

English *there*-clefts: A construction-based extraposition analysis

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Kim, Jong-Bok. 2022. English *there*-clefts: A construction-based extraposition analysis. *Linguistic Research* 39(2): 389-404. In addition to prototypical clefts (e.g., *it*-clefts), English also employs non-prototypical *there*-clefts (e.g., *There is Sydney who wants to experience every good thing*). This squib reviews key grammatical properties of *there*-clefts, referring to *it*-clefts. It also discusses the authentic data extracted from the corpus COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English). It then sketches a construction-based analysis in which the head copula verb in *there*-clefts is a lexical-class construction derived from the specificational copula. This specificational copula places a cleft clause in the extraposed position, together with assigning a focus value to its second argument. This analysis could pave a new way to license *there*-clefts in a systematic way. (Kyung Hee University)

Keywords cleft, specificational, copula, extraposition, lexical-class construction

1. Introduction

Examples in (1) illustrate three proto-typical cleft constructions in English:

(1) a. *It*-cleft:

It is these uncontrolled variables that I would like to discuss in detail.

b. Pseudo-cleft:

What I would like to discuss in detail is these uncontrolled variables.

c. Inverted pseudo-cleft:

These uncontrolled variables are what I would like to discuss in detail.

It is well noted that these prototypical clefts share certain information structure properties (see, among others, Hedberg 2000; Lambrecht 2001; Kim 2007; Davidse 2016). All these clefts have the presupposition such that ‘I would like to discuss x in detail’, the focus value ‘these uncontrolled variables’, and the assertion ‘x is these uncontrolled variables’.

In addition to these, there are non-prototypical cleft constructions including the so-called *there*-clefts:

- (2) a. There is the use of clefts that he wants to explain. (Halliday 1967: 238)
 b. There is John who painted the shed. (Davidsen 2016)

These examples are quite similar to the *it*-clefts, in particular. Both examples here have three main components: presupposition, focus, and assertion. For instance, (2a) has the presupposition ‘he wants to explain x’, the focus value ‘the use of clefts’, and the assertion ‘x is the use of clefts’. However, these clefts seem to behave differently from *it*-clefts.

This squib first reviews some key properties of *there*-clefts in English, focusing on their similarities to and differences from *it*-clefts. To see their usages, it investigates the corpus COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English). After discussing their usages in real life, this squib then sketches a construction-based grammar approach that could address their grammatical properties as well as usages.

2. Similarities and differences with *it*-clefts

As noted, the non-prototypical cleft constructions in English, *there*-clefts, share certain grammatical properties with *it*-clefts but at the same time display their own constructional properties (Davidsen 2000; Lambrecht 2001). Let’s compare the following two:

- (3) a. It was John who painted the door.
 b. There was John who painted the door.

The two appear to be quite alike in terms of syntax. Both cleft constructions have an expletive pronoun (*it* and *there*), *be*, a focal element, and then a cleft clause (Collins 1992).

- (4) It is Kim who painted the door.
 subject copula focus cleft clause

- (5) There is Kim who painted the door.
 subject copula focus cleft clause

The focus function of the postcopular NP seems to be clear from the following exchange of a dialogue:

- (6) A: Who painted the door?
 B1: It is Kim who painted the door.
 B2: There is Kim who painted the door.

As noted by Halliday (1967), both the *it*-cleft and the *there*-cleft can function as an answer to the *wh*-question. The only difference seems to be with the implication. In (6B1), it is Kim and no other who painted it, while in (6B2), Kim is one of them who painted the door.

The possible focal element in the postcopular position is quite diverse: it can be an NP, a PP, and even a clause (Davidse 2000):

- (7) a. It/there's [John] that's causing us trouble.
 b. It/there's [on the table] that you may have left it.
 c. It/there's [when you were away] that it might have happened.

The cleft clause following the focus expression is more often introduced by *that* rather than *wh*-pronouns. In some cases, *wh*-pronouns are even unacceptable (Huddleston 1984).

