

JUAN MANUEL HERNÁNDEZ-CAMPOY  
DAVID BRITAIN

## 500 YEARS OF PAST *BE* IN EAST ANGLIA: A VARIATIONIST INVESTIGATION

### VARIABLE PAST TENSE *BE* IN EAST ANGLIA AND BEYOND

The preterite forms of the verb *to be* in present-day English are geographically variable: “virtually every vernacular variety of English appears to be variable with respect to past tense *BE*, even those varieties with *relatively* little other morpho-syntactic non-standardness” (Britain, 2002, p. 17). Most non-standard varieties have regularised the past tense of *BE* to some extent. As Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2003, p. 131) state:

the fact that past tense *BE* is the only English verb to preserve distinct singular and plural preterite forms makes it one of the most susceptible candidates in the English language for analogical based levelling. Most vernacular varieties of English throughout the world therefore indicate some degree of past-tense *be* levelling. (*weren't intensification*)

There appear to be three broad dominant patterns across varieties of English all over the world—though occasionally with some slightly differing grammatical conditioning (for a summary, see Rupp & Britain, 2019):

1) Levelling to *was* across person, number and polarity, as in *You was, wasn't you?* This is the most common pattern and has been considered by some to be a “vernacular primitive” (Chambers, 1995, p. 242; but see Trudgill, 2008). This is found, for example, in the North East of England (Beal, 2004), in Scotland (e.g. in Buckie (Smith & Tagliamonte, 1999), and in the Shetland Islands (Durham, 2013)); in the

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JUAN MANUEL HERNÁNDEZ-CAMPOY, Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of Murcia, Spain; e-mail: [jmccampoy@um.es](mailto:jmccampoy@um.es); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2282-7565>.

DAVID BRITAIN, Professor of Modern English Linguistics at the University of Bern, Switzerland; e-mail: [david.britain@unibe.ch](mailto:david.britain@unibe.ch); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4228-0242>.

United States of America (e.g. in Alabama (Feagin, 1979), in varieties spoken in the Southern Highlands (Wolfram and Christian, 1976), in western North Carolina (Mallinson & Wolfram, 2002), in Indiana (José, 2007) and in AAVE (e.g. Labov et al., 1968)); in Canada (e.g. Nova Scotia (Tagliamonte & Smith, 1999)); in Australia (Eisikovits, 1991; Shnukal, 1978; Malcolm, 1996) and New Zealand Maori English (Jacob, 1990); in Falkland Island English (Sudbury, 2000, 2001; Britain, 2023); in Tristan da Cunha English (Schreier, 2002); and in Samaná English in the Dominican Republic (Tagliamonte & Smith, 1999).

2) Levelling to *were* in positive polarity is a pattern found today in an area concentrated in the north-west, particularly parts of southern and western Yorkshire, Derbyshire in the northwest Midlands, and southern Lancashire in British English (Shorrocks, 1999, pp. 168–169; Anderwald, 2001, 2002, 2003; Beal, 2004, p. 122; Britain, 2002; Moore, 2010; Petyt, 1985; Pietsch, 2005a, 2005b). Klemola (2006) investigated the transcribed sound recordings made as part of the Survey of English Dialects (SED)—a written corpus of over half a million words. Like the others mentioned above, he finds that positive *were*-levelling is especially common in Yorkshire and Lancashire, but also in parts of the South-West, such as Somerset, Wiltshire and Dorset, and, importantly for our discussion here, in the East Midlands, including in Cambridgeshire, showing that the *were*-levelling area was once much larger in England than it is today.

3) Levelling to *weren't* in clauses with negative polarity and levelling to *was* in clauses with positive polarity, as in *I was, weren't I, You was, weren't you*. This pattern is found in Reading (Cheshire, 1982), York (Tagliamonte, 1998), the Fens (Britain, 2002), outer London (Cheshire & Fox, 2009), Redbridge (Levey, 2007) and Tiverton (Tagliamonte, 2009) in British English; in isolated dialects spoken on the Mid-Atlantic Coast (Outer Banks of North Carolina, Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia, and Appalachian Mountains in West Virginia, North Carolina and Virginia), such as Smith Island in Maryland (Schilling-Estes, 2000a, 2000b; Parrott, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, 2003; Mittelstaedt & Parrott, 2002; Carpenter, 2004; Mittelstaedt, 2006), Ocracoke (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram, 1994; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1995, 2002, 2003), Harkers Island (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2002), and Hyde County (Wolfram & Beckett, 2000) in North Carolina, and Lumbee in the Appalachian Mountains (see Trudgill, 1990/1999; Wolfram and Sellers, 1999; Carpenter, 2004; Trüb, 2006; Mallinson, 2006) in US English.

In addition to these three types, linguistic constraints on variability, some apparently universal, others localised, operate on past BE: past BE in existential clauses, full noun phrases (Northern Subject Rule: NSR), and third person plural pronouns (East Anglian Subject Rule: EASR). The first constraint refers to the very widespread levelling to *was* in existentials with plural nouns, as in *There was loads of*

*things to do*, which has been widely reported across the English-speaking world (see Rupp & Britain, 2019 for a summary). The second constraint—known as the Northern Subject Rule—permits levelling to *was* after full noun phrases (*The cats was purring*) or non-adjacent pronouns, but not after adjacent pronouns (*They were purring*) (see Rupp & Britain, 2019; Tagliamonte, 1998; Godfrey & Tagliamonte, 1999; Wolfram & Sellers, 1999; Hazen, 2000; Kingston, 2000; Britain, 2002; Tagliamonte, 2002; Pietsch, 2005a, 2005b). There is evidence from East Anglia that the Northern Subject Rule is overturned: levelling to *was* occurs more after third person plural pronouns (*They was purring*) than after third plural noun phrases (*The cats was purring*). Given the robustness of this pattern across East Anglia and in both past *be* and present tense verb forms, it has come to be known as the *East Anglian Subject Rule*, EASR (see Britain, 2002; Rupp & Britain, 2019).

