Journal of Pragmatics 130 (2018) 51–66

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Negative auxiliaries and absent expletives in Texas vernacular English

William Salmon

University of Minnesota Duluth, 1201 Ordean Court, Duluth, MN 55812, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 4 December 2017
Received in revised form 12 April 2018
Accepted 12 April 2018

Keywords:
Negative inversion
There-existentials
Definiteness effects
Expletive subjects

ABSTRACT

Drawing on thought from sociolinguistics and theoretical and historical pragmatics, this paper argues that Negative Inversion (NI) sentences such as *Can't nobody beat them* are the diachronic descendants of Modal Existential (ME) sentences such as *There can't nobody beat them*. The expletive subject of the ME has undergone a deletion process in the twentieth century, leaving behind what is now considered to be the NI. This diachronic understanding enables a clear account of the so-called "definiteness effects" (Milsark, 1974) associated with the present NI. The paper makes a significant contribution here to the empirical understanding of the construction as well. It has been universally maintained since Labov et al. (1968) that NIs prohibit definite subjects, much like Milsark's characterization of *there*-existential sentences. I show, however, that definite subjects are accepted, but that they are restricted by pragmatic constraints: the same ones, it turns out, that Ward and Birner (1995) have shown to constrain the appearance of definite subjects in *there*-existentials.

1. Introduction

The Negative Inversion (NI) construction in (1) has received significant attention over the years in the syntax and sociolinguistics/dialectology literature, beginning with Labov et al. (1968) in their discussion of such sentences in African American Vernacular English.[1]

(1) Can't nobody beat 'em. [Labov et al. (1968)]
'Nobody can beat them'.

The construction has been treated in various frameworks with various goals over the last five decades, and it has been discussed extensively in Southern and Appalachian Englishes as well. There is general agreement on the basic structure of the sentence, and Matyiku and McCoy (2011/2015), writing for the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project (YGDP), sum this up succinctly:

E-mail address: william.salmon@aya.yale.edu.

[1] NIs have gone by various other names in previous literature, including Non-canonical Negative Inversion (White-Sustaita, 2010), Verb-initial Negative Inversion (Horn, 2015). Popular Negative Inversion (Blanchette, 2015), Negative Auxiliary Inversion (Green, 2014; Matyiku, 2017). The "Negative Inversion" of the present paper also appears in Labov et al. (1968), Labov (1972), Weldon (1994), Sells et al. (1996), Foreman (1999), and elsewhere.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.04.003
0378-2166/

> Negative inversion is a phenomenon in which a declarative sentence begins with a negated auxiliary or modal, such as *can't*, *ain't*, or *won't*, followed by a quantificational (or indefinite) subject, such as *nobody*.

Most treatments assume this description as a starting point for both AAVE and non-AAVE sentences.

In the present paper, I show that this empirical description, which has been maintained since Labov et al. (1968) for AAVE and all Southern varieties, does not hold for NIs in Texas vernacular English (TVE). For example, I show that in this variety, definite subjects are allowed in the construction; yet, they are subject to pragmatic constraints that conceal this fact outside of the proper contexts. I then show that these constraints are the same as those that restrict the appearance of definite subjects in *there*-existential sentences. A further question in the literature with respect to NIs is their relation to Modal Existential sentences, which are quite similar, but for the presence of an expletive subject in the latter. Relying on an apparent-time analysis of 121 speakers, as well as structural similarities of the two sentence types, I argue that the NI is in fact a diachronic descendant of the ME, which appears to have undergone expletive deletion in this variety over the course of the 20th century. I argue as well that this deletion can be understood straightforwardly as motivated by Jespersen's (1917) observation that negatives tend to occur as early as possible in a sentence.

Before doing these things, however, it should be mentioned that the account given here is not meant to hold for the related NIs in AAVE.[2] While the constructions in the two varieties overlap to a large degree, as is made clear in Salmon (2017), they diverge significantly enough that they should ultimately receive different treatments. Similarly, it is possible that the present account does not extend to other varieties of non-AAVE Southern US Englishes. My preliminary explorations suggest that this is not in fact the case; however, further research is needed before that claim can be advanced.

1.1. Empirical description of NIs

NIs require a modal or finite auxiliary to appear sentence initially in either present or preterite form. Most of the prototypical English modals are allowed, though *may/might*, *shall* appear to be disallowed, and lexical verbs are similarly disallowed, as in (2a-d).[3]

(2) a. *__Mayn't/?Mightn't__ nobody be in there.
b. *__Shan't__ nobody pass.
c. *__Ran__ nobody that race.
d. *__Slept__ nobody in that bed.

Initial modals must also be in negated form. Non-inflected forms, as in (3a-b), are unacceptable.

(3) a. *__Can not__ anybody lift that rock.
b. *__Should not__ anybody read that magazine.

NIs are also possible with semi-modals, such as *need*, *ought*, and *had better*.

(4) a. __Needn't__ anybody go over there anymore.
b. __Oughtn't__ nobody to'a done that.
c. __Hadn't/Hain't__ nobody __better__ call me again.

Importantly for the present work, NIs have been assumed to require an indefinite or quantified, non-referential subject, and to exclude, for example, definite subjects. This has been maintained in the literature since Labov et al. (1968), and is generally assumed to be identical for AAVE and other Southern Englishes. I take explicit issue with this assumption in the next sections of the paper, illustrating that it does not hold for NIs in Texas English.

2. Locating Negative Inversions in Texas English

Though the term “Texas English” or “Texas vernacular English” is used in the present paper, NIs cannot be identified as strictly a regional feature of non-AAVE Texas English. This is not enough of a specification, as it is not the case that all speakers of Texas English use NIs. Rather, NIs seem to belong to the speech of the Texas working class, in informal or familiar situations, and they seem to be used by at least Caucasian, Hispanic, and African American speakers.[4] It is not the purpose of the present essay to demonstrate the precise demographic strata or distribution—for example, there is likely variation across generations as well as urban/rural dimensions to the question as well. For the present purposes it is enough to assume NIs exist in the

[2] This is an important point to make, as the literature on Negative Inversions often assumes that the constructions are identical, or at least very close, across AAVE and non-AAVE Southern US Englishes.

[3] The examples in (2a-b) are likely unacceptable as the modals in question are not compatible with inflected negation in general in the relevant dialect.

[4] Matyiku (2017: 10) reports usages occurring across classes of Texas speakers.

informal speech of many working-class Texans and that they also exist to a lesser extent in the speech of the middle and upper classes as well. The situation is directly comparable to Wolfram and Schilling's (2016: 34) discussion of the distribution of "regional" dialect features across social classes in Appalachia. With respect to Appalachian English features, they write: "[W]e have to be careful to note that these features are used at different rates among different social groups in Appalachia and may not be used at all by those of higher social status." This description holds as well for the NI constructions of the present paper.

