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On a special type of English *there*-existential construction and its alternant: A perspective in Construction Grammar

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Abstract This paper examines an understudied type of the English *there*-existential construction that is used to describe a mental experience which accompanies a certain state denoted by the gerund form (e.g., *There is comfort in knowing that other people felt the same way*). It can be observed that the preposition *in* of the final prepositional phrase of the construction is sometimes omitted, making a formal variant which exhibits no semantic/functional departure from the full-form variant. This will then be argued to be problematic for the view which strictly follows the functional principle that stipulates an isomorphic relationship between formal differences and semantic/functional distinctions. From the perspective of Construction Grammar, it will be shown that the problem can be resolved by referring to horizontal links that connect structurally different constructions; in contrast to well researched types of *there*-existential construction, the construction in question is horizontally linked to a transitive-verb construction in which the subject refers to who has the mental experience denoted by the object. It will then be suggested that this horizontal link is responsible for the observed formal variation. Lastly, the issue of formulating a principle for free formal variation in grammar will be addressed.

Keywords *there*-existential construction; extreme constructionism; horizontal links; formal variation; principle of synonymy/equivalence

1. Introduction

This paper will examine a relatively minor and under-studied type of existential *there*-construction illustrated in (1)-(3), from the perspective of Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006; Croft 2001; Diessel 2019, 2023), especially focusing on its location in the network of constructions, aka “constructicon” (Lyngfelt 2018):

- (1) There’s a certain comfort in dissociating yourself from the animal you’re eating for dinner. (COCA 2014 Magazine)
- (2) There is a great satisfaction in getting the landmarks right. (COCA 2014 Fiction)
- (3) There’s some consolation in knowing that she felt so complete. (COCA 2006 Magazine)

The sentences given in (1)-(3) seem to be instantiating the clausal grammatical construction often called the *there*-existential construction (=TEC), as they appear to share the schematic formal properties represented in (4). Following the convention in the literature (McNally 2011), the post-verbal NP will be called the *pivot*, and the PP that follows the pivot will be called *coda*.

- (4) [*there* BE NP_{pivot} PP_{coda}]
- (5) a. There’s one copy on the table. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1393)

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- b. There is a wolf at the door. (Milsark 1977: 1)
- c. There are some people in the bedroom. (ibid.: 18)

At the same time, examples (1)-(3) distinguish themselves from ones like (5) in two respects; (i) the referent of the pivot is not an entity but a mental experience, and (ii) the gerund-form complement of the coda PP describes a certain state which is construed to be the cause of the experience denoted by the pivot. In this paper, the class of the TEC displaying these properties will be called the Mental Experience *There*-construction (=MET).

A cognitive semantic treatment of the MET can be found in Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 30-31), where (6) is presented as an example which illustrates the “container” metaphor in the sense that a mental experience (=a lot of satisfaction) conceptualized as an entity lies in a state (=washing windows) conceptualized as a container.

- (6) There is a lot of satisfaction in washing windows. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 31)

Since there are examples of *there*-existential constructions such as (5c) where a physical container-contained relation is described by the preposition *in* as the head of the coda PP, the conceptual metaphor analysis as above would work as a conceptualist explanation of why the MET has the structure it has, although investigation into specific grammatical constructions (i.e., semasiological study) was not their intention. As will be shown in what follows, however, the conceptual metaphor account gets stuck in dealing with the relationship of the MET and its formal variants. It will be argued that adequate characterization of the MET within the constructional network requires an approach that allows a single construction to show a certain degree of free formal variation.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 will discuss how formal variation of MET poses a challenge for approaches which strictly follow the well-noted functional linguistic principle that any formal difference should indicate functional/conceptual difference. Section 3 will show that the problem can be resolved by considering horizontal links in light of recent developments of Construction Grammar, and then argue for a principle that embraces formal variation of each construction. Section 4 concludes this paper.

