

Subject-Verb Agreement in Existential Constructions in Contemporary American English: A Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the variable subject-verb agreement in existential constructions in the Corpus of Contemporary American-English (COCA). While variable subject-verb agreement in existential constructions has been extensively studied in many varieties of English, we study this variation in a particular corpus to find out the correlation between the distribution of the standard and non-standard subject-verb agreement variants in American-English and a number of linguistic factors (tense, contraction, kind of plural and adjacency of subject and verb). To achieve this goal, a total of 375 tokens of standard and non-standard agreement in existential constructions are extracted from the corpus and coded in terms of the aforementioned linguistic factors. The data are then analyzed using a computer program, namely Goldvarb X, which is capable of providing the frequencies of the standard and non-standard variants in the extracted tokens. The results of the study confirm the findings of the previous studies and hypotheses. Present tense, contraction, absence of plural-s, and presence of intervening material are found to favor singular agreement in existential constructions in contemporary spoken American-English. In addition, processing, default, and lexicalization hypotheses (Walker, 2007) are supported by the absence of plural-s, intervening material, and the high frequency of occurrence of *there's* respectively.

Keywords: Contemporary American English, corpus linguistics, existential constructions, language variation & change, variationist approach.

1. Introduction

Variable subject-verb agreement in existential constructions in English varieties has been widely investigated from a variationist sociolinguistic perspective (Feagin, 1979; Wolfram, 1991; Meechan & Foley, 1994; Walker, 2007; Cheshire & Fox, 2008; Tagliamonte, 1998, 2008; Cruschina, 2015). It has been reported that subject-verb agreement varies in these constructions in that

the subject and its verb either agree or disagree in number as in (1) and (2) respectively.

- 1) If **thereare** laws of Hollywood physics, this film surely violates a bunch.
(COCA, CBC_ Evening News, 110127, 6:30)
- 2) But apparently there **is** now **mommies** that are going on their Facebooks...
KOTB: Gagging everyone. (COCA: NBC_ Today, 110322, 7:00AM)¹

Variation in existential constructions can be heard everywhere in spoken English. It is not restricted to one area or one group of people (Walker, 2007). It is very frequent in native speakers' speech: at universities, in malls, in markets, at schools, in formal and informal styles of language, in language of educated and uneducated, young and old, women and men. Moreover, this variation is widespread in almost all varieties of English, Old English (Tagliamonte, 1998), contemporary spoken English and even Standard English (Hilton, 2016). Walker (2007, p.148) states that "this variability exists in every variety of English [...] and is one of the few areas of grammar in which standard varieties show variable agreement."

While morpho-syntactic variation of subject-verb agreement in existential constructions has been extensively studied in different varieties of English, we study this variation in a particular corpus, namely Corpus of Contemporary American-English (COCA, cf. more details are in the methodology section). Therefore, the main contribution of the present study lies in its reliance on real language in use through using COCA, which has never been used to analyze variation in existential constructions in American-English.

In the previous studies of the variable subject-verb agreement in existential constructions in English varieties, linguistic and social factors have been reported as the determining factors in constraining the variant choice (Walker, 2007; Tagliamonte, 2008). While most of the studies use data from everyday communications, very few other studies use formal (De Wolf, 1992) and semi-formal (Smallwood, 1979) speech data to investigate this variation. The results of these studies show that non-standard agreement in existential constructions in English is higher in informal speech than in semi-formal speech, which in turn is higher than formal speech. This is in line of Smallwood (1979), who argues that style plays a role in constraining the choice between standard and non-standard agreement in existential constructions. Therefore, using COCA as the source of our data enables the researchers to investigate the status of this variation in semi-formal and formal speech styles as COCA includes public interviews and TV shows that are different from sociolinguistic interviews (Labov, 1972, 1984) that are usually obtained on an individual basis through face-to-face interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee. In spite of the importance of

sociolinguistic interviews in investigating all levels of variation in spontaneous speech style, it is necessary to study variation in different speech styles. Consequently, using corpora such as COCA gives the chance to study variation in semi-formal and formal speech styles. By doing so, the results can be compared and contrasted with the ones obtained from investigating informal speech styles. This provides a better understanding of the effects of different speech styles on all kinds of variation, including the one under investigation. Before introducing the linguistic variable, the researchers provide the research questions that they seek to answer in this study.

