

# The case of Rita

**Incipient expressive negation in Catalan and Spanish proper nouns?**

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*Functional categories, dimensions of meaning, and expletiveness*  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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# Introduction

# Overview

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**A proper noun, *Rita*, appears to function similarly to *negative indefinites* ( $\approx$  *nobody*)**

- (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').

- c. Si segueixen així, (no) aprovarà **Rita.** [Catalan]  
if continue.3PL like.this not pass.FUT.3SG EPI

'If they continue like this, nobody will pass (the exam) / they won't pass the exam.'

- Undescribed case of apparent **expressive negative indefinites** (Catalan and Spanish), henceforth **Expressive Pseudo (Negative) Indefinites**, or EPIs.

## Today

- Describing, for the first time, the syntactic distribution of the proper noun *Rita* as (apparent) EPI and its inter-speaker variation.
- Native speaker consultation (Catalan and Spanish), supplemented by a **grammaticality judgement survey** among 1,344 Catalan speakers, of which 460 use the expression (ongoing).

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  - Native speaker consultation (Catalan and Spanish), supplemented by a **grammaticality judgement survey** among 1,344 Catalan speakers, of which 460 use the expression (ongoing).
  - The upshot: **A change-in-progress?**
- **Rita** patterns as a *syntactic class of its own*, sharing only some of the traits of existing categories, such as Negative Concord Items, Polarity Items and squatives.
- Significant **inter-speaker variation**: different patterns of syntactic distribution across groups of speakers.
- **Implications** for a syntactic typology of polarity/negative items and diachronic sources of related elements.

# The plan today

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## 1. Introduction

## 2. Describing Rita: The Data

- 2.1 The phenomenon: general observations
- 2.2 Rita vs other negative and polarity items
  - Rita and NCIs
  - Rita and (weak) PIs
  - Rita and squatives

## 3. Implications and Conclusions

## 4. References

## **Describing Rita: The Data**

## The phenomenon: general observations

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**A proper noun, *Rita***, appears to function similarly to *negative indefinites* ( $\approx$  *nobody*<sup>1</sup>)

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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').
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if continue.3PL like.this not pass.FUT.3SG EPI  
'If they continue like this, nobody will pass (the exam) / they won't pass the exam.' (lit. 'Rita is going to pass the exam')

↪ Preference for *Rita* as *subject*, specifically **postverbal subject**.

↪ **Expressive**, encoding **speaker attitude**: negative attitude towards the likelihood of what is conveyed in the proposition or towards past events.

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<sup>1</sup>Simplifying grossly! To be refined now.



## The phenomenon: general observations

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- **Part of a possibly broader phenomenon:** *limited* set of proper nouns and person-referring DPs can behave (at least superficially) similarly.

→ **Focus on Rita only here**

- (3) a. *Pues vendrá 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>

- 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 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>3</sup>

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

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

## The phenomenon: general observations

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- Some signs of grammaticalisation and pragmaticalisation:
  1. **Grammaticalisation**: apparent rise in negative/quantificational and more pronominal interpretations.
    - **Bleaching**: original function as proper nouns/DPs is lost, including reference to a specific individual.
    - **Decategorialisation**: loss of syntactic attributes associated with more lexical categories → loss of personal article *la* before *Rita* in Catalan (otherwise compulsory with proper nouns)<sup>4</sup>.
  2. **Pragmaticalisation** (Diewald, 2011): propositional meaning > metacommunicative, discourse interactional meaning.
    - **Novel encoding of negative speaker attitude** → (inter)subjectification (Traugott, 1989).
- Overall, **proper noun** seemingly undergoing *some change*. Its study may be **instructive** in at least three ways:
  - Placement of EPIs in a syntactic typology of negative/polarity items.
  - Development of expressive language (see relevant data in, i.a., Speas and Tenny, 2003; Gutzmann, 2015; Wiltschko and Heim, 2016; Trotzke, 2017; Wiltschko, 2014, 2021).
  - Possible sources of negation/polarity-related items.

