1. A comparative program for the study of language change
At the outburst of linguistics the study of language relationship appeared to be inseparable from the study of language change. The strong interest that the neogrammarians put into uncovering language relationship led to an astonishing development of historical linguistics during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Throughout this period much about language change, language relationship and language family was revealed and became common ground knowledge. The need to compare in order to achieve insight into questions of human language later extended beyond the limits of classical historical linguistics and became a hallmark of theoretical linguistics. This paper intends to show that comparatism needs to be kept central in the study of language change. The paper will also illustrate how the comparative study of language change can incorporate the contributions of current linguistic theory without loosing track of the achievements of earlier historical linguistics.

Starting from a case study in language change, we will argue for the general tenets listed in Figure 1 (cf. sections 2. and 3.). Negative polarity items in Romance will constitute our case study. A brief conclusion will be drawn in section 4.

FIGURE 1

1. Research on language change is by default comparative – comparative inquiry cuts across the synchrony/diachrony distinction.

2. Comparative historical research can be extended beyond family relationship to integrate typological relationship – typological affinity is as illuminating as genetic affinity.

3. Theoretically informed historical research may lead to find what exclusively data-driven research may fail to reveal – the ability to make predictions helps to formulate new questions.

2. A case study in the interplay between synchronic variation and diachronic change
Negative indefinites like *nenhum/ninguno/nessuno/aucun/cap* ‘none, no one’, *nada/rien/res* ‘nothing’, *ninguém/nadie/ningú/niente/personne* ‘nobody’, etc. (henceforth ‘negative polarity items’) display a diverse behavior across the Romance languages and also vary across time. In previous work, the diachronic and geographical variation of Romance negative polarity items was the object of scrutiny (Martins 2000). Here I will summarize the aspects of that earlier work that are relevant to support the idea that a comparative approach to language change (in a broader sense than in neogrammarian times) is necessary and gratifying.

2.1. Facets of negative polarity items in Romance – a description
Old Romance languages generally shows no subject/object asymmetry with respect to the co-occurrence of negative indefinites with negation proper (*não/no* etc. ‘not’) in ‘negative
concord’ constructions. Negative indefinites, either preverbal or postverbal, co-occurred with the sentential negative marker. At later stages of Old Romance (with different chronologies for different linguistic varieties) the sentential negative marker (não/no etc. ‘not’) becomes optional with preverbal negative indefinites.

(1) a. *que nehũ não scapou
that no-one not escaped
‘that no one escaped (death)’
(Crónica Geral de Espanha de 1344. Cintra, ed. 1954: 107)
b. avya grande vontade de nô leixar nehũs do bando de Pompeo
he-had great determination of not to leave no-one from-the group of Pompeo
‘he was determined to not leave alive anyone from Pompeo’s group’
(Crónica Geral de Espanha de 1344. Cintra, ed. 1954: 111)

(2) a. que a myo Çid Ruy Diaz, que nadi no diessen posada
that to my Lord Ruy Diaz, that nobody not-him give lodging
‘that nobody give lodging to Mio Cid Rui Diaz’
(Cantar de Mio Cid 25. Menéndez-Pidal, ed. 1946: 910)
b. Fablo Muño Gustioz, non spero a nadi
spoke Muño Gustioz, not waited for nobody
‘Muño Gustioz spoke, he didn’t wait for anybody else to do it’
(Cantar de Mio Cid 1481. Menéñdez-Pidal, ed. 1946: 953)

Another trait of Old Romance is the frequent use of negative indefinites in non-negative contexts. These are ‘non-assertive’ (Milner 1979), or ‘modal’ (Giannakidou 1994, Bosque 1996a, 1996b) contexts, such as questions, imperatives, conditionals, comparatives, the scope of modal verbs, the scope of words expressing prohibition, generic constructions, subjunctive clauses introduced by the temporal connective antes que (‘before’). This particular use of negative indefinites is not found in non-negative assertive contexts, that is, not in declarative clauses.

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1 I will be using the label ‘Old Romance’ as a convenient shorthand to refer to ‘the older stages of the Romance languages’. I will use ‘Modern Romance’ in a similar vein. So ‘Old Romance’ is not meant to refer to a particular linguistic entity nor to a periodization across all the Romance languages.

