



# Subject-Operator Disagreement in English Existential Constructions: A Corpus-Based Analysis of American English and Hong Kong English

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## ABSTRACT

Attributed to disparate goals as well as tenets of prescriptive grammar and descriptive grammar, disagreement exists between the two in that prescriptive grammar rules may be violated in descriptive grammar; one concrete instance is subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions. The present study aims at following up antecedent studies on subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by native English speakers, identifying any changes in patterns of subject-operator disagreement in recent years, and looking specifically into subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions in Hong Kong English. A quantitative research design was exploited, and data of American English and Hong Kong English were collected from the Corpus of Contemporary American English and the PolyU Learner English Corpus respectively. It was discovered that subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions was rare amongst American English speakers yet more frequent amongst speakers of Hong Kong English. Rarity of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by American English speakers possesses a disposition to suggest that language use of those speakers is still influenced by the prescriptive rule of subject-operator agreement in English existential constructions while pervasiveness of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by speakers of Hong Kong English indicates disparities between those speakers' language use and prescriptive rules..

**Keywords:** English existential constructions; Subject-operator disagreement; Corpus linguistics; American English; Hong Kong English.

## 1. Introduction

By no mean does a unanimous conceptualization of the notion of 'grammar' exist, but such a linguistic concept can chiefly be characterized by two means: prescriptivism and descriptivism. Whilst prescriptive grammar, which is usually documented in usage manuals such as *The King's English* and *Modern English Usage*, denotes rules of a prestige dialect such as Standard English, which are advocated by language purists and stipulate how language users ought to speak and write, descriptive grammar, which is grounded upon primary language data from corpora, is concerned about actualities of language users' spoken and written language use, which is presumed to be realization of their mental grammar or linguistic competence (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2013; Pullum & Huddleston, 2002).

Only does compilation of prescriptive grammar entail documentation of a set of rules of one dialect, but compilation of descriptive grammar is frightfully complicated in that actual language use varies substantially across language users even of the same dialect as suggested by a recently emerging sociolinguistic concept 'idiolect' (Pullum & Huddleston, 2002). Attributed to disparate goals as well as tenets of the two conceptions of grammar, disagreement exists between the two in that prescriptive grammar rules may be violated in descriptive grammar; concrete instances of such violation of rules embody ending a sentence with a preposition, use of double negatives, use of the pronoun 'who' in the accusative case, separation of to-infinitive, and use of the singular form 'was' in the subjunctive mood. The prescriptive grammar rule under investigation in the present study is associated with English existential constructions, where the prescribed subject-operator agreement rule appears to be breached by language users every now and then as exemplified in sentence (1), where the singular form 'be' disagrees with the plural subject 'so many forces that don't even have computers yet' (Biber, Leech, & Conrad, 2002).

(1) There's so many forces that don't even have computers yet.

(Biber, Leech, & Conrad, 2002)

Such a phenomenon may be attested in language production of both native and non-native speakers of English, and the present study aims at investigating subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions in language production of speakers of American English and those of Hong Kong English in language corpora.

## 2. Literature Review

English existential constructions comprise four segments: an adverb 'there', which serves as a provisional subject, a copular verb 'be', which serves as an operator, an indefinite noun phrase, which serves as a notional subject, and optional predication (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990; Nelson, 1998). In contrast with canonical statements, where the theme, or given information, precedes the focus, or new information, existential sentences introduce the focus without presentation of the theme; the primary function of existential sentence is to delineate existence of entities (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990; Ward, Birner, & Huddleston, 2002). A regular correspondence exists between existential sentences and clauses expressed in terms of basic clause structures. For instance, sentences (2a) and (2b) below, which are sentences expressed in the existential structure and the basic clause structure respectively, express the same proposition: existence of a car blocking the speaker's way.

(2a) There is a car blocking my way.

