

# NOTES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF EXISTENTIAL *THEY*

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines expletive *they*, a form occasionally noted in the literature (especially on Appalachian English) but heretofore not analyzed. It examines phonological and syntactic patterns in which the form occurs and explores four hypotheses for its development. Two of these posit that expletive *they* reflects a phonological process of postvocalic /r/ loss from expletive *there* and a third that it is derived from pronominal *they*, which has an identical phonological shape. Historical citations support only a fourth possibility, which argues that expletive *they* can be traced to Ulster and ultimately to Scotland in the seventeenth century and has been in variation with expletive *there* for 400 years. The form is thus seen to have had a long and complex history in both the United States and the British Isles.

IN SOME VARIETIES of American English, *they* serves as an expletive form to introduce existential clauses. This has been noted especially in the English of Appalachia and is shown in (1)–(3) from the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina:

1. THEY was some of the largest timber in that section of country [that] THEY is in the state of North Carolina. [Corpus of Smoky Mountain English (CSME), 1973]<sup>1</sup>
2. Of course, it's possible THEY could have been a mill there. [CSME, M58, 1970]
3. THEY would be a lady sit by the side of the woman that was a-going to be married. That was called the waiter. [CSME, F65, 1939]

In *Appalachian Speech*, their book based on another part of the region (southern West Virginia), Wolfram and Christian (1976) also note expletive *they*. Stating that the local variety shows little if any sign of *r*-lessness and that *they* is unknown as a variant of *their*, *they're*, or locative *there* in the variety, they consider expletive *they* an anomalous form, at least synchronically, and conclude only that “if this process [of deleting postvocalic /r/] is the historical reason that the *they* correspondence arose, it was clearly restricted in terms of the grammatical forms to which it applied” (125). Over the years expletive *they* has occasionally been documented in American English: Wentworth (1944) has 14 citations dating from 1861 (in New England), while

unpublished evidence in the files of the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (*DARE* 1985–) starts in 1843 (from Indiana).<sup>2</sup> However, expletive *they* and its development have attracted little attention from linguists, presumably because it has been considered a simple synchronic reflex of *there*. None of the regional linguistic atlas surveys have sought to document it (cf. Davis, McDavid, and McDavid 1969). One quantitative study found that a group of 46 former residents of the Smoky Mountains in east Tennessee used expletive *they* more than twice as often as expletive *there*, at 166 versus 73 tokens (Montgomery and Chapman 1992, 631); this ratio alone suggests a form that warrants closer scrutiny and needs to be accounted for.

This article represents a first effort to consider the history of expletive *they*. Heretofore scholars have not identified its possible sources, much less explored or judged these against one another. Is it an innovation in American English, or is it a retention from the British Isles? Might it in some respects be both? If retained from abroad, how old is expletive *they* and where did it most likely come from? If it arose in America, when did this most likely happen, and why is it so common in the English of Appalachia? The present investigation presents four hypotheses for expletive *they*'s path of development that suggest answers to such questions. The evidence (scarce and speculative though it often is) is most consistent with expletive *they* being a retention originated in Lowland Scots, brought to America in the eighteenth century from the Irish province of Ulster.

The first of the four hypotheses, the Early Phonological Hypothesis, posits that expletive *they* is a form reflecting the loss of postvocalic /r/ from *there* at an earlier stage of the language in Britain. The occurrence of a few forms in mountain speech that evidence the loss of /r/ in times past lends this retentionist hypothesis some plausibility. Though the English of Appalachia is often described as *r*-ful, this is true only if one ignores forms that are historical residues. According to Hill (1940), as early as the fourteenth century, /r/ began assimilating to a following dental, alveolar, or alveopalatal consonant (especially /s/ or /ʃ/) to produce not only forms that are now widespread in English, such as *cuss*, *gal*, *bust*, and *passel* 'parcel', but also /r/-less forms of *mercy*, *first*, *worst*, *partridge*, and other words (Hall 1942, 89). This process was separate from the general loss of /r/ postvocalically, which took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England and was part of the input for or spread to many varieties of extraterritorial English, including those of eastern New England, the Lower South, and some other parts of the United States. One thing making such a phonological context more pertinent to the case at hand than might at first appear is that historically *is* very commonly follows expletive *there* and has been contracted to it, producing *there*'s. The loss of /r/ in this prealveolar environment, giving /ðeɪz/ (later analyzed as *they*

