

Ain't it always the same?

A Diachronic Corpus-Based Study on Non-Standard Negation in British TV Shows

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The use of non-standard negation in present-day British English has been associated with the vernacular (cf. Cheshire 1981) and with regional dialects (cf. Anderwald 2003; Cheshire 1981). Previous studies identify “a general trend in nonstandard dialects toward the simplification of linguistic systems” (Cheshire 1981: 366). This explains the increased use of *ain't* in the language of native speakers of English (cf. Anderwald 2003: 520), as *ain't* can stand for five negated forms of BE and HAVE, namely, *am not*, *are not*, *is not*, *have not*, and *has not* (cf. Anderwald 2003: 517; Cheshire 1981: 366).

Previous studies, like Cheshire (1981) and Anderwald (2003), analyze the phenomenon in spontaneous speech. However, due to the rise of modern media, such as television, an increasing amount of the language native speakers are exposed to is scripted. This raises the question how non-standard negation is used in this genre.

This paper analyzes how the use of *ain't* is represented in British TV shows of the 1960s, 1980s, and 2010s and whether its use has undergone significant diachronic changes. Taking a quantitative approach, we collected a total of 4,145 tokens of *ain't* (241 from the 1960s, 834 from the 1980s, and 3,069 from the 2010s) from the *TV Corpus* (Davies 2008-). We coded the data for a negative concord, i.e., whether the sentence contains double or triple negation, such as in (1). Furthermore, we look at whether *ain't* is preceded or followed by a personal pronoun (2), and if *ain't* is part of a question tag (3).

(1) **Ain't nobody** else here.

(2) **I ain't** doing it.

(3) He's your son, **ain't he?**

The aim of this study is to investigate whether scripted TV language mirrors the increase of *ain't* found in spontaneous speech and whether it is therefore representative of spontaneous speech in this respect.

References

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