Some Discourse Functions of Existentials in English

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1.   Introduction

This paper considers some of the discourse functions of existential *there*-sentences in English. No claims are made as to comprehensiveness or exhaustiveness, the aim being to tackle some vexing issues and to test some claims that have been made in the literature against a set of tokens extracted from the London-Lund Corpus. This corpus, which comprises 170,000 words of spontaneous, surreptitiously recorded conversation, is richly prosodically annotated and is available both in printed form (Svartvik and Quirk 1980) and in electronic form.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 2 I shall consider the commonly accepted view that existential *there*-sentences serve a 'presentative'' discourse function and argue that there are limitations on its applicability. Section 3 discusses apparent exceptions to the 'presentative' principle involving definite post-verbal NPs. Finally, in Section 4 an additional set of discourse functions that existential *there*-sentences may serve are presented and exemplified.

2.   The 'Presentative' Function

Existential *there*-sentences have often been characterised as serving a 'presentative' discourse function, drawing attention to an element that comes into the view or to the attention of the addressee. For example Bolinger (1977:94) suggests that the construction "presents something to our minds (brings a piece of knowledge into consciousness)", and Hannay (1985) that it is used to explicitly introduce an entity into the world of discourse.

While it can be safely assumed that the presentative function applies generally to existential *there*-sentences, there are tokens in the corpus where the post-verbal NP in fact represents information that is familiar, or 'given'. Consider the following: [1]

(1)   B   did you hear about this RISK magazine #
        d   [m]
        B   WELL # *there IS such a THING* # [S.2.11.1056]

(2)   A   AH # there's an excruciating shortage of SEATS in the
              library #
        B   well *there ISN'T actually* #
        D   well *there isn't at the MOMENT* #
        B   *there isn't except in the SUMMER term at the MOMENT* #
              [S.3.3 117-21]

(3)   what they've DONE # is I THINK - you KNOW # several THOUSAND {of
        the BOOK #} # this PAPERBACK # but only three HUNDRED # of the
        CASSETTES # - er so *there's that DISPARITY* # [S3.2.928]

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[1] I have limited the transcription symbols in Svartvik and Quirk (1980) to the following: "#" = end of tone unit; CAPS = word carrying nuclear tone; "{...}" = subordinate tone unit; "." and "-" = pauses of different length; "[...]" = phonetics. In addition, "(...)" is used to indicate material omitted from within an extract. The location of each example cited from the corpus is indicated as follows: [S.1.2.34-5] = text category S.1.2, tone units 34-5.

In (1) B's NP *such a thing* substitutes for *this 'Risk' magazine*, its status as given information being ensured by its immediate textual recoverability. The confirmation of the existence of the type of magazine alluded to via the stress on *is* provides the only new information. In (2) it is the direct recoverability of the post-verbal NP *an excruciating shortage of seats in the library* from A's turn that enables B and D to elide it in their *there*-sentences. In (3) the familiarity status of the post-verbal NP *that disparity* can be considered to be given in view of its ready inferability from information presented in the immediately preceding linguistic context.

3.   *There*-sentences with Definite Post-verbal NP
In this section I acknowledge the existence of cases where the post-verbal NP is definite and which therefore may appear to be counterexamples to the tendency for this NP to introduce new information. Such NPs, however, can convey various types of new information despite being grammatically definite (as many have noted, including Rando and Napoli 1978, Hannay 1985, Lumsden 1988, and Birner and Ward 1998). The five-category taxonomy proposed by Birner and Ward (1998:120-144) I found could be successfully applied to my corpus data, my only reservation being the emergence of a considerable amount of indeterminacy and overlap across the categories. Birner and Ward's five types are illustrated in (4) - (8):

(4)   B   he's a SILLY ass # he was EMBARRASSED by the SITUATION #
            and that was the way he BEHAVED # and it's VERY {STUPID #} #
            but we'd all AGREED # we were going to DO that sort of thing in
            FUTURE # HADN'T we # - - Jock's MINESTRA idea # - -
       A   so why does he pretend you don't KNOW #
            (…)
       A   I did NOT know it was going to happen #
       B   I didn't know it was going to happen at COFFEE # but I *knew there*
            was this proposal about MINESTRA # [S.2.5.683]

