

# Variably Overt and Empty Expletives with Finite (and Non-finite) Clauses in Early English

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ICEHL 17, 21<sup>st</sup> August 2012

## 0. Introduction

- In Old (OE) and Middle English (ME) expletives are variably overt or absent with finite *that*-clause associates (1) and non-finite associates (2):

- (1) a. *Æfter þisum gelamp* [þæt ða leasan hæðenan wrægdon Philippum to ðam casere ]  
after this happened that the false heathens betrayed P. to the emperor  
'After this, it happened that the false heathens betrayed Philip to the emperor'  
(coelive,ÆLS\_[Eugenia]:284.361)
- b. and **hit** *gelamp* [þæt se gedwola rad ymbe sum ærende]  
and **EXPL** happened that the heretic rode about some errand  
'And it happened that this heretic rode to carry out an errand'  
(coelive,ÆLS[Ash\_Wed]:50.2729)
- (2) a. *swa gedafenað* [to ahebbenne þone mannes Sunu]  
so behoves to up-lift the man's son  
'so it behoves to lift up the son of this man'  
(coaelhom, ÆHom\_13:38.1905)
- b. **hit** *gedafenað* [Drihtne to gehyrsumienne swiðor þonne mannum]  
**EXPL** behoves Lord to obey rather than men  
'It behoves to obey the Lord rather than men'  
(coaelhom, ÆHom\_9:178.1383)

- The two options are not conditioned by linguistic factors (Mitchell 1985, §1035), but undergo a syntactic change such that null expletives disappear from the language<sup>1</sup>.

year	overt expletive	no overt expletive	% overt
890	181	97	<b>65.1</b>
940	33	38	<b>46.5</b>
1010	98	31	<b>76.0</b>
1200	20	5	<b>80.0</b>
1300	24	3	<b>88.9</b>
1400	155	22	<b>87.6</b>

$\chi^2=72.282$ ,  $df=5$ ,  $p<0.001$

**Table 1:** Frequencies of overt vs. no overt expletives, active verbs, no experiencer, with a finite *that*-clause

<sup>1</sup> Here, and elsewhere, the data was collected with the electronic, syntactically parsed corpora YCOE2 (Taylor et al. 2003) and PPCME2 (Kroch & Taylor 2000).

- (3) a. *Ʒa wearð gefylled [Ʒæt his swiðre hand wunað hal]*  
 then was fulfilled that his right hand lived whole  
 ‘Then it was fulfilled that his right hand was made whole’  
 (coaelive,ÆLS\_[Oswald]:169.5477)
- b. **Hit** wearð Ʒa gefylled [Ʒæt ealle ða femnan gewytan of worulde]  
 EXPL was then fulfilled that all the women departed of world  
 ‘It was then fulfilled that all those women departed of this world’  
 (coaelive,ÆLS\_[Julian\_and\_Basilissa]:96.994)

year	overt expletive	no overt expletive	% overt
890	123	179	<b>40.7</b>
940	46	47	<b>49.5</b>
1010	65	61	<b>51.6</b>
1250	10	9	<b>52.6</b>
1450	70	27	<b>72.2</b>

$\chi^2=29.515$ ,  $df=4$ ,  $p<0.001$

**Table 2:** Frequencies of overt vs. no overt expletives, passive verbs, no experiencer, with a finite *that*-clause

- outline:
  - analysis of variation with finite clause associates and evidence
  - conclusion

## 1. Analysis with Finite Clauses

### 1.1. Non-Nominative Subjects

Early English could subcategorize for subjects other than nominative determiner phrases

- **non-nominative DPs :**

- (4) *him sceamige eft on Domesdæg*  
 him.DAT shames.sbjctv again on Doomsday  
 ‘he should feel ashamed again on Doomsday’  
 (coaelhom,ÆHom\_28:103.4065)

evidence :

**A)** conjunction with nominative subjects (e.g. Allen 1995):

- (5) *hie [ hie onfooð ðære lare sua micle lusðlicor ]*  
 they they.NOM receive the lore so much gladder  
 & [ ~~him~~ sua micle ma scamiað hiera unðeawes ]  
 and them.DAT so much more shames their fault  
 ‘they will receive the advice so much more gladly and [they] will be so much more  
 ashamed of their fault.’  
 (cocura,CP:40.293.21.1939)

