

The Meaning of *There*: From Identifiable to Vague Location to Existence, Purpose, and Support

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the range of polysemous usages and variable structures of the *be there* construction in English. Using a corpus of 112,345,722 words from the British National Corpus, we identified 16,111 instances of *be there*. From these, a randomized sample of 500 instances was analyzed for their usages and functions and categorized into five basic categories. The categories range in designating the meanings of *there* from concrete, specific, identifiable locations to vaguer indicators of place to abstract references of place that signal the meanings of benefaction (i.e., *be there* for someone) and purpose (i.e., *be there* to do/accomplish something). We explore the meaning of *there*, progressing from designated identifiable concrete space through abstract, non-identifiable locations, to hybridized meanings of vague location bordering on mere existence, and finally to the metaphorical extensions of *there* that express concepts of support and purpose. *There* in English is unique because just this single word carries such varied meanings, thus posing challenges for L2 learners of English.

Keywords: *There*, pro-adverb, deictic, existential, non-identifiable, metaphorical extensions

1. Introduction

This study investigates the range of polysemous usages and variable structures of the *be there* construction in English. Using a corpus of 112,345,722 words (British National Corpus), we culled a total of 16,111 instances of *be there*. We subsequently used the *Sketch Engine* concordance tool to generate a random sampling of 500 tokens of *be there*. That set of 500 tokens constitutes our database for the analysis and categorization of the meanings and functions of the target form. As a result, we found that the categories range in designating the meanings of *there* from concrete, specific, identifiable locations to vaguer indicators of place to abstract references of place that signal the

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meanings of benefaction (i.e., *be there for* someone) and purpose (i.e., *be there to* do/accomplish something). In addition to the foregoing scope of meaning of *be there*, we also note that the construction varies in terms of backward pointing place reference (anaphoric, locative *there*), immediately visible (exophoric, deictic *there*) and forward pointing reference in terms of support or purpose (cataphoric, benefactive/purpose *be there + for* and *be there to*).

There in its most concrete usages and meanings of an anaphoric locative (used as a pro-adverb) and deictic reference point has rather straightforward counterparts cross-linguistically that function much in the same way as English (i.e., Spanish *ahí, allá, allá* - differing in terms of distance from speaker/writer; Korean *저기 ceki* and *거기 keki*; Japanese *そこ soko* and *あそこ asoko* - also differing in terms of distance from speaker/writer; German *dort*; Chinese *那裡 nàlǐ*; Hebrew *שם sham*; and French *là* or pro adverb *y*).

However, within discourse, it becomes evident that *there* takes on meanings much vaguer than specific place mentioned or implied in prior discourse in the case of anaphoric locative *there* and specific place designated by pointing or other ways of demonstrating location within the immediate context of the discourse as in the case of deictic *there*. That is, the place reference related to English *there* often degrades in specificity and simply takes on a meaning related to vague indicator of place, mere existence of something or someone, and existence of an entity to provide benefactive support or to accomplish a purpose or a goal.

In this regard, cross-linguistic counterparts become much less frequent, and many, if not most, do not even include the original word *there*, which is especially salient in existential constructions: Spanish *haber* -abstract meaning of 'have'; French *il y a* 'to exist [literally 'it has there']; Korean *있다*¹⁾ *issta* 'to be, to exist'='there is/there are'; Japanese *いる iru* and *ある aru* 'to be, to exist'='there is/there are'-differing on the basis of the animacy or inanimacy of the subject; German *geben* 'to give'; Chinese *有 yǒu* 'to be, to exist'; Hebrew *יש yesh* 'there is/there are.' Of these languages, French *il y a* is the only one that contains the pro-adverbial form of *there*.

Given the complexity of the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of *there* and *be there* constructions, we conducted a corpus-based study of *be there* in authentic discourse with a view to discover the gradient scale of meanings of *there* from

1) While the Korean existential verb *issta* etymologically includes elements of tense marking (Kim, 2008), its usage as a prototypical existential verb that itself marks both tense and aspect is widely recognized by Korean linguists (Lee, 2022; Lee & Ramsey, 2000; Sohn, 1994, 2001) as clear counterparts to existential constructions in other languages such as Spanish, French, Italian, and so forth.

concrete, specific, and identifiable designation of place or location to vague, abstract reference related to place, existence, benefaction, and purpose/goal.

Such gradient scale of meanings represents an important perspective on the conceptualization of *there* in authentic English discourse, as it departs from the traditional and more narrow understanding of the binary distinction of simply existential *there* and locative *there*. The binary distinction both pre-supposes and forces the interpretation that every instance of the use of locative *there* actually points to a concrete, specified, and identifiable location. Crucially, as observed in actual discourse (as pointed out in this study) and in the following invented examples, this is not the case.

To illustrate:

(1) **Locative/Anaphoric/Pro-adverbial**

--We put up a new light over the entry door.

--I don't see it **there**. Maybe it's not on.

(2) **Locative/Deictic**

The light is **there**. Do you see where I'm pointing?

(3) **Existential**

There's a light over the door now. That should make you feel safer.

(4) **Nonidentifiable hybrid** (vague location bordering on existence)

I know a light was **there** at one point, but they must not use it any longer.

(5) **Benefactive/Purpose** (*be there for* someone, *be there to* accomplish something)

The light is **there** for your own safety. It's **there** to keep everyone safe.

