Existential *there* and catenative concord. Evidence from the British National Corpus

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1. Introductory[1]

1.1 Existential sentences

Like many other languages, English has a presentative construction that mainly serves to create end-focus. A subject that contains new information (normally expressed by an indefinite noun phrase) is given a position after the verb and the typical subject slot is filled by *there*.[2] The result is, for instance, *There is a teacher in the classroom* in preference to *A teacher is in the classroom*. Syntactically, *there* behaves like a subject, for instance occurring in postverbal position in a direct question (*Is there ...?*).

1.2 Subject–verb concord

There is general agreement that in the existential construction, the predicate verb (prototypically a form of *be*) shows concord with the notional (postponed) subject, at least in formal Standard English:

(1) *There **is** a book on the table*
(2) *There **are** some books on the table*

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[1] A similar analysis based on CobuildDirect and limited to *seem* is to be found in Olofsson (2007). For an analysis of the concord patterns of the basic *there* + *be* construction in contemporary spoken British English, see Martinez Insua & Palacios Martinez (2003) and Breivik & Martinez-Insua (2008). Spoken Canadian English has been similarly analysed by Meechan & Foley (1994).

[2] Often in the past, this *there* has been regarded as an empty place-holder. However, as noted by e.g. Breivik & Martinez-Insua (2008:356) it can also be described as a presentative signal "to tell the addressees that they must be prepared to direct their attention towards an item of new information."

In less formal English, many speakers use and accept the singular verb, but only if it is contracted with *there*: *There's some books on the table*. This contracted invariable form has often been referred to as "frozen *there's*". From a communicative point of view it has also been called a "fixed pragmatic formula", for instance by Breivik & Martinez-Insua (2008:361).

Apart from the formal/informal dimension, the situation with *be* is fairly clear-cut in the sense that it is possible to claim that the postponed element is "really" the subject of the clause in which it is positioned.[3] Concord in this type of construction has been extensively studied and reported on, for instance by Meechan & Foley (1994), Martinez Insua & Palacios Martinez (2003) and Breivik & Martinez-Insua (2008).

1.3 Catenative constructions

The prototypical form of the existential sentence has factual meaning. Modality, for instance possibility or probability, can be expressed by means of modal auxiliaries (*can, may*), but from the point of view of concord, such constructions are of no interest. Alternative modes of expression involve catenative verbs (e.g. *appear* or *seem*), which are full verbs in the sense that they show concord distinctions in the present tense.[4]

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[3] Meechan & Foley (1994:82) claim that "orthodox" concord based on the number of the notional subject in this construction is just an artefact: "We assert that these prescriptive rules of grammar taught in high school ... serve to obscure the fact that nonconcord is the norm."

[4] There are different definitions of the class of catenatives. Two major grammars, Quirk et al. (1985) and Huddleston & Pullum (2002), represent two extremes. According to Huddleston & Pullum (2002:1177), any verb that takes a non-finite complement, be it gerund-participle or infinitive, with or without *to*, is a catenative verb. Quirk et al. (1985:236) declare: "We may use the expression 'marginal auxiliaries' to apply to all four categories (marginal modals, modal idioms, semi-auxiliaries, and catenative verbs) discussed in 3.40–51." In the passage referred to (1985:146), the catenative category is narrowed down even further: "The term CATENATIVE will in practice be used to denote verbs in such constructions as *appear to, come to, fail to, get to, happen to, manage to, seem to, tend to,* and *turn out to* followed by the infinitive." In Biber et al. (1999), the term is not used at all.

One important function of *appear* and *seem* is that of hedging, as mentioned briefly by Biber et al. (1999:944). Sometimes this kind of hedging is a sign of excessive politeness and writers can use it for humorous effect, as in the following lines, spoken by a butler to his employer:

(3) "I'm very sorry, sir, but there appears to be a tiger in the dining room. Perhaps you will permit the twelve-bores to be used?" (BNC AR3 384)[5]

When catenatives are used, the syntax, including concord, is more complicated.[6] As noted by Huddleston & Pullum (2002:242), the noun phrase in question is not located inside the clause with the finite verb, so it is difficult to argue that it governs the choice of form (singular/plural) there. Instead, in their view, *there* can be seen as "inheriting" the number of the noun phrase, and this inheritance is decisive for the choice of verb form after the introductory subject.

