DIACHRONIC SYNTAX

Models and Mechanisms

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ALEXANDER WILLIAMS

7.1. INTRODUCTION

In Early Middle English (1150–1250) as in Old English (850–1150), the expletive pronoun there (be, beare, etc.) is often missing from existential sentences in which it could grammatically occur, as it is missing from (1). (2) comes from the same text as (1), but here the expletive is pronounced.

(1) Nis buten an godd, as ich ear seide, þat al þe world wrahted
not-þis but one god as I said before that all the world wrought
‘There is but one god, as I said before, that wrought all the world’
(St Katherine 24.87, c.1225)

(2) Ah þer nis buten an godd purh hwam witerliche ha all
but EXPL not-þis but one god through whom certainly they all
wrenen i wreaked
were wrought
‘But there is just one God, through whom certainly they all were
made’ (St Katherine 22.61, c.1225)

After 1250, however, both the frequency and the structural variety of existentials without an overt expletive decrease radically.

§7.3 reports results from a study, described in §7.2, of fifty-two Middle English texts from the Penn–Helsinki corpus. In Early Middle English roughly seven in every ten sentences intuitively classed as existential lack there, but after 1250 the proportion drops to about one in five. Certain of these existentials without there, I subsequently argue, do not have a silent expletive subject either. Eliminating these from the count, we find that three in five existential expletives in the hundred years before 1250 were unpronounced. Immediately afterwards, the number plummets to around one in thirty.

These facts prompt two questions, which I aim to solve in §§7.4 and 7.5. First, how were silent expletives possible at all in the grammar of Early Middle English? And second, why was their loss so sudden and so extreme?

The first question depends on certain generalizations about the syntax of Early Middle English and the distribution of silent expletives in Germanic which should be put forward immediately.

As in Old English, full NP subjects in Early Middle English obey the regular V2 pattern, following the finite verb (VF) when another phrase fills the clause-initial ‘topic’ position; but pronominal subjects do not (Pintzuk 1991, van Kemenade 1987, Kroch and Taylor 1997). In so-called canonical declarative clauses, pronominal subjects precede the finite verb, even when another phrase is fronted, as in (3).

(3) (a) And alle hire sinnen he forçaf
and all her sins he forgave
‘And he forgave all her sins.’
(3.1.3)

(b) His louerd he de ðe arst michel harm
his lord he did first much harm
‘He did much harm first to his lord.’
(Vices and Virtues 115.486, c.1225)

Just so, expletive subjects will precede VF in canonical declaratives. I will make two crucial assumptions, (4) and (5).

(4) Subject pronouns in Early Middle English that precede VF are not c-commanded by VF (that is, are not within the sister of VF), even when another constituent occupies the clause-initial topic position.

(5) Unpronounced pronouns in Early Middle English distribute just like pronounced pronouns in the syntax, and not like full NPs.

(4) is a corollary of the theories in Pintzuk (1991, 1996b) and Kroch and Taylor (1997), which supply the background for this chapter. Both Pintzuk and Kroch and Taylor take the normal position ofVF in Old English and Early Middle English to be I’. Non-topic subject pronouns Pintzuk puts in a clitic position adjuncted to Spec,IP, and Kroch and Taylor at ‘the CP–IP boundary’. Either way, they are not in the sister of I’, and (4) follows. (5) is supported by the claim in Pintzuk (1996b) and van Kemenade (1987) that non-topic pronouns in Old English are ‘syntactic clitics’, as are the weak pronouns in modern Germanic (Cardinaletti and Starke 1994). This means that the positional difference between nominal and pronominal non-topic subjects is established already in the syntax, and is not just an effect of phonology. Assuming the same for Early Middle English, we derive (5), since the pronunciation of the Early Middle English expletive should not affect its distribution in the syntax.

Thanks to Anthony Kroch, Chungyhe Han, Jeff Lidz, Ann Taylor, and Don Ringe for their help, as well as to the very friendly editors and reviewers of this volume. Special gratitude is due to Anthony Kroch for reading this chapter at the University of York while I was in Kazakhstan.
The pattern of silent expletives (pro) in Germanic is arguably described by
the licensing principle in (6). (6) allows the surface structure in (7) and rules out
that in (8).

(6) An expletive may be silent only if its surface position is within the
sister of F, where F is a feature generated in the position of the finite
verb in declarative main clauses.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{F} \\
\text{pro} \\
\text{pro}_{\text{X}} \\
\text{F}
\end{array}
\]

(7) In German, main clause Vfs are in C, so F is in C. Thus German forbids pro above C and allows it below, whether C hosts a verb or a complementizer.
Main clause Vfs in Yiddish are generally below C, let us say in F (Diesing
F, no expletive above F can be silenced; Yiddish does not allow pro following a
complementizer. But if Vf moves onward to C, as it does in questions, F is
carried along and pro is thereby licensed in Spec,IP. Assuming that the crucial
dependency between F and pro consists not in their linear order, but in a hier-
archical structural relation, (6) follows. Similar observations can be made for
the other Germanic languages, modern and historical, if sometimes with subtlety.
I will therefore assume (6) is correct, and will expect any adequate syntax of
Middle English to abide by it. The converse of (6), importantly, does not hold:
possibly all Germanic languages pronounce existential expletives below F some-
times, if not always.

The conjunction of (4–6) implies that silent expletives could not possibly be
licensed in canonical Early Middle English declaratives, where pronouns are not in
the c-command domain of F. Yet pro is abundantly attested in the Early
Middle English texts.

