

Title	Number Disagreement in There Sentences with Existence Verbs
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Citation	言語文化共同研究プロジェクト. 2023, 2022, p. 41-50
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/91597
rights	
Note	

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Number Disagreement in *There* Sentences with Existence Verbs*

MINO Takashi

1. Introduction

Number disagreement between the verb and the postverbal noun in *there* constructions (TCs) has sometimes been observed, especially in a colloquial register, as in (1).

- (1) a. Well, *there is* **children** that are going to trick-or-treating, I'm sure. (COCA: SPOK)
b. *There was* **reports** that this was in fact not spontaneous. (COCA: SPOK)
c. *There's* **problems** in a regulatory process. (COCA: SPOK)¹

Meechan and Foley (1994: 76) showed that such number disagreement is more widespread than many previous analyses would lead us to believe, and Svartvik and Leech (2016: 200) claimed that *there's* with plural postverbal nouns is no longer unacceptable. Many studies have focused on number disagreement in TCs with *be*-verbs and concluded that number disagreement is caused by grammatical factors (e.g., tense, person, and polarity), processing factors (e.g., word length and the gap between the verbs and postverbal nouns), and socio-geographic factors (e.g., age, birthplace, and education).

By contrast, it has been reported that the postverbal noun should always agree with the non-*be* verb in TCs (e.g., Fisher (1985) and Martínez Insua and Palacios Martínez (2003)). However, there are some examples of number disagreement in the corpora, as shown in (2).

- (2) a. Similarly, in this country, I think, *there exists* **certain Americans** who harbor resentment or regard Japan even as a threat to this country. (COCA: SPOK)
b. But on the other hand, *there remains* **plotters** out there. (COCA: SPOK)
c. In every person, *there lives* **two possible selves**: (TV: 2007)

Bauer (2022: 127) stated the following: “Perhaps because of this spoken-language construction, we do find examples with *there is* or *there are* that breaks the basic rule of agreement. We also find *here is/here are*, *where is/where are*, *there exists/there exist* and other variants [underline mine],” which suggests that number disagreement can also occur in TCs with the verb *exist*. Therefore, this study investigates the number disagreement in TCs with existence verbs such as *exist* and *remain*.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Sections 2 and 3 summarize previous studies on number disagreement in TCs with *be*-verbs and non-*be* verbs, respectively. Section 4 discusses the behavior of TCs with existence verbs based on corpus research. Section 5 concludes the paper.

* This work was funded by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 21K20003.

¹ All emphasis is mine.

2. Number Disagreement in TCs with *Be*-verbs

Many previous studies have examined the number disagreement in TCs with *be*-verbs (e.g., Meechan and Foley (1994) and Hay and Schreier (2004)). This section reviews three studies: Al-Shawashreh and Al-Omari (2019), Martínez Insua and Palacios Martinez (2003), and Yaguchi (2017), which conducted quantitative surveys based on four large corpora: *the British National Corpus* (BNC), *the Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), and *the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English* (SBCSAE), and *the Wordbanks* (WB).² Smallwood (1997) claimed that the ratio of non-standard agreement is higher in informal speech data than that in formal and semiformal speech data. Because these corpora include not only informal speech but also formal or semiformal speech, it is expected that the TC disagreement ratios would be lower than the ratios reported by sociolinguistic studies that only used informal speech datasets (e.g., 71% (167/235) in Meechan and Foley (1994), 62% (193/310) in Tagliamonte (1998), and 58% (599/1028) in Hay and Schreier (2004)).³

Al-Shawashreh and Al-Omari (2019: 667) extracted data from COCA by “typing the word *there* in the word(s) space, choosing *nounpl.* in the *pos* (part of speech), and highlighting *SPOK* and *2011* from the drop list.” After manually excluding the out-of-scope usages, 375 tokens were obtained, as shown in Table 1. They found that 38% of the tokens (143 out of 375) had number disagreement between the nouns and verbs.

Variants	%	No.
Singular (<i>is, 's, was</i>)	38	143
Plural (<i>are, 're, were</i>)	62	232
N	100	375

Table 1. Number disagreement ratios in COCA (SPOK in 2011); adapted from Al-Shawashreh and Al-Omari (2019: 669)

Martínez Insua and Palacios Martinez (2003: 266) investigated TCs by the BNC one-million-word spoken and written English corpus. In their study, “the texts selected are drawn from the years 1989 onwards, and equal proportions of words were taken from both speech and writing.” The results are presented in Table 2. Unlike Al-Shawashreh and Al-Omari (2019), no distinction between singular verbs (*'s, is, was*) and plural verbs (*are, were*) was made in Table 2.

² Many previous studies built original corpora or used genre-specific corpora to reveal sociological factors triggering number disagreement. However, this study introduced previous studies that used large and balanced corpora such as COCA and BNC because this study made use of these corpora as well.

