

Variation in Kinyarwanda

ra-

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ACAL 57

Today we're
talking about...

What **morphosyntactic variation**
does Kinyarwanda have?

Kinyarwanda

Bantu; Rwanda

~10 million speakers



(1) Ba-aá-ra-gi-sóm-ye.

3pl.SBJ-DIST\PST-DJ-OBJ-DIST\read-PFV.PST

'They read it (yesterday or earlier).'

“disjoint” marker (DJ)

(1) Ba-aá-**ra**-gi-sóm-ye.

3pl.SBJ-DIST\PST-DJ-OBJ-DIST\read-PFV.PST

‘They read it (yesterday or earlier).’

“disjoint” marker (DJ)

(1) Ba-aá-ra-ḡ

3pl.SBJ-DIST\PST-DJ-OBJ-

‘They read it (yesterday or e

**distribution of disjoint
marker depends on...
a lot!**

information structure
TAM
constituency of vP
polarity
embeddedness...

(Ngoboka & Zeller 2016, van der Wal 2016,
Halpert 2012, Nshemezimana & Bostoen
2017)

2016,
al 2016) 6

Today we're also
talking about...

What **expectations** do Rwandans
have about ra - variation?

What predicts how ra - varies?

- 1. previous descriptions of *ra*-**
(Ngoboka & Zeller 2016)
- 2. variation in *ra*-**

previous descriptions:

present habitual

present progressive

near future

* previous descriptions

present habitual:
ra- always occurs at the **end** of a vP

(2) Ba-**ra**-som-a.

3pl.SBJ-DJ-read-IPFV

'They read.'

* previous descriptions

present habitual:
ra- doesn't occur when vP material
follows the verb

(3) Ba-(*ra)-som-a **ibitabo.**

3pl.SBJ-CJ\read-IPFV
'They read books.'

books

* previous descriptions

present habitual:
ra- is optional when **ngo** 'that' follows
the verb

(4) Ba-(ra)-vúg-a ngo...

3pl.SBJ-DJ-read-IPFV

'They say that...'

that

* previous descriptions

present habitual:
ra- doesn't occur in **negation**

(5) **Nti**-ba-(***ra**)-som-á.

NEG-3pl.SBJ-NEG\read-NEG\IPFV

'They do not read.'

* previous descriptions

present habitual:
ra- doesn't occur in **relativization**

(6) **a-b-áana** ba-(*ra)-som-á

AUG-2-children

3pl.SBJ-REL\read-REL\IPFV

'children who read'

* previous descriptions

present habitual:

ra- doesn't occur in **participials**

(an embedded category selected by a few lexical heads)

(7) **N-saang-a** bá-(***ra**)-som-a.

1sg.SBJ-CJ\realize-IPFV

PART\3pl.SBJ-read-IPFV

'I realize they read.'

* previous descriptions

present habitual

end of vP

required

vP material follows

banned

***ngo* 'that' follows**

optional

negated

banned

relativized

banned

participial

banned

previous descriptions:

present habitual

present progressive

near future

* previous descriptions

present progressive / near future:
ra- **does occur** when vP material follows
the verb

(8) Ba-**ra**-som-a **ibitabo.**

3pl.SBJ-CJ\read-IPFV

books

'They are reading ~ are about to read books.'

(equivalent in present habitual doesn't have *ra-*)

* previous descriptions

a **periphrastic** present progressive competes with *ra-*

(9) Ba-**ra**-som-a.

3pl.SBJ-PRES.PROG-read-IPFV

'They are reading.'

Ba-ri

3pl.SBJ-COP

gu-som-a.

INF-read-IPFV

* previous descriptions

	present habitual	present progressive near future
end of vP	required	required
vP material follows	banned	required
<i>ngo</i> 'that' follows	optional	not documented
negated	banned	banned
relativized	banned	banned
participial	banned	banned

1. previous descriptions of ra -
- 2. variation in ra -**

previous fieldwork:

(An & Umuhoza 2023, An & Ngoboka 2025)

ra- use **varies**

previous fieldwork:

(An & Umuhoza 2023, An & Ngoboka 2025)

ra- use **varies**



four
"variables"
selected

1

near future / present progressive *ra-*
may be present or absent in:

negation

(10) **Nti**-ba-(**ra**)-som-á.

NEG-3pl.SBJ-PROG-NEG\read-NEG\IPFV

'They are not reading.'

1

near future / present progressive *ra-*
may be present or absent in:

relativization

(11) **a-b-áana** ba-(**ra**)-som-á

AUG-2-children

3pl.SBJ-PROG-REL\read-REL\IPFV

'children who are not reading'

1

near future / present progressive *ra-*
may be present or absent in:

participials

(an embedded category selected by a few lexical heads)

(12) N-saang-a bá-(ra)-som-a.

1sg.SBJ-CJ\realize-IPFV

PART\3pISBJ-PROG-read-IPFV

'I realized they were reading.'

2

ra- may be obligatory or optional before *ngo* 'that'

(13) N-a-(ra)-vúz-e ngo haanze híijimye.

1sg.SBJ-PST-DJ-say-PFV that it's dark outside

'I said that it's dark outside.'

3

present progressive *ra-*
competes with a **periphrastic**

(14) Ba-**ra**-som-a.

3pl.SBJ-PRES.PROG-read-IPFV

'They are reading.'

Ba-ri

3pl.SBJ-COP

gu-som-a.

INF-read-IPFV

4

ra- encodes
near future or present progressive

(15) Ba-**ra**-som-a.

3pl.SBJ-**FUT.near~PRES.PROG**-read-IPFV

'They are about to read ~ they are reading.'

1

near future / present progressive *ra-*
may be present or absent in:
**negation, relativization,
participials**

2

ra- may be obligatory or optional before
***ngo* 'that'**

3

present progressive *ra-*
competes with a
periphrastic

4

ra- encodes
near future or present progressive

	present habitual	present progressive near future (variable)
end of vP	required	required
vP material follows	banned	required
<i>ngo</i> 'that' follows	variable	variable
negated	banned	variable
relativized	banned	variable
participial	banned	variable

variation
exists!

→ explains
**discrepancies in earlier
documentation?**

(Coupez 1980, Botne 1981, Cadiou
1985, Overdolve 1988, Nkusi 1995,
Nkejabahizi 2007, Ngoboka 2016,
Ngoboka & Zeller 2016)

variation
unusual for
Bantu!

ra- (or its counterparts)

**usually forbidden in negation,
relativization** (van der Wal 2016),
participials (Zorc & Nibagwire
2007, Buell 2005)



1. Who do Rwandans **think** use *ra*- differently?
2. Who actually **accepts** *ra*- differently?
3. What **patterns** of acceptance are there?

Who do
Rwandans **think**
use *ra-*
differently?

expectations / ideologies

about these variables

Who do
Rwandans **think**
use *ra-*
differently?

15 respondents

aged 23-59

all five provinces of Rwanda

general metalinguistic
commentary

comparison of selected variables

*Ni abahe bantu ukeka ko bavuga ikinyarwanda
kitaboneye?*

'Who do you think speaks Kinyarwanda **incorrectly**?'

Abo ntara y' Amajyaruguru n' Uburengerazuba.

'Those from the **Northern and Western** provinces.'

(59-year-old man from the Northern province)

Abantu bamwe nabamwe bakoresha ikinyarwanda kitaboneye bitewe naho bari urugero iyo abantu barimo kuganira nk'ishuti bashobora gukoresha ikinyarwanda kitaboneye, mugihe abakinnyi barimo gukina umupira w'amaguru rimwe narimwe bakoresha ikinyarwanda kitaboneye. ariko iyo umwalimu arimo kwigisha akoresha ikinyarwanda kiboneye.

'Some people use incorrect Kinyarwanda **depending on the situation**. For example, when people are **chatting with friends**, they may use incorrect Kinyarwanda. When **football players are playing football**, they sometimes use incorrect Kinyarwanda. But when a teacher is teaching, they use correct Kinyarwanda.'

(25-year-old woman from the Western province)

Hari abavuga Ikinyarwanda bakivanze n' indimi z'amahanga nk' Igifaransa, icyongereza ndetse bakakivanga n' indimi zo mu bihugu budu kiline nk' Igiswahili, Ikigande, Lingala etc. [...] Uvuga Ikinyarwanda kiboneye akivuga neza atakivanzemo izindi ndimi., mbese akubahiriza ikibonezamvugo cy' Ikinyarwanda yuta ku kivugwa, igihe kivugiwe n' abo ikivugwa kigenewe.

