1   **Impersonal constructions – a challenge for modern syntactic theory**

2

3   **Abstract**

4

5   Based on the Germanic languages, this article explains what is meant by 'impersonal

6   constructions' – a special type of subjectless constructions. The introduction is followed by a

7   section providing background knowledge about the development of the notion 'subject

8   position' in Generative Grammar. The main part of this article focuses on how subjectless

9   constructions and the subject requirement can be brought together. To this end, several

10   syntactic analyses of impersonal constructions and related constructions are presented and

11   some of the pros and cons of these analyses are discussed. Special emphasis is put on

12   different assumptions as to the presence of expletive elements in impersonal constructions.

13

14

15   **1. Introduction – What are impersonal constructions?**

16

17   When asked out of the blue almost everyone who has at least some knowledge about

18   grammar will say that a sentence minimally consists of a subject and a verb. But on closer

19   inspection one will notice that it isn't as easy as that.

20   Some languages can simply do without an overtly realised subject, as, for example, Italian

21   as illustrated in (1).

22

23   (1)   Canto.   Italian

24   sing-1sg[1]

25   I sing.

26

27 Other languages can feature an Experiencer argument that does not look like a normal subject

28 but behaves like one as will be shown later, as in Icelandic or Old English in (2), and yet

29 others can have such an Experiencer argument that seems to occupy the subject position but

30 nevertheless neither looks nor behaves like a subject, as e.g. German (3).

31

32 (2) a. Þeim var hjálpað.   Icelandic

33   them-Dat was helped   (Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson 1985: (11a))

34   They were helped.

35

36   b. Henni hefur alltaf þótt Ólafur leiðinlegur.   (ibid: (13))

37   her-Dat has   always thought Olaf-Nom boring-Nom

38   She has always considered Olaf boring.

39

40   c. ac Gode   ne licode na heora geleafleast…   ac asende him to fyr

41   but God-Dat not liked   not their faithlessness-Nom… but sent   them to fire

42   of heofonum   Old English (Allen 1986: (14))

43   of heaven

44   But their faithlessness did not please God, but (he) sent them fire from heaven.

45   OR: But God didn't like their faithlessness, but sent them fire from heaven.

46

47 (3) a. Ihnen   wurde geholfen.   German

48   them-Dat was   helped

49   They were helped.

50

51   b.   Mir   ist kalt.

52   me-Dat is cold

53   I feel cold.

54

55   c.   Mich   friert.

56   me-Acc freezes

57   I feel cold.

58

59   Last but not least, some languages have constructions that require the presence of an

60   expletive element – either always (as in the Mainland Scandinavian (MSc) languages,

61   illustrated by Norwegian in (4)) or only under certain conditions, as e.g. German (5).

62

63   (4)   a.   Det ble danset.   Norwegian

64   it   was danced

65   There was dancing.

66

67   b   … at   det ble   danset.

68   … that it   was danced

69   … that there was dancing.

70

71   c.   I går   ble det danset.

72   yesterday was it   danced

73   Yesterday, there was dancing.

74

75 (5) a. Es wurde getanzt.   German

76   it was danced

77   There was dancing.

78

79   b. … dass getanzt wurde.

80   … that danced was

81   … that there was dancing.

82

83   c. Gestern wurde getanzt.

84   yesterday was danced

85   Yesterday, there was dancing.

86

87 While (1) is an example of a default sentence in a null-subject language and is usually

88 analysed as featuring a non-overt pronoun *pro* in subject position and thus does not concern

89 us here, all the other above-mentioned constructions can be summarised under the term

90 'impersonal constructions' and will be the topic of this article.

91   Usually, we classify as impersonal constructions constructions that do not feature a

92 referential subject, but instead have a 'prominent' Experiencer argument or an expletive

93 element whose distribution varies depending on the language. Among the impersonal

94 constructions, we find, e.g. impersonal psych verb constructions, such as (2b,c) and (3b,c),

95 and impersonal passives, as in (4) and (5), but also weather verb constructions (6) and

96 constructions with an impersonal pronoun as in (7).

97

98   (6)   a.   Es regnet.   German

99   it rains

100   It's raining.

101

102   b.   … weil   es regnet.

103   … because it rains

104   … because it's raining.

105

106   c.   Gestern   hat es geregnet.

107   yesterday has it   rained

108   Yesterday, it rained.

109

110   (7)   a.   Hier,   on m' a   volé   mon vélo.   French

111   yesterday one me has stolen my bike   (Cabredo Hofherr 2008)

112   Yesterday someone stole my bike.

113

114   b.   Gestern   hat man mir   mein Rad gestohlen.   German

115   yesterday has one me-Dat my   bike stolen

116   Yesterday someone stole my bike.

117

118   The non-referential element of weather verb constructions has usually been analysed as a

119   quasi-argument and can differ in its distribution from the distribution of the expletive element

120   in, say, impersonal passives of the respective language – a fact that has to be accounted for.

121   Constructions with an impersonal pronoun, however, won't be discussed here because the

122   impersonal pronoun, though in itself impersonal, serves as the external argument of the

123 construction, which means that these constructions do not pose a problem for syntactic

124 theory.

125

126 Although not actually subjectless, so-called Transitive Expletive Constructions (TECs) as in

127 (8), i.e. constructions that contain both a subject and an expletive element, should be

128 discussed together with impersonal constructions because there seems to be a correlation

129 between the availability of TECs and the type of expletive element we find in impersonal

130 constructions.

