

Existential sentences in Chinese have the verb “有” serving as the predicate, with the subject and the object respectively expressing a (spatial or temporal) setting and someone/something that exists in that setting. It has previously been observed that the object of this construction “is *in many cases* an indefinite nominal expression, *generally* accompanied by a quantifier, and cannot be a bare noun” (劉月華等 1983). Thus the underlined parts of (1) and (2) would be regarded as typical existential sentences.

(1) 我抬頭一看發現樹上有 一 只 熊貓, ……

tree on be one CLF panda

When I casually looked up, there was a panda up in the tree ...

(2) 從前 有 座 山, 山上住着一群土匪。有一天, ……

previously be CLF mountain

Once upon a time there was a mountain, where bandits lived. One day, ...

As the phrases “in many cases” and “generally” suggest, however, there are actually quite a few existential sentences with their object positions filled by either definite noun phrases or bare nouns unaccompanied by quantifiers.

(3) 家里情况挺好的, 有一老人, 有 我 爱人, 有两个小孩儿。

House-in are I wife (《当代北京口语语料 东城》)

[Things were going well in the house, where there were an old man, my wife and two children.]

[家のなかはうまく行っていて、年寄りが一人がいて、私の妻がいて、子供が二人いた。]

(4) 乌鸦看见一个瓶子。瓶子里 有 水。(《小学語文》)

bottle-in is water

[The crow saw a bottle. In the bottle was water.]

The question naturally arises: what are the circumstances in which either the object of an existential sentence need not be an indefinite noun phrase (i.e. it can be definite) or a bare noun without an accompanying quantifier is allowed to serve in that capacity? To the best of my knowledge, no attempt has been made to give a clear answer to this question.

The purpose of my presentation is to take another look at the properties of existential sentences in Chinese from a syntactic and a functional perspective, focusing on the (in)definiteness of the object nominal as well as the presence/absence of an accompanying quantifier.