Definite NPs in Mandarin You-Existentials

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Introduction
One type of English existential sentences is the there-be existential, which has the structure of (1a) and an example is provided in (1b).

(1) a. There be NP (XP) (Abbott 1993, following Milsark 1974)
   b. There is a book on the table.

Following Huang (1987), the you ‘have’-construction in Mandarin is widely recognized as the closest counterpart to there be-sentences in English. The structure and an example of you-construction can be found in (2).

(2) a. (NP) you NP (XP)
   b. you yi-ben shu zai zhuozi shang
      have one-CL book ZAI table top
      'There is a book on the table.'

In Mandarin existentials, as Abbott’s observation for English existentials (1993:41-42), “the postposing of the focus NP puts it into a position similar to that occupied by direct objects,” which tends to convey new information. As exemplified in (1) and (2), both the English focus NP a book and the Mandarin one, yi-ben shu ‘one-CL book’ are located in a post-verbal position, which is similar to an object position in both languages and tend to express new information.

A well-known phenomenon in existential sentences is DEFINITENESS EFFECT, which stands for the ungrammaticality of definite NPs occurring in existential sentences. For instance, when the sentence (3) contains an indefinite NP a book, the sentence becomes grammatical. The sentence becomes ungrammatical if it includes

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*I would like to thank Professor Barbara Abbott and Professor Cristina Schmitt for their encouragement and helpful comments. I thank my colleagues at Pragmatics class and Syntax reading group and the audience at CLS-40 for comments and suggestions. All errors are mine.


1. The Mandarin verb you ‘have’ has at least two meanings, the existential meaning as shown in (2) and the possessive meaning in (i).
   (i) ta you yi-tai xin-de jipuche
       he have one-CL new-DE jeep
       ‘He has a new Jeep.’
a definite NP, the book. In the same way, although Mandarin does not have any equivalents for the English indefinite and definite articles, a and the, the Mandarin you-existential construction is grammatical with an indefinite NP, yi-ben shu ‘one-CL book’, and ungrammatical with a definite NP, na-ben shu ‘that-CL book’, as shown in (4).

(3) There is a/*the book on the table.
(4) you yi/*na-ben shu zai zhuozi shang
    have one/that-CL book ZAI table top
    'There is one/*that book on the table.'

The Definiteness Effect, however, does not apply across the board to English or Mandarin existentials. Definite postverbal NPs can be found in these existential constructions, as in (5) and (6).

(5) A: Is there anything to eat? (Abbott 1993 ex. 4)
    B: There is the leftover chicken from last night.
(6) you na-ge xuehseng zai jiaoshi li, laoshi bu neng fangxin
    have that-CL student ZAI classroom in, teacher not can rest assured
    'There is that student in the classroom, the teacher cannot rest assured.'

Sentences (5B) and (6) are existential constructions since the basic function of such constructions, namely introducing a new entity to the discourse, is fulfilled. Then, a problem arises, why existential sentences like (3) and (4), exhibit the Definiteness Effect, but (5B) and (6) do not.

There are different explanations for the lack of Definiteness Effect in English or Mandarin. (See Abbott 1993, Ward and Birner 1995 for English; Hu and Pan 2002, Huang 1987, Li 1996, and Shi 1989 for Mandarin, inter alia.) In this paper, I assume Abbott’s pragmatic account and find that it is able not only to explain when a definite NP is allowed in Mandarin existentials, but also to accommodate the generalization found by relevant research in Mandarin, namely, Huang (1987) and Li (1996). The goal of this paper is to apply the pragmatic account for Definiteness Effect in English there be-existentials proposed by Abbott (1993) to the Mandarin data and illustrate that the definite NPs in existentials are best explained pragmatically not only in English as claimed by Abbott, but also in Mandarin.