The study of past *BE* in English dialects is not recent at all, dating back to the work of the traditional dialectologists. Ellis (1889), for example, reported on: i) the levelling to *were* detected in different areas of England—such as Bedford in the East Midlands, Pakenham in Suffolk, Chapel-en-le-Frith in Derbyshire and Skipton in Yorkshire—his evidence indeed backs up Klemola's (2006) claim that the *were*-area was once much bigger than today; ii) the levelling to *was* in Enfield in the South-East, West Somerset, Norwich in Norfolk and Southwold in Suffolk; and iii) their variable use, especially in negative polarity, such as *weren't* in the contexts of standard *wasn't* (see Britain, 2002, pp. 20–21).

Cheshire, Edwards and Whittle (1989) were able to measure the geographically heterogeneous nature of past *BE* forms across the regions of Great Britain using an indirect method (a postal questionnaire sent to schools): 80% of the informants showed levelling to *was*, except in the urban northern areas of England and in Glasgow. Non-standard *were* (levelling to *were*) was more frequently present in the Northwest, Yorkshire and in the Midlands, but less in the South.

As far as East Anglia is concerned, we can draw some dialectological information for parts of Suffolk from Kökeritz (1932) and Peitsara (1996), and for the entire region from the SED (Orton & Dieth, 1991). Kökeritz (1932, p. 214) provides transcriptions of a number of early 20th century recordings of East Suffolk dialect speaking non-mobile rural speakers. These include examples of levelling to *were*; for example *he were* [wɛ:t] *a-whinnocking*. Peitsara (1996) points to some confusion about the traditional East Anglian pattern. She contrasts Forby's (1830) view that *war* is used in the singular, with Claxton's (1968, p. 12) claim that *wuz* usually takes the place of *were*. The SED shows *was*-levelling in Suffolk, but the data from Norfolk show a standard system (see Trudgill, 1983 on problems with the SED data from Norfolk).

Recent evidence from core linguistic East Anglia is lacking, but there have been analyses of past BE from the Eastern transition zone where East Anglia meets the East Midlands: Ojanen's (1982) work on traditional dialect speakers from Cambridgeshire, and Britain's (2002) analyses based on an apparent time study of informal spoken conversation collected in the Fens in the late 1980s. Ojanen (1982) initially presented data from 18 speakers aged 70–94 from 14 Cambridgeshire villages. In the north, mainly in north-west Cambridgeshire, Ojanen (1982) attested levels of *were* at over 90% and there were speakers who used no non-standard tokens of *was* at all. This northern area was split off from an area of *was*-speakers, which covered roughly the north-eastern, south-eastern and south-western parts of Cambridgeshire. These are examples of a *were*- and *was*-speaker from Ojanen (1982, pp. 5, 8), respectively:

- a. Well, I'm pleased to see you Ernie. I— I knowed you *were* about ... He *were* a good horse.
- b. I *was* a horsekeeper ... Times are different now'n what they *was* then.

Negative contexts showed a dominance of *weren* 't regardless of the levelling orientation of the speaker; thus, both *was/weren* 't and *were/weren* 't occurred, and overall levelling to *weren* 't reached 86.5%.

Vasko (2010) is a more extensive, later study by the same researcher<sup>1</sup> covering a larger area of Cambridgeshire. The number of informants she analysed was larger, too: 50 speakers from 26 localities in southern Cambridgeshire and 52 speakers from 20 localities in northern Cambridgeshire (historically the Isle of Ely). Levelled *were* occurred in the south-western part of Cambridgeshire, and levelled *was* notably in three regions: the south-east, east and far north. Vasko (2010) subscribes to the idea that Cambridgeshire can be characterised as a transitional area with respect to patterns of past BE and suggests that the current predominance of *was* in the region is most likely the result of the spread of this variant from south-east England.

The nearest we have to an analysis of contemporary use and using sociolinguistic methods comes from Britain (2002). He analysed 80 residents of the Fens of West Norfolk, North and East Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and South Lincolnshire. Britain (2002) compared three age groups: i) the youngest, born between 1969 and 1975; ii) a mid-group, born between 1925 and 1945; and iii) an old group born between 1900 and 1925. Each token of past BE from the recordings was analysed and coded for subject type (1st, 2nd, 3rd person singular and plural pronouns, 3rd person

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial note: Vasko previously published under the name Ojanen, and thus Ojanen (1982) is an earlier publication of the same author.

singular and plural noun phrases, and 3rd person singular and plural existentials) and polarity (positive v negative).