The following section turns to consider the placement of definite subjects in the NI sentences, as well as the pragmatic restrictions that constrain their appearance. I rely upon my intuitions as a native speaker of Texas vernacular English as well as the judgments of an additional 10 native speakers, who range in age from 35 to 78. This group is evenly divided by gender and are of comparable social class.

2.1. *Definiteness effects and Negative Inversions*

Since Milsark (1974), there has been a general assumption in the syntax and semantics literature that an assortment of NP types, including those with definite marking, are prohibited in the post-expletive subject position of *there*-existential sentences. According to Milsark, the following definite NPs are excluded [Milsark's (64)]:

(5) *There is {the dog, John's dog, that dog, John, him/he} in the room.

Over the last four decades, this data has been treated to an immense range of syntactic and semantic approaches.[5] Since at least Martin (1992), it has been believed that NIs pattern in an almost identical fashion to Milsark's existential sentences. Here again, in stronger language than the quote above, are Matyiku and McCoy (2011/2015), writing for the Yale Grammatical Diversity Project:

> Definite subjects such as pronouns, proper names, and DPs headed by definite or possessive elements are not possible, so none of the following are allowed:
>
> *Don't the police break up a fight.
> *Won't they catch us.
> *Wouldn't Sally and Jean help the poor man.

The examples cited here from the YGDP are African American Vernacular English, but the YGDP intends them to exemplify the grammaticality pattern of Southern Englishes in general. To be more specific to the non-AAVE varieties in question in the present work, we can turn to Martin (1992: 66) on non-AAVE Southern Englishes, who writes that "the Definiteness Condition ([…] which prohibits the use of definite NPs after pleonastic subject constructions) operates in the case of negative inversion constructions". Similarly, Foreman (1999: 10), with respect to West Texas English, writes that "the restriction against Definite subjects in NI sentences still needs to be explained". This grammaticality pattern has been the starting point for every researcher up to and including the most recent work on the subject, which appears to be Matyiku (2017) and Blanchette and Collins (to appear).[6] The present work is the first to argue that definite subjects are not ruled out in this construction and that there are systematic, pragmatic reasons for why this is the case.

In the previous literature, almost without exception, example sentences of NIs have been given in isolation, with no supporting context and no indication of intonation, stress, and the like. The examples are bare sentences with an ungrammatical marking, much like those in the YGDP quote above. As is argued in the present work, though, the constraints at work are pragmatic, meaning that their application can be supported or defeated in different contexts. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that the acceptability of definite subjects in the construction would be missed over the years.

The only exception of which I am aware, in which it is suggested that the prohibition against definite subjects might be more complicated than it seems, is found in Green (2014) with respect to AAVE. In the context of a larger discussion, Green provides one example, given in (6) below, and suggests that the subject requirements of NIs in AAVE are more complicated than we have been led to believe over the years. As this is not Green's focus in the article, however, the topic is then left with no further comment.

[5] See Francez (2007) for a detailed discussion of previous literature on the grammar and use of existential sentences.

[6] Foreman (1999), Matyiku (2017), Blanchette and Collins (to appear), are syntactic accounts focusing directly on the status of subjects in NIs. These accounts attempt to explain the putative prohibition against definite subjects as a result of various scopal interactions posited between the subjects and the negation. For example, Matyiku (1) writes:

> The types of subjects that are possible in [NIs] behave uniformly in their scopal interaction with negation. This discovery furthers our understanding of why subject restrictions arise.

The details of the aforementioned scopal accounts need not concern us here, however, as the more fundamental claim is being made that NIs actually do allow definite subjects. As such, NIs are actually different empirical objects than what the syntactic accounts mentioned above sought to describe.

(6) Speaker A: Many old fraternity guys showed up for homecoming. I think even Vince Jackson was there.
Speaker B: No, didn't no Vince Jackson show up!

Green (131) describes the example like this:

> Although B's sentence can also have a nonreferential reading of *no Vince Jackson*, such that no one showed up by that name (reading 1), the [NI] construction can indeed refer to the nonappearance of a specific old fraternity guy *Vince Jackson* (reading 2).
>
> There are obviously different flavors of [NI], and I do not want to confound the issues here, where the focus is on negative concord (i.e., NegAux … Neg Quantifier) or what I have been referring to as canonical [NI]. However, it is worth noting that the subject position in [NI] is not limited to negative quantifiers or non-referential DPs.

To my knowledge, this is the first and only time that the definite subject prohibition has been breached in the literature, and it is noteworthy that the example is accompanied by a richer discourse context.

In the presentation of examples to come, I follow the work of Ward and Birner (1995) on *there*-existential sentences. In this work, Ward and Birner show that contrary to most of the literature on *there*-existential sentences, definite subject NPs are in fact allowed. They argue further that the definiteness effect for *there*-existentials claimed in Milsark (1974) is actually not a real effect, and is instead epiphenomenal. Thus, in Ward and Birner's account, subjects—or post-verbal NPs—in existential sentences are allowed to be grammatically definite as long as they are pragmatically construable as being hearer-new.[7] I argue that the definite subjects allowed in NIs are constrained by precisely this same pragmatic restriction: i.e. they must be construable as hearer-new. Here are Ward and Birner (728) on the pragmatic constraints on definites in existential sentences:

> [For] an entity to be hearer-old entails that the speaker believe or assume it to be present within the hearer's knowledge store, while for an entity to be hearer-new entails that it not be assumed to be present within the hearer's knowledge store. As we will show, however, it is possible for an entity to be treated by the speaker as being hearer-old in one respect yet hearer-new in another. […] We will discuss a number of circumstances in which an entity may be both hearer-new and uniquely identifiable, supporting our claim that definiteness and postverbal position in *there*-sentences are subject to distinct discourse constraints. […]
>
> Specifically, we have identified five distinct cases in which formally definite yet hearer-new NPs may felicitously occur in *there*-sentences. In each case, the definiteness of the NP was found to be licensed by the unique identifiability of the referent, while the *there*-construction is licensed by the hearer-new status of the referent.

The five distinct cases of definite but hearer-new NPs mentioned above are the following:

(i) Hearer-old entities treated as hearer-new
(ii) Hearer-new tokens of hearer-old types
(iii) Hearer-old entities newly instantiating a variable
(iv) Hearer-new entities with uniquely identifying descriptions
(v) False definites

As with Ward and Birner's definite subjects in *there*-existentials, the definite subjects found in NIs can also be shown to fit naturally into each of these classes. Let's consider them one at a time, with first an existential example from Ward and Birner followed by an NI.[8]

Group (i), *hearer-old entities treated as hearer-new*, includes what are commonly referred to as "reminder *there*-sentences," with their example given below in (7) [Ward and Birner's (14a)]. The idea here is that the entity in question has been previously evoked, but "there are sufficient grounds for the speaker to believe that the entity has been momentarily forgotten" (730).

