

A preliminary sketch of variation in the verbal agreement system of Smith Island English

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1. Introduction

Variation in the verbal agreement system is a salient characteristic of Smith Island English (SIE), a moribund dialect of English spoken on Smith Island, MD. Recent studies have investigated particular aspects of agreement variation in SIE. Schilling-Estes (2000) examines a change in progress: the subject agreement paradigm of negated *was* is leveling, such that the form *weren't* is used regardless of the subject. Parrott (2001a; 2001b) looks at the agreement properties of weak expletive subjects in SIE. The weak expletive *it* (WEIT) induces categorical third singular agreement regardless of the associate noun phrase; but verbal agreement is variable with expletive *there*, sometimes leveled to singular and sometimes showing agreement with the associate.

A problem is that to date there has been no general picture of the entire verbal agreement system of SIE, and therefore these studies of very specific agreement variation phenomena are not set against any contextual background. It is not clear, for instance, whether agreement leveling of the sort documented by Schilling-Estes is part of a more general change--or does it affect only the verb *be*, or only the past tense, or only negated verbs, etc? Similarly, is the 3s leveling variation associated with *there* expletives a more general feature of the agreement system, or is it restricted to *there* expletive constructions?

The answers to such questions are not inconsequential, and not only because they would yield a better understanding of variation, change, and dialect death. The answers also matter for theoretical accounts of agreement variation, especially in light of the important role played by agreement features in recent syntactic theory (e.g., Chomsky 1995; 1998; 1999). For example, it would be surprising to find agreement variation restricted to a single word, since lexical specificity is not taken to be a characteristic of syntactic operations on agreement features.

The goal of this study, then, is to provide the first sketches of a more general picture of verbal agreement and agreement variation in SIE. The methodology employed is roughly quantitative: generalizations are drawn from the quantitative patterning of tokens drawn from naturally occurring speech, in this case sociolinguistic interviews with three generations of Smith Islanders. However, a general description of the entire agreement system requires that the search for data be quite broad, and so the number of tokens is too low to allow statistical analysis. Moreover, the dearth, or total lack, of tokens in certain categories or of certain types means that some factors that may be affecting agreement variation remain unexplored. Hence the picture that results is truly a sketch, but it is perhaps enough to provide some context for the previous studies, and to

act as a starting point for future studies of agreement variation in SIE, including theoretical ones.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents the data sources used, and Section 3 lays out the two part methodology used to search the data for tokens. Section 4 contains the results of these searches, and the paper concludes with a summary of these results and some suggestions about their implications.

2. Data

The data for this study were extracted from transcripts of three sociolinguistic interviews conducted on Smith Island during the summer of 1999 and the spring of 2000. All of the interview participants were females; all were born and raised on Smith Island. The first interview was with "Betsy," an older speaker born in 1909.^{1,2} The second interview was with "Ruth," a middle aged speaker born 1971.³ Prof. Natalie Schilling-Estes (Georgetown University) and Laurie Zimmermann⁴ carried out both of these two interviews in July 1999. The third interview was with four teenage girls: "Lisa," born 1982; "Elaine," born 1983; "Stevie," born 1985; and "Rachel," born 1987.⁵ Jeffrey Parrott (Georgetown University) conducted this interview in April 2000.

Speakers from three age groups were chosen following the apparent time model (Bailey, Wikle, Tillerly, & Sand 1992), in the hope that diachronic changes in the SIE agreement system would perhaps reveal themselves despite the low number of tokens. Female speakers were chosen in order to simplify the analysis by eliminating variation based on sex.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to provide a picture of the entire SIE verbal agreement system, insofar as possible. The intent was not to gather data from a representative sample of the community, nor to provide enough data tokens for a quantitative statistical analysis; breadth, and not depth, was called for. The goal was to find tokens of agreement of all types and in all environments, and then to determine which of these was relevant for variation. Thus, the methodology for data extraction had two parts. Both parts are reviewed below, so that the process by which categories were eliminated or included for consideration is transparent.

3.1 First pass

First, all instances of verbal agreement were extracted from the first 15 pages of each interview transcript. A verb was counted as an instance of agreement if it was finite, and of a type and tense such that there is overt subject agreement in its paradigm. For instance, past tense main verbs were not counted because main verb past tense paradigms

¹ All Smith Island participants' names are replaced here by pseudonyms. Note that these pseudonyms were concocted at random by the author, and should not be taken to represent typical Smith Island names.

