Taming the Vernacular: Some Repercussions for the Study of Syntactic Variation and Spoken Grammar

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses two areas of research thar are usually treated separately: the analysis of syntactic variation, and the analysis of tlze grammar of spoken English. Variationist analysis has focused more on phonetic and phonological variation rhan on syntactic variation, partly because phonological variables tend to occur more frequently than syntactic variables. This in turn, together with the fact that variable syntactic forms usually have specific pragmatic functions in conversation, means that syntactic variables do not usually distinguish social groups in tlze same way that phonological variables do. Nevertheless, analysing tlze social distribution of a variable syntactic construction can throw light on the nature of its pragmatic function, and sometimes helps us to discover more about tlze social aspects of language use. This is illustrated here with rhe example of subject-verb concord in topic - introducing structures in spoken English, and with a brief discussion of lone wh- *clauses in spoken English. The paper also argues, however, that both variationist analysis and the analysis of spoken grammar have been affected by our susceptibility to focus on features that have become salient to us as a result of tlze processes of standardisation of a language, so that features that are unaffected by these processes are often overlooked. This is illustrated by considering rhe nature of the variables that are conventionally analysed in social dialectology, such as the current analysis of dialect levelling in three English towns.* (Keywords: syntactic variation: dialect levelling; spoken grammar).

RESUMEN

El presente artículo trata dos áreas de investigación que normalmente se abordan por separado: el análisis de la variación sintáctica y el de la gramática del inglés hablado. Los análisis variacionistas han prestado más atención a la variación fonética y fonológica que a la sintáctica, en buena medida porque las variables fonológicas suelen ser más habituales que las sintácticas. A su vez, esto, junto con el hecho de que las formas sintácticas variables normalmente desempeñan unas funciones prágmáticas específicas en la conversación, nos ka llevado a pensar que las variables sintácticas no suelen diferenciar grupos sociales como las

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fonológicas. Sin embargo, el análisis de la distribución social de una construcción sintáctica variable puede arrojar luz sobre la naturaleza de su función pragmática, y, en ocasiones, nos ayuda a avanzar en nuestro conocimiento sobre los aspectos sociales de la lengua en uso. Esto .re demuestra aquí con el ejemplo de la concordancia subjeto-verbo en las estructuras de introducción de temas en el inglés hablado, y con una breve discusión sobre las oraciones con wh- aisladas en el inglés hablado. Este artículo también sostiene que tanto el análisis variacionista como el de la gramática hablada se han visto influidos por nuestra susceptibilidad para centrarnos en rasgos que han llegado a ser prominentes para nosotros corno consecuencia de los procesos de estandarización de una lengua, de tal modo que se han incluido otras completamente ajenos a estos procesos. Esto se demuestra al considerar la naturaleza de las variables que se analizan en la dialectología social convencionalmente, como es el caso del presente análisis de la nivelación dialectal que está teniendo lugar en tres ciudades inglesus. (Palabras Clave: variación sintáctica. nivelación dialectal, gramática del habla).

I. INTRODUCTION

«... unlike phonological variables. which show up with high frequencies in [sociolinguistic] interviews, syntactic variables often involve special semantic and pragmatic circumstances which rnay occur rarely or unpredictably in interview settings»

Rickford et al (1995: 106)

«A very tentative hypothesis [...] emerges [...] according to which syntax is the marker of cohesion in society. with individuals trying to eliminate alternatives in syntax. In contrast. pronunciation represents the permanent social group with which the speaker identifies»

Hudson (1996: 45)

«Perhaps inost of so-called "syntactic variation" is rnotivated by pragmatic factors alone, and rarely. if ever, serves the function of distinguishing social groups in the way that "classic" phonological and morphological variables do»

Winford (1996: 188)

«We do not know enough about the acceptahle norrns of grammar in speech since. up to now. our grammar books have heen larpely formulated from introspective and written data. A pood grammar of spoken English might well contain a few surprises»

McCarthy (1991: 143-4)

These four quotations represent iny starting points for this paper. I intend to discuss two areas of research that are usually treated separately: the analysis of syntactic variation and the analysis of the grammar of spoken English. I will argue firstly that the norms of standard English (and therefore mainly written English – see Cheshire. in press) have intluenced not only our grammar books, as McCarthy (1991) states. but also the choice of variables that have

been analysed in social dialectology. I will then mention some preliminary findings on morphological and syntactic variation from the research project on which I ani currently working, and will follow this with a discussion of some insights into the grammar of spoken English that can be achieved through a variationist analysis of this type. Finally I will briefly describe sorne characteristic structures of spoken English.

I will begin. however. by elaborating on the fundamental point made in the quotation from Rickford and his colleagues (1995).

II. THE FREQUENCY OF SYNTACTIC VARIABLES

Tlie point made in the quotation from Rickford et al (1995) explains why the study of syntactic variation has lagged behind the study of phonological variation: syntactic variables occur less often in speech than phonological variables do. not only in sociolinguistic interviews but also in spontaneous conversation. The result is that although it may not be too daunting a task to embark on a study of. for example. /t/ glottaling in English. because half an hour of recorded speech is certain to contain a good number of tokens of the (t) variable. a study of a syntactic variable is quite another rnatter. It took Rickford and his colleagues eipht years to collect 1200 tokens of the (*as far as*) variable. and even then they took 500 of those tokens from computer corpora. From a practical point of view, the conditions under which we work in present-day academe make this kind of time span a serious deterrent to the analysis of syntactic variation. In British universities. for example. we are assessed every four years on the research that we have published; PhD dissertations need to be completed in at least four years because if students take longer than this. the department in which they are registered is deemed to have an unsatisfactory 'output'. Studying the glottal stop, then. is currently a better career prospect than studying the (*as far as*) variable.

