

Semantic and Information-Structural Aspects of *be home to**

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of the *be home to* construction in English, particularly in comparison with other so-called existential or presentational constructions such as *there is*. It is shown how the existence of only a surprisingly limited number of types of entity can be expressed with this construction, and a link is drawn between this constraint and the obvious metaphorical origins of the construction. Additionally, the information structure of *be home to* is compared with other semantically similar constructions, and it is shown that *be home to* occupies a niche among these constructions in taking the location of existence as the topic of an unmarked topic-comment structure.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the construction *be home to* (e.g. *Australia is home to over ten species of deadly spider*) and looks at its typical usage situations and the factors which motivate its use as compared to other constructions which partially overlap with *be home to* semantically.

No two constructions will have exactly equivalent meanings and be used in exactly equivalent ways. One good example of this is DATIVE ALTERNATION, where the DITRANSITIVE and PREPOSITIONAL DATIVE constructions have a significant semantic overlap with regards to some kind of transfer.¹ Nevertheless, speakers make a choice between these constructions on the basis of a multitude of factors which “pertain to practically all levels linguistic structure: morpho-phonology, syntax, semantics, and information packaging” (Hilpert 2014: 187).

We can observe a similarly significant semantic overlap between *be home to* and the quintessential existential construction, the THERE construction, as pertains to the existence of an entity (in a location). As we will see in the following section and throughout this paper as a whole, much of what can be expressed with one of the constructions can be expressed with the other, too. However, just as with the dative alternation example above, there exist factors which can be shown to motivate speaker’s choice of one construction over the other. The two which I find most compelling and which will be explored in this paper are the semantic and information-structural factors. An additional point of interest with this particular construction is its obvious metaphorical origins (being the literal home to something → being

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¹ Pinker (2013: 163) makes this overlap explicit, saying that if a verb in the prepositional dative has the meaning “X causes Y to go to Z” and a verb in the ditransitive has the meaning “X changes the state of Z by means of causing Y to go to Z” then “the semantic representation of the second [verb] actually contains [that] of the first” (Pinker 2013: 164).

the place of its existence) and I show in section 3.2 how this metaphor still constrains the types of entities which can be expressed as existing using this construction. The format of this paper is as follows: first a brief overview of *be home to* as a construction is given. Then, the semantic and information-structural aspects of the construction are examined in that order.

2. *Be home to* as a construction

Let us first refresh ourselves on the nature of this construction. Our intuition and experiences as competent, adult speakers of English² tell us that *be home to* is a frequently reoccurring conventional expression for talking about the existence of something in a place. We are also aware of how the phrase metaphorically extends the literal home-dwelling situation to apply to a range of non-typical ‘homes’ (regions, geographical features, etc.) and a range of non-typical ‘inhabitants’ (animals, plants, even non-living entities such as buildings and organizations).

This metaphorical mapping from the home-dwelling situation is the most intuitive factor motivating use of this construction. As we will see in section 3.2, this construction is frequently used with wildlife and plants, often in sentences which emphasize the rarity or endangered status of these entities. A concerned writer could deliberately make use of the metaphorical mapping between the home-dwelling situation and these endangered creatures in their habitats: ‘This is their home just as your home where you live is yours,’ the writer might be thought to be saying. Even excluding such deliberate rhetorical tactics, the obvious overlaps between such animal habitats and our prototypical sense of ‘home’, such as being a place to live, and providing shelter and safety, may make the use of this construction unsurprising.

What, though, to make of examples talking about relatively mundane, non-living entities such as those in (1) below (sourced from the British National Corpus)?

- (1) a. As well as great views, it is home to [...] a quarry.
 b. One ‘slot’ can be home to as many as five satellites as long as they do not use exactly the same frequency.

In such examples, the metaphorical significance of *home* is weakened, though it is possible to see aspects of the prototypical home, such as being a somewhat permanent place of existence, as being relevant here as we will see in section 3.2. Nevertheless, in (1) the construction seems to be being used primarily to talk about the existence of an entity in a location. In other words, it is not immediately apparent what nuance would be lost were *be home to* to be replaced with other existential constructions such as *THERE* or the lexical construction *exist* in the above examples. Of course, a feature of *be home to* is that the location of existence cannot be null-instantiated (as opposed to the optional prepositional phrase in *THERE*), but the location can still be naturally stated in other constructions, too.