131

132 (8)   Es kommt der König über die Hügel geritten.[2]   German

133   it comes the king   over the hills   ridden

134   The king comes riding over the hills.

135

136 Since the man in the street is not mistaken and Noam Chomsky (1981:131) himself

137 formulated the requirement that "clausal structures must have subjects" it remains to be seen

138 how such obviously subjectless structures like impersonal constructions can be accounted for

139 in modern syntactic theory and be accommodated in a generative syntactic framework.

140

141 In the following, I will therefore go over the basic assumptions of the framework, present

142 several tests that have been proposed for determining subjecthood and discuss various

143 analyses of impersonal constructions – with special emphasis on how they answer the

144 question of subjecthood.

145

146

147 **2. Subjects, subjecthood, clause structure, and subject positions in the generative**

148 **framework in the course of time**

149

150 As we want to see how subjectless constructions can be analysed syntactically we first of all

151 have to determine what a 'subject' actually is. Such a definition, however, is not as easy as

152 one might think because subjecthood has been associated with a number of often rather

153 disparate features. A nice overview can be found in McCloskey (1997:197-198) and reads as

154 follows:

155 (i) The subject is the characteristic bearer of certain kinds of semantics roles (prototypically AGENT and

156   perhaps also CAUSE and, more controversially EXPERIENCER [This is one of the crucial points

157   with respect to impersonal psych verb constructions, X.X.]).

158 (ii) The subject is more prominent than any other argument of the main verb. Its prominence is

159   manifested in a variety of phenomena:

160   a. the subject may bind reflexive and reciprocal pronouns appearing in other argument positions but

161   may not itself (if it is a reflexive or a reciprocal) be bound by elements in other argument

162   positions.

163   b. the subject, at least in the typical case, takes wider scope than an element in any other argument

164   position.

165   c. a subject, if it has the right semantic properties, licenses a Negative Polarity Item in some other

166   argument-position. A Negative Polarity Item in subject-position cannot, however, be licensed by

167   an appropriate element in another argument-position.

168 (iii) Subjects are typically formally marked – positionally and/or morphologically. Morphological

169   marking may be on the subject itself (in the form of a case) or on the main inflectional element of the

170   clause (in the form of agreement morphology).

171 (iv) It has sometimes been claimed hat every clause must have a subject. This is not obviously correct,

172   but it is clearly correct in some broad sense for some languages. […] [Let's see whether we can make

173   this work for impersonal constructions and if yes, how, X.X.]

174 (v) Subjects are almost always nominal. […]

175   (vi) Subjecthood is the central system of promotion and advancement of nominals (to use the terminology

176   of Relational Grammar). That is, there are many grammatical operations which create surface

177   subjects by promoting nominals from other positions or ranks (passive, subject-to-subject raising,

178   unaccusative advancement, *Tough* Movement and so on). These operations exhibit an impressive

179   constancy across languages – in the way that they function and in the constraints that they are subject

180   to.

181

182 If we now want to model clause structure most of these characteristics attributed to subjects

183 should follow from our clause structure, or more precisely, from our assumptions about

184 subject positions. Before we try and see how subjectless impersonal constructions have been

185 accounted for in Generative Grammar, let's first briefly summarise the development of the

186 notion 'subject position' in the generative framework in general. Many of the accompanying

187 assumptions, such as conditions on feature checking etc., are highly theory-dependent,

188 theory-specific and in many cases already obsolete and will therefore be reduced to an

189 absolute minimum in this overview.

190

191 In the early days of Generative Grammar, Chomsky (1981:131) states that "clausal structures

192 must have subjects" and this requirement became known as the Extended Projection Principle

193 or EPP, for short (Chomsky 1982:10). Moreover, as a legacy from Phrase Structure Grammar

194 it was clear that there is exactly one subject position and that this position always has to be

195 the sentence-initial one. If we model these requirements in a tree structure the subject always

196 has to be in SpecIP, the so-called 'canonical subject position'. Furthermore, the EPP requires

197 that SpecIP is always filled.[4] A sample tree structure is given in (9).

