"It ain't nothing to do with my school." Variation and Pragmatic Uses of *ain't* in the Language of British English Teenagers.

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1. Introduction

Most studies on language variation in English devote a special section or even a whole chapter to the system of negation.[1] Negative polarity shows a wide variation not only across the medium of expression used, whether it is speech or writing, but also across general English varieties as regards the different negative forms used, the position of these in the clause, the function and meaning of *never*, negative contractions used with auxiliaries, and other characteristic aspects with respect to the scope of negation and negative polarity items.

Out of the above-mentioned, negative concord or multiple negation, and the *ain't* form seem to be the most distinctive negative features. Negative concord in general English and, more particularly, in non-standard varieties has already been extensively studied.[2] However, this does not equally apply to *ain't*, which has only been partly investigated. When considering this non-standard negative, most scholars have tended

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[1] See, for instance, Wolfram and Fasold; Cheshire, *Variation in an English Dialect*; Viereck, ed.; Trudgill; Trudgill and Chambers; Biber; and Biber *et al*.
[2] For instance, Labov, "Negative Attraction"; Wouden; Palacios Martínez; Anderwald; "Negative Concord"; and Kallel.

to focus on its origin and development; however, its variation and actual use have received much less attention. This is one of the main motivations of this paper: to analyse its variation, distribution and pragmatic uses in a particular register, the language of British teenagers, on the basis of the COLT corpus.

The majority of grammarians refer to the multiple nature of *ain't* since it can stand for both forms of BE (*am not*, *is not*, *are not*) and HAVE (*has not*, *have not*). Thus, *ain't* can be equivalent to forms of BE as both lexical and auxiliary verb. However, *ain't* for HAVE is basically restricted to examples where this verb acts as auxiliary, either in combination with *got* or as expressing perfect aspect. Cases where *ain't* stands for HAVE as main verb are very rare and the same applies to this negative as equivalent to *don't/doesn't* or *didn't*, the latter only being found in African American Vernacular English.[3] This behaviour of *ain't* has been equally attested in British and in American English although some scholars, such as Anderwald maintain that it is much more common in American English than in British English and, more particularly, among people living in the south of the USA and among black people.[4]

The origin of *ain't,* with a wide variety of pronunciations /eint/, /ent/, /int/, /ant/ has also been the subject of much controversy and dispute. A group of scholars, such as McDavid claim that *ain't* derives phonologically from *aren't*.[5] They contend that *aren't* became *arn't* in the course of the 18th century. Later on the /r/ was lost and, as a result, there was a compensatory lengthening of the vowel that yielded /æ:/. This early modern English phoneme later developed into the contemporary dipthong /ei/ and, as a consequence, *aren't* became *ain't*. The evolution of *ain't* according to this theory can be represented as follows:

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[3] Wolfram and Fasold, 162
[4] Anderwald, *Negation in Non-Standard*, 120.
[5] McDavid, 57.

aren't	>	arnt	>	ant	>	aint
18th c.		loss of /r/		dipthongisation of /æ/		

Furthermore, McDavid also adds that both forms ['aj 'ejnt] and ['aj 'ant] correspond to normal phonological variants in different dialect areas. The latter became more prestigious while the former was clearly stigmatised on the grounds of vulgarity.

In contrast to the previous view, Jespersen and Stevens maintain that *ain't* has its origin in *am not*, which underwent a syncope process of the vowel /o/ because of its weak nature and, as a result, became *amn't*.[6] Later on there was an assimilation of the first nasal, giving *ann't* and, finally, a lenghthening of the vowel took place, resulting in *ain't*.

am not	>	amn't	>	ann't	>	ain't
		syncope of /o/	assimilation of the first nasal		lengthening of the vowel	

Stevens also reviews the position maintained by E. Payson Williard who believes that *ain't* has come from the verb HAVE.[7] This is justified by the fact that the loss of the fricative is not unusual, as is the case in *e'er*, *se'en,* and the same is true for the disappearance of the initial aspirate /h/ in unstressed position. In this respect, Francis objects to the previous two theories since, in his view, the raising and dipthongisation of the vowel is not clearly justified on solid historical reasons.[8]

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) also provides additional information on this question. Two entries of this form are found. The first corresponds to *ain't* as equivalent to the forms of BE mentioned. The first citation of this dates from 1778 and is found in an epistolary work, *Evelina*, by Edward Frances Burnes. We are told that this form represents vulgar speech, typically found in Cockney speech and in Dickens' novels,

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[6] Jespersen, 300; and Stevens, 199.
[7] Ibid, 200.
[8] Francis, 149.

and also draws attention on the fact that for some time it was also an upper-class colloquialism. The second entry is recorded as a variant of *hain't*, *have not* and *has not*; it dates back to a citation from 1845 taken from the American writer, W. Gillmore Simms. This source also indicates that this negative is found especially in dialogues and is regarded as vulgar.

