HiLL PUBLISHING

Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 2025, 9(6), 1057-1065
https://www.hillpublisher.com/Journals/jhass/
ISSN Online: 2576-0548
ISSN Print: 2576-0556

The Cross-linguistic Expression of Existential Constructions and Their Spatiotemporal Typological Features

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How to cite this paper: Yue Shen, Dan Du. (2025) The Cross-linguistic Expression of Existential Constructions and Their Spatiotemporal Typological Features. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 9(6), 1057-1065.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2025.06.002

Received: April 27, 2025
Accepted: May 25, 2025
Published: June 23, 2025

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Abstract

This paper adopts a typological perspective to investigate the diverse expressions and inherent spatiotemporal typological characteristics of existential constructions across world languages. By systematically comparing different expressive types of these constructions, the study elucidates their distinct spatial and temporal features. Based on this analysis, the paper advances a hypothesis concerning implicational universals linking the expressive types of existential constructions to broader spatiotemporal typological patterns. Cross-linguistic examination reveals three core findings: 1) Four primary expressive types exist cross-linguistically, defined by the core element T [Theme] and its position relative to L [Location] and V [Verb]: L+V+T/L+T+V/V+T+L, L+T, V+T/T+V, and T. These types form an implicational hierarchy: L+T⊃T⊃V+T/T+V⊃L+V+T/L+T+V/V+T+L. 2) Existential constructions fundamentally categorize into entity-types (associated with spatial patterns in nominal-dominant languages) and event-types (associated with temporal patterns in verbal-dominant languages). 3) The observed cross-linguistic variation and spatiotemporal properties ultimately stem from differing cognitive schemas prioritizing either temporality or spatiality.

Keywords

Existential Constructions; Spatiotemporality; Tense-Aspect Markers; Typology

1. Introduction

In what manner do entities in the world exist—anchored in time or grounded in space? Philosophically, both time and space serve as fundamental modes of existence for all entities. Every entity is defined by its spatiotemporal attributes, occupying a specific space at a specific time (Wang, 2019, p. 44). While scholars have reached a consensus on the definition of existential constructions, significant cross-linguistic divergences persist in their expressive types across language families and syntactic structures, with varying grammatical encodings. Generally, the existential modes of entities are constrained and expressed through the philosophical categories of time and space. The coordinated relationship between these two dimensions constitutes the sole mechanism enabling material "existence": space delineates the positional attributes of objects, while time reflects the continuity of processes and the succession of states in development and transformation (Wang & Wang, 2018). Building on Wenbin Wang's (2013, p. 172) hypothesis that "Chinese exhibits a spatial predisposition, whereas English demonstrates a temporal predisposition," languages often partition and interpret the spatiotemporal world through culture-specific frameworks. Certain linguistic communities prioritize spatial concepts in their expressions, while others foreground the abstract concept of

time. Guided by this theoretical perspective, scholars (Wang & He, 2016; Zhao & Wang, 2017; Wang & Wang, 2018; Wang & Wang, 2019) have conducted comparative studies on Chinese, English, and Russian from diverse angles.

Focusing on existential constructions, this study investigates cross-linguistic divergences in spatiotemporal representations to further analyze similarities and differences in spatiotemporal conceptualizations across languages—a topic that remains underexplored in current scholarship. Consequently, this paper conducts a typological survey of existential constructions in languages spanning the Sino-Tibetan, Bantu, Indo-European, Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Altaic, and Afro-Asiatic families. By systematizing expressive types of existential constructions and identifying the implicational hierarchy among T (Theme), L (Location), and V (Verb), the study aims to uncover both universal and language-specific spatiotemporal patterns concealed within these features. Ultimately, it seeks to elucidate the correlations and motivations between typological characteristics of existential constructions and spatiotemporal orientations across languages, thereby advancing our understanding of linguistic universals.