Just as Vasko (2010) had done for the north of Cambridgeshire, Britain found “that polarity was a very strong determinant of past BE use” (Britain, 2002, p. 26). The analysis showed an emerging *was-weren ʔ* pattern, with *was* being used across the person and number paradigm in all positive contexts, *weren ʔ* in all negative contexts. As far as *was*-levelling is concerned, in positive contexts, *was* was most common in plural existentials, and after 2nd and 1st person pronouns. It was less common after 3rd person plural NPs than after 3rd person plural pronouns—evidence of the earlier mentioned East Anglian Subject Rule in action (Britain, 2002, p. 28). Rupp and Britain (2019, p. 203) show that this same constraint hierarchy (2nd > 1st > 3rdPRO > 3rdNP) is found in Brentwood and Basildon in Essex (and in Sydney, Australia), perhaps lending further support for the idea that *was*-levelling had arrived from London and the South-East (and thereby also shaping Australian English). The use of non-standard *weren ʔ* across the negative contexts was further advanced, however, than the use of non-standard *was* across the positive contexts (so, e.g. *I weren ʔ* is more likely than *they was*). This would suggest (though not conclusively) that levelling to *weren ʔ* in the Fens began before levelling to *was* in these varieties. Non-standard levelling to *weren ʔ* was most common with 3rd person singular subjects, and least common after 1st person subjects, although it was very common indeed across the paradigm. Even after 1st person subjects, *weren ʔ* levelling affected over 70% of all relevant tokens. Also, among his oldest Fens speakers, born between 1900 and 1925, many used *were* in positive contexts where the standard would use *was*, so *he were*, *I were*, *the cat were*, *there were a bus*. In the Fens data, among those old informants, *were* was most common after 1st person singular subjects, and least after 3rd person noun phrases.

His analysis highlighted change in progress: while those born after 1925 have focussed an almost entirely standard-like system for past tense singular BE in affirmative clauses, the oldest speakers born 1900–1925 are variable *was/were* users, so “*I were*”, “*she were*”, “*the dog were*” are almost as frequent as standard forms. Meanwhile, in affirmative plural contexts, the oldest speakers show much less non-standard *was*-levelling than the younger Fenlanders: “the overall impression ... is of a gradual shift over time from a (possibly once levelled?) *were* towards a *was* system” in positive polarity contexts (Britain, 2002, p. 30). In negative contexts, however, *weren ʔ* is very advanced. Across the paradigm, the oldest and youngest speakers especially show very little use of *wasn ʔ* at all. *Weren ʔ* in non-standard negative contexts seems to have been present in the variety longer than *was* in non-standard positive ones, and overall Britain’s (2002) results seem to suggest that because of change from the south towards *was*-levelling, the Fens have, sometime in the early 20th century,

shifted from being a *were-weren* 't variety to being a *was-weren* 't dialect. The recency of the emergence of *was-weren* 't systems in England is supported by Klemola (2006), who finds little evidence of them (except in Sussex, in South East England) in his analysis of the sound recordings of the SED.

What we know about *was-* and *were-*levelling from the sporadic mentions from earlier East Anglian dialectology and from these more detailed empirical analyses of nearby dialects, leads us to ask a set of empirical questions about *was-*levelling in East Anglian English:

- a) To what extent does East Anglian English demonstrate *was-* and/or *were-*levelling, and is any levelling constrained, as it is in the Fens, by polarity and by person? Which is the more common in East Anglia? To what extent does East Anglian English show evidence of the East Anglian Subject Rule for past BE marking, as can be seen in the Fens, in Essex (and in Australia)?
- b) Can an investigation of past BE in East Anglia shed light on Klemola's (2006) claim that *were-*levelling was once geographically more widespread, a claim apparently lent support by Forby's (1830) comments on East Anglian dialects.
- c) How far back can we trace *was-* and *were-*levelling in the history of East Anglian English?

In order to address these questions, we investigate two corpora of East Anglian English from the county of Norfolk. These data, however, were generated 500 years apart. Our historical corpus is the Paston Letters from 15th-century Norfolk. Our more contemporary corpus is the set of recordings made by Peter Trudgill for his PhD thesis on Norwich in the late 1960s.

#### THE PASTON LETTERS: CORPUS, ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The Paston family is the best documented gentry family of late medieval England. The family takes its name from a Norfolk village about 20 miles northeast of Norwich. Written evidence on this family mentions Clement Paston as founder of the dynasty. The initial social position of this Norfolk family was not originally as high as it became later in the century. The family fortunes improved with William Paston I (1378–1444). He was the only son of Clement, who, after school, trained as a lawyer in the Inns of Court in London and gained a good local reputation: he acted as counsel for the city of Norwich from 1412, and in 1415 became steward to the Duke of Norfolk, beginning a successful career at the royal courts. There he married Agnes Berry in 1420 and became Justice of the Common Bench in 1429.

The members of this family evolved from the middle-high position of the professional lawyer William Paston I to the higher one attained by John Paston II, who became a member of the court nobility when knighted in the 1460s. This could be taken as a clue to their upward social mobility.<sup>2</sup>

The historical context in which the Paston family found itself was the England of the War of the Roses, a series of dynastic civil wars fought in medieval England from 1455 to 1487 between the House of Lancaster and the House of York. The Pastons found themselves embroiled in a number of different struggles: i) the royalist allegiance during the civil wars—which severely penalised the family descendants, and ii) the Siege of Caister Castle—triggered by disputes with the Duke of Norfolk and the Duke of Suffolk about its ownership, at that time held by John Paston III.

The *Paston Letters* is the name given to a collection of 422 authored documents (letters and notes) written by 15 members belonging to different generations of this Norfolk family mainly during the 15th century (from 1425 to 1496), with roughly 246,353 words. The historical and philological interest of these documents is exceptional, not only because they offer data on the political and domestic history of fifteenth century England, but also because they were composed at a crucial period in the development of the English language (see Hernández-Campoy & Conde-Silvestre, 1999; Conde-Silvestre & Hernández-Campoy, 2004). Previous studies such as Hernández-Campoy & Conde-Silvestre (1999) and Conde-Silvestre & Hernández-Campoy (2004) have shown that the different members of the Paston family had an uneven adoption of the incipient standard English written norm depending on their personal circumstances: the individual rate of adoption of this written standard was associated with their social and geographical mobility, as some of them quickly rose in the social scale and/or had travelling experience.

