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Regional variation in the English verb qualifier system[1]

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Nonstandard dialects often use the same form for the past tense and past participle of irregular verbs for which the standard language has distinct forms. One possible reason would be that some speakers have a nonstandard system of verb qualifiers (tense, mood, and aspect markers) in which the past tense/past participle distinction is functionally redundant. Data on spontaneous speech in Britain in the 1990s partly supports this by showing marked regional variation in the use of the Perfect construction. However, some nonstandard past tenses cannot be explained in terms of a nonstandard qualifier system.

1 Introduction

The recent creation of structurally analysed samples of spontaneous spoken English is opening up new possibilities of discovering how the language is used in practice in everyday life. The first stage of the CHRISTINE Corpus, 'CHRISTINE/I',[2] was completed in summer 1999. It comprises forty extracts, annotated in accordance with the detailed and comprehensive scheme of Sampson (1995), drawn from random points in randomly selected files from the 'demographically-sampled' speech section of the British National Corpus (BNC).[3] It thus represents the spontaneous, conversational usage of a cross-section of the United Kingdom population, balanced in terms of age, sex, social class, and region, during the past decade. CHRISTINE/I contains about 80,500 'full words' of speech (not counting distorted words, hesitation phenomena, etc.) uttered by 147 identified speakers together with a number of unidentified speakers.

Since it was completed in 1995 the British National Corpus has been criticized with respect to the reliability of its demographic classification of speakers. But considerable effort was devoted in the CHRISTINE project to correcting these data, in consultation with the BNC team and from internal evidence. The CHRISTINE/I classifications are accounted for in detail in the various documentation files which form part of the resource. Unquestionably, even these corrected data are less 'clean' than one might ideally like, particularly with respect to social class (which is not

[1] I thank my colleague Larry Trask, Anders Ahlqvist of the National University of Ireland, Galway, and anonymous referees, for comments on drafts of this article or issues contained in it. Responsibility for the conclusions is mine alone.

[2] To download the corpus or its documentation file, follow the respective links from http://www.cogs.susx.ac.uk/users/geoffs/Resources.html. The project which created the CHRISTINE Corpus was sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK), under grant reference R000 23 6443.

[3] http://info.ox.ac.uk/bnc/.

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relevant to the present study); but no alternative source of evidence on present-day British speech comes close to the BNC in representativeness, and I believe the data are well worth study despite their imperfections. Any errors in classification of individual speakers are likely to be random and hence are likely to blur statistically significant correlations that may exist in the 'true' data; therefore, if correlations are found in the data we have, they should be genuine.

The present study depends heavily on the regional classification of speakers. CHRISTINE/I uses a simpler system of regional classification than the BNC. The BNC system divides England into seventeen regions, in a way that seems to be based on the sixteen regions of Trudgill (1990: 3–5) but contains various inconsistencies, probably caused by the nature of the dialect information supplied to the BNC team by their respondents. For most purposes of spoken grammatical analysis, a sixteen- or seventeen-region classification is more refined than is useful. CHRISTINE/I classifies speakers in terms of four English regions – SE England, SW England, Midlands, and Northern England – together with Wales, Scotland, and Ireland[4] as one region each. This makes the classification more reliable, because the inconsistencies of the BNC system relate largely to subdivisions of these broad regions. The four English regions correspond to the second level from the root in Trudgill's hierarchical classification of modern dialects (1990: 65, fig. 3.1). The Northern England/Midlands boundary runs north of Merseyside, south of Yorkshire, and through the north of Lincolnshire. The southern boundary of the Midlands runs south of Shrewsbury and Birmingham and north-eastwards to the Wash. The SE/SW boundary runs between Northampton and Oxford and south-westwards to Bournemouth.

The present article uses the CHRISTINE/I data to study nonstandard spoken usage with respect to the English system of verb qualifiers. (This is sometimes called the 'tense/aspect' system; but the same system also includes the modal verbs, which would not normally be included under either 'tense' or 'aspect'. It is convenient to use 'verb qualifiers' as a term embracing tense, aspect, and modality markers.)

