"Some do and some doesn't": Verbal concord variation in the north of the British Isles

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Abstract

Among the chief characteristics of the northern dialects since Middle English times has been the so-called Northern Subject Rule, a systemic split in the verbal concord system which allows for invariant verbal *-s* forms everywhere except when the verb is directly accompanied by a simple personal pronoun. This study provides a geographical and comparative survey of the reflexes of this pattern in the northern dialects, drawing attention to their variability and to their interaction with other related and/or competing patterns of concord variation. A corpus investigation reveals that over and above the 'hard' constraints that define the Northern Subject Rule as such, there exist a number of 'soft' probabilistic constraints governing its effects which are also near-universally shared between the varieties in question. I then go on to discuss the likely paths of historical development that have given rise to this grammatical pattern, and critically review some attempts that have been made to account for it in terms of formal syntactic theories. I show that existing formal models fail to account for the range of variability of this pattern, both in a comparative, diatopic perspective and on the level of individual speakers. I finally argue that variation phenomena of this kind can theoretically be better accounted for in a usage-based model in the vein of current functionalist and emergentist theories.

1. Introduction

The verbal concord system is an area of particularly rich regional variation in English. Several quite distinct regional types of non-standard agreement systems exist in the traditional dialects. Some of them are also well attested historically and can be traced as far back as the Middle English period. Today these patterns coexist, and sometimes compete, with other types of non-standard agreement forms, which have spread through the modern vernaculars. Some of these even appear to have the status of 'vernacular universals' (Chambers 2004).

Within this complex field of variation, one pattern stands out as particularly interesting, both from a historical and from a theoretical perspective: the so-called Northern Subject Rule. According to this rule, the Standard English contrast between verbal *-s* in the third person singular and zero forms elsewhere is observed only where the subject is one of the closed set of simple personal pronouns: *he/she/it goes; I/you/we/they go*. All other subjects can take an invariant *-s* form of the verb. Moreover, the agreement contrast in the pronominal subjects is found consistently only when the subject directly precedes or follows the verb; in other cases, even *I, you, we* and *they* may take the *-s* form. Agreement contrasts are thus organized not or not exclusively along the lines of the subject's person-number features, but instead they are sensitive to the morphological type and syntactic position of the subject. This intriguing system has been among the chief grammatical characteristics of the dialects of northern Britain, including Scots, since the Middle English period. It is also found in Irish English, above all in the varieties of Ulster. Some of its reflexes, especially with regard to the usage of *was* and *were,* can be found in overseas vernacular varieties all over the English-speaking world (cf. for instance Montgomery 1988, 1997, Tagliamonte 2002). The latter varieties must remain outside the scope of the present paper, which will concentrate on those varieties where the pattern originated historically, namely those of northern Britain, as well as their immediate geographical neighbour and offspring, the dialects of Ulster.

Verbal concord variation in English nonstandard varieties has received some more attention in past research than many other phenomena of grammatical, especially syntactic, variation. This is certainly due to the fact that it is a high-frequency phenomenon, whose occurrences in texts can relatively easily be identified and counted. It has been given some treatment in traditional dialectology, at least occasionally (e.g. Murray

1873; Wright 1892, 1905; Orton *et al.,* ed. 1962–1971). The Northern Subject Rule, in particular, is routinely mentioned in dialect descriptions, though often only in a summary fashion (Beal 1993, 1997, 2004; Miller & Brown 1982; Miller 1989, 1993, 2004; Macafee 1983, 1994; Harris 1993; Ihalainen 1994; Robinson 1997, Filppula 1999, Shorrocks 1999). Some of the major historical patterns of verbal concord have also been documented for older varieties (e.g. Macafee 1993, McIntosh, Samuels & Bensik 1986). Recently, verbal concord variation has become a stock-in-trade of corpus-based studies in variation and change. Some of them have been based on diachronic corpora (e.g. Meurman-Solin 1992, Kytö 1993, Montgomery 1994, Ogura-Wang 1996), while most studies used synchronic local corpora from individual speech communities, either historical (e.g. Bailey & Ross 1988, Bailey, Maynor & Cukor-Avila 1989, Montgomery, Fuller & DeMarse 1993; Schendl 1996, 2000, Wright 2002, McCafferty 2003) or contemporary (e.g. Tagliamonte 1999, Smith & Tagliamonte 1998, Godfrey & Tagliamonte 1999, Britain 2002, Schreier 2002, Peitsara 2002).

The present chapter reports on a new corpus-based study (Pietsch 2003, 2005) which attempts to complement this existing research in two ways. With respect to empirical description, a mostly diatopic-comparative perspective was chosen. Being based on dialectal speech recordings sampled over relatively large areas, the study traced the distribution of related variation patterns through space and also (in some parts) through the apparent-time dimension. The aim was to identify commonalities and differences in the linguistic conditioning of inherent, quantifiable variation across related varieties. The main result is that – over and above the defining constraints constituting the NSR itself – there exist a number of recurrent types of constraints which act as conditioning factors on concord variation. They can be detected statistically in the form of probabilistic effects, and they can best be described in terms of prototypical syntactic environments which idiomatically favour a certain morphological realization of the verb over the other.

The second contribution lies in an attempt to forge a closer link between this descriptive, empirical work on the one hand and recent grammatical theorizing on the other. Most of the existing studies of verbal concord have treated the phenomenon of quantifiable variation mainly under its societal (in Chomskyan terms: "E-language") aspects. On the other side, those among the studies of dialect grammar that have been inspired by theoretical concerns about individual linguistic competence ("I-language") have tended to concentrate on 'variation' in the sense of 'differences between

lects', but have rarely addressed the issue of variability within lects (see papers in Black & Motapayane 1996 and Barbiers, Cornips & van der Kleij 2002; for a notable recent exception see Henry 2002). There are only a few studies offering specific analyses regarding a formal theoretical characterization of concord phenomena of the northern type (Henry 1995, Corrigan 1997, Börjars & Chapman 1998, Hudson 1999), and none of them addresses inherent variability. I will therefore propose a fresh attempt to relate the empirical observations regarding variable grammatical performance to the theoretical question of how variation is anchored in grammatical competence. In doing so, I will seek explanations in a theoretical framework inspired by functionalist and cognitive research traditions (Bybee 1985, Bybee & Hopper 2001, Langacker 1987; Croft 1995, 2001).

This chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 gives a descriptive survey of the phenomena in question, and raises some of the problems involved in an adequate synchronic analysis. Section 3 reports on empirical corpus findings with respect to the patterns of quantitative variation and their geographical distribution as found in a range of twentieth-century dialects. Section 4 presents an excursus into the history of the northern concord pattern and the hypothetical diachronic processes of its first emergence in early Middle English. Section 5 presents a critical discussion of several theoretical proposals that have been made to account for the effects of the Northern Subject Rule in modern dialects. Finally, Section 6 presents a concluding discussion and an outlook on possible theoretical solutions to the problems presented in the earlier sections.

2. The Northern Subject Rule: Descriptive problems

The most concise descriptive definition of the phenomenon in question can be given as follows:

(1) **The Northern Subject Rule (Version A):** concord verbs[1] take the *-s* form with all subjects, except with the personal pronouns *I, we, you* and *they* when they are directly adjacent to the verb.

However, this is only a somewhat idealized statement, describing a hypothetical, "pure" northern concord system. Indeed, varieties that come reasonably close to this have been identified, for instance in Older Scots and northern Middle English (Montgomery 1994; McIntosh, Samuels &

Bensik 1986). In these older varieties, verbal -s in fact occurred with near-categorical regularity in all environments where the rule licensed it. In Modern English varieties, however, the system is always a variable one. It has therefore been customary in the literature since Montgomery (1994) to describe the variation patterns observed in terms of two separate constraints, the first of them most often called the Type-of-Subject Constraint, the second variously Position-of-Subject Constraint, Sequence Constraint, Proximity-to-Subject Constraint or similarly.

(2) **The Northern Subject Rule (Version B):**

a. All third singular subjects (and, where preserved, the old second singular *thou*) always take verbal -*s*.

b. **The Type-of-Subject Constraint:** All other subjects except the personal pronouns *I, we, you, they* (and, where it exists, *youse*) take verbal -*s* variably.

c. **The Position-of-Subject Constraint:** Non-adjacency of subject and verb favours verbal -*s*.

Condition (2c) may apply, in principle, to all types of subjects. This means, on the one hand, that the prohibition of verbal -*s* with *I, we, you* and *they* may be overridden if the verb and the pronoun are not adjacent. With respect to the other environments, on the other hand, it means that there is commonly a quantitative effect further increasing the likelihood of verbal -*s*. However, the nature of this constraint is difficult to define exactly. Some of the effects in question appear to be cross-dialectal universals that can be observed even in varieties not directly affected by the Northern Subject Rule. There seems to be a strong tendency in many dialects of English that clauses that diverge from the canonical structure, of a syntactically simple subject immediately followed by the verb, may display lack of agreement. For instance, it has often been observed that complex subjects consisting of two conjoined singular noun phrases may trigger an invariant third singular verb form, as in the following Early Modern English example (Visser 1963: 80):

(3) *I and my company* ***was*** *arrested ij days at Dunckyrke.*

Another environment that seems to stand out is subject-verb inversion, for instance in questions and under locative inversion. Non-agreement in the latter type of clause seems to have been common in English already during the Old English period (4). The same has been true for almost all forms of

English in the case of existential *there* clauses, a special clause type that developed through grammaticalization out of the more general schema of the locative inversion. Non-agreement in this type of clause is found quite independently of the Northern Subject Rule (5).

(4) *On þæm selfan hrægle* ***wæs*** *eac awriten þa naman ðara twelf heahfædra* ('On that same garment was also written the names of the twelve patriarchs') [Ælfred, C.P. 6,15, quoted after Visser 1963: 73]

(5) *There* ***is*** *two or three lords and ladies more married* [Shakespeare, Mids. IV, II, 16, quoted after Visser 1963: 74]

Interestingly, it will be found that just among those modern dialects that otherwise follow the Northern Subject Rule in allowing many non-standard verbal *-s* forms, there are some that exhibit variation in exactly the opposite direction with respect to the existentials: here, they allow non-standard, seemingly plural verb forms even with singular subjects.

Whereas concord variation in existentials is thus largely independent of the Northern Subject Rule, the situation is different with subject-verb inversion in questions. This type of clause is neatly integrated with the general pattern of the Northern Subject Rule in the northern dialects. Thus, under interrogative inversion, full noun phrases are clearly distinguished from pronominal subjects just as in canonical subject-verb order. Whereas full noun phrase subjects in inversion may trigger a fairly strong effect in favour of verbal -s, even more so than full noun phrase subjects in canonical position, inverted pronoun subjects faithfully follow the Type-of-Subject Constraint, displaying agreement no less regularly than in other positions. The northern dialects thus regularly display forms such as *have they,* not **has they*. Indeed, it will be argued in section 4 that exactly these environments, of verbs with inverted adjacent pronouns, may in fact represent the historical core and point of origin of the Northern Subject Rule as a whole, and that the occurrence of the forms without *-s* in these environments has always been one of its central features.

Relative clauses, especially those following clefting *it's* or existential *there,* are another environment where non-agreement is often observed, and these relative clause environments will be found to play a major role for the dialects affected by the Northern Subject Rule too.

A case that is problematic for the statement of the Northern Subject Rule is the one where subject and verb stand in the canonical order of the declarative clause but are separated from each other by intervening, clause-internal material. In Modern English, this may apply to either adverbs or

so-called floating quantifiers, as in *I often go* or *they all go*. The Position-of-Subject Constraint as stated above predicts forms like *I often goes* or *they all goes*. Indeed, such forms occur, but only in the most 'purely' northern, older varieties such as Old Scots do they reach a high amount of regularity:

(6) a. *...that we **lely** heichtis and grantis...* [Montgomery 1994: 89]

b. *we **all** hes mater to thank God...* [Montgomery 1994: 89]

In present-day dialects such as Northern Irish English (cf. section 3.3.4 below), similar forms are also attested but much rarer:

(7) a. *Oh never, they **never** was so strict, at that time, anyway* [*NITCS:* L10.2]

b. *And they, they **both** was yoked onto it.* [*NITCS:* L19.3]

In other dialects such as Yorkshire and Lancashire English, similar forms with adverbs like *often, never, always* are fairly common, but it has been argued (Shorrocks 1999: 112, 116–117) that this usage is governed not so much by the syntactic environment but by the temporal semantics of the adverb, as verbal *-s* in these varieties also functions as a marker of habituality.

The last remaining type of environment where verbs typically occur in positions non-adjacent to their pronominal subjects is found in co-ordinated verb phrases. The second and any subsequent members of a series of verbs sharing the same subject will regularly take *-s* in typical northern dialects. Clauses of this type, *they sing and dances,* are often quoted as prototypical instances of the Northern Subject Rule. Indeed, of all the subtypes of Position-of-Subject effects, this appears to be the one that is most characteristic and specific to the northern dialects.

Summing up, it may be said that whereas the Type-of-Subject Constraint has been a stable and fairly unmistakeable feature of northern dialects, the Position-of-Subject Constraint may be regarded as the composite effect of several different patterns, of varying degrees of regularity, only some of which are specifically characteristic of the northern dialects whereas others are shared with many varieties elsewhere. Only in those older dialects which were least affected by standardizing influences from the south or other similar dialect contact or levelling effects, can it be said that the Position-of-Subject Constraint was a unified, tightly integrated feature of a consistent grammatical system.

3. Data from twentieth-century northern dialects

3.1. Data and methods

In the following sections, I will report on empirical findings regarding the quantitative variation patterns and the geographical distribution of reflexes of the northern concord system and some related phenomena in twentieth-century dialects. These data are based in part on the *Survey of English Dialects* (*SED,* Orton et al., ed. 1962–1971); partly on the *Northern Ireland Transcribed Corpus of Speech* (*NITCS,* Kirk 1991); and partly on a subset of a preliminary version of the *Freiburg Corpus of English Dialects* (*FRED;* see Kortmann, this volume). These data are of rather different kinds, and caution must be exercised in interpreting them in order to make results commensurable. Nevertheless, taken together they do give a fairly comprehensive picture of a range of grammatical varieties across a large geographic area.

The *NITCS* is a corpus of some 230,000 words, collected across a geographically regular grid of 38 mostly rural locations in Northern Ireland, sampling (ideally) one speaker from each of three age groups (9–12, 35–45, and 65–75) from each location. It is based on unscripted interviews conducted in the context of a dialect atlas project, the *Tape-Recorded Survey of Hiberno-English Speech (TRS),* during the 1970s (cf. Barry 1981b). In representing speech from different age groups, this project went an important step beyond the traditional design of dialect atlas surveys. Hence, it can be used for analyses not only along a diatopic but also along a diachronic, apparent-time dimension. For the purposes of this study, some 17,000 tokens of clauses with concord verbs were extracted and tagged. Obviously, many of these – actually, their great majority – are not of much interest for this study, as they exemplify environments that display no or only marginal variation. In general, this goes for all third person singular tokens, and for collocations with immediately adjacent personal pronoun subjects. The main focus of the analysis therefore were the approximately 1,000 tokens of third-person plural verbs with non-pronominal subjects. A separate study was made of existential *there* clauses (approx. 2,400 tokens). Tokens were classified for a range of different environment variables (such as syntactic constellation or morphological type of subject, in addition to the obvious variables of person and number). Multivariate analyses were then conducted, using the well-known *Varbrul* system, examining these intra-linguistic context variables as well as a

number of social, extra-linguistic variables such as age, sex, and religious denomination.

These data, which provide for a fairly detailed view of the linguistic situation within the small geographical area of Northern Ireland, were complemented with data from *FRED,* illustrating a much wider geographical range of varieties. The subcorpus of *FRED* selected for the present study consisted of approximately 300,000 words of transcribed speech from 63 informants. It represented Scottish – predominantly Lowlands – speakers as well as different regions within the north of England. Most of the texts were conversations recorded for purposes of local 'oral history' projects. They were recorded between the 1970s and the 1990s, and typically consist of interviews between a fieldworker and an informant, centring about topics such as life in the old days, working conditions, war experiences and so forth. The informants were typically elderly people, of predominantly working-class background. Owing to the interview situation, speech styles tended to be relatively formal, but the speech nevertheless displayed a considerable range of local non-standard linguistic features. On the whole, these recordings are thus fairly similar in style to the interviews with the older age group in the *NITCS.* The Scottish recordings exemplify different speech styles along the continuum between broad Lowlands Scots and Standard Scottish English; similarly, the English recordings range from strongly local, containing conservative dialectal relic forms, to something fairly close to the standard. To these texts were added six additional recordings from the *TRS,* which for technical reasons could not be included in the *NITCS.* These are from Counties Donegal, Leitrim, and Louth. While these data, taken together, represent a much larger area than those of the *NITCS,* they evidently lack the systematicity of sampling characteristic of the latter, which means that they cannot be used with the same degree of reliability for investigations of social or fine-grained geographical variation. Nevertheless, multivariate analyses of this material revealed highly interesting patterns that matched or complemented findings from the *NITCS* in a number of ways.

To add a further dimension of real-time depth, as well as more fine-grained geographical information, the corpus data were supplemented with data from the *Survey of English Dialects (SED).* Obviously, these cannot be analysed with the same quantitative methods and in direct comparison with corpus data of the former kind. The *SED* data, collected during the 1950s, consist of isolated lists of elicited tokens, not exhaustive records of all forms produced in natural speech, and hence do not lend themselves to a

quantitative assessment of intra-speaker variation. Nevertheless, the *SED* data provides valuable evidence for the geographical distribution of some morphosyntactic variables in the traditional dialects, and, if interpreted with the necessary caution, also for some of their quantitative aspects. The *SED* has repeatedly been used for studies of subject-verb agreement (Orton, Sanderson & Widdowson 1978; Viereck 1991/1997; Trudgill 1990); Ihalainen 1991, 1994; Klemola 1996, 2000; Bresnan & Deo 2001; Wright 2002; and Britain 2002). However, none of these studies has fully exhausted its possibilities with regard to a study of the Northern Subject Rule and related phenomena.

Most of the relevant questionnaire items in the *SED* deal with the morphology of the primary verbs *BE, HAVE* and *DO*. Some others deal with the agreement morphology of lexical verbs after various pronouns. Only two questions are specifically aimed at morphosyntactic environments for the Northern Subject Rule, namely, lexical verbs after full noun phrase subjects (III.10.7 'bulls bellow', and VIII.7.5 'burglars steal them'). A number of other questions were primarily aimed not at morphosyntactic but at various lexical, phonological or idiomatic targets, but nevertheless provide material that contains tokens of present-tense subject-verb combinations which can be included in the analysis. As for most other questions eliciting verbs as answers, the material unfortunately does not regularly include subject forms and is therefore unusable.

Apart from these, the *SED* fieldworkers recorded a large number of additional utterances produced spontaneously by the informants during the interviews, whenever they felt these utterances illustrated interesting dialect features. These recorded tokens are known as "incidental material" in the *SED*. In cases where the features illustrated by these utterances were also the topic of one of the systematic questionnaire items, incidental material evidence was sometimes included in the published "Basic Material" of the *SED* (Orton *et al.* 1962–1971, henceforth *SED-BM*). However, this coverage of the incidental material is far from complete. For instance, the list of incidental tokens of plural verbal *-s* given under questionnaire item III.10.7 ('bulls bellow') is mostly – though not quite consistently – restricted to tokens that match the elicited grammatical context in a rather narrow sense: subject NPs headed by lexical nouns in canonical, declarative SV clauses. Some of the most interesting grammatical environments with respect to the Northern Subject Rule are therefore missing: relative clauses, verbs after plural demonstrative and indefinite pronouns, to name but a few. Many incidental material tokens that illustrated verbal *-s* in these

environments are either scattered across a large number of other headings in *SED-BM,* or have up to now not been accessible at all. Thus, a wealth of additional data is still enclosed in the original hand-written fieldworker notebooks and has never become available in publications. For this reason, the geographical picture that has so far been derivable from published *SED* data alone is in some respects distorted.

To remedy this situation, it was necessary to return to a study of the original fieldworker notebooks, held at Leeds University Library. This investigation was conducted for 139 of the 311 *SED* locations, covering the northern half of England roughly down to the Chester-Wash line and somewhat beyond. All incidental material tokens illustrating subject-verb agreement were excerpted from the notebooks, converted from the original phonetic to an orthographic transcription, and later collated with the data found under various headings in *SED-BM.* (The resulting token lists, which form the basis for the analyses in the following sections, can be found in an appendix to Pietsch 2005) They include approximately one thousand tokens of plural verbal *-s* related to the Northern Subject Rule, and another thousand tokens representing various other related phenomena.

