structures, in comparison to SN structures, regardless of which NI word is used. Current syntactic theories do not fully account for these findings, yet, as shown in this paper, this study opens the door for future research.