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**‘The seas was like mountains’: intra-writer  
variation and social mobility in Irish  
emigrant letters**

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a case study based on the writing of James Horner, one of the many Irish emigrants who crossed the Atlantic between the late 1700s and early 1800s. Communication between Horner and his family back in Ireland was kept through personal correspondence. His letters, which contain about 14,000 words in total, are part of the Corpus of Irish English Correspondence (CORIECOR), and they provide detailed accounts of his experiences and impressions of the recently adopted country. They also show progressive standardisation, which makes them an interesting site for historical sociolinguistic analysis: shifting from vernacular Irish English towards a more standardised type of English to some degree. Our study focuses on the use of subject-verb agreement and addresses the following research questions: does geographical and social mobility condition Horner’s speech? If so, how does an individual’s social status affect language? The findings reported below show that social mobility as well as dialect contact seem to have contributed to general standardisation and the subsequent blurring of identity markers in language use. The paper, thus, offers new perspectives on the analysis of intra-speaker variation using historical data and contributes to the discussion of the need for this type of micro-analysis in the area of historical sociolinguistics.

**Keywords:** Irish English; *Corpus of Irish English Correspondence*; emigrant letters; intra-writer variation; standardisation

*When I first came to this country I did not think of staying so long but time is like the flowing stream glides swiftly past. I am very well pleased with this country, the longer a man is in it I believe he is the fonder of remaining.*

– James Horner (30 October 1807)

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# 1 Introduction

The study of intra-speaker or stylistic variation has become a key research issue in historical sociolinguistics, following more broadly the variationist sociolinguistic research agenda that has focused on taking into account social factors in addition to intra-linguistic factors (Hernández-Campoy 2016a: 30). This approach has, in a way, responded to Milroy's call (1998: 41) for the need to analyse how these factors interact, in order to come closer to explanations that help us understand how changes in language diffuse socially.

In his discussion of how patterns of co-occurrence of inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation are activated in communication in general, Hernández-Campoy (2016b: 117) cites Bell's reflections on how a sociolinguistic variable which is differentiated by certain speaker characteristics (e.g., by class, educational background or place of origin, for the case at hand) "tends to be differentiated in speech to addressees with those same characteristics" (Bell 1984: 167). In that respect, the roles of the addressee become an important factor that needs to be studied in combination with the speaker's role, particularly when measuring the presence or absence of specific variables which may be indicative of region, social class or educational background. The case study that we discuss in this article is a good exponent of how a specific feature (i.e., subject-verb agreement) lends itself to analysis of intra-speaker variation. By analysing the writing of an Irish emigrant we explore how factors such as social class, education and origin have an impact on this particular writer's use of subject-verb agreement in his correspondence with family members. Bell's style axiom, as discussed by Hernández-Campoy (2016a: 122), operates at synchronic and diachronic level:

First, it operates synchronically for an individual speaker who, in specific situations, shifts style to sound like another speaker. Second, it operates diachronically for individual speakers who, over time, shift their general speech patterns to sound like other speakers (e.g., after moving to a different dialect region). Third, it operates diachronically for an entire group of speakers which, over time, shifts its speech to sound like another group (Bell 1984: 151).

This paper draws attention to how case studies like the one presented here can provide useful insights into the way style shifting evolves into more permanent language change in the context of emigration and dialect contact. Dialect contact and type of social network are part of the ingredients that come with geographical mobility, which, together with social mobility, has a prominent role in historical sociolinguistics. The present study poses two main research questions (i) what impact do geographical and social mobility have in an individual's speech? and (ii) how does social status affect linguistic choice? Here, we use quantitative methods in

order to construct a comprehensive account of *plural verbal* –s, i.e., its development and the different occurrences of this feature in the context of private correspondence.

