

# The Correlation between Possessive and Existential Constructions in English and Chinese

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**Abstract:** Chinese possessive sentences (e.g., “I have a pen”) and existential sentences (e.g., “There is a bird in the tree”) both use the predicate 有 (“have/exist”) and exhibit similar syntactic structures. In English, however, possessive and existential constructions are syntactically distinct, yet both are translated into Chinese with 有. Moreover, English prepositional phrases headed by with (e.g., “dry with scattered showers”) also correspond to 有 in Chinese. While prior studies have noted syntactic parallels between Chinese possessive and existential sentences, their cognitive connection remains unexplored, and the three English constructions have not been examined together. This paper argues that Chinese possessive and existential constructions share the same underlying conceptual schema: both encode an attachment relation between a host and a dependent. The English with-construction, though translated simply as 有, retains an underlying semantic sense of accompaniment.

**Keywords:** possession; existential; possessive construction; existential construction

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## 1. Introduction

Possessive constructions reflect the recognition of several distinct relationships in the objective world, including ownership, part-whole relations, kinship, and others. Within grammatical categories, however, the possessive construction is the formal expression of a possessive relation. As a semantic concept, possession is universal to human cognition.

Regarding English possessive constructions, scholars such as Heine (1997)<sup>[1]</sup>, Payne & Barshi (1999)<sup>[2]</sup>, and Dixon (2010)<sup>[3]</sup> classify them into two main types: attributive possession (e.g., Owen’s jacket) and predicative possession (e.g., I have a dog). Payne & Barshi (1999)<sup>[2]</sup> define attributive possession as a construction that contains both a possessor and a possessed entity, as in Lily’s flower or the flower of Lily. Predicative possession, on the other hand, refers to constructions in which the possessive relation is expressed by a predicate, such as I have a pen or The pen is mine. Predicative constructions typically employ the possessive verb have or a copula followed by a possessive expression. The present study focuses exclusively on the latter type—that is, predicative possessive constructions.

Additionally, there exists a construction introduced by the preposition with (e.g., Many places are dry at first with scattered showers in the afternoon). Semantically it resembles both possessive and existential meanings, yet structurally it falls into neither category. To date, no clear classification has been established for this type of sentence in the literature. Such sentences frequently appear in English weather-forecast texts to describe local weather variations.

Huddleston & Pullum (2005)<sup>[4]</sup> define existential constructions as sentence structures that express the existence, appearance, or disappearance of someone or something in a certain location. They further distinguish between existential clauses, which indicate that something exists in a particular location or during a specific period, and presentational clauses, which indicate the appearance or disappearance of something in a given location or timeframe—collectively termed existential-presentational clauses.

In English, existential sentences are realized through two main structures:

The “there + predicate + existent” construction, in which there functions as a dummy subject, the predicate is typically a verb expressing existence or appearance (e.g., be, exist, appear, arrive, remain), and the existent is a noun phrase representing the entity in question. This type is referred to as there-existential clauses (e.g., There appeared no imminent danger).

The “locative adjunct + predicate + subject” construction, where the predicate is often the copula be or verbs such as stand or lie that denote posture or manner of existence. This form is also called subjective-predicative inversion existential clauses (e.g., At the foot of the hill stands a small village).

Existential constructions are closely related to possessive constructions. In English, research on possessive and existential structures has largely focused on their syntax or semantics individually, or on comparing the two, while overlooking the preposition with-introduced construction that semantically intersects with both. In Chinese, the relationship between existential and possessive sentences has long been a focus of scholarly attention due to their structural similarities—shared word order and verbal argument structure, among other commonalities. However, few studies have approached the connection between these two constructions from a cognitive perspective.

This paper compares Chinese and English possessive and existential sentences, analyzes the with-construction that carries existential meaning, and explains why its Chinese translation also employs the predicate 有 (“have/exist”).

## 2. A comparison of possessive and existential constructions

In Chinese, possessive and existential constructions exhibit similar syntactic forms and share the same typical predicate, leading most scholarly discussions to focus on their distinctions. In English, by contrast, possessive and existential structures differ syntactically, and existing research has primarily examined their semantics while overlooking the possessive or existential meanings conveyed by with-introduced expressions. This section summarizes scholarly perspectives on both possessive and existential constructions, as well as a review of studies on the preposition with.

