Dialect contact and past BE in the English Fens

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Abstract

In the dialect contact framework proposed by Trudgill (1986), relatively little research has investigated the consequences of the mixing of different *grammatical* systems of English. The apparent time survey of the Fenland dialect of Eastern England reported here provides an example of a range of dialect contact processes reconfiguring variable patterns of past tense BE, resulting in a variety with analogical levelling to *was* in positive contexts – '*the farms was*' – and to *weren't* in negative clauses – '*the farm weren't*'. In focussing this *was/weren't* pattern, a number of the processes typical of koineisation can be observed – *diffusion* (the geographical and/or social spread of a linguistic form from another socio-geographical place), *levelling* (the eradication of marked or minority forms in situations of dialect competition, where the number of variants in the output is dramatically reduced from the number in the input), *simplification* (a relative diminution of grammatical irregularity and redundancy) and *reallocation* (where two (or more) ingredient variants of the dialect mix are refunctionalised to serve new social, stylistic, or, as here, grammatical roles).

INTRODUCTION

Trudgill's (1986) influential text *Dialects in Contact* outlined the kinds of linguistic process we might expect would operate when speakers of radically different varieties of a language interact. The evidence presented ranged from relatively fleeting and short-term contacts, such as those in service encounters and summer holidays, to the long-term establishment and crystallisation of new varieties in, for example, newly created or newly settled environments, post-colonial settings and contexts of forced or unforced labour movements. Whilst much of

Trudgill's evidence was based on English – and particularly the development of its diaspora varieties – relatively few of the linguistic processes that are engendered by mixing were exemplified by cases of contact between *grammatical* systems of English. This has largely been the case since, despite the burgeoning of research in the field that followed the publication of the 1986 text, despite considerable regional and social variation in the grammars of, especially, British English dialects (see, for example, Edwards, Trudgill and Weltens 1984; Cheshire, Edwards and Whittle 1989, Milroy and Milroy 1993, Britain forthcoming, b), and despite the substantial evidence of widespread diffusion, levelling, dialect supralocalisation, and second dialect acquisition provoked by socio-demographic mobility (Llamas 1998; Milroy 1999; Watt and Milroy 1999; Foulkes and Docherty 2000; Kerswill and Williams 2000; Kingston 2000; Britain forthcoming, a; Britain and Simpson, forthcoming).

The Fens of East Anglia[1] are a particularly suitable locale for the study of dialect mixture. They experienced contact between quite divergent East Anglian and Midland dialects in the 17th and 18th centuries because of the in-migration that followed marshland reclamation by the Dutch (Britain 1991, 1997a, b), and given that the traditional local variety is quite distinct from diffusing south-eastern dialects, more recent contact has, in some cases, led to the focussing of innovative linguistic outcomes rather than the dialect merely being swamped by invading (sub)urban varieties (Britain 2001b, forthcoming, a). This study exploring the consequences of contact on the past tense system of the verb BE in the Fens provides evidence of how grammatical systems of English fare following contact. As I will demonstrate below, young people in the Fens increasingly use *was* in affirmative clauses (irrespective of person/number) and almost exclusively use *weren't* in negative contexts. Where this pattern came from, what it has replaced, and where it is spreading is the focus of this article, along with a variationist analysis of linguistic constraints on variation and change and contact-based interpretations of the results[2]. As we will see, a number of koineisation processes, such as levelling, reallocation and simplification, as well as geolinguistic diffusion are operative on past BE variation in this variety.

Figure 1: Locations mentioned in the article.

VARIATION IN THE PAST TENSE OF *BE*

Virtually every vernacular variety of English appears to be variable with respect to past tense BE, even those varieties with *relatively* little other morpho-syntactic non-standardness. Bauer (1994:400), for example, claims that the use of *was* in non-standard contexts is present at low levels in New Zealand English and this is supported by Jacob's (1990) research on grammatical variation in the speech of Maori and Pakeha residents of the North Island city of Levin. In addition, Sudbury (2000, 2001) for Falkland Island English, and Eisikovits (1991) and Malcolm (1996) for Australian English all report the use of *was* in non-standard environments.

There appear to be two broad dominant patterns of past BE across varieties of English, and within each, perhaps not surprisingly, there is often slightly differing grammatical conditioning (see below):

- The first and most common – Chambers (1995: 242), indeed, calls it a 'vernacular primitive' - is a variable pattern of levelling to *was* across person, number and polarity: *You was, wasn't you*? Dialects with this broad pattern include: AAVE (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968), varieties spoken in the Southern highlands of the US (Wolfram and Christian 1976); Alabama English (Feagin 1979); Tristan da Cunha (Schreier 2001); the Maori English of New Zealand (Jacob 1990), Falkland Island English (Sudbury 2000, 2001), Australian English (Eisikovits 1991; Malcolm 1996), the Scottish English of Buckie (Smith and Tagliamonte 1999), a number of varieties of Nova Scotian English in Canada (Tagliamonte and Smith 1999) and Samanà English of the Dominican Republic (Tagliamonte and Smith 1999), etc.

- A second pattern involves levelling to *weren't* in clauses with negative polarity, and, often less advanced, levelling to *was* in clauses with positive polarity: *I was, weren't I? You was, weren't you?* This pattern is found in Reading in Southern England (Cheshire 1982), York (Tagliamonte 1998), Smith Island in Maryland (Schilling-Estes 2000), as well as Ocracoke (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994), Hyde County (Wolfram and Beckett 2000), and

Lumbee, Anglo-American and African American varieties of Robeson County, North Carolina (Wolfram and Sellers 1999; see also Trudgill 1990).

Extensive levelling to *were* in positive polarity clauses also occurs, but the literature provides little detail of its present socio-geographical distribution or the linguistic constraints operative on such varieties. Edwards, Trudgill and Weltens' (1984:20) suggestion that levelling to *were* was very regionally restricted is considered 'an inaccurate and wildly misleading contention' by Shorrocks (1999: 168). *Were* levelling is found both in parts of Northern England (see, for example, Shorrocks (1999: 168-9) on Bolton) and at *much* lower levels in the *was/weren't* varieties of pattern two above, though it is clear it was once much more widespread in England (see below; Ellis 1889; Orton and Tilling 1969; Cheshire 1982; Ojanen n.d., a, b; Britain, Kingston, Fox and Baker, forthcoming; Kingston, forthcoming; and the data in Van den Eynden (1991)).

Across these types, we find two fairly consistent linguistic constraints. The first, and one which has shown very strong effects, is the favouring of *was* in existentials followed by plural nouns. This effect is obviously related to the favouring of *'s* in present tense existentials and has been found right across the English-speaking world (see, Meechan and Foley 1994; Britain and Sudbury, in press, for reviews of the literature), even in speech communities with relatively little non-standard *was* in other contexts. Indeed, recent research by Cheshire (1999) has interpreted the general absence of variability in the verb BE in existentials in the *written* standard, but widespread use of singular verb forms before plural nouns in the *spoken* standard as highlighting the fact that different social, discourse and processing constraints on the spoken word as opposed to the written will result in different strategies of linguistic organisation, and thus different grammars. In other words, the universality of *there's/there was* could be a result of the role of existentials in conversational management, rather than them being a non-standard feature per se.

The second, and again a constraint that has scope beyond past BE, is the 'Northern Subject Rule' – a stronger favouring of, in this case, *was* after full noun phrases or when the subject and verb are separated by a clause, than after pronouns. Bailey, Maynor and Cukor-Avila (1989:290) found this constraint to affect present tense marking in Early Modern English,

Hazen (2000) found it operative in Ocracoke, as did Godfrey and Tagliamonte (1999) in Devon. It is not universal, however. Clarke (1997: 236-7) claims that in Newfoundland English, for example, the 'present-tense third person plural marking pattern is not governed by the NP/PRO constraint' and, importantly, Kingston (2000), working on Suffolk English, found quite the reverse to be true for 3rd person singular present tense marking. In her study, subject pronouns favoured –s marking (63%) over full noun phrase subjects (45%) (see, further, Britain et al, forthcoming). Studies of past BE have shown the Northern Subject Rule to be operative in, amongst other places, Ocracoke (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994), York (Tagliamonte (1998) and, in contexts of positive but not negative polarity, among the Lumbee of Robeson County, North Carolina (Wolfram and Sellers 1999).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON PAST *BE* IN ENGLAND.

Detailed commentary on the regional dialectology of past BE dates back to Ellis (1889). He shows: the use of levelling to *were* across a wide area of England, (e.g. '*the kettle were a boiling*' in Bedford in the east Midlands (1889: 207), Pakenham in Suffolk (1889: 288), Chapel-en-le-frith in Derbyshire (1889: 321), Skipton in Yorkshire (1889:546), etc.), though it predominates in the north Midlands, the north-west and parts of Yorkshire; as well as levelling to *was* (for example, in Enfield in the South-East (1889: 235), West Somerset (1889: 155), Norwich (1889: 277), Southwold in Suffolk (1889:285) (although, as far as England is concerned, this levelling to *was* appears restricted to the South)) and even *weren't* in contexts of standard *wasn't*[3]. Figure 2 displays the regional distribution of non-standard forms across England that Ellis comments upon in his survey. The Survey of English Dialects from the mid-20th century shows not only a very wide range of patterns of past BE systems around the country, but also a dazzling array of variant pronunciations of these forms. Table 1 shows the entries in the Basic Materials for a number of sites around the Fens (see Figure 3 below)[4].

