



ЯЗЫКИ НАРОДОВ ЗАРУБЕЖНЫХ СТРАН (С УКАЗАНИЕМ КОНКРЕТНОГО ЯЗЫКА ИЛИ ГРУППЫ ЯЗЫКОВ)/LANGUAGES OF PEOPLES OF FOREIGN COUNTRIES (INDICATING A SPECIFIC LANGUAGE OR GROUP OF LANGUAGES)

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THE DISCURSIVE CATEGORIZATION OF THE NOTIONAL SUBJECT IN ENGLISH EXISTENTIAL SENTENCES

Research article

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Abstract

The present paper aims to reveal the specific properties of the notional subject of English existential sentences with anticipatory *there*. With reference to 140 examples from J.B. Priestley's collection of essays "Delight" it is shown that the notional subject of an existential sentence can be expressed by a variety of nouns or correlative forms and nominal phrases with different semantic and structural characteristics. By using the methods of contextual, distributional analysis and synonymous paraphrasing, it is revealed that common to all uses of notional subjects of the analyzed constructions is the discursive categorization of such subjects as key components of the described existential situations. By using the notion of situation which integrates static (object-like) and dynamic (processual) components in the theoretical description of structural and semantic properties of the notional subject it is possible to account for a structural and semantic variety of the main member of an existential sentence, the specifics of its combinability with the indefinite article (as it typically happens) and with the definite article, to explain the use of *be* alongside other verbs as predicates of existential sentences.

Keywords: existential sentence, notional subject, existential predicate, situation, discourse.

ДИСКУРСИВНАЯ КАТЕГОРИЗАЦИЯ СМЫСЛОВОГО ПОДЛЕЖАЩЕГО В АНГЛИЙСКОМ БЫТИЙНОМ ПРЕДЛОЖЕНИИ

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В исследовании ставится цель выявить специфику смыслового подлежащего в английском бытийном предложении с вводным *there*. На материале 140 примеров из сборника эссе «Delight» («Радости») британского писателя Д.Б. Пристли показано, что смысловое подлежащее бытийного предложения может быть выражено существительным либо соотносимыми с ним именными формами или словосочетаниями с самой различной семантикой и структурными характеристиками. При использовании методов контекстуального, дистрибутивного анализа, синонимического перефразирования выявлено, что общим для всех употреблений бытийных конструкций в тексте является дискурсивная категоризация смыслового подлежащего этих конструкций в качестве ключевого компонента бытийной ситуации. Введение понятия «ситуация», в которой интегрируются статический (собственно предметный) и динамический (процессуальный) компоненты, при описании структурно-семантических свойств подлежащего позволяет объяснить большое структурно-семантическое разнообразие главного члена бытийного предложения, специфику его сочетаемости как с неопределенным (в прототипическом случае), так и с определенным артиклем, а также возможности употребления — наряду с основным предикатом *be* — других глаголов в составе бытийного предложения.

Ключевые слова: бытийное предложение, смысловое подлежащее, бытийный предикат, ситуация, дискурс.

Introduction

English existential sentences with anticipatory *there* present a special model of syntactic construction in modern English usually symbolized as "There be X prep Y" [5], where the anticipatory element is preserved (*there*), the existential predicate is represented by the verb *be*, whereas "X" and "Y" stand for the notional subject of the sentence and the name of location, respectively. For instance, in a sentence like *There is a book on the table* the notional subject is represented by the word *book* and location is expressed by the prepositional phrase *on the table*. This existential model is generally considered to be language-specific which implies the absence of identical structures in other languages, especially those with mostly inflectional morphology like Russian [4].

It is traditionally assumed that the structural constituents of English existential sentences have different semantic status. Whereas anticipatory *there* is considered to be "semantically bleached" and to perform no actual functions except a syntactic one [1, P. 110], the verb *be* carries a generalized meaning of existence and location, the meaning of a noun or nominal phrase which follows the existential predicate is based on a semantic content associated with the noun in question. This nominal element of the existential sentence is generally called a notional subject which — by contrast with the formal subject *there* —



“denotes or points out a person or non-person, that is, various kinds of concrete things, substances, abstract notions, or happenings” [2, P. 326].