The type of material we analyse comes from the Corpus of Irish English Correspondence (CORIECOR), which to date contains approximately 6,500 texts, with a total of about four million words. An estimated 5,731 texts and over three million words are personal letters by 1,784 different writers. In all, 74 per cent of these letters were written by 1,057 different writers whose educational or professional background is known or can be inferred from the contents of the letters, while 23 per cent were written by 727 authors whose background is not known. The rest of the letters (197 in total) are anonymous. The letters are from 1731 to 1940, which spans the period during which Ireland became overwhelmingly English-speaking. Most letters were written by people who were in the process of emigration or who had emigrated (to the United States and Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, and Argentina) while a small proportion of the letters are from relatives or friends at home in Ireland. As noted in Amador-Moreno (2019: 15) a total of 856 letters were sent from Ulster and 305 from the rest of Ireland. CORIECOR allows researchers to trace the emergence and development of features of Irish English (henceforth IrE) and study syntactic, morphological, stylistic, regional and social variation (cf. e.g., McCafferty 2014; McCafferty and Amador-Moreno 2012; McCafferty and Amador-Moreno Forthcoming).

The analysis of geographical mobility and of how certain features may have been transported with emigration is the most immediate use of this type of data.<sup>1</sup> However, while it is evident that patterns of geographical mobility provide us with tools to explain “processes of diffusion, in particular dialect contact and the type of social network” (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2017: 37), social mobility also needs to be taken into account. While some information related to this factor is sometimes available when dealing with historical data, it is more often the case that the exact background of speakers/writers (i.e. information about levels of literacy, education, their home environment, social status, etc.) and other specific information related to the social mobility of individual speakers who produce a specific feature may not be all that clear. In that respect, we are dealing with incomplete information (see Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2017: 17), but there may be other useful indicators of usage that allow the researcher to draw a general picture of how all these factors may have interacted in the preservation or abandonment of a specific linguistic feature.

An advantage that electronic corpora like CORIECOR can offer is that a number of changes can be traced over time and with the same individual writers. We can

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<sup>1</sup> In recent years, the study of familiar and emigrants’ correspondence has grown considerably (cf. e.g., Dossena and Camiciotti 2012; Dossena and Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2008; Hickey 2019; van der Wal and Rutten 2013).

therefore compare real-time and apparent-time approaches by looking at how a specific feature develops in the language of an individual and compare it to how other contemporaries of the selected writer used it within the same variety of English and in other varieties (by checking other corpora). A sufficient amount of baseline data is provided by CORIECOR. Comparing the occurrence of one specific linguistic feature used in the letters of a writer, or group of writers, with the larger corpus is possible. Such comparison would give us a panoramic overview of how similar types of speakers with similar social circumstances (Irish emigrants, same period, English language, same or similar type of interaction-intimate discourse, same genre: private correspondence) made use of that same feature. Empirical validity can be taken further by looking further: comparisons with corpora representing other varieties of English can also be carried out. An overview of how a specific linguistic feature was used within the same period in other varieties, not just IrE, can provide a diagnosis of use, context, function and attestation.

In this study we consider the writing of James Horner, one of the hundreds of thousands of Irish emigrants that crossed the Atlantic between 1783 and 1814 (Miller 1985). Horner was upwardly mobile, and his language use shows change over the 10 years covered in the letters, shifting from vernacular Irish English towards a more standardised type of English to some degree. The present investigation focuses on Horner's case study in the light of his use of subject-verb agreement. His correspondence, which contains about 14,000 words, is analysed in the broader context of CORIECOR. Horner is representative of the socially mobile emigrant, whose change in language usage is dictated by changes in the writer's professional status. Our analysis focuses on how intra-writer variation evolves over the lifespan of writers in specific historical contexts, and it addresses the question of how social mobility and dialect contact can contribute to the blurring of identity markers in language use. The paper thus offers new perspectives on the analysis of intra-speaker variation in historical data and contributes to the discussion of the process of implementation of standard forms in informal/familiar styles over time (Hernández-Campoy 2016a: 50).

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 gives a brief overview of subject-verb agreement in English. Section 3 is concerned with the data and methodology that will be used in the analysis, while Section 4 presents the results. The last section draws some conclusions and discusses the limitations and possible extensions of the study.

