

The diversity of expletives: an LFG approach

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Expletive elements have been central in the development of many generative theories of grammar, owing to their lack of semantics and their appearance in structural positions which typically host arguments. Yet, despite their important position in the syntactic literature, expletives are in fact relatively rare crosslinguistically (Newmeyer 2005). Various proposals have been put forward in terms of how to account for their typological distribution, including in relation to the presence/absence of configurationality (Hale 1982, 1983), null subjects (Rizzi 1982, 1986), rich inflectional morphology (Falk 1993; Berman 1999), and VO/OV order (Haider 2013), however counterexamples and problems have been highlighted for all of these accounts. Moreover, it is generally recognised that expletives exhibit diverse properties, both synchronically and diachronically. Various typologies of expletives have been proposed, and one which has been particularly prominent in the generative literature is the distinction between (i) “expletive subjects” and (ii) “expletive topics” (Faarlund 1990) or “Vorfeld/prefield expletives”, as exhibited in e.g. Icelandic (Thráinsson 1979; Platzack 1983; Maling 1988) and German (Lenerz 1985; Abraham 1993; Fuß 2018). However, this two-way distinction is in many ways oversimplistic and fails to capture the messy behaviour and mixed properties of expletives which we find both synchronically and diachronically.

In this talk, I explore how a modular approach to grammar, such as that assumed within Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG, Bresnan et al. 2015; Dalrymple et al. 2019), can allow for a more nuanced typology of expletives. In particular, I show that the separation of position and function inherent in LFG’s parallel architecture allows one to model subtle differences in how both expletive subjects and expletive topics are licensed, whether (i) functionally licensed (ii) structurally licensed or (iii) licensed via a combination of both functional and structural requirements. In this view, the extent to which different types of expletive are motivated in a particular language (stage) is a consequence of its status wrt. whether subjects/topics are functionally obligatory (as per a language-specific subject/topic condition, cf. Bresnan & Kanerva 1989; Erteschik-Shir 2007) and the extent to which subjects/topics are associated with particular structural positions (i.e. levels of argument/discourse configurationality, cf. Nordlinger 1998; Kiss 1995; Booth 2021). I will also consider the opportunities such an approach holds for a better understanding of the diachrony of expletives where the general account of Faarlund (1990) – whereby expletive topics develop first and then expletive subjects – has been shown to be inadequate, particularly in the context of Germanic (e.g. Booth 2018, 2020).

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