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There's three variants: Agreement variation in existential *there* constructions

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies of agreement variation in existential *there* constructions treat the variable as binary, distinguishing between agreeing and nonagreeing variants. Using new data from a corpus of English spoken in California, we argue that this widely studied variable cannot be fully understood without instead making a three-way distinction between agreement (*there are/were* + plural), nonagreement using a full form of the verb (*there is/was* + plural), and nonagreement using *there's*. We motivate this three-way distinction by showing that the two nonagreeing variants differ in their distributions with respect to polarity and determiner type, as well as speaker age and education level. Full form nonagreement is more frequent among speakers with less formal education, while *there's* is favored by younger speakers. These results suggest that the two nonagreeing variants differ in their longitudinal trajectories, a finding that would be obscured in an analysis that makes only a binary distinction between variants.

Agreement variation in existential *there* constructions is a widely attested phenomenon in many varieties of English. In these constructions, the verb can agree in number with the *pivot*, the noun phrase that follows it, as in (1). However, in many dialects of English, the verb may also appear with singular agreement inflection, even when the pivot is plural, as in (2). The sentence in (2a) has a plural pivot and a full, uncontracted form of the verb bearing singular agreement, in this case *is*. The sentence in (2b) shows that the verb may also appear as a clitic *-'s*, usually analyzed straightforwardly as a contraction of *is*.

(1) AGREEMENT: **There are** more new subdivisions in the south side of town.
(2) a. NONAGREEMENT WITH FULL VERB: **There is** basically no jobs in the industry.
b. NONAGREEMENT WITH *THERE'S*: **There's** only two thrift shops down there.

Because the verb's inflection in (2) does not correspond to the grammatical number of the pivot, we refer to this phenomenon as *nonagreement*.

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Sentences such as those in (2), where the verb does not agree with the pivot, appear to violate prescriptive norms. However, previous studies find that nonagreeing variants account for 13% to 71% of utterances with plural pivots, often on the higher end of that range (Riordan, 2007). This fact contradicts our usual understanding of nonstandard variants, which tend to appear less frequently than standard variants, especially in the speech of educated, middle class speakers (Trudgill, 1999). Why should the nonstandard variant predominate here? Our answer to this question involves a closer look at the different ways that nonagreement may be realized. We show, in alignment with previous work, that the predominant form used by speakers is *there's*, and we argue that nonagreement with the variant *there's* crucially differs from nonagreement with *there is/was* in its social and linguistic distribution.

Although there has been a great deal of work on agreement variation in existential *there* constructions, most production studies of this phenomenon have treated it as a binary variable, with a distinction between agreeing and nonagreeing variants. However, there is reason to believe that *there's* behaves differently from *there is/was*. First, researchers observe that the use of *there's* with plural pivots is lacking in social stigma (Crawford, 2005; Kortmann, 2006; Squires, 2011). Additionally, Walker (2007) found that although *there's* and *there is/was* are conditioned by the same linguistic factors compared to *there are*, the relative effect sizes of these factors differ. On this basis, Walker concluded that *there's* must be treated as a different variant from *there is/was*; the present study provides further evidence in support of the same conclusion.

We analyze new data from a corpus of English spoken in California to make the case for a three-way distinction between agreement using *there are/were*, nonagreement using *there is/was*, and nonagreement using *there's*. We motivate this three-way distinction by showing that the two nonagreeing variants are conditioned by different social and linguistic factors. We show that nonagreeing *there is/was* is more likely than either of the other variants to be used by speakers with less formal education, which is in line with interpreting this variant as nonstandard. In contrast, nonagreeing *there's*, while very widespread, is more likely to be found in the speech of younger people. Because younger speakers favor *there's* followed by a plural pivot, but not nonagreement more generally, we argue that a change in progress is underway, and that the two nonagreeing variants are on two different longitudinal trajectories. Furthermore, following Squires (2011:48), we suggest that *there's* is "moving into the standard dialect," and that only nonagreement with *there is/was* constitutes the nonstandard variant.

EXISTENTIAL *THERE*

Variable number agreement in existential *there* constructions has been present in English since at least AD 1000 (Quirk & Wrenn, 1957:76) and continues to thrive in Modern English, as noted by both sociolinguists and traditional grammarians (Jespersen, 1954:181–183; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973:419).

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Unlike other nonstandard grammatical features, agreement variation in existential *there* constructions is widespread across most varieties of English, including those considered standard. Nonagreement occurs in 13% to 71% of utterances with plural pivots, depending on a variety of factors such as the speaker's level of education and the type of determiner in the pivot (Riordan, 2007).

