



Existential constructions in Korean and English: A revised mapping approach to situation variables and presuppositionality

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Jeon, Yoon-Ho. 2026. Existential constructions in Korean and English: A revised mapping approach to situation variables and presuppositionality. *Linguistic Research* 43(2): 403-425. Existential constructions have long been central to discussions of the syntax-semantics interface, particularly under Diesing's (1992) Mapping Hypothesis, which links VP-internal material to existential closure. While this framework successfully accounts for English *there*-existentials, Korean locative existentials display interpretive contrasts that cannot be reduced to a simple VP-external distinction on noun phrases. Building on Jeon (2019), which argues for a VP-CP mapping architecture in the domain of genericity, this paper extends that structural framework to existential constructions. I argue that while VP remains the locus of existential closure, Korean differs from English in allowing situation variables to be interpreted in the CP domain, yielding presuppositional readings. The identification of CP as the restrictive domain is not a straightforward extension of Diesing's TP-based architecture, but a theoretically motivated revision grounded in independent syntactic evidence concerning subject positions and information-structural movement in Korean. By incorporating situation variables into the mapping mechanism, the analysis derives the contrast between existential and presuppositional readings compositionally, without appealing to nominal definiteness. The cross-linguistic comparison shows that differences between English and Korean existential constructions arise from variation in access to higher clausal domains rather than from differences in existential predication itself. (Kyungnam University)

Keywords existential constructions, situation variables, Mapping Hypothesis, presuppositionality, VP-CP domains

1. Introduction

Existential constructions have long played a central role in discussion of the syntax-semantics interface, particularly with respect to the interpretation of indefinites and the relationship between structural position and semantic interpretation. Since Milsark's (1974) seminal observation that existential sentences impose restrictions on the interpretation of NPs, a substantial literature has explored how existential closure and structural configuration interact in such constructions (e.g. Diesing 1992; Herburger 1997; McNally 1997; Chung and Ladusaw 2004; Irwin 2018; Kiss 2023).¹

Among these approaches, Diesing's (1992) Mapping Hypothesis has been especially influential. Under this view, material interpreted within the VP (or vP) domain is mapped to the nuclear scope of existential closure and receives an existential interpretation, whereas material outside VP is mapped to a restrictive domain and is excluded from existential closure. In English *there*-existentials, this mapping derives the definiteness effect: the associate noun phrase, confined to the nuclear scope, must be interpreted existentially and cannot receive a presuppositional reading. Here and throughout this paper, *presuppositional* is understood as an interpretive notion: a nominal is presuppositional when its existence is taken for granted rather than asserted under existential closure.

While this architecture is well supported by English, Korean existential constructions raise questions about how broadly the original VP-based mapping can be maintained. Korean expresses existence through locative predication with *-ey iss-ta* 'be located', but allows flexibility in case marking and information-structural marking. This flexibility gives rise to interpretive contrasts that are not reducible to a simple VP-internal versus VP-external distinction on noun phrases. Consider the contrast in (1).

- (1) a. Mwulkhep-i pwuekh-ey iss-ta.
 glass-NOM kitchen-LOC exist-DECL
 'There is a glass in the kitchen.'

¹ I use the traditional term NP to refer to nominal constituents, without committing to a particular position in the NP-DP debate, which plays no role in the analysis developed here, and none of the empirical claims or theoretical conclusions hinge on assumptions about DP structure.

- b. Mwulkhep-un pwuekh-ey iss-ta.
 glass-TOP kitchen-LOC exist-DECL
 ‘The glass is in the kitchen.’

Sentence (1a) receives a neutral existential interpretation, asserting the existence of a glass in the kitchen. By contrast, (1b) yields a presuppositional interpretation: the existence of the glass is taken for granted, and the sentence asserts its location relative to a contextually salient set of alternatives.² Crucially, this contrast cannot be attributed solely to the existential predicate itself, nor to overt definiteness marking on the noun phrases. Instead, it correlates with differences in information structure and with the availability of higher clausal domains for semantic interpretation. Morphological marking interacts with these structural differences: topic marking restricts interpretation to the higher clausal domain, while nominative marking remains compatible with interpretation within the verbal domain.

Previous studies have often captured such contrasts in terms of thetic versus categorial judgments (Kuroda 1972) or the discourse-configurational nature of Korean (e.g. Choe 1995; Choi 1999). While these approaches highlight the role of information structure, they leave open how such effects are integrated into a compositional mapping between syntactic structure and semantic interpretation that remains compatible with the core insight of the Mapping Hypothesis.

