

## The Case of Rita: Incipient Expressive Negation in Catalan and Spanish Proper Nouns\*

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**ABSTRACT** This paper introduces a previously undescribed phenomenon in Catalan and Spanish, in which several proper nouns and person-referring DPs appear to have grammaticalised into negative indefinites that serve expressive functions (termed here *Expressive Pseudo (Negative) Indefinites*, or EPIs). I focus primarily on *Rita* (*la Cantaora*), the proper noun which most prototypically allows for these readings. I summarise *Rita*'s syntactic distribution and compare it to that of Negative Concord Items (NCIs), Polarity Items (PIs) and other expressive elements, such as English squatives (Horn 2001). I show that *Rita*, like other EPIs, patterns as a syntactic class of its own, sharing only some of the traits of NCIs, PIs and squatives. I conclude EPIs' *sui generis*, yet *systematic*, distribution merits further scrutiny. These patterns have some implications for the typology and diachrony of negative indefinites and underscore the productive role of proper nouns in the encoding of expressivity in these languages.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a colloquial and widespread use of (a limited set of) proper nouns and person-referring expressions in Catalan and Spanish, with particular focus on the proper noun *Rita*. The main observation at stake is the phenomenon whereby some (proper) nouns can function as apparent negative indefinites, with expressive, speaker-attitude-oriented functions. The basic pattern is outlined in (1):<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The judgements presented in this paper are from Central Catalan and Peninsular Spanish varieties, including, primarily, my own judgements, supplemented by consultation with other native speakers. Whenever examples/translations for the two languages are provided together separated by a slash, the Catalan item/expression is provided first, followed by the Spanish one. Finally, when *Rita* and other proper nouns are intended as negative-indefinite-like elements in the examples provided, they will be glossed as EPI, to indicate that they are not intended as (literal) proper nouns.

- (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').

For brevity, I will refer to these person-referring nouns/DPs behaving (partly) like negative indefinites as *Expressive Pseudo (Negative) Indefinites* (or EPIs, for short). However, I will not commit to a specific formal analysis of them here. Henceforth, too, when the EPI *Rita* is being discussed, it will be written in block capitals as *RITA*, to signal it is not being used as a proper noun.

In this paper, I introduce the patterning of these thus-far undiscussed EPIs, centering on *RITA*, arguably the most frequently used EPI in these languages. [Section 2](#) begins by describing this novel empirical phenomenon and compares the behaviour of *RITA* to already-existing categories of negation/polarity items; namely, Negative Concord Items, Polarity Items and squatives. I show that *RITA* only partly overlaps with these existing categories, constituting a class of its own whose patterning is nonetheless constrained. Data from other EPIs beyond *RITA* is also provided, demonstrating that *RITA*-type expressions are a broader phenomenon. EPIs are shown to display inter-item variation in degrees of grammaticalisation, with *RITA* being more advanced than other EPIs in the varieties of Catalan and Spanish studied here. I summarise the data presented in [section 3](#) and conclude that EPIs' *sui generis*, yet *systematic*, distribution merits further scrutiny.

[Section 4](#) then discusses the original denotations of *RITA* and other EPIs, and speculates about the possible diachronic pathway of these expressions. It also discusses their broader implications in the context of well-attested diachronic trends. Taboo words and common nouns more broadly are well-studied as sources of expressive (grammaticalised) forms of negation (see e.g. [Horn 2001](#), and many sources since). However, literature on *proper nouns* and *person-referring* expressions similarly undergoing polarity- or negation-oriented grammaticalisation is, to the best of my knowledge, almost non-existent (though proper nouns are known to take on expressive, quasi-pronominal uses; see e.g. [Collins & Postal 2012](#), and subsequent work, and [Song, Nguyen & Biberauer 2023](#)). The overall contribution of this paper is thus an empirical one: to provide one such case study of *proper nouns* resembling (expressive) negative indefinites. [Section 4](#) also offers a comparison with other crosslinguistic constructions that resemble Catalan and Spanish EPIs. [Section 5](#) concludes.

## 2 DESCRIBING RITA: THE DATA

In this section, I describe the syntactic distribution of EPIs. I begin by outlining the basic characteristics of the phenomenon, including, but not limited to, *RITA*. Subsequently, I restrict the focus to *RITA* only, as the most prototypical and widely used EPI: I compare the syntactic behaviour of *RITA* in some varieties of Catalan and Spanish vis-à-vis existing polarity/negation categories, namely Negative Concord Items (NCIs), Polarity Items (PIs) and squatives. At the end, I come back to other proper nouns and DPs that display similar behaviour to *RITA* and point out some of their distributional differences.

## 2.1 General observations

The phenomenon in this paper is outlined below. Broadly, we can observe that proper nouns and person-referring DPs, such as *Rita* or Cat. *ta mare* ‘your mother’ (a colloquial, contracted form of *la teva mare*, ‘the.FEM your.FEM mother’), appear to function similarly to negative indefinites like *nobody*. These items are generally used in main-clause contexts (2), but (more rarely) they can also be embedded (see 13 and 18 below).

- (2) a. *Si segueixen així, aprovarà Rita.* [Catalan]  
if continue.3PL like.this pass.FUT.3SG EPI  
‘If they continue like this, nobody will pass (the exam) / they won’t pass the exam.’
- b. *Pues vendrà el Papa de Roma a arreglar* [Spanish]  
well come.FUT.3SG the Pope of Rome to fix.INF  
*las cosas.*  
the things  
‘Well, nobody is going to come to fix this / ‘I’m not coming to fix this.’<sup>2</sup>
- c. *Això (no) ho farà (ni) Déu.* [Catalan]  
this not CL.DO= do.FUT.3SG not.even God  
‘No one is going to do this.’
- d. *Perdona’m, però les redaccions te les farà ta mare.*  
forgive.IMP=CL.DO but the essays CL.IO= CL.DO= do.FUT.3SG your mother  
‘Sorry, but I’m not doing these essays / no one is doing these essays.’<sup>2</sup>

There is a preference for EPIs to be subjects, as exemplified above. When they function as external arguments, EPIs are usually postverbal in both languages (note

<sup>2</sup> <https://x.com/LauritaRMadrid/status/185108997504909313?s=20>. Accessed 2 March 2024.

<sup>3</sup> <https://x.com/AnaFerrerS/status/521411305102929920?s=20>. Accessed 2 March 2024.

that Catalan and Spanish both readily allow VS orders; e.g., [Ordóñez 1998, 2007](#), [Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 2001](#)). This is also the case because, often, other constituents will have been topicalised and will appear in sentence-initial position (2c-2d). Pre-verbal subject EPIs face important restrictions, which I turn to in the next section ([subsubsection 2.2.1](#)). Nonetheless, EPIs can be used as internal arguments, albeit more rarely, as the next example shows.

- (3) *Convidaré Rita a la festa.* [Catalan]  
 invite.FUT.1SG EPI to the party

‘I’m not inviting anyone to the party / There’s no way I’m inviting anyone/them to the party.’

EPIs are expressive, encoding the attitude of the speaker. They contribute an additional layer of expressive meaning and speaker attitude: the speaker is emphasising a negative attitude towards the likelihood of what is conveyed in the proposition, cf. paraphrases like ‘There’s no way anyone/I’m doing this’ or ‘I’m not doing this’. It can also be interpreted as signalling a negative speaker attitude towards past events, e.g., Sp. *No se presentó Rita a la reunión* ‘(I’m criticising that) (absolutely) no one turned up to the meeting’<sup>4</sup>. The following quote about *RITA* from the newspaper *La Razón* sheds some light on the origin of the expression and the ‘I’-centred nature of *RITA*:

The figure of Rita la Cantaora remained for posterity in Spanish popular culture, not so much for her work as a singer and dancer, but because of an expression that became a popular proverb. Apparently, her passion for the work was such that she was willing to perform wherever she was asked, regardless of the money she earned for performing, and even to perform additional shows, whether asked by the owner of a ‘tablao’ or the organizer of a private party. She was so famous that even her own colleagues recommended her services when they were not offered enough money to perform themselves. In this way, the expression *que lo haga Rita la Cantaora* ‘let Rita la Cantaora do it’ was coined to refer to all those occasions in which one is not willing to perform an action.

([Campos 2024](#), my own translation)

EPIs can only make reference to a person, collective or animate being. Importantly, however, they have flexible person-indexing: the participants/agents involved in the action/event reported need not include the speaker and/or addressee and can refer to a 3<sup>rd</sup> person. This is observed in the translations provided here, which can involve all of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person subjects. What reading is obtained depends entirely on the context in which it is uttered and what the most likely reference of *RITA* is.