Further detail comes from Cheshire, Edwards and Whittle's (1989) *Survey of British Dialect Grammar*, based on a questionnaire sent to schools around Britain. 80 percent of the responses confirmed the presence of non-standard *was*. It was found across the country, but less frequently in Glasgow and the urban north. Non-standard *were* was also frequent in the north-west, Yorkshire and Humberside, and in the Midlands, as well as being present, but at lower

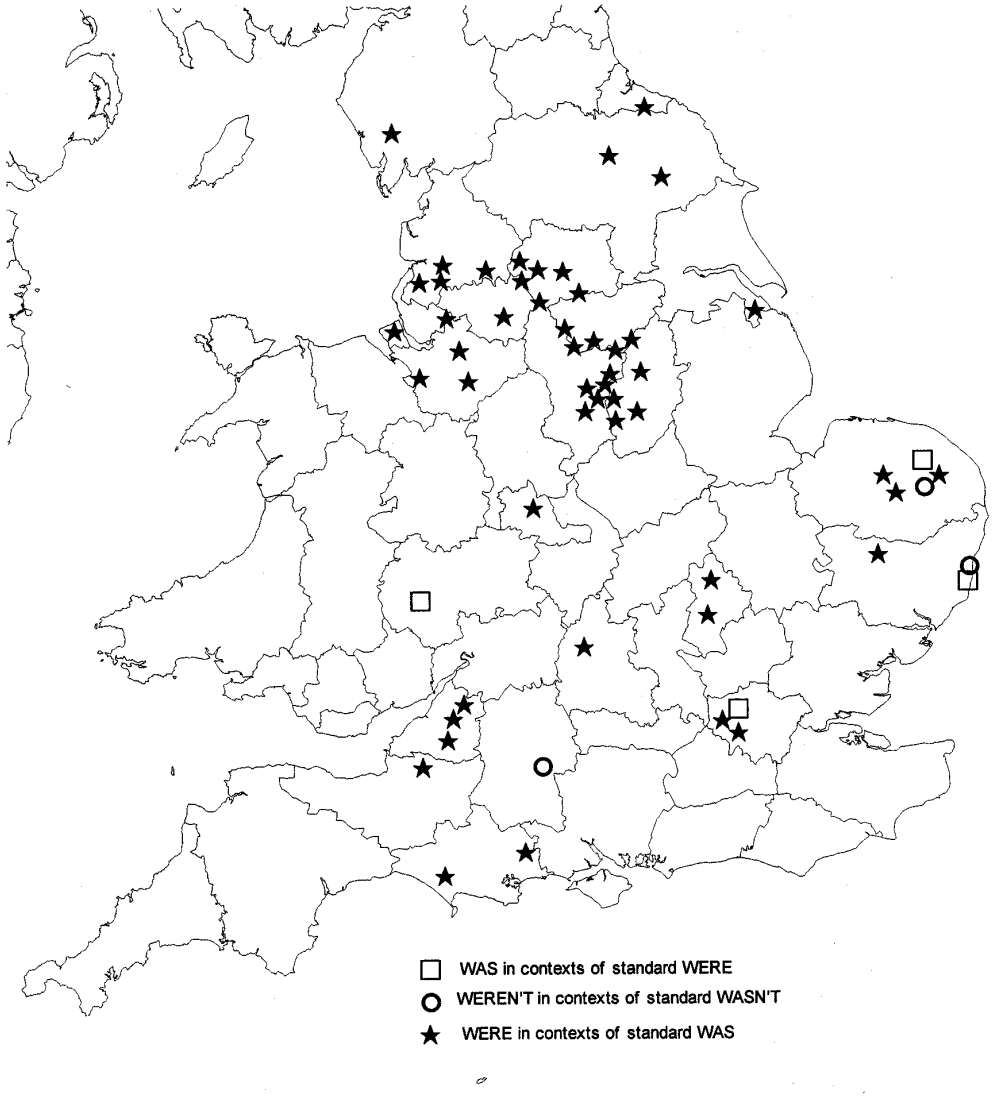

Figure 2: Comments on past BE in Ellis (1889).

Table 1: Past tense of BE in the Survey of English Dialects for selected locations in East Anglia/East Midlands (Orton and Tilling 1969: 1187-1189, 1295-1297). For localities see Figure 3.

Location	1st singular affirmative	3rd singular pronoun affirmative	1st plural affirmative	3rd plural pronoun affirmative	1st singular negative	2nd negative	3rd singular pronoun negative	3rd plural pronoun negative
1 (L12)	[wəz]	[wəz]	[wəz]	[wəz]	[wɔnt]	[wɔnt]	[wɔnt]	[wɔnt]
2 (L13)	[wə]	[wəz]	[wə]	[wəz]	[wɔznt]	[wɔznt]	[wɔznt]	[wɔznt]
3 (L14)	[wəz]	-	[wəz]	[wəz]	[wɔːn̥d̥]	[wɔːnt]	[wɔ̈ənt]	[wɔ̈ənt]
4 (L15)	[wəz]	[wəz]	[wə]	[wə]	[wɒznt]	[wɔnt]	[wɔnt]	[wɔnt]
5 (Hu1)	[wəz]	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wɔːnt]	[wɔːnt]	[wɒnʔ]	[wɔːnʔ]
6 (Hu2)	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wɒnt]	[wəːnt]	[wɒnt]	[wɒnt]
7 (C1)	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wɔːnt]	[wɔːnt]	[wɔːnt]	[wɔːnt]
8 (C2)	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wɔ̰ːn̥d̥]	[wɔ̰ːnt]	[wɔ̰ːnt]	[wɔ̰ːnt]
9 (Nf 7)	[wəz]	[wəz]	[wə]	[wə]	[wɔənt]	[wɔənt]	[wɔənt]	[wɔənt]
10 (Sf 1)	[wəz]	[wəz]	[wəz]	[wəz]	[wɔznʔ]	[wɔznʔ]	[wɔnt]	[wəːɪnt]
11 (Sf 4)	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wɔn̥d̥]	[wɔːnt]	[wɔnʔ]	[wɔ̰nʔ]
12 (Ess 1)	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wə]	[wɔːnt]	[wɔːnt]	[wɔːnt]	[wɔːnt]

levels, in the south. Non-standard *weren't* was also frequent, except, again, in the north and Glasgow. Some schools reported *weren't* but not *were*, suggesting that, as elsewhere, *were* levelling can often be restricted to negative contexts.

Few studies of individual locations in England have analysed past tense BE in any detail, despite its great variability and 'vernacular primitive' status. Cheshire (1982) found that non-standard *was* reached 83.19 percent among Reading adolescents - and even higher among core network members (1982: 44, 91) - and non-standard *weren't* 36.59 percent overall (although some groups, e.g. the Orts Road boys, exceed 50%) (1982: 45). In a later study, Kerswill and Williams (in press) report much lower levels of non-standard *was* in Reading (29%), as well as in the New Town of Milton Keynes (21%) but much higher levels in the northern city of Hull (78%), though no detail is given of linguistic constraints, such as subject type or positive/ negative polarity. Hudson and Holmes (1995) found that 56 percent of speakers in and around Liverpool, 29 percent in the South-west and several in London used '*they was*'. In addition, they claim that '*were*' is also used non-standardly in London. They label this '*he were*', but the example cited is of a negative, so we cannot tell if the use of *were* appears in both affirmative and negative clauses or is largely restricted to negatives as it is in Ocracoke, etc. Shorrocks (1999: 168) claims that the past tense affirmative of BE around Bolton is '/wɵ(r), wɵː(r)/, throughout. Modified speech can have /wɔz, wɵz/ for all persons, although many people retain /wɵ(r)/ throughout the conjugation'. Similarly for the negative he finds /wɵː(r)nt/ as the dominant form with *wasn't* found only in more formal styles (1999:169). Petyt's (1985: 195) study of Huddersfield, Bradford and Halifax in Yorkshire found diachronic, social and gender variability in past tense BE use. Working class speakers used nonstandard [wə(r)] in around half of all tokens. Men were more non-standard than women, the old and young more so than the middle aged, and those in Huddersfield and Bradford more so than those in Halifax. Tagliamonte's (1998: 162) very detailed study of past BE in York found high rates of levelling to *was* in existentials, but low rates elsewhere – around 7 percent when existentials are excluded - no levelling to *was* in negative contexts, except in existentials, and moderate amounts of levelling to *weren't* in contexts of standard *wasn't* (26%). *Weren't* levelling was particularly high in tag questions (57% as opposed to 15% in other contexts (1998:165)), and its socio-diachronic distribution suggested a change in progress being led by young York women (1998: 178).

