In the absence of a subject

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1. Background

Initially, there was a simple question incited by a simple observation: what might be the grammatical reason for the ungrammaticality of subjectless clauses in English? The observation was this: “There is compelling evidence that the subject of a clause is obligatory in English and similar languages (Chomsky 1981, 40).”

In the absence of any deeper understanding, the empirical finding has been turned into an axiomatic grammatical constraint, namely the 'Extended projection principle' (EPP). It should be obvious that this is merely a technical restatement of the fact and the unanswered original question is turned into an unanswered technical question: why would a grammar have to embody such a requirement? In Lasnik's words (2001, 356) "The ‘Extended Projection Principle’ (EPP) has been […] a pervasive mystery since it was first formulated by Chomsky (1981)."

Even more mysterious is only the fact that the EPP is considered to be a universal axiom of a theory of sentence structures. In the present versions of generative theorizing, the axiom is not limited anymore to a subset of languages, namely “English and similar languages”. Without any substantive evidence beyond SVO languages, it has been elevated to the rank of a universal property of clause structure.

The universality claim is in immediate conflict with facts from languages other than English and similar languages, that is, other than SVO languages. McCloskey (1996) has shown that VSO languages such as the Celtic languages do not pattern as predicted.¹ As for SOV languages, there is no language known that provides unequivocal evidence for

¹

(i) Laghdaigh ar a neart. (Irish)
   decreased on his strength
   ‘His strength decreased’
the efficacy of an EPP requirement. In particular, no SOV language requires or admits a purely expletive\(^2\) subject in an otherwise subjectless clause, Dutch notwithstanding.

Eventually, the EPP axiom got translated into a feature device. Each clausal structure happens to be universally imbued with an EPP feature that must be eliminated (‘checked’) by a lexical item in the affected subject position. It is truly surprising that anyone could regard the postulation of an EPP feature as a satisfactory theoretical explanation of the alleged fact that clauses must have subjects in SVO languages. Hardly anyone seems to be irritated by the narrow circularity: clauses have subjects, because there is an EPP feature (= theoretical claim), and there is an EPP feature because clauses have subjects (= empirical claim). The understandable theoretical move – let’s postulate a feature for an ill-understood structural property – is deceptive for at least two reasons. Empirically it is wrong; theoretically it is immaterial as long as the postulation of such a feature is merely begging the question. Moreover, such a feature would be unique. It would be the only meta-grammatical feature. To postulate an EPP feature amounts to advising a grammar by posting signs such as “To leave this position empty is against the law. If it is left empty, the sentence will be starred.” The grammar has to decide then whether to move something to this position or to plug it with an expletive.\(^3\)

2. EPP as an SVO affair

If SVO languages are seen as what they are, namely as languages with a particular type of sentence structure, EPP falls in place. In SVO languages, there is an argument that does not stay within the projection of the verbal head it is an argument of. It ends up in a functional spec-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 head inside the VP. It is this setting that constitutes the clause structure type called [S [VO]]. In the two other clause structure types, the verbal head either precedes all its arguments or it follows all of its arguments. In any case, all the arguments stay within the same directionality domain. Only in SVO there is a mismatch. One argument is not in the directionality domain that contains all the other arguments. This is the argument in the pre-VP functional subject position.

\(^2\)As will be argued below, semantically void arguments (e.g. weather-verb subjects) must not be mistaken for expletive subjects. Void arguments are nevertheless arguments of a verb. Expletives are mere structural fillers.

\(^3\)Note that in Norwegian there is free alternation (Taraldsen 1979, 49). The obligatory structural subject position may be filled by an expletive (‘det’) or by fronting the complement of a PP (cf. English ‘pseudo-passive’), even in the presence of a direct object, which could be fronted.