For the present study, the body of letters used for analysis was taken from the Middle English Collection of the Internet electronic edition of the *Paston Letters* (First Part) currently available online from the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse at the University of Michigan,<sup>3</sup> which largely corresponds to the printed edition published by Norman Davis (1971). The preservation of some collections of late fifteenth century private correspondence—like the Paston letters, the Cely letters or the Stonor letters—offers a very useful corpus from which to carry out quantitative sociolinguistic analysis, as they involve writers of different sexes, ages, social extractions and geographical locations. The existence of such valuable collections of texts has allowed us, for example, to correlate its structure both with certain social

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<sup>2</sup> Further information on the Paston Family can be found in Davis (1971), Bennett (1990/1995), Richmond (1990/2002, 1996), Barber (1993), Gies & Gies (1998) or Coss (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved February 26, 2023, from <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/paston>

factors (like social status, sex and age) and with the degree of adoption of the incipient standard norm as noted for a number of selected variables (see Hernández-Campoy & Conde-Silvestre, 1999; Conde-Silvestre & Hernández-Campoy, 2004).

In order to analyse the corpus of Paston letters, each token of past BE from the collection was extracted and coded for subject type (1st, 2nd, 3rd person singular and plural, 3rd person singular and plural noun phrase, and 3rd person singular and plural existential, and polarity) as in Britain's (2002) analysis of the Fens. Experience with cases of spelling variability in previous studies of the Paston letters (see Hernández-Campoy & Conde-Silvestre, 1999; Conde-Silvestre & Hernández-Campoy, 2004) made us consider a range of other possible orthographic forms for both *was*, such as *waz*, *wos*, *woz*, *wos*, *wus*, or *wuz*, that were not present in the corpus, and *were*, such as *wer*, *werre*, *weere*, *weer*, *war* or *ware*, which were unevenly found in the letters of some members of the family. We also had to be cautious with misspelling phenomena such as the occasional use of *were* instead of the conjunction or the relative adverb *where*. We only extracted instances of *was* and *were* used in the indicative mood to avoid the skewing of the results in favour of *were*, had subjunctive contexts been included (see Hernández-Campoy, 2011). Cases of subjunctive with past *be* forms were found typically expressing condition, hypothesis, contingency, possibility, wishes, commands, emotion, judgement, necessity, and statements contrary to fact at present in subordinate clauses with sentence connectors such as *as son(e) as*, *till/tyll*, *in cas(e)*, *if/ȝf*, *before that*, *as ever*, *in as much as*, *so that*, *for (if)*, *after that*, *as*, *so*, *that soone aftyr that they*, *whether*, *I pray + clause*, *I wish/wold + past*, etc. (see Moessner, 2020). In order to facilitate the detection and quantification of the different possibilities for each variable in each possible morpho-syntactic combination, we used the Concordance Package *MonoConc Pro* (ver. 2.0, Build 228, by Michael Barlow).

The data were coded for a number of linguistic constraints, as well as for social and geographical factors: linguistic variables (*was/were* forms, positive/negative polarity, and subject), and extralinguistic variables such as informant, gender, date of birth, location and mobility, date of letter writing, and social networks.

The results obtained for the use of *was* and *were* in the Paston letters collection can be found in Tables 1–2.



**Table 1***Past BE in Contexts of Positive Polarity in the Paston Letters (N = 1270)*

Singular subject	Number of tokens	%		Plural subject	Number of tokens	%
<b>First PRONoun</b> <i>I was</i> <i>I were</i>	106/110 4/110	96 4		<b>First PRONoun</b> <i>We was</i> <i>We were</i>	0/17 17/17	0 100
				<b>Second PRONoun</b> <i>You was</i> <i>You were</i>	0/28 28/28	0 100
<b>Third NP</b> <i>The farm was</i> <i>The farm were</i>	531/545 14/545	97 3		<b>Third NP</b> <i>The farms was</i> <i>The farms were</i>	4/145 141/145	3 97
<b>Third PRONoun</b> <i>It was</i> <i>It were</i>	278/309 31/309	90 10		<b>Third PRONoun</b> <i>They was</i> <i>They were</i>	0/51 51/51	0 100
<b>Third Existential</b> <i>There was a farm</i> <i>There were a farm</i>	47/50 3/50	94 6		<b>Third Existential</b> <i>There was farms</i> <i>There were farms</i>	0/15 15/15	0 100

**Table 2***Past BE in Contexts of Negative Polarity in the Paston Letters (N = 75)*

Singular subject	Number of tokens	%		Plural subject	Number of tokens	%
<b>First PRONoun</b> <i>I was not</i> <i>I were not</i>	6/6 0/6	100 0		<b>First PRONoun</b> <i>We was not</i> <i>We were not</i>	0 0	0 0
				<b>Second PRONoun</b> <i>You was not</i> <i>You were not</i>	0/1 1/1	0 100
<b>Third NP</b> <i>The farm was not</i> <i>The farm were not</i>	14/16 2/16	88 12		<b>Third NP</b> <i>The farms was not</i> <i>The farms were not</i>	0/1 1/1	0 100
<b>Third PRONoun</b> <i>It was not</i> <i>It were not</i>	25/30 5/30	83 17		<b>Third PRONoun</b> <i>They was not</i> <i>They were not</i>	0/4 4/4	0 100
<b>Third Existential</b> <i>There was not a farm</i> <i>There were not a farm</i>	12/13 1/13	92 8		<b>Third Existential</b> <i>There was not farms</i> <i>There were not farms</i>	0/4 4/4	0 100

Remembering that these are, after all, written texts, the creation of which was carefully crafted and stewarded, we see relatively little non-standardness in the Paston Letters. There is, however, some evidence of positive *were*-levelling, even in these

rather formal texts, and this is especially high (10%) after third person pronoun subjects. *Was*-levelling is much more limited, restricted to four tokens with 3rd person NP subjects. Note, also, that there is no non-standard *was*-levelling in plural existentials.

