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Non-Concord in English Sentences

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ABSTRACT

The frequent occurrences of sentences like "There's several reasons…" in a university lecture, "there's going to be storms tonight," in the weather channel and "there are people…" in the CNN news, motivated this research. Scholars interested in linguistic change have commented on changes at the syntactic level. For instance, studies of *Existential There Be Constructions* (ETBs) have found variation in the rule for number agreement. The traditional grammatical rule indicates that ETBs take their form from the notional subject. This agreement pattern is called concord. Plural notional subjects normally take plural verbs and singular notional subjects take singular verbs. However, *The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* claims that there is a "strong tendency in conversation to use a singular verb regardless of the number of the notional subject [of ETBS]" (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan, 1999, p. 944). Research by Meechan and Foley (1994), Cheshire (1999) Martinez and Palacios (2003) and Crawford (2005) indicates that non-concord is found primarily in spoken language and occurs more frequently when the verb is contracted. In this project, my objective is to investigate variables that motivate non-concord in ETBs. I analyze the role of the syntactic constituents of ETB sentences and find the possible correlations with non-concord. In addition, I determine the role of age and gender in concord variation of ETBs.

Keywords: existential there be sentences, non-concord in existential there be constructions,

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INTRODUCTION

Concord in *Existential There Be Constructions* can be viewed from different linguistic perspectives. For example, the main purpose of prescriptive grammars is to state the principles and rules of formal standard language, which refers to the forms of written language (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002 p. 5). This view restricts change to the written norms of language. Prescriptive rules focus on the way people ought to write, and pays little attention to actual language use. From the point o view of prescriptive grammars, non-concord in ETBs is generally considered an ungrammatical pattern, because it does not follow the rules prescribed for concord.

A descriptive approach is less restrictive with respect to language change. The goal of a descriptive grammar is to describe how people actually speak and claims about grammar are based on evidence of real language use (Huddleston & Pullum, pp. 5-6). Descriptive grammars acknowledge the fact that language varies. Based on the descriptive model's objectives, concord variation in ETBs is viewed as a reflection of language use. This investigation consists of a syntactic analysis on the frequency of non-concord in existential there be sentences of spoken registers. It examines concord and non-concord by considering number agreement with the notional subject in *Existential There Be Constructions (ETBs).*

Existential There Be Constructions and Concord

Little emphasis is given to *Existential There Be Constructions (ETBs)* in descriptive grammar books. The three most relevant grammar works that address this syntactic structure include: *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik, 1985; *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written Language*, Biber et al., 1999; and *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, Huddleston & Pullum, 2002. However, it is the volume by Douglas Biber et al. that gives the most detailed description of both the form and variation of this structure. Biber et al. define *existential there* as "a device used together with an intransitive verb to predicate the existence or occurrence of something (including the non-existence or non-occurrence of something) (p. 943). The main function of this structure is to present new information. The formal structure to *existential there* is:

There + be + indefinite NP (+ place or time position adverbial)

"There" is placed before the verb in declarative clauses and can be used in tags. "*There"* is a function word which developed from the locative (positional) adverb to an existential. According to Biber et al., these two forms differ in three major aspects. First, in terms of phonology, they are pronounced differently; existential "*there"* is normally reduced to / ( )/. Second, the original locative meaning of "*there"* is lost in existential sentences. Third, in terms of syntax, *existential there* functions as a grammatical subject rather than as an adverbial (p. 944). This type of grammatical subject is known as empty or dummy subject. Biber et. al. provide the following example to illustrate the difference between these two units, and explain them as follows.

There is still no water there, is there?

1 2 3

Physically they look like the same word, but functionally they are different. The words numbered 1 and 3 are clearly existential: they indicate the existence or non-existence of water. Nonetheless, example 2 refers to a position or place which indicates "*there"* is functioning as an adverb. It is only existential "*there"* which requires number inflection. My research focuses only on *existential there*.

Quirk et al. point out that speakers often feel uncertain about the rules of concord. They list the cases in which concord is more troublesome and summarize them as follows. They agree that concord causes more problems when the subject contains: a collective head noun (e.g., the public is/are tired of demonstrations); coordination (e.g., The captain, as well as other players, was tired); and an indefinite expression (e.g., Some of the guests have arrived, and either is welcome) (pp. 755-766). Huddleston & Pullum (2002) explain that in subject-verb concord the subject serves as the source and the verb as the target (p. 499). Biber et al. state that in the case of existential sentences, concord is formed when "the verb phrase combining with *existential there* takes its number from its notional subject; a plural verb form is generally used with plural noun phrases, a singular form otherwise" (p. 186). Biber et al., claim that non-concord has a single origin: "because of contraction, *there's* tends to behave as a single invariable unit for the process of speech processing" (p. 186).

