

Dialect death and morpho-syntactic change: Smith Island weak expletive *it*¹

1. Goals

This study examines the usage of weak expletive *it* (WEIT), a characteristic morpho-syntactic feature of the moribund English dialect spoken on Smith Island, MD. The results replicate Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999) and Schilling-Estes (2000), who found that:

- (1) Dialect death is proceeding via *concentration* rather than *dissipation* on Smith Island. (Schilling-Estes 2000; Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1999)

Concentration:

As a dialect dies, the use of distinctive or innovative features increases over time,
➔ throughout the dialect (as opposed to *focusing*);
➔ As the population decreases.

- (2) Morpho-syntactic change take place at the same speed as phonological change.² (Schilling-Estes 2000)
- (3) Morphosyntactic change can proceed regularly and not "erratically."³ (Schilling-Estes 2000)

This study will demonstrate that the conclusions in (1-3) are supported by quantitative data about the usage of WIET in Smith Island English.

2. Smith Island^{4,5}

Smith Island is actually a small cluster of islands located in the Chesapeake Bay, just on the Maryland side of the Virginia - Maryland border.

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² Contrary to what has been claimed e.g., (Rickford 1985; Wolfram 1974).

³ Contrary to what has been claimed e.g., (Hoch & Joseph 1996; Hock 1991).

⁴ This section adapted from Parrott (2001).

⁵ For more on the history and social life of Smith Island, see Dize (1990), Horton (1987), Horton (1996), Sheenan (1994), and Wennersten (1992).

- English, Cornish, and Welsh settlers first established a community on Smith Island in 1657, and the island has been continuously populated since.
- Smith Island is separated from nearby Crisfield, MD on the mainland by a forty minute boat ride. (And the ride might be impossible during the winter, when the Bay can freeze up.) There is no automobile access and no airport. There are three small towns on Smith Island: Ewell, Rhodes Point, and Tylerton. Ewell and Rhodes Point are connected by a road; Tylerton, the most isolated of the three communities, can be reached only by boat.

(4) Smith Island, MD⁶



- The island's only industry, small scale crabbing and oystering, has become threatened due to environmental and political factors beyond the control of the islanders. For this reason, young people tend to leave SI after high school in order to find work. Moreover, erosion has been eating away at the island, and it is not clear whether SI will even be habitable in 100 years.
- Since the 1960s Smith Island's population has been steadily declining by about 100-150 people per decade. The current population is about 350 people. This number will certainly go down as well.
- Because of Smith Island's geographical isolation, contact with the mainland has been limited. Mainlanders are regarded as “foreigners.” A modern innovation is tourism, which draws increasing numbers of mainlanders to Smith Island. Unlike Tangier Island or North Carolina's Outer Banks, however, Smith Island has never catered to tourism.

⁶ Map from Schilling-Estes (2000).

There are only two Bed & Breakfasts on the island, and no other tourist facilities to speak of. Few mainlanders move to the island, and fewer settle for long periods of time.

3. Expletives in English⁷

An expletive is a grammatical subject with no semantic content. Expletive subjects don't *mean* anything--they just act as a kind of placeholder, satisfying the requirement that English sentences have a subject.⁸ Most varieties of English have two expletives: expletive *it* and the 'weak' expletive *there*. These have distinct properties and occur in complementary syntactic environments.

3.1 Expletive *it*

(5-6) are examples of the English expletive *it*. This expletive can be the subject of a weather predicate; it can also serve as the subject of a raising predicate⁹ with a finite complement clause:

(5) **Weather predicates**

It is rainy today.

(6) **Raising predicates w/finite complement clauses**

- a. It seems that the crabs are plentiful this year.
- b. It is likely that we will catch a lot of crabs this year.

