Singular Concord in Ottawa Valley English

Shayna Gardiner*

This paper investigates a syntactic phenomenon known as *singular concord* as it exists in the dialect of Ottawa Valley English. Singular concord refers to a construction wherein a plural subject presents with third person singular agreement on the verb, as in *The kids is hungry*. Ottawa Valley English singular concord is compared and contrasted with a similar agreement phenomenon in Arabic and with singular concord as it exists in Belfast English. The result is a description of singular concord in Ottawa Valley English, including productivity and restrictions, and an account and analysis of the phenomenon in that dialect, along with insights into the singular concord family of phenomena overall.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates a dialect of Canadian English known as Ottawa Valley English (henceforth OVE). This dialect exists separately from Standard Canadian English (henceforth SCE) in the Ottawa Valley, a region of Ontario and Quebec that extends from the convergence of the St Lawrence River and the Ottawa River at Lac Les Deux Montagnes, near Montreal, and continues northwest through Algonquin Park (Pringle and Padolsky 1983). Existing work on OVE focuses on the dialect's lexicon and phonology (Pringle and Padolsky 1983, Woods 1979), but this paper aims to begin research into the dialect's morphosyntax. It will focus specifically on a detailed account and analysis of a single phenomenon, which will henceforth be referred to as *singular concord*, since it is quite similar to various other phenomena of the same name in other dialects of English and languages other than English (Bobaljik and Carnie 1996, Henry 1995, Mohammad 1989, Mohammad 2000). Singular concord in Ottawa Valley English refers to the phenomenon wherein a plural subject presents with third person singular agreement on the verb rather than standard agreement, as in for example *The kids is hungry*; thus, it is singular concord where no singular subject appears to exist. The account will be laid out as follows: section 2 will discuss singular concord in general; section 3 will describe the singular concord phenomenon in detail as it occurs in OVE; section 4 will look at analyses and accounts of singular concord in other languages; and section 5 will be an analysis and account of OVE singular concord, followed by conclusions and suggestions for further research.

OVE singular concord will be seen to be case-related and having to do with a different mechanism for case-licensing than standard agreement. It will also be seen to be different from other varieties of English singular concord, suggesting that there is not one, canonical singular concord that exists across languages and dialects, but rather the phenomenon might take on many different forms depending on the language.

2. Methodology

In order to obtain data for this research, I used the Joan Finnigan fonds in the Queen's University Archives. Included in these files are transcripts and audio files of interviews conducted by Finnigan with residents of the Ottawa Valley, native speakers of OVE. Her research was originally conducted for her many novels, which are a collection of folktales and oral histories of the Ottawa

Valley, including *Some of the Stories I Told You Were True*, *Legends and Lies* and *Tallying the Tales of the Old-Timers*. These files are from 1977-1993[1].

The files found in the Joan Finnigan fonds are ideal for my research. Given that Finnigan was from the Ottawa Valley herself, her informants were very familiar with her and were less likely to switch their speech into a more formal register when recounting their stories. Since the stories themselves are old folktales, the informants were unlikely to switch into Standard Canadian English during the interviews, and because the speakers are from an older generation, they are more likely to have retained all the features that existed in OVE prior to any standardization that may have happened in recent years due to greater urbanization, any prestige attributed to urban dialects, and the availability of internet websites, television, and radio programs in more standard dialects. Thus, this archival data is ideal for collecting information about OVE.

In addition to the information from the Queen's Archives, I also obtained information and data from present-day native speakers of OVE, in order to confirm or deny results obtained from the archival data. My informants consisted of five speakers (two male speakers and three female speakers) native to the Ottawa Valley (specifically from the Pembroke and Eganville areas), ranging in age from 24 to 70. This provided a more detailed picture of the morphosyntactic anomalies I came across by allowing me to see which were consistent within the dialect and which were merely the result of idiolect differences. In addition, consulting with living native speakers allowed for flexibility that archival data could not provide: when the need arose to test hypotheses about the nature of certain anomalies, it was easy to do so by proposing specific constructions suited to a particular need, rather than being limited to the sentences that existed in the Finnigan fonds. Thus, in consort, these two methods of data collection were ideal for my research.

3. Singular Concord

Singular concord is a syntactic phenomenon that occurs in a variety of English dialects. It involves non-standard verbal agreement, specifically a tensed verb that appears to have third person singular (3sg) agreement with a subject that is not 3sg. The following example is from Belfast English (Henry 1995):

(1)   The eggs is cracked.
      'The eggs are cracked.'

In OVE it is also thus. For example:

(2)   The plates **is** in the cupboard.
      'The plates are in the cupboard.'[2]

OVE singular concord may only occur with subjects that are not overtly marked for nominative or overtly marked for singular – that is, only non-nominative pronouns, or regular NPs (which are unmarked for case in English). It occurs only with tensed forms of *be*.

3.1 Origins of Singular Concord

This phenomenon in general appears to have come into English dialects as a result of language contact with the Celtic languages (Hickey 2007, Bobaljik and Carnie 1996). Celtic languages show two different types of verb agreement, one involving full agreement (or concord) and the other involving less than full agreement, and each of these is associated with a different word

---

[1] "Joan Finnigan fonds" is the term used by the Queen's University Archives for the body of work done by Joan Finnigan of which they are in possession. This includes recordings and transcripts of interviews with informants, of which I made use, but as is the case with a fonds, the entire collection is not limited to these things and may include other items such as notes for Ms. Finnigan's novels, portions of those novels, etc.

