

A contrastive analysis of (English) ‘there’ and (Spanish) *hay* existential sentences

Towards a constructional prototype*

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This study is devoted to the grammatical, semantic and informative analysis of the so-called existential sentence (“There is a girl in the garden” in English, or *Hay una niña en el jardín* ‘There-is a girl in the garden’ in Spanish) in an attempt to establish a multi-linguistic prototype of the construction. To that end, data from several corpora of contemporary spoken English and Spanish are analysed in a number of ways, including the frequency of this construction in the two languages, the basic elements of its syntactic structure, and the semantic and informative constraints which operate in the existential/presentational construction. This study also deals with the degree of variation which these sentences exhibit and how this affects the selection of the marker of the construction (‘there’, *hay*), agreement between the marker or the verb and the postverbal noun phrase, the accommodation of additional constituents such as locative phrases or nominal postmodifiers and complements, the so-called indefiniteness restriction, and the compliance with general informative principles to which English and Spanish are claimed to be subject. A corpus-based contrastive methodology leads both to a prototypical and to a language-specific description of the existential construction in English and Spanish, in which the notion of grammatical, semantic and informative versatility plays a significant role.

Keywords: existential, presentational, construction, prototype, English/Spanish

1. Introduction and theoretical assumptions

This paper takes as its starting point the assumption that the existential construction can be claimed to qualify as a construction in the grammars of languages such as English and Spanish, and aims at defining a multi-linguistic prototype of it on formal and functional grounds.¹ To that end, I will use data retrieved from

a number of corpora of present-day English and Spanish, and will undertake a multi-feature characterization of the existential construction in both languages. Formal and functional similarities will lead to the conclusion that the description of the existential construction from a multi-/cross-linguistic perspective is certainly a worthwhile undertaking. The study is contrastive² in that it tries to identify cross-linguistic equivalents of a form in two languages,³ and to specify the degree and the type of correspondence between such compared items. Following the traditions of contrastive analysis (see, for example, James, 1980:30), I will first describe the existential construction individually in English and in Spanish (the so-called descriptive level) and then compare and contrast the results in the search for a cross-linguistic prototype (the juxtaposition level). At both levels I will explore different layers of analysis, including morphology, syntax, semantics and (shallow) pragmatics.

My departure point is the claim that there exists a so-called ‘existential construction’ (henceforth EC) at least in the languages currently under investigation. Even though the term ‘construction’ is not used technically here, evidence from different theoretical frameworks suggests that examples such as 1 and 2, which illustrate, respectively, the English and the Spanish existential strategies most frequently attested in use, are very specific as regards their meaning, pragmatics and formal characteristics.

- (1) There was in many urban and rural areas extreme poverty due to unemployment, bad working conditions, poor housing, inadequate diet, and chronic ill health. (BNC D8YPS002)
- (2) *[yo me rijo por unas normas y yo conservo un — yo qué sé (...)] yo tengo unos principios y] para mí hay valores fundamentales* (Val.Es.Co)
 ‘I myself rule by some norms and I keep a — I what know (...) I have some principles and] for me there-are values fundamental’
 “I am ruled by some norms and keep a — I don’t know (...) I have some principles and] there exist fundamental values to me”

From a Chomskyan perspective, Babby (2009:69, my emphasis) claims that “the form and meaning of [Existential Constructions] are a function of a *dedicated phrase* (existential functional projection)”. In other words, it is claimed that the EC is so specific that it deserves unique treatment in the theory of grammar. In this framework Babby argues for an Existential functional category (E) and the corresponding maximal projection Existential Phrase (EP), in which ‘there’ would occupy the Specifier position in English, whereas in Spanish *hay* would be generated as an argument internal to the intermediate projection E’ and would later occupy

the (Spec,EP) position via movement. The syntactic configuration of the EP would thus be universal and its instantiation would be language-specific.

From a different perspective, Goldberg (2006: 5) defines 'construction' as follows: "Any linguistic pattern is recognized as a construction as long as some aspect of its form is not strictly predictable from its component parts or from other construction recognized to exist". One may argue that examples 1 and 2 above could be regarded as constructions in that their pragmatic existential/presentational interpretation is not easily deduced from their formal configuration. Within Construction Grammar, constructions in different languages may exhibit comparable features and can thus justify the existence of more general constructs, which is theoretically more satisfying than positing the existence of language-specific constructions based on very concrete features not shared by other linguistic systems. In Goldberg's (2006: 5) words, "an explanation that refers only to the specific question at hand runs the risk of being *ad hoc*. General constructs that are independently needed are always preferable". The bid for general constructs must not be taken as a wink at a universal concept of construction. On the contrary, Goldberg (2006: 184) says that "'universals' are only tendencies, and each tendency is argued to be a result of general cognitive, pragmatic, or processing attributes of human cognition". For the sake of this introduction, let us assume that in the forms under consideration here there exists a special (learned?) constructional pairing of form with a specific semantic or discourse function, and that such a pairing shows comparable cross-linguistic tendencies in languages such as English and Spanish. This premise will justify the search for a cross- or multi-linguistic prototype of the EC on structural and functional grounds.⁴

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 I deal with the description of ECs in English and Spanish, paying attention to the different levels of grammatical analysis. In Section 3 I describe the methodology and the corpora from which the data have been drawn. Section 4 is devoted to the analysis of the data from different perspectives: grammatical, semantic and informative. A summary of the study and the main conclusions are given in Section 5.

2. Characterization of the existential construction

Before embarking on the analysis of my data, in this section I describe the main features of the EC in English and Spanish. In Section 2.1 I deal with formal aspects such as word order, the grammatical characterization of the marker, the syntactic function of the nominal constituents, and the issue of subjecthood. Section 2.2 is devoted to a brief semantic characterization of the ECs. Finally, in Section 2.3 I refer to the pragmatic effects of the construction.

2.1 Formal features

In this section I deal with the formal structural characteristics of ECs in English and in Spanish. The grammatical feature which is most salient in ECs in English and Spanish is perhaps their thematic organization (à la Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). ECs are thematically marked in these languages, since their (overt) word order does not conform to a subject-verb-complement design (see Suñer, 1982 for the preference for an SVO word order in Spanish, versus other unordered base hypotheses). In this respect, the thematic configurations in examples 1' and 2' could be argued to constitute the unmarked alternatives of examples 1 and 2.