This paper argues that Korean existential constructions do not undermine Diesing’s proposal, but instead motivate a refinement of the mapping mechanism. Building on work that incorporates situation variables into the semantics of predication (Carlson 1977; Diesing 1992; Chierchia 1995; Kratzer 1995; Jeon 2019), I propose that the crucial parameter of variation concerns not only the structural position of the nominal, but also the interpretive locus of the situation variable associated with predication. While VP remains the locus of existential closure, Korean differs from English in permitting interpretation relative to a higher clausal domain. When interpretation proceeds within VP, existential closure yields a non-presuppositional reading. When interpretation accesses a higher domain, existential closure is unavailable, and presuppositional

2 A comparable presuppositional interpretation is available in (1a) when the nominative-marked noun phrase *mwulkhep-i* ‘glass-NOM’ bears contrastive focus prosody. I take this to indicate that CP-level interpretation of what will later be analyzed as situation variables is not contingent on overt topic marking (*-nun*), but may also be triggered by information-structural operations such as focus.

readings arise.

Under this revised mapping approach, cross-linguistic variation does not concern existential predication itself, but the availability of higher clausal domains as interpretive resources. English *there*-existentials represent a highly restricted configuration in which the associate NP is confined to the nuclear scope. Korean, by contrast, permits access to a higher domain under identifiable structural and semantic conditions.

The contribution of this paper is threefold. First, it refines the Mapping Hypothesis while preserving its central insight that existential interpretation is structurally regulated. Second, by incorporating situation variables into the mapping mechanism, it derives the contrast between existential and presuppositional readings compositionally, without appealing to nominal definiteness or purely discourse-level stipulations. Finally, it offers a comparative perspective showing that differences between English and Korean existential constructions follow from variation in clausal mapping rather than from differences in existential meaning itself.

2. Existential closure and the mapping hypothesis

This section briefly reviews the theoretical assumptions about existential closure and structural mapping that form the background of the present analysis. I first summarize the relation between existential closure and the weak/strong distinction, and then consider English *there*-existentials as a canonical illustration of how syntactic position constrains interpretation.

2.1 Existential closure and weak/strong indefinites

A central assumption in formal semantics is that existential interpretations of indefinites arise through existential closure at logical form rather than being lexically specified (Kamp 1981; Heim 1982, 1983; Groenendijk and Stokhof 1991; Diesing 1992). On this view, an indefinite introduces a variable that is bound by an existential operator unless it is licensed by some other operator.

Existential closure applies within a designated semantic domain, commonly identified as the nuclear scope. Material interpreted within this domain is subject

to existential binding, whereas material interpreted outside it is mapped to a restrictive domain and is therefore excluded from existential closure. This structural division accounts for the interpretive contrast between existential and presuppositional readings without appealing to morphological marking.

Diesing's (1992) Mapping Hypothesis formalizes this distinction by linking interpretive domains to syntactic structure: material interpreted within VP (or vP) is mapped to the nuclear scope, while material interpreted outside VP is mapped to the restrictive domain. As a consequence, indefinites interpreted VP-internally receive existential interpretations, whereas those interpreted VP-externally escape existential closure and are interpreted presuppositionally.

This mapping underlies Milsark's (1974) distinction between weak and strong noun phrases. Weak noun phrases are compatible with existential closure and occur in nuclear-scope positions, whereas strong noun phrases, including definites, proper names, and discourse-linked indefinites, require interpretation in the restrictive domain. Importantly, the distinction is semantic rather than morphological: the same indefinite expression may be interpreted as weak or strong depending on its structural position at logical form.

2.2 Existential closure and nuclear scope

English *there*-existentials provide a clear illustration of this mapping architecture. In such constructions, the postverbal noun phrase—the associate or pivot—must be interpreted existentially and resists presuppositional readings.

- (2) There is a glass in the kitchen.

As originally observed by Milsark (1974) and further developed in subsequent work (e.g. Diesing 1992; Herburger 1997; McNally 1997), definite noun phrases are systematically excluded from the pivot position of *there*-existentials, a restriction commonly referred to as the definiteness effect.³ Within the Mapping Hypothesis, this effect follows from the structural confinement of the associate NP to the VP

³ For instance, definite noun phrases are typically excluded from the pivot position of *there*-existentials (e.g. *There is the glass in the kitchen).

domain, where existential closure obligatorily applies.

Because presuppositional noun phrases require interpretation outside the nuclear scope, and because the *there*-construction prevents access to such a higher interpretive domain, only weak indefinites are licensed in the pivot position. English *there*-existentials thus represent a configuration in which the mapping between syntactic position and semantic interpretation is tightly constrained.

This configuration serves as a theoretical baseline for the analysis of Korean existential constructions developed in the following sections. The central question will be whether, and under what conditions, the mapping architecture permits access to higher clausal domains beyond VP.

