

Expletives beyond English

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1. Introduction

- ‘Expletive’, ‘pleonastic’, ‘dummy’ subject as they’re usually interpreted: placeholders associated with a specific syntactic position (Spec-IP in generative terms)
- Importantly, the class of expletives isn’t homogenous; there is clearly a typology of expletives (cf. Bolinger 1977 for early discussion)
- In this talk, we distinguish the following types of expletives:

(1)	It is raining.	Weather
(2)	There arrived some yellow birds.	Presentational
(3)	There are pancakes on the table.	Existential
(4a)	It is obvious that you like pancakes.	Extraposition
(4b)	It seems that you like pancakes.	Raising
(5)	Der må ikke ryges. EXPL may not be.smoked ‘Smoking is not allowed.’	Impersonal

(Danish, Svenonius 2002)

- English has an extensive inventory of expletive elements, but it has often been observed that expletives generally are crosslinguistically very rare (Newmeyer 2005).
- Our purpose in this paper:
 - (section 2) show that we need to distinguish types of expletives, based on
 - their diachronic development in Germanic,
 - their synchronic distribution, and
 - modern English acquisition data;
 - (section 3) show that we need to look at a range of contexts, including some not suggested by investigation of English, to establish whether a language “has expletives”;¹
 - (section 4) discuss the implications for the centrality of the subject.

2. Types of expletives

2.1 The different types

- Expletives are typically seen as meaningless ‘fillers’, but the types in (1)-5) differ in the extent to which they are contentful: not all expletives are empty placeholders!
- Argument status:
Weather-expletives are taken to be [+argumental], unlike the other types of expletives, because it takes up the predicate’s theta-role (see Bolinger 1977 for insightful discussion).
- Agreement:
 - Expletives that trigger subject agreement (see (4b) and contrast **It seem that you like pancakes*) apparently have some contentful features (i.e. not completely contentless and hence “impure” in Lasnik’s (1995) terms).
 - Expletives that do not trigger subject agreement (see (3) and contrast: *There is a pancake on the table*) are taken to have fewer formal features (“pure expletives” in Lasnik’s terms).

¹ In this research we only look at overt, free expletive pronouns; we remain agnostic about possible null expletives.

- Interpretative effects:
 - Presentational expletives flag up a forthcoming informationally new element.
 - Extraposition expletives refer to a forthcoming specific element.

2.2 Evidence in support of the distinction

Diachronic evidence is found in the gradual sequence of expletive developments in Germanic (Ball 1991, Allen 1995, Williams 2000, Biberauer 2006), with the modern Germanic languages having “stopped” at different points in this developmental sequence:

- I. Establishment of clause-initial expletives (all types; nominal-related expletives (2-3) clearly topic- rather than subject-sensitive, i.e. still sensitive to information structure at this point).
- II. Systematic occurrence of Weather type expletives (1), both clause-initially and clause-internally.
- III. Ever-increasing occurrence of Presentational (2), Existential (3) and Impersonal (5) type² expletives in clause-internal position, in addition to the existing clause-initial position.
- IV. Obligatory presence of Presentational (2) and Existential (3) type expletives in all positions.
- V. Obligatory presence of Impersonal (5) type expletives in all positions.
- VI. (for English) Obligatory presence of *it* in clefts and other Extraposition (4) contexts.

Synchronic evidence, primarily at this stage from the distribution of expletive-types in modern Germanic (but see section 3 for more variation!). The Germanic languages show variation as to which types of expletives are obligatory, and in which position they may occur (only Initial or Everywhere).

	weather	presentational	existential	impersonal	extraposition
Icelandic	I	I	I	I	I
German	E	I	I	I	I
Dutch	E	I and (E)	I and (E)	I and (E)	E
Afrikaans	E	E	E	I and (E)	E
English MSc	E	E	E	E	E

(where *I* = initial position only, *E*=everywhere and *()* signals optionality. It is worth noting that initial expletive drop is possible in topic-drop structures in all of these languages and is not therefore specially indicated in the Table.)