2. Typological Patterns and Implicational Hierarchies of Existential Constructions Across Languages

This paper, through a cross-linguistic investigation of existential constructions in languages spanning the Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, Altaic, Austronesian, Austroasiatic, Bantu, and Afro-Asiatic families, identifies and categorizes four typological patterns of existential constructions across languages. The findings reveal that the Theme (T) constitutes an obligatory component of existential constructions, and further demonstrate an implicational hierarchy governing the relationships among the Theme (T), Locative phrase (L), and Existential verb (V).

2.1 Typological Patterns of Existential Constructions (I)

Based on a typological investigation of existential constructions in Sino-Tibetan languages, Mandarin Chinese exhibits four structural patterns: L+V+T, L+T, V+T, and T, as illustrated in Example 1. In Chinese existential constructions, the Theme (T) is an obligatory component and cannot be omitted in any of these four patterns. Similar fourfold typological patterns—L+V+T/L+T+V, L+T, T+V, and T—are also attested in languages such as Xianzuo, Tujia, Sui, Buyi, and Yi.

(1) Mandarin Chinese (self-constructed examples)
a. Qian mian zou lai yi ge ren. (There came a person from ahead.)
b. Di shang yi tan wu shui. (There is a pool of dirty water on the ground.)
c. You yi ge gu lao de chuan shuo. (There is an ancient legend.)
d. Xian yan de hong qi, dong ren de xiao lian. (There are bright red flags and touching smiling faces.)

(2) Tujia (Qingxia Dai & Jing Tian, 2005, p. 138)
a. xuɛ^{33}su^{55}kha^{54}mu^{33} tɕi^{55} lɔ^{55}pha^{54}sə^{33} ka^{35}na^{54} xu^{33} tõ^{33} o^{54} la^{33}
huaishu dixia laodaye ji wei zuo zhe
Huai shu di xia zuo zhe ji wei lao da ye. (Under the pagoda tree sat several elderly men.)

b. si^{55}ni^{21}ka^{21} tsũ^{55} na^{55} thũ^{55} ɕe^{35}
mayi wo yi wo you
You yi wo ma yi. (There was a nest of ants.)

c. kha^{33}khu^{54} pa^{54}tsa^{33} ka$^{33/54}$ khɯ$^{33/54}$li^{55} su^{35}sɛ^{54} kha^{54}mu^{33}
yewai pianpo shang quanbu lizi shu
Shan po shang quan shi li shu. (The hillside was entirely covered with chestnut trees.)

d. su^{21}su^{21} a^{21}si^{21}tɕhĩ^{21} tɕhĩ^{21}
xue baiaiai
Bai xue ai ai. (The snow lay glistening white.)

In Indo-European languages such as Russian, four patterns of existential constructions are observed: L+V+T, L+T, V+T, and T. Similarly, Altaic languages—including Mongolian, Dongxiang, Kazakh, Uyghur, Kyrgyz, Tatar, Turkish, and Korean—exhibit four structural types: L+V+T, T+V, L+T, and T. Cross-linguistic studies of Austroasiatic languages further confirm the prevalence of four typological patterns: L+V+T, V+T, L+T, and T.

2.2 Typological Patterns of Existential Constructions (II)

Within the Sino-Tibetan language family, certain languages exhibit only three typological patterns of existential constructions: L+V+T/L+T+V, V+T/T+V, and T, with the L+T pattern being unattested. This is observed in languages such as Thai, Dai, Zhuang, Naxi, Daofu, and Mile Miao.

(3) Thai (Qingxia Han, 2018, p. 78)
a. bon^{1} to^{4} mi:^{1} naŋ^{5}sɯ:^{5} nɯŋ^{2} le:m^{3}
shang zhuozi you shu yi ben
Zhuo zi shang you yi ben shu. (On the table there is a book.)

b. mi:^{1} rɯa:ŋ^{3}lau^{3} bo:^{1}ra:n^{1} nɯŋ^{2} rɯa:ŋ^{3}
you chuanshuo gulao yi ge
You yi ge gu lao de chuan shuo. (There exists an ancient legend.)