(7) Mr. Rummel: Well, didn't the designer of the orbiter, the manufacturer, develop maintenance requirements and documentation as part of the design obligation?
Mr. Collins: Yes, sir. And that is what we showed in the very first part, before the Pan Am study. **There were those other orbiter maintenance and requirement specifications**, which not only did processing of the vehicle, but in flow testing, pad testing, and what have you, but also accomplished or was in lieu of an inspection plan.

[7] Ward and Birner attribute the concept "hearer-new" in general to Prince (1992).
[8] Ward and Birner's data is taken from a corpus of 1.3 million words of "transcribed oral data drawn from transcripts of The Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident" (723).

It is straightforward to compose NIs with similar definite subjects and analysis, as in (8).

(8) A: Man, of everything that coulda gone wrong today. Tire blows out. Then I lose my keys. It's cold as hell outside, and the damn oil heater's busted.

[Phone rings. *A* answers, repeats the same story to caller.]

A [to caller]: Yeah, I was just telling Bobby how messed up it's been. First I had a damn blow out, then I lost my keys!

B [interjecting]: **Didn't that oil heater end up comin' on either**!

As Ward and Birner explain, "The use of the definite in conjunction with the *there*-construction reflects the treatment of the referent as simultaneously hearer-new and uniquely identifiable. Indeed, it is precisely this mixed marking that leads the hearer to infer that the utterance is a reminder" (731). The same intuition clearly holds for the reminder NI in (8). In addition, it is straightforward to find NI cases where there are no grounds for the "speaker to believe that the entity has been momentarily forgotten." In such cases, the definite subject is ruled out. This is what we see in (9), in which the subject referent in question was evoked in the directly preceding utterance and so the "reminder" function is misplaced, rendering the definite subject infelicitous.

(9) A: Man, of everything that coulda gone wrong today. Tire blows out. Phone's dead. Cold as hell outside.
B: Oh yeah. **#Didn't that phone work either.**

In (9), it is unlikely that the phone has been momentarily forgotten in such a short span. As such, it is difficult to treat the referent as hearer-new, which gives rise to either infelicity or to the possibility of the speaker's intention to remind the hearer of a different malfunctioning phone.

Group (ii), *hearer-new tokens of hearer-old types*, includes NPs with a series of adjectives indicating that a type is known (such as, *same, usual, regular, traditional, obligatory, expected*, etc). As Ward and Birner note, the NPs in question have dual-reference: one to a type and one to a token. If the type is old or uniquely identifiable, this allows for the definite use, while at the same time, the new instantiation or token of the type, allows for the existential use in an example like (10) [Ward and Birner's (21)]:

(10) There was **the usual crowd** at the beach today.

It is clear that "the usual crowd" could refer to the exact same group of people that is always at the beach; or, it could refer to the fact there is always a crowd of people, whatever their identity, at the beach. It is this dual reference, and dual dependence on the new and old/uniquely identifiable, that licenses the definite use. It is straightforward to find similar examples with the NI and ME in (11).

(11) A: Hey baby, y'all have a good time tonight? How was the bar?
B: Not too bad. **Couldn't the usual crowd** get in 'cause of the cover charge, so there was a lot of room. Got the best table in the house.

As Ward and Birner write of *there*-existentials, "The definite is licensed by the identifiability of the (hearer-old) type, while the *there*-construction is licensed by the hearer-new instantiation of that type" (732). The same is true in the NI in (11). We can alter (11) a bit, however, so that the NI in question bears a subject NP that is both identifiable and hearer-old, and the results are infelicitous, as in (12).

(12) A: Hey baby, y'all have a good time tonight? How was the bar?
B: Not too bad. **#Didn't the usual bar** fill up 'cause of the cover charge' so there was a lot of room. Got the best table in the house.

Here, the pragmatic requirements are not met, and felicity suffers predictably.

Group (iii), *hearer-old entities newly instantiating a variable*, is home to the most frequently discussed definite subject in existential sentences: i.e. the "list reading," as in (13) [Ward and Birner's (30b)]. The idea here is that the rhetorical structure of the list renders entities that might be hearer-old as new; i.e., they are new in the manner in which they are enumerated on the list.

(13) Speaker A: Who was at the party last night?
Speaker B: There was **John, Mary, Fred, Susan, Hilda, Xavier, and Ethel**.

Here we see that John, Mary, and so on are known to Speaker A, and so hearer-old. However, their arrangement on the list puts them into a relation that is new to Speaker A, and so they qualify as hearer-new in this individual situation. Specifically, as Ward and Birner write, "the individuals constitute hearer-new instantiations of the variable in some salient open proposition" (734). It is this fact of instantiating the variable slot of the open proposition that licenses the definite NP in that position. Comparable list-reading examples with NIs and MEs are straightforward and are acceptable for the reason just mentioned.

(14) A: Hey man, how was y'all's meetin' last night? Y'all have a good turnout?
B: Yeah, it was pretty good. Bob and Mary, Jenny and Doug, was all there. **Couldn't Tommy, Darin, or little Mikey come out**, but we still had a pretty good time.

Relatedly, we can find less felicitous NIs of this type when the necessary context of the open proposition is missing, as in (15). In (14) above, A and B set up the expectation of a list and a salient open proposition. There is no similar expectation in (15), which renders the definite subject NP infelicitous.

(15) I had kind of a boring time last night. **#Couldn't Tommy, Darin, or little Mikey come out to the party I went to.**

What this suggests is that it is not the "list form" per se that licenses the definite NP, but is rather the manner in which the sentence fills the open proposition.

It is worth mentioning here as well that Green's (2014) "no Vince Jackson" example from above in (6) also fits in this category. Ward and Birner describe the list example this way: "the individuals listed are uniquely identifiable; however, their membership in the set being enumerated is new to the hearer" (734). This describes the Vince Jackson example as well. In the example, the first speaker identifies Vince Jackson and locates him within a particular set (i.e. the set of those who showed up for homecoming). The second speaker then adds Vince Jackson to a different set (i.e. the set of those who did not show up for homecoming). As such, Vince Jackson's "membership in the set being enumerated is new to the hearer."

Group (iv), *hearer-new entities with uniquely identifying descriptions*, does not "depend on the prior context for felicity" (735). Rather, the NPs in question contain enough descriptive content to render them felicitous without a co-text or situation. Among other forms, this group includes formal superlatives (16a) and deictics (16b) [Ward and Birner's (38a-b)].

(16) a. There was **the tallest boy** in my history class at the party last night.
b. You can see the runway and the HUD that overlays the Edwards runway, and then **there is this line** which comes out to the outer glide slope aim point.