( cf. *German:* \*Er [er sagt von sich fleißig zu sein], aber [~~ihm~~ käme die Aufgabe zu schwer vor].  
 vs. *Icelandic:* <sup>ok</sup>Hann [~~hann~~ segist vera duglegur.] en [~~honum~~ finnst verkefnið of þungt.]  
 (Wunderlich 2003: 590) )

**B)** stranding of *self* only occurs with subjects:

- (6) a. ac he<sub>i</sub> eode sylf<sub>i</sub> to þam yttran gete,  
but he went self to the outer gate  
'But he himself went to the outer gate'  
(coaelive,ÆLS\_[Martin]:1166.6740)
- b. ... ðæt hie sua fægenigen oðra monna godra weorca  
... that they so rejoice other men's good works  
  
ðæt hie<sub>i</sub> eac selfe<sub>i</sub> ðæs ilcan lyste  
that them.ACC also self the same pleases  
'... that they rejoice so much in other men's good works that they themselves also  
desire the same'  
(cocura,CP:34.229.13.1502)

o **clausal subjects**

- (7) a. Helped [þæt se mete hreðe & wel mylteð].  
helps [that the food quickly and well digests]  
'[That the food digests quickly and well] is helpful'  
(coverhom,HomU\_11\_[ScraggVerc\_7]:97.1131)
- b. Þæt æreste wundor wæs  
that first wonder was  
  
[þæt þreo tungolcraeftegan comon fram eastdæles mægðum to Criste.]  
[that three astrologers came from east-part tribes to Christ]  
'[That three astrologers came from the tribes of the East to Christ] was the first  
wonder'  
(comart3,Mart\_5\_[Kotzor]:Ja6,A.6.35)

→ contra Traugott 1992, Fischer 1992, Fischer & van der Leek 1983:

“under the assumption that the *þæt*-clause functions as subject, there is not a readily available explanation why such clauses never occur in initial (=canonical subject) position” (Fischer & van der Leek 1983: 349)

→ why should position be a knockout argument against subjecthood? (Mitchell 1985, §1963)

→ complement clauses do not frequently occur in clause-initial position either

→ subjects can occur in places other than the canonical, preverbal subject position

→ alternative: empty expletive with associate?

evidence:

**A)** associates must be extraposed; subject clauses can remain in situ

- (8) a. (cf. German:  
 \*...weil es [vielleicht [[dass die Aktie immerzu sinkt] [Probleme in der Firma]]] beweist.  
 ...weil es [vielleicht [Probleme in der Firma]] beweist, [dass die Aktie immerzu sinkt].)
- b. Context: (cocura,CP:51.395.11.2678) - (cocura,CP:51.395.23.2685)  
 “About this, Paul spoke very well with few words in his Letter to the Corinthians.  
 He said:  
 (1) those who have a wife, those should be as if they did not have a wife,  
 (2) and those who weep, those should be as if they did not weep,  
 (3) and those who bliss, those should be as if they did not bliss.  
 → He then has a wife as if he had none who has her for bodily comfort, and [who],  
 nevertheless, for the pleasure and for the love, does not refrain himself from better  
 works.  
 → That one weeps and not weeps, that then means that one weeps the tears of this  
 world, and nevertheless knows that one shall be comforted, and have bliss in the  
 eternal joy”
- c. → & eft is [ðæt mon blissige & ne blissige] [ðæt mon aehbbe his mod]  
 and again is that one bliss and not bliss that one arise his mind  
 ‘and again, [that a man rejoices and yet does not rejoice] means  
 [that he exalts his mind]’  
 (cocura,CP:51.395.23.2685) subject clause

**B)** fronted subject clauses with resumption:

- (9) þæt he lifde in lichaman, hit wære efen  
 that he lived in body, it was.sbjctv true  
 ‘[That he lived in bodily form] would be true’  
 (cogregdC,GDPref\_and\_3\_[C]:17.218.11.2943)

**C)** associates allow argument fronting; subject clauses do not (Authier 1992)

- (10) a. \*[That this book, Mary read thoroughly] is true.  
 b. It is true [that this book, he read thoroughly].