<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, my own and others’ judgement suggest a preference for *RITA* with verbs with future tense, especially, and present tense, over past tense. I set this aside here, pending a more in-depth investigation of *RITA*’s constraints across a wider range of speakers.

Henceforth, then, any translations with, e.g., a 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> person pronoun should not be taken as unambiguous/definitive; they could also very often be translated with a 3<sup>rd</sup> person subject (and vice versa), if the context is appropriate. What is systematic in their interpretation is the negative *speaker*-oriented attitude conveyed with EPIs, which is absent in canonical negative indefinites like *nobody*.

The set of EPIs is crucially limited: the most common example is the proper noun *RITA* (referring to a 19th century Spanish flamenco singer also known as *Rita la Cantaora*; see [section 4](#)), but other EPIs with similar behaviour are found: *el Papa de Roma* ('the Pope of Rome'), *Déu/Dios* ('God'), *te/ta/la teva mare* and *tu madre* ('your mother'), *el teu pare/tu padre* ('your father'), among others. I will offer a non-exhaustive list of (proper) nouns that can be used expressively as (pseudo) negative indefinites in [section 4](#). For now, exemplification will draw on *RITA*, and other commonly attested EPIs will only be discussed at the end of this section. Importantly, not all (proper) nouns in these languages can function as negative indefinites in the way shown above: e.g., Sp. *Esto lo hará Juan* cannot read as ≈ 'Nobody will do this', it can only be interpreted as 'This, John will do it'. The availability of the expressive negation-type reading is restricted to a limited set of proper nouns and person-referring DPs.

An alternative (more literal) reading of the sentences above, where each of these DPs/nouns refers to a specific person (e.g., *Rita* referring to a person with this name), is nonetheless possible.<sup>5</sup> Generally, the felicity of the possible readings (literal and EPI) is determined by both context and intonation (e.g., emphasis; see [subsection 2.2](#)).

Overall, *RITA*'s linguistic status appears unlike canonical proper nouns in Catalan and Spanish: on the one hand, *RITA* is taking on grammatical functions, namely an apparent rise in negative/quantificational and more pronominal interpretations, and expressive functions, on the other, indicated via the encoding negative speaker attitude (see [Traugott 1989](#), on (inter)subjectification). Its original reference (an individual named *Rita*) has also been bleached, and it is losing syntactic attributes associated with more lexical categories (e.g., nouns). The latter point is exemplified by the loss in Catalan of the personal article before *RITA*. Its loss is significant in signalling some grammaticalisation, as proper nouns *mandate* a preceding personal article in Catalan (but not in Spanish), either *en/el* (masculine) or *la* (feminine), e.g., *la Rita*. The EPI *Rita*, on the other hand, cannot take an accompanying personal article.<sup>6</sup> Altogether, these divergences from canonical proper nouns invite a finer-grained study of *RITA*'s distribution.

With this in place, the next section makes an initial attempt at describing the syntactic patterning of these EPIs, taking *RITA* as the primary empirical focus, and compares *RITA* to existing negation/polarity categories.

<sup>5</sup> Note that in Catalan the proper noun reading is harder to obtain for *Rita* as the personal article that accompanies proper nouns in the language is systematically absent when *RITA* is used as an EPI.

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that inter-item variation nonetheless exists, suggesting all EPIs may not be grammaticalised to the same extent (I take this up again in [subsection 2.2](#) and [section 4](#)): in contrast to *RITA*, EPIs such as Cat. *en Pere Vamba* ([section 4](#)), *do* take the personal article and furthermore cannot drop it, even if used in this expressive, negative-related construction.

## 2.2 Rita and other negative and polarity items

This section compares the distribution of *RITA* with NCIs, PIs and squatives. Judgements are drawn only from my own varieties of Catalan and Spanish<sup>7</sup> (and other consultants' judgements that agree with my own). Important points of interspeaker variation will, however, be pointed out. This will show that *RITA* is likely at a more advanced stage of grammaticalisation in varieties like my own, compared to other speakers consulted. The task of obtaining a more systematic picture of the distribution of *RITA* across other speakers and varieties remains ongoing. I refer interested readers to Bosch (2024) for results of a survey among Catalan native speakers, corroborating the trends described in this paper.

### 2.2.1 Rita and NCIs

Negative dependents, as summarised by Giannakidou & Zeijlstra (2017), can be categorised in at least two ways: 'strong' NPIs, and 'weak' NPIs, to be defined below. I begin by outlining why EPIs are *not* NCIs or 'n-words', a subset of strong NPIs (Laka 1990), despite sharing several distributional patterns with them. The following definition of NCIs from Giannakidou & Zeijlstra (2017: 7) forms our starting point:

- (4) N-words (or Negative Concord Items): an expression  $\alpha$  is an n-word iff:
- a.  $\alpha$  can be used in structures that contain sentential negation or another  $\alpha$ -expression, yielding a reading equivalent to one logical negation; and
  - b.  $\alpha$  can provide a negative fragment answer (i.e., without the overt presence of negation).

The above summarises how n-words are licensed in so-called *antiveridical* contexts, namely negative contexts. Weak Polarity Items (such as English *anything*), on the other hand, occur in *non-veridical* contexts. These include antiveridical (i.e., negative) contexts and additionally, contexts with questions, conditionals, modal verbs, imperatives, generics, habituals, disjunctions (see Giannakidou 2002: 33, for further detail).

I will now discuss *RITA*'s grammaticality in *antiveridical* contexts, and compare it to NCIs in Catalan and Spanish. I identify (minimally) four points of divergence between *RITA* and NCIs. *Non-veridical* contexts with *RITA* are discussed in the next section (subsubsection 2.2.2).

An indication that the distribution of *RITA* is partly unlike NCIs comes from its behaviour with sentential negation. First, consider the interplay between NCIs and negation in Catalan and Spanish (5). As these are non-strict Negative Concord languages, their NCIs do not always co-occur with the negative marker; whether

<sup>7</sup> For Catalan, a Central Catalan variety, primarily influenced by the region of *el Ripollès* (province of Girona), a transition area between Central Catalan and Northern Catalan (Rosellonese), but also influenced by the more central *Osona* region (province of Barcelona). Similarly for Spanish, my variety is a Peninsular Spanish variety, more specifically a variety of the Catalanian Spanish dialect. All consultants shared a similar linguistic background, namely, Central Catalan and Catalanian Spanish varieties.

or not they do is conditioned by the position of NCIs: postverbal NCIs *must* co-occur with a preceding negative marker (5a). Pre-verbal NCIs *cannot* co-occur with sentential negation in Spanish (5b); in Catalan, they need not, but they optionally can (5c) (see also Giannakidou & Zeijlstra 2017, for a review on Negative Concord languages).

- (5) a. *\*(No) vino nadie.* [negative doubling; Spanish]  
 not come.PST.3SG n-body  
 ‘Nobody came.’
- b. *Nadie (\*no) vino.* [no negation with pre-verbal NCIs]  
 n-body not come.PST.3SG  
 ‘Nobody came.’
- c. *Ningú (no) menja.* [optional negation with pre-verbal NCIs; Catalan]  
 n-body not eat.3SG  
 ‘Nobody eats.’

On the other hand, *RITA* is most commonly used *without* sentential negation, even if postverbal. Some contexts in which *RITA* would be very natural are given below:

- (6) a. *N'estic farta. El farà Rita aquest* [Catalan]  
 CL.REFL=be.1SG fed.up.FEM CL.DO= do.FUT.3SG EPI this  
*projecte.*  
 project  
 ‘I’m fed up. I’m not doing this project / there’s no way I’m finishing this project’.
- b. *Los perros de los vecinos solo hacían que* [Spanish]  
 the dogs of the neighbours only do.IMPF.3SG that  
*ladrar esta noche. Evidentemente, ha dormido Rita.*  
 talk.INF this night obviously AUX.HAVE.3SG sleep.PTCP EPI  
 ‘The neighbours’ dogs were barking constantly last night. Obviously, we couldn’t sleep at all.’

For *some* speakers, including myself, *RITA* is nevertheless compatible with sentential negation. However, there is significant inter-speaker variation in this respect: in a simple poll among 39 Catalan native speakers,<sup>8</sup> 17 (46%) accepted sentences like (7a) with *RITA*; the remaining 22 (54%) would not utter these examples. (7) offers some examples of postverbal *RITA* with negation, including one taken from social media interactions.