3. Korean existential constructions

This section presents the core Korean data that motivate the analysis developed in this paper. The focus is on existential sentences formed with the locative predicate *-ey iss-ta* ‘be located’ and on the interpretive contrasts that arise depending on information-structure factors. The discussion remains largely descriptive, with the aim of establishing empirical generalizations rather than advancing a full analysis.

3.1 Basic existential sentences

Korean expresses existence through locative predication, typically involving a locative phrase and the predicate *-ey iss-ta*. A canonical example is given in (3), repeated from (1a).

- (3) Mwulkhep-i pwuekh-ey iss-ta.⁴
 glass-NOM kitchen-LOC exist-DECL
 ‘There is a glass in the kitchen.’

4 Korean existential sentences also permit the locative-initial order (e.g. *Pwuekh-ey mwulkhep-i iss-ta*. ‘In the kitchen, there is a glass’). While word order may affect discourse prominence under marked prosody, both orders are compatible with a neutral existential interpretation. The analysis developed here abstracts away from such prosodic variation and focuses on the interpretive domain of the nominative NP.

Sentence (3) receives a neutral, existential interpretation: it simply reports the existence of a glass in a particular location. The nominative-marked noun phrase *mwulkhep-i* ‘glass-NOM’ is interpreted as an indefinite, and no presupposition is made regarding the prior discourse status of the referent. Such sentences are naturally used to introduce new entities into the discourse and are compatible with out-of-the-blue contexts.

This reading closely parallels the existential interpretation found in English *there*-existentials, in which the noun phrase is interpreted within the domain of existential closure. Importantly, however, Korean does not employ an expletive subject or a dedicated existential construction; existential meaning arises through ordinary locative predication.

3.2 Presuppositional existentials and information structure

A presuppositional interpretation emerges when existential sentences interact with information-structural marking. One well-known case involves the topic particle *-nun*, as illustrated in (4).

- (4) *Mwulkhep-un pwuekh-ey iss-ta.*
 glass-TOP kitchen-LOC exist-DECL
 ‘The glass is in the kitchen.’

Sentence (4) does not simply assert existence. Rather, the existence of the glass is taken for granted, and the sentence identifies its location relative to a contextually salient set of alternatives. Crucially, this shift in interpretation cannot be attributed to morphological definiteness, since Korean bare noun phrases lack overt definiteness marking; their interpretation as existential or definite is determined by structural position and contextual factors.

A comparable presuppositional reading is also available in the absence of topic marking, when the nominative-marked noun phrase bears contrastive focus prosody, as shown in (5).

- (5) [mwulkh^he^hp-i]_{FOC} pwuekh-ey iss-ta.
 glass-NOM kitchen-LOC exist-DECL
 ‘It is a glass that is in the kitchen.’

Here, the noun phrase remains nominative-marked, yet the sentence presupposes the existence of a relevant set of alternatives and highlights *glass* as the true member of that set. The availability of this interpretation indicates that presuppositionality in Korean existential constructions cannot be reduced to the presence of the topic particle *-nun*, but is sensitive to information-structural operations such as contrastive focus, which may be realized prosodically.

Taken together, the data in this section support the following generalizations. Korean existential sentences allow morphologically indefinite noun phrases to receive both non-presuppositional and presuppositional interpretations. The latter correlate systematically with information-structural factors, including topic marking and contrastive focus, rather than with nominal definiteness or with the semantic contribution of the noun phrase itself. Importantly, although topic- and focus-related interpretations are commonly associated with movement to the CP domain, the Korean data show that presuppositionality cannot be reduced to the syntactic displacement of the noun phrase alone.⁵ At the same time, it follows from how existential predication is interpreted at the clausal level. These observations will form the empirical basis for the analysis proposed in the next section.

4. Analysis: Mapping structure, situation variables, and existential interpretation

This section develops the analysis of Korean existential constructions within a revised mapping architecture. Building on Jeon (2019), I adopt the structural distinction between VP and CP as distinct interpretive domains, but extend it to existential

5 Throughout this paper, I assume that topic- and focus-related interpretations are syntactically represented in the articulated CP domain, following Rizzi's (1997) split-CP hypothesis. In particular, topic and contrastive focus are taken to involve movement of the noun phrase to designated positions in the left periphery. See Jeon (2019) for a detailed CP-based analysis of genericity and information structure in Korean, and Kiss (1998) and Belletti (2004) for related discussion of focus and topic in the left periphery.

constructions and presuppositionality. The central claim is that presuppositional readings arise when the situation variable associated with predication is interpreted outside the VP domain.