2 The standard system and nonstandard alternatives

For standard English I assume a verb qualifier system which can be expressed by the following formula (adapted from Chomsky, 1957: 39):

(Past) (Negative) (Modal) (Perfect) (Progressive) (Passive) Main-verb

Any verb group (sequence of zero or more auxiliaries and a main verb) in a finite clause can be treated as realizing a set of markers qualifying the main verb, each of which is optional and which occur in the order given. (Here and below, forms in

[4] BNC speech recordings were made exclusively in the UK; but the classification 'Ireland' rather than 'Northern Ireland' is used because the CHRISTINE/I extracts include one speaker labelled 'Irish' who was living in England, and may have come from the Republic.

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capitals represent lexemes, for instance DO stands for *do*, *does*, *did*, etc.) The logical markers are realized morphologically as follows:

Past is realized as the past tense form of the next verb
Negative is realized as *-n't* or *not* suffixed to the next auxiliary verb, or to DO if no auxiliary follows
Modal is realized as one of the verbs CAN, WILL, etc.
Perfect is realized as HAVE with the past participle form of the next verb
Progressive is realized as BE with the present participle form of the next verb
Passive is realized as BE with the past participle form of the next verb

Thus in theory a verb group might contain all six markers, e.g. *couldn't have been being eaten*. In practice no CHRISTINE/I verb group has more than four markers, e.g. *that he wouldn't have said this* T10.00976: Past Negative Modal Perfect.

I shall use terms such as 'Past', 'Negative Progressive', to describe verb groups (e.g. *ate*, *isn't eating*) containing just the markers named and no others. I shall use e.g. 'Past-marked' to describe verb groups which contain a particular marker irrespective of whether it also contains others.[5] This article does not consider verb inflexion for subject agreement, although CHRISTINE/I data show plenty of nonstandard phenomena in this area.[6]

It has often been noted (e.g. Edwards, 1993) that nonstandard dialects show many differences from standard English in the forms used for past tenses and past participles of individual verbs. Dialect usage frequently has the same form for past tense and past participle of an irregular verb which has distinct forms in the standard language (e.g. *drove* for both parts of DRIVE, *done* for both parts of DO). The form used for these two parts is sometimes identical to the base form, e.g. *run*, and sometimes different from any standard form, e.g. *seed* as past tense/participle of SEE.

One author who has examined such phenomena in detail, Edina Eisikovits (1987), discusses them on the assumption that the *system* of the nonstandard dialect she describes is the same as the standard system, and the differences relate only to the forms used to realize particular elements of the system. (Eisikovits describes the English of inner-city Sydney; but, as Trudgill & Chambers (1991: 52) rightly say, many of her findings apply to other English dialects.) A point which makes this assumption seem problematic, with respect to the CHRISTINE/I material, is that by far the commonest nonstandard verb use there is *got* without an auxiliary replacing standard HAVE *got* in the meanings 'possess' or 'must', e.g. *you got a nice case* T11.02751, *all you got +ta do is . . .* T03.00943. The form *got* in isolation can of course be either past tense or past participle in standard English (and Eisikovits does not discuss it); but *got* = 'possess'/'must' can only be a past participle in the standard

[5] Some grammarians would describe a verb group which is both Past-marked and Perfect-marked as 'pluperfect', but this term might better be reserved for languages like Latin which contain special pluperfect paradigms.

[6] A further feature which might be included in the verb qualifier system is contrastive DO, as in *does eat* v. *eats*. This article has nothing to say about it.

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language, and has to occur within a Perfect construction (although the usual meaning of the Perfect does not apply to this special idiom).

It seems possible that sometimes nonstandard dialects might use the same form for past tense and past participle because their verb qualifier system makes no distinction between Past and Perfect, and therefore has little use for separate past-tense and past-participle forms even in those verbs for which the standard language offers separate forms. (For detailed analysis of the meanings of the two constructions in the standard language, see Elsness 1997.) That is to say: a speaker who produces forms like *they done it* might (as Eisikovits assumes) be using a dialect which contains the same contrast as standard *they did it* v. *they've done it*, but which expresses the contrast as *they done it* v. *they've done it*; an alternative hypothesis, though, is that the speaker's dialect contains no such contrast – *they done it* is this speaker's equivalent of both standard *they did it* and standard *they've done it*.

