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# On the lexicalization of *there's* in spoken discourse<sup>1</sup>

Edmundo Cruz Luna

## 0. Introduction

So-called *existential phrases*, i.e., phrases which express the existence of some referent via a specialized construction (sometimes with a special existential verb), typologically present several properties which mark these types of clauses as structurally atypical, given what is known about the properties of more stereotypical “intransitive” and “transitive” clauses. In English, the existential clause *there is* (or its contracted variant *there's*) is no exception to the clause type's tendency to exhibit a number of unusual structural and semantic characteristics, which include the following two considerations:

- 1) The demonstrative “there” loses its direction-giving vector function (but preserves some of its deictic function);
- 2) The referent itself presents a number of restrictions on its status of “definiteness”, i.e., the referent typically cannot co-occur with the definite article *the* in most contexts of the *there is* construction (Milsark 1974, 1977, Safir 1985, Ward & Birner 2007, *inter alia*).

In more functionalist terms, the construction introduces a novel referent (or ‘new information’, according to the activation cost rubric provided in Chafe 1994) into any given “chunk” or stream of discourse, which is at first of high activation (i.e., cognitive) cost but is then subject to subsequent mentions which are not as costly.

However, a number of scholars have remarked that there may be in fact a *lack* of agreement between the copular verb *be* and the following

nominal referent in this particular construction, whereby the structure [*there is* + NP<sub>PL</sub>] has been instantiated (e.g., *There's* [apples]<sub>NP</sub>), which has been attested in Old English (Quirk & Wrenn 1957) and is still present in contemporary Modern English. Furthermore, most of the research on this particular phenomenon has centered on attempting to provide formal accounts of the structural anomalies of this construction (Belletti 1988, Safir 1985) and/or sociolinguistic variational patterns, especially with regards to the form of the verb itself (Meechan & Foley 1994), social register (Walker 2007), and educational level (Meechan & Foley 1994).

However, in this study, I will problematize the previously reported motivations for the evident discord between the singular verb *is* in *there is/there's* and its co-occurrence with plural nominals: rather than viewing it as simply a variable focused solely on the verb or any other singular variationist or formalist factor, we must also consider how speakers actually use this construction in interaction. Ultimately, I argue that this is an example of lexicalization in process: first, the construction has grammaticized to not only an unusually specialized function, but through a specific pathway of reanalysis (after Langacker 1977); and second, its association with plural referents is further evidence that this construction is being used by increasingly more speakers as a cohesive, conglomerated “chunk” of discourse, which is what one would expect with the effects of increasing frequency and ritualization (Du Bois 1985, Bybee 2007, Haiman 1994). Furthermore, a closer examination into what exactly occurs in naturally-occurring spoken data is useful, as it affords us explanations into what motivates apparent structural mismatches such as [*there is* + PLURAL] by ascertaining the tendencies which speakers actually present, rather than establish some sort of contrived set of conditions by which the lack of concord occurs.

## 1. Background

As mentioned previously, the existential construction *there is/there's* exhibits some unusual properties that set it apart from more typical syntactic constructions in English. First, the construction begins with the demonstrative *there* rather than subject NP. In fact, in this position, the demonstrative *there* is in a “focused” (i.e., grammatical subject) position, and yet due to the effects of grammaticization, the demonstrative itself has been bleached of its vector-like properties; instead, the demonstrative only occupies a rather vague deictic orientation, to the point where all that matters is that it represents more of a metaphorical than an actual physical “location”<sup>2</sup>. This contrast is illustrated in the constructed examples (1) and (2), where (1) contains the vector-filled *there*, while (2) contains the vector-bleached *there*:

- (1) An apple is *there* in the bowl.
- (2) *There* is an apple in the bowl.

In (1), *there* indicates an explicit direction, which is a vector towards the NP *the bowl* expressed in its respective prepositional phrase. In (2), however, *there* does not indicate any particular vector or physical location; instead, it solely indicates a metaphorical location at best in which the referent's (i.e., the apple's) existence can be established.

