Verbal Existential Sentences

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1. Existential Sentences.

When one reads English, one often comes across an interesting structure called an existential sentence. To cite some examples (as to the abbreviation at the end of each sentence, see §2 below):

(1) a. There is a danger. (WAR)
   b. There were some dames you had to wait for. (ASS)
   c. There will always be people who say it does not exist because they cannot have it. (BEL)
   d. There had been no noise of firing below since they had first seen Pablo. (BEL)

Notice that each sentence begins with there, after which, with or without an auxiliary, the verb be follows, and after it a noun phrase appears. In the present tense, these sentences mean "the noun phrase which follows the verb exists, or if negative, it does not exist". That is, "someone or something exists, or does not exist". The term EXISTENTIAL SENTENCE derives from this. The noun phrase is situated in most cases immediately after the verb be and is usually regarded as the subject of the sentence.\(^1\) The number of the verb is subject to that of the noun phrase following it; though there is an exception:

(2) But there has been yesterday and the night before and last
Existential sentences may appear with a phrase denoting space or time:

(3) a. There were big white clouds in it. (BEL)
   b. In war there are many things like this. (BEL)

In most cases, the noun phrase is an indefinite noun phrase, though a definite noun phrase may occur:

(4) a. On an ordinary day there would be the long interval till supper-time to be lived through, passed in reading, or correcting, or in desultory conversation with Nan. (MUS)
   b. There's not the slightest chance of her turning up. (MUH)
   c. There were the two ridges, and there were the tanks ahead and there were his two good bridges ready to leave the woods and here came the planes now. (BEL)

Fries points out that in a special situation there-sentences are used as “an enumeration, or listing of items”. Also, Rando-Napoli divides there-sentences into two types: EXISTENTIAL and LIST. This type of listing has a definite noun phrase, and this is true for (4c). In the sentence (4b), however, the noun phrase has the adjective in the superlative degree, thus it must have the definite article the. The sentence (4a) is not classifiable in either category.

Stress does not fall on there in existential sentences, the pronunciation of which is not [ $__\theta\alpha(r) $] but [ $\delta\alpha(r) $]. There is non-deictic and
does not carry any place meaning. Thus, one finds sentences with an adverbial phrase of space or time, and even with another there which is deictic and denotes space:

(5) The fire was burning brightly but there was no one there.
    (MUH)

2. Verbal Existential Sentences.

There are also sentences which parallel those cited above, but with verbs other than be. These sentences are called VERBAL EXISTENTIAL SENTENCES.

The terms “Inside Verbal ES (Existential Sentence(s))” and “Outside Verbal ES” are taken from Milsark and will be used in the following analysis. The structural definitions are as follows:

i. **Inside Verbal ES**

\[ S \text{ there-AUX-V-NP-X] } \text{, where } V \neq \text{be} \]

Examples:
There arose many trivial objections during the meeting.
There ensued a riot immediately upon the reading of the riot act.

ii. **Outside Verbal ES**

\[ S \text{ there-AUX-V-X-NP] } \text{, where } V \neq \text{be} \]

Examples:
There walked into the room a fierce-looking tomcat.
There stood on the table a lamp.\(^4\)
Here, in Inside Verbal ES, the verb (V) and the noun phrase (NP) contact each other without any other elements (X) intervening, while on the other hand in Outside Verbal ES there is a phrase between them. In Verbal ES, most of the verbs are intransitive. And while transitive verbs may appear, they are in the passive form.

The quotations that follow are taken from twenty-one different sources. The source abbreviated at the end of each sentence in parentheses appears in full in a list at the end of this paper. (The sentences in §1 are taken from the same sources.) The number of works is restricted, and there will be more other examples. The examples are in alphabetical order according to the verbs; one extract for each verb. All those sentences in these structures that are found in our literature will appear below, and if it is doubtful whether a sentence in question is an existential one or not, it will be noted. See what verbal existential sentences there are.


There are thirty-eight sentences in our literature. Twenty-one different verbs are found. Thus, so many examples are cited here. (The underlining here is my own. It is the same below.)

