Investigating the development and use of negation by Kom children at language acquisition age

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The expression of negation in English is such a complex phenomenon that many linguists have dedicated attention to investigating it. Cameron et al (2007) state that the English language has two negative morphemes which are "no" and "not". Chase and Clark (1972) explain that adults take quite an effort to process negative sentences than positive one, hence the paradox that negation is acquired at such an early age with negative particles like NO and not, enabling one to express multiple concepts. Again, Comparative analyses of communication have proven that negation is central to human language and that several meanings of negation have played central roles in determining meaning. Nordmeyer and Frank (2013); Bloom (1991) and Pea (1980) posit that each of these negators express specific sub-functions including: non-existence, rejection and denial. Despite these studies, little or nothing is done in the area of language acquisition specifically regarding the development and use of negation in African languages. This paper therefore, considers Tomasello's (2003) usage based approach which claims that linguistic structures emerge from experience to investigate the interface in the development and usage of negation in Kom, a Central Ring Grassfields Bantu language. Following a simple elicitation strategy based on observation, the study looks at the forms and function of negation in children between the ages of 1.5 – 4.8 acquiring Kom, and argues that even though there are several negators in this language, their apparition occurs in a developmental sequence and the order of appearance fits within the usage-based approach.

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