Deictic examples, such as demonstratives, are actually some of the most facile definite subjects in NIs, with examples such as (17). These in-situation demonstratives clearly pick out hearer-new entities, but entities that are at the same time uniquely identifiable due to the demonstration in the context.

(17) [Looking at the racing form, picking horses on which to bet, pointing at each horse as she speaks.]
Won't **this ☞ one or that ☞ one** end up finishin' the race.

Superlatives are similarly straightforward in NIs, as in (18).

(18) A: Hey man, how's that work comin' on your back porch? You get them cracks all sealed up?
B: Yeah, it's sealed up tight. **Cain't even the littlest mouse** get hisself through there now.

For this group, Ward and Birner note that NPs with modifying relative clauses can be felicitous in existentials, in which "the relative clause serves to fully specify the referent […]" resulting in unique identifiability (737), as in (19) [Ward and Birner's (39)].

(19) There are **those who would claim** that computers will take over the earth within the next decade.

There are similarly straightforward NP-relative clause examples in NIs.

(20) [Two friends talking about their dates from the previous night.]
Speaker A: What a sweetheart he was. He wouldn't let me pay for anything. Dinner. Movie. He covered it all. I tried to pay my part, but he wouldn't allow it.
Speaker B: Well, I don't know where you found that one. **Couldn't the guy I was with be bothered to pay for ANY thing.**

Finally for this group, Ward and Birner note that cataphoric references are allowed, as in (21).

(21) There are **the following reasons** for this bizarre effect …. [Ward and Birner's (38c)]

Cataphoric references are similarly allowed in NIs, as in (22).

(22) [In a military boot camp setting. The sergeant comes into the barracks to share the results of a field test. Everyone snaps to attention. The sergeant barks:]
Okay, listen up, you maggots! Didn't **the following losers** pass the exam! Salmon, Park, Turner! Get your butts in my office. Now!

For all of the different cases in this group, the key fact is, as Ward and Birner point out, "the unique identification justifies the definite, while the hearer-new status of the referent of the postverbal NP licenses the *there*-sentence" (737). With the NIs, we can test this by observing cases where the forms in question don't uniquely identify a referent. For example, in (20), above, the post-modifying relative uniquely identifies the date in question. A sentence of the same form can be rendered much less felicitous by weakening the identificational content, as in (23).

(23) [Two friends talking about their dates from the previous night.]
Speaker A: What a sweetheart he was. He wouldn't let me pay for anything. Dinner. Movie. He covered it all. I tried to pay my part, but he wouldn't allow it.
Speaker B: Well, I don't know where you found that one. #**Couldn't the guy I know be bothered to pay for ANY thing.**

This fact illustrates once again that it is not the form of the definite NPs at issue here, but rather its relation to the discourse context and the common ground assumptions of the speaker and addressee.

The last group Ward and Birner identify are the *false definites*. These are forms which are grammatically definite but are cognitively indefinite, and introduce or "refer to a specific entity that the speaker believes is unknown to the hearer."[9] They provide examples such as those in (24a-d) [Ward and Birner's (43) and (44)].

(24) a. One day last year on a cold, clear crisp afternoon, **there was this huge sheet of ice** in the street.
b. There are **all sorts** of other false definites.
c. There is **the most curious discussion** of them in our paper.
d. There is **every reason to study them.**

There is no expectation that the hearer will be aware of the huge sheet of ice in (24a), nor would anyone take the speaker to believe the discussion of false definites in the paper is the most curious of a set, as a literal superlative. As such, these forms are only grammatically definite, but they are cognitively indefinite.

It is possible to find false definites of this sort in NIs as well. For example, in (25) we see a superlative form that is not used as a literal superlative, similar to (24c), but instead has an intensification function.

[9] See Prince (1992).

(25) [Police officer A is watching an interrogation through the one-way interrogation mirror at the police station. The person being interrogated refuses to talk, and the interrogating officer stands up quickly, spilling his cup of coffee on his lap in the process. Officer A turns to Officer B, who has not been paying attention.]

Officer A:	Well, cain't **the best discussion** be goin' on in THERE.
Officer B:	Huh? What? What you mean?

It is evident that a wide range of definite subjects are allowed in the NI constructions, contra all the literature on the subject since Labov et al. (1968). There are many different questions to ask in light of this observation. I will ask three of them here. The first is, is this a new development; i.e. has the prohibition against definite subjects gradually bleached out over the years? And if so, why? The second question is, is there a rhyme or reason for which definites are allowed in subject position? The third question regards the relation between the "copula" *there*-existentials that Ward and Birner discuss and the Modal Existentials, such as *there can't nobody lift that rock*, which is hypothesized here to be the syntactic etymon of the NI.

There is insufficient historical data to determine when definite subjects became possible in NIs, so there is no conclusive answer to the first question in that respect. It is possible that the construction's prohibition against definite subjects has weakened over the years as a result of some kind of discourse pressure—perhaps in favor of becoming a general negation strategy. On the other hand, the feeling that there is still a strong prohibition against definite subjects is very real. Not just any definite in any context is allowed in the construction. This supports the belief that it's not a general weakening of the prohibition that is being observed, but that instead the distribution is systematic.

The second question, which asks if there is a rhyme or reason to which definite subjects are allowed, can receive a positive answer—the NI allows definite subjects when they do not clash with the pragmatic and cognitive constraints set out above in Ward and Birner's discussion of *there*-existentials. This positive answer also goes some distance toward answering the first question raised above, as to whether the acceptance of definite subjects is a new phenomenon. I believe it is not. As I will argue below, the NI is essentially a Modal Existential sentence that has lost its expletive over time. The modified definiteness effect that we see with the NI today is very likely just the same modified definiteness effect that has been associated with its ME etymon all along.

The third question regards the relation between the copula-*there*-existential and the Modal Existential. Why did the expletive delete from the latter, rendering NIs such as (26a), but not the former, that would have resulted in an expletiveless existential, such as (26b)?[10]

(26) a. ~~There~~ Can't nobody lift that rock.
b. ~~There~~ *Is a man in the house.

I argue in the following section that the difference between (26a) and the impossible (26b) is in the negation, and in what Jespersen (1917: 5) laid out as an organizing principle of language: namely, that "there is a natural tendency in language […] to place the negative first". Discussion of this question follows in the next section, which takes a close look at the Modal Existential and its reflex, the Negative Inversion.[11]

[10] An anonymous reviewer notes that there can be expletiveless existentials in English, such as:

(i) 'z two cats on the counter. (C.f. There's two cats on the counter)
(ii) A: There is no cat on the counter.
B: Is too!

