Was/were variation: a perspective from London

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Abstract

We present an analysis of morphosyntactic variation in London, investigating *was/were* variation in the speech of adolescents and elderly speakers in a multicultural inner London area and a less diverse outer London area. In outer London, dialect levelling to a mixed *was/weren't* system is well underway, as in many other areas of the UK. Negative *weren't* is frequent and a grammaticalised invariant *weren't it* tag is developing. In inner London, variation in adolescent speech is strongly influenced by ethnicity, resulting in a lower overall frequency of *was* levelling and a mixed pattern of levelling to both *wasn't* and *weren't*. The patterns of variation of Anglo 'heritage' inner London adolescents differ both from elderly speakers in the same area and from their peers in outer London. Our analysis confirms the need for socially realistic models of language change that take account of the social diversity of large multicultural urban cities.

Key words: morphosyntactic variation, ethnicity, dialect levelling, grammaticalisation

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1 Background

Variation in the past tense forms of BE occurs in almost all varieties of vernacular English. The historical record shows that usage has always been variable, perhaps even as far back as Old English (Tagliamonte 1998: 157) and recent studies throughout the English-speaking world show that variation and change is still the norm. It is only in the standardised varieties that the forms have stabilised, with *was* used with first and third singular subjects and *were* elsewhere. In the UK, recent empirical analyses of *was/were* variation reveal dramatic ongoing innovation and change, as we report below. To date, however, there has been no systematic analysis of past forms of BE in London English. In this paper we fill this gap, presenting an analysis of *was/were* variation in two areas of the capital.

London is an important research site for ongoing grammatical changes in Britain and, indeed, elsewhere. Although it is assumed to be the most influential source of recent phonetic innovations both in Britain and further afield (Wells 1982, Foulkes and Docherty 1999), its role as a source of changes in the grammatical system is not yet clear. In the past, London has been instrumental both in promoting dialect mixtures and in spreading morphosyntactic innovations, as a consequence of the in-migration of speakers of non-contiguous dialects (Ellis 1889:110, Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003:165) and, presumably, of different languages. Migration to London continues to be high today, so we might expect to find high rates of the innovations in *was/were* variation reported elsewhere in the country. On the other hand, the standardised variety of English is more influential today than it was in Tudor and Stuart London, the period studied by Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg. The different rates of non-standard *was* found in present-day varieties are thought to result from differing amounts of contact with prescriptive norms and from the effects of literacy (Tagliamonte and Smith 1999:22, Tagliamonte 2002:742, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2003), such that Chambers (2004: 118) has argued that in large urban areas – such as London – a trend towards the use of standard English may disrupt what he considers to be the basic pattern of past BE forms: invariant *was*. This, then, would lead us to expect lower rates of the innovations reported elsewhere in the UK.

In fact, analyses of past BE forms in earlier periods present conflicting evidence about the effect of dialect contact and language contact on the use of non-standard past BE forms. In the dialect contact phase of the creation of New Zealand English, when there must also have been language contact between the indigenous Maori speakers and the incoming English speakers, there was a reduction in the use of non-standard *was* (Hay and Schreier 2004: 233). In Tristan da Cunha, however, where there was also both language contact and contact with a range of English dialects, categorical levelling to *was* occurred within three or four generations (Schreier 2002: 93): an increase rather than a decrease, then, in the use of non-standard *was*. We do not yet fully understand, then, the implications of dialect contact and language contact on *was/were* variation. One of the aims of this paper is to explore this dimension of variation, within the London setting.

A further aim is to assess the effect of the internal linguistic factors that previous researchers have found to constrain *was/were* variation. A brief review of these factors follows, to set the scene for our own analysis.

2 Internal constraints on *was/were* variation

2.1 Polarity

Many vernacular English dialects throughout the world show an extensive distribution of levelling to *was* in all contexts (in other words, across number, subject and polarity; see Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2003: 132). In present-day England *was* levelling is very frequent (see, for example, Anderwald 2001) but recent research indicates that in many – perhaps most – areas of the country the past BE system is reorganising towards the unambiguous expression of polarity, with *was* levelling favoured in positive polarity contexts and with parallel levelling to *weren't* in contexts of negative polarity. Anderwald's (2001) analysis of the British National Corpus data showed widespread levelling to *was* in positive polarity contexts and, with the single exception of the north-west Midlands, levelling to *weren't* in all areas for which sufficient data were available. The pattern was seen most clearly in East Anglia and parts of the Southwest (Anderwald 2001: 5, 6). Britain (2002) confirms that in the Fens, East Anglia, there has been a gradual shift over time to a levelled *was/weren't* system. Levey's (2007) research in an eastern outer London suburb found a similar mixed *was/weren't* system in the speech of children as young as 7-11. In COLT (the Corpus of London Teenage English) the patterns are clearer still: non-standard *was* occurs only in positive contexts and non-standard *were* only in negative contexts (again, see Levey 2007).

 In some English cities *weren't* in negative contexts is increasing even where levelling to *was* is declining. Khan (2006) found adolescents in Birmingham – the largest urban conurbation in England after London – using more non-standard *weren't* overall than non-standard *was*, whereas older speakers used more non-standard *was* and no non-standard *weren't* at all. Tagliamonte (1998) observes a similar pattern in the small northern city of York, where nonstandard *was* "appears to be fading away" (1998:184) while non-standard *weren't* is increasing, dramatically so in tags[1]. The trend towards invariant *weren't* in some UK cities, then, appears to be very strong. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1994: 289) argue that this restructuring of the past BE paradigm can be explained as a remorphologisation of both *was* and *were* as transparent markers of polarity, meeting the functional need to distinguish clearly between negative and positive propositions. They point to the parallels with other frequently occurring verbs that have distinct positive and negative forms, such as *do/don't* and *will/won't*, as well as with present tense forms of BE in those vernacular varieties that have the single form *ain't* in negative contexts but *am, are, is* in positive contexts (Anderwald 2001:18, Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1994).

 Tags provide an important context for levelling to *weren't* in England. Tagliamonte found levelling to *weren't* increased dramatically in tags across the generations in her York data, with *weren't* used predominantly when the subject of the tag was *it* (1998:179). Anderwald's survey of BNC data (2002:178) also reports non-standard *weren't* as favoured in tags in nine out of twelve British dialect areas [2].

 It seems likely that *weren't* generalization is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of vernacular English. Nevalainen (2006: 360) finds no difference in negative contexts between the use of *was* and *were* in the regional component of the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence*, which covers the period from 1410 to 1681 (although, as she points out, negative forms of past BE are not very frequent in her data). Hay and Schreier (2004: 228) report *was* levelling in early New Zealand English (although, as mentioned above, this was later reduced), suggesting that *was* levelling was present in the speech of early colonizers from Britain, but they found no evidence of *weren't* levelling. Ellis (1889), however, shows that *weren't* certainly existed in East Anglia and Wiltshire in the late nineteenth century, and Kökeritz (1932) gives examples of *weren't* in Suffolk in the early twentieth century (see Britain 2002: 21). The Survey of English Dialects confirms that by

the 1950s non-standard *weren't* was clearly a dialect feature in England (Tagliamonte 1998: 184). We cannot conclude from these early studies that a mixed *was/weren't* system necessarily existed, but such a system is attested for Reading, southwest England, in the late 1970s: Cheshire (1982: 44-45) reports high rates of non-standard *was* (83%) in adolescent speech in Reading, with non-standard *were* used very rarely other than in negative contexts (where it occurred at a rate of 37%). If inner London is the source of innovations, then, we might expect our analysis to discover high rates of both *was* and *weren't* amongst young speakers in this location.

2.2 Grammatical subject

Tagliamonte (1998: 158) notes that a synthesis of contemporary research on *was* levelling reveals a constraint hierarchy for the effect of the grammatical subject that is "surprisingly consistent across varieties", namely NP existential > *you* > NP plural > *we/they*. Chambers (2004:133) proposes a slightly different constraint hierarchy: NP existential > *you* > *we* > NP plural > *they*. There is agreement on the poles, then: *they* is thought to favour non-standard *was* the least, and existential subjects the most, followed by *you*.

Recent work in the UK, however, particularly in southern England (which is only beginning to be explored), demonstrates that the effect of the grammatical subject varies according to geographical region. The inconsistency is particularly clear in third person plural contexts, where non-standard *was* may occur with either the plural pronoun *they* or a plural Noun Phrase. In northern varieties there is often a much greater use of *was* with NP plural subjects, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as an aspect of the Northern Subject Rule: for example, in Buckie, Scotland, *was* occurs after 81% of all plural NPs but never after *they* (Smith and Tagliamonte 1998:116). In southern England the effect is either reversed, or non-existent. In East Anglian varieties, for example, *was* occurs more frequently with *they* than with a plural NP (Britain 2002, Rupp, Britain, Fox, Baker and Spurling 2005), and in COLT both *they* and plural NPs have a roughly equal, slightly inhibiting effect on *was* (Levey 2007). The constraint hierarchy in the East Anglian Fens data was NP existential < *you* < *we* < *they* < NP plural (Britain 2002: 26) – somewhat different from the general hierarchies proposed by both Tagliamonte and Chambers. In the adolescent data from Reading (Cheshire 1982) the hierarchy for non-standard *was* is different again, with existential *there* < *we* < *you* < NP plural < *they*. Britain's comparison of four regionally differentiated varieties (2002: 28) shows different configurations again, though existentials again favour non-standard *was* in all varieties.

In many varieties (not, however, Reading English) *you* seems to frequently occasion higher rates of non-standard *was* (see, for example, Labov et al 1968, Feagin 1979, Smith and Tagliamonte 1998), but other than this the main consistency lies in the repeated high frequencies of *was* with existential subjects. We argue below, however, that existentials are a special case and should be analysed separately, though they certainly favour *was*. It is possible that the regional differences in the effect of plural NPs on the use of non-standard *was* relate to changes in the overall frequencies of this non-standard form. Britain (2002) observes that although older speakers in the northwest Fens show higher rates of *was* with NP plural subjects than with *they*, the effect of these subjects is reversed for younger speakers, whose use of non-standard *was* is dramatically higher than that of the older Fens speakers. Nevalainen's analyses (2006) similarly indicate that during the period 1440-1519, plural NP subjects favoured *was* in the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence* but that the effect was lost alongside the gradual decline of *was* levelling between 1440 and 1681. Thus an analysis of the effect of the grammatical subject on the use of non-standard *was* in London English should help determine the extent to which

the grammatical subject hierarchy is consistent across different varieties of present-day English.

