**"It just sounds proper common": Exploring the social meanings expressed by nonstandard grammar**[1]

It has been suggested that morphosyntax has more constrained social meanings than phonological variation, despite the scarcity of empirical research evidencing this claim. By using frequency correlations to isolate stylized moments of grammatical variation, this paper provides evidence of the rich social meanings constructed by nonstandard[2] grammar. In particular, we show that, whilst definite article reduction (DAR), nonstandard *were*, and negative concord work together in one British working class young person's speech to produce an intimate, collaborative style, these variants are used strategically to index subtly different states and alignments. We also show that other grammatical variants – use of nonstandard irregular preterit forms and demonstrative *them* – are not used strategically to convey interactional positioning. The different function of these variants demonstrates the diversity of morphosyntax, raising questions about the relationship between grammar and social meaning, ideology, pragmatics and linguistic processing. We argue that addressing these questions not only benefits our understanding of social meaning across different levels of linguistic architecture, it also provides us with better evidence to advocate for alternative (and more suitable) models of linguistic variability in educational discourse.

Keywords: variationist sociolinguistics, grammatical variation, social meaning, ethnography, social class.

## Introduction

Studies which examine the agility with which individual speakers adapt their use of phonological variants have advanced our understanding of the range of social meanings exhibited by phonological variables (Podesva 2008; Sharma & Rampton 2015; Sharma 2018; Tamminga, Mackenzie & Embick 2016; Van Hofwegen 2017). These studies have shown that some variables work in a compositional way as 'style clusters' to produce interpretable social meanings. For instance, Podesva (2008) shows that one individual, Heath, a gay man, uses a range of linguistic strategies (frequently deleting word-final coronal stops, producing long and intense plosive release bursts, using high pitch on declaratives and frequently phonating in extreme falsetto) to construct a 'diva' persona. The emergence of this persona is the union of each linguistic component's meanings in one style, since all such meanings are compatible with one another. Other work has shown how phonetic items can combine in a process of bricolage (Hebdige 1979) to produce new meanings from linguistic variants with seemingly distinct social meanings. For instance, Quist (forthcoming) shows how young people in Vollsmose, Denmark, combine emergent ethnolectal features with traditionally local Funen features to produce a style that is distinctly 'Vollsmose'.

These studies have highlighted speaker dexterity in the use of phonological variants. But do individual speakers use morphosyntactic variants in similarly agile constructional or compositional ways to produce social meanings? It has been suggested that our use of morphosyntax is more fixed by virtue of its 'deeper' cognitive structure (Eckert & Labov 2017: 481), and that syntactic variation is less socially meaningful than phonological variation because syntactic variables are more sharply socially stratified than phonological variables (Cheshire 1999: 61). This sharp social stratification, and the clear opposition between nonstandard and standard variants (at least for the most frequently-studied grammatical variables, such as negation, subject-verb agreement, past-tense and plural

markers), has been argued to make grammatical nonstandard variants "the focus of standard ideology and educational attention", giving them "quite fixed social meanings associated with class and ethnicity" (Eckert 2019: 758).

Research by Levon and Buchstaller (2015) has provided some evidence to dispute the first assertion – showing that listeners' evaluations of morphosyntax are influenced by a range of social and psychological conditions. Their work indicates that perceived differences between the social meanings of phonological variation and syntactic variation may be a consequence of standardization processes acting more readily on the kind of syntax that has been studied, rather than on any inherent property of syntax itself (Levon & Buchstaller 2015: 323). Similarly, the finding that syntactic variables are more sharply stratified than phonological variables may also be a consequence of the type of variables typically studied by variationists. As Cheshire (1999: 62) has noted, research has tended to focus on a small set of highly stigmatised variants (such as forms of nonstandard negation). This has given the impression that the use of all grammatical variants are sharply stratified when in fact, there are many different kinds of grammatical variants that may pattern socially in slightly different ways. This point was highlighted by Cheshire herself in her (1982) ethnography which demonstrated that some grammatical variables were used almost categorically across contexts by adolescent boys, whereas others more closely aligned with the boys' engagement in vernacular culture. Subsequent studies have shown similar alignments between the use of grammatical variables and forms of social practice – for instance, Eckert (2000) shows how negative concord sharply differentiated social groups in an American high school. However, beyond work by Snell (2010; 2013) and Moore and Podesva (2009), there remains little research into the ways in which grammatical variation maps onto more nuanced social meanings associated with a speaker's interactional alignment. The absence of this research means we lack the data to properly assess the extent to which the social meanings of

grammatical variants are limited to association with macro-social categories like class and ethnicity.

Further research into the social meanings of grammatical variation is essential if we are to (i) investigate claims about the relative social meanings of grammar and (ii) widened the debate in sociolinguistics about the interaction between social meaning and different levels of linguistic architecture. Furthermore, research on grammatical variation has important implications for educational policy, given that policy focuses on grammar and discourse, not variation in accent (although, of course, ideologies about accent variation also infiltrate classroom discourse – e.g. Cushing 2020). Novel interventions within the curriculum need to be based on a sound understanding of how grammatical variation works. Current policy portrays the use of grammatical variation as a choice between the standard variety and nonstandard alternatives; see, for instance, The National Curriculum for English in England which states that children should be able to identify and operationalise "differences associated with formal and informal registers, and between Standard English and other varieties of English" (Department of Education 2014: 6–7) and the extended critique provided by Cushing (2019; 2020) (who demonstrates the implicitly prescriptive nature of policy documentation and how a series of policy mechanisms turn these language ideologies into practices). The binary way of characterising linguistic variation relies upon the assumption that variables "range along a single vector of formality or attention to speech" (Eckert 2016:69), and suggests that standard and nonstandard alternatives are simply "ways of saying the same thing" (Labov 1972a: 323) that differ only by their levels of formality. However, what counts as 'saying the same thing' (or semantic equivalence) in morphosyntax is long debated and has never been satisfactorily resolved (Lavandera 1978; Labov 1978; Dines 1980; Romaine 1984; Cheshire 1987; Winford 1996; Moore 2012). Empirical research is increasingly demonstrating that, whilst a given standard and nonstandard form may share

basic referential meaning, each form may function to communicate different social and pragmatic meanings. For instance, as we explore below, Moore (forthcoming) has shown that how one expresses negation may not just reflect how standard (*I didn't say anything*) or nonstandard (*I didn't say nothing*) a linguistic form is, but also how emphatic or intense the expression of negation is required to be (see also discussions in Labov 1972c:381; Labov 1984; Giora 2006:992–994; Burnett, Tremblay & Blondeau 2015; Eckert & Labov 2017:469).

Following the work of Andrews et al. (2004), Crinson & Williamson (2004), Godley et al. (2007), Mac Ruairc (2011a; 2011b) and Austin (2014), we advocate for an approach which simultaneously recognises the breadth of grammatical variation and its associated social meanings, and the potential range of ways in which speakers manipulate this variation. We provide data which further supports Snell's (2013) claim that speakers have rich repertoires of language use that are not restricted to wholesale alternations between 'standard' and 'nonstandard' codes. Instead, we show that speakers use a range of semiotic resources (including both standard and nonstandard forms) in order to position themselves in discourse. Previous research has tended to focus on how speakers adapt specific, individual grammatical variables. Our account is innovative by exploring how an individual speaker adapts her use of multiple grammatical variants to undertake social work in a number of interactional situations. It also considers how an individual differentially manipulates different grammatical variants. In this way, it feeds into debates about the contribution that grammatical variation makes to compositional and constructional stylistic work. By presenting a detailed analysis of the language use of one working class young person (a female, 14 years old), we first show how the individual language features often identified as 'problematic' in working class children's speech do not vary in obvious or aligned ways across different situations of talk. Instead, we demonstrate differences in how grammatical

variables index social information and alignment. As we discuss below, our analysis indicates that, if we are to reflect language users experience of language, then we need to do more than simply evidence variation, we also need to find ways to more adequately talk about the richness of that variation, its many social functions, and the extent to which speakers manipulate their talk.

## Data and methodology

In line with our commitment to participatory research (and the recommendations of Mallinson & Charity Hudley 2018 as well as Snell 2018b), our data comes from a project which collaboratively examined language, identities, and place by collecting data with the attendees of a youth club over a period of four weeks. The youth club is situated in a working class area of a northern English city (Sheffield) and the young people who attend live nearby. Both authors attended the youth club once a week for around two years as volunteers. Our role included setting up equipment (e.g. board games, craft activities, table tennis), helping activities run smoothly (e.g. taking part in manicures, overseeing craft activities), and generally spending time with the children and young people and talking to them. The youth club did not have an authoritarian atmosphere, and young people were actively involved in decision-making and the day-to-day organisation of activities. We knew the young people well and had easy relationships with them, but our status as adults undoubtedly introduced a particular power dynamic between us and the young people.

During data collection, we worked with a local community arts organisation to design activities within the youth club and the local area. This centred around the young people producing a piece of artwork to capture the associations between language, identities, and place. Participants created mental maps of important spaces; worked in pairs to take

photographs of places important to them using disposable cameras; gave researchers guided walks to explain their choices of important places; created artwork based on the photographs and stories; discussed selected photographs and artwork during individual interviews; and took part in focus groups to discuss the associations between language, identities and place. The aim was to generate discourse which reflected "the normative and regulatory functioning of spaces, such as neighbourhoods" on language use (Mac Ruairc 2011a: 539). We gained ethical approval from the University of Sheffield to run the project and we obtained written parent/carer consent and child assent for formal participation in the project.

Here we focus upon the language use of one female, Laila (a pseudonym). We treat Laila's data as a 'telling case' (Mitchell 1984: 239), rather than a 'typical case', to demonstrate the extent of variability that may occur in an individual's speech (though we would not argue that that variability is replicated in every individual's language use). Laila was 14 years old, of mixed heritage (Jamaican and White British), and a native speaker of English who had lived in the same city for all of her life. She lived on a cul-de-sac in a local authority rented property in 'Green Acre' (another pseudonym), close to the youth club. She was a popular girl who was engaged with education and aspired to higher education. Her recordings include discussion of a range of activities including family and neighbourhood life, parties, relationships, and fights/conflict.

