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# Nonstandard Agreement in Standard English: The Social Perception of Agreement Variation under Existential there

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# Nonstandard Agreement in Standard English: The Social Perception of Agreement Variation under Existential *there*

## **Abstract**

When using existential constructions to introduce plural NPs (e.g., *there are dishes in the sink*), speakers have the option of using a plural or singular form of the verb. In other words, speakers can use agreeing (plural) or non-agreeing (singular) forms of the verb when the NP is plural. Previous research reveals that non-agreement under existential *there* is the norm, even in standard varieties of spoken English. Speakers use non-agreeing forms, such as *there's* or *there is*, in roughly two-thirds of all tokens with plural NPs. This is striking, because other forms of non-agreement are relatively uncommon in standard varieties of spoken English. There is mounting evidence, though, that the two present tense non-agreeing forms *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> and *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> are neither syntactically nor sociolinguistically equivalent. While the full verb non-agreeing form *there is* NP<sub>pl</sub> seems to be socially distributed like a stable, stigmatized variant, the cliticized non-agreeing form *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> appears to be widespread and relatively free of social stigma. In this paper, I investigate whether *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> and *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> constitute distinct sociolinguistic variants by testing how listeners socially evaluate the speakers who use them. The results of this perception study demonstrate that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is much less socially stigmatized than *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub>, and it is almost identical to the standard agreeing form *there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub> in how it influences social perceptions.

# Nonstandard Agreement in Standard English: The Social Perception of Agreement Variation under Existential *there*

Katherine Hilton\*

## 1 Introduction

Nonstandard number agreement under existential *there* is the norm, even in standard varieties of English. Past research indicates that when existential constructions occur with plural subjects, the verb is more likely to display singular agreement, such as in Examples (2) and (3) below, than plural, as in Example (1) (Breivik and Martínez-Insua 2008, DeWolf 1992, Feagin 1979, Meechan and Foley 1994, Riordan 2007, Tagliamonte 1998, Walker 2007):

- (1) AGREEMENT: *There are more new subdivisions in the south side of town.*
- (2) NON-AGREEMENT WITH FULL VERB: *There is basically no jobs in the industry.*
- (3) NON-AGREEMENT WITH COPULAR CLITIC: *There's only two thrift shops down there.*

This high rate of non-agreement is striking given the relative infrequency of non-agreement elsewhere in English (Chambers 2004, Cheshire and Fox 2009, Meechan and Foley 1994). It also raises the issue of whether or not it makes sense to treat agreement patterns like those in (2) and (3) as nonstandard when they are the norm in spoken English and occur with much greater frequency than the standard variant (1). Before addressing this question, though, it is important to note that, although the constructions in (2) and (3) appear to constitute the same nonstandard, non-agreeing variant, there is mounting evidence that they are neither syntactically nor sociolinguistically equivalent (Breivik and Martínez-Insua 2008, Krejci and Hilton 2015, Meechan and Foley 1994, Walker 2007). The form *there's* with a copular clitic (3) accounts for the vast majority of non-agreement and differs from full verb non-agreement (2) in the set of linguistic (Walker 2007) and social factors (Krejci and Hilton 2015) that condition its usage. This suggests that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is distinct from other forms of non-agreement under existentials, and that as a unique variant, it may convey a different set of social meanings. In this paper, I address the question of whether or not *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> and *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> constitute distinct sociolinguistic variants by testing their relative effects on how listeners socially evaluate the speakers who use them. The results of these perception studies demonstrate that not only is *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> much less socially marked than *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub>, but its effects on listener perceptions are almost indistinguishable from those of the standard variant *there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub>.