[2] It should be noted that the standard agreement forms in the glosses are completely acceptable in OVE and are used interchangeably with the singular concord forms. It is unclear as to whether the standard agreement forms are OVE or simply a result of the speaker switching into SCE.

order. Full agreement occurs with an SVO word order, while less than full agreement occurs with a VSO word order (Bobaljik and Carnie 1996). This second agreement pattern appears to be an ancestor of the English varieties of singular concord. Bobaljik and Carnie (1996) propose that while a Celtic language like Irish Gaelic is a verb raising language, it does not require that the subject NP move to SPEC/AGR$_S$P but rather it may remain in SPEC/Tense, and the verb is also not required to raise all the way to AGR$_S$. While Irish word order is not always the same as English, this instance of optional lack of raising, which allows the verb to remain in Tense and the subject to remain in SPEC/Tense, appears quite similar to the structure behind the Belfast English (henceforth BE) phenomenon of singular concord (Henry 1995). It has also been noted that this optional structure in Irish, wherein the verb remains in SPEC/Tense, results in a sentence with less than full verb agreement, just like singular concord of English dialects (Bobaljik and Carnie 1996, Henry 1995, Roberts 2007). Similarly, Klemola (2000) suggests that singular concord comes from contact with P-Celtic languages related to present-day Welsh due to the fact that, in modern Welsh, there is a concord system involving non-agreement with full NPs but agreement with personal pronouns. These types of agreement patterns can be found in other modern Celtic languages as well (Bobaljik and Carnie 1996, Hickey 2007, Roberts 2007). This is not to say that the phenomena in the Celtic languages are identical to singular concord as it exists in English dialects today, but that agreement patterns like the Celtic ones are the ancestors of singular concord, which has become its own phenomenon.

While singular concord has been documented previously in overseas, Celtic-contact dialects like BE (Henry 1995), it does not exist in SCE, and Celtic languages are not spoken in the Ottawa Valley. This optional OVE phenomenon and its origins can therefore be traced back to English dialects that were prevalent in the home regions of the Ottawa Valley's first immigrants, namely Ireland, Scotland and other areas with sustained contact between English speakers and Celtic language speakers (Pringle and Padolsky 1983). According to Woods (1979), the Ottawa Valley's first (and the vast majority of later) English-speaking inhabitants were Irish and Scottish immigrants. This is very clearly evidenced by place names in the Valley: Glengarry, Lanark, Renfrew, Killaloe, Arnprior, Mayo and Antrim are just a few, all named after places in Ireland and Scotland (Pringle and Padolsky 1983). Pringle and Padolsky note in their (1983) phonological and lexical survey of OVE that the dialect bears many similarities in terms of phonology and lexicon to the Englishes of its Scottish and Irish progenitors, suggesting that the syntax of these dialects has also left its mark on OVE. There is evidence that various types of singular concord are common across most modern regional Irish dialects of English (Hickey 2007), and it has also been found to be very common in regional Scottish varieties of English (Hickey 2007). It is also found in the older varieties of English in areas with sustained contact with Celtic peoples. Godfrey and Tagliamonte (1999) found that singular concord is a conservative feature of southern dialect regions in Britain, such as Devon, for example:

(3)   And the animals **looks** down.
       'And the animals look down.'

And the phenomenon has been found in the far north of England as well, and Pietsch (2005) calls attention to the fact that in northern dialects of Old English there are many examples of singular concord, as in:

(4)   On þæm selfan hrægle **wæs** eac awriten þa naman ðara twelf heahfædra.
       On that same garment **was** also written the names of the twelve patriarchs.
       'On that same garment were also written the names of the twelve patriarchs.'

These facts are useful in both a Scottish and Irish context, given that Scottish English was brought about mostly thanks to varieties of Northern English (Millar 2007), and the southernmost regions of England are where Ireland got its first varieties of English (Hickey 2007). Singular concord is also attested in the dialect of Scottish English currently spoken by the many Scottish immigrants who settled in Ulster, Northern Ireland, around the same time that the various dialects of British English were being introduced to the Irish Gaelic-speaking population (Montgomery 2006), for example:

(5) Me and them's crakkin.
     'They and I are chatting.'

Thus, despite not speaking Celtic languages themselves, it can still be suggested that OVE singular concord came into being as a result of the Ottawa Valley's first and foremost settlers being from Scotland and Ireland, where various forms of singular concord are prevalent across regional English dialects, which acquired it through contact with Celtic languages.

4. Singular Concord in OVE

Its origins clarified, it is now possible to discuss the nature of singular concord itself as it occurs in OVE. This will be discussed in three parts: productivity, subject restrictions and ordering restrictions. The first section will illustrate the environment in which singular concord can occur in OVE, and the second two will describe the restrictions that exist with the phenomenon. OVE singular concord will be seen to be case-related, and it will also be made clear that OVE singular concord stands out from many other English varieties of singular concord in that it may only occur with *be*, while in other dialects it is generally all lexical verbs that are included (Henry 1995, Hickey 2007).

4.1 Productivity

Special characteristics to note about the productivity of OVE singular concord are that it occurs only with finite *be,* is productive across all tenses and uses of finite *be*, can occur with polar and wh-questions and can occur in both active and passive voice.

4.1.1 3sg Verb

Singular concord in OVE patterns with singular concord in other dialects in that the verb is always in what appears to be third person singular agreement. This is illustrated in the examples below.

(6)   a. The plates **is** in the cupboard.
         'The plates are in the cupboard.'
      b. You boys **is** getting rowdy.
         'You boys are getting rowdy.'
      c. Us farmers **is** hard-working.
         'We farmers are hard-working.'
      d. The kids **was** sick today.
         'The kids were sick today.'
      e. You **was** going into the garden, I thought.
         'You were going into the garden, I thought.'