'There are those who speak Kinyarwanda **mixed with foreign languages** such as French, English and even with languages from neighboring countries such as Swahili, Luganda, Lingala, etc. [...] A person who speaks Kinyarwanda perfectly speaks it well **without mixing it with other languages.**'

(51-year-old man from the Southern province)

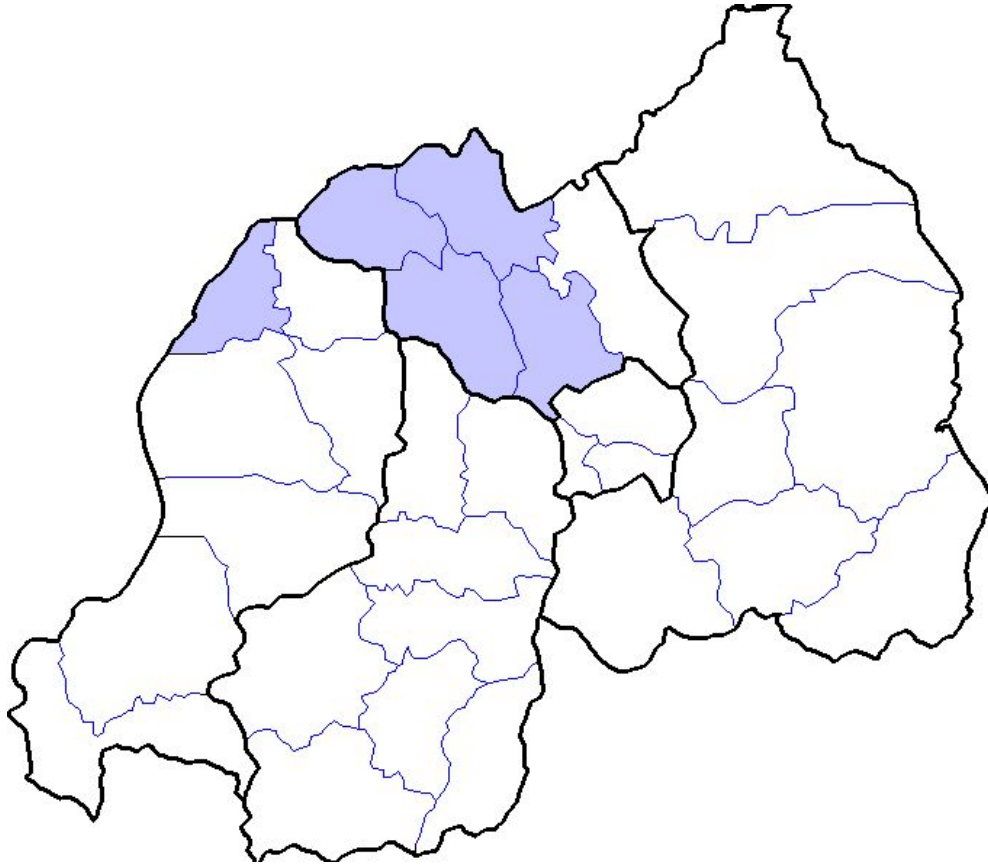
“incorrect” or “bad” speech:

casual style

the Northwest

children

language mixing



Northwest

ikirera, ikigoyi

stigmatized

what about *ra*-
specifically?

(N = 15)

	aware at all	<i>ra-</i> is young	<i>ra-</i> is Northwestern	<i>ra-</i> is used by any gender
negated <i>ra-</i> 1	13	4	3	0
<i>ra-</i> before <i>ngo</i> 2	11	4	1	0
periphrastic 3	13	3	1	0

Rwandans think
ra- in ① ②
and periphrastic ③
are **Northwestern**
and **young**

1. Who do Rwandans **think** use *ra*- differently?

2. Who actually **accepts** *ra*- differently?

3. What **patterns** of acceptance are there?

Who actually **accepts** *ra-* differently?

survey of 65 respondents

ages 23-59

all five regions of Rwanda

17 self-reported users of NW
dialects

Who actually **accepts *ra-*** differently?

Likert scales for sentences with /
without *ra-* (White & Roberts 2022)

“Thinking specifically about the verb,
would you yourself say this?”

5. always

4. usually

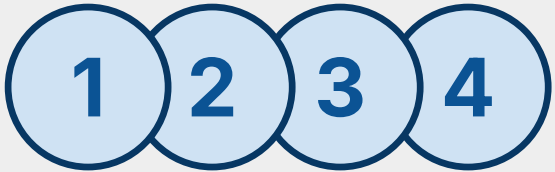
3. I don't know

2. sometimes

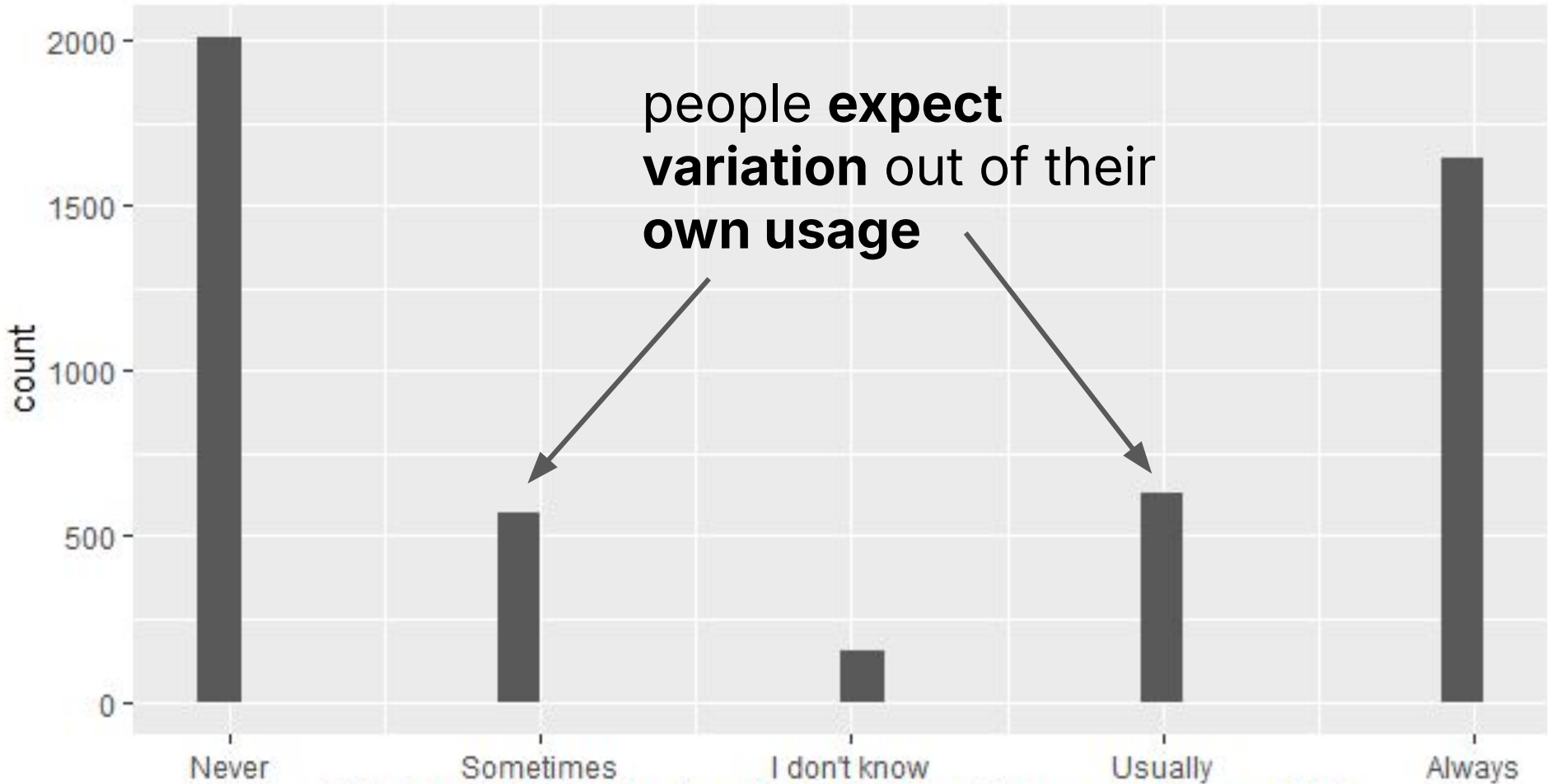
1. never

Who actually **accepts** *ra-* differently?

sentences in a variety of TAM
readings and syntactic environments

including 

+ "good on purpose" / "bad on
purpose" sentences



Thinking specifically about the verb, would you yourself say this?

