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Expletive Split: Existentials and Presentationals*

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1. Introduction

Perhaps no other constructions than the ‘expletive’ one has attracted so much attention in the recent generative (‘minimalist’) literature. Among the many intriguing aspects that arise in connection with expletives, Belletti 1988, Lasnik 1992, 1995, and Vikner 1995 (among others) have drawn attention to the following contrast between Italian and English.

- (1) a. There has been **a book put** on the table
b. *There has been **put a book** on the table
- (2) a. (Pro) e stato **messo un libro** sul tavolo
(Pro) is been put a book on-the table
b. *(Pro) e stato **un libro messo** sul tavolo

Lasnik’s account of the possible source of parametrization capitalizes on the distinction between weak and strong features. In particular, Lasnik claims that the Projection relevant for partitive Case-checking (AGRoP/Aux-beP) is strong in English, but weak in Italian, hence the overt displacement of *a book* (following Belletti 1988, Lasnik assumes, contra Chomsky 1995, that both the expletive and the associate have Case).

While adequate for the data generally mentioned in the literature, Lasnik’s account fails to extend to the following contrast internal to Italian.

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- (3) a. Ci sono **molte case bruciate**
 Expl. are many houses burned
 b. *Ci sono **bruciate molte case**
- (4) a. *(Pro) sono **molte case bruciate**
 Expl. are many houses burned
 b. (Pro) sono **bruciate molte case**

Here, of course, given the intralinguistic character of the contrast, we can no longer appeal to some parametric value of Case or any other variable (given that parameters are reasonably assumed to be valid across constructions for one 'language' (in the sense of I-language)).

The aim of the present paper is to account for the contrast just noted in a principled way that also captures the basic contrast in (1)-(2), where 'basic' is intended to mean 'well-known' or 'discussed in the literature.' To the best of my knowledge, the contrast in (3)-(4) has never been submitted to a systematic investigation, although I will show that it is more 'basic' (in the sense of reflecting 'deep' properties) than the contrast between (1) and (2).¹

The contrast illustrated in (3)-(4) is by no means restricted to Italian. In fact, as far as I have been able to determine, it generally holds across (at least) Germanic and Romance. Consider the following data.

(5) *French*

- a. Il est **arrivé trois hommes**
 It is arrived three men
 b. *Il est **trois hommes arrivé**
 c. Il y a **une femme couchée** sur la rue
 It there has a woman lay on the street
 d. *Il y a **couchée une femme** sur la rue

Spanish

- e. (Pro) ha sido **puesto un libro** sobre la mesa
 Expl. have been put a book on the table
 f. *(Pro) ha sido **un libro puesto** sobre la mesa
 g. (Pro) había **un libro puesto** sobre la mesa
 Expl. have.impers. a book put on the table
 h. *(Pro) había **puesto un libro puesto** sobre la mesa

Swedish

- i. Det blev **skrivet tre böcker**
 It was written-3sg three books
 j. *Det blev **tre böcker skrivet**
 k. Det ble **tre böcker skrivna**
 It was three books written-3pl
 l. *Det ble **skrivna tre böcker**

¹This observation was also made by Noam Chomsky (1997 Fall class lectures), who emphasized the need for an explanation.

*Icelandic*²

- m. Það voru skrifaðar þrjár bækur
There were written three books
- n. Það voru þrjár bækur skrifaðar

Much like in the case of *do*-support (another language peculiarity that led to much insight), English appears not to be representative, and lacks what I will argue to be a basic distinction. In the next section, I show how the accounts that first come to mind to account for (3)-(4) cannot possibly be correct.

2. Non-explanations

2.1. The morpho-phonology of the expletive

The first idea one might be tempted to pursue when faced with (3)-(4) is capitalize on the null vs. overt ('lexical') character (i.e., the morpho-phonology of) of the expletive involved: if the expletive is null, then the indefinite NP (henceforth 'associate') follows the past participle (ppt); if the expletive is overt (lexical), the associate precedes the past participle.

While this rough approximation works fine for Italian and English, it leaves French and Swedish (among others) unexplained since the expletive is always lexical in both languages, and yet, as we saw, we do get different orders. In addition, if the morpho-

²It might be objected that the 'associate' in (5n) is not in SpecVP, but much higher, in SpecTP, say, following Bobaljik and Jonas's 1996 analysis of Transitive Expletive Constructions (TECs). I believe that this is in fact the case: one just has to add an auxiliary to see that the associate surfaces after the first auxiliary, not just before the past participle:

- i. Það mundu einhverjar bækur hafa verið keyptar
there would some books have been bought

which alternates with the in-situ pattern:

- ii. Það mundu hafa verið keyptar einhverjar bækur
there would have been bought some books

Nonetheless, I integrate the example in the discussion, for failure to consider it would miss an important generalization. The associate in (5n) goes through SpecPartP; it just happens that a subsequent step is required in Icelandic, but the basic point is the same: the associate has two positions in the language: one to the left and one to the right of the past participle.

