

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The syntax of Expletive Negation in English: the case of *not-ACC-ing* constructions

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Abstract

This work aims to describe and analyze a relatively new, puzzling construction that has become very productive in informal registers of English. It is primarily used by younger generations, especially on the web and social-media platforms, but also in spoken language. It appears with the configuration negative marker + subject in the accusative case + gerund (e.g. *Not me taking the train at 5 a.m.*; meaning: it is ironic and unexpected that I took the train early at 5 a.m.). These constructions, which we dubbed *not-ACC-ing* constructions, are strictly root phenomena where negation does not reverse the polarity of the sentence. They convey a peculiar ironic, sarcastic, self-deprecating flavor. The existence of the *not-ACC-ing* construction raises the following questions, which we will address in this article: (i) How come negation does not have its prototypical function of reversing the polarity of the sentence? (ii) How come the subject is in the accusative case, despite *not-ACC-ing* constructions being invariably root? (iii) How is their peculiar interpretation obtained? We propose an analysis that captures all their structural and interpretive properties by combining some crucial ingredients of Lowe's (2019) analysis of *ACC-ing* constructions and Greco's (2020) analysis of Expletive Negation.

Keywords: syntax; expletive negation; gerund; X (formerly Twitter); default case

1. Introduction

In recent years, a new construction (Morris 2021; Pereira 2023) has gained increasing productivity in informal registers of English, to the point where its occurrence and, crucially, its distinctive syntactic structure, on which this article focuses, demand the attention of linguists. This construction is mostly employed by younger generations, especially on the web and social-media platforms, but also in oral speech (Morris 2021). In its superficial form, it appears as a negated gerundive construction:

- (1) Not me starting to understand football.
Meaning: It is surprising/amusing/unexpected that I am only now starting to understand football.
(X (formerly Twitter) post by Simone Biles, gymnast and Olympic Champion, L1 American English. Posted 5 November 2023. Retrieved 5 November 2023.
ID:1721240118319595965)

- (2) Not me taking the train at 5 a.m. on 3 hours of sleep.
 Meaning: It is ironic and unexpected that I took the train early at 5 a.m. and slept only 3 hours.

These sentences are always formed by *not* + (mandatory) accusative subject + gerund, in this order. They are invariably root constructions. Negation does not reverse their polarity, which remains strictly affirmative. In (1), Byles is indeed starting to understand football; in (2), the speaker is indeed taking the train at 5 a.m. despite having slept only a little. What these peculiar sentences express on top of the affirmative (propositional) content is irony, sarcasm, unexpectedness, amusement about a given situation, often with a self-deprecating undertone.

The earliest documentation of these constructions appears in a blog post by Morris (2021), followed by a further discussion in Pereira (2023). However, as a relatively recent phenomenon, they still lack a comprehensive formal analysis that fully accounts for their syntactic and interpretive peculiarities. This article aims to fill the gap, with a particular focus on their internal syntax.

Constructions of this kind, featuring this special use of *not*, appear in two main variants: one in which *not* precedes a gerundive clause (e.g. *Not John leaving early again!*) and another in which *not* precedes a DP. Examples of the latter are provided in Pereira, one of which we report below (2023: 7):

- (3) Not [DP the Starbucks cup].

We follow Pereira in adopting the term *spotlight not* as a cover label for this broad class of constructions. Pereira distinguishes the two subtypes just mentioned.

This article concentrates exclusively on the gerundive (NEG + accusative subject + gerund) subtype, which we argue to be genuinely clausal rather than nominal in nature. We treat these structures as ACC-*ing* constructions (Lowe 2019) and refer to them as NOT-ACC-ING CONSTRUCTIONS.

Pereira (2023) offers an initial syntactic characterization of both subtypes and explicitly raises the question of their internal structure. While we leave the DP subtype to future work and refer readers to Pereira's treatment, our goal here is to address this question with respect to the gerundive subtype. We argue that *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions involve a clausal core and provide a syntactic analysis in line with Lowe's approach to ACC-*ing* clauses. In what follows, we lay out the basis of our proposal and address the core questions raised by the existence of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions. Why does negation in these constructions deviate from its prototypical function of reversing sentence polarity? Why is the subject in the accusative case, and why are these structures consistently root clauses? Finally, what is their underlying structure, and how does it contribute to their peculiar interpretation, combining irony, unexpectedness, surprise and self-deprecation?

We start by presenting empirical data drawn from social-media platforms, examining the use of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions in digital discourse, building on previous studies (Morris 2021; Pereira 2023).

Concerning the syntactic and semantic properties of these constructions, we argue that negation in *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions is expletive, using this label to distinguish this 'special' kind of negation (which does not act on the propositional content of the sentence) from Standard Negation (SN) (see, e.g., Jespersen 1917; Horn 1989, 2010: 201; Yoon 2011; Makri 2013; Wood 2014; Delfitto *et al.* 2019; Greco 2019, 2020; Jin & Koenig 2021; Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022). The expletive nature of the negative marker in *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions can be observed through its incompatibility with Negative Polarity Items (NPIs, Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* 2002) (4a), as well as its compatibility with Positive Polarity Items (PPIs, Giannakidou 2011, among others) such as *already* (4b). This is an observation first made by Pereira (2023):

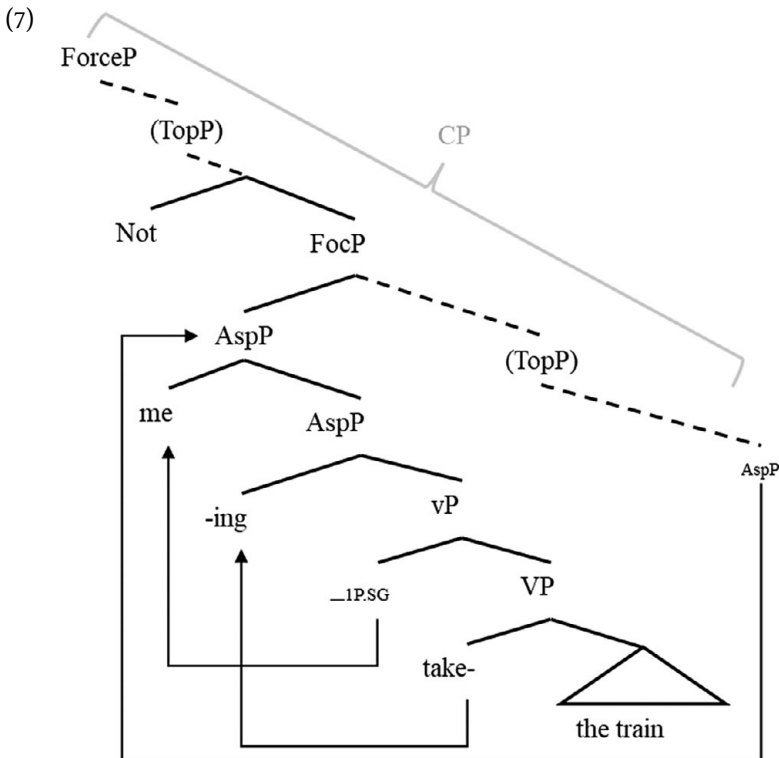
- (4) (a) *Not me being dumb **at all**.
 (b) Not me laughing **already** –
 (examples from Pereira 2023: 10)

Not-ACC-ing constructions are also similar to *ACC-ing* constructions (Stowell 1982; Reuland 1983; Matsuoka 1994; Lowe 2019), as the label suggests. They are both formed by an accusative subject + a gerund and, *prima facie*, they differ only with respect to the presence of negation:

- (5) Him stupidly missing the penalty lost us the game. ACC-ing construction
 (from Lowe 2019: 318)
- (6) Not him stupidly missing the penalty. *not-ACC-ing* construction
 Meaning: It is surprising/amusing/unexpected that he missed the penalty.