1. Who do Rwandans **think** use *ra-* differently?
2. Who actually **accepts** *ra-* differently?
3. What **patterns** of acceptance are there?

does variation depend
on:

demographics?

morpheme?

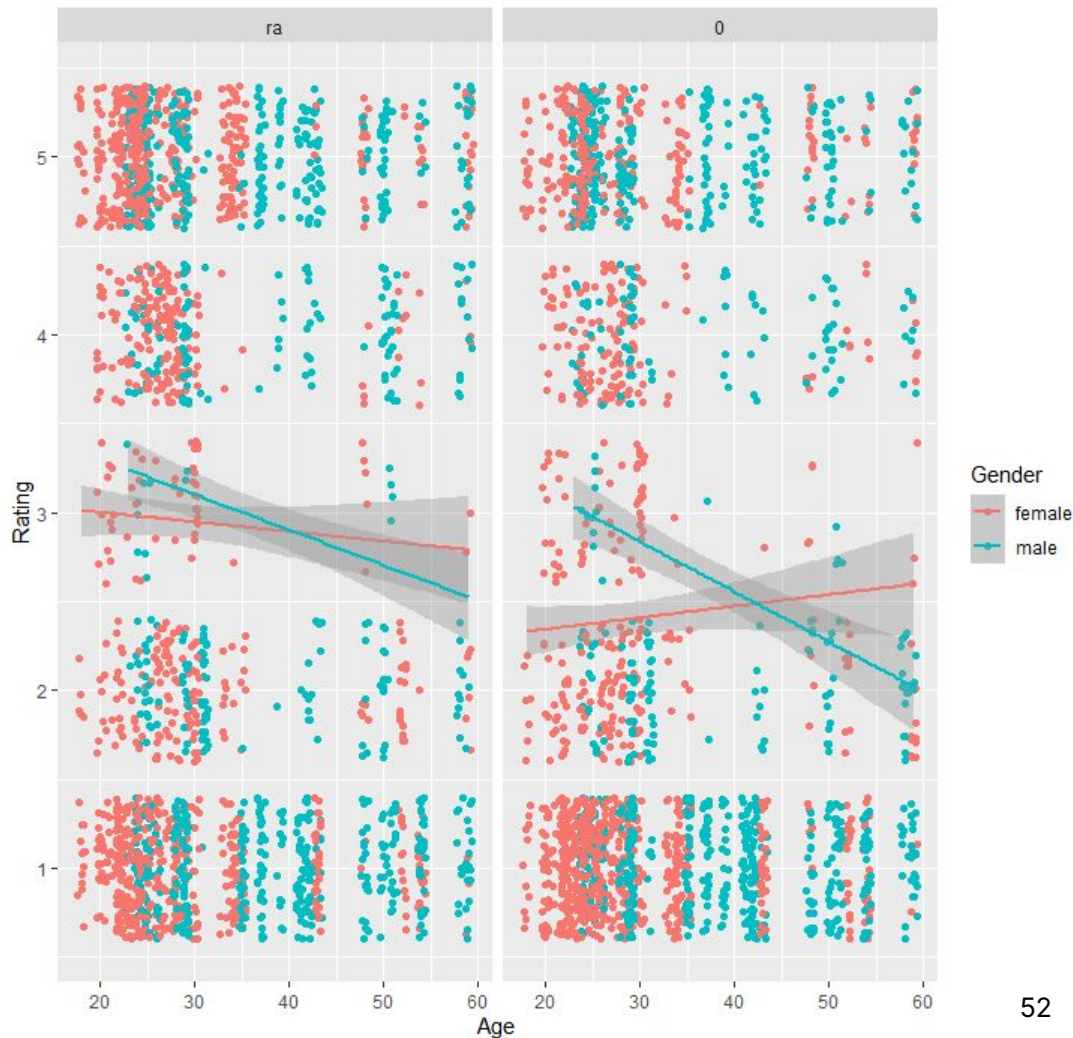
environment?

variation:

all over the place

**no significant
effects of age,
gender, region,
dialect**

*shown: all responses taken together.
but no effects were found in individual
morphosyntactic contexts, either.



variation:

all over the place

**no significant
effects of age,
gender, region,
dialect**

*shown: all responses taken together.
but no effects were found in individual
morphosyntactic contexts, either.



does variation depend
on:

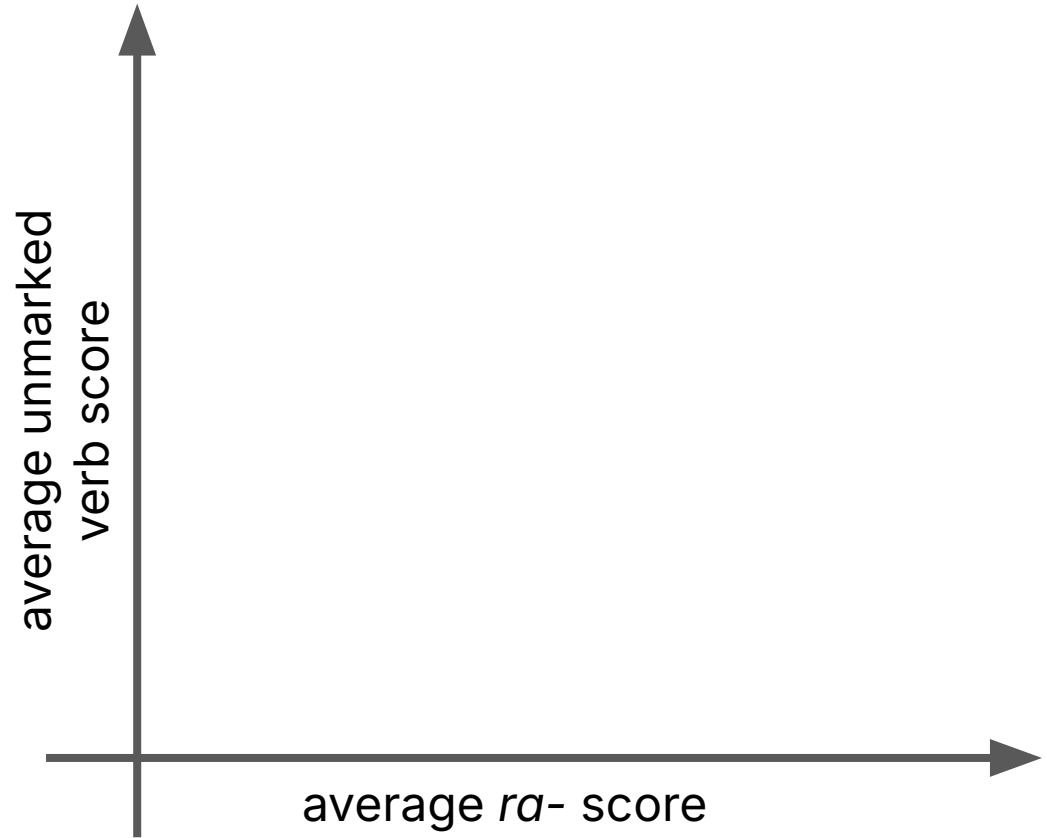
~~demographics?~~

morpheme?

environment?