## 2 Subject-verb agreement in English

According to Klemola (2000: 329), besides the standard English subject-verb agreement pattern, at least three other agreement types have been identified in some

vernacular dialects of English. The first pattern can be found in some traditional dialects in the South-West of England and East Anglia where verbal *-s* fell into disuse paving the way for the rise of the zero marker (generalised  $-\emptyset$ ) with third-person singular subjects as in *she live here* (Bonness 2016: 145). In some Southern/South-Western dialects, on the contrary, verbal *-s* has been generalised to all grammatical persons (cf. e.g., Godfrey and Tagliamonte 1999; Hughes and Trudgill 1979) as in *I/you/she/we/they reads*. A third paradigm was first observed in Northern varieties such as Scots and North Midlands dialects and later transported via Ulster to North America and elsewhere (McCafferty 2003: 105). Such pattern, as explained in Pietsch (2005b), is a variable system that consists of two major constraints: the *Type of Subject Constraint* (TSC) and the *Proximity to Subject Constraint* (PSC) which condition verbal *-s*. Both types have been defined in Bonness (2017: 131) who points out that the pattern “allows singular concord with third-person plural nominal subjects, but not with plural personal pronouns (Types of Subject Constraint), unless they are nonadjacent to the verb (Proximity of Subject Constraint)”. As Buchstaller et al. (2013) illustrate, the Northern pattern can occur with all lexical verbs and subject-verb concord in the past and present tenses of the lexical and auxiliary verb *be* can be variable, as in “I was bad for about 10 days and all that time the seas was like mountains” (James Horner, 1801). Given the origin of our letter writer, who was an Ulster emigrant to the United States, patterns like these are expected to appear in his writing, so we focus our attention to this type of construction here.

The type of structure “the seas was like mountains”, which we include in the title of this paper, has been the subject of considerable interest in the research tradition, where it has been labelled differently depending on “geographical or temporal categorisations” (McCafferty 2003: 105). Some of the labels used in contemporary studies are *Northern Present-Tense Rule* (e.g., Montgomery 1994; Robinson 1997); *singular concord* (e.g., Henry 1995; Wilson and Henry 1998); nonconcordance (Kallen 1991); nonconcord (Filppula 1999) and *Northern Subject Rule* (e.g., Bonness 2016; Buchstaller et al. 2013; Childs 2012; Klemola 2000; McCafferty 2004; Pietsch 2005a). In this study, the geographically-neutral term *plural verbal -s* will be used to refer to this phenomenon.

The existing literature on *plural verbal -s* is extensive and includes research on different varieties such as British English (e.g., Britain 2002; Buchstaller et al. 2013; Childs 2012; Tagliamonte 1998), Scottish English (e.g., Rodríguez-Ledesma 2013), Northern and Southern Irish English (e.g., Corrigan 2010; Hickey 2007; Montgomery 1997a, 1997b; Montgomery and Robinson 1996; Pietsch 2005a, 2005b) and American English (Bailey et al. 1989; Montgomery 1997a). In this sense, as McCafferty (2003: 110) points out, most of what is known historically about subject-verb concord in Northern Irish English (hereafter NIrE) comes from North American research concerned with tracing the roots of American dialect features to the British Isles. Here,

the diachronic studies by Montgomery (1994, 1995, 1997a, 1997b) and Montgomery and Robinson (1996) have demonstrated the validity of private and legal correspondence to explore the link between Ulster and American English. Using letters sent to and from Ulster emigrant families, McCafferty (2003), Bonness (2015, 2017), Myklestad (2015) and Amador-Moreno (2019), have also examined the occurrence of *plural verbal* –s in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century IrE, as produced by writers both at home and in diasporic contexts. Apart from the aforementioned studies, however, few exhaustive empirical analyses on individual letter writers have been carried out. In fact, there seems to be a knowledge gap when it comes to illustrating how such agreement operates at the level of individual speakers in specific contexts. This study, therefore, aims to contribute to this growing area of research by investigating the occurrence and development of *plural verbal* –s in the context of an Ulster emigrant in nineteenth-century America.

