Conditions on Transitive Expletives:
Evidence from Appalachian English

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One way in which Appalachian English (AppE) differs from other varieties of English is in exhibiting expletive pronouns not only in existential sentences, but also in clauses with transitive verbs, as in (1):

(1) a. \(... there wouldn’t nothin’ go down through there. \) (Feagin 1979: 238)
   b. They asked four men, but \( there \) didn’t \( anyone \) want to leave their church. \( \) (ibidem)
   c. And \( they \) can’t \( many people \) say that. \( \) (Dante Oral History Project)

Such sentences in AppE are similar to Transitive Expletive Constructions (TECs) in Icelandic in requiring that the thematic subject be an indefinite or weak quantifier in the sense of Milsark (1977). However they differ from TECs in Icelandic in two respects: (1) they always contain a finite auxiliary (a form of \( have, be \) or \( do \)) or a modal; (2) the finite auxiliary or modal bears the negative morpheme \( n’t \).

What distinguishes AppE from other varieties of English that do not allow TECs? What does this kind of micro-syntactic variation tell us about TECs in general, and more broadly about the co-occurrence of a pronoun and a quantificational associate?

In order to answer these questions, it is interesting to observe that the AppE speakers who allow TECs also allow what the literature calls NEGATIVE AUXILIARY INVERSION (NAI): declarative clauses in which the auxiliary or modal precedes the subject. Such sentences have the falling intonation of declarative clauses (not the rising intonation of interrogatives) and are used to make an assertion (not to ask a question):

(2) a. \( Didn’t nobody \) get hurt or nothin’. \( \) (AppE; Wolfram and Christian 1976)
   b. \( Can’t no one \) keep me and Little Sid apart from this day on. \( \) (ibidem)
   c. \( It had this room that wouldn’t nobody stay in. \) (ibidem)

Interestingly, these sentences exhibit the same restrictions that characterize TECs: (1) the subject cannot be definite but must be an indefinite or weak quantifier; (2) they always contain a finite auxiliary or a modal; (3) the finite auxiliary or modal bears the negative morpheme \( n’t \). Building on Foreman (1999) and in agreement with Matyiku (2013), we argue that in these sentences the negated auxiliary or modal raises to a position higher than the indefinite subject to unambiguously mark the scope of sentential negation. This approach straightforwardly accounts for the range of subjects that are possible (scope-bearing elements that can occur in the scope of negation) and those that are not possible (definite descriptions, positive polarity items) in this construction.

Building on the correlation between the presence of TECs and NAI in the same grammar, we argue that what makes TECs possible in AppE is the ability of the negated auxiliary or modal to raise to a structural position higher than the indefinite subject, within the IP domain. More generally, we argue that:

(3) A necessary condition for an expletive pronoun to co-occur with a quantificational associate is that the tense-bearing element (auxiliary, modal or finite verb) raise to a position within the IP-domain from which it c-commands the subject.
This configuration might be achieved differently in different languages. In Icelandic, movement of the finite verb to a position higher than the subject goes hand in hand with “rich” inflection (whether it is triggered by the morphology, as traditionally assumed, or the syntax, as argued in Bobaljik 2002). In the case of AppE, only auxiliaries or modals can move to a position higher than the subject and, we argue, such movement is triggered by the negative marker *n’t*: the auxiliary or modal bearing *n’t* raises to a position higher than a scope-bearing subject to unambiguously mark the scope of negation. (In Belfast English, quantificational subjects can occupy structural positions lower than auxiliaries and modals, cf. Henry & Cottell 2007.)

Accepting (3) as a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for TECs amounts to saying that the presence of an expletive subject is parasitic on some form of verb movement. Why would this be? We argue that it is because the tense-bearing element attracts certain features of the subject that can move independently of the rest of the phrase. This view requires viewing the expletive not as a lexical element taken from the numeration, but as a subset of the features of the associate. Sabel (2000), Witkoś (2004) and Kayne (2008) have independently made a similar proposal for standard English expletive *there* in existential clauses, viewing it as the overt realization of a D-feature of the associate or as a deictic element that starts out as a modifier of the associate.

This way of thinking opens the possibility that all instances of subjects that exhibit a pronominal and a quantificational component split over two positions might share a basic syntax: they all start as a unit and split as a result of movement. In the case of TECs, it is a D-feature or a deictic feature of the associate that raises and spells out as an expletive pronoun; in the case of Floating Quantifiers, in contrast, it is the nominal component of the quantificational associate that raises, leaving the quantificational element behind (*The children will each take a piece*). The parametric variation depends on whether the tense-bearing element can raise to a structural position higher than a canonical subject position and on which features of the associate can raise.

References