It is important to distinguish the present proposal from purely information-structural approaches. While topic and focus marking correlate with CP-level interpretation, the analysis developed here does not attribute presuppositionality directly to information-structural features. Rather, presuppositional readings arise from the interpretive locus of situation variables within the clausal mapping architecture. Information-structural marking serves as an overt indicator of CP-level mapping, but the underlying mechanism is configurational rather than discourse-pragmatic.

4.1 Mapping structure in Korean: VP, CP, and existential interpretation

Diesing's (1992) Mapping Hypothesis links existential interpretation to syntactic structure: material interpreted within VP is mapped to the nuclear scope of existential closure, while material interpreted outside VP is mapped to a restrictive domain. In English, this contrast is often modeled as VP versus TP, reflecting the fixed structural position of subjects.

Jeon (2019) argues that Korean requires a refinement of this architecture. While VP remains the domain of existential closure, CP, rather than TP, functions as the restrictive domain in Korean. This revision is independently motivated by syntactic evidence that nominative-marked subjects in Korean need not raise to Spec-TP and may remain within the VP/vP domain at surface structure.

It is important to clarify that the present proposal does not merely relabel Diesing's restrictive domain. In Diesing's account, the higher interpretive domain is typically identified with TP in languages like English, where subjects occupy a structurally fixed position outside VP. Korean, however, provides independent syntactic evidence that nominative-marked subjects need not raise to TP and may remain VP-internal, while topic- and focus-marked nominals occupy positions in the left periphery. The identification of CP as the relevant higher interpretive domain in Korean is therefore grounded in language-particular syntactic properties rather than a terminological shift. Here, *CP* refers to the left-peripheral domain above TP as a structural locus of

discourse-linked interpretation, without commitment to a particular cartographic analysis. Under this revision, the interpretive contrast relevant for existential constructions arises between VP and CP: nominative-marked NPs that remain VP-internal fall within the scope of existential closure, whereas nominals interpreted at CP yield presuppositional readings. The VP-CP distinction thus directly links clausal architecture to the availability or unavailability of existential closure.

Crucially, this conclusion is supported by independent syntactic diagnostics. Lasnik and Saito (1993) observe that Japanese lacks the sharp subject-object extraction asymmetries found in English, a contrast attributed to the possibility that subjects remain within the verbal domain rather than occupying a fixed Spec-TP position.⁶

Jeon (2019) shows that Korean patterns with Japanese rather than English when these diagnostics are applied. Extraction out of subject-associated domains does not exhibit the severe degradation characteristic of English, and the subject-object asymmetry is substantially reduced. The contrast with English is demonstrated in (6) and (7), which are quoted from Jeon (2019: 60-61).

- (6) a. Who_i did you hear a story about t_i.
 b. ?*Who_i did a story about t_i amuse you.
- (7) a. ?Enu chayk-ul_i Mary-ka [_{NP} John-i t_i san
 which book-ACC Mary-NOM John-NOM bought
 fact-ACC mwuncay-lo sam-ni?
 sasil]-ul problem-to make-Q
 ‘Which book is it that Mary is calling the fact that John bought
 it into question.’
- b. ?Enu chayk-ul_i Mary-ka [_{NP} John-i t_i san
 which book-ACC Mary-NOM John-NOM bought
 sasil]-i mwuncay-la-ko sayngkakha-ni?
 fact-NOM problem-COP-COMP think-Q
 ‘Which book is it that Mary thinks that the fact that John

6 Similar views have been advanced in earlier work on Japanese clause structure, which argues that subjects need not occupy a fixed Spec-TP position, unlike in English (e.g. Fukui 1986; Kuroda 1988). This general view has also been reinforced in more recent minimalist work on Japanese and Korean, which questions the universality of Spec-TP as the locus of subject licensing (e.g. Miyagawa 2010; Bošković 2014, 2024).

bought it is a problem.’

Although the examples in (7) are not intended as decisive tests in isolation, the conclusion that nominative-marked subjects in Korean need not occupy a fixed Spec-TP position does not depend on these examples alone.⁷ A range of independent diagnostics—including multiple nominative constructions, scope and focus interactions, scrambling patterns, honorific agreement, and binding asymmetries—have been taken to support the view that subject position in Korean and Japanese is not structurally fixed. For reasons of space, these arguments are not rehearsed here; see the works cited in footnote 6 for detailed discussion.

If nominative-marked subjects may remain VP-internal, they fall within the default domain of existential closure. The relevant interpretive contrast in Korean therefore arises between VP and CP: VP serves as the nuclear scope of existential closure, whereas CP constitutes a higher, discourse-linked interpretive domain. This revised mapping structure can be schematically summarized in (8).

- (8) a. VP: nuclear scope of existential closure
 b. CP: restrictive domain for discourse-linked interpretation

Under this architecture, basic nominative existential sentences are interpreted within VP, where existential closure binds both the individual and situation variables, yielding a non-presuppositional reading. The availability of this interpretation follows from independently motivated properties of Korean clause structure, rather than from information-structural stipulation.

