

No vacuous negation in subjunctive questions in Serbian*

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1 Introduction

This paper discusses the interaction of negation and subjunctive polar questions in Serbian. To set the stage, consider first indicative polar questions (hereafter IQ). A canonical IQ in Serbian contains *da* (glossed as *da*IND) and a question clitic *li*, as in (1). *Da li* is a stressed form of *li* (Browne 1974, *i.a.*).²

- (1) **Da** **li** deca večeraju?
*da*IND Q kids dine.3PL.PRES
'Are the kids having dinner?' (Oikonomou & Ilić to appear:4)

A subjunctive polar question (hereafter SQ) is shown in (2). Note first that the verbal form in (2) is morphologically the same as the indicative in (1). Second, SQs also contain *da* (glossed here as *da*SUBJV). So, how are SQs different from IQs? They denote modality, despite the absence of an overt modal (Oikonomou & Ilić to appear, henceforth O&I). O&I observe that in (2), the speaker is asking about the addressee's preferences/priorities.

- (2) A: **Da** deca večeraju? B: Ne. 'No'
*da*SUBJV kids dine.3PL.PRES
'Should the kids have dinner?'
(adapted from O&I to appear:5)

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² IQs can also be formed, e.g., with *je li*, also a stressed form of *li*, or with a particle *zar*, or through V-fronting. There are subtle pragmatic differences between all those forms. I leave the discussion of these forms aside (see Todorović 2023).

*Da*SUBJV and the present tense form denote modality in non-question contexts as well, e.g., with commands (Kaufmann et al. to appear), as in (3a), or wishes, as in (3b).^{3,4}

- (3) a. **Da** čitaš ovu knjigu!
*da*SUBJV read.2SG.PRES this book
 ‘Read this book (already)!’ (Kaufmann et al. to appear:7)
- b. **Da** ti se sve želje ostvare!
*da*SUBJV you REFL all wishes come.true.3PL.PRES
 ‘May all your wishes come true!’

The IQ in (1) and the SQ in (2) can combine with negation, as shown in (4a) and (4b,c), respectively. In the IQ in (4a), negation is interpretable. In an SQ, the negation can be interpretable, as in (4b), or not, as in (4c). In (4c), the speaker is asking or wondering if the kids are having dinner; the negation seems vacuous. I will label IQs with negation as NegIQ, SQs with contentful negation as NegSQ₁, and SQs with seemingly vacuous negation as NegSQ₂.

- (4) a. **Da** li deca **ne** večeraju?
*da*IND Q kids NEG dine.3PL.PRES
 ‘Are the kids not having dinner?’ (NegIQ)
- b. **Da** deca **ne** večeraju?
*da*SUBJV kids NEG dine.3PL.PRES
 ‘Should the kids not have dinner?’ (NegSQ₁)
- c. **Da** deca (možda) **ne** večeraju?
*da*SUBJV kids maybe NEG dine.3PL.PRES
 ‘Could it be that the kids are having dinner (I wonder)?’
 (NegSQ₂)

³ *Da*SUBJV can occur in certain complements. See Todorović (2015), Todorović and Wurmbrand (2020), and Kaufmann et al. (to appear) for arguments that *da*SUBJV is semantically different from *da* found in indicative complements.

⁴ SQs do not contain *li*. It is, however, possible to combine *da li* and *da*SUBJV, as in (i). O&I report that, unlike (2), (i) has a more introspective flavor; the answer is not required. I leave the discussion of this construction aside.

- (i) A: **Da** li da deca večeraju? (B: Ne. ‘No’)
 A: *da*IND Q *da*SUBJV kids dine.3PL.PRES
 A: ‘Should the kids have dinner (I wonder)?’ (O&I to appear:5)

This is even more evident in (5) with past forms. In the NegIQ in (5a), the negation is interpretable — the speaker is asking whether the kids did not have dinner. In the NegSQ₂ in (5b), the negation seems vacuous — the speaker is asking or wondering whether the kids had dinner. Note that, although the negation can occur in two positions in (5), it is always contentful in the NegIQ in (5a) but not in the NegSQ₂ in (5b).