² Smith Island Archive #100.

³ Smith Island Archive #103.

⁴ I do not know her affiliation.

⁵ Smith Island Archive #111.

do not show agreement in English, as opposed to the present tense paradigm (the exception being *be*, which was counted). An example is given below:

- | | | |
|-----|----------------|---------------|
| (1) | I walked. | I walk. |
| | You walked. | You walk. |
| | He/she walked. | He/she walks. |
| | We walked. | We walk. |
| | Y'all walked. | Y'all walk. |
| | They walked. | They walk. |

Modal verbs such as *would* were also excluded because they do not display subject agreement, while agreeing auxiliary verbs such as *have* were counted:

- | | | |
|-----|---------------|-------------|
| (2) | I would. | I have. |
| | You would. | You have. |
| | He/she would. | He/she has. |
| | We would. | We have. |
| | Y'all would. | Y'all have. |
| | They would. | They have. |

The first pass extraction yielded a total of 697 tokens of verbal agreement,⁶ which were classified as specifically as possible according to type and environment. Tokens were cross classified in all relevant cases (e.g., the 'clitic' category does not apply to main verbs); thus, every token of agreement was entered into one of over 2000 category cells. The first pass classification categories are given below:

(2) **Verb type**

- main verbs [present tense] (e.g. *read/reads*)
- *be* [present tense] (*is, are, am*)
- *be* [past tense] (*was, were*)
- *have* [present tense] (*have, has*)
- *do* [present tense] (*do, does*)

(3) **Subject type**

- 3rd singular (e.g., *a woman*)
- Plural (e.g., *the women*)
- Pronoun (*I, you, he/she, we, y'all, they*)

(4) **Clause type**

- Inverted (e.g., *Is she from Tylerton?*)
- Relative clauses (e.g., *The woman who is from Tylerton.*)
- Other [matrix and embedded finite clauses] (e.g. *She is from Tylerton.*)

⁶ 208 tokens from the first interview; 284 tokens from the second interview; 205 tokens from the third interview.

- (5) **Auxiliary homophones**
- Auxiliary (e.g., *They have seen a boat.*)
 - Non-auxiliary (e.g., *They have a boat.*)
- (6) **Morpheme type**
- Clitic (e.g., *He's a waterman.*)
 - Full form (e.g., *He is a waterman.*)
- (7) **Negation type**
- Inflection + cliticized negation (e.g., *We aren't going.*)
 - *ain't* (e.g., *We ain't going.*)

The first pass extraction established a baseline picture of the location of variation in the SIE verbal agreement system. This made it possible to narrow the field of inquiry and allowed a targeted extraction in the second pass. Many categories and category combinations could be combined, or had to be eliminated from consideration, either because there were so few tokens in the category, or because the category had no discernable effect on variation. For reasons of space and relevance the full quantitative results of the first pass are not reported here.

3.2 Second pass

The second pass extraction proceeded from page 15 through the end of each transcript. Only instances of particular types of verbal agreement were extracted and categorized; all other instances of agreement were ignored. The extracted types are as follows:

- (8) **Second pass extraction categories**
- Verbal elements with plural subjects (e.g., *The men are crabbing.*)
 - Relatives of plurals (e.g., *The people that live here.*)
 - Negated *was* with singular subject (e.g., *I wasn't there.*)
 - Negated *do* with third singular subject (e.g., *She doesn't get out much.*)

Tokens extracted on the second pass were added to tokens of the same types that were extracted on the first pass. This yielded a total of 452 tokens of the types in (8).⁷ These form the basis for the results and analyses discussed below.

4. Results

4.1 First pass

Results from the first pass establish several basic characteristics of the verbal agreement system of SIE. These characteristics act as a jumping off point for the second pass, and for the subsequent analysis of variation and change in the system. Results from the first

⁷ 80 tokens from the first interview; 80 tokens from the second interview; 292 tokens from the third interview.

pass indicated that tokens from certain categories were so scarce as to not merit inclusion in the second pass. These categories were discarded, and the tokens reclassified. Additionally, some categories were conflated in the second pass because the results of the first pass suggested that these categories had no discernible effect on agreement variation.