### 3 Data and methodology

As Table 1 below indicates, a total of 15 letters penned by James Horner and sent to his loved ones back home between 1801 and 1810 have been examined using Sketch Engine corpus tool (Kilgarrieff et al. 2004).<sup>2</sup>

In doing so, the paper follows a case-study design, with a mixed methodology based on corpus linguistics (e.g., Säily and Jukka 2017) and historical sociolinguistics (see e.g., Hernández-Campoy and Conde-Silvestre 2012; Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2003).<sup>3</sup> More specifically, a two-stage analysis of the data was performed combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The initial, quantitative phase involved the identification and compilation of all tokens of the primary verbs *be*, *have* and *do* and all the other lexical verbs occurring in the data using the frequency lists and concordance functions on Sketch Engine. Overall, this procedure elicited 2,921 tokens which were manually inspected to retain only present indicative verbs and *was/were* occurrences with plural subjects and all existential constructions. This resulted in a total of 242 examples which were grouped into two main categories, namely, *concordance* referring to present-day Standard English usage and *non-concordance* which includes all *plural verbal* –s examples. This study puts forward a combined methodology to address a research topic that many would associate exclusively with qualitative research. In this sense, by using quantitative methods, we were able to construct a comprehensive account of *plural verbal* –s, that is, its distribution over time as well as the different types of constructions occurring in the

2 More information on Sketch Engine is available at the website: <http://www.sketchengine.co.uk>.

3 See <https://varieng.helsinki.fi/series/volumes/index.html> for more information on historical corpora.

Table 1: James Horner’s letters chronological distribution and general information.

Year	Author	Origin of letter	Location of receipt of letter	Recipient	Sender-recipient relationship	Number of words
1801	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	776
1801	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	1,622
1801	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	1,109
1801	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, John	Nephew-uncle	886
1802	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	327
1802	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	1,214
1802	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	McCracken, Jacob	Grandson-grandfather	649
1802	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	998
1802	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	727
1803	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	799
1803	Horner, James	Georgetown, Maryland, USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	1,454
1804	Horner, James	Philadelphia, Penn., USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	908
1804	Horner, James	Georgetown, Maryland, USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	1,053
1807	Horner, James	Maryland, USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	1,888
1810	Horner, James	Vienna, Maryland, USA	Co. (London)Derry, N. Ireland	Horner, Thomas	Son-father	449

letters. Such assessments provide further insights into the topic of intra-speaker variation and enable comparison with other individuals in similar contexts.

The qualitative stage, then, focused on the composition and usage of the non-standard forms identified in the initial phase. The examples were further classified based on the categories encountered in previous studies of *plural verbal –s* and discussed in McCafferty (2003) and Bonness (2017). As example 1 illustrates, the first category is *existential there with plural NPs* which, as McCafferty (2003: 126) highlights, “is shown in many studies to be the context in which *plural verbal –s* is most frequent”. The strong presence of this feature in non-standard, and even standard varieties, has been addressed in Tagliamonte (1998: 174), who maintains that this is highly correlated with the postverbal position of the subject. *Conjoined* and *collective* NPs are also considered strong contexts for non-concordance as represented in examples (2) and (3), respectively.<sup>4</sup> The widespread use of verbal *–s* with *existential there*, *conjoined* and *collective* nouns in many varieties of English, including relatively standardised ones, has been discussed in McCafferty (2003) who supports the inclusion of these subjects in treatments of *plural verbal –s* by stating that in “nineteenth-century N1rE they simply comply with the broad pattern by which *–s* is permitted with plural NPs but prohibited with adjacent *they*” (p. 127).

- (1) There **is some remarks** that I will let you know in the next (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Thomas Horner, Co. (London)Derry. 18 August 1804).
- (2) I understand that **Unkle and Aunt McCracken is** in a House of there [their?] own and **has** got a son (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Jacob McCracken, Co. (London)Derry. 10 October 1802).
- (3) I suppose the **family is** all living together as yet and I am convinced he will not say against it (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Thomas Horner, [Bovevagh?], Co. (London)Derry. 1 January 1802).

*Relative* and *plural pronouns* triggering *plural verbal –s* have also been attested in the letters. In this regard, while relative clauses with plural antecedents can occur with singular verbs (cf. Pietsch 2005a; Bonness 2015, 2017) as in example (4) below, plural pronouns are generally affected by subject-verb adjacency as demonstrated in (5), but we will return to this issue in Section 4 below. Lastly, the *other NPs* category includes common NPs as in (6), quantifier expressions and NPs with subject-verb inversion:

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<sup>4</sup> Collective nouns understood as “nouns without plural form but with plural reference” (Filppula 1999: 154 in Bonness 2016: 154).



