

# INVARIANT *BE* IN NEW ENGLAND FOLK SPEECH: COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL EVIDENCE

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**ABSTRACT:** This article attempts to document the history of finite *be* in New England folk speech, a phenomenon thus far neglected in scholarly publications devoted to American historical dialectology. The authors aim at proving that even though plural indicative *be* had been brought to the early colonies with the first settlers, *be* as a singular indicative form was a New Englandism, not attested until the late seventeenth century—consequently, the authors engage in a comparative analysis of the linguistic contexts attracting the feature in focus respectively in Early Modern British English, early and late colonial New England English, and postcolonial New England English. In terms of textual selection, the authors make use of a vast array of primary sources, ranging from documents containing “close-to-oral” language through vernacular letters and comments by coeval language specialists to literary representations of the New England dialect; as for the latter, the authors have not shunned fictional portrayals but approached them with necessary caution both by means of careful selection of reliable dialect writers and comparison of the retrieved data with the ones obtained from other sources, such as the *Linguistic Atlas of New England*.

HENRY L. MENCKEN’S (1948, 357) comment that “the stronghold of [finite indicative] *be* is and always has been New England” must come as quite a surprise for present-day dialectologists, considering that the literature has almost exclusively focused on *be* as an aspect marker in African American Vernacular English. That Mencken briefly discusses invariant *be* as a typical feature of New England speech ways in a chapter dedicated to the “Common Speech” has to do with the fact that he had sought advice in the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (LANE 1939–43).<sup>1</sup>

Ironically enough, the reconstruction of New England folk grammar on the basis of the material available from the LANE records (including *be*) has been researched most carefully by a handful of linguists working mainly on the “speech realism” quality inherent in literary representations of the New England dialect: among these works are Ruth Blackburn’s (1967) study of Eugene O’Neill’s play *Desire Under the Elms*, Evelyn Cutler’s (1976) study of Sarah Orne Jewett’s *Country of the Pointed Firs*, and Jacob Bennett’s (1974,

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1979) articles on George Savary Wasson's Maine fiction. We believe that invariant *be* in New England folk speech has received little attention by dialectologists mainly because it disappeared from the vernacular in the course of the 1940s or 1950s and does not seem to have been revived as a marker of regional identity, unlike, for instance, nonstandard *were/weren't* in North Carolina folk speech (e.g., Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1994).<sup>2</sup>

### SCOPE AND AIM

In order to fill the void left by dialectologists, in the present article we intend to document the history of finite (or invariant) *be* in New England folk speech by relying on (1) comments from contemporary language specialists (grammarians, lexicographers); (2) the scrutiny of primary—chiefly “speech-based”—sources (dialect atlases, court records, vernacular letters, and fiction);<sup>3</sup> and (3) selected secondary materials. The periods under consideration are the precolonial (–1620), the colonial (1620–1776), and the postcolonial (up to the early twentieth century).

In the present article, we are not concerned primarily with the question of whether invariant *be* in New England folk speech owes its existence to one specific “founder dialect,” such as the dialects of East Anglia or (South) West England (as suggested by Mencken 1948, 356, and Montgomery 2001, 147, resp.). Instead, we would like to claim that *be* used as a singular form (e.g., *What be I doing here?, tall as he be*) is an “American” phenomenon; that is to say, even though singular indicative *be* is also characteristic of British English dialects, we believe that *be* was brought to the New England colonies as a plural (and NOT as a singular) form.<sup>4</sup>

In order to test our research hypothesis, we have compared Early Modern British English (sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries), colonial New England English, and post-Revolutionary New England English in terms of how various internal linguistic contexts constrained the (un)inflected forms of *to be* through time and space. Our observations concerning invariant *be* in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century New England folk speech constituted our point of departure; these, in turn, have led us to focus upon five linguistic constraints pertinent to the verb form at issue; they will be discussed in more detail in a section below.

Our data are drawn from different primary and secondary sources: concerning Tudor and Stuart England, we have relied on reference works, such as Shakespeare grammars (E. Abbott 1891; Franz 1909), general introductions (Barber 1976; Millward 1989; Nevalainen 2006), and selected secondary

sources (Nevalainen 1998; Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 1996; Wright 2003). As far as colonial New England is concerned, we have had recourse to both secondary sources (O. Abbott 1953) and, more importantly, primary sources containing “close-to-oral” language, in particular the *Salem Witchcraft Papers* (SWP 1977). As regards the postcolonial period, we have, again, availed ourselves of a mixed type of sources: comments by contemporary language reformers (Webster 1789; Pickering 1816; Kirkham 1834), works of reference presenting primary data, namely *LANE* (1939–43) as well as dialect dictionaries (Wentworth 1944; *Dictionary of American Regional English* [*DARE*] 1985–), and, finally, primary “speech-based” sources, both letter collections (Silber and Sievens 1996) and dialect fiction (e.g., Humphreys 1815; Stowe 1869; Jewett 1896; Wilkins 1890, 1905). Secondary materials dealing with British dialects of the Late Modern period (i.e., Ihalainen 1985, 1986, 1991, 1994) have also contributed in significant ways to the research underlying the present study.

#### DISCUSSION OF THE PRIMARY SOURCES

COLONIAL SOURCES. Our choice of the *Salem Witchcraft Papers* (SWP 1977) as a corpus of colonial New England records is by no means accidental. The importance of the material under scrutiny was observed as early as the 1920s in Henry Alexander’s (1928) article. In fact, the records of the Salem witchcraft trials were acclaimed by Alexander to “give us what is probably the best and most complete picture of the popular language as spoken in New England at this period” (390).

Several studies dealing mainly with these trial records as linguistic evidence of Early American English have appeared lately (e.g., Rissanen 1997, 2003; Dylewski 2004; Grund, Kytö, and Rissanen 2004), all testifying to their relevance in reconstructing late-seventeenth-century colonial English. As the center of interest of the present article lies in comprehending an oral feature of the postcolonial New England dialect, we have made sure also to scrutinize colonial materials (1) that have a speech-reflecting quality and (2) that represent the language of both elite and nonelite colonial subjects. Accordingly, we have focused on certain Salem materials selected from the Boyer and Nissenbaum collection available online, namely the testimonies and interrogations as they were recorded within the trial protocols and witness accounts. All these documents in particular reflect real-life spoken utterances, and, according to Kytö (2004, 133), all these documents “contain unique instances of language which tell a good deal about colloquial usage

of the time.” The corpus created for the present study contains 57 examinations and 103 depositions.<sup>5</sup>

POSTCOLONIAL SOURCES. *Comments by Contemporary Observers*. According to Montgomery (1996, 219), comments made by contemporary language specialists on a specific form (generally in grammars or dictionaries) suggest that a given feature was “relatively common,” “socially salient or stigmatized to some extent,” and/or “employed by regional or social groups of speakers who were not esteemed.” Although grammarians prior to the age of dialectology rarely attempted to specify in which linguistic (and extralinguistic) contexts the socially unfavored variant was used, describing it instead as categorical (even when the “standard” form was also employed by the same speakers, e.g., in certain linguistic environments, in certain sociolinguistic situations), this type of metalinguistic reflection is nevertheless invaluable for the dialect historian, especially for want of better dialect material, that is, when primary “speech-based” sources are scarce or even missing.

To our knowledge, the earliest comments on the speech of contemporary New Englanders date back to the days of America’s independence; language observers both within and outside the United States mentioned Yankee speech ways mostly with disapproval; others, among them Noah Webster and James Russell Lowell, emphasized that New England’s folk speech still preserved lexical, semantic, and grammatical features of “Elizabethan English.” The traits most commonly commented on, however, were phonetic and prosodic: thus, the English travelers Nicholas Cresswell (1777) and Patrick Campbell (1792) referred to the New Englanders’ “whining cadence” and “twang,” respectively (in Dillard 1992, 33).

The language observers paid heed to in the present article are those who mention finite *be* in relation to New England: these are Noah Webster (1789), John Pickering (1816), and Samuel Kirkham (1834).