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<sup>4</sup>In *most*, but not all, speakers.

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**Next up:** Comparing *Rita's* distribution with existing syntactic categories

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### N-words (or Negative Concord Items)

(Giannakidou and Zeijlstra, 2017, 7)

N-words (or Negative Concord Items): an expression  $\alpha$  is an n-word iff:

- $\alpha$  can be used in structures that contain sentential negation or another  $\alpha$ -expression, yielding a reading equivalent to one logical negation; and
- $\alpha$  can provide a negative fragment answer (i.e., without the overt presence of negation).

### Veridicality and non-veridicality

- A propositional operator  $F$  is **veridical** iff  $Fp$  entails  $p$ :  $Fp \Rightarrow p$ ; otherwise,  $F$  is **nonveridical**.
- A nonveridical operator  $F$  is **antiveridical** iff  $Fp$  entails *not*  $p$ :  $Fp \Rightarrow \neg p$ .

- **Upcoming:** *Rita's* behaviour in *antiveridical* contexts, compared to NCIs in Catalan and Spanish.
- I identify (minimally) **five points of difference** between *Rita* and NCIs, but also important **convergences**.

## Rita and NCIs: sentential negation


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- Catalan and Spanish as Non-strict Negative Concord languages.

- (4) 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.'

## Rita and NCIs: sentential negation

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 **First point of divergence:** *Rita* is most commonly used **without sentential negation**, even if postverbal, or negation + NCI *ni*.

- (5) a. *N'estic           farta. El       farà       Rita aquest* [Catalan]  
CL.REFL=be.1SG fed.up 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, (no) ha dormido (ni) Rita*  
talk.INF this night obviously not AUX.HAVE.3SG sleep.PTCP not.even EPI

'The neighbours' dogs were barking constantly last night. Obviously, we couldn't sleep at all.'

## Rita and NCIs: sentential negation

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❗ It can nonetheless **co-occur with sentential negation for some speakers**.

- *Rita* is gradually sanctioning sentential negation in some speakers.

(6) 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

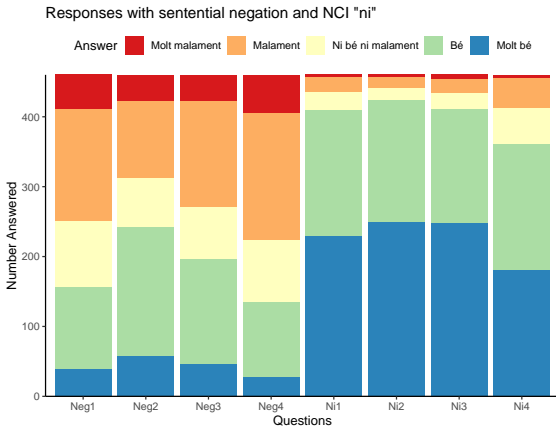
As for the fine, nobody is believing this / I'm not going to believe this.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup><https://x.com/AgoneyCarmel/status/1326535312193937409?s=20>.

## Rita and NCIs: sentential negation

- Highly statistically significant difference between acceptability of clauses with sentential negation vs *ni*-accompanied *Rita* ( $W = 26386, p < .0001$ ). **However**, significant proportion of speakers judged the former as "Good" or "Very good".






## Rita and NCIs: positional restrictions and focalisation

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~ Negation *can* (but need not) precede postverbal *Rita* for some speakers; for others, it is entirely ungrammatical. NCIs, in contrast, *require* negation when postverbal.

 **Second point of divergence: positional restrictions** on *Rita* which do not apply to Catalan/Spanish NCIs. *Rita* is preferably postverbal and, if **preverbal**, it must be **focalised** and receive **emphatic prosody**.