In the following sections, I will first give a brief overview of the geographical distribution of several variation phenomena related to verbal concord in the north. I will then give a more detailed account of each of them in turn, starting with some phenomena of minor importance, proceeding through the special areas of *was/were* variation and of existential *there* clauses, and finally dealing with the reflexes of the Northern Subject Rule proper, found in the shape of plural verbal *-s* with non-pronominal subjects.

3.2. An overview

For the situation in the traditional dialects of England, a good overview can be gained from the data in the *SED.* It can be summed up as follows (cf. Map 1). There is a central northern area covering the three northern counties of Cumberland, Westmorland, Durham, and the southern half of Northumberland.[2] They are characterized by a fairly consistent, homogeneous subject-verb agreement system, which conserves many features of northern Middle English. Its most important features are: preservation of the *thou* versus *you* distinction, with *thou* always taking verbal *-s* forms; generalized use of *is* as the singular present tense form of

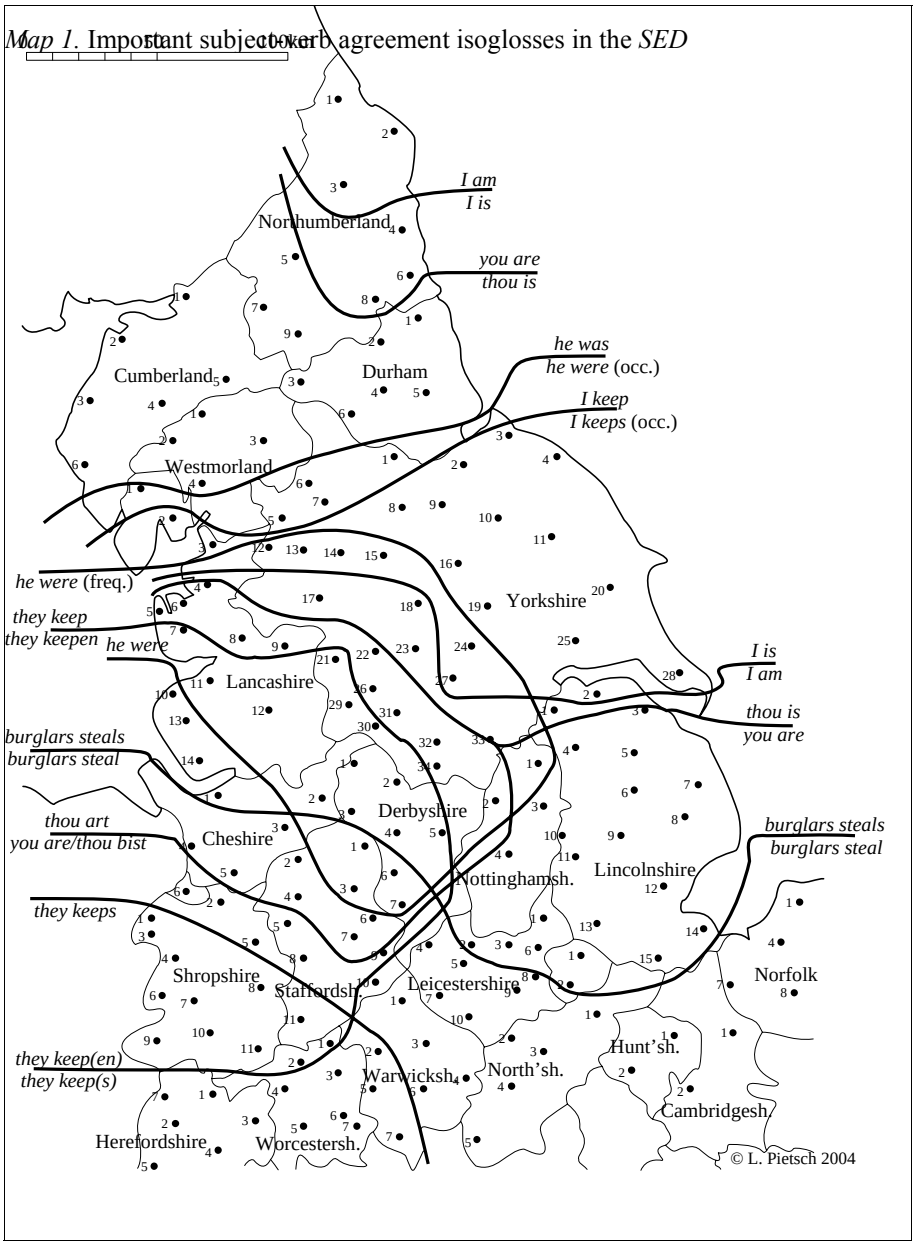
BE in all three persons; preservation of the *was* versus *were* number distinction as in the standard; hence parallel paradigms of *BE* in both tenses *(I/thou/he is, we/you/they are, I/thou/he was, we/you/they were);* application of the Northern Subject Rule to all verbs, including *BE*. This bundle of features can conveniently be called the Central Northern[3] agreement system.

In the northern half of Northumberland, we find more or less the same features, but with less consistency, *BE* paradigms more similar to the standard, and a lack of *thou.* This area can conveniently be labelled the "Upper North".

Towards the northwest Midlands, more heterogeneous and variable agreement systems can be found. Verbal *-s* conforming to the Northern Subject Rule exists here too, but competes with inflectional forms in *-n*, another conservative relic form from Middle English. Unlike in the Central North there is a strong tendency to neutralize the *was/were* distinction in favour of generalized *were* forms. The second singular form of *BE* is generally *thou are* or *thou art.* These three features together are characteristics of an area between Derbyshire and southern Lancashire, also reaching into the southwestern border areas of Yorkshire, and may be labelled the "Northwest Midlands" agreement system. To the north of it, one finds a gradual shift from the Northwest Midlands features towards the Central Northern features. It can be visualized as a bundle of successive isoglosses stretching through Yorkshire and northern Lancashire. These isoglosses are grouped roughly around a line from Morecambe Bay to the mouth of the Humber. This line, also called the Humber-Lune-Ribble line, has long been known as one of the most important and oldest boundaries in the traditional dialects of English (Trudgill 1990: 34; Ihalainen 1994: 219; Samuels 1988). For the present purposes, the area spanned by the whole isogloss bundle, i.e. most of Yorkshire and northern Lancashire, can conveniently be called the "Lower North".

Further southwest into the Midlands, more variation in the paradigm of *BE* is found, involving present indicative forms such as *be, bist,* and *bin.* Also, the area preserving inflectional *-n* overlaps in the south with an area that has generalized verbal *-s* independent of the Northern Subject Rule.

The East Midlands differ from the West Midlands mainly in that present-tense paradigms of *BE* are more similar to the standard, and second singular *thou* is generally absent. The two areas are divided by a line that



Map 1. Important subject-verb agreement isoglosses in the *SED*

runs between the counties of Derbyshire and Staffordshire in the west, and Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire in the east. However, one feature that

both the west and the east Midlands share is the tendency to neutralize the *was* versus *were* number distinction, in the one or other direction.

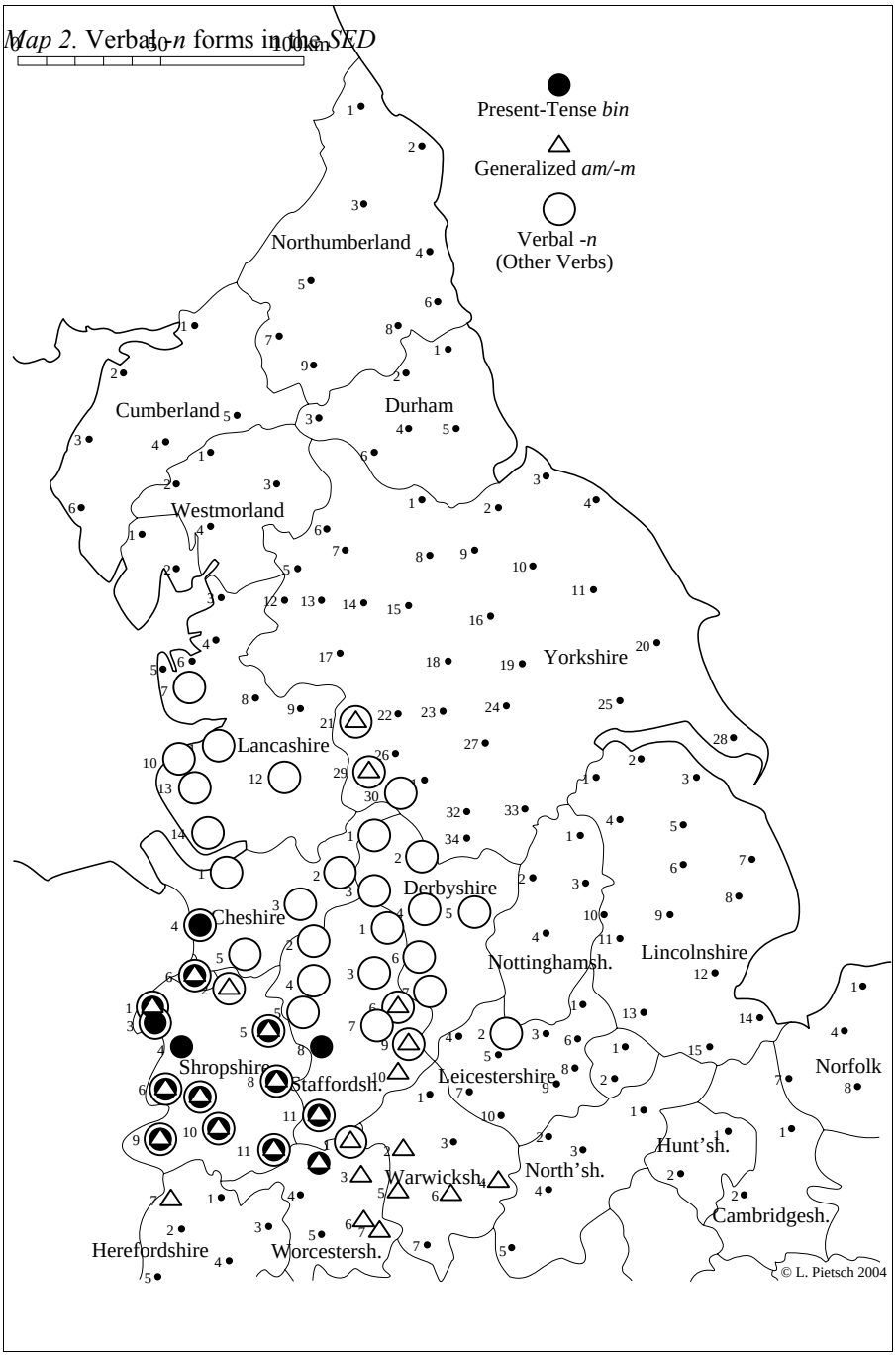
Plural verbal *-s* with lexical noun subjects, as licensed by the Northern Subject Rule, is found everywhere north of a line running from Merseyside to the Wash. In Map 1 the isogloss is labelled *burglars steals* (named after a relevant item in the *SED* questionnaire). It cuts right through both the West and East Midlands with their otherwise very different systems.

For Scotland and the north of Ireland, data of similar geographical quality are not available. Data from the *TRS/NITCS* show a strong influence of the Northern Subject Rule in the northern parts of Ireland. Data from *FRED* and from other dialectological and sociolinguistic studies suggest that the dominant situation in Scotland for the most part resembles that of the Upper North. While modern Scottish varieties share with many English dialects a tendency for neutralization of the *was/were* contrast independently of the Northern Subject Rule (as in *we was, you was*), such tendencies were not discovered in the northern Irish data. On the other hand, one pattern that is found only in Ulster and in some parts of Scotland is the tendency of using neutralized singular *there were,* and possibly *there are,* in existential clauses only.

3.3. Minor patterns

3.3.1. Verbal -n

Verbal forms in *-n* are relic forms of the Middle English plural *-en* paradigms typical of the Midlands (Wright 1905: 296; *LALME* I: 467). In the *SED,* such forms are still well attested in one compact relic area in the northwest Midlands, covering southern Lancashire, Cheshire, Derbyshire, Shropshire, and Staffordshire, and reaching also into the southwestern corner of Yorkshire (Map 2; see also Pietsch 2005: ch. 4). They are also documented for some more recent dialects of that area (cf. Shorrocks 1999 on Bolton, Lancashire). The area overlaps with that affected by the Northern Subject Rule, which means that nonstandard forms in *-n* and in *-s* compete with each other in some areas. The examples in (8) show that verbal *-n* forms occur in all plural environments, with the pronouns *we, you,* and *they,* as well as occasionally with plural noun phrase subjects. However, the latter type appears to be rare. The example quoted under (8f)



Map 2. Verbal *-n* forms in the *SED*

is the only one found among 335 tokens of *-n* forms in the *SED,* all the others having pronoun subjects. Shorrocks (1999: 114) states that *-n* occurs only "in the first, second and third persons plural, after pronominal subjects that do not trigger *-s*." This type of distribution, where an *-s* versus *-n* alternation behaves according to the same pattern as *-s* versus *-∅* in more purely northern varieties, may have been typical of some parts of the border zone between the north and the Midlands as early as in late Middle English (Laing 1978: 244; McIntosh 1988: 117).

(8) a. *We never **sayen** that.* [*SED:* Y29]

b. *We **callen** it.* [*SED:* Db1]

c. *You **mowen**.* [*SED:* Db6]

d. *They **taken** more pulling than a cart.* [*SED:* Db1]

e. *They think they **knowen** it.* [*SED:* Ch1]

f. *Burglars **thieven** them.* [*SED:* St2]

In the singular, verbal *-n* forms seem to occur only in the paradigm of *BE* (in the form *I/he bin*), and of *HAVE* (*I/he han*). In addition, *he done* is recorded, but only once (Sa5). The *bin* forms occur only in the southwestern half of the area in question, namely in Shropshire and some closely adjacent areas in the neighbouring counties. Areas yet further south, especially Herefordshire and Worcestershire, tend to have generalized *be* forms instead of *bin* (not charted in Map 2). Another phenomenon geographically related to the verbal *-n* forms seems to be the existence of *am* forms generalized to other persons and numbers than the first singular in the paradigm of *BE.* Especially *you'm* and *they'm* are often recorded, and seem to be used as a contracted form both of *you/they are* and sometimes *you/they have.* These forms compete with both the *bin* and the *be* paradigms, in an area overlapping with the general *-n* area in Shropshire and southern Staffordshire.[4]

In the *FRED* data used for the present study, verbal *-n* was not recorded, but this may well be due to the area not being well represented in this part of the corpus.

3.3.2. I is

As stated above, throughout the Central North – north of a line reaching from Morecambe Bay to the mouth of the Humber, but excluding the Upper North – the present tense of *BE* generally has *is* in the first and second singular. In this area *BE* has isomorphic paradigms in the present tense and past tense, with singular *-s* forms contrasting with plural *-r* forms. This means that the first singular present tense of *BE,* just like its past tense in most other areas, falls by necessity outside the scope of the Northern Subject Rule.

While forms like *I is* (or *I's*) are abundantly attested in the *SED,* they are almost completely absent in the more recent *FRED* data. Only two speakers in the corpus show residual *I is* as a relic form. Interestingly, one of these informants (Yks3:SL, a farmer from the Teesside area, born c.1910, and recorded during the mid-1980s) used *I's* only in direct speech quotations in the context of narratives set in the old days, using standard *I'm* elsewhere. For this speaker *I's* apparently functions as a signal of vernacular speech employed to give a certain stylistic touch to his narrative. The other speaker (Wes4:HL, a retired forest worker from the Lake District, Cumbria) used twice *I's* and twice *I'm* in his recording.

(9) a. *And t' porter says, well,* ***I's*** *about sick o' this.* [*FRED:* Yks3:SL]

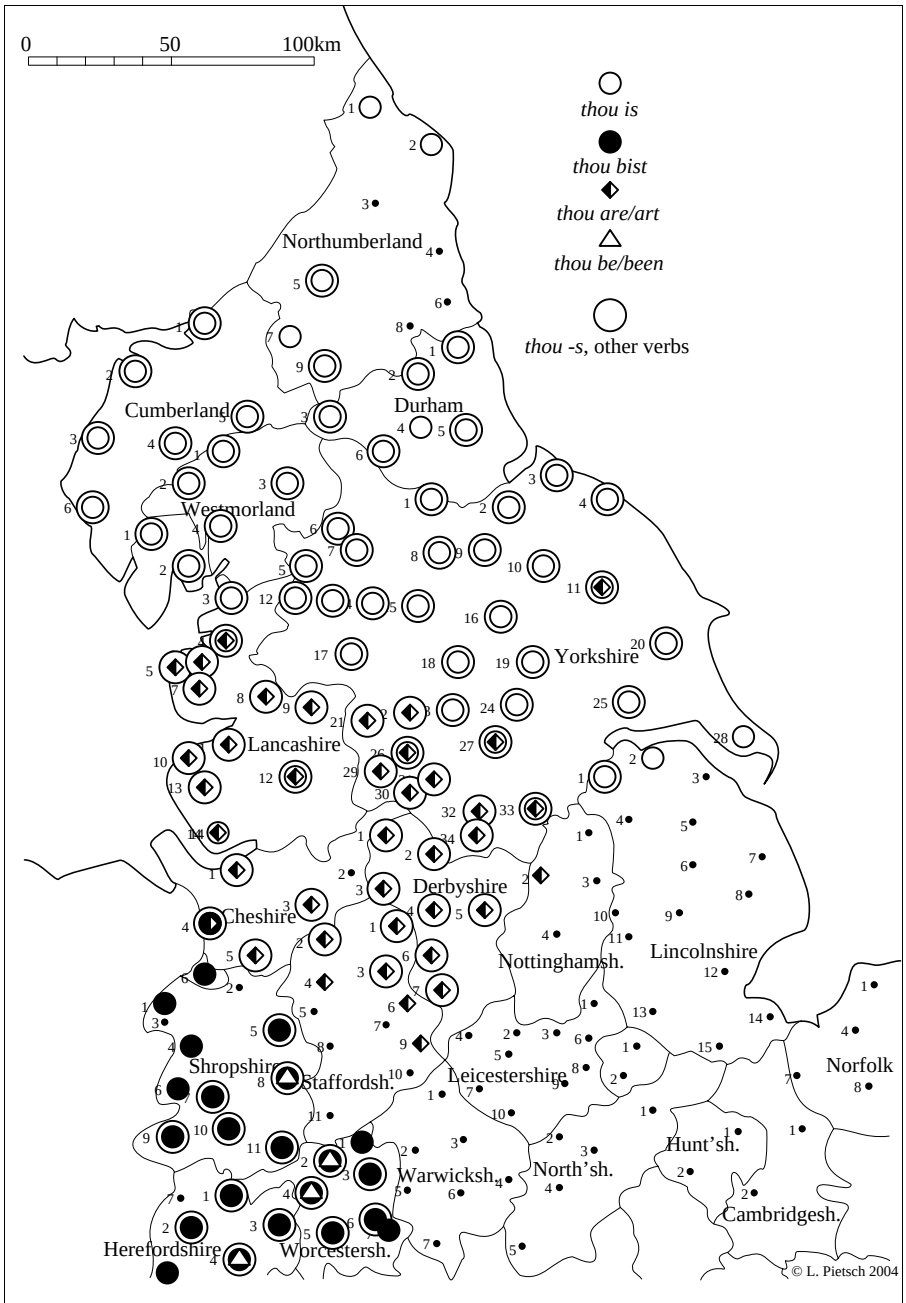
b. *And mi mother says,* ***I's*** *not goin' to have room to work in here.* [*FRED:* Yks3:SL]

c. *And now, so I got this one done and I thought, … This is mi last morning,* ***I's*** *not going to bother.* [*FRED:* Yks3:SL]

d. *I used to dread to have to go down to give my boss a message when he was among all t' boozey folks, 'cause they all knew me: "Fetch him a drink in. Fetch him a drink!" – "****I's*** *coming back. I'll just deliver this message!"* [*FRED:* Yks3:SL]

e. ***I's*** *going on for eighty.* [*FRED:* Wes4:HL]

f. *He says,* ***I's*** *goin' to have a real good go at it* [*FRED:* Wes4:HL]



Map 3. Verbal agreement forms with *thou* in the *SED*

3.3.3. Verbal -s *with* thou

The old second singular pronoun *thou* (in a variety of forms: *thou, thee,* [ðə], [tə] etc.) is found preserved in the *SED* in a large coherent area covering all of the north, with the exception of the East Midland counties. Only in northern Northumberland is it found less frequently, and *ye/you* is generally used instead (cf. Trudgill 1990: 86, Beal 2004). Where they exist, the *thou* forms almost invariably command agreement with *-s* forms (rarely also *-st* forms) of the verb, irrespective of the Position-of-Subject Constraint. Hence they do not pattern together with *you* under the Northern Subject Rule but rather align themselves with third person singular *he/she/it.* Variation in the verbal forms occurs only in the paradigms of *BE.* As for the past tense, the variation between *thou was* and *thou were* will be dealt with together with that in the other persons and numbers in the next section below. As for the present tense, three fairly distinct regional types can be distinguished (Map 3). In the Central North one regularly finds *thou is,* alongside *I is* and *he/she/it is.* Further southwest, in southern Lancashire, southwestern Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Cheshire, and northern Staffordshire, the forms are *thou are* or *thou art,* in inversion sometimes contracted to *art'*. Going yet further south into the West Midlands, one finds forms such as *thou bis(t),* as well as other forms with the verbal stem *be* in which the plural forms have been generalized to the second singular *(thou be, thou bin)*.