These examples do not strike me as the same thing described above with respect to (26b). For example, in (i), the reduced clitic form of the auxiliary is similar to what it would be if the expletive were phonologically present. It is likely that (i) is simply an instance of allegro speech deletion. Note that a fully deleted expletive as in (26b) is clearly unacceptable. Regarding (ii), it seems likely that it this is also an instance of interactional conversational deletion and so not a true expletiveless existential, as we might find in Hebrew, for example, as described in Francez (2007).

[11] A second anonymous reviewer notes that the analysis provided in the present paper makes no mention of two phenomena that researchers have discussed with respect to NIs. The first phenomenon at issue is the relation between NIs and their non-inverted counterparts with quantificational subjects, such as *Didn't everybody eat* vs. *Everybody didn't eat*. According to Foreman (1999) and Matyiku (2017), the second sentence is ambiguous between readings with wide-scope *every* and wide-scope negation, while the NI is believed to harbor no such ambiguity. These analyses posit syntactic movement motivated by resolution of this ambiguity: i.e. the NI is derived to be a non-ambiguous variant. This is not a goal of the present analysis for two reasons: First, I believe that the ambiguity raised by the anonymous reviewer is not actually as described. With the proper intonation, stress, and context, both sentences can have both readings, and I show this quite clearly in in-progress work. Second, accounting for different scope-induced readings is generally a theory-internal goal of syntactic movement accounts, which is beyond the scope of the present work.

The second phenomenon raised by the anonymous reviewer is that no mention is made of the apparent prohibition against quantificational *few* and *some* in NI subjects. However, Salmon (2017) shows that *some* can appear in NI subject NPs. Quantificational *few*, on the other hand, as the reviewer notes, does not appear in NI subject NPs. However, this form is a positive polarity item, [See Israel (2011: 87)], that does not appear under negation in any context. Accordingly, Matyiku (2017) notes that *few* does not appear in negative *there*-existentials, as in **There aren't few students outside* [Matyiku, Fn. 44]. It is not surprising to see it blocked from appearing under negation in NIs as well.

3. The Modal Existential and Negative Inversion constructions

In this section I argue that the expletive subject of the Modal Existential—i.e. *there* or *they*—has been lost in Texas vernacular English (and likely other varieties as well) over the course of the 20th century.[12] This hypothesis provides a straightforward account of the definiteness effects described in Section 1 above, and it is supported by the quantitative results of a cross-generational survey, reported on below. Here are the basic facts of the ME construction.

Ball (1991) and von Fintel (1992) trace the roots of the construction through Middle English (27a) and suggest it ultimately descends from the Old English in (27b).[13]

(27) a. But kynge Arthur was so courageous that **there might no maner of knight** lette hym to lande.
'But King Arthur was so courageous that there could no manner of knight prevent him from land'.
b. **Ne mai no man Dese word seggen** Danne he godes milce biseco̸.
'There may no man these words say when he beseeches god's mercy'.

In the US, currently, MEs are believed to exist only in Southern or Appalachian varieties; although, it is likely that these sentences had a wider distribution in the past. For example, (28) is found in the novel *Madelon*, by Mary Wilkins Freeman of Randall, Massachusetts, published in 1896. Freeman has been described as "a local-color realist […] in the tradition of New England women's writing" Reichardt (1997).

(28) […] but I guess **there didn't nobody have any knife**, and I guess he'll git out of prison pretty soon.

It is also believed that MEs do not occur in contemporary AAVE (see e.g. Martin and Wolfram (1998), Green (2014) and references therein), but that NIs do occur in AAVE. MEs are known, however, to have existed in older varieties of AAVE, as tokens are found in ex-slave narratives reported in Bailey et al. (1991).

MEs have been discussed only occasionally over the years in the sociolinguistics and dialectology literature, such as Feagin (1979) and Montgomery and Hall (2004). The semantic and syntactic description following below, however, comes primarily from Zanuttini and Bernstein (2014), who refer to the sentences as "Transitive Expletive Constructions," though I will use the terminology "Modal Existential," which comes from Ball (1991) and von Fintel (1992). Consider the following examples, from Zanuttini and Bernstein.[14]

(29) a. There can't nobody ride him.
b. There wouldn' nothin' go down through there.
c. […] but there didn't anyone want to leave their church.

Zanuttini and Bernstein (147–148) include the following descriptive properties, which are quoted below almost verbatim:

(i) co-occurrence of a pronominal anaphoric subject with quantificational associates like *nobody*, *nothing*, *anyone*, *many people*, *no girl*, etc.
(ii) only a pronominal anaphoric element can occur in the position preceding the modal; a lexical noun phrase cannot;
(iii) the associate typically co-occurs with only one of two pronominal elements, namely *they* or *there*;
(iv) the subjects always occur in the presence of a modal (like *can't*, *couldn't*, *won't*) or finite auxiliary (like *didn't*, *ain't*);
(v) the subjects under investigation occur in sentences in which the modal or finite auxiliary carries the negative morpheme *n't*.

[12] Montgomery (2006) writes that expletive *they* in general "can be traced to Ulster and ultimately to Scotland in the seventeenth century and has been in variation with expletive *there* for 400 years". He hypothesizes that *they*'s presence in the American South is due to immigration from Ulster and Scotland, as opposed to resulting from a post-vocalic deletion process of [ɹ] in Southern and Appalachian dialects. For present purposes, I note only that my older participants in Texas state that expletive *they* is common and that there is no meaning difference between it and expletive *there*. My suspicions are that there is a stylistic difference, perhaps of formality. This will require further research to determine though.

[13] von Fintel (1992) cites *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory as source for (27a), and *Trinity Homily* 5 27.32–33 for example (27b).

[14] Zanuttini and Bernstein cite Feagin (1979) and Montgomery and Hall (2004) as sources for these examples.

von Fintel (1992) is concerned with similar data and provides the syntactic description in (30), describing the sentences as "very uniform and idiosyncratic".

(30) *there* + modal auxiliary + negative subject + verb + object

As can be seen from the previous data and empirical descriptions of the Modal Existential, it bears a striking resemblance to the Negative Inversion. So similar are the two, that my test participants as well as those of Zanuttini and Bernstein (2014) could detect no difference in meaning or use of the MEs and NIs. There is, however, a crucial demographic difference in the results of my survey participants: namely, older participants accepted the ME sentences, while younger participants rejected them as ungrammatical. As I discuss below, this finding is one of the motivating factors for the diachronic account pursued in this paper.

Accordingly, the two primary bases for assuming the diachronic truncation relation between the NI and the ME are: a) all of the NIs I have encountered in the literature, as well as those I have constructed, can be reconstructed as MEs with no change in meaning; and b) my survey reveals a marked difference in the acceptance of MEs across generations, with the 61+ age group most familiar with them, the 20–40 group familiar with them roughly half of the time, and the 18+ group mostly baffled by them.

