WHAT IS THE NORTHERN SUBJECT RULE? THE RESILIENCE OF A MEDIEVAL CONSTRAINT IN TYNESIDE ENGLISH[1]

Abstract

This present study focuses on the historical development of one of the most salient features of northern English syntax, the so-called 'northern subject rule' (NSR). It investigates the resilience of this medieval constraint in contemporary Tyneside English, using evidence found in the *Newcastle Corpus of Tyneside English* (NECTE). I question the affirmation by some authors (Corrigan & Beal, 2000) that the NSR is still productive in contemporary northern dialect by adopting a historical perspective which aims to clarify the confusion as to what structures constitute exclusively northern patterns. The NSR coexists with other non-standard agreement forms which are not restricted to northern varieties and have an extensively documented history dating back to Old English; it is only by looking to the past that the development of this medieval constraint can be accurately assessed in present day varieties.

Keywords: northern English, historical syntax, Tyneside, subject-verb agreement.

Resumen

El presente estudio se centra en el desarrollo histórico de uno de los rasgos más notorios de la sintaxis del inglés norteño, la llamada 'regla norteña del sujeto' (RNS). Investiga el mantenimiento de esta constricción medieval en el inglés del Tyneside hablado hoy en día, usando ejemplos extraídos del *Newcastle Corpus of Tyneside English* (NECTE). Cuestiono la afirmación de algunos autores (Corrigan & Beal, 2000) de que la RNS aún es productiva en los dialectos norteños contemporáneos, adoptando una perspectiva histórica que pretende clarificar la confusión sobre qué estructuras constituyen patrones exclusivamente norteños. La RNS coexiste con otras formas no estándar de concordancia que no se reducen a variedades norteñas y tienen una historia documentada abundantemente desde el inglés antiguo; solamente mirando al pasado se puede evaluar fielmente el desarrollo de esta constricción medieval en las variedades actuales.

Palabras clave: inglés norteño, sintaxis histórica, Tyneside, concordancia sujeto-verbo.

1 Introduction

One of the most salient features of northern British English, including Scots, is its verbal morphology and more concretely, a phenomenon generally referred to as the Northern Subject Rule (henceforth NSR), a grammatical constraint that governs present tense verbal morphology according to the type and position of the subject. Although it

[1] I would like to express my gratitude to Julia Fernández Cuesta for reading and commenting on this article. Any remaining errors are my responsibility alone.

can be assumed that the NSR must have emerged in the northern dialects during the early Middle English period, the scant evidence of northern provenance from this era means its origin continues to elude linguists.[2] A discussion of the origins of the NSR is beyond the scope of this present article, which seeks instead to quantify the resilience of this medieval constraint in the North-East of England in contemporary Tyneside English. The results presented in this study, however, form part of a broader future research project which will explore the origin and historical development of the NSR by gathering textual evidence from Old Northumbrian texts, the *Linguistic Atlases of both Early and Late Middle English (LAEME)* and *(LALME)* and the University of Seville's collection of northern Middle English texts (*SCONE*).

In his discussion of what he terms the "personal pronoun rule"[3] McIntosh (1989: 117) describes the late northern Middle English present indicative paradigm as possessing alternative plural suffixes which are syntactically conditioned. The plural present indicative marker in the North was *-es* unless the verb had a personal pronoun immediately preceding or following it, in which case the marker was *-e* or the zero morpheme, giving a system in which *They play* occurs in juxtaposition to *The children plays, They who plays, They play and eats.* Other studies provide evidence of the NSR pattern with first person singular subjects after the analogical extension of the *-es* marker to this environment, while the verbal *-s* forms of *be*, *is* and *was,* also came under the scope of the

[2] Typological similarities between the Modern Welsh verb-agreement system and the northern pattern have led some scholars (Klemola 2000, de Haas 2006) to argue that the NSR may be a substrate effect from Brythonic Celtic due to language contact between Brythonic Celtic speakers and English speakers in the North, while others (Isaac 2003, Pietsch 2005) attribute the development of the pattern to language internal effects.

[3] McIntosh (1989: 117) also refers to the NSR as the "northern paradigm". The term "Northern Subject Rule" was coined by Ihalainen (1994: 221), but the constraint is also referred to as the "Northern Present-Tense Rule" (Montgomery 1994: 83), "*they*-constraint" (Wright 2002: 243) and "northern concord rule" (García-Bermejo Giner and Montgomery 2003: xxxiii).

constraint through the analogical extension of the rule to both the present and past tense of *be*.[4]

Despite the original distribution of the NSR affecting verbal morphology across all three plural persons and the first person singular environment, in modern varieties in which the rule is still prevalent, plural verbal *-s* only seems to occur in third person plural contexts and its distribution has become highly variable under the effects of standardization and dialect levelling. In light of this, it has become customary in the literature to treat the NSR in terms of two separate constraints:

1. **Type-of-Subject Constraint,** which inflects a verb with *-s,* "if its subject is anything but an adjacent personal pronoun" (Montgomery 1994: 86).

(1) a. *My parents* ***is*** *broader than we are. Since they retired they* ***'re*** *terrible.*
b. ... *dresses* ***is*** *better than anoraks. They* ***'re*** *easier, anoraks* ***is*** *a bit more awkward ... No, wasn't very good money that, but they say the dresses* ***are.*** [*NECTE* 1969]

Hence, in (1a) the adjacent subject pronoun *they* clearly has an effect on morpheme choice. The Type-of-Subject Constraint triggers *is* with the full noun phrase (NP) *my parents* but not with the adjacent subject pronoun *they*. In (1b) the same constraint applies: *dresses is*, *anoraks is,* but *they are*. The alternation between *is* and *are* with the full NP *the dresses* in the speech of the same individual in the same sentence is indicative, however, of how variable this rule has become in modern northern dialects.

