

The subject is the subject

How to get rid of it grammatically

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Diachronic and synchronic perspectives
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These slides can be downloaded from my homepage
[Google: Hubert Haider + downloadable papers](#)

Claims

- **Expletives** in subject **positions** must not be confounded with **void subject arguments**.
- **Void subject arguments** may be **null** in null-subject languages.
- **Expletives** cannot be **null**, in no language.
- **SVO** languages necessitate, but **SOV** languages do **not** tolerate, *expletive subjects* (because there is no *structural* subject position in SOV clause structures)
- **Consequently**, in null-subject SVO languages, intransitive verbs cannot be standardly passivized.
- In null-subject constructions, transitive verbs with void subjects yield constructions with **accusatives in the *apparent* absence of a subject** (cf. Romance, Icelandic)

Grammatical **subject** management

Three options

Grammatical **subject** management

Fill it, kill it, or hide it!



Grammatical **subject** management

Fill it, kill it, or hide it!



- ☞ **Filling:** **Subjects** are *syntactically obligatory* to an extent that **objects** are not.
- ☞ **Killing:** Make the subject argument **inaccessible**
 - by *eliminating* a subject argument *syntactically*
 - by *voiding* the *thematic relation of the subject argument in the lexical entry*
- ☞ **Hiding:** Make the subject 'phonetically' **zero**

Grammatical **subject** management

Why all this fuss with subjects?

Grammatical **subject** management

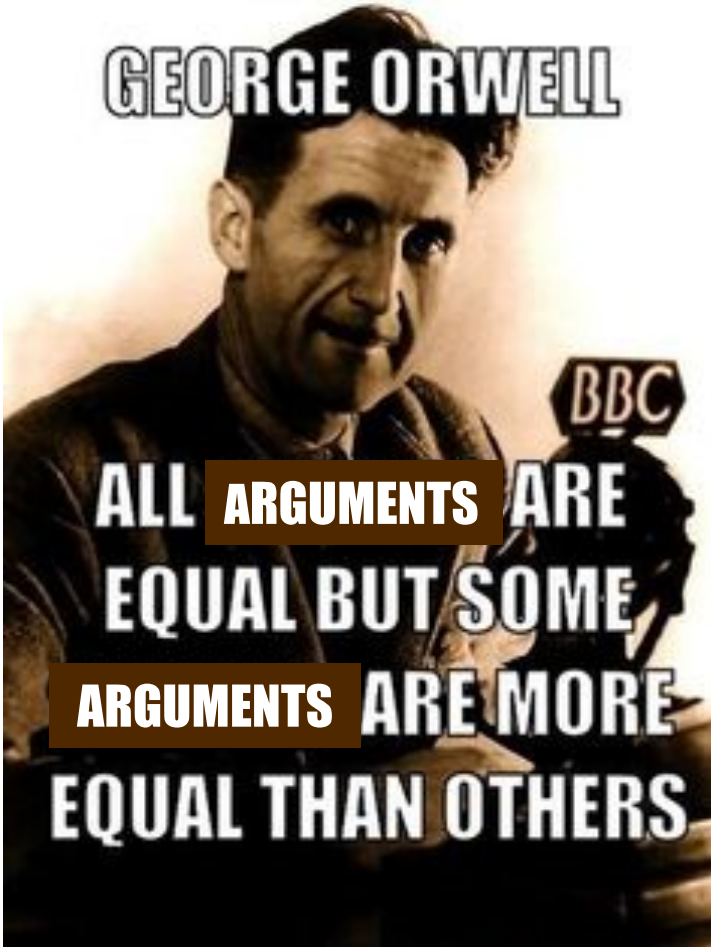
Why all this fuss with subjects?

