

Existential indefinite constructions, in the world and in Mainland Southeast Asia¹

JOHAN VAN DER AUWERA 

University of Antwerp

QUAN NGUYEN HAI

Can Tho University

VIPAS POTHIPATH

Chulalongkorn University

STEFANIE SIEBENHÜTTER 

Waseda University

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In some languages assertions about ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’ are existential in a strong sense, i.e. they need or prominently allow an explicit syntactic marker of existence (‘there is’, ‘exist’). This paper presents a state-of-the-art typology of existential indefinite constructions and finds the typological understanding to be inconclusive in many respects. The paper responds to this inconclusiveness with a study of the existential indefinite constructions in four mainland Southeast Asian languages, namely Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, and Khmer. These are languages in which existential indefinite constructions take pride of place, although the

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typological literature has not acknowledged this. The paper then sketches the implications of the study of the aforementioned languages for typology.

KEYWORDS: existence, existential indefinite constructions, generic noun, ignorative, indefiniteness, interrogative, negation, specificity

1. INTRODUCTION

This is a study of how existential constructions function in the expression of what corresponds to English *somebody* and *nobody*. Thai in (1) illustrates this: *khraj0 baan0 khon0* is, at least in (1a), the closest we get to English *somebody*. In (1b) we get *khraj0*, which together with the negator *maj2* corresponds to *nobody*. But in both we also see an existential syntactic marker *mii0*.

(1) Thai

(a) Mii0 khraj0 baan0 khon0 hen4 chan4.

EX IGN.HUM SPEC CL.HUM see 1SG

‘Somebody saw me.’

(b) Maj2 mii0 khraj0 hen4 chan4.

NEG EX IGN.HUM see 1SG

‘Nobody saw me.’

Of course, neither *khraj0 baan0 khon0* nor *khraj0* are exact counterparts of English *somebody* or *nobody*. The latter are indefinite pronouns. The Thai phrases are not quite the same, but they contain a pronoun too, viz. *khraj0*, which, depending on one’s analysis, is an interrogative pronoun or a pronoun with a meaning which allows both interrogative and indefinite uses, sometimes called ‘ignorative’ pronoun after Karcevski (1969). Example (2) illustrates the interrogative use.

(2) Thai

Khraj0 hen4 chan4?

IGN.HUM see 1SG

‘Who saw me?’

That the sentences in (1) contain an existential marker too is not entirely surprising. We can see something similar in English in (3).

(3) English

(a) There was somebody that saw me.

(b) There was nobody that saw me.

Languages may avoid an indefinite constituent early in the sentence, plausibly because of a ‘Given before New’ principle. This principle goes back to the Prague School of linguistics and perhaps before (Vachek 1966: 89) and achieved further prominence through e.g. Halliday (1967: 205–211), Givón (1979a: 299), and Gundel (1988: 229). It says that there is a preference for given information to

precede new information. With an existential construction the speaker explicitly marks that the ‘Given before New’ ordering is not adhered to and that what follows the existential, i.e. *somebody* or *nobody* or what corresponds to this in another language, is new information (see Givón 1979a: 27; Van Alsenoy 2014: 241). In some languages and in some constructions the pressure to mark that the given does not precede the new can be strong. Thus in Thai it is stronger than in English. To render *somebody* or *nobody* in Thai, at least when what renders ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’ occurs before ‘see’, one has to use an existential marker. In this study we look in detail at the kinds of constructions shown in (1).

A few words on terminology. First, we will call *somebody* a ‘specific’ indefinite pronoun, *nobody* a ‘negative’ one and we will say that *somebody* and *nobody* express ‘specific’, respectively, ‘negative indefiniteness’. English also has *anybody*, which we call a ‘non-specific indefinite’ pronoun.

(4) *English*

- (a) Did anybody call?
- (b) Anybody can do that.
- (c) I didn’t call anybody.

Negative indefiniteness is a subtype of non-specific indefiniteness. Hence it is no surprise that a language can express negative indefiniteness with a combination of a negator and a non-specific indefinite pronoun, as we see in English in (4c). In this paper we focus on specific and negative indefiniteness and leave non-specific indefiniteness aside. Second, we look at both ‘pronominal’ and ‘nominal’ indefinites. The latter are like pronominal ones, except that there is a noun or noun phrase that denotes the (non-)existing person. We see this in Thai in (5).

(5) *Thai*

Chan4 hen4 khon0.
 1sg see person
 ‘I saw somebody.’

When it does not matter whether the indefiniteness is nominal or pronominal, we use the term ‘(pro)nominal’. Third, a construction that uses a syntactic existential marker to express either specific or negative indefinites is called an ‘existential indefinite construction’. A construction can be both (pro)nominal and existential. Thai in (1a), for instance, is pronominal and existential. Fourth, as adumbrated already, a (pro)noun that has one meaning (semantics), but both interrogative and indefinite uses (pragmatics), has been called ‘ignorative’ and we follow this practice. Finally, we use the terms ‘preverbal’ and ‘postverbal’ to refer to the position of the indefinite construction relative to the lexical verb, e.g. *hen4* ‘see’ in (5). The existential marker may also be a verb, but that is not the verb that the terms ‘preverbal’ and ‘postverbal’ relate to.

In Section 2 we will evaluate where we stand with our understanding of existential indefinite constructions for the world at large. In Section 3 we zoom

in on four mainland Southeast Asian ('MSEA') languages, viz. Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, and Khmer. There are four reasons for this focus. First, in each of these languages existential indefinite constructions are prominent. We can thus hope that the language-specific similarities and differences between these languages help the general typology of existential indefinite constructions. Second, Kaufman (2009: 194) compares MSEA, as part of the larger Asian mainland, to conservative Austronesian languages and claims that what is special for the expression of indefiniteness in MSEA is the use of 'wh-words', different from conservative Austronesian languages, which favor existential constructions. Though we cannot compare Austronesian and MSEA languages, we can at least have a closer look at four MSEA languages and check whether existential indefinite constructions do indeed take second stage there. Third, the four languages are 'big' languages, which are in general well described, the data are more accessible than for 'smaller' languages, and for each of the four languages, (pro)nominal indefiniteness has already attracted scholarly attention.² Fourth, the MSEA languages 'are well known for their seemingly high degree of convergence in many if not all aspects of their grammar' (Enfield 2019: 236). This has led to the hypothesis that MSEA is a *Sprachbund* (see Enfield 2005; Comrie 2007; Dahl 2008; Vittrant & Watkins 2019; Peterson & Chevalier 2022). This further invites one to find out how much similarity there is with respect to existential indefinite constructions, which has not been done yet. Of course, Enfield (2019: 1, 234–235; 2021: 10; see also Enfield & Comrie 2015: 14) warns that the restriction to the four national languages will not disclose the variation found in MSEA as a whole. It will thus not allow us to establish whether any feature of MSEA existential indefinite constructions is criterial for the MSEA *Sprachbund*, nor will this synchronic account tell us anything about the diachrony of the convergence, possibly established due to long time contact.

2. EXISTENTIAL INDEFINITE CONSTRUCTIONS IN THE WORLD

2.1 *Specific indefinites*

Despite the fact that there is a continuously growing voluminous literature on indefiniteness, to find out how existential indefinite constructions fare in the world at large, *WALS* (*World Atlas of Language Structures*), in particular Haspelmath (2005a),³ is still the best guide, at least for specific indefinites.⁴ Haspelmath (2005a)

[2] But there are few dedicated studies. For Vietnamese there is Tran & Bruening (2013). For Khmer there is an unusually long section on the relevant issues in Jacob (1968: 122–137). Koshy (2009) is a study of the Khasi language Pnar.

