



New Perspectives on 'was/were' variation in London

Jenny Cheshire & Sue Fox
Queen Mary, University of London

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Havering

Redbridge

Barking
Dagenham

Bexley

Bromley

Waltham
Forest

Tower
Newham

Greenwich

Lewisham

Enfield

Haringey

Hackney

Tower
Hamlets

Southwark

Croydon

Islington

Lambeth

Barnet

Camden

City of
Westminster

Kensington
& Chelsea
Hammersmith
& Fulham

Wandsworth

Merton

Sutton

Brent

Harrow

Ealing

Hounslow

Richmond-
upon-Thames

Kingston-
upon-Thames

Hillingdon

Britain (2002) identifies two broad patterns of past BE across varieties of English:

1. A variable pattern of levelling to *was* across person, number and polarity – a common pattern of variation which Chambers (2003:266) identifies as a ‘vernacular primitive’

a) you **was** a defender (2:Ollie_Bradley 38:10)

b) we **wasn't** allowed to wear hats (1:Alan_Brian 2 26:10)

2. A variable pattern of levelling to *were* in clauses with negative polarity

c) I **weren't** talking to no-one (1:Gavin_Jerome 21:00)

d) It was still good, **weren't** it? (2:Donna_Kate 2 0:10)

How does London fit in with these two patterns of past BE?

Results based on subsample of 40 speakers in the London English corpus: –

- 6 elderly speakers (70yrs+) inner London: 3 male 3 female, white Anglos
- 16 adolescents inner London: 8 male 8 female, from a range of ethnic groups reflecting the local population
- 6 elderly speakers (70yrs+) outer London: 3 male 3 female, white Anglos
- 12 adolescents outer London: 6 male 6 female, all white Anglos reflecting the local population
- All contexts of *was* and *were* extracted from the data, yielding a total of 2,769 tokens from inner London and 2,001 tokens from outer London

Levelling to was in contexts of positive polarity – inner London

| <u>Subject</u> | <u>Older speakers</u> | | <u>Adolescents</u> | |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------|--------------------|----------|
| | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
| First | | | | |
| I was | 177/177 | 100 | 353/353 | 100 |
| Second (sing) | | | | |
| You was | 5/5 | 100 | 3/8 | 38 |
| You were | | | 5/8 | 62 |
| Second (indefinite) | | | | |
| You was | 21/23 | 91 | 4/6 | 67 |
| You were | 2/23 | 9 | 2/6 | 33 |
| NP Sing The girl was | 175/175 | 100 | 88/88 | 100 |
| Third Pronoun <i>He/she</i> | 231/231 | 100 | 147/147 | 100 |
| Third Pronoun <i>It</i> | 252/252 | 100 | 235/235 | 100 |

Levelling to was in contexts of positive polarity – inner London

| <u>Subject</u> | <u>Older speakers</u> | | <u>Adolescents</u> | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|----------|--------------------|----------|
| | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
| First plural | | | | |
| We was | 38/82 | 46 | 50/83 | 60 |
| We were | 44/82 | 54 | 33/83 | 40 |
| NP Plural | | | | |
| The girls was | 34/63 | 54 | 23/56 | 41 |
| The girls were | 29/63 | 46 | 33/56 | 59 |
| Third Pronoun | | | | |
| They was | 40/94 | 43 | 33/71 | 46 |
| They were | 54/94 | 57 | 38/71 | 54 |

Levelling to was in contexts of positive polarity – outer London

| <u>Subject</u> | <u>Older speakers</u> | | <u>Adolescents</u> | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
| First | | | | |
| I was | 161/161 | 100 | 261/261 | 100 |
| Second (sing) | | | | |
| You was | - | - | 9/11 | 82 |
| You were | 4/4 | 100 | 2/11 | 18 |
| Second (indefinite) | | | | |
| You was | - | - | 5/6 | 83 |
| You were | 11/11 | 100 | 1/6 | 17 |
| NP Sing | | | | |
| The girl was | 123/123 | 100 | 111/111 | 100 |
| Third Pronoun <i>He/She</i> | 86/86 | 100 | 131/131 | 100 |
| Third Pronoun <i>It</i> | 166/166 | 100 | 178/178 | 100 |

Levelling to was in contexts of positive polarity – outer London

| <u>Subject</u> | <u>Older speakers</u> | | <u>Adolescents</u> | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------|--------------------|-----------|
| | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
| First plural | | | | |
| We was | 13/50 | 26 | 43/53 | 81 |
| We were | 37/50 | 74 | 10/53 | 19 |
| NP Plural | | | | |
| The girls was | 2/37 | 5 | 8/16 | 50 |
| The girls were | 35/37 | 95 | 8/16 | 50 |
| Third Pronoun | | | | |
| They was | 5/66 | 8 | 23/47 | 49 |
| They were | 61/66 | 92 | 24/47 | 51 |

