

# The Northern Subject Rule: Hypothesis Formation and Testing



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## Aims

- To investigate the Northern Subject Rule (NSR) in Wallsend, North Tyneside and compare the results with previous research into Tyneside English.
- To see how the NSR patterns, i.e. whether it is more common with particular types of sentence.
- To examine whether there is a social difference between male and female perceptions of the NSR.

## What is the Northern Subject Rule?



The NSR is a **grammatical feature** found in some varieties of English, whereby the verb in a sentence exhibits an **'-s' ending** even if the subject of the sentence is not 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, e.g.:

*The teachers wants a pay rise (3<sup>rd</sup> person plural)*

## Constraints on the NSR

There are two major constraints on how the NSR operates:

### 1. Type of subject constraint:

**Verbal -s is triggered if the subject is not a pronoun**

e.g. *the men like-s football* (full NP subject) vs. *they like-∅ football* (pronominal subject)

Some subject types, e.g. conjoined subjects, are thought to trigger the NSR more than others (McCafferty 2003; Cole 2008).

### 2. Proximity constraint:

**Verbal -s is triggered if there is a personal pronoun subject which is not directly adjacent to the verb**

e.g. *you never need-s help*                      *they fight-∅ and argue-s*

As there are potentially many more constraints on the NSR, this project set out to investigate some which have not been investigated to their full potential:

#### Different types of conjoined NP subjects

pronouns                      *You and him like-s playing*  
 possessives                 *My mother and my father like-s running*  
 definite NPs                 *The director and the actors like-s dancing*  
 proper nouns               *Jim and Carol need-s computers*  
 other NPs                     *Girls and boys like-s playing*

• **Pronoun + NP**                 *You girls need-s a bath*  
    *You folks like-s painting*

• **Reciprocals**                 *You and him like-s playing together*  
    *My brother and my sisters like-s dancing together*

• **Subject proximity**         *You eat-∅ and leave-s*  
    *The boys cough-∅ and sneeze-s*

## Methodology

### Hypotheses

- Different subject types will elicit significantly varied average ratings from informants (**type of subject constraint**).
- Sentences testing the **proximity constraint** will elicit significantly high average ratings from informants.
- Sentences where the last conjunct is 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular will elicit higher average ratings from informants than other types of conjunct will.

### Informants

4 men and 4 women completed a questionnaire.  
 A balanced sample of informants was used, who:

- Were born and raised in the North East
- Had parents who were born and raised in the region
- Had lived in Wallsend at least until the age of 18 and had not lived elsewhere for more than 7 years
- Spoke their local dialect natively
- Were White British
- Were aged 50+
- All belonged to a similar socioeconomic group based on their education, occupations and parents' occupations



### Questionnaires

The questionnaire examined the extent to which the Wallsend informants thought that different types of NSR sentences were common in their local area. Informants were asked to rate the sentences according to the following scale:

- This type of sentence would never be used here – it seems very odd.
- This type of sentence is not very common here but it does not seem too odd.
- I have heard this type of sentence locally but it is not that common.
- People around here use this type of sentence a lot.

The sentences were introduced with a scenario to put them into context. Similar types of sentences were separated and filler/non-test sentences were included to prevent the informants noticing a pattern:

William told Matthew that his parents struggled to do everyday tasks at home. William said, "My mother and my father needs a carer".

1-----2-----3-----4                      **[NSR sentence]**

I went to the pub with my friends on Tuesday night. I asked Jonathan why Lee didn't come. Jonathan said, "He got no money".

1-----2-----3-----4                      **[Filler sentence]**

## Bibliography

- Cole, M. 2008. 'What is the Northern Subject Rule? The resilience of a medieval constraint in Tyneside English'. In T. Guzmán González & S.G. Fernández-Corugedo (eds.) *Journal of the Spanish Society for Medieval Language and Literature* XV.
- McCafferty, K. 2003. 'The Northern Subject Rule in Ulster: How Scots, how English?'. *Language Variation and Change* 15: 105-139.



## Results

The average ratings for each constraint are given below:

### Gender

Men	3.11
Women	3.02

- On average, the men gave higher ratings than the women, but the difference is small.

### Subject Type

Conjoined NPs	3.27
Reciprocals	3.13
You+NP	3.09
Proximity Constraint	2.19

- High ratings, apart from the **proximity constraint** (e.g. *they fight-∅ and argue-s*).
- Low ratings for sentences testing the **proximity constraint** support previous findings that the constraint may no longer be active in dialects like Tyneside, even though the **type of subject constraint** is still present (Cole 2008: 3).

### Person of Last Conjunct

3 <sup>rd</sup> person sg.	3.26
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	3.08
3 <sup>rd</sup> person plural	3.03

- Sentences where the last conjunct is 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular may be deemed more acceptable because the verb agrees with the last conjunct. This type of agreement is found across many languages.

### Verb Type

need	3.36
like	3.10
conjoined verbs	2.19

- The conjoined verbs, which tested the **proximity constraint**, received a low rating. However, the different types of verb within this category had varied average ratings.

## Conclusion

- The **type of subject constraint** appears to be active in the Wallsend dialect, but the **proximity constraint** is not. The fact that not all potential NSR constraints are active indicates that the NSR system of all English dialects should not be assumed to be identical.
- The fact that sentences where the last conjunct is 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular elicited the highest average ratings from informants suggests that there is an adjacency effect between the last conjunct and the verb.