2.3 Existential constructions and word order

As mentioned above, plural NP subjects in existential constructions consistently favour *was*, even in varieties where non-standard *was* is declining, or virtually non-existent, elsewhere (see, for example, Britain and Sudbury 2002, Hay and Schreier 2004, Khan 2006, Tagliamonte 1998). The constraint often overrides other strong influences on the use of levelled *was*, such as collective nouns as subject (Tagliamonte 1998: 167). This is not a new phenomenon: as Traugott (1972:134) notes, agreement in English existentials has been relatively infrequent for centuries. Pietsch (2005: 156) reports that it can be attested as far back as Old English (see also Visser 1963:62). Nevalainen's (2006) analyses show that there is minimal variation in the factor weights for the existential subject constraint over time.

Chambers (2006) suggests that in existential constructions, where the thematic subject is postverbal, a 'look-ahead' mechanism is required if the subject is to trigger agreement. It has also been argued that the prevalence of *was* with plural NP subjects in existential constructions reflects the ongoing grammaticalisation of *there was* (and present tense *there's*) into an invariant prefabricated expression used to introduce new topics into the discourse (Cheshire 1999, Crawford 2005, Eisikovits 1991, Riordan in press). There is no reason, of course, why both explanations should not be possible: existential constructions are frequent in speech, so the frequent collocation of *there* and *was*, whether or not the result of the 'look-ahead' mechanism, could promote grammaticalisation.

Non-existential contexts with postverbal subjects occur much less frequently in speech and are rarely included, therefore, in analyses of *was/were* variation. Where they have been taken into account, the results confirm the effect of the 'look-ahead' mechanism. For example, Tagliamonte notes some rare contexts with adverbial fronting followed by subject-verb inversion, as in (1), where agreement does not occur.

(1)   and on that island was the cooling towers (Tagliamonte 1998:169).

In inner city Sydney English, interrogatives with subject-verb inversion similarly favour *was*, as in (2), though again the number of tokens was low:

(2)   who was you with? (Eisikovits 1991: 250).

Further support for a 'look-ahead' mechanism comes from studies showing that agreement is less likely to occur when the subject is preverbal but separated from the verb. Thus relative *that* favours non-standard *was* in Buckie (Smith and Tagliamonte 1999: 120) and Appalachia (Hazen 1996), apparently continuing a Middle English tendency for relative markers to favour levelling to *was* (Forsström 1948: 207). In the *Corpus of Early English Correspondence*, too, levelled *was* occurred with relative pronouns, despite being infrequent overall with personal pronouns (Nevalainen 2006: 364). Collective NPs and coordinated NPs are also widely held to be usual sites for non-standard *was*, perhaps, as Tagliamonte suggests, because in these cases number interpretation is not straightforward (Tagliamonte 1998; see also Biber et al 1991: 189). In the case of coordinated Noun Phrases the verb agrees with the most recently uttered noun rather than with the Noun Phrase as a whole, as in (3), from our London corpus.

(3)   mum and dad was always at work

Tagliamonte (1998: 173-4) analyses separately the effect of proximity between the verb and the subject for both preverbal and postverbal third plural NP subjects, finding in each case that frequencies of non-standard *was* increase with greater numbers of intervening words. Another way of framing this might be to say that the further ahead one has to look, the less likely there is to be subject-verb agreement.

Thus the universal tendency for existential subjects to favour non-standard *was* may reflect a basic processing constraint, such that the linear word order of spontaneous speech makes speakers resort to the 'vernacular primitive' or default form *was* (Chambers 2003a:266) in contexts where the subject is separated from the verb and cannot easily trigger agreement. We test this in our analysis by analysing the effect of both existential contexts and interrogative contexts on *was/were* variation. Unlike most previous studies, however, we analyse existential contexts separately, on the grounds that the grammar differs here. The thematic subject is postverbal in both expletive *there* clauses and interrogative clauses, but within formal syntactic models these two clause types are held to differ in the position of the thematic subject relative to the structural subject. In expletive *there* clauses the position of the thematic subject is lower than that of the structural subject. This is not so in interrogative clauses, despite the fact that the subject and verb are inverted in the surface structure such that the verb precedes the subject. Thus the grammar of interrogative clauses does not differ from clauses where the subject takes the usual preverbal position. An elaborate generative apparatus is needed to explain the structure of existential clauses (Meechan and Foley 1994, Tagliamonte 1998: 169, 185); for example, in the principles and parameter model a different parameter setting generates the absence of agreement (Wilson and Henry 1998:11) with existential subjects. The distinctiveness of existential contexts is further confirmed by Moore's (2003) analysis of past BE forms in Bolton, Lancashire, a UK city where *were* levelling predominates. In Moore's data, levelled *was* occurs in non-existential contexts with a frequency of only 1%; in existentials, on the other hand, *was* is the favoured form. Tagliamonte (1998: 169), similarly, states that "existential constructions are a special case when it comes to *was/were* variation". Since existential constructions constitute a distinct syntactic context from the other contexts in which *was/were* variation occurs, we conduct this part of our analysis separately.

3 The London project

Our analysis forms part of the research project *Linguistic Innovators: the English of Adolescents in London* (UK ESRC grant number RES – 000-23-0680). This is a sociolinguistic investigation of the English spoken by adolescents in two different locations in London, one inner East London area and another further to the east. The two sites are important in relation to the sociohistorical changes that have taken place in London and we focus here on developments following the end of World War II.

The inner London site is associated with the dense, social networks of the traditional white working class families who lived in this part of London, known somewhat globally as Cockneys, and who spoke the traditional dialect of the area, also known as Cockney. However, in the post-war slum clearance and reconstruction of London, many of the original inhabitants were transferred to new estates further east or to the New Towns of Harlow and Basildon, both in Essex (for a fuller discussion see Fox 2007). This left an ageing population in the inner London site until, with the arrival of foreign immigrants, the population started to increase. The proportion of immigrants to the total population rose from 105 per 1,000 in 1951 to 192 in 1961 and 240 in 1966[3]. Many of the arriving immigrants were West Indian and this group today makes up 10.29% of the total

population, but the area is multicultural in nature and home to many other minority ethnic groups including Black Africans, Asians, Greek Cypriots and Turks. By 2001, the White population accounted for 59.4% of the total (2001 Census figures).

The outer London site is an area to where many of the traditional white working class East London families migrated. It contains two large housing estates constructed to deal with the incoming population from the slum clearance programme in London. It is an area which was once firmly situated in the County of Essex but was transferred to Greater London from Essex by the London Government Act 1963, to become part of one of the outer London Boroughs created in 1965. Today it is generally referred to as part of the East End of London, perhaps a reflection of the population movement. In contrast to the inner London site, the population is predominantly white – 95.2% according to the 2001 Census figures.

These two sites provide us with the means to test the claim that inner London is the source of linguistic innovation as well as to consider the effect of speaker ethnicity on the English spoken in London. We focus on the speech of adolescents in the two locations on the assumption that it is in adolescent speech that linguistic innovations are likely to occur (Chambers 2003a; Eckert 2000).

3.1 The participants

The aim of the project was to obtain a selection of speakers, aged 16-19 years, reflecting the ethnic makeup of the local population. The categories were not pre-determined, however, as we also aimed to take account of friendship groups. Our sample was therefore guided by what we found once fieldwork had started. Our sampling criteria included the requirement that each speaker had to have been born and raised in the location. Ethnicity is of course notoriously difficult to define, and by including ethnicity in our analysis we did not wish to impose our own classifications on the speakers. Each individual was therefore asked to give a self-definition of "where they belong" in terms of their own identity, and these are the definitions we use.

In the event, we obtained two very different datasets. Our sample for inner London consists of 49 adolescent speakers, 27 male and 22 female, from multicultural backgrounds. Our sample for outer London consists of 36 adolescent speakers, 19 male and 17 female, predominantly of white British background, also reflecting the local population. All are in post-16 education, taking vocational courses such as bricklaying, painting and decorating and catering, and are generally from working class backgrounds.

3.2 The data

Our fieldwork yielded a corpus of around 110 hours of recorded conversations, each recording ranging in length from around 45 minutes to 3 hours. This amounts to over 1,000,000 words, which have been orthographically transcribed. All of the adolescent recordings, with the fieldworker present, took place in the colleges attended by the adolescents and were made after an initial observation period. Although some of the adolescents have been recorded individually, most of the recordings were with friendship pairs or small self-selected groups. The conversations were informal and mainly unstructured, with topics led by both the fieldworker and the participants. In addition, we have a small number of self-recordings made by the adolescents either in the college or off-site. The recordings for the elderly speakers were, in the main, conducted in the speakers' homes.

4 Methods

We began by analysing the speech of a subsample of 32 adolescent speakers (16 from each site) and 12 elderly speakers (6 from each site). The 2769 tokens from these speakers revealed no use of *were* in standard *was* contexts of positive polarity[4]. It was decided therefore that in contexts of positive polarity, for the remaining speakers, only the use of *was* in standard *were* contexts would be coded. In negative polarity contexts however all tokens of *wasn't* and *weren't* were extracted and coded, for all speakers. In total, 5328 tokens of past BE were analysed.

Each token from the recordings was coded for a number of linguistic and social constraints noted in the literature to be relevant to the use of non-standard *was* or *were*. Those we discuss here are polarity, subject type, word order and clause type (declarative, interrogative or tag) as well as age, gender and ethnicity. For the word order factor group, each token was coded according to whether it occurred (i) in pre-verbal position (ii) in *wh-* interrogatives or (iii) in other interrogatives with postverbal subjects[5]. The results are presented first for positive polarity contexts and then for negative polarity contexts. As explained above, there is no theoretically grounded reason for including expletive *there* clauses alongside other 'subject' types; these clauses were analysed independently and we deal with them in a separate section.

