English Existential Constructions: Case, (Non)Agreement, and Variation

I. Introduction

This paper examines a type of English construction, the existential with expletive *there* subject, that has received significant attention in what are often perceived to be two disparate areas of linguistic study: sociolinguistic variation, and syntactic theory. This class of construction includes sentences like:

1a) There is a student waiting.

1b) There are students waiting.

1c) There's students waiting.

1d) There aren't students waiting.

Existentials have been the subject of many variationist studies seeking to investigate differences among dialects of English; the primary focus of such articles has been the issue of variable concord, that is, whether the verb *be* is overtly inflected to agree in person and number with the lower predicate, the associate-NP, rather than the grammatical subject (expletive *there*). The examples (1a-1d) above illustrate that agreement with the lower NP is not strictly adhered to, and this syntactic variation has interested sociolinguists.

Similarly, but in largely a separate realm of research, the agreement variability noted above has been of interest to syntacticians seeking to explain grammatical agreement phenomena. In specific, existentials raise questions about the structural relation between verb and both the expletive and the lower associate-NP, as well as the relation between the expletive and associate-NP. The need to explain these noncanonical relationships has also inspired a host of research regarding assignment of Case assignment in existentials, which in turn has implications for analyses of agreement.

It is the aim of this paper to give a basic review of proposed syntactic analyses of English existentials in terms primarily of Case assignment and agreement. After summarizing Lasnik's (1995) seminal analysis of Case via expletive and associate-NP raising in LF, I turn to analyses of (non)agreement in existential constructions, where I discuss several arguments that have been put forth and how they conceive of agreement relations. I will focus this discussion on arguments that singular

concord is actually nonagreement, which is posited by Rupp (2005), whose explicit aim is to square syntactic analysis of these phenomena with empirical variationist findings regarding English dialects. To conclude, then, I briefly discuss the relations between syntax and sociolinguistics as implicated by the existential analyses from both sides.

II. Existential Constructions and Case (largely a summary of Lasnik from my Midterm Review)

One of the earliest concerns of generative analyses of English existentials emerged from the noncanonical relationship between expletives (*there*) and their relationship to associate-NPs, which occur as a lower argument and are often called the "notional subject," reflecting the analysis that they raise at LF to take the subject position. Lasnik (1995) provides what seems to be the seminal proposal for Case assignment in existential constructions; explaining how associate arguments receive Case despite being outside of the typical Spec-Head relationship with the Infl Case assignor, where subjects receive nominative Case.

In sum, Lasnik contradicts Chomsky's claim that associate-NPs receive Case by moving to the expletive position in Logical Form (LF), thereby following the principle of Greed, which states that arguments move only to satisfy their own morphological needs. Rather, Lasnik suggests that associates' movement satisfies a requirement of the *expletive*, which as an "affix" cannot be freestanding in LF. The move, Lasnik ends up arguing, has nothing to do with Case. In fact, because existential *be* licenses partitive Case and partitive Case is inherent, the verb assigns Case to the associate as its complement in the lower VP. Because Case requirements are satisfied in VP, there is no internal motivation for associates to move.

In a sentence like (1a) above, the interest for syntactic theory is how the argument [a student] is assigned Case, since the complement position of *be* is not usually a Case-licensing position. Typically, in situations that don't involve exceptional case marking, the Infl assigns Case to its Spec (here, the position of [there]). However, this cannot be how associates are assigned Case; this structural relation is not present and further explanation is needed. The *Case Transmission* (CT) analysis explains that in (1a), [a

student] would receive Case from its association with [there], which is in the Spec of AgrP. By this analysis, [a student] actually moves to the expletive position at LF level via covert movement, checking its Case as Spec of AgrP. So, according to CT, associates have their Case checked at LF by moving to the expletive position and receiving Case as the subject/Spec of existential AgrP. This is in line with Chomsky's analysis that all movement is motivated by morphological requirements of the moved argument itself: the principle of Greed.

