

Peripheral significance: a neo-emergentist perspective on the grammaticalization of expletives

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English-style, specifically subject-oriented expletives are crosslinguistically unusual (Newmeyer 2005). What is striking, however, is the consistency of the diachronic pathway along which these elements have developed in the languages that have them: in all cases, phase-peripheral (Spec-CP and then Spec-vP) uses have become established prior to phase-internal (Spec-TP) ones (see Williams 2000 for English, and Richards & Biberauer 2005 for Germanic more generally). In languages with non-English-style nominal expletives (e.g. Icelandic, Dominican Spanish, Finnish, and Vietnamese), the locus of dedicated expletives remains exclusively phase-peripheral. The objective of this paper is (i) to propose a neo-emergentist generative account of this seemingly recurring grammaticalization pattern and (ii) to demonstrate how this approach leads to a new perspective on the nature of modern English varieties' various *there*- and *it*-expletives.

We take as our point of departure the Three-Factors-inspired Maximise Minimal Means (MMM) model (Biberauer 2019). In terms of this model, grammars are expected to develop, both diachronically and over the course of first-language acquisition, in such a way that elements and/or structure that is already incorporated in the grammar will serve as the basis for further modification and/or elaboration of that grammar. From this perspective, we can understand the “recycling” aspect of grammaticalization – in terms of which existing contentful elements take on new, more grammar-oriented properties – as one of the reflexes of the general cognitive bias to maximise the use of already-present formal components (e.g. features, roots) and operations (Merge and Agree). I adopt the perspective that roots rather than formal-feature-bearing lexical items are the elements typically assigned new Merge-positions in grammaticalization, and, additionally, the MMM-centred neo-emergentist assumptions (i-ii):

- (i) phasal peripheries systematically serve to facilitate a “way in” for the integration of new grammatical elements (roots) by virtue of the formal feature-free way in which Merge can operate at phase-edges, but not elsewhere (Zyman 2022; see also Bosch 2022 on ‘edge-of-chaos’ zones, facilitating creativity and innovation in Dynamic Systems);
- (ii) phase-peripherally merged roots are interpreted at LF as relating to the here-and-now and speaker-hearer (stance)-related aspects of the utterance, thus leading us to expect early grammaticalizations which reflect more of a “discourse”-oriented flavour (consider i.a. recurring patterns in cyclic developments, where optional-use stages have (inter)subjective pragmatic significance; Hansen 2020).

From this perspective, systems featuring the kinds of exclusively CP-peripheral, information-structurally sensitive expletive elements mentioned above are expected; English-style systems, in which expletives appear in Spec-TP in the absence of suitable alternative subjects only arise where one or more dedicated subject positions (subsequently) arise, triggering a further cycle of grammaticalization (discourse expletivization > subject expletivization). Additionally, specific closer consideration of English points to the role of a further phase-periphery, at the nominal phase-edge, in establishing modern English's peculiar expletive system. Following Kayne (2008), I show how originally deictic *there*'s DP-peripheral location contributed to the rise of a subject-system with not one, but two dedicated subject-positions, as argued in Kiss (2008), each with a dedicated expletive, *there* vs *it* respectively.

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