Contrary to the situation with "frozen *there's*", which speakers can get away with, there is no accepted frozen **thereseems* or **thereappears*, at least not yet, but in spite of that, unorthodox choice of singular verb forms with plural notional subjects is well attested in both spoken and written native production. According to Quirk et al. (1985:1406), the catenative verb in existential sentences "often agrees with the notional subject in number", but the authors go on to say that "often informally" the singular of the verb is used also with a plural subject.[7] The question asked in this article is the same as in Olofsson (2007), though the answer is now sought in a different, larger material, viz. "How often?" (which implies "How acceptable is the construction?" and "Should learners be penalized for using it?").

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[5] The source is *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro.

[6] Breivik (1983), a standard work for existential *there*, presents (1983:158) the examples *there appears to be no one else* and *there appear to be one million policemen outside* (from the Survey of English Usage) without commenting on the S–V concord complication.

[7] Thagg Fisher (1985:54) categorically condemns the construction: "… there can be no doubt about the error status of the following types of singular verb concord: … there seems [seem] to be animals crawling under it and everywhere". (Square brackets are her way of introducing the correct form.)

2. Material and method

The answers to the questions asked above will be based on the entire British National Corpus (BNC), which consists of about 100 million words of British English, about 90 per cent written and 10 per cent spoken.[8] The material was searched for strings containing *there* in conjunction with present-tense forms of *appear* and *seem* followed by *to be* or *to have been*.[9] The overwhelming majority of the instances contain *be* in the sense of "exist", but there are occasional findings of auxiliary functions (bold added):

(4) ... there seems to **be** some kind of disturbance **going** on ... (EFP 843)

(5) Within the context of the Mysteries, there seems to have **been enacted** a Sacred Marriage ... (G3C 132)

From a methodological point of view it seems worth mentioning that the statistics automatically generated in a search are not quite the whole truth. For absolute precision, ocular inspection of the matches returned is necessary. Consider the following examples of spurious instances of *there seem to* (double slashes and bold added):

(6) Eliot hailed from St Louis, but the Eliots **there // seem to** have regarded themselves as Bostonian ... (A05 237)

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[8] The entire corpus was needed to provide a sufficient number of instances. In contrast, for Martinez Insua & Palacios Martinez (2003) and Breivik & Martinez Insua (2008) subcorpora were sufficient for their investigations of the much more frequent constructions with *be*.

[9] *Seem* is the best attested catenative verb in the corpus (about 30,000 of the 60,735 instances of the lemma *seem*). There are 30,513 instances of the lemma *appear*, but only slightly more than a third of them represent the catenative function. The actual strings of *there* + present tense *seem* + present or perfect infinitive of *be* number 65 in the spoken part of the BNC, i.e. 6.5 per million words; in the written part the corresponding figure is 583, i.e. practically the same pmw. The corresponding strings for catenative *appear* are less than half as frequent.

(7) ... to note how indiscriminately trigger-happy so many people over **there // seem to be** ... (CJP 215)

The obvious span of the search is just two positions, with *there* and *seem(s)* or *appear(s)* next to each other, but, for good measure, in all the queries on the catenatives, the window was expanded to include the positions –2 and –3, thus catching cases such as (7)–(9).

(8) Nevertheless, **there** still **appear** to be notable differences … (J7D 153)

(9) **There** thus **appear** to be two relationships … (HPM 14)

(10) **There** also sometimes **seems** to be a feeling that … (EX6 1321)

In contrast to Olofsson (2007), instances with present-tense *do*-constructions (emphatic and question-forming) were not included. Not that there are many of them, but their exclusion makes for more clear-cut statistics, where present-tense *appear* and *appears* (or *seem* and *seems*) are the only contrasting elements.

The focus of the investigation is on constructions with plural notional subjects.[10] The percentages of non-concord indicated in the results below stand for the proportions within this subset, not for the relation to the total number of *there*-constructions with the catenative in question.[11]

[10] As noted by e.g. Meechan & Foley (1994:72, 75–76) and Olofsson (2007), the phenomenon under scrutiny is unidirectional in the sense that the verb often varies with plural notional subjects but hardly ever with singular subjects.

