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The Diachronic Development of the *There Comes a* Time-Class-Noun Expression

Mino Takashi

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the diachronic development of *there* constructions with the verb *come* and time-class-nouns, as in (1):

(1) a. There comes a time in life when you have to make a sacrifice for your country.
b. There comes a day when you have to decide whether to take the risk in the first place.

(COCA)¹

In present day English (PDE), the configuration of *there come(s)* tends to take a time-class-noun such as *time* and *day* in its subject. In this paper, the *there comes* sentence with a time-class-noun is referred to as the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction. Only the behavior of *there* constructions with the third person singular present *comes* is examined in this study.²

In particular, this study investigates the historical change of the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction. The primary objective of the study is to reveal how this construction has evolved. This paper adopts a definition of constructions proposed by Goldberg (2006), as illustrated in (2).

(2) Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form or function is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other constructions recognized to exist. In addition, patterns are stored as constructions even if they are fully predictable as long as they occur with sufficient frequency.

(Goldberg 2006: 5)

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the basic information of the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction in PDE in terms of frequency and constructional semantics/syntax; Section 3 discusses the historical development of the *there comes a* time-class-noun expression and further analyzes this sentence by employing the constructionalization analysis (Traugott and Trousdale (2013)); and the study is concluded in Section 4.

2. The Basic Information of the *There Comes a* Time-class-noun Construction in PDE

This section outlines the basic information of the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction. Section 2.1 investigates the types of nouns that are likely to occur as the subject of the *there come(s)* expressions, which is based on the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA). Next, Section 2.2 briefly describes three characteristics of the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction.

2.1 The Corpus Study of the *There Come(s)* Expressions in terms of Logical Subjects in PDE

In total, 569 examples of *there come(s)* were found in COCA. In Figure 1, the distribution of the three noun classes selected as subjects for *there come(s)* is depicted. As the survey illustrated in Figure 1 suggests, there is an extremely un-

balanced preference toward time-class-nouns, which account for approximately 82 % of all the examples found in COCA.³

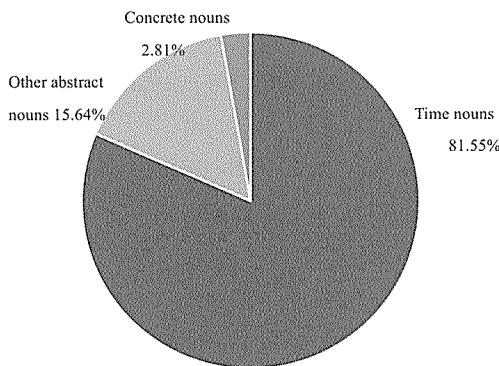


Figure 1 Tendency in the logical subjects for the *there come(s)*

The same tendency is observed in *the British National Corpus* (BNC): Out of possible 94 examples, 77 (82%) are used with time-class-nouns.

Table 1 presents more detail in relation to numbers and ratios for the time-class-nouns in the expressions. Ten types of time-class-nouns, namely, *time*, *point*, *moment*, *day*, *stage*, *age*, *climax*, *flashpoint*, *night* and *period* were found in COCA. Only the five examples in the table appeared more than once.

Table 1 Tendency in logical subjects for the *there come(s)* in COCA

	time	point	moment	day	stage
Total	223	180	34	19	3
Proportion (%)	39.19	31.63	5.98	3.34	0.53

Time constituted approximately 40% of all the logical subjects and was most frequently used, followed by *point*, and *moment*, which amounted to approximately 32% and 6%, respectively. This result reveals that only a few major time-class-nouns are employed extremely frequently. A few examples from COCA follow:

(3) a. You know, I think there comes a time when people can only suffer vicariously for so long.

b. None of us want it, but there comes a point when you simply have to say enough.

c. There comes a moment when it's just time to give some other people a chance.

d. There comes a stage in a child's life, before he is twelve months old, when he visibly takes the great step.⁴

(all from COCA)

Furthermore, time-class-nouns are rarely modified by adjectives. No examples of *there comes a time* expressions that were modified by adjectives were found in COCA even though such modifications are grammatically possible. In relation to other time-class-nouns, *point*, *moment*, and *day* are modified with adjectives only in four, three, and one examples, respectively, as in (4). This finding indicates that *there comes a time/point/moment/day* is formed as a fixed chunk (Bybee 2010).

