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## The syntactic position of the subject in Hungarian existential constructions<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the factors that determine the syntactic position of the subject in Hungarian existential constructions. I argue that the exact positioning of the subject in these constructions is influenced by a number of semantic and contextual features, such as the semantic and pragmatic function of the utterance and the information status of the individual denoted by the subject. These factors may interact with each other, but there is always a dominant strategy which determines the order of the constituents.

*Keywords:* existential construction, preverbal subject, postverbal subject, predication of location, predication of existence, topic promotion, description, (un)expectedness

### 0 Introduction

Hungarian existentials can be realized in several word orders, all of which differ from the word order used in canonical locational clauses. The sentence in (1) represents a canonical locational clause<sup>2</sup>:

- (1) A légy a 'leves-ben van.  
 the fly the soup-INESS is  
 'The fly is in the soup.'

As a general rule, the subject of a canonical locational clause in Hungarian is placed at the left edge of the sentence, whereas the locative constituent appears in a preverbal comment position and receives obligatory stress. In contrast, the subject of an existential sentence is always stressed and occurs either before or after the verb *lenni* 'to be'. The sentence may also contain a locative expression in the postverbal<sup>3</sup> part of a neutral sentence<sup>4</sup> (2)-(3).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was supported by the NKFIH project n. 120073 („Open access book series on the syntax of Hungarian”).

<sup>2</sup> The apostrophes in the examples indicate obligatory stress on the constituent.

<sup>3</sup> A locative can also appear in Topic position. The sentences in (2)-(3), where the locative occurs postverbally, are typically uttered “out of the blue”.

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘neutral sentence’ refers here to non-topicalized, non-focused and non-negated sentences where each main constituent is equally stressed (Kálmán 1985a, 1985b, Puskás 2000). In neutral existential clauses the verb is also stressed if the subject occurs postverbally and remains unstressed if the subject precedes it.

- (2) a. Egy 'légy van a 'leves-ben  
       a fly is the soup-INCESS  
       b. 'Van egy 'légy a 'leves-ben.  
       is a fly the soup-INCESS  
       'There is a fly in the soup.'
- (3) a. 'Légy van a 'leves-ben.  
       fly is the soup-INCESS  
       b. 'Van 'légy a 'leves-ben.  
       is fly the soup-INCESS  
       'There are flies in the soup.'

Although the word order variants in (2) and (3) are truth-conditionally equivalent and are often used in the same contexts, the choice between them is not totally free. In fact, (2)a and b can be taken as synonymous, whereas (3)a and b, which contain a determinerless subject, have different meanings, or more precisely, they are associated with different implicatures. On the other hand, unlike in (2), a subject with a determiner cannot always be placed in any of these two syntactic positions: in (4) the only possible variant is the one in which the subject is placed postverbally:

- (4) a. \*Egy 'tó van 'Oroszország-ban, ami...  
       a lake is Russia-INCESS which  
       b. 'Van egy 'tó 'Oroszország-ban, ami...  
       is a lake Russia-INCESS which  
       'There is a lake in Russia which...'

The aim of this paper is to examine the factors that determine the syntactic position of the subject in Hungarian existential constructions. It will be demonstrated that the exact positioning of the subject in these constructions is influenced by a number of semantic and contextual features, such as the semantic and pragmatic function of the utterance and the information status of the individual denoted by the subject. These factors may interact with each other, but there is always a dominant strategy which determines the order of the constituents.

The investigations presented in the paper are part of a pilote corpus study. The corpus consists of 205 Hungarian utterances involving existential constructions, built up by means of Google search.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 1 gives an overview of the relevant literature about Hungarian existential constructions. Section 2 focuses on the relationship between the referential properties and the position of the subject in the utterances of the corpus. Section 3 discusses the issue of the syntactic complexity of the subject. Section 4 investigates the semantic and pragmatic properties associated with the two alternative word orders. The paper ends up with a summary of the results and some concluding remarks.

