

“Expletive negation” as a decomposed NPI in Québec French¹

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Going Romance 34, November 26-27, 2020

1 Introduction

► Across languages, we find instances of negation that do not have a straightforward semantic contribution (Yoon 2011, Makri 2013, Greco 2019, a.o.), so-called “expletive negation” (ExN):²

- (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.

Main claim: ExN *pas* in QF is a dependent NPI that appears only in certain DE environments.

Roadmap:

Section 2: Data: The “expletive” use of *pas*
Section 3: Analysis : A decomposed NPI
Section 4: Discussion: On the limited distribution of ExN *pas*
Section 5: Conclusion

¹We thank Luis Alonso-Ovalle, Aron Hirsch, Dana Isac, Yoann Léveillé, and Mathieu Paillé for their feedback on this project.

²Expletive negation has also been called “Paratactic Negation” (Jespersen 1917, van der Wouden 1994) or “Evaluative Negation” (Yoon 2011). There has been much work and different analyses of expletive negation in Romance and beyond, including Espinal (1992), 2000; Portner (2000); Abels (2002), Abels (2005); and Greco (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. [NEG]
I.like NEG this book-DEM
'I don't like this book.'
b. C'est le pire livre que tu peux **pas** lire. [ExN]
it.is the worst book that you can ExN read
'It's the worst book you can read.'

► We first provide a set of diagnostics to tease apart NEG from ExN *pas* and then establish its distribution.

2.1 Diagnostics for ExN *pas*

► *No licensing of neg-words or NPIs*: Unlike regular negation, ExN cannot license neg-words or NPIs.³

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

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

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

► *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.

(8) a. J'ai **pas pas** acheté ce livre-là. [NEG]
I.have NEG NEG bought this book-DEM
'I didn't not buy this book' (= I bought this book)
b. C'est le pire livre que tu peux **pas** **PAS** lire. [ExN]
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)

³See Burnett and Tremblay 2012, 2014 on *pantoute*, which translates as 'at all'.

2.2 Distribution of ExN *pas*

ExN *pas* ≠ a typical case of ExN

► ExN *pas* cannot occur in environments known to allow ExN across languages, for instance, under adversative predicates (9) and in comparatives (10).

(9) a. J'ai peur que ça **ne** puisse se reproduire. [European French]
 I-have fear that it ExN could REFL happen.again
 'I am afraid that it could happen again.'
 b. *J'ai peur que ça puisse **pas** se reproduire. [Québec French]
 I-have fear that it could ExN REFL happen.again
 (Int.) 'I am afraid that it might happen again.'

(10) a. Ton livre est plus cher que je **n'aurais** pu l'imaginer. [European French]
 your book is more expensive that I ExN-have could imagine.it
 'Your book is more expensive than I could have imagine.'
 b. *Ton livre est plus cher que j'aurais **pas** pu l'imaginer. [Québec French]
 your book is more expensive that I-have ExN could imagine.it
 (Int.) 'Your book is more expensive than I could have imagine.'

ExN *pas* distributionally very limited

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

1. In superlative sentences of different types (as seen in previous examples):⁴

(11) 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*:

(12) J'ai fait tout ce que je pouvais **pas** faire.
 I.have did all that I could ExN do
 'I did all I could.'

► Importantly, these two environments are not known to license ExN in other languages.

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

⁴ 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.

(14) Hice todo lo que **no** podía hacer. [Spanish]
 I.did all that not I.could do
 Means: 'I did all I could *not* do.'
 Cannot mean: 'I did all I could do.'

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 that 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)

- This is shown in (15) and (16) for superlatives and RCs headed by *tout*, respectively.

(15) 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.'

(16) 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.'

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 (17):

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

- (i) the head of the relative clause contains a universal quantifier, quantifying either over individuals (12) or sets of degrees (11), and
- (ii) the relative clause contains an expression conveying existential quantification, either via an ability modal, plain existential, possessive have or verb of existence.

3 Analysis: A decomposed NPI

3.1 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 (18a) but also activates a set of domain alternatives (ALT) consisting of subsets of the relevant quantificational domain (18b).

(18) a. $\llbracket \text{any} \rrbracket = \lambda P. \lambda Q. \exists x \in D [P(x) \wedge Q(x)]$
b. ALT: $\{\lambda P. \lambda Q. \exists x \in D' [P(x) \wedge Q(x)], D' \subseteq D\}$

- 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 (19).

(19) $\llbracket \text{EXH} \rrbracket^{g, w}(\phi) = \phi_w \wedge \forall p \in \text{ALT}(\phi) [p_w \rightarrow \phi \subseteq p]$
‘Given a sentence ϕ and a set ALT of alternatives to ϕ , EXH(ϕ) asserts ϕ and negates the alternatives that are not entailed by the assertion.’

Proposal:

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.

- To illustrate, consider example (20) where ExN *pas* occurs in a relative clause headed by *tout*.