GEORGE ORWELL

ALL ARGUMENTS ARE
EQUAL BUT SOME

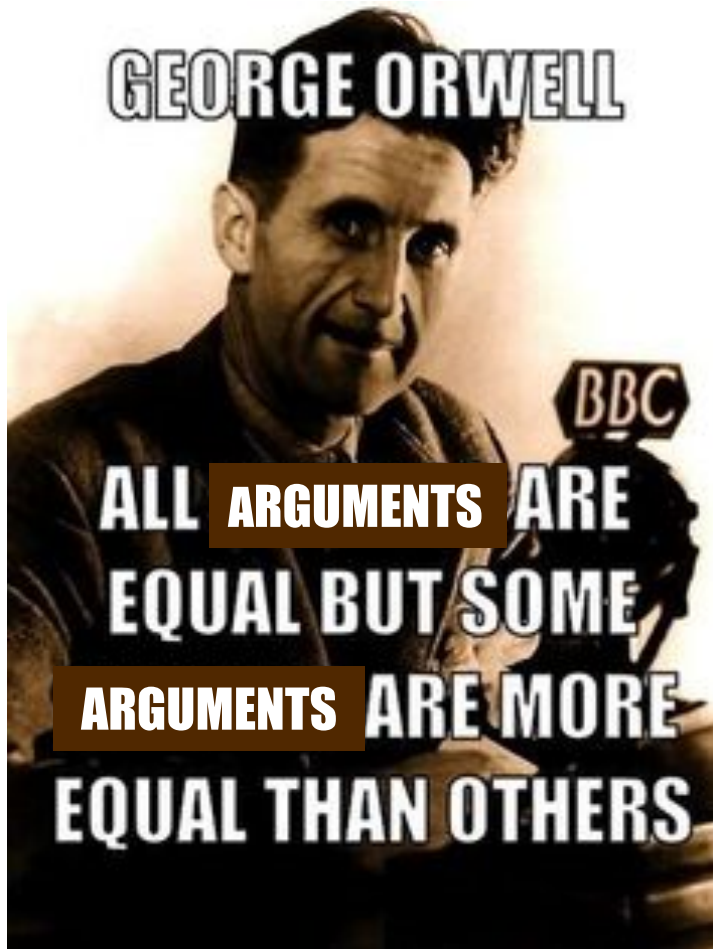
ARGUMENTS ARE MORE
EQUAL THAN OTHERS

BBC



Grammatical **subject** management

Why all this fuss with subjects?



Subjects are syntactically **privileged**

- **Case** (superordinate structural case)
- **Agreement** (cross-referencing)
- **Structural** positioning in **SVO**
- **Restoration**: Subjects are *obligatorily* **restored** if successors are available: a direct object **replaces** an *eliminated* subject.

How to get rid of a subject in style

Filling – with little referential content

- Instantiating the argument with an **indefinite** or generic pronoun
 - a. Sur le pont d'Avignon, l'**on** y danse
 - b. Auf der Brücke zu Avignon, da tanzt **man**
 - c. Auf der Brücke zu Avignon, da tanzt **wer**

👉 Filling in the absence of a subject argument

Expletive in a *structurally obligatory* position

- a. Ofte vart det telefonert Det vart ofte telefonert *Norwegian*
often was *it* telephoned
- b. Ofte telefoneres det Det telefoneres ofte
often telephones-PASS *it*

As representative of **SVO** languages (without null pronominal subjects).

»il a été discuté de« 18.800 hits

- c. **Il** a été discuté de l'adjonction des paramètres à la liste.
d. **Il** a été procédé à une comparaison des règles
e. **Il** a déjà été répondu à ces questions
f. **Il** sera parlé de vous par tout le monde
f. *Was **there** talked too much?
g. *Was **it** talked too much ?