*Vernacular Letters*. “Vernacular” letters constitute one of the most valuable sources for the study of earlier nonstandard grammar (Montgomery 2004, 12), yet research to date has made little use of them, because they are difficult to locate. In his search for “vernacular” letters, Montgomery (1997, 229) examines letters composed by individuals of lower social stations and little education, written “in the least conscious style” and for a compelling reason (e.g., asking for financial aid, inquiring about one’s family). Montgomery goes on to say, “These situations . . . motivate individuals to write for themselves, to do their best in putting words to paper regardless of their level of literacy . . . thus paying little attention to the form of his or her writing” (229). Hence, while pinpointing letters of likely value for linguistic investigation,

one has to be careful to sift out those which exhibit impact of “prescriptive rules, linguistic authorities, fixed conventions, and social norms . . .,” as they display formal, artful, and standard language (Schneider and Montgomery 2001, 388).<sup>6</sup>

We have focused on a selection of relatively informal personal writings, not meant for the public and hence linguistically less monitored, more “down-to-earth,” namely 53 letters written by New Englanders to family and friends during the Civil War (in Silber and Sievens 1996). Unorthodox spellings and nonstandard grammatical features, which are attested in all of these letters, as well as scattered apologetic remarks concerning the “bad righting,” indicate that they might have been produced by less literate writers who did not have recourse to the help of amanuenses (see also Schneider and Montgomery 2001, 388).

*Fictional Portrayals.* The recourse to constructed dialogue for linguistic descriptions of a dialect is generally cautioned against by dialectologists, even though the bulk of connected discourse readily available through fictional texts is appealing, in particular to the dialect historian. Still, Montgomery (2001, 101) maintains that linguists “have often shunned American literary dialects in reconstructing earlier American speech.”<sup>7</sup> Some experts, however, have mentioned the New England regionalists writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century as rich and reliable sources for the study of extinct New England speech ways. Jacob Bennett (1974, 65), discussing the dialect representations of Mainer George Savary Wasson, makes the following observation: “There is nothing in Wasson that contradicts the *Atlas* [LANE] findings, but on the other hand, there are thirty-eight features for which Wasson and the *Atlas* are in agreement.”<sup>8</sup>

We would like to argue that the suitability of a literary dialect for historical dialectology depends primarily on four factors, even though it must be admitted that these guidelines, taken as a whole, represent idealizations and are hardly exhaustive: (1) the dialect writer’s biography; (2) the dialect writer’s method of obtaining the data; (3) the prospective readership/audience; and (4) the dialect writer’s loyalty to a specific “school” of vernacular literature.

1. *The Dialect Writer’s Biography.* The term “biography” is used here to describe the writer’s regional, social, linguistic, and educational background. It is desirable, even though by no means always feasible (e.g., in case of an anonymous writer), that the dialect researcher collect information concerning (1) the writer’s firsthand acquaintance with the speech ways and lifestyle of the folk whose nonstandard speech he or she portrays and (2)

the writer's degree of exposure to other varieties, either regional or social. Norm Mundhenk (1974, 260–61) recalls a personal experience which shows how deeply extended sojourns in another dialect area can impinge on a writer's dialect portrayals:

I am interested in English dialects, and had noticed one particular grammatical usage common in England, but not used at all in America. Several years ago, shortly after I had noticed this, I read a short-story in an American magazine about a rustic New England family. The characters were occasionally made to speak using this construction, as well as a word or two which sounded suspiciously British to me. Puzzled, I wrote the author, who admitted that she had spent a great deal of time in England, and that even though she was American her speech might well have become more British.

Labov (1970, 62), in turn, relates the quality of literary dialects to a writer's educational background. Thus, he views interference from the standard variety as inevitable: "There will be unnoticed inconsistencies where the author's own grammar appears without his realizing it." He goes on to say that writers "hear a 'marked' behavior as invariant when in fact it is variable." However, on the one hand, Labov's explanations ignore the fact that writers can also be bidialectal, that is, master a regional nonstandard variety as well as the standard variety. On the other hand, Labov expresses an idea pertinent to the present study, which was already mentioned with reference to language observers: "One can therefore use dialect literature as a good indication that a certain form does occur, and that it has a social value great enough to be noticed by the author" (62).

2. The Dialect Writer's Methods of Obtaining the Data. Several scholars (e.g., Bennett 1979; Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2000) have pointed out that the quality of fictional dialect representations will be enhanced if verbatim recordings, witnessed by ear—rather than empirical knowledge exclusively—constitute the foundation underlying the constructed dialogue. For instance, Bennett (1979, 92) reports that Maine writer George Savary Wasson kept two notebooks in which he entered, among other things, lexicographic material collected from the mouths of informants, whom he identified for every entry.

3. The Dialect Writer's Prospective Readership/Audience. Labov (1970, 62) points out that fiction written with a view to a large-scale geographical distribution (i.e., nation- or worldwide) is more likely to contain stereotyped dialect representations, for "the author wants to heighten or enrich the local flavor of speech." The Yankee stage character, who was particularly popular in the

first half of the nineteenth century in both the United States and England (Dorson 1940; Hodge 1964), is a case in point: in fact, theater audiences expected the speech of New England country bumpkins to be replete with certain “quaint” traits not (or no longer) found in the speech of educated Americans and Englishmen, such as *to improve* ‘to employ’, plural verbal *-s* (*they knows*), *be* for *am/are*, *warn’t/wa’n’t* for *wasn’t*, the possessive pronouns in *-n* (*hisn, hern*), *on* for *of* (*any on’em*), and euphemisms (*tarnation!*, *darn!*), not to mention the many peculiarities concerning accent.

4. The Dialect Writer’s Loyalty to a Specific “School” of Vernacular Literature. Dialect writers are oftentimes confronted with the existence of comparable works of dialect literature imitating the very same regional variety. They show allegiance—although by no means always explicitly—with a particular community of writers, both coeval and anterior, and therefore face the choice of adopting—or not—conventions, such as those concerning the representation of a dialect (e.g., orthography, rote phrases, etc.). Hence, the phenomenon of “intertextuality” (e.g., Allen 2000) cannot be disregarded if fictional portrayals of nonstandard varieties are used for scholarly purposes: writing dialect fiction is, in fact, always ideologically motivated, including the question of “authenticity,” which dialect writers have to tackle when it comes to their depictions of marked varieties.

We believe that literary dialects CAN indeed shed light on synchronic grammatical variation (i.e., how a variant correlates with social variables and which linguistic environments constrain the occurrence of a variant) if other data are consulted as a means of comparison. Montgomery (1996, 220) has the latter aspect in mind when claiming that “literary portrayals . . . do provide forms in linguistic contexts.”

Just as there are qualitative differences between fictional portrayals of a dialect variety, one can likewise detect qualitative differences within one and the same literary dialect when it comes to the representation of the various nonstandard features. As far as invariant *be* is concerned, we have found that by and large the literary portrayals of the verb form, mostly occurring as part of the speech ways of rustic Yankee characters, agree crosstextually (both sociolinguistically as well as in terms of internal linguistic contexts); more importantly, the fictional representations of *be* show many parallels with the examples of *be* published in *LANE* (Pablé 2004a, 2004b).

On the basis of our own close readings and the scholarly opinions expressed in earlier studies, we have selected a handful of New England dialect writers whom we regard as reliable portraitists of New England folk speech and of the linguistics of *be* in particular:

DAVID HUMPHREYS, whose play *The Yankee in England* (1815), featuring a glossary of Yankee words and grammatical forms (including negative *ban't/ben't*), was among the first printed fictional representations of New England speech (Dillard 1992, 33, 40, 55).<sup>9</sup>

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL, whose Yankee dialect representations in his *Biglow Papers*, published between 1846 and 1848 (1st series) and in 1862–67 (2nd series), became the model for many Downeaster dialect writers to come (Blair 1960, 52; Blair and McDavid 1983, 17–18). It must be mentioned at this point that Lowell's dialect depictions have also been criticized, however (e.g., Krapp 1925, 235–36; Killheffer 1928, 235).<sup>10</sup>

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, author of *Oldtown Folks* (1869) and *Oldtown Fireside Stories* (1872). Stowe's most famous Yankee character, the village gossip Sam Lawson, is considered by Westbrook (1981, 22–3) as the "truest Yankee fiction."<sup>11</sup>

MARY WILKINS FREEMAN, author of novels and numerous short stories depicting the so-called "New England decline." In an essay on rural New England, the sociologist R. L. Hartt (1899) gave Wilkins the status of an authority (in Westbrook 1967, 54).<sup>12</sup>

SARAH ORNE JEWETT, whose collection of sketches entitled *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) became a landmark in rural New England fiction (Cutler 1976).<sup>13</sup>

EUGENE O'NEILL, who, although born to Irish parents, spent much of his lifetime in Connecticut and Massachusetts; on many occasions O'Neill listened to the talk of Yankee sailors and farmers. His New England dialect portrayals are praised as "accurate" by some scholars (e.g., Blackburn 1967) and dismissed as "fake" by others (e.g., Chothia 1979, 71; Westbrook 1981, 163). The main reason we have selected O'Neill has to do with the fact that his New England characters also use *be* in atypical contexts (as regards both the subjunctive and indicative mood), which makes this playwright a suitable "anti-source" for the present study.