Moving beyond this practical outlook, we can note that the relative frequencies of occurrence of phonological and syntactic variables have implications for their sociolinguistic functions. Because we repeat syntactic structures in speech less often than phonological structures. they are less available for social evaluation and less likely to function as sociolinguistic markers. This is the basis of Hudson's remark: syntax functions as a marker of cohesion, he suggests. whereas phonological variants can act as a badge to show who you think you are and where you come from. As is well known. syntactic variables that occur relatively frequently often have regular patterns of sociolinguistic variation. but these are usually sharp patterns of variation rather than the gradient patterns associated with phonological variation. This is illustrated by Table 1 and Figure 1, which shows the frequencg of occurrence of multiple negation in the ethnopraphic interviews recorded by Annie Williams and Paul Kerswill in Milton Kegnes. England. as part of our current project on dialect levelling (Cheshire. Kerswill and Williams 1996-99).

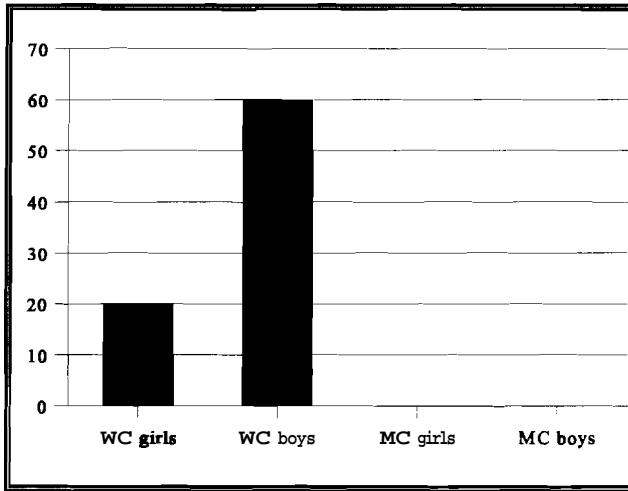| *Table 1*: Frequency of Multiple Negation in the Milton Keynes Data Srt		
Speakers	**N**	**%**
WC girls	50	20
WC boys	35	60
MC girls	*35*	0
Mí' boys	24	()

Figure 1: Frequency of multiple negation in the Milton Keynes data set

The sharp pattern of social stratification that has been repeatedly found for variables such as multiple negation often reflects the social stigmatization that has come about. in part at least. because of the attention that they have been paid by prescriptive grammarians during the codification of standard varieties. Multiple negation. to stay with this example. has been subject to overt prescription since the eighteenth century. and although it is not clear to what extent prescription can really influence speech. a link does appear to have been established between 'educated' speech and the use of the assertive forms in negative clauses rather than the corresponding negative fortns – if only in the minds of those who consider themselves to be educated (Cheshire, in press). That is. an utterance such as *I don't want anything*. with the assertive form *anything*. has become standardised. whereas the corresponding *I don't want nothing* has not. Syntactic variables that occur frequently in speech are obviously more susceptible to this kind of social evaluation. However. a further result of their relatively high frequency of occurrence is that it is these same variables that researchers in the field of English urban dialectology and variationist linguistics tend to select for analysis. over and over again. In other words. their frequency makes these variables simultaneously more feasible to analyse and more noticeable – to prescriptive grammarians. laypeople and linguists alike. The aim of variationist analysis, of course. is to discover more about processes of variation and change rather than to produce spoken prammars; but one consequence of the continued focus on the same features is that all linguists working on spoken language have tended to neglect syntactic features that are less frequent and less notorious. As a result we still have a great deal to learn about the syntax of spoken English. as McCarthy states in the fourth quotation above.

III. DIALECT LEVELLING IN THREE ENGLISH TOWNS

1 will illustrate my point about the criteria for selecting variables by discussing in more detail the dialect levelling project on which I am currently working. This is a three year project

funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. co-directed by Paul Kerswill. Am Williams and myself. Not unreasonahly. the funding hody expects sonie results at the end of the three years. and this restricts the variables that we can study: we are not. for example. embarking on a study of the (*as far as*) variable. The focus of the research is dialect levelling in phonology and gramniar: Paul Kerswill and Ann Williams are analysing phonological features. and I am investigating morphological and syntactic features. Because of the different nature of tlie two types of vai-iation. the phonological analysis is more advanced: for the grammatical features we have had to transcribe all the interviews. and the transcription is still not finished: for the phonological features Paul and Annie already had some interesting results just six months into the research. on the hasis of word lists which the speakers read out (see. for this and subsequent analyses. Kerswill and Williams 1997a. 1997b).

Our research builds on two previous projects which have suggested that dialect levelling is taking place in Britain. The first was the Survey of British Dialect Grammar: this identified a number of nonstandard grammatical features reported as occurring throughout the major urhan centres of Britain (Edwards and Cheshire 1989. Cheshire. Edwards and Whittle 1989). For this investigation we used a postal questionnaire sent to schools. which invited schoolchildren to act as sociolinguistic researchers in their cummunity. reporting in small groups on a total of 196 linguistic features (see Cheshire and Edwards 1991). The second project was a case study of phonological variation in a new town, Milton Keynes (Kerswill and Williams in press. Kerswill 1996). There were three main findings: firstly. by the age of 12 children in Milton Keynes were speaking a variety of English that bore little resemblance to the pre-new town variety spoken in the area: secondly, the children tended not tu adopt the marked regional phonological features of their parents. who had come to Milton Keynes as adults: thirdly. the children favoured vai-iants currently in widespread diffusion throughout the southeast of England. It was the 12 year old speakers who diverged most from the parent group. and so in our present project we have chosen to work with adolescents. We are expanding the work of the previous two projects by recording spontaneous speech in three English towns: Milton Keynes. which is Britain's fastest growing new town: Reading. an established prosperous town in the south-east with both a stable local population and considerable in-migration: and Hull. a northern city with little in-migration and declining industries. There are 96 speakers aged between 15 and 16, equally divided by town. gender and two hroad social class categories. The speakers are recorded in one-to-one ethnographic interviews with Annie Williams or. occasionally. with Paul Kerswill. as well as in more spontaneous interactions with the interviewers and one or more of the adolescents' friends. They also take part in a number of quasi-experimental investigations of their attitudes to their own ways of speaking as well as to other people's speech. The preliminary findings that I discuss in sections III and IV of this paper rely on the interviews carried out by Paul Kerswill and Annie Williams.

