

Dialect Death and Morphosyntactic Change: Smith Island Weak Expletive *It*¹

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1 Introduction

Two previous studies of the moribund English dialect spoken on Smith Island, Maryland, have made important contributions to our understanding of the processes of language death and the progression of morphosyntactic changes. Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (1999) examine two cases of phonological variation in Smith Island English (SIE), and show that usage of the innovative phonological variants raised /ai/ and glide-fronted /aw/ is increasing rapidly over time. This accelerated change demonstrates that dialect death, and by extension language death generally, can proceed via a process they refer to as concentration. Under concentration, usage of innovative or distinctive features increases over time, so that as a dialect approaches death it becomes less, not more, similar to the dialect that is replacing it. Schilling-Estes & Wolfram suggest that this process typically occurs during population attrition, so that "linguistic distinctiveness is heightened among a reduced number of speakers." (1999:488). Dialect death by concentration has received less attention in the literature than death by dissipation and decay (e.g. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1995), where the distinctive features of the dying language dissipate or decay over time, being gradually replaced by features of the encroaching language (e.g., Dressler 1988).

Schilling-Estes (2000) investigates the progress of a morphosyntactic change in SIE—the leveling of clitic negated *was* to *weren't* in all persons. As predicted by the concentration model, *weren't* leveling is increasing rapidly over time. The results of Schilling-Estes (2000) are significant because they challenge common assumptions about language change. Some claim that morphosyntactic changes are always slower than phonological changes because morphosyntactic change is disruptive to the grammatical system (e.g., Rickford 1985; Wolfram 1974). For this reason, morphosyntactic changes are said to proceed erratically, in contrast to the regular progress of

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phonological change (e.g., Hoch and Joseph 1996; Hock 1991). The findings of Schilling-Estes run counter to both of these claims. *Weren't* leveling is proceeding at much faster rate than the phonological changes documented by Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999), and *weren't* leveling is completely regular, displaying no erratic grammatical behavior.

This study examines the usage of weak expletive *it* (WEIT), another characteristic morphosyntactic feature of SIE. The results of quantitative analysis replicate the findings of Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999) and Schilling-Estes (2000), supporting their conclusions about dialect death and morphosyntactic change. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 gives a brief overview of the history of Smith Island, some of the conditions that gave rise to a unique dialect there, and some of the reasons for the endangered status of the dialect. Section 3 reviews the grammatical properties of English expletive subjects; Section 4 introduces Smith Island WEIT. Section 5 presents the results of quantitative analyses of WEIT usage on Smith Island, in both real and apparent time. Section 6 demonstrates that the change to WEIT is proceeding regularly, with no unexpected grammatical eccentricities. Section 7 summarizes and concludes the paper.

2 Smith Island, Maryland²

One in name and identity, Smith Island is actually a small group of islands located in Chesapeake Bay, just on the Maryland side of the Virginia-Maryland border. Although many of the Chesapeake Bay islands were once inhabited, only Smith Island and nearby Tangier Island, VA, are currently populated. Smith Island is separated from Crisfield, MD, the closest town on the mainland, by a forty minute boat ride. The ride is sometimes impossible during the winter, when the Bay can freeze. There is no automobile access, and no airport. There are three small towns on Smith Island: Ewell, Rhodes Point, and Tylerton. Ewell and Rhodes Point are connected by a short road; Tylerton, the most isolated of the three, can be reached only by boat.

English, Cornish, and Welsh settlers first established a community on Smith Island in 1657, and Smith Island has been continuously populated since. The original population consisted of a few groups of farmers, grew to 19 families by 1808, and then to 300 by the end of the Civil War. In recent decades, the population of Smith Island remained steady at about 650 residents, but began to fall in 1980, reaching 459 in 1990, and approximately 350 in 2001. The island's only industry is small scale crabbing and oyster-

² For more on the history and social life of Smith Island, see Dize (1990), Horton (1987), Horton (1996), Sheenan (1994), and Wennersten (1992).

ing, and this trade is increasingly threatened due to environmental and political factors beyond the control of the islanders. For this reason, most young people leave Smith Island after high school in order to find employment. Moreover, the island is being eaten away by the constant erosion of the Chesapeake Bay, and may not even be habitable after 100 years. Thus, the population of Smith Island will undoubtedly continue to decline until the community ceases to exist.