- (5) a. Da li {nisu} deca {nisu}
*da*IND Q NEG.be.3PL.PRES kids NEG.be.3PL.PRES
 večerala?
 dine.PART.F.SG
 ‘Did the kids not have dinner?’ (NegIQ)
- b. Da {nisu} deca {nisu}
*da*SUBJV NEG.be.3PL.PRES kids NEG.be.3PL.PRES
 večerala?
 dine.PART.F.SG
 ‘Could it be that the kids had dinner (I wonder)?’ (NegSQ₂)

The interpretation of NegSQ₂s immediately raises the question of whether the negation in NegSQs is sometimes vacuous. I argue that it is not. The evidence comes from the interaction between the modal and the negation in NegSQ₂s. I also show that NegSQ₂s are sensitive to epistemic and evidential bias (Sudo 2013), similarly to NegIQs in the language. While SQs have been discussed in the formal literature (O&I to appear), the interaction of SQs and negation has not. This paper aims to contribute to the discussion of the interaction of Slavic polar questions with negation (Abels 2005; Staňková 2023; Zanon 2023) by analyzing novel Serbian data.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, I show that the negation in NegSQ₂s seems vacuous, based on the distribution of Negative Polarity Items (NPIs). However, I argue that the distribution of NPIs is due to the syntax of negation and not due to its vacuous status. In Section 3, I show that the negation in NegSQ₂s cannot be vacuous, based on its interaction with modality. In Section 4, I show that NegSQ₂s are biased, similarly to NegIQs. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2 Negation only seems vacuous

In this section, I discuss the distribution of NPIs in NegSQs. The data

seem to indicate that the negation is vacuous in NegSQ₂. However, I show that the effects arise from syntax, not semantics.

Serbian has two types of NPIs: *ni*-NPIs and *i*-NPIs. *Ni*-NPIs and *i*-NPIs are in complementary distribution (Progovac 1988 et seq.). *Ni*-NPIs need to be licensed by a clausemate negation, as shown for *nikoga* ‘nobody’ in a simple clause in (6a). The embedded *nikoga* in (6b) is licensed by the clausemate negation, but not by the matrix negation.

- (6) a. Jovana ***(ne)** voli **nikoga**.
 Jovana NEG love.3SG.PRES nobody
 ‘Jovana doesn’t like anybody.’
- b. Jovana ***(ne)** kaže [da ***(ne)** voli
 Jovana NEG say.3SG.PRES *da*IND NEG love.3SG.PRES
nikoga].
 nobody
 ‘Jovana says that she doesn’t like anybody.’

I-NPIs are licensed, e.g., in IQs, as shown for *ikoga* ‘anybody’ in (7). They cannot be licensed by a clausemate negation, as in a simple clause in (8a). The embedded *ikoga* in (8b) is not licensed by the embedded negation, but it is licensed by the matrix negation.

- (7) Da li je **ikoga** primetila?
*da*IND Q be.3SG.PRES anybody notice.PART.FEM.SG
 ‘Did she notice anybody?’ (IQ)
- (8) a. *Jovana **ne** voli **ikoga**.
 Jovana NEG love.3SG.PRES nobody
 Intended: ‘Jovana doesn’t like anybody.’
- b. Jovana ***(ne)** kaže [da ***(ne)** voli
 Jovana NEG say.3SG.PRES *da*IND NEG love.3SG.PRES
ikoga].
 anybody
 ‘Jovana doesn’t say that she likes anybody.’