→ collection of all clausal subjects/associates in Old English, without experiencers, and a heavy (=non-pronominal) DP, with overt expletive vs. without overt expletive:

	<b>overt expletive</b>	<b>no overt expletive</b>	$\chi^2=9.043$ , $df=1$ , $p<0.01$ <b>Table 3:</b> Argument fronting with and without overt expletive
all <i>that</i> clauses	186	238	
with argument fronting	10	2	

- (11) þa gelamp hit [þæt ðam gyftum win ateorode.]  
 then happened it that the wedding-gifts wine was-lacking  
 ‘It then happened that, for the wedding gifts, wine was lacking.’  
 (cocathom1,ÆCHom\_I,\_4:206.8.646)

## 1. 2. The Position of Subjects

There are four possible subject positions in early English

(12) a. *preverbal (as in Modern English)*

Æfter þison **Moyses & Aaron** eodon in  
 after this Moses and Aaron went in  
 ‘After this, Moses and Aaron went in’  
 (cootest,Exod:5.1.2466)

b. *postverbal*

... swa þæt næs **þæt scip** betwyh þam yþum gesewen  
 ... so that not-was that ship between the waves seen  
 ‘... so that the ship could not be seen between the waves’  
 (cogregdC,GDPref\_and\_3\_[C]:36.248.26.3516)

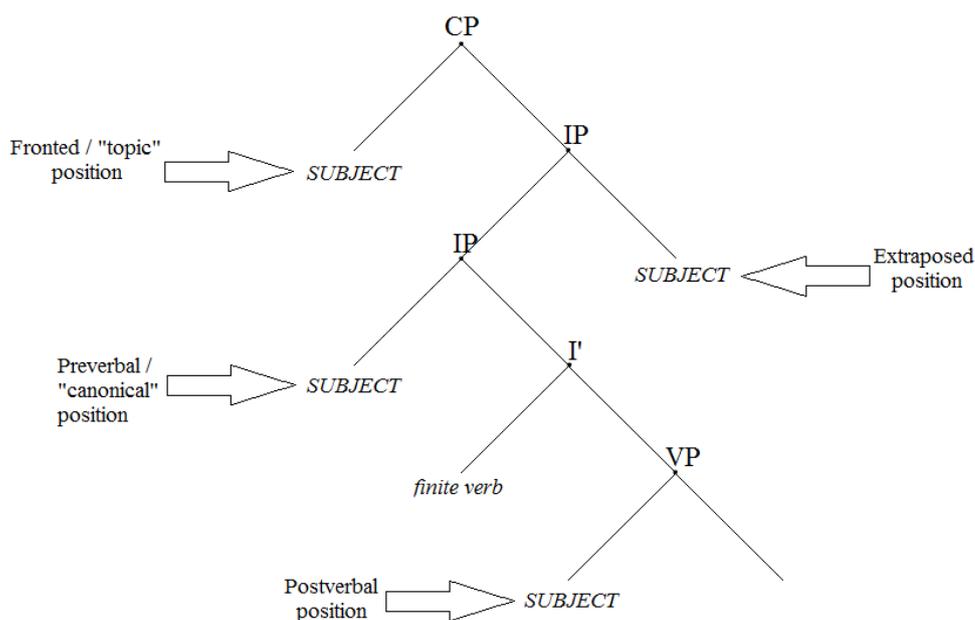
c. *topicalised (fronted)*

& **yfel mann** of yfelum goldhorde bringð yfel forð.  
 and evil man of evil gold-hoard brings evil forth  
 ‘and an evil man brings forth evil things out of an evil treasure.’  
 (cowsgosp,Mt\_[WSCp]:12.35.771)

d. *extraposed*

... on þære stowe, ðær ofslægen wæs **se cyning Oswald**  
 ... in that place where slain was the king Oswald  
 ‘... in the place where king Oswald was slain’  
 (cobede,BedeHead:3.14.16.64)

(13)



### 1.3. Generalization of the Canonical, Preverbal Subject Position

English developed a rigid subject position before the finite verb. Other, postverbal subject positions decline.

evidence:

**A)** Subordinate clauses with a full subject, finite verb, nonfinite verb. Presence of a non-finite verb required to reduce the probability of subject extraposition. Calculate the frequency of clauses with subject between finite and nonfinite verb, as in (14). Result: a rough measure of subjects that are not placed in the canonical, preverbal subject position.

