

## Grammatical change and information structure

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### Lecture 2: The historical development of ‘prefield’ expletives

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. In this lecture, we will take a closer look at the historical development of CP-related expletives, focusing on Old and Middle High German (with a comparative side glance at Scandinavian). It will be shown that

- clauses introduced by dummy placeholders took over pragmatic functions previously expressed by V1 sentences;
- the rise of generalized V2 in Old High German (OHG) 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* (in Middle High German (MHG) and Early New High German (ENHG)).

This scenario is supported by the observation that the relevant structural options seem to be functionally equivalent, compare the following examples (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 lánthe hirta háltente [...] **OHG/MHG: *thô*+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))