(6) a. Then one day, as he daily expected, there appeared a sign in the empty store window, announcing the coming of a new fancy delicatessen and grocery. (ASS)

b. And more and more frequently there arose disagreements about how to kill the toubob. (ROO)

c. There comes a moment when hair dye is too painfully obvious. (CUR)
d. From his belt there dangle a large ring of the slender, shiny things that Kunta had glimpsed others using.... (ROO)

e. There exists a letter of 1882 in which Henry Junior gives his father's address to an autograph seeker. (EDE)

f. I could not stop thinking about Honor and with every reason for despair, somewhere, through some minute cranny, there filtered a ray of hope to make in the dark labyrinth of my bewildered thoughts a little dim light. (MUH)

g. There followed a faint double thud on the trapdoor. (OTH)

h. There goes another pod, sir. (WAR)

i. There lay escape from the frustrations of his juniorhood: in books, in the imagination, in writing. (EDE)

j. In a village of Musashi Province, there lived two woodcutters: Mosaku and Minokichi. (YUK)

k. We regarded each other with a dismay behind which, in my case, there lurked an abject terror, ready to probe the difference. (MUH)

l. ...and upon the surface of the fast flowing water itself there played a warm light, turning its muddy hue to an old gilt. (MUH)

m. The universals in the present context are presumably the awareness that behind every petty individual circumstance there ramifies an endless network of general moral, social and historical relations. (WAT)

n. ...here throughout long centuries there reigned an era of peace. (MIL)

o. There remained something rather ineffectual about him.
p. But even there, there seemed a lack of any connecting link. (CUR)
q. There spoke a man who all his life felt himself spied upon. (EDE)
r. Clark turned around and where Fellman Gordon belonged there stood one of the immortal Guardians. (SUP)
s. Behind the blacks, as far as Kunta's eyes would let him see, there stretched vast fields of crops growing in different colors. (ROO)
t. In the belly of this emptiness there throbbed a rich pulse of blood. (MIL)
u. The well was situated at the foot of a steep declivity around which there wandered a gout-like path. (MIL)


Eleven examples are cited here from fourteen for the same reason suggested in §3.

(7) a. ...and one night there appeared in the white light a stranger, a gaunt German with a German pompadour, who spent the silent night hours, a dead cigar struck in his teeth, packing out symmetrical rows of brightly labeled cans, jars, gleaming bottles. (ASS)
b. I remember it for the very special reason that at the first showing of the destruction of Shanghai, the streets littered with mutilated bodies which were being hastily shovelled into carts like so much garbage, there arose in this French cinema such a pandemonium as I had never heard before.
(MIL)
c. If I bore into you now with an awl, here at the temple, will there come out with the blood a single tangible clue?

(MIL)
d. Across the distinction of factivity there cuts orthogonally another semantic distinction, which we term EMOTIVITY.

(KIP)
e. ...there emerges in the West of England a type of native alliterative poetry. (ROS)

(EDE)
f. ...he also felt increasingly that there existed between man and the God of his father "a profound natural enmity."

(MIL)
g. It was beating and with each beat there fell to the ground a huge gout of blood. (MIL)

(ASS)
h. There followed, in large print, a list of specials they were offering....

(CUR)
i. She is grave and slightly scornful, and to my mind there has always hung about her a suggestion of tragedy.

(MUS)
j. In the privacy and difference of his past, in all that had brought him, by ways that he had never told, to the present moment, there lay for her a promise of consolation and a long long solace of discovery.

(MUH)
k. From this there shivered through me a violence of amazement not distinguishable from horror.

5. Inside Verbal ES with a Definite Noun Phrase.

Eight examples are shown from ten. The sentence (8e) may be under influence of the Spanish tongue, for Pilar is a Spanish woman.
(8) a. The week Jules and Arlene Luthor...moved into the house on Merriellees Lane, there appeared the second banner headline in the history of the Smallville Times-Reader: SUPERBOY REVEALS HIMSELF.... (SUP)
b. But with this, and with far more authority, there came the image of Honor shaking her head.... (MUH)
c. Now there follows the pale astonished look on the face of Madame, her little cry.... (OTH)
d. There went the trestles, the funeral draperies. (OTH)
e. "Those!" Pilar said. "There has only lacked those!" (BEL)
f. There remains the difficulty of establishing a contextually related norm. (ULL)
g. There spoke the formed cosmopolitan. (EDE)
h. And for no more than another instant there stood the most powerful man on Earth. (SUP)

6. Outside Verbal ES with a Definite Noun Phrase:

Six examples are shown here from ten.