(2b) A car is blocking my way. (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990)

Prescriptions of English existential constructions are found in various usage manuals. In accordance with Fowler (1908)'s *The King's English*, "the copula should always agree with the [notional] subject" (Ch. II). Fowler (2009)'s *Modern English Usage* also suggests that 'there is' and 'there are' ought to be followed by singular and plural nouns respectively. Subject-operator agreement in English existential constructions is thereby deemed to be frightfully strict under prescriptivism. All the same, reference grammars compiled under the framework of descriptivism delineate that "the verb [in existential sentences] is likely to be singular even when the following notional subject is plural" (Biber et al., 2002, p.236). For all no indication of either exact or approximate frequency of occurrence of such subject-operator disagreement in existential constructions, such delineations in reference grammars exhibit that such language use is not uncommon amongst users of the English language.

A number of studies have been conducted under the paradigm of descriptivism to examine English existential constructions using language data from corpora of standard English. Possessing the same goal of providing a description of actual usage of English existential constructions with disparities predominantly in language corpora selected, antecedent studies capitalized upon similar research methodology: existential constructions were identified from selected corpora, counted, and analyzed quantitatively. Findings of all antecedent studies unanimously lent support for substantial deviation of learners' actual language usage from the prescriptive rule of subject-operator agreement; various linguistic, stylistic, and social factors have been identified to explicate

such a phenomenon.

In the linguistic respect, subject-operator disagreement has been discovered to be more prevalent in English existential constructions with plural notional subjects and singular verbs, the contracted form of 'be', and heavy notional subjects. Disagreement between plural notional subjects and singular copular verbs constitutes the overwhelming majority of cases of subject-operator disagreement in existential constructions, for the phrase 'there is' is argued to be an unmarked presentative form of existential construction out of emptiness of the provisional subject 'there', which motivates language users to use a singular in lieu of a plural verb (Crawford, 2005; Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez, 2003; Meecham & Foley, 1994). Disagreement is even more frequent when the copular verb 'be' is in its contracted form; one argument is that the phrase 'there's' is treated by language users as a default form or even analyzed as a formulaic sequence without any internal structure for both singular and plural notional subjects (Givon, 1993). Moreover, should notional subjects be long, heavy, and structurally complicated, there is also a greater tendency for agreement between the subject and the operator to be absent by virtue of a long distance between the two elements, which may induce language users to disregard connections between them (Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez, 2003). It is thereby for subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions to be observed in the three aforementioned linguistic contexts. From a stylistic perspective, mode and formality of communication have been found to be influential factors in deviation from prescriptive rules in that subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions is more pervasive in informal spoken discourse than formal written discourse. Prescriptive rules are argued to be more applicable to formal than informal contexts whereas spoken discourse has been observed to deviate profoundly from written discourse in terms of language use and even grammar (Cheshire, 1999; Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez, 2003); it is thereby reasonable to observe subject-operator disagreement in existential constructions more frequently in informal spoken discourse, when prescriptive rules are less applicable. When combined with findings in the linguistic respect, reasons for more frequent subject-operator disagreement in informal spoken discourse are even clearer. The contracted form of 'be' being much more common in informal spoken than in formal written texts, linguistic contexts favoring subject-operator disagreement occur more frequently in informal spoken discourse (Biber et al., 2002). In addition, processing and producing language on a real-time basis, learners are more likely to keep subject-operator disagreement out of consideration in informal spoken discourse, which is usually unscripted, given heavy burden on language processing, in particular when notional subjects are heavy (Crawford, 2005). For such reasons, a spoken mode and informality of communication favor subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions.

