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The encoding of indefinite human reference

In Chinese/English aligned translation

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This corpus-based investigation is concerned with the Chinese sequence *yǒu rén* [exist person(s)]. From both a structural and semantic-functional perspective, *yǒu rén* can be considered the minimal existential-presentational construction (for existential sentences see McNally 2011, 1830; Koch 2012; Bentley/Ciconte/Cruschina 2015, Creissels 2019; Sarda/Lena, in press, and references therein). In this sense, it relates to the broader class of *yǒu* existential-presentational constructions, that may include other types of nominals in the postcopular position (see Chao 1968, 727–729; Li/Thompson 1981, 510, among many others). On the other hand, *yǒu rén* is the unmarked option available in Chinese to express indefinite human reference, and as such it plays the role of indefinite pronouns in languages such as English. Due to its high frequency, Xiao/Rayson/McEnery (2009, 292) classify *yǒu rén* as a common “compound word” with the SOMEONE meaning. The correspondence between *yǒu rén* and indefinite pronouns is only partial, however. In (1) the sequence forms an autonomous sentence, which cannot be translated by the indefinite pronoun alone. When it co-occurs with a locative expression (as in [2]), English can make use of both a canonical sentence with verb *be* ([2a]) or a *there*-construction ([2b]). By contrast, when *yǒu rén* occurs in biclausal constructions ([3a]), a monoclausal equivalent is strongly preferred ([3b]). Further, when it points to a generic-partitive human referent, ([4a]), it naturally translates as (*some*) *people* in this case ([4b]).

This study makes use of a parallel corpus consisting of 213 relevant hits extracted from Mo Yan’s novels and their aligned English translations, to elucidate the interaction of discourse-pragmatic and semantic motivations for the use of *yǒu rén* in Chinese. Three major types of *yǒu rén* constructions were identified, i.e. locative-existential, eventive-presentational and generic-existential, according to predicate selection (if applicable), presence and function of the locative, and the co-dependent interpretation of the pivot. As expected, *yǒu rén* strongly tends to occur in biclausal constructions (92.4%), often with SAY-verbs (20.1%) in the post-pivotal position. The indefinite pronoun *someone* (29.1%), along with a verb in nonpresent tense, align with episodic constructions. Kind-referring expressions such as (*some*) *people* (13%) and the present tense of the verb are both strongly associated to the generic reading. The English translation with partitive NPs such as [*one/some* of N] brings out the cases where *yǒu rén* selects an instance of a discourse-old referential group. In turn,

the relevant English referring expressions tend to be (preverbal) subjects in mono-clausal constructions (64.7%), while rarely being pivots in a *there*-construction (only 5.1%, as in (2d)).

The underlying semantic property of all *yǒu rén* constructions is that they are linked, either to the spatiotemporal variables and/or to a discourse-old group, either to a generic set of entities. Despite their diversity, the situations they depict thus offer favorable contexts for the acceptance of discourse-new indefinite preverbal subjects in English (Leonetti 1998).

Examples

- (1) *Yǒu rén!*
EPP¹ person
‘*(There’s) someone!’ (= ‘Restroom occupied!’) (Chao 1968, 727)
- (2) a. *Jīnjú bù zhīdào shēnhòu yǒu rén, (...).*
Jinju NEG know body.rear EPP person
b. *She didn’t know **someone** was behind her.* (The Garlic Ballads)
c. *... hòubian hái yǒu rén.*
behind also EPP person
d. *There’s **somebody** behind me.* (Big Breasts & Wide Hips)
- (3) a. *Yǒu rén zài mén=wài yòng shénme dōngxī dǎo-zhe tiěmén (...).*
EPP person be.at door=outside use some stuff beat-DUR iron.gate
b. ***Someone** outside banged the door with a hard object (...).* (The Garlic Ballads)
- (4) a. *Yǒu rén zǒu-xiàng zhāoyáng, tā zǒu-xiàng luòrì.*
EPP person walk-towards rising.sun 3SG walk-towards setting.sun
b. ***Some people** walk toward the morning sun; he was walking toward the setting sun.*
(The Republic of Wine)

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¹ The gloss “EPP” (Existential/Possessive Predicator) is Chappell’s & Creissels’s (2019).

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