

# 外国语言研究

## Foreign Language Studies

主 编 吴国良

副主编 温中兰 吴 春



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# On the Structure and Function of Existential Sentences (Abridged)

Wu Guoliang & Huang Beiying

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## Abstract

The *there* existential sentence is one of the most commonly used sentences in English. It seems to be easy in the description of some grammatical books, but the practical language is much more complicated than what some traditional grammar books describe.

This article describes and analyzes the *there* existential sentence in form, meaning and practical usage from the viewpoint of applied linguistics. The following frequency table was obtained by the author with the help of a language computer (Input file pop. lob,)

Input file pop. lob Search Type was THERE

Words found in text 97558

Number of Tokens found in text 250

<i>There</i> used in <i>there</i> existential sentences	217
used in other cases	33
<i>There</i> used with <i>be</i> (in different forms)	207
used other than <i>be</i>	10
used in continuous tense	2
used in passive voice	1
used with semi auxiliary	2
used with definite notional subject	12
used with indefinite notional subject	205

## I. When Do We Use *There* Existential Sentences

A. J. Thomson and A. V. Martinet (1986) point out: when a noun representing an indefinite person or thing is the subject of the verb *be* we normally use a *there+be+noun* construction. We can say "*A policeman is at the door.*" but "*There is a policeman at the door.*" would be more usual. Michael Swan (1987) says when we tell people that something exists (or does not exist), we usually begin the sentence with *there is, there*

are, etc. and put the real subject after the verb. (Swan, 1987, P600)

He lists some typical mistakes, one of which is:

\* A hole is in my tights.

This sentence should be corrected as

There's a hole in my tights.

He doesn't give more reasons about that.

When discussing the use of *there* existential sentences the important idea for the students to be aware of is that existential constructions are used to avoid having to place new information in an initial position while, at the same time, they achieve a satisfactory structural balance: the principle of end-weight.

The problem is that sometimes one meaning can be expressed by two forms. See the following examples:

A couple of Alsatians were in the garden.

①

There were a couple of Alsatians in the garden.

②

According to Huddleston (1997):

(a) Sentence ① is the syntactically unmarked member of the pair.

(b) Structurally, Sentence ① is more elementary than Sentence ②.

(c) Sentence ② is commonly analyzed as deriving transformationally from Sentence ①.

The other important thing is that not all clauses containing *be* + *locative* allow the two variants illustrated above. Both are subject to certain restrictions.

Now what are the conditions under which only the *there* version is acceptable?

Compare the following sentences:

There was an accident at the factory.

①

\* An accident was at the factory.

②

There's a mistake in the last line.

③

\* A mistake is in the last line.

④

Thomson, A. J. and Martinet, A. V. (1986) point out, "When *be* is used to mean 'occur, take place,' the *there* construction is necessary." So in the first pair, it is clear that only Sentence ① is correct. But what about the second pair, Sentence ③ and Sentence ④? Well, some grammarians give us a very useful hypothesis that the word *there* is required unless the clause describes a scene having "visual impact" (Bolinger, 1977). Based on this hypothesis which is supposed to be correct, we know Sentence ④ is not acceptable.

The following sentences which are wrong can be used for the students to correct and to explain why:

\* A small problem seems to be here.

\* An accident has been outside.

\* A lady asking for you is outside.

Apart from the above aspects, there are some lexical limitations for the transformation from one form into another. We can say:



Too many people with vested interests seem to be on these committees. ①

We can also say:

There seem to be too many people with vested interests on these committees. ②

But only those words which have the function of linking verbs can have the possibility of transformation. e. g. with the verb *expect*, only the pattern of Sentence ① is grammatical:

Too many people with vested interests expect to be on these committees.

\* There expect to be too many people with vested interests on these committees.

There is another criterion for the use of *there*. As Bolinger (1977, P95) points out we are more apt to use *there* when something is out of sight, and so are unlikely to accompany it with a pointing gesture, e. g.

Over on the other side a little to the left (pointing at the object) is a millinery shop?  
(there is a millinery shop).

