

# Translating *Existence*

## A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS

### AIM, METHOD AND DATA

Translations in contrastive studies provide a unique insight into the relationship that exists between two languages. Toury (1981:257) claims in this connection that “an exhaustive contrastive description of the languages involved is a pre-condition for any systematic study of translation, and, on the discipline level, a developed CL [contrastive linguistics] is a necessary pre-condition for translation studies”. Generalized contrastive facts regarding specific features of two different languages offer a possibility to create a reliable source of data for building up translation competence (cf. Ebeling 1999).

With this broader aim in mind, the present article focuses on the analysis of translation patterns of English existential constructions into Lithuanian. This small-scale study is corpus-based. The data are drawn from the parallel English-Lithuanian corpus, i.e. a collection of English original texts and their translations into Lithuanian ([www.donelaitis.vdu.lt](http://www.donelaitis.vdu.lt)). At the moment the English-Lithuanian parallel corpus contains 6,768 sentences. Aijmer and Altenberg (1996:12) strongly assert that parallel corpora

give new insights into the languages compared – insights that are likely to be unnoticed in studies of monolingual corpora;

can be used for a range of comparative pur-

poses and increase our knowledge of language-specific, typological and cultural differences, as well as of universal features;

illuminate differences between source texts and translations, and between native and non-native texts;

can be used for a number of practical applications, e.g. in lexicography, language teaching and translation.

The English existential construction possesses a characteristic syntactic pattern. The unstressed, non-deictic introductory *there* is considered by most scholars (see, among others, Allan 1971, Mil-sark 1979, Hannay 1985) to be a defining property of existential sentences (abbreviated ESs). Therefore, the data search in the corpus was unidirectional, that is, the element *there* was searched for. Out of 438 hits, 313 examples of the English ESs, together with their translations into Lithuanian, were found suitable for the analysis.

The specific research questions taken up in the paper concern several issues. First, the frequency and position of the locative element in English ESs and their translations into Lithuanian are looked at to see whether the translated material follows the established patterns of the existential construction in Lithuanian (see Kalėdaitė 2002). Another issue of considerable interest is rendering of the English existential verb *be* into Lithuanian; it is a characteristic feature of

Lithuanian ESs that they more often incorporate a verb with its full lexical meaning than do their English counterparts.

### STRUCTURAL CORE OF THE EXISTENTIAL ASSERTION IN ENGLISH AND LITHUANIAN

Existential constructions in world languages involve a set of fairly fixed sentence patterns. The typological differences between English and Lithuanian

are especially conspicuous on the syntactic level. In English, position is a defining criterion for the grammatical subject; this is not the case in Lithuanian, where the subject can be dispensed with. However, it appears that in spite of this essential difference in syntactic structure, existential constructions in both languages have identical structural elements which constitute *the core* of an existential assertion. As far as assertions of existence go, a distinction has to be made between the two 'types' of existence: *absolute* and

Table 1. Basic structural constituents of an absolute model of existence in English and Lithuanian

<i>English</i>		<i>Type of ES</i>	<i>Lithuanian</i>	
1a/b	There was an old man and a woman.	Vital	Buvo trys broliai. ('There were/lived three brothers')	
2a/b	There are no ghosts.	Ontological	... iš tiesų yra vaiduoklių ... ('There are really ghosts/ghosts exist')	
3a/b	There are many reasons for believing this.	Existential	Yra naujovių, kurios tautai gali būti nepriimtinos. ('There are changes which might be unacceptable to the nation')	
4a/b	There have been many wars.	Occurrence	Bus didelė šventė. ('There will be a big festival')	
<i>The structural pattern of absolute existence:</i>				
<b>English</b>	<i>There</i>	<i>verb<sub>exist</sub></i>	<i>subjNP (XP)</i>	<b>Lithuanian</b>
	—	<i>verb<sub>exist</sub></i>	<i>subjNP (XP)</i>	

Table 2. Basic structural constituents of a locative model of existence in English and Lithuanian