- (1') Extreme poverty due to unemployment, bad working conditions, poor housing, inadequate diet, and chronic ill health was [found] in many urban and rural areas.
- (2') [*yo me rijo por unas normas y yo conservoo unn — yo qué sé (...) yo tengo unos principios y] valores fundamentales [existen] para mí*
 'I myself rule by some norms and I keep a — I what know (...) I have some principles and] values fundamental [exist] for me'

Even if we assume that the propositional content of examples 1–1' and 2–2' is identical, this is not a theoretical problem for the theories which focus on thematic variation, since it is commonly contended that the same propositional meaning can be conveyed by a number of linguistic choices; in Matthiessen *et al.*'s (2010: 69) words, “[t]he nature of the choice [...] is determined by [...] what other options the option contrasts with”. What is left to address, then, is the question of what is gained by the selection of sentence-initial *there/hay* with respect to other options. In what follows I describe the distribution of unmarked ECs in English and Spanish.

English ‘there’-constructions (or TCs) conform to the pattern shown in example 3:

- (3) ‘there’ + verb + X

where: (i) ‘there’⁵ is commonly analysed as an expletive item (Kuno, 1971; Haiman, 1974; Radford, 1997); (ii) the verb is prototypically intransitive; and (iii) the post-verbal complement (X) is normally categorized as a noun phrase (NP) or as a Small Clause (or SC;⁶ see, among others, Lumsden, 1988 or Hale and Keyser, 2002) and functions as either the object or the subject of the construction.

I will now deal with the syntactic status of the NP in the TC. Among the reasons for the analysis of the postverbal complement as the object are the following:⁷

- The NP occupies the (unmarked) postverbal position of the object in a declarative sentence.

- The postverbal NP is not used in postverbal position in tags ('Isn't there?') or in inverted sentences (in examples 4, 5 and 6), so it is not the subject:
 - (4) Never is there time when one needs it. [negative inversion]
 - (5) Had there been enough time, I would be able to complete the paper. [conditional inversion]
 - (6) Is there time? [question]
- 'there' and not the NP functions as the subject in raising constructions:
 - (7) There appears to be trouble.
 - (8) [He expected] there to be trouble.
- When the postverbal constituent is pronominal, it is overtly marked for Accusative case ('There's him'), and this constitutes a strong argument in favour of the object status of the NP. The way in which the accusative case is assigned to the NP is not free of controversy, since 'be' is not a case-assigner in canonical generative grammar (see, in this respect, Safir, 1982). Unlike *haber* in Spanish, the postverbal complement in a TC has to receive case from a constituent other than 'be'. In this vein, it has been claimed that the NP either has to be coindexed with a preverbal element, and thus inherits case via coindexing, or simply receives case from the locative phrase within a SC (see Torrego, 1984 for a review of these proposals).

The subject status of the postverbal NP is justified in light of the following circumstances:

- A (weak) argument could be based on the fact that since 'there' has no content,⁸ it is not likely to be analysed as a subject, and hence the NP can be taken as the subject of the construction. However, this does not explain why expletive 'it' is treated as the grammatical subject of sentences exhibiting the extraposition of their subjects (in example 9), weather sentences (in example 10), etc.
 - (9) It is crucial to determine the function of the NP.
 - (10) It has been raining for ages.
- Allan (1971), who supports the view that 'there' is the subject in TCs, notes that there are three arguments which do not favour the analysis of 'there' as the subject and which thus pave the way for the subject status of the NP: (i) 'there' cannot be clefted out of the phrase (in example 11), (ii) 'there' cannot be elicited by a *wh*-question (in example 12), and (iii) its syntactic behaviour in some transformations is not parallel to other average subjects (as in example 13).

- (11) *It is there that is the/a lion in the garden.
- (12) *What/Who are lions in Africa? There.
- (13) a. Sam is the man in the garden.
The man in the garden is Sam.
Sam, the man in the garden.
- b. There is a man in the garden.
*A man in the garden is there_{existential}.
*There, a man in the garden.

As I pointed out in Pérez-Guerra (1999: 84fn), Allan's objections do not disqualify the treatment of 'there' as the subject of its clause, but simply demonstrate that 'there' is not a referential word but an expletive, which is crucial here. In fact, if one applies the tests in (i)–(iii) above to sentences like 'It is raining', in which 'it' functions as the grammatical subject, the results will also be ungrammatical.

The (unmarked) Spanish EC or *hay*-construction (henceforth HC) sticks to the pattern in example 14:

- (14) *hay* + NP (+Y)

where the NP is obligatory and Y, as pointed out by Suñer (1982), can be realized by: (i) an adverbial (in most HCs, as in example 2 above), (ii) a Complementiser Phrase or CP (in example 15),⁹ (iii) an unbound relative clause (in examples 16 and 17),¹⁰ or (iv) a participial clause (in examples 18 and 19):

- (15) ¿[Te parece que] aún hay libros que cuestan \$2?
'To-You seems that still there-are books that cost \$2?'
"Do you think that there are still books that cost \$2?"
- (16) *Hay quienes contemplan la vista pasivamente.*
'There-are who glance-at the view passively.'
"There are people who glance at the view passively."
- (17) *No hay por quien votar.*
'Not there-are for whom to-vote.'
"There's nobody who one can vote."
- (18) *Hay una mujer mirando las puestas de sol.*
'There-is a woman glancing-at the sunset.'
- (19) *Hay varios estudiantes sentados en el suelo.*
'There-are some students sitting on the floor'

The syntax of the HC is not free of controversy. In what follows I will deal with the arguments adduced in the literature in favour of the subject status (if there is a

subject at all; see Suñer, 1982 in this respect) and in favour of the object status of the postverbal NP in example 14. The reasons for treating the NP in an HC as the object of the construction are the following:

- agreement: Rodríguez-Mondoñedo (2005) points out that there are two dialects as far as agreement between the verb and the NP in HCs in Spanish is concerned: (i) the default option is agreement in third-person singular (see example 2), and (ii) the marked option is agreement with the NP, as in example 20, predominant in Latin American Spanish and non-standard in Peninsular Spanish.

