



Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

The Structural Role of the Subject in Categorical Propositions and Its Existential Import
Konunun Kategorik Önermelerdeki Yapısal İşlevi ve Varlıksal Anlamı*

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Öz: Doğruyu yanlıştan ayıran bir sistem olması itibarı ile, *Mantıkta* oluşturulan tüm yargılar bir “şey” hakkında olmak zorundadır. Yüklemlili önermelerde de yargı bu şey üzerine bina edilir. Önermede bu “şeye” referansta bulunan kavram “konu” terimi ile karşılanır. Konu tüm sistemin kendisi üzerine bina edildiği yapı taşıdır. Klasik gelenekte, yalnızca olumlu önermelerin konularının varlığını gerektirdiği yaklaşımı yaygındır. Oysa önermede bir yargının oluşturulabilmesi için, konunun bir varlığa referansta bulunması gerekmektedir. Bu çalışmada, önermede konunun varlığına yönelik klasik gelenekte yer alan tartışmalar incelenecek ve bu tartışmalar dolayısıyla konunun varlıksal değeri sorgulanacaktır. Zira konunun varlığı, klasik mantık açısından birçok veçheden oldukça önemlidir. Örneğin iki önerme arasında çelişkinin oluşabilmesi için sekiz birlik şartından biri olan “konuda birliğin” sağlanabilmesi adına var olan konunun iki ayrı önermede kullanılması gerekmektedir. Ayrıca konunun referansta bulunduğu fertlere yönelik Fârâbî-İbn Sinâ arasındaki fiil-imbân tartışmalarına yer verilerek konunun olası fertlerine yönelik yaklaşımlar değerlendirilecektir. En temelde mantıksal sistemin tutarlılığının tespiti için konunun varlıksal anlamının irdelenmesi önem arz etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Önerme, Yargı, Konu, Varlık, Varlıksal Anlam.

Abstract: Logic, as a system designed to distinguish between right and wrong, necessitates that all judgments pertain to a “thing.” In categorical propositions, this judgment is anchored in the “thing,” which is represented by the term “subject.” The subject serves as the foundational element upon which the entire logical system is built. Within the classical tradition of logic, it is widely accepted that only affirmative propositions presuppose the existence of their subjects. However, for a judgment to be formed within a proposition, the subject must refer to an existent. This study examines the debates within the classical tradition regarding the existence of the subject in propositions and questions its existential significance based on these discussions. The existence of the subject holds pivotal importance in classical logic for several reasons. For example, to establish a contradiction between two propositions, the “unity of subject”—one of the eight conditions for contradiction—requires that the same subject be used in both propositions. Furthermore, the study explores the discussions between Farabi and Ibn Sina regarding the actuality and possibility of the individuals to which the subject refers, evaluating their approaches to

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the possible individuals denoted by the subject. At its core, analyzing the ontological implications of the subject is essential for assessing the coherence and consistency of the logical system.

Keywords: Proposition, Judgment, Subject, Existence, Existential Import.

Introduction

In logic, a *proposition* is a statement containing a relation between two things. The proposition, which can be true or false, arises from the relationship between subject and predicate (Ibn Sīnā, 1982, p. 50). A proposition comprising subject, predicate and the nexus (the relation between them) is called a categorical proposition. The most critical feature of such a proposition is the unity of meaning between the subject and the predicate, as well as the nexus linking them. However, this coexistence is not limited to the unity of the subject and predicate in the mind; rather, it reflects the mind's belief in the nexus, whether affirmative or negative. Such propositions are considered simple.

Categorical propositions can be classified into two types based on their quality: affirmative and negative. In an affirmative proposition, the subject affirms the predicate, indicating that the subject assumes the meaning of the predicate. Conversely, in a negative proposition, a conjunction is attached to the subject and predicate, signifying the absence of the nexus (Ibn Sīnā, 2006, p. 33,36; Also see. Qutb ad-Dīn Razī, n.d.; Samarqandī, 2022b, p. 175). The nexus represents whether an entity possesses or lacks another existential meaning conveyed by the predicate. Consequently, each part of a proposition refers to an existent. Thus, analyzing a proposition requires considering the existence or non-existence of the entity on which the proposition is established, as well as the quality and quantity that define their relationship.

Judgments are grounded in the subject as the entity about which something is asserted (*mahkum al-alayh*). The subject is the smallest unit described by the predicate and forms the foundation of the entire logical system. Fārābī defines the subject as “the meaning/subject about which a judgment is made in the art of logic” (Fārābī, 2016, p. 31). Aristotle, as the founder of logic, addresses the subject in *Categories*, the first book of the *Organon*. According to Aristotle, everything in language participates in judgment in some way. He categorizes elements that can function as subject and predicate into three groups: “subject,” “present in a subject,” and “predicable of a subject.” By “present in a subject,” Aristotle refers to something that does not exist as a part of the subject but cannot be separated from it (Aristoteles, 1989, pp. 4–5).

