“There is many criteria that I’m studying”: *There*-Existentials in African Englishes

Student Research in English Linguistics
2026, issue 1

DOI: 10.5282/cq0paj28
srel.uni-muenchen.de

Lara Keser
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Abstract

This study investigates existential *there*-constructions in three African Englishes, namely Ugandan (UgE), Nigerian (NiE), and Kenyan-Tanzanian English (K&TE). Extending Collins’ (2012) comparative analysis of World Englishes, five morphosyntactic constraints on existential non-concord are examined to assess alignment with Inner and Outer Circle patterns, using spoken data from the *International Corpus of English*: subject-verb agreement, verb tense, copula contraction, covert plural marking, and bare vs. extended existentials. Findings reveal low overall existential non-concord rates characteristic of Outer Circle varieties, with tense emerging as a conditioning factor, though patterns vary depending on analytical perspective. UgE and K&TE exhibit conservative profiles aligning with Non-South-East Asian Outer Circle Englishes, reflecting Phase 3 prescriptivism in Schneider's Dynamic Model. NiE shows greater flexibility, converging with South-East Asian and select Inner Circle norms, indicative of early Phase 4 hybridization and American influence. The results challenge uniform “African English” assumptions, highlighting intra-continental diversity in structural nativization and underscoring the need for expanded corpus representation of underrepresented varieties.

1. Introduction

As Collins (2012) notes, existential *there*-constructions (e.g. *There are many rules*) show a striking degree of syntactic variation across World Englishes, particularly in their acceptance of subject-verb non-concord with plural post-verbal noun phrases (e.g. *There is many rules*). While this morphosyntactic construction may appear structurally simple at first glance, its behavior across varieties often reflects underlying differences in educational practices, prescriptive norms, and sociolinguistic policies. In this light, it gives insight into broader global patterns of morphosyntactic variation.

Given the large body of research on *there*-existentials in English varieties — particularly those grouped into Inner Circle (IC) and Outer Circle (OC) categories — the research gap in African Englishes is surprising. Due to their frequent characterization as norm-developing, postcolonial, L2 varieties, African Englishes are often assumed to align closely with the broader OC pattern, which

tends to show moderate tolerance for non-standard forms such as existential non-concord (e.g. Collins 2012; Schmied 2006). However, this assumption has rarely been empirically investigated.

The present study addresses this gap by examining *there*-existential constructions in four African Englishes: Ugandan English (UgE), Nigerian English (NiE), Kenyan English (KenE), and Tanzanian English (TzE). Drawing on data from the spoken components of the *International Corpus of English* (ICE), the study analyses the patterning of these varieties with regard to five key morphosyntactic features of *there*-existentials that co-vary with non-concord: subject-verb agreement, verb tense, copula contraction, covert plural marking on post-verbal noun phrases, and the presence of extended versus bare existential structures. The consistent behavior of these features has been attested in previous research (Breivik 1981; Collins 2012; Hay & Schreier 2004; Krejci & Hilton 2017; Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez 2003), allowing for the identification of cross-varietal patterns and local prescriptive norms.

Section 2 outlines the theoretical background and previous research on *there*-existentials, including their role in typological studies of World Englishes. Section 3 gives insight into the corpus data and methodology used for the analysis, followed by a presentation of the results for each of the five grammatical constraints under investigation, with comparative reference to previous studies in section 4. Finally, section 5 draws together the main findings and discusses their implications for the understanding of syntactic variation and future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Existential *there* across Englishes

There-existential constructions constitute a distinct syntactic structure in English. The term "*there*-existential," coined by Jespersen (1924), refers to constructions used to assert the presence of an entity or event. Traditionally, these constructions follow the structural pattern in which *there* is followed by a form of the verb BE, and a post-verbal subject noun phrase (NP), as seen in example (1). Importantly, *there* occupies the subject position but lacks locative or referential meaning. It is often referred to as "dummy *there*," highlighting that in these constructions *there* performs a purely grammatical function and does not encode location (Jespersen 1924: 155f; Quirk et al. 1985: 756).

A central syntactic feature of *there*-existentials is the variability in subject-verb agreement, particularly when the post-verbal NP is plural. In line with grammatical concord, English requires verbs to agree in number with their subject, as seen in examples (1–2):

(1) there **is** that concept of customary land [ICE-UG:S1A-025 194]
(2) There **are** certain qualities that are seen [ICE-UG:S1A-030 7]

However, because the subject in *there*-existentials is postposed to the verb, this non-canonical syntax — i.e. a deviation from the canonical subject-verb order and default agreement marking

(Pham & Leukert 2025: 4f.) — leads to variation: most notably, the phenomenon of "singular agreement" or "existential non-concord." In non-concord cases, the singular verb form is used with a plural NP, as in example (3). This feature is especially common in spoken English and is seen as a result of processing pressures and discourse function — namely ease of articulation, (in)formality, and rapid speech, rather than grammatical error (Collins 2012: 55).

(3) Because what I have heard about marriage, there **is** a lot of circumstances
[ICE-UG:S1A-034 222]

Jespersen (1924) and Tagliamonte (1998) trace the permissiveness of singular agreement back to earlier stages of English, namely Old and Middle English, when agreement rules were less rigid (Tagliamonte 1998: 157). In contemporary usage, the contracted form *there's* often functions as a "single presentative formula," reinforcing the tendency toward existential non-concord (Breivik 1981: 15). Moreover, multiple studies have concluded that existential non-concord is more prevalent in the present tense than in the past, likely due to its frequency and ease of contraction (Britain & Sudbury 2002; Hay & Schreier 2004). Krejci and Hilton (2017) further demonstrate that verb number variation in existential constructions is not arbitrary but follows structured patterns conditioned by tense, contraction, and register.

At the same time, a substantial body of research has shown that certain factors do not significantly influence the likelihood of existential non-concord. Specifically, studies by Meechan and Foley (1994), Hay and Schreier (2004), and Krejci and Hilton (2017) have found that the type of determiner in the post-verbal NP (weak determiners: e.g. *a, some, many* or strong determiners: e.g. *the, all, every*) (Meechan & Foley 1994: 67), the polarity of the clause (affirmative or negative), and social variables such as age, gender, or sex do not have a consistent effect on the frequency of non-concord across English varieties. These findings suggest that non-concord is primarily conditioned by linguistic factors such as verb tense, verb contraction, the absence of overt plural markers on the corresponding NP, and the presence of extensions. Here, extensions refer to constructions with additional syntactic material such as "locative or adverbial elements, relative clauses, participial *-ing* clauses, and *to*-infinitival clauses" (Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez 2003: 275); some extensions are exemplified in section 3.2.

Corpus-based studies have taken advantage of this variability to explore the intersection of grammar, discourse, and sociolinguistic attitudes. For example, Meyerhoff and Walker (2013) examine existential agreement in Bequia English (St. Vincent and the Grenadines) and show how variation is conditioned both by social factors and the nature of the construction itself. Their work engages with Labov's (1993) notion of the "sociolinguistic monitor," suggesting that syntactic variables like existential non-concord are less socially stratified than lexical ones because they are

processed more automatically and lie below the level of conscious awareness (Meyerhoff & Walker 2013: 409).

Notably, much of this research has focused on IC Englishes — particularly British, American, Canadian, and New Zealand English (Britain & Sudbury 2002; Hay & Schreier 2004; Meechan & Foley 1994) — along with a smaller number of studies incorporating OC varieties, most notably in Collins' (2012) large-scale comparative corpus analysis. Collins' (2012) findings confirm that existential non-concord is robustly attested across national varieties, while identifying subtle regional distinctions. Yet even in this relatively inclusive framework, African Englishes are strikingly underrepresented. Of the eight varieties examined, only Kenyan English appears as a partial representative of Africa.

This gap in research is particularly surprising given the growing prominence of African Englishes in World Englishes frameworks. No dedicated study was found that examines *there*-existentials in varieties such as UgE, NiE, or TzE, despite their availability in corpora such as the *International Corpus of English* (ICE). The closest parallels come from works that discuss subject-verb concord more generally. For instance, Asante (2012) and De Vos (2013) examine subject-verb agreement variation in written Ghanaian and spoken South African English respectively, documenting existential non-concord-like patterns without treating existentials as a separate category.

In response to this underrepresentation, the current study aims to bring new empirical and theoretical insight into the behavior of *there*-existentials in African Englishes. More generally, this analysis contributes to ongoing discussions about the grammatical development of African Englishes and the extent to which they exhibit endonormative structural change.

2.2 Sociolinguistic context of African Englishes

While the syntactic variation of existential *there*-constructions has been mapped extensively across many varieties of English, African Englishes remain significantly underrepresented in these accounts. To interpret how such variation might emerge and what it reveals about each variety, it is necessary to consider the sociolinguistic context in which these Englishes have developed.

A useful framework for understanding the sociolinguistic development of African Englishes is Schneider's Dynamic Model (2007), which outlines five evolutionary phases (foundation, exonormative stabilization, nativization, endonormative stabilization, differentiation) that describe how postcolonial varieties of English emerge and become localized through ongoing contact and sociopolitical changes. This model provides valuable information to interpret the degrees of nativization across varieties of African English.

The sociolinguistic profiles of UgE, NiE, KenE, and TzE reveal important differences in linguistic norm orientation and degrees of structural nativization, which in turn help explain broader variation patterns across African Englishes. English plays a prominent role in education and

professional mobility in all four contexts, but the specific trajectories of each variety have diverged notably. Despite being introduced via British colonialism in all four countries, the manner and depth of the institutionalization of English varied significantly. Uganda and Tanzania, as British protectorates, saw English spread mainly through formal education, often limited in scope and elitist in access (Isingoma & Meierkord 2022: 88, 103f; Schmied 2012: 2). Kenya, while also under British rule, experienced more extensive English-medium schooling during the post-war modernization phase (Michieka 2005: 175–177). In contrast, Nigeria combined widespread colonial education with an intensely multilingual environment, setting the stage for a more hybridized linguistic evolution (Foyewa 2020: 64; Modu 2018: 112–114). These shared paths, however, diverged sharply in the post-independence period, producing distinctive sociolinguistic outcomes in each variety.