<sup>8</sup> The majority were Central Catalan speakers, with a minority from North-Western areas of Catalonia.



- (7) a. **No** *s'aixecarà* **Rita** *demà*. [Catalan]  
 not CL.REFL=wake.up.FUT.3SG EPI tomorrow  
 'There's no way we're waking up (on time) tomorrow.'
- b. **No** *vindrà* **Rita** *al gimnàs!*  
 not come.FUT.3SG EPI to.the gym  
 'Nobody is going to come to the gym / I'm not coming to the gym!'
- c. *Lo de la multa no se lo cree* [Spanish]  
 the of the fine not CL.REFL= CL.DO= believe.INF  
**Rita la Cantaora.**  
 EPI  
 'As for the fine, nobody is believing this / I'm not going to believe this.'<sup>9</sup>

For those speakers that disallow sentential negation with *RITA*, the structure can only be remediated either by dropping the negator or by adding the minimiser *ni* 'not even' before *RITA*. This stands to reason, insofar as *ni* behaves like an NCI in Catalan/Spanish, and so can be licensed by the negative marker (Espinal & Llop 2022).

Therefore, some speakers can sanction negative markers with *RITA* postverbally. *RITA* is accepted without negation by all speakers that allow its expressive use, and *RITA* most naturally occurs without the sentential negation marker, even in its most common postverbal position. This is clearly different from NCIs, which *require* negation when postverbal.

Secondly, *RITA* is subject to positional restrictions which do not apply to Catalan/Spanish NCIs. *RITA* is preferably postverbal and, if preverbal, it must be focalised and receive emphatic prosody (8). Postverbal subjects in Catalan and Spanish are known to exhibit focal properties (i.a. Belletti 2004, Ortega-Santos 2008, Etxepare & Uribe-Etxebarria 2008, Forcadell 2013). The restriction in (8) suggests that *RITA* has kept this requirement *also* preverbally, thus behaving unlike canonical preverbal (generally topical) subjects in these languages (e.g., Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998: and subsequent work). As (8b) shows, this option with preverbal focalisation is also available to non-EPI *Rita*, i.e. a structure with focalised preverbal *Rita* could also be concerned with an individual named *Rita*. This appears to be true for all EPIs, see subsection 2.4.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> <https://x.com/AgoneyCarmel/status/1326535312193937409?s=20>. Accessed 2 March 2024.

<sup>10</sup> This preverbal restriction could feasibly help explain a point not addressed earlier, namely why *preverbal RITA* does not readily take negation even in speakers that permit negation with postverbal *RITA*. My own judgements, which readily permit postverbal *RITA* with negation, indicate that this construction appears largely ungrammatical (e.g., \**RITA no vindrà demà* 'There's no way anyone is coming tomorrow').



- (8) a. \*?**Rita** trobarà feina aquí. [Catalan]  
 EPI find.FUT.3SG work here  
 (intended) ‘Nobody will find a job here’ (alternative reading: ‘Rita will find a job here’<sup>11</sup>).
- b. **RITA** trobarà feina aquí.  
 EPI find.FUT.3SG work here  
 ‘NOBODY will find a job here / There’s no way I’ll find a job here’ OR  
 ‘RITA will find job here (not someone else).’

At least in Catalan and Spanish, NCIs generally do not mandate focalisation in preverbal position (although cf. Giannakidou 2001, on the emphatic NCIs *TIPOTAS* and *KANENAS* in Greek). Compare, for example, the sentences below, which can be uttered with neutral prosody, but are not natural with initial focus.

- (9) a. **Cap**/?**CAP** dels estudiants va presentar els [Catalan]  
 none of.the students AUX.PST.3SG hand.in.INF the  
*deures a l’hora.*  
 homework at the.hour  
 ‘None of the students handed in the homework on time.’
- b. **Nadie**/?**NADIE** se podía creer que las [Spanish]  
 no-one CL.REFL= can.IMPF.3SG believe.INF that the  
*medusas inmortales existieran.*  
 jellyfish immortal exist.SUBJ.IMPF.3SG  
 ‘No one could believe that immortal jellyfish existed.’

Thirdly, *RITA* differs from ‘prototypical’ NCIs with respect to *absolutely/almost* modification. NCIs in various Romance languages permit *absolutely/almost* modifiers under negation (see Quer 1993, Giannakidou 2000). This does not carry over to *RITA*, with or without sentential negation. Contrast (10) and (11).

- (10) a. *No he vist absolutament/quasi ningú.* [Catalan]  
 not AUX.HAVE.1SG see.PTCP absolutely/almost no-one  
 ‘I have seen absolutely/almost no-one.’
- b. *No he visto absolutamente/casi nadie.* [Spanish]  
 not AUX.HAVE.1SG see.PTCP absolutely/almost no-one  
 ‘I have seen absolutely/almost no-one.’

<sup>11</sup> Although odd and only marginally acceptable in Catalan because of the lack of personal article. The same holds for (8b).

- (11) a. \*(No) *he* *vist* ***absolutament/quasi*** *Rita*. [Catalan]  
 not AUX.HAVE.1SG see.PTCP absolutely/almost EPI  
 (intended) ≈ ‘I have seen absolutely/almost no-one.’
- b. \*(No) *he* *visto* ***absolutamente/casi*** *Rita*. [Spanish]  
 not AUX.HAVE.1SG see.PTCP absolutely/almost EPI  
 (intended) ≈ ‘I have seen absolutely/almost no-one.’

Finally, as noted earlier, *RITA* is expressive in nature, conveying negative speaker attitude towards an event or action. This is unlike canonical NCIs (and other types of negative indefinites more broadly, such as NPIs or negative quantifiers), which can be uttered in discourse-neutral contexts (see 5 above).<sup>12</sup>

However, there are respects in which the behaviour of NCIs and *RITA* align substantially, notwithstanding inter-item variability with other EPIs (which I briefly address in subsection 2.4). Particularly, many antiveridical contexts allow *RITA*. This concerns (i) licensing via neg-raising predicates, (ii) negative spread, (iii) ability to provide negative fragment answers and, less clearly, (iv) *without*-clauses. In all cases, *RITA* appears grammatical at least for the speakers studied.

I consider first neg-raising predicates. These predicates comprise a restricted set of matrix verbs (*think*, *believe*, *suppose*, etc.), which have two important properties in the present context: structures with neg-raising predicates have been shown to involve raising of negation from the embedded to the matrix clause (see Hoeksema 2017, for a review) and, concomitantly, they can license NPIs in the embedded clause, due to the negator that originates in the same clause (12a). Non-neg-raising predicates, on the other hand, do not license NPIs (12b).

- (12) a. I **don’t** think he lifted **a finger** to help. [neg-raising predicate]  
 b. \*I **don’t** mean that he lifted **a finger** to help. [non-neg-raising predicate]

The contrast in (13) exemplifies the grammaticality of *RITA* with neg-raising predicates (13a) vis-à-vis its ungrammaticality with predicates that do not involve neg-raising (13b). This behaviour is expected of NCIs (and NPIs more generally); these require licensing by a clause-mate negation when postverbal and this negation can move to a higher clause iff it contains a neg-raising verb (as in 13a).

- (13) a. *No* *crec* *que* *vingui* [neg-raising predicate; Catalan]  
 not think.1SG that come.SUBJ.3SG  
***Rita***  
 EPI  
 ‘I don’t think (absolutely) anyone will come / I think (absolutely) no one will come.’

<sup>12</sup> The clear tendency for *RITA* to surface as a subject (subsection 2.1) would also be another factor that makes *RITA* distinctly non-NCI-like.

- b. \**No dic que vindrà* [non-neg-raising predicate]  
 not want.1SG that come.FUT.3SG

**Rita.**

EPI

‘(intended) I am not saying that anyone/no-one came.’

Additionally, *RITA* displays an ability to license lower NCIs, matching the second component of the definition of NCIs in (4a), namely ‘ $\alpha$  can be used in structures that contain [...] another  $\alpha$ -expression’. Examples with pre-verbal (focalised) *RITA* and a lower NCI turn out, again, to be grammatical, at least in these varieties of Catalan.

- (14) a. *A aquest ritme, RITA aprovarà* [negative spread; Catalan]  
 at this rate EPI pass.FUT.3SG

**cap examen.**

no exam

‘At this rate, nobody will pass any exams / there’s no way anyone is passing any exams.’

