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A Frame Analysis of English and Ukrainian Existential Sentences: A Comparative Study

Abstract

This article provides a contrastive analysis of English and Ukrainian existential sentence patterns as a means of expressing the syntactic concept of existence. The investigation is grounded in the theoretical framework of Charles Fillmore's Frame Semantics and Marvin Minsky's frame theory. The paper conceptualizes the existential sentence pattern as a typical proposition in which the predicate requires two mandatory actants (specifically, Patient and Locative) to form a grammatically correct utterance in both English and Ukrainian. Employing both frame modelling and comparative methods, the author compares the 'default' assignments of the 'Locative slot' and the 'Patient slot' in these languages. The study's findings indicate that the 'Locative slot' has identical 'default' assignments in both English and Ukrainian. However, speakers follow different 'default' assignments when filling the 'Patient slot' with nouns representing specific classes. In English, both singular and plural forms are acceptable, whereas in Ukrainian, the plural is the preferred option.

Keywords: syntactic concept; existential sentences; frame; default assignments; Locative slot; Patient slot

1 Introduction

Over the last several decades, the number of academic studies applying a cognitive approach to the analysis of linguistic phenomena has increased. This approach proposes new methods for investigating and understanding how natural language structures conceptual content, how lexical units are represented in human consciousness, and how the process of verbalisation functions. Frame analysis, also known as frame modeling, is a primary research method in cognitive linguistics used to analyse the interaction between conscious mental processes and language and speech. As a research tool, frame analysis allows scholars to uncover the mechanisms of categorisation and analyse conceptual structures, making it a powerful method for linguistic research (Davydiuk, 2019, p. 9; Zan'kovs'ka, 2015, p. 103).

Scholars often draw an analogy between 'frame' and 'concept' as distinct ways of representing a fragment of the world. However, they also highlight key differences. A frame is linked to the process of categorisation, whereas a concept deals with the process of conceptualisation. While a frame typically consists of typified and dominant features, a concept, on the other hand, encompasses all features. Structurally, a frame is often depicted as a hierarchical scheme, while a concept is described as a semantic field with a central 'core' and a surrounding 'periphery' (Davydiuk, 2019, p. 9). These unique characteristics of the frame, particularly its hierarchical and feature-based nature, make it a particularly relevant tool for representing syntactic concepts.

In linguistic and cognitive studies, the conceptualisation and categorisation of knowledge are understood to be performed through both lexical and grammatical units. Grammatical concepts and words embody the human cognitive capacity to generalise, classify, and typify the connections and relationships between objects and phenomena in the mind (Dubrova, 2017, p. 12). These grammatical concepts can be both universal and nationally specific.

The necessity of studying syntactic concepts and their representation in language has been highlighted by numerous linguists (Adger, 2015; Dubrova, 2017), who emphasise the intricate relationship between the syntactic structure of a sentence and the meanings of its constituent words. Researchers argue that a sentence is not simply a set of words; rather, the meaning of a lexical item is fundamentally determined by the syntactic arrangement in which it appears. Consequently, comprehending the information conveyed by a sentence requires more than just knowledge of individual word meanings; it necessitates a thorough understanding of the meaning generated by the syntactic structure itself.

This analysis aims to compare the ‘default’ assignments for the compulsory actants of the existential proposition in English and Ukrainian. The goal is to establish similarities and differences between typical existential sentence patterns in both languages. The findings of this contrastive analysis have practical value and can be applied to English–Ukrainian and Ukrainian–English translation.

2 Research Methods and Research Material

To achieve the research aim, the frame analysis method was employed. This method facilitated the study of the syntactic conceptualisation of existence as expressed through existential sentences. It allowed for a detailed analysis of the syntactic slots within typical existential sentence patterns and their default assignments.

Alongside frame analysis, other linguistic methods were utilised. The methods of analysis, synthesis, and generalisation were instrumental in developing the theoretical framework of the investigation and in formulating the study’s conclusions. The comparative method was used to identify similarities and differences between typical existential sentence patterns in English and Ukrainian.

