

## Morpho-syntactic co-variation in English dialects

Dialectological research has been criticised for tending to ‘treat linguistic forms in isolation rather than as parts of systems or structures’ (Chambers & Trudgill 1998: 33). Although dialect areas can be drawn as a result of aggregating the spatial distribution of various linguistic variables independently (Szmrecsanyi 2013), there has been comparatively little consideration of how such variables might co-vary (see Guy 2013). Considering how one linguistic form might inhibit or promote the use of another grants us a window into speakers’ internal grammars (Embick 2008).

This focus on interactions between variables is central to an ongoing AHRC project examining negation and agreement phenomena in dialects of England. This paper focuses on results from an acceptability judgement questionnaire completed by 70 working class individuals aged 18-30 and 50+. Participants were from four cities chosen to represent different dialect areas in England: Newcastle upon Tyne (North East), Leeds (Yorkshire), Nottingham (Midlands) and Southampton (South). 17 test sentences (alongside 13 fillers) elicited speakers’ judgements of negative concord (NC), auxiliary-/not-contraction, *ain’t*, and *was/were* variation. The features were presented both in isolation and in co-variation, while controlling for other linguistic factors that might affect ratings. Participants were asked whether they would use each sentence type themselves in speech and were presented with Likert Scales from 1-5 to score frequency, i.e. how frequently they would hear that sentence type in their home city, and correctness, i.e. how acceptable or “correct” they think it is in speech.

Quantitative analysis, including mixed-effects modelling, shows that *ain’t* and NC are rated as more frequent as one moves from North to South among the four communities, mirroring some previous observations from production data (Anderwald 2002, 2005; Szmrecsanyi 2013). Auxiliary-contraction and non-standard *was/were*, in contrast, do not pattern in a North-South manner. Co-occurring forms are also perceived differently across the cities. For example, Newcastle has such low frequency/acceptability ratings for *ain’t* and NC independently that their co-occurrence (*I ain’t seen nobody*) makes no difference to their ratings. In Leeds and Nottingham, however, *ain’t* is more frequent and acceptable in a NC construction than in a non-NC sentence. This result contrasts with Southampton where *ain’t* is judged as less common with NC than without, despite both features receiving high frequency ratings separately. These findings indicate that speakers of some dialects hold associations between certain stigmatised forms and these together index the local vernacular, but this is not merely a compound of how those forms were perceived independently.

This paper will show how speakers of different regional dialects can perceive the same grammatical variants differently depending on their linguistic context, even when the variants overall might be equally frequent in the varieties. Contrary to what we might expect, the clustering of multiple stigmatised forms in the same sentence does not necessarily reduce acceptability – it can actually increase it. As a supplement to analysing multiple variables in isolation following more traditional dialectological approaches, studying them in tandem allows us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their structural and social relationships across space.

## References

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