(20) *Hubieron dos hombres en la fiesta.*
 'There-were two men at the party.'

Montes Giraldo (1982:384) gives examples of (sporadic) plural agreement not only in past-tensed verbal forms but also in the present, with verbal variants such as *hayn* or *haen*, and, in light of this fact, he gives support to the subject status of the NP. Although agreement between the NP and the verb strongly disfavours the object status of the NP, scholars such as Rodríguez-Mondoñedo (2005) believe that the arguments against the analysis of the NP as the subject are stronger. The possibility of agreement in some dialects is justified by Rodríguez-Mondoñedo on theoretical grounds as follows: the verb in the HC is defective in the default dialect since it lacks (uninterpretable) [person] and [number] features. The lack of the [person] feature accounts for the ungrammaticality of examples such as 21 and 22.

(21) **Hay Juan.*
 'There-is Juan.'

(22) **Hay {me / te}.*
 'There-is {me / you}.'

And the lack of the [number] feature explains why agreement does not hold in the HCs in this dialect. By contrast, Rodríguez-Mondoñedo maintains that the verb (in fact, tense in his proposal) is not defective or incomplete in the agreement dialect since it does contain the relevant number feature, and thus agreement between the NP and the verb is possible.

- raising: the NP cannot be promoted to subject position in raising or control constructions:

(23) *²*Fantasmas parece haber en esta casa.*
 'Ghosts it-seems to-be in this house.'

(24) **Dos hombres creen haber en el jardín.*
 'Two men believe to-be in the garden.'

- The impossibility of coordinating an HC and an unmarked declarative sentence as in example 25 shows that the syntactic structure of the two clauses is different, which paves the way for a non-subject analysis of the NP in the HC (see Rodríguez-Mondoñedo, 2005):

(25) **Había(n) y olían agradablemente dos docenas de rosas.*
 ‘There-is(are) and smelt_{plural} nicely two dozens of roses.’

- *hay* and impersonal *se* are mutually exclusive, and this, according to Suñer (1982:20), is because *hay* does not take a subject.
- cliticisation: the NP is pronominalised or cliticised in the accusative:

(26) *No las hay menos hermosas.*
 ‘Not those there-are less beautiful.’

Torrego (1984) claims that *hay* (or *haber*) is a transitive verb which assigns the accusative case to the NP occurring in an HC. She contends that since *haber* assigns case to the NP and also gives it a theta-role, the NP does not have a reason to move to subject position and cannot be passivised (see example 27)¹¹ — the impossibility of passivisation is taken by Fernández Soriano and Táboas Baylín (1999: 1755) as evidence of the syntactic status of the NP as a non-object.

(27) **Libros son habidos en esta biblioteca.*
 ‘Books are existed in this library.’

Case agreement is also put forward as the main argument in Torrego (1989) and Contreras (1996) in order to justify the object status of the NPs in HCs, at least in the final stage of the derivation.¹²

- No HCs are attested containing *hay* and a reflexive clitic (Suñer, 1982:21).
- HCs do not occur in imperative sentences or commands (Suñer, 1982:21).
- As I will point out in the subsection on the pragmatics of ECs, these presentational constructions introduce new participants into discourse and, as a consequence, are focalised. Waltereit and Detges (2008:25) argue that “[f]ocal participants [...] are most naturally encoded as non-subjects, typically as direct objects”. However, as they also point out, this claim contrasts with the fact that the NPs are the only arguments of the HCs and “[t]he unmarked syntactic role of only arguments is the subject status” (2008:26), and they conclude by suggesting that the NPs in the HCs, at least in the agreement dialect, have undergone reanalysis from subject to object status. This proposal is in keeping with the fact that reanalysis, as an instantiation of linguistic change, takes place first in the periphery, and past-tensed HCs (or non-present tensed HCs in general) are peripheral, since HCs are most frequently used in the

present tense in spoken Spanish. The ratios of the expansion of agreement in HCs would corroborate an initial phase of reanalysis based on low frequency (Waltereit and Detges, 2008: 27).

I will now analyse a number of formal features which argue for the treatment of the NP as the subject of the HC. As noted above, the psychological subjecthood of the NP or even of the locative phrase¹³ is beyond the scope of this section.

- As already pointed out, agreement holds between the NP and the verb in many dialects in Latin American Spanish, which is a strong argument in favour of the subject status of the NP. That agreement is only observed in certain dialects does not imply that this is a minor issue. In fact, D'Aquino Ruiz (2008) analyses the pluralisation of *haber* in the HCs in Caracas and concludes that this tendency has recently increased in this dialect. Similarly, Bentivoglio and Sedano (1989 and, especially, 2011: 173) report that the proportion of plural *haber* forms in dialects spoken in Caracas and Táchira (Venezuela) and in Mérida (Mexico) amounts to 54–82% of the HCs.
- When the NP has a human referent, it is not preceded by the preposition *a*, which introduces human objects. Suñer (1982: 24) explains this by arguing that, since HCs are subjectless, there is no need to mark the object by means of the preposition. Suñer then maintains that this favours the analysis of the NP as object.
- As far as case marking is concerned, Conti Jiménez (2005) claims that the postverbal NP is a nominative constituent, inherently predicative, which gets referential content and argument status in the HC. The consequence that the NP gains argument status by its occurrence in an HC or, in other words, by its dependency on *hay*, is the agreement relation with the verb. Conti Jiménez's proposal combines not only the subject status of the NP and its marking in the accusative, but also the fact that only unaccusative verbs are plausible in ECs in general. In her view, the HC is a locative main predication, whose topic is the preposed locative phrase and thus turns out to be obligatory. Such a theoretical assumption justifies the impossibility of the NPs occurring preverbally, at least in the unmarked examples.

Accusative cliticisation is a strong counterargument to Conti Jiménez's position. Treviño (2003), in favour of the subject analysis of the NP, contends that cliticisation is a weak argument since (i) in some types of HCs (her type I or 'locational', in example 28) clitics are barred (as in example 29), and (ii) the interpretation of the clitic is generic and not specific.

- (28) *Hay una víbora detrás del sofá.*
 'There-is a viper behind of-the sofa.'

- (29) **La hay detrás del sofá.*
 'It_{accusative} there-is behind of-the sofa.'