From a social point of view, low education level has been argued to be a predictor of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions albeit contentiousness of such an argument amongst scholars. Meecham and Foley (1994) conducted a multivariate statistical analysis and discovered education level to be the most significant social indicator of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions. Cheshire (1999) also argued that inability to produce English existential constructions with standard subject-operator agreement in both spoken and written discourse may provide people with a percept that a language user lacks formal education. All the same, not yielding similar findings, other scholars are doubtful and reserved about the correlation between education level and frequency of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions. More importantly, should linguistic and stylistic factors be taken into consideration, the situation will become even more complicated, and it is frightfully difficult to draw a definite conclusion on the interconnection between education level and subject-operator disagreement on account of impacts of various other factors, *videlicet* formulaic sequence, processing load, mode and formality of communication, and even personal choice.

Not only have studies been conducted to explore subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by native English speakers, some studies inclined towards fields of sociolinguistics and language learning have also been conducted to compare frequency of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions across multifarious varieties

of the English language as well as that between native English and learner English; the former illuminates frequency of occurrence of the phenomenon in distinct varieties within World Englishes whilst the latter illuminates disparities between language production of native speakers and that of non-native speakers. Subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions has been identified as a vernacular universal ubiquitous across distinct varieties of English, be they spoken by native or non-native English speakers, albeit remarkably more frequent disagreement in varieties in the Outer Circle of World Englishes, such as Philippine English, Indian English, Hong Kong English, and Kenyan English (Collins, 2012; Palacios-Martinez & Martinez-Insua, 2006; Walker, 2007). Disagreement patterns of non-native speakers are thereby considered as disparate from those of native English speakers; this may be attributable to the fact that subject-operator agreement poses profound challenge to second or foreign language learners of English. For instance, Prevost and White (2000) have found that subject-operator disagreement is omnipresent in language production of second language English learners. The root of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by native speakers and that produced by non-native speakers may thereby be discrepant from each other.

The present study is intended to fill two research gaps. First and foremost, despite a comprehensive investigation into factors influencing subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by native English speakers, barely were any follow-up studies conducted in the past decade. In light of the dynamic nature of language, it is worth probing into any changes in disagreement patterns in recent years. Another gap is a lack of research looking specifically into subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions in Hong Kong English, which is a newly emerging variety in the Outer Circle of World Englishes spoken by English learners in Hong Kong. Even though the current status of Hong Kong English as an independent variety of new Englishes is in doubt from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, such a variety has been discovered to possess distinctive linguistic attributes and been the subject of a growing body of research in recent decades (Sung, 2015); it is thereby worth studying distinct linguistic structures in Hong Kong English to expand the body of literature. Besides filling the two aforementioned theoretical gaps, the study also possesses practical significance in that a better understanding and more advanced linguistic knowledge of actual usage of English existential constructions may inform pedagogical content in second language instruction.

In particular, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. In what contexts does subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions occur in language production of American English speakers?
2. In what contexts does subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions occur in language production of speakers of Hong Kong English?

On the basis of findings of antecedent studies, subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions is expected to occur more frequently with plural notional subjects and singular verbs in production of both native English speakers and speakers of Hong Kong English. That said, disagreement is predicted to be more frequent amongst speakers of Hong Kong English by virtue of their difficulty in acquisition of English subject-verb agreement (Chan, 2010). Concerning register, it is postulated that findings not concurring with those of antecedent studies may be obtained on account of blurred dichotomy between spoken and written discourse as well as that between formality and informality with the advent of Internet communication (Elbow, 1985; Herring, 2012).

### **3. Method**

The present study is a corpus-based study illuminating subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions in language production of American English speakers and speakers of Hong Kong English. Akin to antecedent studies with similar aims and a comparable scope, a quantitative research design was exploited.

