

Understudied aspects of expletive negation:
Typological and corpus-based insights

Workshop proposal for the 60th Annual Meeting of the Societas Linguistica Europaea

Convenors:

Jesús Olguín-Martínez (University of Hong Kong)
Andreas Dufter (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)
Jutta Salminen (University of Helsinki)
Karoliina Mäkilähde (University of Helsinki)

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Description

A number of works have investigated the grammatical properties of one type of negation that has been characterized as semantically empty. For instance, Spanish *hasta* ‘until’ clauses may occur with the standard negative marker *no* (1). This marker is optional and can be omitted without affecting the temporal relation holding between clauses.

(1) Spanish (Indo-European)

el hombre no dormirá,
DET man NEG sleep.FUT.3SG
‘The man will not sleep,

hasta que la fiesta (no) comience.
until that DET party NEG start.PRS.SUBJ.3SG
‘until the party starts.’ (Olguín Martínez 2024a: 755)

The type of negative marker that occurs in the example in (1) is known, in the literature, as EXPLETIVE NEGATION (see Salminen 2018: 264-266 for other terms that have been used in the literature). It corresponds to cases in which a negative formative is used in a main or subordinate clause (e.g., adverbial and complement clause) without providing any truth-conditional contribution to interpretation (Delfitto 2020; Delfitto et al. 2019; Espinal 1992: 49; Fortuin 2023). The occurrence of expletive negation has been noticed for a long time by Romance grammarians (Espinal 1992; Molina 2006; Prete 2008). However, it has recently been noted that expletive negation is by no means confined to Romance languages but occurs widely (Jin 2021; Jin and Koenig 2021a). Jin and Koenig’s survey of 722 languages (2021b: 40) reports that 74 languages show examples of expletive negation.

While previous corpus-based and typological research has advanced our theoretical understanding of expletive negation, much more work remains to be done in this field.

Aims of the workshop

The workshop will bring together original research that contributes to our understanding of understudied aspects of expletive negation in independent main clauses and subordinate clauses. We welcome contributions on any given language, family, or macro-area, as well as broad

typological studies. Potential contributions include, but are by no means restricted to, the following:

1. Expletive negation-triggering contexts. Different typological and corpus-based studies have provided comprehensive lists of expletive negation-triggering contexts (e.g., Jin 2021; Jin and Koenig 2019, 2021ab; Mäkilähde 2025). For instance, complement clauses of verbs of fear often contain an expletive negative marker (see Dobrushina 2021). Expletive negation may also occur in comparative clauses (Donati 2000), exclamatives (Delfitto and Fiorin 2014), ‘before’ clauses (Tahar 2021), ‘unless’ clauses (Jin and Koenig 2021a), and ‘without V-ing’ clauses (Olguín Martínez and Peregrina Llanes 2023), among many others. Despite these comprehensive lists of expletive negation-triggering contexts, more recent typological work has shown that there may be more to the story in that there are other constructions that may license expletive negation, such as ‘let alone’ clauses (Olguín Martínez 2024b). Besides these contexts discussed in previous research, are there any other expletive negation-triggering contexts not identified by previous studies?

2. Functions of expletive negation. Different studies have shown that expletive negation may not always be semantically vacuous (e.g., Dobrushina 2021; Jin and Koenig 2021a). They may have an expressive-evaluative layer of semantic interpretation in that they serve to express the status of the proposition with respect to the speaker’s overall knowledge (e.g., whether the propositional content of a construction is unlikely or undesirable; Bordería and Schwenter 2005: 270; Yoon 2011: 146). Moreover, it has been proposed that in a number of constructions, expletive negation may not really be semantically empty, but somehow reflects the negative interpretation of the construction. For French *avant que* ‘before’ clauses, Tahar (2021: 620) notes that expletive negation may be part of an enriched meaning of ‘before’. Besides these functions identified in previous research, can expletive negation serve other functions?

3. Interactions of expletive negation with other grammatical domains in language use. Expletive negation shows intriguing interactions with other grammatical domains in language use. For instance, based on data from Italian, Greco (2020) shows that there is an interesting interaction between the use of expletive negation and the intonation pattern of the construction where such expletive negative marker occurs. While the analysis of such interactions is key to understanding the workings of expletive negation from a more comprehensive perspective, they remain largely understudied. Potential contributions to the workshop could explore, for instance, how the presence or absence of expletive negation may interact with specific lexical preferences in one or two slots of the same construction by using corpus-based methods such as (co-varying) collexeme analysis (Stefanowitsch and Gries 2003; Gries and Stefanowitsch 2004) or multi-variate extensions of (co-varying) collexeme analysis (Olguín Martínez and Gries 2024, 2026a).

4. Language contact and expletive negation. There are studies that have shown that languages may develop expletive negative markers due to language contact. For instance, different Mesoamerican languages have borrowed expletive negation from Mexican Spanish with its exact form (Olguín Martínez 2024c). This process is referred to as matter replication (Sakel 2007). Conversely, there are other Mesoamerican languages that have replicated expletive negation from Mexican Spanish using native linguistic material (Olguín Martínez 2024a), a process known as pattern replication (Sakel 2007). While the role of language contact in the diffusion of expletive negation has received some attention in the literature, much more work remains to be done. In

particular, little is known about whether recipient languages not only borrow or copy expletive negation from a donor language, but also adopt additional properties of the source construction in which these expletive negative markers occur, such as their discourse-pragmatic functions. Potential contributions to the workshop could address this issue by applying corpus-based quantitative methods that have recently been used to investigate comparable language contact scenarios (e.g., Olguín Martínez and Gries 2025, 2026b).

5. Expletive negation, prescriptive grammar, and register. In languages with a long-standing tradition of prescriptive grammar, expletive negation has repeatedly been subject to normative scrutiny. The use of negators that are semantically “redundant,” if not “aberrant,” has been regarded as undesirable in the interest of linguistic clarity and economy. Such normative pressure does indeed appear to have contributed, in some cases, to a decline in the use of expletive negation (cf. Stauf 1927: 206–210; Brunot 1966: 1866–1867 for French). Paradoxically, however, it has also, in some instances, contributed to a revaluation of the more complex construction involving expletive negation as more prestigious and elegant (cf. Dufter 2025). The relationship between metalinguistic criticism and the use and prestige of different forms of expletive negation constitutes a further gap in the research, which this workshop could help to address.

Please send provisional abstracts of no more than 100 words (excluding references) in PDF format by November 10, 2026 to:

- ❖ jfolguinmartinez@gmail.com
- ❖ Dufter@lmu.de
- ❖ jutta.salminen@helsinki.fi
- ❖ karoliina.makilahde@helsinki.fi

If the workshop is approved, authors will be asked to submit revised 500-word abstracts according to the SLE guidelines.

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