
Appalachian English *They*-Existentials

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1 Introduction

The ‘expletive’ in Appalachian English existential constructions can take different forms: *it*, as in (1), *there*, as in (2), and *they*, as in (3).^{1,2}

- (1) It was a lot of them started bathing there. DOHP:JB
- (2) There was a spring out there. DOHP:JB
- (3) They was a lady around here. DOHP:CC

This paper investigates the variety of expletive construction in (3), analyzing these *they*-existential constructions as possessives.³ More examples of this type are below.⁴

- (4) They’s a cemetery up there... DOHP:GAC

¹I would like to thank Christina Tortora for discussing with me the data and ideas presented here and for very generously sharing with me the transcripts that she and Judy Bernstein produced while listening to recordings from the Dante Oral History Project housed at the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University. I would also like to thank Marcel den Dikken for discussing aspects of this paper with me. All errors and missteps are completely mine.

² Examples that come from the Dante Oral History Project will be indicated along with the initials of the speaker (Jerald Buttry:JB, Clyde Carter:CC, Gladys Amburgey Carter:GAC).

³ Treating *they*-existentials as possessives was originally suggested to me by Christina Tortora.

⁴ Examples that come from Montgomery & Hall (2004) will be indicated as M&H (2004).

- (5) They is not so many there now. M&H (2004:lxii)
- (6) They are another one down the street. M&H (2004:lxii)
- (7) They were several houses... DOHP:CC S

Sentences like the ones in (3) through (7) have been discussed elsewhere, including Tortora (forthcoming), Montgomery & Hall (2004), Wolfram & Christian (1976), and Hackenberg (1972), among others, and the interested reader is referred to these works.

This paper is organized as follows: Section two of this paper is dedicated to the nature of the expletive in sentences like the ones in (3) through (7). Section three provides background to and develops the possessive analysis pursued here. Section four addresses the apparent flexibility *they*-existentials exhibit with respect to verbal morphology and the nature of the ‘associate’. This apparent flexibility is seen in (3) through (7) above, in which it *appears* to be the case that plural and singular ‘associates’ can optionally appear with a singular verb form (-s) or a plural verb form (-r). For much of this paper, forms of *be* will be described as -r forms or -s forms rather than plural or singular for reasons that I hope will become clear in section four. Section five concludes the paper.

A few terms will be used throughout this paper, and it is worth dedicating some space to them. I will be referring to ‘Appalachian English’ although I do not truly take it to be the case that only one dialect of English is spoken in Appalachia. The construction discussed here is often called an existential construction, and the preverbal lexical item in these constructions is often called an expletive. I will use the term ‘expletive’ without intending to take a stand one way or the other on the true nature of so-called expletives. The postverbal NP in these sentences is often called the ‘associate.’ Because I treat these sentences as possessive constructions, I do not view the postverbal NP in this way. Finally, when I wish to distinguish between the *they* that is used in Appalachian English existential constructions (*They is a man in my room*) and the *they* that is used in other constructions (*They are planning to arrive at seven*), I will describe the latter *they* as ‘referential’ *they*, without intending to make specific claims about reference.

2 Two *Theys*

Above it was shown that the apparent agreement marking on the verb in *they*-existentials does not necessarily correspond to the apparently plural Nominative expletive nor to the ‘associate’, be it singular or plural. Often, speakers who allow -s verb forms in *they*-existentials do not exhibit this

phenomenon in their referential uses of *they*. Why should this be? The proposal advanced in Tortora (forthcoming) that Appalachian English has two *theys* is useful in addressing this question and is adopted here.

2.1 Weak *They* and Strong *They*

A number of tests have been employed to distinguish strong locatives from weak locatives (Allan 1971; Tortora 1997; Cresti & Tortora 2000) and strong pronouns from weak pronouns (Cardinaletti & Starke 1999), including coordination, modification, clefting, and the ability of the pronoun or locative to bear stress. The weak versions of these items are typically taken to be impoverished in some way compared with the strong version. The *they* in Appalachian English *they*-existentials is taken here to be impoverished with respect to its number value, following the proposal in Tortora (forthcoming) that referential *they* (strong *they*) has the number specification [-singular] while the *they* in *they*-existentials (weak *they*) is unspecified for the value of this feature and is marked [singular] (which is distinct from the specification [+singular]).

2.2 Weak *They* as a Nonreferential Possessor

The *they* in Appalachian English *they*-existentials is here characterized as a nonreferential possessor. This is similar to the *they* in the sentence below, which can be paraphrased as ‘There are lots of distance runners in Oregon.’