In negative contexts, the corpus suffers not only from there being relatively few tokens, but also from the lack of contracted forms of the negator. Nevertheless the non-standard use of *were*-levelling is notable, especially again with third person pronoun subjects. Again there is no evidence of non-standardness with plural existentials. We will return to the implications of these results after having presented the analysis and results of the contemporary corpus.

### THE TRUDGILL NORWICH CORPUS: DATA, ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The second corpus we were able to analyse was quite different from the historical Paston letter corpus. In order to investigate the state of past BE in 20th-century East Anglian English, we turned to Peter Trudgill's own collection of recordings of sociolinguistic interviews from Norwich from the late 1960s. Trudgill's (1974) investigations of language variation and change in Norwich were important for a number of reasons. Firstly, they were the first investigations of social constraints on language variation and change in England using the newly emerging Labovian variationist paradigm, and were one important trigger for further research of this kind in the UK and beyond. Secondly, the methodological design of the study — with a fine (five-way) categorisation of social class and interviews gathering data across four styles (casual/formal/reading passage/word list) — largely modelled on Labov (2006) but sensitised to the British context, enabled Trudgill to find local examples of *stable* linguistic variables (e.g. (ing), as in “running” (92)), *indicators*, showing only social but not stylistic variation (e.g. (a:), as in “path” (98)), *markers*, demonstrating social and stylistic variation (e.g. (t) as in “butter”, (96)) and, *change from below* (e.g. (e), as in “bell” (105)). He thereby was able to demonstrate the robustness of Labov's (2006) findings, since they were shown to apply on a different continent and in a very different urban context. Trudgill analysed seventeen linguistic variables in the Norwich data, and for each provided careful detail on the social and stylistic embedding of the implicated variants. Linguistic constraints on variation and change were not, understandably for the time, and given the research goals, a primary focus. The TNC is made up of recordings of 63 sociolinguistic interviews, conducted in mid-1968, with speakers ranging in age from 11 to 89. The original reel-to-reel recordings were professionally digitised into .wav format. The sociolinguistic interviews recorded consisted of a number of different tasks to elicit different degrees of attention paid to speech — these included the reading of a long passage, two word lists, and a list

of minimal pairs, as well as a self-evaluation experiment and a linguistic insecurity experiment. The amount of time spent on informal conversation was understandably less than one might find in more recent variationist work where less attention is paid to eliciting data from a complex set of stylistic tasks. We transcribed the free conversation parts (but not the reading passages, word lists or experiments) into ELAN. The length of the conversational parts of the recordings varies between 6 and 26 minutes (average 15 minutes), a merger of what Trudgill labelled “formal speech”—the default style of the interview—and “casual speech”—the style of storytelling and other moments of reduced formality. Ultimately, the corpus comprised just over 100,000 words of conversational Norwich English. From the recordings and from information kindly provided by Peter Trudgill, we were able to log each speaker’s age, sex and social class.

We extracted from the transcripts all tokens of indicative past BE, and excluded tokens where relevant information (e.g. the subject) was missing and tokens followed by /s/ or /z/, which render it impossible to distinguish between *were* and *was*. Each token was coded for subject type (1st, 2nd, 3rd person singular and plural, 3rd person singular and plural noun phrase, and 3rd person singular and plural existential, and polarity) as in Britain’s (2002) analysis of the Fens.

The results obtained for the use of *was* and *were* in the Trudgill Norwich Corpus can be found in Tables 3–4:

**Table 3**

*Past BE in Contexts of Positive Polarity in the Trudgill Norwich Corpus (N = 1119)*

Singular subject	Number of tokens	%	Plural subject	Number of tokens	%
<b>First PRO</b> <i>I was</i> <i>I were</i>	299 0	100.0 0.0	<b>First PRO</b> <i>We was</i> <i>We were</i>	7 50	12.3 87.7
			<b>Second PRO</b> <i>You was</i> <i>You were</i>	1 25	3.9 96.1
<b>Third NP</b> <i>The farm was</i> <i>The farm were</i>	123 2	98.4 1.6	<b>Third NP</b> <i>The farms was</i> <i>The farms were</i>	4 34	10.5 89.5
<b>Third PRO</b> <i>It was</i> <i>It were</i>	413 5	98.8 1.2	<b>Third PRO</b> <i>They was</i> <i>They were</i>	1 100	1.0 99.0
<b>Third Existential</b> <i>There was a farm</i> <i>There were a farm</i>	24 0	100.0 0.0	<b>Third Existential</b> <i>There was farms</i> <i>There were farms</i>	20 11	64.5 35.5