Subject constraint hierarchy of non-standard *was* in contexts of positive polarity

Inner London – elderly

| | % | <i>N</i> |
|---|-----------|------------|
| 2 nd Person – <i>you</i> | 96 | 28 |
| NP plural | 54 | 63 |
| 1 st Person plural – <i>we</i> | 46 | 82 |
| 3 rd Person – <i>they</i> | 43 | 94 |
| Total: | 60 | 267 |

Outer London – elderly

| | | |
|---|-----------|------------|
| 1 st Person plural – <i>we</i> | 26 | 50 |
| 3 rd Person – <i>they</i> | 8 | 66 |
| NP plural | 5 | 37 |
| 2 nd Person – <i>you</i> | - | - |
| Total: | 10 | 153 |

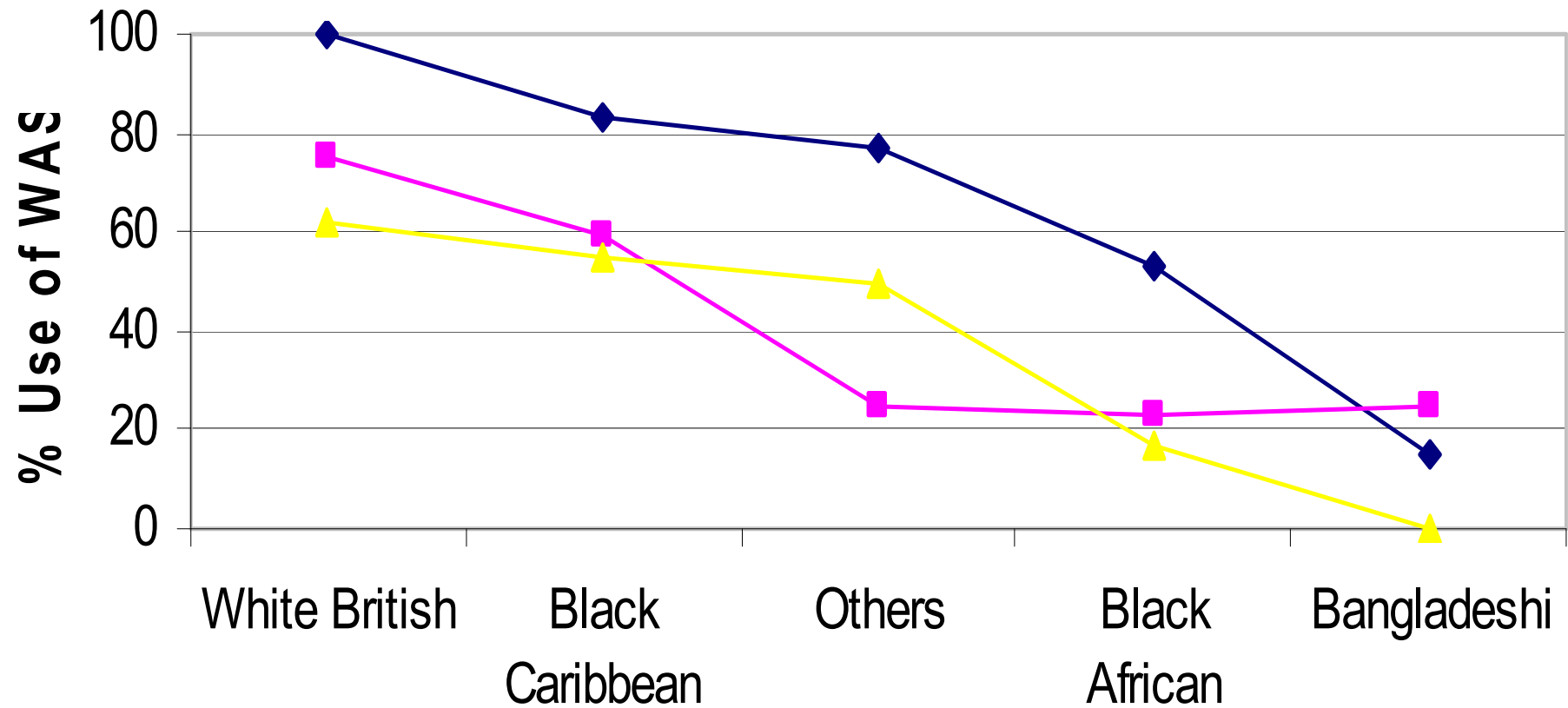
Inner London – young

| | % | <i>N</i> |
|---|-----------|------------|
| 1 st Person plural – <i>we</i> | 60 | 83 |
| 2 nd Person – <i>you</i> | 51 | 16 |
| 3 rd Person – <i>they</i> | 46 | 71 |
| NP plural | 41 | 56 |
| Total: | 50 | 226 |