Grammatical variation in general, and specifically number agreement variation in English, is typically more stigmatized and subject to greater negative social evaluation than phonological variation (Murray and Simon 2004, Squires 2011, Wolfram 1991). Through their prescribed use in printing and the education system, the grammatical features that make up Standard English have come to be used more often by those speakers who have spent more time in the education system (Trudgill 1999). Accordingly, standard grammatical features have become ideologically linked to notions of greater education, intelligence, articulateness, wealth, and power, while use of non-standard grammatical features has come to be associated with the opposite (Campbell-Kibler 2010, Cheshire 1999). On the whole, variation in number agreement under existential *there* follows the expected production patterns of a socially stigmatized grammatical variable. Nonstandard agreement (*there* + BE<sub>sg</sub> + NP<sub>pl</sub>) is used more frequently by speakers with less formal education (Meechan and Foley 1994) and those who are from lower status socioeconomic backgrounds (Feagin 1979). It is also found more often in less formal registers (Cheshire 1999, Crawford 2005, Schütze 1999) and is more common in spoken than written language (Crawford 2005, Martínez-Insua and Palacio Martínez 2003).

Several researchers have noted, though, that the form *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub>, whether in comparison with other nonstandard grammatical features or other forms of singular agreement under existen-

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tial *there*, stands out as particularly lacking in social stigma (Crawford 2005, Kortmann 2006). Although on the surface, *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> looks like any other nonstandard grammatical feature displaying a nonstandard agreement pattern, it carries remarkably “broad social acceptance, at least in informal, spontaneous spoken English” (Squires 2011:55) and “seems to be moving into standard dialect” (2011:48). The majority of variationist studies on the production of existential *there*, however, have not explored the peculiarities of *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub>, because they have combined *there's* with full-verb non-agreeing forms like *there is* and treated these as a single variant. One production study that has examined the social distribution of *there's* separately from full-verb forms has uncovered noteworthy differences between the two. Krejci and Hilton (2015) found that full-verb non-agreement (e.g., *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub>) conforms to the expected social distribution of a stable stigmatized feature (Ash 2013, Labov et al. 2006); it is used more often by men and speakers with less formal education, and occurs consistently across different age groups. In stark contrast to this, *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> patterns more like a feature undergoing change in progress than a stable nonstandard variant. It shows no sharp stratification – it is used by every speaker in their 144 person sample and does not correlate with speaker's level of education. It does correlate, however, with age and is used significantly more often by younger speakers, despite the finding that this group is not more likely to use other forms of nonstandard agreement or other contractions more often. These results suggest that the two variants differ in their respective levels of standardness and in their longitudinal trajectories, where *there's* appears to be considered relatively standard by most speakers and its usage may be increasing over time.

## 2 Hypotheses

Prior research suggests that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is not (or is no longer) a stigmatized feature of non-standard English but has gained a place in standard spoken English. I assess this hypotheses through a perception study that tests listeners' social evaluations of speakers using *there's*, *there is* and *there are* to introduce plural NPs. If it is true that *there's* differs from full-verb non-agreement in lacking social stigma and undergoing a change in progress, then we can make several predictions about how listeners will interpret its use.

Nonstandard grammatical features in general, and nonstandard agreement under existentials in particular, are used more often by speakers who are from lower status socioeconomic backgrounds and who have less formal education. Nonstandard features are also ideologically linked to a lack of wealth and educational experience. These associations are reflected in the ways that listeners evaluate a speaker's intelligence, education, and class background (Campbell-Kibler 2010). Therefore, I expect listeners to evaluate speakers who use *there is* as less educated, intelligent, articulate and wealthy than speakers who used the standard form *there are*. But if *there's* is becoming an accepted part of standard spoken English, then we would not expect its use to correlate with any of these attributes. And if *there's* is becoming a broadly accepted feature of Standard spoken English, then we would also expect a wide range of listeners to accept its use. However, I predict that there will be greater inter-listener variation in response to *there is* and that the use of *there is* will be more stigmatized by listeners who are the least tolerant of morphosyntactic variation.

Previous research also suggests that use of the cliticized form *there's* as an existential may be increasing over time. If this is the case, and listeners are sensitive to the age distributions associated with changes in progress (as Koops, Gentry and Pantos 2008 demonstrate that they are), then I predict that speakers using *there's* might be perceived as younger than speakers using other forms, and that the use of *there's* may be evaluated more favorably when heard in younger sounding voices or when rated by younger listeners.

