‘PEOPLE *SPEAKS* LIKE THIS!’ A FEW NOTES ON SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT IN AMERICAN ENGLISH DIALECTS

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Abstract: *Subject-verb agreement is such a basic phenomenon in language that we usually take it for granted. The verbal concord system in English is an exciting area of research due to the rich regional variation. Some types of non-standard concord systems are found in traditional dialects and some of them are well attested historically and can be traced to the Middle English period (Pietsch, 2005: 125). Nowadays, there are also other types of nonstandard concord forms, identified in different varieties of English. Chambers (2004) suggests that some of these have the status of ‘vernacular universals’. This paper takes a closer look at the nonstandard agreement forms (the verbal suffix -s) found in several American English dialects (Appalachian English, Newfoundland English, African American English, Samaná English) and comments on their function(s).*

Key words: *verbal -s, concord, subject, American English, dialects, the North Subject Rule*

1. Preliminary remarks and terminology

In Standard English, present tense verb forms have an -s suffix[1] with third person singular subjects only. This suffix has three phonological conditioned variants /s, z, ɪz/. Verbal -s in English is an inflection which indicates person, number and mood of the verb, being an agreement marker. The agreement relation which is established between the subject and the verb of a sentence is one in which the subject dictates the form or inflectional ending of the verb. Interestingly, several varieties of English make use of verbal -s in constructions where the form of the verb is not in concordance with the number and person of the subject. In Standard English such forms are considered to be nonstandard and are deemed grammatically incorrect. In the nonstandard varieties, they are viewed as correct, as they can fulfill functions other than marking subject-verb agreement.[2] We shall start with an overview of several functions that verbal -s can take in addition to the Standard English one and then we will focus on subject-verb agreement in certain American dialects.

(i) Type of Subject Constraint (TSC)[3]

In this case, the verbal ending is used if the subject is not a personal pronoun (*I, you, we, they*):

(1) The children *like**s*** to play outside. *vs.* They like to play outside.

(ii) *Position of Subject Constraint* (PSC)[4]

Verbal -s occurs in contexts of non-adjacency between the subject and the verb.

[1] Tagliamonte (2012:207) uses the term ‘variable verbal (s)’ to refer to the absence of the -s suffix in third person singular contexts and the variable presence of an -s suffix in persons other than the third person singular. Bickerton (1975: 134) calls it ‘hyper -s’.
[2] For a more thorough discussion see Bismark (2010).
[3] See Beal (1993), Godfrey and Tagliamonte (1999), Pietsch (2005).
[4] See Tagliamonte (1998) and Pietsch (2005).

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(iii) *The Northern Subject Rule* (NSR)

Concord verbs take verbal -s with all subjects, with the exception of the personal pronouns *I*, *we*, *you* and *they*, when they are directly adjacent to the verb (Pietsch, 2005: 128).

(iv) *Existential there*

This represents a blend of the PSC and TSC, in that the grammatical subject *there* requires -s according to the rules of the TSC and non-agreement is due to the inversion of the verb and its notional subject following the PSC (Peitsara 1988, Tagliamonte 1998, Britain and Sudbury 2002).

(2) a. *There*'**s** lots of cars on the street.
b. *There* **was** many people in the house.

(v) Sociolinguistic factors

Though often not taken into consideration, sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, social class, ethnicity may affect the use of verbal -s. A study carried out by Cheshire (1982) in Reading, England showed that, as in many other Southwestern varieties, verbal -s also occurs with other subjects. Consider the following examples:

(3) a. *I* start**s** Monday, so shut your face.
b. *You* know**s** my sister, the one who's small.
c. *They* call**s** me all the names under the sun, don't they?

(Cheshire, 1982: 31)

Cheshire (1982) further argues that the nonstandard suffix is frequent with a wide array of verbs, including the irregular verbs *say*, *have* and *do*. She considers that this occurrence of verbal -s is a remnant of Northern varieties of English. The Northumbrian dialect of Old English had an -s suffix which occurred throughout the present tense paradigm and this was extended in the Middle English period to Midland areas[5]. Strang (1970: 146) notes that around 1640 the -s suffix was used in Standard English with singular subjects and sometimes with plural subjects.

2. Colloquial American English

In Colloquial American English nonstandard agreement patterns are very frequent. Consider the following:

(4) Plural subject + singular be
(i) Them dogs *is* really startin' to annoy me.

