Overt non-referential subjects and subject-verb agreement in Middle Norwegian[1]

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Abstract

This paper is a contribution to the long-standing debate on the relationship between subject-verb-agreement and the need for overt non-referential subjects. On the basis of new Middle Norwegian data I argue that the loss of subject-verb agreement (i.e. Agr in I° (Holmberg and Platzack, 1995)/unvalued number and person features in T (Holmberg, 2010a)) cannot have been the direct cause of the rise of overt non-referential subjects. Further I argue that the approach proposed by Faarlund (forthcoming), in which the loss of non-referential null subjects is analyzed as a lexical change, overall gives a better account of the development in Norwegian. Within this approach, changes in the agreement system are not considered a direct cause of the development of overt non-referential subjects. However, they may possibly have played a pragmatic and indirect role.

1. Introduction

Modern Norwegian requires a subject in finite sentences, and when the predicate does not assign an external theta-role, the non-referential pronouns *det* or *der* may be used to satisfy this condition.[2] The need for a subject can be ascribed to a strong Nominative Case feature in finite T that needs to be checked by a DP in Spec-TP – this is the formal task of the subject, and in Modern Norwegian, the subject needs to be overt, regardless of its referential properties.[3]

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[1] This paper is based on my MA thesis (Kinn, 2010). I want to thank Jan Terje Faarlund, Piotr Garbacz, Christer Platzack, the audience at Grammar in Focus 2011 and anonymous reviewers from DIGS XIII for helpful comments.

[2] In many dialects, only *det* is used, but some allow *der* in existential constructions, impersonal passive constructions and to a limited extent also in weather constructions (NRG:681).

[3] In Minimalist litterature the need for a subject is commonly ascribed to an EPP feature, not a Case feature, but the Case analysis has some advantages – for one thing it is economical. Cf. Kinn (2010:40–52) for a discussion.

In Old Norse (ca.700/800–1350) overt subjects were not obligatory. Non-referential subjects were always null, while referential subjects could be null when they had a general, generic reference or the reference was recoverable from a preceding clause (Faarlund, 2004:220–223). Null objects were also possible, a fact that I will briefly return to in section 5, but the main focus of this paper is non-referential subjects.

In the other Mainland Scandinavian languages, non-referential subjects have apparently undergone a development similar to that in Norwegian, and the rise of overt non-referential subjects in Scandinavian has been under debate. But until now the discussion has mainly been taking Swedish data into account (see core works by Falk (1993a) and Håkansson (2008)), while little attention has been devoted to the previous stages of the other Mainland Scandinavian languages. In this paper I will investigate new Middle Norwegian data, and discuss two hypotheses of the rise of overt non-referential subjects. The first one is the well-known approach represented by e.g. Holmberg and Platzack (1995) and Holmberg (2010a), where the existence of non-referential null subjects has a very close connection to the presence of overt subject-verb agreement. The second hypothesis is proposed by Faarlund (forthcoming), and takes the properties of the inaudible pronoun *pro* as its point of departure.

The syntax of Middle Norwegian (ca. 1350–1550/1600) is an understudied field, compared to both earlier and later language stages. Potentially, it is of great theoretical relevance to test hypotheses against this kind of data, but also from an empirical point of view, it is important to investigate the language of this period.

The paper will be organized as follows: In section 2 I will give an overview of non-referential null subjects in Old Norse. Section 3 contains a presentation of (some versions of) the hypothesis of a relationship between subject-verb-agreement and obligatory overt subjects. In section 4 I discuss data from Middle Norwegian and argue that they do not support the approach presented in section 3. In section 5 I discuss Faarlund's (forthcoming) proposal, and argue that it is a more fruitful one, although some questions still need to be sorted out. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Non-referential null subjects in Old Norse

Basically there are two types of non-referential subjects, quasi-arguments and expletives, and in Old Norse both types were realized as null subjects. The Nominative Case feature of finite T needs to be checked also in constructions with null subjects, and I will assume that the inaudible pronoun *pro* performed this task in Old Norse. The notion of *pro* has been under much debate (cf. e.g Biberauer (2010) for a recent account), but I will not enter into this discussion here. However, the results of investigations that presuppose *pro*, may indirectly contribute in this respect, especially those that take the properties of *pro* as their point of departure, like in the approach outlined in section 5. If a hypothesis building on the properties of *pro* is able to account for data synchronically and diachronically, it may be taken as an argument in favor of postulating the silent pronoun.

In the next subsections we will see examples of quasi-argumental and expletive null subjects, i.e. quasi-argumental and expletive *pro*, in Old Norse.

2.1. Quasi-argumental null subjects

Quasi-arguments differ from expletives in having a status as syntactic arguments, although they have no (specific) reference. One indication of this is that quasi-arguments, as opposed to expletives, seem to be able to control PRO. The examples below (from Modern Norwegian) illustrate the difference:

(1) a. Det$_i$ regnet i dagevis uten å PRO$_i$ stoppe
         It$_i$ rained in for-days without to PRO$_i$ stop
         'It rained for days without stopping'

     b. ? Det$_i$ ble knust mange ruter uten å PRO$_i$ bli betalt erstatning
         It$_i$ became smashed many windows without to PRO$_i$ become payed compensation
         'Many windows were smashed, but no compensation was payed"

1a, in which *det* is a quasi-argument, is a grammatical sentence, whereas 1b, in which *det* is an expletive, is at least questionable.

Predicates licensing quasi-arguments typically refer to "various kinds of abstract or concrete processes independent of anybody's interference or intention, such as the lapse of time, change of seasons, the weather, natural events, etc." (Faarlund, 2004:217). 2a-c are Old Norse examples of this.