However, Lasnik's alternative analysis is that nothing inherent to associates can motivate their movement, and particularly not Case. This stems from the fact that *be*, along with other unaccusative verbs, licenses *partitive* Case, which is inherent. As inherent Case, it must be checked in the Head-Comp relation and not in the Spec-Head relation (618-619). So the verb *be* does assign Case to its complement in existentials, which is the associate, and the associate thereby receives Case and checks the Case feature of the verb. Lasnik argues that the associate in fact *cannot* move to satisfy its Case, because there is actually nothing to check its Case by the time it gets to LF (T's Case feature has already been discharged by the expletive itself) (617). Why, then, does the associate move at all in LF?

What Lasnik proposes is that the associate argument moves in order to satisfy the *expletive's* requirements. This would *not* be following a principle of Greed, but rather what Lasnik calls Enlightened Self Interest (ESI). The expletive is treated as an *affix*, and affixes are uninterpretable if freestanding in LF; thus the associate *must* raise to join to the expletive, in order for the derivation to converge. So it is the *affixal relationship* between the expletive and the argument that motivates movement, to avoid having an illegitimate object resultant in LF. ESI recognizes that the beneficiary of movement can be the target of the movement, not necessarily the moved item itself (624-626). Note that the move doesn't take place until LF because according to the principle of Procrastinate, items will wait as long as possible to move while maintaining interpretability, and it's only in LF that this affix feature is uninterpretable.

While Lasnik's analysis of Case assignment in existentials is still widely accepted by many, it poses several problems. Perhaps the biggest question left is its implications for explaining and predicting *agreement* phenomena in existential constructions, to which I now turn.

III. Existentials and Agreement

Lasnik claims that agreement in existentials is explained (though not predicted) by associate movement to the subject position in LF. He makes the often-echoed point that the agreement found in existential constructions is unexpected, because the inflected verb agrees with the associate of the expletive, not the expletive subject itself. So, in constructions with plural associate-NPs as in (2a-c) below, *be* is typically inflected to agree in number with the NP.

2a) There is a dog.

2b) There are dogs.

2c) *There are a dog.

The agreement relation is typically accepted as Spec of IP/TP, rather than the Comp of V (or Spec of VP), and syntactic theory must account for this unexpected agreement relation. We can see further why these are interesting if we look at nonexistentials, where *be* agrees with the NP in the canonical subject position; that is, Spec of IP/TP:

3a) Dogs are good.

3b) A dog is good.

3c) Dogs eat food.

3d) *A dog eat food.

3e) *Dogs eats food.

3f) Labradors are a good breed.

3g) There is a good breed.

If we say that the associate-NP moves to the Spec of IP in LF, as Lasnik has done, agreement can be explained, since it is now in the typical agreement relation within the IP/TP. This provides evidence for associate movement beyond Lasnik's claim that it was needed to fulfill the expletive's requirements to affix to an NP at LF.

Yet Lasnik's analysis still does not seem to explain why and when the verb itself checks its agreement features. Morphological inflection has clearly already happened at PF (there is overt agreement between verb and associate argument), yet the movement of the argument to Spec is covert and does not happen until LF, at which point it should already have its agreement features checked. That is, if agreement is already present before spell-out, how does saying that an associate moves in LF explain that agreement?

Similar questions about agreement in existentials have inspired much treatment in syntactic theory. As the generative framework has moved to a split-IP analysis whereby Tense and Agree are (generally considered) separate functional categories, agreement is taken to occur in AgrP. The verb will raise first to T, where it checks Case, and then to Agr, where it checks agreement (theta-roles are assigned prior to any movement, in D-structure; though these are of course relevant to any thorough analysis, they are [unfortunately] outside the scope of my discussion here). If the associate-NP moves to join the expletive at LF, then agreement is still maintained to take place in Spec/AgrP, fitting the normal pattern. However, if agreement is already morphologically marked before spell-out, then claiming that it is due to the NP's covert movement in LF is an unsatisfactory solution (on this point, see Epstein and Seely 2006: 184-186).