(i) \(\textit{Brevet ble klistret frimerker på.}\)

\(\text{letter}_\text{DEF} \text{was pasted stamps on.}\)

(ii) \(\textit{Det ble klistret frimerker på brevet.}\)

Note that in (ii), the subject expletive has moved to the clause-initial spec-position while the object remains in its post-verbal position. Alternatively, the direct object could be fronted to the subject position in both sentences.
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The trigger of the EPP property of SVO structures is this very directionality mismatch. In SVO, the canonical directionality of heads is to the right; the directionality of merger in phrases is to the left. Hence, neither the verb nor a projection node of the verb can provide directional licensing for the VP-internal subject in (1a). Therefore, a functional head is employed to provide directional licensing (1b), which is indicated by arrows in (1). The projection of the functional head establishes the particular spec-position that is typical for SVO languages, namely the position for XP in (1b).

(1)  a. \[\text{[VP XP}_{\text{Subj}} [V^o \rightarrow [ZP]]}\]
    b. \[\text{[FP XP}_{j} [F^o \rightarrow [VP e_j [V^o \rightarrow ZP]]]}\]

In SOV (2a) and in VSO (2b), 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:

(2)  a. \[\text{[VP XP}_{\text{Subj}} \leftarrow [V^o ZP \leftarrow V^o]}\]
    b. \[\text{[VP V}_{i}^o \rightarrow [XP}_{\text{Subj}} [e_i \rightarrow ZP]]\]

The functional projection in (1b) provides a directionally licensing head for the preverbal, VP-internal subject and a trigger for moving the subject to the spec-position. This is an effect of the general licensing condition (Haider 2015, 84). The licenser and the licensee must c-command each other. In (1b), F° c-commands the VP-internal subject and the subject c-commands F° by virtue of being raised to the spec-position. The very same relation holds VP-internally and triggers the VP-shell structure\(^4\) for complex, head-initial phrases (see Haider 2015, 85).

3. Immediate evidence for a structural subject position and for its absence

The difference between (1b) and (2) accounts for a wide range of predictable syntactic differences with respect to subjects. On the one hand there are differences between the subject and the objects within the same SVO language, and on the other hand, there are differences between SVO subjects and subjects in VSO or SOV languages. Among the most perspicuous differences are the following ones (see Haider 2010, ch.1; 2015).

(3)  a. (no) island-effects for subjects
    b. (no) ban against in-situ wh-subjects
    c. (no) expletive element in an otherwise subjectless clause

In the past century, more than two decades of Generative research on conditions constraining extractions has produced clear results. In SVO, any position preceding the verbal head, that is, any position outside of the domain of the head-initial VP, is an opaque domain for extraction. In particular, the subject of a CP is an opaque domain. This is

\(^4\)\[\text{[VP V}_{i}^o \rightarrow [DP [e_i \rightarrow DP]]}\] as in: [deny, [nobody [e_i anything]]]_{\text{VP}}
clearly not true for SOV (4). In (4a), the extraction site is the subject clause of a transitive verb. (4b) illustrates the extraction out of an object clause preceding the subject. In SVO languages, none of this is grammatical.

\[(4)\]

\[a.\] Wen, würde [e, damit konfrontieren zu dürfen]
whom would [with-it confront to-be-allowed-to]
jeden Syntaktiker amüsieren?
every syntactician amuse

\[b.\] Was, hat [e, mit diesem Satz zu beweisen] jemand soeben versucht?
what has [with this clause to prove] someone just tried

The explanation for the ban against a wh-subject in situ in SVO proposed in Haider 2010, 117 is based on the very same structural difference. In VO, an in-situ wh-subject is in a functional spec position. In OV, the in-situ wh-subject is in its VP-internal argument position. A wh-pronoun in a functional spec-position gains operator status. It cannot be interpreted as a dependent wh-element anymore. This rules out patterns such as in (5a-c), originally discussed by Chomsky (1981, 236). They show that in-situ subjects are ungrammatical, independently of any Superiority violation.\(^5\) In SOV languages, no matching restrictions are found. There is no such restriction against an in-situ wh-subject in German (5d-f):

\[(5)\]

\[a.\] I know perfectly well who thinks (that) she/*who is in love with him.
\[b.\] I don’t know who would be happy that she/*who won the prize.
\[c.\] I don’t remember who believes that she/*who read the book.
\[d.\] Wir müssen herausfinden, wer sich sicher ist, dass wer gewinnen werde.
we must find out who REFL sure is that who win will
\[e.\] Man weiß nicht genau, wer hustete, als wer geredet hat.
one knows not exactly who coughed when who talked has
\[f.\] Hier steht geschrieben, wer zuständig ist, wenn sich was ereignet.
here is written who in-charge is when REFL what happens

