

On expletive, semantically void, and absent subjects¹

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Abstract

What follows expounds empirical and theoretical reasons for a basic, but frequently neglected, differentiation of the subjects of impersonal constructions. An essential difference is the syntactic distinction between a semantically void subject *argument* on the one hand and an expletive item for an obligatory structural subject *position* on the other hand.

The primary source of evidence will be the passive and the middle construction of intransitive verbs in Germanic and Romance languages. The Germanic group comprises languages with verb-initial ("VO") or verb-final verb phrases ("OV"). Romance languages, on the other hand, are uniformly head initial ("VO") but they differ with respect to the null-subject property. In all, this cross-linguistic constellation is a good testing ground for theoretical assumptions concerning the syntactic management of subjects in "impersonal" constructions, given the following reference points:

In SVO languages, the obligatory preverbal subject position is the grammatical source of subject expletives. In the SOV and VSO clause structure, arguably, there is no obligatory VP-external subject position and therefore no room for expletive subjects. For structural reasons, SOV and VSO languages allow for *genuinely subjectless* clauses but the SVO clause structure does not.

As for expletives, they have to be distinguished from semantically void subject pronouns since the same pronoun may be found in either function. The subjects of intransitive middles, for instance, are semantically void *arguments* of the verb while the structural subject of an intransitive passive, as in French or in Scandinavian languages, is a *non-argumental* item in a structurally obligatory subject position. Semantically void subjects may be lexical or null, depending on the null-subject property of the given language. Expletive subjects cannot be null. In the linguistic reality, there is no such thing as an "*empty expletive*", contrary to widely shared assumptions in the literature.

Whenever analyses or descriptions of so-called impersonal constructions confuse the qualities mentioned in the title, the theoretical conclusions based on such data become inconclusive. In the linguistic reality, clauses may be genuinely subjectless or they may contain an expletive subject or a semantically void argumental subject, which, in a null subject language, is null but recoverable. What they never contain is a "*null expletive subject*". An "*empty expletive*" is – as shall be demonstrated – a grammatical concept without factual basis. Its motivation rests on an SVO-biased perspective on the clause structure of SOV and VSO.

1. What is at issue²

The paper is organized as follows. *Section 1* sets the background, separates the various grammatical shapes of impersonal³ constructions, and explicates two issues. The first one is the

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² This paper draws on, extends, and develops further a squib on the same topic, viz. Haider (2017).

discrimination between expletive subjects and semantically void subject arguments. The second issue concerns the alleged universality of structural subject positions in need of lexicalization. It will be argued that an obligatorily VP-external, structural subject position is an exclusive property of SVO clause structures. Consequently, expletives for these obligatory subject positions are an SVO phenomenon.⁴ Section 2 explicates the differences between expletive subjects and semantically void subject arguments. Sections 3 and 4 justify the claim that subject expletives are an SVO property and that "null expletive" is an urgently dispensable concept. The theoretical consequences for passives and middles as well as for the so-called "new impersonal" in Icelandic are presented in section 5.

There are grammars that provide *expletive* elements for plugging *obligatory* structural positions. In SVO languages, the VP-external subject position is an obligatory structural position. The obligatory presence of a subject expletive for an otherwise empty position is a reflex thereof. On the other hand, grammars also contain verbs with subject arguments that lack semantic content, that is, *semantically void arguments*. This is a property of the argument structure of verbs (or adjectives).⁵ Some verbs, such as weather verbs (1a), are specified for a semantically void subject argument in their lexical argument structure. Other verbs (1b) may alternate between a semantically specified subject argument and a semantically void one. In each case, the subject, which is typically a third person (neuter) pronoun, is a subject *argument* of the verb. A subject *expletive*, on the other hand, is a structural phenomenon. The expletive is not an argument of the verb. It merely *plugs* an obligatory structural position. This is an essential difference and it shows in the different grammatical behaviour. Here are some preparatory illustrations.

In some languages, for instance French, the very same morpheme is employed for either function. So, "impersonal construction" subsumes two grammatical functions with an entirely different grammatical behaviour. Furthermore, these functions must not be confused with expletives for obligatory *non-argument* positions, such as the clause-initial position in Germanic V2-languages. Here are some typical example pairs from German and French, with either a semantically void subject ("SVS"), a subject expletive ("SE"), or a clause-initial expletive for an obligatory non-argument position ("EX"), viz. the "Vorfeld" (prefield) of V2 clauses.

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|---|---|---|---------------------------------|
| (1) a. Gestern regnete <i>es</i> . (Ger.) | – | Hier <i>il</i> pleurait (Fr.) | SVS |
| yesterday rained it | – | yesterday it rained | |
| b. wenn <i>es</i> läutet | – | Quand il sonne, décrochez. | SVS |
| if it rings | – | when it rings, pick up | ('if there is a ringing sound') |
| c. <i>Es</i> verging die Zeit | – | <i>Il</i> vient un moment quand ... | EX (Ger.) – SE (Fr.) |
| it passed the time | – | it comes the moment when | |
| d. dass (* <i>es</i>) die Zeit verging | – | qu' <i>il</i> vient un moment quand ... | *EX/*SE (Ger.) – SE (Fr.) |
| that (it) the time passed | – | that' <i>it</i> comes a moment when | |

³ In this paper, "impersonal" is construed as follows: "without a semantically specified subject". This specification covers genuinely *subjectless* clauses, as well as clauses with an *expletive* or with a *semantically void* subject argument, but it does not subsume constructions with indefinite, generic, or idiomatised subjects and the like.

⁴ "SVO" should be read as a *label* for a type of clause structure that is characterized by (i), a head-initial verb phrase, plus (ii), a VP-external, obligatory structural position for the subject. Condition (i) contrasts with "head-final" while condition (ii) contrasts with a clause structure with a VP-internal subject position, such as in SOV.

⁵ Example: (a). Hier ist *es* kalt (Ger.: 'Here is *it* cold') – (b). Here, *it* is cold. – (c.) Hier is *het* koud (Du.)

- | | | | |
|--|---|---|----------------------|
| e. <i>Es</i> wurde gearbeitet | – | <i>Il</i> a été chanté / travaillé ici. | EX (Ger.) – SE (Fr.) |
| <i>it</i> was worked | | <i>it</i> has been sung / worked here | |
| f. dass (* <i>es</i>) gearbeitet wird | – | qu' <i>il</i> a été chanté / travaillé ici. | EX (Ger.) – SE (Fr.) |
| that (<i>it</i>) worked is | – | that' <i>it</i> has been sung / worked here | |

The subjects in (1a,b) are *semantically void* subject *arguments*.⁶ The pronoun "es" (it) in the German example (1c) is an expletive for the obligatory clause-initial position in Germanic declaratives, that is, the so-called "*Vorfeld*" (pre-field), which is open for any arbitrary but *single* constituent to be fronted. Therefore, it is absent in (1d). In French (1d), "*il*" is an expletive subject, with the argumental subject candidate in the postverbal position. Passive cancels the subject argument of a passivized verb. Hence, a passivized intransitive verb becomes syntactically argumentless. In languages with an obligatory subject position, such as French, an expletive plugs the obligatory position (1e). In German, with its SOV basic clause structure, there is no obligatory structural subject position. Hence, there is no room for an expletive. This is not a peculiarity of German. German is merely an instance of a cross-linguistic generalization, namely (2). For a sufficiently detailed theoretical coverage, please consult (Haider 2015:84-86; 2013:64; 2010:20-22, 35-37 and sect. 2.4).

The generalization (2) simultaneously covers SOV and VSO languages. In these languages, the verbal arguments either precede or follow the verb, respectively. In [S[VO]] languages, however, a single argument, viz. the subject, precedes the verb within the VP while all other arguments follow. It raises to an obligatory structural position preceding the VP. This is the position that is lexicalized by subject expletives if it would end up empty otherwise.

(2) Generalization on VP-external subject positions

In languages in which the base positions of the verbal arguments are all within the *canonical directionality* domain of the verb, there is no VP-external, structural subject position.

The obligatory VP-external subject position in SVO is a reflex of a VP-external, directionally licensing (functional) head for the VP-internal, preverbal subject position which is not within the directionality domain of the verb. The functional head serves as the directional licenser and its spec-position is the obligatory structural subject position in SVO languages (Haider 2015:84-86). This paper will try to arrive at a straightforward account of the following facts:

- In SVO languages, in contradistinction to SOV and VSO languages, genuinely subjectless clauses are not admitted, the reason being the structurally obligatory, preverbal subject position as a characteristic feature of the SVO clausal architecture. This position cannot end up radically empty. A subject-expletive serves as a plug for this otherwise empty position.

⁶ The lexical argument structure of such verbs contains an argument in the argument grid without semantic specification (e.g. weather verbs), or allows for an argument that is semantically unspecified as in (1b). A semantically void argument may be a subject or an object. Semantically void objects are typically represented by a reflexive pronoun. The verbs are called "inherently reflexive". There are even verbs with semantically void subject and object, that is, verbs with two underspecified argument slots, as for instance the German verb "*sich_{refl.} handeln um*" ('to be a matter of'; lit.: deal itself).

i. Bei *Handeln* handelt *es sich* um ein seltsames Verb.

with "*handeln*" deals *it itself* around a strange verb ["*Handeln*" is (a matter of) a strange verb].

