Existential commitment is sometimes carried by NPs. For example, (1) seems to entail (2):

(1) The boat is in the garage.
(2) There exists a boat.

By contrast, (relevant) existential commitment does not appear in inceptive cases:

(3) The boat is under construction.

(3) may entail the existence of something, but it does not entail the existence of a boat. Furthermore, it is far from clear that (relevant) existential commitment appears in defective cases:

(4) The boat has a hole in it.

If boats by definition are vehicles for traversing surfaces of water, and if x is incapable of traversing surfaces of water because x has a sufficiently large hole in it, then x is not a boat, even though it may be called one.

My paper addresses the following issues.

1. Under what conditions does a statement carry existential commitment, or not? Using experimental data from an elicitation task, I argue that existential commitment is sensitive to pragmatic (extra-linguistic) context, it is carried under default conditions (cf. Jaszczolt 2005), and it fails under a variety of specifiable conditions.

2. The potential difference between what something actually is and what it's commonly or conventionally called matters in determining (e.g.) whether an inoperable car is a car and whether an unborn child is a child. Discourse analyses of legal interpretations and political rhetoric reveal systematic equivocation between what might be called attributive uses of NPs and referential uses (cf. Donnellan, 1966).

3. What theory of meaning best explains the distribution of existential commitment? Extending insights made by Kripke (1977), Searle (1979), and Soames (1994), I argue that existential commitment is a pragmatic phenomenon (contra Donnellan, endorsing Soames). Distinguishing between linguistic meaning and speaker meaning allows us to say that even when sentences make existential commitments, speakers need not.