A common dialect feature of varieties of English is verbal concord variation. This paper centres around verbal –s; that is, extension of –s to contexts other than third person singular. The phenomenon is illustrated in (1a-b):

(1) a. Me legs aches a bit. (Devon, Godfrey & Tagliamonte 1999: 89)  
b. They was standing on this bucket thing. (Burntwood, Rupp 2005)

Findings on verbal –s do not seem to fully converge regarding the grammatical patterning of verbal –s across dialects, however. On the one hand, for example, Britain & Sudbury (2000: 26) identify for English varieties world-wide a ‘remarkable similarity’ in grammatical conditioning of verbal –s in existentials (e.g. absence of plural marking on the logical subject-noun generally favours –s marking). By contrast, varieties which have verbal –s in non-existentials like (1a-b) appear to pattern differently with respect to a grammatical constraint that Ihalainen (1994, cited in Klemola 2000) has coined the Northern Subject Rule (NSR). Following the NSR, present tense verbs may take the verbal suffix –s in the presence of subjects other than third person singular, except when adjacent to a personal pronoun. While the NSR is traditionally associated with northern dialects of the British Isles, the same direction of effect has in fact also been observed elsewhere, for example in Godfrey’s and Tagliamonte’s (1999) study of Devon in Southwest England. At the same time, there are verbal –s varieties which fail to show the NSR altogether, show a differentiated application, or even the opposite tendency, as has been reported for local varieties of English spoken in Burntwood in the Midlands (Rupp 2005), Buckie (Smith & Tagliamonte 1998) and Belfast (Pietsch 2004), and East Anglia (Bray et al. in preparation), respectively.

I will show that in order to obtain a maximally full understanding of the nature of a feature like verbal –s and its grammatical pattern of occurrence, it is necessary to integrate the perspectives afforded by variationist and generative research (and diachronic work), as well as the methods of data gathering used in these fields of study.

Bray, M., Britain, D., Fox, S., and Spurling, J. (in preparation). An East Anglian Subject Rule?
Smith, J. and Tagliamonte, S. 1998. “ ‘We were all thegither … I think we was all thegither’: was regularization in Buckie English.” World Englishes 17: 105-26.