Faroese is informative in that regard, in that, as Jonas (1994:53) has shown, the language is divided into two dialects, only one of which allows Object Shift and TEC. Faroese allows the associate to occupy three positions: SpecTP, SpecPartP, and in-situ (complement of Part).

- iii. a. Tað hava verið nakrar lagkøkur bakaðar til veitsluna
It have been some cakes baked for the-party
b. Tað hava verið bakaðar nakrar lagkøkur til veitsluna
c. Tað hava nakrar lagkøkur verið bakaðar til veitsluna

phonology of the expletive were the crucial factor, we would wonder why things are the way they are, that is, why a null expletive would force the associate to precede the past participle, and not the other way round?

On the face of it, it is safe to abandon this first hypothesis and turn to another one.

2.2. The morpho-semantics of the expletive

As a second try, one might capitalize on the pronominal vs. locative nature (i.e., the morpho-semantic character) of the expletive. Thus, Italian *pro* and French *il* would be distinguished from English *there*, French *y*, and Italian *ci*. The obvious question that arises now is why the associate precedes the past participle when the expletive is 'locative,' but follows the past participle when the expletive is pronominal.

The answer to that question might come from the preference for Merge over Move (see Chomsky 1995 for discussion).³ Suppose we say that an expletive should be merged as soon as possible; basically, whenever we have to decide whether to move the associate or not—that is quite early if we assume Lasnik's claim that the associate in (1) occupies SpecAGRO/SpecPart (or any equivalent projection). It is not unreasonable, I think, to say that feature checking in the SpecAGRO/SpecPart position involves ϕ -features (cf. the past participle agreement phenomenon found in Romance, Germanic, and many other language groups, see Kayne 1989, Christensen and Taraldsen 1989, Siloni and Friedemann 1997, and Boeckx 1998, among many others, for discussion). The absence of ϕ -features in 'locative' elements would prevent them from being merged in SpecAGRO (thus forcing raising of the associate). By contrast, pronominal expletives would be potential candidates for checking, and should be favored given the preference for Merge over Move. The associate would then stay in situ, which seems to give us the basic facts in (3)-(4).

The hypothesis seems to receive support from the following Norwegian data discussed in Christensen and Taraldsen 1989. Christensen and Taraldsen note that in the Norwegian dialects⁴ allowing the associate to raise over the past participle, the latter agrees with the associate (6). When the associate stays in situ, default (3rd sg) agreement surfaces on the past participle (7).

- (6) Der ble breva skriva
 There were letters written-pl
- (7) Det ble skrivne breva
 It was written-sg letters

³The possibility of merging the expletive right at the edge of VP would be excluded in Chomsky's 1998 system, where insertion of the expletive is restricted to the TP-'phase.' I won't discuss the implication of 'phases' for the present proposal, for we will see that even if we were to allow merger of the expletive at the edge of VP, we could not explain the pattern of interest here.

⁴Other dialects disallow raising, for obscure reasons, as mentioned in Holmberg 1994.

Note that the associate precedes the past participle when the expletive *der* ('there'), not *det* ('it') is used, as expected under the hypothesis entertained.

But, the hypothesis meets with difficulty when a language like French is brought to bear on the issue. As we already saw, French allows sentences like (5c), repeated here under (8).

- (8) *Il y a une femme couchée sur la rue*
It there has a woman lay on the street

where both types of expletives surface in the same sentence.⁵

Things get even trickier for the basic analysis when we turn to Swedish and Icelandic, where the same (pronominal) expletive (*det/það*, respectively) is used and yields the two possible surface orders (associate-ppt/ppt-associate) ((5i-l)/(5m-n), repeated here under (9)).

- (9) a. Det blev skrivet tre böcker
It was written-3sg three book
b. Det ble tre böcker skrivna
c. Það voru skrifaðar þrjár bækur
There were written three books
d. Það voru þrjár bækur skrifaðar

Finally, the account capitalizing on the nature of the expletive would predict an asymmetry between German and Dutch, given that the former uses pronominal *es* while the latter uses locative *er*. However, no asymmetry is found.⁶

- | | | |
|------|------------------------------------|--------|
| (10) | <i>Es</i> wurde ein Äpfel gegessen | German |
| | It was an apple eaten | |
| (11) | <i>Er</i> werd een appel gegeten | Dutch |
| | There was an apple eaten | |

Given the difficulties it faces, it seems fair to conclude that the analysis capitalizing on the morpho-semantic nature of the expletive to account for the relative order between the associate and the past participle fares no better than the one relying on the morpho-phonological nature of the expletive. Since the two alternatives that come to mind fail, we will have to take a fresh start.