In Uganda, English was primarily established through formal, institutionalized education during the protectorate era (Isingoma & Meierkord 2022: 104). UgE developed under highly prescriptive educational models that continue to shape linguistic attitudes today. Numerous studies underscore that grammar instruction anchored in British English norms dominates Ugandan classrooms and public discourse (Isingoma & Meierkord 2022; Nankindu 2020). Grammatical deviations are often stigmatized as signs of poor education, and local varieties are rarely accepted as legitimate linguistic systems or are dismissed as “broken English” (Isingoma & Meierkord 2022: 88). These formal norms persist not only for convenience reasons but also because they are ideologically linked to authority, modernity, and professional opportunity. Within Schneider’s Dynamic Model, UgE remains situated in late Phase 3 (nativization), with English firmly rooted in institutional environments but still lacking structural independence and widely accepted local norms.

Tanzanian English occupies a more ambivalent position. It has maintained its prestige status and is “used officially only on the ‘highest levels’ of the educational and legal system” (Schmied 2012: 2). However, the sociolinguistic profile of Tanzania is strongly shaped by the dominance of Swahili, which acts as the main language of public life, serving as a symbol of unity and national pride, while English is viewed more pragmatically as a tool for socioeconomic mobility, higher education, and international engagement, rather than as a core element of Tanzanian identity (Bwenge 2012: 172f.). The triglossic policy of local languages, Swahili, and English, following a functional hierarchy, has prevented the emergence of a distinctly Tanzanian English, despite its broad usage in education and professional contexts. TzE thus remains in early Phase 3 of Schneider’s model.

Kenyan English presents a slightly more advanced evolutionary position. English remains the dominant medium of instruction in schools from primary level onwards and is used widely in the media, legal system, and higher education. Kenyan English shows some signs of structural nativization, particularly in phonology, lexis, and informal code-mixing between English, Swahili, and local languages (Higgins 2009: 220f; Michieka 2005: 175–177).

However, these innovations have not yet translated into broad norm acceptance. The educational system continues to emphasize British English standards, and deviations are largely treated as errors. Still, among younger speakers and in urban centers, English is increasingly embedded in daily life and identity construction. Media usage, schooling, and international influence have contributed to the emergence of more localized registers (Michieka 2005: 177f.). As such, KenE, like UgE, is best classified in Phase 3 of Schneider's model, though perhaps with stronger forward momentum toward Phase 4 (endonormative stabilization).

In contrast to the prescriptive rigidity observed in East African varieties, Nigerian English presents a more complex, hybrid trajectory. English continues to serve as Nigeria's official language and main medium of instruction, but its sociolinguistic evolution has been shaped by Nigeria's vast multilingualism, politicized education system, and intense norm contestation (Foyewa 2020: 64). While British English initially dominated education and public life, Nigeria's early post-independence period was also marked by growing American influence, introduced through returning graduates, missionary education, and institutional exchange programs, which gradually began to undermine the exclusive status of British norms (Olatoye 2025: 16).

Within Nigerian linguistics, scholars like Modu (2018) have outlined a "triangular model" for understanding NiE, which includes the core shared features from native varieties, mother-tongue interference, and norm-developing elements that emerge locally through "hybridization, conversion, neologism," for instance (Modu 2018: 113). This model reflects a relatively high degree of nativization, particularly in informal or spoken registers. At the same time, formal education in Nigeria remains deeply rooted in the grammar-translation tradition, which prioritizes memorization of rules and correction of deviations from Standard British English (Adebileje & Akinola 2020: 1017f.).

These competing pressures have produced what Schneider (2007) describes as a variety in early Phase 4, with widespread nativization and some signs of endonormative tendencies, yet with norm orientation still contested. Recent studies also point to the role of globalization and media in accelerating the Americanization of certain linguistic features — especially in lexis and popular culture — without displacing the prestige attached to formal BrE in academic and institutional contexts (Olatoye 2025: 112f.). As a result, NiE is characterized by dominant British norms in formal contexts and grammar instruction, while hybrid forms are tolerated or preferred in digital media and spoken discourse.

Taken together, these sociolinguistic profiles show that East African Englishes (e.g. UgE, KenE, TzE) remain strongly prescriptivist and grammar-oriented, with limited grammatical nativization and continued allegiance to British norms. In contrast, NiE reveals a broader tolerance for local variation, especially in morphosyntax and lexis, reflecting its more advanced position on the evolutionary scale. This divergence in acceptance of non-standard variants has direct implications for the present study of *there*-existentials in African Englishes. Given the observed variation in existential *there*-constructions across World Englishes, it becomes important to examine how they

manifest in underrepresented varieties. Therefore, the present study aims to show how patterns of *there*-existentials vary across African Englishes, drawing on data from NiE, UgE, KenE, and TzE.

In light of the outlined sociolinguistic context, it is hypothesized that African Englishes will pattern more closely with OC than IC varieties. Additionally, it is expected that West African Englishes (NiE) will show slightly more IC-like behavior than East African Englishes (UgE, KenE, TzE) due to more advanced nativization. Section 4 discusses the results in detail, showing that while overall alignment with previously documented OC patterns is confirmed, internal differences regarding grammatical constraints are noteworthy. Overall, these findings help explain how broader sociolinguistic factors (such as prescriptive grammar norms and language attitudes) interact with syntactic variation. Finally, the study provides new insight into grammatical norms and adds to a growing body of work that seeks to better represent African Englishes in corpus-based linguistics.

3. Methods and Materials

3.1 ICE corpus

The *International Corpus of English* (ICE) is a structured and balanced corpus project designed to represent national and regional varieties of World Englishes. It was created to fill the gap of spoken data in earlier corpora such as the Brown and LOB corpora, which enabled comparison between British and American English but were limited to printed texts (Greenbaum & Nelson 1996: 3). Unlike these earlier corpora, ICE includes spoken components and provides data that is generally comparable across English varieties, including those where English is not a native language but plays a central role in public and educational life, such as African Englishes (Greenbaum & Nelson 1996: 5). However, this comparability is not without limitations, as ICE components were compiled at different times and under varying conditions, potentially introducing diachronic variation. Each ICE component includes approximately one million words of written and spoken language produced after 1989, sampled from educated adult speakers. Due to its standardized design and annotation system, ICE enables controlled, cross-varietal studies, particularly those focused on morphosyntactic variation in World Englishes.

ICE corpora provide valuable spoken data that is both natural and authentic, and contain metadata on speaker variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, and first language. For the present study, three African ICE components were examined: ICE-Uganda (ICE-Ug), ICE-Nigeria (ICE-Ni), and ICE-East Africa (ICE-EA), the latter combining Kenyan and Tanzanian English. The relevant subcorpora of private conversational data consist of 203,950 words for Uganda, 201,413 for Nigeria, and 87,621 for East Africa. The smaller size of ICE-EA is attributed to the practical and sociolinguistic difficulty of collecting informal English conversations in Tanzania, where Swahili dominates everyday speech. As a result, ICE-EA relies more heavily on Kenyan data, where English is more commonly spoken and accessible for data collection (Hudson-Ettle & Schmied 1999: 4). Nonetheless, the three

subcorpora offer representative datasets of spoken African Englishes that allow for a cross-varietal investigation.

This study draws exclusively on texts from the S1A category (S1A: 001–100), which comprises spontaneous and informal speech, namely direct conversations and telephone calls. Therefore, the samples are particularly suitable for examining variation.

3.2 Method and retrieving data

For the present study, Collins' (2012) methodology on existential agreement across World Englishes was largely emulated to ensure comparability and consistency in data retrieval and analysis and to generate descriptive statistics. This was decided in order to enable direct comparison of how African Englishes pattern relative to IC and OC Englishes.

All instances of *there*-existentials were retrieved with the software SketchEngine and were manually inspected. A classification by whether the noun that the verb BE would usually agree with was singular or plural was necessary, since existential non-concord can only occur with plural NPs. The tokens amount to 347 in ICE-Ug, 148 in ICE-Ni, and 95 in ICE-EA. Existential tokens could then be examined for their following subject noun phrase (NP). Cases with plural NPs were categorized by three types of agreement: agreement, non-agreement, and constructions where agreement is always unmarked.

Non-agreement:
(4) there **is** many criteria that I'm studying [ICE-Ni:S1A-con48]
(5) there**'s** no canteens in German schools [ICE-UG:S1A-070 56]

No agreement possible:
(6) there **used to be** no systems [ICE-UG:S1A-002 279]
(7) there **will** be higher returns when you persist on it [ICE-UG:S1A-018 133]

In instances like (6–7), agreement was considered not possible due to constructions with semi-modals (6) or modals (7), which cannot inflect for number. Thus, cases where agreement was not possible were excluded from non-concord frequency counts and categorized separately.

Since previous research showed that non-agreement constructions are more likely to occur in the present than the past tense, particularly with the contracted verb form *'s* (5) instead of full *is* (4), further coding exposes this convergence of existential non-concord and verb tense and contraction. The next stage of analysis focused on the morphological realization of plurality, in particular investigating whether the absence of the overt plural marker *-s* on the post-verbal NP increases the likelihood for non-concord. For this purpose, all plural NPs were coded as either overtly marked (8) or covertly plural (9).

(8) there is a lot of thing**s** you need to do with that money [ICE-UG: S1A 014 279]

(9) especially when there's new **people** [ICE-Ni: S1A -con05]

Finally, existential constructions were further classified as either bare or extended, since extensions co-vary with non-concord constructions (Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez 2003: 276). Bare existentials contain only the existential marker and the NP, as seen in example (10), whereas extended existentials include additional syntactic material such as "locative or adverbial elements, relative clauses, participial *-ing* clauses, and *to*-infinitival clauses" (Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez 2003: 275), some exemplified in (4–5) and (7).

(10) there's no jobs [ICE-UG: S1A-089 138]

For accuracy reasons, all cases with repeated or unidentifiable NPs were excluded from the analysis. This study focused exclusively on grammatical constraints with a strong empirical impact on existential non-concord to ensure maximum accuracy of the findings. Factors shown to have minimal influence, such as determiner type and polarity, along with sociolinguistic factors such as age, gender, and sex (as discussed in section 2.1), were not examined.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 Verb agreement in existentials with plural NP

Drawing on Collins' (2012) findings as a reference point, the following section presents the results for verb agreement in *there*-existential constructions with plural post-verbal noun phrases across the selected African English varieties. The analysis focuses on three patterns: standard plural agreement, existential non-concord, and instances where agreement is not possible in African Englishes. The discussion proceeds in a stepwise manner. First, overall frequencies are presented to establish a comparative baseline, followed by more detailed analyses of relevant structural and contextual factors. The African English data are then compared with World Englishes from IC and OC varieties in order to situate them within broader global patterns, before a final comparison within African Englishes distinguishes between East and West African varieties to identify regional patterns and variation.

