

# Expletive dropping in Faroese: Two competing ways of expressing the world

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## Abstract:

In some languages with expletive subjects, these subjects are either optionally or mandatorily left out of the sentence if they cannot occur in its initial position, a phenomenon which will here be referred to as expletive dropping. Expletive dropping in Faroese is traditionally described as optional, but the author's fieldwork disclosed a number of conditions which either favour or disfavour expletive dropping. In this paper these fieldwork data, and the research results extracted from them, are outlined in detail, in light and support of the author's theory that expletive subjects are referential items which refer to "the world", i.e. the stage of the event.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Expletive subjects and expletive dropping

This paper intends to map the phenomenon of *expletive dropping* in Faroese, and to explain its occurrence both in Faroese and in general<sup>1</sup>. This grammatical phenomenon is found in a number of languages which have expletive subjects as a part of their grammar, so a definition of the latter is necessary before we can give a definition of the former.

Expletive subjects (or dummy subjects, formal subjects or pleonastic subjects, as they are also known as in the literature) are in themselves a bit of a mystery, and have been discussed and analysed for decades already, but a traditional definition of expletive subjects would be that they are *semantically empty items which are introduced as purely formal subjects in sentences which either lack a potential subject candidate, or where the potential subject candidate is blocked in a non-subject position*.

Very broadly speaking, we can say that expletive subjects occur in three core types of contexts (cf. Svenonius 2002, pp. 5-6, for a similar division, but with different terminology): Existential sentences (henceforth E-sentences), meteorological sentences (henceforth M-sentences), and sentences with clausal "subjects", or more correctly, with (infinite or finite)

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<sup>1</sup> I want to thank the organizers of the NORMS workshop on the Faroe Islands (August 8-16, 2008) for providing me with the opportunity to conduct the fieldwork on which this paper is based. I also want to thank all the informants for taking the time to answer my questionnaire.

clauses as their main thematic arguments (hence P(ropositional) T(heme)-sentences). I will refer to all this collectively as *expletive contexts*. Below are examples of each context, with the expletive subject in bold types:

- (1) a. E-sentence:  
       ‘**There** is a dog in the garden.’  
    b. M-sentence:  
       ‘**It** is snowing.’  
    c. PT-sentence:  
       ‘**It** is nice to dance.’

Expletive dropping refers to the phenomenon when an expletive may or must be left out of a sentence which otherwise is an expletive context. This takes place under the following condition: The expletive is dropped if it is blocked from appearing in the pre-verbal topic position – either because this position is filled by some fronted constituent, or if the sentence is a polar question in a language which requires that the pre-verbal position is left empty in such questions. Icelandic examples of expletive dropping are given in (2a-b), where the presence of the expletive *það* is ungrammatical, as it is blocked from appearing in the pre-verbal position (examples from Tháinsson et al. 2004, p.287):

- (2) a. Hafa (\*það) verið einhverjar mýs í baðkerinu?  
       *have it been some mice in bath.tub.the*  
       ‘Have there been any mice in the bath-tub?’  
    b. Í Reykjavík rignir (\*það) oft.  
       *in Reykjavík rains it often*  
       ‘In Reykjavík it is often raining.’

Not all expletive languages display expletive dropping, and those that do may vary in terms of which expletive contexts require dropping, and/or if dropping is mandatory or facultative. In Icelandic it is mandatory in both E-, M- and PT-sentences, while in German it is only mandatory in E-sentences, but illicit in M-sentences<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Be aware that languages which do not use any expletive subjects in the first place, are not, under this definition of the phenomenon, considered as having any sort of “general expletive dropping”. The way I have defined the phenomenon above is purely descriptive, in light of which languages without expletives are simply described as not having them. The term *expletive dropping*, on the other hand, is used to describe a distributional peculiarity in languages which *do* have expletives.

Faroese displays expletive dropping in the same contexts as Icelandic, but whereas dropping is mandatory in Icelandic, the literature states that it is optional in Faroese (Thráinsson et al. 2004: 286-287). Hence both (3a) and (3b) are possible renditions of the same English sentence (examples from Thráinsson et al. 2004, p. 286):

- (3) a. Eru tað mýs í baðikarinum?  
*are it mice in bath.tub.the*
- b. Eru mýs í baðikarinum?  
*are mice in bath.tub.the*  
 ‘Are there mice in the bath-tub?’

But every claim of optionality in grammar awakes the suspicion that the researcher promoting this claim simply is unaware of what really constitutes the distinction between the presence and absence of the purportedly optional element – be that a syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, stylistic or other distinction. This paper presents an effort to go deeper into this matter, in pursuit of unveiling factors which determine whether expletives will be dropped or pertained in expletive contexts.

## 1.2. A theory of expletive subjects

The main part of this paper presents the results from a fieldwork trip to the Faroe Islands in August 2008, where I presented informants (53 in all) with a questionnaire of sentences in Faroese (21 in all). The sentences were all instances of expletive contexts in which the pre-verbal position was filled by a non-expletive constituent, thus establishing the general conditions for expletive dropping, but they varied with respect to whether the expletive subject was dropped or retained. The informants were asked to evaluate each sentence with grades on a scale from 1 (completely unacceptable) to 5 (completely acceptable). The final statistics of grades across the sentences in the questionnaire should thus indicate in which instances dropping was preferred, and in which instances retaining it was preferred.

