A descriptive enquiry into subject-verb concord in English existential constructions

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Introduction

Subject-verb concord is generally regarded as a fundamental part of English syntax. It is also true, however, that there are some peculiar cases in which non-concord somehow seems to be part of the norm. One such instance is the "*there's* + plural noun phrase (NP)" construction. This singular agreement of the verb *be* in existential constructions with plural post-verbal NP appears particularly idiosyncratic and thus highly perplexing to teachers and learners of English as a second language (ESL); more often than not, it is criticised as incorrect by prescriptive grammars, even though, as Nevalainen and Tieken-Boon van Ostade point out (2006: 298-9), this construction has been used since the Middle English period. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore reasonable accounts for the occurrence of this type of construction in present-day English in a descriptive manner by taking advantage of several corpora. This paper will first examine the primary qualities of existential *there* and concord in

existential constructions by reviewing diverse literature. Then, some corpus surveys using such corpora as the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus (LOB), the Freiburg-LOB Corpus (F-LOB), the Brown Corpus, the Frown Corpus and the British National Corpus (BNC), along with the evaluations of previous corpus research on this topic, will be conducted, before finally certain conclusions are drawn.

Existential *there*

Existential *there* has a number of interesting linguistic properties, which distinguish existential *there*, as in [1], from locative, or spatial, *there* , as in [2].

[1]   **There** are two problems with this line of argument. (BNC, EVP 1122)
[2]   She's going to try her luck out **there**. (BNC, A0F 1402)

First of all, these two *there*s are phonologically different. Existential *there* is normally pronounced /ðə/, whereas locative *there* is pronounced /ðɛə/ or /ðe/ (Huddleston, 1984: 68). In other words, existential *there*, unlike locative *there*, has no stress (Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990: 426). Secondly, the two *there*s sharply differ in semantics. Existential *there* carries "none of the locative meaning of the place-adjunct *there*" (Quirk et al., 1985: 1405), because, although existential, or dummy, *there* historically originates in locative *there*, it has lost its original independent meaning concerning location (Ward, Birner and Huddleston, 2002: 1391). Therefore, it is perfectly possible to employ both *there*s in a single clause, as in [3] (Huddleston, 1984: 68):

[3]   There's a mistake there.

Also, there are several syntactic differences between existential *there* and locative *there*. The third point to make is that the word class, or part of speech, of existential *there* seems to be rather complex. Quirk et al. (1985: 1405) do mention that "The *there* of existential sentences differs from *there* as an introductory adverb". However, they apparently fail to classify existential *there* into any of the word classes, so that they do not seem to view existential *there* as other than an adverb. Interestingly enough, Breivik (1981: 1), opposing Lyons' (1975) notion that existential *there* is a non-proximal adverb, argues that existential *there* is "an NP, inserted for syntactic and pragmatic reasons." Likewise, Huddleston (1984: 68) deems existential *there* a pronoun, claiming that "under certain conditions we do have a paradigmatic contrast between *there* and *it*; compare *There / it was a siren blaring*; certainly *it* is the word

to which it bears the closest syntactic resemblance, and they are best put in the same word-class, pronoun". Payne and Huddleston (2002: 427) also state that "Historically [dummy] *there* is a locative preposition (an adverb in traditional accounts), but it . . . has been reanalysed as a pronoun."

Fourthly, along with the difference in syntactic category above, there seems to be a stark contrast in syntactic function within a clause between existential *there* and locative *there*. While the grammatical function of locative *there* is typically considered to be a modifier, adjunct or adverbial, that of existential *there* does not appear so straightforward. Conventionally, existential *there* has been regarded not as the subject of the clause, which requires its verb to have the same number, gender or person, but as something else. For instance, according to Swan (2005: 579), existential *there* is an introductory subject and the real subject follows the verb after *there*. In contrast, Breivik (1981: 5-6) points out that "It is a characteristic feature of non-referential *there* that it behaves like a subject NP with respect to a number of syntactic transformations" such as "Subject Raising" and "Subject-AUX inversion". Quirk et al. also explain the possible status of existential *there* as the subject of the clause by citing the following as the reasons: (i) "It often determines concord, governing a singular form of the verb . . . even when the following 'notional subject' is plural", as in [4]; (ii) "It can act as subject in *yes-no* and tag questions", as in [5] and [6]; and (iii) "It can act as subject in infinitive and *–ing* clauses", as in [7] and [8] (1985: 1405):

[4]   *There's* some people in the waiting room.
[5]   *Is there* any more soup?
[6]   There's nothing wrong, *is there*?
[7]   I don't want *there to be any misunderstanding*.
[8]   He was disappointed at *there being so little to do*.

