

## Variation and change in the Middle English existential construction

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In Middle English (c.1150-1450 CE), two existential constructions were in competition: one with *there* as a formal subject and one without *there*, the latter being the historically older of the two (Jensen and McGillivray 2017, 166–87). The two variants are exemplified, in (1) and (2) respectively, below from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*:

- (1) With hym ther was a Plowman (GP: 529)  
"With him there was a ploughman"
- (2) Was nevere wight, sith that this world bigan,... (MkT: 2111)  
"[There] was never [a] man, since the world began..."

At the start of the Middle English (ME) period the *null* variant without *there* was dominant, but during the middle of the period that situation was reversed. The reasons for this reversal have remained unclear. Previous research (Breivik 1990; Williams 2000) suggest that a contributing factor was downstream effects from other word-order changes but Jensen and McGillivray (2017) show that it is less likely, based on corpus data.

In this talk I take a construction-based approach (Bardal and Gildea 2015), and argue that the question can be better viewed as a situation of constructional variation, following which two separate constructions emerged, before one finally replaced the other. Compared to previous studies, a construction-based approach allows for a better integration of the syntactic and semantic sides of the question under scrutiny.

At the start of the ME period the two variants were semantically very similar, based on their distributional behaviour (Breivik 1990, 185–87). However, such a situation is by nature unstable, plausibly leading to sociolinguistic differences, semantic differences, or replacement (Neset and Makarova 2018). I will argue that the semantic instability of the ME existential construction led to new semantic differences. Subsequently, the *there* construction became predominant, due to a very extendable semantic configuration driving an analogical process (Barðdal 2008).

This question, and its proposed solution, is of wider interest beyond the status of the ME existential construction. Firstly, the proposed solution brings quantitative corpus data to bear on a multi-faceted explanation, which is grounded in language use. Specifically, the conclusions in the presentation are supported by data from the Penn-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Middle English (Kroch and Taylor 2000) combined with advanced statistical analysis, including regression modelling. Secondly, the offered solution has ramifications for the theoretical question of constructional synonymy and constructionalisation (Hilpert 2013).

## References

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