

The Northern Subject Rule

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1. Introduction

- Generalized -s in the present tense: Major difference between Standard English and northern varieties of English:

	Standard English	Northern dialects of English
1sg	sing	sing-s
2sg	sing	sing-s
3sg	sing-s	sing-s
1pl	sing	sing-s
2pl	sing	sing-s
3pl	sing	sing-s

Table 1: Verbal inflection (present tense), Standard English vs. Northern dialects

- Northern Subject Rule (NSR): In many (Central) Northern varieties (in particular, Northumberland, Cumberland, Durham, Westmorland), the realization of verbal agreement (i.e., -s) is sensitive to:¹

- (i) type of subject (pronouns vs. DPs);
- (ii) position of subject:

(1) *Northern Subject Rule (NSR)*

A finite verb takes the ending -s except when it is directly adjacent to a non-3sg pronominal subject (i.e., *I/you.sg/we/you.pl/they*).

	Standard English	Northern dialects of English	
		pron. subjects (adjacent to V)	DP subjects
1sg	sing	sing	-
2sg	sing	sing (but: thou sing-s)	-
3sg	sing-s	sing-s	sing-s
1pl	sing	sing	-
2pl	sing	sing	-
3pl	sing	sing	sing-s

Table 2: Verbal inflection (present tense), Standard English vs. northern dialects + NSR

- As a result, the NSR dialects exhibit a three-way distinction dependent on type and position of subject:

- (2)
 - a. The birds (only) sings.
 - b. They sing.
 - c. They only sings.
 - d. They sing and dances.
 - e. they that sings

¹ Cf. e.g. Murray (1873), Berndt (1956), Montgomery (1994), Schendl (1996), Corrigan (1997), Börjars & Chapman (1998), Klemola (2000), Pietsch (2005).

- **Linguistic variation in most present-day varieties:**
- Little or no variation:
 - (i) All 3sg subjects always trigger the presence of *-s*;
 - (ii) Personal pronouns (apart from 3sg and 2sg *thou*) do not trigger *-s* when adjacent to the verb.
- Variation: All other subjects trigger *-s* **variably** (non-adjacency of subject and verb favors the use of *-s*; see Pietsch 2005 for details).
- The effects of the NSR can also be observed in cases where the pronoun is right-adjacent to the finite verb (i.e., in cases of subject-verb inversion):
 - (3) a. Do they sing?
 - b. Does the birds sing?
- Inversion has a different effect on agreement with full subjects (consistent use of *-s*, cf. Pietsch 2005:110).
- In many varieties, the NSR also governs the distribution of the past tense forms *was/were*:²
 - (4) a. They were supposed to [...]
(Pietsch 2005:100)
 - b. [...] they never was so strict, at that time, anyway.
 - c. [...] they both was yoked onto it.
(Pietsch 2005: 101)
- Similar differences between pronominal and full DP subjects can be observed in other varieties of English:
 - (i) Present-day varieties: Afro-American Vernacular English (cf. Corrigan 1997, Montgomery 1997, Tagliamonte 2002, Chambers 2004), Northern Irish varieties (Henry 1995, Pietsch 2005) and Scottish varieties (Pietsch 2005).
 - (ii) Historical stages of English: Northern and some Midlands varieties of Middle English (ME; McIntosh et al. 1986, McIntosh 1988), Old and Middle Scots (Meurman-Solin 1993), and (to a limited degree) Early Modern English (EModE; Schendl 1994, 1996).
- The NSR figures prominently in traditional dialectological and sociolinguistic studies (for an overview cf. Tagliamonte 2002, Chambers 2004, Pietsch 2005), but from a theoretical point of view no convincing explanation and analysis has been put forward so far.
- This paper:
 - (i) Post-syntactic analysis of NSR effects, based on the assumption that the distribution of *-s/-∅* marks the absence/presence of positively specified agreement features (person/number) in the minimal phonological phrase the finite verb is part of.
 - (ii) New perspective on the historical development of the NSR: (a) Internal factors: NSR as a reflex of Old English agreement weakening in inversion contexts (1pl/2pl), which gained a wider distribution in Northern varieties due to their generalized V2 syntax; (b) external factors: internally-driven changes were possibly promoted by language contact with Brythonic and/or southern dialects.

² (4c) shows that floating quantifiers such as *both* or *all* also give rise to the adjacency effect characteristic of the NSR.

