

## Existential constructions and two types of comparative concepts: Construction-functions and construction-strategies

For transparency and easy comparability, grammatical descriptions normally make use of well-known grammatical terms, such as “bound form”, “dative”, “antipassive” and “existential”. But such terms are often used with different senses in the literature, and here I highlight a kind of polysemy that is not well-known yet but should be more widely recognized: the difference between **construction-functions** and **construction-strategies** that is made by Croft (2022) (first in Croft 2016). Both are comparative concepts, i.e. concepts that are defined in the same way for all languages, and are thus different from descriptive categories. A construction-function is a type of construction defined by its function, and a construction-strategy is a type of construction defined by its formal properties. For example, “constituent question” and “predicative possession” are construction-functions, while “in-situ question” and “transpossession construction” are construction-strategies. (Croft uses the simple terms “construction” and “strategy”, but I find the compounds *construction-function* and *construction-strategy* more transparent.)

As a first approximation, a descriptive grammar can be thought of as a set of construction-strategies that are associated with a pre-established construction-functions (as is particularly clear in the grammars based on the Comrie & Smith (1977) questionnaire, which consists of questions about construction-functions). But of course, each language-particular construction needs to be defined in its own terms in addition to being related to comparative strategy types.

I exemplify these general points here with **existential clause constructions**, because this term has been used both in a construction-function sense (e.g. Clark 1978) and in a construction-strategy sense (e.g. McNally 2016; Creissels 2019). In the strategy sense, an English sentence such as *There are books on the table* counts as existential, but a German sentence like *Auf dem Tisch liegen Bücher* [on the table lie books] does not. In the function sense, this sentence does count as existential as well. There is no general way of addressing this kind of polysemy, but I will discuss a number of options, and for the case of the term “existential”, I will say why I think that the construction-function sense should be preferred. The overall point, however, is that linguists need to pay attention not only to descriptive/comparative meaning differences, but also to function/strategy polysemies (which lead to analogous polysemies of terms like “indirect object” and “antipassive”).

## References

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