The questionnaire itself was based on a theory of expletive subjects, which the author has recently developed (cf. Eriksen, in progress). To present the entire theory here would go far beyond the borders of this paper, both metaphorically and physically speaking, but I will give a short résumé.

I oppose the standard view that expletive subjects are semantically empty items, licensed on purely formal grounds. Instead I have tried to offer a functional analysis of the phenomenon, taking my point of departure in a functional-typological approach. It should be noted that there have also been earlier attempts to analyse expletives as being (to some extent) referential,

cf. Bolinger (1970), Bennis (1986) and Hoekstra and Mulder (1990). See also Falk (1993, pp. 78-105 and also pp. 106-113) for a summary of referential and non-referential analyses of expletive subjects.

My hypothesis is that expletive subjects are licensed not by a *subject* requirement, but by a *topic* requirement. I use a functional-typological definition of topics, developed by Maslova and Bernini (2006), according to whom there are three different types of topics: *h*(anging)-topics, *f*(ronted)-topics and *s*(ubject)-topics. Only the latter two will concern us here.

*F*-topics are topics that have been fronted to a sentence-initial topic position, and prototypically they are topics which refer to the stage of the event (the majority of *f*-topics are adverbial phrases). Among various topic functions (like new topics, old topics, contrastive topics) they prototypically express contrastive topics.

*S*-topics are a subset of grammatical subjects, i.e. unless a subject is used in certain constructions like presentational constructions ('Into the room came a man'), subjects generally refer to a topical entity, and it is this latter group which M&B call *s*-topics. *S*-topics prototypically refers to the primary participant of the event, and among the various topic functions they may have, they prototypically express *continuous* topics, i.e. a topic which is a central, on-going topic to the current conversation.

Finally it should be noted that Maslova and Bernini's theory of topics allows sentences to have more than one topic, provided that the topics are of different types, i.e. a sentence may both have a fronted non-subject phrase and a topical subject, like the words 'yesterday' and 'I' in 'Yesterday I was at home'. They do not, however, consider post-verbal subjects topical, a point at which I disagree with them, although post-verbal subjects certainly can be *non-topical* too, like in the presentational construction above.

My hypothesis is thus that expletive subjects are licensed by an *s*-topic-requirement. This preserves the original subject requirement, but adds a functional aspect to it, namely that it also must refer to a topic that is continuous to the conversation. This also means that it must have a referent. I argue, on the basis of typological data from languages worldwide, and from diverse syntactic data in the local, North European expletive languages, that this referent is *the world*, in the sense of a locational and/or temporal background to the event.

As far as expletive dropping is concerned, I analyse it as being dependent on the nature of *f*-topics. As stated by Maslova and Bernini, and referred to above, an *f*-topic prototypically defines the background/setting of the event, i.e. it refers to the world, just like I have argued that expletive subjects do. It follows that in some languages *f*-topics may perform the same

function as the expletive subject, i.e. express a topic which refers to the world, so they can substitute for expletive subjects, causing expletive dropping.

The reason why this does not hold for all expletive languages, might be because there still is a categorical difference between *s*(ubject)-topics and *f*(ronted)-topics. Some languages might be stricter on the demand that the topic in question must be realized as a subject, while others are more lax, as long as there is a topic in the sentence which is co-referential with the world that would otherwise have been realised as the *s*-topic.

## 2. Structure of the questionnaire

### 2.1. Predictions

The following predictions were made on the distribution of expletive dropping in Faroese, on the basis of the theory sketched in section 1.2. The predictions are themselves used as basis for the questionnaire.

**Fronting of low adverbials will lead to expletive dropping more often than fronting of high adverbials.** I here adopt a narrow understanding of the term ‘low adverbial’ as an adverbial which refer to the concrete background of the event, i.e. most prominently locative adverbials and temporal adverbials. Given the hypothesis that *f*-topics may substitute for expletive subjects because of the former’s inherent reference to the world, this reference might be more enforced if the *f*-topic explicitly refers to the concrete time and/or place of the event, which would be the case if the *f*-topic is such an adverbial.

As far as high adverbials are concerned, I include not only sentence adverbials like ‘luckily’ and ‘regretfully’ under this term, but also aspectual adverbials like ‘suddenly’.

**E-sentences will display expletive dropping more often than other expletive sentences.** This follows both from the author’s theory, and also from documented use of expletive dropping in other languages. In German expletive dropping is compulsory in E-sentences, but not in other contexts. I argue that this is an effect of the world’s relation to the event (or state) in E-sentences.

E-sentences are used to express the existence of something, i.e. an event (or state) which requires two arguments: An existencèe and a location (a “world”). It follows that the world functions as a locative argument in E-sentences, unlike other expletive contexts, where the world does not have a similar argument status. Since the E-predicate itself thus subsumes a location in its argument structure, I argue that this enforces the interpretation that a

world is present even more strongly, and leaves the expletive more redundant. However, expletive dropping is still dependent on fronting, i.e. that an *f*-topic is expressed. This restriction comes from the topic requirement. Even though the expletive might be redundant as a reference to the world, it is still needed to satisfy the topic requirement, unless an *f*-topic can take its place.

**Non-contrastive use of expletive sentences will lead to expletive dropping less often than contrastive use of expletive sentences.** This follows from the prototypical pragmatic function of *f*-topics and *s*-topics. *F*-topics are prototypically used to express contrastive topics, while *s*-topics are prototypically used to express continuous topics, central to the discussion at hand.

