

# A Blind Alley Development in the Early Acquisition of Polish Negative Sentences

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## Introduction

In this study, we analyse and explain a syntactic blind alley development (BAD) in child language acquisition, a phenomenon that has not previously been systematically addressed. The only existing study on the acquisition of Polish negation (Sopata, 2010) focuses on different aspects and provides only two examples of BADs without analysis or explanation.

A BAD (Dressler et al. 2023, Čamber & Dressler 2024) is a rarely occurring, ephemeral development that systematically deviates from parental input and is eventually abandoned due to persistent implicit or explicit correction by caregivers.

We distinguish between:

- **Strong BADs**, which have no source in either the general target structures or parental input (as in our syntactic BAD);
- **Weak BADs**, which have a source in the input but develop against it.

Typically, young children's outputs progressively align with parental input, except for unsystematic overgeneralisations (e.g., English bring, brang, brung).

## Background

Our theoretical framework is Natural Linguistics, a cognitively and semiotically grounded preference model (Dressler, 1999, 2024; Dressler & Kilani-Schoch, 2017), which we find particularly suited to explain BADs.

## Methods

We follow the established methodology of MacWhinney's (2000) CHILDES Project, further developed within the Crosslinguistic Project on Pre- and Proto-Morphology in Language Acquisition (Bittner et al., 2003; Mattes et al., 2022). In cases of ambiguous utterances, we employed the hermeneutic method of group interpretation (Soeffner & Hitzler, 1994), based on Popper's principle of falsification: multiple analysts propose interpretations, and the one most resistant to falsification is selected.