These facts lead Treviño to suggest that the clitics in HCs are neither Accusative nor Nominative arguments but unaccusative elements. In other words, though superficially Accusative, the clitics occurring in HCs are not specifically marked for case.

- The NP can occur in preverbal position, which is the unmarked location for subject NPs:

- (30) *Un hombre había en el jardín.*
 'A man there-was in the garden.'

Rodríguez-Mondoñedo (2005) contends that the placement of *un hombre* in example 30 is marked because it is the result of movement from a postverbal position, which corroborates the object status of the NP.

2.2 Semantic features

The literature is unanimous in the claim that indefinite NPs are preferred in ECs. From an informative perspective, if one assumes that ECs are completely rhematic, which is in keeping with their presentational interpretation (see Section 2.3), the referent of the NP in postverbal position should not be discourse-given and is thus formally indefinite. As regards Spanish, Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2008:75) says that only weak quantifiers can enter the HC (see Barwise and Cooper, 1981 for the concept of weak quantifier), normally with a partitive interpretation (Fernández Soriano and Táboas Baylín, 1999:1755).

Suñer (1982:9–10) maintains that “[a]lthough it might be argued that the ‘ideal’¹⁴ presentational should introduce its NP with an indefinite determiner, such indefiniteness is by no means required. [...] Any determiner, and even proper names, may appear”. Suñer herself provides examples of definite NPs in HCs, as in examples 31, 32 and 33, which illustrate her cataphoric, anaphoric and list use of definite NPs, respectively (see Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2008: 80ff for exceptions to the so-called definiteness effect).

- (31) *Había el caso del emigrante que tenía contrato ya.*
 'There-was the case of the migrant who had contract already.'
- (32) *¿Hay ese sistema en su país?*
 'Is-there that system in your country?'
- (33) *Pues hay el colectivo y el subterráneo.*
 'But there-is the collective and the subway (transportation).'

The situation is very similar in TCs, where one finds definite NPs in examples like 34 and 35:¹⁵

- (34) [And here we have some of the erm patterns that appeared, patterns for women in the services, patterns for men and women,] there's the balaclava helmet. (BNC D90PS002)
- (35) Then there's the Neighbourhood Development Team [and that team is principally working on implementing the Council 's decentralization and democratisation policy,] (BNC D95PS001)

2.3 Informative features¹⁶

ECs are presentative or presentational strategies, which means that they bring into play a referent which is going to be mentioned or implied in the subsequent discourse. The EC thus acts as common ground, serving as a starting point for the ensuing discourse. In Suñer's (1982: 1) words, presentational sentences "are functionally defined as those which introduce the referent of a noun phrase into the universe of discourse. Their verb serves to assert this appearance". In an influential study on English 'there', Bolinger (1977: 110–11) states that "[i]n presentatives without *there*, the stage is a link to what has gone before; it is in a sense topicalized. [...] But if the presentative initiates a line of thought, *there* must be added". What Bolinger is claiming in this quotation is that presentative sentences initiated by locative constituents obey the informative rule of given-before-new, which requires that the first elements normally link the sequence to the previous discourse. Such an informative account of TCs is also applicable to HCs and thus constitutes a feature which can be incorporated in the prototype of the EC, in which the NPs are normally focal and thus placed in postverbal position, and the locative phrases are sentence-initial or sentence-final depending on their informative content.

3. The methodology

This is a corpus-based approach to the characterization of ECs in English and Spanish. Although I have already referred to a number of theoretical studies of the EC and will allude to theoretical postulations during the presentation of my findings, the prototype of EC which I will subsequently profile will be supported by empirical data.

For the purposes of establishing a prototype of the EC in English and Spanish, I have opted for using spoken corpora. For English I have retrieved the data from a random selection of 1,000 examples from the spoken dialogistic component of

the British National Corpus Baby, which amounts to 696,258 words. This corpus is parsed, so I have limited myself to retrieving examples which are annotated as EX0. To that end, I have used the Xaira software, capable of performing searches in XML-annotated corpora. The results for Spanish are also based on a sample of 1,000 examples of ECs, retrieved from the Valencia, Español Coloquial (Val.Es.Co) corpus (see Briz *et al.*, 2002) and the twentieth-century oral component of Corpus del Español, compiled by Mark Davies (<http://corpus.byu.edu>). Whereas Val.Es.Co contains 110,814 words, the contemporary spoken component of Corpus del Español comprises 5,113,249 words. Since neither Val.Es.Co nor Corpus del Español is parsed, the examples have been retrieved manually, simply using the item *hay* as the search keyword — I have also searched for other inflected *haber* forms, and their inclusion in the database has required manual filtering.

4. Contrastive analysis of the data

In this section I will deal with issues such as the frequencies of TCs and HCs in the database (Section 4.1), the syntactic design of the ECs (Section 4.2), the structure of the NPs (Section 4.3), the length of the main postverbal elements (Section 4.4), and some semantic and informative aspects (Section 4.5).

4.1 Frequency

Table 1 shows the general distribution of TCs and HCs in the corpora.

Table 1. Distribution of TCs and HCs in the database (raw figures and normalised frequencies [n.f.] per 1,000 words).

| | words | raw frequency | n.f. |
|----|-----------|---------------|------|
| TC | 696,258 | 11,004 | 15.8 |
| HC | 5,224,063 | 28,227 | 5.4 |

The statistics in Table 1 are indicative of the significant frequency of TCs and HCs in English and Spanish, and the normalized frequencies allow us to determine the proportion of ECs per clause in the database. If one takes into account that the average length of the clauses in the English corpus is 10.6 words, and that the average clause length in Spanish is 10.2 words, then the proportion of TCs in English is one per 5.9 clauses, and the ratio of Spanish HCs is one per 18.1 clauses. This leads to the conclusion that the TC is considerably more frequent in spoken English than in spoken Spanish. I will come back to this issue in Section 5.

4.2 Syntactic organization of the existential construction

Table 2 gives the proportions of the syntactic patterns found in the database, which, as already pointed out, contains a random selection of 1,000 ECs in each of the languages under investigation. On this occasion, I analyse the thematic organization of the clause, and have grouped the examples into three main categories:¹⁷

- basic pattern, which conforms to one of the following syntactic designs: 'there'+V+NP, *hay*+NP, NP+'there'+V, V+'there', NP+*hay*, that is, TCs and HCs without additional constituents (locatives, etc.), as in examples 36 and 37.