As the theory behind expletive dropping is that expletive dropping is licensed by co-extension of the *f*-topic and the (expletive) *s*-topic, this co-extension will be reinforced if the two topics also share pragmatic function. I will argue that it is possible to construct different sentences where the expletive *s*-topic is used contrastively, just like the *f*-topic it is co-indexed with, and sentences where it is not used contrastively. This is exemplified with the sentences in (4):

- (4) a. In the cities there are people, but in the mountains there are trolls.  
 b. At home by himself he sings often, but at the inn there are so many people, so there he does not dare to sing.'

In (4a) the *f*-topics 'in the cities' and 'in the mountains' are contrasted, true to their prototypical function as *f*-topics. In addition, there is an expletive *there* in each of the two clauses. According to the theory outlined so far these are co-referential with the previously mentioned *f*-topics, and hence contrasting against each other.

In (4b) the *f*-topics 'at home' and 'at the inn' are contrasted, but only the latter of the two clauses contains an expletive. According to the theory it is co-referential with 'at the inn', but it is not in itself used pragmatically to be contrasted against another expletive. It follows that the latter is a *non-contrastive use of an expletive sentence*, even though it does contain a contrastive *f*-topic.

In the questionnaire I have included both explicitly contrastive sentences, like (4a), explicitly non-contrastive sentences, like (4b), and contextless sentences, like 'In the fridge at home there are ten beers'. However, I argue that sentences with *f*-topics have a contrastive reading by default, hence contrastive and contextless sentences are predicted to behave

more or less in the same way, and to be the unmarked option, whereas explicitly non-contrastive sentences are predicted to show a lesser degree of dropping. Consequently, in the listing of features below, contrastive and contextless sentences are not overtly marked as such, but non-contrastive sentences are separated from the rest.

## 2.2. Sentences

The sentences in the questionnaire were thus formulated so as to check how the different features listed in 2.1., and combinations of them, would conform to either expletive retaining or expletive dropping. For each combination of features there was given at least one retaining example, and one dropping example.

Apart from the features that were predicted to influence the use of expletives, it was also ensured that the examples displayed other feature oppositions that tend to cause variations in expletive sentences, in order to see if they would influence expletives too. Among these feature oppositions were verbal M-sentences vs. adjectival M-sentences (which in other languages sometimes license different expletives, but which are not known to license expletive dropping differently), E-sentences with existential verbs vs. E-sentences with passive verbs, locative low adverbials vs. temporal low adverbials, etc. However, as these features were not predicted to influence the outcome, they were not checked against all other possible variables in the questionnaire. As it turned out that the distinction between verbal and adjectival M-sentences in fact had a strong influence on expletive dropping (cf. section 4), this decision might be felt as unwise in hindsight. Hopefully, these features can be checked more thoroughly in future research.

For simplicity's sake, and in order to keep the questionnaire reasonably short, PT-sentences were left out of the research scope. No strong predictions were made before the fieldwork that PT-sentences would differ radically from M-sentences, only that they both would differ from E-sentences. However, as the research results proved that M-sentences were a more complex matter than at first thought, I do not wish to make any unfounded statements about expletive dropping in Faroese PT-sentences in either one or the other direction. If the opportunity comes, they should also be tested in future research.

Below is given a full list of the sentences given in the questionnaire. Here the sentences are ordered according to the features listed in section 2.1., but in the actual questionnaire they were listed in random order. The features are presented as follows: (1) *Sentence type (i.e. E- or M-sentence)*; (2) *adverbial type in the sentence initial position (i.e. low or high)*; (3)

*contrastiveness (only mentioned explicitly if the sentence is non-contrastive);*  
*(4) status of the expletive subject (i.e. whether it is retained or dropped).*

*E-sentence / low adverbial / retaining*

Í køliskápinum heima eru tað tíggju øl.

‘In the fridge at home there are ten beers.’

Í býunum búgva tað menniskjur, men í fjøllunum búgva tað trøll.

‘In the cities there live people, but in the mountains there live trolls.’

*E-sentence / low adverbial / non-contrastive / retaining*

Heima hjá sær sjálvum syngur hann ofta, men á kaffistovuni eru tað so nógv fólk, so har torir hann ikki at syngja.

‘At home by himself he sings often, but at the inn there are so many people, so there he does not dare to sing.’

*E-sentence / low adverbial / dropping*

Í Hetlandi eru eingi góð hotell.

‘On Shetland (there) are no good hotels.’

Í Noregi eru úlvar, men í Danmark eru bara revar.

‘In Norway (there) are wolves, but in Denmark (there) are only foxes.’

Fríggjadagin bleiv skotin ein hvítabjørn í Íslandi.

‘On Friday (there) was shot a polar bear on Iceland.’

*E-sentence / low adverbial / non-contrastive / dropping*

Í Fugloy búði eg í tjaldi, men við Gjógv var eitt gistingarhús, so tá búði eg har.

‘On Fugloy I lived in a tent, but in Gjógv (there) was a hotel, so then I lived there.’

*E-sentence / high adverbial / retaining*

Tíbetur vóru tað fleiri øl í køliskápinum.

‘Luckily there were more beers in the fridge.’

*E-sentence / high adverbial / dropping*

Tíbetur er ikki hundagalskapur í Føroyum.

‘Luckily (there) is no rabies in the Faroes.’

