

# Expletives and agreement in passives

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## 1 Introduction

Passives with expletive subjects seem to be possible in all Nordic dialects, but there is variation with respect to the choice of expletive subject, order between participle and object DP and agreement, as well as with respect to which type of passive is preferred. Some varieties use the pronominal expletive *det* 'it' in passives, while other varieties have a locative form (*der/där* 'there' or *her/här* 'here'), or vary between the two (see [Larsson 2014](#) for an overview of expletives in Norwegian and Swedish). Moreover, in some varieties, the object DP can either precede or follow the participle in passives, as in the Swedish examples in (1). These examples also differ with respect to agreement: when the participle follows the DP, it agrees with it in number and gender, when it precedes the DP, it is invariably neuter singular.

(1) a) Det har blivit skrivet/\*skrivna tre böcker om detta. (Swe.)  
*it.N.SG have.PRES been write.PASTPART.N.SG/write.PASTPART.PL three book.PL about this*  
 'It has been written three books about this.'

b) Det har blivit tre böcker \*skrivet/skrivna om detta. (Swe.)  
*it.N.SG have.PRES been three book.PL write.PASTPART.N.SG/write.PASTPART.PL about this*  
 'It has been written three books about this.'

(Holmberg 2002: 86)

In Swedish (and some varieties of Norwegian), the neuter singular form of the passive participle (e.g. *är skrivet* 'is written') is distinct from the active form used in perfects (*har skrivit* 'has written'). The perfect participle is traditionally referred to as the supine (see Platzack 1989, Larsson 2009).

With respect to agreement, Standard Swedish differs from Icelandic, where the participle obligatorily agrees with a postverbal object:

(2) Það hafa verið \*skrifað/skrifaðar þrjár bækur um þetta. (Ice.)  
*it.N.SG have.PRES.3.PL been write.PASTPART.N.SG/write.PASTPART.FEM.NOM.PL three book.FEM.NOM.PL about this*  
 'It has been written three books about this.'

(Holmberg 2002: 86)

Other varieties of Scandinavian disallow the order DP—participle altogether; cf. the Norwegian examples given in (3).

(3) a) Det har blitt skrevet tre bøker om dette. (No.)  
*it.N.SG have.PRES been write.PASTPART.N.SG three book.PL about this*  
 'It has been written three books about this.'

b) \*Det har blitt tre bøker skrevet/skrevne om dette. (No.)  
*it.N.SG have.PRES been three book.PL write.PASTPART.N.SG/write.PASTPART.PL about this*  
 'It has been written three books about this.'

(Holmberg 2002: 85)

Holmberg (2002) argues that the variation is a consequence of differences in agreement morphology in combination with variations in properties of the expletive. Many varieties of Norwegian do not inflect participles in periphrastic passives at all, and some varieties also lack predicative agreement (see Sandøy 1988).

In the Norwegian survey, it was investigated if a participle that precedes the DP-associate in passives with expletive subject shows agreement or not. In the Swedish survey, the test-sentences in addition used different expletive forms (locative and pronominal expletives). All the tested sentences have a postverbal DP. Results from the Nordic Syntax Database (Lindstad et al. 2009) are presented below.