- (8) They have lots of distance runners in Oregon.⁵

2.3 The Failure of the ‘Associate’ to Raise

Many analyses of *there*-existentials assume that agreement between the verb and postverbal NP (the ‘associate’) obtains through the raising at LF of the associate or features of the associate. Under the analysis of *they*-existentials proposed here, the postverbal NP does not raise at LF just as the postverbal NP does not raise at LF in possessive sentences that have strong pronouns or full DPs as the possessor. The postverbal NP is not the associate in *they*-existentials, but rather is the possessed item.⁶

The view on the pronominal subject of *they*-existentials has been covered, and the next section addresses the form of the verb in *they*-existentials, which is *be*, not *have*.

⁵Thanks to Christina Tortora for bringing examples like these to my attention.

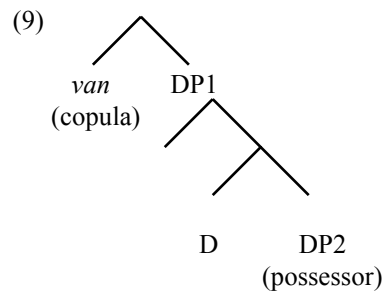
⁶For a different view on the absence of ‘associate’ raising in *they*-existentials see Tortora (forthcoming).

3 Kayne (1993)

In this section I will briefly present the details of Kayne (1993) that are relevant to the proposal advanced here. Some modifications will be made to the picture that Kayne presents. The end proposal is that *they*-existentials in Appalachian English be analyzed as underlyingly possessive constructions.

3.1 Hungarian and English Possessives

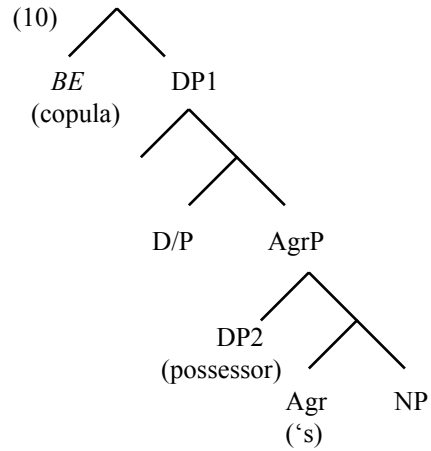
Kayne (1993) takes the analysis of Hungarian possessives presented in Szabolcsi (1981, 1983) as a starting point and develops an account of possessive *have* that he generalizes to auxiliary *have*.⁷ The basic components of Szabolcsi's analysis as Kayne presents them follow. The copula selects a DP headed by a D that itself selects a possessor DP. This is depicted below.



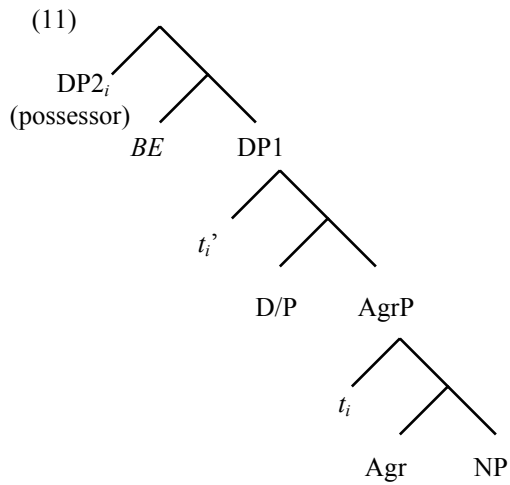
There are three possibilities regarding DP2: DP2 remains in situ and is marked Nominative; DP2 raises to SpecDP1 and is marked Dative; DP2 raises to SpecDP1, is marked Dative, then raises to the left of the copula.

Kayne's proposal for English possessives is similar in that the copula selects a DP. A modification he makes is that D selects an Agreement Phrase instead of a DP possessor. The possessor occupies SpecAgrP, and the possessed NP is the complement of the Agr head. Accepting the parallel between CP and DP argued for by Szabolcsi, Kayne proposes that the head of DP1 can be a D or a P (on analogy with prepositional complementizers found in the head of CP). This is illustrated below.

⁷ For problems with such an account, the interested reader is referred to Tham (2004). Thanks to Steve Wechsler for this reference.



Kayne suggests that it is reasonable to posit 's as an instantiation of the Agr head if this 's is taken to be similar to the -s ending on third person singular verbs. Having established an underlying structure, Kayne first suggests the derivation represented below.