2. Previous accounts

2.1 The syntax of NSR effects

- The probably most comprehensive syntactic account of a related phenomenon is Henry (1995), focusing on what she calls ‘singular concord’ in Belfast English.
- (5) a. The teachers is/was busy.
(Henry 1995:27)
- b. They are/*is going.
(Henry 1995:33)
- Basic idea: Link between morphological case marking and the subject’s capability of triggering agreement on the verb:
 - (i) Only elements that are clearly marked as nominative (i.e., the pronouns *I, we, he, she, they; you* is treated as an exception) move to SpecAgrsP and trigger ‘standard’ agreement on the verb (i.e., 3sg *-s* vs. \emptyset in all other contexts);
 - (ii) Full DP subjects occupy SpecTP, from which they cannot trigger verbal agreement, resulting in the default ‘singular concord’ ending *-s*, which is analyzed as a pure tense marker (i.e., Henry seems to assume that 3sg *-s* and Present tense *-s* are separate inflectional markers, which happen to be homophonous).
- (6) a. [CP [AgrsP They [Agrs’ are [TP [T’ T [VP going]]]]]]
- b. [CP [AgrsP [Agrs’ [TP The teachers [T’ is [VP busy]]]]]]
- While this approach accounts for the type-of-subject condition, it does not have much to say about the adjacency condition which characterizes all other NSR varieties.

2.2 Morphological aspects

- Basic question: What’s the feature specification of *-s*/ \emptyset in the NSR dialects?
- General problem: “Markedness paradox” (Pietsch 2005) – while *-s* is clearly the marked inflection in Standard English, the situation in the NSR dialects is more complex:
 - (i) DP /non-adjacent subjects: *-s* as a default marker;
 - (ii) Subject pronouns adjacent to the verb: *-s* seems to mark 3sg.
- Previous approaches:
 - (i) *-s* with DP subjects/under non-adjacency as a default inflection or pure tense/mood marker (e.g., Berndt 1956, Henry 1995, Pietsch 2005); problems: (a) it must be assumed that the *-s* ending that occurs with 3sg pronouns has a different character (3sg Agr); (b) feature specification of \emptyset remains unclear.
 - (ii) the presence of *-s* signals a difference in the categorial status of the subject (DP vs. pronoun, Pietsch 2005); problems: (a) *-s* with (adjacent) 3sg pronouns (and 2sg *thou*) ; (b) additional explanation necessary for position-of-subject constraint.
 - (iii) *-s* as an agreement affix that may not co-occur with preverbal pronouns that have been reanalyzed as prefixal agreement markers (Börjars & Chapman 1998); problems: (a) feature specification of *-s* unclear; (b) no account for the position of subject constraint (in *they often talks*, *they* must be analyzed as a genuine pronoun, but then it is unclear why that pronoun cannot be used in **they talks*);
 - (iv) *-s* as a default ending “in discourse contexts where identification of the non-adjacent subject require[s] greater than usual processing” (Corrigan 1997: 200); problem: again, the status of *-s* in the context of adjacent 3sg pronouns remains unclear;

3. A post-syntactic approach to the NSR

Northern dialects of English		
	pron. subjects (adjacent to V)	DP subjects and/or non-adjacency
1sg	sing-∅	sing-s
2sg	sing-∅	sing-s
3sg	sing-s	sing-s
1pl	sing-∅	sing-s
2pl	sing-∅	sing-s
3pl	sing-∅	sing-s

Table 3: Verbal inflection (present tense), NSR dialects

- Observations: Different agreement patterns dependent on type/position of subject:
 - (i) DP subjects: *-s* ending does not signal any person/number distinctions;
 - (ii) Pronominal subjects (under adjacency): *-s* ending seems to signal the same set of distinctions as in Standard English (3sg vs. all other person/number combinations).
- Basic claims:
 - (i) In the NSR dialects under discussion, there is only a single *-s* affix with a uniform specification (default marker/elsewhere case);
 - (ii) The zero marker signals the presence of positive values for person or number features.³
 - (iii) Agreement is established in the post-syntactic components of grammar (cf. e.g. Embick & Noyer 2001, Ackema & Neeleman 2004, Bobaljik 2008), either via (a) post-syntactic agreement rules that operate on feature bundles that are part of the same phonological phrase (cf. Ackema & Neeleman 2004 on complementizer agreement); or (b) insertion of dissociated agreement morphemes (copies of the subject's phi-set) under adjacency (Embick 1997, Noyer 1997, Embick & Noyer 2001).
- Adjacency effect:
 - (7) $-\emptyset$ marks the presence of positive specifications for [\pm speaker], [\pm hearer], or [\pm pl] in the minimal phonological phrase the finite verb is part of.
- *-s* with adjacent 3sg pronouns: 3sg pronouns are characterized by the feature combination [$-\text{speaker}$, $-\text{hearer}$, $-\text{pl}$] (note: 3sg forms could also be analyzed as completely underspecified forms which are characterized by the absence of person and number specifications, cf. Benveniste 1966, Halle 1997, Noyer 1997, Harley and Ritter 2002, Cysouw 2003)
- *-s* with DP subjects: (i) DP subjects are generally 3rd person; (ii) DP subjects are mapped onto a separate phonological phrase (Cinque 1993). Their feature content is therefore not visible to the workings of the relevant agreement operations.