The examples are invented simply to hold the context constant and to illustrate with simplicity the gradient meaning from concrete and identifiable locative, e.g., (1) and (2), existence, e.g., (3), as well as the final two categories not typically addressed in traditional accounts of *there* and *be there*. Essentially, if we were to limit the analysis to the traditional binary distinction between locative and existential, we lose the very ambiguity and gray areas of meaning evoked by nearly 20% of the uses of *there* in our data, as illustrated in the invented examples in (4) and (5). See Table 1.

The uses of *be there* evoking a hybrid meaning between non-identifiable place and existence in addition to the benefactive/purposive (*be there for*, *be there to*) are evident in the following quotes about "being there" by famous individuals:

(6) Non-identifiable hybrid plus existence: Famous Quotes—Meaning Category 4

a. Christopher Walken, American film star:

I think that a good movie creates its own world, and that world needn't refer to anything that's real. If it's consistent, if it's entertaining, if it's interesting, it justifies its **being there**.

b. Sebastian Coe, British sports administrator

Nobody ever becomes an expert parent. But I think good parenting is about consistency. It's **about being there** at big moments, but it's also just the consistency of decision making. And it's routine.

(7) Benefactive and purposive: Famous Quotes—Meaning Category 5

a. Gwyneth Paltrow. American film star (*be there for* = benefactive)

Taking care of yourself is **being there for your kids**, like how on a plane, they tell you to put on your oxygen mask first.

b. Gerry Harvey, Australian entrepreneur (*be there to* = purposive)

I'm a great believer in governments doing as little as possible and people power doing the rest, so I'm in favour of governments **being there to** govern in the areas that need governing, not a whole heap of other things that they stick their sticky fingers into.

As is evident here and as will be illustrated throughout this article, *there* is clearly used in authentic English discourse where location as a concrete and/or literal entity does not hold, thereby taking on both semantic and pragmatic nuances of vagueness. Such vagueness often captures the very hybrid instances of meaning that border between vague location and existence as in (4) as well as metaphorical meanings where *there* resides in the mental spaces of the speaker/writer (Fauconnier, 1994) expressing concepts of both benefaction and purpose (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987) as in (5), i.e., meaning extensions that a binary analysis would mask entirely.

2. Literature Review

Perhaps the most concrete and semantically transparent uses and meanings of *there* are the locative senses in its pro-adverbial meanings, as 1) a general reference to a concrete and specific place or location mentioned in prior discourse and 2) the

deictic meanings, as a means of pointing out the concrete and specific location of an entity within an immediate context, as in (8) and (9) below, respectively:

(8) Locative pro-adverbial meaning

She had been cleaning [that room] all day.

[there] all day (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 698)

(9) Locative deictic meaning

(a) Look! There's a polar bear over there! (Brevik, 1981, p. 1)

(b) THERE is the little boy who looks after the sheep.

(Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2016, p. 466) (emphasis original)

(c) The little boy who looks after the sheep is THERE.

(Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2016, p. 467) (emphasis original)

In both cases, *there* carries an assumption of sharedness of locative information such that the interlocutor/hearer can accurately and easily identify the place through anaphora as in (8) or through gestural designation as in (9). Moreover, with respect to deictic *there*, Lakoff (1984) points out that deictic *there* also contrasts with *here*, the locative deictic marker of immediacy or physical closeness. Levinson (1983) expands the concept within the domain of pragmatics and indicates that *there* serves as a spatial deictic that connects the speaker's perspective with the designated place-in contrast with *here* as noted by Lakoff, designating a difference of place in terms of proximity or discursive focus.

With respect to shifts in meaning and syntax from pro-adverbial and deictic *there* to *there* as it appears in existential clauses, Jespersen (1924) is perhaps the earliest study, connecting this construction to the change in the loss of Old English word order, thereby requiring an overt sentential subject or a subject-like place-holder. That is, *there* as a pro-adverb designating a specific place grammaticalized into a syntactic place-holder to introduce indefinite subjects or subjects that are new to the discourse, as in "Once upon a time there was a tailor" (p. 154). *There* in this construction has lost its meaning of locative due to the shift from Old English to Middle English whereby Middle English took on the more fixed word order of today, i.e., Subject Verb Object (SVO) structure.

As a result of this shift, *there* once functioning solely as a locative expression, underwent the process of grammaticalization (Traugott, 1989; Traugott & Hopper, 1993, inter alia). Through this process, the meaning and structure of *there* changed

from concrete locative expressions that dually designate concrete spaces as well as assume mutual recognition and understanding to an abstract subject-like place-holder that serves to introduce entities into discourse or to simply designate their existence (See also Davide, 1999; Denison, 1998; Haspelmath, 2002; Heine, 1993; Heine & Kuteva, 2002; Lyons, 1968; Warner, 1993, 2008: among others).

Examples (10) from Biber et al. (1999, p. 945) and (11) from Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia (2016, p. 467), respectively indicate the use of an indefinite subject together with the existential *there* construction:

(10) Behind the sundial, there were a few trees, some of them in flower.

(11) There's a little boy who looks after the sheep, isn't there?

Biber et al. (1999) also illustrate uses of *there* across its three meanings and uses, i.e., pro-adverbial-designating a prior mentioned place known by the interlocutor, deictic *there*-designating a place in concrete or abstract space, and existential *there*, as in (12), which contains three tokens of *there*, two of which are existential, and one which is potentially ambiguous between pro-adverbial *there* and deictic *there*.

(12) From Biber et al. (1999, p. 944)

...there's still no water there, is there?