(36) There's no other way (BNC PS0PN)

(37) [*ahora voy a buscar un bañador*] y no hay bañadores (Val.Es.Co)
'[now I-go to look-for a swimsuit] and not there-are swimsuits'

- post-NP, when at least one constituent has been found after the postverbal NP, as in the following examples in which the post-NP constituent has been underlined.

(38) Ha, well there's a window out there (BNC PS1BY)

(39) ¿*qué horario hay aquí?* (Val.Es.Co)
'which timetable is-there here?'
"What is the timetable here?"

- pre-NP, when at least one constituent occurs before the NP, underlined in examples 40 and 41.

(40) There was in many urban and rural areas extreme poverty due to unemployment, bad working conditions, poor housing, inadequate diet, and chronic ill health. (BNC D8YPS002)

(41) *hay ahí una diferencia entre la mente de un sexólogo y de un homosexual* (Val.Es.Co)
'There-is there_{locative} a difference between the mind of a sexologist and of a homosexual'

Table 2. Syntactic patterns in TCs/HCs.

| | basic | post-NP | pre-NP | other |
|---------|-------|---------|--------|-------|
| English | 624 | 302 | 62 | 12 |
| Spanish | 870 | 76 | 4 | 50 |

Table 2 shows, first, the predominance of the basic EC type, especially in Spanish. From the opposite perspective, the English TC contains a locative phrase in almost

40% of the examples, where the locative phrase is found in only 13% of the HCs in the database. Even though the figures in the post- and pre-NP columns register examples of constituents other than locative phrases occurring, respectively, after or before the NP, 98% of such constituents are locative phrases or adverbials in the post-NP examples, and 97% are adverbials in the pre-NP sentences. The absence of a locative phrase in 13–40% of the examples raises doubts about those theories which, by using strange framework-specific machinery, advocate the subject status of the locative phrase (see footnote 7).

Second, most of the locative phrases occur in final position, that is, after the NP both in English and in Spanish. In this connection, the proportion of pre-NP adverbials is particularly low in Spanish HCs (5%), and this contrasts with the number of TCs which contain pre-NP locatives in English (17%).

4.3 Structure of the nominal constituent

This section investigates the structure of the NPs in TCs and HCs. I have classified the nominal constituents into the following types:

- simple nominal constituents ('NP/Pro'), that is, TCs (as in example 42) and HCs (in example 43) consisting uniquely of the head noun or pronoun, determiners, and possible pre-head modifiers:

(42) [I was going to say] there was a flourishing black market (BNC D8YPS00A)

(43) *o sea que hay muchas autovías* (Val.Es.Co)

'or (it-)be that there-are many motorways'

"That is, there are many motorways."

- nominal constituents including post-head dependents, that is, complements or modifiers ('_+mod/compl'), as in examples 44 and 45:

(44) And there was this awful woman, Mrs so and so, that was always telling women what to do (BNC D8YPS002)

(45) *pues hay una que está como un tren* (Val.Es.Co)

'but there-is one which is like a train'

"There is one that is hot stuff."

- coordinated nominal constituents ('list'):

(46) [Yeah, yeah, yeah but I mean] there's the weather forecast including the local weather forecast erm that you can switch on any time and er news of course erm oh er er lots and lots. (BNC PS0A8)

- (47) *hay la persona menos evolucionada que te pregunta por cosas materiales y la persona más evolucionada que te pregunta por su camino en esta vida y por perfeccionarse ella misma y evolucionar* (Val.Es.Co)

'there-is the person less developed who you asks about things material and the more developed that you asks about her path in this life and about improve her herself and evolve'

"There's the person who is less evolved that asks you about material things, and the person who is more evolved that asks about her path in this life and about the way in which she can improve and evolve herself."

- 'free relative clause', that is headless or unbound relative clauses, which are quite common in Spanish:

- (48) *hay quien tiene costumbre la broma de cuando llega ese momento llamar por teléfono* (Val.Es.Co)

'There-is who has custom the joke of when arrives that moment phone by telephone'

"There's who normally — funnily makes a call precisely in this moment."

The raw data corresponding to this taxonomy is given in Table 3, and the same information is shown in Figure 1.

Table 3. Typology of notional subjects.

| | NP/Pro | _ ₊ mod/compl | list | free rel.cl. | other |
|----|--------|--------------------------|------|--------------|-------|
| TC | 531 | 415 | 8 | 0 | 46 |
| HC | 572 | 392 | 15 | 21 | 0 |

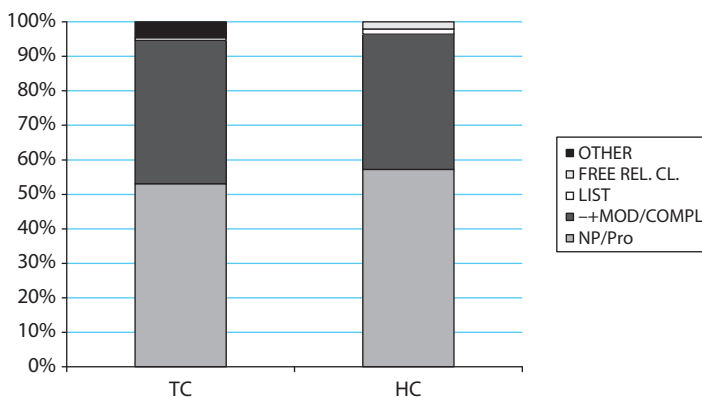


Figure 1. Typology of notional subjects.

The proportions of the different types of NPs in the database are quite similar in both languages. More than half of the examples belong to what I called the simple type, that is, without post-head dependents, and approximately 40% of the constructions contain either postmodifiers or post-head complements. The proportions of the other types of NPs are statistically less relevant. These facts lead us to conclude that the NPs in the ECs in English and Spanish are structurally versatile, since the grammar easily accommodates all types of nominal constituents, even in spoken language. I will return to this issue in Section 4.4, in dealing with the length of the NPs.