### 3.1.Procedure

In response to the first research question, data were collected from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), a large database with more than 560 million words of authentic texts produced by users of American English (Davies, 2008). Only written and spoken texts produced in year 2017 were collected from the corpus for analysis in a bid to yield findings presenting recent English usage. In response to the second research question, data were collected from the PolyU Learner English Corpus (PLEC), which comprises one million words of academic texts written by tertiary second language English learners in Hong Kong, who are presumed to be speakers of Hong Kong English (Li, 2016). Two varieties of English existential constructions in the present tense, videlicet the singular form 'there is' and the plural form 'there are', were analysed in the study. Existential constructions in the past tense and other verb forms, such as those with auxiliary verbs, were excluded from the study for the sake of limiting the scope whereas contracted forms of existential constructions, videlicet the contracted singular form 'there's' and the contracted plural form 'there're', were also excluded owing to their more frequent occurrence in spoken texts and rarity in academic texts; incorporation of the factor may interfere with data analysis with respect to register.

Amongst all linguistic, stylistic, and social factors identified to exert impacts on deviation from the prescriptive rule of subject-operator agreement in English existential constructions in antecedent research, only does the present study target two of them, videlicet (1) numbers of notional subjects and verbs, (2) register (for the first research question), for detailed analysis by reason of more significant influence of these factors as suggested by antecedent studies. The factor of register is inapplicable to the second research question inasmuch as the selected corpus comprises merely texts belonging to the academic genre.

After calculation of the frequency of occurrence as well as that of subject-operator disagreement in each variety of English existential construction in each register, the percentage of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement was computed. Descriptive statistics were subsequently analyzed with respect to the two target factors.

### 4.Results

Descriptive statistics of the frequency of occurrence of English existential constructions as well as frequency and percentage of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement in COCA were computed and presented Table 1. The total percentage of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions in COCA was 0.44%; this reveals that subject-operator disagreement is frightfully uncommonly produced by American English speakers. Should such descriptive statistics be analyzed with respect to the two target factors, videlicet numbers of notional subjects and verbs as well as register, findings are comparable to those of antecedent studies and confirm predictions made in previous sections of the paper.

Table 1 *Frequency of Occurrence of English Existential Constructions as well as Frequency and Percentage of Occurrence of Subject-Operator Disagreement in COCA*

Register	There is			There are			Overall		
	Frequency of occurrence	Subject-operator disagreement	Percentage of subject-operator disagreement	Frequency of occurrence	Subject-operator disagreement	Percentage of subject-operator disagreement	Frequency of occurrence	Subject-operator disagreement	Percentage of subject-operator disagreement
Spoken	2494	46	<b>1.84</b>	2390	0	<b>0</b>	4884	46	<b>0.94</b>
Fiction	403	0	<b>0</b>	568	0	<b>0</b>	971	0	<b>0</b>
Magazine	1263	13	<b>1.03</b>	1305	0	<b>0</b>	2568	13	<b>0.51</b>
News	922	0	<b>0</b>	1314	0	<b>0</b>	2236	0	<b>0</b>
Academic	1698	0	<b>0</b>	1034	0	<b>0</b>	2732	0	<b>0</b>
Total	6780	59	<b>0.87</b>	6611	0	<b>0</b>	13391	59	<b>0.44</b>

Only was subject-operator disagreement observed in English existential constructions with plural notional subjects and singular verbs, videlicet the 'there is' construction with no subject-operator disagreement identified in existential constructions with singular notional subjects and plural verbs, videlicet the 'there are' construction, at all, and the percentage of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement amongst all 'there is' constructions was solely 0.87%, which was argued to be frightfully low. In spite of compliance with such findings with those of antecedent studies (e.g. Crawford, 2005; Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez, 2003; Meecham & Foley, 1994), a total lack of subject-operator disagreement in the 'there are' constructions was out of the blue in that even previous studies were capable of identifying instances of subject-operator disagreement in existential constructions with singular notional subjects and plural verbs. One plausible explication was a small sample size of the current study. Had texts produced over a longer period of time been extracted for analysis, some instances of such subject-operator disagreement might have been detected.