[existential]

[deictic] [existential]

In addition to existential *there* and its function to introduce entities into discourse or to designate the existence of an indefinite entity, we also find instances in our data of *be there for* [+someone or something] and *be there to* [+accomplish a goal or purpose]. In this regard, *there* again has lost its original meaning of concrete place and has taken on a metaphorical location related to emotion or support vis à vis the hearer or interlocutor, as noted in Lakoff & Johnson (1980). Lakoff (1987) builds on the metaphorical extensions of *be there for* as a way to express emotional support in conjunction with the abstract, non-referential place *there*, where *there* serves as a mental space (p. 544). Lakoff (1987) also discusses the function of *be there for* or *be there to* as the meaning shifts metaphorically both to the concept of support, purpose or goal as in “There's a bed for you to sleep in” (p. 750).

Given the range of meanings of *there* in general and *be there* specifically, it has been documented that teaching these expressions can be challenging in an ESL or EFL context (Celce-Murcia, 2002; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Kim &

Lee, 2022; Lee, 2011; inter alia). With regard to existential *there*, Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) point out complexities of the construction associated with the fact that *there* is non-referential in existential constructions in addition to the fact that English L1 speakers often do not adhere to subject-verb agreement rules. For example: in a case such as “There’s problems here,” a) speakers might want to avoid extended “r” sounds, as in “There are or there’re problems here,” or b) speakers might use the “there’s” construction as a grammaticalized chunk (Brevik, 1981).

There is a range of research that centers on syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects that render *there* constructions in English challenging to L2 learners. Ionin & Chen (2024) investigate existential constructions and indefiniteness in Mandarin and English. Chou (2004) investigates Mandarin *you* (‘exist’) sentences in light of *there be* existential constructions in English. With regard to Korean learners of English, Kim & Lee (2022) provide a comprehensive language acquisition study of Korean L1 speakers’ comprehension and processing of English existential *there* constructions. Focusing on Persian learners of English *there* constructions, Farsani et al. (2012) investigate the effects of Focus on Form, task-based instruction on the acquisition of *there is/there are* constructions by Persian L1 speakers.

Kim & Lee (2022) analyze *there be* existential constructions (ETC), differentiating between the adverb locative *there* as in “Don’t leave your shoes there” from Ward et al. (2002, p. 1391) and locative extensions (e.g., *there is an X on the Y*) and expletive extensions as in “There’s a screwdriver here” from Quirk et al. (1985, p. 1405). According to Kim & Lee, in locative and expletive extensions, *there* serves simply as a placeholder and carries no meaning. The study investigates English proficiency as a factor in interpreting ETCs, especially with respect to native speaker, advanced English speaker, and intermediate English speaker ability to understand the meaning of *there* to refer to “something or somebody that exists regardless of its distance” (p. 37). The findings reflect that native speakers of English score the highest in distinguishing expletive *there* from locative adverbial *there*, followed by advanced learners. Lower proficiency learners exhibited the greatest difficulty in distinguishing the two, and interpret expletive *there* as a locative adverbial.

In contrast with Kim & Lee, who investigate *there be* constructions, our study focuses on the *be there* form, which yields a wider range of discourse-based usage and hence a wider variety of meaning. With regard to the verb *be* in the *be there* constructions, it must be noted that we analyze *be* in the context of its locative/existential (Freeze, 1992; Cann, 2007) and motion meanings (Talmy, 1985,

2000) and not in the context of its simple copular meaning and/or auxiliary meaning (i.e., passive voice; progressive aspect). That is, *be* can function as a simple copula (e.g., ‘New York **is** a lively city’; ‘The cake **is** moist’), or as a locative, existential, or motion verb (e.g., ‘Have you ever **been** to New York?’; ‘The cake **is** in the oven’). The use of *be* in the *be there* constructions in our data clearly fits within the latter category.

This review of the literature reflects the broad range of issues surrounding the meaning, form, structure, and use of *there* and *be there* constructions in English, which, as noted, do clearly tend to pose areas of difficulty for learners of English at various levels of proficiency.

3. Data & Coding Categories

3.1. Data

The goal of our study was to examine various uses of *there* in actual discourse, particularly because of the complexity of *there* and its related constructions in English. Conducting a discourse-based study sheds light on how, where, and in what contexts speakers and writers of English use *there*. For this study, we have chosen to investigate the use of the *be there* construction in that it can demonstrate all three uses of *there*, i.e., pro-adverbial *there*, deictic *there*, and existential *there*. Appealing to the British National Corpus (BNC), a corpus of 112,345,722 words, we employed the concordance tool *Sketch Engine* to retrieve all occurrences of *be there*. This search yielded a total of 16,111 occurrences of *be there*, or a ratio of 143.31 tokens per million words (0.014%). For the practicality issue, we then extracted a random sample of 500 tokens.

We chose to use the BNC due to its variety of exemplars: Spoken, Non-Academic, Fiction, Magazine, Newspaper, Academic, and Miscellaneous, coupled with the fact that it is temporally stable, i.e., its representation of spoken discourse is limited to the mid-1990s and does not reflect neologisms and more contemporary, idiomatic, and slang-like expressions that may populate the data of modern TV and web-based sources (e.g., blogs, general web). The data sources for the BNC range from 1991 through 1994.

3.2. Coding categories

For our analysis, we used the following five categories and coded the 500 sample tokens based on those categories.

3.2.1. Pro-adverbial *There*

There in this category has a clear and concrete co-reference and is used anaphorically. The following are the examples in this type with the *be there* construction boldfaced.

- (13) ‘Dear Loretta,’ she read, ‘I’ve just come back from an official trip to Italy, and I squeezed in a visit to a peace camp while I **was there**.

In this example, Italy and there are straightforwardly co-referential.

