VULGAR MINIMISERS IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH[1]

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigated whether vulgar minimisers form a natural class in English and Spanish by evaluating (i) their similarities and differences with respect to non-vulgar minimisers and (ii) whether vulgar minimisers are inherently negative in these languages. We proposed that vulgar minimisers in the two languages are lexically ambiguous between polarity-sensitive items and quasi-negative expressions containing a local negation as part of their structure. As polarity-sensitive items, vulgar minimisers show similarities with non-vulgar minimisers when it comes to compulsory co-occurrence with the sentential negative marker, compulsory co-occurrence with *not/ni* 'not even' in fragment answers and when preposed, and triggering of subject-auxiliary inversion when preposed. By contrast, as quasi-negative expressions containing a local negation as part of their structure vulgar minimisers are allowed to optionally co-occur with the sentential negative marker and not be preceded by *not/ni* 'not even' when occurring as fragment answers or when preposed. We also argued that the internal negation in (quasi-)negative vulgar minimisers can only take narrow scope, thus resulting in sentences with vulgar minimisers being diagnosed as non-negative by sentential negation tests.

Resumen

En este artículo discutimos si los minimizadores vulgares forman una clase natural en inglés y en español evaluando (i) sus similitudes y diferencias con respecto a los minimizadores no-vulgares, y (ii) si los minimizadores vulgares son inherentemente negativos en estas lenguas. Mostramos que en las dos lenguas que examinamos los minimizadores no-vulgares son léxicamente ambiguos entre términos de polaridad y expresiones casi negativas porque contienen una negación local como parte de su estructura. Como términos de polaridad, los minimizadores vulgares presentan similitudes con los minimizadores no-vulgares en cuanto a la obligatoriedad de coaparecer con el marcador negativo oracional, la obligatoriedad de coaparecer con *not/ni* cuando se usan aislados o antepuestos, y la activación de la inversión sujeto-auxiliar cuando se usan antepuestos. En cambio, como expresiones casi negativas con una negación local en su estructura, los minimizadores vulgares pueden aparecer opcionalmente con el marcador negativo oracional y pueden estar opcionalmente

precedidos por *not*/*ni* cuando se usan aislados o antepuestos. También defendemos que la negación interna en los minimizadores vulgares (casi) negativos sólo puede tener ámbito estrecho, resultando, por lo tanto, en que las oraciones con minimizadores vulgares se diagnostiquen como no negativas en las pruebas de negación oracional.

1. Introduction

In this paper we investigate vulgar minimisers in English and Spanish with the purpose of gaining some insight in to what extent they constitute a class cross-linguistically. By comparing vulgar minimisers to non-vulgar minimisers in the two aforementioned languages, we attest to many similarities but also uncover one crucial difference in their distribution, which is of relevance to fully understand the complexity of the relation of these items to negation. The research question we want to explore is whether vulgar minimisers are inherently negative by nature in the two languages under examination and, if so, how this property is formally encoded in the structure of vulgar minimisers. The hypothesis that we will discuss is that vulgar minimisers form a natural class, related to but different from non-vulgar minimisers in one crucial respect: like non-vulgar minimisers, vulgar minimisers can be polarity-sensitive items that can establish a syntactic relation with overt negation, but unlike non-vulgar minimisers, vulgar minimisers can be negative expressions by virtue of containing a Noun Phrase-internal negation. We thus advocate for vulgar minimisers being lexically ambiguous (in the sense of Herburger 2001) between non-negative polarity-sensitive items and quasi-negative expressions.

Before delving into the main grammatical properties of minimisers in English and Spanish, introducing some terminology is in order. Let us start by explaining that a minimiser is a minimal quantity or extent-denoting expression (e.g. *a word*, *a red cent* in English, *ni una engruna* 'not a crumb', *ni cinc* 'not five (cents)' in Catalan, *(ni) un alma* '(not) a soul', *(ni) una pizca de* '(not) a pinch of' in Spanish) (Pott 1857; Wagenaar 1930; Horn 1989). Within minimisers a subtype with scatological and sexual denotations can be singled out. These are labelled as 'SQUAT' by Postal (2004), but had already been discussed in McCloskey (1993), Horn (2001) and De Clercq (2011). According to Horn (2001), Ross and Postal coined the term 'squatitives' in unpublished work carried out in the 1990s. The kind of elements that are part of the SQUAT/squatitives class can be seen in (1) for English and in (2) for Spanish, as it is the case that vulgar minimisers exist in this language too.[2]

(1) SQUAT = squat, fuck-all, beans, crap, dick, diddley, diddley-poo, diddley-squat, jack, jack-shit, jack-squat, piss-all, poo, shit, shit-all, sod-all, bugger-all, naff-all, crap-all (De Clercq 2011: 14)

(2) *una mierda* 'a shit', *un carajo* 'a penis', *un mojón* 'a turd', *un pijo* 'a penis', *un huevo* 'a ball', *dos carajos* 'two penises', *tres cojones* 'three testicles'

The article is organised as follows. In Section 2 the grammatical properties of vulgar minimisers and non-vulgar minimisers are described and exemplified for English and Spanish, mainly reflecting on how vulgar minimisers and non-vulgar minimisers differ with respect to

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[2] English vulgar minimisers exhibit considerable morphosyntactic diversity, as the class includes bare mass nouns and bare plurals. In a similar vein, Spanish vulgar minimisers include expressions headed by a numeral (*un/a* 'one', but also *dos* 'two' or even *tres* 'three'). The properties described in the main text for vulgar minimisers in Spanish and English (namely optionality to co-occur with the sentential negative marker, the optionality of being preceded by *not* or *ni* 'not even' in isolated answers to questions and when preposed) and for vulgar minimisers in English (namely the impossibility of triggering subject-auxiliary inversion when preposed) obtain identically, regardless of the said morphosyntactic diversity.

(i) the optionality (vulgar minimisers) vs. obligatoriness (non-vulgar minimisers) to occur with the sentential negative marker in English and Spanish, (ii) the optionality (vulgar minimisers) vs. obligatoriness (non-vulgar minimisers) of being preceded by *not* or the particle *ni* 'not even' in isolated answers to questions in English and Spanish, respectively, (iii) the optionality (vulgar minimisers) vs. obligatoriness (non-vulgar minimisers) of *not* or the particle *ni* 'not even' in preposing and (iv) the impossibility (vulgar minimisers) vs. obligatoriness (non-vulgar minimisers) for subject-auxiliary inversion in preposing in English. In Section 3 we discuss the nature of non-vulgar minimisers in English and Spanish in the light of the facts observed in Section 2, and in Section 4 we flesh out an analysis of vulgar minimisers in English and Spanish putting forward a proposal that captures the data and addresses the theoretical issues raised. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Describing the grammatical properties of vulgar minimisers and non-vulgar minimisers in English and Spanish

In this section we compare vulgar minimisers to non-vulgar minimisers in English and Spanish to evaluate to what extent vulgar minimisers behave like non-vulgar minimisers in the two languages, and whether the grammatical properties of each type of minimiser are the same in the two languages under consideration. The first observation concerns how vulgar minimisers and non-vulgar minimisers relate to sentential negation. As shown in (3) non-vulgar minimisers such as *a word* in English or *(ni) un bocado* '(not) a bite' in Spanish obligatorily occur with sentential negation, while vulgar minimisers optionally co-occur with sentential negation in negative sentences in both languages, as shown in (4). The particle *ni* 'not even' is optional before Spanish non-vulgar minimisers.

(3) a. They haven't said a word about it.
    b. *They have said a word about it.
    c. No   probó   (ni)   un   bocado durante   la   comida.
       not   try.PST.3SG not.even   a   bite   during   the   meal
       'S/he didn't have a bite during lunch.'
    d. *Probó   (ni)   un   bocado durante la   comida.
       try.PST.3SG not even   a   bite   during the   meal
(4) a. They (don't) know jack shit about linguistics.
    b. (No)   sé   una   mierda de   lingüística
       not   know.PRS.1SG a   shit   of   linguistics
       'I (don't) know jackshit about linguistics'

Horn (2001: 186) lists a number of examples similar to (4a) with negation under the heading 'Licensed *squat*', as shown in (5), and those without negation as 'Unlicensed *squat*', as in (6).[3]

(5) He then looked into a career as a newspaper   (Horn 2001: 186, ex. 18)
    reporter but discovered writing didn't pay squat

(6) When the more sophisticated students complain that   (Horn 2001: 187, ex. 19)
    they are learning squat, I would direct the professor to [...]