Moreover, the more vividly on the stage an action is, the less appropriate *there* becomes. Bolinger also gives a very convincing example: If he has a pencil in his open palm extended forward and an eraser in his clenched fist held behind his back, he will say, for the respective hands:

"In my right hand is a pencil, and in my left there's an eraser."

From the semantic point of view, sentences with entirely new themes seem to be less awkward if combined with discontinuous post modification of the noun phrase:

Compare:

— A bird is in that tree.

A bird is in that tree which I've never seen around here before.

— An idea is in his head.

An idea is in his head that the rest of us are against him.

In classroom teaching such kinds of distinctions are badly needed by the students of English in universities.

Many a time, students feel bored with some descriptions in some grammar books. For example:

When describing *there be* sentences, F T wood (1981) says:

There *is/are* is also used to denote the mere existence of something. The word *there* must not be omitted.

There is a saying that the third time is lucky.

(Not: Is a saying ) (A Remedial English Grammar for Foreign Students)

P. A. Erades (1975), when explaining *there* existential sentences, also explained why we should say "there was no wind" rather than "no wind was".

Celce Murcia, et al. (1999) point out:

There is a Santa Claus. but not:

\* A Santa Claus is.

Such kinds of distinctions are boring to the students in the English department. An idea

like this is that either you understand the distinctions instinctively or you don't, that if you don't, you probably never will; and that if you do, you don't need to be told anyway.

## II. Which Is the Subject

There are different opinions about how to analyse *there be* construction, especially the subject.

Most traditional grammar books regard *there* in *there be* sentences as the introductory word without any meaning at all. This kind of consideration is supported by the phenomenon of number concord, e. g.

There's someone at the door.

There are some people at the door.

The advantage of this analysis is that it is easy for the teacher to teach and for the students to learn.

There are some other grammarians who regard *there* in *there be* sentences as subject. The justifications are as follows:

① It can function as a subject in *yes-no* questions and *tag* questions. Some of theoretical linguists do regard *there* in *there* existential sentences as the subject. Here is the tree diagram and the derivation for the second sentence mentioned above:

There are some students at the door.

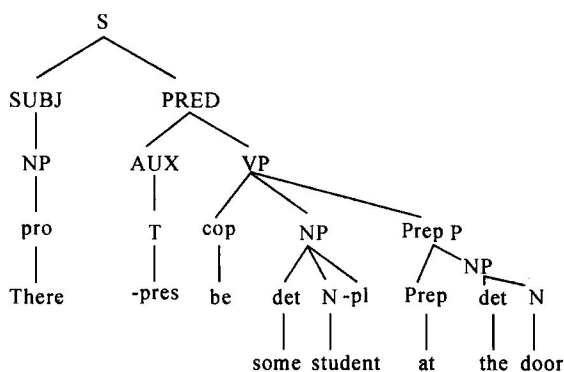


Figure 1

In modern theoretical Linguistics, for the sentence "There is someone knocking at the door," we can have the following diagram:

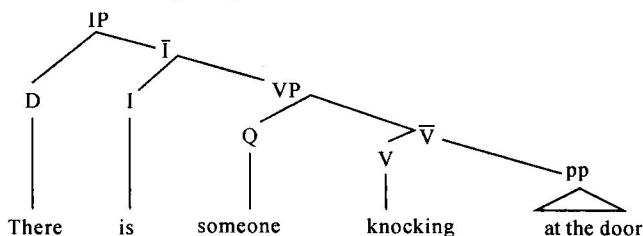


Figure 2

We can also see the following comparisons:

*There* is no brandy in the house, is *there*?

It is not heavy for you, is it?

Is *there* any difficulty in this?

Is this difficult to understand?

Since *it* is regarded as the subject without doubt, why can't *there* be regarded as the subject?

① *There* sometimes can determine the concord:

There's some students in the library.

In informal English this is acceptable. Obviously, here the verb agrees with *there*, not with *some students* which is in the plural form.

③ *There* can also function as a logical subject in infinitive and -ing clauses.

I don't want *there to be* any misunderstanding.

①

She was at a loss what to do, *there being* no one else at home.

②

In Sentence ① *there to be* structure is considered as a compound object of the verb *want*. Within the compound object *there* functions as the logical subject, while *to be any misunderstanding* functions as a logical predicate. In Sentence ②, *there being* structure is an absolute structure functioning adverbially, *there* is the logical subject.

