Impersonal constructions – a challenge for modern syntactic theory

Abstract

Based on the Germanic languages, this article explains what is meant by ‘impersonal constructions’ – a special type of subjectless constructions. The introduction is followed by a section providing background knowledge about the development of the notion ‘subject position’ in Generative Grammar. The main part of this article focuses on how subjectless constructions and the subject requirement can be brought together. To this end, several syntactic analyses of impersonal constructions and related constructions are presented and some of the pros and cons of these analyses are discussed. Special emphasis is put on different assumptions as to the presence of expletive elements in impersonal constructions.

1. Introduction – What are impersonal constructions?

When asked out of the blue almost everyone who has at least some knowledge about grammar will say that a sentence minimally consists of a subject and a verb. But on closer inspection one will notice that it isn’t as easy as that.

Some languages can simply do without an overtly realised subject, as, for example, Italian as illustrated in (1).

(1) Canto. Italian
    sing-1sg¹
    I sing.
Other languages can feature an Experiencer argument that does not look like a normal subject but behaves like one as will be shown later, as in Icelandic or Old English in (2), and yet others can have such an Experiencer argument that seems to occupy the subject position but nevertheless neither looks nor behaves like a subject, as e.g. German (3).

(2) a. Þeim var hjálpað. 
Icelandic
them-Dat was helped (Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson 1985: (11a))
They were helped.

b. Henni hefur alltaf þótt Ólafur leiðinlegur. (ibid: (13))
her-Dat has always thought Olaf-Nom boring-Nom
She has always considered Olaf boring.

c. ac Gode ne licode na heora geleafleast… ac asende him to fyr
but God-Dat not liked not their faithlessness-Nom… but sent them to fire
of heofonum Old English (Allen 1986: (14))
of heaven
But their faithlessness did not please God, but (he) sent them fire from heaven.
OR: But God didn’t like their faithlessness, but sent them fire from heaven.

(3) a. Ihnen wurde geholfen.
German
them-Dat was helped
They were helped.
b. Mir ist kalt.
   me-Dat is cold
   I feel cold.

   me-Acc freezes
   I feel cold.

Last but not least, some languages have constructions that require the presence of an 
expletive element – either always (as in the Mainland Scandinavian (MSc) languages, 
illustrated by Norwegian in (4)) or only under certain conditions, as e.g. German (5).

(4) a. Det ble danset. Norwegian
   it was danced
   There was dancing.

   b … at det ble danset.
   … that it was danced
   … that there was dancing.

   c. I går ble det danset.
   yesterday was it danced
   Yesterday, there was dancing.
While (1) is an example of a default sentence in a null-subject language and is usually analysed as featuring a non-overt pronoun pro in subject position and thus does not concern us here, all the other above-mentioned constructions can be summarised under the term ‘impersonal constructions’ and will be the topic of this article.

Usually, we classify as impersonal constructions constructions that do not feature a referential subject, but instead have a ‘prominent’ Experiencer argument or an expletive element whose distribution varies depending on the language. Among the impersonal constructions, we find, e.g. impersonal psych verb constructions, such as (2b,c) and (3b,c), and impersonal passives, as in (4) and (5), but also weather verb constructions (6) and constructions with an impersonal pronoun as in (7).
The non-referential element of weather verb constructions has usually been analysed as a quasi-argument and can differ in its distribution from the distribution of the expletive element in, say, impersonal passives of the respective language – a fact that has to be accounted for. Constructions with an impersonal pronoun, however, won’t be discussed here because the impersonal pronoun, though in itself impersonal, serves as the external argument of the
construction, which means that these constructions do not pose a problem for syntactic theory.

Although not actually subjectless, so-called Transitive Expletive Constructions (TECs) as in (8), i.e. constructions that contain both a subject and an expletive element, should be discussed together with impersonal constructions because there seems to be a correlation between the availability of TECs and the type of expletive element we find in impersonal constructions.

(8) Es kommt der König über die Hügel geritten.²

The king comes riding over the hills.

