

# Roots of English in the African American diaspora\*

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## Abstract

In this paper we use the world-wide variability in the past tense paradigm of the verb *be* (e.g. *I/you/we/they was/were*) to examine the similarities and differences across four geographically separated and ethnically diverse dialects of English spoken in North Preston, Guysborough Enclave and Guysborough Village in Nova Scotia, Canada, and Buckie in northern Scotland. Through comparative linguistic analysis of the distribution of forms across the verbal paradigm, we demonstrate unexpected parallelisms across three of these varieties. We conclude that these are the result of longitudinal continuity of the verb *to be*. The critical factor in explaining the similarities across dialects is their relative isolation from ongoing linguistic change in the English language.

**Key words:** *was/were* variation, African Nova Scotian English, Buckie English, Continuity.

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## 1. Introduction

The verb *to be* is an intriguing item of the English language. A hybrid by any measure, its origins may be traced to two separate verbs, one for the present tense, Old English *beon*, 'to exist', and one for the past, *wesan*, from Indo-European *vasati* 'to dwell' (Lass, 1987). Today, it continues to be 'a badly mixed up' verb (Pyles and Algeo, 1993), and is widely-attested as exhibiting

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non-standard forms, not just in Britain (Cheshire, 1982; Trudgill, 1990; Henry, 1995), but in all the major countries where English is spoken: Australia (Eisikovits, 1991), the United States (Feagin, 1979; Christian et al., 1988; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, 1994; Hazen, 1996), and Canada (Meechan and Foley, 1994). Consider the examples in (1):

(1) 2nd person singular:

a. You *wasn't* allowed to use their toilets. (NP:p:367.51)<sup>1</sup>

b. You *were* home (NP:p:512.53)

1st person plural:

c. And we *was* the only colour family. We *were- we were* just surrounded. (GE:l:1591.7)

d. We *were* all thegither...I think we *was* all thegither. (BE:h:72.44)

Full NP plural:

e. The kids *was* all here. (GE:l:124.20)

f. My kids *were* all men and women before I moved here to Lincolnville. (GE:l:1006.8)

Existential *there*:

g. And there *was* nine years between me and my brother. (GV:c:51.17)

h. There *were* three girls- no, there *were* four girls. (GV:c:16.12)

Are these utterances instances of non-standard dialect, slang, or simply mistakes? On the other hand, might this represent yet another robust example of systematic linguistic variation typical of all languages? At least part of the answer resides in the more compelling question: how did varieties of English from locations all over the world get this way?

The standard answer is that *was/were* variation is the result of 'regularisation' processes in language (e.g. Fries, 1940). This explanation is based on the idea that the verb *to be* is gradually becoming more like the other more regular verbs in English in having the same form, i.e. *was*, throughout the verbal paradigm, rather than the more complex distinction between 1st and 3rd person singular *was*, and 2nd person singular and 1st, 2nd and 3rd person plural *were*, as in (2).

(2) a. See that the house *was* evenly halved. (BE:g:408)

b. We never did that in our days. The doors *were* open. (BE:b:265.51)

But then where did the variation come from in the first place? One hypothesis is the standard diffusionist explanation, in which *was/were* was carried to these locations by people speaking varieties which contained the same featu-

1. The letters in brackets signal the name of the community — NP: North Preston, GE: Guysborough Enclave, GV: Guysborough Village, BE: Buckie English, and the speaker code. The numbers signal co-ordinates in the transcription.

res (cf. Weinreich et al., 1968). Another hypothesis argues against diffusion and suggests that this is the result of a more general tendency in all non-standard varieties of English to gravitate toward more primitive (i.e. not learned) linguistic patterns (Chambers, 1995).

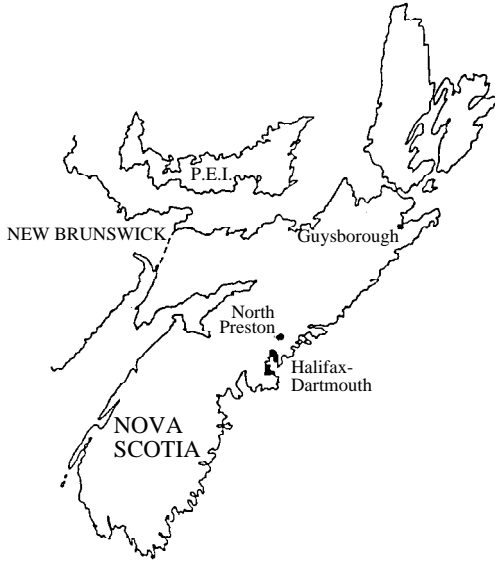
What type of linguistic analysis might shed light on the possible explanations for this variation?

