

# ON THE STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF NPs IN TURKISH EXISTENTIALS

EMRAH GÖRGÜLÜ

Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University

## Abstract

This paper analyzes the structural and interpretive properties of Noun Phrases (NPs henceforth) in Turkish existential sentences. There are three different types of NPs, namely bare NPs, singular indefinite NPs and plural indefinite NPs, that can appear in existential structures. However, their behavior with respect to their interpretive and discourse characteristics considerably differ from each other. Specifically, bare NPs are obligatorily interpreted as number-neutral and do not introduce discourse referents while this is not the case for the other two NP types. In order to account for the characteristics of bare NPs, I argue for a modified version of the pseudo-incorporation analysis, originally proposed by Öztürk (2005) to account for the behavior of caseless direct objects. Unlike Öztürk, however, I argue that pseudo-incorporation applies only to bare NPs, excluding other NP types.

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to analyze the syntactic and semantic behavior of various NP types in existential sentences in Turkish. From a cross-linguistic point of view, existential sentences are argued to have certain things in common whereas they dramatically differ from each other in other respects (cf. McNally, 2011; Creissels, 2014). When we consider the issue in Turkish, we observe that there are only a number of descriptive studies on this particular topic. However, no formal analysis of existential structures and their constituents was offered in previous work. This paper is, therefore, an attempt to provide a thorough analysis of existentials and shed light on some of the issues in question.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 provides a general overview of existential sentences and their ingredients in languages, giving specific reference to English. Section 3 considers the characteristics of existentials in Turkish and provides an overview of certain descriptive studies. Section 4 introduces the new account in order to capture the facts about the characteristics in existential sentences, giving particular reference to NP syntax and semantics. Section 5 briefly concludes the paper and makes some suggestions for future work.

## 2. Existentials in languages

Existential sentences across languages are often argued to have the function of asserting the existence or presence of an entity in that they draw attention to an element that comes into the view or to the attention of the addressee (cf. Weinert 2013, Creissels 2014). In addition to that, they introduce an entity into the world of discourse, one that fits the description provided by the NP, known as *the pivot* (cf. Milsark 1977, Beaver et. al 2005, McNally 2011). Consider the sentences in (1) from English.

- (1) a. There is [<sub>NP</sub> *an apple*] in the basket.  
b. There are [<sub>NP</sub> *women*] standing in the hall.  
c. There is [<sub>NP</sub> *water*] in the cooler.

Basically, the structures in (1a-c) respectively identify the existence of a single entity, multiple entities and a mass entity relative to a certain location. Specifically, each structure has an indefinite NP functioning as the *pivot* (i.e. the entity whose existence is being asserted), an expletive subject *there* at the beginning of the sentence and a prepositional phrase (PP henceforth) indicating location. Note that the NPs in (1a-c) are fully referential and each introduces a discourse referent that may act as an antecedent for a pronominal in the subsequent discourse, as shown in (2).

- (2) a. There is [<sub>NP</sub> *an apple*] in the basket. Take *it* and eat *it*.  
b. There are [<sub>NP</sub> *women*] standing in the hall. I know *them*.  
c. There is [<sub>NP</sub> *water*] in the cooler. Feel free to drink *it*.

It is clear from the examples above that NPs in existential sentences in languages like English, regardless of their properties in terms of number, are referential and may introduce a discourse referent for future reference. The question that one could ask at this point is whether the same also holds for NPs in existential structures in Turkish or whether there are certain language-specific properties that distinguish one from the other. In the next section, I consider this question.

### 3. Existentials in Turkish

When we consider the existential sentences in Turkish, we see that there are different types of indefinite NPs that can appear in these constructions. In that respect, they are similar to their counterparts in languages like English. Consider (3).

(3) a. Bahçe-de [NP *kedî*] var.  
garden-LOC cat exist  
'There is a cat/are cats in the garden.'

b. Bahçe-de [NP *bir kedi*] var.  
garden-LOC IND cat exist  
'There is a cat in the garden.'

c. Bahçe-de [NP *kedî-ler*] var.  
garden-LOC cat-PL exist  
'There are cats in the garden.'

The sentences in (3a-c) illustrate that different types of NPs, namely bare NPs, singular indefinite NPs and plural indefinite NPs, can occur in Turkish existentials. Also, there is always a specialized predicate *var* 'exist' at the end of the sentence and there is an optional postpositional phrase in the sentence initial position. What is also interesting is the fact that NPs can appear in their bare form in existentials. This may seem counterintuitive since in many languages like English NPs, at least singular count NPs, do not normally appear in their bare form. The sentence in (4) would sound ungrammatical under the reading where we talk about a single sturdy chair and a healthy living cat.

