Topic drop or VP focus?

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1. Introduction
In Swedish a question such as (1) can be answered as in (2a,b):

(1) –Vad gör Johan?  
what does Johan ("What’s Johan doing?")

(2) –Speler dataspel.  
plays computer games ("He’s playing computer games.")

Alternatively you can answer as in (3):

(3) –Han spelar dataspel.  
he plays computer games

A not implausible analysis of the subjectless reply in (2) is that it is derived by deletion of the subject pronoun under identity with the subject of the preceding question, or some descriptively equivalent null-subject (pro-drop) mechanism. Since the understood subject in (2) is a topic, this is plausibly a case of topic-drop. Swedish has topic-drop of objects under certain conditions. (4) is an example (based on Mörnsjö 2002):

(4) –Kan vi sita där inne?  
can we sit there in ("Can we sit in there?")

–(Det) kan vi göra.  
that can we do ("We can do that.")

Here the object pronoun, clearly a topic in this case, is fronted and, in colloquial speech, optionally not pronounced. (2) might be the same process applied to a subject topic pronoun.

Mörnsjö 2002 contains a large number of examples of topic-drop sentences, mainly excerpted from a corpus of spoken Swedish. Most of them have a very colloquial, casual flavour. This is not the case with (2). The subjectless alternative (2) is not stylistically clearly more marked than the alternative (3) with a subject, and is not even restricted to a spoken language register, except that dialogues in general are less common in written than in spoken language. If (2) is a case of subject topic-drop, this implies that the distinction between null-subject languages and non-null-subject languages is less strict than traditionally assumed, since even a supposedly rigid non-null-
subject language such as Swedish readily accepts null subjects in certain contexts, say, if they have an antecedent which is accessible enough, under one definition of accessibility (see Cole 2000).

However, on closer inspection the topic-drop analysis of the reply in (2) is largely wrong. Instead it is derived by focus-fronting of a VP, and deletion (or on-spell-out) of everything except the focused VP (henceforth VP-focus-with-ellipsis). The fully spelled-out counterpart of (2) is not (3), but rather something like (5a) or (5b); crucially, the VP is focused by fronting.

1° a. Spelar dataspel är vad han gör.
   plays computer games is what he does
b. Spelar dataspel gör han.
   plays computer games does he

In the following I will substantiate this claim. I will show that (2) is a member of a class of ellipses which also includes for instance gapping and sluicing, driven by focus-fronting of a constituent with ellipsis of everything except the ont constituent. This supports the view that Swedish is indeed quite a rigid m-null-subject languages where subject topic-drop is a highly restricted ocess.

Against subject topic drop
this section I will compare the topic-drop analysis and the VP-focus-with-ellipsis analysis. Compare (1), (2), and (3) with (6):

a. Vad gör Johan? What does Johan do?
   what has Johan done today
b. Han har sovit. he has slept
   has slept

c. *Har sovit. has slept

this case dropping the subject pronoun is impossible. This is unexpected der the topic-drop analysis. Under the VP-focus-with-ellipsis analysis it flows from the fact that a constituent headed by an auxiliary cannot be focused (whatever the reason may be for that restriction). (7) exemplifies this in some alternative constructions, none of which work.

a. *Har sovit gör/gjorde han. has slept does/did he
b. *Har sovit är vad han har gjort. has slept is what he has done

c, consider the conversation in (8):

(8) a. Vad gör Johan? what does Johan do?
   what’s Johan doing?
  b. Han sover inte, i alla fall. he sleeps not in any-case ‘At least he’s not sleeping.’
  c. *Sover inte, i alla fall. sleeps not in any-case

Although (8c) might, perhaps, be found in a large enough corpus of spoken Swedish, it differs sharply from (2) in terms of markedness. This follows under the VP-focus analysis of (2): You can’t focus front a verbal projection containing the negation.

(9) *Sover inte är vad han gör, i alla fall. sleeps not is what he does in any-case

The only way (8c) can be derived, then, is by ‘real’ topic-drop, which is only marginally acceptable.

Next consider the conversation in (10). In this case the question is negated.

(10) a. Vad gör Johan inte om nätterna. ‘What does Johan not do at night?’
   what has Johan done today
b. Sover. sleep
   he sleeps

c. *Han sover. he sleeps

In this case the two replies don’t have the same meaning. (10b) means that Johan does not sleep at night, while (10c), insofar as it is a possible reply at all to this question, can only mean that he does sleep. So obviously (10a) cannot be derived from (10b) by ellipsis of the subject pronoun. The fully spelled out VP-focus construction (11), on the other hand, means exactly what (10b) means, and is therefore a plausible source of (10b).