Acquisition evidence from Modern English also suggests the types of expletives are not acquired together (cf. Inoue 1991, Shafer & Roeper 2000, Kirby & Becker 2007). The Weather expletive (1) is acquired much earlier than the Extraposition use (4); the Existential expletive (3) is acquired independently of (1), (4) and (5). As the Presentational use is quite a literary form, it is only acquired later.

3. Extending expletives beyond English

Once we recognise the importance of distinguishing within the class of expletives, the question of whether languages other than English “have expletives” may actually be harder to answer than might at first seem to be the case. Even if few languages operate with the entirety

² Except in English, which, unlike its Germanic relatives, does not permit impersonal passives. This gap is ill-understood and we leave it aside here.

of the varied inventory of expletive types found in English, it might nevertheless be expected that lesser studied systems, including those with properties quite different from the familiar Germanic varieties, may feature one or more of the sub-types found in Germanic. Thus, we have to look at a range of contexts to find expletives.

Our search for expletives outside of the familiar languages brought to light 3 sorts of systems, defined on the basis of the distribution of expletive types:

1. a small subset of the expletive types obligatorily employed;
2. one or more of the expletive types used on an optional basis;
3. a range of obligatory expletive-types.

3.1 Employing just a subset of the expletive types obligatorily.

Crosslinguistically we find languages with obligatory expletives, but not in all the cases where English obligatorily inserts an expletive. Haitian Creole, for example, obligatorily uses the expletive ‘li’ with Extraposition of a clause, but optionally with a Raising construction, and there is no expletive in the Presentational construction.

Haitian Creole

(6) **Li** difisil pou pale ak Jan
 EXPL difficult for speak with John
 ‘It is difficult to speak with John’ (Deprez 1994)

(7) (Li) sanble Jan entèlijan.
 expl seem John intelligent
 ‘It seems that John is intelligent.’ (Law 1992)

(8) Gen jwèt sou tab la.
 have toys on table the
 ‘There are toys on the table.’ (DeGraff 1996:68)

Some Romance varieties have only a specific type of expletive which occurs in a subset of the potentially available contexts. In Galician Portuguese the Weather expletive is only present in initial position. Strikingly, in this respect it seems to resemble modern Icelandic and earlier Germanic.

Galician Portuguese (Nicolis 2008)

(9) a. El choverá hoje?
 EXPL rain.FUT today
 ‘Will it rain today?’

b. *Choverá el hoje?
 rain FUT EXPL today

In Jamaican Creole, the expletive is optional in main clauses, while obligatory in embedded clauses.

Jamaican Creole (Durrleman 2008)

(10) a. (I) komiin like seh di pickney a go run weh
 EXPL seem like seh the child PROG PROSP run away
 ‘It seems like the child is going to run away.’

- b. (I) look like im nuh like yu
EXPL look like 3SG NEG like 2SG
'It looks like s/he does not like you.'
- (11) a. Im tell me seh *(i) komiin laik
3SG tell 1SG seh EXPL seem like
di pickney a go run weh
the child PROG PROSP run away
'S/he told me that it looked like the child is going to run away.'
- b. Im tell me seh *(i) look like im nuh like yu
3SG tell 1SG seh EXPL look like 3SG NEG like 2SG
'It looks like s/he does not like you.'

3.2 Employing one or more of the types on an optional basis, apparently without any interpretive effect.

Finnish seems permits many of the types as *options*.

Finnish (Nicolis 2008 and Anders Holmberg, p.c.)

- | | |
|---|----------------|
| (12) a. Nyt (se) taas sataa
now EXPL again rains
'Now it's raining again.' | Weather |
| b. (Sitä) on ilmennyt ongelmia
EXPL have appeared problems
'Problems have come up.' | Presentational |
| c. Nyt sitä on taas liian paljon lapsia kadulla.
now EXPL is again too many children on.street
'Now there are too many children in the street, again.' | Existential |
| d. (Se) oli hauskaa että tulit käymään
EXPL was nice that came.2sg visiting
'It was nice that you came to visit.' | Extraposition |
| e. Sitä ei puhuta paljon ranskaa Suomessa.
EXPL not speak-IMPS much French in.Finland
'French is not spoken much in Finland' | Impersonal |

Entr'acte: discourse-sensitive use of "expletive"

Some languages use what looks like an expletive optionally, in an interpretively significant way. These can be analysed as 'fore-runners' of an expletive (i.e. place-holder) although their synchronic analysis does not warrant such an analysis. Examples are Cimbrian *da*, which instantiates an interpretively significant version of the Germanic Presentational type, and in some Dutch variants the impersonal 'er' can be used to indicate specificity.