	<i>English</i>	<i>Type of ES</i>	<i>Lithuanian</i>	
5a/b	There is someone in the garden.	Locative-existential	Ant tėvų trobos yra žaibolaidis. ('There is a lightning conductor on my parents' house')	
6a/b	There was a demonstration in London.	Locative occurrence	Buvo nemaloni pažintis tuščioje Vilniaus gatvėje... ('There was an unpleasant meeting in an empty street in Vilnius...')	
7a/b	(This room has two windows.)	Possessive <i>to be-for</i>	Mirusiajai ant kaklo buvo geležinė antkaklė... ('On the dead woman's neck there was an iron adornment...')	
8a/b	And then there were the animals.	Presentative	Tarp kitų kūrinių buvo ir garsusis Siksto madonos paveikslas. ('Among other works of art there also was the famous painting of Sistene Madonna')	
<i>The structural pattern of locative existence:</i>				
<b>English</b>	<i>There</i>	<i>verb<sub>exist</sub></i>	<i>subjNP</i>	<i>LocP</i>
	—	<i>verb<sub>exist</sub></i>	<i>subjNP</i>	<i>LocP</i>
				<b>Lithuanian</b>

*locative* existence. Moreover, within each of these types the core elements in the two models are identical in English and Lithuanian; Tables 1 and 2 illustrate this point. Note also that what we are dealing with here is a neutral, unmarked pattern of the existential assertion in the two languages. Communicative word order patterns in Lithuanian and examples of locative inversion with *there* do not concern us at this point. The material presented in the tables is based on Kalėdaitė (2002).

The data in Tables 1 and 2 allow us to make several important generalisations. First, both languages distinguish structurally between two variants of the existential assertion: one pattern is used for expressing absolute existence; the other introduces an entity as existing in a certain location. Second, the two structural types in both languages differ with respect to the number and kind of obligatory elements they take. As for the correspondences, both languages exploit (almost) the same clause structure, i.e. the *existential verb*, the *subject NP*, and (*XP*) for assertions of absolute existence, whereas the locative model makes use of the *existential verb*, the *subject NP*, and the *locative phrase*. The only difference in the syntactic struc-

ture of ESs in the two languages is the occurrence of an empty subject *there* in the English ES. This aspect goes hand in hand with the subject-prominent quality of the English declarative clause and is noted in all discussions of the subject.

Since the idea of an existing entity is fundamental for an existential assertion, the *VS* sequence of the core elements is attested across languages. This particular ordering allows the speaker to arrange the sentence constituents according to the increasing degree of communicative dynamism and, at the same time, to focus the addressee's attention on the entity conveyed by the subject NP.

#### PATTERNS OF ESs IN THE ENGLISH MATERIAL AND THEIR TRANSLATIONS INTO LITHUANIAN

Table 3 contains the type/token statistical count of the structural patterns of ESs in English. The data are categorized according to the occurrence/non-occurrence of a locative element and its position in a clause.

Numerous studies of the existential construction in the world's languages

Table 3. Frequency and position of the locative element in English texts

	Number of occurrences	Number of occurrences	Total
Pattern of the ES	ESs with <i>be</i>	ESs with other verbs	
<b>1. Locative existence</b>	129	15	144 (46%)
· <i>Loc</i> in initial position <i>Loc + there + verb<sub>exist</sub> + subjNP</i>	46	9	55 (38.2%)
· <i>Loc</i> in medial position <i>There + Loc + verb<sub>exist</sub> + subjNP</i>	3	6	9 (6.3%)
· <i>Loc</i> in end position <i>There + verb<sub>exist</sub> + subjNP + Loc</i>	80	-	80 (55.5%)
<b>2. Absolute existence</b>	169	-	169 (54%)
<i>There + verb<sub>exist</sub> + subjNP</i>			
<b>Total</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>313</b>

tend to support the claim that locative existence of the type *There + verb<sub>exist</sub> + subjNP + LocP* is prototypical. However, our data show that ESs without a locative element (54%) are at least as common as those containing it (46%).

Another important observation regards the position of space adverbials in English.

Hasselgård (1996) and Ebeling's (1999) research supports the claims of other studies in that end position for the locative element is the unmarked position in English. Initial position, on the other hand, can be used for cohesive purposes. To say it with Ebeling (1999:59), "if an entity is introduced in the preceding sentences, ...it is not uncommon to start the next sentence with a prepositional phrase referring to the aforementioned entity". Example (9) below is a case in point:

(9) <s>There was not a human creature anywhere, not a leaf stirring, not even a bird awake.</s><s>In a place like this the danger that there would be a hidden microphone was very small, and even if there was a microphone it would only pick up sounds.</s>

The figures in Table 4 clearly indicate that end position of the locative element in the English data is preferred to initial placement of place adverbial – 62% against 35.6%. A locative in the position between the verb and the NP is very rare, and a verb other than *be* is typically used in these sentences.

