

Expletives at the syntax-discourse interface

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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 (including configurationality, null subjects, rich verbal agreement and verb position) both synchronically and diachronically (e.g. Haiman 1974; 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 Icelandic (Zaenen 1983; Rögnvaldsson 1984; Sells 2005; Booth 2019; 2020), West Flemish (Greco & Haegeman & Phan 2017), Finnish (Kaiser 2019), Russian (Pekelis 2019), and Somali (Svolacchia & Mereu & Puglielli 1995; Mereu 2009; Frascarelli 2010). Discourse-related expletives are also exhibited in some null-subject Romance varieties, (Sornicola 1996; Carrilho 2008; Ledgeway 2010; 2013; Gupton & Lowman 2013; Corr 2017; Widera 2021), despite the fact that null-subject languages are not expected to feature expletives in the traditional sense (cf. Rizzi 1982).

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 1974; Breckenridge 1975; Lenerz 1985; Abraham 1993; Thráinsson 2007). Although more discourse-oriented approaches have also been proposed (e.g. Sells 2005; Booth et al. 2017; Fuß & Hinterhölzl 2021), the theoretical modelling possibilities in this area remain largely unexplored.

Beyond pronouns, “expletive” as a term referring to semantically vacuous elements has been extended to other categories, most notably negation in contexts where a negative marker appears to be redundant and contributes something other than negative meaning (e.g. Jin & Koenig 2021; Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022). Expletive negation is commonly analysed in terms of the activation of a distinct expressive-evaluative layer of interpretation (Potts 2005; Delfitto 2020). Strikingly, this has parallels in work on pronoun-type expletives, which in various languages have been attributed speaker-related meaning (Corr 2017; Greco et al. 2017; Kaiser 2019). This could open the door to a more unified account of expletive elements more broadly, but this issue has been scarcely explored to date (see though Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022 for a promising start).

Another interesting question concerns how the existence of discourse-related expletives bears on the overall typological status of expletives. Many authors, for instance, have traditionally highlighted the fact that expletives are relatively rare crosslinguistically and particularly characteristic of West European languages (e.g. Breivik 1984; Dahl 1990; Dryer 2007; Wälchli

2011; Camacho 2013). Yet if one acknowledges that expletives can extend beyond those which are strictly subject-related, this could open the door to a range of elements being considered as expletive which have not standardly been characterised as such, thus significantly expanding the crosslinguistic inventory of expletives.

Overall, despite increasing empirical evidence for discourse-related expletives, our theoretical, typological and diachronic understanding of them is still unsatisfactory. Through this workshop, we intend to address this research gap from a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, bringing together researchers working on standard and non-standard varieties from a range of language families, as well as on different types of expletive element (e.g. expletive subjects, expletive topics and expletive negation).

Specific **research questions** to be explored include the following:

- To what extent can expletive elements be considered to contribute discourse-related information, and what does this mean for our understanding of expletives as a category, given that the status of expletiveness is currently a topic of debate (Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022)?
- What can discourse-related expletives tell us generally about the nature of the syntax-discourse interface and about how this should be theoretically modelled?
- 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, and where do null expletives fit in with this, if at all?
- 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?
- What role does discourse play in the diachronic development of expletives?
- 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, given that many null-subject varieties in fact exhibit expletive-like elements?
- To what extent do discourse-related expletives occur in those languages which have been labelled as “discourse-configurational” (Kiss 1995)?

The convenors will introduce the workshop via a presentation which outlines the state-of-the-art, outstanding challenges concerning discourse-related expletives and how the workshop aims to respond to these challenges. A final discussion session will also be led by the convenors, summarising the key insights from the various papers and highlighting future research opportunities.

In sum, the 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.

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