[3] For some *WALS* chapters the 2013 electronic version differs from the 2005 printed version, but in the case of the two chapters on indefiniteness, there are no differences.

[4] The chapter is called 'Indefinite pronouns', but it only concerns the ones that express specific indefiniteness.

classifies the world's languages into five types. This is shown and illustrated in Table 1. The examples are taken from Haspelmath (2005a).

The phrases 'interrogative-based' and 'generic noun-based' each cover two subtypes. Either the indefinite pronoun is identical to an interrogative pronoun or generic noun (like the German example *wer*) or it contains an interrogative pronoun or generic noun (like the English example *something*). The last column offers an approximation of the number of languages illustrating each type. That the number is approximate has several reasons. First, for the languages in which the indefinite pronoun is identical to an interrogative one, Haspelmath (2005a) admits that the view that such pronouns are not really interrogative, but only ignorative, could be correct. In that case the number for interrogative-based strategies will be lower, and we have to devise a new category, to wit, that of ignoratives, or perhaps consider the ignoratives to be a subtype of special indefinite pronouns. Haspelmath (2005a) does not make clear in how many of the 194 languages the interrogatives and the indefinites are identical, but the number must be significant. In a 100-language sample in Haspelmath (1997: 174), 64 languages are classified as 'interrogative-based' and in 31 languages the interrogatives and the indefinites are identical. The ignorative issue also affects the mixed category, of course, for languages could have non-ignorative and ignorative strategies. Note that the synchronic status of the ignorative is different from its etymology. According to Haspelmath (1997: 176, 2005a), historically ignoratives are always interrogative-based.⁵

A second reason for calling the numbers for each strategy 'approximations' is that there may be more nominal strategies, translating *somebody* or *something* with the equivalent for *person* and *thing*, than a grammarian reports. This especially affects the number given for type B, but also the one for type D. Curiously, languages that use the numeral 'one' (as in English *someone*) or what used to be the numeral 'one', are also included in type A. One could argue that this is a separate type rather than a subtype.

Table 1 shows that it is rare for a language not to have a specific indefinite (pro) noun and to rely solely on an existential construction. Table 1 only has two languages, out of a total of 326. These languages are Mocoví (Guacuruan, Brasil) and Tagalog (Malayo-Polynesian, Philippines).

(6) *Tagalog* (Haspelmath 1997: 54)

May dumating kahapon.
EX come.AF yesterday
'Somebody came yesterday.'

[5] On the subject of diachrony, it should be pointed out that the *WALS* analyses give no clue as whether 'true' indefinite pronouns can originate in existential indefinite constructions, whether, in other words, a construction like Thai (*maj2*) *mii0 khraj* can morphologize into a (*maj2*)*mii0khraj* pronoun. At least for negative indefiniteness, for the world at large, though not for MSEA, the answer is positive (Van Alsenoy 2014: 141–145; Van der Auwera 2022).

Languages characterized by a pattern		Example	n
A	With an interrogative-based specific indefinite (pro)noun	German <i>wer</i> ‘somebody’ also has a ‘who?’ use	194
B	With a specific indefinite (pro)noun based on the generic nouns ‘person’ or ‘thing’	English <i>something</i> , with the generic noun <i>thing</i> ⁱ	85
C	With a special indefinite (pro)noun	Spanish <i>alguien</i> ⁱⁱ	22
D	With a mixed strategy	German <i>jemand</i> ‘somebody’ (c) and <i>etwas</i> ‘something’ (a)	23
E	Without a specific indefinite (pro)noun, but with an existential construction	as in Tagalog in (6)	2
			326

i *Pace* Haspelmath (2005a) we would claim that *somebody* is a special pronoun too. *Somebody* obviously contains the noun *body*, that it is not a generic noun meaning ‘person’ or, as Haspelmath (2005a) has it, it is not a generic noun ‘anymore’. Thus English itself becomes mixed, as it has both the generic noun-based *something* and the special *somebody*.

ii The Spanish form *alguien* does not itself contain an interrogative element, but its Latin predecessor *aliquem* does.

Table 1

Languages classified as to the way they express ‘somebody’ and ‘something’.

Tagalog in (6) has an existential marker *may* and there is no (pro)noun. It is interesting to compare Tagalog in (6) with Thai in (1a). In (1a), Thai also contains an existential marker, but there is a pronoun as well, viz. an ignorative one. Since Haspelmath (2005a) counts ignoratives as interrogatives, he classifies Thai as a type A language. But does the presence of the pronoun make (1a) any less existential? A terminological decision is needed, depending on whether one allows the term ‘existential’ for constructions that contain an existential marker independently of whether there is an exponence of the individual that exists. We have implicitly already chosen for the wider definition. Most importantly, the decision should ideally be the same when we come to negative indefiniteness, which has been investigated better than specific indefiniteness and also by other linguists. In this area the terminological decision is also the wider one, not only in Haspelmath (2005b), but also in the earlier Haspelmath (1997) as well as in Kahrel (1996) and the later Van Alsenoy (2014). This gives additional support for the choice of the wider definition for specific indefiniteness. This then means that Thai should fall into category D, the mixed one. It has both an existential and an ignorative pronoun (interrogative-based for Haspelmath 2005a). In fact, as already illustrated with (5), Thai also allows the generic noun-based strategy – so it is mixed for an additional reason.

2.2 Negative indefinites

For negative indefiniteness we turn to Haspelmath (2005b). The focus of this study is on whether an expression that ‘directly translates’ *nobody* or *nothing* occurs with

a clausal negator or not. In standard English in (7a) there is no clausal negator, in substandard English in (7b) there can be one.

(7) *English*

- (a) I saw nobody.
 (b) I didn't see nobody.

Like for specific indefinites, the indefinite may be pronominal or nominal. This is also the wide sense that we adopt. Haspelmath's definition is even wider, since 'negative indefinite' also includes 'non-specific indefinites', such as *anybody*, to which we object (see also van der Auwera & Van Alsenoy 2016, 2018). Table 2 shows Haspelmath's findings: the definition of 'negative (pro)noun' in this table is his, not ours.

A language can be mixed, Haspelmath (2005b) points out, and in more than one way. The parameter that has received most attention concerns the position of the negative indefinite relative to the verb, as in Italian in (8).

(8) *Italian*

- (a) *(Non) ho visto nessuno.
 NEG have seen nobody
 'I have seen nobody.'
 (b) Nessuno (*non) venne.
 nobody NEG came
 'Nobody came.'

Languages characterized by a pattern		Example	n
A	With an indefinite negative (pro)noun with a clausal negator	Croatian, as in <i>Nitko nije došao</i> glossed as 'nobody NEG.is come'	170
B	With an indefinite negative (pro)noun without a clausal negator	German, as in <i>Ich habe niemand gesehen</i> glossed as 'I have nobody seen'	11
C	With a mixed strategy	Italian as in (8)	13
D	With an existence marker	Nêlêmwa, as in (9)	12 ⁱ
			206

i There is only one language that is classified by *WALS* as requiring an existential construction for both specific and negative indefiniteness, viz. Mocoví, but there are no convincing data in *WALS*, and at least in the variety of Mocoví studied by Carrió (2015, 2019), negative indefinites do not require an existential construction (Cintia Carrió, pers. comm.).