+*-s/is*) could explain why locative *there* and pronominal *their* never lost /r/ and why *they* does not occur as a variant of these forms in Appalachian speech. Expletive *they* derived from *there* (or, more precisely, /ðez/ derived from *there's*) would then be a simple retention from Early Modern English and consistent with the absence of postvocalic /r/ only in historical residues that met certain phonological conditions in Late Middle or Early Modern English. However, there is no apparent historical support for this phonological hypothesis in orthographic evidence, and it would in any case predict erroneously that *theirs* would also have lost its /r/, a phenomenon to my knowledge not attested in Appalachia. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 1933) has no citations of expletive *they* (s.v. *there*), nor does *The English Dialect Dictionary* (1898–1905), so linguists may perhaps be forgiven for failing to track the form in earlier periods of the language. The one dictionary that does have evidence, the *Scottish National Dictionary* (SND 1931–75), documents the language of a part of Britain where the aforementioned early assimilation rule of /r/ to a following consonant did not take place.

A second hypothesis, the Later Phonological Hypothesis, posits that *they* resulting from the general loss of postvocalic /r/ spread (for extralinguistic reasons yet to be determined) into Appalachia from the Lower South, where general /r/-lessness has been well known for more than two centuries and still operates (unlike in Appalachia) as a synchronic process. Inasmuch as the process is usually understood to have originated in England, this is also a retentionist hypothesis. However, a complicating factor is that Appalachian expletive *they* has a different phonological shape (i.e., [ðei]) than the form that the process would have produced. In the Lower South the loss of /r/ following lax vowels, such as /ɛ/ in *there* and *bear*, normally results in a centering off-glide (i.e., it is vocalized, not deleted), and sometimes in a vowel that is tensed (which is what is found in expletive *they*), and the form [ðe<sup>ɪ</sup>]/[ðe<sup>ɪ̃</sup>] is not found in Appalachia.

All this does not completely rule out the two phonological hypotheses, but it makes it quite unlikely that in Britain *there's* was the source of *they's* or that Southern American *there* was the source for *they*. So far as the historical record is concerned (at least as revealed in major dictionaries), in the speech of England expletive *there* has never been represented as *they*, even in varieties that were thoroughly /r/-less, while Scottish speech, always /r/-ful, had expletive *they* as early as three centuries ago, as we shall see. Thus, it is unlikely that in England or Scotland *there's* was the source for *they's*, phonologically speaking.

A third possibility is the Pronominal Reanalysis Hypothesis. It draws from the fact that expletive *they* has an identical phonological shape with the personal pronoun *they* and posits that the former derives from the latter,

more likely as an innovation in America because of its greater prevalence there. Instances of *they* that are apparently ambiguous between the expletive and the pronoun can certainly be found (as in 4 and 5), though discourse contexts that permit the two alternative readings appear to be uncommon, based on review of a portion of the CSME. One cannot, however, rule out the potential of any ambiguous structure to give birth to a new one.

4. Well, as I said, [there were] four grades to one teacher. They had four grades. Of course, now, in a lot of these grades THEY wouldn't be but three or four children. [CSME, F72, 1978]
5. They fixed up to go back in to help pack out the bear and THEY was eleven of them went back in and they had had supper when I got in. [CSME, M54, 1939]

Relevant to this hypothesis is the intriguing fact that expletive *they* occurs occasionally with a plural verb and a following singular subject, not only in the English of Appalachia (6) and (7), but occasionally elsewhere in American English, as in a nineteenth-century local-color novel set in southern Indiana (8):

6. THEY ARE another one [i.e., a restaurant] down the street. [M 40, 1995, from Montgomery and Hall 2004, xlix]
7. It seems like they used to be more water in the streams than THEY ARE now. [F60, 1994, Montgomery and Hall 2004, xlix]
8. THEY'RE a mighty sight of resemblance atwext men and oxen. [Edward Eggleston, *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (New York: Ford, 1871), 105]