Social factors conditioning nonagreement

With regard to social factors, nonagreement in existential *there* constructions follows the expected patterns of a nonstandard grammatical feature in some but not all respects. On the one hand, nonagreeing forms in existential constructions are used more frequently by speakers with lower levels of education (Britain & Sudbury, 2002; Meechan & Foley, 1994; Tagliamonte, 1998). On the other hand, nonagreement in existential constructions also occurs frequently in formal speaking contexts, such as academic lectures (Crawford, 2005). With respect to sex, we might expect nonstandard features to be used more frequently by men than by women (Labov, 1990); however, nonagreement in existential constructions does not clearly follow this pattern. While Britain and Sudbury (2002) found that men are more likely than women to use nonagreeing forms, Hay and Schreier (2004) and Tagliamonte (1998) found the opposite pattern.

Several researchers have shown age to be a relevant factor conditioning nonagreement; they suggest that the use of nonstandard agreement in existential constructions, especially with *there's*, is becoming increasingly more frequent and accepted over time (Britain & Sudbury, 2002; Cheshire, 1999; Crawford, 2005; Walker, 2007). Britain and Sudbury (2002) examined this variable in New Zealand English and Falkland Island English and found that both of these varieties, despite being isolated from each other, seem to be undergoing a change in progress toward the more frequent use of singular verb forms before plural pivots, and furthermore, that the variation in both of these varieties is conditioned by the same linguistic constraints. Based on these findings, they suggested that a shift toward singular forms in existential *there* constructions is common across most, if not all, dialects of English, including standard varieties. However, they did not distinguish between use of *there's* and *there is/was*, so it is unclear whether nonagreement in general is becoming more frequent in these constructions, or, as we argue here, only the use of nonagreement with *there's* is becoming more frequent.

Linguistic factors conditioning nonagreement

One of the most well-represented linguistic factors in previous work is the type of determiner that introduces the pivot (e.g., *there's* ***the*** *old timers*). Meechan and Foley (1994) hypothesized that "strong" determiners in the sense of Milsark (1977), such as definite determiners (*the, these*) and universals (*any, all*), would positively condition agreement. While this hypothesis was not supported by their study, determiner type has since been shown to have an effect on agreement patterns. Studies vary as to how determiners are

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classified, which determiners turn out to influence agreement patterns, and how strong the effect is. Tentatively, it seems that the form *no* and numeric quantifiers tend to condition nonagreement (Britain & Sudbury, 2002; Hay & Schreier, 2004; Tagliamonte, 1998).

Second, the polarity of the clause has been shown to affect agreement realization in copular and existential constructions. Tagliamonte (1998) found that, in existential constructions with plural pivots, nonagreement occurs more frequently in affirmative clauses. For example, sentences such as 'there was many people' were more common in her data than sentences such as 'there wasn't many people'. In contrast, Claes and Johnson (2016) found the opposite pattern. Other researchers did not find polarity to have a significant effect on agreement (Britain & Sudbury, 2002; Hay & Schreier, 2004; Martínez Insua & Palacios Martínez, 2003).

Three other linguistic factors are also often included in studies on existential agreement, but they are incompatible with an analysis that treats *there's* as a distinct variant. First, cliticization has been treated as a factor conditioning nonagreement (Hay & Schreier, 2004; Meechan & Foley, 1994). These studies show that nonagreement is more frequent when the verb of the existential construction has undergone cliticization, that is, if *there is* is reduced to *there's* and *there are* is reduced to *there're*. However, given the design of the previous studies, it is not possible to determine whether nonagreement with *there's* has different conditions on its use than does nonagreement with *there is/was*.

A related problem arises when tense is included as a factor conditioning agreement. Several studies find that nonagreement is more likely to appear in the present tense than in the past (Britain & Sudbury, 2002; Hay & Schreier, 2004; Meechan & Foley, 1994). However, as Walker (2007) noted, this observation reflects the fact that use of *there's* with plural pivots is very frequent. *There's* occurs categorically in the present tense, so proposing that present tense conditions nonagreement can be misleading.

Finally, Tagliamonte (1998) and Britain and Sudbury (2002) included subject-auxiliary inversion as a linguistic factor in their studies. However, just as *there's* never appears in the past tense, it also never appears in a question involving inversion (e.g., ' 'S there any cookies?'). Therefore, inversion cannot be included as a factor.

DATA AND METHODS

The data for the present study come from 145 sociolinguistic interviews collected between 2010 and 2012 in the cities of Bakersfield, Merced, and Redding in the Central Valley of California by graduate student and faculty researchers as part of Stanford University's Voices of California Project. The interviewees were women and men aged 18 to 93, including speakers from several different ethnic and class backgrounds. They were all native English speakers who had lived in their respective cities for the majority of their lives.

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The one-on-one, audiorecorded interviews lasted about an hour and covered the same range of topics, from the speaker's experiences growing up in the city, their current day-to-day life in the city, their opinions of the city as compared to other areas of the state, and commentary on language in their city and in the rest of California. The audio recordings were then transcribed, and the resulting text transcripts searched for uses of the word *there*.

