

PATTERNS OF VERBAL -S IN THE VARIETIES OF ENGLISH TODAY

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Abstract

The occurrence of the verbal ending *-s* with non-3rd person singular subjects is a frequent phenomenon in varieties of English worldwide. It has been attested to fulfil a wide range of functions in addition to its Standard English use as a person-number marker. This paper is to characterize the various factors which condition the use of non-standard verbal *-s*. It will discuss their areal distribution and give an account of the frequency with which each of the conditioning factors is attested. Based on this characterization, a group of core constraints will be isolated, the specific character of which will be shown to have facilitated their stability, endurance and spread.

Keywords: *subject-verb agreement, verbal -s, non-standard varieties, constraint, Northern Subject Rule, regularization*

1. Verbal *-s*

Verbal *-s* is an ending with a great variety of functions. In the context of Standard English (StE), it is an inflectional ending indicating person, number and mood of the verb, thus functioning as an agreement marker. The agreement relation in this case persists between the subject and the verb of a sentence, where the subject controls the form or inflectional ending of the verb (cf. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik 2000:755, Corbett 2006:4). Contrastingly, many non-standard varieties of English¹ display verbal *-s* use in constellations where the form of the verb does not match the person and number of the subject. According to StE rules such constellations are instances of non-agreement and

¹ Where referring to non-standard varieties of English. I decided to include Scots and Ulster-Scots as a dialect thereof, although Scots is today increasingly regarded as an autonomous language (e.g. Kirk 2003). The reason for this classification is that in terms of non-agreement structures it bears a considerable number of similarities to non-standard English patterns (cf. *Northern Subject Rule* including the *Type-* and the *Position of Subject Constraint*, 2nd person singular *-s*, *Text Type*).

grammatically wrong. In the non-standard varieties, however, they may be perfectly regular, since here they fulfill functions other than marking subject-verb agreement. In the following, an overview will be given of the 16 functions verbal *-s* can take in addition to the StE one.

Generalized -s. Verbal *-s* is attached to every member of the paradigm but does not display a specific function. This type of *-s*-leveling is most frequent for past tense *be*.² For other verbs, a specific function tends to be related to the regularized ending.

Tense. In varieties where generalized *-s* occurs with present tense full verbs, the ending is observed to fulfill a function. In Welsh English and I`-*s* regularization.³

Aspect. Another function generalized *-s* may fulfill is to indicate habitual aspect specifically for full verbs.⁴

(1)

- a. *We goes to Spain for holidays every year.*⁵
- b. *I drinks a cup of green tea in the morning.*

Polarity. This constraint is restricted to past tense *be* where leveled *was* commonly indicates positive polarity as opposed to generalized *weren't* in the negative.⁶

(2)

- a. *They was out when you called.*
- b. *I weren't at home when you called.*

² Christian, Wolfram & Dubc (1988), Anderwald (2001), Schreier (2002), Wolfram (2004).

³ Coupland (1988), Thomas (1994). Paddock (1975:29) uses the term 'non-past' in order to avoid the term 'present tense', because according to him, the *-s* form of the verb does not convey any specific time reference at all (see also Clarke 2004:308).

⁴ Pitts (1986), Poplack & Tagliamonte (1989), Lewis (1990), Clarke (1997).

⁵ The examples here and in the following paragraphs are my own based on definitions of the constraints from the research literature.

⁶ Cheshire, Edwards & Whittle (1993), Wolfram & Dannenberg (1999), Anderwald (2001), Britain (2002). In contrast Smith & Tagliamonte (1998) as well as Tagliamonte & Smith (2000) report negative levelling of *wasn't*.