The resolution of this apparent paradox, I will show in §7.4, emerges from a
proper taxonomy of the facts. Before 1250, most of the existentials without there
are not canonical clauses. They are of exceptional types where Vf inverts with
subject pronouns. In the resulting configuration, the expletive is c-commanded by F, and its silence is licensed. The remaining minority, as well as the vast
majority of the few cases after 1250, consists largely of locative inversions and
existentials of the shape ‘NP be’. I argue in §§7.4.2–3 that these sentence types

\begin{itemize}
\item[1] See Falk 1992a, Hult and van Kemenade 1992, Platzack 1987, Platzack and Holmberg 1989,
Vikner 1995 for relevant data and, in most cases, an equivalent generalization.
\item[5] One language which demands a subtle treatment is Icelandic; see Maling 1990, Rognvaldsson
and Thráinsdóttir 1990, Sigurðsson 1990, and Vikner 1994. It is not difficult to argue that most of the
apparently discordant data from Icelandic in fact comply with (6); but there is a small and obscure
residue (see Santorini 1994: 93–4).
\end{itemize}
There are certain sentence-types without an overt expletive, but still plausibly regarded as existential, that the parsers of the corpus did not consistently treat as having a silent dummy subject. (10) and (11) identify the types I have in mind, which I call NP-be Existentials (NPBEs) and Existential Locative Inversions (ELIs), respectively.

(10) **NP-be Existentials**

Moni cunne riwlen beó
many kinds of rules are
'There are many kinds of rules.' (Ancrene Riwle I.42.5)

(11) **Existential Locative Inversions**

In eache an beó fife eures
in each one are five verses
'In each one are five verses.' (Ancrene Riwle I.68.264)

Sentences like (10) are certainly existential in spirit, and since their modern translations require an overt expletive, one must at least entertain the hypothesis that they include covert expletives in earlier English. ELIs like (11), on the other hand, are still possible today without the addition of an overt expletive. Yet given the existence in all periods of English of very similar sentences which overtly have expletive subjects, for example (12) and (13), it is certainly possible that (11) does contain a null subject.

(12) In Egipt þere ben v prouynce
    'In Egypt there are five provinces.'
    (Mandeville 29.28)

(13) [U]nder the cercle of Cancer ben there 12 divisouns
    'Under the circle of Cancer there are 12 divisions'
    (Chaucer, Treatise on the Astrolabe 667.CI.115)

ELIs cannot be excluded a priori from the tally of sentences which might contain a silent expletive, therefore, whatever our eventual conclusions about whether or not they do. I will discuss NPBEs and ELIs in detail below.

Entirely excluded from the study were clauses with extraction or relativization of the logical subject, as well as any string naturally interpreted (from the perspective of modern English) as an eventive passive.⁴

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3 In a language with silent expletives, extraction of the logical subject in an existential will in general produce a string that is ambiguous between an existential and a simple predicative reading. One could not straightforwardly decide whether a sentence like (1a) has the surface structure in (b) or the one in (c). Hence I excluded such cases from the count.

(i) (a) What is in Philadelphia?
(b) What is PRO, I, in Philadelphia?
(c) What, I, PRO in Philadelphia?

---

7.3. THE PRIMARY NUMBERS

Table 7.1 shows that the large majority of existential sentences in Period One, 71%, do not include an overt expletive. The numbers are roughly reversed in all subsequent periods. Expletive there is absent in only 15% of Period Two, 25% of Period Three,⁴ and 17% of Period Four existentials. (Breivik 1989 reports very similar numbers, despite very different methodology.) Not much changes if we eliminate from the count sentences with verbs other than be, as in Table 7.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.1. Existentials with vs. without expletive</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>there</th>
<th>no there</th>
<th>% without there</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>there for all verbs</td>
<td>1 (1150–1250)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 (1250–1350)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 (1350–1420)</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 (1420–1500)</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 7.2. Existentials with vs. without expletive</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>there</th>
<th>no there</th>
<th>% without there</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>there for just the verb be</td>
<td>1 (1150–1250)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 (1250–1350)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 (1350–1420)</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 (1420–1500)</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dividing these numbers up by dialect group, or sorting them into main versus subordinate clauses, turns up little of robust significance, as far as I have been able to tell. The basic patterns are simply recapitulated in finer counts, and space prevents me from discussing details. Two aspects of the data are salient and impressive. First, there-less existentials are quite common in Period One. Second, they become much less common immediately after 1250, and remain stably

My reasons for excluding sentences that read like eventive passives were similar. Many such sentences do include an overt expletive there (as in There was a pig roasted). But I was uncomfortable with regarding as existential, rather than eventive, cases that do not, much less with posulating for these a null expletive subject, even provisionally. To give any analysis for a string like (ii) (an artificial example with modern words, for simplicity’s sake) would have involved me in issues of Middle English participles and proto-passives which I was not prepared to handle.

(ii) yesterday was a crook hanged in the town square

An ideal study would handle these issues. But their avoidance is at worst a venial convenience, since it discounts just a small number of tokens, relative to the size of the database.

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4 The anomalous size of this number has to do with a large group of NP-be Existentials found in the two versions of The Mirror of St Edmund. Without these, the Period 3 number falls to 18%, in line with Periods 2 and 4.
so through the later periods, where there is little change. I aim to explain the first fact in §7.4 and the second in §7.5.

7.4. ACCOUNTING FOR THERE-LESS EXISTENTIALS IN EARLY MIDDLE ENGLISH

7.4.1. Exceptional inversion and the silent expletive

How could Early Middle English allow silent expletives when pronominal subjects are generally not c-commanded by the finite verb? A close look at the data reveals that the silent expletives occur exactly and only in those cases where the canonical order of pronouns and Vf is reversed.

