A Gradient Grammar Approach to Concord Variation in Existential There+Be Constructions

English existential there+be constructions (ETB, as coined in Crawford 2005, e.g., Waiter, there’s a fly in my soup) are well known to exhibit variable concord (e.g., There’s lots of stars out tonight; There are lots of stars out tonight). Existing analyses either dismiss this observed lack of consistent ETB verb agreement as un-analyzable or explain it as the product of more general verb agreement mismatch phenomena not specific to ETBs. Further, neither approach fully explains the full range of concord variation observed, even for utterances by a single speaker operating within a single register. We apply the stochastic analysis techniques of ‘gradient grammar’ to show that ETB concord variation is both probabilistic and dependent on variables not considered in previous accounts.

While certain researchers have labeled the contracted there’s form as ‘frozen’ (Chomsky 1995) or ‘a formulaic sequence’ (Crawford 2005), others such as den Dikken (2003:33) have argued that the contracted singular copula form there’s in combination with a plural associated NP ‘represents a real option of the grammar’. den Dikken explains the lack of concord as the product of processes not peculiar to ETBs: agreement attraction (Bock and Miller 1991), variant concord with collectives (Humphries and Bock 2005), dialectal variation (Bock et al. 2006), and the effect of pluralia tantum (Bock et al. 2001), among others. Den Dikken does distinguish there as being not subject to long-distance agreement attraction (thus, There is a set of assumptions).

Applying the concepts of ‘gradient grammar’ (Bresnan and Hay 2006) stochastic analysis employed in works such as Bresnan et al. (2005), O’Connor et al. (2004), Snider and Zaenen (2006), and Wasow and Arnold (2005), among others, I conducted a study of spoken ETB concord, using the 1.85M-word MICASE corpus to look for probabilistic patterning in agreement variation.

The data show that ETB agreement mismatch is unidirectional; putative singular presents as plural in just 0.5% of utterances, while plural appears as singular in 50.2%. Lack of ETB concord is also strongly associated with contraction; there’s represents 97.3% of all singular-copula disagreement cases.

In terms of contextual variables, ‘cue distance’—word count from copula to first lexical indication of number—is statistically significant in discord, though total NP weight is not. The presence of a plural cue—demonstrative (these), collective (group), numeral (ten), or other quantifier (many)—anywhere prior to the associated NP head is significantly correlated with mismatch. Most counter-intuitively, singular copula presents in 29.3% of utterances with an explicit numeral (greater than one) interceding before the head noun (There’s two textbooks).

Preliminary analysis of 300 additional examples from the Switchboard corpus indicates that each of these tendencies is, in fact, robust.

These findings demonstrate both probabilistic variation in alternations predicted by earlier studies (e.g., collectives behavior) and the surprising tendency towards there’s despite the presence of a numeric marker, a correlation previously unaccounted for.