Singular concord in OVE is not some kind of anti-agreement; it is a specialized usage of the 3rd person singular form of the verb. Thus we never find plural verb (*are*) mismatches. That is, unless the tensed verb occurs in its 3rd person singular agreement form, sentences where the verb does not agree with the subject are systematically rejected as ungrammatical. Thus the following examples are ungrammatical in OVE:

(7)   a. *Anna **are** going to the store.
         'Anna is going to the store.'
      b. *I **are** pretty tired.
         'I'm pretty tired.'
      c. *Mary **am** hungry
         'Mary is hungry.'
      d. *You boys **am** getting rowdy.
         'You boys are getting rowdy.'

4.1.2 *Be*

One of the distinguishing properties of OVE singular concord is that the only verb that participates is *be*. This is established in the examples below.

(8) a. The pies **is** in the oven.
        'The pies are in the oven.'
    b. *Anna and Basil **has** a new car.
        'Anna and Basil have a new car.'
    c. *The children **likes** movies.
        'The children like movies.'
    d. *You and me **eats** supper.
        'You and I eat supper.'

OVE singular concord is productive across all occurrences of finite *be*: copular *be* (9a), progressive aspect *be* (9b), periphrastic future *be* (9c), equative *be* (9d) and passive *be* (9e).

(9) a. Anna and Beatrice **is** in the kitchen.
        'Anna and Beatrice are in the kitchen.'
    b. The cats **is** catching mice.
        'The cats are catching mice.'
    c. The kids **is** going to go swimming later.
        'The kids are going to go swimming later.'
    d. Them cows **is** Holsteins. [As opposed to another kind of cow.]
        'Those cows are Holsteins.' [As opposed to another kind of cow.]
    e. The kids **was** taught by Mrs. Fraser down in Arnprior.
        'The kids were taught by Mrs. Fraser down in Arnprior.'

4.1.3 Tenses

Singular concord in OVE is also productive across tenses, as in the following examples.

(10) a. Eva and Dorothy **was** going to the store.
         'Eva and Dorothy were going to the store.'
     b. The crops **is** good this season.
         'The crops are good this season.'
     c. Aaron and Josh **is** going to drive to Eganville in the morning.
         'Aaron and Josh are going to drive to Eganville in the morning.'

4.1.4 Questions

Another distinguishing characteristic of OVE singular concord is that we also see productivity in constructions where *be* has undergone head movement to C^0. The following are direct polar questions.

(11) a. **Is** you heading off to the barn?
            [$_{CP}$ Is$_i$ [$_{TP}$ you t$_i$ heading off to the barn]]?
            'Are you heading off to the barn?'
     b. **Was** the kids sick today?
            [$_{CP}$ Was$_i$ [$_{TP}$ the kids t$_i$ sick today]]?
            'Were the kids sick today?'

Similarly, the following are OVE singular concord wh-questions.

(12) a. Where'**s** my cookies?
   Where **is** my cookies?
   [$_{CP}$ Where$_j$'s$_i$ [$_{IP}$ my cookies t$_i$ t$_j$]]?
   'Where are my cookies?'
  b. How'**s** the kids?
   How **is** the kids?
   [$_{CP}$ How$_j$'s$_i$ [$_{IP}$ the kids t$_i$ t$_j$]]?
   'How are the kids?'

In summary, OVE singular concord has the following characteristics in terms of productivity: 1) the verb is always in what appears to be 3sg agreement; 2) OVE singular concord occurs only with *be,* but 3) it is quite productive across all occurrences of finite *be.* The first quality is in keeping with the characteristics of singular concord in other English dialects while the last two are distinguishing features of OVE singular concord specifically. Now that the productivity of the verb has been specified, the next section of the description will focus on restrictions on the subject and the order of the sentence.

4.2 Subject Restrictions

In other English dialects, such as BE, singular concord may not occur with overtly singular subjects or with any subjects that are overtly marked for nominative (Henry 1995). In terms of ordering, if the verb is a raising verb, it may not occur when an adverb is between the subject and the verb (Henry 1995).
 Singular concord in OVE disallows subjects that are overtly marked for nominative case. It can occur only with subjects that are plural, or the 2sg pronoun. Other subjects are considered ungrammatical.

4.2.1 Nominative Case Marking

OVE singular concord cannot occur with any subject that is overtly marked for nominative case, thus the following sentences, with overtly nominative pronouns as subjects, are ungrammatical.

(13) a. *I'**s** weeding the garden.
   'I'm weeding the garden.'
  b. *We'**s** hungry.
   'We're hungry.'
  c. *They'**s** going to the party.
   'They're going to the party.'
  d. *Eric and I **is** at the cottage.
   'Eric and I are at the cottage.'

By those same restrictions, the following sentences, with subjects that are not marked for nominative case, are grammatical in OVE.

(14) a. Tim and me **is** milking the cows today.
   'Tim and I are milking the cows today.'
  b. Them'**s** going out for pizza.
   'They're going out for pizza.'
  c. These cows **is** getting fat.
   'These cows are getting fat.'
  d. You said you **was** going for a run today.
   'You said you were going for a run today.'[3]

---

[3] For the 2sg and 2pl pronoun *you*, it is impossible to differentiate the nominative forms from the other cases. Thus in occurrences of singular concord in OVE, these pronouns are not overtly marked for nominative.

This restriction generalizes to constructions where *be* has undergone head movement to C^0. Thus the following sentences are ungrammatical.

(15) a. *How**'s** they?
      'How are they?'
   b. ***Is** they sick today?
      'Are they sick today?'

And the following sentences are grammatical.

(16) a. Where'**s** the tools?
      Where **is** the tools?
      'Where are the tools?'
   b. How'**s** the cows?
      How **is** the cows?
      'How are the cows?'
   c. **Is** the kids sick today?
      'Are the kids sick today?

