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Acquisition of German Negation by Cantonese-native speakers

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1. Introduction

German and English are both Germanic languages; consequently, they share a lot of similarities in terms of the vocabularies. However, due to various historical reasons, the grammar of English has undergone a lot of changes since its divorce from High German. The accumulated result is the often subtle differences in the languages' grammars, and these differences often create problems to English second language learners of German. In the present study, we are going to investigate the acquisition of German negation by Cantonese native speakers in Hong Kong. As Hong Kong was a colony of the Britain, and due to Hong Kong's status as an international financial centre, universities students in Hong Kong, who are our target subjects, generally have long exposure to English. Also, since the negation construction in Cantonese is quite different from German, we propose that the influencing factors of the subjects' German acquisition are mainly from English.

In our research, we will focus on the prescriptive grammar of standard High German. For the reference of the German grammar, we will base on "*Deutsche Grammatik -- Ein Handbuch Für Den Ausländerunterricht*"¹, an authoritative German grammar handbook for foreign learners.

¹ The grammar book is published by Langenschiedt in 2004.

Our research is a very brief attempt to look into the German studies in Hong Kong. Through our research, we hope to understand how L2 learners would be influenced by English when they acquire the German negation constructions. We assume that there may be a positive transfer for the L2 learners from English.

2. Negation with *nicht* and *kein* in German

According to the “*Deutsche Grammatik*,” there are six categories of negation in German. We will just be focusing on the first category, namely the negation words in a strict sense² (*die Negationswörter im engeren Sinne*). We have chosen two negation words: *nicht* and *kein* to investigate. These two words roughly translate into English as *not* and *no*, and in fact, in some cases their usages are similar to the ones in English. However, they are not exactly identical.

According to the syllabus of the German studies course in the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), the university where our subjects study German in, these two negation words are taught in the beginner course. As our subjects are all in intermediate and advanced level, we are ensured that they have already learnt these two words.

² According to the handbook, the other negation words in a strict sense included *nichts*, *nie*, *niemand*, *nimmer*, *nirgends*, *keener*, *keinerlei*, *nirgendwohin*, *nirgendwoher*, *keinesfalls*, *keineswegs*, *nein*, *weder...noch*.

In the present study, the negative formation will be examined and compared under four categories: negation of definite nouns, negation of indefinite nouns, negation of uncountable nouns, and negation of verbs, adjectives and adverbs. In these categories, German uses *nicht* and *kein* in ways similar to English, yet they do not correspond exactly. We will compare their usage in the following section.

2.1 Negation of definite nouns

The German negation word *nicht* is basically equivalent to the English word *not* and *kein* to *no*. In the negation sentences with a definite noun (in the object position), both German and English negations share the same characteristic.

English:

- (1) **I *don't* like that car.**
- (2) * **I like *no* that car.**

German:

- (3) **Ich mag das Auto *nicht*.**
I like that car not
“*I don't like that car.*”
- (4) * **Ich mag *kein* das Auto.**
I like no that car

In both English and German, negation of definite nouns can only take *not/nicht*.

In German, the negation of a definite nouns places *nicht* at the end of the sentence like (3).

2.2 Negation of indefinite nouns

English:

- (5) **I *don't* like cars.**
- (6) **I like *no* cars.**

German:

- (7) * **Ich mag Auto *nicht*.**
I like car not
- (8) **Ich mag *kein* Auto.**
I like no car
“*I don't like cars.*”

In the category of negation of indefinite nouns, English and German do not share the same characteristic. In English, as in sentence (5) and (6), it is grammatically correct to take either *not* or *no* in negation of indefinite nouns, though (6) is less used in daily life. With an indefinite noun, negation with *kein*, like sentence (8) is grammatical correct in German. The negation word *kein* must be placed in front of a noun, rather than at the end of the sentence. The negation is referring to the noun *Auto* “car”, not referring to the verb *mag* “like”.

2.3 Negation of uncountable nouns

Just like the negation of indefinite nouns, English can take either *not* or *no* for negation with uncountable nouns, while German can only take *kein*.