(7) 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>6</sup>)

b. **RITA** trobarà feina aquí  
EPI find.FUT.3SG work here

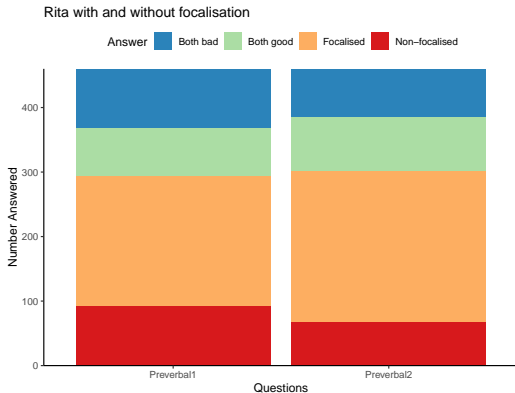
'NOBODY will find a job here / There's no way I'll find a job here' OR 'RITA will find job here (not someone else).'

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<sup>6</sup>Although odd and only marginally acceptable because of the lack of personal article.

## Rita and NCIs: sentential negation


- Significantly higher proportion of acceptability of *Rita* when focalised pre-verbally ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.8359, p < .016$ ).



- Postverbal** subjects known to display **focal properties** in Cat./Sp. (i.a., Belletti, 2004; Ortega-Santos, 2008; Etxepare and Uribe-Etxebarria, 2008; Forcadell, 2013) → **preverbal Rita appears to have kept this requirement**, unlike canonical preverbal (topical) subjects in these languages.

## Rita and NCIs: argument structure and *ni*

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 **Third point of divergence:** argument structure preferences on *Rita* (dependent on the presence of NCI *ni*) which do not apply to Catalan/Spanish NCIs.

- Postverbally and without *ni/no*: transitive and unergative frames preferred, compared to unaccusatives. *Rita* dispreferred as *object*.
- With *ni*: differences disappear; all contexts rated as "Good" or "Very good".

(8) a. *El farà Rita aquest examen .* [Catalan]  
CL.DO= do.3SG.FUT EPI this exam

'There's no way we're/I'm doing this exam.'

b. *L'aire condicionat no va. Treballarà Rita.*  
the-air coinditioning not work.3SG work.3SG.FUT EPI

'The air-con isn't working. I'm not working today!/There's no way we can work today!'

c. *Mira qué cola de coches. Llegará Rita a tiempo!* [Spanish]  
look what queue of cars arrive.3SG.FUT EPI on time

'Look at the car queue! No way we're arriving on time.'

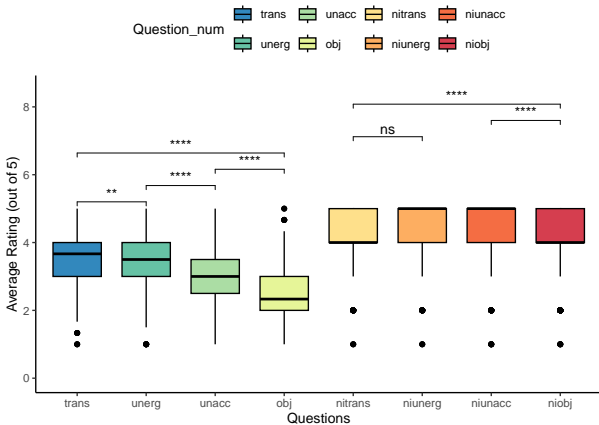
d. ??*Llamaré (a) Rita, no estoy de humor!*  
call.1SG.FUT DOM EPI not be.1SG in mood

'I'm not going to call anyone/them/him, I'm not in a good mood!'

## Rita and NCIs: argument structure and *ni*

- Statistically highly significant differences between argument structure frames, and differences between exclusion/inclusion of NCI *ni*.