Let us turn now to the cardinal evidence for a structurally obligatory subject position, namely expletive subjects as plugs for otherwise empty positions. This area of syntax is notoriously contaminated by the equivocation of apparently similar but entirely different items, namely true expletives on the one hand and void subject arguments on the other hand. The latter are arguments of a verb; the former are not.

\(^5\)Of course, the very same restriction that rules out an in-situ wh-subject in (5) would rule out an in-situ wh-subject in a superiority context such as in (i). Nevertheless, and in oblivion of the facts illustrated by (5), clauses with in-situ wh-subjects are standardly adduced as evidence for superiority-based accounts.

\[(i)\]

*Why would who omit such facts?
4.  *Expletive versus void subjects*

The lexical entry of a verb may provide argument slots without linking them semantically. These are syntactically realized as semantically void arguments. In German, a void argument may surface as a third person neuter pronoun (6a) or as a reflexive (6b). (6c) illustrates a verb with both a void subject and a void object.

(6)  a.  weil *es* keinen Wein gab
    since it no wine gave
    'since there was no wine'

     b.  weil *er* sich wunderte
    since he *himself* wondered
     'since he wondered'

     c.  weil *es* sich bei diesem Verb um ein seltsames Verb handelt
    since *it itself* at this verb about a strange verb deals
    'since this verb is a strange verb'

It is essential to draw a clear distinction between a structural expletive and a void argument. In German, for instance, a structural expletive is found in the clause initial position in declarative clauses. This is an obligatory functional spec-position that must be filled. It cannot be left radically\(^6\) empty. If this spec-position is not occupied by a fronted phrase, it is filled with an expletive (7a). This expletive is homophonous with the pronoun used for void arguments. However, unlike a void argument, the expletive *es* cannot appear anywhere else but in the clause-initial position. Clearly, this element would be the candidate for the role of a subject expletive. If German had a structurally obligatory subject position, (7d) would have to be grammatical.

(7)  a.  *Es* hat jemand angerufen.
    it has somebody called
    'there has called somebody'

     b.  *Es* wurde darüber diskutiert.
    it has been about-this discussed
    'there has been a discussion about this'

     c.  dass (*es*) jemand angerufen hat.
    that (*it*) somebody called has

\(^6\)‘Radically empty’ means that it is *phonetically* as well as *syntactically* empty. The position is not *radically* empty if it contains a trace (i) or an empty operator (ii):

(i)  Wh-trace: Was, hat er behauptet [*e* [stehe hier in Spec-C]]?
     what has he claimed stands here in Spec-C

(ii) Topic operator: Wo ist hier das Subjekt? [0, [Ist *e*; stumm]] und [0, [e; steht in Vorfeld]]
     where is here the subject? [ [Is silent]] and [ [ stands in-the pre-field]]
d. dass (*es) darüber diskutiert wurde
   that (it) about-this discussed was

In Dutch, the expletive for the clause-initial position in V2-declaratives is er (‘there’) while the void subject is het (‘it’). The expletives in Dutch and German declaratives are expletives for the obligatory clause-initial spec position. Hence, if Dutch or German employed subject expletives, these would be the proper candidates for this function, too. Indeed, er has been claimed to be a subject expletive in Dutch:

(8) a. dat er ge-sms’t werd
    that there text-messaged was

b. dat er iemand de oproep heeft beantwoord
    that there someone the call has answered

In (8a), there would be room for an expletive but not in (8b), because of the transitive subject that allegedly needs to be accommodated in the subject position. If, on the other hand, er is not an expletive subject in (8b), it need not be one in (8a) either. This is what Dutch syntacticians such as Hoekstra & Mulder (1990), Neeleman and Weerman (1999, 210-13) and Koeman (2000, 192) argue for.

