

On the subject – and topic-hood of the Finnic expletive elements

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Expletive pronouns are generally seen as semantically vacuous elements, i.e. dummies that may or may not have the relevant agreement properties. For example, the expletive-verb agreement is present in Germanic languages but not always in Finnish (Booth 2018, Holmberg and Nikanne 2002). In non-configurational languages with freer word order and syntactically unexpressed subjects, one might not expect to find the expletive pronouns (cf. É. Kiss 2002). Nevertheless, uses of expletive pronouns have been attested in Finnish, a non-configurational language, where they are analysed as topic-, rather than subject pronouns (Holmberg and Nikanne 2002). This paper shows that the same analysis can, in broad lines, be applied to the Estonian dialectal expletive pronoun.

We examine the expletive pronouns used in two largest Finnic languages representing the Northern and Southern branch respectively - Finnish and Estonian. Although the main features of the syntax are similar and both languages use the SVO order in unmarked clauses, more grammatical devices seem to be in use in Finnish (Metslang 2009). Both languages exhibit a word order that is mostly dependent of the discourse configurational properties of the information structure and have thus been classed as topic -prominent. In topic-prominent languages the logical subject of predication does not always coincide with the grammatical subject (cf. É. Kiss 1995, 2002).

In Finnish, the expletive pronouns in colloquial use are the 3rd person inanimate pronoun *se* (this, it) in its nominative and partitive form (Example 1a). Holmberg and Nikanne (2002) classed this element as a topic expletive due to their morpho-syntactic they are formally caseless, and they do not control verb agreement or binding. In Standard and colloquial Estonian, however, such use of the 3rd person inanimate pronoun is infelicitous and non-attested (Hiietam 2022). The only environment where a non-referential pronoun occurs grammatically is with extraposition. Yet, there are dialectal examples of a 3rd person singular animate pronoun that is used in a similar way to the Finnish expletive pronoun - *se/sitä* (Example 1b).

1. a. Nyt (se) taas sataa.
Now EXPL.NOM again rain.3.SG
'Now it's raining again'
- b. tä see suvel õli vähäne einiäkasv
3.SG.NOM this.NOM summer.ADE be.PAST.SG. poor hay growth.NOM
'EXPL this summer (there) was poor hay growth'

The paper delineates the referential properties of both the Finnish *se* (it) and the Estonian *see* (it) and *tä* (he/se) and offers an tentative account that classes the Estonian expletive elements as a topic expletive much in the vein of Holmberg and Nikanne (2002). In conclusion, this paper shows support for analysing the expletive elements in the two languages mentioned above as topic-pronouns that introduce the topic of the predication rather than grammatical, albeit semantically empty subjects regardless of their degree of grammaticalisation.

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