As a type of the non-prototypical cleft constructions in English, there-clefts, illustrated by attested examples like (1), share certain grammatical properties with it-clefts but at the same time display their own constructional properties (Collins 1992, Lambrecht 2001, Davidse 2000, 2014):

(1)  a. Then there was the Stealth plane that went down in Kosovo. (COCA 2000 SPOK)
    b. There is the conflict which brought the case to the Supreme Court. (COCA 2013 SPOK)
    c. There will be those horrible late-night moments when you kick it back and forth. (COCA 2001 MAG)

As seen from these attested examples, similar to it-clefts, there-clefts have the seemingly expletives as the subject, be + a focal expression, and relative pronouns like that, which, and even when. In both types, the postcopular focused expression is linked to the cleft clause, and in addition, the cleft clause and the matrix clause independently select grammatical categories such as tense, aspect, modality and polarity (i.e., (1b) and (1c)). One key difference of the there-clefts comes from the semantics of the focal expression. Different the postcopular focal expression of it-clefts that offers an exhaustive value to the variable introduced by the open proposition of the cleft clause ((2a)), that of there-clefts enumerates a member of the possible values for the variable ((2b)):

(2)  a. It was Iraq that increased oil production dramatically. (COCA 2003 SPOK)
    b. There also are Santiagos that define a way of life for many. (COCA 1992 MAG)

In (2b), Santiagos is not the exhaustive value for the variable ‘x’ in the open proposition ‘x defines a way of life for many’, but just one of the possible values.

In order to understand the uses of there-clefts, we have investigated the corpus of COCA. We extracted total 798 tokens and performed a qualitative and quantitative investigation. We observed that the dominant grammatical function of the focused expression is subject (70%). The most frequently used pronoun is who (34%) followed by that (24%). In terms of the information structure, there-clefts are used either as presentational focus (43%) or enumerative (10%):

(3)  a. "They were just freely swimming around. You’d just sit there and watch them. They didn’t bother us.” Then there were the snakes that neighbors found everywhere in their homes, even in the air-conditioning. (COCA 2005 NEWS)
    b. "I love everything about sculpture,” she later said. ” There is nothing that I don’t love”. (COCA 2017 MAG)

Examples like (3) are presentational where the focal expression and the cleft clause together present new information whereas in those like (3b) just the postcopular focal expression offers an enumerative value for the variable.

Our corpus investigation supports a Construction Grammar approach to there-clefts: it-clefts and there-clefts both share certain properties as being focus constructions but each has its own constructional constraints. The anticipatory pronouns are different, which contributes to the difference in the semantic/pragmatic properties of the focused phrase: the it-cleft induces an exhaustive reading whereas the there-cleft evokes either a presentational or enumerative one with offering a possible value for the open proposition linked to the cleft clause.

[Words Count: 492]

Selected References


Word count: 494 (excluding references)

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1COCA: Corpus of Contemporary American English