

## Variation in Existentials on Bequia (St Vincent and the Grenadines): Grammatical or Lexical?

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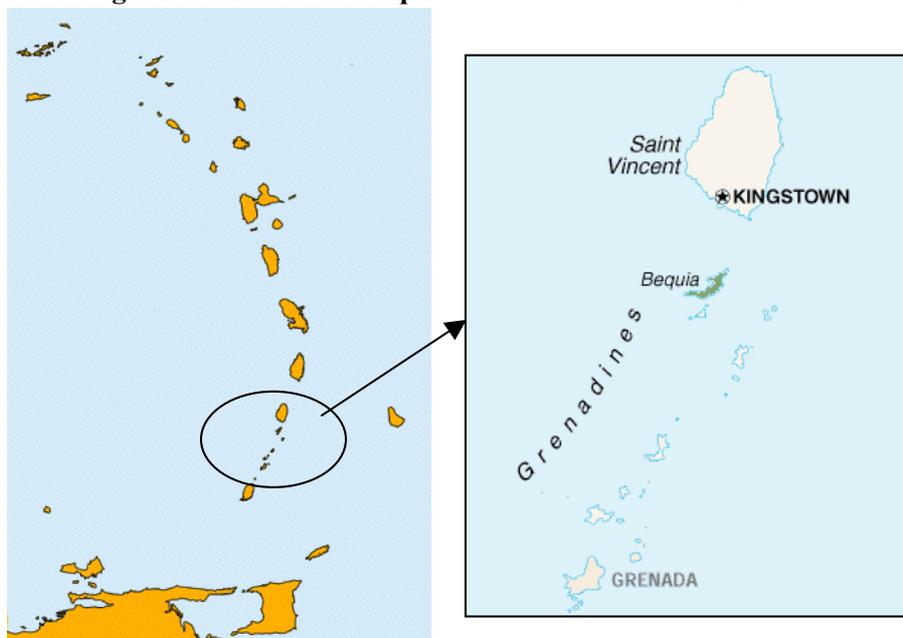
### ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question of whether variation in verbal agreement in existential constructions is best viewed as grammatical or lexical. Using a corpus of spontaneous English from the island of Bequia (St Vincent and the Grenadines), we contrast the behaviour of ‘urban sojourners’ with their home village norms. Multivariate analysis reveals that differences in the frequency of preference for type of existential do not consistently match differences in the general preference for standard agreement. We suggest that variability may become available to the sociolinguistic monitor through reanalysis by individual speakers of grammatical variables as lexical forms.

### 1. Introduction\*

Existential constructions are a topic of special interest to linguistic theory because of their implications for systems of subject-verb agreement (e.g. Chomsky 1995; van Gelderen 1997). The examples in (1) and (2) demonstrate variation in (what we will initially call) agreement in different existential constructions in varieties of English and English-based creole spoken on the island of Bequia (St Vincent and the Grenadines) in the Eastern Caribbean (see Figure 1). Existential *be* may occur as morphologically singular (1a-c) or plural (2a-b), with standard (1a, 2a) or nonstandard (1b-c, 2b) agreement with the number of the postverbal subject. In Bequia, there is also variability in the form of the expletive (*there* or *it*), as well as variability in the existential verb (*be*, *got* and *have*), all of which exhibit variability in agreement.

Figure 1: Location of Bequia in St Vincent and the Grenadines



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### (1) Singular Agreement

- a. Generally speaking *there is too much noise* in Bequia. (H27:1939)
- b. And *there was lot of fellows* there who misunderstand. (L316:1799)
- c. Well, *there's a lot of changes* g- since tourists start to come in. (P14: 252)
- d. I would say *it has some truth* in it. (H2:167)
- e. *It got fire axe* all- all inside the thing you know. (H3:1360)

### (2) Plural Agreement

- a. *There are very, very few students* that I can name. (L28: 351)
- b. *There are a lot of illiteracy* in that- that village still. (M313:891)
- c. *It have certain people* here who giving, if you go to them for lumber. (P9:135)
- d. It have- eh, look, *it have mint*. (P24:959)