⁵The same might hold for Italian if we assume that *pro* is occupying the subject position (for EPP-reasons) when *ci* (a clitic, head-adjoined to the verb) is used. The French data are less controversial (SpecTP is uncontroversially filled), hence my focusing on them.

⁶V-movement (or absence thereof) might obscure the issue of 'associate placement' for German and Dutch. However, the point remains: there is no asymmetry between German and Dutch.

3. The proposal

The proposal I would like to make is that we should assume some ‘expletive split,’ more precisely, two kinds of constructions involving expletives, viz. an existential and a presentational type.⁷

Such a distinction has already been made in the literature (see, for instance Zwart 1992, Cardinaletti 1997), but its consequences still remain to be explored, which I will do in the remainder of the paper.

Let me start by laying down an abstract, naive semantic representation of the two types of constructions. I assume that existential constructions assert the ‘existence’ of *x*, where *x* would be a thing/object. Presentationals, on the other hand, ‘present’ *x*, with *x* an event. From this, it would follow that the nucleus of an existential construction is the main verb *be*, meaning ‘exist’ (as in *there is a solution*), whereas the nucleus of the presentational construction would be the eventive predicate (formed around the past participle), and would then involve a dummy auxiliary *be*. Put differently, our “two expletives” hypothesis would correlate with the classic “two *bes*” distinction.^{8,9}

If I am correct, then the past participle plays a different role in the two constructions. The past participle involved in existentials would take on the status of a modifier of the thing whose existence is asserted. Abstractly, we would have a clausal structure like (12) (‘core’ elements are capitalized).

(12) Expletive BE [_{NP} NP [ppt]]

By contrast, the past participle in presentationals would correspond to the core of the sentence (eventive predicate), which would yield a structure like (13).

(13) Expletive (be) [_{VP} NP [PPT]]

At LF, the past participle and the NP can be assumed, given (12), to form a unit in existentials (with the past participle incorporating into NP, in the spirit of Longobardi’s 1994 N-to-D movement). In presentationals, the past participle would replace the dummy auxiliary *be* (via participle raising of the type already suggested for Slavic by Boeckx 1998 and Bošković

⁷Terms do not really matter, of course. The very fact of distinguishing two constructions does.

⁸For detailed surveys of the literature and useful discussion, see Rouveret 1996, Moro 1997. The controversy around *be* goes back to Aristotle (for whom *be* corresponds to the equal sign) and Jespersen (who views *be* as asymmetric, expressing ‘subsumption’).

⁹As pointed out to me at the presentation of this paper, the distinction I am making resembles the thematic-categorical distinction, whose relevance to various syntactic phenomena has been highlighted by Kuroda 1972, and Raposo and Uriagereka 1996, among others.

1995, 1997, and for Hebrew by Shlonsky 1997).¹⁰ Given that, we expect to find semantically transparent existential constructions where the associate precedes the participle, and presentationals where the participle and the *be*-auxiliary form a ‘complex,’ leaving the associate behind.

If the “expletive split” view is correct in essence, we also expect to find two kinds of expletives: an existential expletive that would be “existentially” loaded, semantically speaking (forming a semantic complex with *be*, roughly meaning ‘be there,’ i.e. ‘exist’); and a dummy (pronominal) expletive for presentationals (somehow cataphorically announcing the event).

In the next section we will see whether all our expectations are met.

4. Are our expectations met?

For Italian, things work just fine. We have an existential locative clitic *ci* and a nominal complex $[_{NP} NP [ppt]]$.¹¹

(14) (Pro) *ci sono* $[_{NP}$ molte case $[bruciate]]$ ¹²

For presentationals, Italian offers us a nice example of overt past participle movement to the auxiliary.^{13,14} (note also the dummy pronominal expletive)

(15) (Pro) [*sono bruciate*_i] molte case t_i
| _____ |

French too meets our expectations, with the existential locative clitic *y* (*il* is a subject-filler, much like Italian *pro*, required for EPP reasons) in existentials.

(16) *Il y a deux femmes couchées sur la rue*

¹⁰The driving force of this movement is still to be determined. Checking of the Tense theta-role (Higginbotham’s 1983 *e*-role) is, in my view, an interesting candidate. (For theta-roles as features, see Boeckx, to appear, Bošković and Takahashi 1998, Hornstein, to appear, Manzini and Roussou 1997, and references therein.)

¹¹The $[_{NP} NP [ppt]]$ structure for *ci*-constructions was already suggested by Moro (1997:106), on independent grounds.

