

Pilot Study – Subject-Verb Agreement

Appalachian English Vernacular
Mountain City, Tennessee

1. Introductory Remarks

In 2003-2004 Judy Bernstein developed an Interview Protocol for a pilot study on subject-verb agreement in Appalachian English.¹ The purpose of the pilot study was threefold: 1) to establish initial contacts in a rural community; 2) to assess the influence of standard English on the local variety, particularly with an outsider present; 3) to assess whether certain non-standard properties of subject-verb agreement are indeed characteristic of the local speech. This brief report provides an overview of the development, procedures, and results of the pilot study, which was conducted in Spring 2004.

In this pilot study, interviews were conducted with nine mostly elderly adults in Mountain City, Tennessee, a small rural community near the border of North Carolina. Billy Ward II, a native of the community and a recent graduate of East Tennessee State University, contacted the participants, arranged the interviews, and accompanied Bernstein on all interview sessions. Billy selected participants who were native to the community and who had not left the area for extended periods of time. Bernstein, neither a member of the community nor a speaker of the local vernacular (and who sounds like an outsider; she was teasingly labeled a “Yankee” by almost everyone she met), refrained from talking at the sessions, except to occasionally engage in some initial small talk.

Bernstein developed an initial list of practice and test sentences, as well as a pragmatic context to be presented prior to each set of sentences. Billy Ward then revised those sentences, retaining the structural patterns and revising the lexical items and context for relevance and naturalness.

All interview sessions took place in participants’ homes, usually in the living room or kitchen. With two exceptions, only the participant and interviewers were present during the interview sessions. In one case, a participant’s spouse was present (but did not talk and was not later interviewed herself since she had grown up in Michigan). In the other case, a grandfather, grandmother and adult grandson were all in the room simultaneously and therefore heard each other’s responses. This second case was not ideal and probably only the grandfather’s and the grandson’s judgments will prove reliable.

On average, interview sessions lasted two hours. After initial introductions and small talk, the interview itself, which took over an hour, began. This was either preceded by or followed by drinks and snacks and further small talk. In the case of the threesome, there was regional music played, the instruments having been hand-made by the grandfather. Billy participated in the impromptu music session.

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2. Interview Protocol

In the following subsections, we provide an overview of the procedures followed for experimental sessions and include some detail about the content and administration of the pilot study.

2.1 Background Questions and Elicited Spontaneous Production

After some introductory small talk, a participant was asked to sign two release forms, one agreeing to participate in the study (approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subject Research at William Paterson University; see IRB release form), and another for permission to place the digital audiotapes in the Archives of Appalachia (see Archives release form).² Once the tape recorder was turned on, Billy Ward engaged the participants in conversation about topics related to local life and history. Participants were asked open-ended questions about life in the region, (changing) sources of livelihood, and local historical events. Most of these conversations lasted about thirty minutes, and participants seemed to enjoy the opportunity to talk and share their experiences.

The initial plan was to include background questions modeled on those of Wolfram and Christian (1976: Appendix), which ask participants about their observations on language use and language change in the region. But this plan was revised once we realized just how loaded the questions might seem to people who were already sensitive to an outsider's potentially negative perception of their speech. So instead, Billy developed general questions about the region based on his own curiosity, knowledge, and insider's perspective. There were several general themes: participation in and changes to the local economy, which has been mostly agriculturally based (farming, cattle, growing beans, etc.); famous local historical events (e.g. the creation in the 1940s of Watauga Lake on top of the foundations of the old town of Butler); discussion of (in)famous local "colorful" characters.

While Billy was conversing with participants, Bernstein jotted down some of the interesting constructions and forms that were produced. We include here samples of constructions uttered during the spontaneous production of two participants, some jotted down manually and some transcribed from the taped interviews.³ (Material included in parentheses provides descriptive information about the forms produced.)

male (82 years old)

Hit's a mess; *hit* works; when I went to put *hit* in (3rd person neuter pronoun)

They's (existential *there*)

...two boys *that's*... (relative pronoun)

He never did get *hisn* back together (possessive pronoun)

After *come* a big snow.

