Supralocal or localized? *Was/were* variation in British English Dialects

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1 Introduction

Variation between standard *was/were* – shown in (1) – and non-standard *was/were* – shown in (2) – is a common feature of vernacular Englishes.[1] *Was/were* variation is attested in varieties of English across nations including England (Anderwald 2002, Britain 2002, Cheshire 1982, Cheshire and Fox 2009, Moore 2011, Pietsch 2005a, 2005b, Szmrecsanyi 2013, Tagliamonte 1998), Scotland (Adger and Smith 2010, Durham 2013), Northern Ireland (McCafferty 2003, Pietsch 2005a, 2005b), the Republic of Ireland (McCafferty 2004), the USA (Feagin 1979, Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994), the Dominican Republic (Tagliamonte and Smith 1999) and New Zealand (Hay and Schreier 2004).

(1) a. it **was** an interesting job [S10, Leeds]
b. my cards **were** selling quite well [S2, Newcastle]
(2) a. it **were** nowt posh [S5, Leeds]
b. they **was** absolutely covered in ivy [S72, Nottingham]
c. I **were** there six hours [S41, Newcastle]
d. we **was** talking to the barman [S16, Southampton]

In vernacular Englishes, often the variation between *was* and *were* becomes levelled to some degree. Levelling is a process which 'reduces the number of allomorphs a form has; it makes paradigms more uniform' (Campbell 2004:106). This often can result in the use of levelled *singular* agreement, which Chambers (2004) calls the 'default singular' and a 'vernacular universal' of English. That said, some English dialects exhibit *were*-levelling rather than *was*-levelling (see Section 2). Levelling can therefore trend either towards *was*-like forms or *were*-like forms, which is true across Germanic varieties (Trudgill 2008:350). The direction that any particular case of levelling will take is difficult to anticipate (Hock and Joseph 2009:153) and Trudgill (2008:343) argues that appealing to naturalness, markedness or frequency as explanations for the direction of levelling is inappropriate. Nevertheless, it is useful to try and establish 'some of the cooperative and competing principles that guide the analogical levelling process' (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994:274).

In this paper, we take up this challenge of examining what linguistic constraints are invoked in processes of linguistic change that may be ongoing in *was/were* agreement in contemporary vernacular British English. We investigate this variation in the English dialects of four cities representing distinct dialect areas within England: Newcastle upon Tyne (North East), Leeds (West Yorkshire, North), Nottingham (East Midlands) and Southampton (South).

2 *Was/Were* Agreement in England

In England, three main systems of *was/were* variation are found. The first is a *was*-levelled system, where *was* is found across the verbal paradigm (across person/number combinations), as found in regions including the North East of England (Beal 1993:194) and the Midlands (Anderwald 2002:186, Pietsch 2005b:78). The second system is a *were*-levelled system. Britain (2002:19) notes in relation to *were*-levelling dialects that 'the literature provides little detail of its present socio-geographical distribution or the linguistic constraints operative on such varieties'. However, *were*-levelling is known to occur in areas such as Bolton, Greater Manchester (Moore 2011) and has also

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[1]The examples given in (1)-(2) come from sociolinguistic interviews analysed in this paper (see Section 3 for further details). 'S2', 'S10' etc. are individual speaker identifiers.

been associated with southern Lancashire, south-west Yorkshire and Derbyshire (Pietsch 2005b:78). Anderwald (2002:186) also associates *were*-levelling with large parts of the North of England, south Midlands and London, based on data from the spoken part of the British National Corpus from the 1990s. However, other studies have shown that the South East of England is one of many areas with a third system of *was*/*were* variation – a 'split' generalized system, where the choice of *was* or *were* is sensitive to polarity (Cheshire 1982, Cheshire and Fox 2009). This manifests as a tendency towards *was* in affirmative clauses and *weren't* in negative clauses, as also found in York (Tagliamonte 1998) and East Anglia (Britain 2002). Pietsch (2005b:80) notes that this polarity-based constraint is found across all areas in the Survey of English of Dialects materials 'with the exception of the Central North and those parts of the NW Midlands and Lower North where *were* levelling is predominant in all environments'.

