



Is There an Expletive Subject in Estonian?

Katrin Hiietam

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Katrin Hiietam

katrinhiietam@hotmail.com

Abstract

This preliminary study investigates whether we can find expletive subjects in colloquial Estonian. Expletive subjects are familiar mostly from Germanic languages, but they have also been attested in certain dialects of Finnish, genetically the closest language to Estonian. Expletive elements are semantically empty but needed for structural considerations in configurational languages. In a language where grammatical functions are not tied to a specific structural position, as in non-configurational languages, one does not expect to find expletive elements. However, Finnish has provided evidence to the contrary. A micro-pilot study on native speaker judgements to investigate the existence of expletive elements in spoken Estonian indicated that the candidates for expletive subjects – *ta* and *see* - have largely retained their referential properties and mostly sound unnatural as expletive subjects at this stage. Hence, we can conclude that there is no established expletive subject in spoken Estonian yet.

Keywords: Expletive subjects, Finnic languages, grammatical functions, native speaker judgements, syntactic change.

Language, a means of communication is a living organism, and as with many other things in the natural world, the only constant with it is the fact that it changes. In the past two decades, there has been a considerable amount of work conducted on the syntax of Estonian, especially on the formal and behavioural characteristics of subjects from various theoretical perspectives (e.g. Erelt et. al. 2017, Kalnača et al. 2019, Metslang, 2013, Lindström, 2017). However, research findings on expletive subjects remain scarce. True, in standard Estonian, expletive subject pronouns do not occur, yet this may not always reflect accurately the situation in the colloquial language. As Finnish shows a discrepancy between the use of expletive subject pronouns in standard and colloquial variety (e.g. VISK, §195), one might be tempted to take a closer look at the spoken varieties of Estonian and investigate, whether we might detect a change from the already described inventory of subjects.

In this short communication we first define the expletive subjects in Section 1, thereafter give a brief overview of Estonian in Section 2, followed by some facts about the Finnish expletive subject pronouns in Section 3. The study results discussed in this article were obtained from a micro-pilot that is outlined in Section 4, and an established pathway for developing expletives subjects is described in Section 5. Finally, the overall conclusion is given in Section 6.

1 WHAT IS AN EXPLETIVE SUBJECT?

Expletive subjects are considered to be elements with no actual semantic content or referent – they are dummies- but they do have the required agreement features and they fill a structurally obligatory position (cf. Asudeh and Toivonen 2009, Booth 2018). Usually, subject expletives occur in configurational languages, e.g. English or German, but they have also been described in a non-configurational language, Finnish. Expletive subjects are quite common with meteorological predicates. An example of an expletive subject is the English *it* -a 3rd person inanimate pronoun, which in non-expletive use refers to an inanimate referent. As a non-referential – expletive -pronoun, it agrees with the verb that is also marked for 3rd person and singular number, as illustrated in example (1) in bold font:

(1) **It** is raining.

(English)

The literature offers a wealth of descriptions on expletive subjects in Germanic, for example in German (e.g. Haider 2019), Swedish (e.g. Engdahl 2012), Danish (Svenonius 2002), and a semi-expletive pronoun has been described in Russian (Zimmerling 2008¹), all languages that have historically had a significant influence on Estonian. In Finnish, genetically the closest language to Estonian, expletive subjects have been studied in more detail by e.g. Holmberg and Nikanne (2002) and Vilkuna (2010, 2011).

2 ESTONIAN

Estonian is a Southern Finnic language with ca 1 million speakers worldwide. The standard language is based on the Northern dialects and traditionally it has been seen as more of a non-configurational and PRO drop language. Recently, there have been claims that Estonian is a partially configurational language (e.g. Sahkai, Tamm 2018). Hence, we would not expect there to be a designated subject position in the syntax of Estonian as subjects and objects are marked morphologically and can move around depending on discourse-configurational conditions. Therefore, there is no need for a place holder in a sentence in case the lexical subject is not expressed. It is true that in the standard written language, there are no expletive subjects (e.g. Erelt et al. 1993; Erelt and Metslang Eds. 2017). Nevertheless, non-referential, expletive uses of the 3sg personal pronoun have been noted in the North-Eastern Coastal dialects of Estonian that are structurally closest to Finnish (Tirkkonen 2006). According to Tirkkonen, these dialects have retained archaic features that do not exist in the remaining, Northern or Southern dialects, as the language changes that occurred between the 13th and 16th century did not affect them. Thus, these dialects possess several archaic characteristic traits of Estonian. Furthermore, these dialects have morpho-syntactic and lexical traits similar to Finnish. Examples (2a, b) are Tirkkonen's (2006) examples (86) and (87) respectively, glosses and