While the choice of the expletive and the existential verb would appear to be straightforwardly lexical, here we address the issue of whether the morphological variation in the existential verb is best characterized as ‘grammatical’ or ‘lexical’. Productive variability in verbal morphology may be viewed as a property of grammatical relations (cf. Britain & Sudbury 2002; Cheshire & Fox 2009; Hundt 1998), though in many instances, *there's* (1c) is the default variant (Eisikovits 1991; Smith 2000; Tagliamonte & Smith 2000; Walker 2007). Such fixed-form expletive-existential constructions may be better viewed as lexical variants.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, we use a corpus of existentials from a spontaneously produced sample of speech to explore the extent to which different speakers and different groups of speakers on Bequia treat the verbal form in existentials as a productive syntactic process (i.e. agreement) or as fixed lexical variants. Although we examine the conditioning of the variation by both language-internal and language-external factors, the bulk of our argument is based on what Labov (1993, 2008) calls the *sociolinguistic monitor*. Since syntactic variables are seldom stratified along different social dimensions (cf. Cheshire 1998), while phonetic variables are always socially stratified, Labov (1993) proposes that syntactic knowledge is too ‘deep’ to be available to the monitor, while phonetic and lexical knowledge is more ‘superficial’ and thus available to the monitor. Although some syntactic variables (e.g. negative concord in English) do exhibit quite clear social stratification, Labov argues that such variables should be seen as fundamentally lexical.

Social stratification is intended to explain group behaviour, but since the sociolinguistic monitor is basically a cognitive filter that operates on individuals, examining group behaviour necessarily masks its operation. Our corpus allows us to explore both group and individual patterns, to investigate the workings of the sociolinguistic monitor in more detail. In particular, because our corpus includes data from speakers who have been in intensive contact with other varieties of English in the course of their lifespan (whom we dub ‘urban sojourners’ (Meyerhoff & Walker 2007), we can compare their behaviour with the norms of their community. Assuming that lexical and grammatical variables are differentially available to the workings of the sociolinguistic monitor, if existential constructions involve grammatical relations, they should not be subject to the sociolinguistic monitor, and we predict that they will not be socially

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<sup>1</sup> We note here that some current syntactic theories treat the choice of agreement itself as essentially the choice between different lexical items at Merge (cf. Adger 2006). In this case, the previously held distinction between syntactic variables and phonetic or lexical variables becomes moot, since all syntactic variation would be expected to behave (qualitatively) in the same way as lexical and phonetic variation.

differentiated. On the other hand, if existentials are a lexical variable, they should acquire social salience via the sociolinguistic monitor, and we predict that they will exhibit social stratification.

We begin by providing some background on the data analysed and the nature of the urban sojourners, before describing the facts of variation in each of the villages, taking as our variable the form of the main verb. We focus in particular on the behaviour of the urban sojourners in each village, to determine whether (as with BE absence) they retain the norms of their natal village or whether there is evidence of restructuring in this aspect of their grammar. We conclude with some comments about the implications of the urban sojourners' behaviour for the formal analysis of variables of this nature.

## 2. Data

Our data come from sociolinguistic interviews recorded on Bequia between 2003 and 2005 by teenagers with family ties to the villages they were working in. All interviewees, who were over the age of 40 at the time of recording, were born in their home village, and in many cases their parents (sometimes even their grandparents) also came from that village. The age restriction means our interviewees had all acquired their basic vernacular before the significant increase in tourism (and therefore contact with other varieties of English) that started in the late 1960s. We interviewed speakers from five villages on Bequia: Hamilton, La Pompe, Lower Bay, Mount Pleasant and Paget Farm. In this paper, we concentrate on data from Hamilton, La Pompe, Mount Pleasant and Paget Farm, drawing on a subsample of 30 interviewees distributed by village and sex as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Bequia interviewees included in the analysis of existentials, by village and speaker sex.**

Village:	Female	Male	Total
Hamilton	4	4	8
La Pompe	3	3	6
Mount Pleasant	4	4	8
Paget Farm	4	4	8
Total	15	15	30

