Existential predication and transpossessive constructions in typological and diachronic perspective

Denis Creissels
University of Lyon
denis.creissels@univ-lyon2.fr

Existential predication as illustrated by English There is a book (on the table), like plain locational predication (The book is on the table), encodes figure-ground relationships, but with a different perspective. In some languages, the existential predicator is also found in have-possessive constructions. This type of existential construction is not rare in the languages of the world. Its historical development can be analyzed as starting from the depersonalization of the possessive construction: X has Y > (at some place) they have Y > (at some place) Y is available > (at some place) there is Y. Another aspect of the relationship between existentials and have-possessives is the ‘have-drift’, by which be-possessives may acquire coding properties typical of transitive predication. The conclusion is that a typological investigation of existential and possessive predication does not support the popular view that the notion of possession would be a mere excrescence of location/existence.