2. **Position-of-Subject Constraint,** which "marks with *-s* any verb having a personal pronoun subject not adjacent to the verb" (Montgomery 1994:

[4] Murray (1873: 211–12), Wright (1905: §435) and Mustanoja (1960: 481–82) all include the 1 sg. environment as coming under the scope of the effects of the NSR in northern ME and Scots. See Fernández Cuesta and Rodríguez Ledesma (2004) for instances of the NSR with 1 sg. in 15th–16th century legal documents from Yorkshire, Montgomery (1994) for instances in Scots and García-Bermejo Giner and Montgomery (2003) for evidence of the NSR with 1 sg. from late 18th century Yorkshire English. For a description of the analogical spread of the NSR to the verbal *-s* forms of *be* in Scots, see Montgomery 1994. Forsström (1948) also mentions the non-categorical encroachment of *is* and *was* into plural environments in northern ME texts.

88), as can be seen in this example taken from the *Survey of English Dialects* (Orton *et al.*, 1962–1971) for the Durham area.

(2) *They gan and never speaks* [*SED*: Du]

Here, non-adjacency of the subject pronoun *they* and the verb *speaks* favours verbal *-s*: the proximity constraint triggers zero morpheme in the adjacent context *they gan*, but *speaks* in the non-adjacent context.

This breaking down of the NSR into two different constraints is of twofold importance. Firstly, the division reflects how present tense verbal morphology in northern British dialects has traditionally been governed not by person-number concord as in Standard English, but rather by the type of subject and the position of the subject. These two separate syntactic constraints on verbal *-s* usage also provide a more precise way of capturing the NSR in contemporary dialects, as the Position-of-Subject Constraint does not seem to operate in modern dialects in which the Type-of-Subject Constraint does still exist.[5] Non-adjacent pronominal contexts are in any case infrequent in recent studies as McCafferty (2004:53) points out.[6] Indeed, such contexts are rare in the data used in this present study and do not usually trigger verbal *-s* in the non-adjacent verb when they do occur, as the examples 3 (a–c) indicate. There is only one token where non-adjacency appears to trigger verbal *-s* (d):

(3) a. *They go and interfere with the gardens.*
b. *They all talk in such a posh accent.*
c. *They usually all talk about the same as we.*
d. *They like drags on and on.* [Source: *NECTE* 1969]

[5] Wolfram and Christian (1976) and Montgomery (1997) find the Type-of-Subject Constraint to be operative for both *be* and lexical verbs in modern day Appalachian English, but find no evidence of the Position-of-Subject Constraint.

[6] McCafferty refers to the NIrE data analysed by Pietsch (2003: 108) in which there are only 147 instances of non-adjacent '*they*' out of a total of 2394 tokens and only five (3.4%) of these tokens trigger verbal *-s*. In McCafferty's own study of 19th century SIrE (2004), he finds that, despite the presence of a strong Type-of-Subject constraint which categorically inhibits *-s* in the adjacent subject pronoun context, non-adjacency in relation to pronominal subjects does not promote *-s* [.342].

2 Previous Literature

In recent years, research on Tyneside English has focused substantially on phonological variation (Milroy 1994; Watt and Milroy 1999; Docherty and Foulkes 1999a, 1999b; Watt 2002), but as is so often the case in dialect studies, less attention has been paid to morphosyntactic analysis, with the exception of Hudson and Holmes (1995), Williamson and Hardman (1997), Beal (1993, 2004) and Beal and Corrigan (2000). While traditional dialectology (Murray 1873; Wright 1892, 1905; Orton *et al.*, ed. 1962–1971) provides an insight into northern dialectal verbal concord and the geographical distribution of the NSR, recent research into the NSR has tended to explore how reflexes of this northern concord pattern operate outside of its traditional geographical boundaries: in Early Modern London English as a low frequency variant (Schendl 1996, 2000; Wright 2002), in Irish varieties (Kallen 1991; Filppula 1999; McCafferty 2003, 2004), African American speech (Montgomery, Fuller and DeMarse 1993; Montgomery and Fuller 1996) and other overseas varieties (Wolfram and Christian 1976, Montgomery 1997). Less scrutiny, however, has been given to quantifying the resilience of the rule in the North itself. Exceptions to this general focus include Beal and Corrigan (2000) who explore subject-verb concord in Tyneside English and Pietsch (2005) who provides a detailed study of verbal concord variation in the North using the *Freiburg English Dialect Project and Corpus* (Kortmann 2000–2005).

3 Aims

The aim of this paper is to present a corpus-based quantitative study which examines the level of occurrence of the Type-of-Subject Constraint with third person plural subjects in contemporary Tyneside English, with the objective of investigating to what extent the inherited Middle English pattern of the NSR still prevails in this northern variety.

Mid-20th century accounts of verbal concord in the North-East, as reflected in the *Survey of English Dialects* (*SED*), describe a system in which the inherited Middle English pattern of the NSR is solidly in place in the spoken vernacular and is applied to all verbs including *be*. Verbal *-s* with full NPs constitutes the core of the system and both the Type-of-Subject Constraint and the Position-of-Subject Constraint are operative. The question is, to what extent this assessment is still true of the verbal

concord system in the North-East, 60 years on, despite the processes of dialect-levelling and standardization and the influence of other non-standard concord patterns such as *was* and *were* levelling. I question the affirmation by Beal and Corrigan (2000) that the Northern Subject Rule is still productive in contemporary northern dialect by adopting an historical perspective, which aims to clarify the confusion as to what structures constitute exclusively northern patterns. The NSR coexists with other non-standard agreement forms which are not restricted to northern varieties and have an extensively documented history dating back to Old English and Middle English: It is only by looking to the past that the development of this medieval constraint can be accurately assessed in present-day varieties.