translations are mine. The semantically empty subject pronouns are shown in bold font and both occur in copular constructions:

(2) a. **tä** see suvel õli vähäne einiäkasv (NEC, EST)
 3.SG.NOM this.NOM summer.ADE be.PAST.SG. poor hay growth.NOM
 ‘EXPL this summer (there) was poor hay growth’

b. jaa no sis kui=**tä** (...) kuiv aig onn (NEC, EST)
 and well then when=3.SG.NOM dry time.NOM be.3SG
 ‘...and well, then when EXPL we have a dry period of time ...’

Due to extensive historical language contact with Danish, German and Swedish between 1227 - 1721 the structure of Estonian was becoming more like the structure of Germanic. However, during the Estophile Enlightenment period during 1750–1840, and the first half of 1900s, the language underwent a change away from the Germanic style language towards a Finnish-style language. This movement was most pronounced in the early 1990s and was started by linguist Johannes Aavik (e.g. Ehala 1998, Verschik 2005). This resulted in the Estonian language having no expletive subjects in either the standard unified written or spoken language. Yet, owing to the relaxation of the language planning strategies and extensive influence of English as a global language since the early 1990s (cf. Verschik 2005), coupled with close contact with Finnish, one might wonder whether they have introduced slight variability into the syntax of at least colloquial Estonian.

3 EXPLETIVE SUBJECTS IN FINNISH

As Finnish is structurally the closest non-endangered Finnic language to Estonian that is fully functional in everyday life, we will take a look at the research conducted on expletive subjects in Finnish. In colloquial Finnish, both *se* and *sitä* have been used as expletives in Finnish (e.g. Holmberg & Nikanne 2002, also Vilkuna 2010, 2011). *Se* is a neutral pronoun that can be used for both living and inanimate referents. It is mostly used in weather constructions and it stands in nominative case. *Sitä*, is a 3rd person singular form is in Holmberg and Nikanne’s classification a fossilised partitive form of *se*. In its referential uses it refers to both human and non-human referents of both genders in the colloquial language and it does not control verb agreement. *Sitä*, according to them, is a “pure expletive” and not a place-holder for subject. Despite the partitive morphology, Holmberg and Nikanne argue that *sitä* is actually a caseless form, as partitive is a default oblique case in Finnish. This has led them to claim that *sitä* is not an expletive subject but rather - an expletive topic. The use of both is shown in example (3):

(3) a. Nyt (**se**) taas sataa. (FIN)
 Now (**it**) again rains
 ‘Now it’s raining again.’
 (From Holmberg & Nikanne 2002, originally example (8))

b. **Sitä**ovat nämä lapset jo oppineet uimaan. (FIN)
 EXPhave these children already learnt to swim
 ‘These kids have already learned to swim.’
 (From Holmberg & Nikanne 2002, originally example (3a))

As in Estonian, the occurrences of Finnish expletive subjects have been attested in spoken language only.

Let us now turn to the experiment on Estonian native speaker judgements in the next section.

4 MICRO-PILOT

To investigate whether we could find expletive subjects in spoken Estonian, a micro-pilot study was carried out. The working hypothesis to be tested was that currently, there is no established expletive subject in spoken Estonian. The tool for the pilot was a questionnaire that was distributed electronically to a representative cross-section and demographically diverse cohort of native speakers of Estonian and they were asked to assess the acceptability of the sentences that contained either an expletive subject, a subject-like element or a null subject. Based on the evidence from Finnish and aforementioned dialectal Estonian, we tested the following potential candidates for the expletive subject in Estonian:

ta – 3.SG

See – ‘this’, an inanimate pronoun, demonstrative, determiner.