## 1 Approaches to existentials in Hungarian

The current literature about Hungarian syntax deals with existential constructions basically in connection with what has been termed as the definiteness effect<sup>5</sup> (Szabolcsi 1986, É. Kiss 1995, Kálmán 1995, Maleczki 2008, 2010), and pays only little attention to word order variations.<sup>6</sup>

As for the possible syntactic positions of an indefinite subject, a distinction must be made between a bare nominal and an NP with a determiner. The main semantic difference between the two types of NPs is that bare nominals are underspecified for number and behave rather like mass nouns. They are also lower on the referentiality scale than NPs with a determiner and, as such, they usually form a complex predicate with the verb in neutral sentences (Kiefer 1990).

### 1.1 Bare nominal subject

Views differ considerably as for the basic position of a bare nominal in existential sentences: according to É. Kiss (2002) and Viszket (2004), they always appear preverbally in neutral sentences (5), whereas a postverbal position – together with the focus stress on the verb – indicates a *verum focus*<sup>7</sup>, and the sentence expresses that there IS (indeed) a certain object at a certain location (6).

- (5) Alma van a kosár-ban.  
 apple is the basket-INESS  
 ‘There are apples in the basket.’
- (6) VAN alma a kosár-ban.  
 is apple the basket-INESS  
 ‘There ARE (indeed) apples in the basket.’

As Maleczki (1998), Viszket (2004) and Hegedűs (2013) observe, a preverbal determinerless subject cannot appear without a locative in an existential sentence.<sup>8</sup> This is illustrated by the contrast between (7) and (5).

- (7) \*Alma van.  
 apple is  
 ‘There are apples.’

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<sup>5</sup> The Definiteness Effect, originally described in connection with the English existential *be* by Milsark (1974, 1977) is a property of certain verbs or constructions requiring an indefinite (or, more precisely, a non-specific) subject or object argument.

<sup>6</sup> For a typological overview of existential sentences, see among others Koch (2012) and Creissels (2014).

<sup>7</sup> The term *verum focus* was introduced by Höhle (1992) and refers to the emphasizing of the expression of truth of a proposition.

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that bare nominal subjects denoting events, periods or situations always occur preverbally, without any locative (Maleczki 2010):

- (i) Gyűlés / gond van.  
 meeting problem is  
 ‘There is a meeting/problem.’

These constructions are beyond the scope of the present paper.

In addition, Maleczki (2008) points out that a bare nominal can occur postverbally in neutral sentences, without having a “verum focus” meaning. As she argues, bare nominals denoting physical objects are even more natural in this position than preverbally. Moreover, when a bare nominal appears in a postverbal position, the locative is not necessarily present.

- (8) ‘Van ‘alma (a kosár-ban).  
 is apple the basket-INESS  
 ‘There are apples (in the basket).’

According to Hegedűs (2013), a bare nominal may appear postverbally only in “true” existential sentences, in which case the presence of a locative is not obligatory:

- (9) Vannak szellemek. (Hegedűs 2013: 52)  
 are ghosts  
 ‘There are/exist ghosts.’

On the other hand, Viszket (2004) argues that “true” existential sentences with a bare nominal subject like (9) cannot be taken to be neutral sentences: the verb bears the same focus stress here as in (6), and the postverbal subject is always unstressed. A similar claim is made by Laczkó (2012) who argues that in copular constructions of this type, the copula itself is the first element of the clause and always receives focal stress.

In fact, existentials like (9) usually imply that the existence of the individuals in question is stated as contrary to previous assumptions. This explains the ungrammaticality of (10):

- (10) \*Vannak almák.  
 are apples  
 ‘There are/exist apples.’

However, my corpus attests that a bare nominal may appear postverbally in a ‘true’ existential construction, provided that it is modified by a relative clause:

- (11) a. Van ember, aki még soha nem járt a falu-ja határ-á-n kívül.  
 is man who yet never NEG went the village-POSS border-POSS-SUP out-of  
 ‘There are people who have never gone beyond the borders of their village.’  
 b. Vannak ember-ek, aki-k még soha nem jár-tak a falu-juk  
 are men who-PL yet never NEG went-3PL the village-POSS.3PL  
 határ-á-n kívül.  
 border- POSS-SUP out-of  
 ‘There are people who have never gone beyond the borders of their village.’

## ***1.2 Indefinite subject with a determiner***

Most researchers of this issue (for instance, Kálmán 1995, 2001 and Maleczki 2010) agree that the standard position of an indefinite subject with a determiner is after the verb in neutral existential constructions, as illustrated by (12).