4 Data and Methodology

This study relies upon the *Newcastle Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English,* or *NECTE.*[7] The *NECTE* database is an amalgamation of two pre-existing corpora collected in the Tyneside conurbation in the late 1960s and between 1991 and 1994. The 1969 recordings are a series of face-to-face interviews between the interviewer and an informant in the speaker's home and formed part of the *Tyneside Linguistic Survey* (Strang 1968; Pellowe *et al.* 1972) The eighteen recordings that comprise the 1994 corpus consist of informal conversations between friends or relatives with little interference from the interviewer and were collected for the project *Phonological Variation and Change in Contemporary Spoken British English* (Milroy *et al.* 1991–1994). The findings reported in this paper are based upon thirty recordings from 1969 and all eighteen recordings from 1994 corpus. The comparable methodology used in collecting both corpora allows for a longitudinal study of linguistic change, while in contrast to the informants of the *Freiburg English Dialect Project and Corpus* (*FRED*), who were mainly so-called NORMS (non-mobile, old, rural males) with a mean date-of-birth of 1905 and a mean age of 74.5, the 1994 *NECTE* informants provide a good insight into contemporary Tyneside urban speech. Besides being equally representative of males and females and of

[7] Data from the *NECTE* is used with the kind permission of Professor Karen Corrigan, University of Newcastle upon Tyne and Professor Joan Beal, University of Sheffield.

working class and middle class speakers, half the informants that make up the 1994 *NECTE* corpus were between 15 and 27 at the time of recording. The results of this study therefore constitute the most contemporary findings on the prevalence of the NSR in a northern English dialect to date.

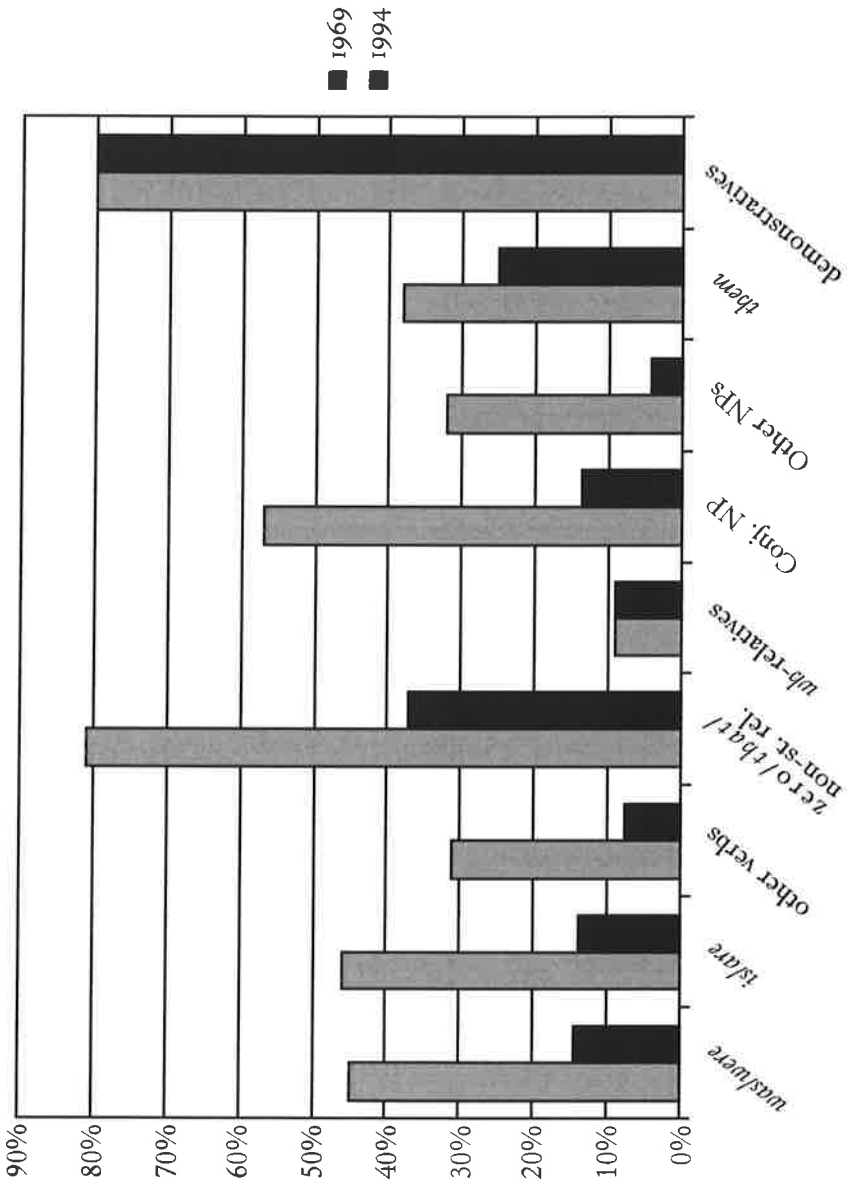
The methodology adopted for this present study was a quantitative, longitudinal study using approximately 133 tokens from the 1969 data and 390 tokens from the 1994 data, giving a total of 600 tokens of third person plural verbs with non-pronominal subjects. A separate study was carried out of *was/were* variation using approximately 2600 tokens of adjacent pronominal subjects from the 1994 corpus. In addition to providing a longitudinal study of verbal concord variation, the main objective was to determine which factors were influencing the internal dynamics of the language and the occurrence of the verbal *-s* suffix in plural environments. With this in mind third person plural nominal tokens were coded according to verb type (*is, was* or *other verb*) and subject type (relative pronoun, conjoined NP, other NP, the dialect subject form *them*, indefinite pronoun subject or demonstrative subject) as these are syntactic features reported in the literature to have an effect on the occurrence of plural verbal *-s* (Montgomery 1994, 1997; Pietsch 2005). The tokens were then subjected to a Goldvarb analysis to determine the salience of factors in relation to plural verbal *-s* usage.

5 Multivariate Analysis of the NSR in the NECTE data for 1969 and 1994

Turning now to the data analysis in question, the analysis reveals a dramatic overall drop in the occurrence of verbal *-s* in plural nominal environments in Tyneside English, from approximately 40% (n = 70/133) in 1969, to just 12.8 % (n = 50/390) in 1994. Figure 1 shows this decrease according to verb type and subject type.

The Goldvarb weightings in Table 2 reveal that for 1969 there is a statistically significant effect according to which the verb *be* has a slight favouring effect on the use of plural verbal *-s* at .64 for *was* in standard *were* environments, and .65 for *is* in standard *are* environments. However, despite this overall preference for plural *was* and *is*, the usage of verbal *-s* forms of *be,* when compared to the usage of verbal *-s* forms of other

Figure 1. Verbal -s usage in plural environments in Tyneside English in 1969 and 1994 according to verb type and subject type.



verbs, does not differ significantly (at p = 0.058) which suggests the NSR is operative with both *be* and lexical verbs in the 1969 data.

