

## (a few remarks on) EXISTENTIAL CONSTRUCTIONS

The literature that describes the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties of existential constructions crosslinguistically is vast.

Crosslinguistically, the structure of existential sentence is variable: “there is no common syntactic form for existentials crosslinguistically” (McCloskey 2014: 343).

Here, we provide some very general definitions which are normally shared (or taken for granted) in the literature.

1) Crosslinguistically, existential constructions often share a number of properties with **possessive structures, copular structures and locative structures** (McNally 2011, Moro 1997, Bentley et al 2013, McCloskey 2014, a.o.).

2) Existential sentences are **specialized**, namely they differ *syntactically* from regular declarative sentences expressing “existence”. For instance (McNally 2011:1829-1830), in English a sentence like the one in example (i) is an existential sentence because it has an existential meaning (it asserts the existence of only one prime number AND has a peculiar syntactic form), while a sentence like the one in example (ii) is not an existential sentence because “there is nothing specialized about its syntax” (it is identical to any other canonical subject-predicate structure used in English).

- i. there is only one even prime number
- ii. one even prime number exists

3) Two general **distinctive features** (McNally 2011, Moro 1997, Bentley et al 2013, McCloskey 2014, a.o.) are often associated with existential structures crosslinguistically:

a. **definiteness restriction:** in some languages, nominal structures containing a definite article, a demonstrative or a strong quantifier, a proper name or a pronoun are ungrammatical in the pivot position of an existential construction, as the following English examples show:

- iii. \* there is John in the room
- iv. \* there is you in the room
- v. \* there is the dog in the garden

b. **predicate restriction:** the coda of existential sentences is incompatible with an (bare) individual-level predicate (individual-level: describing a general property of an individual): it has to be a stage-level predicate (a predicate that describes a temporary (holding at a specific time), as shown in the following examples from English:

- vi. ?? there were many students intelligent/tall
- vii. ?? there were some donors generous
- viii. there were many rooms available
- ix. there were some students waiting

4) A ‘typical’ existential structure has the following form (the items between parentheses are not required crosslinguistically and, if present, do not have to be linearized in the sequence given below: various word orders are possible crosslinguistically):