Type of Subject Constraint (TSC). In the context of this constraint, the verbal ending is used where the subject is of any type other than a simple personal pronoun (*I, you, we* and *they*).⁷

(3)

- a. *The children likes to play in the back yard.* vs. *They like to play_ in the back yard.*
 b. *Many of us goes to the concert.* vs. *We go_ to the concert.*

Position of Subject Constraint (PSC). Where the *PSC* applies, verbal -s occurs in contexts of non-adjacency between the subject and the verb⁸ or in broader terms, the ending is used in contexts of deviation from the canonical subject-verb order.⁹

(4)

- a. *They go_ and leaves the dirty dishes in the sink.*
 b. *Is you ready to leave?*

Northern Subject Rule (NSR). This constraint combines the effects of the *TSC* and the *PSC* resulting in a single rule according to which verbal -s is blocked in personal pronoun+verb constellations but possible elsewhere.¹⁰

(5)

- a. *TSC: The girls goes out.* vs. *They go_ out.*
 b. *PSC: They get_ dressed.and goes out.* vs. *They go_ out.*

Existential there Effect. This effect also constitutes a combination of the *TSC* and the *PSC*, that is, the grammatical subject *there* triggers -s according to

⁷ Montgomery (1989, 1997), Beal (1993), Harris (1993), Henry (1997), Filppula (1999, 2000), Godfrey & Tagliamonte (1999), McCafferty (2003, 2004), Pietsch (2005).

⁸ Christian et al. (1988), Montgomery, Fuller & deMarse (1993), Godfrey & Tagliamonte (1999), Hazen (2000b), McCafferty (2004).

⁹ Hedevid (1967), Tagliamonte (1998), Pietsch (2005).

¹⁰ Murray (1873), Hedevid (1967), Macafee (1992), Montgomery (1997), McCafferty (2003, 2004), Pietsch (2005), Millar (2007).

the rules of the *TSC* and, in addition, non-agreement is caused by inversion of the verb and its notional subject following the *PSC*.¹¹

(6)

- a. *There 's lots of cars in front of the house.*
- b. *There was many people at the show.*

Text Type. Verbal *-s* in the 1st person singular¹² or throughout the paradigm¹³ may mark texts as narratives or as told in the so-called 'historic present'.

(7) ... *and we gets lost in the woods and it's getting dark and some of us starts to panic and they walks faster and faster and suddenly I sees a light...*

Number. In a range of varieties verbal *-s* indicates number. The majority option in this respect is singular marking,¹⁴ although plural *-s* is attested as well (cf. Table 1).¹⁵

Person and Number. In addition to the StE person-number constraint according to which verbal *-s* marks the 3rd person singular, it is common in some non-standard varieties of English to use the ending as a 2nd person singular marker.¹⁶

(8)

- a. StE: *She takes me to work every day.*
- b. NonStE: *What has(t) thou been doing?* (Hedevind 967:240)

¹¹ Sabban (1982), Christian et al. (1988), Peitsara (1988), Tagliamonte (1998), Cheshire (1999), Britain & Sudbury (2002), Hay & Schreier (2004), Pietsch (2005). The grammatical subject is the syntactic element in subject position whereas the notional subject carries subject-meaning.

¹² Henry (1995), Hughes & Trudgill (1996), Melchers (2004), Wolfram (2004).

¹³ Macafee (1992), Shorrocks (1998), Millar (2007).

¹⁴ Hirst (1906), Briloth (1913), Dieth (1932), Edwards & Weltens (1985), Melchers (2004), Pietsch (2005).

¹⁵ Wright (1905), Edwards & Weltens (1985), Pawley (2004).

¹⁶ Wright (1892), McClure (1994), Melchers (2004), Pietsch (2005), Millar (2007). Note that in these dialects 2nd person singular *-s* occurs with the archaic personal pronoun *thou* and may in itself be regarded as an archaic feature.

Verb Type. With regard to present tense *have* and *do*, generalized -s may mark the distinction between full and auxiliary verbs, with full verbs receiving the ending whereas auxiliaries remain uninflected throughout.¹⁷

(9)

- a. *I haves no money to pay you.* vs. *She have_ seen the movie already.*
 b. *You does the cleaning far too sloppily.* vs. *He do_ n't like cleaning.*

Cheshire (1978, 1982) reports that verbal -s also serves to distinguish dialect verbs from standard verbs so that the former are marked by -s.