198

199 (9)
```
                          IP
                        /    \
                   DP_Subj    I'
                    /  \      /  \
           Syntacticians I°      VP
                                  |
                                  V'
                                /    \
                             V°       DP_Obj
                              |
                            love      languages
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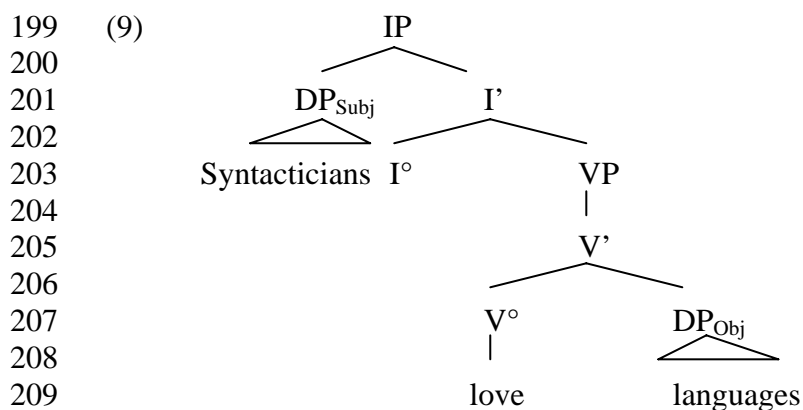
210

211   Since there was this one and only subject position all the features given in (ii) and

212   contributing to subjecthood could be explained by the fact that the subject occupied this

213   prominent position c-commanding all other positions of the clause. Furthermore, Case- and

214   agreement marking could be explained by the specifier-head relation holding between the

215   subject in SpecIP and the inflectional head I°.

216   In the course of time, however, syntactic theory became more complex and it began what

217   McCloskey (1997:203) calls 'the deconstruction' of the subject position. First of all, it has

218   been claimed that subjects are base-generated in SpecVP and only later move to SpecIP to

219   satisfy the EPP (e.g. Kuroda 1988, Koopman & Sportiche 1988, Sportiche 1988). Some

220   constructions, however, have been analysed as having 'low' subjects, i.e. subjects that stay in

221   SpecVP and do not move to SpecIP. Diesing (1992), for example attributes an existential

222   reading of the subject to the subject being in SpecVP and a generic reading to the subject

223   having moved to SpecIP. Constructions with 'low' subjects raise questions as to how the EPP

224   is satisfied in these cases.

225   Starting with Pollock (1989) and Belletti (1990), it has been argued that the IP hosting

226   tense- and agreement-features should be split into several individual phrases so that each type

227   of feature projects its own phrasal category. So the prototypical tree with a Split-IP looks as

228   follows (10).[5]

229

230 (10)

AgrSP

232 DP AgrS'

234 Syntacticians AgrS° TP

236 T'

238 T° AgrOP

240 AgrO'

242 AgrO° VP

244 V'

246 V° DP

248 love languages

249
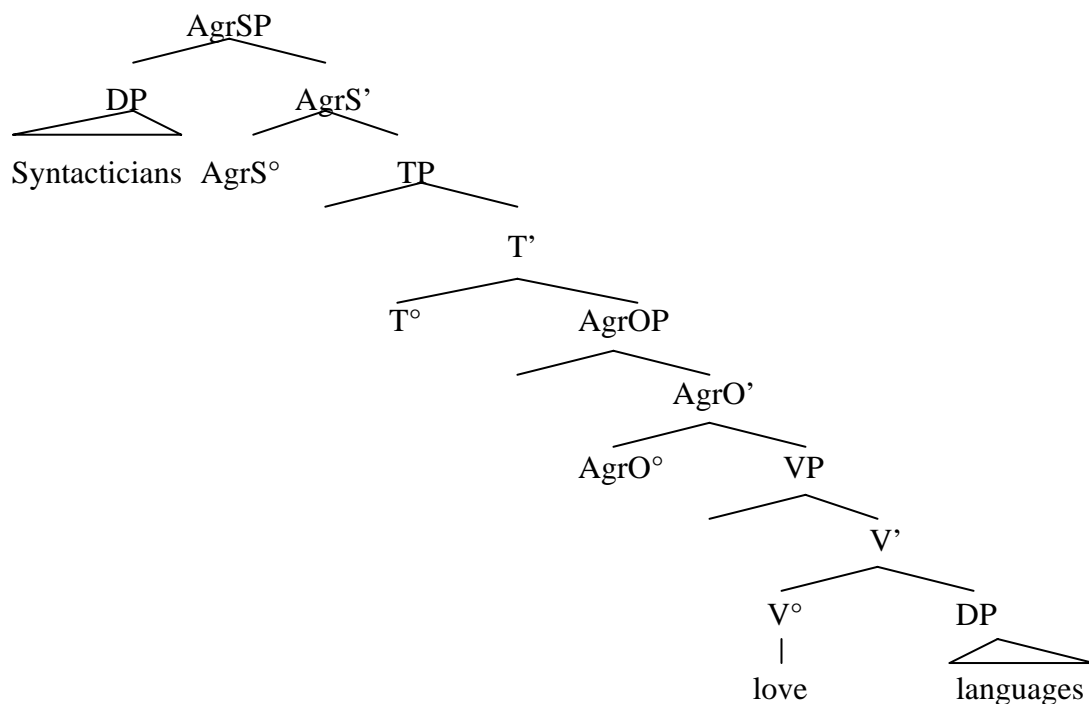
250   In view of such an extended clause structure there arise many questions relating to the

251 EPP. Is there still a 'canonical' subject position? If yes, which position is it – SpecAgrSP or

252 SpecTP? If a subject DP moves to SpecAgrSP does it have to pass through SpecTP? These

253 questions have never satisfactorily been answered. Instead, Chomsky (1995:342) claims that

254 if AgrS is associated with a strong D-feature, to which he reduces the EPP, then AgrO must

255 have one as well. By associating the EPP also with a non-subject position, namely

256 SpecAgrOP, Chomsky reduces the EPP to a generalised movement feature and dissociates it

257 from the idea that clauses must have a canonical subject position.

258   Kiss (1996) takes up Diesing's (1992) idea that there are two subject positions, one

259 hosting specific subjects and one hosting non-specific subjects. Unlike Diesing, Kiss claims

260 that both of these subject positions are VP-external and calls the higher subject position (the

261 one for subjects with a specific reading) SpecRefP, where RefP expresses referentiality, and

262 the lower one she simply associates with SpecIP. As all subjects have to leave the VP and

263 move to at least SpecIP, this position can still be called the canonical subject position and be

264 associated with the EPP, while SpecRefP is only targeted when interpretationally necessary.

265 Cardinaletti (2004), finally, adds in her cartographic approach to subject positions another

266 phrase and subject position to the Split-IP, namely SubjP whose specifier is occupied by the

267 'subject of predication'. This property allows for the position to be targeted by phrases such

268 as Dative Experiencers (DPs or PPs) – as in impersonal constructions – or locatives that are

269 not Nominative DPs but that display some characteristics typically associated with

270 subjecthood.

271 Last but not least, we have to take into consideration that most of the languages we

272 discuss here (the Scandinavian languages, Dutch and German) are so-called Verb-Second

273 (V2)-languages that have usually been analysed as involving at least one further level of

274 structure, namely CP. V2-languages are characterised by the fact that in main clauses the

275 finite verb always comes in second position, preceded by exactly one constituent, so that the

276 word order can schematically be represented as follows: $XP–V_{fin}–ZP$..... If the constituent in

277 sentence-initial position is not the subject, the subject follows the finite verb – but not

278 necessarily immediately, as illustrated in (11).

279

280 (11)   Gestern   hat das Buch noch keiner vermisst.   German

281   yesterday has the book yet   no one missed

282   Yesterday, no one had yet missed the book.

283

284 However, the default case in V2-languages, too, is that the subject shows up sentence-

285 initially.

286

287 (12)   Syntaktiker lieben Sprachen.   German

288   Syntacticians love languages.

289

290   If V2-languages activate the CP-level and the sentence-initial XP always occupies SpecCP,

291   then SpecCP also has to qualify as a subject position. And if we adopt the Split-CP in (13) as

292   proposed by Rizzi (1997), this Split-CP even offers several potential subject positions, such

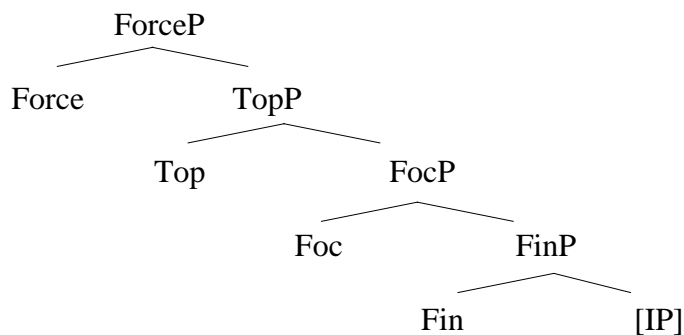293   as SpecTopP, SpecFocP and SpecFinP.

294

295   (13)

