



A new look at *was/were*: the perspective from London

Jenny Cheshire & Sue Fox

Queen Mary, University of London

ESRC Award RES-000-23-0680

Linguistic Innovators: the English of adolescents in London

Paul Kerswill , Jenny Cheshire , Eivind Torgersen , Sue Fox 

 University of Lancaster  Queen Mary, University of
London

Methodology

- Digital recordings of 100 adolescents aged 16-19 attending colleges in two London Boroughs, one inner London and one outer London
- Informal semi-structured directed conversations in single, paired and group conversations
- Word-lists
- Home recordings
- Orthographic transcriptions of all conversations
- Corpus of around 1,000,000 words

Britain (2002) identifies two broad patterns of past BE across varieties of English:

1. A variable pattern of levelling to *was* across person, number and polarity – a common pattern of variation which Chambers (2003:266) identifies as a ‘vernacular primitive’

a) you ***was*** a defender (2:Ollie_Bradley 38:10)

b) we ***wasn't*** allowed to wear hats (1:Alan_Brian 2 26:10)

2. A variable pattern of levelling to *were* in clauses with negative polarity

c) I ***weren't*** talking to no-one (1:Gavin_Jerome 21:00)

d) It was still good, ***weren't*** it? (2:Donna_Kate 2 0:10)

How does London fit in with these two patterns of past BE?

Preliminary results based on subsample of 28 speakers in the London English corpus: –

- 16 for inner London: 8 male 8 female, from a range of ethnic groups reflecting the local population
- 12 for outer London: 6 male 6 female, all British white reflecting the local population
- All contexts of *was* and *were* were extracted from the data, yielding a total of 1,445 tokens from inner London and 1,042 tokens from outer London

Levelling to was in contexts of positive polarity – outer London

Singular Subject	<i>N</i>	%	Plural Subject	<i>N</i>	%
First			First		
I was	261/261	100	We was	43/53	81
			We were	10/53	19
Second (sing)			Second		
You was	9/11	82	You was	-	-
You were	2/11	18	You were	-	-
Second (Indefinite)					
You was	5/6	83			
You were	1/6	17			
Third NP			Third NP		
The girl was	111/111	100	The girls was	8/16	50
			The girls were	8/16	50
Third Pronoun			Third pronoun		
It was	178/178	100	They was	23/47	49
			They were	24/47	51
Third Existential			Third Existential		
There was a boy	28/28	100	There was boys	10/12	83
			There were boys	2/12	17

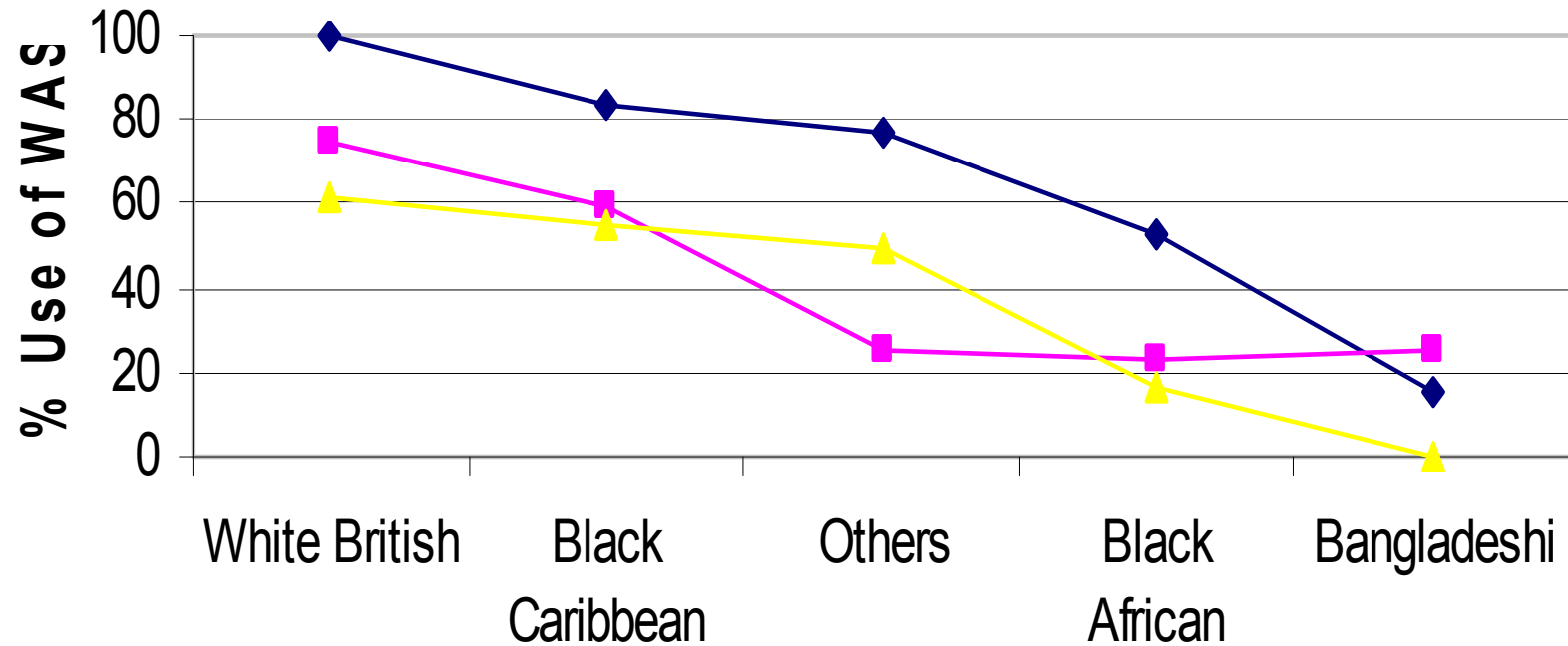
Levelling to was in contexts of positive polarity – inner London