In the next section, I will start sketching Abbott’s account and then her model will become clearer when I go on discussing other researchers’ accounts and comparing their differences and similarities with Abbott’s pragmatic account. In the last section, I will have concluding remarks.
Accounts for the Definite NPs in Existentials

A Pragmatic Account: Abbott 1993
Abbott (1993:42-44) argued that there are two kinds of existentials (summarized in table 1). Abbott (1993:42) notes that “NPs which do not presuppose the existence of their referents should be perfectly natural in the focus position of an existential.” This kind of existential naturally occurs at the beginning of a discourse and is what she calls NONCONTEXTUALISED EXISTENTIAL (NE). In contrast, “NPs which do presuppose existence require special contextualization and their existentials cannot initiate a discourse” — this is the CONTEXTUALISED EXISTENTIAL (CE).

Table 1  Two kinds of existentials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NONCONTEXTUALISED EXISTENTIALS</th>
<th>CONTEXTUALISED EXISTENTIALS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NE:</td>
<td>CE:</td>
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<tr>
<td>— can appear with/without contexts</td>
<td>— must appear with contexts</td>
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<tr>
<td>— naturally occur at the beginning of a discourse</td>
<td>— cannot initiate a discourse</td>
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In NEs:
— the NP does not presuppose the existence of its referent
— the NP has a locational or predicative phrase following it
— the XP is a separate constituent from NP and is usually filled, as in (7).

(7) There’s [\_\_ a book] [\_\_ on the table].

In CEs,
— the NP presupposes the existence of its referent
— the XP, e.g. *on the table* in (8B), is a part of the NP. ((7) (8A, B1) from Abbott 1993)

(8) A: What can I use to prop open the door?
B: There’s [\_\_ the book on the table].

The types of existential sentences discussed in Abbott’s paper (1993) can be summarized in the following table. From table 2, we can see that both NE and CE can have indefinite and definite focus NPs. The types that have an indefinite NP, (9)-(10) and (13)-(14), are existentials that we usually encounter. However, the sentences with a definite NP, as shown in (11)-(12) and (15), contradict the Definiteness Effect. Although in cases like (11) and (12), a definite focus NP can appear in an NE, most definite NPs need to appear in a CE, as (15), to get felicitous interpretation.

Table 2

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Existential Types</th>
<th>Form of the NP</th>
<th>(all examples from Abbott 1993)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NE</td>
<td>Indefinite</td>
<td>(9) There is [a fire escape] [outside the window].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(10) Partitive: There are [any of several options] [open</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| CE | Definite | (11) Cataphoric definite: There were [the expected hoots and catcalls] [after the speech].
|     | (12) Semantically indefinite: There is [the most beautiful house] [for sale in the next block].
| Indefinite | (13) A: What can I give to John? B: There is [a book on the table].
|     | (14) Partitive: A: Who is there left to be interviewed? B: There are [some of the people in the bedroom].
| Definite | (15) A: Is there anything to eat? B: There is [the leftover chicken from last night].

From a syntactic or a semantic view, the commonly cited examples in (16) are simply ungrammatical. (Abbott 1993:47)

(16) a. There is everyone in the room.
    b. There is the strange book in the room.

Following Abbott, the unacceptability of (16a-b) is a pragmatic problem. (16a-b) are CEs and are fine with contexts as in (17). ((16) (17) from Abbott’s (19) (20))

(17) a. Is there anybody we can get to help clean up?
    Well, there’s everyone in the room, for a start; and maybe we can get some of the people down the hall, too.
    b. Where do you think that awful smell is coming from?
    Well, there’s the strange book in the living room.

As Abbott claims, “an account of the definiteness effect that claimed that examples such as those in (16) were simply ungrammatical would have a hard time accounting for the wellformedness of the examples in (17).” (Abbott 1993:47)

In this paper, I assume Abbott’s pragmatic account and find that it is able not only to explain when a definite NP is allowed in Mandarin existentials, but also to accommodate the generalization found by relevant research in Mandarin, namely Huang (1987) and Li (1996).