We compare *not-ACC-ing* constructions with *ACC-ing* constructions, examining their differences as well as notable similarities in detail. We argue that *not-ACC-ing* constructions do contain an *ACC-ing* construction but constitute a distinct syntactic structure which requires an independent analysis.

In particular, we build on Greco's (2019, 2020) analysis of Expletive Negation (EN), in which high negation in the Left Periphery (LP, Rizzi 1997; Rizzi & Bocci 2017) is expletive and selects a Focus Phrase (FocP). The expletive negative marker selects a 'regular' *ACC-ing* construction, namely an Aspectual Phrase (AspP), which is focalized in the specifier of the focus phrase (SpecFocP). It is moved there as a whole chunk of structure.



By applying only two mechanisms, namely high negation and the focalization of the entire ACC-ing construction, all properties of *not*-ACC-ing constructions are derived. The movement of the entire ACC-ing construction is licit because ACC-ing constructions are not only considered clausal (Lowe 2019), but also reduced structures which lack the LP portion of the functional spine (Rizzi 1997; Rizzi & Bocci 2017). For example, they cannot host complementizers such as *to* or *that*, unlike infinitives (see section 3.3 and Stowell 1982; Reuland 1983; Matsuoka 1994 for the relevant tests):

- (8) *To him stupidly missing the penalty lost us the game.

This article is structured as follows. First, we provide several examples of *not*-ACC-ing constructions taken directly from social-media platforms (section 1.1), discussing also empirical data from previous literature (Morris 2021; Pereira 2023). Then, in section 2, we provide background on crucial ingredients of the proposed analysis, like the syntax of EN (section 2.1) and ACC-ing constructions (section 2.2). We illustrate the structural and interpretive properties displayed by *not*-ACC-ing constructions in section 3, while in section 4 we provide a full description of the proposed formal analysis. Section 5 concludes.

1.1. Empirical data

In this section, we present several examples of *not*-ACC-ing constructions sourced from social-media platforms to familiarize readers with them, particularly those who may not have encountered them before. This is likely to be the case for speakers outside younger generations, as noted by Morris (2021). All examples are taken from X (formerly Twitter). The reader will notice that the predominant topics of discussion mainly involve commonplace, everyday occurrences or matters of humor, with the register being informal:

- (9) Not me getting SZA tickets despite knowing only two songs 🙄
 Meaning: It is ironic and unexpected that I got tickets for a concert (SZA is an R&B/soul singer).
 (X post. Posted 5 February 2024. Retrieved 10 February 2024. ID: 1755808599476211931)

In (9), the user posted this sentence to convey that she bought tickets for a concert of a well-known contemporary singer; however, she is familiar with just a couple of songs from that artist. This is somehow unexpected and generates an ironic effect. We know that she actually bought tickets because when another user asked for more details, she replied: ‘My friend got in and asked if I wanted to go and I said sure why not 😊.’ Therefore, despite the presence of negation, the polarity of the sentence is strictly affirmative: the user indeed bought tickets for that concert.

In the following example, the X user wants to convey that it is ironic and unexpected that she finds herself singing a love song to her cat.

- (10) Not me singing you belong with me to my cat 🐾
 Meaning: It is ironic and unexpected that I am singing a love song to my cat.
 (X post. Posted 9 February 2024. Retrieved 10 February 2024. ID: 1755886627195371598)

Again, the user is indeed singing a song to her cat, and negation does not reverse the polarity of the sentence.

In (11), a young woman cannot believe she found a new job and is happy and emotional about it:

- (11) Not me getting my dream job ahhhhh! God has been so good to me I could cry rn¹
 Meaning: I did not expect it, but I got the job of my dreams. ...
 (X post. Posted 9 February 2024. Retrieved 10 February 2024. ID: 1722180309683147067)

In the comment section of the post, she adds: *'What's crazy is, I didn't want to apply for the job initially cause I didn't think I was qualified cause I'm still at the early stages of my career but LOOK AT GODD.'* Another X user replies to her congratulating her. So, as in the other examples, the context provides proof that the polarity of the utterance is affirmative and the propositional content is not negated: the user has indeed found her dream job.

The previous examples of *not-ACC-ing* constructions are from American English (AE). However, *not-ACC-ing* constructions seem to be employed by British English (BE) speakers as well. The next example in (12) is a sentence used as a caption/description of a video. In the humorous video, there is an employee in the offices in the background of a TV news program. The employee is cheering and waving his arms in a celebratory, over-the-top way because Arsenal (football team) has just scored. Everything takes place behind a journalist who is reading the news, unaware of what is happening.

- (12) Definitely not me celebrating Arsenal's 3rd goal vs Man Utd on live national telly
 (X post. Posted 3 September 2023. Retrieved 10 February 2024. ID: 1698390426351251917)

The football teams mentioned in (12) (Arsenal and Manchester United) are British, and the word *telly*, meaning television/tv, is typical of BE. The video, showing the employee celebrating happily, is evidence that the sentence in example (12) is affirmative.

What emerges from these examples is that *not-ACC-ing* constructions invariably have positive polarity, despite the presence of the negative marker *not*. They all have a special interpretation, tied to unexpectedness/surprisal, irony, amusement, emotional/moving/touching matters, often with a self-deprecating undertone.

Let us now introduce additional empirical data drawn from the literature. The only two recent studies that explicitly mention *not-ACC-ing* constructions are Morris (2021) and Pereira (2023). These constructions were first identified by Morris (2021) in a blog post, where he described the unique type of negation found in these structures as *ironic not*. Morris observed that they primarily occur in written social-media discourse but are also present in spoken language. He conducted a data-scraping study analyzing social-media posts from the Reddit platform, which is particularly suitable for this type of research due to its structure. Reddit consists of various subcommunities, or 'subreddits', which allow researchers to examine discourse within specific interest groups or demographics. Morris implemented scripts (available at <https://github.com/colinmorris/ironic-not>) to identify patterns such as 'not (me/you/them) (thinking/taking/using/acting/trying)' on Reddit. His study uncovered approximately 1,600 occurrences of such sentences. By analyzing the demographics of the subreddits where these constructions appeared, Morris noted that they were predominantly used by individuals who identified as young, female, belonging to LGBTQ+ communities, or a combination thereof. Although the dataset is relatively small, Morris observed that no single user produced more than five examples of *not-ACC-ing* constructions, which rules out idiolectal usage and instead points to broader productivity within these demographics.

Regarding the origins of these structures, Morris highlighted that many slang terms from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and LGBTQ+ communities – such as those

¹ *Rn* is an abbreviation for 'right now'.

emerging from the ballroom scene in 1970s New York – have gradually entered mainstream English. Examples include *shade*, *tea*, *beat*, *chile* and *go off*. While a detailed discussion of these terms is beyond the scope of this article, Morris observed that the oldest instances of *not-ACC-ing* constructions on Reddit date back to 2015. However, earlier occurrences, some as early as 2008, were found on the social media platform Twitter (now X), with most examples from this period attributed to Black users, and subsequently diffused into mainstream English usage (Pereira 2023).