We collected only existential uses of *there*. About half of all instances of *there* were not existential uses, but instead locative uses where *there* is a place adverb, as in 'I remember going out there and playing as a kid'. We also excluded deictic uses of *there*, as in 'Here's my house, and there's Jan's house'. Excluding false starts and repetitions, we found 5865 instances of existential *there* constructions across all interviews. Of these 5865, we excluded tokens in which the main verb does not inflect for number, such as *ain't* or modals such as *will* or *would*; the remaining tokens totaled 5651. Of those tokens where agreement variation is possible, 2614 have plural pivots, the context in which almost all agreement variation occurs.[1] Finally, we excluded 70 tokens in which the verb inflecting for agreement was not copular, such as "there has been a lot of changes," for a total of 2544 tokens.[2]

In addition to coding for the agreement inflection on the verb, each utterance was also coded for the linguistic factors of polarity and determiner type. Clauses in which the verb was negated by *not*, *-n't*, *never*, or *no longer* were coded as negative; tokens with *no* as the determiner, as in 'there are no jobs', were also coded as negative. All other tokens were coded as affirmative. Determiners were classified as strong or weak: strong determiners include definite determiners (*the, these, those*), universals (*all, any*), and proper names; all other determiners were classified as weak. This includes *some*, *many*, *no*, *a lot of*, and numerical quantifiers. Bare noun phrases and noun phrases introduced by an adjective rather than a determiner were also classified as weak.

Next, each utterance was coded for social factors, including speaker age, sex, education level, and field site. Speaker education was divided into five categories: some high school, completed high school (including GED), some college (including a two-year degree or currently attending college), completed four-year college, and beyond college (including both attempted and completed graduate degrees).

Of the 2544 tokens, 1699, or 67%, show nonagreement of some kind, and 1320 of them, or 52%, show nonagreement with the form *there's*. This means that the majority of nonagreement, 78%, occurs with the form *there's* rather than *is* or *was*. Table 1 shows how agreement varies across the present and past tenses.[3,4]

We conducted two multinomial logistic regressions in R to test the relative effects of the social factors (age, education, sex, and field site) and linguistic factors (polarity and determiner type) on the realization of the verb as agreeing, nonagreeing with *there's*, and nonagreeing with *there is/was* (Multinominal Logistic Regression, 2014). We treated level of education and age as continuous factors and all other social and linguistic factors as categorical. Table 3 in the Appendix lists the rates of all three variants across each of the social and

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TABLE 1. *Distribution of agreeing and nonagreeing forms in present and past tense*

Agreement	Tense	Form	*n*	%
Agreeing	Present	There are	422	50
		There're	9	1
	Past	There were	414	49
		Subtotal	845	
Nonagreeing	Present	There is	34	2
		There's	1320	78
	Past	There was	345	20
		Subtotal	1699	
Total			2544	

linguistic factors, and Table 4 provides the number of female and male speakers across each education level, as well as average ages for each education level.

The realization of the verb served as the dependent variable, with three different outcomes. To determine how all three variants behave with respect to one another, we ran two separate regressions, one where the variant *there's* served as the reference level and another where *there are/were* served as the reference level. The first regression allows us to compare the distribution of *there's* with the other two variants. The second regression, where *there are/were* serves as the reference level, allows us to compare the distribution of nonagreeing *there is/was* to that of agreeing *there are/were*. If *there's* and *there is/was* are sociolinguistically equivalent, then we expect the same linguistic and social factors to condition their use and for them to deviate from plural agreement in similar ways. The results, presented in the next section, indicate that this is not the case.

RESULTS

The results of the first multinomial logistic regression, in which *there's* serves as the reference level, reveal significant distinctions between nonagreeing *there's* and nonagreeing *there is/was*. Complete results of this regression are provided in Table 5 in the Appendix. The two nonagreeing variants are used at different rates by different social groups and are conditioned by different linguistic factors. Compared to *there's*, the nonagreeing forms *there is/was* are significantly more likely to be used by older speakers and by speakers with less formal education. As for linguistic factors, *there is/was* is also significantly more likely than *there's* to occur in sentences with negative polarity and when the pivot contains a strong determiner.

The first multinomial regression also allows us to compare the distributions of *there's* with the agreeing forms *there are/were*. Neither of the two linguistic factors, polarity or determiner strength, have a significant effect. However, compared to *there's*, *there are/were* is more likely to be used by older speakers and by speakers with higher levels of education.

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The direct comparison of the two uncontracted variants *there are/were* and *there is/was* is possible in the second regression model, in which *there are/were* serves as the reference level. Complete results of this regression are provided in Table 6 in the Appendix. The two linguistic constraints have a significant effect on the use of these two uncontracted variants. Compared to *there are/were*, nonagreeing *there is/was* is more likely to occur in sentences with negative polarity and when the pivot contains a strong determiner. Of the social factors, only the speaker's level of education has a significant effect, with *there is/was* being used at higher rates by speakers with less formal education. Age, however, has no significant effect. Across both statistical models, neither speaker sex nor field site shows any significant effects.