Although Bequia is very small (7 square miles) and has a relatively shallow time depth of settlement (the island was only permanently occupied after the British took possession of it under the Treaty of Paris in 1763), residents claim that it is possible to tell what village a person comes from solely on the basis of the way they talk. The most perceptually salient villages are Mount Pleasant and Paget Farm. Residents of Mount Pleasant, the historic home of the settlers of British descent, are relatively well off and prominent in local businesses. Residents of Paget Farm, the far-most village on what is collectively known as Southside, are ethnically and economically more diverse, in keeping with its history as a key village in the island's whaling and fishing trades. La Pompe, another Southside village, is also ethnically mixed but perhaps a little more prosperous overall.<sup>2</sup> Residents of Hamilton, the community that grew up on the site of a former plantation, are predominantly of African descent and generally less affluent than those in Mount Pleasant, La Pompe and even Paget Farm.

<sup>2</sup> A comparison of the 1990 and 2000 censuses shows that the greatest increase (14%) in the number of individual households was in La Pompe.

## 2.1. Bequia's Urban Sojourners

As noted above, all interviewees had grown up in the village where they lived at the time of their interview. Most people interviewed showed strong loyalty to their natal village: when asked where else they would live on Bequia if they did not live in their own village, they commonly replied that they would not like to live anywhere else. Nevertheless, this loyalty has not restricted travel, and there is a long tradition of economic migration, especially for men. Many of the older men interviewed had travelled extensively in the Caribbean on merchant and/or fishing boats in their youth. In addition, we discovered afterwards that in every village we had an interview with one (sometimes two) people who had spent a number of years living in cities overseas in their youth (UK or Canada). We dub these people 'urban sojourners' (Meyerhoff & Walker 2007) because they have re-settled in their home village upon returning to Bequia. We have noted that "[a]n urban sojourner's residence in an overseas city exposes them to more standard varieties of English, and in the recordings from our corpus, they clearly sound more like speakers of 'Standard English' than do their stay-at-home peers" (Meyerhoff & Walker 2007: 354). Despite sounding more Standard-like, we have shown that, with respect to the variable absence of BE (both as an auxiliary and as a copula), urban sojourners exhibit the same constraints on the variability as their stay-at-home peers in each village. In other words, although the overall frequency of BE absence may decrease (approaching Standard English), the contexts which favour and disfavour BE absence do not differ markedly from residents of the same villages who never left. We conclude that the underlying grammar of BE absence for the urban sojourners remains the same as that of their stay-at-home peers.

### 3. Defining the Variable

Existential constructions are one strategy available to speakers to introduce new or contrastive referents or information into the discourse. There are of course other ways of introducing new referents,<sup>3</sup> but existentials are of particular interest. Structurally, they require the new information to be positioned post-verbally, which functions (cross-linguistically) to highlight the unusualness or newness of the referent (Birner & Ward 1996; Dryer 2007: 241; Prince 1992; Ward 1999). In English, the syntactic subject position must then be filled with a dummy or expletive subject. This structural configuration presents problems for syntactic analyses of agreement that rely on relations between a syntactic head (a verb in a functional position) and its specifier (a NP in syntactic subject position) (e.g. Chomsky 1995; Groat 1995; Milsark 1977; Rupp 2005; Stowell 1978). Under these accounts, agreement in existentials occurs either through identity of the expletive with the postverbal subject or through covert movement (e.g. Chomsky 1995; Groat 1995; van Gelderen 1997). Non-standard agreement (e.g. singular agreement with a plural postverbal subject) is assumed to arise either from a specifier-head relation with the expletive (which is considered singular or numberless) or through 'default' or unmarked agreement that surfaces whenever a syntactic subject is unavailable (e.g. Henry 1995; Schütze 1999). Our study focuses on the variable consequences of both properties: the choice of expletive subject and verbal morphology.