5 Results

5.1 Affirmative contexts

As already mentioned, in this corpus of London English non-standard *were* never occurs in positive standard *was* contexts, making the following sentences impossible[6]:

(4)   *I were really angry
(5)   *There were a dog in our garden this morning.

The analysis in this paper, therefore, for affirmative contexts, is restricted to the use of non-standard *was* in standard *were* contexts. Table 1 on page 9 shows the use of this form for the adolescent and elderly groups in both inner London and outer London.

The first thing to note is the striking difference between the inner London and outer London elderly speakers. Overall, the inner London elderly speakers have 51.5% use of non-standard *was,* compared to only 19.2% among the outer London elderly speakers, a statistically significant difference (chi square = 36.1806, p <0.001). As both sets of speakers are white Anglos and are of similar social backgrounds, this seems to suggest that these are regional differences. All of the elderly speakers in this sample were born between the period 1918 - 1940, before the large movement of population from the East End of London to the suburbs further east and beyond. For this generation of speakers the concept of the 'East End' was confined to a specific geographical area to the east of the City of London, whereas what we now refer to as the 'outer London' site was firmly placed in Essex (Fox 2007). The elderly speakers in outer London tend to use more standard features generally, perhaps an indication of less contact with London speech patterns.

There is also a difference between the two sites among the adolescent speakers, but this time the situation is reversed. The use of non-standard *was* among the outer London adolescents is considerably higher than among the inner London adolescents, 58%

Table 1: Use of *WAS* in standard *WERE* contexts of positive polarity

Subject	Inner London Adolescents		Inner London Elderly		Outer London Adolescents		Outer London Elderly	
	No. of tokens	% *was*	No. of tokens	% *was*	No. of tokens	% *was*	No. of tokens	% *was*
First person We	102/197	51.8	38/82	46.3	117/150	78	13/20	39.4
Second person You	56/91	61.5	26/28	92.9	38/46	82.6	0/7	0
Third person pronoun *they*	57/194	29.4	40/94	42.6	61/135	45.2	5/47	10.6
NP	46/133	34.6	34/64	53.1	22/79	27.8	2/24	8.3
Total	**261/615**	**42.4**	**138/268**	**51.5**	**238/410**	**58**	**20/104**	**19.2**

compared to 42.4%, again a statistically significant difference (chi square = 23.9932, $p<0.0001$). The figures demonstrate that the outer London adolescents are closer in their use of non-standard *was* to the inner London elderly speakers than to the outer London elderly speakers. The reason for this may be twofold. First, the sociohistorical changes again go some way to providing an explanation. As outlined above, many families were transferred from East London during the post-war slum clearance program to newly built estates in the outer London borough, and this exodus has continued to such an extent that many families living there have their ancestral roots in the East End. The sheer volume of movement would seem to make it inconceivable that the London forms have not exerted an influence on the local variety. Secondly, levelling to *was* in positive polarity contexts has been noted as a phenomenon affecting British varieties more generally, for example York (Tagliamonte, 1998), and The Fens (Britain, 2002; see our earlier discussion). Interestingly, the Fenland area of eastern England parallels the outer London site in that it, too, was a region affected by the post-1945 overspill and New Town developments, and evidence suggests that levelling to *was* in the Fens has been brought about by diffusion from the South (Britain 2002:33). The use of non-standard *was* by the young people in our outer London site, then, conforms to what would be predicted from the general pattern of dialect contact in southern England, which in turn mirrors what has been reported in England generally.

In contrast to the outer London adolescents, the inner London adolescents appear to be reversing this trend. There is a significantly different distribution of *was/were* in positive contexts between both the inner London adolescents and the inner London elderly speakers (chi square = 6.1771, $p <0.025$) as well as between the adolescents of inner London and the adolescents of outer London (chi square = 7.1845, $p <0.01$), indicating that the inner London adolescents are neither following patterns of previous generations from the same area nor following patterns of their peers in the south east. We return to possible reasons for this later, when we consider social factors.

## 5.2 Linguistic constraints

5.2.1 Grammatical subject

As mentioned earlier, the research findings to date reveal inconsistencies in the relative effects of the grammatical subject. Figure 1 (page 11) demonstrates that we do not find a consistent pattern in our data sets, even between adjoining locations.

In inner London the pattern of use for non-standard *was* with NP plural subjects and third person plural subjects among both the elderly and adolescent speakers conforms to what has been termed the Northern Subject Rule, with non-standard *was* more frequent with NP plural subjects than with third person plural pronouns. For the outer London speakers the pattern of use with these subjects is reversed, conforming instead to the so-called Southern Subject Rule. It could be that regional differences account for the split, with the outer London speakers allying themselves with the rest of south Essex. However, it should be noted that the differences between the uses of non-standard *was* with third person plural pronouns and plural NPs by the two age groups are low in both inner and outer London, and what difference there is, is not statistically significant.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this part of the analysis relates to the use of non-standard *was* with second person subjects. Figure 1 demonstrates that the highest users are the inner London elderly speakers, with, at 93%, almost categorical rates of non-standard *was,* compared to the outer London elderly speakers who do not use non-standard *was* at all in this context. Among the adolescents, however, it is the outer London speakers who are the higher users of *you was*, at 83%. Inner London adolescents

use *you was* with a rate of only 61%. The reasons why the outer London adolescents may have increased their overall use of non-standard *was* relative to the elderly speakers in this

Figure1

Use of WAS in standard WERE positive polarity contexts by grammatical person
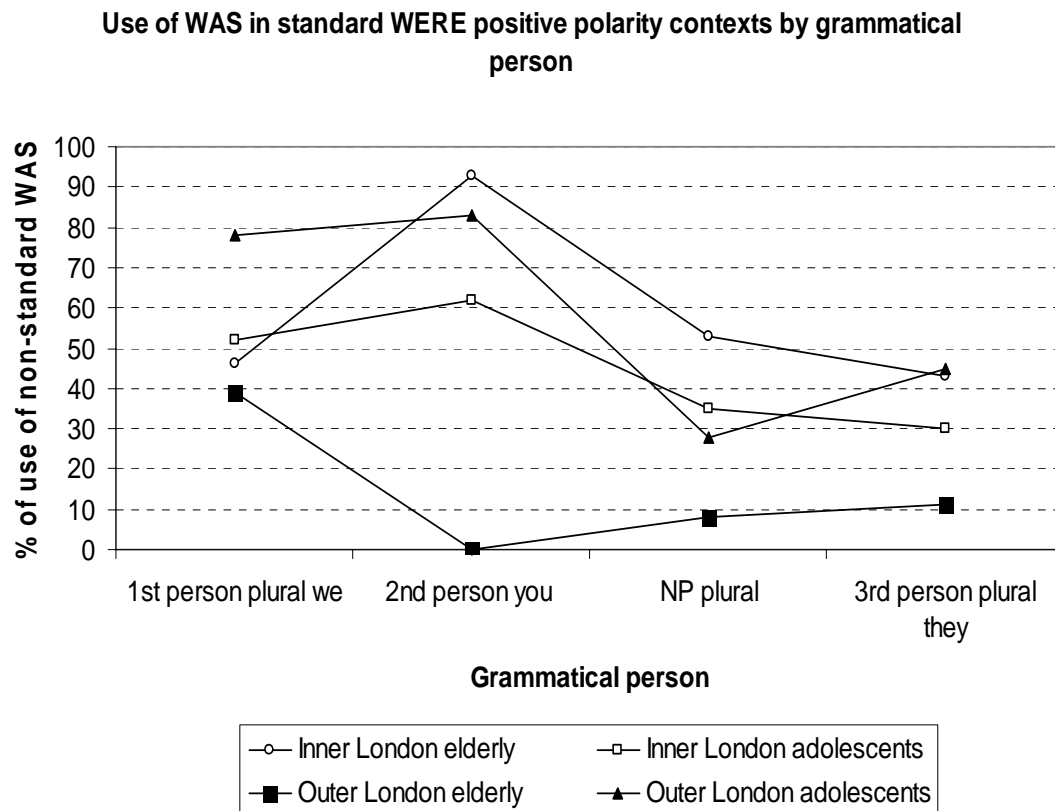
area were discussed above. These figures, together with their high frequencies of non-standard *was* in first person plural contexts (78% – the highest rate of all four groups of speakers), confirms that the outer London adolescents are patterning with speakers of other British varieties where high rates of levelling to *was* in positive contexts have been reported (Tagliamonte 1998; Britain 2002).

Nevertheless, all groups of speakers except the elderly outer Londoners use more non-standard *was* with second person subjects, as reported by most other studies that have sufficient tokens for second person subjects to be included separately in the analyses. For the two adolescent groups, first person plural pronouns also occasion non-standard *was*, though less frequently. Apart from this, however, there is no consistency between the four groups of speakers in the hierarchy of grammatical subject conditioning, as Figure 1 shows (Figure 1 is based on numbers shown in Table 1).

5.2.2 *Postverbal constructions*

Was/were variation in existential clauses has been analysed very often, reflecting, we assume, the high rates of existential clauses in spontaneous speech. The frequency with which *was* occurs with a plural postverbal subject in these clauses has been explained as

reflecting the influence of word order or, more generally, processing effects, as we noted earlier, such that a subject that is uttered after the verb or that is separated from the verb does not trigger agreement. One of the problems of analysing the more general effect of subject - verb order is that most other relevant constructions do not occur with any great frequency in spontaneous speech. However, interrogatives arise sufficiently frequently among the inner London adolescent speakers to enable us to report on the use of non-standard *was* in these contexts. Figure 2 displays the use of non-standard *was* according to whether the subject occurs in preverbal position (in declarative clauses), in postverbal position in interrogatives such as (6) or in postverbal *wh*-interrogatives as in (7).

(6)   How long was we in here the first time*?*
(7)   What was we doing?

