There is them, and then there are them

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THEY/THEM AGREEMENT ASYMMETRY

Collins (2025: 3–4) outlines the following paradigm:

PRE-COPULAR AGREEMENT

(1) [*Talking about a group of students.*]
They **are** ready to meet you now, sir.

(2) [*Talking about a student who just entered the office.*]
They **are** sitting on the couch over there.

POST-COPULAR AGREEMENT

(3) [*Talking about divorce.*]
You have children, so there **{is/are}** them to consider first.

(4) [*When asked who else has been in the office, other than the one student seen entering earlier, I respond:*]
There **{was/*were}** them, but I did not see anybody else.

If pre-copular and post-copular agreement are both handled by Agree, it follows that **singular-*them* and plural-*them* have distinct syntactic structures** (Collins 2025)

KEY COMPONENTS

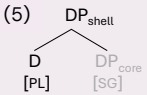
The agreement asymmetry follows from the interaction of three mechanisms:

- "Townhouse structure" of singular-*they/them* (Arregi & Hewett 2025)
- Case-sensitive Agree (Bobaljik 2008; Preminger 2014)
- Syntactic relation between *there* and the associate (Richards & Biberauer 2005; Deal 2009; Leu 2015; Kayne 2020)

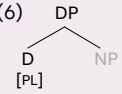
PRONOMINAL STRUCTURE

Singular-*they/them*: outer PL DP shell with elided SG DP core (Collins & Postal 2012; Arregi & Hewett 2025)

(5)



(6)



Plural-*they/them*: PL pronominal DP with elided NP complement (Postal 1966; Elbourne 2001)

PRE-COPULAR AGREEMENT

In standard subject–verb agreement, DP's outermost features are the highest = **plural in (1) and (2)** (Minimality)

POST-COPULAR AGREEMENT

T has two possible agreement paths (Béjar & Rezac 2009; Sobin 2014; Deal 2015; Kang 2019):

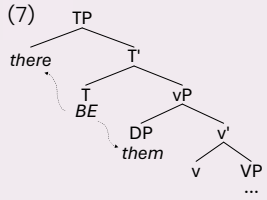
i. AGREEMENT WITH THE ASSOCIATE

- The pronominal associate is not nominative (Schütze 2001; Sobin 2014). Under case-sensitive Agree (Bobaljik 2008), attempted agreement results in default (Preminger 2014) **= singular in both (3) and (4)**

ii. AGREEMENT WITH THERE

- *There* stands in a syntactic relation with the associate and inherits its features (Deal 2009; Kayne 2020) — PL **(3) or** SG **(4)**—before occupying subject position
- Since *there* occupies a nominative position (see Sobin 2014; Kang 2019), agreement succeeds

(7)



(Smith 2021, ch.5)

On the **interaction/satisfaction model** (Deal 2015), a probe interacts with a goal but continues probing unless satisfied. A probe that is satisfied by the first (closest) goal stops; otherwise, it continues to the next goal

DP-INTERNAL *THERE*

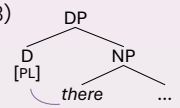
There originates low, rather than in subject position (Richards & Biberauer 2005; Deal 2009)

We hypothesize that it originates DP-internally, within the associate (Sabel 2000; Kayne 2020), in the deictic position motivated for demonstratives (Bernstein 1997; Brugè 2002; Leu 2015)

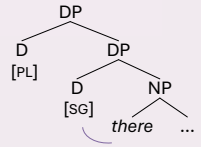
DP-INTERNAL *THERE (cont.)*

There agrees with the closest D for number and then raises to subject position (Kayne 2020)

(8)



(9)



ON POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVES

SEMANTIC AGREEMENT

- Optional plural in (3) could be characterized as semantic agreement, which is also consistent with the singular pattern in (4)
- But semantic agreement is argued to be restricted or unavailable in existential constructions (Elbourne 1999; Sauerland & Elbourne 2002; Smith 2017)

GRATUITOUS 3SG

- Some accounts attribute singular in (3) and (4) to gratuitous [3SG] on *there* (Chomsky 1995; Sobin 2014)
- In the present account, it follows from independently motivated case-sensitive Agree (a grammar-internal approach as in Schütze 1999)

FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

NON-PRONOMINAL ASSOCIATES

- Lexical associates also show the SG/PL alternation, though the distribution may depend on definiteness (Milsark 1974)

(10) There {is/are} (the) linguists to consider first.

PERSON RESTRICTIONS

- Post-copular agreement is invariably 3rd person. This appears to follow if person and number are separate probes, and person requires a local (spec-head) relation (Baker 2008) — *there* can inherit number but not person from the associate

(11) There {is/*am} me. There {was/*were} you.

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