- (10) *Next thing I know, I legs it.* i.e. 'Next thing I know, I run_ away' (cf. Cheshire 1978:61)

Phonological Environment. The likelihood of verbal -s to occur was observed to be greater in vocalic as opposed to consonantal environments.¹⁸

- (11) *We sees a kite in the sky.* vs. *We can hear_ the wind.*

Following Complement. In keeping with this constraint, the probability for the -s-ending to be used increases for verbs which are followed by complements like infinitives or gerunds that are not inflected for tense or person and number (Cheshire 1978, 1982, Clarke 1997).

(12)

- a. *We decides to go to the movies.*
 b. *They hates going to the supermarket on Saturday.*

Sequence Constraint. The sequence constraint stipulates that, in a series of more than one verb, verbal -s in the initial verb is likely to trigger the ending in the following ones (Poplack & Tagliamonte 1989, Clarke 1997).

- (13) *She sings and we drinks and dances all night.*

¹⁷ Cheshire (1978, 1982), Paddock (1981), Coupland (1988), Clarke (2004).

¹⁸ Poplack & Tagliamonte (1989, 2004), Clarke (1997), Godfrey & Tagliamonte (1999).

Sociolinguistic Variables. Sociolinguistic factors like social class, age or gender may affect the use of verbal *-s*. The trend of which speaker group is more likely to use the ending is however dependent on the variety in focus.¹⁹

This great array of constraints results in several possibilities as to which form the verbal paradigm can take. In addition to the StE pattern where one specific member of the paradigm is marked (*Person and Number Constraint*), the application of the non-standard constraints may result in 3rd person *-s* (*TSC*) and singular or plural *-s* (*Number Constraint*) up to the leveling of the whole paradigm (e.g. *Aspect*):

3rd person	singular	plural	throughout	specific member
<i>I run</i>	<i>I run-s</i>	<i>I run</i>	<i>I run-s</i>	<i>I run</i>
<i>you run</i>	<i>you run-s</i>	<i>you run</i>	<i>you run-s</i>	<i>you run-s</i>
<i>she run-s</i>	<i>she run-s</i>	<i>she run-s</i>	<i>she run-s</i>	<i>she run-s</i>
<i>we run</i>	<i>we run</i>	<i>we run-s</i>	<i>we run-s</i>	<i>we run</i>
<i>you run</i>	<i>you run</i>	<i>you run-s</i>	<i>you run-s</i>	<i>you run</i>
<i>they run-s</i>	<i>they run</i>	<i>they run-s</i>	<i>they run-s</i>	<i>they run</i>

Table 1

2. Distribution of constraints

Of the listed constraints not all occur with equal frequency and in the same areal distribution. The following account is to discuss where and how frequent the individual conditioning factors apply. The discussion is based on my review of the research literature on the topic incorporating 145 attestations of subject-verb non-agreement in non-standard varieties of English worldwide. Each of these 145 accounts was treated like a set of data consisting of five component parts: reference, constraint, area, paradigm and verb type (cf. Table 2).

Reference	Constraint	Area ²⁰	Paradigm	Verb type
Cheshire (1982:32f)	Verb type 1	BR-E-S-E	<i>-s</i> throughout	<i>have</i>
Clark (1997:242)	Aspect	NA-CA-NL	<i>-s</i> throughout	full verbs

¹⁹ Tagliamonte (1998), Hazen (2000a), Tagliamonte & Smith (2000), Schreier (2002).

²⁰ BR-E-S-E = British Isles: the Southeast of England; NA-CA-NL = North America: Newfoundland in Canada; BR-SC-N-E = British Isles: the Northeast of Scotland; BR-E-N = British Isles: the North of England.

Reference	Constraint	Area ²⁰	Paradigm	Verb type
Smith & Tagliamonte (1998:116, 124)	Subject Type	BR-SC-N-E	3rd person -s	past tense <i>be</i>
Hedevind (1967:265)	Number	BR-E-N	singular -s	present tense <i>be</i>

Table 2

Each column was then ordered and counted for the constraint in focus so that conclusions could be drawn about its areal distribution, the paradigm its application is probable to result in and the verb type it is likely to occur with.