Verbal agreement in expletive *it* constructions is always third singular (3s):

- (7) *It seem that the crabs are plentiful this year.
(cf. *The crabs seem plentiful this year.*)

3.2 'Weak' expletive *there*

(8-11) are examples of the English expletive *there*. *There* can be the subject of a copular existential construction; the subject of a raising predicate with a non finite complement clause; the subject of an unaccusative verb;¹⁰ or the subject of a passive sentence:

(8) **Copular existentials**

There are a lot of crabs in the pot today.

(9) **Raising predicates w/non finite complements**

- a. There seem to be a lot of crabs in the pot today.
- b. There are likely to be a lot of crabs in the pot today.

(10) **Unaccusatives**

Every weekend, there arrive at the inn a lot of unruly researchers.

⁷ This section adapted from Parrott (2001).

⁸ The standard syntactic analysis holds that some principle of grammar, referred to as the EPP, requires sentences to have subjects.

⁹ Raising predicates are verbs (e.g. *seem, appear*) and adjectives (e.g., *likely*) with no external argument. Their surface subject position can be filled by an expletive, or by an NP moved from lower in the structure.

¹⁰ Unaccusative verbs (e.g., *arrive, come*) are single argument verbs with no external argument. Their underlyingly post verbal subject moves to the surface subject position.

(11) **Passives**

There were a lot of crabs caught in the Bay this year.

There is called 'weak' because it does not induce 3s verbal agreement, unlike *it*. The verb in a *there* expletive construction always agrees with the associate NP lower in the structure:

- (12) a. There is/*are a crab in that pot.
b. There *is/are a lot of crabs in that pot.
- (13) a. There seems/*seem to be a crab in that pot.
b. There *seems/seem to be a lot of crabs in that pot.
- (14) a. Every weekend, there arrives/*arrive at the inn a solitary researcher.
b. Every weekend, there *arrives/arrive at the inn a lot of unruly researchers.
- (15) a. There was/*were a crab caught in the Bay this year.
b. There *was/were a lot of crabs caught in the Bay this year.

Expletive *there* also induces a definiteness restriction, such that definite NPs cannot be used with expletive *there*:

- (16) * There are the/those jimmy crabs in the pot today.
- (17) a. * There seem to be the/those jimmy crabs in the pot today.
b. * There are likely to be the/those jimmy crabs in the pot today.
- (18) * Every weekend, there arrive at the inn those unruly researchers.
- (19) * There were the/those jimmy crabs caught in the Bay this year.

3.3 Complementary environments

Neither expletive can occur in the environment of the other:

- (20) * There is rainy today.
- (21) a. * There seems/seem that the crabs are plentiful this year.
b. * There is likely that we will catch a lot of crabs this year.
- (22) * It are/is a lot of crabs in the pot today.
- (23) a. * It seem/seems to be a lot of crabs in the pot today.
b. * It are/is likely to be a lot of crabs in the pot today.
- (24) * Every weekend, it arrive/arrives at the inn a lot of unruly researchers.
- (25) * It were/was a lot of crabs caught in the Bay this year.

4. Smith Island weak expletive *it*

Smith Island English differs from other English varieties in its variable use of *it* as a weak expletive. This variable is hereafter referred to as weak expletive *it* (WEIT):¹¹

¹¹ Where data are attested, the interview year is given in parentheses.

- (26) ...it's a dance tonight. (2000)
 "There's a dance tonight."
 (cf. *There's a house...down the road from here....* (2000))

WEIT has the expected distribution of a weak expletive. It can appear in all of the weak expletive environments discussed above:

- (27) **Copular existentials**
 In winter, it's nothing to do. (2000)
- (28) **Raising predicates w/non finite complements**
 It just happened to be a EMT on this part of the island.... (1983)
- (29) **Unaccusatives**
 Then you go straight on down, and it comes this white house here... (1983)
- (30) **Passives**
 And it was sharks seen down there that day. (1983)

However, WIET has the agreement properties of expletive *it*, uniformly triggering 3s verbal agreement regardless of the associate NP:

- (31) a. I don't know how many it is there now. (1983)
 b. * I don't know how many it are there now. (non-attested)¹²

