Sociolinguistic Variation in Smith Island English:
Existential It

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By

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Abstract

Smith Island, located 11 miles off the Eastern Shore of Maryland in the Chesapeake Bay, just north of the Maryland-Virginia boundary, is a geographically isolated community. Speakers of Smith Island English use existential *it* to replace existential *there*, a feature that has been documented in other dialects but not as an indicator of language change. This study examines four age groups across three communities for both sexes to determine the extent of use of this nonstandard form. Results of the study indicate that a language change appears to be taking place across the entire island, whereby residents are using existential *it* as the primary existential subject. The data indicate proportions of use of .076 for existential *it*, .022 for existential *there*, and .002 for elliptical forms that had no filler in the subject slot. High rates are documented in all three communities and in male and female speakers of all ages except those islanders above 65 years old. These older residents prefer to use existential *there*, and there is evidence that the change to existential *it* began with those residence under 65. In these under-65 speakers, the study presents evidence that existential *there* is being limited to sentences in the simple present and simple past and existential *it* is being used in more structurally complex and semantically intricate speech. The study presents argument that the choice of *it* as the existential subject came about in three steps: e-*there* was accepted as a subject NP which had the properties of a pronoun; e-*there* was analyzed as a singular subject NP; the role of *it* was extended to take over as the pronoun in existential sentences.
Preface

This research was supported in part by a dissertation grant from the National Science Foundation. The support made it possible for me to travel to Smith Island on several occasions to collect data. Dr. Paul Chapin of NSF was always helpful in his advice, even when I was unable to meet the time-line I originally proposed.

I must give special thanks, also, to my advisors on this paper, Dr. Ralph Fasold and Dr. Roger Shuy of Georgetown University and Dr. Walter Wolfram of the University of the District of Columbia. Their support and counsel helped me through the usual trials and tribulations that every student faces when writing a dissertation. Dr. Fasold, in particular, was very supportive when I had to face several crises which delayed my work. This paper would not have been nearly as valuable to my personal and academic growth without the guidance of my committee members.

Because most of this work was completed while I was living and working in Pittsburgh, I was fortunate to have an understanding supervisor, Dr. Edward Anthony of the University of Pittsburgh and Director of the Language and Culture Institute where I am employed. He allowed me to take time as needed to complete my research, but, more than that, Ed Anthony became a friend who gave me support at every turn.
Lastly, I must recognize the debt I owe to the many residents of Smith Island who taught me more than they could know. They opened their homes to me and introduced me to many aspects of life on their island in the Chesapeake Bay. I will never forget two of my older subjects who passed away before I finished writing, and in some measure, I want this work to be a record of the island they loved so much. I developed a respect and affection for the watermen and their families, and I intend to return to visit with them as often as I can.

One of the most valuable lessons that I learned during this research relates to data collection procedures. Though I relied heavily on the work of others in developing an appropriate methodology, I also had to develop my own intuitions in my capacity as fieldworker. Many of the decisions I had to make to find subjects and to inspire trust from the natives came about only after very careful observations during my early trips to the island. As a result I believe that I have grown as a student of language variation, and I hope that others will benefit from my experiences.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In linguistic analyses of dialects of English we often expect that if a language change occurs it will be in the direction of decreased use of a nonstandard variant and increased use of its more standard counterpart. In other words, as dialects change, they typically become more standard, especially with respect to grammatical changes. In this case, however, I have an instance of a dialect which is moving in exactly the opposite direction. In Smith Island English the standard form “there” is being replaced by the nonstandard form “it” in existential sentences of the sort, “There’s a girl I know who likes to swim in the Bay” to give “It’s a girl I know….This paper then will examine the various sociological and linguistic parameters to attempt to accurately describe the dialect change and to understand why such an unexpected change might occur.

Rationale

In the structuralist era of linguistics in the United States, one of the tenets of language study was the philosophy of empiricism which required that statements about language had to be directly observable from the data. This approach to language study was particularly amenable to fieldworkers involved in describing languages which were considered exotic; the decreasing number of native speakers, as in some American Indian languages, made it imperative for
those linguists to document, as precisely as possible, what they heard, without concern for “underlying” or “abstract” forms and without concern for the functional and social implications of certain linguistic choices made by the speakers.

Primarily, the work of the dialect geographers was, and still is, an effort to document actual, observed data so as to arrive at a description of linguistic forms. These descriptions, then, would be the primary data for geographical divisions, or isoglosses, to show this aspect of dialect diversity in the United States. These linguists were less concerned with explaining the patterns of diversity than with describing them, though in some cases, the social implications of the data were delineated.

The dialect geographers, the structuralists, and other linguists of the pre-50’s era of American linguistics provided less information about the complex interaction of language with the range of significant social parameters which are now an integral part of much of linguistic methodology. They did, however, lay the groundwork for examining variation in language in terms of an accepted standard and in terms of regional differences.

In recent years detailed investigations of linguistically diverse groups have provided data that, in some measure, have been used as evidence of the inherent adequacy of language varieties, particularly of varieties spoken by socially less prestigious groups. Over the past two decades, a major trend in research on
American English dialects has been concerned with the social significance of language and with social dialects. Varieties of English which are considered socially, rather than necessarily regionally, diverse are as logical and inherently adequate as any other. The examination of social parameters as input to language diversity has helped scientists from many fields begin to understand what people are actually doing when they speak their languages. Such a point of view allows linguists to examine questions such as the following:

1. What linguistic features are markers of particular social groups?
2. What social function is served by alternation among linguistic variants?
3. To what extent are social facts necessary in explaining linguistic patterns?
4. Does the differentiation of linguistic features in terms of social function shape culture or does cultural diversity result in or shape linguistic structure?

The trend in dialect research toward greater emphasis on social dialects does not diminish the importance of studying geographically determined varieties of American English which have maintained many unique features. These dialects are as inherently adequate as more mainstream varieties. As such they are rule governed and, by studying them in greater detail, as e.g. Wolfram and Christian did for Appalachian English (1976), one can describe these rules. These studies
of linguistic variation have provided more than mere description of a language however; the data have been used in considering several issues relevant to the broader topic of linguistic theory, whether as it pertains to language change or as it pertains to grammar construction. Dialect studies have given us a solid beginning in answering such questions as:

1. Should features of language variation be included in the grammar of a language?

2. If they should, which ones should be included?

3. What are the linguistic structures that set off one speech community from another?

4. Are the linguistically divergent features indicators of more general patterns of language change?

Beyond the more explicitly linguistic issues, studies of unique dialect groups are important because they provide an historical record of a group of people at a particular time. Written and tape-recorded data is important as a resource for future researchers; this kind of data is important in understanding the historical relationship of cultural and linguistic change. An integrated perspective on the study of language which includes geographical factors, social factors, and factors of speaker attitudes allows the linguist to develop analyses which reflect a portion of human history. Linguists have begun to equip themselves with the tools to examine the interdependence between language and social function so that they
can better understand not only the language but the people who speak the language as well. In the words of Dell Hymes,

We are ill equipped to make sense out of the adaptation of a subordinate language to a rise of national feeling, or to use as a national “lingua franca;” to trace the consequences of ebb and flow in communicative status and prestige; to recognize recurrent patterns in the adaptation of a language to a certain niche in a personal, community, national repertoire. In short, we are best equipped to look at languages as evolving isolates, most poorly equipped to look at languages as instruments of evolving populations. (1967, p.1)

Studies of variation provide a framework within which we can examine the way an evolving population uses language. It is important that variationists examine communities which are on the periphery of evolutionary trends; otherwise, we may miss (1) an opportunity to expand the empirical base from which we make decisions and (2) some differentiation of language function that is significant for that population of people in a way that is less important for other populations. For example, Wolfram and Christian (1976) examined the variety of English referred to as Appalachian English and provided a detailed account of numerous phonological and grammatical features. In a subsequent study in which these researchers compared Appalachian English to Ozark English, they also drew some conclusions about how the people use their language.

We also revised our earlier position on the Semantic/pragmatic function of the a-prefix based on additional data collected in this study. We now maintain that the a-form can be used to indicate pragmatic intensity. In addition, it can be used as a vernacular indicator, marking shifts into older, more rural styles. (Christian, et.al., 1984, p. 233)
In another, rather different study of a periphery group, Churchill and Gray (1977) discovered that auctioneers are “skilled conversationalists” who have specific methods by which they use language to exercise control over the bidders. From his examination of data collected in Philadelphia neighborhoods, Labov (1972) drew the following conclusions:

It appears that the speakers who are the most advanced in the sound changes are those with the highest status in their local community, as the socioeconomic class patterns indicate. But the communication networks provide additional information, discriminating among those with comparable status. The most advanced speakers are the persons with the largest number of local contacts within the neighborhood, yet who have at the same time the highest proportion of their acquaintances outside the neighborhood…..Through further studies of this process, we hope to discover how sound changes are generalized throughout the community and how local values are transmitted to create a relatively homogeneous urban dialect. (pps. 261-262)

Linguists should also study isolated environments, especially when those environments are susceptible to extinction. Island communities, in particular, often have a unique position in a population, and they often face extinction from natural forces.

The Chesapeake Bay Islands, for example, are unique in terms of their geography, their political structures, and their professions, as well as their language varieties. Many of these islands are losing land yearly to the Bay waters.

Take Holland Island, for example, up in the area of Captain John Smith’s Isles of Limbo (in the Chesapeake Bay). In the beginning of this century Holland had a population of three hundred, some
sixty homes, a two-room schoolhouse, church and post office. But by 1922 continuing erosion and some severe storms forced out the last inhabitant. (Warner 1979)

Sharp Island as well (also in the Chesapeake Bay) has been reduced from an inhabited island of over seventy acres in the early 1900’s to being completely underwater today.

Linguistic diversity in these island populations may result in part from the geographical isolation of such groups. As Wolfram and Fasold (1974) state,

> Although transportation obstacles are not generally considered to be a serious handicap with our modern technological advances, separation of areas by rivers, mountains, and other natural barriers has inhibited the spread of language in the past because it has inhibited the physical mobility. Mountain ranges, islands, and other isolated areas as a result often become relic areas – areas in which older forms of a language are preserved. (p. 74)

Very often the conservative and non-conservative may be compared by studying local and regional differences. In isolated and outlying areas changes typically occur slowly and “sounds that were standard in the 17th and 18th centuries…remain alive on the lip of the folk.” (Robertson, 1954, p. 93)

This study, then, is aimed at expanding our understanding of language variation and its interaction with social processes. To do so, it will examine and provide documentation for the unique sociolinguistic situation and the unique dialect that exist in one island community. The object of the study is one aspect of the speech used by the people who live on Smith Island, Maryland, in the Chesapeake Bay.
Chapter 2

Description of the Island Community

Smith Island, located 11 miles off the Eastern Shore of Maryland in the Chesapeake Bay, just north of the Maryland-Virginia boundary (cf. maps in Appendices A and B), is a geographically isolated community. The island was first mapped by John Smith in 1608 when he was exploring the Bay waters looking for new harbors and salt for the Jamestown colony. It was settled in 1638 by colonists seemingly from the new settlements in Virginia and North Carolina, though the history books are unclear on this matter. (Middleton 1966) Because of its location, Smith Island is subject to the same kind of extensive erosion that Holland and Sharp Islands were. The Army Corps of Engineers reported in “Flood Control, Shore Erosion Control and Navigation – Smith Island, Maryland and Virginia” (1981) that

Unquestionably Smith Island is an ever-changing land mass which is shaped by the elements. Historical work done by many authors traces the development of Smith Island from a peninsula which encompassed Tangier Island to the south and South Marsh and Bloodsworth Island to the north…As water level rose, salt water intrusion progressed up the Bay; uplands converted to wetlands; wetlands were eroded or submerged; and once inhabited areas succumbed to the forces of nature….There is no indication that the past trends will not continue to shape the future. With all the available upland areas presently inhabited, and without some form of action to counteract the forces of nature, the future existence of Smith Island is questionable.
Smith Island can be reached only by water or by air. (There is a small runway large enough for a small airplane or a helicopter.) Its closest neighbors are Tangier Island, a thirty minute boat ride to the south, and Crisfield, Maryland, a forty-five minute boat ride to the mainland on the Eastern Shore. Most off-island contacts occur in Crisfield when people from the island ride the mail boat to the mainland in the morning to buy supplies or attend to business which cannot be handled from Smith Island and return home in the early afternoon. Since most of the inhabitants on the island earn their livings as watermen, fishing, oystering, and crabbing, they also typically go to Crisfield to sell their catch.

Smith Island’s rather isolated location in the Chesapeake Bay (and its lack of tourist accommodations) discourages regular tourist traffic. There are occasional off-island visitors who typically catch the mail boat to the island and return to the mainland on the boat a few hours later.

Given its social and geographical isolation, Smith Island is an excellent modern-day example of a sociolinguistic laboratory. First of all, the island community is relatively homogeneous in terms of socio-economic class and ancestry. Most of the inhabitants on the island are direct descendants from the original colonists who settled there in 1638 and began lives as watermen, a tradition that has been passed down to today. The population of Smith Island is approximately 500. (A decline in population in recent years reflects the migration of some of the younger generation to the mainland, especially since earning a
living from the water has become more difficult, and employment opportunities are more attractive elsewhere.) Linguistically, Smith Island should provide historically relevant information.

Secondly, the island is divided into three distinct communities – Ewell, Tylerton, and Rhodes Point (cf. Appendix B) – among which the population is roughly equally divided. Ewell and Rhodes Point receive the most direct contact from off-island visitors. Both communities have an inn where tourists can dine, but only Ewell has over night accommodations in the form of eleven rooms which can be reserved in one of three island homes. Ewell and Rhodes Point are separated by a one-mile long road built across a marsh. Tylerton, however, has no tourist accommodations and can be reached from the other two communities only by boat. Because the island itself is small, and the three communities proportionately even smaller, direct empirical evidence can be used to provide a detailed account of possible linguistic differences among the groups, differences which may in fact be indicative of the maintenance of group identify. The questions which must be asked are as follow: (1) Are the groups preserving identical linguistic structures? (2) Are the groups changing in different directions or in the same direction but at different rates?

Objectives of the Study

If the time should come that the island is no longer habitable, the residents would quickly become dispersed throughout the mainland, and the native dialect
would be subject to fairly rapid changes; therefore, the overall objective of this study is to provide an accurate description of Smith Island English. This record will help establish the unique position of Smith Island natives within the American English speaking community.

Specific objectives of the study are as follow:

- to provide an accurate and detailed description of one salient linguistic feature of Smith Island English which sets it off from more mainstream varieties;
- to describe the distribution of the feature across any patterns of variation in terms of age, sex, and island community;
- to identify the linguistic and social correlates of the feature to determine if there is a language change in progress and to provide possible explanations for the change if there is evidence for one, both externally and internally.

Methodology

A. Speech as the primary data

The sociolinguistic data for this research was gathered within a speech community. Gumperz (1972) defines a speech community as “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use.” (p. 219) Labov (1972 takes the concept of speech community
one step further by including the principle that “social attitudes towards language are extremely uniform…” (p. 293) Differences in language are significant if they underlie the development of social attitudes within a speech community (as in the often heard comment from subjects on Smith Island that so and so speaks “real good English” or “the folks on Rhodes Point talk different from us”). The same differences may also be the reason for attitudes of non-natives toward the speech of a community (as in comments from journalists who have said that Smith Islanders sound like they are using “medieval English”). These differences may or may not be ones which have risen to social consciousness and become stereotyped, but it is one of the jobs of the sociolinguist to examine them, whether stereotypical or not, and to discover the relationship between language behavior and social structure in the speech communities.

We might consider speech as an unproductive source of data because it is so often full of false starts and circuitous language; however, factors show this characteristic to be irrelevant in this study. Labov reports that “In the various empirical studies that we have conducted, the great majority of utterances – about 75 percent – are well-formed sentences by any criterion.” (1972, p. 203) Similarly, on Smith Island I found the majority of sentences to be grammatical and acceptable. Grammaticality of the sentences in spontaneous speech, however, was never a concern, since to accomplish my goals, I wanted to examine the speech of this community as it is used as a tool for daily, social interaction, and I
wanted to discover what forms comprise the dialect’s uniqueness. My interviews on Smith Island averaged 45 minutes long, and any ungrammatical forms or false starts did not seriously limit my data.

The variation that exists in the choices a speaker makes among alternate ways of saying the same things is not accommodated by the notion of an “idealized homogeneous speech community.” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3) This variation is often patterned and, when patterns exist, they can be discovered by an examination of the linguistic and social correlates of speech behavior. Once the patterns emerge we are one step closer to formalizing the rules that govern the variation. Uncovering patterns of variation and formulating the rules is a primary concern for this research.

The quality of recorded speech that is used as primary data can be reduced by extraneous noise or environmental interferences. In this research, however, I made a point of using good equipment – tape recorders, microphones, and tapes – for the recordings. On Smith Island I used a Technics 686-D tape recorder with a battery pack that allowed me considerable flexibility in where I did the recordings. This recorder has two microphone jacks for the lavalier microphones which I used. Extraneous noise was not a serious problem for two reasons: First, the recorder contained a noise reduction component which filtered out most background noise; Secondly, the interviews were conducted most of the time in locations that were relatively quiet. I did encounter one problem, however; I
recorded one session at volume that was too low for adequate playback. I remedied this problem by playing the tape back on my Optonica stereo cassette deck which was hooked up to two Advent speakers thereby providing more than adequate volume.

