

ON THE EXISTENTIAL CONSTRUCTION: DEFINITE NP AND FUNCTIONAL FEATURE ASSIGNMENT

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Definite NP and functional feature Assignment** *Linguistics*,
Vol 1. In this paper, I try to show that existential constructions
have the feature of [+Existent] in Infl and [-Unique] in the theme
NP. Also I argue that the feature [Existent] is assigned either by
copular be and locative phrase or by event verbs that ascribe
existence or visibility to the speaker, and the feature [unique] is
determined in the discourse context which makes the theme NP
lose uniqueness in designating its referent. With the two features,
we can appropriately explain crosslinguistic data which have the
definite theme NP in existential constructions, which cannot be
explained by Freeze's (1992) [+Locative] feature. Going a step
forward, I claim that Locative - null NP - VP structure of Korean
is an existential construction, and Locative - deixis + NP - VP is
a locative inversion construction.

1. Introduction

Existential sentences (hereafter ES) have been studied very
extensively because of the morpho-syntactic peculiarities of
the structure. In English, the term has been used to designate
sentences in which the unstressed, non-deictic there occurs in
subject position such as those of (1):

- (1). a) There is a book on the table.
- b) There was a cat in the kitchen.
- c) There appeared a man in front of us.

In the last quarter century, various analyses of ES have been
tried, focusing on one or more characteristics of the structure. Some
linguists have zeroed in on the Case and theta-marking mechanism

in the structure (Lasnik 1992, Belletti 1988, Stowell 1978, among others), others on the nature of indefiniteness of the NP in the sentences of (1) (Ziv 1982, Rando and Napoli 1978, Milsark 1977, among others), and others on the relationship between (2a) and (2b) (Chomsky 1981, Milsark 1974, Lyon 1967, Freeze 1992, among others).

- (2). a) Predicate locative: The book is on the chair.
 b) Existential: There is a book on the chair.

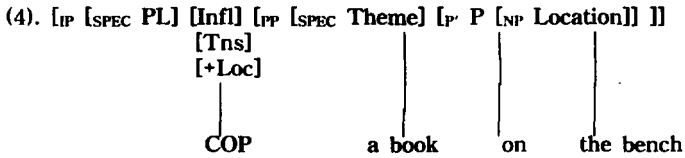
In this paper I try to combine functionally determined features with syntactic formalism that has been already established to explain the occurrence of ES. I propose two things, which are closely related with each other: one is that when Infl has [+Existent] and the theme NP has [-Unique] feature, existential construction occurs, and another is that definite NP can occur in ES, and the structure is not different from the typical ES. I argue that the occurrence of the definite NP is determined functionally and can be explained by the feature [-Unique]. In Section 2, I review Freeze (1992) and argue that existential construction is a universal phenomenon. In Section 3, I show that a definite theme NP can also occur in ES crosslinguistically, and review previous explanations on the definite NP. In Section 4, I suggest the features of [Existent] and [Unique], and combine them with Freez's formal analysis. Section 5 is the conclusions.

2. Existential as Universal Phenomenon

Lyons (1967), even though no originality is claimed for, hypothesizes that perhaps in all languages existential, have predication, and possessive constructions derive (both synchronically and diachronically) from locatives. Freeze (1992) also argues, with crosslinguistic data, that predicate locative, existential, and have predication constructions have a common abstract structure (D-structure). According to Freeze, the three sentences in (3) have the

same D-structure as in (4); ¹

- (3). a) The book is on the bench.
- b) There is a book on the bench.
- c) Lupe has a book.

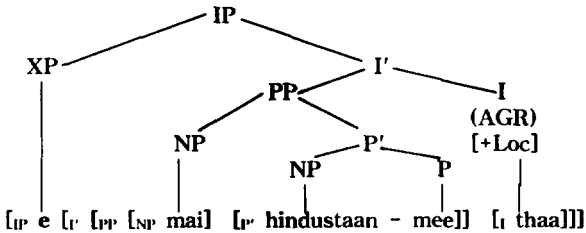


In (4), if the theme a book moves up to Spec of IP, the sentence becomes (3a). If it does not move up, Infl feature [+Loc] is lexicalized as there, and thus the sentence becomes (3b). When the Location NP has [+Human] feature, it becomes the sentence (3c).²

Freeze (1992) also argues that in some languages like Russian, Japanese, Hindi, etc., locative phrase (actually P') moves up to the Spec of IP and the feature [+Loc] in Infl is not lexicalized, though it triggers the movement. Thus, he presents the following diagram for Hindi ES:

- (5). a. mai hindustaan-mee thaa.
I India-in Cop.sg.Masc. Past (Theme Locative V)
'I was in India.'
- b. kamree-mee aadmii hai.
room-in man Cop. 3sg. Masc. Pres (Locative Theme V)
'There is a man in the room.'