Similarly, though more assertively, Ward, Birner and Huddleston (2002: 1391) argue that the syntactic function of existential *there* is the subject of the clause and that of the NP following the verb is a "displaced subject", which is "an internal complement of the verb" that is semantically, but not syntactically, a subject. Huddleston (2002: 236-43) provides certain evidence of existential/dummy *there* being the subject: (i) Category: "The prototypical subject has the form of an NP" and existential *there* is a pronoun, which is a subclass of noun. (ii) Position: existential *there* has "the property of occupying the default subject position." (iii) Agreement: "the dummy pronoun *there* does not have inherent person-number properties but inherits them from the NP that it 'displaces' as subject." (iv) Subject-auxiliary inversion: It is existential *there* that comes "in post-auxiliary position". (v) Tags: existential *there* is

"repeated in interrogative tags." (vi) Coordination: "a coordination of VPs" is possible. (vii) Obligatoriness: "The minimal finite" reduction is *There are*, and *there* satisfies "the subject requirement". In addition, existential *there* functions as the raised subject a catenative verb, as in [9] (Ward, Birner and Huddleston, 2002: 1392):

[9]   There seems to have been a mistake.

Finally, existential *there* has a distinctive pragmatic feature with respect to information packaging. As is sometimes discussed (Ward, Birner and Huddleston, 2002: 1368; Quirk et al., 1985: 1402), new or unfamiliar piece of information in a sentence or discourse tends to occur after given or more familiar ones to attract more focus. Referring to existential sentences, Crystal (2003: 231) nicely describes this tendency: "Sometimes we want to bring the content of a whole clause to the attention of our listener or reader, making it all new information. To do this, there is a construction in which the first words have no meaning", and "The main means of achieving this effect is to use the word *there* . . . followed by the simple present or past tense of *be*". Likewise, Breivik (1981: 15) mentions that existential *there* carries what he calls "signal information" and "functions as a signal to the addressee that he must be prepared to direct his attention toward an item of new information." This also accounts for the fact that it is not a definite notional subject but an indefinite one that usually succeeds the verb in the existential-*there* construction (Biber et al., 1999: 951).

Concord in the existential construction

The general rule of subject-verb concord, or agreement, in English seems to be fairly simple: (i) "A singular subject requires a singular verb", (ii) "A plural subject requires a plural verb", (iii) "The number of a noun phrase depends on the number of its head", and (iv) for coordinated NPs, "A plural verb is used even if each conjoin is singular", as in [10] (Greenbaum and Quirk, 1990: 214-6).

[10]   Tom and Alice *are* now ready.

In the existential construction, therefore, it appears quite reasonable for English grammar to have the basic rules of concord such as: "*There are* is used with plural subjects" (Swan, 2005: 579), "If the postponed subject . . . is plural, the verb is also in the plural" (Leech and Svartvik, 2002: 298) and "the verb phrase combining with existential *there* takes its number from the notional subject" (Biber et al., 1999: 185-6). Additionally, Quirk et al. (1985: 1403-4)

formulate "a regular correspondence" between the existential construction [12] and its semantically equivalent basic clause pattern [11] on condition that the subject is an indefinite NP, and it seems perfectly natural that the verb *be* agrees with the 'subject' in [11] and [12] in number.

[11]   subject + (auxiliaries) + *be* + predication
[12]   *there* + (auxiliaries) + *be* + subject + predication

In fact, in most of the existential constructions, this rule of agreement holds true. As is well known, however, this seemingly straightforward law does not appear to be always the case. For instance, Sinclair (1990: 416) clearly notes that "You use a singular form of 'be' when you are giving a list of items and the first noun in the list is singular or uncountable", as in [13]:

[13]   There was a sofa and two chairs.

Nevertheless, distinctly more anomalous and baffling is the case of singular concord when the post-verbal NP is plural. Leech and Svartvik (2002: 298) state that "A frequent feature of informal conversation is the use of the singular verb contracted form *'s* attached to the preceding *there*, also when the following postponed subject is plural", as in [14]:

[14]   *There's* only four bottles left.