When a judgment is “predicable of a subject,” the predicate is attributed to the subject both literally and in essence (Aristoteles, 1989, p. 7). On the other hand, for entities that are “present in a subject,” neither the name nor the meaning of the predicate may always apply to the subject. This distinction underscores the importance of verifying whether the subject can genuinely assume the meaning attributed to it by the predicate. According to Aristotle, the subject and predicate in a proposition must belong to one of the following categories:

- a. *Predicable of a subject*: For example, in the proposition “A human being is an animal,” the predicate “animal” is not inherent to the subject “human being” but is predicated of it both literally and meaningfully. The subject also encompasses the definition of its predicate.
- b. *Present in a subject*: For example, in “The door is orange,” the quality of “orange” is present in the subject (the door), but its definition is not.
- c. *The subject itself*: This refers to substances as individual entities that are neither present in nor predicated of another subject. All substances can be examples of this category.

What does not apply to an individual being cannot apply to that being taken generally. For example, if “being an animal” did not apply to an individual human being, it could not apply to humans as a general concept. This is an example of what is “predicable of” a subject. Similarly, for something “present in a subject,” such as color, Aristotle argues that if color did not exist in an individual object, it could not exist in objects taken generally (Aristoteles, 1989, p. 8). Lastly, “the subject itself” refers to

a substance that is not predicated of any being. Thus, Aristotle delineates the roles of subjects and predicates in logical propositions.

(Being a) Subject in a Proposition

In the classical logic tradition, there are discussions about the individuals to whom the subject refers in a proposition. Various answers have been given to the question of whether the subject corresponds to the individuals present at that moment or whether it also includes potential or possible individuals. This leads to different interpretations of what the symbol “C” (representing the subject) and “B” (in the predicate position) signify in a categorical proposition, such as “C is B.” These discussions explore what “C” and “B” express and to which entities they refer.¹

According to Rāzi, the expansion of the field of existence as the carrier of the meaning implied by the concept of “subject” in a proposition began with Fārābī. Abharī explains that, according to Fārābī, in a proposition like “Every C is B,” the “C” in the subject area includes not only those who are actually C (as a one-sided possibility, *imkān al-amm*) but also potential individuals who are characterized by the attribute C. However, if the actual individuals in which C is verified are not meant, the individuals designated as C are still included within the scope of subject C. If verification occurs, however, naming is excluded (Abharī, 1998, p. 60). In other words, for Fārābī, the possibility of qualifying the subject with a predicate in *nafs al-amr* is sufficient for *‘aqd al-waḍ* (Tāṣköprüzāde, 2009, p. 67). *‘Aqd al-waḍ* refers to the verification of the subject's title in relation to the individuals to whom the subject refers (Abdünnāfi İffet Efendi, 2019, pp. 265–266).

Some followers of Ibn Sīnā and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, however, argue that C refers only to actual individuals. The state of actuality here does not necessarily include what happens in the external world at the moment of judgment. In fact, not every subject we make a judgment about actually exists outside the mind (Ibn Sīnā, 1964, p. 21; Abharī, 1998, p. 60; Street, 2016, p. 83).² What is meant is that the relationship between the subject and the predicate must actually occur (Tāṣköprüzāde, 2009, p. 67). In other words, for *‘aqd al-waḍ* to occur, being described with a title must be actualized in the *nafs al-amr* (For detailed information, see. Gelenbevī, 1309, p. 50). In this approach, also adopted by Alexander of Aphrodisias, one of Aristotle’s commentators, the subject is verified in terms of its actual meaning (al-Mallawī, n.d., fol. 9b). According to Ibn Sīnā, the proposition “Every C is B” means that each individual C is B, whether in the mind or outside it, at any time—past, present, or future (Ibn Sīnā, 1375, p. 34; Samarqandī, 2022a, p. 112). In other words, Ibn Sīnā includes all individuals in the proposition “Every C is B,” provided that they are characterized by the actual subject, including essential, external, and mental entities (Ibn Sīnā, 1964, pp. 21–24; al-Mallawī, n.d. fol. 8a). According to Ibn Sīnā, every subject called C corresponds to one of the things to which C actually applies in one of the three tenses (past, future, present). If the individuals of the universal C, as in the proposition starting with “Every C...,” are individuals that will exist in the future, they cannot be called C unless they are actually represented as such in the mind. However, for Fārābī, the possibility of being C is sufficient for the members of the subject.