In spite of all these theories and assumptions, there does not seem to be full consensus on the exact date of the origin of this negative item. Stevens, for example, clearly defends that "the contraction *ain't* has been in our language, dialectally and colloquially, much longer than most dictionaries indicate" and a couple of lines further down he adds that the form *an't* was already recorded in 1706 and even some dictionaries register the first literary usage around 1710.[9] All seems to indicate that there is still work to be done to confirm with absolute accuracy the first attestation of this negative and its variants. This is explicitly admitted by Anderwald, who, after a general review of the evolution and development of this form with its all corresponding variants, affirms that "the history of *ain't* remains to be written, where the material from the OED might play a minor role in the exploration of this topic".[10] In spite of all this, there are some claims that can be made with almost total precision: (i) it started being used at least in spoken English and with a multiplicity of values before the 18th century, (ii*) ain't* as equivalent to forms of BE is recorded earlier in time than *ain't* standing for forms of HAVE, (iii) it has been traditionally regarded as vulgar and colloquial although for a certain period it was also present in the language of upper-class British society, (iv) this character of multiplicity and a high degree of stigmatisation associated with it still remain nowadays in spite of being frequently used in most varieties of English throughout the world, (v) as in the case of negative concord, there do not seem

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[9] Stevens, 197.
[10] Anderwald, *Negation in Non-Standard,* 120.

to be strong arguments for the stigmatisation of this negative except for the arguments maintained by language prescriptivists which have had a strong influence in the consideration of this item, and (vi) it is a widely-used negative form nowadays both in British and American English. In this respect recent examples of this form have been recorded from the speech of the American President Obama in the last presidential campaign with respect to the proposals of the republican candidate as regards health policies, "it <u>ain't</u> right"; similarly, an English journalist of the *Daily Mail* on 26 May 2009 writes in reference to the football championship final, "Manchester <u>ain't</u> big enough for both Messi and Ronaldo."

As explained above, with the exception of Cheshire, there are very few studies on variation in the use of *ain't* in contemporary English. Cheshire focuses on the occurrence of this negative item in the speech of twenty-five working-class adolescent groups in the area of Reading, in the south of England. First of all, she explains the different realisations of *ain't* in this variety and then analyses the sociolinguistic variables that have an influence on the occurrence of this form. She concludes that all groups of subjects tend to use it more frequently for the auxiliary HAVE than for BE and gender differences, broadly speaking, are also identified as boys' speech shows a higher number of occurrences than that of girls'. On the other hand, *ain't* is significantly more frequent in tag questions in the speech of girls. [11]

2. Purpose and Method

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[11] Cheshire, "Variation in the Use of *ain't*".

This paper forms part of a general study of polarity in the spoken language used by young people in Britain with special reference to the system of negation, and it focuses in detail on the distribution of *ain't* as well as on its pragmatic meanings. I will analyse not only the most distinctive syntactic features but also the possible pragmatic motivations for its use. According to this, grammatical and sociolinguistic variables will also be considered in order to investigate the factors that may condition its occurrence in modern speech. The results obtained will be compared with those in previous studies, primarily Cheshire and Anderwald .[12] As already mentioned, data provided by COLT has been taken as the basis of the analysis. This corpus, compiled in 1993, contains around 500,000 words and consists of 377 spontaneous conversations produced by teenagers aged 13 to 17 in the London area. All the conversations are equivalent to roughly 100 hours of recorded speech.

There are a couple of methodological issues that should be borne in mind. Firstly, although this corpus was compiled to represent language produced by British adolescents, all the speakers represented in the corpus come from the London area with their own geographical, social and ethnic backgrounds. As a consequence, this corpus in no way should be regarded as fully representative of general adolescence British English but of London teenager speech exclusively. However, it is true that some of the findings obtained and the tendencies identified may be applied to general teenage British English. This may be justified by the fact that several sociolinguists have come to the conclusion that some London features seem to be spreading throughout the whole country.[13] This tendency is also perceived in the data collected as part of a project of Multicultural London English conducted by a group of academics.[14]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] See, for example, Kerswill and Williams; and Foulkes and Docherty, eds.