1.1 Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

- 1) What is the distribution of the standard and non-standard variants of subject-verb agreement in existential constructions in contemporary spoken American-English?
- 2) How do some linguistic factors affect the variable subject-verb agreement in contemporary spoken American-English?

1.2 The variable

The variable chosen in this study is subject-verb agreement in plural existentials. There are two noticeable variants, namely singular ('s, is, and was) and plural ('re, are, were) as in (3 a-e) below.

3)

- a) I want to hear you. RENEE: But, I mean, I -- there's **people** that I see on TV out there that's been in worse condition. (COCA: NBC_ Dateline, 110315, 9:00 PM)
- b) I don't see the wisdom of intervention by American military forces but if there **are things** we can do to isolate and sanction the Qaddafi government to put further. (COCA: CBS_Evening News, 110227, 6:00 PM)
- c) my brother's partner. Well, what my father didn't know was that there **were cameras** there for security, and when the guys that came - my brother. (COCA: NPR FRESH Air, 110215, 9:00 PM)
- d) right after my brother passed. It was very difficult, the times, and there **were moments** that when it would help me get through it. (COCA: CNN Morgan, 110215, 9:00 PM)–
- e) But apparently there **is** now **mummies** that are going on their Facebooks... KOTB: Gaggling everyone. (COCA: NBC_Today, 110322, 7:00 AM)

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the pertinent literature on subject-verb agreement in existential constructions from a prescriptive, as well as, a variationist perspective. Section 3 introduces the methodology used to collect and analyze the data. Section 4 presents the results and discusses them in light of the wider existing literature. Section 5 concludes the paper and recommends for further future research.

2. Literature review

Variability in existential constructions in English varieties has been intensively studied: Toronto (Smallwood, 1979), Quebec City (Adams, 2005; Walker, 2007), Ottawa (Meechan and Foley, 1994; Woods, 1979), Halifax (Meechan and Foley, 1994), Australia (Eisikovits, 1991), Falkland Islands (Britain and Sudbury, 2002), New Zealand (Britain and Sudbury, 2002; Hay and Schreier, 2004), the United Kingdom (Britain, 2002; Crawford, 2005; Tagliamonte, 1998), the United States of America (Feagin, 1979; Christian, Wolfram and Dube, 1988; Hazen, 2000; Crawford, 2005; Krejci & Hilton, 2017). These studies investigated in details this widespread variable in almost all possible internal and external factors conditioning its occurrence. The researchers noted a strong correlation between the frequencies of singular and plural subjects in existential constructions and linguistic factors such as tense of the verb, contraction of the copula and intervening material, as well as social factors such as age, sex, education and style. The present study is only limited to linguistic factors as the corpus we use, (COCA), does not provide a social stratification of the participants according to their age, gender, education and social class. Therefore, our study sheds lights on the effects of some linguistic factors on choosing singular or plural variants in existential constructions.

The above-mentioned studies come up with similar results regarding this variable. The following linguistic factors are reported to favor singular agreement: present-tense contexts (Britain and Sudbury, 2002; Feagin, 1979), contraction,² presence of intervening material (Tagliamonte, 1998), absence of plural-s at the end of noun phrase subjects, grammatical subject (Chambers, 2004; Cheshire, 2008) and positive contexts (Levey, 2007). In spite of the fact that some few studies come up with different results [Hay and Schreier (2004) found that past-tense contexts favor singular agreement], these studies show that the occurrence of this variation is in a way or another regular. Before introducing the methods of data collection and analysis, we turn now to prescriptivists' views about agreement in existential constructions. This helps in identifying whether or not every day communications reflect these prescriptive views.