There is an essential difference between the views of Ibn Sīnā and Fārābī. In both views, the title of the subject is confirmed with respect to its individuals. In other words, when the proposition is established, the concept in the subject area refers to the individuals of the subject. According to Fārābī, the characterization of the subject with a predicate includes the possibility of an obstacle preventing this characterization. In contrast, for Ibn Sīnā, there should be no such obstacle, and the subject and predicate are assumed to be fully integrated (Tāṣköprüzāde, 2009, p. 67). While, according to Ibn Sīnā, this

¹The issue of reference has been a central focus of debate in the modern era, particularly within the context of Frege’s notions of “sense” and “reference.” It has been argued that, although all terms appearing in subject or predicate positions convey meaning, only a specific subset functions as identifiers of singular entities. For further discussion, see. (Özel, 2022, pp. 49–50)

² Paul Thom states that this approach of Avicenna reminds us of the requirements of the subject of the existence-essence distinction. (Thom, 2008, p. 362)

situation requires the title of the subject to be confirmed on the actual individuals of the subject's nature, for Fārābī, it is confirmed for possible individuals. However, possibility here does not mean potentiality (*quwwah*) as opposed to actuality (*fi'il*) (al-Mallawī, n.d., fols. 9a–9b). For example, while the statement “All the Sultan's mounts are horses” is accepted as valid according to Ibn Sīnā, Fārābī considers it wrong, allowing for the possibility that some mounts could be donkeys (Samarqandī, 2022b, p. 207; Urmawī, 2006, p. 31; Amāsī, 1276, p. 28; El-Rouayheb, 2010, pp. 40–41).

The universal proposition “Every C is B” attributes B to C, not to C as a whole but to each of its individual members. The “C” in the subject area is not C in its entirety, but the particular individuals to which C applies. However, the verification of the individuals is not about those to whom C is attributed (Ibn Sīnā, 1964, pp. 20–21; Abharī, 1396, p. 176). It can be thought of as individuals in which the nature (*haqiqah*) of C is confirmed. Some logicians accept that, in such propositions, sometimes the nature of the subject and sometimes its external existence are considered.

According to some logicians, including thinkers like Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Abharī, Katibī, and Urmawī, if the subject of a proposition refers to the nature of the subject, then the thing whose possible individuals are C is B when it comes into existence. In other words, everything that requires C also requires B. When the subject refers to an individual in the external world, it means that every being that would be C in the external world at one of three times (moment of judgment, before or after: past, present, future) is also B in the external world. Everything externally appropriate to C is equally appropriate to B (Urmawī, 2006, p. 31; Abharī, 1396, pp. 176–178; Kâtibî, 2017, p. 96). This means that it is sufficient for the subject to exist at one of these three times for the proposition to hold. This scenario may cause the association of contrastive concepts in predications, such as “The one who is asleep is the one who is awake” or “The one who is black is the one who is white” (Keşşî, n.d., p. 8). However, this does not imply that the “sleeping person” in the subject area is actually asleep at that moment; rather, it is used to express that the “sleeping person” was awake at a certain time. To illustrate this, Qashshī refers to the 36th verse of Surah Yusuf. According to him, in the Quranic verse “I saw myself (in my dream) squeezing (the water of) wine” (*Kur'an-ı Kerim*, n.d. Surah Yusuf/36.), wine is used to refer to grapes that have not yet turned into wine, with the assumption that the grapes will turn into wine at some point (future).

One thinker who offers a remarkable approach to such uses is Shahrazūrī. He argues that a proposition like “C is B” does not mean “Every individual qualified as C is also characterized as B.” In fact, the subject relates to its individuals only after it has a general meaning. He provides the following propositions as examples:

1. كل انسان تسعه دار واحدة (*Kullu insān tas'ahu dār wāḥidah*)
2. جمع الناس تسعهم دار واحدة (*Jam'u al-nās tas'uhum dār wāḥidah*)

The first proposition, “Every human being lives in a house” does not mean “All human beings live in one house” (as in the second proposition). This is because the general statement of the subject requires that the individual carries the general meaning. If only the individual were meant, the phrase “every human being” would refer to a mass of people collectively. However, this is not the intended meaning (Shahrazūrī, 1372, pp. 77–78).