In exhibiting what at first glance looks like agreement between pronominal *they* and a tensed verb, (6)–(8) represent a second type of pattern that raises the question whether *they* might be derived not from expletive *there* but from pronominal *they* (correspondence between a third-person pronoun and the existentializing form is by no means unusual; cf. German *es*). They do not occur frequently in Appalachia, but as strange as they may appear, examples like (6)–(8) are neither the nonce nor the local productions of only two or three speakers.<sup>3</sup> However, the rarity of sentences (4)–(8) in American English, including Appalachian English, prevents the Reanalysis Hypothesis from being pressed. If in a sentence like (6) *they* is taken as governing agreement, the far smaller frequency of *they are* in existentials than *they is* suggests that any reanalysis did not proceed very far.

A further difficulty for the third hypothesis is that the two patterns exemplified in (4)–(8) imply that expletive *they* is a relatively recent, innovative form, if not one undergoing ongoing development, and empirical evidence suggests otherwise. The CSME,<sup>4</sup> for example, has 970 (71.7%) occurrences

of expletive *they* but only 383 (28.3%) of expletive *there*, with the proportion of *they* considerably higher among speakers born before 1900. A study of the later generations of speakers in the same vicinity who were interviewed in the late 1970s found expletive *there* to occur nearly three times as often (268, or 73.0%) as expletive *they* (99, or 27.0%). This trajectory suggests that in southern Appalachia expletive *they* dates back at least to the early nineteenth century and has been losing ground for several generations. Sentences like (4) and (5) provide an attractive point for structural reanalysis, but expletive *they* is rarely anything other than a completely unambiguous and empty form. It seems unlikely that a form could have become so prevalent from this one point of actuation and unclear why the effects of such a development have not been more widely seen in American English. A final difficulty for the Reanalysis Hypothesis is that *are* occurs only marginally in existential sentences at all in Appalachia. The CSME has only five cases of *there are* or *there're* + plural verb (as 9 and 10); by comparison, *there is* or *there's* + plural verb (11 and 12) occurs hundreds of times. With a following plural subject, existential *there is/there's* occurs 194 times, *they're* only once (as in 13 below), and *they are* only once (14, a doubtful example because of the conjoined phrase after the verb). If expletive *they* derived from pronoun *they*, one should expect to see more *are* or *-re* in existential clauses beginning with *they*, if not also hints that the form has referential value. Instead, one finds an almost categorical preference of *is* over *are* with expletive *they* (as well as with expletive *there*) and the use of *they* with clearly no pronominal reference (15–17):

9. I think this is one of the beauty spots THERE ARE in Cades Cove. [CSME, M, 1973]
10. THERE'RE a few Newmans buried here and a few Bradleys. [CSME, M, 1969]
11. THERE ISN'T any citizens that lives there at all now. [CSME, M80, 1939]
12. THERE'S lots of mountains that's higher than the Smokies. [CSME, M63, 1954]
13. THEY'RE Evans around here. [CSME, M, 1969]
14. THEY ARE one or two blue-back spellers in existence now. [CSME, M61, 1973]
15. THEY used to be a field on down here where we played. [CSME, F73, 1980]
16. THEY was a cornfield had corn in it out there. [CSME, M96, 1939]
17. THEY was a fellow Sam Hunnicutt in the party that was well acquainted with the Smokies. [CSME, M54, 1939]

The evidence to this point supports little more than speculation for the evolution of expletive *they*, though elements and insights offered by the

scenarios envisioned by the first three hypotheses may ultimately inform a larger historical account and the issue of whether the form is a retention, an innovation, or perhaps both. The Early Phonological Hypothesis, though unsupported by early attestations, is consistent with the view that expletive *they* is a retention that arose in Early Modern English and came to America as a developed form. The Later Phonological Hypothesis, a modified retentionist one, is at present no more than speculation that cannot account for why /r/-less variants of other forms (including *their*, *they're*, and locative *there*, as Wolfram and Christian 1976 point out) are absent from Appalachian speech. The Reanalysis Hypothesis accounts for sentences like (6)–(8), which illustrate an intriguing but infrequent pattern, but it implies that reanalysis is a continuing tendency and thus that expletive *they* is a newer form than the evidence otherwise justifies.