Overall, these findings indicate that the three variants are used at different rates by different social groups. Younger speakers are more likely than older speakers to use *there's* over either of the full form variants, whether agreeing or nonagreeing. However, in our data, age has no effect on the use of nonagreeing *there is/was* when compared with agreeing *there are/were*. In other words, younger speakers are not more likely to use all nonagreeing forms more than older speakers, only the specific nonagreeing form *there's*. These age patterns are illustrated in Figure 1. Although speaker age was treated as a continuous variable in the statistical analysis, in Figure 1 it is divided into three categories, roughly corresponding to generational groups, to illustrate the overall pattern.

Figure 1 illustrates that the nonagreeing form *there's* is the preferred variant for speakers age 35 and under, accounting for 63% of all of their tokens. For these youngest speakers, nonagreeing *there is/was* makes up only 12% of their tokens. In other words, the youngest speakers are five times as likely to use nonagreeing *there's* as they are to use the full verb nonagreeing form *there is/was*. Speakers

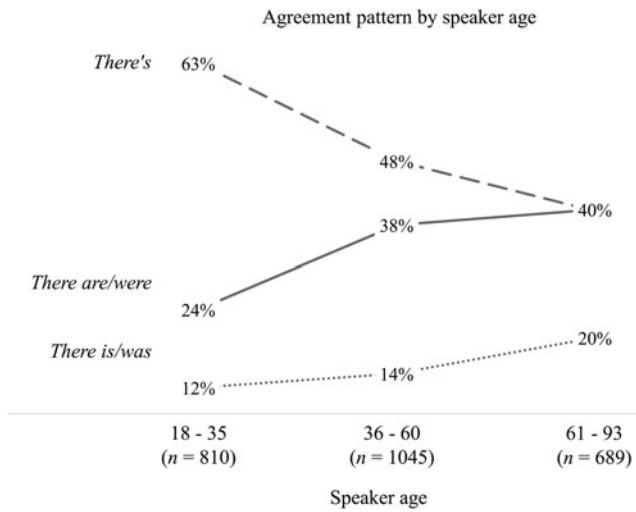


FIGURE 1. Rate at which speakers use the three variants across three age groups.

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over the age of 60, however, use nonagreeing *there's* only 40% of the time and *there is/was* 20% of the time, meaning that they are only twice as likely to use *there's* over the full form nonagreeing variant.

Compared to agreement with *there are/were*, the two nonagreeing variants *there's* and *there is/was* are both more likely to be used by speakers with less formal education. However, the two nonagreeing variants differ significantly from each other in their correlations with education—nonagreement with *there is/was* exhibits a stronger correlation with lower levels of education. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of each variant across the five education levels.

The use of nonagreement with *there is/was* is concentrated among speakers with only a high school education (21% to 28% of their tokens), and it occurs relatively infrequently in the speech of college graduates (9% to 11% of their tokens). In contrast, the agreeing variant *there are/were* exhibits the opposite trend. Speakers who do not have a college degree use plural agreement somewhat infrequently, with *there are/were* accounting for only 17% to 25% of these speakers' tokens. Among those who have completed college, though, plural agreement accounts for 48% to 51% of their tokens, making it the most commonly used variant for this group of speakers. Although both the use of *there's* and the use of *there is/was* show an inverse correlation with education, the slope of the correlation is less steep for *there's*.

The results also demonstrate that the choice of variant is affected by both of the two linguistic factors we investigated. The agreeing variant *there are/were* and the nonagreeing variant *there's* pattern together and are conditioned by the same linguistic factors in the same direction. Both are significantly more likely to occur in sentences with affirmative polarity and when the pivot contains a weak determiner. Nonagreeing *there is/was* shows the opposite correlation; it is more likely to occur in sentences with negative polarity and when the pivot contains a

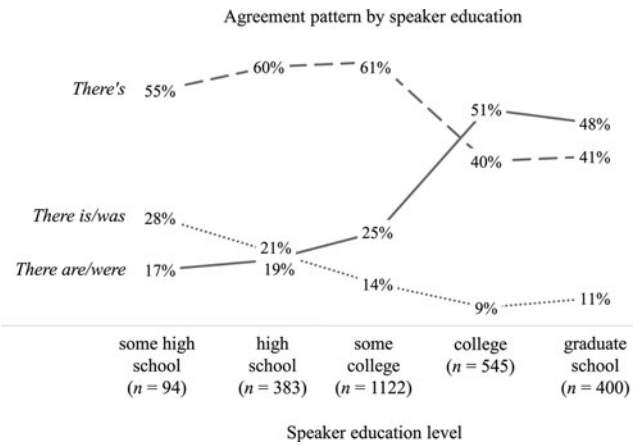


FIGURE 2. Rate at which speakers use the three variants across five education levels.