(5)   I have er had a LOT of contact with PIELL # over the YEARS # when I was a
       postgraduate SUPERVISOR # he was a POSTGRADUATE # and er he was
       one of ANNABEL'S # and er of course *there were the usual DIFFICULTIES* #
       [S.2.6.569]

(6)   I can't get IN at the WEEKENDS # do you want somewhere to warm to
       WORK # at the WEEKENDS # because *there's MY place* # you can er
       [S.2.4.446]

(7)   SECONDLY # and FAR more SERIOUSLY # I SAID # *there is er the*
       question of the student RESISTANCE # to buying a BOOK # which is going
       to be marketed at something like one NINETY-FIVE # or TWO ninety-five
       something # [S.3.21116-9]

(8)   A   would you feel WORRIED # if you were told that you had to go to a
            seminar somewhere ELSE #
       B   well *there's this extraordinary SYSTEM* # of *LECTURES* #
       D   we do ANYWAY #
       A   you DO # ALREADY # um # [S.3.3.582-3]

In (4) there has been prior mention of the Minestra proposal, but it is treated as new by B on the assumption that it might no longer be in the addressee's consciousness. In (5) the modifier *usual* in the post-verbal NP suggests that it represents a new instance of a given type. In (6) the entity denoted by *my place*, which is accessible to the speaker, newly instantiates the variable in the proposition "You can work in X at the weekends". In (7) the post-verbal NP contains a long post-head dependent, the *of*-PP complementing *question*, which serves to individuate the head by defining what

question the speaker is referring to. In (8) we have a special use of *this*, one restricted to informal style, where it is indefinite in meaning. [2]

As an example of the indeterminacy to which the Birner and Ward taxonomy is subject, consider (9):

(9)   not that - - you know she would ever come in come in and necessarily
        INTERRUPT # anything SPECIFIC # but *there was just this sort of IDEA #
        that you it wasn't your own ROOM #* [S.2.7.502-3]

Is this a case of the definite determiner being warranted by the individuating effect of the post-head dependent *that it wasn't your own room*, or of the false definite *this* category?

4.   Additional Discourse Functions of Existential *there*-sentences

One of the few writers to have recognised that existential *there*-sentences serve a range of discourse uses over and above their widely recognised presentative function of introducing entities newly into the discourse is Ziv (1982). Ziv's investigation of the relationship between discourse uses and structural types is thought-provoking, but at the same time exploratory, and I would like to press it further. In the following discussion I shall identify the discourse uses associated with three structural types, the latter distinguishable in terms of the association of the post-verbal NP with certain non-subject functions in the simpler non-existential counterpart without *there*. In (10), for example, the post-verbal NP functions as adjunct in the more basic non-existential alternate ("We were running some of his programmes one Saturday morning"):

(10)   there was one Saturday morning we were running some of his
        PROGRAMMES you SEE [S.1.6.87]

The class of relevant cases is readily extendable if we escape from the constraints of surface syntax. Allowing reconstruction at a 'deeper' level, we may regard the post-verbal NPs in (11) and (12) as nominalisations of respectively a predicative complement ("Angus Wilson is not particularly outstanding at all"), and a predicator ("they did not monkey about"):

(11)   I don't think there's anything particularly OUTSTANDING about Angus
        WILSON at ALL [S.3.5.104-5]

(12)   there was no [m] MONKEYING ABOUT [S.1.14.856]

4.1   Highlighted Circumstance

Ziv (1982:748) identifies a class of bi-clausal *there*-sentences with a locative or temporal post-verbal NP, "where the *there*-clause provides the spatio-temporal background against which the proposition contained in the second clause is presented." (10) above is an example, as are (13) and (14) below.

(13)   # I think there is a PLACE # where I [ai] I can get a cheap KETTLE #
        [S.1.4.943]

(14)   there WAS a time when they felt THAT {earlier ON #} #   [S.2.8.566]

These are a type of 'cleft existential' (see further Collins 1992), derivable from a single clause and comprising a *there-be*-NP matrix clause plus a dependent relative clause.

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[2] I would suggest that the selection of a definite determiner in such a case such as (8) is not entirely unexpected insofar as the lecture-system referred to is familiar to at least some of B's interlocutors (speaker D), even if not to others (speaker A): *this* suggests that the addressee is being brought up to date with information to which others are privy.