5. Quantitative analysis

5.1 WEIT in apparent time

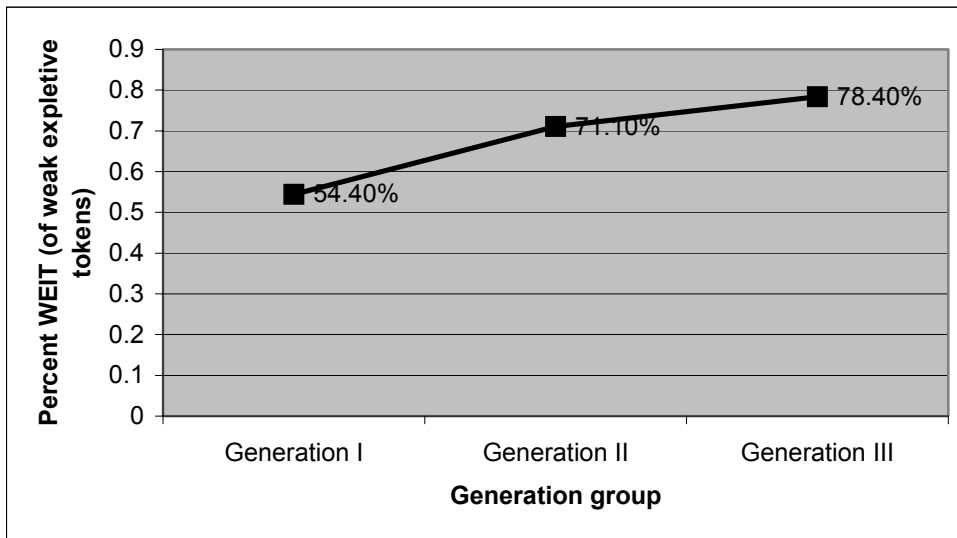
Adopting an apparent time methodology (Bailey, Wikle, Tillerly, & Sand 1992), data from 15 persons were analyzed according to age. The data were collected in 1983 by Rebecca Setliff and a Smith Island informant during unstructured sociolinguistic interviews.

(32) Raw numbers and percentages, 1983 interviews

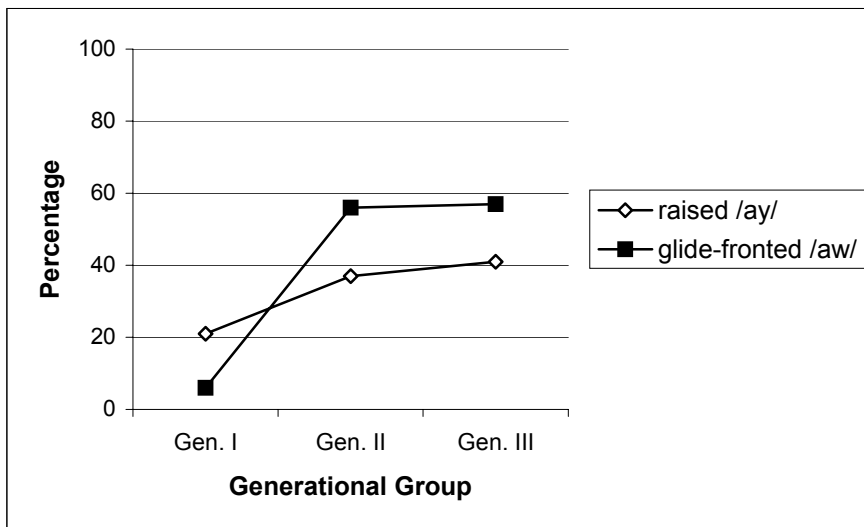
<i>Generation Group</i>		<i>WEIT</i>
Generation I (4 persons) b. 1899-1916	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	73 / 135 54%
Generation II (4 persons) b. 1944-1961	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	69 / 97 71.1%
Generation III (7 persons) b. 1966-1971	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	109 / 139 78.4%
Totals for sample	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	251 / 371 67.7%

¹² Sentences like this were strongly rejected by the two Smith Island informants I consulted.