Regarding register, only was subject-operator disagreement observed in English existential constructions in spoken texts and magazines with no subject-operator disagreement identified in existential constructions in other registers. The percentage of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement in spoken texts almost doubled that in magazines; such a piece of finding is congruent with findings of antecedent studies, which suggested higher frequency of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement in informal spoken discourse as a result of speakers' plausible disregard of subject-operator agreement effectuated by a heavy burden on language processing exerted by the real-time nature of communication in spoken discourse (Cheshire, 1999; Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez, 2003). Occurrence of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions in magazines could probably be attributable to informality of some feature articles in more casual magazines, which favors deviation from prescriptive rules.

Descriptive statistics of the frequency of occurrence of English existential constructions as well as frequency and percentage of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement in PLEC were computed and presented Table 2. The total percentage of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions in PLEC was 4.88%, which was much higher than that in COCA; this demonstrates that subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions is more prevalent amongst speakers of Hong Kong English than amongst American English speakers. A particularly noteworthy point was that subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions attested in PLEC were produced by speakers of Hong Kong English in academic texts albeit an utter lack of such a phenomenon in academic texts in COCA; the pattern of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by speakers of Hong Kong English is thereby argued to deviate from that produced by American English speakers.

Table 2. *Frequency of Occurrence of English Existential Constructions as well as Frequency and Percentage of Occurrence of Subject-Operator Disagreement in PLEC*

	Frequency of occurrence	Subject-operator disagreement	Percentage of subject-operator disagreement
There is	1665	127	7.63
There are	3067	104	3.39
Total	4732	231	4.88

Unlike findings of COCA, subject-operator disagreement was observed in English existential constructions with both singular and plural verbs in PLEC albeit a higher frequency of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement with plural notional subjects and singular verbs, which nearly doubled that of subject-operator disagreement with singular notional subjects and plural verbs. Argued to be an unmarked presentative form of existential construction, the phrase 'there is' is likely to be produced by language users by default given that they would like to produce existential constructions (Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez, 2003). Occurrence of subject-operator disagreement with singular notional subjects and plural nouns suggests that even the unmarked

form deviates from the prescriptive rule of subject-operator agreement; such a phenomenon may thereby be viewed as language learning phenomenon in lieu of simply one correlated with language use or language choice.

### 5. Discussion

From the aforementioned analysis, it is evidently observed that subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions was rare amongst American English speakers yet more frequent amongst speakers of Hong Kong English. As for contexts of production of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions, whilst such disagreement occurred more frequently in English existential constructions with plural notional subjects and singular verbs produced by both groups of English language speakers, patterns of disagreement of the two groups varied substantially in terms of register. As noted in the antecedent section, findings with respect to numbers of notional subjects and verbs are compatible with formulated predictions as well as findings of antecedent studies. On the other hand, even though it was predicted that growing popularity of online discourse might further blur dichotomy between spoken and written discourse as well as that between formality and informality, subject-operator disagreement was still more frequent in informal spoken discourse than in other registers produced by American English speakers. Apart from contexts of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement as articulated in the two research questions, some other issues emerging from the findings are also worthy of deliberation.

Rarity of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by American English speakers possesses a disposition to suggest that language use of those speakers is still influenced by the prescriptive rule of subject-operator agreement in English existential constructions. Sporadic production of subject-operator disagreement was discovered in specific informal spoken contexts, where language use is presumed to be ephemeral, and magazines, where informal language use is attested, albeit absence of such a phenomenon in various written registers, especially formal ones, where language use is understood to be indelible and treated more seriously (Elbow, 1985). In practice, motivation for deviation from prescriptive rules is twofold: language change and dialectal uniqueness.

Attributed to the dynamic nature of language, by no means does a static view of language stand; on the contrary, all living languages change with time in distinct respects. Plausible reasons for language change are language contact and a desire for linguistic simplicity and regularity, as in reduction of two forms of English existential constructions, *videlicet* the singular and plural forms, into one (Fromkin et al., 2013). Notwithstanding plausibly effectuating language users' deviation from prescriptive rules, which were formulated long ago, in their language production, language change takes place slowly and gradually. For such a reason, hardly can results of language change be observed within a short period of time, such as 20 years, but only after a relatively long period of time can language behaviour be revolutionized (*ibid.*); this provides a reasonable explication for consistency between American English speakers' language production observed in COCA and the prescriptive rule of subject-operator agreement in English existential constructions.