Because of Smith Island's geographical isolation, contact with the mainland has been sporadic and limited in nature. Mainlanders are regarded as "foreigners," although tourism draws increasing numbers of them to the island. Unlike Tangier Island or North Carolina's Outer Banks, however, Smith Island has never catered to tourism. Ferry service is infrequent and scheduled for islanders rather than for visitors, making days trips next to impossible. There are only two bed and breakfast style hotels on the island, and no tourist facilities other than a small visitors center. Very few mainlanders migrate to the island or spend long periods of time there. Students from Smith Island attend high school in Crisfield and have friends there, but the islanders retain a strong sense of their Smith Island identity, and report that they tend to stick together at school.

3 Expletives in English

This section reviews the basic facts about expletives in English. An expletive is a grammatical subject with no semantic content. Expletives don't *mean* anything—they act as a kind of placeholder, satisfying the requirement that English sentences have a subject.³ Most varieties of English have two morphologically differentiated expletive subjects: expletive *it* and the 'weak' expletive *there*. These two expletives have distinct properties and occur in complementary syntactic environments.

3.1 Expletive *It*

(1-2) are examples of the English expletive *it*. This expletive can be the subject of a weather predicate (1); it can also serve as the subject of a raising

³ The standard syntactic analysis holds that the EPP requires sentences to have subjects. See Haegeman (1995) and references cited.

predicate⁴ with a finite complement clause (2). In expletive *it* constructions, verbal agreement morphology is always third singular (hereafter 3s) (3).

- (1) Weather predicates
It is rainy today.
- (2) Raising predicates w/finite complement clauses
 - a. It seems that the crabs are plentiful this year.
 - b. It is likely that we will catch a lot of crabs this year.
- (3) * It seem that the crabs are plentiful this year.
(cf. The crabs seem plentiful this year.)

3.2 'Weak' Expletive *There*

(4-7) are examples of the English expletive *there*. This expletive can be the subject of a copular existential construction (4); the subject of a raising predicate with a non finite complement clause (5); the subject of an unaccusative verb (6);⁵ or the subject of a passive sentence (7):

- (4) There are a lot of crabs in the pot today.
- (5) a. There seem to be a lot of crabs in the pot today.
b. There are likely to be a lot of crabs in the pot today.
- (6) Every weekend, there arrive at the inn a lot of unruly researchers.
- (7) There were a lot of crabs caught in the Bay this year.

There is called the 'weak' expletive because, unlike expletive *it*, *there* does not trigger 3s verbal agreement. The verb in a *there* expletive construction always agrees with the associate NP lower in the structure (8-11).⁶ Expletive *there* also induces a definiteness restriction, such that definite NPs cannot be used with expletive *there* (12-15).

⁴ Raising predicates are verbs (e.g. seem, appear) and adjectives (e.g., likely) with no external argument. Their surface subject position can be filled by an expletive or an NP that moves from lower in the structure. See Haegeman (1995) and references.

⁵ Unaccusative verbs (e.g., arrive) are intransitive verbs with no external argument. Their surface subject position can be filled by an expletive, or by an NP that moves from its underlying post-verbal position. See Haegeman (1995) and references cited.

⁶ An associate NP is the thematic argument of a *there* expletive construction, and can occur in surface subject position when the expletive is omitted:

- (i)
 - a. A crab is in that pot.
 - b. A crab seems to be in that pot.
 - c. A solitary researcher arrives at the inn.
 - d. A lot of crabs were caught in the Bay.