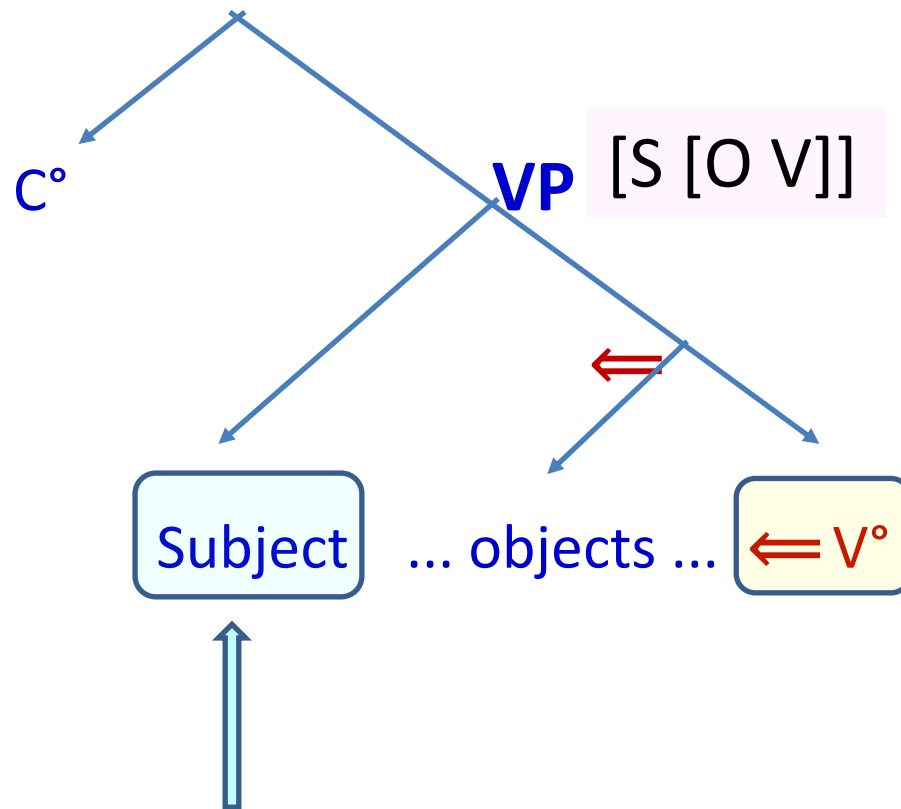
Es wurde zuviel geredet
*Wurde **es** zuviel geredet?

Explanation: see Haider, H. 2010. *The Syntax of German*. C.U.P. Chapter 2.4.

**Why expletive subjects,
and why only in SVO?**

How to get rid of a subject in style

☞ SOV: Subject in the VP-internal argument position



argument position for subject (no room for **expletive**)

See: Haider, H. 2010. The syntax of German. C.U.P. chapter 2.

How to get rid of a subject in style

 **HIDING** – The subject is still there but it is not pronounced

a. Sich nicht ans fehlende Subjekt klammern!

b. *Subject, where are you?* – Stehe im Vorfeld!

c. Non sono udibile!

Infinitival zero subject

Dropped topic pronoun

Dropped pronominal subject
= **pro-drop**

How to get rid of a subject in style

☞ **HIDING** – The subject is still there but it is not pronounced

- a. Sich nicht ans fehlende Subjekt klammern! **Infinitival zero subject**
- b. Subject, where are you? – Stehe im Vorfeld! **Dropped topic pronoun**
- c. Non sono udibile! **Dropped pronominal subject**

☞ **KILLING** – Eliminating it **syntactically**

- d. wie das Subjekt **entfernt** wird Passive
- e. wie das Subjekt **zu entfernen** ist Passive
- f. wie **es sich** gut lebt ohne Subjekt Middle
- g. wie **sich** das Subjekt entfernen **lässt** Middle of the causative (MoC)
- h. wie **es sich** ein subjektloses Leben genießen **lässt** MoC with void subject

How to get rid of a subject in style

☞ **HIDING** – The subject is still there but it is not pronounced

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| a. Sich nicht ans fehlende Subjekt klammern! | Infinitival zero subject |
| b. Subject, where are you? – Stehe im Vorfeld! | Dropped topic pronoun |
| c. Non sono udibile! | Dropped pronominal subject |

