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WEIT ON SMITH ISLAND (ANOTHER VEXING EXPLETIVE)

1. INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research attempts to bridge the gap between Minimalist theories of syntax and the empirical study of 'Labovian' variation and change in progress (Adger and Smith 2005, Adger to appear). English expletive constructions, with their characteristic property of "apparently anomalous rightward agreement" (Chomsky and Lasnik 1993), could be a productive point of contact. Expletive constructions are a central topic in Minimalist syntactic theory, but there have been few attempts to reconcile theories with documented instances of co-occurring variation in agreement morphology and expletive forms. In this poster, I present the case of 'weak' expletive *it* (WEIT), one instance of morphosyntactic variation and change currently in progress on Smith Island, Maryland (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999). WEIT variation constitutes a paradoxical case of morphosyntactic mismatch, on Chomsky's (2000) feature-checking analysis of agreement in expletive constructions. I suggest a fairly radical alternative account utilizing mechanisms of Distributed Morphology, an articulated theory of the PF-interface branch of the syntactic computation (Halle and Marantz 1993, Embick and Noyer to appear). Adopting this proposal would require substantial and largely unexplored revisions to Minimalist syntactic theories of agreement and feature checking.

2. LABOVIAN VARIATION AND CHANGE IN PROGRESS

➤ 'Labovian' variation (a.k.a. 'inherent variation,' 'variability,' 'sociolinguistic variation') is when "speakers use different forms to express the same meaning" (Labov 1995: 115). In other words, this kind of variation is "the non-deterministic choice of form" (Adger to appear), as opposed to allomorphy (see below). A working definition:

(1) LABOVIAN VARIATION

- a. Individuals use variant morphosyntactic forms;
- b. The variant forms appear in the same morphosyntactic environment (variants are not allomorphs in complementary distribution);
- c. The variant forms do not express different lexical or truth-conditional semantics, nor different morphosyntactic functions.

VS. PARAMETRIC VARIATION: Differences in linguistic forms observed between individuals or speech communities (= cross-linguistic/dialectal variation) are to be explained by a theory of principles and parameters (e.g. Chomsky and Lasnik 1993, Kayne 1996, and much other work). Labovian variation in morphosyntax has been claimed to arise from 'multiple parameter settings' (Henry 1995, 1996, 2002, Wilson and Henry 1998), and 'competing grammars' (perhaps as defined by multiple parameter settings) yield morphosyntactic change over time (Kroch 1989, 1994).

VS. ALLOMORPHY: Labovian variation must be distinguished from the familiar phenomenon of allomorphy, where variant forms appear in complementary distribution as determined by aspects of their morphosyntactic or morphophonological environment. The appearance of Labovian variants can be probabilistically influenced, but is crucially not determined, by aspects of their morphosyntactic or morphophonological environment.

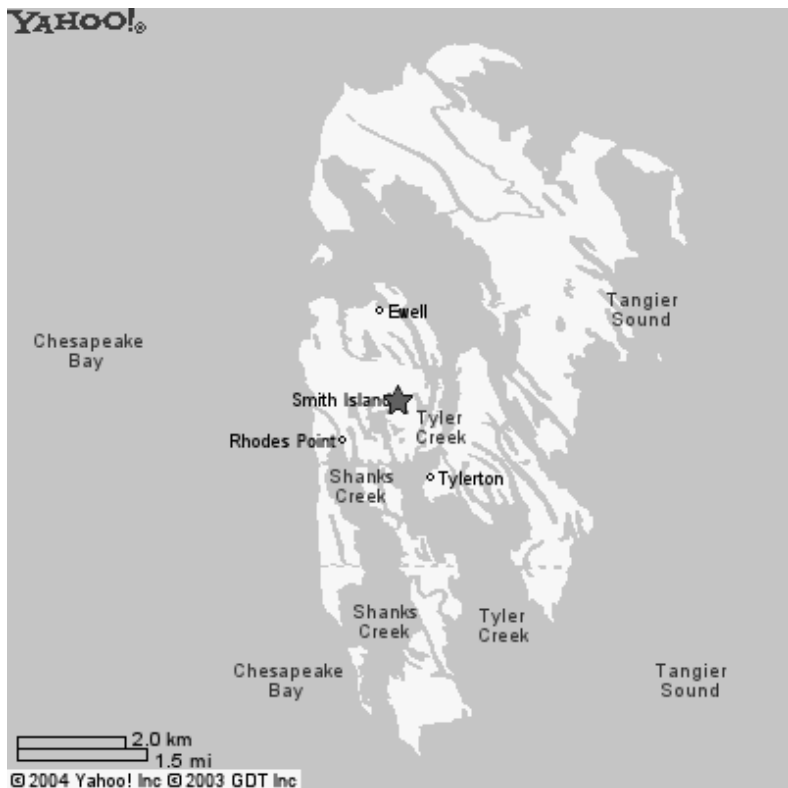
CHANGE IN PROGRESS: Labovian variation usually (always?) involves the sociolinguistic choice of form: although variants “convey exactly the same grammatical meaning”, they “convey very different social meanings” (Chambers 2002: 3-4). The empirical, sociolinguistic study of variation yielded the apparent-time method for observing language change in progress (Bailey et al. 1992, Labov 1994, 2001), “one of the cornerstones of research in language variation and change” (Bailey 2002: 312).