(4) a. There comes for every caterpillar a difficult moment when he begins to feel pervaded by an odd sense of discomfort.

b. There comes a critical point, if the reform is going to work, when leaders of the community get together to figure out not how they're going to adopt the plan, but how they're going to adapt it, adjust the plan to their own needs and strengths, and figure out how to make the reform their own.

c. There comes the day, the inevitable day: the trichologist's bananas are store-bought, mottled, mealy things, and they come, like trouble, in bunches; mocking tufts of hair have sprouted at the base of his spine, on his knuckles, on his upper arms; Lauren's beauty grows, implaca-

ble.

(all from COCA)

To verify the uniqueness of the *there comes* expressions, one hundred samples of *comes* that took an SV pattern were also randomly collected from COCA.⁵ The results reveal only one example, (5), which was classified as one with a time-class-noun:

(5) Fill your tank when the time comes.

(COCA)

Therefore, it is concluded that the unbalanced preference for time-class-nouns is a special feature of *there comes* expressions, which cannot be observed in the canonical SV word order.

The use of concrete nouns such as human nouns was very limited in frequency; for example:

(6) From out the rumpled cloth of clouds there comes an angel.

(COCA: FIC)

Furthermore, this type of example is limited to certain genres such as novels. When used in conversation, the example in (7) was low in acceptability according to native English speakers:

(7) (?)There comes a boy to the park.

(spoken)

According to Breivik (1990) and Biber et al. (1999), *there* constructions with non-

be verbs are generally used in formal written English. However, our corpus research has revealed that the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction can be used frequently even in spoken English. Table 2 presents a genre-based distribution of the *there comes* with time-class-nouns. The data in Table 2 demonstrates that the *there comes* expressions with time-class-nouns are most widely used in *spoken* communication. In addition, of all the time-class-nouns, the *there comes* expressions with the noun *point* are used most frequently in spoken communication.

Table 2 Distribution of the *there comes* with time-class-nouns in COCA

Registers	Raw frequency
spoken	134
fiction	84
magazine	98
newspaper	82
academic	45

Before arriving at a conclusion, it is important to note that only five examples of the plural time-class-nouns were found in COCA:

(8) a. “there come periods, either through disaster or self-knowledge, when applied science and Benjamin Franklin’s *The Way to Wealth*” are not enough.

(COCA: MAG)

b. But there come times when we have to make a choice of one evil over another, and what we faced in Iraq was one of those times that Saint Augustine called a just war, just like our war with Hitler was a just war. And while war is bad and evil, yet there come times we have to defend ourselves, or we have to take up for justice in the

world . . .

(COCA: SPOK)⁶

Moreover, most of the examples are used with the indefinite article *a* and only eight examples are used with other determiners such as *the*, *that*, or *this*, as in (9).

(9) a. As a result, says Taylor, “there comes this terrible moment in a company’s evolution when it outgrows the owner’s capacity to direct things singlehanded, but it doesn’t yet have the managers in place to take it to the next level.

b. Well, you know, there comes this point when the law can not settle all social problems.

(all from COCA)

Because the pattern of the singular time-class-noun with the indefinite article *a* is most preferable in this construction, the *there comes a* time-class-noun expression was examined in this study.

In essence, concrete nouns such as animate and volitional nouns are not used frequently with the configuration of the *there comes*. Rather, there is an unbalanced preference for time-class-nouns.

2.2 Three Characteristics of the *There Comes a* Time-class-noun Construction

This section deals with three characteristics of the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction which are related to the discussion in Section 3.⁷

First, the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction denotes a generic event as its constructional meaning; that is, this construction does not refer to any specific time or express a habitual event. For example, consider (10):

(10) There comes a time when we have to decide, “What path am I going to take?”

(COCA)

This sentence means that at a certain time in life, it is necessary to make a decision, rather than referring to a particular time or describing the perfect tense. For example, the backshifting of tenses used in reported speech is not employed in this construction. This is exemplified in (11).⁸

(11) Sharon Petty once told me that there comes a time when a leader must break away and let the association go about its business without feeling responsible for the directions it pursues.