English:

- (9) **I don't have time.**
(10) **I have no time.**

German:

- (11) * **Ich habe Zeit nicht.**
I have time not
(12) **Ich habe keine Zeit.**
I have no time
“I don't have time.”

2.4 Negation of verbs, adjectives and adverbs

In the category of negation with verbs, adjectives and adverbs, both English and German can take *not/nicht* only. Taking adjective as an example, sentences (13) and (15) are correct, both negation words are placed before the adjective.

English:

- (13) **He is not rich.**
(14) * **He is no rich.**

German:

- (15) **Er ist nicht reich.**
he is not rich
“He is not rich.”
(16) * **Er ist kein reich.**
he is no rich

2.5 Comparison between English and German negations

For concluding the comparison between English and German, we can see in the Table 1 that German and English do share a lot of similarities on negation. For

definite nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, they can both use *not/nicht*. Two categories which may lead to confusion are negation with indefinite nouns and negation with uncountable nouns. In English, both *not* and *no* are acceptable, while in German only *kein* is acceptable.

Table 1: Comparison between German and English negation

	<i>German</i>	<i>English</i>
Definite noun	<i>nicht</i>	<i>not</i>
Indefinite noun	<i>kein</i>	<i>not / no</i>
Uncountable noun	<i>kein</i>	<i>not / no</i>
Verb, adjective and adverb	<i>nicht</i>	<i>not</i>

3. Hypothesis

For Cantonese native-speakers in Hong Kong, English is the second language and German is probably the third language they acquire. Since English and German share many similarities in grammar, we propose that there may be positive transfer effects on Cantonese learners with English as L2 when they acquire German as a foreign language. And we hypothesize that they may over-simplify *kein* as *no* and *nicht* as *not*. And they may be influenced by the negation construction in English that *nicht* can be used for indefinite and unaccountable nouns. On the other hand, since both English and German use *not/nicht* for verb, adjective and adverb negations, we propose that there should be less confusion in this category for them.

4. Methodology

In order to assess the Cantonese L2 learners of German about their knowledge on the negation construction, a judgment test was conducted. In the experiment, there were 2 target groups: Group 1 consisted of 29 Intermediate-level L2 learners, while Group 2 consisted of 20 Advanced-level L2 learners, all of them studied German in the CUHK. In addition, a control group of 9 German native speakers was tested for comparison. The test consisted of two parts. In part 1, subjects were asked to make judgment on the grammaticality of 30 German sentences, which were divided into five categories but randomized in the questionnaire. The five categories were the ones discussed above plus distracters, namely:

1. Negation with definite nouns;
2. Negation with indefinite nouns;
3. Negation with uncountable nouns;
4. Negation with verbs, adjectives and adverbs; and
5. Distracters.

Each sentence was given a context alongside the target experimental sentence.

An example is given as follows:

Meine Mutter fragt immer nach meinem Leben, aber **ich bin nicht ein Kind!**
My mother ask always PREP my life but I am not a kid
“My mother always asks about my life, but I am not a kid!”

Subjects were asked to judge on the grammaticality of only the bolded sentence.

The sentences were to be rated on a 7-point scale, with 1 meaning totally unacceptable, 4 meaning unsure and 7 meaning totally acceptable. The subjects, in addition, were asked to make amendments to the sentence if they think a sentence is ungrammatical, that is, the score is less than 4.

In order to compare their judgments on the German sentences with their English knowledge, a second part was included in the questionnaire. This part consisted of 18 English sentences, all of which belong to the first four groups in part 1. Subjects were also asked to make judgment on the grammaticality of the sentences, but they were not required to make amendments. There was no time limit for completing the questionnaire, but subjects were all able to finish within 15 to 20 minutes.

5. Results

There was some misunderstanding of the task by some subjects, who rated some sentences grammatical (i.e. rating greater than 4) even though they corrected them. They reasoned that they could understand the sentences, and thus gave the sentences high ratings despite their ungrammaticality. In order to minimize the distortion of the figure caused by these misleading data, we have discarded the ratings which are higher than 4 and yet major mistakes were corrected in the corresponding sentences.³

³ Since our focus is on the distinction between *nicht* and *kein*, other types of error, such as gender and case agreement, were not involved in this adjustment.