Table 2

Languages classified as to the way they express 'nobody' and 'nothing'.

In (8a) the negative indefinite follows the verb and the clausal negator is obligatory. In (8b) the negative indefinite precedes the verb and the clausal negator is unacceptable.⁶

Despite the fact that parameters for the typologies of specific and negative indefinites are different, both typologies contain an existential type. Haspelmath (2005b) uses Nêlêmwa (Oceanic, New Caledonia) to illustrate a language that requires an existential construction for negative indefiniteness.

(9) *Nêlêmwa* (Bril 1999: 84)

Kia agu I uya.
 NEG.EX person 3SG arrive
 ‘Nobody came.’

Note that (9) does not only have an existence marker, but also an exponent of the non-existent individual, viz. *agu* ‘person’. We thus see that ‘existential’ is defined more liberally than in Haspelmath (2005a): for negative indefinite constructions an existential strategy may have a (pro)nominal exponent for the non-existent person. Thus Nêlêmwa in (9) is similar to Thai in (1b). Yet, for negative indefiniteness Haspelmath (2005b) categorizes Thai as a non-existential type A language, presumably because the negative indefinite pronoun *khray* occurs with a verb (*mii0*) which has to occur with a clausal negator. Our criticism is that the verb *mii0* is crucially an existential verb. This would *ceteris paribus* put Thai together with Nêlêmwa, but the matter is more complicated. When the Thai negative pronoun follows the verb, one does not use an existential construction.

(10) *Thai*

Chan4 maj2 hen4 khraj0.
 1SG NEG see IGN.HUM
 ‘I saw nobody.’

The placement of the indefinite relative to the verb is the main parameter for classifying a language as mixed. But ‘mixed’ in Haspelmath (2005b) does not allow for one of the strategies to be existential; we propose that ‘mixed’ should allow this. This is also where Tagalog should be classified, *pace* Haspelmath (2005b), who categorizes Tagalog among the 170 languages that use a negative (pro)noun with a clausal negator.

(11) *Tagalog* (Schachter & Otanes 1972: 534)

Hindi siya ginigising ng kahit sino.
 NEG 3SG awaken.AF linker even INT.HUM
 ‘Nobody awakens him/her.’

[6] A full account of Italian negative indefinites, which is not our concern here, will have to deal with the fact that these indefinites can have a non-negative reading in questions.

But, as already mentioned in his earlier work (Haspelmath 1997: 54), Tagalog has an existential indefiniteness strategy too.

- (12) *Tagalog* (Haspelmath 1997: 54)
 Walang dumating kahapon.
 NEG.EX.LK come.AF yesterday
 ‘Nobody came yesterday.’

Van Alsenoy (2014: 240) suggests that in Tagalog the choice is determined by whether or not the indefinite is the subject. This hypothesis does not contradict Haspelmath (2005b), for he accepts that there is more than one parameter that determines the choice between various strategies. Furthermore, the two parameters, i.e. word order and subjecthood, may be related, at least for Thai. Thai is an SVO language, so the preverbal position is, *ceteris paribus*, also a subject position.

There may be more parameters. In a publication later than Haspelmath’s source (Bril 1999), Bril (2002) suggests that in Nêlêmwa emphasis could play a role.

- (13) *Nêlêmwa* (Bril 2002: 250)
 Kio no axe a agu.
 NEG 1SG see at.all person
 ‘I saw nobody at all.’

This way Nêlêmwa ceases to be a good example of a language that can only express negative indefiniteness existentially.

Though Haspelmath (2005b) does not provide for a mixed category allowing existential constructions, his earlier work (1997) did. Haspelmath (1997: 214–215) claimed about SVO languages with non-specific pronouns that allow negative uses, that in some of these languages this pronoun cannot occur before the verb.⁷ This is illustrated with Mandarin in (14).

- (14) *Mandarin* (Haspelmath 1997: 215)
 (a) Tā bù xǐhuān shénme.
 3SG NEG like IGN.NHUM
 ‘She doesn’t like anything.’
 (b) *Shénme rén bù xǐhuān tā.
 IGN person NEG like 3SG
 ‘Nobody likes her.’

To express the meaning of something like (14b), languages may resort to an existential construction. Mandarin serves to illustrate this.

[7] Haspelmath (1997: 216) explains this with the hypothesis that in some SVO languages preverbal constituents cannot be focused or, in our view, that they cannot be new. We think that this ultimately relates to the ‘Given before New’ principle invoked when discussing (1) and (3).

- (15) *Mandarin*
 Méiyǒu rén xǐhuān tā.
 NEG.EX person like 3SG
 ‘Nobody likes her.’
 (lit. ‘There is not a person that likes her.’)

So Mandarin also counts as a mixed language, *pace* Haspelmath (2005b), who classifies it as one of the 170 ‘unmixed’ ones.

When we compare the *WALS* accounts for specific and for negative indefinites, we learn that Haspelmath finds existential constructions for negative indefinites in 12 out of 206 languages, but for specific indefinites only in 2 out of 326 languages. Whereas the number of languages with specific indefinites is much bigger than that for negative indefinites, we thus find much fewer existential constructions for specific indefiniteness than for negative indefiniteness. This might be taken to suggest that the existential strategy is associated more with negative indefiniteness than with specific indefiniteness. The numbers, however, do not warrant this hypothesis. First, the accounts of specific and negative indefiniteness define ‘existential’ in a different way. The study of negative indefiniteness uses the wider definition allowing an exponent of the non-existent entity. So it is not surprising that the number of negative existential constructions is higher than that of specific indefinite constructions. The second reason is that the data sets of the two studies are not representative samples. So one cannot, in principle, compare the numbers.

So far we have focused on Haspelmath (1997, 2005b), but there are two more typological accounts. Both Kahrel (1996) and Van Alsenoy (2014) write about negative existential indefinite constructions, but their category of existential constructions is possibly wider than that of Haspelmath’s. They include the construction illustrated for Nadëb (Nadahup, Brasil) in (16), which Weir (1993: 301) analyzes as an ‘ascriptive’ or ‘equative’ construction.

- (16) *Nadëb* (Weir 1993: 301)
 Dooh ha-wəh pəh.
 NEG RS-eat.INDIC NREF
 ‘Nobody is eating.’
 (lit. ‘One who is eating is something non-existent.’)

Interestingly, both Kahrel (1996) and Van Alsenoy (2014) acknowledge a mixed category allowing one of the strategies to be existential. In his sample of 40 languages, Kahrel (1996: 38) has seven languages with an existential negative construction, five of which are part of a mixed strategy. Van Alsenoy (2014: 238–239) has 179 languages, with 20 allowing existential negative indefinite constructions, possibly half of which are mixed. So existential negative indefinite constructions may occur at least as often as an alternative to a non-existential strategy than as the only option, and maybe the mixed strategies are more common.

A final point is that the ‘mixed’ label has by now covered different things. In the discussion of specific indefiniteness we focused on the presence of an existential marker and on the presence and the nature of the (pro)noun. Thai is mixed because the sentences contain both an existence marker and an exponent of the non-existent person and also because the latter can use either an ignorative or a generic noun – see (1) and (5). In the discussion of negative indefiniteness, however, the nature of the (pro)nominal exponent is irrelevant. What matters is the presence or absence of the clausal negator and the presence or absence of the existence marker. For the latter parameter Thai is mixed again, for (1b) contains the existence marker and (10) does not.

