

A Comparative Study of English and Chinese Existential Sentences Based on Corpus

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Abstract

Existential sentence as a special syntax and semantic structure has been widely used by people. As the two languages with the largest number of speakers in the world, it is important and necessary to explore the internal structure of Chinese and English existential sentences. This study uses corpora to compare Chinese and English existential sentences and explore the reasons why the two kinds of existential sentences are so different. It's found that they have similar syntactic structure. However, for the preverb component, English existential sentences usually have "there" in the preverb component. Chinese existential sentences have many forms of preverb components. For the noun phrases, the noun phrases are indefinite in both kinds of existential sentences. But the sentences type with a postpositive appositive clause is only seen in Chinese existential sentences. For the word order, in English existential sentences, position of the locative phrase (LP) is flexible, in Chinese existential sentences, however, the LP is fixed at beginning of the sentence. For the semantic, the semantic meaning and function of English and Chinese are similar, because they both represent the appearance, existence or disappearance and the locative adverbial in English existential sentences is equivalent to the existential regional words in Chinese. But there are more existential verbs in Chinese, with more complicated semantic types, and the distribution of the existential sentences they form is very extensive. The differences are explained from three aspects: ethic thinking patters, ethic culture and languages themselves. These findings supplement the understanding of Chinese and English existential sentences and shed light on later studies should consider more corpora to study existential sentences.

Keywords

English Existential Sentences; Chinese Existential Sentences; Chinese-English Culture.

1. Introduction

Most of languages have existential sentences, but they are expressed in many different ways. Languages across the world have varied means to express the notion, which tends to be associated with locative and possessive constructions (Freeze, 1992; Creissels, 2015). Chinese and English belong two different language lineages so their existential constructions are different from each other in terms of formal semantics and functions. As a common linguistic phenomenon and unique syntactic structure, English and Chinese existential sentences have been the focus in the academic researches for a long time.

In the study of language, it is important to recognize the structure, function of language and the ontological nature of language. As for function, the most important function of language is to convey information. As far as the ontological nature of language is concerned, language is a complex symbolic system of symbols with a hierarchical combination of sound and meaning. From a certain point of view, the information conveyed by a sentence is the result of the meaning produced by the integration of the meaning of the sentences into a certain communicative context and the blending of the two to produce a communicative effect. Lu

Jianming (1987) thinks that the communicative context in which a sentence can appear is theoretically infinite. That is to say, a sentence can convey as many different messages as it appears in the communicative context. Therefore, it is also important to explore the semantic function of Chinese existential sentences and English existential sentences.

As Lv Shuxiang (1979) pointed out, since Chinese is a non-morphological language, many grammatical phenomena are gradual changes rather than abrupt changes, and it is easy to encounter various intermediate states in grammatical analysis. Yu Guoliang (2000), Tong Helong (2003), Chen Desheng and Zhao Yush (2007) compared the similarities and differences between English and Chinese existential sentences from the perspectives of syntax and semantics. Subsequently, Xiong Yonghong (2014) examined the differences between English and Chinese existential sentences in terms of subject and sentence structure.

In summary, the above comparative studies on English and Chinese existential sentences focused on the syntactic and semantic levels, but there are still deficiencies, and the reasons for the differences are rarely mentioned. Also, there are few researches use corpus to explore their differences.

Therefore, this article will be based on existing research results and with the help of corpus to compare the similarities and differences between English and Chinese existential sentences. At the same time, explore the reasons for the similarities and differences between English and Chinese existential sentences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Definition of Chinese Existential Sentences

Lv Shuxiang (1943) firstly defined Chinese existential sentences in terms of sentences meaning. Zhang Zhigong put forward two types of existential sentences: “there is something in a place” and “something is in a place”.

In the current researches, the controversy over the definition of existential sentences is that some scholars believe that sentences such as “place/temporal word + existential verb + existential subject” should be regarded as typical and standard existential sentences. However, some scholars believe that the head existential sentences can only be served by the locative noun, and the temporal word representing the time. It is not an inevitable component of existential sentences, so it can be treated as adverbial.

According to Dong Xiufang (2022), existential sentence is a sentence pattern indicating the existence of an object in a certain place, which is one of the basic sentence patterns in language. From a cross-language perspective, Wang Chen (2021) thinks that it is common to use marked word order to express the meaning that someone/something exists somewhere. This sentences pattern is called existential sentences. Zhang Keding (2009, 2021) thinks that existential relationship as a kind of spatial relation. Similarly, when people use language to express the existential relationship between things, they will adopt certain language structure to express the existential relationship according to their observation, perception and understanding of the objective world. Language structure gradually becomes fixed through continuous repeated use, and finally forms the existential sentences expressing the meaning of existence to convey the existential relationship.