**A Syntactic/Semantic Observation: Huang 1987**

Recall that as presented in the introduction section, English *there-be* and Mandarin *you* existentials have very similar structure, repeated below:

(18) a. (=1a) English: *there be* NP (XP)
    b. (=2a) Mandarin: (NP) *you* NP (XP)
I am going to show in this section that Huang’s observation about the structure of Mandarin existentials actually share the same spirit with Abbott’s analysis for the English data.

Huang (1987:234-235) observes that in *there be*-existentials, the meaning of a pre-nominal and post-nominal XP is different. A pre-nominal XP has a restrictive function; therefore, (19a) asserts *a dancing girl* not just *a girl*. On the other hand, a post-nominal XP has a descriptive function; thus, (19b) asserts merely the existence of *a girl* and goes on to provide a description of the girl.

(19) a. There is \[NP \text{a dancing girl}] \]. (Restrictive) CE
    b. There is \[NP \text{a girl}] \[XP dancing] \]. (Descriptive) NE

Similarly in Mandarin, an NP with pre-nominal modifier has a restrictive meaning and must appear in CE, (20B1). This CE is not felicitous in discourse-initial position.

The NP – XP sequence is descriptive and appears in an NE, (20B2), which can occur with or without contexts. Huang further notes that when XP occurs, the Definiteness effect will occur without exception. In other words, a *you NP XP* sentence as (20B2) will always be an NE preferring an indefinite focus NP.

(20) A: wo keyi song shenme liwu gei Lisi?
    I can give what gift to Lisi
    ‘What gift can I give to Zhangsan?’

    B1:(Restrictive, No definiteness effect) CE
    you yi/na-ben hen youqu-de shu. (ni keyi song gei ta)
    have \[NP one/that-CL very interesting book]. (you can give to he)
    ‘There’s one/that very interesting book. (You can give it to him.)’

    B2:(Descriptive, definiteness effect) NE
    you yi/*na-ben shu hen youqu-de (ni keyi song gei ta)
    have \[NP one/that-CL book] \[XP very interesting]. (you can give to he)
    ‘There’s one/*that book, which is very interesting. (You can give it to him.)’

Huang’s observation agrees with Abbott’s analysis of the difference between NE and CE. The NP in NE has a locational or predicative phrase following it. In NE, the XP is a separate constituent from NP and is usually filled, as in (21). In CE, the XP is a part of the NP, as in (22). Abbott also notes that for “proper names and anaphoric definites, the predicative slot must be fixed before they are introduced”. For the proper name, the *Oxford dictionary*, in (22B2), the predicative slot would be, *that you can use to prop open the door*, which has been introduced in A. ((21) (22A, B1) from Abbott 1993)
(21) There’s [NP a book] [XP on the table].
          NE   Descriptive

(22) A: What can I use to prop open the door?
    B1: There’s [NP the book on the table].
    B2: There’s [NP the Oxford Dictionary].
          CE   Restrictive

Abbott’s and Huang’s proposals are summarized in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Abbott 1993</th>
<th>Huang 1987</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **NE**
  There be [NP, NP] [NP, XP] | Indefinite | you [NP, NP] [NP, XP] |
  | Definite     | ??         |
| **CE**
  There be [NP, NP, XP] | Indefinite | you [NP, NP, XP] |
  | Definite     |             |

From Table 3, we can see that Abbott’s explanation for English existentials and Huang’s for Mandarin existentials are very similar. However, Huang’s argument will incorrectly predict the type of NE with definite NPs to be non-existent because he claims that whenever XP forms a constituent itself, the Definiteness effect will occur and the NP must be indefinite.

**A Syntactic Account: Li 1996**

Li (1996) first uses some tests to differentiate definite and indefinite NPs in existential sentences. She discovered that modals, reason expressions (adverbials), the lian...dou ‘even’ construction, and preposed objects can appear between an indefinite NP and XP, but not between a definite NP and XP. That is, definite NP-XP sequence cannot be intervened by any phrases, while an indefinite NP and XP must not be a constituent because they can be separated by other phrases. Furthermore, the you-indefinite NP sequence behaves as a constituent for it can be preposed as a unit, while you-definite NP cannot.