4.2 Situation variables, presuppositionality, and CP-level interpretation

While the mapping structure adopted here is inherited from Jeon (2019), the semantic mechanism proposed in this paper extends that framework. I argue that

7 The contrast in (7) involves a difference in clausal embedding and complement structure. The example is not intended as a decisive test of subject-object asymmetry, but as an additional illustration consistent with prior proposals that nominative-marked subjects in Korean need not obligatorily occupy Spec-TP. The central claim of the present analysis does not depend on this example alone, and the argument concerning subject position is supported by broader syntactic and interpretive considerations.

presuppositionality in existential sentences arises when the situation variable associated with predication is interpreted outside the VP domain, in particular at the CP level.

Following situation-based approaches (cf. Carlson 1977; Heim 1982; Kratzer 1989; Schwarz 2012), I assume that predicates are evaluated relative to situations. Existential sentences therefore introduce not only an individual variable but also a situation variable that anchors the predication. When interpretation proceeds within VP, both variables are bound by existential closure, yielding an asserted existential reading.

Importantly, however, situation variables are not restricted to predicates. As discussed in Enç (1986), Percus (2000), and subsequent work, and adopted in Jeon (2019), nominal expressions may also be associated with situation variables. This is illustrated by examples such as *Every fugitive is now in jail* (Enç 1986), where the situation relative to which the nominal *every fugitive* is evaluated need not coincide with the situation introduced by the predicate *be in jail*. At the time of evaluation, individuals in jail are no longer fugitives, showing that the nominal and predicational situations may be distinct. While in many cases the situation variables associated with nominals and predicates are coindexed, yielding a single situation of evaluation, the grammar allows these two to be distinguished in principle.

This distinction plays a crucial role in the present analysis of Korean existential constructions. In basic existential sentences such as *mwulkhep-i pwuekh-ey iss-ta* ‘There is a glass in the kitchen’, both the individual variable and the situation variable associated with the nominative NP are introduced within the VP domain. The existential predicate is likewise interpreted within VP. Crucially, the situation variables associated with the nominal and the predicate are coindexed, yielding a single situation of evaluation that is bound by existential closure. As a result, both the existence of the individual and the situation in which the predication holds are asserted. By contrast, presuppositional existential sentences arise when the situation variable associated with the nominal is interpreted outside the domain of existential closure. Once a situation variable is accessed at a higher domain, its existence can no longer be asserted but must instead be taken for granted. In other words, when the situation relative to which predication is evaluated is supplied by a CP-level domain, existential predication no longer contributes new information about existence, but presupposes it.

This configuration can be schematically represented as in (9).

- (9) a. VP-level interpretation
 $\exists s \exists x [\text{glass}(x, s) \wedge \text{in-the-kitchen}(x, s)]$
 b. CP-level interpretation
 $\text{glass}(x, s) \wedge \text{in-the-kitchen}(x, s)$

In (9b), the variables are not bound by VP-level existential closure but are interpreted as discourse-linked parameters supplied by the higher clausal context, reflecting the fact that the sentence is evaluated relative to a contextually given situation rather than introducing a new one through existential closure. The distinction between the individual variable x and the situation variable s allows for a more articulated understanding of how clausal structure interacts with interpretation. In principle, four configurations are logically conceivable depending on whether each variable is interpreted within the VP domain or at the CP level: (i) both x and s interpreted within VP, (ii) both interpreted at CP, (iii) x interpreted at CP while s remains within VP, and (iv) s interpreted at CP while x remains within VP.

The present proposal predicts that only the first two configurations are systematically realized in Korean existential constructions. In the VP-level configuration, existential closure binds both x and s , yielding a single-situation existential predication in which both the individual and the situation are newly introduced. In the CP-level configuration, neither x nor s is introduced by VP-level existential closure. Rather, both are interpreted relative to a discourse-linked domain. As a result, existence is not asserted but presupposed.

Mixed configurations are not independently motivated. Although the grammar in principle permits the situation variable associated with a nominal to be distinct from that of the predicate—as illustrated by examples such as *Every fugitive is now in jail*—the present analysis assumes that, in Korean locative existentials, the nominal and predicate situation variables are ordinarily coindexed, yielding domain uniformity: both are interpreted at the same structural level. Apparent disruptions of this coindexation, as will be shown in the following section, arise only in environments where single-situation evaluation becomes semantically untenable, thereby forcing interpretation at a higher clausal domain rather than licensing a stable mixed configuration. A further logical possibility concerns the inverse configuration, in which the predicate's situation variable escapes VP-level interpretation while the nominal remains VP-internal. However, such a configuration would require independent

motivation for predicate-level extraction from the VP domain, and no evidence for this option emerges in Korean existential constructions.

