

There-existential Sentences in Trial: A Corpus-based Approach

Yuxiu SUN & Le CHENG

China University of Political Science and Law, Beijing, China

ABSTRACT: With the evolution of corpus techniques, there are the possibilities of computers' capacity for fast, accurate and complex analyses, which could benefit linguists describing linguistic characteristics in different registers. Applying corpus linguistics as methods and trial transcripts as materials, the present study is concerned with there-existential sentence pattern, one traditional grammar. After analyzing data extraction, four detailed sentence patterns are explored with examples. Such a way to examine the data could benefit understandings and interpretations from Halliday's metafunction theory. Since the materials selected from trial transcripts are spoken legal language, which have both the characteristics of legal language and oral language, results show that existential there, beyond the guidance of new information and new topic, has two more functions---stressed information and corporation; and make bedding for latter interactive, which are the combinational application of all three metafunctions. This paper, as an example of corpus-based approach, shows corpus linguistics great potential, for more comprehensive descriptions of linguistics features and the various understandings of linguistic theory in legal domain.

KEYWORD: Corpus; There-existential sentence; There; Metafunctions

1 INTRODUCTION

In present-day English, some modern computer techniques could be, even have to be, utilized in linguistic researches, which aims to firstly describe the linguistic characteristics of different features among different registers. Although researchers have long recognized the need for such descriptions, it has proven difficulties to achieve them without a corpus-based approach. Difficulties arise without corpus-based techniques because comprehensive register studies have three important requirements: inclusion of a large number of texts, consideration of a wide range of linguistic characteristics, and comparison across register (Biber et al 2000:136) [1].

Among all registers, some of them are associated with some specific disciplines, in other words, ESP, English for Specific Purposes, including IT language, technology language, engineering language and forensic language. ESP practitioners are concerned with the frequency and distribution of lexico-grammatical features within genres, not independently of them (Nesi 2013) [2]. Furthermore, speech happened in trials could be analyzed as a linguistic material in forensic linguistics field, since their descriptions are based on legal colloquial

language, which has both the characteristics of legal features and oral English features.

Since forensic linguists always try to explore all the linguistic features in one particular register showing the degree of registers' differences, existential there, one major grammar construction, could have some further investigations.

The existential there-structure is defined as a formal device used, together with an intransitive verb, to predicate the existence or occurrence of something. The typical existential clause has the structure: there + be + indefinite NP (+ place or time position adverbial).

The existential clause is reserved to designate any clause containing existential or locative "be" or an intransitive verb which has included in it the meaning of "be in existence" or "come into existence" (Breivik 1983:23) [3], which seems as a special sentence pattern in English grammar. Many researchers have previous discussions about existence there, from the perspective of its meanings (Bolinger 1977) [4], its origins and meanings (Breivik 1979) [5] and its functions (Hukin & Pesante 1988) [6]. In general, "there" has no semantic meaning but only grammatical functions (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 243) [7]. This, however, doesn't mean "there" has no pragmatic

meaning, which could be seemed as the guidance of new information and real subject, the existence (Breivik 1981) [8]. And Hukin and Pesante (1988) [6] pointed out that “there” could pronounce the existence of the particular things, the new information and the guidance of a new topic or the summary of a previous topic.

This paper adopts self-build corpus based on two case studies from the trial transcripts of Simpson, articulating existential there explicitly, which was used to discussed from sociolinguistic approach and traditional linguistic approach (Cotterill 2003) [9]. This research show a new perspective which endeavors to explore some particular characteristics of existential there in legal colloquial language.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 *Corpus linguistics*

This study employed corpus linguistics methods to guide the analysis and interpretations of findings. Corpus-based methods have been firstly used in the 19th century for infant language acquisition (Taine 1877) [10], and since then some small number of linguistic studies in the 1970s (Baker 2006:2) [11]. Now corpus linguistics has been widely applied in many areas of linguistic explorations, including lexicography and language variation studies from Biber et al (1998) [12], language description from Sinclair (1999) and language teaching materials from Johns (1997) [13]. One more trend in corpus-based investigation shows in ESP fields. The use of ESP is closely associated with the use of genres within discourse communities, entailing an understanding of context and communicative purposes.