[14] See Kerswill, Cheshire and Torgersen. Further information can be obtained at the following website: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/linguistics/multicultural/>, accessed May 2009

The second methodological issue that should be kept in mind concerns the nature of the searches and the corpus transcription. As I did not have access to the tapes, I mainly relied on the written materials identifying all cases in which the form *ain't* with its possible spelling variants, such as *an't*, *in't, int* appeared. This means that the written transcriptions were my only source of reference. For the analysis of the data, first of all, I manually examined about half of the total conversations included in the corpus to acquaint myself with the general features of the material, with the conventions used for the transcription, the topics discussed in the conversations and also to identify the different speakers. In this respect, it is important to mention that the corpus provides interesting information about their geographical location, social background, age, sex, mother tongue, occupation, education, and relationship to other participants in the conversation, details which were extremely useful when examining the sociolinguistic factors. Once I was fully familiar with the corpus material, I made use of the computer programme Concapp4 for the queries. This computer instrument facilitated part of the work but it was then necessary to filter carefully the data obtained. On many occasions, I was compelled to trace the different examples in the dialogues, study the full context where they appeared, read the whole conversation extract, contrast the language behaviour of the different speakers in other exchanges and compare forms and figures.

3. Results Analysis and Discussion

3.1. Frequency

A total of 291 occurrences of *ain't* in the speech of the teenagers was recorded out of a potential 1,261 registers of the form; this means that this negative item is quite common in this group of adolescent teenagers as these subjects opted for it in almost 23% of the total. It is true that these figures could be somewhat misleading and should be handled with care as I have observed that the frequency indices do not apply in equal proportions and terms to all the speakers of the corpus; in other words, there are a group of speakers, as we will see below, that show a much higher frequency in the use of this negative item than the rest. This means that the use of *ain't* varies largely from one speaker to the other and this may condition to a certain extent the general average obtained. In terms of frequency, the results obtained differ quite considerably from previous studies.[15]

The different data and sources used as the basis for study in each of these investigations may be responsible for this. Thus, Cheshire compiled conversations from adolescents in the area of Reading (England), Biber *et al.* considered information taken from the Longman corpus containing over 40 million words of text while Anderwald resorted to the British National Corpus (BNC), a 100-million-word corpus of British English collected in the early 1990s which includes COLT. In spite of the differences in the sources and data used, which should definitely have a direct reflection on the numbers and percentages obtained, similar patterns of use are identified as will be shown below.

Cheshire reports an average of *ain't* use of almost 75% in the general speech of the twenty-five boys and girls in her study, Biber *et al.* record approximately 400 occurrences per million words in conversation and Anderwald refers to an average frequency of almost 14%.

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[15] Cheshire; "Variation in the Use of *ain't*"; Biber *et al.*; and Anderwald.

Table 1 shows the frequency of occurrence of *ain't* in the speech of the teenagers analysed. Out of the total 291 occurrences, 281 stand for negatives of HAVE (1) and BE (2).

(1) I <u>ain't</u> got enough room for all that. (B132616/19)

(2) And then my Mum goes, eight o' clock I still <u>ain't</u> up, my Mum goes get out of bed. (B132707/286)

As regards the remaining 10, 8 of them correspond to examples which could not be classified, either because it was not clear what the speaker meant or there was not enough context for a sound interpretation of them.

(3) Yo = <u>ain't</u> your dad can't yo = dad fork out for something like that something like fifty quid. (B135302/12)

The two left can be interpreted as cases in which *ain't* stands for *didn't* and *don't* respectively, something which is quite unusual and which should be regarded as marginal.[16] Study the following:

(4) She couldn't go and see him yesterday he <u>ain't</u> eat the food anymore. (B136105/40)

(5) <u>Ain't</u> you wear a shirt underneath it.(B134903/22)[17]

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[16] This is not at all unusual; however, in African American English where *ain't* shows variation not only with forms of BE and HAVE but also with *did* and, less frequently, with *do*. See Labov, *Language in the Inner City*; Fasold and Wolfram; and Walker for more details on this and other related issues of the negative expression in the African American English variety.

[17] These two examples could also be interpreted differently. Thus (4) could be equivalent to *he hasn't eaten the food…* instead of *he didn't eat the food…*. Something similar happens with (5) in which *ain't* could be understood as representing *aren't*, that is, *aren't you wearing a shirt underneath*?