It should be noted that anticipatory *there* of existential sentences receives a variety of interpretations in modern linguistics, ranging from the treatment of this word as a purely formal element to cognitively oriented accounts in which it is regarded as a communicatively important unit [3, P. 242], an “abstract setting” or “abstract presentational frame” [9, P. 154-155], a spatial domain in which both material substances and abstract notions can be placed [6, P. 71]. In line with these accounts, it has been suggested in recent research [7], [8] that anticipatory *there* has a nominative value which consists in the implication of a human as the subject of perceptual and mental activity and in the designation of the subjectively centered relevant situation space of the overtly described existential state of affairs.

The present paper aims to reveal the specific properties of the notional subject of English existential sentences, which regularly refers to an entity, event, property, or abstract notion that is closely related to and anchored in a particular situation space (*there*). Linguistic material for the subsequent discussion is drawn from a collection of essays “Delight” by J.B. Priestley [10].

Data and methods

The collection of essays “Delight” by J.B. Priestley contains 114 essays, each describing sources of delightful experiences for the narrator. They range from some aspects of professional activities, travelling, sightseeing to feelings and emotions that arise from social contacts, reading, observing, hearing something. Each essay contains the noun *delight* and/or its derivatives in which the nominal stem occurs in verbs (*to delight*), adjectives (*delightful*) or adverbs (*delightful*; *delightedly*): *After finishing a piece of work that has been long and rather difficult, I have a sense of satisfaction that can expand into **delight**; <...> while we are still highly conscious of ourselves as writers, we **delight** in the thought of ourselves at work writing; And now at last I can please myself what I read, and it is **delightful**; Why not try going **delightfully** mad?; It is to the rhythm that we **delightedly** bind our bodies.*

Nominal phrases with *delight* occur in existential sentences with anticipatory *there*, as in the following two examples: ***There is mild delight** merely in escaping from our new servitude to Time; **There is a double delight** here for me, for achievement has been added to possessio.* Both examples feature the noun *delight* as a notional subject of the sentence, which presupposes that there are some principles — possibly, of discursive nature - that allow abstract nouns (including *delight*) to perform this syntactic function in clauses with anticipatory *there*.

Generally, the analyzed collection of 114 essays contains 140 occurrences of existential clauses. Notional subjects of these clauses display a variety of semantic and structural characteristics. Semantically, such subjects represent different kinds of entities and phenomena, namely,

a) physical objects: *Finally, there is **a peculiarly hard, green, sour little apple** that must be grown specially for picnic boxes;*

b) events: *In Radio there is **an endless** <...> **fuss** about seconds <...>;*

c) processes: *<...> I never want to go to any place where there is **dancing** <...>;*

d) emotional experiences: *<...> there is **delight** in my heart <...>;*

e) temporal slots: *<...> there are **moments** of desolation or terror in the dream world <...>;*

f) spatial domains: *There was **space** too for the big guns and little guns, lions and mice.*

From a structural point of view, notional subjects of existential clauses take the form of different parts of speech with nominal characteristics that include the following:

a) singular and plural nouns in the common case: *There was **a time** when merely wearing long trousers brought me delight; <...> there are **times** when beneath the grave weighty manner are abysses of bitterness, unfathomable depths of despair, as if all life on this planet had been a blunder <...>;*

b) indefinite pronouns: *<...> there is **something** wrong; But there was never **anything** here for my own secret delight;*

c) negative pronouns: *You turn a corner, and there happens to be **nobody** about; There is practically **nothing** I cannot be sold if I have been long enough away from shops;*

d) the demonstrative pronoun *those*: *There are **those** who call this a filthy habit;*

e) gerunds and gerundial phrases: *<...> there was so much **sizzling** and **sparking**, so many sulphurous fumes; There was no **mistaking them** for wool merchants, shipping clerks, and deacons of Baptist chapels, all those familiar figures of my boyhood.*

The semantic and structural variety of notional subjects is particularly conspicuous because of semantic contrasts within each set of characteristics. Thus, semantic classes of nominals range from concrete to abstract nouns. At the same time, different types of nominals display contrasting features in terms of definiteness (indefinite vs. demonstrative pronouns) and properties related to part-of-speech characteristics (nouns and noun-pronouns vs. gerunds as verbal forms).