Like the *I is* forms, the *thou* forms are clearly obsolescent in the more recent data from *FRED.* Only four tokens of subject *thou (thee/tha)* with concord verbs are found in the data. One example from the Teesside data, and one from the Scottish Borders, again occur in narrated direct speech situated in the 'old days' (10). These two tokens have the old *-s* form of the verb and happen to be both in interrogatives. The other two tokens are in stereotypical collocations of the *you see / you know* type, and have been recorded in northeast England and southwest Scotland respectively (11). In these two tokens the pronoun *thou* has taken over the affixless verb form used also with *you.*

(10) a. *And uh, an old woman over North Gate said, where* ***'s thou*** *come from then? Says, from Middlesbrough. She says, what a bloody muck-hole that is.* [*FRED:* Yks1:WF]

b. *And they used to go down and cook their meals, down in the, on the fire, hm-hm, and never anybody said, what* ***doest thou****, they never were put out or anything then.* [*FRED:* Pee2:MT]

(11) a. ***Tha see*** *it? See this here?* [*FRED:* Dur1:ML]

b. *Oh, they,* ***thee ken****, there was no, ye see, there were, there was a lot come in at what we call Huggins up there.* [*FRED:* Dfs1:WH]

3.3.4. Verbal -s with I/we/you/they

Apart from the old use of *I is,* described above, and the widespread *was/were* variation which will be the subject of section 3.4 below, non-standard *-s* with the pronouns *I, you, we* and *they* occurs occasionally in many but not all northern varieties. We can distinguish several types of usage.

First, there are those instances which are covered by the Position-of-Subject Constraint, most typically in the coordinated structures of the *they sing and dances type.* This usage is characteristic of the more conservative varieties. In the relatively recent data of *FRED* it is not attested, but it appears with some regularity in data from the *SED* (12-13), even as far south as Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire, and it is also found in a number of Ulster speakers in the *NITCS* (14-17).[5]

(12) a. *They gang and never speaks.* [*SED:* Du4]

b. *They peel 'em and boils 'em.* [*SED:* La6]

c. *They break into houses and steals.* [*SED:* La7]

d. *They go in and cuts 'em down.* [*SED:* Y17]

e. *They throw that down and picks another sheaf up.* [*SED:* Y17]

f. *They feel over 'em and weighs 'em, does butchers.* [*SED:* Y22]

g. *They rope 'em and then pulls 'em in.* [*SED:* Y29]

h. *They run at one another and brods one another.* [*SED:* Y31]

i. *They cut 'em down low and lays 'em.* [*SED:* Nt2]

j. *They lead bulls wi' staffs, puts a band on their horns, puts it undernien their hind legs.* [*SED:* L4]

(13) a. *You stack it up and carts it up to where you want it.* [*SED:* Y17]

b. *You put middling of water into it and pulls it down.* [*SED:* Y17]

c. *You go fair down t' middle and pulls one each way.* [*SED:* Y22]

d. *You take that there up and shakes it out.* [*SED:* Y14]

(14) *The women goes out and rickles, dear. I rickle my own turf. After I do my work in the daytime, I go out and rickles my turf. When I come home, I go away and rickles my turf.* [*NITCS:* L17.3]

(15) a. *You have, you shovel off the, makes the top of it smooth, you know.* [*NITCS:* L17.3]

b. *And then you just cut down, and makes the shape of the turf* [*NITCS:* L22.1]

c. *You pull a wee drawer there, hey, and puts the… maybe you have one of them?* [*NITCS:* L2.2]

d. *Like, you, if you go out to speak to anyone, know, ch-, has to challenge them about, if they're doing any harm, or d-, your property or anything, they just answer you back.* [*NITCS:* L4.2]

(16) a. *But we lived, we lived about, about four mile out of the town here, and was taught at Ballyreagh school.* [*NITCS:* L25.3]

b. *We were all good neighbours, and is yet, I hope.* [*NITCS:* L17.3]

c. *Mm, we just t-, plays swinging on the ropes, and in the bars, you know, climbing bars, and swinging round on them.* [*NITCS:* L17.1]

(17) a. *And they season and gets lighter there then.* [*NITCS:* L22.2]

b. *So they closed it and sends their milk to Manorhamilton.* [*NITCS:* L31.2]

c. *So they go on that way and takes about ten minutes for that* [*NITCS:* L8.1]

Note, incidentally, how in example (15b) the presence of an intervening adverb in the first conjoined phrase *(you just go)* fails to trigger a Position-of-Subject effect according to the Northern Subject Rule, whereas the conjoining of verb phrases does trigger *-s* in the second verb.

A second, apparently quite unrelated pattern involving non-standard verbal *-s* with pronoun subjects is found in the so-called historic present. A

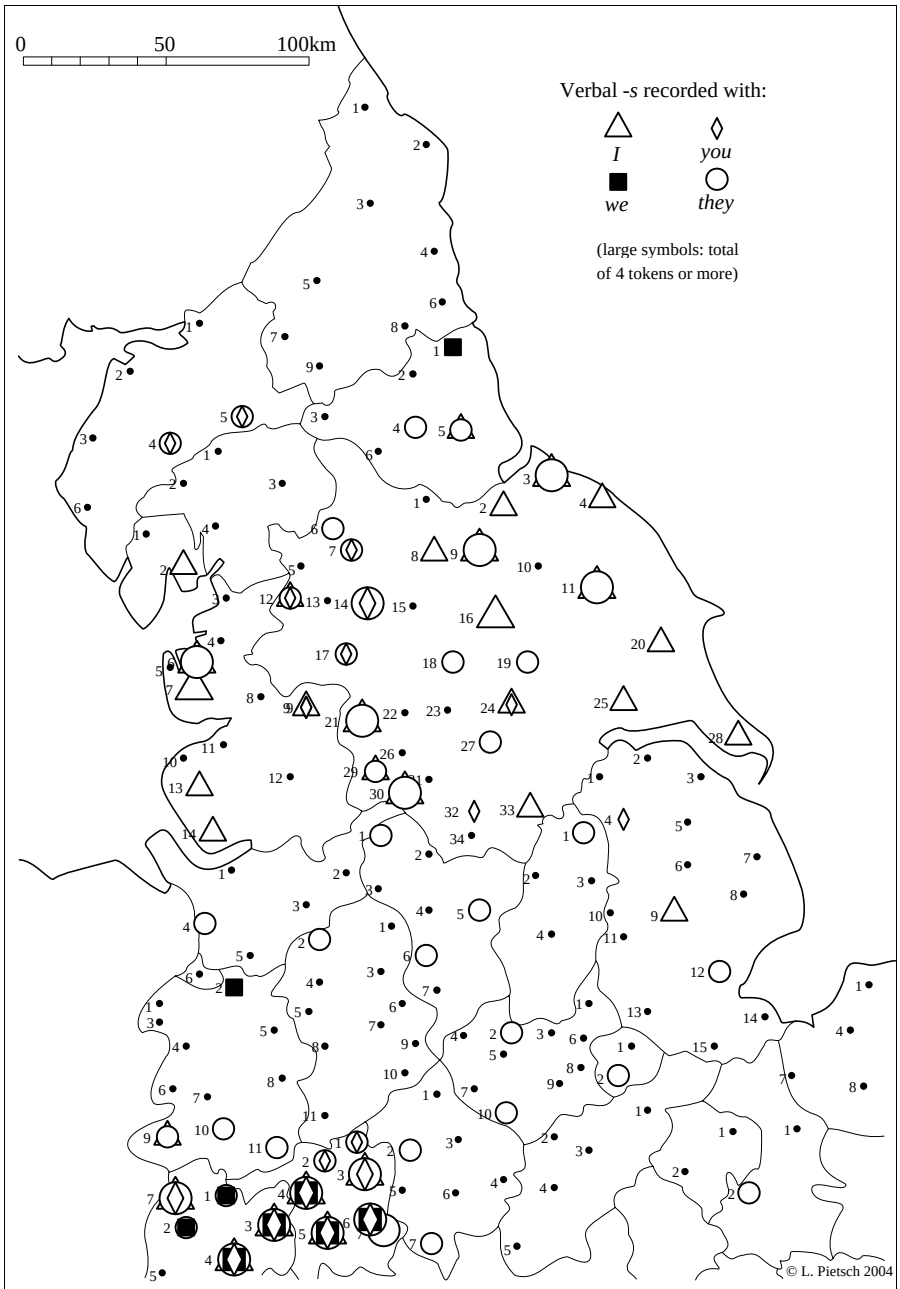
tendency to mark narrative clauses in the present tense with generalized verbal *-s* forms is commonly reported for many modern varieties of English. Such verbal *-s* forms occur very commonly also with pronoun subjects where they are not licensed by the Northern Subject Rule.

The prototypical usage condition for such forms is in clauses introducing direct speech within the narrative. In the *FRED* data, 141 tokens from 21 informants in all parts of the survey area were recorded in this textual function; with one exception *(I shouts)* all using the verb *says*. In the *NITCS* data there were 20 tokens from 8 informants, all of them using *says*. One clear piece of evidence for the restricted, formulaic nature of the *I says* idiom is that for some of the older speakers it is associated with a special rule of subject-verb inversion (*says I;* also: *says he* etc.), which is likewise restricted lexically and pragmatically to exactly these formulae of introducing direct speech. 16 of the tokens mentioned above were of this type, and they were found in a few older speakers in Scotland and in Ulster.

Only 18 tokens were found of other verbal *-s* forms used in other textual functions within a narrative in the *FRED* data (and none at all in the *NITCS*), of which 13 came from a single informant and were produced during two longer narrative sequences. Apart from this, there is little evidence in the data of the present study that speakers have a productive stylistic rule of using verbal *-s* as a marker of the historic present as such, over and above the prototypical, idiomatic use of *says* (or its semantic equivalents).[6] However, such wider usage of the narrative present has repeatedly been reported elsewhere, for instance by Harris (1993: 154–156), Robinson (1997: 127) and Henry (1995: 18) for Irish English. Henry – in a formal, generativist discussion of verbal concord – uses the existence of this usage as an argument for a formal analysis which involves a T (i.e. tense) node playing a central role in a feature checking mechanism that is responsible for licensing verbal *-s*. (1995: 27). The reference to the T node comes close to suggesting that the simple present and the narrative present must actually be two distinct morphological tenses, as that would presumably be the case by definition – within a formal theory such as Henry's – if this node contained different features in each case. (For further discussion of Henry's analysis, see section 5.1 below).

The attestation of verbal *-s* with *I/you/we/they* in environments other than those described so far, i.e. where it violates the Northern Subject Rule, is quite marginal in both the *NITCS* and *FRED*. This is somewhat astonishing, since the existence of such forms is fairly well documented in

some of the older dialects in the *SED.* There it is attested occasionally in a



Map 4. Verbal *-s* with *I/you/we/they* in the *SED*

large area of Northern England, overlapping with the central northern *I is* area in Yorkshire and Lancashire but also extending further south, and excluding most of Cumberland, Westmorland and Durham in the north (Map 4). It should be noted that the phenomenon of occasional verbal *-s* usage in these areas must be distinguished geographically from the much more general usage of neutralized verbal *-s* in a different area towards the southwest (beginning in Map 4 in the counties of Herefordshire and Worcestershire; cf. Klemola 1996: 50–52). In this southwestern area, verbal *-s* is traditionally found quite regularly in all environments, irrespective of type and position of subject. Both areas are separated from each other by a broad belt in which non-standard verbal *-s* in the pronominal environments seems to have been largely absent in the traditional dialects, just as it was also absent further north. These observations confirm those by Wright (1905: 296), who likewise stated that exceptions to the Type-of-Subject Constraint occurred "occasionally in parts of Yks. Lanc. and Lin." but not further north.

As for the function of this Yorkshire/Lancashire type of occasional verbal *-s* usage, nothing can be stated on the basis of the *SED* material, since the tokens are mostly documented without context. However, it seems likely that the phenomenon reflected in the *SED* attestations can be identified with that described for more recent Lancashire dialects, where verbal *-s* in such cases is reported to serve as a marker of habitual semantics (Shorrocks 1999: 112).

It should be noted in passing that many of the *SED* tokens that can be counted as potential examples of habitual *-s* occur with one of several typical adverbs between the pronoun and the verb: *never, always, often,* etc. According to the 'ideal' northern system, the presence of such an adverb would also in itself count as a condition for the Position-of-Subject Constraint to apply. Hence, it is sometimes difficult to decide whether verbal *-s* in this cases is triggered by the temporal semantics, or by the Northern Subject Rule. However, to the degree that the same dialects also exhibit occasional verbal *-s* in cases of no intervening adverb, with comparable frequency, the pattern is better described as independent of the Northern Subject Rule, at least in the case of Yorkshire and Lancashire. Matters are somewhat different in the northern Irish data of the *NITCS:* here, verbal *-s* with pronominal subjects is quite rare throughout; but it is, relatively speaking, a good deal less rare in cases not adjacent to the pronoun than in others. In this dialect, then, it is indeed the Northern

Subject Rule that is responsible for the marginal option of verbal *-s* in these cases.

3.4. *Was/were* neutralization

Variation between *was* and *were* in the northern dialects is a highly complex field. This is due to the fact that it tends to follow only partly the pattern defined by the Northern Subject Rule, with *was* and *were* behaving like the *-s* and zero forms of other verbs. This pattern is often overlaid with other, complementary or competing, rules of variation specific to *was* and *were* alone. The high potential for irregularity and variation that characterizes this verb can be linked historically to two factors.

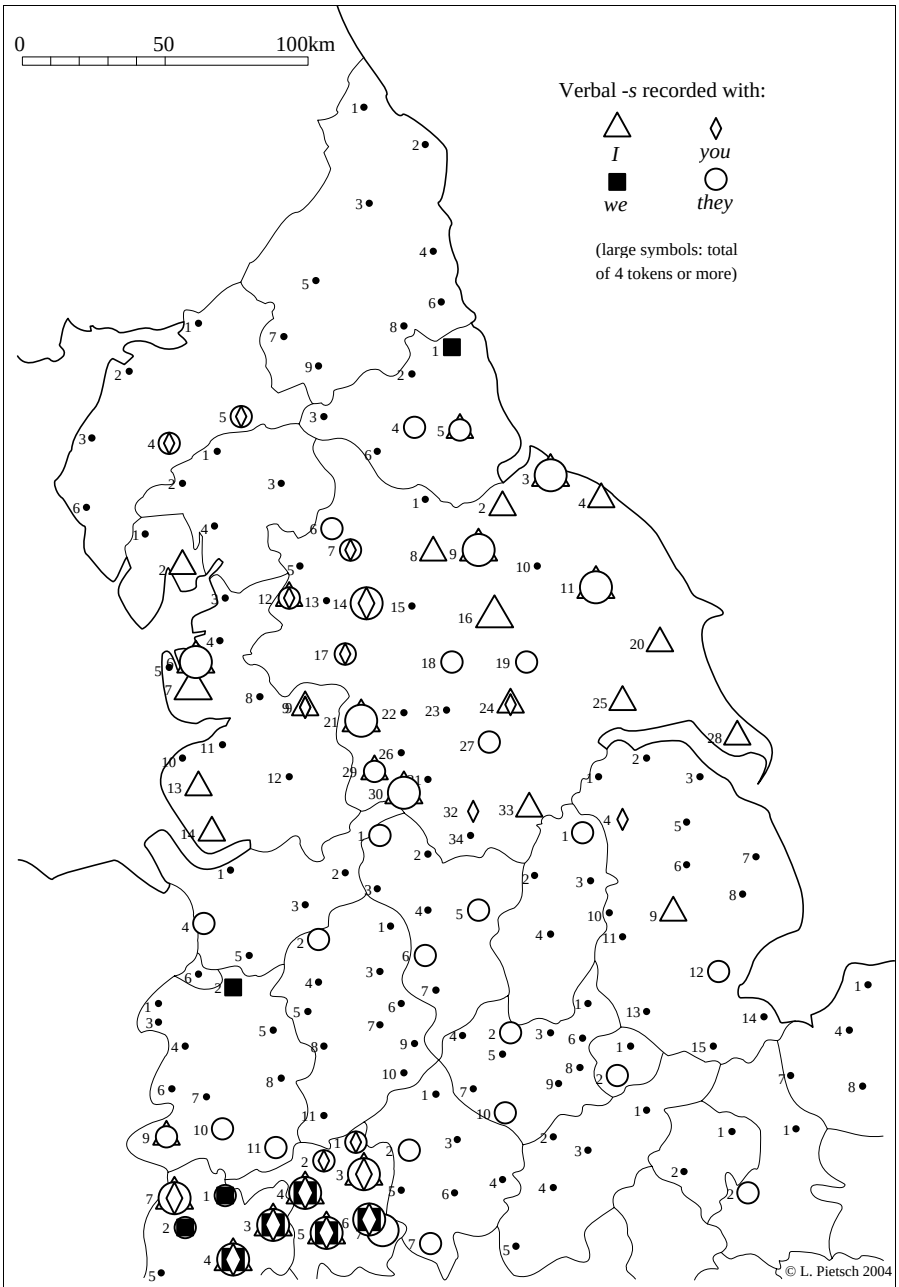
First, the *was/were* paradigm patterned differently from the present-tense verbs from the outset, and of course it still does so in Present-Day Standard English. The same form, *was,* is used for both the first and third person singular, whereas in present-tense verbs the *-s* form is unique to the third person. This is the last remnant of the Old English concord paradigms of the past tense, in which first and third singular regularly patterned together as against the rest. The breakdown of this system can best be seen when the old second person singular is taken into account too. Its original Old English form *(ðu wære)* resembled the plural form *(wæron)* more than the other singular forms *(wæs)*, and it predictably fell together with the plural form in many dialects of Middle English *(thou were)*. Elsewhere, however, analogy with other verb classes gave rise to a variety of other forms such as *thou wert, thou was, thou wast,* before the second person singular finally became obsolete in Modern English. It is not surprising that tendencies of analogical extension or levelling of forms have continued to operate on the *was/were* paradigms of different dialects, leading to a number of different outcomes.