² Of course, there is the possibility some individual difference here. While I find it difficult to imagine an adult native speaker of English not having this construction in their repertoire, I am sure Taylor (2012: 59) felt much the same way when writing about *much the best* (“*They provided much the best explanation*”) for example, and that is a construction I did not recall having heard before.

- (1') a. As well as great views, there is also a quarry there.
 b. As many as five satellites can exist in one 'slot'.

This overlap motivates my investigation in the following two sections, which will show how the usage of *be home to* is constrained by its metaphorical origins even in the cases of non-living entities such as those in (1) (section 3.2), and how *be home to* occupies an information-structural niche among the set of existential constructions (section 3.3).

3. Analysis

3.1. Method

I searched the British National Corpus (BNC) via Sketch Engine for *be home to* (with *be* as a lemma), excluding 14 unwanted results (e.g. *it was home to bed for a good night's sleep*) to leave 176 instances of this construction. These sentences were then tagged in a bottom-up manner for a number of significant-seeming factors such as: living and non-living entities; frequently reoccurring categories of entity such as human, plant, building, etc.; frequently reoccurring semantic factors such as ideas of diversity and rarity of the entity; and significant information-structural factors such as the entity being marked by a definite marker.

I will continue to use the term 'entity' to refer to the thing which is proposed to exist in the existential constructions we look at (taken from the name of the corresponding frame element in FrameNet's EXISTENCE frame).

3.2. Semantic factors

Fillmore describes the prototypical meaning of home as follows:

- (i) A home is a place where people live.
- (ii) The people who live in the home are members of an intact family.
- (iii) The home is comfortable and familiar.
- (iv) Each member of the family has unquestioned use of at least some of the objects and facilities in the home.
- (v) One lives in the home throughout one's childhood and early youth.
- (vi) There are many reasons to go away from the home temporarily (shopping, play, travel, education, work, military service, etc.) but after these temporary absences, the natural and expected thing is to return home. When one reaches the age appropriate for seeking one's fortune, one leaves home and, sooner or later, founds or becomes a part of a new home.

(Fillmore 1992: 10; some minor formatting changes)

In the usage of the *be home to* construction which maps place our concept of home to a place of existence, there is to a greater or lesser extent an overlap between the prototypical home and the situation depicted using the construction. It also appears (unsurprisingly?) that this overlap is greater when we use the construction to depict entities which better fit our idea of the prototypical home-dweller. There were a

rather limited number of categories of entity which appeared with a significant frequency in this construction: these were, in intuitive order of prototypical home-dweller status, humans, animals, plants, communities/clubs/organizations/military groups, scenery, industries and buildings.

Figure 1 below shows the frequencies of tags for types of entity which often reoccurred in the data. Single sentences were given more than one such tag when different categories of entity appeared in the same sentence (animals and plants being the most frequent combination). Additionally, the military nature of a number of the entities was noticed late in the tagging process and sentences with this tag are also tagged for categories such as ‘organization’ or ‘building’. While the bottom-up and overlapping nature of the tagging may impede comparison of the frequency of categories, Figure 1 is intended to give an overview of the kinds of the entities which frequently appeared in the data.