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TABLE 2. *Rate at which speakers use the three variants across different linguistic contexts*

Factor	Level	*There are/were*		*There's*		*There is/was*		Total
Polarity	Negative	56	33%	74	44%	39	23%	169
	Positive	789	33%	1246	52%	340	14%	2375
Determiner type	Strong	45	26%	82	48%	43	25%	170
	Weak	800	34%	1238	52%	336	14%	2374

strong determiner. Table 2 provides the rates at which each variant co-occurs with each linguistic factor.

DISCUSSION

The majority of nonagreement in our data, 78%, occurs with the form *there's* rather than *there is/was*. Examining only a single category containing *there's*, *there is*, and *there was* would conflate these forms without determining whether they have separate properties. We have shown that the variants do in fact exhibit distinct distributions—they are used at different rates by different social groups, and they are conditioned by different linguistic factors—and therefore merit distinct sociolinguistic analyses.

Education and standardness

The social distribution of nonagreeing *there is/was* appears similar to other stable stigmatized features, such as alveolar ING (Trudgill, 1972), negative concord (Eckert, 2000:109–110; Shuy, 1969), *ain't*, and invariant *don't* (Feagin, 1979:186–243); compared to the other two variants, *there is/was* shows a strong negative correlation with speaker education level. Speakers with only a high school education are the most likely to use nonagreeing *there is/was*, and they use this form more frequently than the agreeing variant *there are/were*. For speakers with a four-year college degree, the pattern is reversed. These speakers use the agreeing variant *there are/were* five times more frequently than nonagreeing *there is/was*. While these two variants differ starkly in their correlations with education level, age does not predict whether speakers use *there is/was* or *there are/were*. These patterns suggest that nonagreement with *there is/was* is an example of a stable stigmatized feature.

In contrast, the other nonagreeing variant, *there's*, does not quite match the typical distribution of a stable stigmatized feature. It does show a negative correlation with speaker education, but the slope of this trend is significantly less steep than it is for *there is/was*. Speakers with a two-year college degree or some college experience are half as likely to use *there is/was* compared to those without a high school degree, but they are just as or more likely than speakers without a high school degree to use *there's*. Also, although speakers with a four-year college degree are slightly more likely to use *there are/were* than *there's*,

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they still use *there's* relatively frequently and at a much higher rate than they use *there is/was*. This suggests that the two nonagreeing variants, *there's* and *there is/was*, differ in the level of standardness they convey.

Other researchers have called attention to the relative social unmarkedness of nonagreeing *there's*. For example, Squires (2011, 2013) showed that nonagreeing *there's* and invariant *don't* differ in their perceived standardness. She noted that nonagreeing *there's* has "broad social acceptance, at least in informal, spontaneous spoken English" (2011:55), an impression that echoes throughout much of the literature on nonagreement in existential constructions. Hilton (2016) specifically investigated the standardness of *there's* relative to *there is*. She found that the use of *there is* followed by a plural pivot negatively affects perceptions of the speaker's intelligence, education, articulateness, and wealth, while the use of *there's* followed by a plural pivot does not demonstrate an effect, relative to plural agreement. This suggests, then, that *there is/was* followed by a plural pivot is a true nonstandard variant, but that nonagreement with *there's* is different. Instead, this variant appears to be a relatively standard form in spoken English.

Age

Our second major finding is that younger speakers favor nonagreement with *there's*, but that they do not favor nonagreement with *there is/was*. This suggests that the two variants are on different longitudinal trajectories. We propose that a change in progress is taking place, whereby nonagreeing *there's* is becoming more frequent over time but nonagreeing *there is/was* is not.

An alternative interpretation of our finding, however, is that perhaps younger speakers are more likely than older speakers to use contractions more generally. Under this interpretation, younger speakers are actually quite likely to use *there is*, and further, they are likely to reduce *there is* to *there's*. This means that higher rates of the use of *there's* by younger speakers would be due to a high rate of contraction. If younger speakers are in fact more likely to use contractions, this would mean that younger speakers use *there's* more than older speakers do because contraction is age graded, and not, as we argue, that a change in progress specific to the variant *there's* is taking place.

To investigate the hypothesis that younger speakers use more contractions in general, we searched a sample of the interviews for a small set of contractions, each in some way similar to *there's*. The sample included all of the white speakers from our data set who had some college experience but had not graduated from a four-year university. This kept both ethnicity and education level constant across all speakers in the sample. These 46 speakers represented a range of ages from 18 to 90.

We searched the text transcripts of the sample interviews for contractions and their uncontracted counterparts. We searched for three different types of contractions based on their similarity to *there's*. First, we looked for instances of *here's/here is* and *where's/where is*; *here* and *where* are phonologically similar to *there*, and they are arguably in the same syntactic position in the clause, preceding a form of *to be* and a pivot. Second, we searched for instances of *he's/*

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he is and *she's/she is* because, like existential constructions, they involve the copula *to be*. Finally, we searched for instances of *don't/do not*, *won't/will not*, and *can't/cannot/can not*. Zwicky and Pullum (1983) argued that *-n't* is an inflectional morpheme rather than a clitic, a property potentially shared by the *-'s* in *there's* (Kiparsky, personal communication). We excluded instances of the uncontracted forms when they were used in contexts that would not allow contraction, such as in questions and contrastively focused environments. Speakers in the sample produced an average of 100 utterances over the course of their interviews in which this variation was possible.