Finally, this study offers the opportunity to test the effects of modality, written vs. spoken language, on listener perceptions. Very little work has investigated the social perceptions of morphosyntactic variation (Campbell-Kibler 2010), and what has been done has presented stimuli to participants in written form (Squires 2011, 2013). While spoken stimuli are necessary for studying the perception of phonetic variation, researchers have a choice of representing morphosyntactic variants with either text or speech. It is likely that this choice of modality can meaningfully affect how participants respond to stimuli. Since Standard English is “the variety of English normally used in writing, especially in printing” (Trudgill 1999:118), nonstandard grammatical features may seem even more marked and stigmatized when they appear in writing and, as a result, elicit

different responses. More specifically, agreement variation under existential *there* occurs much less frequently in writing than it does in speech (Martinez-Insua and Palacio Martinez 2003); this is even the case for informal written registers such as online chat conversations (Crawford 2005). Therefore, I predict that the use of *there is* to introduce plural NPs will be more negatively evaluated in writing than in speech. It is not immediately clear how perceptions of *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> might be affected by modality, since it too is relatively uncommon in writing.

### 3 Methods

This study uses the Matched Guise Technique to capture a range of social meanings associated with the three variants under investigation: *there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub> (agreement), *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> (full verb non-agreement), and *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> (non-agreement with copular clitic). Participants were asked to read or listen to a single sentence containing an existential construction. After reading or listening to the stimuli, participants answer a series of questions designed to elicit their perceptions, along a number of different social axes, about the person who uttered the sentence they saw or heard. The two surveys are nearly identical, aside from the modality of the stimuli. Regardless of whether the survey used written or spoken stimuli, survey-takers were told that the sentence they saw or heard was randomly selected from a spoken conversation between two people. This makes it possible to test the effects of modality independent of genre or register.

After reading or listening to a single guise, participants answered a series of questions about the speaker which were designed to test the hypothesis that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is distinct from full-verb non-agreement in terms of its associations with education, economic prestige and formality. Participants rated the extent to which the speaker could be described as educated, intelligent, articulate, and laid-back. They also guessed the likelihood that the speaker was from a wealthy, middle-class and working-class or blue-collar background and rated the plausibility that the sentence was uttered during a conversation between friends or a job interview. In order to assess the hypothesis that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is undergoing a change in progress and is, therefore, used more often by younger speakers, survey-takers were asked to guess the age of the speaker. Finally, survey-takers rated the likelihood that the speaker was from four different regions of the United States: the East Coast, the West Coast, the Midwest, and the South. For every attribute, except age, participants selected a number between 0 and 10 which corresponded to (i) the extent to which that attribute described the speaker (e.g., “not at all articulate” to “very articulate”) or (ii) the likelihood that the speaker was in a particular speaking context or belonged to a certain socioeconomic class (e.g., “not at all likely talking to a friend” to “very likely talking to a friend”). After answering questions about the speaker, participants provided information about themselves: their age, gender, occupation, and education level, as well as how much, on a scale from 0 to 10, it bothers them when other people make grammar mistakes.

The stimuli for the two surveys consisted of a single sentence, which varied only in the form of the copula. The three sentences that served as the stimuli are listed below:

- (4) AGREEMENT: There are probably different ways to do it.
- (5) CLITIC NON-AGREEMENT: There's probably different ways to do it.
- (6) FULL VERB NON-AGREEMENT: There is probably different ways to do it.

A number of criteria influenced the decision to use this sentence frame for the guises. First, it does not contain any particularly marked lexical material and is semantically vague enough that readers/listeners could imagine a variety of people uttering it in a range of situations. Second, the copula and the noun phrase are separated by two words (*probably* and *different*), which should make the non-agreement stimuli sound more natural than if the copula and NP were adjacent, since non-standard agreement in existential constructions is more common as the amount of intervening material between the verb and noun phrase (or quantifier) increases (Britain and Sudbury 2002, Melnick 2013, Tagliamonte 1998). The final consideration in choosing the sentence frame was the first segment of the word that immediately followed the copula. If this word began with /s/, /z/ or /r/ it could obscure the form of the copula (which ends in either /z/ or /r/), making it difficult for the listener to decipher the variant.