3.2.2. Deictic *There*

This category illustrates the use of deictic *there* to designate a referent within the immediate context of the interlocutors.

- (14) ... so hopefully everything’s in order but somewhere around Eric, George, and Arthur, are they around? Oh they’re **there**, ah they’re at the front, that’s the best place for them. A warm welcome, colleagues.

3.2.3. Existential *There*

This category illustrates the uses of existential *there* in our database. Note here that due to the form *be there* being culled from the concordance search, this use of existential *there* appears only in interrogative form.

- (15) Now if you take the table one and bearing in mind it it’s reflects reasonably well that that the factors or the criteria which we discussed on Friday morning. **Are there** any others which people feel ought to be added to that list?

3.2.4. Non-identifiable Hybrid *There*: vague location bordering on existential

The meaning and uses of *there* in this category reflect a hybridized semantics of *there* that is a cross between the vague location of an entity and the existence of that entity, though the syntax does not reflect the syntax of existential *there*. Paraphrasing the use of *there* in all instances of this category would involve the designation of an entity in space that simply points to the speaker's/user's knowledge of that entity's existence. To date, we find no explication of *there* or *be there* in prior research that captures the meaning and usage as represented in this particular category.

- (16) Famous last words, she thought to herself, as she stepped out of the lift on to the second-floor landing of the luxury block of flats where she lived. Though the landing was empty and there wasn't a sound all around, she had the strangest sensation that someone **was there**. The entrance to her own flat was down one of the narrow corridors that led off from the rectangular landing

3.2.5. *Be there for* (someone or something) [benefaction]/*Be there to* [purpose]

This category is designed to note particular constructions, i.e., *be there* followed by *for* (someone/something) to be the object of benefaction and *be there* followed by *to*-initiative to refer to a purpose or a goal, in line with the metaphorical extensions explicated by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) and Lakoff (1987).

- (17) He preferred to keep acquaintances as such, rarely divulged his feelings and placed little reliance on others. He could be quite casual in his attitude to his wife's anxiety and more often than not failed to let her know when he was delayed. However, on his belated homecomings, he indirectly reassured her that the needed person did return in the end. And he, so apparently casual - punitively casual - often irritated by her anxiety, could also rely on her **being there for him**, but without having to know about his own need for her to be safely where he had left her.

3.2.6. Other

There were also instances of *be there*, which were part of other constructions and thus were categorized as “other” from our data. For example, excerpts (18) and (19) reflect a prototypical instance of existential *there* as part of the ETC *there be* construction, analyzed in Kim & Lee (2022). These two examples are considered “other” since they were picked up by the concordance tools as *be there* but syntactically and pragmatically they do not follow the *be there* constructions in our data.

(18) What they said **was there** was too many other people on beforehand.

(BE THERE BE)

(19) The trouble **is there's** no guarantee.

(BE THERE BE)

In addition to the two examples above, we also had a handful of ill-formed excerpts as in the following:

(20) Er what happens in a light bulb, when you switch on? The electricity flows through and lights the bulb up. Why does it light up? Because electricity's **been there's** a bit in the bulb that- How does it how does it make light?

All the examples of *be there* in the data were examined and coded by both researchers, and the coding of any *be there* incidences that prompted initial disagreement was decided through discussion and deliberation throughout the various stages of the coding process.

4. Results

4.1. Distribution

Table 1 presents how the 500 instances of the *be there* construction were coded based on the five categories for the analysis.

Table 1. Distribution of *Be There* in different categories

Category	Number of occurrences (percentages)
1 Pro-adverb <i>there</i>	178 (35.6)
2 Deictic <i>there</i>	14 (2.8)
3 Existential <i>there</i>	169 (33.8)
4 Non-identifiable hybrid <i>there</i>	53 (10.6)
5 <i>Be there for/be there to</i>	42 (8.4)
Other	32 (6.4)
Ill-formed	12 (2.4)
Total	500 (100)

As noted, the 500 instances were a random selection of a total of 16,111 cases. We are, therefore, refraining from drawing any type of generalization about the frequency of each category shown in the table. We also note the strikingly low frequency of deictic *there*. That is, compared to almost similar frequencies of pro-adverb *there* and existential *there* (i.e., 178 and 169, respectively), deictic *there* is less than one-tenth of their frequencies (i.e., 14). This is likely due to the fact that deictic *there* depends upon the immediate context of interaction within spontaneous colloquial conversation. However, 90% of the BNC is composed of written discourse from various genres including academic books, newspapers, and popular fiction, and with only 10% derived from spoken discourse genres such as casual conversation and business meetings. These various sources and the noticeably disproportionate amount of spoken discourse data do not provide sufficient natural environments for deictic *there* to take place. Another point to note is that the use of *there* in Categories 4 (Hybrid *there*) and 5 (*be there to/be there for*) (i.e., 95 instances) accounts for about 20% of all codable cases, i.e., totaling 456 incidences excluding ‘other’ and ‘ill-formed’ cases as exemplified above. The frequencies of these cases deserve added explication, as noted in the next section.

4.2. Analysis of the use of *There*

In this section, we will examine the use of *there* in the five categories, focusing on the basic characteristics in each category.

4.2.1. Category 1: pro-adverb *There*

This category provides one of the most transparent uses of *there* as a pro-adverb with a clear co-referent. The following examples demonstrate this use of *there* used anaphorically.

- (21) My job was to operate the telephone switchboard, sort the morning post, direct house-callers to the appropriate organization, and that was about it. The telephones kept me just about busy but the potential for job satisfaction in the tasks I was required to do was almost nil. This was, I kept telling myself, just a staging post. It does, however, hold the distinction of being the second-longest-running job that I have held to date. I **was there** for about three and a half years.