The question of whether expletive *they* is an innovative or retained form cannot be answered without a good deal more historical evidence. At least some of this informs a fourth possibility, the Scottish Hypothesis, which combines phonological and grammatical elements and posits that expletive *they* arose in Scotland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and was subsequently brought to America, most likely in the eighteenth century. It is thus a retentionist hypothesis. Those varieties of American English that most exhibit expletive *they* today, as in Appalachia, are well known for having more Scottish influence than others (Montgomery 1995, 2001).

The core of the fourth hypothesis was in fact proposed for Scots by David Murison, editor of the *SND*. According to the *SND*, expletive *they* occurs as early as 1733 (18) and the composite expletive form *there* is documented as early as 1704 (19). The *SND* states (s.v. *there* adv. 1) that: “[the expletive occurs] with the verb *to be* and the future auxiliary *will*, freq[ue]ntly in reduced forms *the(y)*, and, in contradistinction to Eng[lish], freq[ue]ntly followed by the pl[ural] verb, although the subject may be singular. . . . The use probably arises from a confusion between the Sc[ots] verb pl[ural] forms in *-s* with the Eng[lish] forms in *-re* [i.e., Scots *is* rather than English *are*].”

18. THEY'll something wamble in your wame. [1733]

19. They clapt their hands and cried, THERE our Prince, THERE our Prince.  
[1704]

These citations and three centuries of others from Scotland and the Irish province of Ulster support a Scottish origin for expletive *they* and argue that its form and patterning in American English reflect Scottish usage. Such a claim is consistent with much recent research on both immigration and transatlantic language connections (see Montgomery 1989, 1997, 2000, 2001; Montgomery and Robinson 2001).

Only certain points in the developmental course proposed by the fourth hypothesis can be detected in available citations. Pending further research, parts of it remain speculative, and it needs more thorough grounding in theory. The Scottish Hypothesis proposes that to understand expletive *they* we must go back to the sixteenth century. At that time the speech of Lowland Scotland (Scots) and the English of southern England, two sibling Germanic varieties having grammatical systems closely related in many ways, but distinct in others, were maximally differentiated. In Scots subject-verb concord followed (as it still follows) the Northern Subject Rule,<sup>5</sup> whereby a verb form in the present tense takes *-s* (or by analogy is *is* or *has*) unless its subject is a single adjacent personal pronoun. This rule operated in Scots and Northern English by the fourteenth century but is undoubtedly much older. One study (Montgomery 1994, 90–91) examining the evolution of verbal concord in pre-1600 Scots found that 29/30 (97%) existential sentences with a plural subject took the verb *is*, as seen in (20) and (21):

20. THAIR IS na syk lettres cumin on my lord as yit as ye wrayt. “There are no such letters come to my lord as yet that ye wrote.” [1543; Annie I. Cameron, ed., *The Scottish Correspondence of Mary of Lorraine* (Edinburgh: Scottish Historical Soc., 1927), 21]
21. [T]HERE IS tua sortis of orizons. “There are two sorts of horizons.” [c1550; Robert Wedderburn, *The Compaynt of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Scottish Historical Soc., 1979), 39]

The beginning of the seventeenth century in particular was a crucial time for the history of Lowland Scots, for two reasons. One (to which we return below) was that speakers of Scots began migrating to Ulster around 1605, from where 100,000 or more of their descendants left for North America in the eighteenth century, providing significant input to early American English. The second reason was that, due to increasing cultural and social pressures from England (one recalls that King James VI of Scotland moved from Edinburgh to London in 1603 to be crowned James I of England), distinctive orthographic and morphological features of Scots as found in the written record had begun to shift to their English counterparts (MacQueen 1957; Devitt 1989; Montgomery 1991), and this undoubtedly had begun for spoken Scots as well. For example, the regular past-tense ending *-it* in Scots was gradually replaced by English *-ed*. One can detect this Anglicization in the correspondence of many landed families, such as the Montgomeries of Ayrshire, as in (22)–(25) (Montgomery 2004), where we see the transition from *is* to *ar(e)*.