The spoken stimuli were created from recordings of eight native speakers of American Eng-

lish who had all spent their entire lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. The speakers comprise two distinct age groups; half were between 18 and 25 while the other half were over 80. There were two women and two men in each age group. Speakers were recorded reading the four sentences below and were asked to read them in a conversational tone with consistent rhythm and intonation.

- (7) There are probably different ways to do it.
- (8) There were probably different ways to do it.
- (9) There's probably different ways to do it.
- (10) There is probably different ways to do it.

To minimize differences across the guises, amplitude was normalized across all recordings, and the stimuli were created by combining the latter half (*different ways to do it*) of (8) with the first half of each of the other sentences. This eliminated most differences in intonation and voice quality across a single speaker's recordings, since the second half of each stimulus came from the same recording. Furthermore, since all stimuli were created by cutting and pasting sections from different recordings, all stimuli are equally influenced by potential side effects of manipulation.

Over 900 participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk to take the two surveys. All of these participants were native speakers of English and lived in the United States. Roughly 180 took the survey with written stimuli, and 720 listened to spoken stimuli. Participants were paid \$0.45 for completing the survey, which lasted 3-5 minutes, and were required to answer all questions. To ensure that participants read the questions carefully, there was a question in the bottom third of the survey that asked them to select the number 9. All participants who failed to select the number 9 for this question had their responses excluded from the study.

Once all of the results were collected, I conducted linear mixed effects regressions in JMP to test the relative effects of the three variants (*there are*, *there's* and *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub>) on the social evaluations of the speakers. The survey-takers' ratings of the speakers with respect to particular social attributes (e.g., ratings of perceived articulateness or the likelihood that the speaker was talking to a friend) were treated as the dependent variables, and the form of the variant was one of several independent variables. The other independent variables included the speaker's age group (young or old), the sex, age and education level of the survey-taker, the extent to which grammar mistakes bothered the survey-taker, and the modality of the stimulus (speech or text). I also analyzed the interactions between the variant and each of the other independent variables. Because the variable under investigation makes a distinction among three variants, I ran each of the statistical models twice with a different variant serving as the default application value. In the first iteration of these models, the standard agreement form (*there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub>) was treated as the default application value, meaning that each regression evaluated the extent to which the two non-agreeing forms deviated from the agreeing form. In the second iteration, the clitic non-agreeing form (*there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub>) was treated as the default application value in order to evaluate whether *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is distinct from the full verb non-agreeing form *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub>. If both *there's* and *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> are nonstandard variants, then one would expect them both to differ significantly, and in the same direction, from the standard *there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub> in their effects on social evaluations. If, on the other hand, *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is the only nonstandard variant, then one would expect to find that the latter deviates significantly from both *there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub> and *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub>.

## 4 Results and Discussion

Overall, the results of this study provide compelling evidence that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is distinct from *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> in how it affects social evaluations of the speaker. Beyond this, they also support the hypothesis that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> enjoys widespread acceptance in spoken English. Not only were the guises with *there's* evaluated more favorably than those with *there is*, listener evaluations of *there's* were nearly indistinguishable from evaluations of the standard agreement guises with *there are*.

### 4.1 Perceptions of Competence and Wealth

When compared to the written and spoken guises with *there are* as well as the guises with *there's*,

speakers were rated as significantly less educated ( $p < 0.001$ ), less intelligent ( $p < 0.001$ ), less articulate ( $p < 0.001$ ), and less likely to be from wealthy ( $p < 0.001$ ) or middle-class backgrounds ( $p < 0.001$ ) in the guises with *there is*. Strikingly, for each of these attributes, there were no significant differences between the guises with *there's* and *there are*. Perceptions that a speaker was from a blue-collar or working-class background did not vary significantly across the three forms. These findings are illustrated below in Figure 1.