Figure 1 offers a visualization of the corresponding frequencies, including reference values from Collins (2012), and highlights overall distributional tendencies while enabling direct comparison between African Englishes and other World Englishes, placing the results in a global perspective. This, and all subsequent figures in this paper, display only the main categories of World Englishes. The full dataset, including data from all individual varieties, is provided in the appendix in the corresponding tables.

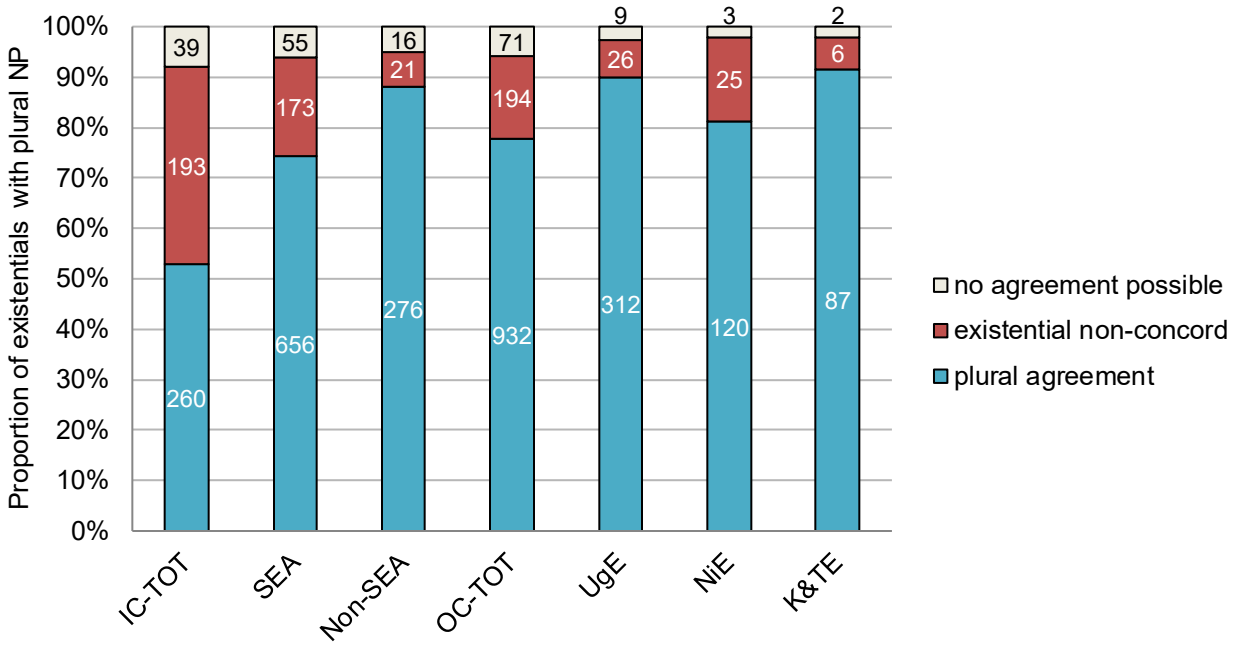

Figure 1: Verb agreement in existentials with plural NP (adapted from Collins 2012: 63)[1]

The results for verb agreement in *there*-existentials with plural NPs confirm the hypothesis that all three African varieties pattern closely with OC varieties. Ugandan English shows a strong preference for standard plural agreement, with a rate of 90%, similar to the non-South-East Asian (Non-SEA) varieties Indian English (IndE) and Kenyan English (KenE). In terms of existential non-concord, UgE exhibits a relatively low tolerance at 7.4%. This rate aligns UgE more closely with the Non-SEA varieties than with the South-East Asian (SEA) varieties Singaporean English (SingE), Philippine English (PhilE), and Hong Kong English (HKE).

NiE exhibits a rate of plural agreement of about 81%, patterning almost identically to the OC average of 79.9%, reinforcing the hypothesis that NiE behaves similarly to more advanced OC norms in terms of phase development within Schneider's Dynamic Model. Existential non-concord frequency in NiE (17%) places NiE within the non-concord range of the SEA cluster: NiE (17.0%) < Phil (17.1%) < SingE (19.6%) < HKE (20.7%). This is particularly notable given NiE's West African context, as it suggests a degree of structural convergence with more advanced SEA varieties. These findings support the broader hypothesis that West African Englishes exhibit greater tolerance for non-standard agreement patterns than East African Englishes and show slight alignment with more advanced varieties.

[1] Inner Circle Total (IC-TOT), South-East Asian (SEA), Outer Circle Total (OC-TOT), Ugandan English (UgE), Nigerian English (NiE), Kenyan and Tanzanian English (K&TE). Collins (2012) groups South-East Asian varieties together because they occupy similar positions of advanced structural nativization and tolerance of non-standard features according to Schneider's Dynamic Model (Collins 2012: 58–60). Table 2 in the appendix presents the data for all individual varieties.

K&TE displays the highest rate of plural agreement among African varieties at 91.6%, closely aligning with Collins' rate for KenE (92.7%). This indicates a strong overall preference for standard agreement forms, suggesting minimal variation between KenE and TzE in this respect. In addition, K&TE records the lowest existential non-concord rate (5.3%) among all reported varieties. This low rate in K&TE may be influenced by the Tanzanian component of the data, given previous descriptions of TzE as strongly oriented towards prescriptive norms, where non-standard forms are often treated as performance errors rather than features of an emerging variety (Mapunda & Vuzo 2023: 95–98; Schmied 2012: 455f.). While the present data do not allow for firm conclusions, this may suggest that such exonormative pressures contribute to the comparatively low tolerance for existential non-concord observed in K&TE.

Apart from the internal findings, the existential non-concord rates observed for African Englishes can be contextualized with reference to *The Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English* (eWAVE), which classifies morphosyntactic features on a scale from *A* (pervasive) to *D* (absent), with *X* indicating non-applicability (Kortmann et al. 2020). Non-concord in *there*-existentials corresponds to eWAVE feature 172 ("Existential/presentational *there's/there is/there was* with plural subjects"). For African Englishes, eWAVE assigns the following ratings: UgE and KenE as *C* ("extremely rare"), NiE as *D* ("absent"), and TzE as *X* ("not applicable").

The present findings largely support the *X*-rating for Tanzanian English, as no existential non-concord tokens were attested in the Tanzanian component of the corpus. The low non-concord frequencies in UgE and KenE are likewise compatible with a *C*-classification, although the stronger and more systematic presence of non-concord in UgE suggests that the feature may be somewhat more entrenched there than in Kenyan English. Most strikingly, the *D*-rating for NiE is clearly contradicted by the corpus data: with an existential non-concord rate of 17%, non-concord is demonstrably present in spoken NiE and occurs at levels comparable to some norm-developing varieties.

Comparing these three African varieties internally, K&TE emerges as the most prescriptively aligned, with the highest plural agreement and lowest existential non-concord tolerance. UgE follows closely, maintaining a high plural agreement rate and moderate resistance to non-concord, however differing by 2.1% to K&TE, representing a difference in prescriptivism and usage of non-standard forms in Englishes within East Africa. Moreover, NiE diverges from East African varieties in its notably higher non-concord acceptance, resulting in the following gradient in prescriptive adherence across the African varieties: NiE (17%) < UgE (7.4%) < K&TE (5.3%).

A comparison of East (UgE, K&TE) and West African (NiE) varieties reveals both regional and grammatical differences. East African Englishes exhibit more conservative agreement behavior, with significantly lower existential non-concord frequencies and higher plural agreement than NiE. Interestingly, this divide in the general behavior of existential non-concord also aligns with the represented SEA vs. Non-SEA distinction. The East African varieties pattern more closely with Non-

SEA varieties, which typically show lower existential non-concord rates and more prescriptive tendencies, while NiE aligns more closely with SEA's high tolerance for non-concord. This further supports the idea that East and West African Englishes may differ not only regionally but also typologically in their language attitudes towards non-standard agreement features.

These patterns align closely with the sociolinguistic profiles of each variety discussed in section 2.2. NiE's higher tolerance for existential non-concord is consistent with Asante's (2012) findings for non-concord acting as a frequent non-standard form in written Ghanaian English (another West African variety) and points to a greater structural flexibility. Moreover, this flexibility mirrors Wolf's (2020) argument that phonetic and lexical features in West African Englishes are more heterogeneous than in East African varieties. While Wolf (2020) focuses on other linguistic levels, the parallel suggests that this regional diversity may also extend to morphosyntactic patterns, supporting the idea that West African Englishes allow for greater grammatical variation. This noteworthy decrease highlights that African Englishes overall demonstrate a comparatively low tolerance for non-standard agreement in *there*-existentials. These findings reinforce the idea that despite their OC status, African Englishes tend to uphold stronger prescriptive agreement norms than some other OC counterparts.

4.2 Verb tense in existentials with existential non-concord

This section presents results for verb tense in *there*-existential constructions with non-concord. Previous research found that the copula tense, either present or past, is a well-established conditioning factor for existential non-concord. The findings of the present study align with this pattern when viewed in terms of the distribution of existential non-concord tokens, confirming that existential non-concord is more frequent with present (11) than with past (12) tense forms, exemplified in the examples below:

(11) there **is** other pains [ICE-EA:S1A-014]
(12) there **was** only boys here [ICE-UG:S1A-026 24]

Collins (2012) argues that overall high existential non-concord rates correlate with its frequent use in past tense constructions and thereby an overall stronger acceptance of non-standard agreement:

> If we can assume that varieties with a high proportion of *there*-existentials selecting SA (see previous sec.) are likely to be more advanced in the rise of SA than those with a smaller proportion, then the frequencies reported in Table 4 (…) suggest that it will be the more advanced varieties that tend to be more tolerant of past tense verbs (Collins 2012: 63f).

If one uses Collins' (2012) approach, the African data is consistent with previous research in that existential non-concord tokens are more frequently associated with present tense environments (UgE present tense = 92.3% vs. past tense = 7.7%; NiE 88% vs. 12%; K&TE 66.7% vs. 33.3%).