- (12) Van egy egér az asztal alatt. (Hegedűs 2013: 79)  
 is a mouse the table under  
 ‘There is a mouse under the table.’

It is also claimed that when they are placed before the verb, such indefinites are focused and the verb, together with the postverbal material, carries an existential presupposition. Example (13) should, thus, carry the presupposition that something is under the table and the sentence should assert that this thing is a mouse.

- (13) Egy egér van az asztal alatt. (Hegedűs 2013: 79)  
 a mouse is the table under  
 ‘There is a mouse under the table.’

According to Maleczki (2010), sentences like (13) are “non-standard versions of existential sentences” (Maleczki 2010: 51, fn. 11). She considers these existentials as problematic since they can hardly be distinguished from constructions where the subject is focused, although she admits that their intonation may be different from that of a sentence with a focus-ground articulation.

On the other hand, Hegedűs (2013) observes that such sentences with a preverbal subject can also be uttered ‘out of the blue’, expressing at the same time that the presence of a mouse under the table is a problem for the speaker.<sup>9</sup> In her approach, only verb-initial existentials like (12) express pure existence, whereas an existential like (13) is much more a description of a certain location than a statement about the existence of the referent of the subject.

## 2 Corpus study: syntactic position and referentiality

The investigations presented in this paper are based on a small corpus of 205 Hungarian utterances involving neutral existential constructions<sup>10</sup>, built up by means of Google search. I was looking for [subject NP + V] and [V + subject NP] strings, such that:

- the subject NP contains the singular indefinite article *egy* and a noun, or consists of a singular bare noun
- the verb is the Singular Present or Past form of the V *lenni* ‘to be’

The nominal element of the subject comes from the following list: *ember* ‘man’, *nő* ‘woman’, *gyerek* ‘child’, *kutya* ‘dog’, *bogár* ‘beetle’, *fa* ‘tree/wood’, *virág* ‘flower’, *lámpa* ‘lamp’, *asztal* ‘table’, *üdítő* ‘soft drink’, *bor* ‘wine’, *város* ‘town’, *erdő* ‘forest’ and *tó* ‘lake’.

In more than half of the utterances (62 %) the subject appears in postverbal position, and the subject occurs preverbally in the remaining 38 %. As we saw in Subsection 1.2, an existential sentence containing a preverbal indefinite subject like (13) may be ambiguous between a (contrastively) focused and a neutral, ‘out of the blue’ reading. I assume that under the contrastive reading the subject fills the structural focus position, whereas under the neutral reading it occurs in verbal modifier (VM) position. The two positions are associated with different prosodic and interpretative properties. Since the analyses presented here are based on a written corpus, I was relying on the contextual properties of the utterances in order to

<sup>9</sup> Viszket (2004) makes the same observation about constructions with “bare N – *van* – locative expression”.

<sup>10</sup> On the definition of a neutral sentence in Hungarian, see Fn. 3 in Section 0.

eliminate utterances involving a focused subject. The same holds for indefinite subjects with a contrastive topic interpretation that may also precede immediately the verb. Similarly, existential constructions involving a postverbal subject may also contain a focused verb, like in example (9). These constructions were identified on the basis of their contextual properties and eliminated from the corpus, as non neutral existential constructions.

The number of the NPs with a determiner largely exceeds that of the bare nominals: 83% of the utterances contain a subject NP with a determiner and only 17% have a bare nominal subject.

As for the distribution of bare nominals and NPs with a determiner, I found that both types of indefinite appear postverbally more often than preverbally. These data confirm some of the observations found in the current literature on Hungarian (cf. Section 1). Actually, both bare nominals and NPs with a determiner may occur quite naturally in the two comment positions in a neutral sentence, with more or less preference for the postverbal position: 62% of the NPs with a determiner and 68% of the bare nominal subjects follow the verb.

### 3 Syntactic complexity

It has often been observed that heavy subjects (in particular, subjects containing an embedded clause) tend to appear postverbally in some languages – this is what we find in a subtype of locative inversion in English, illustrated by (21) below:<sup>11</sup>

- (14) With incorporation, and the increased size of the normal establishment came changes which revolutionized office administration. (corpus example from Biber et al. 1999: 913)

Postposition of the subject is often motivated by its status as new information, in conformity with the principle of End-Focus (cf. Quirk et al. 1985). In fact, grammatical complexity can easily be related to the richness of informative content and focused status: as pointed out by Biber et al. (1999), the End-Weight Principle (cf. Quirk et al. 1985) and the End-Focus Principle tend to have convergent effects.