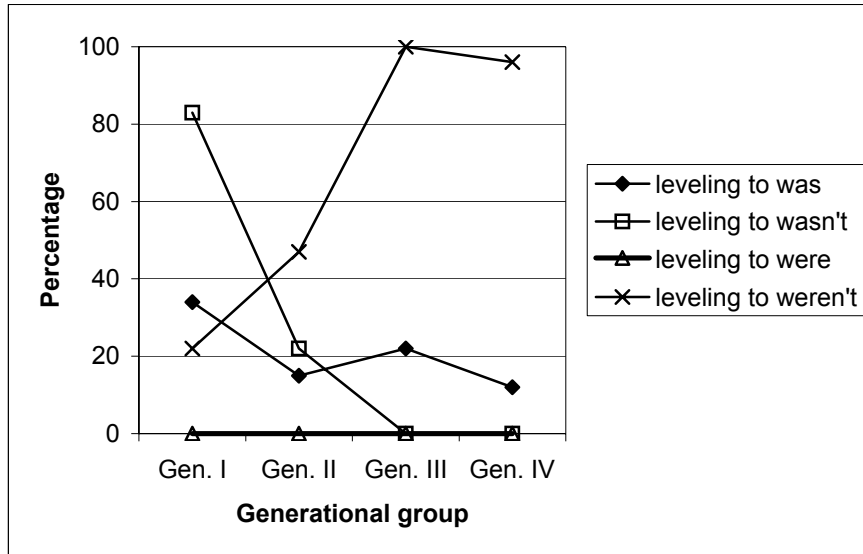
(33) WEIT usage by generation, 1983 interviews



(34) The Cross-Generational Patterning of Raised /ay/ and Glide-fronted /aw/ on Smith Island (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1999), graph from Schilling-Estes (2000)



(35) The Progress of *was/weren't* Leveling in Smith Island English (Schilling-Estes 2000), graph from Schilling-Estes (2000)



(36) VARBRUL results, generation only, 1983 interviews

Application: WEIT

Factor group: Generation

Input probability = .69

Generation group

Generation I = .35

Generation II = .53

Generation III = .62

Chi-square per cell = .000

Total Chi-square = .000

- The change from *there* to WEIT is taking place at approximately the same rate as previously studied phonological and morpho-syntactic changes in Smith Island English.

5.2 Sex

VARBRUL results showed that sex is not significant as an independent factor group, i.e. across generations. However, sex is significant when combined in a single factor group with age.

(37) Raw numbers and percentages, 1983 interviews

<i>Generation/sex Group</i>		<i>WEIT</i>
Gen. I, male (2 persons)	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	53 / 97 54.6%
Gen. I, female (2 persons)	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	20 / 38 52.6%
Gen. II, male (2 persons)	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	44 / 52 84.6%
Gen. II, female (2 persons)	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	25 / 45 55.6%
Gen. III, male (3 persons)	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	50 / 69 72.5%
Gen. III, female (4 persons)	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	59 / 70 84.3%

(38) VARBRUL results, generation/sex

Application: WEIT

Factor group: Generation/sex

Input probability = .70

Generation/sex group

Gen. I/male = .35

Gen. I/female = .33

Gen. II/male = .71

Gen. II/female = .35

Gen. III/male = .54

Gen. III/female = .70

Chi-square per cell = .000

Total Chi-square = .000

- Gen. I males and female are equally (un)likely to use WEIT, similar to the findings of Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999) and Schilling-Estes (2000).
- The difference between Gen. III males and females is not significant according to a Chi-square test (chi-square score = 2.86; $p = 0.090901$ (n.s.); degrees of freedom = 1).
- Unexpectedly, Gen. II males seem to lead females in the change; in fact the Gen. II/female group disfavors WEIT (probability = .35). This result is contrary to the findings of Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999), where Gen. II females led the phonological change; but it is consistent with Schilling-Estes (2000), who found that Gen. II males led the morphosyntactic change.

