

On the non-homogeneity of expletive negation: A comparative study of *fear* and temporal (*before/until*) clauses

Lena Baunaz (University Côte-d'Azur/BCL, UMR 7320)
Anne-Li Demonie (Masaryk University)

Over the past decades, the distribution and interpretation of expletive negation (ExN)—a formally negative marker without genuine negative force—have been extensively studied across a range of clause types. Most proposals have argued that ExN is a unified phenomenon, with diverging analyses of its exact contribution. Some have put forward that ExN contributes modal, specifically epistemic, meaning (Yoon 2011; Makri 2013, 2015; Mari & Tahar 2020; Tsiakmakis et al. 2022; Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022; Tahar 2023). Others claim that these markers are still regular negators whose atypical behaviour merely follows from their scopal position at LF or from pragmatic inference (Abels 2005; Cépeda 2018; Delfitto et al. 2019; Delfitto 2020). A third line of work has proposed that it is an empty element (cf. Espinal 1992, 1997). More recently, the idea that ExN is not unitary has also entered the stage, with Greco (2019) for instance, distinguishing ‘weak’ from ‘strong’ ExN, and Tsiakmakis (2025), ‘apparent’ from ‘real’ ExN. Building on their intuitions, the present talk argues that cross-linguistic ExN markers indeed fall into distinct types, supported by morphological evidence. Comparing their behaviour in *fear*-clauses and temporal clauses, however, we aim to show that the relevant contrast might not have anything to do with the notion of negation, but rather with a distinction of two types of modality. We also maintain that this difference can be encoded lexically and modelled within the Nanosyntactic framework (Caha et al. 2025). By means of this approach, we may capture the divergent distributions and interpretations of ExN without resorting to post-syntactic or purely pragmatic explanations, and motivate a typology of ExN grounded in fine-grained morphosyntax.