(4) Dai (Hongkai Sun et al., 2007, p. 1143)
a. lə^{1} phən^{1} mi^{2} la:i^{2} pap^{8} ləŋ
shang zhuozi you shu ben yi
Zhuo zi shang you yi ben shu. (There is a book on the table.)

b. mi:^{2} tsɔk^{8} ja:u^{2} ja:u^{2} sen^{3} ləŋ
you shengzi chang chang tiao yi
You yi tiao chang chang de sheng zi. (There is a very long rope.)

Investigations of Altaic languages reveal that Turkish, Korean, and others predominantly employ three patterns: L+T+V, T+V, and T. In these languages, the Locative phrase (L) may be omitted, whereas the existential verb (V) remains obligatory. Similarly, most Austronesian languages—including Atayal, Thao, Paiwan, Bunun, Puyuma, Amis, Yami, Tagalog, and Amis—display three typological patterns: V+T+L, V+T, and T.

2.3 Typological Patterns of Existential Constructions (III)

Languages within the Bantu family generally exhibit only two typological patterns of existential constructions: L+V+T and V+T, as observed in Chichewa, Swahili, Herero, and Luyia. Similarly, Afro-Asiatic languages—such as Standard Arabic, Tunisian Arabic, Hausa, and Toqabaqita—typically display two patterns: L+V+T/V+T+L and V+T. Additionally, certain Indo-European languages also manifest two predominant patterns, primarily L+V+T and T.

2.4 Summary

Based on the cross-linguistic investigation of existential constructions in languages from the Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, Altaic, Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Bantu, and Afro-Asiatic families, this paper systematizes their typological patterns as summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. The Expression Type System of Existential Verbs

Expression Type	L+V+T/L+T+V/V+T+L	V+T/T+V	L+T	T	Distribution of Language Families
Four-Type System	+	+	+	+	Sino-Tibetan language families, Indo-European language families, Austroasiatic language families
Three-Type System	+	+	-	-	Sino-Tibetan Language Family, Altaic Language Family, Austronesian Language Family
Two-Type System	+	-	-	+	Indo-European Language Family, Afro-Asiatic language family, Austroasiatic Language Family

As evidenced by Table 1's systematic summary of existential construction patterns, four cross-linguistic expressive types are identified: L+V+T/L+T+V/V+T+L, V+T/T+V, L+T, and T. Languages across different families exhibit distinct patterns, thereby allowing a classification into four-type, three-type, and two-type systems.

Building on these observations, it becomes apparent that in certain languages, either the existential verb (V) or the locative phrase (L) can be omitted independently while retaining the other component. This suggests that languages where existential verbs are obligatory (forming constructions centered on verbal elements) can be categorized as verbal-dominant languages, whereas languages permitting existential expressions to be realized through nominal phrases alone (without obligatory verbs) may be defined as nominal-dominant languages.

3. Expressive Types and Spatiotemporal Characteristics of Existential Constructions

3.1 Entity-Type and Event-Type Existential Constructions

The above summary of cross-linguistic existential construction types shows that the existential subject can independently express existential meaning. Existential events can be expressed by nouns denoting the existential theme. Typically, nouns can denote both concrete entities, for example "Fang jian" (room) and "Da yin ji" (printer), and events with a more pronounced temporal aspect. Concrete nouns like "Fang jian" (room) and "Da yin ji" (printer) are spatially oriented and directly linked to locative arguments in existential sentences. In contrast, complex or non-intuitive events like "Tong huo peng zhang" (inflation) or "Zha dan bao zha" (the explosion of a bomb) conceal temporality, embedded in deverbal nouns. When these nominals are expanded in propositions, their temporality is usually reasserted through verbal forms (Wang & Wang, 2019). Based on this, Wenbin Wang categorizes existential sentences into "entity-type" and "event-type". Entity-type existential sentences feature nouns expressing spatially extended entities, as in example 5. Event-type existential sentences arise when the noun includes temporal deverbal elements, as shown in example 6.

