COME/CAME VARIATION
IN ENGLISH DIALECTS

SALI TAGLIAMONTE

University of York

One of the most familiar nonstandard features of English dialects is the alternation between *come* and *came* in past-reference contexts, as illustrated in the examples from (1) to (8) in York English (Tagliamonte 1998a). This feature is so common that Chambers (1995, 240–41) classifies it as “ubiquitous” and “mainstream.”

1. a. Yeah, well when war *come* out they pulled me in.
   b. When I *came* home that day, it was a different world.
   [male, age 91, educated to age 14; YRK/?]
2. a. Anyway eventually she *come* back and it all got sorted out.
   b. But he never did stay out one night, he always *came* home.
   [female, age 81, educated to age 16; YRK/b]
3. a. And I was coming along Skeldergate Bridge, and on the bike, and a car *come* straight in front of me.
   b. When we first *came* into this house, this used to be gardens.
   [female, age 72, educated to age 14; YRK/g]
4. a. Hercules *come* over and drop a load.
   b. It was really a little tiny lad *came* in on the train at Strensall.
   [male, age 37, educated beyond 16; YRK/≠]
5. a. Then when it *come* to harvest time I was working nights on t’corn-drier.
   b. And when he *came* back, he saw hole in t’hedge.
   [male, age 59, educated to age 14; YRK/m]
6. a. And Laura *come* in at five-pound odd and she was only really diddy.
   b. I *came* in on the Friday and they let me out.
   [female, age 38, educated to age 15; YRK/J]
7. a. She was like, taking the piss out of them, but she *come* back.
   b. But she went last year and then left after a term and *came* back.
   [female, age 20, educated beyond 16; YRK/d]
8. a. And they were supposed to be there a day before they *come* home.
   b. She’s been at university like for three years and she *came* back and tossed it off for a year or two.
   [male, age 20, educated to 16; YRK/-]

The verb *come* is one of the most frequent verbs in the English language. As illustrated in figure 1, large scale quantitative studies of North

Copyright © 2001 by the American Dialect Society

42
American dialects find that *come* consistently makes up 10–20% of the total number of all strong verbs used in past-reference contexts (Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001).

Moreover, *come* consistently exhibits extremely high levels of nonstandard usage compared to other verbs. This is illustrated in figure 2, where the proportion of past-reference *come* exceeds nonstandard usage of all other strong verbs combined in each of the communities. Why is the verb *come* so much more nonstandard than other English verbs?

In this paper I systematically examine the behavior of *come* in a large and sociolinguistically stratified sample of spoken data from northern England. In so doing, I draw comparisons with other dialects of English that show similar variability as well as with earlier stages of the English language. The variety of English spoken in York exhibits the same nonstandard variability between *come* and *came* as that reported in North American dialects, across all age groups and even in the speech of the same individual in the same conversation, as illustrated in (1)–(8).

Corroborating earlier reports, this study demonstrates that the external factors of sex, education, and age are major contributors to this variability. However, the effect of education is statistically significant in the younger generations only, suggesting that the sociolinguistic conditioning on *come/came* variation is likely a product of the last century. Moreover, although...
external factors are heavily implicated in this variation, older and younger speakers, as well as male and female speakers, can be shown to follow quite different grammatical patterns in their use of *come* and *came*. These patterns suggest that *come/came* variation has undergone a certain amount of change over the past 100 years. Interestingly, the changes in external social patterning are mirrored in shifting grammatical distributions as well. Finally, the study suggests that the variation between *come* and *came* in English dialects is the legacy of the relatively late development of *came* in the history of English.

**COME/CAME VARIATION PAST AND PRESENT**

In contemporary varieties of English, *come/came* variation is widely attested. The *Survey of English Dialects* (Orton and Halliday 1963), which was conducted in the 1950s, reports that although the standard form *came* was current for most of England, *come* was found all over the country as well, particularly in the east (Orton, Sanderson, and Widdowson 1978, 14). In North America, the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (*LANE* 1939–43) and the *Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States* (*LAMSAS* 1980–) show past-reference *come* occurring pervasively in all the communities that were surveyed. Atwood (1953, 9) reports its use by speakers in a variety of education brackets and by male as well as female speakers.

![Bar chart](chart.png)

**Figure 2**

Use of Past-Reference *come* Versus All Other Nonstandard Strong Verb Forms (Poplack and Tagliamonte forthcoming)
Come/came Variation in English Dialects

It is not difficult to find examples of *came/came* variation in contemporary English dialects in North America and the British Isles: Ozark and Appalachian English (9); Alabama English (10); Vernacular Nova Scotian English (11); and nonstandard dialects of English in England (12–13) and Scots in Scotland (14).