4.2.2 1st and 3rd Singular Subjects

It is also impossible for this 3sg singular concord verb form to occur with an accusative subject in the 3rd or 1st person singular, unless they are part of a larger plural NP. Thus the following examples are ungrammatical.

(17) a. *Him **is** mowing the lawn.
      'He is mowing the lawn.'
   b. *Her **is** eating supper.
      'She is eating supper.'
   c. *Me **is** in the kitchen.
      'I am in the kitchen.

And the following examples are grammatical.

(18) a. Doug and him'**s** mowing the lawn.
      'He and Doug are mowing the lawn.'
   b. Eva and her **is** eating supper.
      'She and Eva are eating supper.'
   c. Nancy and me **is** in the kitchen.
      'Nancy and I are in the kitchen.'

So the subject restrictions on singular concord allow only for subjects that are not overtly marked for nominative case, as well as allowing only plural subjects or the 2sg pronoun. OVE singular concord also has some ordering restrictions, which will be discussed next.

4.3 Ordering Restrictions

4.3.1 Adverbs

In instances of regular agreement, adverbials can occur before or after the verb, as in the following examples.

(19) a. The cows **are** <u>surely</u> big.
   b. The cows <u>surely</u> **are** big.
   c. Mary and Margaret **were** <u>never</u> angry.

    d. Mary and Margaret <u>never</u> **were** angry.
    e. Jim and Kevin **are** <u>really</u> feeding the cows.
    f. Jim and Kevin <u>really</u> **are** feeding the cows.

In OVE singular concord, the adverb cannot occur between the subject and the verb, and so it may only occur after the verb. Thus the sentences in 20 are ungrammatical.

  (20) a. *The cows <u>surely</u> **is** big.
        'The cows surely are big.'
      b. *Mary and Margaret <u>never</u> **was** angry.
        'Mary and Margaret never were angry.'
      c. *Jim and Kevin <u>really</u> **is** feeding the cows.
        'Jim and Kevin really are feeding the cows.'

And, by the same logic, the sentences below are grammatical.

  (21) a. The cows **is** <u>surely</u> big.
        'The cows are surely big.'
      b. Mary and Margaret **was** <u>never</u> angry.
        'Mary and Margaret were never angry.'
      c. Jim and Kevin **is** <u>really</u> feeding the cows.
        'Jim and Kevin are really feeding the cows.'

    In summary, the singular concord form of the verb itself appears to be what is, under normal circumstances, the form that agrees with a third person singular subject. In OVE it occurs only with the tense verb *be* and is productive across all tenses and all usages (copula, periphrastic, equative and locative). It is also productive across all persons that are not overly marked for nominative, except for 3sg and 1sg pronouns, which can only occur with singular concord if they are part of a larger NP, indicating that the phenomenon is case-related. It is also impossible to have singular concord when an adverb appears between the subject and the verb. These characteristics and restrictions are in effect whether the sentence is a statement or a question, and whether it is passive or active.

5. Singular Concord & Similar Phenomena in Other Languages

Now that a detailed description of the OVE singular concord phenomenon has been established, a full account of its nature can be made. As noted previously, singular concord has been documented in various dialects of English (Henry 1995, Godfrey and Tagliamonte 1999, Pietsch 2005, Hickey 2007, Millar 2007), and there also exist similar phenomena in the Celtic languages (Bobaljik and Carnie 1996) and in Arabic as well (Mohammad 1989, Mohammad 2000). In order to create a full account and analysis for OVE singular concord, it is useful to look at both an account of singular concord in an English dialect and an account of a similar phenomenon in another language. Therefore this section will look at Mohammad's analysis of non-standard verbal concord in Arabic (1989, 2000) and Henry's (1995) analysis of Belfast English singular concord.

5.1 Arabic Non-Standard Verbal Concord

Arabic singular concord occurs only in sentences with VSO word order: in cases of SVO word order, only standard agreement is permissible (Mohammad 1989, Mohammad 2000). Mohammad (1989) proposes that this phenomenon is not simply the result of, for example, faulty agreement, but rather lack of agreement entirely. He does this by way of a configurational account that places the subject of singular concord sentences in a different position in the sentence structure than in standard agreement. For Mohammad, a typical Arabic sentence would look like this (Government & Binding labels are used for ease of understanding):

$[_{CP} [_{AGRSP} [_{TP} [_{AGROP} [_{VP}]]]]]$

In sentences with standard agreement, subject NPs are checked for case by raising to SPEC/AGR$_S$ and objects to SPEC/AGR$_0$. The following sentence shows Arabic standard agreement (from Mohammad 1989). Here the subject is in SPEC/AGR$_S$P, where it is checked for nominative case, and the verb is in VP.

    (22) l-ʔawlaad-u   jaaʔuu.
            the-boys-NOM   came3plMASC
            $[_{CP} [_{AGRSP}$ the boys $[_{TP} [_{AGR0P} [_{VP} [_V$ came$]]]]]]$
            'The boys came.'

Mohammad proposes something different for Arabic singular concord:

    (23) jaaʔa   l-ʔawlaad-u.
            came3sgMASC the-boys-NOM
            $[_{CP} [_{AGRSP}$ PRO $[_{TP} [_{AGR0P} [_{VP} [_V$ came $[_{NP}$ the boys$]]]]]]]$

This sentence shows the VSO singular concord agreement. Mohammad hypothesizes that in Arabic non-standard agreement sentences the subject is not actually in SPEC/AGR$_S$P after all, but rather it simply stays in VP rather than raising out and thus cannot copy its features to AGR. Since the subject does not raise to SPEC/AGR$_S$P, it cannot be checked for nominative case, resulting in a lack of agreement between the subject and the verb, forcing the verb into the default 3sg agreement. He then proposes that in Arabic non-standard agreement, the subject position (SPEC/AGR$_S$P) is filled by a null expletive, as seen in 23. This hypothesis accounts extremely well for the Arabic singular concord data, explaining the VSO word order as well as the non-standard subject-verb agreement.

