

# Choice of non-referential subject in existential constructions and with weather-verbs

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## 1. Introduction

All the Scandinavian languages have overt non-referential subjects in e.g. impersonal or existential constructions and with weather-verbs like *rain*. It is, however, well known that the properties of the non-referential element vary between varieties and constructions (see e.g. Platzack 1983, Falk 1993, Holmberg & Platzack 1995, Vikner 1995, Svenonius 2002, Thráinsson et al. 2004, Thráinsson 2007). Icelandic, Swedish and varieties of Norwegian use a form identical to the neuter pronoun (like English *it*) in all kinds of constructions with non-referential subjects. In Danish, on the other hand, the pronominal form *det* ‘it’ is used as a quasi-argumental subject with weather-verbs and in extrapositions, but a locative form corresponding to English *there* or *here* is used (to a varying extent) in other types of sentences with non-referential subjects; see (1). According to Hansen & Heltoft (2011:1216), *her* ‘here’ can always be used instead of *der* ‘there’. In some cases, there is a choice between a locative and the pronominal expletive, but in other cases, only one of the forms is possible; cf. (2) and (3).

(1) a. *det* *sner* (Da.)

*it* *snows*

‘It snows.’

b. *der* *var* *engang* *en* *konge*

*there* *was* *once* *a* *king*

‘Once upon a time, there was a king’

c. *der/her* *arbeides* *med* *tjære*

*there/here* *work.PASS* *with* *tar*

‘Work with tar is being done’

(Hansen & Heltoft 2011:1213-1219)

- (2) a. *der er mørkt* (Da.)

*there is dark.N.SG*

‘It is dark.’

- b. *det er koldt*

*it is cold.N.SG*

‘It is cold.’

(Hansen & Heltoft 2011:1200, 1214)

- (3) a. *Det/\*Der regner* (Da.)

*it/there rains*

‘It rains.’

- b. *\*Det/Der er kommet en dreng.*

*it/there is come a boy*

‘There has come a boy.’

(Vikner 1995:225)

The locative forms *der/där* ‘there’ and *her/här* ‘here’ appear as non-referential subjects to a varying extent also in Norwegian and Swedish dialects (see below and cf. e.g. Hulthén 1944:53, Aksnes 2003, Carlsson 2003).<sup>1</sup> The pattern is not always the same as that reported for Danish. For instance, also weather-verbs can take a locative form as subject in the Stavanger dialect of Norwegian, whether the subject is clause-initial or not (Aksnes 2003).<sup>2</sup>

The ScanDiaSyn survey included sentences with a weather-verb with a preverbal locative or pronominal form, as well as presentational sentences with an unaccusative verb and the non-referential subject in a postverbal position. The following sentences were investigated in Norway, Sweden and Finland:

- (4) a. *Der snør.* (#966) (No.)

*there snows*

- b. *Her snør.* (#967) (No.)

*here snows*

- c. *Det snør.* (#968) (No.)

*it snows*

‘It snows.’

- (5) a. Men då kom der inn ein svær hund. (#969) (No.)  
*but then came there in a big dog*
- b. Men då kom her inn ein svær hund. (#970) (No.)  
*but then came here in a big dog*
- c. Men då kom det inn ein svær hund. (#971) (No.)  
*but then came it in a big dog*  
 ‘But then a big dog came in.’

The results from the Nordic Syntax Database (Lindstad et al. 2009) are presented in section 2 below. Data from corpora (e.g. the Nordic Dialect Corpus; see Johannessen et al. 2009) are discussed in section 3.

## 2. Results

### Pronominal *det* ‘it’ as non-referential subject

The sentence *det snør* ‘it snows’ (#968) with a weather-verb and the pronominal expletive is judged acceptable all across Norway, Sweden and Finland (see Map 1). Only four speakers (from Western Norway) judge it as unacceptable. Pronominal *det* ‘it’ is the most widespread non-referential subject form also in the presentational sentence with an unaccusative verb. Sentence (#971) is accepted in all locations where it was tested.



Map 1: Quasi-argumental det 'it' with a weather-verb

(#968: *Det snør*. 'It snows').

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).

#### Locative *der/där* 'there' as non-referential subject

With the locative expletive *der/där*, instead of *det* 'it', the sentence with a weather-verb (#966) is rejected by most speakers (Map 2). However, some informants accept also this sentence. It gets high scores in two locations in Rogaland in Western Norway, and in two locations in Nyland in Finland. There are also a few locations in Norway, Sweden and Finland where it gets an intermediate score.