22. THAIR IS vther ten thowsand merks. [1612; William Fraser, *Memorials of the Montgomeries, Earls of Eglinton* (Edinburgh: n.p., 1859), 1: 183]

23. THER IS many things that I have forgot to schow your lordship of curtisis and kyndnes. [1633; 1: 229]
24. [T]HER AR 10,000 landed at a place called Monster. [1641; 1: 245]
25. [T]HER AR manie reasons that your lordship aught not to be too much concerned. [1658; 1: 308]

The transition from Scots to English had many social dimensions, of course, taking place gradually first among the upper classes and then the middle classes somewhat later, but it presented a situation in which those who spoke and wrote Scots had to master the details of a syntactic rule, in this case the appropriate use of English *are* for their native *is* in existentials having a plural subject (i.e., the shift as illustrated from sentence 23 to 25). While some varieties in Northern England also followed the Northern Subject Rule, the London English that was to become the model for Scots after the Union of the Crowns in 1603 did not. In clauses with plural nominal subjects, whether such clauses were existential or otherwise, *are* was taken to be an English form, and users of Scots had to “unlearn” the Northern Subject Rule when employing English. In such circumstances overgeneralization and other effects of language learning could easily have come into play, and the close proximity of Scots to English made this no easier. Thus, it is not especially surprising to find variation within a single writer, as in (26), in which neither of the existentials follows the English pattern:

26. [T]HAIR AR no corner in the northe quhairin THAIR IS not gud numbers of our nation. [1614; John Stevenson, *Two Centuries of Life in Down* (Belfast: White Row, 1929), 41]

Since the conventional Scottish form with both singular and plural subjects was *there is* (no doubt usually contracted to *there's* in speech), this meant that many speakers of Scots probably had a fixed, invariant form to introduce existential clauses, and the grammatical number of the following subject was irrelevant. As London English became increasingly heard in Scotland in the 1600s and became the prestigious model, especially as the sons of Scottish nobility were sent south for education, patronage in the Court, and training and service in the military, it is not unreasonable to believe that Scots speakers used their existing template of a single existentializing pattern in acquiring English. On a macro level English and Scots penetrated one another, becoming a tighter linguistic continuum, and Scots began to erode. At the same time, in English existentials introducing a plural subject the form *are* was partially, if not totally, absorbed into *there* and thus *there're* was pronounced as one syllable, homophonous with *there* (as is frequently the case today).<sup>6</sup> For some Scots speakers accustomed to having a fixed form introducing existentials, English *there're/there* must have been opaque, taken



as a fixed form equivalent to their native *there's* and generalized to constructions having either plural or singular subjects. This would then predict that some speakers would have used *there* (with no overt verb in the clause) with a singular subject, and indeed this is what the *SND* reveals as occurring as early as 1704 (19 above), a pattern that to this day is prevalent in Scotland (27):<sup>7</sup>

27. [T]HERE a chairge for the guidit tour [Scottish Parliament, <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/vli/language/scots/index> (accessed May 30, 2005)]

During the period of transition (whether one calls this bidialectalism or bilingualism), other speakers of Scots probably pursued alternative strategies, interpreting English *there/there're* as *they* (i.e., not the personal pronoun) + *are* through back-formation, making *they* an expletive form free to introduce a variety of verb forms (not only *are*), regardless of the number of the following subject. Inasmuch as /r/-lessness has not been a general feature of Scots, the loss of postvocalic /r/ in *there*, though seemingly a simpler linguistic process, was less likely to have happened. Though it is apparently a minority variant in Scotland today, expletive *they* demonstrates this freedom of patterning with different verb types. Macafee (1992, §6.1) surveys the variation, echoing Murison's earlier statement:

Existential *there* has a reduced form *they, the* in Scots. The construction *there* – NOUN PHRASE at the beginning of an existential sentence can therefore be interpreted as *there* with elision of the copula verb *be*, or as *they are*, with phonetic assimilation. This occurs with singular as well as plural subjects:

“Well,” he says, “there nae hairm in tryin.” (Bessie Whyte, “The cat and the hard cheese”, recorded by Peter Cooke and Linda Headlee (1975), *Tocher* 3 (1975–76): 267) [*sic*]

The first interpretation is supported by the elision of *be* after *there* as a place adverb:

Cos there Wee Junior, he wis up at probation (young Glasgow man, recorded 1979)

