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. 3rd 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 & Anagnostopoulou 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. Nhuong 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 3rd 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 bây giờ đây
   Nó rain now PRT
   ‘It rains now.’
   b. (Nó) không có cái büt nào trên bàn
   Nó NEG exist CLS pen any on table
   ‘There isn’t any pen on the table.’
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, nó 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 constrains 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 nó 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 3₃ person feature and a definiteness feature. [6] Conclusion. In this paper we discuss a number of contexts in which the referential pronoun nó 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.