Map 2: *Quasi-argumental der/där* ‘there’ with a weather-verb (#966: *Der snør*. ‘It snows’).

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).

In several locations, the locative form *der/där* ‘there’ is possible as an expletive in the presentational sentence, and in this context, *der/där* is considerably more widespread than in the weather-sentence (see Map 3). In Swedish, it is accepted in many locations in Götaland (particularly in the south and southwest), four locations in Northern Sweden, and three in Finland. It also gets an intermediate score in several locations. The sentence is judged unacceptable in Eastern and northernmost Norway, but acceptable in several locations in the south (Rogaland and Vest-Agder), in the west (Sogn og Fjordane and Møre og Romsdal), and in a few locations in Nordland and Troms in Northern Norway. In other words, many speakers have the distal locative an alternative to the pronominal form in presentational sentences.



Map 3: Expletive *der/där* 'there' in a presentational sentence with an unaccusative verb (#969: *Men då kom der inn ein sver hund. 'But then a big dog came in'*). (White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).

#### Locative *her/här* 'here' as non-referential subject

The proximal locative *her/här* 'here' is a more widespread alternative to pronominal *det* 'it' as a quasi-argument to *snø* 'snow' than the distal locative (Map 4). It is for instance accepted in a few locations on the Swedish east coast and in Finland. The sentence gets an intermediate score in a number of locations in Götaland and Northern Sweden, and in a few locations in Southern, Western and Northern Norway.



Map 4: *Quasi-argumental her/här* 'here' with a weather-verb  
 (#967: *Her snør*. 'It snows').

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).

In the presentational sentence (5a) (#969), on the other hand, the proximal locative *her/här* 'here' is a less widespread subject form than *der/där* 'there' (see Map 5). In Norway, it is only accepted in a two locations, but it gets an intermediate score in some of the other places where also *der* is accepted. In Sweden, the sentence is acceptable in many locations in Götaland (particularly in the south) and in a few places in the north. It is also accepted in several locations in Southwestern Finland. Although *här* 'here' is more widespread in the presentational sentence than in the sentence with a weather-verb, there are locations in Sweden (particularly along the east coast) that accept the latter but not the former (see further section 3 below).



Map 5: Expletive *her/här* 'there' in a presentational sentence with an unaccusative verb (#970: *Men då kom her inn ein svær hund. 'But then a big dog came in'*). (White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).

All three subject forms are accepted in weather-sentences in locations in Southwestern Finland. In presentational sentences, all three subject forms are acceptable in several locations, particularly in Southern and Southwestern Sweden.



### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Age variation in NSD

With respect to the sentence with locative *här* ‘here’ and a weather-verb (4b) (#970), the judgments sometimes correlate with the age of the informant; cf. Map 6 and 7 below. Particularly in Sweden, the sentence is accepted to a higher extent by older speakers (Map 6), than by younger speakers (Map 7).



Map 6: Expletive *her/här* ‘there’ in a presentational sentence with an unaccusative verb (#970), older speakers.

