Some syntactic and semantic properties of the existential construction in Malagasy

In this paper I argue that Malagasy has the same constraint as that in many other languages excluding a definite or specific argument from appearing in the existential construction (EC) with the predicate *misy*. Evidence from word-order, extraction, syntactic projection of arguments and semantic interpretation shows that *misy* takes either a DP or a clause as argument (contra Paul’s (2000) proposal that *misy* uniformly takes a small clause complement whose head is possibly null) and that the VP-external argument of the thematic predicate in the EC need not be projected in syntax and is bound by existential closure (Heim 1982).

Like in many other languages, the sole DP argument of the existential predicate *misy* in Malagasy may not be a demonstrative and proper name (cf. (1)). A thematic predicate may occur in the EC, with its VP-external DP argument appearing to its left or right (Paul 2000) (cf. (2)). The thematic predicate can be of any valency; its VP-external argument can be overtly realized, but cannot be a demonstrative or proper name, in contrast with other cases (cf. (3)). These two facts have not been reported in the literature. The VP-external argument must be under the scope of negation (cf. (4)). Generally extraction of arguments correlates with particular focus/voice morphology on the verb (cf. (5a-b)), but this constraint fails to hold of the EC when the VP-external argument is absent (cf. (5c)).

The impossible occurrence of the relative complementizer *izay* in (2b) shows that the example cannot possibly be derived from the structure underlying (2a) by moving the argument *ny zaza* ‘a child’ to the right (cf. Paul 2000). Thus, if the argument of the existential predicate *misy* in (2a) is a DP, then the argument in (2b) cannot be a DP, but a clause. Further evidence for *misy* possibly taking a clausal complement comes from the sentences in (2b) and (3a-b) without *misy* but with the parenthesized arguments being possible matrix sentences.

The obligatory narrow scope interpretation of the VP-external argument with respect to negation in (4) contradicts the common understanding in the literature that a DP marked with the determiner *ny* is generally interpreted as definite (Keenan 1976) or specific (Paul 2000). In constructions other than the EC the VP-external must be projected in syntax (cf. (3d)) and the VP-internal argument cannot be extracted (cf. (5a)). The example in (5b) is therefore evidence that the VP-external argument of the thematic predicate in the EC need not be syntactically projected, not even a null pronoun. The possible movement of a VP-internal argument of the thematic predicate in the EC (cf. (5c)) is very problematic for extraction theories relating it to specificity (cf. Aldridge 2005 and Rackowski and Richards 2005 for Tagalog), the extracted VP-internal argument in the EC being non-specific, or to fronting of the predicate that contains the VP-internal argument, inducing a violation of Huang’s (1982) Condition on Extraction Domain (Aldridge 2003, Massam 1995, Rackowski and Travis 1999). The (5a) vs (5c) contrast thus clearly shows the blocking effect of the syntactically projected VP-external argument. I take this to be evidence that on the way to SpecCP the extracted argument must first move to the position where the VP-external argument can be syntactically projected.

I suggest that the existential predicate *misy* introduces an existential quantifier. The DP argument of the predicate *misy* or the VP-external argument, syntactically projected or not, in the clausal complement of *misy* is interpreted as a variable (Heim 1982). The variable is then bound by existential closure (Heim 1982) (cf. (6)).

My account explains why demonstratives and proper names cannot be arguments of *misy* (cf. (1b-c)) or occur as VP-external arguments in the clausal complements of *misy* (cf. (3e)). These are not semantic variables; hence, the existential quantifier introduced by *misy* would bind no variable, giving rise to vacuous quantification. It also accounts for why the VP-external argument of a predicate need not be syntactically projected just when the predicate occurs in the EC (cf. (3b) vs (3d)). Existential closure is impossible without *misy* introducing an existential quantifier, and structures with free variables violate Full Interpretation.
(1) a. misy ny olana.
   exist DET problem
   ‘There’s a problem.’

   c. *misy Rabe.
   exist Rabe
   ‘There’s Rabe.’

   b. *misy ity olana ity.
   exist this problem this
   ‘There’s this problem.’

(2) a. misy ny zaza (izay) mitomany.
   exist DET child that cry
   ‘There are children who are crying.’

   b. misy (*izay) mitomany ny zaza.
   exist that cry DET child
   ‘There are children who are crying.’

(3) a. nisy nandrahon-dRabe (ny trondro).
   exist cooked.PASS DET fish
   ‘There’s cooking (of fish) by Rabe.’

   b. nisy nanome boky an-i Rasoa (ny lehilahy).
   exist gave.ACT book ACC- DET man
   ‘There’s giving of books to Rasoa (by a man).’

   c. *nisy nanome boky an-i Rasoa ity lehilahy ity.
   exist gave.ACT book ACC- this man this
   ‘There’s giving of books to Rasoa (by a man).’

   d. nanome boky an-i Rasoa *(ity lehilahy ity).
   gave.ACT book ACC- this man this
   ‘This man gave a book to Rasoa.’

(4) a. tsy misy (ny) zaza mitomany.
   not exist DET child cry.ACT
   ‘There are no children who are crying’
   NOT ‘There are children who are not crying.’

   b. tsy misy mitomany *(ny) zaza.
   not exist cry.ACT DET child
   ‘There are no children who are crying’
   NOT ‘There are children who are not crying.’

(5) a. *trondro firy no nahandro ny zaza?
   fish how many FOC cooked.ACT DET child
   ‘How many fish did the child cook?’

   b. trondro firy no nandrahon’ ny zaza?
   fish how many FOC cooked.PASS DET child
   ‘How many fish did the child cook?’

   c. trondro firy no nisy nahandro (*ny zaza)?
   fish how many FOC existed cooked.ACT DET child
   ‘How many fish were there that were cooked?’

(6) a. $\exists x [\text{problem}(x)]$ (for (1a))

   b. $\exists x [\text{thing}(x) \& \text{cook-by-Rabe}(x)]$ (for (3a) without the argument ny trondro)

   c. $\exists x [\text{fish}(x) \& \text{cook-by-Rabe}(x)]$ (for (3a) with the argument ny trondro)