Corpus-based research actually depends on both quantitative and qualitative techniques, since one of key concepts is association patterns “represent quantitative relations, measuring the extent to which features and variant are associated with contextual factors” (Biber 1998:4) [14]. Then some specific measurements are required in three analysis stages: PowerGREP, AnnoTool and TreeTagger for corpus building stage; WordSmith Tools, AntConc, ParaConc, BFSU Collocator and BFSU Colligator for data extraction stage; and SPSS, Chi-square Calculator and Log-likelihood Calculator for statistics and data analysis stage. Choosing appropriate measurements is based on the research aims and corpus categories applied in researches.

The fact that these researches are encoded electronically means that complex calculations can be carried out on large amounts of text, revealing linguistic patterns and frequency information that would otherwise take days or months to uncover by hand, and may run counter to intuition (Baker 2) [11]. The areas that traditional studies have neglected turn out to be strengths of corpus-based

studies of grammar. The availability of large and computer tools make it possible to study the patterned ways, in which speakers use the grammatical resources of a language---by investigating the frequency distribution of various constructions, the association patterns between grammatical structures and other linguistic and non-linguistic factors, and the factors that affect choices between structural variants.

After raw texts cleaning and part-of-speech tagging which based on Constituent Likelihood Automatic Word-tagging System (CLAW), some further analyses are based on BFSU Colligator, which aims to find colligations of the study object, since colligations refer to the collocations in the grammatical level, focusing on the co-occurrence related to part of speeches or grammatical categories (Baker et al. 2006) [15].

2.2 *Case Study & Self-build Corpus*

The materials for self-build corpus are based on two case studies, representing the two main “there” studies, from the transcripts of the Simpson trial, which are all available online including the 1994-95 criminal and 1996 civil trials of Simpson. All references to the transcripts are found at Jack Walraven’s website (<http://walraven.org/simpson>) on the Simpson cases. Our data are part of the transcripts, composed of around 450,000 words. By centering on one single trial, it would be more manageable to make an in-depth analysis of the targeted linguistic feature --- existential there construction in its linguistic environment as used by the participants in the courtroom setting. After analyzing all the transcripts, the final data 450,000 words are selected including the opening statements, witness examinations and closing arguments with the participants including the judge, prosecution and defense attorneys, and witnesses. These real transcripts could benefit the research holding an adequate and accurate result.

3 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

From grammatical perspective, Lumsden (2014) [16] referred to existential as constructions involving the unstressed introductory “there” together with some form of the verb “be”. That is to say, all clauses introduced by “there” with any form of the verb “be” or verbs of existence are called existential sentences. Halliday (1996) [17] identified existential process as the process concerned with existence in the transitivity system.

However, this bare grammatical analysis for there-existence sentence is not required in trial materials, since trial language is a specific register. From the perspective of systemic-functional

grammar, Halliday pointed out that language holds three metafunctions, ideational metafunction, interpersonal metafunction and textual metafunction, which could be associated with transitivity, mood and theme (1970) [18].

After analyzed data extraction, there are four detailed there-existential sentence patterns in total, which has more details in Table 1.

P1 --- There + Be + Number/Noun/Noun Phrase.

P2 --- There + Be + Number/Noun/Noun Phrase + Time/ Place Adverbials.

P3 --- There + Be + Noun/Noun Phrase + for/that-clause.

P4 --- Noun + Verb (+ that) + There + Be + Noun/Noun Phrase (+ Time/Place Adverbials).

Table 1 Frequencies and percentages of four there-existential sentence pattern

	Frequency	Percentage
P1	201	30.8%
P2	220	33.7%
P3	172	26.4%
P4	58	8.91%
TOTAL	651	100%

(1) Case 1

In actual language environment, existential sentence is not only for the guidance of the existence, but also for some descriptions or further interpretation, which could be achieved by the latter components, which are called as extension component. P2 is the pattern having extension component (see Example <1>, <2>, <4> and <5>), which have different functions.

Q. Now, as you approached the rear of 875 South Bundy, *is there* <1> anything in the alley there or in the walkway there? I'm sorry.