Given this restriction, treating presuppositional readings as involving CP-level interpretation of both x and s provides theoretical advantages over approaches that focus exclusively on the individual variable. If only x were interpreted outside existential closure while s remained existentially introduced, the sentence would still assert the introduction of a new situation. However, presuppositional readings in Korean do not present the situation itself as newly introduced. By allowing the situation variable to be interpreted outside VP-level closure as well, the analysis captures the intuition that both the individual and the relevant situation are discourse-anchored rather than existentially asserted.

In Korean, the structural configuration systematically correlates with topic marking. Topic-marked NPs are commonly associated with aboutness and, in many cases, contrastiveness—properties that have been argued to be structurally encoded in the CP domain (Rizzi 1997). Importantly, however, the present analysis does not treat topic marking itself as a presupposition trigger. Rather, topic marking correlates with a configuration in which the situation variable associated with the nominal is interpreted at the CP level, that is, in a discourse-linked interpretive domain.

The contrast between nominative- and topic-marked existential sentences thus reduces to whether the nominal is interpreted within VP or at CP. Presuppositionality emerges from the interpretive locus of situation variables, not from definiteness or from the lexical semantics of the topic marker.

Finally, this account refines Diesing's (1992) analysis. Whereas Diesing ties presuppositionality to the escape of an individual variable from existential closure, the present proposal locates the contrast in the division between VP and CP as distinct interpretive domains and extends it to situation variables. When interpretation proceeds at CP, both the individual and situation variables fall outside VP-level closure; when interpretation remains in VP, both are existentially bound. The VP-CP mapping therefore regulates not only nominal interpretation but the status of existential predication itself.

5. Empirical consequences

This section examines the empirical consequences of the revised VP-CP mapping architecture. The central claim is that the contrast between existential and presuppositional readings follows from whether a nominal can be interpreted within VP, where existential closure applies, or must instead be interpreted at CP. This contrast is not reducible to morphological case marking. Consider the minimal pair in (1) again.

- (1) a. Mwulkhep-i pwuekh-ey iss-ta.
 glass-NOM kitchen-LOC exist-DECL
 ‘There is a glass in the kitchen.’
- b. Mwulkhep-un pwuekh-ey iss-ta.
 glass-TOP kitchen-LOC exist-DECL
 ‘The glass is in the kitchen.’

In (1a), the nominative-marked NP is interpreted within VP, and existential closure binds both the individual and situation variables, yielding a neutral existential reading. In (1b), the topic-marked nominal is interpreted at CP; existential closure cannot bind its associated variables, and the sentence receives a presuppositional interpretation. As argued above, what matters is not surface case per se, but the interpretive domain to which the nominal is mapped.

The analysis further predicts that presuppositional readings may arise even without overt topic marking. Nominative-marked sentences may receive presuppositional interpretations under contrastive focus, where information-structural operations correlate with CP-level interpretation.

At this point, however, a further empirical issue arises. There are nominative-marked existential sentences that lack both overt topic marking and contrastive focus, yet nevertheless resist existential interpretation. A representative example is given in (10).

- (10) Thalokpem-i icey kamok-ey iss-ta.
 escapee-NOM now jail-LOC exist-DECL
 ‘The escapee is now in jail.’

Sentence (10) is fully grammatical, but it does not receive an existential interpretation. The sentence does not assert the existence of an escapee; rather, it presupposes the existence of a particular individual who previously qualified as an escapee and asserts that this individual is now in jail. This reading arises despite the presence of nominative case and in the absence of any overt topic or focus marking.

Under the present analysis, this pattern follows from a failure of VP-internal interpretation. VP-level mapping constitutes the default option for nominative-marked NPs, but it is available only when the nominal and predication situation variables can be coindexed, yielding a coherent single-situation existential predication. In (10), this condition is not satisfied. The nominal *thalokpem* 'escapee', in this case, is a role-denoting expression that presupposes an escape event, that is, a situation in which the individual has escaped from custody. By contrast, the predicate, anchored by the temporal adverb *icey* 'now', describes the individual's present location. Because VP-level interpretation enforces evaluation with respect to a single situation, interpreting the nominal within VP would require identifying these two situations. This point can be made explicit by considering the logical representation that would be required under VP-level mapping.

$$(11) \exists s \exists x [\text{escapee}(x, s) \wedge \text{in-jail}(x, s) \wedge s = \text{now}]$$

The representation in (11) forces the escape-defining situation and the present locative situation to be identical, producing semantic incoherence. VP-level existential closure, which binds both x and s within a single domain, therefore cannot apply. The unavailability of the existential reading in (10) thus reflects a structural constraint on situation coindexation rather than a property of nominative case itself.