Biber et al. (1999: 186) also mention that "In conversation, . . . we frequently find a singular form of *be* followed by plural noun phrases. The verb is regularly contracted and attached to the preceding *there*", and continue to argue that "In fact, such examples are somewhat more common in conversation than the standard constructions with plural verb plus plural noun phrase." Alternatively, Huddleston (2002: 242) notes that "When the copula is cliticised to the subject [i.e. *there*] in informal style, many speakers use the 3rd person singular form irrespective of the number of the post-verbal NP".

With regard to the deviant concord of *where*-sentences, and consequently that of the *there* construction, Dixon (1977: 600) argues that "number agreement is suspended when a plural verb form is phonologically disharmonious with a preceding word, and in this circumstance the singular verb form can be used with a plural subject". Nathan (1981), however, dismisses Dixon's phonological explanation, pointing out that such a sentence as [15] below is acceptable, and proposes that the contracted *'s* can be used with a plural subject "only when in

a *wh*-question, and only when the verb in question is the copula, not when it is an auxiliary" (152-3).

[15]   Where on earth's the horses?

Sparks (1984: 182) furthers Nathan's argument and submits the generalisation of 'number neutralisation' with *be*, as is shown in [16]:

[16]   The third person singular form of the verb *be* may be used with a plural subject
         a. in *wh*-questions with *where*, *when*, *how* and *what*,
         b. in declarative sentences with adverbials corresponding to *where*, *when*, *how* and *what*,
         under the following conditions:
         a. The verb *be* must be the copula, not an auxiliary.
         b. The singular verb *is* must be contracted to −*'s*.
         c. The question-word or corresponding adverbial must appear before the copula.
         d. The subject of the sentence must not be a personal pronoun.

He also suggests that this number neutralisation may apply not only to locative *there* but also to existential *there*, as in [17] and [18] respectively (182):

[17]   There's the lions.
[18]   Look! There's two lions in the yard.

In addition, Sobin (1997) claims from the point of view of generative grammar that in existential constructions, any singular agreement is "normal, local specifier-head agreement" (332), whereas plural agreement is the result of a grammatical virus, which "operates out of conformity with the principles that govern the proper devices of a grammar" (319). Schütze (1999), however, contends that plural concord in existential construction is not due to a virus but rather because of "sequential processing", i.e. "the human sentence processor has a tendency to produce and accept agreement between a verb and the linearly closest NP even when that NP is not its subject", as in [19], which actually is, as Schütze notes, ungrammatical for the speakers of standard English (472-3):

[19]   The author of the speeches are here.

At the same time, Schütze (1999: 477) also proposes that "speakers of English have at their disposal two grammatical ways of dealing with non-NP syntactic subject (*there*, PPs, etc.):

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these noncanonical subjects may disallow agreement and therefore 'deflect' agreement to an NP lower in the sentence, or they may trigger 3sg agreement." In other words, "When the subject is *there*, a locative PP, and so on, agreement with the subject is not possible, and one of two things can happen: I[nfl] agrees with a nonsubject NP, or I[nfl] is 3sg by default" (Schütze, 1999: 479).

Finally, according to Huddleston (1984: 69), "the normal rules of subject-verb agreement do not apply to the *there* construction: person-number inflection in the verb is shared between *there* (which is 3rd person singular, like *it*) and the NP following the VP." He puts forward intriguing arguments: "Suppose, for example, someone said to me, *Who is there who could help her?*: I might reply, *Well there's always you*, not **There are always you*", and "even if we consider only number variation in the 3rd person, we must distinguish between a plural attributable to the selection of a plural noun . . . and one attributable to the coordination of two singular NPs" (69). Quirk et al. (1985: 756) also attempt to explain "the tendency in informal speech for *is/was* to follow the pseudo-subject *there* in existential sentences". They note that "It is possible to generalize the rule of concord to 'A subject which in not clearly semantically plural requires a singular verb'; that is, to treat singular as the unmarked form, to be used in neutral circumstances, where no positive indication of plurality is present" (756). However, they cautiously add that "On the other hand, the principle of proximity . . . effects a change from singular to plural more often than the reverse, perhaps because the plural is the form that is morphologically unmarked" (756).

