

# Expletive negation and negative polarity: The view from Québec French<sup>1</sup>

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## 1 Introduction

► Across languages, we find instances of negation that do not have a straightforward semantic contribution (Espinal 1992; 2000; Yoon 2011, Delfitto 2020, a.o.), so-called “expletive negation” (ExN):<sup>2</sup>

- (1) Rimarrò alla festa finché **non** arriva Gianni. [Italian]  
stay.FUT to-the party until ExN arrives John  
‘I will stay at the party until John arrives.’
- (2) No dormiré hasta que **no** llegues. [Spanish]  
not will.sleep until that ExN arrive.  
‘I won’t sleep until you arrive.’
- (3) J’ai peur que ça **ne** se reproduise. [European French]  
I-have fear that it ExN REFL happens.again  
‘I am afraid that it might happen again.’

► Today we focus on an expletive use of *pas* in Québec French (QF), discussed in Kemp (1982).

- (4) C’est le pire livre que tu peux **pas** lire. [Québec French]  
it.is the worst book that you can ExN read  
‘It’s the worst book you can read.’

- In (4), *pas* does not negate the proposition expressed by the embedded clause.
- We will call this use of *pas* “ExN *pas*”, following Larrivée (1996).
- Based on diagnostics presented in section 2, we will assume an ambiguity with regular negation.

### Our goals:

1. Show that the distribution of ExN *pas* in QF is a puzzle, since it does not pattern with previously-reported instances of ExN (despite checking all the diagnostics for ExN).
2. Provide a preliminary analysis of ExN *pas* as a dependent negative polarity item (NPI) that appears only in certain DE environments.

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<sup>2</sup>Expletive negation has also been called “Paratactic Negation” (Jespersen 1917, van der Wouden 1994, Zeijlstra 2004) or “Evaluative Negation” (Yoon 2011). There has been much work and different analyses of expletive negation in Romance and beyond, including Espinal 1992, 2000, 2007; Tovena 2002; Portner and Zanuttini 2000; Abels 2002, 2005; Zanuttini and Portner 2003; Yoon 2011; Makri 2013; Margulis 2019; Greco 2019, 2020. Since the distribution of ExN *pas* in Québec French does not clearly fit with what is reported for other cases of ExN in the literature, we will not engage on these work further.

## 2 Data: The “expletive” use of *pas*

► Both regular negation (NEG) and ExN are expressed with *pas* in Québec French:

- (5) a. J’aime **pas** ce livre-là.  
I.like NEG this book-DEM  
‘I don’t like this book.’ [NEG]
- b. C’est le pire livre que tu peux **pas** lire.  
it.is the worst book that you can ExN read  
‘It’s the worst book you can read.’ [ExN]

► We first provide data relevant to the distribution of ExN *pas*, and then show, based on previous work (e.g., [Delfitto and Fiorin 2014](#)), that ExN *pas* checks all the diagnostics for identifying expletive negation.

### 2.1 The very limited distribution of ExN *pas*

#### ExN *pas* and relative clauses

► ExN *pas* occurs in two main environments, which both involve relative clauses:

1. In superlative sentences of different types (as seen in previous examples):<sup>3</sup>

- (6) a. C’est le pire livre que tu peux **pas** lire.  
it.is the worst book that you can ExN read  
‘It’s the worst book you can read.’
- b. Léa m’a donné le meilleur cadeau qu’elle pouvait **pas** me donner.  
Léa me.has given the best gift that.she could ExN me give  
‘Léa gave me the best gift she could have given me.’

2. In relative clauses headed by the universal quantifier *tout*:

- (7) J’ai fait tout ce que je pouvais **pas** faire.  
I.have did all that I could ExN do  
‘I did all I could.’