An overview of existential agreement is found in Epstein and Seely (2006), who discuss two possibilities for how agreement obtains in existentials. The first possibility is that of feature movement, wherein the agreement features of the associate-NP move up to T to check its agreement feature; this would be another instantiation of ESI, where the associate-NP moves for reasons of T's needing agreement, not its own morphological requirements. A second possibility is that agreement is checked *in situ* with a probe-goal relationship, where T basically searches its c-commanding relationships to find a match that will check its features. The goal, in this case the associate-NP, can check T's agreement features without movement, and T's agreement features will delete (189-192). Epstein and Seely accept Lasnik's analysis of *in situ* partitive Case checking, and they claim that agreement must therefore be checked by a different relation than that responsible for Case.

Both Lasnik's and Epstein and Seely's analyses *assume* verbal agreement in existential contructions; that is, perhaps because agreement was one bit of evidence for Lasnik's argument for partitive Case and associate movement, agreement is taken to be the relevant phenomenon to be explained. However, as much sociolinguistic variationist work has shown, it is often the case that English speakers use constructions where the copular *be* does *not* agree with the associate-NP; that is, despite having a plural notional subject, the verb form is third person singular, as below.

4a) There is many students outside.

4b) There's many students outside.

Noticing that particularly in nonstandard English dialects this construction is common, variationists - and more recently syntacticians - have sought thorough accounting for these phenomena. Such accounts want to explain, in essence, the *opposite* of what Lasnik's analysis sought to explain; that is, how does *nonagreement* occur? (It should be noted that all of the terms for this phenomenon in the literature - "variable concord," "singular concord," "nonagreement," "singular agreement" - are theory-laden; I use them variably.) Analyses of nonagreement have mostly been done in order to describe features of nonstandard dialects of English; that is, sociolinguists have been interested in grammatical patterns and their social implications or connections (e.g. Anderwald 2001; Britain & Sudbury 2000; Crawford 2005; Godfrey & Tagliamonte 1999; Martinez-Insua 2002; Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez 2003; Meechan & Foley 1994; Tagliamonte 1998). Yet obviously, any adequate grammatical theory must be able to account for the occurrence of *both* variants (in this or any other situation of stable variation). More recently, this has been a goal of generative research.

To explore singular concord, I will use Rupp's (2005) potentially controversial analysis of singular concord as nonagreement, and her invocation of Rizzi's (1994) Truncation Hypothesis, as a backdrop against which to discuss other relevant approaches and problems with her analysis. I initially chose Rupp's analysis because she is explicitly interested in uniting the generative and variationist frameworks, and also because she seems to accept Lasnik's analysis of inherent partitive Case. She reviews proposals for how agreement works in existentials, dividing them essentially into the same two

types as Epstein and Seely discuss: analyses that associates move to the position of the expletive, thereby checking the T's agreement features, and analyses that agreement happens locally under a small clause analysis (where the expletive itself is what raises to IP, the associate gets Case through local relationship with the expletive's trace, and agreement is also done locally) (276-77). Thus, her essential premise regarding Case does not differ from Lasnik's; her interest in *nonagreement*, however, fundamentally does.

Rupp focuses on what she terms "nonstandard *-s*" with expletive *there* in a dialect of English spoken in the West Midlands of Great Britain. Her data come from both elicited speech and speakers' grammaticality judgments. She limits her analysis to constructions containing expletive *there*, the copula *be*, and plural associate-NPs. Rupp's argument is that singular concord is best understood as the absence of agreement altogether, or *nonagreement*, and her evidence lies in syntactic restrictions on where singular concord can be used, namely the impossibility of singular concord with inverted interrogative forms, and the cline of acceptability of singular concord depending on contexts of negation, wherein *no* seems to encourage singular concord, and singular concord with sentential negation is not permitted, whereas constituent negation is accepted. She argues that these facts point to singular concord as involving a truncated syntactic hierarchical structure that terminates at TP, and does not generate NegP or AgrP.

