

Overt expletives in pro-drop languages – Evidence from Vietnamese

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Vietnamese possesses an unexpected combination of ‘subject’ properties: (i) it is commonly considered as a radical pro-drop language (under Roberts & Holmberg 2010’s classification) for in the absence of rich verbal morphology, both subject and object pronouns can be dropped as long as those pronouns are the topic of the sentence:

(1) a. Mary thích Tom. Và (e) cũng thích Peter nữa.

Mary like Tom And also like Peter more

‘Mary likes Tom. (She=Mary) also likes Peter.’

b. Mary thích Tom. Nhưng Peter không thích (e).

Mary like Tom But Peter NEG like

‘Mary likes Tom. But Tom does not like (him = Tom)

but (ii) in colloquial Vietnamese, the third person singular pronoun *nó* ‘it’ can naturally act as an expletive subject in all expected environments.

(2) a. Trên Viện (nó) tuyển người đấy

above institute it recruit person DEM

‘There is recruitment at the Institute.’

b. (Nó) mưa bây giờ đấy, thu quần áo vào đi!

it rain now DEM, collect clothes enter IMP

‘It is raining now, go get the clothes!’

c. Đừng ấn mạnh thế, (nó) gãy cái thìa đấy

don’t press hard PRT, it broken CLS spoon DEM

‘Don’t press that hard, the spoon will break’

d. Mặc quần đùi cho (nó) mát

wear pant thigh for it cool

‘Wear short pants to cool down.’ (Examples from Nguyen & Nguyen 2011)

There is also cross-linguistic evidence for the unexpected presence of expletive-like elements in null subject languages, most notably in Finnish (Holmberg & Nikanne 2002) and in non-standard varieties of European Portuguese (Carrilho 2007). It is often claimed that expletives in these languages are actually not expletive subjects as in English. In particular, Finnish ‘*si-ta*’ ‘is not an expletive subject but an expletive topic’ (Holmberg & Nikanne 2002:96), while in Portuguese, ‘a project headed by Force must be present and that the expletive occupies its Spec position.’ (Carrilho 2007:12). I will present reasons and arguments that Vietnamese expletive ‘*nó*’ does not appear that high in the structure, it neither occupies the [Spec, TopicP] nor the [Spec, ForceP] position, ‘*nó*’ still stays in the canonical subject position and has to follow the topic markers.

- (3) a. Học ngôn ngữ thì nó khó
 Study linguistics TOP it difficult
 ‘It’s difficult to study linguistics.’
- b. * Học ngôn ngữ nó thì khó
 Study linguistics it TOP difficult
 ‘It’s difficult to study linguistics.’

Within a cartographic approach, it is proposed that ‘nó’ is the realization of a functional projection, namely Subj^o which mediates between CP and IP domains (Rizzi 2006). This analysis can also account for the sensitivity of ‘nó’ to different predicate types (unaccusative vs. unergative) and the incompatibility of ‘có’ with wh-subject questions, and the asymmetry between subject and object with respect to topicalisation. This is in support of an articulated subject field within the IP domain (Cardinaletti 2004) and can also serve as an attempt to minimize the structural difference between null-subject and non-null-subject languages, Vietnamese though being a null-subject language still obeys the universal subject constraints, namely the existence of SubjectP as a criterial position (Rizzi & Shlonsky 2006).

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