For the purpose of my investigations, I considered as heavy those subjects that contain a clausal element (in particular a relative clause) or coordinated nominals. It should be noted, however, that the preverbal VM (or focus) position in Hungarian is not accessible to clausal elements (É. Kiss 2002). A constituent including a subordinate clause can only be focused by leaving the clausal part of the construction in the postverbal field:

- (15) a. \*EGY HÁZ-AT, AMI-NEK ÖT ABLAK-A VAN lát-ok.  
 a house-ACC that-DAT five window-POSS is see-1SG  
 ‘It is A HOUSE THAT HAS FIVE WINDOWS that I see.’  
 b. EGY HÁZ-AT lát-ok, AMI-NEK ÖT ABLAK-A VAN.  
 a house-ACC see-1SG that-DAT five window-POSS is  
 ‘Idem.’

My corpus contains relative clauses modifying a preverbal subject (16) as well as those integrated into a postverbal subject (17):

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<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the interface conditions of the subject’s postposition, see, among other works, Lozano & Mendikoetxea (2010).

- (16) Az épület-ben egy nő volt, aki meghalt a tűz-ben.  
 the building-INESS a woman was who died the fire-INESS  
 ‘In the building there was a woman who died in the fire.’
- (17) Oregon-ban van egy tó, ami pont úgy működik, mint otthon a kád-ja.  
 Oregon-INESS is a lake that just so functions like at-home the bathtub-POSS  
 ‘In Oregon there is a lake that functions exactly like the bathtub in your home.’

A sentence with a preverbal subject associated with a postverbal relative clause like (16) is always acceptable with the subject placed postverbally, while such a modification of the subject’s position is not necessarily possible for sentences with a postverbal subject like (17).

- (16’) Az épület-ben volt egy nő, aki meghalt a tűz-ben.  
 the building-INESS was a woman who died the fire-INESS  
 ‘In the building there was a woman who died in the fire.’
- (17’) \*Oregon-ban egy tó van, ami pont úgy működik, mint otthon a kád-ja.  
 Oregon-INESS a lake is that justso functions like at-home the bathtub-POSS  
 ‘In Oregon there is a lake that functions exactly like the bathtub in your home.’

The main semantic difference between sentences with a preverbal subject like (16) and those with a postverbal subject like (17) is that the relative clause in the former is a non-restrictive relative, which is due to the exhaustive reading associated with the indefinite description in preverbal comment position.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the most natural reading of the relative in (17) is a restrictive reading, presupposing the existence of several lakes in Oregon.

In many cases, relative clauses associated with a postverbal NP may also have a non-restrictive interpretation. Example (16’) is in fact ambiguous between the two readings: the sentence either means that there were several women in the building and one of them died in the fire or that the only woman present in the building died in the fire.

The reason for the unacceptability of (17’) is that it contains necessarily a non-restrictive relative, which is incompatible with our knowledge about the world. The sentence implies in fact that there is nothing but a lake in Oregon,<sup>13</sup> as shown by the contrast between (18) and (19), where the non-restrictive relative clause is elided.

- (18) Az épület-ben egy nő volt.  
 the building-INESS a woman was  
 ‘In the building there was a woman.’
- (19) \*Oregon-ban egy tó van.  
 Oregon-INESS a lake is  
 ‘In Oregon there is a lake.’

In Hungarian a contrastively focused element is characterized by exhaustive reading, as opposed to elements that follow the verb. This seems to hold for subjects containing an

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<sup>12</sup> I assume that indefinite NPs in VM position containing a determiner share with NPs in preverbal focus position the property of being interpreted exhaustively in most cases. In fact, (23) is only felicitous if there was only one person in the building.

<sup>13</sup> (17’) would be acceptable in a context where the subject (or the numeral *egy* ‘one’ inside the subject) is contrastively focused.

enumeration in an existential construction as well. Each of the coordinated preverbal subjects in the corpus expresses an exhaustive enumeration, like in (20):

- (20) A bázis konyhá-já-ban hűtött ásványvíz és üdítő van, kávé, tea  
 the base kitchen-POSS-INNESS chilled mineral-water and soft-drink is coffee tea  
 igény szerint készít-hető.  
 need accordingly make-can.PART  
 ‘In the base’s kitchen there is chilled mineral water and soft drinks, and coffee and tea can be made if one wants to.’

