



Labex  
TransfertS

Lattice



# The syntactic position of the subject in Hungarian existential constructions



Zsuzsanna GÉCSEG  
University of Szeged, Hungary  
gcecsegz@lit.u-szeged.hu



# Introduction

## Canonical locational clause

(1) [A légy]<sub>Top</sub> [a 'levesben van]<sub>Comm</sub>.  
the fly the soup.in is  
'The fly is in the soup.'

## Existential clause

(2) [(Egy) 'légy van a 'levesben]<sub>Comm</sub>.  
a fly is the soup.in  
'There is a fly in the soup'

(3) ['Van (egy) 'légy a 'levesben]<sub>Comm</sub>.  
is a fly the soup.in  
'There is a fly in the soup'

# What factors influence the syntactic position of the subject in Hungarian existential constructions?

# Word order in Hungarian (É. Kiss 2002, Gécseg&Kiefer 2009)

Topic – ... – [**Focus/’Verbal modifier** –  
Verb – **Postverbal material**]<sub>Comment</sub>

(2) **(Egy)** ‘**légy** van<sub>V</sub> a levesben.

(3) ‘Van<sub>V</sub> **(egy)** ‘**légy** a levesben.

‘There is a fly in the soup’

‘There are flies in the soup’

# Current analyses: bare indefinites

- É. Kiss (2002), Viszket (2004), Hegedűs (2013):
  - bare nominals always precede the V in neutral sentences
  - postverbal position of bare nominals involves V focusing
  - bare nominals in Topic position: contrastive reading
- Maleczki (2008):
  - bare nominals denoting physical objects are more natural in postverbal position than preverbally
  - bare nominals denoting physical objects or individuals in preverbal position always need the presence of a locative, whereas in postverbal position they can occur without a locative

# Examples

- (4) Alma van a kosárban.  
apple is the basket.in  
'There are apples in the basket'
- (5) VAN alma (a kosárban).  
is apple the basket.in  
'There ARE (indeed) apples (in the basket)'
- (6) \*Alma van.  
apple is  
'There are apples'
- (7) 'Van 'alma (a kosárban).  
'There are apples (in the basket)'
- (8) Alma (csak) a KOSÁRBAN van.  
apple only the basket.in is  
'Apples are (only) in the basket.'

# Current analyses: indefinites with a determiner

- Kálmán (1995, 2001), Maleczki (2010):
  - They always appear postverbally in (neutral/standard) existential sentences
  - before the existential verb: the subject is focused
- Hegedűs (2013):
  - They can also occur before the existential verb without being focused

# Examples

(9) Van egy egér az asztal alatt.

is a mouse the table under

‘There is a mouse under the table.’

(10) Egy egér van az asztal alatt.

a mouse is the table under

‘There is a mouse under the table.’



# Current analyses: indefinite pronouns

- Kálmán (2001), É. Kiss (2002), Gécseg (2003):  
indefinite pronouns can only appear in topic position or postverbally

(11) ['Valaki]<sub>Top</sub> 'van a 'ház előtt.  
somebody is the house in-front-of  
'Somebody is in front of the house'

(12) \*'Valaki van a ház előtt.

(13) 'Van 'valaki a 'ház előtt.  
is somebody the house in-front-of  
'There is somebody in front of the house'

# The corpus I.

Bulgakov: *The Master and Margarita* (B) (cf. Waldenfels 2011) – Hungarian translation by K. Szöllősy

- forms of *lenni* ‘to be’
- indefinite subject
- denoting physical objects or individuals
- Topic, VM or postverbal
- non-possessive
- with or without a locative
- declarative, non-negated

# The corpus II.

- **Google search**

„(egy) *N van/volt*” ‘a N is/was’ / ‘some Ns are’

„*van/volt (egy) N*” ‘there is/was a N’ / ‘there were some  
Ns)

„*valaki/valami van/volt*” ‘somebody/something is/was’