In East Anglia itself, we can glean information about past BE from three studies. Kökeritz (1932) provides close transcriptions of a number of early recordings of Suffolk speech which include tokens of past BE. A number of examples are present of levelling to *were* (e.g. '*he were* [wɛ̝̊:ɽ] *a-whinnocking*' (1932:214); '*I were* [wɽ] *a-saying*' (1932: 214)) and a couple of levelling to *was* and *weren't*, but since the text is concerned overwhelmingly with the phonology of the county, no comment is passed on these forms. Peitsara's (1988:81) study gives information only on past BE in existentials followed by a plural NP, where she finds *was* use of 89 percent. Ojanen investigated past BE among NORMs (Chambers and Trudgill 1998) in the south-east of Cambridgeshire in both affirmative (Ojanen n.d., a) and negative (Ojanen n.d., b) contexts. Her work found that 'the forms *was* and *were* show a striking distribution' for affirmative clauses. Six of her 18 speakers (living in four villages) showed a predominant use of *were* in non-standard positions, and the remaining 12 showed levelling to *was*. This distribution, an important one for our future discussions of diffusion in the Fens, was a geographical one (see Figure 3). The *were* levellers – marked by stars in Figure 3 - were all located to the north of her study area and showed no non-standard tokens of *was* at all, with *were* levels in non-standard positions all over 90 percent (existential singular: 96.8% [N=31], 1st singular: 93.5% [N=31], 3rd singular: 93.4% [N=121] (Ojanen n.d, a: 6, 15)). The 12 *was* levellers (in ten villages – see the squares in Figure 3) demonstrated the following conditioning on the use of *was*: 1st singular: 87.6 percent [N=105], 3rd singular: 88.5 percent [N=253], existential singular: 82.8 percent [N=35], 1st plural: 71.4 percent [N=21], 2nd person: 60 percent [N=15], 3rd plural: 56.1 percent [N=66], existential plural: 75 percent [N=52] (Ojanen n.d., a: 9). Geographically, then, *was* levelling is found in the far south of the county, with *were* levelling further north. Negative forms show a dominance of *weren't* regardless of the levelling orientations of individual speakers in affirmative clauses. Overall, levelling to *weren't* in non-standard contexts was at a level of 86.5 percent [N=52], with only one token of non-standard *wasn't*. (Ojanen n.d., b: 5, 8).

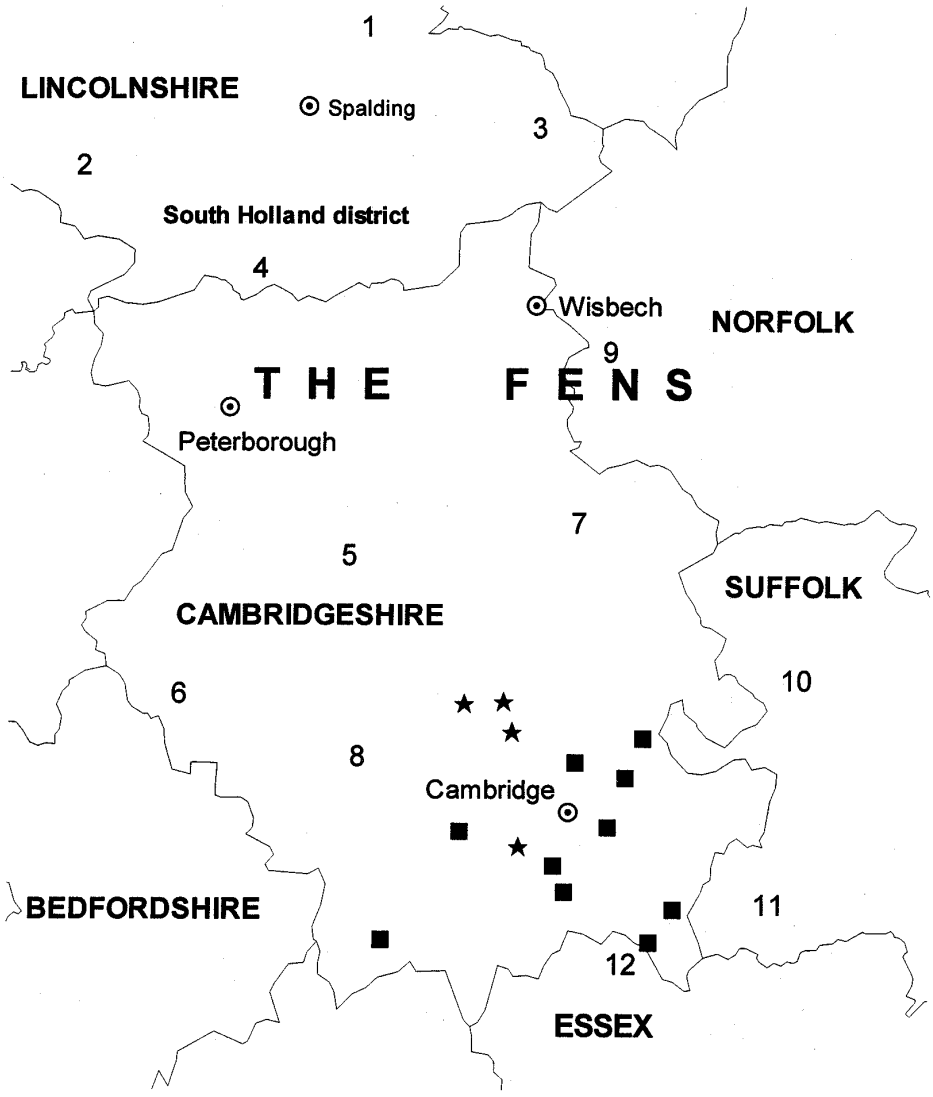

Figure 3: SED locations mentioned in this study (Numbered 1-12 - see Table 1) and villages studied by Ojanen (n.d. a, b). Stars represent villages with a dominant *were/weren't* pattern, and squares represent villages with *was/weren't*.

THE FENS: DIALECT CONTACT OF TWO KINDS.

The Fens are located around 130km north of London, and 80km west of Norwich in eastern England. Their rather unusual geomorphological and sociodemographic history has led to two quite distinct periods of dialect contact, each with noteworthy linguistic repercussions. The first was as a result of marshland reclamation in the 17th century. Before that time much of the present Fenland consisted of largely uninhabitable undrained bog, and the livelihood of the small settlements on slightly higher ground was directly related to the success of efforts to hold the water back. Serious and concerted reclamation efforts by Dutch engineers in the mid-17th century led to the eventual drainage of the area, which, because of its new fertility became an attractive destination for rural migrants both from Norfolk and Suffolk to the east and the Midlands to the west. The phonological consequences of the resulting contact of speakers of quite different varieties of English have been reported elsewhere (Britain 1991, 1997a, b, c, 2001a, b; Britain and Trudgill 1999; Trudgill and Britain, forthcoming). Before reclamation was complete, the Fens posed a considerable barrier to innovation diffusion (see, especially, Britain 2001a). Today, however, the area, like so many in the south-east of England, has come under the linguistic influence of London, and this influence has been accelerated somewhat by New Town and London 'overspill' developments in nearby Peterborough and King's Lynn. In Radford, Atkinson, Britain, Clahsen and Spencer (1999:82), for example, I mapped how the Fens had been affected by one diffusing feature, apparently from London, namely the vocalisation of /l/. In Britain (forthcoming), I demonstrate how a wide range of features associated with the south-east of England (e.g. use of [f] for /θ/, [v] for non-initial /ð/, use of [ʊ] for prevocalic /r/, fronting of /u: ou ʌ/, unrounding and fronting/lowering of /ʊ/ etc) has affected Fenland varieties (and, importantly, how the contact between old and new inherent in the diffusion process has sometimes created novel combinations of variants, rather than the old variety simply being swept away by the innovative one as is often portrayed in diffusion studies (see also Britain 2001b)). Thus, the contact between east and west that was facilitated by Fenland reclamation has now been succeeded by contact with varieties from the south (see Trudgill 1988, 1999; Spero 1996; Kingston 2000 for further evidence of the result of contact between East Anglian and London/south-eastern varieties).

In southern English English terms, the Fenland varieties demonstrate relatively high levels of morphosyntactic non-standardness. In addition to relatively common features such as the use of *them* as a demonstrative adjective, multiple negation, absence of plural marking, *what* as a relative marker, never as a past tense negator, the use of [ɪnʔ - iːnʔ] forms of '*ain't*' for ALL realisations of negated auxiliary present tense BE and HAVE, etc, also present, as relic forms, are the use of habitual *bes* (e.g. '*Stephen says she bes in the Wisbech Arms a lot*'; '*you know that John Virgo what bes on Big Break*'), relic third person present tense zero in the east, and perfective *I'm* (e.g. '*I'm never ever supported a football team in my life*'). These forms are no longer present among Fenland youngsters, and provide but a few examples of the levelling away of traditional forms in the area under the influence of external varieties. As we shall see, a number of the changes currently underway in the past BE system in the Fens appear to be due to the latter, more recent phase of contact with varieties from the south-east.

The data analysed for this study comprise recordings of casual conversations with 80 residents of the fen Boroughs of King's Lynn and West Norfolk in Norfolk, Fenland, East Cambridgeshire, and Peterborough in Cambridgeshire and South Holland in Lincolnshire (see Britain 1991 for more details). The ages of the speakers from this dataset fall into two groups: one born between 1925 and 1945 and another born between 1960 and 1975. In addition, an oral history archive of Fenland speakers born around the turn of the 20th century, and held in the museum in Chatteris was analysed to add an 'older' sample in the apparent time investigation. Each token of past BE from the recordings was analysed, and coded for subject type and polarity.