*The Linguistic Atlas of New England.* The most valuable source providing data on *be* in New England folk speech is Hans Kurath's *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (LANE 1939–43).<sup>14</sup> Dialect atlases show two significant advantages over the primary sources explored before: (1) unlike vernacular letters, tokens published in dialect atlases did occur in SPOKEN—largely connected—discourse; (2) unlike literary dialect portrayals, dialect atlases elude authorial censorship (even though what is eventually published within a dialect atlas will be subject to selective criteria too).

Concerning LANE's New Englanders who still used *be* as late as the 1930s, the following observations apply: speech patterns varied with the social characteristics of informants living in one and the same New England community, along a LITERACY CONTINUUM.<sup>15</sup> In order to take the continuum into due account, Kurath and his assistants decided to work with three categories or

“types,” which, as they themselves admitted (Kurath et al. 1939, 41), were “rather vague” and thus subject to diverging interpretations. Speakers classified as Type I represented the “old-fashioned and most definitely local type,” in fact descendants of old local families, whose speech would preserve “the oldest living forms”—echoes of New England’s preindustrial era (Kurath et al. 1939, 41). Type I informants had typically little formal education, did little reading, and entertained restricted social contacts. It is likely that many of them would rarely practice writing once they had quit compulsory school and hence must have been “semi-literate” (see Koch 1997).<sup>16</sup> Type II informants, in turn, whom Atwood (1953, 2) identifies as speakers of the so-called “vulgate” or “common speech” (see also Mencken 1948; Kurath 1949), that is, those classes employing “a general colloquial grammar” (Montgomery 2001, 144), would as a rule have received better schooling, read more widely, and/or enjoyed contacts with the better educated. While Type I informants were chiefly old-aged, with relatively few middle-aged informants, Type II speakers comprised both middle-aged and elderly people, as certain old-aged rural informants would have received some formal education or were self-educated through reading; moreover, they would often be classified by field-workers as “modern.” Finally, Type III informants were the ones labeled as “cultured,” that is, those having a college education: they would mainly (but not exclusively) live in the larger cities and older cultural centers and their speech would be “less local than that of the common man” (Kurath et al. 1939, 41), that is, more oriented toward regional—or often supraregional—standards. In fact, these speakers, when entering college or a business school, which may have been located in a different section of the country, would have contact with peers and teachers from other states and would “read widely and [be] taught to write in the idiom of others” (Kurath 1949, 8). Those cultured informants who had returned to their native community were found to use narrowly local speech forms only when dealing with the common people. Some of the Type II informants, in turn, were also labeled by the field-workers as “cultured” (in spite of a less formal education), as they spoke a cultivated type of speech. Atwood (1953, 27) confirms that informants using *be* as part of their sociolect in *LANE* belonged exclusively to the “Type I” category, that is, those born in the mid-nineteenth century, which suggests that *be* had become a relic form, no longer actively used by informants born in the first decades of the twentieth century. In fact, some field-workers of *LANE* noticed that the expressions *How be ye?* and *... than I be* were associated with “humorous usage” by younger speakers, which seems to indicate that such phrases were sociolinguistically marked in the 1930s and may have served for stereotyping.<sup>17</sup>

LINGUISTIC CONSTRAINTS ON *BE*

As already mentioned in a previous section, the present discussion of invariant *be* is centered on five internal linguistic contexts which, according to our observations, were mainly responsible for governing the occurrence/nonoccurrence of invariant *be* in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—a time when *be* evidence is particularly abundant. We will hence interpret the Early and Late Modern data at our disposal in light of these five linguistic constraints, namely: prominence, subject type, person-number, polarity, and syntactic level.

In the present article, we will thus attempt to trace the evolution of *be* in New England (folk) speech from its very beginnings, tackling the question whether *be* as attested in Early Modern England differed from *be* as attested in the New England of the earliest colonists—and, if not, whether any differences found in New England folk speech were of late colonial or rather of postcolonial origin.

The notions of a “prominence” constraint and a “subject type” constraint in relation to *be* were proposed by the Finnish dialectologist Ossi Ihalainen, who remains one of the few scholars to have systematically described the linguistics of *be* in white vernaculars (Ihalainen 1985, 1986, 1991).<sup>18</sup> Even though Ihalainen worked on southwestern British—not New England—folk speech, we have noticed that his findings concerning invariant *be*, which were based on a close scrutiny of tape-recorded material, are crossdialectally pertinent.

Ihalainen’s research aimed at describing the diffusion of standard and other nonlocal forms within twentieth-century rural dialects (at the expense of native forms), a process leading to what he defined as “highly mixed grammars.” The loss of finite *be*, a form that had spread to new grammatical contexts (the first-, second-, and third-person singular) sometime during the eighteenth century in various regional varieties of British English (see Ihalainen 1994, 223–24), represents a case in point for the process described above. Ihalainen (1985, 62) found that in the dialects of the Southwest the innovating forms were conditioned by what he called “prominence,” that is, by stress, syntactic position, and sentence modality. As a matter of fact, the standard forms *am/are* clearly preponderated in the so-called “weak affirmative” position, that is, with the copula/auxiliary being unstressed and in a sentence-medial position and therefore able to freely contract with its antecedent subject (most likely a pronoun subject or existential *there*). Ihalainen (1991, 110) found that 81% of all “weak” affirmatives in his data featured the suppletive variant. The so-called “strong” positions, in turn, with no contraction possible because the copula/auxiliary is either not sentence-medial

or emphatic, proved to be conservative contexts (*be* occurred 23% of the times, even though “strong” affirmatives made up only 1.5% of all sentences in the corpus). Examples of such “strong” affirmatives would be sentences with a heavily stressed verb (e.g., *They ain’t there; I say, they BE there!*) or, more frequently, with the copula/auxiliary placed sentence-finally (e.g., *He’s older than what I be*). As for sentence modality, Ihalainen discovered that positive questions, in which the verb equally finds itself in a positionally “strong” context, were also favorable contexts for the *be* variant to occur (e.g., *Be I right?*), affecting 42% of all direct questions (interrogative clauses making up only 6% of the sentences within the corpus). Negativity (in questions and “weak” affirmatives), in turn, promoted a supraregional nonstandard form, *ain’t*, even though the contracted form of *be not*—*DARE* identifies six spelling variants, namely *beant*, *ban’t*, *been’t*, *bein’t*, *beunt* (1985–, 179, C 1a)—was still found as well among Ihalainen’s data (however, only 15% of the times).

Apart from the “prominence” constraint as just described, Ihalainen (1986, 378; 1991, 113) also noticed a “subject type” constraint, that is, *be* seemed to be preferred in conjunction with nonnominal subjects rather than nominal ones. In fact, no instances of *be* co-occurred with a noun subject among his data (at the same time, Ihalainen did not specify how many pronoun and zero subjects he had found with *be*). If we consider the “weak” affirmative clause in relation to the “subject type” constraint, we would actually expect plural noun subjects to attract *be* rather than *are*, as the copula/auxiliary finds itself in a noncontractable (“strong”) position. However, it must not be forgotten that southwestern British folk speech, like many other nonstandard varieties of English, variably allows the singular verb to concord with plural noun subjects, in which case the copula/auxiliary is no longer in a noncontractable position.

The “person-number,” “polarity,” and “syntactic level” constraints are drawn from Babbitt (1893), who claims that the occurrence of *be* is (categorically!) blocked in the third-person singular context, with the negative form, and in nonsubordinate declarative clauses: “This form *be* is never used in the third singular, nor in the negative, which is *aint* for all persons and numbers. *Be* is not used in an independent direct statement; ‘I be agoin’ . . . would be contrary to the usage. It is used in dependent sentences generally . . . ‘I say I be agoin’ tew’” (340). It could also be claimed that Ihalainen’s “prominence” constraint actually comprises Babbitt’s “syntactic level” constraint; however, the latter descriptive rule mixes semantic with syntactic notions, namely “direct statement” versus “subordinate clause,” while the former focuses on a syntactic property, namely “contractability” (sentence-medial with pronoun subjects or existentials) versus “noncontractability” (stress, sentence-final, or sentence-medial with plural subject nouns).

