

Verbs of Existence and the Definiteness Effect

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Two hard questions form the backdrop for this talk. First, what explains the definiteness effect (DE) in existential sentences, which is illustrated below in (1) (see e.g. Milsark 1977, Lumsden 1988, Ward and Birner 1995, and many others)?

- (1)a. There are frogs/two frogs/no frogs/*most frogs/*all frogs in the pond.
- b. And then there's the problem of global warming.
- c. There were all sorts of books on display.

Second, is existence a property, and if so, is it a property of individuals?

The standard view in analytic philosophy since Frege and Russell has been that existence is a second-order property: a property not of individuals, but of properties or propositional functions. The philosophical view has a linguistic analogue in McNally's (1998) semantic-pragmatic analysis of the DE in English. For McNally, the existential predicate *there be* is synonymous with *be instantiated*, and —like *be instantiated*—is second-order: it seeks a property as argument. All weak DP's and some strong DP's (essentially, definites) have property-type denotations; other strong DP's (essentially, proportional quantifiers) do not. From this combination of assumptions, she claims, the DE follows.

McNally's approach gives an extremely attractive account of the DE in existentials of type (1). My aim here is to raise the question of how well the account generalizes to other types of existential sentences in English.

I investigate sentences formed with English's 'other' existential predicate, *exist*, such as

- (2)a. Kate exists.
- b. Every individual exists in some sense.

with the aim of making the following points. First, by the criteria discussed by Kratzer (1995), Fernald (2000) and others, the predicate *there be* is stage-level (cf. Musan 1996, Dobrovie-Sorin 1997), but the predicate *exist* is individual-level. This leads us to expect *exist* to seek an individual as argument (Carlson 1980). Second, *exist* can occur in an impersonal construction, illustrated in (3), which has all the hallmarks of an existential sentence.

- (3) There exist numerous counterexamples to your proposal.

Using naturally-occurring data, I show that the impersonal *There exist X* exhibits the same DE as existential sentences of the type *There be X*. I then show that *There exist X* is not presentational, but instead has the syntactic profile of existential sentences of the type *There be X*. In this respect, it differs from impersonal constructions formed from many other verbs of appearance and coming-into-being. Assuming a unitary verb *exist*, the DE exhibited in *There exist X* cannot result from *exist*'s seeking a property as argument, because *exist* seeks an individual as argument. In other words, English has existential sentences formed from at least one verb whose DE does not arise in the way McNally proposes.

The discussion could be seen as supporting an alternative view of the DE, sketched by Ladusaw and me (2004) in the context of a semantic framework in which not all predicate-argument composition results in the elimination of some functional incompleteness. On that view, existential predicates like *there be* and *exist* seek an individual as argument. But when impersonal, they require this argument to compose not by Function Application, but instead by Restrict, a nonsaturating operation that composes a predicate with a property. Whether or not this further step is taken, the patterns discussed here suggest a broader conclusion: the best account of the DE must be able to look beyond *There be X* to encompass the full range of existential and other constructions in which the DE occurs.

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