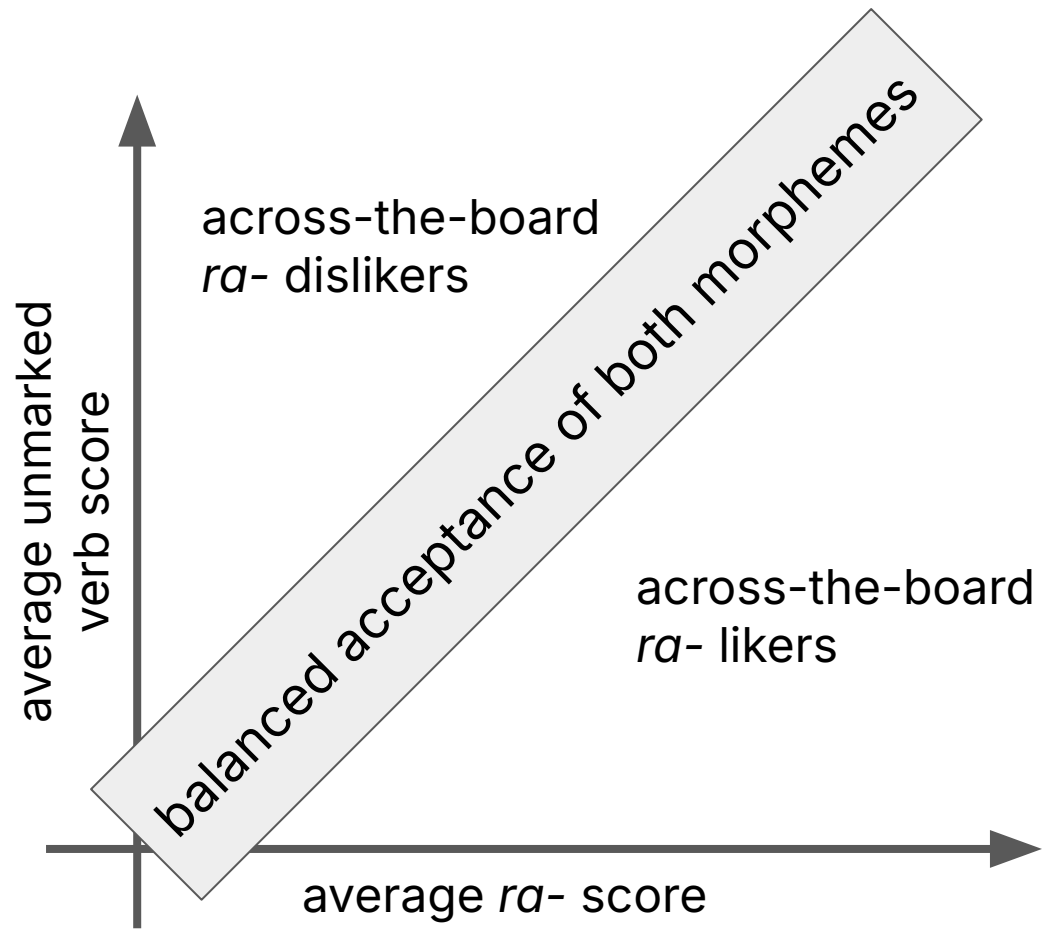
are there
across-the-board
ra-likers or *ra*-
dislikers?

averaged scores
for all verbs with /
without *ra*-
across all
environments



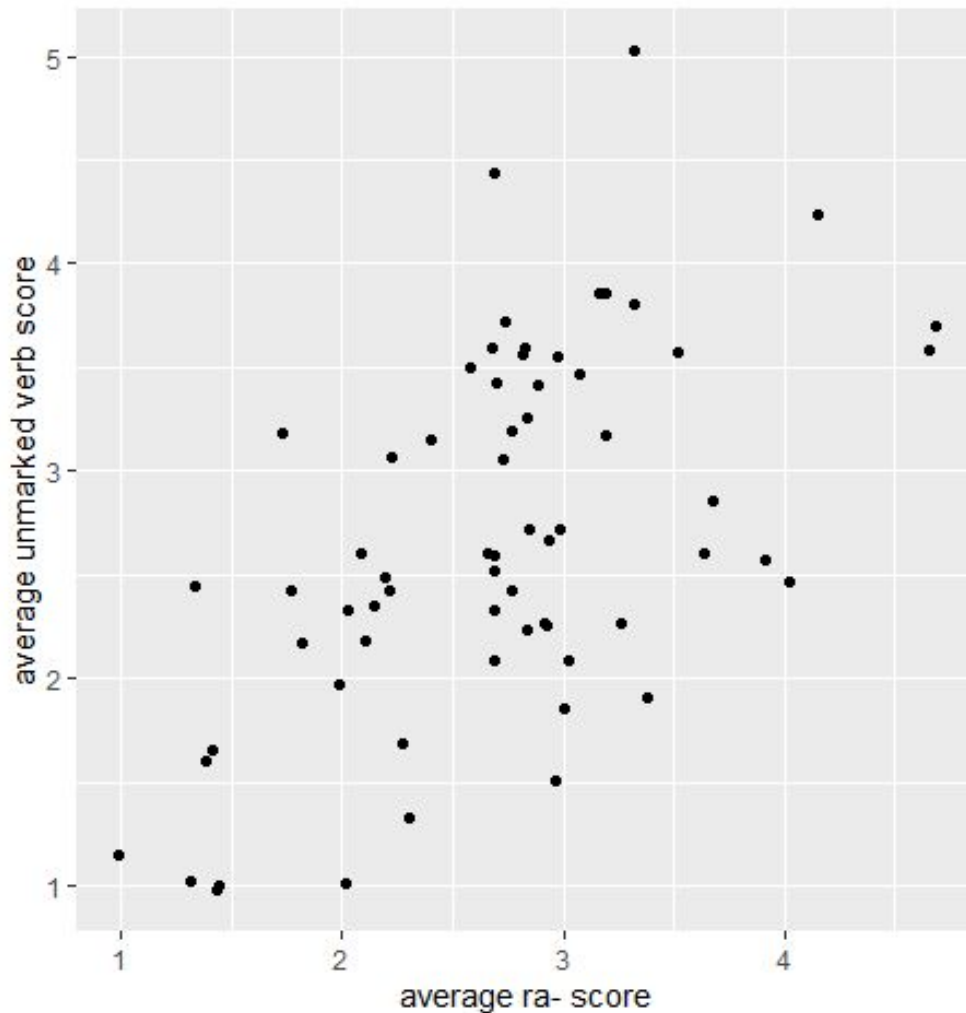
are there
across-the-board
ra- likers or *ra*-
dislikers?

averaged scores
for all verbs with /
without *ra*-
**across all
environments**



are there
across-the-board
ra- likers or *ra-*
dislikers?

**not
really!**

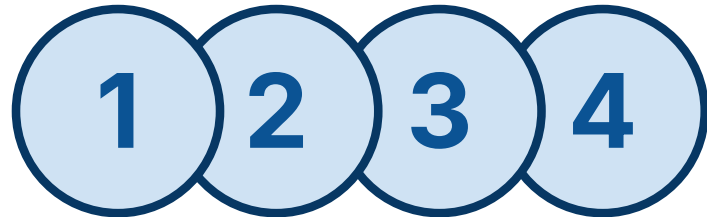


does variation depend
on:

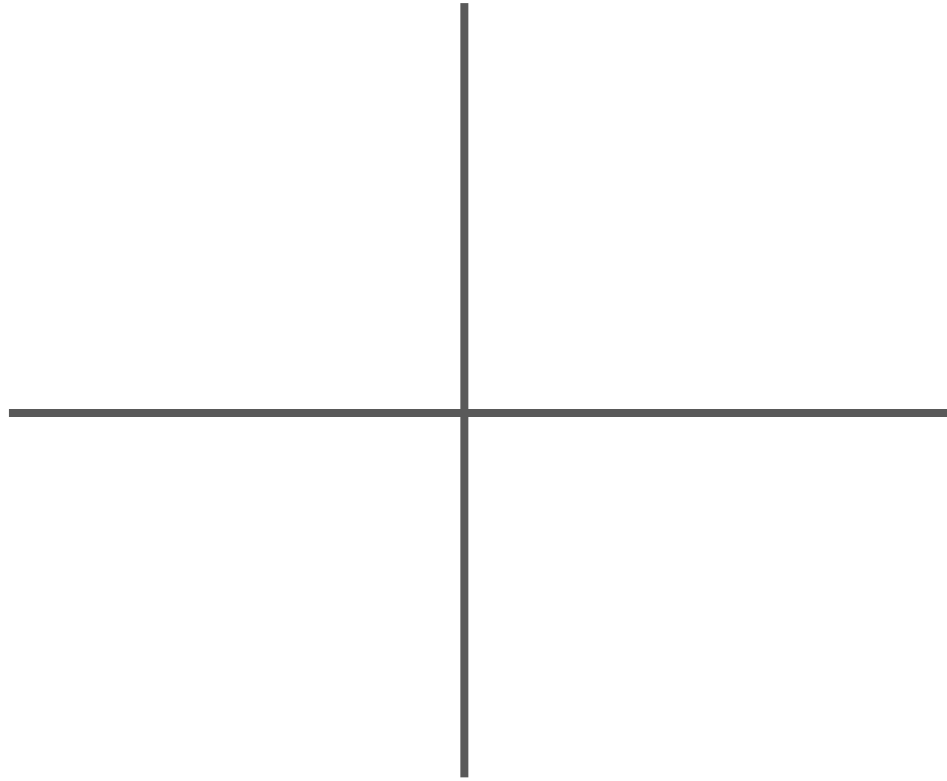
~~demographics?~~

~~morpheme?~~

environment?