Them logs (demonstrative *them*)

² The IRB form states that a participant's name will not be used without separate written permission. The second form (for the Archives) overrides this. All participants readily signed the IRB form and all except one signed the Archives form. This one participant indicated that she did not want her interview to be made available to others and did not want her identity revealed.

³ It often seemed as though some of the most interesting speech was produced before/after the tape recorder was turned on/off.

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I still have it *yet* today; She's up at the nursing home *yet* (*yet* adverb placement)
/ðar/ (locative *there*)
three *year* ago, sixteen *year* ago (Ø plural marking)

female (80 years old)

Hit washed down the hill. (3rd person neuter pronoun)

It was *kindly* funny; she was *kindly* sick; she's been *kindly* crippled up

They had *right* much timber come out...

Of the morning, of the evening

Whenever that he's in the service; ...took him *where that* they was; That was *how that* they got people; I don't know *how much* tobacco quota *that* I'll have for another year

For to

He got *him* a car

Hern (possessive pronoun)

We was out in the kitchen, *me and Dorothy was*; We'd go out to the farm, *me and Dorothy would*; I think she was a Manes, *Nancy was*.

/ðar/ (locative *there*) and *they* (existential *there*)

2.2 Transition

Next, Billy delivered a spontaneous and more colloquial version of the following sample script, which is meant to explain to participants the purpose of the acceptability judgment task. This script and the one that follows it, as well as the inclusion of test sentences and pragmatic context, are modeled on those used by Professor Dana McDaniel in her L1A research.⁴

"We're interested in studying language diversity across varieties of American English. Instead of comparing speech in, for example, New York and Tennessee, where the differences are going to be vast, it makes more sense to investigate variation within a fairly confined geographic area. The expectation is that differences between local language varieties will be less extreme, and so more manageable to study. For that reason, we are interested in comparing, as a first step, the way people use language in the various counties of east Tennessee. In the future, we'll compare these results with those from people in southwest Virginia and western North Carolina."

This was followed by another explanation, this time about acceptability judgments. Billy again provided a spontaneous and informal version of the following script:

"We want to ask your opinion about a bunch of sentences. What we want to know is whether they sound good or bad to you. In other words, can you imagine saying these sentences? There are no right or wrong answers. Whether or not a particular sentence sounds good is completely up to you. Your opinions may differ from those of other people we talk with. That's the whole idea: to learn about the variation between speakers."

Keep in mind that we're not interested in what a school teacher might say about the sentences. We want to know whether or not they sound "ok" or "natural" to you. Once we get opinions

⁴ Bernstein was employed under Dana McDaniel's L1A NSF research grant from 1995-1998.

from lots of people in a certain community or area, we can start to figure out what the rules are for that particular language variety.

Let's try a few practice sentences so you can see what we have in mind."

2.3 Practice Sentences

At this point, Billy provided six practice sentences for people to judge. The point of this section of the protocol is to train participants to give judgments. In each case, pragmatic context was given for a sentence, so that participants would not accept/reject based on pragmatics or truth values. The first practice sentence had a scrambled word order and was completely uninterpretable. The remaining training/practice items included sentence types that were completely unrelated to the topic of subject-verb agreement. But they did touch on phenomena we might expect to find among people living in the Appalachian region. Because this was a training session, Billy engaged participants in discussions about why they accepted or rejected sentences.

The six practice sentences, as well as the context that preceded each one, are provided here (context italicized). The part of the sentence expected to play a significant role in a participant's judgment is underlined.

Let's say you're telling me about some relatives of yours who are coming to Tennessee next summer. Is it ok to say:

(1) Come they year next Tennessee to summer in the.

Let's say I want to suggest that Ned help you with vacation plans. Can I say:

(2) Ned might could help you with vacation plans.

Let's say you want to ask me if Ned can help you with vacation plans. Can you ask:

(3) Might could Ned help me with vacation plans?

Let's say you want to ask about the weather. Can you ask:

(4) Ain't it snowin' a lot today?

Let's say you want to tell Ned that you'll try to come to his party. Is it ok to say:

(5) I'll come iffen I can.

Let's say you want to tell Ned that his price for milk is too high. Is it ok to say:

(6) I think ninety-five cent is a lot to pay for a quart of milk.