Despite the obvious heterogeneous properties that notional subjects display as language units, they do display certain strict regularities in their uses in a variety of contexts of narrative and dialogic discourse. First, notional subjects of existential sentences make an integral part of existential predication by combining with existential verbs, predominantly *be*. Second, nouns and nominal phrases in the function of notional subjects may combine with both definite and indefinite articles. Though in the analyzed text there is a typical prevalence of indefinite over definite noun determination (only ten uses of the definite article in the whole corpus of examples), there are reasons for predicting some factors of cognitive and/or discursive nature that underlie the choice of a determiner in a particular context.

The given overview of general characteristics of notional subjects as key elements of existential sentences suggests that a unified account of their functional properties can be given by addressing their distributional characteristics at the level of utterance and discursive context. This will be done in the subsequent discussion that involve the use of the following methods of analysis:



- 1) descriptive and contextual analysis that will allow to identify the meaning and senses of existential predicates that combine with notional subjects;
- 2) synonymous paraphrasing that will contribute to identifying the implications of notional subjects;
- 3) contrastive analysis that will reveal the grounds for uses or non-uses of determinatives with singular nouns as notional subjects.

Discussion

The verb *to be* is used most frequently in existential sentences with anticipatory *there*. The overall number of its uses amounts to 127 out of 140 found examples. However, even with subjects denoting physical entities, the meaning of the verb cannot be reduced to mere indication of existence in physical space. Let us take the following example: *I am told that in one of the ruined temples, deep in the jungle of Central America, there is a carving, more than two thousand years old, showing a Mayan priest smoking a pipe.* The notional subject of this sentence (*a carving*) is represented as "existing" in the narrator's relevant situation space designated by anticipatory *there*. This space is shaped by the narrator because of his interest in the described antiquity. The predication *there is a carving* can be paraphrased as *one can see a carving*. Put otherwise, the verb *be* in existential sentences is not about existence as such but about the possibility of the subject's referent to be the center of someone's attention. This understanding of the verb's meaning is reflected in the following dictionary definition of anticipatory *there*: "1. **There** is used as the subject of the verb "be" to say that something exists or does not exist, or to draw attention to it. <...> 2. You use **there** in front of certain verbs when you are saying that something exists, develops, or can be seen".

The elements of the above mentioned dictionary definition that relate the state of being to a perceptual event like seeing can also be found in the analyzed text where identical or very similar existential situations are described by both existential sentences and clauses with verbs of sense perception or predicates denoting experiential activities and events, such as finding, meeting, experiencing emotions and the like.

To illustrate the correlations of existential *be* let us compare the following examples: *Is there in fact anything more delightful in all the symphonies, concertos and tone-poems that follow than this anonymous opening piece, so enormous in its promise, so cunningly anticipatory of the best of what is to come. What else that we hear during the evening takes such a hold on the imagination?; Somewhere among the damp obstinate sticks <...> there has been delight like a crumb of gold. — <...> somewhere here is the beginning of an enchanted life. And I for one find this altogether delightful; There are never many of them, and perhaps we meet a true specimen of the type about once every ten years; We appear to be living, as so many well informed persons have observed, in a gigantic madhouse, but there are a few compensations even here, and one of them is that we have the Marx Brothers with us.*