Responses with verbs with different argument structure with/without NCI *ni*



## Rita and NCIs: argument structure and *ni*


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**Table 1:** Pairwise comparisons using Kruskal-Wallis test

	<b>trans</b>	<b>unerg</b>	<b>unacc</b>	<b>obj</b>	<b>nitrans</b>	<b>niunerg</b>	<b>niunacc</b>
<b>unerg</b>	0.0028	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>unacc</b>	< .0001	< .0001	-	-	-	-	-
<b>obj</b>	< .0001	< .0001	< .001	-	-	-	-
<b>nitrans</b>	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	-	-	-
<b>niunerg</b>	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	0.1178	-	-
<b>niunacc</b>	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	0.2890	0.6358	-
<b>niobj</b>	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001	< .0001

## Rita and NCIs: *absolutely*-modification

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 **Fourth point of divergence:** 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.

(9) 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.'

(10) a. *\*(No) he vist absolutament/quasi Rita.* [Catalan]  
not AUX.HAVE.1SG see.PTCP absolutely/almost EPI

(intended)  $\approx$  '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)  $\approx$  'I have seen absolutely/almost no-one.'

 **Fifth point of divergence:** *Rita* is **expressive** in nature, conveying **negative speaker attitude** towards an event or action. Canonical NCIs (and other types of negative indefinites more broadly, such as NPIs or negative quantifiers), can be uttered in discourse-neutral contexts.

- Overall:

1. Behaviour with sentential negation (notwithstanding inter-speaker variation)
2. Positional restrictions and focalisation
3. Argument structure restrictions
4. *Absolutely*-modification
5. Expressivity

→ **In these respects, *Rita* ≠ NCIs.**

- **Next: points of convergence** in antiveridical contexts, namely neg-raising predicates, negative spread, negative fragment answers and *without*-clauses.

## Rita and NCIs: neg-raising predicates

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- NPI-licensing properties of neg-raising predicates (*think, believe, suppose, etc.*)

- (11) 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]

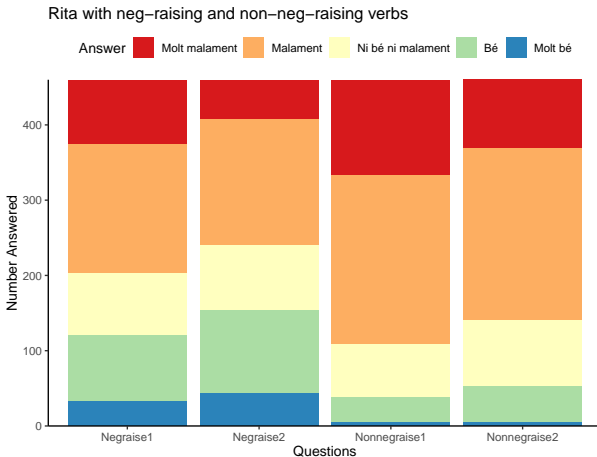
👍 **First point of convergence: grammaticality** of *Rita* with **neg-raising predicates** (12a)  
vis-à-vis predicates that do not involve neg-raising (12b).

- (12) a. *No crec que vingui **Rita**.* [neg-raising; Catalan]  
not think.1SG that come.SUBJ.3SG EPI  
'I don't think (absolutely) anyone will come / I think (absolutely) no one will come.'
- b. \**No dic que va venir **Rita**.*  
not say.1SG that come.SUBJ.IMPF.3SG EPI  
'(intended) I am not saying that anyone/no-one came.'



## Rita and NCIs: neg-raising predicates

- Highly statistically significant difference between acceptability of *Rita* with neg-raising verbs vs non-neg-raising ones ( $W = 73484, p < .0001$ ).



## Rita and NCIs: negative spread

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- In non-strict Negative Concord languages, a pre-verbal n-word can sanction a postverbal one, without requiring sentential negation, Sp. **Nadie** comió **nada** ‘Nobody ate anything’ (lit. ‘nobody ate nothing’).