(Insert Table 1)

The above figures clearly indicate that the distribution of this negative item is not symmetrical for BE and HAVE. Thus, for BE we obtain 131 (91+ 40) occurrences while for HAVE there are 112. This means then that in absolute terms it is more common as a negative for BE than for HAVE. If we consider the numbers for BE in particular, we note that it is much more frequent for BE as a copula than for BE as auxiliary, 91 versus 40. Furthermore, *ain't* occurs more often when it corresponds to *is + not*, 66 cases, than when it is equivalent to *am + not*, 44 occurrences, and *are + not*, 21 examples. When used for BE as auxiliary, it mainly expresses progressive aspect (6) as only 3 occurrences of passive structures are registered (7).

(6) He ain't talking to me and I ain't talking to him. (B132913/15)[18]

(7) No, the tape ain't finished. (B132615/5)

As for negative auxiliary for HAVE, it is much more common to find it together with *got* (8) than it is for expressing perfect aspect (9). Only one occurrence is recorded in which this form is used for full verb HAVE (10):

(8) She's stupid though, she's dumb, she ain't got a brain. (B132707/40)

(9) We ain't been on that yet. (B135601/51)

(10) It ain't nothing to do with my school. (B132802/132)

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[18] This is also a good illustration of how the same speaker uses *ain't* for both *am not* and *is not*. This could be taken as clear evidence that this negative item seems to be regularising for all the persons in the verbal system.

The latter example is not clear either since *ain't* could also be replaced by *isn't*. Anderwald devotes a full section to the use of *ain't* for full verb HAVE. She comes to the conclusion that it is not totally adequate to say that *ain't* can never function as the negative form of the main verb HAVE. From her data it can be gathered that "*ain't* may be on the way towards behaving like negative HAVE in all its functions".[19] There are some extracts in the corpus where the occurrence of *ain't* is particularly noticeable. In the exchange that follows. two girls are having a conversation which is interrupted by the presence of a dog, Dandy. One of the girls uses *ain't* in a short exchange as equivalent to three different forms: *aren't, isn't* and *hasn't*. This confirms the multiple nature of this negative form.

(11)   A: Yes, she's trying to be nosy…. <u>Ain't</u> you, Dandy? (*aren't you?*)

         B: Dandy the dog.

         A: What's that you got?

         B: Microphone.

         A: Why?

         B: Because I'm taping you.

         A: Why are you taping?

         B: For a college…. <nv> whistling</nv>

         A: What, is it on now? … What college?

         B: Norwegian college.

         A: Oh! …. Sweet, <u>ain't</u> she? (*isn't she*?)

         B. Come on, bark at me!

         A: She <u>ain't</u> barked since she was attacking you. (*hasn't*)

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[19] Anderwald, *Negation in Non-Standard*, 144.

(B132905/51-63)

The general scale or pattern of use of *ain't* identified by Cheshire, and only partially confirmed by Anderwald, is totally borne out in this study.[20] This hierarchy can be represented as follows:

(12)   aux HAVE > cop BE > aux BE

According to this, *ain't* occurs more often as the negative of HAVE, followed by BE as copula and BE as auxiliary. All this suggests that the use of *ain't* could be regarded as a strategy of simplification of the grammatical system since the same form is used for different persons and verbal forms according to Anderwald.[21]

If the occurrences of *ain't* are analysed according to the clause type system, I observe it appears in 222 declarative sentences, 21 interrogative and 38 tags. Both Cheshire and Anderwald noticed that the frequency of *ain't* in tags is significantly higher than the general average for BE and HAVE. However, in the present study this hypothesis is only partially confirmed as Table 2 shows.

(Insert table 2)

For BE, *ain't* occurs as the negative form in almost 30% of all cases in clauses other than tags versus almost 11% in tags. For HAVE, the opposite tendency is observed; *ain't* is used in 21% of all non-tags vs. 27.2% of all tag questions. This difference can

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[20] Cheshire, "Variation in the Use of *ain't*", 51; Anderwald *, Negation in Non-Standard*, 138.
[21] Ibid, 125.

be considered as statistically significant. In general terms, *ain't* occurs in clauses other than tags almost 25% while in tags this percentage is noticeably reduced to 13.2%.

3.2. Grammar and Sociolinguistic Constraints on Ain't

In the analysis of the data, I have also noted that a number of grammar and sociolinguistic factors may condition the presence of *ain't*. This means that the distribution and variation of this negative item are not totally free but respond to a series of variables that can be described as of a grammatical and sociolinguistic nature. Among the former, the following can be mentioned: subject of the clause, negative concord, idiomaticity, and existential-*there* constructions. Within the latter, the speaker's social and ethnic backgrounds stand out.