[11] In this respect, my investigation resembles that by Meechan & Foley (1994) rather than those by Martinez Insua & Palacios Martinez (2003) and Breivik & Martinez Insua (2008), who have chosen the equivalent of the latter principle. This means that our results cannot be compared, apart from very general tendencies.

3. Results

3.1 Introductory

In order to set the stage, the following table presents a few pairs of the corpus cases with *seem*, chosen for being as parallel as possible in structure, the difference being the choice between an unexpected singular and an orthodox plural form of the catenative verb. As in the fuller presentation that will follow, the parallelism as often as possible includes determiners of the notional subjects.[12]

Table 1. Pairs with different concord

Singular verb (unexpected)	***Plural verb (orthodox)***
… there seems to be fewer episodes of rebleeding … (HU2 6914)	… there seem to be few reliable cues … (HX9 1187)
… there seems to be many instances … (B7H 1376)	… there seem to be many cultures … (CLP 1144)
There seems to be two possible ways … (EW1 831)	… there seem to be two basic ways … (J2K 706)

Judging from the examples presented, there seems to be a fair degree of free variation. However, the corpus represents a spectrum of genres, registers and styles, and, given the well-known differences between planned (and perhaps even edited) and spontaneous "online" production, it can be assumed that the constructions are not evenly distributed. Therefore, in what follows, examples and statistics for each of the two catenative verbs will initially be presented in two main sections, spoken and written. The material does not seem large enough for further systematic subgrouping to be meaningful.

[12] The distinction sometimes made between "weak" and "strong" determiners (for a listing, see e.g. Meechan & Foley 1994:67) does not seem to have played a part in the choice of concord in the present material. Meechan & Foley (1994:79) found that, according to the variable rule program they used, the only truly relevant distinction was between *no* and all the other determiners.

3.2 SEEM

3.2.1 Table 2. Spoken British English, c. 10 million words. Plural NP with singular verb, 10 instances

Unexpected singular verb	**Close parallels or similar cases with orthodox plural verbs**
There seems to be an awful lot of people … (KCK 1280)	There seem to be an awful lot of local companies … (JA4 487)
There seems to be an awful lot of us going … (KD8 3732)	And there seem to be a lot of those. (KRL 5026)
… there seems to be about four or five about … (KBB 6088)	… there seem to be a lot of Scouts about … (HYJ 998)
… there seems to be more men than women … (KD6 459)	… there seem to have been a lot of problems … (KRW 59)
… there seems to be more flowers going down than up … (KCD 4789)	… there seem to [be] a number of headings here that I couldn't account for … (JA5 95)
… there seems to be many people for whom erm all my effort gets nowhere … (KRL 3122)	There seem to be so many different terms … (KRS 33)
There seems to be quite a number [of churches] … (GYT 81)	How many joint telephones can you have? There seem to be a number in Client Services. (FLS 456)
… there seems to be two stands this morning. (J9B 527)	There seem to be <pause> our two groups … (KB0 1962)
… there seems to be no questions … (J3W 128)	… there seem to be some suggestions … (JNM 25)
… there seems to be very few councillors attending. (J3R 459)	… there seem to be quite a few German [TV stations] … (KDM 5167)

3.2.2 Table 3. Written British English, c. 90 million words. Plural NP with singular verb, 19 instances

Unexpected singular verb	**Close parallels with orthodox plural verbs**
There thus seems to be quantitative differences … (FT0 188)	… there seem to be fundamental differences … (GV0 1541)
… there seems to be two types of studs … (AN2 469)	… there seem to be two anatomically distinct types … (HWS 4384)
… there seems to be two Jamaicas … (HH3 6879)	There seem to be two main differences here … (G2E 1948)
There seems to be three possibilities … (H78 1682)	… there seem to be at least three possible strategies … (GWJ 987)
There seems to be two possible ways … (EW1 831)	… there seem to be two basic ways … (J2K 706)
… there seems to be two centres or loci of power … (EEB 1822)	… there seem to be two bases on which a contractual term can be attacked … (J7B 132)
… there seems to be two concentration optima … (HWS 1948)	There seem to be two distinct periods … (AA8 167)
There seems to be hundreds of supporters' clubs. (K4T 10505)	… there seem to me to be four kinds of responses. (GVX 331)
… there seems to have been hundreds and thousands of years … (J18 1107)	… there seem to have been many years when there was little or no nationally-coordinated resistance. (HXX 318)
… there seems to be a few misconceptions … (C91 1706)	There seem to be quite a few local authorities … (HPP 555)
… there seems to be fewer episodes of rebleeding … (HU2 6914)	… there seem to be few cases of actual censorship. (CDU 1662)
… there seems to be several species … (H10 202)	… there seem to be several quite different types of trial … (EUW 774)
… there seems to be many instances … (B7H 1376)	… there seem to be many cultures … (CLP 1144)