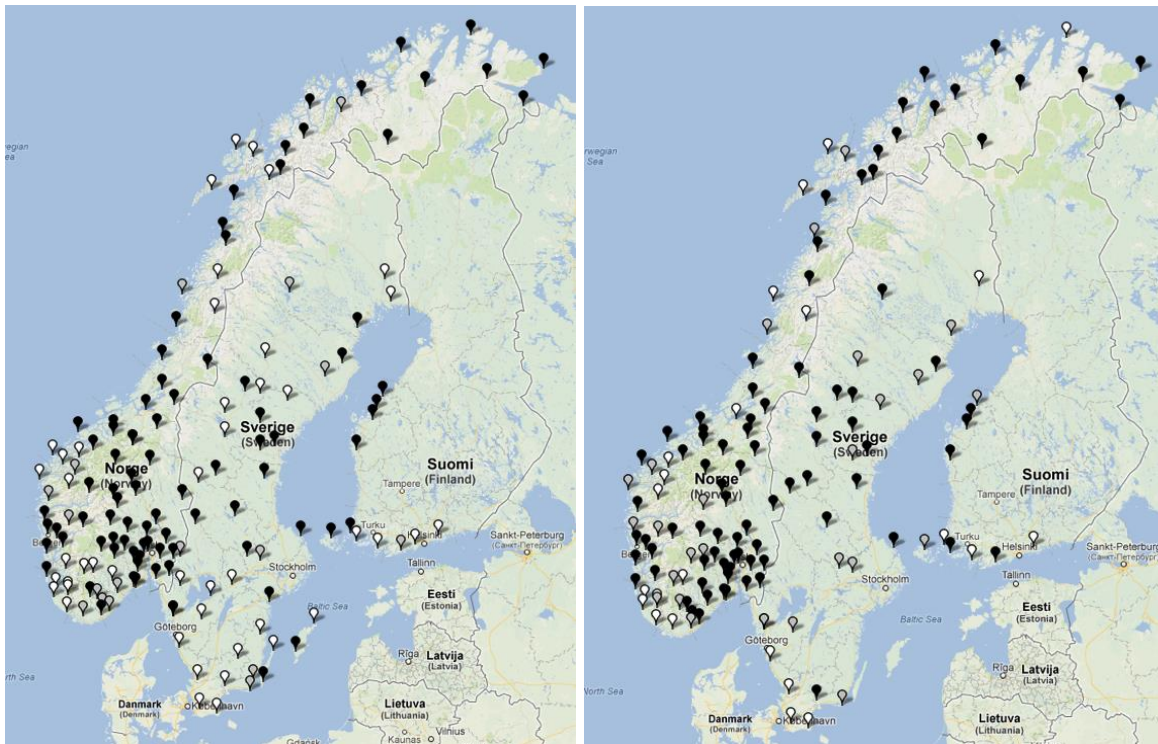
(*Men då kom her inn ein svær hund.* ‘But then a big dog came in.’)

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score).



Map 7: Expletive *her/här* ‘there’ in a presentational sentence with an unaccusative verb (#970), younger speakers.

The difference between older and younger speakers seems to be even greater with regard to the presentational sentence with *där* ‘there’ (5a) (#969); see Map 8 and 9 below. Also this sentence is accepted to a higher extent by older speakers (Map 8), than by younger speakers (Map 9). Expletive *där* is typically viewed as a feature of the dialects in southernmost Sweden, but in fact, many of the older Swedish informants from other parts of Götaland and Norrland accept the sentence. Among younger Swedish speakers, the sentence gets a high score only in Southern and Southwestern Sweden (i.e. where it is expected to occur), and in a couple of other spread places. Age seems to be a more important factor in Sweden than in Norway and Finland.



Map 8: Expletive *der/där* 'there' in a presentational sentence with an unaccusative verb (#969), older speakers.

Map 9: Expletive *der/där* 'there' in a presentational sentence with an unaccusative verb (#969), younger speakers.

(*Men då kom der inn ein svær hund.* 'But then a big dog came in'),

(*White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score.*)

### 3.2 Theoretical issues regarding expletives

In the present-day Mainland Scandinavian languages expletive subjects are generally obligatory. In older stages, the languages had null non-referential subjects (see e.g. Falk 1993, Kinn 2011). Falk (1993) shows that the use of expletive and quasi-argumental *det* 'it' increases in Swedish around the beginning of the 17th century. In the 15-16th century, *det* 'it' is used considerably more often in weather-sentences (around 30-40 %) than in expletive constructions (5-8 %). Still in the 18th century 1/3 of the weather-sentences and 2/3 of the expletive sentences in Falk's corpus lack an overt subject. Null subjects are still possible in some restricted cases also in Present-Day Swedish (see Engdahl 2010, 2012 and Håkansson 2012).

As observed above (and discussed in much previous work), there is variation in present-day Scandinavian with respect to the form of non-referential subjects (pronominal *det* 'it', locative or null) in the different constructions. There is also variation in the possible positions of expletives. In Icelandic, an overt expletive *það* 'it' only appears in clause-initial position; cf. (6a) and (6b). In Swedish, on the other hand, expletive *det* 'it' is possible, and obligatory, also in the subject position after the verb; see (7). In Faroese, the expletive can occur in postverbal position, but it is not obligatory (see Thráinsson et al. 2004:286 and Eriksen 2009 for discussion).