The list below shows the main grammatical variables that we are investigating in the recordings.

1. Verb concord in present tense:
    - -*s* with non-3rd singular subjects
    - nonstandard do and *does* as auxiliaries and full verbs
    - nonstandard don't

2. BE: present and past tense forms. especially
     - nonstandard *was*
     - nonstandard were

3. ain't
     - its form (*ain't. int, ent* etc.)
     - use as negative BE and/or negative HAVE

4. Negative concord

5. Relatives
     - which forms occur as subjects, objects and genitives. in restrictive and non-restrictive clauses?
     - does *what* occur as a levelled form. as the Survey of British Dialect Grainrnar suggested?
     - occurrence of forms such as *you've done it as well as what I did*. where standard English has no relative pronoun.

6. Demonstratives
     - which forms occur?
     - does *them* occur as a levelled form. as the Survey of British Dialect Grammar suggested'

7. Prepositions
     - simple forms where standard English has complex forms e.g. *I went up London*
     - complex forms where standard English has simple forms e.g. *I took it off of the table*
     - localised prepositions e.g. *she's without the house* (= 'outside'), or slang or in-group forms

8. Past tense verb forms
     - *done*
     - forrns of frequently occurring lexical verbs e.g. COME. SEE. GIVE

9. Discourse particles
     - e.?. *like*, OK. *you know*, set marking tags

10. Strategies for introducing new topics. or new referents
     - e.g. *there's* (with plural subjects) 'indefinite' *this* (e.g. *this girl I know*). left dislocation, right dislocation

11. Intensifiers
     - e.g. *wicked, real. that* (e.g. *I was that ill I couldn't go to school*)

12. *Never* with the meaning 'not' (e.g. *I never saw you last night; she pushed me but you never*)

I nientioned earlier that linguists tend to select the same variables for analysis. over and over again. Our own selection illustrates this tendency well, as can be seen if we consider the history that governed our choices. Features 1-8. and 12. were amongst those that the earlier Survey of British Dialect Grammar had established as reported more frequently than any others in ttie urban centres of the country. As I said above. we used postal questionnaires in the Survey. to investigate the reported regional distribution of 196 features. One of the aims of the current project, therefore. is to carry out some empirical checks on whether these features are indeed involved in dialect levelling.

In order to understand tlie criteria reflected in our choice of variables. then. it is necessary to ask on what basis we selected the features included in the earlier Survey. This time our choice was based mainly on an earlier literature review (Edwards and Weltens 1984). from which we identified forms that seemed likely candidates for dialect levelling. We added a few features in which we had a special interest. such as existential *there* constructions with a plural subject NP (see section V), and we also included most of the grammatical features that featured in the earlier Survey of English Dialects (Orton et al 1962-71). Thus we need to travel back still further in time. to consider how Harold Orton and his team selected those variables that they investigated in the Survey of English Dialects, and how the individual researchers whose work was reported in Edwards and Weltens' literature survey chose the variables that tliey investigated.

In short. there is a long tradition in dialect research of investigating certain features rather than otheis. presumably because they strike researchers as particularly worthy of study. Sometinies this is because they are known to have a regional or a social distribution of some kind: this was given as a criterion by Kurath (1972: 3) in his work on the Linguistic Atlas of New England. and it accounts for the first eight features in our list. Variants that have been labelled 'non-standard' in reference grammars or in guides to good usage also fall into this caregory. because they are likely to have a social distribution in the community: for example. the use of *that* as an intensifier (see feature 9) is considered 'non-standard' by Quirk et al (1985: 44). Researchers often choose to analyse features that are thought to be new (this explains our choice of **like** at nuniber 10 in our list); conversely, they may opt to study features thought to be in decline. Sometimes the choice stenis from previous research. which may have had intriguing results: indefinite *this*, for example. was analysed by Wald (1983). The variables under investigation must also, of course. occur frequently: as I rnentioned above, this is especially important when a funding body expects sonie results after three years. Hinskens (1986) discusses some of the reasons that have been given for the choice of variables to be analysed – although. as he points out (1986:54). researchers often give no reasons for their choice.

To some extent. of course. the motivations I have suggested represent simply a common sense way of proceeding. However. as Romaine (1983: 95) has rnentioned. there is a risk of dealing only with those aspects of linguistic structure that are quantifiable. and of discounting as irrelevant those which are not. I certainly do not want to suggest that the work that has been done on features selected on these criteria is worthless, but it is true that we have tended to be conservative and even unadventurous in tlie features that we investigate. In variationist analyses we are limited in what we discover by what we set out to look for: so it is hardly surprising that despite the eniphasis of twentieth century linguistics on the primacy of speech, the field of language study that has worked more than any other on the analysis of spontaneous speech has. paradoxically. discovered rather little about the syntactic features that characterise

it.