The research involved a corpus-based analysis of English literary works and their corresponding Ukrainian translations. The translations are considered valid and relevant research material because the translator acts as both a recipient and a speaker. Specifically, the translator first comprehends the denotative situation encoded in a source text utterance and subsequently recreates it in the target language. This process involves filling lexical and grammatical slots with appropriate data from the target language’s resources. By comparing the ‘default’ assignments of these slots in both the source and target sentences, the study provides a unique opportunity to investigate how different linguistic systems handle the same underlying concepts and situations.

3 Theoretical Background

3.1 Frame Modeling

The concept of a frame was introduced to the field of artificial intelligence by Marvin Minsky in the 1970s. Minsky defined a frame as “a data-structure for representing a stereotyped situation” (Minsky, 1975, p. 212). In this context, the term ‘situation’ refers to any object, concept, event, or action. Minsky conceptualised a frame as a network of nodes and relations.

Frames are structured with different levels of abstraction. The upper-level nodes (or terminals) are fixed and represent the core concept (for instance, ‘a cube’) or the action (for example, ‘cleaning a room’). These fixed elements provide the general context for the frame. The lower-level nodes, more commonly referred to as slots, are not fixed and must be filled with specific data. Each slot has specific constraints or requirements for the data it can contain. Minsky referred to these as default assignments, which represent typical or expected properties of the object or situation the frame is representing. For instance, a ‘cube’ frame might have slots for ‘color’, ‘size’, and ‘material’, with default assignments like ‘white’, ‘small’, and ‘wood’. This enables the system to make informed inferences or assumptions when information is incomplete – a defining characteristic of frame theory.

When a speaker constructs a sentence, they draw upon frames, which are mental representations of stereotyped situations, to organise and express information. These frames contain slots that are filled with specific values. A default assignment is a value that is typically associated with a particular slot within

a frame. Minsky (1975) observed that the default assignments and the number of slots associated with a specific frame can vary across different languages.

For instance, Minsky noted that in Japanese, it is more natural to specify what a living creature drinks than to simply state that it is drinking. In this context, the frame for 'to drink' has a slot for the liquid, and its default assignment is a specific liquid. This contrasts with English, where the slot for the liquid is not always obligatory. Consequently, when translating a sentence like "A hungry Wolf one day saw a Lamb drinking at a stream" from Aesop's fable "The Wolf and the Lamb" into Japanese, a translator would likely need to explicitly add the word for 'water' to fill the required slot, even though the English version omits it. The English sentence simply implies that the lamb is drinking water from the stream, while the Japanese version would require this information to be stated directly to sound natural (Minsky, 1975, p. 234).

Charles Fillmore introduced the term 'frame' into linguistics (Fillmore, 1968, 1985), interpreting Minsky's frame theory within the framework of Transformational Grammar. Initially, he conceived of a frame as a 'case frame'.

According to Case Grammar, a theory developed by Fillmore, each verb requires a specific set of deep cases (or semantic roles) to form a grammatically correct sentence. These deep cases include roles like Agent, Patient (or Object), Beneficiary, Location, and others. Fillmore distinguished between compulsory and optional deep cases. Compulsory cases are essential for a sentence's grammaticality and cannot be omitted. Optional cases, however, can be deleted without affecting the sentence's grammatical structure. For example, the verb 'to give' requires three compulsory deep cases: an Agent (who gives), a Patient (what is given), and a Beneficiary (to whom it is given). Any other deep cases, such as Location, are optional. Thus, in the sentence, "Mary (Agent) gave him (Beneficiary) an apple (Patient) in the garden (Location)", the phrase 'in the garden' can be omitted because it is an optional deep case, and the sentence will remain grammatically correct.

In the 1970s, Fillmore expanded upon his earlier work on Case Grammar to develop Frame Semantics. His theory proposes that a semantic frame is a system of concepts related in such a way that comprehending any single concept requires understanding the entire system. Conversely, a single concept can evoke or activate the complete cognitive frame to which it belongs.

Fillmore illustrated this principle with the example of the verb 'to sell'. One cannot fully grasp the meaning of 'to sell' without an understanding of the entire commercial transaction scenario, which includes a seller, a buyer, goods, and money. The use of the word 'to sell' consequently activates this complete commercial transaction frame in a speaker's mind. Therefore, Fillmore defined a frame as a cognitive structure that provides the necessary context for understanding concepts represented by words.

