

The existential *there*: From a discourse particle to a copular complement

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Many diachronic analyses of the English existential construction, illustrated in (1), assume that the pre-verbal (“existential”) *there* is semantically completely void and that this non-referential *there* was already present in Old English. In particular, Breivik and Swan (2000) claim that the existential *there* was grammaticalized from an empty position-filler in Old English into an expletive subject in Middle English. I argue that the pre-verbal *there* was never fully semantically empty. It retained its locative meaning, developing from a locative discourse particle in Old English, through a position-filler in Middle English, to the locative complement of the copula in Modern English.

(1) *There are trees in the garden.*

Breivik and Swan’s (2000) account According to Breivik and Swan, the Old English existential *there* ((2)) can be compared to the German position-filler *es* ((3)). It was used in cases where, due to information structure reasons, the subject had to occur later in the linear structure of the clause. They were, thus, an alternative realization of thethetic V1 clauses ((4)). With the establishment of the subject-verb word order in Middle English, *there* became the grammatical subject of the construction.

(2) *þær is sum beladung on ðære sægne.* (Ælfric)
there is some excuse in that statement
‘There is some excuse in your statement.’

(3) *Es kamen viele Touristen an.*
it came many tourists PRT
‘There arrived a lot of tourists.’

(4) *is þonne on westan medmycel duru þæt mannes heafod ge þa sculdro magan in...*
is then on western small door that man’s head and the shoulders capable in
‘There is, on the western side, a small door, through which a man’s head and shoulders can enter.’ (Blickling)

Breivik and Swan’s approach is flawed for several reasons: First, although Old English did have some kind of a V2 restriction, V1 clauses were still commonly used. Hence, it seems unlikely that Old English had a fully grammaticalized position-filler. Secondly, the analysis of *þær* as a semantically empty expression in Old English cannot account for the fact that it had a temporal counterpart – the temporal expressions *þa/þonne* ‘then’, which was also used for construing V2 substitutes for V1 clauses (Hinterhölzl and Petrova 2010):

(5) *Þonne ærnað hy ealle toward þæm feo* (Orosius)
then run they all towards the treasure
‘Then they all ran towards the treasure.’

Thirdly, if modern-day English *there* is the grammatical subject of the existential construction, what is the syntactic function of the nominative DP?

Discourse particle I regard the Old English pre-verbal *there* and *then* as discourse particles spatially or temporally connecting the proposition of the clause to the main story line. (This assumption is in line with Hinterhölzl and Petrova’s claim that pre-verbal *there* and *then* are discourse linkers (Hinterhölzl and Petrova 2010: 324)). Fully referential adverbs like *there* or *then* can be semantically decomposed into a two-place locative/temporal predicate (labelled with “LOC” in (6)) and its internal argument – a contextually bound individual variable (labelled with “e” in (6)). I suggest that the clause-initial *there* and *then* still semantically include a spatial/temporal relation but do not anaphorically refer to an individual. Their locative/temporal predicate has a reduced semantic valency, analogously to how the predicate

of the impersonal clause in (7b) has one semantic argument less than the one in (7a).

(6) a. $\llbracket there_{adverb} \rrbracket = \lambda x.LOC(e, x)$ (2-place predicate)

b. $\llbracket there_{existential} \rrbracket = \lambda x.LOC(x)$ (1-place predicate)

(7) a. *The sky is cloudy.* (*cloudy* as a 1-place predicate)

b. *It's cloudy (outside).* (*cloudy* as a 0-place predicate)

The non-anaphoric nature of *there* and *then* made them perfect candidates for expressing the same information structure as V1 clauses: In both *there/then-V* and V1 clauses, the pre-verbal position does not contain any reference to an entity.

Position-filler In Middle English, the pre-verbal position in declarative sentences became reserved for the subject. Nevertheless, *there-be* clauses retained their linear structure. This raises the question of why a locative expression was permitted in the subject position.

It has long been recognized that locative PPs have some subject-like properties in English – they can appear pre-verbally ((8a)), they match in features the pronoun of tag questions ((8a)), and they can be raised ((8b)). These are all features that characterize subjects in English.