(9) a. Everyone is a potential murderer—in everyone there arises from time to time the wish to kill—though not the will to kill. (CUR) (The underlining of wish and will is by Christie.)
b. There came back to him the remark which Miss Carter had made about his having no malice in him. (MUS)
c. ...but there drifted into his mind, with ease and no sorrow, the form and image of his boy Ephraim, gone so long from him.... (ASS)
d. ...and now there lay between them the two things: her
question, his answer. (OTH)

e. There remains indeed the significant fact that not all little boys had a subjective passion that could be stirred. (EDE)

f. Above the red-tiled roofs, and over the drooping foliage of the trees there rose high into the soft midsummer haze the neo-Gothic tower of St Bride's school where Mor was a housemaster. (MUS)

7. Others.

See the following examples:

(10) a. There, in one horrible hour, came the dark breakdown foreshadowed in all the years of his conflict. (EDE)

b. In the midst of the most terrible poverty and suffering there nevertheless emanated a glow which was holy .... (MIL)

c. ...while there on the ground beside them lay a swine thrashing about with blood pulsing from its cut throat .... (ROO)

d. ...there just seemed no way for either of them to crack through it... (ROO)

e. Down there, in that streaming plain where the automotrice crawls like a caterpillar, is it not possible there once stood wigwams? (MIL)

Here, the structure can be shown simply as $S_\text{there-X-V-NP}$. In the sentences (10b), (10d) and (10e), the elements intervening between there and the verb are adverbs. Their existence is irrelevant here, thus they may be classified under §3. The sentence (10a) may also
be placed in §3, because the phrase is set off by commas. The sentence (10c) may not be an existential sentence, and there in it may be deictic and have stress.

8. Verbs.

The examples cited in §§3-7 have an intransitive verb. The number of relevant sentences here is seventy-seven, and there are forty-seven different verbs. Consequently, so many examples are cited earlier in this paper. Some verbs appear frequently, others do not. The verbs that appear more than one time are: in §3, arise 2 times, come 8, exist 3, follow 3, seem 5, stand 2; in §4, come 3, exist 2; in §5, come 2, go 2; in §6, come 5. Come appears most frequently, nineteen times among seventy-seven sentences. Next come appear, 3 times; arise, 4; exist, 5; follow, 5; go, 3; lie, 4; remain, 3; seem, 6; speak, 2; stand, 4. Others appear only once. There is a case, however, where their occurrence is subject to the kind of literature. For example, though there is only one instance of live, the more folk tales one reads, the more one will find.

Consider part [V-X] in Outside Verbal ES, sentences (7) and (9). Some will be classified as phrasal verbs: (7c) come out, (9b) come back, etc.

In the sentence (7h), the phrase “in large print” is set off by commas. Also, the sentence (7d) has “orthogonally”, (9e) “indeed”, and (9a) “from time to time”, which are simple adverbs. Their existence is irrelevant to the fundamental character of existential sentences. We can proceed without regard to them as they may be classified under §§3 and 5.

Next, consider sentences (7a), (7b), (7e), (7g), (9c), (9d), (9f)

— 50 —
and (11).

(11) ...and after a time there came winging back from mouth to ear the joyous response, "I, Jabon Sallah, am here!" (ROO)

For instance, in (7a), a stranger appeared, but where? A stranger appeared somewhere. In (7g), a huge gout of blood fell, but where? It fell to the ground. Here the verb and the X constitute a constellation. In (11), "came winging" constitutes a combination, and it should not be separated. This is true for (9f) as well.

There are some Outside Verbal ES in which the noun phrase is long and should be placed at the end of the sentence to avoid confusion. Examples are (7a), (9a), (9c), (9e) etc. This is one of the reasons why existential sentences are preferred to sentences without there. See also ordinary and Inside Verbal ES, many of which have a long noun phrase. Another reason is that attention is focussed on the noun phrase at the end of the sentence. In the third place, sentences appear in context and the location of the noun phrase has influence upon the flow of the thought. This is not exclusively restricted to Outside Verbal ES. Many other existential sentences also have this character. This relates to style. Examples are: (7d), (7f), (7i), (9a), (9c) etc.

On the other hand, there are sentences in which [X] may be separated from the verb: (7c) and (7e), for example. The adherence of [X] to [V] is weak. Thus, [V-X] can be rewritten [VP]. The VP is a verb phrase like a phrasal verb, though in some cases the verb phrase can be separated.