While this generalization offers a useful point of departure, the present study adopts a different analytical perspective. Rather than examining the distribution of present and past tense within existential non-concord tokens alone, verb tense is treated as an independent conditioning environment. Existential non-concord frequencies are calculated relative to all *there*-existentials with plural post-verbal NP in each tense. This approach allows for a more direct assessment of existential non-concord frequencies in present versus past tense environments within African Englishes. The following section first presents the distribution of existential non-concord across tense contexts before offering a brief interpretation of the observed patterns.

Table 1. Existential non-concord frequency in past and present tense existentials in African Englishes (absolute frequencies in parentheses)

	UgE	**NiE**	**K&TE**
Past tense (in %)	16.7 (2)	20.0 (3)	33.3 (2)
Present tense (in %)	7.4 (24)	17.1 (22)	4.6 (4)

Table 1 reveals substantial variation across the three African Englishes. Although previous research has associated existential non-concord primarily with present tense environments, the results show that present tense is not uniformly the most permissive domain when tense is treated as the conditioning factor. Instead, the relationship between tense and agreement appears more complex and variety-specific than previously assumed.

This pattern is not entirely unexpected from a cross-varietal perspective. In line with Hay and Schreier (2004), the comparatively high proportional rates of past tense existential non-concord in the African Englishes are consistent with findings from other English varieties (e.g., New Zealand English, Australian English, Caribbean English, South Atlantic English, and American and British dialects), where the past tense paradigm of BE is particularly susceptible to regularization. Hay and Schreier attribute this tendency to the irregularity of the verb BE, whose past tense forms are more vulnerable to regularization than the present tense paradigm (2004: 210). From this perspective, the African English data reflect a broader cross-varietal pattern rather than a variety-specific development.

Not shown in Table 1, the overall number of past tense *there*-existentials is considerably lower than that of present tense constructions (UgE n = 12 vs. 326; NiE n = 15 vs. 129; K&TE n = 6 vs. 87). This imbalance reflects the discourse profile of the ICE spoken components, which consist primarily of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. As a result, present tense constructions form the dominant existential environment across all three corpora. The uneven distribution also means that relatively small changes in token counts can produce substantial shifts in percentages, particularly within the much smaller past tense categories. Consequently, the percentages reported in Table 1 should be interpreted alongside the token frequencies.

UgE displays a past tense existential non-concord rate of 16.7%, compared to only 7.4% in present tense environments. Although the absolute number of past tense non-concord tokens is small, the contrast nevertheless indicates that existential non-concord in UgE is not restricted to the present tense. This result diverges from the pattern commonly reported for IC and OC varieties, where present tense constructions generally provide the primary environment for non-concord. Rather than suggesting a widespread acceptance of non-standard agreement, however, the figures point to a relatively weak conditioning effect of tense in UgE. Given the overall low non-concord frequency observed in Section 4.1, the variety remains strongly oriented toward standard agreement norms despite this distribution.

NiE presents a different profile. With a past tense non-concord rate of 20.0% and a present tense rate of 17.1%, the difference between the two environments is relatively small. Unlike the East African varieties, NiE exhibits a comparatively balanced distribution across the tense paradigm. This result is consistent with observations from the previous section, where NiE emerged as the variety with the highest overall tolerance for existential non-concord. The relatively even distribution suggests that tense does not act as a particularly strong constraint on non-concord in NiE. Instead, existential non-concord appears to function as a more generally available grammatical option across discourse environments. This finding aligns with the broader picture of NiE outlined in Section 2.2, where competing exonormative and endonormative pressures were shown to create a more flexible morphosyntactic system.

The most striking result emerges from K&TE. Despite displaying the lowest overall rate of existential non-concord among the three varieties (5.3%), K&TE records the highest non-concord frequency in past tense environments at 33.3%. By contrast, present tense constructions show only 4.6% non-concord. At first glance, this finding appears contradictory. However, caution is necessary because the percentages are based on very small token numbers. Nevertheless, the figures indicate that the distribution of existential non-concord across tense environments does not necessarily mirror the overall frequency of the feature. K&TE therefore demonstrates that low overall acceptance of existential non-concord can coexist with comparatively high rates in specific grammatical environments.

In comparison with Collins (2012), a more differentiated picture emerges. Collins reports that varieties with higher overall non-concord frequencies tend to display greater tolerance for past tense non-concord, thereby suggesting a relationship between overall acceptance of singular agreement and its extension across tense environments. The African Englishes only partially support this observation. NiE broadly conforms to the prediction, combining relatively high overall non-concord frequencies with comparatively high past tense rates. However, UgE and especially K&TE complicate the pattern. K&TE displays the highest past tense percentage despite having the lowest overall non-concord rate. This indicates that overall existential non-concord frequency alone cannot predict how the feature is distributed across tense categories.

A closer comparison of absolute token counts further nuances this interpretation. In the combined K&TE dataset, the number of past tense existential non-concord tokens increases from n = 2 in Collins' (2012) KenE data to n = 4 in the combined corpus, whereas present tense non-concord remains limited (Collins 2012: 64). Although these numbers remain small, they suggest that the inclusion of Tanzanian data does not fundamentally alter the overall profile of East African Englishes but contributes additional evidence that tense distributions may vary independently of overall non-concord frequency.

Taken together, the results summarized in Table 1 demonstrate that verb tense remains an important factor in the distribution of existential non-concord, but not necessarily in the way predicted by previous research. Rather than showing a uniform preference for present tense environments when tense is treated as the conditioning factor, the African varieties display distinct tense profiles. When compared internally, past tense existential non-concord follows the cline UgE (16.7%) < NiE (20.0%) < K&TE (33.3%). At the same time, overall non-concord frequency follows the opposite tendency, with K&TE showing the lowest rate and NiE the highest. This divergence highlights the importance of examining individual grammatical constraints separately rather than assuming that tolerance for one non-standard feature automatically predicts tolerance for another.

Overall, the tense distribution of existential non-concord in African Englishes reveals both shared tendencies and substantial intra-continental variation. While all three varieties remain broadly aligned with OC norms in their relatively low overall non-concord frequencies, the distribution across tense environments differs considerably. These findings suggest that tense-related constraints on existential non-concord are shaped by local sociolinguistic developments and may evolve independently from the overall acceptance of non-standard agreement forms.

4.3 Verb contraction in existentials with existential non-concord

In this section, the results for verb contraction in present tense *there*-existentials involving existential non-concord will be presented. The focus is placed on the copula, which is contracted to *'s*, resulting in the monosyllabic *there's* in existential *there*-constructions, since monosyllabic *there's* is considered a "single presentative formula" or a default form for both singular and plural post-verbal subjects in informal speech, where the salience of the verb is undermined (Breivik 1981: 15; Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez 2003: 264). Figure 2 summarizes the distribution of contracted and full verb forms across agreement and non-agreement contexts. Figures 3–5 further illustrate these patterns for UgE, NiE, and K&TE respectively, providing a visual comparison of contraction behavior in standard and non-standard agreement contexts.

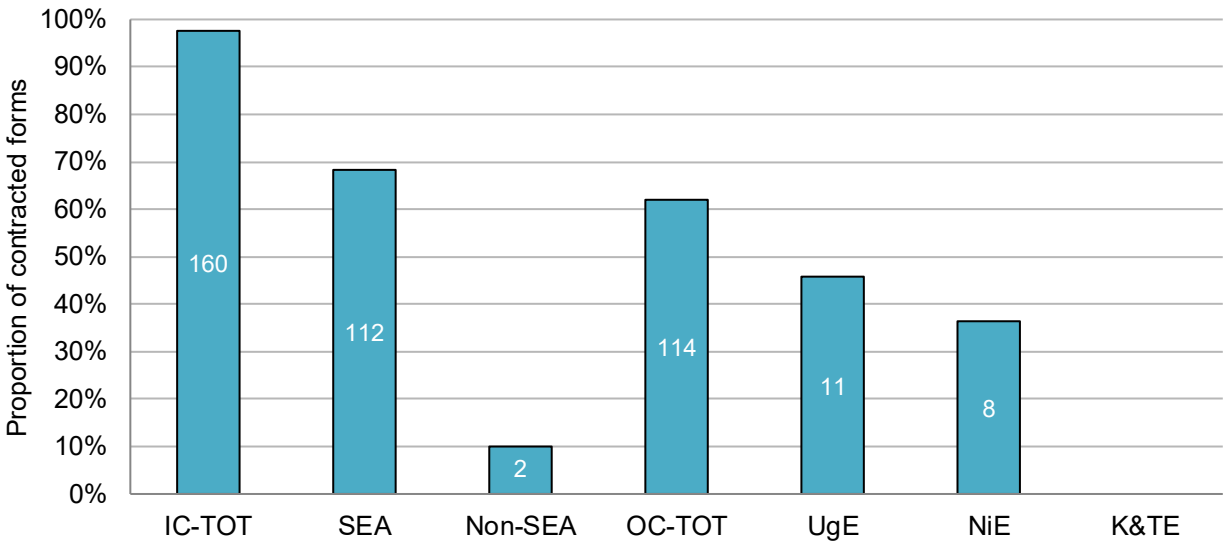

Figure 2. Verb contraction in existentials with existential non-concord (adapted from Collins 2012: 65)

UgE exhibits a contraction rate of 45.8% within existential non-concord contexts, positioning UgE among the more conservative OC varieties in terms of contraction tolerance, distinctly below the OC average (62%) and SEA average (68.3%) reported by Collins (2012).