### 2.1. Possessive constructions

Predicative possession refers to a possessive construction in which the possessive relationship is expressed by a predicate. In Chinese, the primary predicate in possessive sentences is the character “有”. Research on possessive structures can be traced back to Mashi Wentong. In *800 Words in Modern Chinese*, the entry for “有” first defines it as indicating possession or ownership, using “有” to express possessive relations. Yuan (2009: 294–295)<sup>[5]</sup> points out that the possessive relations expressed by “有” sentences in Mandarin mainly fall into four types: possession, containment, inclusion, and existence. In English, the word “have” is commonly used to denote possession. Quirk et al. (1985: 245–246)<sup>[6]</sup> argue that the semantics of “have” primarily include possession, acquisition, and obligation.

Heine (1997)<sup>[1]</sup>, Payne & Barshi (1999)<sup>[2]</sup>, and Dixon (2010)<sup>[3]</sup> classify English possessive constructions into two main types: attributive possession (e.g., Owen’s jacket) and predicative possession (e.g., I have a dog). In attributive possession, the possessed typically serves as the head, while the possessor functions as the dependent. Predicative possession, on the other hand, refers to constructions where the possessive relation is expressed by a predicate, such as I have a pen or The pen is mine. Predicative possessive structures are mainly formed using the possessive verb have or the copula be.

### 2.2. Existential constructions

Chinese existential sentences represent a special sentence type categorized at the semantic level and are highly practical

in use. In 1999, Lu Shuxiang<sup>[7]</sup> first introduced the concept of “existential sentences” in *Essentials of Chinese Grammar*, marking a pioneering contribution in domestic linguistics. Lu suggested that existential sentences could be understood in terms of “having or not having a subject,” dividing them into those with and without an initiator (subject). He classified subject-initiator existential sentences into three categories based on temporality, locativity, and possessiveness, and considered subjectless constructions such as “有人于此” as also expressing existence and thus qualifying as existential sentences. Pan & Yan (2007)<sup>[8]</sup> proposes three criteria for identifying existential sentences: meaning, form, and a combination of both. The sentence structure of existential sentences can be summarized as “A (temporal/locative word) + B (verb expressing existence, appearance, or disappearance + aspect particle) + C (noun expressing existence, appearance, or disappearance).” While this structural pattern aids in identifying existential sentences, not all sentences conforming to this pattern in Chinese are necessarily existential. Therefore, determining an existential sentence requires both adherence to the “A+B+C” tripartite structure and the expression of existential meaning.

In English, building on prior research, Quirk et al. (1985)<sup>[6]</sup> classify existential sentences into five types: there + be, there + modal + be, there + marginal modal + be, there + semi-auxiliary + be, and there + intransitive verb. Huddleston & Pullum (2003, 2005)<sup>4</sup> refer to there-existentials with be as existential clauses and those with other predicates as presentational clauses. Chen Guohua identifies two main structures for English existential sentences: one is the “there + predicate + existent” construction, in which there acts as a dummy subject, the predicate is an intransitive verb expressing existence or appearance, and the existent is a noun phrase representing the entity—this type is called there-existential clauses. The other is the “locative adjunct + predicate + subject” construction, where the predicate is the copula be or verbs such as stand or lie that denote posture or manner of existence—also known as subjective-predicative inversion existential clauses.

