Existentials: from Angst to Harmony?

David I. Beaver, Ivan Garcia, Itamar Francez and Dmitry Levinson and Line Mikkelson.
Stanford University and UC Berkeley

Since Milsark's pioneering work there have been numerous attempts to explain the distribution of NPs in there-insertion contexts. However, every one of these approaches suffers from major empirical limitations, as shown in the table below.[1]

	Ordinary							Abstract		Presentational		
	cardinal	universal	mon↓	non-cons	k-place det	partitive	possessive	kind univ	possibility univ	trivial	remind	other def
Barwise&Cooper 83	y	y	y	?	?	n	n	n	n	?	?	?
Keenan 87	y	y	y	n	n	n	n	n	n	y	n	n
Keenan 03	y	y	y	y	y	n	n	n	n	y	n	n
McNally 98	y	y	*	n	n	y	y	y	n	?	y	y
Zucchi 95	y	y	y	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n	n
Ward&Birner 95	y	y	?	?	?	?	y	y	y	?	y	y
Corpus examples:	*a man*	*(* every man)*	*no man*	*only the woman*	*more cats than dogs*	*every member of*	*a woman's shoe*	*every kind of*	*every chance that*	*at least zero*	*Charles, for example*	*the same reaction*

In recent work, Mikkelsen (2002) has shown that aspects of the distribution of NPs in Danish existentials can be explained in terms of properties of canonical subjects, and the avoidance of NPs which lack those properties. More precisely, she derives distributional properties of existentials by harmonically aligning a scale preferring subjects to a scale preferring definites (cf. Aissen 1999, 2003). However, Mikkelsen originally only considered three broad types of NP — definites, standard indefinites and generic indefinites. Thus she did not even attempt to account for the full complexity of NP distribution, as indicated for English in the table above. Furthermore, while Mikkelsen's work was strongly suggestive of a cross-linguistic typology of existential-like constructions, the original data was drawn almost exclusively from Danish.

We will describe a model that extends Mikkelsen's original proposal in several ways, using the resulting account to recast many of the insights in prior literature on existential constructions. First, we use a much finer grained taxonomy of NP types, and show that in many cases plausible universal preferences for subject properties can explain the distribution of existentials. Second, we will show that our new proposal is promising as regards languages that have existential-like constructions with different distributional properties than English or Danish. An important feature of the new model is that licensing of NPs in there-insertion contexts becomes an inherently gradient phenomena, whereas previous accounts have generally assumed an underlyingly categorical distribution. As well as English and Danish, we will draw on data from Hebrew, Russian, Spanish, and Dutch.

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[1]Key: y = correct distribution predicted for basic cases; * = correct distribution but problematic analysis; ? issue not discussed, predictions unclear; n = issue not discussed, predictions appear incorrect. Corpus examples were collected by the current author and all have the form *there is/are/was/were* followed by the string given, possibly followed by additional material. Full examples will be presented in the talk. The table (and talk) is based solely on *there+be*, not *there*+unaccusative constructions.