According to Rupp, in the typical analysis of agreement, the subject NP is taken to move from Spec/VP to Spec/TP, and up to Spec/AgrP by some analyses (such as Chomsky's older work and current theories that maintain AgrP as a functional head), passing through Spec/TP, where it checks the Case features of T (in analyses that do not maintain AgrP, agreement features are also checked at TP) (see also Groat 1995). The verb moves from Head/VP to Head/TP (possibly to Head/AgrP), also checking Case (in TP) and agreement (in TP or AgrP) features along the way. There are a couple of problems with this structure regarding existentials. First, if this is indeed the relation for agreement, it must be the case that associate-NPs originate as Spec/VP rather than Comp/VP. In contrast with Lasnik's analysis of *be* assigning partitive Case, which is inherent Case, this switches the base-generated position of associate-

NPs from Comp/VP to Spec/VP. She does not specifically address the issue of where the associate-NP is base-generated, but by Rupp's analysis, it seems we would have 5a and not 5b.

5a) [AgrP There [Agr' are$_i$ [TP many students$_j$ [T' t$_i$ [VP t$_j$ [V' t$_i$ outside]

5b) [AgrP There [Agr' are$_i$ [TP many students$_j$ [T' t$_i$ [VP [V' t$_i$ t$_j$ outside]

Regardless of whether Agr is posited as a separate functional category from T, the lower structure represents perhaps another problem: if the associate is base-generated in the Spec position, what (if anything) occupies the Comp position; by the same token, if it is base-generated in Comp, what (if anything) occupies Spec/VP? Rupp does not discuss this and instead focuses on what takes place above the VP level.

Within the basic structure where agreement is checked in AgrP (and Case in TP), Rupp summarizes previous proposals of agreement as being of two types: 1) agreement happens by associate-NP movement to the expletive position at LF (this is in line with Lasnik's analysis); 2) agreement is established locally in the Spec/VP, and movement carries the agreement with it. In the first case the expletive is base-generated as Spec/TP; in the second it is base-generated as part of the lower predicate (with the associate-NP) and then raises. From here, she turns directly to discuss whether functional categories ought to be posited even in languages that don't seem to evince them; namely, whether AgrP is a necessary category in English if English doesn't utilize it and (at least certain) structures are syntactically complete without it. She compares what happens in existentials to Rizzi's (1994) Truncation Hypothesis, which posits that during the language acquisition process there are periods of time when higher structures are not projected, until universal principles are operational; meanwhile, constructions not allowed in the adult grammar will be used. Rupp claims that this represents a potential line of explanation for some features of adult grammar, singular concord being one of them. By this analysis, existential structures are truncated at TP, which is as high as the structure needs to project in order to converge. If the structure *did* project above TP, in fact, apparent constraints on singular concord would be inexplicable (278-283).

There are two key structural aspects to Rupp's claim of truncation: one, that the verb does raise as far as TP; two, that the verb does not raise *beyond* TP. The verb *must* raise to TP because it is always marked for tense; you do get past-tense singular concord constructions as below in (6).

6) There was students outside.

Rupp additionally argues that this provides further evidence that TP must be situated below NegP, due to the lack of sentential negation contexts in which singular concord is acceptable. This is her primary argument with regards to the second point: sentential negation (SN) is rejected by speakers, such that negation can only occur below TP as constituent negation (CN), not in a separate higher NegP, as below.

7a) There was [not many students] waiting outside. (CN)

7b) *There wasn't many students waiting outside. (SN)

In (7a), the negative element is part of the constituent, whereas in (7b), its scope is the entire TP. Thus, since these constructions are unacceptable, Rupp claims, negation is above TP, forcing a higher projection category of AgrP, which forces agreement on the verb. The structure also cannot project higher than TP because if it projected all the way to AgrP, you would be able to get inversion for interrogatives, where the verb must pass through AgrP to get to CP for the C's question feature to be checked. However, inversion is not allowed by Rupp's speakers, so that (8) is unacceptable:

8) *Was there many students waiting outside?

On the other hand, if there *is* sentential negation or inversion, full agreement must be present:

9a) There weren't many students waiting outside.

9b) Were there many students waiting outside?

Hence, because it must be marked for tense but does not involve a full NegP or AgrP, a nonagreeing existential verb derivation terminates at TP.