In addition to the issues discussed above, speech as the primary data can be unpredictable. If a researcher wishes to study a particular form, especially a grammatical one, there is no way to guarantee that speakers will actually use that form. Labov and others, however, have developed methods to control the interview so that target forms will be more likely. In fact, Labov states that “Eventually, we will be in a position to assert that a speaker does not have a given form in his system because of his consistent failure to use it in a context where other members of the community do so regularly. (1972, p. 205) Having a consistent set of questions that typically elicit the target grammatical form allowed me to remove some of that unpredictability.

Speech recordings that are collected from a speech community, then, can be excellent data for the sociolinguist given, of course, that the research takes the appropriate steps in planning and carrying out her research.

The elementary steps of locating and contacting informants, and getting them to talk freely in a recorded interview are formidable problems for students. It is an error for anyone to pass over these questions, for in the practices and techniques that have been worked out are embodied many important principles of linguistic and social behavior. (Labov, 1972, p. 207)
B. The Observer’s Paradox

One of the most difficult problems in data collection is what Labov calls the Observer’s Paradox (1972, p. 209): Sociolinguists aim to discover how people talk when they are not being observed, but the people must be observed to obtain the data. On Smith Island, I had to deal with this problem within the must larger picture of the whole island before I could begin to address it in the actual interviews. To do so, I had to assume a role within the community that was honest and unassuming, and I had to plan my course of action very carefully. In the beginning, I made two trips to the island with the primary goal of letting as many people as possible know who I was. The island is small and strangers are often a topic of conversation; I knew that my face and purpose must become familiar to the people so that they would begin to trust me. Wolfram and Fasold state that “..some communities have thus become reticent about cooperating in research projects in which they may feel exploited.” (1974, p. 45) This reticence was in evidence during my first two trips when many natives made sure that I was not a newspaper journalist; several human interest stories had been written by journalists who were not careful with their facts and who emphasized many of the negative aspects of living on Smith Island, often ignoring the best aspects of island life. The natives were suspicious also because many of them are involved in a business (as watermen) that does not require strictly accurate records of income; Internal Revenue Service agents are not welcome on Smith Island. I had
to convince everyone that my interest was not to pry, that I was a student, and that I could be trusted.

It was easy for me to project an interest in the life of the people since it was so different from my own. I learned to “hang out” at the general store and to be quiet while giving non-verbal signs that I was willing to talk. With patience, I began to see indications that I was being accepted into the community in my role as a student researcher of Smith Island English; the old men on the porch of the general store began to include me in their jokes and stories, and people began to invite me into their homes.

Once I broke through the natives’ reservations concerning my purpose, I could then concentrate on resolving the observer’s paradox in the tape recorded, ‘spontaneous’ conversations that I held with each subject. My procedure was as follows:

1. I began each interview by asking questions about familiar topics, the crabbing industry, the weather, winter on the island, growing up on the island, family history, etc. Questions of this sort are less threatening and easier to answer. To prepare myself, I read everything I could find about the island’s history, and I listened carefully to conversations around me in the stores about current topics of interest.

2. I often asked ‘how’ questions, for example “How can you tell when a crab is going to turn into a peeler?” Questions of this sort allow the interviewee to
assume a role as an authority who is teaching the interviewer, thus decreasing
any intimidation the subject might feel regarding the interview situation.

3. I asked questions about emotion-laden topics. As Labov states, “We can also
involve the subject in questions or topics which recreate strong emotions he
has felt in the past, or involve him in other contexts.” (1972, p. 209) In some
instances I asked about frightening incidents on the water, e.g. fear of
drowning or of being stranded on the Bay in bad weather. On Smith Island,
the topic of laws governing the seafood industry on the Chesapeake Bay is an
emotional one and often elicited strong statements about unfair treatment or
ignorant lawmakers or political nonsense. In addition, I discovered that many
natives feel as though the county and state governments ignore their needs
because the island is isolated in the Bay and is easy to forget about. Questions
about these issues were often part of my interviews as well.

4. When possible during the interviews, I included a third person, perhaps a
friend or family member, to whom I occasionally directed comments or
questions. In so doing, I hoped to provide an atmosphere where informality
was the rule and the interviewee was less likely to feel “on the spot.” In the
case of the 10-15 year olds, all but one were in groups of two or three.

5. Though the use of recording equipment and external microphones is limiting
to movement, I did not avoid asking questions that would require the
informant to move about. For example, if we were discussing the erosion of
island land, I would ask if the subject would show me the part of the island he
was referring to by pointing out the window or door. Or, if the topic of a
family picture or Bible came up, I would ask if I could see it. I hoped that
fewer physical restrictions would make the interview seem more like a natural
conversation.

6. I included also an occasional, personal anecdote of my own when appropriate
during the interview, especially concerning any experiences I had had on the
water or concerning my early years in a rural area. Elements of shared world
knowledge and experiences increased my rapport with the islanders and the
feeling of naturalness. I also observed, though it was not a conscious effort at
the time, that my own speech became less formal and somewhat less standard
during the interviews; in fact, my own Appalachian English dialect surfaced to
some degree. I do not know whether this speech made me seem less
“foreign,” but it must have made me seem less formal.

7. Though I was interested in attitudes concerning speech, in particular whether
there were perceived differences in speech among the three communities, I
waited until the end of the interview to ask such questions. By so doing, I
hoped to avoid directing the subject’s attention toward his own speech.

The use of these procedures does not guarantee that the subject will not monitor
his speech and use more standard forms. My subjects showed, however, through
their non-verbal behaviors that they became more relaxed and more informal
during the interviewing process. As a result, I believe they were more likely to
use their vernacular because I took these steps.
C. Choosing and Finding Subjects

Several factors affected my choices regarding the sample population for this study:

1. In previous studies (Labov 1966, Shuy, et. al. 1968, Wolfram 1969, Wolfram and Christian 1976) gender of the speaker has been found to correlate with some linguistic variables. From my initial experiences on the island, I hypothesized that there would be a difference between the speech of men and women; therefore, I divided my subjects according to sex.

2. Because Smith Island is a relatively isolated geographical area, I wanted to examine language change as it is evidenced in apparent time. In other words, I wanted to examine the speech of successive age levels to determine if systematic variation in the speech of these groups could be evidence of language in the process of changing. I, therefore, chose four age groups: The first group of 10-15 year olds represents those speakers who are beyond the period of language acquisition. They are also the oldest students who go to school on the island and, as a result, have less regular contact with off-island language varieties than do those teenagers who attend high school on the mainland. The second group of 16-25 year olds contains those speakers who go to school off the island and who are establishing their roles in the community. The third group of 26-25 year olds represents those speakers who have established roles in the community. And, the over fifty group represents those speakers who may be using historically older language forms.
3. There are three distinct communities on the island. During my initial visits, I was surprised to be told that there is a difference in the way people talk in these communities, though no one could really explain why he thought so. Also, I discovered that natives describe the communities very differently, and, in fact, I observed some intangible quality that made each community seem different from the other. I decided to divide my sample with equal numbers of subjects for each community to determine if my intuitions were confirmed by the data.

4. Though other studies have shown a significant correlation between social class and linguistic behavior, this parameter was not used to sample the Smith Island population. Most inhabitants are homogeneous in terms of education and occupation; there is not enough difference in income or lifestyle to justify class divisions.

5. To limit the effect of off-island contacts on the speech of the subjects, I “time away” as a decision factor. All adult subjects must have spent no longer than one continuous year living off the island, except in the case of those adults who were in military service or who had attended college and lived away from home. If either exception occurred, I would include this in my analysis. The youngest subjects could not have lived elsewhere for longer than six months unless those months were the first months of their lives.

With population selection parameters determined, I decided on the number of subjects in each cell of the design. By choosing two subjects for each slot, I was able to obtain 16 speech samples in each community as follows:
The most serious problem with this design is that having only two subjects in each cell might skew the results for certain kinds of comparisons. For example, if I compared 10-15 year old males in Ewell with the same age group in Rhodes Point and in Tylerton, I would be limited in how reliable my comparisons would be. If, however, I wanted to compare 10-15 year olds with all other age groups on the entire island, there would be twelve subjects in each age group. For practical reasons, I limited the sample size to two subjects per cell giving 48 subjects for the island. Labov states that “we find ourselves fortunate in that the patterning within this (inherent) variation is by no means obscure: it does not require the statistical analysis of hundreds of speakers’ records as linguists traditionally feared. On the contrary, we find that the basic patterns of class stratification, for example, emerge from samples as small as 25 speakers.” (1972, p. 204) An island sample of 40 seems particularly adequate since it represents approximately
nine percent of the total population. I will, however, be limited in the kinds of statements that I can make concerning individual, cross-cell comparisons.

To find the subjects to fill each cell of the design required, first of all, that I develop a role within the community which people would be willing to trust, as discussed earlier. Initially, I simply interviewed anyone who was willing even if subjects in a particular cell were duplicated; when there were too many subjects for a cell, I chose the interview based on the quality of the recording, the quantity of speech, and the criteria for subject selection. One of my first tasks was to visit the minister. Smith Islanders are devout Methodists, and they place a great deal of importance on the activities of the church. At the time of my interviews, the minister, though not a native, had been on the island for seven years and was married to a native woman from Ewell. I had to convince him of my sincerity and my purpose; once I accomplished that hurdle, he made some suggestions as to persons I should contact and allowed me to use his name when I did so. After a few people were interviewed, word of what I was doing spread around the island, and people became less suspicious of my motives. As I became a familiar face, I asked for suggestions for interviewees in particular cells. Gradually, as the network of persons familiar with me became denser, I was able to pick subjects who met all of my requirements.

D. The Interviews

The interviews were mostly unstructured conversations about life on the island. Though I prepared a list of questions based on my reading and
experiences, this list was merely a guide. I allowed the conversations to take their own natural course as befitted the interests and inclinations of each subject. (cf. Appendix C for the list of sample questions.)

The length of the interviews for the 48 subjects varied somewhat. Interviews with individual subjects lasted from 40 to 60 minutes. In interviews with two or more subjects (10-15 year olds) the interviews lasted from 45 to 90 minutes; in these dual-subject interviews I structured each session so that each speaker provided an equal amount of speech. (cf. Appendix D for a sample transcript of one interview)

E. Extraction of Data

After interviewing the subjects and listening to the tapes, it became clear that one of the most obvious non-standard dialect features was the use of “it” where standard English would use “there.” For example, where standard English would have “There’re three birds in that tree,” Smith Island English had “It’s three birds in that tree.” What seemed most interesting about this feature was that some subjects seemed to be using it exclusively, and there were no subjects who did not use this feature at all. Also, at first listening, it seemed that even the most educated speakers on the island used this non-standard feature while the oldest speakers (and the least educated) used the more standard “there.” I chose this feature as one that would be salient for the purpose of this research.

Extraction of this feature was a simple but lengthy process. I listened to each tape and transcribed every sentence which contained the target feature. In
those cases which seemed ambiguous. I marked the sentence and returned to the tape at a later time to listen again and determine if the form was the non-standard one. When I could not reasonably decide that the form was the existential use of “it” rather than the pronominal use, I did not include the sentence as part of the corpus.

I divided all of the extracted data according to age, sex, and community. Within these categories, I analyzed the proportions for “there” and “it” as a first step to identifying the linguistic and social correlates of this feature.
Chapter 3

Relevant Research

The first full-scale attempt to categorize American English dialects began with the work of the linguistic geographers in the early twentieth century to develop an Atlas of American English that would show dialect clustering. The original studies were the efforts of a group headed by Hans Kurath to map the isoglosses of the New England States. (Kurath 1939) Fieldworkers armed with pad and pencil interviewed subjects to scientifically determine the regional and social variations of American English. Through dialect geography, language use by the life-long inhabitants of a particular area was documented with the result that dialectologists developed a new emphasis on “the density of communication” as a factor in language change. Relic forms of a language, i.e. forms preserved from an earlier point in time and which are no longer considered to be part of the prescribed standard, were shown to survive in relic areas where there was less opportunity for communication outside of the speech community, a weakness in the density of communication. (Dinneen, 1967, p. 282)

There are, however, serious criticisms leveled at the procedures by which the original Atlas data was collected. Pickford (1977) lists several: (1) the length of the interview, sometimes requiring as much as 10-12 hours; (2) inconsistent, haphazard training of fieldworkers; (3) lack of uniformity in how responses were recorded; (4) disproportionate and non-random sampling of communities and social classes within the communities. Despite these methodological flaws, the
research for the Linguistic Atlas provided a large amount of data which other linguists subsequently used to describe some American English dialects within a framework that paid more attention to the role of social factors in explaining language variation. Most of this attention was of a perfunctory nature, however, and much of the socially stratified dialectal variation was described as “free.” In other words, features were not described as patterning according to constraints on occurrence or non-occurrence. It was not until the late 1950’s in a study by John Fischer that a quantitative study of one variant, “-in” and “-ing” (e.g. walkin’ versus walking) provided actual frequency ratios to illustrate the effect of social constraints on language. His method for determining the social parameters and, in turn, his conclusions, were mostly impressionistic. Standardized guidelines for studying the relations between linguistic and social behavior were probably not given primary consideration until the 1960’s. For example, in 1963 William Labov published an article concerning the social motivation for a sound change, and in 1964 he wrote his doctoral dissertation on “The Social Stratification of English in New York City.” (1966) These studies broke the ground for the application of reliable and valid procedures for collecting data and for defining the social parameters; many of these empirical procedures were standard in sociological research but had not been used in dialectology. First of all, in this 1964 study, Labov used a 10 point sociological index developed by the Mobilization for Youth and the Columbia School of Social Work. (1966, p. 211) According to this scale, three indicators, occupation, education, and income, are used to determine the social class index. Decisions, then, were not made
arbitrarily or impressionistically but by the application of previously tested procedures. Secondly, Labov incorporated the concept of random selection of informants into his research design. One of the major criticisms of previous dialect studies, particularly the work of the dialect geographers, was that informants were selected arbitrarily or non-randomly. Labov was able to access a large sample of informants who had been selected according to rigorous procedures of random sampling. From this group, Labov was able to select a smaller sample for the linguistic interviews.

A third procedure addressed the need for consistent and reliable fieldwork. Labov and one other fieldworker used a structured questionnaire for the linguistic survey. The questionnaire was divided into several sections, all of which were administered to every informant. The tasks in each section were designed in an attempt to isolate different contextual styles varying in degree of attention paid to speech. The consistency of the structure of the interview, as well as the fact that Labov, himself, did 102 of the 122 interviews, added to the reliability of the data collection. The subjects’ responses in all of the contexts were tape recorded and ultimately submitted to quantitative analyses to arrive at the relative frequencies of all of the linguistic variables.

All of these kinds of procedures were innovative in linguistic research and had significant impact on research design. More important perhaps was Labov’s insistence on approaching dialect studies with a view to solving fundamental linguistic and sociological issues. As he states,

My own intention was to solve linguistic problems, bearing
in mind that these are ultimately problems in the analysis of social behavior: the description of continuous variation, of overlapping and multi-layered phonemic systems; the subjective correlates of linguistic variation; the causes of linguistic differentiation and the mechanism of linguistic change.

The data also….bear on…. the discreteness of socio-economic stratification, the integration of ethnic groups into the social system, the role of exterior reference groups, the relation of normative values to social behavior, the transmission of prestige patterns on the nature of social control. (1966, p. v-vii)

In other words, many researchers in dialectology were developing the area of study known as sociolinguistics; descriptive studies could no longer be viewed as mere documentation of some speech phenomenon, rather, such studies were beginning to be viewed as potentially significant to solving theoretical issues in linguistics and sociology. This perspective goes beyond the abstract, idealized speaker-listener in an effort to achieve theoretical explanations in light of actual performance. Such a point of view toward research provided the foundation for much of the sociolinguistic research which followed.

In 1967, Shuy, Wolfram, and Riley reported the results of a large-scale study of Detroit speech. These authors used the work of urban sociologists who had studied the Detroit area to plan their random sampling procedures and to delineate the informants in terms of social status. In addition, a computer program was developed which allowed the researchers to compare the use of one variable across social parameters. Their linguistic data were coded onto key punch cards; these cards were then used to organize the data into “contingency charts” like the following:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vowel of “fog”</th>
<th>10-12 year olds</th>
<th>teenagers</th>
<th>parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[a]</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[au]</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[av]</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wolfram (1969) examined the Detroit data with specific attention to “negro Speech,” a variety more commonly called Black English today. His study was one of many which used strict principles of research design to examine the speech of urban Blacks. The overwhelming interest in Black English that developed in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s was primarily a result of government concern over the “deep and dangerous alienation” felt by the black segment of the society. (Labov, 1973, p. 236) The data found in such studies as Labov (1968), Stewart (1968), Wolfram and Clarke (1971), Dillard (1972), and Fasold (1972) was used to examine such questions as “what differences exist between the dialects spoken by Blacks and those spoken by Whites,” “is there such a thing as Black English,” “was Black speech originally derived from a creole predecessor,” “how should a theory of grammar account for this variety (as well as other dialects),” and “how sociolinguistic data be used to solve the academic problems faced by black children in the public school system?” It was hoped that the answers to questions such as these would provide a new perspective and new knowledge with which to supplement the attack on racial inequality.
The focus of sociolinguistic inquiry on Black English resulted in an imbalance in the available information on American dialects; there was little information on other non-mainstream varieties. As this inequality in dialect studies became evident, researchers began to examine other varieties, in particular rural white varieties. For example, William Sledd (1967) addressed himself to the Language Communication Problems in Southern Appalachia, and in 1972, Lawrence Davis reported his Office of Education study on Appalachian Speech as it existed in a northern urban setting. In 1976 Wolfram and Christian published Appalachian Speech in an effort to “expand the descriptive base of dialect diversity in American English by focusing on an often-neglected geographical area of the United States – the mountain range of Appalachia.” (p.1) More recently, Christian, Wolfram, and Dube (1984) compared Appalachian English and Ozark English, two historically related but geographically isolated dialects. Besides describing and comparing the linguistic correlates of these two varieties, the researchers examined the ways in which the dialects are undergoing language change in apparent time, as evidenced by generational differences. The results of their study indicate that (1) the two dialects are very similar linguistically, (2) in terms of the features studied, Ozark English appears to be moving toward conformity with the more mainstream varieties faster than Appalachian English, (3) “the lexical component may be of particular significance in the incipient and terminating points of (language) change in general” (p. 239), and (4) there seems to be a pattern of “selective form retention” across linguistic environments. Their
study is evidence of the importance of comparative dialect studies to understanding language differences and language change.

