CHAPTER 5

There's thieves in the house
Existential there-*Constructions in Late Modern English*

Claudia Lange

5.1 Introduction

The existential *there*-construction (henceforth also 'existential construction') is among the syntactic devices that allow speakers to highlight salient information by deviating from the canonical English sentence structure. The literature on the forms and functions of the existential construction in general is extensive (e.g., Lambrecht 1994; Birner & Ward 1998; Ward & Birner 2004); most current empirical research focuses on grammatical variation concerning agreement between the verb and the postverbal noun phrase (NP), the so-called notional subject. The findings indicate that in many varieties of spoken present-day English (PDE), existential *there's* is on its way to becoming an unanalysable chunk, combining with singular or plural notional subjects (Rupp & Britain 2019: 273). That is, the existential construction's non-canonicity in terms of sentence structure is supplemented by non-canonical agreement patterns.

This chapter provides historical depth to some developments pertaining to number agreement in the existential, drawing on Late Modern English (LModE) data from the *Old Bailey Corpus 2.0* (*OBC 2.0*; henceforth also '*OBC*'), representing speech-like transcripts from the proceedings of the Old Bailey court from 1720 to 1913. This chapter is structured as follows. Section 5.2 sketches the form, function, and origin of the existential construction; a subsection is devoted to the default singular as a putative vernacular universal. Section 5.3 introduces the database, namely the *OBC 2.0*. Section 5.4 comprises two case studies. The first follows Nevalainen (2009) in focusing on default singulars with plural notional subjects in existential constructions, replicating her study with *OBC* data and then considering these data in relation to a very specific turning point in English

This chapter profited considerably from the careful scrutiny of one anonymous reviewer, whom I would like to thank for their perseverance and attention to detail. All remaining inconsistencies are entirely my own.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

usage, when *you was* gave way to *you were*, that is, at the end of the eighteenth century (Widlitzki 2018). The second case study is dedicated to 'notional plurals' across all periods covered by the *OBC*, that is the agreement patterns in existential constructions featuring collective nouns, coordinated subject NPs, and quantifying determiners (such *as a variety/number of*). In Nevalainen (2009), those existential tokens were excluded because contemporary prescriptive literature und usage were divided over what was to be considered the 'correct' agreement pattern. Section 5.5 discusses the different aspects of non-canonicity that came to the fore in the case studies. Finally, Section 5.6 evaluates the findings in the light of current research on the variability in the existential construction and suggest further options for historical approaches.

5.2 The Existential *there*-Construction

The following sections briefly sketch those aspects of the existential *there*-construction that are most relevant in the context of the case studies based on the *OBC 2.0*.

5.2.1 Form, Function, and Origin

Both the form and the function of the existential construction are captured succinctly by Ward and Birner (2004: 163–4): as a postposing construction which 'offer[s] a way to preserve the given-before-new ordering of information in cases where canonical word order would violate this ordering', the existential construction is 'defined by the presence of non-referential *there* occurring in subject position while the NP that would canonically appear in subject position instead appears postverbally, and finally by the presence of *be* as the main verb'. This definition excludes the presentational construction with verbs other than *BE* (example (1)). Example (2), from the statement of a police surgeon under cross-examination in a case of assault on the police, features two existential constructions, one 'bare' and one extended form. Example (3), again with an extended notional subject, further displays lack of agreement: singular agreement with plural notional subjects, or 'default singulars', will be the main focus of this chapter's first case study.

(1) I was present at the fight. **There appeared no malice**; it was perfectly fair – I saw it all. (OBC218220522, emphasis added)[1]

[1] Examples from the *OBC* are cited with the *OBC* text identifier, which also contains the date of the trial (following 'OBC2'_) in the format year-month-day.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(2) **There were no teeth marks** on Smith's testicles – **there was a bruise**. (OBC219020909)

(3) I keep a sale-shop in Rag-fair; that day the watch was lost, a young girl called to me, and said, madam **there is some whores** in your alley have got a watch (OBC217550910)

The first existential construction in example (2) contains a locative extension, one of the most common among the larger set of possible extensions (see Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1394 for a complete list); the second existential remains bare. Both existential constructions 'serve to introduce previously unidentifiable or inactive referents into a discourse' (Lambrecht 1994: 179). In this particular instance, both Smith and his bruised testicles have been mentioned at the very beginning of the surgeon's statement but are now being recalled. This example also illustrates that *BE* agrees with the postverbal notional subject. In example (3), the notional subject is indeed hearer-new, thus confirming that 'the existential construction is characteristically used to introduce addressee-new entities into the discourse, and for this reason the displaced subject NP is usually indefinite' (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1396).

5.2.2 History

The history of the existential *there*-construction can be traced back to Old English, as Breivik (1990, 1991) has shown. His database, a corpus including Old English (OE), Middle English (ME), and Early Modern English (EModE) texts, yields 1,653 existential constructions (Breivik 1991: 34). OE originally featured three options for the existential construction, two with a dummy subject (either *there* or *it*) and one without an overt subject. The large majority of existential constructions in OE were formed with a zero subject, with existential *it*-constructions a marginal option throughout the periods covered by his data. Existential constructions introduced by *there* began to outnumber those with zero subjects between early and late ME; by EModE, the distribution of *there*- vs. zero existential constructions was 88.1% against 11.9% (Breivik & Martínez-Insua 2008: 354). Breivik (1990, 1991) also discusses the origin of dummy *there* in the existential construction; Huddleston and Pullum provide a short summary of the process:

> Historically, dummy *there* derives from the locative *there* of, for example, *Don't leave your shoes there.* Locative *there* is an intransitive preposition contrasting with *here:* it has deictic and anaphoric uses . . .. *there* has been bleached of its locative meaning and reanalysed as a pronoun. (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 1391)

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

One of the alternatives to the existential *there*-construction, 'the type "*It* is no man (who) can discourage me" was formerly quite common' (Visser 1963: 42). Visser's list of examples goes up to the early nineteenth century, with his last examples from poetry. A search for existential *it* in the *OBC* yielded no examples, which might be taken to indicate that the existential *it* was restricted to archaic/poetic usage from the eighteenth century onwards.

