

CHAPTER 5

ON EXPLETIVES

An important aspect of the analysis of 'XP-subject' orders in the Germanic languages in chapter 4 was the assumption that in some languages subjects can remain below an adjunct XP because the highest subject position is filled by an empty expletive. This proposal raises the question what the status of expletives is within the framework proposed here. In particular, it is well known that the use of expletives can be subject to certain restrictions related for example to definiteness or to verb type (transitivity). The aim of this chapter is to explore how the properties of expletive constructions can be accounted for in terms of the theoretical proposal made in chapters 2 to 4.

1. EXPLETIVES AND NO ARGUMENTS

The simplest cases of expletive constructions are those which do not involve any arguments. This situation can typically be found in passives of intransitives (impersonal passives), i.e. in constructions in which the only argument of the predicate has been absorbed due to passivization. Examples of such constructions are shown in (1) (from Vikner 1995:209 and Platzack 1987:388, fn. 6).

- (1) a. ***(Der)** er blevet danset *Danish*
 (There) is been danced
 b. at ***(der)** er blevet danset
 that (there) is been danced
 c. Ble ***(det)** danset på skippet? *Norwegian*
 Was (it) danced on the-ship

The three sentences from Mainland Scandinavian in (1) would be ungrammatical without the presence of an expletive subject. The question that arises then is why expletives have to be present in (1) although they do not contribute anything to the meaning of the sentence and their occurrence thus cannot be motivated semantically. The answer that can be given to this question within the framework proposed here

has already been discussed in chapter 2. Every clause contains verbal elements but for these elements to have the categorial status of verbal elements they have to eliminate (check) the non-verbal (i.e. nominal) features in their feature matrices. Thus, for example V has to eliminate its uninterpretable N-feature, or finite T has to eliminate its uninterpretable D- and N-features. Hence, the presence of a nominal element is simply required for obtaining adequate feature matrices for the necessary components of a clause. If a predicate does not assign any thematic roles and, hence, if therefore no argument is inserted which could check the nominal features in the clausal domain, an expletive has to be inserted instead. This is what happens in (1). If we assume, as proposed in chapter 2, that expletives are [+D(+N), -T(-V)] elements, the role of the expletive is to check the N-features on V and the D- and N-features on T which could not be checked otherwise.¹

The pattern of occurrence of expletives is not always as regular as in Mainland Scandinavian. This is shown by the following examples from German.

- (2) a. *(Es) wurde getanzt *German*
 It was danced
 b. dass (*es) getanzt wurde
 that it danced was
 c. Gestern wurde (*es) getanzt
 Yesterday was it danced

An overtly realized expletive is only present in (2a) where the expletive is in clause-initial position but not in the other contexts shown in (2). Nevertheless, the nominal features of the verbal categories such as D and N on T seem to be checked during the derivation of (2b) and (2c) so that the categorial feature matrices in the clausal domain are correctly specified. Thus, the grammaticality of (2b) and (2c) suggests that categorial feature checking, i.e. checking of nominal features on verbal elements, has taken place but it seems to be impossible to identify the source of categorial feature checking. This problem can be dealt with by assuming that, as proposed in chapter 4.2 already, German licenses empty expletives (expletive *pro*) and that empty expletives thus check the relevant categorial features in (2b/c) which are checked by an overt expletive in Scandinavian. In addition, what we have to

¹ Given that V and T both have nominal features that must be checked, the idea would be that an expletive in the constructions in (1) is already inserted within the lowest VP and then moves up to finite TP (or possibly to CP in 1a).

As for adjuncts like the one in clause-final position in (1c), I argued in chapter 2 that they are generally not accessible for categorial feature checking because they are generated in a position which is not a potential categorial checking position (cf. chapter 2.5.1.2, condition 21). Hence, the presence of an adjunct in (1c) does not have any influence on categorial feature checking and the insertion of an expletive is obligatory. Note finally also that the participle of the passivized main verb does not help for feature checking, either. In chapter 2.5.2.9, I argued that the feature matrix of participial T contains an interpretable N-feature. But an N-feature would not be sufficient for categorial feature checking because T-heads also contain an uninterpretable D-feature for which there would be no appropriate checker.

assume for German is that the expletive checks not only categorial features but also NOM and Agr_s.