(2) a.   Þá er *pro* myrkt var orðit, leituðu þeir sér til náttstaðar […] (Gylf 57.4)
           Then as *pro* dark was become, looked they themselves to night-place
           'When it had become dark, they looked for a room for the night"

     b.   En at morni þegar *pro* dagaði, stendr Þórr upp ok þeir félagar […] (Gylf 65.17)
           And at morning soon *pro* dawned, stood Þórr up and the(y) companions
           'And in the morning, as soon as the day was dawning, Þórr and his companions got up'

     c.   En at miðri nátt þá heyrir Þórr at Skrýmir hrýtr ok sefr fast svá at *pro* dunar í skóginum. (Gylf 59.1)
           And at middle night then hears Þórr that Skrýmir snores and sleeps fast so that *pro* roars in forest
           'And in the middle of the night Þórr hears that Skrýmir snores and sleeps fast, so that a roaring sound filled the forest'

Quasi-argumental *pro* also occurs in sentences where it is possible to interpret the null subject as having a general, vague reference (Falk, 1993a:229). In the example below, *pro* may refer to a general state or situation:

(3)   "Ekki er þat mín ætlan," segir hann, " at *pro* svá sé." (Gunnl 191. 29)
       Not is that my opinion says he that *pro* so be
       '"In my opinion it is not so", he says'

2.2. Expletive null subjects

Expletive *pro* occurred in sentences were the predicate did not assign any external theta-role, not even a quasi-theta-role. The examples in (4) below have no external arguments, but one or two internal ones.

(4)   a.   "Ok mun *pro* þik kala ef ek sit svá lengi ok útarliga sem ek em vanr." (Gylf 69.4–5)
          And will *pro* you.ACC make-freeze if I sit so long and far-out as I am used-to
          'You will be cold if I stay as long and as far out as I am used to'

      b.   Skorti *pro* þá eigi góðan fagnað, mat ok drykk. (Gylf 65.19)
          Lacked *pro* then not good.ACC welcome.ACC, food.ACC and drink.ACC
          'The welcome was warm, there was no lack of food and drink'

      c.   Ok er *pro* þeim gaf byr, létu þeir í haf […] (Gunnl 205.1–2)
          And as *pro* them.DAT gave fair-wind.ACC ran they in sea
          'And when they had fair wind, they ran off to sea'

In passive constructions, internal accusative arguments were raised to the subject position, whereas internal dative or genitive arguments kept their status as objects. In such sentences *pro* occupied the subject position:

(5)   […] ok eigi er *pro* þess getit at æsirnir bæði þá heila hittask. (Gylf 59.25)
       and not is *pro* that.GEN said that gods asked then well meet
       'And it is not said that the gods wished him welcome back'

3. The relation between lack of subject-verb agreement and overt non-referential subjects

3.1. The rise of overt non-referential subjects as a consequence of loss of agreement

The idea of a connection between morphological subject-verb agreement in person and number and the possibility of having null subjects, is old and well known, both from traditional and generative grammar (see e.g. Falk and Torp (1900:2) and Taraldsen (1980:5)). As for the Scandinavian languages, Holmberg and Platzack (1995), to which I will return shortly, is one of the most influential works on syntactic effects of subject-verb-agreement, cf. also Platzack (1987), Platzack and Holmberg (1989), Holmberg and Platzack (1991) and Holmberg (2010a). In these works, the connection is formulated as a parameter – *pro* is licit only in languages with subject-verb agreement. There are obvious empirical arguments against the claim that the connection is direct and universal – languages like Chinese, Korean and Japanese have no subject-verb agreement, but still have non-referential null subjects (Huang, 1984). Languages which have subject-verb agreement, but at the same time overt non-referential subjects (like Middle Norwegian, as we shall see in the following sections) also pose a problem to approaches like Holmberg's and Platzack's (1995). The account does not provide an explanation why overt subjects would be necessary in this type of language, as *pro* should be licit. Nevertheless, the hypothesis has been said to hold, and counterexamples have been explained among other things with reference to independent factors masking the correlation (see e.g. Roberts and Holmberg, 2010:19). According to Roberts and Holmberg (2010:19), parameter effects like the connection between subject-verb agreement and null subjects will often be visible only in closely related languages. Middle Norwegian is therefore a good testing ground – it is closely related both to its previous stage, Old Norse, and to the later one, Modern Norwegian, both of which have been used as arguments in favor of the connection between subject-verb agreement and null subjects.

In Holmberg and Platzack (1995) it is stated that the difference between Icelandic, that has non-referential null subjects, and the Mainland Scandinavian languages, that require overt non-referential subjects, is caused by presence vs. absence of Agreement (Agr) in I˚, which is reflected in the presence or absence

of person and number inflection on the verb. The diachronic development in the Mainland Scandinavian languages, from only having non-referential null subjects to not allowing them, is explained in the same way – the Mainland Scandinavian languages have lost the Agr feature, and therefore require overt subjects (Holmberg and Platzack, 1995:121–123). A newer formalization is the one found in Holmberg (2010a). According to Holmberg (2010a:20), the difference between Icelandic and the Mainland Scandinavian languages (and hence, Old Norse and Modern Norwegian, I presume) is that Icelandic has unvalued number and person features in T, while neither is found in Mainland Scandinavian. According to Falk's (1993b, 1993a) works on the diachronic development of non-referential subjects in Swedish, expletive *pro* is licensed only when I° is a governor, and in V2 languages I° is turned into a governor by subject-verb agreement (Falk, 1993a:145). Quasi-arguments, however, could be lexicalized as overt non-referential subjects already before the loss of governing I°, due to their "dual status" as non-referential, but argumental elements (Falk, 1993a:236).

The analyses cited above are formalized differently, but basically they all predict that overt non-referential subjects should not appear before the loss of subject-verb-agreement (note that the prediction only applies to expletives in Falk's case). If the loss of unvalued person and number features in T/Agr in I°/governing I°, which is reflected in the loss of morphological subject-verb-agreement, caused the rise of overt non-referential subjects, there is no reason why the non-referential subjects would occur before this.

The formulation of the prediction has one obvious problem, considering the fact that all subject-verb agreement was not lost at the same time in the history of Norwegian: It is unclear how rich the agreement has to be to be syntactically relevant. This question will be briefly discussed in the next subsection (see also Dahl and Koptjevskaja-Tamm (2010)).