Part of the sociolinguistic literature was also concerned with the English spoken by groups which had experienced some influence from a foreign language. For example, Leap (1973) and Wolfram, et. al (1979) examined certain American Indian groups; Labov, et. al (1968) and Wolfram (1973) examined Puerto Rican English in New York City; and Christian, et. al (1983) looked at the English of Vietnamese refugees. Data from such studies was used often to address issues in language identity, language maintenance and language contact.

As a result of these inquiries into non-mainstream varieties of American English, sociolinguists became increasingly interested in using their data to address theoretical issues, for example, the relation of variability to formal rules of grammar. Such issues take the student of language variation beyond the descriptive and into attempts to explain language phenomena. Some of the major, and most often heard, criticisms of sociolinguistic studies have been based on the somewhat professionally ethnocentric notion that such work is “mere description.” In the past decade, however, linguists concerned with language variation have developed new frameworks and new concepts for examining theoretical concerns. The notion of a formal grammar based on the “ideal speaker hearer, in a completely homogeneous speech community” (Chomsky, 1965, p. 3) has been discarded by many linguists in favor of an approach that incorporates observed data from people using their language in everyday situations.
Part of the controversy over whether or not variation should be part of the input to a formal grammar revolves around the concept of speaker-hearer competence. Chomsky (1965, Ch. 1, section 1) used the word “competence” to describe that ability to control the rules that allow meanings to be encoded into sounds, and this knowledge of the rules of the language is separate from the actual performance but is a basis for that performance. Competence of this sort has been further designated as linguistic competence in contrast to what Hymes (1967) calls communicative competence.

Whereas linguistic competence covers the speaker’s ability to produce grammatically correct sentences, communicative competence describes his ability to select from the totality of grammatically correct expressions available to him, forms which appropriately reflect the social norms governing behavior in specific encounters. (In Gumperz, 1972, p. 205)

Is competence, then, a one-way street? Do we, as speaker-hearers, have intrinsic competence in our language that is the framework on which we hang our performance? Or, is competence a two-way thoroughfare? Is our knowledge of appropriate (social) language use part of that intrinsic knowledge and not just part of the decoration?

Sociolinguistics became increasingly interested in the idea that linguistic performance should be conceived of as part of a speaker-hearer’s intrinsic ability.

While the simplifying idealization advocated by Chomsky has probably been a necessary step in the development toward an adequate theory of language, sociolinguists, variationists, and generative semanticists maintain that even formal grammatical competence has to include the
Many linguists who have carefully studied linguistic variation (Klima 1964, Labov 1972, Bickerton 1975) have argued that a theory of grammar should be able to explain the nature of such variation. This idea was supported by the evidence that much of variation which, at first glance, seemed so random, was, in fact, patterned according to a hierarchical set of constraints on its use. Further, sociolinguists were also beginning to discard the notion that an individual could rely on his own intuition alone to arrive at an examination of the intrinsic knowledge of a language; the individual system is not the most consistent system but, rather, is full of “contradictions and oscillations.” (Labov, 1966, p. 6) These contradictions within the system will somewhat hamper the validity of one individual’s reliance on intuition. Labov (1966, p. 7) says “the most coherent linguistic system is that which includes the …speech community as a whole. It is a long-standing axiom of structured linguistics that a system is essentially a set of differences;” these differences are, by function of being part of the system, patterned.

There have been several attempts to incorporate patterned variation into a formalized grammar by addressing questions of the following kind: Must speakers of all dialects of a language be equally competent across dialects (though not in a productive sense)? Should dialect speakers of, say, Appalachian English, Black English, and Standard English have the same grammar from which the particular variety gets its features through a unique subset of rules attached to that
grammar? Some researchers (Bickerton 1971, DeCamp 1971) have posited the existence of many grammars with each occupying some position within a framework that allows for finely distinguishable differences. For example, Carden (1973) speculated that a “parallel grammar” model could be used to examine and explain differences among dialects. His model works from the assumption that speakers of different dialects, social and geographical, have internalized grammars which differ in relatively trivial ways, either rule ordering, rule statement, or in the addition of a rule. Bailey (1973) and Bickerton (1975 also support the notion that a grammatical model should account for the existence and nature of variation in language. Bailey strongly asserts that “The study of patterned language variation in its communicative life cannot be omitted from linguistic theory and practice without invalidating them.” (p. 23) His belief is the basis of his conceptualization of the wave model for representing different “isolects” (his term for dialects, p. 11). In the wave model, a grammatical or phonological rule operates in certain linguistic environments (heavier weighted) prior to its operation in others (lighter weighted); if an isolect can be described by reference to a rule which is operating in a lighter-weighted environment, this occurrence of the rule implies its operation in heavier-weighted environments. Bailey stresses that the wave model represents the patterns that language users internalize (p. 74) and can be used to compare the constraints on variable linguistic features across dialects. Bickerton was also concerned with looking at differences across dialects in his formulation of a polylectal grammar. His research in creole languages led him to believe that speakers are “polycompetent”
such that every speaker on the creole continuum has internalized a diverse and conflicting set of rules which are “ordered in such a way that random mixing of their outputs does not occur, and selection of any rule entails a series of correlated choices.” In other words, all of the variation within a single language can be incorporated into a pan-lectal grammar. In contrast to Bailey, Bickerton believes that differences among “lects” should be viewed as minimally different but distinct grammars which relate to each other on a continuum. This contrast in viewpoints has serious implications for linguists who wish to incorporate dialect variation into a generative framework of linguistic theory; should dialect differences be explained at the level of their underlying representations or should the differences be explainable by reference to constraints on surface representations. Are dialects of the same language a result of “radical divergences in phrase structure and in the organization of the grammatical and semantic categories” or a result of “differences in the selection of redundant formatives in low-level segmentation transformations……of constraints upon particular rules…” or of “generalizations of low-level phonological rules?” (Labov, 1969, p. 718)

Though both Bailey and Bickerton were concerned with implicational hierarchies, i.e. the existence of one feature implies the existence of another (Bickerton), or the existence of a feature in one environment implies its existence in a second environment (Bailey), neither was very interested in the frequencies of occurrence of a feature. Labov (1969), however, had already shown the importance of quantitative analysis of internal linguistic constraints as an aid in
formulating rules which accounted for linguistic variation. In his examination of
the English copula, Labov followed a procedure whereby he compared how many
times a variant occurred with the number of times it could have occurred. These
frequencies of occurrence allowed him to hierarchize the linguistic environments
which motivated the production of the variant and to examine whether such
differences between Nonstandard Negro English and Standard English were a
result of high level rules of grammar (as in Steward 1968) or not. As he states,

The goal of our analysis is to incorporate such
variable rules as contraction and deletion into the main
body of generative rules needed for a full description
of NNE or SE. By absorbing the data…on systematic
variation into the rules, we will be able to resolve
questions of ordering and rule form which would
otherwise remain undecidable. Furthermore, it will
be possible to enlarge our current notion of the
linguistic competence’ of a native speaker. (p. 736)

By using the data on the contraction and deletion of the copula, he attempted to
illustrate how traditional generative rules could incorporate devises to condense
variable constraints within a single rule. With this kind of variable notation, then,
he could show that all of the sub-rules were actually aspects of the same
operation. For example, in the rule

\[ (\emptyset)/[^{pro}]##[^{+T}] [^{*Nos}] ##[^{Vb}] \]

the contraction (of schwa) is promoted by a following verb and is categorical after
pronouns and before nasals. Each part of this rule, e.g. the effect of the following
nasal, could be written separately, but, in so doing, a significant generalization
about the hierarchical nature of linguistic constraints would be lost. In addition,
Labov proposes that by incorporating variation into grammatical models by rules of this type, “a stage in the mechanism of linguistic change which involves re-ordering among these variables rather than re-ordering of entire rules” may be reflected. (p. 742)

Labov’s analysis of the rules for contraction and deletion of the copula set the stage for a revision of the notion of competence to include knowledge of variable rules. As he says,

The variable rules themselves require at so many points the recognition of grammatical categories, of distinctions between grammatical boundaries, and are so closely interwoven with basic categorical rules, that it is hard to see what would be gained from this complex system. It is evident that rules (for contraction and deletion) are part of the speaker’s knowledge of the language, and if some of these rules are cast in a different form than traditional categorical rules, then we must clearly revise our notions of what it means to ‘know’ a language. (p. 759)

Labov’s use of the notation of generative grammar to formulate variable rules was modified by Cedergen and Sankoff (1972) to incorporate the formal concept of probability. They went one step further than Labov, using the observed frequencies of a rule to estimate the probability of occurrence of the rule. They hypothesized that the variable constraints affecting the application of a rule are independent and contribute the same amount to the probability of the rule. In other words, instead of computing the effect of a particular environment, Cedergren and Sankoff computed the contribution of a feature to the total environmental effect. Though this conception was part of Labov’s analysis of the
copula (1969), Labov chose to use an additive model that says that the probability 
(p) that a rule will apply in a given environment is the sum of the numerical 
quantities attached to each relevant feature in the environment: 

\[ p = p_h \times p_i \times p_j \times \ldots \ldots \] (p. 239) If however, 

the multiplicative formulation predicts rule probabilities 
greatly at variance with observed count proportions of rule 
applications per number of eligible environments, 
we reject the hypothesis of independence and examine 
the environmental factors more carefully to see which 
one interacts and to determine the nature and 
linguistic significance of this interaction. (p. 342)

Cedergren and Sankoff used a FORTRAN computer program to calculate 
the “probabilistic aspects of a rule on the basis of frequency data.” Computer 
assisted analysis of linguistic variation allowed the researchers to examine large 
amounts of data on a large number of features. The authors believed that linguists 
should examine rule probabilities because “it is our contention that these 
probabilities are properly part of competence.” (p. 343)

A great deal of controversy has arisen as a result of variable rule analysis 
of linguistic variation. There is, of course, the issue of whether or not the relative 
effects of linguistic constraints are indeed part of our competence. Do we as 
speakers of a language have knowledge of these constraining parameters and of 
their probabilistic effect on the production of a linguistic variant? There have also 
been arguments that variable rule analysis is mostly restricted to phonological 
phenomenon or can be applied only minimally to syntactic variation. Along this 
same line, some researchers have insisted that the possible interaction of linguistic
constraints or of linguistic constraints and social parameters if overlooked by variable rule analysis which was developed around a model which assumed the independence of constraints.

As regards the first issue concerning variable rules and linguistic competence, Chomsky (1977) perhaps best stated the position of one of the opposing camps when he said “...it is not very clear that there are significant principles governing the extent and character of the variability of the system or systems in the heads of speakers or members of a language community.” (p. 191) It is interesting to note that, in his historical review of linguistic theory in the United States, Newmeyer (1980) chose not to include models or approaches for examining language and variability, models and approaches founded by leading linguists in the area of sociolinguistics. His argument for excluding variable rules from a discussion of linguistic theory, for example, is that variable rules are descriptions, not explanations and cannot, therefore, be legitimately viewed as part of competence. (Personal communication 1982) In addition, if such rules are statements about speech communities and not about an idealized speaker how could a child learn them. Newmeyer does not, however explain how a child is more likely to learn a rule such as “wh-movement” than a variable rule such as “t-d deletion.”

Kay and McDaniel (1979) and Romaine (1981) argue that variable rules by function of their emphasis on frequency information should be viewed simply as a statistical tool for analyzing data, and the tool does not, an and of itself, say anything about linguistic competence.
Token frequencies might for Chomsky be a part of the data of a theory of linguistic performance, but so far as we know he has said nothing in print on this point. In any case it seems impossible to alter Chomsky’s view of linguistic competence to account for observed patterns in token frequencies without distorting the original concept beyond recognition and usefulness. (Kay and McDaniel 1979)

In her review “Linguistic Variation in Time, Space, and Society” which critiqued several texts on linguistic variation and its social bases, Gal (1982) states that “other models of structured heterogeneity are needed.” She argues that the variable rule has limitations….“because it makes the neat assumption that variable linguistic constraints and their rankings are shared by all speakers in the community” and this assumption may not be true for all cases of variation. (p. 858) In other words, she agrees with the camp that views variable rule analysis as useful but not pertinent to a discussion of linguistic competence.

Fasold (1978) takes a very practical approach in the “competence controversy.” He examines experimental data to determine which of the following six statements is most likely as an hypothesis as to what speakers know:

1. Speakers know the precise frequency of rule application;
2. Speakers know the probability values assigned to a rule in a particular environment;
3. Speakers know the factors that favor a rule and also a hierarchical order of strength or weight among them. This hypothesis assumes that each constraint in the hierarchy outweighs the effects of all constraints below it;
4. As in (3) but without the proviso that higher factors in the hierarchy outweigh all lower factors;

5. Speakers know only which factors are relevant, but not their relative ordering;

6. Speakers know only that the rule is optional.

Fasold states that some data indicate that number 3 is correct but in other instances hypothesis 4 is correct. If hypothesis 3 or 4 is most likely, the data should indicate that constraints can be ordered hierarchically. To this end, Fasold illustrates that Wolfram’s rule for “d” deletion in the speech of New York Puerto Rican male adolescents is ordered as follows:
Fasold argues that such patterns hold for individuals as well as for groups and are evidence for shared linguistic competence.

Wolfram also takes a practical approach to this controversy. He proposes (1982) that linguists should develop methods for tapping into speaker-hearer capabilities so that they can empirically determine the outer limits of the grammar.
and so they can “consider what type of evidence constitutes a reasonable basis for claiming competence beyond a speaker’s given productive uses.” (p. 5) Wolfram points out that linguists do not have to accept carte blanche the notion that all variation is part of competence. Rather as an illustrative case he uses acceptability judgments of actual dialectal forms to see if such judgments could be used as evidence for (or against) including the feature(s) in a competence grammar. As a first step, Wolfram prepared a selection task based on the previously analyzed phonological, syntactic and semantic constraints for a-prefixing and for distributive be. Interestingly enough, the subjects, who were not productive users of either of the forms, demonstrated an excellent ability to discern the acceptability of the a-prefixing sentences but little ability to identify acceptable sentences incorporating distributive be. Wolfram suggests that for a-prefixing, little adjustment in the grammar of the non-Appalachian speaker is necessary in order to accommodate this form, but since distributive be involves the time aspect system and is a deeper, less superficial level of difference, the non-Black English speaker cannot generalize a rule to accommodate it. A grammar of English, then, should not account for the use of distributive be by one group of English speakers.

A second controversy concerns whether or not variable rules are restricted to (1) phonological variation as opposed to syntactic factors and (2) linguistic constraints as opposed to social factors. Lavandera (1978), Hudson (1980) and Romaine (1981) have argued that variable rule methodology cannot be applied to the analysis of syntactic variation. Romaine states strongly that to extend the
linguistic variable from phonology to syntax requires an assumption that syntax is somehow analogous to phonology and such an assumption ignores a major issue:

Nonphonological variables, however, may have social and stylistic significance (or what we may call ‘stylistic’ meaning) in a given case, but they always have cognitive meaning by definition. The difficulty is that the cognitive meaning must be assumed to be the same for all variants of the variable. The real dilemma, then, is the difference in defining or assuming sameness of meaning for phonological as opposed to syntactic variants. (p. 7)

In other words, differences in phonetic variation are meaningless; differences in syntactic variation cannot be assumed to be. In fact, Romaine suggests that syntactic variables must be examined within a framework which allows for an explains the existence of different forms in terms of their function. This framework extends the idea of meaning from the logical, referential, and truth conditional concept to a concept which studies linguistic forms in terms of communicative functions, i.e. pragmatics. According to Romaine, variable rule methodology does not allow for such an expansion of the concept of meaning. The important question may be whether or not variable rules can or should incorporate pragmatic constraints.

Though the attempts to use variable rules to study syntactic variable have not been nearly as numerous as studies of phonological variation, there have been a few: Weiner and Labov (1977) examined the constraints on the agentless passive and determined that “preceding clauses with subjects coreferent to the underlying object of a sentence favored the application of the passive transformation as against an active sentence with a generalized noun.
Rousseau and Sankoff (1978) used variable rule methodology to examine Sankoff, Kemp, and Cedergren’s (1978) data on ce que versus qu’est-ce-que as the head of complement clauses in Montreal French, and Sankoff and Thibault (1977) examined the alternation of the auxiliaries avoir and être in compound tenses of some verbs; Laberge (1977) examined the variation between on and tu (vous) as indefinite subject clitics; Jacobsen (1975) examined the “Factors Influencing the Placement of English Adverbs in Relation to Auxiliaries,” and Labov (1972) examined negative attraction and negative concord with a variable rule framework. Part of the scarcity of variable rule analyses of syntax occurs as the result of a problem inherent to the data collection procedures; in an effort to collect unmonitored speech samples, sociolinguists try to record conversations that are as spontaneous as possible. Such samples may or may not contain examples of syntactic variation and the instances are typically very few. As an example, it would be difficult to analyze alternation between the active and the passive (given, of course, that such an alternation is considered syntactic variation) if there were only five or fewer occurrences within a speech sample.