The distribution of NPIs can be used to diagnose the nature of negation in SQs. In the NegSQ₁ in (9), the *ni*-NPI *ništa* ‘nothing’ is licensed, while the *i*-NPI *išta* ‘anything’ is not. The reverse holds in the NegSQ₂s in (10a) and (10b)—the *i*-NPI *išta* ‘anything’ is licensed, while

the *ni*-NPI *ništa* ‘nothing’ is not. In the NegSQ₁ in (9), the negation acts as expected: it licenses the clausemate *ni*-NPI and doesn’t license the *i*-NPI. The apparent problem arises with the NegSQ₂s in (10a) and (10b). In both cases, an *ni*-NPI is infelicitous and an *i*-NPI is felicitous, despite the presence of the clausemate negation. Given that the negation dictates the distribution of NPIs in all the other contexts (6–9), the data in (10) might indicate that the negation in NegSQ₂ is vacuous.

- (9) Da deca **ne** večeraju **ništa** /
*da*SUBJV kids NEG.be.3PL.PRES dine.PART.F.SG nothing /
 * *išta*?
 anything
 ‘Should the kids not eat anything for dinner?’ (NegSQ₁)
- (10) a. Da deca **ne** večeraju * *ništa* /
*da*SUBJV kids NEG.be.3PL.PRES dine.PART.F.SG nothing /
išta?
 anything
 ‘Could it be that the kids are eating something for dinner?’
 (NegSQ₂)
- b. Da {**nisu**} deca {**nisu**}
*da*SUBJV NEG.be.3PL.PRES kids NEG.be.3PL.PRES
 večerala * *ništa* / ***išta***?
 dine.PART.F.SG nothing / anything
 ‘Could it be that the kids were eating something for dinner?’
 (NegSQ₂)

Such a conclusion might, however, be premature. The split we see between NegSQ₁s and NegSQ₂s in terms of NPIs resembles the split we see with NegIQs. First, assume that (i) NPI-licensing happens within the TP in Serbian and that (ii) Serbian has two polarity phrases, one below and one above the TP (Progovac 2005). If the negation is below the TP, it should license clausemate *ni*-NPIs but not *i*-NPIs. This happens in simple clauses, as in (6a), and in the NegSQ₁ in (9). It also happens in IQs with low negation, as in (11a) — only the *ni*-NPI is licit. If the negation is above the TP, it should license *i*-NPIs, but not *ni*-NPIs. This happens with IQs with high negation, as in (11b).

- (11) a. Je l' **nije** *ikog / **nikog**
 JE Q NEG.be.3SG.PRES anybody/ nobody
 primetila?
 notice.PART.FEM.SG
 'Did she not notice anybody?' (low NegIQ)
- b. **Nije** li **ikog** / *nikog
 NEG.be.3SG.PRES Q anybody / nobody
 primetila?
 notice.PART.FEM.SG
 'Didn't she notice anybody?' (high NegIQ)
 (adapted from Milićević 2006:5)

Crucially, high negation can still be contentful; the reason why the *ni*-NPI is licensed, but *i*-NPI is not is because the negation is above the TP in (11b) (see Milićević 2006 and Todorović 2023 for additional arguments). In other words, the distribution of the NPIs is due to syntax, not semantics.⁷ Crucially, we cannot exclude this option for the NegSQ_{2S} in (10a) and (10b) — the negation could be contentful, but located above the TP. In that case, the distribution of *ni*-NPIs and *i*-NPIs would similarly be captured by syntax and not by the vacuity of the negation. In other words, the distribution of NPIs is not a strong argument for treating negation as vacuous in NegSQ₂.

3 Negation is not vacuous

In this section, I show that the negation in NegSQs interacts with modality in predictable ways, provided it is analyzed as contentful in both NegSQ_{1S} and NegSQ_{2S}.

Consider first modality. O&I argue that *da*SUBJV in SQs is a modal with prioritizing flavor. First, they show that *da*SUBJV in a wh-SQ as in (12) is obligatory in order to ask about the questionee's prioritizing state; otherwise, the question is an IQ. Second, *da*SUBJV is obligatory for the prioritizing reading in the embedded question in (13); otherwise, the question is an IQ.

⁷ Abels (2005) argues for a similar approach to negation in Russian polar questions (cf. Brown & Franks 1995).