9. SEEM TO BE.
There are also existential sentences whose $[V]$ is $[\text{seem to be}]$.

(12) a. ...and there $\textit{doesn't seem to be}$ any other exit. (WAR)
    b. There $\textit{seemed to be}$ answers. (EDE)

There are others that are similar to (12):

(13) It seems like sheer improvisation and unless his lungs give out, there $\textit{promises to be}$ no end to it. (MIL)

(14) a. There's $\textit{got to be}$ another way out. (WAR)
    b. I think after the war there $\textit{will have to be}$ some great penance done for the killing. (BEL)

(15) a. It's nearly three o'clock now and there $\textit{is going to be}$ some food sooner or later. (BEL)
    b. There $\textit{are evidently going to be}$ plenty of horses if you can believe the signs. (BEL)

(16) a. There $\textit{was to be}$ a ceremonial dinner, at a date not yet arranged, to honour the presentation to the school of the portrait of Mr Demoyte. (MUS)
    b. After this, there $\textit{was to be seen}$ the green-grass roof of the squash court.... (MUS)

(17) a. And there's $\textit{bound to be}$ one or two adequate for our needs among that group. (WAR)
    b. ...there $\textit{were bound to be}$ bad hours to off-set the good. (EDE)
(18) There were supposed to be Italian troops concentrated in Soria... (BEL)

Sentences (16b), (17) and (18) are passive. Observe the following passive existential sentences.


(19) a. In the front parlor there was hung a large painting of a Florentine view by Thomas Cole.... (EDE)
  b. Each year there was held a memorial dinner in honour of Granddaddy Perry. (OTH)
  c. ...day and night there could be heard the hum of the traffic along the arterial road and the distant thunder of trains and their sad piping cries. (MUS)
  d. ...here at Knossus...there had been initiated some twenty or thirty centuries before the dawn of that blight called Christianity a way of life which makes everything that has happened since this Western world. (MIL)
  e. There were presented to us the relationships of phenomenon $a$ and phenomenon $b$.5 (LLH) (The underlining of $a$ and $b$ is by Spitzer.)
  f. Felicity was in a rocky bay where at low tide there was revealed a great expanse of rounded boulders heaped at the base of the cliff. (MUS)

This structure, however, can be found among many sentences without there in the subject position:
(20) a. ...thus gradually *was constituted* an atmosphere around the small boy and his brothers and sister.... (EDE)
b. Thus on the ninth page of the novelist's memoirs *is established* that difference between himself and his elder brother which.... (EDE)
c. ...wherein *were folded* the lost ironstone villages of Sibford Gower and Sibford Ferris. (MUH)
d. It is an ark on which *are gathered* together a pair of every kind. (MIL)
e. From the mantlepiece the bulbous and inexplicable brass ornaments had vanished, to be replaced by flowers—and above the mantle, surmounting all, *was hung* the portrait of Demoyte. (MUS)
f. In that same chamber of youth and sentiment *were hoarded* the memories of the dramatized Dickens, the actor B.... (EDE)
g. ...on a peninsula where *are located* Tiryns and Epideurus. (MIL)
h. On the door of the church of my village *was nailed* the paw of a bear that I killed in the spring, finding on a hillside in the snow, overturning a log with this same paw. (BEL)
i. ...through which in winter *were revealed* the red roofs of the housing estate.... (MUH)

What difference is there between the *there*-sentences and those without *there*? Most of the examples cited above have definite noun phrases. In examples (19), (19c) and (19e) have definite noun phrases. Is there a definite restriction in existential sentences? Is there
any difference in meaning? It is very difficult to say, but there must
be difference. If the sequence of words in a sentence differs, there
must be some difference in meaning. For example, see the following
sentences:

(21) a. The linguist saw the pelican. (from a Pelican Book)
       b. The pelican was seen by the linguist.

In the sentence (21a), the subject is “the linguist”, and in (21b), it
is “the pelican”. The meaning of the two sentences is almost the
same: the person who saw is the linguist, and the object which re-
ceived the action is the pelican. The cognitive meaning is the same.
They are intellectually synonymous sentences. Their emotive meaning,
however, differs. Like these two, the meaning differs with existential
sentences and their antagonisms. This kind of pair also exists between
verbal existential sentences (not passive) and sentences without there.
Examples without there are:

(22) a. On the fringe of this wood, within sight of the Library,
       stood the Chapel, a stumpy oblong building of lighter brick
       and more recent date, looking not unlike a water works.
       (MUS)
       b. At the end of the row lay a pile of white paper and some
       poster paint ready mixed. (MUS)

There are other numerous examples that are inversions. Some of
the noun phrases are long, as is often the case with existential sen-
tences. And the subjects of the sentences are definitely the noun
phrases. But with there-sentences the subject is there. A question
can be made from there-sentences, but not from sentences without
there by a further inversion.