3.2.1. Grammar constraints

3.2.1.1. Clause subject. When considering the nature of the grammatical subject of the clauses that goes with *ain't*, it is observed that the latter tends to occur more frequently with first and second personal pronouns, *I* and *you*, than with the rest. Table 3 shows the general distribution of *ain't* according to the type of subject of the clause.

(Insert Table 3)

The first personal singular pronoun stands out clearly as the most frequently found, followed by *you* and *it*. In contrast, *we* and *they* seem to be the most uncommon. This means that there is a tendency on the speaker's part, consciously or unconsciously, to

associate *ain't* with *I*. Under the label of 'other', I registered cases which were impossible to classify, either because they were ambiguous or because the subject was unclear or omitted (13).

(13)   A. No, quite out far they were

         B. <unclear> ain't that hotel though. (B136301/15)

The previous group also includes existential sentences, which will be studied below in more detail, where dummy *there* could be classified as the grammatical subject, and clauses which contain a personal subject. It is also interesting to see the distribution of *ain't* with reference to the subject and the clause type, that is, comparing tags with non-tags. The table below shows this distribution.

(Insert table 4)

Table 4 above shows major differences between tags and non-tags in *ain't* clauses according to the clause subject parameter. This is particularly noticeable in the case of *I* and *you* where the number of non-tags containing these pronouns is 71 and 32 respectively versus 13 and 6 in tags. In the case of *they,* the great majority of the *ain't* clauses that take this pronoun as subject are non-tags. Finally, it is also important to point out the existence of one single case of a tag with *ain't* in which the subject is *it*. This may be explained by the fact that the invariant question tag *innit* has really taken its place. In fact, one could argue that *innit* could be analysed as a further development of *ain't it*? Although *innit* as a question tag does not necessarily agree with the subject

of the main verb in person, gender or number (14), it tends to agree with third-person singular *it* (15), followed in frequency by *you* (16).[22]

(14)　　Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. She dropped over, <u>innit</u>? (B134803/51)

(15)　　It's good, <u>innit</u>? (B132611/392)

(16)　　Saira, you're in my class, <u>innit</u>? (B132804/71)

Out of the 252 tokens of *innit* recorded in the whole corpus, in 152 of them this tag agreed with *it*, that is, in 60.3% of the total number.

3.2.1.2. Negative concord. The second factor that conditions the occurrence of *ain't* is negative concord. From a potential 52 registers, we find 33 occurrences in structures of this type.[23] This means a percentage of 61.5%, which can be regarded as statistically significant since in more than half of the negative concord structures this negative form occurs. In all cases *ain't* occupies first position. Witness the following:

(17)　　I <u>ain't</u> got no cash. (B135602/210)

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[22] This particular tag may be used to represent other operators apart from BE, such as HAVE and DO, and even any modal verb such as WILL, WOULD, SHOULD, CAN, COULD, MUST and MIGHT. Consider, for instance, the following: *She love her chocolate, innit*? (B132707/227); *You can have it for Friday, innit*? (B138301/332); *[Oh my god] I would just die, innit* (B140804/33). Moreover, this form does not even necessarily follow the ordinary reversal of polarity pattern generally found in tags. That is the case, for example, of *I wasn't talking about her, innit*? (B135207/2), *Didn't have a hair cut then, innit*? (B134803/141). For further information about this non-variant tag, see Andersen, and Stenström, Andersen and Hasund.

[23] In the whole corpus and once considered all the contexts of possible negative variation, a potential of 687 cases were identified; out of these, 178 were examples of negative concord. According to this, negative concord structures were present in 25% of the total.

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Out of these 32 negative concord sentences, *ain't* stands for the negative of HAVE in 20 of them (18) whereas in the remaining 12 *ain't* represents the negative of BE (19).

(18)   Shit! I <u>ain't</u> got no money. (B139614/92)

(19)   I <u>ain't</u> telling you no more. (B135805/138)

(Insert table 5)

As Table 5 shows, *no* is the negative that tends to collocate more often with *ain't,* followed at a long distance by *nothing* and *no more*. The examples with *no one* (20) and *nobody* (21) are marginal since they are restricted to only one occurrence in each case.

(20)   <u>Ain't</u> no one to look at. (B134804/50)

(21)   She <u>ain't </u>nobody to squash. (B132903/31)

As regards the pragmatic meanings associated with these negative concord constructions, I found that in many of them the speaker is simply reporting a negative fact or denying a previous statement. In this respect, these double negatives would not be different from the standard ones.