The Problem of Existence of the Subject in Propositions

An affirmative proposition is established by predicating something of a subject that exists either in the mind or outside of it. The existence of one entity for another serves as evidence of its own existence. If the proposition's existence is external to the mind, its subject must also exist externally; if its existence is in the mind, the subject likewise exists in the mind (Samarqandī, 2022a, p. 168). For instance, Aristotle considered the propositions “Every human being is a philosopher” and “No human being is a philosopher” as opposites. However, many contemporary logicians challenge this view, arguing that if no human beings exist, both propositions can simultaneously be true. In other words, opposite universal affirmative and negative judgments appear true when their subject does not exist.

This paradox can be clarified as follows: It seems impossible to falsify or verify a feature attributed to non-existence. In contrast, medieval logicians supported Aristotle's view, arguing that affirmative propositions are false if their subjects do not exist (See. Parsons, 2014, pp. 9–10). Whether negative propositions require the existence of their subjects depends on the level of the subject's existence. Some logicians contend that both affirmative and negative propositions require the subject's existence in some form..

When propositions are constructed essentially, they analyze the subject's essence, assuming the subject's potential to exist. Conversely, when propositions are based on external individuals, the individual must actually exist. In the first case, if something exists by its very nature, it necessarily exists with its predicate. For example, "The phoenix has wings" refers to an essence that does not yet exist but is not impossible. In the second case, the subject must exist or will exist, and the predicate applies to its actual state. This distinction highlights the role of the subject's level of existence in determining the truth of propositions.

Medieval logicians debated conditions for affirming the truth of propositions.

- *The Inherence Theory of Predication*, held by some historians, claims that a true affirmative proposition requires the predicate to be inherent in the subject. For instance, "Adam is a scholar" is true only if Adam exists and possesses knowledge as an inherent quality (Klima, 2009, p. 145).
- *The Identity Theory of Predication*, widely adopted by Buridan and nominalists like Ockham, states that a categorical affirmative proposition is true if the subject and predicate refer to the same entity. For example, "Adam is a scholar" is true if Adam is one of those who are called scholars. Here, the intersection of the subject and predicate concepts is essential: neither can be an empty set (Klima, 2009, p. 145).

Buridan argued that nothingness can only arise from nothing, making it unacceptable for affirmative propositions to refer to non-existent subjects. Such propositions must therefore be deemed false. (Klima, 2009, p. 145). It can be said that Ibn Sīnā's idea of "the non-existent is that which cannot be informed" was adopted in the Latin world around the same time. (Oruk Akman, 2024, p. 73) Suppose every affirmative and negative propositions require the existence of their subjects. In this case, the following question arises: "What would be the meaning of the proposition if the subject or predicate contains a meaning referring a non-existent being?" Even if it is accepted that only affirmative propositions require the existence of their subjects, what happens if the subject or predicate of the proposition declares non-existence?

The existence of a subject is self-dependent, while its non-existence arises solely from itself. For example, Adam does not exist due to a lack of any external entity; Adam's non-existence occurs *only if Adam does not exist* (See. Qūshjī, 1393, pp. 91–96). Therefore, Adam's existence or non-existence depends only on his continued existence. If Adam exists, he exists only as himself. In this case, if the 'existence' as predicate attaches to a subject, it signifies that the subject itself exists.

A fundamental issue in propositions involving the existence of their subjects is determining when the subject must exist for the proposition to be valid. A general consensus among logicians is that categorical affirmative propositions require the existence of their subjects. However, opinions differ regarding negative propositions: while some argue that negative propositions do not necessitate the subject's existence, others disagree. This debate is closely linked to the method by which the proposition is established.

The question of a subject's existence/non-existence leads to further inquiries:

- *What kind of existence or non-existence does a proposition require?*
- *Is there a level or gradation of non-existence?*
- *Do all non-existent entities equally lack existence?*

These questions highlight the complexity of propositions about subjects that are known *not* to exist. For example, mythological entities such as the phoenix or Qaf Mountain are mentally conceivable, and their existence is not logically impossible. In contrast, entities that violate fundamental logical principles—such as a square triangle or a partner of God—are considered impossible. Even so, propositions concerning these entities can still be constructed using negative or metathetic predicates (e.g., “The square triangle does not exist”).

The subject of a proposition is not always an object that exists in external reality. This introduces a significant challenge: the truth of a proposition traditionally depends on the correspondence between its meaning and existence. For example, if a subject exists and the predicate accurately describes it, the proposition is true. However, what happens if the subject does not exist? Are such propositions false or simply meaningless? Bertrand Russell illustrates this dilemma through the case of the non-existent king of France (See. Russell, 1905, pp. 483–485; Klima, 2009, pp. 161–163).