*M-sentence / low adverbial / retaining*

Í Sahara er tað heitt.

‘In Sahara it is hot.’



Í gjár var tað so kalt, at eg ikki kundi ganga úti.  
 ‘Yesterday it was so cold, that I could not go outside.’

Í Klaksvík regnar tað næstan altíð.  
 ‘In Klaksvík it almost always rains.’

Í Føroyum regnaði tað, men í Noregi kavaði tað.  
 ‘In the Faroes it rained, but in Norway it snowed.’

*M-sentence / low adverbial / non-contrastive / retaining*

Fríggjakvøldið fóru vit á kaffistovu, men leygarkvøldið var tað so kalt, so tá blivu vit heima.  
 ‘Friday night we went to the inn, but Saturday night it was so cold, so then we stayed at home.’

*M-sentence / low adverbial / dropping*

Á Norðpólinum er kalt.  
 ‘On the North Pole (it) is cold.’  
 Í Runavík var kalt, men í Havn var heitt.  
 ‘In Runavík (it) was cold, but in Torshavn (it) was hot.’  
 Í norsku fjøllunum kavar ofta.  
 ‘In the Norwegian mountains (it) is often snowing.’  
 Nú regnar.  
 ‘Now (it) is raining.’

*M-sentence / low adverbial / non-contrastive / dropping*

Í Føroyum spældi bólkurin uttandura, men í Íslandi regnaði, so har spældu teir innandura.  
 ‘In the Faroes the band played outdoors, but on Iceland (it) rained, so there they played indoors.’

*M-sentence / high adverbial / retaining*

Bráðliga bleiv tað kalt.  
 ‘Suddenly it got cold.’

*M-sentence / high adverbial / dropping*

Tað er so kalt úti! Møguliga kavar í morgin.  
 ‘It is so cold outside! Possibly (it) snows tomorrow.’

### 3. Results

As already stated in section 1.2., the sentences were given grades on a scale from 1 (completely unacceptable) to 5 (completely acceptable). In table A below the informant responses for each sentence in the questionnaire have been added together to a total, and the average score for each sentence have been calculated from this total (i.e. TOTAL / 53). The sentences are listed in declining order with respect to their totals. At the bottom of the table the average total and the average score for the entire table have been calculated.

Table A:

| Sentence:  | Total: | Average: |
|--|--------|----------|
| Á Norðpólinum er kalt.   | 263    | 4,96     |
| Í Klaksvík regnar tað næstan altíð.  | 257    | 4,85     |
| Nú regnar.   | 250    | 4,72     |
| Í Føroyum spældi bólkurin uttandura, men í Íslandi regnaði, so har spældu teir innandura.                          | 249    | 4,7      |
| Í Hetlandi eru eingi góð hotell.   | 248    | 4,68     |
| Tíbetur vóru tað fleiri øl í køliskápinum.   | 248    | 4,68     |
| Í Noregi eru úlvar, men í Danmark eru bara revar.  | 243    | 4,59     |
| Bráðliga bleiv tað kalt.   | 243    | 4,59     |
| Heima hjá sær sjálvum syngur hann ofta, men á kaffistovuni eru tað so nógv fólk, so har torir hann ikki at syngja. | 243    | 4,59     |
| Í Føroyum regnaði tað, men í Noregi kavaði tað.  | 242    | 4,57     |
| Tíbetur er ikki hundagalskapur í Føroyum.  | 238    | 4,5      |
| Í norsku fjøllunum kavur ofta.   | 235    | 4,43     |
| Í Fugloy búði eg í tjaldi, men við Gjógv var eitt gistingarhús, so tá búði eg har.                                 | 233    | 4,4      |
| Í Runavík var kalt, men í Havn var heitt.  | 231    | 4,36     |
| Í Sahara er tað heitt.   | 230    | 4,34     |
| Í gjár var tað so kalt, at eg ikki kundi ganga úti.  | 229    | 4,32     |
| Tað er so kalt úti! Møguliga kavur í morgin.   | 216    | 4,08     |
| Í býunum búgva tað menniskjur, men í fjøllunum búgva tað trøll.  | 215    | 4,06     |
| Fríggjakvøldið fóru vit á kaffistovu, men leygarkvøldið var tað so kalt, so tá blivu vit heima.                    | 211    | 3,98     |
| Í køliskápinum heima eru tað tíggju øl.  | 175    | 3,3      |
| Fríggjadagin bleiv skotin ein hvítbjørn í Íslandi.   | 140    | 2,64     |
| <b>Total:</b>  | 4839   | 91,34    |
| <b>Average:</b>  | 230    | 4,34     |

However, the data presented in table A may be slightly misleading, as many informants rated sentences low for reasons that are totally unrelated to expletives. Giving explicit reasons for negative responses was not a part of

the original task set to the informants, but in many cases the informants would by themselves add an explicit explanation to their evaluations, and in other cases I would ask if they could add an explanation, especially in cases which seemed dubious.

It turned out that in several cases the informants would give a rating lower than 5 for reasons unrelated to expletives – i.e. other syntactic issues (e.g. word order patterns unrelated to expletives), lexical issues (e.g. the use of a word in the example that they felt uncomfortable with), semantic/pragmatic issues (e.g. interpretation(s) of (parts of) the sentence unrelated to expletives was felt as strange to them), non-linguistic issues (e.g. the informant would not accept a sentence referring to trolls as he did not believe in trolls), etc. In many other cases, of course, it turned out that the presence/absence of an expletive was (one of) the reason(s) why the informant gave a negative evaluation of the sentences. I kept track of whenever the informants would give explicit explanations, and whether that explanation would be related to expletives or not.