Corpus research

1. Previous corpus research

Meechan and Foley (1994) report their sociolinguistic research on concord in the existential construction. Analysing speech data from 31 native speakers of English in Canada, they observe that "Perhaps the most striking result of our study is the overwhelming lack of concord among Standard English speakers" (80). According to their research, "Only 1% of existentials containing a singular noun exhibited plural agreement, whereas 72% of existentials containing a plural noun showed singular agreement" (75). Meechan and Foley suggest that contraction of the verb *be* is one of the key factors in non-concord, by showing that when the copula is in the form of clitic, only 8% of existentials with a plural noun show concord, whereas when it is in full form, 50% do so. They also point out "an overall increased use of concord associated with attendance at high school and exposure to more advanced rules of grammar" (82) and argue that "the prescriptive rules of agreement associated with

grammatical education exert a powerful influence on perceived agreement patterns" (83).

Martinez Insua and Palacios Martinez (2003), making use of the BNC, conducted extensive corpus research into possible elements that influence non-concord in existential constructions. The factors that they claim to have found are essentially threefold. First, the medium of expression: the frequency of non-concord in existential constructions in spoken English (13.26% of the total spoken samples) is much higher than that in written English (3.22% of the total written samples) (268). Second, the length and the complexity of the post-verbal sequence: "the frequency of non-concord is markedly higher among TCs [i.e. existential *there*-constructions] with an extension (especially in writing). Minimal existential TCs [i.e. existential *there*-constructions that lack any kind of extension after their post-verbal NP]. . . , as opposed to those containing any kind of extension after the PVNP [i.e. the post-verbal NP] . . . , display lower rates of non-concord" (276), and, also, the percentage of non-concord among all the existential constructions with coordinated post–verbal NPs (63.08%) is significantly higher than the percentage of non-concord in all the samples of existential constructions (9.25%) (278). Lastly, intervening elements between the verb and the post-verbal NP: the percentage of non-concord among existential constructions with intervening material (14.35%) is higher than that of total non-concord average (9.25%) (279).

However, although the data presented seem correct, Martinez Insua and Palacios Martinez's interpretation of the numerical data, thus their argument, in the second point above is probably flawed. Contrary to their explanation, if interpreted properly according to the figures provided, the frequency of non-concord in minimal existential constructions (13.14%: 64 out of 487) is actually higher than that in existential constructions with an extension (8.27% : 159 out of 1923), and the frequency of non-concord in written minimal constructions (3.28%: 4 out of 122) is almost the same as the average non-concord frequency in written English (3.22%). Also, since it is considered a norm to have singular concord in existential constructions with coordinated post-verbal singular NPs, their data on coordination do not seem to mean much in supporting their argument of the length and complexity of post-verbal sequence being a factor of non-agreement.

2. Corpus findings

2.1   LOB, F-LOB, Brown and Frown
In this paper, I present some corpus research into the existential-*there* construction, with a particular focus on the (non-)concord of the verb *be* when its post-verbal NP is plural. First of all, by utilising the LOB Corpus, which consists of written British English in 1961, and the F-LOB Corpus, a 1991 updated version of LOB, diachronic research on written present-day

British English has been conducted.

Table 1   Percentages of four forms of existential *there + be* followed by plural NP in LOB

	there are	*there're*	*there is*	*there's*
total: 334	329	0	0	5
	329		5	
percentage	98.5%	0%	0%	1.5%
	98.5%		1.5%	

Table 2   Percentages of four forms of existential *there + be* followed by plural NP in F-LOB

	there are	*there're*	*there is*	*there's*
total: 411	395	3	0	13
	398		13	
percentage	96.1%	0.7%	0%	3.2%
	96.8%		3.2%	

Table 1 above shows that, in 1961, in the vast majority of the cases of present tense (98.5%), *there are* is used with plural NP, and only 1.5% of the total matches have singular concord, with all the instances being the contracted form of *there's*. The overall picture in 1991 of table 2 is not much different from that of table 1. However, it is noticeable that the percentage of singular concord has almost doubled over the thirty years (3.2%). There may be an increasing tendency to use singular concord in existential constructions with plural post-verbal NP in written present-day British English, although its frequency itself remains very low.

Secondly, research on geographical synchronic variations between British English and American English, as well as on diachronic changes in present-day American English, has

been done, by making use of the American equivalents of LOB and F-LOB: the Brown Corpus, comprising written American texts in 1961, and the Frown Corpus, an update of Brown in 1992, as well as the data obtained from LOB and F-LOB above.