Cimbrian (Grewendorf & Poletto 2010)

- (13) dar mann bo (**da**) hat o- geheft a nauga arbat
the man that EXPL has up taken a new job
'the (specific) man who has taken up a new job.'

Dutch variant (Mohr 2003)

- (14) De voorstelling kwam maar heel stroef op gang.
the show came only very slowly on going
'The show got off to very grinding start.'
- a. Maar op het laatst werd gelachen.
but on the last was laughed
'But in the end the audience laughed.'
- b. Maar op het laatst werd **er** gelachen.
but on the last was **EXPL** laughed
'But in the end there were some people who laughed.'

Various Romance varieties can also be shown to have developed interpretively significant optional “expletives” of different kinds (cf. i.a. Carrilho 2008, the contributions in Kaiser & Remberger 2009, and Bartra-Kaufmann 2011). We know that in some cases this optionality is a stage before the obligatorization of the expletive pronoun (Falk 1993, Allen 1995, Williams 2000, Biberauer 2006). However, the “expletive” may synchronically be better analysed as a proper discourse particle rather than a subject-oriented particle. This is proposed by Hinzelin & Kaiser (2007) for Dominican Spanish, also based on the fact that the “expletive” can occur optionally in initial positions in constructions where no expletive is usually posited (17)-(18).

Colloquial European Portuguese Carrilho 2008)

- (15) **(Ele)** há tanta mulher por aí!
EXPL have.3SG so.many women for there
'There are so many women around!'

Dominican Spanish (Hinzelin & Kaiser 2007: 10, citing Henríquez Ureña 1939: 212, 224)

- (16) **(Ello)** es fácil llegar
EXPL is easy arrive
'It's easy to get there.'

- (17) **(Ello)** no obstante
EXPL however
'However, ...'

- (18) **(Ello)** veremos.
EXPL see.1PL.FUT
'We'll see.'

3.3 An English-like range of obligatory expletive-types

The Mainland Scandinavian languages show obligatory expletives in a whole range of different uses, as illustrated for Danish (Vikner 1995: chapter 7):

- (19) **Det** regner Weather
It rains
'It is raining''

- (20) a. **Der** er kommet en dreng Presentational
 EXPL is come a boy
 ‘A boy has come’ / ‘There came a boy’
- b. Igår er **der** kommet en dreng
 Yesterday is EXPL come a boy
 ‘Yesterday there came a boy.’
- (21) Han mente at **det** måtte være klart for enhver at jorden er rund
 He thought that EXPL must be clear to everyone that earth.the is round.
 ‘He thought that it must be clear to everyone that the earth is round.’ Extraposition
- (22) a. **Det** forekom ham at hun var enig
 EXPL appeared to.him that she was agreed
 ‘It seemed to him that she agreed.’
- b. **Det** siges at Peter elsker chokolade
 EXPL said.PASS that Peter loves chocolate
 ‘It is said that Peter loves chocolate.’
- (23) **Der** er blevet danset Impersonal passive
 EXPL has been danced
 ‘There was dancing.’

Strikingly, we also find a range of contexts for the expletive pronoun ‘i’ in Khoekhoe.

Khoekhoe (Wilfrid Haacke, p.c.)

- (24) |Awi **i** ge ra Weather
 rain EXPL IND PRES.CONT
 ‘It is raining.’
- (25) Tāb ai **i** ge appel-e hā Existential
 table on EXPL IND apple+i+a present
 ‘There is an apple on the table.’
- (26) !Gāsa **i** ge a tsamperena~ts a |nam !khaisa Extraposition
 obvious EXPL IND is cakes you PRES.STAT like matter
 ‘It is obvious that you like cakes.’