- (4) I beive [believe?] I got all the letters **that was** wrote me this last summer (J. Horner, Georgetown, to Thomas Horner, Co. (London)Derry. 10 December 1803).
- (5) They may soon get a little money when **they have** all things Clothing with them and **has** there [their?] health which is above all other things. (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to John Horner, Co. (London)Derry. 23 October 1801).
- (6) **Markets is** very low we have had a very fine season as yet no storm what ever (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Thomas Horner, [Bovevagh?], Co. (London)Derry. 1 January 1802).

Altogether, this study followed the analytical procedure described in Bonness (2017: 137–138) and investigated well-documented linguistic variables, such as verb type, subject type and subject-verb proximity. The variables are aimed to address the central questions framing this research: does geographical and social mobility condition Horner's speech? If so, how does an individual's social status affect language? In the next section, the results of the analysis will be discussed, with a particular focus on intra-speaker variation.

## 4 Findings

Table 2 presents a general overview of the diachronic distribution of the non-concord constructions as identified in James Horner's correspondence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, what emerges from the analysis of the data here is that most non-standard subject-verb agreement forms appeared in the letters written in the first four years, with exception of one example of *has* with a plural subject registered in 1807.<sup>5</sup> As mentioned in the previous section, the analysis of the personal letters displayed a total of 242 instances of subject-verb agreement of which 26 % ( $n = 64$ ) were examples of *plural verbal -s*. In line with McCafferty (2003), Rodríguez-Ledesma (2013) and Bonness (2017), results are presented in percentages of attestation.

A closer look at the distribution of the non-concord occurrences across verb types also highlights the robustness of plural *is/was* in the writing of this Ulster emigrant, and corroborates the ideas of McCafferty (2003: 131), who states that “frequent use of *was* and *is* with third plural subjects indicates that nineteenth-century Ulster dialects preserved the situation Murray (1873) regarded as a late

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5 One reviewer points out that data for 1802 may be skewed by the letter to the writer's grandfather, whose own usage may have influenced the writer. However, since no letters from Horner's father or grandfather are available, assessing such influence here is not possible.

**Table 2:** *Plural verbal -s/ is/ was/ has/ does* in James Horner's letters (1801–1810).

Years	Be		Have		Do		Other verbs	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
1801	17/39	44	3/14	21	0/2	0	3/14	21
1802	15/29	52	3/9	33	0/1	0	4/11	36
1803	7/23	30	1/6	17	2/3	67	0/10	0
1804	8/21	38	0/1	0	–	–	0/8	0
1807	0/27	0	1/8	13	–	–	0/9	0
1810	0/2	0	–	–	0/1	0	0/4	0
Total	47/141	33	8/38	21	2/7	29	7/56	13

development of the N[orthern] S[ubject] R[ule]”. Interestingly, in the study of nineteenth-century Ulster-Australian emigrant correspondence, McCafferty (2003) found a tendency for plural *was* with 58 % (30/52) and Goldvard factor weight 0.703 as opposed to 0.404 for present-tense *is* (98/192, 51 %). A higher tendency towards non-concord with past-tense *be* has also been attested in Bonness' (2015) study of nineteenth-century Ulster letters in CORIECOR. Such tendency, however, disappeared in the letters from a nineteenth-century Ulster emigrant family in New Zealand, with 41 % plural *is* and 39 % plural *was* (Bonness 2017: 140). In the present study, there is no clear preference for plural *was* either. On the contrary, as Table 3 shows, plural *is* seems to be slightly more frequent than plural *was* with 35 % ( $n = 39$ ) examples of present-tense *is* as opposed to 29 % ( $n = 8$ ) past-tense *was* cases.