3 Verb qualifiers in CHRISTINE/I

In the present study I investigate this issue by examining those CHRISTINE/I verb groups which occur in finite clauses, where neither the verb group itself nor the clause is a second or subsequent conjunct (in which case its constituency might be affected by Co-ordination Reduction). I excluded cases which formed part of tag questions, cases where the verb group is split into two parts by Subject–Auxiliary Inversion (for instance in questions), 'semi-auxiliaries' (Quirk et al. 1985: §3.47) such as *it +'s going to be well less than a minute* T25.00177, and cases where the main verb is 'understood', e.g. *I have to plug in earphones – no you don't* T30.00684. Thus the cases retained for study should be ones in which all verb qualifiers are available to the speaker and explicit for the researcher. There are 9,430 such verb groups in the data.

The proportions of these tagmas which include the various markers (or category of markers in the Modal case, which covers each of a range of modal verbs with different meanings) are shown in table 1.

The incidence of various combinations of markers is very broadly in line with the figures predicted if these proportions are treated as probability estimates. For instance, the incidence of Past Negative Progressive forms that would be predicted from these figures is:

$$9430 \times 0.258 \times 0.124 \times 0.057 \times (1-0.125) \times (1-0.079) \times (1-0.009) = 13.9$$

Table 1. *Verb qualifier frequencies*

Past	25.8%
Negative	12.4%
Modal	12.5%
Perfect	7.9%
Progressive	5.7%
Passive	0.9%

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– the figure observed is 9. The most noticeable deviations are that combinations including both Past and Modal marking, and combinations including both Negative and Modal marking, are more frequent than predicted. The former case is not surprising, since forms like *could*, *would*, have important uses other than as the past tense of *can*, *will*. Why Negative Modal combinations should be specially frequent is less obvious; but it is noteworthy that English morphology recognizes close links between these markers via special forms such as *won't*, *shan't*. (Tottie, 1991: 38 quotes a finding by Svensson that negatives and modals tend to co-occur in Swedish.)

It does not appear that there is any systematic tendency to avoid verb groups with large numbers of markings. If no verb group with more than four markers occurs in our data, this is easily explained by the fact that the predicted incidence of the most probable five-marker combination would be far below 1 (in fact 0.17).

Notice that the Passive marker, which is the other verb qualifier apart from Perfect that involves past-participle forms, is extremely infrequent – for many speakers there is no evidence in our data that the standard Passive construction is used at all.[7] This is of course no surprise: linguists often describe the Passive construction as characteristic of formal style, suggesting that it is not likely to occur much in spontaneous speech. If a speaker's verb qualifier system were to lack the Passive term, this would be one factor reducing the value of a morphological contrast between past participle and past tense.

4 Past and Perfect

It is well known that there is a difference between the standard English verb qualifier system and the dialect of at least one region: the standard Perfect construction is little used in Irish English. John Harris (1991: 205; and see 201ff) describes this dialect as 'lack[ing] a fully grammaticalized perfect form' and using a range of constructions not found in standard English to express perfective meanings (e.g. *she's her course finished*, *he's after doing* . . .). This is sometimes explained as an inheritance from a Gaelic substrate, although Harris argues that it is more likely to reflect development from an earlier state of English, with the modern Perfect construction being a relatively recent innovation in standard English (Visser, 1973: 2042–3).

The ten Irish speakers represented in CHRISTINE/I bear this out. They do produce some standard Perfect forms, and this is not surprising: probably most Irish speakers, and certainly all those represented in CHRISTINE/I, are exposed to a greater or lesser extent to the British standard language. But the Irish speakers between them uttered only 26 Perfect-marked forms in 545 verb groups. This

[7] I have not investigated the use of 'catenative' GET, which can be used to express an alternative construction with passive meaning.

