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"How is her eyes [?] are they still closed [?]" Subject-verb agreement in nineteenth-century Irish English

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the development of the Northern Subject Rule in nineteenth-century Irish English by using emigrant letters. In contrast to other investigations on this specific concord pattern, the present study focuses solely on the high-frequency verb BE. It shows that the Northern Subject Rule pattern was solid in this context in nineteenth-century Ulster English, especially Mid-Ulster English, thus supporting an earlier claim that it had been transported to Ulster by Scots and northern English founder populations, rather than having diffused from Ulster-Scots settlement areas. In Southern Irish English, the data show the presence of a *Type of Subject Constraint*, but no *Proximity of Subject Constraint*. This study contributes to research on the development of Irish English as well as on concord patterns in World Englishes.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the interest in subject-verb agreement has increased among linguists all over the world and it is probably one of the best-researched topics in the area of World Englishes. Work on subject-verb agreement in Northern Irish English (NIrE) has, for instance, been done by Milroy (1981: 12-13), Montgomery – Robinson (1996: 417-421), Corrigan (1997: 194-231), Montgomery (1996, 1997a, 1997b: 233-239, 2006: 310-317), McCafferty (2003, 2005), Pietsch (2005a, 2005b, 2012), Amador-Moreno (2010: 62-64), Myklestad (2015), and Bonness (forthcoming), whereas Southern Irish English (SIrE) has been investigated by Kallen (1991), Montgomery (1996, 1997b: 233-239), Filppula (1999: 150-159), McCafferty (2004), Hickey (2007: 179-182),

and Pietsch (2012). The characteristic concord pattern that these studies have found in Irish English (IrE) is commonly referred to as the Northern Subject Rule (NSR) (e.g. Ihalainen 1994; McCafferty 2003, 2004; Pietsch 2005a)[1]. The following pilot study looks at subject-verb agreement with the verb BE (henceforth plural *is/was*) in IrE[2]. Subject-verb concord can have different realisations in different English varieties and what is considered ungrammatical in one variety might be completely grammatical in another. The NSR itself has, historically, been a shared feature of Northern English, Scottish and Irish English varieties, and BE has repeatedly been reported as being prone to nonconcord in those varieties. It is one of the most common and most irregular verbs in the English language, being the only verb that distinguishes between person and number in the past tense and functioning as both a main verb and an auxiliary. Pietsch (2012: 368-369) notes that, in present-day English varieties, "inherited NSR effects are much more likely to manifest themselves in the use of non-standard *is* and *was*" than in the use of lexical verbs, and that the former, due to its high frequency in recurrent chunks, behaves differently from other verbal combinations when it comes to variation. For nineteenth-century SIrE, however, he finds that BE was much more conservative than lexical verbs, despite a general increase of plural verbal *-s* at that time. This study takes a close look at the verb BE in nineteenth-century NIrE and SIrE, including several independent linguistic and social variables. There are, to my knowledge, no other studies of the NSR in Ireland that include such a detailed investigation of this verb[3].

The Irish English data in this study are provided by the *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence* (CORIECOR, McCafferty – Amador-Moreno in preparation). CORIECOR currently consists of about 6,500 letters

[1] Other terms are, for instance, 'northern present-tense rule' (Montgomery 1994), 'Northern Concord' (Montgomery 1989), or '(Northern) personal pronoun rule' (McIntosh 1983: 237-238). These terms often refer to the Northern origin of this concord pattern. However, this pattern has also been documented in non-northern areas such as the North Midlands and, marginally, even in South East England as early as the fifteenth century (McIntosh 1983: 237-239; Bailey – Maynor – Cukor-Avila 1989). More neutral terms are, for example, 'nonconcord' (Corrigan 1997; Filppula 1999), 'singular concord' (Milroy 1981), or 'nonconcordance' (Kallen 1991).

[2] This study is part of the *Contact, variation and change project* at the University of Bergen (Research Council of Norway grant no. 213245) which is concerned with the evolution of IrE over time. Thank you to Kevin McCafferty and Carolina P. Amador-Moreno for invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this article, which is part of a longer study conducted during a research fellowship at the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Thanks to the Stout for granting me a position as resident scholar in early 2015.

[3] Note that BE in this study comprises both lexical and auxiliary use.

(approximately 4 million words), of which 4,800 stem from the *Irish Emigration Database* at the Mellon Centre for Migration Studies in Omagh, Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland. In 2013, 1,694 letters were added from other published versions in order to complement decades that are underrepresented in the corpus. The majority of the documents are personal letters written by Irish emigrants and their families between the late seventeenth and the early twentieth century[4]. In the absence of spoken data, the historical sociolinguist is dependent on written sources as a substitute to investigate language variation and change in earlier centuries. Personal letters are commonly regarded as relatively close to vernacular speech, often reflecting more dialectal speech types (cf. Biber 1995: 283-300, Montgomery 1995: 27, Palander-Collin 2010: 658, McCafferty – Amador-Moreno 2012: 183). They are often less self-conscious than other written documents because they are written to close friends and families who know the writer well, and precisely this intimate and informal style can reveal a lot about the writer's speech patterns (Montgomery 1995: 27). Letter writers from the nineteenth century and earlier are often also assumed to have undergone minimal schooling, thus relying on their ear rather than on knowledge about standard writing conventions (Montgomery 1995: 32). Montgomery, in fact, claims that 'no other type of document, be it dialect poetry, folk tales, or any other, reveals the speech patterns of earlier days nearly so well or fully as family letters' (1995: 28).

2. The Northern Subject Rule

Generally, Modern Standard English takes verbal *-s* with third-person singular subjects in the present indicative, while all other subjects take the *-Ø* form. For the verbs BE, HAVE and DO, the forms are *is/was*, *has* and *does*, respectively. In some vernacular dialects of English, however, nonstandard concord patterns commonly also include the *-Ø* form (generalised *-Ø*) with third-person singular subjects (*she live here*) (e.g. East Anglia English (Trudgill 1974)) or verbal *-s* with non-third person singular subjects (generalised *-s*) as in *I says/you was* (e.g. Godfrey – Tagliamonte 1999 on southwestern English). Over a timespan of a few centuries, several northern English varieties in Great Britain developed a variable syntactic concord pattern that allows verbal *-s* with third-person plural subjects (*The Potatoes is not near all dug yet*, William Gilkison, 05.11.1896, CORIECOR) but prohibits it with adjacent

[4] The term 'emigrant letter' here refers to both letters written by the emigrants themselves and to letters written by family members and friends to the emigrant.

plural personal pronouns. This pattern is commonly referred to as the NSR. The NSR is conditioned by the Type of Subject Constraint (TSC) in which "the verb is marked with *-s* (or copula/auxiliary *is* is used) when the subject is a noun or any pronoun (i.e., a relative, indefinite, or interrogative pronoun) other than an immediately preceding personal pronoun" (Montgomery: 1997a: 127), as exemplified in (1), and the Proximity of Subject constraint (PSC), which allows verbal *-s* with pronouns in nonadjacent contexts (2).