- (6). Hindi (SOV):
a.

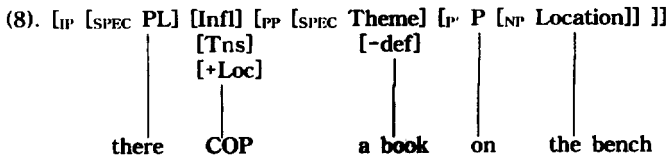


examples show that ES is a universal phenomenon, though in some languages, pleonastic pronoun or particle appears in the structure, and in other languages, just locative phrase moves up to the initial position of the structure.

As Lyons (1967) does, Freeze tries to unite a certain variety of surface structures which are possibly derived from a single underlying structure, and his hypothesis explains the 'pure existentials' very well.

3. Definite NP in Existential Sentences

Freeze (1992:559) argues that the feature [-Definite] governs the movement of the location to the subject position, yielding the existential sentences. This analysis explains the Case Assignment and the Agreement appropriately. Here I repeat the diagram (4) for convenience:



Because the pleonastic there is another representation of location, it is not assigned Case, and bound by P' like an anaphor, though it is not A-bound by the usual definitions. Infl moves to P, and governs the Spec(P) and assigns nominative Case to the theme.

He, however, does not tell anything about the occurrence of a definite NP or a pronoun in ES. Thus, he can argue that when there is a [-Definite] feature in Infl, there appears in the subject position. As in the following examples in (9), there are many cases where a definite NP or a pronoun occurs in English ES.

- (9). a. There is *the strangest bird* in that cage.

- b. (What is worth visiting here?)
There is *the museum*, a good souvenir shop, and *the library*.
- c. (A: Mother, may I watch TV?)
B: Yes, but there is *the homework* to be finished until tonight.
- d. (A: I don't have any friend.)
B: Oh, don't be silly! There's *John*, and *me* and *Susan* and...

For the explanation of the definite NP in ES, Milsark (1974) argues that there are 'list' there-sentences that constitute a special subset of ES allowing definite NP's. He says that the assertion of existence is made of the list, not of the entities comprising it. In other words, the list, not its components, constitutes the argument in the list there-sentences, and thus the definite NP is conceived of as indefinite.

Bolinger (1977) and McCawley (1988) regard the definiteness in ES as 'semantic' indefiniteness. For example, even though (9a) has formally definite NP the strangest bird, it means a stranger bird than any that I have ever seen. It can explain appropriately the superlative NP and an NP modified by a relative clause.

Rando and Napoli (1978) argue that the term 'indefinite' is not enough to explain many cases where definite NP occurs, and thus introduce the term 'non-anaphoric'. They argue that an NP can appear in ES if it is non-anaphoric (new information in the context). In other words, they expand the morpho-syntactic term 'indefinite' to the discourse term 'non-anaphoric'.

- (10). a: I have just finished my dissertation.
- b: Let's go to the theatre!
- c: Don't relax yet, there is still *the problem* with your dissertation.

They argue that the *problem* itself in (10c) is new to the discourse, and thus it is non-anaphoric, while the *problem* it is being compared to is old.

can occur.

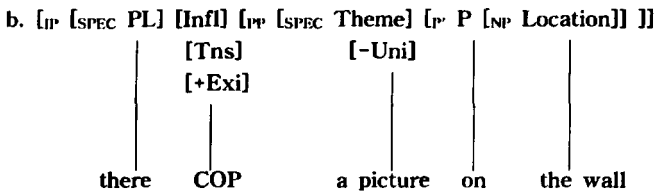
Though Milsark's 'list' reading and McCawley's semantic indefiniteness explain well some of the definite NP cases in ES, it is very difficult to combine their ideas into formal or systematic explanation. Moreover, though Bak and Ziv explain well the wide varieties of definite NP in ES, they only suggest a dichotomic solution for morphologically and syntactically similar structures. They do not suggest any appropriate explanation to solve the problems of the structures which have almost the same structures in surface forms. Even when a definite NP occurs in ES, the structure still preserves all other morpho-syntactic characteristics of ES.