- b. ??*Esto huele fatal. RITA se va a comer* [Spanish]  
 this smell.3SG terrible EPI CL.REFL= go.3SG to eat.INF

**nada.**

nothing

‘This smells terrible. There’s no way we’re eating any of this.’

In Catalan and Spanish (and non-strict Negative Concord languages more generally), a pre-verbal n-word can sanction a postverbal one, without requiring sentential negation; a construction termed *negative spread*. This is the case in Sp. *Nadie comió nada* ‘Nobody ate anything’ (lit. ‘nobody ate nothing’). (14a), then, effectively illustrates that *RITA* occurs in negative spread structures in Catalan. At a surface level, the extent to which (14a) features negative spread could be contested, insofar as negative spread is generally taken to require a negative item (often assumed to be endowed with [NEGATIVE] or similar) to license the postverbal NCI. This may be unexpected of *RITA prima facie*, given its proper-noun origin. However, note the following contrast between *RITA* and other proper nouns in Catalan: *RITA* can sanction a postverbal NCI, but, crucially, proper nouns in Catalan (e.g., *Joan*) systematically cannot. They require accompanying sentential negation (see 15).

- (15) *A aquest ritme, en Joan \*(no) aprovarà cap examen.* [Catalan]  
 at this rate the John not pass.FUT.3SG no exam

‘At this rate, John won’t pass any exams.’

This suggests the formal make-up of *RITA* is distinct from canonical proper nouns in the language. Potentially, the former may have acquired (or may be acquiring) some inherent negative force or negation-related formal features, which sanction these constructions, at least in the Catalan variety discussed here (I come back to this in section 3). Note, importantly, that negative spread appears more degraded in Spanish, relative to Catalan, according to my own and other consultants' judgements (14b). It is possible this disparity between Catalan and Spanish judgements may hold for other examples given in this section. I leave it to future work to compare judgements across both languages, not least because the acceptability of sentential negation with *RITA* displays significant inter-speaker variation.

Thirdly, EPIs can provide negative fragment answers, given appropriate contexts.<sup>13</sup> This is, again, like Catalan/Spanish NCIIs, which can serve as negative fragments, e.g., Cat. *Qui s'ha menjat el pastís? Ningú* 'Who ate the cake? Nobody'. (Weak) NPIs, on the other hand, cannot, cf. English *Who did you talk to? \*Anybody*.

- (16) A: *Qui vindrà a córrer?* [isolated answer; Catalan]  
 who come.FUT.3SG to run.INF  
 'Who is going running (with me)?'  
 B: *Rita! (Amb aquesta calor...)*  
 EPI with this heat  
 'Nobody! / I'm not coming! (given this heat...).'

The final antiveridical context I will discuss is *without*-clauses, which are antiveridical and thus license NCIIs (Giannakidou 1999), as below.

- (17) a. *El partit es va acabar sense que* [Catalan]  
 the match CL.REFL= AUX.PST.3SG finish.INF without that  
*els equips concedissin cap gol.*  
 the teams concede.SUBJ.IMPF.3PL no goal  
 'The match ended without the teams conceding any goal.'
- b. *Intenta levartarte sin despertar* [Spanish]  
 try.IMP get.up.INF=CL.REFL without wake.up.INF  
*a nadie, por favor.*  
 DOM no-one for favour  
 'Try to get up without waking up anyone, please.'

<sup>13</sup> Note that not all contexts seem equally felicitous. Consider for instance Sp. *¿Quién vino al final? ¡Rita!* 'Who came in the end? No one!', which appears significantly more degraded than the examples provided above. Additionally, not all speakers appear to sanction negative fragments (thanks to an anonymous reviewer for a workshop at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona for pointing these aspects out). As with the rest of this paper, I note that the above represent my judgements, which have also been corroborated with speakers that agree with my own.

Eliciting judgements of *RITA* (or other EPIs) for these contexts is, however, not straightforward, as they rarely occur in these constructions and consultants judge them as artificial. My own judgements and some of my consultants' suggest, however, that *without*-clauses can probably allow EPIs given an appropriate context, like the one below:

- (18) A: A en Joan el devia veure marxar [Catalan]  
 DOM the John CL.DO= should.IMPF.3SG see.INF leave.INF  
 tothom, no?  
 everyone no

'Everyone must have seen John leave, right?'

- B: Què va! El tio va marxar sense que se  
 INTJ the guy AUX.PST.3SG leave.INF without that CL.REFL=  
 n'adonés Rita!  
 CL.PART=notice.SUBJ.IMPF.3SG EPI

'Not at all! The guy (somehow) managed to leave without anyone/a single person noticing!'

In summary, then, *RITA* matches the distribution of NCIs to a significant extent, due to its compatibility with antiveridical contexts: namely, sentential negation (for some speakers), neg-raising predicates, negative spread (in Catalan, at least), negative fragments and, possibly, *without*-clauses. However, this is only a partial match. Crucially, recall that *RITA*'s behaviour with respect to sentential negation is *distinct* from NCIs. NCIs are *licensed* by and require sentential negation (or another antiveridical operator); *RITA* *permits* negation for a subset of speakers, but is grammatical without it for any speaker who has this construction. Specifically, then, *RITA* differs from canonical NCIs in these languages in four important respects: (i) its grammaticality *without* sentential negation when postverbal; (ii) its pre-verbal focalisation requirement; (iii) its incompatibility with *absolutely/almost* modification; and (iv) its expressive, speaker-attitude-oriented nature.

### 2.2.2 Rita and weak (N)PIs

Having established in the previous section that EIs are not (fully) strong NPIs (of the n-word kind), I now turn to *RITA*'s status relative to (weaker) Polarity Items (PIs) and its acceptability in non-veridical contexts. A broad definition of Polarity Items (encompassing strong and weak) is given below (Giannakidou 2001: 669).

- (19) A linguistic expression  $\alpha$  is a *polarity item* iff:
- a. The distribution of  $\alpha$  is limited by sensitivity to some semantic property  $\beta$  of the context of appearance; and
  - b.  $\beta$  is (non)veridicality, or a subproperty thereof:  $\beta \in \{\text{veridicality, non-veridicality, antiveridicality, modality, intensionality, extensionality, episodicity, downward entailingness}\}$ .

As discussed until now, strong NPIs appear with antiveridical contexts, whilst weak NPIs appear in a wider array of non-veridical and non-negative contexts. As I will demonstrate, *RITA* does not fit the typology of weak PIs.

A PI analysis of EPIs proves unfeasible due to one key aspect, its (in)compatibility with non-veridical contexts. Consider the examples below as non-veridical contexts where PIs are licensed in both Catalan and Spanish:<sup>14</sup>

- (20) a. *Si tienes **cualquier** problema, por favor* [conditional; Spanish]  
 if have.2SG any issue for favour  
*llámame.*  
 call.IMP=CL.IO  
 ‘If you have any issues, please call me.’
- b. *Que vol **res**?* [interrogative; Catalan]  
 Q wants anything  
 ‘Does s/he want anything?’
- c. *Ho va veure abans que **ningú** ho veiés* [before]  
 it AUX saw before that anybody it see.SUBJ.3SG  
 ‘S/he saw it before anybody did.’

(Tubau et al. 2023: 12)

Crucially, EPIs do not overlap with PIs in any of these contexts, as they are ungrammatical (see 21).

- (21) a. \**Si truca **Rita**, avisa’m.* [conditional; Catalan]  
 if call.3SG EPI warn.IMP=CL.DO  
 (intended) ‘If anyone/nobody calls, let me know.’
- b. \**Que vindrà **Rita**?* [interrogative]  
 that.INT want.3SG EPI  
 (intended) ‘Is anyone/nobody coming?’
- c. \**Lo vio antes que se* [before; Spanish]  
 CL.DO= see.PST.3SG before that CL.REFL=  
*diera cuenta **Rita**.*  
 give.IMP.F.SUBJ.3SG count EPI  
 ‘S/he saw it before anybody realised.’

<sup>14</sup> Note that some of the items given as PI examples above are the same as the NCIs discussed so far (e.g., Cat. *ningú, res*). See Espinal & Tubau (2016) and Tubau, Exteberria & Espinal (2023) on this point: they analyse Catalan items like *ningú* as cases of lexical ambiguity/homophony between two separate homophonous items, an NCI and a PI (see also Garzonio & Poletto 2023, on this context, who treat similar NCIs in Italo-Romance as non-homophonous items with a wider range of licensing environments).

Therefore, *RITA* is not licensed under non-veridical contexts, in contrast to PIs. This then disqualifies *RITA* as a subclass of the definition in (19).

