# On the historical development of pronouns referring to situations: the case of so-called 'expletives' in Germanic

Across Germanic we find a class of syntactic placeholders called 'expletive', 'dummy' or 'pleonastic' elements, which seem to carry out a primarily syntactic function (marking a position that must be obligatorily filled) and are traditionally taken to not contribute to the meaning of the clause. These elements come in two guises, namely as subject expletives and as CP-related 'prefield' expletives, the latter occupying the clause-initial position in V2 languages (cf. e.g. Vikner 1995). While there is a bulk of literature dealing with expletives in the present-day languages, many aspects of their historical development are still under-researched. This assessment applies in particular to the emergence of prefield expletives in the history of the Germanic V2 languages. Focusing on German, this paper seeks to shed new light on the diachrony of prefield expletives by combining new empirical evidence gathered from a range of corpus studies with a novel perspective on the pragmatic function(s) of apparent 'expletive' elements.

In generative approaches, it is usually assumed that the so-called prefield *es* 'it' developed in connection with the consolidation of V2 order (either as a side effect or a cause of a generalized EPP-feature in C, cf. Axel 2007; Fuß 2008; Petrova & Hinterhölzl 2009). This line of thinking is challenged by the fact that there seems to be a gap between the development of a rigid V2 syntax, which is firmly established by the early MHG period (11th/12th century), and the grammaticalization of the prefield *es*, which is usually dated to late MHG (13th/14th century, cf. Brugmann 1917, Lenerz 1985, Paul 252007). Essentially following Fuß (2018), we propose that this problem can be circumvented by assuming that the rise of a rigid V2 syntax was accompanied by the development of an earlier prefield expletive *thô/dô* (< deictic temporal/locative adverbs *thô/dô* 'then' and *thar/da* 'there'), which was later replaced by *es*. This scenario is supported by both qualitative and quantitative evidence. First, there seems to be a pathway from V1 over *tho*+V2 to *es*+V2 in presentative/thetic clauses, which suggests that the relevant structural options are functionally equivalent. This is exemplified by the examples in (1a-c), which show the same bible passage in various historical stages of German.

(1)  a. **uuarun** thô      *hirta*      In thero lantskeffi uuahante [...]   **OHG: V1**
        were       then/there shepherds in that   country   abiding
        'And there were shepherds abiding in the fields [...]'  (*Tatian*, 85,29; Lk, 2,8)
     b. **Tho** wárun thar in lánte hirta háltente [...]                    **OHG/MHG: *tho*+V2**
        (O., Ev. I. 12,1)
     c. **es** waren Hirten in der selbigen gegend auff dem felde          **MHG/ENHG: *es*+V2**
        (Luther 1545 (letzte Hand))

Second, a study carried out in the Bonn Corpus shows that *tho*+V2 is ousted by *es*+V2 in the course of ENHG period, again suggesting that the two structures are intimately related and shared similar functions (cf. Fuß 2018 for details). However, even if this proposal is on the right track, it raises a couple of further questions. More precisely, nothing much is known about the circumstances that led to the emergence of the prefield *es* in the MHG period (cf. Brugmann 1917 for some suggestions). In addition, it is unclear why *do* was replaced by the new expletive *es* in the ENHG period. To address these questions, we extracted all cases of clause-initial *dô* (5,582 cases) and *es* (1,769 cases) from the MHG Reference Corpus (ReM) and added further annotations including time, genre, type of subject, discourse function, and syntactic function (e.g. quasi-argument, correlate-*es*, and genuine expletive). Preliminary results show that the strongest predictors for the appearance of the prefield expletive *es* are time, genre, and type (i.e., indefiniteness) of the subject.

Time: It turns out that the vast majority of all instances of CP-expletive *es* occurs in texts from the 13th and 14th century. Still, it is interesting to note that there are also some earlier cases dating to the 12th century as in (2). There seems to be a tendency for these earlier cases to appear in texts that are based on Old French *chansons de geste*, possibly indicating some influence from language contact.

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

<u>Type of subject</u>: (2) also serves to illustrate another major factor, namely the presence of an indefinite subject, which accounts for over 60% of all cases with a prefield expletive *es*.
<u>Genre</u>: CP-Expletive *es* is particularly frequent in legal texts as in (3), while it is rare in narrative texts. In contrast, *dô* is frequently used in narrative texts, but rare in legal texts (and treatises).

(3) Ez   sol     auch   niemen   chein   silber   verkauffen   in   der   Stat.
    it    should  also   nobody   no     silver  sell         in   the   city
    'Nobody should sell silver in the city.' (13,2; *Augsburger Stadtbuch*, 15rb,21-22)

We suggest that the different distribution of *es* and *dô* is linked to differences in discourse function: *dô* is a discourse-continuative marker that links its clause to a time interval that has been established in the previous discourse, while *es* is primarily used in clauses that (i) are temporally independent (not bound to the previous discourse context), or (ii) introduce a new tense setting/situation. We will then develop an alternative theoretical account of expletive elements that (i) pays attention to the changing role and text-linguistic function of prefield-elements in German and that (ii) supersedes the standard account of pre-field *es* as an expletive that is due to an EPP-feature of the finite verb. In particular, we will discuss the semantic and pragmatic properties of weak and strong definites and will argue that *es* constitutes the weak version of a pair of pronouns *es – das* that refer to situations. While *das* refers back to a situation established in the previous context, *es* introduces a new situation that is identified with one argument of Tense, where Tense is interpreted as constituting a relation between two situations, the utterance situation and the so-called reference situation, following Reichenbach (1947). *Es* is argued to be inserted in [Spec,TP] and moved into [Spec,FinP] in main clauses. Its presence is argued to follow from a pragmatic account of the original EPP-requirement, as specified in (4).

(4) <u>Anchoring Condition</u>: The predication of the clause must be anchored to the context via a given subject or via a topic situation that is identifiable with respect to the utterance situation.

The spread of *es* can then be attributed to an extra-linguistic factor, namely the role the mediaeval chanceries played in the creation of a written standard language. We propose that in MHG, expletive *es* became popular as a means to introduce certain legal statements, which were typically produced by the mediaeval chanceries. When the language use of the chanceries became a model for written German in the ENHG period, the prefield *es* spread to other (i.e., narrative) text types. This development is part of a larger change that affected the organization of written narrative texts, leading to a general tendency to explicitly mark discourse relations and textual cohesion by lexical means in the left clausal periphery. This explanation receives further support from the fact that many present-day dialects of German still lack *es* as a prefield expletive (cf. e.g. Weiß 1998).

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