(1) for **the people is** watching to see how **we are** dowing (John James Smith, 01.09.1904, CORIECOR)
(2) **They** both **is** for going to West Australia (Bella Smith, 01.04.1896, CORIECOR)

The exact origins of the NSR could so far not be successfully clarified, but it has been claimed that it emerged in northern English and Scots dialects during the early Middle English period. Documents from the Old English period (from around the mid-tenth century) apparently do not show signs of the NSR yet, while it appears to have been fully developed in Middle English (Pietsch 2005a: 45). This view is, however, challenged by, for instance, Cole (2012), who found "the syntactic configuration at the crux of the NSR" in Old Northumbrian texts from the tenth century, thus indicating a Brittonic influence on the NSR (2012: 141). Murray (1873: 212) states that, with lexical verbs, "*-s* had been extended to all cases in which the verb was accompanied by its proper pronoun, whether before or after it, leaving the full form in *-s* to be used with other nominatives only" before the earliest Northern writings of the thirteenth century. The verb BE, with its plural forms *aron*, *aren*, *are*, *ar*, *er*, and *yr*, however, appears to not have been affected by the changes until a later stage (Murray 1873: 213). Montgomery (1994) remarks that the NSR only gradually extended to BE from the fourteenth century onwards – though he doubts that it ever reached completion. He further suggests that the shift with past-tense *was* either developed simultaneously with, or even prior to, the shift in present-tense contexts (1994: 89-91). When Anglicisation took place during the sixteenth/seventeenth century, the Scots agreement pattern eroded and assimilated to the Southern British English pattern, thus leading to the variable concord system (3) that characterises the NSR today (Montgomery 1994: 84).

(3) The children GO versus The children GOES
The children ARE/WERE versus The children IS/WAS
They GO/ARE/WERE

Montgomery (1994: 84) mentions that Murray, unfortunately, does not specify the exact timespan in which the three stages occurred, but both Meurman-Solin (1993: 204-206) and Montgomery (1994: 87-91,1997a: 129) confirm that the TSC and the PSC were used almost categorically with lexical verbs between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century in written Scots.

2.1 The NSR in Northern Irish English – Seventeenth to twentieth century

NIrE is the outcome of contact between Irish Gaelic, Scots and English varieties and the different dialects spoken in Ulster today still reflect the original founder populations of those areas. Ulster has commonly been divided into the four major dialect areas Irish Gaelic, Ulster Scots (USc), Mid-Ulster English (MUE) and South-Ulster English (SUE) (see, among others, Gregg 1972; Harris 1984: 117; McCafferty 2007). Interest in verbal concord in IrE increased during the last few decades and its history can, thanks to recent research, be traced back several centuries. Some ground-breaking work on the earliest varieties of English in Ulster, or more precisely USc, comes from Montgomery (1996, 1997a, 1997b) and Montgomery – Robinson (1996). Montgomery – Robinson (1996: 415) investigate five sets of private and legal correspondence to document the use of (plural) verbal *-s* in early USc. They look at both direct evidence from Scots (*Duntreath letters*, *McClelland letters*) and Southern British English (*Plantation Papers*) influence on seventeenth-century Ulster English (UE), as well as at the language of first generation Ulster-born speakers (*The Templepatrick Session Book*, 1646-47) and of eighteenth-century Ulster emigrants (collection of miscellaneous letters). The latter data set, as well as the Duntreath letters, also provide the empirical evidence in Montgomery (1997a), while Montgomery (1996, 1997b) focus on the letters of an Ulster-born and a Dublin-born Irish-Indian trader from the eighteenth century. The common result of these investigations is that the NSR, though to varying degrees, was a robust feature in UE from at least the seventeenth century onwards (cf. Montgomery – Robinson 1996: 418; Montgomery 1996: 228; Montgomery 1997a: 130-32; Montgomery 1997b: 237). Montgomery (1997b) suggests that this feature then diffused from USc areas to MUE areas. In these studies, singular concord with BE is used rather frequently.

Using Australian-Irish emigrant letters, McCafferty (2003) looks at NIrE in the nineteenth century. He finds that plural verbal *-s* is used in 51% of all instances of third-person plural subjects, and in 72% of all NP subjects,

"suggesting that the NP/PRO constraint is strong in nineteenth-century NI[r]E" (McCafferty 2003: 128). In more detail, McCafferty finds that subject type, subject proximity (adjacency versus nonadjacency) and verb type are all significant factors for the use of plural verbal *-s* in nineteenth-century NIrE. Subject proximity turns out to be significant both when all subjects are analysed as a single class and when analysed for PRO and NP subjects individually. In both cases, nonadjacency favours plural verbal *-s* in NIrE (McCafferty 2003: 131). With regard to verb type, past-tense *was* (58%) occurs more often than present-tense *is* (51%) in McCafferty's Irish-Australian data, followed by *has/does* (48%) and lexical verbs (45%). McCafferty finds that the NSR is not a diagnostic feature to distinguish between USc and MUE and proposes that this shared concord pattern was brought to MUE by northern English settlers (2003: 131-132), thus supporting Mufwene's *founder principle* (1996).

The NSR in twentieth-century NIrE has, for instance, been studied in Belfast English (Milroy 1881), South Armagh English (Corrigan 1997), NIrE (Pietsch 2005a, 2005b), or USc (Montgomery 2006). Pietsch (2005a) gives a diachronic account of the NSR in the *Northern Ireland Transcribed Corpus of Speech* (NITCS), compiled during the 1970s. The NITCS consists of interviews conducted among three generations of speakers (ages 9-12, 35-45, and 65-75). Pietsch studied four major dialect areas, the North (comprising the coastal belt from eastern County Down to the northern part of County Londonderry), the Centre (including areas west of Lough Neagh on both sides of the Londonderry/Tyrone border), the South (covers the southern half of County Tyrone, as well as Fermanagh and Armagh), and the Southeast (five locations in southern Antrim and Down) (2005a: 103). He finds that the NSR is present in all locations, but it is strongest in the Centre and the Southeast. In contrast, the North and the South show a rather steep decline in apparent time. A sex difference can be found in the latter two areas, where men tend to use more plural verbal *-s* than women. In the Centre, women show a higher usage of this variant in all three age-groups, indicating again that this variable is strong in this area (Pietsch 2005a: 105-107). Pietsch's results, thus, confirm an observation that has also been pointed out in McCafferty (2003) for nineteenth-century NIrE, namely that the NSR is strong also outside the traditional Ulster-Scots settlement area.

Pietsch (2005a) further finds sporadic use of a plural predicator (*are/ were*) with singular subjects in existential constructions, e.g. *There are a big dancing hall/ There' a big dancing hall* (2005a: 125). This phenomenon is most frequent in the North and the Northwest, whereas it is either non-existent

or very subtle in the other areas (Pietsch 2005a: 126-127). With pronominal subjects, verbal *-s* is rare in NIrE (used in 0.7% of cases with third-person plural *they*), but in those cases where it does occur, it is favoured by nonadjacency (3.4% as opposed to 0.5% with adjacent *they*). Pietsch concludes that the PSC is active in twentieth-century NIrE and appears to be strongest in the speech of the older speakers from counties Tyrone, Londonderry, and (western) Fermanagh (Pietsch 2005a: 100-102).

2.2 The NSR in Southern Irish English – Eighteenth to twentieth century

Referring to Kallen (1991: 32), McCafferty (2004: 64) confirms that the NSR in Ireland was not geographically limited to the North. His study on nineteenth-century SIrE reveals that the NSR was very robust with all NP subjects in the West/Midlands area, which consists of counties Clare, Galway and King's County (Offaly). Counties "Cork, Dublin, Kerry, Meath and Tipperary form a discontinuous East/South region in which the mean *-s* rate is less than half that of the West/Midlands" (McCafferty 2004:68)[5].

