On the rhetorical function of existential *there*

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In his *Rhetoric*, which was written about 330 BC, Aristotle emphasises that a speaker must be aware of which type of audience he is addressing, and that his style must vary accordingly. Since my audience here in Rome consists predominantly of literary scholars, I feel it is necessary to say a few words about the place of rhetoric in linguistics and to define a few central linguistic concepts and terms. An ancient Greek *rhetor* was a person skilled in addressing gatherings of people in order to persuade. The aim of my paper is to persuade this particular gathering that linguists can also contribute to rhetorical study. For this purpose, I shall take a close look at the factors governing the use and non-use of *there* in sentences like *On Roy Tommy's desk (there) lay a book dealing with the nature of rhetorical proofs.* As is well known, it is possible to speak effectively and persuasively without speaking truthfully. I would like to point out that I am not engaged in the kind of activity performed by the sophist Protagoras (and criticised in some of the Platonic dialogues); Protagoras taught his pupils how to make a weak case appear stronger (as well as arguing cases from opposing points of view).

As was implied in my opening sentence of this paper, the interest in features of situational context as a major stylistic variable was present from the very beginning of rhetorical

study. In *The Linguistics Encyclopedia*, we find the following statement under the heading "rhetoric" (Malmkjær 1991: 382):

> When, in the 1950s and 1960s the term STYLISTICS began to gain currency [...], the term 'rhetoric' tended to be retained by writers concentrating mainly on structural features of texts, excluding situational context. There are two major trends which retain the term rhetoric in their designations [...]. One of these trends is known as GENERATIVE RHETORIC and the other as CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC.

This paper will not be concerned with contrastive rhetoric (which is based on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis). Generative rhetoric developed under the influence of Noam Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar in the late 1950s and 1960s. In his early writings, Chomsky insisted that one common underlying deep structure was shared by, for instance, a sentence in the active voice and another sentence in the passive voice. Thus the active sentence in (1a) and the passive sentence in (1b) would have the same deep structure, the same semantic content or cognitive meaning, but different rhetorical functions or interpretations. Instead of talking about rhetorical function, many linguists today prefer the terms PRAGMATIC FUNCTION or COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION. Thus we could say that (1a) and (1b) differ pragmatically or communicatively.

(1) a. The boy hit the ball.
     b. The ball was hit by the boy.

Jerrold Katz, an ardent supporter of Chomsky's early concept of grammar, makes the following statement in his famous book *Semantic Theory*: "Rhetoric and style thus concern the manner of saying (or writing) what is said (or written) and semantics its information content" (1972: 419). Katz even becomes quite literary and discusses at length the

first sentence of Kafka's *The Trial*. This sentence is quoted in (2a):

(2) a. *Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K.,* for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.

b. *Lies must have been being told about Joseph K.,* for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.

Instead of (2a) Kafka could have written (2b). But he did not, and for good reasons. Sentences (2a) and (2b) are synonymous; that is, they have the same semantic content. However, as Katz points out (1972: 422-423),

> the use of the active sentence [(2a)] focuses attention on the existence of the anonymous liar from the very outset of the novel. This is stylistically necessary, since the entire book is about Joseph K.'s attempt to resist the fate imposed on him by finding out the identity of his malefactor. The use of the passive sentence [(2b)] would not bring out this theme.

It should also be noted that recent subject areas such as textlinguistics, discourse analysis and conversational analysis have their roots in rhetoric.