This study holds the stance that the scope of Chinese existential sentences is as follows: part A (place word/time word) + part B(existential verb) + part C (existential subject)

2.2. The Study of Chinese Existential Sentences

It is found that the research of Chinese existential sentences follows the pace of western English grammar studies. So the study of Chinese existential starts late.

The study of Chinese existential sentences has a history of nearly one hundred years. Since the publication of Ma Shi Wen Tong, the first systematic grammatical work in China, Chinese existential sentences have attracted the attention of scholars in the field of Chinese, but also a large number of scholars in the field of English. They actively introduce foreign research methods and grammar theories, and devote themselves to the study of theoretical localization. Therefore, the study of Chinese existential has made great progress in both breadth and depth. (Pan Wen,2022; Deng Renhua, 2015)

There are many researches on Chinese existential sentences in generative grammar, mainly focusing on the beginning of the sentences and the noun phrases after the verb. Most scholars believe that the place phrase at the beginning of a sentence is the main language component (Song Yuzhu, 1984; Huang zhengde, 1987). In the field of systemic functional linguistics, scholars considered the position component of the beginning of existential sentences as adverbial. The research of cognitive linguistics appeared later, but the research achievements are remarkable. Wang Baohua (2005) argued that the sentence patterns of “着”, “了” in Chinese existential sentences are interchangeable, which reflects the differences in people’s cognitive patterns.

From the above researches we can see that many achievements have been made in the study of Chinese existential sentences, but there are still some problems, such as the definition and scope of Chinese existential sentences. As far as the research methods of Chinese existential sentences are concerned, they are traditional. And a few scholars use the method of corpus to explore existential sentences.

2.3. The Definition of English Existential Sentences

As is widely acknowledged, an existential construction is used to assert the existence or nonexistence of some entities in a context (Francez, 2010). Semantically, existential constructions are used “to draw the addressee’s attention to the existence and/or location of the entity or entities denoted by the focus NP” and serve a presentational function (Abbott 1993: 41).

In English, existential sentences have the typical structure of “there + existential verb + noun phrase”. This sentence patterns mentioned by Quirk et al. (1985). Its particularity lies in the necessary element “there” at the beginning of the sentence. Therefore, in order to reveal the essence of the sentence “there”, no matter in traditional grammar, descriptive linguistics, generative linguistics or functional linguistics (such as cognitive linguistics and systemic functional linguistics), everyone has done research on the grammatical and semantic feature of “there”. In addition, the fields of generative linguistics, cognitive linguistics and systemic functional linguistics do not stop at the simple description and analysis of existential sentences, but further analyze the generation or production mechanism of existential sentences.

As for the conceptualization of existential construction, the definition of existential sentences in English is controversial. For example, whether a sentence without “there” indicating the existence of something is an existential sentence? From Breivik’s (1981) perspective, such sentences are also existential sentence because they convey the same meaning only with different forms. Kuno (1971) also agree that the sentence like “A yellow carpet was in the bedroom” is an existential sentence because the structure of “LOC+V+NP” is the potential source sentence of all existential sentences. Quirk et al (1972) thinks that there is another kind of existential sentence with “have”. Breivik (1981) first proposed to identify English existential sentences by looking at existential verbs. He believes that the predicate part of English existential sentences should be acted by verbs such as appearance, existence and emergence. “Be” in English existential sentences is the most common verb and can express the meaning of existence or position, the direction of motion, as well as the meaning of occurrence, progress, realization, or revelation of things. There is also a long history of the ontological study of English

existential sentences. Its basic structure can be summarized as: There +V+NP+ (other components).

2.4. The Study of English Existential Sentences

Western linguistics developed earlier and the research results are more than in the field of Chinese existential sentences. English existential sentences have been studied by various linguistic schools. The research begins with the definition and classification (Brown, 1884; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973), followed by extensive exploration of syntactic structure, semantic and pragmatic.

The generative grammar school mainly focuses on the generation motivation and syntactic features of English existential sentences. Systematic functional linguistics analyze the pragmatic function of "there". Cognitive linguists discuss the causes and characteristics of existential sentences from a cognitive perspective. Construction is a new paradigm in cognitive linguistics, but there are few researches on existential sentences.