(4) \*There is [NP *chair*] / [NP *cat*] in the living room.

As can be observed from the discussion above, when NPs appear with the indefinite determiner 'bir' and with the plural marker *-lar* in Turkish, this leads to a singular indefinite and a plural indefinite interpretation respectively. On the other hand, bare NPs are always interpreted as number-neutral in that they do not specify singularity or plurality in the bare form. Also, they are non-referential since they do not introduce a discourse referent that can act as an antecedent in the subsequent discourse. This is shown below.

(5) a. Kutu-da [NP *köpekî*] var. \**O*<sub>i</sub>-nu / \**onlar*-ı gör-dü-m.  
box-LOC dog exist it-ACC they-ACC see-PAST-1SG  
'There is a dog /are dogs in the box. I saw it / them.'

b. Çatışma-da [NP *yaralı*] var. \**O*<sub>i</sub>-nu / \**onlar*-ı tanı-yor-um.  
combat-LOC wounded exist s/he-ACC they-ACC know-PROG-1SG  
'There is wounded / are wounded (people) in the combat. I know her/him.'

The bare NP *köpek* in (5a) does not specify number and the sentence would be true if there is a singular dog or pluralities of dogs. The NP just specifies the existence of dog-type entity or entities. The same is also true for the bare NP *yaralı* in (5b). As the ungrammaticality of the second sentence in (5a) and (5b) indicates, an overt pronominal cannot refer back to a bare NP. The only way the sentence would become grammatical is through a zero pronominal, as in (6a) and (6b).

(6) a. Kutu-da [NP *köpek*] var.  $\emptyset$  gör-dü-m.  
box-LOC dog exist see-PAST-1SG  
'There is a dog /are dogs in the box. I saw.'

b. Çatışma-da [<sub>NP</sub> yaralı] var. Ø tanı-yor-um.  
 combat-LOC wounded exist know-PROG-1SG  
 'There is a wounded (person) in the combat. I know.'

On the other hand, singular indefinite and plural indefinite NPs are not subject to such restrictions since they are number-specific, referential. Also, they may be in an anaphoric relationship with a full pronoun. This is shown below.

(7) a. Kutu-da [<sub>NP</sub> bir köpek] var. O-nu gör-dü-m.  
 box-LOC IND dog exist it-ACC see-PAST-1SG  
 'There is a dog in the box. I saw it.'

b. Kutu-da [<sub>NP</sub> köpek-ler] var. On-lar-ı gör-dü-m.  
 box-LOC dog-PL exist it-PL-ACC see-PAST-1SG  
 'There are dogs in the box. I saw them.'

The question that arises at this point is how would one capture the facts about the semantic and discourse behavior of different NP types in Turkish? In other words, what kind of analysis would account for the behavior of NPs in existential sentences? There are a number of studies investigating the properties of existential constructions in the language. However, they are mostly descriptive in nature and do not provide a formal analysis. Tura (1986), for instance, argues that even though bare NPs are referential, they are non-definite in the sense that the reference is not to a particular individual. She goes on to say that the other two types are both referential and indefinite. On the other hand, Taylan (1987) notes that NPs have an indefinite reading even when the indefinite article *bir* 'one' is missing from the structure. In that sense the two analyses have significant differences and this poses a problem since the two NP types, namely bare NPs and indefinite NPs, differ from each other in important respects. Keleşir's work (2001) is more theoretically-oriented but she is mostly interested in whether NPs in existentials are VP-internal or VP-external, and whether or not they are presuppositional. Therefore, her account does not fully capture the issues raised above. In that respect an analysis in which the nature of NPs in existential structures is fully explained is warranted. In the next section, I propose an analysis in order to account for the characteristics of different types of NPs in Turkish existential structures.

#### 4. A New Account

As noted above, previous work goes only so far to offer a formal analysis of existentials in Turkish. I argue here that one reasonable way of understanding the nature of existential constructions, and especially their constituents, is to consider non-existential structures and their ingredients and see if there are any parallels between them. For instance, in addition to other nominal like case-marked NPs, the three NP types can also appear in verbal sentences. Consider (8).

(8) a. Ali [<sub>NP</sub> kitap] oku-du.  
 Ali book read-PAST  
 'Ahmet did book-reading.'

b. Ali [<sub>NP</sub> bir kitap] oku-du.  
 Ali IND book read-PAST  
 'Ahmet read a book.'

c. Ali [<sub>NP</sub> kitap-lar] oku-du.  
 Ali book-PL read-PAST  
 'Ahmet read books.'