Here, the writer is talking about his/her first job as a telephone switchboard operator, and *there* refers to that particular place of employment. *There* is backward pointing, referring to the job s/he used to hold.

- (22) DAY 2 - VISIT THE EURO DISNEYLAND THEME PARK A day entirely dedicated to the fantasy world of EURO DISNEYLAND. After breakfast, board your coach for the drive to the EURO DISNEY Resort and the entrance to the fabulous EURO DISNEYLAND Theme Park. You will **be there** from the time it opens in the morning, until the evening, when our coach will be waiting to drive you back to your hotel.

In this excerpt, *there* clearly and unequivocally is co-referential with Euro Disneyland.

All the examples in this category share a clear co-reference with backward pointing designation of a prior referent, thereby rendering the location transparently clear.

4.2.2. Category 2: deictic *There*

This category presents another prototypical use of *there*, i.e., as a deictic adverb. As mentioned earlier, it reflects a low frequency of usage, due primarily to the nature of the major sources of data in the BNC. That is, deictic *there* tends to occur in

spontaneous conversation, whereas the BNC has only 10% of spoken discourse which is also a mixture of conversations and formal meetings and others.

The examination of *there* in this category reveals a very intriguing pattern. Seven out of the 14 instances in this category reveal a pattern of *there* followed by a more specific description of the location. Excerpt (23) illustrates the point.

(23) So where they gonna put the, the other bedroom? At the side. At the side, so, but she's not having a garage or anything at the side, she's having a side extension down below, but the front bit she's having made into a shower room and then the back bit it's gonna be like a morning room to the kitchen. Oh right. like where you go in the kitchen you turn right, like that one of mine over there, the sink's **there** on the right hand side.

In this excerpt, the speakers are discussing a remodel job that includes the placement of the kitchen and also the sink. This example contains two instances of deictic *there* where the speaker is pointing out locations for the interlocutor to envision based on what can be seen and what is visible within the co-present space. It is also notable that the first deictic instance of *there* in 'like that one of mine over there' is not alone but is complemented with the specifying adverb 'over,' which is another illustration of *there* that sometimes lacks the clarity to point out the relevant referents on its own.

As noted, half of the examples in this category illustrate the same pattern, i.e., *there* followed by further specification/designation of the referent. This semantic-pragmatic phenomenon surrounding *there* points to the fact that its meaning and use in discourse has indeed undergone a degradation of specificity that users are themselves clearly aware of. That is, when they use *there* in discourse and (sub)consciously realize that the place designation is in need of further specification, they add that location to the discourse just following the initial use of *there*. The type of added locative specification includes adverbials formed variably from noun phrases, prepositional phrases, participial phrases, and adverbial phrases, all of which serve to designate with more clarity or specificity the very place that *there* refers to.

The following are the examples in this pattern.

(24) 'the boy **was there**, a mere span away.' Adverbial=noun phrase

(25) 'what one was most afraid of **is there**, behind the antique panels, waiting to throw one to the floor' Adverbial=prepositional phrase, participial phrase

- (26) 'he **was there**, running towards him' Adverbial=participial phrase
 (27) 'It's **there**. Right from here.' Adverbial= adverbial phrase
 (28) 'The ice was here, the ice **was there**, the ice was all around.' Adverbial= adverbial phrase

The next example illustrates the pattern relating to the other seven instances of *there* in Category 2.

- (29) 'You're sure you've got the right guy?' 'The Holland and the Carlton are hotels too. I suppose he must have been choosing between them. He sure as hell found the right one if anonymity is what he's after. It's Apache country. Attack dogs go round in pairs.' 'But it's him?' Pascoe persisted. 'I nipped in for a look. His passport's **there**. An Amex gold card that I suspect he can't use. One or two other personal bits and pieces. He probably didn't take them out with him because he was afraid of being mugged. So he leaves them in a room where the locks open if you give them a threatening look.

In this excerpt, *there* is not followed by any further specification of the location of the referent. It is because the purpose of the sentence is to provide evidence that they found the right guy. The author further enumerates what else s/he saw, in addition to 'his passport', i.e., 'an Amex gold card' and 'one or two other personal bits and pieces'.

As is clear from the foregoing examples, deictic *there* occurs in co-present interaction or in described co-present interaction, where *there* designates the location of the entity in question, at times, supplemented by added locative information through the range of adverbial phrases following its use.

4.2.3. Category 3: existential There

This category shows another prototypical use of *there*, that is, as an existential marker. A total of 169 instances of *there* were used existentially, which represents the second largest category within our data set.

- (30) But maybe Darwin knew better, since the assumption of random mating could hardly apply in those numerous societies that actually favour

first-cousin marriages. **Is there** some functional similarity with male choice in quail?

- (31) 'Is there anything in that universe that would be like a black hole to a beetle?'
'Did you say that a black hole is left when an old planet collapses in on itself?' 'This black hole business has got me worried. **Is there** any danger of the Sun becoming a black hole?'

These examples show how existential *there* is used. In these cases, as discussed by reference grammars (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2016), existential *there* involves non-referential meaning, unlike the other categories of *be there* explicated in this article.

4.2.4. Category 4: Non-identifiable Hybrid There: Vague Location Bordering on Existential

A total of 53 instances of *be there* were coded into this category, which evinces aspects of meanings of *there* that are unlike the three of the prior categories, i.e., pro-adverb *there*, deictic *there*, and existential *there*. That is, the locative meaning of *there* has weakened, thereby rendering the location of the referent non-specific and often non-identifiable, and also seemingly bordering on the simple existence of the entity in question.