Attestations are most frequent for *Generalized -s* with 65 sources mentioning the feature. Its use with past tense *be* is treated in 55 of these accounts and displays worldwide distribution, being reported throughout the British Isles, North America and varieties beyond these areas.²¹ With present tense full verbs its frequency and regional scope are lower. The 24 attestations concentrate in (South) Wales, the South(west) of England and in some black US varieties.²² Present tense *be* was reported to be generalized least often. The majority of the 20 accounts refer to black and white varieties in the South of the US. In addition, leveled -s with present *be* was sporadically observed for the North of England and some other varieties beyond the British Isles and North America.²³ In sum, *Generalized -s* occurs predominantly with past tense *be* and in this context it is a phenomenon of English worldwide.

The regularized past tense *be* paradigm functioning as a marker of *Polarity* is not as frequent, although the 15 instances reported are widely distributed. Of all areas studied in this respect, England and the South(east) of the US constitute core-regions of occurrence.²⁴

²¹ England, Scotland and Wales: Edwards & Weltens (1985); Ireland: Hickey (2007); Canada: Clarke (2004); US: Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (1998), Hazen (2006); Australia: Pawley (2004); Caribbean: Tagliamonte & Smith (1999); New Zealand: Bauer (1994) etc.

²² Wales: Coupland (1988), Connolly (1990), Thomas (1994); England: Barth (1968), Edwards & Weltens (1985), Pietsch (2005); US: Labov, Cohen, Robbins & Lewis (1968), Fasold (1972), Schneider (1983).

²³ US: Fasold (1998), Wolfram & Dannenberg (1999), Wolfram (2004); England: Melchers (1972), Petyt (1985); Caribbean: Reaser & Torbert (2004). Fijis: Mugler & Tent (2004); St. Helena: Wilson & Mesthrie (2004); Tristan daCunha: Schreier (2002).

²⁴ England: Cheshire et al. (1993), Tagliamonte & Smith (2000), Anderwald (2001), Britain (2002); US: Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1994), Wolfram & Dannenberg (1999), Hazen (2000a).

Cases where full verbs display a leveled *-s*-paradigm indicating *Tense* are rare. Only six sources characterizing a variety of English spoken in Newfoundland (Paddock 1981, Clarke 2004) and black varieties in the Southern US (Brewer 1973, Pitts 1986) mention the conditioning factor. In contrast, the generalized ending as conveying the meaning of habitual *Aspect* is attested more frequently and with a broader distribution.²⁵ The majority of the 20 accounts which discuss this constraint cover the British Isles, North America and the Caribbean.²⁶ By virtue of their meaning, full verbs are documented to be favored by this constraint.

Next to *Generalized -s*, the group of *Northern Subject Rule* constraints is extremely successful in conditioning verbal *-s* use. With respect to all three conditioning factors included (*TSC*, *PSC*, *NSR*), research has focused on the North of England, on Scotland and Ireland in general, on black and white varieties spoken in the Southeastern part of the US²⁷ and in the case of the *TSC* on a range of regions outside the US and the British Isles.²⁸ The application of each of the three constraints may result in full *-s* paradigms for all verb types, although *Subject Type* is documented to be most decisive in 3rd person contexts. The major difference between the conditioning factors of this group is the frequency of their attestation. Whereas the *TSC* is mentioned in 64 sources, the effect of the remaining two constraints falls behind with 25 accounts discussing the *PSC* and 20 records attesting the occurrence of the *NSR*. These numbers are, however, still high in comparison to the numbers for many of the other conditioning factors.

The *Existential* there *Effect* is closely related to the previous three constraints. It is a conditioning factor of high currency, the application of which leads to a 3rd person *-s* paradigm for present and past tense *be*. Attestations are

²⁵ Some of the literature suggests that the semantics of habitual aspect and present tense overlap so that the constraints *Aspect* and *Tense* are not exactly two different phenomena (Poplack & Tagliamonte 1989:76, Godfrey & Tagliamonte 1999:95).