4. Feature [-Unique] in NP and [+Existent] in Infl

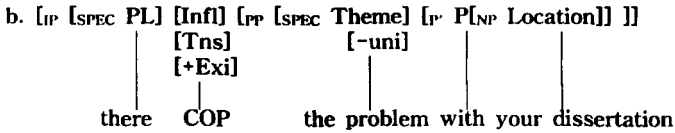
As Freeze (1992) does, if we argue that there is only an indefinite NP in ES, we fail to explain the definite NP cases. Also, if we dichotomically argue that the there-structures with an indefinite NP and the there-structures with a definite NP are two totally different constructions, we cannot capture their morpho-syntactic similarities.

Here, based on English and Korean data, I suggest the feature [Unique] and [Existent] (hereafter [Uni] and [Exi]). When there are [-Uni] feature in the theme NP and [+Exi] in Infl, there can occur in subject position in English. In other words, there is allowed to occur compositionally by two features [+Exi] and [-Uni].

(12). a. There is a picture on the wall.



(13). a. There is the problem with your dissertation.(=8c)



As in the above diagrams, the problem in (13a) has lost uniqueness in designating its referent. In other words, the speaker assumes that the referent of the definite NP is not a unique one, as in 'a picture' in (12). Also, in the above examples, even when there is [-Uni] in NP, if [-Exi] is in Infl, the sentence becomes 'a picture is on the wall' and 'the problem is with your dissertation.'

As I have already mentioned in the above explanation, the "uniqueness" of an NP is determined in a discourse context. The next question will be: what gives the feature [-unique] to the theme NP? I think that what gives the feature [-unique] is language-specific. For example, in English 'list' reading, 'semantic indefiniteness', 'non-unique token' of an NP, etc. give the feature to the theme NP. The following examples can be explained well by the feature:

- (14) a. There is *the strangest bird* in that cage
- b. (A: What is worth visiting here?)
B: There is *the museum*, a good souvenir shop, and *the library*.
- c. (A: Mother, may I watch TV?)
B: Yes, but there is *the homework* to be finished until tonight.
- d. There is *the man* next door to consider.
- e. There is *the sun* rising above the hill.

In (14a), the strangest bird does not mean a unique entity, but a non-unique object, and in (14b) the museum and the library also indicate non-unique objects. The homework in (14c) refers to homework which the speaker and the hearer already have in their mind generally, not a unique one. In (14d) the man also refers to an object which the speaker and the hearer already have known.

The sun in (14e) indicates a sun which everybody sees everyday, not a unique one, though its entity is unique in the world.

In Korean, however, there is no definite article. Following Chang (1980), I think ku is a deictic term, not a definite article.⁵ However, because Korean has relatively free word order and is a topic-subject prominent language, any phrase can be fronted to be topicalized, as follows; (cf. Li and Thompson 1976)

- (15) a. chayksang-wiey i chak-i aniko ku chak -i issta
 table on this book not book Nom is

Lit: 'On the table, the book, not this book, is.'

- b. A: ku sacen -i etiey iss nunya?
 dictionary Nom where be Que

'Where is the book?'

- B: ?? chaeksang-wiey ku sacen -i issta.
 table on the dictionary SM be

'On the table is the dictionary'

I argue that the above cases are "locative inversion", and the preposed P' 'chaeksang-wiey', as well as the subject NP 'ku sacen', is topicalized. Most Koreans do not answer like B, but answer like 'chaeksang-wiey ϕ issta.' Thus, in (15b) the ku + NP has relatively strong accent and thus have [+uni] feature.

Even though Korean does not have ES with a definite NP, it has the following existential forms in which a null NP appears in the theme NP position:

- (16) a: (Where is the book that I bought yesterday?)

- b. chaeksang-wiey ϕ issta.
 table on be

Lit.: 'There is the book on the table'

a'. (Where is the statue?)

b'. kenmul - twiey ϕ issta.
 building behind be

Lit.: 'There is the statue behind the building'

In the above examples, the null theme NP refers to the NP that is mentioned in the previous discourse; thus, it can be interpreted as the + NP, though it is generally regarded as pro in Government and Binding Theory. Sells (1985:71) argues that 'pro may also be 'expletive' (semantically empty), just like overt pronouns (e.g., English it).' Thus, for the following Spanish example, he presents the nearest English example 'There arrived a man.'

(17) pro_i llego Juan_i 'Juan arrived.'

