Cross-Linguistic Exceptions to Definiteness Effects

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***Abstract*—This article reviews relevant syntactic studies on the Definiteness Effect phenomenon, and on this basis, puts forward some existing problems from a coss-linguistic perspective. The most influential analysis attributes DE to the semantic property of partitive Case, an inherent Case assigned to the indefinite NP. This partitive hypothesis also explains exceptions through parametric differences in Case licensing across languages like English, Italian, and French. However, there are still some exceptions, such as Chinese and Japanese, which demonstrate different DE manifestations compared to English and Italian. These cross-linguistic variations suggest that further research is required to comprehensively explain DE within the framework of partitive hypothesis.**

***Keywords*—definiteness effect, unaccusative, partitive case, cross-linguistic variation, existential sentences**

I. Introduction

The Definiteness Effect (DE) refers to a linguistic phenomenon where the use of definite noun phrases is restricted in specific syntactic environments, particularly in existential sentences and unaccusative constructions, examples are given in (1)(2):

(1)There is a/*the man in the room.
(2)There arose a strom/*the strom here.
(Belletti1988:3-4)

Milsark (1974) first proposed this phenomenon and dubbed the difference between definites and indefinites by the terms of strong and weak, and only weak NPs can occur in unaccusative constructions[1].

(3) a. There is a hole in my blanket.
b. There are {three/some/many/no/a lot of} holes in my blanket.
(weak NPs)
(4)a. There is {every/each/neither} hole in my blanket.
b. There are {most/both/all} holes in my blanket.
(strong NPs)

What exactly is the difference between weak NPs and strong NPs? A closer observation of DE is later given by Belletti (2016), Who figures out that the fundamental distinction between weak and strong determiners lies in whether they carry presuppositions within the framework of formal semantics [2]. The common property of all the NPs that are restricted in unaccusative constructions (strong NPs) is the presupposition of the restriction set [2].

How do we analyze the syntactic structure of such constructions, and what motivates the occurrence of the DE phenomenon? These questions have been systematically explored for nearly five decades.

II. Literature Review

Two classical syntactic analyses are proposed in the literature: nominative Case transmission and partitive hypothesis. Both of the analyses are based on Unaccusative hypothesis.

A. Unaccusative Hypothesis

It is argued that in some languages, intransitive verbs do not behave exactly the same syntactically. Comparing the Italian examples below, some intransitive verbs like *telefonano* do not allow so called Ne-cliticization phenomenon[1], while others like *arrivano* do allow it.

(5)a. Molti studenti telefonano.
many students telephone
'Many students are calling'
b. *Ne telefonano molti.
Of-them telephone many
(6)a. Molti studenti arrivano.
many students arrive
'There arrive many students'
b. Ne arrivano molti.
Of-them arrive many

The contrast between (5) and (6) shows that the only argument of *arrivano* is the internal argument. Based on the syntactic analysis of passive sentences, Burzio (1986) proposed that intransitive verbs like *arrivano* have only an internal argument and assign only an internal theta-role. Due to the absence of an external theta-role to assign, these verbs lack the capacity to assign accusative case. They named these verbs unaccusatives[3]. Similar differences can also be found with the *essere* selection phenomenon. *Essere* is a perfective auxiliary in Italian and it would be selected where there is a chain between the subject position and the complement position[4], as illustrated in (7).

(7)a. Giacomo ha telefonato.
b. Giacomo e arrivato.

The members of unaccusatives are difficult to define; it is argued that they include verbs of movement (*come, go, return, leave*) and verbs that indicate some state (*die, fall*) [3]. Do the differences between unaccusatives and other intransitive verbs exist in other languages? Though there is no Ne-cliticization phenomenon or *essere* selection phenomenon in Modern English, we can still find some

[1] Ne-Cliticization is an Italian syntactic phenomenon that occurs on the internal argument of a predicate. See Belletti and Rizzi (1981), Burzio (1986).

similar observations in older stages of the language. As demonstrated in (8), verbs of movement and state in English formed their perfective forms using *be* [3]:

(8)a Se halga faeder waes inn agan.
the holy father was in gone
'The holy father had gone in.'
(Quirk and Wrenn, 1957: 78)
b Is nu geworden.
is now become
'It has happened.'
(Quirk and Wrenn, 1957: 79)

Another property of unaccusatives found in English is the use of the expletive *there*, as in (9)-(11). [3]

(9)a Three men arrived at the palace.
b There arrived three men at the palace.
(10)a Three students came to the party.
b There came three students to the party.
(11)a Three men slept in the room.
b *There slept three men in the room.