Rupp also points out that this case in fact supports analyses of agreement that posit agreement in a separate functional category besides TP; otherwise, if agreement is said to take place in TP, then singular concord actually would not be permissible at all, since the structure must project to TP as evidenced by overt tense marking. She says that one way to account for agreement is to assume a local

agreement relation between the verb and the associate-NP (in the lower VP); however, this also cannot be the case, because likewise you would never get singular concord in a situation with agreement always happening before TP. So what happens in *agreeing* forms? According to Rupp's analysis, agreeing verbs presumably *do* project higher levels, where the verb moves up through TP to AgrP. However, what motivates these higher levels to be projected in some declarative existential constructions and not others is left unexplained. She claims, "AGR is available in the adult English system but may not be projected in the case of nonstandard -*s*" (281). I find this analysis problematic for the simple reason that it does not explain the variation between singular and standard concord in existential constructions; that is, there is no direct motivation for higher levels to be either projected or truncated. I turn in the next section to discuss this issue.

IV. Discussion

A first issue with Rupp's analysis of truncation at TP is largely a conceptual one. For her analysis to hold, one would have to assume that the verb, and specifically the singular copula *be*, is deterministic of what higher levels get projected or not. That is, because *be* does not have agreement features to be checked, it does not require higher-level projections that are the site of agreement. This seems fair - subcategorization of verbs does drive structural differences - except it seems that this form of the copula must then be lexically split from the form of the copula that *does* agree; namely, the plural-marked forms *were* and *are*. One cannot just say that *be* sometimes requires agreement and other times does not, and when it does, it establishes higher-level relations. There is then no motivation in declarative sentences for it to force agreement. One could alternately claim that when higher levels such as NegP and CP, for instance, *are* present (due to sentential negation or interrogative inversion), they force agreement on the verb because it must pass through AgrP, which needs its agreement features checked. But if *be* is an agreementless form, as Rupp argues, can it even check the agreement features of Agr (or T)? Can it be made to be an agreeing form simply *because* of its relation with higher functional positions? for instance,

Rupp says that only agreeing forms can move through AgrP. By this analysis, in the singular, *is* clearly *is* an agreeing form, even though it is singular and so doesn't show it morphologically:

10) Is she coming home?

What makes this distinct from the singular *is* in either agreeing or nonagreeing declaratives, or is it distinct at all?

Additionally, two critical empirical issues arise with Rupp's analysis. How does it explain the a) variation between agreement and nonagreement in what are otherwise the same constructions, and b) disallowing nonexistential singular concord?

On the question of variation between agreement and nonagreement, it is important first to clarify that Rupp's claim is that nonstandard *-s* is *agreementless* from the claim that it represents a *default* agreement form, which has been posited elsewhere (by Schütze 1999?). Rather, the form itself does not carry agreement features *at all*. It is unclear why such an analysis is preferable over claiming a default agreement; why not simply say that it has agreement features but they are weak enough that they don't *require* checking, and if they're unchecked at spell-out, you get a nonagreeing form, which is then something like a *default*? In fact, this line of argument has been pursued, wherein singular verbal agreement is a matter of the verb's relationship with the subject as expletive (Schütze 1999). Critically, a truncation hypothesis does not account for what motivates *variation* between agreeing and nonagreement. That is, one can claim that the verb does not project up to AgrP because it does not have agreement features to check; but *why* doesn't it have agreement features, when it does elsewhere? In fact, this *does* seem to be something like a "default" agreement argument.

Additionally, a significant and unexplored gap in Rupp's analysis is why her speakers disprefer singular concord in anything other than existential constructions. That is, according to her data, though (11a) is grammatical, (11b) is only acceptable to a few speakers (which she attributes to a historical remnant, as the speakers are of older generations [260-262]; this argument itself is somewhat unclear to me).

11a) There was many students outside.

11b) *Many students was outside.

How can this be accounted for by Rupp's analysis? Why can't typical subjects with copular *be* also manifest singular concord, if the *-s* form is agreementless? First, take the difference between existential constructions that agree and those that do not show agreement. For nonagreement, we presumably have the structure below.

12) [TP There [T' was$_i$ [VP many students [V' t$_i$]]]

The associate presumably checks partitive Case in VP, the expletive checks nominative Case in TP, and the verb raises from VP to TP to check tense features. In an agreeing form, by comparison and on Rupp's analysis, we would have (13) below.

