CHAPTER 9

Existential and Related Clauses

1 Existential Clauses

1.1 Introduction

An existential clause is one which predicates the existence of something, usually in a definite location. This is a topic about which there are a number of different opinions. Most of the Finnic literature deals with either Finnish or Estonian. Nemvalts (1996: 18) has compared the two languages. Less information is available about the other languages, although examples of existential clauses are certainly to be found. Hakanen (1973: 68) concludes from his observations that the existential clause is basically the same in all Finnic languages. Much of the older linguistic literature does not differentiate between existential and copula clauses. Huumo and Perko (1993: 399) consider that there is a continuum with no strict boundary between existential and non-existential clauses. Häkkinen (1994: 333) comments that the existential clause is not clearly defined in modern Finnish and it was even less clear previously. Tiainen (1997) has summarized the problems and various opinions that have been expressed in the Finnish linguistic literature, and concludes that the problem of the existential clause has not yet been solved. Metslang (2013) has carried out quantitative analysis relating to existential and similar clauses in Estonian and has presented new insights into the problem, studying the relationship between subjects and objects with respect to their case-marking.

For Finnish a description of existential clauses is found in Visk §893. It divides the clauses into prototypical ones and others less typical. For the prototypical ones there are a number of features listed, which are characteristic of an existential clause:

1. The verb is ‘be’
2. The theme is a location
3. The divisible subject is partitive.
4. In a negative clause all subjects are partitive.
5. The verb does not show agreement with the subject.
6. The subject has not been mentioned previously.

* Part of the material in this chapter has been published in Lees (2008).
A canonical existential sentence in Estonian and its Finnish equivalent are shown below.

(9.1)  

A.  

E  Laua-l  ol-i  raamatu-id  

b.  

F  Pöydä-llä  ol-i  kirjo-ja  

    table-ADE  be-PST.3SG  book-PL.PAR  

‘There were some books on the table.’

For the less typical existential clauses virtually each of the above features can be the converse according to VISK §893.

1. Other verbs
2. The subject in theme position
3. The divisible subject in nominative case
4. Nominative subject in a negative clause
5. Verbal agreement
6. Subject mentioned previously

The list refers to the ‘subject’ of the existential clause. This is the traditional way in both Estonian and Finnish grammars of referring to the noun whose existence is predicated. There has been considerable discussion about the nature of this argument, which I shall mention further in Section 3. VISK §910 calls it the e-subject. I prefer to refer to it as the e-argument.

The list of features pertaining to less typical existential clauses negates every feature of the prototypical list, resulting in the question of where should the line be drawn. Would one feature from the prototypical list be sufficient? The following sentence (9.2) with the verb ‘be’ can in no way be classified as existential, so this one feature alone would certainly not be sufficient.

(9.2)  

E  Raamatu-d  oli-d  laua-l.  

    book-PL.NOM  be-PST-3PL  table-ADE  

‘The books were on the table’

The sentence in (9.1) tells us what existed on the table, (9.2) makes a statement about the location of a known set of books.

Metslang (2013: 80) comments on the difficulty of distinguishing between existential and intransitive clauses when doing a corpus-based analysis. In the multitude of papers written on this subject, there are differences as to what