Further constraints on agreement in some dialects of English include those that form the Northern Subject Rule (NSR). The NSR originated in Northern England and Scotland at least as far back as the Middle English period, if not earlier (Cole 2014). It consists of two constraints, the Type of Subject Constraint (TSC) (3) and the Proximity to Subject Constraint (PSC) (4).

(3) The Type of Subject Constraint 'marks a verb with *-s* if its subject is anything but an adjacent personal pronoun' (Montgomery 1994:86).
(4) The Proximity to Subject Constraint 'marks with *-s* any verb having a personal pronoun subject not adjacent to the verb' (Montgomery 1994:86).

Although the definitions in (3)-(4) refer to *-s*, which may suggest that the NSR is pertinent to lexical verbs in the present tense, the constraints can also apply to *was*/*were* (Montgomery 1994:91; Pietsch 2005b:91). If the TSC applies, it would license non-standard singular agreement in contexts such as (5a) with an NP subject, but not contexts like (5b) where there is a personal pronoun subject that is adjacent to the verb. The PSC would, however, license non-standard singular agreement with pronominal subjects if they were non-adjacent, in an utterance like (5c).[2]

(5) a. the advertising hoardings **was** advertising something for Saudi Arabia [S2, Newcastle]
b. they **were** making the clay tile [S29, Nottingham]
c. they just sort of **was** like, "right, you need to know your algebra" [S8, Nottingham]

The NSR is variable and its constraints have weakened over time (Montgomery 1994). Childs (2013) observed this when carrying out an acceptability judgement questionnaire in four locations in England and Scotland, three of which were in traditional NSR areas (Hawick, Scotland; Wallsend, North Tyneside; Newcastle, Tyneside) and one of which was an area where the NSR did not originate (South East England). Results indicated that speakers in all of the fieldwork sites except Newcastle were attuned to the TSC, rating non-standard verbal *-s* as more acceptable with adjacent NP subjects than with adjacent pronoun subjects. The TSC is therefore potentially found more widely than areas where the NSR is well attested, and even within longstanding NSR areas, the constraint does not necessarily apply in the same way. The acceptability of pronoun subjects did not differ significantly according to the pronoun's adjacency to the verb or lack thereof, in any community, indicating that the PSC does not necessarily apply in contemporary English dialects (Childs 2013), as also suggested by Cole (2008:94). Montgomery (1994) even suggests that the PSC might only be a feature of Scots and Ulster Scots. Overall, the PSC might be 'the composite effect of several different patterns, of varying degrees of regularity, only some of which are specifically characteristic of the northern dialects whereas others are shared with many varieties elsewhere' (Pietsch 2005b:11). For example, increased distance between subjects and verbs can lead to lack of agreement independently of the NSR, as Levin (2001) found for agreement with collective nouns.

Existential constructions are also likely to promote lack of agreement, particularly singular agreement, across many dialects of English (Buchstaller et al. 2013, Cheshire and Fox 2009, McCafferty 2004, Montgomery 1997:136, Moore 2011, Pietsch 2005a, Schilling-Estes and

[2]In East Anglia – and possibly parts of the South East – there is a different set of constraints called the East Anglian Subject Rule. This behaves in the opposite manner to the NSR, with singular *-s* or *was* favored with pronouns (Britain 2002, Rupp & Britain 2019).

Wolfram 1994, Tagliamonte 1998). Example (6) shows the use of non-standard *was* with existential *there*.