In SOV and VSO, such an obligatory, a VP-external subject position is absent since *any* argument of a verb is able to stay within the domain of its verbal head on the canonical side of the head, that is, uniformly preceding or following. In SVO, the subject is "exceptional" since already in its base position, it precedes the verb while all other arguments follow it.

- In SVO languages, in the absence of a suitable expletive, intransitive verbs cannot be passivized regularly. This is the case in English but also in null-subject SVO languages such as most Romance standard languages. In SOV languages, no restriction against subjectless clauses applies since there is no structural subject position triggering the restriction that this position be represented by an identifiable syntactic item. In other words, in SVO, the structural subject position must not be *syntactically* empty while in SOV and VSO such a position does not exist, for principled reasons.
- In middles and in impersonal constructions resulting from middles diachronically, the pronominal subject is a semantically void argument, also known as "quasi-argument" (Chomsky 1981: 325). In null-subject languages, it is phonetically "zeroed" but syntactically recoverable by virtue of the argument relation to the verb. The result is a superficially subjectless construction which is not subjectless syntactically. In null-subject languages, any pronominal subject is phonetically zeroed in a finite clause, semantically void subjects included.

In sum, there is a neat correlation between the respective clausal architecture and the grammatical management of the subject position. Since there is no VP-external, obligatory structural position for accommodating subjects in SOV and in VSO, expletives for such a position are neither required nor admitted in such languages.

Second, if in a given SVO language, the expletive would have to be pronominal and this language happens to be a null-subject language, then this property deprives such a language of its candidate for serving as explicit subject expletive. As a consequence, in these languages, intransitive verbs cannot be passivized. This is the case in Romance null-subject languages in contradistinction to French, which does not drop pronominal subjects. In English, intransitives cannot be passivized either, but for a different aetiology, with the same grammatical cause. English lacks a suitable expletive because the typical candidates for this grammatical function (i.e. *it* or *there*) have gotten recruited for other grammatical commissions. In the absence of a suitable expletive, the passive of intransitive verbs is ruled out since the resulting clause structure ends up with an empty subject position for which there is no filler available.

2. Semantically void vs. expletive vs. subjectless

A semantically *void* subject argument of a verb – aka "quasi-argument" – is typically instantiated by a pronoun, typically third person singular (neuter). An *expletive* subject, on the other hand, is a *dummy item* in an obligatory structural subject position without any argument relation.⁷ A *subjectless* clause is a clause that does not contain a syntactic subject. The ungrammaticality of a subject expletive in (1f) in a German subjectless clause is representative of SOV languages in general. No SOV language is known that requires or admits *expletive* sub-

⁷ In German, the morpheme "es" ('it') serves both as a void subject and as a structural expletive for the clause-initial position. Dutch uses "het" ('it') for void subjects and "er" ('there') for the clause-initial expletive.

jects.⁸ This is a strong indication that there is no obligatory subject position to be filled by an expletive in SOV languages.

Some generative approaches, motivated by an SVO bias, have assumed the contrary, as for instance Cardinaletti & Roberts (2002:150), quoted below.⁹ The Chomsky's EPP conjecture (see section 4) states that in *any* language, the clause structure contains an obligatory structural subject position. Consequently, if a clause seems to lack a subject or a subject expletive, this is taken to be as indication that the subject position is plugged by an "empty expletive". In other words, something empty is assumed to be inserted in order to prevent a position from ending up empty. It is entirely unclear how the presence or absence of such an empty expletive could be ascertained. What is a testable difference between a position with an empty expletive and an empty position?

Let us test a straightforward prediction. If there is an empty specimen of "es" in (3a), the silent form would have the same syntactic effects as its audible counterpart. This is not true, however. An overt "es" blocks fronting (3b). Consequently, a silent variant would block it too. Fronting is possible only in the absence of "es". In this case, the extraposed clause is the argument of the verb. If there is an "es", this pronoun is the argument of the verb and it serves as the antecedent of the extraposed clause. The clause that depends on its antecedent is not the argument of the verb (see Bennis 1986 for Dutch), whence its opacity for extractions.

- (3) a. Damals wurde (es) verabsäumt, die Baustelle mit Planen vor Regenwasser zu schützen.
 then was (it) neglected the building-site with canvas against rain-water to protect
 b. Diese Baustelle_i wurde (*es) verabsäumt, --_i mit Planen vor Regenwasser zu schützen.
 this building-site was (it) neglected with canvas against rain-water to protect

Quite a few cross-linguistic studies of impersonal constructions are flawed because of equivocating semantically void subject arguments with expletive subject expletives. Another area of mix-up is the delineation of genuinely subjectless clauses from clauses with a null subject. The following statements are representative for syntactic literature on these matters and the misjudgement of the distribution of "es" (it), "er" (there) and "það" (it) in German, Dutch, and Icelandic, respectively:

"Wherever it is possible for the expletive null subject to appear, it must appear and so the lexical expletive is excluded. "Wherever the expletive null subject is not licensed, the overt expletive appears." Cardinaletti & Roberts (2002:146).

"In German, the situation regarding null expletives is largely comparable to what we have just seen for Icelandic." (Cardinaletti & Roberts 2002:150).

Data from Icelandic and German do not confirm this claim and the very concept of an "expletive null subject" is not only a contradiction in terms – something null as a substitute for

⁸ Here are Turkish examples:

(i) Burada çalışılır/oynanır/bağırılır.

Here works_{+Pass} /plays_{+Pass} /shouts_{+Pass}

Turkish

Knecht (1986: 59).

Japanese does not admit expletive subjects either; cf. Ishizuka (2012: 53).

⁹ Others, as for instance Biberauer (2008:1), acknowledges the counterevidence from Germanic, Slavic, and VSO languages and ascribes "different T-properties" to them. Nonetheless, "expletive pro" is not discarded in general.

something that must not be null – but also empirically inadequate. Structures that it renders possible turn out to be ungrammatical.

First, if Cardinaletti & Robert's characterization were accurate, German and Icelandic ought to display parallel patterns for the presence or absence of expletive subjects, but they don't. The pattern illustrated by (4g) and in (6), with an explicit expletive, is disregarded in the paper. Second, if there existed an "*expletive null subject*", the standard passive of an intransitive verb ought to be grammatical in null-subject languages, but it is not (see below).

Let us first analyse the relevant Germanic data. In (4a,c,e), the first position in the V2-clauses is marked by an expletive, but crucially, this is not a subject position. It is the clause initial, obligatory non-argument position of the clause structure of V2 languages. In Dutch, the expletive is homophonous with the locative pronoun and in German and Icelandic with the neuter personal pronoun. This indicates also what would be the candidate for the function of an expletive subject. There is consensus that the clause-initial items in (4a,c,e) are expletives for the obligatory clause-initial position of declarative clauses in a V2-language. The rest is controversial.

(4d) and (4f) appear to be parallel, but (4g) and (4h) contrast. (4g) is representative of all North Germanic languages, which require an expletive in this structure. German forbids it.

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|--|-----------------------|
| (4)a. Er wordt gewerkt. | Dutch |
| EXPL is worked ('Work is going on') | |
| b. Nergens wordt (er) gewerkt ¹⁰ | |
| nowhere is (there) worked | |
| c. Es wird gearbeitet | German |
| EXPL is worked | |
| d. Nirgendwo wird (*es) gearbeitet | |
| nowhere is (EXPL) worked | |
| e. Það var dansað í gær. | Icelandic |
| EXPL was danced yesterday | |
| f. Í gær var (*það) dansað. | |
| yester day was (it) danced | |
| g. að það hefur verið veitt í leyfisleysi á svæðinu. | (Thráinsson 2007:330) |
| that EXPL has been fished without permit in area _{Def.} | |
| h. dass (*es) gefischt wurde in der Gegend | German |
| that (EXPL) fished was in this area | |

In Dutch and German, the clause structure rests on a head-*final* VP, that is, an SOV structure. Therefore, these languages share the general property of SOV languages, namely the absence

¹⁰ i. *Nergens wordt gewerkt*, nergens gesport, er wordt geslenterd, gegeten, gewacht op betere tijden.
nowhere is worked, nowhere is played, there is strolled, dined, waited for better times
<https://www.volkskrant.nl/archief/zielzoekers-a3602961/> (27-2-2018)

ii. *Tegelijk wordt er gewerkt aan risicobeheersing*.
concurrently is *there* worked on risk-control
<http://stadtiel.nl/lokaal/regionaal-brandweezorgplan-besproken-368856> (27-2-2018)

A Google search (Feb 28, 2018) for "*dat wordt gewerkt*" ('that is worked') and "*dat er wordt gewerkt*" ('that there is worked'), restricted to *news* sites, produced 567 hits for the variant without 'er' and 2210 with 'er'. Evidently, 'er' is not obligatory in subjectless clauses in Dutch.

of expletive subjects. In (4a) and (5a), "er" is not a subject expletive but the counterpart of German "da" (there) in (5b).¹¹ One of its usages is non-deictic. It is a particle that occurs in any type of clause structure, that is, clauses with and without a subject. Neither Dutch nor German employs an unequivocal subject expletive. Dutch syntacticians, in particular Hoekstra & Mulder (1990), Neeleman and Weerman (1999:210-13) or Koenenman (2000:192), have provided detailed arguments for this conclusion.