- (8) a. It is in November that/*when you should prune the roses.
 b. It's only by train that/*how you will get in.
 c. There's on the platform that/*where you can wait.

Just like prototypical clefts, there is a syntactic dependency relation between the focus and a missing element in the cleft clause.

- (9) a. There is this guy that he has to deal with ____ .
 b. *There is this guy that he has to deal with the man.
 c. *There is with this guy that he has to deal with.

As illustrated by these examples, the gap in the cleft clause matches with the focus expression in the postcopular position.

One clear difference of the two clefts comes from semantics. As noted in the literature, the *it*-cleft induces an exhaustive meaning whereas the *there*-cleft evokes either a presentational or enumerative meaning (Lambrecht 2001; Davidse 2016):

- (10) a. It's Jim who makes the coffee.
b. There's Jim who makes the coffee.

In the *it*-cleft (10a), *Jim* is the only one, but not others, who makes the coffee. Meantime, in the *there*-cleft (10b), *Jim* is just one possible individual among others who make the coffee.

In terms of semantics, *there*-clefts can be divided into two main types: enumerative and presentational. Observe the following pair:

- (11) a. We don't have to tell him. I mean there's **only me and you** that know about it. (Davidse 2000)
b. There is **a linguist** who wants to explain clefts. (Lambrecht 2001: 507)

In the example (11a), the postcopular focal element *only me and you* offers an enumerative value for the variable 'x' linked to the cleft clause, 'x knows about it'. In (11b), the focal element *a linguist* and the cleft clause together present new information for the open proposition 'x wants to explain clefts'.¹

3. A corpus investigation

In order to investigate the authentic uses of *there*-clefts, the research investigated the corpus COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English) which contains more than 560 million words of text (20 million words each year from 1990 through 2017, Davies 2008). The first phase of the study identified three types of the *there*-clefts with the following search strings:

¹ The presentational focus is usually equivalent to the typical term 'focus' whose common diagnosis is questioning: a focus is the part of the sentence that corresponds to the answer to a given question.

- Type 1: *there* (*) BE Pronoun *that|who|which|where|when|how*
- Type 2: *there* (*) BE ProperN *that|who|which|where|when|how*
- Type 3: *there* (*) BE Det (*) noun *that|who|which|where|when|how*

Some exemplar tokens are given in the following:

- (12) a. Type 1 with a pronoun
 There's nobody that wants to win more than him. (COCA 2016 NEWS)
- b. Type 2 with a proper noun
 And one day, there was Deme that was left over. (COCA 2004 FIC)
- c. Type 3 with a definite NP
 There're the people that are big fans and would love to have your autograph. (COCA 1994 MAG)

Of the tokens extracted from the search strings, there are two main types excluded from the study, as given in the following:

- (13) a. There's a man who had his picture taken by Time magazine. (COCA 2013 SPOK)
- b. There's the fact that she's married to Bill. (COCA 2007 NEWS)

Examples like (13a) in which an indefinite NP is in the postcopular position are excluded since they could be interpreted as existential constructions. Those like (13b) are also excluded since the postcopular NP and the following clause are in an appositive relation.

After this manual filtering-out process, the research identified 1,102 tokens for Type 1, 33 tokens for Type 2, and 998 tokens for Type 3. This research thus looks into these total of 2,133 tokens. The first observable variable is registers. As given in the following figure, the most favored register for *there*-clefts is SPOK (939 tokens) followed by FIC (427 tokens). This could imply that the *there*-cleft prefers informal registers.