(ii) They *was* there all day, spent the entire day there.

(Murray and Simon, 2008: 404)

[5] See Wakelin (1972).

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A sentence like the one provided in (ii) is frequent in colloquial American English. The construction *they* plus singular *be* occurs 856 times in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). A construction such as *them* + a plural subject is more rarely used, compared to the second example. In COCA it appears 18 times. In order to have an insight into the development and use of such constructions, I have used Google Ngrams, to offer a diachronic perspective, starting from the 1800s to present-day.

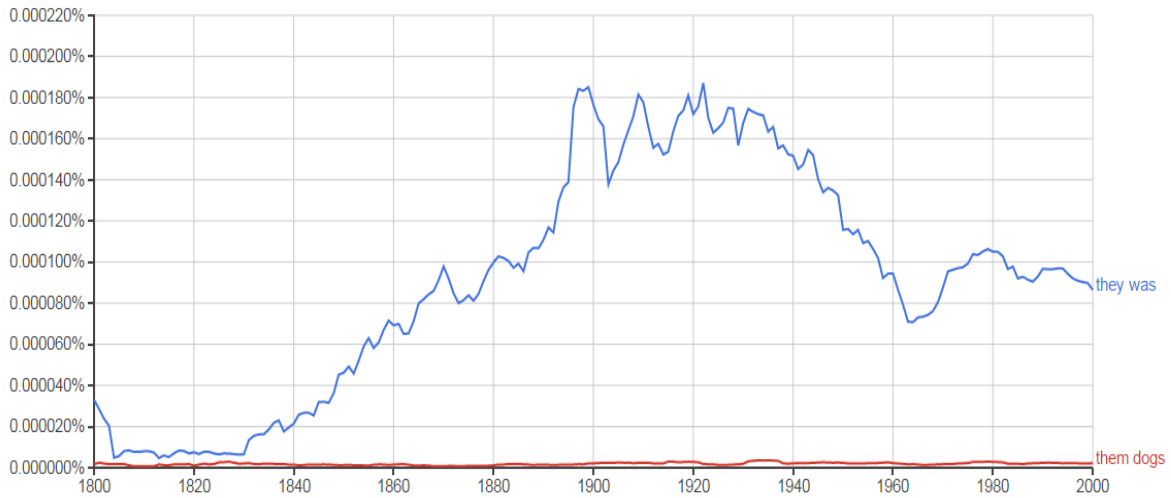

Figure 1. The use of '*they was*' and '*them dogs*' according to Google Ngrams

The person pronoun 'they' followed by a verb in the singular 'they was' reached its peak in usage towards the beginning of the 20th century, probably due to the high number of immigrants recently arrived in the United States. From 1925 onwards, we witness a slow but steady decrease in the usage of a plural pronoun with a singular verb. There is a significant decrease around the 1940s and 1960s, when we are dealing with second or third generations of immigrants, who have already acquired English as their mother tongue.

(5) Singular subject + plural, present tense do + contracted not
  (i) The meatloaf *don't look* too healthy

(Murray and Simon, 2008: 404)

(6) Plural subject + singular, present tense *have*
  (i) The cars on that lot across the street there *has* just got to go.

(Murray and Simon, 2008: 404)

(7) Plural subject + singular, present tense (other verb)
  (i) Them city people *eats* out a lot more'n we do.

(Murray and Simon, 2008: 404)

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Figure 2. The use of '*cars has*' in American English according to Google Ngrams

These nonstandard agreement patters show that in colloquial American English the verb does not necessarily have to agree with the subject. Wolfram and Schilling (2016) note that a decisive factor which has contributed to the distinctive features of American English is the influence of other languages, from the Native American languages to the Scandinavian ones on the pronunciations of the Upper Midwest, to the influence of African languages on Ebonics. They further argue that even the languages of more recent immigrants from Asia and different Hispanic countries affect English in the same way as various European languages have done throughout the history of the US. Figure 2 reinforces the immigration hypothesis mentioned above. It is clear that the significant wave of migration to the US towards the beginning of the twentieth century has put its mark on the language used here.