Sometimes the single clause source is readily available, as in the case of (10) above, but sometimes retrieving the single clause source requires a certain amount of reconstruction, as in the case of (13) ("I can get a cheap kettle (at) a (certain) place") and in (14) ("They felt that (at) one time"). It may be noted that the need for such minor adjustments in reconstructing the source is a phenomenon that is familiar with other types of cleft construction (e.g. an *it*-cleft such as *It was September when I visited them* may be derived from "I visited them **in** September"; a pseudo-cleft such as *That was when I visited them* may be derived from "I visited them then").

Ziv's 'scene-setting' category is in fact too narrowly conceived: the post-verbal NP which serves as adjunct in the non-existential alternant may express types of circumstantial meaning other than spatiotemporal, as in (15) where the meaning is causal:

(15)   there was always some reason why she couldn't COME [S.1.13.660]

The backgrounding role of the post-verbal NP in examples such as (10), (13), (14) and (15) is reflected, as Ziv (1982:749) notes, in the fact that the 'circumstance' referred to in the matrix clause is not referred to later in the discourse, but rather the discussion refers to parts of the information supplied in the subordinate clause. For instance in (14) the ensuing discussion relates not to the previous time mentioned in the matrix clause, but to the feelings referred to in the relative clause, as can be seen in (16) where more context is provided:

(16)   A   well the Catholic er population {don't FEEL {that the British ARMY #} #} # are ge- ge- are genuinely safeguarding their in- their INTERESTS # IMPARTIALLY # any MORE # *there WAS a time when they felt THAT* {*earlier ON* #} # but they no longer er have that CONFIDENCE # I'm AFRAID #
         B   NO # I KNOW # they don't - well - YES # I think that's probably TRUE #
         A   for one reason or ANOTHER #
         B   I think that . no I mean I'm not disputing the FACTS of it # I think the PROTESTANT . certain members of the PROTESTANT community have # SIMILAR feelings about the ARMY # because they were ASTOUNDED to find # that it was going to interfere with THEIR ACTIVITIES {TOO but #} # I don't see [S.2.8.566]

The type of existential *there*-sentence under discussion is informationally similar to *it*-clefts (as discussed by Collins 1991:112) such as:

(17)   It was not long ago that Richard Rodney Bennett composed a "Calendar" for chamber ensemble. [LOB Corpus, CO1 73-4]

Here a scene-setting adverbial serves as highlighted element in the matrix clause with *it* as subject. Meanwhile, the presentation of the main 'news' in the dependent clause has the rhetorical effect of imbuing it with a non-controversial character. The addressee is made to feel that that s/he is being made privy to a generally known piece of information.

4.2   Highlighted Attribute
In this type an attribute is nominalised (as postpositive modifer to an indefinite pronoun in the post-verbal NP), the attribuand being encoded in a PP. In (18) and (19) below the attributes are respectively *terrible* and *wrong*; the attribuands are *a picture I do* and *the candidate from their college*.

(18)   # and I paint close UP # to a PAINTING # and I don't know what it looks

like till I FINISH # and then I step BACK # and then the FACE jumps # (...)
but I can't at ALL tell you what I DO # I only paint what's THERE # you
KNOW # if it's PINK # I paint it PINK # I paint it PINK # and if it's
GREEN # I paint it GREEN # - - and of course I have NO er # COMMAND
I mean I don't know how to paint a MOUTH or anything # *so there's
always something TERRIBLE # in a picture I DO* but # [S.1.8.850]

(19)   (...) # they had shortlisted five PEOPLE # including ME # four of them were
GRADUATES # um three were EXTON graduates # one was a GRADUATE #
of this particular COLLEGE # well bearing in MIND # they had this
FELLOWSHIP # to offer once every ten YEARS # I can't SEE # REALLY #
unless *there's something WRONG with # the candidate from their COLLEGE* #
why she shouldn't GET it # can YOU # [S.1.3.267]

The attribute is foregrounded both prosodically, as the locus of an intonation nucleus,
and thematically, as a marked theme. The type of thematic prominence here is
comparable to that of the highlighted element in *it*-clefts. In other words the post-verbal
NP operates as a type of marked theme (one that is marked both in the sense that it is
not the grammatical subject and in the sense that it is associated with new rather than
given information). This type of *there*-sentence often serves a pivotal role in discourse:
the attribuand encoded in the extension is previously-introduced and thus contributes to
the 'method of development' of the discourse, while the post-verbal NP newly ascribes
an attribute to that entity (in (18) the speaker's paintings are the immediate topic of
discussion: the 'news' is that they are "terrible"; in (19) the candidate from Exton
College has been mentioned previously: the possibility that there might be something
wrong with her has not.