Secondly, it must be noted that both *was/were* and *is/are/am* did not originally fall under the scope of the Northern Subject Rule at all. As will be described in more detail in section 4, the diachronic development in these verbs went exactly in the opposite direction than with all others. In the lexical verbs, the (now non-standard) *-s* forms represent an older, conservative form both in the singular and in the plural, while the (now standard) zero forms in the plural are an innovation in Middle English. In contrast to this, the forms *is* and *was* are truly and exclusively singular in

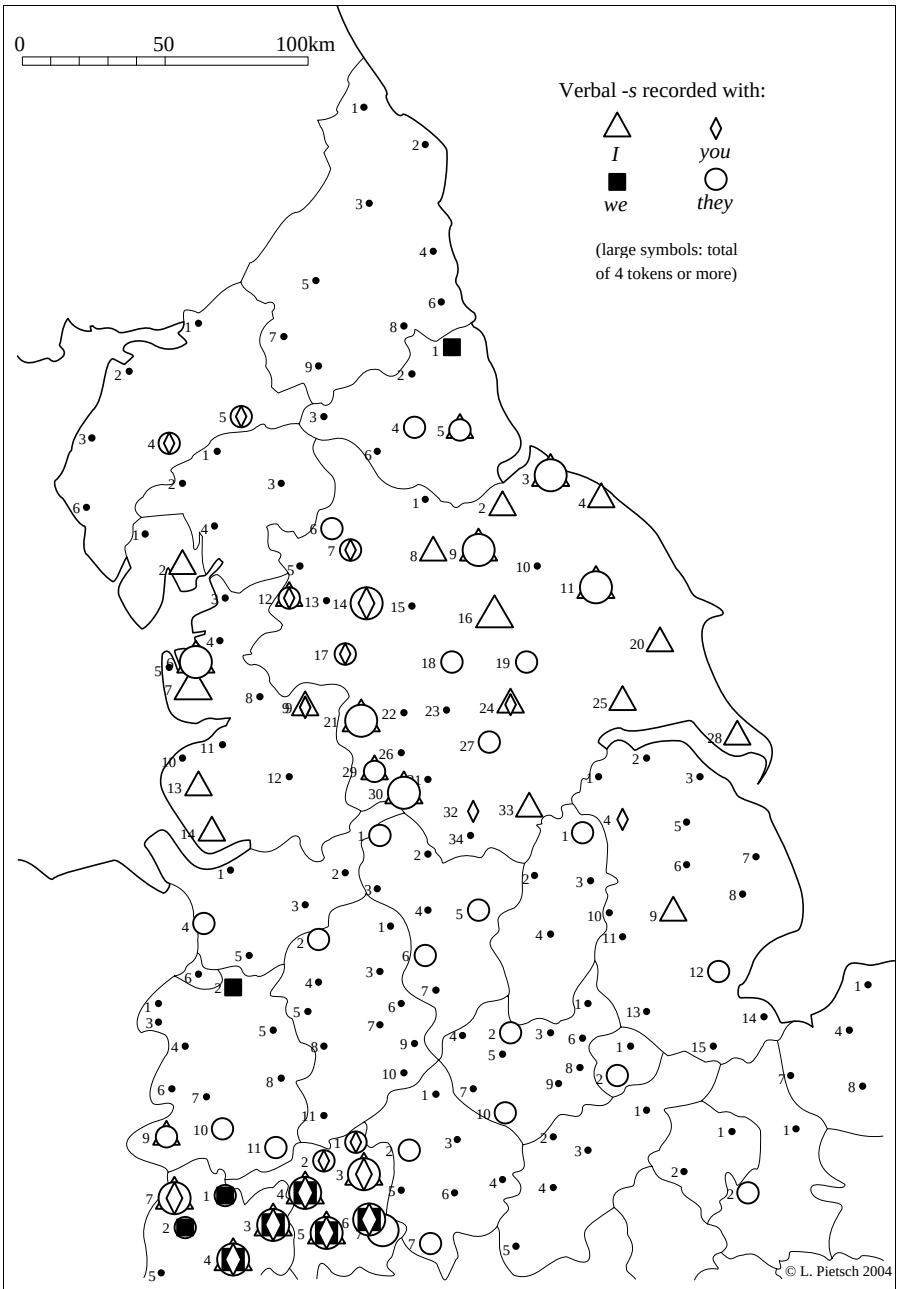
origin, and were only extended to plural use under the Northern Subject Rule by way of analogy with the other *-s* forms later. Apparently, the use of *was* in plural environments as licensed by the Northern Subject Rule never became quite as regular as the corresponding use of other verbal *-s* in the same environments, even in the 'purest' older dialects of the northern type (cf. Montgomery 1994 on Older Scots). But even though the forms of *BE* were relatively slow in picking up the Northern Subject Rule pattern, they have also been slower than other verbs in giving it up again and replacing the northern with the standard pattern, under conditions of dialect levelling in more recent times. This results in a situation found in some modern varieties where *BE* apparently tends to be the only verb to conserve reflexes of the northern pattern (see e.g. Tagliamonte 1999 on the English of York).

In the traditional dialects of northern England as reflected in the *SED,* the following situation obtains. In the Central North, the use of indicative *was* and *were* is, as a rule, parallel to that of *is* and *are.* The singular of all three persons (including *thou*) is invariably *was,* while the plural (including *you*) mostly has *were* but allows for *was* in accordance with the Northern Subject Rule. This is mainly true for the four northern counties of Cumberland, Northumberland, Westmorland and Durham. The *SED* data suggest a near-categorical validity of the number contrast with adjacent pronoun subjects in this area.

All the rest of the survey area shows a tendency of *was/were* levelling, either generalizing *was* to the plural, or *were* to the singular. Four regional clusters of locations can be distinguished in this respect. First, in a compact area centring around southern Lancashire, southwestern Yorkshire (i.e. southwest of a line from Morecambe Bay to the Humber) and Derbyshire, there is a strong preference for generalized singular *were* forms (cf. also Shorrocks 1999: 168). Second, in a broad transitional belt from this area into the Central North, covering northern Lancashire and the northeastern half of Yorkshire, singular *were* forms are also occasionally recorded but less frequent. Third, in a smaller area in the east Midlands, especially in northern Lincolnshire, the preference seems to be for neutralization in *was* rather than *were.* In the Northwest Midlands there are also occasional attestations of plural *weren.* Finally, most other locations in the Midlands, further south, have highly variable or hybrid systems where both singular *were* and plural *was* may co-occur. A common tendency in many of these dialects seems to be that *were* is preferred in negated environments (cf.



Map 5. Was/were neutralization in the *SED*



Map 6. The *was/weren't* negation constraint in the *SED*

Anderwald 2002, Britain 2002). This effect is discernible in all parts of the SED data except the Central North and those parts of the NW Midlands and Lower North where *were* levelling is predominant in all environments. To the north of the central generalized *were* area, this negation constraint tends to affect only the singular forms (*he was* vs. *he weren't*), while *were* remains near-categorical in the plural, except where the Northern Subject Rule licenses *was.* The existence of systems of this kind is consistent with findings by Tagliamonte (1999), who reports the combined effects of singular *were* generalization, the negation constraint, and the Northern Subject Rule (though with no plural verbal *-s* usage preserved in the lexical verbs) in the local dialect of York city. In contrast to the *SED* findings, Beal (1993: 194) attests plural *was* levelling also for Tyneside and Northumberland.

In varieties where *was/were* levelling and the Northern Subject Rule compete with each other, it is also often found that the third person plural differs from the first and second person plural. Levelling typically results in *we was* and *you was,* whereas the third person plural tends to conserve near-categorical *they were* in conformity with the Northern Subject Rule (Tagliamonte 1999, Chambers 2004).

Regional diversification in this respect, similar to what is evidenced in the *SED,* can also be seen in the *FRED* data. Table 1 displays the rates of non-standard *was* in the three pronominal standard *were* environments *(we, you, they)* across eight regional clusters of texts. For comparison, the table also shows the rates of standard *I was* as opposed to non-standard *I were.* The regional clusters are defined as follows. 'Ulster' comprises the six *TRS* recordings in the northern part of the Republic of Ireland, all in close neighbourhood to the six Northern Ireland counties covered by the *NITCS* (the label is used somewhat loosely, since not all of the locations are actually in the province of Ulster – four are in County Donegal, one in Leitrim and one in Louth). 'Northern Scotland' comprises one recording from Banffshire and six from the Scottish Highlands (Inverness, Eastern Ross and Sutherland). 'Mid Scotland' refers to a cluster of interviews from the east coast area, between Kincardineshire and West Lothian. 'Southern Scotland' comprises recordings from the Scottish Borders as well as one from Dumfriesshire. A group of Northumberland recordings represent the traditional English Upper North. Recordings from County Durham and northeast Yorkshire are grouped under 'Teesside' and represent part of the traditional Central Northern area. Another cluster, labelled as 'Cumbria',

Table 1. Was with pronoun subjects in *FRED*

	They		*We*		*You*		*I*	
Ulster	0/22	0%	0/5	0%	0/15	0%	11/11	100%
N Sco	1/113	1%	0/23	0%	0/8	0%	66/66	100%
M Sco	1/188	1%	8/68	12%	60/104	58%	115/116	99%
S Sco	4/114	4%	4/15	27%	2/6	33%	48/48	100%
Northumb.	0/39	0%	1/15	7%	0/14	0%	47/49	96%
Cumbria	0/66	0%	1/27	4%	0/22	0%	76/77	99%
Teesside	6/264	2%	3/128	2%	3/171	2%	331/344	96%
Lower N	9/104	10%	15/61	25%	3/7	43%	99/115	86%
Total	21/910	2%	32/342	9%	68/347	20%	793/826	96%

represents data from near Ambleside in the Lake District and also forms part of the traditional Central North. Finally, grouped under 'Lower North' are two recordings from southern Lancashire and southwest Yorkshire

The data in Table 1 suggest that speakers in Ulster, northern Scotland, as well as in the Upper and Central North of England, tend to have categorical *was/were* concord with pronoun subjects, identical to the standard. This is also confirmed in the data from the *NITCS,* where non-standard *was* with adjacent pronoun subjects is extremely rare. In Middle and Southern Scotland, there is variable non-standard *we was* and *you was,* but hardly any *they was.* It must be stressed that these differences are not due simply to an uneven distribution of standard and dialectal speakers across the corpus. All clusters, including those that show no *was/were* variation at all, do contain informants who otherwise use strongly non-standard features, including heavy use of non-standard verbal *-s* according to the Northern Subject Rule. These data therefore fit in with the earlier findings in the *SED* and the *NITCS,* which indicated that central Northern England and Ulster do not share in the pronominal *was/were* variation in the same way as so many other English vernaculars, and that this type of *was/were* variation is historically unrelated to the Northern Subject Rule.

The Lower North speakers, as can be expected on the basis of the earlier *SED* findings, have some use of non-standard *were* in standard *was* environments, represented in the table by the figures in the *I* column (only 84% of standard *was;* the situation is similar in third person singular environments.) However, at the same time they also have variable plural *was* in standard *were* environments. These speakers even have *they was,* but they too use it less frequently than *you was* or *we was.* In all areas that

allow plural *was* at all, *you was* seems to be more frequent than *we was,* and both are more frequent than *they was.* This fits in with observations made in other studies (e.g. Smith & Tagliamonte 1998, see also Chambers 2004). It is only in the speech of the Teesside informants that plural *was* is found with no marked differences between the three environments, but it is only of marginal frequency in all three. In a common Varbrul model for all areas that have plural *was,* factor weights of .26, .61, and .88 were calculated for *they, we* and *you* respectively.

Whereas there is no discernible Position-of-Subject effect in present-tense verbs with pronoun subjects in the *FRED* data, some effect of this type may be in evidence with *was/were,* although owing to small absolute token counts the evidence is hardly conclusive. While the overall rate of non-standard *was* with adjacent *we/you/they* is 115/1579 (7%), with non-adjacent pronoun subjects it is 6/20 (30%). Varbrul selects the factor group as significant at a 0.009 level, with factor weights of 0.49 versus 0.84 for adjacent and non-adjacent subjects respectively. The negation constraint had no discernible effect on plural *was* in the data.

3.5. Existential *there* clauses

In all data discussed in the previous sections, clauses with existential *there* have been excluded because they require special consideration. Concord variation in existentials and concord variation in canonical clauses have followed quite different paths of historical development, they have different sociolinguistic status in the dialects in question (cf. also Wilson & Henry 1999: 12), and their distribution is governed by different sets of linguistic constraints.

As is well-known, existential clauses in formal Standard English require the verb to agree in number not with the syntactic dummy subject *there*, but with the so-called notional subject, the NP that follows it. This constitutes a systemic anomaly, as the morphosyntactic properties of subjects are divided between two constituents. The dummy subject *there* acts as the subject of the clause as far as word order is concerned, but the following NP acts as the subject in so far as it controls agreement. Many varieties of English share the tendency to level out this irregularity, by allowing invariant singular verb forms after *there.* Non-agreement in clauses beginning with *there* or similar adverbs have been a structural option in most forms of English even since the Old English period (Visser 1963: 62).

In the modern dialects, the strong tendency for non-agreement means that the residual subject status of the following noun phrase is effectively lost. Historically this can be seen as part of a long-term trend of grammaticalization of the *there* construction, in which *there* has gradually changed its status from being originally a deictic adverb to being a subject (cf. Breivik & Swan 2000; *pace* Van Gelderen 1997: 88–109).

It is not surprising that evidence for non-agreement in existentials was also found everywhere in the data of the present study. However, there is a second, competing non-standard pattern in effect in some parts of Northern Ireland and Scotland, which works in just the opposite direction. In this pattern the distinction between singular and plural existentials is also neutralized, but the neutralization is in favour not of the normal singular verbal forms *is/was,* but of the verb forms that are otherwise used in the plural: *are/were*. These forms appear to be favoured in negated clauses, but are by no means restricted to them. The present-tense form of this pattern is often a contracted form in which the verb has lost all or most of its segmental phonological substance: *there'* < *there're* < *there are*, but full forms of *are* are also attested (18c). In the following discussion I will refer to these forms collectively as *-r* forms, as opposed to the *-s* forms *is, 's* and *was*.

(18) a. *Och, aye,* ***there'*** *no blacksmithing work now, except odd wee bits.* [*NITCS:* L7.3]

b. ***There're*** *no school.* [*NITCS:* L7.3]

c. *The young would rather go away till Dungiven, or, or Strabane, or some place where* ***there are*** *a big, eh, dance-hall.* [*NITCS:* L10.2]

In the NITCS data, *-r* forms are found strongly concentrated in the speech of informants from the north and northwest of Ulster, whereas only a bit further towards the southeast (county Down and the southern half of county Antrim) such forms were not found or only very marginal. This finding is interesting from a dialect-geographical perspective, as this apparent division cuts right across what has long been recognized as an important dialect boundary within Ulster, that between 'Core Ulster Scots' and 'Mid Ulster English' (Gregg 1972; see Pietsch 2005: ch. 5.4.1 for details). In the FRED data, singular *-r* forms in the present tense are found only in the speech of six informants, two of them located in Ulster and four in southern Scotland. Some informants in the northwestern part of the 'Core Ulster Scots' area went on record using singular *-r* in about two thirds of all cases.

However, the existence of the competing patterns of neutralization in *-s* and neutralization in *-r* means that for some speakers all eight of the options shown schematically in (19) and (20) seem to be possible.

(19) a. *There's a house now*
b. *There's houses now*
c. *There was a house then*
d. *There was houses then*

(20) a. *There' a house now*
b. *There' houses now*
c. *There were a house then*
d. *There were houses then*

The following authentic examples (21) give a first impression of the amount of variability observed in the corpus. They were all produced by one Ulster speaker within a single short stretch of discourse, in this order:

(21) a. *There was fairs.*
b. *Well, there was a fair in Kilrea.*
c. *There were no pastime for you.*
d. *There were no fences.*
e. *There were better sheepdogs than there is now.* [*NITCS:* L6.3]

Across the whole survey area, singular *were* in past tense existentials is more widespread than singular *are* in the present. All of the six *FRED* informants who used singular bare *there'* in the present tense also had singular *there were* in the past. Additionally, singular *there were* was also found in the speech of twenty other informants. Many of these informants are also found in Ulster and southern and middle Scotland. But, not surprisingly, singular *there were* is also found in the Lower North of England, that is, with those speakers who have singular *were* levelling in non-existential clauses as well. In the Central and Upper North of England and in northern Scotland, singular *were* in either type of environment is only marginally present or, in many speakers, not attested at all. The two phenomena can thus best be described as distinct in principle, and probably in origin: speakers either have singular *-r* forms in existentials (the 'Ulster Scots' type: *there are a house, there were a house*); or they have singular *were* in all clause types (the 'Yorkshire' type: *he were going; there were a house*); but no speakers have both. Structures of the type *there were a*

Table 2. Nonstandard *-r* forms in *FRED*

	Pres. Sg. Ex. *there're* + Sg.		Past Sg. Ex. *there were* + Sg		Past 3Sg. / 1Sg. *I/he/she/it were*		Total	
Ulster	9/43	**21%**	13/48	**27%**	2/110	02%	24/201	12%
S Scot.	9/42	**21%**	26/92	**28%**	9/678	01%	44/812	05%
M Scot.	1/45	02%	13/175	**07%**	9/1257	01%	23/1477	02%
N Scot.	0/21	00%	1/68	01%	4/455	01%	5/544	01%
Cumbria	0/22	00%	0/80	00%	4/428	01%	4/530	01%
Northumb.	0/11	00%	1/58	**02%**	6/272	**02%**	7/341	02%
Teesside	0/82	00%	8/362	**02%**	35/1850	**02%**	43/2294	02%
Lower N	0/22	00%	22/73	**30%**	72/661	**11%**	94/756	12%
Total	19/288	07%	84/956	09%	141/5711	02%	244/6955	04%

house, representing a point of incidental overlap between the two patterns, seem to have spread across an area much larger than either of the focal areas of these two patterns, as a marginal option at least. This distribution can be seen in Table 2, cross-tabulating figures for the three usage types across the eight regional clusters within the *FRED* data.

Unlike the *FRED* data, the data of the *NITCS* allowed also for a study of the effects of sociolinguistic variables, such as age and sex (Pietsch 2005: ch. 5.4.2). Looking at the three age groups sampled in the *NITCS,* it was found, first, that the middle age group tended to observe standard-conforming number concord in existentials more often than either the children or the older informants in the corpus. The youngest age group showed a strong tendency to use generalized *-s* forms, approaching near-categoricity in some groups. In contrast to this, the use of generalized *-r* forms was strongly associated with the oldest age group. Moreover, across all age groups, male informants consistently used *-r* more often than women and girls. All of this clearly indicates that generalized existential *-r* has the status of a socially marked, conservative local variant in Northern Ireland and that there is a change in progress replacing this pattern with that of generalized *-s.* The gender differentiation can be seen as an expectable side effect of such a development, as it confirms the long-established rule in sociolinguistics (cf. Trudgill 2000: 73) that women tend to follow prestigious standard models of speech more than men do, and that men in rural societies tend to be more conservative in preserving local non-

Table 3. Existential *-r* in the *NITCS,* by area, sex and age group

Area	Sex	Age Group	Singular		Plural		Total	
North	m	65–75	82/188	44%	78/126	62%	160/314	51%
		35–45	38/158	24%	51/93	55%	89/251	36%
		9–12	13/38	34%	5/19	26%	18/57	32%
	f	65–75	8/30	27%	5/15	33%	13/45	29%
		35–45	1/63	02%	15/28	54%	16/91	18%
		9–12	2/56	04%	5/46	11%	7/102	07%
South	m	65–75	10/150	07%	15/92	16%	25/242	10%
		35–45	4/129	03%	7/67	10%	11/196	06%
		9–12	0/75	00%	1/40	03%	1/115	01%
	f	65–75	3/137	02%	2/69	03%	5/205	02%
		35–45	0/71	00%	14/49	29%	14/120	12%
		9–12	0/73	00%	3/44	07%	3/117	03%

standard forms. In this case, women were found both to adapt more to the standard of formal English than men do, and simultaneously to be leading the trend, apparent in younger speakers in general, to move away from the more specifically local non-standard pattern of generalized *-r* forms, towards the supraregional colloquial norm of generalized *-s* forms. Table 3 displays the distribution of *-s* and *-r* tokens across the different social groups in two geographical sub-regions in the Ulster corpus.

In addition to this, there seem to be indications in the *NITCS* data that Protestant speakers in the north may have a stronger preference for the conservative *-r* forms than Catholic speakers. Although the findings are somewhat inconclusive in statistical terms (Pietsch 2005: ch. 5.4.2), such an effect would fit in plausibly with a hypothesis that linguistic features of traditional Ulster Scots serve as a marker of Protestant identity in Northern Ireland, whereas Catholics show more of an orientation towards varieties of English used in other parts of Ireland (Harris 1991: 46, cf. also McCafferty 1998a, 1998b, 1999).

Verbal concord in existentials is also influenced by linguistic environment factors. One of them is negation. With singular notional subjects, the use of *-r* is three times more frequent in negated than in non-negated clauses (27 per cent as opposed to 9 per cent); in plural clauses the difference is slightly less marked but the direction is the same (45 per cent

as opposed to 28 per cent). This effect reflects the pattern already discussed in the previous section, of generalized *weren't* being preferred over *wasn't* in many dialects (cf. Anderwald 2002: 180–182). In Ulster, such an effect was found only in existentials, not in canonical clauses, and it seems to apply in parallel fashion both to *was/were* and *is/are.* The data suggest that for many speakers the negation constraint is a more powerful factor in determining the choice of form than the grammatical number of the notional subject. A Varbrul model shows a slightly larger span of factor weights, of 0.45 versus 0.71 for non-negated and negated clauses respectively, as opposed to a span of only 0.42 versus 0.64 for singular versus plural subjects.