Table 2. Multivariate analysis of the contribution of factors selected as significant to the probability of verbal -s in plural environments in Tyneside English in 1969.

Factor Group		-*s*/Total	% -*s*	Factor Weight
Verb Type	*was*	15/33	45%	.64
	is	35/76	46%	.65
	other verbs	20/64	31%	.25
Subject Type	zero/*that*/non-st. relative	21/26	81%	.93
	wh-relative pronoun	1/11	9%	.14
	conjoined NPs	4/7	57%	.60
	other NPs	35/111	32%	.37
	them/quantifier + *of them*	5/13	38%	.40
	demonstratives	4/5	80%	.77

Factor groups not selected: none

Similarly, despite plural forms of *be* occurring twice as often as for other verbs, Table 3 shows that for the 1994 sample, verb type was not selected as having a significant effect on the probability of verbal -*s* usage, whereas subject type was selected as salient in relation to the occurrence of plural verbal -*s* for both the 1969 and 1994 data.

Subject type has clearly become the most salient factor in determining where plural verbal -*s* may appear. However, despite verbal -*s* usage with full noun phrases forming the traditional core of the NSR, the Goldvarb weightings reported in table 3 for 1994 indicate that this environment no longer favours verbal -*s* forms [.32]. The increased weightings for all subject types except for 'other NPs' in 1994 compared with 1969, and the fact verb type was not selected as significant for the 1994 sample seems to indicate that verbal -*s* is becoming increasingly restricted to syntactic environments involving subjects types comprising relative pronoun subjects, conjoined NPs, the dialectal subject form *them*, demonstrative pronouns and indefinite pronouns, which is consistent with Pietsch's

(2005) findings using data from the *FRED* corpus. The favouring environment of conjoined NPs requires further comment and will be discussed later in this paper.

Table 3. Multivariate analysis of the contribution of factors to the probability of verbal -s in plural environments in Tyneside English in 1994.

Factor Group		-*s*/Total	% -*s*	Factor Weight
Verb Type	*was*	20/139	14.4%	[.55]
	is	20/144	13.9%	[.54]
	other verbs	8/105	7.6%	[.37]
Subject Type	zero/*that*/non-st. relative	13/35	37%	.86
	wh-relative pronoun	2/22	9%	.53
	conjoined NPs	6/44	13.6%	.63
	other NPs	11/260	4.2%	.32
	them/quantifier + *of them*	2/8	25%	.78
	demonstratives	12/15	80%	.97
	indefinite pronouns	2/4	50%	.91

Factor groups not selected: verb type

The findings of the analysis in table 3 clearly point to a strong relative pronoun subject constraint, manifested as a robust tendency towards the use of non-standard verbal *-s* with plural relative subjects, as in (4), especially with zero, *that*-relatives and non-standard relative pronouns such as *what*, although *wh*-relative subject pronouns also show a weak tendency [.53] to trigger verbal *-s* in the 1994 data.

(4) a. *There's a lot lives on our estate.* [*NECTE* 1994]
b. *You'd be surprised the cars that comes round here.* [*NECTE* 1969]
c. ... *barracks which was occupied by soldiers in those days.* [*NECTE* 1994]
d. *They're all the same what gets in.* [*NECTE* 1969]

Relative clauses collectively outweigh other clauses significantly (at p=<0.001) which tallies with the historical record where this syntactic environment is mentioned as favouring non-standard *was* and *is* in northern

Middle English (Forsström 1948). This result also fits with observations reported by Wright as early as 1892 on the dialect of Windmill, West Riding, Yorkshire in which he noted that plural verbal *-s* had largely become restricted to relative clauses (1892: §395).

Another strongly favouring environment for verbal *-s* documented by the literature (Harris 1993; Shorrocks 1999; Pietsch 2005) are subject types involving the dialect subject form *them*, demonstrative pronouns and indefinite pronouns of the type illustrated by the examples in (5) taken from the *NECTE*:

(5) a. *Half of them was fathers at 14.*
b. *These is just sitting watching it.*
c. *Them's only two lessons I didn't like.*
d. *It's a wonder some of them's not killed.*
e. *There's some goes away for a holiday* [*NECTE* 1969]

Although the small nature of the token-sample impedes conclusive results, these subject types certainly seem to dominate among the occurrences of verbal *-s* in the *NECTE* and the Goldvarb weightings for these subject types in table 3 indicate these environments favour verbal *-s* forms.

6 Adjacent subject pronoun contexts and verbal -s in the NECTE

Adjacent pronoun subjects in the *NECTE* show near-categorical standard number agreement in the present indicative except in the widespread use of *I says* and its semantic equivalents *I goes, I gans* to introduce direct speech. This occurrence of verbal *-s* with first person singular pronominal subjects does not constitute a violation of the NSR because it falls under the scope of the unrelated pattern of the *historic present*. The wider use of verbal *-s* as a marker of habitual aspect is extensively reported in both British and overseas varieties of English. Shorrocks (1999: 116) notes that informants in Lancashire use verbal *-s* when "describing habitual behaviour, or their more permanent tastes and opinion", while Godfrey and Tagliamonte (1999: 107) find verbal *-s* is "nearly twice as frequent in narrative contexts as in non-narrative ones" among elderly speakers in Devon. Tokens of verbal *-s* as a marker of habitual aspect are rare in the *NECTE* and subject to variation within the speech of the same speaker

as 6(b) and (c) reveal, which suggests they are probably best considered conservative forms.