Figure 2

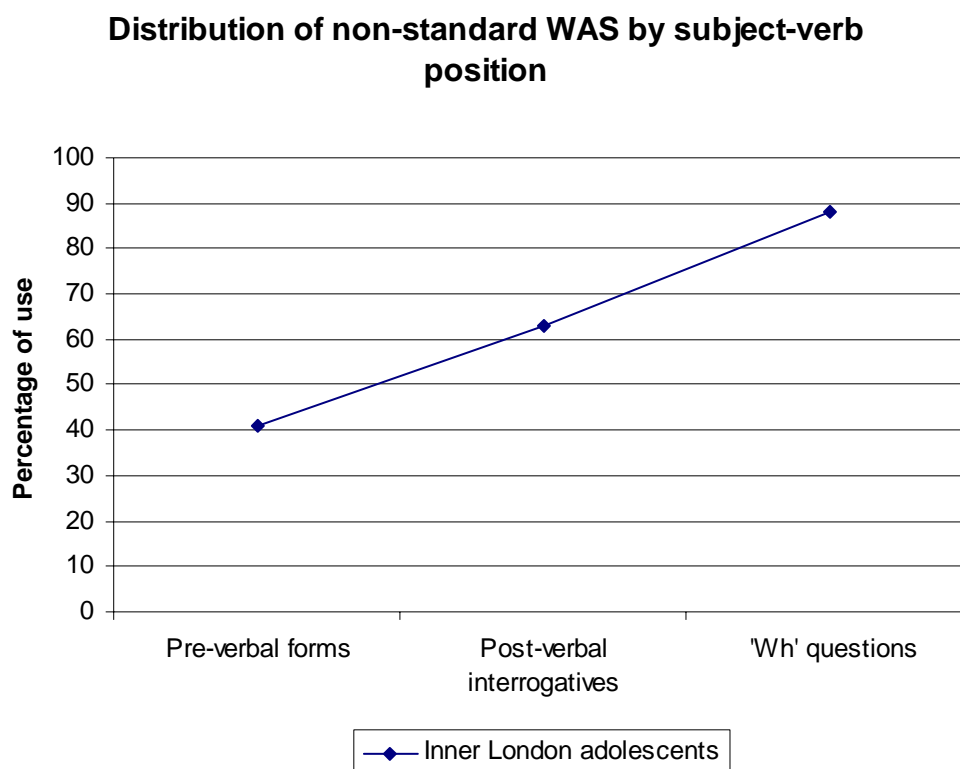**Distribution of non-standard WAS by subject-verb position**

Figure 2 reveals that subject-verb order is indeed a strong constraint on the use of non-standard *was*. In interrogatives where the subject is postverbal, non-standard *was* is used 63% of the time; this figure increases to 88% in *wh-* interrogatives. It is not only existential constructions, then, where the thematic subject is in postverbal position, that affect the use of non-standard *was*. The pattern of occurrence may well be based on the underlying mechanism that operates for all postverbal subjects i.e. the requirement of a 'look ahead mechanism' (Chambers 2006) means that there is less likelihood of subject verb agreement when the subject is produced after the verb. We return to *was/were* variation in existential clauses later.

5.3 Social constraints

5.3.1 Gender

Figure 3

Distribution of non-standard WAS in contexts of positive polarity by GENDER
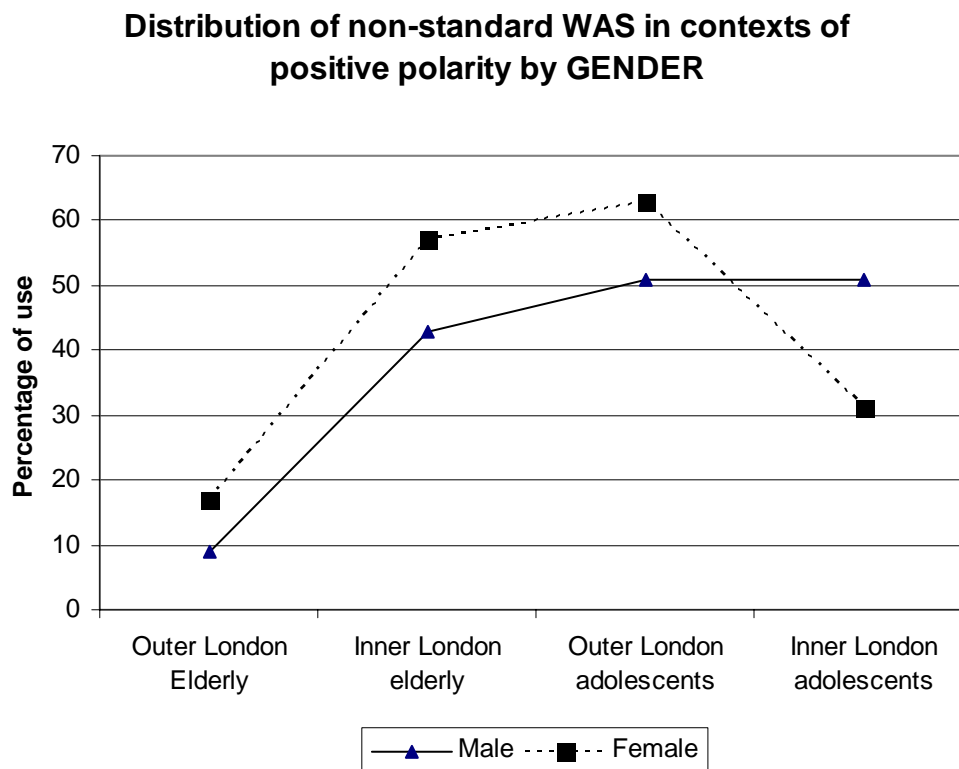
As we have already demonstrated, the inner London adolescents are not following the same patterns of use for non-standard *was* as the elderly speakers from the same area nor of their peers from the outer London site. Furthermore, we can see from Figure 3 that there is differentiation between male and female patterns of use. For all except the inner London adolescents, female speakers use non-standard *was* more frequently than male speakers**.** Females appear to be in the lead, then, in the spread of *was* levelling in positive polarity contexts in the outer area of London**.** The inner London adolescents differ from the other groups in that it is the male group that has the higher use of non-standard *was* in positive contexts. While the males' use has increased in comparison to their elderly counterparts, the girls' use has decreased and they seem to be moving towards the use of standard *were.* What possible explanation could there be for this pattern of use? Since the populations of the two areas are very different, with the inner London area highly multicultural in nature and the outer London site predominantly white, we turn to ethnicity as a potential social constraint among the inner London adolescents.

5.3.2   Ethnicity

 The self classifications given by the speakers allowed us to divide them into five main ethnic groups, with each group containing four or more speakers: Black Caribbean, Mixed race (White/Black Caribbean), Black African, White British and Bangladeshi. We placed together in a sixth group, 'other', those speakers claiming to belong to an ethnic group where there was just one speaker. This group consisted of individuals describing themselves as Moroccan, Chinese, Columbian, Portuguese and Middle Eastern. While

these classifications may not be entirely satisfactory, it allows us to see whether a particular group is leading in, and by implication possibly influencing, the use of non-standard *was*.

Figure 4

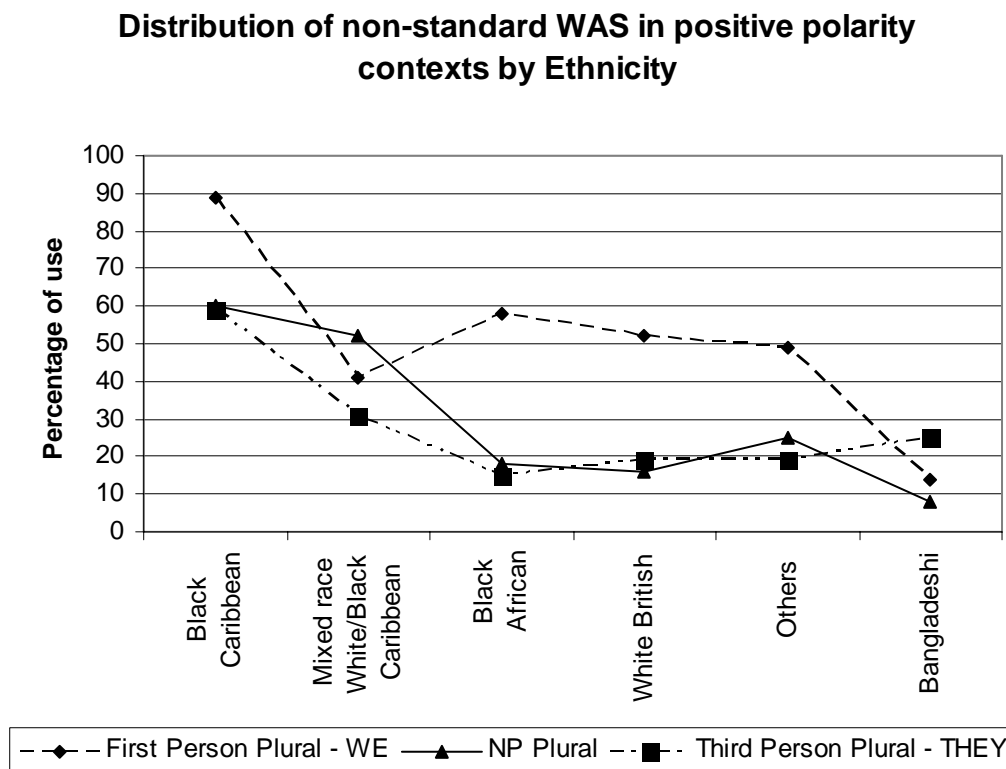## Distribution of non-standard WAS in positive polarity contexts by Ethnicity

Figure 4 shows the frequency of use of non-standard *was* in positive polarity contexts, for different grammatical subjects, by the different ethnic groups. For the different subject contexts there is remarkable consistency across the ethnic groups, with the Black Caribbean speakers always the highest users of non-standard *was* and the Bangladeshi speakers generally the lowest users. However, we saw in Figure 3 that the male speakers in inner London are higher users of non-standard *was* than the females, so what happens when we cross-tabulate ethnicity with gender?

Figure 5 demonstrates that although the Black Caribbean speakers are the highest users among both the males and females, there are clear gender differences overall. In fact, the highest users of non-standard *was* in positive contexts are the Black Caribbean boys and the boys of White/Black Caribbean mixed race, while the girls in this latter group are actually the lowest users. Why might this be the case? The reason, we think, is that some of the boys and girls from these groups in this study have quite different lifestyles. It is not enough to talk about ethnic differences *per se*; instead, we need to look in more detail at the social practices of the individual speakers and to take into consideration their friendship groups and contact with other ethnic groups. While it is outside the scope of this paper, the investigation would benefit from a closer qualitative analysis. For now, we can say that the Black Caribbean males are leading in the use of non-standard *was*. We will see later that this is part of a general trend towards levelled *was* in both positive and negative contexts.

