Existence, negation and negative existentials: The singular/ plural distinction in negative existentials in English

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Abstract

The English language has a straightforward system for asserting the existence of some entity, either countable or uncountable, be it material entities like people, animals, water, et cetera, or abstract, non-material entities such as reasons, theories, ways and so on. The two variants of countable existential expressions differentiate between the existence of a single entity (there is a thing) versus the existence of plural entities (there are things). The case of non-existence on the other hand is more complex. To assert negated existence there is, counterintuitively for the value zero, a parallel singular/plural distinction, but in each case, there are several options. For countable referents, singular non-existence can be expressed with either 'there isn't a thing' or 'there is no thing', and non-existence of uncountable referents can be expressed with 'there is no stuff' or 'there isn't any stuff'. Non-existence of plural countable referents can be expressed with either 'there are no things' or 'there aren't any things'. Although the underlying concept may be that the number or amount of extant entities or substances is zero, the variability in expressing this concept signals subtleties and nuances that may be based in both the cognitive and pragmatic aspects of the constructions.

Introduction

The ability to state the existence of some entity is an available function of

every natural language, although the precise ways that existence is stated may vary in subtle or not so subtle ways between languages. Similarly, negation is a universal function of every natural language, although, again, the way that negation finds expression in any particular language is subject to various particular manifestations of syntax, morphology and typology. It stands to reason that expressing non-existence, to assert that something does not exist, is not present, is missing, lacking, or absent in some way, will also reside within the inventory of language universals. In the following I will outline some of the ways that existential expressions highlight or disattend to aspects of the asserted entities across several languages. I will then describe some of the negation systems that obtain in several languages. I will then go on to describe some of the ways in which negative existence is expressed in various languages and I will focus on the negated existential expressions in English and try to tease out some of the underlying aspects of the system.

Stating existence: An overview

In English, the verb 'be' is the most variable verb in its morphology, having a total of eight forms: *be, am, is, are, was, were, being,* and *been*. The highly variable morphology of the verb 'be' traces back to Proto Indo-European and the suppletion of various root words meaning things like 'become' and 'sit'. （Mallory and Adams, 2006, p. 369.） In modern English the 'be' verb is utilized in a wide range of copular expressions such as stating current condition （I'm tired）, identifying （He is John）, expressing location （The book is on the table） and so on. In addition to these copular expressions, the verb 'be' is used to state existence. Following Bentley et al. （2013, p.1） the English existential system can be schematized as follows.

　(1) There　　　　are　　　　some books　on the table.
　　　(PROFORM)　(COPULA)　(PIVOT)　　　(CODA)

　In other languages, there are a variety of available copular verbs for different functions, revealing contrasts that are not attended to in English.　In Spanish, speakers utilize the verbs *ser, estar* and *haber,* with "*ser* used for individual level predicates that denote permanent or essential properties, and *estar* used for stage-level predicates that denote transient or accidental properties." (Perpiñán, 2014, p. 487).　The verb *haber* (have) is used in existential constructions where English would use 'be', as illustrated by:

　(2) Hay　　　　　　　　unos　libros　sobre　la mesa
　　　HAVE. 3SG SG-PROFORM　SOME　BOOKS ON　　THE TABLE
　　　There are some books on the table.

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Bentley et al. 2013, p.1)

　In German, the existential construction is generally expressed with the verb *geben* (give) and the proform *es* (it).

　(3) Es　gibt　　　　　viele　Sterne　am Himmel.
　　　It give.3SG　　　　many　star.PL　in　sky
　　　There are many stars in the sky.

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Constructed example)

　However, in certain circumstances, the existential statement can be expressed with a more locative construction.

　(4) Da sind　　　　　viele Wolken　　am Himmel.
　　　There Be.3PL　　many cloud.PL　in Sky
　　　There are many clouds in the sky.

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Constructed example)

　　The situation here is that the *es gibt* construction is used for expression of general existence, while the *da sind* construction is used for specific, here and now, perceptible existence.（German Grammar Frau, 2019）．In the case of the two sentences above the meaning could be combined and glossed as something like 'there are many stars in the sky（always, even during daytime when it is impossible to see them）, but tonight we cannot see the stars because of the temporary and directly perceptible existence of clouds in the sky right now.' This distinction is not expressed in the English version which would use the same 'there are' construction for both existentials.