(5) Zhuo zi shang you bu shou ji. (There is a cell phone on the table.)

(6) Cun zi li fa sheng le qi xiong sha an. (A murder case occurred in the village.)

Based on the preceding analysis, this paper argues that the Theme (T) alone can constitute an existential construction, exhibiting a dual semantic capacity. It not only encodes entity-type existential sentences, as in Examples 7-8, but also expresses event-type existential sentences, as demonstrated in Examples 9-10.

(7) Mongolian (Bu Dao, 1985, pp. 28-94)
Adɷɷ-mĭn.
Wo de ma qun. (My herd of horses.)

(8) Kazakh (Shimin Geng & Zengxiang Li, 1985, pp. 26-170)
ləq tolʁan χaləq.
yongji renqun
Yong ji de ren qun. (A crowded crowd.)

(9) Russian (Shufen Guo, 2003, pp. 125-148)
Вода!
shui (water)
You shui! (There is water!)

(10) Turkish
Yılan!
she (snack)
She! (There is a snake!)

The existential sentence patterns mentioned above are all directly composed of the existential subjects. Based on the above analysis, this paper argues that the existential subject can not only express entity existential sentences but also event existential sentences. In Examples 7-8, nominal phrases such as "Wo de ma qun" (my herd of horses) and "Yong ji de ren qun" (a crowded crowd) can independently form existential sentence patterns, indicating the existence

of my herd of horses and a crowded crowd in a certain place. In Examples 9-10, “Shui” (water), “Du she” (venomous snake), etc. not only indicate the existence of the existential subjects but also have the usage of converting nouns into verbs, conveying meanings such as “You shui le” (there is water) and “Chu xian le du she” (a venomous snake appears). The pragmatic category corresponding to the syntactic category of “noun-verb” is “referential expression-predicative expression” (Shen, 2016). In terms of the syntactic category, nouns and verbs are in a separated state in many languages. However, at the pragmatic level, nouns have certain predicative functions, and verbs have certain referential functions. Nouns have referentiality, but according to the performance of the existential subject forming a sentence independently, the existential subject has certain predicative functions at this time. When the existential subject expresses the predicative function of an event, it is generally in imperative sentences or exclamatory sentences expressing prohibitions and warnings.

In addition, according to Table 1, the phenomenon of using nouns as verbs to express existential events is a common one across languages. Wenbin Wang (2018) believes that Chinese has a rich variety of nominal single-sentence structures, reflecting the thinking characteristics of Chinese that emphasize nouns and space. This point cannot be denied. However, the use of this phenomenon to express existential events is very common across languages, and this paper argues that it has a great deal to do with the typological characteristics of the existential sentence pattern itself. The existential sentence pattern is one of the basic concepts through which human beings perceive things. It also reflects the mapping of people’s perception process of actions and follows the principle of iconicity of distance. The iconicity of distance means that the distance between grammatical units corresponds to the distance between the expressed concepts, also known as the proximity principle. That is, if two units are cognitively close, then they are also close in terms of linguistic symbols. In other words, in the grammatical structure, the word that has a closer relationship with the head word is closer to the head word. Old information is often placed at the front, and new information is placed at the back. For example, Chinese existential sentences conform to the general law of information arrangement: Section A describes the starting point, which is generally filled by known and definite components, and determines the cognitive framework of the sentence, playing the role of presenting the spatial background. Section C explains the things existing in Section A, generally representing indefinite new information, which reflects the cognitive and psychological perception process of “from the known to the unknown”. In the basic structure of the English existential sentence “there + V + NP”, “there” is located at the beginning of the sentence, representing known information, and at the same time leading to the emergence of new information. From old information to new information, English existential sentences follow the conventional information pattern and also conform to people’s expression habits and cognitive characteristics. Therefore, from the analysis of the iconicity theory in cognitive linguistics, existential sentence patterns all reflect the mapping of people’s perception process of actions. When the locative phrase and the way of existence are known to both the speaker and the listener and are treated as old information, the locative phrase and the existential verb can be omitted, and only the existential subject is retained. At the same time, according to the investigation and research, it is found that existential sentence patterns composed only of existential subjects are mostly exclamatory sentences, indicating the appearance of something in an emergency to remind the other party, which shows that the speaker has applied the principle of economy, expressing new information with the fewest words.