Impersonal/presentational passive

- (27) O **i** ge ge hî-he: |girib xa |gam khoera ge ū-he hā
 and EXPL IND REM.PAST do-PASS jackal by two women REM.PAST take-PASS AUX
 o **i** ge |gui khoes |guis |kha ra lom-he
 and EXPL IND one woman ona with PRES sleep-PASS
 ‘And it was done: there were two women had by jackal, and there was slept with only one woman. (after L. Schultze 1907: 494)

A typical opening phrase with expletive and passive (in bold) for a traditional story is:

- (28) |Guitsē i ge ge hâ-he i kaira aob xa
 one.day EXPL IND REM.PAST exist-PASS old man by
 ‘One day there was existed by an old man’

Other non-European languages with potentially more types of expletives include Dagbani and Supyire (Carlson 1994).

Dagbani (Olawsky 1999:48, 66)

- (29) **Di** niṅ talahi ni n ti baya guli. Extraposition
 it make duty SUB I give diviner kola
 ‘I must give kola to the diviner.’

- (30) a. **Di** ni chan. Impersonal
 it FUT go
 ‘There will be gone.’
- b. **Di** di kɔdu.
 it eat-PRF banana
 ‘Bananas were eaten.’

Further, we found some languages which show obligatory non-referential pronouns even in environments where they cannot occur in English or familiar Germanic languages.

It is well known that French subject relatives require the subordinator *qui*, while non-subject relatives use *que*. Taraldsen (2002) analyses ‘*qui*’ in (29) as a combination of the subordinator ‘*que*’ plus an expletive ‘*i*’ (compare ‘*il*’). He proposes the same analysis for Rhaeto-Romance Vallader, where the expletive ‘*i*’ hypothesized to be a component of the subordinator ‘*chi*’ (32) also surfaces independently in presentational constructions (33).

French

- (31) Quelles filles crois-tu qu-*i*/**que* vont acheter ce livre-là ?
 which girls believe-you that-EXPL go buy.INF this book-there
 ‘Which girls do you think will buy this book ?’

Vallader (Taraldsen 2002:30,31)

- (32) a. Qual cudesh crajast cha/*chi las mattas cumpraran?
 which book think.you that the girls will.buy
 ‘Which book do you think the girls will buy?’
- b. Qualas mattas crajast chi/*cha cumpraran quel cudesh?
 which girls think.you that will.buy that book
 ‘Which girls do you think will buy that book?’
- (33) a. ...la spranza chi/*cha turnaran quels temps docts
 the hope that will.return those times learned
 ‘...the hope that those learned times will return.’
- b. **I** turnaran quei temps docts
 it will.return those times learned
 ‘There will return those learned times.’

Looking at languages beyond Europe, Esan (Rolle 2010), Fongbe (Lefebvre), Edo and Yoruba (Adesola 2006) all require obligatory resumption in subject relatives (extraction contexts) to ensure that the subject slot be overtly filled. In Edo, Yoruba and Fongbe, this ‘resumptive pronoun’, as in Vallader, does not agree with the extracted subject, but is an (expletive) 3rd person form.

Esan (Rolle 2010)

- (34) a. \varnothing jabe eni ibhokhan ghon-ghon Raising
 3.SG seem DEF child.PL be.happy-REDUP
 ‘It seems the children are happy.’
- b. a le oni iyan Impersonal
 EXPL eat def jam
 ‘We’ve eaten the jam.’ ‘One eats the jam.’ ‘The jam has been eaten.’
- c. oni okpia [ni \varnothing de oni ebe] Extraction
 DEF man REL 3.SG buy DEF book
 ‘the man that bought the book’
 (Lit.: the man_i [that he_i bought the book])

Yoruba

- (35) a. \varnothing rho vbe ibare Weather
 EXPL rain LOC outside
 ‘It is raining outside.’ (Adesola 2009:81)
- b. ó jo pé Olú ní owó lówó Extraposition
 EXPL resemble that Olu have money in.hand
 ‘It seems that Olu is rich.’ (Adesola 2009:76)
- c. [Adé àti Olú] ni ó ra iwé Extraction
 Ade and Olu be EXPL buy book
 ‘It was Ade and Olu who bought books.’ (Adesola 2005:103)

Note that in these languages, the “resumptive” is only present in cases of subject extraction, not when the object position is ‘empty’, as seen in the contrast between subject in (36a) and object in (36b).

