

# A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of English Existential Sentences

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Due to the particularity of structure and the universality of use, English existential sentences have always been one of the topics concerned by linguists. Within the framework of cognitive linguistics, this paper uses a variety of theoretical perspectives (iconicity principle; grammaticalization; Prototype Category Theory) to make a multi-dimensional analysis of English existential sentences, including the generation, development and meaning expansion of English existential sentences. Cognitive linguistics contributes to the deepening of the study of English existential sentences, and the focus of the study shifts from the surface level to the deeper level.

*Keywords:* English existential sentences, iconicity principle, cognitive linguistics

## Introduction

English existential sentence is a language item concerned by different language schools. Existential sentence, defined by Chomsky, N. (1957), is simply a sentence pattern that means there is someone or something in a place. Radford, A. (1997) defined existential sentences in the process of studying existential sentences and pointed out that existential sentences are a specific kind of sentence structure, which is often used to express the existence and orientation of people, things and ideas. After that, many researchers concluded that English existential sentence is a sentence structure composed of an expression of there be or a non transitive verb. There be here should meet the requirements of unstressed guide words. This definition has been accepted and recognized by a large number of scholars, and this definition can avoid ambiguity and controversy. Existential sentence has always been a focus in the field of linguistics and has become a focus discussed and controversial by many linguists and linguistic schools.

## Iconicity Analysis of English Existential Sentences

### Iconicity Overview

In today's cognitive linguistics research, the analysis and research on the iconicity of language symbols is a subject that people attach great importance to. It mainly refers to the natural relationship between language structure and human experience or conceptual structure. When there is a parallel relationship between the external structure and the internal concept of a language expression, the language expression has iconicity. If it is found that there is a parallel relationship between the external form and the connotation of a language sentence, such a language also has syntactic iconicity. With the deepening of the study of language iconicity, more and more researchers take syntactic iconicity as the key content and actively summarize the principle of iconicity, which provides many powerful references for language education and language development. At the

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level of English language analysis and understanding, it has become the consensus of the majority of researchers to take iconicity analysis as a breakthrough.

### **Sequential Iconicity**

Sequential iconicity, defined by Frezz, R. (1992), refers to the state that in a complete language text, the language components constituting the text will be effectively arranged in a certain order. The order of language and behavior is usually highly consistent. Relevant studies have pointed out that sequential iconicity is often a linear order in language. There are usually two kinds of structures in English existential sentences: There + VP + NP + location phrase and location phrase + VP + NP. After the comparative analysis of the two structures, they have the same composition, that is, VP + NP. This component reflects a chronological order, such as the emergence and disappearance of things. The person who performs the action sends out a certain action, but in the short-term perception, it is often unable to be clearly understood by the other party, which will form a fuzzy and novel perception.

### **Quantitative Iconicity**

The complex cognitive concepts and language forms represented by quantitative iconicity are consistent. It shows that the amount of information at the conceptual level is larger, more important and unpredictable. The corresponding language expression will become longer and increase the complexity of language expression. At the cognitive level, very complex and cumbersome information often needs more attention and time to ensure the smooth understanding of complex content. When the syntactic or morphological complexity increases gradually, the elements that can carry meaning will also increase. In short, if the meaning is more complex, the syntactic morphology is more complex. If the more information, the more codes, and the stronger the importance of the information given, the more coding materials can be provided.

## **Grammaticalization Analysis of English Existential Sentences**

Grammaticalization, defined by Milsark, G. L. (1979), usually refers to the process or phenomenon of transforming words with real meaning into words with no real meaning and expressing grammatical functions. Grammaticalization actually means that after the word meaning is abstracted to a certain extent, it causes the word meaning to become empty, so that it eventually loses its original lexical meaning and becomes a grammatical unit that only represents grammatical relations or grammatical functions. Lexical items and structures enter a language environment to represent the evolution of grammatical functions. Once these lexical items and structures are grammaticalized, they continue to develop new grammatical functions. The change of English existential sentence from the first symbolic structure, i.e., place adverbial + VP + NP to the second structure, there + VP + NP + A, is actually a process of grammaticalization.

The grammaticalization process of “there” is actually its virtualization process, that is, “there” gradually loses its original meaning as a notional word and slowly changes into a process with the nature of only functional words. “There”, as a meaningful adverb, is used to indicate place and direction. For example, A tree is over there. Here, “there” is no exact direction indication. Of course, we can guess that there is a certain consensus between the speaker and the listener. Therefore, even if the “where” is not clearly pointed out, both sides know where it is. “There” should be stressed at this time. In the “There” sentence pattern, “there” is no longer a notional word with real meaning, but a marker and sentence initiation word indicating existence. For example: There is an apple on the table. In this sentence, “there” does not have its original meaning, but plays a

grammatical function. At the same time, “on the table” is used to indicate the specific spatial position in the sentence and balance the sentence structure. At this time, there should be lightly read. This process is the first stage of grammaticalization of there, that is, phonetic weakening. The second stage is the process of morpheme syntactic change, that is, the process of fixing the word order of “There” sentence pattern.