Furthermore, possessing his/her own idiolect, never does any language user use language in exactly the same way as another language user does, but dialectal disparities in terms of variables such as age, sex, social situation, and geographical location may exist amongst language users of the same language (Fromkin et al., 2013). The prescriptive rule of subject-operator agreement in English existential constructions applicable chiefly to standard varieties of English, speakers of other varieties of English, such as the English spoken by the New Zealand Niuean community (e.g. Starks & Thompson, 2009), may deliberately produce existential constructions with subject-operator disagreement to mark their dialectal uniqueness and thereby their own identity. All primary language data from COCA yielded from American English speakers, who speak the standard variety of the English language, it is likely for those language data to be commensurate with the prescriptive rule of subject-operator agreement albeit some disagreement due to attributes of particular idiolects.

Pervasiveness of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by speakers of Hong Kong English indicates disparities between those speakers' language use and prescriptive rules. Attributed to presence of an array of dialects of the English language, dialectal disparities are inevitable, so it is reasonable for patterns of subject-operator disagreement amongst speakers of Hong Kong English to deviate from those amongst American English speakers (Fromkin et al., 2013). All the same, a much higher frequency of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by speakers of Hong Kong English is a piece of pronounced finding worthy of attention. Examining such a phenomenon of deviation from prescriptive rules, scholars in fields of second language acquisition and sociolinguistics provide distinct accounts.

On one hand, in the respect of second language acquisition, deviation from prescriptive rules may be regarded as errors in the interlanguage. Redundancy being an integral input-related factor determining second language learners' acquisition of certain linguistic attributes, linguistic attributes necessary for conveying meanings are discovered to be more easily acquired by learners (Collins et al., 2009). The overriding function of English existential constructions is to delineate existence of entities, and numbers of notional subjects are clearly marked in notional subjects by inflectional means; for such a reason, the form of the operator 'be' is viewed as redundant, so subject-operator agreement may be likely to be kept out of consideration by second language learners given that other linguistic attributes are more salient and vital in conveyance of meaning. In accordance with MacWhinney, Bates, and Kliegl (1984)'s competition model, language acquisition is basically acquisition of cue strengths of the target language. Subject-verb agreement not being a particular strong cue in English, seldom do second language learners of English take heed of such a cue when processing English sentences (Ng, 2019). Not taking heed of agreement, learners may possess a propensity to produce English existential constructions with subject-operator disagreement. Additionally, speakers of Hong Kong English receive no facilitation from Cantonese, their mother tongue, in terms of agreement. Cantonese possessing no subject-operator agreement, English learners in Hong Kong possess a low awareness of and thereby possess immense difficulty in acquisition of the concept of agreement (Chan, 2010); subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions thereby occur in their production.

On the other hand, from a sociolinguistic perspective, deviation from prescriptive rules may be perceived to be an attribute of Hong Kong English as a novel variety of English. Deviating from the standard variety, an attribute of a new variety of a language is stable and has gained credence from language users in society (Groves, 2010). On the basis of such yardsticks, subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by speakers of Hong Kong English appear more like errors in the interlanguage in lieu of an attribute of Hong Kong English. Findings from PLEC manifest that scarcely does subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions a stable attribute produced by speakers of Hong Kong English; on the contrary, variability is observed in that alternations between agreement and disagreement occur. Social acceptance of subject-operator disagreement in Hong Kong is also argued to be frightfully low in that such a syntactic phenomenon is most likely treated as erroneous in formal educational settings (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2013).. For such reasons, hardly can subject-operator disagreement be argued to be a widely acceptable attribute of Hong Kong English.