2 These are the kind of contexts where ‘modal polarity items’ (Bosque 1996a, 1996b), such as Spanish cualquier(a), siquiera, are licensed. Modal polarity items are excluded from affirmative clauses without modal import. The examples below are taken from Bosque (1996b).

(1) a. ¿Has escrito acaso cualquier de tus ideas?
have-you-written by-chance any of your ideas
‘Did you happen to write any of your ideas?’
b. *He escrito cualquier de mis ideas.
I-have-written any of my ideas
(2) a. Si la vieras siquiera una vez.
if her you-might-see at-least one time
‘If you might see her at least once’
b. *Te llamó siquiera una vez.
you he-called at-least one time
‘He called you at least once’
(3) a. Pudo entrar por la ventana cualquier ladrón.
could come-in through the window any thief
‘Any thief could come in through the window’
b. *Entró por la ventana cualquier ladrón.
came-in through the window any thief
(3) a. *E ante que outro nenhūu falasse, disse o conde dô Fernā Gonçalves que esto nõ era* and before that other no-one spoke said the count Sir F. G. that this not was 
*conselho per se.aver de fazer* advise to have to do
‘Before anyone spoke, the count F. G. said that such advice was not to be taken.’
(Crónica Geral de Espanha de 1344. Cintra, ed. 1954: 27)

b. *¿Que sabe nadie de la manera que toca Dios a cada uno?* what knows nobody of the manner that reveals God to each one
‘What does anybody know about the way that God reveals himself to each one of us?’
(Cf. Keniston 1937: 610)

c. *S’il i a nul si hardit / qui s’esmueve de joie fere, / il le fera prendre ou desfere* if it there is no-one so brave that himself moves of joy doing / he him will-make 
imprison or destroy
‘If there is anyone so brave as to move to show joy, he will have him imprisoned or killed.’ (Cf. Foulet 1930:245)

The above-mentioned features of the earliest stages of Old Romance, taken as a cluster, were lost in Modern Romance as the result of historical change. Hence, there is no contemporary Romance language or dialect which displays the obligatory co-occurrence of negative indefinites with the sentential negative marker on a par with the possibility of using negative indefinites in non-negative modal contexts. Historical change led to splitting of the Romance linguistic domain into different linguistic groups as far as the behavior of negative polarity items is concerned. Different levels of conservatism/innovation are displayed by the contemporary Romance languages.3

Catalan behaves just like late Old Romance. In negative clauses, preverbal negative indefinites optionally co-occur with the sentential negative marker. As for non-negative clauses, negative indefinites are licensed in a subset of the modal contexts where licensing of negative indefinites is attested in Old Romance.

(4) a. *Ningú no m’ ha vist.* nobody not me has seen
‘Nobody saw me.’

b. *Ningú m’ ha vist.* nobody me has seen
‘Nobody saw me.’

c. *Ha vingut ningú aquesta tarda?* has come nobody this afternoon
‘Did anybody come this afternoon?’

d. *Demana-li si en sap res?* ask him whether of-it he-knows nothing
‘Ask him whether he knows anything about it?’

e. *Si hi trobeu cap defecte, digueu-m’ho.* if in-it you-find none defect tell me about-it
‘If you find any defect, let me know.’

3 Romanian will not be considered in this paper as it might have been influenced in the relevant respect by the neighboring (non-Romance) languages (cf. Martins 2000).
Spanish, Galician, Italian and French differ from Catalan in not allowing preverbal negative indefinites to co-occur with negation proper in negative concord constructions. (As for Standard French, I am taking *pas*, not *ne* as the true propositional negator, in view of the fact that *ne*, in contrast to *pas* cannot by itself express negation in any variety of French). Spanish, Galician, Italian and French are similar to Catalan in licensing negative indefinites in some types of non-negative modal contexts.