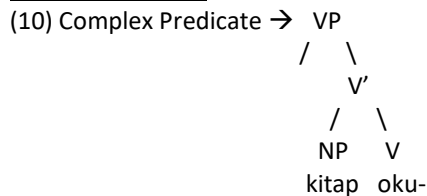
The examples above show that the use of different NP types in Turkish is not restricted to only existential sentences. Bare NPs, singular indefinite NPs as well as plural indefinite NPs can occur in verbal sentences too. What is interesting in the examples above is that the NP in (8a) is non-referential, number-neutral and do not introduce a discourse referent. However, this does not hold for the non-bare NPs in (8b) and (8c). In that sense the bare NPs in existential and verbal constructions have important characteristics in common. In order to account for the behavior of nominals in different constructions, Öztürk (2005) proposes an analysis in which

she argues that bare NPs undergo a process called pseudo incorporation. Following Massam (2001), Öztürk argues that bare NPs in Turkish are not syntactic arguments but form a complex predicate along with the verb. She goes on to say that this is also true for idioms and light verb constructions in which bare NPs are introduced as a sister of the lexical verb, as shown in (9).

- (9) a. Ali surat as-tı.  
 Ali face hang-PAST  
 'Ali got upset.'
- b. Ali dua et-ti.  
 Ali prayer do-PAST  
 'Ali prayed.'

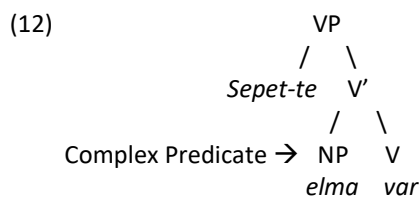
The sentence in (9a) illustrates a case of idiom while the one in (9b) is a light verb construction. Öztürk argues that in these cases the bare NP remains predicative and forms a complex predicate with the verb. The NP is not specified for number nor may it introduce a discourse referent. It is for this reason that it cannot be an antecedent for a pronominal element in the subsequent discourse. A simplified version of the syntactic structure for bare NPs that Öztürk proposes would look like (10).

Öztürk (2005:108)



The syntactic representation in (10) captures the structures in (8) and (9). What is important here is that the theme NP is pseudo incorporated into the verb and does not act like a syntactic argument. In that sense the theme pseudo incorporation truly detransitivizes the verb. I argue here that the pseudo incorporation analysis that accounts for the behavior of bare NPs in verbal sentences, idioms and light verb constructions could, with certain modifications, also be extended to bare NPs existential sentences in the language. Consider the sentence in (11) and the syntactic structure proposed in (12).

- (11) Sepet-te [NP *elma*] var.  
 basket-LOC apple exist  
 'There is apple / are apples in the basket.'



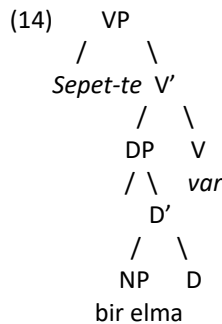
Note that I argue that the complex predicate formation in (12) takes place not at the phrasal level but under the X' level. This is because of the fact that only bare NPs go through pseudo incorporation, excluding other NP types like indefinite singular and plural NPs that may appear inside the verbal domain. Note also that the pseudo incorporated NP *elma* right above remains number-neutral, nor does it introduce a discourse referent for subsequent reference. In that sense its behavior mimics its counterparts in verbal sentences as well as idiomatic and light verb constructions. If this analysis is on the right track, then we have a uniform account of bare NPs across all clause types in Turkish.

On the other hand, it was shown that the behavior of non-bare NPs, namely singular and plural indefinite NPs, is different in the sense that they are number-specific and do introduce discourse referents. Thus it would be unreasonable to propose an analysis along the lines with the one proposed for bare NPs. Instead I argue that in cases where there is a singular or plural NP functioning as the pivot in an existential structure, that NP simply does not undergo pseudo incorporation at all. More specifically, it does not participate in any kind of complex

verb formation along with the lexical verb. The syntactic structure I propose for the sentence in (13) is then shown in (14).

(13) a. *Sepet-te* [<sub>NP</sub> *bir elma*] *var*.  
 basket-LOC IND apple exist  
 'There is an apple in the basket.'

b. *Sepet-te* [<sub>NP</sub> *elma-lar*] *var*.  
 basket-LOC apple-PL exist  
 'There are apples in the basket.'