According to Table 1, in addition to the basic existential construction and the existential subject-only construction, some languages use an L+T (Location + Theme) construction composed of noun phrases to express existential meaning without an existential verb, while others use a V+T (Verb + Theme) construction composed of an existential verb. The semantic category of the existential subject noun is also one of the main factors determining the probability of verb occurrence. In existential constructions, locative phrases (spatial modifiers) are more directly and objectively associated with spatially three-dimensional entities rather than spatiotemporal events, and the existential verb is often omitted. However, when the existential subject noun relies on the existential verb to highlight its temporal dimension, the probability of verb occurrence is relatively higher, and this weakens its connection to visual space. In such cases, the existential verb is retained.

3.2 Expressive Types and Aspectual and Temporal Features of Existential Verbs

This paper also argues that the existential state of the subject and the tense of the existential verb significantly influence whether the existential verb is retained or omitted. Following Wenbin Wang (2018), existential constructions are categorized into thing-oriented existential constructions (focusing on spatiality) and event-oriented existential constructions (focusing on temporality). In thing-oriented constructions, the existential subject typically exists in a

completed or sustained state. In contrast, event-oriented constructions emphasize the manner of existence and aspectual/temporal expression.

Dongxue Wang and Wenbin Wang (2019), in their comparative study of spatial and temporal representations in existential sentences across Chinese, English, and Russian, found that existential verbs are obligatory in English but optional in Russian. They attributed this difference to the distinct ways in which tense and aspect are represented in the two languages. In English, verb morphology follows a "past–present–future" system, with "past" and "future" being dependent on "present." In Russian, verb morphology adheres to a "before–after" dual-time system, and the Russian-speaking community conceptualizes time as a continuously moving point along a line, mentally constructing a tripartite system of past, present, and future.

This distinction allows us to categorize languages into two types: spatially oriented languages, which prioritize nouns and spatial thinking, and temporally oriented languages, which prioritize verbs and temporal thinking. In spatially oriented languages, actions are often conceptualized as spatial nouns, and verbs are treated as modifiers of nouns. In temporally oriented languages, actions are viewed as temporal events, and verbs play a central role in expressing predicate structures, aspectual features, and temporal concepts, making them indispensable. The morphological changes of existential verbs serve as a necessary means for expressing temporal concepts in existential constructions. In spatially oriented languages, greater emphasis is placed on the spatial domain formed by locative phrases and the existential subject. In temporally oriented languages, greater emphasis is placed on the eventuality of the existential subject within the locative phrase. Generally, thing-oriented existential constructions (composed of locative phrases and existential subjects) typically indicate a present continuous tense, while event-oriented constructions often emphasize the manner of existence or the completion of the existential action.

3.3 Language Typology and the Spatiotemporal Licensing of Existential Verbs

In addition to the influence of temporality and spatiality on the retention or omission of existential verbs, this paper argues that language typology plays a crucial role. From a typological perspective, languages can be classified into synthetic and analytic types. Synthetic languages include agglutinative and fusional languages, while analytic languages are primarily isolating. Synthetic languages rely on inflectional changes and affixes for syntactic operations, whereas analytic languages lack inflection and depend on word order and function words. Languages that retain existential verbs are typically found in the Altaic, Austronesian, Bantu, and Indo-European families, which are synthetic. In contrast, existential constructions formed by nominal phrases are common in the Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic families, which are analytic.