Our decision to focus on Laila as a telling case was, in part, because Laila demonstrated an astute awareness of how her language was perceived by people within and outside her immediate social peer group. It was initially believed that children did not actively replicate patterns of stylistic variation until late adolescence (Labov 1964: 91–93). However, recent interest in the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation has provided empirical evidence that children show patterns of sociolinguistic variation much earlier, leading to suggestions that it is part and parcel of the more general acquisition process that begins in the

early years (Roberts 1997; Foulkes, Docherty & Watt 1999; Chevrot & Foulkes 2013). This has been shown to be true even for grammatical variation (Smith & Durham 2019). Nonetheless, it is still the case that children become more affected by the social stigma associated with nonstandard variants as they age. Extract 1 demonstrates that, even at 14, Laila seems to be aware of the stigma associated with working class speech. In this extract, she is discussing the way in which her and her friends' talk is perceived as 'common' (note that Laila accepts this characterisation in her initial statement).

Extract 1: Laila's metalinguistic reflection on language and social class (from a group discussion).

1 It just sounds proper common. Like you don't say, "You're
2 alright" or "right". "You're reet", "You reet," "You alreet"
3 or … It sounds normal to us obviously but everyone thinks
4 we're - not - not - "They don't speak properly."

Laila knows that there are alternative ways of speaking: she offers alternatives forms that are framed as 'common' (e.g. *You're reet/You reet/You alreet* on l.2) and 'not common' (e.g. *You're alright/right* on ll.1-2). 'Common' is a term used colloquially and pejoratively in the UK to denote people or practices that are considered typical of the lower classes. If we accept the view implicit in the UK's National Curriculum – that knowledge of Standard English gives speakers the tools to use it when appropriate – then Laila's awareness would suggest that she has the tools to switch between standard and nonstandard forms depending upon the "differences associated with formal and informal registers" (Department of Education 2014: 6).

We audio-recorded Laila talking in a number of different contexts: (1) when talking to Sarah, one of the paper's authors, to explain her artwork (Laila was told that clips from the interview would feature as part of a public art exhibition so this talk could be considered the least intimate recording situation); (2) during a group discussion with five other female friends, which covered topics such as the links between language and identity, the outcomes of the summer project, and the stories behind their artworks (here the intimacy of the group context might be expected to override other situational constraints, such as the presence of two adults, see Labov 1972b); and (3) when giving a guided tour of local important places, with her friends, for the benefit of the paper's authors (this context situationally placed the young people around their home environment but, interactionally, it positioned them as expert in relation to the us, the 'naïve' researchers). Table 1 summarises the data available from each of the contexts described above. By recording Laila in a number of contexts, we first aimed to explore the extent to which her use of linguistic variants correlated with vectors of intimacy versus formality. If use of nonstandard grammatical variants indexes fixed social meanings, then variation in use should neatly pattern in line with relative situational formality. In highlighting inconsistent or ambiguous patterns of situational variation, this aspect of our analysis serves to motivate our attempt to seek more nuanced social meanings for nonstandard grammatical forms.

[Table 1 here]

All Laila's audio data was transcribed verbatim using ELAN (Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics 2018). All nonstandard morphological or morphosyntactic items that appeared regularly in the recordings were identified; these are listed in Table 2. It is important to note that we only identified those features that have been identified as

'variables' in sociolinguistic research, and not the many other kinds of 'nonstandard' syntactic constructions that can occur in speech (as opposed to writing). This is to enable us to investigate the claims made in the sociolinguistic literature that morphosyntax tends to have fixed social meanings associated with one's place in the social hierarchy, as opposed to more nuanced interactional functions. In addition to coding the variants found, we also coded for a number of the primary linguistic factors which have been identified as affecting the occurrence or non-occurrence of a particular variable form, as shown in Table 2.

[Table 2 here]

Having outlined the methods used in our analysis, we now turn to our results.

**Results**

Table 3 shows how our data was distributed across the different situations in which Laila was recorded. As predicted, the total column suggests that frequency of the nonstandard varies depending upon which variable is considered. Demonstrative *them* is categorically nonstandard and irregular preterit forms are also nonstandard most of the time (the standard only occurs in the interview context but, even then, as the minority form). Both nonstandard *were* and negative concord are nonstandard about half of the time. On the other hand, definite article reduction is more frequently standard than any other variable. Of course, one explanation for these differences across variables could be that certain forms simply occurred more frequently in the linguistic environments that constrain their use (listed for each variable in Table 2). We explore this in the next section before turning to our main focus: the social correlates of these nonstandard forms.

[Table 3 here]

***Linguistic environments***

Although the low data counts precluded a multivariate analysis of the grammatical forms analysed, we manually examined each variable in turn to check for the possibility that linguistic environment had skewed our data distributions.

As a morphophonemic variable, DAR has a number of complex constraints. Tagliamonte and Roeder (2009: 455) found preceding sonorant to have the greatest effect on the realisation of the definite article as [ʔ] or [t], and our data also show this same effect: 94.1% (16/17) of [ʔ] or [t] tokens were preceded by sonorants. Tagliamonte & Roeder (2009:455) find the opposite (and weaker) effect for tokens realised as zero. We found this too: only 42.9% (3/7) of zero realisations were preceded by a sonorant. (Note that we combine [ʔ], [t], and zero realisations as nonstandard forms in Tables 2 and 3.) Sonority clearly affects the kind of DAR that occurs, but it does not explain why nonstandard forms occur in the first place, given that standard forms occur predominantly in the dataset across all contexts (98/121, 80.1%). We take this to indicate that, despite these linguistic constraints, DAR is socially conditioned as also demonstrated by Tagliamonte & Roeder (2009). Of course, as with all our linguistic variables, factors such as stress or emphasis likely affect the usage of DAR, so we account for this in our discussions of the extracts cited below.

Cross-tabulations show no obvious skew for linguistic factors and nonstandard *were*. Several previous studies (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1994; Tagliamonte 1998; Britain 2002; Moore 2010) have focused on the strong effect of negative polarity on nonstandard *were* occurrence but, in our data, the nonstandard form actually occurred more frequently in

positive polarity contexts (46/81 = 56.8%) than negative polarity contexts (4/9 = 44.4%). That is to say, there is robust use of the nonstandard form even in positive polarity contexts (something also found in the northern English data analysed in Moore 2010) across all situations of talk, suggesting that linguistic constraints alone do not explain the variation in our dataset.

There are very low data counts for our remaining variables. Despite low token counts, tokens of negative concord occur with a range of indeterminates (*anything/nothing*, *any/no*, *any more/no more*, *owt/nowt* and *anyone/no-one*), with several different verbs (e.g. BE, CAN, DO, HAVE) and with the negative particles *not* and *n't*. This is in line with previous research on dialects of British English by, for instance, Smith (2001) and Moore (2003: Chapter 4). The low data counts make it difficult to read anything into these distributions, nonetheless, they show that the tokens are not isolated to occurrences within one narrow set of linguistic environments.

Four verbs show irregular preterit forms (COME, SEEN, SHINE AND GIVE), so only these verbs are analysed here. The first three in this list are categorically nonstandard, whereas GIVE occurs twice in the interview data (where it is standard) and twice in the group data (where it is nonstandard). Despite the low data counts (17 tokens in total), the predominance of the nonstandard preterit for these variable verbs suggests that linguistic factors alone cannot explain the variation we observe.

Finally, all tokens of demonstrative *them* occurred as determiners in the direct object of a clause. They had both animate and inanimate complements, and were sometimes quantified (e.g. *all them people*). Despite variation in some of the linguistic environments discussed by Hazen et al. (2011), demonstrative *them* occurred 100% of the time across situations of talk, as shown in Table 3. Again, this suggests that their patterning in Laila's talk cannot be explained by linguistic environment alone.

Having established that the variation in our dataset is not easily (or at least comprehensively) explained by linguistic factors, we now turn to a consideration of the extralinguistic distribution of the variants in our dataset.

***Variation by situation of talk***

Our analysis collected data from three different situations: an interview, a group interaction, and a walk in Laila's neighbourhood. If we assume that the relative formality of a situation patterns with degrees of nonstandardness, then Table 3 shows expected patterns for some of our variables. The difference in the distribution of DAR across situation types is statistically significant (Fisher's Exact, two-sided, $p=0.002$): most notably, it occurs more frequently in the 'informal', 'intimate' friendship group context than in the 'formal', 'public' interview context. Although the numbers are too small to test statistical significance, negative concord also seems to pattern as expected (with more nonstandard forms in the group context than in the interview context). Similarly nonstandard preterit verbs are proportionally more frequent in the group context than the interview context. That these situations of talk correlate with how frequently speakers use these nonstandard forms seems to provide support for a link between informality (and its associated indexes) and nonstandard variants.

However, the correlation between situation of talk and use of nonstandard variants is not consistent across all of the variables shown in Table 3. Whilst DAR, negative concord and irregular preterit verbs all appear to pattern in line with the relative situational formality of the group and interview contexts, the difference across contexts for nonstandard *were* is not statistically significant (Fisher's Exact, two-sided, $p=0.794$). Furthermore, whilst numbers are small, demonstrative *them* occurs categorically irrespective of situation. This raises questions about how nonstandard morphosyntactic variants function in discourse.

Further evidence against treating nonstandard grammatical variants as simple indexes of informality can be found in the data from the walk context. This situation is less easily characterised in relation to formality. As Laila was talking whilst she was physically situated in her immediate neighbourhood, we might expect the situation to align best with the informality of everyday discourse. However, the precise context also situates her in the role of 'expert' (Laila was relaying her knowledge of the local area to 'outsiders'), in which case the situation may align best with the formality of educational discourse. There is much less data here than in the other contexts (and note that we had no data for negative concord or demonstrative *them* during the walk), but there is no obvious pattern in the variation: DAR occurs less frequently than in any other context, but irregular preterits and, especially, nonstandard *were* occur robustly.