2.3 Conclusion

Our typological understanding of existential indefinite constructions is unsatisfactory. We still have to rely on the two *WALS* chapters. But this is problematic. For one thing, ‘existential indefinite construction’ is defined in a different way for specific versus negative indefinite constructions. Negative indefinite constructions may have a (pro)nominal exponent of indefinites in addition to the existential marker, but specific ones may not. In addition, the classification of mixed languages should allow for a mix between existential and non-existential strategies, both for specific and for negative indefinites.

It is true that we know more about negative existential constructions than about specific existential constructions, largely due to Haspelmath’s own pre-*WALS* work (1997) and to Kahrel (1996) and Van Alsenoy (2014), but our knowledge is deficient there too, for none of these works focuses on negative existential constructions. The general problem is also that descriptive grammars, the main source for typological works, generally fail to treat existential indefinite constructions in a satisfactory way. So we need supplementary, language-specific studies. This is what we will do in the second half of this paper.

3. EXISTENTIAL INDEFINITE CONSTRUCTIONS IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

3.1 Introduction

Of the four MSEA languages of which we study the expression of indefiniteness, two were discussed in Haspelmath (2005a, 2005b), viz. Thai and Vietnamese. These two languages have existential constructions, as already illustrated for Thai, but neither was recognized for this by Haspelmath (2005a, 2005b): both languages were classified as making their indefinites with interrogatives. In what follows we will provide a more satisfying account and we add two more MSEA languages, viz. Lao, genealogically closely related to Thai, and genealogically unrelated Khmer.

This study has many limitations. The most important one was mentioned at the end of [Section 1](#): it is obvious that a study of just four MSEA languages falls short of sketching the variation that is expected to emerge if either many more MSEA

languages or a balanced sample of them would be studied. This study is thus very much an invitation to undertake more comprehensive work. Second, we only study human indefinites, i.e. constructions corresponding to English *somebody* and *nobody*. We leave for later the study of non-human constructions such as the ones corresponding to English *something* and *nothing*, but also *somewhere* and *nowhere*, *sometimes* and *never*, and a few more. Third, as in the previous section we only cover specific and negative indefiniteness, so not non-specific indefiniteness. Fourth, there is only one parameter of variation that will be studied, viz. whether or not the human specific or negative indefinite construction occurs before or after the verb. There might be other parameters of variation. Fifth, our account is based on a small number of grammatical descriptions and native speaker judgments. Regional, register or stylistic variation will fall under the radar. Also, when a meaning can be expressed by more than one strategy, one strategy might be much more frequent than the other strategy or strategies or have different discourse-grammatical functions. Only corpus work or a questionnaire survey would allow solid frequency statements and only Givón style discourse analysis (Givón 1979b, 1983) will uncover the finer discourse-structural dimensions of the various strategies. Sixth, we do not study emphatic strategies. We study the way the languages express ‘nobody’, for instance, but not ‘not even one person’ or ‘nobody at all’. The distinction between an emphatic and a non-emphatic strategy is not always clear, of course, primarily because an emphatic strategy may be in the process of bleaching and turning non-emphatic. We also steer clear of rhetorical expression types, such as the one illustrated for Khmer in (17).

(17) *Khmer* (Haiman 2011: 201)

A: na: hian kaw: moat nwnɡ via.
 ANA IGN dare throat mouth with 3
 ‘No one dared stand up to him verbally.’

The translation has ‘no one’, but John Haiman (pers. comm.) points out that (17) is literally a rhetorical question meaning ‘Who dared stand up to him?’, with ‘No one’ as the implicated answer. Seventh, we do not discuss the nature of what follows the existential indefinite construction or the relation between that part and the existential indefinite construction. Consider Thai in (1a) again. The existential indefinite construction is *mii0 khraj0 baaj0khon0* and the remaining part of the sentence is *hen4 chan4*. Both parts contain verbs, viz. *mii0* ‘exist’ and *hen4* ‘see’. Is the appearance of the two verbs in any way related to the phenomenon of ‘verb serialization’, prominently present in MSEA languages (see e.g. Bisang 1992)? Also, is *hen4 chan4* a kind of reduced relative clause, somewhat similar to what can be called a ‘relative infinitive’ in English (18a) (e.g. Brevik 1997), sometimes also called ‘modal’ (e.g. Šimik 2011), or the ‘contact clause’ relative in English (18b), after Jespersen (1933: 360)?

- (18) *English*
 (a) There was nobody to be seen.
 (b) There was a man came to see you.

These are interesting issues, but they are well beyond the confines of the present study. Relatedly, MSEA languages may also have uncontroversial relative clauses, such as Thai in (19), and these will also be left out of account.

- (19) *Thai*
 Mii0 baaj0 khon0 thii2 chan5 hen5.
 EX SPEC CL.HUM REL 1SG see
 ‘There is somebody that I saw.’

Furthermore, there has been much research on the negation of existence of states of affairs, prompted by Croft (1991) and strongly associated with the work of and inspired by Veselinova (most recently Veselinova & Hamari 2021). At least in some languages, the expression of the negation of physical entities and states of affairs may be related – see e.g. van der Auwera, Van Olmen & Vossen (forthcoming) on Tagalog. This issue will also be shelved for future research.

We will use the same terminology as in Section 2. We will thus have occasion to use the term ‘ignorative’ for each of the MSEA languages. The term has not been used in MSEA scholarship. The issue of how to deal with pronouns that have both interrogative and indefinite uses, however, has not been avoided there. For Lao, for example, Enfield (2007: 86) is compatible with our account. He is aware of the term ‘ignorative’, through Wierzbicka (1980), but prefers to call ignoratives ‘indefinites’.⁸ This seems to be a terminological difference only. When one claims that the meaning is always indefinite, one does not claim that the interrogative meaning is the same, only that it includes the indefinite meaning. In this account, ‘indefinite’ captures what is common between indefinite interrogative and indefinite non-interrogative meanings. ‘Ignorative’ covers the same common meaning. One also finds linguists giving pride of place to the interrogative meaning, as in Tran & Bruening (2013) for Vietnamese. In part motivated by Haspelmath (1997), they take the elements that we take as ignorative as basically or ‘underlyingly’ (Tran & Bruening 2013: 218) interrogative – although Haspelmath’s claim (1997: 176) concerned only the diachrony of ignoratives. The interrogative hypothesis is also found in Emeneau (1951: 59), for instance, again for Vietnamese, though Emeneau is aware of a possible Indo-European bias for wanting to distinguish between interrogative and indefinite pronouns. For Khmer we see Jacob (1968: 122) implicitly embracing an interrogative hypothesis when she writes that ‘[m]any of the question words ... may have different

[8] This view is implicit in Haiman’s (2011) account of Khmer, too. ‘Indefinite pronoun’ is considered a part of speech (Haiman 2011: 360–366) and when he discusses content questions the counterparts of English interrogative pronouns are referred to as ‘content question words (indefinite pronouns)’ (Haiman 2011: 233). Yet Haiman (2011: 331) also refers to them as ‘indefinite/interrogative pronouns’.

lexical meanings ... They may be used to express indefiniteness, having in English the translation of “some” and “any”. And for Thai Jenny (2019: 577) writes that interrogatives are ‘also used as indefinites’.