2.1 Prescriptive treatment of existential constructions

In this section, we provide what some prescriptivists (Fries, 1940; Robert, 1962; Shaw, 1979; Marius & Wiener, 1985; Olson, 1997; Lester & Beason, 2005) mention about standard and non-standard agreement in existential constructions. To start with, Lester & Beason (2005, p.124) describe this phenomenon as follows: "a surprising number of subject-verb errors involve sentences that begin with *thereis* and *therewas*. Part of the problem is that [...] the subject actually follows the verb (*There is usually some leftovers in the freezer*). The verb is singular but the actual subject is plural, so the verb also needs to be in the plural forms." Similarly, Shaw (1979, p.73) argues that "*There* is not a subject. After *there* [...] we usually find the verb first and then the subject."

According to Marius & Wiener (1985, p.179), "when verbs follow *there* at the beginning of a sentence, make sure that the subject that follows the verb agrees with it." Within the same lines, Olson (1997, p.121) emphasizes that "when a sentence asks a question or begins with the word *there*[...] the subject follows the verb. Locate the subject of the sentence and make certain the verb matches it." This is further prescribed by Aaron (1997, p.106), who adds that "the verb agrees with the subject even when the normal word order is inverted. Inverted subject-verb order occurs mainly in [...] constructions beginning with *there* and a form of *be*."

For his part, Huddleston (1984) distinguishes between amount and proportion in the case of mass noun phrases. He argues that in sentences like (4-5) below, the former is perfectly acceptable while the latter is not.

4) There was some sugar on the floor.

5) *There was most of the sugar on the floor.

These prescriptive views are summarized in a similar view by Fowler (1996, p.778), who states that

Before launching into a sentence beginning with *there* plus a part of the verb to be, one must decide whether the following subject is actually or notionally singular or plural. [Fowler indicates that] there is a strong, not always resisted, temptation, found prominently but not only in uneducated speech, to introduce a plural subject with the reduced form *there's*.

Fowler's viewpoint regarding the strong temptation to use *there's* regardless of the number of the following subject by educated and, to a higher degree, uneducated speakers of English is supported by Hilton (2016). Hilton (2016, p.60) finds that the cliticized form *there's*, but not *there is*, is very frequent, not stigmatized even in Standard English and "almost identical to the standard

agreeing form *there are* + NPpl in how it influences social perceptions." This means that, excluding the prescriptive norms, *there's* is not stigmatized in spontaneous speech (as well as more careful speech) at both production and perception levels.

In a nutshell, it is very clear that the use of singular variants in existential constructions with plural subjects is only condemned by prescriptivists. Yet, research has shown that usage does not match prescription where speakers frequently use singular verbs with plural subjects in *there* constructions in existential constructions (Walker, 2007; Britain and Sudbury, 2002; Feagin, 1979; Hanney, 1985; Smallwood, 1979; Tagliamonte, 1998; Mecchan and Foley, 1994).

3. Methodology

3.1 Source of data

The data were taken from the Corpus of Contemporary American-English (COCA). This corpus contains more than 560 million words (Davies, 2008) that are equally divided among spoken, fiction, newspapers, magazines, and academic. For the sake of this study, only spoken tokens were considered. The corpus includes 20 million words each year from 1990-2017. It is updated once or twice every year.

This corpus is suitable for looking at current, ongoing changes in the language. Search can be for words, phrases, wildcards, lemmas, parts of speech, or any combinations of these. Search can be limited by genre or overtime.

3.2 Variable Context

The context of this variable includes existential constructions with **there** plus one of these forms of verb **be** (is, 's, was, are, 're, were) followed by a plural noun phrase as its subject.

Every such construction was identified. Because the number of tokens was more than seventy thousand tokens in the whole corpus, we included only tokens in 2011³. Still, the number was around five thousand tokens. We included only spoken ones in 2011, and this limits the number to 452. Among these, tokens where *there* is not used in existential constructions and/or is not followed by a verb are excluded as in 6(a). Also, we excluded all tokens in which *there* is followed by a *modal*, *have*, or *has* as in 6 (b and c).

6)

- (a) Those FBI agents sat **there** for many hours. (COCA, Fresh Air, 110314, 12:00 PM)

(b) **There will** 100 times more. (COCA, CNN_Arena, 110315, 8:00 PM)

(c) **There have** been cars turned over and washed on to the highways. (COCA, PBS_News Hour, 110314, 6:00 PM)

Meechan and Foley (1994) mention that contracted **are** might be confused with zero copulas. Walker (2007) excluded this sub-variable because of its rarity of occurrence. In our study, no single token of the contracted **are** was noticed and then it is automatically excluded. The number of tokens after the exclusions was three hundred and seventy five.