First, it is necessary to employ a method which can disentangle the many different influences on a linguistic variable through systematic comparison of its behaviour. In order to determine the status of a form, it is not its current *existence* in a variety which is decisive, nor even its rates of occurrence, but its *distribution*, i.e. precisely where it occurs in the language, as determined by the relative frequency of the feature across its contexts of use. Such evidence is particularly critical in order to assess the claims that *was/were* variation represents diffusion and/or 'regularisation' of the verbal paradigm. For example, precisely how is a given dialect regularised and to what degree? Crucially, it is necessary to situate the variation through comparison with the same features in related varieties (Rickford, 1977: 195). In other words, is the variation patterned in the same way across varieties? Is it embedded in the social strata in the same way? And perhaps most importantly, how can the variability be contextualized within the social history of the community (Mufwene, 1996)?

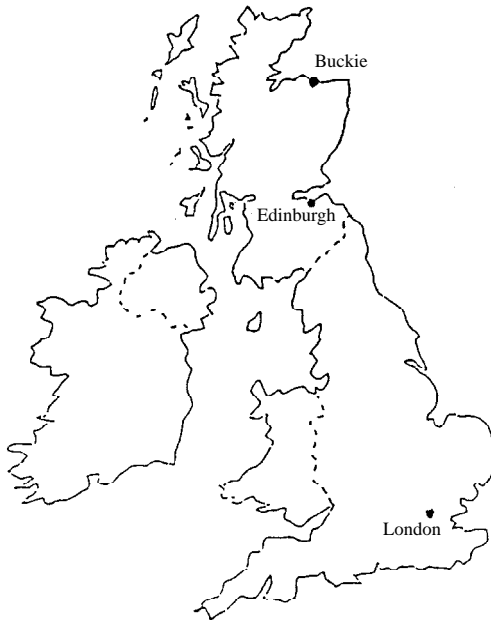
In an attempt to shed light on these questions, this paper provides a consistent cross-variety comparison of *was/were* variability in four varieties of English. These have been selected because they represent polar extremes on a number of different extra-linguistic dimensions. They may be differentiated on three major criteria: their geographic location, their relative degree of isolation from mainstream developments in the English language and their ethnicity. Three are spoken in Nova Scotia, one of the maritime provinces on the east coast of Canada (see Map 1) —North Preston, Guysborough Enclave, Guysborough Village. The fourth is spoken in Buckie, on the north-east coast of Scotland (see Map 2).

Although it is obvious that many linguistic changes have taken place in North American and British varieties of English over the last few centuries, the effects of different contact situations to such changes are not well known. This article contributes to ongoing comparisons between varieties of English in contrastive dialect situations. Because our data come from communities whose cultural heritage cross-cuts their social history, we are also able to address competing hypotheses about the origins of varieties of English spoken by people who do not trace their lineage back to the British Isles.<sup>2</sup>

2. This is a highly controversial topic in contemporary sociolinguistics. The extent to which varieties of English spoken in various locations in the world are 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' offspring of English (Mufwene, to appear) or may be more appropriately viewed within a creole-origins framework (Rickford, to appear) is a matter of much debate in the literature.



**Map 1.** Map showing location of Nova Scotian communities.



**Map 2.** Map showing location of Buckie.

However, any attempt to explain the current state of *was/were* variation in English is enhanced by a time-depth perspective of the past, as the contemporary standard forms of the verb *be* have gone through many changes since the time of Old English. Therefore, we first consider the historical record.

## 2. Historical precursors of *was/were* variability

Despite the dual etymological origins of the verb *to be*, the past tense paradigm derives from a single source, which through various phonological processes gave rise to the two contemporary variants — *was* and *were*. Standard English requires strict subject-verb agreement with 1st and 3rd person singular *was* and 2nd person singular and 1st, 2nd and 3rd person plural *were*. However, data from the historical record confirms that this has, in fact, always been variable (Jespersen, 1942; Forsström, 1948; Pyles, 1964; Visser, 1970; Curme, 1977), particularly the occurrence of non-standard *was* as in (3).