I mentioned earlier that those features that recur frequently in speech tend to he not only more feasible to analyse but also more noticeable to prescriptivists. lay speakers and linguists. This point can prompt us to consider the basis for our choice of syntactic variables from a different perspective. which has not been much commented on. There are certain principles that have been important to the writers and the grammarians who played a major role in the standardization of English and other European languages. so much so that they act as filters on the forms that come to be accepted as 'standard'. These principles are discussed in Cheshire and Stein (1997). Many of them are reflected in the standard variants of the variables that we are investigating in our current project which. as I have shown. represent a Ion$-standing research tradition in dialectology. The principles include the preservation of subject-verb concord (as in the standardised present tense verb forms. and forms of BE). and the avoidance of spoken forms that differ markedly from their written equivalents (for example. *ain't)*. A further principle insists on a single form having a single meaning: hence a distinction is felt to he needed between the past participles and preterite forms of verbs. and between present tense and past tense forms: and *never* is considered 'standard' when it can be interpreted as 'not ever'. and 'nonstandard' when it means simply 'not' (Cheshii-e 1997. 1998). The double surface realisation of a process such as negation is considered undesirable (as with negative concord): and the preservation of inflections is favoured (hence relative pronouns with distinct forms for the subject. object and genitive forms – such as 'standard' *who, whom* and *whose* – are preferred to *what* or the genitive *what's*). Ellipsis is unacceptable. so some uses of *never* are proscribed. as in *she pushed me hut you never*. It happens that features 1-12 occur relatively frequently in speech and so fit with the practical demands of investigators. But their frequency has also made them salient to prescriptivists and purists. and to those speakers who want to identify themselves as 'educated'. This in turn has made them salient. it seems. to linguistic researchers.

This does not, of course. mean that analysing variation and change in the use of the nonstandard features I listed above is without interest. In section IV I will give some interim results from the dialect levelling project that suggest some trajectories of change in the three towns where we are working. In section 5. however. I will go on to discuss the intluence that the filtering principles at work during standardisation have sometimes had on our perception of what constitutes a given syntactic variable. In section VI I will show that it is important to move beyond the features that have been traditionally studied in dialectology. in order to learn more ahout the structure of spoken English syntax. but that it is as important to consider sociolinguistic variation in the use of these features as it is with those that are conventionally analysed in urban social dialectology. In other words. hoth the analysis of syntactic variation and the structure of spoken syntax has to be grounded in language as it used in the speech community.

IV. VARIATION AND CHANGE IN SOME WELL-KNOWN VARIABLES

Several writers have suggested that regionally niarked forms are heing lost in the urban centres of Britain. in favour of a common set of nonstandard forms (see. for example. Hughes and Trudgill 1987. Coupland 1988). The Survey of British Dialect Grammar found that many of these potential common core nonstandard forms were reported as widespread throughout the

major urban centres of Britain (Cheshire, Edwards and Whittle 1989). but so far there has not been enough empirical research for these reports to be confirmed.

Table 2 and Figure 2 show the frequency with which five of the putative common nonstandard forms are used in the three towns in our study. The figures are based on the speech of eight girls and eight boys from the lower social class groups in Milton Keynes and Reading (the full data set for the working- class groups) hut on only two boys and two girls from Hull. from where the full data set has not yet been transcrihed. The findings are therefore provisional: the data set for Hull will he extended. and the analysis will be refined for some features. with a breakdown by linguistic environment where there are sufficient tokens. We can already see, however, that these five nonstandard forms are indeed used in the three towns in our study. including the relatively isolated town of Hull - in fact. so far it looks as though they are used more frequently by the adolescents in Hull than by those in Reading and Milton Keynes. At this early stage in the analysis we suggest that this reflects the wider social separation of the working class and middle class groups in Hull: many of the middle class speakers lived in villages outside the town, so the social networks outside school of the two broad social class groups overlapped less in Hull than in Reading or Milton Keynes.

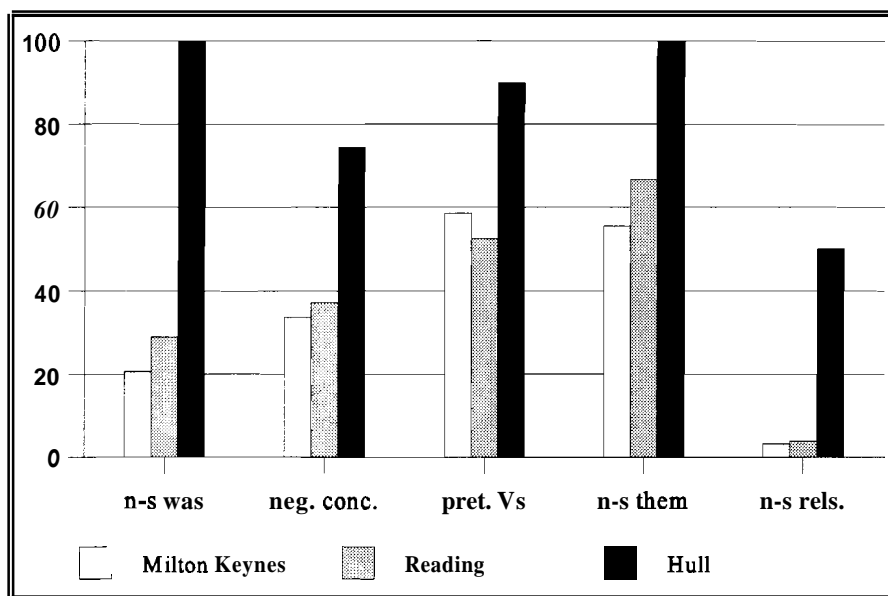| *Table* 2: Common Nonstandard Features in Three English Tuwns										
town	n-s *ivas*		neg. conc.		Pret. Vs		n-s *them*		n-s rels.	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Milton Keynes (MK)	57	20.6	92	33.7	58	58.6	9	55.5	95	3.2
Reading	45	28.9	43	37.2	59	52.5	6	66.7	52	3.8
Hull	10	100	39	74.4	20	90	2	100	10	50