Table 3   Percentages of four forms of existential *there + be* followed by
plural NP in Brown

	there are	there're	there is	there's
total: 312	305	0	0	7
	305		7	
percentage	97.8%	0%	0%	2.2%
	97.8%		2.2%	

Table 4   Percentages of four forms of existential *there + be* followed by
plural NP in Frown

	there are	there're	there is	there's
total: 256	249	0	0	7
	249		7	
percentage	97.3%	0%	0%	2.7%
	97.3%		2.7%	

Table 3 shows that the percentage of singular concord in existential constructions with plural NP in written American English in 1961 (2.2%) is slightly higher than that of written British English in the same period (1.5%; in table 1). However, comparisons between tables 2 and 4 reveal the reversed situation: approximately thirty years later, in 1991/1992, the use of singular concord is somewhat more frequent in Britain (3.2%) than in America (2.7%) in written English. This indicates that although the overall use of singular agreement is on the rise both in Britain and in America, the rate of increase over the thirty years in America is rather lower than that in Britain.

2.2   BNC Written and Spoken texts

Finally, by using the British National Corpus (BNC), which contains both written and spoken present-day British English, I carried out a study on synchronic differences between written and spoken English. The data in tables 5-8 below were acquired in the following method: in order to obtain manageable yet valid data, the word *there* was first searched, and all the hits are thinned with the random selection method to 1000 instances; then, all the relevant samples to the research were manually selected.

Table 5   Percentages of four forms of existential *there* + present *be* followed by plural NP in BNC Written sample data

	there are	*there're*	*there is*	*there's*
total: 126	123	0	0	3
	123		3	
percentage	97.6%	0%	0%	2.4%
	97.6%		2.4%	

Table 6   Percentages of two forms of existential *there* + past *be* followed by plural NP in BNC Written sample data

	there were	*there was*
total: 77	77	0
percentage	100%	0%

Tables 5 and 6 above show the results of written English: existential *there* with the forms of present tense *be* followed by plural NP in table 5, and past tense *be* in table 6. Considering that the texts in BNC are taken from those since the 1960s onwards, it is probably not surprising that the frequency of singular concord in table 5 (2.4%) is actually almost the average of those of table 1 (1.5%) and table 2 (3.2%). However, it might be unexpected to have no singular concord instance at all in the past tense (0%), as seen in table 6.

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Table 7   Percentages of four forms of existential *there* + present *be* followed
by plural NP in BNC Spoken sample data

	there are	*there're*	*there is*	*there's*
total: 87	47	0	1	39
	47		40	
percentage	54.0%	0%	1.2%	44.8%
	54.0%		46.0%	

Table 8   Percentages of two forms of existential *there* + past *be*
followed by plural NP in BNC Spoken sample data

	there were	*there was*
total: 36	23	13
percentage	63.9%	36.1%

What seems of major significance is that spoken data in tables 7 and 8 above demonstrate a striking contrast to those of written texts in tables 5 and 6. As table 7 shows, in nearly half the entire occasions (46.0%), existential constructions with plural NP in the present tense have the singular forms of *be*, mostly in its clitic form *'s*. This seems quite remarkable although the number is rather lower than that of Meechan and Foley's (72%) (1994). Perhaps even more noteworthy is the frequency of *there was* followed by plural NP in the context of past tense: in more than one third of the cases (36.1%), singular agreement occurs, as shown in table 8.

These results appear to indicate that singular concord in existential constructions with plural post-verbal NP does not happen primarily because, or only when, the verb *be* is contracted as several grammarians suggest. In fact, given the rather high frequency of *there was* in spoken context, together with a certain behaviour of existential *there* in terms of syntactic function, the verb *be* does seem to often select existential *there* as subject and agree with this singular subject in number. In this sense, the singular forms of *be* in existential constructions with

plural NP should probably be understood not as non-concord but rather as concord. If this is the case, however, then nearly complete absence of non-contracted form *is* in the present tense (1.2%) in table 7 will, in turn, have to be clarified.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to elucidate descriptively the mechanism for seemingly bizarre concord in existential-*there* constructions, particularly that of the "*there's* + plural NP" construction, by means of corpus research as well as literature reviews. Although clear accounts for this construction are not yet secured, certain facts on this issue are revealed. The use of *there's* with plural post-verbal NP seems to be well established in spoken British English. This probably means that this mode of expression is, to a certain extent, considered to be part of proper usage, if not the only option, in an informal register. Also, it appears plausible that existential *there* behaves as the subject of the clause and it is treated as singular, in the light of the high frequency of *there was* followed by plural NP in the past tense. In this regard, it could be said that it is not appropriate to view singular concord in existential constructions with plural post-verbal NP as 'non-concord' as is usually reckoned.

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