Es hät vs. *es git*: Investigating the lexical split of Swiss German existential clauses

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Swiss German, the group of Alemannic dialects spoken in German-speaking Switzerland, displays a case of a lexical split in its existential clauses, resulting in two competing, semantically distinct types. Formally, the two types are constructed using the expletive pronoun *es* 'it' and the verbs *hät* or *git*, the 3.SG forms of *haa* 'have' and *gää* 'give', respectively. Due to their non-canonicity (expletive subject, bleached verb) and their function to assert the existence or presence of objects at a location, cf. McNally (2011) and Sarda & Lena (2023), I interpret them as existential constructions.

I investigate this semantic contrast based on data collected from a corpus ("What's Up, Switzerland", Ueberwasser & Stark, 2017) and an online survey conducted with native speakers of Swiss German (N=93).

Competing types of existentials within one linguistic system also exist in other languages. Koch (2012) offers a typological review of a split between existential and locational sentences. Czinglar (2002) compares *es hot* (the Austrian-Alemannic variant of *es hät*) with the Standard German *es gibt*, but not as competing constructions within one linguistic system. However, the data shows that the case of Swiss German existentials cannot be understood strictly in terms of existential vs. locational vs. presentational.

The contrast involves several linguistic categories. *Es hät* existentials have an imperfective modality, they require a specific, instantiated referent identifiable from within the speech act and being within deictic reach. They state the specific existence/presence of an extant object. *Es git* existentials, on the other hand, are unable to access instantiated objects within the hearer-speaker deixis. They rather refer to entities outside the deixis with two possible readings: (1) generic and kind reference; (2) reference to the instantiation of an object coming into existence – a resultative-transformative *Aktionsart*-reading with a prospective aspect, which I call the EXISTENTIVE.

(1) a. *uf-em Wysshorn hät-s hüt schnee*
    on-the PN   has-it today snow
    "There's snow on the Wysshorn today."
  b. *uf-em Wysshorn git-s hüt schnee*
    on-the PN   gives-it today snow
    "There is going to be snow on the Wysshorn today."

Sentence (1a) refers to concrete, instantiated snow currently lying on the ground. In sentence (1b), there is necessarily still no snow, but the future presence of snow is stated, i.e., the process, at the end of which there will be snow – the EXISTENTIVE reading – hence the future-time reference in the translation.

The contrast thus lies at the conjunction of several categories: modality and aspect, genericity, and referentiality. It is an example of the interaction between categories, mutually affecting each other across domains.

Finally, attempting a holistic perspective, I suggest that the contrast between *es hät* and *es git* has a strong pragmatic component and has to do with a contrast between the 'pragmatic' plane and the 'objective/real' plane, cf. Bühler (1934) and Benveniste (1971): *Es hät* is a predication embedded in the act of speech and requires knowledge of the speaker's origo-deixis; *Es git* is a predication that can be detached from the speech act.

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