… there seems to be far too many players …HJ3 7647)
There seems to have been too many people writing blockbusters. (GWK 989)
There seems to be rather a lot of the latter [people] about … (B1J 1942)
There seems to be rather a lot of names … (B1J 983)

… there seems to be a number of factors at play … (GWL 647)

... there always seems to be an inadequate number of facilities for women. (EFG 591)

There seem to be too many outlets in Wales … (CRB 2663)
There seem to be too many women with very possessive attitudes towards you! (JY3 3603)
… there always seem to be a lot of people who make the effort … (HDB 1024)
… there seem to have been a lot of gas shells landing … (HRA 3929)
… there seem to be a number of rules to be followed … (BML 1558)
... there seem to be a number of connections ... (HY0 164

3.2.3 General comments on the results

The overall absolute figures for spoken British English are 10 and 14 for singular and plural verb respectively, which looks like this in pie-chart format:[13]

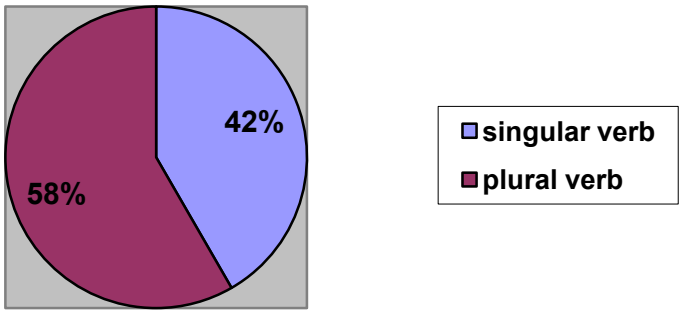

Figure 1. Spoken English. Choice between singular *seems* and plural *seem* with plural notional subjects. N = 24.

It is only to be expected that unorthodox concord in general, not only with existential *there*, has its highest frequency in informal spoken language. However, even within that category, syntactically conditioned differences can be noted. For existential sentences it has been pointed out by Breivik & Martinez-Insua (2008:358) that intervening material between the verb (in their investigation always a finite form of *be*) and the postposed notional subject may make speakers "lose sight" of the number of the notional subject.[14] With catenatives, intervening material is a built-in feature, in the form of *to be* or *to have been*, so it is

[13] It should be kept in mind that with this small total, each instance carries over four percentage points.

[14] The proportion of non-concord cases with and without "extensions" is roughly 2:1 in their material from BNC and COLT.

systematically more difficult for speakers to handle concord in such constructions, as borne out by the proportions in the present material.[15]

The pattern in written British English is illustrated in the following pie-chart, which has a stronger statistical basis than the previous one:

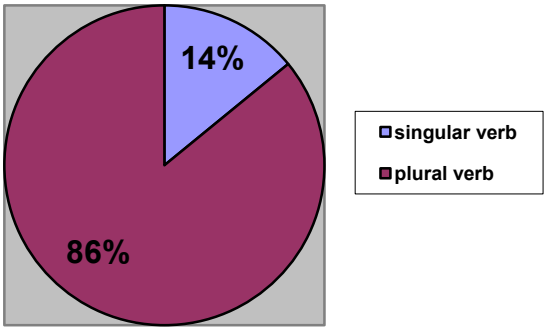

Figure 2. Written British English. Choice between singular *seems* and plural *seem* with plural notional subjects. N = 134.

Written, and perhaps edited, language offers opportunities for revision and amendment which are not available in online spoken production. This is indeed confirmed by the BNC material. Only one out of seven existential sentences with plural notional subjects comes out with unorthodox concord, as against two out of five in the spoken BNC material.[16] Still it is surprising that 13 of the 19 cases originate in the

[15] There are some more striking examples of intervening material, but none of them have contributed to unorthodox concord. Two of them are (bold added): *There seems* ***to me to have been*** *a growing wish to ...* (EA8 282) and *There seems,* ***from past votes on the matter, to be*** *an overwhelming majority ...* (C8R 321).