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|--|--------|
| (5)a. dat (<i>er</i>) iemand iets heeft gezien | Dutch |
| that <i>there</i> someone something has seen | |
| b. dass (<i>da</i>) jemand etwas gesehen hat | German |
| that <i>there</i> someone something seen has | |

As for Icelandic, Thráinsson (2007:328) discusses "*expletive það*" as an "overt expletive" for the structural subject position, viz. Spec-IP, and characterizes the grammatical management of an otherwise empty structural subject position as follows (2007: 181)

"This kind of subject gap can be 'filled' (or 'neutralized') by an overt expletive, by fronting a head and by fronting a maximal projection." Maling & Zaenen (1978: 491) had affirmed this before: *"If, however, a fronting rule of any kind applies, moving some other constituent to initial position, there is no need for það Insertion to apply."*

In (4g) and (6a,b), a subject expletive is present in Icelandic, and according to Thráinsson (2007:355), its presence is grammatically required unless another item takes its place, as for instance, the stylistically-fronted supine in (6c).¹² The counterparts in German are ungrammatical. Cardinaletti & Roberts (2002) would have to rule out "*það*" from these contexts since the expletive null subject should replace it obligatorily. Faroese (6d) reconfirms this picture (Vikner 1991:59). Icelandic and Faroese employ lexical subject expletives while neither Dutch nor German tolerates such items.

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|--|-----------------------------|
| (6) a. Hún sagði [að <i>það</i> hefði verið dansað í gær]. | Maling & Zaenen (1978: 491) |
| he said that EXPL has been danced yesterday | |
| b. Þeir segja [að <i>það</i> verði dansað í brúðkaupinu]. | Thráinsson (2007:355) |
| they say that it will-be danced at wedding _{Def} | |
| c. Þeir segja [að <i>dansað</i> _i verði <i>e</i> _i í brúðkaupinu]. | |
| d. Eg veit ekki [hví tað/* <i>pro</i> ekki er komið nakað bræv.] | Faroese (Vikner 1991: 59) |
| I know not why there not is come any letter | |

Icelandic and Faroese are special among Germanic languages since they provide a null-subject option for semantically void subject arguments. A typical case of a semantically void argument is the subject of weather-verbs. Icelandic drops a void subject argument obligatorily (7a), while in Faroese it is optionally dropped (7b). In all other Germanic languages such as in Dutch and German (7c,d), semantically void subjects must not be dropped (7c,d).

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|--|---|
| (7)a. Rignði (* <i>það</i>) mikið í Reykjavík þá? | Icelandic (Thráinsson 2007: 481) |
| rained (*it) much in Reykjavík then? | ('Did it rain much in Reykjavik then?') |

¹¹ Biberauer (2008:35) calls these particles "*imposters which superficially resemble English-style expletives.*"

¹² According to Holmberg (2000:446) "*the element moved by SF [= stylistic fronting]_{HH} functions as a pure expletive in its derived position [...] it alternates with the special expletive það in some cases. The trigger of the movement is a version of the Extended Projection Principle (EPP).*"

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|---|---------------------------|
| b. I gjár regnaði (tað).
yesterday rained (it) | Faroese (Vikner 1991: 59) |
| c. Regent <i>het</i> veel in Groningen?
rains it much in Groningen | Dutch |
| d. Regnet <i>es</i> viel in Salzburg?
rains it much in Salzburg? | German |

Semantically void subjects are not restricted to weather verbs, of course. An instructive class is the class of verbs that come in two variants, that is, an agentive variant and a variant with a semantically void subject argument, as illustrated by German (8a,b) and – less easy to identify – by Icelandic in (8d). In the semantically void version, the verb conceptualizes an event as something that happens without reference to a particular agent. In the agentive variant of (8b), the masculine subject "er" (he) refers to "storm", whose gender is masculine in German. In the non-agentive event-reading, "es" (it) is the semantically void subject argument. In Icelandic, the semantically void subject arguments are dropped, that is, replaced by a null pronoun, whence the absence of a *lexical* subject in (8d) in spite of the presence of an accusative object; for details see also Haider (2001). The subject argument is the semantically void null subject and therefore accusative can be assigned regularly. Otherwise, the object would have to surface as nominative, as in passive (8e) or with unaccusative verbs.

- (8) a. Dann hat *es* ihn /umgeworfen/vom Dach geweht/aus der Bahn geworfen/ ...
then has *it* him /overturned/off the roof blown/out of the track thrown/ ...
- b. (Der Sturmⁱ war heftig.) Sogar den Schornstein wehte *erⁱ/es* vom Dach.
(The storm was violent.) Even the chimney_{Acc} blew he/it_{Nom} off the roof
- c. Stormurinn blés strompinn af húsinu. (Icelandic)
storm_{Def.-Nom} blew chimney_{Def.-Acc} off house_{Def}
- d. Strompinn blés af húsinu.
the chimney_{Def.-Acc} blew off house_{Def}
- e. Strompurinn var blásinn af húsinu.
the chimney_{Def.-Nom} was blown off house_{Def}

The class of verbs that provide an argument structure format with either an agentive or a semantically void subject in Icelandic is akin to the German class. (9) presents one more example. A sample of corresponding verbs is listed in Haider (2001:4-6). In each case, the Icelandic and the German patterns are fully congruent, modulo null semantically void subject in Icelandic. Once it is realized that in cases such as (9a,c) and (10d), an Icelandic clause contains a null semantically void subject, the "exceptional" accusative is not exceptional anymore. It is just a regular accusative in a transitive construction with a semantically void argument in the form of a pronominal null subject (Haider 2001).

- (9) a. Bátana hefur broti í spón. (Zaenen & Maling 1990:145)
boats_{Def.-Acc} has_{sg.} broken in pieces
- b. Die Boote hat *es* in Stücke gerissen
the boats_{Acc} has_{sg.} it_{Nom} in pieces ripped
- c. Skipið rak á land.
ship_{Def.-Acc} drifted to land

- d. Das Schiff trieb/schleuderte/verschlug *es* an Land
 the ship_{Acc} *drove/threw/kocked* it_{Nom} on land

Let us now summarize the essential difference between subject *expletives* and semantically void subject *arguments*. A semantically void subject is an *argument* of the verb that is specified in the lexical argument structure of the verb as an argument, but it is dissociated from semantic specifications. It is an argument with a morphological form but without semantic content. In null subject languages it is null, just like any other unstressed subject pronoun. In German, it is realized as *es* (it), in Dutch as *het* (it). An expletive, on the other hand, is a dummy element that is not related to the argument structure of a verb at all. Its realization is structurally triggered.

Next, let us turn briefly to counterevidence for the syntactic conception of "*expletive null subjects*" aka "*null expletives*". A theory that admits such an entity fails when confronted with null-subject languages, for instance Romance languages. Although the facts are clear and undisputed, they seem to be persistently neglected. If "expletive null subjects" existed, their natural grammatical biotope would be null-subject languages. The pronominal subject expletive would be turned into a null-subject since any unstressed subject pronoun is bound to be replaced by a null pronoun in such languages. The prediction is clear and straightforward, but it is downright wrong. In a nutshell – for details see section the following section – the situation is this:


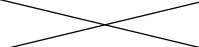
French employs a pronoun as a lexical expletive in otherwise subjectless clauses (10a). This is expected since French is not pro-drop. If it were, it would be predicted to generally replace *il* by its null variant, that is, a null expletive pronoun (10b). However, the predicted result for a null subject language(10b) is ungrammatical. This is not only true for Italian but for any Romance null subject language.

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|--------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (10)a. | <i>Il</i> a été dormi dans ce lit | French [Rivière (1981: 42)] |
| | it has been slept in this bed | |
| b.* | È stato dormito in questo letto | Italian |
| | has been slept well in this bed | |

It is a general but unexplained fact of Romance null-subject languages that the grammatical means employed for the standard passive of transitive verbs cannot be applied to intransitive verbs. The outcome is ungrammatical. This is a scandal for anyone who claims that a null pronoun can be recruited as an expletive subject in a construction without a subject argument. Null subjects are ubiquitous in null-subject languages, but they are always tied to an argument slot of a lexical head.

Here is an interim summary of the main issues of the above discussion that will be dealt with in the following sections. As summarized in Table (1), expletive subjects are an SVO phenomenon. Genuine subjectless clauses are excluded in SVO and expletives are a means of lexicalizing the obligatory subject position in the absence of a subject argument. This will be the topic of the following section.

Table (1): Void pronominal subjects, expletive subjects, and genuinely subjectless clauses

	'SVO'	'SOV'	'VSO'		lexical	null
semantic. void	yes	yes	yes		yes	yes
expletive	yes	no	no		yes	no
subjectless	no	yes	yes			

3. Obligatory subject positions? – Yes, but only in SVO

A structurally unique and obligatorily lexicalized subject position is the hallmark of SVO languages. In such languages, expletive subjects are mandatory in clauses that lack an argumental candidate for the structural subject position. Scandinavian languages such as Norwegian are particularly instructive in this respect because of the grammatically free alternation between various options of handling this grammatical obligation.¹³

The item for filling the obligatory subject position in the clause structure may be the direct object (11a), turned into a derived subject, as in English. Another option is (11b), the so-called pseudo-passive, with the complement of the prepositional object turned into a subject. Third, the subject position may be lexicalized with a subject expletive (11c). Only if the position remains empty is the resulting structure ungrammatical (11d). These data have been first discussed by Taraldsen (1979:49) and confirmed by Lødrup (1991:127).