Research by Meechan & Foley (1994), Cheshire (1999), Martinez & Palacios (2003), and Crawford (2005) demonstrates that plural notional subjects often take singular verbs. They argue that this situation has several origins and conclude that a single approach is not sufficient to explain concord variation of ETBs. They agree that the motive for non-concord is mainly the interaction of both linguistic and social factors

GRAMMAR AND STANDARDS

Prescriptive grammar views favor the maintenance of traditional structures, and often reject any type of variation to mainstream English language. Grammarians like Quirk et al. and Biber et al., define Standard English as the forms that are normally included in school textbooks and student reference handbooks. It is the dialectal variety that has been codified in dictionaries and in usage grammar books. According to Biber et al., "this variety is characterized by a very high degree of uniformity" (p. 18).

Sociolinguistic studies portray standards in a broader sense. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes mention that stylistic features affect Standard English (2006, pp. 10-11). They list formal and informal styles. Formal styles match the features provided by prescriptive views. These authors explain that informal styles are hard to define because they are seen as a continuum rather than a categorical notion. Wolfram & Schilling-Estes state that Formal Standard English "tends to be based on the written language of established writers and is typically codified in English grammar texts" (p. 11), whereas "Informal Standard English is the variety free of stigmatized features" (p. 13). They also state that standard dialects are defined by the absence of socially disfavored structures of English. In contrast, vernacular or non-standard varieties are characterized by the presence of socially conspicuous structures (p.15).

Wolfram & Schilling-Estes acknowledge that Informal Standard English (ISE) allows certain types of language variation. They maintain that this variation is accepted at certain linguistic levels like pronunciation and lexicon, but not as accepted in grammatical structures which are socially stigmatized (p. 12). An interesting point that this notion includes is respect for dialectal variation and the identification of standards among dialects. Huddleston & Pullum agree that informal language styles are often mistaken as ungrammatical. For instance, Quirk et al. (1985) state, "the forms that are associated with uneducated are generally called nonstandard" (p. 18). However, not all linguists agree with this definition. Most scholars argue that speaking non-standard English is not necessarily linked to lack of education. It has been demonstrated that even

highly educated people show traits of vernacular forms in their speech. Therefore, one cannot assume that only the uneducated use non-standard forms. Sociolinguistic views consider it important to take into account other factors before making these types of judgments.

Linguists consider spoken and written registers as the most common forms in which language is depicted. Biber et al. claim that "conversation is the most commonplace, everyday variety of language" (p. 1040). They add that the grammar of conversation is a system with different rules from the written grammars. They recognize that conversation has special grammatical characteristics not typically found in writing. They note that the grammar of conversation has also mistakenly been compared to the written forms, but they point out that conversation is a register which carries specific features not shared with written registers.

The volume *"The Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English"* (1999) provides the following list of features that distinguish conversation from other registers:

a) It takes place in the spoken medium, usually in a shared context;
b) A key feature of spoken language is the lack of elaboration or specification in meaning;
c) It is dynamic, interactive and allows for the expression of extra-linguistic features such as politeness, emotion, and attitude;
d) it employs the vernacular. This book asserts that conversation often takes place among intimates or in contexts that do not necessarily require standard usage. These conditions provide the opportunity for vernacular forms to occur and be accepted without prejudice in everyday conversations among people with close ties.

Holmes (1991) confirms that "the better you know someone, the more casual and relaxed the speech style you will use to them, certainly, people use considerably more standard forms to those they don't know well, and more vernacular forms to their friends" (pp. 224). She adds that we have the tendency to use more relaxed language at home with those we know well; that we talk differently to people from different social backgrounds; and that we tend to elaborate our language according to our audience. In other words, we adapt or accommodate our language depending on the addressee. I claim that given the high frequency of non-concord ETBs in all types of registers and by all types of peoples and ages, the structure "there's + plural subject" seems to be widely accepted across all spoken dialects and is free of stigma. I therefore categorize it as part of Informal Standard English.

LANGUAGE CHANGE

In order to understand the changes taking place in *Existential There Be Constructions*, I consider it important to refer to approaches and principles of language change. The socio-historical approach worries about the timing and sequence of language change. Non-concord ETBs seem to be a recently documented phenomenon. Sparks (1984) is the first work to acknowledge concord variation in ETBs. His work focuses on number neutralization of certain grammatical structures. He concludes that number neutralization affects *Existential There Be Constructions*. Then, David Cristal continued the research in 1987. He worked with concord in general and concluded that there is a tendency in informal English to use the singular rather than the plural in ETBs. More specific and recent research documenting of non-concord in ETBs include Meechan & Foley (1994), Cheshire (1999), Biber et al. (1999), Martinez & Palacios (2003) and Crawford (2005).