- (8) a. There *is*/**are* a crab in that pot.
b. There **is*/**are* a lot of crabs in that pot.
- (9) a. There *seems*/**seem* to be a crab in that pot.
b. There **seems*/**seem* to be a lot of crabs in that pot.
- (10) a. Every weekend, there *arrives*/**arrive* at the inn a solitary researcher.
b. Every weekend, there **arrives*/**arrive* at the inn a lot of unruly researchers.
- (11) a. There *was*/**were* a crab caught in the Bay this year.
b. There **was*/**were* a lot of crabs caught in the Bay this year.
- (12) * There are *the*/**those* jimmy crabs in the pot today.
- (13) a. * There *seem* to be *the*/**those* jimmy crabs in the pot today.
b. * There are likely to be *the*/**those* jimmy crabs in the pot today.
- (14) * Every weekend, there *arrive* at the inn those unruly researchers.
- (15) * There were *the*/**those* jimmy crabs caught in the Bay this year.

3.3 Complementary Environments

English *it* and *there* are in complementary distribution: neither expletive can occur in the environment of the other. *There* cannot be the expletive subject of weather predicates (16) or raising predicates with finite complements (17). *It* cannot be the expletive subject of copular existentials (18), raising predicates with non-finite complements (19), unaccusative verbs (20), or passives (21). For recent syntactic analyses of expletive subjects that account for the complementary distribution of *it* and *there*, see Chomsky (1995; 1998).

- (16) * There is rainy today.
- (17) a. * There *seems*/**seem* that the crabs are plentiful this year.
b. * There is likely that we will catch a lot of crabs this year.
- (18) * It *are*/**is* a lot of crabs in the pot today.
- (19) a. * It *seem*/**seems* to be a lot of crabs in the pot today.
b. * It *are*/**is* likely to be a lot of crabs in the pot today.
- (20) * Every weekend, it *arrive*/**arrives* at the inn a lot of unruly researchers.
- (21) * It *were*/**was* a lot of crabs caught in the Bay this year.

4 Smith Island Weak Expletive *It* (WEIT)

Smith Island English (SIE) differs from other English varieties in its variable use of *it* as a weak expletive (hereafter referred to as weak expletive *it*)

(WEIT)). The example below illustrates a typical instance of WEIT (22).⁷ SIE speakers continue their variable use of *there* as a weak expletive (23).

(22) ...it's a dance tonight. (2000)

"There's a dance tonight."

(23) There's a house....down the road from here.... (2000)

Although it is morphologically identical to *it*, Smith Island WEIT is clearly a weak expletive, syntactically equivalent to *there*. WEIT has the expected distribution of a weak expletive. It can appear in all of the weak expletive environments discussed above (24-27). WEIT also induces the definiteness restriction associated with weak expletives. Examples like (28-31) are unattested; two Smith Island informants strongly rejected WEIT sentences with definite associate NPs

(24) Copular existentials

In winter, it's nothing to do. (2000)

(25) Raising predicates w/non finite complements

It just happened to be a EMT on this part of the island.... (1983)

(26) Unaccusatives

...it comes this white house here... (1983)

(27) Passives

And it was sharks seen down there that day. (1983)

(28) * In summer, it's the big barbecue.

(29) * It just happened to be the doctor on the island.

(30) * Then you go straight on down, and it comes John's house.

(31) * And it was that shark seen down there.

However, a puzzling difference between WEIT and *there* is that WEIT has the agreement properties of expletive *it*, categorically triggering 3s verbal agreement regardless of the associate NP. Examples like (32b) are unattested; two Smith Island informants strongly rejected WEIT sentences with non-3s verbal agreement. Parrott (2001) discusses why the agreement facts of Smith Island WEIT are problematic for Chomsky's (1998) analysis of expletives, and offers an alternative account.

(32) a. I don't know how many it is there now. (1983)

b. * I don't know how many it are there now.

⁷ Throughout the paper, attested data appear with the interview year in parentheses.