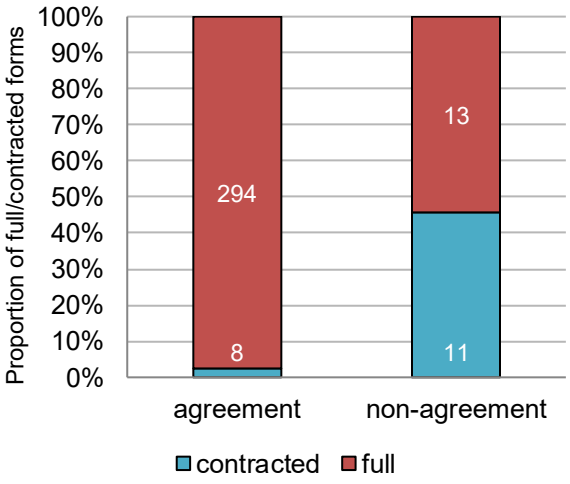

Figure 3. Verb contraction in existentials in UgE

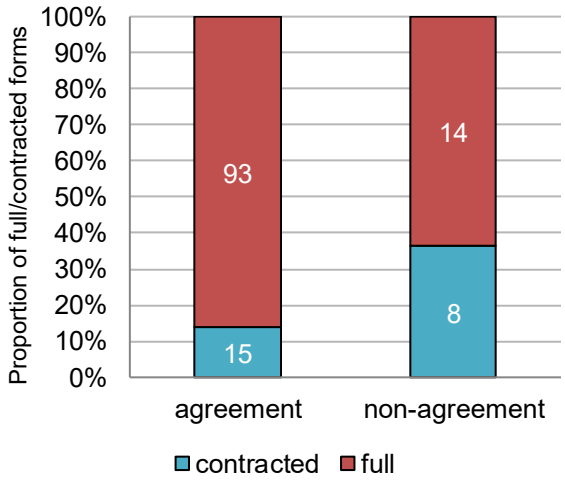

Figure 4. Verb contraction in existentials in NiE

Figures 3 and 4 visualize contraction behavior in UgE and NiE by contrasting the rates of contracted and full forms. This representation allows for a direct comparison of contraction patterns within and across agreement types. As illustrated in these two figures, contraction occurs substantially more frequently in existential non-concord contexts than in standard agreement contexts in both UgE (13) and NiE (14).

(13) **there's** already ten cows written on this thing [ICE-UG: S1A-052 314]

(14) **there's** so many people seated [ICE-Ni: S1A]

(15) **there's** no need for a mad rush to make a lot of money [ICE-Ni: S1A]

The expected asymmetry emerges, where contraction is virtually absent in standard agreement contexts, with full forms appearing in 97.4% of cases and contraction in only 2.6%, as exemplified in (15). By contrast, existential non-concord environments appear to relax these constraints, consistent with other World Englishes. The much higher contraction rate in existential non-concord suggests that when standard agreement is already undermined, additional stylistic reduction becomes acceptable. This supports previous researchers' claims that *there's* not only diminishes the salience of the verb but also enables the mismatch between singular verb and plural post-verbal NP (e.g. Breivik 1981; Martinez-Insua & Palacios-Martinez 2003).

However, this pattern needs to be interpreted in light of the makeup of the Ugandan corpus. The speakers represented in ICE-Ug differ from those in the other African components, as its S1A data had to be elicited through "semi-structured group interviews that involved the presence of two or three Ugandan speakers and one or two" non-Ugandan interlocutors (Isingoma & Meierkord 2022: §3.1). This cross-cultural, semi-formal interactional setting contrasts with the predominantly peer-to-peer conversations found in ICE-Ni and ICE-EA and could have encouraged heightened stylistic monitoring in standard agreement contexts.

By contrast, NiE presents a distinct contraction profile compared to UgE. As illustrated in Figure 4, NiE shows a contraction rate of 36.4% in non-agreement environments — well below the averages reported for SEA (68.3%), OC (62%), and especially IC varieties (97.6%). This result complicates the initial hypothesis that NiE might pattern closer to IC norms in this domain. While NiE does allow for both existential non-concord and contraction, the co-occurrence of the two remains relatively limited, particularly when contrasted with American English, which shows both high non-concord rates (44.4%) and near-categorical contraction (97.1%). NiE's comparatively low contraction rate in these contexts suggests that *'s*-contraction is not a primary pragmatic conditioning factor for existential non-concord in this variety.

Furthermore, the relatively high rate of existential non-concord in the past tense in NiE (20%) contrasts sharply with its lower rate of contraction in non-concord contexts, suggesting a disconnect between these two features. This means that while NiE displays signs of grammatical innovation through tolerance for non-standard agreement across tenses, this process may not be phonologically driven. Instead, existential non-concord in NiE may be undergoing a more structural form of grammaticalization, one that is not consistent with the assumption of *there's* enabling subject-verb non-concord. This interpretation aligns with the view that NiE reflects an uneven grammaticalization process that was identified in section 4.2, with certain non-standard features appearing independently of others rather than uniform stylistic shifts, just as existential non-concord rates not being able to predict past tense patterns.

NiE shows a contraction rate of 13.9% in standard agreement contexts, indicating a noticeably higher tolerance for phonological reduction than UgE. This suggests that even when maintaining grammatical concord, speakers of NiE exhibit greater stylistic flexibility and a more relaxed attitude toward informal features.

Taken together, NiE's contraction profile suggests a more structural than stylistic pathway of vernacularization. The relatively weak clustering of existential non-concord with contraction, combined with robust non-concord rates across tense contexts, indicates that non-concord in NiE is not merely a by-product of phonological reduction but is beginning to function as a grammatically available option within a still partly regulated system, consistent with its hybrid, partially endonormative profile (see Section 2.2).

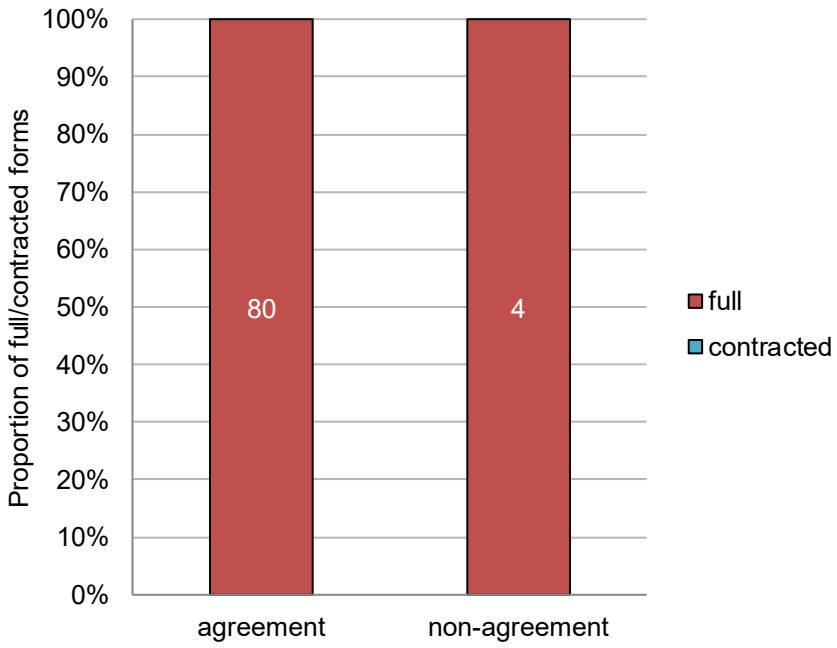

Figure 5. Verb contraction in existentials in Kenyan & Tanzanian English

K&TE by far presents the most categorical rejection of verb contraction in existential non-concord contexts among the three African varieties. As seen in Figure 5, in agreement contexts, the full verb form occurs in all tokens, and there are no instances of contracted forms. In line with this behavior, 100% of the tokens in such non-concord contexts use the full form and 0% the contraction. However, the rather low token count for present tense-existential non-concord in K&TE (n=4) limits the scope of interpretation of that specific feature. Importantly, other contraction forms unrelated to non-concord (e.g. *it's, that's, he's*, and general contractions like *can't, don't, wouldn't*) are common in the K&TE corpus. Therefore, the complete absence of *'s*-contraction in these contexts is striking and aligns with Collins' (2012) findings of 0% contraction in KenE, suggesting that contraction in such constructions remains strongly avoided in both KenE and TzE.

An internal comparison between the three African Englishes reveals that each variety exhibits a distinct pattern of contraction behavior shaped by stylistic preferences. In agreement contexts, K&TE displays the highest level of standardness with no contraction observed, followed by UgE (2.6%) and NiE (13.9%). This gradient reflects varying degrees of conservativeness, with K&TE representing the most formal variety and NiE the most relaxed in its contraction tolerance. In existential non-concord contexts, the ranking shifts in contraction usage, as UgE (45.8%) leads the way, followed by NiE (36.4%) and K&TE (0%). This inversion illustrates that UgE is the most sensitive to the interplay between grammatical deviance and phonological reduction, suggesting a more register-driven deployment of contraction. These contrasting distributions point to distinct pathways in the management of phonological reduction: UgE permits contraction selectively in marked, non-standard environments, NiE allows contraction more uniformly but without strong coupling to existential non-concord, and K&TE resists contraction categorically, reinforcing its strongly exonormative orientation.

The consistent rejection of contracted forms in both agreement and non-agreement contexts signals a highly formal register form, in which contracted verb forms are avoided regardless of grammatical environment. This strongly aligns with K&TE's high plural agreement rate and low existential non-concord tolerance analyzed in section 4.1, reinforcing the interpretation that East African varieties retain strong exonormative norms shaped by educational institutions and limited vernacular transmission.

Furthermore, the presented results highlight the contrast between East (UgE, K&TE) and West African (NiE) varieties. Both East African varieties display significantly more conservative contraction patterns than NiE. However, there is a central difference in how the two East African varieties engage with contraction since UgE exhibits a stylistic sensitivity that allows contraction in non-standard existential non-concord contexts, while K&TE avoids it regardless of grammatical environment. By contrast, West African NiE shows greater general tolerance for contraction across agreement types. While not particularly high in absolute terms, NiE's data mark it as the most flexible and prone to non-standard forms among the African varieties. This again reflects the colloquial orientation of English in Nigeria's sociolinguistic context, where English is partially acquired through oral transmission and growing pervasive media exposure.

Framed within Collins' (2012) broader typology of World Englishes, the African varieties again present a challenge to existing generalizations and observations in *there*-existential constructions. This shift reinforces the notion that African Englishes tend to use phonological reduction less, particularly in non-standard contexts such as existential non-concord. In addition, according to Collins, the contracted verb form acts as a facilitator of non-concord (Collins 2012: 64). The findings of the present study call this interpretation into question, since this relationship appears less robust in the African context. NiE, for instance, demonstrates a relatively high non-concord rate but comparatively low contraction rate, indicating that non-agreement may be structurally accepted even

when phonological reduction is avoided. Conversely, UgE exclusively tolerates contraction in non-concord contexts, but not in agreement ones, pointing to a more stylistic than structural integration of contracted verbs.

Ultimately, the discussed patterns once again support the broader trend identified in the previous subsections: East African Englishes exhibit greater grammatical conservatism, while West African Englishes demonstrate signs of nativized innovation. At the same time, the results highlight that contraction may support the rise of existential non-concord in some contexts, but may be selectively adopted in others, highly dependent on local linguistic norms.