(6) there **was** a few times when I kind of like messed up [S9, Southampton]

Was/*were* variation is therefore subject to many constraints that may or may not apply depending on the dialect. The direction of any levelling is also not consistent across varieties. With these observations in mind, we take a variationist sociolinguistic approach to analyze *was*/*were* variation in four regional dialects of British English using the methods described in Section 3.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection and Sample

The analysis in this paper uses sociolinguistic interview data collected in 2021-2022 as part of the AHRC-funded project 'Interactions in Grammatical Systems: North-South Dialect Variation in England' (Childs 2021-2023, grant number AH/V011073/1). In this paper, we analyze *was*/*were* variation in a sub-sample of 32 one-to-one interviews carried out by the second author on the online video-conferencing platform Zoom. This medium was chosen in light of increasing COVID-19 case numbers in the UK at the time of starting the data collection in November 2021. The interviews took the form of an informal conversation using a semi-structured sociolinguistic interview approach, asking questions on topics such as the local area, childhood, school, work, holidays and attitudes to the local dialect. A rigid structure was not followed, but rather participants were encouraged to take the conversation in whichever direction they chose.

The participants in the present sample are all drawn from one of four English cities or their surrounding areas. From north to south, these cities are: Newcastle-upon-Tyne (North East), Leeds (West Yorkshire, North), Nottingham (East Midlands) and Southampton (South). The present sample comprises 32 speakers – 8 per location – balanced across two age groups and (near-)balanced across two gender groups.

	Newcastle	Leeds	Nottingham	Southampton
Male 18-30	2	2	2	1
Female 18-30	2	2	2	3
Male 50+	2	2	2	2
Female 50+	2	2	2	2

Table 1: Sample of speakers.

Participants were selected for the study based on the following criteria: they had been born and raised in one of the four areas; they self-described as working class; they were aged 18-30 or 50+; they had not spent significant time outside the area in which they were born/raised; and they considered their accent/dialect to be broadly representative of the local area.

3.2 Data Extraction and Coding

All tokens of *was*, *were*, *wasn't*, and *weren't* were extracted from the transcribed interviews using AntConc (Anthony 2022). Tokens that did not form part of the variable context – categorized as follows – were excluded from the sample:

(7) repetition: but no they were- they **were** nice sisters [S18, Newcastle]
(8) false start: my Dad **was** a- um- he never really had a trade [S13, Southampton]
(9) metalinguistic commentary: the verb noun erm agreements they just didn't happen […] "they **was**", "we **was**" [S3, Leeds]
(10) quoted speech: and he said "well NAME **was** the first customer" [S2, Newcastle]

(11) ambiguous subject: <it/they> **were** great [S10, Leeds][3]
(12) unclear variant: <and we **were**> like, "this is weird" [S25, Nottingham]
(13) fixed phrases: the purse strings closed as it **were** [S50, Nottingham]
(14) 1SG/3SG past subjunctive: if it **was** me I'd take them into the old city [S4, Southampton][4]

The remaining tokens were coded for their variant (*was*/*were*) and whether this was 'standard' or 'non-standard' in context. One consideration in this regard was the coding of collective nouns. These refer to a collective group of multiple items and often take singular or plural agreement variably, even within standard varieties of English (Hundt 2009). For example, *the family* can occur with 3SG syntactic agreement, referring to the whole unit, as in (15a), or 3PL semantic agreement, reflecting the fact that the group consists of multiple members, as in (15b). Such cases are relatively infrequent in the data, but were coded as 'standard' with either *was* or *were*.

(15) a. by then um the family **was** dwindling [S64, Leeds]
b. he used to ask her how the family **were** [S13, Southampton]

All tokens in the dataset were coded for Age, i.e., 'younger' (18-30) or 'older' (50+), and Location, i.e., Newcastle, Leeds, Nottingham or Southampton. Linguistic factors include Subject Type, which is analysed as a distinction between personal pronouns (*I*, *we*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *they*), existential *there* constructions, and an 'Other' category including NP and clausal subjects. Subject-Verb Adjacency was also coded, with 'adjacent' subjects being adjacent to the verb (regardless of the subject length) as in (16). 'Non-adjacent' tokens included those with adverbs between the subject and verb (17a), relative clauses (17b) and more complex clausal structures with long distance agreement (17c). With existential *there*, because *there* is a dummy subject, the relevant environment for intervening material is between BE and the post-verbal subject that is either singular or plural.