👍 **Second point of convergence:** pre-verbal (focalised) *Rita* turns out, again, grammatical in **negative spread** contexts for varieties of Catalan (NB: Spanish judgements).

(13) 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

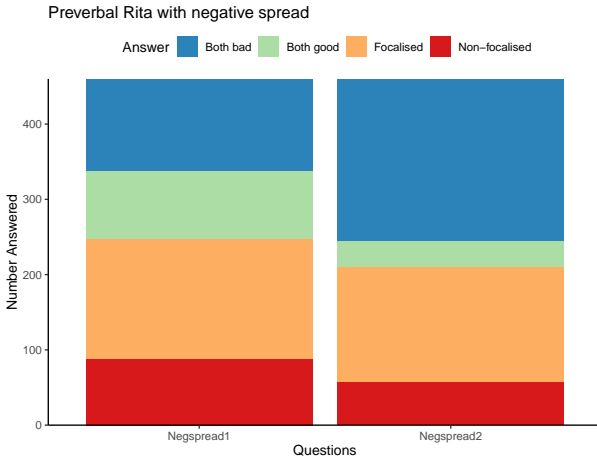
**nada.**

nothing

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

## Rita and NCIs: negative spread

- Participants generally prefer focalisation (32%), 15.6% the non-focalised version. Rest like neither (34.9%) or both (12.9%).



## Rita and NCIs: negative spread

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- How can we tell the previous examples involve genuine negative spread?

→ Contrast between *Rita* and *other proper nouns* in Catalan (e.g., *Joan*).

(14) 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.’

- **Potential discrepancy** in the formal make-up of *Rita* vis-à-vis other proper nouns in Cat.
- ↪ Whatever formal properties *Rita* is acquiring (e.g., some inherent negative force or negation-related features), they are ‘enough’ to sanction structures with apparent negative spread.

## Rita and NCIs: negative fragment answers

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- Catalan/Spanish NCIs, 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.

👍 **Third point of convergence:** *Rita* patterns like NCIs here.

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

## Rita and NCIs: *without*-clauses

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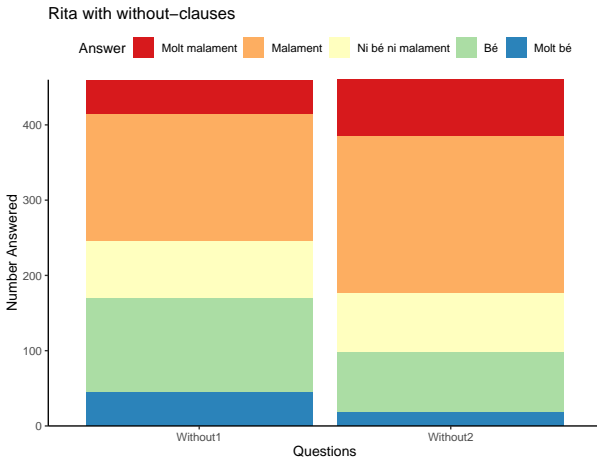
- **Without-clauses** as another antiveridical context that licenses NCIs:

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



## Rita and NCIs: *without*-clauses

- 169 and 98 participants rated the two examples as 4-5 across the two questions. Around 50% of the 460 did not accept them.





## A change-in-progress?

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- *K-means clustering*: finding coherent participant profiles<sup>7</sup>.

Group	Affirmative	Negation	Ni	Neg-raising	Without-clauses	N
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	2.660000	3.395000	3.910000	3.740000	3.320000	50
4	4.402299	4.063218	4.678161	4.074713	3.959770	87

**Table 2:** Four clusterings of participants obtained based on their ratings

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<sup>7</sup>Appropriate number of clusters determined with the aid of `fviz_nbclust()`. `set.seed()` of 123 adopted.

<sup>8</sup>Plausibly includes those speakers that only sanction *Rita* if it has the accompanying personal article. The survey did not address this variant of the expression (due to unawareness of its existence on my part).