3.2. Agreement in person and number vs. agreement in number only

It is well known that the verb inflection during the Middle Norwegian period was reduced from marking both person and number to marking number only (Mørck, 2004:427), and as we shall see, this is reflected in a significant part of the investigated data. It is not self-evident that it is interesting to discuss the

hypothesis of a connection between overt non-referential subjects and loss of subject-verb agreement in light of data containing agreement in number only. However, for different reasons it seems relevant to include this kind of data in the investigation.

First of all, Holmberg and Platzack (1995:121–123) are only operating with two stages in the history of Scandinavian, one stage with Agr and one stage without it. There is no intermediate stage, and the most obvious interpretation seems to be that the stage with Agr lasts until both types of subject-verb agreement are gone. Later versions of the hypothesis are not more explicit on how much agreement is necessary to trigger syntactic effects, a fact which Holmberg (2010b:87–88) is aware of. According to him, investigations of what he calls "intermediate dialects" are "crucially important", and Middle Norwegian could be considered such a dialect. Of course, an option could be to operate with a more explicit definition of agreement, like Rohrbacher's, which states that the agreement is only syntactically relevant if "in at least one number of one tense, the person features [1ST] and [2ND] are distinctively marked" (Rohrbacher, 1999:130). But practically, this would be extremely difficult, as it would require a large number of Middle Norwegian texts containing subjects with a very specific combination of features.

In addition to this, data with agreement in number are interesting because Falk (1993b:156) states that agreement in number was a sufficient condition for expletive null subjects in Early Modern Swedish: "[…] this weak agreement is however strong enough to identify I as a governor, that is I that may license *pro*". If we take this survey as a point of departure, it is not to be expected that overt, expletive subjects co-occur with the reduced subject-verb agreement that is found in many Middle Norwegian texts.

In the next section we will investigate the Middle Norwegian data.

4. Overt non-referential subjects in Middle Norwegian

The data set serving as basis for this investigation mainly consists of charters, dating from the period 1450–1536 (cf. Kinn (2010) for a complete list of investigated texts). Due to lack of systematic studies, there is no consensus about when overt non-referential subjects became a part of Norwegian grammar. Mørck (2004:433–434) seems to be of the opinion that the rise of overt non-

referential subjects happened after the Middle Norwegian period, but in my data the first appearances are found somewhat earlier, in the 1450s. In the next section we shall see how overt non-referential subjects co-occur with person and/or number inflection on verbs.

4.1. Co-occurrence of overt non-referential subjects and subject-verb-agreement

In Modern Norwegian a unified singular form of the verbs has survived, while the person distinctions and all the plural forms are gone. Presence of person distinctions or plural forms in a text therefore indicates that the grammar has subject-verb agreement. However, I will assume that there are some constructions in which the inflectional morphology may be absent, although the grammar has the syntactic properties that would normally cause subject-verb-agreement (i.e. unvalued phi-features in T/Agr in I°/governing I°). The constructions in question are a) sentences with a post-verbal subject consisting of two or more conjuncts, b) relative clauses where the subject has been relativized, c) constructions with plural forms of the quantifier *allr* and d) constructions where the subject is a farm name in the plural form. In these syntactic surroundings morphological marking of subject-verb agreement is known to be unstable already at the Old Norse stage (Indrebø, 1924), although agreement was still the main rule. I will assume that lack of overt agreement in the syntactic surroundings mentioned above may be caused by a limited reanalysis concerning the relevant constructions only, not by a more general change in the grammar. In other words, I will not necessarily interpret absence of agreement morphology in the aforementioned constructions as evidence that subject-verb agreement is lost.[4]

A crucial methodological question is, of course, whether the subject-verb-agreement found in the texts really reflects agreement in the I-language. Alternatively, it could be ascribed to conventions in the written language, a view that has been maintained by Seip (1955:321). In that case, the instances of

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[4] Ottosson (2003) also leaves most of these constructions out of his survey of subject-verb agreement in Middle Norwegian, basically for the same reasons that I have mentioned. (Ottosson does not explicitly mention farm names with plural form.)

agreement are hardly relevant to the questions posed in this paper. However, Ottosson (2003) has made a thorough investigation of the subject-verb agreement in a data set that is partly overlapping with my data, concluding that the agreement must have been a part of the spoken language (and hence the I-language, I will presume) (Ottosson, 2003:173–174). Ottosson's basic argument is that the morphological marking is very consistent (when the constructions in which agreement could be absent already in Old Norse, are excluded). My data set leaves me with the same impression – although the texts exhibit slightly different degrees of richness in their agreement systems, there is mostly consistence within each text. I will therefore assume that the subject-verb-agreement reflects properties of the I-language.[5]

Very few texts, if any, have instances of subjects in all person and number categories, so it is impossible to give a complete description of their agreement systems. It is particularly difficult to find evidence for person distinctions, or lack of this, in the singular, but many texts contain subjects in both 1. pl. and 3. pl.. In the remaining part of this section, I will focus on this distinction, in addition to the more basic distinction between singular and plural forms.

While some texts consequently distinguish between the 1. pl. and 3. pl., others have partial syncretism between these forms, meaning that the suffixes are sometimes different, and sometimes not.[6] In some texts the old 3. pl. forms have expanded to the 1. pl., so that the verbs exhibit agreement in number only. In a few texts it is very hard to tell whether there is agreement or not, due to lack

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[5] Within the framework of Holmberg and Platzack (1995) there is a theoretical possibility that morphological subject-verb agreement may be present in the I-language, but without syntactic effects. This is called *non-nominal Agr*, and according to Holmberg and Platzack (1995:49–53) it is found in a language like French, which has subject-verb agreement, but also overt non-referential subjects. One could argue that Norwegian has gone through a similar stage. However, I will not take this option into consideration. Holmberg and Platzack do not mention it in connection with the Scandinavian languages, and besides, the concept of non-nominal Agr makes the hypothesis of a connection between null subjects and subject-verb agreement very hard to falsify.

[6] I have not studied this variation in detail, but one possible explanation is that different verbs have different suffixes. Piotr Garbacz points out that another possible source of variation may be the position of the subject – if a 1. pl. subject is preverbal, the verb has a 1. pl., suffix, if it is postverbal, there is syncretism with 3. pl. This kind of system is found in the vernacular of Orsa, spoken in a part of Dalarna in Sweden (Garbacz, in progress).

of plural subjects. However, when the sources where the agreement system remains unclear are excluded, it is relatively most frequent for overt non-referential subjects to occur in texts with distinct suffixes in the 1. pl. and 3. pl. or partial syncretism between these forms (cf. the tables in the appendix for a complete overview).