INVARIANT *BE* DISCUSSION

EARLY MODERN ENGLAND. In sixteenth-century England, recourse to the variant *be* was determined by a categorical rule concerning “number”: *be* was confined to the plural, according to E. Abbott (1891, 212), Franz (1909, 169), Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1996, 304), Wright (2003, 38–40), and Nevalainen (2006, 18). Other scholars, for instance, Millward (1989, 234) and Nevalainen (1998, 169), prefer to say that *be* was confined to *are* and thus acknowledge the singular number as potentially attractive to *be* as well.<sup>19</sup> All of them, however, seem to agree that *be* in Early Modern British English did not function as a variant of *am* and *is*.

Nevalainen’s (1998) study remains one of the few quantitative analyses of the *be/are* variation in Early Modern English with a focus on the distribution of the various linguistic contexts. Nevalainen’s findings are based on scrutiny of two versions of *The Book of Common Prayer*, written in 1552 and 1662, respectively, which can be classified as “liturgical prose.” As may be expected, Nevalainen found that the older variant *be* had become much less prominent in the later version. As far as the constraints at issue are concerned, it seems that some of these determined the choice between *be* and *are* in Early Modern (Southern) British English (albeit in somewhat different ways than in colonial and postcolonial New England—see the sections to follow).

When it comes to the “subject type” constraint, Nevalainen’s research suggests that *be* was more likely to appear with noun and zero subjects than with personal pronoun subjects: thus, she found 18 tokens of *be* with nominal subjects (out of 35) and 4 tokens of *be* with zero subjects (out of 8) in the 1552 version (Nevalainen 1998, 182–84); however, only 46 tokens of *be* co-occurred with pronoun subjects in the 1662 version, of a total of 114 tokens. In fact, quotations of *be* cited in the two Shakespeare grammars (E. Abbott 1891; Franz 1909) also show *be* in conjunction with noun (rather than pronoun) subjects, which tends to corroborate Nevalainen’s results:

1. a. ... for that the rules *BE* few and easy. [*Preface to the Book of Common Prayer*, 1552 (Nevalainen 1998, 182)]
- b. Ay, but the doors *BE* lock’d and keys kept safe. [Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 1590s (Franz 1909, 169)]

What is more, Nevalainen (1998) claims that by the mid-seventeenth century *be* had become the marked variant even with noun subjects: among her data, only 6 tokens (out of 35) showed *be* in that very context, that is, in noncontractable positions. Nevalainen does not mention, however, that *be*—not *are*—was otherwise the variant sensitive to syntactically “strong” contexts: Barber (1976, 246), for instance, reports that *be* for *are* was particularly

frequent within existential clauses (as in 2), while Nevalainen (1998, 184) herself confirms the same with respect to relative clauses (as in 3):

2. There *BE* some sports are painful. [Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1611 (E. Abbott 1891, 211)]
3. “Provide for all ... that *BE* desolate and oppressed.” [*Making of Deacons*, 1662 (Nevalainen 1998, 184)]

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the tokens of plural indicative *be* that Wright (2003, 39–40) found in a corpus of Elizabethan prison narratives almost exclusively concern existentials and relative clauses. Besides these two latter contexts, we have found that yet another syntactically “strong” context attracted the *be* variant in Early Modern English, which no study has mentioned so far, namely sentence-final position:

4. a. ... those meates and drinks that are of grosser substance and hoter than others *BE*. [William Turner, *A New Booke on the Natures and Properties of All Wines*, 1568 (Nevalainen 2006, 98)]
- b. Yes, *Mitis*, and their Souls, and who they *BE* / That either will or can except 'gainst me. [Ben Jonson, *Every Man Out of his Humor*, 1599 (<http://www.luminarium.org/editions/outofhumor.htm>)]
- c. Let's see what they *BE*: read them. [Shakespeare, *Henry IV, part I*, 1597 (<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/1henryiv/1henryiv.2.4.html>)]

As for the “polarity” constraint, the data in Nevalainen (1998, 182–83) suggest that the negative clause was a “neutral” environment for *be* to occur in the 1552 version of *The Book of Common Prayer* (8 out of 15 tokens), while *are* was clearly the favored variant in the 1662 version: only 1 token of *be* was found with the negative particle, whereas *are* occurred 14 times; contracted negative forms in Early Modern English (e.g., *ben't*), typical of the Late Modern period, in turn, are not attested in any of the reference works consulted by us, nor mentioned in the secondary literature:

5. but for as much as those tables *BE* not altogether truly Printed, and for that they haue beene lately corrected.... [Thomas Blundeville, *The Tables of the Three Speciall Right Lines Belonging to a Circle*, 1597 (Nevalainen 2006, 98)]

Nevalainen's study partly validates the “syntactic level” constraint with respect to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English; in fact, *be* remained more stable in subordinate clauses, which is hardly surprising in view of the fact that subjunctive *be* still had a certain currency in Early Modern English. In turn, Nevalainen found that in the 1662 version *be* had become the marked variant in the main clause context, with only 8 tokens featuring the latter variant—as opposed to 37 tokens with *are* (Nevalainen 1998, 182–83).

Finally, the spatial diffusion and social patterning of *be* in Early Modern British English were investigated in Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1996) and Nevalainen (2000). Thus, with respect to London, Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1996, 319) found evidence that the local form *be* and the supralocal (northern) counterpart *are* were being used side by side to the same extent until the middle of the sixteenth century, with the exception of the Royal Court, where *be* was still the prevailing variant. This suggests that *be* was a prestigious form in the 1550s and *are* a socially marked form. By the year 1600, in turn, *are* had become the clearly dominant variant in all social ranks, except for the social climbers, who clung to the older variant. According to Nevalainen (2000, 356), the northern variant reached the capital city via regular dialect diffusion; that is, it appeared in East Anglia prior to London.

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND. The wave of Puritan immigrants sailing for New England between the years 1620 and 1675 brought finite *be* with them,<sup>20</sup> but its status was likely that of a minority—and, according to Wright (2003, 40), a nonprestigious—variant of *are*. At any rate, rather than dying out completely, indicative *be* established itself in New England as well as Virginia (see Fischer 1989, 257; Wright 2003, 40).

The first piece of evidence concerning *be* in seventeenth-century New England is taken from O. Abbott's (1953) dissertation on verb forms and verb uses in early American writings, in which the author briefly discusses "third-person plural indicative *be*," listing 23 passages drawn from five different New England authors to illustrate the use of this verb form (40–41). It is important to notice that he did not apparently find any instances of singular indicative *be* among his data. O. Abbott does not comment on the internal distribution of the *be* tokens found, nor does he make any quantitative statements. It should be mentioned that even though the author categorizes the texts of his corpus into poetry, solemn style texts, history/narrative, legal style, and the informal/formal styles,<sup>21</sup> strikingly enough, he does not relate the examples of *be* he cites to any stylistic factor: as it appears, some of his quotations featuring plural *be* are taken from religious poems, written by Michael Wigglesworth and Samuel Danforth, who have resorted to plural *be* for rhyming purposes.

All of the contexts attested for the *be* variant in Early Modern British English (see the previous section) equally attract *be* in the writings of early New Englanders scrutinized by O. Abbott (except for negative forms): hence, *be* is still recurrent in independent declarative clauses in conjunction with noun subjects (as in 6), which suggests that neither a "syntactic level" nor a "subject type" constraint was in operation in early New England:

6. Their soules *BE* in a searching condition. [John Eliot, *The Glorious Progress of the Gospel among the Indians of New England*, 1649 (O. Abbott 1953, 41)]

Concerning the “prominence” constraint, the examples cited by O. Abbott suggest that syntactically “strong” positions were still favorable contexts for *be*: the sentence types involved are existential structures (as in 7a), relative clauses (7b), and subordinate clauses with *be* occurring sentence-finally (7c and 7d):

7. a. There *BE* no Rulers left. [John Cotton, *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven*, 1644 (O. Abbott 1953, 41)]  
 b. ... saving a few that *BE* good. [John Eliot, *The Glorious Progress of the Gospel among the Indians of New England*, 1649 (O. Abbott 1953, 41)]  
 c. I shewing them how uncapable they *BE*. [John Eliot, *The Glorious Progress of the Gospel among the Indians of New England*, 1649 (O. Abbott 1953, 41)]  
 d. what the keys ... *BE* and what their power. [John Cotton, *The Keyes of the Kingdom of Heaven*, 1644 (O. Abbott 1953, 41)]

No data are available that allow us to discuss the “polarity” constraint, but it is plausible that *be not* was (perfectly) acceptable in seventeenth-century New England; in turn, there are no written attestations of contracted negative forms until the early eighteenth century (see section below).