[16] As long as we regard the BNC as the universe that we are investigating, these figures can be taken at face value. However, owing to the small number of spoken examples (which is a reflection of the relatively small size of the spoken component of the BNC), the difference between spoken and written, though striking enough in pie-chart format, is statistically significant only at the 10 per

edited categories Books and Periodicals, which means that there is no real difference between strictly edited and more informal written material.[17]

3.2.4 Comparisons with CobuildDirect

As shown in Olofsson (2007:5), in CobuildDirect (c. 57 million words) there are 84 instances of plural notional subjects with existential *there* and some present-tense form of *seem*, which means that the overall frequency of this construction in that corpus is c. 1.5 per million words. The pmw figure for the BNC is the same. As for the proportions of singular and plural verbs, the best area for comparison seems to be spoken British English, which is a separate category in both corpora. Unorthodox concord is slightly more frequent in the BNC (42%) than in CobuildDirect (34%), but the totals are far from large enough for general conclusions. More interesting than such a comparison on a weak statistical basis is to conflate the figures for spoken British English from the two corpora, which gives a boosted total of 56 and the proportions illustrated in the following pie-chart:

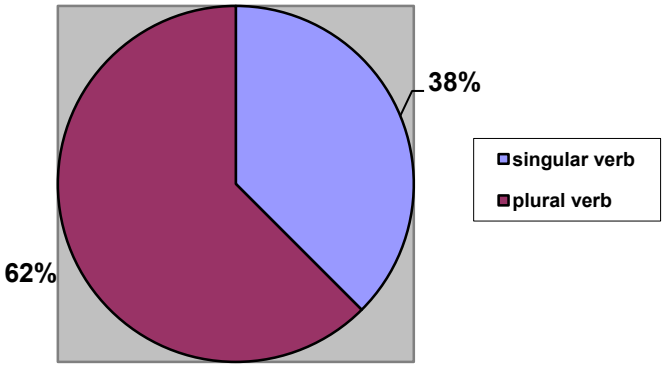

Figure 3. Choice between singular *seems* and plural *seem* with plural notional subjects in the spoken British English of the BNC and of CobuildDirect. N = 56.

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cent level. Not even with the conflation with CobuildDirect done below (3.2.4 and Figure 3) does the difference quite reach the 5 per cent level.

[17] C. 70 out of the 90 million words in the written component represent Books and Periodicals, so 13 out of 19 is only marginally less than what can be expected.

It seems safe to conclude that in spoken British English with the degree of (in)formality represented in the corpora, roughly two catenative *there*-constructions out of five with a plural notional subject come out as *there seems*.

3.3 APPEAR

3.3.1 Spoken

In the spoken part of the BNC (c. 10 million words) there are two cases of *there* + *appear* where *appear* is finite and the notional subject is a plural NP. Of *there appears*, there are nine cases in all, none of which has a plural notional subject. There is thus nothing to comment on, except the low frequency of catenative *appear* in spoken English.

Catenative *appear* is less frequent in general than *seem* and it is particularly infrequent in spoken English as compared with *seem*. A search on the strings *appear to, appears to, appeared to, seem to, seems to* and *seemed to* (with no other collocational restrictions) shows that in the written part of the BNC, the *seem* forms taken collectively are 2.6 times more frequent, and in the spoken part they are over ten times more frequent than the catenative *appear* forms. The *seem* forms are fairly evenly distributed over written and spoken in relation to the amounts of text, whereas the *appear* forms are about four times more frequent in written than in spoken. This medium and register difference comes out very clearly in Biber et al. (1999:945), where a diagram shows that the typical habitat of *there appear(s) to* is academic prose, whereas *seem* is more evenly distributed.