Existential *there*-sentences with a highlighted attribute as post-verbal NP may have a
'situation' or 'event' as attribuand (realised in the form of a finite or non-finite clause in
the extension). With these, as Ziv notes (p.755), there is a functional similarity to
extraposition. Consider:

(20)   # the point IS you see # that when we were setting that kind of QUESTION #
and Hart thinks we set it now in individual SENTENCES # where *there's little
difficulty about swapping over swapping AROUND* # you'll get your candidate
will punctuate those things PERFECTLY # [S.1.1.1180]

(21)   they can HARDLY um {SNUB #} # five VICE-PRESBYTERS # and so if
they think *there's even the possibility they might HAVE to* # or might WANT
to # the first thing to DO # is to er to break it OFF # [S.1.2.528]

In (20) the attribuand is "swapping over/around" and the parallel is with an
extrapositioned sentence such as "It is not difficult to swap over"; in (21) the attribuand
is "They might have to snub five Vice-Presbyters" and the parallel is with "It's even
possible they might have to ... ". It follows from the parallels noted here that a further
pragmatic consideration relevant to 'existential formation' is one which is widely
recognised to operate in the case of extraposed sentences (see for example Collins
1994), namely the principle of end-weight. Thus the selection of an existential *there*-
sentence, like that of an extraposed sentence, enables the speaker/writer to avoid the
processing and informational awkwardness of a sentence with a 'heavy' subject (as in
"That they might have to snub five Vice-Presbyters is even a possibility/possible").

A very common - almost formulaic - type of attributive post-verbal NP is that with *no* +
'modal' noun such as *doubt*, *possibility*, *reason*, *way*, *point*, as in (22). These NPs are
generally modal in the sense that they express the speaker/ writer's angle on, or
assessment of, the validity of the proposition.

(22)   Hamlet um STARTS # er as a noble SOUL # th *there's no   doubt that that Hamlet has got this nobility of SOUL* # [S.3.5.317]

4.3   Highlighted Activity

In this category of existential *there*-sentences the post-verbal NP is a nominalisation of the predicator in the ultimate source. The nominalisation enables the activity to be given a degree of thematic and informational prominence not available to it in the source sentence. A further pragmatic factor that can be identified as operating here is impersonality: the speaker assumes a detached role, non-committal as to the source or truth of the statement, which is presented simultaneously as on the one hand the 'news' and on the other as information that is uncontroversial or not-at-issue. Consider some examples:

(23)   # well there have been a couple of er inchoative er but abortive CALLS # um from PETERBOROUGH # to my HOME # [S.1.2.355-7]

(24)   *there was an ATTEMPT # TOWARDS such - SOME such STRUCTURE* # and it had to be nipped on the head with a heavy HAMMER # [S.2.4.647]

(25)   NEXT thing is # I find *there's a proposal to have all the electric FIRES # on one great MASTER switch* # so that they all go ON # early in the MORNING # to get the offices warm for the SECRETARIES # [S.2.4.423-4]

In (23) the nominalisation enables the speaker to avoid identifying and therefore accusing the caller; in (24) and (25) respectively to avoid specifying the source of the attempted restructuring and the electric fires proposal, when the identity of the agent may not be known, or may be considered less significant than the action effected.

Included in this category are cases where there is only partial nominalisation: the post-verbal NP is realised as a gerund, and thus retains something of its verbal character, as in:

(26)   there's no getting AWAY from it [S.1.7.80]

5.   Conclusion

The post-verbal NPs in existential *there*-sentences do not always serve the presentative function of introducing an entity newly into the discourse. Not only are there cases where this entity is 'given', but also where the post-verbal NP provides the circumstantial background, thematises an attribute, or foregrounds a nominalised activity.

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