**Table 4***Past BE in Contexts of Negative Polarity in the Trudgill Norwich Corpus (N=87)*

Singular subject	Number of tokens	%	Plural subject	Number of tokens	%
<b>First PRO</b> <i>I wasn't</i> <i>I weren't</i>	4 7	36.4 63.6	<b>First PRO</b> <i>We wasn't</i> <i>We weren't</i>	0 4	0.0 100.0
			<b>Second PRO</b> <i>You wasn't</i> <i>You weren't</i>	1 2	33.3 66.7
<b>Third NP</b> <i>The farm wasn't</i> <i>The farm weren't</i>	5 0	100.0 0.0	<b>Third NP</b> <i>The farms wasn't</i> <i>The farms weren't</i>	0 2	0.0 100.0
<b>Third PRO</b> <i>It wasn't</i> <i>It weren't</i>	20 26	43.5 56.5	<b>Third PRO</b> <i>They wasn't</i> <i>They weren't</i>	0 5	0.0 100.0
<b>Third Existential</b> <i>There wasn't a farm</i> <i>There weren't a farm</i>	5 3	62.5 37.5	<b>Third Existential</b> <i>There wasn't farms</i> <i>There weren't farms</i>	2 4	33.3 66.7

The results for positive polarity show:

- very low levels of non-standard levelling to *were* with singular subjects: only 7 tokens across the whole corpus;
- somewhat higher amounts of levelling to *was* with plural subjects: especially in first person plural and 3rd person plural NP contexts;
- considerable use of *was* with plural existentials.

For negative polarity, as with the Paston Letters corpus, we suffer from a lack of tokens in some contexts, but we see:

- considerable amounts of levelling to *weren't*, especially with first and third person pronoun subjects, and even with singular existentials;
- a few tokens of levelling to *wasn't* with plural subjects, especially in plural existentials, but given very low token numbers it is impossible to make further interpretations of the significance of these.

## DISCUSSION

Let us now revisit the questions we posed earlier in the paper, based on reflections from the existing literature. We will take each in turn:

- a) To what extent does East Anglian English demonstrate *was-* and/or *were-*levelling, and is any levelling constrained, as it is in the Fens, by polarity and by person? Which is the more common in East Anglia? To what extent does East Anglian English show evidence of the East Anglian Subject Rule for past *BE* marking, as can be seen in the Fens, in Essex (and in Australia)?

On the basis of both the Paston Letters and the Trudgill Norwich Corpus, we can see that *were-*levelling has considerable longevity in Norwich. Although at low levels in both corpora, it is nevertheless present with singular subjects. It appears to be less frequent in the recent corpus than the earlier one, suggesting that, as elsewhere in the South, it is probably obsolescent. Levels of *were-*levelling in the TNC are also lower than in Britain's (2002) Fenland data. This could either be because, as a city, Norwich is simply further advanced in the loss of positive *were-*levelling than in the rural Fens, or, if we consider Klemola's (2006) analysis, it could be because Norwich was not really part of the geographical *were-*levelling area, but the Fens were.

All analyses of south-eastern England have found *were-*levelling to be more prominent in contexts of negative polarity than positive. Our two corpora from Norwich are no exceptions to this—in the TNC, *weren't* levelling is indeed the majority form when following both first and third person pronoun subjects. Overall frequency levels are lower than they were in the Fens, but this could be because the data types were different—the Norwich data came from sociolinguistic interviews, where conversation was intermingled with various formal tasks, the Fenland data consisted entirely of very informal unstructured conversations. Even in the relatively more formal Paston Letters, and taking account of the fact that there were no written contractions in the corpus,<sup>4</sup> *were-*levelling is higher when clauses have negative polarity than when they are positive.

The major systematic difference between the Paston Letters and the Trudgill corpus occurs with respect to *was-*levelling: present in the TNC, but almost entirely absent in the Paston Letters. The more recent Norwich data, then, suggests the emergence of a *was-weren't* system in competition with the standard paradigm.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The contracted forms *wasn't* and *weren't* did not begin to appear in writing until the 17th century (see Pyles & Algeo, 1982, p. 204).

<sup>5</sup> Both Britain (2002) and Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2003) argued that, today, *weren't* probably behaves as a synthetic morpheme, rather than as *were + n't*; in *was-weren't* systems, the phonetic distance between the functionally important positive and negative forms is maximised. The distinction between positive and negative is then not simply a matter of the presence or absence of a negative clitic but also changes to the stem, just as is the case with other frequently occurring positive-negative pairs such as *can* vs *can't*, and *will* vs *won't*, etc. The Paston data suggest that when contraction is not possible (and the negator is therefore morphologically distinct from the stem), there is no need to

This is consistent with the existing literature which suggests that, in Southern England at least, levelled *was-weren* *ʔ* systems are relatively recent (Britain, 2002; Klemola, 2006). In the Fens, *weren* *ʔ* levelling (88% of tokens) is more frequent than *was*-levelling (63%). This was also the case in the TNC—*weren* *ʔ* levelling in 51% of possible tokens, *was* levelling in 13% of possible tokens. The TNC also shows, as expected, a significant use of *was* with plural existentials—64.5% *was*. In the Paston Letters, there were no such tokens at all, even though the use of *was* with plural existentials has been noted in English well before these letters were written.

Rupp and Britain (2019, p. 203) show that the likelihood of levelling to *was* in neighbouring speech communities follows the hierarchy: 2nd > 1st > 3rd-PRO > 3rdNP. In the TNC, the hierarchy is distinct: 1st > 3rd NP > 2nd > 3rd Pro, though for some subjects there are too few tokens for a conclusive account. This does suggest, though, that the East Anglian Subject Rule is not operative in Norwich for past BE (though it is for 3rd person singular present tense -s, see Britain & Rupp, 2023), at least with respect to *was*-levelling with plural positive subjects. For *weren* *ʔ*-levelling, the subject constraint hierarchy found in the Fens (Britain, 2002, p. 29) was 3rd NP > 3rd Pro > 1st. In the Paston Letters it is 3rd Pro > 3rd NP > 1st and in the TNC it is 1st > 3rd Pro > 3rd NP—though again there are very few negative tokens at all in the Norwich corpora.