An account of subject-verb concord in eighteenth-century SIrE is provided by Montgomery (1996, 1997b), who investigates letters written by a Dublin-born Indian trader during 1749-1771. His main observation is that there is considerable evidence for the TSC, both with lexical verbs and with BE (Montgomery 1996: 228, 1997b: 235). Boling (2003: 655-656) looks at the language of Quakers in the rest of Ireland and finds the NSR with speakers whose ancestors came from non-northern English areas. He suggests that Quakerism (a religious movement originating in northern England) might have supported the use of this concord pattern to maintain their northern origin in exile. Nineteenth-century SIrE has, for instance, been investigated by McCafferty (2004). As with his study on NIrE, the data set comes from Australian-Irish emigrant letters. McCafferty finds 61% usage of the TSC in the West/Midlands area, whereas it is used in only 27% of tokens in the East/South region of Ireland. The PSC could only be found in County Clare, whereas the *-Ø* form was used with non-adjacent *they* in the counties under investigation (McCafferty 2004: 68). McCafferty further finds subject type and region to be salient factors for the use of plural verbal *-s* in SIrE. It is used most often in existential *there* constructions (70%) and least likely to

[5] In our data set, only two informants come from County Galway and none come from counties Clare and Offaly. Most informants included in this study come from the East and the South (see also Fig. 1).

occur with PRO (2%). Relative pronouns with plural antecedents turn out to be the second most important factor for plural verbal *-s* in the Australian-(Southern) Irish data, followed by conjoined NPs, 'other' NPs and collective NPs. Subject proximity turned out to be significant only when omitting the adjacent *they* context, which was a knockout factor for the use of plural verbal *-s* (McCafferty 2004: 71).

Existential *there* constructions were also the most common factor for the use of plural verbal *-s* in Filppula's study on present-day SIrE in his Hiberno-English corpus (HE), especially with past tense *was* (91.5%), while present tense *is* occurred in 83.3% of instances. The corpus is a collection of oral speech representing rural dialects in counties Clare, Kerry, and Wicklow, as well as urban speech from Dublin City (Filppula 1999: 37). Hierarchically, the existential context in the HE data is followed by 'other' NPs[6] (48.2% for BE present, 56% for BE past, and 46.4% for other verbs). Within this category, plural verbal *-s* is most common with relative pronouns and common nouns. Plural verbal *-s* with collectives is used at rates of 25% (BE present), 50% (BE past), and 25% (other verbs), respectively, while PRO subjects only rarely occur with *-s/is/was* (between 0% and 10.2%) (1999: 155-156). Even though the hierarchy found in Filppula (1999) is surprisingly in line with McCafferty's (2004) results for nineteenth-century SIrE, he is more hesitant to ascribe his results to the NSR as the TSC with pronoun subjects (10.2% for BE past) is not as stringent as in NIrE (1999: 156). However, Filppula has not investigated the PSC in his study, so it might be possible that some of the *-s* tokens with *they* (and other personal pronouns) are in nonadjacent contexts.

3. Methodology

The CORIECOR corpus is biased towards the province of Ulster, due to the nature of collection and donation of documents, and towards male writers. In order to get a more balanced sample, the letter writers included in this study have been sampled prior to the actual investigation (*judgement sample*). Two data sets have been extracted from the CORIECOR corpus, each set covering a 25-year subperiod, 1850-1875 and 1875-1900. Each subperiod consists of 20 letter writers, 10 females and 10 males. Out of these, five come from Ulster[7] and five from the rest of Ireland. Most of the writers included

[6] 'Other' NPs here include indefinite, demonstrative, and relative pronouns (Filppula 1999: 154).

[7] The term Ulster refers to counties Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Monaghan, as well as County Tyrone, and is not to be confused with today's Northern Ireland.

here come from farming or working-class backgrounds, though some (upper) middle-class writers are represented as well. This is due to the fact that, especially for SIrE, finding enough writers from the lower social classes turned out to be rather challenging[8]. The women were usually housewives, though it is not always clear from the letters which social class they belong to. For two females, social background remains completely unclear as there was not sufficient information in the letters.

Since some writers in this study are the sole representatives for their counties, an important factor for inclusion in the analysis was the number of letters a specific writer had written. Two letters were considered the minimum for inclusion. The intention was to use as many letter writers from the original CORIECOR corpus as possible and fill in the gaps with authors from other published collections. For the females, four authors have been included from *Oceans of Consolation* (Fitzpatrick 1994) and one author from each *The McIlrath Letters* (Bassett *et al*. 2009) and *The Prendergast Letters* (Barber 2006). Furthermore, one male author each was included from *The Earth Between Them: Joseph Beale's Letters Home to Ireland from Victoria, 1852-1853* (Beale 1975), and *Patrick McMahon Glynn, letters to his family (1874-1927)* (O'Collins 1974). In the period 1875-1900, some men wrote up to 79 letters, one even wrote 118 letters. In cases where the male writers wrote a lot of letters, the data set was limited to 15 letters per letter writer. For writers of large numbers of letters, I took the first 15 scripts stored in the database by number. In most cases, the letters are numbered in chronological order, though in cases where there are very large numbers of letters from individuals, this means the sample includes documents that may have been written years apart. This procedure, coincidentally, led to a relatively even distribution of letters written by men and women. Altogether, 405 letters were analysed for this study, 206 were written by women, and 199 letters were written by men[9]. In total, 148 letters were written by SIrE letter writers, whereas most (n = 257) were written by authors of Ulster origin. Fig. 1

[8] For the same reason, no distinction has been made between letters written from Ireland to emigrants and letters written by the emigrants themselves, though emigrants clearly predominate. The main criterion for inclusion in this study was whether the letter writer had grown up in Ireland, on the normal sociolinguistic assumption that an individual's language does not change significantly during their lifetime (cf. e.g. Trudgill 1988: 37). Although this is not unusual in such studies (cf. e.g. Pietsch 2012: 367; McCafferty – Amador-Moreno 2012), an interesting follow-up might investigate whether emigration has led to variation in the written language of the emigrants.

[9] Several of these letters were written over a longer time span and would sometimes cover two or more of the 25-year subperiods in this investigation. The authors were assigned to the subperiod they wrote most letters in.

illustrates the geographical distribution of the authors included for analysis in this study. For Ulster, the majority of the letter writers come from counties Armagh, Down, and Tyrone, whereas Co. Carlow (n = 3) provides most authors representing SIrE. The Ulster letter writers included here either come from MUE areas (Armagh, Donegal, Fermanagh, Tyrone), USc areas (Antrim, Down, Londonderry), or from a border area between those two varieties (Dundonald and Portaferry, Co. Down). One letter writer comes from the SUE Co. Cavan (see Harris 1984: 117 for a map over present-day dialect areas). Roughly following McCafferty (2004), the SIrE writers have been divided into writers from the West (Galway and Sligo), the Midlands (Westmeath), the East (Meath, Dublin, Kildare, Laois, Wicklow, Carlow, Wexford), and the South (Tipperary, Cork, and Kerry). Social variables included in this study are *time*, *sex* and *place of origin*.

The letters analysed in this study produced 2,814 tokens (1,608 NP subjects and 1,206 PRO subjects) in which present indicative *is* (BE) and past tense *was* with plural subjects are possible. The pronoun (PRO) subjects include both first- and third-person plural pronouns. The tokens were then analysed according to the categories described below.

Singular concord in BE with plural subjects in existentials is a widespread feature in present-day English varieties. Existential *there* has also been studied in Australian English (Eisikovits 1991), British English (Tagliamonte 1998; Childs 2012; Buchstaller et al. 2013), Canadian English (Meechan – Foley 1994; Walker 2007), Irish English (Corrigan 1997; Filppula 1999) and in New Zealand and Falkland Island English (Britain – Sudbury 2002). Also historical accounts of subject-verb agreement have found that singular concord occurs most often in existential sentences, e.g. Montgomery (1989: 259) on Appalachian English, McCafferty (2003, 2004) on Irish English, or Hay – Schreier (2004) on New Zealand English.