The possessor raises to SpecDP1, as in the Hungarian case. English then must do what Hungarian has the option of doing: The possessed DP raises

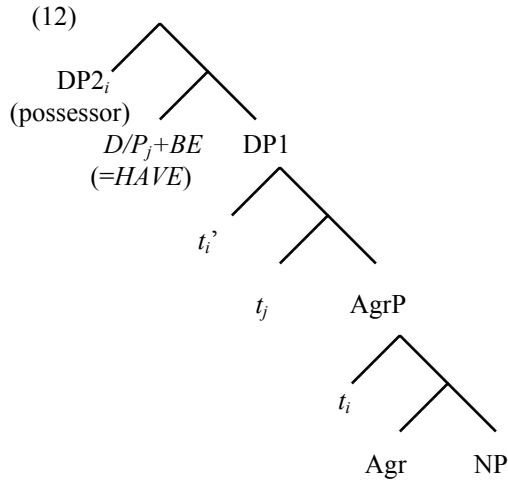
further, to the left of the copula. If nothing more were said, this would yield sentences like *Lee Morgan is a new album* that would be interpreted as *Lee Morgan has a new album*. Kayne considers dialects of English in which this is impossible, and so he modifies the proposal to rule out a *be* possessive and to guarantee a *have* possessive.⁸

However, in the Appalachian English examples under consideration here, the proposal is precisely that in *they*-existentials we see a possessive construction with a form of the copula rather than the verb *have*. Although the further modifications Kayne makes to rule out the presence of the copula in English possessive constructions will not be adopted in this analysis of *they*-existentials, some of the details will be relevant, so I review them here briefly.

3.2 A- and A-bar Positions

Kayne suggests that a modification of the derivation represented in (11) is forced once the nature of specifier positions is taken into consideration. Assuming the parallel between CP and DP, Kayne proposes that SpecDP1 is an A-bar position. If this is true, in (11) above the possessor DP moves from an A-position to an A-bar position and then to an A-position, the final step being an instance of improper movement. If this sequence of movements is to be made licit, SpecDP1 must be made into an A-position or all subsequent movements by the possessor NP (after it has landed in SpecDP1) must be to A-bar positions. Kayne proposes that if the D/P head of DP1 incorporates into the head that hosts *BE*, SpecDP1 will become an A-position. Building on the idea (Freeze 1992) that *HAVE* = *BE* + *P*, Kayne proposes that when the D/P head incorporates into *BE* the complex head is pronounced *have*. This modified derivation is illustrated below.

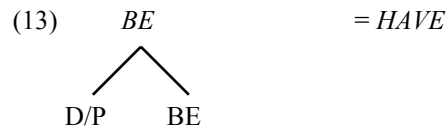
⁸ He does not in fact explicitly state which dialect of English is being considered.

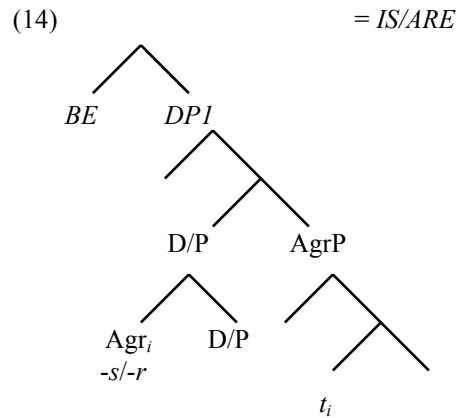


3.3 Incorporating Agr

The first modification I would like to make to the above approach in order to account for Appalachian English *they*-existentials is that instead of D/P incorporating into *BE*, the Agr head incorporates into D/P. Although this is a modification to the picture Kayne presents for English, it is in fact identical to the proposal he makes for Central Italian dialects for cases in which *be* is the auxiliary form rather than *have*. A second modification I make is that the Agr head may sometimes host an *-s* and sometimes host an *-r*. This will be discussed briefly in section 4.

When the phonologically null complex D/P head incorporates into *BE* the resulting surface form is *have*, as Kayne suggests. However, if instead the Agr head incorporates into D/P and no further incorporation obtains, the result is *is* or *are*, similar to what he suggests for the relevant cases in the Central Italian dialects. These possibilities are illustrated below.