However, *are they* does appear with singular subjects in interrogatives:

“Are they any waater coming in over it?” ([James Laurensen] “Maggie Miller’s Tows” [recorded by Alan Bruford (1973), *Tocher* 3 (1975–76): 93])

*There were* likewise appears with singular subjects:

An they were a oald mǎn among them (*ibid.*, p.93)

That year was pretty hard, the weren’t much money to be made. (Bella Higgins, “The three dogs”, recorded by Maurice Fleming (1955), *Toucher* vol.3 (1975–76): 184)

By contrast, *there's* and interrogative *is there* are now regular in Scottish speech with plural subjects, as in colloquial English generally:

Is there weapons? ([Tom McGrath and Jimmy Boyle] *The Hard Man*, [Edinburgh: Canongate, 1977, 15])

and likewise *there was*:

There was very few jobs available even after the six months course (Glasgow man, recorded 1979)

The quantitative dimensions of the different, sometimes competing patterns in Scots remain for research to show. What is important to the Scottish Hypothesis is that most of the necessary patterns can be found not only in Scotland but also in both Ulster (beginning in the early seventeenth century, seen in 28) and the United States. Letters written by Ulster immigrants to America attest *there is* (29) and expletive *they* (usually spelled *the*), seen in (30)–(32). Twentieth-century literature (33) and transcripts from recorded interviews (34 and 35) indicate the currency of *there* as a composite expletive form more recently.

28. ... for that THERE IS severall cases to be objected. [1629; *The Manuscripts of Col. Mordaunt-Hay of Duns Castle; Sir Archibald Edmonstone of Duntreath; Sir John James Graham of Finlry, K.C.M.G.*, Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, Various Collections, vol. 5 (Hereford: HMSO, 1909), 131; cited in Montgomery 1991]
29. [T]HERE IS Eleven Ships intended to sail from Newry & Belfast. [Henry Johnston, April 28, 1773]<sup>8</sup>
30. THE ARE but few Methodists. [James Richey letter, August 13, 1819]
31. [T]HE ARE plenty of farmers rising up and leaving their place [and] does not know where to go. [Margaret Sproule to Andrew J. Sproule, January 11, 1864]
32. [T]HEY AR no money in the country nor no business a doing. [Joseph Witherow letter, Dec. 3, 1867]
33. THERE' nobody can rightly tell the colour of his eyes, / This Johneen. [Moirá O'Neill, *Songs of the Glens of Antrim* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1912), 37]
34. THERE a wee door inside, the wee porch door. [Kirk 1991, recorded in 1970s]
35. THERE a load of farm produce in another cart. [Kirk 1991, recorded in 1970s]

It appears, then, that a mixed or variable system was brought to America by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century settlers from Ulster (who were more numerous than those from Scotland). In their Scots or their Scots-influenced English many would still have had categorical *there's*, regardless of the number of the following subject, but others who had reanalyzed *there're*, or who had inherited such a reanalysis, used *they* as an expletive. Because

written data so often disguise spoken language patterns, we will never know how prevalent expletive *they* was among Irish and Scottish immigrants in the eighteenth century, though evidence from immigrant letters suggests it was a minority variant. However, when evidence from spoken American English surfaces in earnest from some speakers born in the mid-nineteenth century, the dominance of *they* over *there* is clear. This is shown in Smoky Mountain English, where we find sentences such as (36)–(40):

36. THEY's a whole lot of stuff that I ain't used to for stomach trouble. [CSME, F79, 1939]
37. THEY's a lot of hunting that's done in this country now. [CSME, M79, 1939]
38. I told him I couldn't do that or THEY would be a whole bunch of people after my ass for not saving them a jar of [the moonshine]. [Popcorn Sutton, *Me and My Likker* (Maggie Valley, N.C.: n.p., c1999), 31]
39. THEY'll be nary grass on these graves as long as I'm a'livin'. ["Family Honors Tradition in Cemetary," *Mountain Press* (Sevierville, Tenn.), June 10, 2003, A3]
40. THEY've been a big change. [M40, Gatlinburg, Tenn., 1995]