- (3) a Thyrty knyghtes ... Forsothe *was* in that companye. (c. 1300 Rich. Coeur de Lion (in Weber, *Metr. Romances* 1810) 95)
- b. This womans wordes *was* well harde. (c. 1523-5 Ld Berners, *Froiss III* 78)
- c. Thousands and thousands at that banquet *was* spent. (c. 1569 Preston, *Cambises* (in Manley, *Spec. II*) 199, 949)
- d. There *was* many Dukes, Erles and Barons. (Ld. Berners, *Huon* 2, 22, 1533)
- e. And there *was* in that tyme many gode holy men and holy heremytes (c. 1400 *Mandev.* 30, 30) [examples a-e from Visser, 1970]
- f. Indeed, when you *was* in the irreligious way, I should not have been pleased with you (James Boswell, *London Journal*, 1762-63) [example from Pyles and Algeo, 1993].

Despite a lack of consensus as to the explanation for *was/were* variability, the most salient factor identified in the literature is that the occurrence of so-called 'non-standard' *was* is not consistent across the verbal paradigm, but varies in frequency according to the person, number and even type of the subject.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, careful reading of the extensive literature on *was/were* variability suggests a relatively consistent pattern differentiating these contexts. In Middle English with personal pronouns, the pre-eminent context for non-standard *was* was 2nd person singular *you*, but apparently only rarely with the plural personal pronouns *you*, *we* and *they* (Forsström, 1948; Mossé, 1952; Brunner, 1970). NP plural contexts also exhibited non-standard *was* in Middle English, while existential contexts, in which the NP follows the verb, are attested as far back as the Old English period (Quirk and Wrenn,

3. These and other constraints are dealt with elsewhere (Tagliamonte, 1997; Tagliamonte and Smith, 1998).

1960; Visser, 1970). All uses of non-standard *was* during this time period are identified as a feature of northern England and Scotland in particular. 'You was' is reported in more southern regions from the 17th century onwards (Pyles and Algeo, 1993).

While historians are not in total agreement as to the explanation for *was/were* variability, not only is it clear that it existed in earlier varieties of English, it is also evident that it had specific patterns across the verbal paradigm (Forsström, 1948; Mossé, 1952).

### 3. Contemporary research on *was/were* variability

One might expect that this variation has by now disappeared from contemporary varieties of English, particularly with dramatically increasing literacy (Chambers, 1997). Nothing could be further from the truth. In the last couple of decades there has been a plethora of studies on *was/were* variation (e.g. Feagin, 1979; Cheshire, 1982; Christian et al., 1988; Meechan and Foley, 1994; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, 1994; Henry, 1995), all attesting to the continuing, and robust, variation between *was* and *were*. The foremost pattern has been the occurrence of *was* in contexts of *were*, providing support for the regularisation hypothesis. However, a number of studies demonstrate that *were* may also be the pivot for regularisation (Cheshire, 1982; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, 1994; Wolfram, 1997), suggesting that 'regularisation' processes may actually be far more complex than otherwise expected.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, a prominent linguistic feature involved in the patterning of *was* and *were* is the person and number of the subject.

Although different patterns are reported for different varieties of English, the personal pronoun *you* is consistently singled out as having a high degree of non-standard *was*, and first person plural *we* is also mentioned (Labov et al., 1968; Feagin, 1979). However, contemporary research focuses far more on 3rd person plural contexts, which exhibit differential frequencies of non-standard *was*, depending on whether they are encoded with a personal pronoun, (e.g. *they were*), a lexical noun (e.g. *the boys were*), or an existential subject, (e.g. *there were boys*). There are actually striking cross-variety similarities with respect to the appearance of *was* or *were* across these contexts (e.g. Christian et al., 1988; Montgomery, 1989). Third person personal pronoun *they* is identified as the context which is *least* likely to exhibit non-standard *was* (Feagin, 1979; Eisikovits, 1991). In the case of third person NPs however, there is a clear distinction between contexts in which the NP is post-posed to the verb, i.e. existential constructions, versus those in which the full NP occurs in subject position. Non-standard *was* is reported as more fre-

4. Researchers investigating *were* regularisation phenomena have suggested a remorphologisation of *was/were* across affirmative vs. negative constructions respectively (Cheshire, 1982; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, 1994)

quent in the former and less frequent in the latter (Wolfram and Christian, 1976; Feagin, 1979; Christian et al., 1988; Eisikovits, 1991; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, 1994).

In sum, the cumulative findings from both the historical and contemporary dialectal record demonstrate the pervasiveness of *was/were* variation. However, this research does not entirely support the universality of regularised *was*, because some varieties demonstrate the regularisation of *were*. Moreover, the question of precisely which person and number *was* is regularised to, and in which linguistic circumstances, is clearly an issue to be grappled with. As we have demonstrated, the verbal paradigm is not equal in this regard. We have been able to identify specific and consistent patterns of variation, not just in the historical record, but also reflected in contemporary varieties of English.

