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Existential 'There' Concordance Across Spoken Discourses

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Abstract

The use of the existential *there* in spoken English does not follow what the textbooks and the traditional grammar prescribe. *There is* and *there was* may also be followed by plural noun phrases. The results contained in this paper are based on a corpus study that compares the frequency of the use of this grammatical construction across university, presidential and radio speeches. There is also an analysis of how two textbooks inform and prepare students to use this grammatical construction and how they may benefit from the findings yielded by this research.

Introduction

EFL students are traditionally taught that *there is* and *there was* is followed by a singular noun phrases and *there are* and *there were* by plural noun phrases. However, often times native speakers concord *there is* and *there was* with both singular and plural noun phrases. However, grammar books and textbooks generally do not inform ESL or EFL students of this. Consequently, when they communicate informally with native speakers, their speech may sound rather stilted. It would, therefore, be beneficial for students to know in what types of discourse this occurs more frequently.

Swan (1995) and the Longman Advanced American Dictionary briefly mention that a plural noun phrase can follow *there is* in informal speech, but EFL and ESL students are unable to determine when the existential *there is +plural noun phrase* is appropriate. Would students encounter it in a university lecture, a political or a radio speech? Are such circumstances informal enough to use it? For this reason it is necessary to investigate this issue in order to orient material designers, especially those designing speaking and listening activities to second language learners.

The existential *there* (Biber, Johanson, Leech, Conrad, & Fininan, 1999) is very often used in conversations because it makes it possible to prepare the interlocutor for new information, which is given in small chunks. In written English, the notional subject determines if the verb phrase will be singular or plural. This, however, occurs less frequently in conversations. An example from the NPR subcorpus of WordBanksOnline is:

“catalog can survive. <p> David Ocker: There **is** a **million catalogs** that are fine”

“he flying glass. As far as I know, there **was** like **75 to 80** people in the”

In order to facilitate speech processing (Biber et al. 1999), *there is* becomes one single unit by analogy with what happens with *here's*, *where's*, and *how's*. This does not occur with *there was* which does not contract in conversations or in written form.

The issues investigated in this paper revolve around the use of *there is* and *there was* in spoken English. We will investigate the frequency in which *there is* and *there was* is followed by a plural noun phrase and compare these findings across university, radio and presidential candidate speeches. We will also look at N+1, N+2 and the nature of the main noun of the noun phrases in an attempt to find patterns that might account for the use of *there is/was + plural noun phrase*. We will also investigate if two published textbooks include this grammatical construction in their speeches and texts and discuss how they would benefit from the findings.

Methodology

For this investigation, three registers were classified according to level of preparedness and formality. Political speech allows the speaker to rehearse and read from a prop and, therefore will be considered the discourse allowing the most preparation. Since radio and lecture speeches contain both extemporaneous and rehearsed speech, they will be clustered in the same group. In terms of formality, (1) political speeches will be considered the most formal, followed by (2) academic lectures and (3) radio speeches.

The formulated hypotheses are as follows:

- (1) there will be more occurrences in registers where speech is more spontaneous and less occurrences where speech is less spontaneous or improvised.
- (2) there will be more occurrences in informal speeches and less occurrences in formal speeches.
- (3) there will be more occurrences of *there is* followed by a plural noun phrase than *there was* for the phonological reason mentioned above.

The data analyzed in this corpus was taken from three different sources. The radio speeches broadcast from NPR (National Public Radio) is a subcorpus of WordBanks Online. The MICASE corpus was utilized as a source of university lecture speeches. TextSTAT-2 was used to produce concordance lines for the 146 presidential candidate speeches.

All the concordance lines that contained a plural noun phrase following *there is* and *there was* were counted and normalized per million words. N+1 and N+2 were also analyzed for shared phonological, grammatical or semantic features and the nouns within the noun phrase were classified according to concreteness and countability regardless of their position.

Data Analysis

The corpus research revealed that, indeed, *there is* and *there was* followed by a plural noun phrase occur more often in impromptu discourses than in prepared ones, confirming hypothesis 1. Neither *there is* nor *there was* + *plural noun phrase* occurred in political speeches (Table 1). However, even though *there is* occurred an equal number of times, *there was* in university lectures was more than double the occurrences in radio speech (Tables 2 and 3).

As for hypothesis 2, the level of formality seems to play a part in the speakers' decision of whether or not to concord *there is* and *there was* with a plural noun phrase. There was not a single occurrence in political speeches (Table 1). Interestingly, *there is* in academic lectures and radio speeches occurred an equal number of times (Tables 2 and 3). It may be the case that both radio and university lectures have the same level of formality, since NPR offers mostly educational programs. Again, the occurrence of *there was* in university lectures was considerably higher than radio speech.

The results did not support hypothesis 3. Tables 2 and 3 show that *there was* occurred more than *there is*. The numbers are particularly high in academic lectures.

Both in radio and academic speeches, the occurrence of *there is/was* + *plural noun phrase* is low compared to their total number of occurrence per million words.