5 Quantitative Analysis

The following section reports the results of quantitative analysis of variable WEIT usage on Smith Island. The primary data were extracted from transcripts of sociolinguistic interviews with 17 islanders; the interviews were conducted on Smith Island in 1983 by Rebecca Setliff and an interviewer from the island.

Because this study is concerned with the variable usage of WEIT as a weak expletive, all and only weak expletives were extracted and analyzed. Potential weak expletive tokens were collected by using the 'Find' function of a word processor to search for all instances of *there* and *it* in a transcript. Non-weak expletive cases of both *there* and *it* were discarded, including locative *there* (e.g., 'I was there'), pronominal *it* (e.g., 'I love it'), and non-weak expletive *it* (e.g., 'It's raining'). Instances of *it* that were ambiguous between a pronominal and a weak expletive interpretation were also discarded (e.g., '...it was a lot to learn....' (1983)). Repeated expletives, expletives isolated in sentence fragments, and self-corrected expletives were counted only when both the expletive and its verb occurred. For example, both expletives in the following sentence would have been counted: 'It's, it's a lot of crabs in the pot;' but only the second expletive would have been counted in this sentence: 'It, it's a lot of crabs in the pot.'

5.1 WEIT in Apparent Time

The primary 1983 data were first analyzed according to the age of the speaker, following the apparent time methodology (Bailey, Winkle, Tillery, & Sand 1992). In order to facilitate comparison, the 17 speakers were divided into the same generation groups used by Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999) and Schilling-Estes (2000): Generation I (born 1899-1916), Generation II (born 1944-1961), and Generation III (born 1966-1971). Table 1 shows, for each generation group, the total number of weak expletives, the number of WEIT tokens, and the percentage of WEIT usage out of all weak expletives: Table 2 shows the results of a VARBRUL analysis of these data.

WEIT accounts for over 70% of the 446 weak expletives in this sample, and has an overall probability of .72. Thus within SIE as a whole WEIT is used far more commonly than *there*. However, Generation II and III speakers account for the majority of WEIT usage, while Generation I speakers only use WEIT about half the time. The VARBRUL analysis confirms this pattern and its statistical significance. According to the apparent time model, these results indicate that usage of WEIT is increasing over time. SIE appears to be undergoing a morphosyntactic change such that WEIT replaces

there as a weak expletive. The change is virtually complete for three of the Generation II and III speakers in this sample, who use WEIT for over 90% of their weak expletives.

Generation Group		WEIT
Generation I (4 persons) b. 1899-1916	# WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	73 / 135 54%
Generation II (6 persons) b. 1944-1961	# WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	133 / 172 77.3%
Generation III (7 persons) b. 1966-1971	# WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	109 / 139 78.4%
Totals	# WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens Percentage WEIT	315 / 446 70.6%

Table 1. Raw numbers and WEIT percentages (1983 data)

Application = WEIT (Non-application = <i>there</i>)	
Factor group: Generation	
Input probability = .72	
Generation group	
Generation I	= .32
Generation II	= .57
Generation III	= .59
Chi-square per cell	= .000
Total Chi-square	= .000

Table 2. VARBRUL results by generation (1983 data)

The WEIT findings are consistent with Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999), adding to the mounting evidence that SIE is undergoing concentration as it dies. A characteristic of dialect death via concentration is that accelerated change is found throughout the distinctive features of the dialect. That is, concentration must be distinguished from focusing, where accelerated usage is confined to just a few features, or even a single feature, which are usually very salient. Schilling-Estes & Wolfram report the increased use of raised /ai/ and glide-fronted /aw/ in SIE, and Schilling-Estes (2000) has

documented the increase in leveling of negated *was* to *weren't* in all persons. As expected on the concentration model, usage of WEIT is also increasing in the moribund Smith Island dialect. This brings to four the number of SIE features known to be undergoing accelerated change. Moreover, only one of these features is particularly salient. When asked about their dialect, islanders invariably discuss (and demonstrate) glide-fronted /aw/, but they never mention WEIT.