Results obtained from the adjusted data of part 1 are shown in Table 2, and the results for part 2 are shown in Table 3.

Table 2: Acceptance of the negation of different units with *kein/nicht* in German (Part 1)

	Q#	Group 1		Group 2		NS		Neg. word	Ans ⁴
		mean	std	mean	std	mean	std		
Definite nouns	2	2.29	1.76	2.15	1.39	2.14	1.21	kein	✗
	12	5.15	1.85	3.26	1.91	5.88	1.25	kein	✗
	15	5.21	1.76	5.60	1.05	5.50	1.85	nicht	✓
	20	2.67	1.44	2.85	1.60	2.88	1.46	kein	✗
	26	5.50	1.45	5.65	1.27	4.29	2.29	nicht	✓
	29	5.32	1.49	4.85	1.60	5.88	1.13	nicht	✓
Indefinite nouns	1	4.78	1.86	5.53	1.33	2.67	1.63	nicht	✗
	5	5.76	1.27	5.30	1.53	6.63	0.74	kein	✓
	11	3.79	1.95	2.95	1.64	2.14	1.57	nicht	✗
	14	3.32	1.85	2.75	1.62	2.57	1.72	nicht	✗
	21	5.54	1.37	5.55	1.36	7.00	0.00	kein	✓
	23	3.89	1.85	3.60	1.47	5.71	1.38	kein	✓
Uncountable nouns	3	5.38	1.47	5.40	1.47	5.38	2.13	kein	✓
	10	3.93	2.12	3.17	1.65	3.75	1.83	nicht	✗
	13	3.84	2.19	4.00	1.91	4.17	2.23	nicht	✗
	24	5.14	1.60	5.50	1.00	7.00	0.00	kein	✓
	27	5.36	1.59	4.50	1.79	6.88	0.35	kein	✓
	30	5.86	1.33	5.90	1.45	6.75	0.46	kein	✓
Verbs, adjectives, adverbs	4	5.03	1.40	4.70	1.42	5.14	2.85	nicht	✓
	8	2.86	1.88	2.28	1.64	1.71	0.95	kein	✗
	9	2.13	1.36	2.28	1.13	2.00	1.15	kein	✗
	16	4.00	2.25	3.85	1.95	5.50	1.31	kein	✗
	17	5.59	1.40	5.45	1.67	7.00	0.00	nicht	✓
	19	5.21	1.79	5.20	1.70	6.63	0.74	nicht	✓

Table 3: Acceptance of the negation of different units with *no/not* in English (Part 2)

Definite nouns		Indefinite nouns		Uncountable nouns	
no	not	no	not	no	not
1.25	7.00	1.94	6.53	5.31	6.38
Verbs		Adjectives		Adverbs	
no	not	no	not	no	not
6.88	1.25	6.94	1.38	6.13	1.19

⁴ Grammaticality according to “*Deutsche Grammatik*.”

5.1 Negation of definite nouns

From the statistics, we see that the subjects had no difficulties in judging that *nicht* should be used for definite nouns. The ratings of grammatical sentences (with *nicht*) were high for both groups, and those of the ungrammatical sentences (with *kein*) were low, except for sentence 12:

* **Ich habe keine Deutsch Hausaufgaben gemacht.**
I have no German homework done

This sentence is indeed grammatical in German. However, since we have specified “your homework” in the context, it was expected that the answer should be a definite noun. Nonetheless, the subjects (including the native speakers) did not generally see this as the only choice, and thus rated the sentence with an indefinite noun grammatical. This, however, does not suggest that the subjects were not capable of using *nicht* in negation of definite noun correctly.

The subjects’ acceptance of negation of definite noun with *not* in English was uniformly very high, and that of *no* was very low. Comparing this with the results in Part 1, we see that it is in agreement with our hypothesis.