What is particularly notable is that this phenomenon involves a productive syntactic construction rather than individual lexical items. This underscores the richness and complexity of syntactic influences in language change and highlights how structural elements of AAVE are shaping broader linguistic practices in contemporary English.

Turning back to the productivity of *not-ACC-ing* constructions in mainstream informal English, Morris (2021) observed a significant increase in their use from 2020 to March 2021, the endpoint of his study.

Through a survey, Pereira (2023) shows that two years later, the construction remained productive. Anticipating greater familiarity among younger speakers building on Morris (2021), the survey divided participants into two groups: Group A (Millennials and Gen Z speakers, aged 18–40, N=36) and Group B (older generations aged 45–60, N=58). The results showed that 91.7 percent of Group A participants were familiar with the construction and its specific meaning, while only 10.3 percent of Group B participants recognized it, and just one individual correctly identified its intended meaning.

Pereira also identified examples of older speakers using what he termed *spotlight not*, such as a tweet by actress Brie Larson:

- (13) Not me crying at the end of that!! You are a brilliant, beautiful human who deserved no less than the world. Thank you for taking the time to watch unicorn store. It's a film that means so much to me.
(Pereira 2023: 3)

However, based on the survey data, he concluded that older generations are far less likely to be familiar with *not-ACC-ing* constructions.

Regarding the meaning of these sentences, Pereira (2023) discusses how *spotlight not* constructions trigger a veridicality inference (*à la* Roberts 2019; White 2020), where the event following *not* is understood as factual. Observe the following examples: in the *not-ACC-ing* construction in (14a) the inferred meaning is (14b), namely that the speakers are indeed getting rained on.

- (14) (a) Not us getting rained on right now.
(b) We're getting rained on right now.
(Pereira 2023: 9)

This contrasts with the expectation that negation standardly reverses the polarity of the sentence. In this sense, Pereira (2023) also observes that *not-ACC-ing* constructions align with *can't believe* constructions (Roberts 2019). For example, (15a) leads to the inference in (15c), namely that it is indeed raining, despite the presence of negation. By contrast, (15b) does not entail that it is raining:

- (15) (a) Mary can't believe that it's raining.
(b) Mary doesn't believe it is raining.
(c) It's raining.

Spotlight not is similar to *can't believe* constructions in that both can implicate an attitude toward the proposition they reference. For example, (16) and (17) may both implicate (18):

- (16) Not the preacher yelling at those students.
- (17) I can't believe the preacher is yelling at those students.
- (18) It's shameful for the preacher to be yelling at those students.

2. Background

In this section, we set the stage for crucial concepts needed to discuss the descriptive syntax and semantics of *not-ACC-ing* constructions (section 3) and the structural analysis provided in (section 4). We cover: (i) the expletive role of the negative marker (section 2.1) and (ii) the accusative case of the subject as well as the gerundive form of the verb, focusing on *ACC-ing* constructions (section 2.2).

2.1. Expletive Negation

EN has been extensively studied, particularly in Romance languages (Espinal 1992; Portner & Zanuttini 2000; Del Prete 2008; Yoon 2011; Makri 2013; Pană Dindelegan & Maiden 2013; Greco 2019, 2020; Jin & Koenig 2021). This phenomenon is evident in clauses where the negative marker does not alter the sentence's polarity, which remains affirmative:

- (19) J'ai peur qu'il **ne** pleuve demain. (French)
 I.have fear that.it NEG rain.SBJV tomorrow
 'I fear that it will rain tomorrow.'
 (Jin & Koenig 2021)
- (20) Rimarrò in stazione finché **non** arriva il mio amico.
 stay.1SG.FUT in the station as long as NEG arrives my friend
 'I will be staying at the (train/bus) station until my friend arrives.'

Focusing on English, Jin & Koenig (2021) note that comprehensive descriptive grammars of SE, such as Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* (2002) and Quirk (1985) make no mention of EN, nor is its use permitted by prescriptive grammars. However, Horn (2010: 125) crucially observes that EN does appear in informal English, describing it as a feature of 'English *parole*', referencing de Saussure's well-known classification. Jin & Koenig (2021) further support this claim through their corpus analysis of social media and networking websites:

- (21) Well, really, how can I keep from **not** worrying? (Horn 2010: 125)
- (22) I can't keep from **not** thinking about the impending doom of it all. (Horn 2010: 125)
- (23) I really miss **not** seeing you
 (Lederer 2014, blogpost 'English is a crazy language', our emphasis)

In these instances, EN requires a c-commanding trigger, such as *keep from*, *miss*, *avoid*, among others. Additional verbs associated with EN include *fear*, *regret* and *complain* (Horn 2010; Jin & Koenig 2021). In spoken English, EN can also be triggered by comparatives, as noted by Jin & Koenig (2021: 69):

- (24) I consumed all I could at my friends' wedding recently. The food was simply delicious! I was sad that I was too full to **not** be able to eat more!²

Thus, EN is indeed attested in spoken English. However, this raises a theoretical challenge: EN can only occur when the negative marker acts as a syntactic head, while it is unavailable when the negative marker is a maximal projection (Greco 2022).³ English negation is generally classified as a maximal projection, which should preclude its ability to function as EN. Yet empirical evidence from Horn (Horn 2010: 125) and Jin & Koenig (2021), as well as *not*-ACC-*ing* examples themselves, contradict this expectation. This classification of English negation as a maximal projection stems from its lack of characteristics typically associated with head-like negation, such as licensing Negative Concord (NC) (Zanuttini 1991; Haegeman 1995; Zeijlstra 2004; Giannakidou 2011; Chierchia 2013), (25a) and enabling *why-not* questions (25b):

- (25) (a) I did not see nobody (with the intended meaning 'I saw nobody' rather than 'I saw everybody')
(b) Why not?

Let us examine the latter phenomenon. According to Merchant (2001), the English negative marker can adjoin to *why* because *why* is an XP. For this to occur, the negative marker must also be an XP. In contrast, when negation functions as a head, such as the Italian *non*, it cannot combine with *why*, rendering the Italian equivalent, *perché non?*, ungrammatical. Since English *not* is classified as an XP, occurrences of expletive EN in English are unexpected given the head requirement discussed earlier. This same reasoning extends to the absence of the NC phenomenon in (formal) SE.

Still, empirical evidence, such as the *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions discussed in this work, challenges the expectation that English cannot host EN. We (tentatively) suggest that this empirical puzzle could be better understood in light of variation across English varieties. In particular, the availability of EN might reflect influence from varieties such as African American English (AAE), where negation arguably behaves more like a syntactic head and licenses NC (Green 2009) (26). AAE is also individuated by Morris (2021) as the language variety where the first attestations of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions emerged (see (27) for a relevant example from a social-media post on X):

- (26) (a) I don't never have no problems. (AAE⁴)
(b) I don't ever have any problems. (SE)
- (27) they **don't** make music like this **no** more man (AAE)
(X post. Posted 5 March 2024. Retrieved 5 March 2024. ID: 1764790422482637119)

While a thorough sociolinguistic or contact-based analysis is beyond the scope of this article, we note that addressing this theoretical puzzle will require further research in that direction. Specifically, we speculate that the presence of EN in informal English may reflect the influence of varieties in which negation has a different syntactic status. If this is correct, then the syntactic behavior of *not* in English may be more variable than previously assumed,

² Retrieved from: www.facebook.com/pg/heart2cart/reviews/ (accessed 23 February 2020), in Jin & Koenig (2021).

