

Expletives at the syntax-discourse interface

Meeting Description:

Expletives have been central in the development of many theories of grammar, as semantically vacuous elements which can reveal crucial insights about syntactic structure. The classic research in this area has focussed on expletives which show subject-like behaviour and in particular their relation to various morphosyntactic parameters, both synchronically and diachronically (e.g. Haiman 1971; Rizzi 1986; Faarlund 1990; Falk 1993; Vikner 1995). However, our established understanding of expletives as exclusively structural fillers for argument slots is challenged by the fact that many expletive(-like) elements crosslinguistically are conditioned by discourse-related factors. Relevant examples have been observed, for instance, in Romance varieties (Sornicola 1996; Carrilho 2005, 2008; Hinzelin 2009; Ledgeway 2010, 2013; Gupton & Lowman 2013; Corr 2017), Icelandic (Zaenen 1983; Rögnvaldsson 1983; Sells 2005), West Flemish (Haegeman et al. 2017), Finnish (Kaiser 2019), Russian (Pekelis 2019), and Somali (Svolacchia et al. 1995; Mereu 2009; Frascarelli 2010).

Moreover, some of the classic expletive subjects have been characterised in terms of their contribution to discourse by certain authors, in connection with the fact that such elements are generally restricted tothetic clauses, e.g. Bennis (1986) on Dutch *er*, and Ward & Birner (1995) and Sluckin (2021) on English *there*. In addition, a long-standing tradition within Germanic distinguishes between expletive subjects and “expletive topics” (e.g. Faarlund 1990). However, although the term “expletive topic” implies a connection to discourse, such elements have typically been treated on exclusively structural terms, as fillers to satisfy verb-second (Haiman 1971; Breckenridge 1975; Thráinsson 1979; Lenerz 1985; Abraham 1993), although more discourse-oriented approaches have also been proposed (Sells 2005; Booth et al. 2017; Fuß & Hinterhölzl 2021).

Despite increasing empirical evidence for discourse-related expletives, our theoretical, typological and diachronic understanding of them is still unsatisfactory. This workshop aims to bring together researchers working on different language families from diverse theoretical perspectives and areas of linguistics to explore the insights which discourse-related expletives offer in terms of the status of expletives as a category, and the nature of the syntax-discourse interface.

Call for Papers:

The workshop is planned as part of the 56th Annual Meeting of the *Societas Linguistica Europaea* (29 August – 1 September, Athens) [<https://societaslinguistica.eu/sle2023/>]. We welcome both empirical and theoretical contributions, as well as contributions which combine the two. Contributions which reference one or more of the following questions are especially encouraged:

- What can discourse-related expletives tell us generally about the nature of the syntax-discourse interface and about how this should be theoretically modelled?
- To what extent can expletive elements be considered to contribute discourse-related information, and how does this impact upon our traditional understanding of expletives?
- How should one synchronically distinguish discourse-related expletives from “discourse markers”, and how are the two related diachronically?
- How do discourse-related factors play a role in the diachronic development of expletives?
- What do discourse-related expletives tell us with respect to how expletives are licensed? Are expletives exclusively structurally licensed, as traditionally assumed, or can they be licensed via functional

and pragmatic mechanisms?

- Given that many discourse-related expletives have been observed to be optional, how can this be reconciled with the traditional view of expletives as obligatory structural fillers?
- What precise contribution to the discourse do “expletive topics” make, and how does this interact with subjecthood given that topicality and subjecthood often coincide?
- How do discourse-related expletives interact with the null-subject parameter? Null-subject languages are not expected to feature expletives in the traditional sense (cf. Rizzi 1982), but some null-subject Romance varieties exhibit expletive-like elements which are discourse-related (Sornicola 1996; Carrilho 2005, 2008; Ledgeway 2010, 2013; Gupton & Lowman 2013; Corr 2017).
- To what extent do discourse-related expletives occur in those languages which have been labelled as “discourse-configurational” (Kiss 1995)?

Please send provisional abstracts of **no more than 300 words** (excluding references) in PDF format to hannah.booth@ugent.be and kim.groothuis@ugent.be by **1 November 2022**. If the workshop is approved, authors must submit revised 500-word abstracts according to the SLE guidelines before 15 January 2023.

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