Figure 5

Distribution of non-standard WAS in positive contexts by Ethnicity and Gender
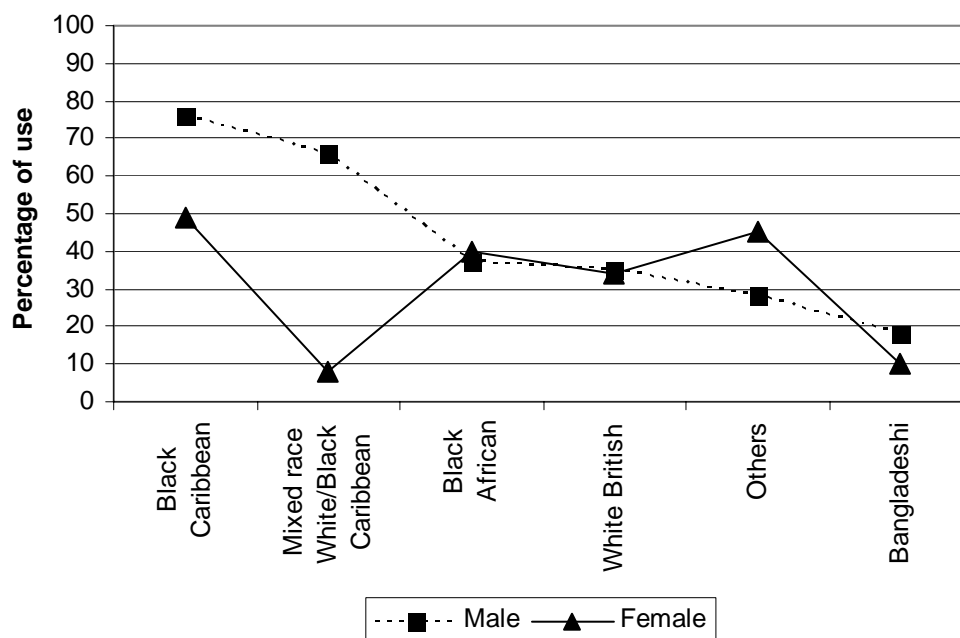
Why, though, are the Bangladeshi speakers the lowest users of non-standard *was*? A possible explanation is that the Bangladeshis have been a somewhat insular group, with the main wave of immigrants arriving in east London in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, at a time when most of the indigenous white working class families had moved out to the suburbs of London or to purpose-built New Towns. Pockets of the East End of London very quickly became densely populated with Bangladeshi families who had very little contact with the white community. The women and children were rarely seen in public (see Fox 2007 for more details). The children went to schools which also came to be dominated by Bangladeshi children: some of the secondary schools in East London today have a 99% Bangladeshi student population. The Bangladeshi adolescents acquired their English mainly from school, then, and have been exposed to prescriptive norms through the influence of formal education. If they then maintain close contact with other members from the same community rather than mixing with other ethnic groups they are less likely to be exposed to non-standard past BE forms. Once again, the investigation would benefit from a more qualitative analysis taking into account the young people's lifestyles and their degree of contact with other ethnic groups.

How do the white Anglo speakers fit into this pattern of use? Growing up in a highly multicultural area, they have been exposed to the speech of many different ethnic groups both through their schools and through their ethnically mixed friendship groups. This appears to have led to a situation where their use of non-standard *was* is significantly different both from that of the elderly speakers from the same area and from their peers from outer London.

Table 2 shows the results of a multivariate analysis using GOLDVARB X of the constraints discussed so far on the use of levelled *was* by the adolescents. Figures shown in bold type were selected as statistically significant by the program; factor weights above 0.5 favour non-standard *was* whereas factor weights below 0.5 disfavour non-standard *was*. Table 2 simply confirms the

patterns of variation described above, and demonstrates that ethnicity is far and away the strongest factor influencing non-standard *was*, with a range of

Table 2: Multivariate analysis of non-standard *was* in standard *were* contexts of positive polarity – a comparison of inner London and outer London adolescents

	Inner London Adolescents			Outer London Adolescents		
Input	0.41					
	FW	%	N	FW	%	N
Ethnicity						
Black Caribbeans	.78	67	118			
Mixed race White/Black Caribbeans	.51	45	141			
Black Africans	.47	38	55	*Not applicable*		
Other (minority Ethnic group)	.43	37	123			
White Anglos	.43	35	136			
Bangladeshis	.15	12	42			
Range	63					
Subject-verb inversion						
'wh' questions	.88	88	16			
Inversion + interrogative	.59	63	8	*Not applicable*		
Non-inverted subjects		.49	41	591		
Range	39					
Grammatical Person						
You	.70	62	91	.76	83	46
We	.64	52	197	.71	78	150
NP Plural	.40	35	133	.21	28	79
They	.34	29	194	.36	45	135
Range	36			40		
Gender						
Male	.57	51	352	[.44]	51	158
Female	.40	31	263	[.54]	63	252
Range	17					

63. Gender is significant in inner London but not in outer London, though the female adolescents in outer London use non-standard *was* more often than the male adolescents.

5.4 Negative Contexts

Was/were variation in negative contexts is an equally complex phenomenon in London. There is a mixed pattern: first, the expected pattern of levelling to *weren't*, resulting in the *was/weren't* system typical of much of Britain today, and secondly the levelled *was/wasn't* system typical of Scotland, Ireland

Table 3: Use of non-standard *WEREN'T* in standard *WASN'T* contexts of negative polarity

Subject	Inner London Adolescents		Inner London Elderly		Outer London Adolescents		Outer London Elderly	
	No. of tokens	% *weren't*	No. of tokens	% *weren't*	No. of tokens	% *weren't*	No. of tokens	% *weren't*
First person Singular *I*	29/72	40	1/12	8	21/39	54	0/13	-
Third Person Singular *He/She*	18/45	40	4/16	25	18/29	62	4/12	33
Third person Singular pronoun *It*	34/75	45	7/28	25	75/91	82	3/19	16
NP singular	6/20	30	0/10	-	7/15	47	0/4	-
Demonstrative Pronoun *That*	2/8	25	0/3	-	4/6	67	0/3	-
Total	**89/220**	**41**	**12/72**	**17**	**125/180**	**69**	**7/52**	**14**

and parts of the northwest Midlands (Anderwald 2001:11) but not, so far, thought to be characteristic of urban areas in the southeast. We discuss each of these systems separately.

5.4.1 Weren*'t in standard* wasn't *contexts*

Table 3 (page 17) shows the overall frequencies of *weren't* in standard *wasn't* contexts for different grammatical subjects. The figures reveal low overall rates for the elderly speakers: 17% (inner London) and 14% (outer London). Closer inspection of the data revealed that in fact non-standard *weren't* occurs only in tags for these speakers[7], a finding replicated in many other British dialects (Anderwald 2002:178). When tags are removed from the analysis, there is no evidence of levelling to *weren't* in this age group.

  As in many other varieties of British English, levelling to *weren't* among the adolescents appears to have increased dramatically, with rates of 41% (inner London) and 69% (outer London). Although both areas seem to be following the general trend of levelling to *weren't*, once more we find a marked difference between the inner and outer London sites, with the outer London speakers allying themselves more with the general dialect pattern found in the southeast and East Anglia (see, for example, Britain 2002, Levey 2007). As in other studies, we find that tags are an important context for levelling to *weren't*. We report on *was/were* variation in negative tags later: for now we simply note that their removal from the data presented in Table 3 does not alter the pattern of *weren't* usage between the inner and outer London adolescents: for the inner London young people the rates are now 38% and for the outer London adolescents the rates are 61%. The grammatical subject had no significant effect on the use of *weren't* rather than *wasn't* (other than in tags, as we will show).

5.4.2 Social constraints on the use of levelled weren't

Figure 6 shows the effect of gender on the use of non-standard *weren't*.

Figure 6

Use of WEREN'T in standard WASN'T contexts according to gender
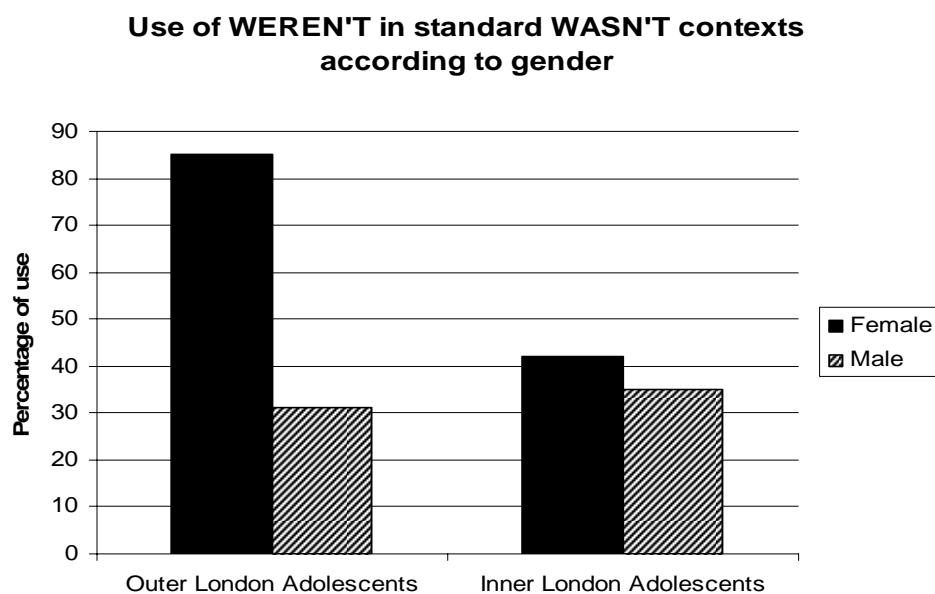
Among the outer London speakers, gender exhibits a significant effect, with females strongly favouring the use of non-standard *weren't* (85%, FW .77). Female speakers also led in the use of levelled *was* (albeit with a frequency difference that was not statistically significant). This suggests then, that females are leading in the spread of the *was/weren't* system in this area of London. Among the inner London adolescents, females slightly favour the use of non-standard *weren't*, with distribution rates at 35% for males and 42% for females, though again the effect is not statistically significant. Once again, however, ethnicity exhibits a significant effect in inner London. Figure 7 shows the effect of ethnicity on the use of non-standard *weren't*.