The first clause in (20) implies that there is no other drink than mineral water and soft drink in the base’s kitchen; this is also confirmed by the second clause that makes explicit the existence of drinks not directly available in the kitchen in question.

A postverbal coordination, on the other hand, expresses an enumeration that is not intended to be exhaustive:

- (21) Szomjas vagy? Van üdítő, víz, tej.  
 thirsty are is soft-drink water milk  
 ‘Are you thirsty? There are soft drinks, water, and milk.’

Implying an exhaustive enumeration, example (20) may be continued by ‘*nem, van sör is*’ ‘no, there is also beer’, by means of which the speaker explicitly denies the exhaustivity implicature. In contrast, (21) only admits a positive continuation of the type “*és van sör is*” ‘and there is also beer’, a statement that does not contradict the affirmation in (21). The same observation can be made about (16), where the only available reading is that there was one person in the building, and it was a woman, as opposed to (16’), which does not exclude the presence of other persons in the building.

As for the distribution of heavy and light subjects in the corpus, coordinated and clausal subjects have a strong tendency to occupy a postverbal position (78% of heavy subjects appear postverbally), whereas light (i.e. non-coordinated and non-clausal) subjects are almost equally distributed between preverbal and postverbal positions (48-52%). The few cases of preverbal heavy subjects are coordinations expressing exhaustive enumeration like the one in the first clause of (20).

## 4 Semantic and pragmatic properties

The syntactic position of the subject in Hungarian existential constructions seems to be motivated by semantic and pragmatic factors as well. As we shall see, these factors may interact in the same utterance or may even be in conflict with each other. The result is a certain number of more or less strong tendencies instead of strictly applied rules.

### 4.1 Location vs. existence

The utterances of the corpus belong to two basic semantic categories of existential sentences, following the classification established by Koch (2012): predications of existence and predications of location. The first type explicitly asserts the existence of an individual or a

class of individuals, whereas the second type serves to localize an individual with respect to a certain location. This basic semantic distinction has its formal correlate related to the syntactic status of the locative constituent: only predications of location need the obligatory presence of such a locative. Predications of existence often lack a locative constituent, or if they have a locative, its presence is optional.

Predications of existence and predications of location are illustrated in (22) and (23), respectively:

- (22) Volt egy gyermek, aki már régóta betegeskedett.  
 was a child who already for-a-long-time was-sick  
 ‘There was a child who had been sick for a long time.’
- (23) Egy bogár van a fal-on  
 a beetle is the wall-SUP  
 ‘There is a beetle on the wall.’

Even though the number of predications of location in the corpus is considerably higher than that of predications of existence, the tendency is straightforward: predications of existence only allow for postverbal subjects in Hungarian, whereas predications of location can occur in any of the syntactic positions authorized for the subjects of existential constructions. In fact, this is what explains the contrast between (16) and (17) in Section 3: the former is a predication of location, asserting the presence of a woman in a house, hence the subject of the construction may appear preverbally as well as postverbally. On the other hand, (17) is a predication of existence, stating the existence of a certain kind of lake in Oregon, and therefore its subject must follow the verb.

The data indicate that there is a partial correlation in Hungarian between the semantic type of existentials and the position of the subject: preverbal subjects always involve predications of location, whereas postverbal subjects are compatible with both types of existential constructions.

#### **4.2 Topic promotion and scene setting**

50% of the corpus data are utterances introducing a new referent that functions as a discourse topic or a spatial frame in the subsequent context. In these cases one of the pragmatic functions – or sometimes the main pragmatic function – of the existential construction is topic promotion or scene setting. Such utterances are typically used at the beginning of a narrative text as a text-opening strategy (25), but a new topic or a new temporal frame may be introduced at other points of a text as well (26)-(27).