3.2 Thai

We have already used Thai to illustrate the general issues. Now we will try to give a more comprehensive description. First, when the indefinite is specific, Thai has five strategies. In each the existential marker is obligatory. When the specific indefinite is postverbal, the strategies are very similar, except that there is no existential marker.

As argued before, we take *khraj0* to be an ignorative as it can also have an interrogative function. Without using the term ‘ignorative’, traditional accounts (e.g. Yates & Tryon 1970; Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom 2005) are compatible with this analysis. Historically, *khraj0* is both generic noun-based and interrogative-based, as it derives from *khon0* and an interrogative determiner *raj* (Teekhachunhatean 2003: 112; Jenny 2019: 595, 608). Note that *nuj1* follows the classifier; it then ‘functions like an indefinite article’ (Jenny 2019: 577) and we gloss it as ‘IND.SG’. When *nuj1* precedes the classifier, it is a numeral (‘one’).

(20) Thai – specific, preverbal

(a)		baaj0 khon0		
		SPEC CL.HUM		
(b)	khraj0			
	IGN.HUM	khon0 nuj1		
		CL.HUM IND.SG		
(c)	Mii0	baaj0 khon0		hen4 chan4.
	EX	khon0		see 1SG
		SPEC CL.HUM		
(d)	person	khon0 nuj1		
		CL.HUM IND.SG		
(e)	∅	baaj0 khon0		
		SPEC CL.HUM		

‘Somebody saw me.’

(21) *Thai – specific, postverbal*

(a)			baaŋ0 khon0.
		khraŋ0	SPEC CL.HUM
(b)		IGN.HUM	khon0 nuuŋ1.
			CL.HUM IND.SG
(c)	Chan4 hen4		∅.
(d)	1SG see	khon0	baaŋ0 khon0.
		person	SPEC CL.HUM
(e)			khon0 nuuŋ1.
			CL.HUM IND.SG
(f)		∅	khon0 nuuŋ1.
			CL.HUM IND.SG

‘I saw somebody.’

For the negative indefinite, the preverbal position only has two options, both with the existential marker.

(22) *Thai – negative, preverbal*

(a)		khraŋ0	
	Maj2 mii0	IGN.HUM	hen4 chan4.
(b)	NEG EX	khon0	see 1SG
		person	

‘Nobody saw me.’

In postverbal position, there is only one option.⁹

- (23) *Thai – negative, postverbal*
 Chan4 maj2 hen4 khraj0.
 1SG NEG see IGN.HUM
 ‘I saw nobody.’

In (23) replacing the ignorative by the generic noun *khon* is possible, but the resulting sentence means that the speaker did not see humans, different from, e.g. birds or horses.

We can now go back to Haspelmath (2005a) and the claim that the specific indefinite constructions of Thai are interrogative-based or, in our recasting, that these constructions are ignorative. First, it is true that Thai has ignorative indefinite strategies, but there are generic noun strategies too and they are no less important. Of the 14 patterns illustrated in (20) to (23) for both specific and negative indefiniteness, six contain an ignorative and six contain a generic noun. If we count the patterns with only a classifier deriving from a generic noun as a generic noun pattern too, then we have eight generic noun-based patterns. Second, there are seven patterns with an existential marker. In line with what we remarked earlier, there is no indefinite pattern that uses an existential marker that is not accompanied by a (pro) nominal exponent of the non-existing entity. But that does not mean that the existential marker is unimportant. Table 3 shows in the top rows in what context we find the existential strategy.

We see that the existential strategy is strongly associated with preverbal indefiniteness, for it is necessary there, and it is impossible for postverbal indefiniteness. It can combine with both an ignorative and a generic noun. Third, in the Haspelmath classification, ignoratives and generic nouns can either occur by themselves or they are marked for specificity, but there are no details on their nature or use. Thai shows that there is more than one type of specificity marking: there is a classifier phrase with *baaŋ0*, but there is also a classifier phrase with *nuŋ1*, which we analyzed as marking singular indefiniteness, and they are incompatible. Other points of interest are that the singular indefiniteness phrase can occur without either an ignorative or a generic noun and that negative indefiniteness does not occur with specificity or indefiniteness marking.

In the preverbal existential context, ignoratives and generic nouns behave in a very similar way. This is true also for the postverbal non-existential contexts. When the sense is specific, they have to be marked for specificity or indefiniteness. There

[9] Teekhachunhatean (2003: 113) also mentions a construction in which the existential marker combines with *phuø-daj3* instead of *khraj0*. This is a form which we will see in Lao. In Thai it is restricted to official language and probably also to the Isan dialect, which is similar to Lao. *Phuø-daj3* is an ignorative and it has the same generic noun and interrogative origin as *khraj0*: it contains *phuø* ‘person’ and *daj3*, a literary interrogative determiner (Jenny 2019: 577).

EXISTENTIAL INDEFINITE CONSTRUCTIONS

				Specific		Negative	
				preV	postV	preV	postV
EX	IGN.HUM			-	-	+	-
EX	IGN.HUM	SPEC CL.HUM		+	-	-	-
EX	IGN.HUM		CL.HUM IND.SG	+	-	-	-
EX		person		-	-	+	-
EX		person	SPEC CL.HUM	+	-	-	-
EX		person	CL HUM IND.SG	+	-	-	-
EX			SPEC CL.HUM	+	-	-	-
	IGN.HUM			-	-	-	+
	IGN.HUM	SPEC CL.HUM		-	+	-	-
	IGN.HUM		CL.HUM IND.SG	-	+	-	-
		person		-	+	-	-
		person	SPEC CL.HUM	-	+	-	-
		person	CL.HUM IND.SG	-	+	-	-
			CL.HUM IND.SG	-	+	-	-

Table 3
Strategies for human indefiniteness in Thai.

is one difference, i.e. when the sense is negative, we can get a bare ignorative, but not a bare generic noun. It is not clear whether this difference is significant. Perhaps this can be interpreted to mean that ignoratives are more strongly associated with negativity than generic nouns.

In the next section we will see to what extent Lao behaves in the same way.

3.3 Lao

Lao is closely related to Thai, but, to the extent that we can see, the patterns are a little different. Example (24) documents how Lao expresses preverbal specific indefiniteness. Note that *phaj3* is the univerbation of *phu ϕ -daj3*, which can always replace *phaj3*.

(24) *Lao – specific, preverbal*

(a)		∅						
(b)	∅	Khon2	person	∅	phuø-nùng1	CL.HUM-IND.SG		
(c)		phaj3			∅			
(d)		IGN.HUM		∅	phuø-nùng1	CL.HUM-IND.SG		
(e)	Mii2	khon2			∅			hên3 khòòj5. see 1SG
(f)	EX	person		∅	phuø-nùng1	CL.HUM-IND.SG		
(g)				baang3 khon2	∅			
(h)		∅		SPEC CL.HUM	phuø-nùng1	CL.HUM-IND.SG		

‘Somebody saw me.’