Fon (Lefebvre 2006)

- (36) a. Mè té (wè) Kòkú dī dò *(è) mò Àsíbá?
 person which it.is Koku think that EXPL see Asiba
 ‘Who is it that Koku thinks saw Asiba?’
- b. È té (wè) Kòkú dī dò Bàyí mò (*è)?
 that which it.is Koku think that Bayi see EXPL
 ‘What is it that Koku thinks Bayi saw?’

Extending the range of languages even further, we see that Tongan, an ergative language, also shows subject-specific resumption in relation to a specific subset of subjects, i.e. only ergative subjects.

Tongan (Osuka 2006:79)

- (37) a. e fefine na'e tangi
DEF woman PAST cry
'the woman (who) cried'
- b. e fefine na'e fili 'e Sione
DEF woman PAST choose ERG Sione
'the woman (who) Sione chose'
- c. *e fefine na'e fili 'a Sione
DEF woman PAST choose ABS Sione
'the woman (who) chose Sione'
- d. e fefine na'e ne fili 'a Sione
DEF woman PAST EXPL choose ABS Sione
'the woman (who) chose Sione'

4. Implications

4.1 Centrality of subject

- To date, a commonly held view has been that the peculiarly strong realization requirement on English's subject-position is what underlies the wealth of expletives found in this language.
 - That view is certainly correct, as languages with optionally filled subject positions or that prioritise topics rather than subjects specifically or that distinguish between sub-types of subjects don't require expletives in the same way as English does.
 - BUT: systems of these types may still employ expletives in a subset of contexts, namely those where there is a necessary subject requirement of some kind AND: there appear to be systems that require expletive elements in contexts where English does not require these, e.g. relative clauses; in fact, some of these systems seem to have an even **stricter** subject realization requirement than English does.
- This raises the question of subject behaviour in general: how subjects are coded in different **systems**, and how the question of 'types of expletives' link to that of 'types of subject' languages.
- Taking the centrality of the subject and its encoding into account, it seems that we can distinguish (at least) the following types of systems:
 - a. Those like English and Esan which designate a specific structural slot for subjects (Chomsky 1981, though see É.Kiss (1996) for a slightly different view),
 - b. Those like Icelandic and Turkish where there's a position to which (only) subjects optionally move, depending on information-structural considerations (Vangsnes 2002, Holmberg 2010, Biberauer & Roberts 2010, Öztürk 2008, forthcoming),
 - c. Those like Korean, Lahu, Zulu, Matengo, Naki where subjects are not independently positionally distinguished, but topics and/or foci are (Li and Thompson 1979, Buell 2006, Yoneda 2011, Good 2010).
 - d. Those like Tongan, where A-subjects are coded differently from S-subjects, and
 - e. Those like Mohawk and Warlpiri where grammatical notions ('subject', 'object', 'topic', etc.) are not positionally, but rather morphologically marked (Hale 1983, Baker 1996).

The languages under (c) can be morphologically rich or poor. For rich languages, certain types of **default agreement** can be viewed as the reflex of the presence of an expletive

(defined as an obligatory placeholder/slot-filler) – see the examples from Southern Bantu languages (38). Similarly, **anti-agreement effects**, of the type seen in Acholi, where an expletive and verb are reanalysed as an auxiliary (39), may also be viewed as an expletive reflex.