²⁶ England: Poplack & Tagliamonte (2004); Ireland: Hickey (2007); Scotland: Macafee (1992); Wales: Lewis (1990); Canada: Clarke (1997); US: Montgomery (2004); Caribbean: Williams (2003), Aceto (2004), Poplack & Tagliamonte (2004).

²⁷ England: Hedevind (1967), Shorrocks (1998), Godfrey & Tagliamonte (1999), Pietsch (2005); Ireland: Harris (1993), Montgomery (1997), McCafferty (2003, 2004), Filppula (2004); Scotland: Smith & Tagliamonte (1998), Miller (2004), Purves (2004), Millar (2007); US: Feagin (1979), Christian et al. (1988), Wolfram, Hazen & Schilling-Estes (1988), Montgomery et al. (1993), Montgomery (1997), Hazen (2000b), Wolfram (2004).

²⁸ Australia: Eisikovits (1991); New Zealand: Sudbury (2001); Africa: McCormick (2004); Caribbean: Poplack & Tagliamonte (2004) etc.

various (38 references) covering all of England, Ireland and Scotland, the USA and a range of areas beyond.²⁹

Text Type constitutes another successful constraint with 27 records in worldwide distribution. In keeping with this conditioning factor, full verbs were observed to receive -s in the 1st person singular or throughout the paradigm, predominantly in the North of England, Ireland and Scotland and in the US in general.³⁰

Areas where plural -s is licensed by the *Number* constraint are few. Only four accounts of the South of England, Wales and Ireland³¹ show this factor to apply to all verb types. In contrast, singular -s with past tense *be* as occurring in the North of England and Scotland³² is referred to in 14 sources. The *Person and Number* of present tense verbs including *be* has been researched with equal frequency for the Northern part of the British Isles and Ireland, focusing on Scotland.³³

For the South of England, for Wales and Newfoundland,³⁴ the *Verb Type* distinction between full and auxiliary verbs in the case of present tense *have* and *do* is reported 11 times, whereas the contrast between standard and dialect verbs is mentioned only once for Reading in England (Cheshire 1982, 1978). Both *Verb Type* constraints result in full paradigms, where they apply.

The impact of the *Phonological Environment* on verbal -s use is scarcely attested with the five records at hand being strongly localized. Although it is highly probable that the constraint applies in more than just the researched areas, it is so far only reported for black varieties of the Caribbean and Nova Scotia as well as for the Southwest of England and for Newfoundland.³⁵ It exerts influence on the whole paradigm of full verbs.

²⁹ England: Petyt (1985), Cheshire et al. (1993), Britain (2002), Anderwald (2004); Ireland: McCafferty (2003, 2004); Scotland: Miller (1993); US: Feagin (1979), Christian et al. (1988), Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (1998), Montgomery (2004); Australia: Eisikovits (1991); New Zealand: Hay & Schreier (2004); Falklands: Britain & Sudbury (2002); Tristan daCunha: Schreier (2002).

³⁰ British Isles: Hughes & Trudgill (1996), Shorrocks (1998), Miller (2004), Pietsch (2005), Millar (2007); US: Feagin (1979), Schneider (1981), Myhill & Harris (1986), Montgomery (2004).

³¹ Wright (1905), Edwards & Weltens (1985), Filppula (2004).

³² Tagliamonte (1998), Smith & Tagliamonte (1998), Melchers (2004), Pietsch (2005).

³³ Wright (1892), Hedevind (1967), Robinson (1997), Melchers (2004), Miller (2004), Purves (2004), Pietsch (2005).

³⁴ Paddock (1981), Cheshire (1982), Lewis (1990), Thomas (1994), Clarke (2004), Wagner (2004).

³⁵ Poplack & Tagliamonte (1989, 1991, 2004), Clarke (1997), Godfrey & Tagliamonte (1999).