An additional characteristic of dialect death concentration, according to Schilling-Estes & Wolfram, is that although the pace is accelerated, linguistic changes progress at an otherwise normal rate. The pattern of rapid change under concentration "approximates the S-curve that characterizes the diffusion of new language forms in healthy language varieties". (2000:513) The increase in WEIT usage over time is proceeding exactly as predicted by the concentration model. Figure 1 clearly shows an S-shaped rate of change.

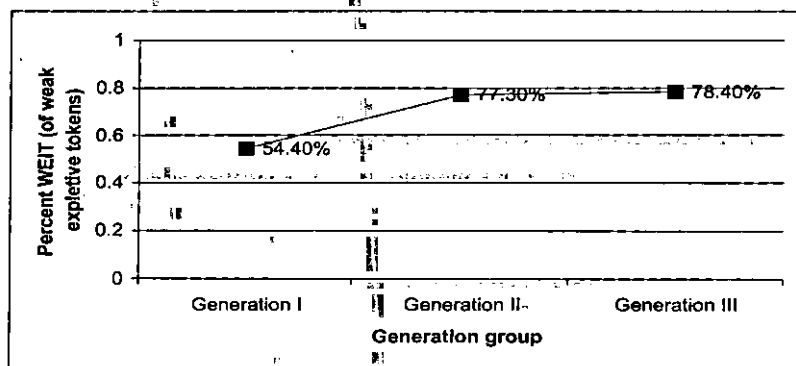


Figure 1. Percent WEIT, by generation (1983 data)

The steepest slope of the S-shaped curve in Figure 1 is the 23% jump in WEIT frequency between Generation I and II. Usage of WEIT continues to increase between Generations II and III, but only very slightly (1%). The rate of change of WEIT is strikingly similar to that of the two phonological changes studied by Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999), where usage of the distinctive Smith Island variant increases sharply between Generations I and II, followed by only a slight increase between Generations II and III. As illustrated in Figure 2, usage of glide-fronted /aw/ jumps by 50% from Generations I to Generation II, but only increases by 1% from Generation II to III; raised /ai/ usage increases by 16% and then 4%:

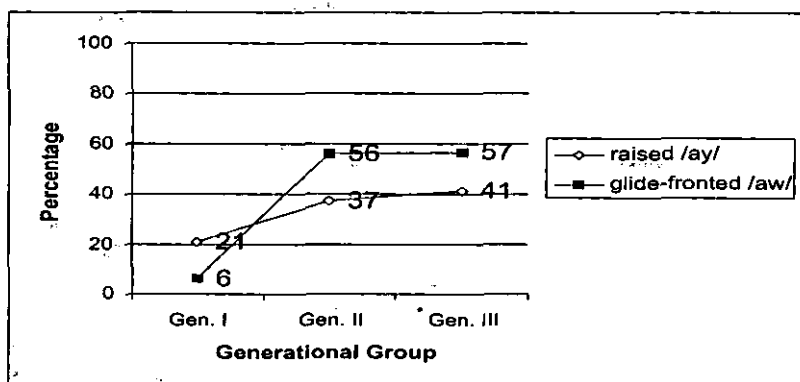


Figure 2. The Cross-Generational Patterning of Raised /ay/ and Glide-fronted /aw/ on Smith Island (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1999), graph modified from Schilling-Estes (2000)

The pattern of change of WEIT is also similar to the morphosyntactic change leveling negated *was* to *weren't* in all persons. Schilling-Estes (2000) demonstrates that this change has proceeded at a lightning pace, faster than either the change to WEIT or the phonological changes discussed above. But the pattern is nonetheless similar: an S-shaped upward curve featuring a sharp increase between Generation I and II (25%), illustrated in Figure 3.