Fillmore's theory, supported by contemporary research, posits that interlocutors comprehend the meaning of linguistic expressions primarily through the activation of cognitive frames. Linguists assert that speakers interpret extra-linguistic information and convey and comprehend messages in accordance with their internalised cognitive frames (Davydiuk, 2019).

Thus, the term 'frame' refers to a conceptual structure that influences our understanding and interpretation of a situation. It is a system that determines the selection of specific lexical items, grammatical categories, and syntactic patterns.

Frame modeling, which involves analysing and contrasting the syntactic concepts of different languages, has significant practical value, especially in translation. This is because languages often have different 'default' assignments for their slots, which can lead to translation errors if not properly addressed.

Let us consider the English sentence 'John put the money into his (the) pocket'. In this example, either the possessive pronoun 'his' or the definite article 'the' must modify the noun 'pocket'. The choice between these two determiners is a 'default' assignment for this specific grammatical slot. In contrast, the equivalent Ukrainian sentence structure does not require a determiner in this position. Filling this 'Location slot' with a modifier in the Ukrainian sentence can significantly alter its meaning. Specifically, adding a determiner in this context can emphasise the noun 'pocket' and create the implication that John stole the money from someone else. This is a crucial distinction that a translator must recognise to avoid misunderstandings in the target text. A translator must therefore consider the differences between the English and Ukrainian frames to produce an accurate translation.

3.2 The Syntactic Concept

Contemporary linguistic research posits that every utterance contains a positional scheme which reflects a specific denotative situation. Linguists sometimes equate this with a proposition that includes a subject, a predicate, and optional actants. These actants are essential for the listener to fully comprehend the situation (Korol'ova, 2017, p. 461). The positional scheme is considered to be on the level of speech, as its positions can be filled by different lexical units.

While 'a positional scheme' refers to a specific denotative situation, 'a proposition' or 'typical proposition' is used to depict a generalised or typical denotative situation (Korol'ova, 2017, p. 461). Propositions are considered part of the language system itself, comprising a subject and a predicate. A proposition serves as a conceptual tool for organising human knowledge, representing relationships between objects and their characteristics, as well as relationships among objects.

A syntactic concept can be conveyed by one or more typical propositions. A typical proposition is a simplified sentence pattern that represents a generalised situation. Thus, a syntactic concept can be represented by one or more of these typical propositions (Dubrova, 2017, p. 13; Korol'ova, 2017, p. 461). Researchers have demonstrated that all verbalised messages are structured according to a limited set of these basic syntactic concepts.

The Ukrainian linguist Svitlana Zhabotynskaya identifies five basic frames: (1) the Object frame; (2) the Taxonomic frame; (3) the Possessive frame; (4) the Action frame; and (5) the Comparative frame (ZHabo-tyns'ka, 2011). In contrast, René Dirven and Marjolijn Verspoor (prominent figures in European cognitive linguistics) propose seven primary schemas: (1) the 'Being' schema; (2) the 'Happening' schema; (3) the "Doing" schema; (4) the "Experiencing" schema; (5) the "Having" schema; (6) the "Moving" schema; and (7) the "Transferring" schema (Dirven & Verspoor, 2004).

Each of these frames or schemas is composed of one or more typical propositions, which correspond to typical sentence patterns. The overarching theme of these propositions, which constitutes the syntactic concept, determines the name of the frame or schema.

While slightly differing in nomenclature and the number of categories, both classifications of schemas and frames are grounded in the same fundamental criteria: they organise the primary relationships between an entity and its properties, or between multiple entities. For instance, the 'object' frame (as per Zhabotynskaya) or the 'being' schema (according to Dirven & Verspoor) is a framework that links quantitative, qualitative, existential, locational, and temporal characteristics to an entity that is not the primary agent of an action (Dirven & Verspoor, 2004, p. 79; ZHabo-tyns'ka, 2011, p. 4). In this frame, the main participant's role is described as a 'Patient', meaning it is the entity that undergoes an action or event indicated by the predicate. Dirven and Verspoor termed this the 'being' schema because it involves the entity's various states of being. Zhabotynskaya, however, favoured the term 'object' frame because it focuses on the object to which the characteristics are attributed.

Here are some typical sentence patterns that exemplify this frame:

The Sahara is dangerous (qualitative characteristic).

The Sahara is in Northern Africa (location).