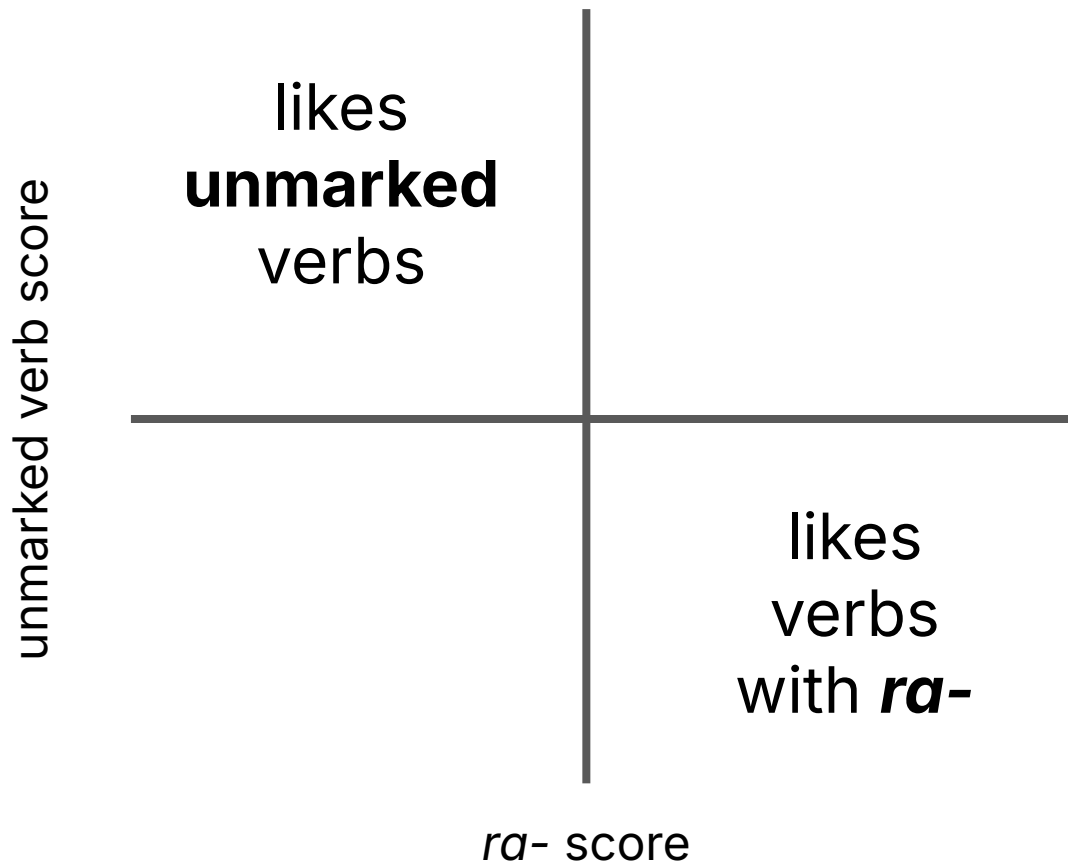


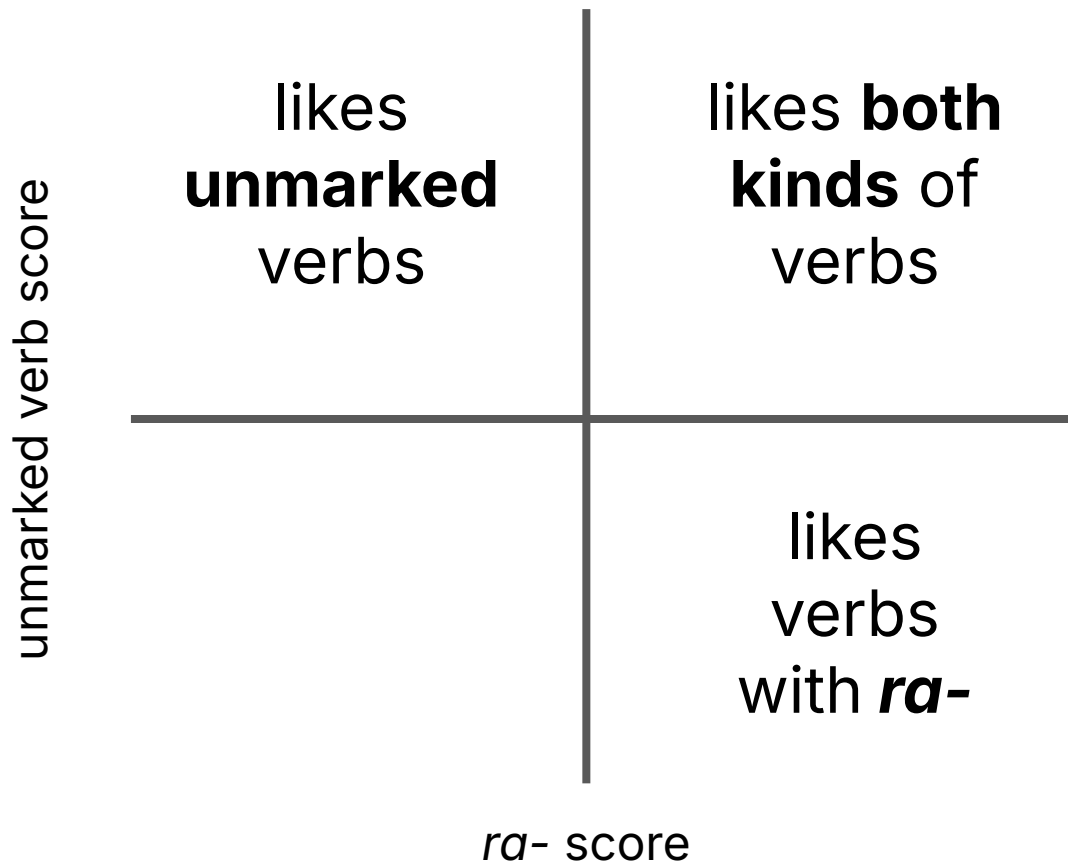
unmarked verb score

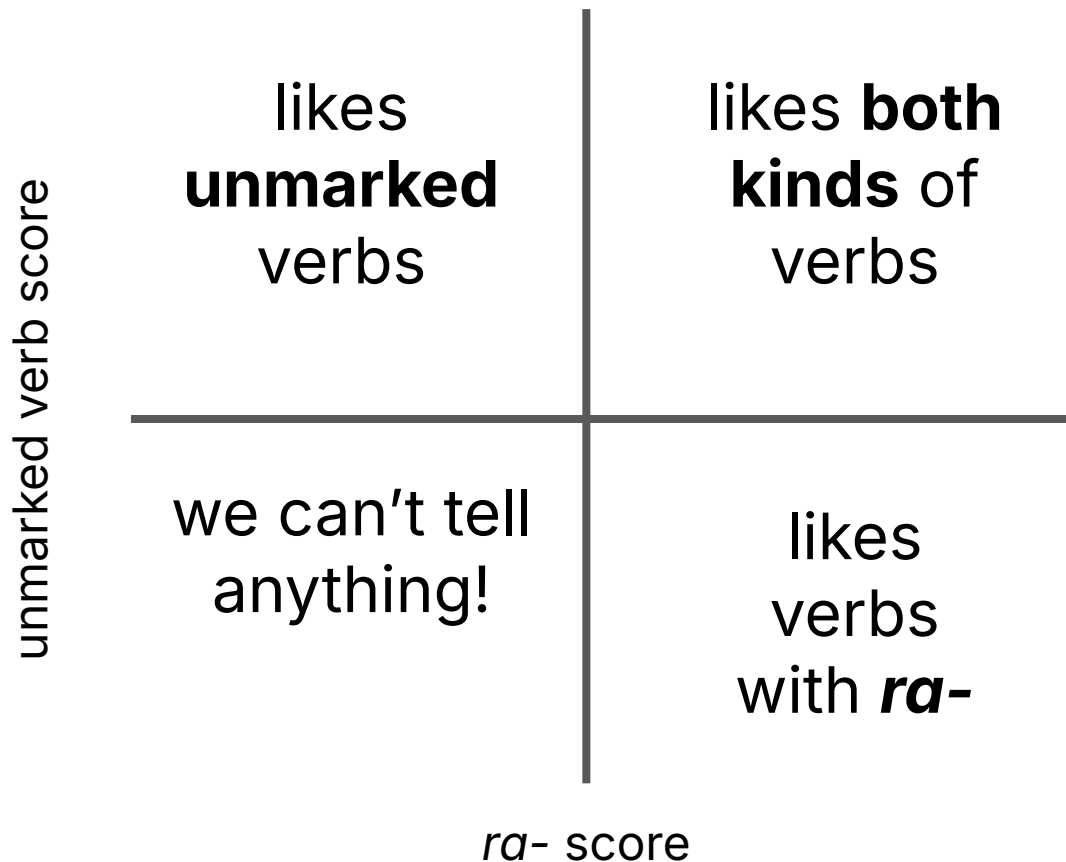


ra- score

*scaled
within
participant







remember:

in **present-habitual verbs**,

ra- is **required utterance-finally**

and **forbidden** when **followed by vP-internal material**

...without any expected variation

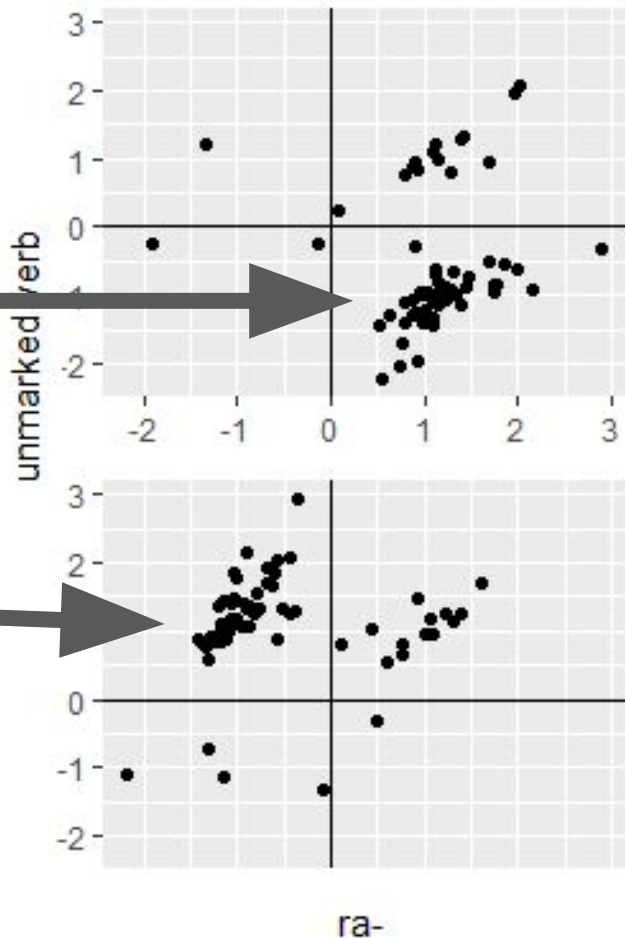
remember:

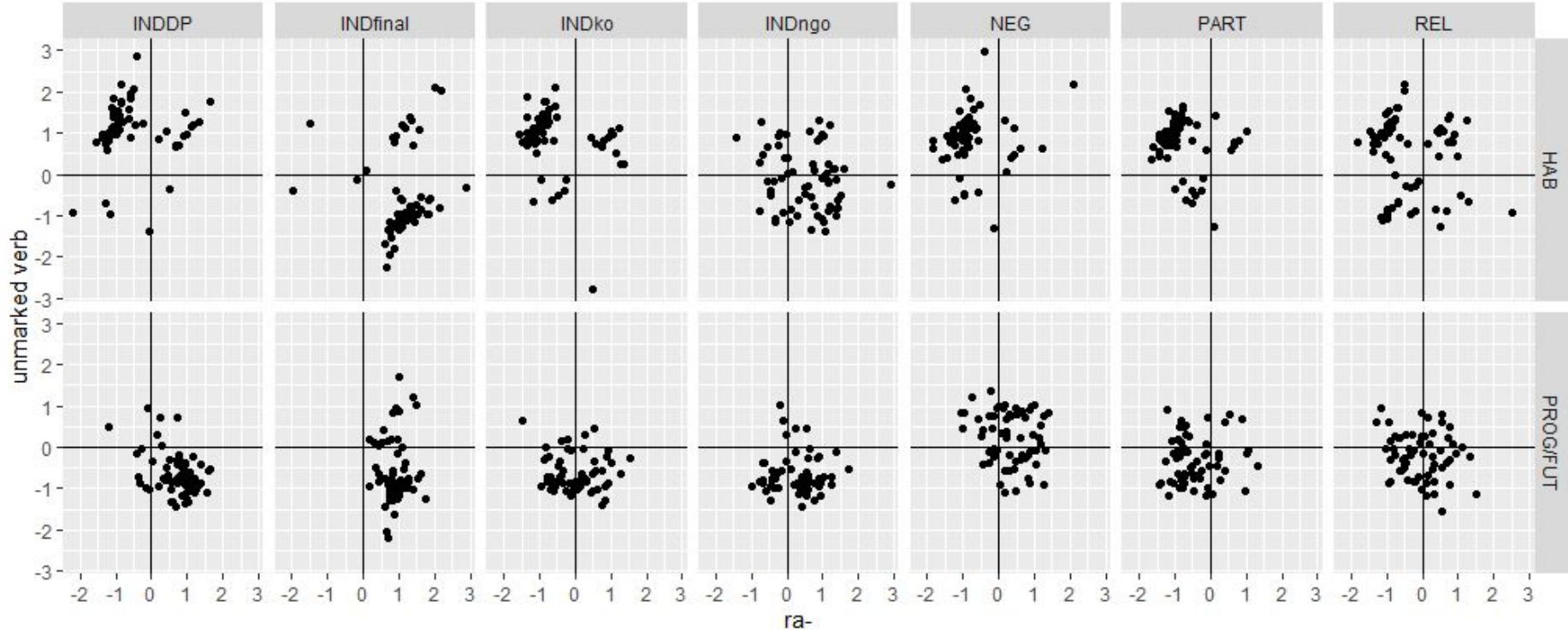
in **present-habitual verbs**,

ra- is **required utterance-finally**

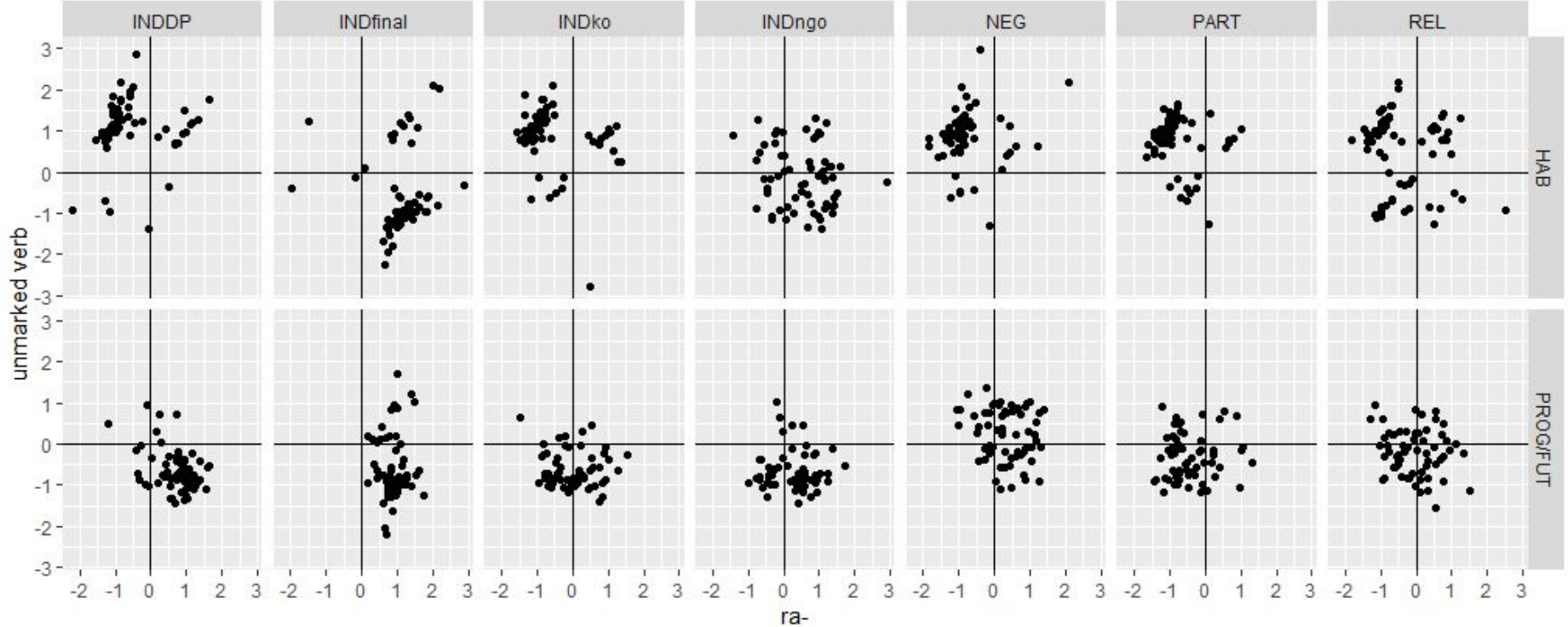
and **forbidden** when **followed by vP-internal material**

...without any expected variation





a lot of these environments
"do their own thing"



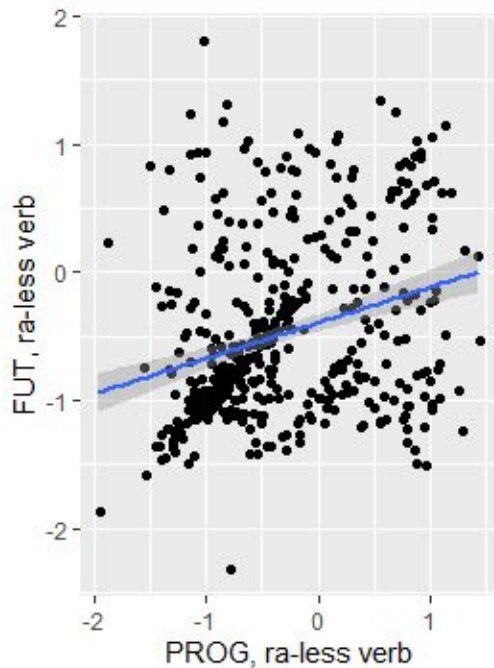
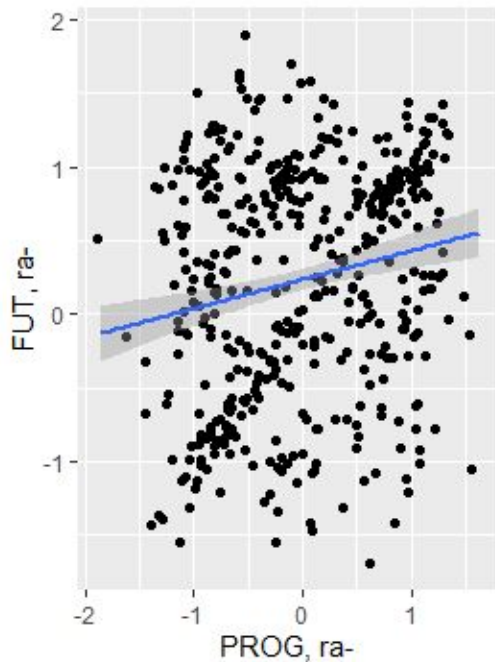