The derivation represented in (14) yields *is* or *are* depending on the nature of the Agr head. It is open at this point whether the *-s* and *-r* correspond to a specific value associated with number agreement. My view is that no matter the surface form of the verb (*have*, *is*, or *are*) the derivations represented in (13) and (14) are associated with a possessive interpretation that comes about because of their identical underlying structure.

The nature of SpecDP1 is worth considering here. In the English examples Kayne originally considers, this is taken to be an A-bar position unless the D/P head incorporates into *BE*. This incorporation yields *have* as the surface verb form. Kayne proposes that incorporation of the Agr head into the D/P head can also transform SpecDP1 into an A-position when this incorporation obtains. Another possibility to consider is that SpecDP1 is simply not projected in Appalachian English. The position is needed in the Hungarian case—it is the site in which Dative case is assigned. But in the English examples it seems that this position is superfluous as case (Nominative) is assigned above this position.

4 Agreement

4.1 Default Agreement and Actual Agreement

The *-s* ending on the verb in *they*-existentials could indicate singular agreement or default agreement. Tortora (forthcoming) argues that expletive *they* triggers default agreement. As mentioned above, she argues that expletive *they* has a NumP projected in its syntactic structure, but does not have a value specified—it is [singular] in contrast with [-singular] (which is the case for strong/referential *they*) and [+singular] (which is the case for singular pronouns like *she*). The suggestion made above that Agr in *they*-

existentials can host an *-s* is compatible with this approach as long as it is taken to be default rather than singular agreement. The suggestion that Agr in *they*-existentials can host an *-r* may also be compatible with this approach, but this requires a closer look at the data recorded for individual speakers. Some discussion of this follows.

4.2 An Apparent Free-For-All

The following examples might lead one to believe that in *they*-existentials agreement is completely optional in the sense that any verb form (*-s* or *-r*) can be used with any NP type (singular or plural).

- | | |
|--|-----------------|
| (15) They's a cemetery up there... | DOHP:GAC |
| (16) They is not so many there now. | M&H (2004:lxii) |
| (17) They are another one down the street. | M&H (2004:lxii) |
| (18) They were several houses built... | DOHP:CC |

However, taking into consideration facts that have been reported regarding the form of singular and plural marked verbs and the sentences produced by individual speakers, there is nothing in the data above to necessarily suggest that *any individual grammar* instantiates optionality. There is also nothing in the data above, taken alone, to determine the status (singular, default, or plural) of the *-r* verb forms. Examples in which *are* and *were* appear with singular referential subjects can be found in Montgomery & Hall (2004) and discussion of these forms is found in Tortora (forthcoming). What is important here is simply that the reader not assume that verbal forms that may be necessarily singular or plural in her own dialect are necessarily singular or plural for the speakers who produced the sentences above.

The sentence below is worth considering together with (18).

- (19) They was two men would walk these logs... DOHP:CC

Example (18) is unusual in that the past tense form of the verb *be* is *were*. In many Appalachian dialects the past tense form of *be* is *was* across NP types. These two examples—since they were produced by the same speaker—raise questions about the possibility that speakers may shift between two grammars. Defining the precise nature of the two grammars would surely be a difficult (though rewarding) challenge, and it is not something that can be done on the basis of this transcript. These examples also raise questions about the possibility of optionality within a grammar, which, depending on one's theoretical framework, will be faced differently. Finally, these examples illustrate in part the limits of linguistic analysis that

can be seriously pursued without fieldwork that would accompany and supplement existing recordings and writings. The example below further illustrates this point. Here the speaker corrects the form of the verb in the sentence (this is a *there*-existential rather than a *they*-existential).

(20) There certainly were—was—witches.⁹

Had this speaker not made this correction it might appear that *were* was the intended form and the assumption might be made that the speaker would accept as grammatical the sentence above with *were* rather than *was*. A precise proposal regarding the nature of Agr (as discussed here) and the nature of *-s* and *-r* verb forms would require more complete knowledge of the grammar of *individual speakers*.

5 Conclusion

It has been argued that *they*-existentials in Appalachian English are underlyingly possessives. Following the approach to possessives outlined in Kayne (1993) and Szabolcsi (1981, 1983) a proposal has been advanced that accommodates a weak nonreferential possessor *they* and a surface verb form of *be* rather than *have*. Some discussion has been offered regarding the nature of the Agr head that is a piece of this proposal and the challenges in interpreting *-s* and *-r* verbal forms in existential and other constructions.

⁹This example is from the Joseph S. Hall collection and is included in the transcriptions of tapes provided to me by Christina Tortora.

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