If er is not a subject expletive, it is not obligatory in subjectless constructions, which is often the case. A Google search (April 28, 2017) for “dat wordt gewerkt” and “dat er wordt gewerkt”, restricted to news sites, produced 1880 hits for the variant with ’er’ and 469 for the variant without er.7 Evidently, er is optional in subjectless sentences in Dutch. What could be mistaken as an expletive subject in (8a) is in fact a particle that can show up also in the presence of a subject (8b). If it were a subject expletive, it would be obligatorily present, just like an expletive subject in Danish, Norwegian, or Swedish:

(9) a. at der bliver handlet nu (Danish)8
    that EXPL is acted now

b. Ofte vart det telefonert/gesticulert. (Norwegian)
   often was EXPL telephoned/gesticulated (Åfarl 1992)

c. Sedan dansades det hela natten. (Swedish)
   then dance_pass EXPL whole night_DEF (Falk 1993, 106)

Could there be an empty version of er, that is, an ’empty expletive’, or in technical diction an ‘expletive pro’? This concept is not only a contradictio in terminis; it also runs

7Here are two examples:

(i) dat wordt gewerkt aan een permanent bezette maanbasis
   (https://www.scientias.nl/chinezen-maken-ruimteplannen-bekend/)

(ii) dat wordt gewerkt aan een snelle oplossing
    (http://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20140423_01078554)

8http://www.tveast.dk/artikel/danske-patienter-det-er-godt-der-bliver-handlet
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into immediate empirical problems. Anyone who admits null expletives wrongly admits intransitive passives in pro-drop SVO languages. This will be the topic of the following section.

Let us summarize the essential difference between expletives and void arguments. Void arguments are specified in the argument structure of a verb. A void argument is an argument with a morphological form but without semantic content. An expletive is a dummy element that is not related to a verb. In languages that – unlike Dutch (10a,b) – use the same morpheme for both functions (10c-f), this may lead to equivocation.

(10) a. *Er wordt gewerkt. b. Het heeft geregendi. (Dutch)
    there is worked it has rained

c. *Es wird gearbeitet. d. Es hat geregnet. (German)
    it is worked it has rained

    was it worked has it rained

In German and in some Scandinavian languages, the form of the expletive (10c) is identical with the form of the void subject (10d). The void subject appears in clause-internal positions (10f) but in an SOV language such as German (10e), there is no clause-internal position available for an expletive.

5. No standard passive of intransitive verbs in pro-drop SVO languages

In Romance null-subject languages, the standard passivization of an intransitive verb is ungrammatical. In other words, if the very same grammatical means used for passivizing a transitive verb are applied to an intransitive verb, the outcome is deviant (11).

(11) a. *[expl] È stato dormito bene in questo letto (Italian)
    has been slept well in this bed

b. *[expl] È stato tossito per il fumo
    has been coughed because-of the smoke

It is the case only in French, a Romance language without the null-subject property, that intransitive verbs may get passivized, but an expletive subject, namely il, is obligatory.\(^9\)

\(^9\)In Vèneto, the vernacular of the Italian province Veneto, intransitives can be passivized, but only in the presence of an obligatory expletive of the there-type. Gratefully acknowledged source: Cecilia Polletto (p.c.).

(i) Z’è stà parlà de ti Regional variant: Gh’è stà parlà de ti
    there has-been spoken about you

\(^{10}\)The literature contains introspectively grounded claims that in subjunctive contexts the expletive subject may be missing. A frequently quoted example is (i). Its factual status is questionable, however.