(6)  
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Nada quero de vostede.}  (Galician)
\begin{itemize}
\item nothing want from you
\item ‘I don’t want anything from you.’
\end{itemize}
\item *\textit{Nada no quero de vostede.}  (Galician)
\begin{itemize}
\item nothing not want from you
\item ‘I don’t want anything from you.’
\end{itemize}
\item \textit{Nada funciona.}  (Spanish)
\begin{itemize}
\item nothing works
\item ‘Nothing works’
\end{itemize}
\item *\textit{Nada no funciona.}  (Spanish)
\begin{itemize}
\item nothing not works
\item ‘Nothing works.’
\end{itemize}
\item \textit{Niente gli fa piacere.}  (Italian)
\begin{itemize}
\item nothing him makes pleasure
\item ‘Nothing pleases him.’
\end{itemize}
\item *\textit{Niente no gli fa piacere.}  (Italian)
\begin{itemize}
\item nothing not him makes pleasure
\item ‘Nothing pleases him.’
\end{itemize}
\item \textit{Personne n’est arrivé.}  (French)
\begin{itemize}
\item nobody NE is arrived
\item ‘Nobody arrived.’
\end{itemize}
\item *\textit{Personne n’est pas arrivé.}  (French)
\begin{itemize}
\item nobody NE is NEG arrived
\item ‘Nobody arrived.’
\end{itemize}
\end{enumerate}

(7)  
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{¿Cuando me regalaches ti nada?}  (Galician)
\begin{itemize}
\item when me gave you nothing
\item ‘When did you offer me anything.’
\end{itemize}
\item \textit{El comandante prohibió que saliera nadie del cuartel.}  (Spanish)
\begin{itemize}
\item the commander prohibited that would-leave nobody from-the barracks
\item ‘The commander prohibited anybody from leaving the barracks.’
\end{itemize}
\item \textit{Prefiero quedarme aquí que ir a ningún sitio.}  (Spanish)
\begin{itemize}
\item I-prefer to-stay-myself here than to-go to no place
\item ‘I would rather stay here than go anywhere.’
\end{itemize}
\item \textit{Hai visto niente?}  (Italian)
\begin{itemize}
\item have-you seen nothing
\item ‘Did you see anything?’
\end{itemize}
\item \textit{Si domandava se sarebbe venuto nessuno.}  (Italian)
\begin{itemize}
\item herself she-asked if would-be come no-one
\item ‘She wondered if anyone would come.’
\end{itemize}
\item \textit{Pierre est parti avant que personne ait pu faire aucun geste.}  (French)
\begin{itemize}
\item P. is left before that nobody might-have been-able to-do no move
\item ‘Pierre left before anyone could make a move.’
\end{itemize}
\end{enumerate}
g. *Pensez-vous que personne ait rien fait pour m’aider?* (French)
   think-you that anyone might have nothing done to me help
   ‘Do you think that anyone might have done anything to help me?’

In Portuguese, preverbal negative indefinites are not allowed to co-occur with the sentential negative marker. In this respect, Portuguese is similar to Spanish, Galician, Italian and French. In contrast to these languages, however, Portuguese does not license negative indefinites in non-negative modal contexts. Portuguese thus appears as the most innovative Romance language with regard to the relevant aspects of negative polarity items.

(8)  
   a. *Nada lhe agrada.*
      nothing him pleases
      ‘Nothing pleases him.’
   b. *Nada não lhe agrada*
      nothing not him pleases
      ‘Nothing pleases him.’

(9)  
   a. *Quando é que me deste nada?*  
      when me gave you nothing
      ‘When did you offer me anything.’
   b. *O comandante proibiu que saísse ninguém do quartel.*
      the commander prohibited that would-leave nobody from-the barracks
      ‘The commander prohibited anybody from leaving the barracks.’
   c. *Perguntava-se se teria vindo ninguém.*
      herself she-asked if would-be come no-one
      ‘She wondered if anyone would come.’
   d. *O Pedro saiu antes que ninguém pudesse falar.*
      the P. left before that nobody could speak
      ‘Pierre left before anyone could speak.’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Summary of the facts described</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-occurrence of preverbal negative indefinites with negation proper</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Old Romance (earliest stages)</td>
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<td>Old Romance (later stages)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catalan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Galician</td>
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<td>Spanish</td>
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<td>Italian</td>
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<tr>
<td>French</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.2. Facets of negative polarity items in Romance and beyond – an analysis
The different behavior of negative indefinites summarized in Table 1 reveals that such polarity items do not have exactly the same features (and content) across the Romance family. In order to understand why, we will need to make work together the traditional observations on the distinction between ‘truly negative’ and contextually negative words⁴ (cf. Keniston 1937: 608ff), the current distinction in the semantics literature between weak negative polarity items