3. Appalachian English

As far as concord is concerned, Appalachian English usually follows the same rules as in general American English usage, with a few exceptions. Verbs in the third person singular conform to the standard usage in almost all regards. A peculiar feature is that verbs ending in *-st* may take a syllabic suffix (Montgomery 2008: 430):

(8) It *disgustes* me now to drive down through this part of the village.
(Montgomery 2008: 430)

Montgomery (2008) further notes that the main difference in subject-verb agreement between Appalachian English and Standard English is found in third-person plural contexts. In these cases verbal -s may occur on verbs if the subject is not a personal pronoun. So, in this case it appears that Appalachian English is governed by the Type of Subject Constraint.

(9) *People* **knows** what you did.
(Montgomery 2008: 430)

An interesting fact is that when expressing historical present –s is seldom used when the subject is *they*. This pattern can be traced to 14th century Scotland and is also valid for the verbs *be* and *have*. Consider the following examples:

(10) a. This comes from *people* who **teaches** English.

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b. That's the way *cattle* **feeds**.

(Montgomery 2008: 430)

Collective nouns also appear to occur with the verbal in the singular in Appalachian English. The Position of Subject Constraint was also discovered in some old letters from the region, but did not survive the 19th century.

(11) We have some sickness in camp of mumps and **has** had some of fever. (1862 letter)
(Montgomery 2008: 430)

4. The American Southeast

In the Southeast there are certain aspects of subject-verb concord which are worth taking into consideration. The agreement pattern in which verbal -s occurs with a plural subject as in *The dogs barks* or *People goes there*, is attested as a feature of American English varieties that were influenced by the Scotch-Irish, such as Appalachian English (Wolfram and Christian 1976, Montgomery 1989), though its colonial distribution appears not to be limited to the Southern Highland region (Wolfram 2008: 479). Wolfram (2008) notes that the encountered patterns of 3rd plural -s in all of the enclave dialect communities he examined, from the European American communities in the Chesapeake Bay and Outer Banks to African Americans and Lumbee Vernacular English. However, it should be noted that there are several constraints which govern the occurrence of verbal -s with plural subjects. The Type of Subject Constraint and the Position of Subject Constraint (which actually form the Northern Subject Rule) are found in the American Southeast. Nouns phrase subjects, collective nouns and coordinate NPs favour -s marking.

(12) The *dogs* **barks**.
(13) *People* **likes** the cats.
(14) *Me and my dog* **likes** to play outside.

(Wolfram, 2008: 479)

The above examples show that -s marking is governed by the Type of Subject Constraint in the sense that plural subjects agree with the verb in the singular with the exception of the personal pronouns (*I, we, you, they*), the same constraint which is found in Irish and Scottish English dialects. An interesting finding is discussed by Pietsch (2005) who highlights that in Northern Irish English the pronoun *they* can occur with a singular verb if between the subject and the verb there is a floating quantifier (Pietsch 2005: 130), as in (15):

(15) Oh never, **they** *never* **was** so strict, at that time, anyway.

(Pietsch, 2005: 131)

Wolfram (2008: 479) points out that in the Hyde County European American community there seems to be a consistent prohibition against verbal -s with pronoun subjects (the Type of Subject Constraint), while the speakers from the African American Hyde County display a rather weak variable constraint. The Position of the Subject Constraint is also present in the American Southeast dialects. Verbs which are not adjacent to the subject because of a heavy NP or a clausal complement are more likely to receive a verbal -s inflection than those which are immediately adjacent to the subject.

(16) The **dogs** in the cars **barks**.

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(17) The **dogs** that **barks** are on the street.

(Wolfram, 2008: 479)

Wolfram (2008: 479) highlights the fact that this seems to be a rather constant pattern though its application is somewhat stronger in some enclave dialect communities than in others.

6. Newfoundland English

In Newfoundland English it seems that there are no constraints on the use of verbal -s. Irrespective of the person and number of the subject -s is attached to the verb throughout the present tense lexical verb paradigm (e.g. *I likes, we drinks, they eats, the dogs runs*, etc.). Clarke (2008: 497) notes that the inflection -s that is attached to the verb is not constrained in vernacular Newfoundland English, as it is in other dialects, by the nature or the adjacency of the subject. Verbal -s functions as a generalized present tense marker for lexical verbs. This feature is, however, found in casual speech style. Godfrey and Tagliamonte (1999) showed that verbal -s is more frequent in Newfoundland English than in other dialects in which it has been attested (Appalachian English, African American Vernacular English). An interesting feature of Newfoundland English, as far as subject-verb agreement is concerned, lies in the fact that there is a morphological distinction between HAVE and DO in terms of their functions as lexical verbs and auxiliaries:

(i) Have/do as lexical verb

(18) She does/doos lovely paintings.
(19) They does/doos a lot of charity work.
(20) He has/have a sports car.
(21) They has/haves their breakfast at 7.