Accordingly, Li proposes two kinds of syntactic structure for Mandarin existentials, as presented in (23).

(23) Indefinite-type   [you indefinite-NP [IP/CP, XP]]  definiteness effect
    Definite-type      [you, VP, definite-NP, XP]  no definiteness effect

Li claims that in the Indefinite-type, you ‘have’ asserts the existence of an entity. Given that the existence of the NP is asserted, it is expected that the NP is not definite. Thus an Indefinite-type sentence will exhibit the definiteness effect. On the contrary, in the Definite-type sentences, you ‘have’ asserts the existence of an event and the sentences exhibit no definiteness effect.
Recall that for Abbott (1993), existentials can be divided into Non-contextualised Existentials (NE) and Contextualised Existentials (CE) and both types can have indefinite and definite NPs. But Li differentiates existentials based on the form, the definiteness, of the NPs. Summarizing the proposed structures for existentials by Abbott and Li in table 4, we can see that Li’s account encounters some conflicts with Abbott’s story.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Abbott 1993</th>
<th>Li 1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NE</td>
<td><em>There be</em> [NP NP] [XP]</td>
<td>Indefinite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definite</td>
<td><em>you</em> [VP NP XP]</td>
<td><em>problem!</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE</td>
<td><em>There be</em> [NP NP XP]</td>
<td>Indefinite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definite</td>
<td><em>you</em> [VP NP XP]</td>
<td>Def.-Type</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The proposals of Abbott and Li are very comparable. Yet, if both Abbott and Li are correct, there will be two structures for the type of NE containing definite NPs. For Abbott, NE has the structure of NP followed by XP while for Li, the Definite-type existential must have NP XP forming a constituent.

As is clear from table 4, Li’s structure cannot account for the type of NE containing definite NPs. According to Abbott, all NE sentences introduce a new entity into the discourse. They do not need a context and can be discourse initial. Abbott and Li agree with each other that NP and XP will not form a constituent in an existential sentence introducing a new entity. Li’s problem is that because she only considers the form of indefiniteness, her account is unable to capture that definite NPs can be connected to new entities sometimes, as shown in (24) and (25). The structure of *you* [VP NP XP] cannot be right for existentials with definite NPs cross-linguistically.

(24) NE with definite NP:
   *There are* [NP the following reasons] [XP for questioning your theory].

(25) Definite NP asserting Entity:
   *you* zhexie keyi fanbo nide lilun de liyou have [NP these can oppose your theory DE Reason]
   ‘There are these reasons to oppose your theory.’

Based on her analysis of Mandarin data, Li (1996:188) predicts that in English *there*-constructions, the definiteness effect will not appear if what is claimed to exist is not an entity [NP] but an event [NP XP]. In other words, if an existential has the structure of [NP XP] forming a constituent, the sentence asserts the existence of an event and the NP must be definite. This is what she calls the Definite-Type. This mistakenly predicts the CE containing indefinite NP type of Abbott to be non-existent, as can be seen in table 4. Following Li’s account, a sentence structure like (26B) and (27B) should not have an indefinite NP.
(26) A: What can I give to John?
   B: There is a book on the table.

(27) A: wo keyi song shenme gei Lisi?
     I can give what to Lisi
   ‘What can I give to Lisi?’

   B: you yi-ben shu zai zuo shang. (Ni keyi naqu gei ta)
       have one-CL book ZAI table on. (You can take away to he)
   ‘There’s one book on the table. (You can take it to him.)’