³ Consult these studies for detailed research methods and targeted expressions.

	<i>TCs showing concord</i>		<i>TCs showing non-concord</i>	
	No.	%	No.	%
Written English	932	96.78	31	3.22
Spoken English	1255	86.74	192	13.26
Total	2187	90.75	223	9.25

Table 2. Number disagreement ratios in BNC;
adapted from Martínez Insua and Palacios Martínez (2003: 268)

In their study, the number disagreement ratio in the spoken sample was 13.26%. The non-concord ratio was low compared to Meechan and Foley (1994), Tagliamonte (1998), and Hay and Schreier (2004). Hence, Martínez Insua and Palacios Martínez (2003: 269) claimed “13.25% (sic) is an important percentage, but it could not be claimed to constitute the majority.”

Yaguchi (2017) examined the number disagreement using four corpora (BNC, COCA, SBCSAE, and WB) with a special focus on verbal forms; the results are shown in Table 3.

	BNC Spoken	COCA Spoken	UKspoken ⁴	SBCSAE
<i>there's</i>	14.1	12.7	21.3	24.5
<i>there is</i>	4.0	2.7	3.4	5.6
<i>there are</i>	0.9	0.2	1.0	0
<i>there was</i>	15.8	5.4	12.5	15.9
<i>there were</i>	0.8	0.4	3.0	0

Table 3. Number disagreement ratios in BNC Spoken, COCA Spoken, UKspoken, SBCSAE;
adapted from Yaguchi (2017: 184) (accessed in March, 2012)

As mentioned by many studies, the disagreement ratios of *there's* are the highest of all variants, except in the case of BNC Spoken. They range from 12.7% in COCA Spoken to 24.5% in SBCSAE. This result showed that *there's* has acquired the status of a fixed presentative formula for both singular and plural postverbal nouns (Breivik and Martínez Insua (2008)).

To summarize, while number disagreement has been observed in TCs with *be*-verbs, the ratio is relatively low in large corpora including both formal and informal samples such as COCA and BNC compared to 71% (167/235) in Meechan and Foley (1994), 62% (193/310) in Tagliamonte (1998), and 58% (599/1028) in Hay and Schreier (2004).

3. Number Disagreement in TCs with Non-*be* Verbs

⁴ UKspoken is a subcorpus of WB.

Many previous studies have claimed that postverbal nouns must agree with the verbs in TCs that have non-*be* verbs, as in (3) and (4):

- (3) a. So say *there're/’s* **two problems**. (Deal 2009: 310)
 b. So say *there arise/*arises* **two problems**. (ibid.)
- (4) a. *There exist/*exists* **no good solutions** to this problem. (McCloskey 1991: 563)
 b. At the old Winthorpe mansion, *there hang/*hangs* over the fireplace **two portraits of the man** who founded this great company. (Schütze 1999: 479)

Martínez Insua and Palacios Martínez (2003: 272) commented on the number disagreement acceptability of TCs with non-*be* verbs: “[S]ince their already particular nature (the fact that *there* is not frequently combined with a verb other than *be*) the speaker/writer would use these structures with more concern about the norms, and would pay special attention to the concord between the verbal form and the PVNP [postverbal noun phrase].” No TCs with non-*be* verbs showed number disagreement in Martínez Insua and Palacios Martínez’s (2003) samples, though, in the first place, only eight TCs with non-*be* verbs were found in their datasets.

However, a few studies have acknowledged the number disagreement between non-*be* verbs and postverbal nouns in TCs. For example, Gazdar and Pullum (1980: 199) provided example (5), in which the verb *sits* occurs with the coordinated noun phrases *a large purple gorilla and a small pink baboon*. Bauer (2022: 127) also hinted that there were TCs with non-*be* verbs that showed number disagreement, which was confirmed when large corpora such as COCA and *the TV corpus* (TV) were consulted, as shown in (2) and repeated here as (6).

- (5) Near the fountain *there sits* **a large purple gorilla and a small pink baboon**.
 (Gazdar and Pullum 1980: 199)
- (6) a. Similarly, in this country, I think, *there exists* **certain Americans** who harbor resentment or regard Japan even as a threat to this country. (COCA: SPOK)
 b. But on the other hand, *there remains* **plotters** out there. (COCA: SPOK)
 c. In every person, *there lives* **two possible selves**: (TV: 2007)

Therefore, it appears that number disagreement is not always unacceptable in TCs with non-*be* verbs.⁵

⁵ Based on a corpus study with BNC, Olofsson (2007, 2011) claimed that number disagreement was observed in TCs with catenative verbs such as *appear* and *seem*, as in (i) and (ii). Quirk et al. (1985) also provided TC examples with the catenative verb *happen* that lacked number agreement, as in (iii):