Below I have listed some instances of non-referential subjects occurring in texts with subject-verb-agreement. The examples in (6) are taken from texts with distinct suffixes in the 1. pl. and 3. pl..:

(6) a.   waare *thet* swa at honom tektis koma heim til honom a Skierffeim i Wardaale sitia ther i hwse nær honom tha wilde han hielpæ honom medher aaker oc eingh […] (DN X.217 (1457))
was it.Q.ARG so that him pleased come home to him at
Skierffeim in Wardaal sit there in house near him then would
he help him with field and meadow
'If it was so that it would please him to come home to him at Skierffeim in Wardaal, and stay there in the house with him, then he would help him with fields and meadows'

b.   […] ok er *tat* sua wordit sem gud fyrbiode at fyrnempder biscop Matteus hefwer gripit eder takit Holastad […] ta skulin j tilhielpa […] (DN V.821 (1459))
and is it.Q.ARG so become as God forbid that aforementioned
bishop Matteus has fetched or taken Holastad then should you
to-help
'And if it should be, God forbid, that the aforementioned bishop Matteus fetches or takes Holastad, then you should help'

The non-referential pronouns in 6a-b are quasi-argumental, and according to Falk overt quasi-arguments are compatible with a grammar with agreement due to there "dual status": Although they have no reference, they are still syntactic arguments (Falk, 1993b:162–163). However, the examples in 7a and 7c below, which are taken from texts with partial syncretism between the 1. pl. and 3. pl., indicate that also overt expletive subjects in impersonal passive constructions could co-occur with subject-verb agreement. According to Falk (1993b), a

grammar with agreement should not license overt, non-refererential subjects of this kind. (In the next section I argue why *det/der* should be interpreted as subjects, and not as e.g. pragmatic construction markers or locative adverbials.)

(7) a. tha var *ther* betalet vti i sylskol saa god som iiii kørlag (DN VI.618 (1493))
         then was there.EXPL payed in one silver-bowl so good as four
         kyrlag (the value of one cow)
         'Then a price of one silver bowl to the value of four *kyrlag* was payed'

     b. ær *thet* oc xxxj aar sidhen ath køupeth war giorth (DN VI.723 (1534))
          is it.Q.ARG also 34 years since that purchase-the was done
         'It has also been 34 years since the purchase was made'

     c. tha var *thet* saa giorth thera i mellom ath the ii fornempde mamata boll skulde […] blyffvæ vnder fornempde Torffyn. (DN X.286 (1499))
         then was it so done they.GEN in between that the two aforementioned *månedsmatsbol* (part of farm) should […] stay under aformentioned Torffyn
         'Then it was arranged between them that the two aforementioned *månedsmatsbol* should belong to Torffyn.'

     d. soghom vy oc hørdom ther vppo ath *ther* kom fram en man som saa heth Villiam Olaffson (DN VI.618 (1493))
         saw.1PL we and heard.1PL ther upon that there.EXPL came forward a man that so was-called Villiam Olaffson
         'There we saw and heard that a man called Villian Olaffson came forward.'

From the examples in (7) we see that overt non-referential subjects appear in a number of different constructions: 7a and c are, as previously mentioned,

impersonal passive constructions, whereas 7d is an existential construction. 7b has a quasi-argumental *det*.

The following examples are taken from texts with full syncretism in the 1. and 3. pl.:

(8) a.   Oc segss at *ther* skal ware ethers nadhis samthyckæ oc fullæ burdh (DN VI.611 (1491))

And is-said that there.EXPL shall be your Grace's approval and consent

'And it is said that we shall have your Grace's approval and consent'

      b.   […] om *thet* bliffuer feide eller orloff emellum høgbornne første her Christiann […] oc the Tyske hennsse steder […] (DN II.1071 (1522))

if it.EXPL becomes quarrel or war between high-born first lord Christiann and the German Hanseatic towns

'if there should be quarrel or war between the high-born king Christiann and the German Hanseatic towns'

      c.   samstvndis stodh han och tiil ath *thet* var helmings del mellum hans fadher och Torgvnde. (DN VIII.427 (1490))

at-the-same-time stood he also to that it.EXPL was half.GEN part between his father and Torgvnde

'At the same time he also admitted that his father and Torgvnde should each have one half'

The examples in (8) are all existential constructions.

4.2. Do the non-referential pronouns function as subjects?

So far I have been treating all the relevant instances of *det/der* as subjects. However, there is a possibility that they may have had other functions, and in that case they are not necessarily incompatible with a grammar with agreement. In this subsection I will discuss three such alternative functions: locative

adverbials, pragmatic construction markers and non-referential topics. I will argue that it is preferable to analyze *det/der* as subjects.

4.2.1. *Der* as a locative adverbial

In Old Norse the adverb *þar* 'there' functioning as a locative adverbial could occupy roughly the same positions as the expletive subjects *det/der* in Modern Norwegian. In Middle Norwegian, it is therefore not always perfectly clear whether *der* is a locative adverbial or an expletive. However, there are certain semantic criteria that can be applied. If *der* refers back to a previously identified locative element, either in the linguistic or in the extra-linguistic context, it should be analyzed as a locative adverbial. But there are no obviously suitable referents of this kind in the Middle Norwegian examples included in this paper, and I therefore analyze *der* as a subject.

4.2.2. *Det/der* with pragmatic or stylistic function

Falk (1993b) notes that non-referential pronouns and subject-verb agreement co-occur in Old Swedish and Early Modern Swedish, but still maintains that there is a direct connection between the loss of agreement and the rise of overt non-referential subjects. As was briefly mentioned above, quasi-arguments are compatible with a grammar with subject-verb-agreement in Falk's analysis because of their so-called "dual status" – they have no reference, but they are still syntactic arguments (Falk, 1993b:163). The choice between a quasi-argumental null subject and an overt, quasi-argumental *det* is determined by "factors outside grammar, such as pragmatic or stylistic factors" (Falk, 1993b:162). Falk does not state more specifically what factors are relevant, but if we adopt her analysis, the occurrence of overt quasi-arguments before the loss of agreement is not problematic.[7] The expletives, however, are still not accounted for.