Figure 2: Common nonstandard features iii three English towns

Examples of the features follow:

Nonstandard *was*:

1. We just held the brake back and we was upside down all the way (MK. D. 536)

Negative concord:

2. I like England..I'm happy with it..we haven't got no diseases no nothing (Rdg. M. 604)

Preterite verh forms:

3. It used to be steak until the mad cow disease come about (MK. A. 254)
4. I knowed him hefore though (Rdg. P. 492)

Nonstandard *them*:

5. It's a bit scary when you're walking past all them druggies (Hull. A. 153)

Nonstandard relatives:

6. Have you noticed though there's no lads what want to do it really (Hull. K. 301)

Table 3 and Figure 3 show the frequency index for two features that are thought to have a more localised distribution. We found no localised features in the new town of Milton Keynes. where all the parents had come from elsewhere in the country. In Reading. however. the regional form of verbal –s occurred: whereas in standard English verbal –s is a present tense marker. occurring with third person singular subjects only. in Reading -s occurs with all persons of the verb, including HAVE TO and main verb DO. as in examples 7-9:

7. I wants to he a hairdresser (Rdg. K. 387)
8. and you has to wear your blazer in the summer (Rdg. K. 361)
9. yeah I does my mum's hair most of the time (Rdg. K. 3900

The groups of adolescents that I recorded in Reading during the late 1970s used verbal -s on lexical verbs with a frequency index of approximately 56 per cent: even in the recordings made by schoolteachers in the classroom the group frequency index for eight boys was 31. 49 (Cheshire 1982). The speakers in our current project also use verbal –s. and they preserve the same linguistic constraint on its occurrence as the speakers I recorded twenty years earlier: that is to say. verbal -s does not occur on verbs that are followed by a finite clause. as in 10:

10. I reckon some girls are much maturer than others (Rdg. S. 533)

However. the frequency with which verbal –s occurs is lower in the more recent study, occurring only about 13 per cent of the time with lexical verbs. as Figure 3 shows. At first

we thought that this might reflect the different contexts in which the recordings were made in the two studies: the first study took place in adventure playgrounds, during a period of long-term participant observation. whereas in our current study the recordings were made in a school setting. albeit a relaxed one. This may he a factor. hut the more striking point is that this localised featuie occurs less frequently in the speech of the Reading adolescents than the 'common core' nonstandard features. as can he seen by comparing Figure 3 with Figure 2.

Table 3: Frequency Indices for Localised Forms								
town	verbal -*s*		n-s *has*		n-s *does*		no def. article	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Reading	594	12 3	38	5 2	18	16 7	0	0
Hull	0	0	0	0	0	0	178	22 5
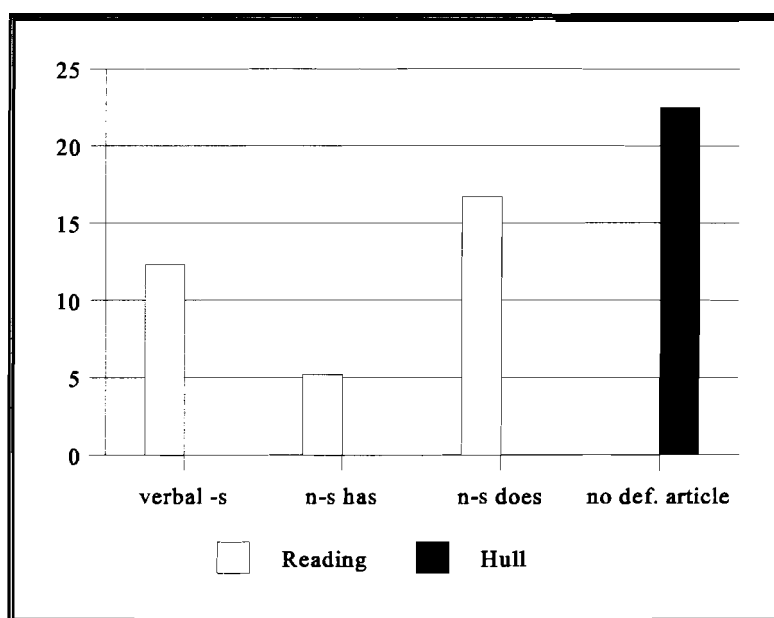
Figure 3: Frequency indices for localised forms

The second localised feature is the ahsence of the definite article. as in exaniple 11. where standard English would require *the* before *flats*:

11. there was this fellow heating this other fellow up near flats (Hull. M, 198)

Figure 3 suggests tliat in Hull too. the localised feature occurs less frequently than the 'common core' nonstandard features (althouph. as 1 said above. the data set is still incomplete for Hull). Thus in both Reading and Hull it looks as though speakers are indeed converginp on a common core set of nonstandard variants in preference to the more localised features.

One advantage. then. of researchers studying the same variables in study after study. is that comparisons can he drawn with earlier studies. enabling us to identify trajectories and mechanisms of change. as we have been ahle to do here. The next stage of the project will analyse other morphological and syntactic variables. and will explore the relationship hetween the use of localised features and the social characteristics of individual speakers. including their adherence to a generalised youth culture.

