Verbs, participles, and subject/object agreement in Norwegian, English and Hindi
Tor A. Åfarli, Norwegian (University of Science and Technology NTNU) & Tanmoy Bhattacharya (University of Delhi)

In Norwegian dialects that show participle agreement, the participle agrees with the subject DP as a main rule. There is one well-known exception to that rule, namely, in those dialects that both show participle agreement and also allow both det ‘it’ and der ‘there’ as expletive subject, participle agreement is with the postverbal object DP when the expletive subject is der ‘there’, but not if the expletive subject is det ‘it’ (Christensen & Taraldsen 1989). We first set out to give an account of this fact, developing the analysis defended in Åfarli (2009, 2016). After an interlude where we seek to extend the analysis (mutatis mutandis) to the it/there alternation in English (e.g., Groat 1995), we explore the possibility of an extension of the analysis to Hindi subject/object agreement facts as well, cf., e.g., Bhattacharya (2018).

Relevant Norwegian data are the following:

(1) a. Utsendingane er komne.
   the delegates.MPl is come.MPI
b. Der er komne/*kome mange utsendingar.
   there is come.MPI / *come.NSg / come.NSg many delegate.MPI
c. Det er kome/*komne mange utsendingar.
   It.NSg is come.NSg / *come.MPI / many delegate.MPI

This pattern is explained on the assumptions that the expletive subject der ‘there’ has no agreement features that can possibly trigger participle agreement, whereas the expletive subject det ‘it’ has such features, namely the features NSg. Given these assumptions concerning the two types of expletive subject, we propose an analysis that rests on two crucial further assumptions: (a) the structure contains a functional participle projection (PclP) in its clausal spine, where the Pcl head has the propositional core (vP) as its complement, and (b) expletive subjects are generated very low in the structure, that is, in the lower structural subject position in the propositional core (vP), see (2). Moreover, the verb inside the propositional vP in (2) raises to Pcl and acquires participle status.

(2) … Pcl [vP subject […]

Pcl contains unvalued number and gender features that are valued in classic probe – goal fashion, by the unvalued features number and gender in Pcl acting as probes that seek in the c-command domain of Pcl to find a goal. The first possible goal is the subject DP in Spec,vP which usually provides the appropriate feature values for the unvalued number and gender features in Pcl. Therefore, the participle usually agrees with the subject, as in (1a).

As for expletive subjects, det ‘it’ has number and gender agreement features (NSg) which value the unvalued features of Pcl just like a contentful DP does. Thus, when det ‘it’ is subject, the participle must agree with that expletive subject, as in (1c). However, if the expletive is the der ‘there’ type, altogether lacking agreement features, the unvalued agreement features of Pcl are forced to probe further down, reaching the object of the participle. Thus, in that case the participle must agree with that object, as in (1b).

In our talk, we will provide independent evidence from EPP facts for the assumption that expletive subjects are generated very low, cf. assumption (b) above, and we will further
discuss evidence for assumption (a), i.e., that PclP is positioned immediately above vP in the clausal spine, which is by no means self-evident, cf. Kayne (1989), D’Alessandro & Roberts (2010), Bellletti (2016).

The above constitutes our analysis of the Norwegian participle agreement facts in a nutshell, in particular it accounts for the restricted existence of participle – object agreement in a language where participle – subject agreement is the overall rule. Notice that Norwegian does not have finite verb – argument agreement.

Next, we extend this analysis to the it/there alternation in English, arguing that whereas the relevant Norwegian dialects contain probing agreement features in Pcl, but not in T, English contains probing agreement features in T, but not in Pcl. We argue, following Groat (1995) for English, that expletive it and there are like the corresponding expletives det and der in Norwegian, in that it/det have agreement features, whereas there/der are devoid of agreement features. Thus, since there in English is unable to value the required agreement features in T, a clause that has there as expletive subject must contain a postverbal DP in order to provide the required features. Since expletive it does provide the required features, no postverbal DP is required with expletive it. This analysis roughly accounts for the well-known it/there alternation facts in English. Moreover, we show that the agreement patterns exhibited with finite verbs in English, are reflected in the behavior of participle agreement in the relevant Norwegian dialects. However, we also note that the proposed analysis for English leaves one fact unexplained, a fact that has no parallel in Norwegian, namely why (3) is out:

(3) *It is a horse in the garden.

To account for (3), we propose an intervening rule of Last Resort (similar in spirit to the do-support rule) whereby it is a last resort option regarding insertion of English expletive subjects.

Last, in a more speculative vein, we will consider agreement facts in Hindi, a language that shows both finite verb – argument agreement and participle – argument agreement, exhibiting an intricate system of subject and object agreement, as well as long distance agreement, see Mahajan (1989), Bhatt (2005), Bhattacharya (2018).

For instance, in Hindi, the finite verb and participle agree with the most prominent argument DP that is non-overtly case-marked, cf. (4) (from Bhatt 2005), resulting in subject agreement in (4a) and object agreement in (4b).

(4) a. Rahul kitaab parh-taa thaa
    Rahul.M book.F read-Hab.MSg be.Pst.MSg
    ‘Rahul used to read (a/the) book.’

    b. Rahul-ne kitaab parh-ii thii
    Rahul-Erg book.F read-Pfv.F be.Pst.FSg
    ‘Rahul had read the book.’

We will explore the challenges that data like those in (4) pose for an analysis like the one that we propose for the Norwegian and English facts, seeking to integrate as far as is reasonable the agreements facts from Norwegian, English and Hindi in one unified analysis.