Figure 7

Use of WEREN'T in standard WASN'T contexts according to ethnicity
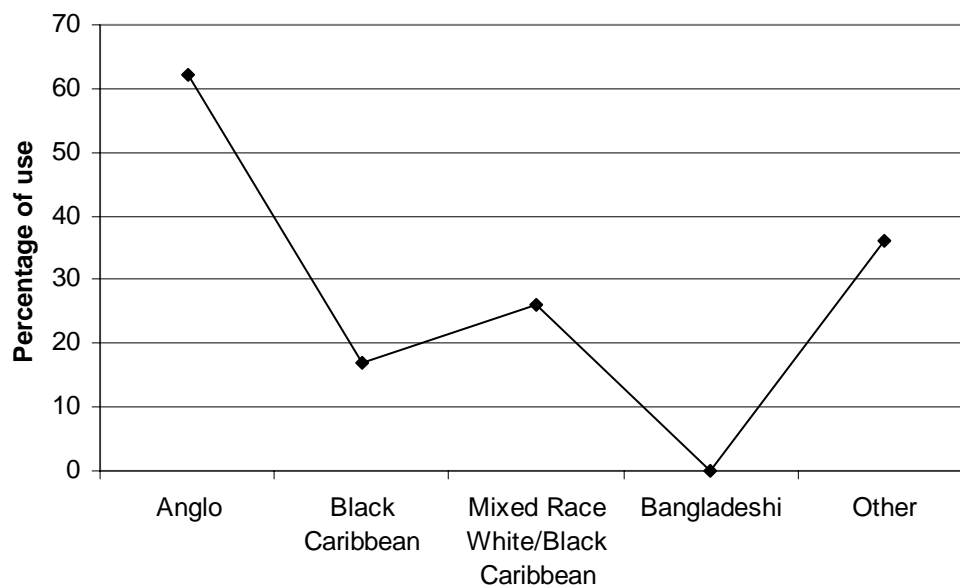
This time the White Anglos highly favour the use of *weren't* (62%, Varbrul FW .725) while the Black Caribbeans (17%, FW .245) and mixed race White/Black Caribbeans (26%, FW .375) strongly disfavour *weren't*, quite the reverse of the results for *was* levelling in affirmative contexts. The distribution rate for the White Anglos in inner London, at 62%, puts them on an equal footing with their outer London peers. The Bangladeshi group does not use non-standard *weren't* at all. This would seem to support the argument that perhaps they have been more exposed to prescriptive norms through their educational institutions. This, however, is not the whole picture, as we will see when we consider the use of *was* in negative contexts.

Before that, let us consider the use of non-standard *weren't* in tags.

5.4.3 Tags

Previous research suggests that tags have an important role in increasing the tendency towards *weren't* levelling generally (Tagliamonte 1998:179; Anderwald 2002:178). We have already seen that this was the only context where the elderly speakers in our sample used non-standard *weren't*. Amongst the adolescents, the overall frequency differs between the two sites, with non-standard *weren't* in negative tags representing 11% (*n* 10/89) of all

instances of non-standard *weren't* in inner London but nearly three times as many – 30% (*n* 38/125) – in outer London.

We saw earlier that the female adolescents in this study lead in the overall use of *weren't*. If we consider tags separately, however, once again we find differences between the inner London and the outer London adolescents. In inner London, the tags are divided evenly between males and females (though the number of tokens is low: just 10 in total). In outer London, however, their use is highly favoured by females – of the 38 instances of non-standard *weren't* tags, 74% (*n* 28) are used by females. The results are presented in Figures 8 and 9, which display graphically the differences between the two sites.

Figure 8

Distribution of WERE in standard WAS contexts among outer London adolescents
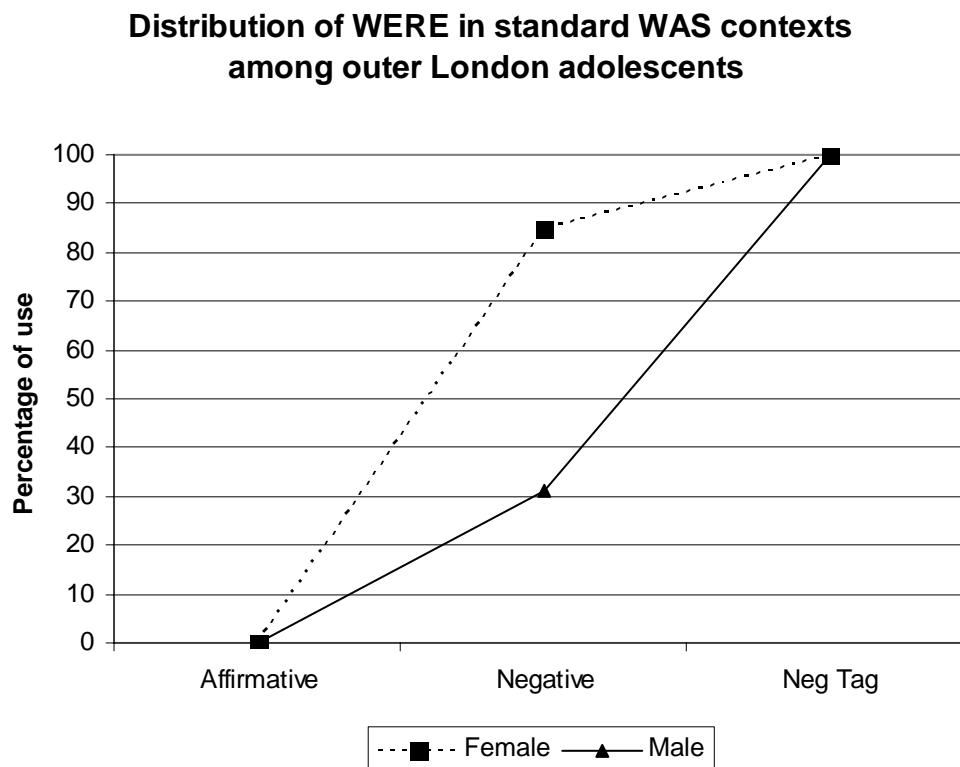
The most striking result displayed in Figure 8 is that non-standard *weren't* is categorical in negative tag contexts in the outer London site, with a strong female lead towards non-standard *weren't* in other negative contexts. In inner London (Figure 9, page 22) the trend is not so strong, although levelling to non-standard *weren't* is well underway in tags, with the males using it categorically in this context.

With just two exceptions, virtually all the tags with non-standard *weren't* occur with *it* as the subject, as in (8). The exceptions were from inner London, where two tags occurred with third person pronoun *he*, as in (9).

(8)   it was June or July weren't it?
(9)   he was gonna post it back to him weren't he?

Furthermore, in outer London *weren't it* does not always show agreement with the subject and verb in the previous clause, as examples (10), (11) and (12) illustrate.

(10)   and it's about ten questions as well weren't it

(11) that's not good weren't it
(12) oh yeah cos I stopped bunning weren't it

We do not find examples of this type in inner London, where in any case tags with past BE are infrequent. It seems possible, then, that in outer London the frequent collocation of *weren't* and *it* in tags is resulting in a grammaticalised invariant *weren't it* tag that functions as a lexical item rather than as a form that shows agreement with a verb and subject in the preceding clause.

Figure 9

Distribution of WERE in standard WAS contexts among inner London adolescents
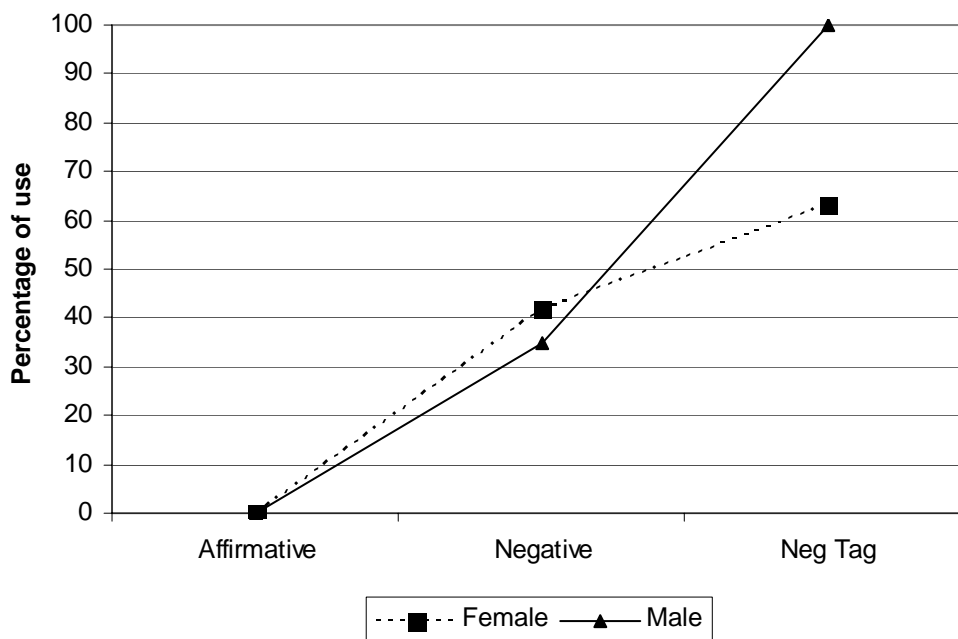
5.5 *Wasn't* in standard *weren't* contexts

In the outer London data we find just two tokens of non-standard *wasn't* from the elderly speakers and one token, in a negative tag, from an adolescent speaker. With levelling to *weren't* well underway in outer London we must assume that these are merely remnants of a mixed pattern that may once have existed in the area.