The data from the walk context highlights the possibility that the relative formality of a situation (to the extent that this can be established) may correlate with frequencies of certain linguistic variants, but it cannot explain the interactional function or social meaning of those forms. In the remainder of our analysis, we seek to demonstrate that the variants found in different situations change because speakers tend to talk about different things and, as a result, are more or less likely to express different states and alignments in different situations (Cheshire 2005a: 99), rather than because nonstandard grammatical variants have fixed associations with formality or class.

Work on morphosyntax at the pragmatics/sociolinguistics interface is increasingly showing that variation in morphosyntax can be traced back to the pragmatic functions facilitated by the structure of a grammatical item. For instance, Acton and Potts (2014) consider the context-dependent semantics of demonstratives, showing how they can be utilized to suggest a sense of shared perspective between interlocutors. This potential is then available to speakers as stylistic resource which may be used variably by individuals

dependent upon tendencies to mark certain stances associated with group solidarity. Similarly, Glass' (2015) work on strong necessity modal verbs shows that *need to* is used over *have to* or *got to* when speakers have knowledge of the relevant domain – for instance, when the speaker has authority over the listener/hearer, or where they are mentoring the listener/hearer. She argues that *need to* occurs more frequently in these contexts because it enables the speaker to linguistically articulate their authority over the listener/hearer's priorities. This has implications for sociolinguistic patterning: we might expect the social distribution of strong necessity modal verbs to correlate with the relative power that different social groups hold.

These studies suggest that individuals exploit the pragmatic potential of different grammatical items in order to project certain interactional stances and assume certain types of social position. Stance is a notorious difficult concept to define and has been construed in a number of different ways (Ochs 1992; Kiesling 2004; Du Bois 2007; Jaffe 2009; Gray & Biber 2012). However, most definitions focus upon the acts of evaluation and alignment, such that, "Stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects" (Du Bois 2007: 163). The taking of a stance can be facilitated by exploiting the pragmatics of a particular linguistic item. For instance, in Acton and Potts' (2014) work, the ability for demonstratives to express shared perspective (a pragmatic function) can be used to project a positive alignment (a stance), allowing the speaker to present themselves as a member of a particular social group (a social position). This suggests that the social meaning of grammatical items is not a simple reflex of how frequently they occur in certain situations or in the talk of certain social groups, but that sociolinguistic meaning is rooted in pragmatics (Cheshire 2005b: 501; Acton forthcoming),

such that "differences in meaning beget differences in use along social lines" (Acton 2019: 45).

Given the importance of pragmatics, how do we interrogate the interactional functions of nonstandard grammatical items? In the next section, we suggest a methodology for identifying the stylized use of grammar and provide an analysis demonstrating how individual variants differ in their interactional functions.

### *The stylizing of grammatical variation*

Several recent studies have suggested that it is possible to tease out the social meaning of phonetic variants by identifying instances of language use which go beyond the mundane in their expression of affect, alignment or social positioning. These studies have focused upon occasions where the use of a phonetic variant is extreme, either by virtue of frequency, or by phonetic intensification (Podesva 2011; Kirkham 2013: chap. 7; Tamminga, Mackenzie & Embick 2016; Sharma & Rampton 2015; Van Hofwegen 2017; Leach 2018: chap. 7; Tamminga forthcoming). Such 'extreme' use of a phonetic variant may be considered to exemplify an instance of *stylization*, in that it represents "a partial or momentary disengagement from the routine flow of unexceptional business" (Rampton 2006: 255). However, it is important to note that this interpretation of stylization does not fully equate to how the concept has been applied in work on "crossing" (Rampton 2006), "initiative style-shift" (Bell 2001) or "high performance" (Coupland 2007). Drawing upon Bahktin (1981: 362), this work defines stylization as "an artistic representation of another's linguistic style", in the sense that speakers use linguistic variants more typically associated with a social identity not typically associated with or assumed by the speaker themself. However, Coupland (2007: 146) has noted there is a scale that runs between "*mundane performance* and *high performance.*" That is to say, instances of stylization may not just involve strategic

use of cross-category styles, but also strategic use of an in-group variant. Consequently, not wishing to circumscribe where one style begins and another ends, we follow a trend in sociolinguistic research that identifies stylization as any deviation from a speaker's most mundane vernacular – whether that is adopting variants ideologically associated with other groups, or extreme use of a variant already present in their own everyday talk (Johnstone 1999; Snell 2010; 2018b; Kirkham 2013; Van Hofwegen 2017; Leach 2018).

How might we identify such instances of stylization? In her work on the stylized use of vowels, Van Hofwegen (2017) suggests that we can use quantitative measures to identify a 'baseline' articulatory target for phonetic variants which can be compared with more 'stylized' articulations (marked by extreme formant measurements and longer durations). The baseline rate may indicate something about a speaker's native acquisition of the form, with 'stylized' articulations indicating moments of heightened sociolinguistic salience. In this approach to stylization, quantitative and qualitative techniques are combined. The quantitative data makes it possible to identify the extent of deviations from a speaker's norm (without having to rely upon intuition or what is salient to the analyst). Subsequent qualitative analysis can then by employed to deduce the extent to which these fluctuations in language use reflect shifts in alignment or social positioning, facilitated by a form's pragmatics.

Van Hofwegen's work identifying stylized use of linguistic variants is applied to phonetic variants only – as is the case in similar work discussed above that seeks to quantify variation from a baseline linguistic norm. Phonetic variants may exhibit degrees of nonstandardness by virtue of variation in phonetic intensity and acoustic extremes. However, morphosyntactic variation is categorical in nature (for instance, there are two or more variants – such as nonstandard *were* or standard *was* – rather than degrees of nonstandardness). Van Hofwegen (2017: 158–160) notes that it is still possible to calculate baseline frequencies of

categorical variants if data can be obtained across a number of contexts of use. Table 3 shows that DAR is used by Laila 19.3% of the time across all situations in which she was recorded. Thus, we might consider 19.3% DAR use to be Laila's baseline, and stylized use might be indicated by occasions in which DAR is used in excess of this baseline rate. In the following discussion, we consider the baseline rates for each variable to be the percentage figure shown in the final column of Table 3.

In order to explore the social meaning of nonstandard grammatical variants, we begin by identifying use of nonstandard grammatical variants which deviates from Laila's baseline usage. Figures 1-3 provide graphs of the raw frequencies of the variants analysed in Laila's data. These figures are separated into the situations in which Laila was recorded – not to imply a causal link between situation and social meaning, but simply to chart the variants as they occurred in our dataset. Demonstrative *them* is not shown in any of the figures because this is invariant in Laila's speech, and negative concord is not shown in Figure 2 because there are no tokens of negation with postverbal indeterminates in the walk data.

Figures 1-3 show occasions where there is heightened use of particular linguistic variants. In Figure 1, there is co-occurrence of nonstandard variants around 31-32 minutes into Laila's interview. At this time point, there are five tokens of the definite article and four of these are reduced (Figure 1a). If we are aiming to identify stylized uses of DAR, then the occurrences between the 31$^{st}$ and 32$^{nd}$ minute seem to be especially marked – notwithstanding the small numbers, DAR occurs in this two minute segment at a rate of 80% (4/5 tokens) – well in excess of the base rate of 19.3%.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Similarly, Figure 1b shows nonstandard *were* occurring 7 times (out of 8 possible tokens: 88% of the time [baseline rate = 55.6%]), and Figure 1c shows negative concord occurring twice (out of two possible tokens [baseline rate = 41.7%]). There is also an occurrence of an irregular preterit form in this segment of talk, shown in Figure 1d (although it is difficult to interpret this in relation to the baseline rate of 41.7%). Nonetheless, taken together, these figures seem to show what Podesva (2008) refers to as a 'style cluster' and what Tamminga et al. (2016) refer to as a pattern of 'microcovariation'.

Extract 3 provides an extract of the interview, taken from the 31st-32nd minute. Laila is being interviewed by one of the paper authors, Sarah, and they have moved from talking about Laila's experience within the local area to discussing the birth of Laila's friend's baby. Extract 3 follows on from Laila saying that she had had to go to the hospital that morning. Sarah asks if Laila had been to visit Lucy, a youth club attendee who had recently had a baby. Laila corrects Sarah by saying she'd had to accompany her mum to a physiotherapy session, but she then goes on to talk about Lucy and her experience of child birth – the content of Extract 3. In this extract, possible tokens of DAR, negative concord, nonstandard *were* and irregular preterit verbs are underlined and nonstandard variants are bolded. Nonverbal occurrences or notes are contained in round brackets.

Extract 3: Exciting new baby

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Laila | I should have gone to see Luce but my mum said it |
| 2 | | **weren't** visiting times. |
| 3 | Sarah | It's the day after as well, [she might] still be a bit |
| 4 | Laila | [Yeah] |
| 5 | Sarah | sore and stuff, [might she?] |

Laila [But she was] gonna come home yesterday but she **were** weak and she couldn't walk properly so hopefully she's home today.

Sarah Aww

Laila But she said he didn't wake her up in **[?]** night. But my mum said wait til he gets home because - You're only in **[?]** hospital then.

Sarah I think like when they first come out babies they're dead quiet, aren't they, but then .. three days, four days later..

Laila But she said he kicked off when Joe left…

Sarah Aww

Laila yesterday.

Sarah So are they still together then?

Laila Yeah. She'll have moved in with Joe - in with his mum and dad .. like .. because .. she **were** living in a hostel.. like in the mum and baby unit. And Joe's mum said it's better 'cause at least you know they - they're all there.

Sarah Mm

Laila And she can move with them until they're settled and they can find a place. And.. she lives there now.