As some of the sentences tended to get a lot of negative evaluations due to non-expletive reasons, many of these sentences have received a too low position in table A, and their relative position to other sentences could be wrong. In an attempt to avoid such miscalculations, I made recalculations of the entire data material, in which negative responses (i.e. ratings lower than 5) which had been attributed only to reasons unrelated to expletives, were readjusted to 5 points each. These adjusted results are presented in table B below. This clearly is a bit risky adjustment, as the informant *might* have reacted on the presence/absence of an expletive in the example too, even though this was not said explicitly. Consequently, the data in table B are not secure evidence on their own, but should always be balanced against the results in table A (and vice versa).

Table B:

| <b>Sentence:</b>   | <b>Total:</b> | <b>Average:</b> |
|--|---------------|-----------------|
| Á Norðpólinum er kalt.   | 263           | 4,96            |
| Tíbetur er ikki hundagalskapur í Føroyum.  | 261           | 4,93            |
| Í Føroyum spældi bólkurin uttandura, men í Íslandi regnaði, so har spældu teir innandura.                          | 260           | 4,91            |
| Í Klaksvík regnar tað næstan altíð.  | 259           | 4,89            |
| Í Hetlandi eru eingi góð hotell.   | 259           | 4,89            |
| Bráðliga bleiv tað kalt.   | 253           | 4,77            |
| Heima hjá sær sjálvum syngur hann ofta, men á kaffistovuni eru tað so nógv folk, so har torir hann ikki at syngja. | 253           | 4,77            |
| Í Noregi eru úlvar, men í Danmark eru bara revar.  | 252           | 4,76            |
| Í Føroyum regnaði tað, men í Noregi kavaði tað.  | 252           | 4,76            |
| Í Fugloy búði eg í tjaldi, men við Gjógv var eitt gistingarhús, so tá búði eg har.                                 | 251           | 4,74            |
| Nú regnar.   | 250           | 4,72            |
| Tíbetur vóru tað fleiri øl í køliskápinum.   | 250           | 4,72            |
| Í Runavík var kalt, men í Havn var heitt.  | 248           | 4,68            |
| Í norsku fjøllunum kavar ofta.   | 245           | 4,62            |
| Í gjár var tað so kalt, at eg ikki kundi ganga úti.  | 243           | 4,59            |
| Fríggjakvøldið fóru vit á kaffistovu, men leygarkvøldið var tað so kalt, so tá blivu vit heima.                    | 239           | 4,51            |
| Í Sahara er tað heitt.   | 234           | 4,42            |
| Tað er so kalt úti! Møguliga kavar í morgin.   | 229           | 4,32            |
| Fríggjadagin bleiv skotin ein hvítbjørn í Íslandi.   | 223           | 4,21            |
| Í býunum búgva tað menniskjur, men í fjøllunum búgva tað trøll.  | 223           | 4,21            |
| Í køliskápinum heima eru tað tíggju øl.  | 197           | 3,72            |
| <b>Total:</b>  | 5144          | 97,1            |
| <b>Average:</b>  | 245           | 4,62            |

Finally, in table C below, the explicit responses that *were* related to expletive subjects are treated. These responses are presented as “explicit reaction points”: Each time an informant explicitly stated that the presence/absence of an expletive was (one of) the reason(s) (s)he gave a grade lower than 5 to the given sentence, this response earned that sentence one “explicit reaction point”. Each sentence is thus listed with the total amount of explicit reaction points it accumulated. The sentences are listed with their total of points in ascending order, so that sentences which have received a high number of points are ranked low in the table, making the presentation of sentences in table C comparable to table A and B: The lower a sentence is found in any of the three tables, the more negatively it was received by the informants.

## EXPLETIVE DROPPING IN FAROESE

Table C by itself is even less trustworthy than table A and B, given that one must assume that informants very often did not state at all why they gave negative response, so that there are high numbers left out of this table. Still, there are some very valuable data here – notice, for instance, that the two lowest ranking sentences have received a total of points which is clearly out of proportion with the rest of the table, thus emphasizing that informants clearly reacted on the use of expletives in these examples. On the other hand, the “polar bear sentence”, which ranks extremely low in A and B, ranks at the top with zero points in C. As additional informant reactions clearly indicate that informants generally reacted to the word order of the sentence, and not to the absence of an expletive, its position in table C gives a far more correct description than its position in A and B. Thus, even though they cannot be reckoned as totally reliable on their own, the data from table C will be used as supporting evidence to the other tables.

