

**Cheshire, Jenny and Sue Fox. 2009. Was/were variation: A perspective from London. *Language Variation and Change*, 21, 1: 1-38.**

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**Intro**

- Variation in the past tense forms of “be” is the norm. Its usage has always been variable, getting stabilized only in the standardized varieties. The rates of variation and dominant patterns differ from one location to another, however, there are **2 principal patterns**:
  - 1) leveling to “was” across person, number, and polarity (“a basic vernacular primitive”)
  - 2) leveling to “was” in contexts of positive polarity and leveling to “weren’t” in contexts of negative polarity. This pattern is very frequent in modern Britain, according to the analysis of British National Corpus (Anderwald 2001), but everywhere else is attested only in isolated communities (e.g., Mid-Atlantic coastal region of the U.S.).
- The reasons why speakers choose one leveling pattern rather than another are unclear (e.g., in New Zealand by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the past system of “be” had standardized, while in the eastern seaboard communities in the U.S. leveling was to was/weren’t pattern at the same period of time).
- The role of literacy and education is also unclear. According to Tagliamonte & Smith (1999), the rates of leveling of “was” can be explained by “the extent to which the community is marked off from the mainstream, whether in social, cultural, or economic terms, or in some other way” (p. 3).
- Though it is reasonable to think that in modern London large urban communities would tend more to use standard English, which would result in a decline of leveled “was” use, the reality is much more complex. Actually, recent research showed that in several large urban areas of the U.K. a decline of non-standard “was” goes hand in hand with an increase in leveled “weren’t.” Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2003) offer the following explanation: “social stigmatization may contribute to the decline of nonstandard *was*, ... and, by contrast, leveled *weren’t* is relatively nonsalient perceptually, and so less subject to stigmatization” (p.3).
- Current study examines several issues raised by the previous ones:
  - 1) Can we “equate proximity to an urban center with speakers’ use of standard English forms”? “If London is a source of morphosyntactic innovation, we might expect to find higher rates in London of the was/weren’t pattern attested throughout Britain, rather than lower rates.” (p.4)
  - 2) How do dialect contact and language contact influence was/were variation?
  - 3) London hasn’t been the subject of a systematic sociolinguistic analyses other than phonological variation analysis yet. This study is thus “the first sociolinguistic account of morphosyntactic variation and change in the capital” (p.5).

**Review of the internal linguistic factors**

**1 ) Polarity**

Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1994): restructuring of the past BE paradigm is “a remorphologization of both *was* and *were* as transparent markers of polarity” (p.5):

- a) “distinguishing positives from negatives is more important than distinguishing subject person and number”;
- b) “the negativity expressed by the negative marker *not* becomes less transparent as *not* is transformed into the phonologically dependent –n’t clitic; as a result *weren’t* has emerged as a phonologically distinct negative allomorph that cannot be mistaken for the positive”;
- c) “the development of *weren’t* may be reinforced by natural phonological tendencies” (p.5).

**2) Grammatical subjects**

- Several authors agree that subject “they” favors non-standard “was” the least, followed in frequency by “you,” followed by existential subject (Tagliamonte 1998, Chambers 2004).
  - Later Tagliamonte suggested it to be too categorical to make such judgments. She found no regular relationship between leveled “was” and different pronoun subjects in her 2009 study.
  - Indeed, data from different locations show different patterns. There are just 2 main consistencies:
    1. subject “you” is frequent with non-standard “was”;
    2. existential subjects favor “was.”
  - ❖ Current study aims at investigating if there is a consistency in subject use with non-standard “was.”
- 3) Existential constructions and word order**
- Plural NP subjects in such constructions consistently favor “was,” probably for 2 reasons:
    - 1) a failure of a “look-ahead” mechanism that helps us agree a postverbal thematic subject with the verb (Chambers 2006);
    - 2) ongoing lexicalization of “there was” into an “invariant prefabricated expression used to introduce new topics into the discourse” (Cheshire 1999; Crawford 2005; Eisikovits 1991).
  - In general, even in cases of a preverbal subject, the agreement is less likely to occur when the subject is separated from the verb: “frequencies of non-standard *was* increase with greater numbers of intervening words” (Tagliamonte 1998) (p. 8).
  - ❖ Current study tests this idea.

### Location and participants

#### 1. Inner London area (Hackney):

- used to be “Cockney” area;
- after WWII, original white working class inhabitants moved further east;
- massive inflow immigrants started in post-war years;
- currently it’s a very multicultural area (44.1% of White British, others are from numerous ethnic backgrounds, many bilinguals).
  - 49 adolescent speakers (27 males, 22 females)
  - half of the speakers are from “white London” background, so-called “white Anglo”
  - the other half are grandchildren and children of immigrants from different ethnic groups

#### 2. Outer London

- used to be rural area;
- now it is East End of London;
- mainly white monolingual population (95.2%).
  - 36 adolescent speakers (19 males, 17 females)
  - predominantly white British

#### All participants from both locations:

- 16-19 years old
- from working class
- post-16 education (vocational courses)

#### 3. Additional data:

8 working class Anglo, 65-80 years old (4 males, 4 females) were included as a reference point for comparison

### The data

- 110 hours of recorded conversations (individual, in pairs, in self-selected groups)
- informal unstructured conversations
- about 1,000,000 words, orthographically transcribed
- 5328 tokens of past tense “be” analyzed