- (24) Mélyen a szív-ed-ben egy virág van. S e virág nev-e tisztaság.  
 deeply the heart-POSS.2SG-INCESS a flower is and this flower name-POSS purity  
 ‘Deep in your heart there is a flower. And the name of this flower is purity.’
- (25) A legenda szerint Silena város-á-nak közel-é-ben volt egy tó,  
 the legend according Silena city-POSS-DAT nearby-POSS-INCESS was a lake  
 ab-ban élt egy sárkány.  
 that-INCESS lived a dragon  
 ‘As the legend says, in the nearby of the city of Silena, there was a lake, and in the lake there lived a dragon.’

- (26) Egy ellenőrzőpont-on volt egy kutya, nyújtotta-m a kez-em hogy  
 a checkpoint-SUP was a dog reached-1SG the hand-POSS.1SG that  
 megszagol-ja és ad-jon jel-et, hogy simogat-hat-om-e.  
 sniff-SUBJ and give-SUBJ sign-ACC that pat-can-1SG  
 ‘At a checkpoint there was a dog, I reached my hand out so he could sniff it and give me a sign that I can pat him.’
- (27) Ott közel volt egy tó, ab-ba bele-állítja  
 there close was a lake it-SUBL into-stands  
 ‘Close to there, there was a lake, he puts her into it.’

This pragmatic function is mostly characteristic of postverbal indefinite NPs with a determiner (cf. (25-27)): 63 % of the indefinite NPs with a determiner in the corpus introduce a referent functioning as a new topic or a new spatial frame in the next clause and 80% of these NPs appear postverbally in the existential construction. The data indicate no correlation between this pragmatic function and the semantic type of the existential construction: both semantic types can be used to introduce a new topic or a new spatial frame.

The corpus includes a small number of cases where the referent of a preverbal subject becomes the topic of the following utterance or even that of a whole paragraph. It should be noted, however, that in these cases the preverbal placement of the subject is always motivated by a discourse strategy other than topic promotion. This is illustrated by (28), taken from a dialogue, where speaker A wants to draw speaker B’s attention to the presence of a dog behind him. Data of this type will be discussed in more detail in Subsection 4.4.

- (28) A: Egy kutya van mögött-ed.  
 a dog is behind-2SG  
 ‘There is a dog behind you.’  
 B: Hogy néz ki?  
 how looks out  
 ‘What does it look like?’

Bare nominals only marginally introduce a new topic, 9% of them can be associated with such a role in the corpus. I found no bare nominal with a frame setting function. Their restricted use can be explained by their low degree of referentiality, hence their unsuitability for introducing discourse referents (Alberti 1998). The topic promoting function of an existential construction with a bare nominal subject is illustrated in (29):

- (29) Volt kenyér és cirkusz rogyásig. Aztán a kenyér fogy-ni kezdett (...)  
 was bread and circus abundantly after the bread wane-INF started  
 ‘There were bread and circus in abundance. And then the bread started to wane.’

Similarly to what can be observed in (28), where the preverbal placement of the indefinite NP is motivated by a discourse strategy other than topic promotion, the use of a bare nominal construction in (29) is linked to an additional discourse strategy, which should be taken as more relevant than introducing a new topic. I will turn back to this example in Subsection 4.4.

### 4.3 Description

Another domain of use of existential constructions is the description of objects or individuals present at a certain location, usually serving as a background for the mainstream storyline. Descriptions are typically linked to a previous context and do not introduce a new topic into the discourse, but in some cases the two functions may interact. As they always express a predication about location in the sense of Koch (2012), a locative constituent is always present in these constructions.

In the corpus, 39% of the utterances containing an NP with a determiner and 26% of the utterances involving a bare nominal subject can be characterized by a descriptive function.

- (30) Egy lámpa volt az asztal-on, az asztal pedig a kandalló mellett állt.  
 a lamp was the table-SUP the table and the fireplace beside stood  
 'There was a lamp on the table, and the table stood next to the fireplace.'
- (31) Nagy előrelépés-t jelent az új iskola. Virág van az ablak-á-ban.  
 great development-ACC means the new school flower is the window-POSS-INCESS  
 'The new school is a great development. There are flowers in the windows.'

Sentence (30) is a typical example of a descriptive text, taken from the Hungarian translation of Victor Hugo's *The Miserables*. At this point in the novel there is a scene with conversation in a dining room, and before going into the details of the conversation, the author describes the background: the objects situated around the participants. The text in (31) comes from a letter reporting the foundation of a new school. The second utterance of the example gives a short description of the school, namely, that the windows are decorated with flowers.