**Table 3:** Analysis of present- and past-tense *be* constructions in James Horner's letters.

	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Be present</b>		
Plural <i>are</i>	57	50
Plural <i>is</i>	39	35
Existential <i>there</i> with singular NPs	17	15
Total	113	
<b>Be past</b>		
Plural <i>were</i>	18	64
Plural <i>was</i>	8	29
Existential <i>there</i> with singular NPs	2	7
Total	28	

As Table 4 illustrates, the study also identified 22 % usage of the auxiliary and lexical verbs *have* ( $n = 8$ ) and *do* ( $n = 2$ ) and 13 % for other verbs ( $n = 7$ ), namely, *attend* ( $n = 1$ ), *differ* ( $n = 1$ ), *go* ( $n = 1$ ), *make* ( $n = 1$ ), *pay* ( $n = 1$ ), *try* ( $n = 1$ ) and *wish* ( $n = 1$ ). Following McCafferty's (2003: 131) procedures the verbs *have* and *do* have been combined as a single class due to the infrequency of *do* in the letters. On the question of subject type, the study found that, of the total amount (64/242), 61/127 (48 %) occurred with NP subjects and 3/115 (3 %) with plural personal pronouns, displaying a strong Type of Subject Constraint. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area (cf. e.g., Fitzpatrick 1994; McCafferty 2004; Bonness 2017) linking subject proximity and verbal *-s*. As shown in Table 4, *conjoined NPs* stands as the most frequent type with 70 % (16/23) of all *conjoined NPs* in Horner's letters of which 13 appeared with plural *is/was* and three with *has* (7a–b). The preference for verbal *-s* with *be* identified here has been previously reported in Montgomery (1995), who observed that the most frequent subject types co-occurring with *be* were *existential there* (18/30, 60 %), common nouns (53/95, 56 %) and *conjoined NPs* (20/37, 54 %). The correlation between *conjoined NPs* and *plural verbal -s* was also significant in

**Table 4:** Analysis of non-concord subject-verb agreement in James Horner's correspondence.

Variables	-s total	-s %
<b>Verb type</b>		
<i>Be-present</i>	39/113	35
<i>Be-past</i>	8/28	29
<i>Have/do</i>	10/45	22
<i>Other Verbs</i>	7/56	13
<b>Subject type</b>		
<i>Conjoined NPs</i>	16/23	70
<i>Collective NPs</i>	3/5	60
<i>Other NPs</i>	25/50	50
<i>Relative PRO NPs</i>	6/15	40
<i>Existential there</i>	11/34	32
<i>Plural PRO</i>	3/115	3
<b>Subject proximity</b>		
<i>Nonadjacent NPs</i>	2/3	67
<i>Adjacent NPs</i>	59/124	48
<i>Nonadjacent PRO</i>	3/6	50
<i>Adjacent PRO</i>	0/109	–

McCafferty (2003), with verbal *-s* occurring with 64 % (56/87) of all *conjoined NPs* in the material. Similarly, these results are in agreement with Pietsch's (2012) study of *plural verbal -s* across syntactic environments, which found that "among the universal favouring environments are clauses whose plural subject is formed by a coordination of singular NPs as well as relative clauses with plural antecedents" (p. 370).

- (7) a. I understand that **uncle and aunt McCracken** is in a house of there [their] own and **has got** a son (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Jacob McCracken, Co. (London)Derry. 10 October 1802).
- b. Let them know that there [their?] son Edward is very well he and Mr Taylor our [supercargo?] **has set up** store (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Thomas Horner, [Bovevagh?], Co. (London)Derry. 1 January 1802).

The second most numerous pattern favouring *plural verbal -s* was *collective NPs* with 3/5 (60 %) instances. These results, however, need to be interpreted with caution because the number of tokens is too small to make conclusive statements on their usage. In this regard, it is important to mention that the study only included those nouns that have been commonly defined as collective nouns in other studies (cf. e.g., Fischer 1992: 365; McCafferty 2003: 127; Bonness 2016: 154). In doing so, two instances of *family* with collective reference (cf. Quirk et al. 1985: 316; Levin 2001: 50) and one of *people* (Filppula 1999: 150; Levin 2006: 322) were retrieved from the data. As examples 8a–b show, the collective nouns occurred with present-tense *be* and *go*.

- (8) a. I hope you will send me a line or tow [two?] as it will be acceptable to me, Robert Brown is well, he lives in the city: Mr [Clinton's] **family** is well Mrs Clinton is well (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Thomas Horner, [Bovevagh?], Co. (London)Derry. 1 January 1802).
- b. This is the Country that the [they?] live on bread and Tea Jacob I think that would agree with you and the **people** goes very plain in there (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Parents, Bovevagh, Co (London)Derry. 1 October 1801).