The questionnaire was drawn up using a form of a reduced Likert scale type design with polar opposite terminal points (a grammatical sentence vs an incorrect sentence), the mid-scale points were reflecting slight preference towards either grammatical or incorrect interpretation.

As the expletives have cross-linguistically been described in weather constructions mainly, and the dialectal Estonian data indicated the non-referential use of the 3rd person pronoun in sentences describing weather, I decided to test a pure meteorological predicate *sadama* ‘to fall, to rain’, and a construction describing a change in weather *läks külmaks* ‘turned/got/went cold’. In the questionnaire, there were stimulus sentences testing for both *see* and *ta* in the canonical subject and topic position. However, this short article is focusing on the results obtained from the sentences testing for the expletive subject and the discussion the subject vs topic is irrelevant for the present purposes.

The entire questionnaire tested the expletive pronouns in the position of subject/topic, locative adverbial and an extraposed expletive pronoun (36 sentences in total). However, what follows is based on the first set of stimulus sentences, testing only for expletive subjects (10 sentences). In set one there was a meteorological predicate ‘started to rain/fall’ in combination with the subject candidates as follows: Sentence 1 had ‘rain.PART’ in the preverbal position, as one frequently gets a preverbal nominal with the meteorological predicate in partitive case; Sentence 2 had a null subject; Sentence 3 had a 3.SG.NOM pronoun and Sentence 4 – the pronoun *see* as shown in (4):

(4) a. Pure meteorological predicate

Vihma/ 0/Ta/ See hakkas sadama. (EST)
 Rain.PART/ 0/3SG.NOM/ PRO[it, this].NOM start.PAST.3SG fall.INF
 ‘Rain/0/He(She)/It (this) started to fall.’

b. Predicate denoting change

Ilm/ 0/ Ta/ See läks külmaks. (EST)
 Weather.NOM/ 0/ 3.SG.NOM/ PRO[it, this].NOM go.PAST.3.SG cold.TRA
 ‘The weather /0/He(She)/It (this) turned cold.’

The respondents were asked to note down the very first reaction they had when reading this sentence. The rating scale had the following categories: a good sentence, unfamiliar, strange, an incorrect sentence. The motivation for these categories was to get a first idea of the preferences of the speakers, yet during the experiment it became apparent that defining the boundaries for the ‘grey area’, i.e. non-terminal categories of the scale was problematic. The size of the cohort was 26 individuals in the age range 19-73. In addition to their native language, the following languages were also spoken: English, 92%, Russian, 81%, Finnish, 32%, German, 20%, and Swedish, 8% - all languages with expletive subjects. One might hypothesise this fact could possibly have an effect on the native language syntax. The educational level of the subjects varied, as did their current country of residence.

4.1 Preliminary results

The results of the experiment indicated that sentences with a lexical NP were considered the most acceptable format of the sentence by all the respondents (100%) (*Vihma hakkas sadama* ‘Rain.PART started to rain/fall’. Sentences with a null subject were considered a little less acceptable (*Hakkas sadama* ‘pro Started to rain’ - 92%. 4% of the respondents considered this sentence ‘unfamiliar’ and 4% - ‘incorrect’. Sentences with an expletive subject were generally considered incorrect: 85% of respondents thought that *ta* was incorrect, and 77% thought that *see* was incorrect. As can be seen, *see* seemed a little more acceptable as an expletive subject. The rest of the respondents considered both *ta* and *see* ‘unfamiliar’ or ‘strange’. Not a single respondent indicated that *ta* or *see* would be completely grammatical in the test sentences. The above is illustrated in Table 1:

	Good	Un-accustomed	Strange	Incorrect
<i>Vihma hakkas sadama</i> ‘Rain.PART started to rain.’	26 100%			
<i>Hakkas sadama</i> ‘pro Started to rain.’	24 92%	1 4%		1 4%
<i>Ta hakkas sadama</i> ‘Ta started to rain.’		3 16%	1 4%	22 85 %
<i>See hakkas sadama</i> ‘See started to rain.’		1 4%	5 19%	20 77%

Table 1. Native speaker judgements for *ta* and *see* in stimulus sentences. The number in bold type indicates the number of responses for the particular category.