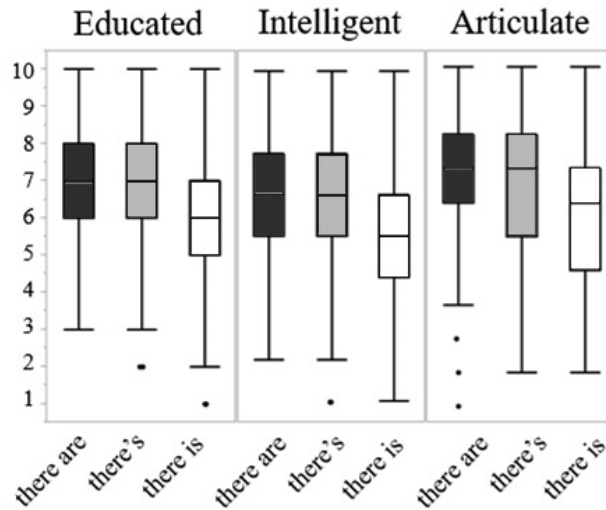


Figure 1: Listener evaluations of speaker competence by variant.

These findings indicate that the full verb non-agreeing variant *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is perceived as relatively nonstandard. However, the cliticized non-agreeing variant is not. Relative to standard agreement, speakers using *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> are evaluated as equally educated, intelligent, articulate, and wealthy.

#### 4.2 Effect of Survey-takers' Attitudes toward Grammar Mistakes

Although variationists might assume that most members of a speech community orient to a somewhat uniform set of norms about what it means to use a particular linguistic feature (Labov 1989), there is variability in how listeners use these norms to make inferences about the speakers they interact with. In other words, not everyone evaluates users of nonstandard language equally. Just as there is a great deal of interspeaker variation in how nonstandard grammatical constructions are used, there is also likely to be systematic inter-listener variation in how the use of these features is perceived. For a number of reasons, some people are more hostile toward the use of nonstandard features, and one might predict that those who are the least accepting of morphosyntactic variation would be more likely to make the least favorable inferences about the intelligence, education and class background of the people who use those stigmatized forms.

If *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is seen as relatively standard, then I predicted that its use should be acceptable to a range of listeners, even those who are the least tolerant of morphosyntactic variation. To test this prediction, I asked participants to rate how much it bothers them when other people make grammar mistakes and analyzed the interaction between these ratings and the variants. In support of the hypothesis that *there's* is relatively standard, the participants' self-reported rating of how much other people's grammar mistakes bother them did not affect their social evaluations of *there's* users relative to the standard *there are*, but it did negatively impact their perceptions of *there is* users when compared with both *there are* and *there's* guises. Relative to the standard form *there are*, survey-takers who reported being more bothered by other people's grammar mistakes perceived speakers using *there is* as less educated ( $p = 0.02$ ), less intelligent ( $p = 0.004$ ), less articulate ( $p = 0.01$ ), and less likely to be wealthy ( $p = 0.04$ ). Similarly, when compared to guises with *there's*, survey-takers with negative attitudes toward grammar mistakes evaluated speakers using *there is* as less educated ( $p = 0.04$ ), less intelligent ( $p = 0.008$ ), and less articulate ( $p = 0.02$ ).

Not only do these results provide evidence in favor of the hypothesis that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is regarded as relatively standard, even by those who are most critical of grammar mistakes, but it also offers insights into the relationship between listener attitudes and social perception more generally. Namely, the results reveal systematic variation in how listeners recruit norms about standard language use to make judgments about a speaker's education level, intelligence, articulateness and wealth. The participants who identified themselves as the least bothered by grammar mistakes showed little variation in how they judged speakers' intelligence, articulateness and education level; all three variants received ratings of roughly 6.5 out of 10 for these attributes. In other words, it appears that the different agreement patterns for this variable had little or no impact on how these participants evaluated the speakers. Among those who are the most bothered by grammar mistakes, though, the evaluations of education, intelligence and articulateness diverge dramatically; the standard *there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub> guises received an average rating of roughly 7 out of 10 across these three social attributes, while the nonstandard *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> had an average of around 5.5. Not only did this group judge speakers less favorably when using the nonstandard variant, but they also seemed to judge speakers even more favorably when using the standard form. Asking participants about their attitudes toward nonstandard language use independent of the variable under investigation reveals that, although most members of a speech community might be aware of a somewhat consistent set of norms about standard language use, there is considerable variation in how members of the speech community employ these norms to make inferences about the people they interact with.

