

The Northern Subject Rule in Northern and Midlands Middle English dialects: *be* and other verbs in morphosyntactic dialect variation

NYNKE DE HAAS

Utrecht University

The Northern Subject Rule (NSR) is one of few well-documented points of morphosyntactic dialect variation in early English. By analysing new data on the verb *be*, this paper will add more detail to our knowledge of the syntactic conditions governing verbal inflection in the NSR in Middle English, and diatopic and diachronic variation in their occurrence.

This paper will integrate data on inflection of the verb *be* in early and late Middle English corpora (LAEME, MEG-C) with earlier findings on strong and weak verbs in the same corpora, thus refining the analysis of the two syntactic conditions involved in the NSR. This includes the subject condition (under which pronoun subjects trigger different inflection than full noun phrase subjects), but the study may especially enlighten the analysis of the adjacency condition (under which the special inflection with pronoun subjects is only triggered when verb and subject are adjacent), as the effects of various types of non-adjacent syntactic configurations are relatively poorly understood.

Moreover, the locations of origin of all the corpus texts will be plotted on maps, indicating the strength of the NSR conditions in various locations and, to the extent that this is possible, in different time periods. It will be shown that although the traditional dialect differences between Northern, East Midlands and West Midlands dialect areas remain visible (especially in the verbal morphology employed), the primary dialect division revealed by the NSR variation is one between North and South. The early Middle English data show strong NSR patterns in the Northern dialect area, with a transitional zone extending southward into the Northern Midlands. By comparison, the late Middle English material shows an extended core NSR area which included northern parts of the East Midlands and a transitional zone extending further than before into the East and West Midlands.