```
                    ForceP
                   /      \
            Force          TopP
                          /    \
                      Top        FocP
                                /    \
                            Foc        FinP
                                      /    \
                                  Fin        [IP]
```

304

305   To sum up, we now have a clause structure that consists of three domains, CP, IP and VP,

306   where VP is the lexical domain in which argument structure is determined, IP the inflectional

307   domain and CP the domain where traditionally clause type is determined and which is

308   activated in V2-languages. As the domains can be further split up we arrive at a fairly

309   elaborate clause structure, as can be seen in (14), and most of these phrasal categories can

310   provide a subject position (marked with a ✓ underneath).

311

312   (14)   TopP FocP FinP SubjP RefP/AgrSP[6] TP/IP vP   VP

313   ✓   ✓   ✓   ✓   ✓ / ✓   ✓/✓ ✓

314

315   It is important to note that only SpecvP and SpecTP/SpecIP seem to be obligatory subject

316   positions – SpecvP as the merging site of external arguments and SpecTP/SpecIP as the

317   canonical subject position associated with the EPP. All the other specifier position **can** serve

318   as subject positions but are only realised as such if required by the semantics of the sentence

319   (e.g. focused or generic reading of the subject).

320   Furthermore, Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1998) suggest that the way the EPP is

321   satisfied is parametrised. They claim that in some languages/language families (e.g. Greek

322   and Celtic languages) the EPP can be checked by a head, namely the verbal agreement

323   morphology which in these languages resembles clitic-like pronominal elements, so that no

324   specifier has to be created.

325

326   The central question now is which subject positions are realised in impersonal constructions

327   and how, and especially how the EPP is satisfied..

328

329

330   **3. Not everything that looks like an impersonal construction really is an impersonal**

331   **construction**

332

333   The simplest case is the case in which impersonal constructions turn out not to be impersonal

334   at all but to feature just a non-prototypical type of subject. This is the case in Icelandic and

335   probably also in Old English.

336   The passive and psych-verb constructions in (15) and (16), do not have a referential

337   agentive Nominative subject DP but a prominent, non-Nominative (often Dative) Experiencer

338   argument and, if transitive, a Nominative Theme argument. Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson

339   (1985) wonder whether such constructions as in (15a,b), really constitute impersonal

340   constructions with a fronted/topicalised Experiencer DP or whether they are personal

341   constructions after all – personal constructions with a real, though non-Nominative subject.

342

343 (15) a. Þeim   var hjálpað.   Icelandic

344   them-Dat was helped

345   They were helped.

346

347   b. Henni hefur alltaf þótt   Ólafur   leiðinlegur.

348   her-Dat has   always thought Olaf-Nom boring-Nom

349   She has always considered Olaf boring.

350

351 Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson (1985:448-455) provide seven tests to determine subjecthood,

352 among them

353   (i)   Raising – only subjects can raise.

354   (ii) Reflexivisation – only grammatical subjects can be the antecedents of reflexive

355   pronouns (cf. McCloskey (iia)).

356   (iii) Topicalisation and subject-verb inversion. If a subject cannot appear in sentence-

357   initial position because some other constituent has been topicalised, the subject has

358   to immediately follow the finite verb, i.e. no object must intervene between the

359   finite verb and the postverbal subject. [Note that this test works for V2-languages

360   only.]

361   […]

362   (v)   Indefinite Subject Postposing. TECs are possible with indefinite subjects but the

363   indefinite subject has to immediately follow the finite verb, i.e. no object must

364   intervene between the finite verb and the subject.

365   (vi) Subject Ellipsis – the subject of a coordinated clause can be deleted under identity

366   with the subject of the preceding conjunct clause.

367 They show that the Experiencer argument in the above constructions behaves exactly like a

368 'normal' Nominative subject in all the tests and thus they conclude that in Icelandic (i) these

369 Experiencer arguments are real, grammatical subjects and (ii) these constructions are no

370 impersonal constructions.

371 　　Thus, if we translate Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson's LFG-analysis of these constructions

372 into the framework outlined in section 2, we will have to say that the Experiencer DP is

373 merged in SpecvP (cf. Hrafnbjargarson 2004). One question, however, remains, namely

374 whether the Experiencer DP also passes through SpecTP – after all, SpecTP is usually

375 associated with Nominative Case assignment – on its way up to SpecFinP (Icelandic being a

376 V2-language) or whether the EPP is checked by the verbal agreement morphology in

377 Icelandic as suggested for other languages by Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1998), cf. also

378 Mohr (2005).

379

380 Concerning Old English, Allen (1986) showed that subject ellipsis in the second conjunct of

381 coordinated construction is possible even if we only have a Dative Experiencer in the first

382 conjunct, as is illustrated in (16).

383

384 (16)　　ac Gode　　　ne　licode na heora geleafleast…　　　　　　ac asende him　to fyr of

385 　　　　　but God-Dat not liked　not their　faithlessness-Nom… but sent　　them to fire of

386 　　　　　heofonum　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　Old English

387 　　　　　heaven

388 　　　　　But their faithlessness did not please God, but (he) sent them fire from heaven. OR:

389 　　　　　But God didn't like their faithlessness, but sent them fire from heaven.

390

391 As usually coordinated subjects can only be deleted under identity (see also Zaenen, Maling

392 & Thráinsson's test number (vi)), data like (16) come unexpectedly and Allen concludes that

393 in Old English, too, these Dative Experiencers were real, grammatical subjects despite their

394 Case.

395

396

397 **4. Impersonal constructions**

398

399 However, if we turn to the German constructions in (17), which superficially look exactly

400 like the Icelandic constructions discussed above, and try to apply Zaenen, Maling &

401 Thráinsson's tests for subjecthood we will notice that none of the tests works for Experiencer

402 arguments in German (leaving aside the fact that some of the test cannot be applied to

403 German at all simply because German does not allow for the testing frame in the first place).

404 Therefore, we have to conclude that in German the Experiencer argument isn't a subject and

405 that we have to do with truly impersonal constructions.

406

407 (17)　a.　　Ihnen　　wurde geholfen.　　　　　　　　　　　　　German

408 　　　　　　them-Dat was　helped

409 　　　　　　They were helped.

410

411 　　　b.　　Mir　　ist kalt.

412 　　　　　　me-Dat is　cold

413 　　　　　　I feel cold.

414

415   c.   Mich   friert.

416   me-Acc freezes

417   I feel cold.

418

419   Nevertheless, these constructions have usually not been analysed as being completely

420 subjectless – see, e.g. among many others, Cardinaletti (1990) and Vikner (1995). Instead, it

421 has been assumed that they contain a non-overt expletive *pro* which serves as a subject and

422 occupies SpecIP.

423   Interestingly, however, impersonal psych-verbs in German allow for an alternative

424 construction with a cliticised *es* 'it', as illustrated in (18).

425

426 (18) a.   Mir   ist's kalt.   German

427   me-Dat is 't cold

428   I feel cold.

429

430   b.   Mich   friert 's.

431   me-Acc freezes't

432   I feel cold.

433

434   c.   … weil   's mich   friert.

435   … because't me-Acc freezes

436   … because I feel cold.

437

438 As this *es* can also show up in non-sentence-initial position (18a,b) and in embedded clauses

439 (18c), Mohr (2005) argues that the construction with *es* represents a different

440 subcategorisation frame of the respective psych verb and that the *es* here is a quasi-argument

441 similar to the quasi-argument found with weather verbs. This means that in the absence of a

442 real subject, *es* is merged in SpecvP. Mohr (2005) further argues that in both construction

443 types it is the vP that moves to SpecTP and thus makes sure that the EPP is satisfied. Since

444 German allows for the vP to move to SpecTP and satisfy the EPP it does not matter that

445 impersonal psych verb constructions do not feature a subject and furthermore, it is not

446 necessary to postulate the presence of a non-overt expletive *pro* in cases where *es* is not

447 present.

448

449 (19)

450

451

452

453

454

455

456

457

458

459