#### 4.3 Effect of Modality

Because of the overall uncommonness of nonstandard grammatical features in written language, I hypothesized that the use of *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> in writing would be seen as more marked and more stigmatized than when it occurs in speech. It was not immediately clear whether this would be true for *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> as well, since it differs from *there is* in terms of standardness but is similar to *there is* in its uncommonness in written language. The results demonstrate that modality did have a significant effect on how participants evaluated users of *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> but had no significant effect on the perception of *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub>. When participants were exposed to written stimuli, as opposed to spoken, they rated *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> users as significantly less educated ( $p < 0.001$ ), intelligent ( $p < 0.001$ ) and articulate ( $p = 0.03$ ) and less likely to be from a middle-class background ( $p = 0.009$ ). In contrast to this, the modality of the stimulus had no significant effect on the social evaluation of speakers who used *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub>. These findings provide further support for the hypothesis that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is somewhat of a standard grammatical feature, given that participants did not find it to be any more marked or stigmatized in writing than speech, as compared to the standard variant *there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub>.

These results also demonstrate the overall influence of modality on social evaluations, regardless of which agreement pattern participants were exposed to. Presenting the stimuli in written form, as opposed to spoken, caused participants to evaluate all speakers as significantly less educated ( $p < 0.001$ ), intelligent ( $p = 0.003$ ), and articulate ( $p < 0.001$ ), less likely to be from a wealthy ( $p < 0.001$ ) or middle-class background ( $p < 0.001$ ) and less likely to be interviewing for a job ( $p < 0.001$ ), while they were more likely to rate the speakers as laid-back ( $p < 0.001$ ), talking to a friend ( $p < 0.001$ ) and from a blue-collar background ( $p < 0.001$ ). The significance of modality is apparent for all variants, even the standard form *there are*. Across the board, this utterance was perceived to be significantly less standard and less formal when it was seen in written form than when it was heard. This finding demonstrates the significant impact that modality has on social perceptions, and thus, has important methodological implications for future work on the perception of morphosyntactic variation. This effect of modality on social evaluations is robust even though participants were told that the stimuli came from the same source: a spoken conversation between two people.

#### 4.4 Effect of Formality

A number of researchers have argued that variable agreement under existential *there*, while not very socially stigmatized, is sensitive to formality and is most widespread and accepted in infor-



mal contexts (Cheshire 1999, Schütze 1999, Smallwood 1997, Squires 2011). To test this claim, survey takers were asked to rate the likelihood that the speaker was talking to a friend and the likelihood that he or she was interviewing for a job, which reflect informal and formal speaking contexts, respectively. They were also asked to evaluate how laid-back the speaker seemed. If nonstandard agreement under existential *there* is seen as informal, then participants would be predicted to evaluate users of *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> as more laid-back and more likely to be talking to a friend, relative to users of *there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub>, and less likely to be interviewing for a job. It is not obvious how use of *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> might be evaluated in terms of formality. It has often been observed that formal speaking contexts tend to occasion greater use of standard language features, but informality is not necessarily diagnostic of nonstandardness. In other words, even if *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is associated with some level of informality, this does not entail that it is nonstandard.

Overall, the results do not support the claim that variable agreement under existential *there* is perceived as informal. Survey takers perceived the speakers of all guises as equally laid-back and equally likely to be talking to a friend or interviewing for a job. However, the lack of correlation between the variants and these metrics for formality does not invalidate the claim that variable agreement patterns are associated with informality. It is possible that the sentence the survey takers listened to/read was not semantically or situationally rich enough for speakers to make these types of judgments. It also seems likely that the sentence was perceived as quite informal, regardless of the variant, since all guises, regardless of variant, were rated as much less likely to have been uttered during a job interview than during a conversation between friends ( $p < 0.001$ ). It is possible that the general informality carried by the sentence frame itself overshadowed the effect of variable agreement, but it is difficult to know for certain. This is why Campbell-Kibler (2009) cautions against attempting to find content- and context-free guises: “there is no such thing as truly neutral content and in seeking it, we are likely not only to fail but to sacrifice important insights about the complex interplay between content and form” (2009:138). It is also possible, though, that these patterns accurately reflect the lack of direct association between variable agreement under existential *there* and formality. Crawford (2005) found that non-agreement under existential *there* was common across different spoken registers, including formal lectures, but occurred much less frequently across all written registers, even informal chat conversations. Based on these findings, he argues that, “the similarities between nonconcord in conversation and lectures point to spoken language as a better indicator of nonconcord in [existential *there* constructions] than the concept of formality” (2005:48).