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[7] In the Middle Norwegian data, it might be relevant that most of the early instances of overt quasi-arguments are found in constructions where *så* 'in such a way' is the predicate and a right dislocated clause functions as an apposition to *så* (cf. Kinn (2010:72–76)). But the strong representation of these constructions may also be due to the fact that the quasi-

Falk (1993b) interprets overt, expletive pronouns before the loss of agreement as pragmatic construction markers, more precisely as markers of the existential construction.[8] Her analysis is based on two empirical observations: First of all, expletive *det* before the loss of agreement appears "almost exclusively" in existential constructions (Falk, 1993b:164). "Almost exclusively" means that out of 18 examples of expletive *det*, 16 are found in existential constructions, and only 2 in other constructions, and these 2 are late examples. Second, expletive *det* seems to be restricted to certain positions: It mainly appears in Spec-CP of main clauses, and sometimes in Spec-TP of embedded clauses, but never in Spec-TP of main clauses. The restrictions on the position of *det* is taken to indicate that expletive *det* before the loss of agreement is not a syntactic subject (Falk, 1993b:164).

However, this account does not seem to hold when confronted with Middle Norwegian data. In Middle Norwegian, overt non-referential pronouns co-occur with agreement not only as quasi-arguments and in existential constructions, but also in passive constructions, as is evident from the examples below (repetitions of 7a and 7c):

(9)   a.   tha var *ther* betalet vti i sylskol saa god som iiii kørlag (DN VI.618 (1493))

then was there.EXPL payed in one silver-bowl so good as four

kyrlag (the value of one cow)

'Then a price of one silver bowl to the value of four *kyrlag* was payed'

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arguments can be interpreted as having a vague reference. I will briefly return to this in section 5.

[8] Falk does not explicitly state why there would be a need to mark out the existential construction like this. The most obvious reason is perhaps that it could be due to information structure: The expletive *det* signals that new information will be introduced at the end of the sentence. (Cf. e.g. Lambrecht (1994:177–181) for a discussion of the information structure of existentials).

b. tha var *thet* saa giorth thera i mellom ath the ii fornempde mamata
    boll skulde […] blyffvæ vnder fornempde Torffyn. (DN
    X.286 (1499))
    then was it.EXPL so done they.GEN in between that the two
    aforementioned *månedsmatsbol* (part of farm) should […]
    stay under aformentioned Torffyn
    'Then it was arranged between them that the two aforementioned
    månedsmatsbol should belong to Torffyn.'

Admittedly, quasi-arguments and existentials do constitute a majority, but it would be misleading to say that overt non-referential subjects are found "almost exclusively" in these constructions, like in Falk's survey. Besides, they are not particularly late examples, as opposed to the counterexamples in Falk's investigation.

Also, the restrictions on the position of the expletive do not apply in Middle Norwegian. *Det/der* is found not only in Spec-CP of main clauses and Spec-TP of embedded clauses, but also in Spec-TP of main clauses. This is evident from both of the examples in (9) above, where *tha* occupies Spec-CP and *ther*/*thet* is in Spec-TP.

The distribution of overt expletives suggests that they were not pragmatic markers for the existential construction before the loss of agreement. But it does not automatically exclude the possibility that overt non-referential pronouns may have had other pragmatic functions before they became obligatory subjects. However, in the Middle Norwegian data, it is hard to identify such a function – as we have seen, the non-referential pronouns appear in several constructions, and both in the preverbal and post-verbal position.

4.2.3. *Det/der* as non-referential topics

Another possibility that should be mentioned, is that non-referential *det/der* may have been non-referential topics before they became subjects. By non-referential topics I mean non-referential pronouns that have the function of filling the preverbal position in V2 languages, and hence are licit in Spec-CP only, which may be referred to as the topic position. Icelandic, German and Yiddish are languages with non-referential pronouns of this kind (Vikner, 1995:69), and

Faarlund (1990:192) has suggested that Norwegian (as well as the other Scandinavian languages, English and French) has gone through a similar stage.

If the non-referential pronouns before the loss of agreement are to be analyzed as non-referential topics and not subjects, they should only occur in Spec-CP, not in Spec-TP. But as we have seen already, expletive pronouns do appear in Spec-TP of main clauses. The examples in (9) are repeated in (10):

(10) a.   tha var *thet* saa giorth thera i mellom ath the ii fornempde
           mamata boll skulde […] blyffvæ vnder fornempde
           Torffyn. (DN X.286 (1499))
           then was it.EXPL so done they.GEN in between that the two
           aforementioned *månedsmatsbol* (part of farm) should […]
           stay under aformentioned Torffyn
           'Then it was arranged between them that the two
           aforementioned *månedsmatsbol* should belong to Torffyn.'

      b.   tha var *ther* betalet vti i sylskol saa god som iiii kørlag (DN VI.618
           (1493))
           then was there.EXPL payed in one silver-bowl so good as four
           kyrlag (the   value of one cow)
           'Then a price of one silver bowl to the value of four *kyrlag* was
           payed'

Also overt quasi-arguments are found in Spec-TP of main clauses:

(11) a.   waare *thet* swa at honom tektis koma heim til honom […] tha wilde
           han hielpæ honom […] (DN X.217 (1457))
           was it.Q.ARG so that him.DAT pleased come home to then would he
           help   him
           'If it was so that it would please him to come home to then he
           would help him'

      b.   ær *thet* oc xxxj aar sidhen ath køupeth war giorth (DN VI.723
           (1534))
           is it.Q.ARG also 34 years since that purchase-the was done

'It has also been 34 years since the purchase was made'

11a (an abbreviated version of 6a) is a conditional construction with the verb in the first position and *thet* in Spec-TP. 11b (a repetition of 7b) is a declarative clause, also with the verb in the first position and *thet* in Spec-TP. Relatively, Spec-TP is the most frequent position in main clauses for non-referential pronouns in the charters – there are no clear examples of a non-referential pronoun in Spec-CP.