(11)a. (at) *frimerker* ble klistret på *brevet*. Norwegian

(that) stamps were pasted on letter_{DEF}

b. (at) *brevet* ble klistret frimerker på.

(that) letter_{DEF} was pasted stamps on

c. (at) *det* ble klistret frimerker på brevet.¹⁴

(that) EXPL was pasted stamps on letter_{Def.}

d. *at ble klistret frimerker på brevet.

VSO¹⁵ or SOV languages are not subject to such a restriction (Haider 2010:11). Dutch has played a deceptive role in this research area because "*er*" (there) has been, and continues to be, mistaken for a subject expletive (see below).

The *raison d'être* of expletive subjects has to be sought in the clause structure of an SVO language. The grammatical causality behind this property is the directionality mismatch mentioned above (Haider 2010: 35-37; 2013:87-90; 2015: 84-86). In these languages, and only in these languages, a single argument surfaces outside of the phrase of the head it is an argument of, that is, outside of the VP. The syntactic subject occupies a functional specifier position outside of the VP. As a consequence, it is not only outside of the VP but it *precedes* the verbal head while all other arguments *follow* this verbal head inside the VP. It is this setting which

¹³ In English, only the option (11a) is grammatical, except for a few idioms such as "*take advantage of*."

(i) is the counterpart of (9b): i. She "*was taken advantage of*" CocA 11 NOW 95
ii. "*Advantage was taken of*" her BNC 7 NOW 9

BNC = British national corpus. COCA = Corpus of contemporary American. NOW = News corpus.

¹⁴ Det ble klistret noen grønne frimerker på brevet (Lødrup 1991:127).

It was pasted some green stamps on the letter'

¹⁵ For V1-languages, see Clemens & Polinsky (2017, sect. 5: V1 and the EPP), Noonan (2004). McCloskey (1996) explicitly emphasizes that the Celtic VSO languages do not admit subject expletives

constitutes the clause structure type known as [S[VO]]. In other clause structure types – SOV or VSO – the verbal head precedes or follows all of its arguments, respectively. In any case, all the arguments stay within the directionality domain of the verbal head. In SVO, there is a mismatch. One argument is not contained in the directionality domain of the verbal head whose projection contains all the other arguments. This is 'repaired' by raising it to a position reserved for subjects above the VP. This position is the source of various structural properties of the subject in SVO languages that are absent in SOV and VSO.

In SVO, the canonical directionality of heads is to the right. However, the directionality of merger in phrases is universally to the left (Haider 2010, 2013, 2015). Hence, neither the verb nor a projection node of the verb can provide directional licensing for the VP-internal subject position in (12a). Therefore, a functional head provides directional licensing (12b), which is indicated by arrows in (12). The projection of the functional head establishes the particular spec position that is typical for SVO languages, namely the position for XP in (12b).

- (12) a. $[_{VP} XP_{Subj} [_{V^o} \rightarrow [ZP]]]$ ¹⁶
 b. $[_{FP} XP_j [_{F'} F^o \rightarrow [_{VP} e_j [_{V^o} \rightarrow ZP]]]]$ SVO
 c. $[_{VP} XP_{Subj} \leftarrow [_{V'} ZP \leftarrow V^o]]$ SOV
 d. $[_{VP} V_i^o \rightarrow [XP_{Subj} [e_i \rightarrow ZP]]]$ VSO

In SOV (12c) and in VSO (12d), any argument of a verb remains within the directionality domain of the verbal head or a projection of it, whence the absence of the particular subject-related functional projection in the clause structures of these languages.

The functional projection in (12b) not only provides a directionally licensing head for the pre-verbal, VP-internal subject, namely the functional head. It also generates a trigger for placing the subject into the spec-position of the licensing functional head. This is an effect of a general licensing condition which is fully explicated in Haider (2015: 84). The licenser and the licensee must c-command each other under canonical directionality. In (12b), F^o c-commands the VP-internal subject position and the subject in its derived spec-position c-commands F^o by virtue of being raised to the spec position. The very same relation holds VP-internally and triggers the VP-shell structure¹⁷ for complex, head-initial phrases (see Haider 2015:85).

The directionality mismatch for the VP-internal subject in SVO (12b) in contradistinction to the uniformity of SOV and VSO (12c,d) accounts for a wide range of predictable syntactic differences with respect to subjects in these language types). On the one hand, there are syntactic differences between the subject and the objects within the same SVO language, and on the other hand, there are syntactic differences between SVO subjects on the one hand and subjects in VSO or SOV languages on the other; see Haider (2010 ch.1), (2013 ch.4), (2015) and a sketch below.

First, a single, illustrative empirical issue, namely the distribution of wh-phrases in clauses with multiple wh-phrases. As this is an infrequent construction, it is very likely to be free of

¹⁶ Here is an example with a subject in its VP-internal position: *He made [them [grasp the problem]]*_{VP}

¹⁷ $[_{VP} V_i^o \rightarrow [DP [e_i \rightarrow DP]]]$ as in: *[deny_i [nobody [e_i anything]]]*_{VP}

Immediate supportive evidence for the internal, empty V-position comes from SVO languages that optionally strand verb particles. Such a phenomenon is completely absent in SOV languages, of course.

i. *He should [send_i [us [e_i-up a drink]]]*_{VP}

normative interventions. Nevertheless, the distribution is grammatically strictly determined and speakers are fully obedient to these restrictions.¹⁸

In SVO languages, the structural subject position is a VP-*external* structural position reserved for the subject.¹⁹ In SOV and VSO languages, on the other hand, the subject position is a VP-*internal* argument position on a par with the other argument positions of the verb. This syntactic difference is clearly reflected by a constraint on the distribution of wh-subjects in clauses with multiple wh-items. An in situ-wh subject that is dependent on a structurally higher wh-item is ruled out in SVO (13a,d).

- (13) a. *It is unclear who(m) *what* has bothered/saved/killed
 b. Es ist unklar, wen *was* gestört/gerettet/getötet hat. German
 it is unclear whom *what* bothered/saved/killed has
 c. Ze wist nooit *wie wat* zong, en ook niet *wat wie* zong.²⁰ Dutch
 she knew never *who what* sang, and also not *what who* sang
 d. *I don't remember who believes (that) *who* read the book.
 e. Man weiß nicht genau, wer hustete, während *wer* geredet hat German
 one knows not exactly who coughed while *who* talked has

What these examples show is that in English, which is representative of SVO languages in this respect, an in-situ wh-subject that is dependent on a preceding wh-item is deviant. This restriction is independent of movement, as Chomsky (1981:236-237) acknowledges: „*Syntactic movement is not a crucial element of this effect, and furthermore the presence of the complementizer is immaterial.*“ The crucial difference is this: A wh-phrase in a functional spec-position is an operator and therefore it cannot be dependent on a higher wh-item. In SVO, the subject position is a functional spec position, in SOV it is not since the subject remains in a VP-internal argument position.

Interestingly, this different behaviour of wh-phrases with respect to functional spec positions can be demonstrated even within the very same language, namely in German. Object clauses may come in two variants, namely as a C°-introduced clause (14a) or a V2-clause (14b). If the subjects in (14a,b) are replaced by a wh-item, (14b) ends up as an ungrammatical sentence (14d). This is the very effect that rules out (13a,d) in English. In (14d), the lower wh-subject is in the initial spec-position of an embedded V2-clause and depends on a higher wh-element, and it is ungrammatical, just like (13a) and (13d) in English. Since the initial-spec position is open to any phrase, the effect is not restricted to subjects (14e):

- (14) a. Er hat geglaubt, dass alle zufrieden seien.
 he has believed that all pleased are_{subjunctive}
 b. Er hat geglaubt, alle seien zufrieden.
 he has believed all are_{subjunctive} pleased

¹⁸ Note that this is just one out of a dozen properties listed and explicated in Haider (2013:130-131) that systematically differentiate between SOV and SVO.

¹⁹ This position may be preceded by positions that are open for a subject, too, as a secondary position. This is the case in Germanic SVO & V2 languages, some of which provide this option even clause-internally; see Vikner et al. (2017) for details. For Spanish, see Pöll (2010).

²⁰ Oscar van den Boogaard. Het verticale strand. 2010. p.8. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.

- c. Wer hat geglaubt, dass *wer* nicht zufrieden sei?
who has believed that who not pleased is?
- d.*Wer hat geglaubt, *wer* sei nicht zufrieden?
who has believed *who* is not pleased
- e.*Wer hat geglaubt, *womit* seien alle zufrieden?
who has believed *with-what* are all pleased

In sum, expletive subjects are an SVO-phenomenon. Semantically void subjects are a phenomenon of the verbal argument structure. Such verbs are found in any language. The lexical argument structure of such verbs provides a subject slot but without semantic specification. Its syntactic realization is a semantically void subject, which is typically a (third person neuter) pronoun or its null variant in a pro-drop language.