- (i) *As there seems to be* **no questions** Ma’am, may I propose the adoption of the report. (BNC)
 (ii) *There appears to be* **substantial numbers of people** who join or leave, become active or inactive, over time. (BNC)
 (iii) *There happens to be* **only two apples** left. (Quirk et al. 1985: 1406)

4. Corpus Study

This section investigated the number disagreement ratios in TCs with existence verbs. Because of the rarity of such examples, this study used seven corpora to collect examples: *the British National Corpus* (BNC), *the Corpus of Canadian English* (Strathy) (CAN), *the Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA), *the Movie Corpus* (MOV), *the Corpus of American Soap Operas* (SOAP), *the TV Corpus* (TV), and *the Wordbanks Corpus* (WB).⁶ Because number disagreement tends to be observed in spoken genres, only spoken samples were collected from these seven corpora. When using genre-balanced corpora (i.e., BNC, CAN, COCA, and WB), only the spoken sub-corpora were consulted. In addition, only singular verb plus plural noun combinations were focused on because almost all TC concord variability has been found to occur with singular verbs and plural noun phrases. Note that many sentences cited below are maybe or probably judged as prescriptively unacceptable but they are given to show the actual usage of TCs with non-*be* verbs.

4.1. Number Disagreement in TCs with *Exists*

First, the number disagreement in TCs with *exists* was examined. The verb *exist* was chosen as the first case study because Bauer (2022: 127) suggests the existence of examples showing number disagreement. Also, Yaguchi (2017) showed that TCs with the genuine existence verb *exist* behave in more similar ways to TCs with the *be*-verb than those with other non-*be* verbs do. Therefore, it was predicted that the disagreement rate would be higher than those with other verbs. Sentences in Mark Davies's corpora were collected using the two strings *there exists* and *there ADV exists* and sentences in WB were collected using the two strings *there exists* and *there ~P(AV0) exists*. This study does not distinguish existential from deictic *there* constructions as the boundary between the two is difficult to clarify.

Table 4 summarized the number disagreement's raw frequencies and percentages. Examples are shown in (7). COCA (sp) and COCA (t/m) show COCA (spoken) and COCA (TV/MOVIES), respectively.

<i>exists</i>	COCA (sp)	COCA (t/m)	BNC	WB	TV	MOV	SOAP	CAN	Total
Tokens	29	28	3	12	55	53	2	6	188
Tokens with disagreement	6	3	0	0	5	8	0	2	24
Percentage (%)	20.69	10.71	0	0	9.09	15.09	0	33.33	12.77

Table 4. Number disagreement's frequencies in TCs with *exists*

⁶ Because COCA shares some samples with TV and MOV, the same examples occur in both of them.

- (7) a. Similarly, in this country, I think, *there exists* **certain Americans** who harbor resentment or regard Japan even as a threat to this country. (COCA: SPOK)
- b. *There already exists* **specific mandatory guidelines** - rules -- for meat, for milk, for seafood. (COCA: SPOK)
- c. *There exists* in this world **some things** too valuable to belong to any one person. (TV: 2004)
- d. It is recognized that *there exists* **high financial costs and significant challenges** in providing quality telephone service to all residents of the NWT... (CAN)

In total, 188 examples of TCs with *exists* were found across the seven corpora, with approximately 13% (24 out of 188 tokens) showing number disagreement. Surprisingly, the number disagreement ratio in COCA (spoken) is over 20%. Though the token frequencies were low in Table 4, it is noteworthy that the results were similar to the results of TCs with the *be*-verb in Martínez Insua and Palacios Martínez (2003) and Yaguchi (2017).

4.2. Number Disagreement in TCs with Other Existence Verbs

TCs with six types of existence verbs; *hang*, *lie*, *live*, *remain*, *sit*, and *stand*; were then examined. TCs in Mark Davies's corpora were collected using the two strings *there hangs/lies/lives/remains/sits/stands* and *there ADV hangs/lies/lives/remains/sits/stands* and sentences in WB were collected using the two strings *there hangs/lies/lives/remains/sits/stands* and *there ~P(AV0) hangs/lies/lives/remains/sits/stands*, the results from which are presented in Tables 5 to 10.

First, only five TCs with the verb *hangs* were found in the spoken corpora, none of which showed number disagreement.

<i>hangs</i>	COCA (sp)	COCA (t/m)	BNC	WB	TV	MOV	SOAP	CAN	Total
Tokens	1	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	5
Tokens with disagreement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Percentage (%)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 5. Number disagreement's frequencies in TCs with *hangs*

Second, the spoken corpora interrogation found 209 TCs with *lies*, 7.18 % of which (15 out of 209 tokens) showed number disagreement. A few examples are given in (8).