(i) Je veux que soit procédé au réexamen. (Roberts 1993, 217)
(12) a. *Il a beaucoup été fumé dans cette sale.*  
    (Gaatone 1998, 124)  
    it has much been smoked in this room

b. *Il a été dormi dans ce lit.*  
    (Rivière (1981, 42)  
    it has been slept in this bed

c. *qu'il a été procédé à cette arrestation.*  
    that-it has been proceeded to this detention

d. *Il a été opté pour cette solution.*  
    it has been opted for this solution.

The obvious question to ask is this: why wouldn't (12a-d) have direct grammatical counterparts in Italian or in any other Romance pro-drop language with a null expletive instead of *il*, given that a null expletive would replace the lexical expletive of French? The straightforward answer is this: there is no such thing as a null expletive. So, (11a,b) and all other cases of passivized intransitive verbs are ungrammatical because a structural subject position in an SVO language must not be null, but a pronominal expletive would have to be null in a pro-drop language.

An expletive subject cannot be empty for at least two reasons, a grammatical and a theoretical one. First, an expletive is not an argument, hence the null-subject identification mechanism of pro-drop languages would not apply. It applies only to arguments of a lexical head. Consequently, an empty expletive would be irrecoverable. Second, an empty position “filled” by an empty expletive could not be distinguished from an empty position without an empty expletive.

Note that here the distinction between a subject expletive and a void subject argument becomes crucial. An expletive cannot be null but a void subject can. In pro-drop languages, verbs with void subjects such as weather verbs are typically null-subject verbs. Void subjects are typical of intransitive middle constructions (13a,b), too. Consequently, pro-drop languages will be able to employ null subjects for this construction (13c,d).

(13) a. *In diesem Bett schläft es sich gut.*  
    in this bed sleeps *it* itself well

b. *Wenn man nicht raucht, hustet es sich leichter.*  
    if one not smokes coughs *it* itself easier

c. *[pro] Sie dormito bene in questo letto.*  
    self is slept well in this bed

d. *[pro] Sie tossito per il fumo.*  
    self is coughed due to the smoke

A corpus search (web, restricted to French, on April 23, 2017) of “veut que soit procédé” produced zero hits. The version with the expletive subject *il*, however, is frequent. The complete imbalance contradicts the alleged optionality of an expletive *il* in this context.

\[1\] From a list of examples with passivized intransitive verbs: http://gabrielwyler.com/page479.html
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In Icelandic, void subjects (e.g. weather-verb subjects) are null subjects (Eythórsson & Sigurðardóttir 2016). The null-subject option is restricted to void subject arguments. Neither referential pronouns nor expletives are dropped (Maling & Zaenen 1978, 491). An expletive may be substituted by a fronted adverbial, however.

(14) Hún sagði að það hefði verið dansað í gær.
    he said that EXPL has been danced yesterday

Weather verbs are not the only void argument verbs of course. There is a large class of verbs that allow for variation between a version with a specified subject argument and a version with a void argument (15a,b). This class of verbs is virtually identical for Icelandic and German. In Norwegian, the subject of these verbs is an overt void subject (15c). The Icelandic null-subject version in (15d) would puzzle those who notice that there is an accusative object in the apparent absence of a subject. What these people would fail to appreciate is that the verb in (15d) is the version with a void subject argument that is pro-dropped in Icelandic. (15d) is the exact counterpart of the German (15e), modulo pro-drop of the void subject.

(15) a. Hier brennt/raucht/ knistert/ stinkt/ hallt/ ... / es sehr.
    here burns/smokes/crackles/stinks/echoes/ ... / it very-much

b. Dann hat es ihn umgeworfen/ vom Dach geweht/
then has it him overturned/ off-the roof blown/

     aus der Bahn geworfen/
     out of-the track thrown/…

c. Frå skogen ropar det. (Norwegian)
from wood-the shouts it

d. Strompinn<sub>Acc</sub> blés af húsínu. (Icelandic)
the chimney blew of house-the

e. Den Schornstein<sub>Acc</sub> wehte es vom Dach.
the chimney blew it off-the roof

The joint evidence from Romance pro-drop languages and Icelandic as languages that drop void arguments clearly points to the conclusion that the absence of an expletive subject in subjectless SOV clauses cannot be reconciled with the EPP by 'throwing in' a null expletive. Neither in Romance nor in OV-Germanic languages would this correctly cover the empirical situation.