We now address a number of questions which arise from this research in our own data:

1. How frequently does *was/were* variation occur in the specific contexts across the verbal paradigm?
2. What are the similarities and/or differences in terms of where and how often levelling takes place?
3. How do contemporary dialects from widely-separated geographic locations compare with respect to this patterning?
4. What do patterns of *was/were* variation reveal about the underlying mechanism which produced the forms?
5. What can patterns of *was/were* variation reveal about the socio-cultural history and origins of different varieties of English?

## 4. Data and method

### 4.1. *The communities*

#### 4.1.1. Nova Scotia, Canada

Nova Scotia, Canada, recognises four founding populations: indigenous Indian and Inuit tribes, as well as early British and African American immigrants. The three Nova Scotian communities we examine here are descendants of the latter two groups. People of African descent came to Nova Scotia in two waves of migration: Black Loyalists after the American Revolutionary War (between 1783 and 1785) and Refugee Slave immigration following the War of 1812. Today, some communities in Nova Scotia still remain which are almost entirely populated by the descendants of these migrations (Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1991; 1994). The two small hamlets in our sample —North Preston and Guysborough— were each populated by one of these migrations. The input settlers to Guysborough were almost entirely Black Loyalists, mainly freedmen and house slaves with service-related skills, while North Preston was populated largely by field hands from the southern United States.

Since settlement, both communities have functioned as enclaves, at least in terms of the amount of *direct* contact they have had with the surrounding whites. In addition to the remoteness of these settlements, poor socio-economic conditions, lack of opportunity, and dissociation from the predominantly British-origin mainstream populations all conspired to create circumstances in which African Nova Scotians were maximally separate, thereby providing optimal conditions for the maintenance of a distinct in-group vernacular.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of North Preston, this is clearly due to geographical isolation. The speakers live in a remote area, separated from the relatively proximate urban centre of Dartmouth/Halifax by wilderness and one limited-access road. In Guysborough, although the African community has coexisted in proximity to their British-origin neighbours, they live in relative isolation in small hamlets outside the main village of Guysborough.

The speakers who constitute our sample of British-origin Guysborough speakers, on the other hand, have lived most of their lives *within* the village of Guysborough. These people trace their lineage to migrations of (white) British American Loyalists who came into the area at approximately the same time as the Africans.

#### 4.1.2. Buckie, Northern Scotland

Buckie is a small fishing town on the far north-east coast of Scotland. As a traditional fishing industry community, it has had a long history of cultural cohesiveness with entire families directly or indirectly taking part in the fishing trade. The population (approximately 8000) has changed little in the last thirty years. Unlike similar rural areas in Scotland, which have suffered from de-population, Buckie has a relatively stable economy, so there is no reason for residents to leave. Therefore, a tradition of endogamy has been effectively maintained up to the present-day (Smith and Tagliamonte, 1997). Although contact with mainstream culture exists through local government agencies, media, work on the oil rigs in the North Sea, and particularly education, sustained contact with outsiders is best characterised as minimal. While Buckie is not a linguistic enclave in the strict sense of the term, the majority of residents have existed through to the present in a situation of relative isolation

#### 4.2. *The data*

The goal of our fieldwork in each of these locations was to collect a representative sample of the vernacular norms of each community. Therefore, the speakers all have relatively homogeneous socio-economic characteristics. They were born and raised in the community in question and in each case

5. See Poplack and Tagliamonte (1991) for a detailed description of the corpora and justification for their categorisation as linguistic enclaves.



**Table 1.** Distribution of speaker sample.

Age	Buckie		North Preston		Guysborough Enclave		Guysborough Village	
	male	female	male	female	male	female	male	female
70-79			2	2	1	1	1	
80+	4	4	1	1	2	2	3	6
Total	8		6		6		10	

they represented the oldest living generation at the time of collection. The data consist of tape-recorded conversations ranging from 1-3 hours.<sup>6</sup> They include discussions about local traditions, narratives of personal experience, group interactions and even local gossip. With the exception of Guysborough Village, all were conducted by in-group community members. Our samples, depicted in Table 1, consist of 30 speakers, ranging from 70 to 87 years of age and divided between men and women.<sup>7</sup>

The occupations of all the speakers were related to traditional or service industries of the community. Most of the women had been housewives, although in Buckie some had worked in the fishing industry and in the Nova Scotian enclaves some had been domestics. In Buckie, all the men were fishermen. In North Preston and Guysborough, they had mostly worked at jobs as labourers, largely in the area of caretaking and cleaning (North Preston) or in the woods, mines, or fisheries (Guysborough Enclave); or as farmers and mechanics (Guysborough Village). Level of education among the informants ranges from almost none to 12 years, with most speakers falling into the lower range. The sociological profile of all the speakers are similar in that they are members of 'dense' networks (Milroy, 1980) and their social circles were generally confined to the community in question.