(4) *Existential* there *with plural NP*

a. There **is a great many Irish Settlers** here, and a great Many Yankees coming in from other States (William Williamson, 03.07.1843, CORIECOR)

b. There **is so many flowers in bloom** this place looks like a little Eden (Isabella Weir, 18.07.1891, CORIECOR)

Two other environments that are prone to singular concord with plural subjects in many varieties of English are conjoined NPs (5) and collective NPs (6). Conjoined structures may even be found in Standard English as

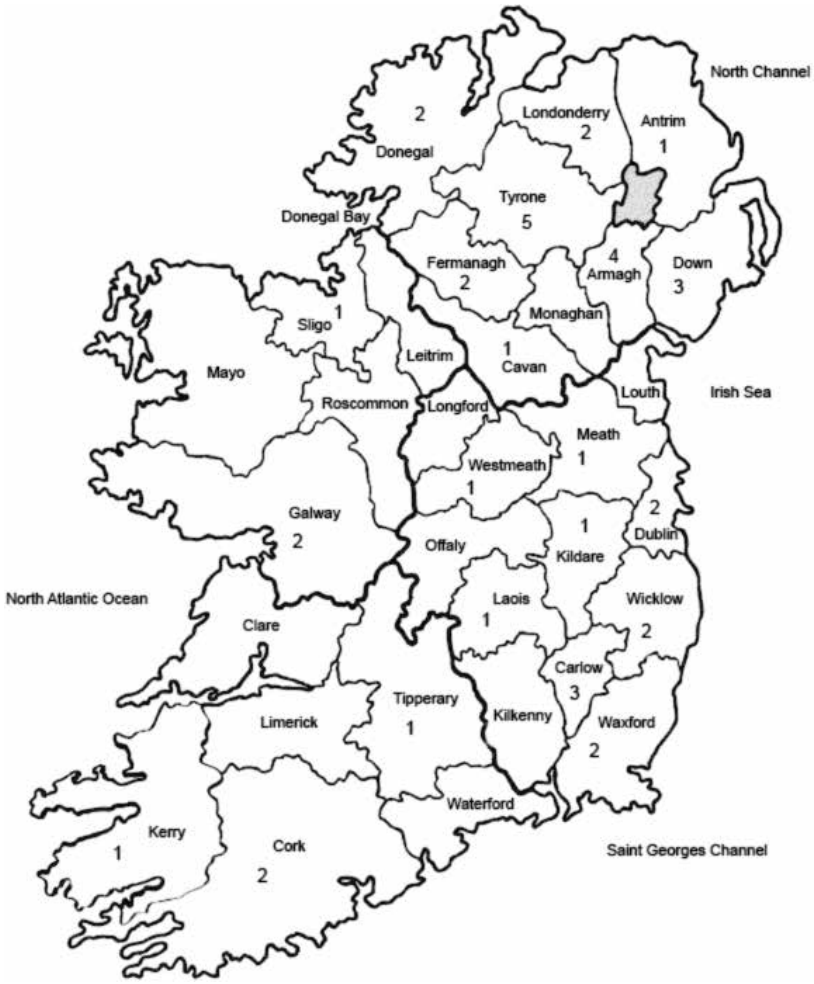

Figure 1. Geographical origin of the letter writers (after http://www.irishgenealogical.org/research/maps/ireland-b-w accessed 13 August 2015)

they are conceptually interpreted as a singular (Pietsch 2005a: 9), whereas collective constructions often seem to be semantically governed, not syntactically (Pietsch 2005a: 13)[10].

[10] Collective nouns are here understood as "nouns without plural form but with plural reference" (Filppula 1999: 154). Pinning down what should be counted as a collective turned out a challenging task and there often is no consensus among grammarians as to what should be categorised as a collective. Furthermore, depicting whether the letter writer was referring to a single unit, or to the individuals within this unit, is extremely difficult, if not impossible, in a dialect that allows singular concord with plural noun phrases. In the analysis I have counted those nouns that have commonly

(5) *Conjoined NPs*
   a. **Sister Ellen, husband and family is** well (Thomas Gallagher, 29.12.1875, CORIECOR)
   b. **Potatoes and corn is** very good price (Thomas Gallagher, 29.12.1875, CORIECOR)

(6) *Collective NPs*
   a. **our congretation is** rather small (Andrew Greenlees, 03.04.1860, CORIECOR)
   b. **The Band was** in Newtownstewart on Saturday last (William Gilkison, 23.11.1899, CORIECOR)

We might ask whether the above-mentioned categories should be included in a study on the NSR as all three are frequent contexts for singular concord in present-day non-NSR dialects as well. McCafferty, however, notes that "in NSR dialects, they can be regarded as complying with the broad pattern that permits verbal *-s* with plural NPs but prohibits it with adjacent *they*" (McCafferty 2004: 68).

Also relative clauses with plural antecedents, as in (7), can frequently be found with singular verbs (Montgomery – Robinson 1996: 418-20; McCafferty 2004: 71; Pietsch 2005a: 8, 2005b: 168; Clarke 2015: 84).

(7) *Relative pronoun with plural antecedent*
   a. I shll have [a] litle to tell you by next mail for the changes **which is** about to take place here (Isabella Wyly, 19.10.1858, Fitzpatrick 1994)
   b. But I mourn for them **that is** shut for ever from mortal eyes (Isabella Weir, 25.08.1886, CORIECOR)

Pietsch (2005a: 115, 2005b: 168) notes that the standard plural demonstrative pronouns *these* and *those* disfavour verbal *-s*, in contrast to non-standard *them* and *thae*, which have an enhancing effect on the singular verb form (see also Montgomery 1989: 252). In the data investigated here, *these* and *those* were extremely rare and were, with one (nonadjacent) exception (8c), always used with a plural verb. The demonstrative pronouns (DP) *them* and *thae* were not present in the data set at all (except as a relative clause complement (7b)).

been defined as collective nouns in other studies or reference works. Collectives that were premodified (e.g. *all the congregation*, *five people*) or postmodified (e.g. *the rest of us*) by lexical items indicating a plural reference were listed under 'other NPs'.

(8) *Plural demonstrative pronouns*

a. **These are** lines wrote by your Cozen altho She is but 9 years of Age (Mary Devlin, 20.12.1857, Fitzpatrick 1994)

b. **those** who spoke against the English and French for taking the part of the Turks in the Crimean War **were** quite right (Jane White, 28.12.1860, CORIECOR)

c. & **those** he did examine **was** merely a form of course (Maggie Black, 16.05.1890, CORIECOR)

As noted earlier, plural personal pronouns inhibit verbal *-s*, or *is/was*, in NSR dialects if the pronoun is adjacent to the verb. Note that most examples below have nonadjacent *is/was*. In fact, only one token of adjacent *was* (9b) was found in the data set (as would be expected in an NSR dialect).

(9) *First and third person plural PRO*

a. **we** received your long looked for letter a few weeks ago and **was** glad to hear yous were all well (Annie Brown, 22.12.1873, CORIECOR)

b. I did not feel the very best in the latter part of the evening as I had been up the two nights previous one of them **we was** up at a fire & the next I had to wait for the midnight train (William J Weir, 09.09.1890, CORIECOR)

c. **They** never **was** right bad till they fell in with the Micky Davies (Bella M Smyth, 19.05.1897, CORIECOR)

The last category included in the analysis is 'Other NPs'. This category encompasses common NPs and indefinite pronouns (10a-b), quantifier phrases (10 c-d), as well as NPs with subject-verb inversion (10 e-f).

