

## Subject-Verb agreement in English Dialects: the East Anglian Subject Rule

David Britain  
Department of Language and Linguistics  
Essex University  
Colchester  
Essex CO4 3SQ, UK  
[dbritain@essex.ac.uk](mailto:dbritain@essex.ac.uk)

Laura Rupp  
Department of English  
Vrije Universiteit  
De Boelelaan 1105  
1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
[lrupp@let.vu.nl](mailto:lrupp@let.vu.nl)

The English dialects of northern and south-western England, Scotland and parts of Ireland preserve reflexes of the so-called 'Northern Subject Rule'. According to the Northern Subject Rule (NSR), present tense verbs may take the verbal suffix *-s*, except when adjacent to a personal pronoun as in (1) and (2):

- (1) the cats purrs
- (2) they purr

Godfrey and Tagliamonte (1999: 106), for example, find that, in Devon, 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural NPs favour *-s* marking whereas 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural pronouns inhibit it.

Furthermore, the rule can also be seen to apply to the past tense of the verb 'to be' in many of these dialects, such that 'was' is used as the verb form except, again, when adjacent to a personal pronoun as in (3) and (4):

- (3) the cats was purring
- (4) they were purring

Smith and Tagliamonte (1998: 116), in analyses of Buckie English in north-east Scotland, found that while the singular form *was* was found after 81% of all plural NPs, it was *never* found after 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural pronouns.

In studies of subject-verb agreement in the diaspora varieties of English, researchers have either found that the NSR applies (e.g. Hay and Schreier (2004: 225) found, in an analysis of early New Zealand English that third person plural NPs were twice as likely to use 'was' than third person plural pronouns) or that there is no significant difference between pronominal and other subjects (e.g. Clarke's (2004) research on Newfoundland English).

This paper highlights the existence in East Anglia of yet another pattern of agreement which is the exact *opposite* of the NSR – in other words *-s* forms and **was** forms are **more common** when the verb is adjacent to a personal pronoun than when adjacent to a full NP as in (5 – 10) (Bray, Britain, Fox, Baker & Spurling, in preparation)

- (5) the cat purr
- (6) it purrs
- (7) the cats were purring
- (8) they was purring
- (9) the cat were purring
- (10) it was purring

This pattern, which we have termed the East Anglian Subject Rule (EASR), applies as a linguistic constraint both to present tense *-s* marking (traditionally absent in East Anglia (Trudgill 1974, 1998) and to the past tense of BE (where a *was-weren't* paradigm is now establishing itself as the local working class vernacular norm) and appears to be robust right across the region from the Fens in the north-west to Basildon in the south-east, in villages, towns and cities, in middle class as well as working class speech, among the young as well as the old.

We note that the different patterning suggests that verb forms may be of a different nature across dialects; for example, with verbal *-s* marking agreement between the verb and subject in East Anglia (hence occurring with nominative pronouns) but constituting the absence of agreement in NSR varieties (hence not occurring with nominative pronouns), and with verbal *-o* marking agreement in Newfoundland English but absence thereof in East Anglian dialects. We go on to note that this distinction seems to be suggested further by the historical development of the verb forms as well as by the observation that across varieties the verb forms not only behave differently regarding nominative pronouns but also show different linguistic conditioning in other ways, like (non-)availability in interrogative sentences.

Bray, M., Britain, D., Fox, S., Baker, S. and Spurling, J. (in preparation) An East Anglian Subject Rule?.

Clarke, S (2004). Verbal *-s* reconsidered: the subject type constraint as a diagnostic of historical transatlantic relationships. In C Kay, S Horobin and J Smith (eds). *New perspectives on English historical linguistics: Selected papers from 12 ICEHL, Glasgow, 21-26 August 2002, Volume 1*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. 1-13.

Godfrey, E and Tagliamonte, S. (1999) Another piece of the verbal *-s* story: evidence from Devon in Southwest England. *Language Variation and Change* 11: 87-121.

Hay, J and Schreier, D. (2004). Reversing the trajectory of language change: subject-verb agreement with *be* in New Zealand English. *Language Variation and Change* 16: 209-236.

Smith, J. and Tagliamonte, S. (1998). We was all thegither, I think we were all thegither: *was* regularization in Buckie English. *World Englishes* 17: 105-126.

Trudgill, P. (1974) *The social differentiation of English in Norwich*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Trudgill, P. (1998) Third person singular zero: African American vernacular English, East Anglian dialects and Spanish persecution in the Low Countries. *Folia Linguistica Historica* 18: 139-148.