The Operator Structure of the Modal Existential Wh-Construction in Hungarian\(^1\)

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In our talk the operator structure of the modal existential wh-construction, MEWh (1a-a') (Lipták 2003, Šimík 2011) is compared to those of other embedded finite (1b) and non-finite (1b-c) verb phrases / deverbal nominal constructions. Topic, quantifier and narrow focus positions are investigated in the constructions, as illustrated by the alternative fillers given in (1d).

(1) SENTENCE TYPES CONSIDERED (PRESENTED HERE WITH NO GRAMMATICALITY JUDGMENTS)

a. ⟨A munkára) van/nincs ⟨kit felbérél[{-ni/-nem/{-jek}) .

\[ \text{the task.Sub is/not is who.Acc up.hire[-Inf/-Inf.1Sg/-Subj.1Sg]}. \]

Intended meaning: ‘There is someone/noone for me to hire to do the task.’

a’. ⟨A munkára) van/nincs ⟨kit felbér[{-ni/-nem/-jek]) fel⟩.

\[ \text{the task.Sub is/ not is who.Acc hire[-Inf/-Inf.1Sg/-Subj.1Sg] up} \]

Intended meaning: ‘There is someone/noone for me to hire to do the task.’

b. ⟨A munkára⟩ hiba volt ⟨Józsi felbér[{-ni/-nem/-jek]/ bér[{-ni/-nem/-jek] fel⟩.

\[ \text{the task.Sub mistake was Józsi.Acc up.hire[-Inf/-Inf.1Sg/-Subj.1Sg] hire[-Inf/-Inf.1Sg/-Subj.1Sg] up} \]

Intended meaning: ‘(Me) hiring Józsi to do the task was a mistake.’

c. ⟨A munkára⟩ hiba volt ⟨Józsi a felbérőséle / bérőséle fel⟩.

\[ \text{the task.Sub mistake was Józsi.Dat the up.hire.Nnm.Poss hire.Nnm.Poss} \]

Intended meaning: ‘(My) hiring Józsi to do the task was a mistake.’

d. ⟨A munkára⟩ ⟨mindkét munkára⟩ Q / ⟨a festésre is⟩Q / ⟨csak a festésre⟩ focus

\[ \text{the task.Sub both task.Sub the paintwork.Sub also only the paintwork.Sub} \]

‘to do [the task] / [both tasks / [also the paintwork] / [the paintwork]’

It will be pointed out in our talk that MEWh essentially patterns with infinitival and deverbal nominal constructions in tolerating both the internal and the external scope taking (see indices [\text{\text{Int:...}}]) of certain construction-internal operators (partly depending on their position), discussed in Farkas, Alberti and Szabó (2017: 41–42). As for the wh-expression in the modal existential wh-construction, we do not follow Lipták (2003: 6) in assuming that this expression occupies a construction-internal narrow-focus position, which is the case in finite Hungarian clauses. Such a hypothesis can be refuted on the basis of the data presented in (2b), in which the verb stem – preverb order is excluded (see also Šimík 2011: 169), while this order is readily tolerated in the non-finite verbal constructions in (2c).

Anyway, even in finite clauses, only wh-expressions with a real semantic-focus interpretation (and not with a universal-quantifier interpretation) behave as narrow foci (É. Kiss 1992: 144). As Lipták (2003: 6) herself accepts, the wh-expression in MEWh has no focus interpretation. Rather, in respect of interpretation, it is closest to the type of finite-clause-internal existential pronoun illustrated in (2e), which is claimed to occupy a topic position by É. Kiss (1992:157), primarily on the basis of its word-order position. All in all, the more or less well-formed word order variants in (2d) suggest that the wh-expression occupies a (undoubtedly special, non-referential) topic position in the MEWh. Even its interchangeability with a quantifier in (2a) does not refuse this hypothesis if we accept Szeteli and Alberti’s (2018: 165) arguments for assuming that quantifiers can belong to either pole of the topic-comment dimension of the Hungarian sentence.

(2) The syntactic position of the wh-expression in the modal existential wh-construction

a. ⟨Mindkét munkára⟩[\text{\text{Int:...}}] van ⟨kit felbér[{-ni/-nem/-jek}) .

\[ \text{both task.Sub is who.Acc up.hire.Inf.1Sg}. \]

Internal reading: ‘There is someone for me to hire to do both tasks.’

External reading: ‘In the case of both tasks, there is someone for me to hire to do that.’

b. ⟨Mindkét munkára⟩[\text{\text{Int:...}}] van ⟨kit felbér[{-ni/-nem/-jek}) fel⟩.

\[ \text{both task.Sub is who.Acc hire.Inf.1Sg up} \]

c. Van kit cask a festésre felbér[{-ni/-nem}) / bér[{-ni/-nem}] fel.

\[ \text{is who.Acc only the paintwork.Sub up hire[-Inf/-Inf.1Sg] hire[-Inf/-Inf.1Sg] up} \]

‘There is someone (for me) to hire to do nothing else but the paintwork.’

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d. ‘(A festésre) van ’kit’ felbérelnem.’
   the paintwork.Sub is who.Acc up.hire.Inf.1Sg
   ‘There is someone for me to hire to do the paintwork.’

e. ‘Valaki mindenkit értesített.
   someone everyone.Acc informed.3Sg
   ‘Someone has informed everyone.’

References
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