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Table 2. *Perfect and Past marking, by region*

	All verb groups	Perfect-marked	Past-marked
SE England (22)	1379	74 (5.4%)	344 (24.9%)
SW England (22)	1163	77 (6.6%)	333 (28.6%)
Midlands (22)	1117	95 (8.5%)	273 (24.4%)
N England (38)	2339	221 (9.4%)	660 (28.2%)
Wales (12)	593	73 (12.3%)	165 (27.8%)
Scotland (6)	420	42 (10.0%)	97 (23.1%)
Ireland (10)	545	26 (4.8%)	133 (24.4%)

proportion of 4.8 per cent of verb groups Perfect-marked is the lowest figure for any region in the CHRISTINE/I data.

On the other hand, it has not been reported previously, to my knowledge, that regional differences with respect to the incidence of Perfect constructions occur within Great Britain, where the special Irish perfective constructions discussed by Harris are not used. But the CHRISTINE/I data show large differences. The figures are given in table 2, including the Irish figures just quoted, and the corresponding figures for Past marking, for the sake of comparison. (Again the utterances of some speakers are omitted because their regional classification is unknown, or in two cases because they are classified as non-native-speakers.) Numbers of speakers for each region are given in brackets after the region name; numbers of marked verb groups are given as absolute counts and as proportions of all verb groups. ('Perfect-marked' here, and below, includes cases of the nonstandard forms *ain't* or *in't* + past participle, as well as standard *HAVE* + past participle. The data include three cases of Perfect-marking with *ain't*/*in't* for SW England and one each for SE England, Northern England, and Wales, with none for other regions.)

The figures for Southern England (that is, SE England and SW England together) are only marginally higher than those for Irish English, which we have seen described as lacking a Perfect construction. Leaving aside Irish English, this large difference between Southern England and the rest of Great Britain is statistically very robust indeed. 151 Perfect-marked out of 2,542 verb groups for Southern England, versus 431 out of 4,469 for the rest of Britain, gives a X^2 figure of 28.72 (using the formula incorporating correction for continuity given e.g. by Siegel & Castellan, 1988: 116, eq. 6.3), corresponding to $p < 0.000004$.

Since British speakers, even more than Irish speakers, are all exposed to the British standard language, which does include the Perfect construction, the relatively low incidence of this construction among Southern English speakers suggests variation between two competing verb qualifier systems: the standard system which includes the Perfect, and a nonstandard regional system which lacks it.

Among the 106 regionally identified CHRISTINE/I speakers who each produced at least ten verb groups, there were fourteen speakers who produced no Perfect-marked forms at all. All but three of these had the regional classification 'SE

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Table 3. got *for standard* HAVE got*, by region*

	got = possess/must	*HAVE got*	col. 2 / (cols. 2 + 3)
SE England	7	24	22.6%
SW England	24	29	45.3%
Midlands	5	38	11.6%
Northern England	7	76	8.4%
Wales	8	29	21.6%
Scotland	1	13	7.1%
Ireland	4	10	28.6%

England' (four speakers), 'SW England' (four speakers), or 'Ireland' (three speakers).[8] The three other speakers who produced no Perfect-marked forms in ten-plus verb groups all have the classification 'Midlands', which is geographically the transitional area between Southern England and the rest of Britain.[9]

In passing it is worth noting that the figures show no tendency for regions which use less Perfect marking to use more Past marking in compensation. It may be misleading to think of Past and Perfect constructions as alternative ways of expressing similar ideas.

5 *got* for *HAVE got*

If Southern English (and Irish) speakers systematically tend not to utter Perfect forms, one might expect that *got* without auxiliary, as an alternative to standard *HAVE got* in the sense 'possess' or 'must', would also be characteristic of these regions. The figures of table 3 confirm this.

(Although column 2 of table 3 includes only *got* in the senses 'possess' or 'must', column 3 includes all cases of *HAVE got*, a few of which may occur in the sense 'have obtained'; our annotation system does not permit cases of the latter type to be distinguished, but inspection of a sample revealed no such cases and they are likely to be very few if they occur at all. As before, *HAVE* here covers the nonstandard forms *ain't*/*in't*.)

Column 4 shows, for each region, the *got* = possess/must figure as a proportion of the total for this and the *HAVE got* figure. We see that the proportion of cases lacking the auxiliary is higher for Ireland and Southern England than for other regions. In this case, the figures for the three former regions are widely different from one another, and the SE England figure is only marginally higher than the highest rest-of-Britain figure, namely that for Wales. Nevertheless, if again we set aside the Irish

[8] The individuals concerned are: (SE England) Anthony065, Ernest068, Benjamin083, Flissy117; (SW England) Darren011, Madge017, Norah022, Dean057; (Ireland) Jane093, Melvin095, Mark111.