(6) a. *So I gans into this dance ...*
b. *So away we go ... gets on the road.*
c. *You gets, you get fellows who like to jump around [change jobs frequently].* [*NECTE* 1969]

Turning now to adjacent plural pronominal subjects with past tense forms of *be* in modern Tyneside English and to the possible effects of *was/were* neutralization, consultation with the *SED* shows the use of generalized *were* predominating throughout all of the traditional northern dialects, except for the four northernmost counties including Northumberland and Durham, which encompass the modern-day metropolitan county of Tyne and Wear.[8] The *SED* reveals that in the North-East the singular of all persons is *was*, while the plural (including *you*) is *were* except where *was* is licensed in plural environments by the NSR. Adjacent pronoun subjects show near-categorical standard number agreement and there is no evidence of a distinction based on polarity. The present analysis of the 1994 *NECTE* data indicates that this system remains remarkably intact. There are no cases of third person plural subject pronouns with *was*, although one token of *we was* does occur (n=1/613: 0.2%).[9] In other words,

[8] *was/were* neutralization or levelling takes the form of either generalizing *was* to the plural (e.g. *you was, we was, they was)* or *were* to the singular (e.g. *I were, he were*), thus neutralizing the singular-plural distinction of Standard English and bringing it in line with all other past tense paradigms. There is also a third generalization strategy that remorphologizes the Standard English person/number distinction in favour of a distinction based on polarity whereby *was* is generalized in positive contexts and *weren't* is used in negated environments (Cheshire 1982; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1996; Tagliamonte 1998; Britain 2002).

[9] The results actually reveal slightly higher rates of non-standard *were* in standard *was* environments (n = 28/1758: 2%). Eighteen of the twenty-eight non-standard *were* tokens, however, were produced by the same informant. These findings tally with those of Anderwald (2001) who finds higher levels of *were*-levelling (n=137/886: 15.5%) than of *was* levelling (n=19/158: 12%) for the North-East of England. The higher rate of *was*-levelling found in Anderwald's study (12%) compared to the present study, is most likely due to the fact that the study analyses adjacent personal pronouns and existential *there* subject types together. The inclusion of this latter subject type explains the much higher percentage of *was*-levelling, as existential *there* subjects trigger was with a plural NP complement even in standardized varieties.

there are very few instances of pronominal subjects with verbal *-s* violating the Type-of-Subject Constraint. This is remarkable bearing in mind that levelling to *was* is so endemic that Chambers (2004: 129) considers it one of the primitives of vernacular dialects worldwide. In pronominal environments *was*-levelling has been reported in many varieties of English across the world. Christian, Wolfram and Dube (1988) describe levels of 76.6% among Appalachian working class speakers. It is also reported in Anniston, Alabama (Feagin 1979), Sydney, Australia (Eisikovits 1991), Samaná English (Tagliamonte and Smith 2000), in Fens English (Britain 2002) and in the West Midlands and East Midlands of Britain (Cheshire *et al.* 1993).

In the *NECTE*, however, *was* rarely occurs in pronominal plural environments: it only occurs in nominal plural environments, albeit at very low levels and predominately in restricted syntactic environments as previously discussed, but when it does occur it is licensed by the NSR as the examples in (7) illustrate. This suggests a strong resilience of the Type-of-Subject Constraint in adjacent pronominal environments with *was*:

(7) a. *I worked with* ***these women*** *which I thought* ***was*** *old then … to me* ***they were*** *old.* [*NECTE* 1994]
b. ***My parents was*** *thinking of getting a shop …* ***they were*** *also thinking of moving* [*NECTE* 1994]

Note too how verbal *-s* is licensed if the subject pronoun is absent:

(8) a. *[They] was the first bombs.* [*NECTE* 1994]
b. *You know [they] was like innocent times.* [*NECTE* 1994]

The strikingly few instances of *was* in third person plural adjacent pronominal contexts highlights how past tense *be* still preserves a reflex of the NSR in its distribution of *was* and *were*, but this traditional patterning coexists and competes with other variation patterns such as generalized *were*.

7 What constitutes the NSR?

Beal and Corrigan (2000: 17) find the use of verbal *-s* with existential *there* in third person plural environments of the type *There was lots of green fields*

[*NECTE* 1994] to be categorical for working-class males in both the 1969 and 1994 *NECTE* corpora, while for females, usage rises from 75% in 1969, to a near categorical 93.75% in 1994. These findings tally with those of Tagliamonte (1998), who reports an increasing use of non-standard *was* in existential contexts among young women in York city with females showing near-categorical non-concord in existential constructions.

Higher levels of verbal *-s* in this environment should not, however, be seen as indicative of "a greater degree of conformity to the NSR" as Beal and Corrigan claim (2000: 25). This non-standard concord pattern is a cross-dialectal universal that occurs in varieties where the NSR does not operate. A number of studies (Christian, Wolfram and Dube 1988; Tagliamonte and Smith 2000; Britain 2002; Feagin 1979 and Eisikovits 1991) report high percentages of levelling to *was* in this context. Hudson and Holmes' (1995) and William and Hardman's (1997) Britain-wide surveys of young teenagers' use of non-standard dialect in speech and writing reveal that the use of *there is* and *there was* with a following plural is common across Britain in Merseyside, the South-West, London and Tyneside. Indeed, the widespread nature of *there is/was* usage in plural environments has led Cheshire *et al.* (1993: 70) to suggest that the tendency is best understood as "a stylistic feature of English, characteristic of colloquial, informal speech rather than a non-standard feature". Indeed such forms are even a feature of educated speech (Quirk and Greenbaum 1996: 176; Chambers 2004: 141) and as William and Hardman (1997: 163) point out, they also occur in written speech.

In the historical record, existential *there* is certainly mentioned as favouring non-standard *is* and *was* when followed by a plural subject in northern ME (Forsström 1948: 193–207), but this propensity towards non-concord when the subject is post-verbal, either with or without existential *there,* is also extensively documented in the historical record for non-northern dialects with both present and past forms of *be*, as the examples in (9) reveal:

(9) a. On þæm selfan hrægle **wæs** eac awriten **þa naman** ðara twelf heahfædra. (Ælfred, *Cura Pastoralis*, 6,15)
b. Here **is** grete **merveylles**. (c1489 Caxton, *Four Sonnes of Aymon* 444. 31)

> c. And **þere was** in þat tyme many gode holy **men** & holy **heremytes.** (c1400 *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* 51, 35)
> d. **There is** no nobler **portes** in England. (1542–7 Andrew Boorde, *Introduction & Dyetary,* 120)
> e. **There's** a vast many smart **beaux** in Exeter. (1797–1811 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*)
> f. **There is** some **things** I can't resist. (1849–50 Thackeray, *Pendennis II*, 36)
>
> [Source: Visser 1970: 73–74]

For all the above, neither existential *there* clauses, nor expletive *it* clauses of the type *It was just gas mantles then* [*NECTE* 1994] where Standard English would use existential *there*, were included for consideration in this study. Both *it* and *there* promote non-concord despite a plural noun complement because concord requires what Chambers terms "a look-ahead processor" (Chambers 2004: 141). More importantly for our present concerns, they are non-standard patterns, which developed independently from the NSR and are present in other varieties where the NSR does not operate. Schreier (2002: 84) finds examples of expletive *it* promoting non-concord of the type *At that time it was no gas stoves* in Tristan da Cunha: an isolated island community in the South Atlantic with high rates of *was*-levelling across the board in pronominal, nominal and existential environments, in other words, a variety unaffected by the NSR.