A sharp increase in usage appears between Generation I and II for every innovative Smith Island variant, phonological and morphosyntactic, that has been investigated to date. It seems very likely that this increase signals the beginning of the concentration process in SIE. According to Schilling-Estes & Wolfram, concentration may occur because speakers "seek, (consciously or unconsciously) to heighten their already increasing dialectal distinctiveness as a sort of linguistic 'self-defense' against the encroachment of the outside world." (1999: p.510) Generation II was the first generation to experience real population attrition. Generation II was also the first generation to come into near daily contact with speakers of mainland varieties. Smith Islanders from Generation II were the first to attend high school on the mainland; prior generations attended school on the island, and rarely visited the mainland. This direct and frequent exposure to mainland dialects would have highlighted the distinctive features of SIE by contrast, providing a target for divergence. Generation II's usage of distinctive SIE features would increase in response to their new awareness that the Smith Island community, and hence its unique dialect, is threatened by population decline. Thus, the con-

stellation of circumstances first experienced by Generation II might explain why these speakers appear to initiate the concentration process in SIE.

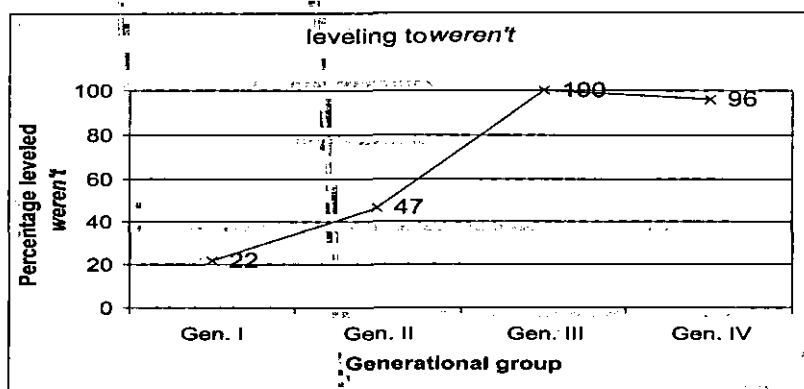


Figure 3. The Progress of *weren't* Leveling in Smith Island English (Schilling-Estes 2000), graph modified from Schilling-Estes (2000)

There is, however, a major difference between *weren't* leveling and the other changes. The changes involving raised /ai/, glide-fronted /aw/, and WEIT are not complete, leveling off at approximately 40%, 56%, and 77% respectively between Generations II and III. Presumably these changes will be completed in Generation IV or even later, if the concentration process continues until SIE dies. In contrast, *weren't* leveling races to its conclusion between Generations II and III, leveling off at virtually 100% between Generations III and IV. It is not clear why *weren't* leveling is so much more rapid than the other changes affecting SIE, and no explanations will be attempted here. What is significant is that Schilling-Estes has discovered a morphosyntactic change that is outpacing a phonological change. This is counterevidence to a common claim about language change, which holds that phonological changes necessarily proceed more quickly than morphosyntactic changes (e.g., Rickford 1985; Wolfram 1974).

The WEIT results replicate Schilling-Estes's findings for an additional morphosyntactic variable. The change to WEIT in SIE is proceeding just as fast, and perhaps slightly faster, than the two phonological changes previously studied. Thus counterevidence is accumulating, and neither Schilling-Estes's nor the WEIT findings can be easily dismissed as a fluke. The claim that a phonological change must be faster than a morphosyntactic change cannot stand in its strong form, and must be revised or discarded.

5.2 WEIT in Real-Time

For a real time comparison, a small set of additional data were analyzed. Some of these data come from re-interviews of one Generation I and one Generation II speaker from the 1983 sample, carried out in 1999 and 2000 by Natalie Schilling-Estes and Laurie Zimmermann. Data was also extracted from a group interview with four Generation IV speakers (born 1982-1987) which was conducted by Jeffrey Parrott in 2000. Only interviews with females were used, in order to abstract away from sex as variable in such a small data set. The data were analyzed using the methodology outlined at the beginning of section 5 above. This produced too few tokens for VARBRUL analysis, but the raw numbers and percentages are given in Table 3.