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[3] The grammaticality judgements for the examples in the paper have been taken from two sources. First, they come from the relevant literature. Second, some examples have been created by the authors, asking native speakers of both English and Spanish about their acceptability. We have noticed some variation among speakers and intend to explore this variation in the future.

Horn calls this ambiguous distribution of vulgar minimisers 'Janus-faced' and relates it to Jespersen's Cycle (Horn 1989), according to which a negative marker in a particular language weakens and, being found insufficient, is then reinforced by some expression (e.g. a vulgar minimiser), which can in turn be felt to be a negative adverb proper, as in (7).[4]

(7) I slept/didn't sleep squat last night (Horn 2001: 191, ex. 21a)

According to Horn (2001), then, vulgar minimisers co-occurring under the scope of sentential negation are reinforcers, but the fact that they can also be attested in the absence of the negative marker is an indication that their reanalysis as negative expressions on their own has already started. Actually, as he puts it, '[a]ll that remains is the extension of *squat* from a minimal-substance nominal to an all-purpose negative adverb.' (Horn 2001: 191).

As has been shown to be the case in negative sentences, when used as isolated answers to questions or fragment answers, non-vulgar minimisers are obligatorily preceded by *not* in English and by the particle *ni* 'not even' in Spanish, as shown in (8).

(8) [Q: What did she understand about the paper?]
    a. Not   a   word.
    b. *A   word.
    c. Ni   una   palabra.
       not.even a   word
       'Not a word.'
    d. *Una   palabra.
       a   word

By contrast, vulgar minimisers used as answers to questions are optionally preceded by *not* and the particle *ni* 'not even' in English and Spanish, respectively. This is shown in (9).[5]

(9) [Q: What did she understand about the paper?]
    a. (Not)   jack shit.
    b. (Ni)   un   carajo.
       not even a   penis
       '(Not) jack shit.'

The facts in (3)–(9), thus, are unambiguous when it comes to establishing that non-vulgar minimisers are inherently non-negative, explaining therefore the need to always occur under the scope of negation. Yet for vulgar minimisers, the data are not conclusive as to whether vulgar minimisers are negative or non-negative.[6] In Section 4 we return to this issue and show

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[4] One further use of squatitives is found in English as a determiner (*John bought fuck-all books*. = 'John bought no books'; De Clercq 2011). We are not addressing this type of modifier here.

[5] For other vulgar minimiser expressions (e.g. *(ni) tres cojones*, lit. '(not even) three balls'), the particle *ni* is also optional, but it seems that certain vulgar minimisers tend to collocate with certain predicates. For instance, many vulgar minimisers show a tendency to collocate with *importar* 'matter, interest', while not all vulgar minimisers would sound natural as an answer to a question containing the predicate *entender* 'understand'.

[6] Comparing Spanish vulgar minimisers to English vulgar minimisers has made it obvious that there probably is a mass bias in the minimizing system of English. Yet, we are not sure whether it is atomicity that favors the evolution towards fully-fledged negative meaning because a similar evolution path seems to be in place for Spanish vulgar minimisers, which do not display the same mass bias as English vulgar minimisers. We intend to explore the different paths in the future. For a comprehensive discussion of English and Spanish minimisers as different kinds of nominal quantifiers of varied polarity restrictions, see Martínez (2023). For a discussion of English and Spanish minimisers as different types of polarity items see Tubau (2020).

that even though vulgar minimisers, unlike non-vulgar minimisers, are not always dependent on overt negation, they are still one step away from being negative in the same way as negative quantifiers like *nobody* or *nothing* in English are.

We now turn to evaluate the distribution of non-vulgar minimisers and vulgar minimisers when fronted. Before doing so, though, let us highlight that negation has always been associated with focus (Fălăuş 2020). In English there is one type of focus preposing that requires the presence of negation, namely Negative Preposing (Hooper & Thompson 1973, Green 1976, Emonds 2004, De Clercq 2010, Haegeman 2012, Radford 2020, among many others). This is illustrated in (10) for English.

(10) a. [On no account] could she move to Paris. (De Clercq 2010: 231)
     b. [Not a bite] did he eat.   (Green 1976: 384)

As can be seen in (10b), the non-vulgar minimiser *not a bite* can be fronted, forcefully triggering subject-auxiliary inversion. This is also the case in (10a), where the expression *on no account*, which contains the negative quantifier *no*, has been fronted. Compare (10a, b) with (11), which is also an instance of focus fronting. As can be seen, (11) does not involve subject-auxiliary inversion, but unlike (10a, b), the fronted expression in (11) (i.e. THIS BOOK, with capitals indicating focus) is not negative. To distinguish (10) from (11), we will use the label NEGATIVE PREPOSING for (10) and FOCUS FRONTING for (11).

(11) THIS BOOK I don't need (but that one I do). (Haegeman 2012: 8)

As has been shown in the literature (Bosque 1980; Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal 2009, 2010; Batllori & Hernanz 2014; Jiménez-Fernández 2018, 2020, 2023), Spanish also allows Negative Preposing, (12), and, as was the case with English, it also involves subject-verb inversion.[7]

(12) a. De nada   carece   don Agapito.
      of nothing lack.PRS.3SG Mr. Agapito
      'Nothing does Mr. Agapito lack.'
    b. De ninguno de   esos   problemas trató   la reunión.
      of nothing of   those   problems treat.PST.3SG the meeting
      'None of those problems did the meeting discuss.'
      (adapted from Bosque 1980: 34–35)

Given that it has been shown in (4) and (8) that vulgar minimisers may or may not co-occur with sentential negation in negative sentences and in fragment answers to questions, it seems pertinent to investigate (i) whether this is also going to be so when vulgar minimisers are fronted, and (ii) whether vulgar minimisers will continue to contrast with non-vulgar minimisers along the same lines as previously described. The data in (13) show that, as expected, non-vulgar minimisers cannot be fronted or preposed without *not* or *ni* 'not even' preceding them in English and Spanish. In addition, as this is a case of Negative Preposing, subject-auxiliary inversion obtains in both languages.

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[7] Leonetti & Escandell-Vidal (2009) claim that Negative Preposing is a subtype of verum focus fronting which makes polarity negative, as do some cases of quantifier fronting (Quer 2002). See Jiménez-Fernández (2015, 2025) for a fully-fledged typology of focus in Spanish.

(13) a. Not a word did she say.
    b. *A word did she say.
    c. Ni   un   bocado   probó   durante la   comida.
       not.even a   bite   try.PST.3SG during the   meal
       'Not a bite did s/he eat during lunch.'
    d. *Un   bocado probó   durante   la   comida.
       a   bite   try.PST.3SG during   the   meal

It is shown in (14) that vulgar minimisers can be fronted without *not* or *ni* in the two languages under consideration. Thus, the answer to (i) and (ii) above is that vulgar minimisers show a consistent grammatical behaviour in all contexts when it comes to the optionality of *not*/*ni* 'not even' in English and Spanish, and that they deviate from non-vulgar minimisers in the same exact way.

(14) a. Mary knows a lot about Maths but (not) jack shit she knows
      about linguistics!
    b. (Ni)   una mierda Pedro sabe   de lingüística.
       not.even a   shit   Pedro know.PRS.3SG of linguistics
       '(Not) jack shit Peter knows about linguistics.'

Yet, there is one aspect of (14) that deserves attention: while there is subject-verb inversion in Spanish regardless of whether *ni* precedes the vulgar minimiser, there is no subject-auxiliary inversion in English irrespective of whether *not* precedes the vulgar minimiser. It is known that focus fronting may involve subject-auxiliary inversion or subject-verb inversion depending on the language. As we saw above, English does not require this inversion for focus fronting when negation is absent from the preposed constituent, as further illustrated in (15a) vs. (15b).[8]

(15) a. MACADAMIA NUTS I think they're called.   (Prince 1981: 250)
    b. NO OTHER COLLEAGUE would he turn to. (Radford 2009)

However, subject-verb inversion is involved in all types of focus fronting in Spanish, regardless of whether the fronted element is negative or positive. The Spanish sentences corresponding to English (15a, b) are given in (16).