As Sells does, I regard pro in Korean as semantically empty, and thus it has [-uni] feature. Thus, the examples in (16) are existentials, not inverted sentences.

Korean data show that even though ES is a universal phenomenon, its morphological and/or syntactic characteristics may be different from language to language.

In addition, it is very natural that an NP which is unique in the designation of its referent cannot appear at the beginning of a discourse and cannot exist at all. When an NP loses its uniqueness, it can exist between the speaker and the hearer and can be used in ES. The same explanation can be applied to the non-restrictive relative clauses;

(18). a. John, who is my friend, is an actor.
 b.*John who is my friend is an actor.

(19). John who is my friend is an actor, and John who is my brother is a teacher.

In (18), John cannot be used as a head NP of the relativized clause because it refers to a unique proper individual that has not been mentioned before. John in (19), however, can be used as a head NP because the speaker and the hearer have presupposed that the proper noun has already lost its uniqueness in designating a referent.

By suggesting the feature [Exi], we can explain the English ES in which diverse verbs, instead of be, occur as in (20):

- (20). a. There ensued a riot.
 b. There barked a dog.
 c. Yesterday there occurred a tragic event.

If we assume only the feature [Locative], it is very hard to explain the above examples because there are not any phrases that indicate location. Moreover, as Stowell (1978) and McCawley (1988) argue, notwithstanding a widespread belief that only a few verbs allow there-structure, there are a fairly large number of verbs that allow it, and the choice of verb is actually discourse-governed. Thus, I argue that in English the feature [+Exi] may be triggered to appear in Infl either by the locative phrase or by the event verbs that ascribe existence or visibility to the speaker, and the feature in composition with [-Unique] allows existential construction.

The [+Exi] feature also explain well the following Korean existential sentences in which there is no locative phrase;

- (21) a. han chinku -ka issess-nuntey, ku chinku -ka ilccik cukessta.
 a friend Nom be and the friend Nom early die
 Lit: 'There existed a friend of mine, and he died early'
- b. horangi hanmari-ka salkoissess- nuntey,
 tiger one Nom lived and
 Lit: 'There lived one tiger, and....'

In the above examples, there are no locative phrases, but [+Exi]

feature in Infl is triggered by the event verb, as in English.

5. Conclusions and Further Studies

Crosslinguistic data show that existential construction is a universal phenomenon, and I have argued that Locative - Theme NP - VP structure of Korean is an existential structure. Freeze's (1992) hypothesis explain the pure ES very well. His explanation, however, cannot deal with the ES which has a definite theme NP, that probably appears universally. Thus, I have proposed the feature [Unique] and [Existent], and the two features [-Uni] and [+Exi] compositionally trigger ES to occur. The feature [-Uni] is determined in the discourse context. In other words, a definite theme NP can have [-Uni] when discourse context makes the NP lose uniqueness in designating its referent. The feature [+Exi] is assigned either by copula *be* and locative phrase or by event verbs that ascribe existence or visibility to the speaker.

It is true that because of the limitation of linguistic intuition, I cannot extend the feature system that I propose to other languages, like Hebrew, French, ect. I, however, think it can be applied to the languages completely or partially, though we need to study further the phenomenon in each language.

NOTES

1. Freeze makes use of the predicate-internal subject analysis and I also follow it; see Koopman and Spotiche 1988, Belletti and Rizzi 1988, and others.

2. The Korean verb *kacita* 'have' is not used alone, but used as *kacigoissta* 'have + be' usually. This phenomenon supports Lyons' and Freeze's hypothesis well. We, however, need further research on the Korean data for generalization.

3. Freeze (1992: 574) argues that English is the only language in which a lexical locative existential pronoun appears in subject position. Most of the

languages have a particle in the middle of ES as in French, Swedish, Hebrew, etc., or just locative phrase appears in the initial position as in Korean, Hindi, Russian, etc.

4. Almost all of my informants translated the Korean example (7b) as 'There is a book in the room', not as 'In the room is a book.'

5. Chang (1980) argues that ku has three functions: real, signal, and conceptual deixis. She argues that ku, as a real deixis, is used to indicate an object near the hearer and known to the speaker and hearer. Ku, as a signal deixis, is used to refer to the object just mentioned in the prior discourse of the hearer. As a conceptual deixis, ku is used when the object has not been mentioned just before in discourse or has not been mentioned for some time before, although it was known to the speaker and the hearer. It is very hard to argue that one of the above cases is similar to the functions of English definite article the.

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