4.4 Covert plural marker

This subsection discusses findings on the frequency of plural noun phrases that lack the overt plural marker *-s* in *there*-existentials with notional plural heads. As noted by Meechan and Foley (1994) and Collins (2012), the absence of overt plural marking on the head noun may serve as a secondary factor promoting existential non-concord. Such covert plurals reduce morphosyntactic transparency and may obscure the number features of the post-verbal NP, thereby facilitating singular verb agreement — similar to the effect observed with contracted verbs in the previous section. Figure 6 presents the distribution of such bare plural forms across the three African English varieties examined, alongside comparative data from Collins' World Englishes.

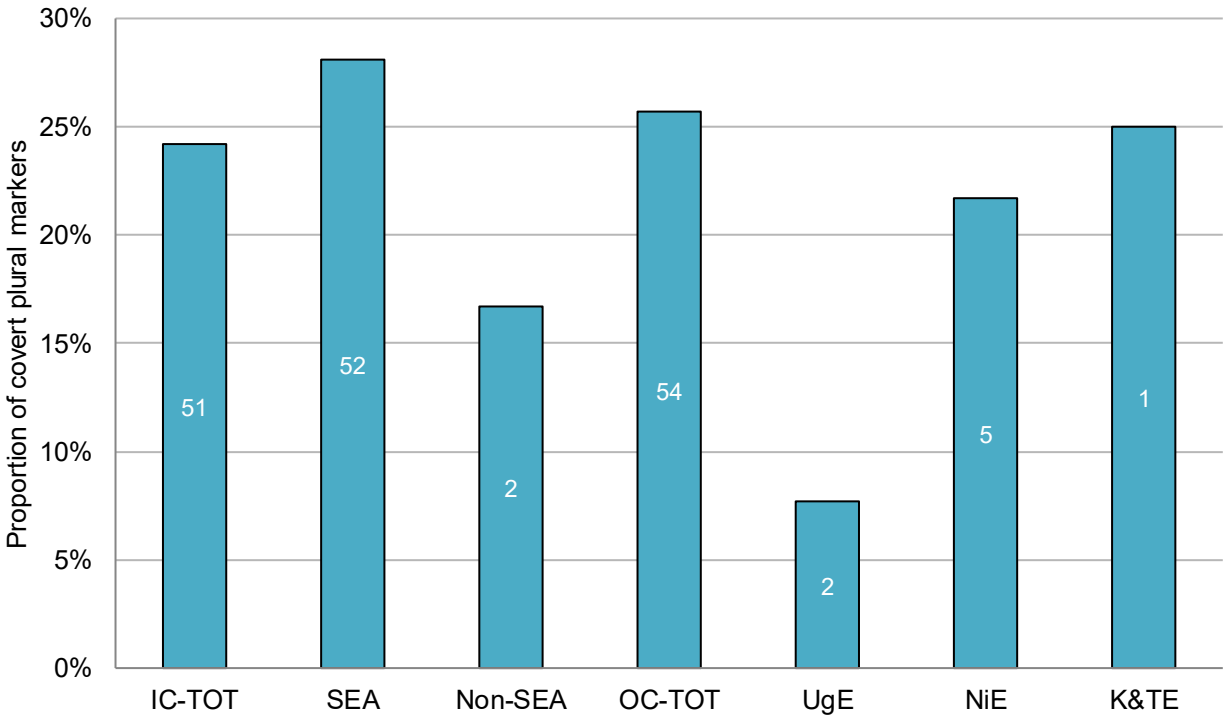

Figure 6. NPs with covert plural marker in existentials with existential non-concord (adapted from Collins 2012: 66)

Among the African varieties, UgE shows a low rate of existential constructions with unmarked plurals (7.7%), positioning UgE well below the average for OC varieties (25.7%). The results suggest that plural *-s* marking in UgE remains highly stable, indicating strong morphological regularity and prescriptive orientation toward overt grammatical marking. Strikingly, UgE patterns closely with American English (9.9%) and Indian English (6.7%), two varieties that appear as outliers within their respective IC and OC groupings. While the similar patterning of UgE and IndE is consistent with the close patterning of agreement frequencies presented in section 4.1, the relation to American English is unexpected. The convergence with these two varieties is intriguing due to the lack of geographic or historical proximity but may signal shared tendencies toward overt plural marking in general.
In NiE, covert plurals appear in 21.7% of cases, a rate much closer to the OC average (25.7%) and even closer to the IC average of 24.2%. However, this will not be interpreted as a significant pattern towards IC varieties due to the almost identical frequencies of IC and OC. Instead, it can be concluded that NiE shows the behavior most consistent with other World Englishes. NiE's rate implies that while standard plural morphology is generally maintained, a certain degree of tolerance exists for existential non-concord with unmarked plural forms. Given NiE's relatively high existential non-concord and past tense tolerance, this result may reflect a more flexible structure across multiple constraints of existential constructions.

K&TE registers a 25% rate of covert plural usage, patterning in line with the KenE rate (26.7%). Interestingly, this finding contradicts earlier sections in which K&TE appeared to be the most conservative of the African varieties in terms of agreement, tense, and contracted verb form. Instead, its results for covert plural marker pattern almost identically with OC norms (25.7%). However, this behavior is consistent with Collins' OC data, which displays that these frequencies can vary internally (e.g. HKE's 35.4%, IndE's 6.7%) (Collins 2012: 66).

In addition, K&TE is entirely consistent with previously observed trends for KenE, thereby indicating internal stability that holds even when the dataset includes TzE. This further strengthens the interpretation that Kenya and Tanzania share highly similar educational frameworks and language policy environments, which evidently contribute to parallel patterns of grammatical encoding. Therefore, the results do not undermine the broader prescriptive tendencies observed in K&TE across other constraints but rather reflect how regional educational norms yield consistent morphosyntactic behavior regardless of a pure Kenyan or a combined dataset.

In line with the other World Englishes, the African varieties demonstrate internal variability: UgE (7.7%) < NiE (21.7%) < K&TE (25%). While UgE maintains a strong preference for existential non-concord in overt plural marking contexts, NiE and K&TE display similar levels of tolerance for such patterns in unmarked head nouns. Given the minimal difference between the OC and IC averages, an interpretation of closer alignment with either group appears rather irrelevant in this specific aspect.

Moreover, these results offer a nuanced contribution to the typological positioning of African Englishes. On the one hand, UgE clearly patterns more conservatively than both OC and IC varieties, reaffirming this study's hypothesis that East African Englishes align with more prescriptive norms. On the other hand, K&TE's unexpectedly high covert plural rate with existential non-concord suggests that grammatical conservatism in this variety may not be uniform across domains. Meanwhile, NiE's result is consistent with the second hypothesis, which predicts that NiE may exhibit greater tolerance for grammatical variation. Interestingly, NiE converges with K&TE in this case rather than standing apart from it, highlighting a point of unexpected alignment between West and East African varieties. This convergence may arise from shared postcolonial educational legacies that permit selective morphological flexibility in informal spoken registers, even as K&TE remains tightly regulated in institutional domains. In essence, the covert plural marker reveals intra-regional fluidity, showing that African Englishes do not form a monolithic group but display domain-specific variation shaped by locally-grounded sociolinguistic and educational norms.

The distribution of covert plural marker in existentials with non-concord demonstrates the first instance where the two East African varieties (UgE and K&TE) significantly diverge from one another. While the previous constraints exposed a consistent distinction between the patterning of East and West African Englishes, covert plural marker displayed that such regional alignments do not behave uniformly across all variables. Instead, the omission of the plural marker highlights that internal variation exists not only within their IC or OC group but within regionally grouped varieties.

In sum, the inclusion of African Englishes shifts the overall average rate of covert plural usage in existential constructions to 21.9%. This figure slightly lowers the total average by 2.9%, underscoring once again the importance of including different African Englishes to refine the complex understanding of standard and non-standard norms across World Englishes.

4.5 Bare vs. extended existentials

This section focuses on the distribution of bare versus extended *there*-existentials in non-concord contexts in the three African varieties. Collins (2012) argues that extended forms often represent informal, spontaneous speech patterns and tend to correlate with higher rates of non-agreement. Figure 7 presents the frequencies for both of these constructions with existential non-concord.

UgE patterns almost evenly between the two types, with 53.8% bare and 46.2% extended existentials. This balance suggests that UgE tends to allow more complex syntactic structures in these constructions. Compared to other English varieties, UgE's extended existential rate is relatively high and aligns closely with American and British English (both 46.3%), despite UgE otherwise patterning closer to the OC average. NiE displays particularly noteworthy results in relation to the initial hypothesis that it might pattern slightly more toward IC varieties. With the highest proportion of extended existentials (68%) among the represented varieties and only 32% of tokens classified as bare, NiE clearly favors the more complex existential form. This finding runs counter to the general

prediction that existential non-concord is more likely to co-vary with bare structures. Interestingly, NiE's rate of extended forms exceeds not only the OC total (40.7%) but all SEA varieties, even approaching the highest global rate reported in KenE (50%).