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⁴ ‘Contextually negative words’ get negative meaning from a negative word in the relevant context.
and strong negative polarity items (Sánchez Valencia, van der Wouden and Zwarts 1993, among others), and last but not least an adequate feature theory, including the notion of underspecification (Rooryck 1994). With all these ingredients in mind it is possible to establish on formal grounds a universal typology of polarity items, which may clarify how lexical items encode polarity features and thus explain their non uniform syntactic and semantic behavior (see Table 2). We will then be able to reconsider diachronic and geographical variation in Romance armed with the means to provide a unitary account of the intricacies of negative polarity items (context sensitivity/interaction to negation) in different but formally, and historically, related grammars.

TABLE 2: A typology of polarity items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPES OF POLARITY ITEMS</th>
<th>FEATURE (UNDER)SPECIFICATION</th>
<th>GENERALIZATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STRONG</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>[+ neg, 0 mod, 0 aff]</td>
<td>Strong polarity items have one, and only one, specified feature and no α-underspecified features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal</td>
<td>[0 neg, + mod, 0 aff]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative</td>
<td>[0 neg, 0 mod, + aff]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WEAK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>[α neg, α mod, 0 aff]</td>
<td>Weak polarity items have at least one α-underspecified feature and no specified feature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmative</td>
<td>[0 neg, α mod, α aff]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi-polar</td>
<td>[α neg, α mod, α aff]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Polarity features: negation (neg), affirmation (aff), modality (mod)
Feature values: + (specified), α (variable underspecified) 0 (non-variable underspecified) – cf. footnote 5

The typology of polarity items shown in Table 2 sheds new light on the diachronic path of Romance negative indefinites. In the history of the Romance languages, negative indefinites evolved from weak polarity items to strong polarity items (compare Table 2 with Table 3). Strong negative polarity items are more restrictive than weak negative polarity items with respect to their licensing conditions (see Sánchez Valencia, van der Wouden and Zwarts 1993). While the former are only allowed in negative sentences, the latter are also admitted in different types of non-negative modal contexts. On the other hand, a strong negative polarity item in contrast to a weak negative polarity items can alone express sentential negation and dispense with the presence of the sentential negative marker. In the Romance languages this happens whenever a negative indefinite which qualifies as a strong polarity item occurs in

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5 Arguing for a feature theory accessible, as a module of grammar, to both syntax and phonology, Rooryck (1994) applies the phonological notion of underspecification to syntactic features. Features are associated with one of three possible values: specified (+), nonvariable underspecified (0) and variable underspecified (α). The nonvariable underspecified value (0) for a certain feature is a notational device that marks the absence of the property conveyed by that feature. So an element with a [0 neg-feature], for example, is simply unable to enter any operation related to the expression of a negative meaning. Borrowing a metaphor from phonological work on vowel harmony, a nonvariable underspecified feature can be said to be ‘opaque’ inasmuch as it cannot enter nor trigger ‘harmony’ relations (i.e. agreement-like relations). On the contrary, variable underspecified features can enter operations leading to the filling in of their former underspecified value – a feature-filling ‘agreement’ relation converts [α F] to [+ F]. That is, α-features are context-sensitive; given an adequate environment, they can ‘harmonize’ (with it) and are therefore said to be ‘transparent’.
preverbal position (because in negative sentences a negative word is required in preverbal position in all the Romance languages under consideration).