Some syntactic forms occur infrequently, and it is difficult to structure an interview specifically to elicit a particular form without giving up much of the ‘naturalness’ of the speech.

The second criticism of variable rules concerns the independence of constraints on rule application. Kay and McDaniel (1979) state that “an assumption in each of the variable rule models so far proposed is that linguistic constraints and social constraints operate independently, that is, that there is not interaction between
linguistic and social constraints.” Their contention is that this kind of independence denies the inhibitory or enhancing effect of social factors, such as age or social class, on a linguistic constraint within a group of speakers; in other words, linguistic constraints may not be uniform throughout a speech community.

To illustrate, the authors use Labov’s data (1966) on final stop deletion among black teenagers in New York. Labov discovered that for one group (the Oscar Brothers) the grammatical constraint (mono-morphemic, as in “walk,” vs. bi-morphemic, as in “walked) was more important than the phonological constraint (the following phoneme). For a second group (the T-Birds), however, the reverse was true. Kay and McDaniel say, therefore, that, in this case, “the linguistic constraints on the rule interact with the social constraints of group membership.” (p. 177) Sankoff and Labov (1979) answer this criticism by pointing out that the assumption of the independence of constraints is a methodological one based on the mathematics of probability theory.

This does not mean that this assumption is expected to hold for any new case or that variable rule analysis is based on the belief that a given set of internal constraints are independent. On the contrary, a variable rule program is a device for finding out if this is the case, and rather more can be learned about the grammar when it turns out not to be true. (p. 205)

They go on to point out that external, social constraints frequently interact with each other and with linguistic factors, but linguistic constraints are typically independent of each other. The variable rule methodology, however, “treats them both in the same statistical way,” although linguistic constraints more often than
not satisfy the assumption of independence whereas for the social factors this is not true.

This issue of constraint independence has a direct effect on the actual writing of variable rules of the format

\[
t, d \rightarrow <0> / \left[ \begin{array}{c} \text{C}_o \\ \# \# \# \# \text{C} \end{array} \right]
\]

which, in this case, assumes that the preceding environment and the following environment are independent. In other words, the effect of a following consonant will be the same whether or not a morpheme boundary exists. If, however, there is some interaction between constraints, the rule must be broken down into individual components, for example,

\[
\begin{align*}
t, d & \rightarrow <0> / \text{C}\#\#\text{C} \\
& \rightarrow <0> / \text{C}\#\#\text{V} \\
& \rightarrow <0> / \text{C}\#\#\#\text{C} \\
& \rightarrow <0> / \text{C}\#\#\#\text{V}
\end{align*}
\]  

(Sankoff and Labov, 1979, p. 204)

It follows that separate rules would have to be written for external social constraints. As Sankoff and Labov (1979) state “interaction of social constraints with internal constraints and with each other makes it less meaningful to simply add on sex, class, or ethnicity as ‘wider’ constraints on a variable rule.” (p. 213)

One of the issues that variationists must resolve is whether or not variable rules can be formulated to show this kind of interaction in a clear and valuable way.

Some of the sociolinguistic research has gone one step further than the typical analyses of sex, class, and age as they interact with linguistic factors.
These studies have paid somewhat closer attention to the everyday speech styles of individuals by applying the concept of social network. The term “social network” refers to the “informal social relationships contracted by an individual.” (Milroy, 1980, p. 174) These relationships are often the key to analyzing the numerous ways people use speech. Labov’s original Harlem studies (1966) pointed out that street gangs exercised a great deal of control over the norms of the group members, including the language norms; the peer group acts as a norm enforcement mechanism and, as a result, actually defines the language norms. In 1980, Leslie Milroy published her influential book Language and Social Networks which reported the results of a two-year study of the urban vernacular of Belfast. Milroy extends the conclusion that group membership is important in two ways: First, she uses the statistical technique of correlation to demonstrate a link between degree of integration in, or closeness to, the vernacular culture and the frequency of linguistic variables shared by the members of the vernacular community; Secondly, she attempts to show that the ideologies of status and solidarity are part of an “integrated system of social values which can help to explain patterns of language use both at the level of the group and at the level of the individual in relation to his group.” (p. 177)

To quantify the strength of an individual’s integration into the community, Milroy used a network strength scale to calculate a network score; one point was assigned for each of the following conditions which was fulfilled:

1. Membership of a high-density, territorially based cluster;
2. Having substantial ties of kinship in the neighborhood (more than one household in addition to his own nuclear family);

3. Working at the same place as at least two others from the same area;

4. The same place of work as at least two others of the same sex from the area;

5. Voluntary association with workmates in leisure hours. This applies in practice only when conditions three and four are satisfied.

(p. 141-142)

Milroy then used analysis of variance to examine the links between this network score and the variables of age, sex and area. She found a fairly clear relationship between network scores and the distributional patterns based on other social patterns of groups. In addition, she examined the correlations between language scores and network scores of individual speakers; again, the results showed a “positive and significant relationship between network scores and language scores on all the variables tested.” (p. 153)

One importance of this kind of sociolinguistic research lies in its usefulness in explaining questions of language maintenance and language change, or, as Milroy states, “the association between close-knit network structure and two related linguistic phenomena: the maintenance of consistent nonstandard linguistic norms, and the emergence in principle at any level of society of a highly focused set of norms.” (p. 185) The break-up of a dense network structure, as in the processes of urbanization and industrialization, will be associated with linguistic change.
Studies such as Milroy’s, which examine in detail the interaction of social
and linguistic structures, have serious implications for the field of sociolinguistics.
First, linguists studying variation in very different locations must choose ways of
characterizing and measuring network structure which are appropriate to that
locality if they wish to thoroughly examine the social function of linguistic
variables – the range of possible relevant factors will depend partly on the “local
cultural categories which reflect the more abstract properties of network structure
such as multiplexity and density.” (Milroy, 1980, p. 199) Second, fieldworkers
can use the concept of social network to formulate a data collection strategy
which can, at least in some measure, resolve the observer’s paradox.” For
example, one of the principles of social network is that the status of “a friend of a
friend” can help the fieldworker be drawn into the network where he will have
greater access to different language styles and greater chances to participate in
prolonged interactions. Third, it seems obvious that more linguists are
recognizing the importance of using statistical measures to illustrate degrees of
significant interactions as an important first step to explaining the “why” of
correlations; in other words, linguists will be one step closer to explaining the
relationships between an individual’s linguistic behavior, the rules of social
behavior, and the function of each in developing and characterizing an
individual’s and a group’s identity.

Summary

This micro-analysis of Smith Island English fits into the tradition of
sociolinguistic inquiry in several ways. First, the data collection procedures
follow the procedures follow the patterns originally developed by the Linguistic Atlas fieldworkers and later refined by linguists such as Labov who wished to concentrate on more “natural” speech samples and, in-so-far as possible, avoid the observer’s paradox. Secondly, the choice of social parameters was based on the traditional divisions of age, sex, and class, though class was not used since the natives are homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic status. Third, this dialect group was chosen because of its geographical isolation and what effect this isolation might have on language maintenance and/or change.

Within this traditional framework, I have attempted to expand the knowledge base concerning American English dialects in some important ways. Except for one study by Shores (1979) in which he discussed vowel use on Tangier Island, this study is the only examination of the speech that exists on any of the Chesapeake Bay Islands. In addition, though other studies have noted the use of existential “it” in various dialects, never has the use been at such high frequencies nor has the use been examined in such detail.

This study also makes it clear that Milroy’s concept of social network must be re-defined in cases such as Smith Island. In this case, social network was not defined by notions of workplace since most of the natives earn their livings as independent watermen, nor was it defined by kinship ties since there has been extensive marriage among the families who carry the names of the original settlers on the island. Rather, group membership was defined by community; Smith Islanders are very loyal to the community where they live, even if they were born on one of the other two communities. This discovery was surprising in
light of the small size of the population and the close proximity of the communities. As a result of these differences, the notion of community of residence was added to age and sex as a social parameter which must be examined.

Beyond the methodological considerations, this study examines also a phenomenon which is unusual in variation research. Smith Island speech provides evidence for a language change toward a nonstandard variant, rather than change toward the standard which is the more typical direction of change. The possible explanations for why such a change is occurring on Smith Island may help us understand more general issues of language maintenance and change. In addition, this study may help us understand why some features of a language are susceptible to variation more than others. This study does not presume to provide the final answers to these questions, but, instead, it provides possible explanations that will supplement the knowledge that now exists concerning language variation.
Chapter IV

Feature Analysis

Introduction

Present day English has two kinds of so-called dummy subjects which may fill the slot left by the logical subject when the logical subject is moved to the right of the verb. The first type is the morpheme “there,” often referred to as existential or expletive “there.” For example, in the sentence “A book is on the desk,” the logical subject “a book” appears to the right of the verb, resulting in “_______ is a book on the table,” and “there” is inserted in the subject slot to give “there is a book on the table.” There are restrictions on the environments within which “there” as a sentence subject may occur: First, the verbs seem to constitute a semantic class of existence or of coming into existence, e.g. “be,” “exist,” “result,” “ensue,” “arise,” “seem,” “appear,” (Soames and Perlmutter, 1979, pp. 42-52), though “there” occurs most commonly with the copula “be.”

Secondly, there are selection restrictions on the noun phrase which follows the verb, i.e. the logical subject, such that a sentence like “There was a theorem lying on my plate” would be considered ill-formed. The restrictions would not allow “theorem” as a subject with the verb “lie,” and the same restrictions would apply in the inverted sentence order which has “there” in the subject slot;

Third, the noun phrase that follows the verb of existence must be indefinite as in “There was a book on my desk” versus “There was the book on my desk.” One exception to this restriction would occur in sentences that
function as part of a list, for example, “There was the book on linguistics, the book on biology, and the book on history lying on my desk.” (Soames and Perlmutter, 1979, p. 51) A second exception occurs in sentences like “There is the book on linguistics I was telling you about.” This sentence would be likely to occur as an answer to a question such as “Can you think of a good book to read on vacation?” In sentences of this sort, “there” is often said to be merely an anticipatory element which alerts the listener to the fact that the main topic is coming later in the sentence.

A second type of expletive subject is “it.” The logical subject, i.e. the NP or sentential NP following the verb, is considered to be in apposition with the “it” as in “It’s a nice day,” or “It seems that I am going” or “It is true that professors are eccentric,” or “It is hard to believe that.” In addition, “it” may be considered an impersonal subject that expresses an action or condition without referring to a specific agent as in statements about the weather (“It’s raining” or It’s cold.) or time (“It’s midnight.”) or distance (“It’s three miles to Pittsburgh.”)

In standard English, these two expletives cannot be interchanged without altering the meaning or function of the sentence. For example, “it” could be used in the sentence “It’s a book in the library,” but only in a context requiring information as in “What’s Syntax and Semantics?” “It’s a book in the library.” In this case, “it” is a pronoun referent which has as its antecedent the noun phrase in the previous part of the discourse. Atypical occurrences of “it” where “there” would be expected occur but are standard only in certain contexts. (“There” is never a possible alternative for “it.”) In some nonstandard dialects, however,
there are occurrences of “it” instead of existential “there.” Particularly in some southern dialects and in Vernacular Black English, such sentences as the following have been documented:

It’s too much murder.  
It’s a lotta them does that.  (Wolfram and Christian, 1976, p. 126)  

It’s a boy in my room named Robert.  
Is it a main street in this town?  (Wolfram and Fasold, 1974, pp. 171-172)  

In this chapter I will examine the use of “it” for existential “there” as it occurs in Smith Island English. After providing an historical setting, I will discuss the patterns of occurrence of existential “it” with reference to both the linguistic and the social conditions that may govern them.

Historical Setting

As an adverb expressing locality or position, “there” was common very early in the English language.

C888, K. AElfred, “Boeth,” xxxiii, Swa is each “aer” fyr on am stanum and on am waetere.
C 1050, Byrhtferth’s Handboc in Anglia (1885), VIII, onne beo “aer” swa fela concurrents.  
(OED, 1981, p. 3284)  

In addition to the lexis function of “there,” the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) cites occurrences of existential “there” as early as the ninth century.

C888, K. AElfred, “Boeth,” iii, a com “aer” gan in to me heofen cund Wisdom (p. 3284)  
Other examples from the period designated as Old English (450-1150 a.d.) show that this form was occasionally used, especially with the verb “to be.”
c893, K. Ælfræd, “Orosius,” “aer” is mid Estum eaw, onne “aer” bi man
dead… (There is among the Estonians a custom, where there is a man dead…)
(Gordon, 1972, p. 215)

c1000, Ags. Gosp. Matthew, vii, a com “aer” ren and mycel flod and “aer”
bleowun windas. (Then come there rain and much flood and there blowing
winds.) (OED, p. 3284)

In the first of these two examples, the second “there” is interpreted as the locative
adverb which would refer to Estonia, but the first “there” would only redundantly
act as an adverb. Rather, the first “thee” has taken on a more expletive role.

Some linguists have stated that the separation of roles into locative “there”
and existential “there” must have occurred before the Old English period.
(Breivik, 1981, p. 19) The existential function, however, was not fully entrenched
in the syntax of old English. The following excerpts from an Old English
translation of Bede’s Ecclesiastical History show no ‘filler’ in the vacated pre-
verbal slots:

A waes on a tid
Then (there) was in that time

Ael elberht cyning haten on
Aethelberht (a) king named

Centrice, and mihtig….
In Kend and (a) might (one)

Onne is in eastewearde
Now (there) is in Eastward

Cent micel ealand, Tenet,
Kent (a) large island, Thanet,
Et is siex hund hida micel
That is 6 hundred hides large

Aefter Agelcynnes eahete.
After England (the) reckoning of
A wae aefter manigum dagum aet se
Then (it) wwas after many days that this

Cyning com to aem ealande….  
King came to this island

(Baugh and Cable, 1978, p. 62-63)

The OED does not offer examples of existential “it” used where “there” would be expected in Old English. This particular usage was uncommon, but “it” did occur in many of the same kinds of constructions as it does in Modern English, as the following examples illustrate:

In statements of weather,
c888, K. AElfred, “Boethe,” xxiv, On sumera, hit bi wearm and on wintra coeld;

In statements of time, seaso, etc.,
c1000, Ags. Gosp, John, i, Hit waes a seo teo e tid;

As the proper neuter pronoun of the third person singular,
c1000, Ags. Gosp, Luke, vi, Hyt ne mihte (th)aet hus astynian, hit waes ofer (th)aene stan etrymed;

To refer to matters expressed or implied in a statement,
c1000, Ags. Ps., 1, Nis hit nan wander eah u sy god and ic yfel;

(OED, p. 1492-1493)

By the Middle English period, existential “there” had become more frequent until, by the 16th century, it was very commonplace. (Gordon, 1972, p. 217) The following examples illustrate “there’s” occurrence:

c1250, Gen. & Ex., 3863, Whan it was ones i-ten…ere cou e no man it aauenche wi no craft. OED, p. 3284);

c1387, Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, 
Ther was also a Nonne a Prioresse, That of hir smyling wa full simple and coy;
By the 1500’s the use of existential “there” “was governed by the same syntactic factors as those operative today,” (Breivik, p. 16) though its insertion was still optional. Examples follow:

There was a knight that hadde 2 doughters…
And in alle the world is no gretter treson than for to deceive gentyll wymmen.
(Breivvik, p. 16, quoting from the Book of the Knight and the Tower)

Though the existential use of “there” was commonplace by the end of the Middle English period, “it” began to be used in the same kinds of existential constructions.

c1470, The Tree & XII Frutes Hly Goost, it is as gret differens between virginyte and chastite as it is between whitness of kynde and whitnes made becraft. (Visser, 1963, p. 42)

1590, Marlowe, Edw. II, Cousin, it is no dealing with him now. (OED, p. 1492)

1600, Shakespeare, As You Like It, It was a lover and his lass…That o’er the green cornfield did pass. (Visser, 1963, p. 42)

In Middle English, then, speakers have three possible choices in existential sentences where the logical subject is post-verbal: (1) no filler in the grammatical subject slot; (2) “there” in the subject slot; or (3) “it” in the subject slot. That this syntactic structure was in a state of transition during this period should not be surprising, since the entire language was marked by extensive changes in both vocabulary and syntax. To understand why the rule for inserting a ‘dummy’
subject where previously no formative had been necessary changed from an optional one to an obligatory one, it is necessary to examine some of the grammatical changes which were fully developed during this time. In particular, I will discuss the change of English from a typologically synthetic language to an analytic one.