As regards Lithuanian translations, they actually reflect the characteristic feature of the Lithuanian existential sentence type which comes down to the following. By definition, existential sentences assert the existence of certain entities in the world or within a smaller fragment of the world. In Lithuanian, the point of departure for this type of message is, what I prefer to call, 'the domain of existence'. It is this element that is viewed as something familiar to both, the speaker and the hearer, and is thus interpreted as known information (cf. 'topicalization of a locative phrase', Bolinger 1977: 100). The focus of the message naturally falls on the subject, which is informationally new; it is therefore most commonly expressed by an indefinite NP. Thus the neutral pattern of ESs in Lithuanian serves to communicate the idea that in some specified location there is an indefinite quantity of some items (example 10), or there is an entity belonging to a certain class of objects, as in (11):

(10)a. <s>Prie gretimo stalo buvo viena laisva vieta, bet kažkas to žmogučio išvaizdoje bylotė bylojo, kad jam pakaks nuovokos pasirinkti tuštesnį stalą.</s>

(10)b. <s>There was a vacant place at a table further away, but something in the little man's appearance suggested that he would be sufficiently attentive to his own comfort to choose the emptiest table.</s>

Table 4. Frequency and position of the locative element in the English-Lithuanian corpus

Verb type	Be		Other verbs		Total	
	EN	LT	EN	LT	EN	LT
Position of the locative element						
· Loc in initial position	46	122	9	11	55	133
Loc+ there+ verb <sub>exist</sub> + subjNP	(35.6%)	(94.6%)	(60%)	(84.6%)	(3 (38.2%))	(93.7%)
· Loc in medial position	3	-	6	2	9	5
There+ Loc + verb <sub>exist</sub> + subjNP	(2.4%)		(40%)	(15.4%)	(6.3%)	(1.4 %)
· Loc in end position	80	7	-	-	80	7
There+ verb <sub>exist</sub> + subjNP+Loc	(62%)	(5.4%)			(55.5%)	(4.9%)
Total	129	129	15	13*	144	142

\* 2 sentences were translated into Lithuanian as non-ESs

(11)a. <s>**Ant jų staliuko** buvo šachmatų lenta su sustatytomis figūromis.</s>

(11)b. <s>There was a chessboard **on the table beside them**, with the pieces set out but no game started.</s>

Statistically, the translations of English ESs into Lithuanian show a clear preference for the unmarked ES pattern with a locative element placed initially: the total number of occurrences of this pattern amounts to 133 instances (93.7%) against 55 (38.2%) original English sentences that exhibit initial placement of a locative phrase.

#### THE VERB: TRANSLATION EQUIVALENTS AND NON-EQUIVALENT TRANSLATIONS

It is pointed out in Kalėdaitė (2002:199) that the semantic class of verbs which are termed 'be'-replacers and are therefore eligible for use in ESs in the two languages are actually equivalent.

It is common knowledge that only intransitive verbs of certain semantic classes can be found in English *there*-existentials. In addition to 'be'-replacers, the long list of such verbs includes intransitive and passive verbs with a very wide range of meanings. Table 5 presents statistical counts of the semantic verb classes found in the English data.

However, in terms of semantics, Lithuanian ESs show even more freedom in this respect. Lithuanian ESs embrace a variety of verb classes denoting what

can be metaphorically called 'the cycle of existence', ranging from emerging existence via increase and static being to the states of decrease, absence and disappearance. Moreover, it is a characteristic feature of Lithuanian ESs that they more often incorporate a verb with its full lexical meaning than do their English counterparts; often the choice of the verb for an existential assertion to be made depends on the semantic features of the subject NP. Typical verbs of this type are those associated with a characteristic state of the subject referent (hence verbs of sound, smell, light, substance emission; note example 12); or verbs which are idiomatically associated with the subject noun, as in (13) below:

(12)a. <s>**There were yells of warning** from all sides.</s>

(12)b. <s>Iš visų pusių **pasigirdo perspėjami riksmi**.</s>

(13)a. <s>**There were streaks of white** in her hair; but the truly dreadful detail was that her mouth had fallen a little open, revealing nothing except a cavernous blackness.</s>

(13)b. <s>Plaukuose **baltavo žilos sruogos**, bet baisiausia buvo tai, kad jos burna prasižiojo ir ten tebuvo tik juoda kiaurymė.</s>

Having this fact in mind, it is interesting to see if this state of affairs is reflected in the translations. Table 6 presents the differences in verb distribution in the original English ESs and in their respective Lithuanian translations.

The corpus analysis demonstrates that even though the frequency of verbs oth-

Table 5. Verb distribution in English ESs

Verb	Number of occurrences
Be 298 (95.2%)	
Existence/appearance ( <i>arrive, come, emerge, remain, rise, spring</i> )	11 (3.5%)
Stance ( <i>float, hang, lie, sit</i> )	4 (1.3%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>313</b>

Table 6. Difference in verb distribution in Lithuanian translations

Verb	Number of occurrences	
	English	Lithuanian
<i>Be</i>	298 (95.2%)	181 (57.8%)
Other lexical verbs	—	83 (26.5%)
No verb (non-use of the verb <i>be</i> )	—	34 (10.9%)
'Be'-replacers	15 (4.8%)	15 (4.8%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>313</b>

er than *be* in the English original texts is low (only 4.8%), lexical verbs in the Lithuanian translations become much more common. Thus 26.5% of the *be* forms are translated into Lithuanian by a verb possessing a full lexical meaning. In addition, the corpus of translated texts exhibits another peculiarity of Lithuanian, that is, the omission of the verb *be* in 34 instances (or 10.9%) of the corpus material. Examples in (14) and (15) illustrate the point:

(14)a. <s>There were deep furrows in the cheeks, the cheekbones felt sharp, the nose flattened.</s>

(14)b. <s>Skruoštuose gilios raukšlės, skruostikauliai išsišovę, nosis plokščia.</s>

(15)a. <s>In the window there were trays of nuts and bolts, worn-out chisels, penknives with broken blades, tarnished watches that did not even pretend to be in going order, and other miscellaneous rubbish.</s>

(15)b. <s>Vitrinoje padėklas su varžtais, nudilusiais kaltais, aplaužytais lenktiniais peiliukais, apmusijusiais laikrodžiais, net nemanančiais eiti, ir visokiausiu kitokiu šlamštu.</s>

## FINAL REMARKS

One of the shortcomings of doing corpus-based research is that the corpus could always be larger and more varied in terms of text types and genres, and this is actually the case as regards the corpus used in the present study. However, even though small in number, the parallel corpus was very instrumental in shedding some light on several important issues, such as the preferred position of the locative element in English and Lithuanian ESs or the difference in verb selection between English existential constructions and their Lithuanian translations.

The present analysis has actually raised a variety of other research questions related to the translation strategies employed by Lithuanian translators. Thus areas for future research may include a close investigation of non-equivalent translations, motivation for choosing a less similar construction, or finding out the most common patterns of rendering language-specific existential constructions.

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## EGZISTENCINIŲ SAKINIŲ VERTIMAS

Lygiagretaus teksto pamokos

S a n t r a u k a

Visose pasaulio kalbose išskiriami *egzistenciniai* sakiniai, pasižymintys tik jiems būdingais privalomais sakinio struktūriniais elementais ir žodžių tvarkos modeliais. Natūralu, kad tokios vienai kalbai būdingos sintaksinės struktūros vertimas į kitą kalbą dažnai sukelia sunkumų vertimo kalboje ieškant tokių atitikmenų, kurie galėtų tiksliai perteikti orig-

inalios struktūros semantinį turinį ir pragmatines šio sakinio tipo vartojimo aplinkybes. Straipsnyje analizuojami 313 anglų kalbos egzistencinių sakinių vertimų į lietuvių kalbą. Šios analizės tikslas – panagrinėti, ar vertimai atspindi lietuvių kalbai būdingus leksinius ir gramatinius egzistencinių sakinių ypatumus.