Grammatical Variation and the Sociolinguistic Monitor: Plural Existentials in Toronto English

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INTRODUCTION*

(1) **Variable Agreement in Plural Existentials**

* Plural agreement
  
  a. We had to hang our food because there *were* bears. (004:774)¹

  * Singular agreement
  
  b. It helps being in the city where there *is* other kids around. (070:193)

(2) **Questions**

  a. What is the linguistic conditioning of singular agreement?
     *
     
     Does it differ from the conditioning of *there’s* (Walker 2007)?

  b. What is the social conditioning of singular agreement?
     *
     
     If *there’s* is lexicalized, is it more available to the sociolinguistic monitor (Labov 2008)?

(3) **Social Factor Groups**

  - **Speaker Number** (45 speakers)
  - **Speaker Sex**
  - **Ethnic Group:** British-Irish, Chinese, Italian
  - **Ethnic Orientation (EO) Status:** High EO, Low EO

(4) **Tense (not relevant for *there’s*)**

  - **Present**
    
    a. There *is* no municipal laws or anything like that. (020:789)

  - **Past**
    
    b. It was very cramped ‘cause there *was* like a lot of people in one room. (031:817)

(5) **Plural –s on N°**

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

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

(6) **Intervening Material**

  ‘Cause there *were* just so many different types of people. (014:728)

(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**

  - **None**
    
    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)

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¹ Examples are identified by speaker number in the Toronto English corpus (Hoffman & Walker 2010) and line number in the transcription.
ANALYSIS OF LINGUISTIC FACTOR GROUPS

Table 1: Contribution of linguistic factors to singular agreement in plural existentials in Toronto English (excluding there’s). (Best model: Tense (2.17 x 10^-8))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tense</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Table 2: Contribution of linguistic factors to there’s in plural existentials in Toronto English. (Best model: Type of Determiner (0.0354) + Intervening Material (0.0221))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Determiner</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indefinite</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definite</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Range: 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervening Material</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Range: 8

Not selected as significant: Plural –s, Polarity.

ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL FACTOR GROUPS

Table 3: Contribution of social factors to there’s in plural existentials in Toronto English. (Best model: Speaker Number (random) + Ethnic Group x EO Status (0.0067))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group x EO Status</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italian, Low EO</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian, High EO</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese, High EO</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British-Irish</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese, Low EO</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not selected as significant: Sex.

CONCLUSIONS

• linguistic conditioning differs for singular agreement and there’s → supports interpretation of there’s as a lexicalized variant
• different rates for ethnic group and EO status → social evaluation?
• groups show parallel linguistic conditioning (Hoffman & Walker 2010)
• mixed models analysis (with speaker as a random effect) (Johnson 2009):
  o singular agreement not conditioned by social group
  o there’s conditioned by ethnic group and EO status
• suggests that lexicalized grammatical variants are available to the sociolinguistic monitor (Meyerhoff & Walker, to appear)

SELECTED REFERENCES