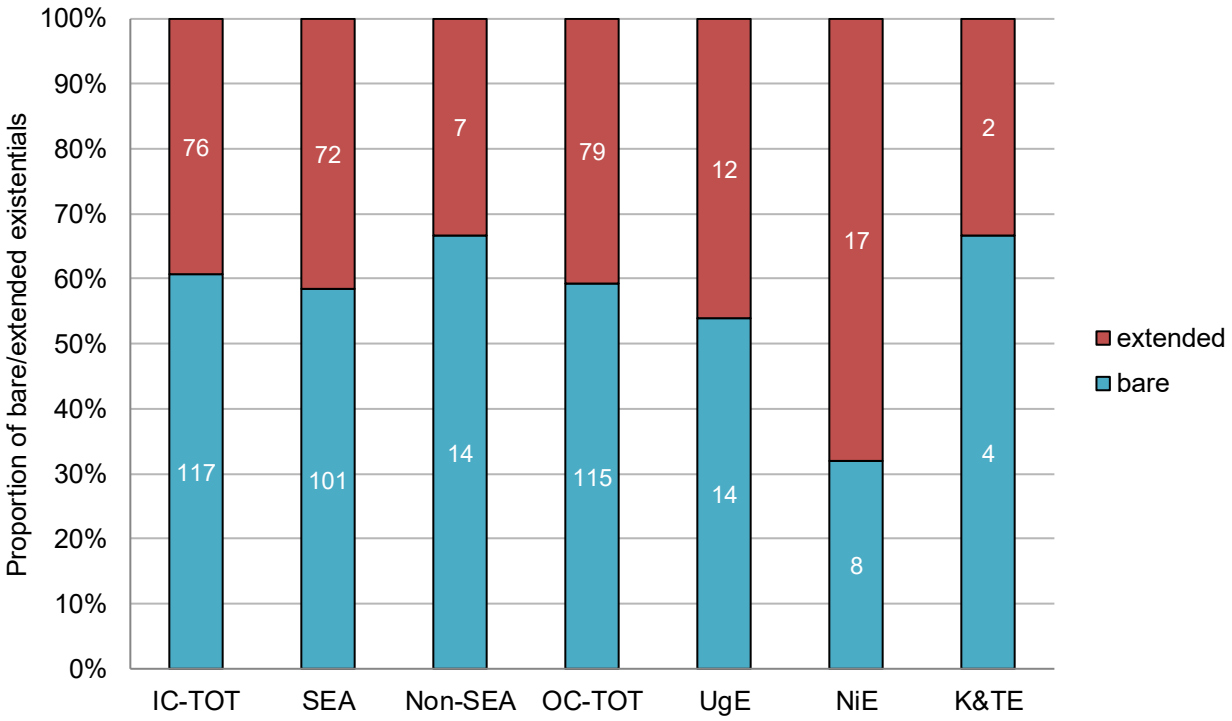

Figure 7. Bare vs. extended existentials with existential non-concord (adapted from Collins 2012: 66)

This strong preference for extended structures is consistent with NiE's overall high existential non-concord tolerance, finally drawing a connection between one feature (existential non-concord) co-varying with another (extension). Ultimately, these features suggest that NiE is undergoing structural elaboration rather than simplification in colloquial contexts. This may reflect a grammatical system influenced by both colloquialization and multilingual contact, characterizing NiE as a dynamic variety where morphosyntactic innovation does not necessarily entail reduction.

K&TE exhibits the lowest extended existential rate at 33.3%, mirroring the Non-SEA total (33.3%). Inconsistent with this study's hypothesis, K&TE extended existentials more closely to IC than OC norms, even though the difference in frequencies is only slight: OC (40.7%) < IC (39.4%) < K&TE (33.3%). Still, the results fit well into K&TE's overall highly conservative tendencies in verb agreement, tense behavior, and contraction avoidance. Notably, the consistency between KenE and K&TE is maintained by the shared educational system and curriculum models between Kenya and Tanzania, which were discussed in section 2.2. These shared systems likely promote standard structures in spoken registers and limit syntactic variation, such as extension in *there*-existentials.

An internal comparison between the African varieties reveals a clear gradient in extended existential use: K&TE (33.3%) < UgE (46.2%) < NiE (68%). This mirrors previous sections, where

NiE consistently exhibited the most flexibility and structural variation, while K&TE maintained the most conservative profile, and UgE once again positioned itself in a transitional position. The typological groupings of IC, OC, SEA, and Non-SEA varieties provide limited guidance, since extended existential rates vary substantially even within these groupings. Likewise, the results show such variation within African varieties and even within regional groupings, such as East Africa.

Similarly, the results expose that varieties at the same developmental phase can still diverge considerably in their use of bare and extended structures. For instance, the average extended existential rate among Phase 3 varieties in Collins' dataset — PhilE (43.2%), HKE (44.6%), IndE (29.4%), and KenE (50%) — is approximately 41.8%. However, UgE and K&TE are assumed to fall within the same stage and display different behavior. While UgE aligns with the Phase 3 average at 46.2%, K&TE diverges sharply at 33.3%. Interestingly, K&TE patterns closely to IndE, which is the only outlier in Collins' observation on evolutionary stage (Collins 2012: 67). However, this result is to be observed with caution due to a very low number of actual existential non-concord tokens in the K&TE corpus (n = 6). This contrast highlights that evolutionary phase alone does not account for existential clause preferences.

NiE is presumably positioned within Phase 4 or early Phase 5 and stands out as an outlier even within its evolutionary grouping as well. NiE's extended existential rate of 68% far exceeds that of other Phase 4–5 varieties, such as American and British English, and even surpasses Australian English (32.7%), a Phase 5 variety. This indicates that NiE has undergone a locally specific trajectory of structural innovation not parallel to other comparable varieties. Notably, this cannot be attributed to a limited token number, as NiE has almost the same number of total non-concord tokens as UgE (NiE n = 25, UgE n = 26), but still exhibits more extended tokens (NiE n = 17, UgE n = 12), signaling a genuine preference for existential non-concord in extended clauses.

Overall, the distribution of bare and extended existentials in African Englishes is mostly in line with other World Englishes, only minimally shifting the total average rate of extended constructions. NiE presents the only inconsistent variety and highlights once again that regionally grouped varieties may diverge significantly depending on the linguistic feature under examination. Importantly, they underscore that African varieties of English are prone to intra-continental variation and should therefore be treated as linguistically diverse entities rather than a homogeneous group.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the morphosyntactic behavior of existential *there*-constructions in Ugandan English, Nigerian English, and Kenyan & Tanzanian English. Based on Collins' (2012) typology of World Englishes and Schneider's Dynamic Model, it was hypothesized that all three varieties would pattern similarly to OC Englishes, while displaying intraregional variation shaped by sociolinguistic and educational contexts. These expectations were partially confirmed, although several noteworthy divergences were exposed.

UgE showed strong alignment with OC norms, particularly in terms of high plural agreement (90%) and overall low existential non-concord tolerance (7.4%). Although existential non-concord occurs in both tense environments, its distribution does not conform to the pattern reported in previous research, with past tense contexts showing a higher rate (16.7%) than present tense contexts (7.4%). Nevertheless, the low overall frequency of non-concord confirms the strongly conservative profile of the variety. Its near-categorical preference for full verb forms in agreement contexts (97.1%) contrasted with a notable rise in contraction in non-concord contexts (45.8%), suggesting a sensitivity to stylistic register. This implies that non-standard features are acceptable in UgE, but only under informal or phonologically reduced conditions. These patterns support Uganda's placement in Phase 3 of Schneider's model and reflect strong exonormative influence of formal education.

NiE, in contrast, exhibits a more variable and hybrid profile. Its plural agreement rate (81%) and non-concord frequency (17%) position it near the OC average. However, unlike the East African varieties, NiE displays relatively similar rates of existential non-concord across verb tenses, its past tense frequency (20%) mirroring IC varieties like American and Australian English, indicating that tense exerts only a limited constraining effect on the feature. This balanced distribution reinforces the interpretation of NiE as the most structurally flexible variety in the dataset. Interestingly, NiE also tolerates contraction in agreement contexts (14.4%) and maintains a moderate rate in existential non-concord contexts (36.4%), indicating broader acceptance of colloquial and reduced forms. These results, supported by prior findings on American influence in Nigerian English (Olatoye 2025), suggest structural nativization is advancing in NiE, placing it between Phases 3 and 4.

K&TE presented the most contradictory pattern. Its high plural agreement rate (91.6%) and extremely low non-concord frequency (5.3%) indicate conservative grammar usage. Yet paradoxically, 33.3% of its non-concord tokens appear in past tense contexts, surpassing both UgE and NiE's rates. Furthermore, verb contraction was entirely absent in non-concord contexts and only marginal (3.1%) in agreement contexts, reinforcing its strong aversion to phonological reduction. These contradictions likely stem from the Tanzanian component of the corpus, which is known for its strong exonormative orientation and formal English acquisition through the institutionalization of English. These findings tentatively place K&TE in early Phase 3, though the Tanzanian component suggests a profile more consistent with an earlier developmental stage.

Importantly, the results of this study challenge the often-assumed prediction that tolerance for one non-standard feature (e.g. existential non-concord) correlates with tolerance for others (e.g. past tense usage or contraction). For example, while NiE shows relative alignment, with its high non-concord frequency coinciding with a comparatively even distribution across tense environments, K&TE demonstrates that a variety may strongly restrict existential non-concord overall while still exhibiting relatively high rates within a specific grammatical environment (e.g., past tense). This

suggests that tense selection and agreement variation may be influenced by independent sociolinguistic or discourse-level factors and should therefore be examined separately.

Similarly, contraction patterns may act as a trigger of existential non-concord in IC and SEA varieties, with non-agreement emerging as part of an informal, colloquial register. In the analyzed African varieties, however, contraction appears less tightly coupled to non-concord. This implies that existential non-concord in African Englishes is not always phonologically masked and may reflect distinct local sociolinguistic attitudes, educational norms, and degrees of vernacularization. Overall, these findings confirm this study's thesis of African Englishes patterning closer to OC than IC varieties, but the unexpectedly low frequencies underscore the distinction between structural grammaticalization and stylistic informality in analyses of morphosyntactic variation.

A broader implication of these findings lies in their confirmation of previous research on postcolonial Englishes and their alignment with Schneider's Dynamic Model. Though all three African Englishes examined here are placed between Phases 3 and 4 of the model, the findings demonstrate varied linguistic behaviors: UgE remains largely exonormative but shows register-sensitive non-standard variation, NiE exhibits deeper grammatical change and hybridization, and K&TE reflects fragmented patterns likely shaped by complex sociolinguistic pressures. This confirms Schneider's (2007) assertion that a developmental phase should be understood as a broad sociolinguistic context rather than a strict predictor of uniform morphosyntactic change, with feature-specific development occurring within varieties.

Ultimately, this study underscores the need for a more differentiated and regionally responsive approach to investigating World Englishes. Internal diversity among African Englishes, even when situated at similar points in historical development, challenges broad typological generalizations and calls for more attention to educational policy, language transmission pathways, and stylistic constraints in shaping variation.

Nevertheless, limitations such as the small corpus size for TzE and the exclusion of factors like determiner type, clause polarity, and speaker variables (e.g. age, gender, region) leave room for further research. This means that further studies should expand the scope of grammatical features analyzed and incorporate richer sociolinguistic data, such as attitude surveys or classroom observations. More balanced and comprehensive corpora will be essential in developing a fuller understanding of existential agreement and its variation across African Englishes.

In conclusion, existential agreement and its conditioning factors provide a productive lens through which the tension between local innovation and prescriptive norms can be examined, highlighting both the convergences and divergences that define the grammatical evolution of African Englishes.