Since the man in the street is not mistaken and Noam Chomsky (1981:131) himself formulated the requirement that “clausal structures must have subjects” it remains to be seen how such obviously subjectless structures like impersonal constructions can be accounted for in modern syntactic theory and be accommodated in a generative syntactic framework.

In the following, I will therefore go over the basic assumptions of the framework, present several tests that have been proposed for determining subjecehood and discuss various analyses of impersonal constructions – with special emphasis on how they answer the question of subjecthood.
2. Subjects, subjecthood, clause structure, and subject positions in the generative framework in the course of time

As we want to see how subjectless constructions can be analysed syntactically we first of all have to determine what a ‘subject’ actually is. Such a definition, however, is not as easy as one might think because subjecthood has been associated with a number of often rather disparate features. A nice overview can be found in McCloskey (1997:197-198) and reads as follows:

(i) The subject is the characteristic bearer of certain kinds of semantics roles (prototypically AGENT and perhaps also CAUSE and, more controversially EXPERIENCER [This is one of the crucial points with respect to impersonal psych verb constructions, \textit{X.X.}]).

(ii) The subject is more prominent than any other argument of the main verb. Its prominence is manifested in a variety of phenomena:

a. the subject may bind reflexive and reciprocal pronouns appearing in other argument positions but may not itself (if it is a reflexive or a reciprocal) be bound by elements in other argument positions.

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

c. a subject, if it has the right semantic properties, licenses a Negative Polarity Item in some other argument-position. A Negative Polarity Item in subject-position cannot, however, be licensed by an appropriate element in another argument-position.

(iii) Subjects are typically formally marked – positionally and/or morphologically. Morphological marking may be on the subject itself (in the form of a case) or on the main inflectional element of the clause (in the form of agreement morphology).

(iv) It has sometimes been claimed hat every clause must have a subject. This is not obviously correct, but it is clearly correct in some broad sense for some languages. […] [Let’s see whether we can make this work for impersonal constructions and if yes, how, \textit{X.X.}]

(v) Subjects are almost always nominal. […]
(vi) Subjecthood is the central system of promotion and advancement of nominals (to use the terminology of Relational Grammar). That is, there are many grammatical operations which create surface subjects by promoting nominals from other positions or ranks (passive, subject-to-subject raising, unaccusative advancement, *Tough* Movement and so on). These operations exhibit an impressive constancy across languages – in the way that they function and in the constraints that they are subject to.

If we now want to model clause structure most of these characteristics attributed to subjects should follow from our clause structure, or more precisely, from our assumptions about subject positions. Before we try and see how subjectless impersonal constructions have been accounted for in Generative Grammar, let’s first briefly summarise the development of the notion ‘subject position’ in the generative framework in general. Many of the accompanying assumptions, such as conditions on feature checking etc., are highly theory-dependent, theory-specific and in many cases already obsolete and will therefore be reduced to an absolute minimum in this overview.

In the early days of Generative Grammar, Chomsky (1981:131) states that “clausal structures must have subjects” and this requirement became known as the Extended Projection Principle or EPP, for short (Chomsky 1982:10). Moreover, as a legacy from Phrase Structure Grammar it was clear that there is exactly one subject position and that this position always has to be the sentence-initial one. If we model these requirements in a tree structure the subject always has to be in SpecIP, the so-called ‘canonical subject position’. Furthermore, the EPP requires that SpecIP is always filled. A sample tree structure is given in (9).
Since there was this one and only subject position all the features given in (ii) and contributing to subjecthood could be explained by the fact that the subject occupied this prominent position c-commanding all other positions of the clause. Furthermore, Case- and agreement marking could be explained by the specifier-head relation holding between the subject in SpecIP and the inflectional head I°.