In the previous analysis, we see that people use the sentence pattern of There Be + NP. However, with the increase of this usage, people gradually do not agree with the syntactic change of this morpheme, but slowly accept it until it is widely accepted. The third stage is functional change. The process of functional change is the transformation of lexical semantics from real meaning to grammatical meaning, that is, the process of lexical semantic loss. With the increasing application of existential sentence patterns in daily oral English, people no longer care what meaning there expresses in “There” sentence patterns, and the sentence patterns gradually evolve into “there is” or “there are”. At the same time, “there” also slowly lost its original practical significance, but becomes a grammatical function that plays an important role in the sentence, and uses prepositional phrases that represent orientation or space to achieve the balance of the sentence. After realizing the function transformation, there can no longer refer to a specific thing, and can express abstract concepts.

### **Prototype Category Theory Analysis of English Existential Sentences**

Categorization is a process in which the human brain uses language symbols to turn the complex external world into orderly information. Aristotle is the earliest scholar who systematically expounds category in the history of western philosophy. Prototype is a typical member of category, which enjoys more attributes with other category members. Therefore, it is the core member of category. Other members are located in different positions of the category according to the similarity with the prototype members, and constitute the edge members of the category. From the most typical members to the most marginal members, their family similarity is decreasing.

Although there is a boundary between one category and another, the boundary is fuzzy. A certain cognitive object may completely become a member of a category, while another cognitive object may be partially classified in the category, and the members of the two categories may have something in common. The prototypic category has the following characteristics: the prototypic nature of category members, the fuzziness and openness of category boundary and the centrality of category structure. The archetypal nature of category means that the determination of category is mainly based on archetypal members, that is, typical members. Prototype is in the center of category, with the ideal value of category, the greatest distinction and the most amount of information. Therefore, archetype is the reference point for determining other category members and the most important basis for category establishment and category identification.

The prototypic characteristics of category are closely related to the centripetal characteristics of category, that is to say, category is a continuous body with prototype as the center and family resemblance as the link to gradually expand outward. No matter how remote the end of the continuum, the category edge member must have some degree of similarity to the member closer to the center of the continuum. The fuzziness of category boundary means that the boundary of category has certain elasticity and there is no clear boundary. There is always a transition region between two adjacent categories, which is gradual, and the boundary between them is not clear-cut. The fuzziness of category boundary is closely related to the openness of category. Just because the boundary of category is fuzzy, the scope of category can be expanded or reduced, the category is open.

Prototype Category Theory provides a new perspective for us to analyze English existential sentences. Next, we explore English existential sentences from Prototype Category Theory.

- a. There is an apple on the table
- b. There were many uprisings in history.
- c. There is no doubt in my mind.

This category has a prototype member, namely, (1)a. Because the structure of (1)a is: there be + NP + place adverbial, which means that there is a specific object in a specific spatial position. Existence is a visible and touchable entity. This is the most natural and typical meaning of English existential sentences. It is also a structure that children learn first and second language learners learn most easily. Therefore, it is a typical member of the category of existential sentences. It has the ideal value of category and is in the central position in the category. It becomes the reference point for other members of cognition. From (1)a to (1)b, it has experienced metaphorical expansion, mapping the specific concept of space to the abstract concept of time. Its structure becomes There Be + NP + time adverbial, indicating that “there is something at a certain time”, and the being is an intangible abstract event.

From (1)b to (1)c, after another metaphorical expansion, the concept of time is further extended to more abstract emotional events. Its meaning is: There is a certain emotion in someone’s heart, and the existence is a more abstract and unpredictable emotion. In other words, from (1)a to (1)c, the adverbial of place is mapped from the specific spatial domain to the abstract temporal domain, and then to the more abstract emotional domain. The NP in the sentence is also expanded from the specific material noun to the abstract event noun, and finally to the emotional noun. This change process not only shows the development process of the category of existential sentences, but also confirms the cognitive law of people's understanding of things from known to unknown, from concrete to abstract.

To sum up, through the prototype analysis of English existential sentences, the expansion process of the category of existential sentences and the deep relationship between the sentence patterns within the category become clear.

### Conclusion

Through the discussion of the cognitive motivation of English existential sentences, we can understand that the structure generation of existential sentences is the embodiment of human visual perception, psychological perception, thinking order and cognitive economy principle. This research model and result break through the internal limitations of language structure in generative linguistics. Although some phenomena cannot be fully explained, it is believed that through the unremitting efforts and research of linguists, we will have a deeper understanding of language cognition and play a positive role in promoting language learning.

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