Expletives: *there* vs. *it*

Or: What the fuck is Chomsky's (1993:32) example (26b) supposed to tell us?

1. θ-structure

COPULA	INTRANSITIVE	DITRANSITIVE
There seems to be a dodo.	There seems to fly a dodo.	*There seems to eat a dodo a kiwi.
There is a dodo.	There flies a dodo.	*There eats a dodo a kiwi.
A dodo is ∃.	A dodo flies.	A dodo eats a kiwi.

➲ *There* is restricted to **monoargumental predicates**.

2. Finiteness

COPULA	INTRANSITIVE
There is a dodo.	There flies a dodo.
*There seems that a dodo is.	*There seems that a dodo flies.
It seems that a dodo is ∃.	It seems that dodos fly.

➲ *There* is restricted to **nonfinite complement structures**, *it* to **finite complement structures**.

3. Complementary distribution

COPULA/INTRANSITIVE
It seems that there is/flies a dodo.

➲ *It* and *there* are not just interchangeable expletive (= semantically void) placeholder elements, but rather they are licensed by type-specific contexts: *There* is restricted to monoargumental θ-structures (alternation Expl–Subj possibly reducible to 'discursive', i.e. syntax-external, conditions), while *it* is restricted to finite clauses (cf. **I know it to seem that a dodo flies*)

➲ *There* must override *it*-insertion if *seem* selects for a nonfinite complement:

[$_{VP}$ *seems* [$_{TP}$ *there to fly a dodo*]] vs. [$_{VP}$ *seems* [$_{CP}$ *that there flies a dodo*]]
→ [$_{CP}$ *There seems* [$_{TP}$ ~~*there*~~ *to fly a dodo*]] → [$_{CP}$ *It* [$_{VP}$ *seems* [$_{CP}$ *that there flies a dodo*]]]

4. Chomsky (1993:32)

So if the expletive *it* is (selectionally?) tightly associated with the copula predicate *seem*, and can only be overridden by *there* in nonfinite raising contexts, Chomsky's (1993) example (26b) (here repeated as (1)) seems odd:

(1) There seems to [$_{\alpha}$ a strange man] that it is raining outside.

He evaluates it as not fully interpretable ('semigibberish'), but convergent, arguing that α (the lexical subject) should covertly adjoin to the expletive for Case-checking, forming the complex 'LF-word' [α-*there*], as in his ex. (26a) (here repeated as (2a)):

(2) a. There is [$_{\alpha}$ a strange man] in the garden.

b. [[α-*there*] $^{\sqrt{[NOM]}}$ Agr_S $^{\sqrt{[NOM]}}$ *is* t_{α} *in the garden*]

Since the need for saturation (i.e. feature-checking) drives the movement, a configuration like (2b) cannot be achieved in (1), because the subject α is embedded in a PP where it has already checked (inherent) Case. However, Chomsky argues, the expletive *there* in matrix subject position does not pose any substantial problems to (θ-) interpretation for being semantically vacuous. Thus, only 'semigibberish' results.

Given the restrictions laid out in 1. to 3., I think that Chomsky's example (26b) is flawed for other reasons than Case-checking. First, finite *seem* taking a finite complement requires expletive *it* in any case. Accordingly, substituting *it* for *there* improves the sentence considerably, promoting it from semigibberish to the usual awkwardness.

(3) It seems to [$_{\alpha}$ a strange man] that it is raining outside.

In any case, it seems unlikely that [*to* α], which to me seems like a (formerly DAT) experiencer (cf. Germ. *mir scheint;* archaic *methinks*), should be thematically equated with α in (2). Although *be* and *seem* are indeed similar as to their abstract copulative semantics, they sure are not identical. Relevant here is that only *seem* can take a periphrastic/prepositional experiencer argument, but *be* cannot (that is, in English; cf. Germ. *Mir ist schlecht*).

NB: Of course, Chomsky's original argument for *Greed* is not substantially weakened by the flawedness of his example!