In the course of time, however, syntactic theory became more complex and it began what McCloskey (1997:203) calls ‘the deconstruction’ of the subject position. First of all, it has been claimed that subjects are base-generated in SpecVP and only later move to SpecIP to satisfy the EPP (e.g. Kuroda 1988, Koopman & Sportiche 1988, Sportiche 1988). Some constructions, however, have been analysed as having ‘low’ subjects, i.e. subjects that stay in SpecVP and do not move to SpecIP. Diesing (1992), for example attributes an existential reading of the subject to the subject being in SpecVP and a generic reading to the subject having moved to SpecIP. Constructions with ‘low’ subjects raise questions as to how the EPP is satisfied in these cases.

Starting with Pollock (1989) and Belletti (1990), it has been argued that the IP hosting tense- and agreement-features should be split into several individual phrases so that each type of feature projects its own phrasal category. So the prototypical tree with a Split-IP looks as follows (10).\textsuperscript{5}
In view of such an extended clause structure there arise many questions relating to the EPP. Is there still a ‘canonical’ subject position? If yes, which position is it – SpecAgrSP or SpecTP? If a subject DP moves to SpecAgrSP does it have to pass through SpecTP? These questions have never satisfactorily been answered. Instead, Chomsky (1995:342) claims that if AgrS is associated with a strong D-feature, to which he reduces the EPP, then AgrO must have one as well. By associating the EPP also with a non-subject position, namely SpecAgrOP, Chomsky reduces the EPP to a generalised movement feature and dissociates it from the idea that clauses must have a canonical subject position.

Kiss (1996) takes up Diesing’s (1992) idea that there are two subject positions, one hosting specific subjects and one hosting non-specific subjects. Unlike Diesing, Kiss claims that both of these subject positions are VP-external and calls the higher subject position (the one for subjects with a specific reading) SpecRefP, where RefP expresses referentiality, and the lower one she simply associates with SpecIP. As all subjects have to leave the VP and move to at least SpecIP, this position can still be called the canonical subject position and be
associated with the EPP, while SpecRefP is only targeted when interpretationally necessary.

Cardinaletti (2004), finally, adds in her cartographic approach to subject positions another phrase and subject position to the Split-IP, namely SubjP whose specifier is occupied by the ‘subject of predication’. This property allows for the position to be targeted by phrases such as Dative Experiencers (DPs or PPs) – as in impersonal constructions – or locatives that are not Nominative DPs but that display some characteristics typically associated with subjecthood.

Last but not least, we have to take into consideration that most of the languages we discuss here (the Scandinavian languages, Dutch and German) are so-called Verb-Second (V2)-languages that have usually been analysed as involving at least one further level of structure, namely CP. V2-languages are characterised by the fact that in main clauses the finite verb always comes in second position, preceded by exactly one constituent, so that the word order can schematically be represented as follows: XP–V\textsubscript{fin}–ZP..... If the constituent in sentence-initial position is not the subject, the subject follows the finite verb – but not necessarily immediately, as illustrated in (11).

\begin{align*}
(11) & \quad \text{Gestern hat das Buch noch keiner vermisst.} \\
& \quad \text{yesterday has the book yet no one missed} \\
& \quad \text{Yesterday, no one had yet missed the book.}
\end{align*}

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

\begin{align*}
(12) & \quad \text{Syntaktiker lieben Sprachen.} \\
& \quad \text{Syntacticians love languages.}
\end{align*}
If V2-languages activate the CP-level and the sentence-initial XP always occupies SpecCP, then SpecCP also has to qualify as a subject position. And if we adopt the Split-CP in (13) as proposed by Rizzi (1997), this Split-CP even offers several potential subject positions, such as SpecTopP, SpecFocP and SpecFinP.

\[
\text{(13)} \quad \text{ForceP} \\
\quad \text{Force} \quad \text{TopP} \\
\quad \text{Top} \quad \text{FocP} \\
\quad \text{Foc} \quad \text{FinP} \\
\quad \text{Fin} \quad \text{[IP]}
\]

To sum up, we now have a clause structure that consists of three domains, CP, IP and VP, where VP is the lexical domain in which argument structure is determined, IP the inflectional domain and CP the domain where traditionally clause type is determined and which is activated in V2-languages. As the domains can be further split up we arrive at a fairly elaborate clause structure, as can be seen in (14), and most of these phrasal categories can provide a subject position (marked with a ✓ underneath).