Only three accounts consider the effect of the *Following Complement* on the occurrence of *-s*. They cover the areas of Reading in England and of Newfoundland (Cheshire 1978, 1982, Clarke 1997). Here the constraint applies to full verbs and results in *-s* marking throughout the paradigm.

The *Sequence Constraint* is attested for a black variety in the Caribbean (Poplack & Tagliamonte 1989) and for Newfoundland (Clarke 1997), where it was found to affect all members of full verb paradigms.

In every variety the distribution of verbal *-s* is most likely to be affected by *Sociolinguistic Variables*, however, not all studies consider this factor in their analyses.³⁶ Even if they did, a common overall trend in this respect could hardly be established as the impact of *Sociolinguistic Variables* differs from case to case.³⁷ Based on these considerations, this constraint is excluded from the discussion.

3. Interpretation

3.1. Core constraints

The account of the areal distribution and the frequency of attestation for every constraint (Table 3) constitutes the basis for a division between core constraints and minor observations. The classification of a conditioning factor as essential is based on its fulfilling two conditions. Firstly, it needs to be spread widely in terms of area, that is, it should occur in no less than five out of six regions given in Table 3. If a constraint meets this requirement, it can be regarded as being vital throughout the British Isles and Ireland, in North America and beyond; in individual cases (e.g. *Generalized -s*), it can even be shown to represent a worldwide phenomenon. This in turn means that some quality of the constraint promotes its endurance in the region of origin, its spread and its stability in the areas it is transported to. The second criterion for the classification as core constraint is the frequency of its attestation. Conditioning factors standing out as having been subject to a larger amount of research offer more information about the way they function and present a good basis for interpretation. Furthermore, a higher number of accounts suggests a preliminary assumption made by researchers that the study of this constraint is relevant and fruitful in its results.

³⁶ Studies explicitly focusing on this constraint are, e.g. Tagliamonte (1998), Hazen (2000a), Tagliamonte & Smith (2000), Schreier (2002).

³⁷ E.g. in terms of gender and age: Schreier (2002) finds a male > female and a young/old > middle aged hierarchy, whereas Tagliamonte & Smith (2000) find the opposite to hold.

The line is drawn at more than 14 attestations, a number which matches neatly with the fulfillment of the first criterion as can be seen in Table 3.

Conditioning factors classified as minor observations have not been attested as widely and as frequently, yet. However, each of them has the potential of becoming a core constraint given it is more strongly researched, better defined and can be shown to hold in a broader range of varieties. *Verb Type I* and *Tense*, for example, could be of interest in this respect, if they were studied for more varieties with an input from the South of the British Isles in addition to Newfoundland English. *Phonological Environment* is another factor worthwhile studying, as it is probable to exert influence in basically every variety due to the preference for vowel-consonant-vowel syllable structures in English.

Constraint	Attestations	British Isles				USA	Others
		England	Ireland	Scotland	Wales ³⁸		
<i>Generalized -s</i>	65	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Type of Subject</i>	64	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Existential there</i>	38	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓
<i>Text Type</i>	27	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓
<i>Position of Subject</i>	25	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓
<i>Northern Subject Rule</i>	20	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓
<i>Aspect</i>	20	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Polarity</i>	15	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Number (singular)</i>	14	✓	✓	✓	×	×	✓
<i>Person and Number</i>	14	✓	✓	✓	×	×	×

³⁸ There are only a few attestations for Wales, as this region has been scarcely researched.

Constraint	Attestations	British Isles				USA	Others
		England	Ireland	Scotland	Wales ³⁸		
<i>Verb Type I.</i>	11	✓	×	×	✓	×	✓
<i>Tense</i>	6	✓	×	×	×	✓	✓
<i>Phon. Environment</i> ³⁹	5	✓	×	×	×	×	✓
<i>Number (plural)</i>	4	✓	✓	×	✓	×	✓
<i>Following Complement</i>	3	✓	×	×	×	×	✓
<i>Verb Type II</i>	2	✓	×	×	×	×	×
<i>Sequence Constraint</i>	2	×	×	×	×	×	✓

Table 3

3.2. Groups of core constraints

The conditioning factors classified as core constraints in accordance with the criteria above are as follows: *Generalized -s*, the *TSC*, the *Existential there Effect*, *Text Type*, the *PSC*, the *NSR*, *Aspect* and *Polarity*. All of them are attested between 65 and 15 times and display a wide areal distribution. They have been shown to be vital throughout the British Isles and Ireland, to have been transported to the US or to other areas, to have persisted there and often times to have spread further from there.