The works cited by O. Abbott as showing evidence of *be* were all written by English-born Puritans: while John Cotton, John Winthrop, and John Eliot arrived in New England when they had already reached adulthood, Michael Wigglesworth and Samuel Danforth were still children when their parents migrated to the New World. Still, it is significant that all of these early New Englanders acquired their language in the mother country and/or from parents who had spent most of their lifetimes in England.

The significance of the *SWP* for the purpose of the present study has to do, on one hand, with the fact that these records offer an insight into late-seventeenth-century “spoken” language, and, on the other hand, that they reflect the language of veritable—that is, American-born—New Englanders:

The date of the witchcraft trials, 1692, is sufficiently long after the first settlement of New England for us to assume that the language indicated is really the speech of American settlers and not merely that of recent arrivals from England. This is made all the more certain because a good deal of the testimony against the supposed witches was given by rather young people. [Alexander 1928, 390–91]

The majority of *be* forms detected in the *SWP* and in the *Records of the Suffolk County Court, 1671–1680* (*Suffolk Records* 1933) are traditionally considered subjunctives, that is, in subordinate clauses introduced by *if*, *unless*, *though*,

and the like, as well as in embedded questions introduced by *whether* and *if* (as in 8a–8c). They are therefore of lesser importance for our purpose, as they are only marginally relevant to the phenomenon of “indicative” *be* as found in postcolonial New England folk speech (see also examples 22 and 23):

8. a. but if it BEE proved against him that hee did Swear or was drunck, hee may bee legally Sentanced for his oaths or Drunkenness though not bound over to answer for them [“Answer to Mr. Humphry Hodges,” Nov. 27, 1672 (*Suffolk Records*, 381)]
- b. I will complaine of you tho you BE A minister [“Ann Putnam Jr. vs. George Burroughs,” Apr. 20, 1692 (*SWP*, 1: 164)]
- c. wee’le aske him whether it BEE soe or noe, but Mr Hodges would not goe... [“Testimony of William Norman,” Aug. 8, 1672 (*Suffolk Records*, 190)]

More noteworthy are nine examples drawn from both the examination and the deposition records of the *SWP*, featuring nonsubjunctive, nonsubordinate *be*, in declarative as well as interrogative clauses, and with both noun and pronoun subjects. Among the four tokens of *be* found in declarative clauses (in 9), of which the first three are unambiguously marked for plural, indicative *be* occurs as part of emotional discourse, with the copula/auxiliary possibly being stressed, that is, in prosodically—and, as far as the first and second examples are concerned, syntactically—“strong” contexts:

9. a. she desired me to ride faster, I asked her why; she said the woods were full of Devils, & said ther & there they BE, but I could se none. [“Clement Coldum vs. Elizabeth Hubbard,” May 29, 1692 (*SWP*, 2: 457)]
- b. mi wife shricked out I presently Ran into the Room wher my wife was and as soon as ever I opened the dore my [wife] said ther BE the evill one take tham. [“Josph Safford vs. Elizabeth How and Bridget Bishop,” June 30, 1692 (*SWP*, 2: 452)]
- c. my Kinsman Wm Coman told mee he would stay with mee & Lodg with mee and see if thay would come againe . . . after Wee Went to bed that s’d night . . . in came all the three women againe . . . soe I told him; Wm heer thay BE all Come againe. [“Richard Coman vs. Bridget Bishop,” June 2, 1692 (*SWP*, 1: 102)]
- d. I Againe did see that or the like creture that I before did see within dores, in such a posture as it seemed to be agoeing to fly at mee, upon which I cryed.out; the whole armor of god BE between mee and you.. [“John Louder vs. Bridget Bishop,” June 2, 1692 (*SWP*, 1: 100)]<sup>22</sup>

In the seventeenth-century corpus of trial protocols and witness accounts, the pattern described is not significant numerically speaking; in turn, within the examination records we have counted 282 suppletive forms (*am*, *is*, *are*) in independent declarative clauses (among which also appear sentences with

the third-person singular copula occurring sentence-finally, as in “There she is!”), while none feature invariant *be*. Analogously, the five direct questions with *be* clearly form a minority pattern, with the suppletive variants occurring 76 times in that very context (within the examination records). Among the tokens belonging to the former category, three are congenial to Early Modern British English usage, that is, *be* occurs in plural contexts:

10. a. Where BE those images, at your house? [“Examination of Deliverance Hobbs,” Apr. 22, 1692 (SWP, 2: 422)]
- b. No I do not know that this Girle is a witch w’t number of witches BE there in all. [*sic*] [“Examination of Elizabeth Johnson,” Aug. 30, 1692 (SWP, 2: 500)]
- c. then I Replied who BE thay she said goode how and goode ollever. [“Jospeh Safford vs. Elizabeth How and Bridget Bishop,” June 30, 1692 (SWP, 2: 452)]

The other two attestations involve the yes-no question “be you . . . ?” addressed to one—clearly identifiable—person:

11. a. Ann Putman, in a fit, said, BE you the man? [“Examination of Nehemiah Abbott, Jr.,” Apr. 22, 1692 (SWP, 1: 49)]
- b. Tell me BE you a witch? [“Examination of Mary Black,” Apr. 22, 1692 (SWP, 1: 113)]

The evidence at hand suggests that the recourse to *be* in this semantico-syntactic context constituted a marked choice in late-seventeenth-century spoken New England English; this becomes evident if we take into consideration that within the trial records 21 tokens of *are* occur in questions, in conjunction with the second-person singular pronoun *you*.

Based on the evidence at our disposal, we feel justified to claim that by the late seventeenth century, *be* in colonial varieties of English was diffusing to grammatical contexts typical of postcolonial New England folk speech, but atypical of Early Modern British English, namely to the first- and second-person singular context. It may well be that the questions just cited constitute the earliest “American” attestations of nonsubjunctive *be* with the singular. The historical dictionaries of American English offer no analogous attestations of *be* dating back to the seventeenth century. The earliest reference work featuring singular indicative *be* in a declarative clause is the *Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* (1938–44), which quotes from Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*, published in 1702: “I been’t afraid! I thank God I been’t afraid!”

Interestingly, the New Englanders using *be* as a singular indicative form (i.e., Ann Carr-Putnam, the magistrates John Hathorne/Jonathan Corwin,

Cotton Mather) were all American-born, which underpins the “domestic origin” hypothesis of singular indicative *be*.

POSTCOLONIAL AND EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND. While invariant *be* in colonial American English has not yet been studied in any systematic way, grammarians and dialectologists devoted some attention to it once it had become recurrent in the speech of the “common people” living in a particular area. In fact, a social and regional connotation inherent in *be* was noticed by contemporary observers already at the end of the eighteenth century—in Noah Webster’s (1789) *Dissertations on the English Language*, he included *be* as a typical feature of “the common discourse of the New England yeomanry”: “The verb *be*, in the indicative, present tense, which Lowth observes is almost obsolete in England, is still used after the ancient manner, I *be*, we *be*, you *be*, they *be*” (385).<sup>23</sup>

Grammarians writing in the first decades of the nineteenth century also commented on the regional concentration of invariant *be* usage. Thus, John Pickering wrote in his 1816 *Vocabulary* that finite *be* “was formerly much used in New England instead of *am* and *are*, in phrases of this kind: *Be* you ready? *Be* you going? I *be*, &c” (46). In his *English Grammar*, Samuel Kirkham (1834, 206), in a chapter dedicated to “provincialisms,” cited two examples of *be* supposedly typical of “New England or New York,” with *be* appearing in independent direct statements (“I *be* goin’”; “the keows *be* gone”); Kirkham also adduced examples of *be* as a main verb in direct questions and short answers—as Pickering had done (“Be you from Berkshire?” “I *be*”)—and cited the negative form (“You bain’t from the Jarseys, *be* ye?”). In Kirkham’s opinion, the latter three cases represented only “New England” usage.

The descriptions by these commentators are only partly in agreement with the five linguistic constraints investigated. The “prominence” constraint is manifested in Pickering’s and Kirkham’s examples, with *be* appearing in syntactically “strong” positions (i.e., direct questions, short answers, tagged questions). Interestingly enough, however, both Webster and Kirkham portray *be* as also recurrent in “weak” affirmatives, while Kirkham cites independent declarative clauses (with no contraction possible) as a further context attracting *be*. As far as the “person-number” constraint is concerned, it is certainly noticeable that none of the grammarians mention *be* in conjunction with the third person singular.