   As for embedded clauses, there are Middle Norwegian examples of non-referential pronouns in the position directly after the complementizer, like in 8c, repeated in (12) below:

(12)   samstvndis stodh han och tiil ath *thet* var helmings del mellum hans
       fadher och Torgvnde. (DN VIII.427 (1490))
       at-the-same-time stood he also to that it.EXPL was half.GEN part between
       his father and Torgvnde
       'At the same time he also admitted that his father and Torgvnde should
       each have one half'

The position after the complementizer may be analyzed as the specifier of a recursive CP (cf. Vikner (1995:67)), or as one of the specifiers in a split CP domain (cf. e.g. Wiklund et al., 2007). Isolated, non-referential pronouns following the complementizer in embedded clauses could therefore possibly be interpreted as non-referential topics. But considering that they exist side by side with unambiguous examples with the expletive in Spec-TP of main clauses, it seems more reasonable to analyze them as subjects. Recall that Spec-CP is a possible position for both non-referential subjects and non-referential topics, whereas Spec-TP is impossible for non-referential topics.

4.3. Conclusions

In this section we have seen that both quasi-argumental and expletive pronouns co-occur with subject-verb agreement in Middle Norwegian. Some texts only distinguish between singular and plural forms, while others also have distinct suffixes in the 1. and 3. pl.. That subject-verb-agreement is still a part of the

grammar in the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century, is in line with the findings of Ottosson (2003). I have argued that the non-referential pronouns are neither locative adverbials, pragmatic construction markers nor non-referential topics, but syntactic subjects.

If it is right, as the Middle Norwegian data suggest, that overt non-referential subjects appear before the loss of subject-verb agreement, the loss of agreement cannot be a direct cause, as is explicitly suggested by Holmberg and Platzack (1995) and, for expletive subjects, Falk (1993a, 1993b). Also Håkansson (2008:224), in his work on Swedish, remains skeptical to the direct connection between loss of agreement and rise of overt non-referential subjects. He suggests that the development of obligatory overt subjects (referential ones, but eventually also non-referential ones) may instead be related to the change from basic OV to VO word order in Swedish, which implicates obligatory movement of the subject to Spec-IP (Håkansson, 2008:195–217, 225). However, this approach is not necessarily applicable to Norwegian. Håkansson (2008:211) presupposes, with reference to Delsing (1999), that Swedish was a pure ("renodlad") OV language until the early 14th century. But investigations of Norwegian data indicate that VO was the basic and most common word order already at the Old Norse stage (Faarlund, 2004:160), which began no later than the 9th century, hundreds of years before the rise of overt non-referential subjects. This time span seems too long for the change from OV to VO to be a direct cause. Therefore, in the next section I will discuss a more recent proposal made by Faarlund (forthcoming).

5. Loss of *pro* as a lexical change

Faarlund's (forthcoming) proposal takes *pro*'s status as a lexical pronoun as its point of departure – *pro* has the same syntactic and referential properties as ordinary pronouns, but lacks phonological content. The loss of non-referential null subjects (and also referential ones) is not analyzed as the result of a parametric change, but as a lexical change that has grammatical consequences. When *pro* was no longer available in the lexicon, an audible pronoun had to take over the formal tasks that *pro* could perform at the earlier language stage, like checking the Case feature in T. *Det/der* were therefore reanalyzed as non-referential subjects by children acquiring Norwegian.

In Old Norse, both *þat* and *þar* were frequently used in contexts resembling those where the non-referential subjects are used in Modern Norwegian. *Þar* was, as mentioned in 4.2.1, a locative adverb, while *þat* could be found in the relevant positions both as a referential pronoun and as a determiner. In the E-language, constructions with *þat* as a determiner to a right dislocated embedded clause could be particularly similar to a modern expletive construction. In these constructions, *þat* and the dislocated clause often constituted a discontinuous DP, with *þat* in Spec-TP or Spec-CP. In (13) below the determiner *þat* occupies Spec-CP:

(13) En *þat* er at segja frá Hermóði *at hann reið níu nætr døkkva dala ok djúpa*
       […] (Gylf 73.29–30)
      And that is to say about Hermóði that he rode nine nights dim valleys and deep
      "And what one can say about Hermóð, is that he rode nine nights through dim and deep valleys"

It seems likely that the distribution of *þat* and *þar,* as well as their having a deictic and not always very specific reference as adverbs and pronouns (and no reference at all as determiners), made them good candidates for reanalysis.

A more crucial question is, of course, what triggered the loss of *pro*. The loss of *pro* can be understood as a kind of reduction, in the sense that children during language acquisition fail to recognize a part of the input data, and therefore create an I-language without it. According to Faarlund (2008:234), children will generally rather leave something out of their analysis of the input data than add something for which there is no solid evidence. In Faarlund (forthcoming) the argument goes that it takes especially robust input data for *pro* to be recognizable, as it has no phonological content. In other words, verbs with an empty subject position must occur regularly, so that the children can infer the existence of an inaudible pronoun that does the formal tasks of the subject. If the frequency of *pro* drops below a certain level, the input data may no longer be robust enough for *pro* to be recognized, and hence *pro* is left out. Faarlund (forthcoming) suggests that the decline of subject-verb agreement in Mainland Scandinavian may have played a role in this process, but in a much more pragmatic and indirect way than in the works of Holmberg and Platzack (1995),

Holmberg (2010a) and Falk (1993b, 1993a): As distinctions were lost in the verbal morphology, overt pronouns may have been preferred to *pro*, not out of syntactic necessity, but for purely communicative reasons.