In Old English and Early Middle English, certain environments exhibit a non-canonical word order where Vf precedes all pronouns, topic or not. Pintzuk (1991) and van Kempen (1987) describe four such environments: non-subject wh-questions (14a); sentences introduced by discourse sequencing adverbs like then, now, thus, or yet (14b); sentences with subjunctive, imperative, or negative verbs, a category I illustrate with a negative verb in (14c); and ‘certain verb-initial sentence types, principally so-called “Narrative Inversions”’ (Kroch and Taylor 1997: 303), as in (14d).

(14)  

(a) Non-subject wh-questions
& hwer edbrÆc ha ut from daue þe hali king godes prophete?
& where broke she out from Davy the holy king God’s prophet
‘And where did she break out from Davy the holy king, God’s prophet?’  
(Ancrene Riwle II.40-347)

(b) Discourse Adverb Inversions
þa ifunden heo þer ðrittig welsprungs
then found they there (loc.) thirty well-springs
‘Then they found there thirty springs.’
(Holy Rood Tree 2.23)

(c) Subjunctive, imperative, or negative verbs
Ant nis ha witerliche akeast & in-to þeowdom idrahent
and not-is she truly cast into slavery drawn
‘And she is not truly cast or drawn into slavery’
(Hali Meibhad 130.30)

(d) Narrative inversions
Comen alle to his bode
came all at his command
‘All came at his command.’
(St. Katherine 18.19)

Pintzuk (1991) treats these inversions as involving movement of Vf from F to C. I will say the same, though I need only commit to Vf (and F with it) moving from its usual position where it does not c-command non-topic pronouns to a higher position where it does. In C, Vf+F will license a silent expletive at the periphery of IP, as in (15).

(15)

\[ \text{As expected, we find existentials without there corresponding to these inversion types, which I will call Discourse Adverb Existentials (DAEs), Nis Existentials (NISEs), and Existential Narrative Inversions (ENIs).} \]

(16)  

Discourse Adverb Existentials
Ach nu is sum wummon þe nald for nan þing wilni
but now is some woman who wouldn’t for no thing desire
lewddess
‘But now there is some woman who wouldn’t for anything desire lewdness.’
(Ancrene Riwle II.49.365)

(17)  

Nis Existentials
For nis nan sunne þet he ne con
for not-is no sin that he not know
‘For there is no sin that he doesn’t know.’
(Lambeth Homilies 35.260)

(18)  

Existential Narrative Inversions
& com a culur se briht þa þe bearnde of heuene
& came a dove so bright as though it burned from heaven
‘And there came a dove from heaven so bright as though it burned.’
(Margarete 89.564)

If the landing site of Vf in non-canonical clauses is in fact C, then we do not expect to find silent expletives below complementizers, unless the embedding context is one that commonly allows recursion of CP, as do said that and so that (Laridou and Kroch 1992, Tony Kroch, p.c.). This is arguably true, assuming that my argument in §7.4.2, that ELs do not have expletive subjects, is correct. Most importantly, with some effort, one could make the case that all the subordinate NISEs are in environments for CP-recursion. In any case, I do not commit to the absolute position of Vf.
Diachronic Syntax

I did not find any interrogatives or verb-first subjunctives with obviously existential interpretation but without there. This is unfortunate, as these were very regular environments for inversion in early English, as they are today. But it is hardly surprising when the entire pool of texts contains only two questions and one conditional with there (all from Period Three). The inference that the expletive lurks unpronounced below Vf in (16-18) has empirical support. We sometimes find overt expletives following the verb in these same constructions, as in (19) and (20), even in texts where the variant with a silent expletive is attested. I was unable to find an ENI with postverbal there, but it is reasonable to assume that these patterns with DAEs like (19).

(19) pa com þær an helendis Mon then came EXPL a foreign man 'Then there came a foreign man.' (Lambeth Homilies 79.496)

(20) Ah nes þær nan þi mahte neauer eanes wrenchen hire but not-EXPL none that might never once wrench her 'But there was none that could ever once divert her.' (St Katherine 19.36)

Since the verb occurs above the pronounced expletive in (19) and (20), we have strong evidence that there is an unpronounced expletive in (16-18) as well, and that the verb is above it. The expletive in these sentences is nor in a preverbal topic position. Hence the configuration described by (7) obtains in (16-18), and the silence of the expletive is licensed. Of course the contrast between (20) and (21) (= (21)) must be noted.

(21) Ah þær nis buten an gudd 'But there is just one God.' (St Katherine 22.61)

If NISEs like (1) and (17) are to comply with the licensing condition in (6), then their underlying shape must be that of (20), not (21). I will assume that it is, and...

Null Subjects in Middle English Existentials

not just for theory-internal reasons. Even the pronounced expletive, there, is more likely to follow than to precede nis. Eight of the twenty-nine existentials with nis in Period One have an overt there. In six of these, there follows Vf, as in (20), and only twice does it come first, as in (21).

Now consider the taxonomy of existentials without there in Table 7.3. The first three columns give the numbers for the three regular V-to-C sentence types.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>DAE</th>
<th>NISE</th>
<th>ENI</th>
<th>be-i</th>
<th>ELI</th>
<th>NPBE</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (1150-1250)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1250-1350)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (1350-1420)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (1420-1500)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NISEs constitute nearly a third of all tokens without there in Period One, and DAEs, about a fifth. Adding the five ENIs, we discover that at least 59% of all the Period One existentials without there are V-to-C clauses, where the licensing feature F will occupy a governing position above the pronominal subject. Over half of the threatening there-less data, therefore, are clearly in compliance with (6).