- (14) ... þæt him wære from Drihtne sylfum **heofonlic gifu** forgifen.  
 ... that him were from Lord self heavenly gift given  
 ‘... that a heavenly gift was given to him by the Lord himself’  
 (cobede, Bede\_4:25.344.23.3465)

year	all	postverbal subject	% postverbal
890	1199	120	<b>10.0</b>
940	484	38	<b>7.9</b>
1010	1044	74	<b>7.1</b>
1185	62	3	<b>4.8</b>
1220	151	6	<b>4.0</b>
1300	163	5	<b>3.1</b>
1385	805	13	<b>1.6</b>
1460	604	7	<b>1.2</b>

**Table 4:** Decline in postverbal subjects, between finite and nonfinite verb, all contexts, in subordinate clauses

**B)** Main clauses with clause-initial constituent (not PPs), finite verb, postverbal full subject as in (15a) vs. main clauses with preverbal subject (15b). Postverbal subjects are probably placed in lower, postverbal subject position. Result: a rough measure of subjects that are not placed in the canonical, preverbal subject position.

- (15) a. *postverbal subjects*

þæt ken na man tel,  
 (CMROLLEP,109.788)

Thus complayned the knyght  
 (CMMALORY,653.4400)

- b. *preverbal subjects*

no man may forzyue þis  
 (CMWYCSE,298.1279)

the knyght sanke downe to the erthe dede.  
 (CMMALORY,26.821)

year	preverbal subject	postverbal subject	%postverbal
890	1520	493	<b>24.5</b>
940	1236	234	<b>15.9</b>
1010	5650	713	<b>11.2</b>
1185	304	53	<b>14.8</b>
1220	982	156	<b>13.7</b>
1300	1946	101	<b>4.9</b>
1385	4131	199	<b>4.6</b>
1460	2686	106	<b>3.8</b>

**Table 5:** Decline in postverbal subjects, in main clauses

C) That trace effect: Impossibility to extract a subject from a clause introduced by a complementizer like *that* (Perlmutter 1971).

- (16) a. John said that Mary read a book.  
 b. What did John say that Mary read \_\_\_ ?  
 c. \*Who did John say that \_\_\_ read a book?

If subject can get extracted, it must have been extracted from a “non-canonical” subject position.

- (17) fela þæra fortacna þe Crist sylf foresæde þæt cuman scolde  
 many of.the fore-tokens that Christ self fore-said that come should  
 ‘many of the omens that Christ himself foretold (\*that) \_\_ should come’  
 (cowulf,WHom\_6:196.371)

Therefore, the percentage of subject extractions out of all long-distance extractions out of a that clause yields an estimate of the frequency of subjects that are not in the canonical, preverbal subject position.

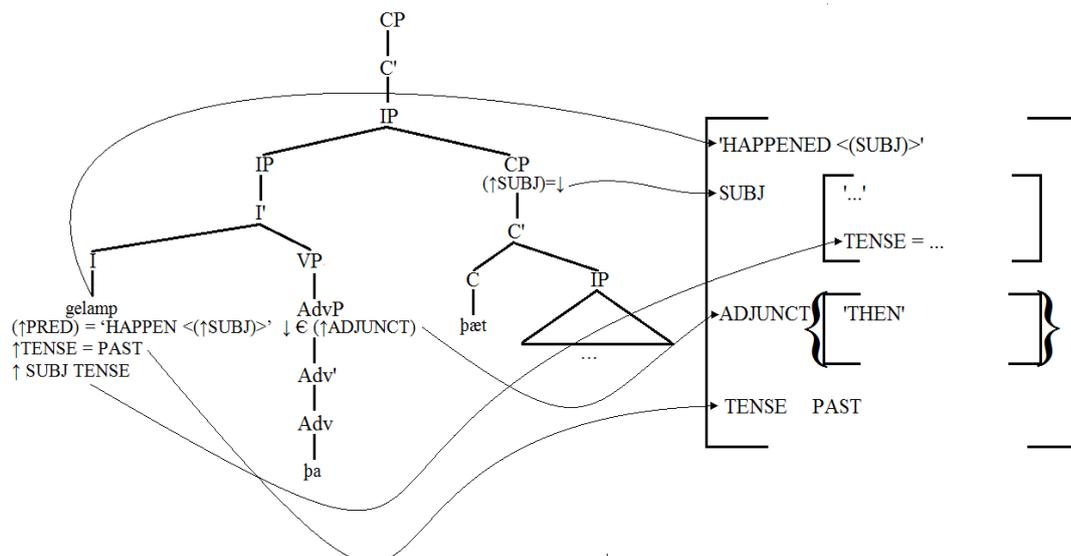
year	all long-distance extractions out of <i>that</i> -clauses	of those, extractions of the subject	% <i>that</i> -trace effect violations
915	132	50	37.9
1010	39	13	33.3
1200	9	5	55.6
1300	14	2	14.3
1425	42	3	7.1