2. Problems with an “extreme constructionist” approach

There are naturally-occurring examples of *there*-sentences which look almost like the MET except that the preposition *in* preceding the nominal gerund phrase is missing:

- (7) There was immense satisfaction knowing something no one else in the world did. (COCA 2012 Fiction)
- (8) There was a lot of comfort being with people who are experiencing the same thing (...) (COCA 2017: Movie)
- (9) There was no useful perspective to be found, climbing the mountain of history and looking down; *there was no consolation taking the long view*. (COCA 2017: Fiction; emphasis added)

As the absence of *in* does not contribute to any substantial semantic/pragmatic distinction from the MET, it is reasonable to assume that these examples suggest the existence of a formal variant of the MET.

To the conceptual metaphor account (see Section 1), however, this subtle formal discrepancy should make much difference, as the involvement of the container metaphor definitely

hinges upon the use of *in*, a crucial element that is solely responsible for the concept of “container-contained” relation. As a matter of fact, if it were not for *in* in the MET examples after all and instances such as (7)-(9) were all that can be observed, none of them would have been cited in Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as representing the container metaphor. This line of reasoning thus would lead to the conclusion that (7)-(9) do not have anything to do with the container metaphor whereas instances such as (1)-(3) do. The rationale of such reasoning is grounded on the principle which states:

- (10) ... the natural condition of a language is to preserve one form for one meaning, and one meaning for one form. (Bolinger 1977: x)

As the principle has been well accepted in the functionalist camp of linguistics, it has also gained its place in the Construction Grammar enterprise, leading several researchers to formulate their own versions, such as the “principle of no synonymy” (Goldberg 1995) and the “principle of no equivalence” (Lecqclercq and Morrin 2023). In this paper, following Cappelle (2006: 11), the stance of strictly obeying the principle (10) will be called “extreme constructionism”.

Thorough implementation of extreme constructionism would produce certain predictions about the relationships of the two patterns to the general TEC schema (4). Let us compare the structure of the *in*-less variant of the MET such as (7)-(9) which henceforth will be called the short-variant (=S-variant) with that of the full-form variant which hereafter will be called the long-variant (=L-variant). For convenience, suppose their structures are represented as (A) and (B), respectively.

- (A) [*there* + BE + PVNP + V-*ing*] (S-variant)
 (B) [*there* + BE + PVNP + *in* V-*ing*] (L-variant)

First of all, under the view of extreme constructionism, it should be impossible to treat (A) and (B) as being equally linked to the structural schema (4); while the final element in the latter (i.e., *in* V-*ing*) is an instance of a PP, the counterpart in the former (i.e., V-*ing*) is not a PP. Furthermore, since (A) cannot be categorized into any of the well-known three types of the TEC (Milsark 1977), one would need to assume a separate constructional schema with its own characteristics.¹ However, such an approach is clearly far-fetched, considering the fact that native English speakers do not see any substantial semantic/functional difference between the two forms.

Now we can see that any approach in the spirit of extreme constructionism would fall into a dilemma. Maintaining the conceptual metaphor account can explain the connection of the L-variant to the general schema of the TEC such as (4), but at the same time it leads to the counterintuitive conclusion that the S-variant is represented separately from the L-variant. On the other hand, if one assumes that there is a close connection between the two variants by seeing them as two formal realizations of the same construction, it will be left unexplained why the omission of preposition *in* can take place at all, when this very element plays a crucial role in the general TEC schema illustrated in (4). The drawback of the former option has already been discussed above. If the latter option is taken, all we could do is to push the problem aside by simply treating the MET as a special, marginal case of the TEC. All these point to the necessity to overcome extreme constructionism, to which we will turn in the next section.

¹ The nominal gerund in (A) is not a post-nominal modifier of the head noun of the PVNP. Rather, it is more like a complement of that head noun of the PVNP. This is why the formal pattern (A) cannot be categorized as the “extension” type of TEC as defined in Milsark (1977).

