English Optional Expletives and the Pragmatics of Judgments

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This talk examines a class of extraposition constructions in which the expletive subject it can be omitted, e.g. Seems like he forgot to sign it (cf. It seems like he forgot to sign it). Omission of the expletive triggers a wide range of pragmatically-motivated distributional effects, indicating that subjectless sentences conventionally express speaker-oriented epistemic judgments. We connect this to previously observed cross-linguistic correlations between subject omission and subjectivity, arguing that judgments are among the class of utterance functions that have systematic syntactic reflections, alongside e.g. interrogatives and exlamatives.