It remains to explain the other half of the data, on the right side of Table 7.3. Among these, there are two types which are by far the most commonly attested: NP-be Existentials and Existential Locative Inversions, as in (10) and (11). I argue in §§7.4.2-3 that neither of these constructions includes a silent expletive subject, thereby eliminating the problem of licensing one. The other two categories, both very thinly populated, I will handle briefly here.

9 In wh-questions and Discourse Adverb Inversions, the finite verb raises to C, but the wh-phrase or adverb precedes it. This implies that V-to-C raising alone is not sufficient to produce verb-first word order. There are consequently two ways to understand sentences like (21). Either nis has not moved to C, in which case Vf is impossible and Vf is satisfied by the expletive, or nis has moved to C and the Vf option is simply not taken, perhaps for pragmatic reasons. The latter seems to me the more elegant explanation.

10 Two of the tokens counted as ELIs have nis as their main verb, and are thus also counted as NISEs. Below, in §7.4.2, I argue that ELIs do not have expletive subjects, and so eliminate them from the tally of existentials with silent expletives given in Table 7.4 of §7.4.4. These two tokens I do not eliminate, however, as they are derivationally ambiguous. They might be ELIs, and therefore lack a silent there; but they might also be regular there-existententials with a topIALIZED PP, where suppression of the expletive is licensed by V-to-C raising of nis (see note 12). I choose to regard them in the latter way, and so count them as having silent expletive subjects.
Diachronic Syntax

The first is Declarative be-H Existentials, of which there are just three tokens in total. Example (22) is one of the two from Period One (the other is Ancrane Riwe 1.44.52).

(22) Declarative be-H Existentials
Ah is an heouenlich gest in hire
but is an heavenly spirit in her
'But there is a heavenly spirit in her.'

(St Katherine 34.240, c.1225)

Ordinarily the affirmative copula does not invert with subject pronouns, but occasionally it does. Kroch and Taylor (1997) report pronoun-verb inversion in 33% of predicate adjective topicalizations, based on a study of seven of the ten Period One texts examined here. I propose to handle the two early be-H Existentials as exceptions of this sort, still within the range of grammatical possibilities. With this exceptional raising of be to C, a silent expletive is licensed. The one later token, (23), requires a slightly different explanation.

(23) My suete sisters, I saie to yu: es na sueter voice pan of iesu.
my sweet sisters I say to you is no sweeter voice than of Jesus.
'My sweet sisters, I say to you: there is no sweeter voice than that of Jesus.'

(The Northern Prose Rule of St Benet 2.23, c.1400)

In St Benet, raising of Vf over even pronominal subjects is completely regular; unless the subject is itself topicalized, it inverts with the verb (Kroch and Taylor 1997: 313). Thus we need not claim that Vf in the existential clause of (23) has raised any higher than usual. We do need to stipulate, however, that this is a bona fide V1 clause, with the preverbal 'topic' position not only silent, but unoccupied. The expletive will then necessarily follow and be subordinate to Vf, satisfying the licensing condition on proX in (5). One problem with this stipulation must be admitted. Indicative V1 is exceedingly rare in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Middle English (see §7.5), so the syntax proposed for (23), which comes from a text written circa 1400, is in fact improbable. Nevertheless it is possible, and of course necessary if the licensing condition in (6) is correct.

Space prevents me from discussing the diverse tokens lumped under Other in any detail. The three from Period One use the modal construction is need with a dative argument, asserting that there is a need for somebody to do or to have something. The translations of these require an expletive ('there is need'), but one could argue that in these early English tokens, the dative is the subject, and there is no expletive. Otherwise, it is again possible to posit exceptional raising of be. The nine later tokens are less challenging. Seven, including the single 'Other' token from Period Three, are plausibly analysed as V2 sentences where a temporal adjunct occupies the 'topic' position; thus there could be no difficulty silencing an expletive subject (if there is one), since it would be below Vf+F. The final two Period Four tokens look like complex sorts of ELI, whose explanation follows.

7.4.2. Existential Locative Inversions

In the Period One texts, topicalization of a PP does not trigger inversion of subject pronouns. Kroch and Taylor (1997) find pronoun-verb inversion in 0 out of 11 cases where a complement PP is preposed to the topic position, and 2 out of 99 with a PP adjunct. Were ELIs to contain a silent pronominal subject in Early Middle English, therefore, it would not be governed by Vf, violating (6). This problem will not arise for purer V2 sublanguages of fourteenth-century Middle English, where subjects always follow Vf when another phrase is fronted. But the problem will arise in all Middle English sentences whose syntax is modern, with regular SV order. I will therefore pursue a maximally general solution, still adhering to the ideally simple principle that silent expletives are impossible unless subordinate to the feature F. I deny the assumption that produces the problem: at no stage of English do ELIs have an expletive subject.

First a historical consideration. Expletives in Middle English are often pronounced even when governed by F—as often as two-thirds of the time of the fourteenth century, it seems (see §7.5 below). But the entire corpus contains just one existential sentence with a fronted PP and a pronounced postverbal expletive, namely (13). (Falk 1993a makes related observations for historical and modern Swedish; see especially pages 292–4.) This discrepancy is strikingly extreme if ELIs necessarily have expletive subjects. The simplest conclusion to draw is that they do not.

Next I will argue that locative inversions in Modern English do not have expletive subjects. If this is true, then it is all the more likely that ELIs in Early Middle English do not have them either.

First, there are several strong dissimilarities between locative inversions and their putative counterparts with an overt expletive—as (25) is the putative counterpart to (24)—that are difficult to explain if locative inversions have a silent form of there in subject position.