Although the practice sentences were not included for the purposes of providing data, the judgments merit brief discussion. No participant accepted sentence (1) (scrambled word order). Five of six participants accepted the double modal construction in (2) (probably general to Southern speech). No participant accepted the question (with two fronted modals) in (3). Although all participants accepted (4), they were all well aware of the stigma of *ain't*, and most

pointed it out.⁵ Only one participant of six did not accept (5), a form which we have read is found in the region.⁶ All participants accepted (6).

2.4 Test Sentences

After completing the practice sentences, Billy provided a colloquial and spontaneous version of the following script.

“You get the idea, right? There’s no particular pattern to the questions or your answers. We’re only interested in your opinion, whether a sentence sounds good or bad to you. As I mentioned before, not everyone will have the same opinions about what sounds good and bad. But that’s what we want to learn about: the differences in acceptability among speakers.”

After that, we moved on to the test sentences, which included items meant to test subject-verb agreement with pronouns and lexical noun phrases, in both declarative and inversion contexts. Before reading a set of sentences, some context was provided in order to ensure participants were not rejecting sentences for pragmatic or semantic reasons. Participants were asked to judge a total of 40 test sentences.

3. Preliminary Results

Three participants had to be excluded from the initial pool of nine. One was an 82-year-old man who said “yes” to almost every sentence, even those that were clearly ungrammatical. Although his acceptability judgments were not reliable, he had many interesting features in his spontaneous production (see examples for “male” in section 2.1 above). Another person excluded was a woman who identified herself as a retired English teacher. She rejected anything that corresponded to non-standard English, and even her spontaneous speech lacked regional syntactic features. Another unreliable participant was one who heard all the judgments of her husband, and was then asked to judge the same sentences. Many of her judgments matched her husband’s, and at the same time she accepted several sentences that should have been unacceptable to any speaker.

The first few sets of test sentences aimed to establish whether these speakers distinguished between pronominal and lexical subjects, as described in the literature for Appalachian English (and also matching the pattern described in Henry 1995 for Belfast English).

Two relevant test sentences with pronominal sentences are given in (7) and (8).

(7) They speaks Italian pretty well.

(8) You speaks Italian pretty well.

Although these sentences were predicted to be unacceptable, three (of six) participants accepted (7) and two (of six) participants accepted (8). The explanation, however, may have more to do with the experimental design than with the actual speaker judgments. As it turns out, verb-final *s* can appear in Appalachian English with all types of subjects in certain contexts (e.g. “historical

⁵ Only four of six participants were asked to judge (4). They all said it was acceptable.

⁶ This participant was significantly younger than the others, which could be relevant.

present”). Another factor is hearing. At least one of the participants wore hearing aids, and clearly had some difficulty hearing Billy. Subtle word endings, for example, may have eluded him.

Consider the following sentences, which display a non-agreeing verb with plural subject in (9), and the parallel cases with inversion in (10). (Henry 1995 claims that examples like (10a) are ungrammatical in Belfast English.)

- (9) a. Them cars goes fast.
b. Them cars is fast.
- (10) a. Is them cars fast?
b. Does them cars go fast?

Of six participants, four accepted (9a) and (9b); two rejected (9a) and (9b).⁷ Contrary perhaps to expectations, the examples in (10) were more unanimously accepted. All participants except one accepted both (10a) and (10b). That one participant accepted (10a) but not (10b). This suggests that examples like (10) do not pattern as in Belfast English.

Several follow-up test sentences presented to the most promising participant, an 80-year-old woman (samples of her spontaneous production included in section 2.1), support the general results in (10), but also suggest that the standard subject-verb agreement pattern is also part of her grammar. Consider the examples in (11), which were all grammatical for this participant.⁸

- (11) a. Doesn't them cars go fast?
b. Isn't them cars fast?
c. Ain't them cars fast?
d. Don't them cars go fast?

Also relevant to the proposed study are judgments with past tense copular *was* in interrogative contexts. Consider the examples in (12).

- (12) a. (I know) the cows was (a-)givin' a lot of milk.
b. Was the cows (a-)givin' a lot of milk?
c. Was they (a-)givin' a lot of milk?
d. Was you milkin' this morning?