In Bequia, there are two possible expletive subjects and three possible verbs that speakers draw on to express existentials. First is an expletive or dummy subject *there* followed by some

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<sup>3</sup> Cheshire (2005) is the only variationist study we are aware of that fully explores the range of strategies speakers make use of to realise this discourse function.

form of the verb BE (3). Second is an expletive or dummy *it* accompanied by a form of HAVE (4) or a form of GET/GOT (5).<sup>4</sup>

(3) *there is/are* NP

- a. **There is** still some interest. (M316:1933)<sup>5</sup>
- b. Yeah, **there is** so jokes when you're in school you know. (H5:621)
- c. **There are** very, very few students that I can name. (L28:351)

(4) *it has/have* NP

- a. I like it being alone and **it have** all kind of book I coulda read. (L20:542)
- b. If I meet there, **it has** phone and thing. (P24:243)
- c. But **it has** some long line boats that the Japanese sell over to St. Vincent. (P22:1175)

(5) *it got/get* NP

- a. Because **it got** several spirits out there. (M303:1197)
- b. We deh pick them and shell out the seed, and open the seed and **it get** a white something what with it. (H16: 830)

There are two primary sites of variation: one in the form of the expletive or dummy subject, and another in the choice of the verb. Clearly, the variants in (3) are the same as the existential construction found even in standard varieties of English (Britain & Sudbury 2002: 213; Chambers 2004: 133). The variants in (4) and (5) occur throughout the Caribbean (Allsopp 1996; also in some varieties of African American Vernacular English, cf. Rickford 1999). Given the different settlement histories of the villages in Bequia, we may expect to find more *there BE*-type existentials in Mount Pleasant than in the other villages. For the purposes of the analysis presented in this paper, we take the main verb as the (dependent) variable, and consider the different expletive subjects as a factor group (independent variable).

#### 4. Method of Analysis

We analysed the data using the multiple regression function incorporated in Goldvarb X (Sankoff et al. 2005), which allows us to explore the variation in relation to a number of different factor groups simultaneously. The hypotheses tested by the linguistic factor groups are informed by previous work on this variable in other varieties of English (e.g. Britain & Sudbury 2002; Cheshire & Fox 2009; Eisikovits 1991; Feagin 1979; Hay & Schreier 2004; Meechan & Foley 1994; Rupp 2005; Walker 2007), as well as our preliminary analyses of the variation in the Bequia corpus. These factor groups are outlined in (6)-(9), with an example provided for each factor.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Although *got* is not simply a past form of *get*, the number of tokens for each variant are too small to analyse satisfactorily unless we treat them as related. Not only is this treatment semantically motivated, but there is also a syntactic motivation. As we show below, in the variable manifestation of agreement with postverbal plural NPs, *get* and *got* pattern alike in having a single, invariant form.

<sup>5</sup> Examples are reproduced verbatim from interviews and are identified by community (H = Hamilton; LP = La Pompe; MP = Mt Pleasant; PF = Paget Farm), speaker number and line number in the transcription.

<sup>6</sup> The motivation for coding for sentence polarity and tense marking on the verb relate to interactions and constraints on negation and BE/HAVE in Bequia (cf. Walker & Sidnell, in press) and attested differences in levelling of forms of BE in past and non-past contexts in other varieties of English (e.g. Britain 2002; Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1994; Schreier 2002).

## (6) Type of Expletive Subject

- a. there:  
***There is*** never a lost of respect. (L28:246)  
... went in a room where ***there have*** about four- hundred people. (P20:281)  
Now if ***there ain't got*** a boots or sock in, they ain't going [to school] (H12:659)
- b. it:  
That time ***it had*** a short cut. (M303:509)  
***It ain't got*** none- none of them in that class now. (M303:418)  
***It was*** plenty [of ducona], yeah and don't talk about cake. (L31:531)
- c. *No overt expletive subject:*  
Jumbie, ***Ø got*** jumbie out there. (H12:298)  
***Ø Had*** a little sailboat races and that was about it. (M103:1538)

## (7) Agreement with Postverbal Subject

- a. *Singular verbal morphology, singular subject:*  
And ***there was*** something in the family. (P7:82)
- b. *Plural verbal morphology, plural subject:*  
***It have*** some people all over Bequia, ... (P24:127)
- c. *Singular verbal morphology, plural subject:*  
Well, there wasn't- ***there wasn't*** much marriages. (M303:677)
- d. *Plural verb morphology, singular subject (collective)*<sup>7</sup>:  
***There are*** a few, but I can count on one hand, not even two. (M313:280)
- e. *Plural verb morphology, singular subject (non-collective):*  
If ***there are*** weak soil, you get weak plant. (H27:533)
- f. *No difference in singular/plural verbal morphology:*  
You know, ***it had*** a girl drown. (L29:61)