(24) On the table was/stood a bust of Mao
(25) On the table there was/stood a bust of Mao

This asymmetry between negative and positive be has a provocative parallel in modern Englishes which allow ain’t, namely the contrast between (i) and (ii). Space forbids me speculating on the significance of this very interesting fact.

(i) Ain’t no room in the car
(ii) *Is still room in the car

For rhetorical purposes, this statement is stronger than it needs to be. I do not need to exclude the possibility of a silent expletive co-occurring with a topicalized locative in a pure V2 grammar, since in that case proX will perform occur below Vf+F. (Compare the case of the two ambiguous tokens discussed in note 16.)
I will note four such differences. Others are discussed in Bresnan (1994).

1. As noticed by Milszark (1974) and others, locative inversions do not allow the range of predicates following the postverbal 'logical subject' that existentials with *there* do: witness the contrast between (26b) and (26c).

   (26) (a) There were two Philadelphia cops murdered (right on that corner)
   (b) Right on that corner, there were two Philadelphia cops murdered
   (c) *Right on that corner were two Philadelphia cops murdered
   (d) Right on that corner were two Philadelphia cops

   On the supposition that (c) has an expletive subject, its ungrammaticality is completely unexpected, given that (a) and (b) are fine. This implies that the supposition is false: (c), hence (d) and locative inversions in general, do not have expletive subjects.

2. Locative inversions without an overt expletive do not show the definiteness effect. For those who believe this effect depends somehow on the inclusion of the expletive, the acceptability of (27) implies the lack of an expletive.

   (27) On the table is the magazine John bought
   (28) *On the table there is the magazine John bought

3. NPs that cannot be the subject of a locative predicate cannot be the logical subject of a locative inversion either (Milszark 1974): witness (29) and (30). Yet these same NPs can serve as the logical subject of an existential with *there*, as in (31).

   (29) *Room is in the front closet
   (30) *In the front closet is room
   (31) In the front closet there is room

   One feels that (29) and (30) are bad for the same reason, and should receive the same explanation. This explanation could not have to do with the pragmatics of the locative inversion construction, since (29) is not a locative inversion. But neither a semantic nor syntactic explanation is likely if (30) has an expletive subject, since then (29) and (30) would differ substantially in composition and structure: (29), clearly, does *not* have an expletive subject. Furthermore, were (30) to have an expletive subject, the contrast between it and (31) would be puzzling. Presumably the two sentences would be identical, at least up to the IP level, in every way but pronunciation. But (30) is bad and (31) is good. Thus the hypothesis that (30) has an expletive subject confounds our explanation of its ungrammaticality.

4. Existentials with *be* that have an overt expletive permit adverbs of temporal quantification (always, usually, etc.) (32a), even when the FP is fronted (32b). But locative inversions are unacceptable with the same adverbs in what is apparently the same position, as shown in (32c).

   (32) (a) There was always a bust of Mao on the table
   (b) On the table, there was always a bust of Mao
   (c) *On the table was always a bust of Mao

   One might hope that there is a good discourse-functional explanation for this, but I have not found one. Hence I suspect that the grammaticality contrast between (b) and (c) diagnoses some structural difference between them. It is at least a reasonable guess that the difference subsists in the absence of an expletive subject in (c).

   A second, much broader type of problem for the idea that locative inversions contain silent expletives is that silent expletives are generally forbidden in Modern English. We see this in sentences like those in (33), which are ungrammatical without the overt *there*, despite Vf being in C*

   (33) (a) Nor were *(there) any simpler examples
   (b) Aren't *(there) better explanations?
   (c) In which department are *(there) still honest linguists?

   The burden of proof is therefore on the linguist who would claim that locative inversions do contain a silent expletive. Most likely, this linguist will argue that a fronted locative argument, and only this, has a special power to silence expletives. Already this is an unattractively narrow position. It is prone to become even more so in coping with the data from (26–32). I doubt whether these contrasts between locative inversions and *there*-existentials could be explained without saying that the putative *pro*-subject of a locative inversion differs from *there* in more than just pronunciation. But then this expletive would not be *pro*, the silent *there*. It would be a new type of expletive altogether, one which apparently has no pronounced counterpart, and which is licensed exclusively by fronted locatives. At this point, the analysis forfeits all generality. And in any case, it now implies that locative inversions are irrelevant to the study of silent *there*, the same conclusion we reach if locative inversions contain no expletive whatsoever.

   Further defence of my position is warranted, but it would lead us too far off the topic. Certain well-known problems having to do with the theories of Case

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13 My impression is that were (32c) to occur in the right narrative context, a *bust of Mao* could introduce a referent 'relatively new to the discourse', or have 'presentational focus', these being conditions on the felicity of locative inversions according to Binzer and Ward (1993) and Bresnan (1994), respectively. It is not clear to me why it should matter that the object(s) newly introduced or presentationally focused are distributed across time. Certainly the unacceptability of (32c) cannot be explained by claiming that the coda of a locative inversion must introduce a single, specific referent, since (l) is perfectly acceptable. It has only a distributive reading, and would be felicitous even if all the busts could not possibly be seen simultaneously.

1 On every model worker’s desk was a bust of Mao
and subjeachood are only briefly discussed in a footnote.  Yet I believe it sufficient to have shown that the no-expletive analysis of locative inversion gets things right that its alternative cannot.

7.4.3. NP-be Existentials
On the face of it, (34) (= (25) = (10)) could form a syntactic minimal pair with (35), the only difference being whether the expletive is pronounced.

(34)  Moni cunne riwlen  beō
  many kinds of-rules are
  'There are many kinds of rules.'
  (Ancrene Riwle L42.5)

(35)  Nicle wodres  per  beō
  nine hosts  there are
  'Nine hosts there are.'
  (Sawles Warde 180.228)

Were this true, we should have to wonder how the silent expletive putatively present in (34) could be licensed.