\[
\text{(14)} \quad \text{TopP} \quad \text{FocP} \quad \text{FinP} \quad \text{SubjP} \quad \text{RefP/AgrSP}^6 \quad \text{TP/IP} \quad \text{vP} \quad \text{VP} \\
\quad ✓ \quad ✓ \quad ✓ \quad ✓ \quad ✓ / ✓ \quad ✓/✓ \quad ✓
\]

It is important to note that only SpecvP and SpecTP/SpecIP seem to be obligatory subject positions – SpecvP as the merging site of external arguments and SpecTP/SpecIP as the canonical subject position associated with the EPP. All the other specifier position can serve
as subject positions but are only realised as such if required by the semantics of the sentence (e.g. focused or generic reading of the subject).

Furthermore, Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1998) suggest that the way the EPP is satisfied is parametrised. They claim that in some languages/language families (e.g. Greek and Celtic languages) the EPP can be checked by a head, namely the verbal agreement morphology which in these languages resembles clitic-like pronominal elements, so that no specifier has to be created.

The central question now is which subject positions are realised in impersonal constructions and how, and especially how the EPP is satisfied.

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

The simplest case is the case in which impersonal constructions turn out not to be impersonal at all but to feature just a non-prototypical type of subject. This is the case in Icelandic and probably also in Old English.

The passive and psych-verb constructions in (15) and (16), do not have a referential agentive Nominative subject DP but a prominent, non-Nominative (often Dative) Experiencer argument and, if transitive, a Nominative Theme argument. Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson (1985) wonder whether such constructions as in (15a,b), really constitute impersonal constructions with a fronted/topicalised Experiencer DP or whether they are personal constructions after all – personal constructions with a real, though non-Nominative subject.
a. Þeim var hjálpað.

them-Dat was helped

They were helped.

b. Henni hefur alltaf þótt Ólafur leiðinlegur.

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

She has always considered Olaf boring.

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

(i) Raising – only subjects can raise.

(ii) Reflexivisation – only grammatical subjects can be the antecedents of reflexive pronouns (cf. McCloskey (iia)).

(iii) Topicalisation and subject-verb inversion. If a subject cannot appear in sentence-initial position because some other constituent has been topicalised, the subject has to immediately follow the finite verb, i.e. no object must intervene between the finite verb and the postverbal subject. [Note that this test works for V2-languages only.]

[v] Indefinite Subject Postposing. TECs are possible with indefinite subjects but the indefinite subject has to immediately follow the finite verb, i.e. no object must intervene between the finite verb and the subject.

[vi] Subject Ellipsis – the subject of a coordinated clause can be deleted under identity with the subject of the preceding conjunct clause.
They show that the Experiencer argument in the above constructions behaves exactly like a ‘normal’ Nominative subject in all the tests and thus they conclude that in Icelandic (i) these Experiencer arguments are real, grammatical subjects and (ii) these constructions are no impersonal constructions.

Thus, if we translate Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson’s LFG-analysis of these constructions into the framework outlined in section 2, we will have to say that the Experiencer DP is merged in SpecvP (cf. Hrafnbjargarson 2004). One question, however, remains, namely whether the Experiencer DP also passes through SpecTP – after all, SpecTP is usually associated with Nominative Case assignment – on its way up to SpecFinP (Icelandic being a V2-language) or whether the EPP is checked by the verbal agreement morphology in Icelandic as suggested for other languages by Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1998), cf. also Mohr (2005).

Concerning Old English, Allen (1986) showed that subject ellipsis in the second conjunct of coordinated construction is possible even if we only have a Dative Experiencer in the first conjunct, as is illustrated in (16).

(16) but God-Dat not liked not their faithlessness-Nom… but sent them to fire of heaven

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

But God didn’t like their faithlessness, but sent them fire from heaven.
As usually coordinated subjects can only be deleted under identity (see also Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson’s test number (vi)), data like (16) come unexpectedly and Allen concludes that in Old English, too, these Dative Experiencers were real, grammatical subjects despite their Case.