Sarah So was Joe living with her in the hostel or just -

Laila No 'cause.. only she could live there 'cause it **were** just for m- It **were** just mother and baby unit.[3]

Sarah Aww … It'll be nice to see her when she

[visits]

Laila [I] can't wait to see her

Sarah (INAUD)

Laila But he looks tiny. He weighed seven pound two ounces.

Sarah That's like average isn't it? That's quite big?

Laila But he really does look tiny.

Sarah They do when they've just come out though, don't they … Was her labour alright?

Laila **She didn't have no pain relief** or - She had three puffs on gas - on gas and air and she chucked it and then she just.. gave birth.

Sarah No. I need to talk to this woman, [I need to find out how she did it]

Laila [(LAUGHS) She said] it **were** **[?]** worst pain of her life but - she got Tom at **(Ø)** end of it so it **were** alright after that. As soon as - As soon as he **come** out and they put him on her chest she said - she forgot about everything.

Sarah Aww. She did really well then didn't she not to [(INAUD)]

Laila [To say] she's only sixteen and **she's not having no pain relief** whatsoever.

Sarah Whoa … Did her mam go in with her?

Laila I don't know, I know her sisters went up. I don't know who else went up there.

Sarah Mm-hm

58 Laila But Joe, his brother and Joe's friend are going up to
59 see her.
60 Sarah Mm … Exciting new baby.

The talk here represents conversation between interlocutors who share knowledge and understandings of the protagonists who feature in the talk. It could clearly be characterised as informal in tone but, importantly, it is intimate in content. Notably, just before this extract begins, Sarah is the person to first mention Lucy – showing her knowledge of youth club members and friendships, and situating herself as an insider – and Sarah continues to display this insider knowledge (for instance, on l.19, she demonstrates that she knows the baby's father is called Joe). For context, Sarah was 32 years old, a homeowner and six months' pregnant at the time with her first baby. Her position is significantly different from Lucy's, who is sixteen years old, with a newborn, and homeless. This inevitably has an impact on the conversation, although Sarah clearly works to positively align with Laila, and Laila's account of Lucy and her baby. She provides several affective displays throughout the extract (use of 'Aww' in l.9, l.17, l.31 and l.50) which express pleasure and affection, and show her enjoyment of Laila's narrative. Although, as the narrative's recipient, Sarah is in a position to evaluate the story (Ochs & Taylor 1992), Sarah is not the sole 'judge' of the content of the interaction. There are shifts in the balance of authority in this extract. Whilst Sarah shows she is more knowledgeable about newborns in the early days and their size (ll.13-15; l.36, l.38), she concedes her inexperience in l.43-44, when she says that she needs to speak to Lucy about not using pain relief in childbirth. Subsequently, Laila becomes the authority on childbirth, reiterating Lucy's account of it in ll.45-49. Both Sarah and Laila then collaboratively positively evaluate Lucy's efforts in ll.50-53, concluding the narrative with a display of positive interlocutor alignment.

How do the instances of nonstandard grammar correlate with these particular interactional states and alignments, and to what extent do they operate in harmony to articulate a particular style of speech? To explore these questions further, we now turn to discuss each of the nonstandard variants found in Extract 3 in turn, comparing their use in Extract 3 with other situations in which Laila was recorded.

***Definite Article Reduction and emotional engagement***

In the interview, the stylized uses of DAR occur when Laila is relating events around heightened affective states (childbirth, having a newborn) and as Laila and Sarah collaboratively construct the account of Lucy's new baby. If we look more closely at the specific instances of DAR in Extract 3, we can also see that they occur in moments when Laila is more specifically reporting how Lucy describes her experience of having a newborn (ll.10-12) and the birth itself (ll.45-46). That is to say, they occur in moments when Laila is directly relating the emotional states experienced by her friend around childbirth. The one occasion on which the full form of the definite article occurs is on l.22. This occurs in the expression 'the mother and baby unit'. It is notable that this is a proper name which includes the definite article itself. Furthermore, this utterance describes the factual information about Lucy's accommodation, not the event of her child's birth.

[FIGURES 2 AND 3 HERE]

Is the correlation between use of DAR and heightened affect found on other occasions when DAR is stylized? In the walk, DAR only occurs once out of 17 possible occurrences. This single token of DAR occurs in the twentieth minute, where two definite articles are uttered – one the full form and one a reduced form, [t], as shown in Extract 4. They occur

when Laila briefly goes into her house to collect something. Her mum attempts to talk to her and Laila tells her she is recording.

Extract 4: Chatting with mum

1 Because I've got- I'm recording on a.. art trip. We're
2 walking around the estate but I just need to.. I'm coming in
3 to get my bus pass cos we're going on a trip. [INAUDIBLE
4 SPEECH FROM MUM] Palm- Palmby Play Centre. [INAUDIBLE SPEECH
5 FROM MUM] Play Centre, after Play Scheme. Can Deja ring her
6 mum off your phone? [INAUDIBLE SPEECH FROM MUM] Yeah!
7 [INAUDIBLE SPEECH FROM MUM] I can't! Just go in **[t]** room.

Laila is audibly frustrated in Extract 4 and this frustration increases as she continues to talk to her mum. The volume of her speech raises considerably and Laila is clearly exasperated in the utterance including DAR on l.7. Like Extract 3, this instance of DAR occurs in talk between intimates but, unlike Extract 3, Laila is not relating a narrative – she is expressing an emotional response to her mum's behaviour.

Is use of DAR in the group recording also linked to emotive content? Figure 3 shows that, although use of DAR is generally high overall in this setting (18 occurrences in 54 tokens, 33.3%), there is a particularly noticeable set of three DAR tokens at 42 minutes. They occur in an extended discussion of ways of talking.

Extract 5: Like Titanic

1 Sarah But right at the beginning of this conversation, Laila
2 said, 'When you talk to someone posh, you feel like..'
3 what? .. 'like an idiot' , [did you say?']
4 Laila [Yeah.]
5 Sarah Does anyone else feel like that, or is that just
6 Laila?
7 (General agreement)
8 Laila It's like they think- it's like.. you know when
9 someone's posh, it makes you feel like...
10 Abi It jus- it just makes you think that like they're
11 better than you, innit?
12 Laila Yeah, like you're.. like, you're- you know like
13 Titanic when they had all **(Ø)** posh people on **[t]** top,
14 and all the lower class people on **[t]** bottom. It can
15 be like that.
16 Sarah Just through the way of talking?
17 Laila Yeah, because it's like, they think they're better,
18 cos.. How you talk comes across as not r- not normal.
19 Like they pronounce all their words.. properly.

In Extract 5, Laila is relating her experience of being a speaker of nonstandard language. It is a personal account of how she feels ('like an idiot', l.3 – as recounted by Sarah from an earlier conversation), which is corroborated by her friend, Abi ('like they're better than you', ll.10-11). Laila use of the Titanic simile is eloquent in articulating the injustice of language evaluation and her personal experience of it – she artfully explains how her talk is perceived

as ‘not normal’ (l.18). Laila knows this situation is not fair (note that she says that people ‘think they’re better’, l.17, not that *she* thinks they are better) and she is speaking candidly, personally and expressing her feelings. The instances of DAR in ll.13-14 occur in this emotionally-charged context.

Whilst the instances of DAR examined here are limited, they indicate that reduced variants seemed to be used when the information being relayed is talk between intimates where emotional states are being communicated or directly experienced. This suggests that there are certain pragmatic constraints on the use of DAR, which link to its distribution in Laila’s talk. The pragmatic potential of the definite article has been explored by Acton (2019). He notes that “speakers must wield *the* with care, for the use of this unassuming function word, commonest of all English expressions, can in fact send potent social signals” (Acton 2019: 37). Whilst Acton (2019: 38) focuses on what he calls the ‘distancing effect’ of *the*-plurals (‘the Americans’) compared to bare plurals (Americans), we might wonder about the more general ways in which presence or reduction of this form is indicative of alignments between speakers and listeners, and between speakers and the content of their talk. The definite article has been described as conveying familiarity (Abbott 2008). Given that the reduced form is typical of Laila’s vernacular, we might wonder whether this variant of the definite article is the one best able to communicate this function in Laila’s talk. Whilst much more data would be required to substantiate this hypothesis, the occurrence of DAR in Laila’s speech could suggest that moments of emotional engagement are themselves an expression of familiarity that does not have to be additionally marked by conventional grammatical structure. In this way, DAR signals Laila’s emotional engagement, enabling her to evoke a stance of intimacy with her interlocutor and/or her talk.

The correlation between use of nonstandard variants and emotional engagement has been documented in other sociolinguistic studies. Indeed, as Leach (2018: 280) notes when

observing a correlation between /h/-dropping and heightened emotion, Labov's 'danger of death' question elicited vernacular variants because it tasked the speaker with recalling an emotionally-charged event. In relation to morphosyntax, Braber (2006) notes discourse variation in German speakers, dependent upon their emotional investment when discussing the fall of the Berlin Wall, and Snell (2010) links stylized use of a possessive *me* to moments of heightened affect (marked by co-occurrence with verbs of emotion). Whilst we would not argue that emotional engagement is the sole pragmatic function of DAR, our data suggests that it is one dimension of its indexical value, and one which is more relevant to its social meaning than the precise situation in which this linguistic form occurs.

***Nonstandard* were *and 'real me'***

Unlike DAR, the distribution of nonstandard *were* across situations of talk was not statistically significant. It occurs so frequently and so variably across our recordings that it is difficult to isolate a discrete pragmatic function associated with Laila's use of this variable in discourse. Nonetheless, we saw that there seemed to be a set of stylized occurrences in Extract 3, where nonstandard *were* use exceeded the baseline rate for use of this variant. Recall that Extract 3 represents conversation between interlocutors who share knowledge and understandings of the content of the talk. It is personal in tone and intimate in content. The talk is collaborative and includes displays of positive interlocutor alignment.