³ Some languages seem to escape this generalization, such as German. See Greco (2022) for a more detailed discussion.

⁴ The data here are taken from the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project (<https://ygd.yale.edu/phenomena/negative-concord>). For a discussion see Zanuttini *et al.* (2018).

functioning as a head in certain constructions, despite its canonical analysis as a maximal projection.

This variation may also be shaped by broader diachronic dynamics, including the Spec-to-Head and Head Preference Principles (Van Gelderen 2004).⁵ In this respect, work by Blanchette (2017) and Blanchette & Lukyanenko (2019) shows that NC, though ungrammatical in formal Standard English, is efficiently processed in informal speech, and that social stigma influences acceptability judgments. These findings suggest that a more nuanced account of negation across English varieties could help clarify the syntactic status of EN in constructions like *not-ACC-ing*. We leave this issue open for future research.

Now, we wish to clarify our use of the term *expletive* in relation to negation. Our focus is specifically on negation and *not-ACC-ing* constructions (for an overview on expletiveness, see Tsiakmakis & Espinal (2022), who discuss also other expletive elements, e.g. expletive subjects). Nonetheless, in line with previous research (Wood 2014; Delfitto *et al.* 2019; Greco 2019, 2020), we adopt the view that expletiveness does not equate to semantic vacuity. We argue that the negative marker *not* in *not-ACC-ing* constructions continues to function as an operator and is not semantically vacuous. Rather than reversing truth conditions on the propositional content, it operates on the presuppositional layer, generating interpretive effects related to irony and unexpectedness (see section 4).

2.2. ACC-ing constructions

As the label suggests, *not-ACC-ing* constructions appear closely related to *ACC-ing* constructions. *ACC-ing* constructions are characterized by a subject in the accusative case followed by a gerund (Stowell 1982; Reuland 1983; Matsuoka 1994; Lowe 2019) and an optional adverb. The main *superficial* difference between an *ACC-ing* construction and a *not-ACC-ing* construction is the presence in the latter of an obligatory negative marker preceding the accusative subject:

- (28) [Him stupidly missing the penalty] lost us the game. ACC-ing construction
(from Lowe 2019: 318)
- (29) Not him stupidly missing the penalty. not-ACC-ing construction
Meaning: It is surprising/amusing/unexpected that he stupidly missed the penalty.

ACC-ing constructions are argued to be clausal, as they permit adverbial modification and always require a subject (Lowe 2019: 318). That is evident in the following sentences, where *there* and *it* must be present in the structure:

- (30) You may count on *(there) being a lot of trouble tonight.
- (31) I wouldn't count on *(it) raining tomorrow.

The clausal nature of *ACC-ing* constructions becomes more evident when compared to other gerundive constructions, which are nominal in nature. Consider, for example, *Poss-ing* constructions (33) and *NP-ing* constructions (34):

- (32) [Him stupidly missing the penalty] lost us the game. ACC-ing
- (33) [His stupidly missing the penalty] lost us the game. Poss-ing

⁵ See Ledgeway (2012) for a discussion on these principles in Latin and Romance languages.

- (34) [His stupid missing of the penalty] lost us the game. NP-*ing*

Poss-*ing* constructions feature subjects in the genitive case, which distinguishes them from ACC-*ing* constructions. NP-*ing* constructions, on the other hand, represent the canonical case of a nominal gerund. Additional evidence for the clausal nature of ACC-*ing* constructions is seen in the following contrast: when two ACC-*ing* constructions are conjoined, they do not trigger agreement of the main verb (examples (35) and (36) below, in Reuland 1983: 107), unlike Poss-*ing* constructions (37) and NP-*ing* constructions (38):

- (35) John playing the piano and Fred singing a song {**were/was*}terrifying. ACC-*ing*
 (36) Him playing the piano and her singing a song {**were/was*} terrifying. ACC-*ing*
 (37) His playing the piano and her singing a song {*were/*was*} terrifying. Poss-*ing*
 (38) His playing of the piano and his singing of that beautiful song
 {*were/*was*} amazing. NP-*ing*

Structurally, it has been argued in the literature that gerunds, including ACC-*ing* constructions, are reduced structures. Stowell states that gerunds ‘lack the COMP position entirely’ (Stowell 1982: 561; cf. also Abe 1986; Yamada 1987; Matsuoka 1994). Let us examine the evidence supporting this claim. One key aspect is that gerunds/ACC-*ing* constructions cannot cooccur with a complementizer like *to* (Rosenbaum 1967) or *that*, unlike infinitives:

- (39) (a) To be loved is to be immortal.
 (b) Being loved is being immortal.
 (c) **To being loved is to being immortal.*
 (d) **To him missing the penalty lost us the game.*

Additionally, a gerund/ACC-*ing* construction cannot serve as a [+wh] complement to a c-commanding verb or preposition:

- (40) (a) I don’t remember who to visit.
 (b) **I don’t remember who (our) visiting.*
 (c) I wonder where to go.
 (d) **I wonder where (his) going.*
 (e) We talked about what to do.
 (f) **We talked about what doing.*
 (from Stowell 1982: 561)

On these grounds, we adopt Stowell’s view that gerunds lack the COMP position. In more recent, cartographic (Rizzi 1997; Belletti 2004; Cinque & Rizzi 2012) terms, gerunds and ACC-*ing* constructions are reduced structures lacking the whole LP (Rizzi 1997; Rizzi & Bocci 2017).

Crucially, *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions are not simply the negated counterparts of ACC-*ing* constructions; rather, they represent a distinct syntactic configuration, as we will discuss in more detail in section 4. For now, let us anticipate this point by considering the behavior and distribution of negation in contrasts such as (41) and (42):

- (41) I am tired of him not being funny.

(42) *I am tired of not him being funny.⁶

In (41), an ACC-*ing* construction appears as the complement of the preposition *of*, with negation following the accusative subject. In (42), a *not*-ACC-*ing* construction is used in the same syntactic position, but crucially negation precedes the accusative subject, as is typical of *not*-ACC-*ing* configurations. This difference in the linear and structural position of negation reveals a deeper distinction between the two constructions. Note also that (42) is ungrammatical: we return to the root nature of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions in section 3.2. The difference in interpretation and acceptability further supports the view that negation occupies distinct syntactic positions in the two structures, and that *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions cannot be reduced to mere negated ACC-*ing* clauses.

3. Properties of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions

In this section, we present the key structural and interpretive properties of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions from a formal perspective. Each core characteristic is presented in turn and discussed in detail in the subsections that follow.

