

## Distributed Morphological mechanisms of Smith Island *weren't* leveling

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A growing body of research attempts to bridge the gap between “biolinguistic” theories of syntax and the empirical study of “Labovian” variation and change in progress (see e.g. the papers collected in Cornips and Corrigan 2005). In this paper, I discuss how variation and change might be addressed within the theoretical framework of Distributed Morphology (DM) (Halle and Marantz 1993, Embick and Noyer to appear, and related work), consistent with the Minimalist research program (Chomsky 1995, 2000, et seq., and related work). Specifically, I provide an empirical argument that mechanisms of variation should be located in DM’s Vocabulary and operations of the morphological component.

*Weren't* leveling is a case of morphosyntactic variation and rapid change currently in progress in the moribund community of Smith Island, MD (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999). Leveling variation in the agreement forms of past-tense *be* (*was/were*) have been documented in a variety of English dialects (e.g. Britain 2002). On Smith Island, quantitative analyses (Schilling-Estes 2000, Mittelstaedt in progress) show that usage of leveled *was* (and *wasn't*) with 2s and plural subjects is declining in apparent time (see Table 1, attested examples from Mittelstaedt in progress and p.c., with speaker sex and year of birth):

- (1) a. The boats was a lot slower. (M, 1951)  
b. There just wasn't enough oysters. (M, 1930)

Leveling to *were* with 1s and 3s subjects is completely unattested (see Table 1):

- (2) a. \* I were scared. (unattested)  
b. \* She were not scared. (unattested)

However, leveling to *weren't* is increasing rapidly in apparent time, approaching 100% usage for the youngest speakers on Smith Island (see Table 1, attested examples from Mittelstaedt in progress and p.c.).

- (3) a. I weren't very old. (F, 1983)  
b. He weren't expecting a boat. (M, 1930)  
c. Ma weren't doing no laughing. (F, 1984)

Adger and Smith (2005, see also Adger to appear) give a Minimalist analysis of *was* leveling variation in the village of Buckie, Scotland. Although their lexical analysis is consistent with DM, it does not hinge upon Late Insertion of phonological features or any other mechanisms of DM theory. Indeed, Adger’s (to appear) analysis can be implemented under “the assumption that lexical items are bundles of syntactic and phonological features when they enter the syntax (that is, roughly the system of Chomsky 1995).” I will try to show that such lexical analyses fail to account for Smith Island *weren't* leveling because they predict the concurrent appearance of leveled *were*, contrary to fact. In other words, I will argue that the empirical facts of *weren't* leveling on Smith Island compel a DM-mechanistic analysis.

Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (1994) suggest that *weren't* leveling results from a “remorphologization” of negation that yields “suppletive-like negators that function as unanalyzable units,” analogous to the form *ain't*. In DM, suppletion results from the morphological operation Fusion. Thus, following Mittelstaedt and Parrott (2002, see also Parrott 2003), I propose that individual Smith Island speakers have the following Vocabulary Item:

- (4) [*be*, tense:past, neg:+] ↔ /wə.ɪnt/

This postulated Vocabulary Item for leveled *weren't* contains no agreement features, and it can only be Inserted when the Neg(ation) terminal node has been Fused with the terminal node containing features of past-tense *be*. This captures the fact that leveling to *weren't* can occur without concurrent *were* leveling on Smith Island. The analysis can be extended to *ain't* and other leveled, negated auxiliaries (Mittelstaedt in progress).

On a DM approach, as with Adger and Smith’s analysis, mechanisms of Labovian variation are located “within properties of lexical items,” so that social “patterns of variation seen across (groups of) individuals reduce to...lexical choice” (Adger and Smith 2005). However, the proposed analysis of Smith Island *weren't* leveling crucially depends on Late Insertion of phonological features, underspecification of Vocabulary Items, and morphological Fusion. Moreover, the postulated Vocabulary Item for leveled *weren't* does not compete for Insertion, pointing to a possible explanation for the distinction between Labovian variation and allomorphy.

Table 1. Past-tense *be* leveling on Smith Island, MD (data from Schilling-Estes 2000)

<b>Generation Group</b>	<b>#was/ #leveling environs %was</b>	<b>#wasn't/ #leveling environs %wasn't</b>	<b>#were/ #leveling environs %were</b>	<b>#weren't/ #leveling environs %weren't</b>
<i>Generation I</i> <i>b. 1899-1932</i> <i>(7 persons)</i>	34/99 34.3%	5/6 83.3%	0/418 0.0%	6/27 22.2%
<i>Generation II</i> <i>b. 1942-1961</i> <i>(7 persons)</i>	17/116 14.7%	2/9 22.2%	0/462 0.0%	17/36 47.2%
<i>Generation III</i> <i>b. 1965-1971</i> <i>(9 persons)</i>	11/49 22.4%	0/2 0.0%	0/214 0.0%	12/12 100%
<i>Generation IV</i> <i>b. 1975-1987</i> <i>(6 persons)</i>	6/51 11.8%	0/2 0.0%	0/254 0.0%	27/28 96.4%
<b>Totals</b> <b>(29 persons)</b>	<b>68/315</b> <b>21.5%</b>	<b>7/19</b> <b>36.8%</b>	<b>0/1348</b> <b>0%</b>	<b>62/103</b> <b>60.1%</b>

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