- Sentence (20) has the LF in (21a) and asserts (21b).
- ExN *pas* signals that the (existential) ability modal *pouvoir* triggers a set of ALT given in (21c).
- All the ALTs are entailed by the assertion, and therefore not negated. Exhaustification is vacuous and simply returns the assertion, as shown in (21d).

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

(21) $\llbracket (20) \rrbracket =$

- EXH [tout [λx [je pouvais pas faire x]] [λy [j'ai fait y]]]
- Assertion: EXH $\forall x [\exists w \in W [I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0]$
with W = the set of words epistemically accessible from w_0
- ALT: $\{\forall x [\exists w' \in W' [I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w'] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0], W' \subseteq W\}$
- After exhaustification: $\forall x [\exists w \in W [I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0]$

3.2 Deriving the distributional properties of ExN *pass*

- Recall the conditioning environment for ExN *pas*:

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

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

- Our analysis of ExN *pas* can explain these restrictions:

(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:

(23) EXH [\forall [... \exists *pas* ...] [...]]

- ▶ Because the first argument of a universal quantifier is downward-entailing, all the ALTs are entailed by the assertion in this configuration. Thus, exhaustification is vacuous and simply returns the assertion.⁵

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

- While *ExN pas* can appear in RCs headed by *tout* (20), it cannot occur in RCs headed by *quelque chose*.

(24) *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.'

- In this case, the ALTs given in (25c) are not entailed by the assertion in (25b). Thus, EXH negates all the ALTs yielding an inference that contradicts the assertion, as shown in (25d).

(25) \llbracket (24) $\rrbracket =$

- a. EXH [quelque chose [λx [je pouvais pas faire x]] λy [j'ai fait y]]
- b. Assertion: EXH $\exists x[\exists w \in W[I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0]$
with W = the set of words epistemically accessible from w_0
- c. ALT: $\{\exists x[\exists w' \in W'[I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w'] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0], W' \subseteq W\}$
- d. After exhaustification: $\exists x[\exists w \in W[I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0]$
 $\wedge \neg \exists x[\exists w' \in W'[I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w'] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0] = \perp$

⁵Downward-entailing functions are defined as follows:

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

(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.

(26) 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.'

- While ExN *pas* can co-occur with the ability modal *pouvoir*, it cannot appear with the necessity *devoir*.

(27) *J'ai fait tout ce que je **devais pas** faire.
I have did all that I must ExN do
(Int.) 'I did all I was supposed to do.'

- In this case again, the ALTs given in (28c) are not entailed by the assertion in (28b). Thus, EXH negates all the ALTs yielding an inference that contradicts the assertion, as shown in (28d).

(28) \llbracket (27) $\rrbracket =$

- a. EXH [tout [λx [je devais pas faire x]] λy [j'ai fait y]]]
- b. Assertion: EXH $\forall x[\forall w \in W[I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0]$
- c. ALT: $\{\forall x[\forall w' \in W'[I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w'] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0], W' \subseteq W\}$
- d. After exhaustification: $\forall x[\forall w \in W[I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0]$
 $\wedge \neg \forall x[\forall w' \in W'[I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w'] \rightarrow I \text{ have done } x \text{ at } w_0] = \perp$

- Because *devoir* involves universal quantification, it cannot form a complex NPI with *pas*. As predicted by alternative-based accounts of negative polarity, we should only find existential NPIs across languages.

3.3 Some predictions: NPI effects and adjacency effects

3.3.1 NPI effects

We discuss two typical NPI effects, which ExN *pas* is also subject to.

Intervention

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

(29) ??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*.

(30) 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).⁶
- 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).⁷

(31) ??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 (31). (31) sounds degraded, probably because it would be pragmatically-marked to widen the domain of individuals in this case.

3.3.2 Adjacency effect

- 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.⁸
- This expectation is borne out:

(32) 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.'⁹

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.'

⁶We 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.

⁷In particular, Kemp (1982) (pp. 275-276) notes the following: “[...] pour pouvoir employer *pas* dans un superlative, 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”.

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

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

3.4 Could ExN *pas* just be regular negation, or a neg-word?

- We just proposed that ExN *pas* is a dependent NPI, but we did not consider alternative analyses of ExN *pas* as either (i) actual negation or (ii) as a neg-word.
 - Re option (i), since ExN *pas* clearly does not contribute negation, it is difficult to imagine how a negative analysis would follow through.
 - Re option (ii), ExN *pas* does not fit standard diagnostics for neg-words (see e.g., [Zeijlstra \(2004\)](#) and [Fălăuș and Nicolae \(2016\)](#) for a discussion of these diagnostics):
 1. Unlike neg-words, ExN *pas* needs to be c-commanded by its licensor.

(33) *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.

(34) 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 (8).

4 Discussion: On the limited distribution of ExN *pas*

- Based on ExN *pas*'s distribution and semantic contribution, we analyzed it as a dependent NPI.
- But its distribution is clearly non-standard for an NPI—We will discuss this issue for the remainder of the handout.