Sticking to the assumptions of this chapter, there are two possibilities. Either (34) involves exceptional raising of be to C, whereby permitting a silent expletive, or it simply does not include a silent expletive. Both solutions are defensible. As mentioned above, positive be does sometimes raise. Unfortunately, the ideal evidence for this first hypothesis is lacking, since there are no NPBEs in the Period One corpus with a pronoun expletive following the verb. The second hypothesis has in its favour tokens like (36).

(36)  Penne sum  tymé  beá  he  was not
  then  some time  was  that  he  was not
  'Then [there] was some time during which he was not.'
  (Mirror of St Edmund, Vernon 258.702)

The relative clause in (36), he was not, has no grammatical counterpart with an overt expletive. Presumably then, it does not have a silent expletive subject either. This suggests that here, be has the intransitive syntax of exist, as it does in 'I think, therefore I am'. Now consider the matrix NPBE, some time was . . . .

Since its subject is indefinite, this clause can be translated with an overt there.

This facilitates an analysis of the matrix verb as a be of the ordinary sort, with two syntactic arguments—but it does not force it. The author of (36) has a simple intransitive use of be available to him; perhaps the matrix be is of this type as well, leaving no room for a silent expletive here either. Potentially, all NPBEs in the Middle English corpus could receive this explanation. There are, therefore, at least two plausible analyses which will bring NPBEs into accord with the licensing condition in (6).

Perhaps most likely, however, is that they are calques. Several of the Period One NPBEs, like (37), are translations of Latin quotations. Many others occur soon after these translations, and seem to mimic their style.

(37)  tre cruces sunt de quibus hic agitare  due corporis una mentis.  preo
  roden beó  ba ich umbre speche. Twa licamliche; and an gastlich.
  'Tre cruces sunt de quibus hic agitare  due corporis una mentis.
  Three crosses [there] are that I speak about: two bodily and one spiritual.'  (Lambeth Homilies 147.717)

Seventeen of the twenty later tokens come exclusively from the two versions of The Mirror of St. Edmund, which are both close translations of the Latin. And thirteen of these seventeen come from the Vernon version, which is thought to be the closer rendering (Ann Taylor, p.c.). Latin of course had no existential expletive and was generally verb final. It is therefore not unlikely that sentences like those in (34) are affected imitations of the Latin, not properly reflecting the Early Middle English grammar at all. Of course such a claim cannot easily be proven. But if it is true, then NPBEs turn out to be irrelevant to the issues of this chapter. If it is not, then both of the explanations proposed in the preceding paragraph are available.

7.4.4. Conclusions of this section
I have argued that not all existentials without there include a silent expletive: ELIs and NPBEs do not. The numbers now break down as in Table 7.4.15

15 Counted as having 'no expletive whatsoever' are existentials of those types that I have directly argued lack expletive subjects. These are the ELIs (excluding the two from Period One with nis (see note 10), but including the two complex cases from Period Four classified as 'Other' in Table 7.3
TABLE 7.4. Overt expletive vs. silent expletive vs. no expletive in Middle English existentials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Overt expletive</th>
<th>Silent expletive</th>
<th>% of expletives silent</th>
<th>No expletive whatsoever</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (1150–1250)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1250–1350)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (1350–1420)</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (1420–1500)</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Outside Period One, there are almost no instances of the silent expletive expletive. Within Period One, nearly two-thirds of the existentials without there include a null subject. In any period, when there is a null expletive, it is appropriately subordinate to (that is, c-commanded by) F. In tokens from Early Middle English, subordination obtains by means of exceptional raising of Vf+F to C. When there is no empty expletive, there is, of course, no question of licensing one. Thus the problem posed at the start of this chapter is solved, and a syntax which assumes (4) and (5) has no difficulty accommodating the data.

More than that, the data can be taken as confirming (4) and (5). (4) and (5) say that Vf does not c-command a subject pronoun, pronounced or silent, in a canonical Early Middle English clause. This predicts that silent expletives will occur only in non-canonical clauses. Since this is indeed what we find, our assumptions are supported, and with them the portions of the Pintzuk–Kroch–Taylor theory from which they derive. Notice, the same point would have to hold even if ELIs did have a silent expletive. Since this particular null pronoun would be one that is licensed independently of F, its existence would be irrelevant to the distribution of the more familiar proX, which is dependent on F. We still would not predict the preponderance of NISEs and DAEs, and the near total absence of Declarative be-1 Existentials, unless (4) and (5) were true.

A theory which might suffer from this conclusion is that of van Kemenade (1987, 1997a). For van Kemenade, the hierarchical relation between Vf and a subject pronoun is the same in so-called canonical and non-canonical clauses. In both cases, the pronoun is syntactically clitic on Vf, and only the linear relation between them varies. Hence her theory does not anticipate the distribution of the data. Van Kemenade could respond by rephrasing the licensing condition on proX in terms of precedence; but this would go against a basic principle of the syntactic metatheory assumed both by van Kemenade and by this chapter.

7.5. DIACHRONY

According to Table 7.4, 61% of existential expletives in the 1150–1250 texts are silent. After 1250 the percentage drops to between 2% and 4%. What accounts for this change, and for its severity?

The probability that an expletive is silent, p(X=proX), depends on two factors: the probability that an expletive will be silent when subordinate to the feature F, p(X=proX|F=X), and the probability that an expletive will indeed be subordinate to F, p(F=X). Presumably these factors are independent, such that p(X=proX) is equal to their product: p(X=proX)=p(X=proX|F=X) x p(F=X). I will assume that the frequencies observed in a group of texts correctly represent an idealized grammar underlying those texts. Thus I will assume that the observed relative frequency of (. . . ) is equal to p(. . . ).

