

Charles Turek

THE SEMANTICS OF 'THERE ARE' SENTENCES

In this essay I am going to set forth the semantics, or meaning, or function of 'there are' sentences.

There is a rule in the English language that requires us to use 'there are' sentences when we want to focus just on the thing we are talking about without comparing it or contrasting it with other things of that class or group. For example, let us say that there are four cats in a room and that they are all sleeping on a bed, and we don't want to talk about any other cats with respect to that bed. Then we must say

(1) There are some cats sleeping on the bed.

If, instead, we say

(2) *Some cats are sleeping on the bed.

then we are speaking ungrammatically! Sentence (2) is used when we want to compare the thing we are talking about with the other things of that group. In such a situation the rule requires us to use the syllogistic 'all', 'no', or 'some' quantifiers. So, for instance, let us say there are those same four cats, and two of the cats are sleeping on the bed and two are not, and someone asks us how many cats are sleeping on the bed. Then we must say

(3) Some cats are sleeping on the bed.

If we want to talk about all four cats, then we would add

(4) Some cats are not sleeping on the bed.

If, instead, we had said

(5) *There are some cats sleeping on the bed.

we would then have spoken ungrammatically!

Note, that in syllogistic sentences with the verb 'to be', the quantifier is stressed while in 'there are' sentences the noun is stressed. This makes sense because if you need to compare then you would stress the quantifier and if you do not need to compare you would not stress the quantifier. So in sentence (3) 'some' is stressed, while in sentence (1) 'cats' is stressed.

Since in syllogistic we are comparing all of the members of a group to each other, the 'all', 'no', and 'some' are short for 'all of the', 'none of the', and 'some of the'. Therefore sentence (3) is really

(6) Some of the cats are sleeping on the bed.

Now in the example of the four cats, if three of the cats are not sleeping on the bed and one is, and we need to do some comparing, then we cannot say

(7) *Some cats are sleeping on the bed and the others are not.

We have to say something like

(8) One cat is sleeping on the bed and the others are not.

Therefore the syllogistic 'some' means 'two or more of the'.

Here are some other 'there are' sentences:

- (9) There are lions.
- (10) There are no lions.
- (11) There are lions in Africa.
- (12) There are no lions in Africa.
- (13) There are earthquakes in California.
- (14) There are no earthquakes in California.
- (15) There are flaws in your argument.
- (16) There are no flaws in your argument.
- (17) There are some suspects being questioned by the police.
- (18) There are no suspects being questioned by the police.

Now if instead of (11) someone said

(19) *Some lions are in Africa.

he would be speaking ungrammatically unless he was comparing. If someone wanted to compare the flaws in (15) he would have to say

(20) Some flaws are in your argument.

Let us discuss the following sentences:

- (21) Several cats are sleeping on the bed.
- (22) Many cats are sleeping on the bed.
- (23) Two cats are sleeping on the bed.

Are they grammatical? Yes, if you are comparing; no, if you are not. If you do not want to compare you must say

- (24) There are several cats sleeping on the bed.
- (25) There are many cats sleeping on the bed.
- (26) There are two cats sleeping on the bed.

Now we see why we were all wondering whether sentences such as (21), (22), and (23) are grammatical.

I believe the following sentence is ungrammatical:

(27) *A cat is at the door.

It certainly is ungrammatical if you are not comparing. The proper sentence is

(28) There is a cat at the door.

Here are two interesting sentences:

(29) There is someone at the door.

(30) Someone is at the door.

I take it that 'someone' in sentence (29) is a compound noun, for if it were a pronoun, the sentence would be ungrammatical. Then why is sentence (30) grammatical? It seems that in sentence (30) 'someone' is considered a pronoun, and any sentence whose subject is a pronoun is syllogistic since a pronoun does or can take the place of a proper name, and a sentence whose subject is a proper name is considered syllogistic.

REFERENCES

- Milsark G. 1977 Toward an explanation of certain peculiarities of the existential construction in English, *Linguistic Analysis* 1.