Table 6: Development of *that*-trace effect violations

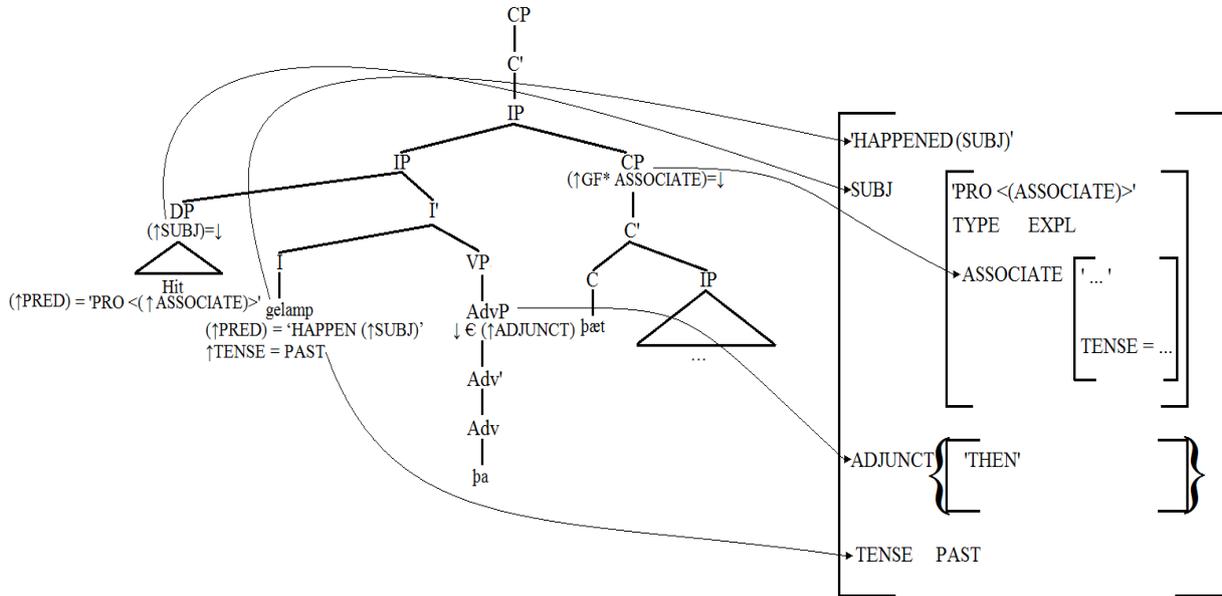
#### 1.4. The Reason why Overt Expletives Developed

As the canonical, preverbal subject position becomes generalized, and all other subject positions decline, clausal subjects cannot be licensed anymore. Ergo, expletives develop.

- (18) a. & gelamp þa þæt ...  
 and happened then that ...  
 ‘And it then happened that...’  
 (cocathom1,ÆCHom\_I,\_26:393.147.5078)