Outer London – young

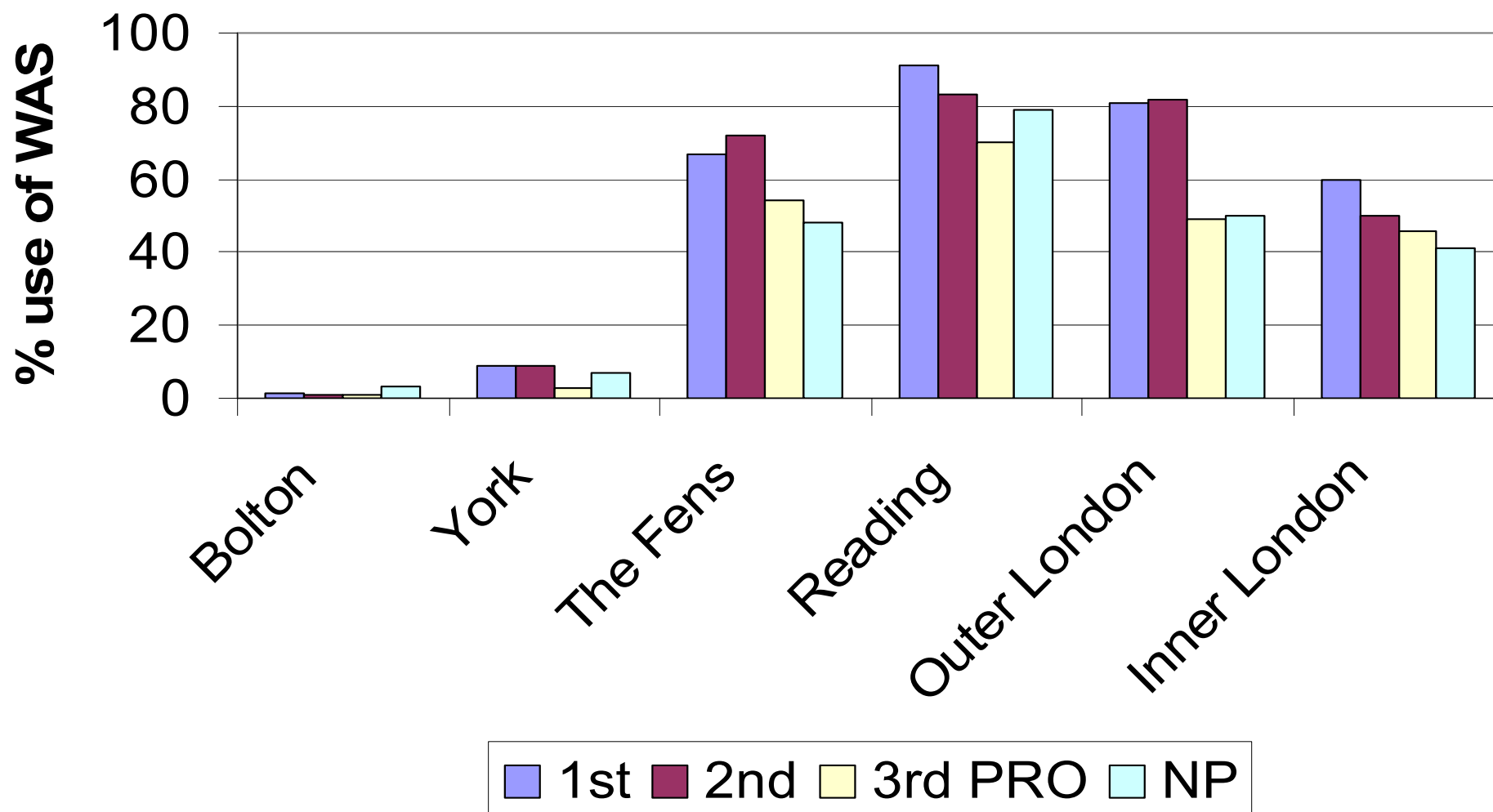
| | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 2 nd Person – <i>you</i> | 83 | 17 |
| 1 st Person – <i>we</i> | 81 | 53 |
| NP plural | 50 | 16 |
| 3 rd Person – <i>they</i> | 49 | 47 |
| Total: | 66 | 134 |