### 2.3. The preposition with

The etymology of with can be traced back to the Indo-European root *wi-* (meaning separation or division), indicating that its original sense was actually “against” or “opposed to.” As a preposition, with is highly common in English, yet most studies have been limited to merely listing its semantics, usages, and classifications. Quirk et al. (1985)<sup>[7]</sup> propose that with as a preposition mainly carries five meanings: spatial, general, manner, method or means, and accompaniment. Sinclair (2001)<sup>[9]</sup> notes that with can indicate specific locations but does not elaborate further; meanwhile, with can also function as a post-modifier, qualifying the subject or object of a sentence rather than describing the manner or circumstances of an action. Zhang Daozhen (2002)<sup>[10]</sup> observes that the preposition with cannot serve as an independent syntactic element but must form a prepositional phrase to function as one, such as a gerund + with. Additionally, with can introduce phrases serving as attributives, as in a child with dark eyes, and combine with verbs to form idiomatic phrases, such as agree with. According to the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, the Chinese equivalents for with span as many as 20 meanings: together, with; possessing, having, or carrying; using, indicating means; indicating cause due to a particular psychological or physiological state; containing, including; covering with something; relating to an action or behavior; referring to people or things with particular feelings or attitudes; supporting someone or sharing their views; referring to individuals, groups, or countries involved in an activity; describing how someone does something or how something happens; indicating the position or state of someone or something; being at the same level or degree due to something; because of; being employed by, working for; indicating someone is looking after something; referring to separated objects; along with; in spite of, despite, notwithstanding; and referring to the object of a strong desire or command. Research on with reveals that it predominantly expresses accompaniment or manner, while its meaning equivalent to “have” has largely been overlooked by scholars.

## 3. The relationship between possessive and existential sentence structures

### 3.1. The connection between Chinese possessive and existential sentence structures

In Chinese, existence and possession are highly correlated: their sentence structures are similar, and they share the

same typical predicate. According to Pan & Yan's (2007)<sup>[8]</sup> criteria for defining existential sentences, the structure of an existential sentence can be summarized as "A (temporal/locative word) + B (verb expressing existence, appearance, or disappearance + aspect particle) + C (noun expressing existence, appearance, or disappearance)," and it must also convey existential meaning semantically. In contrast, Chinese possessive structures are primarily introduced by the word "有," following the pattern N1 + 有 + N2. Here, "有" functions as a verb that does not denote an action or behavior, but rather expresses a certain relationship between entities. The word "有" can indicate both possessive and existential relations, as illustrated in the following examples:

- (1) 房间里有一个人在说话。
- (2) 小明有很多书。
- (3) 院子里有一个人。
- (4) 我有一辆车。

In the four examples above, "有" may express either possession or existence. However, in subjectless sentences, it can be observed that the existential meaning of "有" has become semantically bleached, developing an indefinite reference function. The typical sentence structure in which "有" expresses existence is "somewhere + 有 + someone/something," where the locative element ("somewhere") plays a crucial role—it influences the syntactic structure and can also shift the meaning of "有." From the examples above, it is evident that the meaning of "有" depends on the word preceding it: if the preceding element is a possessor, the following element is the possessed, and "有" denotes a possessive relation; if the preceding element is a location, the following element is the existential subject, and "有" expresses an existential relation.

According to the definition in the Modern Chinese Dictionary<sup>[11]</sup>, "附着" (attachment) refers to "a smaller object adhering to a larger object." Typical attachments involve physical entities with specific spatial dimensions, and typical attachment relations are materially and spatially observable. For instance, existential sentences such as (1) "房间里有一个人在说话" and (3) "院子里有一个人" reflect this kind of typical attachment relation. Generally speaking, intangible or psychological attachment relations can be inferred from tangible, physical attachment relations. In other words, people are inclined to understand and express certain possessive relations that resemble typical attachment relations as attachment relations themselves.

From a semantic-cognitive perspective, whether it is a person or an object, whether tangible or intangible, as long as it belongs to a possessor, it is psychologically perceived as 依附 (attached) to the possessor. Similarly, the possessor is likened to the entity to which something is attached, and is thus attributed the same properties and functions as the locative element that serves as the typical "host" in existential sentences. Therefore, it becomes easier to comprehend if we regard the possessor as the host, the possessed as the dependent, and metaphorically map the abstract possessive relation onto a concrete attachment relation. In examples (2) and (4), we can treat Xiaoming and I as hosts, and books and car as dependents. Here, the relationship between Xiaoming and the books, and between myself and the car, constitutes an attachment relation—identical to the attachment relation found in existential sentences. Thus, it can be argued that possessive and existential structures share the same underlying schema: both express a relation of attachment.

### 3.2. The special construction introduced by with

Thus far, we have discussed the connection between possessive and existential constructions. However, a question remains: when Chinese sentences with "有" are translated into English, what meanings can they convey besides possession and existence? According to the Modern Chinese-English Dictionary, the word "有" corresponds to seven English translations, namely: have, possess.

Example 1: It has every advantage and no drawback.