Assuming that the distinction between strong and weak negative polarity items (taken from the semantics literature) is a matter of specified vs. α-underspecified neg-features, Romance negative indefinites ‘reduced’ their degree of underspecification (cf. Table 3, further commented below). Meanwhile, they went through a stage of lexical ambiguity, which was common to all Romance languages at a certain point and is nowadays found in Catalan (hence the optional co-existence in Catalan of negation proper and preverbal negative indefinites). In some other languages, the lexical ambiguity between weak negative polarity items and strong negative polarity items evolved to a lexical ambiguity between modal polarity items (Bosque 1996a, 1996b) and strong negative polarity items (this is the case of Galician, Spanish, Italian, and French; in the nineteenth century Portuguese still belonged to this group). Modal polarity items are 0-underspecified for neg-features and aff-features but specified for mod-features. The relevant languages do not allow preverbal negative indefinites to co-occur with the negative marker, but do license negative indefinites in modal contexts. Finally, in Portuguese, lexical ambiguity was lost as negative indefinites only retained the features of strong negative polarity items. Thus in contrast with the initial stages of Old Romance, Portuguese negative indefinites are not allowed in non-negative modal contexts; moreover, preverbal negative indefinites cannot co-occur with negation proper.

### TABLE 3: Diachronic and geographical variation in the domain of Romance negative polarity items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Romance (earliest stages)</th>
<th>WEAK NEGATIVE POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, α neg, α mod]</th>
<th>STRONG NEGATIVE POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, + neg, 0 mod]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old Romance (later stages)</td>
<td>WEAK NEG. POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, α neg, α mod]</td>
<td>STRONG NEG. POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, + neg, 0 mod]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalan</td>
<td>MODAL POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, 0 neg, + mod]</td>
<td>STRONG NEG. POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, + neg, 0 mod]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galician</td>
<td>MODAL POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, 0 neg, + mod]</td>
<td>STRONG NEG. POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, + neg, 0 mod]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>MODAL POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, 0 neg, + mod]</td>
<td>STRONG NEG. POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, + neg, 0 mod]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>MODAL POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, 0 neg, + mod]</td>
<td>STRONG NEG. POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, + neg, 0 mod]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>MODAL POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, 0 neg, + mod]</td>
<td>STRONG NEG. POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, + neg, 0 mod]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>STRONG NEGATIVE POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, + neg, 0 mod]</td>
<td>STRONG NEGATIVE POLARITY ITEMS [0 aff, + neg, 0 mod]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As negative indefinites evolved towards reducing their degree of variable underspecification, they became, over time, more restrictive with respect to their licensing contexts, which were eventually confined to negative sentences. This is the direction we would expect for change given current assumptions on the relation between language acquisition and language change (cf. Lightfoot 1991, 1999; Anderson and Lightfoot 2002). If children rely on strong positive empirical evidence in order to make decisions leading to a particular linguistic choice while building up their grammars, they may well not identify a less salient polar environment as a

6 The example given below, taken from the nineteenth century writer Alexandre Herculano, shows that the exclusion of negative indefinites from non-negative modal contexts is a recent change in Portuguese. Sentence (i) below is nowadays ungrammatical; in contemporary Portuguese, the polarity item in the scope of the negative predicate *estar bem livre* would have to be *qualquer* ‘any’ or *alguma* ‘some’.

(i) Eles estavam bem livres de ser nenhuma dessas cousas
    ‘They were certainly not any of those things.’

(Cf. Dias 1918: 307)
licensing context for a certain kind of polarity items. In non-negative modal contexts, both negative indefinites and positive indefinites might occur, but positive indefinites are far more common than negative indefinites. Hence this kind of context is a less salient licensing environment for negative polarity items than negative contexts are.

2.3. Acquisition of negative polarity items in Dutch (understanding the change in the light of typological affinity)

The results of van der Wal’s (1996) study of the acquisition of negative polarity items by Dutch children support the rationale of change proposed in the previous section. It was showed by van der Wal’s investigation that weak negative polarity items are straightforwardly used in negative contexts much earlier than in non-negative modal contexts. Since the acquisition of non-negative modal contexts as licensing contexts for negative polarity items is an enduring task in the acquisition process, it is not surprising that those are just the type of contexts where negative polarity items may be lost through time. Although we will be now dealing with a Germanic language, not a Romance language, the comparison here sought is legitimate on methodological grounds because both contemporary Dutch and late Old Romance display certain negative words that qualify as weak negative polarity items. So, typological affinity (instead of genetic affinity) will now guide our search for explanatory understanding of language change.