(16) the rooms **were** big [S33, Nottingham]
(17) a. we kind of **was** hardly in Newcastle [S63, Leeds]
b. working for a charity that **was** supporting British soldiers [S73, Southampton]
c. (*talking about dialect words*) there was the one I remember when I was teaching and my kids used to use it as well **was** "shan" [S76, Newcastle]

The final dataset consists of 4,720 tokens of standard and non-standard tokens of *was*/*were* which were subject to quantitative analysis.

4 Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis begins with a look at the distribution of *was*/*were* across age groups in each location (Section 4.1), followed by an analysis of subject type effects (4.2) and, lastly, generalized linear mixed models that ascertain the relative impact of various factors on the variation (4.3).

4.1 Overall Frequency of Non-Standard *Was*/*Were*

Figure 1 shows that although speakers in all four locations tend to use standard *was*/*were* most of the time, non-standard forms are used to some extent. In cases where non-agreement occurs, a clear parallel can be drawn between Newcastle, Nottingham and Southampton in terms of an overall tendency for non-standard *was*. Younger speakers use non-standard *was* less often than older speakers in every community, but in Newcastle and Southampton, this difference between the age groups is very small. Non-standard *were* barely appears in these three communities. There is a lack of variation in negative *was*/*were* tokens in the data (only 4 out of 212 negative tokens are non-standard, and these are equally split between *was* and *were*, with one token of each appearing in

[3]The brackets < > indicate a portion of uncertain transcription due to unclear speech.
[4]The past subjunctive 'expresses unreal, counterfactual, or completely hypothetical situations' (Bergs and Heine 2010:111).

Leeds and Nottingham respectively) which suggests that there is no polarity-based 'split' system of the kind attested in other parts of England (see Section 2). We therefore characterize the Newcastle, Nottingham and Southampton dialects as predominantly *was*-levelling systems.

Leeds, on the other hand, shows the opposite pattern: non-standard agreement tends to take the form of *were*. This pattern is particularly strong among the older Leeds speakers, with non-standard *were* used over 25% of the time instead of standard *was*. Barely any non-standard *was* is used. Furthermore, a striking age-related difference can be seen, where the younger Leeds speakers not only use non-standard *were* less than the older generation, but they use non-standard *was* more. This pattern is explored further in Section 4.2 which considers the impact of subject type on the variation.