As a synthetic language, early Old English was highly inflected. As a structural device, inflections serve to distinguish syntactic categories such as gender, number, case, mood, tense, voice, and so forth. These inflectional markings indicate the relationship between words in a sentence. For example, in Old English one could equally well have said any of the following four constructions:

- Se mann bohte (th)one half
- Se mann (th)one half bohte
- One half bohte se mann
- One laf se mann bohte. (Robertson and Cassidy, 1954, pp. 285-286)

The inflections on the individual words, not their order, indicated their function, interpretation was not ambiguous. Case markings on nouns are a good example. Old English had four cases, the nominative, genitive, dative, and accusative. The inflectional endings on nouns could be divided into two major categories depending on whether or not the stem ended (in Germanic) in a vowel or in a consonant. There were other subgroups by which the declensions could be divided but, according to Robertson and Cassidy, (1954, p. 115) “Practically, then, we may say that in Early West Saxon there are only three dominant declensions to be distinguished – two varieties of the vocalic declension, and one
variety of the consonantal declension. The others were decidedly minor…” The
major case markers for Old English were

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stem</th>
<th>Final Vowel</th>
<th>Final Consonant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>stan</td>
<td>gum-a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>stan-es</td>
<td>gum-an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>stan-e</td>
<td>gum-an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>stan</td>
<td>gum-an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>stan-as</td>
<td>gum-an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>stan-a</td>
<td>gum-ena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>stan-um</td>
<td>gum-um</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>stan-as</td>
<td>gum-an</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Typical Inflectional Endings in OE

These inflectional endings were unstressed and “before the end of the Old English
period, every unstressed a, e, o, and u tended to become a vowel that was spelled
e and was presumably pronounced [ ē ].” (Robertson and Cassidy, p. 116) This
process of neutralization gave rise first to plural endings –es, -e, and –e, and
finally to the typical declension for nouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nom/Acc</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>-es</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>-(e)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not all of the nouns were declined according to this model but this pattern of
inflectional simplification existed for many nouns by the end of the Middle
English period.
Another example of inflectional leveling occurred in the verbs. To briefly summarize, the following table lists the present and preterite endings of typical verbs in the indicative and subjunctive moods:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old English</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Preterite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing.</td>
<td>Person 1</td>
<td>_e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pl.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>_edest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>_ede</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjunctive</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
<td>_en</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Middle English</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Preterite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing.</td>
<td>Person 1</td>
<td>_e</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pl.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>_edest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>_ede</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjunctive</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
<td>_en</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Inflectional Endings on Verbs in Old and Middle English

Ultimately, the final consonants were lost, the _e was neutralized to [ ] and then the [ ] was lost leaving the following Modern English endings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modern English</th>
<th>Present</th>
<th>Preterite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing.</td>
<td>Person 1</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pl.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>_ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>_ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjunctive</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Inflectional Endings on Verbs in Modern English

This kind of leveling occurred in personal pronouns, adjective, adverbs...
and demonstratives as well, resulting in an across the board simplification of the system of inflections. Increased independence of the system of inflection, however, meant that the language had to either dispense with the grammatical functions for which inflection had served or had to develop new ways of showing these functions. English, then, became a more analytical language, relying on word order to indicate grammatical relationships.

In Old English a given part of speech was almost always recognized as such by its form. Old English ecg, log, and waeter, for example, could only be nouns; the Modern English words descended from them edge, land, and water, must be in context before we can be sure that they are not verbs, adjectives, or some other part of speech. (Robertson and Cassidy, p. 144)

As individual words gained in simplicity of form, they lost freedom of movement and became dependent on one another; the order of the words, i.e. the word group, indicated grammatical function.

As the ordering of elements became more important as a syntactic device for indicating function, the subject-verb-object pattern became the most frequently used, especially in independent clauses. This regularization in one part of the syntax had concomitant effects in other parts.

The strong association, in positive affirmative clauses (enormously more frequent than other types of clauses) between subject and pre-verb position, led the reshaping of sentences which otherwise would from the pattern. The ‘empty’ use of “there” and “it” fill such positions was well advanced by the beginning III…. (late 1300’s). (Strang, 1970, p. 211)

By the 15th century slot-filling became quite regular; “the insertion of the formal subject “there” allowed the logical subject, the communicative core, to remain in
post finite position…” (Breivik, 1981, p. 20) For example, King Alfred could write “swae feawa hiora waeran” (so few of them were), but to translate this into more modern English, we need to supply a subject slot filler as in “so few of them there were” or more naturally “there were so few of them.” (Strang, p. 16) It has even been suggested that “dummy subjects are properties of languages which either are or have been subject to the very-second constraint.” (Breivik, p. 21)

By the early Modern English period (16th-17th century) the use of Existential “there” was well documented. There are fewer documented instances, however, of “it” used where “there” would now be. In fact the OED does not cite this construction after the early 1600’s and the English Dialect Dictionary (1961) states that “it used impersonally for “there” is now obsolete. The dialect dictionary does give some citations from Scotland, for example,

From Jamieson, “Pop. Ballads,” 1806,
Then out it spak the lady, As she stood on the stair.

From Buchan, “Ballads,” 1828,
Then out it speaks him, sweet Willie, And he spake aye thro pride.

The OED states that “In archaic ballad style, the introductory “it”… (may) in (some) cases…mean ‘the subject of my song’ or ‘tale’ as in

1805, Scott, Last Mistral,
It was an English Ladye bright…And she would marry a Scottish knight.

1832, Tennyson, Miller’s Daughter, It is the miller’s daughter, and she is grown so dear (p. 1492)
In sentences of the type “______+Verb of Existence + Indefinite NP (logical subject),” then the slot was normally filled with “there,” and the use of “it” was more often used for stylistic effect and represented an older form.

By the time of the first major colonizations in North America, the use of existential “there” was common; existential “it,” however, was less frequent, though not unheard of. Within the language which became known as American English, the use of existential “it” has been restricted to dialect varieties. During the late Modern English period, greater emphasis was placed on the standardization of the language, and English grammars of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century (Plain English 1892; Gould 1880; Witney 1880) only consider the ‘correct’ form, “there + verb of existence + indefinite NP, making no mention of “it” as an alternative filler for “there.”

Though very little documentation or analysis of existential “it” can be found in the dialect literature of American English, some mention has been made. In his compilation of the verb forms of the Eastern United States, Atwood (1953) states that “a variation that occurs with some frequency (in about half the communities) in W.Va. and the Chesapeake Bay area is ‘it’s many people’…being used instead of there’s.” This form was about as common in younger, more modern informants as in older, more old-fashioned informants, and three cultured informants used “it’s” in this context. (p. 30)

Wolfram and Christian (1976) also found some use of existential “it” in their analysis of Appalachian English which concentrated on three countries in southern West Virginia. They provide the following as representative examples:
King Cobra ‘posed to be ‘bout the deadliest snake it is.  
It’s too much murder.  
It’s a lotta them does that.  
It’s rapids down there.  
It was a fly in it. (p. 126)  

They also comment that

The use of it as a correspondence for expletive there is a pattern that appears to be fairly extensive. In fact, it may be hypothesized that one of the reasons that expletive they does not occur in Vernacular Black English is due to the fact that it is used so extensively. It is also found in White non-mainstream varieties spoken in the North and South. (p. 126)

Appalachian English speakers use both expletive it and they, but older speakers tend to prefer the they correspondence (a phonetic reduction of there) while younger speakers prefer it. Wolfram and Christian (1984) also compared their Appalachian English data to Ozark English and found that the use of existential it was not common in their Ozark English data.

Studies of Black English (McKay 1969; Wolfram and Fasold 1973; Burling 1973) indicate that existential it is common in this variety. McKay states that 48 sentences in his data contained existential there (p. 161); this data, however was limited to only one informant. Wolfram and Fasold point out that “where standard English uses there in an existential or expletive function, Negro dialect has it. (1973, p. 145) Labov (1972, p. 270) points out that within the group of adolescent blacks which he studied, the use of existential it was common but that it varied a great deal depending on the individual’s social distance from the white vernacular.

This is not a categorical rule, but it rises to very high frequency
in the vernacular. The Tbirds use 79 percent it and only 21 percent there; the 1390 Lames use 91 percent there and only 9 percent it.

Categorical or semi-categorical rules of BEV are weakened to variable rules by the Lames (individuals who are not members of a peer group and who have greater interaction with white nonstandard speakers); rules that are in strong use in BEV are reduced to a low level by the Lames. Whenever there is a contrast between SE and BEV, the language of the Lames is shifted dramatically towards SE. (pp. 270-271)

Except for occasional references to existential it in the research of the dialectologists, in-depth studies of this form have not been done. Labov perhaps did most with his comparison of the percentages of it within the adolescent groups, but most of the attention in the research was given to accounting for the standard usage.

Some linguists have begun concentrating on the effect of discourse strategies on syntax, often positing grammars which are governed by pragmatic functions. (Kay and Sankoff 1974; Schachter 1977; Givon 1979) In regards to existential there Breivik, for example, has suggested that there has a thematic function which allows the listener to anticipate new information which will come at the end of the sentence. (1981, p. 23) Such theorizing, however, has not considered dialectal variants of this form.

In those white non-standard varieties of American English where existential it does occur, it seems to be less common than the standard there or the they form. In Vernacular Black English, however, it seems to be the most common existential filler for the subject position. The use of existential it on
Smith Island seems to be more aligned with the Black English variety in terms of frequency of use.

Smith Island Data

The following examples are typical of the use of existential it for there in Smith Island English:

Because it’s not a lot of mainlanders, Crisfielders for that reason, could do what Smith Island Children do. (DwMT)

It’s so much difference in the taste of ‘em when you get ‘em like that. (GlMT)

It was a dress maker there. (LiMT)

…well one time it used to be four high schools in the county. (EvME0

It ain’t much to do around here. (GaGE)

It’s been sev….alot of doctors here stayed, but not at that time. (KaBRP)

I’ve tried ever beer it is. (CaMRP)

Problem Cases

Though these examples were clear instances of existential it, other cases were less obvious. In several cases, it was unclear whether it was a pronoun or a ‘dummy’ subject, without referring to the context of the conversation. The following examples are representative of this kind of difficulty:

(1) “I don’t think it was the money in it.” (EdMT) This sentence was spoken within a monologue about clamming and was said in response to a question; however, if this sentence had been the response to the question “Was the
money the reason?” the it could ambiguously be interpreted as a pronoun referring to ‘the money’ or as an existential form.

(2) “It is. It is.” (GlMT) At first glance these expressions appear to be cases of pronominal it. This statement, however, was in response to my comment “It doesn’t look like there’s that much land actually,” in which case, the subject’s response was an elliptical form of “It is that much land” or “It is a lot of land.” Within context, the form is used existentially.

(3) “I don’t really know if it is or not.” (GaGE). This statement appears to be a structure which is commonly used to respond to a question of the sort “Is it a problem for the people here?” when the it would refer to some previously mentioned information. In this context it would be interpreted in the question and the response as a pronoun. In the case of this interview, however, the question was “Is there something living in it?” which contains the existential there; the standard response would be “I don’t know if there is or not.” The subject’s sentence is, therefore, an existential it for there.

In all of these examples, context provided the clues which were necessary to accurately interpret the subjects’ uses of it. In other occurrences, reference to the context was less conclusive, for example

Interviewer: Do you watch television a lot?
DwMT: I watch television a lot, but during the school year, unless it’s a show I really like I usually do my books and listen to the radio.

In this case, if the speaker is referring to the notion of liking one show and it is referring anaphorically to this mental notion, then it could be interpreted as a
pronoun. If the speaker is stating the possible existence of a show that he might like, then it could be interpreted as existential. The clause “unless it’s a show I really like” also meets the deep structure description for obligatory there in standard English: NP followed by existential verb – ‘A show I really like is – where there is no overt locative, providing further evidence for existential it. To complicate matters further, the subject goes on to say,

I listen at….I like to watch Hart to Hart and After Mash is purty good.

It is possible that it could be referring ahead to these particular shows, which, until he lists them verbally, exist in his mind as ones he likes. One interpretation of existential there, though, is that it is an anticipatory device to prepare the listener for new information and, in this text, new information does follow. The evidence here, though not totally conclusive, does seem to support an existential interpretation. Either pronominal it or existential there would be a standard form in this context, but the pronominal interpretation requires an assumption about the speaker’s thinking. The existential interpretation can be supported by the context of the discourse and the grammar.

Another ambiguous example occurred in response to a question about what the teenagers did for fun when the subject was growing up.

It was a lotta fun. It was a lot of parties. It was a lot of stayin’ up late.

In this text, the first it pronominally refers to growing up on the island which is described in the predicate as being a lot of fun. In the second sentence the situation is different. The predicate contains the indefinite NP “a lot of parties;”
for the it to be a pronoun referring to growing up on the island, the subject would have to be saying that growing up on the island was equivalent to a lot of parties. This interpretation is less appealing than an interpretation of existential it for there (i.e. ‘there was a lot of parties’). The third sentence is similar. In other words, ‘when I was growing up there was a lot of stayin up late’ or ‘we stayed up late a lot when I was growin’ up’ seem to be more acceptable interpretations of the meaning. For these three sentences, then, I counted only the last two as instances of existential it.

Most of the ambiguous uses of it were disambiguated once I referred to the context. If, however, I was not able to determine that the occurrence was, in fact, existential it or, at least make a reasonable guess that such was the case, the occurrence was not included as an example of the existential form.

The Corpus

The corpus for this analysis contains 557 instances of existential ‘filler’ subjects divided among the three communities as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Proportion of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>205</td>
<td>Ewell</td>
<td>.367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>142</td>
<td>Rhodes Point</td>
<td>.255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>210</td>
<td>Tylerton</td>
<td>.378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of these occurrences, 424 (76 percent) were existential it, 123 (22 percent) were existential there and ten (2 percent) were elliptical forms which had no filler in the subject slot.
It seems obvious from a cursory examination of these percentages that existential it is the dominant form in Smith Island English. Understanding why this fact is so requires an examination of both the linguistic and social factors that may be conditioning the use of it and there in existential sentences.

Linguistic Environments

A. Verb Tense and Structure

Because the existential function in sentences of the type under discussion is most often indicated by the copula, I examined the verbs to see if there were some difference between the use of it and there based on the form of the verb.

The data were divided first into the different tenses for each speaker and then by form of the tense, including contracted and/or negative forms. Tokens of each form of each tense for each speaker were counted. Table 4 shows the results of this counting procedure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IT</th>
<th>Present Tense</th>
<th>THERE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ain’t</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s ‘s</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>‘s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘s neg</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>‘s neg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isn’t</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>is no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘s gettin’</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>‘s been</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>might be</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may be</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can be</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can bet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘s not gonna be</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seems to be</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Occurrences of Existential Subjects Divided by Tense

Of all present tense verbs, .788 have it as the subject; .850 of present perfect verbs; and .715 of past verbs. There is only one token of the past perfect (it) and only nine tokens of the future tense (6 it, 3 there). These proportions indicate that it is the existential NP of choice for all tenses represented in the data, and neither NP is constrained by tense.

It is interesting to examine the copula within the present and past tense for the two variables. Most of the tokens of existential there (.951) occur with the
simple present (is and are) and simple past (was and were) - exclusive of verbs with auxiliaries of any type. Existential there does not occur in the structure ‘Aux + Be.’ By contrast, existential it occurred 13 times (.051 of all present tense verbs with it) with present verbs that had some type of auxiliary (may, might, can, is going to, seems to, does seem to) and 24 times (.158 of all past verbs) with past verbs that had auxiliaries (used to, happened to, would, was going to). Not only are these forms more structurally complex, but they are also more semantically intricate. For example, the modal auxiliaries in the following examples allows the speaker to indicate a degree of uncertainty.

It may be a processing place in Rhodes Point. (JKE)

Sometimes I think it might be more (that) goes on here. (JKE)

It might be more people (on here now). (EMT)

The most common auxiliary is used to as in

It used to be four high schools in the county. (EuME)

..and it used to be, on that tip, a beautiful – the government put it there – a pavilion for swimming. (LME)

This structure indicates that something had existed in the past but no longer, and in many cases, it implies a familiarity with the subject under discussion, a familiarity that goes beyond knowledge of the fact to include more personal experience.

To express these meanings with the copula alone without an auxiliary would require qualifying phrases to provide information. For example, to express uncertainty a speaker could say, "There was a processing plan in Rhodes Point, I
believe/to the best of my recollection.” To express the conditional is possible with “If a storm hits, there are several homes which may be (are likely to be) destroyed.” To express familiarity, a speaker would have to say “There were four high schools in the county when I was in school.” In Smith Island English, then, if the verb is a copula plus auxiliary, existential it is more likely than there.

There are several possible explanations for why this pattern exists. First it is possible that the data does not provide enough tokens of ‘Aux + Copula.’ of the 517 sentences in the present and past, only 37 (.071) contain complex verb forms.

Second, the subjects who produced the complex verb phrases with it may also be subjects who have a low probability of using there. In other words, the correlation between existential it and complex verb phrases is accidental. An examination of the subjects, however, indicates that of the 19 people who produced an existential it sentence containing a complex verb phrase, three had proportions of there above .500. Table 5 shows all of the subjects who used complex verb phrases and the proportion of sentences with existential there. Other subjects who produced a proportion of existential there sentences higher than .500 - but did not use complex verb phrases – align with the list in Table 5 in terms of the total number of existential sentences produced. Table 6 identifies these subjects.