Adapting the argot of Rizzi (1986), we can say that p(X=proX|F=X) represents the strength of the capacity to ‘identify’ proX. Most probably, the ability to identify proX correlates with aspects of the Case system, and perhaps with subject–verb agreement as well (Allen 1995, Falk 1993a, Platzer 1987, Vikner 1995, among many others). Given this, one expects fourteenth-century Middle English to have retained this capacity to some significant degree, as the Case and Agreement systems had corrodled only gradually since the early thirteenth century, and certain Case distinctions absent from the modern language were still active (Allen 1995). Table 7.5 gives some evidence supporting this expectation. In Period Three, expletives are silenced in around one-third of Discourse Adverb Existentials, the one regular environment for subject–verb inversion in which we find silent expletives even outside the earliest period.

TABLE 7.5. Overt vs. silent expletives in environments of subject–verb inversion (numbers in parentheses are for just the verb be)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Clause type</th>
<th>Over there after verb</th>
<th>Silent expletive</th>
<th>% of postverbal expletives silent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (1150–1250)</td>
<td>DAE</td>
<td>1 (0)</td>
<td>15 (6)</td>
<td>94% (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NISE</td>
<td>6 (6)</td>
<td>21 (21)</td>
<td>75% (78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1250–1350)</td>
<td>DAE</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (1350–1420)</td>
<td>DAE</td>
<td>5 (5)</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
<td>35% (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (1420–1500)</td>
<td>DAE</td>
<td>4 (4)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The composite picture here disguises enormous variation between texts, and the data are in any case sparse. But since they corroborate our expectations based on the condition of Middle English morphology, let us cautiously suppose that they do correctly depict the state of the grammar. For Period Three Middle
Null Subjects in Middle English Existentials

In Period One texts, 2.2% (100/4,450) of all tensed, non-interrogative clauses (not just existentials) have an indicative verb in initial position. In texts of Period Two composition, the number falls to 0.26% (3/1,162). Periods Three and Four have just 0.13% (12/9,128) and 0.11% (7/6,310), respectively. Declarative V1 thus appears to have suffered a very significant drop in productivity at the end of Early Middle English, a drop that is quite extreme in comparison to the gradual decay from Period Two onwards.

This change is expressed very dramatically in the domain of existential sentences, as before 1250 the rate of V1 in this domain is exceptionally high. In the Period One texts, verb-first indications make up fully 46% (33/71) of existentials with expletive subjects, or 34% (33/98) of all existential sentences generally. In the later periods, by contrast, the proportion of V1 among existentials is never higher than 2% (Period Two: 2% (1/42), Period Three: 2% (3/184), Period Four: 0% (0/160)).

The frequency of XP-VF-expl clauses among existentials decays as well, but more gradually. Among the Period One existentials with expletives, 28% (20/71) have XP-VF-expletive order. Period Two shows an unexpected 0% (0/42), but Periods Three and Four register 7% (13/184) and 8% (12/160), respectively.

Table 7.6 summarizes these results. What we notice is that the loss of V1 dominates the overall decline in p(F> )X), here represented in the rightmost column by the sum of the first two columns. (Notice, these measurements of p(F> )X) coincide closely with those based on the estimates of p(X=proXIF> )X) in Table 7.5.) Between Period One and Period Three, the percentage of V1 among existentials with expletives drops from 46% to 2%. The decline in XP-VF-expletive order, on the other hand, is slighter, sliding only from 28% to 7%. It is fair to say, then, that the drop in p(F> )X) is due primarily to the loss of V1. The decline in XP-VF-expletive order—or rather, the implied decline in the odds

These numbers are based on tensed, non-imperative clauses whose tensed verb was morphologically in the past, and was not a modal. The set of V1 tokens among the complementary set of clauses (those with a modal or a present-tense verb) includes a much higher proportion of non-declaratives, mainly hortatives and conditionals, to be eliminated from the count. I should also note that this search was executed over the new, second edition of the online Penn-Helsinki corpus (Kroch and Taylor 2000), as it stood in late August 1999.

The drop from 28% to 7% in the frequency of the V1 order XP-VF-expletive is not due to any change in the productivity that some non-subject XP will be formed in an existential sentence. This probability remains steady throughout the four historical periods at about 0.59, or about 0.33 if ELIs and NPBEs are excluded from the count. Consequently, the 28% to 7% drop directly indicates a (nearly) equivalent change in the likelihood that forming of an arbitrary non-subject XP will trigger inversion of the expletive and the finite verb.

One should not be surprised that the frequency of XP-VF-expletive order suffers only a minor loss between 1150 and 1420. V2 is indeed in decline as of the late 14th century (van Kemenade 1997a: 326). But expletives are pronouns, and in the Early Middle English of Period One, clauses with pronominal subjects are generally not V2 either, strictly speaking. In canonical clauses, pronouns precede Vf. Thus, importantly, we should not expect the obsolescence of V2 to have very strong effects in the domain of existential sentences.
that a fronted XP will trigger inversion of Vf and the pronominal, expletive subject (see note 18)—is secondary. And since the decrease in \( p(F>X) \) is in turn the main contributor to the severe drop in \( p(X=pro_X) \), we may regard the loss of V1 as the most significant factor in the near disappearance of silent expletives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>V1 (Vf-expl)</th>
<th>V2 (XP-Vf-expletive)</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Vf-expletive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (1150–1250)</td>
<td>46% (33/71)</td>
<td>28% (20/71)</td>
<td>75% (53/71)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (1250–1350)</td>
<td>2% (1/42)</td>
<td>0% (0/42)</td>
<td>2% (1/42)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (1350–1420)</td>
<td>2% (3/184)</td>
<td>7% (13/184)</td>
<td>9% (16/184)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (1420–1500)</td>
<td>0% (0/160)</td>
<td>8% (12/160)</td>
<td>8% (12/160)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can now understand why the disappearance of unpronounced expletives was so sudden, when Case and Agreement weakened only gradually. They disappeared suddenly because V1 did. The dimensions of the change seem catastrophic because before 1250 V1 was unusually common among existentials.19 Were V1 as common among the existentials in Period Three as in Period One, the proportion of expletives silent in Period Three would be rather higher than the attested 3% (Table 7.4), perhaps as high as 20%,20 and consequently the drop in \( p(X=pro_X) \) would not be nearly so severe as it is.