The contrast illustrated in (10) can be generalized into a diagnostic for CP-level interpretation.⁸ VP-level mapping requires a single situation of evaluation in which

8 Nominals denoting socially unique roles, such as chairperson, often display a strong presuppositional bias even under nominative marking (e.g. *Isacang-i hyencay pyengwen-ey iss-ta*. 'The chairperson is now in the hospital'). Crucially, however, an existential interpretation remains available in such cases, indicating that VP-level mapping is not structurally blocked. The preference for a presuppositional reading instead reflects the pragmatic tendency to interpret socially unique roles as discourse-identified individuals. By contrast, topic marking (e.g. *Isacang-un hyencay pyengwen-ey iss-ta.*) systematically excludes existential interpretation, since the nominal is interpreted in the CP domain. This contrast shows that pragmatic definiteness and structural CP-mapping must be distinguished.

both the nominal and the predicate are interpreted. When the lexical semantics of the nominal presupposes evaluation relative to a prior situation—as in the case of role-denoting nouns such as *escapee*—and the predicate is temporally anchored to the present, single-situation interpretation becomes conceptually unstable. In such cases, VP-level existential closure is blocked, and interpretation must proceed at a higher clausal domain. This provides an independent grammatical and semantic diagnostic for CP-level mapping, rather than a post hoc explanation of presuppositional readings.

When VP-level interpretation fails, the grammar resorts to CP-level mapping. The nominal's situation variable is then interpreted as a discourse-linked parameter, distinct from the predicational situation. This allows *escapee* to be evaluated relative to a prior escape situation while the locative predicate is anchored to the present. The resulting interpretation presupposes existence and asserts only present location.

Crucially, this shift does not depend on overt topic marking. It is forced by the semantic requirements of the nominal and the impossibility of constructing a coherent single-situation existential predication within VP. The contrast between (1a) and (10) thus reveals a broader generalization: nominative marking makes VP-level interpretation available by default, but existential interpretation is derived only when VP-level mapping yields a well-formed single-situation structure. When it does not, CP-level interpretation becomes obligatory, and presuppositionality follows from the mapping architecture.

Taken together, these facts show that presuppositionality in Korean existential constructions is determined not by definiteness or the lexical semantics of the topic marker, but by whether a nominal can participate in VP-level existential closure under a coherent single-situation interpretation. This provides independent empirical support for the revised VP-CP mapping architecture developed in Section 4.

6. English existentials and the limits of CP-level interpretation

This section considers the implications of the proposed analysis for English *there*-existentials, which originally motivated Diesing's (1992) Mapping Hypothesis, and provide a useful point of comparison for the revised VP-CP mapping architecture developed in this paper.

English *there*-existentials impose a well-known restriction on the interpretation of the associate noun phrase. As illustrated in (12), the postverbal NP must be interpreted as an existential indefinite and systematically resists presuppositional readings.

(12) There is a glass in the kitchen.

As discussed in Section 2, the associate NP is confined to the VP domain and mapped to the nuclear scope of existential closure. Presuppositional noun phrases, which require interpretation in a restrictive domain, are therefore excluded, yielding the definiteness effect.

It should be acknowledged that the definiteness effect is not entirely uniform. Apparent exceptions—such as list readings or certain discourse-licensed uses of role-denoting nominals—have been noted in the literature.⁹ These cases are often analyzed as involving contextual restriction, presentational uses of the construction, or semantic coercion. Crucially, however, they do not provide evidence for systematic access to a higher clausal domain. Rather, they reflect interpretive adjustments within the scope of existential closure and do not undermine the structural restriction characteristic of English *there*-existentials.

Nothing in the present analysis challenges this conclusion. On the contrary, English *there*-existentials instantiate the most restrictive configuration permitted by the revised mapping architecture. The construction itself prevents the associate NP from accessing higher clausal domains for interpretation.¹⁰ As a result, CP-level interpretation of the

9 So-called list readings (e.g. *There were John, Mary, and Bill*) have been analyzed as presentational or enumerative uses rather than canonical existential predications. The present discussion does not hinge on a specific analysis of these marginal cases, but only on the absence of systematic higher-domain interpretation.