4.4 Length

Table 4 shows the average length of the main constituents in the ECs in English and Spanish, that is, of the postverbal NP ('NP'), of the possible elements which can occur before the NP ('pre-NP'), and of those which can possibly follow the NP ('post-NP'). This metric has been calculated in numbers of words.¹⁸ I have also taken into account the pre-NP and the post-NP elements in order to determine the importance of the length of the NP with respect to the other dependents (mostly adverbials) which can co-occur with the NP in the EC. The same information is portrayed visually way in Figure 2.

Table 4. Length (average no. of words).

| | pre-NP | NP | post-NP |
|----|--------|------|---------|
| TC | 1.48 | 5.44 | 2.72 |
| HC | 1 | 4.78 | 2.76 |

In light of Figure 2 and Table 4, on the one hand, the NPs occurring in the ECs are long (around 5 words), significantly longer than the unmarked (preverbal) subjects in spoken texts, which on average contain 3.12 words in English and 2.92 in Spanish in my database. The post-NP material, on the other hand, is shorter

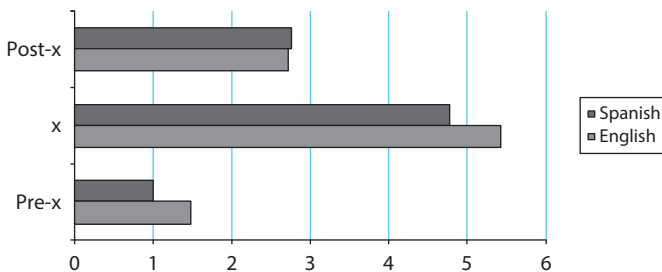


Figure 2. Length (average no. of words).

than the NP, and this reinforces the impact of the length of the NP on the syntactic design of the construction. Although these facts might lead to the conclusion that ECs are compliant with the principle of end-weight, one must take this cautiously since (i) as already noted, the occurrence of sentence-final post-NP constituents (mostly locatives) which are shorter than the NPs casts doubt on end-weight, and (ii) the average length of the NPs is similar to that of topicalised (that is, sentence-initial) segments in other utterances, as reported in Martínez Insua (2011). These facts question the consideration that end-weight is the triggering factor of the placement of NPs in ECs. For the purposes of the contrastive characterization of TCs and HCs, let us conclude, first, that the English and the Spanish existential constructions are very similar as far as the structural complexity of the postverbal material is concerned, and, second, that the syntactic design of the TCs and HCs is versatile enough to couch postverbal constituents which do not necessarily conform to end-weight requirements.

4.5 Indefiniteness and information

As pointed out in Section 2.2, it is commonly agreed that the postverbal NPs in the TCs and HCs must be indefinite, and this results from the presentational interpretation of the construction and the subsequent focal status of the NPs. Table 5 clearly shows that the vast majority of the ECs in the database are subject to the indefiniteness condition.

Table 5. Definiteness of notional subjects (percentages).

| | indefinite NP | definite NP |
|----|---------------|-------------|
| TC | 85.27% | 14.73% |
| HC | 97.94% | 2.06% |

The difference between the number of indefinite NPs in TCs and HCs is statistically significant ($\chi^2=10.86$, $p=0.001$), which suggests that the indefiniteness condition is stronger in Spanish than in English. Such a concluding remark will be dealt with further as part of the definition of the prototype around core and peripheral features in Section 5.

As far as the type of information conveyed by the postverbal NP is concerned, I have classified the database examples according to a basic taxonomy of information status. The type of information conveyed by the NPs has been assessed on the basis that information status is a speech-oriented dichotomy and, as a consequence, the context is crucial in terms of the characterization of a constituent as either informatively new or given. In Włodarczyk and Włodarczyk's (2008:3)

words, “information is validated as O[ld] or N[ew] not by the knowledge about it, but by the very way it is treated in discourse”. The taxonomy is as follows:

- referring constituents (similar to Walker *et al.*'s 1998 ‘backward-looking centres’), when they are given/available in the discourse domain of seven clauses
- low-referring constituents, when they are semi-available in the discourse domain, that is, when only the non-head component of the constituent (a modifier or a complement) is textually given/available
- non-referring (similar to Walker *et al.*'s 1998 ‘forward-looking centres’), when the constituents are new in the discourse domain.

The classification of the postverbal NPs in the TCs and HCs is reflected in Table 6.

Table 6. Informative status of the nominal constituents.

| | referring | low-referring | non-referring |
|----|-----------|---------------|---------------|
| TC | 9% | 22.5% | 68.4% |
| HC | 35.18% | 16.66% | 48.14% |

Table 6 shows that in English the vast majority of NPs convey either low- or non-referring information, less than 10% of the nominal constituents being informatively given or referring. Among the examples in which the NPs are not referring and thus are not coreferential in the discourse domain, most (approximately 75%) are clearly non-referring, that is, absolutely new. In Spanish, most NPs are also either low- or non-referring, but the proportion of referring NPs is higher (approximately 35%). What is surprising is that within the set of NPs which are not referring, the proportion of absolutely non-referring NPs is practically identical to the ratio shown by the English data (74.29% in the Spanish dataset). The following conclusions thus arise: first, the NPs retrieved from the Spanish corpora are more referring than those in the English samples, and this is statistically significant ($\chi^2=18.21$, $p<.0001$); second, the relative proportions of low- and non-referring NPs are comparable in English and Spanish (the results are statistically not so relevant: $\chi^2=0.51$ and $p=.4751$ for the low-referring NPs, and $\chi^2=7.41$ and $p=.0065$ for the non-referring NPs), the major difference being in the proportion of strictly referring nominal constituents.

These findings characterize the EC as a syntactic and informative device chosen by speakers to place new information in sentence final position, and thus to accord with the informative principles given-before-new and end-focus. The importance of the postverbal NP gains support through the informative (quasi-) emptiness of *hay* in HCs, and of ‘there’ and the verb in TCs. The EC can thus be seen as a structural device that the language makes available to solve the listener-unfriendliness arising from the introduction of new information in thematic position.