5.2.3 *The Existential Construction as a Vernacular Universal*

The concept of vernacular universals has been proposed for English by Chambers (e.g., Chambers 2004). He includes 'default singulars, or subject-verb non-concord' (2004: 129) in his list and also points out that the existential construction happens to be the context which favours default singulars the most (2004: 132). The finding that default singulars occur more frequently in existential constructions than in all other contexts has been confirmed multiple times for a wide range of varieties of English (Hay & Schreier 2004; Tagliamonte 2009). For present-day English, feature 172 'Existential/presentational *there*'s with plural subjects' in the *electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English* (*eWAVE*)[2] ranks among the top runners-up to the top six vernacular universal features across varieties of English, with an attestation rate of over 70% (Kortmann & Wolk 2012: 908).

Rupp and Britain note with respect to default singulars in existential and non-existential constructions:

> In fact, verbal –s [i.e., the default singular] in existentials is so pervasive that it has been demonstrated (i) to occur across varieties of English world-wide; (ii) to show higher rates of usage than in any other clause type; and (iii) to be even deployed by speakers in whose dialect verbal –s is otherwise (virtually) non-existent. . . . In view of the pervasiveness of verbal –s in existential *there* sentences, variationists commonly treat this use separately from the use of verbal –s in other clause types. (Rupp & Britain 2019: 238)

Collins (2012) summarises the factors that have been shown to correlate with default singulars in PDE; apart from social variables such as gender, a range of grammatical variables favour default singulars in existential constructions, among them:

- present tense;
- *'s*-contraction;

[2] https://ewave-atlas.org/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

- 'absence of overt number marking in the NP via the plural marker *–s*' (Collins 2012: 55); and
- bare (vs. extended) existential constructions.

Hay and Schreier (2004: 217) have further included modifier type in the notional subject NP as a grammatical variable (e.g., adjective, article, quantifier, negative) and report that the distance between verb and notional subject might also be a conditioning factor (2004: 221). The two case studies in Section 5.4 will contribute a diachronic perspective to the contemporary analyses. Both case studies focus on additional factors conditioning default singulars in existential constructions, namely the influence of normative grammar and semantic criteria. In addition, the first case study, in Section 5.4.1, will probe into the question whether default singulars in two different contexts show similar developments, namely in existential constructions and with singular *you was*.

5.3 Data: *The Old Bailey Corpus 2.0*

The *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, covering the time span from 1674 to 1913, represent more or less verbatim reports of the criminal cases heard by the court and were generally published shortly after the trials. The current *OBC 2.0* is based on a selection of these *Proceedings* ranging from 1720 to 1913. It is freely accessible after registration,[3] contains 24.4 million words,[4] around 1 million words per decade, and is divided into five main periods of around 40 years each as depicted in Tables 5.1 and 5.2. It is further fully tagged with the CLAWS 7 tagset and annotated for a wide range of external variables pertaining to the individual speakers (e.g., gender, social class, role in the courtroom etc.) as well as the individual texts (e.g., scribe).[5] As is to be expected, speaker information becomes more extensive for later corpus periods.

Both Huber (2007) and Widlitzki (2018) have commented extensively on the production process of the *Proceedings*, from the actual trials via the

[3] Retrieved from http://fedora.clarin-d.uni-saarland.de/oldbailey/.

[4] The statistics sheet for the *OBC 2.0* word count (retrieved from https://fedora.clarin-d.uni-saarland.de/oldbailey/documentation.html) is based on the CLAWS-tagged version of the corpus, leading to a higher overall word count of 30,195,073. Accessing the *OBC 2.0* within the CQPweb interface (http://corpora.clarin-d.uni-saarland.de/cqpweb/obc2/) results in an even higher word count of 35,436,580 words. For the sake of consistency, all frequency calculations were based on the CQPweb frequency counts.

[5] See https://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/claws7tags.html for the tagging scheme.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 5.1 *Frequency of all existential* there*-constructions in the* OBC *(absolute and per million words/pmw), divided by five 40-year periods*

OBC period	1 1720–1759	2 1760–1799	3 1800–1839	4 1840–1879	5 1880–1913
No. of words	5,917,325	6,773,964	8,193,849	7,904,888	6,646,554
Existential constructions					
Absolute frequency	10,244	15,235	14,561	18,541	14,229
Frequency pmw	1,731.2	2,249.1	1,777.1	2,345.5	2,140.8

Table 5.2 *Frequency of contracted* there's *in existential* there*-constructions in the* OBC *(absolute and per million words/pmw), divided by five 40-year periods*

OBC period	1 1720–1759	2 1760–1799	3 1800–1839	4 1840–1879	5 1880–1913
Contracted *there's*:					
Absolute frequency	266	2	8	12	21
Frequency pmw	45.0	0.3	1.0	1.5	3.2

scribes' shorthand recordings to the preparation of manuscripts ready for printing, assessing the overall speech-like quality of the data. Huber (2007) found evidence for 'differential faithfulness':

> On the intra-scribal level this means that individual scribes and printers can be more faithful with regard to the representation of some linguistic variants (maybe because of the variants' greater social or linguistic salience or indexical function) than with regard to others. On the inter-scribal level there may be agreement between different scribes/printers only on certain variables and not on others. (Huber 2007: n. pag.)