The claim that NIs are actually truncated Modal Existentials should not be controversial. Martin and Wolfram (1998) assert of AAVE NIs that the most straightforward account of these types of sentences would be to say that "inversion does not occur. Rather, negative inversion sentences are negative existential sentences" (27). However, Martin and Wolfram cannot ultimately take this line of argumentation, as they note that AAVE inversion sentences do not allow an expletive subject to be expressed, as in (31) [Martin and Wolfram's (32a-b)].[15] The fact that expletive sentences such as (31) never seem to surface in AAVE leads Martin and Wolfram away from a deletion account. Crucially, however, they are concerned with synchronic deletion, and do not consider the possibility that deletion might be diachronic, as hypothesized in the present work.

(31) a. *There/*It didn't nobody laugh.
b. *There/*It can't no man round here get enough money to buy they own farm.

Sentences such as (32) are in fact acceptable to older and middle-aged speakers of Texas English, however.

(32) a. There didn't nobody laugh.
b. They cain't no man round here get enough money to buy his own farm.

As such, Martin and Wolfram's reasons for objecting to the expletive hypothesis for AAVE NIs do not hold for the non-AAVE Texas English sentences.[16] I argue that the Texas NI is essentially a ME sentence, or what is left of one, after the expletive has deleted over time. In the section that follows, I consider the generational data brought to bear on this question.

3.1. Data collection

The sociolinguistic, demographic claims made with respect to NIs and the MEs in this section come from surveys of 121 native speakers of Texas vernacular English. Ninety-two surveys were administered online via Survey Monkey. The survey link and a call for participants was posted in three private Facebook groups, each of which was restricted to members who had grown up in the cities of Abilene, Corpus Christi, and Odessa, Texas.[17] The results of these surveys have been sorted by age, resulting in three groups, with roughly equal numbers of men and women. This is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Number and (average) age of participants.

Age group	Average age	Number in group
16–18	17.2	29
20–40	24.1	26
41–60	47.7	42
61+	68.3	24

[15] This inability of NIs in AAVE to take expletive subjects is also noted in White-Sustaita (2010), Green (2014), and the many sources therein.

[16] Matyiku (2017: Chap. 2) argues that NIs cannot be derived from *there*-existential sentences, based on differing subject restrictions of NIs and *there*-existentials. I am concerned here with Modal Existentials, however, which are related though ultimately different constructions than the *there*-existentials with which Matyiku is concerned.

[17] Abilene (pop. 117,000) and Odessa (pop. 118,000) are two of the primary cities of west Texas, which both have significant agricultural and working-class populations. Corpus Christi (pop. 515,000) is located in south Texas. This city was chosen for similar reasons. Furthermore, it is also the author's home town, and he wanted to ascertain that his linguistic intuitions were in line with members of his home speech community.

The 16–18 group was surveyed in three high school classes in a rural west Texas town in December 2016. For these surveys, the author attended each class, introduced himself and the bare essentials of the research questions to each group of students, and then administered the surveys in hard copy.

All of the surveys queried meaning, use, and dialect group for NI or ME constructions, and contained questions such as the following:

Consider the two statements (a) and (b). Who (in terms of age, gender, socio-economic class, race) do you think is most likely to say something like (b)?
(a) Nobody came to the party.
(b) Didn't nobody come to the party.

When someone says (b), what do they mean by it? Is there a difference in meaning between (a) and (b)?

Does (c) differ in meaning from (d)? If so, how does it differ? Who do you think is most likely to say a sentence like (c)?
(c) They can't nobody lift that thing.
(d) Can't nobody lift that thing.

The survey also gathered demographic information of participants, such as age, race, and socioeconomic class.

Please tell us your age, race, gender, where in Texas you are from, and what your parents do for a living.

Results were compiled by age group into a spreadsheet.

Rather than querying participant intuitions directly, I chose to do so indirectly for a variety of reasons. First, as a native speaker of the relevant variety, I know that NIs and MEs are stigmatized as "uneducated" working-class speech; and, pilot surveys in two state university classrooms confirmed this.[18] To a participant who is unaware of the goals of linguistic research, a direct query about such linguistic features can be tantamount to asking if the participant herself is uneducated or working-class, and so might cause offense, undermining the intent of the survey. The indirect nature of the instructions—i.e. "who do you think is most likely to say this"—was meant to mitigate this possibility. I further wished to avoid survey responses that attempted to "correct" test stimuli to what would be prescriptively acceptable: i.e. 'the proper way to say this is *Nobody can lift that thing*.' By posing the stimuli as sentences associated with a third party rather than directly with the participants themselves, I hoped to receive a more objective consideration of the grammatical realities.

Instructions also included questions regarding differences in meaning between the NI/ME stimuli and the canonically ordered sentences: "When someone says (b), what do they mean by it? Is there a difference in meaning between (a) and (b)?" These latter questions were crucial to inferring familiarity with and understanding of the NI and ME test stimuli. For example, most participants provided clear descriptions of differences between the NI and canonically ordered sentences. Or, they responded that there were no differences in meaning. On the other hand, many younger participants indicated that they had no idea what the ME sentences meant and so didn't know what the difference in meaning would be. From these types of response it is straightforward to infer that MEs are likely not part of the younger participants' linguistic experience, while NIs are much more likely to be so.

3.2. Generational results

As can be seen below in Table 2, the youngest survey participants were uniformly unaware of the ME sentences in the green column, though they were quite aware of the NIs in the orange column. As the age of the groups increases, we see a parallel increase in familiarity with the ME constructions, with the oldest group being 83% familiar with them. Meanwhile, there is broad familiarity with the NIs across age groups, ranging from 80 to 100%, suggesting that the NI is still very much in the realm of experience for these participants—whether or not they admit to using it themselves.[19]

Table 2
Familiarity with MEs and NIs by age group.

Age group	Number in group	Average age	Percent familiar with ME	Percent familiar with NI
16–18	29	17.2	0	82%
20–40	26	24.1	34%	96%
41–60	42	47.7	47%	95%
61+	24	68.3	83%	100%

[18] Pilot surveys were administered at Texas State University in San Marcos and Texas Tech University in Lubbock.
[19] For example, some of the rural West Texas high school students remarked that NIs are "how rednecks talk."

The variation in familiarity with the two constructions suggests that a change has occurred, or is occurring, with the ME over the second half of the 20th century. The most straightforward way to describe this change is the loss of the expletive subject in the ME.

This manner of making diachronic hypotheses based on age-stratified variation in real time is referred to as "apparent-time" analysis.[20] It is a commonly used method to assess language change when it is unrealistic or impossible to gather longitudinal data over an extended period of time, or when there are no corpora available for the necessary times. In addition to the survey data, I worked closely with two of the older participants (73- and 78-year-old Caucasian males), and tested a wide range of reconstructed ME sentences with them. The consultants confirmed that there was no difference in the meanings of NIs and MEs. Thus, consider the following examples from the Yale Grammatical Diversity Page for Negative Inversion.