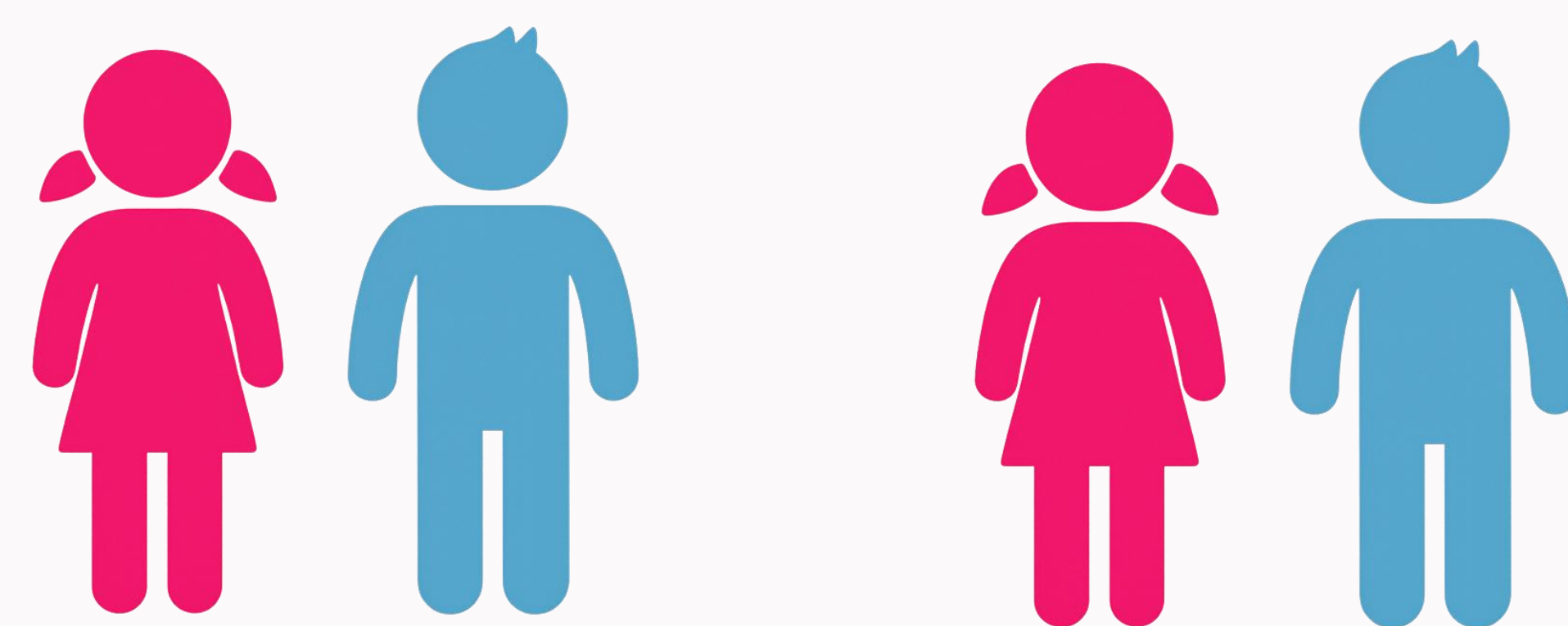
## Data

This study draws on four complementary datasets. The first consists of detailed diary entries kept by the mother, documenting the development of siblings: Child 1 (female, 2;1–2;10) and Child 2 (male, 2;2–2;3.5), with every naturally occurring utterance recorded in their home environment. The second dataset comprises longitudinal audio recordings of two unrelated children: Child 3 (female, 1;7–2;9; 103 utterances) and Child 4 (male, 1;3–2;11; 140 utterances), likewise captured under naturalistic conditions. All four participants are monolingual Polish learners.

The target structure which interests us here, is sentence negation, e.g., in *Nie czekam* 'I don't wait', where the negation is a preposed and unstressed negative particle, whereas the verb is stressed on the penultimate syllable (as Polish words and names in general). Such inputs also occur in parental input from the beginning. The children transform this structure into the illegal BAD, where the negation is postposed and stressed.

Our analysis focuses on instances of non-canonical negation – specifically, utterances in which the negative particle *nie* follows the verb and/or appears sentence-finally.

These constructions diverge systematically from adult Polish syntax, in which *nie* is pre-verbal and unstressed, and which are never present in caregiver input.



Child 1	Child 2	Child 3	Child 4
2;2–2;10	1;2–2;6	1;7–2;9	1;3–2;11
●	●	●	●
[Diary]	[Diary]	[Recordings]	[Recordings]