#### 4.5 Regional Associations with Nonstandard Variants

If agreement variation under existential *there* is a “vernacular universal” and exhibits “little evidence of regional diversification” across most varieties of English (Walker 2007:147), then none of the three variants would be expected to significantly affect perceptions of a speaker’s regional background. This is exactly what the results demonstrate, with one notable exception. For the most part, neither *there's* nor *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> correlated with perceptions that the speaker was more or less likely to be from a particular region of the United States. The one exception to this is that, when survey-takers evaluated the use of *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> in written form only, they were more likely to guess that the speaker was from the South ( $p = 0.006$ ).

One possible interpretation of this finding is that *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> occurs more often in Southern varieties of English, and listeners are sensitive to this distribution. This is unlikely, though, since this pattern was not present at all among spoken guises of *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub>. There is also a more probable explanation for this trend. Although nonstandard agreement patterns are widespread across different regional varieties of English and are considered to be “socially diagnostic” as opposed to being specific to any particular region of the country (Murray and Simon 2004), stereotypes that Southerners speak “incorrect English” (Lippi-Green 1997, Preston 1989) may cause people to associate especially marked or nonstandard grammatical features with the American South, even if those specific features are not any more likely to occur in Southern varieties of English. As Feagin (1979:186) notes, “lack of agreement between subject and verb has been one of the stereotypes of Southern vernacular”. Because of these stereotypes, the finding that survey-takers were more likely to perceive users of *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> as Southern does not reflect actual differences in production but is merely a manifestation of the language attitudes people have about

Southerners. This finding also speaks to just how nonstandard *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> seems to participants, compared to the other two variants, when it appears in written form. By contrast, the lack of correlation between *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> and Southernness serves as further support for the claim that *there's* is a more standard form. Unlike *there is*, *there's* did not increase perceptions that the speaker is from the South.

#### 4.6 Age

Production patterns (Krejci and Hilton 2015) and proposals that *there's* is undergoing grammaticalization (Breivik and Martínez-Insua 2008, Cheshire 1999, Crawford 2005, Walker 2007) both advance the hypothesis that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is becoming more frequent over time. However, the results of this perception study do not support this hypothesis. Hearing or reading guises with *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> did not cause survey-takers to perceive the speaker to be younger. These guises did not elicit more favorable social evaluations from younger survey-takers, nor were they evaluated more favorably when heard in a younger speaker's voice. Contrary to expected correlations, survey-takers actually perceived users of *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> as younger than users of both *there are* ( $p = 0.02$ ) and *there's* ( $p = 0.01$ ). These results do not refute the hypothesis that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is used more often by younger speakers or that it is being used more frequently over time. If *there's* is undergoing a change in progress, it is possible that this change is too gradual for survey-takers to have strong age associations with its use. It is likely that any associations between younger speakers and the use of *there's* is overshadowed by much stronger ideologies about youth language.

The strong correlation between written *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> and perceived youth may be partly driven by the perception among at least some of the survey-takers that this was a child's speech error. All 126 participants who saw either *there's* or *there are* guises in written form perceived the speaker to be at least 17 years old. However, 16% of the people who saw *there is* in written form perceived the speaker to be under the age of 17, and more than half of those values were between 6 and 12. The lack of phonetic cues for age in the written stimuli left open the possibility that the speaker was a child, and several survey-takers did guess that sentences containing *there is*, but not *there's* or *there are*, were spoken by children. It is possible that this association among some of the survey-takers reflects the markedness and nonstandardness of *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> in written form if it caused participants to perceive that it was produced by a child.