does *ra-* acceptance in one of these cells
predict *ra-* use in any others?

4

ra- encodes
near future or present progressive

4

ra- encodes near future or present progressive



correlation between
scores for near future
and present
progressive

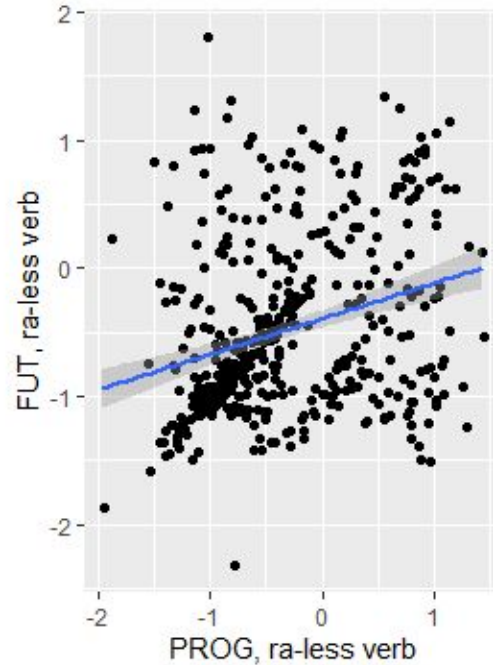
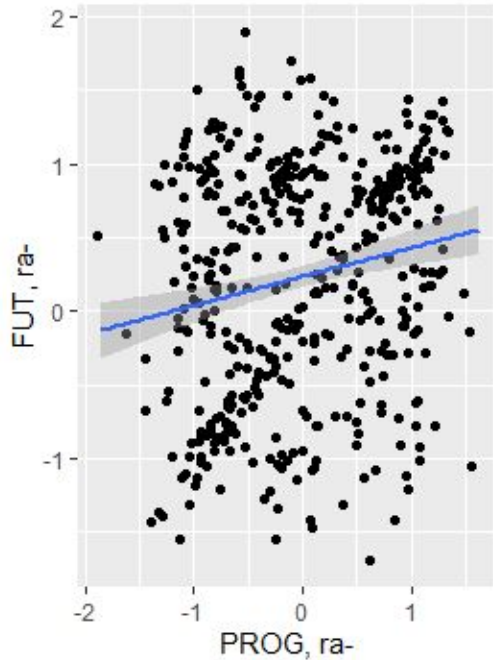
ra- ($\beta = 0.182$, $p = 4.89e-05$)

*ra-*less verbs ($\beta = 0.299$, $p = 4.17e-10$)