```
                         FinP
                        /    \
                     Fin      TP
                      |      /    \
                    weil   vP      T'
                          /  \    /    \
                    (es) mich <friert>  T      <vP>
                             ↑          |
                                      friert
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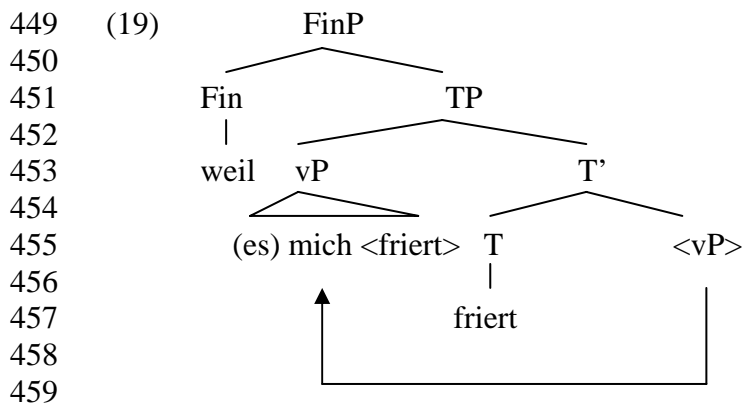
460

461 With respect to impersonal passives in German, similar derivations have been proposed. As is

462 illustrated in (20), *es* shows up only in sentence-initial position of declarative clauses and is

463 ungrammatical in all other clause-types.

