

Comparing Existential Sentences in Chinese, English and Vietnamese from the Perspective of Linguistic Typology

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*  <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.222317>

Received: 25/05/2022

Revision: 13/06/2022

Accepted: 13/06/2022

Online: 18/06/2022

ABSTRACT

Keywords: existential sentence, type of linguistics, syntax, order, asymmetric

Chinese existential sentences denote “somewhere appears, exists or disappears something or someone” (someone or something exists, appears or disappears somewhere). This paper comes from the perspective of semantics and syntax to analyze and find out more about the existential sentences of Vietnamese with English and Chinese, and compares the similarities and differences of the three components “component of place”; “verb indicating the existence”; the “existence subject” of the three languages. The paper has applied the cognitive theory of spatial relationships to explain the different orders of existential sentences in these three languages. The paper goes one step further with the preliminary study of existential sentences in Japanese, Korean, and Thai, and finds that Eastern languages can use the form of existential sentences to express two meanings: one is “in somewhere exists something”; and two is “in somewhere is lost something”, but Indo-European English cannot use the form of the existential sentence to express the idea “in somewhere is lost something”.

Introduction

The existential sentence is a rather special type of sentence in the language. It denotes the meaning “something appears, exists or disappears in somewhere”. In many languages, the existential sentence is a sentence pattern with a high frequency of occurrence. It appears a lot in daily communication and in writing, making many researchers interested in the study. Most research papers usually come from the perspective of syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and perception of existing sentences and have a certain research output, according to the extension of existential sentence research. Some researchers have begun to search for new ways to explain the syntax of existential sentences and have begun to appear comparative studies of existential sentences between different languages. Chinese existential sentences have the form “word of place + existential verb + existential subject”, in Vietnamese, it has the form: “Có + existential

subject + existential verb + word of place”, and in English has the form: “There+ VP+ NP + LP”, comparing existential sentences of these three languages is a very useful topic for study, teaching, and learning languages.

Literature review

At present, there have been many researchers who have written and compared existential sentences between languages from different points of view. For example, Chen (2010) analyzed the similarities and differences between existential sentences in English and Chinese and applied the findings in translation from the perspective of sentence order. Fu (2009) studied existential sentences in English from a syntactical perspective; the paper described the basic characteristics, manner, and nature of existential sentences in English. He analyzed specifically the internal structure of this type of existential sentence from this angle. Gu and Li (2010) studied the information structure in existential sentences of English and Chinese from the cognitive perspective. The article discussed the similarities and differences of existential sentences in the syntactic structure and pointed out that the similarities and differences between the two languages are due to different thinking models. Jia (2006) compared existential sentences of Korean and Chinese from the perspective of semantics and pragmatics, analyzed and pointed out the difference between the two languages, and applied the results in teaching and learning. The comparison study of existential sentences in Chinese, English, and Vietnamese languages, however, from the perspective of linguistics, has not yet found any researchers studying this issue.

Methods

The study objects are existential sentences in Chinese, Vietnamese, and English on two aspects of form and meaning. First, the existential sentences of the three languages are described and analyzed thoroughly in these aspects, find out the similarities and differences, and concurrently explain some phenomena of asymmetry in existential Sino-Vietnamese-English sentences. The main method uses the methods of analytic comparison and marking theory, asymmetry theory, combining form and meaning, combining description and explanation from then the existential Sino-Vietnamese-English sentence orders are compared and explained at the same time, from the perspective of spatial perception. Overall research idea: linguistic phenomena description — comparisons — differences — explanations by reasoning.

Results and discussion

Existential sentences express the meaning “in somewhere appears, exists or lose someone, something.” From a syntactical perspective, this type of sentence can be divided into three components: the first part is the “place of existence” taken up by the noun of place, which is the place where a person or thing appears, exists, or disappears; the second part is the “existential verb” which is assumed by a verb, indicating the appearance, existence, disappearance of people or things; The third component is the “existential subject” which is taken up by a noun, indicating that “subject” appears, exists or disappears.

Ex (1):

Chinese: 窗外晃过一个黑影儿。

Window outside appeared one shadow

English: There appeared a shadow outside the window.

Vietnamese: Ngoài cửa sổ có một bóng đen xuất hiện.

Outside window have one shadow appeared

Ex (2):

Chinese: 村里住着一名音乐家。

Village in live one composer

English: There lived a composer in a village.

Vietnamese: Có một nhạc sĩ sống trong làng.

