You calls it jannying, we calls it mummering – but what do they call it?

New and old constraints on verbal -s

Susanne Wagner (Chemnitz University of Technology)

The variable realisation of verbal -s has been investigated in a large number of English varieties, including traditional dialects as well as pidgins and creoles (see Clarke 1997 and van Herk & Walker 2005 for literature reviews). Its use is commonly associated with habituality, contrasting with the non-habitual bare form. However, a number of syntactic constraints, chiefly among them the Northern Subject Rule, also play a role, although to differing degrees in different varieties.

Newfoundland English is one of the varieties displaying variation between forms with and without -s. While it is generally assumed that – like most traditional dialect features – use of verbal -s is receding in present-day Newfoundland English, detailed investigations reveal a more complex picture. This paper is based on some 2,500 present-tense tokens of first and second person verbs (third person being excluded on grounds of invariability) in a sociolinguistically stratified corpus of contemporary Newfoundland English, collected in 2006. Tokens were coded for linguistic and non-linguistic factors, not only incorporating findings from earlier studies, but also focussing on more recent trends such as a possible influence of lexical item(s) functioning as “triggers” (not only verbs but also presence of certain adverbs/adverbials not necessarily signalling habituality).

On the one hand, results obtained from multivariate analyses (using both Goldvarb and Rbrul) show that speakers of Newfoundland English are very traditional in certain respects, maintaining constraints that have been present for centuries. On the other hand, however, divergent patterns for certain constructions and verbs indicate that verbal -s is possibly changing from a true variable to an artefact only found in certain contexts / situations.

References