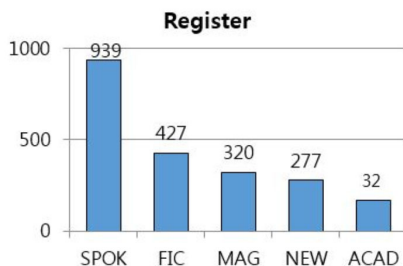


Figure 1. Frequencies of the three types by five registers

The second variable investigated in the study is the types of relative pronoun introducing the cleft clause:

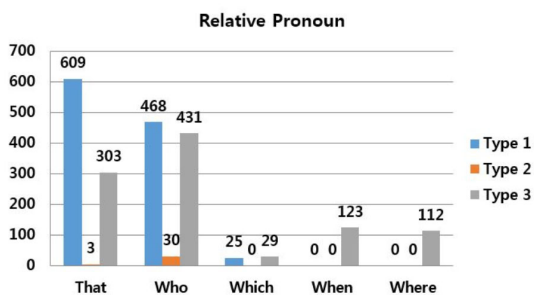


Figure 2. Relative pronouns in the three type

As the figure shows, the pronoun *that* and *who* have dominant uses in introducing the cleft clause.² Type 3 also includes tokens in which the cleft clause introduced by *when* and *where*, as illustrated by the following:

- (14) a. And there was the time when I stepped out of the house and faced Rukhsana. (COCA 2015 FIC)
- b. And then, of course, there were the benches where our mothers sat, gossiping over newspapers and beckoning us with offers of sliced apples. (COCA 2014 FIC)

² The corpus search excluded a variety of tokens where *that* is used as a complementizer introducing an appositive clause as in the uses of *that*, *there is the possibility that self-injury will persist despite active intervention* (COCA 2013 ACAD).

In the examples, the focal expression denotes a temporal or a place in the propositions denoted by the cleft clause.

The grammatical functions of the focused element quite vary. They can be the subject, object, or adverbial expression of the cleft clause, as given in the following table:

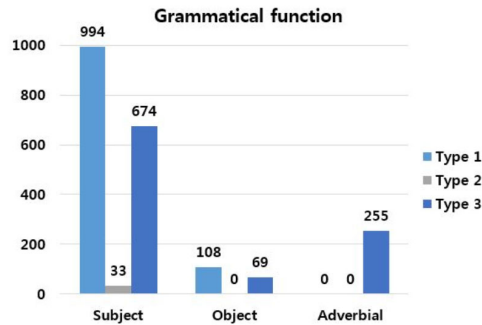


Figure 3. Grammatical functions of the focus in the three types

The figure shows that the subject is the dominant grammatical use (1,701 tokens) in all the three Types:

- (15) a. There was nothing that could be done and she would already be feeling bad enough. (COCA 2016 FIC)
 b. And then there is Jane who looks moribund. (COCA 1998 FIC)

The focal element can also function as an object in Type 1 and Type 3.

- (16) a. If there's anything that I feel really great about, it's that I've really been able to polish this kind of jewel. (COCA 2011 MAG)
 b. There may be the extreme odd examples that the president cites. (COCA 1990 SPOK)

However, there is no Type 2 tokens in which the proper name functions as the object of the cleft clause. The corpus also yields examples where the focus function as an adverbial expression.

- (17)a. And then there was the time when Jay-Z took again to Twitter to defend the company's slow growth. (COCA 2017 NEWS)
- b. And then, of course, there were the place where our mothers sat, gossiping over newspapers and beckoning us with offers of sliced apples. (COCA 2014 FIC)

Like other types of cleft constructions, *there*-clefts also display bi-clausal properties with respect to tense and modality selection. This can be evidenced by different tense and modal markings in the main clause and in the cleft clause (11 tokens in Type 1, 4 in Type 2, and 8 in Type 3):

- (18) There **is** the wife who **listened** to the 8th and 9th drafts of a troublesome passage with the same humor and intelligence as she did the first. (COCA 2001 ACAD)
- (19) As far as I can see there **is** nothing which Stafford **could have taken** any further. (COCA 1993 FIC)

In terms of the semantics of the focus, the predominant use is enumerative (82%) or presentational (18%):