Accounting for non-standard *was* usage in the North-East is complicated by the fact that under the effects of dialect-levelling, the NSR system occurs alongside other non-standard verbal concord patterns such as *was* levelling.[10] Unlike the plural verbal *-s* forms of lexical verbs, which are a reflex of the northern ME plural agreement marker *-es, is* and *was* were originally singular forms which came under the scope of the NSR pattern through the analogical extension of the rule to the verbal *-s* forms of *be* with *is/are* and *was/were* patterning like the plural verbal *-s* and zero morpheme forms of lexical verbs. In other varieties, the use of *there is* and *there was* in plural environments is indicative of a 'default singular' system (Chambers 2004: 131) whereby the default singular form *was*

[10] See Pietsch 2005 for further discussion of these competing systems of *was/were* variation.

occurs invariably for standard *were* in nominal, pronominal and existential environments (e.g. *the boys was, they was, there was some boys).* Default singulars according to Chambers (2004) are natural structural linguistic developments that arise naturally in all languages. The increase in use of verbal *-s* with existential *there* in third person plural environments is best understood therefore, not as a sign of greater compliance with the NSR pattern, but indicative rather of dialect levelling towards a pan-vernacular norm in the vein of Cheshire *et al.* (1993: 53) who note, "dialect diversity in Britain is reducing and being replaced not by grammatical forms of Standard English but by a development towards a levelled non-standard dialect."

Turning now to the relevance of verbal *-s* usage with conjoined NPs, Beal and Corrigan (2000: 17–18) report a dramatic increase in verbal *-s* usage with conjoined NPs among females from zero usage in 1969 to 57.15% in 1994. It is difficult, however, to agree with Beal and Corrigan that this move away from standard concord points to "dialect levelling towards a pan-northern norm" (2000: 25). Although this could be argued for the use of verbal *-s* with conjoined plural NPs, as in *The new signals and points was worked by compressed air* [*NECTE* 1969], in the 1994 data, verbal *-s* only occurs with conjoined singular NPs. The historical literature reveals that non-concord in this context has an extensively documented history dating back to the Old English period and occurs in non-NSR varieties as the examples taken from the historical record in (10) illustrate:

(10) a. **Hægl** se heardan and **hrim þeceð** (Old English Riddles 81,9)
b. Gif **se weorðscipe and se anweald** his agnes þonkes god **wære.** (Ælfred, *Boethius*,16, 3)
c. Forðæm **leaf and gærs** bræd geond Bretene, **Bloweð** and **groweð.** (*Meters of Boethius.* 20, 98)
d. **Þær fæder and sunu and frofre gast** in prinnesse þrymme **wealdeð.** (Andreas 1684)
e. The kyng ... axeth where **his wyf and his child is.** (c1386 Chaucer, C. T. B. 878
f. **The kyng Alymodes and all his oost was** right sore affrayed. (c1489 Caxton, Blanchard 119, 29)

g. And **the arm and the hond** þat he putte in our lordes side ...**ys** yit lyggynge in a vessel withouten the tombe. (c1400 *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* 115,2)
[Source: Visser 1970: 80]

Although Modern English is less free in its use of verbal *-s* in this environment, it is still employed, according to Visser, when the two subjects represent a kind of notional unity (Visser 1970: 80) e.g. ***Bread and butter is my usual breakfast.*** A closer examination of the conjoined singular NPs, which occur in the 1994 *NECTE* data (11), reveals that plural verbal *-s* occurs precisely in this environment.

(11) a. ... *when your mam and dad dies.*
b. *My mam and dad's going away ...*
c. *My mam and dad's catholic.*
d. *My dad and my step mam thinks ...*
e. *Aye, then your mother and sister comes out.*
[Source: *NECTE* 1994]

Furthermore, out of the seventeen instances of verbal *-s* after full NPs in the 1994 data, six occur after conjoined singular NPs, which suggests that the environment is rather over-represented. Full NPs, other than conjoined NPs, trigger plural verbal *-s* just 4.2% in the 1994 *NECTE* corpus, a huge drop from 31% in 1969, despite plural verbal *-s* with full NP subjects forming the traditional core of the NSR pattern.

In his study of 19th century Southern Irish English McCafferty justifies not discounting instances of verbal *-s* with conjoined NPs, collective NPs and plural existential contexts from his data analysis, despite their widespread occurrence in many varieties of English, on the basis that they comply with "the broad pattern that permits verbal *-s* with plural NPs, but prohibits it with adjacent *they*" (McCafferty, 2004: 68). This is certainly true, but McCafferty's analysis of SIrE shows the vigour of the Type-of-Subject constraint, not only with existential *there* and conjoined NPs, but also with other full NPs[11] in stark contrast to the *NECTE* 1994 corpus where full NPs (other than conjoined NPs) actually inhibit *-s* [.32]. Another interesting point of comparison cited by McCafferty

[11] In McCafferty's study, full NPs other than conjoined NPs have a Goldvarb weighting of .749, which indicates this environment promotes the occurrence of verbal -s.

is found in 19th century English emigrant letters (García-Bermejo Giner and Montgomery 1997), which reveal the solid presence of the NSR in the North, in contrast to Suffolk where verbal *-s* is rare. All the Suffolk tokens of verbal *-s* (n=3/22: 14%) occur with conjoined NP subjects, further evidence that this environment favours verbal *-s* even in non-NSR varieties.