In village have one composer live

Language	Place of existence	Existential verb	Existential subject
Chinese	窗外	晃过	一个人影儿
	村里	住着	一名音乐家
English	outside the window	appeared	a shadow
	in a village	lived	a composer
Vietnamese	Ngoài cửa sổ	xuất hiện	Có một bóng đen
	Trong làng	sống	có một nhạc sĩ

Existential sentence form in Chinese

Let's see some examples of existential sentences in Chinese:

Ex (3): 楼上跑来一个小男孩。

Upstair run down one child boy

There ran down a boy from upstairs.

Ex (4): 天上掉下来一只鸟。

Sky on fell one bird

There fell a bird in the sky.

Ex (5): 墙上挂着一张画儿。

The wall on hang one painting

There was a painting on the wall.

In terms of form, Chinese existential sentences are expressed as: “LP + VP + NP”, in which the place at the beginning of the sentence is the subject, and the existential subject at the end of the sentence is the object. In terms of meaning, it denotes “somewhere appears or loses someone or something”. The NP in the sentence pattern is an existential subject that is mostly used by an indefinite article, such as “一个小男孩” (a child), “一只鸟” (a bird), “一张画儿” (a picture).

The existential verbs are mainly non-objective verbs such as: “跑来” (run to), “走来” (go to), “掉下” (fall down), “挂” (hang), “死了” (die). The above sentences can also be expressed according to the sentence pattern “NP+ LP+ VP” :

Ex (6) : 一个小男孩从楼上跑下来。

A child boy + from upstairs + run down

Ex (7) : 一只鸟从天上掉下来。

One bird + from sky on + fell down

Ex (8) : 一张画儿在墙上挂着呢。

One painting + the wall on + hang

but Chinese researchers argue that it is not an existential sentence, although both the sentence patterns “LP+ VP+ NP” and “NP+ LP+ VP” denote the meaning “in somewhere appears, exists or disappears something or someone”. Chinese researchers recognize that “LP + VP + NP” is the typical existential sentence pattern, while the pattern “NP + LP + VP” is assumed that the subject sentence has a common meaning.

Existential sentence form in English

Let's see some examples of existential sentences in English:

Ex (9): There lived a great composer in a village.

Ex (10): There remain survivors at the Azovstal steel plant.

Ex (11): There occurred an accident at that intersection.

Ex (12): There arose a terrible commotion at his house.

Scholars consider the above sentences to be existential sentences in English, and all are expressed according to the sentence pattern "There + VP + NP + LP". In terms of meaning, it denotes "in somewhere appears someone, or something", but there is a difference from Chinese to English. The English existential sentence does not denote the meaning "in somewhere disappears someone or something", which only denotes the meaning of existence or appearance. In this sentence pattern, NP is the existential subject, most of which are also indefinite nouns, such as "a great composer", "survivors", "an accident", "a commotion," etc. The verbs that exist are mainly non-objective verbs such as: "live", "remains", "occurred," etc. But the above sentences can also be expressed according to the sentence pattern "LP+ VP+ NP" :

Ex (13) : In a village, there lived a great composer.

Ex (14): At Azovstal steel plant, there remains survivors.

Ex (15): At his house, there arose a terrible commotion.

Ex (16): At that intersection, there occurred an accident.

To analyze the above examples, it can be seen that the adverb of place in the sentence is moved to the front of the sentence. The syntactic form of these sentences seems to be similar to the syntactic form of the Chinese existential sentences, but the difference is that: the word of place at the beginning of the Chinese sentence is the subject, but the words of place in four examples (13)(14)(15)(16) of English are adverbs of place, that because this is not a typical form of the English existential sentences, but a "transformed form" of the English sentence only. Typical existential sentences in English are example sentences (9),(10),(11),(12), "There" at the beginning of a sentence is considered a null subject, and words of place are considered adverbs of place in a sentence.

Existential sentence form in Vietnamese

Let's see some examples of existing sentences in Vietnamese:

Ex (17) :Có một chú chim bay ra từ trong cây.

There is a bird flying out from the tree.

Ex (18) : Có một con cá chết trong hồ.

There is a dead fish in a tank.

Ex (19) : Có hai bức tranh treo ở trên tường.

There are two pictures hanging on the wall.

Ex (20) : Có một vụ tai nạn xảy trên đường cao tốc.

There was an accident on the highway.

Vietnamese researchers believe that a typical Vietnamese existential sentence has the form: “Có + NP + VP + LP”. Words of place in existential sentences are considered adverbs of place, which can also be at the beginning of sentences, and the above existential sentences can also be expressed according to the following sentence pattern: “LP+ Có + NP + VP”:

Ex (21) : Từ trong cây, có một chú chim bay ra.