13) [AgrP There$_k$ [Agr' were$_i$ [TP t$_k$ [T' t$_i$ [VP many students [V' t$_i$]]]

(Additionally on Rupp's analysis, the NegP would be inserted between TP and AgrP for *There were not many students*.) Here, the associate again checks partitive Case in VP, the expletive checks nominative Case in TP, and the expletive moves to Spec/AgrP to satisfy AgrP's strong N-feature. The verb raises from VP to TP, discharging Case and Tense, and then from TP to AgrP, discharging agreement.

The only structural difference between these two cases is that the verb moves to AgrP to check its agreement features in (13). What Rupp seems to be arguing (or perhaps what she *must* be arguing) is that these are two different verbs with different sets of agreement features: (12) is an agreementless verb, whereas (13) does require agreement to be checked. Yet even where the verb moves, the relationship between plurality is not clear; that is, there still must be some relationship between the associate-NP and the verb that makes agreement happen with the plural associate, rather than the singular expletive; or else some movement of the expletive from a lower position must be posited, which isn't possible on the Lasnik or Epstein and Seely's analysis, since they claim that it is generated in TP (to satisfy T's Case requirements). Furthermore, the relationship between associate-NPs and expletives needs to be different in the agreeing and agreementless forms. You could claim that the structure in (14) is present, where the associate moves to TP rather than the expletive being generated there, but this results in the same problem

regarding Case as we ran into earlier; if the associate-NP's Case is already checked in VP, it cannot check the Case of T.

14) [AgrP There [Agr' were$_i$ [TP many students$_j$ [T' t$_i$ [VP t$_j$ [V' t$_i$]]]

Moving to the next problem of why nonexistentials are dispreferred with singular concord, Rupp does not discuss nonexistentials, but we can infer what her analysis of them would need to be. The structure would look something like (15).

15) [AgrP Many students$_k$ [Agr' were$_i$ [TP t$_k$ [T' t$_i$ [VP t$_k$ [V' t$_i$ outside]]]]

Here, the subject [many students] is generated in Spec/VP, then moves subsequently through TP, checking Case, and AgrP, checking agreement. Note that this immediately poses a problem: if *be* checks partitive Case in VP, how does the subject DP satisfy T's Case requirement (assuming it was assigned Case in the VP)? There doesn't seem to be a need for movement of the DP, other than to satisfy the AgrP's N- and agreement features (see Groat 1995); but, can the DP pass to AgrP without passing directly through TP? This is doubtful. Aside from these issues, there seems nothing structurally to account for why the singular concord form is not acceptable:

16) [TP Many students$_j$ [T' was$_i$ [VP t$_j$ [V' t$_i$ outside]]]

According to Rupp this structure is not permissible, but it is unclear why, if it is the same verb as in the existential examples. That is, if all of the same processes are happening and the same relationships with the same verb obtain, then it's unclear what drives verbal agreement and projection of AgrP, unless it is that the *argument* is not in a position to agree in lower levels (that the argument cannot have unchecked agreement features in TP). But if this were the case, then it has nothing to do with the verb itself being an agreementless form; it rather has to do with the subject requiring or not requiring agreement.

One possibility is to say that in nonexistential constructions, movement to the subject position requires that there be agreement because it is passing through AgrP. However, if Agr is not a necessary or always-present functional category, but instead is a level projected by necessity from agreeing verbs, then the verb is only passing through AgrP in the first place because the verb needs agreement checked; this is a fully circular explanation. Perhaps a nonagreement form somehow blocks movement of the

associate up into the expletive position, the subject position, which triggers insertion to satisfy T's Case feature. This doesn't quite make sense either though, because it would mean that it was the expletive already filling the subject position itself that prevents the associate from moving up into it; this cannot be since there often *is* agreement in expletive constructions.

It is instructive to note that the case for singular concord as a function of agreementless verbs has been made elsewhere; notably by Henry (1995), who also claims that the copula in singular concord lacks agreement features. Interestingly, however, Henry's data (from Belfast English) show speakers utilizing precisely the constructions that Rupp's speakers do not allow; that is, in nonexistentials such as:

(17) The eggs is cracked.

