

‘We have had very pearlous times and lost much but through devine providance is blessed with sufficent of the nessarys of life’:

A study of subject-verb concord in 18th-century Ulster

ABSTRACT

Within English linguistics, studies of *language variation and change* investigate linguistic diversity and language development by analysing the effects of factors on the distribution of variants. Whereas varieties in England and the USA have received considerable attention, Irish English remains an understudied area.

This MA thesis investigates subject-verb concord (SVC) in varieties of Irish English in Ulster between 1741 and 1800. In general, studies of SVC that include data from 18th-century Ulster are few (Montgomery 1995, 1996, 1997; Montgomery & Robinson 1996). As these studies are based on relatively small data sets, consider few factors and do not test the statistical significance of frequencies, the results are suggestive rather than conclusive.

The present study aims to fill the gap in our knowledge about SVC in 18th-century Ulster. The study is based on the 4747 occurrences of SVC in personal correspondence in the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR) (McCafferty & Amador-Moreno in preparation). In order to give a detailed account of SVC in the historical-linguistic context, the study uses regression analysis to test the impact of nearly all linguistic and extralinguistic factors found to affect the distribution of verbal inflectional *-s* in past and present varieties in Ulster and beyond.

While some results confirm findings in previous studies, others add new insight into SVC during the early history of Irish English in Ulster. A key finding is that the use of verbal *-s* reflects the *Northern Subject Rule* (NSR). This SVC system allows the use of verbal *-s* either in contexts with plural NP subjects (but not with personal pronoun subjects, cf. the ‘NP/PRO constraint’) or with personal pronoun subjects that are in non-adjacent position to the finite verb (the ‘position to subject constraint’, PSC). In contrast to studies on data from the 19th (McCafferty 2003) and 20th centuries (Pietsch 2005), this study on 18th-century data identifies no correlation between the PSC and the frequency of verbal *-s* with plural NP subjects. The result is intriguing as it suggests that the application of the PSC with plural NPs is a more recent development in Ulster.

The study further shows that verbal *-s* is sensitive to *type of plural NP subject* and *subject heaviness*. I tentatively propose that the high frequency of verbal *-s* with light NPs reflects a priming effect (cf. Loebell & Bock 2003).

Finally, the study shows that the NSR is solid in areas where descendants of Scots settlers dominated, as well as in areas where descendants of English settlers were numerous. The geographic spread of the NSR adds support to the hypothesis that the NSR emerged in Ulster during the 17th century with Scottish and English *founding populations* (cf. Mufwene 1996).

To conclude, this study increases our knowledge of the SVC system used in Ulster during the 18th century by elucidating the most important factors to the distribution of nonstandard verbal *-s*. By analysing the variants in geographic context, the study further contributes to our understanding of the emergence and development of the NSR in Irish English.

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