

**BEGINNING NEGATIVE SENTENCES AMONG MANDARIN  
SPEAKING TODDLERS: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE  
TO THE DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN "BU"  
AND "MÉI YǒU"**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study analysed the earliest negative sentences produced in naturalistic environments by 8 toddlers acquiring Mandarin Chinese ( $1 < \text{MLU} < 3.56$ ). Mainly, there are two negative markers in Mandarin: "bu" and "méi yǒu". The central differences between "bu" and "méi yǒu" concern whether "will" or "completion" are involved. The first emerging negative sentences in Mandarin expressed rejection or prohibition with "bu-yao" and described nonexistence of an entity with "méi yǒu". Later on, the meaning of nonexistence was extended to negate the existence of states, attributes or experiences as well as the occurrence of actions or events. As such, typical errors appeared in these early negative sentences involved overgeneralizing the use of "méi yǒu" to cases where "bu" should be applied. Further differentiation of "bu" from "méi yǒu" appeared to be learned through acquiring specific lexicons or limited-scope-formulas associated with "bu". This shows that toddlers of this age have not mastered grammatical rules as much controlled as adult usage by notions such as "completion", "aspect" and "state vs. action or process". Even in adult usage, the differentiation between "méi yǒu" and "bu" can only be handled by taking distributional factors and typicality into considerations. It is quite possible, even adults still depend on some limited-scope or lexicon-based rules.

In addition, Mandarin-speaking toddlers learn to construct negative sentences by first affixing the negative marker to a verb, adjective or auxiliary verb. The second step was to put this negated verb stem in relation with either a subject or an object. Finally, by combining the above two components, single complete negative sentences were thus in shape. In such a course of acquisition, Mandarin-speaking toddlers do not have to go through a transitional stage where negative marker was first placed external to the sentence and then transported to the proper position within the sentence—as postulated by some investigators studying toddlers acquiring English.