Singular Subject	<i>N</i>	%	Plural Subject	<i>N</i>	%
First			First		
I was	353/353	100	We was	50/83	60
			We were	33/83	40
Second (sing)			Second		
You was	3/8	38	You was	1/2	50
You were	5/8	62	You were	1/2	50
Second (Indefinite)					
You was	4/6	67			
You were	2/6	33			
Third NP			Third NP		
The girl was	88/88	100	The girls was	23/56	41
			The girls were	33/56	59
Third Pronoun			Third Pronoun		
It was	235/235	100	They was	33/71	46
			They were	38/71	54
Third Existential			Third Existential		
There was a boy	39/39	100	There was boys	37/37	100

Non-standard was in contexts of positive polarity

	Outer London		Inner London	
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
1st Person Plural – <i>We</i>	81	53	60	83
2 nd Person Sing – <i>You</i>	82	11	38	8
2 nd Person Indef – <i>You</i>	83	6	67	6
3 rd Person Pronoun - <i>They</i>	49	47	46	71
NP Plural	50	16	41	56
Total:	66	133	50	224

Use of Non-standard WAS by ethnicity

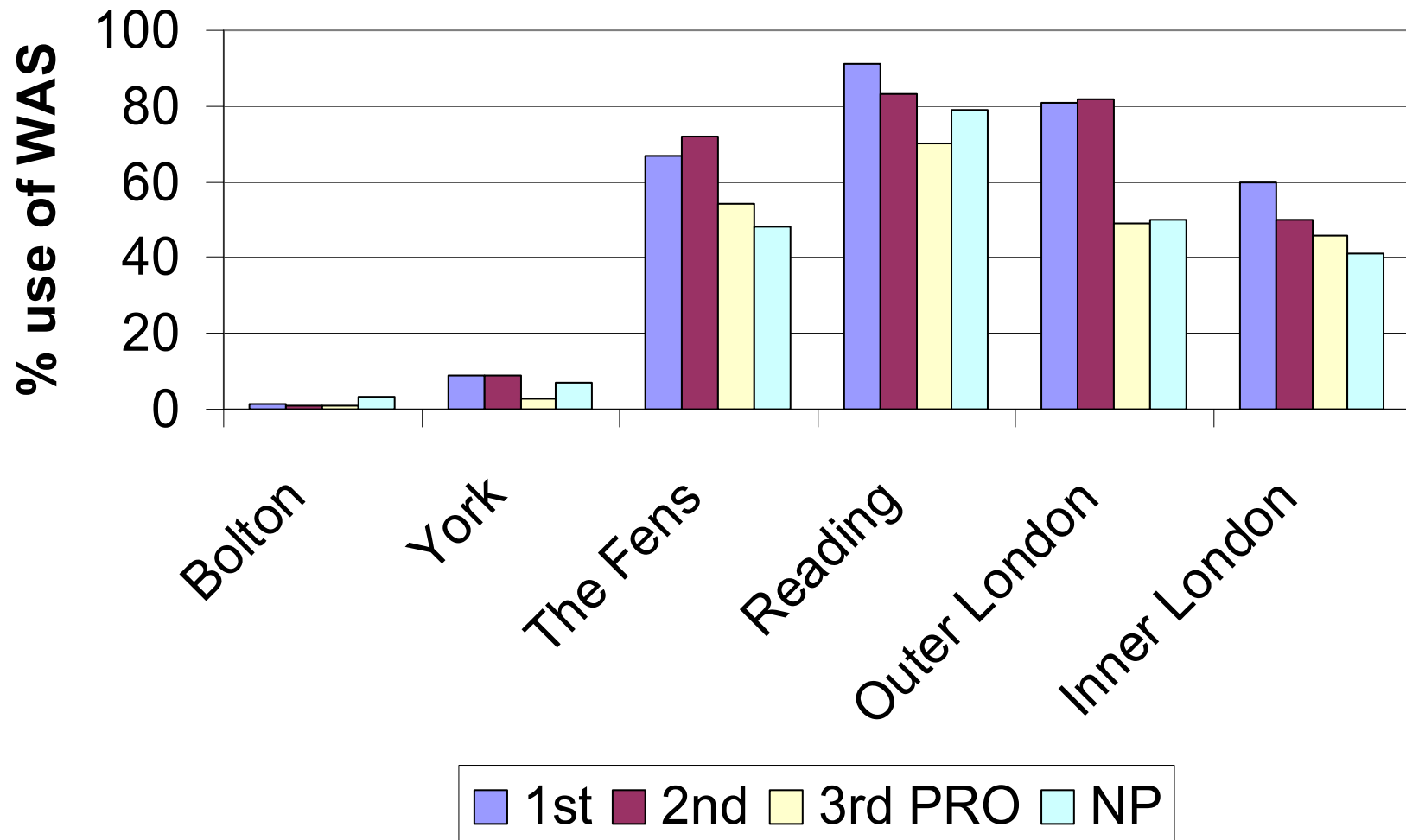


◆ Ist Person Plural - We

■ 3rd Person Plural Pronoun - They

▲ NP Plural

The use of WAS in contexts of standard WERE in 6 British varieties



Levelling to *weren't* in contexts of negative polarity – outer London

Singular subject	<i>N</i>	%	Plural subject	<i>N</i>	%
First			First		
I wasn't	6/9	67	We wasn't	1/3	33
I weren't	3/9	33	We weren't	2/3	67
Second (sing)			Second		
You wasn't	9/11	82	You wasn't	-	-
You weren't	2/11	18	You weren't	-	-
Second (Indef)					
You wasn't	5/6	83			
You weren't	1/6	17			
Third NP			Third NP		
The girl wasn't	3/5	60	The girls wasn't	8/16	50
The girl weren't	2/5	40	The girls weren't	8/16	50
Third Pronoun					
He/she wasn't	8/16	50			
He/she weren't	8/16	50			
Third Pronoun			Third Pronoun		
It wasn't	7/35	20	They wasn't	-	-
It weren't	28/35	80	They weren't	0/1	100

Levelling to *weren't* in contexts of negative polarity – inner London

Singular subject	<i>N</i>	%	Plural subject	<i>N</i>	%
First			First		
I wasn't	20/27	74	We wasn't	7/11	64
I weren't	7/27	26	We weren't	4/11	36
Second (sing)			Second		
You wasn't	-	-	You wasn't	-	-
You weren't	-	-	You weren't	-	-
Second (Indef)					
You wasn't	2/3	67			
You weren't	1/3	33			
Third NP			Third NP		
The girl wasn't	4/5	80	The girls wasn't	1/4	25
The girl weren't	1/5	20	The girls weren't	3/4	75
Third Pronoun					
He/she wasn't	11/13	85			