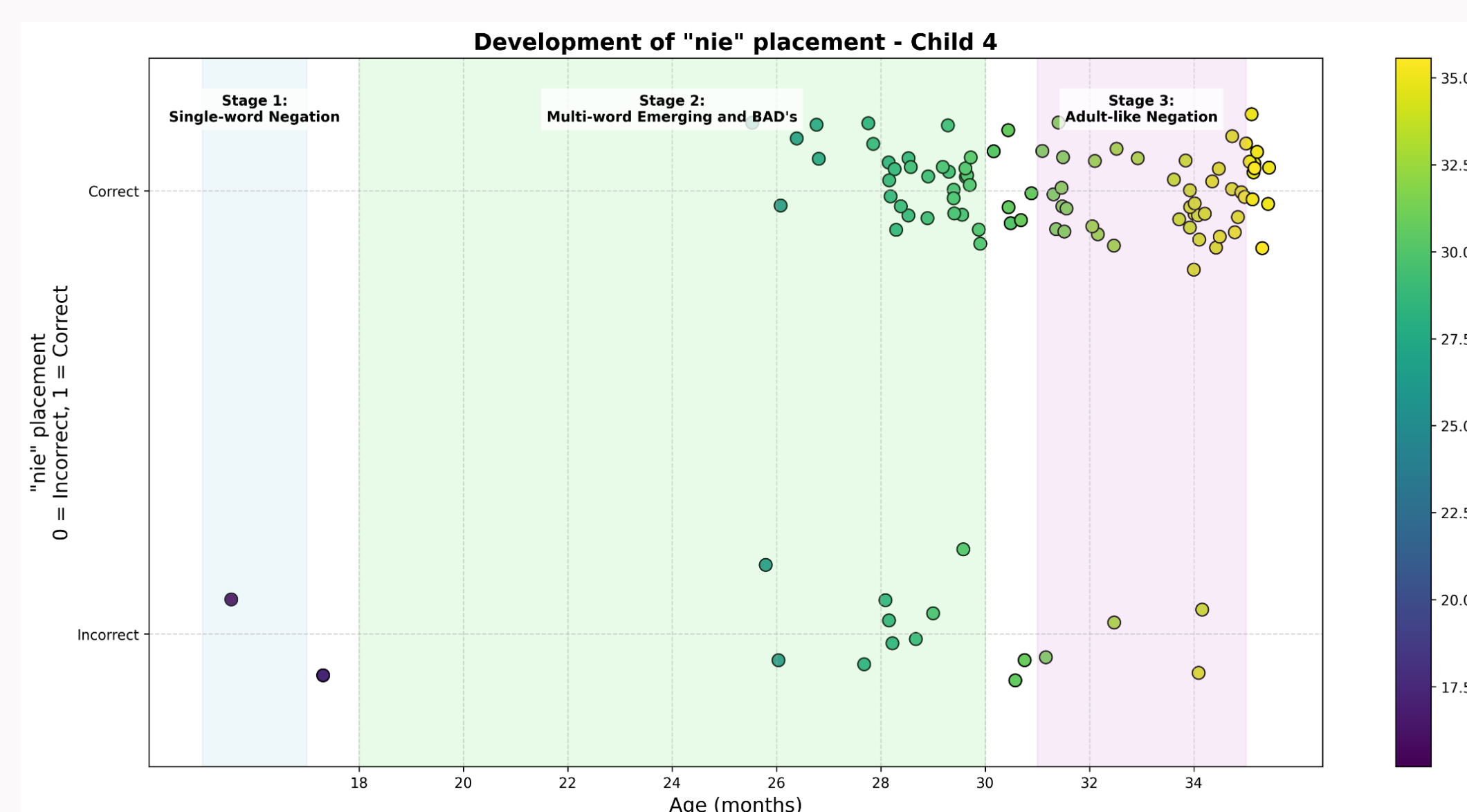
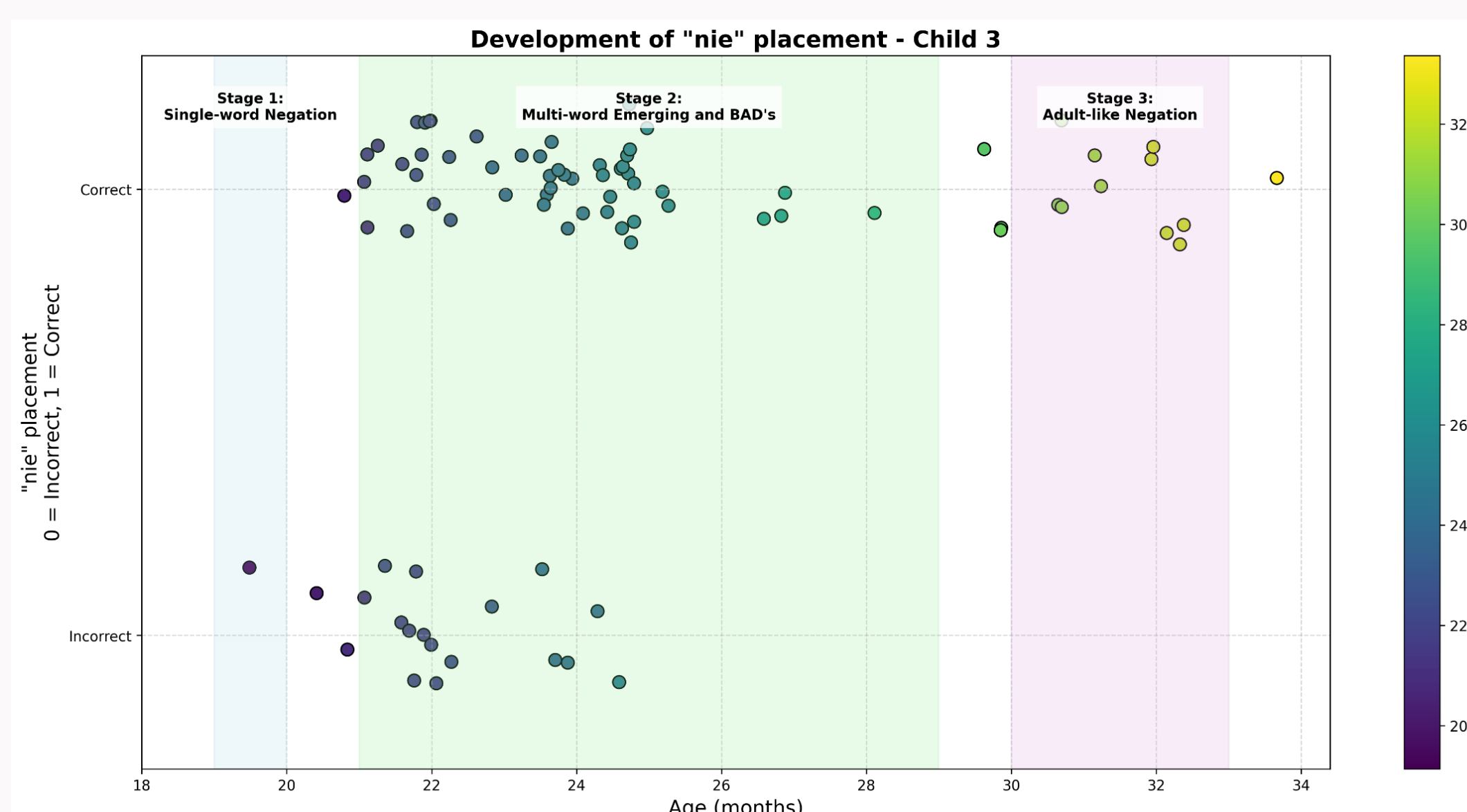
The mother's diary offers limited data, preventing observation of developmental changes over time. Nevertheless, the documented examples and exact ages enable us to trace BAD trajectories at specific stages.