Generation/sex Group		WEIT
Gen. I, female (1 person, 1983 data) b. 1911	# WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens	20 / 38
	Percentage WEIT	52.6% (1983 = 48.3%)
Gen. III, female (1 person, 1983 data) b. 1971	# WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens	36 / 37
	Percentage WEIT	97.3% (1983 = 100%)
Gen. IV, females (4 persons) b. 1982 - 1987	# WEIT / Total weak expletive tokens	43 / 70
	Percentage WEIT	61.4% (1983 Gen. III females = 84.3%)

Table 3. Raw numbers and percentages, 1999-2000 interviews

The individuals in Generations I and II use WEIT at a rate virtually identical ($\pm 5\%$) to their 1983 usage, suggesting that the change observed in apparent time is real, and not an instance of age-grading. However, the rate of WEIT usage is unexpectedly low for Generation IV. While Generation III in 1983 used WEIT for an average of 84.3% of their weak expletives, Generation IV declines to 61.4% WEIT. The concentration model predicts that WEIT usage should increase over time, and that prediction is born out for Generations I-III, where the trend is clearly upward. For this reason the apparent Generation IV decline is puzzling, but it could be the result of small sample size. If so, the average WEIT usage rate is predicted to increase with more Generation IV data. This task, and more real time analysis, should be undertaken in future research.

6 The Regularity of Morphosyntactic Change

There is no evidence of erratic grammatical behavior at any point during the progress of the change from *there* to WEIT in SIE. This finding is consistent with Schilling-Estes (2000), and contrary to the claim that morphosyntactic changes are disruptive to the grammatical system and therefore proceed in an irregular and erratic fashion (e.g., Hoch & Joseph 1996; Hock 1991).

6.1 Locative *There*

The WEIT change involves a morphosyntactic feature and not just an across-the-board lexical substitution of *it* for *there*. Despite the homophony of expletive and locative *there*, only the weak expletive, in its distinct syntactic environment, is variable during the change. If the change to WEIT were erratic or irregular, we might expect confused speakers to occasionally substitute *it* for locative *there*, but this is not the case. In all of the data, for all speakers, there is not one single instance where *it* replaces locative *there*. Sentences like the (b) examples below are unattested:⁸

- (33) a. it's only a handful of 'em down there. (1983)
 b. * it's only a handful of 'em down it.
 (34) a. ...it was [a] cat in there... (1983)
 b. * ...it was cat in it...

6.2 Agreement

Associate agreement is variable with expletive *there* in SIE, sometimes leveling to 3s -s. This occurs with both clitic and non-clitic agreement:

- (35) I believe there's spirits though. (2000)
 (36) There are two older than me and one younger. (1983)

As discussed in Section 3 above, WEIT and *there* have distinct agreement properties: verbal agreement with WEIT is categorically 3s. If the change to WEIT were irregular or erratic, we might expect to find occasional plural associate agreement with WEIT, but this is not the case. In all of the data, there is not a single instance of non-3s agreement with a WEIT subject, regardless of the associate. This holds for both clitic and non-clitic agree-

⁸ The (b) examples were not given to informants, who would presumably reject them given their total absence in the data.

ment. Sentences like the (b) examples below* are unattested, and were strongly rejected by informants.

- (37) a. It's no...separate burial plots on Tylerton. (1983)
 b. * It're no separate burial plots on Tylerton.
 (38) a. Is it any funny things you remember...? (1983)
 b. * Are it any funny things you remember?

7 Conclusion

This study has shown that the usage of WEIT is increasing rapidly over time in Smith Island English, concurrent with ongoing population decline. The change to WEIT is taking place at approximately the same rate as the two previously studied phonological changes in SIE, and is proceeding regularly, with no confusion of WEIT's grammatical distribution or agreement properties. These findings replicate the results of Schilling-Estes & Wolfram (1999) and Schilling-Estes (2000). The quantitative analysis of WEIT therefore offers support for the death by concentration hypothesis, and refutes claims that morphosyntactic change is slow or erratic.

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