With respect to the issue of the possible lack of agreement between the copular verb and the postverbal nominal referent, as Quirk and Wrenn (1957) point out, there are instantiations of this very phenomenon in Old English, as illustrated in (3):

- (3) *ðār sceal beon gedrync and plega*  
*there must: 1/3: SG be drinking and merrymaking*  
*'There must be drinking and merrymaking'*

(Quirk & Wrenn, 1957: 76)

As shown in (3), the verb *sceal* 'must' is in the singular form, while its co-referents (*gedrync* 'drinking' and *plega* 'merrymaking') occur as a plural argument.

Likewise, in contemporary usage, this apparent lack of concord is also instantiated in many spoken contexts, as illustrated in (4) and (5):

- (4) PETE: ... Well they --  
→ .. they claim that **there's** *these cycles*,  
and that we're in the .. the middle of a normal cycle.  
(CONCEPT)
- (5) ALINA: (H) I walk in,  
and the first hint that there's --  
% this is gonna be something a little bit unusual,  
is **there's** *all these helium balloons*?  
(CUZ)

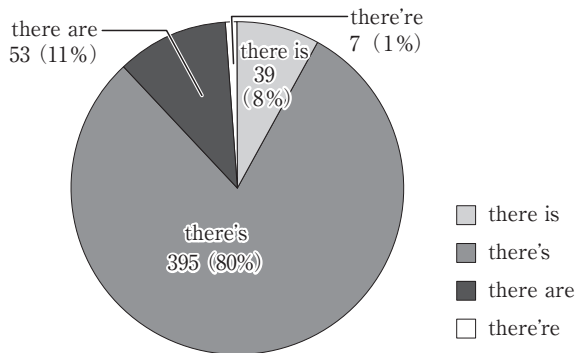
As with the Old English example in (3), examples (4) and (5) illustrate that this lack of agreement is still attested in contemporary spoken English data. In addition, the latter two examples will illustrate another factor which pose a strong motivation for both the lack of agreement and the suggestion that lexicalization is currently taking place in this particular context: the contracted form *there's* will show the greatest range of variation of co-occurrence with both singular and plural nominal referents.

## 2. Data and methods

The spoken data used for this study come from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBCSAE), a corpus which contains 60 transcripts (with approximately 249,000 words) of a wide variety of naturally-occurring spoken situations collected from both formal and informal situations and a large range of spoken genres from within the United States. The discourse

within these transcripts are parsed into *Intonation Units*, which are defined as spoken units that are typified by audible cues such as pauses, pitch reset, and a gestalt intonational pattern (after Du Bois, Schuetze-Coburn, Paolino, & Cumming 1993).

From this corpus, an eligible token was counted if it contained one of the four following structures: [*there is* + NP], [*there's* + NP], [*there are* + NP], and [*there're* + NP]. From this initial parsing, there were 494 eligible tokens, further divided among the four aforementioned structures, as illustrated in Figure 1:



**Figure 1: Distribution of existential constructions in the SBCSAE.**

As Figure 1 shows, [*There's* + NP] is the most frequent structure in the corpus data, which suggests that this particular construction is highly susceptible to the altering effects of grammaticization and lexicalization via a high level of token frequency (Bybee 2007).

### 3. Co-occurrence with referent type

At this point, it would be instructive to examine the types of referents that occur within the [*there's* + NP] construction. First, there is the referent type

that is the focus of this study and the one that is the most atypical, i.e., plural referents, resulting in the structure [*there's* + NP<sub>PL</sub>]. A few examples are illustrated in (6)-(8) below:

(6)  
 600.35 601.93            LYNNE: ... <VOX Oh,  
 601.95 602.89            you have to do this,  
 602.89 603.62            you have to do that,  
 603.62 604.92            → **there's *dead horse hooves***,  
 604.92 605.71            you know you gotta,  
 605.71 607.00            (H) and they stink VOX>,  
 (ACTUAL BLACKSMITHING)

(7)  
 1072.18            1074.14            → LYNNE: .. (H) Since **there's *four seasons***,  
 1074.14            1074.34            you know?  
 1074.34            1075.59            I wonder if [that has] something to do with it,  
 (ACTUAL BLACKSMITHING)

(8)  
 864.8 86.65            MILES:            Yeah,  
 86.48 88.68            → **there's *less calcium % deposits*** <X in them X>.  
 (LAMBADA)

As one can observe, examples (6)-(8) show that not only can these referents be unmistakably plural, but the lack of pause in these examples suggests that speakers face no difficulty or hesitation in producing these structurally “anomalous” instances. Thus, we must seriously consider to what degree plural referents have been used with this particular construction. In this particular data set, there were 87 tokens of *there's* co-occurring with plural referents.

