

Existentials

Existential sentences assert the existence of some entity either ontologically or in some particular location. The former are sometimes referred to as universal-existentials and the latter as existential-locatives. Structurally, prototypical existential sentences in Modern Hebrew open with the existential particle **יש** *yeš* followed by an indefinite NP with an optional Locative or Temporal as in:

יש צדק (בעולם)/(בימינו)

yeš *šedeq (ba-ʿolam) /*
 existential particle justice (in-the-world) /
 (*be-yamenu*)
 (in-days-ours)

There is justice (in the world)/(these days).

אין *'en* 'there is/are not' replaces **יש** *yeš* in the negative counterpart, as in:

אין צדק (בעולם)

'en šedeq (ba-ʿolam)
 not exist justice (in-the-world)

There is no justice (in the world).

The occurrence of an optional Locative or Temporal is justified by the idea that existence necessarily involves a place and a time. The syntactic realization of the temporal or locative element is, however, optional.

The existential particles **יש** *yeš* and **אין** *'en* appear to display both verbal and nominal properties and have been variously analyzed as (a) verbs, since they are restricted to present tense, occur in suppletion with the verb **היה** *haya* 'to be', which substitutes for **יש** *yeš* in the past and future tenses, and potentially trigger direct objects with the accusative marker **את** *'et* (see Glinert 1990); (b) nominals, since they occur in subject position in the unmarked case and display only number and gender distinctions (see Falk 2004); (c) verboids (e.g. Rubinstein 1968; Rosén 1977); (d) mixed copula categories (e.g., Berman and Grosu 1976; Berman 1978; Falk 2004); and (e) have been referred to by the non-committal label 'existential predicates' (Henkin 1998; Kuzar 2006) and 'existential particles' (Tobin 1982; Doron 1983).

Interestingly, **יש** *yeš* and **אין** *'en* may also occur in their inflected forms, exclusively in 3rd person in the case of Modern Hebrew **יש** *yeš*, and sometimes, though admittedly, more restrictedly, also in 1st or 2nd person in the case of **אין** *'en* 'there is/are not'. It has been observed, however, that even in the case of **אין** *'en* 'there is/are not', where the 1st and 2nd forms are available, the preference is for 3rd person. Thus we find:

אני איננה

'ani 'enena
 I not existential-locative-3fs.

I am not here/in.

The occurrence of the inflected forms was taken to be either restricted to existential-locatives, as in the example above, where both the word order (subject precedes the existential particle) and the definiteness of the NP whose existence is asserted or denied appear to deviate from the canonical existential sentence, or to constitute a variety of universal-existential restricted to non-spoken registers, as in Yoram Thar Lev's song:

ישנן בנות

yešnan banot
 3fpl. girls

There are girls [with undesirable properties].

However, closer inspection reveals that, despite significant statistical differences, both the inflected and the non-inflected forms occur as universal-existentials in Spoken Hebrew, and it has thus been suggested within the Saussurian framework (Tobin 1982), that there is in fact a difference between them, with the inflected form being used as a focusing device serving such communicative purposes as pin-pointing, identifying, emphasizing or contrasting.

The NP in Modern Hebrew existential sentences displays properties which liken it to both subject and object: like subjects it may agree with the verb as in:

היו המון בעיות בפרויקט
hayu hamon be'ayot ba-proyeqṭ
 Were many problems in-the-project

There were many problems in the project.

But, like objects it does not occupy clause-initial position in the unmarked case and it may sometimes co-occur with the definite accusative marker *את* 'et as in:

היה את הבעיה הזאת כבר קודם
haya 'et ha-be'aya ha-zot
 was (m.) ACC the-problem(f.) the-this (f.)
kvar qodem
 already earlier

There was the same (type of) problem earlier.

Since the more formal varieties of Hebrew demonstrate the agreement pattern and the spoken, even sub-standard, variety often displays the lack of agreement (or the invariable 3ms. form) and the optional definite accusative marker *את* 'et, it has been proposed (e.g., Ziv 1976) that this constitutes evidence for a diachronic development in process, whereby the subject NP is gradually gaining object properties.