3.3 Procedure

The procedure followed to extract data from the corpus was by word search. 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 enabled us to get the eligible tokens.

Having tried different ways to extract the data, we found that the above mentioned procedure was the most adequate one. However, one problem arose. Even with the clear and precise instructions given in the procedure of extracting the tokens (**there**, plural noun, SPOK, and 2011), we always got all tokens for 2011 including academics, magazines, fiction, and newspapers. We did try it many times, but we got the same thing. We adopted this search because it was the best among the tens of trials with different instructions. We filtered out (14618) tokens including all tokens in 2011. Then we extracted spoken ones alone by going over the whole tokens (14618). It was easy because the tokens were classified by genre. All we had to do was to take the spoken tokens out of the data and choose the eligible ones for the study. The number of the spoken tokens in 2011 was 5317. We examined those tokens and excluded the ones with singular copula verbs and singular subjects. Also, we excluded tokens where **there** was not used in existential constructions and where it was followed by modals and/or verb to have (as mentioned above in the variable context). A total of 375 tokens were retained for further analysis. These tokens were coded according to some linguistic factors.

3.4 Linguistic factors conditioning variation

Each token was considered to see whether it is followed by a singular or a plural agreement. Then we coded them based on a number of linguistic factors.

3.4.1 Tense

There are two factors here (present and past). Following many studies (e.g., Feagin, 1979; Britain and Sudbury, 2002), it is hypothesized that present-tense contexts favor singular agreement than past-tense counterparts.

3.4.2 Contraction

Contraction (contracted forms and full forms as a factor group) is said to affect the choice of the variant. Many studies show that contracted forms favor singular agreement compared to full forms (Hanney, 1985; Smallwood, 1979):

- 7) **There's** many sources that you cite. (COCA, Tail to the Nation, 110113, 2:00 PM)
- 8) **There's** lots of things... (COCA, Fox, 110114, 10:00 PM)

Walker (2007, p.6) states that "tense and contraction cannot be extricated as contraction can only occur with present-tense forms of **be**." This is true, but we included contraction as a factor of the frequency of contracted forms with present-tense and their effects on choosing singular agreement.

3.4.3 Kind of plural

The presence or absence of the plural *-s* is said to affect variability in existential constructions. Meechan and Foley (1994) suggest that the presence of plural-*s* on the subject of existential constructions might favor plural agreement as in the following example:

- 9) If **thereare** laws of Hollywood physics, this film surely violates a bunch. (COCA, CBC_ Evening News, 110127, 6:30 PM)

Hanney (1985) adds that the absence of plural-*s* extension beyond the NP favors singular agreement, as in (10) below.

- 10) **There'speople** with fire hoses. (COCA, ABC_20/20, 110325, 10:00 PM)

3.4.4 Adjacency

In existential constructions, the noun phrase subject can occur immediately after the verb with no intervening material between them, or it can be separated by an intervening material. We considered anything that comes between the subject noun phrase and the verb as an intervening material. These include articles, adjectives, nouns, numbers and the negative morpheme *no*. Many studies show that non-adjacent subjects (as in 11-13 below) favor singular agreement (Tagliamonte, 1998; Britain and Sudbury, 2002).

- 11) There was **somany** questions still unanswered. (COCA, NBC_ Dateline, 110121, 9:00 PM)
- 12) I mean, there's **even** photos that probably can't be seen on air. (COCA, CNN_ Evening News, 110115)
- 13) There's **largeparts** of your story... (COCA, NBC_ Dateline, 110121, 9:00 PM)

After having coded the whole tokens according to the aforementioned linguistic factors, the researchers resorted to a computer program, namely Goldvarb X, which is capable of providing a statistical analysis of the distribution of the variants of the targeted variable (i.e., singular and plural agreements in this study). This program also presents the contribution and the statistical significance of the factor groups (independent variables) in constraining the choice of variants. These results are presented in the ensuing section.