→ The difference between Gen. II males and females may be exaggerated due to the low number of speakers (2 Gen. II females). One of these women is a school teacher, and her percentage of WEIT use is unusually low for the Gen. II group (47.3%). If she is an outlier, then the difference may disappear as data from more speakers is analyzed.

→ If the difference is real, the finding is consistent with the previous work on change in Smith Island English, since WIET is a morphosyntactic feature. There may be sociological reasons why Gen. II females lead phonological changes but lag in morphosyntactic changes, as Schilling-Estes (2000) suggests.

5.3 Change in real time

For real time comparison, a small set of data from 1999-2000 interviews was analyzed.

(39) Raw numbers and percentages, 1999-2000 interviews

<i>Generation/sex Group</i>		<i>WEIT</i>
Gen. I, female (1 person) (same person in 1983 data; b. 1911)	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	20 / 38 52.6% (1983 = 48.3%)
Gen. III, female (1 person) (same person in 1983 data; b. 1971)	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	36 / 37 97.3% (1983 = 100%)
Gen. IV, females (4 persons) (b. 1982 - 1987)	Number WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	43 / 70 61.4% (1983 Gen. III females = 84.3%)

- These individual Gen. II and Gen. II females show roughly the same level of WEIT usage that they did in 1983. This suggests that the change observed in apparent time is real, and not an instance of age grading.
- The rate of WEIT usage is unexpectedly low for the Gen. IV females. This may be an artifact of the small sample size (the data come from a single group interview). If so, the rate should increase as more Gen. IV data are analyzed. If not, the change may be changing.

6. Regularity of morphosyntactic change

The change from *there* to WIET is taking place regularly and not erratically.

6.1 Locative *there*

In all of the data, there is not one single instance where WEIT replaces a locative *there*:

- (40) a. it's only a handful of 'em down there. (1983)
 b. * it's only a handful of 'em down there. (non-attested)
- (41) a. ...it was [a] cat in there.... (1983)
 b. * ...it was cat in it.... (non-attested)

- The change involves a morphosyntactic feature and not just a lexical substitution. Only the weak expletive, in its distinct syntactic environment, is variable during the change. This is despite the homophony of expletive and locative *there*.

6.2 Agreement

With expletive *there*, associate agreement is variable in Smith Island English:

- (42) I believe there's spirits though. (2000)
 (43) There are two older than me and one younger. (1983)

When WEIT is used, however, verbal agreement is categorically 3s. In all of the data, there is not a single instance of non-3s agreement with a WEIT subject. This data includes many tokens of non-cliticized agreement.^{13, 14}

- (44) a. It's no...separate burial plots on Tylerton. (1983)
 b. *It're no separate burial plots on Tylerton. (non-attested)
- (45) a. Is it any funny things you remember...? (1983)
 b. *Are it any funny things you remember? (non-attested)

- WEIT and *there* have distinct agreement properties.¹⁵ These properties are not confused during the change, despite the variation.

7. Conclusions

- (46) The usage of WEIT is increasing rapidly over time on Smith Island English, concurrent with ongoing population decline. This result supports the concentration model of dialect death for Smith Island English, replicating Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999) and Schilling-Estes (2000).
- (47) The rate of change from *there* to WEIT is the same as the rate of previously studied phonological and morphosyntactic changes, replicating Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999) and Schilling-Estes (2000) respectively.
- (48) The change from *there* to WEIT is progressing regularly and not "erratically," replicating Schilling-Estes (2000).

¹³ See also Parrott (2001).

¹⁴ Sentences like the starred examples were also strongly rejected by the two Smith Island informants I consulted.

¹⁵ See Parrott (2001) for a preliminary attempt at an analysis.

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