Close scrutiny of our primary postcolonial materials, namely fictional representations, *LANE*, and a selection of Civil War letters, has yielded the following insights with reference to the five constraints on *be*: we found that the “prominence” constraint operating in the dialects of Southwestern England (Ihalainen 1985, 1986, 1991) is also the major force regulating the

occurrence of invariant *be* in New England folk speech; a large number of *be* tokens occur in syntactically “strong” contexts, distributed mainly in unemphatic sentences with *be* occurring sentence-finally (as in 12), in emphatic sentences with *be* occurring sentence-finally (13), and in direct questions and tagged questions (14); the sentence types with the highest numbers of *be* tokens appearing on map 677 of *LANE* are clearly direct questions and phrases of comparison/similarity (a similar impression has emerged from scrutinizing the fictional examples; see Pablé 2004a, 2004b).

12. a. ... when you think your ladyship’s a better man than I BE. [Humphreys 1815, 33–34]
- b. I ain’t sure, ez some BE. [Lowell 1846–48, 171]
- c. Set where you BE till it dries on. [Jewett 1896, 137]
- d. tel Daniel and John folks that I ame wel and hope thay BE. [William Scott Letters, Oct. 13, 1861 (<http://www.vermonthistory.org/educate/cwletter/scottlet.htm>)]
- e. for i think that if you knew the particular of things as they BE you would feel different. [Huldah Morse, letter to brother, Feb. 2. 1864 (Silber and Sievens 1996, 165)]
- f. “Men is different,” said Sally Jinks. “Yes, they BE.” [Wilkins Freeman 1905, 218–19]
- g. Tain’t near so cheap as they generally BE. [*LANE*, M677]
13. a. Here you BE, Sam Lawson! [Stowe 1869, 165]
- b. My water pipe is frozen, and there I BE! [*LANE*, M677]
14. a. “BE you goin’ to buy more cows?” [Wilkins Freeman 1890, 68]
- b. How BE ye? [*LANE*, M677]<sup>24</sup>
- c. Who BE I talkin’ to? [*LANE*, M677]<sup>25</sup>
- d. Ye ain’t goin’, BE ye? [*LANE*, M677]

A small number of examples recorded in *LANE* show *be* to occur sentence-medially; we can assume that in these instances *be* found itself in prosodically “strong” contexts, especially if the position was syntactically “weak” (as in 15). In fact, the fieldworkers of *LANE* thought fit to note that “in all constructions, excepting the phrase of comparison, *BE* has a heavy or a medium stress” (*LANE*, M677):

15. a. They BE just as good [*LANE*, M677]
- b. They used to be coffins, but they BE caskets now [*LANE*, M677]
- c. Here we BE usin’ ... [*LANE*, M677]

Somewhat surprisingly, plural existential clauses are not prominent among our postcolonial data (and neither were they mentioned by Ihalainen as a context promoting *be* in Somerset folk speech). Nevertheless, we are in-

clined to believe that existentials still attracted *be* in the postcolonial New England dialect to some extent, possibly representing a relic from the early colonial days. For instance, Maine-born Gerald Lewis (1989), whose account of twentieth-century Maine folk speech is based on fictional material from the *Bert & I* series (Dodge and Bryan 1981), lists *be* as an “archaic” variant, with the only example being an interrogative existential clause. In Lewis’s example, a rustic Yankee, on being asked what he means by “the Island,” answers indignantly:

16. Barter Island, for chrissakes! What other island BE thay? [Lewis 1989, n.p.]

Other writers of dialect fiction with a New England background (e.g., Harriet Beecher Stowe, Eugene O’Neill) equally have recourse to *be* in conjunction with existential *they* or *there*, albeit on rare occasions:

17. a. “Now, Sam, tell us certain true, is there any such things as ghosts?” “BE there ghosts?” said Sam, immediately translating into his vernacular grammar. [Stowe 1872, 139]  
 b. And then they BE ghosts guardin’ it, ben’t they? [O’Neill 1920, 918]

The collocation *there be/they be* for ‘there/they is/are’ was not recorded as occurring in the speech of any *LANE* informants. Notably, map 678 of the *Atlas* investigates the existential clause on the basis of the construction *There are a lot of people who think so*. As it turns out, Type I informants were reported to have said *They’s many folks think(s) so* and *There’s many folks think(s) so*, not *They/there be many folks...*, probably because contraction between the existential and the copula is always possible (i.e., grammatical), irrespective of whether the context is singular or plural (i.e., *they’s*, *they’re*, and *there’s*). Thus, plural existentials in postcolonial nonstandard varieties of English no longer find themselves in syntactically “strong” contexts.

Ihalainen’s “subject type” constraint, operating in southwestern British folk speech, was found to have been equally pertinent to the New England dialect. In fact, in our primary sources the overall number of *be* tokens occurring together with noun subjects (both in main and subordinate clauses) is low: in *LANE* we have spotted only two such constructions (in 18), while in the our nineteenth-century fictional texts we have noticed no analogous cases:

18. a. Griddles BE... [LANE, M677]  
 b. So ye see what doctors BE. [LANE, M677]

On these grounds, we thus believe that Eugene O’Neill’s examples showing *be* in independent direct statements with a singular noun subject (and thus

in a contractable position) cannot have been widespread in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century New England folk speech:

19. a. The year *BE* up today and you've got to come or I'll... [O'Neill 1920, 946]  
 b. Aye, Nat and Sue, your father *BE* comin' home now. [O'Neill 1920, 898]

Babbitt's "polarity" constraint governing finite *be* in contemporary Connecticut vernacular speech is confirmed in our postcolonial data. In fact, the *LANE* records, which testify to the speech ways of New Englanders who had equally acquired their language in the latter half of the nineteenth century, feature only a single token of *ben't*, albeit in a syntactically "strong" position:

20. ...and I says I *ben't*. [*LANE*, M677]

Otherwise, Atwood (1953, 30) reached the same conclusion with respect to the speech ways of *LANE*'s Type I informants as Babbitt did concerning folk speakers in Connecticut, namely that the common negative form of *to be* was *ain't* (and, less frequently, *hain't*).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the negative contracted form of *be not* may still have been more widespread (as in 21), at least if we are to give credence to the dialect portrayals of dramatist Humphreys and Kirkham:

21. a. I *BEN'T* sitch a beast as to believe in all disbeliefs. [Humphreys 1815, 57]  
 b. You *BAIN'T* from the Jarseys, be ye? [Kirkham 1834, 207]

The data available through *LANE* do not, however, confirm the categoricity of the "person-number" and "syntactic level" constraints postulated by Babbitt; still, the scarcity of counterexamples in the *LANE* suggests that Babbitt's description is accurate, even though the latter ignored the phenomenon of variability: (1) There are examples in *LANE* featuring *be* with third-person singular pronouns, predominantly in noncontractable contexts (i.e., questions and sentence-final position): "What time *be* it?" "How *be* it?" "Who *be* it?" "That's what it *be*," "I don't know as it *be*," "Tall as he *be*."<sup>26</sup> (2) Independent direct statements with the copula/auxiliary in noncontractable position occur among the examples cited in *LANE* but are rare overall: "Griddles *be*..." and "I *be* what I *be*."

The postcolonial data inspected for the present study are not rich in examples featuring tokens of *be* that may be termed "relic" subjunctive forms;

we have found some instances which relate to Babbitt's "syntactic level" constraint, that is, with *be* figuring in subordinate clauses introduced by *say*, *know*, and *think* (as in 22). Conditional, concessive, and *if/whether* clauses are also present among our data (as in 23).

