The existential *there* construction (ETC) has been identified in many varieties of English around the world as a locus of instability of subject-verb agreement. In particular, the singular copula frequently appears in the context of a plural postcopular NP. A variety of linguistic, processing, and social factors have been shown to be associated with concord in ETCs. For example, Meechan and Foley (1994) and others have found that greater education is associated with higher levels of concord. Cheshire (1999) speculates that concord in ETCs is strongly related to discourse factors: only speakers in monologic contexts have the time to adjust their speech to prescriptive norms on concord. I present a large-scale corpus study of ETC concord in speakers in a university context. This study represents the largest sample of ETCs to date (4083 tokens), and the first to find quantitative evidence for the role of discourse context in ETC concord.

ETCs were extracted from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English and coded with all factors that have been significantly associated with nonconcord in previous quantitative studies. The overall percentage of concord in ETCs in MICASE, 85.2%, contrasts with previous studies of ETC variation, but is very close to the figure reported in a sample from the BNC, 86.7% (Martinez Insua & Palacios Martinez, 2003).

Since 99.5% of cases of nonconcord occurred with a plural postcopular NP, further analysis was restricted to this subset of ETCs. Distributional and multivariate analyses revealed a somewhat different configuration of factors correlating with the production of concord in this context than in previous studies. A series of binary logistic regression models of increasing complexity were fit to the data to predict concord. The most significant linguistic factor was the type of determiner that appeared in the postcopular NP: cardinal numerals and “non-count quantificational nouns” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002) were highly correlated with nonstandard *there’s*. Distance between the copula and the subject noun has been previously identified as an important processing factor affecting concord in ETCs, but this alone was not found to be a significant predictor. Among social factors, age/academic role is the dominant factor: younger people are more likely to produce nonstandard *there’s*. Finally, discourse context was highly predictive: monologic contexts were associated with very low rates of nonconcord. Only after adding interactions did the fit of the model significantly improve.

The data reported here provide support for Cheshire’s contention that concord in ETCs is higher in monologic contexts. While supporting Meechan and Foley’s claim that ETC concord is associated with higher levels of education, it provides a more nuanced account of the behavior of educated speakers. The results are also consistent with the idea that many speakers maintain two options for concord (Schütze, 1999), with the use of the “concord option” conditioned by social and discourse pressures. The finding that there are distinct patterns of concord by determiner type suggests a role for speakers’ sensitivity to collocational statistics in their linguistic environment.

References