Research on phonetic variation by Sharma (2018) provides clues about how nonstandard *were* might be functioning in Laila's talk. In an examination of how a bi-dialectal media personality, Fareed Zakaria, shifts between Indian English and American English, Sharma (2018) observes how Zakaria tends to shift to his first-learnt lect, Indian English, in moments of unvarnished frankness – a process that she refers to as 'biographical indexicality'. She suggests that individuals may style shift in this way when this shift is

interpretable to the listener (because of shared knowledge about the speaker's personal biography). Drawing upon Soukup (2009: 162–163), Sharma (2018: 24) notes that these shifts coincide with "a very particular cluster of stances and acts that are often associated with vernacular voices: dismissing, rebutting, parentheticals, arguing, ridiculing, asides, teasing, irony, and generally telling it like it is".

The last of these, 'telling it like it is,' reflects Laila's stance in Extract 3. Relative to her interlocutor, Laila positions herself as someone fit to tell the frank and detailed version of Lucy's story. She achieves this by highlighting her relationship with Lucy (who is referred to by the familiar name 'Luce' on l.1), and correcting Sarah about the details of the story (rebutting Sarah's assumption that new mothers don't come home from hospital the day after birth on l.6). Laila positions herself interactionally as the person capable of relating the unvarnished circumstances of her friend's state after giving birth ('she were weak', l.6), Lucy's less than ideal living arrangements ('it were just mother and baby unit', l.30; 'she were living in a hostel', l.21), and the intense pain of the birth ('it were [ʔ] worst pain of her life', l.45; 'it were alright after that', l.46). Here, the pragmatic function of *were* is related to it being the majority – potentially the 'default' – form in Laila's discourse. This contextual knowledge may allow her interlocutor (who has an intimate relationship with Laila) to interpret extreme use of nonstandard *were* as interactionally significant.

In this way, the occurrences of nonstandard *were* in this extract may reflect the act of Laila 'telling it like it is', rather than being indicative of more specific micro-interactional alignment (as was the case with DAR). The relatively high incidence of nonstandard *were* across all of the situations in which Laila was recorded may reflect the normative status of nonstandard *were* in Laila's speech: it is her usual way of talking and it is possible that it may be dialled up to perform 'real me' positioning in interaction.

***Negative concord, emphasis and evaluation***

Negation with postverbal indeterminates (e.g. *I didn't ever go in that house/I didn't never go in that house*) is not frequent, so numbers of tokens for this variable are low.[4] Nonetheless, negative concord has a baseline use of 41.7% (5/12) in Laila's discourse. This suggests that the two occurrences of negative concord in the 32nd minute of the interview are stylized. These are shown on lines 40 and 52-53 in Extract 3. What is the function of these instances of negative concord? Negative concord has been described as "arguably the most common stigmatized variable in the English language" (Eckert 2000: 216). Other studies have also shown correlations between use of negative concord and rebelliousness – given the increased use of this form in groups identified as 'delinquent' (Cheshire 1982; Eckert 2000). Given these findings, we might wonder if negative concord facilitates Laila's expression of some kind of rebellious or subversive positioning. However, whilst it is possible that the instances of negative concord in Extract 3 relate to the articulation of 'toughness' (a quality compatible with 'rebelliousness'), Laila's depiction of her friend not requiring pain relief during childbirth is not explicitly associated with rebellious behaviour.

Rather than looking to the social distribution of negative concord to decode its discourse function, it may be more helpful to think about what the structure of negative concord allows it to convey pragmatically, given that the form is relatively frequent in Laila's speech. Unlike standard negation with postverbal indeterminates, negative concord has multiple negation markers. It has been noted that the meaning expressed by negative concord may be intensified by this repetition (Labov 1984; Eckert & Labov 2017: 469), or that the repetition of negative particles may function to communicate emphasis (Cheshire 1987: 270, citing Edwards, Trudgill & Weltens 1984; Palacios 2017). It is possible, therefore, that the syntactic structure of negative concord may allow speakers to communicate emphasis, intensity or evaluation, as argued by Moore (forthcoming).

Laila's observation that Lucy did not require pain relief in childbirth is, perhaps, surprising information, given the well-known intensity of birth pain. In this sense, it is an observation worth emphasising – so much so, that Laila states it twice, using the two instances of negative concord to do so. Laila also emphases the significance of Lucy's feat by citing her age on l.52. The remarkableness of not having pain relief is recognised by Sarah with her joke that she needs to talk to Lucy in l.43 and her expression of "Whoa" in l.54. In this way, both Laila and Sarah align to positively evaluate Lucy's stoicism.

Does negative concord function similarly to mark emphasis, intensity or evaluation elsewhere in Laila's discourse? Figure 3 indicates that there is differentiation in the use of negative concord in the group recording, where there are four tokens of negation with postverbal indeterminates: two instances of negative concord occur in the first half of the recordings and two instances of standard negation occur in the latter part of the recording. The first instance of negative concord is shown on l.12 of in Extract 6. The girls in the group are discussing how the dialect of their local area, 'Green Acre', is perceived.

Extract 6: Green Acre talk

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Sarah | What did your dad say? That sounds interesting. |
| 2 | Laila | He said I've got a Green Acre talk. |
| 3 | Sarah | What's a Green Acre talk? |
| 4 | Laila | Because like.. |
| 5 | Abi | Dead chavvy. |
| 6 | Laila | Yeah it - No it's not chavvy. It's just like - … I |
| 7 | | don't know. |
| 8 | Sarah | Right, [this is interesting]. |

9 Laila [My mum talks -] My mum, my mum totally said
10 'cause you're all off Green Acre you all talk like it
11 but - **you can't say nothing** either Abi as well - Like
12 proper common like…

As Laila is explaining what Green Acre talk is like, her friend, Abi, interjects to say that Green Acre talk is 'Dead chavvy' (l.5). In British English, *chavvy* derives from the 'chav' character type, which has connotations of low social status and is associated with outspoken and uncouth behaviour. Notably, Abi has only lived in the area for a short period so her comment is critiquing Laila's dialect but not her own. In addition to denying Abi's claim in l.6-7, Laila use of negative concord on l.11 suggests to Abi that she is in no position to criticise other people's accents. In this instance, then, Laila's use of negative concord functions to simultaneously dispute Abi's evaluation of her own talk, and also to evaluate Abi's talk in return. In this way, a pragmatic function (the ability of negative concord to express emphasis and evaluation) is used to distance Laila from Abi in this interactional moment.

The second instance of negative concord in the group interview, shown in Extract 7, is also used to dispute an assertion and mark distancing from an interlocutor's utterance. The girls have been talking about a late night visit to McDonalds and their noisy return home, when a boy from their neighbourhood, Carson, had complained about their noise (l.1). Abi didn't go with them and, after a comment about hearing them in the street (ll.1-2), Laila responds by disputing that the disturbance was her fault, using the instance of negative concord in ll.4-5.

Extract 7: McFlurries at midnight

Abi (INAUD) Carson were up, you know. Carson were- I heard you all - I heard you all

[(INAUD)]

Laila [He must've been at the window.] **I weren't even doing nothing**. I was like... I was in your house. I was- cos your brother was half asleep and he wanted a milkshake, I was like, "You can have some of this." I **were** feeding him McFlurry, then I went back downstairs, then Clarrie was there, and then, I don't know.[5]

The instance of negative concord in Extract 7 occurs as Laila emphases her innocence in the face of an accusation about her being noisy. Laila goes on to provide further evidence of her innocence by precisely listing her actions in ll.4-10, encouraging a re-evaluation of her behaviour as described by Abi.

All of these instances of negative concord seem to construct and reflect moments of emphasis and/or evaluation. Of course, this does not preclude the possibility that negative concord is used to index social status or 'delinquency' (or any number of states and stances which are ideologically associated with these characteristics). Nonetheless, as a reasonably frequent user of negative concord, Laila's use of this variant seems to express meanings that are connected to the pragmatics of this form.

***Irregular preterits and demonstrative* them *as default variants***

The irregular verbs that show variation in their preterit forms in Laila's speech rarely occur in the standard (overall, irregular preterits occur 16 times out of 18 tokens, or 88.9% of the

time). Given the frequency with which the nonstandard form occurs, we might think of it as Laila's default variant, with use of the standard, rather than the nonstandard, requiring explanation.

Both occurrences of standard irregular preterits occur in the interview, and they both occur with the verb GIVE. One occurs on l.42 of Extract 3. It occurs after a pause in Laila's speech and within an idiomatic expression: 'to give birth'. The other is shown in Extract 8, and occurs on l.2, following Sarah's noticing of a ring that Laila is wearing. Laila explains that the ring was given to Laila by her nannan (the Sheffield dialect word for 'grandmother').

Extract 8: Laila's ring

1 Mm that - That was my nannan's auntie's ring. And then when
2 she died… she **give** it to my nannan then my nannan just .. gave
3 it to me. 'Cause my nannan didn't wear it so she let me have
4 it.

Again, this standard irregular preterit form occurs after a pause in Laila's talk. Whilst it is not possible to reliably discern a pragmatic function for the standard form, the pauses preceding these examples suggest that Laila only uses this form when her speech becomes more inhibited.

Demonstrative *them/those* is the most infrequent of all of the variables considered in this paper (occurring only 8 times), but it is categorically nonstandard in Laila's talk – irrespective of the situation in which she is talking. Whereas there is evidence that Laila has standard irregular preterit forms in her repertoire, there is no evidence that she has standard demonstrative *those* in her repertoire. As with nonstandard irregular preterits forms, demonstrative *them* seems to be the default in Laila's speech. Consequently, it is difficult to point to any specific interactional function

for this form, given that it is used categorically. Of course, this is not to say that this form is not meaningfully used by other speakers, or even by Laila in situations not recorded during this study, but it does provide further evidence that not all nonstandard grammatical forms function to mark the same social meanings. We elaborate on this further below, where we discuss the diverse ways in which the nonstandard variants analysed in Laila's talk occur in her discourse, and the implications for how nonstandard grammar is characterised.