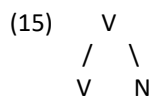


The structure in (14) illustrates that the maximal projection that is the sister of the verb is not a lexical phrase. That is to say, it is not an NP but a functional one, namely a Determiner Phrase (henceforth DP). The NP under the D' node refers to a singular object and it introduces a discourse referent. Thus the account proposed here also presupposes that only lexical phrases (i.e. a phrase whose head is a lexical element) can go through pseudo incorporation, excluding other functional elements.

Note that Öztürk also claims that singular indefinite NPs undergo pseudo incorporation just like bare NPs. More specifically, there is no syntactic distinction between singular indefinite NPs and bare NPs in Öztürk's account. However, this obviously raises certain problems as there are significant differences between the two types in terms of their syntactic, semantic and discourse properties. As it was shown above, while bare NPs are non-referential, number neutral and do not introduce discourse referents, this is not the case for singular indefinite NPs. This distinction was captured by proposing that singular and plural indefinite NPs project a functional projection that do not undergo pseudo incorporation. In the next section, I will discuss another cross-linguistic approach to bare NPs by Espinal and McNally (2011) and show why it falls short to capture the facts about existentials in Turkish.

### 5. Bare NPs across languages

In their work on bare nominals and incorporating verbs in Spanish and Catalan, Espinal and McNally (2011) independently argue that bare NPs in these languages are in fact complements and not syntactic arguments. In that sense, the behavior of bare NPs in Spanish and Catalan are similar to their counterparts in language like Turkish. Espinal and McNally note that the non-argumental behavior of bare NPs is intimately connected to the semantics of Spanish and Catalan object bare NPs, which share semantic properties associated with incorporated NPs. Specifically, these NPs are indefinite, number-neutral (unlike determiner bearing singular NPs) and do not introduce discourse referents. They note that this behavior of bare NPs in Spanish and Catalan naturally extends to existential sentences which combine with bare NPs. Following Hale and Keyser (1993, 2002) and Mateu (2002), Espinal and McNally (2011: 104) adopt a syntactic structure and argue that bare NPs can only appear in structures like (15).



Espinal and McNally note that the structure above presupposes that the verb only takes the bare noun as a complement and excludes the subject nominal. It also presupposes that the verb takes the nominal at the lexical level and the noun itself do not project a maximal projection. However, I argue that an analysis along these lines is not so compatible with the facts in Turkish. This is because of the fact that the element that

undergoes pseudo incorporation is a phrasal entity. The evidence comes from the fact that certain elements can appear between the NP and the verb. Following Taylan (1986), Öztürk (2005:38) notes that in verbal sentences, certain focus particles like *da* 'also', *bile* 'even' and *mi*, the yes/no question particle, can intervene between the verb and the bare nominal. This implies that the verb and the bare noun do not form a morphologically complex predicate which act as a singular unit. When we consider existential sentences, we observe that this is also the case in existentials. Consider (16).

- (16) a. Bahçe-de köpek *de* var.  
 garden-ABL dog FOC exist  
 'There is also a dog / are also dogs in the garden.'
- b. Bahçe-de köpek *mi* var?  
 garden-ABL dog Q exist  
 'Is there a dog / Are there dogs in the garden?'

The only way a focus element or a question particle can appear between the nominal and the verb is if the nominal has its own maximal projection. Thus if we adopt an analysis similar to Espinal and McNally's (2011), we would not be account for the facts in (16) in Turkish.

To conclude, I have shown in this section that the differences bare NPs and indefinite NPs in Turkish existential sentences could be captured by extending the pseudo incorporation analysis of caseless direct object NPs in verbal constructions. More specifically, bare NPs in existentials undergo pseudo incorporation like their counterparts in verbal sentences. However, I have also argued that the pseudo incorporation analysis does not hold for indefinite NPs in existentials as their behavior exhibit significant differences. Instead I motivated a distinction where indefinite NPs are embedded in a functional projection.

## 6. Conclusion

I have shown in this work that just like caseless direct objects in verbal sentences, idiomatic and light verbs constructions, bare NPs in existential structures are number-neutral and do not introduce new discourse referents. This behavior of bare NPs was accounted for by assuming that they undergo pseudo-incorporation just like their counterparts in other environments. However, unlike previous claims, I showed that singular indefinite NPs behave differently and their behavior was accounted for by arguing that they do not go through pseudo-incorporation. Instead, I proposed a different syntactic structure in order to explain their properties and argued that they are embedded in a functional category, namely DP. The pseudo-incorporation analysis I argued for in this work is dramatically different from the one suggested by Espinal and McNally (2011) in the sense that they I proposed an account in which bare NPs are full syntactic complements rather than being a lexical head going through incorporation with the verb.

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