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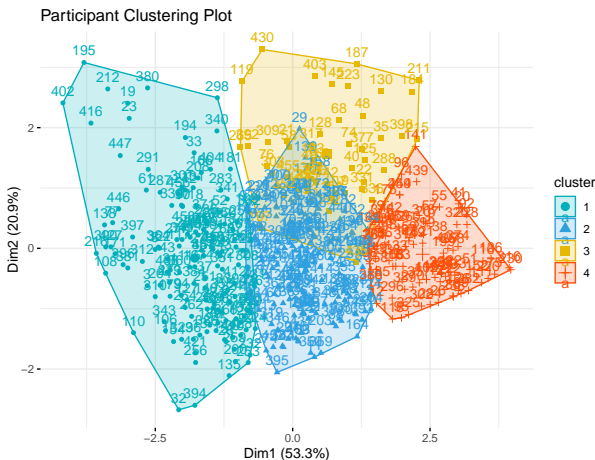
- **Group 1** → *Rita* OK only with NCI *ni* (34%).
- **Group 2** → *Rita* OK in affirmative and with NCI *ni* only (37%).
- **Group 3** → *Rita* bad-ish everywhere (11%)<sup>8</sup>.
- ! **Group 4** → *Rita* OK everywhere (incl. some/all antiveridical contexts) (19%).

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## A change-in-progress?



- Significant proportion of speakers allowing either *Rita* with *all* antiveridical contexts explored (negation, neg-raising, negative spread, without-clauses); or with *some* of them.
- Assuming *Rita* with negation is diachronically more recent → gradual grammaticalisation for *Rita* → **a change-in-progress?**

## Rita and NCIs: a recap

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- *Rita* matches the distribution of NCIs to a significant extent, due to its compatibility with antiveridical contexts:
    1. Sentential negation (for some speakers)
    2. Neg-raising predicates
    3. Negative spread (in Catalan, at least)
    4. Negative fragments
    5. *Without*-clauses (maybe)
  - Only *partial* match.
    1. Inter-speaker variation w.r.t. antiveridicality.
    2. Pre-verbal focalisation requirement.
    3. Argument structure restrictions
    4. Incompatibility with *absolutely*-modification.
    5. Expressivity, speaker-attitude orientation.
- **Rita is not an NCI, but may be undergoing *some formal change* in several speakers, gradually causing points of convergence with NCIs.**

## Rita and (weak) PIs: non-veridical contexts

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- A broad definition of Polarity Items (encompassing strong and weak) is given below (Giannakidou, 2001, 669).

### Polarity Items

A linguistic expression  $\alpha$  is a *polarity item* iff:

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

- **Next:** *Rita* also does not fit the typology of **weak PIs**.

## Rita and (weak) PIs: non-veridical contexts

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- PIs licensed in non-veridical contexts: this includes questions, conditionals, imperatives, habituals, etc.

- (18) a. *Si tienes **cualquier** problema, por favor* [conditional; Catalan]  
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]  
Q wants anything  
'Does s/he want anything?'
- c. *Ho va veure abans que **ningú** ho veiés.* [before]<sup>10</sup>  
it AUX saw before that anybody it see.SUBJ.3SG  
'S/he saw it before anybody did.'

(Tubau et al., 2023, 12)

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<sup>10</sup>NB: *before*-clauses have also been analysed as antiveridical, so the example above can be contested. I simply copy Tubau et al. (2023)'s exposition here.

## Rita and (weak) PIs: non-veridical contexts

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 **Key point of divergence:** *Rita* **ungrammatical** in **non-veridical** contexts.

- (19) 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 diera* [before; Spanish]  
CL.DO= see.PST.3SG before that CL.REFL= give.IMP.F.SUBJ.3SG  
*cuenta Rita.*  
count EPI  
(intended) 'S/he saw it before anybody realised.'