(16) a. NUECES DE   MACADAMIA creo.   (yo)   que se llaman.
       nuts   of   Macadamia   think.PRS.1SG I   that SE call.PRS.3PL
       'MACADAMIA NUTS I think they are called.'
    b. A   NINGÚN OTRO   COMPAÑERO acudiría.   él.
       to   no   other   colleague turn.COND.3SG he
       'NO OTHER COLLEAGUE would he turn to.'

Given that subject-auxiliary inversion is associated with Negative Preposing but not with focus fronting, we would have expected (14a) to be grammatical only in the absence of *not*, thus predicting (17a) to be grammatical, contrary to fact.

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[8] Focus fronting in English is not as frequent as in languages such as Spanish. It may have different discourse readings. However, one of the most salient interpretations is that of contrastive focus (Gussenhoven 2007). Here a previous statement (or part of) is negated and corrected by a new statement where the focussed element is preposed. A sentence such as (ii) may be interpreted as *It's not hazel nuts that they call them, but macadamia nuts*. See Samek-Lodovici (2018) and Samek-Lodovici & Dwyer (2024) for a statistical study of focus fronting in English; see Jiménez-Fernández (2023, 2025) for a systematic contrast between English and Spanish concerning the frequency and the grammatical strategy that focus employs.

(17) a. *Not jackshit did she say.
　　 b. (Not) jack shit she said.

In short, the fact that (17b) is grammatical but (17a) is not seems to indicate that the *not* preceding a VM in a fragment answer or in a fronted position does not contribute sentential negation at all. We return to this issue in Sections 3 and 4.

We offer an interim summary of the grammatical properties that distinguish non-vulgar minimisers from vulgar minimisers both in English and Spanish in Table 1 and Table 2. The facts are parallel in the two languages except when it comes to subject-auxiliary inversion, as we illustrate in the last row in Table 2. As indicated in bold type, vulgar minimisers in English do not trigger subject-auxiliary inversion regardless of whether they are preceded by *not*; in Spanish, by contrast, vulgar minimisers always trigger subject-auxiliary inversion regardless of whether they are preceded by *ni* 'not even'. Note that the last property in Table 2 is precisely what makes the difference between the two languages.

TABLE 1. Summary of grammatical properties of non-vulgar minimisers

Non-vulgar minimisers...	Must co-occur with sentential negation in negative sentences
	Must co-occur with overt negation in English, and with *ni* 'not even' in Spanish in fragment answers
	Must be preceded by overt negation in English, and by *ni* 'not even' in Spanish when preposed
	Give rise to subject-auxiliary inversion when preposed

TABLE 2. Summary of grammatical properties of vulgar minimisers

Vulgar minimisers...	Optionally occur with sentential negation in negative sentences both in English and Spanish
	Optionally co-occur with overt negation in English and with *ni* 'not even' in Spanish in fragment answers
	Are optionally preceded by overt negation in English and by *ni* 'not even' in Spanish when preposed
	Do not give rise to subject-auxiliary inversion when preposed in English, but always give rise to subject-auxiliary inversion when preposed in Spanish

3. NON-VULGAR MINIMISERS IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH

As was mentioned earlier, sentential negation is obligatory with non-vulgar minimisers. This means that non-vulgar minimisers are unambiguously non-negative and, for this reason, we will assume them to be polarity-sensitive items. This straightforwardly accounts for the observations made in the previous section, namely that they must be under the scope of negation in negative sentences, when used as fragment answers and when fronted. Additionally, if non-vulgar minimisers not preceded by *not* are polarity-sensitive items, it is predicted that they should be grammatical under the scope of non-veridical operators (Giannakidou 1997, 1998 and ff.), as this is a property of polarity-sensitive items.

This is confirmed for English, as non-vulgar minimisers (without *not*) can occur in questions (Ladusaw 1979; Giannakidou 1998, 2011; Guerzoni 2003, 2004), as in (18), conditionals (Giannakidou 1998, 2011), as in (19), as well as directive propositional attitudes, as in (20), the scope of *only*, as in (21), and complement clauses of emotive factive verbs, as in (22) (Giannakidou 2011).

(18) a. Did Mary contribute a red cent for this cause?
　　 b. Who contributed a red cent for this cause?
　　　　(Guerzoni 2003: 99)

(19) If you give a damn, you'll listen.
(20) She's still funny and cute and smart and I wish she
      gave a damn that we aren't friends anymore. I miss
      Candice. www.xanga.com/betweenIDs
(21) Only Mary gives a damn. (= Only Mary cares)
(22) I'm glad he said a word. (= I'm glad that he said
      something)
      (Giannakidou 2011: 1685)

For Spanish, it is reported in Vallduví (1994) that non-vulgar minimisers can occur in non-negative contexts such as questions, as in (23), and conditionals, as in (24), provided they are not preceded by the particle *ni* 'not even'

(23) ¿Acaso   dijiste   (*ni)   palabra cuando debías?
      perchance say.PST.2SG   not.even   word   when   must.IPFV.2SG
      'Did you say a word when you should have?'
(24) Si   dice   (*ni)   (una)   palabra, avísame.
      if   say.PRS.3SG   not.even   a   word   warn.IMP.2SG
      'If he says a word, let me know.'
      (adapted from Vallduví 1994: 279)

Thus, we conclude that non-vulgar minimisers without an immediately preceding *not* in English and without *ni* 'not even' in Spanish are polarity-sensitive items and we attribute them the structure in (25).

(25) [$_{FocP}$ [Foc°] [$_{DP}$ [D° a/*una*] [$_{NP}$ [N° word/*palabra*]]]]

By contrast, when preceded by *not* in English, non-vulgar minimisers behave like negative quantifiers, and when preceded by *ni* 'not even' in Spanish, non-vulgar minimisers behave like Negative Concord Items. Thus, following the work by Tubau (2016, 2020), we assume that non-vulgar minimisers have the structure in (26) in English and the structure in (27) in Spanish when occurring in negative sentences and fragment answers.[10]

(26) [$_{NegP}$ Neg not [$_{FocP}$ (even) [Foc°] [$_{DP}$ [D° a] [$_{NP}$ [N° word]]]]]
(27) [$_{FocP}$ *ni*$_{[neg]}$ [Foc°] [$_{DP}$ [D° *una*] [$_{NP}$ [N° *palabra*]]]]

The structure of non-vulgar minimisers is not identical in English and Spanish, though. English non-vulgar minimisers are halfway between polarity-sensitive items and negative quantifiers, while Spanish non-vulgar minimisers are halfway between polarity-sensitive items and Negative Concord Items. In Tubau (2016), it is argued that English non-vulgar minimisers can behave as polarity-sensitive items when their lexical entry corresponds to (25),

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[9] Minimisers have been assumed to be associated with the Focus particle *even* (Horn 1989; Giannakidou 2007; Kuno 2008, among others) which may be left unpronounced. Without the Focus particle, the Determiner Phrases *a word* and *una palabra* 'a word' are non-minimising expressions. For the connection between negation, focus and scalar adverbs such as *even*, see Yang (2024).

[10] We assume that Neg(ation) is a functional category that enjoys flexibility when it comes to the kind of constituents it can combine with. Both for Spanish and English, Neg can merge in the nominal domain, but also in the clausal domain. What determines whether negation is sentential (i.e. it reverses the truth-conditions of the proposition) is its ability to "scope at least above (the existential binding the event argument of) the main predicate" (Penka 2007: 11). In the clausal domain, we assume Neg to be slightly higher in the structure in Spanish (Neg is above T(ense)) than in English (Neg is below T). Following Tubau (2016), in the present paper we also assume minimisers to be formed by several functional layers (inspired by the work by Klima 1964; Jacobs 1980; Penka 2011; Iatridou & Sichel 2011; Zeijlstra 2011; Temmerman 2012) on negative quantifiers, as well as the Distributed Morphology model (Halle & Marantz 1993; Embick & Noyer 2007, among others), according to which word formation is a syntactic process following the same syntactic rules that are used to build up clauses.

but behave as negative quantifiers when a negation is associated to (25) yielding the structure in (26). The polarity-sensitive item behaviour of English non-vulgar minimisers is illustrated in (28), whereas their negative quantifier-like behaviour is illustrated in (29).