[9] These are: Celine026, who lives in Nottingham; and Solange046 and Geoff048, work colleagues in a Birmingham press agency, who are assigned a code defined as 'Midlands' in BNC – though this is one of the BNC codes which does not relate clearly to the Trudgill dialect classification.

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data, and within Britain compare the Southern England totals of 31 *got* vs. 53 *HAVE got* with the rest-of-Britain totals of 21 vs. 156, the X^2 statistic (calculated as before) is 20.8, $p < 0.0002$.

6 Casual subject-auxiliary omission

At these significance levels, we are clearly dealing with a genuine regional difference of usage within Great Britain. Statistics alone cannot show that the difference relates to the verb qualifier system, if there is any other structural phenomenon which might explain the figures. The only alternative that occurs to me is the rule whereby a subject and any clitic attached to it can be omitted in casual speech: people say things like *saw them catch him up* T25.00167 for *I saw them catch him up*, or *taken my Sundays away in April* T22.01282 for *they've taken my Sundays away in April*. For most verbs, the standard past-tense and past-participle forms are identical, so a clause intended by the speaker as a Perfect form with subject and *HAVE* 'understood' in this way can be indistinguishable from a Past form and may be registered as such in the CHRISTINE Corpus.

This might explain the regional differences reported above, if 'casual subject-auxiliary omission' were more frequent in the relevant regions. However, the data suggest that it is not. I checked the proportion of all verb groups in our data which are the first constituent of a non-co-ordinate declarative main clause. This will not catch every case of casual subject–auxiliary omission, because for instance a clause in which the omission occurs may begin with an adverbial – *I've just come back* may be reduced to *just come back*. But, if the Perfect data were to be explained away in terms of different rates of casual subject–auxiliary omission, one would expect that difference to be reflected in rates of verb-group-initial declarative clauses. Instead, the proportion of verb groups in our data which occur in this configuration is 2.9 per cent for Southern England and 3.2 per cent for the rest of Britain – a small difference, in the wrong direction. The proportions for the seven separate regions in fact vary in a random-looking way within a narrow band.[10] I infer that there is no systematic regional difference in casual subject–auxiliary omission; in the absence of other possible explanations for the figures, I conclude that the Perfect aspect is genuinely marginal in Southern English vernacular.

7 Modals + *of*

If this conclusion is correct, it may explain another puzzling phenomenon: the nonstandard use of *of* after modals in writing. The BNC speech transcriptions include many cases where Modal Perfect forms are written with *of* rather than *have*, e.g. *could of been*. In America, at least, this seems to be an orthographic deviation of long standing; Booth Tarkington's 1914 novel *Penrod* used it in representing the

[10] The figures in ascending order are Ireland 2.2 per cent, Midlands 2.4 per cent, SE England 2.5 per cent, Scotland 2.9 per cent, SW England 3.3 per cent, Northern England 3.6 per cent.

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speech of a boy uninterested in schooling (*'Cause if they had they'd of give you a good name!*, Tarkington 1914: 193). It is very familiar in present-day British undergraduate prose. Either spelling would normally correspond to the same pronunciation [əv], with an obscure vowel, so I had taken the *of* spelling to represent a simple orthographic confusion. The BNC transcribers made many spelling mistakes; our policy on the CHRISTINE project was to standardize their spellings, except where these reflected nonstandard spoken-language structure (e.g. *nowt* for *nothing*). I took this to imply that cases like *could of* should be corrected to *could've*; but two researchers with whom I discussed the issue on separate occasions felt that this was inappropriate – one, with a language-teaching background, protested vigorously that *could of* should be retained because, for the speakers, the word 'really is' *of* rather than *have*.