4.1.1 Baseline

In all of the data gathered in the first pass, non-negative verbal elements with third singular (3s) subjects categorically appear with the expected agreement. This is illustrated below with tokens:⁸

- (9) a. It costs ten dollars for washing and vacuuming out....⁹
- b. That's right.¹⁰
- c. ...the main thing was getting lost in the high school.¹¹
- d. ...he has a good job....¹²

Agreement variation in this data is limited to verbs with plural subjects, which sometimes exhibit 3s agreement:

- (10) a. ...the men says...¹³
- b. ...a lotta people's making money that way.¹⁴

There is not a single instance, in three transcripts, of a verb with a 3s subject and plural agreement. Tokens of the following types are completely unattested:

- (11) a. * It cost ten dollars for washing and vacuuming out.
- b. * That're right.
- c. * The main thing were getting lost in the high school.
- d. * He have a good job....

Negated *was* and *do*, however, show exactly the opposite pattern. For both of these plural agreement can appear with singular (3s for *do*) subjects:¹⁵

- (12) She weren't there.
- (13) It don't matter.

Schilling-Estes (2000) reports that singular agreement can appear on negated *was* with a plural subject. However, not a single token of this type occurred in the first pass.¹⁶

⁸ There were no instances of non-negative 3s *does*.

⁹ #111 Line 34.

¹⁰ #100, Line 9.

¹¹ Second interview, Line 87.

¹² #100, Line 112.

¹³ #100, Line 563.

¹⁴ #100, Line 235.

¹⁵ Documented for *weren't* by Schilling-Estes (2000).

There were also no instances of singular agreement on negated *do* with a plural subject. Tokens of the following types are completely unattested in the first pass :

- (14) * They wasn't there.
- (15) * We doesn't drink much.

Based on these results from the first pass, it was determined that agreement variation on non-negative verbs would not be found with singular subjects. The search was therefore narrowed to verbs with plural subjects, and verbs with singular subjects were not extracted in the second pass. The first pass results also indicated that the opposite situation holds for negated *do* and *was*. Thus the search for these items in the second pass was narrowed to instances with singular subjects, and 3s subjects with *do*. Negated *do* and *was* with plural subjects were not counted.

4.1.2 Excluded categories

Most of the categories that were included in the first pass were discarded or conflated in the second pass. The 'inverted' category was discarded because tokens in this category were so scarce--there were only three in the entire data set. This was not enough for comparison with other clause types, and moreover none of these three tokens were of the relevant type (non-negative verbs with plural subjects or negated *do* and *was* with singular subjects). Negated *be* and *have* were excluded from consideration for the same reason--too few tokens of the types needed for comparison occurred in the data set. Other categories were conflated because they did not seem to have any effect on agreement variation. These categories included the 'auxiliary/non-auxiliary' distinction for *be*, *was*, *have*, and *do*, and the 'clitic/non-clitic' distinction for *be*, *was*, and *have*. Thus, the second pass data reported below include auxiliary, non-auxiliary, clitic, and non-clitic forms of these verbs.

4.2 Second pass

The following sections report the results of the second pass. The number of tokens is low, and so no statistical analysis was carried out. However, several of the patterns that emerge are clear enough to allow generalizations, leading to a more general picture of the agreement system of SIE.

4.2.1 Singular leveling

Singular agreement on verbs with plural subjects is a characteristic feature of several varieties of English, and it has been observed in SIE (see Schilling-Estes (2000) and references cited). Singular leveling of this type appears to be dying out in SIE. The tables

¹⁶ Nor, in fact, in the second pass. Schilling-Estes (2000) examined data from interviews conducted in 1983, while the present study looked only at data from 1999-2000. Schilling-Estes reports that *wasn't* leveling was already dying out in 1983, when Ruth was a teenager. Thus two of the three generation groups in the current sample have already lost *wasn't* leveling by 1999-2000. This, plus the low number of tokens from Betsy, is a likely explanation for the total absence of *wasn't* leveling in this data.

below show the number of instances of singular and plural agreement on non-negative verbs with non-pronominal plural subjects. All verb types (main, *be*, *was*, *have*, *do*) are included (verbs in relative clauses were counted separately).

