Above and Beyond Phonology in Ethnolinguistic Variation: Existentials in Toronto English

James A. Walker
York University

jamesw@yorku.ca
http://www.yorku.ca/jamesw

INTRODUCTION

(1) Variable Agreement in Plural Existentials

Plural agreement
a. We had to hang our food because there were bears. (004:774)

Singular agreement
b. There’s black bears, I believe there’s brown bears. (006:059)

(2) Questions
a. What is the linguistic conditioning of singular agreement?
   - Does it differ from the conditioning of there’s? (Walker 2007)
b. Is singular agreement available for social evaluation?

LINGUISTIC FACTOR GROUPS

(3) Tense + Form

Present, contracted
a. There’s other jobs that you can get with criminology. (014:348)

Present, uncontracted
b. There is no municipal laws or anything like that. (020:789)

Past, uncontracted
c. It was very cramped ’cause there was like a lot of people in one room. (031:817)

(4) Plural -s

Absent
a. Yes, there are a few select people that I wish I could fire. (024:224)

Present
b. There’s just a lot of things I want to learn about. (007:712)

(5) Intervening Material

Present
a. ’Cause there were just so many different types of people. (014:728)

Absent
b. There’s always people who like that sort of darker fashion. (025:514)

(6) Extension (Martinez Insua & Palacios Martinez 2003)

None
a. There weren’t actually a lot of Caucasians. (066:1012)

Adverbial
b. There are people from every culture still down there. (020:364)

Clausal
c. And then sometimes there’s fights breaking out. (014:786)

(7) Polarity

Positive
a. Up in the sky, there was two rainbows. (022:647)

Negative
b. And there weren’t a lot of houses for sale then. (027:061)

(8) Type of Determiner (Meechan & Foley 1994)

No determiner
a. I know there’s good Americans in America. (007:099)

Number
b. There were about six families that left our church. (027:809)

Definite
c. Then there’s like the holidays like Halloween … (002:432)

Indefinite
d. There’s a bunch of apartments right up on the hill. (032:201)

Other
e. Yeah, there were some Asian math teachers. (020:059)

* The ‘Contact in the City’ project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Faculty of Arts, York University, in collaboration with Michol Hoffman.
1 Examples are identified by speaker number in the Toronto English corpus (Hoffman & Walker 2007) and line number in the transcription.
Table 1: Factors contributing to singular agreement in plural existentials in Toronto English (excluding there’s).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tense</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not selected as significant: Type of determiner, Plural –s, Intervening material, Polarity, Extension

Table 2: Factors contributing to there’s in plural existentials in Toronto English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Determiner</th>
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<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indefinite</td>
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<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definite</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No determiner</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>31</td>
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Range: 37

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Intervening Material</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>55</td>
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Range: 19

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<th>Plural –s</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Range: 12

Not selected as significant: Polarity, Extension

CONCLUSIONS

- linguistic conditioning differs for singular agreement and there’s (Walker 2007)
- existentials appear to be available for social evaluation (Meyerhoff & Walker 2008; cf. Cheshire 1998)
  - rates differ according to ethnic group and enclave status
- groups follow community in linguistic conditioning (Meyerhoff & Walker 2008)
  - rate of singular agreement relative to there’s remains constant
  - primary effects for singular agreement and there’s parallel across ethnic groups and enclave status
  - secondary effects for there’s weakened in +enclave groups

SELECTED REFERENCES