³ Alternatively, we might assume that the *-s* ending marks the absence of positive specifications for person or number in the immediate phonological phrase the finite verb is part of. While this analysis seems to be a technical possibility, it fails to capture the elsewhere/default character of *-s* in the relevant varieties (e.g., under non-adjacency etc.).

- The proposed analysis makes available a new perspective on 3sg -s in Standard English (not explicitly specified for person and number, but rather sensitive to the presence/absence of positive feature values).
- Open questions:
 - (i) Variation in the use of -s in the context of DP subjects/non-adjacency;
 - (ii) Conditions that generally favor the use of -s (e.g., subject gaps, inversion with full subjects, cf. Pietsch 2005:109ff. for details)?
 - (iii) Status of -s in *thou is/sings*-varieties?
- Ad (i): Grammar competition (Kroch 1989, 1994)?
 - (i) Little or no variation in those contexts where the agreement systems of Standard English and the relevant dialects overlap;
 - (ii) Variation in contexts where there is a conflict between the two systems.
- Ad (ii): Beyond the scope of this paper, but see the following section for some relevant observations concerning historical stages of English.
- Ad (iii): *thou is/sings*-varieties: -s marks negative (or absent) values for [\pm speaker, \pm pl]?

4. The historical development of the NSR

4.1 Facts

- Historical stages in the rise of the NSR:
 - (i) During the transition from OE to northern ME, 2sg -es, 3sg -eð and pl -að/-as fell together in -(e)s (rise of an underspecified inflectional marker);
 - (ii) After the loss of vowels in the final syllable, northern ME exhibited an opposition between 1sg -∅ and all other contexts (-s);
 - (iii) Extension of -s to 1sg; **NSR**: introduction of the zero marker in plural contexts (lexical verbs + adjacency): first with 1pl/2pl, somewhat later with 3pl;
 - (iv) Analogical extension to forms of *be* (including *was/were*);⁴ replacement of *thou is* with *you are* (the original plural form) in the EModE period (not in all dialects).

	Old English	Northern ME I	Northern ME II	Northern ME III/ EModE
1sg	sing-e	sing-e	sing-∅	sing-s I sing-∅
2sg	sing-es(t)	sing-es	sing-s	sing-s thou sings > you sing
3sg	sing-eð	sing-es	sing-s	sing-s he/she/it sing-s
1pl	sing-að	sing-es	sing-s	sing-s we sing-∅
2pl	sing-að	sing-es	sing-s	sing-s you sing-∅
3pl	sing-að	sing-es	sing-s	sing-s they sing-s > sing-∅

Table 4: Historical development of verbal inflection, Northern dialects

- While the NSR is not attested in late (northern) OE records (dating from the mid-10th century), it appears to be firmly established in the works of Richard Rolle (early ME, 1290–1349):

⁴ Apparently, the use of *is* and *was* in the plural was never as categorically as the use of -s with lexical verbs (cf. e.g. Montgomery 1994). However, it seems that present-day dialects exhibit a different tendency, in that they preserve the NSR more strongly with forms of *be* (Pietsch 2005).

- (8) Some þe deuell deceyves þurgh vayne glory, þat es ydil joy: when any has pryde and delyte in þamself of þe penance þat **þai suffer**, of gode dedes þat **þai do**. of any vertu þat **þai have**; es glad when **men loves** þam, sari when **men lackes** þam, haves envy to þam þat es spokyn mare gode of þan of þam;
(CMROLLEP,86.368)
- (9) He says þat ‘he lufes þam þat lufes hym, and **þai** þat arely **wakes** til hym sal fynde him’.
(CMROLLEP,76.212)
- (10) and God comfortes his lufers mare þan **þai wene** þat **lufes** hym noght. and God comforts his lovers more than they think-∅ that love-s him not
(CMROLLEP,63.44)

• MORE FACTS & GENERALIZATIONS???(SUBJECT GAPS etc.).