The main similarities with Thai are the following. First, in both languages we see existential markers, ignoratives, generic nouns, and both specific and indefinite classifier phrases. Second, in both languages existential markers are prominent. But then there are differences. First, the Lao existential marker is not necessary. Hospitalier (1937: 180) does not even mention the existential strategy, but at least in present-day Lao existential strategies are more common. Second, the classifier strategies do not use *khon2* but *phuø*. Third, though *nùng1* can both precede and follow the classifier in both languages, the association with indefiniteness may be different. In Thai the different positions relate to the difference between an indefinite article (after the classifier) and numeral use (before the classifier). In Lao the counterpart allows these orderings too, but Enfield (2007: 105) does not link this to different meanings. Nevertheless, for an existential construction like in (24) he glosses *nùng1* as ‘a/one’ and he makes clear that the main function is to mark singular number. We therefore gloss it as

‘IND.SG’, like we did for Thai. Fourth, whereas in Thai the specific and indefinite classifiers phrases are incompatible, (24h) shows that Lao allows them to co-occur. A fifth difference is that Lao has no counterpart to Thai *khraj0*. Lao instead uses *phuø-daj3* or the shorter *phaj3*. *Phuø-daj3* and *phaj3* are ignoratives, they also have an interrogative use, but these Lao words also show a universal quantifier use (‘everybody’), as in (25).

(25) Lao (Enfield 2007: 88)

Phaj3	hên3	câw4	juu1	talaat5.
IGN.HUM	see	2SG.POL	be.at	market

‘Who saw you at the market?’ / ‘Everybody saw you at the market.’

In (26) we see the options for specific postverbal indefinites.

(26) Lao – specific, postverbal

(a)		phaj3	phuø-nùng1.
		IGN.HUM	CL.HUM-IND.SG
(b)	Khòj5	hên3	khon2.
	1SG	see	person
(c)		baang3	khon2.
		SPEC	CL.HUM

‘I saw somebody.’

According to Enfield (2007: 88) a bare *phaj3* is possible when the specific indefinite is postverbal, but our informants ruled the indefinite reading out or called it ‘unnatural’: its only reading is interrogative.

Again, there are similarities and differences with Thai. Differences concern the uses of the classifier phrases. The most important similarity is that the structure allows a bare generic, but not a bare ignorative.

For negative preverbal indefiniteness, Lao differs from Thai in an interesting way. Like Thai, Lao has an existential construction with either an ignorative or a generic noun, but there are also a few non-existential constructions that literally mean ‘Everyone didn’t see me’, with the universal quantifier scoping over the negation.

(27) *Lao – negative, preverbal*

(a)	Bòø mii2	phaj3 IGN.HUM			
(b)	NEG EX	khon2 person			
(c)	Ø	Phaj3 IGN.HUM	phaj3 IGN.HUM	kaò/met2 also/all Ø	hên3 khòò5. see 1SG
(d)				bòø	
(e)	Ø	Phaj3 IGN.HUM		kaò/met2 also/all Ø ¹⁰	NEG
(f)					

‘Nobody saw me.’

The universal strategies in (27c–f) are peculiar. An ‘all not’ strategy makes sense from a logical point of view: if a negative predicate holds true of all, then there is nobody of which the positive predicate holds true. In English, however, sentences like (28a, b) with the interpretation of (28c) are unusual.

(28) *English*

- (a) All didn’t see me.
- (b) Everybody didn’t see me.
- (c) Nobody saw me.

Languages that use universal quantifiers as a dedicated negative indefiniteness strategy are rare. Neither Kahrel (1996) nor Haspelmath (1997, 2005b) even provide for this type. In her 197-language sample Van Alsenoy (2014: 242–249) does, but she only finds it in four languages. We are confident¹¹ that Lao, not included in the Van Alsenoy sample, is such a language too.

[10] Enfield (2007: 111) says about this variant that without kaò or met2 an interrogative reading is possible too. The double phaj3 phaj3 pattern does not have this vagueness.

[11] We are confident because the strategy is not only mentioned in Enfield (2007: 89, 111), but it was independently volunteered by an informant.

Negative postverbal indefiniteness is also a little different. In Thai the generic noun is not appropriate, but in Lao it is.

(29) *Lao – negative, postverbal*

(a)	Khòj5	bòø	hên3	{	phaj3.
					IGN.HUM
(b)	1SG	NEG	see	{	khon2.
					person

‘I saw nobody.’

Table 4 gives a survey of the various strategies.

To conclude, in Lao existential constructions are associated with preverbal indefiniteness, but the association is not as strong as in Thai, for both specific and negative indefiniteness can do without existential marking. Like in Thai, however, existential constructions are not used for postverbal indefiniteness. We can represent the similarity and the difference in the ‘accessibility’ hierarchy of Table 5.

In both languages specific indefiniteness allows ignoratives and generic nouns, which tend to be accompanied by specificity or indefiniteness marking, with the exception of specific postverbal indefiniteness, which allows a bare generic (in both languages). The reason, we hypothesize, is that generic nouns do not ‘suffer’ from the indefinite – interrogative – vagueness. Lao has two more exceptions: both bare ignoratives and generic nouns are allowed for specific preverbal indefiniteness. Interestingly, in these uses ignoratives and generic nouns still require the existential marker. So the bareness of the noun does not mean that there is no other special marker. In particular, we take the existential marker to signal that the entity thus introduced is not ‘given’ (see the ‘Given before New’ hypothesis, introduced in Section 1). The accessibility hierarchies in Tables 6 and 7 show the similarities and the differences.

The main difference is that Lao allows an ‘all not’ strategy for negative preverbal indefiniteness.

3.4 Vietnamese

We now turn to Vietnamese. When we discussed Lao we interlaced the analysis with comparative remarks on Thai, because the languages are closely related. For genealogically unrelated Vietnamese – as well as for Khmer in Section 3.5 – we will save the comparison to the end of the section.

				Specific		Negative	
				preverbal	postverbal	preverbal	postverbal
EX	IGN.HUM			+	-	+	-
EX	IGN.HUM		CL.HUM-IND.SG	+	-	-	-
EX		person		+	-	+	-
EX		person	CL.HUM-IND.SG	+	-	-	-
EX			SPEC CL.HUM	+	-	-	-
EX			SPEC CL.HUM	+	-	-	-
	IGN.HUM			-	-	+	+
	IGN.HUM		CL.HUM-IND.SG	-	+	-	-
		person		-	+	-	+
		person	CL.HUM-IND.SG	+	-	-	-
			CL.HUM-IND.SG	+	-	-	-
			SPEC CL.HUM	-	+	-	-
	IGN.HUM	IGN.HUM		-	-	+	-
	IGN.HUM	IGN.HUM	ADD	-	-	+	-
	IGN.HUM	IGN.HUM		∇	-	+	-
	IGN.HUM		ADD	-	-	+	-
	IGN.HUM			∇	-	+	-

Table 4
Strategies for human indefiniteness in Lao.

EXISTENTIAL INDEFINITE CONSTRUCTIONS

	Preverbal		Postverbal
Thai	necessary	>	impossible
Lao	possible	>	impossible

Table 5
Existential constructions in Thai and Lao.

	Specific <i>Postverbal</i>		Specific <i>Preverbal</i>		Negative
Thai	necessary		necessary	>	impossible
Lao	necessary	>	possible	>	impossible

Table 6
IND or SPEC marking with ignorative constructions in Thai and Lao.

	Specific <i>Postverbal</i>		Specific <i>Preverbal</i>		Negative
Thai	possible	>	impossible		impossible
Lao	possible		possible	>	impossible

Table 7
IND or SPEC marking with generic noun constructions in Thai and Lao.