3.3.2 Written

In the written part of the BNC (c. 90 million words) there are 77 cases of *there* + *appear* where the lexeme *appear* is in the present tense and the notional subject is a plural NP. There are no instances of *there appear* with a notional subject in the singular.[18] There are thirteen cases of *there appears* with a plural notional subject, i.e. 14% of the total situations

[18] This statement is not as vacuous as it may seem. Olofsson (2007:6) reports two instances from CobuildDirect.

with a plural notional subject.[19] The picture is identical to that presented in pie-chart format for *seem* (Figure 2 above) but with weaker statistical support.

Table 4. Written British English, c. 90 million words. Plural NP with singular verb, 13 instances

Unexpected singular verb	**Close parallels with orthodox plural verbs**
There appears to be only three front ranking firms not involved … (A55 277)	… there appear to be only three main sources of gesture … (A12 1089)
There appears to be disagreements within Whitehall … (A96 57)	There appear to be mountings for the transformer … (G00 3124)
There appears to be no standard pinouts for p.c.b. (C91 994)	… there appear to be no obvious reasons … (B15 241)
Through the mouth there appears to be the remains of a chain link … (G30 171)	There appear to be those in the Lord Chancellor's Department who perceive its role as being far wider … (FRT 566)
There appears to be just 60% of the residents supporting the scheme. (GXH 220 + HD1 250)	… there appear to be only five possibles … (HTG 3244)
… in some preserved specimens there appears to be interradial rays of thickened skin; (H79 2145)	There appear to be structural differences between the major countries … (H7T 1360)
There also appears to be some quasi-religious motives for the operation … (F9E 1376)	There appear to be some important challenges … (B2A 1465)
With a laminate there appears to be many who will [listen]. (HH0 1577)	There appear to be many small churches … (ADC 1167)
There appears to be substantial numbers of people who join or leave … (HJ2 3140)	Nevertheless, there still appear to be notable differences … (J7D 153)

[19] Strictly speaking, the figure is slightly misleading because one of the cases occurs twice (i.e. verbatim in two different texts). If one of the doubled instances is subtracted, the percentage goes down to 13.

There appears to have been a substantial number of "rank and file" supporters scattered across the whole of both Galilee and Judaea (EDY 955)

… that [misprint for *there*] appears to be quite a significant number of dogs … (K54 3984)

There appears to be only a finite number of such theories. (FYX 889)

Of course, there also appear to have been a good number of people who regarded her as an eccentric … (AN4 339)

(No more examples with *number* and *appear*) … there seem to be a growing number of collectors. (KAP 67)

There seem to be an extraordinary number of people ... (HD4 32)

Somewhat surprisingly in view of the fact that the characteristic environment for *there* + *appear* is written language, no less than seven of the instances of unorthodox concord with *appear* (C91 994, EDY 955, FYX 889, F9E 1376, G30 171, H79 2138 and HH0 1577) hail from the professionally edited Books and Periodicals.

4. Some grey areas

As is well known, it is not always easy to determine whether a noun phrase merits grammatical treatment as singular or plural.

4.1 Coordinated noun phrases

In cases where two noun phrases, with or without different grammatical numbers, are coordinated, there can be doubt as to concord, as discussed by e.g. Quirk et al. (1985:759). I have counted for instance the following sentence as representing orthodox concord.

(11) In the posterior part of the body there appears to be a distinct mid-line streak and diagonal marks running out from it. (B7N 781)

My argument is that the coordinator *and* is very close to the preposition *with* in a sentence of this kind. What is being described by *streak* and *marks* is one pattern rather than two.

4.2 Collective nouns

In British English, a collective noun such as *group* or *team* as subject can take either a singular or a plural verb.[20] The best-known collective nouns are not represented in the present material; the closest we get is an instance of *array* in *There appears to be a bewildering array of choices* (HSW 10), which I have chosen to exclude from my statistics. This noun is not among the examples of (frequent) collective nouns enumerated in Quirk et al. (1985:316), nor is it mentioned in connection with the grammaticalization of noun phrases such as *a number of* in Quirk et al. (1985:264).[21] However, its status as a variable collective noun is illustrated in the *Collins COBUILD Dictionary for Advanced Learners*: (under **array 1**) *A dazzling array of celebrities **are** expected at the Mayfair gallery to see the pictures* vs. (under **array 2)** *There **was** an impressive array of pill bottles stacked on top of the fridge* (emphasis mine).[22] Now, using paraphrases, if for the BNC example *A bewildering array of choices **was** presented* is the "correct" form, the example quoted has normal concord, but if *A bewildering array of choices **were** presented* is preferable (still in BrE), then the concord of the corpus example is deviant.[23]

4.3 Relative what

Without being an example of the situation in question, the sentence ... *there appears to be a preponderance of narrow gauge or what I would call miniature railways.* (CJ7 78) brings to our attention a potential grammatical ambiguity. Relative *what* is in itself singular, but, as pointed

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[20] General problems of this kind are discussed extensively in Levin (2001). There is only a brief mention of the existential construction, but his two examples (2001:92) are in line with my discussion.