**Discussion**

Drawing upon previous research combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to stylization, our analysis used frequency correlations to isolate stylized moments of grammatical variation. This approach made it possible to identify an occasion (Extract 3) when nonstandard grammatical variants seemed to cluster in the talk of one individual, Laila. This 'style cluster' (Podesva 2008), or instance of 'microcovariation' (Tamminga, Mackenzie & Embick 2016) occurred when interlocutors positively aligned with each other to share knowledge and understandings of the content of the talk. The interaction was personal in tone, intimate in content, and collaboratively constructed. An investigation of the individual nonstandard variants that occurred during this style cluster suggested that different grammatical items helped to constitute this interactional style in subtly different ways. DAR seemed to function pragmatically to express emotional engagement which, in turn, may evoke stances typical of talk between intimates. The normative status of nonstandard *were* in Laila's discourse means that its pragmatic function may be intertwined with Laila's own identity, such that heightened use of this already frequent form may express a 'real me' positioning in her discourse. The syntactic shape of negative concord may allow it to express emphasis and evaluation – values which can be useful to as Laila distances herself from her interlocutor and the content of the surrounding discourse. Two other nonstandard grammatical items occurred in the same style cluster: nonstandard irregular preterit forms and demonstrative

*them.* The near categorical and categorical frequency with which these forms occurred in Laila's speech suggested that they were not utilised to communicate specific interactional detail (at least for Laila), although they undoubtedly add to the more general ways in which Laila's identity is perceived, as we discuss below.

What has this analysis added to our understanding of the kind of social meaning exhibited by grammatical variation? Firstly, whilst we would not deny that nonstandard morphosyntax is commonly associated with lower social class groups, our research demonstrates that these forms can also have important functions, which derive from their pragmatics. Furthermore, our analysis showed that different nonstandard variants function to communicate attributes that are more or less 'interior'. In her discussion of the nature of sociolinguistic meaning, Eckert (2019) notes that different linguistic variables exist on a "cline of interiority", whereby some index internal personal affective states, and others index more public, social facts about the speaker. We can see this by comparing DAR and nonstandard *were*. Whereas DAR seems to constitute affect, nonstandard *were* constitutes more enduring states, enabled by the association between use of a form and a speaker's most frequently projected persona (the 'real me'). This difference is reflected in the patterns of variation observed for these variables. DAR fluctuates by situation because it is more or less appropriate to articulate certain emotional states in certain situations, whereas nonstandard *were* use is more stable because it reflects more enduring speaker qualities, with certain stylized uses occurring at moments where more enduring aspects of a speaker's identity are foregrounded to highlight the speaker's commitment to the content of their talk. In both cases, what explains their patterning is the need to express certain states which may be more or less likely to occur in different situational contexts.

Although DAR and nonstandard *were* may differ in placement on a cline of interiority, they are both used strategically. Is this the case for all nonstandard grammatical variants? The data from irregular preterits and demonstrative *them* suggests that these forms are not used to convey specific

states or positions in Laila's talk. Sharma and Rampton (2015: 8) have suggested that we ought to distinguish between strategic and nonstrategic use of variants, where nonstrategic uses may be associated with particular styles or identity characteristics (to some extent dependent upon language input), whereas strategic uses may reflect more subtle shifts in alignment. That is to say, nonstrategic use of nonstandard variants may be interpreted as socially meaningful by listeners (insomuch as they index persona or social group – characteristics that tend to endure across contexts) but they are not necessarily used by speakers to mark interactional positions. Instead, their use may reflect something about how linguistic forms are acquired and cognitive limitations on linguistic variation (for preliminary research on stylistic variation and cognitive processing, see Sharma and McCarthy 2018).

Our work demonstrates that the only way to distinguish between types of grammatical variable, and further investigate the types of social meaning articulated by any one specific variable, is to engage in discourse analysis of language use in interaction, a point coherently argued by Cheshire (2005b). This will allow us to discriminate between the ideologically-skewed interpretation of a linguistic form which arises from its social distribution (and reflects how typical speakers are viewed relative to a culture's hegemonic narrative of language value) and the more subtle pragmatic functions that many nonstandard grammatical variants fulfil in interaction. That is to say, whilst a nonstandard grammatical variant may be classified as stigmatised because of its relationship to macro-categories like social class, it does not mean that those who use nonstandard variants are unable to exploit these forms to communicate more subtle interactional moves. Disentangling these differing perceptions and functions is vital if we are to move beyond views of grammar that are dictated by ideologies of stigma and prestige. To understand why people use nonstandard grammar, we need to examine what they use it to do. The importance of better understanding what motivates the use of nonstandard grammar is further explored in the final section, where we consider the wider implications of our findings.

## Conclusion

Whilst sociolinguists have never claimed that grammatical variants all operate in precisely the same way, the tendency to focus on one variable at a time has made it difficult to unpick the full extent of sociolinguistic work undertaken by grammatical variants. Our study has shown that grammatical variants can work compositionally to construct style clusters but, also, that this does not necessarily mean that all grammatical variants share the same social meanings or the same interactional functions.

The nuanced ways in which grammatical variation functions has important implications. Learning more about the discourse embedding of grammatical variation will not only benefit our understanding of the social meaning of linguistic variation more generally, it also provides us with better evidence to advocate for alternative models of linguistic variability in educational discourse. The tendency to present nonstandard grammatical items as simple alternatives to standard forms fails to adequately reflect how language functions in everyday use. Furthermore, when educational policy presents language in this way, it advocates for a view of language which is at odds with many speakers' own experiences as language users. So long as it is important that children master written Standard English, we need to find ways to help them to understand what governs variation in their own language use. By providing clearer evidence of what social factors govern grammatical variation, we are better able to supply children, teachers and the general public with knowledge that can be applied to managing and manipulating different language styles. Laila's use of grammatical items suggests that some variants are more available for adaptation than others and/or that they occupy a broader continuum of social meaning than others. Furthermore, her linguistic dexterity provides evidence of communicative competence that goes far beyond the National Curriculum's aim for children to recognise the differences between formal and informal interactional contexts. This kind of communicative competence remains unacknowledged in educational contexts. We

suggest that the linguistic skill demonstrated by Laila and others (including the younger speakers in Snell's 2013 research) could be built upon in classrooms. If children do indeed require instruction on how to extend their repertoires and increase their use of features of Standard English in specific educational tasks, then building on how children already employ their linguistic repertoires in relation to interactional positioning and alignment – in addition to formality and situation – would be a sound pedagogical starting point.

Given the persistence of discriminatory views and practices around nonstandard language use (Cushing 2019; 2020), we need new ways to challenge deficit views of nonstandard dialects. If we are to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the social and pragmatic functions of morphosyntactic variation then our datasets and analyses should reflect how language is used in everyday interaction. This requires that sociolinguists look beyond phonological variation, and that they consider the interaction between morphosyntax and discourse. In order to effectively challenge the linguistic discrimination faced by speakers of nonstandard dialects, research needs to do more than simply evidence variation – we also need to talk about the richness of that variation and examine the strategic manipulation of it.

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Table 1. Summary of audio-data available for Laila.

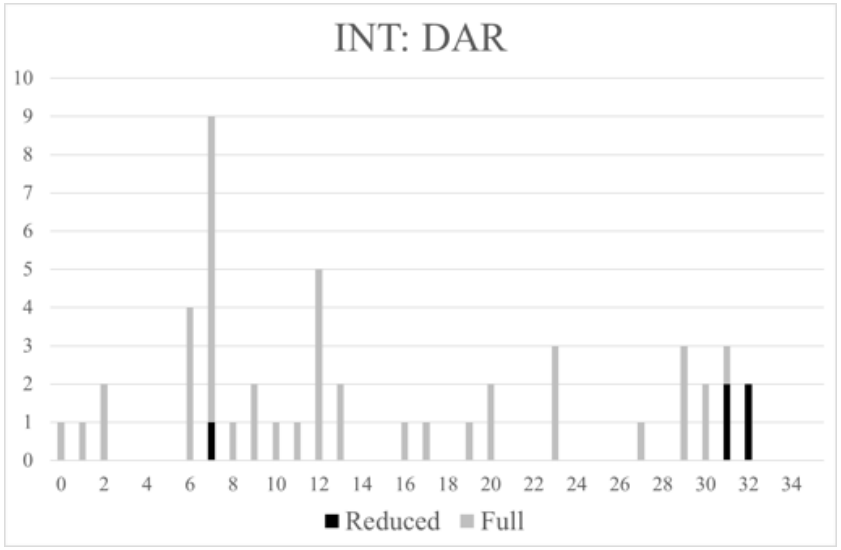
| **Situation** | **Length of recording (mins)** |
|---|---|
| One-to-one interview about artwork | 34 |
| Group discussion exploring knowledge about language | 81 |
| A walk in their neighbourhood, describing meaningful locations | 43 |

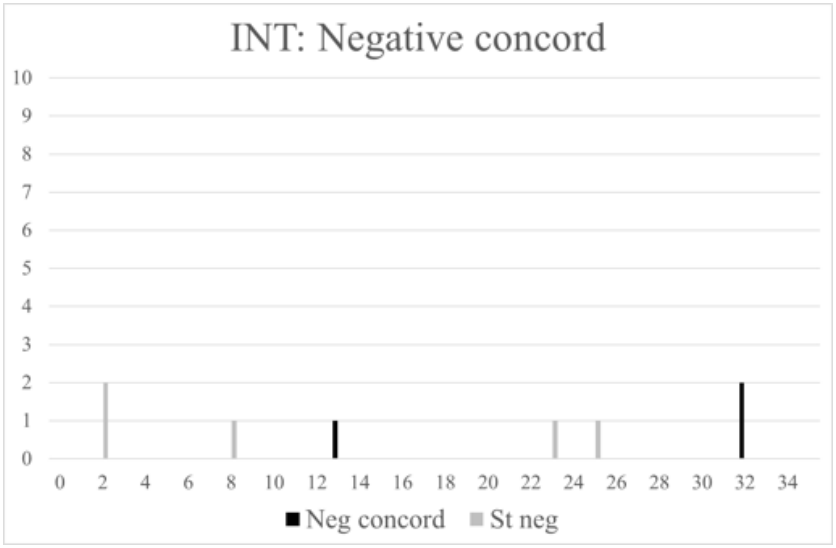
Table 2. Grammatical items coded for in the analysis