(COCA)

This construction is interpreted similarly to aphorisms that are concise statements that illustrate a general truth and/or principle (e.g., *A bad penny always turns up.* / *You have to take the good with the bad.*). In addition, many examples are used with *every*, showing that events described in subordinate clauses are applicable to every member who belongs to a particular category.

(12) a. For every kid, there comes a point where your parents stop being cool.
b. There comes a time in every homeowner’s life when the realization hits: you’ve run out of excuses to avoid working on your yard.

(all from COCA)

Second, the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction is generally used to introduce special or serious events rather than daily commonplace events that can

easily be experienced. To test this supposition, the following examples should be considered:

(13) a.? There comes a time when you have to make coffee.
b. Being the kind of person I am, I want as much information on my body and my health so I can make my decisions. With Alzheimer's, there comes a point when you can't make your own decisions.

(COCA)

(13 a) is not acceptable in this context as the event described in the *wh*-clause is commonplace and easy to carry out. However, as (13 b) introduces a serious issue that Alzheimer's sufferers will inevitably experience, this sentence is a perfectly natural example of this construction. In fact, the adjectives used with *there comes* in COCA can be classified as one particular type: *difficult* (4 a), *critical* (4 b), *terrible* (9 a), *tipping*, *inevitable*, *pivotal*, and *crash*. All these denote the seriousness or importance of events. However, it is noteworthy that modification by adjectives is extremely limited.

Finally, this construction is subject to one syntactic constraint: Examples should be used with subordinating clauses. If the subordinating clause does not follow time-class-nouns, examples become very low in acceptability as exemplified in (14).

(14) a.* There comes a night.
b. There comes a night when you have to leave your home.

The acceptability of the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction such as (14 b) is degraded without a subordinate clause. Therefore, it is necessary to identify fully what kind of serious or important event is introduced by employing the sub-

ordinate clause. However, as noted in Section 2.1, our corpus research has shown that modification by adjectives is rare.

In conclusion, the three characteristics are considered to be important features in the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction in PDE. Moreover, the characteristics are only observed in this construction, not in other *there* constructions.

3. The Diachronic Development of the *There Comes a* Time-class-Noun Expression

This section investigates the diachronic aspect of the *there comes a* time-class-noun expression. First, Section 3.1 examines the diachronic development of this expression with the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA). Second, Section 3.2 investigates the semantic and syntactic behavior of *there comes* expressions with time-class-nouns in the 18th and 19th centuries. Furthermore, Section 3.2 claims that the three features of the *there comes* a time-class-noun construction in PDE were not observed in the 18th and the early 19th centuries. Finally, *there comes a* time-class-noun expressions are analyzed under the constructionalization analysis (Traugott and Trausdale (2013)) in Section 3.3.

3.1 From 1810s to 2000s on the basis of COHA

As demonstrated by the corpus study with COCA in Section 2, *there comes* expressions are often used with time-class-nouns. However, the corpus research with COHA revealed that other types of nouns were more frequently used than time-class-nouns in the 19th century. Moreover, relatively recently, the logical subjects of the *there comes* expressions have been inclined to time-class-nouns.

The graph depicted in Figure 2 exhibits the historical change of the logical subjects since the 1810s. One important fact emerges from an examination of Figure 2: the ratio of time-class-nouns has been dramatically increasing since the

1920s. At first, during the 19th century, the proportion of time-class-nouns among all nouns was not significant. The results revealed 0% (0/8), 17.65% (9/51), and 17.11% (13/76) in the 1810s, 1860s, and 1910s, respectively. However, since the 1920s, the proportion has gradually but increasingly become larger, and similar to that of the present data compiled in COCA, that is, approximately 80%. Therefore, the biased distribution to time-class-nouns is considered to be a recent phenomenon. This historical result demonstrates that the *there comes a* time-class-noun expression has been established as a construction recently based on the criteria of constructions proposed by Goldberg (2006: 5).