4. Expletive null subjects? – Not only a contradiction in terms

Initially, there was a correct generalization: "*There is compelling evidence that the subject of a clause is obligatory in English and similar languages.*" (Chomsky 1981:40). Without substantive empirical underpinning, the very SVO property got elevated to the rank of an unrestricted, allegedly universal principle, namely the "EPP".²¹ Instantly, it had to be shielded against immediate counterevidence. The generalization is wrong for languages that do not resemble English, viz. non-SVO languages. Instead of accepting the EPP as a property of SVO languages, an "universal" EPP was defended by introducing an auxiliary hypothesis, namely the "expletive pro" hypothesis; see Biberauer (2008) and the literature cited there. It went unnoticed, however, that the auxiliary hypothesis is incompatible with Romance pro-drop languages. Since Rizzi (1986), it is assumed that there are "semi-NSL-languages"²², that is, languages that permit null subjects only in expletive contexts. They only license an expletive pro. German and Dutch are assumed to be representatives of NSL.

In an SVO language, such as Danish (15a) or French²³ (15b-e), a dummy subject is obligatory for a clause that would end up subjectless. This is the case when an intransitive verb is passivized. In Danish, the expletive is a cognate of English "there". In French, the expletive is the personal pronoun "il" (he/it).

- | | |
|---|---------------------------|
| (15) a. (at) <i>Der</i> blevet danset
(that) <i>There</i> was danced | Danish (Vikner 1995: 209) |
| b. <i>Il</i> a beaucoup été fumé dans cette salle
it has much been smoked in this room | Gaatone (1998: 124) |
| c. <i>Il</i> a été dormi dans ce lit
it has been slept in this bed | Rivière (1981: 42) |

²¹ EPP =_{def.} 'clauses have subjects' (Chomsky 1982: 9-10). Originally, this has been formulated by Perlmutter (1971:100): "*Any sentence other than an Imperative in which there is an S that does not contain a subject in surface structure is ungrammatical.*" Lasnik (2001:356) comments: "*The 'Extended Projection Principle' (EPP) has been [...] a pervasive mystery since it was first formulated by Chomsky (1981).*"

²² NSL = null subject language

²³ Ledgeway (2003:139) points out that clause-initial expletives may be dropped in non-standard varieties of French (i). This is independent of the null-subject issue, however, as (ii) shows. It is a clause-initial property.

(i) (il) faut pas compter là-dessus ('you must not count on it') French
(ii) (Es) hat ja nie geregnet heute! – Heute hat *(es) ja nie geregnet! German
(it) has PRT never rained today – today has (it) PRT never rained ("PRT" = discourse particle)

- d. *qu'il a été procédé à cette arrestation* *Le Figaro*, Sept. 7, 2016
 that it has been proceeded to this detention
 e. *Il a été opté pour cette solution*²⁴

Here comes the challenge for the expletive-null-subject conjecture. The crucial prediction of this conjecture for null-subject languages fails. It is THE crucial prediction since it is directly implied by the background theory. The prediction based on the assumption of null expletives is this: In a null-subject language, the counterparts of (15b,c,d,e) are sentences with an expletive null subject. The expletive pronominal subject will be replaced by a zero pronoun. The prediction turns out as wrong, however.

A typical example of a null-subject representing a semantically void subject is the subject of weather-verbs as in the counterparts of "*Today, it rains*" in Italian, Corsican or Romanian (16a-c), contrasting with French (16d) or Friulan (16e).²⁵

- (16) a. *Oggi piove.* (Italian) b. *Oghje chjaru.* (Corsican) c. *Astăzi plouă.* (Romanian)
 d. *Aujourd'hui il pleut.* (French)
 today it rains
 e. *L ha lampat.* (Friulian)
 it has lightened

The prediction fails for intransitive passives. According to the prediction, the subject of a clause with a passivized intransitive verb has to be an expletive, and this expletive will be null in a null-subject language. However, it is a fact that whenever the canonical passive is applied to intransitive verbs, the result is ungrammatical. This contradicts the assumption behind the prediction, that is, the assumption that there is such a thing as an "empty expletive subject". Intransitive passives in null-subject languages are ungrammatical for the very same reason that is responsible for the ungrammaticality of the intransitive passive in English. The subject position must not remain empty, but there is no expletive available. The French counterparts are grammatical, with a pronominal expletive subject (15b-e).

- (17) a. **È stato ballato in questa sala* Italian (n.b. intransitive 'ballare')
 has been danced in this hall
 b. **È stato dormito in questo letto*
 has been slept well in this bed
 c. **Fue trabajado duro aquí.* Spanish
 was worked hard here

Why are clauses like those in (17) ungrammatical? A straightforward account is this. Romance languages are SVO languages.²⁶ In SVO, the structural subject position must not be radically empty. If there is no filler available, this position must be plugged with an expletive. But, if the available expletive is pronominal, it falls victim to the null-subject rule which re-

²⁴ From a list of examples with passivized intransitive verbs: <http://gabrielwyler.com/page479.html>

²⁵ This example is taken from Haiman (1988:387), who reports that "dummy pronoun" subjects are obligatory also in Sursilvan and Ladin. See also Ledgeway (2003:123-125) on Southern dialects.

²⁶ Sporadic suggestions that Romance languages should not be filed as SVO but rather as a special kind of VOS languages (cf. Barbosa 1995, Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1998) have been rejected; see Sheehan (2016) for discussion. As for the present concerns, it suffices to note that in VSO languages, but crucially not in Romance languages, subjectless passive sentences are grammatical (see section 5.1).

quires pronouns in subject positions to be phonetically silent. A silent expletive would be irrecoverable, however. Hence null-subject languages cannot employ pronominal expletives.²⁷ The essential difference between (16) and (17) is the argument status of a semantically void subject in (16). A null subject is a null-*argument*. The null subject in (16) is recoverable due to the argument relation. A null expletive would be irrecoverable.

An expletive is nothing but a *lexical* dummy item. If the dummy is a pronoun, as in French, it provides agreement features,²⁸ but as a dummy it is not tied to the verb by any dependency relations and it does not have any semantic content. Hence its presence can be verified only by virtue of it being *lexically* present. How could there be an empty version of it? It would be undetectable. A position "filled" by an empty dummy cannot be distinguished from an unfilled empty position since the dummy does not have a relation to any other element that would make it recoverable.

What about German and Dutch? The structural organization of German and Dutch clauses is SOV, with the V2 property on top of it, and in the SOV clause structure, there is no obligatory, VP-external structural subject position that could accommodate, or call for, an expletive. This is the simple story, but people who are fond of empty dummies prefer more complicated narratives. Those who assume an empty expletive for German are bound to admit one for Romance null subject languages, too. But once they do so, the theory fails. What is allegedly empty in German must not be empty in Italian and other Romance languages despite the fact that the theory predicts that it has to be empty because of the null subject character of these languages. The remedy for German and Dutch kills the very same account for a null subject language.

Here is the simple answer: Null subject languages cannot employ pronominal expletives as replacement for a lexical pronoun such as "il" in French since in null subject languages, subject pronouns will be phonetically null. This makes a would-be expletive irrecoverable. In other words, "null expletives" do not exist. So, a sentence with a passivized intransitive becomes a sentence without a subject and in the absence of a lexical expletive it is ungrammatical. This is the situation in the Romance null subject languages.

The only workable option for null subject languages is an *adverbial* dummy since such an item does not fall prey to the null subject condition. Anyway, expletives are recruited mainly

²⁷ A reviewer pointed this example out to me: "*In quel punto fu bussato alla porta*" ('at this moment was knocked on the door'). This is a subjectless sentence from C. Collodi's novel *Pinocchio* discussed by Milan (1992:105). In Italian, it is used as a (Pinocchio-) quote and does not generalize across other verbs, such as *polemizzato* su (polemised about), *trasgredito* a (transgressed to), as corpus searches show.

²⁸ As a consequence, the finite verb in the French counterpart of an English *there*-construction as in (i) agrees with the expletive subject pronoun. Prescriptive grammars (Grevisse/Goosse 1993: § 230) admit agreement with a postverbal noun phrase. This does not correspond to actual usage, however. Google searches (Sept. 26, 2018) for "il a_{sg} manqué deux" produced 1.090 hits under news sites but *zero* hits for "il ont_{pl} manqué deux_{pl}". A search on book sites produced a *single* hit in a book from 1800 (Vie de Lazare Hoche, p.59: Il ont manqué deux fois de l' être). Similarly, "il manque_{sg} deux" produces 1750 hits on news sites and 12.100 under 'books', while "manquent_{pl}" produced a single site under 'news' and six sites in books (all before 1800).

i. Il a_{sg} manqué deux points.

it *has* been-missing two points ('There have been missing two points')

from two²⁹ sources, namely a neuter, 3rd person *pronoun*, as in French, or a locative *adverbial* corresponding to Danish "der" ('there').³⁰ Within the Romance world, at least one language has successfully arrived at the latter solution, and there may be others as well. In Vèneto, the vernacular of the Italian province Veneto, intransitives can be passivized, but only in the *obligatory* presence of an expletive of the *there*-type (18).³¹ This fact indicates that the Gallo-Romance pronominal expletive does not work for a Romance null subject language and that there is in principle a grammatical way that is not blocked by the null subject condition, namely an adverbial expletive.

