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Expletive *es* in German: Theoretical analysis and historical development

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1. Introduction

All present-day Germanic V2 languages exhibit CP-related expletives ("Vorfeld/prefield-expletives", "prefinite expletives", "expletive topics", cf. e.g. Vikner 1995 for an overview):

(1) a. **Es** **ist** ein Junge gekommen.   (German, Vikner 1995: 70)
       EXPL is a   boy   come

   b. **Es** **iz** gekumen a yingl.   (Yiddish, Vikner 1995: 70)
       EXPL is come   a boy

   c. **Það** **hefur** komið   strákur.   (Icelandic, Vikner 1995: 70)
       EXPL has   come   (a) boy

   d. **Tað** **búðu** nógv fólk   í bynum.   (Faroese, Vikner 1995: 204)
       EXPL   lived   many people in town-the

   e. **Det** **er** løver i   Afrika.   (Norwegian, Breivik 1989: 57)
       EXPL are lions in Africa

   f. **Der** **boede** mange folk   i byen   (Danish, Vikner 1995: 204)
       EXPL lived   many   people in town-the

   g. **Er** **is** hier veel   sneeuw.   (Dutch, Breivik 1989: 57))
       EXPL is here much snow

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1. Introduction

- **This talk...**
- <u>Focus</u>: Analysis and historical development of CP expletive *es* in German
  - Section 2: Properties and pragmatic functions
  - Section 3: On the analysis of CP-expletives
  - Section 4: Some remarks on the historical source of CP expletive *es*
  - Section 5: The historical development of CP-expletives in German – overview
  - Section 6: The rise of *es* in Middle High German (MHG)
  - Section 7: Concluding remarks

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2. CP expletive *es* in German: properties and pragmatic functions

- Confined to clause-initial position
- CP-expletives typically appear in clauses that lack a topical subject (broad focus):
  - **subjectless constructions** (e.g., impersonal passives)
  - **existential sentences**, which often specify the location of a discourse-new entity
  - **presentational sentences** describing a specific event in which a discourse-new entity participates

2. CP expletive *es* in German: properties and pragmatic functions

- **Discourse function I: Introducing a new situation**
  - Sentences introduced by expletives are typically found at the beginning of texts/text sections; cf. Brugmann (1917: 36f.) on German *es* 'it' (and its predecessors)

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2. CP expletive *es* in German: properties and pragmatic functions

- **Discourse function II: Contextual anchoring**
  - CP-expletive *es* contextualizes the event expressed by the clause; in particular, clauses introduced by *es* seem to imply that the speaker has a specific event/situation in mind (for related ideas on the discourse function of expletives cf. Greco et al. 2017, 2018, Sluckin 2021):

(2) a. Es wurde getanzt.

    EXPL was danced

    'There was dancing.' ⇒ There was a specific situation in which people danced.

  b. Es ist ein Haus abgebrannt.

    EXPL is a house burned down

    'A house burned down.' ⇒ There was a specific situation where a house burned down.

  - The utterances in (2) appear to convey some form of evidentiality, in the sense that the speaker has either witnessed the event or has sufficient background information on it (see also Sluckin 2021 on English *there*).
  - Idea: CP-expletive *es* anchors an event to the utterance situation/the speaker (Fuß & Hinterhölzl 2022)

3. On the analysis of CP-expletives

Basic assumptions I

- **Expletives as morphosyntactic repairs**: semantically and phonologically light elements that are inserted as a last resort to realize a certain structural position (cf. e.g. Heck & Müller 2007, 2013, Müller 2020).

- **Expletives therefore signal the presence of obligatory EPP-features**:
  - SpecTP: English, Mainland Scandinavian, and Dutch (?);
  - SpecCP in all Germanic V2 languages.

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3. On the analysis of CP-expletives

Basic assumptions II

- **XP-fronting in V2-languages**: triggered by a generalized EPP-feature on C°, cf. e.g. Grewendorf (2002), Holmberg (2015)
- **Movement (internal Merge)** is parasitic on an Agree relation (Chomsky 2001), i.e. the presence of an unvalued/uninterpretable formal feature [uF] that must be valued in the course of the syntactic derivation.
- <u>Unclear</u>: Identity of [uF] (on C) in V2 languages?