A. *There's* <2> a gate at the rear of the walkway.

Q. And as you approached *there was* <3> a gate, did you make any observations of that rear gate at that time?

A. I observed it to be blood on the inside of the rear gate. And I was advised *there was* <4> blood on the outside of the gate by my partner. *There was* <5> blood on the gate. ...

Q. And you indicated that you observed *there was* <6> blood on different portions of the gate at that time?

A. Yes, I did....

Since there <1> is asked for new information and there <2> is answered for new information, their extension component is for some further information. However, there could be some different in <4>, <5> and <6>. "Blood" are their rhemes, which need to the real subject and something unfamiliar with hearers, but "blood" <5> was absolutely unnecessary, even all the contents of the second sentence has been covered by the previous sentence, and "blood" <6> was partly unnecessary, which has violated the textual metafunction, but the

violation could be understood from the interpersonal metafunction, which needed have the realization of the dialogue.

This dialogue happened between prosecution attorney and witness. Since witness has the lower status in the whole trials, to some extent, their testimony was doubted, and "blood" was obviously the key information in the whole trial. For the prosecution attorney, he was willing to ask and repeat the same question as strategy which showed his doubt to the witness in order to dig more useful information from his opposite side; and for the witness, he was also willing to answer and repeat the same answer showing the accuracy of his testimony.

Furthermore, there-existential sentence is a special sentence pattern for expressing the existence of things, which frequently happened in trials. That is to say, these existential there could not have so much extra meaning, but within the special circumstances, "there" in Example <5> and <6> have the functions of stressed information and the signal of corporation.

Thus, the combinational application of interpersonal and textual metafunctions is necessary. That is to say, one dialogue or one sentence pattern could not only understand from one particular pattern, which is narrow for interpreting the linguistic feature, or the register related to.

(2) Case 2

Gomez-Gonzales discovered through corpus analysis that 93% of existential sentence has extension components, and the bare existential sentence only covers 7%, which is quite different from 30.8% in data collection.

In functional term, the construction is used to assert the existence of some entity or to locate it with respect to the current discourse, to introduce a situation or event. "There" has no representational function, but it is needed as a subject (see Example <7>-<12>).

There were <7> lab technicians; there were <8> criminalists; there were <9> scientists; there were <10> coroner's assistants; there were <11> people who drive cars to and from; there were <12> police officers who secure crime scenes, people who put up crime-scene tape; officers who take care of traffic; detectives, lead detectives, watch commanders, lots and lots of people involved in this investigation collecting the evidence and storing it and testing it and investigating the case.

And there will be no evidence that <12> any of them did anything wrong to harm Mr. Simpson, to prejudice Mr. Simpson, let alone to frame Mr. Simpson.

Only one "there" could achieve the status of subject and the guidance of the new topic, however, six "there" here are not only for new topic, since these repetitions could emphasize the following information. Six continuous "there were" stand as

the bedding, which made a comparison as a conflict with latter “there will be no evidence that...” (see Example <12>). These could receive the conflict effectively between the affirmative and negative sentence contrast, which could be understood from ideational metafunction.

These words were from the defendant attorney, who was trying to rebut the prosecution. Existential there has the effect of objective and fairness, and using existential sentences frequently in one monolog could guide hearers into the attorney’s construction directly and achieve them passionate. Here, the interpersonal metafunction could lead “there” a new function --- make bedding for latter interactive.

4 CONCLUSION

It is important that ESP corpus research draws on both the quantitative and the qualitative aspects of corpus study. And there holds a corpus-based approach to forensic linguistics area (Wools and Coulthard 1998) [19], covering particular linguistic features in legal materials with some specific legal interpretation. This approach takes advantages of: computers’ capacity for fast, accurate, and complex analyses; the extensive information about language use found in large collections of natural texts from integrating quantitative findings and functional interpretations (Baker 2006:233) [11]. For these reasons, the corpus-based approach has made it possible to conduct new kinds of investigations into language use and to expand the scope of earlier investigations (233).

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Existential there, beyond the guidance of new information and new topic, has two more functions--stressed information and corporation; and make bedding for latter interactive, which are the combinational application of all three metafunctions.

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