Huber's case study on negative contraction (e.g., *can't* vs. *cannot*) in the *OBC* reveals an unexpected drop in frequency towards the 1830s, given the contemporary pervasiveness of the form: 'It could mean that the early *Proceedings* are more representative of spoken language, possibly because the language became more and more formal as the City of London gained control over the publication and it became an official document' (Huber

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2007: n. pag.). Widlitzki (2018) arrives at a similar conclusion with respect to her case studies:[6]

> What seems to be far more important than corrections or interference at the level of the written publication are the changing courtroom procedure and the changing register in court. For the most part, I assume that the move towards the exclusion of informal, conversational variants was due to speakers using them less frequently in the courtroom setting as the whole process was becoming more formalised, the role of lawyers became more and more important and witnesses were increasingly better prepared before appearing in court. Linguistic flexibility decreased in other ways, too: a major development in this regard was the fixing of conversational roles. (Widlitzki 2018: 251)

That is, even though the value of the *OBC* as the largest historical corpus of speech-like data remains undisputed, all quantitative results and changes in frequency over time have to be interpreted against the background of scribes' 'differential faithfulness' and the impact of changing register conventions.

To return to the existential construction: accessing the BNC 2.0 via the CQPweb interface leads to the 'Standard Query' page; a search for the tag _EX yielded almost 75,000 tokens;[7] after manual removal of some mistagged locative *there*-forms as well as all presentational constructions (see example (1)), 72,810 tokens remain which are distributed over the five *OBC* periods as shown in Table 5.1. The existential *there*-construction occurs with a normalised frequency of 2054.7 per 1 million words across the corpus as a whole. Periods one and three feature frequencies below the average; the highest peak of existential constructions is found in *OBC* period four. This distribution is in itself intriguing but cannot be explored further at this stage.

While it would in principle be possible (and highly interesting) to exhaustively describe the forms and functions of the existential construction in LModE given the extensive dataset, this is far beyond the scope of the present chapter. In the following, speaker variables will play no role, and only selected internal variables will be considered. The overall dataset was also narrowed down depending on the specific research questions for the two case studies in Section 5.4. As the main focus is on number agreement with the notional subject, all tokens with forms of *BE* not displaying overt number marking were discarded. These included

[6] See also Archer (2014) for changing courtroom conventions.

[7] Query settings: 'simple query' for the query mode, and 'none (search the whole corpus)' for restrictions.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

non-finite *BE* in recurring set phrases as in example (4) as well as forms of *BE* in modal and past perfect contexts as in examples (5) and (6).

(4) **There being** no Proof that he stole it, he was acquiteed [*sic*]. (OBC217230828)

(5) I can not recollect the exact time I was last in the cellar, but when I was last in the cellar I did leave wine in it; **there ought to be** wine in the cellar when I left this country. (OBC218070114)

(6) Briscoe said **there had been** a bloody row. (OBC218021027)

In addition, all existential *there*-constructions for which the variable 'date' was not specified were disregarded. All further narrowing down of the database will be indicated separately for each case study.

Another brief look at the whole database provides not necessarily an answer, but at least permits a comment on the trend towards contracted *there's* as a unit mentioned in Section 5.1 and illustrated in examples (7) and (8).

(7) And one Day he told me, Ned, says he, **There's a Country Gentleman of my Acquaintance** that's just come to Town, and if you'll give him a Wedding Night, he'll pay you very handsomely. (OBC217260420)

(8) the landlady called out, '**There's two men** run through the passage' (OBC218991023)

Against expectations, the figures for contracted existential *there's* display a drastic drop in frequency between the first and all subsequent *OBC* periods. Quite unlike the historical trajectory for the establishment of the existential *there*-construction in general as noted in Section 5.2.1 (cf. also Breivik & Martínez-Insua 2008), the *OBC* data do not show a straightforward massive increase in contracted forms, and the actual figures do not display an accelerating trend towards existential *there's* as a chunk, at least not to the extent that could explain the purported dominance of the form in contemporary varieties of English. Two interpretations suggest themselves: first, the grammaticalisation of existential *there's* as an unanalysable chunk only takes off after 1913, and second, the choice of contracted *there's* and especially its uneven distribution over time rather represents change in courtroom conventions than in language use outside of the courtroom; 'the OBC moved away from conversational to more formalised speech in the course of the Late Modern period because the register conventions in the courtroom changed in this direction' (Widlitzki 2018: 252). More spoken or speech-like data from the twentieth century would be needed to opt for one or the other interpretation.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

5.4 Case Studies

When speakers opt for the existential construction, they use a construction which deviates from the canonical English sentence structure with its form–function mapping, introducing non-referential *there* in subject position and postponing the 'notional subject' as new information. The very choice of the existential construction is rooted in the information status of its referents and should therefore not be sensitive to changing linguistic norms. On the other hand, the variability of agreement patterns in existential *there*-constructions may be conditioned by a range of other factors impinging on speakers' choices, as the following two case studies will show.

5.4.1 *Two Constructions, One Development?* There was/were *vs.* you was/were

As described in Section 5.2.2, Chambers' (2004) list of vernacular universals includes default singulars in a hierarchy of favourable syntactic contexts ranging from *you was* to *there was*. Nevalainen (2009: 92–3) points out that 'according to the original definition of the term, "default singular" was used only with reference to *was*', but her data, to be discussed below, show that present tense forms pattern with the default singulars. If singular *BE* with (singular) pronominal *you* and singular *BE* with plural notional subjects in existential constructions were indeed related, then we would expect a shared historical trajectory. The following case study combines data and evidence from different studies on the changing agreement preferences in these two syntactic contexts.