The judgments of the six participants strongly suggest that so-called non-agreeing *was* may appear in interrogative contexts. Only one participant of six rejected (12a); another did not provide a response. All six participants accepted (12b-d). The examples in (12c,d) are interesting because they involve pronouns, which usually trigger agreeing verbs. This may suggest that past *BE* (i.e., *was*) is invariant.

⁷ It is interesting to note that one participant rejected (9a,b) when presented as in the examples above, but then accepted both after *them cars* was changed to *those cars*, a change made at his initiative. Perhaps the other rejections have a similar explanation.

⁸ Standard subject-verb agreement examples were mostly excluded in the pilot study, out of fear of “influencing” participants’ judgments of the non-standard examples. However, the standard examples will be incorporated in the questionnaires we are developing for the current project.

4. Special Status of One Participant

A follow-up set of questions was developed for the most promising participant (the 80-year-old woman discussed above). This participant displayed qualities that no other did: a) she took her time and thought carefully before offering a judgment; b) she took the task extremely seriously; c) she was confident about her judgments; d) she was consistent; e) her reactions and comments displayed metalinguistic awareness. The list of follow-up questions Bernstein developed for her is included in its entirety in section 4.1. In section 4.2, we briefly discuss the significance of the results.

4.1 Follow-up interview session

In this section, we provide the sets of questions (including context) this participant was asked to judge at the second session. (She was also asked to judge a new set of practice sentences at this second session, but these are not included here.) Her judgments are indicated alongside the sentences (Y = accepted; N = rejected).

Now let's say we're talkin' about some really fast cars.

(Last time, you said that the following sentences sounded ok to you. Do they still sound ok?)

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---|
| (1) | I think them cars <u>goes</u> fast. | Y |
| (2) | I think them cars <u>is</u> fast. | Y |

Still talking about the cars, what do you think about:

- | | | |
|-----|--|---|
| (3) | I think they' <u>s</u> fast. | N |
| (4) | I think them' <u>s</u> (<u>is</u>) fast. | N |
| (5) | I think they <u>goes</u> fast. | N |
| (6) | I think they <u>is</u> fast. | N |

What if I want to ask you about them fast cars. Is it ok to ask:

- | | | |
|------|---|---|
| (7) | Tell me, <u>doesn't</u> them cars <u>go</u> fast? | Y |
| (8) | Tell me, <u>doesn't</u> them cars <u>goes</u> fast? | N |
| (9) | Tell me, <u>isn't</u> them cars fast? | Y |
| (10) | Tell me, <u>ain't</u> them cars fast? | Y |
| (11) | Tell me, <u>isn't</u> them fast? | N |
| (12) | Tell me, <u>isn't</u> they fast? | N |
| (13) | Tell me, <u>don't</u> them cars go fast? | Y |

I figure that the regional word "you'uns" is familiar/ok to you. Is that right? OK.

Let's say me and Judy are talking about Watauga Lake. Is it ok for you to say to us:

- | | | |
|------|--|---|
| (14) | I know you'uns <u>is</u> talkin' about Watauga Lake. | Y |
| (15) | I know you <u>is</u> talkin' about Watauga Lake. | N |

Is it ok for you to ask us:

- | | | |
|------|---|---|
| (16) | Tell me, <u>isn't</u> you talkin' about Watauga Lake? | N |
| (17) | Tell me, <u>ain't</u> you talkin' about Watauga Lake? | Y |

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(18) Tell me, isn't you'uns talkin' about Watauga Lake? N

Let's say you're telling us about your son. Is it ok to say:⁹

(19) It's true that me and him gets in a fight sometimes. Y

(20) It's true that he and I gets in a fight sometimes. Y

Let's say we're talkin' about a bunch of young'uns go to school late¹⁰. Is it ok to say:

(21) I know the young'uns is late. Y

(22) I know the young'uns really is late. N

(23) I know the young'uns really are late. Y

Let's say we're talking about what the young'uns like to eat anymore¹¹. Is it ok to say:

(24) I know the young'uns like pizza. Y

(25) I know the young'uns really likes pizza. Y

(26) I know the young'uns likes pizza. Y

Let's say we're talking about a few of the students' plans after high school. Is it ok to say:

(27) They's studying at ETSU after high school. Y

(28) They is studying at ETSU after high school. N

Let's say we want to ask about the students. Is it ok to ask:

(29) Is they studying at ETSU after high school? N

(30) Ain't they studying at ETSU after high school? Y

4.2 Discussion of Results

As mentioned above, this participant's judgments are amazing in terms of their internal consistency, and also in terms of their consistency with the patterns described for Appalachian English in Wolfram and Christian (1976) and Montgomery and Hall (2004). They also show consistency with many of Henry's (1995) Belfast English facts, with notable exceptions which we return to.