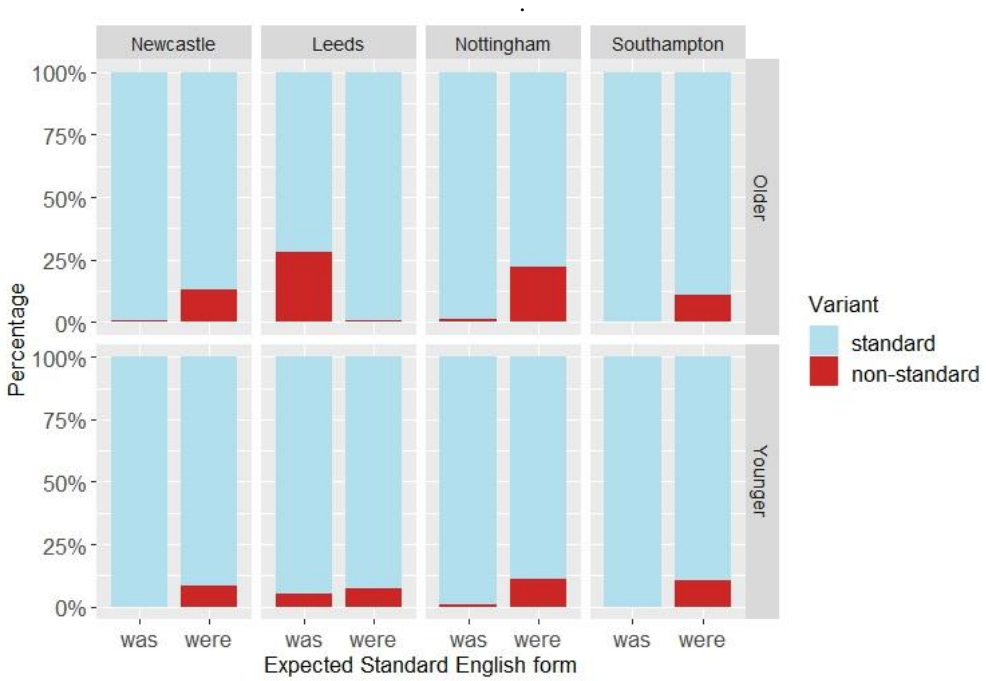

Figure 1: Percentage of standard vs. non-standard variants used in Standard English *was/were* contexts for each age group, per location.

4.2 Subject Type

Existential *there* is the linguistic environment perhaps most associated with non-standard agreement – particularly singular agreement – in vernacular English (see Section 2). The analysis presented in Figure 2 establishes whether this is true across the four dialects in this study. The results, from 280 tokens of existential *there*, reveal that our northernmost location in the sample, Newcastle, has robust, near-categorical *was*-levelling with existential *there* across both age groups. The Nottingham and Southampton dialects also have some evidence of *was*-levelling with existentials, as the majority of both their singular and plural existentials occur with *was*. Although younger Nottingham speakers use less non-standard *was* with existentials than their older counterparts, the former still use it over 50% of the time, and there is no such age difference in the Southampton data.

Once again, Leeds stands in contrast to the other localities, with markedly different linguistic behavior between the age groups. For the older Leeds speakers, most of the existentials take standard agreement – and categorically so for plural existentials – but over 30% of singular existentials occur with non-standard *were*. The younger group patterns in the opposite manner, using standard *was* categorically for the singular existentials and, around 50% of the time, continuing to use *was* for plural existentials also. These findings in Leeds are indicative of a change in progress where a traditional *were*-levelled system is becoming depleted in existential *there* constructions in apparent

time, giving way to a more supralocal tendency for *was*-levelling in this linguistic environment.

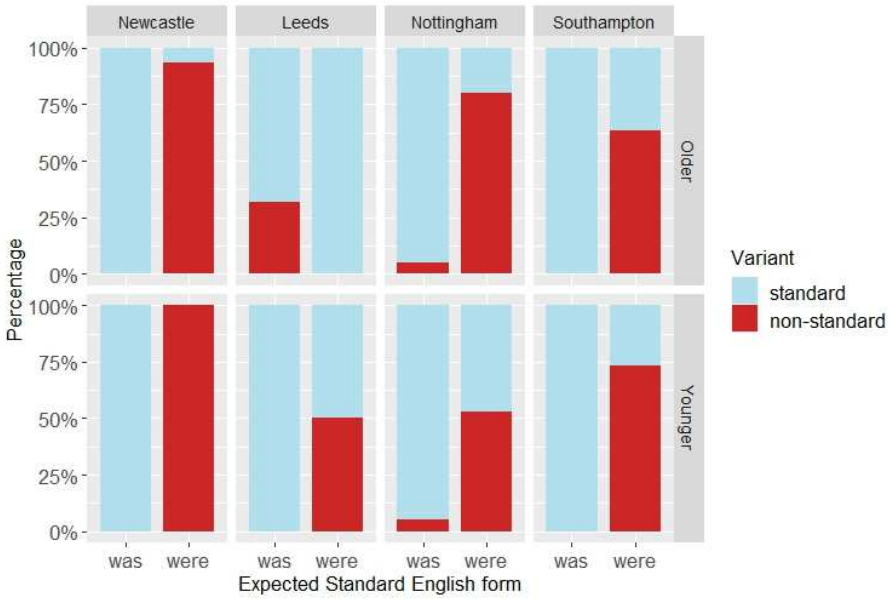

Figure 2: Percentage of standard vs. non-standard variants used in Standard English existential *there* + *was*/*were* contexts for each age group, per location.