- (12) Šta #(da) deca večeraju?
 what *da*SUBJV kids dine.3PL.PRES
 ‘What should the kids have for dinner?’ (O&I to appear: 5)
- (13) Jovan pita Mariju da li da deca
 Jovan ask.3SG.PRES Marija Q *da*SUBJV children
 večeraju.
 dine.3SG.PRES
 with *da*SUBJV: ‘Jovan is asking Marija whether the kids should
 have dinner.’
 without *da*SUBJV: ‘Jovan is asking Marija whether the kids are
 having dinner.’ (O&I to appear:5)

O&I assume that the modal flavor of *da*SUBJV in embedded contexts depends on the matrix predicate and argue that something similar happens in matrix SQs — the *da*SUBJV modal depends on the speech act Question operator (Q_{op}). *Da*SUBJV acquires a prioritizing flavor in the context of questions, as in (14), where the priorities of the addressee of the speech act event matter (ensured by the e variable). It will also be relevant that O&I treat *da*SUBJV as a weak necessity modal.

- (14) [[SUBJV]] / $Q_{-} =$
 $\lambda f \langle \epsilon, stt \rangle \lambda g \langle \epsilon, stt \rangle \lambda e \lambda q \langle st \rangle \lambda w. \forall w' \in \text{Best}_{PRT}(f, g, e, w) \rightarrow q(w')$

Consider now the SQs in (15). Example (15a) is a non-negated SQ. Example (15b) is a NegSQ₁. Suppose now that (i) the negation is contentful and below the TP in (15b), and (ii) *da*SUBJV is a necessity modal within the TP but above the negation. At the level of the TP, the universal modal scopes over the negation. The reading that we get is ‘It must be the case that the kids are not having dinner’. When we introduce the Q_{op} , the modal gets the prioritizing flavor and the question is asking ‘Should the kids not have dinner?’. This matches the reading in (15b). Consider now the NegSQ₂ in (15c). Assume that *da*SUBJV is the same modal, but the negation is contentful and above the TP. In this syntactic constellation, the negation scopes over the modal. The resulting reading is ‘It is not the case that the kids are necessarily having dinner’. Now, if the negation scopes over the universal quantifier, we standardly expect it to be equivalent to an existential quantifier scoping over the negation. In other words, the reading that we have — ‘It is not the case that the kids are necessarily having dinner’ — can be paraphrased as ‘It is possible

that the kids aren't having dinner'.⁸ At this point, we introduce the Q_{OP}. Importantly, the Q_{OP} scopes over the negation, which scopes over the modal. If locality is required for the modal to acquire the prioritizing flavor in SQs, then this will not be possible in (15c) — the negation occurs between the Q_{OP} and the modal. The Q_{OP} then gets us the reading 'Is it possible that the kids are not having dinner?'.⁹ This is a problem because the paraphrase in (15c) does not correspond to it. But this problem is only apparent.

- (15) a. *Da deca večeraju?*
daSUBJV kids dine.3PL.PRES
 'Should the kids have dinner?'
- b. [Q_{OP} [Modal [Neg...]]]:
Da deca ne večeraju?
daSUBJV kids NEG dine.3PL.PRES
 'Should the kids not have dinner?' (NegSQ₁)
- c. [Q_{OP} [Neg [Mod...]]]:
Da deca (možda) ne večeraju?
daSUBJV kids maybe NEG dine.3PL.PRES
 'Could it be that the kids are having dinner (I wonder)?'
 (NegSQ₂)

Let's think about questions — they introduce a set of possible answers (Hamblin 1973, *i.a.*). For the question in (15c) the set of answers would contain the two propositions 'It is possible that the kids aren't having dinner' and 'It is not possible that the kids aren't having dinner' (which can further be paraphrased as 'It must be the case that the kids are having dinner'). Semantically, both options are valid answers for (15c). But pragmatically, the speaker in (15c) might have a slight expectation for the positive answer, i.e., that the kids are having dinner. Thus, while semantically it is possible to ask about either the negative or the positive option, I propose that the positive speaker's bias is what affects the interpretation of this question. So, the semantics of NegSQ₂ is unchanged, showing the scopal interactions of modal, negation, and Q_{OP}.