Like *conjoined* and *collective NPs*, the category *other NPs* also ranked high with 50 % (25/50) instances of which 20 tokens occurred with plural *is/was* (9a), two with lexical verbs (9b), two with *does* (9c) and one with *has* as shown in the following examples:

- (9) a. My neighbor **boys** was all landed safe (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Thomas Horner, Co. (London)Derry. 1 October 1801).
- b. The **customs** of this place **differs** from what he has seen (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Thomas Horner, [Bovevagh?], Co. (London)Derry. 1 January 1802).
- c. I would do as some of the young **men** does (J. Horner, Georgetown, to Thomas Horner, Co. (London)Derry. 10 December 1803).

The occurrence of non-concord agreement with this subject type has been comprehensively studied in the research tradition as illustrated by the number of works that address this feature (cf. e.g., Childs 2012: 320; Cole 2008: 99; Filppula 1999: 154; Pietsch 2005b: 171; Poplack and Tagliamonte 1989: 66; Schendl 2000: 271). In our study, *plural verbal –s* often seems to co-occur with quantifiers like *all who* and common nouns such as *acquaintances, affairs, friends, places, seas*, etc.

With regard to the last two categories included in the NP subject type, the lowest rates for *plural verbal –s* were found with *relative pronouns* (6/15, 40 %) and *existential there* (11/34, 32 %). While *relative pronouns* with plural antecedents occurred with *be, have* and *attend* (10a–b), 10/11 tokens of *existential there* occurred with plural *is* and only one with *has* (11a–b). As the existential constructions here illustrate, there is no agreement with the postverbal NPs, but instead the auxiliary verbs have adopted the third singular verb form as observed in Buchstaller et al. (2013: 23).

- (10) a. I know **some that has** com [come?] in this year and the [they?] have gon [gone?] through all there [their?] money (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to John Horner, Co. (London)Derry. 23 October 1801).
- b. I could not give any encouragement as I know **some of the difficulties that attends** (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Thomas Horner, [Bovevagh?], Co. (London)Derry. 1 January 1802).
- (11) a. I must live on hope until [until?] my time [be?] [?] that I must leave this country and go to poor Ireland again to view the place I hope **there is no alterations** in the family since I left you (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Parents, Co. (London)Derry. 1 October 1801).
- b. This City [City] got a small turne [turn?] of the yellow feavour [fever?] this summer but nothing as much as before **there has** been as many as 13 **persons** per day (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Thomas Horner, Co. (London)Derry. 7 December 1802).

Similarly, the results of this study show that *plural verbal –s* occurred with 3 % (3/115) of all plural pronouns in the letters. More specifically, there are two tokens of nonadjacent *they* and one of the plural pronoun *you* which, in this case, refers to the parents. Here, it is noteworthy that the *Proximity to Subject Constraint* (PSC) described in Section 2 conditioned the occurrence of verbal –s in these three cases. As examples 12(a–c) demonstrate, where the pronoun and verb were nonadjacent, the pronoun seemed to trigger non-concordance instead of agreement:

- (12) a. **They have** all things Clothing with them and **has** there [their?] health (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to John Horner, Co. (London)Derry. 23 October 1801).

- b. A single person can do a grait [great?] deal better if **the [they?]** be content and **has** there [their?] health (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Parents, Co. (London)Derry. 24 October 1801).
- c. I have Shipped [shipped] two HHds. of Flax seed a board [aboard?] the ship Pennsylvania bound for Londonderry of which Elkanah Bray is Master Marked with P No 1 and 2, **you take** two good [ons?] and **pays** 14s freight pr. hhd (J. Horner, Philadelphia, to Parents, Co. (London) Derry. 7 December 1802).

Comparison of the findings with those of previous studies confirms that subject proximity also had a strong effect in our data. As Table 4 shows, while 50 % (3/6) of all *nonadjacent PRO* subjects favoured *plural verbal –s*, *adjacent PRO* never occurred with verbal *–s*. On the other hand, 2/3 (67 %) tokens of *nonadjacent NPs* and 59/124 (48 %) *adjacent NPs* co-occurred with *verbal –s*. These results seem to be consistent with McCafferty (2003: 131), who found that adjacent pronoun subjects never occur with *–s* and adjacent plural NPs are almost as likely to occur with *–s* as without, whereas nonadjacent plural NPs generally favour non-concordance in nineteenth-century Irish emigrant letters.