Let us examine the example shown earlier (16), which is presented here as (32).

- (32) Famous last words, she thought to herself, as she stepped out of the lift on to the second-floor landing of the luxury block of flats where she lived. Though the landing was empty and there wasn't a sound all around, she had the strangest sensation that someone **was there**. The entrance to her own flat was down one of the narrow corridors that led off from the rectangular landing,

In this excerpt, *there* does not refer to any of the locative nouns mentioned earlier such as the landing, meaning that it is not used anaphorically. Rather, it has a vague and weak sense of meaning that crosses between deictic *there* and existential *there*. The vagueness is also evoked by the indefinite pronoun 'someone' suggesting the vague assumption of the presence of an unidentified or unidentifiable person at 'the entrance of her own flat'.

A similar example is seen in (33).

(33) While I could still feel and just see it, I opened the back door to the garden. I left it open. Last time I had been a fool enough to close French doors and knew they **were there** only frantic moments later, when I saw blood spatter my wrists and hands, like a fly buzzing, like a bird beating against the see-through reality.

Excerpt (33) begins with the writer stating that the back door to the garden had been left open. This action had to do with the previous accident because the writer had left the French doors closed and hit them later. The writer's realization of the doors being *there* came only after the accident. The meaning of *there* signals a vague location (i.e., the French doors) coupled with the sense of their very existence, rather than pointing to any concrete and/or identifiable location.

We will examine a few more excerpts where the existence meaning of *there* is shown. Location, here, is clearly not an issue, and *there* marks non-identifiable and less specific existence itself. Excerpt (34) below takes place in a hero's monologue while walking in pain with an arrow through his chest.

(34) No one but a bloody fool would try to walk a mile with an arrow through his chest. Meet J. Kendall, bloody fool. Light-headed. One o'clock. The moon, I thought briefly, had come down from the sky and was dancing about in the wood not far ahead. Rubbish, it couldn't be. It certainly was. I could see it shining. Lights. I came to sensible awareness; to incredulous understanding. The lights were travelling along the road. The road was real, **was there**, was not some lost myth in a witch-cursed forest.

Here, located right after the clause 'the road was real' and before the phrase 'was not some lost myth in a witch-cursed forest', *there* emphasizes the actual existence of the road itself, coupled with the reference to a vague location.

Excerpt (35) is a conversation between a doctor and a patient.

(35) Doctor: Hello. What can we do for you today?

Patient: Er well, I've had a sore throat. It's about three weeks now. The er not a sore throat th you know, it's **there** for a couple of days and then it kind of eases off, I think it's getting better and then the next day it's as bad as ever. As bad as ever. This morning I can kind of feel it, but last night it was as if I was when I swallowed there was a big lump.

Initially, the patient calls what s/he has a sore throat and specifies its duration. Subsequently, however, the patient denies it being a sore throat and starts to elaborate on the symptoms by saying 'it's there for a couple of days and then it kind of eases off'. In this excerpt, *there* is vaguely non-identifiable and signals mere existence of the pain rather than a specific location, as if a hybridized use of *there* meaning 'existing vaguely somewhere in my throat'.

(36) In the novels I am thinking of he attributes certain ideas to certain characters and utters them in the prevailing manner of the novel, while also submitting them to question within it. He can appear in so doing to have his opinions and to eat them too. And he can also appear to place the novel in a state of suspension. If the state was not present in his novels from the first, it is there in *One Fat Englishman*, and in *Jake's Thing*. It **is there** in *Stanley and the Women*, which persuaded Marilyn Butler - somewhat against the odds, but none the less intelligibly - to interpret it in the *London Review* as a critique of male supremacy, but which has left a very different impression on others.

Excerpt (36) has been taken from a writing about Kingsley Amis, a British novelist. The writer discusses the novelist's style of placing the novel in a state of suspension. Then, the writer lists the novels that share this trait using *be there* in three of his works, *One Fat Englishman*, *Jake's Thing*, and *Stanley and the Women*. Again, pronoun *it* refers to the 'state of suspension' and *be there* designates the vague borderline between existence of suspension and place, i.e., each of the novels.

Let us now examine a more abstract use of *there* in Excerpts (37) and (38), where its locative meaning does not seem to be present at all.

(37) ... children are still at school and tour operators try to tempt others to book their holidays. These months are known as the shoulder months in the industry. The eight to 10 weeks after schools have broken up for the summer are the peak period for tour operators, and it is only around mid-September that they can judge how successful they have been. Mr. Coe feels that though the recession is still strong and unemployment high, those in employment have a much higher disposable income to spend on a holiday. 'I think the money **is there**. Though they might be putting off buying new carpets or curtains, they have continued to buy holidays.'

In this excerpt, four operators discuss their summer expectations despite the recession and high unemployment. *There* in the phrase ‘the money is there’ does not refer to any previously mentioned location nor point to any physical location of the referent ‘the money’. Rather it means that the money exists in some vague, unspecified place, e.g., in those parents’ pockets as a disposable income, ready to be spent.

(38) Opposition politicians were unimpressed by the government’s claims. These figures show that manufacturing output, far from growing, is beginning to shrink again and that the growth rate is not enough to start seeing serious inroads into our high level of unemployment. The evidence out there in the real world and I’m a London M P is that people are not yet certain that there is a secure economic recovery. They hope it’s **there**, they believe it may be there, they see a faltering sign here and there, but they need other encouragement.