#### ExN *pas* and existential predicates

► A second peculiar requirement on ExN *pas* is that it must co-occur with a very limited set of expressions. What unites all these expressions is they convey existential quantification ([Kratzer 1981](#); [Freeze 1992](#)):

1. the modal *pouvoir* ‘can’
2. the basic existential *il y a* ‘there is’
3. possessive have
4. the existential verb *exister* ‘to exist’ (cf. [Kemp 1982](#))

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<sup>3</sup>As [Kemp \(1982\)](#) shows, several different “superlative heads” in addition to *le meilleur/pire* could be used, including: *le premier/dernier*, *le plus/moins*, *le maximum/minimum*, etc.

- This is shown in (8) and (9) for superlatives and RCs headed by *tout*, respectively.

(8) Superlatives:

- a. C'est les pires bandits {que tu peux **pas** avoir} / {qu'il y a **pas**} / {qu'on a **pas**}.  
 it.is the worst bandits that you can ExN have / that.∃ ExN / that.we have ExN  
 'These are the worst bandits {that you can have} / {there are} / {that we have}.'
- b. \*C'est le pire bandit que Lou aime **pas**.  
 it.is the worst bandit that Lou likes ExN  
 (Int.) 'It's the worst bandit that Lou likes.'

(9) Relative clauses headed by *tout*:

- a. J'ai lu tous les livres {que je pouvais **pas** lire} / {qu'il y a **pas**} / {qu'on a **pas**}.  
 I.have read all the books that I could ExN read / that.∃ ExN / that.we have ExN  
 'I read all the books {I could read} / {there is} / {that we have}.'
- b. \*J'ai lu tous les livres que j'ai **pas** trouvés.  
 I.have read all the books that I.have ExN found  
 (Int.) 'I read all the books that I found.'

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### Conditioning environment for ExN *pas*:

- Assuming that superlatives encode universal quantification over degrees (Heim 1999, a.o.), the conditioning environment of ExN *pas* boils down to (10):

(10) ExN *pas* appears inside relative clauses, iff:

- (i) the head of the relative clause contains a universal quantifier, quantifying either over individuals (7) or sets of degrees (6), and
- (ii) the relative clause contains an expression conveying existential quantification, either via an ability modal, plain existential, possessive have or verb of existence.
- .....

## 2.2 Diagnostics for ExN *pas*

- *No licensing of neg-words or NPIs*: Unlike regular negation, ExN cannot license neg-words or NPIs.<sup>4</sup>

- (11) a. J'aime **pas pantoute/du tout** ce livre-là  
 I.like NEG at.all this book-DEM  
 'I don't like this book at all.' [NEG]
- b. \*C'est le pire livre que tu peux **pas pantoute/du tout** lire.  
 it.is the worst book that you can ExN at.all read  
 [ExN]

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<sup>4</sup>See Burnett and Tremblay 2012, 2014 on *pantoute*, which translates as 'at all'.

► *Co-occurrence with PPIs*: Unlike regular negation, ExN *pas* can co-occur with PPIs.

- (12) a. J'ai **pas** donné ce livre-là à (??**quelqu'un**).  
 I.have NEG given this book-DEM to someone  
 (Int.) 'I didn't give a book to anyone.' [NEG]
- b. C'est le pire livre que tu peux **pas** donner à **quelqu'un**.  
 it.is the worst book that you can ExN give to someone/anyone  
 'It's the worst book you can give to someone.' [ExN]

► *Incompatibility with negative connectives*: ExN *pas* cannot occur with negative connectives:

- (13) a. On a **pas** ce restaurant-là à Québec {**pis/ni**} à Montréal {**non plus/\*aussi**}.  
 We have NEG DEM restaurant-DEM in Quebec and/nor in Montreal neither/also  
 'We don't have this restaurant in Quebec nor/and in Montreal (neither).' [NEG]
- b. C'est le meilleur restaurant qu'on a **pas** à Québec {**pis/\*ni**} à Montréal  
 It.is the best restaurant that we have ExN in Québec and/nor in Montréal  
 {**aussi/\*non plus**}.  
 also/neither  
 'It's the best restaurant we have in Québec City and Montréal.' [ExN]

► *No double negation*: When two negative morphemes co-occur, they logically cancel each other out and give rise to a positive (i.e., double negation) reading. ExN cannot give rise to such a reading.