Use of Non-standard WAS by ethnicity



—◆— 1st Person Plural - We —■— 3rd Person Plural Pronoun - They —▲— NP Plural

The use of WAS in contexts of standard WERE in 6 British varieties



Levelling to weren't in contexts of negative polarity – inner London

| <u>Singular Subject</u> | <u>Older speakers</u> | | <u>Adolescents</u> | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------|--------------------|-----------|
| | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
| First | | | | |
| I wasn't | 9/10 | 90 | 20/27 | 74 |
| I weren't | 1/10 | 10 | 7/27 | 26 |
| NP Sing | | | | |
| The girl wasn't | 8/8 | 100 | 4/5 | 80 |
| The girl weren't | | | 1/5 | 20 |
| Third Pronoun | | | | |
| He/she wasn't | 11/15 | 73 | 11/13 | 85 |
| He/she weren't | 4/15 | 27 | 2/13 | 15 |
| Third Pronoun | | | | |
| It wasn't | 21/28 | 75 | 12/18 | 67 |
| It weren't | 7/28 | 25 | 6/18 | 33 |

Levelling to weren't in contexts of negative polarity – outer London

| <u>Singular Subject</u> | <u>Older speakers</u> | | <u>Adolescents</u> | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------|--------------------|-----------|
| First | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>%</i> |
| I wasn't | 10/10 | 100 | 6/9 | 67 |
| I weren't | | | 3/9 | 33 |
| NP Singular | | | | |
| The girl wasn't | 4/4 | 100 | 3/5 | 60 |
| The girl weren't | | | 2/5 | 40 |
| Third Pronoun | | | | |
| He/she wasn't | 3/11 | 67 | 8/16 | 50 |
| He/she weren't | 3/11 | 33 | 8/16 | 50 |
| Third Pronoun | | | | |
| It wasn't | 15/18 | 83 | 7/35 | 17 |
| It weren't | 3/18 | 17 | 28/35 | 83 |

Non-standard *were* in contexts of negative polarity among adolescents

| | Outer London | | Inner London | |
|---|--------------|----------|--------------|----------|
| | % | <i>N</i> | % | <i>N</i> |
| 1 st Person Sing – <i>I</i> | 33 | 9 | 26 | 27 |
| 3 rd Person Sing – <i>he/she</i> | 50 | 16 | 15 | 13 |
| 3 rd Person Sing – <i>it</i> | 80 | 35 | 33 | 18 |
| NP Sing | 40 | 5 | 20 | 5 |
| Total | 63 | 65 | 25 | 63 |

- **And it's about ten questions as well weren't it**
- **That's not good weren't it**
- **Oh yeah cos I stopped bunning weren't it**



**Gotta go with
the times innit?**

Woof!



- *last year I was opening the bowling **innit** for the second team but I got injured **innit** I injured my shoulder*

(Chris_Dean 10.00)



- *in the car I was drinking tequila **innit** we was drinking some other juice*

(Grant_Chris_Kim 15.00)

Levelling to *wasn't* in contexts of negative polarity – inner London

Plural Subject

Older speakers

Adolescents

First

N

%

N

%

We wasn't

1/4

25

7/11

64

We weren't

3/4

75

4/11

36

Second (indefinite)

You wasn't

2/4

50

2/3

67

You weren't

2/4

50

1/3

33

Third NP

The girls' wasn't

1/2

50

1/4

25

The girls' weren't

1/2

50

3/4

75

Third Pronoun

They wasn't

2/9

22

2/3

67

They weren't

7/9

78

1/3

33

Levelling to *wasn't* in contexts of negative polarity – outer London

Plural subject

Older speakers

Adolescents

First

N

%

N

%

We wasn't

1/5

20

1/3

33

We weren't

4/5

80

2/3

67

Second (indefinite)