In summary, both the Paston Letters and the Trudgill Norwich Corpus show evidence of some levelling to *were* (especially) in negative contexts. There is no levelling to *was* in the Paston letters, but the patterning of *was* levelling in the TNC suggests that a *was-weren* *ʔ* system has emerged there.

- b) Can an investigation of past BE in East Anglia shed light on Klemola's (2006) claim that *were*-levelling was once geographically more widespread, a claim apparently lent support by Forby's (1830) comments on East Anglian dialects.

As we saw earlier, Klemola (2006) claimed that *were*-levelling (in positive contexts) once covered a larger geographical area than it does today, and was very common, for example, in Cambridgeshire—a finding confirmed by both Vasko (2010) and Britain (2002)—but suggested that in Norfolk and Suffolk levels of *were*-levelling were under 10%. Peitsara (1996) pointed to the lack of agreement among earlier scholars working in Norfolk and Suffolk, with some saying *were*-levelling was indeed common, and others saying *was* was more common. So can we see evidence of the

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maximise the distinction between positive and negative by also choosing a distinct stem, and no need to “compensate” for a potentially phonetically less distinct clitic.

*were*-area extending eastwards, as Trudgill (2008, p. 350) speculates? The answer appears to be not really. *Were*-levelling is at very low levels in both the Paston Letters and, especially, the TNC. The lack of extensive *were*-levelling (in comparison, say, with some of Vasko's (2010) NORMs and NORFs or the oldest speakers in Britain's (2002) Fenland data) does not necessarily mean, of course, that it was not once more prevalent. It is possible that it is more common, for example, in the rural areas of East Anglia than it is in urban Norwich, and that the picture painted in the TNC is simply the end result of attrition (as is also the case in the Fens).

Finally, we can consider:

- c) How far back can we trace *was*- and *were*-levelling in the history of East Anglian English?

The literature from neighbouring areas (e.g. Britain, 2002; Vasko, 2010) has suggested that *were*-levelling was of some longevity, but that *was*-levelling in the wider region was relatively recent. Britain (2002, p. 32), for example, shows that speakers born after 1925 have double the amount of non-standard *was*-levelling than speakers born between 1900 and 1925. Evidence from the Paston Letters and the Trudgill Norwich Corpus, 500 years apart, lend some support to this. *Were*-levelling, although at low levels, is present even in the Paston Letters, and, given the formality of those, may well have been used significantly more in informal speech. By the 20th century, although still present, it appears on the brink of extinction in Norwich. *Was*-levelling, however, was barely present at all in the Paston letters, but is an important part of the 20th century system as seen in the TNC. We need corpora from the intervening period to be able to ascertain with any degree of precision when *was*-levelling became prevalent in the Norwich system however (Klemola, 2006 argues that it was very common in Norfolk and Suffolk in the SED recordings).

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary studies of past *BE* in Eastern England have detected an emerging picture of *was-weren*  $\dot{\iota}$  levelling, but we have lacked fine grained empirical evidence from the linguistic East Anglian heartland. This investigation has attempted to address this by looking at both the past—a well preserved corpus of letters from 15th century Norfolk—and the present—the most systematic, sociolinguistically motivated corpus from Norfolk in the variationist era of dialectology. We found evidence of the longevity, but at very low levels, of *were*-levelling, but considerably more extensive *weren*  $\dot{\iota}$  levelling in both corpora, providing strong support for the

claim (Britain, 2002) that polarity is, and long has been, the key determinant of the shape of the past BE system in this part of England. Non-standard *was*-levelling, almost entirely absent in the Paston Letters, is now well-embedded into the Norwich system of past BE. At a surface level, the 20th century Norwich data shows many similarities with the patterns that Britain (2002) found in the Fens, though, as we saw, fine-grained linguistic constraints on variability were rather different in the two locations. Further investigations are required to ascertain whether Norwich is typical of East Anglia as a whole, whether the *was-weren* *t* system is being retained in 21st century East Anglia, and what actually happened in the five hundred years between the Paston letters and today.

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500 YEARS OF PAST *BE* IN EAST ANGLIA:  
A VARIATIONIST INVESTIGATION

S u m m a r y

As it is widely known, the verb *to be*, in its different tense, person and number forms, is the most frequently used verb in both written and oral English. Additionally, at least in Standard English, it is the most irregular verb, with many different forms. However, this degree of irregularity is not universal across the English-speaking world—more regularised patterns are found in a number of non-standard varieties. Despite much empirical investigation in the variationist literature on past *BE*, and despite the considerable corpus of work examining East Anglian English, especially by Peter Trudgill (e.g. 2021),

there has, as yet, been no variationist investigations of past BE from the core heartland of linguistic East Anglia. In this paper, we try to address this by examining datasets from East Anglia that are half a millennium apart. We begin with a historical sociolinguistic study of past BE forms in the Late Middle English stages of the history of English by observing, detecting, quantifying and analysing their presence in one of the most important linguistic corpora of the period: the Internet electronic edition of the (East Anglian) *Paston Letters* from the Virginia University Electronic Text Center. We then, much nearer to the present-day, scrutinise a more contemporary corpus of East Anglian English for variable patterns of past BE, namely Peter Trudgill's own corpus of sociolinguistic interviews from Norwich in the 1960s (see Trudgill, 1974). While the data are (understandably) of very different kinds, our analysis enables us to broaden our understanding of past BE variability, both diachronically and synchronically, by adding East Anglia to the map.

