

### MOTH6 - 2018 Abstract - The *amn't* gap in Scottish English

In some dialects of English the predicted neg-contracted form of the first person singular (*amn't*) is ungrammatical. This phenomenon is known as the *amn't* gap, and in the interrogative it is filled with *anomalous aren't* (e.g. *Aren't I early?*), where the auxiliary *be* does not agree with the pronoun. Traditional explanations of this gap (Francis, 1985; Hudson, 2000; Bresnan, 2001; Frampton, 2001) have approached the problem by ruling out *amn't* altogether as lexically unavailable, and focusing on why *aren't* is used instead in restricted contexts.

These previous analyses are incompatible with another dialect: Scottish English. In Scottish English, *amn't* is available in interrogative contexts, as is anomalous *aren't*, but *amn't* is ruled out in declarative contexts (Dixon, 1982). The context-sensitive availability of *amn't* cannot be explained by ruling out the form outright. This pattern also causes problems for previous explanations of *anomalous aren't* as 'filling a gap', as *aren't* also occurs in Scottish English, where it is in competition with *amn't* (i.e. there is no gap to fill).

Additionally, new data collected from 40 Scottish English speakers suggests that the dialect may be in a state of transition regarding *amn't*. Rather than being a unified dialect, Scottish English exhibits at least two distinct patterns: more conservative speakers accept *amn't* only in interrogative contexts, more innovative speakers accept *amn't* in declarative contexts as well.

I propose an analysis which accounts for both the context-sensitive acceptability of *amn't* in Scottish English as described in the literature, as well as the apparent variation in the acceptability of the form among its speakers. Specifically, I propose that neg-contracted forms (such as *amn't* as well as *isn't* and *aren't*) are generated by two disparate processes in Scottish English: head movement and post-syntactic contraction. Only one of these two processes (head movement) can generate *amn't*. Traditionally, head movement has been restricted to interrogative contexts, and contraction to declarative contexts, accounting for the differential availability of *amn't* in conservative Scottish English. The more innovative dialect represents a spreading of the head-movement strategy to declarative contexts as well.

I further propose that while anomalous *aren't* represents a repair strategy in Standard English (i.e. filling a gap caused by the exclusion of *amn't* in all contexts), in Scottish English anomalous *aren't* is a form borrowed due to contact with Standard English for reasons of prestige. Anomalous *aren't* in Scottish English is produced via an independent featural impoverishment rule which has the effect of reproducing the surface prestige form *aren't*, without reproducing the gap conditions which produce it in Standard English.

#### Selected References:

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- Frampton, J. (2001). The *amn't* gap, ineffability, and anomalous *aren't*: Against morphosyntactic competition. *Proceedings from the Parasessions of the Thirty- Seventh Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, 37(2).
- Francis, W. N. (1985). *Amn't* I, or the hole in the pattern. In W. Viereck (Ed.), *Focus on: England and Wales* (pp. 141–152). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
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