(22)   I know your mummy <u>ain't </u>got no lips. (B135001/27)

However, on other occasions, the speakers use them to strengthen a negative (23), to protest or complain against the established norms (24) and even to sound funny and to make fun of a friend or mate (25).

(23)   Mr <name> must think I'm becoming a goody goody <unclear>, but I

ain't no goody goody. I've got fucking detention man [I've gotta go]

(B140301/3)

(24)   > [(reading from wall) <reading>We're all rebels], ain't got no cause.

Total anarchy and gang wars. Kill the pigs. There ain't no laws. Let's all

go out and score some whores. (B132503/69)

(25)   Your Mum ain't got no arms but she still wants to wear gloves.

<shouting> Come on! Hurry up</>! (B135805/137)

Thus, through the use of the negative concord with *ain't,* the speaker in (23) wants

to make it clear that he does not want to behave himself and the fact of having detention

confirms it. In (24) Peter, one of the teenagers participating in the conversation, is

reading graffiti from the wall, which is clearly a message against the establishment. The

inclusion of the negative concord structure with *ain't* is not casual: the meaning of

protest and rebellion is thus reinforced. Finally, in (25) a boy and girl are teasing each

other. The double negative together with *ain't* helps to convey something funny to

laugh at.

3.2.1.3. Idiomatic expressions. In the analysis of the data, I have also noted that *ain't*

occurs very frequently as part of some idiomatic and fixed constructions. This is the

case of the following:

(26) I ain't got a clue man. (B133203/137)

(27) I ain't got a brain. (B132803/455)

(28) That <u>ain't</u> on. (B132911/63)

(29) <u>Ain't</u> even bothered to ask. (B135802/16)

The same is true for negative sentences introduced by *you* followed by *lot* as a vocative.

(30)   You lot <u>ain't</u> been in music, I have. (B132803/475)

(31)   You lot <u>aint</u> supposed to know I'm taping. (B132607/230)

Broadly speaking, speakers opt for *ain't* on almost two-thirds of the occasions when these particular idioms are used. This means that the occurrence of *ain't* is not by chance; on the contrary, it is connected with the idiomatic nature of these structures.

*3.2.1.4. Existential-*there *Constructions.* These constructions also favour the occurrence of *ain't*. This finding clearly contradicts Mazzon's view where she claims that *ain't* functions as an existential and "blocks the occurrence of *there*".[24]

The total number of existential-*there* clauses is 24, 13 of them containing *isn't*, 2 with *aren't* and 9 of them with *ain't*. This means that in more than one third of them this negative item is present. Verbal agreement with *ain't* is made both in the singular (32) and in the plural (33). This means that this negative item is not really conditioned by number; this finding also supports the hypothesis that considers this form as a regularisation strategy within the verbal system. In fact, in 5 of them the verb is in the plural whereas in the other 4 it is in the singular, which would suggest that it is not possible to speak of a particular pattern in this regard.

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[24] Mazzon, 119.

(32)   There <u>ain't</u> one decent man in it, only Michael Douglas. (B132901/89)

(33)   There <u>ain't</u> no laws. (B132503/569)

It should also be noted that 6 of these existential-*there* constructions with *ain't* are also negative concord structures.

(34)   No, there <u>ain't</u> nothing else I could do. (B133203/468)

From this, one could postulate the existence of a triple correlation between *ain't*, negative concord and existential *there*-clauses.

3.2.2. Sociolinguistic Factors

In a preliminary analysis, I assumed I was going to find interesting data in the use and distribution of this negative according to gender since Cheshire reports, as explained above, the existence of relevant differences between boys and girls.[25] However, my results reveal that this is not so clear in the case of the COLT corpus as the differences between boys and girls are not really relevant. We find a proportion of 56.4% on the boys' part versus 43.6% in the girls' group. Once the Chi-square test is applied to this distribution, the p value obtained is 0.211 (df =1), which clearly indicates that these differences are not statistically significant. In contrast with this, it has been found that speakers belonging to some particular ethnic communities tend to make more use of *ain't* than the rest of the speakers. It may then be possible to speak of a correlation

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[25] Cheshire, "Variation in the Use of *ain't*".

between *ain't* and the ethnic variable. In fact, eleven of the 30 recruits of the corpus were classified as belonging to various ethnic minorities. At this point, it is also important to bear in mind that 44,6 per cent of Britain's ethnic minority population live in London.[26] Furthermore, this assumption is reinforced by the fact that these speakers very often resort to other non-standard forms which are also characteristic of these varieties, such as the non-variant tag *innit* and a large number of other vernacular lexical and syntactic forms (*innit, dunno, nuffink, nope, gotta, ya, an't, don't used* for all persons,[27] negative concord, and use of vocatives such as *boy,*[28] etc.). The following extract can illustrate this point where speaker A in a short exchange makes use of the non-variant tag *innit*, a negative concord structure and the negative item *ain't*.