### 2.2.3 Rita and squatitives

I finish the empirical discussion on *RITA* by briefly considering its behaviour relative to other expressive forms of negation/polarity items, specifically to so-called *squatitives* (Horn 2001). These are English expressions of scatological origin (*jack shit*, *(diddly) squat*, *fuck-all*, etc.). They have taken on negative force via Jespersen's Cycle, a diachronic cycle whereby the original (single) marker of negation (often weakened) is strengthened through some additional word (e.g., minimisers such as *a drop*, *a crumb*). This new reinforcer can in turn take over as the negative marker proper, leading to the loss of the original negative marker. Squatitives are thought to be undergoing the cycle at present, given they can appear both in the presence of sentential negation (as reinforcers) or in its absence (as the main marker of negation), without interpretive differences, as shown in (22):

- (22) a. I didn't sleep **squat** last night.  
 b. There have been a couple of veterans who have done **squat** since they've been here.

(Horn 2001: 186)

In the first case (22a), squatitives behave like NPIs (e.g., English *anything*). In the second (22b), they bring their own negative force, behaving more like negative quantifiers (e.g., English *nothing*).

Squatitives are licensed in antiveridical contexts, like NCIs. Examples in (23), from Thoms, Adger, Heycock & Smith (2017), illustrate their behaviour with sentential negation, neg-raising and negative spread:

- (23) a. He doesn't know **jackshit/fuck all**. [sentential negation]  
 b. He knows **jackshit/fuck all**.

- (24) a. I don't think he brought **jackshit**. [neg-raising predicate]  
 b. \*I didn't say he brought **jackshit**. [non-neg-raising predicate]

- (25) **Nobody** said **fuck all**. [negative spread]

(Thoms et al. 2017)

On the other hand, squatitives cannot be licensed in non-veridical and non-negative contexts on an NPI reading (e.g., *anything*, *anyone*) or PI reading (e.g., *something*, *someone*):



- (26) a. \*Did he say fuck all?  
 b. \*The last person to say fuck all was John.

(Thoms et al. 2017)

The squatitives in (26) are only grammatical if intended as negative quantifiers (e.g., English *nobody*), in which case uses such as those above are licit.

The foregoing is sufficient to probe the extent to which squatitives pattern like *RITA*. I suggest, again, that *RITA* only partly overlaps with squatitives. On the one hand, squatitives are licensed in antiveridical contexts (see 23), as also seems to be the case for *RITA* for the Cat./Sp. varieties considered here. The Janus-nature of squatitives (allowing both absence and presence of preceding negators) is shared with some Catalan/Spanish speakers, as is the inter-speaker variability with respect to the presence/absence of negation.

However, squatitives are not person-referring, whilst all EPIs do necessarily refer to a person/human collective. Squatitives can surface in non-veridical contexts with a negative quantifier (NQ) reading (but *not* on an NPI/PI reading). This stands in contrast to *RITA*, which is not accepted in, e.g., interrogatives, even if the intended interpretation is a NQ reading. Cat. \**Ha vingut Rita?* is ungrammatical, and cannot read as either ‘Did anyone/someone come?’ (PI reading) nor ‘Did nobody come?’ (NQ reading) (see also 37 later for other EPIs).

Additionally, squatitives permit *absolutely* modification (27), unlike *RITA* (subsubsection 2.2.1), and they do not have systematic positional restrictions; they can appear both preverbally and postverbally, without any other constraints, such as focalisation or emphatic prosody (subsubsection 2.2.1):

- (27) a. He knows absolutely **fuck all** about this. [absolutely modification]  
 b. He kens absolutely **nihin** about this.

(Thoms et al. 2017)

- (28) I published this a year ago and **fuck all** has [pre-verbal squatitives]  
 been done.<sup>15</sup>

Squatitives, then, share some of the NCI-like behaviour of *RITA*, namely licensing in antiveridical contexts, as well as their expressive nature. However, they differ in the possibility of *absolutely/almost* modification, in their licensing in non-veridical contexts, in whether they refer to individuals/people and in their positional preferences/restrictions.

### 2.3 Interim summary

So far, this paper has centred on one EPI, *RITA*, in some varieties of Catalan and Spanish. I have shown that it can be licensed in a range of antiveridical contexts

<sup>15</sup> <https://x.com/Vltra.MK/status/1653762970072272899?s=20>. Accessed 2 March 2024.

(sentential negation<sup>16</sup>, neg-raising, negative spread, negative fragment answers, *without*-clauses), paralleling some of the behaviour of NCIs. Nonetheless, I concluded that *RITA* still only partly overlaps with existing classes of polarity/negation items (specifically, NCIs, PIs and squatives), given its behaviour with non-veridical contexts and *absolutely*-modification, among others. Before summarising the entire empirical presentation in more detail in section 3, I now briefly describe how *RITA*'s behaviour contrasts with other EPIs exemplified in (2).

#### 2.4 The behaviour of EPIs beyond Rita

The general behaviour observed in *RITA* — namely, its ability to function partly as a negative indefinite with speaker-attitude-oriented interpretations — is also displayed in a wider range of proper nouns and person-referring DPs in Catalan and Spanish, as briefly outlined in (2). These are what we referred to initially as Expressive Pseudo (Negative) Indefinites (EPIs). A (non-exhaustive) list of EPIs and their origin will be provided in section 4. Here, I limit myself to illustrating that EPIs are a broader phenomenon in Catalan and Spanish (observed beyond *RITA* itself) and I compare some of the behaviour of other EPIs with *RITA*. Based on their syntactic distribution, I show that *RITA* is plausibly at a more advanced stage of grammaticalisation compared to other EPIs, which behave unlike *RITA* in several respects.

Some illustrations of EPIs outside *RITA* are repeated below from (2):

- (29) a. *Pues vendrà el Papa de Roma a arreglar* [Spanish]  
 well come.FUT.3SG the Pope of Rome to fix.INF  
*las cosas.*  
 the things  
 ‘Well, nobody is going to come to fix this / ‘I’m not coming to fix this.’<sup>17</sup>
- b. *Això (no) ho farà (ni) Déu.* [Catalan]  
 this not CL.DO= do.FUT.3SG not.even God  
 ‘No one is going to do this.’
- c. *Perdona’m, però les redaccions te les farà*  
 forgive.IMP=CL.DO but the essays CL.IO= CL.DO= do.FUT.3SG  
*ta mare.*  
 your mother  
 ‘Sorry, but I’m not doing these essays / no one is doing these essays.’<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> In this context, it is inappropriate to speak of ‘licensing’ proper, insofar as *RITA* is grammatical without negation and so does not actually *require* ‘licensing’ by negation.

<sup>17</sup> <https://x.com/LauritaRMadrid/status/185108997504909313?s=20>. Accessed 2 March 2024.

<sup>18</sup> <https://x.com/AnaFerrerS/status/521411305102929920?s=20>. Accessed 2 March 2024.

(29) illustrates the primary construction in which all EPIs can be found and are grammatical, namely positive affirmative sentences where the EPI is postverbal and/or negative affirmative sentences with the accompanying NCI *ni*<sup>19</sup>. As far as (29) is concerned, then, other EPIs pattern interchangeably with *RITA*. In contrast to *RITA*, however, the broader range of EPIs appears generally ungrammatical (or, minimally, much more degraded) in antiveridical contexts. Observe the behaviour of the EPIs above with sentential negation in these dialogues, where the intended interpretation is one of single negation:

- (30) a. \**No lo va a comprar tu madre.* [Spanish]  
 not CL.DO= go.3SG to buy.INF EPI  
 (intended) ‘No one is going to buy this / I’m definitely not buying this.’  
 Alternative readings: ‘Your mother will not buy this.’
- b. \**No es saltarà classe Déu!* [Catalan]  
 not CL.REFL= jump.3SG class EPI  
 (intended) ‘No one is skipping class / I’m definitely *not* skipping class.’  
 Alternative readings: ‘God is not skipping class.’

Unlike *RITA*, these items categorically cannot appear under the scope of negation and receive a single sentential negation reading, in contrast to *RITA* in (7), where a single negation reading *was* possible. They have to occur without sentential negation (as shown in 30) or with the NCI *ni* as a preceding minimiser. The latter option is illustrated below:

- (31) a. *No lo va a comprar \*(ni) tu madre.* [Spanish]  
 not CL.DO= go.3SG to buy.INF not.even EPI  
 ‘No one is going to buy this / I’m definitely not buying this.’ Literal readings: ‘Not even your mother will buy this.’
- b. *No es saltarà classe \*(ni) Déu!* [Catalan]  
 not CL.REFL= jump.3SG class not.even EPI  
 ‘No one is skipping class / I’m definitely *not* skipping class.’ Literal reading: ‘Not even God is skipping class.’