Non-standard number agreement in general and in existential *there*-constructions in particular was quite high on the list of eighteenth-century prescriptive grammarians (cf. Leonard 1962: 211–27; Sundby et al. 1991): 'Subject-verb (non)agreement was a topic regularly treated in eighteenth-century grammars. A number of patterns of "false concord" in existential constructions were distinguished and proscribed' (Nevalainen 2009: 87). Two studies provide a historical perspective on change in the status of/attitudes towards 'default singulars' in existential *there*-constructions, dealing with developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both Nevalainen (2009) and Anderwald (2017) examine the lack of concord in existential constructions as a putative vernacular universal (see Section 5.2.2). Nevalainen's data come from the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Extension* (*CEECE*), a collection of around 4,400 private letters from 300 writers, covering the period 1681 to 1800 and comprising

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

around 2 million words (Nevalainen 2009: 85). Her search frame for relevant instances of singular verb agreement with plural notional subject NPs was narrowed down as follows:

- only present and past forms of *BE* were included, that is non-finite compound tenses such as the perfect were left out;
- all cases with coordinated subject NPs were excluded, since contemporary grammars were divided about their agreement patterns, for example, 'When he express'd himself upon these Subjects, *there was a Weight and a Dignity* in his Manner, such as I never saw before' (Nevalainen 2009: 90, emphasis in the original).

This left Nevalainen with 631 instances of *BE* with plural notional subjects, with 151 instances of non-standard against 480 instances of standard agreement, distributed over three 40-year periods shown in Table 5.3. Table 5.4 displays the data for two *OBC* periods that overlap with the two *CEECE* periods which show the most decisive decrease in default singulars.

In Nevalainen's data, the steady decrease in the relative frequency of singular *BE* with plural subjects is noticeable, both as an overall tendency and separately for present tense *is* and past *was*. The relative frequency of *there was* + NP_{pl} remains stable at slightly over 50% in the first two periods, but then drops to less than a third of all relevant tokens in the second half of the eighteenth century. The *OBC* data in Table 5.4, on the other hand, depict a similar downward trend for default singulars overall, but with much lower frequencies to begin with, and further without any indication of a decisive turning point between the first and the second half of the eighteenth century. In order to arrive at a more differentiated picture, Table 5.5 breaks down the data from Table 5.4 into 20-year periods.

Table 5.3 *Singular* BE *with plural notional subjects in the* CEECE*, relative frequencies*

CEECE period	1680–1719	1720–1759	1760–1800
is + NP_{pl}	33%	17%	12%
was + NP_{pl}	54%	54%	28%
Total BE_{sg} + NP_{pl}	**38%**	**26%**	**15%**

Source: adapted from Nevalainen (2009: 92–3).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 5.4 *Singular* BE *with plural notional subjects in two* OBC *periods matching Nevalainen's (2009) periodisation, absolute and relative frequencies*

OBC period	1 1720–1759	2 1760–1799
∑ words	5,917,323	6,773,964
∑ tokens existential constructions	8,320	12,242
∑ tokens with NP_{pl}	3,004	4,318
is + NP_{pl} (abs. & rel. freq.)	42 (1.4%)	67 (1.6%)
was + NP_{pl} (abs. & rel. freq.)	344 (11.5%)	334 (7.3%)
Total BE_{sg} + NP_{pl} (abs. & rel. freq.)	**386 (12.8%)**	**401 (9.3%)**

Table 5.5 *Singular* BE *with plural notional subjects, breakdown of* OBC *periods, absolute and relative frequencies*

OBC subperiod	1a 1720–1739	1b 1740–1759	2a 1760–1779	2b 1780–1799
∑ words	2,331,226	3,586,099	3,443,553	3,330,411
∑ tokens existential constructions[a]	1,995	6,325	6,016	6,226
∑ tokens with NP_{pl}	620	2,384	2,283	2,035
is + NP_{pl} (abs. & rel. freq.)	19 (3.1%)	23 (1.0%)	26 (1.1%)	41 (2.0%)
was + NP_{pl} (abs. & rel. freq.)	182 (29.4%)	162 (6.8%)	172 (7.5%)	162 (8.0%)
Total BE_{sg} + NP_{pl} (abs. & rel. freq.)	**201 (32.4%)**	**185 (7.8%)**	**198 (8.7%)**	**203 (10.0%)**

[a] Narrowing down of the database: only existential *there*-constructions with present and past *be*, judges' questions excluded.

Table 5.5 reveals a sharp decrease in default singulars from around a third of all tokens in the period 1720–1739 to less than 10% in subsequent periods. This overall tendency is again mostly due to the plummeting of *there was* + NP_{pl}, showing a trajectory comparable to Nevalainen's results. The relative frequencies in the subperiods 1b to 2b, on the other hand, are messier in that they do not replicate the general downward trend apparent in Table 5.4, which invites further research.

One difference between Nevalainen's data and the *OBC* data is due to text type: while Nevalainen found more present than past tense forms in her letter corpus (2009: 93), past tense forms predominate in the *OBC*, which is only

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 5.6 *Existential constructions with plural notional subjects in the two* OBC *subperiods; frequencies: absolute, pmw, relative (where applicable)*

OBC subperiod	2b (2nd half) 1790–1799	3a (1st half) 1800–1809
$\sum$ words	1,678,291	1,828,541
$\sum$ tokens with NP_{pl}	950 / 566.1	1,018 / 556.7
are + NP_{pl}	181 / 107.8 / 19.1%	144 / 78.8 / 14.1%
is + NP_{pl}	21 / 12.5 / 2.2%	36 / 19.7 / 3.5%[a]
was + NP_{pl}	82 / 48.9 / 8.6%	79 / 43.2 / 7.8%
were + NP_{pl}	666 / 396.8 / 70.0%	758 / 414.5 / 74.5%
Total *BE*$_{sg}$ + NP$_{pl}$	**103 / 61.37 / 10.8%**	**115 / 62.89 / 11.3%**