6. Exceptional English

One of the many exceptional traits of English is the ungrammaticality of the passive of intransitive verbs. (16a) is deviant, with or without there. In Scandinavian languages, as for instance in Danish, an expletive would fill the structural subject position (16b).

(16) a. *that there was worked
It is a longstanding question as to what prevents *there* from functioning as an expletive in passive constructions. Vikner (1995, 209) suspects nominative-case assignment to be the crucial factor and assumes that in V2 languages, but not in English, “nominative is assigned from C° under government” while in English “nominative is assigned from I° via spec-head.” Together with the assumption that expletives have to be governed, this would rule out (16a). But there is a simpler account. English *there*-constructions (17a) as well as locative inversion constructions (17b) show agreement effects. Since *there*, unlike French *il*, does not provide an agreement value of its own, it is well-formed only if it is associated with an item from which it imports agreement features (17a). This is true also for locative inversion (17b), with a PP in the subject position.\(^\text{12}\) (16a) is deviant because *there* does not provide any agreement values.

(17) a. There has arrived a letter - There have arrived two letters
   b. On this spot has stood a great man - On this spot have stood several great men

Vikner (1995, 210) does not fully trust his account because of the ungrammaticality of ECM infinitival constructions such as (18a) for which nominative assignment (or agreement) would not come into play. However, this construction is deviant for an independent reason. Subjectless infinitival clauses (18b) are ungrammatical in SOV languages as well (Haider 2010, 304). This indicates that the source of the ungrammaticality of (18a,b) is independent of the presence or absence of a special subject position and the availability of a suitable filler.

(18) a. *I expect there to have been danced.
   b. *ohne am Sonntag gearbeitet zu werden.
      without on Sunday worked to be
   c. ohne dass am Sonntag gearbeitet wird.
      without that on Sunday worked was
   d. ohne dass gearbeitet zu werden braucht.
      without that worked to be needs

In German, clausal infinitival constructions without a (silent) subject argument are ungrammatical (18b) and contrast with subjectless finite clauses (18c). If the infinitival construction is not clausal but rather a mono-sentential verb cluster construction (18d), it

\(^{12}\)The absence of *do*-support indicates that the PP is in the subject position indeed:

(i) Out of which carriage jumped a horse?
(ii) Out of which carriage *did* there jump a horse?
may remain subjectless. In sum, an agreement-based account of the deviance of there as an expletive subject is sufficient.

7. Summary

Semantically void subject arguments must not be confused with subject expletives. Expletive subjects are non-arguments. In pro-drop languages, void subject arguments are null subjects. Null expletives are a theoretical fiction. They do not exist. Void arguments are found in virtually every language, be it a null-subject language or not.

For principled reasons, SVO languages employ subject expletives, and SOV and VSO languages don’t. In the SVO clause structure, there is a VP-external subject position that needs to be filled. If an SVO language lacks a subject expletive – either because it is a null-subject language or because it lacks a suitable candidate – it is unable to passivize intransitive verbs in the standard passive construction.

The EPP describes an SVO phenomenon, namely the defining characteristics of the SVO clause structure, with its obligatory VP-external structural subject position, which is a 'reaction' of the grammar on a 'defect' of the VP-internal position of the subject in SVO. In SOV and VSO, the base position of any argument of a verb is within the directionality domain of the head. In SVO, the VP-internal subject argument precedes, but the other arguments follow the verbal head they depend on. A functional head selecting the VP turns the VP into an extended projection in which all argument positions are in the canonical directionality domain of a head, either a lexical or a functional one. The spec of this functional head is the VP-external subject position. Expletives are indicators of this position and the requirement that it be lexically represented.

References


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