- (14) a. J'ai **pas pas** acheté ce livre-là.  
 I.have NEG NEG bought this book-DEM  
 'I didn't not buy this book' (= I bought this book) [NEG]
- b. C'est le pire livre que tu peux **pas PAS** lire.  
 it.is the worst book that you can ExN NEG read  
 'It's the worst book you can ever not read.' (≠ that you can ever read) [ExN]

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**In sum**: We saw (i) that ExN *pas* has a very limited distribution, and (ii) that it checks all the standard diagnostics for identifying expletive negation.

► Next: We see that ExN *pas* is unlike previously-reported cases of expletive negation in many ways.

### 3 On the “non-uniformity” of ExN

► Various accounts of ExN have been proposed—we briefly discuss two and show that they do not extend straightforwardly to ExN *pas*, concluding that another analysis must be sought.

► Note: This does not mean that previous accounts are wrong—i.e. “expletive negation” does not have to be *one* uniform phenomenon (Zeijlstra 2004; Eilam 2007; Greco 2019, 2020; in contrast with Yoon 2011), and “expletive” negation might sometime be best re-analyzed as real negation (see e.g. Portner and Zanuttini 2000, Abels 2005; Delfitto 2020 and the Appendix).

### 3.1 ExN as kind of “negative concord”

► A number of scholars have proposed to connect ExN to Negative Concord (e.g. Espinal 1992, 2000, 2000; Zeijlstra 2004)—insofar as both need to be licensed by some higher operator.

► Espinal (2000), for instance, argues that ExN in Catalan and Spanish is licensed under the scope of *nonveridical* operators introduced by e.g. adversative predicates (*fear, doubt, etc.*).

- (15) Rough definition of *nonveridicality* (see Giannakidou 2011)  
 In a context *C*, an operator *OP* is nonveridical iff the truth of *OP + p(roposition)* in *C* does not require that *p* be true in *C*.

► A Catalan example is provided below—ExN *ne* in European French is also licensed in this context:

- (16) Fear-predicates
- a. Em temo que **no** escullin nou director.  
 I fear that ExN elect.SUBJ.3PL new director  
 ‘I’m afraid that a new director would be elected.’ [Catalan, Espinal 2000: (11)]
- b. J’ai peur que ça **ne** puisse se reproduire.  
 I-have fear that it ExN could.SUBJ REFL happen.again  
 ‘I am afraid that it could happen again.’ [European French]

► The embedded propositions in (16) are both *nonveridical*: if the entire propositions in (16a) and (16b) are true, the embedded propositions *do not have to be* true.

► This analysis cannot be extended to ExN *pas* — First, ExN *pas* is not licensed in these environments:

- (17) \*J’ai peur que ça puisse **pas** se reproduire.  
 I-have fear that it could ExN REFL happen.again  
 (Int.) ‘I am afraid that it might happen again.’ [Québec French]

► Second, the environments that license ExN *pas* (i.e. RCs with existential predicates that are headed by universals/superlatives, see (10)) do **not** license ExN in other languages.

- (18) Es el peor libro que **no** puedes leer.  
 is the worst book that not you.can read  
 Means: ‘It’s the worst gift that you can \*not\* read.’ [Spanish]  
 Cannot mean: ‘It’s the worst gift that you can read.’

- (19) Hice todo lo que **no** podía hacer.  
 I.did all that not I.could do  
 Means: ‘I did all I could \*not\* do.’ [Spanish]  
 Cannot mean: ‘I did all I could do.’

► Third, this analysis could not explain ExN *pas*’s peculiar dependency on an existential predicate:

- (20) \*C’est le pire bandit que Lou aime **pas**.  
 It.is the worst bandit that Lou like ExN  
 (Int.) ‘It’s the worst bandit that Lou likes.’ (repeated from (8b)).

- Fourth, some of these environments do not seem to be compatible with a *nonveridical* analysis—consider a superlative sentence like (21):

(21) La Russie c'est le plus grand pays qu'il y a pas.  
 The Russia it.is the most big country that.there is ExN  
 'Russia is the biggest country there is.'