There is a desert (in Northern Africa) (existential sentence).

It is important to note that the same syntactic concept can be expressed through similar or different typical propositions across languages. Even when the sentence patterns appear to be similar, the 'default' assignments for their grammatical slots can vary. This means that seemingly identical English and Ukrainian existential sentences may have different requirements for the specific lexical or grammatical elements that fill these slots.

4 Results and Discussion

The concept of existence is a universally recognised cognitive notion that manifests linguistically in what are known as existential sentences. Scholars across various languages assert the universal nature of these

sentences (Jespersen, 1992, pp. 154–157; Mammadova, 2019, p. 349). These sentences align with the ‘being’ schema (according to Dirven & Verspoor) or the ‘object’ frame (according to Zhabotynskaya). An existential sentence is a construction that expresses the proposition of an object’s existence or non-existence, whether in the external world or an individual’s internal consciousness (McNally, 2011, p. 1830; ZHovto-briukh, 2017, p. 365). While they share certain commonalities, the structure, semantics, and pragmatics of existential sentences can vary significantly from one language to another (McNally, 2011, p. 1830).

In his case frame theory, Fillmore argues that a predicate, typically a verb, necessitates a specific number of compulsory actants to form a grammatically well-formed sentence. Research confirms that the compulsory actants for both English and Ukrainian existential sentences are the Patient and the Locative.

English speakers employ a specific syntactic pattern with the use of the expletive ‘there is / are’ to convey existence. Conversely, in Ukrainian, the concept of existence is typically expressed through word order in affirmative sentences and by using the genitive case for the noun functioning as the Patient in negative sentences. This highlights a key typological difference in how these two languages realise the same underlying semantic concept.

In Ukrainian, the word order of positive existential sentences is crucial for determining the sentence’s semantic frame. Specifically, the Predicate must precede the Patient to maintain an ‘object’ frame. The reverse word order, where the Patient precedes the Predicate, shifts the sentence to an ‘action’ frame or ‘doing’ schema (Dmytruk, 2000, pp. 182–183). For instance, the sentence ‘У цьому будинку живе молода жінка’ (There lives a young woman in this house) is an existential sentence. The Predicate ‘живе’ (lives) is followed by the Patient ‘молода жінка’ (a young woman). In contrast, if the Patient precedes the Predicate, as in ‘Молода жінка живе у цьому будинку’ (A young woman lives in this house), the proposition belongs to the ‘doing’ schema, emphasising the action rather than the existence of the object.

For negative existential sentences in Ukrainian, the positions of the Predicate and Patient do not determine the type of frame. Instead, the use of the genitive case for the noun functioning as the Patient indicates the ‘object’ frame. This is why negative existential sentences in Ukrainian are also referred to as ‘genitive sentences’ (Bondarenko, 2018). The genitive form serves as a key grammatical marker that distinguishes these sentences from their action-oriented counterparts, regardless of word order (Diachok & Popkova, 2024, p. 6).

Linguists have observed that the Locative can denote both spatial and temporal orientation (Dmytruk, 2000, p. 183). This is rooted in the idea that humans conceptualise all objects and events within the categories of space and time (Onyshchuk, 2017, p. 172). Consequently, a recipient of information naturally attempts to fill the ‘Locative slot’ in a given utterance to make sense of the context.

When an utterance expresses a generalisation, the recipient often implicitly fills the ‘Locative slot’ with lexemes like ‘ever’, ‘never’, ‘in the universe’, ‘in the world’, or ‘somewhere’. This process explains why a sentence like “There is no truth” is perceived as elliptical; the listener understands that the speaker is implicitly referring to a broader, unspecified location. The listener, therefore, comprehends the intended meaning as “There is no truth anywhere” or “There is no truth in the universe”. Thus, a Locative such as ‘in the universe’ or ‘anywhere’ is considered to be implicitly present in existential generalisations.

Let us consider the following English examples, where Locatives are absent from the existential clauses but can be easily inferred from the context:

- (1) “[...] surely there must be a power which always arranges things to happen in the most humiliating circumstances” (Greene, 2003, p. 32).
- (2) “We were witnesses, but there was no court which would ever hear our testimony” (Greene, 2003, p. 141).