3. On the analysis of CP-expletives

Basic assumptions III

- **V2 languages:** C° is endowed with a single unvalued/non-interpretable discourse-related feature **[uδ]** (Miyagawa 2017) that is valued under Agree with an XP that carries a corresponding interpretable (i.e. valued) feature [iδ] (possible values: topic, focus etc.; [iδ] is optionally added to the head of XP when it enters the numeration).

- **Locality (MLC)**: C's [uδ] probes the closest [iδ] in its search domain, leading to Agree and (EPP-triggered) movement of the relevant XP to SpecCP.

- **German**: [uδ] comes in two variants (cf. e.g. Frey 2004, 2006 for related ideas; Coniglio 2012 on MHG):
  - a general unspecified δ-feature, leading to attraction of the highest element in the TP-domain (usually a topical subject)
  - a δ-feature linked to focus/contrast [uδ$_{Foc}$], which serves to attract the closest element carrying an interpretable focus feature [iFoc] (e.g., a wh-Phrase, or a contrastively focused XP)

3. On the analysis of CP-expletives

CP
C'
C $_{[u\delta], [EPP]}$ TP
AGREE
DP$_{[i\delta]}$ T'
MOVE
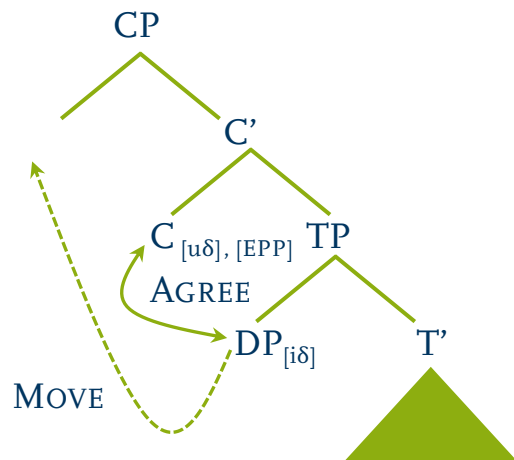
- Dependent on the interplay between [uδ] on C and [iδ] on the fronted XP, the clause-initial XP can assume any of a number of different information-structural functions.

- Movement/internal Merge is parasitic on Agree: When [uδ] has been valued, C is no longer active ⇒ **the V2 effect**

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3. On the analysis of CP-expletives

Examples:

(8) Anna hat __ dem Studenten ein Buch gegeben.
Anna has the$_{DAT}$ student$_{DAT}$ a book given
[$_{CP}$ Anna$_{[iTop]}$ [$_{C'}$ C$_{[u\delta]}$ +V$_{fin}$ [$_{TP}$ ~~Anna~~ $_{[iTop]}$ ... [$_{vP}$ dem Studenten ein Buch gegeben]]]]

(9) Was hat Anna dem Studenten __ gegeben?
what has Anna the$_{DAT}$ student$_{DAT}$ given
[$_{CP}$ Was$_{[iFoc]}$ [$_{C'}$ C$_{[u\delta Foc]}$ +V$_{fin}$ [$_{TP}$ Anna ... [$_{vP}$ dem Studenten ~~was~~ $_{[iFoc]}$ gegeben]]]]?

3. On the analysis of CP-expletives

- **CP-expletives as repairs:**
  - **Basic idea**: CP-expletives are externally merged in SpecCP to rescue a derivation where EPP/[uδ] on C cannot be satisfied ⇒ **Last Resort/repair** (cf. Blümel 2017 for a general repair perspective on V2)
  - This is the case if **no [iδ]-features have been added to the numeration**.
  - However, if no [iδ]-feature is part of the numeration, [uδ]/[EPP] on C cannot be satisfied ⇒ CP-expletives to the rescue...

3. On the analysis of CP-expletives
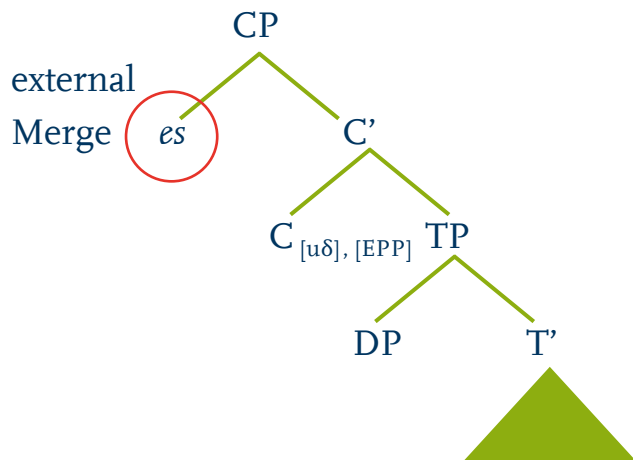
CP
external
Merge ⟨ *es* ⟩ C'

C $_{[u\delta],\ [EPP]}$ TP

DP T'

Es   hat niemand angerufen.
EXPL has nobody   called
'Nobody called.'