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### ExN *pas* not a neg-word

- Independently of the analysis proposed in Espinal (2000), it is important to note that ExN *pas* does not fit standard diagnostics for neg-words (see e.g., Zeijlstra (2004) and Fălăuş and Nicolae (2016) for a recent overview of these diagnostics), and thus should not be analyzed as a neg-word:

1. Unlike neg-words, ExN *pas* needs to be c-commanded by its licenser.

(22) \*C'est pas le pire livre que tu peux lire.  
 it.is ExN the worst book that you can read  
 (Int.) 'It's the worst book you can read.'

2. Unlike neg-words, ExN *pas* is not felicitous as a fragment answer to a positive question.

(23) Est-ce qu' elle est déjà allée à Montréal? \*Non, pas.  
 Q she is already gone to Montreal no ExN

3. Unlike neg-words, ExN *pas* cannot give rise to double negation readings (14).
- .....

### 3.2 ExN as a mood marker?

- Yoon (2011) proposes that ExN is essentially a subjunctive mood marker licensed under the scope of *nonveridical* operators.

- This analysis raises the exact same questions and runs into the same issues as the negative concord approaches:

1. Why would the conditioning environments for ExN *pas* not also license ExN in other languages?
2. Why would ExN *pas* not also be licensed under the scope of other *nonveridical* operators?
3. Why would ExN *pas* mandatorily co-occur with an existential predicate?
4. Some of the environments that license ExN *pas* are not clearly *nonveridical*.

**In sum:** These previous approaches to ExN cannot be extended to explain ExN *pas* in QF.

- Next: we consider an alternative account, partially based on van der Wouden's (1994) proposal that ExN should be understood as NPIs.

## 4 ExN *pas* as a decomposed NPI?

- ▶ On alternative-based accounts of negative polarity (Krifka 1995; Lahiri 1998; Chierchia 2013, a.o.), NPIs are existential items that obligatorily activate alternatives.

- For instance, *any* has the same denotation as a plain indefinite (24a) but also activates a set of domain alternatives (ALT) consisting of subsets of the relevant quantificational domain (24b).

$$(24) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. } \llbracket \textit{any} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda Q. \exists x \in D [P(x) \wedge Q(x)] \\ \text{b. } \text{ALT: } \{ \lambda P. \lambda Q. \exists x \in D' [P(x) \wedge Q(x)], D' \subseteq D \} \end{array}$$

- ▶ Once they are active, alternatives need to be factored into meaning. One way to implement this is through the insertion of an exhaustification operator, defined in (25).

$$(25) \quad \llbracket \text{EXH} \rrbracket^{g,w}(\phi) = \phi_w \wedge \forall p \in \text{ALT}(\phi) [p_w \rightarrow \phi \subseteq p]$$

‘Given a sentence  $\phi$  and a set ALT of alternatives to  $\phi$ , EXH( $\phi$ ) asserts  $\phi$  and negates the alternatives that are not entailed by the assertion.’

ExN *pas* is just one of the two ingredients in the composition of an NPI.

- ▶ Unlike *any*, *pas* does not contribute existential meaning by itself.
- ▶ It requires that the predicative existential expression (*pouvoir*, *il y a*, or *exister*) it co-occurs with activates a set of ALT.

### 4.1 Deriving some distributional properties of ExN *pas*

- ▶ Recall the conditioning environment for ExN *pas*:

$$(26) \quad \text{ExN } \textit{pas} \text{ appears inside relative clauses (RC), iff:}$$

- the head of the RC contains a universal quantifier, and
- the RC contains an expression conveying existential quantification.