464

465 (20)   a.   Es wurde getanzt.   German

466   it   was   danced

467   There was dancing.

468

469   b.   … dass (*es) getanzt wurde.

470   … that (*it) danced was

471   … that there was dancing.

472

473   c.   Gestern   wurde (*es) getanzt.

474   yesterday was   (*it) danced

475   Yesterday, there was dancing.

476

477   Since the days of Government & Binding it has been assumed that German impersonal

478 passives require the presence of an expletive pronoun to take care of the EPP and that this

479 expletive pronoun can come in two forms, overtly as expletive *es* and non-overtly as

480 expletive *pro* (see among many others, Cardinaletti 1990, Vikner 1995). Thus it has been

481 argued that clauses like (20b,c) actually feature an expletive *pro* in the position where *es* is

482 ungrammatical.

483   Such an approach, however, is highly implausible because there does exist a reading

484 where clauses like (20b) are grammatical, namely when *es* is a true referential pronoun, as in

485 (21).

486

487 (21)   … dass es gegessen wurde.   German

488   … that it eaten   was

489   … that it was eaten. [meaning e.g. that the bread was eaten.]
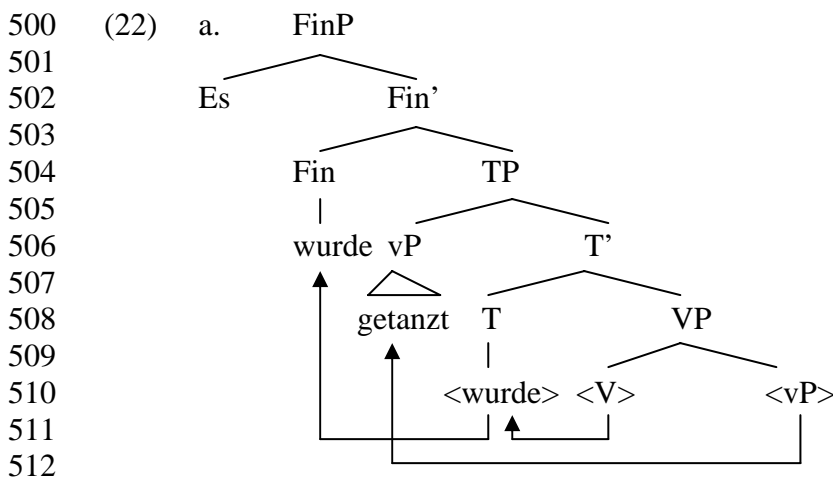
490

491   Thus, if we want to postulate the presence of a null element in SpecIP/SpecTP of

492 impersonal passives, we can only assume that there is a null cognate object (as proposed by
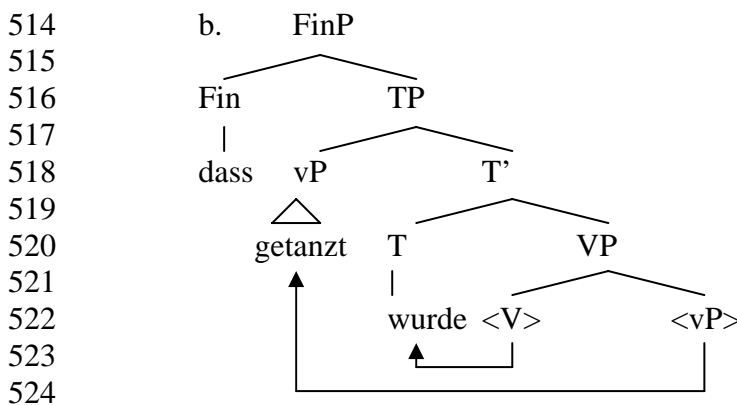
493 Cabredo Hofherr 2000[7]) which is 'promoted to subject' and consequently moves to

494 SpecIP/SpecTP and checks the EPP.

495   Mohr (2005), on the other hand, suggests that an expletive really only ever shows up

496 when it is overtly present, as in (20a). Mohr argues that the EPP is always checked by the vP

497 moving to SpecTP in impersonal passives in German and that therefore an expletive is only

498 needed if no other element can fulfil the V2-requirement in the C-domain.

499

500 (22) a.   FinP
501
502   Es   Fin'
503
504   Fin   TP
505 |
506   wurde vP   T'
507
508   getanzt T   VP
509
510   <wurde> <V>   <vP>
511
512

513

514   b.   FinP
515
516   Fin   TP
517 |
518   dass   vP   T'
519
520   getanzt T   VP
521 |
522   wurde <V>   <vP>
523
524

525

526 When we turn to impersonal passives in MSc we will see that the distribution of the expletive

527 element is completely different from that in German impersonal passives – more precisely,

528 the expletive element shows up in all clause types (23).

529

530   (23)   a.   Det ble danset.   Norwegian

531   it   was danced

532   There was dancing.

533

534   b   … at   det ble   danset.