Ratios of Time-Class-Noun After 1810

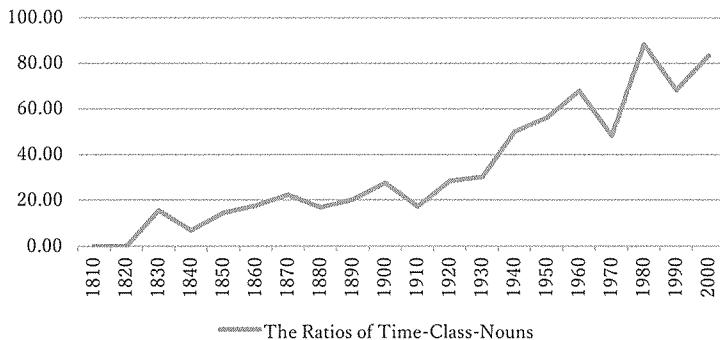


Figure 2 Increase in the ratios of time-class-nouns as the subject of the *there comes* expressions

Examples of the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction from COHA are as follows. Interestingly, the backshifting of tenses used in reported speech is not employed in (15 c), as in (11). Also, the examples (15 c), (15 d), and (15 e) are used with the word *every* and *all*, as in (12). These are some of features that are observed in the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction in PDE.

(15) a. There comes a time when the souls of human beings, women, per-

haps, more even than men, begin to faint for the atmosphere of the affections they were made to breathe.

(COHA: 1859)

- b. There comes a time in the life of a woman who has long retained her youth, when the years which have passed over her head without leaving a wrinkle write themselves down pitilessly all at once in ineffaceable marks.

(COHA: 1878)

- c. General Grant has often told me that there comes a time in every hard-fought battle when both armies are nearly or quite exhausted and it seems impossible for either to do more.

(COHA: 1885)

- d. There comes a time for every book in a library when it is wanted by somebody.

(COHA: 1891)

- e. There comes a time in all great wars when the issue becomes unmistakable.

(COHA: 1916)

Some instances with concrete nouns were found in the 19th century, as in (16). However, more abstract nouns were found than concrete nouns.

(16) a. [S]o very good, that, until there comes a new fleet from Cuba, the captain Salvatierra will be scarce able to follow after his charger.

(COHA: 1834)

- b. And to his side there comes a wounded horse, bearing the young Virginian, whose hunting shirt, is torn into ribbons by the bullets of the foe.

(COHA: 1849)

c. There comes another gentleman who looks as though he had a sweet tooth; at any rate, he seems as good-natured as a pound of sugar.

(COHA: 1850)

d. But there comes along an obscure monk, who says, “Triturate and mix together sulphur, saltpetre, and charcoal”; - and the thing is done.

(COHA: 1861)

The increase in the ratios of time-class-nouns becomes more interesting when *there* constructions with other non-*be* verbs are taken into consideration. Previous studies have demonstrated that the use of non-*be* verbs has been decreasing dramatically. Yaguchi (2017: 143) revealed on the basis of a corpus study with *the Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) that *there* constructions with non-*be* verbs reached their peak at the beginning of the Early Modern English period and have experienced a gradual decrease since then. Furthermore, Pérez-Guerra (1999: 106) observed a similar tendency, which is illustrated in Table 3. (Pérez-Guerra used two corpora: *the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* and *the LOB Corpus of British English*):

Table 3 The ratios of *there* constructions with *be*-verbs/non-*be* verbs
[Pérez-Guerra (1999: 106)] [slightly modified]

	1420~1500	1500~1570	1570~1640	1640~1710	PDE
With <i>be</i> -verbs	70.9%	67.5%	76.9%	77.3%	94.5%
With non- <i>be</i> verbs	29%	32.3%	22.97%	22.6%	5.3%

Until 1710, approximately 20% to 30% of the *there* constructions were ones with non-*be* verbs. However, the ratio has dramatically declined in PDE.

Moreover, the total number of the *there comes* expressions has been decreasing in COHA. In this respect, the increase in the ratios of the *there comes* with

time-class-nouns among the *there comes* expressions is significant. In situations where the use of non-*be* verbs is no longer popular, time-class-nouns have frequently been selected as the subjects of the *there comes* expressions. In other words, the *there comes* time-class-noun construction has resisted the sharp decline among *there* constructions with non-*be* verbs.

It is noteworthy that abstract nouns were used as the logical subjects of *there* constructions even during the period of Old English (Nagashima 1992: 5). In this respect, the preference for abstract nouns is not a recent phenomenon even though concrete nouns were initially employed a great deal. In this situation, the unbalanced preference for time-class-nouns only started recently.