In another step, this group of successful conditioning factors is subdivided according to the character of its individual constraints, their common traits or relations among them. Group I draws on the latter criterion of relatedness in that it subsumes the constraints of the *Northern Subject Rule-family*, i.e. the *NSR*, the *TSC* and the *PSC*. In addition, the *Existential there Effect* is included, as its application combines *TSC* and *PSC* elements.

The second grouping is based on similarities in the way the constraints apply and in the character the results of their application take. It encompasses *Generalized -s*, *Text Type*, *Aspect* and *Polarity* due to the fact that the latter three

³⁹ Most likely to be widely distributed, but not tested so far.

factors combine the regularization of the verbal paradigm, i.e. *Generalized -s*, with a broadening of the verbal meaning (*Text Type* - 'narration'; *Aspect* - 'habitual', *Polarity* - 'positive').

3.3. Explaining their success

Having classified the core constraints as members of either Group I or Group II, an explanation is sought for the high currency of these conditioning factors. With regard to the constituents of Group II, the *Generalized -s* constraints, the explanation is straightforward. Here the tendency for regularization may be interpreted in terms of the system striving for paradigmatic simplicity, that is, two forms distinguishing person-number differences in meaning are replaced by one form which does not make this distinction (cf. Tagliamonte & Smith 1999: 9). Instead all members of the resulting regular paradigm convey the verbal meaning of the stem and an additional semantic component making sense of the ending.

The *NSR*-constraints of Group I require a somewhat longer explanation starting with a revision of how they apply. In the case of the *TSC*, verbal -s is triggered by every subject, which is not a simple personal pronoun. Such subjects tend to be more complex and hence more difficult to interpret in terms of person and number than are simple personal pronouns.⁴⁰ The assumption that greater complexity of the subject increases the occurrence of verbal -s, is supported by the frequent observation of the 'heaviness of subject' effect. According to this effect, heavier subjects, i.e. noun phrases which include much material, have been attested to further intensify the influence of the *TSC*.⁴¹ In (14) two examples of such heavy subjects are given. The first of them displays a subject consisting of two conjoined noun phrases while the second demonstrates how post-modification increases the complexity of the subject. With regard to structures like (14a) it has been suggested that the -s favoring effect is caused by the conjunct closest to the verb which tends to be singular and thus triggers a singular suffix (Christian et al. 1988:118f, Smith & Tagliamonte 1998:118).

⁴⁰ The more complex nature of non-pronominal as opposed to nominal subjects already surfaces in the case of noun phrases consisting of simple nouns. In the phrase *the cats plays*, for example, the subject consists of two elements in contrast to the one-word subject in *they play*. And even where pronouns in subject function which are formally simple object pronouns (*us plays*) trigger -s, the unusual configuration of a non-subject form taking on subject function needs to be understood before person and number can be assigned. This, too, may be regarded as increased complexity of the subject.

⁴¹ Bailey, Maynor & Cukor-Avila (1989:291), Montgomery et al. (1993:348), Wolfram (2004:291), Hickey (2007:179f).

(14)

- a. *The cat and the dog chases a mouse.*
- b. *The boys with the long hair needs a haircut.*

Heavy subjects do not only cause verbal *-s* within the realms of the *TSC*. They also comprise structures which underlie the *PSC*, that is, they form constellations where the subject and the verb are separated by intervening material. In addition to examples (14a and b), the sentence in (15a) shows another such structure. Here the first verb and the conjunction create distance, leading to the occurrence of verbal *-s* even with a simple personal pronoun subject. The application of the *PSC* goes, however, beyond a mere non-adjacency rule. In broader terms it can be defined as licensing verbal *-s* where the syntax deviates from the canonical subject-verb order. Within this framework, question (15b) is yet a further example of how the constraint works.