3. A solution with horizontal links

Drawing on the recent developments in Construction Grammar, the present paper entertains the hypothesis that the speaker's linguistic knowledge is modeled as a "network of constructions", where distinct constructions with varying degrees of abstraction and complexity are treated as "nodes" which are connected to one another with variable strength (Diessel 2019, 2023, Cappelle et al. to appear). Since the early days of the Construction Grammar enterprise, it has been acknowledged that such connections between constructions are realized through multiple types of links (Goldberg 1995). Although exact types of links actually involved are still under debate and yet to be fully clarified, there is a fair amount of agreement on the significance of "horizontal" links, i.e., connections between structurally different constructions at the same level of abstraction, along with "vertical" links, i.e., taxonomic connections between constructions at different levels of abstraction that share the same schematic syntactic structure (Cappelle 2006, 2009, Van de Velde 2014, Perek 2015, Diessel 2023). In what follows, it will be shown that this view helps overcome the problem that studies based on extreme constructionism faces in analyzing the MET; it will be shown that the problem is resolved by considering the fact that it is horizontally connected with other constructions.

3.1. The MET and its peculiar "alternant"

Near-synonymous relationships that are held between constructions with different syntactic structures have drawn considerable attention in functionalist studies, and the TEC has also been studied from such a perspective. In particular, it has been observed that TEC (= (11a) and (12a)) and the copula existential construction (= copula EC) (as in (11b) and (12b)), which share the same propositional content, exhibit different properties as regards the definiteness of the noun denoting what is located ("a vase"):

- (11) a. There was a vase on the table.
b. A vase was on the table.
(12) a. # There was the vase on the table.
b. The vase was on the table.

The copular EC is preferred over TEC when the NP denoting what is located (i.e., the "locatum") is definite, hence the unnaturalness or clumsiness of (11b) without any context (Kuno 1971, Breivik 1981). Conversely, when the "locatum" NP is indefinite, TEC is preferred over the copula EC. TEC is often characterized as a syntactic strategy to avoid indefinite subjects (Prince 1981). Therefore, the "definiteness effect" on the PVNP has been one of the central issues about TEC (Milsark 1977, Rando and Napoli 1978, Abbott 1993, Birner and Ward 1998). From the perspective of Construction Grammar, such traditional studies can be interpreted to have identified a particular type of horizontal link between TEC and the copula EC.

However, this horizontal link does not pertain to all the constructions that are vertically linked by virtue of sharing the schematic form of (4). In fact, the MET does not have a connection to the copula EC, although it has been treated as a key feature of the TEC in previous studies. Instead, the MET (= (13)) is linked horizontally to the transitive construction such as (14):

- (13) There was some comfort in knowing that everyone else was feeling the same way.
(14) {I/she/he/...} {took /found/felt/got/...} some comfort in knowing that everyone else was feeling the same way.

Unlike what we have observed with (11) and (12), the structural difference between (13) and (14) does not have to do with information-structural properties; the motivation for the speaker's choice of the *there*-variant over the transitive variant is not to avoid having indefinite

subject in the latter, since the “locatum” (=some comfort) is realized as the object, a grammatical relation which, unlike the subject, readily accepts indefinite elements.² In contrast to the well-known pair of the TEC and the copula EC, the distinction of the two variants has to do with the propositional (or conceptual) content; while both the experiencer and the experiencing process of the mental experience denoted by the PVNP are left implicit and unspecified in (13), they are directly expressed in (14); a specific experiencer is realized as the subject of the main clause and the experiencing process is described by the transitive verb.

There are several noteworthy facts that suggest the close connection between the MET and its transitive counterpart. First, as shown in (15), the MET is used with an adjunct *for*-phrase which specifies who experiences the described mental experience (Minami 2023: 30). This indicates that the existence of the experiencer per se constitutes part of the conceptual meaning of the MET, just like the transitive counterpart.

- (15) a. For the instructor, there is comfort in having an orderly file of lecture notes and exams. (COCA 1996 Fiction)
 b. There is liberation in being a character actor, especially for someone who’s used to ‘carrying’ movies. (COCA 2003: News)

Second, verbs occurring in the gerund-form complement of the *in* phrase in these two constructions show remarkably similar patterns. This is suggested by a survey through *The Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) regarding the two most common mental experience nouns, *comfort* and *satisfaction*.³ The procedure was as follows: (i) all the search results containing the sequence “NOUN in V-ing” were retrieved; (ii) instances of the MET and the transitive construction were sorted out; (iii) the numbers of verbs occurring in the “V” slot of each construction were counted. The results for each noun are shown in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively. In both cases, it is clear to see that the two constructions show similar preferences for a certain set of verbs such as *know*, *see*, *watch*, and *be*.