3.1. Expletive Negation in *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions

Not-ACC-*ing* constructions respond positively to all the relevant tests for EN. As noticed by Pereira (2023), *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions are incompatible with strong NPIs such as *either*, *at all*, *yet*, *anywhere* (Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* 2002). Crucially, they may cooccur with PPIs, hence elements such as *too*, *already* and *somewhere*, which may be licensed only in positive environments (Espinal 1997; Israel 1997; Huddleston & Pullum *et al.* 2002; Giannakidou 2011):

- | | | | |
|------|-----|---|-------|
| (43) | (a) | *Not me being dumb at all. | (NPI) |
| | (b) | *Not me being dumb either. | (NPI) |
| | (c) | Not me being dumb too. | (PPI) |
| | (d) | *Not me laughing yet. | (NPI) |
| | (e) | Not me laughing already. | (PPI) |
| | (f) | *Not me getting anywhere with this. | (NPI) |
| | (g) | Not me getting somewhere/nowhere with this. | (PPI) |
| | (h) | *Not him complaining anymore. | (NPI) |
- (from Pereira 2023: 10)

A further crucial aspect for the purposes of this work is the following. An additional negative marker may appear after the subject, and when that happens, it can license a NPI (Pereira 2023):

⁶ Following a reviewer's observation, (42) could be acceptable under contrastive stress on the pronoun ('I am tired of not HIM being funny... (but always someone else)'). However, this example does not instantiate a standard *not*-ACC-*ing* construction. In (42), *not him being funny* conveys the ironic/surprising meaning of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions ('it is surprising/ironic that he is being funny'). Instead, with contrastive stress and a follow-up, the meaning shifts to a declarative statement with SN ('someone else is being funny'), lacking the expressive flavor inherent to *not*-ACC-*ing*. This peculiar ironic/surprising interpretation is tied to the syntax of the construction and cannot be derived via implicature alone. The contrastive-stress example may have either an unmarked or expressive interpretation depending on prosody, but it does not exhibit the systematic interpretive properties of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions. We therefore maintain that the non-embeddability of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions holds.

- (44) ? Not her *not* talking to me *anymore*.⁷

This is important because it shows that the first negative marker cannot license NPIs, therefore it does not scope over the rest of the sentence. The second one, instead, licenses NPIs and functions as SN. This is a further distinction which supports the view that the first negative marker (the one which is invariably present in *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions) instantiates a EN rather than SN. We will come back to this crucial point in section 4, where we capitalize on this in our structural analysis of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions.

As anticipated in section 2.1 on EN, we use the traditional term expletive to refer to the ‘special’ kind of negation which does not reverse the truth-value conditions of the sentence (Horn 1989; Horn & Katō 2000), but rather generates interpretive effects tied to irony and unexpectedness. In this sense, expletiveness is not tantamount to semantic vacuity (Wood 2014; Zanuttini *et al.* 2018; Delfitto *et al.* 2019; Greco 2019, 2020). Consider the following sentences, which illustrate that EN is not semantically empty: the distinctive ironic interpretation of a *not*-ACC-*ing* construction vanishes when the negative marker is omitted from the corresponding non-negated sentence in (46). Note also that (46b) would be grammatical only if used as a caption of a social-media post (a typical environment for a *not*-ACC-*ing* construction):

- (45) Not me getting SZA tickets despite knowing only two songs🤔
 Meaning: It is ironic and unexpected that I got tickets for a concert even if I know only two songs from that artist.
 (X post. Posted 5 February 2024. Retrieved 10 February 2024. ID: 1755808599476211931)
- (46) Me getting SZA tickets despite only knowing two songs (unmarked)
 Meaning: I am getting tickets for a concert even if I know only two songs from that artist.

3.2. *Not*-ACC-*ing* constructions convey new information

Not-ACC-*ing* constructions are used in isolation in social-media contexts, where users post content spontaneously and out of the blue, thereby conveying entirely new information. Crucially, this is why *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions are also acceptable as responses to questions like ‘What is happening?’ Indeed, on X (formerly Twitter), the prompt ‘What is happening?’ appears in the box where users compose their posts.

- (47) A: What is happening?
 B: (Definitely) Not me eating all the cookies!

3.3. *Not*-ACC-*ing* constructions are a root phenomenon

Not-ACC-*ing* constructions are a strictly root phenomenon, instantiating a special case of EN, one in which the presence of negation does not require syntactic licensing. This contrasts with other instances of EN in English, where negation typically depends on a c-commanding

⁷ Pereira (2023: 11) places a question mark at the beginning of this sentence, as his survey reveals that more than half of Group A (composed of young people; see section 1.1) accepts the utterance as grammatical, while 18 out of 33 speakers do not. Our informants share a positive judgment of the utterance.

trigger for proper licensing (section 2.1; cf. Horn (2010) and Jin & Koenig (2021)). Their superficial structural make-up is always the following: negative marker + subject in the accusative case + gerund, thus not allowing any licenser.

(48) (*I can't keep from) Not me swimming ...

Importantly, notice also how *not-ACC-ing* constructions cannot function as sentential subjects (49), nor be the complement of a preposition such as *of* (50):

- (49) (a) Not me taking the train at 5 a.m. *not-ACC-ing* construction
 (b) *[Not me taking the train at 5 a.m.] is stupid
- (50) (a) I am tired of [him being disrespectful]
 (b) *I am tired of [not him being disrespectful]

3.4. Not-ACC-ing constructions and left-peripheral elements

A distinctive feature of *not-ACC-ing* constructions is their interaction with left-peripheral elements and discourse-related constituents. They cannot host *wh*-elements (51a), nor *why* (51b), nor focalized constituent (51c), while topics are admitted (51d):

- (51) (a) *What not me taking the train at 5 a.m. on 3 hours of sleep
 (b) *Why not me taking the train at 5 a.m. on 3 hours of sleep
 (c) *THE TRAIN not me taking at 5 a.m. (not the car)
 (d) ? The train, not me taking it at 5 a.m. (marginal, but better than focus)

Moreover, *not-ACC-ing* constructions seem to exhibit a distinct prosodic contour, which appears to be similar to that of focalized constructions, though not identical (Pereira 2023). Intonation rises when uttering *not me*, then the rest of the sentence is prosodically flatter (see section 4.2 and footnote 12).

3.5. Not-ACC-ing constructions and adverbial modification

Not-ACC-ing constructions present an asymmetry when it comes to preposed adverbs. Adverbs like *stupidly* and *sadly* cannot precede the negative marker (52a, b), while no problem arises if adverbs follow the subject (52c, d):

- (52) (a) *Stupidly not me crying over a silly romantic comedy.
 (b) *Sadly not me eating alone in my house during quarantine.
 (c) Not me stupidly crying over a silly romantic comedy.
 (d) Not me sadly eating alone in my house during quarantine.

The only adverbs which may be preposed and precede the negative marker are *definitely* and *totally*, and here lies the asymmetry⁸ (ex. (12) is repeated below in (53)):

⁸ Note, however, that an anonymous reviewer does not share these judgments and does not accept *definitely* and *totally* as preposed adverbs, whereas our consultants (three American, one Australian) find them acceptable in preposed positions. Although examples (53) and (54) are naturalistic and sourced from the platform X, we acknowledge that more quantitative data is required. We leave this issue for future investigation.

- (53) Definitely not me celebrating Arsenal's 3rd goal vs Man Utd on live national telly
(X post. Posted 3 September 2023. Retrieved 10 February 2024. ID: 1698390426351251917)
- (54) Totally not me wishing I could retire and just be a housewife full time.
(X post. Posted 15 December 2024. Retrieved 15 December 2024. ID: 1868074624787050667)

4. Structural analysis of *not-ACC-ing* constructions

In this section, we propose a structural analysis of *not-ACC-ing* constructions in English, drawing on their similarities with *ACC-ing* constructions. However, there are factors that prevent us from treating them as merely another variant of these constructions. Additionally, we will exclude the simplistic parallelism with reduced cleft constructions, leading us to treat *not-ACC-ing* constructions as a distinct syntactic phenomenon that requires its own analysis.