(33) a. Can't nobody beat 'em.
b. Didn't nobody get hurt or nothin'.
c. Won't anybody hit us.

All of these sentences are equally possible with expletive subjects in Texas vernacular English, with no change in meaning, as seen in (34).

(34) a. They can't nobody beat 'em.
b. They didn't nobody get hurt or nothin'.
c. They won't anybody hit us.

I provide only a few examples above; however, as a middle-aged native speaker of Texas vernacular English, I have not come across any examples in any of the literature that refuse to take an expletive subject in this way.

These findings parallel those of Zanuttini and Bernstein (2014: 163), who note that their Appalachian English consultants had minimal ability to point out a difference between NIs and MEs. As they write:

> When asked about the difference between a sentence with [negative inversion] and one with an expletive, our consultants say that the one with the expletive allows for prosodic emphasis on the quantificational associate. In the example below, we represent such emphasis with capital letters:
>
> (i) Wouldn't nobody go to see her.
> (ii) They wouldn't NOBODY go to see her.

The difference in prosodic potential is the only difference Zanuttini and Bernstein's consultants could provide. This is very little difference indeed, however, as NIs themselves bear heavy stress on the quantificational associate by default.

It seems then that there is a strong case to be made for the diachronic deletion account. An important question that must be addressed, though, is why deletion occurred in the first place. While it cannot be known for sure, it is likely that deletion of the expletive is motivated by the need to be negative, following a pathway set out for language in general in Jespersen (1917).[21] As Jespersen (5) writes:

> [T]here is a natural tendency, also for the sake of clearness, to place the negative first, or at any rate as soon as possible, very often immediately before the particular word to be negatived (generally the verb, see below). At the very beginning of the sentence it is found comparatively often in the early stages of some languages […].

A very obvious way of following Jespersen's tendency is to simply delete the expletive subject, as in *There can't anybody lift that rock*. This is especially plausible given the semantic and phonological weakness of the expletive subject. As is noted repeatedly in the literature, expletive subject *there* is a semantically and phonologically bleached derivative of locative *there* (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002; etc.). Thus, it should not be surprising for expletive *there* and its dialectal cousin *they* to drop off of the ME sentence completely over time.

[20] The apparent-time construct has been used in many studies over the years, such as Labov's (1963) Martha's Vineyard research. See Bailey (2002) and sources therein for history and criticism of the apparent-time analysis. Boberg (2010: 188) notes that apparent-time analysis is "largely valid for phonology and syntax" but that it can be problematic in consideration of the lexicon.

[21] Horn (2015) notes that NIs follow the "Neg-First" principle, which is "the tendency for negative force to be marked as early as possible within a sentence." See Horn and Wansing (2017) for further discussion of the Neg-First principle and its roots in Jespersen (1917).

This idea is very much in accord with work in synchronic "conversational deletion," in which sentence-initial material can be deleted in spoken English from a wide variety of sentence types.[22] Napoli (1982), for example, following Dwight Bolinger, argues for a phonological rule that deletes the first part of a sentence "preceding the first main accent," resulting in constructions like those in (35) [Napoli (85)]:

(35) a. Wish Tom were here. (I wish Tom were here)
b. You seen Tom? (Have you seen Tom?)
c. Good thing you decided to come along. (It's a good thing you decided to come along)

This pre-stress deletion would be precisely the type to result in an NI. Consider a pre-deletion ME such as (36a). The natural sentence stress falls on "nobody." Thus, a rule such as the Bolinger/Napoli rule would delete content to the left of that. It makes sense too that the negativized modal would be spared the deletion, as emphasis of the negative is the most likely motivator for the deletion in the first place, resulting in the NI in (36b).

(36) a. They cain't nobody win there.
b. Cain't nobody win there.

We find similar deletion behavior in standard *there*-existentials as well. Consider (37a-b). It is perfectly possible for (37a) to undergo conversational deletion resulting in (37b) without altering the meaning of the sentence or speech act performed.[23]

(37) a. There isn't a dog in the yard.
b. Idn't a dog in the yard.

This same manner of conversational deletion is not available for positive *there*-existentials, as in (38a-b), which is a strong argument for the role negation likely played in the shift from Modal Existential to Negative Inversion: i.e. the absence of negation diminishes motivation for subject deletion and maximization of negative force.

(38) a. There's a dog in the yard.
b. *Is a dog in the yard.

Thus, a conversational deletion element in the present account of NIs is neither surprising nor unmotivated. For the diachronic purposes of this paper, it's not necessary to fully understand or argue for a particular type or level of deletion rule; it is enough to see that it is a very common phenomenon and that, when coupled with the negative tendencies of Jespersen (1917), can provide a very straightforward account of the NI data. Combined with the generational data in which only the elder participants were familiar with the MEs, it is very likely that the ME construction has undergone systematic expletive deletion, resulting in the present-day NI.

Importantly, this hypothesis accounts for the extant definite effects still seen in the NI. Thus, the definiteness effect in the syntax remains in residence with the NI, even as the expletive subject itself has been deleted, in effect concealing a ME behind the missing expletive subject. A useful historical analogy can be seen here with nasal vowels in contemporary French, in which certain vowels retain their nasal character long after the nasal consonant to which they originally assimilated has dropped off. The nasality, however, remains behind on the vowel, reminding us of what the earlier coda structure of the syllable had been.[24]

[22] See, for example, Thrasher (1974), Napoli (1982), Zwicky and Pullum (1983), and more recently Weir (2012: 110) on conversational deletion in general. Weir (110) argues, following Zwicky and Pullum, that conversational deletion is post-syntactic. This means that though the phonological form in question has deleted, the syntactic content of it is still in residence. This would seem to be a natural step for the expletive-to-NI story told here, in which the expletive drops off and the definiteness effects continue to be associated with the construction.

[23] An additional argument here in favor of the preservation of the negative can be seen in the difference between (i) and (ii) below. In (ii), which is a far more natural locution in this variety than (i) would be, the fricative [z] has assimilated to the [-continuant] feature of the [n] of the immediately adjacent negative, further accentuating Jespersen's early negation.

(i) #Isn't anybody there.
(ii) Idn' anybody there.

See Reynolds (1994) for further discussion of the Southern /z/ → [d] rule, in which it is suggested that this alternation is far more likely to occur in contracted negative auxiliary forms such as [ɪznt] → [ɪdn] than in non-auxiliary items with similar phonological environments, such as [bɪznəs] → [bɪdnəs], which do occur but much less frequently.

[24] See, for example, Rochet (1976) and the plentiful references and discussion included in that work.