4. Results and discussion

The results in Table 1 below show the overall distribution of the standard and non-standard agreement variants in COCA. It can be noticed that the number of plural verbs is more than that of singular verbs.

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

This is a surprising result if we compare it with the previous studies based on everyday communications. Yet, if it is compared with the studies that used formal speech data such as De Wolf (1992), then we can understand that our result is justified as it is based on semi-formal speech data. This is in line with Smallwood (1979), who finds that the percentage of non-standard agreement is higher in informal speech data than that in formal and semi-formal speech data. While the percentage of non-standard agreement is 94% in Ottawa English (Meechan & Foley, 1994), it is 26% in De Wolf's (1992) controlled frame tests and 41.8% in Smallwood's (1979) semi-formal task survey. Therefore, our result supports Smallwood's claim about the effect of style on standard and non-standard agreement in existential constructions in English. COCA includes different genres and styles. The spoken data can be safely classified as semi-formal simply because they are different from the speech data collected through sociolinguistic interviews. While in both cases, speech data were recorded, the ones in COCA were obtained from public TV shows and channels, unlike the interviews that were just between the interviewer (mainly the researcher(s) and the interviewee.

Now, we turn to the contribution of the linguistic factors in constraining variant choice of standard and non-standard agreement in existential constructions.

Table 2: Contribution of linguistic factor groups to the selection of singular agreement variant in existential constructions in American-English

Total N.	No./tokens	%	Factor
Tense			
Present	43	139	327
Past	8	4	48
Contraction			
Contracted	100	130	130
Full	5	13	245
Kind of plural			
Ending with pl. -s	35	121	347
Not ending with pl. -s	79	22	28
Adjacency of subject NP			
Adjacent	29	27	94
Non-adjacent	41	116	281
		143	375

4.1 Tense

The results in Table 2 show that present-tense contexts favor singular agreement more than past-tense contexts do. These results confirm the ones reported in the previous studies regarding tense (Adams, 2005; Feagin, 1979; Britain and Sudbury, 2002; Meechan and Foley, 1994; Eisikovits, 1991). However, Walker (2007) and Adams (2005) believe that contraction here is the reason behind the preference of using singular agreement rather than the present tense itself. Adams (2005, p.28) states that "some studies have drawn the conclusion that it is contraction, rather than tense that seems to be affecting the rate of singular concord." That is why she did another run of analysis using tense and contraction as one factor group. She finds that full forms of the copula show low occurrences of singular agreement in both the present and the past. When the verb is contracted, singular agreement becomes categorical with present tense only (97%). These results justify what Adams did in combining tense and contraction as one factor group. We follow Adams in her approach of using contraction and tense as one factor group. The results are very similar, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Distribution of singular agreement by tense and contraction

	Present	%	Past	%
Contracted	130/130	100	0/130	0
Not contracted	8/245	3.2	4/245	1.6

The results in Table 3 show that there is no single occurrence of contracted past verb and all contracted forms are present and singular. Also, when they are in full forms, present and past tenses have very low tokens of singular agreement (8 for the present and 4 for the past). The agreement becomes categorical (100%) when the verb is contracted and present. In our data, although the number of tokens with full forms of the verb is not large, it shows that present, full forms of the copula favor singular agreement more than past counterparts do. The percentage is doubled in the direction of singular agreement (from 1.6 % to 3.2 %).

Walker (2007, p.163) does not use contraction and tense together in his study. Rather, he excludes contraction and uses tense only. That is because he believes that contraction might affect the choice of singular variant rather than the tense of the verb in the copula. Also, he concludes that "the inclusions of *there's* in previous studies of singular agreement may be responsible for inconsistencies in the ranking of constraints, especially those of tense and type of determiner (163)." For that reason, he excludes *there's* from his first analysis. He comes up with opposite results where he finds that past tense contexts (60 %) favor singular agreement than present-tense contexts do (18%).

4.2 Contraction

Our results confirm the ones in the previous studies (Meechan and Foley, 1994; Hay and Schreier, 2002; Adams, 2005) in that contracted verbs in the copula favor singular agreement. It is noticed in this study that this preference is entirely categorical for the benefit of the singular agreement (100%). The association between contraction and singular agreement apply in all tokens. Adams (2005, p.27) justifies for this categorical singular agreement (97% in her data) in that "contraction draws attention away from the copula, and ungrammatical agreement is much less noticeable."