3. DIALECT DEATH BY CONCENTRATION ON SMITH ISLAND

- Smith Island, Maryland has a small, homogeneous population of 364 according to the U.S. Census (2000); the community has been geographically and socially isolated throughout its history; the declining seafood-based economy and ongoing land erosion are causing population attrition. (For non-linguistic sources on Smith Island's history and culture, see Horton 1987, Dize 1990, Wennersten 1992, Horton 1996, or Sheenan 1994.)
- Dialect death by “concentration” is a pattern of variation and change in progress first documented on Smith Island (Schilling-Estes 1997, Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999, Schilling-Estes 2000, Parrott 2002, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2003, Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 2003, Trester 2003, Mittelstaedt to appear), whereby usage of certain variants (assumed to be socially characteristic) increases in apparent time. As a result, “linguistic distinctiveness is heightened among a reduced number of speakers” (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999) for social reasons, here to express solidarity in a moribund community.



MAP 1. SMITH ISLAND, CHESAPEAKE BAY, AND SURROUNDINGS



MAP 2. SMITH ISLAND: EWELL, RHODES POINT, TYLERTON

4. WEIT: MORPHOSYNTACTIC VARIATION IN APPARENT TIME

➤ In many varieties of English, two expletive forms appear in complementary distribution.

(2) **ENGLISH EXPLETIVE FORMS AND AGREEMENT**

- a. *it* =>
categorical 3s agreement
- b. *there* =>
variable number agreement w/associate DP

(3) **WEATHER PREDICATES**

* There is/are stormy tonight.

(4) **RAISING PREDICATES W/FINITE COMPLEMENTS**

- a. * There seems/seem that these isles are haunted.
- b. * There is/are likely that wraiths are among us.

(5) **COPULAR EXISTENTIALS**

* It are/is poltergeists in this house.

(6) **RAISING PREDICATES W/NON-FINITE COMPLEMENTS**

- a. * It seem/seems to be will-o'-the-wisps everywhere.
- b. * It are/is likely to be shades in the cemetery.

(7) **PASSIVES**

* It were/was phantoms seen on this beach.

(8) **UNACCUSATIVES**

* Every year, it appear/appears on this bridge malevolent apparitions.

➤ On Smith Island, the form *it* appears variably in the syntactic environments of weak-expletive *there*; henceforth, this variant is called weak-expletive *it* (WEIT). All examples are attested in sociolinguistic interviews, from Parrott (2002).

(9) ...it's a dance tonight.
Cf. There's a dance tonight.

(10) **COPULAR EXISTENTIALS**

In winter, it's nothing to do.

(11) **RAISING PREDICATES W/NON-FINITE COMPLEMENTS**

It just happened to be a EMT on this part of the Island....

(12) **PASSIVES**

And it was sharks seen down there that day.

(13) **UNACCUSATIVES**

Then you go straight on down, and it comes this white house here....

➤ As in many other varieties of English, associate number agreement with weak-expletive *there* is variable on Smith Island.

(14) a. There are two older than me and one younger.
b. I believe there's spirits though.

➤ However, 3s subject agreement is categorical with WEIT; plural associate agreement with WEIT is completely unattested (and rejected by informants) on Smith Island.