We ran a mixed-effects logistic regression to test the effects of speaker age and contraction type on the use of contractions. This model included speaker age as a continuous variable, type of contraction as a nominal variable (inflectional, copular, phonologically and syntactically similar to *there*), and the interaction between age and contraction type, as well as speaker as a random effect. The results of this regression show that age does have a significant effect on use of contracted forms, but in the opposite direction from what the age-grading hypothesis predicts. Older speakers are significantly more likely than younger speakers are to use contracted forms ($p < .0001$). The interaction between age and contraction type reveals that this overall trend is driven by older speakers' tendency to use the contractions *here's* and *where's* at higher rates than younger speakers do ($p < .0001$). Figure 3 illustrates the results.

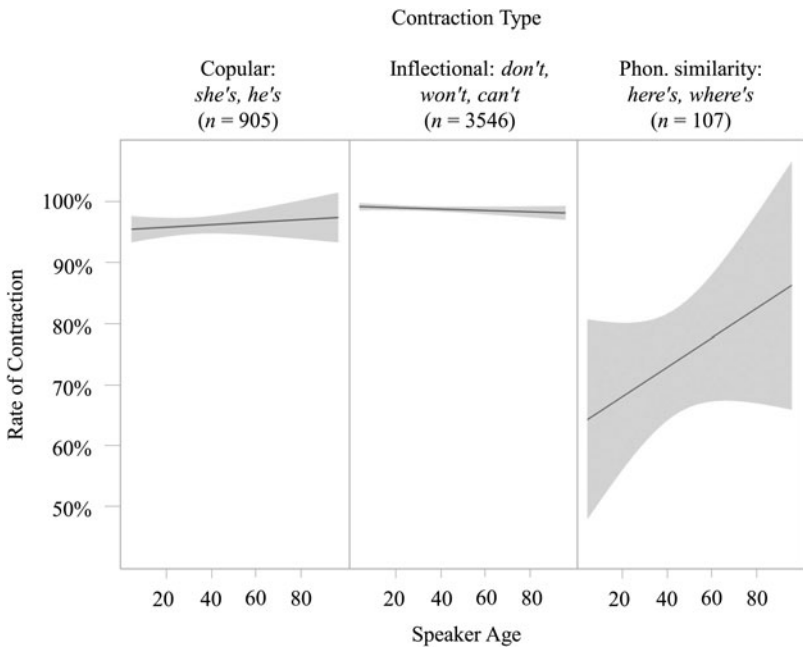


FIGURE 3. Rate of contraction by speaker age and contraction type.

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Because we know that younger speakers are not more likely to use contractions generally, we can conclude that their frequent use of *there's* is not part of a more general trend toward contraction. Instead, it appears that a change in progress is taking place, with younger speakers being more likely to use the form *there's* to introduce plural pivots. In contrast, the use of nonagreeing *there is/was* does not appear to be increasing over time. This provides further support for our claim that *there's* exhibits distinctive behavior from existential constructions with full form nonagreement.

Linguistic factors

The effects of linguistic factors on agreement variation further highlight the need to analyze *there's* separately from other nonagreeing variants. Speakers in our data set were significantly more likely to use *there is/was* in clauses with negative polarity and strong determiners. Use of *there's* showed the opposite correlation, patterning together with *there are/were*.[5] Claes and Johnson (2016), who found as we do that negative polarity conditions nonagreement with *there is/was*, offered a possible explanation for the pattern. Underlying their cognitive linguistic analysis of agreement variation in existential constructions is the idea that, when referents denoted by the pivot are more conceptually prominent, they are more likely to be treated as subjects, and, as a result, are more likely to occasion agreement. When noun phrases occur in constructions with negative polarity, their reference is said to be "suspended" (Keenan, 1976:318), and they are therefore less conceptually prominent. If negative polarity corresponds to less prominent pivots, then these pivots will be less likely to occur with agreement.

The polarity patterns we find align with Claes and Johnson's (2016) analysis; however, the correlations we find between determiner type and nonagreement run counter to what we might predict from their analysis. Strong determiners, such as *the* and *these*, point to specific, prominent referents. Their analysis might predict that existential constructions with strong determiners would be more likely to display agreement than constructions with weak determiners would. Instead, our data show the opposite correlation, with strong determiners conditioning the use of nonagreeing *there is/was*.