**Keywords:** historical sociolinguistics; past BE; levelling; language variation and change; Paston Letters; Norwich; East Anglia; Northern Subject Rule; polarity.

## PIĘĆSET LAT DZIEJÓW FORMY PRZESZŁEJ CZASOWNIKA *TO BE* W ANGLII WSCHODNIEJ. BADANIE WARIACYJNOŚCI FORM

### S t r e s z c z e n i e

Jak powszechnie wiadomo, czasownik *to be* jest najczęściej używanym w języku angielskim czasownikiem w różnych czasach, osobach i liczbie, zarówno w mowie, jak i w piśmie. Co więcej, przynajmniej w standardowej odmianie angielszczyzny jest to czasownik o najwyższym stopniu nieregularności odmiany, charakteryzujący się wieloma odrębnymi formami ortograficznymi. Ten stopień nieregularności nie jest jednak powszechny w całym kręgu anglojęzycznym — bardziej regularne wzorce można znaleźć w wielu niestandardowych odmianach angielszczyzny. Pomimo licznych badań empirycznych w literaturze dotyczącej wariacyjności zjawisk językowych poświęconych formie przeszłej czasownika *to be* i pomimo znacznego korpusu danych na temat odmiany angielszczyzny z terenów Anglii Wschodniej, a zwłaszcza prac autorstwa Petera Trudgilla (np. 2021), jak dotąd nie przeprowadzono badań wariacyjnych nad przeszłą formą czasownika *to be* w centralnym obszarze językowym Anglii Wschodniej. W niniejszym artykule staramy się wypełnić tę lukę badawczą, analizując zbiory danych z Anglii Wschodniej, rozdzielone między sobą dystansem historycznym pięćset lat. Badania nasze rozpoczynają się bowiem od historyczno-socjolingwistycznego studium form przeszłych czasownika *to be* na etapie późnośrednioangielskim i polegają na obserwacjach, konstatacjach, opracowaniu ilościowym i analizie obecności tychże form w jednym z najważniejszych korpusów językowych tego okresu: internetowym elektronicznym wydaniu (wschodnioangielskich) Listów Pastonów w Virginia University Electronic Text Center. Następnie przenosimy się znacznie bliżej dnia dzisiejszego, by przeanalizować bardziej współczesny korpus Anglii Wschodniej pod kątem zmiennych wzorców form przeszłych czasownika *to be*, tj. korpus wywiadów socjolingwistycznych zebranych przez Petera Trudgilla w Norwich w latach sześćdziesiątych XX wieku (zob. Trudgill, 1974). Chociaż analizowane dane są (co zrozumiałe) wysoce zróżnicowane, przedstawiona analiza pozwala poszerzyć nasze rozumienie wariacyjności form przeszłych *to be*, zarówno w perspektywie diachronicznej, jak i synchronicznej, poprzez umiejscowienie angielszczyzny terenu Anglii Wschodniej na mapie dialektów języka angielskiego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** socjolingwistyka historyczna; formy przeszłe czasownika *to be*; niwelacja; wariacja i zmiany językowe; Listy Pastonów; Norwich; Anglia Wschodnia; Northern Subject Rule; polaryzacja.

JUAN MANUEL HERNÁNDEZ-CAMPOY is Professor of Sociolinguistics at the University of Murcia in Spain, where he teaches Sociolinguistics, Varieties of English, History of English, and sociolinguistic research methods. His research areas include sociolinguistics, dialectology, and socio-stylistics, with special interest in language variation and change, where he has published books such as *Sociolinguistic Styles* (2016), *Style-Shifting in Public* (with J. A. Cutillas-Espinosa, 2012), *The Handbook of Historical Sociolinguistics* (with J. C. Conde-Silvestre, 2012), *Diccionario de Sociolingüística* (with P. Trudgill, 2007), *Metodología de la Investigación Sociolingüística* (with M. Almeida, 2005), *Sociolinguistics and the History of English* (with J. C. Conde-Silvestre, 2005), *Geolingüística* (1999), *Variation and Linguistic Change in English* (with J. C. Conde-Silvestre, 1999), and *Sociolingüística Británica* (1993), as well as numerous articles in leading journals.

DAVID BRITAIN has been Professor of Modern English Linguistics at the University of Bern in Switzerland since 2010. His research interests embrace language variation and change, varieties of English (especially in Southern and Eastern England, the Southern Hemisphere, especially New Zealand, Australia and the Falkland Islands, and the Pacific, especially Micronesia), dialect contact and attrition, new dialect formation, second dialect acquisition, dialect ideologies and the use of new technologies, such as smartphone applications, in collecting dialect data. He is also actively engaged in research at the dialectology-human geography interface, especially with respect to space/place, urban/rural and the role of mobilities. He is co-author (with Laura Rupp) of *Linguistic perspectives on a variable English morpheme: Let's talk about -s* (2019), editor of *Language in the British Isles* (2007), co-editor (with Jenny Cheshire) of *Social Dialectology* (2003), and co-author of *Linguistics: An Introduction* (with Andrew Radford, Martin Atkinson, Harald Clahsen and Andrew Spencer) (2nd ed., 2009). He was Associate Editor of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* between 2008 and 2017.