- *es* satisfies [EPP] only (arguably the more important condition), leaving [uδ] unvalued (cf. e.g. Preminger 2014 for the idea that not all unvalued features lead to a crash at the interfaces).

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3. On the analysis of CP-expletives

CP
external
Merge ⟨ *es* ⟩   C'
                 C $_{[u\delta], [EPP]}$ TP
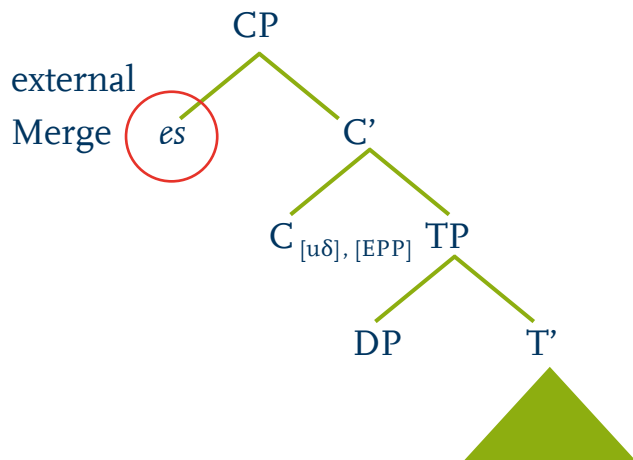   DP   T'

Es   hat niemand angerufen.
EXPL has nobody   called
'Nobody called.'

- *es* satisfies [EPP] only (arguably the more important condition), leaving [uδ] unvalued (cf. e.g. Preminger 2014 for the idea that not all unvalued features lead to a crash at the interfaces).

- This captures the Last Resort character of expletives (no optimal solution, expletives cannot be freely inserted): if both [uδ] and [EPP] can be satisfied by another XP, this XP must undergo movement to SpecCP (local economy).

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3. On the analysis of CP-expletives

- <u>A potential consequence</u>: Incompatibility of CP-expletives and pronominal subjects (cf. Heck & Müller 2013 for an OT analysis based on similar assumptions):

(10) *Es   hat er angerufen.
     EXPL has he called
     'He called.'

- <u>Analysis</u>: The presence of a pronominal subject blocks insertion of a CP-expletive:

  - (unstressed) subject pronouns are inherently topical elements and carry always [iTop];
  - as a result, they can check both [uδ] and [EPP]; movement is therefore "better" than EXPL-insertion, which satisfies [EPP] only (Maximize matching effects, Chomsky 2001: 15).

- Apparent problem:

(11)   Es   hat der Klempner angerufen.
        EXPL has the plumber   called
        'The plumber called.'

- <u>Potential solution</u>: In contrast to pronouns, [iTop] is only optional with full DPs; as a result, they can occur in existential/presentational clauses introduced by CP-expletives.

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Semantic/pragmatic effects of this repair operation I:

- <u>Lack of a topic-comment/focus-background structure</u>: CP-expletives (i.e. [uδ] on C) signal the absence of [iδ]-features in a clause, which gives rise to the characteristic 'all-new' reading of existential/presentational sentences (broad/wide focus).

3. On the analysis of CP-expletives

Semantic/pragmatic effects of this repair operation II:

- Contextual anchoring/introduction of new (specific) situation:
  - CP-expletives *es*: A pronominal element that does not fill an argument slot and therefore seems to violate the Theta Criterion/Full Interpretation. Possible effect: *es* cannot be taken to refer to an individual.
  - Re-Interpretation via repair (some form of (conventional) implicature): *es* relates to a specific situation linked to the speaker/utterance context (Hinterhölzl 2019, Fuß & Hinterhölzl 2022: a situational argument of tense; see Brandt 2019 for a general repair perspective on related interpretative effects).