(28) a. Did she say a word at the meeting? (= Did she say anything at the meeting?)
  b. She didn't say a word at the meeting. (= She didn't say anything at the meeting)
  c. Q: What did she say at the meeting?
     A: *A word (= *Anything)
(29) a. She said not a word at the meeting (= She said nothing at the meeting)
  b. Q: What did she say at the meeting?
     A: Not a word (= Nothing)

The flexibility of negation, which can optionally merge to (25), yielding (29a), or higher up in the clausal domain yielding (28b) explains the otherwise quirky behaviour of non-vulgar minimisers in English. It is also argued in Tubau (2016) that when negation and the minimiser form a unit, (26), the resulting lexical item, which is focussed, undergoes Quantifier Raising. When English non-vulgar minimisers undergo Quantifier Raising, the negation in their structure takes sentential scope. The presence of the Focus Phrase (with an overt or a covert *even* particle) results in the idiomatic reading of non-vulgar minimisers.

In Tubau (2020), similar data are considered for Spanish, showing that non-vulgar minimisers can also behave as polarity-sensitive items that can occur in non-veridical contexts such as questions and conditionals, as shown in (30), and negative sentences, as shown in (31), but not as fragment answers to questions, as illustrated in (32) (as is also the case for polarity-sensitive items that are not minimising expressions). Notice that for Spanish non-vulgar minimisers to occur in non-negative contexts, the particle *ni* 'not even' must not precede the minimising expression. In negative contexts, the particle *ni* 'not even' is optional.

(30) a. ¿Acaso   dijiste   (*ni)   palabra   cuando debías?
        perchance   say.PST.2SG   not.even   word   when   must.IPFV.2SG
        'Did you say a word when you should have?'
  b. Si   dice   (*ni)   (una)   palabra, avísame.
     if   say.PRS.3SG   not.even   a   word   warn.IMP.2SG
     'If he says a word, let me know.'
     (adapted from Vallduví 1994: 279, example (46))
(31) a. No   queda   (ni)   (una)   gota   de   vino.
        not   remain.PRS.3SG not.even   a   drop   of   wine
        'There isn't a drop of wine left.'
  b. No   tiene   (ni)   (una)   pizca   de   gracia.
     not   have.PRS.3SG not.even   a   pinch   of   grace
     'It isn't a bit funny.'
  c. No   le   toqué   (ni)   un   pelo.
     not   to.him   touch.PST.1SG not.even a   hair
     'I didn't touch him/her at all.'
     (adapted from Vallduví 1994: 270, examples (15), (16), (18))

When preceded by *ni* 'not even', Spanish non-vulgar minimisers behave like Negative Concord Items: as shown in (32)–(34), they can occur in isolation, they can be modified by *almost/absolutely*, and they can occur in preverbal position without the presence of the sentential negative marker (as is typical of a Non-Strict Negative Concord language such as Spanish).

(32) A: ¿Quién   vino   a   la   reunión?
          who   come.PST.3SG to   the   meeting
          'Who attended the meeting?'
      B: Ni   un   alma.
          not.even   a   soul
          'Not a soul.'
(33) Ni   una   mosca   (*no) se   oía.
      not.even   a   fly   not   SE   hear.PST.3SG
      'Not the slightest sound could be heard.'
(34) No   queda   (ni)   (una)   gota de   vino.
      not   remain.PRS.3SG   not.even a   drop of   wine
      'There isn't a drop of wine left.'

The ambiguous distribution of non-vulgar minimisers in Spanish, which is already discussed in Vallduví (1994), was accounted for in Tubau (2020) by adopting Tubau's (2016) analysis of Negative Concord Items as polarity-sensitive items that carry an uninterpretable negative feature (à la Zeijlstra 2004) that makes them negation-dependent, but also grammatical when occurring in isolation and in a preverbal position. It was suggested for Spanish non-vulgar minimisers preceded by *ni* 'not even' that this particle encodes not only the meaning of *even*, as has been suggested in the literature (Vallduví 1994), but also the uninterpretable negative feature that explains the Negative Concord Item-like behaviour of these expressions.

In Tubau et al. (2024) the phenomenon of NEGATIVE CONCORD is triggered by the presence of a negative formal feature, [neg], which needs to overtly c-command the tense feature of the sentence. When [neg] is in a position in the clause from where it is not able to c-command Tense, it disembodies (i.e. ex-corporates) and adjoins to Tense Phrase via Move F(eature) (Roberts 1998). Such a feature is then Spelled-Out independently from the rest of the indefinite it was part of as *no* 'not' (as a homophone of the sentential negative marker). That is, *no* 'not' in Spanish may correspond to a syntactic negative head Neg, as in (35), or to the Spell-Out of a [neg] feature, as in (36).

(35) Juan no   canta.
      Juan not sing.PRS.3SG
      'Juan doesn't sing.'
(36) Juan no   canta   nada.
      Juan not sing.PRS.3SG (any)thing
      'Juan doesn't sing anything.'

Disembodiment of the feature [neg] is not necessary if the requirement that negation c-commands Tense is fulfilled through other movement processes that are independent from negation (e.g. subject movement, fronting, etc.), hence the absence of *no* 'not' in (37).

(37) Nadie   canta.
      [neg]-body   sing.PRS.3SG
      'Nobody sings.'

Combining Tubau's (2020) analysis, where *ni* 'not even' is responsible for the Negative Concord Item-behaviour of minimisers, and Tubau et al. (2024) analysis, where the defining property of Negative Concord Items is that they contain a formal feature [neg] that must c-command Tense, we claim that *ni* 'not even' induces Negative Concord Item-behaviour of minimising expressions because it carries a [neg] feature that needs to c-command the tense

features of the clause and, to do so, [neg] may disembody and be Spelled-Out independently from the rest of the minimising expression. Assuming that non-vulgar minimisers in Spanish are non-negative polarity-sensitive items, they can be licensed by a negation that sits in NegP above Tense Phrase, as in (38).

(38) a. No dije   una palabra sobre lingüística.
       not say.PST.1SG a   word   about linguistics

       'I didn't say a word about linguistics.'
    b. [$_{NegP}$ [Neg° *no*] [$_{TP}$ [T° *dije*$_i$] [$_{VP}$ t$_i$ [$_{FocP}$ [Foc°] [$_{DP}$
       [D° *una*] [$_{NP}$ [N° *palabra*]]]]]]]

Alternatively, given that the particle *ni* 'not even' is assumed to carry a formal negative feature [neg] that can relocate to take scope over the Tense Phrase, non-vulgar minimisers preceded by *ni* 'not even', as in (39a), would receive the analysis in (39b).

(39) a. No dije   ni   una palabra sobre lingüística.
       not say.PST.1SG not.even a   word   about linguistics
       'I didn't say a word about linguistics.'
    b. [$_{TP \ [neg] \ (Spell-Out \ = \ no)}$ [$_{TP}$ [T° *dije*$_i$] [$_{VP}$ t$_i$ [$_{FocP}$ *ni* $_{[neg]}$ [Foc°]
       [$_{DP}$ [D° *una*] [$_{NP}$ [N° *palabra*]]]]]]]

Sentences (38a) and (39a) are truth-conditionally equivalent, but their syntax is slightly different (compare (38b) to (39b)). In the following section we extend this analysis to vulgar minimisers and we argue that the lexical ambiguity that we postulate for vulgar minimisers introduces one more possibility to the landscape of minimisers, namely that vulgar minimisers can also be quasi-negative expressions in the absence of a sentential negative marker or *ni* 'not even'.