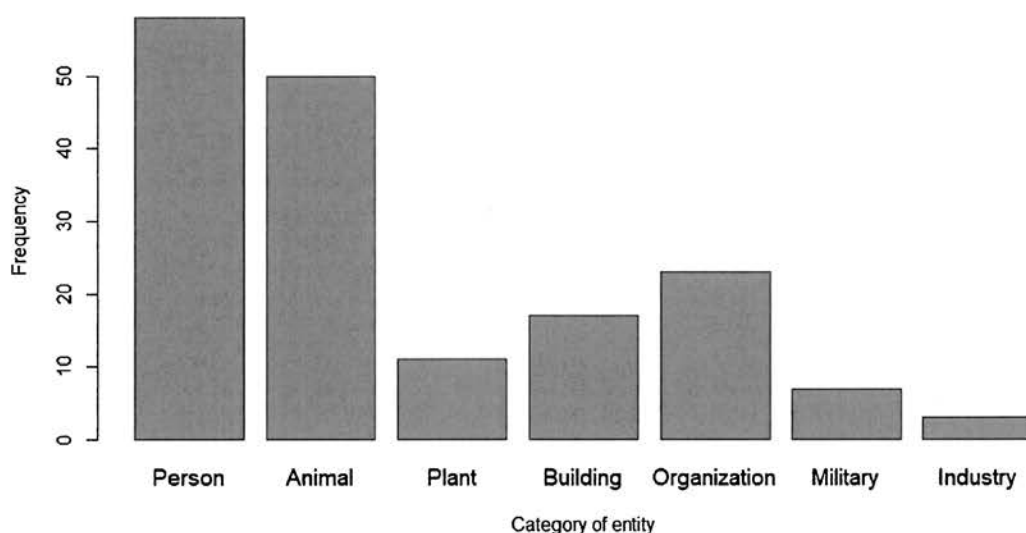


Figure 1: Bar-plot of the frequency of some reoccurring categories of entity

Focusing on the most typical home-dwellers first, the majority (65%) of the results contain a LIVING ENTITY, with human entities (58) being slightly more frequent than animals (50), and plants a clear minority at 11. A couple of examples are given below:

- (2) The park is home to a fascinating and varied collection of mammals, birds, reptiles, fish and invertebrates from all over the world.
- (3) London Caribbean households typically are home to speakers of several different language varieties.

Sentences containing such entities frequently stressed how rare and endangered, as well as how diverse they are. 20 results explicitly stated the rarity/endangered status, and 24 results similarly stated the diversity of the entities. In the end, this meant that 28% of sentences in the living-entities group (compared to just 2% in the non-living-entities group) explicitly contained such semantic content.

- (4) Some 150 wolves are likely to be killed this year in the region, which is home to the delta herd of caribou, whose numbers have fallen from 10,700 to 4,500.
- (5) The area is home to the Tawahka Indians - one of the last hunter-gathering tribes left in Central America.

The frequency of semantic contexts such as rarity and endangerment in the living-entity group can be explained by its fitting with aspects of the prototypical home such as the safety and shelter a home provides – endangered animals are often in such a state due to loss of habitat. Additionally, as I suggested in section 2, a careful writer can play up these mappings from the prototypical home for rhetorical effect.

Moving on to the less prototypical home-dwellers now, we are left with 35% of our sentences containing NON-LIVING ENTITIES. This is a significant number, and as we will see, the sentences in this group display rather different characteristics to those from the group above. First, in this group we have some relatively prototypical home-dwelling entities: communities, clubs, and military groups. These at least strongly imply human activity: people who use the ‘home’ to live in or as a base for their activities. Additionally, we see some very non-typical home-dwellers as entities including 17 buildings, 23 organizations and 3 industries. Examples of these are given below:

- (6) A quiet turning in Hove is home to the British Engineerium: the South's own museum of steam power housed in the magnificent Victorian pumping station.
- (7) This may be home to Mercedes, Bosch, Kodak and Porsche to name but four, but it also offers endless greenery from the banks of the winding Neckar to the baroque palace in the historic heart of the city.
- (8) The Yangtze River valley supplies 40-70 per cent of China's annual grain harvests, and is home to nearly three-quarters of the country's heavy industry.

The rather limited number of categories for entity does however show that even at this end of the scale the idea of ‘home’ must be conferring some limitations on possible entities. These kind of constraints on the entity are not seen in the THERE construction, or with *exist* as a lexical construction. Considering entities such as organizations, buildings and scenery, one common characteristic seems to be the permanency of their existence in that place. Recall (vi) from the Fillmore quotation at the start of this section. Like a prototypical home in which we tend to dwell for years before moving (only leaving temporarily), these buildings and scenery are rooted to that place. This, I believe, can account for the differences in nuance and naturalness of the constructed examples below:

- (9) a. There is a flu bug currently going around Tokyo.
- b. ??Tokyo is home to a flu bug which is currently going around.
- c. ?Tokyo is home to a flu bug.

(9a) is a natural sentence expressing the spread of influenza currently seen in Tokyo. In (9b), the transient

nature of this event (stated explicitly in *currently going around*) conflicts with the typically permanent nature of the home in this construction even for the most non-prototypical home-dwellers as discussed above. In (9c) the interpretation forced by the construction is that Tokyo is a more permanent place where this flu bug exists, though this conflicts with our real world knowledge of the nature of such bugs. Changing the infectious disease to one we typically think of as longer lingering, the bubonic plague for example, makes for a much more natural sentence: *I wouldn't go to Tokyo if I were you; it's home to the bubonic plague.*

Thus, even in cases where the overlap with the prototypical home is not immediately apparent, we can see that the need to have some level of overlap with this prototype puts restrictions on the types of existence situations which can be depicted with this construction. This appears in the data as certain entities (such as buildings among the non-living entities) being highly frequent.

