

Expressive negation with proper nouns? Syntactic variation in the distribution of *Rita* in Catalan

This paper introduces a previously undescribed phenomenon in Catalan and Spanish: a *restricted* set of proper nouns and person-referring DPs appear to be grammaticalising into negative indefinites that serve expressive functions – termed here *Expressive Pseudo (Negative) Indefinites*, or EPIs. The focus of this article lies on one such common EPI, the proper noun *RITA* (originally denoting a 19th century singer), especially its behaviour in Catalan. The basic observation is outlined in (1).

- (1)
- | | | | | | |
|----|--|-----------------|--------------|--------------|-----------|
| a. | Això s’ho | creurà | Rita. | [Catalan] | |
| | this CL.REFL=CL.DO= | believe.FUT.3SG | EPI | | |
| | ‘Nobody is going to believe this / There’s no way I’m going to believe this’ (lit. ‘Rita is going to believe this’). | | | | |
| b. | Esto se | lo va | a creer | Rita. | [Spanish] |
| | this CL.REFL= CL.DO= | go.3SG to | believe.INF | EPI | |
| | ‘Nobody is going to believe this / There’s no way I’m going to believe this’ (lit. ‘Rita is going to believe this’). | | | | |

These items display *signs of grammaticalisation*: bleaching (loss of reference to a specific individual), decategorialisation (loss of the personal article *la* in Catalan before *Rita*). Similarly, some pragmaticalisation (Diewald, 2011) is also observed, namely via (inter)subjectification towards speaker attitude (negativity/disagreement towards the likelihood of an event). Significantly, a subset of native speakers *also* sanctions occurrence of *RITA* in antiveridical contexts, such as Cat. *No s’aixecarà Rita demà* (\approx ‘There’s no way we’re waking up (on time) tomorrow.’) or Sp. *Lo de la multa no se lo cree Rita la Cantora*¹ (\approx ‘As for the fine, nobody is believing this / I’m not going to believe this’). These observations plausibly signal that even more grammatical change (again, unstudied) may be at play in some speakers.

Taboo words and common nouns more broadly are well-studied as sources of expressive (grammaticalised) forms of negation (see, e.g., Horn, 2001, and subsequent work). However, literature on *proper nouns* and *person-referring* expressions seemingly undergoing polarity- or negation-related change is almost non-existent (though proper nouns are known to take on expressive, quasi-pronominal uses; see, e.g., Collins & Postal, 2012; and Song et al., 2023). The contribution of this paper is thus an *empirical* and *descriptive* one: documenting in-depth the distribution and syntactic behaviour of one such proper noun, *RITA*, in Catalan.

To this end, I present the results of a **grammaticality judgement survey** among 460 Catalan users of *RITA* (out of 1,344 participant responses), and **consultation** with individual speakers. The studies probed the acceptability of *RITA* in antiveridical contexts: (i) sentential negation, (ii) negative spread, (iii) *absolutely*-modification, (iv) neg-raising predicates, (v) negative fragments and (vi) *without*-clauses. I also investigate positional and argument structural restrictions on *RITA*’s distribution. Our data analysis is two-part: **I.** outlining the *syntactic constraints* and *distribution* of *RITA* across the speakers consulted, and how *RITA* only partly converges with existing syntactic categories; **II.** unpacking *inter-speaker variation* therein.

§1. I first systematically compare *RITA*’s distribution to existing syntactic categories; namely, Negative Concord Items (NCIs), Polarity Items (PIs) and squatives. I show *RITA* clearly **patterns as a syntactic class of its own** across all speakers surveyed, only partly overlapping with existing syntactic categories (summarized in **Table 1**). Evidence against *RITA* as an NCI or squative comes from the following distributional information: (i) *RITA* is most widely accepted when it appears without sentential negation ($W = 141382$, $p < .0001$), or if it co-occurs with negation, when it follows the NCI *ni* ($W = 26386$, $p < .0001$); (ii) subject *RITA* is preferably *post-verbal* and, if preverbal, it is significantly more acceptable with focalisation ($\chi^2(1) = 5.8359$, $p = .016$); (iii) *RITA* is strongly preferred as an external argument, and is