To sum up, firstly since the *there be* sentence has some special characteristics in the usage, it is natural to have different opinions among grammarians. When teaching, in order to describe the language more scientifically, we'd better not say which is the subject. Instead, we say *there* is a grammatical subject, the noun phrase which is usually put at the end of the sentence is the notional subject.

Secondly, the students should know the notional subject usually determines the concord, which is very important for the students to remember.

Thirdly, there exists an exception, that is, sometimes even though the notional subject is in plural form, the verb can be in singular form, especially in informal English as I mentioned before. The students are not encouraged to use *there be* sentences in this way, but the English majors should know this exception.

Moreover, the students should be taught about the difference of the degree of the acceptability between *there is* and *there's*.

In spoken English, the contracted form *there's* makes the lack of agreement more acceptable.

There's too many fashions in Spain.

There is too many fashions in Spain.

Fourthly, most grammarians think that *there* in *there be* sentences is meaningless, based on which many grammarians describe *there* in many ways, such as: "preparatory", "anticipating", "anticipatory", "anticipative", "empty", "formal", "nonreferential", "dummy" *there*.

The justification of the idea that the word *there* is meaningless is that the absence of locative meaning is indicated by the acceptability of the existential sentence with *here* co-occurring with introductory *there*.

There's a screwdriver here.

According to Bolinger (1977), who has a different opinion about this, the meaning or function of nonreferential *there* can best be explained by contrasting it with its absence.

① An old barn is behind the poplars.

② There is an old barn behind the poplars.

The difference here is one of discourse context:

The first sentence is one piece of visual information in a longer background narrative; the second one is part of an oral description that utilizes a spatial organization.

The meaning of nonreferential *there* is that it is a signal to the listener that he or she is about to be made aware of the location or existence of something.

In *there be* sentence teaching, maybe the following two points are also worth being mentioned. See the examples.

A. Who is there who could help her?

B. There's always you. But not \* There are always you.

If this point has not been mentioned, most non-native students will make mistakes according to the rule that in *there* existential sentences the verb should agree with the notional subject.

See another example:

A: Who is there who could help her?

B: Well, there's always *me*. (object case)

But not \* There's always I.

Let's see other examples cited by Bolinger (1977):

① MrA: Who of all our friends can we trust?

MrB: There's only John, I'm afraid.

MrC: Not so. Because if there were only him, you'd be denying the essential goodness of human nature.

② MsA: How many can we get for our group?

MrB: Well there's Tom, and Gladys and Lucille.

MsA: Let's not forget Bill.

MrB: Oh, yes, there's him-and there's you and me-that ought to make up the number we need.

It is very easy for those who hold that the notional subject should govern the concord to make the above mistakes. And the above examples can also be used by some grammarians to support the idea that *there*, rather than the noun phrase at the end of the existential sentence, is the subject.

### III. The Definiteness and Indefiniteness of the Notional Subject

It is reasonable for grammarians to put emphasis on the indefiniteness of the notional subject which is one of the most typical characteristics of *there be* constructions. However, some grammarians, when describing *there be* sentences, failed to explain them completely. Some even did not mention the possibility of the definite notional subject in *there be* sentences. Most grammarians describe it in a vague way, but all the examples they give are the ones in which the indefinite notional subjects are used, as a result of which, students have no idea about the possibility of the definite notional subject in *there be* sentences.

Now when will the definite notional subject appear?

Michael Swan (1987) says: When a sentence has a "definite" subject (for instance, a noun with a definite article, or a proper name), *there* is not normally used.

The door was open (Not \* There was the door open.)

James was at the party. (Not \* There was James at the party.)

The exception to this is when *be* has a subject, but no complement.

"Who can we ask?" There's James, or Miranda, or Annie. (Not \* James is,...)

No doubt, the examples given by Swan are acceptable sentences. However, Swan's explanation is far from being satisfactory. Firstly, the verbs are not limited to *be*, though the frequency of *be* is by far higher than the words other than *be*. e. g.

There came to his mind her beautiful and intelligent face. Suddenly there appeared before him the ghost of his father.