(8) a. *In the garden is a beautiful statue, isn't there?* (Bresnan 1991: 55, (11))

b. *On this wall is likely to be hung a portrait of our founder.* (Bresnan 1991: 55, (9a))

I assume that these properties of locative arguments demonstrate that locative predicates can have one of two logical subjects – an individual or a place. In (8a), a statue is ascribed to the garden. The PP *in the garden* contains the logical subject of the predication. A simple locative clause can, therefore, denote two different propositions – a proposition ascribing a location to an entity (for a clause with the linear order ‘DP *be* PP_{loc}’) or a proposition ascribing an entity to a place (for a clause with the linear order ‘PP_{loc} *be* DP’). Accordingly, an expression must represent the logical subject of the main predicate in order to precede the finite verb.

However, discourse particles are not arguments of the main predicate. They are independent predicates that take the core proposition as an argument. As a result, they should be excluded from the pre-verbal position, just like locative adjuncts are ((9)). Thus, the existential *there* must be part of the main predication.

(9) **In the living room hangs a picture on the wall.*

I propose that in Middle English, the existential *there* was reanalysed from a discourse particle to a locative position-filler. The syntactic reinterpretation was facilitated by the meaning of *there_{existential}*: Its locative semantics match the meaning of the main predicate (the locative PP), and the lack of a place-argument means that it does not express any information separate from the one in the main proposition. Consequently, the pre-verbal *there* became a locative dummy functioning as a pre-verbal slot-filler in locative clauses.

Copular complement The position-filler role was only the first step in the integration of *there* into the predication structure of existentials. Position-fillers are not genuine syntactic arguments of the predicate. Their only function is to overtly occupy the pre-verbal position in a sentence, which means that they are not licensed in other positions (see the German pre-verbal *es* in (10)). In contrast, the existential *there* in Modern English can appear after the finite verb ((11)).

(10) *Kamen (*es) viele Touristen an?*

came it many tourists PRT

‘Did a lot of tourists arrive?’

(11) *Is *(there) still time to apply for the position?*

Like Breivik and Swan, I believe that sometime between Middle and Modern English, the existential *there* became an argument of the copula. However, *there* is not the grammatical subject. It is the locative complement of *be* and hence the main predicate in the existential predication. In turn, the post-nominal PP was “demoted” to an adjunct. (The adjunct function of the post-nominal PP is demonstrated by its optionality ((11))). From this, it follows that existential *there-be* clauses are entity-ascribing locative clauses, i.e. copular clauses of the type ‘XP_{loc} *be* DP’. Since *there_{existential}* does not have a place-argument (cf. (6b)), English existentials can be viewed as impersonal clauses. On my account, the sentence in (12a) is the impersonal

version of the one in (12b), similarly to the relation between (7b) and (7a).

(12) a. *There were clouds (in the sky).*

b. *In the sky were clouds.*

Analysing current-day English existentials as impersonal locative clauses can account for the absence of existentials with the linear order ‘DP *be there*_{existential}’. The argument missing in impersonal constructions is always the logical subject of the main predicate, while a sentence with the linear structure ‘DP *be there*_{existential}’ would yield a proposition in which an argument other than the logical subject is semantically absent.

As impersonal entity-ascribing clauses, Modern English existentials have a predication structure that matches the information structure of Old English locative V1 and *there-be* sentences. Clauses such as the ones in (2) and (4) introduce new discourse referents (e.g., the door in (4)). Consequently, the nominative DP is the core of the new information, not the locative PP. The PP serves logically as an adjunct that specifies the exact location of the entity.

Summary Modern English existentials developed through a syntactic reanalysis of the discourse particle *there* triggered by the establishment of the SV word order in Middle English. This resulted in the gradual incorporation of *there* into the main existential predication.

Primary texts

Ælfric = *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints, Being A Set of Sermons on Saints’ Days Formerly Observed by the English Church*, edited by W. W. Skeat, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966.

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References

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