

## Natural and irrational syntactic change and the syntax/semantics interface

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It is common to assume that language change—to the extent it is natural and not due to the vagaries of history or contact—is rational in that it improves either efficiency or communication. In this talk, we discuss a case of semantic interference, expletive negation (see the Catalan example in (1)), that leads to ambiguity (and, thus, does not improve communication), but (i) is part of speakers' knowledge of their language and (ii) is natural in that it follows from general properties of language production and basic semantic relations. We first discuss the results of Jin and Koenig (2019, 2020, 2021a) that show that expletive negation occurs widely across languages of the world and in the same semantic contexts. We then argue on the basis of 4 comprehension experiments and 2 corpus studies that each trigger (*tenir por* in (1)) is *lexically* associated with a likelihood of an expletive negation occurring in its complement clause. We argue that the lexicalization of expletive negation is due to a combination of (i) lexical entailments (fear something *entails* wanting it not to occur) and (ii) general properties of language production, following insights from Dell (1986). Finally, we provide a formal model of how the meaning of clauses containing an expletive negation compositionally combines with the meaning of triggers within a semantic underspecification approach (Lexical Resource Semantics, Richter and Sailer 2004; see Jin and Koenig 2021b).

(1) *Tinc por que no arribin.*  
have.1SG.PRS fear that NEG arrive.3PL.SBJV  
'I am afraid that they will arrive.' (Espinal 1992: 336)