Van der Wal (1996) demonstrates that from the onset, negative polarity items have a restricted distribution in the children’s speech, making it clear that children are sensitive to the peculiar nature of such linguistic entities from early on. However, children start out with a distribution of weak negative polarity items which is confined to negative sentences, a distribution far more restricted than the one found in the grammar of adult Dutch. Whereas licensing of negative polarity items by instances of classical negation is precocious and steady, acquisition of the full range of licensing environments, namely the non-negative modal ones, is a prolonged gradual process which continues until the teenage years.

The late acquisition of certain licensers might explain why considerable variation between speakers in the licensing of negative polarity items in non-negative modal contexts is commonly found within one language community (cf. Vallduví 1994 and van der Wouden 1994). It might also account for the emergence of lexical ambiguity if we admit that children, while acquiring a language cannot backtrack in an unrestricted way from earlier decisions (cf. Dresher 1999). If the extreme salience of negative polar environments as licensers for negative polarity items in a certain language leads the child to posit their strong nature at an early stage of language acquisition, he/she may not be able to review this choice when confronted with other kinds of licensing environments. In this situation the child will be left with the option for lexical ambiguity and may or may not choose it.

3. Results, predictions, and further findings

The approach developed in the previous section makes certain predictions with respect to the possible types of polarity items in natural language. We will now consider whether such predictions are fulfilled.

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7 In the adults’ speech the frequency of licensing by niet ‘not’ is about three times superior to the frequency of licensing by other licensors – namely modal ones. The frequency of licensing by other licensors increases in the adults’ writing. (Cf. van der Wal 1996: 85)

8 According to van der Wal’s grammaticality judgment test, only the group of 13- and 14-years olds ‘are close to the adult standard’. The judgments of 7- and 8-years-olds are still ‘fuzzy’ for sentences with certain pseudo-licensers. ‘The two middle groups in this study, the 9- and 10-years-olds and the 11- and 12-years olds, demonstrate that the differences between the oldest and youngest age groups are best described as representing gradual changes’ (cf van der Wal 1996: 175).
3.1. Strong affirmative polarity items

Strong affirmative polarity items are, according to our analysis, specified for the feature ‘affirmation’ (i.e., [+ aff]) and bear no variable underspecified features; hence they must be licensed in non-negative assertive contexts, being excluded from both negative and modal environments. Although generally ignored in the linguistics literature, strong affirmative polarity items do in fact exist. The theoretical perspective undertaken in this work made them identifiable.

The Sicilian affirmative indefinite *coccunu* ‘someone’ and the innovative intensifying/quantifying words *paca(s)* ‘very, extremely, absolutely, like hell’ and *bué* ‘very much, many’, respectively found in Brazilian Portuguese and European Portuguese (see Clotilde Almeida, this volume, for the latter), are strong affirmative polarity items and behave accordingly. Below we illustrate how *coccunu* and *paca(s)*\(^9\) are restricted to declarative affirmative sentences. In Sicilian, it is the weak negative polarity item *nuddu* ‘no one’ that appears in non-negative modal contexts, such as direct and indirect interrogatives.

(8)  
\[ \text{a. } \text{Maria parrò ccu } \textit{coccunu}. \]
Maria spoke to someone

\[ \text{b. } *\text{Maria } \textit{un parrò ccu } \textit{coccunu}. \]
Maria not spoke to someone

‘Maria didn’t speak to anybody.’

\[ \text{c. } \text{Maria } \textit{un parrò ccu } \textit{nuddu}. \]
Maria not spoke to no-one

‘Maria didn’t speak to anybody.’

(9)  
\[ \text{a. } *\text{Telefonò } \textit{coccunu}? \]
called someone

‘Did anybody call?’

\[ \text{b. } \text{Telefonò } \textit{nuddu}? \]
called no-one

‘Did anybody call?’

(10)  
\[ \text{a. } *\text{Ddumannacci si veni } \textit{coccunu}. \]
ask-him if come someone

‘Ask him whether anyone is coming.’

\[ \text{b. } \text{Ddumannacci si veni } \textit{nuddu}. \]
ask-him if come no-one

‘Ask him whether anyone is coming.’