⁸ I would like to thank Mariia Razguliaeva for sharing her ideas on this matter.

⁹ NegSQ_{2S} with past forms show the same pattern as NegSQ_{2S} with present forms.

In the following section, I show that NegSQ₂s are indeed sensitive to speaker's bias. In that respect, they are parallel to negative IQs in Serbian.

4 NegSQ₂s are contextually-sensitive, just like NegIQs

In this section, I show that NegSQ₂s are sensitive to contextual information, which captures the speaker's expectations of what the answer should be. In terms of being contextually sensitive, NegSQ₂s align with NegIQs in Serbian.

The interaction of negation and questions in different contexts has been extensively studied across languages (Büring & Gunlogson 2000, *i.a.*). Negative questions tend to be biased (Ladd 1981), and Sudo (2013), for example, identifies that the bias is epistemic (stemming from the speaker's beliefs) or evidential (stemming from the context) (this is by no means an exhaustive list). Sudo also argues that different values of epistemic or evidential bias capture the differences in the distribution of questions with high and low negation.

To illustrate this with Serbian IQs, when there is no bias, a positive IQ as in (16a) is felicitous, but a low NegIQ as in (16b) or a high NegIQ as in (16c) is not.

(16) *Context: Your roommate was at her friend Milana's birthday party. One typically makes a birthday cake for that occasion, but you don't know if Milana does that too. You also don't know if she made a cake this time. You ask your roommate:*

- a. Da li je Milana pravila tortu?
*da*IND Q be.3SG.PRES Milana make.PART.F.SG cake
 'Did Milana make a cake?' (IQ)
- b. #Je l' Milana **nije** pravila tortu?
JE Q Milana NEG.be.3SG.PRES make.PART.F.SG cake
 'Did Milana not make a cake?' (low NegIQ)
- c. #**Nije** li Milana pravila tortu?
 NEG.be.3SG.PRES Q Milana make.PART.F.SG cake
 'Didn't Milana make a cake?' (high NegIQ)

Manipulating the value of the bias further affects the distribution of negative questions: while both low and high NegIQs are felicitous with

positive epistemic and negative evidential bias in (17), only low NegIQ is felicitous with neutral epistemic and negative evidential bias in (18) (see Todorović 2023 for a complete distribution of these questions in context).

(17) *Context: Your roommate was at Milana's birthday party. One typically makes a birthday cake for that occasion. You know that Milana likes making cakes and you think she made one this time as well. Whenever there's cake at a party, your roommate brings you the leftovers. You open the fridge, but don't see any cake leftovers. You ask your roommate:*

- a. # Da li je Milana pravila tortu?
*da*IND Q be.3SG.PRES Milana make.PART.F.SG cake
 'Did Milana make a cake?' (IQ)
- b. Je l' Milana **nije** pravila tortu?
 JE Q Milana NEG.be.3SG.PRES make.PART.F.SG cake
 'Did Milana not make a cake?' (low NegIQ)
- c. **Nije** li Milana pravila tortu?
 NEG.be.3SG.PRES Q Milana make.PART.F.SG cake
 'Didn't Milana make a cake?' (high NegIQ)

(18) *Context: Your roommate was at Milana's birthday party. One typically makes a birthday cake for that occasion, but you don't know if Milana does that too. Whenever there's a cake at some party, your roommate brings you the leftovers. You open the fridge, but don't see any cake leftovers. You ask your roommate:*

- a. # Da li je Milana pravila tortu?
*da*IND Q be.3SG.PRES Milana make.PART.F.SG cake
 'Did Milana make a cake?' (IQ)
- b. Je l' Milana **nije** pravila tortu?
 JE Q Milana NEG.be.3SG.PRES make.PART.F.SG cake
 'Did Milana not make a cake?' (low NegIQ)
- c. # **Nije** li Milana pravila tortu?
 NEG.be.3SG.PRES Q Milana make.PART.F.SG cake
 'Didn't Milana make a cake?' (high NegIQ)

NegSQ₂s, like NegIQs, are also sensitive to epistemic and evidential bias. First, they cannot be used in a neutral context, as shown in (19).