The structure of [NP XP] forming a constituent is able to capture the facts in
the English example (26B) and the Mandarin example (27B) nicely, while
naming this structure, the Definite-Type, is not adequate. In order to include
sentences where indefinite NP and XP can form a constituent like (26B) and (27B), Li’s
model should extend a bit by stating that when NP-XP forms a constituent, the
definiteness effect will be irrelevant, as shown in table 5. Comparing table 4 and
5, the extended version of Li’s model will have problem only in the type of NE
with definite NPs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NE</th>
<th>There be [\np NP] [\npXP]</th>
<th>Indefinite</th>
<th>you NP [v\np XP]</th>
<th>Entity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CE</td>
<td>There be [\np NP XP ]</td>
<td>Indefinite</td>
<td>you [v\np NP XP]</td>
<td>Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Definite</td>
<td></td>
<td>problem!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

Côté (1998, cited in Hu and Pan 2002), in the same spirit as Li, claims that an
existential containing a definite NP like (28) asserts the existence of an event
(Jean’s coming).

(28) French
   Il y a Jean qui est venu
   ‘There is Jean who came.’

BUT in sentences (29) and (30), the focus NPs appear alone without any XP so it
is clear that they are introducing entities not events as claimed by Li and Côté.
The argument of asserting an event cannot fully portray all existentials with
definite NPs. It is better to say that they have a ‘fixed predicative slot’, e.g. greet
the guests in (29), before they are introduced.

(29) A: Who should greet the guests? (Abbott 1992 ex.14)
   B: Well, there’s John.  Definite NP asserting Entity
Furthermore, Li (1996: 180) declares that existentials with a definite NP cannot appear as a matrix clause or a complement clause of a verb such as think or believe. They appear only in if and other adjunct clauses, time clauses, or as a sentential subject. This claim cannot be right because given Abbott’s account, as long as there is a context; they should be able to appear in matrix clause like their English counterparts. Li’s claim is based on the ungrammatical examples in (31), which some native speakers, including myself, consider grammatical. These sentences may sound weird because they are CEs and need some context. In (32), when a context is given, sentences (31a-b) are perfectly good to function as a matrix clause, (32B1), or in a think/believe sentence, (32B2). There seems to be no restriction about the types of clauses in which the existentials with definite NPs can appear.

(31) a. *you Zhangsan zai zhaogu Lisi?
have Zhangsan ZAI take care of Lisi
‘There is Zhangsan taking care of Lisi.’

b. *wo renwei/xiangxin you Zhangsan zai zhaogu Lisi
I think/believe have Zhangsan ZAI take care of Lisi
‘I think/believe there is Zhangsan taking care of Lisi.’

(32)A: ni bu zai jia de shihou, shei zai zhaogu Lisi?
you not at home DE when, who ZAI take care of Lisi
‘When you are not at home, who is taking care of Lisi?’

B1: you wo meimei/Zhangsan zai zhaogu ta
have my sister/Zhangsan ZAI take care of he
‘There’s my sister/Zhangsan taking care of him.’

B2: wo xiang/xiangxin you wo meimei/Zhangsan hui zhaogu ta
I think/believe have my sister/Zhangsan will take care of he
‘I think/believe there’s my sister/Zhangsan who will take care of him.’
In sum, Li’s syntactic account loses its generalization power in cases of NEs with a definite NP and definite NPs asserting entities while Abbott’s pragmatic account can apply in Mandarin data and save Li’s ungrammatical sentences.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that Abbott’s model can accommodate Huang’s observation (1987) for the definiteness effect in Mandarin and all those Mandarin existential sentences containing a definite postverbal NP found in Li (1996). The discussion in previous sections makes evident that a pragmatics account as Abbott’s model has more flexibility and explanatory power than a syntactic or semantic account.

It is not the linguistic form, the definiteness of the NPs, which is incompatible with existential construction. It is the function of existentials that confines the kind of NPs that can appear in it. The tendency of the NP to be formally indefinite in existentials is a reflex of the tendency to be informationally new. As long as some context information is given, a definite NP can convey novel information and thus appear in an existential sentence.

Counterexamples to the definiteness effect have long been acknowledged in Mandarin (e.g. Hu and Pan 2002, Huang 1987, 1988, Li 1996, and Shi 1989); now the definiteness effect is more like a misnomer as declared in Ward and Birner (1995).

**References**