Each community differs with respect to the relative degree of exposure of residents to mainstream culture and language. While all areas can be described as rural, the African Nova Scotian enclaves and Buckie have relatively limited contact with mainstream culture and outsiders.<sup>8</sup> In each, the speakers

6. Each corpus is entirely machine readable, with transcription and correction protocols which follow the same methods used in other large corpus construction projects (e.g. Poplack, 1989; 1991; Tagliamonte, 1996).
7. This is actually a small sub set of much larger bodies of materials (see Poplack and Tagliamonte 1991 and Smith, (in preparation). See Tagliamonte and Smith (1998) for an examination of *was/were* variability across age groups and other communities.
8. In today's media-enriched and mobile society, isolation is, of course, a relative term. We note however that linguists are relatively unanimous in claiming that while the media may serve to spread vocabulary, *new idioms* and fashionable pronunciations, it cannot precipitate change in a linguistic *system* (Milroy and Milroy, 1985; Trudgill, 1986).

**Table 2.** Distribution of the varieties of English by ecological circumstances.

Variety	Geographic Isolation	Psychological Isolation <sup>a</sup>	Ethnicity
Buckie	+ Isolated	+/- Isolated	+ British
North Preston	+ Isolated	+ Isolated	- British
Guysborough Enclave	+ Isolated	+/- Isolated	- British
Guysborough Village	+ Isolated	- Isolated	+ British

- a. This measure is based on a number of indices as outlined in O'Leary (1997). For example EDUCATION: were community members educated within, or outside the community/ EMPLOYMENT: Location of main employment opportunities for community members RELIGION: Was it the same or different from the mainstream population group?

live in a remote fringe area, where they are also separated from large urban populations on more socio-cultural grounds.

Due to these circumstances, data from these varieties of English can provide an interesting site for models of language change as they have the potential for retaining relic linguistic features. Similar findings have been reported in other communities which have evolved in similar situations of historical isolation (e.g. Tagliamonte and Poplack, 1988; Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1989; 1994; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram, 1994; Hazen, 1996; Wolfram, 1997).

As mentioned earlier, these four communities may also be differentiated by the ethnic ancestry of their inhabitants. In two communities the speakers are of African descent; in the other two, the speakers are of British ancestry. More interestingly, this cross-cuts the factor of isolation. Thus, we are provided with an interesting opportunity to conduct a cross-variety comparison in which linguistic features may be viewed across these two extra-linguistic dimensions relatively independently, as summarised in Table 2. For example, although Buckie and Guysborough Village have ethnicity in common, the socio-economic ecological circumstances under which they have arisen represent the two extremes in our sample; Buckie is one of the most isolated in terms of direct contact with mainstream developments; Guysborough Village is the least.

These extra-linguistic facts, in conjunction with what we know of the preconditions for contact-induced linguistic restructuring including physical contact, frequency of interaction, prestige and other factors (Pousada and Poplack, 1982; Thomason and Kaufman, 1988), would lead us to expect that the more separate from mainstream culture, the higher the degree of impermeability to influence from surrounding mainstream vernaculars. In the case of the Nova Scotian communities, these considerations, in conjunction with a standard diffusionist hypothesis, would lead us to expect that North Preston and Buckie should retain more local vernacular features; while Guysborough Enclave may show similarities with their neighbours in Guysborough Village.

**Table 3.** Overall distribution of *was* in *were* contexts in Guysborough Enclave, Buckie, North Preston and Guysborough Village.

Community	%
Guysborough Enclave	68
Buckie	58
North Preston	49
Guysborough Village	30

In the remainder of this article, we present a methodologically consistent cross-variety comparison of *was/were* variation. The results we report in ensuing sections emerge from a distributional analysis of the overall rates of presence and absence of non-standard *was* in contexts of standard *were* across the most salient factor involved in *was/were* variability: grammatical person and number.<sup>9</sup> Because these rates will vary according to features of the situation, we stress here the *pattern* across the verbal paradigm. Our hypothesis is that if a variable phenomenon is influenced by the same linguistic features across varieties (i.e. grammatical person and number), and that categories of these features (i.e. 1st, 2nd and 3rd person) are ranked in the same order across varieties, then this will be evidence that they share a similar grammar (see also Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1991; 1994; 1996a; 1996b).

## 5. Results

Table 3 shows the overall distribution of *was* in contexts of *were* in Guysborough Enclave, Buckie, North Preston, and Guysborough Village.