4. Some remarks on the historical source of CP expletive *es*

- <u>Speculation</u>: The capability to anchor an event to the utterance context is linked to the fact that *es* is a **weak deictic element** (Hinterhölzl 2019):
  - historical origin as a demonstrative/deictic pronoun: Germanic expletives go back to **deictic/demonstrative** elements (*d/th*-Forms < PIE demonstrative root **so/*tod* 'this, that'; *it*-forms < PIE **he*-, neut. **hid* 'that, the (just named)'; cf. Beekes 2011: 226):
  - evidence from present-day dialects…

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4. Some remarks on the historical source of CP expletive *es*

- **Present-day dialects**: CP-*es* is often realized as proclitic /s=/:

(12) a. S=isch es   Haus abpränt.
       it=is   the house burned down
       'The house burned down.' (Zurich German, Weber 1964: 240)
    b. S=wird geschafft.
       (Swabian, Fabian Heck p.c.)

- The weak proclitic /s=/ does not alternate with the full form /es/, but rather with a corresponding strong d-form (e.g., /des/), cf. e.g. Mayerthaler & Mayerthaler (1990: 403) on Bavarian:

  "[The] pronoun *es* does not exist in Bavarian; its function is divided between a stressed form *des*, which is identical with the demonstrative pronoun, and a clitic form *s* ([əs], [sə])."

- See also Weiß (1998: 101) on Bavarian; Rothmund (1932: 35) on Alemannic; Baumgärtner (1959: 39) on East Central German; Schönhoff (1908: 181) and Appel (2007: 290f.) on Low German.

⇒ *es* (or rather, /s=/) is a weak deictic element, part of the demonstrative paradigm

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4. Some remarks on the historical source of CP expletive *es*

- **Unclear**: Is the dialectal pattern the result of an innovation, or does it preserve the original state of affairs?
- **Traditional assumption (Brugmann 1917):** expletive *es* developed from cataphoric *es*, which is merely optional in all historical stages of German and can therefore be analyzed either as a cataphoric or an expletive element (cf. Axel 2009 for a related proposal):

(13)   Iz déta imo   thiu   fásta, [thaz ínan   es gilústa]   **(bridging context for reanalysis)**
       it did   him.DAT the.NOM fast.NOM that him.ACC it lust-for
       'Fasting made him crave for it [for bread].'
       (Otfrid, II, 4, 45)

- This ambiguity still persists in present-day German (cf e.g. Sternefeld 2006: 347f.):

(14)   a.   *(Es) gefällt mir, dass es endlich Sommer ist.
             it   pleases me that it finally   summer is
       b.   weil (es) mir gefällt, dass es endlich Sommer ist.
            '(since) it pleases me that it is finally summer.'

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4. Some remarks on the historical source of CP expletive *es*

- **Observation**: In early Germanic, the correlative/cataphoric pronoun relating to an embedded clause is typically a demonstrative and not 'it' (Axel 2017: embedded clauses develop from explicative clauses modifying the demonstrative)
- **Gothic**: *þata* 'that' and not *ita* 'it':

(15) Aþþan þata   kunneis [ei   in spedistaim dagam atgaggand jera   sleidja]

      but   that.acc know   COMP in last   days   come   years perilous

      'But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come'

      (2 Timothy 3:1; Axel 2017: e37)

- **Old High German**: similar patterns (*thaz* more frequent than *iz,* Axel 2017: e34)

(16) Er tháhta   odowila táz, \ [thaz er ther dúriwart wás],
      he thought maybe   that.acc that he the gatekeeper was
      'Maybe he thought that he was the gatekeeper' (Otfrid II 4.7; Axel 2017)

- (perhaps wild) guess: Expletive *es* developed from a weak variant of *thaz* (possibly as a result of folk etymology when the vernacular was

4. Some remarks on the historical source of CP expletive *es*

- **(perhaps wild) guess**: Expletive *es* developed from a weak, clitic variant of correlative/cataphoric *thaz* (/-s/)
  - when the vernacular was put down in written form, clitic /-s/ was rendered by /iz/, separating it from the paradigm of demonstratives (some form of folk etymology in combination with a tendency to avoid clitcs in the written language).
  - result: strange situation in present-day Standard German, where *es* is linked to a wide variety of different functions

5. The historical development of CP-expletives in German – overview

- **OHG (750-1050)**: *es* 'it' is confined to the following functions:
  - personal pronoun
  - quasi-argument: weather verbs, certain impersonal constructions (also without overt subject ⇒ V1)
  - cataphoric pronoun referring to an extraposed clause
- **MHG (1050-1350)**:
  - additional functions (mid/late MHG) – **development of prefinite expletive *es*** with
    - (i) existential/presentational clauses and
    - (ii) impersonal passives (of intransitive verbs).
- **ENHG (1350-1650)**:
  - consolidation of prefinite expletive *es*
  - development of existential constructions of the type *es + geben* 'give' (16th century, cf. Newman 1998).