Another factor that seems to constrain the choice of verb forms in existentials is the syntactic environment in which it occurs. Table 4 shows token counts tabulated across three types of structures: Type A, the bulk of the canonical existentials with the verb immediately preceding the notional subject; Type B, clauses where the verb and the notional subject are separated by intervening material such as adverbials; and Type C, all other clauses in which the element order between the verb, the notional subject and the existential marker *there* differs in some way. This group most notably comprises tag clauses, questions, and relatives. It can be seen that both of the special environment types have an interesting effect. In the cases with intervening adverbials, the proportion of *-r* and *-s* is almost exactly the same in the singular and in the plural. In these cases, the choice of verb form thus appears to be governed entirely by factors other than grammatical number. In other words, agreement between the verb and the notional subject – which, as seen earlier, is disregarded by many speakers much of the time anyway – is practically non-existent whenever other words intervene between the two. However, in the Type C cases, those with inverted or other non-canonical word orders, the picture is different: whereas for the plural the rate of *-r* usage is just about average,

Table 4. Existential *-r* in the *NITCS,* by number and clause type

Clause Structure	Singular		Plural		Total	
Type A: Adjacent NP	152/1134	13%	196/612	32%	357/1755	20%
Type B: Adv. Intervening	14/76	18%	10/51	20%	24/127	19%
Type C: Others	1/53	02%	14/44	30%	15/97	15%
Total	167/1263	13%	229/716	32%	396/1979	20%

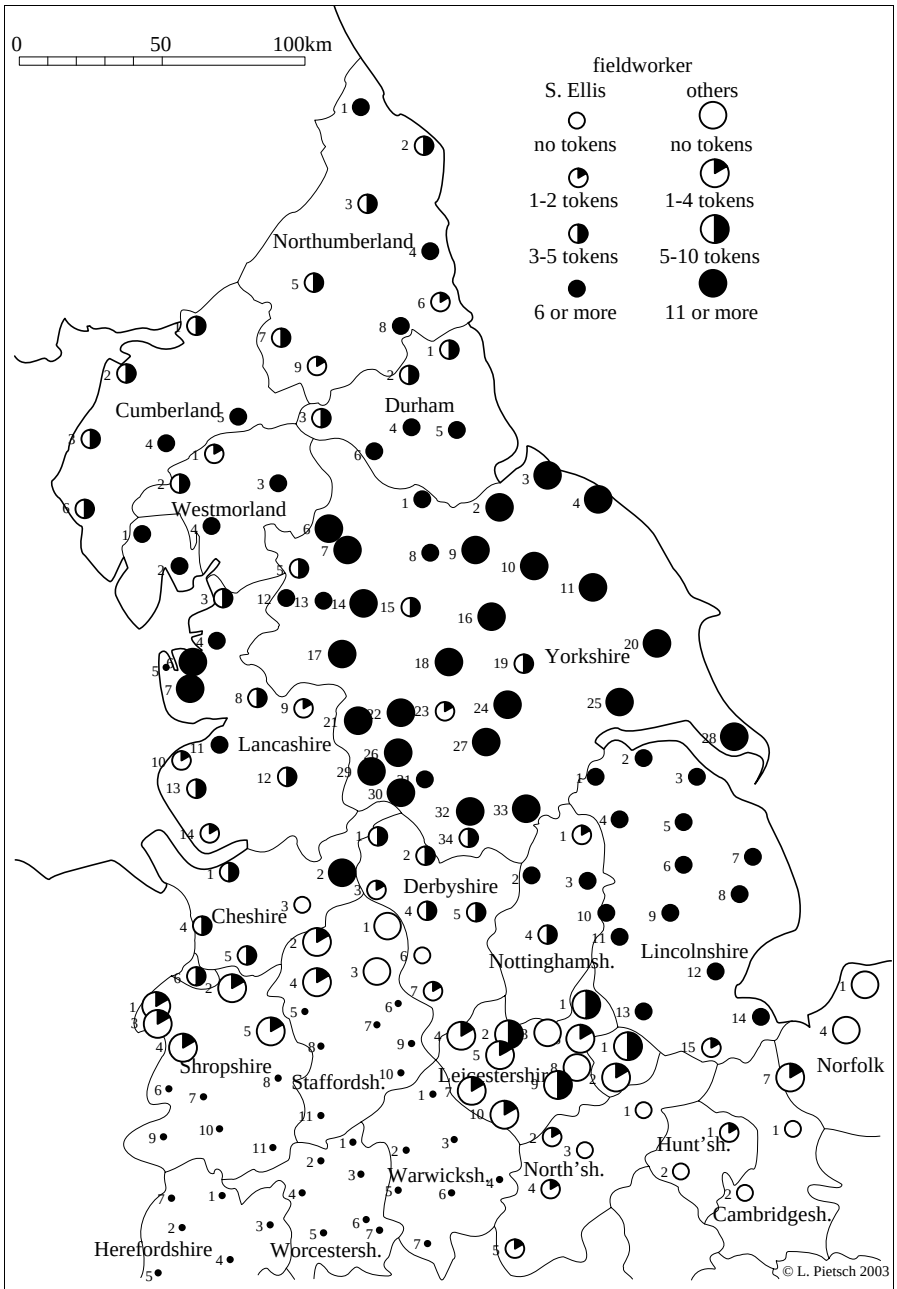
surprisingly few instances of non-standard *-r* were found in the singular. A definitive explanation for this effect cannot be given at the present moment, but it may be related to the fact that in these clause types (tags, questions and so on) the verb is usually stressed. Apparently, the use of singular *were* and *are* in Ulster English tends to be restricted to unstressed environments.

3.6. Verbal *-s* with plural NPs

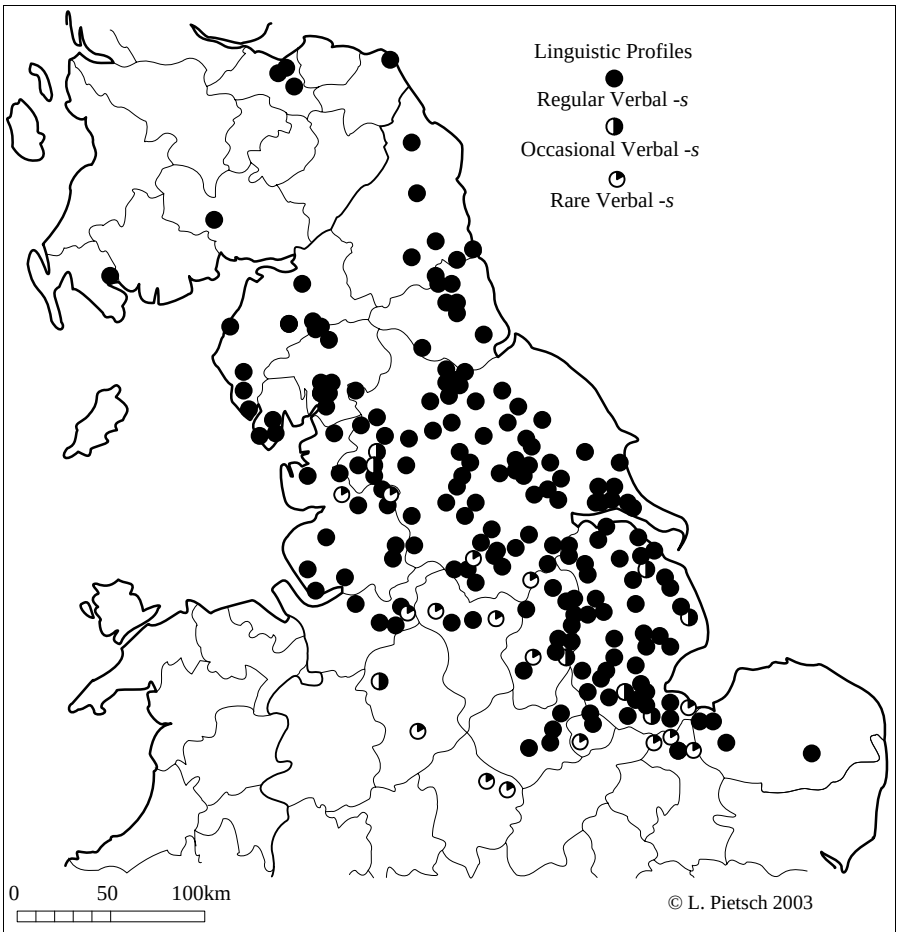
Having so far discussed the distribution of phenomena that have no or only a marginal relationship to the Northern Subject Rule, we can now proceed to a more detailed discussion of the pattern that stands at its core and is most characteristic of the traditional dialects of the northern type: non-standard verbal -s with third person plural subjects other than the pronoun *they*.

The geographical distribution of this pattern in the traditional dialects of England can be traced well in the *SED* data. The *SED* questionnaire contained two items that were designed to elicit structures of the relevant type (III.10.7 'bulls bellow', and VIII.7.5 'burglars steal them'), and atlas charts based on these data have been printed in Viereck (1991/1997: II, M27 and I, M40); Klemola (2000: 334), and Viereck, Viereck & Ramisch (2002: 84); see also the isogloss labelled 'burglars steals' in Map 1 above. However, as was pointed out earlier, the published material these charts are based on is in some sense deficient, as it excludes a great number of incidental material tokens that did not match the elicited environment in a narrow sense, but still provide important evidence for the effects of the Northern Subject Rule.

When this additional material, recovered from the original fieldworker notebooks, is taken into account, two important observations can be made. First, the area affected by the Northern Subject Rule in the traditional dialects reaches a good deal further south into the East Midlands than shown in those maps based exclusively on the published *SED* material. The data suggest that there is a broad transitional zone in which plural verbal *-s* occurs but becomes progressively rarer the further one goes to the south. The outer limits of this transitional zone are still virtually identical to the limits of the northern system of six hundred years earlier (see section 4



Map 7. Plural verbal *-s* in the *SED* fieldworker notebooks[7] (all NP subjects)



Map 8. The NSR in Late Middle English (based on data in *LALME* I: 467, IV: 110–111)

below). This can be seen by comparing the attestations in the *SED* (Map 7) with those in the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Middle English* (*LALME,* McIntosh, Samuels & Bensik 1986), displayed in Map 8.

Second, the distribution of tokens in the border zone reveals an interesting concentration of some special environment types. Whereas in the core area of the northern dialects proper, plural verbal *-s* can be found in all types of clauses, with all types of subject noun phrases and all types of verbs, towards the transition zone in the south plural verbal *-s* is

documented almost exclusively in a set of special environments. Among them are: relative clauses; clauses with demonstrative pronoun subjects such as *them* or *those;* and clauses with indefinite pronoun subjects such as *some, some of them* etc. Unfortunately, these are by and large just the types that were not documented systematically in the published *SED* material. These types of environments together make up for almost 80 per cent of all the (relatively sparse) tokens of plural verbal *-s* in the transitional zone. In the northern dialects proper, their predominance is less strong, but with roughly 50 percent of all recorded tokens they still appear over-represented. To these environment types that seem to be particularly favourable to verbal *-s* can be added cases of subject-verb inversion, as in questions and tag clauses.

Shown below are typical *SED* attestations of relative clauses, including presentational relative clauses after existential *there,* most typically with zero relativizer and with non-concord in the preceding existential construction (23), as well as after cleft *it's* (24).

(22) a. *You don't see many has holes now* [*SED:* La7]

b. *Them what's got a few* [*SED:* Lei5]

c. *Hedges that hasn't been done* [*SED:* Lei9]

d. *The ones that goes across was braces* [*SED:* R2]

e. *It kills the thorns as grows round it* [*SED:* Nth2]

f. *I know several signs as is pretty sure* [*SED:* Nth4]

g. *People what was used to it* [*SED:* Hu1]

(23) a. *There's a lot of the people now as doesn't talk like they used to* [*SED:* L9]

b. *There's any amount takes cattle on* [*SED:* Nb4]

c. *There's not so many fills a ten-quart tin* [*SED:* Cu3]

d. *There's a lot of people kills 'em* [*SED:* L15]

e. *There's two or three comes up at five o'clock in the morning* [*SED:* Lei7]

(24) *We're both right, aren't we, it's t'others 'at's wrong* [*SED:* Y16]

Typical attestations with indefinite pronouns are shown under (25), and examples with demonstratives are shown under (26). The indefinite items include *some, most, many, a lot,* etc., often with postmodifiers like *of them,* sometimes also in determiner function followed by nouns. As for the demonstratives, the most typical item is *them,* but standard *these/those* also occur; in the Ulster and Scottish data a demonstrative determiner *they* (also spelled *thae* in written Scots, and not to be mistaken for the simple pronoun) occurs and has a similar effect. Examples such as these are extremely common in all parts of the data.

(25) a. *some uses a jug and gets it broke* [*SED:* R1]

b. *some says lop but I'd say slat* [*SED:* L13]

c. *some on 'em reckons it in't* [*SED:* Lei1]

d. *some on 'em's red* [*SED:* L13]

e. *most on 'em has one* [*SED:* L14]

f. *a good many keeps hens* [*SED:* Lei10]

g. *some folks steals 'em* [*SED:* L9]

(26) a. *them's ourn* [*SED:* Lei9]

b. *them's gisters in the top field* [*SED:* Lei9]

c. *these is the front of these* [*SED:* Lei2]

d. *I wonder if them two's married* [*SED:* L11]

Plural verbal *-s* in inversion is exemplified in (27). Note that the list includes several instances where *'em,* a weak form of demonstrative *them,* is used as a tag subject just like a simple pronoun *they,* i.e. apparently without emphasizing or deictic force. It nevertheless takes verbal *-s,* retaining its status of a full NP, and not of a simple pronoun, in terms of sensitivity to the Type-of-Subject Constraint. This can be taken as a piece of evidence that the Type-of-Subject Constraint is defined in terms of particular items and the constructions they are part of, not in terms of some abstract semantic or formal features defining 'pronoun-ness'.

(27) a. *Is them two married?* [*SED:* Nb2]

b. *Who's them?* [*SED:* Nb3]

c. *Is thy teeth warking?* [*SED:* Cu5]

d. *Where's my yorks at?* [*SED:* We4]

e. *Doesn't 'em?* [*SED:* La4]

f. *Is 'em?* [*SED:* La4]

g. *Has thi taties comed up yet* [*SED:* Y7]

h. *Is both you women wed?* [*SED:* Y7]

i. *Has them horses been served?* [*SED:* Y27]

j. *Where's them come fra?* [*SED:* Y28]

A special idiomatic type of inversion environment which appears to be particularly favourable to plural verbal *-s,* found mostly in Yorkshire data, is in tag clauses of the kind exemplified under (28) and (29), used as a postponed expression of a sentence topic. Note that these are typically preceded by a clause with a co-referential pronoun *they,* and that this first clause invariably has the appropriate verbal form without *-s.*

(28) a. *They're real hard gossips, is them.* [*SED:* Y2]

b. *They're rough mutton, is tups.* [*SED:* Y3]

c. *They're rum things, is the pigs.* [*SED:* Y11]

d. *They're a bit queer, is pigs to manage.* [*SED:* Y12]

e. *They're very affectionate, is pigs.* [*SED:* Y25]

f. *They're laced boots, is these of mine.* [*SED:* Y18]

g. *They're not worth bringing up, isn't little pigs.* [*SED:* La6]

(29) a. *They vary, does stee-steps.* [*SED:* Y18]

b. *They've recently comed, has them.* [*SED:* Y18]

c. *They feel over 'em and weighs 'em, does butchers.* [*SED:* Y22]

d. *They always crawl upwards, does lice.* [*SED:* Y25]

Two tokens of this type, both from the same informant, are also recorded in the more recent *FRED* data, both using *was* (and both closely preceded by rule-conforming *they were*):

(30) a. *They were proper slaves, was women, in them days.* [*FRED:*Yks9]

b. *They were wicked, was farmers, for playing nap.* [*FRED:*Yks9]

As was mentioned above, the Northern Subject Rule also interacts in interesting ways with the concurrent pattern of *was/were* levelling. Tokens of plural *was* with plural NP subjects are found throughout the area affected by the Northern Subject Rule. To the degree that *they was* is rarer or absent in these dialects, these forms can be ascribed to the Type-of-Subject Constraint. Such tokens occur even in areas which otherwise have strong preferences for generalized *were* even in the singular, such as the core generalized *were* area in south Yorkshire and the northwest Midlands. Examples are shown under (31). Note that many of these tokens also exemplify the common occurrence of subjects involving demonstrative *them* and other demonstrative pronouns.

(31) a. *Shops was open while ten.* [*SED:*Y20]

b. *Them's sideboards what was cut off.* [*SED:*Y25]

c. *Them that was on that ship 'at went down.* [*SED:*Y27]

d. *Half on'em was apt.* [*SED:*Y28]

e. *Horses was baiting.* [*SED:*Y28]

f. *These was like that.* [*SED:*Y32]

g. *Them pigeons was there.* [*SED:*Ch2]

These findings fit in with observations reported by Wright[8] as early as in 1892: in the dialect of Windhill in the West Riding of Yorkshire, plural verbal *-s* had largely become restricted to relatives and to the forms of *HAVE* and *BE,* and it occurred in other environments only rarely as a relic form (1892: 156). Wright also includes several examples with the subject *them* among lists of typical occurrences:

(32) a. *Them's the men that does their work best.*

b. *Them men's been very good to me.*

c. *Us that's done so much for him.*

d. *Me that's so poorly.*

e. *The coals isn't done yet.*

(33) a. *I've done.*

b. *They're at it again.*

c. *Them men do their work very well.*

Wright's location is situated well north of the *burglars steals* isogloss in the *SED.* Although the *SED* data does attest the continued presence of verbal *-s* in that same area even outside the special favouring environments, more than half a century after Wright, his observation suggests the existence of a strong favouring tendency, and as such it fits in nicely with the observation in the *SED* that verbal *-s* was preserved longer, and further in the south, in just the same set of favouring environments.

The impression that environments of this type are over-represented among the occurrences of verbal *-s* cannot be tested statistically in the *SED* data, because the *SED* does not fully record all utterances of any informant through a given stretch of discourse. However, very similar effects are also found in the corpus data of both the *NITCS* and *FRED.* In both corpora, the relative clause constraint is solidly in evidence, as relative clauses take verbal *-s* up to twice as often as other clauses. This goes especially for *that* relatives and for the non-standard zero relatives that are common in these dialects. *Wh*-relatives, on the other hand, tend to co-occur more often with standard concord behaviour, apparently due to their stylistic status of being more characteristic of formal Standard English. A similar stylistic differentiation can also be found with respect to the demonstratives. Whereas the non-standard demonstratives *them* and *thae* have a very strong favouring effect on verbal *-s*, the effect of the standard demonstratives *these* and *those* is rather the opposite.

Potential candidates for plural verbal *-s* in inverted environments are quite rare in the corpus (since the overwhelming majority of inverted clauses have pronoun subjects and/or modal verbs), but in the few cases in point, verbal *-s* is strongly over-represented (7 out of 9 cases in the *NITCS,* and 11 out of 12 in *FRED*). Inverted clauses must therefore be counted as one of the most strongly favouring environments.

As for the indefinite pronouns, effects are difficult to quantify, as the class of constructions that exemplify this type is a rather open one. Its typical ingredients (*some, a lot, ones, of them,* etc.) can occur in a wide variety of combinations, and they also often co-occur with some of the other factors mentioned above. For instance, many instances of *a lot* are followed by a relative clause; *ones* is often preceded by a demonstrative

them ones, etc. It is therefore not easy to find the most appropriate classification when it comes to testing the effects of these and similar items statistically, as the statistic method always requires the counting of tokens across a set of distinct, clearly defined environment types. The classifications used for the statistics below are therefore somewhat arbitrary. However, intuitively it seems to be the case that the effect is linked not so much to a precisely circumscribed set of structural environments anyway, but rather to a set of prototypicality conditions. It will be discussed in more detail in section 6 how effects of this type can be integrated into a theoretical model of grammatical variation. Going through the attested examples of plural verbal *-s,* one is left with the impression that sentences such as *there's a lot of people kills 'em* represent something close to a common prototype, and that a sentence's likelihood of having verbal *-s* depends on its relative degree of similarity or dissimilarity with this or a small number of other prototypes. Among the conditions that seem to play a role here is the subject's role of being focussed, unlike in the most common constellation of a clause with a pronoun subject, where the subject is typically topical and unstressed.

However, apparent effects of favouring verbal *-s* may also be linked quite arbitrarily to specific items in the syntactic or semantic environment. For instance, it was found in the *NITCS* data that sentences with the subjects *times* and *days* displayed a far higher than average proportion of verbal *-s*, as in the examples below (34–35). This usage type must be characterized as a special stylistic idiom.

(34) a. *The times is better in a way, like, as regards money.* [*NITCS:* L4.3]

b. *Oh, aye, times is a whole lot better now.* [*NITCS:* L15.2]

c. *Oh, the times is a-changed very much.* [*NITCS:* L36.3]

d. *The times was very bad.* [*NITCS:* L8.3]

e. *If the people had sense, the times is perfect. That's what the times is.* [*NITCS:* L8.3]

(35) *After all, my young days was far better.* [*NITCS:* L10.3]

Quite prominent among the factors favouring or disfavouring verbal *-s* is, not surprisingly, the type of verb involved. In the *FRED* data, a moderate overall preference for plural *was* (used in 51 per cent of all cases of past-tense *BE*) is in evidence in all parts of the corpus. *Is* is also used slightly

more often (35 per cent) than the *-s* forms of other verbs (31 per cent). It is perhaps remarkable that this effect is not even stronger. Judging from some recent descriptions of northern varieties – e.g. Tagliamonte (1999) on York English, or Miller (2004) on the current spoken language in the Central Lowlands of Scotland – one might expect the trend towards a restriction of the Northern Subject Rule to *was/were* to have progressed much further. These studies attest effects of the Northern Subject Rule to be preserved only for *BE*. As for modern Scots, Görlach (2002: 95) suggests that the Northern Subject Rule may have become a victim of social stigmatization in recent decades, despite its long tradition in Scots, because of its overlap with the non-standard verbal *-s* in other colloquial varieties of English. He reports that it is even avoided in some modern Scots writing. This stigmatization may explain the presence of some speakers in the *FRED* corpus who consistently lack verbal *-s* but otherwise display many quite distinctively Scots grammatical features in their speech. The very solid presence of Northern Subject Rule effects both with *BE* and with lexical verbs in many other speakers in the corpus confirms that *FRED,* on the whole, represents a range of predominantly very conservative types of speech.