As the corpus data show, the subject in existentials with descriptive function tends to occupy the preverbal VM position if the subject is an NP with a determiner: 75% of these constructions contain a preverbal subject. This is in accordance with the observation that preverbal subjects are always related to predications about locations and the fact that descriptions are instances of predications about locations. As for bare nominal subjects, they are almost equally distributed between preverbal and postverbal position in the corpus. The difference between the two positions has to do with syntactic complexity, on one hand, since all postposed bare nominal subjects are coordinated NPs, and with an expectedness implicature associated with postverbal position, on the other hand. This implicature will be dealt with in the next subsection.

When the subject appears postverbally, the utterance usually contains coordinated subjects in case of NPs with a determiner as well. These utterances describe a place by enumerating the objects that can be found there, like in (32):

- (32) A nappali-ban van egy asztal 2 szék-vel, 1 kihúzható kanapé, konyha.  
 the living-room-INCESS is a table 2 chair-INSTR 1 sofa-bed kitchen  
 'In the living-room there is a table with two chairs, a sofa-bed, a kitchen.'

### 4.4 Expected vs. unexpected referent

In a few cases, the corpus data confirm the observations of Visket (2004) and Hegedűs (2013) about preverbal subjects in existential constructions, referred to in Subsection 1.2. The corpus includes a subclass of utterances with a subject in VM position implying that the

presence of the object at a particular location is a problem for the speaker. This can be illustrated by (33), reporting the unusual and annoying presence of a man on a race track. These are typically emphatic statements that do not require any previous context (called *announcements* by Sasse 2006).

- (33) Egy ember van a pályán!  
 a man is the track-SUP  
 ‘There is a man on the track!’

I also found utterances expressing such an unusual presence by means of a bare nominal in VM position, like in (34), which is an announcement out of the blue about the fact that the speaker’s paprika has insects in it.

- (34) Bogár van a házi pirospapriká-m-ban  
 bug is the homemade red-paprika-POSS.1SG-INNESS  
 ‘There are bugs in my homemade paprika.’

If we place the subject in (33)-(34) after the verb, the resulting strings are (33’)-(34’) below:

- (33’) Van egy ember a pályán.  
 (34’) ?Van bogár a házi pirospaprikámban.

(33’) is perfectly acceptable and can be used with the same implicature as (33), but the sentence may also be interpreted as a neutral statement about the presence of a man at a given place. At the same time, (34’) is odd.<sup>14</sup> The only acceptable reading for (34’) requires contrastive stress on the verb with each element of the postverbal material unstressed, where the sentence means that (in conformity with or, contrary to previous assumptions,) there ARE indeed bugs in the speaker’s homemade paprika. If the sentence is uttered with a neutral prosody (i.e. with the same stress on the verb and the postverbal elements), the presence of the insects in the red paprika is presented as a positive, expected situation for the speaker<sup>15</sup>. The oddity of the example comes from the fact that this positive character conflicts with the participants’ knowledge about the world: to our knowledge, there is no situation compatible with such an interpretation.

My corpus contains a number of examples of postverbal bare nominals characterized by the implicature that the presence – more precisely, the availability – of an object at a given location is favorable, and in conformity with the expectations:

- (35) De addig is szolgál-já-tok ki magatok-at, van üdítő a hűtő-ben,  
 but until-then also serve-IMP-2PL PERF yourself-ACC is soft-drink the fridge-INNESS  
 meg van ám kaja is, ha éhes-ek vagy-tok.  
 and is but grub also if hungry-PL be-2PL  
 ‘But in the meantime, help yourself, there are soft drinks in the fridge, and there is also grub, if you are hungry.’

<sup>14</sup> Note that the acceptability of (34’) considerably improves if the subject contains a determiner.

<sup>15</sup> Compare this interpretation with that of the second clause in (35), which is perfectly natural if uttered with the same stress on the verb *van* and the postverbal constituents.

- (36) Szegény-ek voltak, de szerint-ük nekik minden-ük meg-volt,  
 poor-PL were but according-3PL they.DAT everything-POSS.3PL PERF-was  
 hiszen volt kenyér az asztal-on és az-t mindig volt ki-vel megosztá-ni.  
 since was bread the table-SUP and that-ACC always was who-INSTR share-INF  
 ‘They were poor people, but they thought they had everything they needed, since  
 there was bread on the table and they always had somebody to share it with.’