Table C:

| <b>Sentence:</b>   | <b>Total:</b> |
|--|---------------|
| Fríggjadagin bleiv skotin ein hvítabjørn í Íslandi.  | 0             |
| Í Fugloy búði eg í tjaldi, men við Gjógv var eitt gistingarhús, so tá búði eg har.                                 | 0             |
| Í Noregi eru úlvar, men í Danmark eru bara revar.  | 0             |
| Á Norðpólinum er kalt.   | 0             |
| Í norsku fjøllunum kavar ofta.   | 1             |
| Í Føroyum spældi bólkurin uttandura, men í Íslandi regnaði, so har spældu teir innandura.                          | 1             |
| Tíbetur er ikki hundagalskapur í Føroyum.  | 1             |
| Í Hetlandi eru eingi góð hotell.   | 1             |
| Bráðliga bleiv tað kalt.   | 2             |
| Fríggjakvøldið fóru vit á kaffistovu, men leygarkvøldið var tað so kalt, so tá blivu vit heima.                    | 3             |
| Í Runavík var kalt, men í Havn var heitt.  | 3             |
| Í gjár var tað so kalt, at eg ikki kundi ganga úti.  | 3             |
| Í Klaksvík regnar tað næstan altíð.  | 3             |
| Heima hjá sær sjálvum syngur hann ofta, men á kaffistovuni eru tað so nógv fólk, so har torir hann ikki at syngja. | 3             |
| Í Sahara er tað heitt.   | 4             |
| Í Føroyum regnaði tað, men í Noregi kavaði tað.  | 4             |
| Nú regnar.   | 5             |
| Tíbetur vóru tað fleiri øl í køliskápinum.   | 5             |
| Tað er so kalt úti! Møguliga kavar í morgin.   | 7             |
| Í býunum bógva tað menniskjur, men í fjøllunum bógva tað trøll.  | 15            |
| Í køliskápinum heima eru tað tíggju øl.  | 16            |

## 4. Patterns

### 4.1. Fronted low adverbial + E-sentence

This is clearly a strong dropping context, as predicted in section 2.1. The retaining sentences *Í kóliskápinum heima eru tað tíggju øl* and *Í býunum búgva tað menniskjur, men í fjøllunum búgva tað trøll*, come out very low in all tables. In table B and C they occupy the very bottom slots, and in table C they score 16 and 15 points respectively, whereas the third sentence from the bottom is down at 7 points, marking a clear prominence in informant reactions on the use of expletives in these sentences.

As opposed to this, E-sentences with fronted low adverbials where the expletive *is* dropped, come out high. *Í Hetlandi eru eingi góð hotel* is fifth from top in both A and B, and takes only 1 point in C. The sentences *Í Noregi eru úlvar, men í Danmark eru bara revar* and *Í Fugloy búði eg í tjaldi, men við Gjógv var eitt gistingarhús, so tá búði eg har* come out slightly lower in both A and B, but the former is still well above the average score in both tables. The latter ranks equally well in B, and they both take zero hits in C.

The only anomaly to this pattern is the retaining sentence *Heima hjá sær sjálvum syngur hann ofta, men á kaffistovuni eru tað so nógv fólk, so har torir hann ikki at syngja*. Unlike the two previously mentioned retaining sentences it ranks relatively high in both A and B, well above average score too, and while it does take 3 hits in C, this is still a far cry from the 15 and 16 hits of the other retaining sentences. And comparing with the dropping sentences, it even ranks just above both *Í Noregi eru úlvar, men í Danmark eru bara revar* and *Í Fugloy búði eg í tjaldi, men við Gjógv var eitt gistingarhús, so tá búði eg har* in table B. This could be explained with the effect of contrasting predicted in 2.1., and will be returned to below.

As mentioned in the description of table C above, the intended dropping sentence *Friggjadagin bleiv skotin ein hvítabjørn í Íslandi* was generally rejected by the informants for reasons unrelated to expletives. The informants did not accept the NP ‘polar bear’ in object position, and when asked, they responded that they preferred a different word order. Even though the syntactic position of ‘polar bear’ is essential to the syntax of E-sentences across Nordic languages, it seems independent of the phenomenon of expletive dropping as such. In any case, the almost uniform rejection of this sentence deprives it of any value to this investigation, so it will be ignored in the further analyses.

#### 4.2. Fronted high adverbial + E-sentence

This context is somewhat less strict on dropping, as the retaining sentence *Tíbetur vóry tað fleiri øl í køliskápinum* comes out far better than retaining E-sentences with low adverbials in all tables. Still expletive dropping is the favoured option also in this context, but this conclusion only appears from the data as they are given in tables B and C. *Tíbetur vóry tað fleiri øl í køliskápinum* is rated higher than the corresponding dropping sentence (*Tíbetur er ikki hundagalskapur í Føroyum*) in the unadjusted table in A. In the adjusted table in B, however, it is severely bypassed by the dropping sentence, which ends up in the very top range of the table. Moreover, the retaining sentence takes five reaction points in C, while the dropping sentence takes only one.

#### 4.3. Fronted low adverbial + adjectival M-sentence

This is another strong dropping context, although retaining is slightly more licit than in E-sentences. Still, the three retaining sentences *Í Sahara er tað heitt* and *Í gjár var tað so kalt, at eg ikki kundi ganga úti* and *Fríggjakvøldið fóru vit á kaffistovu, men leygarkvøldið var tað so kalt, so tá blivu vit heima* all group together in the lower part of the tables A and B, below all other adjectival M-sentences. They also take 4, 3 and 3 points respectively in table C.

Turning to dropping sentences with the same features, the sentence *Á Norðpólinum er kalt* comes out on the very top of both table A and B, and has zero points in C. From this one would be tempted to conclude that dropping is the undisputedly preferred option in this context, but the picture gets more complicated when a second dropping sentence, *Í Runavík var kalt, men í Havn var heitt*, is taken into consideration. In both table A and B it comes out only right above the disfavoured retaining sentences, and it takes three hits in C. It could be that the strong emphasis on contrasting in this sentence is somehow involved, but for now I cannot explain this result any further.