10 In Diesing's (1992) original formulation, the restrictive domain is identified with TP. In English *there*-existentials, the expletive *there* occupies the relevant structural position, with the effect that the associate NP cannot be interpreted in the restrictive domain. This can be understood not merely as blocking overt movement, but as restricting interpretive access to higher clausal domains more generally, including at LF. As a result, VP-level existential interpretation is forced. However, Korean differs crucially in lacking such a structural blocking mechanism. Although nominative-marked NPs may remain VP-internal at surface structure, nothing in the grammar prevents them from being interpreted relative to a higher clausal domain at LF. I suggest that in sentences such as *Thalokpem-icity kamok-ey iss-ta*, the nominative NP is interpreted with access to the CP domain at LF, even in the absence of overt topic or focus marking. This option is unavailable in English *there*-existentials,

situation variable is unavailable, and existential closure obligatorily applies.

This restriction becomes particularly clear with role-denoting nominals. Consider sentences such as *There are fugitives in jail*. Under a default interpretation, the sentence is markedly degraded. The reason is not that English disallows role nouns per se, but that *there*-existentials require both the nominal *fugitive* and the locative predicate *in jail* to be evaluated within a single VP-level situation. Because the role-denoting nominal and the locative predicate do not naturally describe the same situation, the construction yields conceptual tension. Any improvement arises only under coerced non-canonical interpretations.

Crucially, this contrasts with Korean. Korean lacks an expletive existential construction that structurally restricts interpretation to VP. While nominative-marked NPs may remain VP-internal at surface structure, the grammar does not structurally block interpretation at a higher clausal domain. When VP-level interpretation fails to yield a coherent single-situation predication—as in cases involving role-denoting nominals combined with temporal anchoring—Korean allows interpretation to shift to CP, yielding a presuppositional reading. This option is systematically unavailable in English *there*-existentials.

From this perspective, the two languages do not differ in the basic semantics of existential predication: in both, VP is the domain of existential closure. The difference lies in whether alternative mappings are structurally available when VP-level interpretation is semantically untenable. English *there*-existentials represent a configuration in which access to higher interpretive domains is blocked by the construction itself. Korean, by contrast, permits CP-level interpretation under well-defined conditions. The cross-linguistic contrast therefore follows from differences in clausal architecture rather than from differences in the semantics of existential predication.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined existential constructions in Korean and English with the aim of refining the relationship between syntactic structure and semantic interpretation

where the construction itself restricts interpretation to the VP domain.

articulated in Diesing's (1992) Mapping Hypothesis. Focusing on Korean locative existential sentences formed with *-ey iss-ta* 'be located', this paper has argued that the contrast between existential and presuppositional readings cannot be reduced to nominal definiteness, lexical properties of existential predicates, or purely discourse-level stipulations. Rather, it follows from how nominals and their associated situation variables are mapped onto distinct clausal domains.

Building on Jeon (2019), this analysis maintains that VP remains the universal locus of existential closure, but that the relevant higher interpretive domain in Korean is CP rather than TP. VP-level interpretation constitutes the default mapping for nominative-marked NPs, yielding a single-situation existential predication in which both the nominal and the predicate are evaluated relative to the same situation. When this configuration is available, nominative-marked NPs receive genuine existential interpretations. When interpretation proceeds relative to a higher, discourse-linked domain, existential closure does not apply, and presuppositional interpretations arise. Crucially, departure from the default single-situation configuration need not be triggered by overt topic or focus marking; it may also be forced by semantic constraints that render VP-level interpretation untenable, as in cases involving role-denoting nominals combined with temporal anchoring.

A central contribution of the paper lies in incorporating situation variables into the mapping mechanism. By distinguishing between the situations associated with nominals and those associated with predicates, the analysis provides a principled account of when existential predication is possible and when it is blocked. Presuppositionality emerges not as a lexical property of topic marking or a primitive discourse effect, but as a consequence of evaluating situation variables outside the domain of existential closure. This approach preserves the core insight of the Mapping Hypothesis while extending its explanatory reach.

The correlations among nominal interpretation, case marking, informational reading, and clausal domain can thus be stated more explicitly. Interpretation within the VP domain, where existential closure binds both the individual variable and the situation variable, yields existential readings typically associated with nominative-marked NPs. Interpretation at the CP level, by contrast, excludes VP-level existential closure and gives rise to presuppositional readings, frequently associated with topic marking or other discourse-linked configurations. Morphological marking does not independently determine definiteness; rather, it interacts with the structural

domain of interpretation. The clustering of definiteness effects, case marking, informational readings, and variable binding therefore follows from their alignment with distinct domains of semantic evaluation.

More broadly, the analysis underscores the importance of clausal domains as interpretive resources in the syntax-semantics interface. By showing how existential closure, information structure, and situation-based interpretation interact within a unified mapping architecture, the paper contributes to a more general understanding of how semantic interpretation is regulated by syntactic structure. The results suggest that cross-linguistic differences in existential constructions reflect variation in how higher clausal domains participate in interpretation, a perspective that may prove fruitful for the study of genericity, focus, and discourse-linked interpretations in other constructions and languages.

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