„*van/volt valaki/valami*” ‘there is/was

somebody/something’

N: *nő* ‘woman’, *gyerek* ‘child’, *kutya* ‘dog’, *bogár* ‘beetle’,  
*ház* ‘house’, *fa* ‘tree/wood’, *lámpa* ‘lamp’, *kép* ‘picture’,  
*tojás* ‘egg’, *alma* ‘apple’, *felhő* ‘cloud’, *üdítő* ‘soft drink’,  
*sör* ‘beer’

# The Bulgakov corpus

<b>Locative</b>	
Present	Absent
87 %	13 %

<b>Subject's position</b>		
Preverbal		Postverbal
Topic	Verbal modifier	
6 %	42 %	52 %

# Subject in Topic position

- (14) a **Nyaraló**<sub>Top</sub> mindössze huszonkettő van<sub>V</sub> (B)  
b There's twenty-two **dachas** in all (Eng. translation)
- (15) **Egyvalaki**<sub>Top</sub> mégis volt<sub>V</sub> ott (B)  
somebody yet was there  
a There was one person (Eng. translation)
- (16) **Valaki**<sub>Top</sub> van<sub>V</sub> a hátsó ülésen! (G)  
'Somebody is on the back seat!'
- (17) **Valami**<sub>Top</sub> van<sub>V</sub>/volt<sub>V</sub> a levegőben (G)  
'Somebody is/was in the air'

# Position and referentiality of the subject in the comment part of the sentence

	Bare N(P)	NP with a determiner
Preverbal	50 %	3 %
Postverbal	17 %	30%

# Position and phonological weight of the subject in the comment part of the sentence

	Heavy subject (coordination, enumeration, embedded clause)	„Light” subject
Preverbal	3 %	41 %
Postverbal	28 %	28 %

# Data

## Preverbal heavy

(18) Egy tábla hirdette két nyelven, hogy **házi méz, pálinka és bor**  
van<sub>V</sub> eladó. (G)

‘A board announced in two languages that there was **home-made honey, brandy and wine** on sale’

## Postverbal heavy

(19) a Van<sub>V</sub> köztük **mágus, asztrológus, jövendőmondó, gyilkos...**  
(B)

b [All sorts of people gather in this town for the feast.] Among them there are **magicians, astrologers, diviners and murderers**  
(Eng. Translation)

(20) Szomjas vagy? Van<sub>V</sub> **üdítő, víz, tej.** (G)

‘Are you thirsty? There are **soft drinks, water, milk**’



# Position and givenness of the subject in the comment part of the sentence

	Given / Accessible referent	New referent
Preverbal	6 %	38 %
Postverbal	22 %	34 %

# Data

New (preverbal NP with determiner)

(21) a Az említetteken kívül **egy óriási fekete kandúr** volt<sub>v</sub> a szobában (B)

b Besides these, there was also **a huge black tom-cat** in the room (Eng. translation)

(22) A bejárattal szemben **egy kép** volt<sub>v</sub>, amelyen Hercules egy glóbuszt tart a vállán. (G)

‘In front of the entry there was **a picture**, which represented Hercule holding a globe on his shoulders’

(23) **Egy bogár** van<sub>v</sub> a falon! (G)

‘There’s **a beetle** on the wall!’

# Data

## Given/accessible (postverbal)

(24) a - Ki az a Latunszkij kritikus? – [...] - Van<sub>v</sub> **egy ilyen nevű kritikus.** (B)

‘[...] There is **a critic with such a name**’

b ‘Who is this critic Latunsky?’ [...] There is **this certain critic**  
(Eng. translation)

(25) a Ott volt a színpad is, [...] Volt **súgólyuk** – sőt közönséget is látott Nyikanor Ivanovics (B)

‘There was also **the** stage, [...], there was **a prompter’s box** [...]’

b There was **a** stage [...] there was **a prompter’s box**, and there was even an audience. (Eng. translation)

(26) Van<sub>v</sub> **sör** a hűtőben! (G) ‘There’s beer in the fridge!’