As a practical issue about policy for the CHRISTINE Corpus this point was difficult to act on, because we had no way of knowing whether any particular case of *of* for standard *have* represented the speaker's or the transcriber's model of English. But the fact that qualified observers believe that some English speakers have such a model, and the pervasiveness of this particular 'spelling mistake', are problematic from the perspective of the standard qualifier system. The patterning of that system would seem to make it obvious that [əv] in this context represents *have*: *he could've eaten*, including Past and Modal markers, alternates with *he's eaten*, without them – [z] in the latter phrase certainly has nothing to do with *of*; and no one, surely, would utter a question form like **of you seen it?* for standard *have you seen it?*, where pronunciation would distinguish *of* from *have*.

On the other hand, if a sizeable group of speakers do not have the Perfect term in their verb qualifier system, then it is perhaps understandable that they will reanalyse sequences such as *could've*, uttered by speakers who do use the Perfect construction, as *could of* and write it accordingly.

This explanation for the *could of* spelling would predict that this spelling deviation should be commoner in Southern England than in the rest of Britain. The only relevant data I know of is a report by Cheshire & Edwards (1993) on the results of a survey in which teachers and pupils in a sample of schools throughout Great Britain responded jointly to a questionnaire on local grammatical usage. Question 196 related to *of* after modals; the questionnaire example was *You should of left half an hour ago!*[11] Writing from a British perspective, Cheshire & Edwards argue that this is a feature which 'may well be of relatively recent origin'.[12]

[11] Cheshire & Edwards write (1993: 66), as if this *of* is sometimes actually pronounced with a full vowel, [ɒv], and others have told me anecdotally that they have heard this. But Cheshire & Edwards's methodology in the publication cited could not have shown this, and I am sceptical.

[12] However, since writing the first draft of this paper I have encountered a British example from a printed source not very much younger than the Booth Tarkington example quoted above. In her 1939 mystery *Murder is Easy*, Agatha Christie's educated amateur detective suggests to a country bumpkin that perhaps someone pushed the victim off a bridge. The bumpkin agrees *They might of*, and the detective continues *He might have made a few enemies* (Christie, 1939: 125). Agatha Christie, and this novel, have a firmly Southern English background.

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Unfortunately, the survey findings are not very conclusive for our purposes, because *should of* was reported from almost all schools throughout Britain. Nevertheless, the minority of schools which did not report *should of* were disproportionately located outside Southern England, as predicted. Of 57 schools outside Southern England, six (10.5 per cent) did not report *should of* (in Oldham, Warrington, Rotherham, Scunthorpe, Nottingham, and Derbyshire); of 22 schools within Southern England, only one (4.5 per cent, in Oxford) did not do so. However, this difference is not statistically significant.

8 Nonstandard verb forms

There remains the issue which initially triggered this investigation: verb forms occurring without a preceding auxiliary which are either standard past participles rather than past tenses, or are standard base (present-tense) forms being used in clearly 'past' contexts.

Our data contain a number of such cases, although taking all such verbs together the phenomenon is less frequent than the use of *got* without auxiliary for standard *HAVE got*. Counting cases is not straightforward, because of several interfering factors. Among the possible cases uttered by regionally classified speakers, I excluded cases where the verb group was not preceded by a subject, because these may have been (and in many instances probably were) the result of casual subject–auxiliary omission rather than nonstandard inflexion; likewise I excluded the question *you ever seen that?* T27.03792. When Catherine059 interrupts herself, talking about the *telly that Tom give us # that give us* T13.01084, I counted one instance rather than two of *give* with past meaning. In the case of speech repairs such as *cos er gone in # it's gone in this week* T13.01006 or *but I thought it was just wo # you know just been left somewhere* T05.01168, I do not count the underlined groups at all, since it seems likely that the speaker is correcting the omission or 'understanding' the omitted auxiliary as having been uttered before the point of interruption. A particularly problematic case occurs in text T09, where Beatrice039 says at three widely separated points during a game of Cluedo *I know who done it*. On the face of it these are cases of *done* for standard *did*; but in the specific context of murder mysteries the phrase *who done it* has become an idiom of the standard language, written as one word *whodunit* or *whodunnit* – Beatrice039's *done*'s should perhaps be excluded for that reason.