(cf. e.g. Miklosich 1883, Brugmann 1917, Paul 1919: 26, 71, 128, Behaghel 1923, 1928, Haiman 1974, Lenerz 1985, Grosse 1990, Abraham 1993, Vogel 2006, Axel 2007, 2009, Pfenninger 2009, Czicza 2010, Light 2015)

5. The historical development of CP-expletives in German – overview

- **OHG**: no CP-expletives; **V1-order** in subjectless, existential and presentational constructions:

(17) **uuas** tho zit   nah sehsta   (subjectless construction)
      was   then hour after sixth
  Lat. hora erat quasi sexta;
      'it was about the sixth hour'
      (Tatian 275,29; Axel 2007: 142)

(18) a. **uuas** thar   ouh sum uuitua/in thero burgi … (existential construction)
         was   there also some widow in that   city
    Lat. vidua autem quaedam erat /In ciuitate illa …
         'There was also a widow there in that city…'
         (Tatian 201, 2; Axel 2007: 121)

   b. **giengun** thô   zuo gotes engila   (presentational construction)
       went   then to   God's angels
    Lat. Et ecce angeli accesserunt
        'God's angels came'
        (Tatian 115,30; Axel 2007: 121)

5. The historical development of CP-expletives in German – overview

- **Wide-spread assumption**: The rise of CP-expletive/prefinite *es* is connected to the development of generalized V2 (i.e., an EPP feature on C, cf. e.g. Axel 2007, 2009, Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2009)
- **Problem**: Apparent chronological gap (~150 years) between the development of (i) generalized V2 and (ii) the rise of expletive *es* 'it' in the history of German:
  - **Late OHG (~11th cent.)**: V2 is already very much in place (cf. e.g. Lenerz 1984, Axel 2007).
  - **Mid/late MHG (~13th/14th cent.)**: development of CP-expletive *es* 'it' (cf. Brugmann 1917, Behaghel 1923, Lenerz 1985, Abraham 1993, Paul 2007, Axel 2009).

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5. The historical development of CP-expletives in German – overview

- **Potential solution**:
  - Prior to the emergence/actuation of expletive *es*, German had developed other strategies/expletive elements to fill SpecCP (see also Light 2015 on ENHG)
  - **light frame adverbials** as potential candidates:
    - *thô/dô* 'then' (deictic temporal adverbial, henceforth *dô*), Axel (2007), Donhauser & Petrova (2009), Fuß (2008, 2009, 2018), Fuß & Hinterhölzl (2022)
    - *thâr/dâr* 'there' (deictic locative adverbial, henceforth *dâr*), Pfenninger (2009)

5. The historical development of CP-expletives in German – overview

- **_dô_ as a (early) CP-expletive**: Apparent functional similarity of V1 (+frame adv.) order, prefinite _dô/dâr_ and later prefinite expletive _es_ 'it', compare the same passage from the Christmas story (Lk., 2,8) in different historical stages of German (existential/presentational constructions):

(19)   a. V1+_dô_

uuarun thô hirta   In thero lantskeffi uuahante […]
were   DÔ shepherds in that   country   abiding
'There were shepherds abiding in the fields […]'
(Tatian, 85,29; Lk, 2,8)

b. _dô_+V2

Tho wárun thar   in lánte   hirta   háltente […]
DÔ   were   there in country shepherds abiding
(Otfrid, Ev. I. 12,1)

c. _es_+V2

es waren Hirten   in der selbigen gegend auff dem felde
IT were   shepherds in the same   area   on   the   field
(Luther 1545 (letzte Hand))

5. The historical development of CP-expletives in German – overview

- **But**: Is it really true that expletive *es* is a rather late development? Revisiting the facts...