In his later more Minimalist account, Mohammad (2000) proposes that for the VSO (singular concord) order, the verb raises to T while the subject remains in VP. This will result in a lack of agreement (and an inactive EPP) on the verb, and we will see the default 3sg form. For SVO order the verb moves to T (as before); the subject moves to SPEC/TP, and an active-EPP sentence with rich agreement is the result. Mohammad (2000) follows Chomsky (1995) in assuming that for SVO order the T features are strong, forcing the subject to move, while for VSO order the T features are too weak to attract the subject NP.

5.2 Belfast English Singular Concord

Like all English dialects with singular concord, Belfast English displays two types of agreement: standard agreement and singular concord, but without the difference in word order seen in Arabic or the Celtic languages. For example, the following is a BE singular concord sentence (from Henry 1995):

    (24) The eggs **is** cracked.
          'The eggs are cracked.'

And the following is a BE standard agreement sentence (Henry 1995):

    (25) The eggs are cracked.

As seen in 24, BE singular concord occurs only with what looks like 3sg verb agreement. Like in OVE, we do not see any agreement mismatches in BE (Henry 1995), indicating that BE singular concord, like OVE, is not some sort of anti-agreement, but rather a specialized usage of the 3sg verb form. The following sentences are therefore ungrammatical in BE (Henry 1995):

(26) a. *John and me **am** going.
         'John and I are going.'
       b. *Me and you **am** supposed to go.
          'You and I are supposed to go.'

And the following sentences are considered grammatical in BE (Henry 1995):

(27) a. John and me **is** going.
         'John and I are going.'
       b. Me and you **is** supposed to go.
          'You and I are supposed to go.'

BE singular concord is productive across all verb tenses and, unlike OVE singular concord, across all lexical verbs. Thus the following sentences are possible in BE (Henry 1995):

(28) a. John and me **kicks** ourselves.
         'John and I kick ourselves.'
       b. The children **shouts** all the time.
          'The children shout all the time.'
       c. These **makes** no sense.
          'These make no sense.'
       d. The students **was** late**.**
          'The students were late.'
       e. Him and me **is** going.
          'He and I are going.'

As well, in BE singular concord does not occur with any overtly nominative subjects, so the following sentences would be considered ungrammatical:

(29) a. *He and I is going.
         'He and I are going.'
       b. *John and he goes away up the road.
          'He and John go away up the road.'

Nor does it occur with any singular pronouns as subjects, even when those pronouns are not overtly marked for nominative (Henry 1995). Thus the following sentences would be considered ungrammatical in BE:

(30) a. *Me **reads** the newspaper every day.
         'I read the newspaper every day.'
       b. *Him **is** going.
          'He is going.'

In keeping with this, the following OVE sentence would also be considered ungrammatical in BE:

(31) You **was** going into the garden, I thought.

When BE singular concord occurs with *be*, a raising verb, it displays the same adverb ordering restrictions as OVE singular concord in that it is impossible when an adverb comes between the subject and a (raising) verb (Henry 1995):

(32) *The children <u>really</u> **is** late.
        'The children really are late.'

But the adverb-verb order is possible in BE singular concord with lexical verbs (Henry 1995):

(33) These books <u>probably</u> **costs** a lot.
'These books probably cost a lot.'

BE singular concord is also possible in wh-questions like OVE singular concord but impossible in polar questions (Henry 1995):

(34) a. ***Is** the children tired?
'Are the children tired?'
b. Where'**s** my glasses?
'Where are my glasses?'

Like Mohammad, Henry (1995) argues that BE singular concord does not actually involve any kind of agreement mismatch but in fact involves a lack of agreement marking entirely, in that the 3sg verb form in BE singular concord is a default agreement. Her configurational account suggests that this occurs because the subject does not raise into SPEC/AGR$_S$P and thus cannot copy its features to AGR. Instead, Henry posits that in BE, Tense can optionally check 'default' (i.e., accusative) case, so the subject only has to rise as far as SPEC/TenseP, which would look like this:

(35) The cats **is** meowing.
'The cats are meowing.'
$[_{CP} [_{AGRP} [_{TP}$ The cats$_i$ $[_T$ **is** $[_{VP}$ t$_i$ $[_V$ meowing$]]]]]]$

Henry's analysis is well-supported by the fact that BE singular concord never occurs with subjects that are overtly nominative – if the subject never raises to SPEC/AGR$_S$P, then there is no way it could be checked for nominative case. This works for all lexical verbs, in all tenses. In this instance, the fact that BE singular concord does not occur with singular pronouns as subjects is considered to be a property of the phenomenon and is not a result of its syntax or case-checking mechanism. The lack of acceptability of polar questions in BE singular concord is said to be caused by the fact that wh-questions possess strong enough features in BE to force the movement to C^0, while polar questions do not. Henry cites a similar featural weakness in the case of the adverb restrictions.

6. OVE Account and Analysis

At this point, it is time to discuss the ways in which the accounts for Arabic and BE are or are not able to be extended to account for the facts of OVE singular concord. This section will discuss Mohammad's treatment of Arabic, followed by Henry's treatment of BE, and will conclude with a final, comprehensive account and analysis of OVE singular concord.

6.1 OVE Singular Concord and Mohammad's Treatment of Arabic

OVE singular concord occurs with *be* in all its usages and tenses, with subjects that are not overtly nominative, with plural subjects and the 2sg pronoun, in questions and in both passive and active voice; it cannot occur when an adverb intervenes between the verb and subject.