With these provisos, the cases in our data, with numbers of examples, are:

come 18
done 13 (10 without the 'Cluedo' cases)
give 3
gone 1
seen 1
shown 1
sung 1

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(In the last case, Lass (1994) shows that the use of *sung* as past tense of *sing* has a long history. But I find nothing in his paper to suggest that the other forms in this list occurred as past-tense forms in dialects which existed before the emergence of a standard language.)

The totals by region are:

SE England 4
SW England 8
Midlands 6 (3 without the 'Cluedo' cases)
Northern England 14
Wales 6
Scotland 0
Ireland 0

My hypothesis at the beginning of this article was that confusions between past-tense and past-participle forms might arise as a consequence of speakers making no Past/Perfect distinction in their verbal system, so that the morphological distinction between past-tense and past-participle forms of the standard language appeared to be meaningless variation. However, that hypothesis implies that these confusions should correlate with absence of Perfect marking. Our data do not show that. Twelve nonstandard forms in 2,542 verb groups is 0.47 per cent for Southern England; even without the 'Cluedo' cases, 23 in 4,469 is 0.51 per cent for the rest of Britain. The region for which Perfect is most clearly marginal, Ireland, shows no examples of nonstandard past forms.

The most judicious conclusion might be that there is truth in *both* the alternative ideas about nonstandard verb usage. The figures do seem to demonstrate that Southern England resembles Ireland in making limited use of Perfect marking as a logical category; and this would explain *got* replacing standard *HAVE got*. At the same time, it is probably true, as Eisikovits suggests, that nonstandard uses of *come*, *done*, and *give*, at least, are often merely equivalents of *came*, *did*, *gave*, representing the Past term of a system that does not differ from standard English in its logic.[13]

9 A possible explanation

A further question, if the concept of a Southern English vernacular lacking Perfect aspect is correct, is about the historical process which has created this situation.

I shall not enquire further into the factors behind the low incidence of Perfect aspect in Irish English; I am not qualified, and the CHRISTINE data would not be suitable, to take that question further than has been done by John Harris, quoted in section 4 above. But the finding of a regional difference within Great Britain is new, and Harris's discussion does not bear on it.

Regional dialects sometimes preserve old structural properties which have been

[13] Of the four one-off cases in our data, *seen* and *sung* were from Southern English speakers, so could be explained in either way; *gone* and *shown* were from Midlands speakers, but two isolated examples seem as likely to represent 'performance errors' as systematic nonstandard usage patterns.

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lost from the modern standard language, but this usually applies to individual regions distant from the centre of national life. It would be surprising to find that a historical development such as the introduction of the Perfect construction had occurred in standard English and in the vernacular speech of all regions *other* than Southern England. Besides, as a Southern Englishman myself (born in 1944, parents Londoners, lived for about four years in North London and for the rest of my childhood near Bristol), I might expect, if that were true, to recognize this nonstandard usage pattern. In fact, the people among whom I grew up seemed, so far as I can tell, to use the Perfect routinely in casual conversation in the ways specified in descriptions of the standard written language. It is more likely, surely, that within Great Britain loss of the Perfect is a recent change which began in Southern England and has not yet spread to more peripheral regions, or to the standard (and which I was born too early to participate in).

It is well known that colloquial American English often uses the Past where British English (and the written American English standard) uses the Perfect (see e.g. Vanneck, 1958; Elsness, 1997). This is particularly striking where the clause contains a time adverb incompatible with the (British) sense of the simple past construction, e.g. *Did he do it yet?*, where *yet*, meaning 'at any time prior to now', conflicts to British ears with the Past marking, meaning 'at the particular time to which we were referring'.[14] There are other cases (such as *I'm tired – I had a long day*, quoted by Quirk et al. 1985: §4.22 n. [a]) where the American Past construction could occur in British English, but the American use seems to be intended in a sense which British English expresses via the Perfect. Presumably there must be many occasions when British hearers fail to realize that an American Past construction is not intended to mean what the same construction would mean in standard British English.[15]

[14] Opinions differ (e.g. Vanneck, 1958: 241; Visser, 1973: §806) about whether this distinctively American use of the Past is more likely to represent influence from the English of Irish or Continental European immigrants, or to be a survival from the Early Modern English of the original settlers. Larry Trask tells me that the usage is deprecated by American editors; but it certainly is often seen nowadays in published American writing.