The next type of referent that co-occurs with *there's* is the singular referent, i.e., [*there's* + NP<sub>SG</sub>], which would presumably be the most expected type. Examples with this type of referent are illustrated in (9) and (10):





(12)

1409.12 1410.77 KEVIN: **There's *nothing*** like new windshield wipers.  
(APPEASE THE MONSTER)

In (11) and (12), the negative element can either appear as something negating the proposition of the context in which it appears (e.g., [*there's* + **no oil pressure**] in (11), which logically denotes an absence of oil pressure), or negating the NP itself by appearing as the pronoun *nothing*. The main point of examining these tokens specifically is to illustrate that this is one particular context where the NP is overwhelmingly *singular* – in the 35 tokens that have *no/not* (as opposed to *nothing*), none has a plural referent. Thus, it can be said that a singular NP has the highest degree of co-occurrence with *there's* when a negative element is present.

If one were to consider the distribution of these referent types that co-occur with *there's*, some interesting patterns begin to emerge, as illustrated in Figure 2:

As Figure 2 illustrates, the majority of the referent tokens that co-occur with *there's* are undoubtedly singular (249 tokens; 63%). However, the

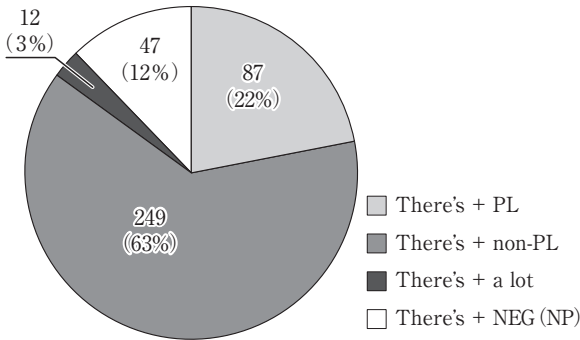


Figure 2: Distribution of *there's* and various NP referent types.

more striking tendency is found in comparing the frequencies of tokens that have plural referents (47 tokens; 11.9%) with referents located within the phrase [*a lot of*[*NP*]] (12 tokens; 3%) in this data set. This suggests that 1) at this point, when plural/multiple amounts of some referent are expressed within an existential phrase, and more specifically, one that incorporates *there's*, the tendency is stronger for the referent to be expressed without an additional quantifier phrase that denotes plurality, such as *a lot of*; and 2) the tendency may have been a product of a gradual process, as it seems that *a lot of* is still present in more formal contexts. Ultimately, these two remarks may reveal a grammaticization process with an intervening stage of lexicalization, which is discussed further in section 4.

#### 4. A possible grammaticization pathway

Most proponents of grammaticization insist that any changes that come about by grammaticization processes are unidirectional (Hopper & Traugott 1993) and follow some defined pathway from a more “lexical” source to a more “grammatical” target (Heine & Kuteva 2002). The construction that is most relevant here is the one that incorporates the quantifier phrase *a lot of*, i.e. [*there's a lot of*[*NP*]]. Examples of these are illustrated in (13)-(15):

(13)  
 348.19            349.07            MONTOYA: ... Alright,  
 349.07            349.47            .. so there's\_  
 349.47            351.07            .. **there's a lot of coalition building.**  
 (AMERICAN DEMOCRACY IS DYING)

(14)  
 113.591           114.660           REED: ... We=ll that's alright.  
 114.660           115.239           ... I mean,  
 115.239           116.400           **there's a lot of things** out there,  
 116.400           117.341           you'll find something.  
 (FLUMPITY-BUMP DOWN THE HILL)

