There + Singular be Construction:
Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives

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Abstract

The there + be construction is a topic frequently encountered in linguistic literature with synchronic and diachronic perspectives owing to its unique nature. There’s is well known for its own peculiar grammatical behaviors: it exhibits a high level of number disagreement and frequent co-occurrences with definite referents, functioning as a fixed pragmatic formula after undergoing the long process of the grammaticalization and subjectification of there + be. The other finite verbal forms, however, have received little attention in previous studies. This paper focuses on the other singular be forms, i.e. there is and there was, both of which Breivik & Martinez-Insua (2008) state function as pragmatic markers like there’s in present-day English. A number of points are revealed in synchronic and diachronic investigation. First, there’s and there is do not share the same semantic-pragmatic functions. There is is clearly different from there’s not only in formalness and expositoriness but also in pragmatic use as well as in its historical development. Second, although there was and there is are considered to have shared the same kind of function of expressing an existential sense until early Modern English, there was evolved into the primary pragmatic marker in contemporary English. This study proposes that communicative needs have helped differentiate there’s, there is, and there was in their grammatical and discoursal behaviors.