In inner London, standard *weren't* contexts arise infrequently among our elderly speakers, but of the 20 tokens extracted from the data 6 display non-standard *wasn't,* as in examples (13) and (14) below:

(13) cos we wasn't really brought up like that
(14) I mean you wasn't to eat sweets

With the tide moving towards levelling to *weren't* in negative contexts we might expect to find less use of non-standard *wasn't* among the adolescents, but in fact we find that

there is 46% (*n* 18/39) levelling to *wasn't* in standard *weren't* contexts. What is more, just as for *was* in affirmative contexts, non-standard *wasn't* in negative contexts is favoured by males, with a distribution rate of 57% compared to the rate for females of 33%. A further parallel with the analysis of levelling to *was* in affirmative contexts is that our Varbrul analysis revealed that ethnicity again has a statistically significant effect on the probability of non-standard *wasn't.*

Figure 10

Use of WASN'T in standard WEREN'T contexts by ethnicity
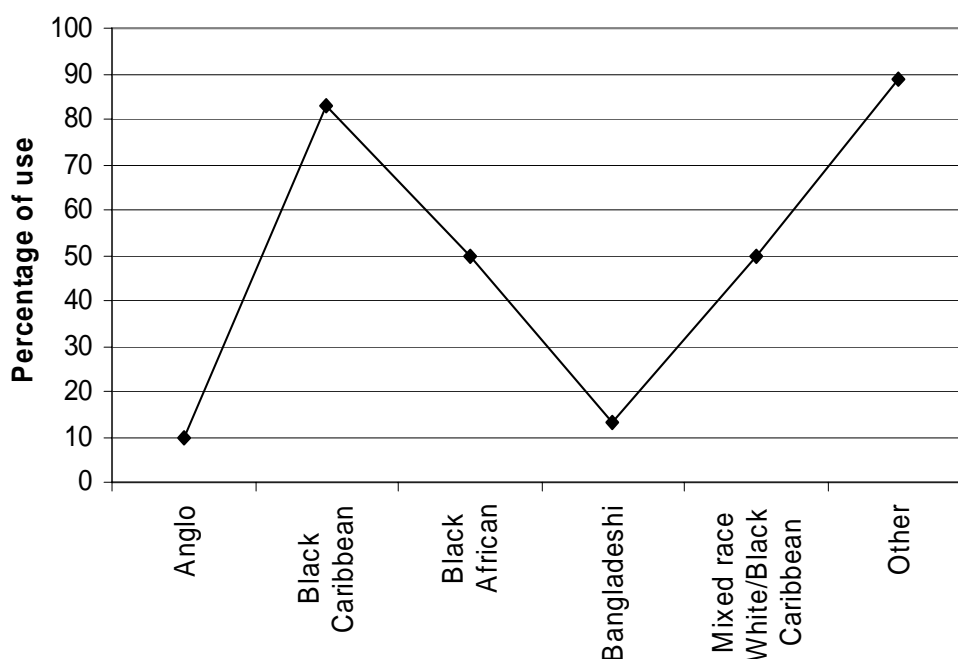
Black Caribbeans favour the use of non-standard *wasn't* (83%, *n* 5/6, FW .863) as well as those from other minority ethnic groups (89%, *n* 8/9, FW .91). Those likely to strongly disfavour the use of non-standard *wasn't* are the White Anglos (10%, *n* 1/10, FW .123) and the Bangladeshis (13%, *n* 1/8, FW .153).

  To summarise the analysis of past BE in negative contexts, we can say that in outer London there is a strong trend towards *weren't* levelling, to the extent that *weren't it* may even be grammaticalising as an invariant negative tag. Our data suggest that in this location levelling to *weren't* is led by females. However, in inner London there is a mixed pattern, with some divergence between different ethnic groups. In general, the Bangladeshis tend to conform to standard uses of past BE, for reasons discussed above. The White Anglos show patterns of use which parallel their outer London peers in that they favour *weren't* levelling and, therefore, the mixed *was/weren't* system. The Black Caribbeans on the other hand, as well as others from minority ethnic groups, favour the use of levelling to *was*, not only in affirmative contexts but also in negative contexts.

5.6 Existential constructions

5.6.1 Singular subjects

As with non-existential clauses, there is no use of *were* in positive contexts, so that the following sentence is ungrammatical in London English:

(16)   * There were a dog in the garden

Negative constructions with existential *there* occur infrequently. When they do occur, only *wasn't* is used with singular subjects by the elderly speakers in both locations, as well as by the adolescent speakers of inner London. The outer London adolescents, on the other hand, display levelling to *weren't* in negative existential contexts (*n* 7/9), with *weren't there* used categorically in negative tags (*n* 4). Again, this is in keeping with the generally more advanced pattern levelling to *weren't* in the speech of the outer London adolescents.

5.6.2 Plural subjects

As with almost every other study of contemporary English (e.g. Eisokovits 1991; Tagliamonte 1998; Britain 2002), our study highlights the fact that the use of non-standard *was* in plural subject existential constructions is much higher than in other plural subject contexts. Even among the outer London elderly speakers, who have a general tendency towards the use of prescriptively standard forms, the rate of non-agreement in this context is higher than elsewhere, with an overall distribution rate of 25% compared to 19% in non-existential contexts (as we saw in Table 1).

Figure 11

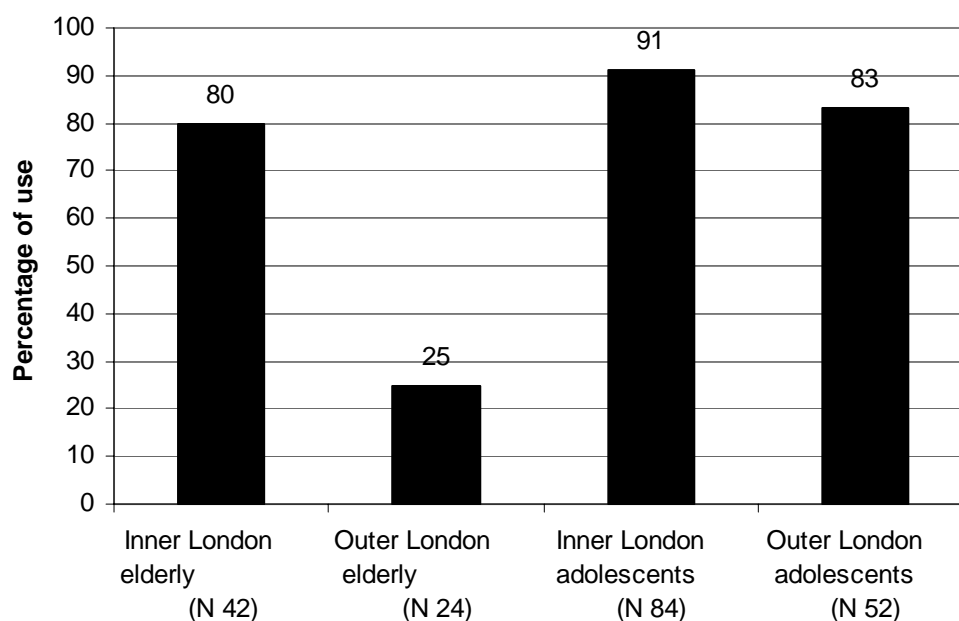**Use of WAS in positive existential constructions with plural subjects**

Figure 11 shows that the inner London elderly speakers, who use non-standard *was* approximately 50% of the time in other contexts, have a high rate (80%) of non-standard *was* usage in existential contexts. These high rates are unexceptional, given the long history of non-agreement in English existentials reported in the literature. The adolescents, though, have still higher rates of non-standard *was* in plural subject existentials. Perhaps this partly reflects the general trend towards *was* levelling in positive contexts. However in inner London non-standard *was* in existential contexts is being adopted by speakers from all ethnic groups, unlike non-standard *was* in other contexts. This is not surprising since, as argued earlier, the grammar of existentials is different from that of other clauses. It confirms, in our view, that a psycholinguistic mechanism underlies *was* usage in existentials: as argued earlier, there is evidence to suggest that all speakers resort to the default form *was* in contexts where they produce the subject after the verb. The inner London adolescents also have the highest number of tokens of past BE in existential contexts (*n* 84), lending support to the idea that as a consequence of the frequent use of the collocation *there was*, it is grammaticalising into an invariant prefabricated expression (Cheshire 1999; Crawford 2005; Eisikovits 1991).

Negative contexts with plural subject existentials occurred too infrequently for a detailed analysis. No examples were found in the speech of the outer London elderly speakers, and only two negative tokens were extracted from the inner London elderly speakers (both *there wasn't*). Three tokens were found in the speech of the inner London adolescents, of which two were non-standard *wasn't* and one standard *weren't*. There were seven tokens extracted from the outer London adolescents, where there was a marginally higher use of *weren't* (*n* 4/7). Perhaps this is in keeping with their higher tendency towards *weren't* levelling in negative contexts generally. Low numbers of tokens prevent us from investigating this aspect of *was/were* variation further.

6 Discussion

6.1 Dialect contact and language contact

We now return to the question of the effect of dialect contact and language contact on *was/were* variation in London, and to the role of ethnicity as a social factor affecting variation and change in major urban settings. Since London is reputed to be a source of innovations we had expected to find high rates of the *was/weren't* split that previous studies throughout the country have reported. We have seen that in the outer London site both levelling to *was* and levelling to *weren't* are indeed well underway. As in the Fens (Britain 2002), the changes can be attributed to dialect levelling, caused in our outer London location by population movement from inner London areas. In inner London, however, both *was* levelling and *weren't* levelling were less in evidence; in fact, here the adolescents use non-standard *was* less frequently than the elderly speakers. Furthermore, in negative polarity contexts we found a mixed pattern of levelling both to *weren't* in standard *was* contexts, and to *wasn't* in standard *were* contexts. Inner London does not appear to be the source of the *was/weren't* pattern that is so widespread in other urban centres in the UK.

