

Book Review: *A Typological Study of the Existential Clause: A Functional Linguistics Perspective*

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Abstract

This review examines Wang's (2024) monograph on existential clauses (ECs), which addresses a longstanding gap by integrating cross-linguistic typology with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The book offers a theoretically grounded, data-rich account of how lexicogrammatical realizations of ECs relate to discourse motivations across languages, thereby bridging the gap between form and function. It makes an innovative contribution to EC studies and has broader significance for research in syntax and typology. As Wang notes, it supports the essential claims in SFL and demonstrate the validity of SFL, pointing to productive directions for future work.

Keywords

Existential Clauses, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

1. Introduction

For decades, existential clauses (ECs), noted for their non-canonical syntactic features (Francez, 2007) and diverse semantic and functional properties (Milsark, 1974; Afonso, 2008), have drawn extensive scholarly interest. However, previous syntactic accounts often overlook functional perspectives, leaving vital questions about how ECs encode meaning and how such meanings are realised across languages. This gap matters because ECs typically introduce discourse-new referents and manage information flow, and explaining their variability requires a model that explicitly links lexico-grammar to function in a way that is comparable across languages. Integrating typology with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is important because it demands operationalizing functional categories as typological variables and ensuring their cross-linguistic commensurability. Wang's (2024)

monograph addresses this gap by integrating insights from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) with a cross-linguistic perspective. The book goes beyond syntax to relate lexico-grammatical form to function, offering not only a theoretical framework for analysing ECs but also methodological tools for combining syntactic, semantic, and functional evidence. It is a valuable contribution for students and researchers in linguistics, especially those interested in functional linguistics and syntax.

2. Description

The volume comprises eleven well-organized and interrelated chapters. The introductory chapter introduces the topic, the questions, the language samples, and the structure of the whole study. It begins by drawing attention to the universality of ECs across languages. The chapter highlights that the semantic basis of ECs is that “something exists in some location” (p. 1) and its function is to introduce “a referent into the discourse, which can be talked about in later discourse” (p. 1). The EC is not only a specialised and non-canonical structure, but is also “associated with interesting semantic natures” (p. 2). As such, the EC is complex, yet it offers an interesting area for investigation from diverse perspectives.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to exploring the theoretical premise and probing into how SFL and typology complement and enrich each other theoretically and methodologically. It begins by explaining the core concepts of SFL that are pivotal to this study, including system, structure, metafunction (the ideational/interpersonal/textual organization of language), and stratification (relations among strata such as semantics, lexicogrammar, and phonology). Wang believes that SFL stands out as the least ethnocentric theory, which is effectively applicable across languages, thereby giving rise to the promising field of Systemic Functional Typology (SFT). In this regard, this chapter further explores how SFL and typology are harmoniously integrated and delves into the origin, features, and methodology of SFT.

Chapter 3 embarks on a cross-linguistic exploration of the morpho-syntactic features of the EC by analyzing three composite elements, i.e. the Existent (E), the Locative (L), and the Process (P). Wang observes that the existential meaning of ECs predominantly lies in either P or L, or in both collectively. In particular, the L primarily conveys existential meaning using prepositional phrase, locative case, or both, while the P contributes to this meaning by employing verbs such as “have” and “be at”. Wang holds that both the EC and its equivalent locative clause convey the same experiential meaning, yet they differ in the definiteness of the E and the discourse perspectives. These variations manifest themselves through word order, the choice of P, and the (non)-use of articles. Thus, it offers further evidence that the functional and semantic features significantly shape the morpho-syntax of the clause.

Chapter 4 is devoted to an interesting topic, the subject of the EC. Cross-linguistic evidence shows that the subject of the EC can be categorized into three types: the locative element (L), the existent (E), and the dummy/null subject, with the first two types being most prevalent. Wang explains the variation of subjects

in ECs by stating that it is due not only to typological features of particular languages, but also to the special features of ECs, including agentivity, topicality, and animacy. It is also noted that though the L and the E are not the typical subjects, they exhibit a degree of subject-like features, which are subsequently reflected in their morpho-syntactic expression.

Chapter 5 discusses the definiteness effect (DE) as manifest in ECs across languages. It is precisely this effect, Wang notes, that is especially salient in ECs and their canonical counterpart, locative clauses (p. 68). Both can represent the same state of affairs, but are different in the definiteness of E. That is, indefinite nominal groups appear as E in ECs, definite ones in the locative clause. Wang presents a comprehensive stratificational model to account for DE and proves that it is a universal phenomenon that arises from the complex interplay of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors. Specifically, the discourse function of ECs is to introduce a new entity, serving as input to its semantics to assert/establish its existence. Meanwhile, it is conveyed semantically and realised lexico-grammatically, e.g. by different case marking, word order, choice of different P (p. 69). Thus, it is argued that the DE is more appropriately interpreted as a functional tendency rather than a syntactic restriction.