→ The above then disqualifies *Rita* as a weak PI.

## Rita and squatitives: also not a match

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- **Squatitives** (Horn, 2001): English expressions of *scatological* origin (*jack shit*, (*diddly*) *squat*, *fuck-all*, etc.).

- (20) 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)

- Labelled '**quasi-NPIs**' in Horn (2001), behaving both like **NPIs** in (20a) (e.g., English *anything*), and like **negative quantifiers** (e.g., English *nothing*) in (20b), bringing their own negative force.



## Rita and squatives: also not a match

---

✓ Licensed in **antiveridical** contexts (sentential negation, neg-raising, etc.).

(21) a. He doesn't know **jackshit/fuck all**. [sentential negation]

b. He knows **jackshit/fuck all**.

(22) a. I don't think he brought **jackshit**. [neg-raising predicate]

b. \*I didn't say he brought **jackshit**. [non-neg-raising predicate]

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

(Thoms et al., 2017)

✗ In **non-veridical** contexts, *only* the *negative quantifier reading* can be obtained, the NPI-reading is lost.

(24) a. \*Did he say fuck all?

b. \*The last person to say fuck all was John.

(All fine on NQ reading)

## Rita and squatitives: also not a match

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- **Partial** overlap with *Rita*:

1. They are also licensed in antiveridical contexts, like *Rita*.
2. Janus-nature of squatitives (with/without negation) only partly true for some Cat./Sp. speakers.
3. Squatitives can get NQ-reading in non-veridical contexts, but not NPI-reading. *Rita* cannot get either.
4. Squatitives are *not* person-referring, whilst *Rita* necessarily refer to a person/human collective.
5. *Rita* disallows *absolutely*-modification.
6. Little focalisation/positional constraints with squatitives (even if usually postverbal).

→ ***Rita* does not behave like squatitives either.**

## Rita and squatives: also not a match

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- (25) a. He knows absolutely **fuck all** about this.  
b. He kens absolutely **nihin** about this.

[*absolutely* modification]

(Thoms et al., 2017)

- (26) I published this a year ago and **fuck all** has  
been done<sup>11</sup>

[pre-verbal squatives]

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<sup>11</sup>[https://x.com/Vltra\\_MK/status/1653762970072272899?s=20](https://x.com/Vltra_MK/status/1653762970072272899?s=20).

## Rita – a summary of the data

**Table 3:** Comparison of the behaviour of NCIs, PIs, squatives and Rita

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

- *Rita* – a **syntactic class of its own**, but whose patterning is nonetheless **constrained** and **systematic** (notwithstanding substantial inter-speaker variation).
- **Resulting challenge:** how should we incorporate *Rita* (especially in more ‘advanced’ speakers) in a syntactic typology of negation/polarity items?
  - However, reality **far from uniform**: ongoing work to tease apart profiles of speakers w.r.t. this expression.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

## Why Rita is Interesting: final comments

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- Novel case-study of *proper noun* undergoing formal change and **acquiring negation/quantificational/pronominal characteristics**.
- **Formal implications:**
  - In more 'advanced' speakers, how do we model *Rita*'s behaviour in antiveridical contexts (e.g., negative spread)?  
See Zeijlstra (2004), Deal (2022), Tubau et al. (2023) and many others for analyses that ascribe some negation-related features or inherent negative force to items behaving in this way.

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- **Diachronic implications:**
  - **Complexifies** the existing polarity/negation landscape.
  - **Taboo words are well-studied** as sources of expressive (grammaticalised) forms of negation (see, i.a., Postma, 2001; Hoeksema and Napoli, 2008; Napoli and Hoeksema, 2009; Gutzmann, 2015; Sailor, 2017, 2020; Sailer, 2018; Erschler, 2023).
  - Common nouns, ‘**minimisers**’ and other sources of negative indefinites **also well-studied** (Haspelmath, 2001).
  - However, **little to no** literature on ***proper nouns*** and/or person-referring expressions (though cf. Collins and Postal, 2012; Song et al., 2023, on ‘imposters’ and non-canonical pronouns).