All the above examples show that the state of existence designated by the verb *be* is correlated with either perceptual (expressed by *hear*) or more complex experiential events denoted by the verbs *find*, *meet* and *have*. In a somewhat adapted form the correlations look as follows: *There is delightful music. — We hear delightful music; There is delight here. — I find this delightful; There are many people of this kind. — We meet many people of this kind; There are a few compensations here. — We have a few compensations here.* The correlated clauses describe the same existential situations from different perspectives. Whereas existential sentences with anticipatory *there* present existence as such through the use of the predicate *be* attributed to the notional subject, the synonymous counterparts of these sentences describe **the preceding experiential events**, including sense perception (hearing), occurrences (meetings), experiencing something (finding something delightful), having something or finding it available. Put otherwise, **the predicate *be*** which is in each case attributed to the notional clausal subject **is metonymically related to the predicates of experiential events** and states (in the case of having) in which these notional subjects are syntactically treated as objects of human experiences and states. Consequently, semantically different kinds of notional subjects of the above mentioned existential clauses acquire the same **discursive status of the key component of the described experiential event**.

Importantly, the cognitive event-schema is a complex structure which includes both static components, such as physical or non-physical entities, and dynamic or processual components that can be denoted by both finite verbs and non-finite verbal forms, as well as nominals (nouns and noun phrases) that serve as names of processes and events. This explains the use of gerunds, gerundial phrases and verbal nouns as notional subjects of existential clauses: *You draw close to the fire; one of you has paper and pencil, but there should not be much actual writing; <...> I never want to go to any place where there is dancing; There was no mistaking them for wool merchants, shipping clerks, and deacons of Baptist chapels, all those familiar figures of my boyhood.*

With the processual component of a described event being in the center of attention, notional subjects of existential clauses can be represented by names of events (<...> *there will be no more telephone calls, urgent messages, interviews, noisy parties <...>*), nominals (nouns or pronouns) modified by infinitives (*To rid myself of this obsession there was only one thing to be done; <...> there is nothing to see yet but the dripping walls of a tunnel <...>*), nouns with temporal meanings that imply events behind the designated interval of time (*There was a time when merely wearing long trousers brought me delight; There is a moment I have been missing for ten years, ever since the war first cut me off from leisurely sea travel*).

The salience or relevance of the processual component in the meaning of a notional subject entails the use of motion verbs or verbs with dynamic senses as predicates of existential clauses. The close analogues of *be* in the analyzed texts are the following: *exist* (1), *happen* (1), *flow* (1), *flare* (1), *settle* (1), *sparkle* (1), *be revealed* (1), *arrive* (2), *come* (4). Let us look at the example with the verb *arrive*: *There arrived too a vast new horde of unadventurous and ignorant smokers, mere creatures of habit, born to raise the dividends of tobacco combines and cartels* (Pr., P. 27). The sentence does not merely describe the event of arriving, but, rather, refers to a dynamic situation initiated by the referent of the notional subject (*a vast horde of unadventurous and ignorant smokers*). With the subject as a point in time (*a moment*), existential sentences with the verb *come* describe the emergence of a new situation: *And so for a little while, before the key grates in the lock again, there I am, out and free, with mountains of treasure before my dazzled eyes. Yes, there comes a moment — just a moment — of delight;*



<...> *there comes a moment when — suddenly, miraculously — the play is alive.* With the verb *settle*, which is also (like *come* in the above examples) used figuratively in collocation with the subject *expression* (on someone's face), the following existential sentence refers to the emergence and dynamic development of the described situation: <...> *then there settled on her face an expression I have noticed ten thousand times since, and have for years now tried not to notice — the typical expression of the reader, the audience, the customer, the patron.* All the given examples with the verbs *arrive*, *come* and *settle* describe not only internal events (like seeing, hearing, finding out, etc.) but external occurrences and situations that arise involuntarily (like the feeling of delight) and/or independently of subjective perceptions or appraisals. This explains why sentences of this kind can in most cases be paraphrased — although with certain losses in the communicative perspective — into constructions with notional subjects in their typical initial position. Compare the following transformations based on the discussed clauses: *There arrived unadventurous and ignorant smokers. — Ignorant and unadventurous smokers arrived; There comes a moment. — A moment comes; There settled an expression on her face. — An expression settled on her face.*