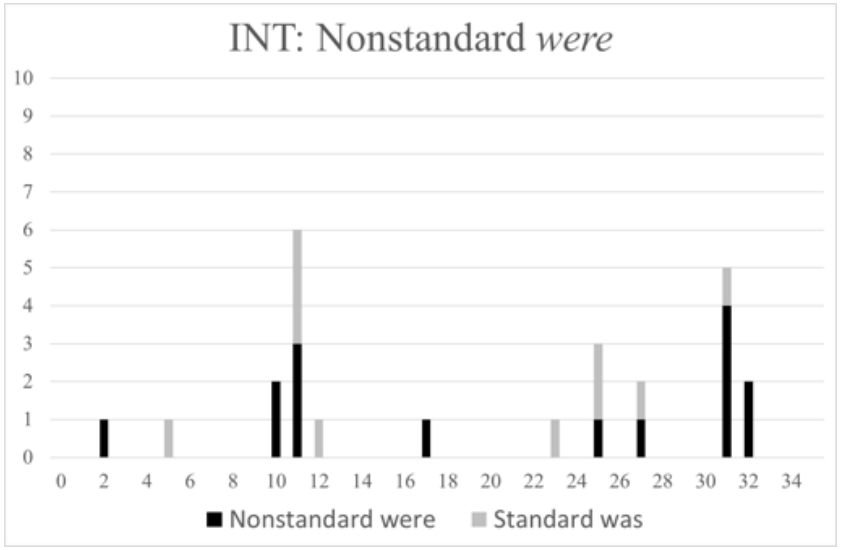
| **Variable** | **Example of Nonstandard variant in context** | **Nonst. variant(s)** | **Standard variant(s)** | **Linguistic factors coded** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Definite Article Reduction** | *I still went to [ʔ] shop* | [ʔ], [t], zero | [ðiː], [ðə] | Preceding phonological context, preceding grammatical context, following phonological context, type of noun |
| **Negative concord** | *I wasn't even doing nothing* | *not/n't ...*<br>*nothing*<br>*no-one*<br>*no more*<br>*no NP*<br>*nowt* | *not/n't ...*<br>*anything*<br>*any one*<br>*any more*<br>*any NP*<br>*owt* | Verb, negative element |
| **Nonstandard *were*** | *It were only a party* | *were* | *was* | Polarity, grammatical subject, clause type |
| **Irregular preterit forms** | *And then I seen the spider again* | *come*<br>*give*<br>*seen*<br>*shined* | *came*<br>*gave*<br>*saw*<br>*shone* | Verb, tense, subject type |
| **Demonstrative *them*** | *You know them bis-cuits, Viscounts?* | *them* | *those, these* | Promixity, syntactic category, animacy, quantification |

Table 3. Frequency of nonstandard variants by situation

| | **Interview** | | **Group** | | **Walk** | | **Total** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** | **N** | **%** |
| **DAR** | 4/48 | 8.3 | 18/54 | 33.3 | 1/17 | 4.4 | 23/119 | 19.3 |
| **Negative concord** | 3/8 | 37.5 | 2/4 | 50.0 | -- | -- | 5/12 | 41.7 |
| **Nonst. were** | 15/25 | 60.0 | 32/58 | 55.2 | 3/7 | 42.9 | 50/90 | 55.6 |
| **Irregular preterits** | 5/7 | 71.4 | 8/8 | 100 | 3/3 | 100 | 16/18 | 88.9 |
| **Dem. them** | 4/4 | 100 | 3/3 | 100 | -- | -- | 8/8 | 100 |


INT: DAR
Reduced
Full


INT: Negative concord
Neg concord
St neg


INT: Nonstandard were
Nonstandard were
Standard was

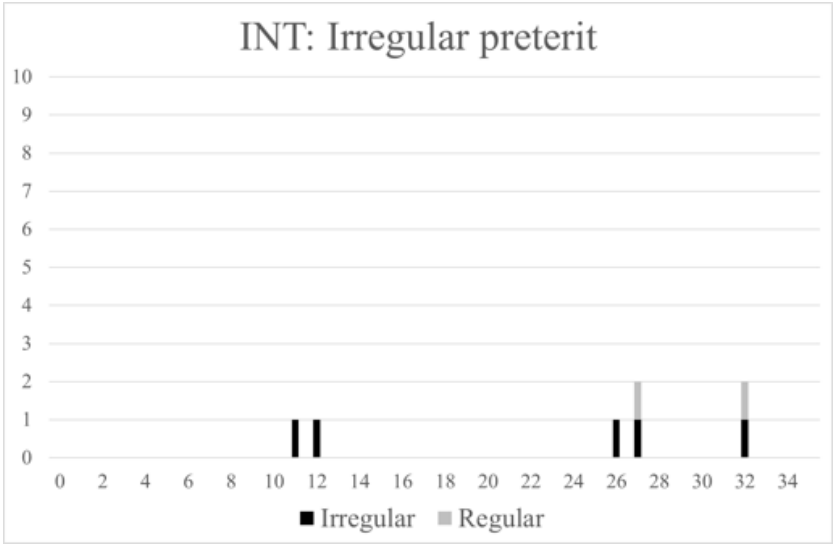
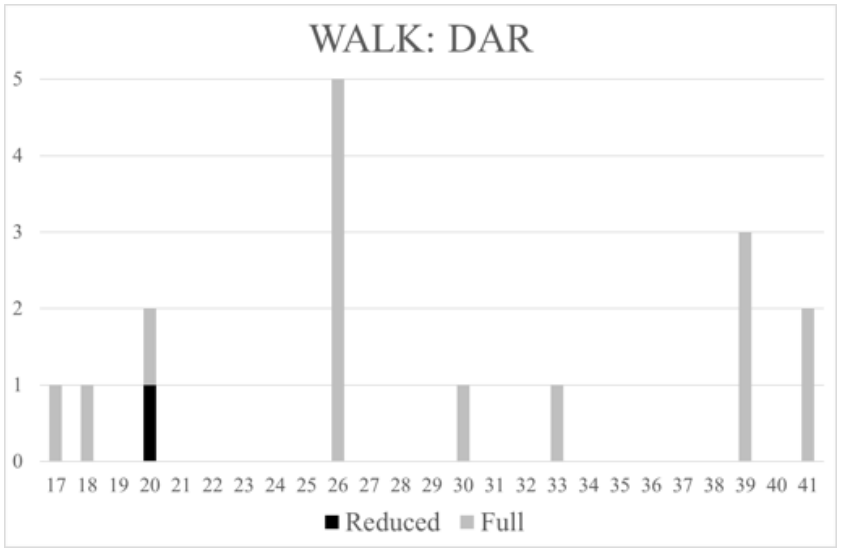
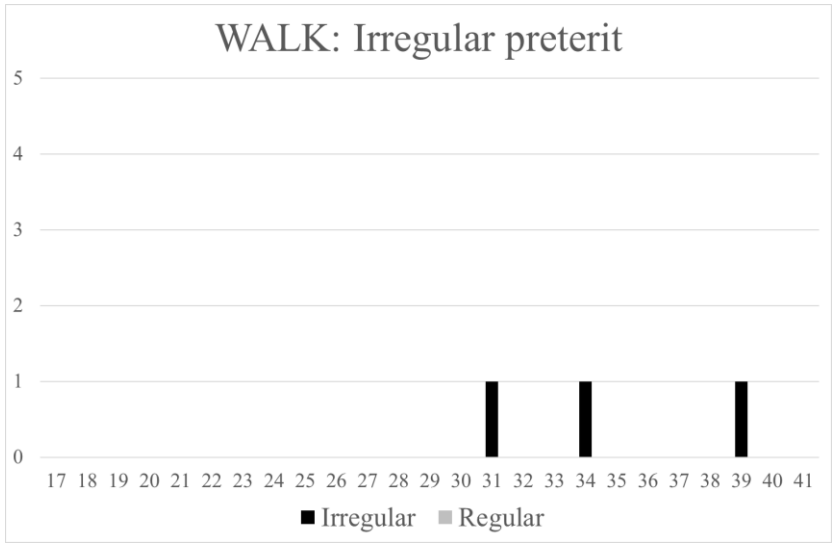

INT: Irregular preterit
Irregular
Regular

Figure 1. Time-aligned distribution of (a) definite article reduction (DAR), (b) nonstandard *were*, and (c) negative concord and (d) irregular preterit verb forms in the Interview context.