<i>lies</i>	COCA (sp)	COCA (t/m)	BNC	WB	TV	MOV	SOAP	CAN	Total
Tokens	11	37	1	5	69	82	4	0	209
Tokens with disagreement	2	3	0	0	5	5	0	0	15
Percentage (%)	18.18	8.11	0	0	7.25	6.10	0	0	7.18

Table 6. Number disagreement's frequencies in TCs with *lies*

- (8) a. You see, in Joseph Newman's garage, *there lies the unlikely results of 18 years of research and frustration.* (COCA: MOV)
b. *There lies some old, wild magiks.* (TV: 2013)

Third, the spoken corpora interrogation found 50 TCs with *lives*, 8.00 % of which (4 out of 50 tokens) showed number disagreement. A few examples are given in (9).

<i>lives</i>	COCA (sp)	COCA (t/m)	BNC	WB	TV	MOV	SOAP	CAN	Total
Tokens	3	8	0	0	17	21	1	0	50
Tokens with disagreement	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	0	4
Percentage (%)	0	0	0	0	11.76	9.52	0	0	8.00

Table 7. Number disagreement's frequencies in TCs with *lives*

- (9) a. *There lives but three good men* unchanged in England. (TV: 1985)
b. In every actor *there lives a tiger, a pig, an ass and a nightingale.* (MOV: 2006)

Fourth, the spoken corpora interrogation found 222 TCs with *remains*, 9.46 % of which (21 out of 222 tokens) showed number disagreement. A few examples are given in (10).

<i>remains</i>	COCA (sp)	COCA (t/m)	BNC	WB	TV	MOV	SOAP	CAN	Total
Tokens	63	19	3	18	65	43	3	8	222
Tokens with disagreement	11	1	0	2	4	3	0	0	21
Percentage (%)	17.46	5.26	0	11.11	6.15	6.98	0	0	9.46

Table 8. Number disagreement's frequencies in TCs with *remains*

- (10) a. Well, on Keystone as you know, *there still remains a couple of steps* to what the

President has said all along is let's go through the regular order, let's go through the regular process. (COCA: SPOK)

- b. Still, General Ricardo Sanchez said *there remains some 5,000 Iraqi guerrillas* out there opposing the U.S. forces. (COCA: SPOK)

Fifth, the spoken corpora interrogation found 41 *there* sentences with *sits*, 7.32 % of which (3 out of 41 tokens) showed number disagreement. A few examples are given in (11).

<i>sits</i>	COCA (sp)	COCA (t/m)	BNC	WB	TV	MOV	SOAP	CAN	Total
Tokens	2	4	0	0	17	18	0	0	41
Tokens with disagreement	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	3
Percentage (%)	0	25	0	0	0	11.11	0	0	7.32

Table 9. Number disagreement's frequencies in TCs with *sits*

- (11) a. And then, in a very subdued imitation of the female whooping crane, she dance-walks over to a large nest where *there sits...* **a can of Yoni Yum and a can of Dew!**
(COCA: MOV)
- b. *There sits my very life and about \$ 10 million.* (MOV: 1945)

Sixth, the spoken corpora interrogation found 80 TCs with *stands*, 5.00 % of which (4 out of 80 tokens) showed number disagreement. A few examples are given in (12).

<i>stands</i>	COCA (sp)	COCA (t/m)	BNC	WB	TV	MOV	SOAP	CAN	Total
Tokens	3	13	0	0	28	36	0	0	80
Tokens with disagreement	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	4
Percentage (%)	33.3	0	0	0	7.14	2.78	0	0	5.00

Table 10. Number disagreement's frequencies in TCs with *stands*

- (12) a. *There stands the two best things* I ever did. (TV: 2013)
- b. *There stands all that hope rising up to infinity and all the beauty all that love and hope and surcease!* (MOV: 1969)

In summary, while TCs with existence verbs that showed number disagreement were found, the

non-concord ratios were all extremely low under 10%. Although the frequencies were so low that it was not possible to make statistical generalizations, it is noteworthy that the disagreement ratio for *exist* is slightly higher than those for the other existence verbs, *hang*, *lie*, *live*, *remain*, *sit*, and *stand*.

5. Conclusion

Previous studies (e.g., Fisher (1985) and Martínez Insua and Palacios Martínez (2003)) have stated that the postverbal noun must agree with the non-*be* verb in TCs. However, the examination of the seven corpora used in this study found that of the 188 examples of TCs with *exists*, approximately 13% of them (24 out of 188 tokens) showed number disagreement. While the token frequencies were low, it is noteworthy that these results were similar to the results of TCs with *be*-verbs in Martínez Insua and Palacios Martínez (2003) and Yaguchi (2017), which appears to indicate that number disagreement in TCs with non-*be* verbs, especially *exist*, is observed to some extent.

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