☞ **KILLING** – Eliminating it **syntactically**

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| d. wie das Subjekt entfernt wird | Passive |
| e. wie das Subjekt zu entfernen ist | Passive |
| f. wie es sich gut lebt ohne Subjekt | Middle |
| g. wie sich das Subjekt entfernen lässt | Middle of the causative (MoC) |
| h. wie es sich so etwas genießen lässt | MoC with void subject |

☞ **VOIDING** – Deprive the **argument** slot of its **thematic** content

- | | |
|--|----------------------------|
| h. wenn es plötzlich Subjekte herunterregnete | Quasi argument (primary) |
| i. wenn es dann plötzlich das Subjekt trifft | Quasi argument (secondary) |
| j. wenn man/wer das Subjekt weglässt | Non-referential indefinite |

Syntactic subject management

Why not simply **eliding it** instead of **killing**?

- **Object** arguments may *often* be **elided**, without further ado
- **Subjects**, however, must *never* be **elided**. If a subject is *eliminated*, this must be **grammatically announced**.
- **Why?** – Because **dynamic re-ranking*** (restoration) would obscure the basic **alignment** relations.

*) **Acc**-assignment is dependent on **Nom**-assignment:

See: H. Haider 2000. The License to License. In: Eric Reuland ed. *Argument & Case: Explaining Burzio's Generalization*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. p. 31-54.

Syntactic subject management

Eliminating it syntactically

- **Object** arguments may be **dropped freely**. If a **subject** is eliminated, this must be **grammatically announced**.
- Why? – Because **dynamic re-ranking** would obscure the basic alignment relations.

(1) God forgives (**everyone**) (**everything**)

God forgives

God forgives everyone

God forgives everything

God forgives everyone everything

..... **but grammar does not!**



Syntactic subject management

Announcement of elimination

➤ **Object** arguments may be dropped freely. If the **subject** is eliminated, this must be **grammatically announced**.

➤ **Why?** – Because **dynamic re-ranking** would obscure the basic the alignment relation

Assume: A subject argument were simply elided

(1)  forgives (everyone) (everything)

(2) *Everyone_{-i} **has** forgiven --_{-i} everything (by himself)

Grammatical announcement

(3) Everyone **is** forgiven everything (by himself)

Syntactic subject management

Grammatical elimination announcements

➤ **Passive** (by **affixation** / by Aux **unacc** + **participle_{II}** / by)

(1) a. Lat.: videt-**ur**; Turk.: izlemek (to watch) - izlen**m**ek (to be watched)

b. has seen – **is** seen;

ha visto - **e** visto, ...

a. hat gesehen – **wird** gesehen;

a vu - **est** vu

➤ **Middle** (viz. by reflexivization)

(2) a. Das sagt **sich** leicht

b. Das lässt **sich** nicht so leicht sagen

c. Da sitzt **es sich** bequem

Syntactic subject management

- Semantically **voided** arguments: the subject **argument** of the lexical entry is **voided of its thematic content**
- a. **Il** pleut – **Es** regnete Geldscheine - **It** rains -
- b. **Det** ropar frå skogen (Norw.: It shouts from the wood)
- c. Jetzt hat **es** gekracht - Dort hat **es** gespukt
- d. Voila, **ça** cogne dans le moteur (There! Something is knocking in the motor)
- e. There, **it** crawled with mice– Dort wimmelte **es** vor Mäusen
- f. Dann hat **es** den_{Acc} Schornstein vom Dach geweht

Syntactic subject management

Voiding the subject argument in the lexical entry

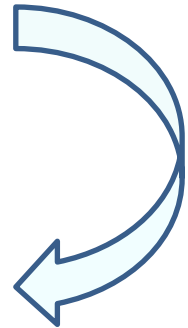
.... and **pro-dropping** it: Imagine a language which may **drop** the 'es' in (a) and (b). In this case, a direct object remains in the apparent absence of a subject:

- a. Dann hat **es** ihn aus der Bahn geworfen
- b. Den Schornstein wehte **es** vom Dach

Strompinn blés af húsinu.
the.chimney.ACC blew off the.house
'The chimney blew off the house'

(Icelandic)

H.Haider 2001. How to stay accusative in Icelandic and Faroese.
Working Papers in Scandinavian Syntax 68: 1-14.