[a] Including a single token for contracted *'s*.

natural given that the court proceedings deal with past events. The 'steady fall in frequency of singular agreement with plural existential *there*-constructions across time' (2009: 92) from 1680 to 1800 in her data ends at 15% non-standard agreement in the period 1760 to 1800 and is still higher than the *OBC* figures of around 10%. The exact reason for this difference is difficult to pin down: it may again be due to specific situational characteristics of the registers involved, or it could reflect the decrease towards the end of the eighteenth century that is captured by the smaller time frame chosen for the *OBC* data. But these do not show a continuing reduction in frequency of non-standard agreement patterns: the total percentage of singular *BE* with plural notional subjects increases slightly in the first decade of the nineteenth century (see Table 5.6), and this increase is mainly driven by the rise in present tense *BE* + NP_{pl}.

This picture changes drastically in the nineteenth century, at least where the attention of grammarians to this particular detail is concerned, as Anderwald (2017) could show. Drawing on a subset of her *Collection of Nineteenth-Century Grammars*, comprising both British and American grammars (Anderwald 2017: 277), she found very little attention to non-standard agreement in existential *there*-constructions and concludes: 'Then as now, *there is/was* seems to have been either not very salient, or simply not very stigmatised, and the present-day attitude of tolerance towards this phenomenon can thus again be traced back to the nineteenth century' (Anderwald 2017: 292). That is, even though the two datasets are not directly comparable, we are left with an apparent contradiction: Nevalainen's study of the actual occurrences of non-standard agreement

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

patterns in existential constructions indicates a steady decrease over time in the eighteenth century, whereas Anderwald's study of nineteenth-century linguistic metacomments is indicative of a trend towards the recognition of the pattern. This case study has concentrated on the eighteenth century and can thus provide no evidence from the *OBC* data for the tendencies identified by Anderwald. However, the data for contracted *there's* in existential constructions displayed in Table 5.2 may be taken to indicate that there are no momentous changes throughout the nineteenth century, leaving ample opportunity for further research.

Nevalainen further examines the use of non-standard agreement in existential *there*-constructions by individual authors represented in the corpus, and found a clear correlation between gender (as a decisive factor in the access to education) as well as social class and non-standard singular *BE* + NP_{pl}: 'In the prenormative era, a gentlewoman at Court could be a consistent *there is/was* user, whereas less than a hundred years later, we have to go much lower down on the social scale to find one' (Nevalainen 2009: 95). Her study also briefly touches upon default singulars with pronoun subjects, that is, *you was/were*-variation. As also observed by Anderwald, *you was* represents the intriguing case of a feature that changed from being prescribed to being proscribed within a relatively short time span:

> *You was* changed from being actively recommended (for the singular) by at least some eighteenth and nineteenth-century grammarians to being unequivocally stigmatized over the course of the nineteenth century, and this stigmatization increases and becomes categorical towards the end of the nineteenth century . . . (Anderwald 2017: 289–90)

Widlitzki (2018) is the first in-depth study to exploit the potential of the *OBC*; her *OBC* data allow to pin down the turning point for the use of *you was* vs. *you were*: between the 1790s and the 1800s, the relative frequency of *you was* went down from more than 60% (142 vs. 229 tokens) to around 15% (362 vs. 54 tokens) (Widlitzki 2018: 230).

Widlitzki's data for the disappearance of *you was* tie in with Nevalainen's finding about the decrease of *there was* + NP_{pl} in existential *there*-constructions, despite the difference in text type. Recall that one of the open questions concerning default singulars is whether the two phenomena are related, or whether *you was* and the rise of *there's/is/was* with plural notional subjects are separate developments which happened to coincide historically. This question can be approached by replicating Widlitzki's focus on the two decades around 1800. Accordingly, two further *OBC* subcorpora were created which straddle the line of the *OBC* periods 2 (1760–1799) and

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3 (1800–1839), comprising the years 1790–1799 and 1800–1809. In a next step, Nevalainen's criteria for the inclusion of tokens were applied (see above). Finally, following Widlitzki, only existential constructions in full declarative sentences were included: 'Inverted forms, mainly found in questions (*was you? Were you?*), were excluded because their distribution in the *OBC* is heavily skewed towards the groups of lawyers and judges. Other participants very rarely make use of them because they almost never ask questions' (Widlitzki 2018: 226). This led to the exclusion of both tokens in example (9), the first representing an interrogative and the second an elliptical answer that is directly prompted by the preceding question.

(9) Q. It was dusk perhaps, not dark?
- It was not.
Q. Was it light?
- Yes, it was.
Q. **Were there** candles in the room?
- No, **there were** not. (OBC217950701)

Table 5.6 shows the frequencies and the distribution of standard and non-standard agreement patterns in existential constructions in the two *OBC* subperiods.

The comparison with Widlitzki's data reveals that the drastic decrease of *you was* is not replicated by the figures for *there was* with plural notional subjects. The turn of the century may represent a turning point for the successful change from above concerning *you was*, but not for non-standard singular past forms in existential *there*-constructions. This may be taken as a piece of historical evidence that the two default singulars are quite separate patterns that either do not influence each other or are subject to different constraints, but further *OBC* data from later periods would be needed to strengthen that point.