- (6) a. \*(Það) eru mýs í baðkerinu. (Ice.)  
*it be.PRES.3.PL mouse.F.PL.NOM in bathtub.N.SG.DAT.DEF*  
 ‘There are mice in the bathtub.’
- b. Eru (\*það) mýs í baðkerinu?  
*be.PRES.3.PL it mouse.F.PL.NOM in bathtub.N.SG.DAT.DEF*  
 ‘Are there mice in the bathtub?’
- (Cf. Thráinsson 2007:312)

The two types of sentences included in the ScanDiaSyn survey differ both with respect to type of non-referential subject (quasi-argument or expletive) and placement of the subject. In the weather-sentence, the quasi-argument is in initial position, whereas it follows the verb in the presentational sentence. It should therefore be noted that some Swedish speakers still allow an expletive subject to be omitted (or covert) when there is a (typically) locative element in sentence initial position, as in (7a) (see Falk 1993, Teleman et al. 1999/4:54 and Engdahl 2012). The locative PP in (7a) does not otherwise have the properties of a subject, and it cannot occur in the subject position after the verb; see (7b) and (7c). In Germanic, expletives with a locative form are generally not restricted to clause-initial position (like Icelandic expletive *það* ‘it’), but occur both in initial and post-verbal position (van Craenenbroeck 2011).

- (7) a. I gräset kan (det) finnas ormar (Swe.)  
*in grass.DEF can.PRES it exist.PRES snake.PL*  
 ‘There could be snakes in the grass.’
- b. Kan \*(det) finnas ormar i gräset?  
*can.PRES it exist.PRES snake.PL in grass.DEF*  
 ‘Could there be snakes in the grass?’
- c. \*Kan i gräset finnas ormar?  
*can.PRES in grass.DEF exist.PRES snake.PL*  
 ‘Could there be snakes in the grass?’
- (Cf. Falk 1993:282 f.)

That sentences with an initial locative element (e.g. *here* or *there*) sometimes do not need to have an overt element in subject position does in other words not necessarily mean that the initial element should be treated as an expletive in that variety. Instead, we could assume that the presence of an initial locative allows an expletive to be omitted (or covert), and this would be one way of accounting for the fact that the form *här* ‘here’ to some of the Swedish-speaking informants is more acceptable in the weather-sentence (with the locative in initial position) than in the presentational sentence (with the locative in post-verbal position). On this account, these speakers give different judgments to the sentences in the

survey based on placement of the locative, not on the type of construction. According to Engdahl (2012), examples like (7a) are more generally accepted by older speakers, just like the tested sentences with *här* and a weather-verb. In examples like (8) below, *här* in the second clause would then have the same function as the phrase *här i gården* ‘here in the farm’ in the first clause:

- (8) Hä i gården har begåtts mord, här spökar, oc ja flyr (Swe  
) r h g .)
- her i farm.D have.PR commit.SUP. murder. her haunt.P an I flee.PR*  
*e n EF ES PASS PL e RES d ES*
- ‘Here in the farm have murders been committed, the place is haunted, and I flee’ (Strindberg \*1849)

On this account, we would have to explain the fact that speakers that allow *här* ‘here’ do not necessarily allow *där* ‘there’. Moreover, as Falk (1993:274) points at out, quasi-argumental *det* ‘it’ is generally obligatory also in the presence of an initial locative phrase, other than *här* (at least for some speakers); cf. (9).

- (9) På Island regnade \*(det). (Swe.)  
*on Iceland rain.PAST it*  
‘It rained on Iceland.’

It has been noted in previous studies that locative *här* is used instead of *det* ‘it’ with weather-verbs in some varieties of Swedish. Hulthén (1944:43) states that sentences like *här regnar* ‘here rains’ are provincial or part of a local standard. He treats *här* as a non-referential subject. Jörgensen (1976) gives examples like (10) from the spoken language. He treats examples like these as subjectless, and groups them with cases like (11).

- (10) Å här regnar alldeles kolossalt mycket (Swe.)  
*and here rain.PRES completely enormously much*  
‘And it rains a whole lot here.’  
(Jörgensen 1976:67)

- (11) a. Så skedde också. (Swe.)  
*So happen.PAST also.*  
 ‘So also happened.’
- b. För här är bra. (Swe.)  
*because here be.PRES good*  
 ‘Because it is good here.’  
 (Jørgensen 1976:67)

In the SweDia2000 material (partially available in the Nordic Dialect Corpus) investigated by Carlsson (2003), there are examples where *här* occurs in postverbal position in Southern Swedish dialects; see (12). Teleman et al. (1999/4:54) give similar examples.