Crucially, however, if a sentential negator is used (without *ni*) *and* the context is appropriate, then the reading can become one of *double negation*. Compare (30) with (32), where supporting context has been added:

<sup>19</sup> Note that not all speakers will readily use all of the EPIs presented in this paper. Nonetheless, with respect to the observation above, the point still holds that, generally, native speakers’ use of the EPIs in their system is most commonly found in this type of construction.

- (32) A: *Tienes demasiados videojuegos, no te compres* [Spanish]  
 have.2SG too.many videogames not CL.IO= buy.SUBJ.2SG  
*el nuevo FIFA. Guarda el dinero para otra cosa.*  
 the new FIFA save.IMP the money for other thing

‘You have too many videogames, don’t buy the new FIFA game. Save this money for something else.’

B: \**¡No lo va a comprar tu madre! Llevo tiempo*  
 not CL.DO= go.3SG to buy.INF EPI bring.1SG time  
*esperándolo.*  
 waiting=CL.DO

(intended) ‘No one is going to buy this.’ Alternative reading: ‘I’m going to buy it anyway (regardless of what you are telling me)! I’ve been waiting for it for a long time’ (double negation reading).

- (33) A: *Fes el favor d’anar a classe aquesta* [Catalan]  
 make.IMP the favour to-go.INF to class this  
*tarda, que tens examen divendres.*  
 afternoon that.CONJ have.2SG exam Friday

‘Please go to class this afternoon, you have an exam on Friday.’

B: \**No es saltarà classe Déu! Jo ja no puc*  
 not CL.REFL= jump.3SG class EPI I already not can.1SG  
*més.*  
 more

(intended) ‘I’m definitely *not* skipping class.’ Alternative reading: ‘I’m skipping class for sure (regardless of what you are telling me), I’ve had enough’ (double negation reading).

Notice that, with additional context, the examples in (30) now permit double negation readings in the speakers consulted.

Overall, then, the availability of a single negation reading with sentential negation appears to be a feature of *RITA* for some speakers. It does not carry over to other EPIs, which either ban sentential negation or, in certain contexts, receive double negation readings. Assuming that the uses of *RITA* with negation are diachronically more recent,<sup>20</sup> it suggests higher degree of grammaticalisation for *RITA*, vis-à-vis other items, as noted earlier.

This point is again endorsed by other EPIs’ behaviour with neg-raising predicates and negative spread. These are similarly degraded, as with sentential negation above:

<sup>20</sup> Possibly supported by the fact that there is little attestation of these uses with Google Search or on Twitter/X, while the use without negative markers is widely attested.

- (34) a. \**No creo que venga* [neg-raising; Spanish]  
not think.1SG that come.SUBJ.3SG

*el Papa de Roma.*

EPI

(intended) ‘I don’t think anyone will come / I think no one will come / there’s no way anyone will come, etc.’ Alternative reading: ‘I don’t think the Pope of Rome will come.’

- b. \**No crec que ho solucioni ta mare això* [Catalan]  
not think.1SG that CL.DO= fix.SUBJ.3SG EPI this

(intended) ‘I don’t think anyone will fix this / I think no one will fix this / there’s no way anyone will fix this, etc.’ Alternative reading: ‘I don’t think your mother will fix this.’

- (35) a. ?\**TA MARE aprovarà cap examen.* [negative spread; Catalan]  
EPI pass.FUT.3SG no exam

(intended) ‘There’s no way I/we/anyone is passing any exams.’

- b. \**EL PAPA DE ROMA limpiará nada.* [Spanish]  
EPI clean.FUT.3SG nothing

(intended) ‘I’m not cleaning any of this / no one is going to clean anything.’

They only pattern alike in negative fragment answers, where EPIs *can* serve as negative fragments:

- (36) A: *¿Quién piensa solucionar esto?* [fragment answer; Spanish]  
who think.3SG fix.INF this

‘Who is going to fix this?’

B: *¡Tu madre / el Papa de Roma / Dios!...*

EPI

‘No one! / I’m not going to do this’, etc.

That these EPIs are licit as negative fragment answers and lead to double negation readings should not be taken to suggest that their behaviour should be derived syntactically following the treatment of other polarity/negation items that pattern similarly in these contexts, such as negative quantifiers (e.g., English *nobody*; see Weir 2020; Espinal, Puig-Mayenco, Etxeberria & Tubau 2023, for a review). In other words, EPIs’ grammaticality in (only) these two contexts does not imply they are acquiring or have acquired any (inherent, syntacticosemantic) negative force, e.g., that they bear [NEG] and have a negative universal quantifier semantics. The interpretation in (36) could be a pragmatic by-product, as I speculate in the following section, and *not* a result of a change in these EPIs’ featural/formal status. From

this pragmatic perspective, *tu madre* and others are interpreted as  $\approx$  *nobody* by virtue of their expressive nature and use conditions. Namely, *tu madre*, *el Papa de Roma*, etc., are felicitously used only if the speaker feels negatively about a certain proposition/event; whence an interpretation such as ‘I’m not doing this’ could be achieved for negative fragments, without needing to resort to a change in their formal content. Double negation interpretations could, potentially, receive a similar treatment, where the negative interpretation provided by the sentential negation would be ‘cancelled out’ by this, also negative, pragmatic inference. This stands in contrast to the discussion in [subsection 2.2.1](#) on *RITA*, which did invite an analysis where it is acquiring some negative force. Its behaviour with neg-raising and negative spread lead to this tentative conclusion, as both constructions are generally analysed as requiring a negation-related feature of some kind on the relevant item to sanction them.

Therefore, EPIs beyond *RITA* do not behave at all like NCIs or squatives, bar in negative fragments, which are plausibly a pragmatic, *not* syntactic, result. Similarly like *RITA*, they are also sharply ungrammatical in non-veridical contexts where PIs are licensed, as shown below:

- (37) a. \**Si ve Déu a la botiga, avisa'm,* [conditional; Spanish]  
 if come.3SG EPI to the shop warn.IMP=CL.DO  
*que surto a fer un encàrrec un moment.*  
 that.CONJ go.out.1SG to make.INF an errand a moment  
 (intended) ‘If anyone/nobody comes to the shop, let me know, I’m going out for a moment to run an errand.’
- b. \**Que vindrà ta mare a posar* [interrogative; Catalan]  
 that.INT come.FUT.3SG EPI to put  
*pau?*  
 peace  
 (intended) ‘Is anyone/nobody going to come to calm things down?’

Overall, other EPIs are only licit in affirmative contexts without sentential negation and as negative fragment answers. Thus, *RITA* is singled out, in the present Cat./Sp. varieties, as an EPI potentially further advanced in the process of grammaticalisation and pragmaticalisation, shown primarily by its behaviour in antiveridical contexts. The broader range of EPIs diverge significantly in distribution from *RITA*, and also do not pattern as NCIs, PIs or squatives. However, they share with *RITA* their expressive, speaker-attitude dimension, as well as bleaching from a lexical item (a proper noun denoting a *specific* individual) into an item acquiring more pronominal and quantificational functions. The next section summarises the conclusions extracted so far.

## 3 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Taking stock, then, of the above, by using *RITA* as the central case study, how EPIs differ from NCIs, PIs and squatives, despite sharing some of their traits. The key data came from *RITA*'s interaction with antiveridical and non-veridical operators, its positional restrictions and its general expressive and speaker-oriented nature. Some inter-item and inter-speaker variation with *RITA* and other EPIs was also pointed out, outlining how *RITA* seems more grammaticalised than other EPIs for several speakers.

Firstly, we have observed *RITA* is licensed in at least five antiveridical contexts. For the varieties studied here, (i) it permits sentential negation, (ii) negative spread, (iii) it is licensed with neg-raising predicates (but *not* with non-neg-raising ones), (iv) it can provide negative fragment answers and (v) it can appear in *without*-clauses. These hold for speakers where grammaticalisation of *RITA* seems fairly 'advanced'. There appears to be significant inter-speaker variation in this domain, as shown briefly for judgements with sentential negation. Most importantly, however, its most common use does *not* feature an accompanying sentential negator. This pattern holds across all speakers of Catalan and Spanish consulted, whether 'advanced' or not. In other words, sentential negation is *not* required to 'license' *RITA*, unlike with NCIs. *RITA* also does not permit *absolutely/almost* modification and requires focalisation preverbally. Based on these observations (among others), I argued that *RITA* only partly parallels NCIs and squatives. *RITA* also falls outside the remit of prototypical PIs, as it is ungrammatical with non-veridical operators. [Table 1](#) synthesises these observations.