(11) Sover är vad han inte gör om nätterna. sleeps is what he not does at nights

I conclude that the topic-drop analysis of (2) can be safely discarded, in favour of the VP-focus-with-ellipsis analysis.

The false impression that the subjectless replies are derived by topic-drop is helped by the fact that the remnant verb is finite. But Swedish (and Norwegian) is notorious for fronting or clefting VPs headed by a finite verb; see Källgren & Prince 1989, Lødrup 1990, Platzack & Holmberg 1990.
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b. Sover/sova är allt han gör.
sleeps/sleep-INF is all he does

The VP-focus hypothesis makes the prediction that we should not find subjectless replies such as (2) in non-null subject languages lacking VP-fronting of finite-marked VP. One such language is Icelandic, a language quite closely related to Swedish, but which does not allow VP-fronting or VP-clefting with a finite-marked VP, and only marginally in certain constructions if the VP is infinitival.

13) a. *Syngur gerir hann. (Icelandic)
sings he does
b. *Syngur er það sem hann gerir.  
sings is that which he does (for a living)

As predicted, (14b) is an ill formed reply; the subject pronoun cannot be omitted, in spite of the highly salient antecedent.

14) a. –Hvað gerir Hreiði? (Icelandic)
    what does Hreiði do (‘What does Hreiði do for a living?’)
b. –*Syngur.
sings
c. –Hann syngur.
    he sings

Anish is another very close relative of Swedish, where, at least for many speakers, the word focused VP cannot be finite.

5) Spille/spiller golf går jeg aldrig.  
    play-INF/play-PRES golf do I never

may seem somewhat unexpected, then, that (16a) can be replied as in (16b).

16) a. –Hvad laver han? (Danish)
    what does he do (‘What is he doing?’)
b. –*Spiller golf.

Nevertheless, (16b) is probably derived from ‘real’ subject topic-drop, like (6c). This is shown by the fact that (17b) is as good as (16b).

17) a. –Hvad har han lavet i det siste?
    what has he done lately
b. –*Har spillet golf det meste af tiden.  
    has played golf most of the time

Anish is another non-null-subject language which does not allow VP-fronting /P-clefting, least of all with a finite-marked VP.

(18) *C’est dort qu’il fait.  
    it is sleeps that he does

As predicted, the question in (19a) can’t be answered as in (19b); the subject pronoun can’t be dropped.

19) a. –Qu’est-ce qu’il fait Jean?  
    ‘What’s Jean doing?’
b. –*Dort.
c. –*Il dort.
    he sleeps

The situation in English is less clear. VP-fronting and VP-clefting of finite-marked VP is ill-formed in (20a,b), but marginally possible in (20c).

20) a. –Sleep/*Sleeps he does.
b. –*Sleep/*Sleeps is what he does.
c. –*Sleep/*Sleeps, that’s what he does.

As predicted, there is some uncertainty in the judgment of replies such as (21b).

21) a. –What does he do, all day?
b. –*Sleep.
c. –*Sleeps.

3. Ellipsis and Focus
The elliptical replies fall into an important class of ellipses derived by focus-fronting of a constituent and then spelling out only the focused portion of the structure. A particularly transparent case is Sluicing, exemplified in (22), the deleted part within brackets.

22) a. She has been to see someone, but I don’t know who.
    She has been to see someone, but I don’t know who
b. ...I don’t know who [s she has been to see].  

Another more controversial one is Gapping, which (in part following Pesetsky 1983) I claim is derived by focus fronting and spelling out of the remnants (Bill and a bracelet in the example below), leaving the rest of the sentence not spelled out. The underlying structure of (23a) is roughly (23b), where the IP is not spelled out but is interpreted under LF-identity, barring the indices, with the IP of the preceding clause.

23) a. John gave her a necklace and Bill a bracelet.
b. [CP Bill, CP a bracelet, CP [CP ti gave her]]
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Another one is the ellipsis deriving replies to yes/no questions in languages where such questions are replied affirmatively by repeating the finite verb. In Finnish, an example is:

\begin{itemize}
\item a. - Pelaal Juhatietokonepelit? (Finnish)
  plays-Q Juhacompughter games (‘Does Juhu play computer games?’)
\item b. - Pelaal.
  plays (‘Yes’)
\item c. pelaa ‘Juhatietokonepelit’
\end{itemize}

According to Holmberg 2001, these replies are derived by focus-fronting and iliting out the constituent hosting the polarity of the sentence, often just the verb or auxiliary, leaving IP not spelled out. The underlying structure of reply in (24b) is roughly (24c).