Among synthetic languages, Bantu languages are particularly representative. Locative phrases are marked with suffixes like "16/17/18," and the existential verb suffix matches the locative suffix. The existential subject follows the verb, which is obligatory, reflecting hypotactic features and favoring event-type existential sentences. In analytic languages, existential verbs can be omitted. Locative phrases and the existential subject form the construction, reflecting paratactic features and favoring entity-type existential sentences.

4. Conclusion

This study conducts a cross-linguistic investigation of existential constructions across languages from the Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, Austroasiatic, Austronesian, Bantu, and Altaic families, aiming to delineate their typological patterns. The findings reveal four universal expressive types of existential constructions: L+V+T/L+T+V/V+T+L, L+T, V+T/T+V, and T, with an implicational hierarchy governing the components—Theme (T) ⊃ Existential Verb (V) ⊃ Locative Phrase (L). The Theme (T) emerges as the core element of existential constructions. The Theme (T) is the core of existential constructions, and this paper maintains that the primary causes of the above phenomena are entity and event-type existential sentences, the expression and tense of existential verbs, and the relationship between language typology and existential verbs.

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Appendix

Below is the Chinese-character form of the sentences cited in the present paper.

1. Mandarin Chinese (self-constructed examples)
a. 前面走来一个人。
b. 地上一滩污水。
c. 有一个古老的传说。
d. 鲜艳的红旗，动人的笑脸。

2. Tujia (Qingxia Dai & Jing Tian, 2005, p. 138)

a. xuɛ^{33}su^{55}kha^{54}mu^{33} tɛi^{55} lɔ^{55}pha^{54}sə^{33} ka^{35}na^{54} xu^{33} tõ^{33} o^{54} la^{33}
槐树 底下 老大爷 几 位 坐 （助）着
槐树底下坐着几位老大爷。

b. si^{55}ni^{21}ka^{21} tsũ^{55} na^{55} thũ^{55} ɕe^{35}
蚂蚁 窝 一 窝 有
有一窝蚂蚁。

c. kha^{33}khu^{54} pa^{54}tsa^{33} ka$^{33/54}$ khɯ$^{33/54}$li^{55} su^{35}sɛ^{54} kha^{54}mu^{33}
野外 偏坡 上 全部 栗子 树
山坡上全是栗树。

d. su^{21}su^{21} a^{21}si^{21}tɕhĩ^{21} tɕhĩ^{21}
雪 白皑皑
白雪皑皑。

3. Thai (Qingxia Han 2018: 78)

a. bon1 to4 mi:1 naŋ5sɯ:5 nɯŋ2 le:m3
上 桌子 有 书 一 本
桌子上有一本书。

b. mi:^{1} rɯa:ŋ^{3}lau^{3} bo:^{1}ra:n^{1} nɯŋ^{2} rɯa:ŋ^{3}
有 传说 古老 一 个
有一个古老的传说。

4. Dai (Hongkai Sun et al. 2007: 1143)

a. lə^{1} phən^{1} mi^{2} la:i^{2} pap^{8} ləŋ
上 桌子 有 书 本 一
桌子上有一本书。

b. mi:^{2} tsɔk^{8} ja:u^{2} ja:u^{2} sen^{3} ləŋ
有 绳子 长 长 条 一
有一条长长的绳子。

5. 桌子上有部手机。

6. 村子里发生了起凶杀案。

7. Mongolian (Bu Dao, 1985, pp. 28-94)
Adɷɷ-mĭn.
我的马群。

8. Kazakh (Shimin Geng & Zengxiang Li, 1985, pp. 26-170)
ləq tolʁan χaləq.
拥挤 人群
拥挤的人群。

9. Russian (Shufen Guo, 2003, pp. 125-148)
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水
有水！

10. Turkish
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蛇
蛇！