If we were to use Mohammad's treatment of Arabic to explain OVE singular concord, it would explain the lack of nominative subjects. It is possible to say for OVE that the subject is *not* in SPEC/AGR$_S$P: nominative case is checked or assigned by way of SPEC/head agreement between SPEC/AGR$_S$P, but since singular concord in OVE does not occur with a subject in nominative case, it appears that the subject is not in a position for nominative case to be checked/assigned.

Using Mohammad's treatment of Arabic non-standard agreement, however, we would not be able to explain OVE singular concord's adverb and subject restrictions; there is no reason for any adverb or subject restrictions to apply in the case of non-standard verb agreement in Arabic.

There is also the problem of word order when applying Mohammad's treatment of Arabic agreement to OVE singular concord. Arabic singular concord can only occur with VSO sentences, and we do see VSO word order in OVE polar questions where singular concord is present:

(36) a. **Is** you heading off to the barn?
          [$_{CP}$ Is$_i$ [$_{TP}$ you t$_i$ heading off to the barn]]?
          'Are you heading off to the barn?'
       b. **Was** the kids sick today?
          [$_{CP}$ Was$_i$ [$_{TP}$ the kids t$_i$ sick today]]?
          'Were the kids sick today?'

However, in OVE, only SVO order is acceptable in singular concord statements:

(37) a. ***Is** the boys eating cupcakes.
          'The boys are eating cupcakes.'
       b. The boys **is** eating cupcakes.
          'The boys are eating cupcakes.'

And while Mohammad's null expletive postulation is well-supported by the facts of Arabic non-standard agreement, there is no evidence for null expletives in OVE singular concord, only overt ones:

(38) a. There**'s** cats in the yard.
          'There are cats in the yard.'
       b. *$_{NP}$[e]is a cat in the yard.
          'There is a cat in the yard.'

Beyond that, many OVE singular concord sentences do not require an expletive at all:

(39) Josh and me **is** going for a walk.
       'Josh and I are going for a walk.'

Therefore, we cannot fully extend Mohammad's (1989) null expletive hypothesis for Arabic non-standard agreement to OVE and say that a null expletive fills the subject position in SPEC/AGR$_S$P. However, we can say that for OVE singular concord, the subject may not be in SPEC/AGR$_S$P, since this is where nominative case is checked and OVE singular concord is impossible with overtly nominative subjects.

   Likewise, even Mohammad's (2000) Minimalist account will not explain the OVE data – since even the Minimalist explanation for the Arabic word order agreement patterns are contingent on exactly that – difference in word order. We see no such difference in word order in OVE sentences, so to obtain more detail we must move on to an English dialect with SVO word order only.

6.2 OVE Singular Concord and Henry's Treatment of BE Singular Concord

Henry's (1995) configurational account of BE singular concord is quite well-supported by the facts of that dialect: placing the singular concord subject in SPEC/TP and having Tense optionally check for 'default' (accusative) case predicts that this construction is available to all verbs in all tenses, and the impossibility of overtly nominative subjects is explained without needing a null expletive in AGR$_S$P as in Arabic non-standard agreement. Henry's treatment of BE also accounts for the BE singular concord restrictions on singular pronouns as subject and on polar questions and adverb position (when singular concord occurs with a raising verb).

   Applied directly to OVE singular concord, this analysis would explain the impossibility of singular concord with overtly nominative subjects: if the subject remains in SPEC/TP, which in this analysis is the only way the 'default' agreement can be produced, then the subject cannot be checked for nominative case, resulting in singular concord.

   Using Henry's treatment of BE singular concord would also correctly predict the verb appearing to have 3sg agreement, since in Henry's account of BE, 3sg verb agreement is considered to be the 'default' agreement that occurs when the subject is not checked for nominative case.

However, this analysis would not account for the fact that OVE singular concord can occur with a 2sg subject, since BE singular concord cannot occur with any singular pronouns as subjects. And Henry's analysis does not explain why BE singular concord cannot occur with singular pronouns as subjects even when they are not marked for nominative case, so it would not be able to explain this for OVE either. Nor would Henry's treatment of BE predict OVE's acceptability with polar questions, since BE singular concord does not allow this. Neither would it account for OVE singular concord only occurring with finite *be*, since BE singular concord can occur with all lexical verbs.

6.3 An Account of OVE Singular Concord

Since neither the Arabic explanation nor the Belfast English explanation can fully account for the facts of OVE singular concord, something more is required. OVE singular concord patterns with other varieties of singular concord in that the verb is always in what seems like 3sg agreement; can occur across tenses, in wh-questions and in both active and passive sentences; and cannot occur with overtly nominative or 1sg and 3sg pronouns as subjects. OVE differs from other varieties of singular concord in that it only occurs with *be,* and it can occur with the 2sg subject. It differs from BE singular concord specifically in that it allows for polar questions.

The evidence from OVE tells us several things. First, there is no single, canonical form of singular concord across dialects of English. The fact that OVE singular concord's productivity is limited to *be* while other dialects allow it to occur with all verbs demonstrates this very well. Secondly, in OVE and in other dialects like BE, the phenomenon is case-related; the fact that OVE and BE singular concord unequivocally do not occur with overtly nominative subjects makes this clear. Thirdly, OVE singular concord involves a different mechanism for case-licensing than does standard agreement; this is evidenced by the fact that singular concord verb agreement is the 'default' agreement and that subjects may not be overtly nominative.

For OVE singular concord, we can apply Mohammad's treatment of Arabic to a certain extent, taking from Mohammad the idea that the subject is not in its standard agreement position of AGR_SP. This is supported by the fact that OVE singular concord occurs with: a) the verb agreement in its 'default' setting of 3sg, and b) the subjects in 'default' accusative case. These facts suggest that there is something about the OVE singular concord subject that keeps it from checking its features with the verb to get agreement and from checking for nominative case, which is done by the subject's moving to the AGR_SP position.

