James Walker Abstract

"Subject-Verb Agreement in English Existentials - A Cross-Community Comparison"

To what degree does 'grammatical' variation represent productive variation in the grammatical system or the effects of lexical or collocated constructions? In this paper, I focus on this question by examining subject-verb agreement in English existential constructions with plural reference, in which plural (are, were) and singular (is, was) marking on verbs co-vary with the collocational form there's. I compare the distribution and conditioning of these variants in three English-speaking communities: Toronto, a large Canadian city featuring a high degree of multilingualism; Quebec City, where English is a minority language; and Bequia, a Caribbean island in which a range of English varieties are spoken, some more creole-like. Over 4,000 tokens were taken from recorded sociolinguistic interviews with 140 speakers. Results for singular agreement parallel those of other studies in terms of linguistic conditioning, while the conditioning of there's differs from that of singular agreement, in terms of the linguistic factor groups selected as significant, the hierarchy of their effects and their relative strength of conditioning. These differences provide evidence that there's is a non-productive lexical variant but that the remaining variation is grammatically productive.