5.4.2 *Leaky Grammar: Variation with Notional Plurals and Coordinated Subject NPs*

Compiling the database for the previous case study has also highlighted that speakers' choices concerning the 'correct' agreement pattern in existential *there*-constructions are not as straightforward as normative grammar would have it. 'The tension between syntactic and semantic criteria in subject-verb agreement is a long-standing one in English' (Nevalainen 2009: 89), and this is particularly evident for the existential construction. Visser (1963: 62–84) documents the extent of agreement variation with collective nouns (e.g., *army*, *crowd*) and indefinites such as *everybody*, *none*, etc., which is persistent

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

across all periods of English. Leonard's survey of eighteenth-century grammars similarly devotes a whole chapter to 'various solutions of problems of concord' (1962: 213–27). Eighteenth-century grammarians felt quite secure in pronouncements such as the following:

> It is an absurdity, which has crept into all the grammars which I have ever seen, to suppose that a noun of multitude may be used indifferently in either the singular or plural number; a noun or name of multitude is singular; for *a crowd* is but *one crowd*; *a multitude*, but *one multitude*. (Lewis Brittain (1778), *Rudiments of English grammar*, quoted after Visser 1963: 62)

Leonard (1962: 213) refers to an almost identical quote from John Clarke's *Rational Spelling Book* (1796) but notes that most grammarians allowed for variable agreement patterns with coordinated subjects depending on semantic criteria.

While collective nouns such as *crowd* or *mob* do indeed occur with singular agreement in the *OBC* data, thus apparently with all due deference to those contemporary grammarians who insisted on the singular, the categories of 'quantifying collectives' (e.g., *group*, *pack*, *flock*) as well as 'quantifying determiners' (e.g., *a number/couple of*) (Biber et al. 2021: 249–50) still seem 'leaky' enough to lead speakers to dissolve the tension between syntax and semantics one way or the other, as examples (10)–(13) show:

(10) and while my master was reading the letter I observed Clinch stoop with his hands under the chair behind him, and **there was a dozen** of spoons (OBC217911026)

(11) we went into the parlour, and took a knife-case, there were no knives in it, **there were about a dozen** forks (OBC217970712)

(12) **There were a parcel** of chaps running, and some of them dropped the watch, and they laid hold of me. (OBC218020714)[8]

(13) **there was a parcel** of women, he talked to them upwards of a minute (OBC218020217)

Such 'faultlines' in the grammar giving rise to variation present a particularly intriguing case for the study of speakers' choices. In the following, the agreement patterns in existential *there*-constructions with a selection of such expressions will be examined. The choice was made mainly on the basis of overall frequency: while some collective nouns occur only infrequently in existential constructions in the *OBC* – *parcel* occurs 60 times,

[8] Sense 6.a. in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) definition of 'parcel', n., runs as follows: 'A small party, collection, or assembly (of people, animals, or things); a detachment; a group, a lot, a set; a drove, a flock, a herd. Now *English regional* and *U.S. colloquial* (esp. in form **passel**)' (emphasis in the original).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 5.7 *Agreement patterns in existential* there*-constructions containing* number (there * a number of. . ., *N = 341; absolute and relative frequencies)*

OBC period	1 1720–1759	2 1760–1799	3 1800–1839	4 1840–1879	5 1880–1913
∑ tokens existential constructions	14	63	71	98	95
BE_{sg} + *a number of* (abs. & rel. freq.)	7 (50%)	15 (24%)	22 (30%)	11 (11%)	5 (5%)
BE_{pl} + *a number of* (abs. & rel. freq.)	7 (50%)	48 (76%)	49 (70%)	87 (89%)	90 (95%)

mob only 18 times overall – the expressions chosen for analysis are frequent enough to trace their agreement patterns over time. Coordinated subjects that were excluded from Nevalainen's analyses (see Section 5.4.1) will also be included.

Table 5.7 presents that data for existential *there*-constructions of the general form *there was/were a (great) number of* (*persons,* . . .), illustrated by examples (14) and (15).[9]

(14) in the other parts of the room **there was a great number** of files and crucibles, new and old (OBC217961026)

(15) I went to this public-house, where **there were a great number** of these loose kind of lads (OBC218030112)

While the choice of singular and plural agreement with this pattern was equally divided in the first *OBC* period (but note the low absolute count), plural agreement has become the unequivocal majority option in the last *OBC* period (see figures in bold print in Table 5.7).

The data for *many* (e.g., *there was/were so/(a great) many people about*), depicted in Table 5.8 and illustrated in example (16), show a stronger initial preference for plural agreement, which turns into the default option over time. According to Visser (1963: 79), '*a* (*great, good*, etc.) *many* is invariably found with a plural verb'; the *OBC* data show that this agreement pattern has developed over time.

[9] Data including judges' questions.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 5.8 *Agreement patterns in existential* there*-constructions containing* many (there * many. . ., *N* = *494; absolute and relative frequencies)*

OBC period	1 1720–1759	2 1760–1799	3 1800–1839	4 1840–1879	5 1880–1913
∑ tokens existential constructions	70	104	106	135	79
BE_{sg} + *many* (abs. & rel. freq.)	8 (11%)	8 (8%)	7 (7%)	7 (5%)	0 (0%)
BE_{pl} + *many* (abs. & rel. freq.)	62 (89%)	96 (92%)	99 (93%)	128 (95%)	79 (100%)

Table 5.9 *Agreement patterns in existential* there*-constructions containing* dozen (there * * dozen . . ., *N* = *92; absolute and relative frequencies)*

OBC period	1 1720–1759	2 1760–1799	3 1800–1839	4 1840–1879	5 1880–1913
∑ tokens existential constructions	8	11	25	28	20
BE_{sg} + *dozen* (abs. & rel. freq.)	2 (25%)	4 (36%)	11 (44%)	4 (14%)	0 (0%)
BE_{pl} + *dozen* (abs. & rel. freq.)	6 (75%)	7 (64%)	14 (56%)	24 (86%)	20 (100%)

