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Historical evidence for “default singulars”: the use of *was* with plural subjects in earlier English

English vernaculars share a number of non-standard features such as negative concord and the use of *was* instead of *were* with plural subjects (“default singulars”). As these features are so widespread, it is hard to maintain that they have diffused from a single ancestor dialect to all the rest. An internal-structural position is therefore adopted by Chambers (1995: 242-250), who argues that these features must represent privileged or primitive linguistic processes, suppressed in the standard language. What interests the historical sociolinguist in this issue is the time-depth of features such as “default singulars” (*Bob and I was the last ones*): if they are to count as vernacular primitives historically, they ought to have been current in earlier stages of the English language.

My paper gives a diachronic account of the variation between the singular and plural past-tense forms of *be* with plural subjects in three British English dialect regions – the North, East Anglia and London – from the early fifteenth to the late seventeenth centuries. The material is drawn from the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (CEEC) and covers the period from 1460 to 1680. The number of informants analysed corresponds to half of the 778 writers in the 2.7 million-word corpus (on CEEC, see Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003). Separate VARBRUL analyses were carried out for three subperiods to find out whether the observed variation correlated more with language-internal factors (type of subject) than the external variable of region.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the results obtained:

- (1) The use of *was* with plural subjects was particularly a Northern dialect feature in the 15th and 16th centuries, but by no means restricted to the North. In the course of the 17th century it declined in the North, but still persisted, to some extent, among the literate social ranks throughout the country.
- (2) In the 15th and 16th centuries, plural *was* was favoured by both existential *there* and full NP subjects, but the subject-NP constraint was no longer effective when *was* began to lose ground in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. That existential *there* persisted is a sign of its diachronic robustness as a conditioning factor.
- (3) The corpus does not provide any evidence of *was* being triggered by *you* until the 17th century. There is independent evidence (e.g. Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2002) to support these findings: the generalization of *you was* is a separate development which largely took place in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

References

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