It can be drawn from the above results that native speakers of English apparently use singular verb that is contracted with *there* regardless of the subject. It might be the case that they use a singular verb before thinking of the possible subject that is forthcoming after the verb. Jespersen (as cited in Adams 2005, p.1) believes that singular agreement has grown to be "a fixed formula to indicate the existence of something; it is often pronounced before the speaker has considered whether it is singular or plural word that is to follow." Another interpretation for this might be that speakers being interviewed in public programs on TV (as the case in our data) are under psychological pressure. They tend to focus on the idea that they want to explain or convey rather than the grammaticality of their sentences. In most cases of these programs, listeners are not language mavens; they need to follow the ideas rather than observing

grammatical errors. The same thing applies to the speakers in these programs; they are after appearing as logical and convincing as possible in front of their audience. That is why they may not lend much attention to the grammaticality of their sentences.

It is true that grammaticality is important, but we think that native speakers tend to speak in a way that they feel comfortable. This way reflects speaking in the way they like, and using everyday speech is the speech style that is suitable for this purpose (the language that is free from prescription); it enables speakers to focus on one direction (ideas and logical flow of these ideas). Trying to watch the grammar of words distracts the speaker's attention to ideas that might not appear to be strong and convincing enough to the listeners. We know that this may not be the case all the time, but it might be one of the interpretations for this lack of agreement in existential constructions.

4.3 Kind of plural

As shown in Table 2, our results perfectly confirm the previous results (Meechan and Foley, 1994; Britain and Sudbury, 2002; Adams, 2005 when he excluded *there's*). The absence of plural-s at the end of the subject noun phrase favors singular agreement (79%), whereas nouns with plural-s disfavor singular agreement. In the above studies, plural-s makes it salient that the noun is plural, and speakers have in mind this association between the plural-s and plural nouns. That is why they favor the plural agreement.

Adams (2005, p.32-33) notes that there is no difference between lexical plurals and grammatical plurals in favoring the singular agreement. Yet, after excluding the lexical item *people* from her data, she finds a difference in favor of singular agreement for lexical plurals. She finds that the presence of the lexical item *people* in particular decreases the possibility of singular agreement.

In our data, checking the occurrence of this exact lexical item, *people*, we find that this item in particular occurs 15 times out of 28 (54%). In all occurrences, it is used with singular verbs. It is the only lexical plural item that categorically favors singular agreement. Unlike Adams (2005), we find that the presence of this lexical item increases the possibility of singular agreement from 54% to 79% (when excluding *people*), as can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Distribution of singular agreement in lexical plurals with and without *people*

	%	N/Total
Lexical plurals with <i>people</i>	79	22/28
Lexical plurals without <i>people</i>	54	7/13

4.4 Adjacency (intervening material)

Similar to other studies (Walker, 2007; Adams, 2005; Tagliamonte, 1998; Britain and Sudbury, 2002), the results of the present study show an effect for intervening material on agreement in existential constructions. The presence of intervening material is found to favor singular agreement (41%). This seems justifiable in that speakers might lose attention to the agreement after having added some words between the subject and its verb. They do not have the chance or sometimes the desire to pause and go back to their words to identify the agreement. As a result, they use the singular form at the very beginning without paying much attention to the agreement.

Regarding the effect of the length of the intervening material on agreement, Tagliamonte (1998) believes that the presence of any intervening material increases the possibility of singular agreement. Britain and Sudbury (as cited in Adams, 2005, p.30) argue that "three or more intervening items led to categorical concord in New Zealand."