In the *NITCS* data the situation is more complex, since internal geographic diversification was found within Ulster in this respect. Towards the northeast, in what has been known as the area of traditional 'Core Ulster Scots' dialects (Gregg 1972), the Northern Subject Rule seemed to apply without much distinction to all verbs, with relative frequencies of verbal *-s* at a uniform but only moderate level (around 21 per cent) for all verbs alike. Along the southern border of Ulster, plural *was* was found much more frequently (56 per cent) than other *-s* forms, including *is* (24 per cent). The verb *have* seemed to play another special role, showing exceptionally low levels of verbal *-s* in this area (5 per cent). Interestingly, the highest levels of verbal *-s* usage overall were found in neither of these two areas, but in the transitional zone between them, in central and southeast Ulster (see Pietsch 2005: ch. 5.3.1 for details).

Table 5 and Table 6 show the relevant statistics for the most important linguistic environment factors in terms of two (partial) Varbrul models calculated separately for the *FRED* and *NITCS* data. For technical purposes, the definition of the factors and factor groups is not exactly identical in both models, but the similarity of the results with respect to the principal effects discussed so far can easily be seen. (For details regarding

the design of the models, interaction tests between the various factor

Table 5. Partial Varbrul model for NSR in *FRED*

Factor Group	Factor	Tokens -*s*/Total	%	Factor Weight
Verb	*Was/Were*	215/420	51%	0.58
	Is/Are	32/92	35%	0.42
	Other Verbs	52/167	31%	0.34
Clause	Inverted	7/9	78%	0.91
	Zero/*That* Relative	64/90	71%	0.78
	Canonical SV (Adjacent)	198/475	42%	0.46
	Wh- Relative	9/26	35%	0.37
	Canonical SV(Non-Adjacent)	21/79	27%	0.35
Subject	*Them*	19/29	66%	0.53
	Indef. Pronouns	61/129	47%	0.56
	Other Demonstratives	13/43	30%	0.31
	Other NPs	206/478	43%	0.50
Total		299/679	44%	

Table 6. Partial Varbrul model for NSR in the *NITCS*

Factor Group	Factor	Tokens -*s*/Total	%	Factor Weight
Clause Type				
	Inverted	11/12	91%	0.97
	Zero relatives	37/60	61%	0.79
	That relatives	38/79	48%	0.58
	Canonical SV	227/751	30%	0.46
	Wh- Relatives	3/36	8%	0.23
Subject-Verb Distance				
	Non-adjacent	52/122	42%	0.62
	Adjacent (and zero subjects)	253/804	31%	0.48

Factor Group	Factor	Tokens -*s*/Total	%	Factor Weight
Determiner of Subject NP				
	Demonstrative *them/thae,* interrogatives	30/38	78%	0.86
	Quantifiers + *of them*	42/95	44%	0.69
	Others	235/746	31%	0.47
	Demonstrative *these/those*	9/59	15%	0.31
Nominal Head of Subject NP				
	Times/Days	18/21	85%	0.86
	Ones	19/34	55%	0.69
	Other nouns	192/643	29%	0.47
	Total	316/938	34%	

groups, and the statistical integration of the social and geographic factor groups with the linguistic factor groups shown here, see the discussion in Pietsch 2005).

Summing up, there seems to be strong evidence that the use or non-use of verbal -*s* in the variable grammars of present-day dialect speakers is governed by a set of prototypicality conditions. Certain types of environments, defined in syntactic, lexical, or possibly also semantic terms, are associated with a relative preference for the use of the conservative dialectal option of verbal -*s*. The likelihood for any particular clause to display verbal -*s* seems to depend on its degree of closeness to one of these prototypes. The relevant conditions may range from very general, productive patterns (such as the relative clause or inversion constraints) to highly specific (such as the *times* constraint detected in the *NITCS* data). In diachronic terms, these effects may be described as a gradual loss of productivity of a once general, universal pattern, which may in the long run lead to its becoming fossilized in a highly restricted set of environments. In synchronic terms, the effects in the grammars of individual speakers may best be characterized as structural idioms: arbitrary properties associated with specific construction types, which range somewhere in between fully general syntactic rules on the one end, and individual lexical properties on the other.

4. The history of the Northern Subject Rule

So far I have dealt with the variable grammars of recent dialects, and centrally with the reflexes they preserve of the Northern Subject Rule, which was shown to be one of the main characteristic patterns of the north. In the present section I will explore what can be reconstructed of the historical development of this pattern. Unfortunately, much of its historical origins lie in the dark. Its first appearance in the dialects of northern England must be dated to the time of early Middle English, a period from which no written documents of northern provenance are extant. In the latest surviving Northumbrian Old English documents from before this gap (the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Rushworth Gloss, and the Durham Ritual, all mid-tenth century), there are signs of an ongoing change that can be understood as a corollary and prerequisite of the emergence of the later rule, namely the change from the verbal *-eð/-að/-iað/-is* affixes to neutralized *-es*. In the earliest reliable Middle English documents from after the gap, from c.1300 onwards, the Northern Subject Rule is already fully in place.

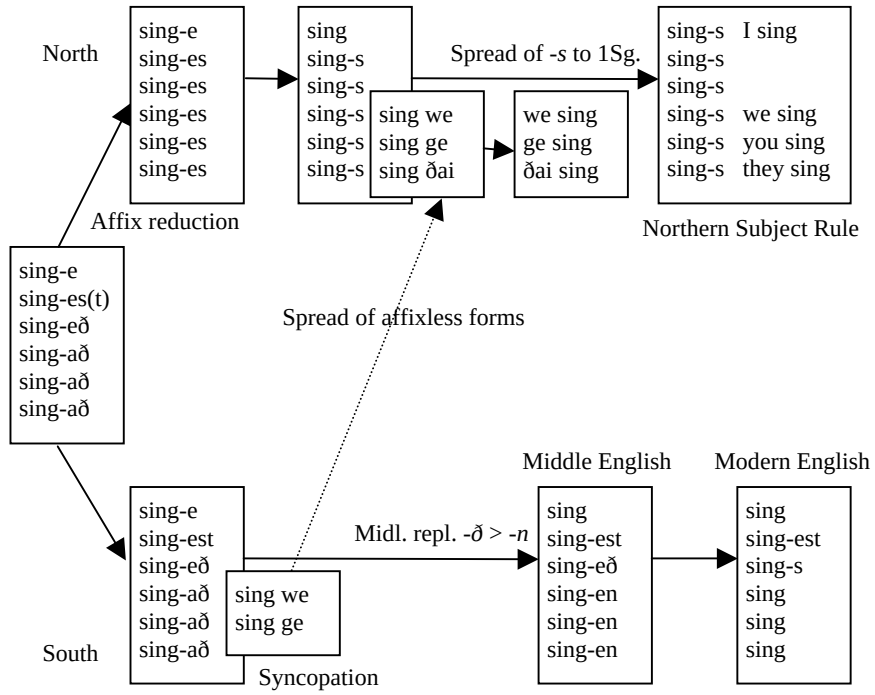
It has been suggested that the emergence of the Northern Subject Rule may have been a result of earlier contact of English with Brythonic Celtic (Klemola 2000). The idea is tempting because of certain typological parallels between the northern system and the concord systems of Welsh and related languages. Just like northern English, Welsh displays non-agreement with full NP subjects but agreement with accompanying personal pronouns. (For the different case of a rather more elusive parallel between the northern English concord system and that of Irish see the discussion in Corrigan 1997: 190–225 and Pietsch 2005: ch. 2.1.2.) However, I have argued elsewhere (Pietsch 2005: ch. 3.3) that a transfer explanation of the kind envisaged by Klemola is not tenable. This is mainly due to problems with the relative timing between the supposed period of contact and certain dateable linguistic changes such as the affix neutralization mentioned above, which are logical prerequisites of the emergence of the Northern Subject Rule and must therefore predate it. In what follows, I will instead sketch a possible alternative model of how the pattern could have evolved. It is based primarily on language-internal causal factors such as analogy and frequency-induced change.

It is, first of all, crucial to point out that the verbal *-s* forms in those environments where they do not match modern Standard English are not an innovation. They were not, as one might think, an intrusion into these positions from the third person singular. Rather (for most verbs, at least)

these *-s* forms are a conservative retention. Etymologically, verbal plural *-s* is no less genuine a reflex of an original agreement marker (northern OE plural *-að>-as>-s*) than third person singular *-s* (northern OE *-eð>-es>-s*). The main innovation thus lies not in a spread of the suffix but in the spread of the suffix*less* forms, in the environments with adjacent pronoun subjects. This innovation can plausibly be seen as part of the general drift of affix loss that affected all the Germanic languages. It may appear somewhat unexpected that it should have been the northern dialects that eventually preserved more of the traditional affixal system than others, in this particular domain of the grammar. After all, it is widely agreed that the trend towards affix loss was, on the whole, particularly vigorous in the north (possibly owing to a situation of intensive language contact with Scandinavian). But it must also not be overlooked that the apparent conservatism of the northern dialects in this particular respect only applies to a last remnant of the affixal system, and not to its actual function of agreement marking. Paradoxically, in keeping the affixed verb forms, northern English eventually preserved more of the phonological substance of the old agreement system than the standard did, but only at the price of having in effect less agreement.

This paradoxical outcome may be interpreted as the result of a 'conspiracy' of two independent developments originating in different dialects. One of them was the weakening and subsequent neutralization of a set of previously distinct but phonologically similar affixes *(-eð/-að/-iað/-is > -s)*. This development originated in the north and was well advanced by late Old English. The other was the innovation of affixless, so-called syncopated forms, at first only in a certain restricted set of syntactic environments adjacent to pronouns. This development was apparently headed by the southern dialects and only began to reach the north at some time during late Old English. At this point, the previous neutralization process had already brought the older, fuller agreement system to the verge of breakdown in that dialect, having obliterated almost all distinguishing contrasts in the verbal paradigm. The new affixless forms that were the output of the second innovation were therefore apt to be reinterpreted and pressed into service as carriers of a new agreement contrast.

Figure 1. Development of agreement paradigms in Old and Middle English



A somewhat more detailed description of the whole process, as far as it can be reconstructed, is in order at this point (see Figure 1). The northern dialects of Old English originally shared the common Old English agreement system (Brunner & Sievers 1965: §352–378), which can be summed up as follows. The three persons in the plural had already been syncretized in pre-Old English and were *-að* or *-iað* in the present indicative of lexical verbs, *-en* or *-un* in other paradigms. The singular forms in the present indicative were originally the common Germanic forms *-u, -is, -ið* (in the case of the strong verbs; the endings in the weak classes were similar.) They underwent a process of vowel weakening to *-e, -is, -eð* during Old English. Despite this, the plurals remained distinct from the third singulars for some time (strong verbs *-að* versus *-eð*; weak verbs *-iað* versus *-eð* or *-að* respectively). In the course of the Old English period, the second singular added a *-t* affix after the *-s,* owing to a reanalysis of the cliticized subject pronoun *ðu.*

During the transition to Middle English, the three principal dialect areas of England behaved differently. The Midlands dialects replaced the plural *-að* endings with *-en,* apparently through analogy with the past and subjunctive paradigms. Through later phonological reduction of the endings, these *-en* forms developed directly into the modern affixless forms of Standard English (cf. Figure 1, bottom). The south retained the *-ð* forms throughout, only to replace them with universal generalized *-s* much later in the modern dialects.

The north replaced the *-ð* forms, both in the plural and in the third singular, with *-s,* a change that occurred already during the Old English period. This change has repeatedly been linked to Scandinavian influence (Keller 1925, Samuels 1988). This idea has met with considerable skepticism (for a survey of the older literature see Brunner 1962: 177), but it seems to have gained ground again in recent decades in the light of current language contact theories (Bailey & Marold 1977: 45, Thomason & Kaufman 1988, Stein 1986; for a recent sceptical view see Ferguson 1996: 178). The older northern documents, such as Cædmon's Hymn, the Leiden Riddle, and – with one notable exception – the runic inscriptions, all have the old *-ð* forms. The late Northumbrian documents from the mid-tenth century are witness to a stage where *-ð* and *-s* were used variably. The variation in these documents has repeatedly been the object of quantitative analyses (most thoroughly by Berndt 1956, but see also Holmqvist 1922, Ross 1934, Blakeley 1949 and most recently Stein 1986). These studies suggest that the variation was conditioned, among other things, by phonetic environment factors, but also already by a tendency to treat pronoun subjects differently from full NP subjects; hence in some way foreshadowing the later Type-of-Subject Constraint.

During the same time when *-ð* changed to *-s* in the north, the vowels in the two endings also lost their contrasts. The new *-st* ending in the second singular appears variably in the late Northumbrian documents, but seems to have been only a temporary intrusion from the south, and was then again replaced by *-s.* The *-e* ending in the first singular became mute. Taken together, these changes meant that by the time of early Middle English the present tense paradigms of lexical verbs must have contained only two distinct forms, *-∅* and *-(e)s.* In the present subjunctive, the neutralization had gone even further, through the loss of final *-n,* so that only one form *-∅* was left. In the present indicative, a hypothetical Late OE or Early ME stage must be posited in which all forms except the first singular had been completely neutralized in *-s* (cf. Figure 1, top left).

At about the same time, the second of the two innovation processes mentioned earlier seems to have set in: new affixless forms must have developed in the pronominal environments in the plural. The exact nature of this process is not known, but the most likely source is found in the southern dialects of some centuries earlier. In the West Saxon standard form of Old English, the original plural *-að* and *-en* affixes were sometimes deleted before the first and second person plural pronouns *we* and *ge*, when these were in an immediately post-verbal, probably clitic, position (cf. Figure 1, bottom left). Brunner & Sievers (1965: §360) suggest that these so-called syncopated forms first occurred in the subjunctive. Here they would be explained easily enough as an early application of the overall trend of deleting final *-n*. They would then have spread by analogy into the indicative. Why in southern Old English these syncopated forms remained restricted to the first and second person plural and did not also spread to the third person is another open question but need not concern us here. What is important is the fact that the syntactic positions these forms occurred in are a subset of those where the affixless forms occur in the later northern dialects.

Curiously, northern Old English, although more progressive in matters of affix reduction in most other respects, seems to have been slow to pick up these syncopated forms at first. In the surviving tenth century manuscripts they are attested, but marginal (Berndt 1956: 213–216). It can be no more than a matter of speculation what exactly triggered the sudden and much wider spread of these affixless forms during the following three centuries. In any case, once the affixless forms did start to appear in the north, they must have spread fairly quickly into all positions with pronominal subjects, irrespective of their pre- or postverbal position. Moreover, the affixless forms were also adopted in the third person plural, where they had not occurred in the older southern dialects, and where the northern dialects had in the meantime also innovated a new personal pronoun, the Scandinavian loan *they*. (cf. Figure 1, top centre). This process had approached completion by 1300 in the north, when written documentation of that area sets in again.

The functional motivation for the quick and thorough adoption of the affixless forms seems to have been that they were co-opted to serve as genuine agreement forms, re-introducing and stabilizing a formal contrast that was no longer signalled reliably by the older set of affixes. However, the newly introduced contrast remained restricted to pronominal environments, as it had been a subset of the pronominal environments

where the affixless forms had originally emerged. Once they had assumed their new role as a carrier of agreement marking in these environments, they stopped spreading further across the system. Thus had emerged a relatively stable new system with an effective split of the once uniform system of subject-verb agreement into two distinct paradigms valid for two complementary sets of environments: a contrast of *-s* vs. *-∅* with pronoun subjects, and neutralized *-s* everywhere else. In a certain sense, this paradigm split can be seen as a major structural innovation in the history of English, comparable perhaps to the common Germanic split of the adjective inflection into the strong and weak paradigms: "the occasional clear instance of an innovation that goes contrary to the main drift and persists along with it for long periods of time" (Ferguson 1996: 189).

Finally, the reorganization of the concord system was completed by two further developments. The first person singular – which had had no consonantal affixes from the outset – introduced new and unetymological *-s* forms in positions not adjacent to the subject, obviously by way of analogy with the other persons and numbers. Then, also by way of analogy, the usage of *is/are* and of *was/were* was partly aligned with that of the other verbs, as *was* and *is* gradually began to be used in plural environments in the same way as the *-s* forms of other verbs (Montgomery 1994). At this point, the 'ideal' Northern Subject Rule system as described in definition (1) above had been reached.

By the late Middle English period, the Northern Subject Rule had established itself as a more or less categorical pattern across all of northern England and Scotland (Mustanoja 1960: 481–482). There is some evidence that the pattern had been spreading from the north into the northeast Midlands, especially Lincolnshire, during the thirteenth century (Berndt 1982: 131). From then on, its southern boundary, roughly along a Chester-Wash line, was to remain stable up to the traditional dialects of the twentieth century, as was shown earlier in Section 3.6 (see Map 7 and Map 8 on pages 39–40).

Laing (1978: 244–247) and McIntosh (1988) draw attention to several types of intermediate systems that occurred along the boundaries of the northern area. In all of them, there was an alternation between two forms that was governed by similar constraints as in the northern system proper, but involved different morphological material *(-s, -th, -en,* or *-∅).* It seems not entirely clear in all cases to what degree each of the affixes in these intermediate systems represents etymologically regular reflexes of older affixes in the respective dialects, or later analogical reintroductions

triggered through contact with the northern system proper (cf. also Schendl 1996: 149).

Plural *-s* forms apparently conforming to the Northern Subject Rule are also widely attested in the emerging Early Modern English standard language, including the language of Shakespeare (Knecht 1911). This is usually interpreted as a dialect contact effect brought about by the massive amount of migration from the north into the London area (Schendl 1996, 2000; cf. also Bailey, Maynor & Cukor-Avila 1989; Bailey & Ross 1988; Montgomery, Fuller & DeMarse 1993; Wright 2002).

The Northern Subject Rule was brought to Ireland, especially to Ulster, by settlers both from Scotland and England (McCafferty 2003, 2004). Later, it was to be transported by Scottish, Irish and English settlers to many of the new overseas varieties of English. There has been some debate about just to what degree certain commonalities in verbal concord variation discernible across a wide range of overseas Englishes today can historically be ascribed directly to a common, specifically northern, dialectal source, or to what degree these similarities reflect universal, functionally explainable trends in English (see e.g. Montgomery 1988, Bailey & Ross 1988, Montgomery, Fuller & DeMarse 1993, Tagliamonte 2002, Chambers 2004). While strong northern input seems historically plausible for many of the varieties in question, there is also some evidence that variation patterns resembling the northern rule may have developed independently in some places, even within England. For instance, some studies of present-day southwestern varieties have found quantitative (though non-categorical) constraints similar to the Type-of-Subject Constraint to be active (Godfrey & Tagliamonte 1999, Peitsara 2002). The apparently independent rise of such structures strengthens the case for some dialect-universal mechanism ("vernacular primitives" in the terms of Chambers 2004).

5. Theoretical accounts of the Northern Subject Rule

There have been several attempts to characterize the northern concord system within formal theories of syntactic competence, using various models in the tradition of formal grammar. Besides some very brief discussion in Roberts (1993) and Van Gelderen (1997), and a somewhat inconclusive treatment in Corrigan (1997), I am aware of two more elaborate proposals: Henry (1995), and Börjars & Chapman (1998). A third and rather different approach, also within a rigidly formalized framework

but with a radically different stance regarding linguistic universals, can be found in a brief sketch in Hudson (1999). However, each of the existing formal proposals is burdened with problems on the level of descriptive adequacy.

The difficulty which formal theories have had in dealing with the Northern Subject Rule is demonstrated by the fact that the existing proposals have mostly concentrated on either the Type-of-Subject Constraint or the Position-of-Subject Constraint, according to some descriptive definition or other, but none of them has succeeded in integrating both in a unified account. A part of the problem seems to be due to a somewhat puzzling feature of the Northern Subject Rule itself, which I have elsewhere called the "markedness paradox" (Pietsch 2005: ch. 1.2.4). All the existing formal analyses implicitly operate with the concept of marked and unmarked forms (even when they do not explicitly use that term). However, which of the two forms involved in the dialectal concord system (*-s, -∅*) is the marked member of the paradigm and which is the unmarked one?

