

# Semantics of the *There* Construction in English

Wahn Nam

(Seonam University)

Nam, Wahn. 2001. Semantics of the *there* construction in English. *The Linguistic Association Korea Journal* 9(1). 133-144. This paper examines the meaning of the *there* construction in English. It is argued that the only indefinite postverbal noun may occur in the *there* construction when the particular discourse world is not presupposed, since the existence of the definite postverbal noun is presupposed in the physical world, and it is not possible that we assert the existence of the entities presupposed. Yet, if the particular discourse world is given, both definite and indefinite nouns are felicitous in the *there* construction. It is also claimed that the meaning of the *there* construction is the assertion of the existence of an entity/entities or a state of affairs, yet the existence is not the existence of the objective meaning irrelevant to the discourse, but the existence of the conceptual meaning relevant to the discourse. (Seonam University)

## 1. Introduction

*There* construction<sup>1)</sup> has long been one of the most frequently discussed topics of English Grammar. It is widely well-known that the postverbal NP in the *there* construction should be indefinite, and also the meaning of the *there* construction is the assertion of the existence and the appearance of an entity/entities or an event/events. Consider the following examples.

- (1) a. There is a ship on the horizon.

---

1) In the present article, we will deal with only existential *there* construction. *There* constructions may have their functions. For detailed discussion on it, see Bolinger (1977) and Quirk et al. (1985).

- b. \*There is the ship on the horizon.
- (2) a. There is an old lady across the street.  
b. \*There is the old lady/Mary/her across the street.
- (3) a. There appeared a little boy in the park.  
b. \*There disappeared a little boy in the park.

Milsark (1974, 1977) argues that the *there* construction means the assertion of the existence and attempts to explain why the postverbal noun phrase should be indefinite, the so-called Definiteness Effect.

As Milsark points out, universal quantifiers are usually not acceptable in the *there* construction, as illustrated below (Milsark, 1977, p. 6).

- (4) a. \*There was everyone in the room.  
b. \*There were all viewpoints considered.  
c. \*There was each package inspected.

The phenomenon that universal quantifiers does not occur in the *there* construction is called Quantification Effect.

In the present article we will observe the meaning of the *there* construction in view of the Definiteness Effect and Quantification Effect. We will assert the meaning of the *there* construction is not the existence in the physical world, but the existence in the discourse world. We will also argue that the grammaticality of the *there* construction depends on the discourse-pragmatic factors.

## 2. Definiteness Effect

*There* is an expletive without any meaning and is treated as having only the syntactic function that fill an empty subject position by the postverbal NP rule (i.e. There-Insertion). However, *there* has some kinds of meaning in the *there* construction. Compare the following

sentences.

- (5) a. Across the street is a grocery built out of bricks.  
 b. Across the street there is a grocery built out of bricks.

At a glance they look identical. Yet (5a) presents something on the immediate stage (brings something literally or figuratively before our presence), while (5b) presents something to our minds (bring a piece of knowledge into consciousness), which is exemplified below.

- (6) a. \*As I recall, across the street is a grocery built out of bricks.  
 b. As I recall, across the street there's a grocery built out of bricks.  
 c. As you can see, across the street is a grocery built out of bricks.

(6b) deals with a piece of information and a specific grocery, whereas (6c) is deictic and means a generic grocery. Therefore it is certain that the difference of two sentences (5a, 5b) is caused by the *there* construction.

Then what is the meaning of the *there* construction? Milsark (1974) observed that the *there* construction is used for an assertion of existence. According to Milsark, (5b) is syntactically derived from (5a) by There-Insertion, afterwards the meaning of the *there* construction is given by the E-rule.

- (7) E-rule

'There AUX (have en) be Q NP X' is interpreted: the class C denoted by NP has at least one number C such that P(C) is true, where P is a predicate and P is the reading of X and the set of such members is of cardinality Q.

According to the E-rule, (5b) has the meaning that there are a set of *grocery* and the set has at least one number and such number consists of bricks. Milsark asserts that the meaning of the *there* construction is

an existential assertion and attempts to explain why the postverbal NP in the *there* construction must be generally indefinite. Consider the following examples, which is repeated from (2).

- (8) a. There is an old lady across the street.  
b. \*There is the old lady/Mary/her across the street.