(Clarke, 2008: 497)

(ii) Have/do as auxiliary

(22) He don't want to leave.
(23) Do she want to see you?
(24) He haven't got no fire.
(25) Have she left already

(ibidem)

Clarke (2008) goes on to explain that with conservative speakers *have/do* as lexical verbs are marked with -s. When they function as auxiliary verbs they take a zero suffix. Forms such as *haves* and *doos* are also documented.

7. African American Vernacular English

African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is one of the most studied English dialects in the United States. Throughout the centuries this variety has been referred to as *Negro Speech, Black English, Ebonics*, to mention just a few. As far as subject-verb concord is concerned, according to Wolfram (2008: 522), there are two aspects which stand out. The first one is connected to the attachment of the verbal suffix -s, and the second one to the conjugated forms of past and present forms of the verb *to be*. Several studies of urban (Labov et al. 1968, and more recently, Rickford, 1999) and rural AAVE (Cukor-Avila 2002) have attested the absence of 3rd person singular -s in sentences such as:

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(26) *She* **walk.** for She walks.
(27) *She* **have** money. for She has money.

(Wolfram, 2008: 522)

Several sociolinguistic studies carried out among younger AAVE speakers (Labov et al. 1986, Fasold 1972) revealed that the absence of verbal -s with 3rd person singular subjects is so high – in some studies reaching levels of 75-100% – that some researchers claimed that contemporary urban "AAVE has no concord rule for verbal -s" (Fasold 1972: 146). Quite intriguingly, for Labov et al. (1968: 167), verbal -s was considered 'irregular and unsystematic', being a case of free variation. Tagliamonte (2012: 208) highlights that verbal -s was originally deemed as an unsystematic importation into the AAVE grammar on the basis of three types of evidence:

(i) It was seldom found in the third person singular;
(ii) It was not subject to style-shifting;
(iii) It did not show regular phonological conditioning.

Based on these interpretations, it might be inferred that verbal -s in AAVE varies among individuals and it is influenced by extralinguistic factors. It has also been argued that verbal-s should be seen simply as a stylistic accommodative device used by African Americans to render their speech more suitable for interaction with speakers of Standard English (Myhill and Harris 1986: 31). Another plausible hypothesis is that verbal -s is not influenced by extralinguistic factors but represents an aspectual feature, marking durative (Brewer 1986), habitual (Pitts 1986) or [-punctual] aspect (Bickerton 1975). All these studies argue for a non-English origin of the verbal suffix -s. Pitts (1986: 304) concludes that verbal -s in AAVE represents "the adoption of a Standard English form without the Standard English grammatical component". This might be then called the **Creolist Hypothesis**, according to which the ***form*** is an English suffix, but the ***function*** is not English, but it is taken from its creole roots and it represents a creole aspect marker (Tagliamonte 2012: 209).

(28) And when you win, *they* **comes** on your street and **tells** you.

(Pitts 1986: 79)

In the literature there is another hypothesis to account for the absence of verbal -s with 3rd person singular subjects or the presence of -s with 1st and 2nd persons singular and plural. Schneider (1983: 104) explained that if the existence of -s in contemporary AAVE came from a suffixless system then an earlier stage in its history would lead to less verbal -s. Contrary to his expectations, he found the opposite result. 72% of the third person singular subjects in the folk narratives he examined, which had been carried out in the 1940s, had a verbal -s suffix. He also noticed that verbal -s was used more than half the time in the 1st and 2nd person plural. As mentioned earlier, several British dialects display this type of variation. Schneider (1983) concluded that the verbal -s variation in early AAVE was influenced by the contact with the British settlers who immigrated to the southern United States from these different dialect areas in the United Kingdom (Tagliamonte, 2012: 210).

All these hypotheses provide us with different insights into the development and use of verbal -s in AAVE. In what follows, we will discuss verbal -s in Early Black English, as represented by tape-recorded interviews with English-speaking residents of the peninsula of Samaná (situated in the Dominican Republic) and the Ex-Slave Recordings, based on the

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research performed by Poplack and Sankoff (1987), Schneider (1983), Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991), and Bailey et al. (1991).