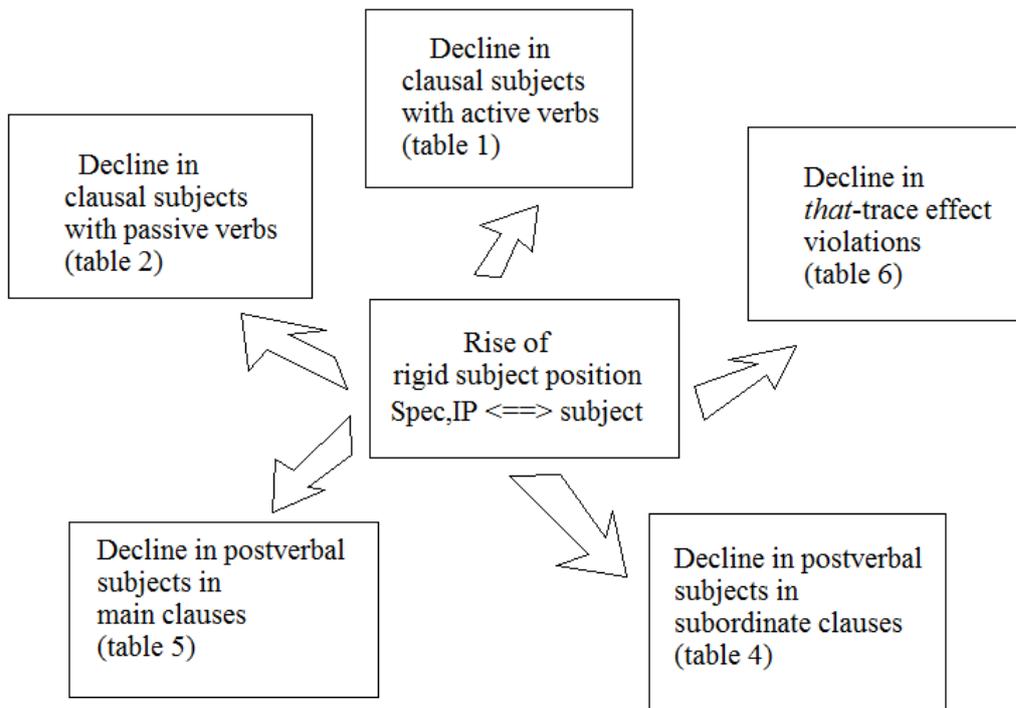


b. & **hit** gelamp þa, þæt ...  
 and EXPL happened then that ...  
 ‘And it happened then that’  
 (cogregdC,GD\_1\_[C]:4.43.12.479)

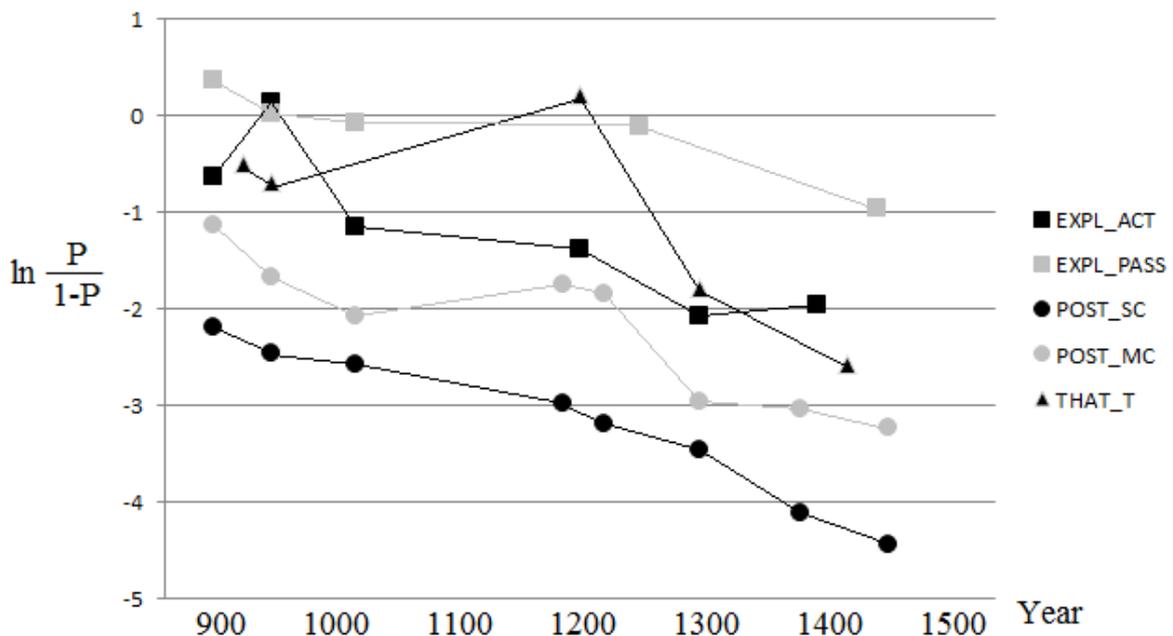


evidence:

A) The five changes presented in tables 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 change at the same rate. Therefore, they are reflexes of the same factor or “parametric” change.