In Standard English, the *-s* form unambiguously encodes one particular person-number value, the third singular, whereas the *-∅* form acts as the default for all other persons and numbers. It is therefore fairly unproblematic to characterize the *-s* suffix as an agreement morpheme in the normal sense, and hence, the *-s* form as the marked member of the paradigm. This is a straightforward analysis even though the system may be a rather uncommon one in terms of a cross-linguistic comparison, as the third singular is generally the most likely candidate for zero marking within agreement paradigms (Bybee 1985). Matters are rather different in the northern system, even though in personal-pronoun environments it is identical to the standard, encoding the same grammatical information with the same means. In all non-pronominal environments it is the generalized *-s* form that leads to a complete neutralization of all person-number agreement contrasts. It can therefore be argued that the -s form in the NSR system, though formally carrying the overt agreement morpheme, acts as a functionally featureless form devoid of person-number information. The *-s* morpheme has repeatedly been characterized instead as a mere tense-mood marker. In contrast to this, the formally unmarked *-∅* form, where it occurs, has the effect of upholding agreement oppositions, particularly that between singular and plural in the third person. It is therefore usually regarded as the one that functionally does carry genuine person-number agreement features. This is a plausible synchronic analysis for the modern

system, even though at the earliest stage, at the time when the zero forms first emerged, the system must have been just the reverse. As described in section 4, the zero forms were originally a product of the erosion of the agreement morphology. They were reanalysed as genuine plural agreement forms, taking on a new functional load as carriers of agreement information, only after the two formerly distinct endings *-eð/-es* and *-að/-as* happened to fall together and were re-analysed as default singular forms. The resulting, somewhat paradoxical distribution of markedness properties will be seen as a recurrent problem that has affected several synchronic and diachronic accounts of the Northern Subject Rule.

5.1. Henry (1995)

Henry's (1995) discussion of plural verbal *-s* ('singular concord', in her terminology) is part of an extensive analysis of the syntax of contemporary Belfast English, based on a late principles-and-parameters version of generative grammar. As such, it is an example of the type of variation studies that has come to be known as 'microparametric syntax' in recent generative work. Henry's data are based on acceptability judgements elicited in interviews with Belfast informants. While Henry devotes extensive discussion to assumed parametrical links between the phenomenon of optional plural verbal *-s* and some other non-standard grammatical phenomena in this dialect, she makes no attempt at integrating her analysis of the narrowly local variety of Belfast with a historical or larger geographical account, with respect to the continuity of the phenomena in question across a wider range of varieties. As to her methodology, it must be noted as unfortunate that Henry fails to give any detailed account of the number and choice of informants, her methods of sampling, or the set of test sentences used. Neither does she give any detailed quantitative or qualitative account of how her informants reacted to each test sentence.

Henry's account of the reflexes of the Northern Subject Rule in Belfast English differs descriptively in some respects from descriptions found elsewhere in the dialectological literature, and it is sometimes difficult to judge whether these apparent differences reflect genuine divergence between the dialects in question, or whether they are merely due to diverging research methodology. Most strikingly, Henry's analysis does not deal with the Position-of-Subject Constraint in the form it is usually

stated in the descriptive literature. Neither the relative clause structures of the type *they that goes,* nor the 'classical' northern pattern *they sing and dances* are mentioned in her analysis; nor does she say anything about the effect of intervening quantifiers or adverbs, as in *they both goes, they often goes* (the latter structures admittedly being rare in Northern Irish English but by no means non-existent, at least in the traditional dialects surrounding Belfast). Interestingly, Henry does report (1995: 19, 26) on an apparent effect in exactly the opposite direction: with adverbs intervening between a full-NP subject and an operator verb ("raising verb" in her terminology, that is, a verb that raises to INFL before spellout), verbal *-s* is reported *not* to be licensed. This means that contrary to the common pattern observed elsewhere, non-adjacency of subject and verb in this case would favour the standard agreement pattern. Thus:

(36) a. *The children really are late.*

b. *The children is late.*

c. **The children really is late.*

Henry explains (1995: 19) that "it seems to be the case that the adverb position between the subject and the topmost projection of INFL which exists in English is unavailable in singular concord". She does not state explicitly whether the same kind of environment has any influence on agreement with personal-pronoun subjects *(they really* $^{?}$*is*/$^{?}$*are late)*, but from her statement it would seem that *a fortiori* the *-s* forms should be ruled out in that case too. A comparison of her observations with some data from the *NITCS* confirms the possibility that verbal *-s* in some of these environments may indeed be rare or avoided (Pietsch 2005: ch. 2.1.1). However, since the adverb position Henry is speaking of tends to be reserved for a rather restricted set of semantic-pragmatic environments in English (Quirk et al. 1991: §8.18), it does not become clear from Henry's discussion whether her informants' reluctance to accept verbal *-s* in these positions really was caused by some property of the phrase structure as such, or by other factors such as, for instance, stress conditions on the verb form, or possibly by the mere rareness of the construction type. It would seem that Henry's set of test sentences, and her methodology in reporting informants' actual reactions to them, are somewhat too limited to draw far-reaching structural conclusions on this particular issue.

A second, interesting constraint that Henry reports concerning the position of subjects is a prohibition of verbal *-s* under inversion (1995: 16–

18) This would exclude sentences of the type *does the children sing?* in Belfast English. This constraint is not confirmed in the data of the present study: as pointed out in section 3.6 above, sentences of this type are regularly attested in conservative varieties of the northern type both in Northern Ireland and in Britain. They were even found to be among the environments most favourable to verbal *-s*. While the overall textual frequency of potential application environments of this type in the corpora is quite low – the bulk of all question clauses actually produced contain either pronoun subjects, or modal non-concord verbs, and thus fall outside the scope of the rule – the relative frequency of verbal *-s* in the few tokens produced is extremely high. Again, it seems unfortunate that Henry does not give any detailed account of her test procedure and results. The question whether these contrasting findings represent a genuine difference between present-day Belfast English and other dialects of the northern type, or just an artefact of diverging research methodologies, cannot be discussed in more detail here.

As far as the Type-of-Subject Constraint is concerned, Henry (1995: 23) finds that verbal *-s* outside the third person singular is possible in Belfast English whenever subjects are not openly marked as nominative. This formulation of the Type-of-Subject Constraint covers the prohibition of verbal *-s* with the simple personal pronouns *I, we,* and *they*. The pronoun *you* must be treated as an exception, as it fails to have an overt distinction between subject and object case but nevertheless patterns together with the other three pronouns with respect to the Northern Subject Rule. Henry takes as a strong piece of evidence for her claim that, according to her observations, the prohibition of verbal *-s* with these items does not apply only to the standalone pronouns but also to co-ordinated NPs involving any of them. The strong forms of the pronouns, which are identical to the accusative forms, are not subject to such a constraint. Co-ordinated NPs involving these can freely take 'singular concord':

(37) a. *You and I are going.*

b. *You and me are going.*

c. **You and I is going.*

d. *You and me is going.*

Henry reports that her informants found sentences of type (37c) "completely ungrammatical" to a degree which, as she argues, excludes the

explanation that the ungrammaticality judgment could be due only to a "sociolinguistic mismatch – with singular concord being a non-standard feature, and thus sounding strange when placed together with the formal, prestige form involving co-ordinate pronouns in the nominative case" (1995: 24). Consequently, Henry makes the 'nominative constraint' the focus of her analysis.

In the principles-and-parameters framework adopted by Henry, agreement phenomena are assumed universally to involve 'checking' in a specifier-head configuration between the two elements. Therefore, the question of agreement or non-agreement logically leads to the question "whether the subject is in fact in SPEC/AGR_SP in this structure" (1995: 21). Henry discusses, and rejects, an analysis according to which subjects of 'singular concord' clauses (those with non-standard verbal *-s*) would remain in VP, while those of standard agreement clauses would raise to SPEC/AGR_SP. Her own proposal is similar but involves a different set of nodes in the tree: while subjects and verbs of standard agreement clauses raise to SPEC/AGR_SP and AGR_S respectively, just as in Standard English, subjects and verbs of 'singular concord' clauses raise only to one node lower in the tree, SPEC/TP and T ('tense') respectively. This reflects the intuition that the generalized verbal *-s* of the 'singular-concord' clauses is a mere tense marker, and that only tense features but no agreement features are involved in this position. Following common assumptions in generative work on English, the movement of the verb is supposed to happen overtly (at 'spell-out') only with the 'raising verbs' *BE* and *HAVE,* while all other verbs undergo the raising operation only at the level of LF. As for the subject, the T node is also assumed to be unable to assign nominative case to the subject in its specifier position, as this is an exclusive property of AGR_S. However, Henry stipulates that T in this dialect has the property of being able to assign 'non-nominative' or 'default' case. Therefore, all subjects except those morphologically marked for nominative can appear in this position, and this explains the 'nominative constraint'. The question of why and when the elements are forced to raise to either of the two target positions is handled, following the preferred mode of thought in recent generative work, by assuming that features are either 'weak' or 'strong'. In this case, the NP features of AGR_S can optionally be either weak or strong in the dialect, whereas in Standard English they are always strong.

One argument Henry adduces for her analysis (1995: 29) is the behaviour of negative-polarity items (NPIs) in this dialect, which she claims to be parametrically linked to the verbal concord behaviour. She

finds that non-standard structures such as (38) are possible in Belfast English:

(38) a. *Anybody wouldn't be able to do it.*

b. *I was surprised that anybody didn't go.*

However, in the plural such negative-polarity subjects can only occur if there also is 'singular agreement':

(39) a. *Any friends isn't coming.*

b. **Any friends aren't coming.*

Following the generative tradition, Henry explains the licensing of negative-polarity items in terms of their being c-commanded by a raised negative operator on the level of LF. Her point is that for theory-internal reasons raising of the negative element above the negative-polarity subject is easily conceivable if the subject is in SPEC/TP, but not so easily if it is in SPEC/AGR_SP. Again Henry seems to exclude the possibility that the perceived co-occurrence restriction between singular concord and negative-polarity subjects could be due simply to stylistic mismatches of elements from different registers:

> That there is a link between singular concord and NPI [i.e. Negative Polarity Item] licensing in subject position seems clear from the the [sic] fact that the two phenomena seem to go together in speakers' grammars; those speakers who allow singular concord also permit NPIs in subject position, and conversely non-users of singular concord find NPIs in that position strongly ungrammatical. This is a clear case where careful examination of dialects or sub-dialects can help to show whether proposed connections are real or not, and where it is important to check what co-occurrence constraints there are on dialect features. (1995: 29–30)

It is not my intention to comment on the technical, theory-internal merits of Henry's proposal. While it is the most comprehensive and probably the empirically best argued formal analysis so far, it must be pointed out here that it fails to provide a unified analysis of the whole range of (contemporary or older) concord systems of the northern type. The presumed parametrical link between the Northern Subject Rule and the negative-polarity scope behaviour is just such a case where more "careful examination of dialects or sub-dialects" (to use Henry's own words) would have been a welcome addition: Henry makes no attempt at establishing

whether the two phenomena do indeed go together in other related varieties outside Belfast. A similar and even stronger argument holds for the 'nominative constraint'. Even if that rule is descriptively adequate for those Type-of-Subject effects which Henry finds in her data, there does not seem to be a straightforward way how her analysis should carry over to varieties where the Position-of-Subject Constraint played a more prominent role. Such varieties, after all, do allow overtly nominative pronouns to co-occur with verbal *-s*, in non-adjacent positions. It is difficult to see how Henry's analysis could be adapted to account for varieties of this type, even by positing a couple of additional parameter settings. This, of course, does not logically invalidate Henry's analysis as such. It may in principle be the case that present-day Belfast English differs fundamentally from northern systems in other (or older) dialects; in that case, Henry's analysis of the former would stand but explanations along rather different lines would have to be sought for the latter. However, an argument in the other direction holds. If there was an explanation that could account for the 'classic' older systems with their stronger Position-of-Subject effects, such as Older Scots or late northern Middle English, then this explanation would very likely be able to account also for the more restricted range of nonstandard verbal *-s* in Belfast English in a unified way. Such a universal explanation would then certainly be preferable to the parochial one Henry proposes for Belfast English.

5.2. Börjars & Chapman (1998)

As we saw in the last section, at the heart of Henry's proposal is the idea that the collocations of pronouns and affixless verb forms represent real agreement whereas the constructions with the *-s* form do not. This is entailed by the assumption that the former but not the latter involve checking of identically marked features of pronoun and verb in a Specifier-Head constellation under AGR_SP. The proposal by Börjars & Chapman (1998) implies the exact opposite. They interpret the co-occurrence restriction on pronouns and affixed verbs in terms that might be described as 'anti-agreement' (in the terms of Corrigan 1997: 203, quoting Roberts 1997: 109), that is, the avoidance of double marking of some feature. In this perspective, then, it is the *-s* forms which represent the real agreement marking, and the *-∅* forms represent the lack of such. Obviously, the feasibility of these two diametrically opposed approaches is a consequence

of the 'markedness paradox' as described earlier. Yet, none of the authors involved seems to be aware of the possibility of the opposite view.

Börjars & Chapman (1998) discuss the northern concord system from the perspective of Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG). They propose a formal model based on the intuition, first developed in Chapman (1998), that pronoun subjects and adjacent verbs stand in a closer syntactic relation with each other than other subjects and verbs, and that together they form an integrated unit in syntactic processing – in the words of Chapman (1998: 39): "a syntactic unit which is interrupted if additional information is added in the form of a second pronoun, for example, or some sort of modifier between the pronoun and verb". This proposal, then, differs from the preceding one in explicitly focussing on the effects of the Position-of-Subject Constraint, as illustrated in (40).

(40) a. *They often talks.*

b. *They talk.*

When seeking a formal explanation for the contrast in (40), one must resort to either of two principal strategies: either posit that the two instances of *they* in (40a) and (40b) are in two different structural positions in the syntactic tree (which would not be the case in the corresponding sentences in Standard English), or posit that the two instances of *they* are somehow not the same thing. The analysis proposed by Börjars & Chapman combines both these options. As for the tree positions, they choose an analysis essentially opposite to Henry's: whereas Henry assumes the subjects of the -s verbs to be structurally closer to the (original) position of the verb in the tree configuration, namely the T node instead of the Agr_S node, Börjars & Chapman ascribe a closer position to the subjects of the affixless verb forms. As for categorial status, they assume the existence of two partly homonymous sets of pronouns with different roles: those which co-occur with an *-s* ending on the verb: *he, she, it,* I_1*,* you_1*,* we_1*,* $they_1$; and those that occur without an *-s* ending: I_2*,* you_2*,* we_2*,* $they_2$. The central point of their proposal is that this latter set has the categorial status of verb inflections, more exactly: "pronominal inflections" – they are really not part of the syntax but part of the verb morphology (1998: 76, 83). In what follows I will adopt the authors' convention of writing these constructions with hyphens to indicate this presumed affixal status: *they=talk.*

Börjars & Chapman go on to specify the necessary properties of the two sets of pronouns in terms of feature settings in the formal mechanism of

Lexical-Functional Grammar. These properties entail the three most important aspects of their behaviour: that the second set must always be adjacent to the verb, that it cannot co-occur with another competing inflectional affix on the other side of the verb stem (namely, the *-s* affix) and that neither of the two sets can co-occur with each other or with another overt subject. In sentences with 'pronominal inflection', the affixal pronoun is generated under the V node, and these sentences therefore lack a subject in the canonical subject position, the sister of the VP. They are therefore, technically speaking, *pro-drop* structures. This generates the following grammatical structures:

(41) a. [$_{NP}$ *they*$_1$] [$_{VP}$ *often* [$_{V}$ *talks*]]

b. [$_{NP}$ e] [$_{VP}$ [$_{V}$ *they*$_2$=*talk*]]

Structure (42), on the other hand, containing both the *-s* ending and a pronominal inflection *they*$_2$, is correctly predicted to be ungrammatical:

(42) *[$_{NP}$ e] [$_{VP}$ [$_{V}$ *they*$_2$=*talks*]]

There are various problems with this analysis. First, as pointed out by Shorrocks (1999: 112), the assumption of affixal or clitic status intuitively conflicts with a central property usually connected with affixes (or clitics, for that matter): phonological dependence. While it may be true that preverbal pronouns in connected speech often tend to be realized as phonologically reduced forms (Börjars & Chapman 1998: 97), these pronouns can nevertheless also take contrastive stress, and will then still occur with the non-inflected verb form in NSR dialects. A second problem concerns the descriptive adequacy of the proposal with respect to the variability of the system. It seems somewhat unfortunate in this respect that the authors base their analysis – as they admit themselves – on rather sketchy and incomplete data, collected from some cursory descriptions of concord variation in the dialectological literature. This is particularly serious since the Position-of-Subject Constraint features so prominently in their discussion. As mentioned earlier, the effects of the Position-of-Subject Constraint in most modern dialects are rather marginal. Börjars & Chapman's proposal predicts, incorrectly, that the presence of *-s* after intervening adverbs should be categorical, i.e. that *they often talk* should actually be ungrammatical – but it certainly is not, in any of the modern varieties I have looked at. Even if one concedes that the authors' goal is only to describe an idealized system and that their generalizations "may

hold only for a subset of subjects or a subset of verbs in each dialect" (1998: 75), this constitutes a weakness of the proposal that cannot easily be glossed over.

Moreover, problems may remain even within the proposed formal mechanism itself. To name but the two most important ones: first, I fail to see how the model, in and of itself, accounts for even as much as the ungrammaticality of **they talks*. After all, instead of the ungrammatical structure in (42) above, repeated here as (43b), one could just as well construe this surface string by means of the structure in (43c), which does not seem to violate any of the principles posited by the authors.

(43) a. **they talks*

b. *[$_{NP}$ e] [$_{VP}$ [$_{V}$ *they*$_2$=*talks*]]

c. (?) [$_{NP}$ *they*$_1$] [$_{VP}$ [$_{V}$ *talks*]]

The second problem stems from the, by now well-known, markedness paradox inherent in the northern system. As stated earlier, the proposal is based on the assumption that the affixless verb forms are unmarked in terms of agreement features. This may work for lexical verbs, but it hardly works for the forms of *BE*. Forms like *am* and *are* following the adjacent pronouns cannot easily be regarded as non-inflected in the same way as e.g. *talk* can. This is particularly obvious with *I=am,* where identical person-number information is clearly encoded twice, in just the way the LFG mechanism is designed to preclude.

5.3. Hudson (1999)

The most recent proposal for a formal analysis of the northern concord system is only a cursory, tentative sketch within a larger discussion of verbal concord in Standard English, found in Hudson (1999: 204). Hudson puts forward an analysis within his own brand of formal dependency grammar, called Word Grammar (cf. Hudson 2001). As his contribution is not centrally concerned with the northern dialects, the descriptive information on which his account of them is based is even sketchier than in the case of Börjars & Chapman – the only authority cited is a passage in Harris (1993). Nevertheless, it may be argued that his proposal constitutes a step forward over those discussed up to now, as it avoids the methodological imperative common to most branches of formal grammar,

of having to deduce observed grammatical behaviour from a small set of postulated universal, innate elements. In Word Grammar, features and syntactic categories can be language-specific and can be freely assigned by ad-hoc rules. Words and grammatical entities form a taxonomic hierarchy (a network of so-called "*isa* relations"), in which all elements can either inherit default properties from their superordinate nodes or override these by specific rules. To account for some special cases in the agreement behaviour of subject noun phrases in Standard English, Hudson introduces a novel ad-hoc feature of "agreement-number" that exists side by side with the traditional "number" feature. Both are linked through the default rule of identity, but may differ from each other in special cases (e.g., the noun *family* may have singular "number" but, by way of exception, plural "agreement-number"). A similar mechanism of exceptional feature assignments specified for individual words is used to account for the behaviour of the pronouns *I* and *you,* and of the verb *BE*.

In this framework, the formal description of the Type-of-Subject Constraint becomes surprisingly simple: in the northern dialects, all nouns by default have either singular "agreement-number" features or no "agreement-number" at all, and only the pronouns *I, you, we, they* have an exceptional plural "agreement-number". The main problem with this proposal seems to be that it does not provide for a way to deal with the Position-of-Subject Constraint, of which Hudson does not seem to be aware. As all the formal distinctions in this model are associated with individual items in the lexicon, there seems to be no easy way to account for differences in behaviour that are triggered only by accidental syntactic environment factors other than the choice of the verb or subject themselves.