Han Jingquan (2001) pointed out by using generative grammar that both English and Chinese existential sentences belong to the deep structure subjectless sentences. The originally vacant subject position can be used for the logical affix of the noun phrase after the verb to move to. The logical affix of the noun phrase moves to the surface subject position to obtain the subject case assigned by the tensed verb inflection. Thus, the logical affix and the trace left in situ form a chain, and through this chain, the subject case is transmitted to the logical object noun phrase after the verb.

From the above researches we can see that the researches on Chinese existential and English existential sentences have produced many results, but most of them focus on the study of language ontology. The comparative study on English and Chinese existential constructions still needs to be further explored. Due to the lack of the comparative study on Chinese existential sentences and English existential sentences, there are still some problems need to be further solved. Also, most comparative studies illustrate and analyze the similarities and differences by giving examples, a few studies use corpora to contrast Chinese existential sentences and English existential sentences.

So we should use other new research instruments to study the differences between Chinese existential sentences and English existential sentences. This study uses detailed and convincing corpora to address the deficiencies of previous research.

3. Research Questions, Data and Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

1. What are differences between Chinese existential sentences and English existential sentences?
2. What are the influencing factors of the differences between Chinese and English existential sentences?

3.2. Data

Instances of Chinese and English existential sentences are randomly sampled from BNC (<https://www.english-corpora.org/bnc/>) and the Beijing Language and Culture University Chinese Corpus (henceforth BCC) (<http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn>, Xun et al. 2016), the two large and well-balanced corpora. The data are then manually coded for a number of contextual features in preparation for quantitative cross linguistic comparison and contrast.

3.3. Methodology

We adopt the corpus-based distributional approach which assumes that similar distributional contexts of senses or linguistic forms reflect semantic similarity (Levshina 2011: 23). Therefore,

in the focus of our attention are not only Chinese and English existential sentences and their constituents, but also the larger linguistic unit which contains these sentences, i.e., the clause or sentence, as well as other elements co-occurring with the construction. We will attend to their morphological, semantic, syntactic and other features.

4. Results

4.1. Comparison of Structure of Chinese and English Existential Sentences

4.1.1. Comparison of Syntactic Structure

For the syntactic structure, English and Chinese existential sentences can be divided into three categories. The first type is Basic type. This mainly refers to existential sentences that do not include additional components (such as prepositional phrases or relative clauses), i.e., sentences linear arranged as there-V-NP (in English) and LP-V-NP (in Chinese), such as: Example(1) But there lies puzzle. The second type is post-noun affix type. This mainly refers to existential sentences with affix that attached after the noun phrase. For example, (3) There remains the possibility that the pregnant mother may catch the infection after her first antenatal examination. The third type is pre-noun modifier type. This type mainly refers to the existential sentences with the modifier which is placed before the noun phrase, as: (5) There came from the middle of the auditorium a huge and shocked voice.

4.1.2. Comparison of Preverb Components

It is generally believed that there are two “there” in modern English. They have the same part of speech but different meanings: there1 means locative there; there2 stands for Existential there. For Example:

(7) Next morning, I arrived in London, there1 I met my wife.

(8) There2 are two kinds of there in present day English.

“There be” structure is the most common expression in the English existential sentences, and its standard sentences pattern is “there + be + NP + other components”. “There” has no meaning at the beginning of the sentences. It refers to the locative phrase that follows. Breivik (1981) proposed that “there” actually has two meanings in modern English, one is there(there1) denoting existence, and the other is there(there2) denoting orientation, or “presentative their” and “demonstrative there” supported by Hannay (1985). However, “there” has been a change in pronunciation, meaning and so on. There1, which denotes the meaning of “a place”, will generally be stressed. Although it is not stressed in some cases, it is also a locative, the antonym of “here”. There2 is generally unstressed. There is only one exception: strongly or emphatically asserting an existence, in which there2 is stressed with the following “be”. There is no locative word in the sentences, so it is not a locative word. It cannot indicate a position, and its opposite is not here. There2 often appears in the position of the subject of the sentences and there2 often appears in the position of the subject of the sentences. There1 is not the subject of the sentences but the adjunction.

4.2. Comparison of Semantic of Chinese and English Existential Sentences

The locative adverbial in English existential sentences is equivalent to the existential regional words in Chinese. Both English and Chinese existential regional words are concrete and perceptible scene state. In most cases, the expression of existential regions in English is “preposition + noun” and “preposition noun directional word” in Chinese. For example: under the bed. It can be seen that in English, the meaning expressed by Chinese directional words included in the prepositional phrase. However, in Chinese existential sentences, the way of expressing the location, “preposition noun directional word”, often in an incomplete form, forming “noun directional word” or only a noun.