(10) *Other NPs*

a. It seems that **Irishmen is** not much in respect in that countery (John James Smyth, 07.01.1892, CORIECOR)

b. **others is** in there cold grave (John James Smyth, 22.12.1900, CORIECOR)

c. The two girls is so like you and the boys **some of them is** so like their grandfather (Eliza McIlrath, 25.05.1879, McIlrath 2009)

d. **all the rest of your friends is** well (Arthur McConnel, 10.06.1857, CORIECOR)

e. how **is all the folks** down there (Isabella Weir, 27.12.1889, CORIECOR)

f. I believe since the siege of Derry never **was the people** so Determined to stand to there colours (John James Smyth, 13.07.1892, CORIECOR)

This study looks only at examples of BE with plural subjects; singular subjects and uncountable nouns that always take a singular verb (*news*, *furniture*, *politics* etc.) were not analysed[11]. However, some singular subjects have been found with a plural predicator in the data, notably in existential constructions. Since Pietsch (2005a: 125ff.) reports on this variation in existential clauses in modern NIrE, this observation should not remain completely uncommented on. In the following examples (plus 34 other examples not listed here) a plural verb was used where a singular one would be expected.

(11) a. the – **are lots of hay** laying in laps (John James Smyth, 12.07.1891, CORIECOR)
b. the **were trouble** in getting them up las year (John James Smyth, 01.07.1891, CORIECOR)
c. the **are a sister of wee Francis wife** comming to Chicago this spring (Isabella Martin, 01.01.1870, CORIECOR)
d. we are glad to know that you are all well, and That **The number of your friends are** on The increase in that contry (John James Smyth, 22.06.1899, CORIECOR)

The authors who used this variation come from counties Down, Tyrone and Fermanagh in Ulster, as well as from counties Wexford and Wicklow in the south of Ireland.

4. Results

4.1 General

We know from previous work on subject-verb agreement that third-person plural contexts offer particularly revealing information about linguistic constraints on variation (e.g. Feagin 1979: 190; Tagliamonte 1998: 157). This study looks at third-person plural and first-person plural contexts. This is because a preliminary analysis of the data showed variation with *we* as well.

[11] One example of 'society' has been excluded from the analysis as this has been described as a collective that occurs only with a singular verb (Depraetere 2003: 93).

In our Ulster data (1850-1900), plural *is/was* occurs with 30% (546/1825) of all plural subjects and with 53% (530/1004) of NPs. In the SIrE letters, plural *is/was* occurs with 9% (88/991) of all plural subjects and 14% (88/614) of all NPs. It does not occur with plural personal pronouns in the latter area (neither adjacent nor nonadjacent). In cases where it can be found with plural pronouns in the Ulster letters, plural *is/was*, with one exception, is limited to nonadjacent contexts (50% *we* and 53% *they*). From a first impression, these data confirm what other studies have already pointed out for IrE, namely a clear TSC and PSC constraint in Ulster and a TSC in counties belonging to the rest of Ireland (Montgomery – Robinson 1996; Montgomery 1996, 1997a, 1997b; Filppula 1999; McCafferty 2003, 2004; Pietsch 2005a).

Table 1. Plural *is/was* with subject types, NIrE and SIrE (1850-1900)

Subject Type	NIrE/Ulster		SIrE	
Pl NP	400/788	(51%)	64/541	(12%)
Adjacent *we*	1/386	(0%)	0/190	(0%)
Nonadjacent *we*	7/14	(50%)	0/8	(0%)
Adjacent *they*	0/406	(0%)	0/170	(0%)
Nonadjacent *they*	8/15	(53%)	0/9	(0%)
Existential *there*	130/216	(60%)	24/73	(33%)
Total	546/1825	(30%)	88/991	(9%)

Independent social variables investigated in this study are *place of origin*, *time* (1850-1875 and 1875-1900), and *sex*. The independent linguistic variables tested are subject type (conjoined NPs, collective NPs[12], other NPs, first- and third-person plural pronouns *we* and *they*, relative pronouns with plural antecedents, plural demonstrative pronouns, and existential *there*), tense (present-tense *is* versus past-tense *was*), and distance between noun and verb (adjacent versus nonadjacent). The results will be presented separately for NIrE and SIrE.

[12] The following nouns were here treated as collective nouns: *board, cattle, colony* ('community'), *company, congregation, council, court, escort (The escort was stopped and the gold taken from them*, Joseph Beale Sr, 1853, Beale 1975), *family, (fire) department, folk, funeral (the funeral left Porter's Hotel at 8o'clock and was in Donagheady burying ground about two, a little over 40 ml,* Bella Smyth, 1900, CORIECOR), *generation, government, (live)stock, ministry, parliament, party, people, police, quartette, settlement* ('an assembly of persons'), *team, the Lodge (the Lodge was invited but they dont care for going*, Bella Smyth, 1899, CORIECOR), *the rest, (the young) set.*

4.2 Ulster – Subject type, place of origin, time and sex

Fig. 2 and Table 2 illustrate how plural *is/was* was used during the two 25-year subperiods 1850-1875 and 1875-1900. The first thing that immediately catches the eye is that plural *is/was*, with one exception, increases with all subject types. The only context where it decreases slightly is with the first-person plural pronoun *we* (from 3% to 2%). With third-person *they* it occurs for the first time between 1875 and 1900. While existential *there* was the context most prone to variation in the first subperiod (1850-1875), the hierarchy for subject type quickly settles to conjoined NPs, collective NPs, relative pronouns with plural antecedents, existential *there*, other NPs, DPs, and PRO. With a chi-square statistic (χ^2) of 32.755, and a *p*-value of 0.00000001, time turns out to be a highly significant factor in the Ulster data[13]. However, Pietsch (2012: 367) actually shows that the use of plural verbal *-s* decreases in Ulster from the 1870s onwards and the rise in the use of plural *is/was* in our nineteenth-century NIrE data is indeed striking. Here, it may not be sufficient to accredit this to normal language change. There is a dramatic increase with 'other' NPs, where the use of this variable more than triples, and also conjoined NPs and relative pronouns with plural antecedents are used twice as often in 1875-1900 as in the preceding 25 years. Here, we simply have to acknowledge that the writers from the second period probably are much more vernacular writers than their counterparts from the first period.

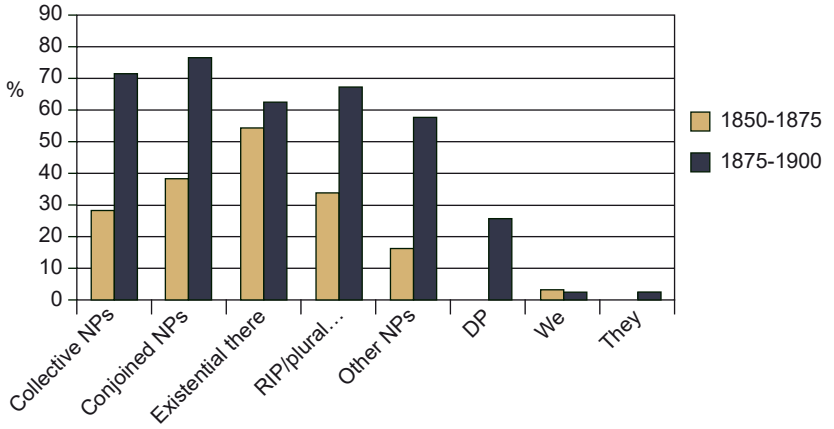

Figure 2. Use of plural *is/was* with subject type across time, Ulster

[13] To test for significance I used Pearson's chi-square test (χ^2). In cases where there were too few data, Yates' modified chi-square test (Yates χ^2) was applied (Preacher 2001). The *p*-value for statistical significance is 0.05.