V. INVARIANT STRUCTURES

One of the variables that we are analysing in the dialect levelling project is *there's* and *there was* in existential *there* constructions. as in 12 helow:

12. 1 went to Gemma's house and (.) of course **there were** hoys staying over as well (.h) so **there was** like all our friends as well (MK. L. 328)

The first token of the existential *there* construction. *there were boys*, shows agreement between the the the form of BE. ivere. and a plural subject. *boys*. as expected in English. The second token, *ther-e was like all our friends,* has no agreement. Lack of agreement is said to he common in informal 'educated' speech (Quirk et al 1985:1405) in many different regional varieties of English, including the English spoken in York. England (Tagliamonte. in press). Sydney. (Eisikovits 1991). Ottawa (Meechan and Foley 1994) and Ocracoke. LISA (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994). ln the words of Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (1993: 285), *there was* has "practically hecome a lexical unit in numerous vernacular varieries in hoth singular and plural contexts". *There's* also seems to function as a lexical unit.

Tahle 4 shows that in the Milton Keynes data set *there's* and *there was* does indeed show signs of being a lexical unit: instead of showing the sharp pattern of variation exhibited by features such as negative concord, invariant existential *there* constructions are used by hoth female and male speakers in both social class groups almost one hundred per cent of the time.

Table 4: Frequency of *there's* and *there was* with a Plural Postverbal Subject (Milton Keynes Data Set)		
Speakers	**N**	**%**
Working Class girls	33	91
Working Class boys	30	93
Middle Class girls	46	96
Middle Class boys	70	89

The existential *there* construction has posed problems for linguists working within the framework of Government and Binding theory. which assumes that agreement is controlled by the preverbal NP. Various complicated solutions have been proposed to account for the fact that it is a postverbal NP that controls agreement in existential *there* constructions (see. for discussion. Cheshire in press, Meechan and Foley 1994). As l have just pointed out. however. the postverbal NP controls agreement mainly in formal educated speech: elsewhere it is an invariant construction. For variationists, then. the main question is not how to account for agreement with a postverbal NP. but why agreenient should occur at all in formal speech.

We can see why the feature may be invariant if we consider the discourse function of the existential *there* construction. Philosophers and theoretical linguists analyse sentences where every argument of the verb is a full referential lexical phrase: spontaneous spoken language, however, is produced as chunks of information, in clauses with light subjects (light both phonetically and in terms of their information content: see Chafe 1994). New information tends to appear at the end of a clause rather than at the beginning. The existential *rhere* construction tits this pattern, with an empty subject (*there*) and an empty verb (BE) preparing the way for the focused presentation of new information.

Like many of the features typical of speech, existential *there* is multifunctional. This can be seen from Schiffrin's (1994) Conversation Analysis perspective on the construction. In hei- data, existential *there* leads hearers towards the identification of a referent. It also has a role in turntakiny: almost all the 60 examples that she analyses were produced under a single intonation contour, suggesting a preference for the construction to be produced as a single turn constructional unit (op cit:253). Like left dislocation, another syntactic construction typical of spoken English (Pawley and Syder 1983:561), existential *there* can be seen as a way for speakers to take the floor quickly and easily in lively conversation. Clearly, it would be functional for such a useful construction to he stored and accessed as a prefabricated phrase rather than as a structure that is generated anew each time that it is used. *There's* or *there was* can be seen, then, as comparable to standard French *il y a* or to German *es gibr* (Eisikovits 1991), neither of which exhibits agreement with the following noun phrase. Il y *en a* in Accadiaii French, which seems to perform similar functions, is also invariant (King 1994). It may be only written English and careful spoken English that has the subject-verb concord favoured by prescriptivists and purists with existential *rhere.* In these more formal styles, where speakers have time to plan what they intend to say and where speaking turns may be distrihuted more routinely than in informal conversation, the expression of grammatical agreement may have hecome more important than the communicative need to take or keep the floor whilst preserving the pace of speech - particularly for speakers who have been exposed to prescriptive norms of subject-verb agreement. In this case the option of choosing a prefabricated phrase can, it seems, be hypassed. Not surprisingly, Meechan and Foley's (1994) analysis reports a correlation between the education of speakers and the frequency of occurrence of the construction. Furthermore, the only speakers in the Milton Keynes sample who had subject-verb concord with existential *rhere* were two middle class adolescents with positive attitudes towards school (one of whom uttered example 12, above).

The generative tradition intentionally takes no account of social and stylistic variation, of course: and since researchers are inevitably educated speakers it is not surprising if the intuitions of analysts working within this tradition have led them to identify the variant that does exhibit agreement and that is used more frequently hy educated speakers. Researchers working within the variationist tradition, on the other hand, have been able to focus on the variant that does not show agreement. Attempting to explain the absence of syntactic variation can then lead to a consideration of the characteristics of the features that are characteristic of spoken discourse, as I have tried to show.

In fact, the ahsence of subject-verb concord on features with the discourse function of introducing a topic in fast speech appears to be a more general characteristic of spoken English. For example, it also exists in Reading English for the *you know* X construction (see Schiffrin (1994:267-89) for discussion of this feature). As mentioned above, for the 24 speakers analysed in niy earlier study the frequency of occurrence of the *-s* suffix on lexical

verbs with non-third person singular subjects was approximately 56 per cent. The lexical verbs include KNOW. as in examples 13 and 14:

13. you knows him don't you Nod?
14. he says to me look over here and see if I knows you

In addition to examples such as 13 and 4. there are 24 tokens of *you know* which introduce a topic for discussion. as in examples 15 and 16:

15. you know that hill down there?
16. you know your mum...you know that bike she had'?