Syntactic subject management

Voiding the subject argument slot in the **lexical** entry

As a lexical option, the voiding option is **lexically** restricted

- a. Hier brennt/ raucht/ knistert/ stinkt/ hallt/ ... / **es** sehr (state)
here burns/ smokes/ stinks/ crackles/ echoes/ ... / **it** very-much
- b. *Hier springt/ rechnet/ tankt/ reist/ **es** sehr (*activity)
- b. Da kam **es** zu ... / Ihm fehlt **es** an ... / Den gibt **es** ... / Dafür braucht **es** ... / ...
- c. Dann hat **es** ihn dahingerafft
- d. Dann hat **es** ihn kurz vor Trafalgar erwischt
- e. Dann hat **es** ihn wohl mehrmals überschlagen
- f. Dann hat **es** ihn hinter den Herd verschlagen

Syntactic subject management

There are **void objects**, too

- (1) a. Er verkroch **sich** in die letzte Reihe (*hole up + inherent reflexive*)
b. Sie begab **sich** in die erste Reihe (*adjourn + inherent reflexive*)
- (2) a. Bei so einem Vortrag döst **es sich** angenehm (*intransit. middle*)
b. Der Vortrag lässt **sich** nicht zusammenfassen (*transitive middle*)
- (3) a. In Salzburg lässt **es sich** so einen_{Acc} Workshop genießen
b. In Salzburg lässt sich so **ein**_{Nom} Workshop genießen

And there are verbs with **void** arguments **only**:

- (4) Bei *'handeln'* handelt **es sich** um ein frequentes Verb
at *'handeln'* deals **it itself** about a frequent verb
Meaning: *'Handeln is a frequent verb'*

Void subject arguments vs. expletive subjects

Void arguments

Voiding the **subject** or direct **object** slot of a verb is an operation on the argument structure of a **lexical entry**:

- ❖ The canonical **void subject argument** is 'it', 'det', 'il', 'es', ...

The canonical candidate for a **void subject argument** is the neutral pronoun (i.e. 3rd p. sg. neutre)

- ❖ The canonical **void object argument** is the **reflexive** (3rd p.sg.)

Expletives are **dummies** for obligatory structural positions:

- ❖ The canonical **expletives** for an *obligatory* subject position are locatives *der, there, ...* or neutre pronouns *det, il, það, ...*

The locative pronouns do not provide agreement values; the 3rd p. neutre pronouns do.

Void subject arguments vs. expletive subjects

Void arguments

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The Middle

❖ The '**Middle**' is a grammatical 'conspiracy' that employs a **void** object element (viz. a reflexive) for a **subject** argument slot:

i. The **subject slot** gets **blocked** with the element that is a canonical *object* (i.e. the *reflexive*; hence there is no access to an implicit subject argument for a *by*-phrase in middles)

ii. The **reflexive** is an *obligatorily dependent* element. So it needs an **antecedent** element.

iii. The antecedent of the reflexive is the direct **object** or a **void direct object** that gets standardly assigned the subject case.