6. The rise of *es* in Middle High German

- Rise of *es* 'it' as a CP-expletive (cf. Brugmann 1917, Behaghel 1923, Lenerz 1985, Abraham 1993, Paul 1998, Axel 2007, 2009), e.g. in presentative/existential clauses (13th/14th century, according to the traditional view):

(20) a. Iz giengen zwei mensch in ein goteshvos vnd baten da
          it went two men in a god-house and prayed there
          'Two men went into a church and prayed there.'
          (13,2; Mettener Predigtsammlung, 73ra,29-30)

      b. ez giengen ze einem mâle ein vuhs vnd ein katze mit einander über velt
          it went once a fox and a cat together across field.
          Once, a fox and a cat went together across a field.'
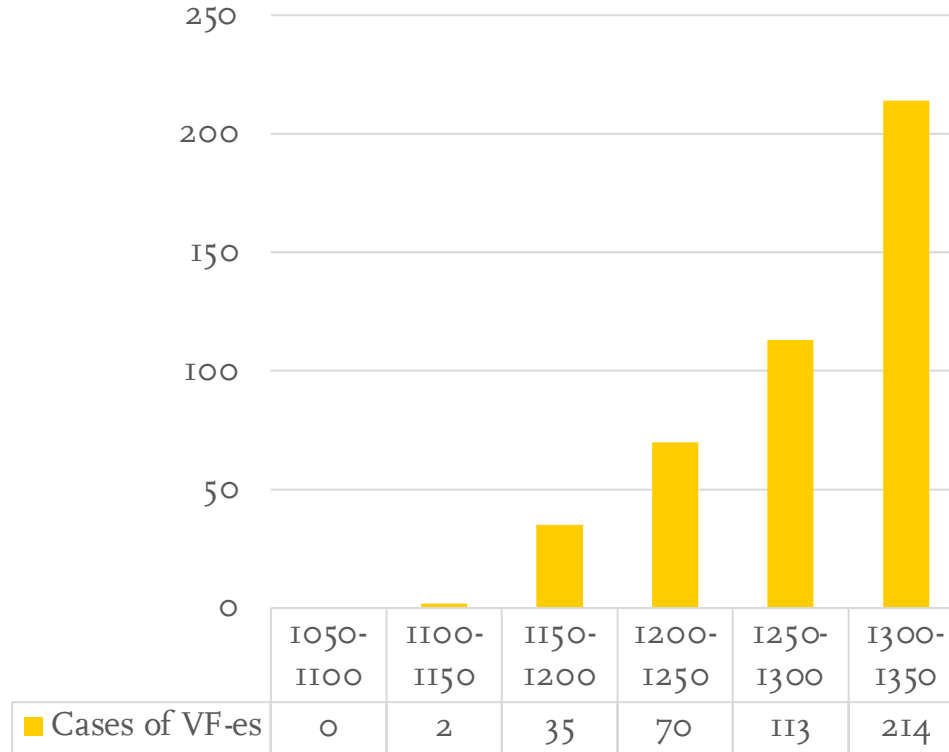   (14,1; Nikolaus von Straßburg: Predigten (C), 72rb,13-16)

6. The rise of *es* in Middle High German

- **Open question**: rise and spread of CP-expletive *es* in MHG
  - How did the development of expletive *es* proceed? (focus today: time course & possible bridging contexts; see Fuß & Hinterhölzl 2022 for additional factors like text genre/type)

6. The rise of *es* in Middle High German

- **Traditional view**: CP-expletive *es* developed in mid/late MHG (~13th/14th cent., cf. Brugmann 1917, Behaghel 1923, Lenerz 1985, Abraham 1993, Paul 2007, Axel 2009).
- However, not much is known about the details of this development.

- **Corpus study (MHG Reference Corpus, ReM)**: Extraction of all cases where *es*
  - directly precedes the finite verb, and
  - is directly preceded by a sentence boundary.
- 1,769 hits (including 254 cases of the pattern *es-ne-*V_{fin})
- After elimination of doublets, annotation errors, and instances of quasi-argument *es* and correlative *es*, 444 cases of CP-expletive *es* remain.

CP-expletive es in ReM – distribution over time (absolute numbers)

	1050-1100	1100-1150	1150-1200	1200-1250	1250-1300	1300-1350
■ Cases of VF-es	0	2	35	70	113	214

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6. The rise of *es* in Middle High German

- As expected, the bulk of relevant examples are from the 13th and 14th century.