To express specific preverbal indefiniteness in Vietnamese one uses an ignorative or a generic noun. An existential marker is optional when the ignorative is followed by *đó*, but obligatory when the ignorative is not followed by *đó* or when the exponent is a generic noun. We gloss *đó* as a marker of specificity. In other contexts it has a distal demonstrative meaning (Nguyễn Đình-Hoà 1997: 133).

When the specific indefinite is postverbal, the existential marker is not used and we only see ignoratives in combination with the specific marker, with an optional indefinite marker.

(33) *Vietnamese – specific, postverbal*

(a)		{	Ø	}	ai	đó.				
(b)	Tôi	đã	nhìn	thấy	}	IGN	SPEC			
	1SG	ANT	see	see	}					
(c)		{	Ø	}	người		nào		đó.	
(d)		{	một	}						
		}	IND.SG	}						

‘I saw somebody.’

The strategies for negative preverbal indefinites are similar to the ones we see for specific preverbal indefinites. The biggest difference is that negative preverbal indefiniteness does not allow a specific or indefinite marker.

(34) *Vietnamese – negative, preverbal*

(a)		{	Ø	}	ai	nhìn					thấy					tôi.					
(b)	Không / Chẳng	{	có	}	EX																EX
(c)	NEG / NEG.EMPH	{	có	người	}	Ø	see					see					1SG				
(d)		{	EX	person	}	nào															
		}			}	IGN															

‘Nobody saw me.’

Note that *một* can be added here, as in (30) and (33), but in (34) it brings along emphasis (not a single) and so we do not include this use of *một*. Example

(35) shows the strategies for negative postverbal indefinites. We only have ignorative constructions.

(35) Vietnamese – negative, postverbal

(a)	Tôi không / chẳng		nhìn thấy	}	ai.
				}	IGN
(b)	1SG NEG	NEG.EMPH	see see	}	người nào.
				}	person IGN

‘I saw nobody.’

The various strategies are surveyed in Table 8. The combination of the generic noun *người* with the ignorative determiner *nào* counts as an ignorative construction.

Compared to Thai and Lao, the strongest similarity is that existential constructions are again restricted to preverbal indefiniteness (see Table 9). It is closest to Thai because existential constructions are necessary.

In Vietnamese, generic nouns have a limited use: they are only used for preverbal specific indefiniteness, except that they are transparent components of the phrase *người nào* ‘person IGN’, which we have analyzed in its entirety as an ignorative. We again see IND and SPEC marking, appearing only for specific indefiniteness, though this time not with a classifier construction. In Vietnamese specific and indefinite markers can occur together – see (30c, g) and (33b). In Lao this is possible too, but the markers occur with classifiers there.

				Specific		Negative	
				Preverbal	Postverbal	Preverbal	Postverbal
EX	IND	IGN	SPEC	+	–	–	–
EX		IGN		–	–	+	–
EX		IGN	SPEC	+	–	–	–
EX		person		+	–	+	–
EX	IND	person		+	–	–	–
	IND	IGN	SPEC	–	+	–	–
		IGN		–	–	+	+
		IGN	SPEC	+	+	–	–

Table 8
Strategies for human indefiniteness in Vietnamese.

	Preverbal		Postverbal
Vietnamese	necessary	>	impossible
Thai	necessary	>	impossible
Lao	possible	>	impossible

Table 9

Existential constructions in Vietnamese, Thai, and Lao.

3.5 *Khmer*

Finally, we turn to Khmer, first with specific preverbal indefiniteness.

(36) *Khmer – specific, preverbal*

(a)	Ø	Neak na:	}	m-neak	ba:n	kheu:nj	knjom.
		person					
(b)	Mian	Mnuh	}	IND.SG-CL	get	see	1SG
		person					
(c)	EX	mnuh	}				
		person					
(d)		kee:	}				
	person						

‘Somebody saw me.’

Once again, we see existential markers, generic nouns, ignoratives, and indefinite classifier phrases, but no specific classifier phrases or markers. There are three different generic nouns that appear here: *neak*, *mmuh*, and *kee*.¹² *M-neak* is analyzed as a ‘quantifier classifier’ construction by Haiman (2011: 144) and *m-* is the short form of *muaj* ‘one’ (Haiman 2011: 74). The long form *muaj neak* is hardly ever used. Haiman (2011: 74, 176–177) takes both the long and short form as numerals, yet we venture the hypothesis that the numeral sense in *m-neak* has

[12] Haiman (2011: 193–194) takes *kee*: to be a third person pronoun, which can be used to mean ‘person’.

changed to an indefinite singular sense and we use the ‘IND.SG’ gloss accordingly. *M-neak* is obligatory: without it (36a) would have an interrogative reading, and in (36b–d) the indefinite phrases would translate as ‘people’. We follow Haiman (2011: 331, 341) in analyzing *na:* as an ‘indefinite/interrogative’ determiner, i.e. an ‘ignorative’ one, in our terminology. This makes the phrase *neak na:* ignorative too. Example (37) illustrates the interrogative use of *na:*.

- (37) *Khmer* (Jacob 1968:72)
 Neak na: kheu:nj via?
 person IGN see 3
 ‘Who saw him?’

Interestingly, Haiman (2011) – but not Jacob (1968) – mentions another ‘who’ phrase, viz. *nau: na:* (or *nauna:*). It contains yet a fourth human generic noun, viz. *nau* (Haiman 2011: 144, 176). *Nau na:* is ignorative, having both interrogative and indefinite uses, but it is not used for preverbal specific indefiniteness.

- (38) *Khmer* (Haiman 2011: 233, 332)
 (a) ... haeuj kee: cia nau na:?
 and 3 be person IGN
 ‘... and who is it?’
 (b) Sua nau na: kaw: ba:n!
 ask person IGN so OK
 ‘Ask anyone (and you’ll get the same answer).’

Nau na: is fine, however, for postverbal specific indefiniteness.

- (39) *Khmer – specific, postverbal*
- | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|-------|------|---------|---|--------|-----|---|-----------|
| (a) | Knjom | ba:n | kheu:nj | [| nau | na: |] | m-neak. |
| | | | | | person | IGN | | |
| (b) | 1SG | get | see | [| mnuh | |] | IND.SG-CL |
| | | | | | person | | | |
- ‘I saw somebody.’

Example (40) shows the strategies for negative preverbal indefiniteness.

(40) *Khmer– negative, preverbal*

(a)	Kmian	{	nau	na:	m-neak	ba:n	kheu:nj	knjom	tee:.
			person	IGN					
(b)	NEG.EX	{	neak	na:	IND.SG-CL	get	see	1SG	NEG
			person	IGN					

‘Nobody saw me.’

(41) *Khmer – negative, postverbal*

(a)	Knjom	mwn	ba:n	kheu:nj	{	nau	na:	m-neak	te:.
						person	IGN		
(b)	1SG	NEG	get	see	{	mnuh	IND.SG-CL	NEG	
						person			

‘I saw nobody.’

Table 10 gives an overview of the various strategies.