5.2 Negation of indefinite nouns

Although negation of indefinite noun with the use of *no* is actually grammatical in English, most subjects did not rate these sentences grammatical. This is reflected in

their usage of *kein* in German. Acceptance of *kein* was only slightly higher than 5 for sentences 5 and 21. Compared with the ratings from native speakers (6.63 and 7.00 respectively), the subjects' ratings were lower. This shows that they were more cautious to use *kein*, which they regarded as ungrammatical in English. In contrast, the acceptance of *nicht* (sentences 11, 14) was high compared with the native speakers. This is especially true for Group 1, whose ratings were close to 4 for both sentences.

The most remarkable error is found in sentences 1 and 23, both of which have the verb *sein* "to be". While in English, it is perfectly grammatical to say

I am not a kid.

Its direct translation is ungrammatical in German:

* **Ich bin nicht ein Kind.**

I am not a kid

Many subjects did not realize this, and even corrected the grammatical sentence (23)

Er ist kein Erwachsener.

He ist no adult

"*He is not an adult.*"

and replaced *kein* with *nicht*.

5.3 Negation of uncountable nouns

In German, only *kein* is grammatical for the negation of uncountable nouns. On the other hand, the subjects generally accepted both *no* and *not* in this type of negation in

English. Consequently, they accepted *kein* with a uniformly high rating. In contrary, the acceptance of *nicht* was only moderate. The subjects were generally unable to realize that *nicht* is ungrammatical for this use.

It should be noted that, while the rating of the *nicht* sentences were also moderate for native speakers, most of them actually corrected the sentences with *kein* and pointed out that they do not use *nicht* for these sentences. The moderate rating, thus, was probably due to their misunderstanding of the task.

5.4 Negation of verbs, adjectives and adverbs

Just as we have hypothesized, the acceptance of *nicht* was high for verbs, adjectives and adverbs, and that of *kein* was generally low. The results were generally consistent, except for sentence 16:

* **Fisch esse ich keinen.**
Fish eat I no

As mentioned above, the negative article *kein* has to precede the noun in German. When the negation word is placed at the end of the sentence, it is actually a negation of the verb *essen* “to eat”, instead of the noun *Fisch* “fish”. While many subjects failed to realize this, the difficult probably lies in the syntactic structure of German sentences, instead of the negation of verbs.

6. Other findings

While the subjects were able to use *nicht* for the correct units such as definite nouns, verbs and adjectives, many of them failed to put *nicht* in the correct place in the sentences.

German negation with *nicht* differs from English that when used for a definite noun, it is placed at the end of the sentence:

Ich habe das Auto nicht.

I have the car not

“I do not have the car.”

Subjects were usually able to do this. However, some of them over-generalize this, and corrected the grammatical sentence

Er ist nicht reich.

He is not rich

“He is not rich.”

into

* **Er ist reich nicht.**

It was also observed that, while Group 2 performed better in a few sentences, the differences between the ratings of Group 1 and Group 2 were not great. This may be due to the little exposure to German of both groups.

6. Limitations

In our research, we focus on prescriptive grammar, and base on grammar handbook to judge the grammaticality of the negation constructions. However, some German

native speakers misunderstood it as a descriptive grammar task, thus causing a somewhat distorted picture. Also, as language is constantly changing, it is sometimes hard to ignore the descriptive aspect.

In addition, in our study of the negation constructions, we have simplified many details which do exist in German. For instance, depending on the meaning and the focus, the position of *nicht* in a sentence actually may change. We have excluded these factors to simplify our study, yet further research should be done to test L2 learners' acquisition on these details,

7. Conclusion

We have seen that there is a strong correlation between the subjects' knowledge of the negation constructions in English and their judgment on the grammaticality of the corresponding structures in German. As hypothesized, the subjects had generally no difficulties in acquiring the structures for definite nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, as a result of the similarities between the structures in English and German. On the other hand, there were transfer effects from English in their acquisition of German, and they had some difficulties with negations of indefinite and uncountable nouns. Understanding this, it may help students learn German better if teachers can pay special attention to these related structures in both English and German.