- However, there are a couple of earlier cases (12th century):

(21) Ez ist geborn der heilant   der   die werlt   alle erlosen sol
      IT   is   born   the Saviour who the world   all deliver   should
      'The Saviour was born, who should deliver the world...'
      (12,1; Londoner Predigt(fragment), 39va,9-10)

(22) a.   iz enwiderrete nieman
            'Nobody protested.'
            (Reinhart Fuchs (late 12th cent.), 1437)

      b.   iz enwart nie niehein keiser sô hêre geboren an der erde
            'Never before, such a great emperor has been born on earth.'
            (Rolandslied (around 1170), 1592)

      c.   Ez leit der vischære von armuot grôze swære.
            'The fisherman suffered from great poverty.'
            (Gregorius (late 12th cent.), 1201)

6. The rise of *es* in Middle High German

- **Type of subject**: 271/444 cases exhibit an indefinite subject (61%)
- *alles* 'all': 38 cases where prefinite *es* combines with an apparent nominative indefinite pronoun *alles* 'all'.

(23) Iz was **allez** uerloren
it was all lost
'All was lost.'
(12,2; Pfaffe Konrad, Rolandslied (A), 0a,3316)

- **Note**: Examples like (22) are another potential context for reanalysis (in addition to cataphoric *es*).
  - MHG *allez* is ambiguous:
    - indefinite pronoun ('all/everything') ⇒ *iz* is a CP-expletive in (22)
    - adverb ('entirely/completely') ') ⇒ *iz* is a subject in (22)
    - (possibly) floating quantifier (compare Engl. *It was all lost*) ') ⇒ *iz* is a subject in (22)

- Traces of this ambiguity still exist in present-day German: *weil (es) **alles** verloren ist* 'since all is lost'

6. The rise of *es* in Middle High German

- In the original manuscript of the *Rolandslied*, *allez* appears twice (changed to a single *allez* in the edition by Wesle 1928) – further support for a potential reanalysis in terms of CP-*es* + lower indefinite:
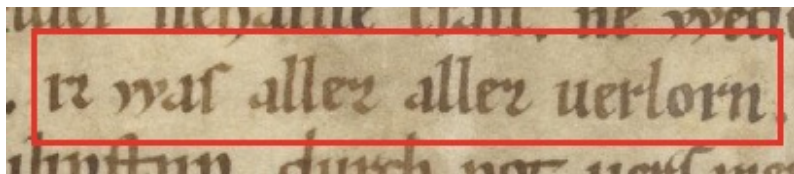
- Similar examples occur in OHG → Did the development of CP-*es* started earlier than assumed in previous work?

(24)   a. iz ist gifúagit **al**   in éin   selp   so hélphantes béin
             it is set   all together similar so elephant's bone/leg
             'All is made so well-proportioned as ivory' (Otfrid I,1, 16)

         b. Iz ward   **állaz** io   sár,   sosọ er iz gibót   thar
             it became all   always immediately as   he it ordered there
             'All happened always immediately as he ordered it.' (Otfrid, II,1, 39)

6. The rise of *es* in Middle High German

- **Potential support for an earlier reanalysis**: Pfenninger (2009: 133, 149) points out that there are a couple of OHG examples that seem to exhibit early expletive uses of *iz*:

(25)   Íz habet beide namen ab estuando táz chit   fóne zéssône uuánda sô accessus maris uuírdet.
        it have both   names ab estuando that means from surf   since   so accessus maris becomes
        (Notker, Boethius IV/V; Sehr & Stark 325, 15–20)

(26)   Iz spríchit ouh giwáro   Hierónimus ther máro,
        it speaks also emphatically Jerome   the famous
        giwuag   er   wórtes sines thes selben álten nides.
        mentioned he words his   the same   old   enviousness
        'Jerome, the famous, also points (this) out emphatically, he mentioned in his writing the same old enviousness.' (Otfrid, 5.25, 69)

7. Concluding remarks

- Repair analysis of CP-expletives:
  - Syntax: CP-expletives are inserted as a last resort to satisfy C's EPP-feature
  - Semantics/pragmatics: weak deictic elements that introduce a new situation (repair-driven interpretation (implicature))
- CP-expletive *es* is robustly attested from the 13th/14th century onwards.
- BUT: Earlier cases dating to the 12th century suggest that the change started earlier – possibly even as early as OHG.
- In addition to cataphoric *es*, cases with postfinite *alles* (pronoun/adverb) provide another context for reanalysis.

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