3.2. Change of the Meanings of the *There comes a* Time-class-noun Construction

This section examines examples of the *there comes* expression with time-class-nouns that were used before 1900, which is the period when the expressions were not frequently attested. The corpus-based research with not only COHA but also *Eighteen Century Collections Online* (ECCO), has revealed that the behavior of expressions with time-class-nouns in that period was different from those in PDE. Therefore, the *there comes a* time-class-noun expression has only recently become an established construction.

Before discussing the historical change, it is necessary to review the three characteristics described in 2.2 of the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction in PDE, as exemplified in (17):

(17) Before the last Gulf war, Billy Graham said, “There comes a time when we must fight for peace.”

(COCA)

First, this construction denotes a timeless event and may be interpreted as if it was

an aphorism. Second, this construction is generally used to introduce special or serious events, rather than daily commonplace events that can be experienced easily. Third, this construction has to be used with subordinate clauses introduced by *when*, *that*, *to*, and so on. The acceptability of the expression is degraded without these clauses.

These three characteristics were not observed in examples of the *there comes* with the time-class-noun in the 18th century, as in (18).⁹ The following examples from the 18th century were collected from ECCO.

(18) a. When there comes a mild day, let the glasses be raised a little noon, to admit the air.

(*The Gardeners New Calendar*: 1763)

b. This should be always done when there comes a warm funny day, and but little wind stirring.

(*Every Man his Own Gardener*: 1767)

c. [B]ut when there comes a necessitous time, the bakers will take it away out of the keelers, while it is light, because it will then fetch the most money.

(*The Complete Maltster and Brewer*: 1765)

First, although the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction denotes a timeless event in PDE like (17), the examples above from the 18th century did not have to have such an aspectual characteristic. The expressions in (18) do not express a timeless event. Rather, for example, (18 b) expresses a habitual event, which is evident from the adverb *always*.

Second, unlike instances in PDE, the examples in (18 a) and (18 b) do not express a serious or an important event. Rather, these two examples merely express the arrival of *a mild day* and *a warm funny day*, and merely create the con-

text in which the events in the main clauses occurred. Therefore, they cannot be used as aphorisms which, for example, make a suggestion or provide advice.

Third, the examples in (18) do not contain the relative clauses even though they must take relative clauses in PDE. Moreover, they are modified by adjectives such as *mild* and *necessitous*. However, such a modification is rare in PDE.

It is also necessary to consider examples from COHA. Similarly, even in the 19th century, some examples did not exhibit the features of the current *there comes a* time-class-noun expression, as in (19), the oldest examples in COHA. The following examples do not contain relative clauses, which are necessary in PDE examples¹⁰:

(19) a. To me, to me, there comes no night.

(COHA: 1831)

b. There comes a time of honest self-confession, of secret meditation to all, and then the boding spirit rises to his proper mastery: . . .

(COHA: 1835)

However, one cannot hastily conclude that the diachronic development of the *there comes* expression with time-class-nouns was not initiated in the 18th century, because there were some examples that showed similar behaviors to ones in PDE, as in (20). The example contains the subordinate clause which describes one's general knowledge about novelty:

(20) There comes a time when novelty ceases, and a continual repetition of the same thing becomes tasteless and insipid, and so it happened to Florio and Nanette.

(*Miscellanies in Verse and Prose*: 1799)

Therefore, a small number of *there comes* configurations with time-class-nouns in the 18th century can be considered to be examples of the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction.

To summarize, it can be concluded that the *there comes* expression with a time-class-noun started to acquire unique features during the 19th century, and then it started to be used productively in comparison to other *there* constructions since the 20th century, as demonstrated in 3.1. This construction made a gradual development historically, as with other grammatical constructions and words.

Table 4 The summary of the behavior of the *there comes a* time-class-noun expression

	before the first half of the 19th century	after the second half of the 19th century
time	future / habitual	generic / not anchored in a specific time
contents	not serious / not important	serious / important
subordinate clauses	optional	mandatory

3.3 Constructionalization of the *There Comes a* Time-class-noun Expression

We are now in a position to analyze the *there comes a* time-class-noun expression under the phenomenon of constructionalization. The process of constructionalization is defined as follows.