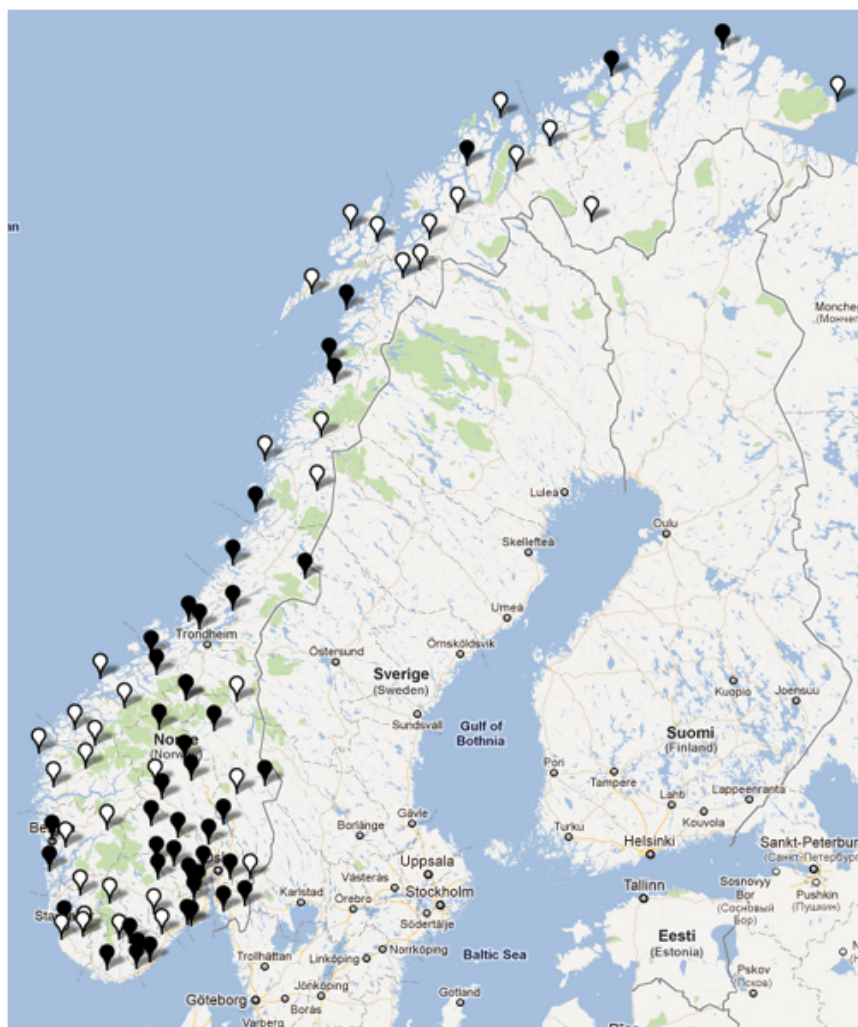
## 2 Results

The following sentences were included in the Norwegian questionnaire:

- (4) a) Der/det/her vart skotne mange elgar i fjor. (#1235) (No.)  
*there/it/here become.PAST shoot.PASTPART.PL many elk.PL last.year*
- b) Der/det/her vart skote mange elgar i fjor. (#1236) (No.)  
*there/it/here become.PAST shoot.PASTPART.N.SG many elk.PL last.year*  
 'It was shot many elk last year.'

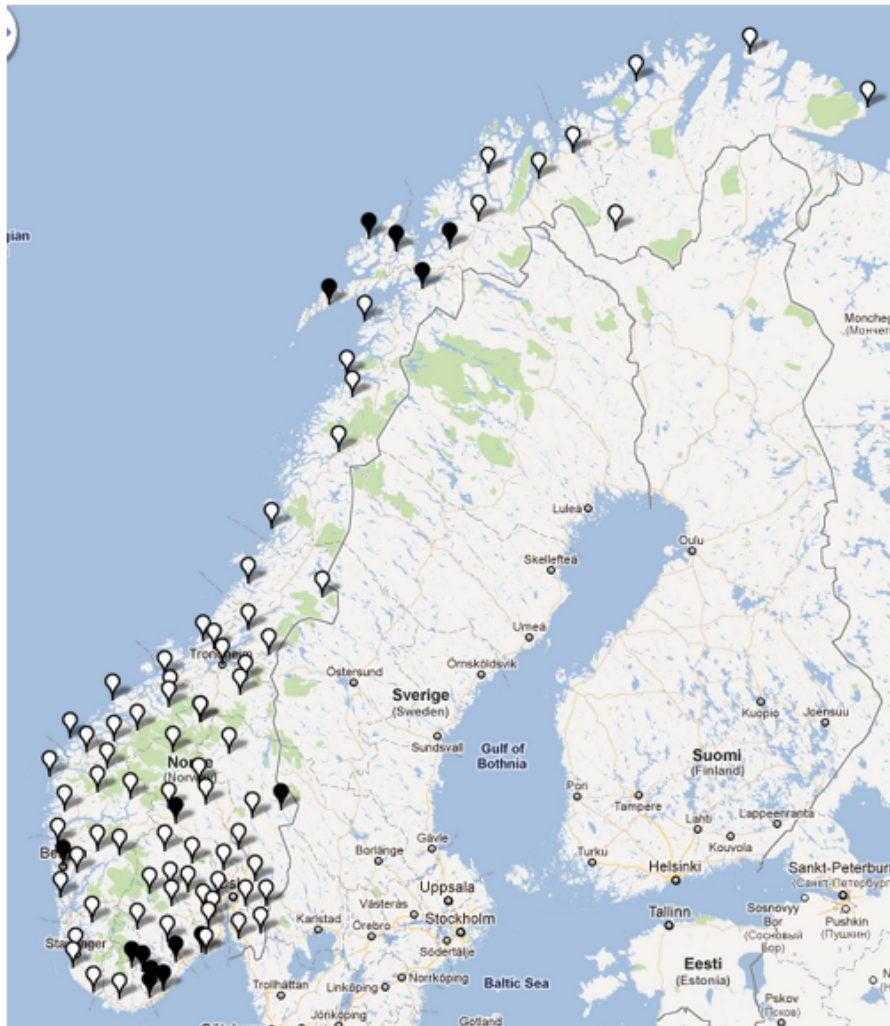
The passive with a participle that agrees with a postverbal DP (#1235) is rejected in an area from the southeast to the northwest (see Map 1). It is judged grammatical in particular in parts of Western and Northern Norway.