> （5）There are loads stars of in the sky, but we can't see them tonight because there are lots of clouds.

　　In Japanese, existential statements bifurcate along a different axis, that of animacy. For any animate entity the existential verb *iru* is used. For all inanimate entities the verb *aru* is used, as illustrated by the following.

> （6）Neko　　ga　　　iru.
> 　　　Cat　　　Subj　　exist-animate-plain-nonpast
> 　　　'There is a cat/There are cats'

> （7）Hon　　　ga　　　aru.
> 　　　Book　　Subj　　exist-inanimate-plain-nonpast
> 　　　'There is a book/There are books'

　　In English existential statements of countable nouns, the obligatory difference in existential statements is found in the expression of the singular/plural distinction. The singular form requires that the singular form of the 'be' verb is used, alongside the singular form of the noun. Although it is usual to

talk about the singular and plural forms of the noun in English, (the plural predominantly using the 's' suffix, or umlaut vowels) the fact is that it is the plural form of the noun which is seen as marked and the default, singular form is unmarked. That is, it is the lack of plural morphology that indicates singular, rather than the presence of any marker. The distinction between singular and plural concepts is not as clear cut as it may seem at first glance, as noted by Rotge (2008), contrasting French and English plural systems,

> The plural is even used with zero: zero degrees Celsius, which can be contrasted with zéro degré (singular) in French. We thus see two slightly different conceptions of the plural: in English the plural is reserved for entities other than '1'; in French the plural starts with '2'. (p.108)

It can be argued from this fact that the 's' suffix cannot be defined just as a plural marker in English; it is more strictly speaking a non-singular marker used whenever the referent is not limited to '1'. Both two and zero number will attract the plural marker in English.

Although the basic form of a noun in English is perceived of as unmarked and singular, the singularity of a noun referent is also marked elsewhere in an existential sentence, usually with the singular indefinite article 'a'.

（8）There is a book.

In（8）the singular nature of the referent is indicated in three places: i) the morphology of the verb (*is* versus *are*), ii) the unmarked noun (*book* versus *books*) and iii) the use of the singular indefinite article 'a' between the verb and the noun. If any one of the three are missing or mis-applied, the sentence becomes ungrammatical. （But see below for cases of non-agreement of number marking.) Copula drop is a feature of languages such as Ukrainian and Hungarian, and articles are absent in languages such as Japanese. Plurals are only marginally present in Japanese with suffixes like *tachi* or *ra* or

reduplication being limited to a small number of fixed cases, usually animate. These differences in language structure can cause confusion and lead to L2 learner utterances such as:

（9） *Is book.

Thus, for an existential statement in English with a single referent, a tripartite singular agreement system is usually required.

For plural existential expressions, the system can also have tripartite plural agreement i.e., plural verb morphology, a plural numeral or quantifier, and the plural noun form as in,

（10) There are some/two/a lot of books.

Alternatively, a bipartite system can be used that dispenses with any modifier or quantifier and relies solely on verb and noun agreement to express a non-specific plural value of the noun.

（11) There are books.

The choice of which pattern to use probably relies on a complex mix of cognitive and pragmatic factors.

Despite singular or plural agreement of verbs and nouns being a fundamental feature of English, in the case of existential expressions the spoken form of the language allows violations of the system. In plural existential expressions, the singular form 'is' can be used, in its clitic form, appended to 'there'. The Corpus of Contemporary American English（Davies, 2008）lists 13,476 hits for the string 'there's a lot of'. The pattern is regular as

regards uncountable nouns, as in the following examples from COCA.

（12）It's ideal because west of the Cascades there's a lot of rain and water

（13）There's a lot of ignorance in America（around the world, in fact）

For plural countable nouns the strictly correct version should be 'there are a lot of' but the corpus is replete with instances of singular, clitic 's' form of the verb used with plural countable nouns as illustrated by the following corpus extracts.

（14）There's a lot of people around.

（15）Look, Mike, there's a lot of things that I'm ready to tell you

It is possible that this violation of the agreement pattern of verb and noun is due to an avoidance of too many weak vowels in subsequent syllables in the stream of fast speech, especially in varieties of English that omit medial and final /t/（or replace it with a glottal stop）, are non-rhotic and carry out other sound changes, which will lead to spoken expressions like the following.