(11)  
\[ \text{a. } \text{Essa menina é bonita } \textit{paca(s)}! \]
that girl is beautiful like-hell

‘That girl is very beautiful.’

\[ \text{b. } *\text{Essa menina é bonita } \textit{paca(s)}? \]
that girl is beautiful like hell

‘Is that girl very beautiful?’

\[ \text{c. } *\text{Essa menina não } \textit{é bonita } \textit{paca(s)}. \]
that girl not is beautiful like-hell

‘That girl is not very beautiful.’

\(^9\) This is a reduction of the expression *pra caramba.*
3.2. Bi-polar polarity items

On the reverse side of strong polarity items, which are severely restrictive with respect to the environments where they can occur, we expect to be able to find words that can express polarity values in a less restrictive manner. Going back to Table 2, bi-polar polarity items with a variable underspecified value for all polarity features (i.e., $\alpha_{neg}$, $\alpha_{mod}$, $\alpha_{aff}$) are predicted to be the more ‘adaptable’ polarity items, which should be able to contextually acquire opposite polar values, namely affirmative or negative. In the Romance languages, positive indefinites are currently excluded from negative contexts. But positive indefinites were less restrictive in Old Romance with respect to their licensing environment. Besides occurring in affirmative and in non-negative modal contexts, as in Modern Romance, Old Romance positive indefinites were also allowed in negative sentences, receiving a negative interpretation through negative concord. This is illustrated by the Old Portuguese negative sentences in (12). In Modern Portuguese (and Modern Romance, in general) positive indefinites do not show the same capacity to acquire a ‘negative meaning’. The fact that positive indefinites could occur in negative contexts in Old Romance, in contrast to Modern Romance, suggests that they evolved from polarity items $\alpha$-underspecified for aff, neg and mod features to polarity items $\alpha$-underspecified for aff and mod features, but 0-underspecified for the neg-feature (see footnote 5). That is, Old Romance positive indefinites were bi-polar polarity items which could match any kind of polar environment; by loosing the $\alpha$-underspecified value for the neg-feature they evolved to being weak affirmative polarity items, therefore being excluded from negative contexts.10

The parallel with the rationale of change observed with respect to negative indefinites is clear. Positive indefinites (like negative indefinites) ceased to occur in a less salient licensing environment; an environment where competition between positive and negative indefinites left the former in a weaker position. The direction of change is the same for negative indefinites and positive indefinites because in both cases the degree of variable underspecification was reduced. The effect is a loss of polar versatility (in general more radical with negative indefinites than with positive indefinites, but see the example of coccunu in section 3.1.).

(12)  

a. nom façades tam gram braveza nem tam gram crueza como fezestes, ca nom vos not do-2SG so big ferocity nor so big cruelty as did-2SG because not you-DAT pode ende vir algùi bem, mas todo mal can from-there come some good but all evil ‘Do not be so ferocious and cruel because that will not bring you any good.’ (Demanda do Santo Graal. Piel e Nunes 1988: 95)  
b. encheronsse aos Franceses d’augua sem lha deytando filled-themselves to-the Frenchmen of water without them-DAT-it-ACC pour algùi, e nò aos Spanhoes someone and not to-the Spaniards ‘(the baptismal fonts) of the Frenchmen appeared filled with water without the intervention of anybody but the same did not happen to the Spaniards.’ (Crónica Geral de Espanha de 1344. Cintra 1954: 193)  
c. hordenou de fazer hìa escaramuça per ssi, sem o fazendo saber ao prioll nem ordered of to-do a skirmish by himself without it-ACC make know to-the prior nor a algùi dos outros seus irmaãos

10 In the sixteenth century the Spanish grammarian Valdés considers to be a sign that no diga alguno (literally, not say someone) for no diga ninguno (literally, not say nobody) is a sign of poor style (apud Keniston 1937: 616).
to some of the other his brothers
‘He decided by himself to lead a skirmish without letting the prior or any of his
other brothers know about it.’
(Crónica de D. Fernando. Macchi 1975: 481)
d. des omte ao serão não ouvemos algúia folga
since yesterday at the evening not have-2PL some break
‘We did not have any rest since yesterday night.’
e. E foram ally mortos XIII cavallos dos cristãos, pero nô morreo algú dos
and were there killed 13 horses of the Christians but not died some of the
senhores que em elles herã
noblemen that in them were
‘Thirteenth horses of the Christian knights were killed in the battle but none of
those knights died.’