This interpretation is further supported by the finding that survey-takers who are most bothered by grammar mistakes were significantly more likely to guess that users of *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> were younger ( $p = 0.01$ ), but there was no significant effect of the interaction between language attitudes and *there's* on perceived age when compared to *there are*. Furthermore, once the interaction between attitudes toward grammar mistakes and variant was included as a factor, the effect of variant alone on perceived age was no longer significant. This demonstrates that association between the use of *there is* and youth was not widely held; rather the correlation was driven by a subset of the participants who are least tolerant of grammar mistakes.

Beyond the possibility that *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> was seen by some as a child's speech error, these patterns could also reflect general stereotypes about youth and adolescent language as "irresponsible, sloppy [and] imprecise" (Eckert 2004:361). Stereotypes that adolescents are sloppy language users might cause people to associate nonstandard forms, in general, with young people, and it is understandable why these stereotypes would have a particularly strong effect on the survey takers who are most bothered by grammar mistakes and are likely the least tolerant of variation and innovation among adolescents more broadly. Although the age correlations in this study do not support the hypothesis that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is undergoing a change in progress, they do seem to echo the findings discussed above that *there's* and *there is* differ significantly in terms of standardness.

## 5 Conclusion

The findings of this study provide support for the argument that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> and *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> constitute distinct sociolinguistic variants. Unlike most grammatical features which exhibit non-agreement, *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> appears to be widely accepted and remarkably lacking in social stigma. However, the same cannot be said for the full verb non-agreeing variant *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub>. Participants perceived speakers who used *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub> as significantly less educated, less intelligent,

less articulate, and less likely to be from a wealthy or middle-class background than speakers who used either *there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub> or *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub>. Moreover, the use of *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> appears to be accepted by a broad population of listeners, including those who self-identify as particularly sensitive to nonstandard language use.

These findings raise several questions for further investigation. *There's* and *there are* showed almost identical effects on social evaluations in this study, but it is unlikely that they consistently convey identical social meanings. But if it is not standardness that differentiates these two variants in spoken English, then what does? We tend to think of the social meanings of morphosyntactic variables as being limited to standardness, but this particular feature seems to present an opportunity to look beyond standardness in investigating the range of social meanings that can be conveyed by grammatical variables. It is also possible that these two variants do differ in their perceived standardness, but that evaluations of standardness are influenced by the speaking situation and the structure of the utterance. For example, the use of *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> might be perceived differently if it is uttered in a formal speaking situation, or if the NP immediately follows the verb instead of being separated by two words.

The widespread perception of *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> as a relatively standard construction also raises questions about how we as researchers make decisions about which features are considered standard or nonstandard. Agreement variation under existential *there* has received a great deal of attention from linguists, in part, because it poses an enigma. It violates prescriptive norms, yet does not seem to violate social norms about language use, even among many prescriptivists. But perhaps, as highly educated researchers, our own attitudes toward language bias how we construe grammatical variation. Cheshire (1999) describes the drawbacks associated with relying on introspection and native speaker intuition, not just by generative linguists, but also by variationists: "Problems arising from introspection... may also come into play in analyses of non-standard varieties of English, if the analysts make their own decisions about which are the 'non-standard' features to be analyzed" (1999:131). She explains that efforts by eighteenth century grammarians to eradicate any grammatical variation from the English language (particularly written English) have caused the absence of variation to be seen as the norm, and "the result is that variation is now relatively unusual in standardized English, and where it does exist, it tends to attract the attention of analysts" (1999:132). These observations shed light on some of the potentially limiting assumptions that have been made in the study of agreement variation under existential *there*. One assumption is that the default form to introduce plural NPs is *there are* and that the use of *there's* or *there is* is anomalous and warrants explanation. Another assumption is that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is sociolinguistically and syntactically equivalent to forms like *there is* + NP<sub>pl</sub>, because they both appear to be nonstandard, non-agreeing constructions. The findings of this study cast serious doubt on that assumption, demonstrating that *there's* + NP<sub>pl</sub> is distinct from other forms of singular agreement and appears to be more similar to the standard *there are* + NP<sub>pl</sub> in its effect on listener perceptions.

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