4. Impersonal constructions

However, if we turn to the German constructions in (17), which superficially look exactly like the Icelandic constructions discussed above, and try to apply Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson’s tests for subjecthood we will notice that none of the tests works for Experiencer arguments in German (leaving aside the fact that some of the test cannot be applied to German at all simply because German does not allow for the testing frame in the first place). Therefore, we have to conclude that in German the Experiencer argument isn’t a subject and that we have to do with truly impersonal constructions.

(17) a. Ihnen wurde geholfen.
   them-Dat was helped
   They were helped.

b. Mir ist kalt.
   me-Dat is cold
   I feel cold.
me-Acc freezes
I feel cold.

Nevertheless, these constructions have usually not been analysed as being completely subjectless – see, e.g. among many others, Cardinaletti (1990) and Vikner (1995). Instead, it has been assumed that they contain a non-overt expletive pro which serves as a subject and occupies SpecIP.

Interestingly, however, impersonal psych-verbs in German allow for an alternative construction with a cliticised es ‘it’, as illustrated in (18).

(18) a. Mir ist’s kalt.
me-Dat is ‘t cold
I feel cold.

b. Mich friert ’s.
me-Acc freezes’t
I feel cold.

c. … weil ’s mich friert.
… because’t me-Acc freezes
… because I feel cold.

As this es can also show up in non-sentence-initial position (18a,b) and in embedded clauses (18c), Mohr (2005) argues that the construction with es represents a different
subcategorisation frame of the respective psych verb and that the es here is a quasi-argument similar to the quasi-argument found with weather verbs. This means that in the absence of a real subject, es is merged in SpecvP. Mohr (2005) further argues that in both construction types it is the vP that moves to SpecTP and thus makes sure that the EPP is satisfied. Since German allows for the vP to move to SpecTP and satisfy the EPP it does not matter that impersonal psych verb constructions do not feature a subject and furthermore, it is not necessary to postulate the presence of a non-overt expletive pro in cases where es is not present.

With respect to impersonal passives in German, similar derivations have been proposed. As is illustrated in (20), es shows up only in sentence-initial position of declarative clauses and is ungrammatical in all other clause-types.

(20) a. Es wurde getanzt. German
    it was danced
    There was dancing.

\[
(19) \quad \text{FinP} \\
    \text{Fin} \quad \text{TP} \\
    \quad \mid \text{weil} \quad \text{vP} \\
    \quad \quad \mid \text{(es) mich <friert>} \quad \text{T} \\
    \quad \quad \quad \mid \text{friert} \quad \quad \mid \text{<vP>}
\]
b. … dass (*es) getanzt wurde.
… that (*it) danced was
… that there was dancing.

c. Gestern wurde (*es) getanzt.
Yesterday was (*it) danced
Yesterday, there was dancing.

Since the days of Government & Binding it has been assumed that German impersonal passives require the presence of an expletive pronoun to take care of the EPP and that this expletive pronoun can come in two forms, overtly as expletive es and non-overtly as expletive pro (see among many others, Cardinaletti 1990, Vikner 1995). Thus it has been argued that clauses like (20b,c) actually feature an expletive pro in the position where es is ungrammatical.

Such an approach, however, is highly implausible because there does exist a reading where clauses like (20b) are grammatical, namely when es is a true referential pronoun, as in (21).

(21) … dass es gegessen wurde.  
… that it eaten was
… that it was eaten. [meaning e.g. that the bread was eaten.]

Thus, if we want to postulate the presence of a null element in SpecIP/SpecTP of impersonal passives, we can only assume that there is a null cognate object (as proposed by
Cabredo Hofherr 2000\(^7\) which is ‘promoted to subject’ and consequently moves to SpecIP/SpecTP and checks the EPP.