535   … that it   was danced

536   … that there was dancing.

537

538   c.   I går   ble det danset.

539   yesterday was it   danced

540   Yesterday, there was dancing.

541

542   Whereas Roberts & Roussou (2002) and Roberts (2005), for example, try to explain the

543   differences in the distribution of the expletive elements in the various languages by means of

544   a parameter which requires different specifier positions to be phonologically realised[8], Mohr

545   (2005) puts the differences down to different types of 'expletives' involved. In other words,

546   Mohr proposes that *es* in German impersonal passives is a true expletive which is inserted as

547   a last resort device, while the 'expletive' in MSc impersonal passives is not an expletive

548   element at all – contrary to what has commonly been assumed – but a quasi-argument which

549   is base-generated in SpecvP and moves to/via SpecTP like a normal subject.

550

551   Insofar MSc impersonal passives resemble weather verb constructions in all Germanic

552   languages except Icelandic, as is illustrated in (24-26).

553

554 (24) a. Es regnet. German

555 it rains

556 It is raining.

557

558 b. … weil es regnet.

559 … because it rains

560 … because it's raining.

561

562 c. Gestern hat es geregnet.

563 yesterday has it rained

564 Yesterday, it rained.

565

566 (25) a. Det har regnet. Norwegian

567 It has rained.

568

569 b. … at det har regnet i dag

570 … that it has rained today

571

572 c. I dag har det regnet.

573 today has it rained

574 Today it has rained.

575

576 (26) a. Það rigndi (í gær). Icelandic

577 it rained (yesterday)

578

579   b.   Hann sagði, að   það hafi   rignt í gær.

580   he   said   that it   has-subjunc rained yesterday

581   He said that it rained yesterday.

582

583   c.   Í gær   rigndi (*það).

584   yesterday rained (*it)

585   Yesterday, it rained.

586

587   d.   Rigndi (*það) í gær?

588   rained (*it)   yesterday

589   Did it rain yesterday?

590

591 For weather verb constructions it has generally been assumed that they feature a quasi-

592 argument which is base-generated in SpecvP and moves to/through SpecTP.[9] This

593 explanation, however, does not cover the Icelandic data. Here, Mohr (2005) proposes that

594 Icelandic does not have a quasi-argument with weather verb constructions but a true

595 expletive.[10] The fact that the expletive also shows up in embedded clauses, as in (26b) can be

596 put down to the fact that Icelandic has generalised V2, i.e. also embedded clauses are subject

597 to the V2 requirement and the complementiser is not merged in Fin° but in Force°. In

598 addition, it has to be assumed that in Icelandic the EPP is satisfied by merging the verbal

599 agreement morphology in T° so that SpecTP does not have to created, following Alexiadou &

600 Anagnostopoulou (1998), Roberts & Roussou (2002) and Roberts (2005).

601

602

5. Types of 'expletive' elements and TECs

A number of linguists, among them Chomsky (1995), Bobaljik & Jonas (1996), Koster & Zwart (2000) and Fischer (2010) explain the (non-)availability of TECs with the number of specifier positions available in the Split-IP of the respective language. The availability of both SpecAgrSP and SpecTP depends on several, often related factors – the strength of the features associated with the respective heads, the possibility of verb movement, whether the language in question allows for object shift, etc. These approaches, however, are often highly technical and therefore tend to become quickly obsolete, as e.g. Bobaljik & Jonas's analysis which relies on the notion of equidistance.

The distinction between true expletive elements and quasi-arguments proposed by Mohr (2005), on the other hand, also helps to account for the (un-)availability of TECs in the different languages. While German has TECs, MSc does not allow for these constructions, as is illustrated in (27) and (28).

(27)   Es kommt der König über die Hügel geritten.   German

       it comes the king   over the hills   ridden

       The king comes riding over the hills.

(28)   *Det har någon   ätit   ett äpple.   Swedish

       it   has someone eaten an apple   (Bobaljik & Jonas 1996:(15d))

       Someone has eaten an apple.

As German *es* is a true expletive pronoun inserted directly in SpecFinP as a last resort operation, the rest of the clause is unaffected by this operation which means that the verb can

628   select two arguments (as required if the verb is transitive) and all of the potential subject

629   positions of the Split-IP are available as landing sites for the subject – including

630   SpecArgSP/SpecRefP, the target of definite subjects. Therefore, German does not only allow

631   for TECs but also does not display a Definiteness Effect (DE) with respect to the subject DP.

632   For the MSc languages, on the other hand, it has been suggested that *det* is a quasi-argument

633   merged in SpecvP. Thus this quasi-argument and the external argument of transitive verbs

634   compete for one and the same position, SpecvP, and this explains why we do not get TECs in

635   MSc.

636

637   With respect to Icelandic, it has been suggested that *það* is a true expletive as well and so we

638   would expect, first, that TECs are possible in Icelandic and, second, that they do not display a

639   DE either. This prediction, however, is only partly borne out because in Icelandic we do get a

640   DE.

641

642   (29)   Það hafa margir jólasveinar   borðað búðing.   Icelandic

643   it   have many X-mas trolls eaten   pudding   (Bobaljik & Jonas 1996:(16a))

644   Many Christmas trolls have eaten pudding.

645

646   The DE can probably be put down to an independent constraint of Icelandic which requires

647   definite subjects to always show up in sentence-initial position. This postulation seems

648   plausible as Icelandic also strongly disfavours, say, topicalisation of an object in the presence

649   of a definite subject.