1. The king of France is bald.
2. It is not true that the king of France is bald.
3. The king of France is non-bald.

The first and third propositions are affirmative, implying that the subject “the king of France” must exist. However, France currently has no king, which raises the question: What is the truth value of these propositions? How should propositions based on these imaginary subjects be understood? Russell would argue that such propositions are not meaningless but false because their subjects do not correspond to anything real. In medieval logic, this issue was addressed by distinguishing different levels of existence for the proposition’s subject: external, essential, and mental existence. (Oruk Akman, 2024, p. 118)

The claim that negative propositions do not require the subject’s existence must be treated with caution. A key question arises: *Do negative propositions require the subject’s existence in the mind as well as externally?* In negative propositions, while no actual or possible individual outside the mind is necessary, the subject must at least exist as a mental concept. For instance, in the proposition “*Adam is not a tea drinker,*” Adam’s non-existence in external reality does not prevent the proposition from being meaningful. To negate the act of drinking tea, an image of Adam must exist in the mind, even if Adam does not exist externally.

The requirement for the existence of a subject in negative propositions depends on the level at which the proposition is established. Negation, in this context, indicates that the predicate does not hold true for the subject in a specific *level of being* (nafs al-amr). For example, in the proposition “*Human beings are not stone,*” the statement does not require the non-existence of human beings; rather, it signifies that “being stone” is not an attribute confirmed for humanity. In contrast, when considering a judgment such as “*No coexistence of contradictions exists,*” where the subject itself is impossible, it is unreasonable to expect the subject to exist externally. Here, a mental representation of the subject suffices.

When the same judgment is analyzed as an *essential proposition*, the focus shifts to the inherent impossibility of the subject itself. Finally, if the judgment is considered as a *mental proposition*, there arises an additional complexity: the entity posited to exist in the mind might itself be absent. In such cases, the proposition risks being reduced to a meaningless assertion. Consequently, propositions involving impossible or nonexistent subjects must be approached cautiously. It seems most appropriate to regard such propositions as lacking external or actual existence, even if their mental representations can serve a logical or conceptual function.

Conclusion

In conclusion, propositions, understood as the predication of one thing for another, fundamentally require the existence of both the subject and the predicate at some level—be it external, mental, or

within *nafs al-amr*. For a judgment to take place, defined as the connection between subject and predicate, the existence of both components must be presupposed. This requirement highlights a critical point: the existential grounding of the subject determines not only the possibility of the proposition but also its truth value. Without some form of existence, even if only mentally or conceptually, the proposition risks becoming meaningless or false.

This observation is particularly significant when considering propositions involving non-existent or hypothetical subjects. While affirmative propositions, as shown, generally necessitate the existence of the subject to be true, negative propositions introduce further complexities. Negative judgments, unlike affirmatives, do not always require the subject's actual existence outside the mind; they rely instead on the subject's mental or conceptual existence to establish their meaning. For instance, a proposition such as "The phoenix does not have wings" does not presuppose the external existence of the phoenix but depends on its mental image to negate a particular feature. This distinction underlines the nuanced relationship between levels of existence—external, essential, and mental—and the logical structure of propositions.

A particularly critical point emerges when examining propositions at the level of *nafs al-amr*—the realm of things as they are in themselves. Even if a subject and predicate do not exist externally, their connection can still be established in *nafs al-amr* through their essential possibility. This allows propositions to hold meaning and retain truth value despite the absence of external referents. However, it remains necessary to distinguish between what merely *can* exist and what *does* exist, as the existential grounding of a subject determines whether a proposition pertains to actuality, potentiality, or mere conceptualization.

Therefore, propositions cannot be divorced from the existential status of their subjects. Whether dealing with externally realized subjects, mentally posited entities, or purely conceptual possibilities, every proposition requires its referents to exist at some level. This distinction is not trivial; it determines whether a proposition can be meaningfully affirmed, denied, or evaluated. To engage in logical judgments, it is not enough to know *what* we are talking about. It is equally critical to determine *to what extent* the subject exists and the nature of its existence—whether actual, potential, or mental. The truth value of any proposition is inherently dependent on this existential dimension, which serves as the foundation for all meaningful predication and judgment. By carefully examining the levels of existence and their relationship to propositions, we gain a clearer understanding of how propositions are constructed and validated. This existential grounding not only resolves complexities surrounding propositions with non-existent or hypothetical subjects but also reinforces the broader principle that existence—whether external, mental, or in *nafs al-amr*—is indispensable to the formation and evaluation of propositions.

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2. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
3. Ethical approval was not sought for this study, as it was conducted solely using texts and articles, without any data collection from human or animal subjects.
4. The content of this study is a research paper because it provides an in-depth analysis of a specific topic in the field of logic, aiming to challenge existing theories and contribute a new perspective to the literature.
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