[21] As can be seen from the arrangement of the examples in the last three rows in Table 4 above, I have regarded *a number of* as a determiner, following Quirk et al. (1985:264), and the grammatical number of the noun that follows (by definition the plural) as decisive for the choice between singular and plural verb.

[22] Somewhat confusingly, the COBUILD "extra column" says "N-COUNT-COLL: usu sing" about the subsense that is illustrated with an example where the verb is plural.

[23] Olofsson (2007:7) uses the CobuildDirect example *There does seem to be a group of women who suffer because of their hormonal cycles ...* and offers two paraphrases to choose from to check the grammatical number: *This group of women suffers* vs. *This group of women suffer*.

out by e.g. Quirk et al. (1985:755), S–V concord is governed by the relevant noun rather than by the formally singular *what*. Although there is no case in the present material, it may be worth while noting the potential problem illustrated by a paraphrase of the above sentence: *There appear(s) to be what are usually called miniature railways*. It would be difficult to determine whether *appear* (based on *railways*) or *appears* (based on *what*) would represent orthodox concord here.

5. Implications for teaching and testing

Taking a Nordic perspective, it can be noted that for most Norwegian and Swedish learners of English, there are two main difficulties involved in the construction under discussion.[24] Firstly, the same introductory subject (*det*) is used for both the existential construction (*There seem/s/ to be ...)* and extraposition (*It seems that there is/are ...*). Thus we find a tendency to produce strings like (**It seems to be something wrong*), certainly helped on by the general frequency of the string *it seems* in English (75 pmw in the written and 91 pmw in the spoken component of the BNC).[25] Secondly, subject–verb concord in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish was gone before the present generation of learners were born, so with any language that has that kind of concord, learners are faced with the need for a new way of thinking.[26] Diagnostic tests and other investigations have shown that texts produced by at least first-term university students of English in Sweden show a considerable amount of uninformed guessing in the choice between singular and plural forms of

[24] Danish learners share only one of the difficulties, that of subject–verb concord. For the information on Danish and Norwegian, I have drawn on Breivik (1983:359–370).

[25] There is actually a dialectal direct counterpart in the south of Sweden which uses existential *där* (which is etymologically identical with *there*) much in the same way as Danish (*der*). The same holds for Norwegian dialects along the southern and western coast, which can use *der* (Breivik 1983:364).

[26] It should be noted that when Swedish still had subject–verb concord, it was the notional subject in the dialectal construction mentioned in the previous note that governed the form (singular/plural) of the verb.

predicate verbs, even in straightforward cases without complicating factors like existential *there*.[27]

In the construction with *there* + some form of *appear* or *seem*, the prescriptive rule is quite clear. The notional subject is what is supposed to govern the choice of verb form. However, as demonstrated above, actual usage differs considerably from the rule, particularly with *seem* in spoken English. In a situation that calls for *there* + a present-tense form of *seem* and a plural notional subject in spoken language, two cases out of five produced by native speakers come out containing the "incorrect" alternative. It would seem cruel to penalize learners severely if their pattern emulates that of native speakers, but at the same time it should be pointed out to them that adherence to the general rule for subject–verb concord is what will guarantee universal acceptance of this aspect of their text.

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[27] Large-scale diagnostic testing done at the University of Gothenburg in the late 1980s and onwards has shown that not even straightforward examples like *John has* are mastered by all prospective first-termers, in spite of the fact that their scholastic background contains some ten years of English. As for the construction discussed here, less than 10% manage to get both *there* and (orthodox) concord right in a translation that should result in *There seem to be very few people here today*. See in particular Olofsson (1989) and Köhlmyr (2005), but also Thagg Fisher (1985) and Karlsson (2002:39–80).

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