The data in Tables 5 and 6 do not support the explanation that the subjects who produced complex verb phrases with it happen to be subjects who also have a very low probability of using there.
In light of the extreme differences in numbers of sentences for each type – 424 existential it and 123 existential there – a third hypothesis seems more likely. If, in Smith Island English, a language change which replaces there with it is in progress, it is possible that the change, which probably began in simpler environments such as the simple copula, has now spread to the more complex environments, such as verb phrases containing modal auxiliaries. This hypothesis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th># of Existential Sentences</th>
<th>Proportion of There</th>
<th># of Complex VP’s with It</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FG-E</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.724</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JE-T</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.571</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OM-T</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>.516</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JB-T</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.384</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DM-T</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>.308</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LM-E</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>.277</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM-T</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>.235</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VE-RP</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.222</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AB-E</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>.136</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EdM-T</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.111</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EM-E</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NE-E</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.071</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dam-T</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.062</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DG-E</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>.058</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JP-RP</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GG-E</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JK-E</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ErM-T</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BG-E</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Subjects Who Produced Complex Verb Phrases with It in Present and Past Tenses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th># of Existential Sentences</th>
<th>Proportion of There</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JST</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BP-RP</td>
<td>WM-E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion</td>
<td>.812</td>
<td>.714</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. Other Subjects with Proportions of There Use Above .500.

requires evidence that a language change is taking place, and I will examine this claim more thoroughly in the section on age-grading.

B. Number Concord

Standard number agreement is governed by the following NP in existential sentences, for example ‘there is a flower in my garden’ but ‘there are flowers in my garden.’ In many varieties of English, the NP seems to have lost much of its control over number marking in existential sentences. For example, Christian, et. al (1984) point out that there has a very high incidence of nonstandard concord and that it can be implicationally related to other kinds of sentences. A speaker who uses a form like ‘flowers grows’ would be likely to have a much higher incidence of forms like ‘there’s flowers.’ (p. 221) Feagin (1974) also points out that in Alabama English the highest incidences of nonstandard concord occurred in cases of expletive there and past tense be with plural subjects. Fasold and Wolfram (1974, p. 157) state that for northern urban vernacular Black English, is is always the verb form in present tense with expletive there or it regardless of the subject.
The data for Smith Island English show similar patterns for existential sentences. Of 547 sentences containing it or there, 503 contain a present or past form of the copula which would require number concord to be marked on the verb. (Modals, past perfect, and future tense forms are unmarked for number agreement.) .449 contained a singular verb with a plural NP (logical subject), and .522 contained a singular verb with a singular NP. In other words, of these verbs .971 are singular. This pattern remains essentially the same when the data are separated for it and there. Table 7 is illustrative:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Existential It</th>
<th>Existential There</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pl NP + Pl V</td>
<td>3/384</td>
<td>2/119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pl NP + Sing V</td>
<td>167/384</td>
<td>59/119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.435</td>
<td>.496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing NP + Sing V</td>
<td>207/384</td>
<td>56/119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.539</td>
<td>.470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing NP + Pl V</td>
<td>7/384</td>
<td>2/119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Divisions of It and There for Number Concord.

The singular verb form is predominant in all existential sentences whether the ‘dummy’ subject is it or there.

In their Appalachian English data, Christian, et. al state that “there is a much greater likelihood of nonstandard concord occurring with a past tense be form than with have, present tense be, or other verbs, except in the case of expletive there where the present be (94.4 percent) and the past be (92.4) forms typically follow nonstandard agreement marking. (1984, p. 199) Likewise, there
is no difference in agreement marking between the present and past tense forms of be on Smith Island. Of 231 past tense sentences containing plural noun phrases as subjects, only five used plural verbs: three are the phrase ‘it weren’t,’ one is ‘there are,’ and one is ‘there were.’ Smith Island English seems to follow the pattern of other English dialects in terms of its marking for nonstandard concord in existential sentences, and there is no correlation between the choice of it or there as the ‘dummy’ subject and number concord. Therefore, there is no constraint on this grammatical structure based on number concord in Smith Island English.

C. Contracted and Negative Verb Forms

Because negative marking can make a difference in how the copula is contracted, e.g. it is, it’s, it’s not, it isn’t, it is not, the positive and negative forms are considered together to determine if there is an effect on the choice of existential subject. Table 8 lists the various forms in the present and past tenses for it and there.

The data show very little differences in the proportion of it and there based on contractions. In the present tense both existential subjects occur primarily with the contracted is form (e.g. it’s or there’s); In the past tense the uncontracted was has the highest incidence. The only major difference occurs with two forms ain’t and weren’t. Approximately 10 percent of the existential its occurred with ain’t; there were no occurrences of there with ain’t. Existential it occurred with
weren’t seven percent of the time in contrast to no occurrences of this form with there.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pres Tense</th>
<th>It</th>
<th></th>
<th>There</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Proportion</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Proportion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>4/68</td>
<td>.059</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is</td>
<td>22/240</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>8/68</td>
<td>.118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘s</td>
<td>168/240</td>
<td>.700</td>
<td>51/68</td>
<td>.750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘s not</td>
<td>24/240</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>5/68</td>
<td>.073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>isn’t</td>
<td>2/240</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>is no</td>
<td>1/240</td>
<td>.004</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ain’t</td>
<td>23/240</td>
<td>.096</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past Tense</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was</td>
<td>110/122</td>
<td>.902</td>
<td>45/49</td>
<td>.918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wasn’t</td>
<td>4/122</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td>1/49</td>
<td>.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>were</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>3/49</td>
<td>.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weren’t</td>
<td>8/122</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Negative and Contracted Forms of the Verb for It and There.

Ain’t is a common nonstandard grammatical feature that most often corresponds to am not, isn’t, or aren’t, though other correspondences are possible (e.g. for haven’t, hasn’t, and even didn’t in the case of Vernacular Black English.) There does not seem to be any structural reason why ain’t should occur only with it in this data. Rather, the reason lies within the data itself. As I will illustrate in the section on age-grading, there is a tendency for the younger population to use more existential it than there. There is also a tendency for more young people use ain’t; of the 23 occurrences of ain’t, 17 are used by 10-15 year olds, two are used by 16-25 year olds, two by 26-50 year olds, and two by subjects over 50. In other words, approximately 83 percent are used by subjects younger than 25 and 74 percent are used by subjects 15 years old or younger. In
addition, one subject, a 14 year old male is responsible for almost half (48 percent) of the total uses of ain’t. This subject also has 100 percent usage of existential it out of 24 possible occurrences. Because ain’t is observed primarily in the younger generations and this generation also has a high frequency of it, it makes sense that the two forms would occur together in high frequencies as well.

Were has been used in both its positive and negative forms since Old English. (Baugh and Cable, 1978, pp. 400-402) Atwood reports that the construction “it weren’t me” is found in “several communities in coastal North Carolina, and there are a few scattered occurrences elsewhere.” (1953, p. 32) Some variant pronunciations of weren’t are found in “scattered communities, mainly along the southern coast and in w. N.C. and in W. Va.” (1953, p. 32) On Smith Island the negative plural weren’t occurs with existential it, pronominal it, and other singular subjects as well, as evidenced by the following:

That weren’t right, what happened there. (GM-T)

I weren’t studying the tests. (RD-E)

I guess I weren’t in love with him, to say he broke my heart… (JZ-E)

…but it weren’t real deep. (LL-T)

He weren’t realizin’ the tide was risin.’ (LM-RP)

In existential sentences, weren’t is used exclusively with it constructions, and it occurs with both singular (5 instances) and plural (3 instances) following NP’s. One explanation for this fact surfaces as we look at the individual subjects who used the ‘it weren’t’ construction. Table 9 delineates these occurrences:
Subjects who use this contracted form use existential it as the ‘dummy’ subject.

There follows the same pattern as it in terms of number concord, i.e. 96 percent of there constructions are with singular verbs, regardless of the number of the following NP, and there are only four instances of a plural verb of any type in this data and none of these four happen to be weren’t. It is highly likely, then, that plural, contracted negative forms would occur with it because

- there were very few instances of a plural verb in the past tense (11 instances);
- there were very few instances of a negative verb in the past tense (13);
- all the negative forms were contracted, but there were two and on-half times as many positive as negative verbs.

Examination of the grammatical environments shows no conditions that would constrain the choice between it and there as the existential subject. I will now turn, therefore, to an analysis of the social factors on Smith Island that may be correlated with this feature.

Social Environments

A. Sex
Sex has been found often to be a definitive parameter in dialect descriptions; women often show a greater sensitivity to linguistic features that are socially evaluative and tend to use the more standard varieties. (Labov 1972, p. 243) If this is true on Smith Island, one could expect that females would use higher proportions of there constructions. Of all the existential sentences produced by females, 17 percent were there and 82 percent were it; males used approximately 28 percent there and 70 percent it. Table 10 presents the comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># It/Proportion</th>
<th># There/Proportion</th>
<th># 0/Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>189/.703</td>
<td>75/.279</td>
<td>5/.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Total responses = 269)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>235/.816</td>
<td>48/.167</td>
<td>5/.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Total responses = 288)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10. Proportions of It and There for Males and Females.

From the data it appears that males use the standard there more often than females. This is an unexpected result with two possible explanations: (1) an intervening effect is hiding the influence of individual factors, and the effect is not identified from the categories into which this corpus is divided; (2) if the data supports a language change toward the nonstandard it, females may be the leaders of this change which, as I discuss later, carries social value.

1. The Intersection of Age with Sex

When the data are examined with reference to the four age groups, the difference between male and female usage becomes clearer and still unexpected. Refer to Table 11.
Of the four groups, the youngest (10-15 year olds) and the third group (26-50 year olds) show higher frequencies of *there* for females as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1 – 10-15 year olds</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3 – 26-50 year olds</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Groups 2 (16-25 year olds) and 4 (51+ years), however, show that males have higher frequencies than females:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 2 – 16-25 year olds</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4 – 51+ years</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age appears to intersect with sex as an extra-linguistic constraint on the choice between it and *there*, but it is not yet clear why the groups would be constrained this way. For example, why would there be a difference of almost 22 percent in the performance of males in groups two and three or a difference of almost 25 percent between groups one and two? A possible answer surfaces when we consider one subject in group two, male subject f, can be separated from the rest as having very atypical use.

**AGE GROUP 4 – 51 years and above**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subj.</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>#Theres Prop.</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>#Theres Prop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.632</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.278</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grp. Avg. = .193  Grp. Avg. = .563
### TABLE 11. Number and Proportion of Existential Theres by Sex and Age Group

**AGE GROUP 3 – 26-50 years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subj</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>#Theres</th>
<th>Prop.</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>#Theres</th>
<th>Prop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.235</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.571</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.222</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.222</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grp. Avg. = .173

**AGE GROUP 2 – 16-25 years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subj</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>#Theres</th>
<th>Prop.</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>#Theres</th>
<th>Prop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.136</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.385</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.063</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.813</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grp. Avg. = .147

**AGE GROUP 1 – 10-15 years**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subj</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>#Theres</th>
<th>Prop.</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>#Theres</th>
<th>Prop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.375</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.125</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.200</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grp. Avg. = .136

Our of 16 existential sentences, subject f used 13 with there and three with it. This proportion was the second highest of existential thee out of all 48 subjects; the other subjects who had high proportions are all above 50 years of age. An explanation for this unexpected result for this subject must lie within his personal history.
This 22 year old male is the youngest of seven children and has lived on Smith Island all of his life. At the time of the interview, he had recently joined the Navy and was home on leave after basic training. The following excerpts are from his interview:

Int: What’s it like goin’ into the Navy?

S: Definitely, it’s away from Smith Island.

Int: How did you end up in the Navy?

S: I was thinkin’ bout it for a long time and place around here kept getting’ worse, place around here kept getting’ worse, specially jobs, and I got tired of stayin’ here. I needed somethin’ new so……

Int: What would you do if you’re not interested in workin’ on the water?

S: I’m interested in it but it doesn’t appeal to me.

Int: Do you think a lot of people are leavin’? (the island)

S: The way things are goin’ they’d be better off.

(After stating that his speech was different now because of his three months in the Navy, the following exchange took place.)

Int: Why in the three months that you’ve been gone has there been a change?

S: Mostly a part of discipline.

Int: Oh yeah.

S: They discipline a lot on how we use our words and everything…how to talk proper and things like that. They really didn’t stress it too much, but I always tried to be proper when I was in front of officers and stuff like that.

Int: So, did you try to mimic the officers?
S: Right...exactly...exactly right.

Int: Because that’s what they want you to do?

S: Right. Be polite to ‘em. Show ‘em you respect ‘em – won’t have no problems with ‘em.

This subject showed a couple of attitudes that could influence any conscious or unconscious desire to use more standard speech. First of all, he was less tied to the notion of living on Smith Island, stating that he needed something new. Though he did not say he wouldn’t live on the island, he did say that he would be interested in living lots of other places. He was particularly concerned about the lack of jobs on the island and did not seem very eager to make his living from the water, though he said that if he ended up living on Smith he probably would become a crabber. Whenever a person expects that his future will happen away from his family home, it becomes more likely that that person’s identification with his roots will be less strong. And, inasmuch as part of our identification with a place is through the language we speak, the ties to the speech of that place are likely to be weaker as well.

In addition, this subject was obviously aware of and concerned about “proper speech.” At one point he commented that on one part of Smith Island the people “speak more proper than we do.” He exhibited a personal motivation to use what he responded to as correct; by imitating his officers he was showing respect for them and putting himself in a position, by virtue of his speech, where he could avoid problems with them.
There were other patterns in this man’s behavior which implied a new identification with the Navy. In the five days that I observed this subject on the island, he wore his uniform every day but one. He also had brought back to the island with him the habit of smoking cigars, something which I had never seen anyone else do before on Smith Island. Though I cannot be certain that smoking a cigar had anything to do with his time in the Navy, it did seem to be evidence for an identification with someplace other than his home. Also, my subjective judgment is that this man’s speech is, in general, less ‘island-like.’ This is not to say that he did not share features of the dialect, but, rather, that his speech would be less likely to be recognized as Smith Island English in comparison to most people his age whom I met on the island and in comparison to the three other members of his family whom I met.

This subject’s profile provides some evidence for his linguistic sensitivity and his motivation to sound more standard. I cannot, however, extrapolate from this evidence to prove a motivation for a specific choice on his part to use existential there rather than existential it. It is interesting – perhaps significant - that with the widespread use of it across most age groups, he stands out as an exception, and it seems reasonable that he could have recognized this commonly heard form on Smith Island as one that he did not hear among those off-islanders with whom he identified.

If the data from this subject are subtracted from the results for the males in group 2, we arrive at a proportion of .161. Sixteen percent of the total responses
for males were there; this percentage is higher than the 14.7 percent for females, but the difference is small.

Group 2 males, then, have a higher proportion of there in comparison to groups 1 and 3 only because of the skewing effects of one subject’s atypical usage. Once we account for this subject’s data, the proportion drops and is much closer to the males in these other two groups.

Group 4 males (those over 50) showed the highest proportion of existential there use of any other group. Again, we must look to the profiles of individual subjects as a way to explain this result since typically we would expect women in this age group to use more standard forms. An examination of the individual frequencies reveals that all of the occurrences of there come from four of the six males; the other two males use no existential there’s in their speech samples. A breakdown of the ages of the subjects shows the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total #S’s</th>
<th>#Theres</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This data indicates a different way of dividing the data, one which correlates directly with frequency of use. The four males who use existential there (and do so at frequencies higher than 50 percent) are 68 or older; both men
who do not use existential there are 58 or younger. A similar pattern, though not quite as conclusive, exists in the group 4 data for females:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total #S’s</th>
<th>#Theres</th>
<th>Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.632</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The only female in this group who has a significant proportion of existential there is 72 years old. The other females are 67 or younger. The data provide some evidence that the older subjects should have been segmented into groups comprising different ranges, one from 51-65 years and a second 66 years and older, to give a total of five age groupings for the data rather than four. This fallacy in the methodology turns up only when group data is broken down into individual data in an attempt to explain results that are unexpected.

The following table shows a comparison of the male and female use of existential subjects for the entire island combining all age groups:

**INCLUDING DATA FOR SUBJECTS OVER 65**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MALES:</th>
<th></th>
<th>FEMALES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total #S’s</td>
<td>= 269</td>
<td>Total #S’s</td>
<td>= 288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Theres</td>
<td>= 75</td>
<td># Theres</td>
<td>= 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prop.</td>
<td>= .279</td>
<td>Prop.</td>
<td>= .167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EXCLUDING DATA FOR SUBJECTS OVER 65**
MALES:  
Total #’s = 201  
# Theres = 30  
Prop. = .149

FEMALES:  
Total #’s = 267  
# Theres = 36  
Prop. = .142

Table 12. Use of There by Sex, with Consideration of Subjects Over 65 Years of Age

When the data for all females are summarized, we find that, of all possible existential subjects, .167 (or approximately 17 percent) are there. For males, the proportion of there is .279 (or approximately 28 percent). When all subjects are included, the figures indicate that males on Smith Island as a group use more of the standard variant. When the data for those subjects who are older than 65 are excluded, the comparison is very different; the proportion of there use for females is .152 (14 percent) and for males is .149 (15 percent). Because there are four men in the excluded category as compared to only two women (one of whom only uses two existential sentences) and because the subjects in this age group use more of the standard form than any other group, excluding their frequencies avoids its skewing effect and brings the data more into line with expectations.

Summary

A comparison of 14 percent existential there for females and 15 percent existential there for males shows no significant difference between these groups when we examine the island as a whole unit. Differences that seem to exist between males and females in particular age groups result from irregularities in
the data. Females as well as males are using the nonstandard existential it in high percentages.