4. Vulgar minimisers in English and Spanish

Turning now to vulgar minimisers, one might also argue that they have polarity-sensitive item status when not preceded by *not* in English or *ni* 'not even' in Spanish. Yet, the fact that they can contribute a negative reading in (4a) and (4b), repeated here as (40) and (41) for convenience, and be used as fragment answers to questions also with a negative meaning (as in (9), repeated here as (42)) calls into question whether they have the structure of polarity-sensitive items in these contexts.

(40) They know jack shit about linguistics.
(41) Sé   una mierda de lingüística
     know.PRS.1SG a   shit   of linguistics
     'I know nothing about linguistics.'
(42) [Q: What did she understand about the paper?]
     A: Jack shit.

To account for what Horn (2001) described as the 'Janus-faced character' of vulgar minimisers (as they sometimes clearly behave as polarity-sensitive items but sometimes clearly do not), and finding inspiration in Déprez's (1997) analysis of French Negative Concord Items such as *personne* 'nobody/anybody', *rien* 'nothing/anything', Postal (2004) puts forward a proposal that takes vulgar minimisers to be D(eterminer) P(hrases) with an incorporated zero numeral, as shown in (43).

(43) $[_{DP} [_D \text{ zero}] + [_N \text{ squat}]]$

Postal's (2004) analysis is consistent with the possibility that vulgar minimisers can receive a negative reading in the absence of overt sentential negation (e.g. in (40) and (41)), but can also co-occur with sentential negation by virtue of not containing a syntactic negation as part of their structure. Postal contributes several arguments in favour of this property of vulgar minimisers such as (i) the distribution of polarity-reversed question tags, where vulgar minimisers clearly align with English non-negative expressions rather than with negative quantifiers, as illustrated in (44), (ii) the possibility to co-occur with positive or negative emphatics such as *too/so* or *(n)either*, as shown in (45) and (iii) the possibility to be continued with the strengthening expression *not even* + X, as in (46). These are all Klima's (1964) diagnostic tests for the expression of sentential negation, but in (47)–(49) three more tests are presented, namely (iv) the impossibility that a parenthetical clause with a negation modifies the clause that contains the vulgar minimiser, as in (47), (v) the distribution of 'expression of agreement' clauses with *so* or *not*, as in (48) and (vi) the impossibility for vulgar minimisers not preceded by *not* to license polarity items, as in (49).

(44) a. Janet read some book, *did/didn't she?
    b. Janet read no book, did/*didn't she?
    c. Janet didn't read squat, did/*didn't she?
    d. Janet read squat, *did/didn't she?
(45) a. Janet read some book and Hilda read some book, too/*either.
    b. Janet read no book and Hilda read no book, *too/either.
    c. Janet didn't read squat and Hilda didn't read squat, *too/either.
    d. Janet read squat and Hilda read squat, too/*either.
(46) a. Jane read some book yesterday (*, not even the assigned book).
    b. Jane read no book yesterday (, not even the assigned book).
    c. Jane didn't read squat yesterday (, not even the assigned book).
    d. Jane read squat yesterday (*, not even the assigned book).
(47) a. Jane read some book yesterday (*, I don't think).
    b. Jane read no book yesterday (, I don't think).
    c. Jane didn't read squat yesterday (, I don't think).
    d. Jane read squat yesterday, (*, I don't think).
(48) a. Jane read some book yesterday. Yes, I guess so/*No, I guess not.
    b. Jane read no book yesterday. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.
    c. Jane didn't read squat yesterday. *Yes, I guess so/No, I guess not.
    d. Jane read squat yesterday. Yes, I guess so./*No, I guess not.
(49) a. *Helga gave squat to anyone.
    b. *Helga has said squat to me in years.
    c. *Helga learned squat in any convent at all.
      (Postal 2004: 164–166)

Tests (45) and (46) have direct parallels in Spanish, (50) and (51), with exactly the same judgements as in English. As shown in (52), vulgar minimisers also seem to resist licensing of polarity-sensitive items such as *N + alguno* 'N + some'.

(50) a.

María	lee	algún	libro	y	Pedro	lee	algún
María	read.PRS.3SG	some	book	and	Pedro	read.PRS.3SG	some

libro	también/*tampoco.
book	too/either

'María reads some book and Pedro reads some book too/*either.'

b.

María	no	lee	ningún	libro	y	Pedro	no	lee
María	not	read.PRS.3SG	n-	book	and	Pedro	not	read.PRS.3SG

ningún	libro	*también/tampoco.
n-	book	too/either

'María doesn't read any book and Pedro doesn't read any book *too/either.'

c.

María	no	lee	una	mierda	y	Pedro	no	lee
María	not	read.PRS.3SG	a	shit	and	Pedro	not	read.PRS.3SG

una	mierda	*también/tampoco.
a	shit	too/either

'María doesn't read jack shit and Pedro doesn't read jack shit *too/either.'

d.

María	lee	una	mierda	y	Pedro	lee	una
María	read.PRS.3SG	a	shit	and	Pedro	read.PRS.3SG	a

mierda	también/*tampoco.
shit	too/either

'María reads jack shit and Pedro reads jack shit too/*either.'

(51) a.

María	leyó	algún	libro	ayer,
María	read.PST.3SG	some	book	yesterday

*ni	el	obligatorio)
siquiera		
not.even	the	compulsory

'María read some book yesterday, *not even the compulsory one.'

b.

María	no	leyó	ningún	libro	ayer,
María	not	read.PST.3SG	n-	book	yesterday

(ni	el	obligatorio)
siquiera		
not.even	the	compulsory

'María read no book yesterday, not even the compulsory one.'

c.

María	no	leyó	una	mierda	ayer,
María	not	read.PST.3SG	a	shit	yesterday

(ni	el	libro	obligatorio)
siquiera			
not.even	the	book	compulsory

'María didn't read jack shit yesterday, not even the compulsory book.'

d.

María	leyó	una	mierda	ayer,
María	read.PST.3SG	a	shit	yesterday

(*ni	el	libro	obligatorio)
siquiera			
not.even	the	book	compulsory

'María read jack shit yesterday, *not even the compulsory book.'

(52)

*María	le	dijo	una	mierda	a	persona	alguna.
María	LE	say.PST.3SG	a	shit	to	person	some

Yet, the incorporated zero-numeral analysis is not tenable for the Spanish data, which involves numerals other than zero in their structure.[11] For this reason, our analysis relies on Déprez's (2011) work, which is based on the assumption that negation can only be sentential when expressed at the edge of a nominal structure, and on Herburger's (2001) work for Spanish negative expressions. In particular, we propose that the vulgar minimiser data in English and Spanish can be accommodated assuming that lexical ambiguity exists for vulgar minimisers in these two languages. While these may have the polarity-sensitive item structure proposed for non-vulgar minimisers in (25) and (26)/(27), they can also have the structure in (53), which allows them to be quasi-negative expressions.

(53) $[_{FocP} [Foc°] [_{DP} [D°] [_{NP} Neg [N°]]]]$

This internal negation facilitates the (quasi-)negative interpretation of the sentences that vulgar minimisers occur in, but it also explains the reaction of vulgar minimisers to Klima's tests of sentential negation when vulgar minimisers are not preceded by *not/ni* 'not even' or co-occurring with a sentential negative marker.

Recall that, as was shown in Table 2, fronted vulgar minimisers do not trigger subject-auxiliary inversion in English, while they always do in Spanish. However, it was also pointed out that subject-auxiliary inversion is obligatory for focus fronting in some languages, but optional or forbidden in others. While Spanish belongs to the first group (and so subject-auxiliary inversion is obligatory for all kinds of focus fronting), in English subject-auxiliary inversion is attested in negative preposing, but not in other cases of focus fronting. This means that only the English data will be relevant at the time of detecting the presence of negation and to investigate the nature and scope of the negation that may precede vulgar minimisers. In other words, given the asymmetry in (54), where (54a) shows a case of negative preposing with subject-auxiliary inversion, and (54b) an instance of focus fronting without subject-auxiliary inversion, the grammaticality of (55a) can be taken to indicate the absence of a wide scope-taking negation in the structure of the vulgar minimiser. By contrast, the grammaticality of (55b) is unexpected.

