

(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):

(EXPLETIVE) (PROFORM) (COPULA) PIVOT (CODA)

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

x.	<i>there</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>a dog</i>	<i>in the garden</i>
	EXPLETIVE	COPULA	PIVOT	CODA

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)

xi.	<i>there</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>a dog</i>	<i>in the garden</i>
	EXPLETIVE	COPULA	PIVOT	CODA

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.

xii.	<i>there</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>a dog</i>	<i>in the garden</i>
	EXPLETIVE	COPULA	PIVOT	CODA

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:

xiii.	<i>pro_i</i>	<i>ci</i>	<i>sono</i>	<i>molte ragazze</i>	<i>alla festa</i>
		loc.there	are	many girls	at.the party
	(EXPL.)	PROFORM	COPULA	PIVOT	CODA

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

- McCloskey, J. (2014) Irish Existentials in Context. *Syntax* 20140:4, 343-384.
- McNally, L. (2011) Existential sentences. In: von Stechow, P., Maienborn, C. and Portner, C. (eds.) *Semantics* (HSK 33.2). Berlin, de Gruyter, 1829–1848.
- Moro, A. (1997) *The raising of predicates*. Cambridge, CUP.
- Bentley, D., F.M. Ciconte and S. Cruschina (2013) Existential constructions in crosslinguistic perspective. *Italian Journal of Linguistics* 25(1):1-13.