Mohr (2005), on the other hand, suggests that an expletive really only ever shows up when it is overtly present, as in (20a). Mohr argues that the EPP is always checked by the vP moving to SpecTP in impersonal passives in German and that therefore an expletive is only needed if no other element can fulfil the V2-requirement in the C-domain.

(22) a. FinP

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{Es} & \text{Fin'} \\
\text{Fin} & \text{TP} \\
\text{wurde} & \text{vP} & \text{T'} \\
\text{getanzt} & \text{T} & \text{VP} \\
& <\text{wurde}> & <\text{V}> & <\text{vP}> \\
\end{array}
\]

b. FinP

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{Fin} & \text{TP} \\
\text{dass} & \text{vP} & \text{T'} \\
\text{getanzt} & \text{T} & \text{VP} \\
& \text{wurde} <\text{V}> & <\text{vP}> \\
\end{array}
\]

When we turn to impersonal passives in MSc we will see that the distribution of the expletive element is completely different from that in German impersonal passives – more precisely, the expletive element shows up in all clause types (23).
(23) a. Det ble danset.
   it was danced
   There was dancing.

b ... at det ble danset.
   ... that it was danced
   ... that there was dancing.

c. I går ble det danset.
   yesterday was it danced
   Yesterday, there was dancing.

Whereas Roberts & Roussou (2002) and Roberts (2005), for example, try to explain the
differences in the distribution of the expletive elements in the various languages by means of
a parameter which requires different specifier positions to be phonologically realised, Mohr
(2005) puts the differences down to different types of ‘expletives’ involved. In other words,
Mohr proposes that es in German impersonal passives is a true expletive which is inserted as
a last resort device, while the ‘expletive’ in MSc impersonal passives is not an expletive
element at all – contrary to what has commonly been assumed – but a quasi-argument which
is base-generated in SpecvP and moves to/via SpecTP like a normal subject.

Insofar MSc impersonal passives resemble weather verb constructions in all Germanic
languages except Icelandic, as is illustrated in (24-26).
22

(24) a. Es regnet.
    it rains
    It is raining.

   b. … weil es regnet.
    … because it rains
    … because it’s raining.

   c. Gestern hat es geregnet.
    yesterday has it rained
    Yesterday, it rained.

    It has rained.

   b. … at det har regnet i dag
    … that it has rained today

   c. I dag har det regnet.
    today has it rained
    Today it has rained.

(26) a. Það rigndi (í gær).
    it rained (yesterday)
b. Hann sagði, að það hafi rignt í gær.

he said that it has-subjunc rained yesterday

He said that it rained yesterday.

c. Í gær rigndi (*það).

yesterday rained (*it)

Yesterday, it rained.

d. Rigndi (*það) í gær?

rained (*it) yesterday

Did it rain yesterday?

For weather verb constructions it has generally been assumed that they feature a quasi-argument which is base-generated in SpecvP and moves to/through SpecTP. This explanation, however, does not cover the Icelandic data. Here, Mohr (2005) proposes that Icelandic does not have a quasi-argument with weather verb constructions but a true expletive. The fact that the expletive also shows up in embedded clauses, as in (26b) can be put down to the fact that Icelandic has generalised V2, i.e. also embedded clauses are subject to the V2 requirement and the complementiser is not merged in Fin° but in Force°. In addition, it has to be assumed that in Icelandic the EPP is satisfied by merging the verbal agreement morphology in T° so that SpecTP does not have to created, following Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1998), Roberts & Roussou (2002) and Roberts (2005).
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
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
select two arguments (as required if the verb is transitive) and all of the potential subject positions of the Split-IP are available as landing sites for the subject – including SpecArgSP/SpecRefP, the target of definite subjects. Therefore, German does not only allow for TECs but also does not display a Definiteness Effect (DE) with respect to the subject DP.

For the MSc languages, on the other hand, it has been suggested that \textit{det} is a quasi-argument merged in SpecvP. Thus this quasi-argument and the external argument of transitive verbs compete for one and the same position, SpecvP, and this explains why we do not get TECs in MSc.