(35) A: Not bad, <u>innit</u>?

B: What's that?

A: I definitely have to wear a top cos <u>never </u>worn <u>no</u> tights on.

B: Mm tights <unclear>

A: Yeah but obviously I'm not going to waste time putting tights on.

A: <nv> bwlch </nv> Pardon

B: <unclear> the sixteen when I bought the fifteen one.

A: Who's Yvonne?

B: Can't even work like a jacket.

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[26] Stenström, Andersen and Hasund, 21.

[27] Examples of this would be the following: *It don't look no different to me* (B135207/58); *Third base he don't know nothing man*! (B135303/1); *He don't do nuffink right*. (B135306/134). As can be seen, they tend to be negative concord structures. For further information about this, see Anderwald, 151-70.

[28] Constructions such as *I'm getting trainers boy* (B132503/136) are quite common in the corpus. There are a large number of words used as vocatives, including some insult and swear words generally placed after the person to whom they refer. The following are the most common*: man*, *fool*, *bastard*, *cunt*, *bitch*, *wanker*, *dick*, *dickhead, dirty cat, tosser, prat, idiot, (stupid) cow*, etc. For example, *Shut up you fool* (B132614/179); *She goes no it ain't <unclear> you fucking stink, you dirty cat* (B132701/111); *I couldn't believe it man* (B132709/1). Chapter 4 of the study by Stenström, Andersen and Hasund provides interesting data about different lexical features of the vocabulary used by the teenagers in the corpus.

A: <unclear> see the bottom.

B: The what?

A: From the back I mean. <nv>laugh> </nv>

B: Oh I <u>ain't</u> wound it up after I put my shirt down there. (B134901/1-13)

3.3. The Pragmatics of Ain't

As explained at the beginning, this study is not only concerned with the analysis of the frequency and variation of *ain't* in the speech of these British teenagers but it also investigates the possible pragmatic motivations for its use. I assumed the existence of some explanations for its occurrence in the oral exchanges of the corpus.

It is true that on many occasions it is not possible to find a concrete reason for its presence as there are no apparent conditions or factors that may explain or justify it. However, on other occasions the existence of a particular purpose or motivation can be contended.

Relying entirely on the corpus transcriptions, the first thing to be noticed is that speakers in general terms do not seem to be very consistent in the use of this negative. At times one particular speaker may opt for the standard negatives while on other occasions they may prefer the non-standard ones. Witness the following:

(36)   A: I <u>ain't</u> looked in the notes.

B: Pardon

A: Haven't looked in the notes.

B: Well, you should do. (B133602/78)

The example above corresponds to a conversation between two boys talking about their literature classes. Speaker A is having difficulty understanding Shakespeare's poetry and speaker B is telling his friend about a book that contains notes that could help him to interpret the poems. The exchange provided starts at the point when A claims, using the non-standard negative form, that he has not seen these notes. As B does not seem to have listened to him or, rather has not understood him, A then resorts to the standard form, *haven't*. Hence, it could be argued that this shift from the non-standard to the standard negative could be explained as a strategy used by speaker A to make himself fully understood. Conversely, some speakers in the corpus make use of *ain't* when they want to insist on their point or they intend to reaffirm themselves on the question at issue. This can be clearly seen in (37) where two boys are about to leave the school without permission. To achieve this end, one of them suggests breaking a glass, possibly of a window or door; however, the other boy, Sh.[29], clearly contradicts him categorically by using the *ain't* form. In the rest of the conversation, there are no other occurrences of this negative. Thus, Sh. clearly makes use of the non-standard negative to strengthen his refusal and opposition to do that.