As Leeds presents the most markedly different patterns between the younger and older age groups out of all the locations, an emerging question is whether these age-related differences found for Leeds *was*/*were* overall (Figure 1) and for existentials (Figure 2) are also found for other subject types. Figure 3 presents the relative frequency of non-standard *was*/*were* across the age groups in Leeds according to subject type. The results for existential *there* that were shown in Figure 2 are displayed again as part of Figure 3 for comparison with personal pronouns and other subjects.

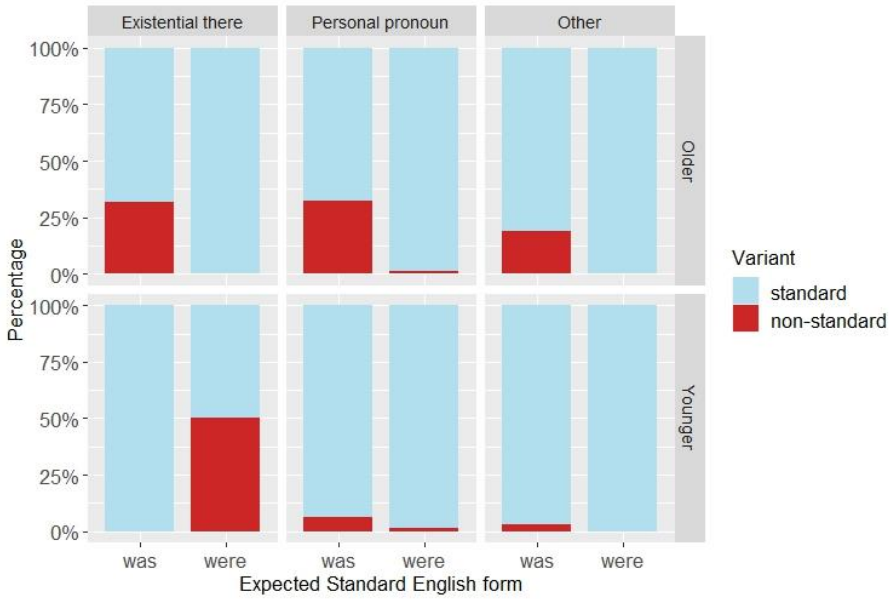

Figure 3: Percentage of standard vs. non-standard variants used in Standard English *was*/*were* contexts for each subject type across age groups in Leeds.

Figure 3 confirms that the switch in behavior from *were*-levelling towards more *was*-levelling in Leeds over time is occurring within the context of existential *there*, bringing the dialect more in line with many other vernacular Englishes with respect to this particular construction. Both older and younger speakers use more non-standard *were* than non-standard *was* in the context of personal pronoun subjects or other subject types. However, young speakers use non-standard *were* much less frequently than the older generation, which is indicative of regional dialect levelling, whereby 'as a result of mobility and dialect contact, linguistic variants with a wider socio-spatial currency become more widespread at the expense of more localised forms' (Britain 2010:193). *Were*-levelling – attested in parts of Yorkshire in 20th century dialect data (Pietsch 2005b) – is gradually being eroded.