The non-standard constructions identified here appeared to operate consistently in the data during the first four years of correspondence. In 1804, after two years working with a Type founder, James Horner moved to Georgetown and then to Easton, where he went from being a schoolteacher, to being a private teacher in a rich gentleman's home. Finally, in 1810, he set himself up in business, becoming the owner of a store in Vienna, Dorchester County, in the State of Maryland. From 1804 onwards, then, there seems to be a change towards a more standard subject-verb agreement that coincides with the writer's relocation and the beginning of his upwardly mobile lifestyle. Contrary to those emigrants that settled in established Irish communities, Horner moved far from his fellow countrymen and devoted himself to continuously improving his social and professional status as explained in a letter sent to his parents in 1810:

(...) Nevertheless if they think proper and venture as I have done I am led to believe they will live in more opulence than ever they can do in Ireland. I live in a part of the country where few of my country men come to settle in and of course I am out of reach of seeing any of the late comers some of our countrymen do well others are on the other side of the question, but I find men that will take care and make themselves respectable they will be taken into the first rank of society.

Interestingly, there is a noticeable absence of vernacular features, such as verbal *–s*, in his later correspondence where those environments that had initially favoured non-concord, are considerably more likely to occur with the standard equivalent as

in *I hope the rest of my brothers and sisters are living well*. Like *conjoined NPs*, the occurrence of plural *-s* with *other NPs* gradually declined after 1804, giving rise to standard constructions such as *the Methodists are getting to be very numerous*. In Horner's case study, then, social mobility as well as dialect contact seem to have contributed to general standardisation and the subsequent blurring of what could be considered an identity marker in language use. The subject-verb concord system analysed in this article prevailed throughout the nineteenth century Ulster emigrants' letters, as observed in Montgomery (1995). It was one of the most frequent patterns imported from Ulster to North America where it made its way into American varieties of English such as Appalachian English.

## 5 Conclusions

The present investigation is a case study providing a micro-perspective on Irish English usage in the past. It reports on a corpus-based analysis which explores how use of subject-verb agreement operates in the personal correspondence of a speaker who emigrated from Ireland to America at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It also underscores the possible impact of literacy and social mobility on this particular speaker's use of the vernacular subject-verb concord. A two-level analysis was required for the morphological examination of the data. The study was designed to trace the occurrence of subject-verb agreement with those prototypical patterns already identified in previous studies, i.e. *conjoined NPs*, *other NPs*, *existential there* and *personal pronouns*. This investigation argues that the proposed approach facilitates the analysis of individual features as well as the comparability across variables.

Focussing on an individual letter writer, the present study zooms into intra-speaker variation taking a microscopic look into language use. Horner's case study illustrates the process of implementation of standard forms in the informal/familiar context of private correspondence over time. The roles of the addressee(s) become an important factor that would need to be studied in combination with the speaker's role, particularly when measuring the presence or absence of specific variables which may be indicative of region, social class or educational background. While such study is not possible in this case, given the fact that the letters that were sent to Horner are not available, we acknowledge that having access to both sides of the exchanges would have provided a better analysis of Horner's attention to 'correctness'.

The paper thus offers new perspectives on the analysis of intra-speaker variation using historical data and contributes to the discussion of the need for this type of micro-analysis in the area of historical sociolinguistics. Similarly, this type of study also highlights the importance of emigrants' letters for linguistic purposes. As was

mentioned above, people's geographical and social mobility has traditionally played a significant role as an "instrument of linguistic change" (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2009: 104). As a result of the social and geographical mobility of individuals, new usages were introduced through personal correspondence to the Irish English-speaking community of Ireland and the New World. In this regard, this investigation has shown how emigrants' letters are an inestimable source of linguistic and sociohistorical value, given the multi-perspectival insights that they provide into the complexities of both the social processes of emigration and the linguistic issues affecting identity and cultural assimilation.

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