What precipitated the loss of V1? Here I can only sketch a conjecture. Historically, the loss of V1 seems to coincide with the shift in the relative positions of pronouns and the finite verb, manifested rather abruptly in the textual record around 1250. Before 1250, weak pronouns preceded Vf. But in the hundred and fifty or so years thereafter many texts (those of Chaucer, for example, as well as northern texts like St Benet) frequently show non-topic pronouns following Vf, giving a more standard V2 word order (Kroch and Taylor 1997; see also note 16). Kroch and Taylor (1997) analyse this as a change in the position of the verb. The older grammar had Vf in I, and the later V2 grammar had it in C
.

Now a typological observation becomes relevant. The modern Germanic languages in which declarative V1 is most productive are Icelandic and Yiddish (Sigurðsson 1990). These are also the languages for which it has been argued that Vf is generally in I, but sometimes in C (Delsing 1988, Iatridou and Kroch 1992, Rögnvaldsson and Thráinsson 1990, Santorini 1994). Suppose this is correct. Declarative V2 in Yiddish and Icelandic then amounts to the requirement that Vf occupy I and some XP occupy Spec,CP. An explanation for the correlation with declarative V1 now becomes available: V1 involves exceptional movement of Vf from I to C, and since nothing requires lexicalization of Spec,CP, Vf in C is free to come first. If this theory is sound, if it can be adapted to Early Middle English, and if Kroch and Taylor’s (1997) theory of the change in pronoun–verb order is correct, then we might have an understanding of why V1 drops away with the disappearance of preverbal pronouns in the V2 texts of Middle English after 1250. Clearly, much further work is required to satisfy these ifs. And, more fundamentally, the original hypothesis wants confirmation. Does the loss of V1 in fact track the change in the relative position of Vf and subject pronouns? Presently I have no certain evidence either way.

7.6. Conclusion

This chapter has given a substantive defence of two hypotheses: (a) silent expletives in Germanic are licensed only in the c-command domain of a feature associated with the finite verb; (b) the finite verb in (Old and) Middle English c-commands pronouns it precedes, but not pronouns it follows. Thus the chapter contributes both to the general theory of expletives across Germanic, and to the ongoing debate over the clause structure of early English, where I have found reason to prefer the theory of Pintzuk (1991, 1996b) and Kroch and Taylor (1997) to that of van Kemenade (1987, 1997a). I have also brought to the foreground a correlation between the occurrence of silent existential expletives and verb-first word order, arguing that a sharp drop in the availability of V1 explains the enormous discrepancy in the frequency of silent expletives before and after 1250. The central virtue of this analysis is that it explains why \( pro_X \) did not disappear from the textual record at the same (relatively) gradual rate that the Case and Agreement systems decayed. I have said nothing about what in these systems underlies the capacity to identify \( pro_X \), but my arguments should sharpen the focus of research into this question, since they imply that the sudden change circa 1250 does not correspond to a commensurate change in that capacity. Finally, in the course of defending (a) and (b), I have argued that locative inversions do not include silent expletives, a claim with extensive implications for the theory of subjects.
## APPENDIX

Source texts from the Penn–Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>MS date</th>
<th>Composition date (if thought different)</th>
<th>Number of sentence tokens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Period One: 1150–1250</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancrene Riwle</td>
<td>c.1225</td>
<td></td>
<td>620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halie Meïndad</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>c.1200</td>
<td>531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Rood Tree</td>
<td>c.1175</td>
<td>11th c.?</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Katherine</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>c.1200</td>
<td>547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lambeth Homilies</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>Old English</td>
<td>734</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margarete</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>c.1200</td>
<td>636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peterborough Chronicles</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td></td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sawles Warde</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>c.1200</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinity Homilies</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>12th c.?</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vices and Virtues</td>
<td>1225</td>
<td>c.1200</td>
<td>608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Period Two: 1250–1350</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayenbite of Inwyt</td>
<td>1340</td>
<td></td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Earliest Prose Psalter</td>
<td>c.1350</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentish Sermons</td>
<td>c.1250</td>
<td></td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aelfred of Rievaulx's De Institutione</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td>Period Two</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusarum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Rolle's Form of Living</td>
<td>1450</td>
<td>1348</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Rolle's Prose Treatises</td>
<td>1440</td>
<td>1349</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Period Three: 1350–1420</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaucer's Treatise on the Astrolabe</td>
<td>a.1450</td>
<td>c.1390</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaucer's Boethius</td>
<td>a.1425</td>
<td>c.1380</td>
<td>501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Northern Prose Rule of St Benet</td>
<td>a.1425</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brut</td>
<td>1400</td>
<td></td>
<td>540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloud of Unknowing</td>
<td>1425</td>
<td>1400?</td>
<td>726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
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**Null Subjects in Middle English Existentials**

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