If we modify the subject’s position in the existential clause in (35) and (36) and place it into preverbal position, the expectedness implicature is absent, and the word order variants in (35’) and (36’) express either neutral descriptions or, more likely, the announcement of an unusual situation. Obviously, such an interpretation is rather incompatible with the original context of the utterances.

- (35’) (...) üdítő van a hűtő-ben, (...)  
 soft-drink is the fridge-INESS  
 (36’) (...) kenyér volt az asztal-on (...)  
 bread was the table-SUP

Example (29), discussed in Subsection 4.2 and repeated here as (37), reflects the same discourse strategy. The first utterance of the text expresses the availability of bread and circus for people, rather than their existence or presence at a certain location.

- (37) Volt kenyér és cirkusz rogyásig. Aztán a kenyér fogy-ni kezdett (...)  
 was bread and circus abundantly after the bread wane-INF started  
 ‘There were bread and circus in abundance. And then the bread started to wane.’

This example also shows that in utterances of this type the locative constituent is optional; constructions expressing availability are actually instances of predications of existence, which explains the fact that they are restricted to sentences with a postverbal subject.

If the assumption about the expected nature is often coupled with a positive connotation, in some cases expectedness is reduced to the neutral assumption that the presence of the object in question is somewhat stereotypical in that situation:

- (38) A ház-nál van kutya és macska is. Le-tehet-em a fű-be a  
 the house-ADESS is dog and cat also down-put-may.1SG the grass-ILLAT the  
 tengerimalac-ai-m-at?  
 guinea-pig-PL-POSS.1SG-ACC  
 ‘At the house there are dogs and also cats. May I put my guineapigs onto the grass?’

The corpus data show that the unexpectedness implicature is mostly associated with preverbal, and expectedness implicature with postverbal position for the subject. The (un)expectedness feature is mostly relevant for bare nominals: 68% of all bare nominals occur in postverbal position, and 80% of them are characterized by the expectedness implicature. Preverbal position is incompatible with expectedness: no preverbal subject in the corpus is characterized by this implicature.

My corpus does not confirm the observations of Hegedűs (2013) that a preverbal NP with a determiner typically expresses that the presence of something or somebody at a particular

location is a problem for the speaker. Instead, the most characteristic pragmatic function of this type of NPs seems to be the descriptive function.

## 5 Summary and conclusion

The corpus data show that the choice between an existential construction with a preverbal or postverbal subject in Hungarian is constrained by a number of semantic and pragmatic factors. These factors may interact or enter into conflict with each other but in most cases there is a leading function determining the exact position of the subject. Table 1 summarizes the main semantic and pragmatic properties of existential constructions related to the preverbal and postverbal position of the subject.

Preverbal subject	Postverbal subject
predication of location	predication of existence / location
exhaustive enumeration	non-exhaustive enumeration
	introduction of a new topic or a new frame
description	description
announcement: unexpected referent	expected / available referent

*Table 1. Semantic/pragmatic properties and syntactic position of the subject*

Preverbal subjects only occur in predications about locations. This explains the obligatory presence of a locative in these constructions. Coordinated preverbal subjects perform an exhaustive enumeration, a property that they share with preverbal narrow foci. They are only marginally used to introduce a new topic or a new frame – such a use can be considered as a contextual effect of more relevant functions like descriptive or announciative function. In the latter case, the utterance usually expresses that the presence of an individual is unexpected or even a problem for the speaker.

Existential constructions with a postverbal subject are less restricted with respect to their semantic or pragmatic function – in this sense they can be taken as the unmarked type of existential constructions. In case of coordinated subjects, they perform an enumeration that is not intended to be exhaustive – this is a common property of postverbal constituents in Hungarian. Since their subject is oriented towards the right context, they are typically used to introduce a new topic or a new frame into the discourse. This function may sometimes be paired with a descriptive or an announciative function.

There is an important difference between existentials with preverbal and postverbal subjects that concerns their information status. Whereas a preverbal subject always denotes a discourse-new referent, postverbal subjects often carry the implicature that the existence or the presence of their referent at a given location is predictable or stereotypical, in other words, available to the discourse participants.

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