4.3 Generalized Linear Mixed Models

In order to disentangle the relative impact of various linguistic and social factors on *was*/*were* variation, this section presents two generalized linear mixed models (GLMMs) using the lme4 package (Bates et al. 2015) in R (R Core Team 2023). The independent variables in the models are Location, Subject Type and Subject-Verb Adjacency. Speaker was included as a random effect to account for inter-speaker variation. For each independent variable, a reference level was chosen, to which the other levels are compared. For Location, Leeds, Nottingham and Southampton are compared against the reference level, Newcastle. For Subject Type, personal pronoun subjects and existential *there* are compared against tokens with other subject types. For Subject-Verb Adjacency, tokens with non-adjacent subjects and verbs are compared against the reference level of adjacent tokens.

A small number of tokens were excluded from the GLMMs. These included *was*/*were* in tag questions (N=8), as the subject and verb are necessarily adjacent within the tag but the actual subject of the clause to which the tag attaches is always non-adjacent to the verb in the tag (e.g. *oh it was horrible, wasn't it?* [S25, Nottingham]). 2SG subjects were also excluded, being the only person/number combination to categorically have standard past tense BE agreement in the data (N=66).

Table 2 shows the results of the first GLMM which measures the effects of Location, Subject Type and Subject-Verb Adjacency on the use of non-standard *was* (vs. standard *were*).

Non-standard *was* (vs. standard *were*) – Total N = 836					
AIC = 314.5; Log Likelihood = -149.3; Deviance = 298.5					
	Estimate	**Std. error**	**Z- value**	**p-value**	**Sig.**
(Intercept)	-3.627	0.771	-4.702	$2.58e^{-06}$	***
Locality					
Reference level: Newcastle					
Leeds	-3.812	1.132	-3.369	0.000756	***
Nottingham	0.275	0.905	0.304	0.761426	
Southampton	-0.816	0.926	-0.881	0.378468	
Subject Type					
Reference level: Other					
Existential *there*	4.934	0.560	8.815	$< 2e^{-16}$	***
Personal pronoun	-0.084	0.498	-0.168	0.866203	
Subject-verb adjacency					
Reference level: Adjacent					
Non-adjacent	1.677	0.459	3.658	0.000254	***
Speaker Random st. dev.			1.516		

Table 2: Generalized linear mixed model for non-standard *was* (vs. standard *were*).

Location, Subject Type and Subject-Verb Adjacency all emerge as significant factors. Starting with Location, we see that the use of non-standard *was* is significantly less likely in Leeds than in the other three cities. Nottingham and Southampton are not statistically distinct from the reference level, Newcastle, in this regard. The results for Subject Type reveal an effect whereby existential *there*

promotes the use of non-standard *was*. Personal pronouns do not exhibit a statistically distinct effect over and above subject types in the 'Other' category. Finally, a lack of subject-verb adjacency significantly favors the use of non-standard *was*.

The second GLMM, shown in Table 3, measures the effects of the same independent variables on the use of non-standard *were* (vs. standard *was*).

Non-standard *were* (vs. standard *was*) – Total N = 3810					
AIC = 654.3; Log Likelihood = -319.1; Deviance = 638.3					
	Estimate	**Std. error**	**Z- value**	**p-value**	**Sig.**
(Intercept)	-7.738	1.119	-6.913	$4.73e^{-12}$	***
Locality					
Reference level: Newcastle					
Leeds	4.349	1.259	3.454	0.000552	***
Nottingham	1.910	1.305	1.463	0.143366	
Southampton	-0.402	1.476	-0.273	0.785206	
Subject Type					
Reference level: Other					
Existential *there*	0.738	0.556	1.328	0.184225	
Personal pronoun	0.785	0.321	2.446	0.014426	*
Subject-verb adjacency					
Reference level: Adjacent					
Non-adjacent	1.354	0.428	3.165	0.001551	**
Speaker Random st. dev.			1.879		

Table 3: Generalized linear mixed model for non-standard *were* (vs. standard *was*).