- (18) a. *Z'è stà parlà de ti* Venetian
 there has been spoken about you
 b. *Gh'è stà parlà de ti* regional variant of (18a)

In sum, null-subject languages provide as clear evidence as one could wish for assuring oneself that the concept of "empty expletives" is dispensable, for empirical as well as theoretical reasons. Why are there nevertheless quite a few syntacticians who seriously maintain this concept? First, they seem to be SVO-biased and believe in a universal VP-external structural subject position. Second, they have got trapped in an apparently attractive scheme: Assume that in a null subject language, there is a null variant for each type of subject pronoun. There are null referential pronouns, there are null semantically void pronouns, and in order to complete the scheme, there are *null expletive* pronouns. What is overlooked is a simple fact: Null subjects are null arguments, and expletives must not be equivocated with arguments. The bigger mistake, however, is a methodological one. First, obviously *every* SOV language would have to be declared a language with null expletive subjects just because of the EPP-dogma. This is implausible since in SVO, there would be null variants as well as lexical variants (cf. Italian vs. French). Why would SOV languages lack lexical subject expletives universally? The answer is that there is no room for an expletive subject in an SOV clause structure.

Second, an obviously contradicting but well-known data area has been constantly neglected, namely the passive of intransitive verbs of a whole language family, viz. the Romance null-subject languages. This amounts to a neglect of immediately relevant but disproving data in order to maintain a favored theoretical standpoint.

5. Passive and middle - similar effects, different syntactic status

The following quote from a handbook article lends itself to an opening of this section since it is a testimonial of the introductory remark in this paper: Expletives tend to be confused with semantically void subjects. The background of the following quote is the well-known contrast between passive and middle of intransitive verbs in German (19) with respect to the obligatory presence or absence of the non-referential subject pronoun "*es*" (it).

- (19) a. Hier wird (**es*) nicht geschlafen (Passive) German
 here is (it) not slept

²⁹ Ledgeway (2003) lists numerous Italian regional varieties with obligatory lexical void subject arguments. Unfortunately, the work does not contain information on the availability of intransitive passivization.

³⁰ In the Scandinavian the spelling of the expletive, namely '*det*' (it) in Swedish or '*der*' (there) in Danish, still betrays their origins as pronouns or adverbials, respectively.

³¹ I gratefully acknowledge the advice of Cecilia Poletto (p.c.), who is native in this language and verified it.

- b. Hier schläft *(es) sich gut (Middle)
here sleeps (it) REFL well

Doron (2015:760) describes the contrast in (19) as follows: "*In German, the expletive subject is obligatory in the impersonal middle [...] whereas in the impersonal passive it is unacceptable in subject position, other than in the position preceding the verb sentence-initially.*" "*In the passive voice, the verb's null external argument occupies an argument position, whereas the external argument is not part of the structure in the middle construction, which instead features a true expletive subject.*"

First, the semantically void subject argument of the intransitive middle is misidentified as an expletive subject. Second, the absence of an expletive subject in the intransitive passive is described as an instance of a null subject, and third, the clause-initial expletive of V2 clauses is mistaken for a subject expletive. The enigmatic "elucidation" of the contrast in the second part of this quote is not explicated further in the paper. How could an intransitive verb in a passive construction provide a "null external argument" that "occupies an argument position"?

The allegedly expletive subject of an intransitive middle cannot be an expletive subject. It is a semantically void subject argument of the verb that is the result of middle formation. This can be verified since its presence or absence interacts with case assignment in the middle construction of "*lassen*" (let). It comes in two synonymous variants,³² viz. one with advancement of the accusative to nominative (20a,c) and a less frequent, alternative, construction (20b,d) with "*es*" as a the semantically void subject and with the direct object in the accusative case.

- (20) a. Hier lässt sich der/*den Sommer genießen.
here lets REFL the_{Nom}/the_{Acc} the summer enjoy
'Here it is possible to enjoy the summer'
b. Hier lässt es sich den/*der Sommer genießen.
here lets it REFL the_{Acc}/the_{Nom} summer enjoy
c. So lässt sich der/*den Tag dort aushalten.
so lets REFL the_{Nom}/the_{Acc} day there endure
'This way, it is possible to endure the day there.'
d. So lässt es sich den/*der Tag dort aushalten.
so lets it REFL the_{Acc}/the_{Nom} day there sustain

If "*es*" were an expletive in the middle construction, (20b,d) and (20a,c), would have to feature a nominative instead of an accusative. In German, in a finite clause, an accusative cannot be assigned to an argument unless nominative has been assigned and nominative is assigned to arguments, not to expletives.³³ Second, if "*es*" were an expletive and could be dropped, (20b,d) would have to be grammatical without "*es*", which is not the case. Third, if the "*es*" of middles were an expletive it could not be absent in a subjectless clause, but it can, as (21c,d)

³² The very same variation is known from constructions that have developed out of a middle construction, as for instance the variation between the so-called 'si passivante' and 'si impersonale' in Italian. (see below).

³³ If an expletive could function as a nominative subject, German would pattern like Norwegian (11) and (i) would have to be predicted to alternate with (ii), which is not the case:

i. dass ein_{Nom} Fehler gemacht wurde (that a mistake made was)
ii. *dass es einen_{Acc} Fehler gemacht wurde (that it_{expl.} a mistake made was)

illustrates. For middles of the causative construction, "*es*" is optional, with concomitant case effects. As already noted, if in (20b,d), the "*es*" were missing, the clauses would become ungrammatical. Hence, "*es*" cannot be assumed to alternate with a null subject.

- (21)a. Hier lässt *es* sich gut leben.³⁴ German
 Here lets *it* REFL well live
 b. Damit lässt *es* sich bequem regieren.
 with-that lets *it* REFL comfortably govern
 c. So lässt sich nicht gut leben.
 so lets REFL not well live
 d. Mit einem Jein lässt sich nicht regieren.
 with a yes&no lets REFL not govern

Finally, Doron (2015:760) – correctly – notes that Dutch employs "*het*" and not "*er*" as subject in an intransitive middle construction (22a). What she fails to appreciate is the fact that in Dutch, "*het*" is the pronoun for semantically void subjects. It is not used as an expletive (22c), neither in the clause-initial position nor as a subject. Let us note in passing that Dutch also admits an alternation between a construction with a semantically void subject (22a) and one with a referential subject (22b).

- (22) a. *Het* zit prima in deze stoel. Dutch
it sits fine in this chair
 b. *Deze stoel* zit gemakkelijk.
 this chair sits comfortably
 c. **Het* wordt niet gelachen – **dat het* niet wordt gelachen – *Er* wordt niet gelachen
it is not laughed – that *it* not is laughed there is not laughed

The following three subsections will focus on the essential differences between passive and middle constructions with respect to the controversial role of the subject as a structurally absent, expletive or semantically void subject.

5.1. Passive

"Passive" is the cross-linguistic denominator of grammatical devices for suppressing the syntactic projection of the subject argument of a verb. "Passive" is the grammatical announcement that the argument slot of the verb is blocked and syntactically inert (Shibatani 1985, Haider 1986:11-15, Kiparsky 2013). The blocked argument remains an implicit argument in the argument structure of the verb, but it can be optionally accessed by special means (e.g. "by-phrases" or equivalents such as ablative or instrumental case, for instance).

In a given language, the canonical passive device blocks the argument in the argument structure of a verb that would end up as the subject of the clause. Object arguments may, but subject arguments cannot, be omitted without announcing this grammatically since the automatic

³⁴ Sources of the examples (19a-d):

a. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/musikerin-islaja-im-portraet-der-waldgeist-von-mitte/20653818.html>
 b. <https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.schuldenabbau-in-baden-wuerttemberg-bares-lacht.150c2827-54d5-40ba-8f09-14d1be238498.html>
 c. <https://www.morgenpost.de/kultur/article213254457/Punkte-lassen-sich-nicht-immer-verbinden.html>
 d. <http://www.rp-online.de/politik/ja-oder-nein-die-spd-muss-sich-jetzt-entscheiden-aid-1.7262814>

case promotion of object-to-subject case, that is, from accusative to nominative, would make the mapping from syntactic structure to argument structure intractable. In the Indo-European family and beyond, grammars typically employ one of two mechanisms. The omission of the subject argument is either directly coded on the verb or achieved by combining a suitable verb form with an auxiliary. Some languages dispose of both devices.

Morphologically coded passive is wide-spread (e.g. Latin, Japanese, Kimaragang Dusun, Turkish etc.). Other languages use a argument-blocking verb form in combination with a suitable auxiliary. Germanic and Romance languages are exemplary cases for the latter strategy. A past participle in combination with an unaccusative auxiliary serves as passive mechanism.

In German, the canonical passive is grammatically formed by the combination of a past participle and the auxiliary "*werden*" (become).³⁵ The participle provides the blocking mechanism since it blocks the subject argument, as can be seen when it is used as an attribute (23c). In combination with a "passive"³⁶ auxiliary, the original subject argument remains syntactically blocked (Haider 1985a,b; 1986:12; 2010: 257). Another syntactic device for achieving a passive effect is the combination of an infinitival verb and the auxiliary "*sein*" (be).³⁷ It is essential that the verb is prefixed with "zu", which is the regular infinitival prefix corresponding to English "to". A bare infinitival attribute would not yield a passive effect, as the contrast between (23d) and (23e) shows.