linear regression

4

ra- encodes near future or present progressive



we can **lump together** near future and present progressive

1

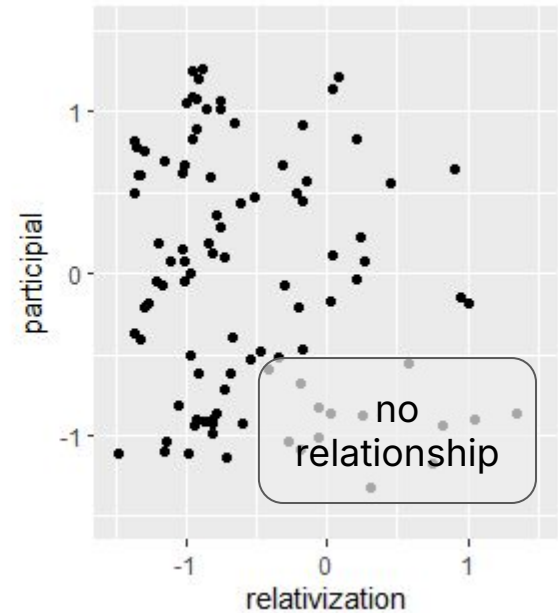
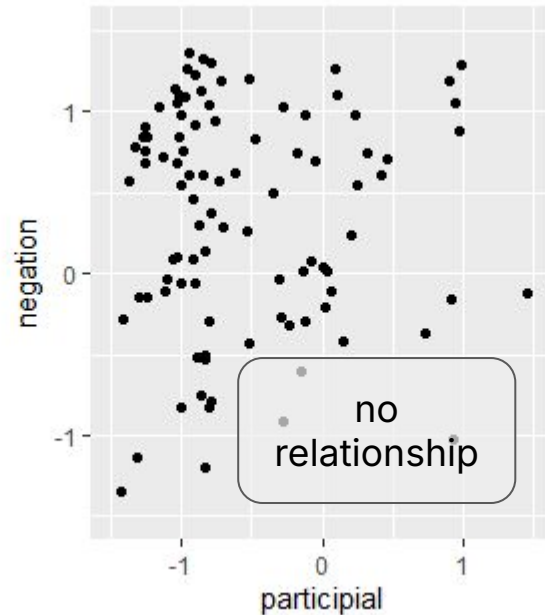
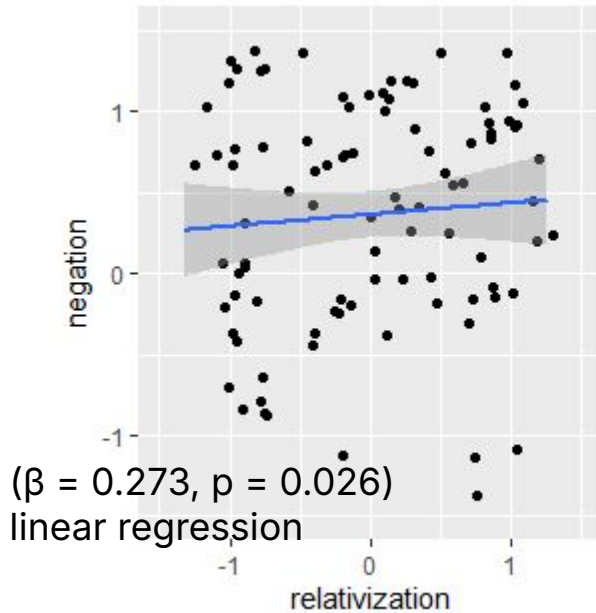
near future / present progressive *ra-*
may be present or absent in:

negation, relativization, participials

1

near future / present progressive *ra-*
may be present or absent in:

negation, relativization, participials



Periphrastic negation uses relativization

(16a) *Ntaabwo ba(ra)somá.*

NEG they.are.about.to.read.**REL**

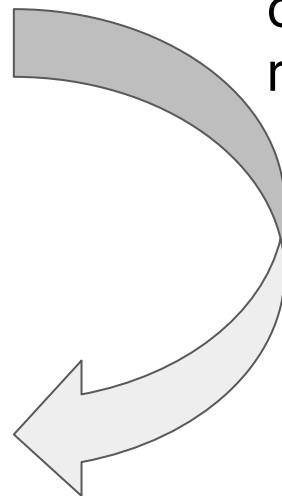
'They are not about to read.'

additional
pressure
created by
relativization?

(16b) *Nti-ba(ra)somá.*

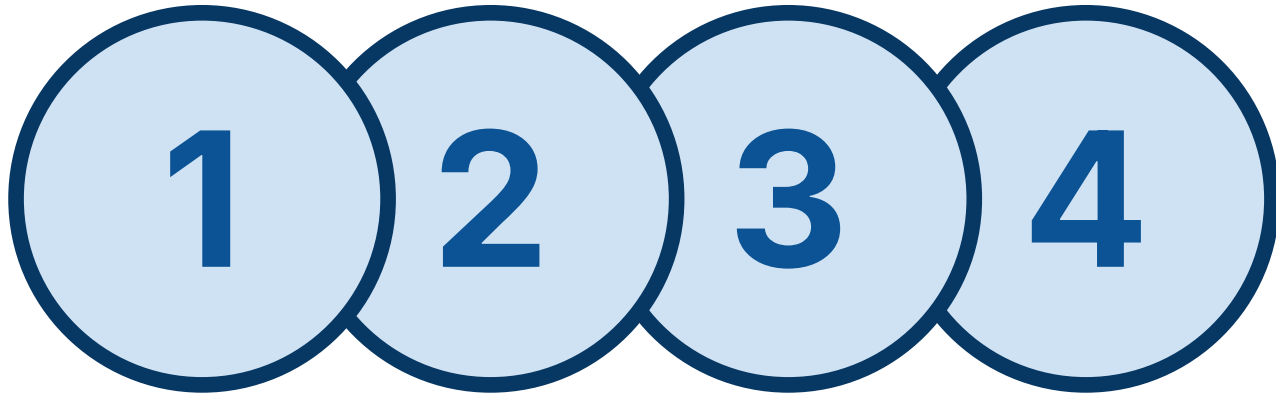
NEG-they.are.about.to.read

'They are not about to read.'

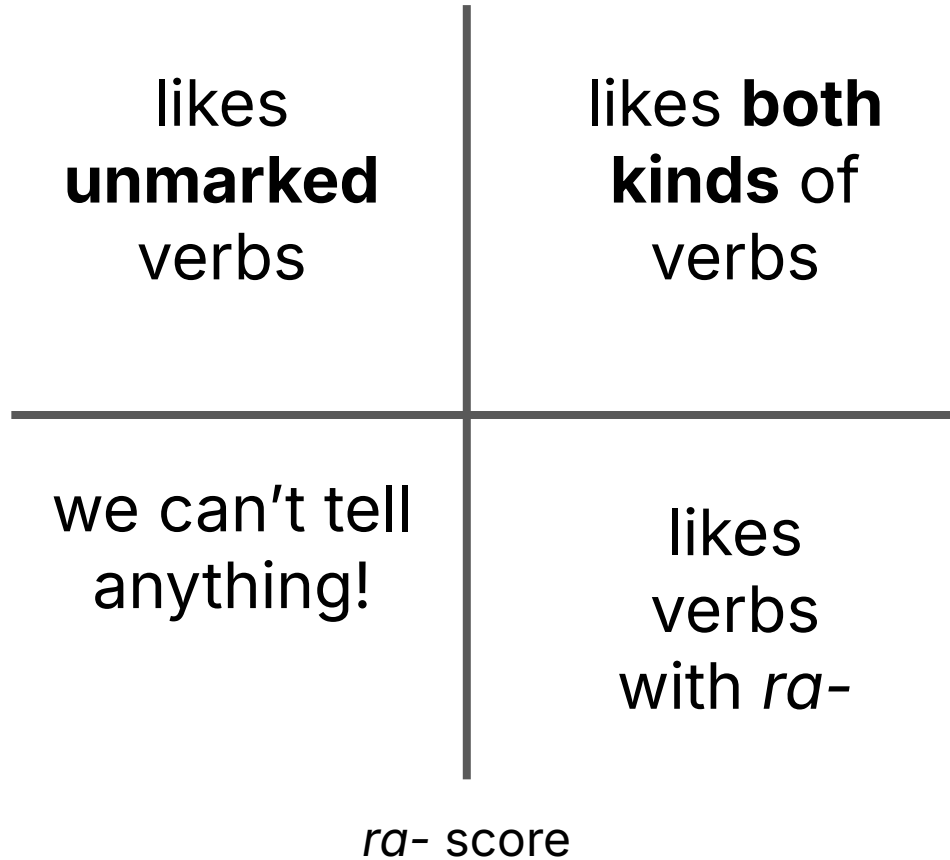


→ vary **independently**

ra- is **multiple sociolinguistic variables**
despite similarity of form and function



unmarked verb score



usage?
you have to
use one or the
other

wrapping up...

variation
exists!

wrapping up...

variation
expected, but
not from who
Rwandans
expect

wrapping up...

ra- is
**multiple
variables**

Murakoze!

'Thank you!'

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DUNCAN Phil
GLUCKMAN John
HOLLIDAY Jeff
JAMES Ki
McKENZIE Andrew
NDAYIRAGIJE Dieudonné
POLITZER-AHLES Steve
ROBERTS Gareth
SHIMA Kevine
UMUHOZA Solange
VELLEMAN Leah
WADE Lacey
WHITE Yosiane

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