2. The Intersection of Community with Sex

As I discussed previously in the section on methodology, the island is composed of three separate communities which have maintained separate identities. It is important, therefore, to examine the intersection of community with sex. Table 13 shows the proportions for existential it and existential there for males and females within each community. Tables 14 and 15 show the mean proportions for these groups. When the data for all 48 subjects are included (Table 14), males have a somewhat higher percentage of the nonstandard it in Ewell (81 percent vs. 78 percent), but females have a higher percentage of it in both Tylerton (77% vs. 66%) and Rhodes Point (90% vs. 68%). If, as in the intersection of sex with age, the data for the 20 year old male from Rhodes Point are excluded, males in this community have a higher percentage of it than females (91% vs. 90%); the difference in the percentages, as in the difference in Ewell, is not large enough to indicate a sex-correlated linguistic choice. In Tylerton, a difference of almost 12 percent seems to indicate that females are more linguistically liberal than males (unless, of course, existential it can be shown to be the accepted community standard with there being the ‘deviant’ variant). The pattern does not hold true if those subjects over 65 are excluded as in Table 15.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FEMALES</th>
<th></th>
<th>MALES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

EWELL
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>It</th>
<th>There</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>It</th>
<th>There</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1=72</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.368</td>
<td>.632</td>
<td>1=84</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.272</td>
<td>.728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2=65</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.666</td>
<td>.277</td>
<td>2=68</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.286</td>
<td>.714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3=41</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>3=50</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.800</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4=34</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>4=45</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.909</td>
<td>.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5=22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>.864</td>
<td>.136</td>
<td>5=20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6=17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>.941</td>
<td>.059</td>
<td>6=16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7=15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.818</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>7=14</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8=13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.625</td>
<td>.375</td>
<td>8=13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.929</td>
<td>.071</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TYLERTON**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>It</th>
<th>There</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>It</th>
<th>There</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1=67</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1=72</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>.484</td>
<td>.516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2=52</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.937</td>
<td>.937</td>
<td>2=70</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>.158</td>
<td>.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3=33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>.765</td>
<td>.765</td>
<td>3=39</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.889</td>
<td>.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4=30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.429</td>
<td>.429</td>
<td>4=34</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.846</td>
<td>.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5=18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>5=22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.938</td>
<td>.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6=17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.615</td>
<td>.385</td>
<td>6=18</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>.692</td>
<td>.308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7=15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>7=15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.750</td>
<td>.187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8=12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>8=13</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RHODES POINT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>It</th>
<th>There</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>#S’s</th>
<th>It</th>
<th>There</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1=60</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>1=58</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2=60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>2=55</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3=39</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.778</td>
<td>.222</td>
<td>3=32</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4=36</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.667</td>
<td>.222</td>
<td>4=28</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5=25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>5=20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.187</td>
<td>.813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6=22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>6=181</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.857</td>
<td>.143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7=13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.875</td>
<td>.125</td>
<td>7=15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.500</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8=12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.800</td>
<td>.200</td>
<td>8=14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.833</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13. Proportions of Existential It and Existential There for Males and Females in Each Community.
(Note: When proportions do not add up to 1.000, it indicates that one or more of the sentence subjects was empty, not it or there.)
Table 14. Proportions of Existential It and Existential There within each Community (including data for subjects over 65).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ewell</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tylerton</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhodes</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 15. Proportions of Existential It and Existential There within each Community (excluding data for subjects over 65).

Without the distortion of the one age group which has an unusually high percentage of there usage but is not represented equally in every community (over 65 year olds), the results show that females respond more conservatively than males in every community, though the differences are small (six percent difference in Ewell, five percent in Tylerton, and one percent in Rhodes Point). It does not appear that there is any combined effect of community with sex.

B. Age

Analyses of age groups often provide evidence of language change through apparent time (Labov, 1972, p. 163). It is possible to track the differentiation of two variants of one linguistic variable by examining the use of those variants by different generations of speakers. Table 16 presents the occurrences and proportions of use for the four age groups.
The percentages for the use of *it* vary from a low of 62% for group 4 to a high of 87% for group 1. The percentages for the use of *there* show exactly the opposite pattern varying from a high of 37% for group 4 to a low of 9% for group 1. There seems, then, to be a direct correlation between age and the choice of existential subject; as age increases so does the use of existential *there*, and as age decreases so does the use of *it*. The exception to this pattern is group 2, the 16-25 year olds. As I discussed in the previous section on sex, group 2 has one subject, male subject f, who has a very high percentage of existential *there*, and I presented evidence as to why I believed this to be the case. If, the, I remove this subject’s responses from the data for group two, we get the results which are presented in Table 17. Now, group 2 fits into the age graded pattern though the difference between groups 2 and 3 is minimal.
Group 2 (16-25) 20/.153 110/.840
Group 1 (10-15) 10/.081 101/.871

Table 17. Use of Existential It and Existential There by Each Age Group Figured after Removing Data for Subject f, Group 2.

Summary

The major conclusion that can be drawn from the data for the four age groups is that younger generations on Smith Island are using significantly smaller proportions of existential there while those natives over 50 are using significantly greater proportions. There is a sharp increase in the standard form in group 4 and, as we have observed, this is primarily true because of speakers in this group who are over 65. For the standard form to be the primary form in this small segment of the population indicates that Smith Island English is undergoing a change toward the incorporation of existential it as the most common existential subject.

1. The Intersection of Sex with Age

The age-grading pattern holds true when we examine the responses of males and females within each group as Table 18 illustrates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEMALES</th>
<th>THERE/PROP.</th>
<th>IT/PROP.</th>
<th>0/PROP.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>17/.193</td>
<td>69/.784</td>
<td>2/.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>14/.173</td>
<td>66/.815</td>
<td>1/.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>11/.147</td>
<td>64/.853</td>
<td>0/.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>6/.136</td>
<td>36/.818</td>
<td>2/.046</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MALES</th>
<th>THERE/PROP.</th>
<th>IT/PROP.</th>
<th>0/PROP.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>45/.563</td>
<td>35/.437</td>
<td>0/.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>4/.089</td>
<td>40/.889</td>
<td>1/.022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Females in each group demonstrate the same pattern that I have illustrated previously; older subjects use more of the standard form and fewer of the non-standard form. The pattern for females, however, is less marked than the pattern for males.

There is a 47 percent increase in the use of the nonstandard *it* from the oldest to the youngest male groups, and a concomitant decrease in the use of *there* of 51 percent. Chart 19 shows the proportions of both existential *it* and *there* for males and females within each age group when the responses for each are compared to the total responses for that age group.

Of all the occurrences of *there* in each group, females have the larger proportions in groups 2 and 4. When the data for subject f are extracted for group 2, females in this group also show a larger proportion of *there*. The results for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>#TOTAL</th>
<th>#FEMALES #Prop.</th>
<th>#MALES #Prop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>THERE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17/.274</td>
<td>45/.726</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14/.778</td>
<td>4/.222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11/.333</td>
<td>22/.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w/o subj. f</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11/.550</td>
<td>9/.450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6/.600</td>
<td>4/.400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IT</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>69/.663</td>
<td>35/.337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>66/.623</td>
<td>40/.377</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 19. Proportions of Existential *There* and *It* for Females and Males in Each Age Group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>There Proportion</th>
<th>It Proportion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>64/.566</td>
<td>49/.434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w/o subj. f</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>64/.582</td>
<td>46/.418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>36/.386</td>
<td>65/.644</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

group 4 can be explained by Table 11 which clearly shows that those male subjects who use a high proportion of *there* are above the age of 68. There is only one woman in this sub-group, and her responses are in accord with the male responses.

Though we cannot project the proportions for the group of males and females between the age of 50 and 65 or the group above 65, we can reasonably surmise that, since age groups 1, 2, and 3 follow the expected pattern, wherein males use less of the standard form, the oldest generation is likely to as well.

**Summary**

The data indicate that females in all age groups tend to be slightly more conservative in their use of the nonstandard existential subject *it*. This is especially clear when the skewing effects previously outlined are accounted for.

2. **The Intersection of Community with Age**

We can also examine the four age groups within each community by referring to Table 20. In both Ewell and Tylerton there is a clear pattern such that group 4 has significantly smaller proportions of existential *it* than the other three age groups which have very high proportions. In Ewell, groups 1, 2, and 3 have very similar percentages ranging from 88% to 96%. In Tylerton, the percentages
are similar for groups 2 and 3 at 73% and 76% respectively, and group 1 has a somewhat higher percentage of 90.

The figures for Rhodes Point, however, show the effects of the two problems which have been discussed previously and which account for the comparative low percentage (67%) of existential it for group 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total S’s</th>
<th>There #S/Prop.</th>
<th>It #S/Prop.</th>
<th>0 #S/Prop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EWELL</td>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>24/.436</td>
<td>30/.546</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44/.956</td>
<td>1/.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>42/.913</td>
<td>4/.087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51/.879</td>
<td>5/.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RHODES POINT</td>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45/1.000</td>
<td>0/.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27/.794</td>
<td>6/.176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28/.667</td>
<td>13/.309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>w/o subj. f</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>25/.962</td>
<td>0/.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17/.810</td>
<td>2/.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYLEERTON</td>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>35/.515</td>
<td>32/.471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>35/.761</td>
<td>11/.239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>43/.729</td>
<td>16/.271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>33/.892</td>
<td>3/.081</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 20. Proportions of It and There Use within Age Groups in Each Community.

We could predict, based on the responses from the six subjects who are above 65 years of age, that, if older subjects had been included in the Rhodes Point sample, the proportion of it for group 4 would have been much lower.

Summary
Two communities, then, show a clear pattern where the oldest generation of speakers uses more standard existential subjects, though this group uses both variants in approximately equal proportions. The oldest generation of speakers on Rhodes Point which includes one 55 year old, one 58 year old, and two 60 year olds shows no use of the nonstandard form. In all three communities, the youngest speakers show very high proportions of it. This difference between the very youngest (10-15 years old) speakers and the oldest speakers (50+ years old), especially those above 65, indicates that each community is showing the same pattern of usage as is evident when the island is examined as a whole.

In comparison to Tylerton and Thodes Point, Ewell shows much higher percentages of it for groups 2 and 3. Those speakers between 16 and 50 years of age of Ewell are less standard in their choice of existential subjects than are these same speakers elsewhere on the island. This is a rather interesting phenomenon when we consider that Ewell, as the ‘port of entry,’ has more contact with non-natives who do not use existential it as the primary subject. Further discussion of the communities’ differences will follow in the section on Community.

C. Community

In many variation studies, social class has been an important category by which to divide subjects; typically, linguistic structures are more nonstandard in the lower working and upper working classes and more standard in the lower middle and upper middle classes. On Smith Island, the people are economically of one class, subjectively equivalent to the lower middle segment of society. There are, of course, a few individuals who would fall into the lower working
class description; their lower economic status is usually the result of the death or
disability of the primary income earner in the family. These individuals comprise
a very small segment of the population. The island, then, is fairly homogeneous
in terms of its overall economic status. The people themselves, however, do
distinguish among themselves in their descriptions of each community. These
factors support my contention that community is a much more valid concept than
socioeconomic class on Smith Island. It is important, therefore, to examine any
possible correlation between choice of existential subject and community of
residence.

Table 21 compares the proportions of existential *it* and existential *there* for
each community. The proportions indicate that, for this variable, Tylerton is the
most standard (30% *there* and 70% *it*) and Rhodes Point the most nonstandard
(15% *there* and 82% *it*) with Ewell (20% *there* and 79% *it*) aligning itself closer to
Rhodes Point than to Tylerton. If the figures for each community are compared
after eliminating the data on those subjects over 65 years of age, a slightly
different relationship is revealed as is illustrated in Table 22. In this case,
Tylerton is still the most standard in terms of existential subjects, but the relative
positions for Ewell are reversed, with Ewell now being the most nonstandard and
Rhodes Pont aligning itself with Tylerton. The data for Rhodes Point, though,
includes the one subject (subject f) whose responses are considerably out of line
with all other subjects younger than 65. If this subject’s responses are subtracted
from the data (see Table 23), the proportions for Rhodes Point indicate that this
community is the most nonstandard with 91% *it*, 6% *there*. Subject f produced
more there is (13) than all the other 15 subjects from Rhodes Point combined (8).

The skewing effect of his responses is obvious here just as it was for his particular

16025 year old age group (cf. section on sex as a conditioning parameter).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>It #S/Prop.</th>
<th>There #S/Prop.</th>
<th>0 #S/Prop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ewell</td>
<td>161/.785</td>
<td>40/.195</td>
<td>4/.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tylerton</td>
<td>146/.695</td>
<td>62/.295</td>
<td>2/.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhodes Point</td>
<td>117/.824</td>
<td>21/.148</td>
<td>4/.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w/o Subj. f</td>
<td>114/.905</td>
<td>8/.063</td>
<td>4/.032</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 21. Proportions of It and There for Each of the Three Communities, Including Data for Subjects over 65 and Showing Data with Subject f Removed from Rhodes Point.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>It #S/Prop.</th>
<th>There #S/Prop.</th>
<th>0 #S/Prop.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ewell</td>
<td>149/.887</td>
<td>15/.089</td>
<td>4/.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tylerton</td>
<td>126/.695</td>
<td>30/.190</td>
<td>2/.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhodes Point</td>
<td>117/.824</td>
<td>21/.148</td>
<td>4/.028</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 22. Proportions of It and There in Each Community Excluding Subjects over 65.

Summary

A comparison of the proportions excluding data for subject f and subjects over 65 years old shows the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>It</th>
<th>There</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tylerton</td>
<td>.797</td>
<td>.190</td>
<td>.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewell</td>
<td>.887</td>
<td>.089</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhodes Point</td>
<td>.905</td>
<td>.063</td>
<td>.032</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 23. Proportions of It and There Excluding Data for Subject f and Subjects Over 65, Listed in Ascending Order for Use of Existential It.
These results match my intuitions concerning the three communities. As I interviewed subjects across the island, Tylerton seemed, through subjective listening, to be most standard, whereas Rhodes Point and Ewell seemed least standard. This intuition is born out in some measure in the responses of Smith Islanders themselves. One subject from Rhodes Point, for example, stated, “They talk more proper over on Tylerton.”

General Summary of Conditioning Factors

The previous sections on linguistically and socially conditioned factors can be summarized as follows:

1. The percentages of it over there are so high as to indicate that it has become the primary existential subject on Smith Island;

2. Twenty-one percent of the verb phrases with it are of the structure AUX + BE (rather than simple be) as compared to zero percent for there. These percentages indicate that there is being limited to sentences in the simple present and the simple past, further evidence that existential it is expanding its role as the existential subject of choice;

3. The more structurally complex verbs are also more semantically intricate. Existential it is being used in sentences which are conditional, which show uncertainty, and which show a personal familiarity with something which existed in the past. Again, this is evidence that Smith Island English has incorporated it as the predominant form and is gradually restricting the environments within which existential there occurs;
4. Females on the island use it for approximately 86 percent of their existential subjects and males use approximately 85 percent. These high percentages and the lack of differences between males and females indicate that existential it does not have the stigma of ‘ungrammatical’ or ‘uneducated’ or ‘lower class’ attached to its use. When a change occurs, the change becomes part of the accepted community standard and, in such cases, one would expect females to incorporate the change;

5. The difference between the youngest (10-15) and the oldest (50+) speakers in two communities supports the pattern that exists overall on the island, where the oldest speakers use the standard form there. The difference becomes clearer when those speakers 65 and older are separated from the data: Speakers over 65 use the standard there at percentages above 70. This percentage is reduced to approximately 50 when the under-65 speakers are included as the oldest group. Such percentages indicate that the change to existential it began in the under-65 year olds;

6. The percentages of it are high for each community (Tylerton, 80%; Ewell, 89%; Rhodes Point, 91%) and show that the whole island is involved in this language change. It appears, however, that the change must have begun on either Rhodes Point or Ewell since Tylerton is still the most standard.

This evidence provides clear support for the conclusion that Smith Island English is changing toward existential it and that this change is near completion. In addition, we can conclude that the change must have begun in that group of
speakers between 50 and 65 years of age and that the change began in either Ewell or Rhodes Point.

Though the evidence for this change seems clear, the explanation for the change seems less so. The following chapter will attempt to provide a reasonable explanation for why the change began at all and why it began when and where it did.
“…we might say that to study language change is to observe how and why people come to develop and use new linguistic structures. …we must first figure out which people introduce or spread novel new forms in the language and must trace the ways in which these forms are introduced or spread. (Baron 1974, p. 33)

In the previous general summary, I stated that the change to it as the existential subject must have begun in the below 65 year old group because there is such an obvious difference in the use of it between speakers who are older than 65 and speakers who are younger. There are two questions, then, which need answering before we can begin to understand this change on Smith Island in the way that Baron suggests. First, we need to examine the role of the linguistic feature which has changed to determine if there are syntactic, semantic or pragmatic reasons that can explain why such a change would have occurred in the first place. Secondly, we need to examine the characteristics of the initiating group to determine if there are social reasons which may have triggered the likelihood of the change.

In an effort to answer the first question, it is necessary to examine the particular characteristics of the form which has changed, existential there. Historically, as English became a more analytical language which relied on word order to signal grammatical relationships, the SVO order became predominant. In those declarative sentences where the subject was moved to post-finite position, it
became necessary to fill the slot before the verb so that the verb would not be in initial position. There moved from occasional use in the pre-finite position to being obligatory in those sentences which met the structural requirements. Many researchers have claimed that existential there (hereafter e-there) is a syntactic remnant of the locative adverbial there (hereafter l-there). (Fillmore 1968; Anderson 1971; Sampson 1972) In fact, Lyons (1969, p. 393) suggests that e-there is a syntactic device for anticipating locative phrases in the surface structure and is derived by abstraction from the notion of location in the sentence. Sentences which are purely existential, e.g. “Mentors exist” are implicitly locative, so e-there in such sentences would follow the same analysis. According to this analysis, e-there acts as a “dummy” subject which, as a slot filler, contributes little or no meaning to the sentence.