3.3. Status of expletive subjects and Negative Inversions

In the diachronic account suggested in this paper, I assume that the expletive subject is no longer part of the construction—primarily because there is little availability for it to surface in ME form among younger speakers. Others have suggested synchronic accounts in which the expletive subject is phonologically null but syntactically present. For example, Parrott (2000) argues that AAVE has a lexical item that equates to a phonologically null expletive subject: i.e. a silent *there*. Martin (1992) suggests for Appalachian English that an expletive "subject [could] delete at PF […] because of the heavier stress which is assigned to the Neg Infl and to the following NP" (65). In these cases, the phonologically null expletive would retain its syntactic and semantic properties, leaving a sentence that appears to be an NI but that is actually an ME in covert form.

I agree with the spirit of Martin's and Parrott's hypotheses, but disagree with how they are operationalized. For example, if there were a phonologically null expletive subject in the NI, we would expect it to surface with all ages of speakers, and to also participate in predictable ways in subjecthood tests such as tag questions; however, as is shown below, this is not the case.

Contra Martin and Parrott, Foreman (1999: 8) argues that NIs are unlikely to be the result of expletive subject deletion (His interests are synchronic, however.). His argument here relies primarily on data from tag questions. As he writes,

> [T]ag questions provide evidence that (underlying subjects of NIs are in fact in the normal syntactic subject position […] If [NI] sentences are derived by eliminating expletive pronouns from [subject position] then we would expect the expletive to resurface in tag questions. However, tags of NI sentences show an agreement with the true subject of the NI sentence, instead of introducing a dummy pronoun.

Consider (39a-b) [Foreman's (17c-d), with Foreman's judgments]:

(39) a. Ain't no man gonna cheat on a woman like that, is he?
b. *Ain't no man gonna cheat on a woman like that, is there?

According to Foreman, the subject of the tag question reflects the subject *no man*, rather than an unarticulated expletive subject. As such, Foreman marks (39b) ungrammatical and concludes that the NI is not simply a synchronically truncated form of the ME construction.

I agree with Foreman's judgments in (39a), but do not agree with his judgment on (39b). In fact, I find both examples in (39) to be perfectly acceptable and can straightforwardly provide other pairs indicating the same judgment patterns, as in (40a-b), which have been checked with 10 native speakers of Texas English.

(40) a. Didn't no man lift that rock, did he?
b. Didn't no man lift that rock, did there/they?

So, it seems that tag questions targeting either "subject" are possible in NIs such as (39) and (40). Further, the same is true of the ME constructions, in which the expletive subject is fully articulated, as in (41) and (42).

(41) a. Couldn't no man lift that rock, could he/they?
b. They couldn't no man lift that rock, could he/they?

(42) a. Ain't no man would cheat on a woman like that, would he/there?
b. They ain't no man would cheat on a woman like that, would he/they?

The indeterminate results of the tag question in these examples suggest a couple of things. On the one hand, it does not provide evidence for a covert, yet syntactically present, expletive. If there were a covert expletive, we would expect it to surface as the subject of the tag question on every occasion. The fact that the expletive is present as the tag subject at the same time that the anchor subject is present in the tag subject, however, suggests that there must be something else going on. This could be a result of the construction being in transition, with "both" subjects equally available for some speakers. Another possibility is that the tag question subjects of these constructions are created and linked pragmatically to some type of discourse referent, depending on the exigencies of the discourse. For example, in Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 893), the authors note that some tag questions are sensitive to communicative—i.e. pragmatic—meaning rather than syntactic co-indexation. In the description of (43), below, they write, "Grammatically, *it's legal* is subordinate to the *think* clause, but communicatively it is the subordinate clause that is primary […] the form of the tag reflects the communicative meaning rather than the grammatical structure […]."

(43) I think it's legal, isn't it?

Another possibility to consider here is that perhaps Texas vernacular English does not require strict identity in tag question formation. If this is the case, it turns out that it is not alone among English vernaculars in not doing so. Consider (44a-c), for example, taken from a variety of vernacular Englishes. As Siemund (2013) writes in his introduction of them, "the agreement properties found in Standard English tag questions are often relaxed or simply non-existent in vernacular varieties."

(44) a. We saw some the other day, isn't it? [Welsh English]
b. You said you'll do the job, isn't it? [Indian English]
c. Yall didn buy no clothes from town, inni? [Gullah]

It seems then that tag question diagnostics steer us away from a covert expletive in NIs, pace Martin (1992) and Parrott (2000). At the same time, the tag question test does not provide an argument in favor of the anchor subject as the main subject either, pace Foreman (1999). The results do point to the inadequacy of the diagnostic for subjecthood in this language variety, though.[25]

3.4. Older speakers accept Modal Existentials and Negative Inversions

A further question that arises is that of the older speakers who accept both MEs and NIs. What is happening with these speakers? Recall from Table 2, repeated here for convenience, that only the youngest speakers completely rejected MEs, while familiarity with the constructions increased parallel to an increase in age. Thus, the oldest speakers were very familiar with both constructions.

As a middle-aged native speaker, I too have intuitions about MEs and NIs. I assume that what is really occurring here with the older speakers (myself included) is that there is actually one construction: i.e. the ME. However, the presence of Jespersen's need to be negative and the application of synchronic conversational deletion simply makes it appear as if there are two constructions: i.e. the ME and the NI. For the younger speakers, however, for whom there are only NIs and no MEs, the diachronic process of expletive-deletion is complete. It thus seems unlikely for these younger speakers that NIs are simply the result of a de-stressing and PF deletion rule, as suggested in Martin (1992)—although this could very well be what is happening with the older speakers.

4. Conclusion

I have argued that NIs in Texas vernacular English are actually diachronic descendants of MEs: essentially, the expletive subject of the former has undergone deletion over time. This argument is supported by quantitative data in an apparent-time analysis, and it provides a compelling account of the origins and distribution of the so-called "definiteness effect" in the NI. I have also argued that the definiteness effect in question with the NI is quite different from what has been maintained in the literature for the last five decades. It has been assumed that definite subjects are prohibited in NIs; I have shown that they are in fact allowed but that they are subject to pragmatic constraints which have concealed their acceptability. The pragmatic constraints in question are then shown to be the same ones that regulate definite subjects in *there*-existential sentences.

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[25] See Croft (1991) for lengthy discussion of the necessity for different syntactic tests across different languages: i.e. the idea that diagnostics in one language don't necessarily apply to or pick out the same categories in another language.

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William Salmon is Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Minnesota Duluth. His research interests are in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, and he works on issues in varieties of US English and Caribbean Creole English. He has published in numerous journals, including *Journal of Pragmatics, Applied Linguistics, Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages, Lingua, Linguistics, Journal of Black Studies, English World-Wide*, and more, and his second book, on language endangerment in Belize, was published in February 2018 with the University of North Carolina Press.