The corresponding sentence without participle agreement (#1236) is more generally acceptable in Norwegian dialects (see Map 2). It is, however, ungrammatical e.g. in some locations in Northern Norway and in Aust-Adger in the south.



Map 1. Passive with expletive subject and agreement between participle and postverbal DP in Norwegian (#1235: *Det/det/her vart skotne mange elgar i fjor.* 'There was shot many moose last year.')

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score)



Map 2. Passive with expletive subject and without agreement between participle and postverbal DP in Norwegian  
 (#1236: *Der/det/her vart skote mange elgar i fjor. 'It was shot many moose last year.'*)  
 (White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score)

In the Swedish survey, the following sentences with passives and expletive *det* 'it' were included:

- (5) a) Det blev skjutna många älgar förra veckan. (#1417) (Swe.)  
*it become.PAST shoot.PASTPART.PL many elk.PL last week.DEF*
- b) Det blev skjutet många älgar förra veckan. (#1418) (Swe.)  
*it become.PAST shoot.PASTPART.N.SG many elk.PL last week.DEF*
- c) Det blev skjutit många älgar förra veckan. (#1419) (Swe.)  
*it become.PAST shoot.SUP many elk.PL last week.DEF*  
 'It was shot many elk last week.'

The sentence with expletive *det* and agreement between participle and a postverbal DP (#1417) gets high or intermediate scores in several locations, particularly in Svealand and Finland; see Map 3. It is rejected in Southern Sweden and in some locations in Northern Sweden.

The sentence with expletive *det* + neuter singular participle (#1418) is grammatical in most locations in Sweden and Finland, but it gets low scores in a couple of locations, particularly in the periphery; see Map 4.

The passive with expletive *det* + supine (#1419) is ungrammatical in most locations in Sweden; see Map 5. It is, however, accepted e.g. in Gotland, in three locations in Finland and along the northern coast (see further section 3 below).



Map 3. Passive with expletive det 'it' and agreement between participle and postverbal DP in Swedish  
 (#1417: *Det blev skjutna många älger förra veckan.* 'It was shot many moose last week.')

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score)



Map 4. Passive with expletive det 'it', neuter singular participle and postverbal DP in Swedish  
 (#1418: *Det blev skjutet många älgar förre veckan.* 'It was shot many moose last week.')

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score)



Map 5. Passive with expletive det 'it', supine form of the participle and postverbal DP in Swedish  
 (#1419: *Det blev skjutit många älger förra veckan.* 'It was shot many moose last week.')

(White = high score, grey = medium score, black = low score)

The Swedish survey also included the following passives with expletive *där* 'there':

- (6) a) *Där blev skjutna många älger förra veckan.* (#1414) (Swe.)  
*there become.PAST shoot.PASTPART.PL many elk.PL last week.DEF*
- b) *Där blev skjutet många älger förra veckan.* (#1415) (Swe.)  
*there become.PAST shoot.PASTPART.N.SG many elk.PL last week.DEF*
- c) *Där blev skjutit många älger förra veckan.* (#1416) (Swe.)  
*there become.PAST shoot.SUP many elk.PL last week.DEF*  
 'It was shot many elk last week.'