#### 4.4. Fronted high adverbial + adjectival M-sentences

Like the corresponding context in E-sentences, this context is much less strict on dropping than sentences with low adverbials. The retaining sentence *Bráðliga bleiv tað kalt* scores quite high in both A and B, and takes only two reaction points in C. Regretfully, a corresponding dropping sentence was not included in the questionnaire, so a full analysis of this context cannot be given, but at least it can be concluded that retaining is more acceptable in this context than with a corresponding low adverbial.

#### 4.5. Fronted low adverbial + verbal M-sentences

This is a context about which it is hard to draw any clear conclusion, but a very important observation must be emphasized: In contrast to adjectival M-sentences, retaining does not seem to cause that much problems in this context. Retaining sentences like *Í Klaksvík regnar tað næstan altíð* and *Í Føroyum regnaði tað, men í Noregi kavaði tað* score well, in particular the former, which is in the highest range in both A and B. However, both sentences take some reaction points in C, 3 and 4 respectively, but considering the very high ranking of *Í Klaksvík regnar tað næstan altíð* in A and B, the 3 hits it takes in C are probably accidental and insignificant.

At the same time dropping seems to be just as acceptable in this context, although with some minor peculiar drawbacks. The non-contrastive dropping sentence *Í Føroyum spældi bólkurin uttandura, men í Íslandi regnaði, so har spældu teir innandura* scores in the highest range in both A and B, and takes only one point in C. Slightly more unclear are the results for the contrastive sentence *Í norsku fjøllunum kavar ofta* and the contextless *Nú regnar*. The former ends up in the low-mid range in both A and B, but either at or right above average rating, and takes only one point in C. *Nú regnar* does much better in A, and relatively better in B, but strangely for such a simple sentence, takes 5 points in C.

Notice in particular that the order between the non-contrastive dropping sentence and the other dropping sentences is the opposite of what was predicted in 2.1.

#### 4.6. Fronted high adverbial + verbal M-sentences

Interestingly, unlike other checked contexts with fronted high adverbials, this context seems to be quite negative towards dropping. The dropping sentence (*Tað er so kalt úti!*) *Møguliga kavar í morgin* is in the lowest range in both A and B, only beaten by retaining E-sentences with fronted low adverbials (and the polar bear sentence) in B. One could assume that the low score, despite of it also being low in the adjusted table, were attributable to reasons apart from expletives, as many informants reacted on the tense of the verb *kavar*, and preferred a future tense construction, but this sentence also took 7 hits in C, and moreover, if informants reproduced a future tense version of the sentence orally, a high number of them (11) added an expletive.

Regretfully, also this sentence lacks a corresponding retaining partner, so it cannot be checked whether a retaining sentence would have scored any better, although informant reactions on the expletive, and the tendency to add an expletive in orally produced variants, makes it seem likely.



#### 4.7. Effects of contrasting

As we have seen already in 4.1., the retaining non-contrastive E-sentence *Heima hjá sær sjálvum syngur hann ofta, men á kaffistovuni eru tað so nógv fólk, so har torir hann ikki at syngja* breaks with the general pattern of dropping and retaining in E-sentences. Whereas retaining in E-sentences with fronted low adverbials is generally given extremely low ratings, the non-contrastive sentence is quite acceptable, just as much as dropping E-sentences are. This can be explained through the predicted effect of non-contrasting, outlined in 2.1. However, it is interesting to note that this effect does not extend to M-sentences. The retaining non-contrastive adjectival M-sentence *Fríggjakvøldið fóru vit á kaffistovu, men leygarkvøldið var tað so kalt, so tá blivu vit heima* comes out just as badly as other retaining adjectival M-sentences with fronted low adverbials.

While retaining seems to be quite OK with non-contrasting E-sentences, this effect does not seem to put dropping in disfavour for the same context. The dropping non-contrastive E-sentence *Í Fugloy búði eg í tjaldi, men við Gjógv var eitt gistingarhús, so tá búði eg har* ranks just as high as other dropping E-sentences, and takes no hits in C.

As far as dropping non-contrastive M-sentences are concerned, the questionnaire only included a verbal M-sentence (*Í Føroyum spældi bólkurin uttandura, men í Íslandi regnaði, so har spældu teir innandura*), and as we have seen that results are quite different for verbal and adjectival M-sentences, it is not really comparable with the token retaining non-contrasting M-sentence, as the latter has an adjectival M-predicate. Nevertheless, comparing it with other verbal M-sentences, one must note that it comes out extremely well in all tables, as do other *retaining* verbal M-sentences, while other *dropping* verbal M-sentences possibly fare a bit less well, although the data are, as said in section 4.5. above, a bit unclear on the general status of the latter. Still, this mirrors the pattern from other data in verbal M-sentences, i.e. that they produce results which are quite the opposite of what was predicted.

#### 4.8. General analysis

The predictions promoted in section 2.1. were mostly met. It turned out that fronting of low adverbials conditioned expletive dropping to a higher extent than fronting of high adverbials. Furthermore, E-sentences were shown to condition expletive dropping to a higher extent than other expletive contexts. Not surprisingly, then, the combination of the features of fronted low adverbials and E-sentences was shown to be the strictest of all feature sets, displaying very strong conditions for expletive dropping, and negative

reactions towards retaining. Finally, the predicted effect of contrasting could possibly be argued to hold for retaining E-sentences, but contrary to predictions, it seemingly did not extend to other contexts.