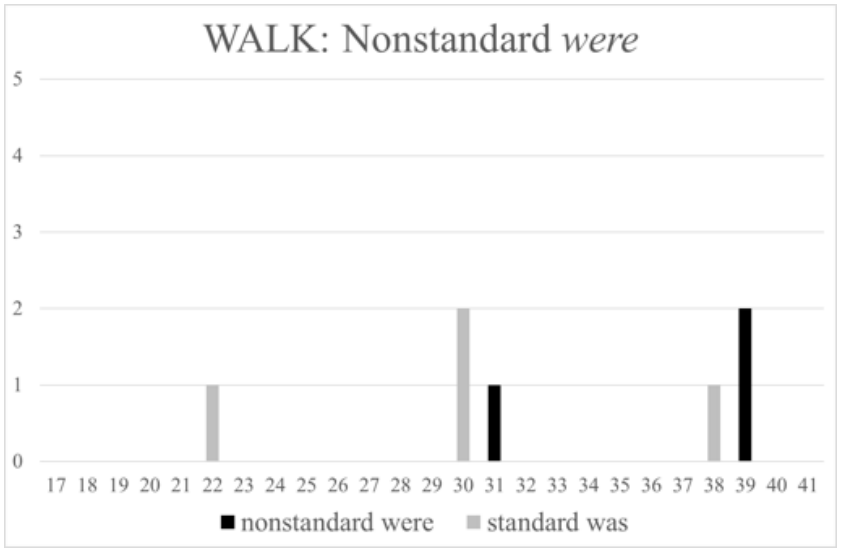
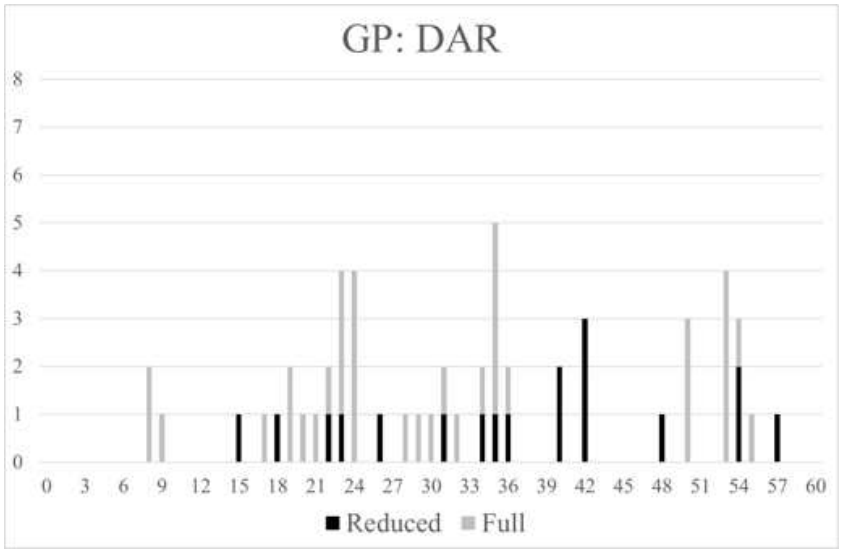
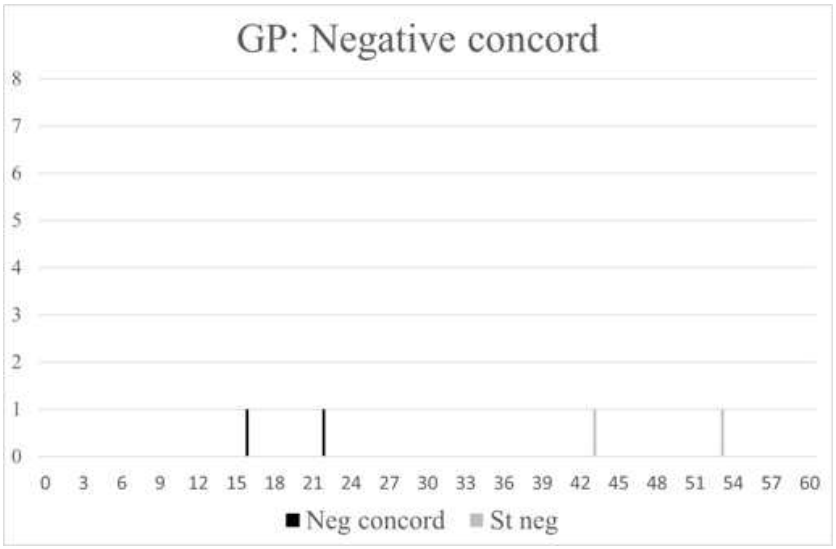
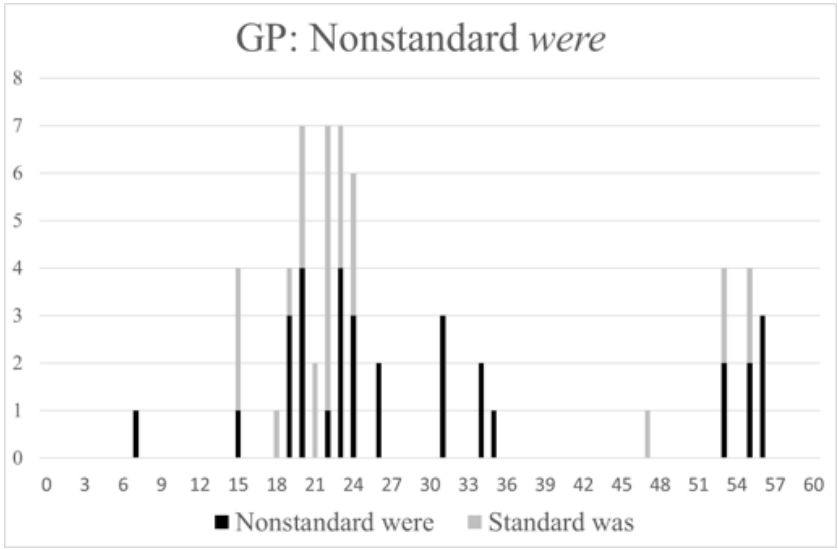




Figure 2. Time-aligned distribution of (a) definite article reduction (DAR), (b) nonstandard *were*, and (c) irregular preterit verb forms in the Walk context.


GP: DAR
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
0 3 6 9 12 15 18 21 24 27 30 33 36 39 42 45 48 51 54 57 60
Reduced
Full


GP: Negative concord
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
0 3 6 9 12 15 18 21 24 27 30 33 36 39 42 45 48 51 54 57 60
Neg concord
St neg


GP: Nonstandard were
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
0 3 6 9 12 15 18 21 24 27 30 33 36 39 42 45 48 51 54 57 60
Nonstandard were
Standard was

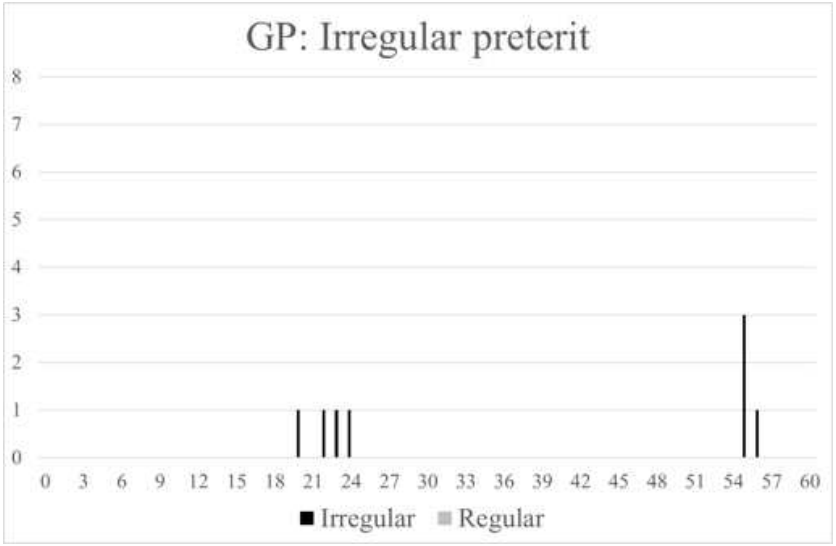

GP: Irregular preterit
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
0 3 6 9 12 15 18 21 24 27 30 33 36 39 42 45 48 51 54 57 60
Irregular
Regular

Figure 3. Time-aligned distribution of (a) definite article reduction (DAR), (b) nonstandard *were*, and (c) negative concord and (d) irregular preterit verb forms in the Group context.

Notes

1. We are grateful to the British Academy for the Mid-Career Fellowship (MD19\190028) which enabled Emma Moore to develop both the methods used in the analysis, and the theory explored in the discussion.

2. We use the term ‘nonstandard’ to refer to linguistic variants that are not codified in the standardised variety of a language. This reflects usual practice in variationist sociolinguistics. We recognize the hegemony of standard language ideologies and the potential for the term ‘nonstandard’ to further marginalize highly regular and frequent modes of language. However, alternative terms such as ‘regional dialect forms’ do not capture the fact that grammatical items are employed across regional and social styles of speech. Also, as our paper demonstrates, variants identified as ‘nonstandard’ are routinely stigmatized, whereas forms described as ‘regional’ are not always sanctioned in the same way or to the same degree; compare, for instance, the use of negative concord (*I didn’t do nothing* to mean ‘I didn’t do anything’) with the use of a variant like multiple modals (*I might could do it* to mean ‘I might be able to do it’). Our use of ‘nonstandard’ is intended to identify variants which undergo prescription precisely because of comparison with standardised alternatives. However, note that we refer to individual nonstandard variants as elements of a person’s diverse repertoire (Snell 2013), without presuming that a specific instance of a nonstandard form equates to speaking in a ‘nonstandard dialect’.

3. Whether or not there is an underlying definite article in the expression “It were just mother and baby unit” (l.30) is unclear. In reference to the unit on l.22, Laila does use a definite article, however, on l.30, Laila states ‘mother and baby unit’ in response to Sarah’s question about whether the baby’s father, Joe, was living with Lucy. The stress is on the word ‘mother’ here as Laila is emphasising that only mothers can be in this unit with their babies.

This emphasis would not be communicated if a definite article was used in this statement. Consequently, we do not consider this to be a genuine token of the definite article.

4. The term 'indeterminate' refers to indefinites which can carry negation (e.g. *any/no, ever/never*, *either/neither*; see Labov 1972d: 775).

5. Notably, there are eight potential occurrence of nonstandard *were* here, but only two (l.4 and l.8) are realised as the nonstandard form. One possible explanation for this is the linguistic context. It has been shown that nonstandard *were* only very rarely occurs with quotatives (such as the one on l.7), and there are some restarts in this section where a quotative is implied (e.g. two of the instances on l.5).