As shown with above examples, an immediately postverbal NP in the *there* construction is indefinite. Indefinite noun in this example is an entity the hearer does not know until someone speaks the sentence (8a). Thus, it is possible that the speaker asserts the existence of the referent of the indefinite noun. Yet the referents of the definite nouns in (8b) are entities the hearer knows and their existence is already presupposed. Hence, Milsark explains the definite noun in the *there* construction does not appear because it is not possible that someone asserts the entity presupposed.

As Milsark noted, the definite noun may also appear in the *there* construction in the following cases.

- (9) a. Is there anything worth seeing around here?  
b. Well, there is *the museum*.

Milsark argues that the meaning of the definite noun is a 'list' and in this case our concern is the list itself, not the individual items. He argues that the postverbal NP in (9b) is really indefinite because the list itself is indefinite. Hence, only the indefinite nouns appear in the *there* construction in any case.

However, Rando and Napoli (1978) argue that the correct restriction on the *there* construction is not that postverbal NPs must not be formally definite, but rather that they must be 'non-anaphoric'. Then the postverbal NPs in the *there* construction must represent unfamiliar entities. Consider the examples.

- (10) Q. What's worth visiting here?  
A. There's *the park*, a very nice restaurant, and *the library*.  
(Rando & Napoli, 1978)
- (11) a. Is there anyone coming to dinner?  
b. Yes, there's Harry and there's also Mrs Jones.  
(Bolinger, 1977, p. 116)

Rando and Napoli argue that in these cases the requirement of non-anaphoricity applies to the list itself and not to the individual items. That is, the answer to question in (10) represents only three lists and the list itself is definite, not indefinite. Thus, the *there* construction may have postverbal definite nouns. Also, Bolinger (1977) argues that the definiteness effect can be waived, where the definite noun phrase conveys new information, in answer to existential question (11a). Yet Abbott (1993) argues anaphoric NPs may also be fully felicitous in non-list *there* construction. Observe the following data.

- (12) a. Don't forget that Kim will be bringing a salad.  
b. Oh right - *there is that*.  
(Abbott, 1993)

In (12b), *that* is clearly anaphoric. In this case a list does not seem to be involved.

As Prince (1992) points out, a definite postverbal NP is permitted in the *there* construction just in case it represents an entity that the speaker believes is not already known to the hearer, as illustrated below in (13).

- (13) a. There was *the usual crowd* at the beach today.  
b. There were *the same people* at both conferences.  
c. There was *the stupidest article* on the reading list.  
(Prince, 1992)

Although the postverbal NPs in (13) are all formally definite, Prince notes that in all cases the entities they represent are assumed to be new to the hearer. For this reason, they are acceptable in the postverbal position in the *there* construction. In (13a) the group identified as *the usual crowd* need not always consist of the same set of members; the phrase may felicitously be used to refer to a group of people whose membership varies. Thus, the postverbal NP in (13a) has essentially two distinct referents simultaneously and the assertion of existence is relevant to the discourse context. The same is true of (13b). In (13c) the superlative NP, *the stupidest article* is sufficient to individuate a new entity that the hearer can think in the discourse context.<sup>2)</sup>

As Bolinger (1977) points out, postverbal NPs of the meaning of 'remind' are usually acceptable in the *there* construction, as illustrated below.

- (14) I would say let's take our vacation this month, but there's *John* consider. And there's *the election* to keep in mind - I don't to skip voting this time. And also there's *the supervisor's* to think over - it might mean missing out on that deal.
- (15) I'd like to go with you, but there's *all this work* to do! And *my mother-in-law* who's got to be taken to the airport.
- (16) We're all booked up. There's *yesterday's accident* still to be and the holdup that just got reported. No time for  
(Bolinger, 1977, p. 119)

---

2) Quirk et al.(1985, p. 1405) observe the definite *the* is acceptable which is determined by the absolute superlative as in (a) below. This corresponds to an indefinite article in the following alternative sentence (a'). This means that the superlative conveys new information and thus the postverbal superlative NPs are acceptable in *there* construction.

a. There's the oddest-looking man standing at the front door.

a'. There's *a* man of the oddest appearance standing at the front door.

In these examples we can find the following two facts. First, no doubt the definite nouns are acceptable in the *there* construction. Then the *there* construction is not the assertion of the existence, since the assertion of existence of the entities is permitted when their existence is not presupposed. Hence, whether the postverbal NPs in the *there* construction must be indefinite or definite is difficult to explain by Milsark's theory representing the assertion of existence.