Canonically, the NP is indefinite and there is solid semantic reason that this is not in fact an arbitrary syntactic property. Rather, it appears to be justified by the very nature of existentials, i.e., to assert the existence of an entity. Since it would be semantically unsound to assert the existence of an entity the existence of which is already presupposed and since the use of a definite NP constitutes evidence for just such an existential presupposition, canonical existential sentences demonstrate what has come to be known as the definiteness effect (e.g., Milsark 1974): the NP in existential sentences must be indefinite. This restriction notwithstanding, there are numerous counter-examples to it. These have been explained away as fundamentally not violating the semantic constraint against asserting the existence of an entity the existence of which is already presupposed (e.g., Ziv 1982a; Ward and Birner 1995). Among others, there are essentially locative examples, as in:

יש את הספר הזה בספרייה
yeš 'et ha-sefer ha-ze
 existential particle ACC the-book the-this

ba-sifriya
 in-the-library

There is (a copy of) this book in the library.

Even more characteristically, there are reminders, such as:

תמיד יש את הפארק
tamid yeš 'et ha-parq
 always existential particle ACC the-park

There's always the park.

Both the locatives and the reminders clearly presuppose the existence of the referent of the definite NP, yet, since the existential structure is not used in these cases to make an existential statement, there is no semantic violation of the so-called definiteness effect.

In addition to their existential discourse function, existential sentences are used to introduce an entity into the discourse. The formal argument for this use rests on the assumption that they display a rhematic structure (e.g., Kuzar 2005) and lack topics, in the sense of aboutness, altogether. This is further substantiated by the philosophical view whereby these are consideredthetic statements, involving no predication about an independently recognized entity. However, closer examination of spoken Hebrew suggests that, more often than not, they do have a topic and predication, much like categorical statements (Sabar 2010). Examples of this type are:

רציתי ללכת לקופה אחרת, אבל אין
rašiti lalexet le-qupa
 I wanted to go to-cash register different
'axeret, 'aval 'en
 but negative existential particle

I wanted to go to a different cash register, but there isn't (one).

The negative existential clearly involves a predication denying the existence of the topic (a cash register) which has been previously established in the context of utterance and can thus be elided. An interesting constraint on such topics is that they may only represent types and not tokens (Ziv 1982a). Thus:

יש את המכונית הזאת אצל כל סוכן
yeš 'et ha-mexonit ha-zot
 existential particle ACC the-car the-this

'ešel kol soxen
at every dealer

This car can be found at every dealer(ship).

It is clear from the pragmatics of the sentence that the reference is not to a unique token. It is impossible that the same token(s) will be located at every dealer(ship). Interestingly, if the reference is to a unique entity as in:

יש את חומסקי באם אי טי
yeš 'et xomsqi be-MIT
existential particle ACC Chomsky in MIT
Literally: 'There's Chomsky at MIT./' 'MIT has Chomsky.'

The statement is not about Chomsky, but rather about MIT: The university has Chomsky as a member of staff. This existential sentence cannot serve as an answer to the question about Chomsky's whereabouts.

Yet additional discourse functions which existential sentences may fulfill include indirect speech acts as in:

יש קפה?
yeš qafe?
existential particle coffee
Literally: 'Is there coffee?' = 'May I have some coffee?'

It is important to note that just as there are instances where syntactically existential sentences are not used to make existential statements, so too there are cases where non-existential sentences without semantically existential predicates are used to make essentially existential claims. Examples of this type are observable in so-called 'evidential existentials' (Rubovits-Mann 1999), where evidence for existence is provided as in:

היום אתה שומע על זוגות שלא יכולים לצאת בערב
ba-yom 'ata šomea' 'al zugot
today you hear about couples
še-lo yexolim lašet ba-'erev
that not can go-out in-the-evening

Today you hear about couples that cannot (afford to) go out in the evening.

This amounts to an existential statement: there are such couples today.

As is the case in several other languages, in Hebrew too, existentials are closely related to possessives (→ Possession). The distinguishing factor is the occurrence of the possessor PP, such that in the canonical pattern the sentence opens with יש yeš followed by the possessor prepositional phrase (*le*-NP) followed by the possessed NP as in:

יש לאחי שתי בנות
yeš le-'axi šte
existential particle to-my-brother two
banot
daughters
My brother has two daughters.

Just as in the case of existentials, יש yeš occurs in the present tense and is in suppletion with the verb היה haya 'to be' and the (possessed) NP shows both subject and object attributes, depending on register. However, there seems to be no definiteness effect of the same type, since the semantics of possessives differs from that of existentials.

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