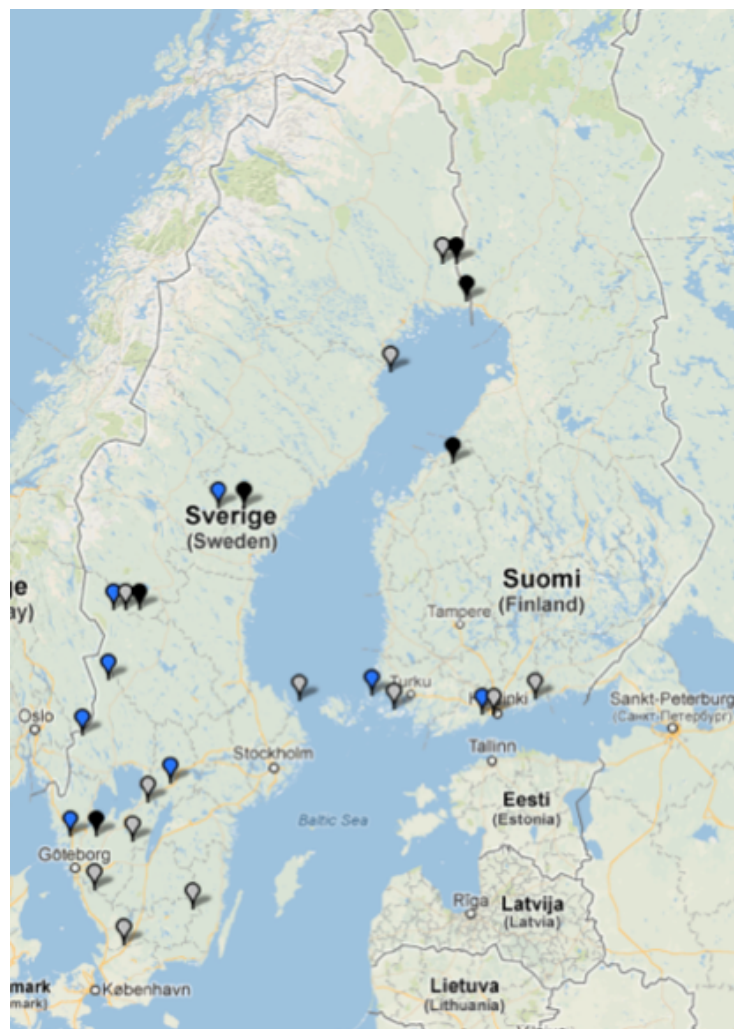
In general, none of these sentences is judged acceptable; see Map 6, which gives the low scores for the three sentences. (*Där* is not generally acceptable in presentational sentences, either; see [Larsson 2014](#) and section 3 below.)

In some locations in Sweden and Finland, one or more of the sentences with *där* is judged as acceptable. The sentence with expletive *där* 'there' and agreeing participle (#1414) is for instance accepted in a few locations close to the Norwegian border; see Map 7. The sentence with the neuter singular form of the participle (#1415) is judged grammatical in a few spread locations, particularly in Götaland. Also the sentence with the supine (#1416) is accepted in a few spread locations. None of the sentences was tested in Skåne and Blekinge in southernmost Sweden (where *där* 'there' is most widely accepted in presentational sentences; see [Larsson 2014](#).)



Map 6. Low scores for passive with expletive *där* 'there' and postverbal DP in Swedish.

(Blue = agreeing participle (#1414 *Där blev skjutna många älger förra veckan.* 'It was shot many moose last week. ');  
 grey = neuter singular of the participle (#1415: *Där blev skjutet många älger förra veckan.* 'It was shot many moose last week. ');  
 black = supine (#1416: *Där blev skjutit många älger förra veckan.* 'It was shot many moose last week. '))



Map 7. High scores for passive with expletive *där* 'there' and the order participle-DP in Swedish.

(Blue = agreeing participle (#1414 *Där blev skjutna många älger förra veckan.* 'It was shot many moose last week. ');  
 grey = neuter singular of the participle (#1415: *Där blev skjutet många älger förra veckan.* 'It was shot many moose last week. ');  
 black = supine (#1416: *Där blev skjutit många älger förra veckan.* 'It was shot many moose last week. '))

### 3 Discussion

Many Norwegian dialects lack participle agreement in passives, and it is therefore not unexpected that the sentence with an agreeing participle is rejected in many locations in Norway. In a few locations, particularly in Eastern Norway, both sentences are judged ungrammatical.