Table 2. Use of plural *is/was* according to subject type, Ulster

Ulster	1850-75		1875-1900		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Collective NP	2/7	29	44/62	71	46/69	67
Conjoined NP	33/86	38	132/173	76	165/259	64
Existential *there*	32/59	54	98/157	62	130/216	60
RP *with plural antecedent*	3/9	33	14/21	67	17/30	57
Other NP	28/171	16	143/251	57	171/422	41
Plural DP	0/4	0	1/4	25	1/8	13
We	3/89	3	5/311	2	8/400	2
They	0/80	0	8/341	2	8/421	2
Total	101/505	20	445/1320	34	546/1825	30

We can conclude that there is a difference in the use of plural *is/was* throughout the 50-year period investigated in this study, which is potentially biased towards the vernacular end of the continuum in the second subperiod. What can the data tell us about the geographical distribution of plural *is/was* in nineteenth-century NIrE? In order to get a better picture of the PSC, I distinguish between NP subjects and PRO subjects, nonexistential and existential constructions have been collocated. Fig. 3 shows that plural *is/was* operates in all regions investigated in this study, though a PSC can be found only in counties Donegal, Tyrone, and Armagh. In Fermanagh, the 2% (n = 1) use of plural *is/was* with a PRO is due to the only occurrence of adjacent *was* in the data – see (9b). Singular concord with BE is strongest in counties Cavan (80%) and Donegal, where it occurs with NPs (71%), and PRO (8%). The rates for plural *is/was* with NPs further range from 65% in Fermanagh to 24% in Down. Surprisingly, the USc areas Antrim, Down, and Londonderry show lower rates of plural *is/was* (between 24% and 44%) than most MUE areas. These counties do not show a PSC either. Bonness (forthcoming), in contrast, finds high use of plural *is/was* with NP subjects in nineteenth-century USc data from Killinchy, Co. Down, where also a PSC constraint can be observed.

Earlier literature indicates that plural verbal *-s* is not a stigmatised feature in IrE (McCafferty 2003: 125, 2004:65; cf. also Hickey 2007: 183-184 on acceptance for non-standard verbal concord in present-day IrE;

Myklestad 2015: 95-96 on eighteenth-century NIrE), and speaker's sex has been found to be insignificant for plural verbal *-s/is/was* in several present-day English varieties as well (e.g. Clarke 1997: 249; Tagliamonte 1998: 182; Childs 2012: 328). These observations would lead us to expect that plural *is/was* is also used rather frequently by the male and female letter writers in our data set. We know from previous sociolinguistic studies that females often tend to avoid stigmatised forms and that they are more sensitive to prestigious speech patterns than men, who tend to use more non-standard variants (e.g. Labov 1990). Fig. 4 shows that Ulster women are in fact more cautious in their use of plural *is/was* than Ulster men, though the difference between the sexes is relatively slight. In nonexistential contexts, men use plural is/*was* in 30% of instances, whereas the women use it in 24%. With existential *there*, it is used more than twice as often as with nonexistential constructions by both sexes, namely in 66% (males) and 57% (females) of cases.

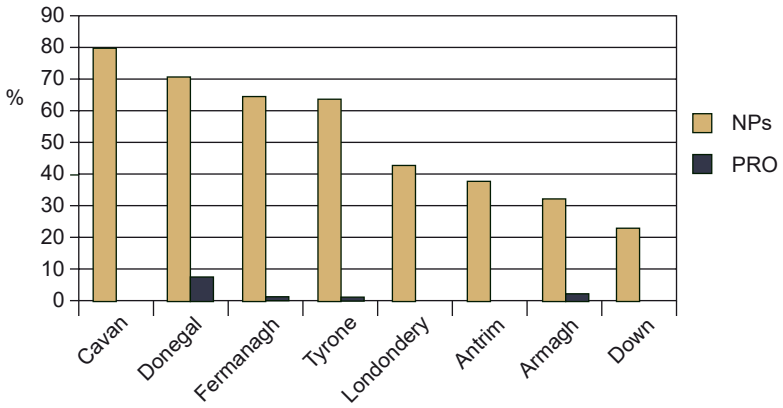

Figure 3. Geographic distribution of plural *is/was*

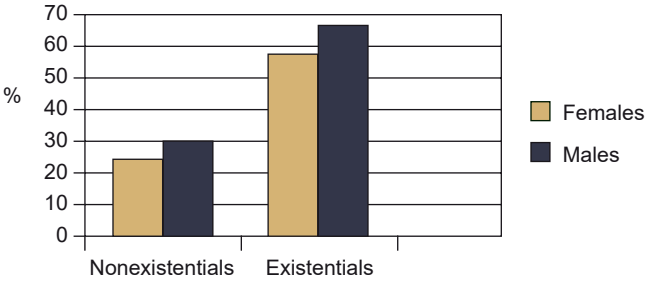

Figure 4. Plural *is/was* as used by female and male writers, Ulster (n = 546)

Table 3. Use of plural *is/was* according to sex, Ulster

	Females (1850-1900)		Males (1850-1900)	
Nonexistentials	246/1034	(24%)	170/575	(30%)
Existentials	79/139	(57%)	51/77	(66%)

A chi-square test reveals that sex is a significant factor for the use of plural *is/was* with nonexistentials in the Ulster letters between 1850-1900 ($\chi^2 = 6.427$; $p = 0.01$). With existential *there*, sex is not significant. This is indeed surprising and probably only a wider sample could give more detailed information on sex differences. For the moment, though, we can state that the results support the claim that there was not much stigmatisation attached to the use of plural *is/was* in nineteenth-century NIrE.

4.3 Rest of Ireland – Subject type, place of origin, time, and sex

For SIrE, Pietsch (2012: 367-368) reports a slow but steady increase of plural *is/was* throughout the nineteenth century. Our data, albeit subtle, show an increase with plural *is/was* as well. It is used with collective NPs, existential *there*, relative pronouns with plural antecedents, conjoined NPs, and with 'other' NPs (Fig. 5), but not with first- or third-person plural pronouns or DPs.

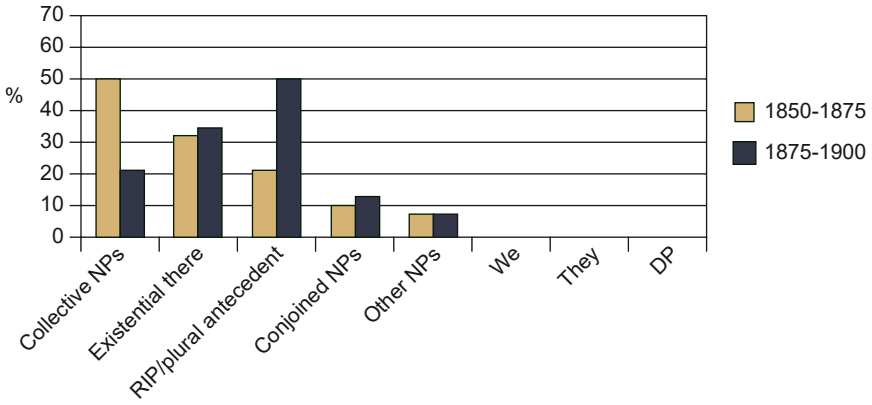

Figure 5. Use of plural *is/was* with subject type across time, SIrE

In 1850-1875, plural *is/was* is most present with collective NPs (50%), followed by existential *there* (32%), relative pronouns (21%), conjoined NPs (10%), and 'other' NPs (8%). In 1875-1900, the use with relative pronouns

rises from 21% (1850-1875) to 50%, and is then the environment most prone to variation in that subperiod. The use of singular concord with collective NPs drops to 21% and the hierarchy is then relative pronouns > existential *there* > collective NPs > conjoined NPs > 'other' NPs. Although we can observe a slight increase in the use of plural *is/was* in the latter subperiod, time is not a significant factor in the SIrE data set ($\chi^2 = 1.003$, $p = 0.32$).