## Results

Longitudinal audio recordings from two children, contribute a combined total of 244 utterances to our corpus. These recordings allow us to delineate the principal stages of negation development, each of which aligns closely with the trajectory established in earlier diary-based data.

First, both children begin with holophrastic negation – isolated uses of *nie* – before advancing to multiword strings in which *nie* is variably positioned. Next, they each pass through a transitional phase characterized by non-canonical post-predicate placement of *nie*, mirroring BAD's observed in other Polish learners.

Finally, by approximately 30 months of age, both Child 3 and 4 consistently produce adult-like negative constructions, placing *nie* immediately before the verb across diverse syntactic contexts.



## Explanation of the BAD's

Negative sentences are marked when compared with their positive counterparts. A different degree of salience is one universal strategy used for distinguishing marked from unmarked grammatical categories, i.e., marked categories are signaled by greater salience. Our explanation of the syntactic BAD lies in the importance of the impact of prosodic and positional salience in early childhood. Young children perceive better and thus acquire earlier stressed than unstressed syllables as well as final than internal and initial elements of units, due to the importance of the recency effect in early childhood (vs. the primacy effect later on, cf. Gathercole et al. 2004).

By changing the position of the unstressed negative article from before the verb to immediately after the verb and by stressing it, they increase significantly both the positional and the prosodic salience of the negation. Such an explanation via salience for a BAD in the course of acquisition has not been used so far; the importance of salience for acquisition has been highlighted only in Natural Linguistics.

## Selected references

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