（16）ðə rə ə lɒ rə
     （Thuh ruh uh lorruh）
       There are a lot of

In these cases, the voiced fricative /z/ of the singular, reduced 'is' will help to break up the string of weak vowels and make the utterance more hearable in the stream of speech, despite its seeming ungrammaticality.

To sum up this brief overview, existential expressions in different languages

show a variety of different strategies. Existence may be expressed with the 'be' verb, which is also used in locative, attributive, equative or identification copular sentences as is the case in English. Alternatively, existence may be expressed with some other verb, such as Spanish *haber* (have), or German *geben* (give). Existential sentences may attend or disattend to the singular or plural distinction, may distinguish between general and specific existence or foreground animacy or inanimacy. It is assumed that this list of cognitively salient existential properties is not exhaustive.

Negation

In common with existential statements, negation is a language universal, as expressed by Miestamo (2017),

> Negation is a function that has been universally grammaticalized in the world's languages. This is something we can state with a high level of confidence, since no language has ever been reported to lack a grammaticalized expression of negation. (p. 405).

The ways in which different languages carry out negation is varied but with strong tendencies towards marking negation with suffixes and prefixes, as noted by Dahl (1979, p.81). One of the basic ways of approaching the grammar of negation is the idea of standard negation. This is defined by Payne (1985, p. 198, quoted in Miestamo, 2017, p.408) as, "that type of negation that can apply to the most minimal and basic sentences. Such sentences are characteristically main clauses and consist of a single predicate with as few noun phrases and adverbial modifiers as possible." Thus, a sentence consisting of a basic head noun followed by a predicate is negated in the following way in English.

(17) The man eats fish.

（18）The man does not eat fish.

The ways that standard negation occurs in various languages can be divided into symmetric and asymmetric types. The differences between the two are described in the World Atlas of Language Structures online（WALS）Miestamo （2013, chapter 113）.

> In symmetric negation the structure of the negative is identical to the structure of the affirmative, except for the presence of the negative marker（s）. In asymmetric negation the structure of the negative differs from the structure of the affirmative in various other ways too, i.e., there is asymmetry between affirmation and negation.

Miestamo illustrates the nature of symmetrical negation by referring to negation in German.

（19）a. ich singe   b. ich singe nicht
　　　　I   sing 1sg   I   sing 1sg. neg
　　　　I sing.   I do not sing.   （Miestamo 2013）

The only difference between the positive and negative sentences is the absence or presence of the negator word *nicht*. In WALS, chapter 113, German is labelled as a symmetric language, while English is noted as having both symmetrical and asymmetrical negation. The English case is demonstrated in Table 1 showing standard negation in English across the tenses.

Table 1.

Tense and Negation in English

Present Simple	He fights	He does not fight
Present Continuous	He is fighting	He is not fighting
Past Simple	He fought	He didn't fight
Past Continuous	He was fighting	He was not fighting
Present Perfect	He has fought	He has not fought
Present Perfect Continuous	He has been fighting	He has not been fighting
Past Perfect	He had fought	He had not fought
Past Perfect Continuous	He had been fighting	He had not been fighting
Future	He will read	He will not read（won't）
Future continuous	He will be fighting	He will not be fighting
Future perfect	He will have fought	He will not have fought
Future Perfect Continuous	He will have been fighting	He will not have been fighting

It is clear from Table 1 that most tenses have a symmetrical negation pattern. That is, the difference between the positive and negative is simply the presence of the negator 'not'. However, for the present simple and the past simple tenses an asymmetrical pattern is observed – highlighted in the table. Here, tense and person marking are stripped from the verb. An auxiliary verb 'do' is inserted, tense and person marking that was removed from the main verb are applied to this auxiliary and the negator *not* is placed after the auxiliary or appended as a clitic form *n't*. The presence of the auxiliary verb 'do' is attributed by McWhorter（2008, pp 22 – 23）to borrowing from Celtic

and it is typologically unusual, not only in other Indo-European languages but also worldwide.

In the case of the future tense with 'will', there is a different kind of asymmetry. In this case, there is no use of the 'do' auxiliary, but the auxiliary verb *will* has two possibilities, either a fully symmetrical negation.

　　(20) I will go　　　I will not go

Alternatively, if the negator appears as a clitic form, then the vowel nucleus in the auxiliary verb changes and the word final consonant /l/ is dropped.

