

Stylistic prescriptivism vs. authorial practice: An inquiry by corpus evidence

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Scholarly writing is far from a mechanistic composition of data analyses but a dynamic social construction of knowledge within the disciplinary community (Bamford & Bondi, 2005; Bazerman, 1988; Hyland, 2004). Foreign and novice writers, therefore, find this challenging and make much reliance on style manuals for authoritative opinions about standard, acceptable usage of the language. However, these guidelines tend to be prescriptive in language use and typically lack empirical justification, and, as a result, are sometimes oversimplified or even misconceived (Bennett, 2009; Huckin, 1993).

This study illustrates this point by examining the ‘*there be + N*’ structure in a 1.7-million word corpus of 160 research articles from eight disciplines. The ‘*there be + N*’ pattern is frequently cited as a typical example of expletive sentence structure and proscribed as taboo by style guides (Alred et al., 2015; Gerson & Gerson, 2014; Mancuso, 1992), since it ‘creates wordy sentence’ at the sacrifice of conciseness (Gerson & Gerson, 2014: 61). For example, ‘Delete the Expletive Pattern’ (Gerson & Gerson, 2014: 61); ‘Eliminate expletives’ (Mancuso, 1992, 157). Concerning whether the proscription on the ‘*there be + N*’ pattern is oversimplified, this study sets out to explore the following three research questions: (1) Is there a deviation of authorial practice from this stylistic prescriptivism? And if any, (2) what rhetorical functions is this construction used to play? (3) in what disciplines and in what rhetorical divisions of research articles it frequently occurs.

In this study, research articles are used as the primary and established means of knowledge production under disciplinary culture. They were selected from eight disciplines: applied linguistics, marketing, sociology, philosophy, electronic engineering, medicine, cell biology, and physics. These disciplines span the spectrum of academic practice from the hard physical sciences to the more rhetorical humanities and social sciences. In a search for ‘*there is/are/was/were*’ in the corpus by AntConc (Anthony, 2014), 599 cases of the ‘*there be + N*’ pattern were identified, averaging 3.7 cases per 10,000 words. The rhetorical functions this pattern is used to serve and the variation across disciplines and generic divisions of research articles are to be presented in the full paper. However, the preliminary findings indicate that there is little justification for having a prescriptive rule against the ‘*there be + N*’ pattern. I may argue further that corpus-based descriptions are better able to show us the effectiveness of academic writing than stylistic prescriptivism.

References

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