**(22i): ExN *pas* appears in RCs headed by an expression conveying universal quantification**

- ▶ Assuming that superlatives encode universal quantification over sets of degrees (Heim 1999, a.o.), both environments in which ExN *pas* occurs yield the following configuration:

$$(27) \quad \text{EXH} [\forall [ \dots \exists \textit{pas} \dots ] [ \dots ] ]$$

- ▶ Because the first argument of a universal quantifier is downward-entailing (DE), ExN *pas* is licensed in these environments.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Downward-entailing functions are defined as follows:

- A function  $f$  is downward-entailing iff for any  $A$  and any  $B$ , if  $B \subseteq A$  then  $f(A) \rightarrow f(B)$ .

(22ii): *ExN pas cannot appear in RCs headed by an existential quantifier*

- ▶ While ExN *pas* can appear in RCs headed by *tout*, it cannot occur in RCs headed by *quelque chose*.

(28) \*J'ai fait **quelque chose** que je pouvais **pas** faire.  
I.have done something c I could ExN do  
(Int.) 'I did something I could.'

- ▶ Because this environment is not DE, it does not license ExN *pas*.

(22ii): *Necessity of the existential predicate inside the RC*

- ▶ Given that ExN *pas* does not contribute existential meaning by itself, it requires the presence of an existential whose set of ALTs will be used by EXH.

(29) a. J'ai lu tous les livres {que je pouvais **pas** lire} / {qu'il y a **pas**} / {qu'on a **pas**}.  
I.have read all the books that I could ExN read / that.∃ ExN / that.we have ExN  
'I read all the books {I could read} / {there is} / {that we have}.'  
b. \*J'ai lu tous les livres que j'ai **pas** trouvés.  
I.have read all the books that I.have ExN found  
(Int.) 'I read all the books that I found.'

## 4.2 Some welcome and one unwelcome consequences

### *Intervention effects*

- ▶ It is well-known that certain expressions, such as universal quantifiers, block NPI licensing, when they intervene between an NPI and its licenser (Linebarger 1980, a.o.):

(30) ??I doubt that every student of mine will *ever* have *any* problems (Chierchia 2013, p. 373)

- ▶ Intervention effects can also be observed with ExN *pas*.

(31) C'est le meilleur achat que (?**tout** le monde / Louise) peut **pas** faire.  
It.is the best purchase that all the people / Louise can ExN make  
(Int.) 'It's the best purchase that everyone / Louise could ever make.'

### *"Domain widening"*

- ▶ Also well-known is the fact that NPIs tend to have "domain-widening" effects or stronger meanings compared to regular indefinite counterparts ( see e.g., Kadmon and Landman 1993).<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ If ExN *pas* forms complex NPIs, we might expect to see "domain widening" effects. This is indeed the case, as was already reported in Kemp (1982).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>We use the term "domain widening" only descriptively, and do not assume that NPIs *need* to yield widened domains (see Arregui 2008 on why this cannot be). We assume, following e.g. Krifka (1995) and Chierchia (2006, 2013), that "domain widening" is tied to the activation of sub-domain alternatives.

<sup>7</sup>In particular, Kemp (1982) (pp. 275-276) notes the following: "[...] pour pouvoir employer *pas* dans un superlatif, il faut que le locuteur pense que le champ de comparaison soit assez vaste [...] le champ de comparaison doit avoir quelque chose d'indéfini, de non-délimitable".



(32) ??Laurent a arrosé toutes les plantes qu'il y a **pas** dans sa maison.  
 Laurent has watered all the plant that. ExN in his house.  
 (Int.) 'Laurent watered all the plants in his house.'

- ▶ A domain-widening effect is perceived in (32). (32) sounds degraded, probably because it would be pragmatically-marked to widen the domain of individuals in this case.

### *Adjacency effects*

- ▶ If ExN *pas* must form a complex NPI with a predicate conveying existential quantification, then we might expect there to be an adjacency requirement between the two.<sup>8</sup>
- ▶ This expectation is borne out:

(33) a. \*C'est la meilleure chose que tu pouvais *parfaitement pas* faire.  
 It.is the best thing that you could perfectly ExN do  
 (Int.) 'It's the best thing that you could perfectly do.'<sup>9</sup>

b. C'est la meilleure chose que tu pouvais **pas** faire *parfaitement*.  
 It.is the best thing that you could ExN do perfectly  
 'It's the best thing that you could perfectly do.'