Importantly, *RITA*'s behaviour with negative spread and negative fragment answers is suggestive: elements permitting these structures (NCIs, notably) are sometimes analysed as contributing negation themselves ([Giannakidou 2002](#), [Weir 2020](#), [Tubau et al. 2023](#)). This thus raises the question of whether (some) EPIs, e.g., *RITA*, are truly specified as inherently negative in the syntax (e.g., bearing [NEG] and contributing a negative semantics), or alternatively, if a non-negative approach to NCIs is adopted, if *RITA* bears an uninterpretable [*u*NEG] feature (per [Zeijlstra 2004, et seq.](#)). This would help explain *RITA*'s availability in negative spread and negative fragment answers ([Giannakidou 2002](#)).

Alternatively, it is conceivable that the negation-like reading in EPIs could stem (at least partly) from a pragmatic/semantic after-effect (*not* from EPIs' featural content), as briefly discussed in [subsection 2.4](#). Namely, the negative attitude in EPIs may be associated by convention and the felicity of EPIs is determined by its use conditions, e.g., '*RITA* is felicitously used if the speaker feels negatively about a certain event, utterance, action, etc.'. A semantic/pragmatic account of EPIs' negative 'flavour' could help explain the behaviour of EPIs beyond *RITA*, which are only allowed as negative fragments, among all the antiveridical contexts examined ([subsection 2.4](#)). However, whether this 'pragmatic after-effect' is sufficient to derive, for example, negative spread with *RITA* is far from clear. Possibly, then, (at least some) EPIs may indeed be acquiring some negative properties (the precise nature of which remains open, see [Espinal et al. 2023](#) for a review of approaches).



	NCIs	PIs	Squatitives	<i>RITA</i>
Licensing via antiveridical operators	✓	✓	✓	Some
Licensing via non-veridical operators	✗	✓	✗	✗
Pre-verbal focalisation requirement	✗	✗	✗	✓
Embeddability	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Absolutely/almost</i> -modification	✓	✓	✓	✗
Expressivity	✗	✗	✓	✓
Speaker-attitude orientation	✗	✗	✗	✓

**Table 1** Comparison of the behaviour of NCIs, PIs, squatitives and Rita.

The empirical contribution of this paper then raises the need for a model that can incorporate the behaviour of *RITA* and EPIs, and it expands the range of case studies on expressive material and its syntactic distribution, presenting a novel phenomenon where *proper nouns* are seemingly acquiring some (expressive) negative/quantificational uses.

#### 4 SOME DIACHRONIC NOTES ON EPIs AND CROSSLINGUISTIC COMPARISON

I finish this paper by briefly reviewing proper nouns and DPs in Catalan and Spanish that fit the behaviour of EPIs, and how they might have come to develop uses as ‘EPIs’. Some crosslinguistic comparison with structures similar to EPIs is given at the end.

Table 2 gives a non-exhaustive list of the kinds of expressions that behave in this manner and their original denotations. Out of these, *Txapote* is generally used in political contexts only (as illustrated in 38 below); the rest have a much less restricted distribution.

Examples with EPIs not illustrated thus far are given in (38). The extent of EPIs’ productivity in Table 2 is speaker-specific. While the first 6 EPIs, especially *RITA*, are common in both day-to-day speech and social media data, others represent more idiosyncratic speaker-specific constructions. One consultant, for example, also provided *en Pere Vamba* and *Josep el fuster* as examples with comparable behaviour in his variety.

EPI	Language(s)	Original denotation/translation
Rita (la Cantaora)	Cat./Sp.	19th century Spanish singer/artist
El Papa de Roma	Cat./Sp.	'The Pope of Rome', head of the worldwide Catholic Church
Déu, Dios	Cat./Sp.	'God'
La teva/te/ta mare, Tu madre	Cat./Sp.	'Your mother'
El teu pare, Tu padre	Cat./Sp.	'Your father'
El Tato	Cat./Sp.	19th century Spanish bullfighter (Antonio Sánchez 'el Tato')
Txapote	Spanish	Former member of the 'hard wing' of <i>Euskadi Ta Askatasuna</i> (ETA)
En Pere Vamba	Catalan	King of the Visigoths from 672 to 680
Josep el fuster	Catalan	Reference to St Joseph of Nazareth

**Table 2** (Incomplete) list of EPIs in Catalan and Spanish.

- (38) a. *Eso lo hará tu padre, porque madre mía,* [Spanish]  
 that CL.DO= do.FUT.3SG EPI because mother mine  
*una cosa es aconsejar y otra mandar*  
 one thing is advise.INF and another order.INF  
 'I'm not going to do this, because, my goodness, one thing is giving advice, another is giving orders'.<sup>21</sup>
- b. *Que te vote Txapote*<sup>22</sup> / *Que*  
 that.EXCL CL.DO= vote.SUBJ.3SG EPI that.EXCL CL.DO=  
*la homenajee Txapote*<sup>23</sup>  
 honour.SUBJ.3SG EPI  
 'I'm not going to vote for you / No one should vote for her' and 'I'm not going to honour her / No one should honour her'.

<sup>21</sup> <https://x.com/trinuela/status/1421797719019040769?s=20>. Accessed 10 March 2024.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.laopiniondezamora.es/buzzeando/2024/02/21/viene-lema-viral-vote-txapote-89741907.html>. Accessed 10 March 2024.

<sup>23</sup> [https://x.com/AJoseTomas\\_/status/1764528566333546749?s=20](https://x.com/AJoseTomas_/status/1764528566333546749?s=20). Accessed 10 March 2024.

- c. *Anirà a la festa en Pere Vamba!* [Catalan]  
 go.FUT.3SG to the part the EPI

‘I’m not going to the party!/No one will go to the party’

(Nil Ramos, p.c.)

- d. *Demà vols anar a caminar a les 6* [Catalan]  
 tomorrow want.2SG go.INF to walk.INF at the six

*del matí!? S’aixecarà Josep el fuster!*  
 of.the morning CL.REFL=get.up.FUT.3SG EPI

‘You want to go on a walk at 6am tomorrow!? I’m not getting up that early!’

(Nil Ramos, p.c.)

The question, then, remains how and why this set of proper nouns/DPs have developed into EPIs, and not any other proper nouns or DPs in the languages. I propose that their development into EPIs proceeded via a conventional implicature. First, notice that a commonality of all EPIs in Table 2 is that they denote ‘powerful’ entities in a broad sense, some with religious links. This is clearly the case for expressions such as ‘God’, ‘the Pope of Rome’ and ‘St Joseph’, denoting religious and/or omnipotent entities; for ‘your mother/father’, as family referents, with ‘power’/responsibility over their children; for *en Pere Vamba*, a reference to the king of the Visigoths; and for *Txapote*, former member of ETA, responsible for assassinations and terrorist activity. It also likely holds for *Rita (la Cantaora)*, as summarised in subsection 2.1, where the original Spanish colloquial expression *Que lo haga Rita (la Cantaora)* ‘let Rita do it’ implied only Rita would want to/be capable of doing a specific job/task. This has now extended to several other structures, as shown in this paper.

In particular, we could propose, speculatively, that the emergence of EPIs might have recruited ‘power’ (or similar) as part of a conventional implicature, whereby ‘Rita is going to do this’ came to roughly imply ‘No one/I/we won’t do this (only Rita, God, etc. will)’. Alternatively, one could imagine that the use of these particular EPIs was a way for speakers to ‘displace’ responsibility onto an entity which they have no control over (e.g., God, the Pope of Rome, Rita, etc.<sup>24</sup>), in which case the implicature could have proceeded from ‘let Rita do this’ to ‘No one/I/we won’t do this (get someone else to do this)’. These proposed pathways (cases of *subjectification* in Traugott’s 1989, sense) could thus shed some light on why specifically these proper nouns served as ‘good candidates’ for EPIs. Given a sufficiently high frequency of this inference, this implicature could have become conventionalised and, additionally, could have further altered the item’s featural make-up and/or category via grammaticalisation/pragmaticalisation (see, e.g., Gutzmann 2011, 2015;

<sup>24</sup> Thanks to James Morley for mentioning this other possibility.