Here there is no variation: the suffix never occurs

There are two general points to he made from this account of two features that do not show variation. Firstly, there is the question of whether the variable has been appropriately defined in the existential *there* and the *you know* X constructions. To date all researchers. as far as I am aware. have considered *there was* as a variant of *there were*. and in all the analyses cited above the investigation of *there's* or *there was* has been part of a wider analysis of variable verh concord. It may be more appropriate. however. to consider *there's* and *there was* as variants of topic-introducing constructions. since this is one of their principal discourse functions: other variants would then include, for example, left dislocation – another multifunctional construction (Pawley and Syder 1983).
        Secondly. we can note that even though these topic-introducing constructions occur relatively frequently in speech. they do not seem to he available for social evaluation and the consequent marking of social groups. There is social class variation for verbal concord in the Milton Keynes data: *we was*, for example, has the well-known pattern of sharp stratification, occurring in the speech of the working class group. as we saw in section III. hut not in the speech of the middle class group. This pattern does not occur for *there's* and *there was*, however. as we have seen. Similarly, verbal −*s* patterns with the gender and peer group status of the speakers who participated in the 1982 Reading study. but the *you know* X construction shows no variation of this kind. These two features exemplify. then. the point made Winford (1996) in the quotation at the beginning of this paper: syntactic variatioii may he motivated by pragmatic factors alone. in which case it may not serve the funcrion of distinguishing social groups in the way that "classic" phonological and morphological variables do. These two features also show how analysing syntactic variation can lead to new ways of rhinking about syntactic variables: by discovering that features or constructions are invariant. we may he led to consider the function they fulfill in discourse. This. in turn. can result in their heing analysed as a different variable altogether: and this could have some repercussions for our analysis of spoken grammar. enabling us to see round the blinkers imposed by our long exposure to the norms of the standard variety. For example. it could he useful to carry out a variationist analysis of the different strategies speakers use to introduce iiew topics into theii discourse. which would include the *you know* X construction. existential *there*. left dislocation and more. As I said ahove. you only find what you set out to look for whcn studying variation. and we still do not always know what to look for in the case of syntacric variatioii. hecause of our ignorance of the syntax of speech.

VI. **SOME FEATURES** O F SPOKEN SYNTAX

I will turn now to some features of spoken English syntax that have escaped the notice of prescriptivists and others who have been involved in trying to tame the vernaculars of English. and that until recently have escaped the attention of descriptive linguists as well. Examples 17 to 22 illustrate what Carter and McCarthy (1995) have temed 'heads' and 'tails'. Heads, as Carter (in press) points out. "perform a basically orienting and focussing function, identifying key information for listeners and establishing a shared frame of reference for what is important in a conversational exchange". Syntactically, they are usually nouns or noun phrases. anticipating a structure which then forms the main subject of the clause. Presumably they reflect speakers' psycholinguistic planning of their utterance.

Heads

17. Jamie . normally . you put him in his cot and he's . he's gone
18. this friend of ours . Carol . her daughter . she decided to buy one
19. that chap over there . he said it was OK

Tails

20. it's not actually very good is it that wine
21. She's a really good actress Clare
22. They do I suppose take up a lot of time kids

Tails, on the other hand. amplify, extend or reinforce what a speaker has just uttered. Carter (in press) notes that they tend to cluster with different kinds of tags. hedges and modal expressions. and often serve to express the speaker's "affective response, personal attitude or evaluative stance towards the proposition or topic of the clause". Again. there are presumably psycholinguistic implications – and important ones. for the final position of tails suggests that speakers may plan the propositional content first. encoding the affective content later and possibly not experiencing the affective component until they utter the clause.

Examples 23 35 illustrate fused structures (Cheshire. in press). These constructions, expressed within a single intonation contour. contain a middle section that straddles the clauses on either side: for example. *what Professor Galbraith was talking abaur* in 1 is both the complement of the preceding verb. in the clause *that's really what Professor Galhraith was talking about.* and the subject of the following verb in the clause *what Professor Galbraith was talking about is that there's a huge knock-on effect. A hunch of baloney* in 24 and *the Mark Thomas crew were doing* in 25 can be analysed in the same way.

23. that's really what Professor Galbraith was talking about is that there's a huge knock-on effect (*Today* programme. BBC radio 4)
24. it's just a bunch of baloney is what it is (educated US speaker)
25. that's what the Mark Thomas crew were doing soinething really interesting today (educated British speaker)

Again, these structures appear to reflect the conditions of speaking. used by speakers to clarify connections hetween what they have just said and what they intend to say next. Example 25 was uttered by a speaker who was aware that I happened at the time to he writing ahout the syntax of spoken English. He stopped and drew my attention to what he had just said. and on reflection explained that he had realised that his *that* maybe did not refer after all to what he had just been saying. and so he then went on to make the topic clearer. Example 23 may well serve the same function of striving for clarity in the ongoing production of speech: the construction. as Berrendonner and Reichler-Béguelin (1989: 109) point out. is an efficient compromise hetween operating cost and effectiveness. Example 24. however. seems to have an emphatic function, and the marked construction presumahly enhances the emphasis.

Montgomery 1989) mentions that he has collected more than 50 examples of this type of fused construction, all heginning. in his corpus. with *that*. He finds that speakers use the construction to cohere foregoing and following discourse (250), and that it also occurs when they sum up what they have been saying and ' create order out of chaos' (251). His example 16 (reproduced as 26 helow) pulls out and condenses the most important information from what had been a long rambling answer to the fieldworker's question 'what do you do for a good time?'

26. that's the best way I ever found to think is just to walk back up through the woods or something

Fused constructions. then, are multifunctional. like existential *there* constructions and the *you know* X construction: they can express emphasis. ensure coherence and. as surnrnary constructions. inipose a hierarchic organisation on the necessarily linear development of discourse.