RESULTS

It became very clear very soon in the analysis that polarity was a very strong determinant of past BE use: across the corpus, 3213 out of 3770 positive polarity tokens had *was* (85.2%), whereas 389 of 434 negative polarity tokens had *weren't* (89.6%) ($p<0.001$). It was therefore decided to continue the analysis by separating tokens in affirmative clauses from negatives to assess the effect of subject type. Table 2 presents the aggregated results for levelling to *was* in contexts of positive polarity. Levelling to *was* (defined as the percentage of tokens realised as *was* which in the formal standard would be realised as *were*) is over 60 percent and a contrary

levelling to *were* in contexts of standard *was* much lower at almost 8 percent. A number of points regarding subject effects are noteworthy. Firstly, there is little evidence in these aggregated data of an operative Northern Subject Rule. In singular contexts (i.e. '*the doctor was/were*' versus '*she was/were*') *was* is only slightly favoured following noun phrases (96%) as opposed to following pronouns (92%). In plural contexts (i.e. '*the gardeners was/were*' versus '*they was/were*'), however, it is the reverse with noun phrases disfavouring *was*. Secondly, and as found elsewhere, *was* levelling in plural existentials is higher than in other contexts. Thirdly, *were* in contexts of standard *was* is found at low levels[5]. Finally, the hierarchy of subject constraints on *was* levelling is: existential > 2nd person > 1st person > Pronoun > Noun phrase, somewhat different from, for example, York and Ocracoke.

Figure 4 contrasts the Fenland results for *was* levelling with three other varieties for which detailed figures are reported – Ocracoke, York and the Lumbee of Robeson County, as well as for the older speakers in an area of the Fens which behaved rather differently from the rest – the north-western area around Peterborough and the Lincolnshire district of South Holland[6]. Note firstly that the older Peterborough/South Holland speakers behave remarkably like those in the northern city of York – low rates of *was* levelling overall, 1st plural contexts favouring over 2nd person and 3rd person noun phrases and pronouns, and existentials behaving radically differently, with very high rates of *was*. Ocracoke shows slightly higher rates of levelling to *was*, but in a different configuration from the two aforementioned British varieties, but share with them the distinctive behaviour of existentials. The Fenland variety generally has high levels of *was* use, and although the existentials have the highest rates, unlike the three varieties mentioned above, they are less dramatically different from other subject types. Finally, and unlike the other four varieties here, the Northern Subject Rule does not hold, and confirms Kingston's (2000) finding that East Anglian varieties appear to favour a reversal of that constraint (see further Britain et al, forthcoming).

Table 3 examines levelling to *weren't* in negative contexts in the Fens. It shows, firstly, that rates of levelling to *weren't* are much higher than rates of levelling to *was*. Over 88 percent of contexts of standard *wasn't* were realised as *weren't*. Across the robust *was/weren't* varieties such as the Fens and Ocracoke, it appears quite usual for levelling to *weren't* to outstrip that to *was*. Whilst singular existentials have *relatively* lower rates of *weren't* than other singular subjects, the

Table 2: Levelling to *was* in contexts of positive polarity (p<0.001; Input Probability: 0.852).

Singular subject	Number of tokens	% *was*	Varbrul weight	Plural subject	Number of tokens	% was	Varbrul weight
First				**First**			
I was	462/517	89	0.523	We was	131/195	67	0.211
I were	55/517	11		We were	64/195	33	
				Second			
				You was	81/113	72	0.248
				You were	32/113	28	
Third NP				**Third NP**			
The farm was	349/364	96	0.752	The farms was	62/130	48	0.106
The farm were	15/364	4		The farms were	68/130	52	
Third pronoun				**Third pronoun**			
It was	1664/1804	92	0.608	They was	158/294	54	0.132
It were	140/1804	8		They were	136/294	46	
Third existential				**Third existential**			
There was a farm	180/197	91	0.580	There was farms	126/156	81	0.354
There were a farm	17/197	9		There were farms	30/156	19	

Total *was*:	3213/3770	% *was*:	85.23%
Total *were*:	557/3770	% *were*:	14.77%
Levelled *was*:	558/888	% levelled *was*:	62.84%
Levelled *were*:	227/2882	% levelled *were*:	7.88%

Table 3: Levelling to *weren't* in contexts of negative polarity (p = 0.017; Input probability 0.901).

Singular subject	Number of tokens	% *weren't*	Varbrul weight	Plural subject	Number of tokens	% *weren't*	Varbrul weight
First				**First**			
I wasn't	7/27	26	0.239	We wasn't	0/8	0	[100%]
I weren't	20/27	74		We weren't	8/8	100	
				Second			
				You wasn't	1/22	5	0.697
				You weren't	21/22	95	
Third NP				**Third NP**			
The farm wasn't	1/14	7	0.588	The farms wasn't	4/12	33	0.180
The farm weren't	13/14	93		The farms weren't	8/12	67	
Third pronoun				**Third pronoun**			
It wasn't	21/237	9	0.530	They wasn't	2/41	5	0.681
It weren't	216/237	91		They weren't	39/41	95	
Third existential				**Third existential**			
There wasn't a farm	9/52	17	0.344	There wasn't farms	0/21	0	[100%]
There weren't a farm	43/52	83		There weren't farms	21/21	100	

Total *wasn't*:	45/434	% *wasn't*:	10.37%
Total *weren't*:	389/434	% *weren't*:	89.63%
Levelled *wasn't*:	7/104	% levelled *wasn't*:	6.73%
Levelled *weren't*:	292/330	% levelled *weren't*:	88.48%

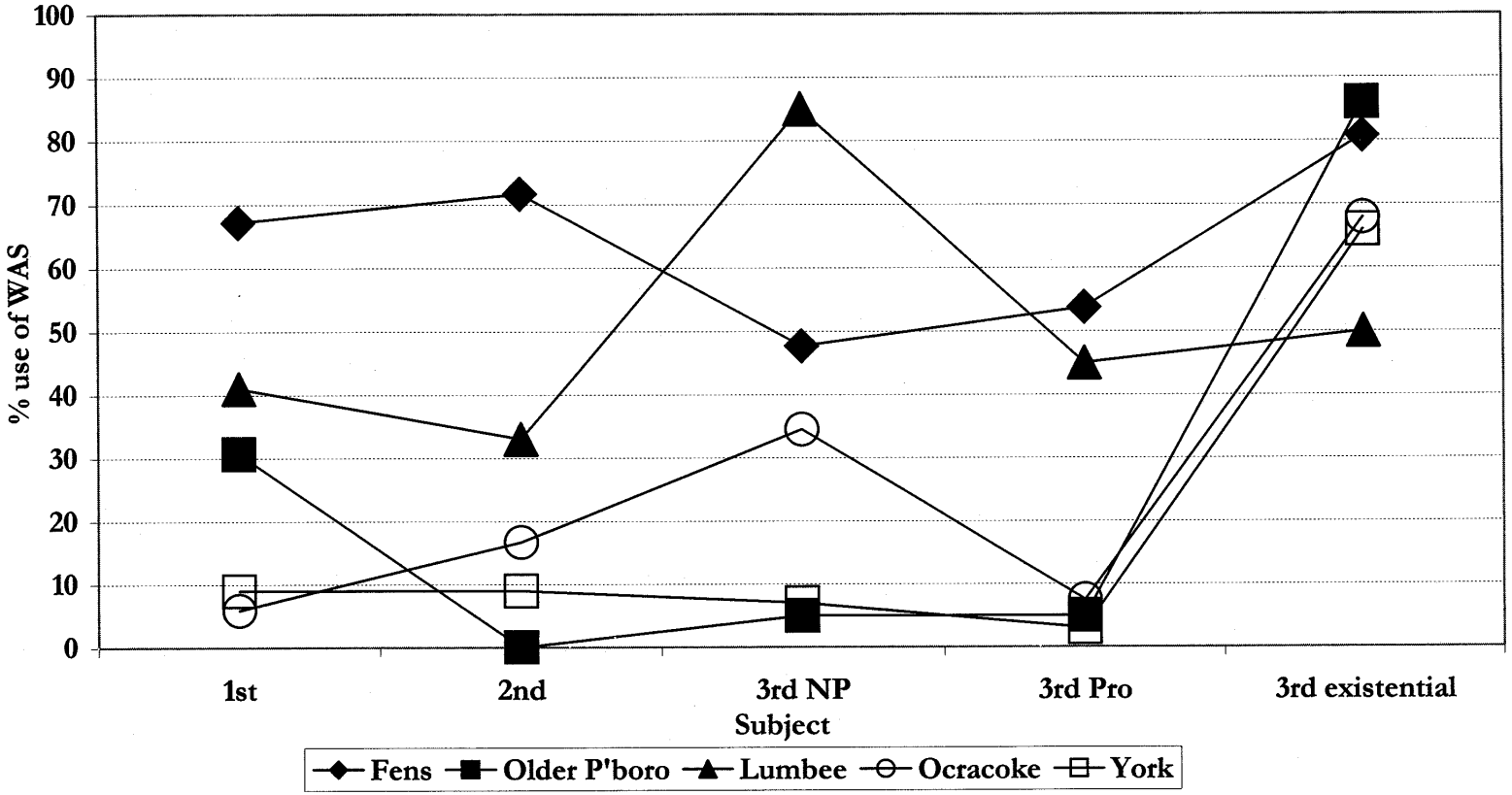

Figure 4: The use of *was* in contexts of standard *were* in 5 varieties, according to subject type (figures for Ocracoke, Lumbee and York drawn from Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994, Wolfram and Sellers 1999, Tagliamonte 1998).

use of *weren't* in the plural is categorical – in this sense, then, the polarity effect is so strong that it overrides the, as we have noted earlier, very strong existential effect. Figure 5 contrasts the Fens again with the other four varieties, this time for *weren't* in contexts of standard *wasn't*. In comparison to the other varieties, levelling to *weren't* in the Fens is very advanced. In addition, while every other variety quite strongly shows 3rd person noun phrase subjects favouring *wasn't* over 1st person, the Fens do not. Like the Lumbee, but unlike the other varieties, the Northern Subject Rule again doesn't operate. And again, the older Peterborough/South Holland speakers behave more like York than the rest of the Fens.