By observing the behavior of the polarity item algum ‘some, someone’ in Old Portuguese
texts, a further significant fact could be found, which is not referred in the literature on the
history of the Portuguese language. In Modern Portuguese, there is a clear contrast between
pre-nominal algum and post-nominal algum. The former is a weak affirmative polarity item
and cannot get a ‘negative meaning’ through negative concord; to the contrary the latter is a
strong negative polarity item restricted to negative sentences (see (13)). This pattern is not the
one we find in Old Portuguese though. As the examples in (14) to (16), coupled with (12),
show the indefinite algum behaves alike in pre-nominal and post-nominal position; in both
situations it may receive a negative or a non-negative interpretation. Thus a change took place
in the history of Portuguese which calls for investigation. Before that change arose, there was
no divergent pattern induced by word order in what concerns the polarity features of algum.

(13) a. Chegou alguma carta?
arrived some letter
‘Did any letter arrive?’
b. *Chegou carta alguma?
arrived letter some
‘Did any letter arrived?’
c. *Não chegou alguma carta.
not arrived some letter
‘It didn’t arrive any letter.’
d. Não chegou carta alguma.
not arrived letter any
‘It didn’t arrived any letter.’

(14) se aqui ficardes em esta furesta, toste vos poderia vir ende mal algúi.
if here stay-2SG in this forest soon you-DAT can come from that evil some
‘if you stay in this forest, something bad may happen to you.’
(Demanda do Santo Graal. Piel e Nunes: 34)

(15) a. De meu padre sabedes ou ouvistes novas algúias depois que vos partistes delle?
from my father know-2SG or heard-2SG news some after that you left of he
‘Did you hear any news from my father since you left him?’
(Demanda do Santo Graal. Piel e Nunes 1988: 46)
b. *disse Galvam: Mas pero do vosso irmão Lançarot sabedes algāus novas?*  
said G. but however from-the your brother L. know-2PL some news  
‘Galvam asked: Do you happen to have any news from your brother Lançarot?’  

(16) *e a quantos achava perguntava por novas do cavalleiro que trazia o escudo*  
and to howmany found-3SG asked-3SG for news of-the knight that brought the shield  
branco e a cruz vermelha; mas nunca achou quem lhe delle novas algūas dissesse.  
white and the cross red but never met the-one-who him-DAT from-he news some said  
‘He kept asking everybody he met for news of the knight with the white shield and  
the red cross but he could not find anybody who had any news from him.’  

4. **The art of making the best use of bad data**

Historical documents survive by chance, not by design, and the selection that is available is the  
product of an unpredictable series of historical accidents (...). Historical linguistics can then be  
thought of as the art of making the best use of bad data. (...) Though we know what was written,  
we know nothing about what was understood, and we are in no position to perform controlled  
experiments on cross-dialectal comprehension. *(Labov 1994: 11)*

The text of William Labov transcribed above is as well known as extensively quoted. In this  
paper I have tried to show that historical linguists may not be condemned to dealing with *bad data*  
as far as they do the best use of available data, which crucially are not limited to  
historical documents. Comparative research may enormously broaden the horizons for a  
better understanding of language change. The present work is intended to be an illustration of  
the potentialities of comparative inquiry for reducing the distance between what historical  
linguists wish and are able to know.

**FIGURE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contention</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comparative research offers a way to overcome the ‘deficiency of data’ problem in historical linguistics.</td>
<td>Studying the behavior of negative polarity items in the contemporary Romance languages, for example, gives us the means to know more about the history of such words than if we were limited to written sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative research extended to typological cognates allows more creativity in the art of making the best use of the available data. Typological affinity enlarges the field for relevant comparative inquiry.</td>
<td>Knowing, for example, how Dutch children gradually learn the full range of licensing contexts for weak negative polarity items (according to a certain learning path) can help to understand why weak negative polarity items changed into strong negative polarity items in different Romance languages (while the reverse change is not attested).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The potentialities of the available textual data are better explored if the historical linguist is armed with a theory that allows predictions to be made and new questions to be asked.</td>
<td>Changes affecting positive indefinites in Portuguese could be identified in this way.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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References