Existentials: The SIR Project
Francesca Ramaglia
University of Roma Tre

Existential constructions provide an issue of intensive and relevant research in the literature, as their modular and interface-based study can shed light on the functioning of human language, including cognitive aspects, the nature of predication and the information-structural (IS) quality of marked constructions. In this respect, existentials (1a) are included in the SIR project as one of the IS-marked copular constructions constituting the topic of our research, together with (inverted) locative sentences (1b-c), clefts and (inverted) pseudoclefts (2) and a specific type of ‘Split Nominal’ structure in which a modifier (e.g., a demonstrative (3a), an attributive adjective (3b), a possessor (3c)) is interpreted as a focused/contrastive element in the noun phrase while the head noun is marginalized and introduced by a functional element (like the preposition di ‘of’ in the Italian examples below):

(1) a. There is a BOOK on the table
   b. A book is on the table
   c. On the table is a book
(2) a. It is a BOOK that I read
   b. What I read is a book
   c. A book is what I read
(3) a. Ho letto QUESTO, di libro
    have.1SG read.PST.PART DEM of book
    ‘I read THIS book’ (lit.: I read THIS (one), of book)
   b. Ho letto quello GRANDE, di libro
    have.1SG read.PST.PART that big of book
    ‘I read the BIG book’ (lit.: I read the BIG (one), of book)
   c. Ho letto il TUO, di libro
    have.1SG read.PST.PART the your(s) of book
    ‘I read YOUR book’ (lit.: I read YOURS, of book)

The comparative analysis of these constructions focuses on their interpretive properties at the Interfaces. This means that the interplay between different levels of grammar (morphology, syntax, semantics, prosody, discourse) is taken into account. In this line of analysis, the cross-linguistic perspective is crucial to compare theories, evaluate results and consider the implications thereof in terms of both broad typology and parametric microvariation.

The first objective of this project is to provide a deeper insight on the nature of predication and contribute to the understanding of its informative role. In particular, based on the working hypothesis that the constructions at issue implement different (types of) copular constructions, the present project aims at providing a comprehensive account on the role of nominal predication in the building up of information-structural meanings. A second major result concerns the assessment of an innovative methodology of research, consisting in the combination of fieldwork, corpus linguistics and testing of interpretive judgments with informants. In particular, empirical data are collected both from already existing grammars, corpora and databases and from fieldwork research with native-speaker consultants. Then, specific diagnostics are created to evaluate the working hypotheses emerged from the analysis of spontaneous data. The collection of data will also obtain a side (but not minor) goal, consisting in the creation of an original corpus of spoken language in which the relevant phenomena can be further investigated in future works.
In the present talk, the analysis developed so far will be illustrated, which is mainly dedicated to (pseudo)cleft, existential and locative constructions. In particular, Frascarelli & Ramaglia’s (2013, 2014) analysis of (pseudo)clefts has been resumed (with the reconsideration of some details) and extended to existential and locative structures. As far as existential constructions are concerned, they are analyzed as copular structures of the predicative type (cf. Den Dikken 2006 for an overview of copular constructions), which involve focalization of the post-copular constituent and topicalization of the (possibly present) locative PP.

Besides proposing a unified explanation for existentials and clefts (and other types of IS-marked copular constructions) – also examining their formal asymmetries –, a distinction is argued to be necessary across there-sentences. As a matter of fact, in exploring the Definiteness Effect (a phenomenon for which definite noun phrases are excluded from the post-copular position of existentials in languages like English as opposed to Italian; cf. (4)), evidence will be provided that this phenomenon is a semantic property of existentials cross-linguistically, and that constructions apparently violating this restriction (cf. (4b) with the demonstrative quel ‘that’) are not existential sentences proper but qualify as there-structures of the presentational type:

(4) a. There is a/*that book on the table
   b. C’ è un / quel libro sul tavolo

As will be illustrated in details, this hypothesis is supported by semantic, intonational and discourse evidence, as well as by a comparative approach: in this talk, data will be discussed from languages in which the two types of there-sentences are also syntactically distinguished. This is, for instance, the case of Logudorese Sardinian, in which the copula can be realized either as have or be, depending on the (in)definiteness of the following nominal (cf. La Fauci & Loporcaro 1997):

(5) a. B a (*sos) ppastorez in domo (Logudorese Sardinian)
   ‘There are shepherds at home’
   b. Bi sun *(sos) ppastorez in domo
   ‘There are the shepherds at home’

As will be illustrated in details, this hypothesis is supported by semantic, intonational and discourse evidence, as well as by a comparative approach: in this talk, data will be discussed from languages in which the two types of there-sentences are also syntactically distinguished. This is, for instance, the case of Logudorese Sardinian, in which the copula can be realized either as have or be, depending on the (in)definiteness of the following nominal (cf. La Fauci & Loporcaro 1997):