transitive construction [V= derive, discover, draw, feel, find, gain, get, have, seek, take]		<i>there</i> -construction (MET)	
verb (word counts ≥ 4)	ratio	verbs (word counts ≥ 2)	ratio
know (170 tokens)	54.7%	know (44 tokens)	56.4%
see (9 tokens)	2.9%	be (6 tokens)	7.7%
be (8 tokens)	2.6%	do (2 tokens)	2.6%
believe (7 tokens)	2.3%	find (2 tokens)	2.6%
have (5 tokens)	1.6%	have (2 tokens)	2.6%
hear (4 tokens)	1.3%	hear (2 tokens)	2.6%
remember (4 tokens)	1.3%	see (2 tokens)	2.6%
311 tokens	100%	78 tokens	100%

Table 1. verbs occurring in the gerund form in the two constructions: the case of *comfort*

² For more details on this topic, see the discussion of Preferred Argument Structure by DuBois (2003).

³ The survey was conducted during the latter half of January 2025. Relevant examples of other mental experience nouns such as *consolation*, *liberation*, *solace*, and *relief* have also been retrieved, but they are excluded here because of their extremely low numbers.

transitive construction [V= derive, express, feel, find, get, have, hold, receive, take]		<i>there</i> -construction (MET)	
verb (word counts ≥ 6)	ratio	verb (word counts ≥ 4)	ratio
know (14 tokens)	9.5%	know (14 tokens)	17.1%
see (13 tokens)	8.8%	see (7 tokens)	8.5%
be (10 tokens)	6.8%	do (5 tokens)	6.1%
help (6 tokens)	4.1%	watch (5 tokens)	6.1%
watch (6 tokens)	4.1%	get (4 tokens)	4.9%
		take (4 tokens)	4.9%
147 tokens	100%	82 tokens	100%

Table 2. verbs occurring in the gerund form in the two constructions: the case of *satisfaction*

Let us now turn back to the issue of how to deal with the two formal variants of the MET. Now that we have seen a close horizontal link between the MET (L-variant) and the transitive construction, it is reasonable to expect that the latter also has its own S-variant, i.e., the structure without *in*. In fact, this prediction is borne out. The omission of preposition *in* is equally observed across the two variants. Some examples are given below:

- (16) a. But you get so much satisfaction knowing you can make a difference. (COCA 1996: Maganize) [transitive construction]
b. There was immense satisfaction knowing something no one else in the world did. (COCA 2012: Fiction) [*there*-construction]
- (17) a. He took comfort knowing his part of the mission was nearly complete. (COCA 2012: Fiction) [transitive construction]
b. I hope at least there is some comfort knowing that you are loved and admired by the community. (COCA 2012: Web) [*there*-construction]

It should also be noted that that the S-variant's frequency distribution over the two constructions is parallel to that of the L-variant. As shown in Table 3, the S-variant examples of the transitive construction far outnumber those of the MET, just as in the case of the L-variants (see Table 1 and 2):

	transitive	<i>there</i>
<i>comfort</i>	47	8
<i>satisfaction</i>	20	7

Table 3. Distribution of the S-variant over the two constructions

All these point to a solution to the puzzle we had in section 2. The occurrence of the L-variant of the MET, which should not have happened as far as the MET's connection to the general schematic structure of TEC is concerned, can be attributed to the presence of a horizontal link connecting the MET and the transitive construction. Since the MET is the alternative form of the transitive construction, the occurrences of the *in*-less variant in the latter will no doubt be carried over to the former. This prediction needs to be evidenced by further research on historical development of the S-variant in the two constructions, which is beyond the scope of this paper.⁴ However, all the observations and discussions given so far certainly suggest something important about the status of the MET, which no studies under extreme constructionism would ever have

⁴ It has been often discussed that horizontal links have various roles to play in language change. For details, see case studies in Sommerer and Smirnova (2020).

reached: Its horizontal connection with the transitive construction takes precedence over its vertical connection with the general schematic structure of the TEC.