\textbf{Is there subject topic drop in Swedish?}

Can safely conclude that subjectless expressions such as (2) are not examples of subject topic drop. Is there subject topic drop at all in Swedish? Called diary-drop (see Haegeman 1990) is a familiar case of subject topic drop which is common in Swedish, too. This is omission of a 1SG subject noun typically in the context of diaries or letters. Omission of a 1SG subject noun is common in certain other contexts, too, especially with verbs of motion (as noted by Mörnström 2002).

\begin{enumerate}
\item a. (Jag) skulle tro att hon kommer.
  I would think that she comes
\item b. (Jag) vet inte om det har någon betydelse.
  I know not if it has any importance
\end{enumerate}

b) can’t be derived by VP-focus-with-ellipsis, as (25a) contains an adverbial (25b) a negation. Another form of subject ellipsis which is non sufficient is colloquial spoken Swedish is dropping the expletive pronoun; see Mörnström 2002 for many examples. As Mörnström notes, this can be characterized as topic drop (as an expletive pronoun can’t be a topic), is rather derived by a special deletion rule. Another familiar form of topic ellipsis which arguably is derived by topic drop is so called conjunction of:

\begin{itemize}
\item a. Han är arg, men (han) visar det inte.
  he is angry but he shows it not (‘but he doesn’t show it’)
\item b. Han var helt sönderskrapad i hela ansikten.
  he was all scratched in all of his face
\item c. Såg förskräcklig ut.
  looked awful PRT (‘He looked awful.’)
\end{itemize}

Here the two sentences might well be coordinated with och ‘and’; let us call it extended conjunction reduction. (27b) could, in fact, also be derived via VP-focus-with-ellipsis (from Såg förskräcklig ut gjorde han ‘Looked awful he did’).

The claim is that once we exclude the lexically restricted cases of 1ST person subject drop and expletive drop, and we control for extended conjunction reduction and VP-focus-with-ellipsis, remaining examples of subject drop are very marginal, at best. Take for instance (27b), add a negation to exclude VP-focus, and put it in a context excluding extended conjunction reduction:

\begin{itemize}
\item a. - Hur såg han ut efter olyckan?
  how did he look PRT after the accident
\item b. *?-Såg inte så förskräcklig ut.
  looked not that awful PRT (‘He didn’t look that awful.’)
\end{itemize}

In a large enough corpus of spoken Swedish one might conceivably find an example of a conversation like this. Yet, compared with (28) or compared with (1-2) it is definitely marginal, even though the subject is clearly topic.

I conclude, tentatively, that the only fully general (not lexically restricted) subject-drop operations in Swedish are extended conjunction reduction and VP-focus-with-ellipsis.

The research for this paper was supported by a grant from AHRB (AR14458). Thanks to Huldor Á. Sigurðsson, Sten Vikner, and Niels W. Lund for data. Thanks to Christer for many years of close collaboration and friendship.

\textbf{References}


Yet another approach to existential constructions

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1. Introduction
Existential constructions (Ecs) are like the canary in the proverbial mine shaft; their analysis exploits (and thereby reveals) every nuance that theory permits. This paper is intended as one more contribution to the subject. The paper starts with a puzzle that arises if one combines the standard analysis of Ecs with the assumption that movement into thematic positions is possible. Our solution to this puzzle offers an account of how transitive expletive constructions pattern in English, German and Icelandic.

2. A thematic puzzle and a proposed solution
The following problem rests on two premises: first, that expletives are related to their associates by some kind of movement, second, that movement into thematic positions is licit.

The first assumption is standard fare since Chomsky (1986) demonstrated that there and its associate have chain like properties. For example, the relation between there and someone/a beer in (1a,b) shows the same locality properties as between someone/a beer and the trace in (2a,b).

(1) a. *There seems that someone is in the room.
   b. *There is the man drinking a beer.

(2) a. *Someone seems that t is here.
   b. *A beer is the man drinking t.

This follows if the relation between expletive and associate in (1) is analogous to the A-movement relation between antecedent and trace in (2). There are other well-known facts that support the idea that the expletive and associate form a chain-like relation at some point in the derivation. Let us mention three more. First, that the associate acts “as if” it were in the position of the expletive as regards agreement.

* Christer Plat Zack’s work has contributed significantly to our understanding of the fundamental structure of Germanic and Scandinavian grammar. It is with great pleasure that we use his insights in advancing our proposal here.