Based on these two observations, the Unaccusative Hypothesis is generally considered applicable to English.

Since unaccusative verbs lack the ability to assign accusative Case to their only argument, which is syntactically projected as an internal argument rather than an external one[2]. Consequently, the Case assignment of postverbal NPs becomes a central issue in unaccusative constructions like (9)b, (11)b.

B. Nominative Case Transmission

The nominative Case transmission approach is proposed to solve the Case assignment problem. According to Burzio (1986), a chain is established between the subject position and the postverbal position. The subject position, which is usually an expletive or a pro, receives the nominative Case from head I, then transmits the Case to the postverbal position through the chain, as in (12). As a result, the postverbal NP gets the nominative Case. This approch can explain Italian sentences such as (13), but it is still unable to explain why the DE phenomenon must occur.

(12)[IP[NP expli] [I' I [vp V NPi]]]
nom
(13) è arrivato Gianni.
arrived Gianni

C. Partitive Case Assumption

From the perspective of DE, Belletti (1988, 2016) assumes that no such nominative Case transmission process works in unaccusative constructions, instead, she proposes that although unaccusative verbs are incapable of assigning accusative case, they can still assign inherent partitive Case, based on some observations of Finnish [2, 4]. Finnish is a morphologically rich language, both accusative Case and partitive Case can be assigned to the object of transitive verbs, depending on the reading of the object, such as (14):

(14) a. Han pani kiriat poydalle.
he put the books(acc, pl) on the table
b. Han pani kirjoja poydalle.
he put (some) books(part, pl) on the table
(Belletti1988:1)

Assuming that accusative Case is not the only Case that can be assigned by verbs, it becomes plausible to propose that unaccusative verbs retain the ability to assign partitive Case. This hypothesis allows for a straightforward explanation of the relationship between unaccusative constructions and DE. As Belletti (1988) stated, "there is en essential incompatibility between partitive Case and a definite NP" [2], This partitive hypothesis provides a more robust account than the nominative Case transmission approach in explaining to the DE phenomenon in unaccusative constructions.

In the framework of the Minimalist Program, Belletti (2016) analyzed the specific syntactic structure of English and Italian existential sentences, as demonstrated in (15). A defective Functional Projection (FP) is posited below TP, carrying both number and gender features. This projection can enter into an agreement relation with the defective NP (lacking a D-layer), the internal argument, thereby assigning partitive Case to render it visible. Crucially, the lack of a D layer provides an explanatory account for the DE.

(15):

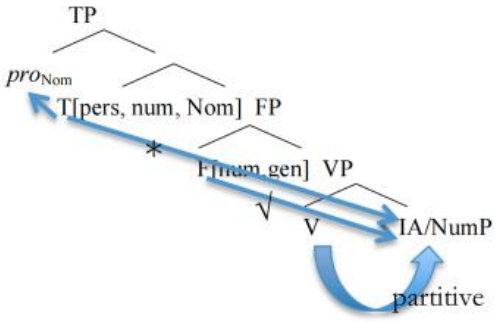

Fig. 1. The licensing of the indefinite NP.

III. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a literature review methodology and corpus-based investigation for analysis. Through a comprehensive literature review, it systematically examines existing research on DE phenomena to establish a foundational understanding. Building upon this foundation, the research question is formulated: whether languages other than English and Italian, such as Chinese and Japanese, exhibit similar DE phenomena in their existential constructions. Specifically regarding Japanese, this paper employs documentary research methods to investigate the manifestations of DE in Japanese existential sentences. For Chinese analysis, a corpus-driven approach is implemented, conducting empirical investigations through systematic retrieval and examination of pertinent linguistic examples from established corpora.