6. Discussion: Variation and usage-based theories

As shown above, all the formal analyses that have been proposed to account for the northern concord systems so far have run into problems of descriptive adequacy. None of them is quite successful even with respect to their primary aim: descriptively integrating the conditioning factors of the Northern Subject Rule under some unified principle. The combinatory effect of the Type-of-Subject Constraint and the Position-of-Subject Constraint, this curious amalgamation of lexical and syntactical conditions, apparently resists such generalizations. Moreover, none of the proposals even attempts to deal with those conditioning factors that affect the choice

of form in the modern dialects, over and above the core defining constraints of the Northern Subject Rule itself: the preference for relative clauses, the effects of indefinite and demonstrative pronouns, of *is/are* and *was/were,* and so on. None of the proposals addresses the question of the quantitative, probabilistic patterns of variation observed with respect to these latter factors. In addition, none of the proposals deals with the full range of diatopic variation and the various geographical sub-types of the northern system, especially with the cases of overlap or competition between the Northern Subject Rule and the other, peripheral patterns of concord variation, such as *was/were* levelling. And finally, none of the proposals can easily deal with the diachrony of the Northern Subject Rule, with its apparently gradual processes of spread and diffusion. In short, these formalist accounts cannot fully account for the northern concord system, either in its reconstructed nascent state of early Middle English, or in its 'ideal' form in the older northern dialects, or indeed in its highly variable forms affected by dialect levelling and dialect attrition, in the present-day varieties.

In this discussion, I will take for granted one thing that may sound like a truism in the context of variationist and sociolinguistic studies, but which in the context of formal grammatical theory requires some justification: that the morphosyntactic variation observed in the dialectal corpora is indeed of the type that has come to be called 'inherent variation'. It cannot be reduced to variation between speakers with different grammars, nor to effects of code-switching between competing, distinct grammatical systems within the production of individuals. The choice between one form and the other within the performance of each individual speaker will vary unpredictably, at any point in discourse, often even within a single sentence – as in the example that forms the title of this chapter (44):

(44) *Some do and some doesn't.* [*SED:* Y10]

Variation of this type can only be described with the help of stochastic models. Even though it may be intuitively evident that much of the observed patterns in the present case can be described in terms of a competition between two distinct rule systems – the rules of the 'ideal' northern system on the one hand, and those of Standard English on the other – such an account may in effect be no more than just a convenient descriptive abstraction. There is little evidence in the behaviour of speakers that these competing 'grammars' are represented as distinct, separate entities and that any wholesale 'switching' between them is involved in

actual production. A description involving competing individual rules within one unified grammatical system seems more plausible.

The idea that quantitative variability may need to be taken into account as part of "core syntax" has recently been acknowledged by Henry (2002), a rare exception for an author coming from a generative research tradition. Note, incidentally, that theoretical attempts at integrating statements of competing grammatical regularities with statements about the probability of their respective use – basically in a fashion similar to the Variable-Rules Theory of the Labovian school in the 1970s – have recently also been brought forward again in the shape of Stochastic Optimality Theory (Boersma 1998, 2000; Boersma & Hayes 2001; Bresnan & Deo 2001).

While probabilistic variation has often been regarded as an awkward problem in formalist theories of grammar, functionalist and emergentist theories have for a long time seen inherent variation as a natural and necessary part of linguistic knowledge. Quantitative variation is easy to accommodate for any theory that accepts the idea that grammars are not stable from the completion of language acquisition in childhood, but can continuously change, as a result of the language encountered throughout the lifetime of a speaker. In this process, a central role is commonly attributed to the relative frequencies with which different linguistic structures are encountered in discourse (Krug 2003). Different quantitative exposure to linguistic structures in discourse is directly mirrored by quantitatively different representation of these structures in linguistic knowledge. The principal cognitive mechanism invoked in modelling frequency effects on mental representation is "entrenchment", strengthening of representations through their activation in use (Langacker 1987: 59).

I would like to suggest that frequency-based theories are highly relevant not only in accounting for the state of variation observed in the present-day dialects, but also in accounting for the historical process that led to the emergence of the Northern Subject Rule in the first place. At the very heart of the northern concord pattern are constructions whose principal distinguishing property is their high discourse frequency: combinations of personal pronouns and finite verbs. Pronouns have, by their very nature, a much higher discourse (token) frequency than any lexical noun has. The relatively much higher degree of entrenchment and routinization that must be involved in the processing of recurrent collocations of adjacent pronoun subjects and their verbs – as opposed to combinations involving lexical noun subjects – can plausibly be seen as causally involved in any

diachronic tendency that leads to morphological reduction or irregularity associated with these constructions. As was explained in section 4, it was exactly such a process that seems to have provided one of the main triggers for the emergence of the Northern Subject Rule in early Middle English: the phonological reduction of the verbal inflexional suffixes in the high-frequency environment with adjacent clitic pronouns. In this perspective, the emergence of the Northern Subject Rule can be seen as a case of morphosyntactic irregularity associated with a high-frequency construction, induced by mental routinization.

We can finally turn again to the question of how the present-day northern concord systems can best be characterized descriptively, with their curious sets of multi-level conditioning factors (lexical, syntactic, idiomatic, semantic). I would like to suggest that a usage-based form of construction grammar (Croft 2001, Kemmer & Israel 1994, Langacker 1987) may offer the most natural account. A central tenet of all brands of construction grammar is the continuity between lexicon and syntax. Properties of grammatical constructions, on all levels of abstraction, are assumed to be represented in essentially the same way as idiosyncratic properties of lexical items. Constructions form a multiple taxonomy, ranging from highly schematic to highly specific, where the more specific constructions can inherit but also override the grammatical behaviour specified in the more general schemata of which they are instantiations. The behaviour of constructions at all levels is non-universal and arbitrary, which means that there is no need to search for "explanations" in the sense of the highly abstract generalizations common in the microparametric syntax of the Chomskyan tradition. Applied to subject-verb agreement in English, such an approach can easily describe, for instance, the combination *they*+verb as a construction that instantiates the more general schema subject+verb, and which, while sharing some or most of its properties with this more general construction by default, may also partly differ from it in some arbitrary way, for instance with respect to its concord behaviour. Such a construction-based approach is conceptually similar though not formally identical to that sketched out by Hudson (1999) in the framework of Word Grammar. Word Grammar too makes extensive use of hierarchies of more general and more specific rules providing defaults and overrides, but locates these in the lexical entries of specific words, not of constructions as such. I would like to suggest that the construction-based description can give a more natural account of those cases where identical items show different behaviour determined only by the word-order

constellation they occur in, as it is the case with the Position-of-Subject Constraint.

Following Kemmer & Israel (1994: 165–171), I shall assume that different construction schemata can compete with each other during production of an utterance, and that variability in a speaker's production can be explained by this competition. The probabilistic results of this competition provide "the basis for a natural account of the sort of structured variability traditionally modelled by variable rules" (Kemmer & Israel 1994: 165). The more heavily entrenched a constructional schema is in memory, the higher is its probability of being selected as the relevant categorization unit for the production of a specific usage event.

The following will give a short and tentative sketch of how this kind of competition might be modelled. Consider first a schematic representation of the agreement system of Standard English (see Figure 2). From the perspective of a maximally parsimonious grammar, a minimum of only three construction schemata, i.e. nodes in the taxonomic hierarchy of stored grammatical representations, need to be posited (ignoring, for the moment, the special cases of *BE* and that of the non-concord verb forms). One is a maximally abstract schema specifying the relationship of subject

Figure 2. A construction inventory for Standard English agreement

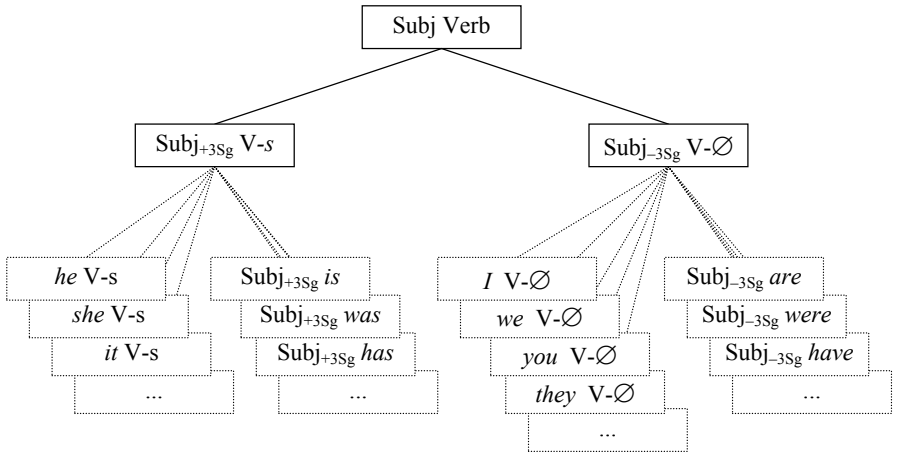
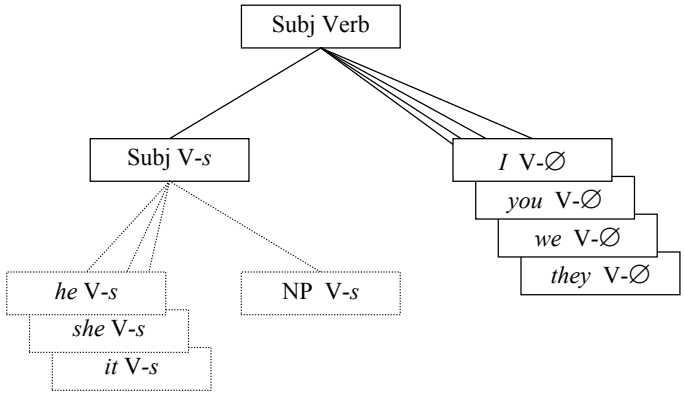


Figure 3. A construction inventory for NSR agreement

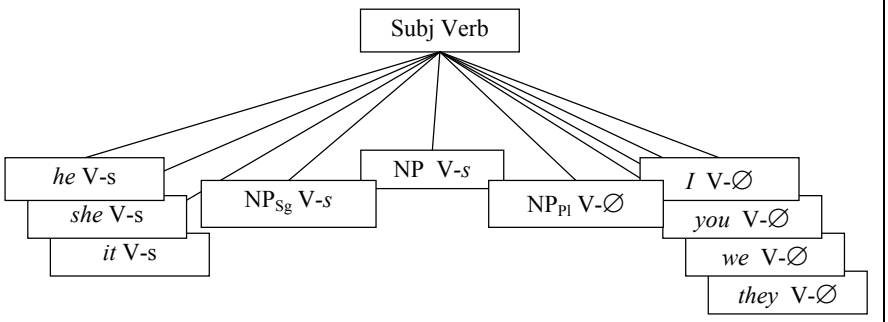


and verb in general. It has two daughter nodes, one for third person singular subjects, specifying the use of the verbal *-s* morphology, and one for all other combinations, specifying the use of the base forms of the verbs. In a usage-based account, it may be further assumed that some additional, subordinate nodes might exist for more specific, frequent combinations, involving for instance pronoun subjects and/or high-frequency verb forms (shown in dotted lines in Figure 2). These may be stored and processed as separate units, having attained unit status through their entrenchment as high-frequency combinations, but they are not associated with any observably different formal behaviour and therefore formally redundant.

Compare this system with that of a northern dialect, considering first the case of a hypothetical, "pure" system in which the Northern Subject Rule is categorical throughout (Figure 3). Here, the structure of the inventory is somewhat different. There must be a set of nodes representing the exceptional behaviour of the pronouns *I, we, you* and *they* (taking the *-∅* forms), in opposition with a more abstract schema representing the use of the default verbal *-s* form for all the rest. Again, there might also be further, more specific units representing other high-frequency combinations, but these are formally redundant. In particular, it seems quite likely that those pronoun combinations that take the verbal *-s* forms (*he/she/it* + V-*s*) may also be stored and processed as independent units just like the other pronouns, owing to their high frequency of occurrence.

We can now turn to the representations needed in the case of a hybrid dialect involving variation between standard-conforming and agreement of

Figure 4. A construction inventory for variable NSR agreement



the northern type. I assume that each of the formal options available to a speaker of such a dialect is represented by a construction schema of its own, and that these schemata can compete with each other in production. Figure 4 shows a partial network structure of the construction inventory needed for such a system. The schemata NP V-*s* (from the northern system) and NP$_{Pl}$ V-∅ (from the standard system) will compete with each other. Any usage event of a particular subject and a particular verb will be processed as instantiating either of these two, whichever happens to be more salient when the construction is being processed. Depending on which of the two is more deeply entrenched, either the one or the other will have the higher likelihood of winning out.

The structured variation effects of the type captured by variable-rules models can be integrated in a system of this kind by again assuming further, subordinate nodes in the network. In a construction grammar approach, separate representation as a unit in the structured inventory of a speaker's knowledge is commonly ascribed to "[a]ny construction with unique, idiosyncratic morphological, syntactic, lexical, semantic, pragmatic, *or* discourse-functional properties" (Croft 2001: 25; emphasis in original). In order to capture a system of structured, inherent variation, a further factor can be added to this list: any type of construction that is associated with distinct, quantifiable behaviour with respect to a linguistic variable must also have unit status and be separately represented. In this way, nodes in the construction network may correspond to what would be modelled as "factors" in a variable-rule model.

Figure 5. A partial construction inventory for structured variation in NSR agreement

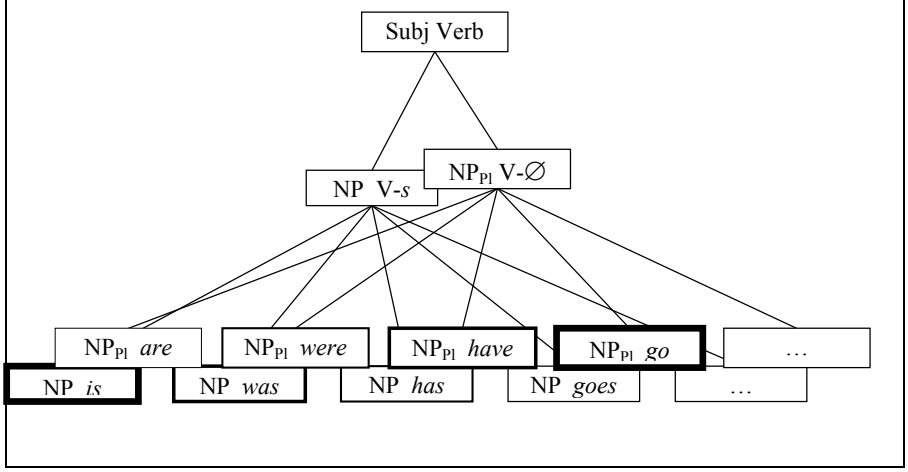


Figure 5 shows a partial network model of such a system. Both the competing nodes from Figure 4 (NP V-*s* and NP_{Pl} V-∅) are here shown as having a number of daughter nodes. The subnodes shown represent schemata associated with individual verb forms. Yet others, not shown here, might represent different types of subjects, and so on. Each of the schemata represents either a standard-conformant or an NSR-conformant use. Each of them may be thought of as characterized by its individual degree of strength of entrenchment (symbolized in the graph by boxes of different thickness). During production, there will be a pairwise competition between relevant nodes. In this way, a situation can be modelled in which, for instance, plural use of *is* as opposed to *are* is relatively more likely than plural use of *goes* as opposed to *go,* just as it was found in the corpus data from many northern dialects.

In construction grammar, it is also commonly assumed that units in the taxonomic network of constructions can have multiple parents, and individual usage events can instantiate more than one construction schemata simultaneously. Each of the schemata activated for the production of any individual utterance will be responsible for a different aspect of its formal behaviour. Transferring this idea to the modelling of structured variation, it may be assumed that more than one set of competing nodes may be activated simultaneously in the production of an utterance, in such a way that each of them represents a different conditioning factor. For instance, it was shown in the previous sections that in many northern

dialects the choice between the competing sentences *them is going* and *them are going* is influenced by two independent conditioning factors (represented as members of two "factor groups" in a variable-rules model): a relatively stronger preference for *is* over *are* as compared with other verbal *-s* forms; and a factor favouring the use of verbal *-s* with the specific item *them* as a subject. Such combinatorial effects of several independent conditioning factors can be modelled in a construction grammar approach by assuming that the production of a sentence such as *them is going* involves the simultaneous competition between a pair of schemata NP + *is* and NP_{Pl} + *are,* as shown in Figure 5*;* and between a second pair of schemata, *them* + V-∅ and *them* + V-*s*.

A usage and schema based approach such as this can account in a natural way for the existence of the two types of constraints on subject-verb agreement that have been reported for many varieties of English, not only those that are directly related to the northern ones: Type-of-Subject and Position-of-Subject constraints. I hypothesize that a Type-of-Subject constraint may arise whenever combinations of verbs and personal pronouns, owing to their high discourse frequency, are entrenched separately and attain unit status. A Position-of-Subject constraint will be a corollary of the fact that both the more specific and the more general schema may compete with each other in the production of a usage event. I hypothesize that the more specific schema in memory – a *gestalt* consisting of a particular pronoun and a verb – will be more salient, and hence more likely to be activated as the relevant categorizing unit, if the utterance that is being formed involves a direct collocation of the pronoun and the verb. If both items are not adjacent, the construction less closely matches the *gestalt* prototype of the stored schema. It will then be less likely to be categorized as an instance of that specific schema, and by default the more abstract schema will be more likely to win out as the relevant categorizing unit.

I also hypothesize that the emergence of a Type-of-Subject Constraint is particularly likely in a situation where a verbal agreement paradigm has previously undergone heavy erosion and reduction. As was shown in section 4, such a state of affairs held in the historical situation in which the Northern Subject Rule first emerged in northern early Middle English. The present tense verbal system had been reduced, by a series of changes, to only one formal opposition between *-(e)* and *-(e)s,* so that only the first person singular was reliably distinguished from all the rest of the paradigm. If language learners are confronted with such a heavily eroded –

typologically and functionally implausible – agreement system, then a distinction such as that between pronominal and non-pronominal subjects may become cognitively more salient in processing than the person-number distinction, and a re-structuring of the agreement system along these dimensions may be the long-term consequence. It may also be argued that a similar state of affairs has again been reached, in a different form, in Modern Standard English, where only the third singular is distinguished from all the rest of the paradigm (and where, in addition, the contrast between *was* and *were* patterns according to yet a different rule, contrasting first or third singular as against the rest). This may be a reason why variation phenomena resembling the northern system in some respects have emerged, independently as it appears, in some modern varieties outside the north.

With the foregoing discussion, I hope to have provided some basis for the claim that a usage-based, cognitive approach to grammatical theory can and should be fruitfully combined with variationist research using methods from the Labovian sociolinguistic tradition. Such a combination has repeatedly been envisaged in recent work. However, while sociolinguistic research has dealt descriptively with phenomena such as verbal concord variation in English quite thoroughly, much of the more theoretically oriented work has so far been restricted to more narrowly local phenomena of grammatical organization, such as inflectional paradigms, phonological reduction phenomena in specific word chunks, and so forth. It seems fair to say that this line of research has been somewhat reluctant to tackle questions of variation in the domain of syntax proper (cf. Bybee & Hopper 2001). The morphosyntax of agreement would appear to be a promising domain for an extension of such studies. Especially with respect to a language whose social and geographical variation is so well documented as English, there is still much fruitful ground for further research aiming to bridge the gap between theory and description.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this study, the term ‘concord verb’ refers to all verbal forms which have the morphological potential of displaying an agreement contrast. This includes all finite present tense verbs except for modals and subjunctives, plus the past tense forms *was* and *were*. The term verbal *-s* is used to include, where not otherwise specified, the irregular forms *is* and *was*.

2. Following the usage in the *SED* and much of the dialectological literature, I am using the historical (pre-1974) counties as a geographical reference frame.
3. Designations such as "Central North", "Lower North" etc. mirror the well-known, partly homonymous labels introduced by Trudgill (1990) for the "modern dialect areas", but are not intended as equivalent to them. As used throughout this chapter, these terms designate areas defined exclusively in terms of the subject-verb agreement data in the *SED*.
4. Three isolated tokens of *'m* forms were also found in the incidental material in southwestern Yorkshire, but they can all be explained as products of a mere phonetic assimilation of *han* before labial consonants.
5. The examples from the NITCS include some tokens where the second verb is *was* or *is*. Since there is otherwise hardly any variation involving these verbs with these pronoun subjects in the Ulster data, these tokens can safely be attributed to the Northern Subject Rule together with those involving lexical verbs.
6. See, for instance, the common extension of the idiom to other verbs of saying, such as the modern vernacular *I goes,* attested for instance for Glasgow in Macafee (1983).
7. Owing to the different data collection habits of certain fieldworkers, it was necessary to use different weighting criteria for tokens recorded by one of them, S. Ellis, and those recorded by the rest. On average, Ellis tended to record only about half as many tokens per location than Wright did in the same geographical area. Locations whose fieldworker notebooks were not consulted are excluded in this map.
8. The examples from Wright (1892) are quoted after Chapman (1998: 38).

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