5. Summary and conclusions

The main findings of this study can be summarized as follows:

- Frequency: although in general the EC is statistically frequent in the language, more TCs have been found in English than HCs in Spanish.
- Structure: first, as far as the overall structure of the EC is concerned, most of the examples are basic since they consist of either 'there'+verb or *hay* plus an NP, without any accompanying locative phrases. Although this is the general trend, the examples of 'basic' HCs outnumber the instances of 'basic' TCs, since more locative phrases have been found in the TCs. The proportion of locative phrases occurring between *hay* and the NP is especially low in the HCs. Second, as regards the syntactic structure of the NP, I have shown that around half the examples belong to what I called the 'simple' type, that is, without post-head dependents, and approximately 40% contain either post-modifiers or complements.
- Length: TCs and HCs are very similar as regards the length of the postverbal material (both of the NPs and of the accompanying locative phrases).
- Semantics: the vast majority of the NPs are indefinite both in English and in Spanish. The indefiniteness condition, however, is stronger in Spanish.
- Information structure: in general, the EC has proved to be a focal strategy since most of the postverbal NPs convey information which is not referring. However, more examples of referring NPs have been found among the HCs, the relative proportions of low- and non-referring NPs being similar in TCs and HCs.

These remarks lead to a prototype of the EC in English and Spanish, with the following features:

- Distribution: frequent, though marked, construction
- Formal features:
 - high degree of grammaticalisation of the construction in both languages, materialised by bleached *haber* in Spanish and 'there'+ 'be' in English, and the fully grammaticalised invariable expressions *hay* and 'there's';
 - compulsory formal marker: 'there' in TCs; *hay* in HCs;
 - closed-set of verbs: intransitive (weak) verbs in TCs; *haber* (*hay*) in HCs;
 - compulsory postverbal nominal elements, with many conditions affecting their selection: object (non-subject) status, fixed postverbal position, part of a closed-set of items (weakly quantified);
 - agreement between the verb and the NP in English and in non-standard Spanish;

- length: long nominal constituents (at least, longer than unmarked sentence-initial subjects) which are, however, admissible by end-weight.
- (Non-formal) Functional features:
 - existential/presentational reading (constructional interpretation);
 - NPs convey information which is not referring.

The differences observable in the preceding sections allow the language-specific characterization of the prototype of the EC to be stated, as follows:

- Distribution: TCs are much more frequent in spoken English than HCs are in spoken Spanish.
- Formal features:
 - formal marker: fully grammaticalised invariable item ‘there’/‘there’s’ in English, versus *hay* in HCs, which is morphologically variable in non-standard peninsular and in non-peninsular Spanish, and so not fully grammaticalised as a marking device.
 - syntactic structure of the construction: locative phrases are more easily admitted in TCs than in HCs.
 - nominal constituents: the indefiniteness condition operates more strongly in HCs than in TCs.
- (Non-formal) Functional features:
 - the HC accommodates referring information (approximately in 35% of the database examples) more easily than the TC.

These language-specific characteristics reveal that: (i) despite the fact that the marker of the construction allows for more variation in Spanish (agreement in non-standard Spanish), the TC is more flexible than the HC in terms of the accommodation of locative phrases (especially before the NP) and thus the HC is nearer the so-called ‘basic’ prototype in this respect; (ii) both TCs and HCs accept NPs both with and without postmodification, and such a degree of structural versatility implies that end-weight is not the only *explicandum* in these constructions; (iii) TCs are more flexible as regards the semantic constraint of indefiniteness, whereas most HCs are subject to such a condition; and (iv) the analysis of the type of information conveyed by the NPs gives support to the informative versatility of HCs since they welcome referring NPs to a greater extent than TCs. The structural and semantic flexibility exhibited by the TC in terms of the accommodation of locative phrases, NPs with postmodifiers or complements, and indefinite (and to a lesser extent, definite) NPs is related to contrasts with the informative constraint operating in TCs, according to which NPs conveying referring information are disfavoured in postverbal position. The HC is thus more constrained than the TC at the levels of clause-syntax, word-grammar (agreement variation does not

percolate into the standard grammar of the construction) and semantics. The versatility of the TC accounts for the high frequency of this construction in English, a language in which the degree of word-order syntacticisation paves the way for very strong informative principles such as given-before-new or end-focus. In this respect, as already pointed out, the only aspect in which the TC is less versatile than the HC is that of the informative status of the NP.

Summing up, I have shown that the EC in English and Spanish is, in general, a syntactic strategy not subject to severe structural requirements (not even end-weight) and thus permits the violation of the rigid unmarked topic-comment organization in such a way that a new presentational (existential) interpretation can emerge from the construction. I have also argued that the two languages investigated in this study, English and Spanish, differ from the prototype in some aspects which in general evince more structural and semantic flexibility in the English construction than in the Spanish one, and this leads to the high frequency of the TC in English and its grammatical and functional versatility, subject only to information principles such as end-focus.

Notes

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1. The relevant literature (to give an example, see the influential account in Ward and Birner, 1996) on what I am here calling the 'existential construction' in English recognizes two kinds of sentences, namely existential sentences (with 'be') and presentational sentences (with intransitive verbs other than 'be'). Although existential sentences differ from presentational sentences on semantic and syntactic grounds (see Pérez-Guerra, 1999:73-76 for a summary of the differences), this paper compares (existential) *hay*-sentences in Spanish and (either existential or presentational) 'there'-sentences since they can be couched within the same constructional definition based on the pragmatic requirement of the so-called 'appearance affect' (Guéron, 1980:671) and this meaning is not directly predictable either from their constituents or from the construction as a whole (Goldberg, 2006:5).

2. This study is not focused on transfer issues or on the possible application of findings for language learning, and thus constitutes an *a priori* or predicative instance of investigation within Contrastive Analysis (see Schachter, 1974). For an excellent account of the learning problems encountered by Spanish learners of English in the production of existential constructions, see Barcelona Sánchez (1991).

3. As James (1980:7) points out, on some occasions the most a linguist can do is “to gather confirmatory evidence from the one or two languages he might know”. This justifies the selection of only English and Spanish as the languages to be analysed in this study.

4. The fact that there is a constructional dimension in linguistic units such as the EC which justifies, for example, the special semantics and pragmatics associated with the construction is modelled in the generative framework by assuming the existence of interpretative functional features in core elements of the construction. As noted elsewhere in this paper, Freeze (1992:569) contends that a certain feature in the verb (in Infl, in fact) is responsible for the existential or presentational interpretation of, for example, the *hay* construction in Spanish. In other words, the combination of features such as special word order, the occurrence of certain core elements in the construction (sentence-initial ‘there’ or *hay*, a postverbal indefinite nominal, certain verbs selected from a closed set of possibilities in English, etc.) warrants a special interpretation of the construction. Depending on the intricacies of the model, this can be seen as part of the syntax of the construction or as a learned pairing of form and meaning.