Second, Milsark (1974), Rando and Napoli (1978) argue that the *there* construction containing the postverbal definite NPs has only the meaning of a 'list', yet this argument is not right. (9b) seems to have the meaning of a 'list', but (12b) does not involve a 'list'. Rather (12) seems to be relevant to the discourse context. (14- 16) have the meaning of a 'remind' rather than a 'list'. Similarly, the definite NP of the *there* construction has also the meaning of 'remind', as illustrated below.

(17) A: It's been a rotten month. John's arm has been in a cast since last week's stupid accident, and now we've cancelled that ski trip we've been planning for months.

B: Why aren't you going?

A: We wanted to, but *there's the dammed cast*, and it would make travelling difficult.

(Ward & Birner, 1995, p. 735)

The speaker A already mentioned the existence of *a cast*, but speaker B does not seem to be aware of it. Thus *'the dammed cast'* is used as the 'remind' in the discourse context. Then the meaning of the *there* construction has several meanings such as the 'existence', 'list' and 'remind'.

Observe the another examples representing the meaning of a '*remind*'. Certain entities that have been mentioned earlier in the discourse may be treated as 'reminders', since the speaker believes the entity may have been forgotten. Observe the following examples in (18). To add to his troubles, Williams used to be chairman of the

subcommittee overseeing grants to the National Endowment for the Arts, and he firmly defended the agency against charges that it funded 'obscene' art works. That's what won him the support of Keillor, who said, "It's a measure of the man when he's courageous when it's not absolutely required of him." But it has inspired the opposition of national conservatives, including Pat Robertson, who referred to Williams as 'Pornography Pat.' *Then there is that resentment.*

(18) a. Like voters everywhere, Montanans are in resentful mood, and Marlenee is adept at exploiting that resentment ...

b. Mr. Rummel: Well didn't the designer of the orbiter, the manufacturer, develop maintenance requirements and documentation as part of the design obligation?

Mr. Collins: Yes, sir. And that is what we showed in the very first part, before the Pan Am study. *There were those other orbiter maintenance and requirement specifications*, which not only did processing of the vehicle, but in flow testing, pad testing, and what have you, but also accomplished or was in lieu of an inspection plan.

(Ward & Birner, 1998, pp. 123-124)

The resentment in (18a) and the specifications in (18b) have each been evoked sufficiently earlier in the discourse to license the speaker's treatment of them as hearer-new information. Thus, we must consider the discourse context<sup>3)</sup> to understand correctly the meaning of the *there* construction.

Here, we argue the several meanings of the existence of the *there*

---

3) Hannay (1985) presents a study of existential *there* within the framework of Functional Grammar and finds that it serves a presentative function, where by 'presentative' he means that the speaker is explicitly introducing an entity into the world of discourse.



construction above mentioned are only interpreted a little differently according to the discourse context. The meaning of the *there* construction is basically the assertion of the existence, yet the existence is not the existence of the objective meaning irrelevant to the discourse, but the existence of the conceptual meaning relevant to the discourse.

Under our analysis, in (9) *the museum* is already in the physical world, and thus the existence of *the museum* is presupposed, yet in the discourse world as the context (9), our analysis predicts that (9b) asserts the existence of *the museum* since *the museum* does not exist in the discourse world. The same is true of (10- 11, 14- 15).

However, if the discourse world is not presupposed, for example, when (1-2) are used as discourse-initial sentences, since (1-2) are relevant to only the physical world, (1a-2a) asserting the existence of the indefinite NPs which is not in the awareness of the hearer until the speaker mentions them are felicitous, while (1b-2b) containing the definite NPs which are presupposed are infelicitous.

Also, the meaning of the *there* construction is the assertion of the existence of an object/objects and a state of affairs in the discourse world, which is very suitable to describe the characteristics of verbs found in the *there* construction. Most of the verbs found in the *there* construction except *be* has also the meaning of the existence or the beginning of existence.<sup>4</sup> Consider the following examples. Example (19) is a repetition of example (3).

- (19) a. There appeared a little boy in the park.  
       b. \*There disappeared a little boy in the park.
- (20) a. There began a festival in the country.  
       b. \*There ended a festival in the country.

Verbs in (19b-20b) is opposite to the existence or irrelevant to the

---

4) A fairly exhaustive list of verbs that can appear in the *there* construction can be found in Levin (1993).

existence. Hence, (19b-20b) are infelicitous.