[2] See Perlmutter (1978) and Burzio (1986)

IV. Result and Discussion

A. The Distribution of DE in Japanese

The occurrence of DE in existential sentences is generally considered a universal linguistic phenomenon. However notable exceptions exist cross-linguistically. Specifically in Japanese, the DE does not appear in existential sentences, as demonstrated in the following examples [5, 6]:

(11)a. tsukuenoueni ｛watashino/arayuru/subeteno｝ hon ga aru.
On the table LOC {my/all/all} books NOM exist
'There are {my/all/all} books on the table'
(Kageyama 2011: 264)
b. Orinonakani rinrin ga iru.
In the cage LOC rinrin NOM exist
'There is rinrin in the cage'
(Kimura 2011: 93)

Strong NPs and definite NPs can both occur in existential sentences. Regarding this exception, Kishimoto (2005) argues that the existential verbs iru/aru (exist) are not unaccusative in Japanese, accounting the absence of DE in such contexts [7].

However, the DE phenomenon can be observed in possessive sentences in Japanese, whose verbs are also iru/aru, examples are given below [5].

(12) a *watashi niha {subeteno/hotonndono} zaisan ga aru.
I LOC {all/most} properties NOM exist
'I have {all/most} properties'
b *watashi niha {subeteno/hotondono} ojisan ga iru.
I LOC {all/most} uncles NOM exist
'I have {all/most} uncles'
(13) a watashi niha {ookuno/ikurakano} zaisan ga aru.
I LOC {many/some} properties NOM exist
'I have many/some properties'
b watashi niha {nanninkano/takusanno} ojisan ga iru.
I LOC {some/many} uncles NOM exist
'I have many/some uncles'
(Kageyama2011:265)

According to Kishimoto (2005), the optionality of the agreement of animacy in possessive sentences justifies dividing aru/iru into two classes: existential *aru/iru*, Which must agree with the NP in animacy, and possessive *aru/iru*, which allows no agreement [7]. Kishimoto (2005) proposes that Japanese possessive structures are analyzable within the Unaccusative Hypothesis and partitive case framework. Crucially, *aru/iru* pattern as unaccusative verbs—paralleling English *be*—whose sole argument receives nominative Case via T. This results in existential constructions with *aru/iru* demonstrating syntactic isomorphism to English *be*-existentials:

(14) a Kouen ni roujin ga iru.
Park LOC old man NOM exist
b That old man is in the park.
(Kishimoto 2005: 177)

Both (a) and (b) represent unaccusative verb usages (i.e., with a single argument). The ni-marked noun *kouen* and the prepositional phrase *in the park* function as adjuncts bearing inherent Case (locative). The sole argument—the ga-marked noun *roujin* or *that old man*—receives structural Case. In existential constructions, this sole argument originates as an internal argument. To satisfy the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) requiring clausal subjects, it raises to the subject position in surface structure. The nominative Case on the *ga*-marked argument in existentials is assigned by Tense, consequently eliminating the DE phenomenon.

Conversely, in Japanese possessive sentences, aru/iru funciton as transitive verbs (not real transitive verbs), taking two arguments. Consider the example Taro ni ototo ga aru ('Taro has a younger brother'). Both the ni-marked noun Taro and the ga-marked noun ototo ('younger brother') are verb-selected arguments. So in possessive clauses:

1.The *ni*-phrase *Taro ni* occupies the subject position, indicating movement to [Spec, TP]

2.Consequently, the verb's internal argument-the *ga*-marked noun *ototo*-remains in object position in surface structure.

3.Since *aru/iru* are unaccusative verbs, they cannot assign structural accusative Case.

4.The *ga*-marked argument therefore receives partitive Case.

5.This Case assignment triggers the DE phenomenon.

B. Issues with Kishimoto (2005)

Kishimoto's (2005) account highlights parallels between Japanese existential constructions and English *be*-existentials, as well as between Japanese possessive constructions and English *there*-sentences. He contends that the DE in Japanese mirrors that in English there-constructions, thereby demonstrating that this effect is not exclusive to existential sentences.

However, his partitive case hypothesis fails to address fundamental questions regarding:

The core mechanism behind the definiteness effect: Why does it emerge specifically in syntactic environments like Japanese possessive clauses and English there-sentences?

The underlying semantic motivations driving this Case assignment pattern.

These persistent gaps reveal explanatory limitations in the partitive case account in Japanese.