Finally, consider what I have termed lone *wh* clauses. In the earlier Reading coi-pus of adolescent speech these structures occur mainly in those sections of conversations where speakers are takinp part in joint remembering (Edwards and Middleton 1986). especially when they are reminiscing about films or TV programmes that they have all seen and enjoyed. These clauses occur as independent constructions in the turn of a single speaker. as in the extracts given as examples 27 and 28. where a group of four 12-14 year old speakers were discussing *The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* a film that had been shown in television recently. The lone *wh* clauses have a distinctive intonation. with level tones on all but the first syllable of the final noun phrase. This syllable has a falling tone: and the final syllable of the tone group is usually lengthened. The clause seems to function as a bid for a topic to be discussed. a bid which is sometimes taken up by the other speakers. like Johnny's *when he took that woman up into that hell thing*. This is accepted by Nicky. with *yeah*, and Johnny goes on to describe the scene more fully, joined by Patsy and Jacky. Topics introduce with a lone *wh* clause are not always taken up by the group, however: this is the fate of Nicky's *and when he took her up.* which he then ahandons for a different topic. When he falters Johnny leaps into the conversation with his own suggested topic, and this is the one that is then taken up by the others. as we have just seen.

37.   Darren: we watch Hunchhack we do
         Patsy: Hunchback of Notre Dame
         All: yeah

    Patsy: it was good that was

    Darren: where that man is all hunchback ...looking through all those cracks

➡   Nicky: and when he took her up.. I saw that other one when...er

➡   Johnny: when he took

              that woman up into

                that bell thing

    Nicky: yeah..you .know..all big bells

    Johnny: I like the bit where he swings down to where she's gonna be hanged and [she

                                              [yeah he

    Patsy: swang down and caught her by one hand didn't he

    Jacky: he had one eye down here and one eye up there

In 28 the first bid for a discussion topic. Johnny's, is successful, as can be seen from the turns that follow. The second, Darren's. is not. We can see clearly here how fast is the pace of speech in these multiparty conversations - a momentary stumble, like Darren's *em*, and the speaker loses the floor. The third bid. Patsy's, is not really successful either: after a pause she adds some detail. but the topic is not elaborated on by the others. and Nicky's contribution closes down the discussion.

28.   Patsy: I thought he was gonna fall when he was treading on the em er edge

➡   Johnny: when

              he was on them bloody bells swinging about

    Patsy: yeah

    Johnny: and he knocked..and he knocked his master down didn't he from the

            galleries..wooo..crash!

    Darren: when he was gonna em

    Patsy: when he told that girl he was deaf..he got deaf by the..that bell

    Nicky: but he was still there

    Patsy: I know

    It is difficult to know how to describe clauses such as these: it is tempting to see them as adverbial clauses because they typically begin with *when* or *where*, indicating a time or a scene in the film. but conventional frameworks. both descriptive and theoretical. would expect an adverbial clause to be dependent on a main clause. and here they are not. An alternative analysis is to see them as the syntactic object of an underlying or 'understood' clause do *you remember*. The intonation is not that of a final clause element. however: instead. the lengthened final syllable resembles the drawl which speakers sometimes use to indicate that they are ready to yield their turn (Duncan 1972). This reflects the discourse function 1 identified above. of enabling a speaker to simultaneously propose a topic and invite the other speakers to take it up. The construction thus has a function in turntaking, but by inviting other speakers to take part in a sequence of joint remembering it also has a role in creating interpersonal involvement. Again. then, this feature of spoken syntax is multifunctional.

    As I said. these four features of spoken syntax have only recently been identified as characteristic of spoken English. They have not been included in descriptions of English

grammar. in formalist analyses of syntax. nor in variationist analyses. We might expect theni to be invariant. like the existential *there* and *you know* X constructions. since like these constructions they appear to be multifunctional in discourse. with a range of pragmatic functions. This cannot be taken for granted, however. Some tails have regionally distinct forms (see Carter. in press). and there may well be social variation in their use too. The speaker's gender may be an important factor determining their frequency of occurrence: Carter notes that tails tend to co-occur with hedges and modal expressions. both of which have been found to be used differently by female and male speakers (see Holmes 1995. Coates 1996). Lone *wh* clauses are used almost exclusively by male speakers in the Reading data: attempting to discover the reason for this took me on a trail involving the collection of a corpus of narratives. and led me to draw conclusions about the different ways in which the male and female speakers used narratives to construct their social identities (Cheshire. ms.).

CONCLUSION

I began by quoting some recent statements about syntactic variation and spoken grammar. and my discussion in this paper has elaborated on these comments. I have argued. firstly. that although syntactic variables occur less frequently than phonological variables, this does not mean that they cannot be analysed. We can otieii demonstrate systematic. robust and justifiable patterns of variation even from quite small numbers of tokens. as Britain (1998: 26) has recently argued. Secondly. I agree with those scholars who have argued that their relative lack of frequency and their pragmatic functions means that syntactic variables do not distinguish social groups in the way that phonological variables do. Nevertheless it is important to carry out a sociolinguistic analysis of the social distribution of a syntactic construction. because this can sometimes enable us to determine its pragmatic function. or to discover more about the social aspects of language use (as in the case of the lone *wh* clauses). Thirdly. both the study of syntactic variation and the study of spoken grammar have been affected by the susceptibility of researchers to the principles that are important during standardisation. with the result that features unaffected by these principles have often been overlooked. This is true for the four features mentioned in section VI. The study of spoken grammar. however. is now identifying new features that can be analysed from a variationist perspective (tails. for example; or lone *wh* clauses). Conversely. variationist analyses may contribute to our understanding of the structure of spoken grammar: for example, by identifying invariant structures such as the *you know* X construction. whose use reflects the cognitive dimension of speaking. Each field. in other words. can benefit from the achievements of the other.

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