### *Puzzle: the restricted distribution of ExN pas*

- ▶ Why can't ExN *pas* appear in other DE environments?
- ▶ The proposed account risks to overgenerate the possibility for *pas* to form complex NPIs in other DE environments.

## 5 Conclusion

- ▶ We provided a description of the (very limited) distribution of ExN *pas* in Québec French, which we assumed is ambiguous with regular negation.
- ▶ We saw that ExN *pas* does not fit with other reported instances of ExN in other languages, which supports the idea that expletive negation is not a uniform category across languages (Zeijlstra 2004; Eilam 2007; Greco 2019, 2020).
- ▶ We provided a preliminary analysis of ExN *pas* as a dependent NPI, but we saw that this potentially leads to overgeneration issues, since ExN *pas* is more restricted than what this analysis predicts.

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<sup>8</sup>Such adjacency effects are reminiscent of complex determiner formation in the context of the (non-local) modification; see e.g., Zimmermann (2003) and Morzycki (2016).

<sup>9</sup>This could mean 'It's the best thing that you could perfectly not do', i.e., where you failed at doing something perfectly.

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## Appendix

### A ExN as actual negation?

- ▶ Some analyses have treated “ExN” as actual, polarity-reversing negation that happens to be obscured by the syntactic environment in which it arises (e.g. [Portner and Zanuttini 2000](#); [Citko 2003](#); [Romero and hye Han 2004](#); [Abels 2005](#); [Delfitto and Fiorin 2014](#); [Margulis 2019](#), a.o.).
- ▶ Most relevant here for QF is the analyses of negation in interrogatives and exclamatives.

#### Negation in polar interrogatives and exclamatives

- ▶ Negation in interrogatives and exclamatives is widespread (even in languages not usually described as having ExN):

- (34) a. Isn't Felipe coming? (=*bias towards the truth of P*)  
 b. Isn't this amazing!

- ▶ Though some have tried to unify ExN under one category (see e.g. [Espinal 2000](#) and [Yoon 2011](#)), [Zeijlstra \(2004\)](#) notes that that it is not clear that the data in (34) should be treated on par with ExN in other syntactic environments.
- ▶ In QF, negation appears in polar interrogatives (both matrix (35a) and embedded (35b)) and exclamatives (see e.g. [Vinet 2000, 2001](#); [Morin 2017](#)), giving rise to the same semantic and pragmatic effects that are found in similar English sentences (34) (see e.g. [Ladd 1981](#) and [Romero and hye Han 2004](#)).

- (35)
- a. Ce serait-tu **pas** lui, le coupable?  
it be.COND-YNQ NEG him, the guilty  
‘Isn’t it him, the guilty one?’ ([Vinet 1998](#): 246)
  - b. Je me demande si Alex a **pas** gagné la lotterie.  
I me ask if Alex has NEG won the lottery  
‘I wonder if Alex won the lottery.’
  - c. C’est-tu **pas** assez beau!  
Is.it-YNQ NEG enough beautiful  
‘Isn’t it beautiful!’

- ▶ As in English (34), the use of *pas* in (non-embedded and embedded) polar questions indicates the speaker’s bias towards a positive answer ([Vinet 1998](#), [Morin 2017](#)).
- ▶ Building on the above-mentioned work, we believe that the data in (35) should be treated separately from the instance of ExN *pas* discussed in this paper, for the following reasons:
  1. European French speakers also produce utterances like (35b), which we take as suggestive of the fact that this use of *pas* is distinct from the uses of *pas* laid out in (10).
  2. The *pas* in (35) is not dependent on the presence of an existential predicate, as was the case with the ExN *pas* described in (10).
  3. There is a considerable amount of work that has provided analyses of negative interrogatives and exclamatives with regular negative semantics [Portner and Zanuttini 2000](#), [Romero and hye Han 2004](#), [Romero 2006](#), [Krifka 2017](#), [Delfitto 2020](#), a.o.