(23)a. Die Frage wird (von niemandem) beantwortet	participle + unaccusative auxiliary
the question is (by nobody) answered	
b. Die Frage ist (von allen) zu beantworten	'zu'-infinitive + unacc. auxiliary ³⁸
the question is (by all) to answer	
'the question is to be answered by all'	
c. die (von niemandem) beantwortete Frage	attributive participle
the (by nobody) answered question	
d. die (von allen) zu beantwortende Frage	attributive 'zu'-infinitive participle
the (by all) to answer _{+Agr} question	
'the question to be answered by all'	
e. der die Frage beantwortende Sprecher	attributive bare infinitive participle
the the question answer _{Agr} speaker	
'the speaker answering the question'	

Some languages exhibit both types of passive simultaneously. In the continental Scandinavian languages, speakers have a choice between the standard Germanic passive (24a) and a diachronically more recent passivizing device, recruited from a former middle construction,

³⁵ This auxiliary is not identical with the copula 'werden' (become). They differ in the form of the participle:

i. Die Tomaten sind reif *geworden*. (copula: 'The tomatoes have *become* ripe)
 ii. Die Tomaten sind geerntet *worden*. (passive: 'The tomatoes have *been* harvested')

³⁶ In fact, these auxiliaries are auxiliaries with an "unaccusative" format, like copulas. If the very same verb form is combined with a "transitive" auxiliary (e.g. *haben*), the original argument format of the verb is available again.

³⁷ Italian utilizes the very same grammatical device:

i. Die zufriedenstellende Lösung ist nicht zu finden. (the satisfactory solution *is not to find* = *not to be found*)
 ii La soluzione soddisfacente non è da trovare. (the satisfactory solution *not is to find* = *not to be found*)

³⁸ If combined with a transitive auxiliary (*haben*, *avere*) the blocked argument is deblocked:

i. Niemand hat die Frage beantwortet. (nobody has the question answered)
 ii. Alle haben die Frage zu beantworten. (nobody has the question to answer)

which has been turned into a morphological passive construction of the affixal type (24b). The Scandinavian "s-passive" (s. Heltoft & Falster Jakobsen 1995: 207; Engdahl 1999, 2006) is a genuine morphological passive³⁹ device, analogous to the Latin suffix "-ur"

- (24) a. Der *bliver* ofte talt dansk i Skåne.⁴⁰ Danish
there is often spoken Danish in Scania
 'Danish is often spoken in Scania'
 b. Der *tales* ikke mere dansk i Skåne.
there speak-pass. no longer Danish in Scania
 'Danish is no longer spoken in Scania'

Whenever the canonical passive device of a given language is fed with an intransitive verb, the result is a subjectless verbal predicate and this triggers additional measures in SVO languages in order to avoid a subjectless clause. The subject position is plugged by an expletive. In the absence of an expletive, the clause is ungrammatical. (25) illustrates these options.

- (25) a. Ofte vart *det* telefonert. Norwegian (Åfarli 1992:85)
 often was EXPL telephoned
 b. Sedan dansades *det* hela natten. Swedish (Falk 1993:106)
 then dance-pass EXPL whole night_{Def}
 c. að *það* hefur verið veitt í leyfisleysi á svæðinu. Icelandic (Thráinsson 2007:330)
 that EXPL has been fished without permit in area_{Def}.
 d. Il a été dormi dans ce lit récemment. French (Zribi-Hertz 1982)
 e. *Fue trabajado duro aquí. Spanish (Cabredo-Hofherr 2008)
 was worked hard here
 f. Am Ende wurde eifrig applaudiert. German
 at-the end was enthusiastically applauded
 g. als niet wordt gerekend vanaf zeeniveau Dutch
 if not calculated is from sea-level
 h. *At the end was enthusiastically applauded.

Scandinavian languages (25a-c) as well as French (25d) are SVO and therefore the obligatory subject position is lexicalized by an expletive. In Spanish, as well as in any other Romance null-subject language, which are SVO, too, intransitive verbs cannot be passivized since they invariably end up in subjectless clauses whose obligatory subject position remains empty. A pronominal expletive would fall victim to the null-subject condition. Dutch and German are SOV, hence there is no obligatory, VP-external subject position and therefore no position for an expletive.

English (25h) does not passivize intransitives although a candidate for an expletive subject would be available, namely "there" (26a), which may even alternate with a PP (26b). Moreover, the absence of *do*-support in (26c) indicates, that the PP is located in the subject position. What would disqualify "there" for the role of an expletive in intransitive passives?

³⁹ The s-passive can be applied to finite as well as infinitival verbs. For an overview, see Laanemets (2009).

⁴⁰ Note that Danish provides the same option as Norwegian does in (9c), namely an expletive subject in the presence of a direct object that could otherwise be promoted to a syntactic subject. This can be read off from word order, since the object follows the verb.

- (26) a. There have emerged several problems.
 b. Out of nowhere emerged a group of five people.
 c. Out of which corner emerged a group of people?
 d. *Il* a été étudié plusieurs problèmes urgents. French
it has_{Sg.} been investigated many problems_{Pl.} urgent_{Pl.}
 e. Différents problèmes ont été étudiés.
 various problems have_{Pl.} been investigated

English *there*-constructions (26a) as well as locative inversion constructions (26b) show agreement effects. Since "*there*" as an adverbial proform, unlike the French pronoun "*il*", does not provide agreement values of its own, it is well-formed only if it is associated with an item from which it imports agreement features. This is the postnominal DP. This is true also for locative inversion (26b), with a PP in the subject position. (25h) is deviant because "*there*" does not provide any agreement values and because there is no associated DP, whose agreement features could be imported. French (26d), on the other hand, employs a pronoun as an expletive and the pronoun provides its agreement features. In (26d), the finite verb agrees with the pronoun and not with the postverbal plural DP. If this DP is fronted to the subject position, the finite verb obligatorily agrees with it (26e).

5.2 Middle and middle-related impersonal constructions

The main concern of this sub-section is the grammatical status of the subject in the intransitive middle construction as a semantically void subject argument (see Haider 2010, sect. 2.4). It is a pronominal subject. In pro-drop languages, the pronominal is replaced by a null subject. German and Italian provide instructive show cases. Remember first that the passive variants that correspond to (27a,b) are ungrammatical in Italian; see section 4, examples (17a,b). Second, in the passive variants of (27c,d), "*es*" (it) would be ungrammatical in German. This follows immediately if the middle construction of intransitive implicates a semantically void subject. This is the null subject in (27a,b) and the obligatory "*es*" in (27c,d). Italian (27a,b) is representative of Romance null subject languages.

- (27) a. [*pro*] Si è dormito bene in questo letto. Italian
 REFL is slept well in this bed
 b. [*pro*] Si è tossito per il fumo.
 REFL is coughed due-to the smoke
 c. In diesem Bett schläft *es* sich gut. German
 in this bed sleeps *it* REFL well
 d. Wenn man stark raucht, hustet *es* sich leichter.
 if one heavily smokes coughs *it* REFL easier

The semantically void subject of the middle construction and of its continuation as an impersonal construction in Romance is an argument; it is semantically void, but nevertheless it is an argument of the verb. As a pronominal argument it is subject to the pronominal drop condition of null subject languages, and as an argument of the verb it is recoverable. In addition, it is the antecedent of a reflexive. Pro-drop SVO languages meet the condition that the structural subject position not be radically empty in middles and reflexive impersonal constructions. There is always a subject argument of the verb associated with the structural subject position.

The argument status is sufficient on the one hand for making it recoverable and on the other hand it serves as a specification for subject position in the SVO clause. What is grammatically excluded, however, is an empty filler for an empty position, that is, an expletive null subject.

A reliable indicator of the argumental status of the semantically void subject of middles is the interaction with case assignment. This can be readily observed in Romance languages. Descriptive grammars of Italian distinguish between "si passivante" (28a,c) and "si impersonale" (28b) in Italian. This terminology is motivated exclusively by the case and agreement properties. The three variants (28a-c) are essentially synonymous (Burzio 1986:46).

- (28) a. Alcuni articoli si *leggeranno* volentieri
a-few articles REFL will-read_{pl} willingly
b. Si *leggerà* alcuni articoli volentieri.
REFL will-read_{sg} a-few article willingly
c. Si *leggeranno* alcuni articoli volentieri.
REFL will-read_{pl} a few articles willingly
d.*Alcuni articoli si *leggerà* volentieri.
a-few articles REFL will-read_{sg} willingly

In (28a) the verb agrees with the subject in its pre-VP subject position. In (28b), it agrees with the semantically void null subject. (28c) is a variant of (28a) with a postponed subject. (28d) is ungrammatical. Here, agreement is obligatory. As for (28b), Burzio (1986:43) seems to be convinced that "*It is clear that in such cases, SI plays the role of the subject*". This is not at all clear, however. If it were so, "*si*" would be a direct counterpart of French "*on*" or German "*man*" and the constructions (28a) and (28b) would be syntactically disconnected. Interestingly, (Burzio 1986:55) mentions example (29), but he apparently is not aware of the consequences. The subject of (28b) is a semantically void subject argument. It is the counterpart of French "*il*" in (30a). Since Italian, unlike French, is a null-subject language, semantically void subject are dropped; see Bently (2006), for detailed analyses of the recoverable null-subject of this constructions.

