Where there is, and why
Bronwyn Bjorkman and Elizabeth Cowper, University of Toronto

Expletive there has played a prominent role in modern syntactic theory, but current approaches are unable to account for its full distribution, particularly as in (1). Views of there as a simple expletive (Chomsky, 1995, et seq.) cannot explain why it occurs with some but not all unaccusatives, while views of there as a locative/predicate-linked element (Freeze, 1992; Moro, 1997, a.o.) have difficulty accounting for its occurrence with non-be verbs at all.

(1)  a. There were some people available. (cf. *There were some people wet.)
    b. There ensued a long discussion. (cf. *There melted a great deal of ice.)

More seriously, much work on there has overlooked the fact that it can occur with transitive predicates, as in (2), provided the clause is progressive. An exception is Deal (2009), who demonstrates that that post-associate verbs in such clauses are not simply participial reduced relatives.

(2)  There were [ people who I met yesterday ] mowing the lawn this morning.

To account for the distribution of there without appealing to selectional properties of be, we argue that the contexts in which there is possible all share a common semantic property: there can be merged only with constituents whose sole unsaturated argument is an open temporal/event argument. This imposes two restrictions on there’s occurrence: (a) the predicate must have a temporal/event argument, and (b) all other arguments—including any external argument—must be merged before that argument is saturated.

The requirement that the temporal/event argument be the sole unsaturated argument, in turn, accounts for there’s restriction to progressive transitive and unergative clauses. In simple unergative and transitive predicates, the event argument is bound below the merge position of the external argument, by the Voice/\mbox{v head} (Kratzer, 1993; Chomsky, 1995), and thus at no point is there a simple predicate of times/events for there to merge with. The progressive, however, converts its complement Voice/vP to a simple predicate of times, with which there can then merge.

On this analysis, there is not linked to either the predicate or the associate, nor is it a true expletive subject. Rather, there is sensitive to the temporal structure of the predicates with which it merges. The semantics of there, however, remain an open question: though it might directly saturate the temporal or event argument of its complement, this would considerably complicate the subsequent semantic contribution of tense, which itself must compose with a predicate of times.

In spite of these remaining questions, the advantage of our approach is a unified account of there’s distribution, explaining both the copular contexts in which it cannot occur and the transitive and unergative contexts in which it can. From this perspective, there provides a novel diagnostic for probing the temporal structure of predicates, one that may shed light on the composition of meaning in copular contexts.
References