## (8) Sentence Polarity

- a. *Affirmative*  
And ***there was*** lot a fellows there who misunderstand. (L316:1799)
- b. *Negative with no*  
So, ***there's*** no harm in working. (M313:696)
- c. *Negative with -n't*  
It ***ain't got*** no bad food in the world, man, all food good. (H12:1420)

## (9) Tense Morphology

- a. *Non-past morphology with non-past temporal reference:*  
Yes, ***it have*** police, not in Mount Pleasant. (M305:197)
- b. *Past morphology with past temporal reference:*  
***There was*** not any of the thing which they has today. (P20:8)

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<sup>7</sup> It might be desirable to have more fine-grained distinctions than this. Bock et al. (2006) show that for both British and American English collective nouns are not all equally likely to occur with plural verb agreement, e.g. *couple* and *majority* occur with plural verbs frequently in both; *faculty* and *group* occur with plural verbs less often in both (and *team* and *university* differ noticeably between the two varieties). The Bequia corpus is too small for us to undertake a quantitative analysis of the semantic distinctions they make within this category.

- c. *Non-past morphology in past discourse context:*  
 Back in my days, **it have** people used to go to the doctor. (H4:1205)

Since we are interested not only in the linguistic factor groups affecting the variation, but also the distribution and conditioning of the variation in the different villages, we also analyse the effect of three non-linguistic (social) factor groups: the speaker’s village of origin, the speaker’s status as urban sojourner or stay-at-home peer, and the speaker’s sex. There is no *a priori* reason to suppose that speaker sex significantly impacts the use of existentials, but the fact that some variants are superficially more standard suggests a possible gender effect. If the relationship between *BE* existentials and *HAVE/GET* existentials is stable (and we have no evidence to suggest it is not), we might expect to find more use of the more standard *BE* existentials both in Mount Pleasant (as noted above) and in women’s speech.

## 5. Results

Our initial exploration of the data included all three existential variants. The summary statistics for each variant in the four villages are shown in Table 2, distinguishing between the urban sojourner speakers and all other speakers in their home villages. At this point, it suffices to draw attention to one feature of this table: the urban sojourners consistently diverge from their stay-at-home peers either in quantity or quality of the existential variant they prefer.

**Table 2: Overall distribution of existentials in Bequia, by village and speaker type (stay-at-home vs. urban sojourner).**

	% BE (N)	% HAVE (N)	% GET (N)	Total N
<b>Hamilton</b>				
stay-at-home	26 (35)	<b>51</b> (70)	<b>23</b> (31)	136
urban sojourner	<b>99</b> (92)	1 (1)	0	93
<b>La Pompe</b>				
stay-at-home	<b>76</b> (79)	23 (24)	1 (1)	104
urban sojourner	<b>88</b> (7)	0	12 (1)	8
<b>Paget Farm</b>				
stay-at-home	<b>75</b> (113)	23 (34)	2 (3)	150
urban sojourner	31 (18)	<b>69</b> (41)	0	59
<b>Mt Pleasant</b>				
stay-at-home	30 (31)	<b>54</b> (56)	<b>16</b> (16)	103
urban sojourner	<b>91</b> (32)	6 (2)	3 (1)	35
Total	407	228	53	688

We also explored the exact co-occurrence restrictions on the main verb and the expletive subject across the corpus, shown in Table 3. With respect to subject type, *have* and *get* existentials clearly pattern alike. The obvious semantic similarity that *have* and *get* share (expressing existence through a metaphor of possession; Heine & Kuteva 2002: 241-2) and the

fact that *it* and zero expletive subjects both stand in opposition to the StE system both justify our treatment of *have* and *get* existentials as a single variant for the remainder of the analyses.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 3: Distribution of existentials in Bequia by verb and type of subject.**

Type of Subject	Verb		
	BE (N)	HAVE (N)	GET (N)
<i>there</i>	93% (377)	4% (9)	2% (1)
<i>it</i>	7% (30)	90% (206)	85% (45)
∅	0%	6% (13)	13% (7)