Secondly, such kind of sentences can still have the complement.

There is the Royal Observatory at Greenwich... (ibid p130).

JanA vanEk and Nico J. Robat (1985) say: Determiner *the*, though often having anaphoric (=referring back) reference, may also have cataphoric (=referring forward) reference, . Although a noun phrase introduced by *the* often derives its definite reference from the circumstance that the entity in question has been mentioned before-hence comes to be associated with given information-this need not always be the case.

They hold that the example in question may therefore be paraphrased: Suddenly there appeared before him a ghost, viz. that of his father.

So the grammatically definite noun phrase *the ghost of his father* may well represent new information.

This explanation is based on the semantic analysis which is supposed to be one of the reasons.

His explanation has some common characteristics with that of O. Jespersen. See the following examples:

There are those who...

Those who believe it are...

②

According to some grammarians, *those* in the first sentence is indefinite. It is equal to:

There are some who...

In the second sentence, usually the meaning of the subject is definite.

This explanation is useful in explaining some type of sentences, but far from a complete one.

Rando and Napoli (1978) also discuss the co-occurrence of nonreferential *there* and definite subjects in conversations such as the following, in which they claim *there* introduces a list:

Q: What's there to do at UCLA?

A: Well, there's the Sculpture Gardens, the Art Gallery, and a good coffee shop.

Q: Damn! who knows about this?

A: There's you, me, and George. That's all.

In these examples we can see the noun phrases are members of the list. But sometimes we have only one member, for example:

Well, there's George.

— It doesn't seem to be a typical list, though we can try to regard it as a member of a list. From the semantic point of view, JanA, vanEK, et al. (1985) put forward another idea of the definiteness of the noun phrase in existential sentences.

They hold that the noun phrase in an existential clause may not only convey new information, i. e. information presented for the first time, but may also re-introduce given information. The listener/reader in these cases is being reminded of something he had overlooked or forgotten:

A: "Who else should we invite?"

B: "Well, there's John, and the people upstairs".

Quirk et al (1985) do not deny the possibility that in an existential sentence, the notional subject can be a definite noun phrase. And they point out that the definite noun phrases are usually used under the following conditions:

① When people answer existential questions:

A: Is there anyone coming to dinner?

B: Yes, there's Harry and there's also Mrs. Jones.

② Also acceptable is the indefinite exclamatory *the* followed by the superlative as in:

There's the oddest-looking man standing at the front door.

③ When a noun phrase is modified by an infinitive phrase.

There's the man next door to consider!

Generally speaking, Quirk, et al. have made a great contribution to the rules of this usage. But these explanations are far from being satisfactory. Bolinger once gave an example of *there* existential sentence in question form:

Is there God?

That means existential questions themselves may have definite notional subjects.

And in their book, *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, the very book in which the explanation of the definite notional subject is given, we still find many sentences which do not follow the rules they give, e. g.

There is still *the* possibility of keeping the particle in second position. (Quirk, et al., 1985, pp980—981) Bolinger, Rando and Napoli have pointed to the existence of sentences such as the following:

- ① There's *the/a* most unusual man standing over there.
- ② There will soon appear the definitive edition of *Hamlet*.
- ③ There never was that problem in Austin.

Their explanations are as follows: In the first sentence *the* or *a* is used because of an odd fact about certain English superlative adjectives that permit either a definite or indefinite article to be used in such a context to mean “very unusual”. In the second sentence the uniqueness explanation applies. (*There* can only be one “definitive” edition of any work); and, in the third explanation, *that problem*, the *that* is being used anaphorically to something previously mentioned.

To sum up:

The use of a definite notional subject is so complicated that few people can give a complete answer. But based on many grammarians' ideas, maybe we can summarize some principles to follow or to have reference.

① It is safer for us not to use the definite notional subject in *there* existential sentences unless it is absolutely necessary.

② It can be used under the following conditions when necessary:

(a) When we answer *there* existential questions as mentioned by Quirk, et al. One more point that should be emphasized is that it can be used not only in answering the explicit *there* existential questions, but also some implicit existential questions, e. g.

A: What's on at the cinema this week?

B: Well, there's *My Fair Lady* at the Odeon and *Goldfinger* at the Regal.