4.2 Towards an analysis: Internal factors

- Basic claims: After the breakdown of the OE agreement system, the NSR developed via a combination of generalized V2 in the northern varieties + agreement weakening in inversion contexts, which was also at work in OE (and turned into the NSR after the loss of V2).
 - Observation: (late) OE exhibits agreement variation/weakening in inversion contexts (Jespersen 1942:15, Quirk & Wrenn 1955:42, Campbell 1959:296, van Gelderen 2000): In cases where a 1pl/2pl pronoun follows the inverted finite verb, the regular agreement ending (present indic. *-að*, past indic. *-on*) is replaced by schwa:⁵
- (11) a. Ne sceole ge swa softe sinc gegangen.
neg must you so easily treasure obtain
‘You must not obtain treasure so easily.’
(*Battle of Maldon*, p. 244, 1.59)
- b. Hwæt secge we be þæm coc?
what say we about the cook
‘What do we say about the cook?’
(*Ælfric’s Colloquy on the Occupations*, p. 188, 1.68)
- Analysis of the OE facts: Contextual allomorphy of 1pl/2pl forms dependent on the structural position of the finite verb (cf. e.g. Roberts 1996):
 - (i) C⁰ in contexts with fronted operators (wh, negation etc.);
 - (ii) A lower position (Infl⁰/T⁰) in all other contexts (cf. e.g. Cardinaletti & Roberts 1991; Pintzuk 1999; Hulk & van Kemenade 1995; Kroch & Taylor 1997; Haeberli 1999, Fischer et al. 2000, and many others):

⁵ Similar observations hold for early OHG (1pl), cf. Braune & Reiffenstein (2004:262), and present-day Dutch (Ackema & Neeleman 2004):

- (i) a. Jij loop-t dagelijks met een hondje over straat.
you walk-2SG daily with a doggy over street
b. Dagelijks loop-∅ jij met een hondje over straat.
daily walk you with a doggy over street
(Ackema and Neeleman 2004: 193)

- (12) a. [CP Op [C' C+V_{fin} [TP subject pronoun [T' T [VP ...]]]]]
 b. [CP XP [C' C [TP [T' T+V_{fin} [VP DP subject ...]]]]]

- In the Northern dialects, the original OE pattern in (11) was generalized to all contexts with adjacent non-3sg subject pronouns (cf. Rodeffer 1903, Pietsch 2005).⁶
- Why only in the northern dialects? In contrast to the southern OE dialects, the northern varieties exhibited generalized V2 (cf. Kroch & Taylor 1997, Trips 2002); thus, the context (V-pron.) that induced agreement weakening was much more frequent than in the southern variants (i.e., syncopated forms were not confined to operator contexts, but occurred in all contexts with 1pl/2pl subjects + inversion).
- Extension to 3pl: In ME, the Northern varieties replaced the original OE 3pl pronoun *hīo/hēo* with the Scandinavian *ðai* (which later spread to all varieties). This innovation led to cluster reduction of [s+ð] to [ð] for phonetic reasons (which was possibly promoted by analogical pressure (1pl/2pl), cf. Pietsch 2005:56).
- Unclear: Triggers for the extension to subject pronouns in preverbal position (possibly on the model of the subjunctive which had -∅ for all persons and numbers?).

4.3 External factors: Language/dialect contact

- External: (i) Contact with Midlands varieties; (ii) Celtic influence

Furthermore, an inspection of the relevant historical facts suggests that the NSR developed via a conspiracy of language-internal and language-external factors.

Concerning the history and provenance of this rule, a number of hypotheses have been put forward in the literature, one being that language contact between English and Brythonic Celtic is a likely source for the NSR (cf. Hamp 1976, Klemola 2000, Filpulla/Klemola/Pitkänen 2002, de Haas 2006). According to de Haas there are clear parallels between the Brythonic anti-agreement pattern and early English differential subject positions: Welsh has a system in which the realization of verbal agreement is sensitive to the type of the subject. Pronouns (overt or covert) trigger agreement on the verb, while full DP subject fail to do so (Borsley & Roberts 1996:40):

- (3) a. *gwelsan (nhw) ddraig.*
 see-3pl (they) dragon
 'They see a dragon.'
 b. *gwelodd y dynion ddraig.*
 see the men dragon
 'The men see a dragon.'

This pattern resembles the NSR, and since Cumbrian, being closely related to Welsh, came into contact with speakers of (Old) English it seems likely that this syntactic rule was borrowed into English. Further evidence for this approach comes from one of Shakespeare's plays, the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, where one character, Sir Hugh Evans, is depicted as a

⁶ Rodeffer's proposal is criticized by Berndt (1956), who argues that quantitative data from Northumbrian OE texts indicate that there is no direct link between agreement weakening in OE and the NSR (more precisely, Berndt argues that the evidence available to us suggests that agreement weakening had already been in decline in the northern varieties before -s was generalized to all persons and numbers). See Pietsch (2005:50ff.) for comprehensive discussion and a critical assessment of Berndt's arguments.

Welsh parson with Welsh speech:

- (4) a. If **Sir John Falstaff** have committed disparagements unto you, I am of the Church, and will e glad to do my benevolence to make atonements and compromises between you.
 b. It is petter that **friends** is the sword, and end it;
 c. 'Plesse my soule: To shallow Riuers to whose falls: melodious **Birds sings** Madrigalls:

de Haas synthesis of Brythonic NSR and OE/ME syntactic system which hosts pronoun in a different, higher, position than full DPs. ...

5. Concluding summary

References

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