- (15)  
 1352.389            1353.247            JO: ... Cause she said,  
 1353.247            1354.642            **there's a lot of old pants you can wear.**  
 1354.642            1355.680            And I hate that.  
 (YOU BAKED)

For the quantifier phrase *a lot of* [NP], the referents that it can co-occur with display a great range of flexibility, as the referent may be abstract (as in *coalition building* in (13)), plural but general (as in *things* in (14)), or plural and specific (as in *old pants you can wear* in (15)). Thus, the grammatical pivot in these cases is the quantifier phrase, rather than the nature of the NP referent itself.

Keeping that in mind, we must consider the potential source for a grammaticization pathway. On first thought, it would most likely be something akin to Heine and Kuteva's [ALL] (2002: 36), but would be defined as a group or a collection of entities rather than the totality of an amount. Thus, *a lot of* [NP] would be best described if the source were defined as [GROUP]. The target then would be [PLURAL], as schematized in Figure 3:



**Figure 3: A schematization of the grammaticization pathway for [a lot of [NP]].**

The question at this point, of course, is what exactly happened here. This is not such an easy question to answer at this moment since we would need to avail ourselves to historical data, which is not yet available. However, from the data that has been examined so far, it appears that the quantifier phrase [*a lot of*] gradually becomes less and less frequent co-occurring with plural referents, which may lead to the lack of this particular quantifier phrase in due time. The motivation for this declining frequency appears to be clear:

there is potential redundancy in such close proximity, whereby [*a lot of*] implies some degree of plurality. For referents that are either abstract (i.e., non-countable) or general (i.e., semantically bleached), the quantifier phrase may still be necessary to delineate “a group” or “a collection” of the aforementioned referents. However, for plural referents, the plural is necessarily already marked on the NP itself, which may prompt speakers to omit the potential redundancy contributed by the quantifier phrase (even though it may not be prescriptively “accurate” or “correct”). At the same time, lexicalization is also relevant here since this seems to have only affected *there's* and not its other variants, especially not *there is*, since they rarely, if ever, co-occur with plural referents in this contemporary spoken data.

## 5. Concluding remarks

As this study demonstrates, the construction [*there's* + NP<sub>PL</sub>] is a product of both lexicalization and grammaticization via a specific pathway ([GROUP] > [PLURAL]) and a source, the *a lot of*[NP] quantifier phrase. It appears that the co-occurrence of the quantifier phrase and plural referents contains an inherent redundancy, which enables the quantifier to be omitted more frequently within the [*there's* (+ *a lot of*) [NP<sub>PL</sub>]] construction, especially in daily conversation. There may indeed be a point at which the quantifier will not appear in this construction whatsoever in spoken English conversation. Additionally, it is evident that from all other of its typologically anomalous traits, the existential construction [*there's* + NP] still exhibits other tendencies that have not been reported previously in the literature, primarily because real-time interaction has not been seriously considered. Thus, in order to keep track of emerging structural changes such as this, interactional data must be included in order to provide a more nuanced and complete picture of the linguistic situation at hand.

### Appendix: Transcription conventions adapted from Du Bois et al. (1993)

Transcript names appear under each excerpt in all caps between parentheses.

Each line in the transcript represents one Intonation Unit.

Names appear in uppercase, followed by a colon.

.	final intonation contour
,	continuing intonation contour
–	truncated Intonation Unit
-	truncated word
%	glottal stop
=	prosodic lengthening
..	short pause
...	long pause
<X X>	uncertain hearing
<VOX VOX>	exaggerated/atypical voice quality
[...]	speech overlap

### Notes

- 1 This paper is based on material presented at the 21st Mokpo National University/Yantai University Academic Symposium at Yantai University, Yantai, in September 2011. I am grateful to those who have provided feedback during the initial presentation.
- 2 That is, despite the fact that Breivik (1997) posits a homophonous dichotomy between the two semantic senses of English *there*: the existential versus the “deictic” (Breivik 1997: 32).

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