<i>Table 1 – Candidate Speeches</i>		
	Per million words	Total number of occurrences of plural noun phrase
There is	535	0
There was	91	0

<i>Table 2 – University Lectures</i>			
	Per million words	Raw occurrences of plural noun phrases	Normalized
There is	398	8	4
There was	316	29	15

<i>Table 3 – Radio Speech from NPR</i>			
	Per million words	Raw occurrences of plural noun phrases	Normalized
There is	438.1	14	4
There was	332.7	21	6

N+1 and N+2 Analysis

We analyzed a sample of 22 concordance lines with *there is* and 50 with *there was*. It is important to look at these findings bearing in mind that the number of

occurrences of *there was* was double the number of *there is*, hence further investigation is needed before making generalizations.

There were several nouns in N+2 position with articles and quantifiers in N+1, but not many nouns in N+1 position. Also, table 4 displays the preponderant presence of cardinal numbers both in N+1 and N+2 positions. Interestingly, *no* appears in N+1 position with *there was*, but not with *there is*. *Like* in N+1 position occurred three times with *there was* and none after *there is*. In two instances, *like* was followed by a cardinal number, which may mean that speakers use *like* as a filler to give them time to recall precise information.

However, based on Table 4, the only finding that may account for the use of *is* and *was* as opposed to *are* and *were* is *some*. Out of 72 occurrences analyzed, 10 had *there is some* or *there was some*. In both cases, it is easier for the speaker to connect /s/+ /s/ than /r/+/s/.

	There is		There was	
	N+1	N+2	N+1	N+2
adjective	1		2	
noun	2	10	4	28
more	1		2	
cardinal number	3	2	8	7
many	1			
some	3		7	

no			7	
couple		1		2
lots	2		3	
tons	1		2	
a	1		4	
and		2		3
only			3	
of				2
like			3	

Noun Phrase Analysis

The noun of each noun phrase was also classified by countability and concreteness (Table 5). There is very little difference in the number of countable and noncount nouns. Ten out of 22 occurrences of *there is* are followed by a noun phrase containing an abstract noun, whereas twelve noun phrases contain a concrete noun. Out of 50 occurrences of *there was*, 22 are followed by a noun phrase containing a concrete noun and twenty-three have an abstract noun.

Nevertheless, the noun phrases have a general tendency to contain a count noun. Eighty-seven percent of the noun phrases following *there is* contain a count noun as opposed to seventy-six percent following *there was*.

<i>Table 5 – Noun phrase analysis</i>				
	Abstract	Concrete	Noncount nouns	Count nouns
There is	45%	55%	13%	87%
There was	56%	44%	24%	76%

Material Evaluation

We have evaluated a textbook (Vai, 1998) and its accompanying teacher's manual, tape and video which target the development of listening, speaking, and critical thinking skills of high-intermediate learners. This book was selected because one of its features is the variety of authentic listening samples such as interviews, mini-lectures, and group discussions, which match the discourses researched in this paper.

In the video and tape recordings, *there is + singular noun phrase* occurred 9 times, *there was* twice, *there were* none and *there are* nine times. The occurrence of *there is + plural noun phrase* was relatively small - only once during an informal and extemporaneous radio interview with a jazz pianist.

“Dinah seems to say there's all kinds of blues.” (p. 105)

There is no reference to this linguistic feature in the student's book or in the teacher's manual even though the publication targets students' speaking and listening skills. Since the occurrence of *there is + plural noun phrases* in the corpus research was

relatively low in comparison to the total number of occurrences in radio interviews and academic lectures, it may be advisable to add just a note in the teacher's manual saying that *there is/was + plural noun phrases* may occur in lectures and radio broadcasting, but they are not very common.

All the lectures in a TOEFL preparatory textbook (Rogers, 2003) were also evaluated and we found out that not once did *there is/was + plural noun phrase* occur. Unlike Vai's textbook (1998), this textbook has rehearsed lectures, which would allow the author to add a few instances of *there is/was + plural noun phrase*, particularly *there was + plural noun phrase* that seems to happen more frequently in academic lectures. This will better prepare international students for their future academic life by exposing them to more authentic speeches.

Conclusion

The corpus research in this paper yielded that level of formality and preparedness of the speaker seem to have an influence on the use of *there is/was + plural noun phrase* as opposed to *there are/were + plural noun phrase*. Yet the occurrence was low compared to the total number of occurrences of this linguistic feature in the corpora. A question remains whether *there is/was + plural noun phrase* is more common in one-on-one or group conversations than in public speech.

Surprisingly, *there was* had a greater number of occurrences in both radio and university lectures even though it does not have a reduced form in written or spoken

English. Further research is needed in order to find out if the pattern also occurs in other types of discourse.

After the analysis N+1, N+2 and the nature of the nouns within the noun phrases, there does not seem to be any plausible reason that explains why speakers choose to concord *there is/was* + *plural noun phrase* except for connected speech. Indeed, there were several occurrences in which *there is* and *there was* are directly followed by a cardinal number or by a noun phrase containing a count noun. However, further investigation is needed before asserting that such facts impact the speakers' choice.

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