

The „Existential Construction“ in Hungarian

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Claim

The „Existential Construction“ in Hungarian formally consists of the inversion of the preverb (verbal particle) and the rest of the verb. Previous analyses attributed different temporal functions to this construction.

In this talk, I want to show that we deal with rather two distinct functions within the pragmatic domain: one being associated with predicate focus, while the second expresses sentence focus (theticity).

Outline

1. Preliminary remarks on preverbs
2. The „Existential Construction“ in previous studies
3. A new approach to the „Existential Construction“
 - 3.1 A marker of predicate focus
 - 3.2 A marker of sentence focus
 - 3.3 Another case of inversion: VS order
 - 3.4 The insertion of temporal adverbs
4. Coming back to previously proposed functions
5. Conclusion

1. Preliminary Remarks on Preverbs

unbound & lexical morphemes

preverbs

bound & grammatical morphemes

Preverbs are syntactically and prosodically separable from the rest of the verb:

→ canonically in preverbal (prefix) position

PRV-V

→ separable under certain conditions:

V (XY) PRV

formal rules

(i) the presence of a **negation marker**

(ii) the presence of a **focalized constituent**
(including WH-words)

(iii) the **imperative** use of the subjunctive

semantically conditioned (iv) the **progressive** interpretation of the event

semantically conditioned? (v) the “**Existential Construction**”

2. The EC in Previous Studies: Examples

With a preverb

(1a) *Kati ki-ment (már) a kertbe.*

Kati **PRV:out-go.PST.3SG** (already) the garden.ILL

‘Kati has (already) gone out into the garden.’

(1b) *Kati ment (már) ki a kertbe.*

Kati **go.PST.3SG** (already) **PRV:out** the garden.ILL

‘Kati has gone out into the garden (before).’

EC

(Piñón 2009: 658)

In all examples with a preverb, a temporal adverb occurs.

Is it optional?

2. The EC in previous studies: Examples

With an incorporated object

(2a) *János kövér lányal táncolt.*

János **fat girl.COM** **dance.PST.3SG**

'It was a fat girl that János danced with.'

(É. Kiss 2002: 29)

(2b) *János táncolt kövér lányal.*

János **dance.PST.3SG** **fat girl.COM**

'John has danced with a fat girl (at least once).'

EC

(ibid.)

What is the context of such examples?

→ corpus

2. The EC in previous studies: properties

Formal Properties

- **inversion** (V PRV)
- a **stress pattern** distinct from the focus construction:
the verb attracts the main prosodic stress,
the preverb displays secondary prosodic stress,
the following constituents are all unstressed (Wedgwood 2003:12)

Functional Properties

- implicates that the denoted event **has taken place at least once** before (Kiefer 1994)
- or **will take place at least once** in the future (Piñón 2009),
- it simply states the occurrence of an event **as a fact** (Balogh 2000),
- **no reference** to any **concrete action** (ibid.)
- the denoted event must be repeatable (Piñón 2009)

2. The EC in previous studies: Questions

1. What are the functions of the „EC“ in Hungarian?
2. How do the functions relate to what is commonly labelled „existential“?
3. What are the contexts of this construction; can data from the corpus give more insights in contexts/functions than ad-hoc generated sentences?
4. What is the role of the temporal adverbs *még* ‘still’ *már* ‘already’?

3. A new approach to the EC

The inversion of the preverb and the verb labelled „Existential Construction“ can be attributed to two main functions:

(i) Predicate Focus

Associated with contrastive emphasis
verum focus
(Höhle 1992)

→ emphasis on the truth of the event

(ii) Sentence Focus / Thetic sentence

(presentational = entity introducing)
thetic = event reporting
(Lambrecht 1994:144)

→ announcing information
interrupting strings of actions

3.1 Predicate focus

Emphasizing the truth of the event

(3) *Ezt soha nem lehet tudni, hiszen **élt meg** ez az ország*
this never NEG possible know, since **lived PRV:PFV** this the country
olyan időszakot [...].

such a period

‘One never knows it, since this country **HAS [indeed] survived** such a period [...].’

Region: Hungary Subcorpus: informal Date: 1998/07/07 Type: fórum Column:
Törzsasztal:Mennél vagy maradnál? Author: McAI Source: Index Fórum

3.1 Predicate focus

Sasse (1995: 12) proposes focalized focus fronting for verbs of saying following direct speech sequences.

This seems to hold for the obligatory inversion of the verb and the preverb in these contexts in Hungarian:

- (4) *-Azt úgy szokták mondani - **oktatta** **ki** Jóska, [...].*
-this that.way used say - **teach.PST.3SG** **PRV:out** Jóska
'-They use to say it that way - Jóska taught, [...].'

Region: Hungary Subcorpus: literature Date: 1986 Type: kisregény Author: Csukás István Title: Keménykalap és krumpliorr

3.2 Sentence focus

In the functions of announcing information
(here: newspaper headlines)

- (5) *Harci kutyák **téptek szét** egy kisgyereket Hamburgban.*
battle.ADJ dogs **tore PRV:apart** a litte.child Hamburg.in
'Little child **torn apart** by fighting dogs in Hamburg.'

Region: Hungary Subcorpus: media Date: 2000/06/27 Type: újságcikk
Column: mozaik Title: RÖVIDEN Source: Népszava

3.2 Sentence focus

In the function of interrupting a string of actions (?)