(15)

- a. *They chase and eats the mouse*
- b. *Has they asked you yet?*

All of the constellations which are subject to the *PSC* share a specific trait. In comparison to simple pronoun-verb structures, their person/number-interpretation takes a longer or more complicated route. Where the adjacency factor applies, it has to bridge intervening material, and the reversal of the regular word order requires number assignment before the assigning instance, i.e. the subject, is expressed (cf. Tagliamonte 1998: 172).

Combining the *TSC* and the *PSC*, the explanation of the *NSR*-mechanism amounts to the statement that every structure other than a pronoun+verb combination complicates number interpretation and therefore receives verbal *-s*.

For the *Existential there Effect*, the interplay of the *TSC* and the *PSC* is more complex. Following the former constraint, existential constructions display a syntactic subject (*there*) which is not a simple personal pronoun and thus requires a verbal *-s*-form. In keeping with the *PSC*, the *-s*-form would be taken to derive from the unusual syntactic configuration with the notional subject being postponed. In this case, the verb is expressed before the exact nature of the subject can be analyzed, so that agreement fails (Tagliamonte 1998:169,186). The third, and to my mind, most convincing explanation unites these two approaches. It starts from the observation that the “morphosyntactic properties of subjects are divided between two constituents” with *there* comprising the subject

in terms of word order and with the following noun phrase representing the notional subject which controls agreement (Pietsch 2005:13). This division of functions causes ambiguity as to which element assigns agreement and leads to the use of the -s form. A related suggestion is made by Christian et al. (1988:120f) and by Eisikovits (1991:245) who claim that in existential contexts *there* takes the position of the notional subject. In doing so, it governs agreement and, being interpreted as a singular subject, it triggers a singular verb form.

In sum, Group I constraints cause the use of -s forms in constellations which are hard to process (cf. Tagliamonte 1998:172) or, in other words, which deviate from the "prototypical" pronoun+verb pattern (Pietsch 2005:153). Given the fact that such constellations form a considerable part of the language, the role of Group I constraints has to be stable and their wide distribution is but a logical consequence.

4. Conclusion

In the present article, a concise characterization was given of the forms nonstandard verbal -s can take in varieties of English worldwide. Based on the account of their distribution and the frequency of their attestation in the research literature, a group of core constraint was elicited. Its members, *Generalized -s*, the *TSC*, the *Existential there Effect*, *Text Type*, the *PSC*, the *NSR*, *Aspect* and *Polarity*, were found to exert influence on the use of verbal -s throughout the British Isles and Ireland, in wide parts of the US and often times even beyond these regions. Also they were shown to have been extensively documented. In a next step, this set of major conditioning factors was further sub-divided according to the common traits or relations between the individual constraints. Thus, the *NSR*, the *TSC*, the *PSC* and the *Existential there Effect* were classified as Group I constraints belonging to the *NSR*-family. The remaining factors were summarized under Group II, which is characterized by -s-generalization in combination with a broadening of verbal meaning. Within the framework of the two groups, an explanation was suggested for the high currency of the respective conditioning factors. Regarding Group I it was claimed that its members relate to phenomena of multifaceted processing and apply to subject-verb constellations for which person-number assignment is complex. Group II constraints were found to work towards a simplification of the verbal paradigm such that one form for all persons and numbers is combined with a meaning common to all members of the paradigm.

The paper presents preliminary results of research conducted for a more extensive project on subject-verb agreement patterns in the varieties of English

as compared to the Brittonic languages. It lies within the broader scope of this main project to establish a still more differentiated model of *-s*-marking patterns and to discuss several explanatory theories for it in depth. Independently of the present project I see significant possibilities in prospective research on verbal *-s*, where it takes a new angle and focuses on the conditioning factors which currently constitute minor observations. I suggest that, given their more thorough study, some of these so far peripheral constraints bear the potential to acquire the status of core constraints.

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