[15] So far as I know, the CHRISTINE Corpus does not contain examples comparable to *Did he do it yet?*, including an adverbial element which would require Perfect marking in standard British usage. However, Lorenz (2001) has found five such cases in the full 10-million-word (demographic and context-governed) BNC speech section, and in using grep to locate his examples I have found a sixth. Quoting BNC filename and s-unit number, these are:

H5H.00668, recorded 1987, Suffolk Sound Archive recording of memories of working at Ipswich docks in the 1920s-30s, speaker male, 77, retired: *We'd always get one, we never lost one yet.*

KC4.00734, recorded 1991, conversation at home in Croydon, Surrey, speaker details unknown: *Since when did they ever?*

KDY.01678, recorded 1993, conversation in Croydon, Surrey, speaker female, 66, retired, social class C1: *She said to me ehm, didn't count those, didn't give a re {pause} refund on those cigarettes yet, I said no.*

KE3.05858, recorded 1991, conversation at home of BNC respondent's aunt, speaker female, 59, shop assistant: *Did she decide what she's doing with her money yet?*

KP4.01651, recorded 1993, conversation in a London park, speaker details unknown but he/she is

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Elsness (1997) shows clearly that the Perfect construction is less frequent (and the Past construction more frequent) in American than in British written English (though he shows, e.g. 1997: 358, that even in the latter the incidence of the Perfect construction has declined over the past two hundred years).[16] At present, spoken American English lacks research resources comparable to the CHRISTINE Corpus which would allow us to discover whether there are American speakers who lack the Perfect construction in spontaneous speech altogether. If the Perfect were more or less marginal for some American speakers, then the findings for British usage discussed above might be another example of American influence on British English. In that case, a pattern of strong American influence on Southern English speakers, less in the Midlands and Northern England, and less still in Wales and Scotland, might perhaps be explained by suggesting that a stronger sense of local identity in regions distant from the metropolis makes speakers more resistant to American linguistic influence (cf. Labov, 1963).

Finally, if the Perfect is disappearing from the spontaneous speech of Southern Englishmen and women, one would expect sooner or later to find this reflected in careful written prose. As this article was being completed, I encountered the first example that I have seen. The national press on 11 December 2000 carried an advertisement by the Benefits Agency of the UK Department of Social Security, headed *Calling people 60 or over – keeping warm this winter just got easier!* Although it would be unremarkable in American English, this use of a Past form with *just* in the sense 'just now' is clearly deviant with respect to standard British English, and would (I believe) never have been seen in print until very recently. Since the intended readers belong to the older generation throughout the country, many of them may have been mildly puzzled by it.

joking as an equal with the BNC respondent who is female, 15, student, social class AB: *I never lost mine yet.*

KP5.03037, recorded 1993, conversation over a meal at an Indian restaurant in Twickenham, Middlesex, speaker female, 20, student, social class C1: *Did you put my red light up yet?*

All six cases were recorded in SE or SW England, and, where the BNC file headers specify dialect details for the speakers, these match recording locations. According to the BNC user's manual, 45.61 per cent of total spoken BNC wording was recorded in the 'South'. How 'South' in that context relates to the 20-way BNC regional classification of speakers, and hence to SE/SW England in the sense used in this article, is far from clear; but, if all the recording locations listed above fall within the region to which the 45.61 per cent figure applies, then the probability of getting this sample distribution, on the null hypothesis that such constructions are not correlated with region in the utterance population, would be less than one in a hundred.

[16] Another, briefer recent discussion of grammatical change in Britain suggests that the opposite trend has been observable recently: Hughes & Trudgill (1996: 10–11) report a growing incidence of utterances like *And Roberts has played for us last season*, where the Perfect construction would traditionally be incompatible with the adverbial *last season*. I do not recognize this usage from my own experience, but, if there are now speakers for whom the Perfect is a feature only of the prestige dialect, absent in their own vernacular, one might expect forms like this to occur as hypercorrections. Vanneck (1958: 24) describes similar forms occurring as occasional hypercorrections in written American English.

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