(37)   A: Oh yeah! True. Mind you … Miss …. No, Miss'd blame me cos she knows me … Sh.! No, you've gotta break the glass first.
B: No, you <u>ain't</u>. You just go, you just go <nv> mimicking sound effect <(nv> …. Let's push <unclear> (B132906/27)

It is also quite common to find examples in which one of the teenagers is telling a story, a joke or a personal anecdote to a group of friends. In order to make their

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[29] Full names are not provided to preserve the teenagers' anonymity.

narrative more realistic or to engage their audience more actively in what is being told, they reproduce literally some of the words a person said and to make it more lively and genuine they introduce the *ain't* form. The following two examples will serve to illustrate this point. In the first account, the speaker is telling a joke about vampires while in the second it is a story about a bear who liked drinking beer. In both cases, the verb *go* functions as a general quotative marker; in other words, it is used to introduce direct speech. It is contended that the verb *go* is used before direct quotations about twice as often as *say,* although there are important grammatical differences between them.[30]

> (38)   So he gives him a pint of water, he goes and sits with the other ones. And the other ones look at him, and hey sort of look in their cups and going …. Er, how comes we got blood … and you got water? <nv> laugh </nv> …. He goes, nah mate! <u>Ain't </u>you ever heard of tea bags? And he puts a Tampax in the water. (B132617/101)
>
> (39)   He goes if you don't touch that bear you're scared of it. He goes <shouting> I <u>ain't </u>scared of no bear! (B132701/17) .

Finally, some examples are also recorded in which the speaker in the middle of a conversation switches to the *ain't* negative as a strategy to converge with their interlocutors who seem to have this negative form in their grammatical system. This is the case, for example, of the text with code number B132617. It is a conversation held by three of the teenagers of the corpus outside their home. They start off the dialogue talking about something completely irrelevant but in a second part they start playing

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[30] Andersen, Stenström and Hasund, 118.

with their cassette recorders pretending they are interviewing other people and also simulating being interviewed. One of the girls, J., who very often uses *ain't* forms, starts by saying,

(40)   I <u>ain't</u> got speakers attached to me, you know [what I mean, S.!].
(B132617/22)

Later on, the other two participants in the conversation, S. and A., who rarely use this negative in their exchanges, are going to include this form naturally in their speech as if they have been influenced by J. and as a way to feel more accepted by the community of speakers. Thus S. says,

(41) She says no when she <u>ain't</u> got the bubble gum in her mouth. (B132617/65)

Four sentences further down, A. repeats the same words introducing a second negative form probably to intensify the negative message,

(42) <laughing> Because she <u>ain't</u> got <u>no</u> bubble gum in her mouth.
(B132617/80)

4. Conclusions

This study has shown that *ain't* deserves further research as it is quite a common negative in the everyday speech of teenagers, in spite of having been stigmatised for a long time. Furthermore, it stands out for its multiple function as it can be equivalent to

forms of BE and HAVE. Everything seems to indicate that it can be regarded as a regularisation strategy in the grammatical system. This would be in keeping with the general tendency of non-standard varieties of English to simplify their grammar.

The results obtained partially confirm previous findings since it is shown that in declarative and interrogative clauses *ain't* is much more common as the equivalent of negativised forms of BE, than it is of HAVE, whereas in question tags the opposite tendency is true, and the proportion of *ain't* as the negative of HAVE is noticeably higher. Moreover, *ain't* is much more commonly used as BE copular verb than as an auxiliary. In the case of HAVE, it mainly occurs as auxiliary in collocation with *got* while the number of occurrences recorded with HAVE expressing perfect aspect is much more limited.

The second part of this paper is no doubt the most interesting and innovative. The distribution and variation of *ain't* are explained on account of a series of grammatical and sociolinguistic variables. Thus, negative concord, existential-*there* constructions, a number of idiomatic expressions and particular subject pronouns favour the use of this negative item. Furthermore, the speaker's ethnicity also plays a role in the distribution of this negative; evidence is found that supports the hypothesis that those speakers belonging to particular ethnic groups make more frequent use of *ain't*. This could be interpreted as a form to strengthen in-group solidarity within their network. Moreover, this non-standard negative also correlates with a wide range of forms typical of these ethnic varieties, such as the non-variant tag *innit*, the use of certain vocative expressions (i.e. *boy*), negative concord constructions and vernacular pronunciations of some words (i.e. *nuffink*, *dunno*, *ya*, *gotta).*

The final part of the study is concerned with the pragmatics of *ain't*. It shows that its occurrence is not always casual as at times there are some pragmatic motivations

associated with it. Thus, some speakers of the corpus opt for this negative when they intend to strengthen a negative statement or they want to make a story or joke they are telling more realistic and dramatic. Finally, extracts of the corpus are registered where some of the speakers use the *ain't* form to adapt themselves to the discourse of other speakers who generally use this negative in their speech.

Further work is needed to study in depth some of these questions. The use of additional spoken corpora of not only British English varieties but also of American English, and even of other dialects, could easily provide supplementary information to compare and complement the findings obtained in the present paper.

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