(54) a. Never again will I lend money to Peter.
 b. THIS BOOK I don't need (but that one I do).
   (adapted from Haegeman 2012: 8)
(55) a. Jack shit she said.
 b. Not jack shit she said.

Notice that while the presence of *not* preceding the vulgar minimiser should trigger subject-auxiliary inversion, the only possible way in which this is not so is if the negation that precedes the vulgar minimiser fails to take sentential scope. As shown in (56), negative elements without sentential scope cannot trigger subject-auxiliary inversion in English.

(56) a. Not long ago {there was, *was there} a rainstorm.
 b. Not much later {they arrived, *did they arrive.}
 c. In no time at all {they had, *had they} routed the enemy.
   (Yang 1986: 9)

This is even clearer in the contrast in meaning that can be observed in (57) and (58), originally from Klima (Klima 1964, cited from Haegeman 1995: 74), where the negated constituent in (57a, b) has sentential scope, but in (58a, b) it does not. This asymmetry is not only revealed by the presence vs. absence of subject-auxiliary inversion, but also by the choice of the

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[11] We thank two anonymous reviewers for pointing this out. Possible numerals are *un/a* 'one' (e.g. *un carajo* 'a penis', *una mierda* 'a shit'), *dos* 'two' (e.g. *dos carajos* 'two penises') and *tres* 'three' (e.g. *tres cojones* 'three balls').

polarity-reversed question tag (i.e. positive for (57b), with sentential negation, and negative for (58b), with constituent negation that fails to reverse the truth conditions of the proposition).[12]

(57) a. In not many years will Christmas fall on a Sunday (in not many years = not often)
    b. In not many years will Christmas fall on a Sunday, will it?
(58) a. In not many years Christmas will fall on a Sunday (in not many years = soon)
    b. In not many years Christmas will fall on a Sunday, won't it?

    Thus, the fact that English vulgar minimisers cannot give rise to subject-auxiliary inversion when fronted as well as their behaviour in Klima's (1964) tests (as reported in Postal (2004) and outlined earlier in the paper) diagnoses (i) either that they lack negation as part of their structure or (ii) that the negation they contain is in a position from where it cannot take sentential scope. Given that vulgar minimisers can be used as fragment answers with a negative interpretation, we pursue hypothesis (ii). Yet, vulgar minimisers in English must be minimally different from negative quantifiers, which are inherently negative and can negate a sentence on their own, (59) (vs. (60)) (as diagnosed by Klima's tests), as well as from polarity-sensitive items, which cannot occur in the absence of an overt licensor in negative sentences, (61) (vs. (62)).

(59) a. Mary plays no instrument, does she?/*doesn't she?
    b. Mary plays no instrument and Peter plays no instrument either/*too.
    c. Mary plays no instrument and neither/*so does Peter.
    d. Mary plays no instrument. Not even the recorder.
(60) a. Mary plays squat, *does she?/doesn't she?
    b. Mary plays squat and Peter plays squat *either/too.
    c. Mary plays squat and *neither/so does Peter.
    d. Mary plays squat. *Not even the recorder.
(61) a. I (*don't) play any instrument.
    b. Q: What instrument do you play?
       A: *Any/None.
(62) a. I (don't) play squat.
    b. Q: What do you play?
       A: (Not) squat.

    Before proceeding further into this issue, let us first clarify that while it has been claimed in the literature that subject-auxiliary inversion is obligatory with any kind of negative preposing (Haegeman 2000), other scholars such as Cormack & Smith (2000), Büring (2004) and Muñoz Martín (2020) have suggested that there is an asymmetry between preposing negated adjuncts, which requires subject-auxiliary inversion, and preposing negated complements, for which subject-auxiliary inversion may be optional, (63).[13]

(63) a. Nobody did John talk to.
    b. Nobody John talked to.

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[12] From an intonational perspective, there is also a crucial difference between the two constructions. In sentences like (58) native speakers of English tend to make a pause between the fronted constituent and the rest of the sentence. This is usually known as "comma intonation" (Emonds 2004). Cases such as (58) are identified as involving topic preposing by De Clercq (2010) and Haegeman (2012). On the other hand, this pause is not suitable in cases of Negative Preposing such as those in (57). See also De Clercq (2010) for a discussion on constituent negation.

[13] See Jiménez-Fernández (2018) for an experiment-based argument against the distinction between adjunct and argument as far as the availability of negative preposing is concerned.

What is crucial for us, though, is that with preposed vulgar minimisers subject-auxiliary inversion is never attested in English, thus confirming that they cannot be treated as negative quantifiers when they occur on their own in the sentence.

Notice that negative quantifiers have been analysed in the literature as decomposable into a negation and an existential quantifier, which, despite entering the derivation separately, are assumed to become a complex object in the syntax that is then spelled out as a single lexical item (Klima 1964, Jacobs 1980, Ladusaw 1992, Rullmann 1995, Sauerland 2000, Penka & Zeijlstra 2010, Penka 2011, Iatridou & Sichel 2011, Temmerman 2012, Tubau 2016, 2020, among others). It seems, therefore, that if vulgar minimisers contain an instance of logical negation as part of their structure, this is in a position from where it cannot trigger subject-auxiliary inversion. This makes vulgar minimisers essentially different from negative quantifiers: while the latter are negative, the former are quasi-negative.

Furthermore, we have shown that vulgar minimisers are also different from plain polarity-sensitive items, which can never occur in the absence of a licensing negation (unlike vulgar minimisers). Following Horn (2001), we account for the distribution of vulgar minimisers by assuming that they are developing from strengtheners of negation to a negation in their own right. Hence, unlike non-vulgar minimisers, which are always polarity-sensitive items, we claim here that vulgar minimisers are transitioning from polarity-sensitive items (hence their similarities with non-vulgar minimisers) to expressions that incorporate a non-scope taking negation in their structure.[14] This negation is what allows them not to be dependent on a negative operator. For vulgar minimisers to be genuinely negative, though, their structure should contain a negative operator in a position from where it can take sentential scope, as is the case for negative quantifiers. We argue that one first step towards this transformation is the possibility of being associated with an instance of negation that has local or constituent scope, as in (55b), repeated here as (64). Given the non-sentential scope of the overt negation that accompanies the vulgar minimiser, preposing will never yield subject-auxiliary inversion.

(64) Not jack shit she said.

In the case of non-vulgar minimisers, which are polarity-sensitive items, the negation that can precede them always takes sentential scope, thus potentially (but not obligatorily) yielding subject-auxiliary inversion when preposed, as is also the case for other preposed negated constituents (e.g. (63)). Vulgar minimisers and non-vulgar minimisers preceded by *not* respond differently to Klima's diagnostic tests of sentential negation, as illustrated in (65)–(68), as well as to Jackendoff's (1969) *It is not that X-Y* test, as shown in (69) and (70).

(65) A: Not jack shit she said, didn't she?/*did she?
     B: Yes, I guess so./*No, I guess not.
(66) A: Not a word did she say, *didn't she?/did she?
     B: *Yes, I guess so./No, I guess not.

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[14] As pointed out by one of the reviewers, if vulgar minimisers incorporate a non-scope taking negation, they are predicted to be able to licence polarity-sensitive items. While this is sometimes possible (see, for instance, the example in (i)), it is not always the case (see, for example, (ii)). That squatitive negators are not consistent licensors of negative polarity items is mentioned in De Clercq & Vanden Wyngaerd (2025).

(i)	*Juan	sabe	una	mierda	sobre	nada.			
	María	know.PRS.3SG	a	shit	about	anything			
(ii)	Juan	le	dijo	una	mierda /	un	carajo	a	nadie	de lo
	Juan	to.him	say.PST.3SG	a	shit	a	dick	to	anybody	of it
	que	quería	hacer.							
	that	want.PST.3SG	do.INF							

'Juan said fuck-all to anybody about what he wanted to do.'

(67) Not jack shit she said and not squat he said too/*either.

(68) Not a word did she say and not an iota did she say *too/
either.

(69) a. Not jack shit she knows about linguistics.
b. #It is not so that she knows jack shit about linguistics.

(70) a. Not a word did she say about the topic.
b. It is not so that she said a word about the topic.