The rates of non-standard *was* range from a high 68% in Guysborough Enclave to a low of 30% in Guysborough Village. Interestingly, these two are the most proximate groups. Notice that whatever dividing line might be drawn between communities, that line cannot be distinguished based on geographical location or ethnic composition of the population — whether British or African in origin. However, taking overall frequencies such as these as an indicator of whether varieties are similar or different obscures underlying patterns which provide clues about the origins and development of *was/were* variability. Such discoveries can only be made by examining the *pattern* of non-standard *was* within the individual contexts of the verbal paradigm.

9. Every instance of *was* or *were* was extracted from the four data sets using Concorder, a concordance program for the Macintosh (Rand & Patera, 1992). In addition to the time-saving benefits, this automated method ensured that every instance of *was/were* used in the data set is accounted for. Then each variant was coded for a series of grammatical features that could have an effect on *was/were* variability (see Tagliamonte & Smith, in progress). The most important of these is reported here.

**Table 4.** Percentage of *was* in *were* contexts by person/number.

	Guysborough Enclave		Buckie		North Preston		Guysborough Village	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
subject person								
2nd p. sg/pl <i>you</i> <sup>a</sup>	80	25	91	45	71	21	7	29
1st p. pl. <i>we</i>	75	52	73	131	43	70	6	35
3rd p. pl. <i>they</i>	50	70	0	118	37	71	0	125
subject type								
existential <i>there</i>	86	28	91	54	64	14	68	28
NP pl.	65	62	81	72	62	54	33	84
Total		237		420		230		301

- a. Tokens of second person plural were extremely rare across all corpora. Because these did not exhibit any qualitative differences with the patterns observed in second person singular, the two have been collapsed here.

Table 4 displays the distribution of *was* in contexts of *were* by the grammatical person and number of the subject.

At first glance, it is quite difficult to draw any obvious conclusions from this array of percentages. We note first that *no* variety regularises *was* at the same *rate* across grammatical person and number. On the other hand, every variety has a significant percentage of non-standard *was* with existentials and NPs. One variety, GV, has much less use of non-standard *was* with personal pronouns. Buckie, surprisingly, is categorically standard in third person plural *they*.

Although one variety in isolation might lead to specific claims regarding the frequency and distribution of non-standard *was* across the grammatical paradigm, this enterprise is exponentially increased when more corpora are added to the picture, since the rates of non-standard *was* in one community do not reflect those in another. However, our task is to understand and explain the variation across *all* the varieties. How can we make sense of this array of variation?

In what follows we consider individual grammatical persons separately according to claims made in the literature and view these against the backdrop of the historical record. As we shall see this provides us with a means to interpret the synchronic variability in Table 4.

### 5.1. The pronouns *we/you/they*

Extrapolating from observations from the historical record and contemporary studies of non-standard *was*, we can project a hierarchy from more to less across the personal pronouns *we*, *you* and *they*. Recasting the percentages

in Table 4 along these lines, Figure 1 displays the distribution of non-standard *was* across the personal pronouns *we/you/they* by community.

As we saw earlier, (Table 4), the pronoun *they* is categorically marked with standard *were* in Guysborough Village and Buckie. Notice, however, that it is the least likely to be used with non-standard *was* in North Preston and Guysborough. So, all the varieties are similar in that this is the context which is the least likely to exhibit regularisation overall, despite their differences in frequency.

Next, consider the placement of the pronoun *you* in the hierarchy. All the varieties have more non-standard *was* in contexts of *you* than in any other location. Moreover, the pattern of more to less with respect to *you* and *we*, is the same across varieties as well, though this difference is quite minimal in both Guysborough Village and Guysborough Enclave.

In general, Figure 1 demonstrates significant patterns of similarity across dialects with respect to the relative rates of non-standard *was*, (i.e. 2nd person singular/plural > 1st person plural > 3rd person plural). Notice, however, the obvious difference between Guysborough Village and all the other varieties. The rate of non-standard *was* with personal pronouns in this variety is negligible compared to the three other communities.

### 5.2. Full NP subjects

All contemporary studies of *was/were* variation report a difference in frequency of existential constructions, which exhibit very high rates of non-standard *was*, and of full NP's in regular subject position, which are less likely to occur with non-standard *was*.

