The ‘Optional’ EPP in Finnish as Clausal Truncation

Holmberg (2005) reports that verbs in Finnish cannot appear in initial position (1a) due to the Extended Projection Principle (EPP, Chomsky 1981, 1982). Instead, either an expletive (1c) or some referential category must precede it (1b). However, if there are no referential items in the clause (2), the expletive becomes optional, and the EPP appears to remain unchecked, although EPP-checking is normally an obligatory process cross-linguistically.

(1)  
Went now wrong
b. Nyt meni hullusti.  
Now went wrong
c. Sitä meni nyt hullusti.  
EXP went now wrong
   ‘Things went wrong.’

[Holmberg 2005]

I propose that the ‘optional’ EPP in Finnish occurs because the clause is truncated, lacking the head bearing the EPP feature and everything above it. Evidence of this truncation comes from the fact that the ‘optional’ EPP is impossible when the left periphery is syntactically active, such as in embedded clauses (3a), with sentential adverbs (3b), and in questions (3c).

(3)  
a. Kuulin että *(nyt) meni huonosti.  
hear.PST.1SG that now go.PST.SG wrong
   ‘I heard that things went wrong (now).’
b. Selvästi *(asiat) meni huonosti.  
clearly thing.PL go.PST.3SG wrong
   ‘Clearly, things went wrong.’
c. Meni-kö *(se) huonosti?  
go.PST.3SG-Q 3SG.NOM wrong
   Did things go wrong?

The EPP head is also where agreement surfaces, and so agreement should also be absent in truncated clauses. The optional EPP is only attested with a generic subject and 3SG agreement, which I assume occurs by default. Furthermore, verbs which mark their subjects with quirky genitive case must have an overt EPP-checker (4), as expected if case is a reflex of agreement. In these cases the EPP head, and thus a subject, must be present for its role in case checking.

(4)  
a. *(Asioiden/ sen/ nyt) täyty-y mennä huonosti.  
thing.PL GEN/3SG GEN/now must.3SG go.NFIN wrong
   ‘Things must go wrong.’

Clausal truncation is also impossible when there are referential elements in the clause, because they require structure in the left periphery, so that their reference can be tracked in the discourse (cf. C/Edge-linking in Sigurðsson 2011).

Other explanations for the lack of an overt subject include proposing null expletives (cf., Rizzi 1986 for Italian) or the raising of the vP to check the EPP (Biberauer 2010 for Afrikaans).
References