This participant clearly distinguished between lexical subjects (see (1)-(2)), which the verb may fail to agree with, and pronominal subjects (see (3)-(6)). This is consistent with the previous descriptions of Appalachian English and Belfast English.

In inversion contexts (see (7)-(13)), the facts clearly depart from those described by Henry for Belfast English,¹² and have never been described for Appalachian English.¹³ In these examples, fronted verbs can fail to agree with lexical subjects, but must agree with pronominal subjects. (Henry found that fronted verbs must always agree in Belfast English.) The example in (9), with agreement on both auxiliary *do* and the lexical verb, was deliberate and included as a filler.

⁹ The participant informed Bernstein and Billy that she and her son never fought, but that the sentences were fine.

¹⁰ *Young'uns* is a regional term meaning "youths" or "kids."

¹¹ "Positive *anymore*" is roughly equivalent to *nowadays*.

¹² Michael Montgomery (personal communication) provides this interesting Belfast English example from Michael Murphy (1955, *Culprit of the Shadows*. Belfast: Carter Publications): *Isn't his clothes an' boots all here*.

¹³ Billy Ward and Michael Montgomery (personal communications) both predicted inversion to be possible in Appalachian English.

The examples in (14)-(15) are consistent with Henry's claim (for Belfast English) that complex plural pronouns, unlike simple plural pronouns, can appear with non-agreeing verbs. The examples in (16)-(18) would seem to suggest that an inverted verb must agree with simple and complex plural pronouns (but plural *are* would need to be tested before any conclusions could be drawn).

The examples in (19)-(20) are consistent with Henry's finding that coordinated pronouns pattern like complex pronouns and require an agreeing verb.

The contrast between the examples in (21)-(23) and (24)-(26) merit special attention, and match the patterns Henry found for Belfast English. Although non-agreeing *is* is possible with a lexical plural subject (see (21)), a preceding adverb may not appear with this form (see (22)), but may appear when the verb agrees with the subject (see (22)). The same does not hold for a lexical verb, as suggested by the acceptability of (25).¹⁴ Henry's explanation of these facts for Belfast English is discussed in section 2.2 of our proposal.

The examples in (27)-(30) (as well as those discussed above in section 3) suggest that there is something special about contracted *they's*, which is apparently acceptable in certain contexts.¹⁵ In contrast, this participant rejected *they* with non-agreeing *is* in both declarative and inversion contexts.

5. Concluding Remarks

The 2004 pilot study reported on here provides a sense of how Bernstein approached an Appalachian community, trained and worked with a regional consultant (Billy Ward II), chose participants to interview, and developed and administered an interview protocol.

At this earlier stage of the research, we focused on establishing what is possible and what is not in the grammar of Appalachian English speakers. We were willing to start from one speaker, observe properties and correlations in that individual, and then determine whether they were present in other speakers as well. Our goal was not that of describing or characterizing a speech community; rather, it was that of describing a constellation of grammatical properties, attested in speakers of Appalachian English, and understanding how they go together.

As a broader goal of the project, we would like to collect data that is useful to the wider community of linguists, and that would allow one to answer broader and more varied research questions--for example, questions concerning the relation between the grammar of standard English and that of Appalachian English (overlapping grammars, grammars in competition?); or questions that other linguists would ask (for example, how language is used to build identity). In order to do that, we will elicit and record speech in a variety of styles and contexts, which can serve as the springboard for other kinds of projects.

¹⁴ For completeness, the agreeing form (*like*) should also have been tested.

¹⁵ It is expected to be accepted as an existential, for example, and was by this participant for the following: *They's two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen in the new house.*