Of the more unexpected results, it turned out that there was a clear difference between adjectival M-predicates and verbal M-predicates. The former group conformed to the prediction that fronting of low adverbials would require expletive dropping to a higher extent than fronting of high adverbials, but verbal M-predicates broke with this pattern. Retaining with fronted low adverbials turned out to be fully acceptable in this latter group, while it was unclear whether dropping was favoured or slightly disfavoured, something which would have made the relationship between retaining and dropping the complete opposite of what it is in other types of expletive sentences. With non-contrastive verbal M-sentences, and with fronted high adverbials in verbal M-sentences this opposite relationship in fact seemed to hold, as expletive dropping came out well with the former, but was clearly disfavoured for the latter. Regretfully, the questionnaire did not include corresponding retaining sentences, so a full check could not be made.

The split between verbal and adjectival M-predicates should be possible to relate to similar situations in other languages, like Danish (Eriksen, in progress). Danish does not allow expletive dropping, but it has two different expletives: *der* ('there') and *det* ('it'). *Der* is the only possible option for E-sentences, and *det* is preferred for PT-sentences, but in M-sentences the picture gets much more complicated. Verbal M-predicates take *det* exclusively (5a), while adjectival M-predicates allow both *der* and *det* (5b), with a subtle and so far unelicited semantic difference.

- (5) a. Det regner udenfor. / \*?? Der regner udenfor.  
*it rains outside there rains outside*  
 'It is raining outside.'
- b. Det er koldt udenfor. / Der er koldt udenfor.  
*it is cold.N outside there is cold.N outside*  
 'It is cold outside.'

In many non-European languages adjectival M-predicates require some grammaticalised lexical subject/quasi-expletive subject, referring to a location ('land', 'world', 'place', 'surroundings', etc.), a period in time ('time', 'day', etc.) or the atmospherical background ('air', 'weather', etc.), whereas verbal M-events have a totally different structure – they take the weather event itself as the subject, while the verb is either cognate with that subject (i.e. 'rain rains'), or is some kind of grammaticalised verb for precipitational subjects (i.e. 'rain falls', 'rain goes') (cf. Eriksen et al., in

progress). An example is given in (6), from the Japanese isolate Ainu. Stative weather predicates in Ainu take an incorporated subject *sir-*, meaning ‘appearance’ / ‘land’ / ‘circumstances’, while active weather events, like raining, snowing and hailing, are constructed with the precipitation type as the subject, and the verb *as* (‘to stand’) as the main verb:

- (6) Ainu (Anna Bugaeva, p.c.)
- a.     *sir*            *-popke*  
        *appearance-be.warm*  
        ‘The weather is warm’
  - b.     *apto / ukas / kawkaw as*  
        *rain snow hail stand*  
        ‘It is raining / snowing / hailing’

Both the Danish and the Non-European data indicate that there is a stronger interpretation of a location (“the world”) being involved in adjectival M-sentences than in verbal M-sentences. Danish adjectival M-sentences share the same expletive as Danish E-sentences, a context which has been shown to have a very strong locative interpretation, and the Non-European data show that adjectival M-sentences tend to have a locational/world-type of subject, while verbal M-events are coded differently. It should therefore come as no surprise that Faroese adjectival M-sentences are much more in line with the predictions made on the hypothesis that expletives are world subjects.

The question remains how to interpret the diverging verbal M-sentences. In Eriksen (in progress) I mention the hypothesis that expletives occasionally might have other references than the world, and that it could be that expletives in verbal M-sentences might refer to the weather phenomena itself, i.e. the precipitation. This would mean that a sentence like ‘It is raining’ could actually have a reading like ‘(The) rain is raining’. As mentioned in the paragraph on Non-European languages above, this is far from unheard of in languages which make a split in the encoding of adjectival and verbal M-sentences. However, this hypothesis is still speculative as far as European expletives are concerned, so I will not promote this as a certain interpretation of the diverging data on Faroese verbal M-sentences, but simply state that the latter are still in need of more research.

## 5. Summary

This paper has dealt with the purported optionality of Faroese expletive dropping. I have made a number of predictions on when expletive dropping

would be likely to occur or not in Faroese, on the basis of a theory that (A) expletive subjects are licensed due to an *s*(ubject)-topic requirement, (B) that expletive subjects refer to the world, in the sense of a background/setting to the event, and (C) that expletive dropping occurs because *f*(ronted)-topics may substitute for expletive subjects, because the former inherently refer to the world as well. The predictions for dropping in Faroese were that (1) fronting of low adverbials would require dropping more strictly than fronting of high adverbials; (2) that E-sentences would require dropping more strictly than other expletive contexts, and (3) that non-contrasting sentences with fronted adverbials would require dropping *less* strictly than contrasting and/or unmarked sentences with fronted adverbials.

Predictions 1 and 2 were shown to hold, and prediction 3 seems to hold for retaining E-sentences, but not for other contexts. In addition there turned out to be a difference between adjectival M-sentences and verbal M-sentences. While the former clearly conform to prediction 1, the latter do not, and even seem to follow the opposite pattern. This split between adjectival and verbal M-sentences is arguably possible to relate to similar splits in other languages, but no strong conclusions were made as to why verbal M-sentences diverge from the general pattern.

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