Logit transforms of the rate of use divided by one minus rate of use equals predictor t, time, s, rate of change and the constant k (determines midpoint of change) of the logistic function used to model linguistic change. If the change proceeds at the same speed with all measures, that should result in parallel lines.



**Graph 1:** Logits of rate of use divided by 1 minus rate of use of subjects that are not in Spec,IP, c. 900-1500, by test item.

Logistic Regression on data from tables 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 evaluates effect of predictors “time”, “test” and their interaction on the occurrence of subjects in the canonical, preverbal subject position.

	Df	Deviance	Resid. Df	Resid. Dev.	Pr(>Chi)
NULL			31	2047.68	
year	1	1064.04	30	983.64	<0.001***
test	4	807.03	26	176.62	<0.001***
<b>year:test</b>	4	6.25	22	170.37	<b>0.1814</b>

**Table 7:** Analysis of Deviance summary of logistic regression on data in tables 1,2,4,5,6

The interaction between year : test is not significant. Therefore, the canonical, preverbal subject position strengthens at the same rate irrespective of the test / measurement used (Kroch 1989).

- Overt expletives are considerably less frequent if an experiencer is present

(19) a. þeah þe nu þince [þæt ðu deorwyrðe feoh forloren habbe],  
 Although you.DAT now seems that you dear property lost have  
 ‘Although it may seem to you now that you have lost precious property’  
 (coboeth,Bo:20.48.17.870)

b. very rare: expletive and non-nominative experiencer

ðeh hit þynce mannen, [þæt arlease mænn habben wele on þyssen wurlde]  
 although EXPL seems men.DAT that honour-less men have wealth in this world  
 ‘Although it may seem to men that dishonourable people have wealth here’  
 (coeluc1,Eluc\_1\_[Warn\_45]:115.88)

year	overt expletive	no overt expletive	% overt
915	1	279	0.36
1010	4	190	2.06
1250	2	28	6.67
1425	8	96	7.69

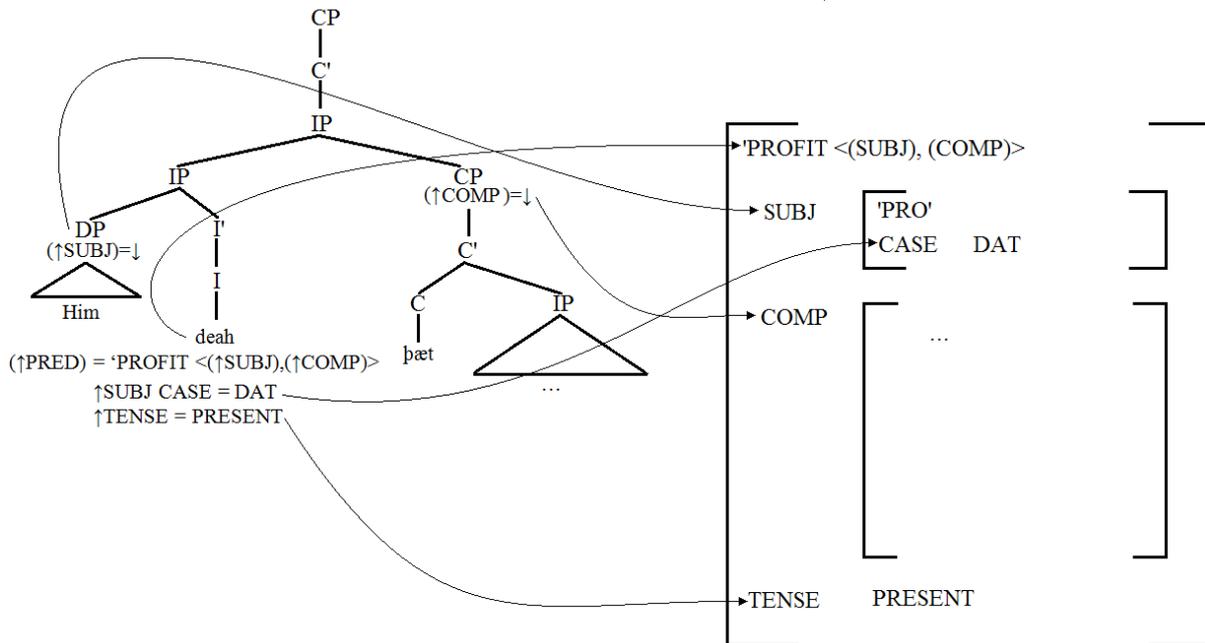
Comparison table 1 vs 8:  
 $\chi^2=15.26$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.0001$