Table 3 shows that Leeds speakers are significantly more likely to use non-standard *were* than those in the other three locations. Newcastle, Nottingham and Southampton are not differentiated from one another statistically in terms of their non-standard *were* use. Subject Type influences the use of non-standard *were* but it is specifically personal pronouns that favour non-standard *were* significantly more than 'Other' subject types; existential *there* does not promote the use of non-standard *were*. Finally, non-adjacency of subjects and verbs is more likely to result in the use of non-standard *were*, just as observed for non-standard *was* in Table 2. A possible interaction effect between Subject Type and Subject-Verb Adjacency was tested in each of the models shown in Table 2 and Table 3 but it did not emerge as significant.

In summary, the GLMMs show that the Leeds dialect patterns significantly differently than those of Newcastle, Nottingham and Southampton in its tendency towards non-standard *were*. Existential *there* is more likely to occur with non-standard singular agreement (*was*) but not non-standard plural agreement (*were*), whereas personal pronouns are more likely to occur with non-standard *were*. Section 5 considers these findings in the context of the other results from Section 4 and the existing literature to consider the contribution of supralocal norms to regional *was*/*were* variation.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Despite Newcastle and Leeds being only around 100 miles apart in the North of England, the results show that they are the two most differentiated dialects in our study in terms of *was*/*were* variation. Where there is non-standard subject-verb agreement, Newcastle speakers often opt for *was*, whereas the Leeds speakers prefer *were*. Leeds' *were*-levelling also distinguishes it from York, a fellow Yorkshire city only about 20 miles away, where Tagliamonte (1998) found *was*-levelling. Newcastle – our most northerly site – has more in common with the cities further south – Nottingham and Southampton. All three dialects are more likely to use non-standard *was* than non-standard *were*.

The results lead one to question – as Trudgill (2008) does – the characterization of singular agreement as a possible 'vernacular universal' of English (Chambers 2004) when there are dialects

with plural *were* as the preferred strategy. Our study finds that *were*-levelling is characteristic of Leeds, as attested for other parts of Yorkshire (Pietsch 2005b). However, apparent time analysis suggests ongoing erosion of this system, which Rupp and Britain (2019:124) propose might be true of *were*-levelling in England more generally. We do find the traditional pattern among the older Leeds speakers, including in existential constructions. They use non-standard *were* with singular existential *there* and avoid non-standard *was* with plural existentials. In contrast, the younger age group use less non-standard *were* with plural existentials and more non-standard *was*. They also use less non-standard *were* with other subject types compared to the older generation. As existential *there* is one of the most common contexts for lack of agreement (particularly the singular) in vernacular Englishes (see Section 2), the young Leeds speakers appear to be shifting towards a more widespread trend of *was*-levelling in this specific linguistic context. The same kind of shift among the younger generation has occurred in Shetland, as Durham (2013) observed. Singular existential agreement appears to be at completion in vernacular Newcastle English and is the predominant pattern in Nottingham and Southampton, again confirming the supralocal nature of this phenomenon.

In a further constraint, the non-adjacency of subjects and verbs contributes to the use of non-standard agreement regardless of whether the variant in question is *was* or *were*. This observation supports the argument that the Proximity-to-Subject Constraint of the Northern Subject Rule – which traditionally was more specific to personal pronouns (see Section 2) – might form part of a broader tendency for non-standard subject-verb agreement to arise if a subject (of any kind) is not adjacent. Greater distance, in terms of the number of words (see Levin 2001) or a measure of syntactic complexity, could also potentially contribute to this effect. Although Subject Type was not significant in the GLMM for the use of non-standard *was*, personal pronouns favored the use of non-standard *were*. This and other factors will be examined further dialect-specific GLMMs in future research. Although an NP vs. pronoun distinction did not transpire from the results for non-standard singular *was*, it is possible that it could be more applicable to *was*/*were*'s present tense counterparts (*is*/*are*), as Wolfram and Christian (1976:85) observed in Appalachian English.

Overall, these findings highlight the value of comparative dialectological work to ascertain the competing nature of supralocal and more localized forces on regional dialect variation and trajectories of linguistic change.

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