Optional expletives in Radical Null Subject Languages and the syntax of Specificity

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[1] Null Subject Languages taxonomy. Languages have been showed to vary with respect to the possibility of omitting subjects. It has been proposed that (at least) five subcases can be distinguished (Biberauer, Holmberg & Roberts 2010):

(1) a. *Non-NLS* - Subjects cannot be dropped (e.g. English);
     b. *Semi NSL* – Expletive subjects can be dropped (German, Dutch);
     c. *Partial NSL* – Some, but not all (e.g. 3_{rd} pers), referential subjects can be dropped (e.g. Finnish, Hebrew);
     d. *Consistent NSL* – Referential subjects can be generally dropped (e.g. Italian, Spanish);
     e. *Radical NSL* – Referential subjects and objects can be dropped in absence of inflectional morphology (e.g. Chinese, Japanese).

[2] Expletives in NSLs. In the traditional view, expletives are grammatical devices employed to satisfy the EPP (Chomsky 1982, 1995) and are not required where the EPP can be satisfied by means of alternative strategies (Rizzi 1982, 1986b; Alexiadou & Anagnostopulou 1998, Saito 2007). In this perspective, NSLs are expected to employ expletives in configurations where the satisfaction of the EPP through other strategies is forbidden. TAs a consequence, the distribution of expletives across languages has been claimed to vary with respect to the restrictions on subject drop: non-NSLs make extensive use of expletives; semi and partial NSLs display hybrid patterns depending on the restrictions on subject drop imposed by a certain type of languages (Holmberg & Nikanne 2002, Holmberg 2005, Biberauer 2010); consistent and radical NSLs languages do not to require expletives. **[3] New data.** Vietnamese is a radical NSL, with no inflectional morphology and free argument drop under the right discourse circumstances:

(2) a. Mary thích Tom. Và Ø cũng thích Peter.
         Mary like Tom And Ø also like Peter
         'Mary likes Tom. (She=Mary) also likes Peter.'
     b. Mary thích Tom. Nhưng Peter không thích Ø.
         Mary like Tom   But   Peter NEG like Ø
         'Mary likes Tom. But Tom does not like (him = Tom).'

Unexpectedly, in spoken Vietnamese the 3_{rd} person singular pronoun *nó* optionally occurs in configurations which paradigmatically require expletives, such as weather sentences (3a), existential structures (3b) and verb-initial thetic structures (3c) (see also Dao 2012):

(3) a. (*Nó)* mưa bâygiờ đấy
         NÓ   rain now PRT
         'It rains now.'
     b. (*Nó)* không có cái   bút   nào trên bàn
         NÓ   NEG exist CLS pen   any on   table
         'There isn't any pen on the table.'

    c.   (Nó) cháy cái   nhà   kho
              NÓ   burnt CLS   house store
              'A warehouse burned.'

The presence of an overt expletive subject comes as strongly unexpected in a radical NSL where subject drop is always allowed. In this paper, we will address the question whether *nó* can be considered as a genuine expletive subject in (3). **[4] Unexpected properties of *nó* as an expletive.** As last–resort devices employed to satisfy the EPP, expletives appear consistently when required, either in non-NSLs or in semi and partial NSLs (e.g. Finnish; Holmberg & Nikanne 2002). Differently, *nò* appears to be optional in all the sentences in (3). Furthermore, whereas expletives are commonly considered semantically empty (Rothstein 1983), *nó* can provide interpretative contribution to the clause in which it is inserted. For instance, in existential sentences, the presence of *nó* turns what would be a generic statement into a statement about a specific context:

(4)   a.   Không   có   ma
             NEG   exist ghost
             'Ghost does not exist.'
      b.   Nó   không có   ma
             NÓ   NEG   exist ghost
             'Speaking of a certain place/time, there are no ghosts in there/at that time.

We argue that these facts indicate that *nó* does not perform the same functions that expletives usually do. In particular, the semantic content of *nó* suggests that this element has a discourse-related function. **[5] The proposal.** We propose that the presence of *nó* in (3) activates a functional projection that encodes specificity (see Kiss 1996). In existential sentences asserting the existence of a (set of) individual(s) as in (4), the specificity requirement constraints the denotation of the (set of) individual(s) to some previously determined domain of quantification. This account for the fact that *nó* cannot receive a generic interpretation in (4). In addition, we will show that the presence of *nò* induces the presence of a retrievable relation linking eventualities to some familiar set present in the discourse context in the sentences in (3). We will assume that these sentences introduce a variable over eventualities at the VP-level, which undergoes existential closure at the IP-level (Rothstein 2001). We then propose that the functional projection activated by *nó* introduces a specificity requirement which constrains the assignment of the denotation of the TP through an acquaintance relation (Enç 1991, Farkas 2002). We will also argue that this use of the pronoun *nó* follows from its featural composition and can be framed in terms of impoverished feature content. We will show that, in its referential uses, *nó* bears only a vacuous 3rd person feature and a definiteness feature. **[6] Conclusion.** In this paper we discuss a number of contexts in which the referential pronoun *nò* shows expletive-like behaviour. We will show that, despite the initial appearances, in these cases *nó* cannot be considered a true expletive subject. Rather, the optional presence of *nó* in structures where expletives are usually required can be analysed as the activation of a functional projection whose semantic contribution is the introduction of a specificity requirement. In this perspective, the presence of *nó* no longer poses a problem within the taxonomy of NSLs, since it is related to the instantiation of a scope-discourse element, rather than to the satisfaction of the EPP.

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