(15) a. It's no...separate burial plots on Tylerton.
b. *It're no separate burial plots on Tylerton.

(16) a. Is it any funny things you remember...?
b. *Are it any funny things you remember?

Weak-expletive form	Plural verbal form	Singular verbal form
WEIT	0	21
<i>there</i>	4	21

TABLE 1. VERBAL AGREEMENT IN WEAK-EXPLETIVE SENTENCES WITH PLURAL ASSOCIATE DPS (ADAPTED FROM PARROTT 2000)

Weak-expletive form	Plural were	Singular was
WEIT	0	28
<i>There</i>	10	22

TABLE 2. PAST-TENSE BE AGREEMENT IN WEAK-EXPLETIVE SENTENCES WITH PLURAL ASSOCIATE DPS (ADAPTED FROM PARROTT 2000)

- WEIT is part of the socially-motivated process of concentration. Usage of the WEIT variant is increasing in apparent time, at a rate comparable to phonological changes (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999).

Generation Group	#WEIT/#Weak-expletive environs	%WEIT
<i>Generation I (4)</i> <i>b. 1899-1916</i>	73 / 135	54%
<i>Generation II (6)</i> <i>b. 1944-1961</i>	133 / 172	77.3%
<i>Generation III (7)</i> <i>b. 1966-1971</i>	109 / 139	78.4%
<i>Totals (17)</i>	315 / 446	70.6%

TABLE 3. NUMBERS AND WEIT PERCENTAGES IN APPARENT TIME (ADAPTED FROM PARROTT 2002)

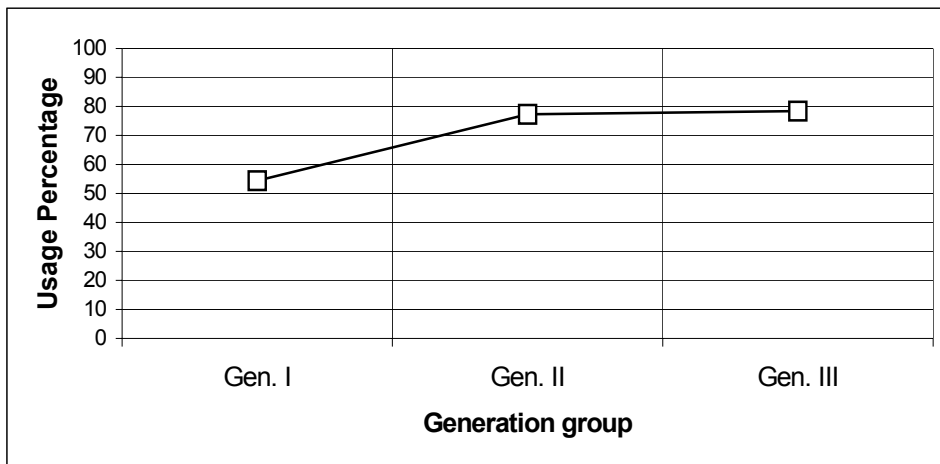


FIGURE 1. PERCENT WEIT USAGE ON SMITH ISLAND, IN APPARENT TIME (ADAPTED FROM PARROTT 2002)

5. MORPHOSYNTACTIC MISMATCH

- On Chomsky's (2000) feature-checking analysis of expletives and agreement, both expletive forms are Determiners (D) which can be Merged from the Lexical Array to check the EPP feature of T in the syntax.

(17) a. IT = [D, pers:3, num:s]
 b. EXPL = [D, upers:]

- Chomsky's analysis connects the complementary distribution of English expletive forms with the weak expletive's characteristic property of "apparently anomalous rightward agreement" (Chomsky and Lasnik 1993).

(18) There are monster crabs in that pot.

(19) [$T_{u\phi:}$, EPP ... [VP EXPL_{uPers:} ...
 [[DP _{ϕ :3p}, uCase:] ...]]]

(20) EXPL_{uPers:3} [$T_{u\phi:3p}$, EPP ... [VP *t* ...
 [[DP _{ϕ :3p}, uCase:Nom]]]]

(21) It seems that monster crabs ate the mainlander.

(22) [$T_{u\phi:}$, EPP ... [VP IT _{ϕ :3s} ...
 [TP [DP _{ϕ :3p}, uCase:Nom] [$T_{u\phi:3p}$, EPP ... [VP *t* ...]]]]]