(16) Betsy

Singular agreement	Plural agreement
9	5
64%	36%

(w/non-pronominal plural subject)

(17) Ruth

Singular agreement	Plural agreement
5	13
28%	72%

(w/non-pronominal plural subject)

(18) Four teens

Singular agreement	Plural agreement
2	32
6%	94%

(w/non-pronominal plural subject)

Singular leveling clearly declines in each generation. It is nearly extinct in the youngest generation, occurring only twice in 34 instances of verbs with plural subjects. If this trend continues, 3s leveling will be completely absent in the agreement system of the next generation. Thus, in this respect the agreement system of SIE English is becoming more like the agreement system of standard varieties.

4.2.3 Pronoun subjects

Several studies have found that subject type affects 3s leveling in non-standard English varieties (see Schilling-Estes (2000) and references cited). The effect is not uniform: for some varieties pronominal subjects disfavor leveling, and for others the opposite pattern holds. Schilling-Estes (2000) reports that pronominal subjects disfavor *weren't* leveling in SIE. The results of the present study indicate that this effect is more general. The table below shows the number of instances of singular and plural agreement on non-negative verbs with pronominal and non-pronominal subjects. All verb types are included, but relative clauses are not:

(19)

	Singular agreement	Plural agreement
Plural	16	50
We	0	138
They	0	175

In all three transcripts there was not a single instance of singular agreement on a verb with a plural pronoun subject, even though there were a relatively high number of tokens in this category. Thus pronominal subjects seem to be a knockout factor for verbal agreement variation in SIE. However, we will see below that this is not the case for negated *was* and *do*.

4.2.4 Relative clauses

Relative clauses are counted separately because they seem to favor singular agreement leveling. The table below shows the number of instances of singular and plural agreement on verbs in relative clauses of plural nouns (e.g., *The people that live here.*). All speakers and verb types are included:

(20) Relative clauses, all speakers

Singular agreement	Plural agreement
14	10
58%	42%

Note that the percentage of singular leveling is quite high, approximating the percentage of singular leveling in Betsy's non-relative clauses (64%), and about twice as high as the percentage in Ruth's (28%). The surprising aspect of this result is that fact that teenagers, who have virtually no singular leveling in non-relative clauses, have the same high percentage of singular leveling in their relative clauses:

(21) Relative clauses, teens

Singular agreement	Plural agreement
8	6
57%	43%

Even more surprising, the majority of these instances of singular leveling (6 out of 8) occur with the verb *have*. In fact, *have* is leveled to the singular agreement form 100% of the time in teenagers relative clauses of plural nouns:

(22) Relative clauses, teens, *have*

<i>has / -'s</i>	<i>have</i>
6	0
100%	0%

These results are totally unexpected so far as I am aware. They could of course be the result of a statistical glitch, arising from the very low number of tokens. In that case, the effects should disappear with a larger amount of data, so that teenagers' percentage of singular leveling in relative clauses approaches their percentage of leveling in non-relative clauses, and *have* no longer categorically induces singular leveling in relative clauses. If this not occur when more tokens are analyzed, however, some explanation will be required. Why should relative clauses favor singular leveling? And why should a particular verb, *have*, show invariant singular agreement in relative clauses?

4.2.5 Negated *do* and *was*

As noted above, Schilling-Estes (2000) has already documented the leveling of negated *was* to *weren't* with singular subjects in SIE. This leveling is increasing over time, and the change seems to be complete: Schilling-Estes found near categorical *weren't* leveling in the youngest speakers.

Her results are replicated in the present study. The tables below show the number of instances of negated *was* with a singular subject:

(23) Betsy

	<i>wasn't</i>	<i>weren't</i>
Singular	2	1
he/she	1	1
	60%	40%

(24) Ruth

	<i>wasn't</i>	<i>weren't</i>
Singular	0	1
	0%	100%

(25) Teens

	<i>wasn't</i>	<i>weren't</i>
Singular	0	8
I	0	4
he/she	0	3
	0%	100%

Although the number of tokens is very low, the change is still detectable. Betsy has *weren't* leveling about half of the time, while the teens categorically level to *weren't*. (Ruth has only one token in this category; while this is not enough for a generalization, her single token is nonetheless an instance of *weren't* leveling.)

