

Evaluation of Pavel Dubec's ph.d thesis

Syntactic and FSP Aspects of the existential construction in Norwegian

I received the thesis on Monday the 4th of November, and hereby deliver my evaluation of the thesis, written to the best of my ability. My comments will be more or less in accordance with the structure of the thesis.

1. Introduction

The subject matter of the thesis is said to be a syntactic and FSP analysis of the existential construction *det er* 'it is' in Norwegian (p. 8), and there is no doubt that this is also what is done. By this delimitation the alternative more traditional and dialectal construction *der er* 'there is' is left out, but still a couple of examples with *der* as grammatical subject are included (ex. (199) p. 72, ex. (346) p. 101).

The analysis is based on a selection of texts consisting of fiction and academic prose, which probably give a good picture of modern Norwegian. It is fair enough to use only texts in the *bokmål* variety, but for a Norwegian the reason for not including texts in the *nynorsk* variety seems a little dubious: "However, this thesis will focus only on the dominant form bokmål since the other one has become more or less marginal in terms of language use." (p. 11), as the literature in *nynorsk* is still thriving.

2. The functional sentence perspective (FSP) and 4. The FSP aspects

For a reader not very well versed in the theories of functional sentence perspective, communicative dynamism, roles like theme and rheme and so on, the description seems to give a good introduction to this field.

3. Syntactic aspects of the existential construction

The syntactic description is based mainly on Faarlund et al.: *Norsk referansegrammatikk* ('Norwegian reference grammar') and Quirk et al.: *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*, and this description is therefore quite general with little discussion of competing views.

A traditional view – not in accordance with the Norwegian reference grammar – is advocated when *som* 'that' in the relative clause in example 1 (ex. (10) p. 14) is called the subject of the clause. In a more modern analysis *som* would be considered a subjunction (or complementizer), and the clause would be considered subjectless (with a deleted subject).

- 1 Her er det tre områder som vies særlig oppmerksomhet [...].
[Here are there three areas that deserves particular attention]

A citation – probably from the Norwegian reference grammar – (line 17–19 p. 33) states according to the translation in the footnote that pronouns among others are usually excluded from being notional subject in the existential construction. After that (p. 34) it is, however, stated that the notional subject may be formed by among others a pronoun. This contradiction seems to be the result of two competing grammatical traditions. The reference grammar uses a "new" classification of words where the term *pronoun* is restricted to personal pronouns and a few other groups, while *pronoun* is used in the "old" way in the thesis where the category of

pronouns is said (p. 80–81) to be subdivided into not only personal pronouns (*dem* ‘them’), but also indefinite pronouns (*noe* ‘something’) and negative pronouns (*ingen* ‘nobody’), which are considered to be quantifiers in the reference grammar. In the same way one would now usually talk about demonstrative determiners instead of demonstrative pronouns (p. 19). In addition *hennes* ‘her’ would be classified as genitive of a personal pronoun and not as a possessive pronoun (p. 19).

Concerning the passive existential construction, two unsubstantiated claims are made:
– First, it is said that this construction is used mainly with intransitive verbs as in example (2), although transitive verbs may be used as in example (3) (p. 32):

2 Det vart arbeidt i hagen.
[There was worked in the garden]

3 Det vart fanga mykje fisk.
[There was caught a lot of fish.]

– Second, it is said that constructions with *stå* ‘stand’ plus a perfect participle as in example (4) are traditionally regarded as passive existential constructions (p. 84). This analysis is, however, questioned by the author later (p. 107–108).

4 I min skal det stå skrevet at du er min, [...]
[In mine should there stand written that you are mine]

The statement that “Two appositive adjuncts are usually situated in the initial position.” as in example (5) (p. 42) seems to follow from a wrong translation from the Norwegian reference grammar (p. 879), which says that when to adverbials follow each other in the initial position, then the order of these adverbial may vary.

5 I parken på benken sat det eit ungt par.
[In the park on the bench sat there a young couple]

6. Analysis

The main and central part of the thesis is naturally the analysis of the existential constructions in the material with descriptions of the syntax and semantics of the various parts of the construction and of the FSP functions of the same parts and the FSP patterns found in these constructions. By this analysis this thesis contributes to our understanding of the existential constructions in Norwegian by giving more substantial basis for a description of these constructions. Syntactic descriptions are often made on the basis of a few sample sentences, but here we have a solid material showing various aspects of the construction.

However, there are a couple of critical remarks that can be made:

The syntactic analysis is generally speaking a description of what would be called the surface structure in generative grammar. Therefore the underlined adjuncts in examples (6) and (7) are said to be in a medial and final position respectively (p. 95–96). In a transformational approach the position of the adjunct would be considered the same and the apparently medial position of the first adjunct a result of extraposition of the following relative clause.