While the principal focus in this paper is what we have called ‘agreement’ (the form of the main existential verb), the notion of subject-verb ‘agreement’ is generally problematic in English, and especially so in Bequia. The Standard English verbal paradigm (past and non-past) **only** exhibits regular alternation between third person singular and all other persons in the non-past. This system might therefore be more properly viewed as a system characterised by a single default past and non-past form – with one exception (third person singular) occurring less than half the time<sup>9</sup> – than as a system of agreement as such.<sup>10</sup> Of course, BE is a bit unusual in this respect, since it has three non-past forms (*am*, *is*, *are*) and two past forms (*was*, *were*), but even this paradigm is fairly slender grounds on which to extrapolate the notion of a robust system of agreement.

The conceptual problem associated with talking about agreement is exacerbated when looking at *-s*-marking in nonstandard varieties of English. In Bequia, the frequency of *-s*-marking in third person singular with regular verbs in non-past contexts is quite low. Millman et al.’s (2007) study of 12 speakers finds only 23% (N=60) in Mount Pleasant, 3% in Hamilton (N=12) and 5% in Southside (N=20). Walker’s (2009) study of 18 speakers finds a frequency of 31% (N=13) in Hamilton, 29% (N=41) in Mount Pleasant and 15% (N=75) in Paget Farm. As in Standard English, BE has a distinct form for first person singular (*am*), but the fact that the grammar is generally associated with such low frequencies of overt person inflection suggests that Bequian, too, might be more appropriately characterised as a system with a default verb form, with variably licensed variants in specific contexts. In our discussion of the results, we return to the theoretical question of whether the alternation between *is/are*, *has/have* and *was/were* can appropriately be considered evidence for a process of agreement.

### 5.1. BE Existentials

Table 4 shows a multivariate analysis of the factors contributing to standard agreement in BE existentials (1a, 2a). The high input probability (.893) reflects (in part) the

<sup>8</sup> This would of course be undesirable if the focus of our investigation was into the patterns underlying the use of different forms of expletive subject. However, the form of the subject is not our primary concern in this paper. Indeed, were we to attempt this, we would have to consider a much wider range of syntactic environments where we have noted null subjects, including referential subjects, which takes us well beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> For example, out of 4,808 verb-phrasal tokens, 2,141 (45%) are third person singular (Walker 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Note that this differs radically from Kayne’s (2000: 188-9) analysis of English verbal agreement, in which he proposes that *-s* marks singular on verbs other than BE, with *you* marked as plural and *I* unmarked for number, thus both failing to occur with *-s*. Our thanks to Hans den Besten for focusing our attention on the key issues here.

(nearly) categorical occurrence of singular agreement (*there is, there was* or *there's*) with postverbal subjects with singular reference. Nevertheless, we retain these tokens in the analysis to shore up the low number of tokens with plural reference. Thus, although the input level for the occurrence of singular agreement as a whole is elevated, the invariance of postverbal subjects with singular reference means that the effects observed in Table 4 can only reflect the contribution of postverbal subjects with plural reference.

**Table 4: Factors contributing to standard agreement with postverbal subjects in BE existentials in Bequia.**

Total N:	390
Input:	.893
<b>Village and Speaker Type</b>	
Mt Pleasant, urban sojourner	<b>.78</b>
Hamilton, urban sojourner	<b>.75</b>
Hamilton, stay-at-home	<b>.63</b>
Paget Farm, stay-at-home	.42
La Pompe, stay-at-home	.32
Mt Pleasant, stay-at-home	.26
Paget Farm, urban sojourner	.20
La Pompe, urban sojourner	.14
<b>Type of Subject</b>	
<i>there</i>	.53
<i>it</i>	.19

Factor groups not selected: Sentence polarity, tense morphology.

For Paget Farm and La Pompe, Table 2 showed the overall frequency of BE existentials to differ according to speaker type, with the urban sojourners using more BE. In Table 4, we see that not only do the stay-at-home speakers in these two villages disfavour (normative) agreement (with factor weights of .42 and .32), but the urban sojourners also disfavour agreement (.20 and .14).