Semantically, existential sentences are affected only by the content of the verb. The verb "you" in Chinese existential sentences and "be" English "there be" sentences are both intransitive verbs. In this case, the subject of the existential sentence is the subject, agent, or possessor the existence state, and accordingly, the existential verb takes an intransitive form. Moreover, the semantic components connected by the verb in both types of sentences are: spatial location and the subject of existence. This reflects a linguistic universal, as these two semantic components are generally present in existential sentences across various languages in the world.

4.3. Accounts of the Differences between English and Chinese Existential Sentences

4.3.1. Ethic Thinking

From the perspective of thinking patterns, the English and Chinese people live in different linguistic environments, so their thinking patterns must be different, and this will directly affect their language expression. Influenced by different natural, social and humanistic factors, Chinese and western philosophy evolved into two different ways of thinking. Chinese emphasize enlightenment rather than empirical evidence in order to achieve the state of the unity of nature and man while Western pursues the understanding of natural knowledge and emphasizes the dichotomy between nature and man, and the positivism and speculation in order to realize the understanding of the nature. Specifically, influenced by traditional thinking, the language expression of Chinese people usually follows the principle of from first to last, from far to near, and from big to small. It is precisely because of this that the typical expression of Chinese sentences is to first describe the larger location, and then describe relatively smaller people or things. However, the thinking pattern of native English speakers is usually from small to large and from near to far. This determines the expression pattern of the existential sentence "there be" is to express people firstly and then express place. Also, due to the constraint of the "subject-predicate" structure, the English existential sentence with a "there", while the words indicating the place are usually placed at the end of the sentence.

4.3.2. Ethic Culture

For one thing, English advocate the Classical and the Christian culture, while Chinese advocate Confucian and Taoist cultures.

Firstly, Classical culture, set a tone for the overall Western philosophy of nature, ethics, and life. The inquiry into the origin presupposes the subject-object dichotomy, and as the inquiry deepens, not only the understanding of the object deepens, but also the understanding of the subject as well as the subject-object relationship further deepens. Of course, the inquiry into the origin is based on logic, forming Logosianism. In this system, the components form another system and are more clearly distinguished from each other.

Secondly, Christian culture is the most important component of Western culture, and the contribution of Christian culture is that it makes the difference between heaven and earth, the ideal and the reality, into an opposition in a clear theoretical form, and that this opposition penetrates deeply into the direct practice of Christian life (Zhao Lin, 1994: 30). The pursuit of truth, goodness and beauty advocated in Christian doctrine is different from the pursuit of benevolence and sincerity in the Chinese Confucian tradition, and the unity of heaven and man in Confucianism. This pursuit of ontology and dichotomy makes the West pay more attention to the existence of the individual.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are both similarities and differences between the English "there be" construction and the Chinese "you" construction in terms of linguistic structure and semantic

function. The differences between them reflect the heterogeneity of the two cultures' languages and thought patterns.

The major findings of the research on existential sentences in English and Chinese can be drawn on the following aspects, that is, the differences between English and Chinese existential sentences in syntactic structure, the differences in noun phrases, word order and the differences in semantic function. First of all, it is found that the intrinsic meaning of existential sentences in English and Chinese is the basically same, but the forms are different. That is, English has a rigorous structure, which reflects that English is a rigid language. On the contrary, the structure of Chinese is relatively loose, reflecting the characteristics of flexibility. Secondly, Chinese existential sentences are not based on the argument relationship of verbs, but focus on the statement of events. The argument of transitive verbs becomes the carrier of state presentation and occupies space. Chinese existential sentences are a kind of language with prominent verbs. As the category of prominent verbs, the verb is very expansive. While, the verbs involved in the English existential sentences emphasize the argument relationship and ignore the information structure.

Language is both scientific and humanistic. On the one hand, when people speak, they will consciously or unconsciously project the perspective, perception, cognition, attitude and emotion into the language. On the other hand, the participation of the subject is important in language coding and decoding. So the reasons why Chinese existential and English existential are so different are the differences of their thought patterns, ethic thinking and ethic culture.

However, this study still has some limitations. In the first place, the amount of the corpus in this study is not enough to fully explore this linguistic phenomenon, and the results of this study may not always be definitely true. In the second place, the differences between existential sentences in English and Chinese are not deeply discussed in terms of topic and definiteness effect. Besides, the type of existential sentences is not enough. So the later researches can use more corpus to compare Chinese existential sentences and English existential sentences.

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