From the tree, there is a bird flying out.

Ex (22) : Trong hồ nước, có một con cá chết.

In a tank, there is a dead fish.

Ex (23) : Ở trên tường , có hai bức tranh treo ở đó.

On the wall, There are two pictures hanging (on it).

Ex (24) : Trên đường cao tốc, một vụ tai nạn xảy ra.

On the highway, there was an accident.

In which the sentence pattern “Có + NP + VP + LP” indicates the meaning “something appears, exists or disappears in somewhere”, while the sentence pattern “LP + NP + VP” indicates the meaning “in somewhere something appears, exists or disappears”, between “LP” and “NP + VP” always exists separated by a comma “,” and this sentence pattern is often used in colloquial speech. But Vietnamese researchers believe that the sentence pattern “Có + NP + VP + LP” is a typical sentence in Vietnamese, in which NP is the subject of existence taken up by an indefinite noun phrase, such as "a bird", "a fish", "two pictures", "an accident". Existential verbs are mainly non-objective verbs such as: “flying out”, “die away”, “run to”, “fall down”, “hang”, “happen”.

Differences in existential sentences of Chinese – English – Vietnamese

From the above content, we can see that: the form of the Chinese existential sentence is “LP+ VP+ NP” ; The form of the English existential sentence is “There + VP + NP + LP”; The form of the Vietnamese existential sentence is “Có + NP + VP + LP”. From the perspective of analytic linguistics, the existential sentences of all three languages not only have differences but also have internal uniformity. The three languages Sino-English-Vietnamese are similar in that they all belong to the SVO language type. If the existential sentences of Chinese and Vietnamese both denote the meaning “in somewhere appears, exists or disappears something or someone”, then the existential sentence in English only denotes the meaning “in somewhere appears someone or something”, it does not denote the disappearance of the thing or person. The

position of existential verbs also has a difference, the existential verb in Chinese and English existential sentences always precedes the subject of existence, but in Vietnamese, the existential verb stands behind the subject of existence. This shows that although the type of language is similar, the order in the existential sentences of the three languages is still different. In addition, words of place go first in the sentence and take the position of the subject in Chinese, but in Vietnamese and English, words of place take the position of the adverb of place.

Table 1. *The basic similarities in Chinese - English - Vietnamese existential sentences*

	The Chinese existential sentence	The English existential sentence	The Vietnamese existential sentence
Form	LP+ VP+ NP	There + VP + NP + LP	Có + NP + VP + LP
Meaning	Somewhere appears, exists, or disappears something, or someone.	Somewhere appears someone or something.	Somewhere appears, exists, or disappears something, or someone.
Similar points	In terms of form: - VP (existential verb) in Chinese and English both come before NP (existential subject); NPs are mostly unspecified subjects; VP is also a non-objective verb. - LP in English and Vietnamese both act as adverbs of place in sentences.		

Table 2. *The basic differences in Chinese - English - Vietnamese existential sentences*

	The Chinese existential sentence	The English existential sentence	The Vietnamese existential sentence
Form	LP+ VP+ NP	There + VP + NP + LP	Có + NP + VP + LP
Meaning	Somewhere appears, exists, or disappears something, or someone.	Somewhere appears someone or something.	Somewhere appears, exists, or disappears something, or someone.
Different points	In terms of form: - In Chinese existential sentences, LP is always at the beginning of the sentence as the subject; and the LP in English and Vietnamese is at the end of the sentence as an adverb of place. - The position of VP (existential verb) in Chinese and English existential sentences always precedes NP (existential subject), but in Vietnamese, the existential verb is behind the subject of existence.		

From the perspective of spatial perception, explaining the asymmetry in Chinese, English, and Vietnamese existential sentences

From the above analysis, we can see that in the existential sentences of these three languages, apart from the similarity and difference in the local syntactic form, the overall order also exists the asymmetry, the commonality of the three languages. English and Chinese show that the existential verb precedes the existential subject, but the verb stands after the existential subject in Vietnamese, and the difference is shown in the Chinese “reference object” (for example, upstairs, in the sky, on the wall) standing in front of a “target object” (e.g., a child, a bird, a picture). But suppose an existential sentence in English, “the reference object” (e.g., a small village, Azovstal plant, that intersection, his house) comes after the “target object” (e.g., a great composer, survivors, an accident, commotion), in this respect. In that case, Vietnamese is completely similar to English. The “reference object” in Vietnamese existential sentences (e.g., in a tree, in a tank, on a wall, on a highway) is behind. The “target object” (e.g., a bird, a fish, two pictures, an accident). This shows the asymmetry of the spatial relationship between Chinese, English, and Vietnamese.