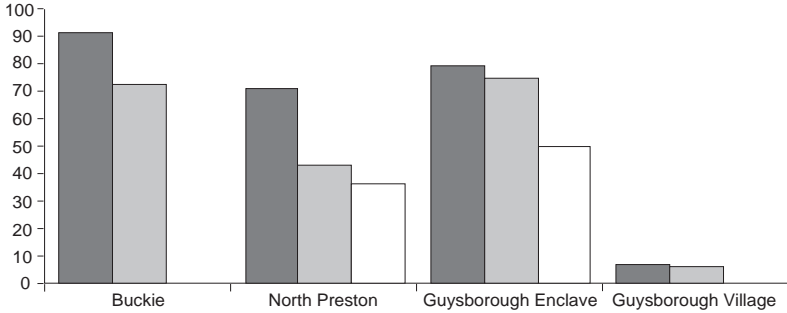
Figure 2 displays the patterns of non-standard *was* in 3rd person plural contexts across communities, distinguishing existential constructions from full NP's.

The regularity of non-standard *was* is striking. The pattern of more to less between existential constructions and regular plural NP's is the same across varieties. In every case existentials have higher rates of *was*. Notice the breadth of this effect in Guysborough Village, where existentials have more than double the rate of non-standard *was* (68% vs. 33%).

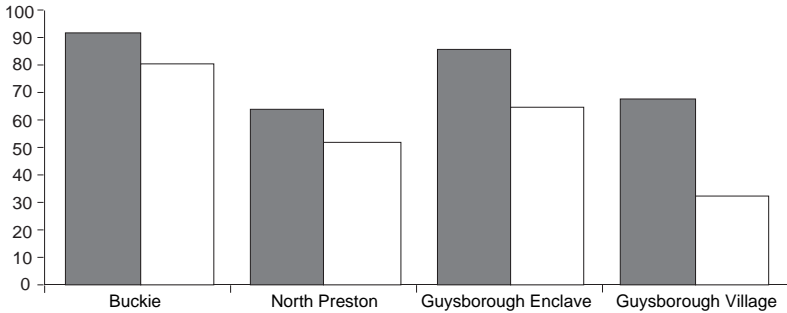
Figures 1 and 2 reveal striking similarities in the patterns of *was/were* variation across the verbal paradigm in Buckie, North Preston, Guysborough Enclave and Guysborough Village.

### 5.3. The verbal paradigm

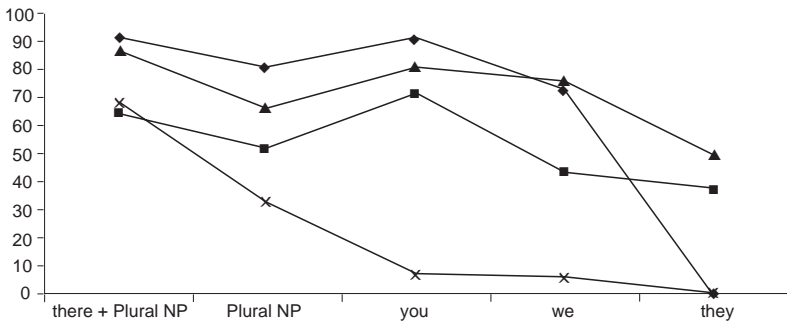
However, despite these parallelisms, it is also apparent that there are distinct differences amongst the varieties. Figure 3 displays the distribution of non-standard *was* by grammatical person/number across all the communities. Here, we can clearly see the patterns of similarity and difference. Which varieties pattern in the same way? Which one differs?



**Figure 1.** Distribution of personal pronouns (*we/you/they*) by community: ■ you; ■ we; □ they.



**Figure 2.** Distribution of 3rd person plural contexts –existential vs. full NPs by community: ■ there + Plural NP; □ Plural NP.



**Figure 3.** Distribution of non-standard *was* by grammatical person/number in Buckie, North Preston, Guysborough Enclave and Guysborough Village. ◆ Buckie; ■ North Preston; ▲ Guysborough Enclave; × Guysborough Village.

One variety is clearly distinct from all the others —Guysborough Village, particularly with respect to personal pronouns. In contrast, aside from the categorical use of standard *were* with the pronoun *they* in Buckie<sup>10</sup>, notice the amazing parallels amongst the other three varieties. These results are surprising. While a standard diffusionist hypothesis would have predicted North Preston to be the most ‘vernacular’ (or most highly differentiated) variety, since it is the most isolated on psychological, geographic and cultural grounds, this is clearly not the case. The same hypothesis would also have predicted that Guysborough Enclave would behave *similarly* to the Guysborough Village speakers. Again this is clearly not the case. Interestingly, and perhaps most striking, Figure 3 reveals that Buckie English is most similar to the *African Nova Scotian* varieties of English and not very similar to that spoken by rural (white) Nova Scotians with whom they share (among other extra-linguistic similarities) the same ethnic heritage.