4.1. Excluding possible analyses: *not-ACC-ing* constructions are neither pure *ACC-ing* constructions, nor (reduced) clefts

As we have discussed, it is interesting to notice that English *not-ACC-ing* constructions are intuitively related to *ACC-ing* constructions.

Let us consider the parallelism between them. Both share a restriction to the non-finite, gerundive form of the verb with an *-ing* suffix. Additionally, neither displays a subject in the nominative case, relying instead on an accusative form. At first glance, the primary distinction between them is the presence or absence of the negative marker. However, they differ in significant respects. As discussed in section 3.3, *not-ACC-ing* constructions are a root phenomenon, rendering them ungrammatical when embedded. They cannot function as sentential subjects or as the complement of a preposition like *of*. In contrast, these restrictions do not apply to *ACC-ing* constructions. Unlike *not-ACC-ing* constructions, *ACC-ing* constructions cannot occur in isolation; they most commonly appear as sentential subjects or as complements of a higher c-commanding element, such as a preposition:

- (55) (a) [Him taking the train at 5am] is stupid *ACC-ing* construction
(b) *[Not him taking the train at 5am] is stupid *not-ACC-ing* construction
- (56) (a) I am tired of [him being disrespectful] *ACC-ing* construction
(b) *I am tired of [not him being disrespectful] *not-ACC-ing* construction

Therefore, *not-ACC-ing* constructions cannot be regarded as pure *ACC-ing* constructions. An alternative analysis might consider *not-ACC-ing* constructions as instances of reduced clefts. However, as we will show, this possibility must also be excluded.

Intuitively, a sentence like (57a) could resemble a reduced version of the cleft sentence in (57b):

- (57) (a) Not me taking the train at 5 a.m.
(b) (It is) not me (who is) taking the train at 5 a.m.⁹

⁹ Among our informants (two American, one Australian), two accept this sentence as grammatical, and another rejects it. The more orthodox form would be one with the subject in nominative case: 'It is not I who...'. However, certain speakers accept also an accusative subject. On the alternation between accusative and nominative case in a diachronic perspective see also Denison (1996).

It is important to note, however, that negation serves its usual function in full cleft or relative sentences, reversing the truth-conditions of the sentence. This contrasts with *not-ACC-ing* constructions, which are obligatorily affirmative despite the presence of negation. In (57a), the negative marker instantiates EN, whereas in (57b), it functions as SN. In (57a), the speaker expresses irony, sarcasm and unexpectedness about taking the train early in the morning, and there is a veridicality inference (Pereira 2023) according to which the speaker indeed takes that train. In other words, in (57b) the speaker does not take the train, and the utterance lacks the ironic flavor.

It is true that, on the one hand, one could mark the sentence in (57b) pragmatically, conveying the opposite of what is uttered in an ironic way:

- (58) It is not me who/that is taking the train at 5 a.m.
 Meaning: It is actually me who taking the train at 5 a.m. (uttered with a smirk and an ironic/sarcastic intent)

However, on the other hand, there is no licit way in which a *not-ACC-ing* construction could be uttered with a different prosody such that its truth conditions are reversed. Crucially, only the affirmative interpretation (with an EN reading) is available.

Further evidence that distinguishes *not-ACC-ing* constructions from clefts comes from a syntactic contrast, and it regards embedding. *Not-ACC-ing* constructions are always root (see section 3.3), while clefts may be embedded. Since clefts involve a finite verbal form with progressive morphology, they can be embedded under predicates like *believe*. This is not the case for gerunds, especially those with an accusative subject (i.e. *ACC-ing* constructions, which are central to this discussion). As we have discussed, gerunds may function as sentential subjects or complements of prepositions like *of*. Therefore, in the examples below, we will see that clefts can be embedded, while *not-ACC-ing* constructions are always root clauses. To illustrate this, the type of higher clause must differ.¹⁰ Specifically, (59b) is ungrammatical in English, but this is because the verb *believe* only takes finite clausal complements. The ungrammaticality here arises from this restriction, not from the root nature of the *not-ACC-ing* constructions in brackets, which is more clearly visible in (59c):

- (59) (a) John believes that it is not me who is taking the train at 5 a.m.
 (b) *John believes not me taking the train at 5 a.m.
 (c) *I am tired of [not me taking the train at 5 a.m.]

Based on the contrasts explored in this section, *not-ACC-ing* constructions cannot be reduced to similar structures. We propose that they should be regarded as a distinct, specific syntactic phenomenon.

4.2. Proposal: focalization of the *ACC-ing* construction through Expletive Negation

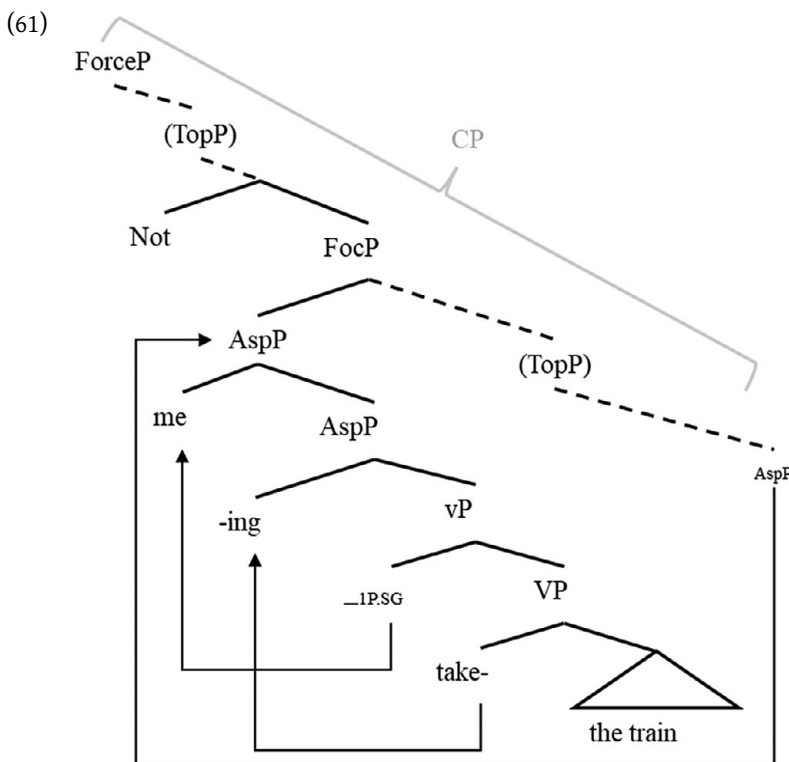
To present our proposal for the structural analysis of *not-ACC-ing* constructions, we address the following questions, which will guide our argumentation:

- I. Where and how is EN represented in the structure of *not-ACC-ing* constructions?
- II. Where does the non-embeddability of *not-ACC-ing* constructions come from?
- III. How does the subject of a *not-ACC-ing* construction obtain accusative case?
- IV. How is their peculiar interpretation obtained?

¹⁰ We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for their insightful comments on these contrasts.

In a nutshell, we argue that *not-ACC-ing* constructions are instances of negated, focalized ACC-ing constructions (AspPs¹¹), with an EN reading arising from negation being merged in the LP (Greco 2020) (60)–(61):

- (60) Structure of a *not-ACC-ing* construction in English
 [CP ... [X° not] ... [Acc-ing Foc° [... t_{ACC-ing} ...]]