The implicit nature of the Locative is further supported by the Ukrainian translation of sentence (1), where the translator explicitly added the lexeme ‘десь’ (somewhere): “[...] напевне, десь існує сила, що з її волі все трапляється за найганебніших обставин” (Hrin, 1969, p. 28). In contrast, the translator did not add a Locative in the translation of sentence (2): “Ми були свідками, та не існувало такого суду, що вислухав би наші свідчення” (Hrin, 1969, p. 118).

Locatives can also be deliberately omitted by a speaker when the location or time of an object's existence can be inferred from the context or the denotative situation. In such cases, the recipient fills the 'Locative slot' with information derived from the surrounding context or situation (Leuta, 2007, p. 38). If the locative cannot be inferred, the sentence may be incomprehensible to the listener.

In a comparative analysis of English and Ukrainian, we can observe similarities in the handling of locative adverbials. Let us examine several examples to illustrate this point:

- (3) "If I were you I would ask at the embassy whether there has been any change" (Greene, 2003, p. 111).
- (4) "There was no chance of an acquittal that day. There never had been a chance" (Snow, 1964, p. 353).
- (5) "They say this in La Granja?"
"Yes, *hombre*. I had forgotten it. But there is always much talk of offensives" (Hemingway, 1981, p. 113).

In the translation of example (3), the Locative is not explicitly rendered in the Ukrainian version (6). This is similar to the source text where a specific locative is absent.

In example (4), the English text contains the Locatives 'that day' and 'never'. However, the Ukrainian translation (7) omits them. This omission suggests that the translator considered the temporal context to be redundant, as it could be inferred from the described situation.

The most interesting case is example (5). The final sentence of the English dialogue does not explicitly fill the 'Locative slot', but the Ukrainian translator chose to add the word 'там' (there), referring to 'La Granja', in the translation (8). This shows a conscious decision to make an implicit location explicit.

- (6) "Я б спершу розпитав в посольстві, чи не сталося яких змін" (Hrin, 1969, p. 93).
- (7) "Ніякого шансу на припинення справи не було, та й не могло бути" (Snou, 1987, p. 351).
- (8) "Але про наступ там завжди ходять усілякі чутки" (Kheminhueї, 1985, p. 212).

The analysis of these texts demonstrates that the 'Locative slot' operates similarly in both English and Ukrainian, that is the slot has the identical 'default' assignments in English and Ukrainian. The locative, as a compulsory actant in a proposition, can be omitted when it can be easily inferred from the context or the denotative situation. In these instances, the Locative is considered to be implicitly present. If a recipient cannot fill this slot with the appropriate information, the sentence may be deemed grammatically incomplete or incomprehensible.

The Patient constitutes another mandatory actant within the proposition under discussion. A comparison of the requirements for the 'Patient slot' in English and Ukrainian reveals differences in the grammatical form of the noun functioning as the Patient, particularly when expressing so-called 'quantitative indefiniteness' (Vykhovanets', 2004, pp. 94–95). Quantitative indefiniteness refers to situations where the speaker does not know or does not wish to specify the exact number of objects involved. In such cases, they aim to avoid both the singular (which indicates quantitative definiteness, i.e., 'one object') and the plural (which indicates a quantity greater than one).

In English, quantitative indefiniteness is commonly conveyed through specific noun phrase constructions, such as 'an object or two' or 'one or two objects' (Jespersen, 1992, p. 198). For example:

- (9) "[...] there's always one or two matinees going on Sunday" (Salinger, 1977, p. 118).
- (10) "[...] but it would be strange if there could not be found a ghost or two in the wake of all these vagrant ghosts" (Henry, 1995, p. 75).

Although Ukrainian has similar constructions, quantitative indefiniteness is most commonly conveyed by using the plural form of a noun. Consequently, while an English speaker might fill the 'Patient slot' with phrases like 'one or two matinees' or 'a ghost or two', a Ukrainian speaker would likely use the plural form of the nouns 'matinee' and 'ghost' to express the same concept. This is demonstrated in the Ukrainian translation of sentence (9):

- (11) “[...] в неділю у них там завжди бувають денні вистави” (Selindzher, 1984, p. 88).