Table 4. Use of plural *is/was* according to subject type, SIrE

SIrE	1850-1975		1875-1900		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Collective NP	9/18	50	3/14	21	12/32	38
Existential *there*	14/44	32	10/29	34	24/73	33
RP with plural antecedent	5/24	21	9/18	50	14/42	33
Conjoined NP	8/81	10	4/31	13	12/112	11
Other NP	17/226	8	9/120	8	26/346	8
We	0/140	0	0/58	0	0/198	0
They	0/109	0	0/70	0	0/179	0
Plural DP	0/3	0	0/6	0	0/9	0
Total	53/645	8	35/346	10	88/991	9

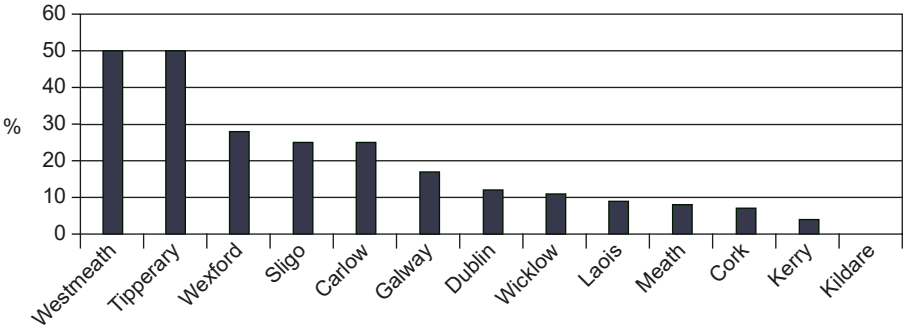

Figure 6. Geographic distribution of plural *is/was*, NP subjects only

Fig. 6 shows the geographic distribution of plural *is/was* in SIrE. This feature is unevenly spread over the rest of Ireland in our data. It is most often used in Westmeath (50%, 5/10), which belongs to the Midlands area, and in the southern county Tipperary (50%, 2/4). Furthermore, singular concord with BE is moderately used in the two neighbouring eastern counties Carlow (25%,

9/36) and Wexford (28%, 13/46) and in the western counties Sligo (25%, 4/16) and Galway (17%, 14/84). In the remaining counties from the South/East (Cork, Laois, Wicklow, Dublin, and Meath) plural *is/was* is used in, or less than, 12% of instances. It should be noted here that the result for Co. Kerry is based on one single token of existential *there*. In Co. Kildare, plural *is/was* could not be found at all. We can, thus, not find the clear West/Midlands and South/East distinction reported by McCafferty (2004).

In contrast to the NIrE results, where the men used slightly more plural *is/was* than the women, this feature is rather preferred by the female writers in SIrE[14]. In existential constructions, women use singular concord in more than half of all instances (53%), whereas men use it only in one-fourth of tokens (27%). Also in nonexistential contexts, female writers use slightly more plural *is/was* (9%) than male writers (6%). However, sex is statistically significant only with existential constructions ($p = 0.04$), but not with nonexistentials ($p = 0.13$) in our data.

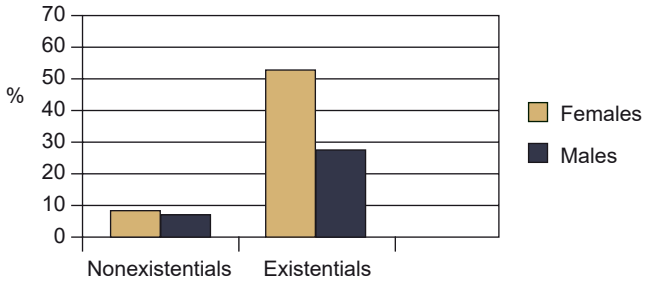

Figure 7. Plural *is/was* as used by female and male writer in SIrE (1850-1900), (n = 88)

Table 5. Use of plural *is/was* according to sex, SIrE

	Females (1850-1900)	Males (1850-1900)
Nonexistentials	23/255 (9%)	41/663 (6%)
Existentials	9/17 (53%)	15/56 (27%)

[14] Due to the inclusion of some (upper) middle-class male writers in the data, some social skewing was expected. However, our results actually show that these writers are the only (male) ones that actually use plural is/was in the letters from the rest of Ireland.

In sum, plural *is/was* is clearly present in the SIrE data as well, though to a much lower degree than in NIrE. Fig. 5 shows that there is a slight increase of singular concord observable over time. Interestingly, existential *there*, which has repeatedly been found to be the environment most prone to plural verbal *-s/is/was* in almost every variety of English, ranks only third in our NIrE data and second in the SIrE data. It is clearly preferred by the female writers in SIrE.

4.4 Tense

Tense is another factor that has been found to have an influence on subject--verb agreement in several English varieties (e.g. Feagin 1979: 201; Tagliamonte 1998; Filppula 1999: 155-156; McCafferty 2003; Hay – Schreier 2004). Singular concord is thus much more likely to occur with past tense *was* than with present tense *is*. McCafferty, for example, found 58% usage of past tense *was* in his nineteenth-century Australian-Ulster emigrant letters, and 51% for present tense *is*. With GOLDVARB weightings from .404 for the latter form and .703 for the former, tense is a significant factor in his nineteenth-century Ulster data (2003: 130-131). For early twentieth-century SIrE, Filppula also reports on a "slight bias towards past tense context[s]", especially in existential there sentences (Filppula 1999: 155). A tendency towards nonconcord with past tense *was* is also observable in our data, at least when we look at the total percentages for the whole 50-year timespan.

Table 6. Use of plural *is/was* according to tense, Ulster (n = 1,825)

	Nonexistentials		Existentials		Total
	1850-75	1875-1900	1850-75	1875-1900	
BE present					
plural *is*	62	214	20	68	362
plural *are*	264	604	17	41	926
Total	325	818	37	109	1288
% plural *is*	19	26	54	62	28
BE past					
plural *was*	10	133	11	30	184
plural *were*	114	212	9	18	353
Total	124	345	20	48	537
% plural *was*	8	39	55	62	34

Table 6 shows that singular concord is used more often with past tense *was* (34%) than with present tense *is* (28%) in the NIrE data. However, a look at the subperiods illustrates that there is considerable variation within them. In 1850-1875, present tense *is* (19%) was used more often than past tense *was* (8%) in nonexistential contexts, whereas the latter was used more often (39%) than present tense *is* (26%) in 1875-1900. The use of singular concord with *is* or *was* remains relatively stable (between 54% and 55% in the first subperiod and in 62% in the second) with existential *there*. Tense is statistically significant with nonexistentials in both subperiods ($\chi^2 = 8.02$, 17.792; $p = 0.0046$, 0.0000246), whereas it is not significant in existential constructions ($p > 0.5$).

In the rest of Ireland, the situation is even more discontinuous than in Ulster, revealing no clear preference for either form. Whereas singular concord with past tense *was* (11%) is indeed found slightly more often than with present-tense *is* (8%) in the 50-year timespan, there is again extreme variation within the subperiods. In 1850-1875, plural *was* with nonexistentials is used in 8% of instances as opposed to 6% usage of plural *is*. In 1875-1900, the use of plural *was* then drops to only 2%, whereas use of plural *is* rises to 9%. In existential constructions, *was* occurs in 75% of instances in the first subperiod. In 1875-1900, existentials in the past tense occur only once and, therefore, cannot be discussed. Tense is not statistically significant in nonexistential constructions, but it is significant with existential *there* in 1850-1875 (Yates' $\chi^2 = 10.355$; $p = 0.001$).