According to actual observations, the spatial relationship is formed by a verb adding two components of the noun. These two noun components represent “reference objects” and “target objects,” respectively. From a syntactical perspective, existential sentences are made up of one verb element and two noun elements, meaning where someone or something appears or disappears so that we can induct the spatial relationship. In this spatial relationship, two noun components will be considered “reference objects” or “target objects”, but judging which noun component is considered as a “reference object”, which noun component will be considered as a “target object”. Different ethnic groups will have different standards. This is a subjective behavior, not an objective one. This has explained why words of place in Chinese always come first, but words of place in English come after.

According to the habits of the Han people, it is often expressed in terms of large area or volume, fixed space, long time, and complex structure, always at the top of the sentence. If the spatial components are arranged linearly, the space in Chinese always tends to be the whole space or the covering space that will come before the covered part or object. As for the order of existential sentences in Chinese, the spatial perception of the Han people will be as follows: compared to the subject of existence (NP), the larger, longer, more fixed, and more complicated the structure of the word of place (LP) is, the more people know it, so it is considered a “reference object” placed at the beginning of the sentence, the subject of existence (NP) is the “objective object” placed at the end of the sentence.

Ex (25): 天上掉下来一只鸟。

Sky on fell one bird

There fell a bird in the sky.

The place of existence (LP) in the sentence (25) is “天上” (heaven) compared to the subject of existence (NP) “一只鸟” (a bird). It is bigger, more fixed, and much better known by humans, so “天上” (in the sky) is considered a “reference object”, according to the spatial perception of the Han people, it must be at the beginning of the sentence, and “一只鸟” (a bird) is considered “target object” must come at the end of the sentence.

So how do we arrange the spatial relationship in the syntax of English and Vietnamese? The British, American, and Vietnamese focus on the principle of analysis, and the principle of “local first, the whole later”, so English and Vietnamese arrange spatial positions in complete contrast to Chinese. They are usually arranged according to the principle “from small to large, from near to far”. Therefore, this spatial thinking has had a certain influence on the order in the existential sentences of the two languages: “target object” stands in front of “reference object”. Small existing subjects are mentioned first. Then large existing space is later.

Ex (26) :

Chinese: 地平线上升起了一颗启明星。

Horizon in rise one star morning

English: There arose a bright morning star above the horizon.

Vietnamese: Có một ngôi sao mai mọc lên ở đường chân trời.

Have one star morning rise in horizon

In example (26) , there are two noun components, respectively “morning star”-“启明星”-“ngôi sao mai” and “the horizon”-“地平线上”-“đường chân trời” , there is also a verbal part “arose”-“升起了”-“mọc lên”. According to our visual perception, we will certainly pay attention to the “morning star”, since it is the focal point of perception, which is again the thing that stands out clearly, but its position in the Chinese, English, and Vietnamese existential sentences are not the same, this is due to the spatial cognitive influence of the Han people, the British, American and Vietnamese are not the same. We said above that the Han people tend to put big, fixed, long-term things at the beginning of sentences, and here “地平线上” (the horizon) fits this point of view, being placed at the beginning of sentences, and “启明星” (morning star) is a small, new, unknown thing, so it should be put at the end of the sentence. This is contrary to

the interpretation of space of the British, American, and Vietnamese peoples, who follow the tendency of “small first, big later, local before the whole”, so this has affected the position of words of place in existential sentences. From this point of view, “the horizon” comes after “morning star” – “ngôi sao mai”. Not only in existential sentences but also in other types of sentences, English and Vietnamese also follow this principle.

Ex (27):

English: Sleeping on the sofa

Chinese: 在沙发睡觉

On sofa sleep

Vietnamese: Ngủ ở trên sofa

Sleep on sofa

Ex (28):

English: Learn in the class

Chinese: 在教室上课

In class learn

Vietnamese: Học ở trong lớp

Learn in the class

Ex (29):

English: Go shopping in the supermarket

Chinese: 在超市购物

In supermarket go shopping

Vietnamese: Mua sắm ở siêu thị

Go shopping in supermarket

Hereafter, we briefly learn the order and meaning of existential sentences of some Eastern languages such as Korean, Japanese and Thai, all of which can use the form of existential sentences to express the meaning “somewhere exists, appears, disappears someone or something”. In Korean, the order of existential sentences follows the syntax “LP+ NP+ VP”. In order to make it easier to recognize the syntax of existential sentences in these languages, the writer has intentionally taken the same examples.