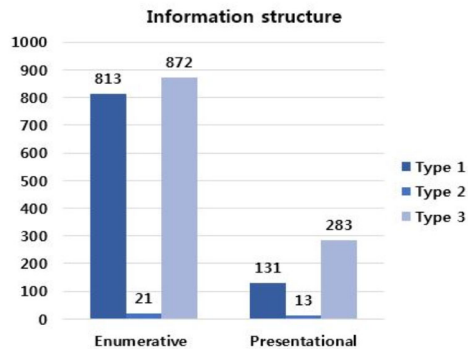


Figure 4. Information-structure function of the focus

The following illustrates enumerative uses of the construction in the corpus:

- (20) a. DATELINE takes you inside the hearts of the Hensel family. There's Koty who's six, and Morgan who's four, and the twins, who are 8. (COCA 1998 SPOK)
- b. There's someone who had no interest in that. (COCA 2019 TV)

The focal expression here is one of the kind that satisfies the variable in the cleft clause. Different from these, the postcopular expression in the following examples provide a presentational focus value:

- (21) a. There was Michelle who spent hours in her shower under the scalding water. (COCA 2009 SPOK)
- b. They were just freely swimming around. You'd just sit there and watch them. They didn't bother us. Then there were the snakes that neighbors found everywhere in their homes, even in the air-conditioning. (COCA 2005 NEWS)

In addition to the three Types we have seen so far, there is another type of *there*-clefts. Literature has noted that *it*-clefts and *there*-clefts both can allow the absence of a relative pronoun introducing the cleft clause:

- (22) a. It's his Mum falls in love with him. (Kim 2007)
- b. There was an old man got injured here yesterday. (Collins 1992: 425)
- c. There's only one thing is that shape. (Huddleston 1984: 460)

These examples include no relative pronoun that introduces a cleft clause. Such examples seem to form an independent type, named Type 4 here. To investigate this type in the corpus, the research used the search strings like *there* (*) [be] n* v?z*|v?d* and identified a total of 241 tokens:

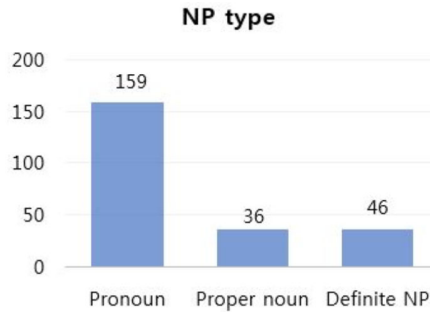


Figure 5. Frequencies of Type 4

Some illustrative examples are given in the following:

- (23) a. No, because it's a small town and there is nobody is here. (COCA 2000 SPOK)
 b. And there's this headline catches my eye, War Against Limbaugh. (COCA 1994 SPOK)
 c. There's the guy give us the dog. (COCA 1990 MOV).

Type 4 also displays bi-clausal properties. The cleft clause and the matrix clause independently select their grammatical categories such as tense and modality. Of the total 241 tokens, 26 tokens show tense or aspect mismatch:

- (24) a. There is nothing **were** ruling out. (COCA 2003 SPOK)
 b. There is Ford **has been** running well ahead and is expected to win. (COCA 2017 SPOK)

In terms of meaning, the Type 4 examples also have either an enumerative reading or a presentational focus:

- (25) a. There's the fences want mending and there's holes that want stoppering from the rain (2015 FIC).
 b. There was Leda was taking a bath in the brook. (COCA 1992 ACAD).

These observations imply that this is another type of *there*-clefts. One thing worth noting is that *it*-clefts also seem to license a similar type where there is no focus expression:

- (26) a. It's just I'm having some trouble here. (COCA 2019 MOV)
 b. It's that they brought their full selves. (COCA 2019 MAG)
 c. It is that he's the vice chairman of the Concord Coalition. (COCA 2002 SPOK)
 d. It was that he came from a high school class of 13 people. (COCA 2012 WEB)

These examples also illustrate that the postcopular clause serves as the focus value.

