

## There's something about *there's*: towards transitive expletives in varieties of English

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Building on Henry and Cottell (2007), this paper points out that not only does Belfast English have what appear to be transitive expletives, such as (1), but other varieties seem to be developing in the same direction. Thus for many speakers of English sentences like (2) are fine.

1. There've some people bought the book.
2. There's somebody been arrested.

(2) is particularly interesting because the contracted verb appears to be *has*, not *is*, as illustrated in (3) and (4), whereas the occurrence of a form of *be* immediately preceding the associate in sentences with expletive *there* is a general requirement of English, usually followed by these same speakers.

3. \*There are some people been arrested
4. \*There's somebody been arrested, hasn't there

(2) appears to be part of the special status of the contraction *there's*, which behaves differently from non-contracted forms in other ways for many speakers. As Chomsky (1995) noted in a footnote to Chapter 4, many speakers can use sentences like (5) whereas they cannot use its non-contracted counterparts, which must exhibit agreement between the verb and the associate, as shown in (6) – (12). Chomsky suggests that for these speakers, *there's* is a low-level phonological-type replacement for *there are*.

- 5 There's three books on the table
6. \*There is three books on the table
- 7 \* Is there three books on the table
- 8 \*There was three books on the table
- 9 There're three books on the table
- 10 There are three books on the table
- 11 Are there three books on the table?
- 12 Was there three books on the table?

Speakers vary between the use of standard-English type agreement as in (9) and (10) and the colloquial non-agreement with the associate of (3). It is interesting to note that Belfast English speakers, for whom (4) – (7) are grammatical and who also allow singular concord (Henry 1995 Ch 2), show vastly more non-agreement in expletive constructions than in others. Data from Henry, Wilson, Finlay and Harrington (1998), the Belfast files on the CHILDES database, which include not only child–adult conversation but also substantial amounts of conversation between adults, show that adults have over 90% non-agreement with the associate, but less than 10% non-agreement with DP subjects (statistics which seem interestingly to be replicated by their children).

This paper will discuss the analysis of this data and its implications for the nature and representation of variation in formal syntax.