You wasn't

-

-

14/17

83

You weren't

4/4

100

3/17

17

Third NP

The girls' wasn't

-

-

8/16

50

The girls' weren't

2/2

100

8/16

50

Third pronoun

They wasn't

1/8

12

-

-

They weren't

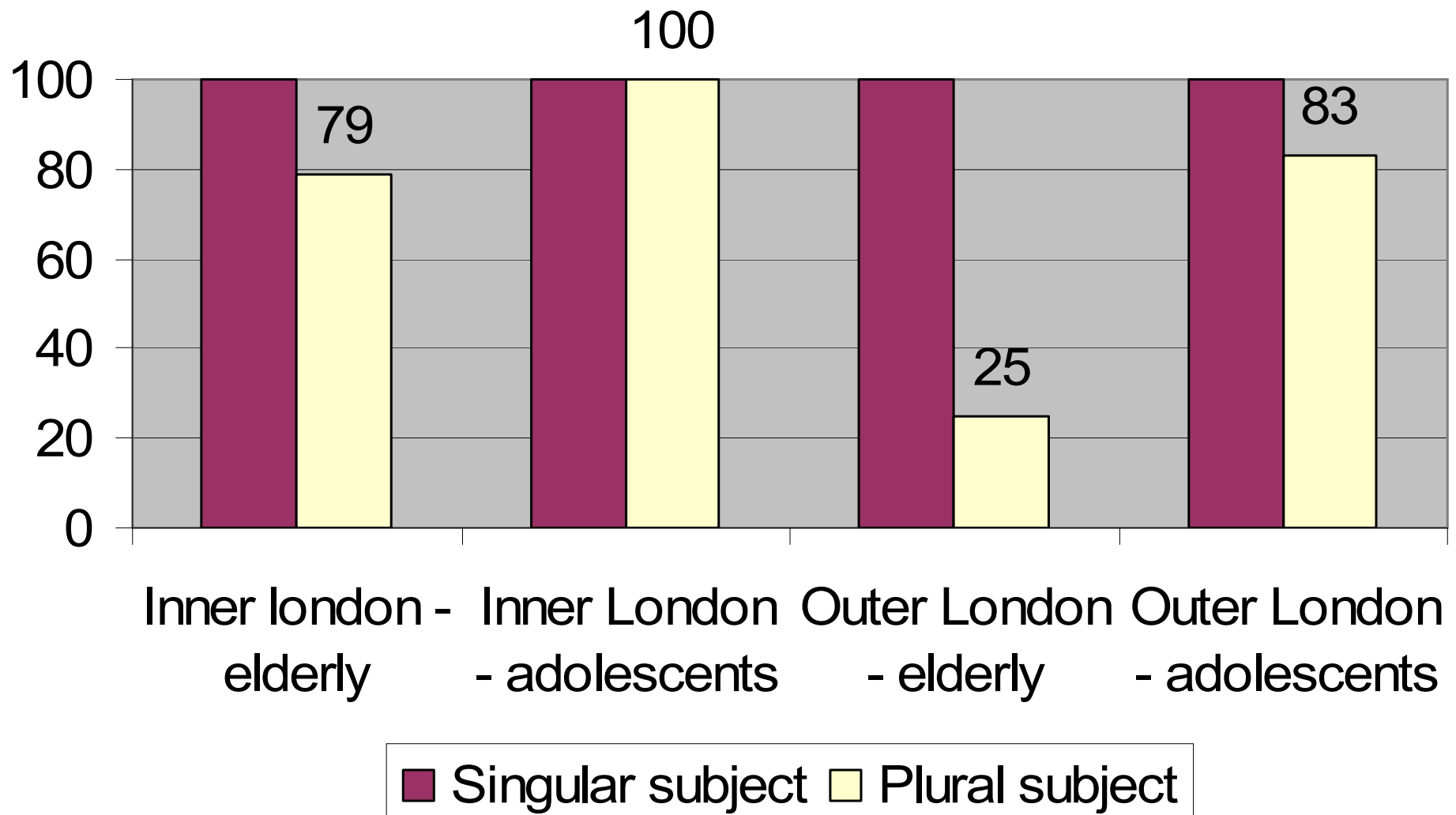
7/8

88

1/1

100

Use of WAS in existential positive constructions (percentage scores)



Conclusions:

- In terms of levelling to WAS in positive polarity contexts, London fits with the general pattern of southern varieties
- Inner London exhibits less levelling to WAS than outer London – ethnicity is a significant factor
- Traditional inner London forms appear to have spread to outer London possibly as a result of population movements

- In negative polarity contexts, London exhibits a mixed pattern of levelling to WEREN'T & WASN'T depending on the subject
- In terms of levelling to WEREN'T, London patterns with other varieties in having the highest frequency with *it* subjects
- In outer London this is mainly due to its high frequency in tags which may be grammaticalising to a discourse marker, in competition with *innit*
- In inner London, tags with past *BE* rarely occur
- Levelling to WAS in existential constructions in both positive and negative contexts appears to be increasing in London

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Linguistic Innovators: the English of adolescents in
London

Paul Kerswill†, Jenny Cheshire‡, Eivind Torgersen†,
Sue Fox‡

†*University of Lancaster* ‡*Queen Mary, University of
London*

Check out our website:

www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/linguistics/innovators/index.htm

(website maintained by E.Torgersen)

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