Table 11 compares Khmer to the other languages. For existential constructions, Khmer is similar, but not quite the same. We will come back to this difference in Section 4. Different from the other three languages, Khmer has no specificness marking. Indefiniteness marking seems to be necessary in all uses, which also means that bare ignoratives and generic nouns are not possible. In these respects, Khmer is the divergent language, yet for the use of existential constructions, Table 4

				Specific		Negative	
				Preverbal	Postverbal	Preverbal	Postverbal
EX	IGN		IND.SG-CL	–	–	+	–
EX		person	IND.SG-CL	+	–	–	–
		IGN	IND.SG-CL	+	+	–	+
		person	IND.SG-CL	+	+	–	+

Table 10
Strategies for human indefiniteness in Khmer.

	Preverbal			Postverbal	
	Negative		Specific		
Vietnamese	necessary		necessary	>	impossible
Thai	necessary		necessary	>	impossible
Khmer	necessary	>	possible	>	impossible
Lao	possible		possible	>	impossible

Table 11

Existential constructions in Vietnamese, Thai, Khmer, and Lao.

shows it to be in between Vietnamese and Thai, on the one hand, and Lao, on the other hand.

4. A CONCLUSION AND A CONJECTURE

How does the typological study of existential indefinite constructions profit from the study of these constructions in four MSEA languages? First, we pointed out that both Haspelmath (2005a,b) and Kaufman (2009) minimize the role of existential constructions for the expression on indefiniteness in Thai and Vietnamese (Haspelmath) or in the South Asian area (Kaufman). This is unwarranted, at least to the extent we can see from Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, and Khmer. A robust finding for these languages is that existential constructions are typical for the expression of preverbal indefiniteness – see Table 11. Second, this does not mean that there are no non-existential markers that may combine or alternate with existential markers. As pointed out by Haspelmath (2005a), indefiniteness also relies on ignorative constructions and generic nouns. They may occur without existence markers, but they may also combine with them, thus militating against the typology of Haspelmath (2005a) in which existential markers and ignoratives or generic nouns exclude each other. Third, another parameter, not focused on in Haspelmath (2005a), is the use of dedicated specificity and indefiniteness markers. A language may have both or only one, and when the language has both, they may or may not be interchangeable and they may or may not combine with each other.

There are strong similarities between the expression of indefinite constructions in the four languages, most strongly so with respect to our main issue, that of existential indefinite constructions. There are three ways in which existential indefiniteness is dedicated to the preverbal position: existential indefinite constructions are either necessary or possible for the preverbal position or they are necessary for negative indefiniteness and possible for specific indefiniteness, but in each case they are impossible for the postverbal position.

We end on an explanatory conjecture on the hierarchy shown in Table 11. What all four languages show is that preverbal indefiniteness is most accessible for existential constructions, but what the Khmer data show is that at least in this language negative preverbal indefiniteness is more accessible than specific

preverbal indefiniteness. We pointed out in Section 2.2 that a superficial reading of the numbers of Haspelmath (2005a,b) – with 12 on 206 ‘existential’ languages for negative indefiniteness versus only two on 326 ‘existential languages’ for specific indefiniteness – would also support this conclusion. We resisted this conclusion then for two reasons (‘existential’ is not defined in the same way for specific and negative indefiniteness; the datasets of 206 and 326 languages are not representative samples). Yet that does not preclude that the difference in accessibility for specific and negative indefiniteness has a higher crosslinguistic validity. By itself, the data on Khmer, i.e. just one language, cannot be conclusive either. But recent work on Malayo-Polynesian languages brings more backing. Van der Auwera et al. (forthcoming) asked four speakers of Standard Malay, three of which also helped for colloquial peninsular varieties, and also one speaker for Standard Indonesian, Sundanese, Balinese, Banjar, and Kulikusu, what their most natural translations of the sentences in (42) would be.

(42) *English*

- (a) Nobody called you.
- (b) Somebody called me.

It is important to emphasize that speakers were not asked to provide all the possible translations in their languages, only what they would prefer, which is different from the research reported on in this paper. Still, naturalness tells us something about accessibility too. The results are the following: for (42a) all of the 12 speakers used an existential construction, like the one in (43a). For (42b) eight translations had an existential construction, but four did not – see (43b, c).

(43) *Standard Malay*

- (a) Tiada se-siapa meng-hubung-i kamu.
NEG.EX one-IGN.HUM AF-connect-TR 2
‘Nobody called you.’
- (b) Ada orang panggil saya.
EX person call 1SG
‘Somebody called me.’
- (c) Se-se-orang meng-hubung-i saya.
one-one-person AF-connect-TR 1SG
‘Somebody called me.’

We conclude that for some languages negative preverbal indefiniteness is more in need of existential constructions than specific preverbal indefiniteness. Why should this be so?

In Section 1, we subscribed to Givón’s (1979a: 27) and Van Alsenoy’s (2014: 241) hypothesis that the preference of existential constructions for preverbal indefiniteness is explained by the ‘Given before New’ principle. A preverbal indefinite is an early ‘Non-Given’ and the existential marker flags this construction as ‘Non-Given’. What we see in specific preverbal indefiniteness is

the ‘Non-Given’ that we are used to, viz. the ‘New’, and this ‘New’ entity can then become ‘Given’ in the ensuing discourse. With negative preverbal indefiniteness the ‘Non-Given’ entity, however, is not a ‘New’ one. It is in fact an entity that does not exist, a ‘non-entity’, which has little or no potential of becoming ‘Given’ in the later discourse.¹³ Put in a different terminology, different from a specific preverbal indefinite construction, the negative one cannot have a ‘presentational’/‘presentative’ function; it has a ‘terminative’ one (McGregor 2010: 213). We propose, therefore, that there is a ‘Given before Non-Given’ principle, either as an alternative to the traditional ‘Given before New’ principle or as a more general principle. With respect to a ‘Given before Non-Given’ principle, introducing something that does not even exist is a more radical breach of the principle than merely introducing something new. As an afterthought, the last quarter of the century has seen much effort on providing a more refined understanding of types of ‘Givenness’, with either conceiving it as a gradient notion or as distinguishing subtypes, with e.g. the ‘Given’ that is explicit in the discourse versus only inferable, accessible, or activated (e.g. Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski 1993; Hansen & Visconti 2009). The proposal to rethink the ‘New’ pole as ‘Non-Given’, allowing for the subtypes of ‘Non-Existent’ and ‘New’, is an attempt to refine the ‘Given before New’ principle from the other end.

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[13] We agree with a reviewer that when one says that nobody called the doctor, there could have been somebody that called the doctor and in that universe of discourse or possible world or in the hearer’s expectation, this person exists. However, the point of using *nobody* here is that, according to the speaker, this person does not exist. It is this sense of ‘non-existence’ that we need here.

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Authors' addresses: (van der Auwera)

*Department of Linguistics, University of Antwerp, Prinsstraat 13,
B-2000 Antwerp, Belgium
johan.vanderauwera@uantwerpen.be*

(Nguyen Hai)

*English Studies, Can Tho University, Campus 1, 411, 30/4 Street,
Hung Loi Ward, Ninh Kieu, Can Tho City, Vietnam
nhquan@ctu.edu.vn*

(Pothipath)

*Department of Thai, Chulalongkorn University, Patumwan, Bangkok,
Thailand 10330
vipas.p@chula.ac.th*

(Siebenhütter)

*Department of English Language and Literature, Waseda University,
1-6-1 Nishi-Waseda, Shinjuku, Tokyo 169-8050
siebenhuetter@waseda.jp*