What has to be accounted for in terms of such an analysis however is why empty expletives are not licensed in languages like Danish or Norwegian (cf. example 1) or why the non-overt expletive cannot occur in clause-initial position in German (cf. 2a). With respect to the latter issue, a simple way to distinguish (2a) from (2b)/(2c) is to assume that the position occupied by the expletive is not the same one in the two cases and that therefore the occurrence of a non-overt expletive is restricted to a certain context in the clause structure. Such a distinction can indeed be made in terms of the traditional analysis of Verb Second (V2) according to which V2 clauses always involve CP (cf. Schwartz and Vikner 1996, Vikner 1995 *contra* Travis 1984, Zwart 1993a, 1997). Given such an analysis, the expletive occurs in the CP domain in (2a). In (2b) and (2c) however, the expletive is in a lower position given that C is occupied by the complementizer in (2b) and by the verb in (2c). More precisely, the expletive occupies [Spec, Agr_sP] given the proposals made for the clause structure in German in the previous chapters. We could argue then that non-overt expletives are subject to a licensing condition which they can only meet in [Spec, Agr_sP] in German but not in a [Spec, CP] position. This approach can then be extended to the Mainland Scandinavian languages. In Danish, empty expletives are not licensed because Agr_sP is not available (cf. chapter 4.3.2.3.1). With respect to Norwegian, it could be argued that although Agr_sP is available (cf. chapter 4.3.2.3.3), it is not rich enough to license an empty expletive. Thus, by analogy to licensing conditions on non-overt pronominals such as that proposed by Rizzi (1986), I propose the following licensing condition on empty expletives (cf. also e.g. Platzack 1987, Holmberg and Platzack 1995 for relating the licensing of empty expletives to agreement).²

² As pointed out in chapter 4.3.2.2.3, Afrikaans does not seem to meet the requirement in (3) as it has no inflectional morphology whatsoever but does not require the presence of expletives in sentences lacking arguments. What one may wonder is why a language like Afrikaans licenses empty expletives but for example Danish does not. The two languages share the property of not having agreement morphology and, in chapter 4, I argued that this morphological property has the consequence that no Agr_s-head is present. Yet, the two languages are not entirely identical with respect to inflectional morphology. While Danish has an inflectional morpheme which is attached to the verb and which is generally analyzed as a tense morpheme, verbs in Afrikaans do not seem to bear any inflectional morphemes whatsoever (cf. chapter 4.3.2.2.3). What could be argued then is that it is this property which accounts for the contrast between Afrikaans and Danish. More precisely, we could argue that a phonologically empty T can also have a phonologically empty [Spec, TP], and we therefore get constructions which lack overt expletives.

As for languages with Agr_sP, the idea would be that, as suggested in the text, Agr_s has to be sufficiently rich to license an empty expletive. That morphologically impoverished Agr_s requires the presence of an overt element can be argued to be related to the role of Agr_sP as the projection licensing a value for Agr_s. If the value is not or only weakly represented by agreement morphology, an overt nominal element has to be present, whereas an expletive element can be dropped if the agreement morphology is sufficiently rich to compensate for the absence of the expletive. As discussed briefly in Haeberli (2002b), certain issues arise with respect to what "sufficiently rich" means for the purposes of licensing empty expletives, but I will have to leave these aside here.

Although the above proposals are fairly speculative, they would lead to a three-way distinction for expletives which resembles Huang's (1984) classification with respect to referential pro-drop. Huang

- (3) Empty expletives must be licensed by Agr in a local configuration.
(local = Spec-head, head-head).

The idea would be that agreement and in particular rich agreement morphology is able to compensate for the absence of phonologically expressed material for example in the specifier position of a given projection since agreement reflects the nominal properties of the expletive. Thus, the presence of an empty expletive is licensed in (2b/c) because it occurs in the specifier position of Agr_S. In (1) and (2a), however, empty expletives are not licensed either because there is no rich Agr at all (cf. 1) or because the expletive is not in [Spec, Agr_SP].

2. EXPLETIVE-ASSOCIATE CONSTRUCTIONS

2.1. Expletive-Associate Constructions and Categorical Feature Checking

Having considered the status of expletives which occur independently of other nominal elements, let us now turn to expletive constructions involving a nominal argument (an *associate*). At first sight the co-occurrence of an expletive and a nominal element may be surprising. If there is a nominal argument, we might expect that it is this nominal argument which can do all the checking required for establishing the adequate feature matrices of the verbal elements in a clause. So again, the presence of an expletive looks redundant at first sight. However, I will argue that the occurrence of expletive-associate constructions again follows from the categorial feature checking system proposed here. Two cases will be distinguished. I will first consider expletive-associate constructions involving predicates which only have one argument (section 2.1.1), and then ones with transitive predicates (section 2.1.2).

2.1.1. One Expletive, One Argument

A typical case of an expletive co-occurring with an argument is shown in (4) (Vikner 1995:197).

distinguishes "hot" languages like English which have agreement morphology which is too weak to allow empty subjects, "medium" languages like Italian and Spanish which have rich agreement morphology which licenses empty subjects, and "cool" languages like Chinese or Japanese which have empty subjects but no verb-subject agreement at all. Adapting this classification to the syntax of expletives, we could say that there are "hot" languages like Danish, Swedish or West Flemish which have inflectional morphology which is too weak to license empty expletives, "medium" languages like German or Icelandic which have inflectional morphology which is rich enough to license empty expletives, and finally "cool" languages like Afrikaans which have empty expletives but no inflectional morphology whatsoever.

- ⁴ As for the indefinite determiner *et* in (5a), we would have to assume that it occurs in a position below D (i.e. on a proxy head between D and the NP, or NP-adjoined). Cf. also chapter 2, fn. 43.

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