A result of the present study is that the leveling pattern discovered by Schilling-Estes appears to be more general in SIE. *weren't* leveling involves the plural form of negated *was* generalizing across the paradigm, regardless of the subject. This can be seen as a change to a form that no longer displays subject agreement at all. In Schilling-Estes's words, *weren't* is being 're-morphologized.' The form is becoming the morphological

spell out of *was* + negation features, but not the spell out of agreement features. It appears that *don't* is being re-morphologized in the same way. The pattern is identical--a non-singular form is generalized across the paradigm, spelling out negation features but not agreement. This change furthermore appears to be proceeding at the same rate in SIE. The tables below show the number of instances, for the three age groups, of negated *do* with a 3s subject:

(26) Betsy

	<i>don't</i>	<i>doesn't</i>
3s	1	1
	50%	50%

(27) Ruth

	<i>don't</i>	<i>doesn't</i>
3s	1	0
he/she	2	0
	100%	0%

(28) Teens

	<i>don't</i>	<i>doesn't</i>
3s	10	2
he/she	4	0
	87.5%	12.5%

Once more the change in progress is detectable despite the low number of tokens. Betsy has only two tokens, but one is leveled to *don't*; Ruth has only 3 tokens, but all are leveled to *don't*. The teens have a fair number of tokens, though, and 14 out of 16 (almost 90%) are leveled to *don't*.

These results seem to indicate that a more general change is at work in the agreement system of SIE, leveling the paradigms of negated verbs such that they no longer spell out agreement features. This would suggest in turn that a similar change might be taking place with negated *be* and *have*. At first glance, this does not seem to be the case. The first pass uncovered no instances of leveling to *aren't* with singular subjects, or leveling to *haven't* with 3s subjects. However, there were several instances of negated *be* and *have* that were simply replaced by *ain't*. Thus it could be these paradigms are being leveled to, only with *ain't* generalizing across the paradigm instead the plural form. But this is a hypothesis that cannot be tested here because of the dearth of relevant tokens in the data.

5. Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that the verbal agreement system of SIE is divided into two parts, the morphologically negated and non-negated verbs. Each part of the system is affected differently by variation and each is undergoing parallel but distinct changes involving agreement leveling.

First, variable singular leveling on non-negated verbs had been a significant part of the agreement system. But singular agreement leveling is disappearing in SIE, and will likely be completely gone by the next generation. This change has the effect of making the SIE agreement system look more like that of standard English varieties, with verbs showing invariant subject agreement.

One aspect of this part of the agreement system is that verbs with pronominal subjects are immune to singular leveling, for all age groups. This is consistent with previous work, which found that subject types affect agreement variation in other English varieties. From a theoretical perspective it is not at all clear why this should be the case, since pronominal and non-pronominal noun phrases are both assumed to have agreement features. Perhaps a more articulated morphology theory can provide answers here.

Another aspect is that despite the ongoing change, singular leveling is favored in relative clauses as opposed to non-relative clauses. Again, it is not obvious why this should be. Even more mysterious is the effect of *have* on teenagers, who level *have to has* 100% of the time in relative clauses, despite having almost no singular leveling in non-relative clauses. Here a morphological theory will certainly have to do the explanatory lifting, so that we may avoid introducing lexical specificity into the syntax.

Morphologically negated verbs comprise the other part of SIE's agreement system. Here, the change is in the opposite direction: leveling is increasing, with SIE becoming less like standard varieties. Schilling-Estes (2000) documented this process for *weren't*; this study indicates that an identical change is leveling *don't*. This part of the system change would seem amenable to analysis in terms of morphological spell out of features: the negated verbs now spell out negation features and not agreement features. It remains to be seen whether negated *be* and negated *have* are subject to the same morphological reanalysis, in which case we might expect to see a leveling to *ain't*.

The sketch of SIE's verbal agreement system that has emerged from this study is incomplete in many respects. Obviously, more data are needed and the claims advanced here should be tested with some statistical analysis. Also, the effects of morpheme type (clitic vs. non-clitic) and auxiliary type (auxiliary vs. non-auxiliary) on agreement variation need to be investigated. But this study has hopefully provided a preliminary framework for these and other potential studies in the future.

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