3.2. Implications for Construction Grammar analysis

The discussion given above suggests a crucial point about the category structure of *there*-sentences. In early days of constructionist studies (Lakoff 1987), the main focus was on sentences including particular elements (i.e., the “expletive” *there* followed by the copula verb *be* or a limited set of verbs) and multiple senses (or uses) associated with the TEC. A tacit assumption shared among such studies is that all the sentences including the expletive *there* should have the same type(s) of horizontal link(s) – if they are in any horizontal relation at all. However, the present study suggests that this is not the case. As shown in 3.1, another type of horizontal link that connects the MET to a construction other than the copula EC needs to be assumed, and there are even cases where the structure of the *there*-variant is affected by a horizontally connected (and structurally different) construction, resulting in degeneration of the former’s membership in the general category of the TEC. It should also be noted that the proposed view is not restricted to the TEC. It can potentially be applied to other types constructions – clausal, morphological, or others – helping to clarify the organization of the constructicon.

The present case study has shown, based upon the view that there are several types of horizontal links (Diessel 2019, 2023), that the MET should be characterized by two different types of horizontal links. On the one hand, the MET and the transitive construction are horizontally linked, and they follow the functionalist principle shown in section 2, as they have significant semantic differences. On the other hand, the two variants (L- and S-variants) of each construction do not follow the principle because they are the results of purely formal “free” variation, suggesting their status as “allostructions” (Cappelle 2006), which are connected through a specific type of horizontal link, forming a single construction named “constructeme” (Perek 2015). This type of horizontal link is inherently different from one that connects two distinct “constructions” (Minami, forthcoming).

It could be argued, therefore, that the present case study indicates the existence of another principle that will be supplementary to the principle of equivalence (cf. section 2), i.e., one that embraces the existence of purely formal variation that involves no semantic/pragmatic differences. Although how exactly such a principle should be formulated is yet to be extensively discussed, it is probably the case that there is some diversity in the phenomena to be covered by such a complementary principle. For instance, allomorphs, which by definition share the same semantic content despite their formal distinctions, should definitely be covered by the complementary principle, but they should be distinguished from the L- and S- variants of a single construction as described in this study; while allomorphs are in complementary distribution (and there is no competition involved), the L- and S- variants seem to be in paradigmatic competition. Still, just like allomorphs, the L- and S- variants are probably immune to the principle of no equivalence. This suggests that the latter phenomenon might be a counterexample to Leclercq and Morin’s (2023: 12) generalization that formally distinct constructions which are in the relationship of paradigmatic competition have to follow the principle of no equivalence. Regardless of the validity of this intuitive classification, it is no doubt worth further investigation to identify, classify and explain the phenomena that fall outside the principle of no synonymy/equivalence.⁵

⁵ The “principle of optionality” as discussed in Leclercq and Morin (2025) might be the one that deals with free formal variation phenomena as discussed here. In their discussion, however, the principle is assumed to be in a

4. Conclusion and prospects

This paper has looked into a minor type of *there*-sentences, the MET, and argued that adequate account of its behavior requires the notion of horizontal links. It first gave some observations on its formal variation that pose a challenge for the extreme constructionist view. As a solution to the problem, it was proposed to take into account horizontal links that connect certain constructions with other formally distinct constructions as well as ones that connect two formal variants of a single construction. Lastly, some implications the present study would hold for analyses from the Construction Grammar perspective were discussed, including the issue of how to capture grammatical phenomena of free formal variation while maintaining the functionalist principle of isomorphism which states that formal distinctions reflect functional distinctions.

It has to be admitted that the phenomena dealt with in this paper is extremely limited in scope. It is obvious that the two alternating constructions (i.e., the MET and its transitive counterpart) are also closely linked to other formally distinct but related constructions which can be sometimes called “neighbors” (Diessel 2023: Chapter 6), such as the transitive construction with the PP headed by *from* rather than *in* (e.g., *She derived comfort from being with him*). Those neighboring constructions will be a focus for further research.

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contradictory relation with the principle of synonymy/equivalence (“principle of isomorphism,” in their terminology), which needs to be “reconciled” (cf. De Smet 2019). This is in stark contrast with the view presented here which assumes that the former is supplementary to the latter. Of course, to determine which view should be taken over the other is an empirical issue.

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