6 Det var et raseri i meg som jeg knapt kunne kjenne igjen.

- 7 [There was rage in me that I hardly could recognize]
 Det lå noen sorte, uformelige klumper i esken [...].
 [There lay some black, shapeless lumps in the box]

It is further strange to say that *også* 'also' is placed finally in example (4) when it is followed by a prepositional phase (p. 106):

- 4 [...] det er mange kvinner også i denne kategorien.
 [there are many women also in this category]

Formal aspects

Concerning the formal aspects of the thesis there are also quite a few critical remarks that should be made:

There are some misspellings (correct form in parenthesis):

- in the English text: *Univeristy* p. 3 (*University*), *than* p. 89 (*then*), *it seem* p. 131 (*it seems*), *siganlled* p. 158 (*signalled*)
- in the Norwegian citations: *sølvfølgelig* p. 56 (*selvfølgelig*), *je* p. 76 (*jeg*), *foskjell* p. 75 (*forskjell*), *negative* p. 79 (*negativt*), *kanskje* p. 90 (*kanskje*), *støtt* p. 97 (*støt*), *funksjonelt* p. 162 (*funksjonelt*)

The use of the terms *communication field* (p. 53) and *existential contraction* (p. 65) is probably misspellings for *communicative field* (p. 12) and *existential construction* (p. 29) and not inconsistent use of terms.

Faarlund et al.: *Norsk referansegrammatikk* and Quirk et al.: *A comprehensive grammar of the English language* are referred to with the abbreviations *NRG* (p. 30) and *CGEL* (p. 30) without any explanation.

Dušková et al. (1994) and Čechová et al. (2000) are referred to only as Dušková (1994) (p. 29) and Čechová (2000) (p. 13) (without *et al.*), while Golden, MacDonald, Ryen (1998) is referred to as Golden et al. (1998) (p. 47) (with *et al.*).

Table 4 (p. 72) summarizes the various types of complex NP in the sample of fiction in this way:

Complex NP (286 instances)					
Single modification		Combined mod.	Multiple modification		
Premod.	Postmod.		Coord.	Subord.	Mixed
14 % (39)	51 % (146)	14 % (40)	7 % (21)	11 % (31)	3 % (9)

This is in accordance with the figures in the preceding text except for when it is said (p. 70): "The last type of complex modification, multiple modification, accounted for 21 % (41 instances) ..." The percentage (7 + 11 + 3 =) 21 % is correct, but there are (21 + 31 + 9 =) 61 instances.

In the account of the various types of complex NP in the sample of academic prose it is said (p. 72): "The most frequent type was represented by single postmodification (48 %, 198 instances)." Table 5 (p. 76) makes it clear that these figures covers both single premodification and single postmodification, and that the correct figures for single postmodification are 39 % and 161 instances.

Some of the percentages given seem to be a little inaccurately rounded off:

42 of 500 instances (p. 79) is given to be 9 % (for 8.4 %).

28 of 500 instances (p. 80) is given to be 5 % (for 5.6 %).

351 of 500 instances (p. 80) is given to be 71 % (for 70.2 %).

In academic prose the notional subject is said to be rheme in 479 of 500 instances, which is calculated to be 95 % in the text (p. 112) and 96 % in table 23 (p. 117).

The Norwegian examples are usually translated into English, but not always, cp. example (76)–(82) (p. 35).

Citations in Norwegian are also usually translated into English, but the translation is sometimes missing, e.g. line 12–14 p. 37, line 4–5 p. 45, line 11–13 p. 46, line 4–5 p. 47, and line 21–22 p. 49. The citation in Norwegian in line 3–5 p. 29 is only partially translated.

In a thesis written in English you would also expect the footnote on p. 13 in Czech to be translated into English.

The English translations from Norwegian are generally adequate. However, a few exceptions are “slektskapsord” (p. 33), which is translated “related words” instead of “terms for kinship”, “mengde eller kvantitet” (p. 35), which is translated “amount” only instead of “amount or quantity”, and “sendarens” (p. 45), which is translated “the senders” i.e. as genitive plural instead of singular.

The words that are discussed are sometimes underlined. However, in example (346) (p. 101) the first adverbial is underlined although the theme is adjuncts in the final position.

On p. 119 there is a reference to “examples (379) and (380) above”, which should be examples (378) and (379) (p. 115).

The source of example (2) (p. 10) is not given.

Conclusion

It is the dissenting opinions task to point to weaknesses in a thesis, and as should be clear from the above, there are substantial and formal aspects of the thesis that can be criticized. However, the main impression after having read this thesis, is that it is a solid work. In my opinion it is always praiseworthy to do an empirical work of this kind, where the analysis is based on a comprehensive material. By doing such an empirical work Pavel Dubec has given new insights into a central syntactic construction. My conclusion is therefore that this thesis is worthy of being defended in a disputation.

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