Something should be added to what Tagliamonte (1998) and Britain and Sudbury (2002) mention about intervening material. It is clear in the studies mentioned above that the presence of intervening material increases the possibility of using singular variants. Yet, the question here is what about adjacent plural subjects with singular agreement variants. In our data, the percentage of adjacent plural subjects with singular variant is 29% (27 tokens out of 94 as shown in Table 2). There is no intervening material here, but the singular is used. So, there must be something else conditioning the occurrence of singular rather than the intervening material. We investigate the data again to find a reason for that. We find that out of 27 tokens, there are 25 ones with *there's* (92.5 %). In addition to what has been mentioned before about the effect of contraction on using singular variants, it seems that *there's* is not affected by adjacency. In other words, adjacency (intervening material) affects other variants but not *there's*. This can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5: Distribution of singular agreement in adjacent subjects with and without *there's*

	%	N/Total
Adjacent subjects with <i>there's</i>	92.5	25/27
Adjacent subjects without <i>there's</i>	7.5	2/25

To provide reliable results, we also investigate the occurrences of *there's* in non-adjacent subjects. We get the same results. Even in non-adjacent subjects the presence of *there's* is dominant (90.5%), as can be seen in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Distribution of singular agreement in non-adjacent subjects with and without *there's*

	%	N/Total
Non-adjacent subjects with <i>there's</i>	90.5	105/116
Non-adjacent subjects without <i>there's</i>	9.5	11/116

Apparently, this supports the claim that the presence or absence of intervening material does not affect the choice of singular verbs in the presence of *there's*. Intervening material appears to affect the choice in other environments (i.e. in the absence of *there's*). That is, adjacency can be a factor but beyond contraction. To make sure that this claim is valid, we have an analysis of the data after excluding *there's*.

4.5 Results after excluding *there's*

The results in Table 7 below show that standard plural agreement is almost categorical in the absence of *there's* (95.5 %). In the presence of *there's*, it is also standard plural agreement that has the highest percentage (62%), as Table 1 above depicts. Yet, it is not as high as the percentage before. This indicates that the absence of *there's* increases the possibility of using the standard plural variants.

Table 7: Overall distribution of standard and non-standard agreement variants in the corpus (COCA) after excluding *there's*

Variants	%	No.
Singular (is, was)	5	13
Plural (are, were)	95	232
N	100	245

It is also worth investigating the roles of the linguistic factors after excluding *there's*. The results in Table (8) show different results from the ones including *there's* in this study. Unlike most of the results in Table (2) above, past tense, full forms of the copula, and presence of plural-s favor singular agreement (8%), (5%), and (5%) respectively. These are exactly the opposite of the results in Table (2). Walker (2007) finds that past tense favors singular agreement (.60%) when he excludes *there's*.

Table 8: Contribution of linguistic factor groups to the selection of singular agreement variant after excluding *there's*

Factor	%	No./tokens	Total N.
Tense			
Present	5	9	197
Past	8	4	48
Contraction			
Contracted	0	0	0
Full	5	13	245
Kind of plural			
Ending with pl. -s	5	13	245
Not ending with pl. -s	0	0	0
Adjacency of subject NP			
Adjacent	3	2	70
Non-adjacent	6	11	175
		13	245

The only factor that confirms the results in Table (2) is adjacency. Table (8) shows that non-adjacent subjects favor singular agreement (6%) compared to adjacent subjects (3%). This might be for the reason we mentioned in the adjacency section. *There's* appears to be unaffected by adjacency at all. Whenever *there's* is used, then the singular agreement is automatically included in its structure. In other words, whenever the copula is contracted in *there* constructions, the singular is used regardless of adjacent or non-adjacent subjects.

Though the results obtained without *there's* differ entirely (except adjacency) from the results of the present study and the mainstream of previous studies, they are not reliable enough to make generalizations. Their rates and percentages are low (8% and 5%), reflected in very few tokens in the data.

Notwithstanding the low rates of the results in Table (8), one important conclusion that can be drawn is the fact that variation in existential constructions is mainly associated with *there's*. Any exclusion for this item in particular will result in a kind of inconsistency in the results (unlike what Walker 2007 mentioned). It is true that its high occurrence might affect the consistency of the results, but its exclusion appears to result in more inconsistency than its inclusion does.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study confirm the findings of previous studies and hypotheses. Present tense, contraction, absence of plural-s, and presence of intervening material favor singular agreement in existential constructions in

contemporary spoken American-English. Processing, default, and lexicalization hypotheses (Walker, 2007, p.162) are supported by the absence of plural-s, intervening material, and the high frequency of occurrence of *there's* respectively.

