

Existential and locative clauses across Germanic languages : A corpus-based contrastive view

The notion of existential construction or existential statement is frequently used in the description of languages in relation to expressions like English *there is / there are* or German *es gibt*. But this raises considerable issues/difficulties if we go beyond these few prototypical examples. One of the most blatant cross-linguistic issues here is: How can we distinguish between locative and existential clauses? And should we? The contribution explores this question drawing on insights from McNally (2016), Creissels (2019), Haspelmath (2021).

In Germanic V2 languages, syntax is extremely sensitive to information-structure. Dutch and Danish display an existential construction that superficially mirror English *there is* (*er is* in Dutch, *der er* in Danish), but where the bleached locative marker (*er, der*) is much less strictly bound to the preverbal slot, so that the constructionalisation of the existential phraseme with respect to the free syntactic expression of something being somewhere. In Swedish, the constructions at hand have different origins (*det er, det finns*), like in High German (*es gibt*). The study of the parallel corpus Europarl reveals that these constructions are not cross-linguistically equivalent.

The findings of the study are actually threefold :

- 1/ existential and locative clauses should be considered parts of the same semantic domain, and in Germanic V2 languages, that domain still displays a high degree of homogeneity
- 2/ the variations in the constructional realisation of locative-existential meaning are dependent on the constructional autonomy of the information-structural syntactic module (e.g. via scrambling) : the more a language can resort to scrambling to mark information structure, the less its existential constructions are separated from the more general realm of locative predication.
- 3/ while 1 and 2 were rather expected, the corpus also shows that the availability of subjectless passives is a crucial factor in the cross-linguistic comparison. In the face of the results from the corpus, it appears that this role of impersonal passives has to do with the ontology of processes: existential constructions can be used in sentences introducing higher-order entities as new discourse referents in languages like English, whereas High German will typically resort to other thetical impersonal constructions, most prominently subjectless passives. Thus, the study suggests the existence of a cross-Germanic accessibility hierarchy for existential constructions: in the Dutch and High German parts of the corpus, existential clauses are mostly restricted to first-order entities; higher-order entities are introduced via thetical clauses, mostly involving passives; Danish and Swedish expand the use of existential clauses to second-order entities. English can construct any kind of entity in an existential clause.

Selected references

- Creissels, Denis. 2019. Inverse-locational predication in typological perspective, *Italian Journal of Linguistics* 31.2, 38-106.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2021. What do we mean by existential clause? *Diversity Linguistics Comments*, 02/07/2021, <https://dlc.hypotheses.org/2516>
- McNally, Louise. 2016. Existential sentences crosslinguistically: Variations in Form and Meaning, *Annual Review of Linguistics* 2, 211-231.