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    - However, **little to no** literature on **proper nouns** and/or person-referring expressions (though cf. Collins and Postal, 2012; Song et al., 2023, on ‘imposters’ and non-canonical pronouns).
- **Overall:**
- Linguistically peculiar phenomenon, worthy of further study.
  - Expands our grasp of grammaticalisation/pragmaticalisation pathways of expressive material and open new research avenues on diachronic sources of polarity/negation items.



# Thank you!

Gràcies, gracias!

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Slides  →

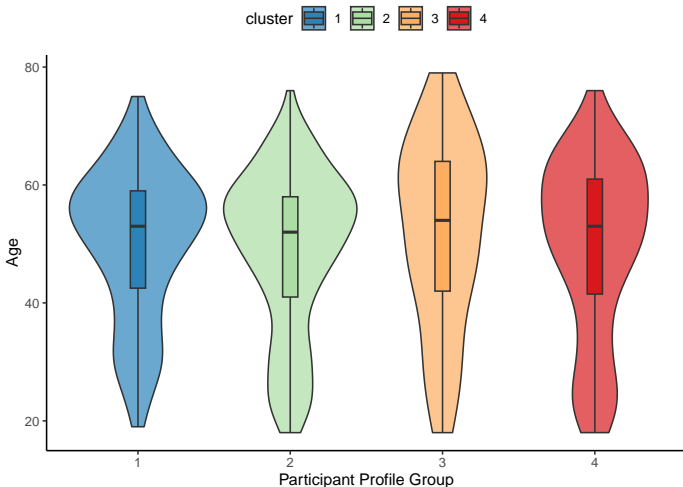


**SCAN ME**

## Inter-speaker variation not age-conditioned

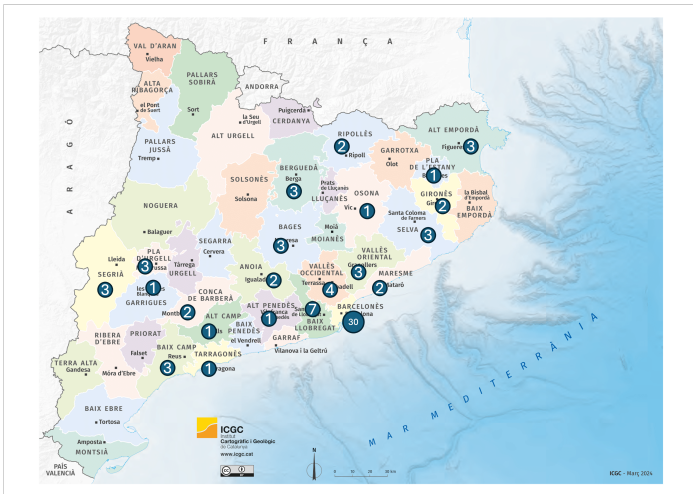
- No significant differences in age across cluster groups.

Responses with verbs with different argument structure with/without NCI ni



# Geographical distribution of Group 4

- Group 4 (most 'antiveridical') scattered around regions in Catalonia.



## Who is Rita?

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- 19th century Spanish singer/artist
- Article in *La Razón* sheds some light on the origin behind 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 did not offer them 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**<sup>12</sup>.*

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<sup>12</sup>My own translation from: [https://www.larazon.es/cultura/historia/quien-fue-rita-cantaora-que-mencionamos-cuando-trabajo-nos-gusta\\_2024012865b5fca3c3cb30000108c092.html](https://www.larazon.es/cultura/historia/quien-fue-rita-cantaora-que-mencionamos-cuando-trabajo-nos-gusta_2024012865b5fca3c3cb30000108c092.html). Accessed 2 March 2024.

## Who is Rita?

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