11. Restriction on Verbs.

There are verbs which for some reason do not occur in verbal existential sentences. Milsark points out the next three sentences:

(23) a. There arose a riot.
   b. There began a riot.
   c. *There started a riot.¹)

These three are all ingressive verbs, but (23c) is an ill-formed sentence. It cannot be said that all intransitive verbs appear in verbal existential sentences. Further consideration in a wider range of literature is required on this matter.


As indicated above, there are structures without there which parallel those of all existential sentences. Jespersen cites two sentences with transitive verbs: “There took place between him and his son a violent and painful scene. If there crossed her path a man with a strong protective arm, he was whisked away.” ²)

In English structure the most important part is the verb or verb phrase, around which English sentences are developed. Hornby’s 25 verb patterns and the five sentence patterns also classify English sentences on the basis of the verb. “Take place” or “cross her path” show one meaning in this combination, so do “come out”, “come up” etc., as considered above. In addition, the passive form: “was heard”, “were presented to us” etc. should not be divided into two. Thus, outside the range of existential sentences are the forms: “were
folded", "was hung", "was nailed" etc.

Hemingway's work contains many there-sentences, but few verbal existential sentences, though it has some relevant sentences without there. Murdoch has twelve instances in two novels, and Miller thirteen in one book. The occurrence of verbal existential sentences differs among writers and even among works of a writer. For example, Murdoch's *The Italian Girl* has only two existential sentences, though her novels considered in this paper have twelve. This relates to style.

13. Conclusion.

Various verbal existential sentences have been considered. Some verbs can appear in this structure, others cannot. There are also some whose occurrence in it is doubtful. Further consideration is needed as to what verbs can appear and what verbs make the sentence ill-formed when they occur. There is, however, some tendency among verbs. They are classified in the following groups: those intransitive verbs which mean (a) change in space or situation, (b) occurrence of a thing, (c) situation of a thing, (d) other cases. The list of the verbs in these groups is as follows:

List of the Verbs

Change in space or situation:

- come
- cut
- drift
- emanate
- fall
- filter
- follow
- go
- play
- ramify
- wander

Occurrence:

- appear
- arise
- emerge
- rise

Situation:
dangle exist hang lie live lurk reign remain seem shiver stand stretch throb

Others:
speak lack (a doubtful case)

Many of the verbs listed above have a meaning similar to the verb be, that is, “to exist” plus other meanings. For example, “to go” means “to change the place where something exists”, “to appear” “to come to exist”, or “to lurk” “to exist hiding”.

List of transitive verbs in passive

be hung be heard be held
be initiated be presented be revealed

List of Sources

ASS Bernard Malamud, The Assistant. (1957)
BEL Earnest Hemingway, For Whom the Bell Tolls. (1940)
CUR Agatha Christie, Curtain. (1975)
EDE Leon Edel, Henry James, vol. 1. (1953)
FIE Earnest Hemingway, Fiesta (The Sun Also Rises). (1927)
JOO Martin Joos, The Five Clocks. (1961)
KIP Paul and Carol Kiparskey, “Fact” (1968)
LLH Leo Spitzer, Linguistics and Literary History. (1948)
MIL Henry Miller, The Colossus of Maroussi. (1941)
MUH Iris Murdoch, A Severed Head. (1961)
MUS ————, The Sandcastle. (1957)
OTH Thomas Tryon, The Other. (1971)
ROO Alex Haley, Roots. (1977)
ROS Christine Brook-Rose, A Grammar of Metaphor. (1958)
SUP Elliot S. Maggin, *Superman, Last Son of Krypton.* (1958)


TYP Murray Schisgal, *The Typists.* (1963)

ULL Stephen Ullmann, *Meaning and Style.* (1973)

WAR George Lucas, *Star Wars.* (1976)


YUK Lafcadio Hearn, “Yuki-onna”.

Bibliography


Notes

1) See Hornby, where such a structure is shown as “there + BE subject”. See also Milsark, who proposes his *there*-insertion rule, which moves the subject noun phrase of an ordinary sentence after the verb *be* and inserts *there* into the subject position.

2) Fries, p. 161.

3) Rando-Napoli, p. 300.

4) Milsark, p. 91.
5) Cf. With extreme vividness there was present to him again the absurd scene of the previous day in Bledyard's bedroom. (MUS)

6) Milsark, p. 5.

7) Jespersen, p. 112.

8) Her sentences are:
(a) ...and there emanated from them all a special and limited sense of the past.
(b) There only remained upon the wall the big familiar map of Italy that Carlotta had pinned up there very many years ago.