For Hamilton, Table 2 showed that the overall frequency of BE existentials differs according to speaker type, with the urban sojourner using vastly more BE (99%) than the stay-at-home peers (26%). As Table 4 shows, both the stay-at-home speakers and the urban sojourner favour (normative) agreement (factor weights of .63 and .75, respectively).

For Mount Pleasant, Table 2 similarly showed that the overall frequency of BE existentials differs by speaker type, with urban sojourners using BE at a much higher rate (91%) than their stay-at-home peers (54%). Table 4 shows that this difference persists in the preference for (normative) agreement: stay-at-home speakers disfavour agreement (.26), while the urban sojourner favours it (.78).

Thus, in La Pompe, Paget Farm and Hamilton, despite differences in overall frequency of preference for the type of existential, the general preference for nonstandard agreement is constant regardless of speaker type. In contrast, Mount Pleasant speakers disagree, not only in the type of existential but also in the preference for agreement.

## 5.2. HAVE/GET Existentials

Table 5 shows a multivariate analysis of factors contributing to the occurrence of (normative) agreement with HAVE/GET existentials. As with Table 4, the high input probability (.840) reflects categorical forms (*had, got*) included to shore up low numbers, and the effects observed can only reflect the variation in agreement according to postverbal plural NPs.

**Table 5: Factors contributing to verbal agreement with postverbal subjects in HAVE/GET existentials in Bequia.**

	Total N:	276 <sup>a</sup>
	Input:	.840
<b>Village and Speaker Type</b>		
La Pompe, stay-at-home		<b>.82</b>
Mt Pleasant, stay-at-home		<b>.65</b>
Paget Farm, stay-at-home		.42
Hamilton, stay-at-home		.40
Paget Farm, urban sojourner		.34
	<i>Range:</i>	48
<b>Speaker Sex</b>		
Male		<b>.66</b>
Female		.31
	<i>Range:</i>	35

Factor groups not selected: Sentence polarity, type of subject, tense morphology.

Table 2 showed disagreement in three villages between urban sojourners and their stay-at-home peers in the preference for type of existential. HAVE/GET existentials are preferred by stay-at-home speakers in Hamilton and Mt Pleasant, but by the urban sojourner in Paget Farm. In La Pompe, both types of speakers agree in preferring BE existentials. Because of the small number of tokens of HAVE/GET existentials for the urban sojourners in La Pompe, Hamilton and Mount Pleasant, we can only compare the preference for standard agreement between speaker types in Paget Farm. As Table 5 shows, the stay-at-home speakers in La Pompe and Mt Pleasant favour agreement, while those in Hamilton disfavour agreement. In Paget Farm, despite the disagreement in preference for type of existential, the urban sojourner patterns with her stay-at-home peers in disfavouring agreement.

<sup>a</sup> The data include past and non-past existentials, though the majority (N=178) of *it HAVE* tokens are past.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study provide support for Labov's hypothesis of the sociolinguistic monitor. Only the Mount Pleasant urban sojourner diverges from the community norm in disavouring agreement (i.e. lexical), while all other existentials show agreement (i.e. grammatical). We suggest that the reanalysis by individual speakers of grammatical variables as lexical forms implies that variability may become available to the sociolinguistic monitor. Thus, focusing of norms within a speech community may be achieved by reanalysing grammatical constructions as invariant lexical forms. The differences among speakers observed in this study, in contrast with the uniform parallels across speakers found for BE absence (Meyerhoff & Walker 2007) demonstrates the need to isolate the study of existentials from the analysis of be variation in general (cf. the attention given to *that's/tha's* in other work on BE; Blake 1997).

The results of this study provide further support for conclusions we have reached in studying other grammatical variables in Bequia, where we find divergence between villages (Daleszyska 2008; Walker & Meyerhoff 2006; Walker & Sidnell in press) alongside stability across (some) individuals' grammars within each village. Thus, a major finding to emerge from all of these studies is that individual divergences in overall frequencies of occurrence of a variant may mask the underlying persistence of the linguistic conditioning of the variable (cf. Meyerhoff & Walker 2007; Sankoff & Blondeau 2007). This finding also argues against views that reduce the entire linguistic system to frequency matching (cf. Walker 2008).

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