Optional expletives

Elisabet Engdahl

elisabet.engdahl@svenska.gu.se

When one looks at the use of expletives in different languages, there is a lot of variation, both synchronic and diachronic. The modern Scandinavian languages all use subject expletives when there is no referential subject in the sentence, but differ in when the expletive is required. In Icelandic (like in German), an expletive is only realized in clause initial position (1) whereas Danish, Norwegian and Swedish require subject expletives also post-verbally (2) (see e.g. Holmberg & Platzack 1995, Thráinsson 2007).

(1)	а	*(það) rigndi í gær. it rained yesterday	b	Rigndi (*það) í gær? rained it yesterday	(Isl.)
(2)	a	*(Det) regnade i går. it rained yesterday	b	Regnade *(det) i går?. rained it yesterday	(Sw.)

Diachronically there is also a lot of variation. Expletive subjects were used sparingly in Old Swedish but have become practically obligatory in modern Swedish (Falk 1993, Håkansson 2008). Recently, however, I have noticed that the expletive subject *det* in Swedish tends to be left out in clauses beginning with a fronted referential *det* as in (3) and (4).

(3)	Det _i var (det) dumt att du sa e_i	(Engdahl 2010)
	it was (it) stupid-NEUT that you said	
	'It was stupid that you said that.'	

(4) Det_i är (det) ju så många som gör e_i it is (it) PRT so many that do 'There are so many that do it.'

In my talk I will discuss the conditions which seem to facilitate this optionality. I will argue that the construction exemplified in (3)–(4) sheds light on the position of subjects in V2 languages, in particular the use of positional expletives (cf. Müller & Ørsnes 2011).

References

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