He/she weren't	2/13	15			
Third Pronoun			Third Pronoun		
It wasn't	12/18	67	They wasn't	2/3	67
It weren't	6/18	33	They weren't	1/3	33

Non-standard *weren't* in contexts of negative polarity

	Outer London		Inner London	
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
1 st Person Sing – <i>I</i>	33	9	26	27
3 rd Person Sing – <i>he/she</i>	50	16	15	13
3 rd Person Sing – <i>it</i>	80	35	33	18
NP Sing	40	5	20	5

- **And it's about ten questions as well weren't it**
- **That's not good weren't it**
- **Oh yeah cos I stopped bunning weren't it**



**Gotta go with
the times innit?**

Woof!

Conclusions:

- In terms of levelling to WAS in positive polarity contexts, London fits with the general pattern of southern varieties
- Inner London exhibits less levelling to WAS than outer London – ethnicity is a significant factor
- In terms of levelling to WEREN'T, London patterns with other varieties in having the highest frequency with *it* subjects
- In outer London this is mainly due to its high frequency in tags which may be grammaticalising to a discourse marker, in competition with *innit*
- In inner London, tags with past *BE* rarely occur

Thank you*

Jenny Cheshire

J.L.Cheshire@qmul.ac.uk

Sue Fox

S.P.Fox@qmul.ac.uk

***We would like to thank Dave Britain for helpful comments in preparation for this paper.**

References:

- Britain, D. 1999. As far as analysing grammatical variation and change in New Zealand English with relatively few tokens <is concerned/Ø>. In A. Bell and K. Kuiper (eds.) *Focus on New Zealand English*. Amsterdam: Benjamins, pp. 198-220.
- Britain, D. 2002. Diffusion, levelling, simplification and reallocation in past tense BE in the English Fens. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 6: 16-43.
- Chambers, J. K. (2003) *Sociolinguistic theory*. Oxford: Blackwell. 2nd ed.
- Cheshire, J. 1982. *Variation in an English dialect: a sociolinguistic study*. CUP
- Fox, S. et al 2005. An East Anglian Subject rule? Paper presented at UKLVC5, Sep, 2005.
- Moore, E.F. (2003) *Learning style and identity: a sociolinguistic analysis of a Bolton High school*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester
- Tagliamonte, S. 1998. *Was/were* variation across the generations: view from the city of York. *Language Variation and Change* 10: 153-192.