

## The diversity of expletives: theoretical possibilities and diachronic opportunities

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Expletive (i.e. non-referential) elements, such as English *there* and *it*, have been central in the development of many theories of grammar, owing to their interesting structural properties. However, the general view of expletives as a relatively homogeneous class, cast as solely structural fillers (e.g. Svenonius 2002), belies their crosslinguistic and diachronic diversity. In fact, data from many languages challenges the view that expletives are exclusively structurally motivated because they exhibit expletives which are optional and/or have a relatively free positional distribution (e.g. Mack & Fuerst 2009; Engdahl 2012; Greco et al. 2018). Moreover, “pragmatic expletives”, i.e. expletives which serve a pragmatic function, have been argued for in many languages, including across Romance varieties (Hinzelin 2009; Corr 2017), in Finnish (Kaiser 2019), Icelandic (Zaenen 1983; Booth 2018), Vietnamese (Haegeman et al. 2017), Russian (Pekelis 2019) and West Flemish (Haegeman et al. 2017). In this talk, I highlight this diversity and (i) explore the theoretical possibilities for modelling different types of expletive within a modular approach to grammar and (ii) show how a more nuanced view of expletives can help shed light on their diachronic development.

Firstly, I show how various crosslinguistically attested types of expletive can be modelled within a parallel constraint-based approach to grammar such as Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG, Bresnan et al. 2015; Dalrymple et al. 2019). In particular, I show that the separation of form and function inherent in LFG’s parallel architecture allows one to model subtle differences between e.g. expletives which are assigned a grammatical function, and those which are not, as well as between expletives which express different types of non-syntactic information in different ways.

Secondly, I will consider the opportunities such an approach holds for understanding the diachrony of expletives which, in the literature, is mostly confined to exclusively structural explanations (e.g. Faarlund 1990; Richards & Biberauer 2005). Focusing specifically on expletives which serve a discourse-related function, I will show how the diachronic emergence and development of expletives at particular language stages is related to the degree of discourse configurationality (e.g. Kiss 1995; Booth 2021), i.e. the extent to which discourse functions are structurally expressed. As I will show, this allows one to model the development of expletives in relation to distinct stages along the grammaticalisation pathway.

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