Puzzle: If ExN *pas* forms a complex NPI, why can't it appear in other DE environments?

- In other words, our account risks to overgenerate the possibility for *pas* to form complex NPIs in other DE environments.
- Though we will not provide a full-fledged answer, we expand on the following observations, which could potentially be used to explain ExN's *pas* limited distribution:
 - (i) Variation in negative polarity in Québec French seems more nuanced than expected (§4.1)
 - (ii) ExN *pas* is distributionally picky and is further subject to locality restrictions (§4.2)

4.1 Nuances of negative polarity in Québec French

Table 1: *Some NPI environments and distinct categories of negative words in Québec French*
Based in part on Burnett and Tremblay (2012) (B&T)

		wh que ce soit	de la journée (B&T)	pantoute (B&T)	ExN pas
Anti-additive	pas/not	✓	✓	✓	✗
	rien/nothing	✓	✓	✓	✗
	personne/no one	✓	✓	✗	✗
	superlatives	✓	✓	✗	✓
Downward-entailing	first argument of tout/every	✓	✗	✗	✓
	antecedent of conditional	✓	✗	✗	✗
	comparatives	✓	✗	✗	✗
	few/peu	✓	✗	✗	✗

- *wh que ce soit* series: prototypical weak NPI.
- *de la journée*: prototypical strong NPI (see Burnett and Tremblay 2012).
- *pantoute*: “extra-strong NPI” (see Burnett and Tremblay 2012).

(35) a. J'ai rien fait **pantoute**.
 I have nothing done at.all
 'I did nothing at all.'
 b. *Personne est venu **pantoute**.
 No.one is come at.all
 (Int.) 'No one came at all.'

- *ExN pas*: very limited NPI that does not seem to fit well with the weak/strong divide.

4.2 A “distributionally-picky” NPI and locality restrictions

- Recall the licensing environments of *ExN pas*:

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

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

- Since *ExN pas* needs to combine with an existential predicate, it cannot appear internal to the DP.
 - In this sense, *ExN pas* is like *ever*, and unlike *any*.
- But *ExN pas* seems to also need to access a relativized DP.
 - As far as “domain widening” goes, *ExN pas* in (37) seems to operate on the domain of the relativized DP (*the meal* below).

(37) Context: Yesterday, my teeth hurt, and you served me very soft food for dinner.

C'est le meilleur plat que tu pouvais (**pas**) me servir **hier**.

It is the best meal that you could ExN me serve yesterday

≈ '(Of all the meals possible), it's the best meal you could serve me yesterday.'

- In this sense, *pas* is like *any* and unlike *ever*.

(38) It's the best meal you could ever serve me (*yesterday).

Thought: ExN *pas* is “distributionally-picky”, and many NPI environments won’t actually be able to (locally) satisfy its distributional requirements.

► Comparatives, for instance, are minimally different from superlatives in French in lacking a relativized DP (see e.g., [Matushansky \(2008\)](#) on comparatives and superlatives in French)—this might explain why ExN *pas* is impossible in comparatives:

(39) Louise est plus gentille que Jean pourrait (***pas**) l'être.

Louise is more nice than Jean could ExN it.be

(Int.) ‘Louise is nicer than Jean could (ever) be.’

Locality conditions

► In addition to its unusual syntactic distribution, ExN *pas* seems to be subject to locality conditions (see e.g., [Progovac 1993](#), [Giannakidou 2011](#) and references therein on NPI locality restrictions):

(40) a. J'ai fait tout ce que je peux **pas** faire.

I have done everything that I can ExN do.

(Int.) ‘I did everything I can do.’

b. *J'ai fait tout ce que Jean pense que je peux **pas** faire.

I have done everything that Jean thinks that I can ExN do.

(Int.) ‘I did everything that John thinks I can do.’

► Given these locality restrictions, and assuming that ExN *pas* competes with the syntactic position of negative *pas*, it follows that it’ll never be able to be licensed by *pas* locally (within the same clause):

(41) *Jean peut pas dire qu'il y a **pas** une surprise pour Louise.

Jean can not say that. ∃ ExN a surprise for Louise

‘Jean cannot say that there is a surprise for Louise.’

► But this can’t be the whole story; otherwise, it’s not clear why *personne* cannot license ExN *pas*:

(42) *Personne peut **pas** cueillir des pommes au printemps.

no one can ExN collect the apples in.the spring

(Int.) ‘No one can collect apples in Spring.’

Universal quantification necessary?

- In (42), the NPI licensor does not encode universal quantification.
- One possibility is that ExN *pas* requires that its licensor encode universal quantification.
- Why this condition should be imposed is a question that remains to be understood.

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 (Greco 2019).
- We analyzed ExN *pas* as a dependent NPI, but we saw that this potentially leads to overgeneration issues, since ExN *pas* is more restricted than what our analysis predicts.
- We provided some potential syntactic reasons for this restrictiveness, but more work is needed to understand why ExN *pas* requires its licensor to encode universal quantification.

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