


# The case of Rita: negative indefinites and expressives in Catalan and Spanish

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## ↓ Key observation ↓

**Proper nouns** in Catalan and Spanish appear to have grammaticalised into *negative indefinites* with *expressive* functions (henceforth, ‘expressive indefinites’, EIs).


- EIs pattern as a syntactic **class of its own** with *systematic* distribution, sharing only some traits of NCIs, PIs, squatives and others.

## Background

### Negation in Catalan and Spanish

- Non-strict negative concord languages*: whether negative indefinites co-occur with the negative marker depends on their position. Preverbal NCIs *cannot* (though optionally in Catalan).
-  **Diachrony of negative indefinites and negative markers**
- Horn (2001) on squatives: ‘quasi-NPIs’ such as (*jack*)*shit*, *crap*, *beans*, *fuck all*, etc.
- Colloquial emphatic *xuj*-negation in Erschler (2023) in Russian (*xuj* ‘dick’).
- ✓ Taboo and scatological words well-discussed as sources of expressive forms of negation through grammaticalisation.
-  However, **little/no data so far on proper nouns and person-referring expressions** → contribution here.

## The phenomenon

 Basic observation: some (*proper*) nouns as apparent negative indefinites.

- (1) a. Això s’ho creurà **Rita** (Catalan)  
this CL.REFL=CL.DO= believe.FUT.3SG EI  
‘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 EI  
‘Nobody is going to believe this / There’s no way I’m going to believe this’ (lit. ‘Rita is going to believe this’)

- Restricted set of proper nouns: *Rita*, notably, but also *el Papa de Roma* ‘the Pope of Rome’, *Déu/Dios* ‘God’, *te mare/tu madre* ‘your mother’, among several others.

## Data

### ① First, EIs ≠ Negative Concord Items, NCIs (syntactically)

→ Post-verbal EIs usually banned with a preceding negative marker.

- (2) \*No lo va a comprar tu madre (Spanish)  
not CL.DO= go.3SG to buy.INF EI  
(intended) ‘No one is going to buy this’ (alternative readings: ‘Your mother won’t buy this’ / ‘I’m definitely buying this’, double negation-like reading)

→ Pre-verbal subject EIs require focalisation and emphatic prosody.

- (3) \*?Rita/✓ RITA trobarà feina aquí. (Catalan)  
EI find.FUT.3SG work here  
(intended) ‘Nobody will find a job here’ (alternative reading: ‘Rita will find a job here’)

→ In Catalan, subject EIs are incompatible with negative markers when in pre-verbal position (e.g., Cat. \*RITA no anirà de vacances ‘Nobody will go on holiday’).

→ EIs are preferably postverbal.

### ② EIs ≠ squatives

→ Squatives can be used as both NPIs and NCIs (Horn, 2001).

→ Squatives can’t be person-denoting.

### ③ EIs ≠ Polarity Items, PIs

→ EIs cannot be licensed in most non-veridical contexts (e.g., conditional, interrogative, etc.)

- (4) \*Si truca Rita, avisa’m. (conditional)  
if call.3SG EI warn.IMP=CL.DO  
(intended) ‘If anyone/nobody calls, let me know’

- This is unlike Cat. NCIs (often indistinguishable from PIs), and Cat./Sp. PIs more broadly.




	NCIs	PIs	Squatives	EIs
Licensing via anti-veridical operators	✓	✓	✓	✗ <i>Rita ok</i>
Licensing via non-veridical operators	✗	✓	✓	✗
Pre-verbal focalisation requirement	✗	✗	✗	✓
Embeddability	✓	✓	✓	✓
Absolutely-modification	✓	✓	✓	✗
Expressivity	✗	✗	✓	✓
Speaker-attitude orientation	✗	✗	✗	✓

Table 1: Comparison of the behaviour of NCIs, PIs, squatives and EIs

## Q Resulting challenge

How can we incorporate EIs in a (syntactic) typology of negative indefinites and/or polarity items?

### Some (speculative) notes on their diachrony

- Signs of grammaticalisation*: some bleaching, decategorialisation (note loss of personal article in Catalan).
- Pragmaticalisation** (Diewald, 2011): acquired, (inter)subjective expressive meaning → speaker attitude orientation, negativity/disagreement towards a specific utterance/context.
-  A possible diachronic pathway — **power**: EIs systematically make reference to a powerful entity/person (broadly interpreted).
- Implicature/metaphor-driven pathway: ‘Only Rita/God/etc. can do this, no one else can’, ‘Let Rita/God/etc. do this, no one else can’.  ‘Rita will do this’ → ‘No one will do this’.
-  Open question: is the negative force of EIs (syntactically) inherent or a pragmatic result?

## Conclusion

- Systematic distribution, predictable contexts of ungrammaticality.
- However, *distinct* from existing syntactic categories.
- Inter-item variation: degrees of grammaticalisation.
- Implications for the diachronic sources of indefinite pronouns. Underscores the productive role of proper nouns in the encoding of expressive language in Cat./Sp.

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