In Norwegian, this may initially have concerned referential *pro* only, as overt non-referential pronouns did not exist at the earliest stage. It could be that the development started with a drop in the frequency of referential *pro*, which later made children fail to recognize not only referential, but also non-referential *pro* as an option. A problem with this suggestion, however, is that there are, as I showed in section 4, Middle Norwegian examples of overt non-referential pronouns in texts where the decline of the verbal morphology has not come very far. These texts exhibit distinct verbal suffixes in the 1. and 3. pl.. One could argue that the speakers at this point probably had lost the person distinctions in the singular (cf. Ottosson, 2003:173), although it cannot be observed in the relevant sources, and that the loss of these person distinctions was sufficient to cause a decrease in the use of *pro*. But the appearance of overt non-referential subjects at the stage where much of the agreement inflection is still intact, may also be taken as an indication that the decline of verbal morphology cannot have caused the decreasing use of the silent pronoun. In that case, the question of what made *pro*'s frequency sink below the critical point, remains open, and it must be a task for further research to investigate this. This is an unclear point in the lexical approach to the loss of *pro* – however, the analysis also has important advantages.

As previously mentioned, the loss of *pro* can be linked to the way children analyze the linguistic input data, as described by Faarlund (2008). Although Faarlund (2008) only discusses language change, it seems reasonable to characterize children's tendency to leave things out rather than add things as a "[principle] of data analysis that might be used in language acquisition and other domains" (Chomsky, 2005:6). If this is correct, it is a factor not specific to the language faculty, or a so-called a *third factor* (Chomsky, 2005:6). Invoking third factors has the theoretical advantage of relating the explanation of a linguistic phenomenon to a domain outside the language itself (cf. Faarlund, 1987) – third factor arguments are in principle independent arguments.

On the empirical side, the analysis of the loss of non-referential null subjects as a lexical change is not dependent on a direct, syntactic relation with the loss of subject-verb-agreement, although Faarlund suggests a more

pragmatic link. Hence the co-occurrence of expletive pronouns and subject-verb agreement does not have to be a grave problem. Another advantage of the approach is that it provides a simple and explicit way of linking the loss of non-referential null subjects to the loss of referential null subjects, and also to the loss of null objects. As was briefly mentioned in the introduction, referential null subjects and null objects were possible (but not obligatory) in Old Norse, but have disappeared at the modern language stage.[9] Consider the examples below, with ungrammatical Modern Norwegian correspondences:

(14) a.   Nú sá æsirnir hvar hann fór. Fara *pro* enn upp til forsins ok skipta liðinu í tvá staði […]. (Gylf 77.16–17)
Now saw gods-the where he went. Go *pro* again up to waterfall-the and split group-the in two parts
'Now the gods saw where he went. They went once again up to the waterfall and split up into two groups'

b.   Nå så æsene hvor han dro. **Pro* drar igjen opp til fossen og deler flokken i to deler
Now saw gods-the where he went. *Pro* go again up to waterfall-the and split group-the in two parts

(15) a.   þa skal *pro* þat barn til kirkíu føra. (Gul 44.5)
then shall *pro* that child to church lead
'Then one shall take that child to a church'

b.   * Da skal *pro* føre det barnet til kirke.
Then shall *pro* lead that child to church

(16) a.   syn hanum gripina, en hann man æigi vilia *pro* af þer taka (Oleg)
show him valuables-the, and he shall not want *pro* from you take

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[9] If two coordinated clauses have the same subject, it may remain unexpressed in the second clause even in Modern Norwegian. This should be analysed as VP-coordination, not as *pro*. Also, as is well known, unexpressed subjects in Spec-CP are possible, but they are pragmatically marked – these constructions may be considered elliptic, and they do not presuppose the existence of *pro*.

'Show him the valuables, and he shall not want to take them from you'

b.   * Vis ham verdisakene, og han skal ikke ville ta *pro* fra deg

Show him valuables-the, and he shall not want take *pro* from you

(17) a.   þetta sværð hæitir bæsengr. hann kuaz nu mindu træystazt at bera *pro* (Oleg)

this sword is-called Bæsengr. he said.REFL now would dare.REFL to wear *pro*

'This sword is called Bæsengr. He said that he would dare wear it now'

b.   Dette sverdet heter Bæsengr. * Han sa nå at han ville tørre å bære *pro.*

This sword is-called Bæsengr. He said now that he would dare to wear *pro*

In (14) *pro* is a referential subject pronoun, with *æsirnir* as its antecedent. In (15) *pro* has a generic, general reference, 'one'. In (16) it is the object of *taka*, and in (17) it is the object of *bera*.[10] Whereas referential subject *pro*, like non-referential *pro*, checks a Nominative Case feature in T, I will assume that *pro* in object positions checks an Accusative or other oblique Case feature. With the lexical approach to loss of null elements, we have a simple and economical account of the loss of referential null subjects and null objects like in (14)–(17) in addition to the loss of non-referential null subjects: *Pro* has been lost not only

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[10] Åfarli and Creider (1987) note that some Norwegian speakers allow the object of the second of two coordinated VPs to be unexpressed. This construction underlies a "strict parallelism constraint" (Åfarli and Creider, 1987:340). Åfarli and Creider tentatively propose to analyse the null objects as *pro*, but there are other options. As Åfarli and Creider (1987:342) suggest, the second verb may in some cases be interpreted as intransitive. It is also possible to consider the constructions elliptic. As is evident from examples (18) and (19), Old Norse null objects are not restricted to coordinated VPs, and the VPs do not need to be parallell in the sense of Åfarli and Creider. It therefore seems more obvious to analyse Old Norse null objects as *pro*.

as a non-referential subject pronoun, but also as a referential subject pronoun and as an object pronoun – in other words, in the Norwegian lexicon it seems to be gone altogether.