　　(21) I will go　　　I won't go

The /wəʊnt/ variant is unique to the negated form of *will* and represents a different kind of asymmetrical negation to the simple present and past English examples that utilized 'do' as a person and tense bearing auxiliary as outlined above.

Negated existentials

So far, I have briefly described two structures, existential statements, and negated statements, that are assumed to be language universals, and I have touched on some of the various ways in which these are expressed in various languages. I will now turn to the conflation of these two concepts – negated existential constructions. In a cross-linguistic study of negative existential constructions Veselinova (2013, p.107) notes, "It is found that there is a strong cross-linguistic tendency to use a special negation strategy in these predications."

In Veselinova's (2013) study a wide range of languages were investigated

from the standpoint of the differences between the expression of affirmative and negative existence. At one end of the scale there are languages that have "...a complete formal and constructional difference between the expressions used for the negation of existential constructions and those used for [Standard negation]." (2013, p.112). The case is illustrated with reference to Turkish which uses the suffix *-me* on the main verb to express standard negation. The verb *var* (exist) is not negated with this suffix or any other morphological change, but in negated existential sentences a separate word – *yok*, which has some verbal features, is used.

(22)

a.   Su   var-dı
     water   exist-PST
     'There was water'

b.   Su   yok-tu
     water   NEG. EXIST. PST
     'There was no water'   (Van Schaaik 1994, pp. 38 − 39)

The same pattern of special negation strategies for positive and negative existential statements is also found in Hebrew. In this case *yesh* is the positive existential verb and *eyn* is the negative counterpart.

(23)

a.   Yesh kan harbe mayim
     Exist here much water
     'There's lots of water here'.

b.   Eyn kan harbe mayim
     Neg/Exist here much water.
     'There isn't much water here'.   (Givón, 2001, p.389.)

Other examples of languages with a specialized existential negator strategy are found in Croft（1991）.

At the other end of the scale there are languages that use the same negation strategy for both standard and existential negation, with Veselivona（2013, pp. 115 − 116.）giving the example of the negator *den* being used for both standard negation and for existential negation in Greek. Between these two poles there are a number of intermediate cases of varying degrees of complexity, which are not discussed here for reasons of space.

As was noted above, the expression of existence can attend or disattend to various factors such as animacy, permanence, plurality and so on, in different languages. These aspects of existence can also find expression in the negated existential sentences. For example, the animate/inanimate distinction, which is obligatorily marked in Japanese as shown in（6）and（7）above, （reproduced for convenience as（24）and（25）below）, also finds expression in the negated existential parallels.

（24）Neko   ga   iru.
      Cat   Subj   exist-animate-plain-nonpast
      'There is a cat/There are cats'

（25）Hon   ga   aru.
      Book   Subj   exist-inanimate-plain-nonpast
      'There is a book/ There are books'

（26）Neko   ga   inai.
      Cat   Subj   exist-animate-neg-nonpast
      'There isn't a cat/here are no cats

（27）Hon   ga   nai.
      Book   Subj   exists-inanaimate-neg-nonpast

'There isn't a book/There are no books

（Constructed examples）

The negated form of 'animate exist' *iru* is *inai* and the negated form of 'inanimate exist' ***aru*** is ***nai***. The distinction that was observed in the affirmative existentials is also attended to in their negated counterparts.

The same parallel system is true of the English marking of singular or plural in negative existential statements, even though it is counterintuitive in a strict sense. By this I mean that when expressing negative existence of countable nouns, the number of entities is zero. On the surface, it would seem nonsensical to various ascribe a singular or plural value to zero number. But singular or plural marking of count nouns is obligatorily marked in English– zero existentials included. As the glosses on the Japanese sentences above make clear, in Japanese it is entirely possible to sate existence without indicating in any way the number of referents. Such a lack of number marking in English would lead to an ungrammatical sentence.

（28） *There （exist） book

The Japanese distinction between animate and inanimate existence is exactly parallel in the positive and negated existentials, but for English, the affirmative/negative pattern is not so neat, with two basic ways （using 'no' or 'not'） to express singular form negation and two basic ways （similarly using 'no' or 'not'） to express plural negation for countable nouns and for non-count nouns. The pattern can be further elaborated by using either the full form of all words or using the reduced form of either the negative particle or the existential verb.