Implications of treating there's as a separate variant

Our main proposal, that *there's* should be treated as a separate variant from nonagreeing *there is/was*, has implications beyond existential constructions. The way researchers choose to classify individual linguistic forms affects which factors are determined to be conditioning linguistic variation, which then affects the social analyses that researchers propose to make sense of the data. Agreement variation in existential constructions is a fitting case study of a broader issue: it is not always obvious how to conceptualize and therefore categorize variants, but these decisions have important consequences for our sociolinguistic analyses.

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While many of the researchers of agreement variation give serious thought to the idea that *there's* is different from other forms of nonagreement, to our knowledge only Walker (2007) considered it to be a distinct variant for analytical purposes. The choice to group *there's* with *there is/was* can lead to generalizations that are inaccurate or incomplete. For example, Britain and Sudbury (2002) found that nonagreement is positively conditioned by present tense. This finding would also be supported by our data if we had grouped constructions with *there's* in the same category as *there is/was*. However, if we consider only full forms of the verb, ignoring *there's*, nonagreement occurs more frequently in the past tense than in the present. In Claes and Johnson's (2016) and Walker's (2007) studies, the same pattern is observed among full form variants. In this case, when *there's* is analyzed separately from the other nonagreeing forms, we find that present tense, a factor proposed to positively condition nonagreement in previous studies, is instead best described as negatively conditioning full form nonagreement.

In a similar case, as a part of a larger study on agreement variation in existential constructions, Rupp (2005) examined negated clauses. She observes that nonagreement with *there's/there is* in a negated present tense clause is more likely to occur when the form of the negation is *not* rather than *-n't*. However, there are linguistic constraints on which form of negation may co-occur with which form of the verb. *Not* appears overwhelmingly in clauses containing *there's*, and the contracted form *-n't* appears exclusively with *is* (there are no tokens of *there'sn't*). Rupp's observed correlation between the form of negation and agreement rates is reducible to the finding presented here that nonagreement with *there's* occurs at much higher rates than does nonagreement with *there is*. This case illustrates how grouping together two variants that behave differently can obscure patterns in the data.

How we classify variants can also influence our understanding of the social distribution of variation; we can illustrate this using our own data. For example, if we group together instances of *there's* and nonagreeing *there is/was* into a single "catch-all" nonagreeing category, both age and education level significantly condition nonagreement. We ran a logistic regression with the same factors as described in the Data and Methods section, but with a binary classification of the variants. The results of this regression show that younger speakers ($p < .0001$) and less educated speakers ($p < .0001$) use "catch-all" nonagreement more frequently than their older and more educated counterparts. Furthermore, neither polarity nor determiner type had a significant effect. Had we grouped the variants in this way, we might have come to a different interpretation of this variable. We might have suspected that this is an example of a nonstandard variant becoming more frequent over time, or that it is an example of age grading in which people of working age use a nonstandard variant more frequently than speakers of retirement age do.

The larger issue here is not about which factors turn out to be significant in the statistical model. Instead, the issue is how a sociolinguistic analysis would proceed based on the results obtained.

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CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study support the proposal that *there's* is sociolinguistically distinct from the nonagreeing forms *there is/was*. The use of *there is/was* is largely restricted to speakers with lower levels of education. However, nearly all speakers in our data set, regardless of their educational background, use the form *there's* at least once to introduce a plural pivot, and younger speakers are significantly more likely to use *there's* over the other forms.

Moreover, *there's* accounts for 74% of all present tense tokens in this study, suggesting that it is the unmarked form for introducing plural pivots in the present tense. This finding may challenge the reasonable assumption that *there's* is a straightforward contraction of *there* and *is*. If *there's* is merely a contracted form of *there* and *is*, it would suggest either that the unmarked form of this construction in the present tense violates normative grammar rules of English, or that the typical agreement rule we see elsewhere in English does not apply in the same way to existential constructions. This second idea would predict that *there is* should also be an unmarked way of introducing plural pivots, but this is not what we find. Alternatively, perhaps *there's* is not a straightforward contraction of *there* and *is*. This raises the possibility that *there's* and *there is* are morphosyntactically distinct.

Several researchers have explored this possibility, accounting for the differences between *there's* and *there is* by suggesting that *there's* is a "frozen form" or a single lexical unit (Cheshire, 1999; Chomsky, 1995:384; Crawford, 2005; Walker, 2007). Under this analysis, *there's* is not syntactically decomposable into *there* and the copula. Although the findings of this study are consistent with the idea that *there's* is a single lexical unit, there are other potential analyses that are also compatible with our results. For example, it is possible that *there's* is decomposable: its component parts may be *there* and *-'s*, with *-'s* being a distinct lexical item from *is*. Under this analysis, we would say the proposed change in progress actually concerns the lexical item *-'s*. The two analyses differ in their predictions about productivity: under the second analysis, we would expect *-'s* to productively attach to other words, such as *here* and *where*, and we would expect *here's* and *where's* to behave similarly to *there's* with respect to agreement patterns.[6]

Regardless of whether these particular analyses are on the right track, studies on agreement variation in existential constructions suggest the possibility of using the sociolinguistic distribution of a variable to extend morphosyntactic research; that is, we may point to distributional differences to argue that what has been thought of as a single syntactic phenomenon is nonuniform. Just as variationist work integrates proposals about sentence structure to provide explanations for the distributional patterns that are uncovered, there is much room for sociolinguistic research to be brought to bear on morphosyntactic puzzles. Through this process of mutual engagement, we can gain insight that is fruitful for both fields.