With these preliminaries in mind, we turn to the main topic of my paper, the rhetorical (or pragmatic or communicative) function of existential *there*. In view of Aristotle's warning, I will start by defining two important linguistic terms: EXISTENTIAL SENTENCE and EXISTENTIAL *THERE*. The former term was coined by the Danish grammarian Otto Jespersen. According to Jespersen (1924:155), existential sentences are sentences "in which the existence of something is asserted or denied [...]". By this definition, all the sentences under (3)-(7) are existential sentences:

(3) a. *There* are lions in Africa.
    b. Lions exist in Africa.
(4) a. *There* are no ghosts.
    b. Ghosts do not exist.
(5) a. In our department a serious crisis is developing.
    b. In our department *there* is developing a serious crisis.
(6) a. An account book lay on the table.
    b. On the table (*there*) lay an account book.
(7) a. An account book is on the table.
    b. *There* is an account book on the table.
    c. On the table is an account book.
    d. On the table *there* is an account book.

These sentences either assert or deny existence. The kind of *there* which occurs in existential sentences is often called existential *there*. Existential *there* should be distinguished from the place adverb *there*, which we find in example (8).

(8) The linguist is over *there*, behind the lamppost.

Existential sentences present a multitude of problems. In the past two decades or so, a large number of articles and books have appeared which discuss *there*-sentences from a theoretical point of view. I have myself made a modest contribution to this discussion (e.g. Breivik 1981, 1990, 1997a, 1997b). My primary concern in this paper will be to show that the discourse distinction between new and given information provides the key to understanding the use and non-use of existential *there*. The use of this particle is governed by a complex interplay of syntactic, semantic and communicative factors. Wallace Chafe defines new and given information in the following way: "Given (or old) information is that knowledge which the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee at the time of the utterance. So-called new information is what the speaker assumes he is

introducing into the addressee's consciousness by what he says" (1976: 30).

In both spoken and written English, the vast majority of *there*-sentences contain a form of lexical *be*. We start off by looking at *be*-sentences. Consider first the four sentences under (7). These sentences are fully synonymous in that they express the same cognitive content; but they differ in the way this content is presented. In (7a) the message is presented in a marked way. This sentence violates what is sometimes called the TOPICALISATION PRINCIPLE. According to this principle, there is a tendency for elements containing given information (i.e. the topic) to come first in the sentence, and for elements containing new information (i.e. the comment) to come near the end. In (7a) the subject, *an account book*, carries new information. Sentences like (7a) are extremely rare in both spoken and written English, but they do occur in certain contexts. By contrast, (7b) represents the unmarked version. (7b) is of course in agreement with the topicalisation principle since the new information comes towards the end. From a communicative point of view, *there*-sentences can be regarded as devices for presenting new information; they are presentative constructions. In (7b) existential *there* functions as a point of departure; the message proceeds by way of the weak item *is* to the communicative core, the real subject *an account book*. As will be shown later, existential *there* cannot occur in sentences in which the subject contains given information. Compare (7a) with the sentence in (9). In the latter example, the definite article signals that the subject contains given information. Hence there is no reason to move it to a position later in the sentence.

(9)   The account book is on the table.

It is a common observation that existential *there* in many ways behaves like an ordinary subject. Syntactically, it

functions as a formal, or preliminary, subject in (7b); that is, when the real subject is moved towards the end of the sentence for communicative reasons, *there* is inserted in the vacated subject slot. In present-day English, a verb cannot occur in initial position in declarative sentences, as shown by example (10). Present-day English is a verb-medial (or SVO) language. This means that the verb normally precedes the subject in declarative sentences:

(10) *Are two books on the table.

We turn now to the sentences which are cited in (7c) and (7d). The only difference between these two sentences is that existential *there* is absent in (7c), while it is present in (7d). Such sentences are not freely interchangeable in contemporary English; the non-use of *there* in (7c) is severely restricted. Again (7d), which contains *there*, is the unmarked version. If my hypothesis about the syntactic status of *there* is correct, it accounts for the fact that restrictions DO apply to (7c): one would expect (7d), which under my analysis has the order subject-verb, to be the unmarked version in a verb-medial language like English. Just as in (7b), the formal subject in (7d) precedes the verb. (7c) has inversion of subject and verb, the verb being preceded by an adverbial of place, *on the table*. Note that both these sentences are in agreement with the topicalisation principle. This explains why (7c) sounds better than (7a) when presented out of context. Both these sentences lack existential *there*.