650

651   The fact that some 'expletive' elements are of pronominal origin (e.g. German *es*, Swedish/

652   Norwegian *det*, Icelandic *það*) and some of locative origin (e.g. Danish *der*, English *there*)

653   does not seem to affect the type and the distribution of the respective element. So the

654   'expletive' elements of MSc languages pattern alike although the Danish one is of locative

655   origin and the Swedish/Norwegian ones are of pronominal origin. On the other hand, the

656   'pronominal expletives' of German/Icelandic and Swedish/Norwegian fall into two

657   completely different groups, namely true expletives and quasi-arguments, respectively.

658   There exists, however, yet another type of 'expletive' element: Location-goal arguments[11]

659   are typically historically derived from locatives, such as Dutch *er*. Mohr (2005) proposes that

660   such location-goal arguments carry a [+specific]-feature and therefore have to pass through

661   the higher subject position of the Split-IP, SpecAgrSP/SpecRefP. This analysis accounts for

662   why TECs are possible in Dutch but display a DE with respect to the subject (30) and why *er*

663   can also show up in non-sentence-initial position in impersonal passives (31).[12]

664

665   (30)   a.   *Er   heeft zo-even de kanselier het toneel   betreden.   Dutch

666   there has   just   the chancellor the platform entered

667   The chancellor has just mounted the platform.

668

669   b.   Er   heeft zo-even een Amerikaan het toneel   betreden.

670   there has   just   an American the platform entered

671   An American has just mounted the platform.

672

673   (31)   a.   Er   wordt gedanst.

674   there is   danced

675   There is dancing.

676

677   b.   … dat (er)   wordt gedanst.

678   … that (there) is   danced.

679   … that there is dancing.

680

681   c.   Op het schip wordt (er)   gedanst.

682   on the ship is   (there) danced

683   On the ship, there is dancing.

684

685 When *er* is present in impersonal passives as in (31b,c) it realises SpecAgrSP/SpecRefP, a

686 position not realised at all in German impersonal passives. In TECs *er* blocks definite

687 subjects from moving to SpecAgrSP/SpecRefP – thus leading to a DE – because *er* is merged

688 in this position before moving to SpecFinP.

689

690

691 **6. Conclusion**

692

693 To sum up, one can say that all analyses of impersonal constructions involve some kind of

694 alternative strategy of satisfying the EPP. Some approaches suggest that the lack of a real

695 subject is amended by the presence of a semantically and sometimes even phonetically empty

696 element, so that the EPP can be checked by this element in exactly the same way as a subject

697 would do. Other approaches suggest alternative ways of checking the EPP, either by merge or

698 move of a head, or by movement of other XPs, e.g. vP, to SpecTP.

699   Last but not least, it has to be pointed out that although the discussion of impersonal

700 constructions has been restricted to the Germanic languages here, other languages and

701 language families also have such constructions and that they even extend the range of devices

702 used. In the Romance languages, e.g. impersonal constructions typically involve reflexive

703 *se/si*, as is illustrated in (32).

704

705 (32) a. In Italia si mangiano gli spaghetti.   Italian

706   in Italy Refl eat-3pl   the-pl spaghetti-pl   (D'Alessandro 2007)

707   In Italy they eat spaghetti.

708

709 b. Aquí se trabajó.   Spanish

710   here Refl worked   (Cabredo Hofherr, forthcoming: (3b))

711   Here, working has been done.

712

713 A discussion of the mechanisms at work here is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

714

715

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[1] Abbreviations used in the glosses and syntactic trees:

Acc = Accusative, Dat = Dative, Fin = finiteness, Foc = focus, Nom = Nominative, Obj = object, pl = plural, sg = singular, Subj = subject, subjunc = subjunctive, Top = topic

[2] This example is taken from Cardinaletti (1990: (40b)) who classifies it as ungrammatical (according to her, the subject DP has to be indefinite) – contrary to fact.

[3] X.X. has to be replaced with the initials of the author.

[4] Therefore people postulated the presence of a non-overt subject pronoun *pro* in SpecIP in null-subject languages.

[5] Equally common is the version without the object agreement phrase AgrOP.

In addition, nowadays the VP is usually dominated by a vP, and it is actually SpecvP which serves as the base position of the subject, whereas SpecVP is the merging site of indirect objects.

[6] It is not quite clear whether RefP/AgrSP actually represent individual categories or whether it is just one category which has been labelled differently (as TP/IP) according to the properties identified by different researchers who looked at subject positions from very different angles.

[7] For reasons internal to her analysis Cabredo Hofherr, however, does not assume that the null cognate object moves to SpecIP.

[8] More precisely, Roberts & Roussou (2002) and Roberts (2005) propose that heads are parametrised with respect to a diacritic which requires phonological realisation. Phonological realisation of a head can be achieved by Merge or by Move where realisation by Move requires subsequent realisation of the corresponding specifier.

[9] Note that German *es* can be both a true expletive and a quasi-argument in this approach. The expletive and the quasi-argument just happen to be homophonous.

[10] According to Gunnar Hrafn Hrafnbjargarson (p.c.) many people consider (6c,d) with *það* grammatical. In that case *það* must be a quasi-argument, as in the other Germanic languages.

Hence Icelandic has two different grammars concerning weather verbs. The question of whether the expletive is undergoing a reanalysis as a quasi-argument requires further research.

[11] This term was coined by Cardinaletti (2004), though used slightly differently.

[12] Why *er* is optional in these positions cannot be discussed here for reasons of space.