Regarding question I, we argue that Greco's (2019, 2020) analysis of EN is a fitting approach. In his account, the negative marker is merged in the LP, rather than in the TP area as it is in standard SN constructions (Belletti 1990; Laka 1990; Zanuttini 1996, 1997, 2001). This allows the negative marker in the CP to be 'blind' to the lower v*P phase (Chomsky 2001), which is closed and impenetrable to further syntactic operations (Phase Impenetrability Condition). In other words, the negative marker is merged too high and cannot 'see' into the lower phase, which is closed. This explains the EN reading and the incompatibility of *not-ACC-ing* constructions with NPIs such as *at all* and their cooccurrence with PPIs like *already*. According to Giannakidou (1997, 2000) and Zeijlstra (2004), PIs are elements that contain a dependent variable requiring licensing by a negative (or nonveridical) operator. This operator must be able to bind all such free variables in the vP domain to license them. If no appropriate operator is available – e.g. because the v*P

¹¹ Following Cinque (1999), aspectual distinctions are represented as a hierarchy of dedicated functional projections (e.g. *Aspdurative*, *Asphabitual*, *Aspprospective*, *Aspprogressive*, etc.). In this article, we use AspP for ease of presentation. In *not-ACC-ing* constructions, the relevant projection would correspond specifically to *Aspprogressive*, given the presence of progressive morphology.

has already been closed off when negation is merged – then this binding fails. As a result, structures involving unlicensed NPI variables are excluded, while PPIs are accepted (phases are underlined in (62)):

- (62) (a) * $[_{CP} \text{Not } [_{FocP} [_{v*P} \text{me being dumb at all}]]_{ACC-ing} \dots [t_{ACC-ing}]]$
 (b) $[_{CP} \text{Not } [_{FocP} [_{v*P} \text{me already decorating my house for Christmas when it's only November}]]_{ACC-ing} \dots [t_{ACC-ing}]]$

It has already been argued in the literature that the distinction between low and high negation in Modern English plays a crucial role in distinguishing certain independent constructions. In particular, Tubau (2020), argues that the position of first-merged negation, whether in a TP-internal or TP-external position, causes contrasts in polarity-reversing question tags, neither/so-coordination, either/too adverbs and other constructions. Additionally, this distinction has been proposed as key to understanding the structure of yes-no questions and their response particles (see Holmberg 2015; Wiltschko 2017).

We also propose that in *not-ACC-ing* constructions, an entire *ACC-ing* construction is moved to the specifier of *FocP*. This accounts for their non-embeddability and new information interpretation. Let us explain why this is the case. As proposed in Greco (2020) for Italian Surprise Negation Sentences (Snegs; see example where negation is expletive, the entire TP *mi è scesa dal treno Maria* is focalized and moves to the specifier of *FocP*, resulting in the new information interpretation and resistance to embedding.

- (63) Surprise Negation Sentence (Italian)
 E non mi è scesa dal treno Maria?!
 and NEG CL.to-me is got off-the train Maria
 'Mary got off the train!'
 Meaning: It surprised me that Maria got off the train.

We argue that the same mechanism applies to *not-ACC-ing* constructions. *ACC-ing* constructions are reduced structures that lack the LP (Stowell 1982; Reuland 1983; Yamada 1987; Matsuoka 1994). As a result, apart from the gerundive verb form, an *ACC-ing* construction is structurally equivalent to the TP moved in Snegs. Consequently, the same mechanism governing Snegs applies to *not-ACC-ing* constructions: a TP is moved to the LP of the clause, where it is focalized by landing in the specifier of *FocP*. The key difference is that, in Snegs, a finite TP is moved, whereas in *not-ACC-ing* constructions, it is an *ACC-ing* construction that undergoes this movement. Focalization yields the new information interpretation, as in Snegs. Crucially, the *ACC-ing* construction moves as a single structural unit, which accounts for the incompatibility with embedding (addressing question II): as shown by Greco's (2020) for Italian Surprise Negation Sentences, natural languages seems to disallow the embedding of big structural chunks.

Let us examine these claims in detail. Among the benefits of this proposal, consider, the new information interpretation that *not-ACC-ing* constructions carry. We recall here that *not-ACC-ing* constructions can be served as answers to propositional questions (64), while they cannot be employed as answers to entity questions (65):

- (64) A: What is happening? Propositional question
 B: Not me taking the train at 5 a.m.
 (65) A: Who took the train at 5 a.m.? Entity question
 B: *Not me taking the train at 5 a.m.!

According to Alonso-Ovalle & Guerzoni (2004) and Brunetti (2004), we assume that what carries new information, at least in answers, lays in the focus domain of a sentence and the rest of the sentence is deleted via ellipsis. The fact that *not-ACC-ing* constructions can only serve as answers to propositional questions suggest that the entire *ACC-ing* construction is the focalized part, as we predict in our analysis. Moreover, if the *ACC-ing* construction realizes the focus of the sentence, we should expect it to influence the sentence prosody. This expectation aligns with findings from the literature, which indicate that focus always induces some suprasegmental phonetics changes (Bocci 2007, 2008; Frascarelli 2000). Specifically, focus is associated with a marked tonal rise (L+H* in ToBi transcription). Importantly, this appears to be the case in *not-ACC-ing* constructions (section 4.4), which exhibit a rising intonation at the beginning of the utterance, followed by a flatter prosodic pattern (Pereira 2023). However, a more systematic investigation into the prosody of these sentences is required to substantiate this observation further.¹²

As per question IV, we argue that the special interpretation of *not-ACC-ing* constructions arises from the focalization of a reduced *ACC-ing* constituent under EN. EN targets the presuppositional layer introduced by focus, rather than the truth-conditional content of the clause (Abels 2005, 1996; Delfitto *et al.* 2019; Greco 2020). As a result, the proposition is interpreted as true but unexpected or undesirable, which explains both the inference of veridicality and the absence of NPI licensing: EN does not create a downward-entailing environment.

Following Rooth (2016), the presence of focus introduces a set of alternatives. The role of EN is to assert that *p* (the focalized proposition) does not belong to the speaker's expectation set (i.e. the set of likely or assumed-to-be-true propositions). Crucially, this does not mean that $\neg p$ is asserted. Rather, *p* is assumed to be true (hence the veridicality inference), but the speaker expresses a negative attitude toward that truth; e.g. surprise, annoyance, or undesirability.

Structurally, this is ensured by EN being merged high, after the previous *v*P* phase is closed, so it does not affect the propositional content directly, but only the attitude the speaker wants to convey toward the proposition. This explains both why EN does not license NPIs (as it does not create a downward-entailing environment) and why the proposition is interpreted as true.