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NOTES

1. Agreement is almost invariant among tokens with singular pivots. Of the 3037 tokens with singular pivots where agreement variation is possible, only 12 of them have verbs with plural agreement, for a nonagreement rate of 0.4%. It is likely that this very low rate of nonagreement with singular pivots is the result of planning errors and does not reflect a regular pattern.

2. While these tokens are relevant to a general analysis of agreement variation, the primary objective in this study is to determine whether and how existential copular *there's* differs from its uncontracted counterparts. Among noncopular constructions, there were 21 agreeing tokens (32%) (e.g., *there have been*), 6 uncontracted non-agreeing tokens (9%) (e.g., *there has been*), and 41 contracted nonagreeing tokens (59%) (e.g., *there's been*).

3. A reviewer points out that speakers may articulate a reduced form of *there was*, perhaps [ðɛrəz]. The reduced form would ideally constitute a separate variant of the past tense copula in studies of agreement variation. While the transcription of our corpus is not narrow enough to distinguish such articulations, to get a full view of the possible variants, it would be fruitful to analyze these reduced forms.

4. Cheshire and Fox (2009), Tagliamonte (1998), and Tagliamonte and Baayen (2012) treated tokens of *there was* as instances of *was/were* leveling, noting that *was/were* leveling occurs most frequently in existential clauses. We view *was/were* leveling and nonagreement in existential constructions as different phenomena, and in this study we have chosen the latter interpretation, classifying the use of *there was* to introduce plural pivots as part of nonagreement in existential constructions.

5. With respect to polarity, Tagliamonte (1998) found the opposite pattern, with nonagreeing forms occurring more frequently in affirmative clauses. It is difficult to compare our results with previous research on determiner type, as studies vary significantly in how they classify determiners.

6. We thank Raffaella Zanuttini (personal communication) for pointing out that presentative uses of *here's* do seem to readily appear with plural pivots (e.g., *Here's my keys*), and for further discussion of the "frozen form" analysis.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 3. *Use of each variant across all social and linguistic factors*

Variable	Factor	*There are/were*		*There's*		*There is/was*		Total
		n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	
Total		845	33	1320	52	379	15	2544
Education	Some high school	16	17	52	55	26	28	94
	High school	92	24	211	55	80	21	383
	Some college	291	26	657	59	174	16	1122
	Four-year college	263	48	229	42	53	10	545
	Graduate school	183	46	171	43	46	12	400
Sex	Female	450	37	597	49	165	14	1212
	Male	395	30	723	54	214	16	1332
Field site	Bakersfield	315	35	461	52	114	13	890
	Merced	236	39	271	45	99	16	606
	Redding	294	28	588	56	166	16	1048
Polarity	Negative	56	33	74	44	39	23	169
	Positive	789	33	1246	52	340	14	2375
Determiner type	Strong	45	26	82	48	43	25	170
	Weak	800	34	1238	52	336	14	2374
Age	(Continuous)	Mean age = 52		Mean age = 44		Mean age = 50		2544

TABLE 4. *Average age and total number of female and male speakers across the five education levels*

Education level	Average age	Number of female speakers	Number of male speakers	Total number of speakers
Some high school	58	2	3	5
High school	57	7	13	20
Some college	41	30	33	63
College	53	24	10	34
Graduate school	52	10	13	23
Total	48	73	72	145

TABLE 5. *Results of the multinomial regression where* there's *served as the reference level*

	There are/were			*There is/was*		
Predictor	Coeff.	SE	*p*-value	Coeff.	SE	*p*-value
Age (continuous)	.022	.002	<.001	.015	.003	<.001
Education (continuous)	.407	.046	<.001	−.113	.060	.035
Sex (male)	−.164	.091	.074	.0470	.119	.778
Polarity (positive)	−.164	.182	.369	−.656	.206	.001
Determiner (weak)	.185	.191	.330	−.631	.198	.001

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TABLE 6. *Results of the multinomial regression where* there are/were *served as the reference level*

	There's			*There is/was*		
Predictor	Coeff.	SE	*p*-value	Coeff.	SE	*p*-value
Age (continuous)	−.023	.002	<.001	−.007	.003	.067
Education (continuous)	−.407	.046	<.001	−.520	.063	.002
Sex (male)	.162	.091	.074	.196	.127	.122
Polarity (positive)	.164	.182	.369	−.493	.217	.024
Determiner (weak)	−.185	.191	.330	−.816	.223	<.001

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