Davis & Gutzmann 2019; Sailer 2018, for precedents suggesting conventional implicatures can lead to expressive uses of previously truth-conditional-only content). Their diachronic origin inevitably remains an open question, but this discussion does underline the extent to which EPIs' possible sources deviate from those typically involved in the diachrony of negative items and in Jespersen's Cycle (e.g., minimisers).

Besides determining the precise formal status of EPIs and their possible origin, future work should also investigate whether similar constructions exist in other languages and to what extent they overlap with the EPIs discussed here. Some Romanian structures are reminiscent, with *dracul* ('the demon/devil') being used with comparable functions to *RITA*. Similarly, *Bulă* (a name for a fictional stock character) is used to refer to a 'generalised silly character/person', often in jokes. This is illustrated in the following dialogues:

- (39) A: *Ai văzut cât de multe lungă* [Romanian]  
 AUX.HAVE.2SG see.PTCP how of very long  
*e tema de la matematică?*  
 the homework of the maths

'Have you seen how long the homework for maths is?'

B: *Da, sunt 30 de probleme...*  
 yes are 30 of problems

'Yes, there are 30 problems...'

A: *Dracul le va face.*  
 devil.the CL.DO= will.3SG do.INF

'The devil will do them.'

(Sergiu Petrușca, p.c.)

- (40) A: *Bucătăria miroase îngrozitor. Cine duce gunoiul?*  
 kitchen.the smell.3SG horrible who take.3SG garbage.the

'The kitchen smells horrible. Who takes the garbage out?'

B: *Bulă duce gunoiul...*  
 Bulă take.3SG garbage.the

'Bulă takes the garbage out...'

A: *Așa mă gândeam și eu, Ionut este neglijent ca de obicei.*  
 then CL.REFL= think.IMPF.1SG and I Ionut is negligent as-usual

'That's what I thought, Ionut is neglectful as usual.' (*Bulă* ≈ 'no one will do something', but both Speaker and Addressee have a specific 'silly' person in mind that they know won't do it, namely Ionut)

(Sergiu Petruşca, p.c.)

So-called ‘Demonic Negation’ in Irish (after [McCloskey 2009, 2018](#)) also displays parallels with *RITA*-type sentences, being a type of emphatic negation with *dheamhan* (‘demon’). However, its distribution is distinct: it can appear in two forms ‘DemNeg + XP’ and ‘Bare DemNeg’ (41a and 41b below, respectively) and is generated in CP, according to [D’Antuono \(2024\)](#) (see [D’Antuono’s](#) paper for further details). Its interpretation also varies from the EPIs discussed here. Demonic Negation, according to [D’Antuono](#), is a semantic expression of *sentential* negation.

- (41) a. *Dheamhan duine a bhuaileann sé.* [DemNeg + XP; Irish]  
 demon person that hits he  
 ‘Not one person does he hit.’
- b. *Dheamhan a mbuaileann sé aon duine.* [Bare DemNeg]  
 demon that hits he any person  
 ‘Indeed, he doesn’t hit anybody.’

(D’Antuono 2024: 2)

The German expression *einen/den Teufel tun* ‘do a/the devil’ (abbreviated as TT) is similarly used for emphatic rejection (42), as summarised in [Sailer \(2018\)](#). See also the set expression in German *Ich verstehe nur Bahnhof*, ‘I don’t understand anything / It’s all Greek to me’, lit. ‘I understand only train station’, for another case of a ‘bleached’ and expressive use of a noun.

- (42) *Ich werde einen/den Teufel tun, dir zu helfen.* [German]  
 I will.1SG a/the.ACC devil do.INF you to help.INF  
 ‘I’ll be damned if I help you / I will certainly not help you.’

(Sailer 2018: 402)

The parallels with *RITA* are again only partial: TT is analysed as contributing a negative conventional implicature, which entails the negation of the proposition; this resembles the proposals above for EPIs. However, there are various points of divergence between TT and EPIs. Among other aspects, the expression is analysed as a Positive PI by [Sailer](#), as it cannot occur under the scope of negation. This is unlike *RITA*, for some speakers, but like the rest of EPIs. TT furthermore requires a *personal agent* as the subject, which is also the subject of second part of the construction (the *zu*-clause). This person-referring aspect of TT is shared with EPIs (which are very often also agents), but EPIs do not have a set subject of the activity in the proposition, even if the structure is strongly speaker-attitude-oriented (it can be a 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> person, given an appropriate context, [subsection 2.1](#)).

Other examples of proper nouns undergoing some bleaching include Italian nouns *Tizio*, *Caio* and *Sempronio* (originally denoting three Roman politicians), which are

now used to indicate any person taken as an example (Valentina Colasanti, p.c.; see also the placeholder names Spanish *fulanito/a* and *zutanito/a* or English (*little*) *John Doe*). These however have not taken on negative interpretations, unlike EPIs.

- (43) *Già, queste sanzioni che vanno bene per tizio ma non* [Italian]  
 yes these sanctions that go.3PL well for Tizio but not  
*per Sempronio. Chissà sulla base di cosa viene presa*  
 for Sempronio who.knows on.the basis of what come.3SG take.PTCP  
*la decisione.*  
 the decision

‘Yes, these sanctions are good for some people but not for others. Who knows on what basis the decision is made.’<sup>25</sup>

Notice, again, that for both Romanian, Irish and German, a ‘powerful’ (often religious/spiritual) entity is recruited for emphatic/expressive and negation-related functions. Whether this trend, observed in Catalan, Spanish, Romanian, Irish and German, is simply accidental is an empirical question for future work.

All in all, we have seen the case of *RITA* and EPIs is novel in two respects. First, taboo words and common nouns more broadly are well-studied as sources of expressive (grammaticalised) forms of negation (see, i.a., Horn 2001, Postma 2001, Hoeksema & Napoli 2008, Napoli & Hoeksema 2009, Gutzmann 2015, Thoms et al. 2017, Sailor 2017, 2020, Sailor 2018, Erschler 2023). EPIs provide case studies on nouns, but most notably *proper* nouns, seemingly developing into expressive forms of negation. Relative to taboo words, this is a highly underdiscussed source of (expressive) negative indefinites (setting aside the EPIs of religious origin, for which comparable data in other languages is well-discussed; see, e.g., Napoli & Hoeksema 2009).

Secondly, their (proper) noun and potential ‘power’-related origin is also significant in the broader context of Jespersen’s Cycle and sources for negative indefinites. Nouns denoting a small unit of measurement (so-called minimisers) are very often the sources for strengthened postverbal negation or emphatic negation more generally. In contrast, EPIs have arisen from proper nouns/DPs, and, more speculatively, from expressions denoting power-related entities. This is a new ‘topic’ in possible origins of expressive negative markers or taboo words (see Napoli & Hoeksema (2009), who primarily discuss primarily religion, health, sex and scatological terms). Note that *RITA*, and several other EPIs (e.g., ‘your mother/father’), cannot be subsumed under the oft-discussed religious sources, suggesting a novel, previously undiscussed source for these kinds of expressions. EPIs then contribute to existing literature on the encoding of expressive and quantificational/pronominal functions via person-referring expressions and proper nouns, a relatively understudied area (see, e.g., the work on ‘imposters’ by Collins & Postal 2012, and subsequent work;

<sup>25</sup> <https://x.com/lamanuzzicri/status/1711714877562146826?s=46&t=fui1wVRJTim3v2iCMFnjdw>. Accessed 2 March 2024.

and compare also EPIs with the non-canonical pronouns discussed by Song et al. 2023 in Afrikaans, especially, but also Vietnamese and Mandarin).

## 5 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I presented a previously undescribed phenomenon in Catalan and Spanish – proper nouns that have undergone some formal change and have started to take on an expressive role partly resembling the behaviour of negative indefinites, dubbed here ‘EPIs’. With particular focus on *RITA*, I have compared their behaviour to existing polarity/negation categories: NCIs, PIs and squattives. However, I concluded that they pattern as a *distinct*, though partially overlapping, class. This, I argued, makes EPIs a linguistically peculiar phenomenon, worthy of further study. I also speculated about the diachrony and source of EPIs, identifying ‘power’ as a common denominator among the proper nouns and DPs from which the EPIs discussed here originate. These results, albeit highly preliminary and exploratory, have some theoretical implications, insofar as they may open new research avenues on diachronic sources of polarity/negation items and expand our grasp of grammaticalisation/pragmaticalisation pathways of expressive material.

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