The patterns of variation in inner London correlated with the ethnicity of speakers. We saw that for some groups, notably the Bangladeshi speakers, there does seem to be a trend towards the use of standard English past BE forms, as Chambers (2003b) predicts for urban speakers who are in contact with prescriptive norms. Other ethnic groups, particularly the Black Caribbean speakers, show a strong trend in the opposite direction, to levelled *was* in both positive and negative polarity contexts. The usage of the white Anglo 'heritage London' speakers seems to be affected by both trends. We attribute

these differences, in part at least, to the nature of individual speakers' friendship groups, their patterns of interaction and their lifestyles, factors that need to be investigated in more detail than has been possible here. The quantitative analyses have therefore pointed to the directions that our future, more qualitative, research needs to take in order to explore in greater depth the effect of ethnicity on *was/were* variation in London, and indeed on other aspects of language use. Cheshire, Fox, Kerswill and Torgersen (in press) represents a preliminary step in this direction.

We assume that the contradictory findings of previous studies of the early stages of dialect contact and language contact can be explained in a similar way: the fact that non-standard *was* declined in early New Zealand English but increased in early Tristan da Cunha English must be due to patterns of interaction between different groups of early English-speaking settlers and the indigenous inhabitants. Schreier (2002:92-95) argues, in fact, that levelling to *was* is a structurally inherent process which has been shaped by the ecological particularities of the island of Tristan da Cunha, including its unusual settlement history and the absence of interaction with exogenous normative developments (see also Levey 2007 for discussion). A full explanation of the patterns found in inner London would similarly need to take account of the sociohistorical development of the varieties of English spoken by the different ethnic groups in London and, indeed by their ancestors. It is possible, for example, that an ancestral English-based Creole input into the English of the Black Caribbean and mixed race Caribbean/Anglo adolescents goes some way towards accounting for their preference for the *was/wasn't* pattern. English-based Creoles acquire *was* first as an irregular lexical insertion, according to Bickerton (1975), and only acquire *were* as their speech becomes increasingly acrolectal. Chambers (2003a) even suggests that *were* exists only in response to the pressure of standard English; see Tagliamonte and Smith (1999: 22) for discussion. It is noteworthy that a pattern of overall *was* levelling is reported for other varieties that may have had some Creole ancestral input, such as African American Vernacular English (Labov, Cohen, Robins and Lewis 1968) and Samaná English in the Dominican Republic (Tagliamonte and Smith 1999). By the same token, the Bangaldeshi adolescents' low use of non-standard *was*, which we have suggested is due to the normative pressure of standard English on their speech, must reflect the ways in which they have acquired English. Since they hear Sylheti or other community languages at home and with their Bangladeshi peers, rather than English, school teachers may have exerted a disproportionate influence on their English. In London, just as in Samaná or Tristan da Cunha, ecological and sociohistorical factors are all implicated, so that even within a single location, such as our inner London research site, different ecological and sociohistorical factors produce different patterns of variation.

6.2 Internal constraints on variation

Previous claims that there is a consistent constraint hierarchy for the effect of the grammatical subject are put into question by the inconsistency of this effect both between our inner and outer London sites and between the older and younger speakers at each site. We expected to find consistency between at least the elderly inner London speakers and the adolescent speakers in outer London, given their shared sociodemographic origins, but even here the only shared constraint was the strong effect of second person subjects. The so-called Northern Subject Rule applied to *was/were* variation for the inner London elderly speakers, and the Southern Subject Rule to *was/were* variation for the outer London adolescents. However our findings add support to the idea that higher overall frequencies of *was* levelling result in higher frequencies of *was* with plural NPs, as suggested by Britain (2002) and Nevalainen (2006). In our data

the highest frequencies of *was* levelling were found among the outer London adolescents and the inner London elderly speakers, both of whom have rates above 50 per cent (as we saw in Table 1). These are the two groups who have higher rates of *was* levelling with plural NPs than with the pronoun *they*. The two groups whose frequency of *was* levelling is below 50 per cent (the inner London adolescents and the outer London elderly speakers) show the reverse effect.

The preference amongst all four groups of speakers for *was* with second person subjects is not surprising considering that this is such a widespread phenomenon . Nonetheless it is difficult to explain. For present-day varieties of northern English or varieties previously influenced by northern English, a preference for *you was* can be seen as a retention of an earlier pattern, since in Middle English *was* is reported as most frequent in second person singular contexts in the North (Forsstrom 1948, Mossé 1948; as reported by Smith and Tagliamonte 1998: 117). Perhaps, then, southern varieties were influenced by northern *you was*, alongside other Northern morphosyntactic forms (Milroy 2002: 4-5). An alternative – or additional – factor may be the distinction between singular *you was* and plural *you were* that is said to have developed in the south in the late sixteenth century, as a consequence of the loss of the number distinction between *thou* and *you* (Pyles and Algeo 1993; see also Petyt 198x). Tagliamonte and Smith (2000 : 165) claim that this southern use was restricted and, since it correlates with specific writers, is best seen as a stylistic device; it is likely, however, that its use by certain writers must have reflected spoken usage, and perhaps the legacy is seen in present day high rates of *you was*[8.]

Our analysis has shed light on the apparently universal effect of existential constructions on the use of *was*. We saw that *there was* with plural subjects is favoured even by the Bangladeshi adolescents who rarely use non-standard *was* in other contexts. The fact that *was* is favoured by the inner London adolescents in other contexts with a postverbal subject confirms, in our view, that agreement is unlikely when speakers utter the verb before the thematic subject: in these cases, the subject does not trigger agreement. Of course, speakers *can* look ahead to the thematic subject in existential clauses when they want to, as, presumably, do speakers who tend to conform to prescriptive norms, such as the elderly Havering speakers. For many speakers of present-day English, however, whether or not they otherwise use standard English forms, *there was*, like present tense *there's*, is often an invariant form in spontaneous speech, perhaps as a result of grammaticalisation (Cheshire 1999, Crawford 2005). Even in communities where *were* levelling predominates, *was* is nonetheless favoured in existential contexts: Moore (2003) reports that this is the case for adolescents in Bolton, Lancashire.

Grammaticalisation may also be relevant in accounting for the effect of tags on the use of non-standard *weren't* in our data (and in the York corpus; see Tagliamonte 1998). Tags are interactionally salient features, occurring at points in the discourse when speakers wish to explicitly involve their addressees, for a range of pragmatic reasons (for discussion of some of these, see Holmes 1995). At these discourse points, the communicative demands on speakers are more pressing than the syntactic demands of marking agreement between the subject and verb in the tag and the subject and verb in the preceding clause. The range of tags used in different varieties of English show a tendency for speakers to use invariant tags for pragmatic purposes. They include, for example, *eh* in New Zealand (Meyerhoff 1994), *isn't it* in Wales (Trudgill and Hannah 1994:35) and, more recently, *innit* for some young speakers of British English (Andersen 2002). Stenström and Andersen (1996) identify the use of invariant tag questions in general as a prominent linguistic innovation in the speech of UK teenagers (see Tagliamonte 1998: 165). The use of *weren't it* by the adolescents in outer London fits with this innovative pattern: we have suggested that *weren't it* is grammaticalising into an

invariant tag, and that this helps accelerate the spread of *were* in negative polarity contexts more generally.

It is not clear why adolescents in inner London use *weren't it* tags less frequently than those in outer London. One possibility however relates to their use of *innit* tags. These are frequent in adolescent speech in both the research sites, but it is noteworthy that in inner London *innit* occurs in contexts where standard *wasn't* or non-standard *weren't* would normally be expected, as in examples (17) and (18) below.

(17)   last year I was opening the bowling innit
(18)   in the car I was drinking tequila innit

This explanation seems plausible since it would be expected that as *innit* becomes further grammaticalised it would occur in past tense contexts as well as present tense contexts. Subsequent analyses of the uses of *innit* in both datasets will allow us to explore this possibility.

7 Conclusion

The analysis has shown that *was/were* variation in London is a complex phenomenon, subject to a range of external and internal constraints. We are left with a set of further questions that now need to be researched in our data sets, such as the functions of *weren't it* and other tags in the adolescent discourse, and the factors underpinning the ethnicity effects on *was/were* variation. There are more general questions, too, for future research on *was/were* variation: for example, it is not clear how consistent the effect of the grammatical subject is across different varieties. Finally, our analysis pointed to some of the implications of taking account of speaker ethnicity in analyses of language variation and change, though space limitations have prevented us from considering them in any detail here. Although we have not attempted to identify the evaluative norms governing adolescent speech, the different patterns of use among the different ethnic groups in inner London suggest that they would differ. Traditional definitions of the speech community as a group of speakers who share a set of evaluative norms governing social and stylistic variation (see Labov 1966) may not hold for the adolescent speakers in inner London, then. Some groups of adolescents may even have different grammars: the patterns of *was/were* variation for the Bangladeshi and the AfroCaribbean speakers indicate this possibility. Nevertheless patterns of language change among the adolescents in inner London are influenced by the different groups: the White British adolescents for example have different patterns of *was/were* variation both from the elderly speakers in the same area and from their peers in outer London, which we attribute to their ethnically mixed friendship groups. The challenge for future studies of language variation and change in our large multicultural urban cities is how best to incorporate this diversity into a coherent account of language use that takes full account of the different language histories and language ecologies of urban speakers.

Notes

1. This is also the case in some of the isolated eastern Atlantic seaboard communities where the *was/weren't* pattern is found (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2003).

2. Interestingly, Moore (2003), reporting on an area where *were* levelling is the norm, again finds tags influencing the use of non-standard *were*, though here the form is favoured in positive as well as negative tags.

3. 'Stoke Newington: Growth: from 1940', *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 8: Islington and Stoke Newington parishes* (1985), pp. 160-163. URL http:/www.british-history.ac.uk/report.asp?compid=4714. Date accessed 8.05.07.

4. There were a small number of instances of *as it were,* which were excluded from the analysis on the basis that this tends to be a formulaic expression.

5. There were two instances of interrogatives with pre-verbal subjects as in *'if we WAS all together?'* These were included in the first category.

6. It should be noted, however, that Levey (2007) finds some instances of non-standard *were* in positive standard *was* contexts in his corpus of outer London pre-adolescents, although its use is rare (0.4%, N =1014).

7. There was one exception, from an outer London elderly speaker, used as part of the fixed emphatic expression *n't half* as in *she weren't half frightened.*

8. We were unable to investigate this possibility as there was only one instance of a plural *you* in the whole dataset which, interestingly, has a plural pronoun followed by were. It was from the Hackney adolescents: *I thought youse were going back to the cage.*

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