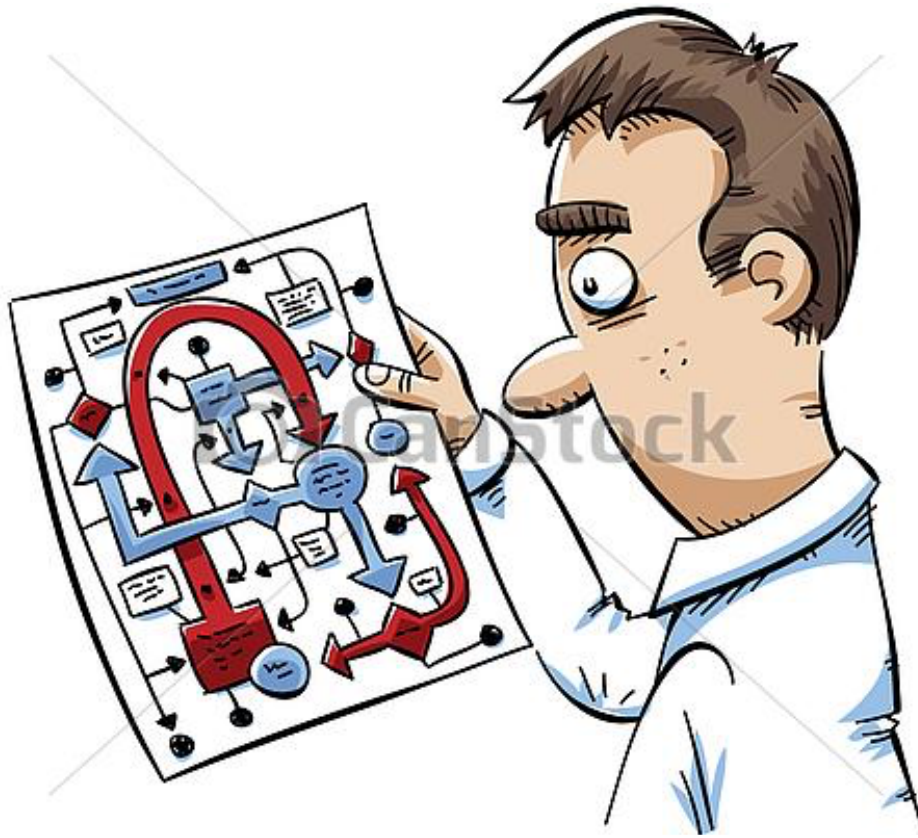
(a) **Acc-to-Nom** [plus migration from object-position to subject-position in SVO.]

(b) **Void object-to-subject** in the absence of a promoted object

- i. Acc-to-Nom (a) plus migration from object-position to subject-position in SVO
 - ii. Void object (b) otherwise, that is turned into a void subject
- a. *So einer*_{NOM} findet *sich* leicht (vgl.: *So einen*_{ACC} findet *man*_{NOM} leicht)
 - b. *Le champagne français* *se* vend bien
 - c. *French champagne* sells well in the US [middle without reflexive]
 - d. Wie lebt *es*_{NOM} *sich* hier als Linguistin?
 - e. [*pro*]_{NOM} *si* vive bene qui

In German, for the middle of causatives, the options (a) and (b) are *alternatively* available:

- f. Dort lässt *sich* *der*_{NOM} Urlaub genießen Accusative-to-Nominative
- g. Dort lässt *es* *sich* *den*_{ACC} Urlaub genießen Void argument as subject



How **SVO-biased** syntacticians get confused easily

How syntacticians get confused easily

Typically, a **void subject argument** is confounded with a **subject expletive** (triggered by the *obligatory subject requirement*, which is effective **only** in **SVO** clause structures):

➤ Here are **EXPLETIVES = DUMMY SUBJECTS IN SVO LANGUAGES**

- a. Ofte telefoneres *det* - Ofte vart *det* telefonert (Norwegian)
often telephones_{-pass} *it* - often was *it* telephoned
- b. *Der/her* arbeides med tjære
there/here work_{PASS} with tar [Norw.: 'Work with tar is being done']
- c. qu'*il* a été beaucoup écrit sur ce sujet
- d. Oft wurde (**es*) telephoniert (no expletive **subjects** in SOV clauses)
- e. **Es** wurde oft telephoniert (dummy for the obligatory **pre-V2**-position)

➤ Here are **EXPLETIVES = DUMMY SUBJECTS IN SVO LANGUAGES**

- (7.35) a. ?Þeir segja [að ___ verði dansað í brúðkaupinu].
 they say that will-be danced in wedding-the
 ‘They say that there will be dancing in the wedding.’
- b. Þeir segja [að **dansað** verði ___ í brúðkaupinu].
 they say that danced will-be in wedding-the
- c. Þeir segja [að **það** verði dansað í brúðkaupinu].
 they say that there will-be danced in wedding-the

Passive of an intransitive verb with an expletive in the structural subject position (Spec-T) in Icelandic.