Singular negation（*count*）

（29）There isn't a book

（30）There's no book

（31）There's not a book

Plural negation（*count*）

（32）There aren't any books

（33）There are no books

Negation of non-count referents

（34）There isn't any water

（35）There's no water

In each case of stating negative existence, the speaker or writer has a choice of expressions to convey the context. A search of the Corpus of Contemporary American English（COCA）, Davies（2008）, reveals the different forms as shown in Table 2.（All corpus data in this paper are from Davies, 2008）. For these constructions, there is a choice of forms, either full（i.e., no reduction of any element）, or reduction of either the existence verb to a clitic form or the reduction of the negator 'not' to a clitic form, but not both. i.e., 'there'sn't' is an impossible form. The negator 'no' is of course not reducible.

Table 2

Negative Existential Forms in English

Form	Singular: IS+ NEG (+ A)		Plural: IS/ARE + NEG +ANY	
Negator	NOT A	NO	NOT ANY	NO
Full	*There is not a*	*There is no*	*There are not any* *There is not any*	*There are no*
Reduced negator	*There isn't a*	—	*There aren't any* *There isn't any*	—
Reduced verb	*There's not a*	*There's no*	*There's not any* *There're not any*	*There're no*

The corpus frequency of these 13 forms is shown in table 3.

Table 3

Corpus Frequency of Negative Existentials

Form	Singular: IS+ NEG (+ A)		Plural IS/ARE + NEG +ANY	
Negator	NOT A	NO	NOT ANY	NO
Full	*There is not a* **2,202**	*There is no* **91,680**	*There are not any* **54** *There is not any* **126**	*There are no* **25,116**
Reduced negator	*There isn't a* **2,855**	—	*There aren't any* **1694** *There isn't any* **1240**	—
Reduced verb	*There's not a* **3,970**	*There's no* **83,353**	*There's not any* **108** *There're not any* **0**	*There're no* **55**

As to be expected, the form *There + is + no* (with either the verb in the full or reduced form, that is, either *There is no* or *There's no*) is the most frequent

form of the negated existential structure. This is unsurprising because this form covers the simple case of singular negation of countable referents, the negation of non-count referents and, when using the reduced (clitic) verb form can also be used for negation of plural referents. The following corpus examples (Davies, 2008) are illustrative of the range of uses.

(36) There's no elevator

(37) There's no food in our house.

(38) There's no signs of any other injuries

As we are dealing with negative existence, that is, the number of referent items or the amount of referent stuff being zero, it is important to note that the 'there + 's/is + not' construction can also be used to express a paucity of referent items or stuff rather than zero when combined with quantifiers, as in the following examples. (With corpus counts added in parentheses.)

(39) There's not many (152)

(40) There's not much (2516)

(41) There's not a lot (1018)

(42) There's not that much/many (180)

What also emerges from the corpus concordance of this construction is that instances like (36) that explicitly state that some single concrete entity does not exist are quite rare, accounting for less than 20% of a sample of 200 instances of 'There's no'. The most common collocates of the 'There's no'

structure refer to abstract concepts as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Collocates of 'There's no' (*Sample 200 lines*)

	Collocate	Number of occurrences	Percentage of sample
	Way	20	10
	Question	14	7
	Reason	12	6
	Doubt	9	4.5
There's no	Need	7	3.5
	Time	6	3
	Point	6	3
	Sign of	4	2
	Guarantee	3	1.5
Total		81	40

It is clear from the very limited data set of Table 4 that the construction 'There's no' seems to be part of a number of set phrases, generally referring to an absence of abstract rather than concrete referents.

A further observation from the corpus data reveals that in some cases the full or reduced forms are similar in number of occurrences. The figures for the full and for the reduced forms of singular verb 'is', negated with the negator no are roughly similar as shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1.

