Bahasa expletive =nya and the height of agents

Background. Bahasa (Malay, Indonesian) has an apparent expletive subject (Expl), =nya, which encliticizes onto lexical verbs; formally it is a third-person pronoun. Constructions with Expl are thetic, meaning they are comments on an event, not on a topical subject (cf. Lonzi 1986, Sasse 1987); this is shown by the contrast between (1b) and (2b):

(1) Q: What happened at the concert?  
      A. climb.up to on stage  
      climb.up=nya A. to on stage

   ‘Ali climbed on the stage.’

Note that both thetic and categorical sentences can answer the question ‘What happened?’ (Lonzi 1986, Lambrecht 1987), so it is not a surprise that (1) has two possible answers. Note that the facts that =nya participates in thetic constructions, and that it is a third-person pronoun, make it typologically likely that it is an expletive (cf. French presentational *il, etc.).

I argue that Expl’s distribution demonstrates that Bahasa’s transitive agents are higher than its unergative agents. The discussion is based on a number of recent findings in the EPP literature (see Richards & Biberauer 2005, Richards 2007, Deal 2009) claiming that Expl is not base-generated in Spec-T, but rather in the highest Spec of a phase: either Spec-v or Spec-C, depending on the language and Expl. This view is meant to derive, for instance, that English Expl can’t co-occur with material in Spec-v:

(3) *There laughed many children.  
(4) *There had some friends a picnic.

Expl occurs with unergatives, but not transitives. Bahasa accepts thetic sentences with both unaccusatives (5) and unergatives (6).

(5) Datang=nya se=ekor orangutan.  
    come=3SG one=CL orangutan.  
   ‘An orangutan came.’

(6) Jerit=nya orangutan-orangutan ni.  
    shout=nya orangutan.RED this  
   ‘These orangutans shouted.’

The above verbs can be shown to be unergative or unaccusative in Bahasa based on quantifier float:

(7) a. (Semua) anak (semua) sudah (?semua) datang (semua)  
    (all) child (all) PERF (?all) come (all)  
    ‘All the children have come,’

b. (Semua) anak (semua) sudah (?semua) jerit (*semua)  
    (all) child (all) PERF (?all) shout (*all)  
    ‘The children have shouted.’

The contrast in postverbal quantifier float shows subjects originate below the verb in unaccusatives, but originate higher than the verb in unergatives.

While unaccusatives and unergatives can co-occur with Expl, transitives can’t (Sommerlot 2018). To be sure, thetic transitives are marginally possible, but they need comma-intonation (8a) or dislocation (8b); and even with these fixes, the resulting phrases are degraded.

(8) a. Letak=nya laki, buku ke atas mejya.  
    place=nya man, book to on table  
   ‘A man put a book on the table.’

b. Makan=nya ais krim laki tu.  
    eat=nya ice cream man that  
   ‘That man ate some ice cream.’

Such sentences have equivalents in English presentationals (which also generally bar transitives):

(9) There entered the room a strange man. (Chomsky 2001:21)
As such, to the extent that English bars transitive Expl constructions, so does Bahasa.

**Analysis.** Richards & Biberauer (2005) find that Expl is always generated in the highest Spec of a phase, rather than Spec-T (as usually assumed in the EPP literature). In languages that only allow Expl with unaccusatives (like English), this is Spec-v. In languages (like Icelandic) that allow Expl with all verb types, this is Spec-C. As a result, either Expl is in complementary distribution with the Agent/Experiencer, or it isn’t.

Bahasa provides a new piece of empirical evidence for Richards & Biberauer’s analysis: specifically, Bahasa actually has Expl surface in the verbal domain, not in Spec-T. Indeed, Bahasa verbs are lower than T, as shown by the adverb-verb order in (10), and =nya always cliticizes on the verb, never an auxiliary, as shown in (11).

(10) Aku tak akan sentiasa makan nasi. 
I \not will \ always \ eat \ rice 
‘I will not often eat rice.’

(11) a. Sudah sampai=nya budak.
PERF arrive=nya child
‘A child arrived.’


c. *Sampai=nya sudah budak.

This is strong evidence against an analysis of Expl as (universally) resulting from a property of T.

But despite apparently providing new and clear evidence for Richards & Biberauer’s theory, Bahasa is unlike other languages in allowing Expl with unergatives but not transitives. Recall that according to Richards & Biberauer’s theory, =nya would be merged either in Spec-C (in which case it should allow transitives) or in Spec-v (in which case it should bar unergatives).

Putting aside complications from cliticization, I argue the PERSON features (Chomsky 2001) of the Expl are base-generated in Spec-Voice in Malay. I follow standard assumptions in taking Voice to be above v, and in taking it to be a phase head – meaning that =nya is indeed generated in the highest Spec of a phase. I only depart from standard assumptions in the following way: I argue the agents of transitives are generated in (or must move to) Spec-Voice, whereas those of unergatives are generated in (or, can stay in) Spec-v:

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{[VoiceP (Agent-Tr) [Voice}^0 [v_P (Agent-Unnerg) [v^0 [VP]]]]}
\end{array}
\]

Combined, these hypotheses make it possible to follow Richards & Biberauer (2005) in accounting for the distribution of Expl structurally: Expl and transitives’ agents compete for the same Spec, namely Spec-Voice; but Expl and unergatives’ agents are in different Specs (Spec-Voice and Spec-v respectively) and can therefore co-occur:

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{[VoiceP Expl [Voice}^0 [v_P Agent-Unnerg [v^0 [VP]]]]}
\end{array}
\]

**Higher agents in transitives: a general property?** Based on data from causatives, Massam (2009) argues that the agents of Niuean transitives are higher than those of unergatives. I have just shown that the Expl data from Bahasa provide a new argument for the same thesis. The next logical step is therefore to speculate this might be a broader property of the world’s languages, which I argue can be derived from Harley’s (2017) argument that Voice and v are bundled in some languages but not others. The agents of unergatives and transitives only occur in the same Spec in languages (e.g. English) where Voice and v are bundled. But as Bahasa and Niuean show, in languages where Voice and v are disjoint, the difference in agent height becomes visible.