What I have said so far is fairly simple. It is not difficult to find contexts in which all the sentences in (7) are acceptable. But there ARE sentences which do not permit the non-use of *there* at all. Such sentences are exemplified in (11):

(11) a. *No sign of life was in the house.
     b. There was no sign of life in the house.

In (16), *there's* is more or less synonymous with "I could mention", "Don't let's forget" etc. In such cases, the formula *there's* seems to recall the referent of the subject phrase into the focus of attention. Although the subject in (16) is definite, it is contextually independent. *There* would be inappropriate if *George* represented given information. The hypothesis that *there + be* functions as a presentative formula, or signal, receives further support from such examples as (17):

(17) A: Who's attending the meeting?
     B: Well, there's (*are) John, Michael and Janet.

Note that in this example the plural form of *be* is disallowed.
    We come now to existential sentences containing a verb other than *be*. This type is not subject to the same constraints as *be*-sentences, as shown by (18) and (19):

(18) An unpleasant smell remains in the house.
(19) Unicorns exist.

Neither of these sentences conveys visual impact, and they both violate the topicalisation principle. However, if the whole of the subject-NP is shifted to post-verbal position in such sentences, existential *there* becomes obligatory:

(20) There exist unicorns that are white in the winter, green in the spring, grey in the summer and black in the autumn.

In (19), the subject is not weighty enough to outbalance the verb, but in (20) the word order *real subject + verb* would be unacceptable because of the discrepancy in length between these two constituents. Note that the real subject is very long in (20), consisting of the phrase *unicorns that are white in the winter, green in the spring, grey in the summer and black in the autumn*. In other words, (20) is consistent with the HEAVIER-

ELEMENT PRINCIPLE, which states that heavier elements tend to come towards the end of the sentence. It is important to note that the real subject in (20) represents new information. Thus, when *there* occurs in sentences containing a verb other than *be*, it can be regarded as a presentative signal in these sentences too.

   There-sentences containing a verb other than *be* are chiefly found in written English. In this connection I may mention that the spoken material of the Survey of English Usage at University College London contains about 2,000 *there*-sentences. Only three of these have a verb other than *be*, namely *come, go and emerge*. Example (20) contains the verb *exist*. Among other verbs which occur in *there*-sentences, I may mention *appear, begin, develop, hang, lie and stand*. There seems to be a unifying principle determining the multitude of verbs which can occur in the sentences in question. The verbs which are found in such sentences are verbs which Jan Firbas has called verbs of "appearance or existence on the scene". (Firbas does not discuss *there*-sentences.) Recall that the verb *be*, as in example (3a), also expresses existence. Indeed, *be* is the existential verb par excellence. If am correct in claiming that *there* is a presentative signal, then this also provides a natural explanation for the restrictions it imposes on the verb. Example (21a) contains a verb of appearance on the scene; hence *there* can be used. This is not the case with (21b).

(21) a. There appeared a man in front of us.
     b. *There disappeared a man in front of us.

My analysis also predicts that the (b) sentences in (22)-(25) are unacceptable:

(22) a. There began a great commotion.
     b. *There ended a riot.
(23) a. Some people died in that fire.

b. *There died some people in that fire.
(24) a. A book vanished from this desk yesterday.
b. *There vanished a book from this desk yesterday.
(25) a. Several people left.
b. *There left several people.

The examples in (22)-(25) are taken from a doctoral dissertation written by the American linguist Gary Milsark. Milsark is unable to explain the deviance of the (b) sentences. He states: "the nature of the principles involved here is at present beyond my ken" (1976: 158). But I do not think the nature of these principles is beyond MY ken. Nor should it be beyond YOUR ken; my paper has hopefully given you some insight into the conglomeration of factors governing the use and non-use of existential *there* as a pragmatic-rhetorical device.

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