Moreover, the schema in (60) also justifies, at least, two more facts: (i) *not-ACC-ing* constructions are compatible with topicalized constituents while resisting focalization; (ii) they cannot host *wh*-elements. We argue that all these restrictions are accounted for by a unique assumption: the focalization of the *ACC-ing* construction. Starting from the first restriction, if the *ACC-ing* construction moves to the focalized phrase, it leaves no space for other focalized phrases, since only one functional projection for focalization is available in the LP (Rizzi 1997) and it is already occupied. The same holds for the incompatibility with *wh*-elements, since they compete for the same SpecFocP position, according to the original proposal in Rizzi (1997). On the other hand, no restriction is found for topicalized items, and, therefore, *not-ACC-ing* constructions can host them. We have discussed how *ACC-ing* constructions are reduced structures that lack the LP. Therefore, the Finiteness position, responsible for Nominative Case assignment to the subject, is missing (building on Phase Theory; Richards 2007; Mackenzie 2018). But then, why is accusative case employed instead (question III)? We argue that *not-ACC-ing* constructions display accusative subjects since

¹² See Pereira (2023) for a spectrogram comparing a *not-ACC-ing* construction with a similar declarative sentence (*Not me being clumsy* vs. *I'm glad it wasn't just me being clumsy*). The spectrogram shows a notable rise in intonation after *not* and across *me being*. However, the data presented are based on a single speaker. While we share Pereira's judgment regarding the spectrograms and the prosody of *not-ACC-ing* constructions, further research is required to systematically investigate their prosody from an experimental perspective.

accusative case is the default case in English (Schütze 2001). Since the ACC-*ing* construction is defective in the LP, where the Finiteness position is found, it follows that there is no case assigner from which the subject can receive Nominative Case. We adopt Schütze's (2001) perspective on default case, which arises when the mechanisms of case assignment break down. In such instances, constituents are spelled out in the default case, as occurs, for example, when no case assigner is present or when the constituent has nothing to match with. In English, default case is accusative, as is visible in several examples discussed by Schütze (2001: 211). We report two of them here:

- (66) Me/*I, I like beans.
- (67) Q: Who wants to try this game?
 (a) Me/*I
 (b) I/*Me do (too).

In (66), *Me* and *I* are not arguments and there are no obvious case assigners for them. The same applies to answers such as (67a). Observe that when a finite verb is present, the subject becomes nominative, as in (67b). The same, we argue, applies to ACC-*ing* constructions. Since they are reduced (Stowell 1982; Reuland 1983; Matsuoka 1994; Lowe 2019), Finiteness is absent, and cannot assign nominative case to the subject, which is spelled out as accusative. That is the reason why English *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions display accusative subjects. Accusative case being the default case in English is supported by acquisition data as well. In child English, reduced structures like root infinitives (Rizzi 1993, 2006) often cooccur with accusative subjects (Schütze & Wexler 1996), where the adult target grammar would require nominative case instead.¹³

To take stock, we have argued that *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions are their own syntactic construction formed by a negated, focalized ACC-*ing* formation with an EN reading given by negation being merged in the LP.

Now, another issue arises, tied to question IV. Since Belletti (2004), focalized constituents have been noticed to target both the LP and low IP area (with different interpretive restrictions), and so the question: is the ACC-*ing* construction focalized in the LP or in the low IP area? We argue for the former on the basis of the expletiveness of the negative marker *not*. Expletiveness could be not obtained if the negative marker stayed in the low IP area. The v*P phase would still be open and only the SN reading would be accessible. Independent evidence come from the contrast regarding preposed adverbs we mentioned in section 3.5: adverbs can only follow the subject, never precede it.¹⁴

- (68) (a) *Stupidly not me missing the train at 5 a.m.
 (b) Not me stupidly missing the train at 5 a.m.
 (c) *Sadly not me eating alone at home during quarantine.
 (d) Not me sadly eating alone at home during quarantine.

Following Rizzi & Bocci's (2017) account of the LP, preposed adverbs target the Modifier (Mod) position in the LP. Observe the sequence of positions in the LP as shown by these authors:

- (69) Force > Int > Topic > Focus > Mod > Fin

¹³ For a diachronic view on the alternation between nominative, accusative and genitive in English, also concerning the subjects in gerundive clauses, see Denison (1996).

¹⁴ *Definitely* and *totally* represent an exception to this pattern (see section 3.5 and footnote 9).

Notice how the Mod position is lower than the Focus position. Recall that in the present analysis, the whole ACC-*ing* construction is focalized in SpecFocP, i.e. in a structurally higher position than the Mod position. From our proposal, the contrast in (68) follows straightforwardly: when an adverb is placed inside the ACC-*ing* construction, after the subject, the sentence is grammatical; on the contrary, when an adverb is placed before the ACC-*ing* construction, it cannot find a suitable slot, as the Mod position is lower than the focalized ACC-*ing* formation (see, however, footnote 9 on *definitely* and *totally*).

This analysis also has the advantage of accounting for all syntactic and interpretive properties of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions, deriving them solely from two mechanisms: high negation in the LP and the focalization of the ACC-*ing* construction.

5. Concluding remarks

In this work, we have described and analyzed a new, intriguing construction that has become notably productive in informal registers of English: *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions. Superficially, these sentences exhibit the structure ‘negative marker + (mandatory) subject in the accusative case + gerund’, as in *Not me taking the train at 5 a.m.* Given their peculiar tone, which conveys a sense of surprise, sarcasm or self-deprecation, this sentence can be rephrased as: ‘It is ironic and unexpected that I took the train early at 5 a.m.’

We showed that *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions are root constructions where negation does not reverse the polarity of the sentence, which is strictly affirmative, representing a unique case of EN without a higher c-commanding licenser in English.

We discussed empirical data from both social-media platforms and spoken languages (Morris 2021; Pereira 2023), focusing also on the role of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions in online discourse and comparing it with *can’t believe* constructions, which, like *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions, trigger a veridicality inference despite the presence of negation (Pereira 2023). We discussed how, given that English does not exhibit NC and English negation is a maximal projection, the presence of structures displaying EN is unexpected (Greco 2022). We tentatively suggested that the theoretical puzzle may be solved taking into account sociolinguistic aspects concerning language contact with AAVE, where negation has the necessary head status to trigger EN readings, and where *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions have originated and then spread in mainstream English, inside and outside of the realm of social media. We then proposed a structural analysis that sheds light on all the other structural and interpretive properties by *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions, which otherwise would remain unaddressed without a formal analysis. We combined some crucial ingredients of Lowe’s (2019) analysis of ACC-*ing* constructions and Greco’s (2020) analysis of EN. In a nutshell, we proposed the following derivation ((60) is repeated below):

- (70) Structure of a *not*-ACC-*ing* construction in English
 [CP ... [X° not] ... [ACC-*ing* Foc° [... *t*_{ACC-*ing*} ...]]

More specifically, we proposed that the negative marker *not* is merged in the LP, instead of being merged in the IP layer as is usual for SN. This makes it possible for the negative marker in CP to be blind with reference to the previous v*P phase, which is closed and impenetrable to further syntactic operations. Whence the expletive reading and the incompatibility of *not*-ACC-*ing* constructions with NPIs such as *at all* and the cooccurrence with PPIs like *already*. We argued that the negative marker is externally merged just above FocP and selects it. Taking advantage from the proposal that ACC-*ing* constructions are reduced structures which lack the LP (Stowell 1982; Reuland 1983; Yamada 1987; Matsuoka 1994), we argue that the entire ACC-*ing* construction moves to the LP of the clause, specifically the specifier of FocP. From this movement, various properties of *not*-ACC-*ing*

constructions follow, including non-embeddability, the new information reading, resistance to focalized constituents, the acceptance of topics, restrictions on preposed adverbs, and their unique interpretation. With respect to the latter, we propose that EN is not semantically empty (Delfitto *et al.* 2019; Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022; Wood 2014), but functions as an operator on the presuppositional layer (Greco 2017, 2019), yielding the special ironic effect associated with *not-ACC-ing* constructions.

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In accordance with the journal's publishing ethics guidelines, we declare that AI tools were used only for grammar and spell checking.

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