If "*si*" were the genuine subject in (28b), it would have to be the derived subject in (29). In this case, "*si*" would be the object promoted to subject. This entails that "*si*" must be a possible object of "*accusare*" (accuse) with the very same semantically void reading as the subject in (28b). In other words, it would have to be an inherently reflexive object of "*accusare*". However, "*accusare*" does not tolerate a *semantically void* reflexive object. The reflexive of an inherently reflexive verb is a semantically void object argument. Let us note in passing that direct objects and subjects are the only arguments of a verb that may be semantically unspecified. For objects, the typical form of the semantically void object is a reflexive pronoun.⁴¹

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------|
| (29) Si è stati accusati | Italian |
| REFL is been accused | |

A comparison with French, which does not drop pronominal subjects, provides more direct insights and confirms an analysis that assigns the same status to the reflexive clitic in all vari-

⁴¹ Whenever the "si" of the impersonal construction happens to co-occur with a reflexive clitic of the same form, "ci si" replaces the otherwise reduplicative sequence "si si"; see Grimshaw (1997:181).

ants of (28). The difference is the presence of a semantically void subject argument in (28b). With respect to the optional availability of a semantically void subject, French is predicted to pattern parallel to Italian, modulo subject postponing in French (30c). So, the parallel will be narrowed down to (28a) and (28b).⁴²

- | | |
|--|---|
| (30) a. Il se trouve des excuses facilement.
it REFL finds _{Sg.} some excuses easily
b. Des excuses se trouvent facilement.
some excuses REFL find _{Pl.} easily
c. *Il se trouvent des excuses facilement.
it find _{Pl.} REFL some excuses easily
d. Si troverà/troveranno scuse.
REFL find _{Sg./Pl.} excuses | French

Italian |
|--|---|

Here is an alternative analysis of the constructional variants illustrated by (28a,b) and (30a,b), based on the general grammatical mechanism involved in middle construction. In a middle construction, unlike a passive construction, the subject argument of the verb is not syntactically blocked and thereby turned into an implicit argument. This is reflected in the fact that middles do not admit the kind of "by-phrases" familiar from passives.⁴³ The subject argument slot of the verb is syntactically active and so the "by-phrase" does not find an implicit subject argument to join with.

Middle formation arguably is an operation on the argument structure of a lexical entry. The result is a complex verb, consisting of the verb and the reflexive, with a syntactic structure like a particle verb. In other verbs, the "middle voice" of a verb consists of the verb plus the reflexive. The reflexive, that plugs the slot of the subject argument in the argument grid, is a semantically void item. As a reflexive, it is an obligatorily dependent item and therefore grammatically handled as an object. Its antecedent is either a direct object promoted to the syntactic subject or a semantically void argument pronoun, such as "es" (it) in German.

What is the grammatical source of the semantically void subject in middles? In short (see Haider 1985a), middle formation maps the argument structure of a verb onto the argument structure format of a *middle verb*, that is a complex verb, consisting of the verb plus the reflexive.⁴⁴ The derived argument structure of the complex verb, consisting of the verb plus a semantically void argument has to match the argument structure format of verbs with a semantically void reflexive, such as inherently reflexive verbs.⁴⁵ The argument structure of an

⁴² The following rare specimen of this construction applied to the verb 'fill' by Gustave Flaubert (*L'Éducation sentimentale*, 1869, p. 2) was brought to my attention by Bernhard Pöll (p.c.):

i. *Il se versait des petits verres.*
It REFL filled_{Sg.} some small glasses. ('Small glasses were filled')
⁴³ i. Per sciare *si* va in montagna (*da tutti). Italian
for skiing REFL goes to mountains (by all)
ii. A Praga, *si* e parlato italiano (*da tutti).
in Prague, REFL is spoken Italian (by all)

⁴⁴ The syntactic form of the 'middle voice' in languages which code the middle by means of a reflexive pronoun is a complex verb consisting of the verb and a reflexive. It is structurally homomorphic with an inherently reflexive verb (which typically is a diachronic continuation of a former middle construction).

⁴⁵ In German there are minimal pairs. (i.) is the middle, (ii) is an inherently reflexive verb:

i. Diese Tür öffnet sich leichter als die andere.
that door opened REFL easier than the other

the finite verb is singular in (32b) and does not agree with the postverbal plural noun phrase.

- (32)a. Les «Huit Trésors» seront étudié. French
the eight treasures will-be_{pl.} studied
b. Il sera étudié les «Huit Trésors».⁴⁶
it will-be_{sg.} studied the eight treasures

What current analyses of the "new impersonal" do not explicitly take into consideration is the third possibility. It is neither an instance of the standard passive (= option 1) nor an instance of an active impersonal construction (= option 2). A *be*-type auxiliary combined with a participle of a transitive verb does not qualify as an active construction in Icelandic. But there remains a third option, namely an *impersonal passive* construction. This option is difficult to identify since the expletive or semantically void subject of the impersonal construction in its canonical structural subject position is standardly null in Icelandic (33).

- (33) Í morgun var sótt Guðmund seint í skólann. Icelandic
in morning was picked-up Guðmund_{Acc} late at school_{Def}.

The subject in this construction corresponds to the French "il" in (32b) and the Norwegian "det" in (11c). However, the Icelandic rendering will be a null pronoun except for the clause-initial position. An adequate analysis needs to account for the apparently contradicting properties, namely the presence of accusative instead of nominative on the object in the context of a passive mechanism, that is, a *be*-type auxiliary in combination with a participle and this option accounts for them.

In general, accusative is assigned to a direct object only if nominative has been deployed. Otherwise the direct object argument receives nominative. This is a result of the nominative-accusative dependency that is behind this switch mechanism (Haider 1985a, 1985b, 2000). The would-be accusative case of a direct object has to change into nominative if the subject argument that would receive nominative is not available for case assignment, as in (31a). In English and similar languages, nominative case assignment entails also a change in position. The object has to change its place and take the subject position. In Icelandic, just like in German, nominative is not assigned positionally but relationally, that is, via a finiteness agreement relation. So, the object may be assigned nominative case in-situ (34a). This is the standard Icelandic "*expletive passive*" (Thránsson 2007:276). The subject position is plugged by expletive material. In (34a) it is the expletive "það". The "new passive" (34b) meets the restriction for accusative assignment if "það" is (mis-)taken for a semantically void subject. As a pronominal it is a candidate for nominative.

- (34) a. Það var barinn strákur. Icelandic standard passive with expletive
there was hit_{m.sg.} boy_{Nom.sg.m.}
b. Það var barið strákin. Icelandic "new passive"
there was hit_{n.sg.} boy_{Akk.sg.m.Def.}

SVO languages with *pronominal* expletives offer a 'fake' way of arriving at an accusative being licensed by assignment of nominative to the expletive. The pronominal expletive in its function as a subject expletive has its origin in the functional subject position, that is, the

⁴⁶ La Dépêche, 29.06.2011.

Spec-TP position. The finite auxiliary in subjectless construction shows default agreement (third person singular) and, if there is participial agreement, the participle's default agreement form is neuter, too. The expletive pronoun happens to be third person singular neuter. As a consequence, the pronoun appears to agree with the verb and the participle, which is typical for nominative in the regular passive. Hence, the condition for accusative assignment is superficially met, but not by the presence of a nominative *co-argument*.

It is this 'fake' argument attribution to the expletive with its subject agreement pattern that the young generation apparently takes as justification for accusative assignment to the object in a passive construction in Icelandic. This twist is not accepted by the older generation, and their grammatical feeling is right. For the time being, the status of this Icelandic construction seems to be a case of "acceptable ungrammaticality" (cf. Haider 2011; Frazier 2015), perhaps on the way to an accepted construction in an Icelandic grammar that will be slightly different from the grammar of present day Icelandic in this respect.

In French (30b,c), the situation is closely parallel to Icelandic, modulo the impoverished case morphology and the absence of Icelandic pronoun drop for semantically void subjects. "*Il*" is a pronoun and is employed both as a subject expletive, as well as a void argument. In passive, it serves as an expletive for the functional subject position with the object in situ. Just like in Icelandic, there is 'fake' agreement between the pronoun in its nominative form and the finite verb in its default form third person singular. This justifies leaving the object in situ.

Crucially, the counterpart of the Icelandic "new passive" is *predictably* excluded in any SOV language such as German or Dutch, the reason being this: As there is no structural space for subject *expletives* in the SOV clause structure, the Icelandic & French kind of 'fake' agreement constellation cannot arise that is needed for reanalysing as an instance of passive with a semantically void subject.

6. Summary

Impersonal constructions may be truly *subjectless* (e.g. passive of intransitives in German or in any other SOV language), they may feature a *pronoun* as a *semantically void* subject argument of the verb or adjective, or they may have an *expletive* in a structurally obligatory subject position. This is a property of otherwise subjectless SVO clauses.

- If a clause based on a passivized intransitive verb has a syntactic subject, it is an expletive subject, and the clause is an SVO clause.
- SOV clauses with a passivized intransitive verb are subjectless.
- The subject of a clause with an intransitive middle construction is an argumental, but semantically void subject.
- Null subjects may be referential or semantically void arguments but not expletive. Null expletives do not exist. Subject expletives are lexical items.

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