- (19) *Context: Your roommate was at her friend Milana's birthday party. One typically makes a birthday cake for that occasion, but you don't know if Milana does that too. You also don't know if she made a cake this time. You ask your roommate:*

# Da	nije	Milana pravila	tortu?
	<i>da</i> SUBJV	NEG.be.3SG.PRES Milana make.PART.F.SG	cake
		'Could it be that Milana made a cake?'	(NegSQ ₂)

Second, NegSQ₂s require neutral or positive evidential bias; the latter is shown in (20).

- (20) *Context: Your roommate was at her friend Milana's birthday party. One typically makes a birthday cake for that occasion. You don't know if Milana made a cake. But you know that Milana likes making cakes and you think that she made one this time as well. You ask your roommate:*

Da	nije	Milana pravila	tortu?
	<i>da</i> SUBJV	NEG.be.3SG.PRES Milana make.PART.F.SG	cake
		'Could it be that Milana made a cake?'	(NegSQ ₂)

The full distribution is shown in Table 1. The distribution of NegSQ₂s does not exactly match the distribution of NegIQs. Yet, even low and high NegIQs do not match in their distribution, as shown, e.g., in (18). What both NegIQs and NegSQ₂s, however, have in common is that they show either epistemic or evidential bias. This aligns with negative questions across languages.

Table 1: Distribution of NegSQ₂s in Serbian

		Epistemic	
Evidential		positive	neutral
	positive		NegSQ ₂
	neutral	NegSQ ₂	NegSQ ₂ (ironic)
	negative		

One way to capture the distribution of these questions would be along the lines of AnderBois' (2019) inquisitive semantics approach to American English negative polar questions. This approach assumes that certain expressions, e.g., existential quantifiers and disjunction, introduce alternatives, i.e., the inquisitive part of an expression that can serve as a starting point for further conversation. Negation, on the other hand, gets rid of any alternatives. In AnderBois' approach, two syntactic positions of negation (above or below the TP) and the distribution of the content of negation (universal quantifier and complementation) between the two heads, affects what will be highlighted as the prominent issue for further discussion. In other words, different syntax and semantics of negation in low and high negation questions will affect which issues are relevant for further discussion; this would reflect different biases of the speaker. Todorović (2023) shows that the same can be applied to Serbian NegIQs. As for the NegSQ₂s, one might expect them to show similarities with high NegIQs, given their syntax. However, they do not match — high NegIQs are restricted to contexts with positive epistemic and negative evidential bias. One of the reasons for their differences might be that the syntax-semantics of the modal in NegSQ₂s also plays a role in highlighting certain issues and reflecting a particular bias. I leave this issue for further research. Importantly, NegSQ₂s, like NegIQs, cannot be used in a neutral context, but are sensitive to contextual information.

5 Conclusion

In certain NegSQs in Serbian, NegSQ₁s, the negation is contentful, while in the others, NegSQ₂s, it seems to be vacuous. Such a division seems to find support in syntax, since NegSQ₁ licenses NPis and NegSQ₂ does not. However, I have argued that the differences that we see are not due to their different semantics. With NegSQ₁s, the negation is in a local enough relationship with the NPI to license it, while with NegSQ₂s, it is too far from the NPI to license it. In other words, the semantics of negation is the same, but the syntax affects the NPI licensing options. I further argued that the differences in syntax of negation in NegSQ₁s and NegSQ₂s also affect the scopal interactions between the modal and negation, deriving different interpretations. In either case, the patterns can be captured just in case the negation is contentful. Finally, I showed that NegSQ₂s show speaker's bias in terms of which answer they expect to hear. In that respect, NegSQ₂s are not different from NegIQs. While

there is more to be said about the properties of NegSQs, it seems the negation in them is not different from negation elsewhere in the language.

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