An analysis of past BE across apparent time is presented in Table 4 and, broken down according to subject type in positive and negative clauses, in Figures 5 and 6 respectively. While those born after 1925 have focussed an almost entirely standard-like system for past tense singular BE in affirmative clauses, the oldest 'archive' speakers born around 1900 are the younger Fenlanders, with *was* levelling at much lower rates. The overall impression of Figure 6 is of a gradual shift over time from a (possibly once levelled?) *were* towards a *was* system.

Table 4: The emergence of *was/weren't* levelling in apparent time (p<0.001).

Age group	**The use of *was* in contexts of positive polarity**	**The use of *weren't* in contexts of negative polarity**
Born around 1900	282/571 tokens 49% *was* Varbrul weight: 0.114	70/73 tokens 96% *weren't* Varbrul weight: 0.693
Born 1925 to 1945	1974/2143 tokens 92% *was* Varbrul weight: 0.606	208/245 tokens 85% *weren't* Varbrul weight: 0.353
Born 1960 to 1975	957/1056 tokens 91% *was* Varbrul weight: 0.560	111/116 tokens 96% *weren't* Varbrul weight: 0.683

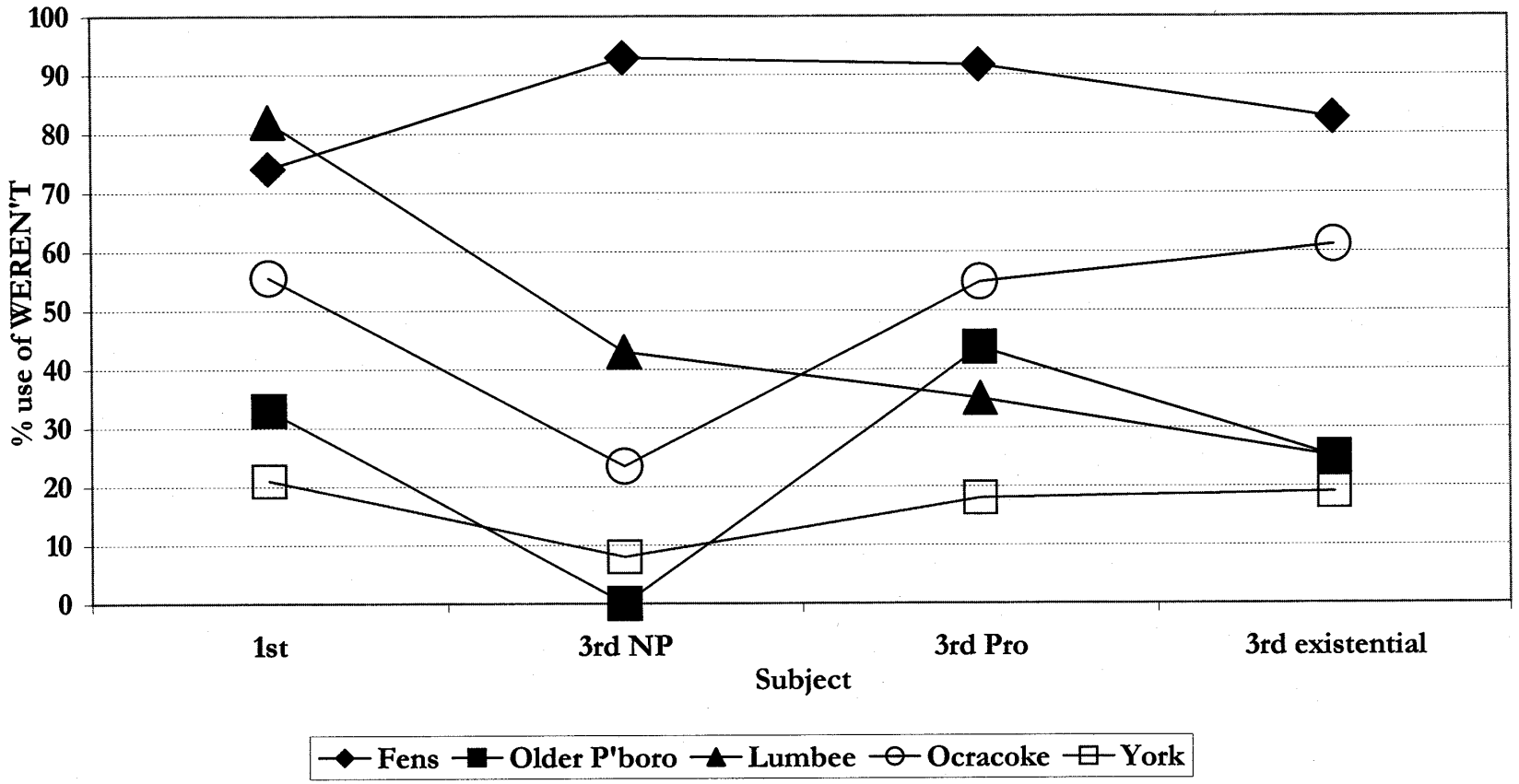

Figure 5: The use of *weren't* in contexts of standard *wasn't* in 5 varieties, according to subject type (figures for Ocracoke, Lumbee and York drawn from Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994, Wolfram and Sellers 1999 and Tagliamonte 1998).

This shift is lagging behind in plural contexts, no doubt partly at least under pressures from the standard variety, but it is nevertheless clear and significant[7]. A contrast of 3rd person plural noun phrase and pronoun subjects across apparent time also shows a dramatic shift from a slight operation of the Northern Subject Rule among the speakers born around 1900 – using *was* with noun phrase subjects 4 percent more than with pronoun subjects – through one where there is little difference between NP and Pro subjects (among the Fenland group born between 1925 and 1945), to a situation among the youngest group where the preference for singular concord after pronouns is quite marked (29% higher with pronouns than with NPs), just as Kingston (2000) found for Suffolk English 3rd person present tense marking. That levelling to *weren't* is much more advanced in negative contexts than *was* in positive is demonstrated by Figure 7. Across the paradigm, the oldest and youngest speakers show very little use of *wasn't* at all, and it is those speakers born between 1925 and 1945 who, almost consistently, show higher rates of *wasn't* use. Nevertheless, across all three age groups, levelling to *weren't* is high in comparative terms.

Fenland English, then, like Ocracoke, and the Lumbee variety of North Carolina, is a clear example of a *was/weren't* dialect of English. Levelling to *weren't* exceeds that to *was*, but both exceed 60 percent of all tokens. The apparent time analysis has also demonstrated that change is in progress, particularly in the levelling of *was*. I turn now to discuss these emerging patterns from within the dialect contact framework this issue sets out to examine.

DISCUSSION: WHERE DID THIS PATTERN COME FROM?

From a social point of view, the dramatic shifts in the patterning of past BE over the 20th century deserve exploration. Undoubtedly the socio-economic make-up of the Fens was radically transformed. A predominantly traditional rural agricultural community in 1900, the region experienced the demographic upheavals of war, post-1945 infrastructural and technological advances, the overspill and New Town developments of the 1960s and 1970s (the population of Peterborough trebled between 1960 and 2000), and the in-migration stimulated by rurbanisation and the expansion of the tertiary sector in the final quarter of the century. Today, agriculture employs just a small minority of the economically active population, young people either leave to enter higher education or stay to engage in mostly