8. Early Black English: The Ex-Slave Recordings and Samaná English

Early research shows that verbal -s has no grammatical function in Vernacular Black English (VBE) and is inserted irregularly in "odd, unpredictable and idiosyncratic positions" (Labov et al. 1968: 165). Three different types of evidence have been provided in favour of the above assertion (Labov et al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, Fasold 1972):

(i) The uninflected verb was found to be the predominant form in the 3rd p. sg. In VBE, undergoing deletion at far greater rates than monomorphemic or plural –s (Labov et al. 1968: 164);
(ii) -s variability was not really affected by style shifting (Labov et al. 1968: 164), especially among younger speakers;
(iii) -s deletion was not influenced by phonological conditioning found in studies of deletion of other final consonants.

The Ex-Slave Recordings represent a number of recordings of African American ex-slaves from the 1940s (Bailey et al. 1991). This collection of recordings gave a well-needed and interesting insight into the use of AAVE. Samaná English, which was a variety of AAVE spoken in the Samaná peninsula in the Dominican Republic until the early 1990s, offered another perspective.

If in earlier studies of VBE verbal -s occurred consistently with non-finite constructions (e.g. questions, imperatives, modal + verb, negative constructions, non-fininte and invariant *be*), such occurrence were very rare or nonexistent in both the Ex-Slave Recordings and in Samaná English (Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1991). They further argued that in Samaná English, the social and geographic isolation of the community since the time of immigration, the English spoken here provides valuable information about the early stages of AAVE.

	Ex-Slave Recordings		**Samaná**	
	% [-s]	N	% [-s]	N
SINGULAR				
1st	3	173	20	609
2nd	0	59	7	414
3rd	71	42	56	604
PLURAL				
1st	(29	7)[29]	22	176
2nd	(0	1)	(0	7)
3rd	5	92	31	675
Total		**374**		**2485**

Table 1. *Distribution of verbal –s by grammatical person in the Ex-Slave Recordings and Samaná (Source: Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1991: 295)*

The number of verbal -s usage is higher in Samaná than in the Ex-Slave Recordings, where -s is more frequent with 3rd p. sg. subjects. Even though verbal -s occurs more with 3rd p. sg in Samaná English, we also notice that it also occurs with 1st and 2nd p. sg subjects, as well as

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with 1st and 3rd p. pl. subjects. Another noteworthy aspect which Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991) discovered in Samaná English is that this dialect had constraints on the usage of verbal -s similar to those found in the history of English, i.e. -s occurred more with nouns than with pronouns. They considered this feature to be connected to the Northern Subject Rule found in British dialects.

I also found some very interesting examples of verbal -s with 1st and 2nd p. sg. subjects in the 19th century American novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*[6] by Mark Twain. Consider the following examples taken from the 'speech' of Jim, the black slave:

(29) 'Say – who **is** *you*? Whar **is** *you*? Dog my cats ef I didn' hear sumf'n. Well, *I* **knows** what *I*'**s** gwyne to do. *I*'**s** gwyne to set down here and listen tell *I* **hears** it agin.' (p. 14)

(30) 'Now dat's what *I* **wants** to know?' (p. 88)

(Mark Twain – *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1994)

In the Explanatory note, Twain writes that "In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri Negro Dialect ; the extremest form of the backwoods South-Western dialect; the ordinary 'Pike-County' dialect; and four modified varieties of the last..." (Twain, 1994). It seems that the use of verbal -s in Black English has also been attested in 19th century American fiction. This corroborates the findings presented above.

9. Conclusion

The occurrence of verbal -s with 1st and 2nd p. sg. and pl. subjects has been attested in many American English dialects, from African American Vernacular English to Appalachian English. There are many hypotheses which try to account for this feature found not only in the US but also in several British dialects. Some researchers argue that the presence of verbal -s in American dialects is a remnant of the colonial period, while others advocate for the Creolist Hypothesis, i.e. verbal –s in AAVE is considered to be a creole aspect marker. The feature is also documented in 19th century American fiction. Intriguingly, it is not undergoing any type of change, since it is still quite frequent with 1st and 2nd p. sg and pl. subjects. It will be interesting to see how this suffix is going to be used in the future, and whether the frequency with which it is being used is going to increase or decrease.

[6] The novel was first published in 1885.

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