In Chapter 6, Wang proposes a distinction between entity- and event-existentials, with the latter often overlooked in the literature and shows why it matters. Entity-existentials are realized by a nominal group denoting a first-order entity and call for an NP analysis; event-existentials are realized by a process denoting a second-order entity and require a small-clause analysis. This distinction has implications for several long-standing issues. Specifically, it clarifies the status of the coda (as an anchoring adjunct in entity-existentials vs. the predicate of a small clause in event-existentials), explains why predication restriction targets only event-existentials (where the postverbal predicate forms a predication with the noun head), and dissolves apparent violations of the definiteness effect by locating it exclusively in entity-existentials, where definiteness is a property of first-order nominals.

To further explore the distinction between entity- and event-existentials, Chapter 7 probes into event-existentials in Chinese, including pseudo-existentials, clauses with the possessor as subject and the possessed as object, (dis)appearance existentials. In entity-existentials, the existence is conveyed through syntactic configuration as “NG_L + VG + NG”, with the NG expressing the existent. However, in event-existentials, the existence is expressed through its juxtaposition with the clause-initial NG_L, with the VG and NG jointly expressing the event. Wang also analyzes four semantic features in event-existentials, including existentiality, eventuality, impersonality and ergativity. Among them, the semantic feature of existentiality is shared by both event-existentials and entity-existentials, while the other three are unique to event-existentials. He concludes that the two types of existentials form a continuum, each occupying a pole, relating to the other through different degrees of thingness and eventuality (p. 106).

Chapter 8 examines the semantic feature of impersonality in ECs by citing stud-

ies from across languages. This chapter first explores how impersonal clauses are defined syntactically and semantically. It is shown that impersonal features are more closely related to event-existential than entity-existentials. Wang further explains that event-existentials and entity-existentials are syntactically similar in impersonal characteristics. However, event-existentials comply with impersonals in semantic terms by demoting or suppressing the agent of the process, whereas entity-existentials fail to conform to this syntactic definition. It is found that one notable feature in event-existentials in English is that they convey both factual/objective statements as well as non-committal remarks, which allows the speaker to choose a detached attitude from the situation described (p. 117).

Chapter 9 further discusses impersonal clauses in Chinese (ICiC), also called pseudo-existential in the literature, which resemble canonical existentials but cannot be transformed into *yǒu*-clauses. Wang challenges existing views by indicating that the process in these clauses can be either transitive or intransitive. He also advises to use “medium” (the participant through which the process is actualized) and “range” (the specification or scope of the process) in place of “patient” to describe the direct participant. It is argued that ICiCs are impersonal, ergative and existential. The feature of impersonality is evident in the demotion or complete omission of the actor in the process; ergativity in conveying the meaning of *happening* rather than *doing*; and the existential meaning in presenting the existence of events relative to a location. Wang indicates that ICiCs are genuine existentials, with the existent being an event as they share characteristics with entity-existentials in conveying existential meaning and indefiniteness.

Chapter 10 moves from ECs to other locationals by investigating how existential and possessive clauses are related. Morpho-syntactically, cross-linguistic evidence reveals similarities between existentials and possessives that are manifest in word order, in case marking, and in the choice of verbs realizing the Process (Wang & Xu, 2013). Semantically, the relatedness is evident in the definiteness effect, in the locative feature, and in the mutually defining relationship between the semantic elements within each construction. All locationals are relational processes, based on two semantic features: the definiteness of the existent and the humanness of the locative element. This systemic relationship between locationals, in turn, sheds light on SFL, especially in analyzing relational process.

The final chapter concludes the study by summarizing its major findings and outlining directions for further research. Wang not only provides a comprehensive treatment of ECs from multiple perspectives, supported by cross-linguistic data, but also explains their distinctive properties by relating form to meaning and function. The study concludes that the morpho-syntactic features of ECs are not arbitrary; rather, the syntax of ECs reflects their semantic properties, which are in turn shaped by contextual factors.

3. Strengths and Weakness

With such wide-ranging and in-depth insights, this book is a comprehensive in-

vestigation of ECs, making a significant contribution to both syntax and functional linguistics. In assessing the strengths of the book, several key aspects stand out.

First, a significant contribution of this book lies in the methodological innovation that combines SFL with a typological perspective in the analysis of ECs. Traditionally, studies of ECs have focused on either their non-canonical morphosyntax or semantic and discourse functions, with little integration between the two. Wang addresses this gap by building on Halliday's (1994) view that language is a semiotic system, integrating it into an analysis of how the functions and meanings of ECs are realised in their lexicogrammatical forms. Within the SFL model, ECs are analysed in the ideational strand as relational processes characterised by an Existent, the Locative element, and the Process. The approach moves beyond the static syntactic description; instead, it examines how choices in transitivity, participant structures, and circumstantial elements function together to realise specific communicative purposes. This establishes a link between form and communicative function, allowing for a unified account that combines syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic perspectives.

