Expletive negation and complex left branches: A typological approach

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Introduction: In Nanosyntax (Starke 2009, Caha 2009), syncretism has been a particularly useful tool to determine the (linear) ordering of functional features in various empirical domains. One of those domains is negation. In her seminal work on sentential negative markers across 24+ languages, De Clercq (2020) observed that negation does not correspond to a single feature, but rather a fine-grained sequence of features – T > Foc > Class > Q – which are characterised by their scoping properties (i.e., T-$_{NEG}$ (NEG1) scopes over a TP, Foc-$_{NEG}$ over a focused constituent etc.), and are ordered according to the patterns of syncretism exhibited by negative markers (see Table 1). Languages may have different markers lexicalising different features, but if they are the same markers, they consistently happen to be adjacent.

Table 1	T	Foc	Class	Q
MG	dhen	oxi	mi	a-
Albanian	nuk/s'	jo	jo-	jo-
Inf. Engl.	-n't	not	non-	un-
Formal Engl.	not	not	non-	un-
Latin	nōn	nōn	nōn	iN-
MChinese	bù	bù	bù	bù

As a continuation of De Clercq's work, Baunaz & Lander (2023) extended the negative functional sequence (FSEQ) to the class of modal negation (NEG2). Based on patterns of syncretism in a number of unrelated languages, Romeyka Greek in particular (see Table 2), they also argued for a decomposition of this type of negation into four distinct features which correspond to a specific syntactic-semantic context and are ordered as follows: Proh(ibition) > Vol(ition) > C(ounterfactual) C(onditional) > P(otential) C(onditional).

Table 2	Proh	Vol	CC	PC	T	…
RG	mi	xe	mutš	midhen	u(tš)(i)	…
Mandarin Chinese	bié	bù	bù-	bù	bù	
Vietn.	đừng	không	không	không	không	…
Hu.	ne	ne	nem	nem	nem	…
MG	min	min	dhen	dhen	dhen	…
Latin	nē	nē	ni-	nōn	nōn	…
Alb.	mos	mos	mos	nuk	nuk / s'	…

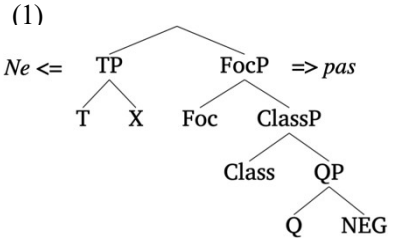
Puzzle: Against this background, the puzzle we deal with in this paper involves expletive negation (ExN), i.e. a formal instance of negation which does not alter the polarity of the sentence. We focus only on instances of ExN in *fear*-clauses. Despite often being considered semantically vacuous or at least void of a negative force, it is remarkable that there are at least 3 different morphological patterns of syncretism between real negators and ExN markers cross-linguistically (see Table 3). In languages like Czech, ExN is realised using the same morpheme as NEG1 and NEG2. In languages like Modern Greek, it is only expressed by the same morpheme as NEG2. In languages with bipartite negation, like French, it corresponds to the 'weakened' element. If we indeed take syncretism to be an indication of structural closeness, as De Clercq and Baunaz & Lander have argued, we are faced with a clear formal issue: even though ExN is regarded as not negative, it is predicted to be part of the same FSEQ under the current assumptions, and even to be associated to features adjacent to real and/or modal negation.

Table 3	ExN?	NEG 2	NEG1
Czech	ne	ne	ne
Modern Greek	min	min	dhen
	ExN		**NEG1**
French	ne	ne	pas

Analysis: To resolve this puzzle, the core of our argument is that the cross-linguistic patterns of syncretism can be captured with a recently developed nanosyntactic tool: complex lexical items (cf. Blix 2021), and that ExN can indeed be located in a high modal projection, specifically an epistemic modal one (in line with other (semantic) proposals such as Makri 2013, Mari & Tahar 2020, Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022 a.o.).

Our analysis builds on an earlier account of (formal) French bipartite negation by De Clercq (2019). As she remarks, *pas* may appear without *ne* in cases when it expresses constituent negation, it cannot act as a stand-alone sentential negator. Because of this, she proposes that the lexical items of both negative markers are deficient and need each other to fully realise sentential negation. As shown in (1), the technical implementation of this is a complex structure whereby *pas* is able to lexicalise all the features up to Foc-$_{NEG}$ and contains the negative value, whereas the lexical item of *ne* is only associated with a T feature, meaning it can complement *pas* but not realise any type of negation on its own.

(1)



For our account of ExN, we adopt a similar structure for each language as in (1), and as mentioned before, we expand the structure to include an epistemic feature; on the one hand to make sense of the modal negation / ExN syncretism, on the other due to theoretical and experimental arguments in favour of such a feature (cf. Makri 2013, Greco 2019, Tsiakmakis et al. 2022, Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022), such as the incompatibility of ExN with other epistemic modal adverbials, a (positive) speaker bias towards *p*, the expression of surprise etc. The various syncretic patterns can thus be explained by nothing more than a uniform structure – the negative FSEQ – and a different distribution of features over one or more lexical items. In a language like French, *ne* lexicalises T and all the modal layers up until epistemicity. In a language like Czech we must assume a single lexical item *ne-*, but the same strategy applies; there is a complex left branch which is not negative, and a right branch which is, and both constituents can be lexicalised separately due to the Superset Effect (cf. Starke 2009). Finally, in a language like Modern Greek one lexical item will be bigger – *min* – and resemble the Czech one. For modal and ExN structures, it will overwrite the smaller standard one – *dhen*. A selection of other languages we are examining is given in Table 4.

Table 4	**ExN**	**Proh**	**Vol**	**CC**	**PC**	**T**	**Foc**
Czech	ne-						
Mod. Gr	min			dhen			oxi
French	ne						pas
Albanian	mos				nuk		jo
Mandarin	bié		bù				
Latin	nē			ni	non		

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