This paper has introduced and begun to explore four hypotheses for the development of expletive *they* in American English. The first, third, and fourth of these consider expletive *there* to be the source, either through loss of /r/ in *there's* or *there* or through replacement of *there's* as a fixed form by *there/there're* and then reanalysis of the latter as *they + are*, creating expletive *they* and freeing it to be used with other verb forms. For the fourth hypothesis historical evidence has been presented from Scotland and Ulster from the the seventeenth and eighteenth century, when a long transition from Scots-based patterns to English-based ones and a possible transatlantic migration of expletive *they* were simultaneously taking place, as well as later evidence both from there and the United States. For only this hypothesis can historical citations of expletive *they* at present be found. Finally, there is phonological evidence to support this hypothesis further. According to Aitken (2002, 152–54), by c1600 in Scots the vowel nuclei in both *thai* 'they' [ðei] and *thare* 'there' [ðer] had raised and fallen together, creating the potential for *there're/thare/thare're* to be interpreted as *they + -'re*. Perhaps more importantly, such a vowel development provides a distinct reason for why expletive *they* in Appalachian English is pronounced [ðei] and has a different vowel from expletive *there* [ðer]. Similar raising does not occur in the English of Mid/Southern England, where the sounds are more distinct (see Dobson 1957, 2: 458), thus limiting the origin to Northern use. This development casts further doubt on the Later Phonological Hypothesis as well.<sup>9</sup>

The phonological and morphological evidence from seventeenth-century Scots dovetails nicely to argue that expletive *they* in American English represents a retention from overseas. But if such evidence suggests that expletive *they* was a relic form, it does not tell us how expletive *they* became so much more common than expletive *there* in Appalachian English. The changes that took place in the British Isles (i.e., the absorption of *are* into *there* and the reanalysis of *there/there're* as *they are*) could logically have continued to take place in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially if *there* sometimes had the vowel [e]. Since it was the dominant form in some American varieties by the mid- to late nineteenth century, expletive *they* either spread rapidly in two or three generations before that time (meaning that the English of Appalachia was, contrary to its usual characterization, a very dynamic variety) or was much more common than eighteenth-century written sources would have led us to believe. Gaps in and the nature of the historical record prevent us from more than raising this issue at the present time.

Understanding the line(s) of structural development is a prolegomenon to—and perhaps more important than—judging whether expletive *they* in American English is a retention or an innovation. In any case, expletive *they* is not the trivial or anomalous form presumed heretofore to be. Exploring its possible historical development uncovers fascinating historical dimensions that raise and challenge questions about the transplantation of language varieties from the Old World to the New and that help us understand that in seemingly minor details of linguistic form one can find systematic traces of language history.

#### NOTES

This paper grew out of a conversation I had with Christina Tortora and Judy Bernstein over a late afternoon Guinness in Johnson City, Tennessee, in July 2002. I am grateful for their input and for comments from Caroline Macafee and two anonymous reviewers for *American Speech*.

1. Many examples in this paper come from the Corpus of Smoky Mountain English, from which speakers are identified by sex, age (when known), and date of recording. The CSME is a compilation of transcribed interviews with 136 speakers from a six-county section of the Tennessee–North Carolina border region. They were born between 1843 and 1915 (most before 1900) and recorded between 1939 and 1984. The corpus has approximately 400,000 words.
2. I am grateful to George Goebel of the *DARE* editorial staff for this information.

3. For example, the following sentence is documented from southwest Virginia: "Are they any way you can get me in the mines?" (Dante History Project Records, Collection 538, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University).
4. See note 1 above.
5. For this term, see Ihalainen (1994). Murray (1873, 211–12) was apparently the first to describe this rule, though he did not give it a name.
6. This process represents a type of copula deletion that is apparently restricted to this one form. Theoretically *here* could have followed the same path, with sentences like *Here are five pencils* spawning *here're* and then *here* without an overt verb.
7. Scots does not have copula deletion.
8. The emigrant letters from which (29) and (30) are drawn are deposited in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (Collections T 3578 and D 3561/A/6/1, respectively). I am grateful to Bruce Boling for example (31), from the Sproule letters, deposited at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and example (32), deposited at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland.
9. The pronunciations [ðær] and occasionally [ðar] heard in Appalachia occur for locative *there* and not for existential *there*.

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