Existential sentences express the existential meaning in Korean:

Ex (30):

Korean	탁자 위에	사과가	있다
Phonetic transcription	tagja wie	sagwaga	issda
Direct translation	On the table	one apple	put
Meaning	On the table put an apple		

Existential sentences represent the disappearing meaning in Korean:

Ex (31):

Korean	정원에서	닭 한 마리가	죽었다.
Phonetic transcription	Jeong-won-eseo	dalg than maliga	jug-eosda
Direct translation	In the garden	one chicken	died
Meaning	In the garden died a chicken		

Korean and Japanese have the same linguistic type as SOV, and existential sentences in Japanese have the same order as Korean existential sentences, also following the syntax “LP+ NP+ VP”.

Existential sentences express the existing meaning in Japanese:

Ex (32) :

Japanese	机の上に	りんごがひとつ	あります
Phonetic transcription	Tsukue no ue ni	ringoga hitotsu	arimasu
Direct translation	On the table	one apple	put
Meaning	On the table is an apple		

Existential sentences represent the disappearing meaning in Japanese:

Ex (33):

Japanese	庭に一	匹の鳥が	死んだ。
Phonetic transcription	Niwa ni	biki no tori ga	shinda
Direct translation	in the garden	one chicken	died
Meaning	In the garden died a chicken		

Thai has a language type of SVO like Chinese, English and Vietnamese, the order of existential sentences in Thai follows the syntax “NP + VP + LP”.

Existential sentences express the existing meaning in Thai:

Ex (34):

Thai	แอปเปิ้ล	ลอยู่	บนโต๊ะ
Phonetic transcription	Xæ ppeɪ	lxyù	bn tó
Direct translation	One apple	put	table
Meaning	An apple is on the table.		

Existential sentences represent the disappearing meaning in Thai:

Ex (35):

Thai	ไก่	ตาย	ในสวน
Phonetic transcription	Kì	tāy	ni s̄wn
Direct translation	one chicken	died	in garden
Meaning	A chicken died in the garden		

From the above examples, it is shown that semantically in Eastern languages such as Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Thai, existential sentences can be used to express two meanings: one is “in somewhere exists something”; and two is “in somewhere is lost something”, but Indo-European English cannot use the form of the existential sentence to express the idea “in somewhere is lost something”. That shows that using the existential sentence to express the idea of “in somewhere is lost something” is a unique feature in Eastern languages.

Conclusion

From a syntactic perspective, we can see: that existential sentences in Chinese have the form “word of place + existential verb + existential subject”; Existential sentences in English have the form: “There+VP+NP+LP”; Existential sentences in Vietnamese have the form: “Có + existential subject + existential verb + word of place”.

The three linguistic types of Vietnamese, English, and Chinese all belong to the SVO type, but the position of the existential verb is different. The existential verb in Chinese and English is in front of the existential subject, but in Vietnamese, the existential verb stands behind the subject of existence. This shows that although the linguistic type is the same, the order in the existential sentences is still different. In addition, in Chinese, the word place goes first in the existential sentence and takes the position of the subject, but the word place in Vietnamese and English existential sentences takes the position of the adverb.

Although Chinese, English, and Vietnamese are all SVO linguistic types, there are differences in spatial perception in existential sentences of the Han people, Americans, British and Vietnamese. The British, American, and Vietnamese focus on the principle of analysis, and the principle of “local first, the whole later”, but the Chinese “the whole first, the local later”. Therefore, this spatial thinking has definitely influenced the order in the existential sentences of the three languages.

Using the existential sentence form to express the idea of “in somewhere lost something” is a unique feature of Eastern language.

Nguyen (2012) says that explicit grammar instruction remains an indispensable element in foreign language teaching and learning and needs to be paid more attention to. Tran (2021) has also identified the grammatical understanding was also identified as a barrier in the study. So comparing grammar between languages is very important in language teaching and learning. Hope the paper will help a small part of teachers and learners to understand more about existential sentences in languages.

Limitations and directions for further research of the article

The paper only compares the syntactic order of existential sentences in Chinese, English, and Vietnamese, points out the similarities and differences and uses cognitive reasoning to explain those differences. But about the semantic comparison of the three components “place of existence”, “verb of existence”, and “the subject of existence” in existential sentences of these languages, the paper has not been researched yet. The paper can take a step further into this issue. Moreover, in order to have a more comprehensive view of existential sentences in languages, it is necessary to study more existential sentences in some Indo-European languages so that there can be an accurate comparison of existential sentences in Indo-European and Eastern languages.

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