## **6. Conclusion**

Employing a corpus-based approach, the current study attempts to study subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by American English speakers, who are native English speakers, and speakers of Hong Kong English, who are non-native speakers. The study possesses no intention to directly compare patterns of subject-operator disagreement between the two groups of speakers; instead, only does it attempt to delineate contexts of occurrence of such a phenomenon. Two target factors, *videlicet* numbers of notional subjects and verbs as well as register, have been selected for analysis. It was discovered that subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions was rare amongst American English speakers yet more frequent amongst speakers of Hong Kong English. Such a phenomenon occurred more frequently in English existential constructions with plural notional subjects and singular verbs.

American English speakers were apt to produce subject-operator disagreement more frequently in spoken texts and magazines whereas speakers of Hong Kong English were found to produce it frequently even in academic texts. Disparities in contexts of production were thereby observed between the two groups of language users.

The study possesses both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically speaking, the study managed to fill certain research gaps identified in the literature review. Not only does it provide a follow-up to antecedent studies of patterns of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by native English speakers, it also extends the scope of the study to speakers of Hong Kong English, a population of under-studied language users in this topic area. In light of profound disparities between patterns of subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by American English speakers and those produced by speakers of Hong Kong English, pedagogical goal and content of the target structure ought to be reconsidered. In accordance with the framework of Lingua Franca Core put forward by Jenkins (2006), language variety, which is any form of language characterized by systematic attributes, ought to be embraced, and second language learners ought not to be forced to abide by norms of the standard variety (Dawson & Phelan, 2016). That said, as noted in the discussion section, subject-operator disagreement in English existential constructions produced by speakers of Hong Kong English is more likely to be reckoned to be errors in the interlanguage in lieu of attributes of Hong Kong English out of variability and a lack of social acceptance. It is thereby more appropriate for pedagogical content in second language curricula to stick to the prescriptive rules of subject-operator agreement in English existential constructions lest communication breakdown occur by virtue of a lack of mutual intelligibility.

The study possesses a number of limitations, which pave way for some suggestions on directions for future studies. To begin with, a larger sample size is required to confirm findings of the study. Only were texts produced in 2017 from COCA were selected for analysis in the present study; a corpus-based study based on texts produced within merely one single year is insufficient to yield conclusive findings. For such a reason, it is suggested that the sample size be enlarged in future studies by means of incorporation of more texts from the corpus into the data set for analysis. Another limitation of the study was that only full English existential constructions in the present tense were selected for analysis, but contracted forms of existential constructions as well as existential constructions in the past tense and other verb forms were all excluded from the study. It is recommended that English existential constructions in other verb forms as well as contracted forms of such constructions be included in the study so that it will be plausible to determine whether certain subject-operator disagreement patterns are only confined to English existential constructions in the present tense or applicable to those in other verb forms. The entirety of the study being a quantitative study, it is also proposed to incorporate qualitative elements into future studies with the hope of yielding a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of subject-operator disagreement. More specifically, linguistic and situational contexts of occurrence of subject-operator disagreement as well as language users' rationale for production of subject-operator disagreement could be studied. Last but surely not the least, representativeness of the two corpora selected for the study is contentious. Even though primary language data of distinct genres are embodied in COCA, language data in the corpus are argued to be solely representative of language produced by educated citizens whilst keeping those produced by their less educated counterparts out of consideration. Also, selection of PLEC as one of the data sources of the study was grounded upon an assumption that it is a collection of texts produced by speakers of Hong Kong English. All the same, it is difficult to confirm whether all texts were produced by speakers of Hong Kong English since tertiary students in Hong Kong producing such texts might possess diverse linguistic background. It is thereby advised to collect primary language data from more than one corpus for each variety in future studies. It is hoped that the aforementioned suggestions will ameliorate research design of future studies, which verify findings of the current study and further contribute to knowledge in the research area of English existential constructions.

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