5. For the treatment of ‘there’s’ as an idiomatic bleached starter or marker, see Sampson (1972: 116–17 fn1), Harris and Vincent (1980), Givón (1984:745, Vol.II), Quirk *et al.* (1985:756, fn [a]), Meechan and Foley (1994), or Thompson (2004). See Pérez-Guerra (1999:65–67) for a review of the relevant literature on ‘there’s’.

6. An influential analysis of the TC is Hazout’s (2004:428), which takes ‘there’ as an expletive subject with which the postverbal NP holds a “purely formal subject-predicate relation”, and suggests some sort of long-distance agreement with the verb. Hazout claims that ‘there’ plus the postverbal NP constitute a SC, different from prototypical SCs in which a semantic predication relation holds between a predicate and a referential subject.

7. I will not consider those analyses which are based on the existence of a logical subject other than the NP. To give an example, Fernández Soriano and Táboas Baylín (1999:1757) claim that the locative in HCs is the logical subject since it is on the locative phrase that the construction predicates the existence of something else.

8. Evidence that ‘there’ in a TC is an expletive pronoun is provided by parallel constructions in other dialects, such as presentational ‘it’ sentences in Black English Vernacular (see Freeze, 1992:574):

(i) It is a policeman at the door.

For arguments against the expletive status of ‘there’ see Moro (1997), who argues that ‘there’ is a predicate and ‘there’-sentences are inverted structures in which ‘there’ moves to a matrix subject position.

9. Suñer (1982) claims that *que cuestan \$2* in example 15 in the main text is not part of the NP, as evinced by cliticisation in (i). However, the *que*-clause in (ii) is a relative clause modifying *libros*, as shown by (iii):

(i) *¿Te parece que aún los hay que cuestan \$2?*

‘To-you seems that still those there-are that cost \$2?’

(ii) *Aquí hay unos libros que acabo de recibir.*

‘Here there-are some book that I-have-just (of) receive.’

(iii) **Aquí los hay que acabo de recibir.*

'Here those there-are that I-have-just (of) receive.'

Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2008:91) points out that sometimes the CP occurring after the NP in the HC is reduced and consists merely of its predicate, as in the adjective phrase in (iv), which is the reduced version of (v). The proof that these constituents do not belong in the NP is provided by cliticisation (in example vi):

(iv) *En el curso hay algunos alumnos {marroquíes / muy inteligentes}.*

'In the course there-are some students {Moroccan / very clever}.'

(v) *En el curso hay algunos alumnos que son {marroquíes / muy inteligentes}.*

'In the course there-are some students who are {Moroccan / very clever}.'

(vi) *En el curso los hay (que son) {marroquíes / muy inteligentes}.*

'In the course those there-are (who are) {Moroccan / very clever}.'

10. In those cases in which the so-called Y constituent in an HC is realized by an unbound relative clause, Suñer (1982), wanting to maintain that the NP is obligatory, suggests that there is a PRO category which acts as the object of *hay* and as the antecedent of the relative clause, as shown in example (i):

(i) *No hay PRO por quien votar.*

'Not there-is PRO for whom to-vote.'

11. In the generative tradition, verbs in passive sentences are defective since they do not assign case to their internal arguments, that is, to the postverbal NPs, and such NPs have to move to subject position in order to be case-marked by T or Agr (see, for example, Haegeman, 1994: 183–184).

12. Torrego (1989) and Contreras (1996) claim that the NPs are initially extra-clausal material which are linked to *hay*, and are then assigned the accusative case and gain referential interpretation.

13. Freeze (1992) maintains that the usual pattern of expressing existentiality in languages is locative + verb + NP, as in (i):

(i) On the bench is a book.

He contends that in the languages in which the pattern in (i) is found, the locative phrase has moved from a postverbal position to subject position ((Spec,IP) in the generative model). Even in those languages which have an existential marker or proform (e.g. *hi* in Catalan), English 'there' being treated in a different way, this proform is not the subject of the construction but the materialisation of a [locative] feature in the verb (Infl). That there is some sort of (syntactic) connection between the verb (Infl) and the existential proform is demonstrated by the fact that the existential or presentational interpretation in, for example, HCs in Spanish is granted by the combination of an NP and a certain *haber* form. Freeze (1992:568) claims that only by accepting that *hay* has a specific interpretative feature can the whole construction convey presentational interpretation. Treviño (2003) rejects this analysis on the basis that there are countless *haber* sentences without locative arguments, that is, HCs without a locative+verb+NP source.

14. That HCs ideally contain indefinite NPs is justified by Suñer (1982:70) when she says that "[b]ecause the primary function of *hay* sentences is to introduce the referent of the NP into the

world of discourse, it comes as no surprise that this construction is highly compatible with an indefinite argument”.

15. See Biber *et al.* (1999:947) and Prince (1992) for the use of ‘there’ + ‘be’ + definite NP.
16. A pragmatic study based on the communicative effects of ECs lies beyond the purposes of this paper. An interesting approach in this line of research is that of Meulleman (2010), who undertakes a pragmatic contrastive study of ECs in Spanish, French and Italian.
17. In the ‘other’ column I include examples which do not conform, statistically speaking, to the three main patterns. Despite the heterogeneity in this column, many are examples of inversion in which the locative phrase is sentence-final, as in “Is there a road on the left?”.
18. An influential paper on the way of measuring length is Gries (2003). In this study Gries codes for the number of syllables and words, and reaches the conclusion that both measurements yield very similar results, the analysis of the number of syllables being a slightly better predictor for ordering choices. Similarly, Yaruss (1999) reports that the “[l]ength of utterance was calculated in terms of words, syllables, and morphemes. [...] Additionally, length was counted in terms of the total number of a clausal constituent” (333), and that, “as expected, there were very strong, positive, significant correlations [...] among measures of length in words, syllables, morphemes, and clausal constituents” (339).

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