- (12) För det första var här inte mycket byggt. (Swe.)  
*for the first be.PAST here not much build.PASTPART*
- För det andra var här en otroligt massa affärer.  
*for the second be.PAST here an unbelievable lot shop.PL*  
 ‘Firstly, there was not a lot built here. Secondly, there were an unbelievable amount of shops here.’  
 (Older woman, Våxtorp, Halland; from Carlsson 2003:12)

*Här* seems to retain its locative meaning also when it is used as subject (or in sentences with a covert non-referential subject). Examples like (12) would be degraded or anomalous without a locative adverbial; cf. (13) with expletive *det* ‘it’. At least some of the Swedish speakers that allow *här* ‘here’ in weather-sentences seem to have this option only when talking about their own proximity, but this has not been tested systematically (cf. Teleman et al. 1999/4:54).

- (13) Det var inte mycket byggt ??(här). (Swe.)  
*it be.PAST not much build.PASTPART here*  
 ‘Not much was build here.’

Also *där* ‘there’ can contribute locative meaning when it occurs in subject position; cf. (14) and (15).

- (14) Ändå bodde där folk. (Swe.)  
*yet live.PAST there people*  
 ‘Yet, there were people living there.’  
 (Older man, N Rörum, Skåne; from Carlsson 2003:13)

- (15) Ändå bodde det folk \*(där). (Swe.)  
*yet live.PAST it people there*  
 ‘Yet, there were people living there.’

In Southern Sweden (as in Denmark), presentational sentences with *der/där* ‘there’ do, however, not necessarily have a distal (or locative) reading; cf. the examples in (16). In Carlsson’s (2003) corpus-study of Southern Swedish dialects, *där* is more common than *det* ‘it’, but speakers alternate between the two, even in similar contexts; see the examples in (17), which are produced by the same speaker.

- (16) a. Men vad är där att göra? (Swe.)  
*but what be.PRES there to do.INF*  
 ‘But what is there to do?’

(Older man, Össjö, Skåne; from Carlsson 2003:13)

- b. Nej, där var inte tid att åka någonstans.  
*no there be.PAST not time to go.INF anywhere*  
 ‘No, there wasn’t time to go anywhere.’

(Older man, Bara, Skåne; from Carlsson 2003:19)

- c. Först får man kolla om där är nåt  
*first get.PRES one check.INF if there be.PRES any*  
 intresse överhuvudtaget och är där det får man ...  
*interest at.all and is there that get.PRES one*  
 ‘First, you need to check if there is any interest at all, and if there is that, you need to...’

(Younger man, Össjö, Skåne; from Carlsson 2003:19)

- (17) Men där är ju ingen som liksom går in och hälsar på (S)  
a.

*but there be no one who like go in and visit*  
*PRES PART PRES PART*

‘But there is no one who like goes in and says hallo.’

(Younger woman, Löderup, Skåne)

- b. För det är nog ingen annan som kommer till en.

*because it is probably nobody else who come.PRES to one*

‘Because there is probably nobody else who comes to you.’

(Younger woman, Löderup, Skåne; from Carlsson 2003:24)

Similar variation is reported for the Stavanger dialect in Norway (Aksnes 2003). The variation is also reflected in the grammaticality judgments given e.g. in Southern Sweden and Rogaland in Norway, where both *det* ‘it’ and *der/där* ‘there’ are accepted in the tested presentational sentence.

Some varieties of Norwegian have developed an expletive form distinct from both the neuter singular pronoun and the locative adverb. This is for instance the case in Lyngdal (West-Agder), where the form *dar* (cognate with the locative adverb *der* ‘there’) is used in many expletive contexts (data from Pål Kristian Eriksen p.c.):

- (18) a. Der kjeme dar ein bil. (No. Lyngdal, West-Adger)

*there comes EXPL a car*

‘There comes a car there.’

- b. Nå snø dar ude.

*now snows EXPL outside*

‘Now it snows outside.’

In these contexts, the pronominal expletive can also be used, but might be a (stylistically) marked alternative (Eriksen, p.c.). In sentences with extraposed infinitives or that-clauses, the pronominal form is more common, and often the only option. The properties (and history) of the distinct expletive form have not been studied, and its geographical distribution is not known.

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### Web sites:

- Nordic Atlas of Language Structures (NALS) Journal: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nals>
- Nordic Dialect Corpus: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>
- Nordic Syntax Database: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>

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<sup>1</sup> Some Scandinavian dialects use a personal pronoun *han* 'he' as a quasi-argument in weather-sentences (see Eriksen 2011).

<sup>2</sup> In periphrastic passives, the form of the participle sometimes depends on the choice of expletive (see Christensen & Taraldsen 1989, Åfarli 2009, 2011 and [Larsson 2014](#)).