(它有百利而无一弊。)

there is, exist.

Example 2: There are two birds in the tree.

( 树上有两只鸟。 )

used in making an estimate or a comparison.

Example 3: The water is more than 3 metres deep.

( 水有三米多深。 )

used to indicate something appearing or occurring.

Example 4: He is ill.

( 他有病了。 )

used to express the idea of having plenty of.

Example 5: He is quite a scholar.

( 他很有学问。 )

used with the meaning of “certain” or “some”.

Example 6: Certain things are still open to discussion.

( 有些事还需要商量。 )

used after certain monosyllabic verbs, the combination functioning as a single word.

Example 7: That fellow has an underhand scheme.

( 这家伙怀有不可告人的目的。 )

From the examples above, we can see that many English words can be translated into Chinese as “有,” with the two primary meanings being possession and existence. We already know that English expresses possession mainly through two structures: attributive possession and predicative possession. Similarly, English expresses existence primarily through two structures: the there-construction and the locative-adjunct + predicate + subject inversion. But how should sentences such as “Most parts of London are dry, with showers in the afternoon” be classified in English—as possessive or existential? Consider the following examples:

(5) In Scotland, some places perhaps with a heavy downpour and rumble of thunder.

( 苏格兰, 一些地方可能会有大雨和雷雨。 )

(6) In North Ireland, staying dry with patchy cloud.

( 北爱尔兰, ( 气候 ) 保持干燥, 有片状云。 )

(7) In London, dry and frosty with some fog in the morning.

( 伦敦, 早上天气寒冷干燥, 有雾。 )

(8) In Edinburgh, mostly cloudy with sleet and snow.

( 爱丁堡, 多云, 有雨夹雪。 )

In sentences (5)–(8), we can observe that these sentences semantically resemble existential or possessive sentences. However, structurally, they do not fit the characteristics of attributive possession—they lack the verb *have* or the copula *be*—nor do they belong to predicative possession. They are not introduced by *there*, so they are not *there*-existentials; moreover, they contain no existential verb and no explicit existent subject, and thus cannot be classified as existential sentences either.

Earlier, we mentioned that *with* primarily expresses accompaniment or manner. Let us first try to interpret the four instances of *with* above in terms of accompaniment. In example (5), it could be understood as “some places perhaps accompanied by a heavy downpour and rumble of thunder.” In (6), “staying dry accompanied by patchy cloud.” In (7), “dry and frosty accompanied by some fog in the morning.” In (8), “mostly cloudy accompanied by sleet and snow.” In all four examples, the preposition *with* conveys a sense of accompaniment. However, if translated literally into Chinese using only “伴随” (accompanied by), the phrasing would sound unnatural—for example, “早上天气寒冷干燥伴随雾” is not idiomatic Chinese. Therefore, it is more natural to borrow the word “有” for expression. Yet, using both “伴随” and “有” together would be redundant. Thus, “伴随” is omitted, leaving only “有,” as in “多云, 有雨夹雪,” which is more concise than “多云, 伴随有雨夹雪.” Consequently, we can interpret *with* as expressing the meaning of Chinese “有” in such contexts.

This usage frequently appears in English weather forecasts precisely because it is neither strictly possessive nor strictly existential, yet semantically it resembles both. Hence, we categorize it as a special construction situated between possession and existence.

#### 4. Summary

The structures of possessive sentences and existential sentences are closely related. Possessive sentences can generally be divided into attributive possessive sentences and predicative possessive sentences, with the latter primarily organized by the predicate have. In Chinese, possessive and existential constructions share the same underlying conceptual relation—both express an attachment relationship.

English features a special sentence structure introduced by with, which frequently appears in weather forecast texts. This construction uses with to convey the meaning of “accompaniment,” yet the intended meaning often becomes clear only through the addition of the Chinese character “有” (“have/exist”). In Chinese, to avoid redundancy, the term “伴随” (“accompanied by”) is typically omitted, leaving only “有.” Thus, with in such contexts can be understood as expressing the meaning of “有.” Structurally, this construction belongs neither to possessive nor existential categories in English, yet semantically it resembles both. Therefore, we classify it as a special structure situated between possessive and existential expressions.

#### Disclosure statement

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