Variationist methodology examines correlations between language and social factors. Sociolinguistics also explores language change by centering on the speakers themselves. This model lists three key elements involved in language variation; the society, situation, and speaker. Milroy (1992) states that the major problem sociolinguistics faces is to explain the causes of language change (p. 184). In his book *Linguistic Variation and Change* he states that sociolinguistics approaches language change by giving a social characterization to persons and sections of society who are responsible for initiating the actuation problem (or spreading change).

The actuation problem starts by distinguishing speaker innovation from language change. It defines speaker innovation as the act of the speaker which is capable of influencing linguistic structure. In contrast, language change is observed within the system. According to Milroy, speakers innovate, not language (p. 169). This indicates that innovators have an important role in language change.

According to Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, innovators are the first people to adopt changes (p. 157). Labov lists two important features an innovator must have. First, they must be individuals with the highest status in their communities. Then, among persons with an equal status, they must be the "individuals with the highest local prestige who are responsive

to a somewhat broader form of prestige at the next larger level of social communication" (Labov, 1980 p. 261). In order for language change to take place, it is necessary that a new language form be accepted. This success will depend greatly on the so-called *early adopters*. These people normally have great acceptance among close-knit groups. They are the ones in charge of spreading the new form. If the new form is well accepted among the social groups they interact with, then other speakers will end up adopting their speech.

Milroy states that "a change is not a change until it has been adopted by more than one speaker, [besides] we cannot demonstrate systematically that it leads to a linguistic change until after it has spread"(p.171). Thus, both innovators and early adopters are fundamental for social language change to take place.

GENDER AND AGE VARIATION

Sociolinguistic studies investigate factors such as social class, age, sex, network, and style affecting language change. These factors often correlate with each other. For instance, gender as a variable often interacts with social class and style. Research on gender differentiates between gender and sex. *Gender* relates to cultural features and *sex* to biological features. Gender is not a discrete variable. In terms of status, Romaine (2004) claims that "women, regardless of other characteristics tended to use more standard forms than men" (p. 101). With respect to style, she states that "the use of non-standard forms increases the less formal the style and the lower one's social status, with men's scores higher than women's" (p. 101). Romaine reports that often working-class men in a casual conversation speak the most non-standard forms; whereas, middle-class women often tend to speak closest to the standard in a formal conversation (p. 102). In discussing sociolinguist patterns and language change, linguists have distinguished changes from "above" and "below:"

Change from *above* is conscious change originating in more formal styles and in the upper end of the social hierarchy; change from *below* is below the level of conscious awareness, originating in the lower end of the social hierarchy. (Romaine, p. 103)

Romaine claims that men tend to use the standard less often than women of the same status. Conversely, women tend to use more prestigious forms in societies that high status and power are conferred to men. Chambers (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2004 qtd) explains that all these socially conditioned situations have their basis on the biological differences between men and women. He claims that sociolinguistic patterns are ultimately the result of *sex* differences. In discussing gender, it is also important to relate it to innovation and prestige. Labov (1990) states that, "in change from below, women are most often the innovators" p. 213). Women lead language change when the form is neither stigmatized, nor non-standard. Some studies tend to associate women with prestige, but Milroy, J., Milroy, L., Harley, S., & Walshaw, D. (1994) suggest that women do not necessarily favor prestige forms. They conclude that women create prestige forms rather than simply follow them. Romaine quotes, "it may not be so much the supposed prestige connotations of the standard that attracts women, but the stigma of non-standard speech that women are avoiding" (p. 110).

Age seems to be less troublesome than gender when discussing language change. Holmes summarizes her findings regarding age in the following way. Speakers tend to be divided into three main groups; the young, the middle-aged, and the elderly. Holmes quotes "people normally use more vernacular forms while they are young and tend to use more standard forms as they get older and respond to the pressure of the society expectations" (p. 206). Chambers et al. (2013) claims that in terms of language variation "the primary social correlate is age, and the change reveals itself prototypically in a pattern whereby some minor variant in the speech of the oldest generation with greater frequency in the middle generation and with still greater frequency in the youngest generation" (p. 355).

Labov (1994) bases his division of age continuum on life stages. He refers specifically to the American society which he categorizes as follows: a) pre-adolescent peer group (8-9); b) membership in the pre-adolescent peer group (10-12); c) involvement in heterosexual relations and the adolescent group (13-16); d) completion of secondary schooling and orientation to the wider world of work and/or college (17-19); e) the beginning or regular employment and family life (20-29); f) full engagement in the work force and family responsibilities (30-59); g) retirement (60s). He suggests that for the main extend of adult life, sociolinguistic behavior has to be traced by decades (Labov, p. 101).

In general, language change is motivated by different factors. From the sociolinguistic approach I have discussed age and gender as possible variables related to non-concord ETBs. Nevertheless, I am aware that there are other internal as well as external factors that can influence language variation. However, they are beyond the scope of my research. Of the social variables I only consider gender and age.

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