(21) Constructionalization is the creation of form_{new} and $\text{meaning}_{\text{new}}$ (combinations of) signs. It forms new type nodes, which have new syntax or morphology and new coded meaning, in the linguistic network of a population of speakers.

(Traugott and Trausdale 2013: 22)

According to the definition in (21), constructionalization is a creation of a new construction unit in a language network. For example, Traugott and Trousdale (2013) proposes a constructionalization analysis of the historical development of expressions such as *a lot of* and *all/what* pseudo-clefts.

The *there comes a* time-class-noun expressions can also be examined by adopting the constructionalization analysis. Semantically, the configuration of the *there comes* with time-class-nouns has acquired the special semantics to denote the timeless events. Moreover, the expressions convey mainly serious or important events, which were not observed in the examples found in the 18th century. As a result, in PDE, the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction is used like aphorisms. Furthermore, syntactically, this expression currently has to be modified by subordinate clauses that are introduced by relative pronouns such as *when* or *that*. Thus, the semantics and syntax of the *there comes* expression with time-class-nouns have changed. Therefore, it can be concluded that this expression has formed one of the new type nodes of *there* constructions, which has new syntax and new coded meaning.

4. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the diachronic development of *there* constructions with the verb *comes*. In PDE, the configuration of the *there comes* tends to take a time-class-noun such as *time* and *point* in its subject. However, this is only the current phenomenon. The corpus study with COHA revealed that the ratio of time-class-nouns as the subject of the *there comes* expressions has been increasing dramatically since the 1910s. In addition, this study indicated that the examples from the 18th century did not exhibit the three characteristics that define the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction in PDE. Therefore, it is concluded that the *there comes a* time-class-noun expressions has recently become an established

construction. Finally, we proposed that this construction has undergone the process of constructionalization.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Prof. KATO Masaharu. I have learned so many fundamental things from his lectures on *there* constructions and locative inversions under the framework of generative syntax. If it had not been for his fascinating lectures at Minoh campus in the undergraduate course, I would not be studying *there* constructions now. Without any doubt, one of the most valuable memories in my research life is the one-on-one guidance over the one and half a year in the sixth period on Wednesday. Unfortunately, I am not a Chomskyan now, though.

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Notes

- 1 All underlining has been added by the author.
- 2 See Mino (2019) for the behavior of the *there came* expression.
- 3 It is difficult to collect *there* constructions from the corpus (Breivik (1990) and Yaguchi (2017)). Breivik (1990) argued that it was sometimes extremely difficult to distinguish between the locative *there* and the existential *there*; therefore, while this quantitative study might include a locative construction, the aim is to capture general tendencies.
- 4 All the four examples with the noun *stage* in COCA and BNC are used with the relative clause *when*, as in (3 a), (i), and (ii):
 - (i) THERE COMES A STAGE IN THE GROWTH CYCLE OF ALmost any business when the need arises for an infusion of outside capital. (COCA) (sic)
 - (ii) In every production there comes an awkward jerky stage when the cast abandon their books for the first time, but for The Hooded Owl it seemed to be going on longer than usual. (BNC)

The temporal sense of *stage* is “*a particular time or state that something reaches as it grows or develops*,” which is cited from *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 6th*.

- 5 The phrase *when it comes to* was excluded from our samples.
- 6 The two examples in (8 b) were found in the same source.

Date	1991 (19910328)
Title	<i>Reverend Billy Graham on the Persian Gulf War</i>
Source	SPOK: CNN_King

- 7 See Mino (forthcoming) for other characteristics of the *there comes a* time-class-noun construction.
- 8 Concerning backshifting, I received an insightful comment from Kenji Kashino, who is a professor emeritus at Osaka Shoin Women’s University.
- 9 The following examples were found before the 18th century. They were from *Early English Books Online* (EEBO).
 - (i) :then there comes a spring vpon a nation: (1627)
 - (ii) Againe, riches stand us in stead in the time of need; for, why doe men lay up treasures? that when dearth comes, when there comes a time of need, the riches that they have laid up, may serve their turne, . . . (1633)

- 10 OED also contains the following example, where *time* is modified with the adjective *sharp* and lacks the subordinating clause:

- (i) Having inflated the market..they make a sudden call for several thousand shares of stock on their buyer’s option, and then there comes a sharp time among the sellers, who are generally all short. (OED: 1857)

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