Höskuldur Thráinsson. 2007. *The Syntax of Icelandic* (Cambridge Syntax Guides). C.U.P.

➤ Here are **EXPLETIVES = DUMMY SUBJECTS IN SVO LANGUAGES**

Subject inversion with *pronominal expletive* in the structural subject position

a. Beaucoup de terroristes **ont été arrêtés** en Italie

b. **Il** a été arrêté beaucoup de terroristes en Italie

(1) **The Canonical Passive**

a. **Stúlkán** var lamin í klessu.
the.girl-NOM was hit-f.sg.NOM in a.mess

The girl was badly beaten.

Nominative Passive

(2) **The Innovative Construction**

a. **Það** var lamið **stúlkuna** í klessu.
it_{EXPL} was hit-neut.sg. the.girl-f.sg.ACC in a.mess

The girl was badly beaten.

‘New Passive/Impersonal’



Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics 5: 97–142, 2002.
© 2002 Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.

The ‘new impersonal’ construction in Icelandic*

JOAN MALING¹ and SIGRÍÐUR SIGURJÓNSDÓTTIR²

Syntactic subject management

The SVO-syntacticians' confusion

➤ Here are **void subject arguments in SVO** (Norwegian examples)

- (2)
 - a. Det regnar.
'It rains.'
 - b. Det haglar.
'It hails.'
 - c. Det lynar.
'It lightens.'
 - d. Det snør.
'It snows.'
- (3)
 - a. Det buldrar (frå fossen).
'It rumbles (from the waterfall).'
 - b. Det mørknar.
'It darkens.'
 - c. Det bankar (på døra).
'It knocks (at the door).'
 - d. Det ropar (frå skogen).
'It shouts (from the wood).'

Expletive subjects vs. void subjects

- Subject **expletives** with **FRENCH** (**SVO**) postverbal subjects
- a. qu'**il** est arrivé trois femmes
 - b. qu'**il** est venu deux ou trois invités
 - c. qu'**il** a été beaucoup écrit sur ce sujet
 - d. qu'**il** a été discuté sur la question
 - e. qu'**il** en a été décidé autrement

No expletive subjects in SOV: **GERMAN** (**SOV** + V2)

- a. *dass **es** drei Frauen ankamen
- b. *dass **es** zwei oder drei Gäste gekommen sind/ist
- c. *dass **es** viel über diese Sache geschrieben wurde
- d. *dass **es** über diese Frage viel diskutiert wurde
- e. *dass **es** darüber anderweitig entscheiden wurde

An example of an outstanding syntactic confusion

‘Empty expletive subject’

- a colorless green idea that sleeps furiously -

We are therefore led to the conclusion that **German** allows an **empty expletive subject**, which not only explains a lot of “ergative effects” in **German**, but also supports the claim that phenomena like the **German** impersonal passive, which are supposed to be “subjectless”, do not contradict the Extended Projection Principle.

Günther Grewendorf & Wolfgang Sternefeld (eds.) 1990.
Scrambling and Barriers. *Small pro in German*. p. 306

The simple truth: No grammar admits **phantoms** such as **‘empty expletives’**.
A null subject is always a **null argument**.

German is OV. An OV clause structure does not provide a VP-external structural subject position, whence no room for a subject expletive. The so-called ‘EPP’ property is an **SVO** effect and absent in SOV, for principled reasons.