3.3. Information-structural factors

Another significant motivating factor is the information structure of the construction. This becomes apparent when we compare the *be home to* construction with other constructions which have a significant semantic overlap. (10a) below is a sentence from the BNC while (10b) and (10c) are constructed examples expressing the same situation using different constructions.

- (10) a. The twin counties of Suffolk and Norfolk are home to several courses in the higher reaches of the golfing firmament. (*be home to* CxN)
- b. There are several courses in the higher reaches of the golfing firmament in the twin counties of Suffolk and Norfolk. (THERE CxN)
- c. In the twin counties of Suffolk and Norfolk, there are several courses in the higher reaches of the golfing firmament. (THERE CxN with marked PP)

The first thing to note is that the place of existence, relegated to a sentence-final prepositional phrase in (10b), is the grammatical subject of the *be home to* construction. On the level of information structure, the *be home to* construction forms a TOPIC-COMMENT structure with the place as the TOPIC. Topic as used here is defined as “the thing which the proposition expressed by the sentence is about” (Lambrecht 1994: 118). ABOUTNESS as used here is characterized by how we normally make our sentences relevant to the current discourse by making them ‘about’ “what is a matter of standing current interest or concern.” (Lambrecht 1994: 119). This means that speakers using the *be home to* construction are identifying the place as a current matter of interest and making a proposition about it: that it is a place where an entity exists.

The existential (or presentational) THERE construction in (10b) on the other hand has been variously called “thetic”, “purely rhematic”, and “topicless” (McNally 2011: 1833). Rather than conveying a proposition about a topic of current interest, its pragmatic function is to introduce a new entity into the discourse.

Finally, what can we say of (10c), which features a THERE construction with the prepositional phrase expressing the place of existence moved from its normal position to a marked position at the head of the

sentence? Systematic Functional Linguistics scholars have identified the initial PP as the THEME (Halliday 1994: 38-39) or part of an EXTENDED THEME (Forey 2002: 34-35), ‘theme’ here being a broad concept which includes and goes beyond Lambrecht’s ‘topic’, being defined as “the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned” (Halliday 1994: 37). An interpretation of (10c) as a topic-comment structure with the place of existence as topic is possible. In that case, the marked position of the PP strongly contributes to a contrastive interpretation (contrasting with a prior or following topic) which is not typically present in the *be home to* construction. The main difference between (10a) and (10c), then, is a difference in markedness of topic and what that entails.

The *be home to* construction represents an unmarked topic-comment structure in that its topic expression is the subject of the sentence. Subject-as-topic is the most frequent type of information structure speakers will experience, evidenced by how speakers, presented with a canonical sentence such as (11) below with no additional context, overwhelmingly tend to apply a topic-comment interpretation to the sentence. This is of course despite the fact that other interpretations are technically possible: for example, rather than a comment about the children as a common topic of interest, it could be the answer to the question *who went to school?*.

- (11) The children went to school. (Lambrecht 1994: 120)

With its unmarked topic, this construction is very suitable for maintaining the sentence topic as the subject of the discourse as a whole. Evidence for this discourse function appears in the BNC data in two ways. First, a number of the sentences featured further propositions about the topic either before or after the *be home to* construction, as seen in the examples below:

- (12) The port of La Sabina has been extended and modernised in the last couple of years and is home to many a fancy yacht.

- (13) The village, which is home to 132 orphans, was set up in the early 1980s by Mr John Foster, a teacher at the former Central Comprehensive School in Darlington.

It is significant that some of these sentences omit the subject pronoun in the second clause following a conjunction (such as in (12) above), something which is optional when the pronoun’s referent is the topic of a topic-comment structure, but unnatural otherwise. Lambrecht (1994: 136) shows this with the following examples:

- (14) Q: Whatever happened to John?
 A: a. John married Rosa, but he didn’t really love her.
 b. John married Rosa, but didn’t really love her.
 (14’)Q: Who married Rosa?
 A: a. John married Rosa, but he didn’t really love her.
 b. *John married Rosa, but didn’t really love her.

Second, many of the sentences clearly mark the subject as given information. In the data we see 95 instances of the subject preceded by definite markers (*the, this, these, each*, etc.), 23 pronouns as subjects, and a number of other topic expressions which appear to express given information.