(27) ??**Sör** van<sub>v</sub> a hűtőben! Idem.

# Sentences without a locative

(28) Van<sub>v</sub> egy ilyen nevű kritikus. (B)

‘There IS a **critic with such a name**’

(29) Van<sub>v</sub> **egy ember, akire Soltész Rezső nagyon büszke**, ez pedig nem más, mint saját testvére, Miklós.  
(G)

‘There is a **man R. S. is very proud of**, and this man is his own brother M.’

(30) Szomjas vagy? Van<sub>v</sub> **üdítő, víz, tej**. (G)

‘Are you thirsty? There are soft drinks, water, milk’

# Summarizing the semantic/pragmatic differences

Preverbal subject	Postverbal subject
new	given / accessible / new
unusual	usual (predictable)
problem	good news
present	present / available
exhaustive	non-exhaustive
description	description / introducing a new topic

# Deriving the differences from the general properties of Hungarian sentences

Topic - **Focus/VM** – V – Postverbal material

(31) Tegnap **MARI** találkozott<sub>v</sub> az elnökkel.

‘Yesterday it was M. who met the president’

Preverbal subject in existential clauses: shares some typical properties of Focus

- Focus: - exhaustive identification
- new information
  - foregrounding a referent
  - backgrounding the V + PV  
(presupposed information)

# Deriving the differences from the general properties of Hungarian sentences

Topic – V/V<sub>Foc</sub> – **Postverbal material**

(32) Pétert meglátogatták/MEGLÁTOGATTÁK **a barátai**.

P.Acc visited.3Pl.Pst

his friends

‘P. was visited by his friends’

neutral or focused V

Postverbal material:

- non-exhaustive reference
- given information (if the V is focussed)
- new information (without V-focus)

# References

- É. Kiss, K. (2002) : *Syntax of Hungarian*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gécseg, Zs. (2003): „Quantification et focalisation dans le hongrois”, *Scolia* 16, 117-133.
- Gécseg, Zs. & Kiefer, F. (2009): „A new look at information structure in Hungarian”, *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 27, 583-622.
- Hegedűs, V. (2013): *Non-verbal predicates and predicate movement in Hungarian*, PhD-thesis, Tilburg University
- Kálmán, L. (1996): „Definiteness effect verbs in Hungarian”. In: Kenesei, I. (ed.), *Approaches to Hungarian Vol 5.*, 221-242.
- Kálmán, L. (2001): *Magyar leíró nyelvtan. Mondattan 1*. Tinta Könyvkiadó.
- Maleczki, M. (2008): „Határozatlan argumentumok”, In: Kiefer, F. (ed.), *Strukturális magyar nyelvtan 4. A szótár szerkezete*, Akadémiai Kiadó, 129-184.
- Maleczki, M. (2010): „On the definiteness effect in existential sentences: data and theories”, In: Bibok, K. & Nemeth, T., E. (eds.), *The role of data at the semantics-pragmatics interface*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin; New York; 25-56.
- Viszket, A. (2004): *Argumentumstruktúra és lexikon*. PhD-thesis, Eotvos Lorand University, Budapest.
- Waldenfels, R. (2011): Recent developments in ParaSol: Breadth for depth and XSLT based web concordancing with CWB. In: Daniela M., and Garabík, R. (eds.), *Natural Language Processing, Multilinguality*. Proceedings of Slovko 2011, Modra, Slovakia, 20–21 October 2011. Bratislava, 156-162.





Lattice

OTKA



***This talk was supported by the project  
„Opération Espace Temps Existence”  
(Labex Transfert, ENS)***

***This talk was supported by the project  
no. 100804. of the National Scientific  
Research Foundation (OTKA) –  
„Comprehensive Grammar Resources:  
Hungarian”***

***Thank you!***