(b) When learning this point, the students should also know that there is another area in which there is less restricted when we answer the existential questions, e. g.

\* There was everyone in the room.

This sentence is wrong. Linguists tell us that noun phrases introduced by the universal term *all* or *every* can hardly be used as the notional subject in *there be* sentences. But when we answer *there* existential questions, the limitation is reduced. The following sentences are acceptable:

A: What is there to be afraid of?

B: There's everything to be afraid of.

(c) Reminder (The speaker is reminding the listener of the existence of someone or something.):

A: Before we leave on vacation, there remains the problem of what to do with the dog.

B: Ops. I almost forgot.

(d) When the noun phrase indicates the meaning of “a type” or gives it as an example, as in:

There are several animals commonly depicted in heraldry. For instance, there is the lion. There is the child next door, for example.

(e) When the head word of the noun phrase is “question, possibility, chance, opportunity, etc.” These words themselves indicate some degree of indefiniteness, e. g. (Input file pop. lob)

There is also *the* problem of the...

There is also *the* question of...

There is *the* question of how strong...

There is also *the* possibility...

There is, then, *the* possibility...

The other phenomenon that we've observed is that in these *there* existential sentences in which definite notional subjects are used, 90% of the sentences contain the adverbs “also, always” which indicate a “type” and which make the definite noun phrases less awkward.

(f) Definite in form, indefinite in meaning, e. g.

There's the oddest-looking man standing at the front door.

We can paraphrase this sentence as:

There's a man of the oddest appearance standing at the front door.

(g) When the notional subject is postponed, there is less constraint for the subject to be definite.

There came to his mind her beautiful and intelligent face.

There came her beautiful and intelligent face.

(h) As Quirk, et al. (1985) point out, when the noun phrase is modified by an infinitive phrase, sometimes the notional subject can be a definite one. e. g.

And of course, there is the unpredictable British weather to contend with.

#### IV. Some Special Problems of *There* Existential Sentences

(1) In SVC-related sentences, the C cannot normally denote a permanent property. Adjectives which express a temporary state of the Existent can occur:

There was plenty of food available.

There were several passengers ill.

There are not many shops open at this hour.



We can say: There were several students ill.

But not \* There were several students tall.

Here *ill*, *tall* are different kinds of adjectives.

*Tall* indicates a permanent property. It is easy for foreign students to make mistakes if they are not taught properly.

**(2) Sometimes, we do find *there* existential sentences in which the notional subject is followed by a past participle:**

There were several students arrested.

Andrew Radford (1997) gives some explanations: The quantifier phrase *several students* in the sentence above originates as the complement of the verb *arrested*. Here is the diagram for the sentence:

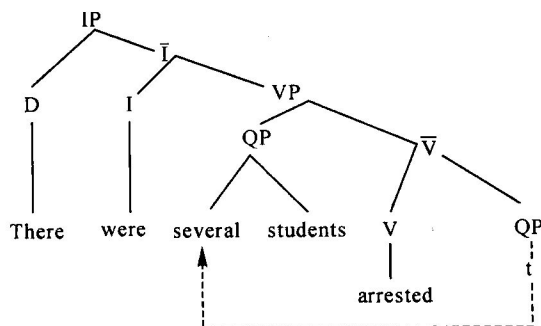


Figure 3

From this diagram, we have reasons to suppose that the person/ number-features of *several students* are attracted to *were*, so that *were* agrees with *several students*.

### (3) The use of some verbs other than *be*.

In *there* existential sentences, the verb *be* form is by far more often used than other verbs. With *be* as the existential verb all tense, aspect and modality combinations are common, with the exception of the progressive, since the dynamic quality of progressive is incompatible with the stative meaning of *be*:

There is being a lot of work lately.

Are there likely to be many people at the meeting?

But not many verbs other than *be* can be used in existential sentences. Those verbs normally have the linking function, e. g.

In a small town in Germany, there once *lived* a rich merchant who had a beautiful daughter.

There *remains* nothing more to be done.

Suddenly there *entered* a strange figure dressed all in black.

There *followed* an uncomfortable silence.

Now what kind of verbs can be used in this way? What are the characteristics of these