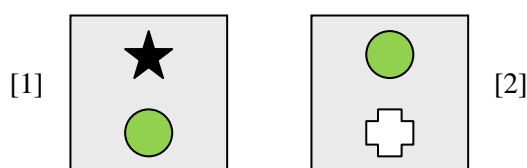# TELLING LOCATIVES AND EXISTENTIALS APART:
AN EXPERIMENTAL INVESTIGATION OF FRENCH *IL Y A*

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The close connection of Locatives and Existentials has often been noted in the litera-ture (*i.a.* Freeze 1992). There are various criteria for deciding between locative and existential structures. Partee/ Borschev 2007 claim that locatives and existentials bear different presuppositions, resulting from a different perspective structure: locatives presuppose the entity (THING) whereas existentials presuppose the LOCATION. This should come out particularly clear under negation, where in the case of a negated locative only the entity should "survive", whereas in the case of a negated existential, only the location should still be perceived of as existing. Although perspective structure and topic-comment structure are not completely identical, the perspectival center most naturally coincides with the topic of the sentence. Extending the approach of Partee/ Borschev, we assume a third type of sentences: existentials that do not bear any presupposition and are characterized by a thetic structure.

Starting from these assumptions, we designed a questionnaire study on testing the presuppositions of French locative and existential constructions. On each page of a little booklet, participants saw a pair of pictures combined with a sentence of one of the four types (a)-(d). All sentences involved two entities (one figuring as the THING and the other as reference point for the LOCATION), whereas each picture showed only one of the objects in combination with some other object that was not mentioned in the sentences. Participants judged which picture more adequately represented the sentence.

(a) L'étoile noire n'est pas au dessus de la croix blanche.
   'The black star is not above the white cross.'
(b) Il n'y a pas d'étoile noire au dessus de la croix blanche.
   'There is no black star above the white cross.'
(c) Il n'y a pas d'étoile noire au dessus d'une croix blanche.
   'There is no black star above a white cross'
(d) Il n'est pas le cas qu'il y ait une étoile noire au dessus d'une étoile verte.
   'It is not the case that there is a black star above a white cross'

Sentence (a) is a clear locative construction, expressing the THING as the topic, so that picture [1] should be most frequently chosen. Sentences (b), (c) and (d) should prompt the choice of picture [2] if the PP, expressing the LOCATION, is interpreted as the sentence topic, or provoke a random choice if the sentence is understood as a thetic sentence, without any topic nor perspectival center. We hypothesized that a topical interpretation of the PP is most prominent in (b) with an increasing likelihood of a broad focus interpretation for (c) and (d).

62 native speakers of French were tested on 20 items. In agreement with our hypothesis, picture [1] was overwhelmingly often chosen in condition (a), whereas picture [2] was strongly preferred in condition (b). The picture-[2] preference decreased from condition (b) to condition (c) and to condition (d) with the former difference not reaching significance. Even in condition (d), the picture-[2] preference was above chance level.

These results provide evidence for a general preference for the topical interpretation of the PP within *il y a* constructions, and thus the interpretation of the LOCATION as per-spectival center. However, the broad focus interpretation, without any topic or presupposition is also an option. We

thereby conclude that the classification of locative and existential constructions should be further subdivided, into locatives, presupposing the existence of the THING, "locative-existentials" or "existential-locatives", presupposing the existence of the LOCATION, and "pure existentials", presupposing neither the THING nor the LOCATION.

References

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