

To be or not to be: A typology of existentials

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Existential predications (henceforward: existentials) are a type of construction that exhibits a number of interesting properties in crosslinguistic comparison. The most striking property might well be their behavior under negation. Whereas other types of (verbal and non-verbal) predication are negated by extra morphological material (affix, particle or auxiliary) in almost every language (Miestamo 2005), negative existentials do not contain a separable negative morpheme in a large number of languages, but are expressed through a lexicalized form expressing the combined meaning of negation and existence (Dryer 2007: 246). Croft (1991: 18) suggests that this negation pattern (his type B languages) is probably the most frequent type of existential negation in the world's languages. He, however, does not give any actual figures to support this claim.

Apart from this notable negation pattern, existentials show a resemblance in coding strategies to a number of other types of intransitive and/or non-verbal predications in many languages (Hengeveld 1992, Stassen 1997). On the one hand existentials commonly share a construction with locational predicates (in which an additional locational phrase is added), the same strategy is often used for predicate possession in addition. On the other hand the coding strategy is sometimes also shared with nominal predications. A common property that existentials do not readily share with nominal predication, even if the two types of predication make use of parallel constructions, is the occurrence of zero-copulas. Croft (1991: 19) notes that he is not aware of a language that allows existentials with zero-copulas, even though Dryer (2007: 244) provides a counterexample (Tolai), the general tendency seems to hold. Still in other languages, existentials are expressed via regular verbal predicates (Hengeveld 1992: 100).

While the quoted studies of non-verbal/intransitive predications make reference to existentials, this phenomenon is not at the core of them. The earlier studies especially fall short in cases in which existentials are encoded differently from the other types of predication studied. In his study of standard negation Miestamo (2005: 44), who explicitly excludes negative existentials and other types of special negation (unless they use the standard negation pattern of a language), notes that a more comprehensive typology of clausal negation – including these special types – is a very desirable goal for future research.

The aims of this paper are twofold. Firstly, to provide quantitative information on the formal encoding (positive and negative) existentials in general and more specifically to test Croft's (1991) claim on the relative frequency of negation strategies with existentials on the basis of a probability sample of 100+ languages. Secondly, to provide a comparison of the coding strategies for existentials with respect to the coding of other types of predication (nominal, locational, possessive).

References

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