4. A construction-based approach

The pronoun *it* in *it*-clefts and the pronoun *there* in *there*-clefts are often treated as a place holder with no referential force (see, among others, Delahunty 1984; Gazdar et al. 1985; Pollard and Sag 1994; É Kiss 1998). However, there seems to be environments where the cleft pronoun has some referential properties (Hedberg 2000; Patten 2012; Kim and Michaelis 2020). The expletive treatment of the pronouns is linked to the *there*-existential construction, motivated from the semantic equivalence of the following pair:

- (27) a. There is a child in the yard.
 b. A child is in the yard.

These two are truth conditionally equivalent, which has led to assign no semantic value to *there*. The ensuing question is then why the language introduces sentences like (27a). It must have a grammatical function. Similar to the anticipatory use of *it*, we can take *there* as syntactically anticipating a topic. The topic is a situational location given in the context. That is, as noted by Bolinger (1977), *there* can serve as the extension of locative *there* that refers to a generalized location. The pronoun *there* is thus not a dummy operator or a redundant word but a functional word referring to a situational location. That is, (27a) means that *there* refers to a location of the given situation, and in this

situation location, a child is in the yard. Consider the following:

- (28) a. There is Lila that came in last night.
b. That is Lila that came in last night.

Within the present assumption, (28a) would mean that in a situational location referred by *there*, ‘x’ came in last night and this ‘x’ is Lila. Since the pronoun is a referential one, we could also expect that it can be replaced by a demonstrative pronoun like *this* or *that* or *those*, as in (28b).

Given that the pronoun *it* in the cleft has some referential power introducing a variable linked to the given situation location, we then could interpret the copula verb in *there*-clefts as a specificational one, as also suggested by Davidse (2016). Consider the following specificational use of the copula (Mikkelsen 2011; Kim 2016b):

- (29) a. What I like is a salad.
b. The mayor of the city is Kim.

In (29a), the subject introduces a variable ‘x’ such that I like ‘x’ and in (29b), ‘x’ is the mayor of the city. As such, one key property of the specificational copula is that the subject evokes a variable ‘x’ and the postcopular expression offers its possible value. In the same manner, the copula in the *there*-cleft behaves like a specificational one, as seen from truncated *there*-clefts (Hedberg 2000):

- (30) Can you help us understand what we’re looking at here? There’s Superman.
(COCA 1993 SPOK)

The speaker asks if the hearer can help them, but the hearer makes a statement with a different value for the subject: it says there is someone ‘x’ who can help us understand what we are looking at here. The truncated *there*-cleft says ‘x’ is Superman.

With this observation, the present analysis accepts the view that the copula in *there*-clefts is a specificational copula (Hedberg 2000; Reeve 2011; Patten 2012). In addition, it is assumed that the copula in *there*-clefts is an independent lexical class construction derived from this specificational copula. The key function of this lexical class construction is that it places the cleft clause in the extraposed position. The

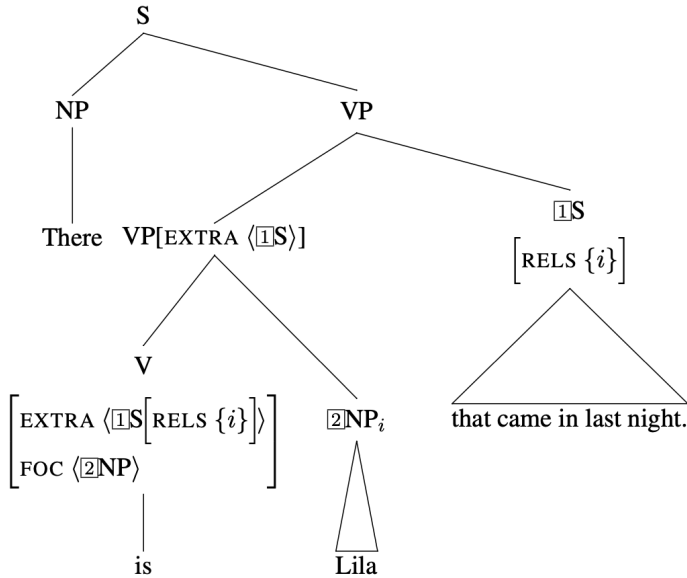
extraposition process is associated with the subject pronoun *there* and triggered by the head copula verb. This lexical relation can be represented as the following:

(31) *There*-cleft Copula

$$\left[\begin{array}{l} \textit{spec-cop-wd} \\ \text{ARG-ST } \langle \text{XP}_x, \text{YP}_y \rangle \\ \text{SEM } \lambda x \lambda y [\textit{identity-rel}(x,y)] \end{array} \right] \mapsto \left[\begin{array}{l} \textit{there-cleft-cop-wd} \\ \text{EXTRA } \langle (\lambda x [\text{P}(x)]) \rangle \\ \text{ARG-ST } \langle \text{NP}_x[\textit{there}], \text{[1]YP}_y \rangle \\ \text{INFO-ST | FOC } \langle \text{[1]YP} \rangle \end{array} \right]$$

This means that the copula in *there*-clefts is (metaphorically) derived from a special copular verb.³ The output copula verb selects two arguments: *there* and an YP argument functioning as a focus. In addition to these two arguments, it introduces an extraposed clausal expression which is an open proposition with the variable x . The semantics of this specificational verb is an *identity-rel* between this variable and the YP's reference. This output specificational copula will license the following structure for (28a):

(32)



3 To be precise, within a construction-based view, the output can be a mother of the input copula. See Sag (2012).

The copula *is* has two syntactic arguments: the subject *there* and the focus NP *Lila*. The cleft clause describes the situation such that an individual ‘x’ came in last night, and the focus refers to the individual ‘y’. The meaning of the specificational copula tells us that this ‘x’ is identical to the individual ‘y’.⁴

Note that the extraposed value can be optional. That is, its value can be empty, as we have seen in Type 4. Type 4 is where the sentence functions as a focus value.

(33) [There] was [Leda was taking a bath in the brook].

Such an example means that the subject *there* refers to a situational location ‘x’ and the postcopula sentence functions as a focus denoting ‘y’. This means that the situation ‘y’ is what the situational location refers to. The present analysis thus can offer a uniform analysis for the different types of *there*-clefts we could observe.

Another clear advantage of the present analysis is that it captures the properties of the cleft clause. Even though the cleft clause has a missing element and further is introduced by a relative pronoun like *that*, *which*, or *who*, it cannot be taken to be a typical relative clause. The putative antecedent, the focus expression here, can be a proper noun which is not accepted as the antecedent of the typical restrictive or non-restrictive relative clause. The present analysis takes the cleft clause to be an extraposed one and linked to the focused expression. This allows us to capture the syntactic dependence between the missing element in the cleft clause and the focus expression, as well.

5. Conclusion

This squib discussed the non-prototypical *there*-clefts in English. The clefts display similarities to as well as differences from *it*-clefts. The key differences of *there*-clefts are the subject and semantic functions of the focus. The *it*-cleft induces an exhaustive reading whereas the *there*-cleft gives us either a presentational or enumerative reading. These differences seem to be linked to the difference in the anticipatory pronouns: *it* and *there*. This argues against the expletive analysis where *it* and *there* are taken to be dummy

4 The feature RELS comes from a relative pronoun introducing the cleft clause. Its index value is linked to the focus expression, as it is linked to the antecedent NP in typical relative clauses (e.g., *the man_i who_j[RELS]_j came in last night*). See Kim and Michaelis (2020) for the analysis of relative clauses in this respect.

expressions.

The research investigated the corpus COCA to see the uses of *there*-clefts in real-life. It also offers a direct interpretation approach that neither refers to a putative clausal source nor movement operations. The squib sketches a construction-based analysis of *there*-clefts. The proposed analysis treats the copula verb in *there*-clefts as a specificational copula which selects two arguments (*there* and a focus XP) and one extraposed expression linked to the subject *there*. This analysis can offer a proper analysis for the three types of *there*-clefts as well as the intriguing Type 4.

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Received: 2022. 05. 16.

Revised: 2022. 06. 07.

Accepted: 2022. 06. 10.