Here, in the target utterances, ‘they hope it’s there’ and ‘they believe it may be there’, *it* refers to a secure economic recovery mentioned in the previous sentence, and *there* refers to perhaps a completion or perfection point of the economic recovery in a very abstract sense. This segment provides a rich patterning of meanings of adverbial *there*, including ‘the evidence out *there* in the real world’ and ‘they see a faltering sign here and *there*’. These uses of *there* reflects the range of more concrete and abstract meanings: ‘out there in the real world’, ‘a faltering sign here and there’.

The next example shows an idiomatic use of *there* in the phrase ‘been there’.

(39) Therefore if we have activists who are put on the panel alib fi safe seats, marginals or unwinnable seats and we’ve been in some areas where it’s been unwinnable, haven’t we Dick, we’ve still canvassed, we’ve got the votes up, places like Macclesfield where they got Nicholas Winterton, where they got that racist Churchill. We’ve still **been there**. But eventually we’re gonna get people in, if the C E C take up our recommendations from Manchester’s one one five branch, that we’re gonna get people who represent the members of the G M B, the working class, the people that we want to be represented.

This excerpt talks about activists who have persistently campaigned and successfully increased votes. The use of *there* and the present perfect aspect in ‘have

been there' refers to some former experience and familiarity with *there* used in an extremely abstract sense.

What we have seen in this category are different degrees of the weakened meaning of *be there*. Through the examples, we have witnessed precisely how the tokens of *be there* in this category denote abstract and non-identifiable location coupled with a sense of existence.

4.2.5. Category 5: *Be there for* (someone or something) [benefaction]/*be there to* [purpose]

This category introduces particular constructions that involve *be there* followed by 'for someone or something' and '*be there to* infinitive phrase'. When *there* is used with these constructions, it provides an abstract meaning of existence and availability, again not denoting any location-related meaning, but with the metaphorical extension designating support and/or purpose, very much in line with the concept of mental spaces (Fauconnier, 1994; Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The following examples illustrate the use of 'be there for someone or something'. There were seven instances of this use.

- (40) 'But what of the personal pressures of working for an artist like Bryan Adams...?' 'Bryan's fun. At the very beginning I took it really personally when he yelled at me, 'Get me that,' but I quickly realised he has a lot on his mind during the show. He's trying to concentrate on saying the right things and singing the songs. All he says to me now is, 'Just make sure you're **there** for me.' I know what he means now; he wants to come on and know everything is just right.'

Here, the construction of 'be there for someone' is an idiomatic expression, meaning 'to offer support or assistance to someone'. In spite of its idiomatic meaning, it is clear that *there* does not denote any location but the existence. The concept of 'being there for someone' suggests the notion of benefaction, e.g., 'I will be there for you,' emerging from the benefactive meaning of preposition 'for' (Strauss & Feiz, 2018).

The following example also shows that the 'be there for something' construction means support for the cause. *There* in this construction, again, signals the existence, coupled with the sense of support and purpose.

(41) I suppose that means the Irish will win which'll be fun. Brainless strike back THERE has been trouble down at the community centre in Evenwood. It is matched by an appropriate, not to mention eloquent concern. Rapport, the community newspaper, describes it as wanton damage and wilful vandalism. It says: 'The individuals who vandalise the building are destitute of any sense of knowledge.' I will not anthropomorphize these vandals as they are wilfully and ignorantly trying to destroy a building that **is there** for the use of all the community.

From a semantic and conceptualization-based perspective, preposition *for* in the 'be there **for** someone or something' expresses the concept of "connection to a purpose, intention, recipient, destination, stand-in [or proxy]..." (Strauss & Feiz, 2018, pp. 360-361) and can be illustrated as in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The conceptual illustration of *for* in *be there for* (Strauss & Feiz, 2018, p. 360)

Finally, we will examine examples with the 'be there to' construction, which also signals the concept of existence coupled with purpose.

(42) A book in the J. C. R. had to be signed each week to record the hours of war work required of us in return for the privilege of remaining students, and the variety of jobs was immense, including, in the long vacation, harvest and fruit-picking camps in various parts of rural England. Nevertheless the idyllic side of undergraduate life **was there to be enjoyed** - though short on male companions as the pre-war ratio of male and female undergraduates was about reversed.

This excerpt mentions that students had to be engaged in several tasks to maintain their student status, while still enjoying aspects of undergraduate life. Along with the *to* infinitive phrase, *there* does not refer to any specific location to be deictic or anaphoric. It rather signals the existence or availability of the idyllic side of undergraduate life. Interestingly, this clause seems to be nearly identical to the clause

which uses the existential *there* (i.e., ‘there was the idyllic side of undergraduate life to be enjoyed’).

The following two excerpts illustrate the use of *be there to* for a purpose.

- (43) ... the line but it’s still up to the client whether they want the work done or not,’ he said. In the end, said, ‘it’s all about getting to know the client’s business and having a partner assigned to that client whose job it is to know it and what it does or does not want’. It means, according to, ‘meeting the client, not just during a transaction but regularly to show an interest in the business and make the client comfortable, that while a lawyer **is there** primarily to earn a living he or she will act in the best interests of the business rather than in the best interests of the till.’ It is hard work, said, ‘but the current recession has shown we have to go out and go through it.’
- (44) ‘I’d like to stop having panic attacks’, or ‘I’d like to be able to catch the train up to London’, or, ‘I’d like to understand and cope more effectively with my anxiety symptoms’, or, ‘I’d like to be more relaxed giving presentations at work’. It can also be enlightening to ask about the circumstances of the original referral. Was it the client’s idea or the GP’s? This information can often be important for assessing the client’s motivation: they may only **be there** to please their doctor.