We can also apply Henry's treatment of BE to OVE singular concord, but again only to a certain extent: placing the singular concord subject in SPEC/TP and allowing Tense to check for 'default' (accusative) case would explain where the singular concord subject is located and why singular concord sentences do not allow for overtly nominative subjects – since Tense can only check for default case. Since the agreement is now set to 'default,' this also explains the reason the verb is in its 'default' (3sg) agreement form.

To explain OVE singular concord's restrictions on 1sg and 3sg subjects, its restriction to *be* only and the acceptability of the 2sg subject and polar questions, we must look at OVE singular concord from a slightly different perspective than has been done previously.

In OVE, singular concord cannot be employed with NPs, single or conjoined, where there is overt nominative marking. Thus the following sentences are ungrammatical:

(40) a. *They **is** cleaning the stables.
         'They are cleaning the stables.'
      b. *George and I **was** fishing.
          'George and I were fishing.'

Conversely, subjects that are not marked for nominative are perfectly acceptable. This includes accusative-marked and ambiguous NPs:

(41) a. Them **is** cleaning the stables.
          'They are cleaning the stables.'
       b. George and me **was** fishing.
          'George and I were fishing.'
       c. The horses **is** in the field.
          'The horses are in the field.'

This failure of singular concord to occur with overtly nominative-marked subjects shows that singular concord constructions do not allow for nominative case licensing, as previously discussed. In her account of Belfast English, Henry (1995) argues that this is because subject NPs in singular concord constructions are simply licensed in a different place than they would be in standard agreement constructions – SPEC/TP for the former and SPEC/AGR$_S$P for the latter. However, this does not explain why the only verb with which singular concord is possible in OVE is finite *be*, which is unusual compared to other dialects with singular concord (Mohammad 1989, Henry 1995, Hickey 2007, Millar 2007). So, in addition to Henry's analysis, what else might account for both the lack of nominative subjects and the restriction to *be* in OVE? There must be something about *be* in OVE that makes it different from other lexical verbs and enables it to allow this special kind of case licensing.

One possible explanation is to look at the singular concord *be* from the perspective of feature content; in some theories it is thought that features may license case (Adger and Smith 2005). Adger and Smith's (2005) framework supposes that lexical items are composed of features. They assume that syntactic features may come in two different types: 1) those with a semantic interpretation, and 2) those that are syntactic. The second type includes case on a noun, such as nominative or accusative, as well as agreement marking on a verb, such as third singular. In this framework, the first type of features are said to be *interpretable* and the second type are said to be *uninterpretable*. Uninterpretable features (i.e., case, person and verb agreement marking) must be checked by a matching feature, which can be interpretable or uninterpretable; for example, the following is from Adger and Smith (2005):

(42) They bark.

In this sentence we have Tense (henceforth T) which comes with an interpretable feature, [tense:pres], and three uninterpretable features, [*u*case:nom], [*u*pers:] and [*u*num:]. We also have *they*, which for now we will call *pronoun*, which comes with [num:pl], [pers:-][4] and [*u*case:]. There is also *bark*, which is just [V]. The case feature of *pronoun* is unvalued, and so are the person and number features on T. *Bark* and *pronoun* both begin in VP, and T is the head of TP. There will be a checking relation between T and *pronoun* when *pronoun* moves to the SPEC/TP position. Because of this relation, T's unvalued number feature becomes [num:pl] and the person feature becomes [pers:-] thanks to *pronoun*, and *pronoun*'s unvalued case feature becomes nominative thanks to T. The resulting surface form is sentence 42. Let us look at an OVE standard agreement sentence and compare it to an OVE singular concord sentence:

(43) a. They **are** hungry.
       b. Them **is** hungry.
          'They are hungry.'

In 43a we have T, *they* and *hungry*. The features of *hungry* are not relevant for the purposes of this analysis, and so we will move on to T and *they*. If we use Adger and Smith's example as a template, *they* should have [*u*case:, pers:-, num:pl] and should instead be called *pronoun*. T should have [tense:pres, *u*case:nom, *u*pers:, *u*num:]. The result is that *pronoun* will get nominative case from T, and T will get number and person specifications from *pronoun*, and the sentence will appear in spell-out as 43a.

---

[4] Adger and Smith (2005) assume that pronouns bear interpretable person and number features. First and second person features are [pers:+] and third person is [pers:-], treating third person as a lack of positive identification for person. [pers:1] is first person and [pers:2] is second person.

The singular concord version is much more interesting: given the OVE evidence, it appears that OVE singular concord *be* has different features from standard agreement *be*. Singular concord *be*, which we will call Aux (for auxiliary), should look like this in the present tense: [tense:pres, *u*num:pl]. Then, as in 43b, we combine it with *pronoun*, which has [*u*case:, pers:-, num:pl]. Since there is no case specified, the only way for *pronoun* to appear in spell-out is in default case, which is the accusative in English. Since there is no person feature in Aux, verb agreement will default to third person in spell-out. Its number feature means that it can only occur with plural NPs, otherwise there will be no spell-out. To explain OVE singular concord's acceptability with the 2sg pronoun *you*, we will say that its features are [*u*case:, pers:2, num:unspecified], since it can be used as both 2sg and 2pl. In this way, it is syntactically interpreted by Aux as acceptable, and spell-out can be achieved.[5] Because standard agreement *be* and Aux *be* have the same interpretable features, their semantic content remains the same, but their spell-out differs due to the effects of their uninterpretable features. To explain OVE's acceptability with polar questions, we can simply say that the features are strong enough in singular concord, as they are in standard agreement, to make the move to C^0 just like wh-questions can. OVE singular concord would not work for other verbs because they are lexical verbs with lexical feature content, while *be* is not.

