

Dialect Loss in Smith Island English: a Look at Non-Standard Subject-Verb Concord

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The community of Smith Island (Maryland, US) has existed in relative isolation from mainland communities for close to 300 years. The variety of English spoken in this community has been influenced by this isolation and represents a rare (perhaps unique) case of dialect death by concentration (the intensification of the dialect among dwindling numbers of speakers) rather than the more usual path of dissipation (the gradual loss of distinguishing features and adoption of more widespread ones) (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999). A number of phonological and morphosyntactic features of this variety have been examined in connection with the investigation of dialect loss in this community (Schilling-Estes 1997, 2000, 2002; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999, 2002; Mittelstaedt & Parrott 2002) One feature which has not been examined in great detail for this community, however, is subject-verb concord.

Nonstandard verbal concord (NSC) is a widespread and well-documented feature of a number of English varieties, including such isolated and post-isolated varieties as Appalachian English and Ocracoke English in the US. In addition, its patterning is similar in a number of communities, and its origins can be traced to historic varieties of Scots English and Scots-Irish English (Christian, Wolfram and Dube 1988; Hazen 2000; Wolfram, Hazen, and Schilling-Estes 1999). Because NSC has been examined for other communities, and much is known about its origins, an examination of the verbal concord system in Smith Island should lend valuable insight into the historical origins and current dialectal affinities of the Smith Island variety, as well how varieties undergoing death by concentration may differ in their patterning from healthy varieties and those undergoing death by dissipation.

In the present study, I examine NSC in Smith Island English. The data are drawn from a subset of sociolinguistic interviews with Smith Islanders carried out in 1999-2001 by a team of researchers at Georgetown University. This subset comprises a balanced sample of male and female speakers across three different generational groups. The data were subjected to statistical analyses, including a VARBRUL analysis.

Results indicate that Smith Island English preserves the historical pattern whereby NSC is strongly conditioned by subject type. This patterning indicates current affinity with other isolated and post-isolated US varieties, and probable historic affinity as well. However, contrary to historic patterns for NSC, and current patterns in Ocracoke and Appalachia, the presence or absence of intervening material seems have only a minimal effect on overall NSC in the Smith Island variety. The demonstrates more broadly that although isolated and post-isolated varieties may share a number of features, especially relic features such as historic patterns of NSC, features may have subtly different constraint patterns in different varieties, thus adding to the unique character of each dialect. This additional level of

differentiation seems especially important in communities undergoing dialect death by concentration, as speakers must strive to make their variety as unique as possible as the number of speakers declines.

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