- in positive polarity contexts, only use of non-standard “was” was coded
- in negative polarity contexts, all tokens of “wasn’t” and “weren’t” were coded
- tokens were coded “for a number of linguistic and social constraints” (p.13): polarity, subject type, word order, clause type, age, gender, ethnicity, location

## Results

### I. In affirmative contexts

1. Location/age (see Table 1 p.14)
    - ✓ a striking difference between elderly speakers from two locations (inner London 51.5% use of non-standard “was,” outer London 19.2%)
    - ✓ reversed situation for adolescents (inner London 42.4% use of non-standard “was,” outer London 58%)
  2. Linguistic constraints
    - ✓ the grammatical subject doesn’t have a consistent effect on was/were variation (see Fig.2 p.15)
    - ✓ SV order is a strong constraint: in interrogatives with a postverbal subject 79% of non-standard “was” use
  3. Social constraints
    - ✓ Gender difference was significant only for inner London adolescents (males produced 20% more of non-standard “was”)
    - ✓ ethnicity + gender in inner London (see Fig.5 p. 18):
      - the highest users are the Black Caribbean boys and the boys from White/Black Caribbean mixed race
      - the lowest users are the girls from White/Black Caribbean mixed race
      - the Bangladeshi boys and girls are very low on use of non-standard “was” (due to little contact with other ethnicities – insular group, live within their community, schools in the area dominated by Bangladeshi speakers – high influence of standard English used in school)
      - White Anglo: overall rate is different from the elderly speakers of the same area and from the peers in outer London (due to the exposure to the speech of many different ethnic groups both at schools and through ethnically mixed friendship groups)
- ❖ In sum, ethnicity is the strongest factor influencing non-standard “was”. Gender is significant only for inner London (see Fig.6 p.20)

### II. In negative contexts

1. “Weren’t” in standard “wasn’t” contexts (see Table 3 p.22)
  - ✓ Overall, low rates for elderly speakers (17% in inner London, 14% in outer London), much higher rates for adolescents (41% in inner London, 69% in outer London)
  - ✓ Grammatical subject: no significant effect
  - ✓ Social constraints:
    - gender: significant effect in outer London (females strongly favor use of non-standard “weren’t” at 85% vs. 31% males)
    - ethnicity: significant effect for inner London (White Anglos strongly favor use of non-standard “weren’t” at 62%)
2. “Weren’t” in tags
  - for adolescents: 11% in inner London (1/2 males and females), 30% in outer London (74% females)

- in many cases, no agreement with subject and verb (“weren’t has been reanalyzed as a unit that cannot be separated into the component parts from which it derives” (p.25)
- 3. “Wasn’t” in standard “weren’t” contexts
  - in outer London, too few tokens to analyze
  - in inner London, 46% leveling to “wasn’t” in standard “weren’t” contexts; such use is favored by males (57% vs. 33% for females)
  - Black Caribbeans favor such use (82%), as well as other minority groups (89%)
  - While Anglos disfavor such use (10%), as well as Bangladeshi (13%)
- ❖ In sum, “in outer London there is a strong trend toward weren’t leveling, to the extent that weren’t it may even be grammaticalizing as an invariant negative tag” (p.27). Here the leveling to “weren’t” is led by females (an unusual gender pattern for a morphosyntactic form). 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. The White Anglos, as a group, show patterns of use that parallel their outer London peers in that they favor “weren’t” leveling and, therefore, the mixed was/weren’t system. The Black Caribbeans, as well as others from some minority ethnic groups, favor the use of leveling to “was”, not only in affirmative contexts but also in negative contexts.

### III. Existential constructions

1. With singular subjects
  - no use of “were” in positive contexts
  - only “wasn’t” in negative contexts by elderly speakers in both locations and by adolescents in inner London.
  - outer London adolescents level to “weren’t” in negative existential contexts
2. With plural subjects
  - the use of non-standard “was” is much higher here than in other plural subject contexts (see Fig.12 p.29)

### **Discussion**

- ✓ In the outer London site, both leveling to “was” and leveling to “weren’t” are in progress. The changes can be attributed to dialect leveling, which is caused in our outer London location by population movement from inner London areas.
- ✓ In inner London, however, both “was” leveling and “weren’t” leveling were less in evidence.
- ✓ In negative polarity contexts, there is a mixed pattern of leveling 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 centers in the U.K.***
- ✓ For some adolescent groups (Bangladeshi) the pressure of standard English is evident, but for other not so much. E.g., male Black Caribbean speakers are moving in the opposite direction to leveled “was” both in positive and negative contexts. These differences are due to the linguistic heritage and language histories in different ethnic groups. E.g., for Black Caribbeans, there can be traces of an English-based creole input that would have had “was” in mesolectal varieties.
- ✓ Most important influence comes from peer groups.
- ✓ There is no consistent influence of the grammatical subject, so the conclusions about a hierarchy of grammatical subject cannot be made.
- ✓ There is a preference of all groups to use “was” with “you” – probably due to the need to distinguish singular and plural subject, as in Middle English.
- ✓ “There was” seems to become an invariant form in a spontaneous speech, possibly as a result of lexicalization.

- ✓ Use of “weren’t” in tags could be also a case of lexicalization (communicative demand is stronger than syntactic demand).

### **Conclusion**

- ❖ Was/were variation in London is a complex phenomenon.
- ❖ The use is influenced by such constraints as social integration, friendship networks, dialect contact and language contact.

Further study:

- functions of “weren’t it” as a tag in adolescent speech
- speech communities vs. communities of practice
- potential influence of second language acquisition for adolescents in ethnic groups