22. a. I've made up my mind, I tell ye, and in the end ye'll know I BE right.  
[O'Neill 1920, 931]  
b. I don't think they BE new. [*LANE*, M677]  
c. He says you BE, and I says I BEN'T. [*LANE*, M677]
23. a. What if it BE? [O'Neill 1924, 160]  
b. He's my blood, if he BE a dumb fool. [O'Neill 1924, 185]  
c. ...see whether it BE in the dictionary. [*LANE*, M677]

On the whole, however, *be* in postcolonial New England folk speech does not seem to have been a form associated with the "old" subjunctive of Early Modern English but was primarily an indicative form (i.e., occurring respectively in direct questions and sentence-finally). In (22c) and (23a), *be* appears in a noncontractable position, which raises the question whether this verb form occurs because it finds itself in a conservative linguistic context, or rather because it is embedded in a clause type historically attracting subjunctive *be*.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the majority of postcolonial examples featuring *be* were found in *LANE* and in fictional portrayals, whereas only two attestations were spotted in the selected vernacular letters (Silber and Sievens 1996): this comes as a surprise insofar as many other nonstandard verb forms occur crosstextually and with a certain frequency in the latter documents.<sup>27</sup> After a search in electronic databases, we have come across a third attestation of *be* in a New England Civil War letter.<sup>28</sup> Montgomery and Mishoe (1999, 251) equally noted the lack of written attestations of *be* and *bes* in nineteenth-century North Carolina colloquial documents: according to them, a possible reason for this might have been that the two variants "became markers of in-group status or membership." In the case of our Civil War letters, this is an unlikely explanation, since the New England soldiers were writing home; that is, they were on intimate terms with their addressees, who, moreover, belonged as a rule to the same social class. However, two other reasons adduced by Montgomery and Mishoe (1999, 261) seem to better account for the avoidance of invariant *be* in New England vernacular letters, namely (1) that it was stigmatized and, even more significant, (2) that it "developed interactional pragmatics ... not relevant in written communication," that is, it was a form exclusively associated with spoken interaction.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The present article has looked at the linguistic history of invariant *be* in the New England dialect, both colonial and postcolonial, with reference to Early Modern British English. Our evidence has been taken from a variety of sources, both primary and secondary, which vary qualitatively. Below we have summarized our findings according to the relevant subperiods:

**EARLY MODERN BRITISH ENGLISH.** *Be* in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Southern English was confined to the plural or, as some scholars prefer to say, to contexts in which it competed with *are*. With regards to the latter point, our data do not suggest that sentence-initial and sentence-medial *be* with second-person singular reference (e.g., *Be you sure?*, *You be a liar!*) was a pre-1700 feature in varieties of British English: in fact, to our knowledge only one—not unambiguous—instance (see note 19) has been mentioned so far in the literature. Early Modern British English *be* was recurrent in conjunction with any subject type (nominal, pronominal, and zero), even though *are* became the majority variant in all environments in the course of the seventeenth century. Still, it seems that *are* forms increased particularly in conjunction with zero and noun subjects (and at the same time in quantitatively less frequent contexts), which has led to the assumption that *are* favored environments in which contraction was not possible (e.g., Nevalainen 1998, 183); that is, it exhibited the very behavior assigned to finite *be* in Late Modern nonstandard varieties of English. On the other hand, there are clear indications that the choice of *be* in Early Modern British English also correlated positively with syntactically “strong” contexts: in fact, it is not difficult to trace examples of *be* occurring in existential clauses and relative clauses, and, most importantly, sentence-finally.

Of further significance, it seems to us, is that Early Modern English *be* was not constrained by “syntactic level,” that is, it was also a main clause phenomenon, irrespective of the antecedent subject type. Finally, the “polarity” constraint on *be* in Early Modern British English only plays a subordinate role for the purpose of the present study, as neither *ain’t* nor *ben’t* was used, which makes a comparison with postcolonial New England difficult.

**COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND DIALECT.** The limited data inspected in the present study suggest that *be* in early New England English (1620–c.1690) did not differ from *be* in Early Modern British English either linguistically or sociolinguistically: this is not a surprise, because much of the earliest colonial evidence comes from the pens of English-born settlers. Thus, plural indicative *be* was a recurrent form in formal writings and among educated

New Englanders, even though we must assume that it was also a trait of colloquial speech and was used by uneducated New Englanders. There are no indications in the secondary literature inspected so far that *be* was already a singular indicative form (*I be, you be*) during the first half of New England's colonial period. As in Early Modern British English, syntactically "strong" positions were favorable contexts for *be*; what is more, plural indicative *be* still occurred in independent direct statements in conjunction with both pronoun subjects ("weak" affirmatives) and noun subjects.

The *SWP* are among the earliest "speech-based" records providing us with clues to the speech ways of American-born New Englanders. The said records give proof that in late-seventeenth-century New England indicative *be* was a feature also associated with spoken discourse, both formal and informal. Linguistically speaking, the *SWP* suggest that *be* was prominent (though clearly the minority variant) in syntactically and/or prosodically "strong" positions and in direct questions. The fact that we have found only one instance of sentence-medial *be* in an independent declarative clause, and in conjunction with an NP subject, indicates that the "weak" affirmative clause had become an infrequent context for *be* to appear in. The most significant finding, however, concerns the fact that in late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century New England indicative *be* was also used as a singular form, as the two direct questions from the *SWP* ("Be you . . .?") and the one attestation by Cotton Mather ("I been't . . .") demonstrate. In our opinion, indicative *be* in New England English changed from a verb determined by a "number" constraint (only plural) to a verb determined by a "person-number" constraint (both singular and plural, except for the third-person singular) at roughly the same time as it did in British English vernaculars, though the changes occurred independently.

POSTCOLONIAL NEW ENGLAND DIALECT. "Speech-related" sources from New England's postcolonial era exist in much larger quantities than sources written prior to 1700 in general. The data at our disposal clearly show that the tendencies outlined for *be* in spoken late-seventeenth-century colonial American English had consolidated when the New England regionalists were depicting the rustic speech ways of their fellow New Englanders in the nineteenth century. *LANE*, whose oldest informants were born prior to the Civil War, confirms the "speech realism" quality inherent in the fictional portrayals when it comes to invariant *be*. *Be* is found in particular in syntactically and/or prosodically "strong" contexts, with it usually placed sentence-finally, and within direct/tagged questions. Contexts not attracting the *be* variant in postcolonial New England are therefore independent declarative clauses with the copula/auxiliary in sentence-medial position: the latter context is

especially impervious to *be* in conjunction with a noun subject marked for singular number (and the demonstratives *this/that*); with existential *there/they*, on the other hand, the occurrence of *be* in a “weak” affirmative clause is more likely but still infrequent.

The negated form *ben't* and its alternates seem to have had a certain frequency during the first half of the nineteenth century but were eventually supplanted by the vernacular “angloversal” *ain't*. The third-person singular context did not favor the *be* variant either, even though the examples in *LANE* clearly show that in syntactically “strong” contexts *be* must have been perfectly acceptable—however, only with third-person singular personal pronouns.

In spite of its historical orientation, the present study also highlights the fact that invariant *be* in the rustic New England dialect patterns differently from other North American regional speech areas and ethnic dialects known for the very same feature: thus, the inflected variant *bes* is attested for Newfoundland folk speech (Dillard 1992, 56–57), white Carolina Vernacular English (Montgomery and Mishoe 1999), and Lumbee Vernacular English (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2006, 208), while it is basically unattested in New England folk speech (*LANE* is the only source investigated by us with one analogous example, namely “That bees it!”). Apart from that, finite *be* usually also carries aspectual (i.e., habitual) meaning, has a periphrastically constructed negative form (*don't be*), and is not subject to any “person-number” constraint: this, in fact, is true for African American Vernacular English (Bailey and Maynor 1985; Bailey and Bassett 1986) and various white nonstandard varieties of American English, including Carolina Vernacular English (Montgomery and Mishoe 1999); none of these properties are inherent in the New England dialect. What is more, *be* possesses both past- and present-tense value in African American Vernacular English (*DARE*, 1: 176; Bailey and Bassett 1986, 166), whereas in New England folk speech it is used as a present-tense form exclusively (instances in which *be* results from the deletion of *will/would*, which are also attested in *LANE*, were disregarded in the present study). Finally, invariant *be* is generally known as a sentence-medial element within independent direct statements, as is the case in African American Vernacular English (Bailey and Bassett 1986, 172–79) and white Carolina Vernacular English (Montgomery and Mishoe 1999, 246–48), while it is primarily a sentence-final—and, within questions, a sentence-initial—element in the New England dialect.

It is our hope that the present study will motivate dialectologists to rethink the history of New England’s folk grammar, which presents many nonstandard features so far acknowledged for conservative varieties of Southern American English exclusively: among them figures the often-cited past-tense *be* paradigm ‘was-weren’t’ (Dylewski and Pablé 2005).

## NOTES

We would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable critical comments on the first version of this paper.