In Norwegian, both agreeing and non-agreeing dialects can be compatible with either of the expletive subject types (Åfarli 2009: 169). Åfarli (2009, 2011) suggests that when the pronominal expletive *det* 'it' is used in a dialect with participle agreement in passives, the participle must agree with the expletive (i.e. have the neuter singular form). The locative expletive *der* 'there', on the other hand, forces agreement with the postverbal DP (2009: 179). In other words, in dialects with participle agreement we expect the pattern in (7) and (8), depending on the choice of expletive (cf. Christensen & Taraldsen 1989).

(7) Det er skote/\*skotne nokre elgar. (No.)  
*it.N.SG be.PRES shoot.PASTPART.N.SG/shoot.PASTPART.PL some elk.PL*  
 'It has been shot some elk.'

(Åfarli 2009: 177)

(8) Der er \*skote/skotne nokre elgar. (No.)  
*there be.PRES shoot.PASTPART.N.SG/shoot.PASTPART.PL some elk.PL*



'It has been shot some elk.'

(Åfarli 2009: 176)

However, the results of the survey suggest that also passives with expletive *det* sometimes have participles that agree with a postverbal DP. For instance, some speakers in Western Norway accept the sentence with an agreeing participle + postverbal DP, even with expletive *det*. Åfarli, Eide & Aa (2013) suggest this might be the case only in (West Norwegian) dialects that have both *der* and *det* as expletives. They compare judgements from Nordmøre (which only has *det* as an expletive) and Sunnmøre (which use both *der* and *det*). Only the Sunnmøre speakers allow the examples with agreement with postverbal objects in constructions with expletive *det*. In Swedish, many varieties accept the sentence with agreement between participle and postverbal DP, with expletive *det*, contra Holmberg (2002). This is the case also in dialects that disallow expletive *där* (e.g. in Finland, cf. Larsson 2014). Agreement is, however, generally not obligatory, and a non-agreeing (neuter singular) participle would normally be used in cases with a postverbal DP. There are no examples of passives with participles agreeing with a following DP in the Swedish part of the Nordic Dialect Corpus (Johannessen et al. 2009).

The correlation between the use of a locative form and agreement between the participle and the postverbal DP is not without exceptions, either. As noted above, some Swedish speakers (particularly in Götaland) accept the neuter singular form of the participle in the sentence with *där* 'there'. It is possible that the locative in these cases should not be viewed as an expletive, and that the sentence should be analysed as involving a covert pronominal expletive (see discussion Larsson 2014). We would then expect *där* 'there' to be restricted to sentence initial position. In a few locations, at least one of the passives with initial *där* gets a high score, whereas the tested presentational sentence (#969), given in (9) below, is rejected; the presentational sentence has *där* in the postverbal subject position. This is for instance the case in Gräsö in Central Sweden and Larsmo in Finland. This might suggest that the locative form is not a truly an expletive subjects in these dialects.

- (9) Men då kom där in en stor hund. (#969) (Swe.)  
*but then come.PAST there in a big dog*  
 'But then, there came in a big dog.'

On the other hand, there are also a few spread places where the presentational sentence with *där* in non-initial position gets a high score, whereas none of the passives with *där* does. This is the case in Vilhelmina in Northern Sweden, Ankarsrum in Southeastern Sweden and Fårö on Gotland.

From the results of the survey, it looks as if a few locations in Sweden have the supine form in passives, even though this form is generally assumed to occur only in perfects. This conclusion is, however, quite uncertain. Rather, the results point us to areas where the vowel distinction between passive participle (*skjutet*) and perfect participle (*skjutit*) is not made, or perhaps where e.g. phonological factors determine the vowel alternation (as in older Swedish, see Platzack 1981 and Larsson 2009: 418–424). Many dialects have the form *skjutet* also in perfects, and speakers can find it hard to perceive the distinction. Moreover, some dialects (e.g. in Finland) have a single form, distinct from both the standard passive participle and the supine, which is used in both passives and perfects. This variation was not captured in the survey.

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**Web sites:**

Nordic Atlas of Language Structures (NALS) Journal: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nals>

Nordic Dialect Corpus: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>

Nordic Syntax Database: <http://www.tekstlab.uio.no/nota/scandiasyn/index.html>