SYNTACTIC AND ARGUMENT STRUCTURE OF EXISTENTIAL

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Existentials are generally considered nominal constructions, in which the predicate is given by an NP even though there may be a copula. This paper proposes a different syntactic structure, leading us to redefine the grammatical relations of the nominal constituents and consequently the argument structure of existentials. We start with a cross-linguistic comparison between the structure of existential clauses and similar constructions such as locative and equative clauses. In the past the NPs and PPs of these nominal constructions have been analysed as predicates associated with empty categories such as dummy subjects (La Fauci & Loporcaro 1997) or dummy predicates (Moro 1993, 1997, 2006a, 2006b). Typologists have analysed them according either to scales of verbalization (Payne 1997) or to their different encoding strategies (Stassen 1997, 2001a,b), with the difference between locative and existential clauses often considered only in terms of the definiteness effect (see Bentley 2004 for a proposal for this parameter in the Romance languages). We will show that the verbal (copular) or non-verbal (particle or (pro)nominal) elements can actually be analysed as predicates while the NPs and PPs encoded in existentials can be considered as nominal constituents behaving as arguments or semi-arguments. Evidence in favour of this analysis is given by cliticization tests in Romance languages, Italian in particular. Thus (1) can be compared to the locatives, equatives and other verbal constructions in (2) through (6), where *lo* = 3PERS masculine or invariabile predicate clitic form and *la* = 3PERS feminine clitic form:

(1)   a. C'è Maria sul letto   'There is Mary on the bed'
        b. Vi/c'/*lo è Maria (sul letto)
        c. Lì c'è Maria (sul letto)
        d. Vi/ci sono io (sul letto)   'There is *I (on the bed)'

(2)   a. Maria è in giardino   'Mary is in the garden'
        b. Maria c'/vi/*lo è (in giardino)
        c. Maria è lì   'Mary is there'

(3)   a. Maria dorme in giardino   'Mary is sleeping in the garden'
        b. Maria vi/ci dorme (in giardino)   '*Mary there is sleeping (in the garden)'
         c. Maria dorme lì   'Mary sleeps there'

(4)   a. Maria è mia sorella   'Mary is my sister'
        b. Maria lo/*la è (mia sorella)   'Mary is it/*her'

(5)   a. Maria ha incontrato mia sorella   'Mary met my sister'
        b. Maria la/*lo ha incontrata (mia sorella)   'Mary met her/*it

(6)   a. Maria vuole mangiare   'Mary wants to eat'
        b. Maria lo/*la vuole   'Mary wants to'

As (4)-(6) show, the invariable clitic *lo* is systematically used to substitute a verb (*mangiare* in (6)) or a nominal constituent (*mia sorella* in (4)), while in (1) the NP is the subject, given the agreement between *è* and *Maria*, and *sono* and *io*, and the PP is the oblique constituent and not the predicate as it can be substituted by the clitic *ci/vi* and not *lo* (compare (1) and (2) with (3)).
As for the argument structure, we follow Dik (1997), Van Valin & LaPolla (1997), Dowty (2003) and Prandi (2004) in thinking that the two-way distinction between arguments and adjuncts is too clearcut and that an intermediate category is needed to account, in particular, for oblique constituents. Therefore, in an existential sentence such as (7), we argue that the post-verbal NP is actually the subject, while the locative PPs, which is considered by many an adjunct, is an argument-adjunct which can be analysed semantically as in (7b); the semantic structure in (7b) is smilar to the logical structure

Van Valin & LaPolla (1997) propose for predicates co-occurring with but not obligatorily requiring locative PPs:

(7) a. In questi sotterranei c'erano le scenografie
     'In these undergrounds there were the stage designs'
     b. [exist' (stage design)], & be-at'/be-located-at' (underground, stage design)