See Haider (2010) *The syntax of German*. C.U.P. (ch. 1)
& (2013) *Symmetry breaking in syntax*. C.U.P. (ch. 4.5)

Romance – no *expletive pro*

- (1) a. **Il** a beaucoup été fumé dans cette salle Gaatone (1998: 124)
b. **Il** a été procédé à l'interrogation de l'accusé.
c. **Il** a peu été fait pour les sauver
d. **Il** a été défilé dans les rues de la ville.
e. **Il** a été dormi dans ce lit Rivière (1981:42)
f. **[exp]* E stato dormito bene in questo letto
g. **[exp]* E stato tossito per il fumo
h. *[pro]* Si e dormito bene in questo letto
i. *[pro]* Si e tossito per il fumo

No empty expletive, no passive of intransitives (f & g.)

GAATONE D. 1998. *Le passif en français*, Paris-Bruxelles, Duculot.

RIVIÈRE, N., 1981. *La construction impersonnelle en français contemporain*. Documents de Linguistique Quantitative n.o 41, St Sulpice-de-Favière, Éditions Jean-Favard.

Avoiding confusion = Avoiding pseudo-problems

- a. **SOV**: **No subject expletives** in subjectless constructions, but lots of void subject constructions.

Why? – no VP-external structural subject position in SOV.

- b. **SVO**: **Subject expletives** and **void subjects**.

If **pro-drop**, then **no passive of intransitives** (e.g. Romance)

Why? – Obligatory subject positions must be lexicalized, but there is no lexicalizer since there is no such thing as a “**null expletive**”.

Null subjects are always **null arguments**.

- c. **Apparent violations** of the **acc-nom dependency** in languages with null void subjects.

Why? – ACC does not switch to NOM if there is a void subject. In pro-drop languages, the void subject is a null pronominal subject.

Here are some examples:

(Burzio 1986:145)

- a. **II** **se** **construit** beaucoup d'immeubles dans cette ville
b. Beaucoup d'immeubles **se** **construisent** dans cette ville

c. *Se alquila coches* - *Se vende botellas*

d. *Coches se alquilan* - *Botellas se venden*

e. Si leggerá volentieri alcuni articoli

(Burzio 1986:43)

f. Alcuni articoli si leggeranno volentieri

g. *Strompinn blés af húsinu.*
the.chimney.ACC blew off the.house
'The chimney blew off the house'


Summary

- a. *Impersonal constructions* are immediate manifestations of *subject management* requirements.
- b. Subject arguments may be voided lexically or eliminated syntactically.
- c. Only in SVO, subjectless clauses trigger a subject expletive.
- d. Null subjects are arguments. *'Null expletive' is a fiction.* However, in pro-drop languages, the null subject may be a *voided* null subject argument.

Consequence

- No passives of intransitives in SVO languages that do not provide overt expletives, such as
 - Pro-drop languages (e.g. Romance)
 - English (no suitable expletive element available)

Synopsis of the reviewed facts

	German	French	Italian	Norweg.	Iceland	English
Head direction	[--h°]	[h°--]	[h°--]	[h°--]	[h°--]	[h°--]
p-drop <i>referential</i>	no	no	yes	no	no	no
p-drop <i>void</i>	no	no	yes	no	optional	no
Expletive subj. 	no	yes	no	yes	(yes)	restr.
Passive (intr.)	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	no
Intrans. middle	yes	yes	yes	(yes)	(yes)	no
Void subj. & acc.	yes	yes	yes	?	yes	no
	overt	overt	null	overt	both	n.a.

A close-up photograph of a baby with light brown hair and blue eyes, looking slightly to the left with a grumpy or pouting expression. The baby is wearing a green and white long-sleeved shirt and is holding a small piece of sand in their right hand. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a beach or park.

**YES, IT IS FINALLY
OVER!!**

THANKS FOR YOUR FEEDBACK

Summary

- a. *Impersonal constructions* are immediate manifestations of *subject management* requirements.
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a. Si mangia bene qui

b.* Il se mange bien ici

Why this?

c. Il se construit beaucoup d'immeubles

d. Si leggerá volentieri alcuni articoli

In French (c), 'il' is an **expletive** subject. In (b), however, it must be treated as a **void** subject argument. The two functions are conflicting.

In Italian (a) and (d), however, the null subject is a void subject only.