Breivik (1981, pp. 8-9), however, takes the notion of ‘anticipatory device’ one step further to propose that e-there has taken on pragmatic importance as a signal that new information is coming. According to Breivik, who bases his analysis on Firbas’ functional sentence perspective (1966, p. 240), English tends to introduce new information toward the end of the sentence. (Garcia (1979, p. 54) points out that in Old English the high frequency of pronouns early in sentences reflects the principle that familiar knowledge should be presented first and built upon.) A sentence such as “An account book is on the table” is rare (and marked) in spoken English because the communicative core is in initial position. (Breivik 1981, p. 9; Lyons 1969, p. 393) Sentences such as this are more
commonly spoken as “There is an account book on the table” which places the
new information in post-finite position and fills the vacated position with \textit{e-there}.
In the sentence “The book is on the table” \textit{the} signals that the information in the
pre-finite position is given, having occurred previously in the discourse; such a
subject with the definite article is not typically transformed into an \textit{e-there}
sentence. From a pragmatic point of view, them, \textit{e-there} “is to be regarded as a
means of manipulating the elements of a sentence so that the logical subject is
allowed to move to a position suitable for its communicative weight.” (Breivik
1981, p. 19) In other words, the ‘pointer’ should be placed early, before the
material to which it is pertinent, so that the hearer knows how to take the
information. (Garcia 1979, p. 34) From this point of view, syntax exists to
perform a function, i.e. it is a functionally motivated entity. (Givon 1979, pp. 81-
82)

Beyond its usefulness as an anticipatory or as a signaling device, another
point of view sees \textit{e-there} as a noun phrase that exhibits the properties of a formal
subject and is semantically and syntactically different from \textit{l-there}. (Allan 1972;
Breivik 1981) \textit{E-there} behaves like an NP in these sentences:

There appears to be trouble.
It appears that there is trouble.
He expected that there would be trouble.
He expected there to be trouble.
Has there been an accident?
There has been an accident, hasn’t there?
Why has there been an accident?
Had there been an accident, I would have called.
Not until yesterday, was there some attempt to halt the slide of the dollar.
John said there would be trouble, and so there was.

(Breivik 1981, p. 6)
As further evidence for *e-there* as an NP, Breivik states that the fact that *e-there* is usually unstressed in contrast to the typically stressed *l-there* brings *e-there* into line with other forms like it, she, or they which also are usually unstressed. (The exception is as an answer to a question like “Who did it?” She/or any emphatic did.)

Pragmatic and syntactic arguments such as these seem valid reasons for accepting the hypothesis that *e-there*, even if it is a syntactic remnant of the locative in Old English and was initially used as a slot-filler, has been reanalyzed as a subject NP. Reanalysis of linguistic structures is not an uncommon phenomenon in English. It is well documented that regular preterite-present verbs in Old English changed to their current status as modals.

As soon as *may* and, say, *take*, stated behaving differently with respect to things like inflexions, infinitive forms, and... the grammar did not just go on adding more and more exception features but undertook a wholesale reanalysis of the pre-modals....(Lightfoot 1974, p. 243)

Reanalysis is also indicated by cases like ‘Hem no nede no help’ which, in modern English is “They needed no help.” The old dative *hem* is reinterpreted as the sentence subject, and the old sentence subject *no help* becomes the object under the pressure of the SVO syntax. The following example shows a similar change:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OLD ENGLISH</th>
<th>14TH CENTURY</th>
<th>15TH CENTURY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ic hit eom</td>
<td>(h)it am I</td>
<td>(h) it is I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I it am)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to Stevick (1972) this particular change seems attributable to two factors:

One is the dominance of the syntactic feature of word order such that the pronoun (now) preceding the verb was reinterpreted as sentence subject and the requirement of subject-predicate concord called for is, not am. The other is that the change was minimal, requiring no alternation of word order, pronoun case form, or (most importantly) location of the prosodic prominence marker. (p. 300)

Jeffers points out, in his discussion of who and whom in ‘Who could she see,’ that

The fact that the form of the interrogative when used as a subject is always who, and that this who virtually always occurs in clause initial preverbal position simply cannot be disregarded. The fact that this pattern might be extended to the object pronouns in an attempt to create more transparent surface relationships is not surprising. (1974, p. 238)

In English, the pressure of the subject slot has motivated a reanalysis of e-there as a subject NP which fulfills the functions of the subject role. It seems reasonable that this reanalysis was the first step toward the development of a new subject, e-there on Smith Island. I propose that the choice of it as a replacement for e-there came about as a result of the following steps:

1. E-there was accepted as a subject NP which had the properties of a pronoun;
2. E-there was analyzed as a singular subject NP;
3. The role of it was extended to take over as the pronoun in existential sentences.
The previous discussion focused on arguments to support step one, the notion that *e*-there functions as a subject NP. As for step two, in my discussion on number concord, I stated that in some nonstandard varieties of English, the following NP has lost much of its control over number marking in existential sentences. On Smith Island the evidence is overwhelming. Of 231 existential sentences that had plural noun phrases following the verb, only five contained a plural verb (2 percent). In other words, 98 percent of the existential sentences contained a singular verb. Of all the sentences that contained a post-finite plural NP, 119 occurred with *there* as the subject; of these only two contained a plural verb. It seems reasonable that, as *e*-there was reanalyzed as a subject NP, the following indefinite NP lost its power over number marking on the verb, and *e*-there was perceived as a singular rather than a plural subject. As a singular subject *e*-there came to be used almost exclusively with singular verbs. In his discussion on subject-verb concord, Lyons states very clearly that number is a category of the noun phrase and the “determination of the subject as either ‘singular’ or ‘plural’ subsequently determines the verb as either ‘singular’ or ‘plural’ according to the principles of concord.…(1969, pp. 243-244) Once *e*-there began functioning as a singular subject, the next step was the change from *e*-there to *it*. There is some evidence that *e*-there acts much like other pronoun subjects. For example, in tag questions, *e*-there is copied onto the tag just as a pronoun would be. The following are illustrative:

He went to the doctor, didn’t he?
There was a man in the office, wasn’t there?
In English there is already a pronoun which occurs in other kinds of sentences requiring a ‘dummy’ subject, for example

It seems that I am lost.
It appears that you are also lost.
It was clear that you were lost.
It was expected that I would get lost.
It is raining.
It is two o’clock.

In these sentences, it is functioning much like e-there in its indication that more information is coming in the sentence, and, of course, it, as a pronoun, is used as a regular subject just like the other pronouns, he, she, they, we, someone, etc. It has, therefore, force as a subject and, among the pronoun forms, it has the broadest scope of semantic reference. (Stevick, 1972, p. 300) It follows, then, that the role of it could be easily extended to include existential sentences which previously contained there; such a change is especially likely if e-there does in fact ‘act like’ a singular pronominal subject as has been suggested.

The advantage of such a change is that it increases the functional load of it in a logical way while restricting there to its primary role as a locative. As Baron states, “The problem for speakers of a language is to maintain the general equilibrium while at the same time incorporating changes which increase simplicity or realism. (1974, p. 42) It should have a greater pragmatic reality for speakers as a subject, and there should have greater reality as a locative.

The disadvantage of such a change is that it allows for ambiguous interpretations of it as either a pronoun with antecedent elsewhere in the discourse or as an existential subject. (cf. Smith Island data, pp. ) Wolfram and Fasold
use the following example to illustrate how this kind of construction can affect the understanding of some sentences:

For example, if a speaker of a dialective with expletive it were waiting for water in ice cube trays to freeze, he could ask “Is it ice yet?” To him, this would mean “Is there (any) ice yet?” To speakers of most standard dialects, it means “Has it become ice yet?” (1974, pp. 171-172.

This kind of confusion, if it interferes with understanding, seems easily worked out within the context of the discourse. The fact that it is not only surviving but is taking over on Smith Island as the existential subject is evidence that the possibility of misunderstanding is a minor difficulty for these speakers. In fact, even in those ambiguous cases where I was not able to confidently assess the form as either pronominal or existential from the recordings and transcripts of the Smith Island data, during the actual conversations I at no time was aware of misunderstanding the speakers’ intent.

Given that the explanation thus far presented is a reasonable one, it is still necessary to examine the characteristics of the initiating group as well as the island community to see if there are discernible social reasons which acted in combination with the syntactic reasons to motivate the change.

The evidence indicates that Ewell or Rhodes Point was the point of origin of the change since these communities have higher frequencies of use of existential it than Tylerton. These communities face the main thoroughfare between Tangier Sound and the Chesapeake Bay and, as a result, receive more non-native visitors than does Tylerton which is more isolated. (Even other islanders must go by boat to reach Tylerton.) In addition, overnight
accommodations and restaurants can be found only in Ewell and Rhodes Point. One might suppose, then, that the change began as the result of contact with other non-mainstream speakers who used existential it. It is also possible that someone or some group left the island, for example the men who in World War II left the island to work in Baltimore, brought the feature back and took up residence in Ewell or Rhodes Point. At this much later point in time, however, it is impossible to do more than guess at the origin of change. It is possible to surmise that once the use of this feature began, Ewell and Rhodes Point, which are reportedly less conservative, were quicker to incorporate the nonstandard form as a community standard.

The interesting question that arises here is why this development went forward on Smith Island but not generally in English. I have pointed out the internal mechanism that would make such a change a reasonable one, but why hasn’t this ‘logical’ use of it as a subject motivated a change in more mainstream varieties of English?

We know that speakers of a language are often influenced by the prestige of the standard variety and, therefore, may react to the implied demand to use more standard forms of that language. Perhaps, then, the comparative isolation of Smith Island has been a factor in allowing the use of it to expand once it began. As people who live and work very independently of urban areas and of speakers of prestige dialects, Smith Islanders feel fewer pressures to adjust their speech to sound more mainstream.
There is also another possibility that has to do with general English patterns. I have observed the use of existential it by standard speakers, both on television and in casual conversations. These occurrences have not been frequent, but they do occur. Though my own speech was probably influenced by my data, I also observed the ease with which I began to use existential it in my own speech. It is indeed possible that existential it is making inroads into mainstream English. My previous discussion illustrated how generalizing the function of it to include all instances of the ‘dummy’ slot is a reasonable one; having one existential subject is structurally simpler than having two alternates, and such usage does not complicate the semantics since minor differences between it and there can be easily worked out within the speech context. In addition, since it already functions as a filler in several kinds of sentences, it does not so readily trigger a negative reaction in listeners that the usage is ‘bad grammar.’ All of these factors provide support for the possibility that it may, at some time in the future, be the primary existential subject, slowly replacing there in this function.

It will be interesting to observe whether such a change does, in fact, occur in standard English. It will also be interesting to watch how this form is used by nonstandard speakers over time. This study, then, makes it clear that further analyses of English varieties must be done before we can understand how the above analysis fits into our general understanding of linguistic change.

In addition, further studies should be made of Smith Island English. If the island continues to erode at its present rate, the people and, therefore, the dialect may one day have to be absorbed into life on the mainland. It is important, then,
that we take advantage of the uniqueness of this sociolinguistic laboratory to provide us with data by which we may fill in some of the gaps in our understanding of American English dialects.
APPENDIX A

MAP OF THE CHESAPEAKE BAY
APPENDIX B

MAP OF SMITH ISLAND
APPENDIX C

SAMPLE QUESTIONS
Sample Questions:

1. Which community did you grow up on?
2. How big was your family? Do you have brothers and sisters? Tell me about them.
3. Has your family always made its living from the water? How? It sounds like hard work. What time of the year are best for being a waterman?
4. What exactly is a soft-shell crab? How can you tell the difference in all of the types? How did you learn so much about it? What’s a scrape? Where do you get them..does someone here make them for you?
5. How many people were there on the island when you were growing up?
6. When you were rowing up did you have special chores that you had to do? What were they?
7. When did you begin to work on the water? Have you always had your own boat? What kind is it? did you buy it or build it? Is there someone on the island or elsewhere who builds boats especially for scraping? Where do the lumber and materials for the boats come from? How is it delivered to the island?
8. Other than seafood, where did (does) the rest of your food come from? Have you ever had farm animals? What kind? Do you usually have a garden? How about canning and preserving food?
9. Since the men work on the water, what kinds of things do the women do? Do the men ever have to go away to work? Where? Why? What do (did) they do?
10. How about when someone gets (got) sick? Is (was) there a doctor? Do the people ever doctor themselves with herbs or anything? Tell me about that.
11. Do you think times were hard when you were growing up? How so? But, I bet you were happy, weren’t you?
12. what did you do for fun? As a child? Games? Dances? Did you go to the mainland very much? Why?
13. How about clothes? Were they homemade mostly? Where did you get the cloth?
15. Do women/folks on Smith have foods that are special to here…not likely to be found in other places? Like what?
16. When your children were rowing up how did you discipline them? Spanking? Are children brought up differently now than they used to be? Do you think teenagers have too much freedom now? How so? What do you think is one of the biggest problems with raising kids today? Did you ever get into trouble with your folks? What happened? What kind of tricks did (do) kids play on each other?
17. Where did (do) you go to school? How many children were (are) there in school? What were (are) your teachers like? Favorite subject? Why? Who built the school building? Did you ever go to school on the mainland? What was that like?
18. How did you meet your wife/husband (friend)? How did (do) you go about dating?
19. When folks got married did they have what’s called a shivaree? Are there special things that happen here for the marriage ceremony?
20. Have you ever gotten lost on the water? What happened? What’s the worst fear that you’ve ever had? Have you ever been afraid that you were going to die? What
21. What’s a crab shanty for? How do you fish the boxes? How do you cull them? Pack them? Where are they shipped to?

22. How about hard crabs? What are the different ways of catching them? What kind of bait do you use? Where do the crabs go in the winter? Is there a limit on how many you can catch? Do you think there should be. Do you think the laws are fair? Why?


24. Tell me about all the different ways to trap or kill waterfowl – ducks, geese, etc. I was reading about how they used to kill blackbirds too; is that so? Did you ever eat one? Are some kinds of ducks better eating than other ones? Which ones? Are the game wardens really strict about the laws? Are they fair? Do you think they’re necessary.

25. What do you think is the biggest problem with the Chesapeake Bay? With the island?

26. How about the young people? Do they stay or leave? Why? Do many go to college?

27. Are you planning to go on to school after high school? What are your plans for later?

28. Do you think that Smith Island has changed much in your lifetime? How?

29. What was the worst weather that you can remember? What do you do if the water freezes over and the boats can’t come or go?

30. Do you think there’s any difference among the three communities? What kind? Is there a difference in the way they talk? What kind? Can you describe it?
APPENDIX D

SAMPLE SENTENCES WITH MODAL AUXILIARIES
JK-E  It may be a processing place in Rhodes Point…It might be two here.
Sometimes I think it might be more (that) goes on here.

BG-E  I guess it would be about the same (number of people now).

EM-E  …it used to be four high schools I the county.

FG-E  It used to be families that, when I was a boy…lived over the hill…
It used to be, all down this way, great big stone…

LM-E  …I think it might be a little more reasonable price….and it used to
be, on that tip, a beautiful, the government put it there, a pavilion
for picnicing.

NE-E  It used to be one up here.

DG-E  It used to be coffins and stuff in there.

AB-E  It used to not be no electricity over here.
It wouldn’t be nothin…

GG-E  It always seems to be a little room somewheres.
It’s got more people here.
It can be a limit but it ain’t now.

VE-RP  It’d be a lot of things I’d like to do for this island.

JP-RP  And if a heavy storm…it wouldn’t be a home on Rhodes Point left.
It would not be one home on Rhodes Point left.
Way over there then, it used to be a doctor’s home.
Well, it used to be three or four houses over there.
It used to be the prettiest trees over there.
ErM-T: It used to have more suppers and plays.  
It used to be a lot got to school.  
They used to tell.....on a dark night it’d be this woman with her head cut off going around.  

EdM-T: It might be more (people livin’ on here).  
Yeah, it’s getting more restrictions and stuff.  

DwM-T: It just happened to be an EMT on this part of the island/ 
It’s not gonna be that many stay here.  

KM-T: It just doesn’t seem to be as much (to do).  
…it was going to be a bad storm.  

OM-T: …and it would be two on a side.  
Now, it used to be plenty o’ clams here.  
Pretty soon they’re gonna start diein’ out cause it’s getting thousands of em.  

DaM-T: It used to be (skipjacks) but it’s not anymore.  

JE-T: It can get bad storms around here.  

JB-T: I think every summer or winter too, it’s just getting’ less and less, you know, crabs and oysters and stuff like that.
APPENDIX E

Sample Transcript of One Subject
VE-RP: 39 years old

- I see. That’s why. It is a reason
- I bet it is too. (Money available.)
- I really do wish it was (Money for me…opportunity)
- On this island, it’s really not much here.
- It is no money bein’ made.
- There’s always limits to what we can do and it’s no need to kid yourself and fret yourself.
- When I was growin’ up it was nothing like this many flies.
- But I don’t remember havin’ flies like it is now when I was a young girl.
- There’s a few will put up a few vegetables.
- There was no communication between us and the mainland.
- I don’t know if it’s because there’s more people after ‘em.
- I don’t think it’s one thing wrong. I think it’s two or three.
- It’s not…(response to there’s no balance?)
- It was two or three things the Corps had come up with.
- See, it’s a sandbar out there from which was the beach.
- It’s a shame we don’t because it’d be a lot of things I’d like to do for this island.
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