With respect to Icelandic, it has been suggested that \textit{það} is a true expletive as well and so we would expect, first, that TECs are possible in Icelandic and, second, that they do not display a DE either. This prediction, however, is only partly borne out because in Icelandic we do get a DE.

\begin{quote}
(29) \textit{það hafa margir jólasveinar borðað búðing.} \\
\textit{it have many X-mas trolls eaten pudding} (Bobaljik & Jonas 1996:(16a))
\end{quote}

\textit{Many Christmas trolls have eaten pudding.}

The DE can probably be put down to an independent constraint of Icelandic which requires definite subjects to always show up in sentence-initial position. This postulation seems plausible as Icelandic also strongly disfavours, say, topicalisation of an object in the presence of a definite subject.

The fact that some ‘expletive’ elements are of pronominal origin (e.g. German \textit{es}, Swedish/Norwegian \textit{det}, Icelandic \textit{það}) and some of locative origin (e.g. Danish \textit{der}, English \textit{there})
does not seem to affect the type and the distribution of the respective element. So the ‘expletive’ elements of MSc languages pattern alike although the Danish one is of locative origin and the Swedish/Norwegian ones are of pronominal origin. On the other hand, the ‘pronominal expletives’ of German/Icelandic and Swedish/Norwegian fall into two completely different groups, namely true expletives and quasi-arguments, respectively.

There exists, however, yet another type of ‘expletive’ element: Location-goal arguments\(^{11}\) are typically historically derived from locatives, such as Dutch \textit{er}. Mohr (2005) proposes that such location-goal arguments carry a [+specific]-feature and therefore have to pass through the higher subject position of the Split-IP, SpecAgrSP/SpecRefP. This analysis accounts for why TECs are possible in Dutch but display a DE with respect to the subject (30) and why \textit{er} can also show up in non-sentence-initial position in impersonal passives (31).\(^{12}\)

(30) a. *Er heeft zo-even de kanselier het toneel betreden.\hfill\text{Dutch}

\hspace{1cm} there has just the chancellor the platform entered

\hspace{1cm} The chancellor has just mounted the platform.

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

\hspace{1cm} there has just an American the platform entered

\hspace{1cm} An American has just mounted the platform.

(31) a. Er wordt gedanst.

\hspace{1cm} there is danced

\hspace{1cm} There is dancing.
b. … dat (er) wordt gedanst.
… that (there) is danced.
… that there is dancing.

c. Op het schip wordt (er) gedanst.
on the ship is (there) danced
On the ship, there is dancing.

When *er* is present in impersonal passives as in (31b,c) it realises SpecAgrSP/SpecRefP, a position not realised at all in German impersonal passives. In TECs *er* blocks definite subjects from moving to SpecAgrSP/SpecRefP – thus leading to a DE – because *er* is merged in this position before moving to SpecFinP.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, one can say that all analyses of impersonal constructions involve some kind of alternative strategy of satisfying the EPP. Some approaches suggest that the lack of a real subject is amended by the presence of a semantically and sometimes even phonetically empty element, so that the EPP can be checked by this element in exactly the same way as a subject would do. Other approaches suggest alternative ways of checking the EPP, either by merge or move of a head, or by movement of other XPs, e.g. vP, to SpecTP.

Last but not least, it has to be pointed out that although the discussion of impersonal constructions has been restricted to the Germanic languages here, other languages and language families also have such constructions and that they even extend the range of devices
used. In the Romance languages, e.g. impersonal constructions typically involve reflexive
se/si, as is illustrated in (32).

(32)  
a. In Italia si mangiano gli spaghetti.  
      in Italy Refl eat-3pl the-pl spaghetti-pl  
      (D’Alessandro 2007)  
      In Italy they eat spaghetti.

b. Aquí se trabajó.  
   here Refl worked  
   (Cabredo Hofherr, forthcoming: (3b))  
   Here, working has been done.

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

Works Cited


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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

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.

X.X. has to be replaced with the initials of the author.

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

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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.