According to Faarlund (forthcoming) a language may lose only some types of *pro*, or it may lose *pro* with different properties at different times. For example, Latin had both subject and object *pro* (in other words *pro* with different Case features), whereas the descendant languages Italian and French have had different developments: Italian allows null subjects, but only to a very limited extent null objects (cf. Rizzi, 1986 for a discussion of null objects in Italian), while French allows neither. There has, to my knowledge, been done no systematic research on the chronology of the loss of subject vs. object and referential vs. non-referential *pro* in Norwegian. However, one tendency in the Middle Norwegian data, which is also known from Swedish (Falk, 1993a:235), is that the earliest examples of overt non-referential pronouns are (predominantly) quasi-arguments (Kinn, 2010:115). Within the lexical approach to the loss of null subjects, this can be captured by a statement that quasi-argumental *pro* disappears before expletive *pro*. A closer inspection of the Middle Norwegian data reveals that all the earliest examples of overt quasi-arguments are of the type briefly mentioned in 2.1, where the subject may be interpreted as having a vague, general reference to a state or situation (Kinn, 2010:120). The earliest example, 6a, is repeated below as (18); *thet* may be understood as 'the situation' or 'things':[11]

(18)   waare *thet* swa at honom tektis koma heim til honom a Skierffeim i
        Wardaale sitia ther i hwse nær honom tha wilde han hielpæ honom
        medher aaker oc eingh […] (DN X.217 (1457))
        was it.Q.ARG so that him.DAT pleased come home to him at Skierffeim in
        Wardaal sit there in house near him then would he help him with field
        and meadow

---

[11] Note that (18) contains an expletive null subject: The predicate *tektis* in the embedded clause "at honom tektis koma heim til honom" only takes oblique arguments, and there is no overt *det*. This may indicate that the grammar is at a stage where expletive null subjects are allowed, but not quasi-argumental ones.

'If it was so that it would please him to come home to him at Skierffeim in Wardaal, and stay there in the house with him, then he would help him with fields and meadows.'

It is tempting to suggest that the ambiguity of quasi-arguments of this type may have promoted their overt expression. Recall that while non-referential subjects were obligatory null in Old Norse, referential subjects could only be null under certain conditions. If examples like (18) were interpreted as having a vague reference, *pro* seems to be a less obvious choice here than in constructions with expletives or quasi-arguments without this referential ambiguity. But more research is needed to give a more detailed and certain account of how and why this happened.

To sum up, the lexical approach to the loss of non-referential null subjects has some important advantages: It does not presuppose a direct connection with the loss of subject-verb-agreement, and it is capable of providing a simple and economical account of the loss of referential null-subjects and null objects in addition to non-referential null subjects. But as it stands, it seems somewhat unclear what initially caused *pro*'s frequency to sink to the point where it was no longer acquired. Still, the idea does not face empirical problems as serious as the approach discussed in section 4, and it may be well worth further investigations.

6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed two approaches to the development of non-referential subjects in Norwegian. The first one considers the loss of subject-verb agreement (or more precisely the loss of Agr in I˚ (Holmberg and Platzack, 1995)/unvalued phi-features in T (Holmberg, 2010a)) to be the direct cause of the rise of overt non-referential subjects. I have argued that this cannot have been the case, basically because overt quasi-argumental and expletive subjects both appear before the loss of subject-verb-agreement. In the second proposal discussed, the rise of overt non-referential null subjects was described as a result of a lexical change, namely the loss of the silent pronoun *pro* (Faarlund, forthcoming). This idea does not face the kind of empirical problems that the first one does, and it provides a simple account of the loss of other null elements. The question of what initiated the lexical change is not unproblematic,

though, but in the light of Middle Norwegian data, the approach seems to be the most fruitful one, and it could constitute an interesting point of departure for further research.

7. Appendix – overview of subject-verb agreement in the investigated texts

The tables below provide an overview of subject-verb agreement in the Middle Norwegian charters containing non-referential subjects, as well as a classification of the non-referential subjects as either quasi-argumental or expletive. Cf. Kinn (2010) for a more thorough discussion of each text and debatable instances.

Table 1: Texts with agreement in the pl., distinct suffixes in the 1. and 3. pl.

Text	Type(s) of overt non-referential subjects
DN X.217 (1457)	Quasi-argumental
DN V.821 (1459)	Quasi-argumental
DN VII.488 (1481)	Expletive
DN II.1021 (1504)	Quasi-argumental

The texts listed in table 1 above have subject-verb agreement and distinguish between the 1. pl. and 3. pl.. DN V.821 (1459) also has one instance of agreement in the 2. pl.. DN VII.488 (1481) contains one example of a plural form with a singular subject, but the agreement is otherwise consistent.

Table 2: Texts with agreement in the pl., partial syncretism in the 1. and 3. pl.

Text	Type(s) of overt non-referential subjects
DN II.846 (1462)	Quasi-argumental
DN VI.723 (1534)	Quasi-argumental
DN X.286 (1499)	Expletive
DN VI.618 (1493)	Expletive
DN II.1087 (1528)	Expletive

The texts listed in table 2 above have a subject-verb agreement system where the verbal suffixes in the 1. pl. and 3. pl. are sometimes distinct and sometimes not. DN II.1087 (1528) has one instance of agreement marking in the 2. pl. (imperative), and also one instance of lack of agreement in the 3. pl., but the agreement is otherwise consistent.

Table 3: Texts with agreement in the pl., full syncretism in the 1. and 3. pl.

Text	Type(s) of overt non-referential subjects
DN VI.611 (1491)	Expletive
DN II.1071 (1522)	Quasi-argumental, expletive
DN VIII.427 (1490)	Expletive
DN VI.610 (1490)	Quasi-argumental

The texts in table 3 above have subject-verb agreement with the same suffix in the 1. and 3. pl..

Table 4: Texts with agreement in the pl., all pl. subjects are 3. pl.

Text	Type(s) of overt non-referential subjects
DN VIII.645 (1531)	Expletive
DN XI.708 (1562)	Expletive

The texts listed in table 4 above only contain pl. subjects in the 3. pl., and it is therefore impossible to give a more detailed characterization of their agreement system.

Table 5: Texts where the status of agreement is uncertain

Text	Type(s) of overt non-referential subjects
DN II.820 (1457)	Expletive
DN IV.998 (1484)	Quasi-argumental
DN X.633 (1531)	Quasi-argumental
DN IX.596 (1527)	Expletive

It is hard to give a good description of the agreement system in the texts in table 5. In DN IV.998 (1484) and DN X.633 (1531) a few examples of pl. agreement are found, but each text also has one instance of a pl. form with a sing. subject. In DN IX.596 (1527) and DN II.820 (1457) the instances of pl. subjects are very few.

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Gylf=Gylfaginning, *in*: Haugen, O.E. (ed.) 1994. *Norrøne tekster i utval.* Oslo: Gyldenal Akademisk.