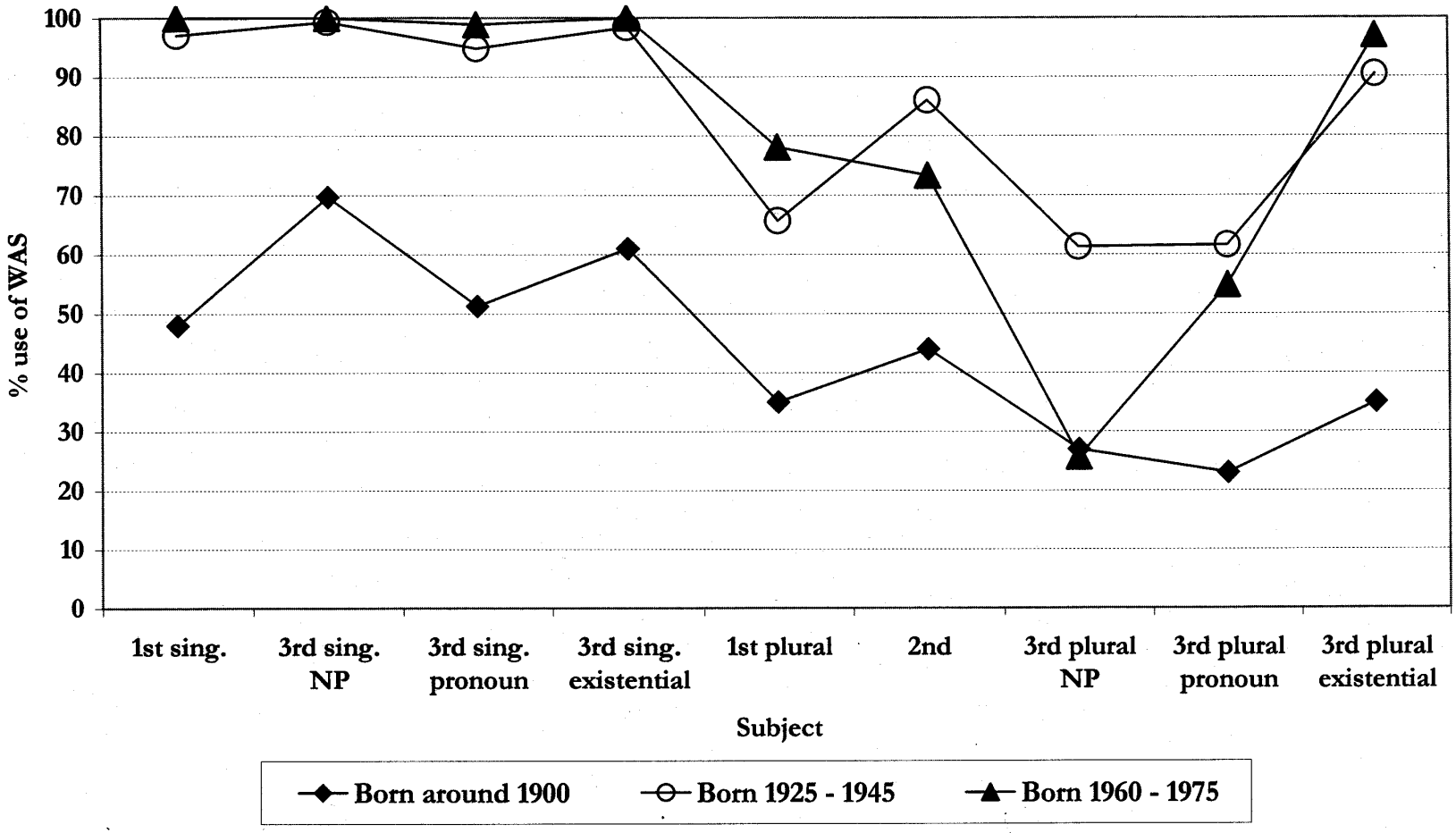

Figure 6: The use of *was* in affirmative clauses across three age groups in the Fens.

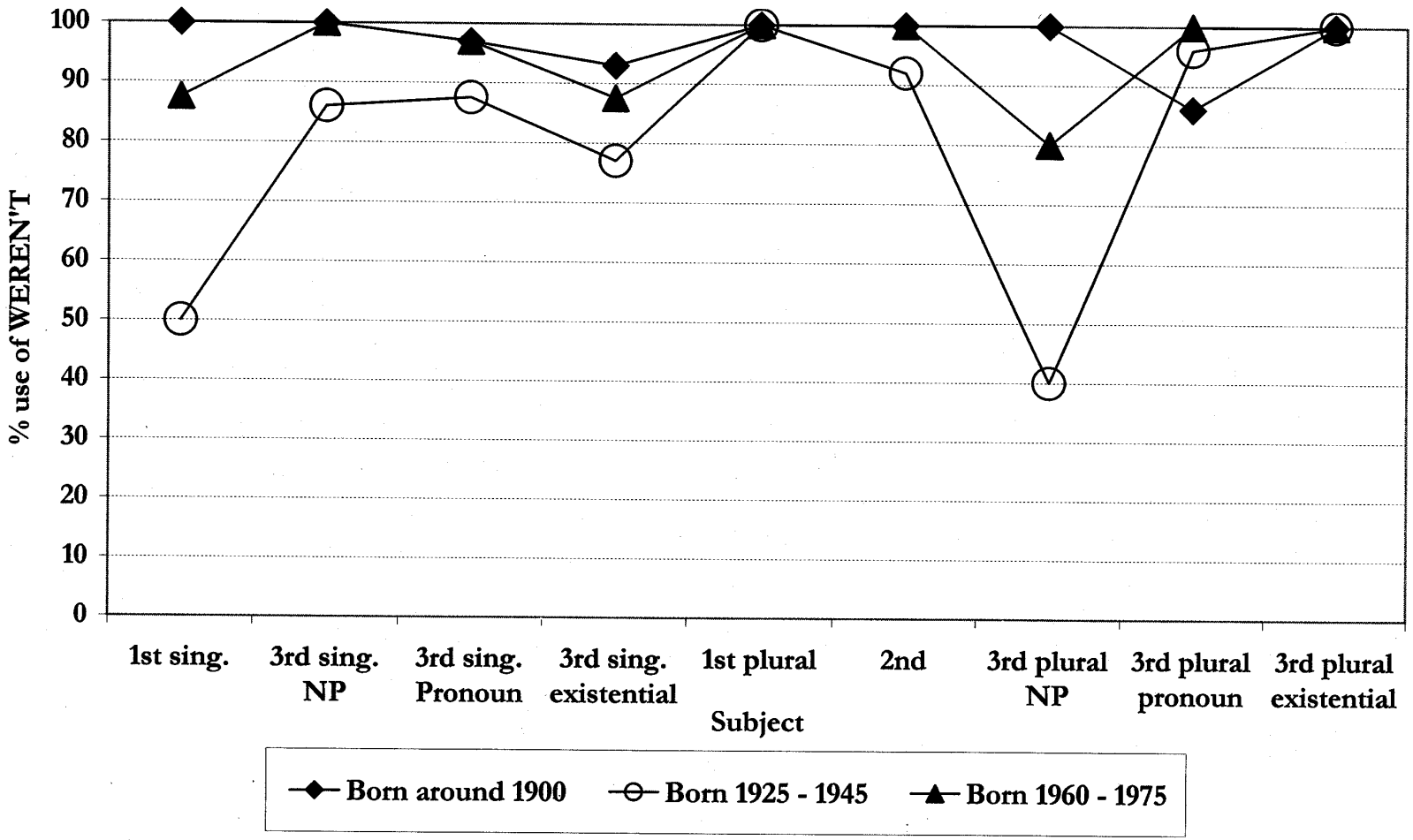

Figure 7: The use of *weren't* in negative clauses across three age groups in the Fens

service sector employment and enjoy the same urban pursuits as those on offer elsewhere in the country. Although this de-localisation has not entirely led to the attrition of traditional dialect forms (see Britain 2001b, forthcoming, a), contact with speakers of other varieties is without question leading to a supra-local convergence with other levelled dialects of southern England. Above, I showed that past BE is one such feature that has undergone change as a result of this contact.

The traditional dialectological literature on past BE in the eastern counties of England shows a myriad of locally differing systems (see, for example, the maps on past BE, in both positive and negative contexts, in a range of subject types, in the Linguistic Atlas of England (Orton, Sanderson and Widdowson. 1978), and Ellis (1889)) and a wide range of phonetic realisations of the different past BE forms (see the SED Basic Materials (Orton and Tilling 1969; Table 1 above). Today, in the Fens, one very dominant pattern emerges – that of a *focussing* of paradigmatic levelling to *weren't* and to *was*. I will demonstrate below that this pattern has been forged thanks to the operation of a number of seemingly universal processes associated with dialect contact. Evidence strongly points to the following: the *diffusion* of the *was/weren't* pattern through the Fens from the South; a dramatic *levelling* both of the phonetic realisations of past BE and of the operation of the Northern Subject Rule in the north-west of the Fens; a *reallocation* of two of the variant traditional forms according to polarity; and a gradual *simplification* of the system from one with three allomorphs to one with two. Each of these patterns will now be discussed in turn.

Focussing is an accommodatory process involving the honing by members of a speech community of a set of agreed (linguistic) norms for their group. It concerns the reduction of systemic *inter*-speaker variability (often as a result of koineisation - see Le Page 1978; Trudgill 1986; Britain 1991; Kerswill and Williams 2000), but not *necessarily* a reduction of *intra*-speaker variability. In other words, speakers may well hone (as can be the case particularly in small, isolated, tight-knit, strong social-network communities) systems with rather high levels of lexically determined exceptions, high levels of grammatical redundancy and so forth, but these can still be 'focussed' if there is speech community agreement on this system as a local norm. In the past BE system in the Fens, this focussing can be seen in Figure 8, which shows the percentage of *was* forms in contexts of positive polarity and the percentage of *weren't* forms in

negatives across apparent time. Among the group born after 1960 over 90 percent of positive polarity tokens are *was* and over 95 percent of negative tokens are *weren't*. This represents clear focussing across apparent time.

A comparison of these Fenland data with Ojanen's (n.d. a, b) analysis of speech communities further south, and of the older Peterborough/South Holland speakers, with younger informants from the same community, strongly suggest that *was/weren't* is *diffusing* northwards across the Fens. Recall that Ojanen (Figure 3) found *was/weren't* to be dominant in the southernmost parts of Cambridgeshire that she studied, but *were/weren't* further north. Recall also that the oldest Fenland speakers born around 1900 showed robust use of *were* in contexts of standard *was* (Figure 6) but that for speakers born after 1960 non-standard *were* had almost entirely been replaced by *was*. Together these findings suggest that *was* levelling is diffusing north. It had reached southern Cambridgeshire but not further north among Ojanen's rural elderly male speakers and was less advanced in the oldest speakers in my dataset. Now, the youngest speakers across the Fens are solid *was* levellers following singular subjects. A comparison of speakers from the northwestern Fenland areas of Peterborough and South Holland born between 1925 and 1945 - who, as Figures 3 and 4 showed, had a pattern of past BE use similar to people from Tagliamonte's (1998) study in York - with younger speakers in the same community provides compelling evidence that *was/weren't* is diffusing to this area too. Figure 9 compares levels of *was* use across apparent time in the north-west, in both positive and negative contexts. While those informants in the north-west born between 1925 and 1945 have low rates of *was* levelling and only moderate amounts of levelling to *weren't*, both *was* and *weren't* levelling among the young are at high levels (and, as before, rates of *weren't* are higher than *was*[8]).