(16) the Magistrate asked him whether I was the man that was seen with the cows — he said he could not say, for **there were so many short men** that wore smock frocks about there — he said **there was a man** with a smock frock, and another man with a brown jacket, with knee breeches and white stockings rather tall. (OBC218360613)

Expressions containing *dozen* in Table 5.9 (e.g., *there was/were (about) x dozen*), illustrated by examples (17) and (18), are fewer overall and display more fluctuation between agreement preferences over time but pattern with the expressions with *many* in arriving at a 100% rate for plural agreement.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 5.10 *Agreement patterns in existential* there*-constructions with coordinated notional subjects* (there * NN and NN, *N = 706, 682 tokens with date; absolute and relative frequencies)*

OBC period	1 1720–1759	2 1760–1799	3 1800–1839	4 1840–1879	5 1880–1913
∑ tokens existential constructions	117	191	115	135	124
BE_{sg} + *NN and NN* (abs. & rel. freq.)	101 (86%)	170 (89%)	110 (96%)	132 (98%)	111 (90%)
BE_{pl} + *NN and NN* (abs. & rel. freq.)	16 (14%)	21 (11%)	5 (4%)	3 (2%)	13 (10%)

(17) "— when I first went up to him, he said, "If you don't leave off, I will knock your head off!" — **there was not half a dozen words** said before the blow was struck (OBC218350511)

(18) I asked the watchman to shew me where to get something to drink; I had never been at the house before; I sat down, and called for some purl and gin between the watchman and myself; I dare say **there were half a dozen** drank out of it. (OBC218040111)

While the data for these collective expressions (see Biber 2021: 249–56) reveal a dominant tendency away from contemporary prescriptive pronouncements demanding singular agreement, the case of coordinated subjects seems to be different. Here, in fact, frequencies of singular *BE* remain high throughout all *OBC* periods, as depicted in Table 5.10. Examples (19)–(21) illustrate the pattern.

(19) I was at supper, I was called down; **there was the prisoner and a cheese of mine** brought in (OBC217670715)

(20) **There were bread and cheese**, and leg of mutton. (OBC217540424)

(21) **There was you and five more** in the public house (OBC218510616)

Figure 5.1 plots the results for all four constructions under review in one graph. All three quantifying expressions show a tendency towards almost categorical plural agreement over time, while the existential constructions with coordinated notional subjects overwhelmingly trigger singular agreement. Given the evidence for the chosen quantifying expressions, it seems

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

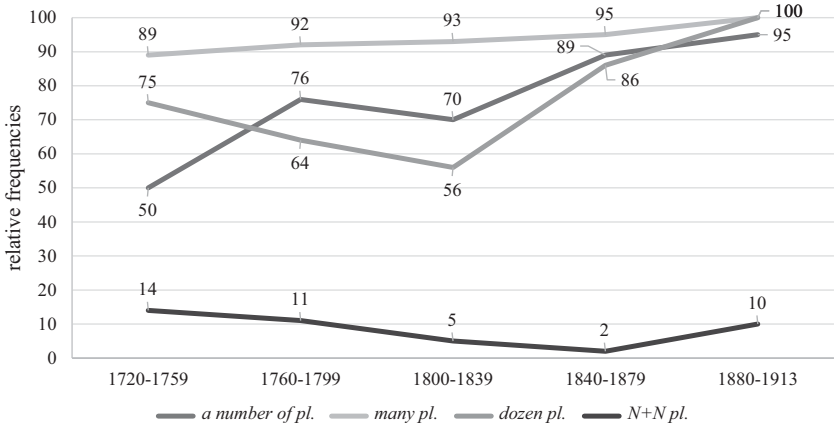


Figure 5.1 Plural agreement patterns over time for selected collective expressions in notional subjects in existential there-constructions (relative frequencies)

safe to assume that speakers' conceptualisations of the referents of these expressions were or became independent of LModE prescriptive grammar rules calling for singular agreement. To put it another way: in this particular case, cognitive factors outweighed the demands of grammatical correctness imposed from above. In the case of the coordinated notional subjects, singular agreement remains speakers' preference over time. It would be interesting to establish whether grammarians' opinions on this topic were as divided in the nineteenth century as Nevalainen (2009) found them to be in the eighteenth century, but this is beyond the scope of the present study.

5.5 Discussion

The case studies presented in this chapter both focused on default singulars in existential *there*-constructions in LModE speech-like data as captured by the *OBC 2.0*. The first one pursued the question whether default singulars in two different contexts are a unified phenomenon, or whether default singulars in existential constructions behave differently from pronominal contexts, in this case *you was*. The analysis showed that the rather abrupt demise of *you was* is not replicated by a loss of default singulars in existential constructions. This finding supports Hay and Schreier (2004), whose historical study of existential *there*-constructions in spoken New Zealand English mirrors these findings. They thus conclude that singular agreement in existential contexts should be treated separately from non-existential

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contexts; that is, prescriptivism and/or standardisation may have impacted the loss of default singulars in general, but not in existential constructions.

The second case study explored 'leaky grammar', that is, those cases where speakers' choices might be conditioned by pragmatic or cognitive factors rather than considerations of correctness. Quantifying expressions in the notional subject overwhelmingly triggered plural agreement in the *OBC* data, a tendency that has become more pronounced and in some cases categorical over time. On the other hand, coordinated notional subjects mostly occurred with singular agreement. Taken together, the case studies testify to the many different facets of the notion of (non-) canonicity that all play a role for the existential *there*-construction.