Frequencies of Reduced and Non-reduced Singular Verb 'is' + No

Frequency of 'is'/ 's + no negator

[Chart showing two bars: "There is no" at approximately 90,000 and "There's no" at approximately 82,000, with y-axis from 0 to 100,000 in increments of 25,000]
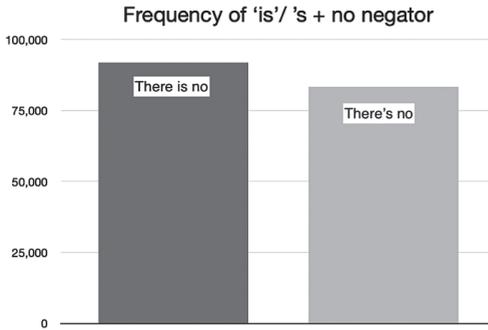
The balance of full and reduced forms found with 'There is no' versus 'There's no' is not found with other cases. The negative form with 'any' shows a clear preference for the negator 'not' to appear in clitic form with either the plural verb form (There are**n't** any), or the singular verb form (There is**n't** any). The full forms of the negator 'not' in combination with the word 'any' are relatively rare. This may be because of the presence of the word 'any' which may be seen as signaling negation in these sentences, with 'not' being reduced in accordance with the Jespersen cycle. (Jespersen, 1917). An imbalance between full and reduced forms is most clearly seen with plural negation using the negator 'no', but this time in the opposite direction, with the full form 'There are no' being by far the most common pattern (25,116 instances) and the reduced verb form (There're no) being exceedingly rare with only 55 instances in the corpus. The differential is seen clearly in chart 2 which needs the frequency axis to be on a logarithmic scale to make the 'there're no' data visible.

Chart 2

Relative Frequencies of Reduced and Non-reduced Plural Verb + No（*Log scale*）

Frequency of 'there are no'/'there're no'
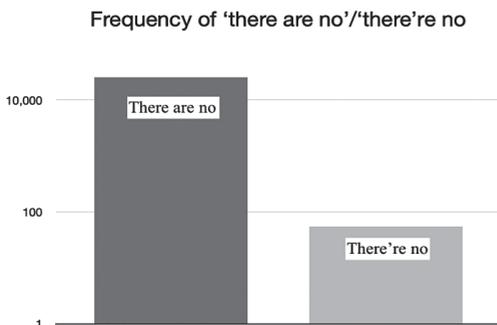
What emerges from this preliminary study is that there is quite a lot of variety in the English existential negative structures, but the forms are not used in equal distribution. The most commonly occurring structure is the Proform + singular verb + no（with either full form of the verb *is* or the reduced form appended to *there*.）The form has a wide range of uses from expressing singular or plural negation of countable referents, negation of non-count referents and many set and idiomatic phrases such as:

（43）There's no telling how bad things might have been today

（44）There's no going back

The simple expression of negative existence of some singular concrete entity seems to be a minor occurrence with this construction.

For the other existential negation forms there seems to be some preference for using or not using the clitic form of either the verb or the negator, with the

word *any* seeming to trigger the reduction of the 'not' negator to its clitic form.

Past tense negative existence

The data examined here were based on simple present tense examples of negative existential expressions. That is, an assertion such as 'there isn't any' or 'there are no' et cetera can cover either here-and-now nonexistence as in (45).

(45) There are no students in the hallway. (right now)

Or, universal non-existence across both time and place.

(46) There's no such thing as monsters. (Anywhere and anytime)

What has not been considered in this study is the occurrence of negative existential expressions in the past tense, such as:

(47) There were no streetlamps.

(48) There was no information.

The distinctions that were observed for the present tense – singular and plural marking, use of either *not* or *no* as the negator, and the reduction of either the negator or the existential verb form and so on – are not fully paralleled in the past forms in English. Both singular and plural verb forms (*is/are*) can be reduced to a clitic form in the present tense.

(49) There is no teacher/ There's no teacher.

(50) There are no students/ There're no students.

However, the past tense forms (was/were) must remain fully expressed in writing.

(51) *Yesterday, there's no teacher.

(52) *Yesterday, there're no students.

The spoken forms of these negative past tense existentials, even if reduced, will remain hearably different from the present tense reduced forms.

Whether past tense negative existential statements are like their present tense counterparts and are used mostly for abstract referents, or tend towards expressing the non-existence of more concrete referents in a question for further research. Likewise, the ability to refer to time-and-place non-existence or universal nonexistence may not be as available for past-tense statements of non-existence. Intuitively, expressing a negative existential in the past tense seems to limit the scope of non-existence to the past.

Expressions of present-tense non-existence can refer to a) locational non-existence, contrasting one location with another, b) temporal non-existence, contrasting now and another time, or c) general/universal non-existence typified by the construction 'there's no such thing as'. The three types are illustrated in the following examples.