Table 7. Use of plural *is/was* according to tense, SIrE

	Nonexistentials		Existentials		Total
	1850-75	1875-1900	1850–75	1875-1900	
BE present					
plural *is*	28	24	6	10	68
plural *are*	454	240	27	18	739
Total	482	264	33	28	807
% plural *is*	6	9	18	36	8
BE past					
plural *was*	10	1	9	0	20
plural *were*	108	52	3	1	164
Total	118	53	12	1	184
% plural *was*	8	2	75	0	11

In contrast to other studies on subject-verb agreement in IrE, our data cannot confirm a clear preference for singular concord in the past tense. We do not achieve the high numbers of usage reported in other studies of IrE either (e.g. Filppula 1999 for SIrE; McCafferty 2003 for NIrE).

4.5 Distance between subject and verb

Distance between the subject and the verb has also been reported to have an effect on subject–verb agreement (e.g. McCafferty 2003, 2004; Hay – Schreier 2004; Pietsch 2005a). McCafferty (2003: 131) found subject proximity to be a significant factor in the Ulster data, with a higher likelihood for plural verbal *-s* to occur with nonadjacent subjects (both NPs and PRO). In the Australian-(Southern) Irish letters, subject proximity turned out to be significant only when ignoring the adjacent *they* context (knockout factor). While nonadjacent subjects have a considerable effect on plural verbal *-s* (.676), adjacent subjects have little, or no, effect (.471) (McCafferty 2004: 70-72). Pietsch (2005a) found that nonadjacency between the head of the NP and the verb triggers plural verbal *-s* in his contemporary NIrE data (2005a: 114). In our nineteenth-century Ulster data, the use of plural *is/was* increases with nonadjacent subjects[15]. Table 8 gives the numbers and percentages for the use of singular concord in Ulster with adjacent and nonadjacent subjects. Again, the latter are more prone to plural *is/was* (37% for nonadjacent subjects in nonexistential and 62% in existential constructions) than adjacent ones (25% and 52%, respectively). A chi-square test confirms that nonadjacency is a significant factor for the use of plural *is/was* in nonexistentials ($\chi^2 = 10.631$, $p = 0.001$). For existentials, the result is not significant ($\chi^2 = 1.187$, $p = 0.275$).

Table 8. Subject proximity between the subject and the verb, Ulster (1850-1900)

Subject	*is/was*	*is/was*	Total
Proximity	Nonexistentials	Existentials	
Adjacent	364/1471 (25%)	16/31 (52%)	380/1502 (25%)
Nonadjacent	52/139 (37%)	114/184 (62%)	166/323 (51%)

In SIrE, the overall picture is a similar one, though plural *is/was* is less frequent than in Ulster. With adjacent subjects, singular concord can be found in 7% (nonexistentials) and 11% (existentials) of cases. In cases where the subject

[15] For the purpose of analysing subject proximity, I looked at distance between the head of the NP and the verb.

is not adjacent to the verb, the rate remains the same with nonexistential constructions (7%), but rises to 37% with existential *there*. A chi-square test reveals that adjacency between subject and verb is neither significant for nonexistentials in the data from the rest of Ireland ($\chi^2 = 0.007$; p-value = 0.93), nor for existentials (Yates' $\chi^2 = 1.286$ $p = 0.257$).

Table 9. Subject proximity between the subject and the verb, SIrE (1850-1900)

Subject	*is/was*	*is/was*	Total
Proximity	Nonexistentials	Existentials	
Adjacent	54/772 (7%)	1/9 (11%)	55/781 (7%)
Nonadjacent	10/147 (7%)	23/63 (37%)	33/210 (16%)

Summing up, the CORIECOR data confirm what has been found in earlier studies, namely an increase of singular concord with nonadjacent subjects, though the increase (at least in our data) is never dependent on the proximity of the subject and the verb in existential constructions. With nonexistentials, it is significant only in the NIrE data. It should be noted here, however, that the results probably do not achieve significance due to the small numbers in some cells of Tables 8 and 9. Adding other subperiods in future investigations might in fact solve this discrepancy.

5. Conclusion

This study looked at the development of the NSR with the verb BE in nineteenth-century IrE. It showed that an NSR concord pattern was present in both NIrE and SIrE at that time. In NIrE, we found evidence for both the TSC and the PSC in MUE dialects. Surprisingly, no such constraint could be found in our USc data. This study thus joins studies such as McCafferty (2003) and Pietsch (2005a) in finding that the NSR has long been strong in non-Ulster Scots settlement areas as well. Furthermore, it supports McCafferty's (2003) claim that this concord pattern not just diffused from USc areas to MUE, but that this rather was a feature that was brought to Ulster by both Scots- and northern-English-speaking settlers in the seventeenth century. In SIrE, plural *is/was*, though clearly present in the data, was used to a much lower degree than in the Ulster letters. In addition, it was non-existent with personal plural pronouns *we* and *they*, suggesting that the writers had a TSC, but no PSC. This is basically in line with Montgomery (1996, 1997b), Filppula (1999), and McCafferty (2004). The use of singular concord is unevenly

distributed in SIrE, with the counties Westmeath (Midlands) and Tipperary (South) showing the highest use of plural *is/was* (50%), while the eastern counties Wexford and Carlow, along with western Galway and Sligo, show moderate use of plural *is/was* (between 17% and 28%). The rest of the South/East showed rather low frequencies of singular concord (12% and less). Collective NPs, conjoined NPs, and existential *there* constructions were usually those contexts that were most prone to variation in our data, and these contexts still show most variation in non-NSR dialects of present-day English varieties. Also relative pronouns with plural antecedents supported singular concord with plural verbs, especially in SIrE. PRO were least likely to occur with singular concord.

This study further found a slight preference for plural *was* in the 50-year period investigated. This is, for instance, in line with Filppula's (1999) findings for twentieth-century SIrE and McCafferty's (2003) findings for NIrE. However, our data show considerable variation within the two subperiods in both areas. While past tense *was* shows higher scores for singular concord with nonexistentials in NIrE between 1875 and 1900, the writers from the rest of Ireland prefer it to present-tense *is* in 1850-1875. In existential constructions, Ulster letters show relatively even use of plural *is/was* (54% *is* and 55% *was* in the former sub period and 62% with both tenses in the latter period). While plural *was* was used considerably more often with existentials in the first subperiod in SIrE (75% as opposed to 18% *is*), the low token frequency with past tense verbs in the latter subperiod prevents us from discussing any preferences or changes for that timespan. Generally, a wider sample would be required to make any generalisations about the influence of tense on plural *is/was* in IrE.

Distance between subject and verb was significant only in non-existential constructions in NIrE. In SIrE, it is not a significant factor for use of plural *is/was* at all. However, the subjects have here been analysed as a single group and distinguishing between NP and PRO subjects might in fact make a difference. As mentioned above, McCafferty found subject proximity to be significant only when ignoring the adjacent *they* context in his SIrE data (McCafferty 2004: 71).

The data on BE, by and large, confirm what other studies have reported about IrE concord patterns, though they also discover considerable variation within the two subperiods. As indicated above, a wider sample might even out these differences. Knowing what the situation was like in nineteenth-century IrE, it would also be interesting to look at the NSR in other postcolonial dialects. Montgomery (1997a, 1997b) claims that an NSR-like

concord pattern has been transported to Appalachia by Irish emigrants in the eighteenth century, but what happened in other colonies in which the Irish constituted a large part of the founder population? Many nineteenth-century Irish emigrants settled in the southern hemisphere, for example. Was their concord pattern reflected in early New Zealand or Australian English, or, and how, did it change due to the influence of other varieties of English in the colonial setting? van Hattum (2015), for example, emphasises that emigrants, who previously had belonged to a fairly homogenous social group with a similar dialect, in the New World suddenly found themselves in direct contact with speakers of many varieties of English, or even different languages. She remarks that former studies, though giving extensive accounts of the way these new dialects evolved in former British colonies (e.g. Schneider 2003; Trudgill 2004), fail to provide much empirical evidence from the initial stages of an individual's language in this context (2015: 106).

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