We propose in this paper that the difference in the scope of *not* in front of non-vulgar minimisers and vulgar minimisers (sentential vs. non-sentential or constituent) is not only related to a difference in the internal structure of non-vulgar minimisers and vulgar minimisers, but also to a different diachronic development path of these two kinds of minimisers. It is shown in Labelle & Espinal's (2014) work that change in lexical items can go both ways: from more negative to less negative, or from less negative to more negative. In the case of vulgar minimisers, it seems that they may have changed from non-negative minimising expressions to (quasi-)negative minimising expressions, possibly due to the fact that vulgar minimisers indicate not just a low end on a scale but, given their scatological nature, an **extremely** low end on a scale, as they carry more negative connotations than other minimising expressions.[15] Thus, while non-vulgar minimisers align with other polarity-sensitive items in their distribution (and are, thus, non-negative but dependent on a non-veridical operator), vulgar minimisers are lexically ambiguous expressions (à la Herburger 2001) ranging from polarity-sensitive item status to (quasi-) negative expressions with a non-scope taking negation in their structure.[16] On a negativity scale, therefore, vulgar minimisers would be further along than non-vulgar minimisers, as negation may be part of their structure, as in (71), while negation in the case of non-vulgar minimisers (as well as in the case of vulgar minimisers that co-occur with overt negation) is a licensing operator that can sit close but outside the minimiser, as in (72a) and (73a), or higher up in the T(ense) P(hrase) domain, as in (72b) and (73b).[17]

(71) I said [$_{FocP}$ [Foc°] [$_{DP}$ [D°] [$_{NP}$ Neg [N° jackshit]]]]

(72) a. I said [$_{NegP}$ [Neg not] [$_{FocP}$ (even) [Foc°] [$_{DP}$ [D° a] [$_{NP}$ [N° word]]]]]
b. I [$_{TP}$ [T° did] [$_{NegP}$ [Neg not] [$_{VP}$ say [$_{FocP}$ (even) [Foc°] [$_{DP}$ [D° a] [$_{NP}$ [N° word]]]]]]]

(73) a. I said [$_{NegP}$ [Neg not] [$_{FocP}$ (even) [Foc°] [$_{DP}$ [D°] [$_{NP}$ [N° jackshit]]]]]
b. I [$_{TP}$ [T° did] [$_{NegP}$ [Neg not] [$_{VP}$ say [$_{FocP}$ (even) [Foc°] [$_{DP}$ [D°] [$_{NP}$ [N° jackshit]]]]]]]

This analysis allows us to explain why we obtain different results in Klima's tests above depending on whether vulgar minimisers occur in the absence of negation in (71), or if they co-occur with an overt negation in (73). While Klima's tests diagnose sentences such as (71) as non-negative, the opposite happens for (73), as shown in (44)–(48) above.

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[15] Labelle & Espinal (2014) show that the lexical items of the polarity landscape can change from less to more negative, but also from more to less negative. In our case, it looks like the move is from less (non-vulgar minimisers, which have the structure of polarity-sensitive items and can combine with a negation external to them) to more negative (vulgar minimisers, which have the possibility to include a negation as part of their structure).

[16] This is actually close to what Herburger (2001) argues for Spanish Negative Concord Items. She shows that an analysis that assumes Spanish Negative Concord Items to be polarity-sensitive items only fails to account for their distribution, as Negative Concord Items can possibly occur in the absence of the negative marker in some contexts (e.g. pre-verbal position, fragment answers) whereas polarity-sensitive items cannot. In a similar vein, an analysis of Spanish Negative Concord Items as negative quantifiers cannot accommodate their dependency on certain non-veridical operators to be licensed. Thus, Herburger proposes that Spanish Negative Concord Items are lexically ambiguous between polarity-sensitive items and negative expressions. She relates that this situation reflects an intermediate stage in Jespersen's Cycle, where a *give* expression transforms along the negativity scale.

[17] That two different lexical entries co-exist for vulgar minimisers (a polarity-item-like that is very similar to non-vulgar minimisers, and an innovative lexical entry with an internal negation) can be seen as a diachronic development. Future research should determine whether speakers show any preference for one of the two possible lexical entries for vulgar minimisers and in which contexts.

As vulgar minimisers can occur in the absence of a negative marker and lead to a negative interpretation of the clause, we predict that the *not* in a *not* + vulgar minimiser sequence used in a preposing structure or a fragment answer may eventually be reinterpreted as an instance of logical negation. If this is so, we predict that such a reanalysis will be visible in a change in the status of subject-auxiliary inversion, which should change from banned to optional, if vulgar minimisers are eventually completely reanalyzed as negative quantifiers in English. For the moment, given that the negation that is part of the structure of vulgar minimisers is deep in the DP structure, we assume that it is in a structural position from where it cannot take sentential scope and, thus, cannot trigger subject-auxiliary inversion when the vulgar minimiser is preposed.[18]

As we did for English vulgar minimisers, we also assume here that Spanish vulgar minimisers are lexically ambiguous between polarity-sensitive items and (quasi-) negative expressions containing an NP-internal negation that fails to take sentential scope. Hence, they can co-occur with an overt negative licensor, but, crucially, can also occur in the absence of it. However, unlike what was discussed to be the case for English vulgar minimisers, which are neither typical polarity-sensitive items nor negative quantifiers (not even when preceded by *not* in a preposed position or in fragment answers), Spanish vulgar minimisers behave exactly like Negative Concord Items when preceded by the particle *ni* 'not even' (Tubau 2020: 419), as shown in (74b). Thus, while vulgar minimisers are lexically ambiguous between polarity-sensitive items and quasi-negative expressions both in English and in Spanish, the picture is slightly more complex in Spanish, as the presence of the particle *ni* 'not even' triggers Negative Concord Item-like behaviour for vulgar minimisers. The examples that follow illustrate this issue.

The example in (74a) shows that a pre-verbal Negative Concord Item such as *nadie* 'nobody' cannot co-occur with the sentential negative marker, as Spanish is a Non-Strict Negative Concord language and these display an asymmetry between pre- and post-verbal positions when it comes to the (im)possibility of the sentential negative marker co-occurring with a Negative Concord Item. Example (74b) illustrates the fact that when *ni* 'not even' precedes a preposed vulgar minimiser (*un pijo* 'a dick') co-occurrence with the negative marker *no* 'not' is ungrammatical (as was seen to be the case for preposed non-vulgar minimisers in (33), as well). This indicates that the presence of *ni* 'not even' with a preposed minimiser induces its Negative Concord Item-like behaviour.

(74) a. A   nadie   (*no) veo.
        to   n-body not   see.PRS.1SG
        'I see nobody.'

     b. *(Ni)   un   pijo   (*no)   veo.
        to   a   dick   not   see.PRS.1SG
        'I don't see dick (lit.: Not dick I see)'

The example in (75), by contrast, exemplifies that when *ni* 'not even' precedes vulgar minimisers (and non-vulgar minimisers), the particle *ni* 'not even' takes sentential scope (and so does the pre-verbal Negative Concord Item in (74a)).[19]

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[18] Here we follow the work by Déprez (2011) according to which the ability of this negation to be active higher up in the structure is connected to the position it occupies within a given computation domain. While a negation at the edge (i.e. outside) the DP can take sentential scope, one that is too low in the DP-domain, as is the case for vulgar minimisers, cannot.

[19] In a transformational perspective, Bosque (1980: 29 and subsequent work) discusses these cases where a negative element in Spanish is preposed thereby eliminating any possible occurrence of the negative adverb *no* intra-sententially. For the author this is a consequence of a transformation (Thematisation of a negative polarity item) plus ellipsis of the negative head NEG.