Sesotho (Demuth 1990:239)

(38) CJ **hó**-tswalá lipó:li
 17SM-give.birth 10.goats
 ‘there are goats giving birth’

Acholi (Heine 1993: 41, via Anderson 2011)

(39) in omyero i-cam mot < **o**-myero
 you [3:]AUX 2sg-eat slowly 3sg-be.suitable/fit.PST
 ‘you should eat slowly’

- Hypotheses regarding the distribution of expletives:
 - Weather-oriented expletives are a separate class, whose availability is essentially determined on the basis of an idiosyncratic lexical decision, i.e. using an expletive pronominal rather than a full NP, as in (42).
 - Languages without dedicated positions for subject/topic have no need for (obligatory) expletives. Thus we don’t expect to find expletives in morphologically rich “free word order” languages.
 - Languages where subject or topic (see (40) and (41)) has a dedicated position, may fill this position with a subject- or topic-oriented expletive, depending on the strength of the positional subject/topic requirement.
 - Different types of expletives expected on the basis of subject- or topic centrality? (e.g. extraposition less IS-related, so more expected in a subject-oriented language)

Good (2010) proposes a template for IS functions, where the topic slot may be filled by the subject, the object or an expletive:

(40) [[topic field] [predicate] [focus field]]

Noni (Hyman 1981:107)

- (41) a. nji dèèlě kèngòm
 Nji cook.PRES.PROG 7.plantain
 ‘Nji is cooking plantain.’
- b. kèngòm dèèlě nji
 7.plantain cook.PRES.PROG Nji
 ‘NJI is cooking plantains.’
- c. è dèèlě Nji kèngòm
 EXPL cook.PRES.PROG Nji 7.plantain
 ‘NJI is cooking plantains.’

That the presence of a particularly strong subject position need not imply an extensive array of expletives is also clearly shown by the case of Esan. As noted above, it necessarily

resumes all subjects in subject relatives, but lacks Weather expletives and, additionally, also does not make use of expletives in Presentational or Existential contexts.

Esan (Nicholas Rolle, Keren Rice, and Irehobhude Iyioha In preparation).

(42) a. Ehoho fi.
 wind blow
 ‘It is windy.’

b. Ame ro.
 water fall
 ‘It is raining.’

(43) Eran n-e bun ri bh-egbo
 tree SBR-3PL be.many be.located LOC-forest
 ‘There are many trees in the forest.’

4.2 Emerging questions for further research

- Do we find specific clusters of expletive types and an implicational hierarchy? Perhaps not, as the familiar expletives types do not seem to be dependent on each other, nor are they determined by one feature.
- More generally, in order to discover the pivotal elements (subject/topic/focus) in a language, we can investigate non-subject expletives, e.g. expletive determiners, expletive ‘light verbs’, even ‘dummy (focused) objects’.

5. Conclusions

- Evidence from the development of expletives, their synchronic crosslinguistic variation and language acquisition suggests a typology of specific sub-types of expletives, not all of which will be present in a particular system and some of which may, depending on the system-type, surface in positions where they’re not required in English.
- Taking expletives to be a diverse class of structurally imposed subject-oriented placeholders, which may or may not be obligatory, we see that, while elements of this type are certainly not crosslinguistically widespread, they are also not as rare as is often imagined.
- We need to look very carefully at a range of subject- and topic-related contexts before we can conclude that a language definitively lacks expletives. Specifically, we suggest that the following areas, which have not traditionally been considered in the context of expletive-oriented research, might be interesting for typological research (both synchronic and diachronic) into expletives:
 - The use of resumptive pronouns in relative clauses. If there is a specific requirement relating to **subjects** only, we have evidence for a subject-prominent language with a strong subject-position requirement. If the resumptive pronoun necessarily takes a default form, we have a system featuring an expletive that does not surface in English.
 - Anti-agreement effects that can be linked to expletive agreement.
- The (co)occurrence of different types of expletives can be used to gain an insight into the systems of which they are part, specifically to what extent the subject functions as a pivot in the respective systems.
- A better understanding of expletives will allow us to refine our understanding of the relationship between syntax and the two interfaces that are very clearly implicated by expletives: phonology and semantics.

Acknowledgements

The research reported here was funded by the European Research Council Advanced Grant No. 269752 “Rethinking Comparative Syntax” (ReCoS; PI: Ian Roberts). We would like to thank Peter Bakker, Wilfrid Haacke, Anders Holmberg, Larry Hyman, Nicholas Rolle, Ian Roberts, and Michelle Sheehan.

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