6. References

Adebileje, Adebola & Aderonke Akinola. 2020. Teaching and learning English as a second language in Nigeria: Examining evolving approaches and methods. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 10(9). 1015–1024. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1009.02.

Asante, Mabel. 2012. Variation in subject-verb concord in Ghanaian English. *World Englishes, Linguistics, Language Studies* 31(2). 208–225. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2012.01751.x.

Breivik, Leiv E. 1981. On the interpretation of existential *there*. *Language* 57(1). 1–25. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/414284.

Britain, David & Andrea Sudbury. 2002. There's sheep and there's penguins: Convergence, 'drift', and 'slant' in New Zealand and Falkland Island English. In Mari C. Jones & Edith Esch (eds.), *Language Change: The Interplay of Internal, External and Extra-Linguistic Factors*, 209–240. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter Mouton. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110892598.209.

Bwenge, Charles. 2012. English in Tanzania: A linguistic cultural perspective. *International Journal of Language Translation and Intercultural Communication* 1. 167–182. DOI: https://doi.org/10.12681/ijltic.18.

Collins, Peter. 2012. Singular agreement in *there*-existentials: An intervarietal corpus-based study. *English World-Wide* 33(1). 53–68. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1075/eww.33.1.03col.

De Vos, Mark. 2013. Homogeneity in subject-verb concord in South African English. *Language Matters* 44(1). 58–77. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2012.744081.

Foyewa, Richard A. 2020. A review of the status of English language in the Nigerian school system. *International Journal of English Language Teaching* 8(6). 63–69.

Greenbaum, Sidney & Gerald Nelson. 1996. The International Corpus of English (ICE) project. *World Englishes* 15(1). 3–15.

Hay, Jennifer & Daniel Schreier. 2004. Reversing the trajectory of language change: Subject-verb agreement with *be* in New Zealand English. *Language Variation and Change* 16(3). 209–235. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954394504163047.

Higgins, Christina M. 2009. Sociolinguistics of East Africa. In Martin J. Ball (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Sociolinguistics Around the World*, 216–225. New York: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203869659-25.

Hudson-Ettle, Diana M. & Josef Schmied. 1999. *Manual to accompany the East African component of the International Corpus of English*. Chemnitz: Chemnitz University of Technology.

Isingoma, Bebwa & Christiane Meierkord. 2022. Between exonormative traditions and local acceptance: A corpus-linguistic study of modals of obligation and spatial prepositions in spoken Ugandan English. *Open Linguistics* 8(1). 87–107. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2022-0185.

Jespersen, Otto. 1924. The philosophy of grammar. https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.282299/page/n153/mode/2up?view=theater (17 June, 2025).

Kortmann, Bernd, Kerstin Lunkenheimer & Katharina Ehret (eds.). 2020. The electronic world atlas of varieties of English. https://ewave-atlas.org/ (20 June, 2025).

Krejci, Bonnie & Katherine Hilton. 2017. There's three variants: Agreement variation in existential *there* constructions. *Language Variation and Change* 29(2). 187–204. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954394517000096.

Mapunda, Evance J. & Mwajuma S. Vuzo. 2023. Implicit teaching of English grammar and its implications for the building of communicative competence in Tanzania. *Journal of Linguistics and Language in Education* 17(2). 81–106. DOI: https://doi.org/10.56279/jlle.v17i2.4.

Martinez-Insua, Ana E. & Ignacio M. Palacios-Martinez. 2003. A corpus-based approach to non-concord in present day English existential *there* constructions. *English Studies* 84(3). 262–283. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1076/enst.84.3.262.16852.

Meechan, Marjory & Michele Foley. 1994. On resolving disagreement: Linguistic theory and variation – *There's bridges*. *Language Variation and Change* 6(1). 63–85. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954394500001587.

Meyerhoff, Miriam & James A. Walker. 2013. An existential problem: The sociolinguistic monitor and variation in existential constructions on Bequia (St. Vincent and the Grenadines). *Language in Society* 42. 407–428. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404513000456.

Michieka, Martha M. 2005. English in Kenya: A sociolinguistic profile. *World Englishes* 24(2). 173–186. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2005.00402.x.

Modu, Ali. 2018. Nigerian English and curriculum development: Challenges and prospects. *Yobe Journal of Language, Literature and Culture (YOJOLLAC)* 6. 110–119.

Nankindu, Prosperous. 2020. The history of educational language policies in Uganda: Lessons from the past. *American Journal of Educational Research* 8(9). 643–652. DOI: https://doi.org/10.12691/education-8-9-5.

Olatoye, Temitayo. 2025. The Americanization of Nigerian English spelling and punctuation. *World Englishes* 45(1). 76-95. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12724.

Pham, Teresa & Sven Leuckert. 2025. Introduction: New perspectives on on-canonical English syntax. In Teresa Pham & Sven Leuckert (eds.), *Non-canonical English syntax: Concepts, methods, and approaches*, 1–13. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863858.001.

Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech & Jan Svartvik. 1985. *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London and New York: Longman.

Schmied, Josef. 2006. East African Englishes. In Braj B. Kachru, Yamuna Kachru, & Cecil L. Nelson (eds.), *The Handbook of World Englishes*, 188-202. Oxford: Blackwell. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470757598.ch12.

Schmied, Josef. 2012. Tanzanian English. https://www.tu-chemnitz.de/phil/english/sections/ling/download/000_Schmied120816.pdf (25 June, 2025.)

Schneider, Edgar W. 2007. The evolution of postcolonial Englishes: The Dynamic Model. In Edgar W. Schneider (ed.), *Postcolonial English: Varieties Around the World*, 21–70. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511618901.005.

Tagliamonte, Sali. 1998. *Was/were* variation across the generations: View from the city of York. *Language Variation and Change* 10(2). 153–191. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954394500001277.

Wolf, Hans-Georg. 2020. East and West African Englishes. In Andy Kirkpatrick (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes*, 2nd edn, 216–232. New York: Routledge. DOI:

7. Appendix

Abbreviations used: American English (AmE), Australian English (AusE), British English (BrE), Inner Circle Total (IC-TOT), Singaporean English (SingE), Philippine English (PhilE), Hong Kong English (HKE), South East Asian English (SEA), Indian English (IndE), Kenyan English (KenE), Non-South East Asian English (Non-SEA), Outer Circle Total (OC-TOT), Ugandan English (UgE), Nigerian English (NiE), Kenyan and Tanzanian English (K&TE).

Table 2. Verb agreement in existentials with plural NP in World Englishes (adapted from Collins 2012: 63). Absolute frequencies in parentheses.

	AmE	**AusE**	**BrE**	**IC-TOT**	**SingE**	**PhilE**	**HKE**	**SEA**	**IndE**	**KenE**	**Non-SEA**	**OC-TOT**	**UgE**	**NiE**	**K&TE**	**TOTAL**
present (in %)	48.8 (45)	37.6 (70)	68.1 (145)	52.4 (260)	71.5 (128)	77.0 (167)	74.0 (361)	74.2 (656)	86.8 (210)	92.7 (66)	89.9 (276)	79.9 (932)	**90.0 (312)**	**81.0 (120)**	**91.6 (87)**	**75.6 (1711)**
past (in %)	44.4 (41)	52.7 (98)	25.4 (54)	39.9 (193)	19.6 (35)	17.1 (37)	20.7 (101)	19.6 (173)	7.0 (17)	5.8 (4)	6.4 (21)	14.8 (194)	**7.4 (26)**	**17.0 (25)**	**5.3 (6)**	**19.1 (444)**
No agreement possible (in %)	6.9 (7)	9.7 (18)	6.6 (14)	7.7 (39)	8.9 (16)	6.0 (13)	5.3 (26)	6.2 (55)	6.2 (15)	1.5 (1)	3.8 (16)	5.3 (71)	**2.6 (9)**	**2.0 (3)**	**3.2 (2)**	**5.3 (124)**

Table 3. Verb contraction in existentials with existential non-concord in World Englishes in % (adapted from Collins 2012: 65). Absolute frequencies in parentheses.

AmE	**AusE**	**BrE**	**IC-TOT**	**SingE**	**PhilE**	**HKE**	**SEA**	**IndE**	**KenE**	**Non-SEA**	**OC-TOT**	**UgE**	**NiE**	**K&TE**	**TOTAL**
97.1 (33)	98.7 (77)	96.2 (50)	97.6 (160)	62.5 (20)	70.6 (24)	69.4 (68)	68.3 (112)	16.7 (2)	0 (0)	10.0 (2)	62.0 (114)	**45.8 (11)**	**36.4 (8)**	**0 (0)**	51.7 (293)

Table 4. NPs with covert plural marker in existentials with existential non-concord in World Englishes in % (adapted from Collins 2012: 66). Absolute frequencies in parentheses.

	AmE	AusE	BrE	IC-TOT	SingE	PhilE	HKE	SEA	IndE	KenE	Non-SEA	OC-TOT	UgE	NiE	K&TE	TOTAL
	9.9 (4)	31.6 (31)	30.2 (16)	24.2 (51)	21.2 (8)	24.2 (9)	35.4 (35)	28.1 (52)	6.7 (1)	26.7 (1)	16.7 (2)	25.7 (54)	**7.7 (2)**	**21.7 (5)**	**25.0 (1)**	21.9 (165)

Table 5. Bare vs. extended existentials with existential non-concord in World Englishes (adapted from Collins 2012: 66). Absolute frequencies in parentheses.

	AmE	AusE	BrE	IC-TOT	SingE	PhilE	HKE	SEA	IndE	KenE	Non-SEA	OC-TOT	UgE	NiE	K&TE	TOTAL
bare (in %)	53.7 (22)	67.3 (66)	53.7 (29)	60.6 (117)	68.6 (24)	56.8 (21)	55.4 (56)	58.4 (101)	70.6 (12)	50.0 (2)	66.7 (14)	59.3 (115)	**53.8 (14)**	**32.0 (8)**	**66.7 (4)**	**58.0 (258)**
extended (in %)	46.3 (19)	32.7 (32)	46.3 (25)	39.4 (76)	31.4 (11)	43.2 (16)	44.6 (45)	41.6 (72)	29.4 (5)	50.0 (2)	33.3 (7)	40.7 (79)	**46.2 (12)**	**68.0 (17)**	**33.7 (2)**	**42.0 (186)**