In summary, by defining singular concord *be* as having different uninterpretable features than standard agreement *be,* we can explain how singular concord can occur in OVE while still having the same meaning as standard agreement *be*. Furthermore, with this account there is no need to explain why this phenomenon exists only for *be*: in this scenario lexical verbs have different feature content than does singular concord *be*. Neither do polar questions pose a problem in this interpretation, and the unacceptability of the 1sg and 3sg pronouns as subjects is accounted for as well. Finally, this treatment also explains why in OVE the pronoun *you* is considered acceptable as a subject of singular concord – in OVE this pronoun is not specified in terms of number features.

7. Conclusions and Future Research

OVE singular concord occurs, like other varieties, with the 'default' verb agreement, which looks like 3sg. OVE singular concord occurs only with *be,* in all its usages and across tenses, allows only for subjects that are not overtly marked for nominative case and does not allow the 1sg or 3sg pronoun as subjects regardless of case marking. OVE singular concord is acceptable in active and passive voice and in polar and wh-questions and is unacceptable when there is an adverb between the subject and the verb.

To account for these facts, we have borrowed from Mohammad's (1989) treatment of non-standard verbal agreement in Arabic to say that the subject of singular concord in OVE does not appear to be in the same position as standard agreement subjects – that is, it cannot be in a position to be checked for nominative case. We have also borrowed from Henry's (1995) treatment of BE singular concord to say that the OVE singular concord subject can only be checked for 'default' (accusative) case, and that the verb, therefore, can only have 'default' 3sg agreement. Finally, Adger and Smith's (2005) feature content framework was used to explain the underspecified features of the OVE singular concord *be* as compared to standard agreement *be*, which accounts for OVE singular concord's characteristics in terms of nominative subject restrictions, lexical verb restrictions and the acceptability of the 2sg subject and unacceptability of the 1sg and 3sg subject.

The facts of OVE singular concord can tell us a great deal about the nature of the phenomenon in OVE itself as well as in other languages and English dialects. It is clear from OVE that the singular concord phenomenon can take many different forms in many different languages; there is no canonical form of singular concord that exists across languages – or even across English dialects, despite their having evolved from the same beginnings. Indeed, it would seem that there is a whole family of singular concord phenomena, each unique to its own language and dialect.

There are many questions left unanswered by the limitations of this paper, including more details about the feature content of other verbs and pronouns in OVE. There is also the question of the nature of singular concord as a family of syntactic phenomena, and the nature of singular

---

[5] We might also hypothesize that the 2sg pronoun, though semantically singular, is interpreted syntactically as being plural, in which case it would still be able to be a subject in a singular concord construction.

concord in other English dialects. Finally, there are many other syntactic phenomena that exist in OVE, such as historical present, which have not been explored at all in this paper and which may be able to shed some light on the singular concord phenomenon as it occurs in OVE and in other dialects of English.

Ottawa Valley English is a rich dialect, and the study of Canadian English, Englishes around the world and linguistics as a discipline would benefit greatly from further research into the morphology and syntax of Ottawa Valley English. A full account of OVE morphosyntax cannot be accomplished in a single paper, and there remains a great deal left to be studied.

References

Adger, David and Jennifer Smith. 2005 Variation and the Minimalist Programme. In *Syntax and Variation: Reconciling the Biological and the Social*, ed. L. Cornips and K. Corrigan, 149-178. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Bobaljik, Jonathan, and Andrew Carnie. 1996. A minimalist approach to some problems of Irish word order. In *The Syntax of the Celtic Languages,* ed. I. Roberts and R. D. Borsley, 223-240. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chambers, Jack, and Peter Trudgill. 1991. *Dialects of English: Studies in grammatical variation.* London: Longman.

Chomsky, Noam. 1995. *The Minimalist Program*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Godfrey, Elisabeth, and Sali Tagliamonte. 1999. Another piece for the verbal -s story: Evidence from Devon in Southwest England. *Language Variation and Change* 11:87–121.

Henry, Alison. 1995. *Belfast English and Standard English Dialect Variation and Parameter Setting.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hickey, Raymond. 2007. *Irish English: History and present forms.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Subject Files. Joan Finnigan fonds. CA ON00239 F00104-S31. Queen's University Archives, Kingston ON, Canada.

Klemola, Juhani. 2000. The origins of the Northern Subject Rule: A case of early contact? In *The Celtic Englishes II,* ed. H. L. C. Tristram, 329-346. Heidelberg: Carl Winter.

Millar, Robert McColl. 2007. *Northern and Insular Scots.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Mohammad, Mohammad Abdel-Latif. 1989. The sentential structure of Arabic. Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California.

Mohammad, Mohammad Abdel-Latif. 2000. *Word Order, Agreement and Pronominalization in Standard and Palestinian Arabic.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Montgomery, Michael. 2006. The morphology and syntax of Ulster Scots. *English World Wide* 27.3: 295-329.

Pietsch, Lukas. 2005. "Some do and some doesn't": Verbal concord variation in the north of the British Isles. In *A comparative grammar of English dialects: Agreement, gender, relative clauses,* ed. Bernd Kortmann, 125-210. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Pringle, Ian, and Enoch Padolsky. 1983. The linguistic survey of the Ottawa Valley. *American Speech* 58.4:327-344.

Roberts, I. 2007. *Diachronic syntax.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Roberts, Ian, and Anna Rousseau. 2003. *Syntactic change.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Woods, Howard. 1979. *The Ottawa Survey of Canadian English. Strathy Language Unit Occasional Papers* 4. Kingston, ON: Strathy Language Unit, Queen's University.

Department of Linguistics
University of Toronto
Toronto, ON M5S 3G3
shayna.gardiner@mail.utoronto.ca