¹²I leave open whether *pro*-drop languages have a null element in subject position. See Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 1998 for discussion.

¹³Which I assimilate to restructuring, on the basis of Cinque’s recent view on restructuring (Cinque 1997, 1998a).

¹⁴The idea that Italian (and Spanish) exhibits overt past participle movement to the auxiliary was already put forward in Boeckx 1998 (originally written 1996).

one order, viz. the one where the associate precedes the past participle?¹⁹ The answer to that question will be provided in the next section.

5. Remaining issue

I believe that English exhibits but one order due to the fact that English past participles are very much immobile, they do not move overtly and adjoin to the auxiliary in presentational constructions, thus yielding a surface word order which is identical to the one in existentials. In other words, I believe English to have both ‘orders’ (presentational and existential) prior to Spell-Out.²⁰ Absence of verb movement obscures this fact.

The overt-covert restructuring distinction seems to me to be a likely source of parametric variation.²¹ Independent evidence for it comes from an apparently unrelated area (as one might expect under the Principles-and-Parameters approach, which favors “octopus-” parameters, with a wide range of consequences in various ‘submodules’): causatives.²²

Compare the following:

- (21) a. Maria makes **Giovanni intervene**
 b. *Maria makes **intervene Giovanni**
 c. *Maria fa **Giovanni intervene**
 d. Maria fa **intervene Giovanni**

(Burzio 1986, Travis 1996)

which I would like to analyze as parallel to (1)-(2), repeated here under (22).

- (22) a. There has been a **book put** on the table
 b. *There has been **put a book** on the table
 c. (Pro) e stato **messo un libro** sul tavolo

¹⁹Disregarding irrelevant Heavy-NP-shift data like (i) (the associate following the past participle in the other languages need not be heavy, as is obvious from the examples).

(i) There has _t arrived [a man who came all the way from Massachusetts].

²⁰Evidence of the present claim that English has two expletives might come from the following (Chomsky 1998:46 fn.94; attributed to Erich Groat):

(i) There look as though there are three men in the room

which seems to point to the fact that two expletives (not two occurrences of one and the same expletive) can be selected, and appear in the numeration. Such sentences are analyzed in Boeckx 1999.

²¹Remember Baker’s 1988 overt/covert reanalysis processes. Interestingly, English was always on the ‘covert’ side in Baker’s typology (causative-restructuring, reanalysis, etc., take place at LF).

²²Travis 1996 also suggests relating causatives and passive existentials.

d. *(Pro) e stato **un libro messo** sul tavolo

The data follow immediately if we assume that Italian infinitives and participles (verbs in general) are much more mobile than their English counterparts.

French is much like Italian in that participles and infinitives move overtly.

- (23) a. Marie a fait **intervenir Jean**
 Marie has made intervene Jean
 b. *Marie a fait **Jean intervenir**

The other languages mentioned in (5) behave as expected (see Guasti 1991 for further data and discussion).

- | | | |
|------|--------------------------------------|-----------|
| (24) | a. He hecho matar a mi amigo | Spanish |
| | I made kill A my friend | |
| | b. *He hecho a mi amigo matar | |
| | c. Martin lät bygga huset | Swedish |
| | Martin let build house-the | |
| | d. *Martin lät huset bygga | |
| | e. Ég lét gera vid billin | Icelandic |
| | I let repair the-car | |
| | f. *Ég lét vid billin gera | |

The causative data provide rather strong evidence for the posited parameter assumed here that English participles are much more immobile than their French/Italian counterparts, which accounts for the asymmetry in (1)-(2) pertaining to the relative order between associate and past participle in existential/presentational constructions, which as already suggested in section 1 is a departure from the more 'basic' contrast found in (3)-(4).

6. Conclusion

Rather than focusing on the by now well-known contrast between English and Italian with respect to the relative position of the associate and the past participle ((1)-(2)), I have tried to explain a language-internal contrast concerning the same issue ((3)-(4)).

The present analysis has provided a rationale for why there should be two surface orders: there are two expletive constructions, an existential and a predicational one. As Uriagereka points out (personal communication), the account amounts to saying that both Stowell (1981) and Williams (1984) were right: existentials structures involve both small-clauses and NP-complements. The rationale for this 'expletive split' is grounded in the fact that there exist two *bes*. Based on the core semantics of the constructions, I have also been able to provide a reason for why the associate precedes the past participle in existentials, and follows it in presentationals. Finally, I have accounted for why English, unlike all other Germanic and Romance languages I have considered, does not exhibit the contrast, which I have tied to the immobility of past participles (and verbs in general) in the language, also

manifested in apparently unrelated data involving causatives, which provides rather strong evidence for the Principles-and-Parameters approach to language variation.

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Expletive Split

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