¹ Retrieved 2 March 2024, from <https://x.com/AgoneyCarmel/status/1326535312193937409?s=20>.

disfavoured as subject of unaccusatives ($p < .0001$) or as direct object ($p < .0001$). In contrast, sentential negation is *required* with (post-verbal) NCIs in both languages, conversely, and is optional (but commonly attested) with squatives. Focalisation and argument-structural restrictions are characteristic of none of them. Further, *RITA* also does not fall under the broader class of PIs, licensed under negation *and* non-veridical operators (interrogatives, conditionals, isolated answers, etc.). *RITA* shares with PIs only one property, licensing in isolated answers in some speakers (Cat. A: *Qui votarà a aquest?* ‘Who will vote this guy (pejorative)?’, B: *Rita!* ≈ ‘Nobody!’). Unlike NCIs, PIs and squatives, *RITA* also disallows *absolutely*-modification (e.g., Cat. **Vindrà absolutament Rita*, ‘Absolutely no one will come), and they can be embedded (*Em sembla que vindrà Rita*, ‘It seems to me that nobody will come’).

Table 1. Comparison of the distribution of NCIs, PIs, squatives and Rita

	NCIs	PIs	Squatives	<i>RITA</i>
Licensing via anti-veridical operators	✓	✓	✓	Some
Licensing via non-veridical operators	×	✓	✓	×
Pre-verbal focalisation requirement	×	×	×	✓
Argument structural restrictions	×	×	×	✓
Embeddability	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Absolutely</i> -modification	✓	✓	✓	×
Expressivity	×	×	✓	✓
Speaker-attitude orientation	×	×	×	✓

§2. I then zoom into **inter-speaker variation** in the survey data. I establish that *RITA* shows **significant convergences with NCIs in a subset of speakers**. K-means clustering analysis on the results of the survey reveal (at least) 3 significant, thus-far unreported profiles of participants. These regard the distribution of *RITA* in (anti)veridical contexts: (i) Group 1 licensed *RITA* *only* following the NCI *ni* (34%, 155 participants), but no other contexts; (ii) Group 2 extended acceptability with post-*ni* *RITA* and veridical/affirmative contexts (without *ni* and/or sentential negation), but rejected *RITA* with antiveridical contexts (37%, 168 participants); and (iii) Group 3 accepts *RITA* in most/all of the contexts presented (19%, 87 participants). This is visualised in Table 2 (with the average values being on a 1-5 rating scale).

Table 2. Four clusterings of participants obtained based on their ratings

Group	Affirmative	Negation	<i>Ni</i>	Neg-raising	<i>Without</i> -clauses	<i>N</i>
1	3.258065	1.956452	4.154839	1.693548	1.764516	155
2	4.065476	3.202381	4.328869	2.633929	2.681548	168
3	4.402299	4.063218	4.678161	4.074713	3.959770	87

I argue for the significance of Group 3’s system. I propose this indicates advanced grammaticalisation of *RITA* in Group 3, plausibly signaling a rise in negative and quantificational properties specifically in this former proper noun. This is further supported by *RITA*’s **differential behaviour vis-à-vis other EPs in this Group**, such as Cat./Sp. *ta mare/tu madre* ‘your mother’, *el Papa de Roma* ‘the Pope of Rome’: only *RITA* is readily accepted in antiveridical contexts in the speakers consulted; other EPs under sentential negation instead give rise to *double negation* readings. I interpret these results as signaling varied *degrees* of grammaticalisation/pragmaticalisation across EPs in these languages and speaker groups.

Overall, this work documents a previously undescribed phenomenon in Catalan – proper nouns that have undergone some formal change and are taking on an expressive role partly resembling the behaviour of (negative) indefinites. I have shown EPs pattern as a class of its own, overlapping only partly with relevant existing syntactic categories. I also established 3 novel groups of participants in *RITA*’s distribution, and underscored the theoretical and diachronic significance of Group 3, which sanctions *RITA* in antiveridical contexts. I conclude the *sui generis*, yet *systematic*, distribution of EPs merits further scrutiny. The data has implications for the typology of negative/polarity items, the role of proper nouns in Cat/Sp. in encoding expressivity, as well as the potential diachronic pathways of negative indefinites.