In the last excerpt below, we can find a similar use of *be there to*, this time in discussing the goal of particular styles by various musicians.

- (45) It was not intended as music for dancing. He similarly composed two leitmotifs to run through *The Sleeping Beauty*. The Lilac Fairy’s music is always heard just before and during all her entrances. It is in contrast to another leitmotif that marks the entrances of Carabosse, the wicked fairy. The two tunes underline the conflict between good and evil. Whereas Adam and Prokofiev’s leitmotifs heighten the emotional content of the love theme, Tchaikovsky’s **are there to create the right atmosphere and to emphasise the conflict**. When Stravinsky composed *The Firebird* he used leitmotifs in yet another way. He created very distinctive passages of ascending chords to accompany the magic bird’s flight through the trees.

In this excerpt, the construction *be there to* marks the purpose of Tchaikovsky's leitmotifs.

Similar to preposition *for*, preposition *to* can be analyzed from a semantic and conceptualization-based approach, whereby the meaning of *to* expresses the concept of “movement in the direction of a goal, endpoint or target.” This meaning can also be represented conceptually as in Figure 2.



Figure 2. The conceptual illustration of *to* in *be there to* (Strauss & Feiz, 2018, p 357)

In this final section, we have examined the use of *there* as part of the expressions *be there for* and *be there to*. In these constructions which have the meanings of support or purpose, *there* basically denotes the meaning of existence and takes on a ‘metaphorical location’ noted in Fauconnier (1994), Lakoff (1987), and Lakoff & Johnson (1980).

5. Conclusion

This study has focused on the discourse-pragmatic meanings of *there*. For this, the 500 randomly selected *be there* constructions out of 16,111 occurrences in the British National Corpus were coded into five categories, i.e., pro-adverb *there*, deictic *there*, existential *there*, non-identifiable hybrid *there*, and the *be there for/be there to* construction. The last two categories were established due to the finding that the three prototypical uses of *there* were not enough to code and explain all the uses. That is, *there* has a very weak meaning almost to the degree of mere existence.

The main findings of the study can be summarized as follows: First, in terms of the frequencies of each category, the deictic *there* category yielded the fewest tokens (i.e., 2.8%), which is understandable given that the BNC is composed of predominantly written discourse, and little occasion for the occurrence of this token as it is used to point out or designate a recognizable entity within concrete space. This category, however, reveals an interesting pattern, that is, *there* followed by further elaboration, which points to the fact that users of this construction are

oriented to the potentially vague meaning of *there* occurring on its own. *There* in this pattern shows a simple pointing of the referent, but the actual location is specified in the added elaboration. Next, the non-identifiable hybrid *there* in Category 4 designates a vague location that borders on existential *there* and serves to simply indicate the mere existence of the referent. This instance of *there* has also grammaticalized into the colloquial and idiomatic expression ‘been there’ which speakers use when they talk about having had a certain type of experience or set of experiences. We also noted metaphorical extensions of the use of *be there*, in the sense expressing support for someone, ‘I’ll be there for you’ as well as ‘be there to,’ which expresses purpose. In both of these cases, no location is identifiable or even relevant; it simply means “in that general area” but no designation of place is recognizable.

The study has served to support collections of prior non-discourse-based work that discuss the meanings of *there*, and we have designed the scale of meaning for this construction as it progresses from concrete, identifiable place to general place and/or to the mere existence of an entity being referred to. As such, *there* in English is unique because just this single word carries such varied meanings posing challenges for L2 learners of English. Deictic *there* is generally introduced at a very early stage of ESL/EFL and learners tend to take it as a simple counterpart of the form in their own language. However, as shown in this study, deictic *there* reveals some differences such as its tendency to be complemented in co-present discourse by additional adverbial phrases to further designate the location being referred to by the speaker.

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the use of *there* in Categories 4 and 5 can also be challenging even to more advanced level learners in that the constructions are used by native speakers to create a certain kind of literary effects (e.g., ‘if the state was not present in his novels from the first, it **is there** in *One Fat Englishman*, ... It **is there** in *Stanley*’ or ‘Whereas Adam and Prokofiev’s leitmotifs heighten the emotional content of the love theme, Tchaikovsky’s **are there** to create the right atmosphere and to emphasise the conflict’).

That is, the meaning of *there* in this subset of *be there* constructions is interestingly and potentially ambiguous, at once signaling a literal, concrete, and identifiable place while at the same time also signaling the more abstract, mental states of both *support* and *purpose*, as in the following blood donation request by the American Red Cross:



Figure 3. *Be there for.* Ambiguous meaning between location and support

The invitation ends with this sentence: ‘Keep a pair, gift a pair, and ask a friend **to be there for** the patients, too!’ Here, the adverb *there* is beautifully ambiguous between the literal and concrete meaning, **be there** (i.e., at the place where you donate blood) and **be there for the patients** (in the sense of purpose and support for the patients who need blood).

As shown in this study, English *there* demonstrates rich uses and a crucial scale in meaning within authentic discourse. Further studies can be conducted in terms of cross-linguistic comparisons to examine whether or not the meanings of *there* revealed and explicated in this study are also found in the counterparts in other languages. In terms of English L2 pedagogy, learners and teachers can work toward developing keener sensitivities to the scalar meanings and usages of language in general. The illustration of the scalar meanings underlying *there* in discourse, as we have demonstrated in this paper, reveal nuances and shades of meaning that are often not captured by simplified pedagogical texts created to teach English grammar and usage.

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