(23) IT _{ϕ :3s} [$T_{u\phi:3s}$, EPP ... [VP *t* ...
 [TP [DP _{ϕ :3p}, uCase:Nom] [$T_{u\phi:3p}$, EPP ... [VP *t* ...]]]]]

- If expletive *it* is Merged in a weak-expletive structure, the uninterpretable Case feature of the associate DP cannot be checked. If expletive *there* is Merged in an *it*-expletive structure, the uninterpretable ϕ -features of T cannot be checked.

(24) * It is (are) monster crabs in that pot.

(25) * [$T_{u\phi:3s}$, EPP ... [VP IT _{ϕ :3s} ... [[DP _{ϕ :3p}, uCase:]]]]]

(26) * There seem (seems) that
monster crabs ate the mainlander.

(27) * $EXPL_{uPers}$: [$T_{u\Phi:}$, EPP ... [VP t ...
[TP [$DP_{\Phi:3p}$, $uCase:Nom$][$T_{u\Phi:3p}$, EPP ... [VP t ...]]]]]

- On this analysis, WEIT constitutes a paradoxical instance of mismatch. Suppose WEIT has a full set of 3s features, as suggested by categorical 3s agreement with WEIT. Then WEIT should be probed by T, leaving an unchecked Case feature on the associate DP.

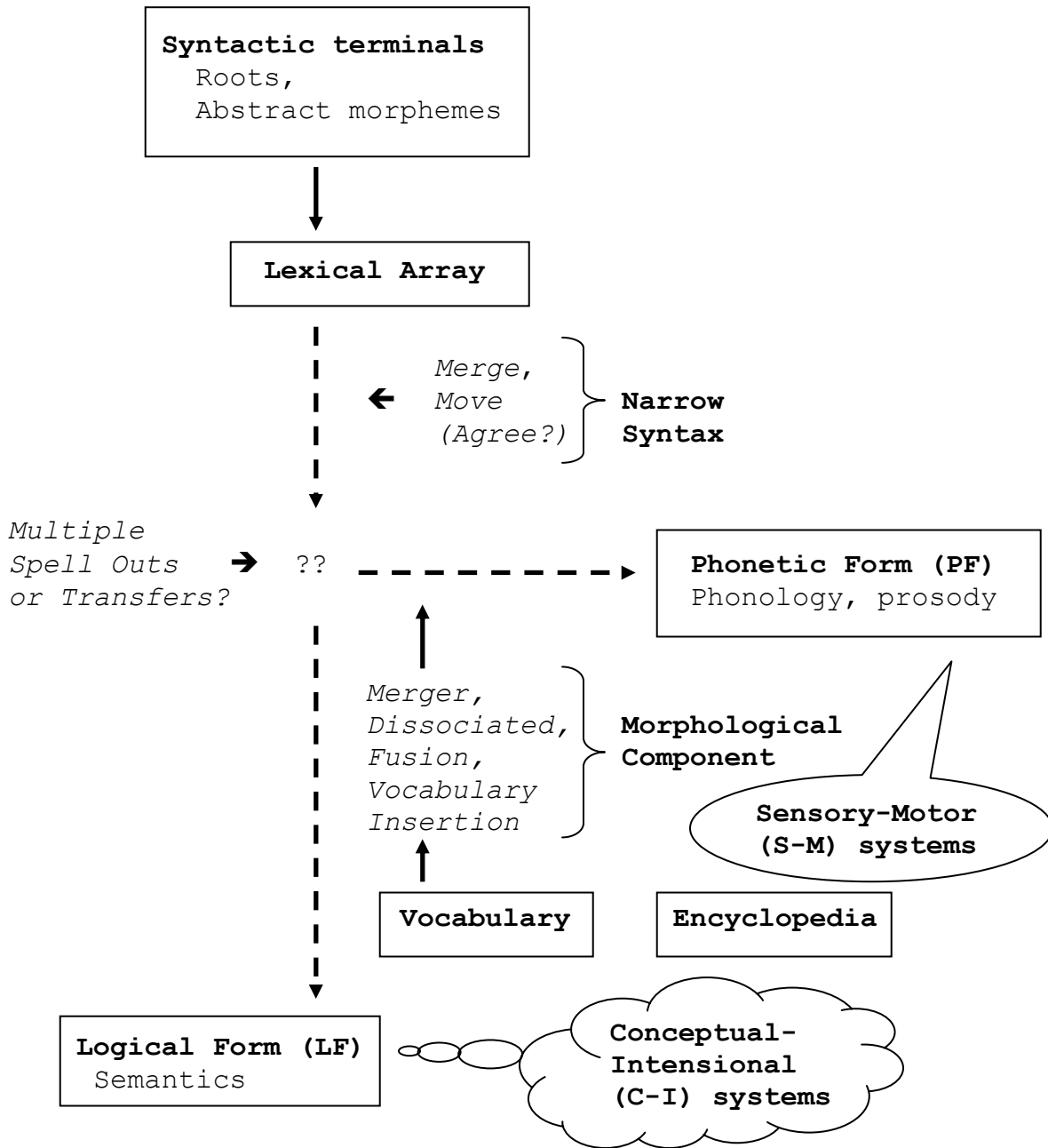
(28) * [$T_{u\Phi:3s}$, EPP ... [VP WEIT $_{\Phi:3s}$... [[$DP_{\Phi:3p}$, $uCase:$]]]]