C. The Distribution of DE in Chinese

Chinese constitutes a typologically distinct exception within this paradigm. Specifically, presuppositional indefinites are licensed in Chinese existential sentences, as evidenced in (15). Notably, certain strong NPs may also appear in such environments, as exemplified in (16). However, Crucially, common strong NPs generally cannot occur in Chinese existential sentences, as illustrated in (17).

(15)zhuozishang you jige moshoulede suliaoshouqiang.
On the table have some of the confiscated plastic pistol
'There are some of the confiscated plastic pistol on the table'
(BCC corpus)
(16)limian you suoyoutayaodedongxi.
Inside have everything she wants
'There are everything she wants inside'

(BCC corpus)

(17)?*fangjianli you Zhangsan.
In the room have Zhangsan
'There is Zhangsan in the room'

Within the Chinese syntactic literature, divergent perspectives persist regarding the classification of the existential verb *you* as an unaccusative verb. If *you* is analyzed as unaccusative, examples such as (15) and (16) resist adequate explanation; If it is not classified as such, the unacceptability of (17) remains theoretically unaccounted for.

D. An Universal Explanation

It is widely accepted in current scholarship that the Definiteness Effect constitutes a universal cross-linguistic phenomenon in existential constructions. However, our preceding analysis reveals that the manifestation of DE exhibits distinct typological patterns across languages, which can be categorized as follows:

Table 1. The distribution of DE across-linguistically

Language	DE	Predicate
English, Italian	rigid	*be*
Chinese	weak	*you ('have')*
Japanese	no	*aru/iru ('exist')*

Type 1: Rigid DE (e.g., English, Italian):

Most restrictive variant
Requires NPs to be non-presuppositional
Bans definite NPs categorically

Type 2: Weak DE (e.g., Mandarin Chinese):

Moderate restrictions
Allows presuppositional NPs
Strongly disfavors definite NPs

Type 3: No DE (e.g., Japanese):

Absence of definiteness constraints
Shows no restriction whatsoever regarding NP definiteness

These typological distinctions in the Definiteness Effect directly correspond to the differential selection of predicate verbs across languages: Languages exhibiting Rigid DE (e.g., English, Italian) employ *be* as their existential predicate; Languages with Weak DE (e.g., Mandarin) utilize *have;* Languages manifesting No DE (e.g., Japanese) select *exist*-type verbs.

While current cross-linguistic evidence remains insufficient to fully substantiate this correlation, should DE typology indeed prove fundamentally linked to predicate verb selection, this correspondence would achieve explanatory adequacy in accounting for DE distribution patterns.

V. Conclusion

This study critically examines two representative theoretical accounts of the Definiteness Effect: nominative Case transmission and the partitive Case hypothesis. Building upon this foundation, we propose a cross-linguistic analytical framework. Our investigation demonstrates that the variation in DE manifestations across languages reveals a central theoretical challenge: the systematic analysis of DE typological diversity. Key cross-linguistic findings include:

The DE in existential constructions exhibits non-uniform distribution across languages, falling into three distinct types: Rigid DE (e.g., English, Italian); Weak DE (e.g., Mandarin Chinese); Null DE (e.g., Japanese). Distinguishing criteria: presence/absence of presuppositionality and definiteness constraints.

(2) These DE types correlate with three classes of existential predicates: Rigid DE ↔ *be*-verbs; Weak DE ↔ *have*-verbs; Null DE ↔ *exist*-type verbs. This correspondence necessarily implies distinct underlying syntactic configurations.

(3) While Rigid DE can be accounted for through the Unaccusative Hypothesis and Partitive Case Hyphothesis, Weak DE and Null DE types require predicate-specific theoretical refinement.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

Jiayao Tian, Huaxue Wang, and Xueni Pan jointly drafted this manuscript; Jiayao Tian was primarily responsible for the literature review section (Unaccusative Hypothesis, Nominative Case transmission, Partitive Case Hypothesis); Huaxue Wang conducted the literature review on Definiteness Effect in Japanese; Xueni Pan performed data collection and analysis of DE in Chinese; The corresponding author Ruijia Zhang substantially revised and edited the final manuscript; all authors had approved the final version.

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