Dialect levelling involves a reduction of marked, socially heavily stigmatised, highly localised, or minority forms in favour of unmarked, less stereotyped, supralocal, majority variants in a dialect mix (see Moag 1979; Trudgill 1986; Kerswill and Williams 1992, 2000; Britain 1997b; Siegel 1997; Sudbury 2000; Britain and Simpson, forthcoming). There are two examples of levelling in this study. The first is the dramatic *phonetic* levelling of realisations of past BE. Whereas the SED data (see, for example, Table 1 above) show a wide range of pronunciations of past BE forms, in my Fenland study this was levelled down to [wɒz] and [wɜːn(ʔ)] (as the

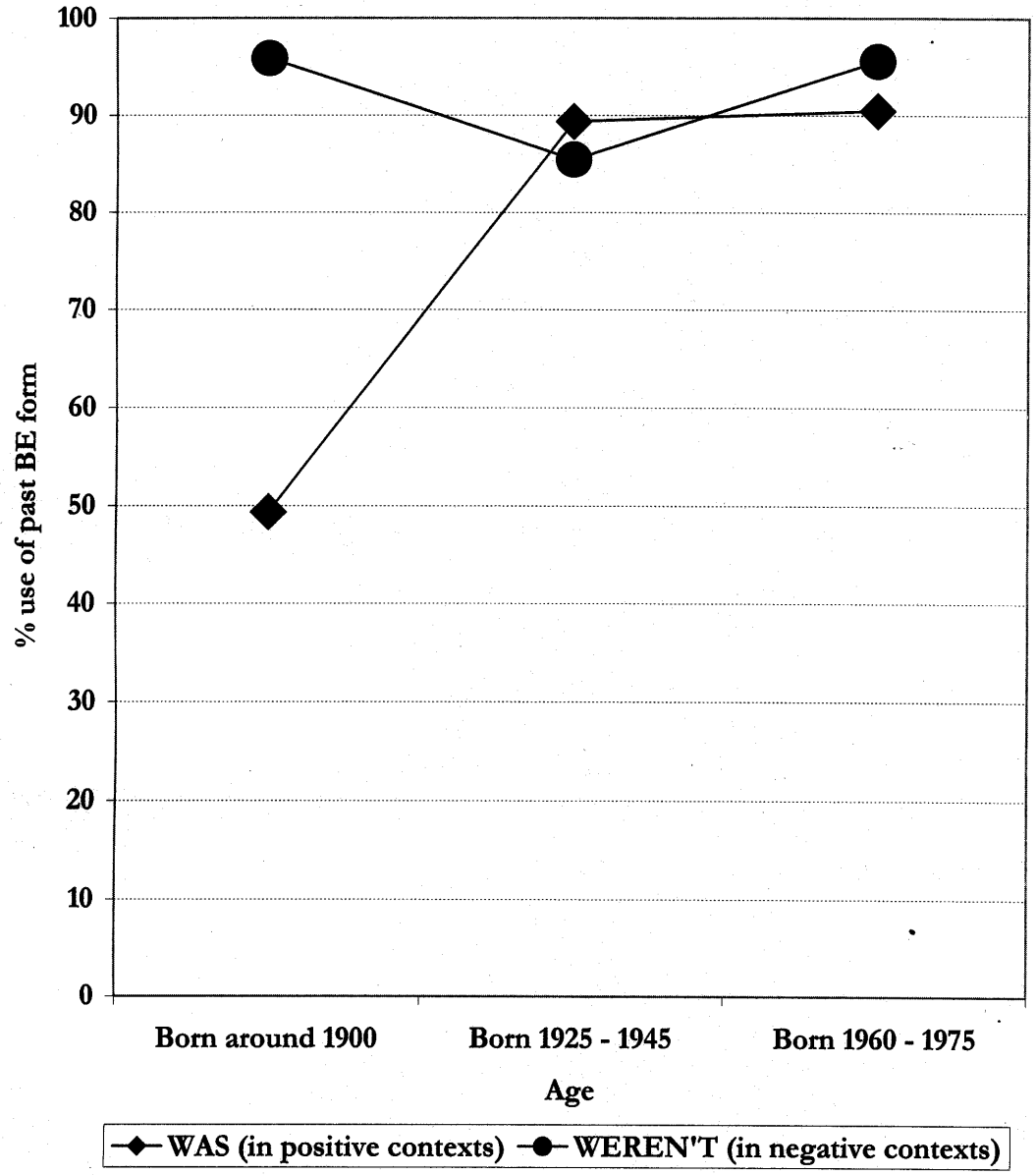

Figure 8: The focussing of past BE and the emergence of a *was-weren't* variety in the Fens.

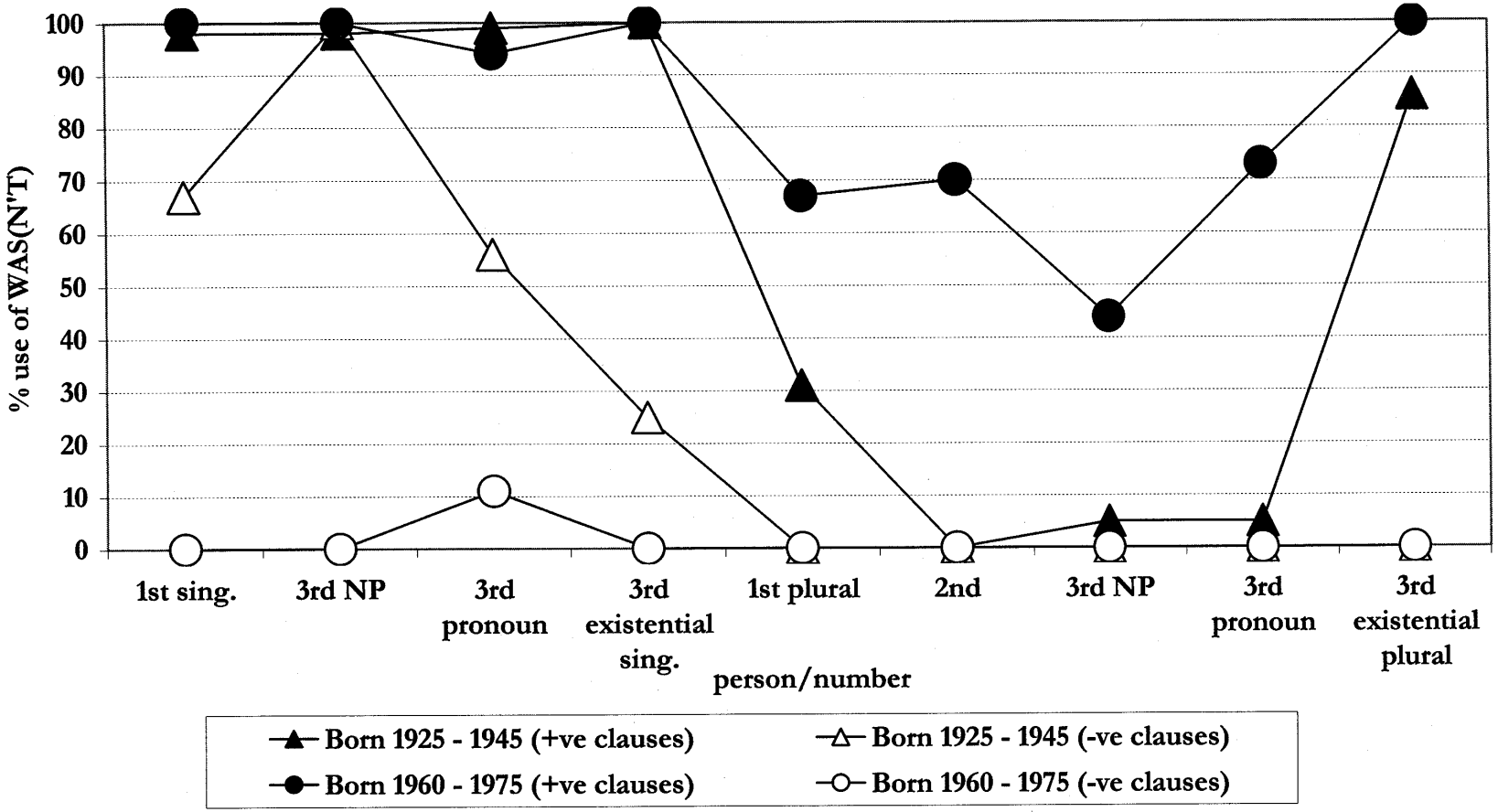

Figure 9: An apparent time analysis of speakers from Peterborough and South Holland in both positive and negative past tense BE clauses (N=658).

dominant forms), with [wɒznʔ] and [wɜ:] as minority forms. Four tokens of [wɒnʔ] were found in South Holland and one token of [wədnʔ] in Peterborough, but this was the sum of alternative variants in the corpus. Whether this extends beyond the Fens (which is – as highlighted earlier – a variety that has already undergone considerable koineisation) into less levelled dialects of East Anglia deserves investigation (see Kingston, forthcoming), though it may be the case that *weren't* is emerging as a south-eastern, or at least East Anglian supralocal form (see Melis et al 1989; Al-Wer 1991, forthcoming; Milroy, Milroy and Hartley 1994; Milroy 1999; Watt and Milroy 1999; Watt, this volume, etc., for further discussions of supralocalisation). The levelling of a *linguistic contraint*, namely the Northern Subject Rule (NSR) - according to which *was/wasn't* should be more strongly favoured after noun phrases than after pronouns - provides a further example. The 'overturning' of the NSR across apparent time in the main Fenland sample was discussed above. This reversal can also be seen in 3rd person singular negative contexts in the smaller sample from the Peterborough/ South Holland areas in the north-west of the Fens. As shown in Figure 9, whereas the NSR is operative among the 1925 to 1945 born group in Peterborough and South Holland (*wasn't* following noun phrase subject: 100%, following pronoun: 56%), it is reversed among the young, with *wasn't* more common following pronouns (11%) than full noun phrases (0%).