- Suppose WEIT has only a single person feature like weak-expletive *there*. Then T should probe the associate DP, predicting the possibility of associate agreement with WEIT, contrary to fact.
- Thus, WEIT (a common feature of many English varieties) is *prima facie* evidence against Chomsky's (2000) feature-checking analysis of expletives and agreement.

6. RADICAL DM REMEDIES?

- Distributed Morphology (DM, Halle and Marantz 1993, Embick and Noyer to appear, and related work) is an articulated theory of the PF-interface branch of the syntactic computation (= the morphological component). DM is not entailed by, but is compatible with, Minimalist theories of syntax.

(29) **A MINIMALIST-DM MODEL**



(30) **ORDERING OF MORPHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS**

(Embick and Noyer 2001, Kandybowicz 2006)

Spell Out



- ← Merger (lowering), insertion of Dissociated features/morphemes
- ← Vocabulary search, Vocabulary Insertion => LINEARIZATION
- ← Fusion, Merger (local dislocation)
- ← Vocabulary search, Vocabulary Insertion



FIRST RATHER RADICAL SUGGESTION: Following McFadden (2004), there are no uninterpretable Case features in the syntax; case morphology is determined post-syntactically.

- Thus, no uninterpretable features on the associate DP must be checked in the syntax; categorical 3s agreement with WEIT is due to ordinary mechanisms of subject-verb agreement in English. In the case of WEIT, the mechanism of Labovian variation (sociolinguistic "choice") is located in the features of abstract syntactic terminals in the pre-syntactic lexical array (as in Adger and Smith 2005, Adger to appear).
- What about variable associate agreement with weak-expletive *there*, found widely among many varieties of English (Henry 2002, see Rupp 2005 for a review), including on Smith Island?

SECOND RATHER RADICAL SUGGESTION: Following Halle and Marantz (1993) and Embick and Noyer (to appear), “Dissociated” agreement features (or an Agr morpheme) are inserted at T by a language-specific rule during the morphological component.

- Let us assume that *it* expletives are Determiners with interpretable 3s agreement features, while *there* has no agreement features at all (perhaps *there* is not even a Determiner).
- For English, we can let Dissociated agreement features be copied from the features of the subject DP. Rightward associate agreement is the result of a default rule that applies because the weak expletive *there* has no agreement features to copy. Variable 3s agreement is the result of an additional (non-competing?) default rule that inserts 3s features. I am leaving the exact mechanisms very (very) sketchy, pending further research.

(31) **FEATURE-COPYING RULES FOR DISSOCIATED AGREEMENT**

Agr[<i>upers</i> : α , <i>unum</i> : α]	➔	Subject DP[<i>pers</i> : α , <i>num</i> : α]
Default?	➔	Associate DP[<i>pers</i> : α , <i>num</i> : α]
Default?	➔	[<i>pers</i> :3, <i>num</i> :s]

7. CONCLUSION

- In order to address the mismatch paradox posed by co-occurring variation in expletive forms and agreement, I have suggested that both case and subject-verb agreement are post-syntactic, morphological processes. Obviously, this fairly radical proposal will have significant consequences for Minimalist theories of syntactic feature checking, and these remain to be explored.

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