In sum, though the increased use of verbal *-s* in plural existential contexts and with conjoined singular NPs certainly signals a move away from the standard, the terms 'non-standard' and 'northern' should not be hastily equated, as non-concord in these environments is not unique to the North, neither from a synchronic or diachronic point of view. In view of the dramatic drop in plural verbal *-s* usage in environments which used to form the traditional crux of the NSR, I would argue rather that this increase in verbal *-s* usage with the aforementioned subject types is indicative, not of dialect levelling towards a pan-northern norm as Beal and Corrigan posit, but rather of a dialect-levelling induced move towards a pan-vernacular norm or vernacular universal.

8 Conclusion

This study has examined the patterning of plural verbal *-s* in contemporary Tyneside English in an effort to document the resilience of the inherited ME pattern of the NSR in a contemporary northern dialect. In certain environments where verbal *-s* is prevalent in Tyneside English, with existential *there* and expletive *it* in third person plural environments, and with conjoined singular NPs, the historical record demonstrates these contexts show an ancient tendency to occur with verbal *-s* forms in varieties unaffected by the constraint, while recent sociolinguistic research highlights their widespread distribution in non-NSR varieties. The results of the data analysis suggest a general, universal pattern in the development of the inherited NSR constraint, whereby under the effects of dialect contact, the NSR has lost its productivity and become fossilized to a restricted set of environments, namely, subjects consisting of subject relative pronouns, demonstratives, indefinite pronouns and the dialect form *them*. The occurrence of verbal *-s* outside of these favouring environments is rather marginal. The near categorical absence of generalised-*was* in the plural pronominal environment, however, is striking and indicates

that a remnant of the Type-of-Subject Constraint may still play a role in inhibiting *was*-levelling to this environment in contemporary Tyneside English.

Marcelle Cole
University of Seville

References

Primary sources

Corrigan, K. P., J. C. Beal & H. L. Moisl 2001–2005: *The Newcastle Electronic Corpus of Tyneside English* (*NECTE*) (www.ncl.ac.uk/necte/). Newcastle University.

Secondary sources

Anderwald, L. 2001: *Was/were*-Variation in Non-standard British English Today. *English World-Wide* 22: 1–21.

Beal, J. 1993: The Grammar of Tyneside and Northumbrian English. In J. Milroy & L. Milroy eds. *Real English: the Grammar of English Dialects in the British Isles*. London, Longman: 187–213.

Beal, J. 2004: English Dialects in the North of England: Morphology and Syntax. In B. Kortmann et al. eds. *A Handbook of Varieties of English*. Vol. 2. The Hague, Mouton: 113–133.

Beal, J. & K. Corrigan 2000: Comparing the Present with the Past to Predict the Future for Tyneside English. *Newcastle and Durham Working Papers in Linguistics* 6: 13–30.

Britain, D. 2002: Diffusion, Levelling, Simplification and Reallocation in Past Tense *be* in the English Fens. *Journal of Linguistics* 6: 16–43.

Chambers, J. K. 2004: Dynamic Typology and Vernacular Universals. In B. Kortmann ed. *Dialectology Meets Typology: Dialect Grammar from a Cross-Linguistics Perspective*. Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter: 127–145.

Cheshire, J. 1982: *Variation in an English Dialect: a Sociolinguistic Study.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Cheshire, J., V. Edwards & P. Whittle 1993: Non-standard English and Dialect Levelling. In J. Milroy & L. Milroy eds. *Real English: the Grammar of English Dialects in the British Isles.* London, Longman: 53–96.

Christian, D., W. Wolfram, & N. Dube 1988: *Variation and Change in Geographically Isolated Communities: Appalachian English and Ozark English.* Publication of the American Dialect Society 74. Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press.

de Haas, N. 2006: The origins of the Northern Subject Rule. In M. Dossena, R. Dury & M. Gotti eds. *English Historical Linguistics 2006. Volume III: Geo-Historical Variation in English. Selected Papers from the 14th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics (ICEHL 14), Bergamo, 2006.* Amsterdam & Philadelphia, Benjamins: 111–130.

Docherty, G. & P. Foulkes 1999a: Sociophonetic Variation in 'Glottals' in Newcastle English. In *Proceedings of the 14th International Congress of Phonetic Sciences*, University of California, Berkeley, 1999.

Docherty, G. & P. Foulkes 1999b: Derby and Newcastle; Instrumental Phonetics and Variationist Studies. In P. Foulkes and G. J. Docherty eds. *Urban Voices: Accent Studies in the British Isles.* London, Arnold, 47–71.

Eisikovits, E. 1991: Variation in Subject-Verb Agreement in Inner Sydney English. In J. Cheshire ed., *English around the World: Sociolinguistic Perspectives.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 235–55.

Feagin, C. 1979: *Variation and Change in Alabama English: A Sociolinguistic Study of the White Community.* Washington, D.C., Georgetown University Press.

Fernández Cuesta, J. & N. Rodríguez Ledesma 2004: Northern Features in 15th–16th Century Legal Documents from Yorkshire. In M. Dossena and R. Lass eds. *Methods and Data in English Historical Dialectology.* Bern, Peter Lang: 287–308.

Fernández Cuesta, J. & N. Rodríguez Ledesma 2007: From Old Northumbrian to Northern ME: Bridging the Divide. In G. Mazzon ed. *Studies in Middle English Forms and Meanings.* Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang: 117–132.

Filppula, M. 1999: *The Grammar of Irish English. Language in Hibernian Style*. London, Routledge.

Forsström, G. 1948: *The verb 'to be' in Middle English: A survey of the forms*. Lund, C.W.K. Gleerup.

García-Bermejo Giner, M. F. & M. Montgomery 1997: British Regional English in the 19th Century. The Evidence from Emigrant Letters. In A. R. Thomas ed. *Issues and Methods in Dialectology*. Bangor, Department of Linguistics – University of Wales: 167–183.

García-Bermejo Giner, M. F. & M. Montgomery eds. 2003: *The Knaresborough Workhouse Daybook: Language and Life in 18th-Century North Yorkshire*. Quacks Books and the Yorkshire Dialect Society.