Reallocation occurs when two or more variants in the dialect mix survive the levelling process, but are refunctionalised, evolving new social or linguistic functions in the emerging koineised variety (see Trudgill 1986; Taeldeman 1989; Britain 1997a, b; Siegel 1997; Britain and Trudgill 1999; Wouk 1999, for more examples). The conquering variants tend, on the whole, to be majority or socially dominant forms and/or variants supported by markedness or language-internal constraints. In Britain (1997a), for example, I demonstrated that the reallocation of central onsets of the PRICE diphthong to pre-voiceless environments and open onsets in other phonological positions in the Fens was driven partly by the (equal) dominance of [ɑi] and [əi] in the original dialect mix and partly by the strong tendency in English for shorter vowels to be found before voiceless consonants and longer ones before voiced (Laver 1994: 446)[9]. A reallocation analysis of past BE in the Fens would require evidence that the victorious forms meet the criteria for survival of contact-based levelling – that they are not marked, or minority forms - and that there are good reasons why the forms are linguistically constrained

in the way they are – in this case why *weren't* is the pivot form in the negative and *was* in affirmative contexts.

Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (1994: 289) discuss why these two allomorphs of past BE are being used to transparently mark polarity rather than person and number, as is the case in the formal standard. They point, for example, to the clear analogy with other frequently occurring verbs in English, such as 'do/don't', 'will/won't' and 'can/can't'. In the Fens, this polarity marking also applies to the verbs 'be' - which is realised as [m] in first person contexts, [s/z] in third singular or [ə] in all other (conversational) affirmative contexts - and auxiliary 'have' - [v] (in 1st singular, 2nd and plural contexts) or [s/z] (in 3rd person singular position) - which are *all* realised as [ɪnʔ - iːnʔ] in negative clauses, hence with quite distinct positive and negative root forms. Another possible reason for the success of *weren't* may well be 'faulty' analysis by language acquirers. The SED data make clear that negative past BE was realised in a wide range of forms. It is possible that forms such as [wɔːnt] or [wɒnʔ] (commonly found in the SED data, but not in the Fens today) which may have derived from phonetic processes reducing [wɒznt] may well be *analysed* by acquirers and learners as *weren't* and adjusted phonetically accordingly. Such imperfect analysis is a recognised cause of such contact phenomena as interdialect (see, for example, Trudgill 1986) and supports a view of *weren't* as a single suppletive (monomorphemic) lexical item, rather than a separable root and negative particle (Zwicky and Pullum 1983; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994).

Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (1994) also explored possible explanations for the favouring of *was* as a pivot form for analogical levelling in positive contexts, highlighting:

- The linguistic 'basicness' (Hock 1986: 214-237) of *was* whereby 3rd person is more basic than other persons, singular more basic than plural, etc (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994: 276).

- Broader based analogy with other verbs, including the sibilant similarity with regular present tense verbs (ibid., 276). This factor opens up the possibility that the spread of *was* levelling in East Anglia from the mid-20th century onwards may well have been accelerated by the gradual loss of zero marking on 3rd person present tense verbs there. Until fairly recently, East Anglian varieties had no 3rd person present tense marking (see, for example,

Trudgill 1974, 1997; Kingston 2000), and hence sibilant similarity with the present tense could not have been a driving force for analogy.

- The fact that 3rd person forms are considerably more frequent in conversation than other forms, and are hence more likely to act as pivot forms (Hock 1986: 220; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994: 276). In the Fens data discussed here, for example, 2168 out of a total of 3770 examples (57.5%) in affirmative contexts were 3rd person singular tokens.

Given these factors, and given the robust evidence of both *was* and *weren't* as potential ingredient forms at earlier stages of these dialects' evolution, reallocation is clearly the most plausible explanation for the development of a solely polarity-sensitive system over a person/number/polarity-sensitive one. Cheshire, Edwards and Whittle (1989: 209) provide a further example of dialect contact – this time in an urban setting - leading to what amounts to a similar reallocation of past BE. Their *Survey of British Dialect Grammar* showed that a considerable amount of *were* levelling was reported in contexts of standard *was* in the East and West Midlands. 12 out of 14 schools reported '*I were singing*', for example. In addition, the same schools report levelling to *was* in contexts of standard *were*. '*You was singing*' was reported by 10 out of 14 schools. In Birmingham, the mostly highly urbanised city of the Midlands, however, a *was/weren't* variety is reported: there were no reports of non-standard *were* in positive contexts, but 50 percent of all negative contexts were reported as being *weren't* - '*Mary weren't singing*' - whilst levelling to *was* in plural contexts reached 75 percent.

Simplification involves an 'optimalization of existing rules and the development of regularities for formerly irregular aspects of a language' (Mühlhäusler 1980:44). It can include increases in morphophonemic regularity and, for example, 'fewer obligatory categories marked by morphemes of concord' (Trudgill 1986:103). The ongoing focussing of *was/weren't* in the Fens represents such an optimalization of the number of allomorphs that make up the system of past BE. Whereas the standard marks for person/number and polarity – a 4-way system of '*was*', '*wasn't*', '*were*' and '*weren't*', the oldest speakers in my analysis, those born around 1900, show a variable 3-way system (see Figure 6): '*was*' and '*were*' in positive contexts – though not neatly aligned to person and number – and '*weren't*' in negative contexts. Today, Fenlanders are focussing a 2-way *was/weren't* system, where polarity emerges as the prime determinant of the

allomorph and person and number become increasingly less relevant. Given no evidence that a standard system was ever used in this area, the simplification should perhaps be seen as a reduction of a 3-way to a 2-way paradigm. It may well be of course that going back further in time would show us a 2-way *were/weren't* paradigm – demonstrating that the simplification of the system today may well be operating on a once similarly 'simple' system that was disrupted by contact with *was* levelling varieties.

Linguistic change in past BE in the Fens provides a powerful demonstration of a number of component processes of the koineisation model proposed by Trudgill (1986), and one of the first detailed validations of the model on a grammatical as opposed to phonological feature of English. As we have seen, contact with other varieties from the south has led to a structural change in the past BE system in the Fens. A new configuration of verb forms, mostly insensitive to person/number, is diffusing across the Fens, levelling away a wide range both of variable paradigms and phonetically variant forms, as well as one of the previously operative linguistic constraints – the Northern Subject Rule - and has reallocated two of the dominant forms in the dialect mix to conform to a number of analogical pressures, thereby simplifying the past BE paradigm to two forms: *was* and *weren't*. That this transformation has taken place within three generations is testimony both to the social, economic and demographic upheavals witnessed in the 20th century Fenland, and the speed at which the koineisation that results from that upheaval takes place.

Notes:

[1] This and other geographical place names can be located on the map in Figure 1.

[2] Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (1994:299), in a footnote to their paper on past BE in Ocracoke, call for a more detailed discussion of the precise patterning of levelled *was/weren't* varieties in England – claimed by Trudgill (1990:98) and Cheshire (1982:46) - and suggest that a basic positive/negative dichotomy is too simplistic. The research presented here provides such a detailed analysis, both of the positive/negative dichotomy and other linguistic constraints on variation.

[3] Ellis, for example, cites a letter from a Hampshire farmer near Andover: '*I wanted to know what he said about the pigs, whose they was and where they come from. I found as how there weren't a single hog from Hampshire*' (1889: 101).

[4] In the subsequently published Linguistic Atlas of England (Orton, Sanderson and Widdowson 1978), these variant pronunciations are 'reanalysed' as being either *was* or *were* and hence the Atlas maps lose a lot of the variability that was undoubtedly present in the area among those born at the turn of the 20th century.

[5] We will see later that the oldest speakers in the sample (born around 1900), importantly, are mostly responsible for these forms.

[6] My research into other variables in the Fens has shown that this area differs in a number of respects from the central and eastern Fens. This area strongly retains short [a] in the BATH lexical set, whereas the rest of the Fens favours [a:] (Britain 1997c), retains [ʊ-ụ] in the STRUT set (Britain 1991, 1997b, 2001a, b), has open onsets to the PRICE diphthong *regardless* of following phonological context (Britain 1991, 1997a), etc (see further Britain forthcoming).

[7] The Varbrul analysis shows that age is significant at $p<0.001$.

[8] The apparent historical and geographical depth of the *weren't* form across southern England lends some support to Wolfram and Sellers' view (1999:109) that levelling to *weren't* may well have been introduced to parts of the US by British contact varieties, although, given its diffusion northwards through East Anglia, their additional comment that 'levelling to *weren't* is probably a relic form of English' (1999: 110) appears less sustainable.

[9] In the case of /ai/, this equates to the phonetic distance between the onset and offglide – shorter before voiceless consonants, longer before voiced (see Britain 1997a: 31-32 for a discussion of the consequences of this on /ai/ in a number of varieties).

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