More specifically, by deploying key SFL concepts including system, structure, transitivity, ergativity, metafunction, and context, morpho-syntactic features such as subjecthood, definiteness effect, impersonality, and ergativity are re-examined from a functional perspective, revealing their roles in meaning-making rather than treating them as isolated structural features. A central example is the reconceptualisation of the definiteness effect as an *entry condition* within the SFL framework. Instead of treating the DE as a rigid syntactic constraint, an approach found in earlier accounts (Milsark, 1974; Freeze, 1992; Abbott, 1993), Wang re-frames it as a functional tendency deriving from the primary communicative role of existential clauses, namely, asserting the existence of the Existent. This shifts the focus away from narrow morphosyntactic definiteness marking towards a broader semantic-pragmatic grouping of noun phrase types and uses, some of which are grammatically definite yet do not invariably trigger the effect. Wang explains why such syntactic features of ECs are non-arbitrary and how syntactic realisation interacts with semantic and pragmatic motivations. This reinterpretation not only provides implications for the issues that purely syntactic accounts cannot address but also offers a comprehensive stratificational approach that connects syntactic features to communicative functions.

Viewed holistically, by integrating SFL with cross-linguistic observations, Wang extends SFL into cross-linguistic comparison and reinforces the view that language is a semiotic system realised in lexicogrammatical form (Halliday, 1994). In this regard, the book bridges the formalist-functionalist divide and offers an SFL-based alternative to syntactic theories in the study of ECs.

Second, Wang makes significant theoretical contributions to the study of ECs, particularly by offering solutions to the long-debated question of subjecthood and proposing the distinction between entity existentials and event existentials.

The specialised, non-canonical structure of ECs has made subjecthood a matter of controversy (Clark, 1978; Bugenhagen, 2002). To provide a holistic account of subjecthood in ECs, Wang treats it as a prototype, namely, a cluster of semantic features, including agentivity, topicality, and animacy. He not only examines how the subject function is realised at the morphosyntactic level, but also analyses subjects as a cluster of features and their distribution across existential and locative constructions, thereby explaining their morphosyntactic behaviour. This approach contributes to our understanding of subjecthood in ECs and opens new avenues for investigating the role of semantic features.

A further theoretical advance is the distinction Wang draws between entity and event existentials, which shifts attention from the mere existence of entities to the existential encoding of events. He observes that the often-ignored issue concerns the nature of the existent in ECs, which may be either an entity or an event. Wang challenges the prevalent assumption that ECs always signify the existence of entities (Cruschina, 2015) and introduces the term “event existentials” for clauses whose existents are events. This distinction bears on several long-standing controversies. It offers a novel perspective for analysing Chinese grammar, including pseudo-existentials, the Wang-Mian clause, and (dis)appearance existentials—and helps to clarify debates over the definiteness effect, coda analysis, and the predication restriction.

Third, compared with other syntactic studies, this book stands out methodologically through its sample of 80 languages—a feature bound to impress readers. Adopting a typological perspective, it examines both variation patterns and universal features manifested in ECs. Because the large-scale sample is characterized by wide geographical distribution, all observations and generalizations are grounded in empirical data, ensuring cross-linguistic validity. In Chapters 3 - 6, 8 and 10, Wang draws on this database to provide a detailed, data-driven analysis of the morphosyntactic features, subjects and types of ECs; this typological evidence, in turn, supports the functional hypothesis regarding the natural relationship between meaning and wording.

Yet, it does not mean the book is spared from any limitations. The limitations deriving from its pioneering integration of typology and SFL on ECs, indeed, highlight directions for future research. While Wang provides an insightful account of impersonality in ECs from syntactic and semantic perspectives, future research could build on this by exploring its interpersonal function within the framework of SFL, as impersonality often connects to cultural conventions and politeness strategies. Additionally, the extensive data on Sino-Tibetan and Austronesian languages offers insights into conventionalised expressions and metaphors within those cultural contexts, yet a wider range of African and Indigenous American languages can be included to diversify the empirical base and test the validity. Moreover, the innovative focus on affirmative existential clauses from a cross-linguistic perspective within the framework of SFL also invites the investigation of their negative ones, including the negative existentials and “Negative

Existential Cycle” (Croft, 1991; Veselinova, 2013). Investigating how their formal realization interacts with functions across languages would strengthen the cross-linguistic validity of Wang’s model.

These minor deficits notwithstanding, this theoretically-grounded and data-driven volume stands as an innovative and invaluable contribution to the study of the EC from a cross-linguistic perspective and within the framework of SFL. This comprehensive resource will be an appealing source for those seeking to deepen their understanding of ECs, while also attracting scholars and students engaged in linguistics, especially in syntax and functional linguistics. As Wang affirms, this book “gives support to the general theoretical claims made in SFL” and proves “the validity of SFT” (p. 165), which will inspire more novel and fruitful research endeavors in SFT.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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