- (15) **The city** is home to an estimated 20,000 dollar millionaires and, according to some estimates, has more Mercedes cars than any other capital in the world.
- (16) **The forests** are home to the Mentawi tribal people, who stand to lose both their livelihoods and their homes as a result of development.
- (17) One of Europe's most important wetlands, **it** is home to rare species such as the imperial eagle and the lynx, and provides a vital staging post where birds rest on their migrations to and from Africa.

(Emphasis mine)

4. Limitations

This study is limited in its use of only British English data. While I would like to imagine that the semantic and information-structural factors discussed above would be the same in the use of this construction in other inner circle varieties of English, Hilpert's (2014: 192-194) surprising discussion of differences in factors influencing the choice of dative alternation between American and New Zealand speakers, and of the different tendencies in the use of the *INTO-CAUSATIVE* construction (e.g. *I threatened him into paying*) between British and American speakers, suggests the possibility of regional differences in the use of the *be home to* construction, too.

Additionally, this study posits a discourse function (maintaining the discourse topic) of the *be home to* construction based on the nature of its unmarked sentence topic which suggests it to be a continuing discourse topic, and on examples which show further propositions about the same topic within the one sentence. More direct evidence for this discourse function would, of course, be found in analyses of longer discourses, not the single sentences used in this study.

Finally, while this study identifies two major factors influencing speakers' choices to use *be home to*, it does not rule out the existence of other factors. One factor which is often overlooked and I would particularly like to bring attention to as being likely relevant here is the social image of the speaker given off by the construction. In a recent paper discussing reasons speakers might choose between synonyms, Yamada (2017: 20; my translation) discusses "looking good in the eyes of one's interlocutor" and "using expressions that the speaker personally finds attractive" as possible reasons. The example he gives is the Tokyo governor's choice of *regashii* (an uncommon so-called *wasei-eigo*³ word coming from *legacy*) over more conventional expressions such as *nokosu beki mono* 'things that should be left as they are' or *isan* 'inheritance':

- (18) 2-mon-me no go-shitsumon no hō kara o-kotae sasete itadakimasu to, watashi wa rainen

³ English-sounding expressions which either do not exist in English or stray from their usual interpretations in English.

made ni to iu kimochi de gozaimashita. Tada, yahari shiwake o, doko made ga **regashii (nokosu beki mono/isan)** de doko made ga kasetu na no ka to iu shiwake ga, kanari komakai bubun ga gozaimasu.

‘To respond to your second question first, I felt that it should be by next year. However, the assorting – assorting **what should be left alone** and what is provisional – is rather complicated.’

(Example from Yamada 2017: 19; my romanization and translation)

The desire to use non-conventional expressions and complex constructions in order to give off an educated impression, and the desire to improve the impression of one’s writing by using varied expressions (as opposed to repeating *there is*) are likely relevant to our *be home to* construction as well. We may expect to see genre, as well as written vs spoken language, being factors influencing usage. Indeed, the vast majority (all but two) of the BNC examples used in this study were written or written-to-be-spoken.

5. Conclusion

We have seen how the *be home to* construction has two major factors motivating its use over other similar constructions. The first is semantic: the speaker using this construction makes use of home as a metaphor, drawing on aspects of the prototypical home-dwelling situation. We have seen that this puts constraints on the possible entities expressed in the construction, with even highly non-prototypical home-dwellers such as buildings and scenery at least sharing the prototypical characteristic of permanency.

The second relates to information structure. The *be home to* construction fits the mold of the most typical type of topic-comment structure where the topic is the subject of the sentence. This makes the construction different from the THERE construction in how *be home to* makes a proposition about the place of existence as a topic, presupposing the place as the current topic of interest. This unmarked topic-comment structure leads to the construction having a wider discourse function in maintaining the discourse topic (facilitating further propositions on the same topic).

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be home to の意味的・情報構造的側面に関する一考察

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キーワード： 英語 存在構文 情報構造 意味的制限 比喻

要旨

本論文ではある場所に何かが存在することを表す英語の be home to 構文を取り上げ、構文を動機づける比喻に起因する使用状況の制限を調べるとともに、there is など他の存在構文との情報構造面での比較を行う。be home to は存在の場所を主語とする無標のトピックコメント構造を成している点で、意味的に類似する構文群の中でも差別化されることを主張する。

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