Henry uses a similar argument to Rupp's that relies on the lack of inversion and the presence of overt tense-marking, to claim that the verb only raises to TP where singular concord is manifested. But because Henry does not provide an explanation for *existential* singular concord, it is not clear whether her analysis explains variation between agreement and nonagreement, or whether her analysis could provide the exegesis (lacking in Rupp) of the relations between existential and nonexistential constructions in terms of agreement phenomenon.

V. Syntactic Theory and Sociolinguistic Variation

It is somewhat difficult to square Rupp's analysis of nonagreement with previous analyses in the literature, as she does not talk directly about Case and this has been the focus of a substantial portion of the work on existentials. However, at least in terms of theoretical and empirical goals, there is a distinct comparison to be made between her project and Lasnik's project: Lasnik wants to explain *agreement*, assuming it is the standard realization of existential constructions; whereas Rupp, interested in variation, wants to explain *nonagreement*, also assuming that agreement is the standard realization but without satisfactorily explaining the relation between the two types of constructions. These disparate loci of inquiry are of themselves interesting, given that both analyses seek to explain the grammar of "English."

However, this case is exemplary of what the value can be of a strong relationship between generative syntax and empirical sociolinguistic research.

That is, Lasnik's (and others, notably Chomsky's) presupposition that agreement was the typical construction in English led to a specific analysis, wherein syntactic theory needed to account for an atypical relationship of agreement between verb and a noncanonical subject. However, as Rupp and many other variationist studies have shown, many dialects of English generate nonagreeing copular forms, either as the norm or as a substantially utilized variant. The fact that this variation is so widespread has serious implications for syntactic theory if empirical data forms the foundation for generative theory. Namely, if agreement is less common across varieties of English than nonagreement, then it is possible that nonagreement is what needs to be examined as the abstracted form of grammar, or what could possibly be posited as a grammatical "default."

One interesting analysis to this effect is that of Sobin (1997), who claims that nonagreement is the typical construction in English, and agreement by contrast represents a "grammatical virus" that is sociolinguistically-imposed and grammar-external. His case for nonagreement being the standard is also made by Meechan and Foley (1994), who argue further that an acceptance of agreement as "standard" reflects an academic and class-based bias of researchers. If nonagreement with the associate-NP is taken to be typical, then one doesn't actually need to posit "nonagreement" at all, because the verb can be said to agree with the actual subject, the expletive *there*. Sobin's account was squarely dismissed by Schütze (1999), who argues that the grammar of English allows either 1) agreement with a nonsubject NP (the associate, whose features raise to Spec); or 2) default 3rd singular agreement. Additionally, in none of the other literature I examined was Sobin's account presented as feasible; according to Meechan and Foley, this may represent a bias on the part of researchers toward the very sorts of constructions that Sobin calls "prestige" forms as being "typical." Yet, regardless of whether agreement or nonagreement is the norm, both possibilities must be explained by a theory of the grammar of English. That is, variation can only occur within the limits of what is grammatically possible, of what one's grammar can generate. If we take seriously this idea, then variation must not only be accounted for within syntactic theory, but it also must

be taken as a key component of the generative project (see Henry and Wilson 1998 for more discussion on this point). Especially in terms of a Principles and Parameters approach within a Universal Grammar premise, an issue such as singular concord raises the question as to what parameter settings are for speakers of one language versus another, but also one dialect or another; and, critically, how within-language variation is related to parameter-setting, universal principles, or sociolectal impositions. Within one's grammatical possibilities, motivation for variation between two options may be more or less social or grammatical, and this is precisely why syntax and variationist research can benefit from one another's work.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I have provided an overview of the topic of existential constructions in English, focusing on how they have been treated in the syntactic theoretical literature as a somewhat problematic or atypical construction-type. This included specific regard to explanations that have been put forth for relations of Case, which explanation was said also to go partway to explaining the phenomenon of agreement between verb and associate-NPs in existentials. I attempted to tie these two strands of research together and to critically assess a specific hypothesis for *nonagreement*, exploring why it might be problematic and what it fails to explain regarding English data. Finally, I briefly discussed what this topic's treatment - and what the topic itself - can tell us about the possible relationships between variationist research and syntactic theory.

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