5 DEVELOPMENT OF EXPLETIVE SUBJECTS

If a language develops or loses a syntactic category, it happens over a considerable length of time and tracing the exact stages and signposts would require a thorough diachronic investigation, which is beyond the scope of the current study. However, as mentioned at the outset, Estonian has been in the linguistic sphere of Scandinavian languages, where the path from no expletive subject to the existence of expletive has already been described by Faarlund (1990). He studied this process in Old Scandinavian and linked the development of expletive subjects to the emergence of V2.

As the preliminary results showed that the preferred sentence type with the tested meteorological predicates was the one with the syntactically expressed, non-prototypical subject, we might take it as an indication that the structure of Estonian could perhaps be moving towards a more rigid, configurational type, where expletives can occur to fill the required subject or topic position. Faarlund (1990) labelled this process the ‘Expletive Sequence’ (originally without explicitly marked stages), given in (5):

(5) 0-Exp (Stage I) >Topic-Exp (Stage II) > Subject-Exp (Stage III)

We could take Faarlund’s Expletive Sequence as a starting point and see whether it could be applied to Estonian as well. While V2 has been described for standard written Estonian, yet spoken language seems to have a wider range of possibilities (Vihman and Walkden 2021; Holmberg et al. 2021). Therefore, we cannot ascertain a direct link between the development of V2 and the emergence of expletive subjects in Estonian and need to look for further possibilities. Nevertheless, assuming that the link with a developing V2 is not a necessary prerequisite, based on the existing findings, we might then hypothesise that the current standard spoken Estonian could perhaps be between stages I and II, with no expletives (I) and topic-expletives (II) occupying a position that needs to be filled for structural reasons.

6 CONCLUSION

This study was motivated by the lack of research into subject expletives in Estonian, despite the existence of research on expletive subjects with meteorological predicates in languages that surround Estonian or have historically influenced it. The fact that expletive uses of 3.SG pronoun have been attested, also together with a meteorological predicate in North-Eastern dialects, prompted this study to investigate whether they may be more widespread in the language. The hypothesis – that there is currently no established expletive subject in Estonian – was tested and was found to be largely correct based on the results of the pilot gauging the acceptability of *ta* and *see* in the subject position with a meteorological predicate and a predicate denoting change of weather.

The conclusion that can be drawn at this early stage is that there is no established expletive subject element in Estonian. Both *ta* and *see* were considered either incorrect or unfamiliar/strange in subject position. At present, it appears that both pronouns have largely retained their referential properties in the sentences used in the test set, and it would be premature to regard them as established expletive subjects.

As the study cohort was rather limited, in order to obtain more accurate results, it would perhaps be justified to conduct the study on a larger set of respondents and perhaps using a finer-tuned questionnaire testing the spoken and written language separately. Also, using different verb types might give different results. For any prospective more in-depth studies, a traditional Likert scales would perhaps give more accurate results in terms of the degrees of nuances in the acceptability of the tested elements.

Finally, as the dialectal data indicated the expletive uses of pronouns occur in clauses where the verb is not in the second position, the previously proposed link between the development of the V2 order in syntax and the expletive subject was found to be non-applicable for the Estonian facts and language-specific factors need to be established.

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ABBREVIATIONS

3 – 3rd person singular
 ADE – adessive case
 Dial. - dialect
 EST – Estonian
 FIN - Finnish
 INF – infinitive
 NEC – North-Eastern Coastal dialect of Estonian
 NOM – nominative case
 PART – partitive case
 PAST – past tense
 PRO – pronoun
 SG – singular number
 TRA – translative case

NOTES

1. Zimmerling (2008) classes the Russian *это* - *èto* 'it, this one' as a semi-expletive pronoun as it behaves like a 'weak subject' – it does not show agreement, control or binding features. Furthermore, it is unstressed and not obligatory.

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