**Table 8:** Frequencies of overt vs. no overt expletives, active verbs, with an experiencer, with a finite *that*-clause

→ Logistic regression shows interaction effect between year : tests with/without non-nominative experiencer. That shows that another factor (case morphology?) causes clauses with experiencers to change at a different rate than clauses without experiencers!

→ Non-nominative experiencer functions as the subject. It “shields” the finite clause CP from requiring an expletive to be licensed.

- (20) Him deah þæt ...  
 him profits that...  
 ‘It is profitable for him that...’  
 (colaece, Lch\_II\_[1]:1.13.7.87)



→ extraction facts support this analysis:

extraction out of complement clause fine, but ungrammatical out of subject clause

- (21) a. Peter knows that Mary loves to cook casserole.  
 → What does Peter know [that Mary loves to cook \_]  
 b. That Mary loves to cook casserole proves her great culinary taste.  
 → \*What does [that Mary loves to cook \_] prove her great culinary taste

In Old English, there are examples of extraction out of *that* clauses with non-nominative experiencers, but none out of *that* clauses without non-nominative experiencers. The reason is that a *that* clause with non-nominative experiencers is a **complement clause** (20) but a *that* clause without non-nominative experiencers is a **subject clause** (18a).

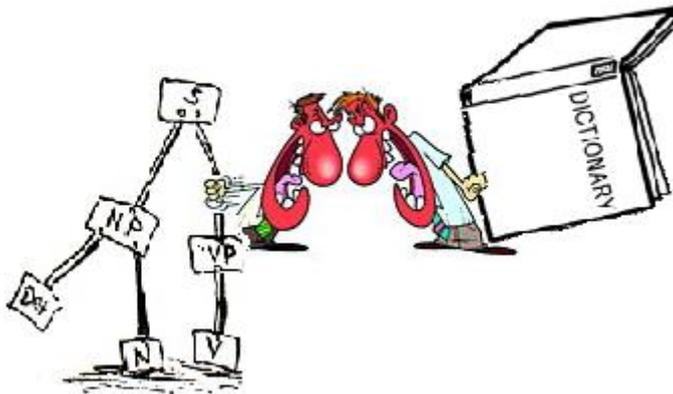
- (22) a. þe þince þæt hyt æall an si. Hwæt þincð þe þæt þu sy?  
 you.DAT seems that it all one is.sbjctv what seems you.DAT that you are.sbjctv  
 ‘It seems to you that it is all one (thing).’ → ‘What does it seem to you that you are?’  
 (cosolilo,Solil\_1:51.13.660) (cowsgosp,Jn\_[WSCp]:8.53.6483)
- b. swa gedafenað þæt ic beo ahafen. NO EXAMPLES LIKE  
 so behoves that I am.sbjctv lifted-up → \*What is [it] fitting that I am?  
 ‘so it is fitting that I be lifted up’  
 (cocathom2,+ACHom\_II,\_13:135.237.2969)

	all CPs with a DP	DP extracted	% extraction
with experiencer	406	18	4.4
without experiencer	112	0	0

$\chi^2=4.92$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p<0.05$   
**Table 9:** Extraction  
 out of *that* clause with  
 / without experiencer

## 2. Conclusion

- under my analysis, the development of overt expletives stems from a mismatch between syntactic constraints and the lexicon; lexical items subcategorize for clausal subjects, but syntactic structure cannot license them in a preverbal position; the mismatch is resolved through expletives.



- even if details of my analysis might be challenged, two main points seem to be indisputable:
  - rise in overt expletives is intimately linked to the development of a canonical, preverbal subject position
  - non-nominative experiencers inhibit the presence of an overt experiencer
- future work:
  - refined data collection,
  - extend analysis to non-finite clauses,
  - extension of time periods to early Modern English, change may not be fully completed by the end of Middle English

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