5.6 Outlook

Only a fraction of the wealth of available (meta-)data provided by the *OBC 2.0* has been tapped for the present study. A larger project could take all the external variables into account, extending what we know about gender and (non-)standardness in the history of English to LModE. It would also be highly interesting to consider internal variables that are bound to condition the frequency of default singulars in more detail. Rupp and Britain (2019: 297), for example, list several hierarchies of determiner types in existential *there*-constructions with singular agreement in PDE; other factors listed in Section 5.2.2 might also play a role as predictors. Even if the basic form of the existential construction was already well established at the beginning of the LModE period, the range of variation in its realisation still leaves ample scope for further research.

REFERENCES

Anderwald, Lieselotte (2017). 'Vernacular universals' in nineteenth-century grammar writing. In Tanja Säily, Arja Nurmi, Minna Palander-Collin, & Anita Auer, eds, *Exploring future paths for historical sociolinguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 275–302.

Archer, Dawn (2014). Historical pragmatics: Evidence from the Old Bailey. *Transactions of the Philological Society,* 112(2), 259–77.

Biber, Douglas, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey N. Leech, Susan Conrad, & Edward Finegan (2021). *Grammar of spoken and written English.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Birner, Betty J. & Gregory Ward (1998). *Information status and noncanonical word order in English.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Breivik, Leiv Egil (1990). *Existential there: A synchronic and diachronic study.* Oslo: Novus Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Breivik, Leiv Egil (1991). On the typological status of Old English. In Dieter Kastovsky, ed., *Historical English syntax.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 31–50.

Breivik, Leiv Egil (2005). The historical development of existential *there*: An example of subjectification in grammaticalisation. In Kevin McCafferty, Tove Bull, & Kristin Killie, eds, *Contexts: Historical, social, linguistic.* Bern: Peter Lang, 163–85.

Breivik, Leiv Egil & Ana E. Martínez-Insua (2008). Grammaticalization, subjectification and non-concord in English existential sentences. *English Studies*, 89(3), 351–62.

Chambers, Jack K. (2004). Dynamic typology and vernacular universals. In Bernd Kortmann, ed., *Dialectology meets typology: Dialect grammar from a cross-linguistic perspective.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 127–45.

Collins, Peter (2012). Singular agreement in *there*-existentials: An intervarietal corpus-based study. *English World-Wide*, 33(1), 53–68.

Hay, Jennifer & Daniel Schreier (2004). Reversing the trajectory of language change: Subject-verb agreement with *be* in New Zealand English. *Language Variation and Change*, 16(3), 209–35.

Huber, Magnus (2007). The Old Bailey proceedings, 1674–1834: Evaluating and annotating a corpus of 18th- and 19th-century spoken English. In Anneli Meurman-Solin & Arja Nurmi, eds, *Annotating variation and change* (Studies in Variation, Contacts and Change in English 1). Retrieved from https://varieng.helsinki.fi/series/volumes/01/huber/.

Huddleston, Rodney & Geoffrey K. Pullum, eds (2002). *The Cambridge grammar of the English language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jespersen, Otto (1927). *A Modern English grammar on historical principles.* Volumes III and V. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.

Kortmann, Bernd & Christoph Wolk (2012). Morphosyntactic variation in the anglophone world: A global perspective. In Bernd Kortmann & Kerstin Lunkenheimer, eds, *The Mouton world atlas of variation in English.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 906–36.

Lambrecht, Knud (1994). *Information structure and sentence form: Topic, focus, and the mental representation of discourse referents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leonard, Sterling Andrus (1962). *The doctrine of correctness in English usage 1700-1800* (reissued edition). New York: Russell & Russell. Retrieved from https://archive.org/details/doctrineofcorrecooleon.

Nevalainen, Terttu (2009). Number agreement in existential constructions: A sociolinguistic study of eighteenth-century English. In Markku Filppula, Juhani Klemola, & Heli Paulasto, eds, *Vernacular universals and language contacts: Evidence from varieties of English and beyond*. London: Routledge, 80–102.

OBC 2.0 Old Bailey Corpus 2.0, 1720-1913 (2016). Compiled by Magnus Huber, Magnus Nissel, & Karin Puga. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/11858/00-246C-0000-0023-8CFB-2.

OED Oxford English Dictionary Online (2023). Oxford: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from www.oed.com/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rupp, Laura & David Britain (2019). *Linguistic perspectives on a variable English morpheme: Let's talk about –s.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Sundby, Bertil, Anne Kari Bjørge, & Kari E. Haugland (1991). *A dictionary of English normative grammar, 1700-1800*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
Tagliamonte, Sali (2009). There *was* universals; then there *weren't*: A comparative sociolinguistic perspective on 'default singulars'. In Markku Filppula, Juhani Klemola, & Heli Paulasto, eds, *Vernacular universals and language contacts: Evidence from varieties of English and beyond.* London: Routledge, 103–32.
Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Ingrid (2008). Eighteenth-century prescriptivism and the norm of correctness. In Ans van Kemenade & Bettelou Los, eds, *The handbook of the history of English.* Oxford: Blackwell, 538–57.
Visser, Frederikus Th. (1963). *An historical syntax of the English language. Volume 1 Syntactical units with one verb.* Leiden: Brill.
Walker, James A. (2007). 'There's bears back there': Plural existentials and vernacular universals in (Quebec) English. *English World-Wide*, 28(2), 147–66.
Ward, Gregory & Betty Birner (2004). Information structure and non-canonical syntax. In Laurence R. Horn & Gregory Ward, eds, *The handbook of pragmatics*. Malden: Blackwell, 153–74.
Widlitzki, Bianca (2018). *Morphosyntactic variation and change in Late Modern English: A sociolinguistic perspective*. Retrieved from https://jlupub.ub.uni-giessen.de/handle/jlupub/15772.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press