Was Levelling: An Ancient Feature in Modern Appalachia

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Some language variation patterns have been found in Englishes world wide, prompting scholars to argue for their status as vernacular universals (Chambers 2004). This paper explores one supposed vernacular universal, default singulars for past be, in a variety renowned for its vernacularity, the Appalachian region of the eastern United States. Through a quantitative examination of native Appalachians, it is clear that default singulars are part of the dialect landscape, but few universal linguistic constraints are found for these speakers, although a linguistic innovation, was contraction, is revealed. In a study of 67 West Virginia speakers, the overall rate was 55% (132/239) for plural existentials (e.g. there was three of them) and 27% (349/1274) for all other subjects. These rates appear robust, are in line with previous findings, and mark this region as vernacular. Yet the divisions between the age groups are substantial, with the oldest age group at 57% (323/570), the middle age group at 21% (100/467), and the youngest age group at 13% (58/449). In comparing previous accounts of was levelling in this region, the indicators of social class and education still align in expected ways. The decline in the rate of was levelling is not even across the social spectrum, with Northern females leading the way to standardization for this previously non-standard dialect variety. Linguistically, was levelling has only two favouring factor groups: grammatical subject and contraction of was show a significant correlation. Although was levelling has been a stable feature in English for centuries, its decline in modern Appalachia reflects changes to the community and the dialect.