In the case of excluding *there's* from the data, the contributions of the linguistic factors favoring singular agreement differ completely (except in adjacency) from the results obtained when *there's* is included. In spite of its high occurrence in the data of corpora, we believe that no thorough study can be conducted in the case of excluding *there's* from the data. It can be excluded in one part of any study, but not at all, to compare the effects of its presence and absence. Its exclusion causes more inconsistency and unreliable results than its inclusion does.

It is very clear that usage does not match prescription. However, it might be argued that there is a tendency, whether intentional or not, to use forms of verbs that agree with their subjects. In the case of this study, this tendency might be seen as a result of the nature of the collected data. Our data were collected from media programs. This means that meetings and interviews were intended to be for the public. That is why interlocutors tend to watch their spoken language more because they were talking in a way or another to the public. Consequently, tokens that reflect correct standard agreement between subjects and verbs in existential constructions are greater than non-standard agreement tokens.

Based on these results, it is recommended to study variation in existential constructions in semi-formal and formal speech styles in more varieties of English to be able to compare the results with the ones reported in the previous studies that focus on spontaneous speech. In addition, as COCA includes data from 1990 until 2017, it is recommended to investigate variation in existential constructions in COCA through comparing and contrasting the results regarding this variation in the years 1990 and 2000, which in turn can be compared and contrasted with the ones reported in this study. These are suggested topics that the researchers leave for further future research.

في التراكيب الوجودية في اللغة الإنجليزية الأمريكية المعاصرة: توافق الفعل مع الفاعل: دراسة قائمة على المدونات النصية

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ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى بحث توافق الفعل مع الفاعل في التراكيب الوجودية في مدونة اللغة الإنجليزية الأمريكية المعاصرة من وجهة نظر تنوعية. وبالرغم من أن هذا المتغير تمت دراسته في لهجات اللغة الإنجليزية المتعددة إلا أن هذه الدراسة تركز على مدونة معينة لإيجاد العلاقة بين توزيع متغيرات توافق الفعل مع الفاعل في الإنجليزية الأمريكية مع عددٍ من العوامل اللغوية (الزمن والتقليص ونوع الجمع وتقارب الفعل والفاعل). ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، تم استخلاص 375 مثالاً تحوي تراكيب وجودية في هذه المدونة، ومن ثم ترميز هذه الأمثلة بناءً على العوامل اللغوية المذكورة آنفاً. تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام برنامج جولد قارب X القادر على إعطاء نسب توافق الفعل مع الفاعل وعدمه في الأمثلة المستخلصة. أكدت نتائج هذه الدراسة النتائج والفرضيات السابقة حيث إن الزمن المضارع، والصيغة المقلصة، وعدم وجود مقطع الجمع، ووجود فاصل بين الفعل والفاعل، تؤدي إلى عدم توافق الفعل مع الفاعل من حيث الجمع والأفراد في الإنجليزية الأمريكية المعاصرة. بالإضافة إلى ذلك تم إثبات فرضيات التنفيذ والافتراضية والمفرداتية من خلال غياب مقطع الجمع والمادة الفاصلة بين الفعل والفاعل والتكرار العالي للتركيب (يوجد) على التوالي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الإنجليزية الأمريكية المعاصرة، اللغويات المدونة، التراكيب الوجودية، التغير والتنوع اللغوي، المنهج التنوعي.

Note

1. The data in parentheses refer to the name of the corpus, the channel, the name of the program, the date and the time of the program.
2. Adams (2005) points out that some studies conclude that it is contraction rather than tense that affects the choice of singular agreement. That is why Adams excluded *there's* from her analysis of existential variation in Quebec English. More details on this point are provided in the results and discussion section.
3. There is nothing special about the data of the year 2011 in COCA. Yet, the researchers choose this year as they intend to conduct a study on the same topic in 2020 and compare and contrast the results with the ones of the present study. With the very rapid revolution of technology and media, the reserarchers believe that ten years would be a reasonable period of time to compare and contrast results to check the nature as well as the directionality of language variation and change.

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