(6) *Ebben a pillanatban olajban sült hal friss illata*
this.in the moment.in oil.in fried fish fresh aroma.POSS:3SG

ütötte meg az orrom.

hit PRV:PFV the nose.POSS:1SG

‘At this moment, the fresh aroma of the fish that was just fried in oil **hit** my nose.’

Region: Hungary Subcorpus: literature Date: 1989 Type: regény Author: Szakonyi Károly Title: Bolond madár

3.3 Another case of inversion: VS order

The inversion of the preverb and the verb fits into a bigger picture of sentence focus, predicate focus and VS sentences (cf., e.g., Sasse 1995):

- various languages (Romance, Balkan, Slavic), including Hungarian, use VS order in contrast to „neutral“ SV **to mark sentence focus**, in the sense that the situation is presented as new as a whole:

(7a) *Csörög a telefon.*
ring.PRS.3SG the phone
'The phone is ringing.'

(7b) ?? *A telefon csörög.*
the phone ring.PRS.3SG
'The phone is ringing.'

3.3 Another case of inversion: VS order

The inversion of the preverb and the verb fits into a bigger picture of sentence focus, predicate focus and VS sentences (cf., e.g., Sasse 1995):

- various languages (Romance, Balkan, Slavic), including Hungarian, use VS order in contrast to „neutral“ SV **predicate focus**:

(8a) **Tudta** **Borbála**, *hogy miről* *beszél* *Mátyás*.
know.PST.3SG Borbála COMP about.what talk.PRS.3SG Mátyás
'Borbála indeed KNEW what Mátyás was talking about.'

(8b) **Borbála tudta**, *hogy miről* *beszél* *Mátyás*.
Borbála know.PST.3SG COMP about.what talk.PRS.3SG Mátyás
'Borbála knew what Mátyás was talking about.'

3.4 The insertion of temporal adverbs

The adverbs *még* ‘still’ & *már* ‘already’ can be inserted between the verb and the preverb.

(9) *Mindenki írt már alá a felesége nevében.*

Everybody wrote.3SG already PRV:under the wife.POSS:3SG name.POSS:3SG.in

‘Everybody HAS already signed in the name of one’s wife.’

[...] *annyi politikus neve hangzik még el* [...].

(10) that.many politician name.POSS:3SG sound.3SG still PRV:away

‘[...] so many names of politicians will still sound [...].’

3.4 The insertion of temporal adverbs

The adverbs *még* ‘still’ & *már* ‘already’ can be inserted between the verb and the preverb.

(11a) *Mindenki írt már alá a felesége nevében.*

Everybody wrote.3SG already PRV:under the wife.POSS:3SG name.POSS:3SG.in
‘Everybody HAS already (*just now) signed in the name of one’s wife.’

(11b) *Mindenki már alá-írt a felesége nevében.*

Everybody already PRV:under-wrote.3SG the wife.POSS:3SG name.POSS:3SG.in
‘Everybody has already (just now) signed in the name of one’s wife.’

3.4 The insertion of temporal adverbs

The temporal adverbs *még* 'still' & *már* 'already' are inserted into sentences with predicate/verb focus

- The focus lies on the predicate and its truth values, **tense features** (exact reference time) are **less prominent**, the utterance does not necessarily refer to a single specific situation
- The semantics of **temporal adverbs** “go along” with that and make the non-actuality explicit
together with predicate / verbal focus, they express **temporal remoteness**
- Since no specific situation is referred to, it is optionally interpretable to have occurred repeatedly, but at least once

3.4 The insertion of temporal adverbs

Remoteness and repeatability of the action expressed by the predicate focus (inversion) and the semantics of the temporal adverb:

- (12) *Mindenki írt már alá a felesége nevében.*
Everybody wrote.3SG already PRV:under the wife.POSS:3SG name.POSS:3SG.in
'Everybody HAS already signed in the name of one's wife.'
- (13) *[...] annyi politikus neve hangzik még el [...].*
that.many politician name.POSS:3SGG sound.3SG still PRV:away
'[...] so many names of politicians will still sound [...].'
- (14) *Kati ment (már) ki a kertbe.* (Piñón 2009: 658)
Kati go.PST.3SG (already) PRV:out the garden.ILL
'Kati has indeed gone out into the garden (before).'

4. Coming back to previously proposed functions

- it simply states the occurrence of an event **as a fact** (Balogh 2000)

→ SENTENCE FOCUS

- implicates that the denoted event **has taken place at least once** before (Kiefer 1994)
- or **will take place at least once** in the future (Piñón 2009),
- the denoted event must be repeatable (Piñón 2009)
- **no reference** to any **concrete action** (Balogh 2000)

→ PREDICATE FOCUS

How does that relate to what is commonly labelled „existential“?

„The term existential sentence is used to refer to a specialized or non-canonical construction which expresses a proposition about the existence or the presence of someone or something.“ (McNally 2011: 1829-1848)

4. Conclusion

- What has been labelled „Existential Construction“, can be viewed as inversion of the preverb and the verb due to **pragmatic reasons (structuring of information)**.
- We deal with two types of inversion: one to mark **sentence focus** and another to express **predicate focus**.
- If the inversion is used to mark predicate focus, it combines with the temporal adverbs *még* ‘still’ & *már* ‘already’ in a way that the situation referred to is interpreted as **temporally remote** and **repeatable**.

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**Thank you
for your attention!**