Summarizing all the examples — with both *be* and other verbs in the function of the predicate, — it can be stated that existential sentences make explicit or implicit reference to internal experiential events like perceptions and appraisals, as well as to externalized events, occurrences and states that can be described in a general way as situations. When looked from this generalized perspective and considering, as mentioned in the Introduction, that anticipatory *there* indicates a relevant situation space, **the notional subject** of existential sentences can be regarded as an expression of **the key component of an existential situation**. Since situations of all kinds are specified in different discourse contexts, respective notional subjects acquire their status of situational key components as a result of discursive categorization, that is, implicit reference in discourse to this particular class of linguistic units.

The notion of situation in characterizing notional subjects of existential sentences appears to be significant in accounting for the use of both indefinite and definite articles with respective nouns and nominal phrases. As a rule, notional subjects expressed by countable nouns in the singular are modified by the indefinite article: <...> *there has been a marriage between a bride of seventy and a bridegroom of forty-three* <...>; *There is a Keep Off the Grass sound about it.* At the same time, countable nouns in the plural and uncountable or abstract nouns in the singular are usually not modified by articles: <...> *There are industrious amateurs of the camera who make their own stereoscope views* <...>; *There was space too for the big guns and little guns, lions and mice.* These cases of uses or non-uses of the indefinite article are motivated by its general grammatical meaning, which consists in indicating one particular thing or phenomenon that is first mentioned and is placed into the center of attention.

However, the corpus of examples from the analyzed essays contains 12 existential sentences in which notional subjects are modified by definite articles, even though respective nominal referents are first introduced into discourse. Illustrative in this respect are the following examples: *So what a wonderful thing it is to come unexpectedly in such a place or situation upon a friend! Suddenly — there is the familiar face, with every feature a landmark in a sensible country;* <...> *you are both alert, business like, know all manner of sensible tricks and dodges, are intent upon getting things done; but through all the pipes and channels of the plan there flows the warm current of your feeling for each other, and the whole business is securely and nourishingly rooted in a deep personal relationship* <...>; *As for air travel, it mostly consists of long waits in sheds haunted by stale cigars or on bleak windy landing grounds. And always, by air, sea or rail, there is the misery of luggage, the malice of heavy objects.* In all the above examples, the narrator describes **typical situations** that are known to people from everyday life. These situations include, respectively, finding oneself in a new place, common planning during a family gathering, waiting for a flight at an airport. The use of the definite article with nouns in the function of a notional subject serves to identify - in an expressive way — the commonly known constituent of the described existential situation. In the first case, that constituent is meeting a friend (*the familiar face*) in a new place. The notional subject of the second sentence refers to an emotional bond (*the warm current of your feeling*) that unites people during a family gathering. Finally, the homogeneous subjects of the third sentence (*the misery of luggage, the malice of heavy objects*) draw the reader's attention to commonly known negative experiences one may go through at an airport.

Conclusion

The conducted analysis of linguistic data has shown that the notional subject of an existential sentence can be expressed by a variety of nouns or correlative forms and nominal phrases with different semantic and structural characteristics. By using the methods of contextual, distributional analysis and synonymous paraphrasing, it is revealed that common to all uses of notional subjects of the analyzed constructions is the discursive categorization of such subjects as key components of the described existential situations. By using the notion of situation which integrates static (object-like) and dynamic (processual) components in the theoretical description of structural and semantic properties of the notional subject it is possible to account for a structural and semantic variety of the main member of an existential sentence, the specifics of its combinability with the indefinite article (as it typically happens) and with the definite article, to explain the use of *be* alongside other verbs as predicates of existential sentences.

Конфликт интересов

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Review

All articles are peer-reviewed. But the reviewer or the author of the article chose not to publish a review of this article in the public domain. The review can be provided to the competent authorities upon request.



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