

Micro-comparative syntax in English verbal agreement

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Present-day standard English is well known for having very impoverished verbal morphology; in the present tense, it is limited to verbal *-s*, arguably a singular marker (Kayne 1989). In this talk, we develop the hypothesis that at least one variety of English has person marking on its verbal morphology, and explore the consequences of this hypothesis.

The variety of English under consideration is spoken in areas including eastern Tennessee and southwestern Virginia, and for simplicity we refer to it as Appalachian English. In this variety, plural lexical subjects may co-occur with present tense verbal forms bearing the suffix *-s*; plural pronominal subjects, in contrast, may not:

- (1) a. Them boys *puts* on some miles. (Hackenberg 1974:240)
b. Them gals *is* purty, but they're crazy as Junebugs. (Montgomery & Hall 2004:46)

We make the hypothesis that Appalachian English minimally differs from standard English as follows: in standard English, verbal *-s* expresses number; in Appalachian English, it expresses person. In particular, we propose the *-s as Absence of Person Hypothesis*: *-s* appears when the N of the subject noun phrase lacks person features. We will show that this hypothesis accounts for the pattern observed in Appalachian English.

The *-s as Absence of Person Hypothesis* is supported by diachronic evidence from older Scots, an ancestor of Appalachian English (Montgomery 1989, 1997), where verbal *-s* appeared across the paradigm, unless the subject was an adjacent personal pronoun. In our view, verbal *-s* was a generalized person marker that appeared on the verb whenever it had not incorporated an element that expressed person, namely one of the personal pronouns. Appalachian English shows vestiges of this system, with verbal *-s* occurring whenever the trigger for subject-verb agreement lacks person features.

We suggest that the *-s as Absence of Person Hypothesis* also allows us to shed light on other properties that distinguish this variety from standard English. For example, Appalachian English differs from standard English in making fairly productive use of transitive expletives, which often display *they* as the expletive pronoun:

- (2) a. But *they won't any of them fight us square*. (Montgomery & Hall 2004:18)
b. He's a ole feller an' has been stillin' for ten years I know of, an' *there don't never nobody bother his still*. (Montgomery & Hall 2004:570)

We build on Holmberg and Platzack's (2005 and earlier work) intuition that the presence of transitive expletives in Icelandic, in contrast to the other Scandinavian languages, is related to the fact that the former expresses person on the verb, while the latter do not. We explore the possibility that this and other differences between Appalachian English and standard English might similarly reduce to differences in verbal morphology between the two varieties.