## 6. Discussion

At the beginning of this article we posited two hypotheses which might explain *was/were* variation. A diffusionist hypothesis predicts that the observed variability can be explained by processes inherent in the English language and diffused across populations of speakers. One of those processes could well be regularisation, but if this applied across the board we might predict undifferentiated use of *was* across the verbal paradigm and a proportional increase over time, barring the effects of prescriptive norms. If, on the other hand, *was/were* variation was a more primitive tendency, we might expect it to exhibit similar distributions in geographically-separated vernaculars, but certainly *without* continuity of linguistic patterns which can be inferred to have been inherited through normal processes of transmission across generations.

Do any of these offer a satisfactory explanation of the results? Through detailed reading of the historical and contemporary literature, we have shown that patterns of *was/were* variation, though varying substantially in *rates* across varieties, demonstrate quite dramatic similarities in *patterning* across the verbal paradigm. However, these patterns are not simply the result of across-the-board regularisation processes. The encroachment of *was* into contexts of *were* cannot be seen to proceed in a uniform way, but exhibits a distinct and quite differentiated pattern across the verbal paradigm. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, this pattern can be traced to the history of the English language (see examples in section 2). We conclude, that *was/were* variation in these varieties is the result of longitudinal continuity in the past tense paradigm of the verb *to be*. What else could account for the similarity in patterning, not only across varieties, but also across centuries?

10. This apparently idiosyncratic result is discussed in Tagliamonte and Smith (1998).

However, we are still left with the question of why African Nova Scotian English is so similar to Buckie English, since it is clearly not the case that African Americans in rural Nova Scotia actually came in contact with people from an insular fishing village in northern Scotland.

Undoubtedly the Buckie speakers, because of the characteristics of their community, have retained patterns of *was/were* from the history of English in Britain (see Smith and Tagliamonte, 1997), but the fascinating question is where did the African Nova Scotians get it? The fact that the descendants of the two African enclaves originated in the United States, coupled with the fact that neither of them resembles the patterns found in the Guysborough Village, suggests that they must have got the patterns from a source that predates their migration to Nova Scotia.

Although we cannot unambiguously reconstruct the precise origins of the English varieties that were spoken in the United States during the late 1700's, the fact that non-standard varieties of English from the British Isles were spoken all over the United States during the same time period is not in question. The fact that the African Nova Scotians, who had migrated from both the northern *and* southern US, exhibit such dramatic similarities with Buckie suggests that they must have acquired the patterns from the varieties of British English spoken in the US at that time.

So why is Guysborough Village so different? We believe that the only possible explanation for the patterns we have discovered here is that the varieties under investigation represent different stages in a longitudinal process of linguistic change in the verb *to be*. The extent of the parallels between Buckie and the African Nova Scotian English enclaves becomes interpretable if we think of them as retaining features from an earlier stage in the history of English. All the varieties which have evolved in enclave or enclave-like situations pattern the same. Only Guysborough Village, the least separate community, does not. In fact, it resembles the high frequency of non-standard *was* recently reported for standard, urban varieties of English in Canada (Meechan and Foley, 1994) as well as in the UK (Tagliamonte, 1997) and undoubtedly elsewhere, i.e. non-standard *was* in existentials, but much less frequently elsewhere<sup>11</sup>. Thus, the differences we observe between Guysborough Village and the other varieties is due to its contact and participation with mainstream developments, not only in Nova Scotia, but in English more generally. The more isolated varieties have simply lagged behind ongoing linguistic developments due to their isolation as well as the in-group solidarity found in the communities.

11. The high rate of non-standard *was* (33%) in NP plural contexts in Guysborough Village is worthy of note. Here we may be viewing the conflation of two different patterns, one which contemporary varieties appear to be moving towards, i.e. high rates of non-standard *was* in existential vs. non-existential contexts, and an older pattern in which NPs had higher rates of non-standard *was* than pronouns (see Tagliamonte and Smith, 1998).



The results of this study taken in conjunction with earlier findings on African Nova Scotian English (Poplack & Tagliamonte, 1991; 1994; 1995; 1996a) provide further confirmation that these varieties are a reflection of the state of the English language at the time the ancestors of our informants were acquiring it. Though it perhaps goes without saying, these findings highlight the fact that differences across varieties of English have far less to do with the ethnic heritage of their speakers (e.g. African, Caucasian or otherwise), than with the origins and development of the communities in which they are spoken. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this study has provided empirical confirmation of the benefits of a more ecologically-focused approach to language contact.

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