

## Distributed Morphological mechanisms of Smith Island *weren't* leveling

A growing body of research attempts to bridge the gap between "biolinguistic" theories of syntax and the empirical study of "Labovian" variation and change in progress (see e.g. the papers collected in Cornips and Corrigan 2005). In this paper, I discuss how variation and change might be addressed within the theoretical framework of Distributed Morphology (DM) (Embick and Noyer To appear; Halle and Marantz 1993 and related work), consistent with the Minimalist research program (Chomsky 1995; 2000 et seq. and related work). Specifically, I provide an empirical argument that mechanisms of variation should be located in DM's Vocabulary.

*Weren't* leveling is a case of morphosyntactic variation and rapid change currently in progress in the moribund community of Smith Island, MD (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999). Variation and leveling in the agreement forms of past-tense *be* (*was/were*) have been documented in a variety of English dialects (e.g. Britain 2002). On Smith Island, quantitative analyses (Mittelstaedt 2005; Schilling-Estes 2000) show that usage of leveled *was* (and *wasn't*) with 2s and plural subjects is declining in apparent time (see Table 1, attested examples from Mittelstaedt 2005 and p.c., with speaker sex and year of birth):

- (1) a. The boats was a lot slower. (M, 1951)
- b. There just wasn't enough oysters. (M, 1930)

Leveling to *were* with 1s and 3s subjects is completely unattested (see Table 1):

- (2) a. \* I were scared. (unattested)
- b. \* She were not scared. (unattested)

However, leveling to *weren't* is increasing rapidly in apparent time, approaching 100% usage for the youngest speakers on Smith Island (see Table 1, attested examples from Mittelstaedt 2005 and p.c.).

- (3) a. I weren't very old. (F, 1983)
- b. He weren't expecting a boat. (M, 1930)
- c. Ma weren't doing no laughing. (F, 1984)

Adger and Smith (Adger 2005; Adger and Smith 2005) give a Minimalist analysis of *was/were* variation in the village of Buckie, Scotland. Although their lexical analysis is consistent with DM, it does not require Late Insertion of phonological features. Indeed, the analysis can be implemented under "the assumption that lexical items are bundles of syntactic and phonological features when they enter the syntax (that is, roughly the system of Chomsky 1995)" (Adger 2005). I will try to show that such a system fails to account for Smith Island *weren't* leveling because it predicts the concurrent appearance of leveled *were*, contrary to fact. In other words, I will argue that the empirical facts of *weren't* leveling on Smith Island require a DM analysis.

Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (1994) suggest that *weren't* leveling results from a "remorphologization" of negation that yields "suppletive-like negators that function as unanalyzable units," analogous to the form *ain't*. In DM, suppletion results from the morphological operation Fusion. Thus, I propose that individual Smith Island speakers have the following Vocabulary Item:

- (4) [F<sub>(be)</sub>, +Past, Neg]            ⇔        /wɜrnt/

This postulated Vocabulary Item for leveled *weren't* contains no agreement features, and it can only be Inserted when the Neg(ation) terminal node has been Fused with the terminal node containing features of past-tense *be*. This captures the fact that leveling to *weren't* can occur without concurrent *were* leveling on Smith Island. The analysis can be extended to *ain't* and other auxiliaries (Mittelstaedt 2005).

On a DM approach, as with Adger and Smith's analysis, mechanisms of Labovian variation are located "within properties of lexical items", so that social "patterns of variation seen across (groups of) individuals reduce to...lexical choice" (Adger and Smith 2005). However, the proposed analysis of Smith Island *weren't* leveling crucially depends on Late Insertion of phonological features and underspecification of Vocabulary Items. Moreover, the postulated Vocabulary Item for leveled *weren't* does not compete for Insertion, pointing to a possible explanation for the distinction between Labovian variation and allomorphy.

Table 1 (adapted from Schilling-Estes 2000)

<b>Generation Group</b>	<b>#was/ #leveling environs %was</b>	<b>#wasn't/ #leveling environs %wasn't</b>	<b>#were/ #leveling environs %were</b>	<b>#weren't/ #leveling environs %weren't</b>
<i>Generation I b. 1899-1932 (7 persons)</i>	34/99 34.3%	5/6 83.3%	0/418 0.0%	6/27 22.2%
<i>Generation II b. 1942-1961 (7 persons)</i>	17/116 14.7%	2/9 22.2%	0/462 0.0%	17/36 47.2%
<i>Generation III b. 1965-1971 (9 persons)</i>	11/49 22.4%	0/2 0.0	0/214 0.0%	12/12 100%
<i>Generation IV b. 1975-1987 (6 persons)</i>	6/51 11.8%	0/2 0.0%	0/254 0.0%	27/28 96.4%
<b>Totals (29 persons)</b>	<b>68/315 21.5%</b>	<b>7/19 36.8%</b>	<b>0/1348 0%</b>	<b>62/103 60.1%</b>

### Selected References

- Adger, David. 2005. *Combinatorial Variability*. Ms. Queen Mary, University of London.
- Adger, David, and Smith, Jennifer. 2005. Variation and the Minimalist Program. In *Syntax and Variation: Reconciling the Biological and the Social*, eds. Leonie Cornips and Karen P. Corrigan. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Britain, David. 2002. Diffusion, leveling, simplification and reallocation in past tense BE in the English Fens. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 6: 16-43.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1995. *The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Chomsky, Noam. 2000. Minimalist inquiries: The framework. In *Step by Step: Essays on Minimalist Syntax in Honor of Howard Lasnik*, eds. Roger Martin, David Michaels and Juan Uriagereka, 89-155. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Cornips, Leonie, and Corrigan, Karen P. eds. 2005. *Syntax and Variation: Reconciling the Biological and the Social*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Embick, David, and Noyer, Rolf. To appear. Distributed Morphology and the Syntax/Morphology Interface. In *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Interfaces*, eds. G. Ramchand and C. Reiss: Oxford University Press.
- Halle, Morris, and Marantz, Alec. 1993. Distributed morphology and the pieces of inflection. In *The View from Building 20: Essays in Linguistics in Honor of Sylvain Bromberger*, eds. Ken Hale and S. J. Keyser. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Mittelstaedt, Jennifer. 2005. *Auxiliary Leveling and Morphological Theory: The Case of Smith Island English*, Georgetown University: Ph.D. dissertation.
- Schilling-Estes, Natalie, and Wolfram, Walt. 1994. Convergent explanation and alternative regularization patterns: *Were/weren't* leveling in a vernacular English variety. *Language Variation and Change* 6: 273-302.
- Schilling-Estes, Natalie, and Wolfram, Walt. 1999. Alternative models of dialect death: Dissipation vs. concentration. *Language* 75: 486-521.
- Schilling-Estes, Natalie. 2000. Exploring morphological change: The *was/weren't* pattern in Smith Island English. Paper presented at *NWAV 29*, Michigan State University.