(53) There's no beer in the fridge.
    (Presumably there is beer elsewhere)

(54) There's no queue at the moment.
    (Presumably there was a queue in the past, or there will be a queue in

the future)

(55) There's no such thing as gremlins.
　　(At no time and in no place can the assertion of gremlin existence have truth value.)

For past tense negative existence statements there is the sense that the referent was non-extant at that particular time or at that particular place, and that there is an implied contrast with present (or at least later) existence as shown in the following corpus examples showing past non-existence combined with the construction 'no such thing as'.

(56) Maas says there was no such thing as HR in the 60s.

(57) Since there was no such thing as in vitro back in the 1824.

(58) people in England long ago thought there was no such thing as a Black Swan. Until one was found in Australia.

The contrast between past non-existence in a general sense (as opposed to a merely locational sense) and implication of present existence seems to be quite strongly implied here and further investigation is warranted.

Discussion & further research questions

In contrast to some languages, English has a wide variety of constructions that can be utilized to express negative existence. The simple singular/plural distinction which applies to count nouns is also attended to in negative existential constructions. But, unlike the simple binary distinction in positive existential constructions (*There is a* versus *There are*), there are two available negators (not and no) for both the singular form and the plural form, giving

four basic constructions to express negative existence. A further set of options are also available in that the speaker can reduce either the existential verb to a clitic form attached to the proform word 'there' ('there's, there're), or the negator 'not' can be reduced to a clitic form attached to the full form of the existential verb. So, in expressing negative existence there are a total of thirteen constructions that a speaker can choose from. The use of a singular verb form with the negator *no* (rather than *not*) can be used for singular and plural negation (despite the seeming ungrammaticality of 'there's no people') and for negation of non-count nouns. The utility of the 'there's no' pattern in expressing negated singular and plural count nouns and negating non-count nouns means that this is the most commonly found pattern. Further examination of the data is needed to tease out the differences that may be present in using the 'there's no' pattern for concrete versus abstract entities, and for negating singular versus plural referents.

　　The above analysis concerning frequency and collocation has relied heavily on corpus data, but there are other issues that may be dealt with from a different standpoint. Givón (2001, p. 372) notes that,

> NEG–assertion is thus a distinct speech act, used with different communicative goals in mind than affirmative assertions. In using NEG-assertion, the speaker is not in the business of communicating new information to the hearer. Rather s/he is in the business of correcting the hearer's misguided beliefs.

Concomitant to this view, there arises the question of the sequential environment of negative existential statements. Is it the case that negative existential assertions are made, either overtly or tacitly, as a contradiction to some previously stated or implied existential statement by some other participant in the interaction? The kinds of micro-analyses that are carried out in a conversation analysis (CA) methodological framework (Schegloff, 2007) will be able to shed light on the kind of sequential environment in spoken

interaction where negative existential statements occur. For example, if Givón is right when he asserts that negative statements are doing some corrective work, then do negative existential assertions have features of dispreferred second pair parts of adjacency pairs?（Pomerantz, 1984.）That is, are such statements embedded within hedging, hesitation and other language and performance phenomena typical of disagreeing or otherwise non-aligning response turns?

A connected issue is the accuracy of the corpus data concerning clitic or non-clitic elements of the negative existential data. For researchers using conversation analysis methodology, it is a basic assumption that "no order of detail can be dismissed a priori as disorderly, accidental or irrelevant" Heritage （1984, p.241.）Therefore, data transcription is highly detailed, and the CA transcriber is very attentive to the exact form of an utterance. It is probably the case that the transcriptions that underly corpus data derived from spoken sources may not always be as attentive to micro-features of the data as CA transcriptions, and the data may in some cases be 'cleaned up' versions of what was actually said.

Negation is an important feature of language and communication, but the apparent simplicity of the concept belies some of the issues surrounding the expression of negation in general and negative existence in particular. As noted by Horn （2001）,

> The form and function of negative statements in language are far from simple and transparent. In particular, the absolute symmetry definable between affirmative and negative propositions in logic is not reflected by a comparable symmetry in language structure and language use. （p. xiii）.

Although English does not have the resource of a clearly different verb for expressing negative existence such as the verbs found in Turkish, Hebrew and others, there is a level of complexity in expressing negative existence that may

not be appreciated at a meta-cognitive level by native English speakers and teachers of English to speakers of other languages.

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