When a speaker wishes to deny the existence of a specific object while also denying the existence of the entire class to which that object belongs, the plural form is used to fill the ‘Patient slot’ in both English and Ukrainian. This is evident in the following dialogue, where the plural forms ‘wires’ and ‘телеграм’ are used:

- (12) “Get my wire?”
 “There haven’t been any wires” (Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 135).
 [“Ти одержав мою телеграму?”
 “Ніяких телеграм не було”] (Fitsdzheral’d, 1982, p. 131).

Unlike English, the Ukrainian language does not use articles to express the category of definiteness and indefiniteness. This category is instead conveyed implicitly, meaning Ukrainian speakers do not need to explicitly state whether an object is definite or indefinite every time they mention it. Ukrainian speakers can express definiteness or indefiniteness through various means, including definite and indefinite pronouns, syntactic structures (specifically word order), and the plural form of a noun (Vykhovanets’, 2004, pp. 94–95).

In English, the indefinite article ‘a/an’ can denote a representative of a particular class. Thus, denying the existence of a single representative can deny the existence of the entire class. An English speaker might use the singular noun with an indefinite article, or the plural form, to fill the ‘Patient slot’ in this context.

Given that Ukrainian lacks articles, the singular form of a noun in a proposition often implies a specific, definite object. To avoid this implication and convey a sense of indefiniteness or class representation, Ukrainian speakers often opt for the plural form.

Let us consider the following sentence from O. Henry:

- (13) “You should have seen him run for the chafing dish, Joe, just as if there wasn’t a servant in the house” (Henry, 1995, p. 24).

The phrase ‘a servant in the house’ refers to ‘any servant’, or ‘at least one person belonging to the class of servants’. To convey this same meaning of class negation, the Ukrainian speaker uses the plural form of the noun. That is why the noun ‘слуг’ (servants) is used in the plural in the Ukrainian translation to express the meaning of ‘no servants at all’:

- (14) “І ти б тільки подивився, як він кинувся по сковороду, наче у них немає слуг” (Henri, 1983, p. 26).

Using the singular form of ‘servant’ in the translation is also possible, but it implies that the speaker is aware of a specific person named ‘a servant’. However, in O. Henry’s story, the speaker is actually presuming the possible existence of a servant in the house. Therefore, to deny the existence of the entire class of ‘servants’, the translator uses the plural.

The findings of this comparative analysis are summarised in Table 1, which illustrates the different ‘default’ assignments for the Patient and Locative slots in English and Ukrainian existential sentences. This table highlights how each language employs distinct morphosyntactic mechanisms to realise the same underlying concepts.

Table 1. Grammatical Realisation of Semantic Roles in English and Ukrainian Existential Sentences.

Frame Slot	English	Ukrainian	Key Differences
Patient	Uses singular noun with indefinite article or plural noun to denote a class or quantitative indefiniteness	Primarily uses the plural form of a noun to denote a class or quantitative indefiniteness	English uses articles to express indefiniteness; Ukrainian achieves this through pluralisation
Locative	Can be explicitly stated or implicitly present, inferred from context	Can be explicitly stated or implicitly present, inferred from context.	Both languages share the same default assignment, where the locative can be omitted if the context is clear

5 Conclusions and the Prospect for Further Research

The existential sentence pattern is a linguistic means of verbalising the syntactic concept of existence, also known as the ‘object’ frame. The term ‘existential sentence’ refers to clauses that express a proposition regarding the existence or non-existence of an object, situated either in the external world or in an individual’s inner world. The predicate in both English and Ukrainian existential sentences requires two mandatory actants to form a complete proposition: a Patient and a Locative.

Research indicates that the ‘Locative slot’ has identical ‘default’ assignments in both languages. Although it is a mandatory actant within the proposition, the Locative may be omitted if it can be inferred from the context or the denotative situation; in such cases, it is considered to be implicitly present. If the recipient cannot fill the ‘Locative slot’ with the appropriate data, the sentence is deemed grammatically incorrect. Conversely, when filling the ‘Patient slot’ with a noun denoting a representative of a particular class, English and Ukrainian speakers follow different ‘default’ assignments. In English, both singular and plural forms can be used, whereas in Ukrainian, the plural form is preferred.

The findings of this study have direct practical relevance, particularly in the fields of English–Ukrainian and Ukrainian–English translation. Furthermore, the analysis of other syntactic concepts and their ‘default’ assignments presents a promising avenue for further research.

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