So far we have dealt with the meaning of the *there* construction in view of the Definiteness Effect. The postverbal NPs must be indefinite in the *there* construction, yet definite postverbal NPs also occur in the *there* construction. Usually, definite NPs are used when their referents are familiar to the participants of the discourse. This means that the existence of the referents concerned is presupposed. Our analysis has shown that definite postverbal NPs are used in the *there* construction when their existence is not presupposed. Therefore, the meaning of the *there* construction must be interpreted according to the discourse context, and we also argue the meaning of the *there* construction is not the existence in the physical world, but the existence in the discourse world. We will observe in the next section the meaning of the *there* construction in view of Quantification Effect.

### 3. Quantification Effect

Milsark (1977) points universal quantifiers are usually not acceptable in the *there* construction. Consider (4a, b, c) again, which are repeated as (21) below.

- (21) a. \*There was everyone in the room.  
b. \* There were all viewpoints considered.  
c. \* There was each package inspected.

Under our analysis, unacceptability of above examples is expected to be very natural, because universal quantifiers (e.g. every, all, each) are used only when the existence of a set is presupposed.

However, Quantification Effect disappears when the quantifiers in the *there* construction are not presupposed, as illustrated below:

- (22) a. *There are all sorts of variations on term insurance: policies structured to pay off your mortgage debt, term riders tacked on to permanent insurance, and many others.*
- b. *It isn't up as much as many cyclical stocks are, and there's every reason to believe that over the next several years demand will continue for the computer hardware and data processing equipment that IBM makes.*

(Ward & Birner, 1998, p. 140)

In (22a), *all sorts of* does not mean 'every sort of', but rather 'a lot of'. Similarly, in (22b), *every reason* does not mean 'each one of a set of reasons, but rather 'good reason' or 'many reasons'. Thus, *all sorts of variations* and *every reason* are presupposed in the physical world as (21), yet they don't seem to be presupposed in the discourse world. Hence in (22a-b), the *there* construction may assert the existence of *all sorts of variations* and *every reason* since they do not exist in the discourse world.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have examined here the meaning of the *there* construction. Below is the conclusive summary of the present study:

(i) Only the indefinite postverbal noun may occur in the *there* construction when the particular discourse world is not presupposed, since the existence of the definite postverbal noun is presupposed in the physical world and it is not possible that we assert the existence of the entities presupposed. Yet, if the particular discourse world is given, both definite and indefinite nouns are felicitous in the *there* construction.

(ii) The meaning of the *there* construction is the assertion of the existence of an entity/entities or a state of affairs, yet the existence is not the existence of the objective meaning irrelevant to the discourse, but the existence of the conceptual meaning relevant to the discourse.

## References

- Abbot, B. (1993). A pragmatic account of the definiteness effect in existential sentences. *Journal of Pragmatics* 19, 39-55.
- Abbot, B. (1997). Definiteness and existentials. *Language* 73, 103-108.
- Bolinger, D. (1977). *Meaning and form*. London: Longman.
- Hannay, M. (1985). *English Existentials in Functional Grammar*. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Hawkins, J. A. (1978). *Definiteness and Indefiniteness: a study in reference and grammaticality prediction*. London: Croom Helm.
- Levin, B. (1993). *English verb classes and alternations: A preliminary investigation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Milsark, G. (1974). *Existential sentences in English*. Doctoral dissertation, MIT, Cambridge, Mass.
- Milsark, G. (1977). Toward an explanation of certain peculiarities of the existential construction in English. *Linguistic Analysis* 3, 1-29.
- Prince, E. (1992). The ZPG letter: Subject, definiteness, and information-status. In *Discourse description: Diverse analyses of a fundraising text*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Quirk, R., Sidney, G., Geoffrey, L., & Jan, S. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London: Longman.
- Rando, E. & Donna, J. N. (1978). Definites in *there-sentences*. *Language* 54, 300-313.
- Ward, G. & Betty, B. (1995). Definiteness and the English existential. *Language* 71, 722-742.
- Ward, G. & Betty, B. (1998). *Information status and Noncanonical word order in English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Nam Wan

Department of English Language and Literature

School of Language and Literature, Seonam University

720 Kwangchi-dong, Namwon

Chonbuk, 590-711, South Korea

Phone: 82-63-620-0183

Email: wanam@tiger.seonam.ac.kr