1. Besides Mencken, one can find similarly brief notes on the history and/or usage of *be* in New England in other scholarly works (e.g., Atwood 1953, 27; Dillard 1992, 55–56; Montgomery and Mishoe 1999, 258).
2. Invariant *be* may not have been revived in New England dialects because it did not serve any restructuring purposes, nor did it introduce transparency into the system, but would rather have caused *be* to become more opaque again (*be* already being reserved for the subjunctive as a finite form and for the infinitive as a nonfinite form). There is evidence, however, that finite *be* is being used in present-day Southwestern British colloquial speech, in particular within direct questions (this piece of information was given to the first author by students from Bristol during their exchange year at Berne University, Switzerland, in 2004). Analogously, Bailey (1989, 160–61) suggests that the demise of plural indicative *be* (and the concomitant introduction of *are*) was functionally expedient, that is, brought about by a lack of transparency (or isomorphism) in the grammar; as a matter of fact, *be* was simultaneously a finite, an infinitive, a subjunctive, and a participle form in late-fifteenth-century English, which is why Bailey (1989, 168) believes that native Londoners “borrowed” *are* from northern migrants living in the capital, leaving *be* as an infinitive and a subjunctive.
3. We follow Montgomery (2004, 9–10), who claims that “evidence from literary dialect in the speech of stock characters in drama and fiction can be used in an appropriate, principled, and restrained manner.”
4. In a similar vein, Montgomery and Mishoe (1999, 269) have argued that *bes*, the inflected variant of *be* in white Carolina vernaculars, did indeed develop independently in the course of the nineteenth century rather than being a feature brought by the Scotch-Irish in the latter half of the eighteenth century.
5. We have scrutinized two other collections of early New England documents, namely the *Suffolk Records* (1933) and the *Annals of Witchcraft in New England* (Drake 1869). The tokens of *be* found in these two corpora, however, are only marginally pertinent to the present discussion of invariant *be* in New England folk speech. In fact, *be* was mostly used as a subjunctive in these colonial records and therefore patterned the way the form was typically used in Early Modern English.
6. However, Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2000, 449) maintains that even the language of letter-writers with very little education tends toward displaying “a kind of formality which is imposed . . . by the nature of the medium.” Montgomery’s (1997, 228) comment on the language of vernacular documents goes in the very same direction: “It must be remembered that the absence of evidence for a linguistic feature in writing must never be mistaken as the evidence of its absence from speech.”

7. Nonetheless, Montgomery (2004, 9) also admits that “despite the fact that literary attestations involve perhaps the most uncertainties of assessment because their relation to real-life models is uncertain, they have been used routinely, but uncritically, in attempts to document and reconstruct AAE.”
8. Bennett (1974, 55, n. 7) did occasionally consult the maps contained within *LANE* but relied mostly on three works based on *LANE*’s complete files: Kurath (1949), Atwood (1953), and Kurath and McDavid (1961).
9. In his preface to *The Down-Easters* (1833), the dialect writer John Neal pointed out that among the “hundreds and hundreds of volumes purporting to describe the New-Englander there were but two upon the face of the earth (one a novel and the other a play) [the latter being David Humphreys’ play *Yankee in England*] containing so much as one single phrase of pure Yankee.”
10. Krapp (1925, 235–36), who examined sound, grammar and lexicon in *The Biglow Papers*, maintained to have unmasked the dialect designed by Lowell as “ordinary low colloquial American discourse with a relatively slight addition of dialect detail more or less peculiar to New England.” Killheffer (1928, 235), arrived at a similar conclusion. They both argue that the impression of authenticity in Lowell (the “New England feeling,” as Krapp 1925 calls it) is not primarily conveyed through language but through content (setting, characterization, incident, sentiment), thus the exact opposite of what Lowell’s contemporaries had been stating. Krapp (1925, 236) also writes that “Lowell’s dialect in a story of the California gold fields would pass as a Western dialect, and would seem not widely out of place on a cotton plantation in the South.” However, Krapp’s judgment is questionable if one considers how representative his data were: Krapp did, in fact, choose Lowell’s dialect poem *The Courtin’* (which is part of the *Biglow Papers*) for his analysis; however, that poem was one of the few texts within the *Biglow Papers* lacking invariant *be* altogether. As a matter of fact, we have found that Lowell employed *be* in a realistic manner, in terms of both quantity and internal linguistic contexts. In light of this, Krapp’s judgment of Lowell’s Yankee dialect is, it seems to us, hardly reliable.
11. Westbrook (1981, 23) goes on to say that “no writer except Sarah Orne Jewett has so successfully caught the rythmns of Down East speech . . . this is true Yankee in rhythm, grammar, and imagery.”
12. In a conference paper, Pablé (2004b) showed that Wilkins Freeman’s use of invariant *be* in the short story “The Revolt of Mother” confirms the data elicited from the *LANE* informants (M677).
13. Born in the village of South Berwick, Maine, Jewett was well acquainted with “the captains and sailors, the fishermen and farmers, the widows and spinsters that peopled the land” (Cutler 1976, 5). During her early years she often accompanied her father, a country doctor, on his visits to patients, and thus came to know “many a rural household and many a country road” (5).
14. A representative sample of *be* constructions was transcribed onto map 677 of *LANE*. We have counted 266 tokens of *be* on that very map; quantitative state-

- ments are not possible retrospectively, however, as we lack information concerning the precise number of *be* tokens per sentence type. Additional information and examples featuring *be* are displayed on maps 424, 606A, 606B, and 675.
15. Already at the beginning of the twentieth century, the playwright Percy McKaye had hinted at the existence of such a SOCIOLECT CONTINUUM: “Country New Englanders use the dialect in all stages of its gradual disintegration from those who use still a pure Biglow vocabulary and pronunciation, to those whose dictionary English is tinged by the mere dying twang of Yankeedom” (in Killheffer 1928, 223–24).
  16. Kurath (1949, 8) pointed out in a later study that “in the country districts of New England compulsory attendance at school until age fourteen or sixteen is of relatively recent date.” The following observation by Krapp (1925, 30) is very likely true for most of *LANE*’s Type I informants: “Although few children leave the public schools without at least a vision of the meaning of standard and literary English, the vision may later become obscured and some students may fall back to the level of provincial and illiterate English.”
  17. Analogously, Wentworth (1944, 46) quotes a 1920 source from central New York, which says that *bain’t* is being used “humorously” by boys.
  18. Other studies of invariant *be* in white folk speech with a focus on language-internal constraints include Bailey and Maynor (1985) and Bailey and Bassett (1986).
  19. Nevalainen (1998, 169–70) cites one example of *Be you . . . ?* from the *Prayer Book of Edward VI* (1552) which she interprets as being addressed to a single person. However, it seems to us that the latter example corresponds to a question not addressed to a specific person, but rather to a general “you”: “Be you perswaded that the holy Scriptures contein sufficiently al doctrine required . . . ?” At any rate, we have not come across any other analogous uses of *be* in Early Modern British English among the primary and secondary sources used.
  20. The New England Puritans originally came from East Anglia (especially Norfolk and Suffolk), as well as the London area, the southeastern counties, the east Midlands and the west (Kytö 2004, 126); except for London, these dialect regions are known to have had invariant *be* as part of their local speech ways.
  21. Nonetheless, the level of formality adopted by O. Abbott (1953) is rather loose: while religious writings represent the most “formal” end of the linguistic continuum, Cotton Mather’s *Diary* is also included there, for it was “written in a highly serious vein” (20).
  22. In (9d), however, *be* could be interpreted as a subjunctive form expressing exhortation, thus as something like ‘May the whole armor of God be between me and you!’
  23. However, there is evidence suggesting that in seventeenth- and, at least partly, in eighteenth-century Virginia and New England the use of present indicative *be* was not yet linked to one’s educational background. For instance, back in 1773, Philip Fithian remarked that “a Virginian even of high rank preferred to say *I be, you be*” (in Fischer 1989, 257).

24. Atwood (1953, 27) points out that the expression *How be ye?* was by far the most frequent question (and overall context) attracting the *be* variant in the informants' responses for *LANE*.
25. At this point we would like to mention that the suppletive forms *am* and *are* (the latter frequently realized as /æɹ/ by New England folk speakers; see Atwood 1953, 27) were not the only variants competing with *be* in *wh*-questions; in fact, auxiliary deletion was also possible, as in *What you standin' here for?*, as opposed to *What be/air you standin' here for?* (for examples, see *DARE*, 1: 179, 8a1).
26. Mencken (1948, 356) mentioned the following in a footnote: "Messrs. Leland O. Hunt and Roger A. Johnson, of New York, call my attention to the fact that *be* is rarely encountered in the United States in the third person singular."
27. The Civil War letters of interest for the present study contain the following nonstandard verb forms: verbal -s, nonstandard *was*, third-person singular *don't*, uninflected third-person singular present indicative verbs, *hain't* for *haven't*, unmarked past forms (e.g., *come*, *see*, *run*), *done* as a past form, past forms used as participle (e.g., *I have wrote*), *lay* for *lie*, and *a*-prefixed participles.
28. The example referred to is cited under 12d (<http://www.vermonthistory.org/educate/cwletter/scottlet.htm>).

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