Abstract

Stroh-Wollin, Ulla, ulla.stroh-wollin@nordiska.uu.se, Senior Lecturer, Dept. of Scandinavian Languages, Uppsala University, Sweden: “On Swear Word Polarity and Expletive Non-Subject det in Swedish”. Språk och stil 18, 2008, pp. 38–66.

The article proposes a grammatical analysis of a certain kind of expression in Swedish. The expression under investigation, ostensibly about the devil, is designated by a swear word. It is used by the speaker to declare that (s)he cannot or does not intend to fulfill the action of the predicate, regardless if the clause contains a negation or not. Thus, fan kan (inte) komma ihåg allas födelsedagar, literally: ‘the devil [fan] can (not) remember everybody’s birthday’, normally implies ‘I cannot remember everybody’s birthday’, the underlying logic being that only the devil or, in negated cases, not even the devil can remember everybody’s birthday; consequently nobody else can be expected to remember everybody’s birthday.

This logic as such could have been a sufficient explanation, if it were not the case that a polarity item heller (roughly ‘either’) may be attached to both negated and non-negated clause variants, although heller normally occurs only after an explicit negation. With some support from other uses of swear words, the analysis in this study proposes a solution in which an invisible, formal negation is implied by the swear word.

Examples of the construction in question often have a non-referential pronoun det in first position: det kan (inte) fan komma ihåg allas födelsedagar. Such a pronoun, unlike the formal subject det (cf. English existential there), cannot take the subject position after the finite verb. Here it is considered an instance of a seldom observed non-subject expletive.

Key words: Swedish, swear words, polarity, non-subject expletive.