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 is 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):
The following distinctive syntactic features are often (but not always) visible in existential structures crosslinguistically:

a. In languages which require expletive subjects, an expletive subject (e.g. _there_ in English) is always required in existential structures as well, like in example (x) below:

\[
\text{there is a dog in the garden}
\]

b. If the existential structure contains an explicit predicate (labeled “copula” in the structure above), it is usually homophonous with a verb that has the meaning “to be”, “to have” or meaning related to possession (e.g. _geben_ in German) but is deprived of its original semantic content. Some languages have a devoted lexical item (e.g. Hebrew _yeS_, …).

c. All existential sentences contain a “pivot” nominal, that describes the individual whose existence is under discussion, as shown in example (xi) below (the pivot is the boldfaced phrase):

\[
\text{there is a dog in the garden}
\]

d. Existential sentences might or not contain a “coda”, that is a phrase (in some languages it is a locative phrase, like the boldfaced ones in the English example in (xii), in others a relative clause, etc.). In some languages (e.g. Irish, McCloskey 2014) the coda is obligatory.

\[
\text{there is a dog in the garden}
\]

e. In many languages, existential structures contain an expression (labeled “proform” in the structure above) that is homophonous with some locative expression but is deprived of its original meaning, like in the example (xiii) from Italian:

\[
\text{pro ci sono molte ragazze alla festa}
\]

5) The major function of existential structures in terms of informational structure is that of introducing a novel referent into the discourse by asserting its presence into a given location/context (Cruschina 2012 and references therein). The nominal structure in pivot position has a focal nature, and must obey a “novelty condition”: it must be hearer-new.

References