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Determining Input Interaction: Present Tense Concord

If linguistic contact gives rise to a new hybridised variety, then a koiné necessarily derives from the donors from which it selects its features. Which input is most influential, contributing most of the features, and for what reasons? How can we assess the mutual influence of dialects in contact, and what structures give us most insights into such selection processes? Does isolation have an accelerating or inhibiting factor on feature selection and focusing? With these aims, I look into diachronic and synchronic aspects of present tense concord in TdCE. From a historical perspective, the question is what norms emerged from the incongruent and random presence of several transplanted systems. What concord system did the new dialect select? Did one pattern prevail, eliminating others present in the original contact setting, or, alternatively, did amalgamation take place, resulting in distinctive structural paradigms with internal constraints that derived from more than one concord system in the inputs? A second point concerns the directionality and motivation of current changes. What extralinguistic factors correlate with present tense variability, and how do younger TdCE speakers differ from their parents and grandparents born before the community opened up to the outside world? I first look at the historical development of present tense concord in British English. I then discuss some language-internal constraints and analyse marking in TdCE, with the aim of reconstructing its historical development.

Present tense concord in British English

Present tense concord in standard English is distinctive because only one grammatical person is morphologically marked for tense. Third person singulars are thus linguistically marked and have minority status, simply because they are the only ones to receive -s suffixation. The irregularity of a standard-type present tense system makes -s a prime candidate for regularisation (Thomason and Kaufman 1988), and we find regularisation and paradigm uniformity in a variety of non-standard dialects of English. Many
dialects are more regular in that they either abandon or else expand -s suffixation across the entire present tense paradigm. These processes operate to bring the paradigm in line with others that have no morphologically expressed person–number concord (such as the past tense paradigm, which has invariant forms for all persons). At the same time, alternate marking systems are not monolithic; they are context-sensitive, correlating with language-internal as well as with social and stylistic factors. Socially, for instance, Trudgill (1974) finds that non-marking is subject to sharp social stratification in East Anglian English, and that Norwich working-class speakers use more non-standard forms than their middle-class peers. At the same time, language-internal factors govern the variability of marking in non-standard dialects, and not all contexts are equally prone to receive or delete -s suffixation (see below).

In order to examine the evolution of present tense marking in nineteenth-century TdCE and to pinpoint transplanted concord patterns, we obviously need to investigate coexisting systems in earlier forms of British English. Originally, the present tense system of English was characterised by extensive person–number concord, and all grammatical persons had morphological tense marking (Baugh and Cable 1963). Historically, the verbal suffix -s represents an innovation, at least in the south of England, which originally had a tense marker -eth. During the late Old English and Middle English periods, the highly inflectional paradigm underwent extensive regularisation (Barber 1993), and the Middle English period saw ‘leveling of inflections and the weakening of endings’ (Baugh and Cable 1963: 162), presumably as a result of changing stress patterns and the gradual loss of affixation (Görlach 1991). Variability in present tense concord in British English has a long-standing continuity of regional differentiation. Wakelin (1977: 119–20), for example, shows that the suffix -eth originally was the southern variant and -s the northern one. Even though there is no agreement as to why exactly northern varieties developed the -s variant in the first place, Curme (1931, 1935) points out that, by the Middle English period, the -s suffix variably occurred with all grammatical persons in northern varieties of British English; in these dialects ‘-s is the only ending in use in the 2nd and 3rd sing. and prevails in the plural; [it is] transferred also to the 1st sing.’ (Holmqvist 1922: 49). Baugh and Cable (1963) trace the diachronic development of third person singular marking:

the regular ending of the third person singular in the whole south and southeastern part of England...was -eth all through the Middle English period. It is universal in Chaucer: telleth, giveth, saith, doth, etc. In the fifteenth century, forms with -s occasionally appear...By the end of this [sixteenth] century forms like tells, gives, says predominate, though in some words, such as doth and hath, the older usage may have been the