Godfrey, E., & S. Tagliamonte 1999: Another Piece for the Verbal *-s* Story: Evidence from Devon in Southwest England. *Language Variation and Change* 11: 87–121.

Harris, J. 1993: The Grammar of Irish English. In J. Milroy & L. Milroy eds. *Real English: the Grammar of English Dialects in the British Isles*. London, Longman: 139–86.

Hudson, R. & J. Holmes 1995: *Children's Use of Spoken Standard English*. London: School Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

Ihalainen, O. 1994: The Dialects of England since 1776. In R. Burchfield ed. *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, vol. 5: *English in Britain and Overseas: Origin and Development*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 197–274.

Isaac, G. 2003: Diagnosing the Symptoms of Contact: some Celtic-English Case Histories. In H. Tristam ed. *The Celtic Englishes III*. Heidelberg, Carl Winter Verlag: 46–64.

Kallen, J. 1991: Intra-language Transfer and Plural Subject Concord in Irish and Appalachian English. *Teanga* 11: 20–34.

Klemola, J. 2000: The origins of the Northern Subject Rule: a Case of Early Contact? In H. Tristam ed. *The Celtic Englishes II*. Heidelberg, Carl Winter Verlag: 329–346.

Kortmann, B. 2000–2005: *Freiburg English Dialect Project and Corpus* (FRED).

McCafferty, K. 2003: The Northern Subject Rule in Ulster: how Scots, how English? *Language Variation and Change* 15: 105–139.

McCafferty, K. 2004: '[T]hunder storms is verry dangese in this countrey they come in less than a minnits notice ...': The Northern Subject Rule in Southern Irish English. *English World-Wide* 25: 51–79.

McIntosh, A. 1989: Present Indicative Plural Forms in the Later Middle English of the North Midlands. In A. McIntosh and M. Laing eds. *Middle English Dialectology: Essays on Some Principles and Problems.* Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press: 116–122.

Milroy, J. 1994: Local and Supra-local Change in British English: the Case of Glottalisation. *English World-Wide* 15: 1–32.

Montgomery, M. 1994: The Evolution of Verb Concord in Scots. In A. Fenton & D. McDonald eds. *Studies in Scots and Gaelic: Proceedings of the Third International Conferences on the Languages of Scotland.* Edinburgh, Canongate: 81–95.

Montgomery, M. 1997: Making Transatlantic Connections between Varieties of English: the Case of Plural Verbal -s. *Journal of English* 25: 122–41.

Montgomery, M. & J. Fuller 1996: What was Verbal -s in 19th Century African American English? In E. W. Schneider ed. *Focus on the USA.* Amsterdam & Philadelphia, Benjamins: 211–30.

Montgomery, Michael, J. Fuller, & S. DeMarse 1993: 'The Black Men has wives and sweet hearts (and third person plural -s) jest like the white men': Evidence for Verbal -s from the Written Documents on 19th Century African American Speech. *Language Variation and Change* 5: 335–357.

Murray, J. A. H. 1873: *The Dialect of the Southern Counties of Scotland.* London: Philological Society.

Mustanoja, T. F. 1960: *A Middle English Syntax.* Helsinki: Société Néophilologique.

Orton, H., M. Barry, E. Dieth, W. Halliday, P. Tilling, & M. Wakelin eds. 1962–71: *Survey of English Dialects.* Leeds: Arnold.

Pietsch, L. 2005: 'Some do and some doesn't': Verbal Concord Variation in the North of the British Isles. In B. Kortmann et al. eds. *A Comparative Grammar of British English Dialects. Agreement, Gender, Relative Clauses.* Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter: 125–209.

Quirk, R. and S. Greenbaum 1973: *A University Grammar of English.* London: Longman.

Schendl, H. 1996: The 3rd Plural Present Indicative in Early Modern English — Variation and Linguistic Contact. In D. Britton, ed., *English Historical Linguistics 1994.* Amsterdam, Benjamins: 143–60.

Schendl, H. 2000: The Third Person Present Plural in Shakespeare's First Folio: A Case of Interaction of Morphology and Syntax? In C. Dalton-Puffer & N. Ritt eds. *Words, Structure, Meaning, Function. A Festschrift for Dieter Kastovsky.* Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter: 263–76.

Schreier, D. 2002: Past *be* in Tristan da Cunha: the Rise and Fall of Categoricality in Language Change. *American Speech* 77: 70–90.

Shorrocks, G. 1999: *A Grammar of the Dialect of the Bolton Area.* Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang.

Tagliamonte, S. 1998: *Was/were* Variation across the Generations: View from the City of York. *Language Variation and Change* 10: 153–191.

Tagliamonte, S. & J. Smith 2000: Old *Was*, New Ecology: Viewing English through the Sociolinguistic Filter. In S. Poplack ed. *The English History of African American English.* Oxford, Blackwell: 141–71.

Visser, F. 1970: *An Historical Syntax of the English Language.* Vol. 1. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

Watt, D. 2002: 'I don't speak with a Geordie accent, I speak, like, the Northern accent': Contact-induced Levelling in the Tyneside Vowel Systems. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 6.1: 44–63.

Watt, D. & L. Milroy 1999: Patterns of Variation in Newcastle Vowels. In P. Foulkes &. G. J. Docherty eds. *Urban Voices: Accent Studies in the British Isles.* London, Arnold: 25–46.

Williamson, J. & F. Hardman 1997: To Purify the Dialect of the Tribe: Children's Use of Non-standard Dialect Grammar in Writing. *Educational Studies* 23: 157–168.

Wolfram, W. & D. Christian 1976: *Appalachian speech.* Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Wolfram, W. & N. Schilling-Estes 1998: Dialect Change and Maintenance in a Post-insular Island Community. In *American English.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Wright, J. 1892: *A Grammar of the Dialect of Windmill in the West Riding of Yorkshire.* London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co.

Wright, J. 1905: *The English Dialect Dictionary.* Henry Frowde, New York.

Wright, L. 2002: Third Person Present Tense Markers in London Prisoners' Depositions, 1562–1623. *American Speech* 77: 242–263.

Received 15 Nov 2008; *revision received* 11 Feb 2009; *accepted* 30 Mar 2009