(75) *(Ni)   {un pijo/   un alma} veo
     not.even a   dick   a   soul   see.PRS.1SG
     y   tu {tampoco/*también}.
     and   you either/too
     'I don't see {jack shit/a soul} and {neither do you/*so do you}'
     (lit.: Not jack shit/Not a soul I see and you either/*too)

Following Tubau et al. (2024), we have argued that the Negative Concord Item-like behaviour induced by *ni* 'not even' in non-vulgar minimisers is the result of *ni* 'not even' being specified with a negative formal feature, [neg], which needs to overtly c-command the tense feature of the sentence. When [neg] is in a position from which it is unable to c-command Tense, it disembodies (i.e. ex-corporates) and adjoins to TP via Move F(eature) (Roberts 1998). Such a feature is then spelled-out independently from the rest of the indefinite it was part of as *no* 'not' (as a homophone of the sentential negative marker). The same analysis that was put forward for non-vulgar minimisers in Section 3 is extended to vulgar minimisers preceded by *ni* 'not even': these contain a [neg] feature that needs to c-command the tense features of the clause and, to do so, [neg] may disembody and be spelled-out independently from the rest of the vulgar minimiser. The implication of this is that a sentence such as (4b), repeated here as (76) for convenience and (77a) has an essentially different analysis when it comes to the nature of *no* (which is a negative marker in (76), vs. the spell-out of a [neg] feature in *ni* 'not even' in (77a)).

(76) No sé   una   mierda   de   lingüística
     not know.PRS.1SG a   shit   of   linguistics
     'I don't know jack shit about linguistics.'

(77) a. No   sé   ni   una   mierda   de   lingüística
         [neg]   know.PRS.1SG not.even   a   shit   of   linguistics
     b. *Sé   ni   una   mierda de   lingüística
         know.PRS.1SG not.even   a   shit   of   linguistics

Given that we claim that vulgar minimisers are lexically ambiguous between polarity-sensitive items (without *ni* 'not even'), Negative Concord Items (with *ni* 'not even') and quasi-negative expressions with a local negation in their structure, the picture that emerges is the following:

- if the vulgar minimiser has the structure of a non-negative polarity-sensitive item, it may be licensed by the syntactic head Neg, as in (78):

(78) $[_{NegP} [Neg° \ no] [_{TP} [T° \ sé_i] [_{VP} t_i [_{FocP} [Foc°] [_{DP} [D° \ una] [_{NP} [N° \ mierda]]]]]]]$ *de lingüística*

- if the vulgar minimiser has the structure of a non-negative polarity-sensitive item, it may be preceded by the particle *ni* 'not even', which encodes a formal negative feature [neg] that disembodies, raises to a position above T and is eventually spelled-out as *no*, as in (79):

(79) $[_{TP \ [neg] \ (spell-out \ = \ no)} [_{TP} [T° \ sé_i] [_{VP} t_i [_{FocP} \ ni \ _{[neg]} [Foc°] [_{DP} [D° \ una] [_{NP} [N° \ mierda]]]]]]]$ *de lingüística*

- if the vulgar minimiser has the structure of a quasi-negative expression containing a local negation, it will be interpreted as pointing at the very end of a scale when the sentential marker is absent, as in (80):

(80) $[_{TP}$ $[T°$ *sé$_i$*$]$ $[_{VP}$ t$_i$ $[_{FocP}$ $[Foc°]$ $[_{DP}$ $[D°$ *una*$]$ $[_{NP}$ Neg $[N°$ *mierda*$]]]]]]$ *de lingüística*

While (76) and (77a) are truth-conditionally equivalent and respond in the same way to Klima's diagnostic tests of sentential negation, in (80) the vulgar minimiser-internal negation can only take narrow scope (i.e. the interpretation of (80) involves the negation not taking scope over the event quantifier of the clause; Herburger 2001). As discussed in Herburger (2001: 302) for Spanish Negative Concord Items,

> . . .there are indeed examples where n-words occur postverbally and where they are interpreted as N[egative] E[xpression]s and not as NPIs. (. . .) [T]hey have a particular property which makes them rather rare. It can be characterised as follows. Assuming that all sentences are descriptions of events (. . .) we find that postverbal NEs are only possible if they are interpreted within the scope of the event quantifier.

This is exactly what happens with vulgar minimisers: there are examples where vulgar minimisers are interpreted as polarity-sensitive items and examples where they are interpreted as negative expressions (but with the restriction that negation is never sentential). Hence, we propose that vulgar minimisers are lexically ambiguous between polarity-sensitive items (which require licensing by a suitable operator) or quasi-negative in the sense that the negative reading has narrow scope only. The particle *ni* 'not even' only combines with polarity-sensitive item-vulgar minimisers and polarity-sensitive item-non-vulgar minimisers, and when it does, it triggers Negative Concord Item-like behaviour in minimisers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

After examining the behaviour of non-vulgar minimisers and vulgar minimisers in English and Spanish we observe many similarities when it comes to the obligatoriness/optionality of overt negation in different contexts: in the two languages under study, non-vulgar minimisers (i) must co-occur with sentential negation in negative sentences; (ii) must co-occur with an overt negation (*not* for English and *ni* 'not even' for Spanish) in fragment answers; (iii) must be preceded by an overt negation (*not* for English and the particle *ni* for Spanish) when preposed; (iv) give rise to subject-auxiliary inversion when preposed. Unlike non-vulgar minimisers, both in English and in Spanish vulgar minimisers (i) optionally occur with an overt negation in negative sentences; (ii) optionally co-occur with an overt negation (*not/ni* 'not even') in fragment answers; (iii) are optionally preceded by overt negation (*not/ni* 'not even') when preposed.

We have argued that while non-vulgar minimisers are polarity-sensitive items and thus are always dependent on a suitable licensor, vulgar minimisers have been analysed, inspired by Déprez's (2011) work, as lexically ambiguous expressions (in the sense of Herburger 2001) that may have the structure of regular polarity-sensitive items, or may be quasi-negative by virtue of carrying a negation as part of their structure. It is precisely this internal negation that allows vulgar minimisers not to be dependent on a (non-veridical) licensor both in English and Spanish. However, this negation cannot take sentential scope (Herburger 2001). We have assumed the structure of both non-vulgar minimisers and vulgar minimisers to involve a nominal root and a Focus *even* particle that interact with negation. Minimisers are thus assumed to be compositionally built, which allows them to behave similarly to other elements in the polarity landscape such as polarity-sensitive items, negative quantifiers and Negative Concord Items in different contexts.

In line with Horn (2001), we have assumed both non-vulgar minimisers and vulgar minimisers to be reinforcers of negation, with vulgar minimisers being further ahead on a negativity scale in comparison with non-vulgar minimisers (as vulgar minimisers may be inherently negative expressions while non-vulgar minimisers cannot). We have also noted that the crucial difference between English and Spanish vulgar minimisers has to do with subject-auxiliary inversion: while in English preposed vulgar minimisers do not give rise to subject-auxiliary inversion, they always do in Spanish. While we have shown that obligatory subject-auxiliary inversion with Spanish fronting (not just with negative expressions) does not allow us to investigate the negativity of vulgar minimisers, the fact that English vulgar minimisers cannot give rise to subject-auxiliary inversion (not even optionally) when preceded by *not* indicates that the scope of this preceding negation is non-sentential, thus crucially distinguishing vulgar minimisers from negative quantifiers (which uncontestably lead to optional subject-auxiliary inversion when fronted).

Finally, we have argued that the Spanish particle *ni* 'not even' is inherently negative and introduces a formal feature [neg] when associated with non-vulgar minimisers and polarity-sensitive item-vulgar minimisers. The presence of *ni* 'not even' activates the mechanism of Negative Concord that results in non-vulgar minimisers and polarity-sensitive item-vulgar minimisers preceded by *ni* 'not even' fully aligning with Negative Concord Items in Spanish. Therefore, the answer to our research question of whether vulgar minimisers and non-vulgar minimisers form a natural class is positive in that they share many grammatical properties, but also negative, as these two types of minimisers may have different internal structures: vulgar minimisers are sometimes polarity-sensitive items and thus align with non-vulgar minimisers, but they can also be quasi-negative expressions by virtue of a (non-scope taking) negation that they contain as part of their structure, thus departing from non-vulgar minimisers.

These two types of minimising expressions, non-vulgar minimisers and vulgar minimisers, also interact with different information structure properties in English and Spanish, thus resulting in an accountable deviation from an otherwise parallel patterning that allows us to conclude that vulgar minimisers form a cross-linguistic class that seems to be developing in similar ways in the two languages.

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