9. Appalachian and Ozark English, USA
   a. Carole and them *come* up there and picked us up. [OE 12:14]
   b. He *come* here during the Civil War. [OE 42:9]
   c. I *come* back and took care of him. [AE 214:18]
      [Christian, Wolfram, and Dube 1988, 85–92]

10. Alabama English, Southern USA
    a. I cried the other night. He *come* on in a picture—I 'uz setting' here a-criyin'.
    b. When I *come* out from over there, I done learnt. . . .
       [Feagin 1979, 322, 327]

11. Vernacular Nova Scotian English, Guysborough, Nova Scotia, Canada
    a. He *come* over . . . 'bout nineteen– around the turn of the century, he *come* over here. [LT/1A/28]
    b. He *came* here and he worked in the– I don’t know what you would call it now. [LT/1A/28]
       [Poplack and Tagliamonte forthcoming]

12. London English, England
    a. I *came* back to bed, like, after breakfast.
    b. It was a long time before this doctor *come* up.
       [Hughes and Trudgill 1979, 41–42]

13. Wheatley Hill English, Northern England
    a. When I *come* back . . . she cried her eyes out.
    b. I used to sit on here and she always *come* and snuggled in.
       [Martin 1999]

14. Buckie Scots, Northern Scotland
    a. I *come* off the sea about nineteen-seventy.
    b. He *come* into the kirk with her.
       [Smith forthcoming]

There is also some evidence for past-reference *come* in locales elsewhere in the world, such as Tristan da Cunha (15) and Australia (16).

15. a. Since the factory *come*, you order wood through the canteen. [GG 27]
    b. And when he *come* out whaling, the captain tell him. . . . [AG 74]
       [Zettersten 1969, 84]

16. They went home an’ got their friends an’ that an’ when they all *come* back they fighted. [Eisikovits 1987, 9]
Most studies explain the appearance of *come* for past reference as leveling of the preterit and past participle to the same form—*came* in the preterit and *come* as a past participle become one form *come* for both (e.g., Edwards and Weltens 1985, 110; Christian, Wolfram, and Dube 1988, 108).

However, the history of the verb *come* suggests a contrasting view. The historical literature indicates that the vowel of the form *come* (and its equivalent earlier spellings) was used uniformly across the past paradigm in Old English (e.g., Hogg 1992, 154) and most of Middle English (e.g., Lass 1992, 131; Krygier 1994). Indeed, it was not until the thirteenth or fourteenth century that *came* appeared on the scene (Long 1944; Jespersen 1954, 56; Krygier 1994), and then only in northern varieties of Middle English, as in (17) and (18).

17. a. Per come to me to fair kniȝes
   
   b. And to þe cherche porche he cam.
   
   [c. 1300; Sisam 1970, 6]

18. a. With hem com mani champioun
   
   b. Pat he ne kam þider þe leyk to se
   
   [early thirteenth century; Dickins and Wilson 1951, 38–39]

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED* 1989), *came* did not entirely drive out *come* in the midland and southern dialects of England until the fifteenth century. However, variation between the two forms is still readily found in the Helsinki Corpus as late as 1500–1570, as can be seen in (19) and (20).

19. a. Sir, one the eving after the making of this letter, your servant Edmund Robyson come home.
   
   b. So I wente with hym, and when we came downe, al the yarde was full of people.
   
   [Helsinki Corpus, c. 1500–1570; Kytö 1993]

20. a. . . . and the copy of the causes, and the letter that come from William Elison.
   
   b. I send you the copy of the letter that came from the Undersherefe.
   
   [Helsinki Corpus, c. 1500–1570; Kytö 1993]

Thus, variation between *come* and *came* must also be viewed against the backdrop of the verb’s own history as well as its participation in more general processes of change which swept the English verb system in Britain from 700 on (Long 1944; Krygier 1994; Lass 1994).

Despite this long-term variability between *come* and *came*, contemporary studies suggest that the use of past-reference *come* is becoming increasingly infrequent, particularly among the younger generation (Tidholm...
Come/came Variation in English Dialects

1979; Christian, Wolfram, and Dube 1988; Smith 2000). The explanation given for this accelerated change is the effect of increasing literacy and education in the twentieth century, as well as social changes such as widespread urbanization, and so on. Indeed, studies of British dialects where past-reference come was productive in the 1970s predicted that it would be obsolete by now (Tidholm 1979, 147).

Under the influence of strong standardizing external forces, it might indeed be expected that came would have won out over come by now. Yet, as we have seen, variability between the two forms persists in English, particularly in regional dialects. Thus, variability in strong verb forms, and the use of come and came in particular, may present a good reflection of the underlying currents of continuity and change in the language.

I now turn to a large-scale community-level study of come/came variation in one contemporary English dialect.

DATA AND METHODS

The data under investigation were collected in York, England, a small city in Yorkshire in the northeast. York is unique among English cities for at least two reasons. First, the industrial revolution somewhat passed it by. York did not undergo the massive economic upheaval (e.g., population contact, rapid growth, rebuilding) that marked other cities. Second, by far the largest group of in-migrants, at least as documented through the nineteenth century, came from the immediate environs of northeast England and Yorkshire (Armstrong 1974). For these reasons, York has retained a somewhat conservative character while at the same time representing a relatively standard northern variety of British English (Tagliamonte 1998a). Thus, it provides an excellent site for examining language variation and locally based change in a geographic context where past-reference come has presumably been around for a very long time.

The York corpus consists of audiotaped conversations from 92 speakers, ranging from 15 to 91 years of age, all born, raised, and living in York. Further details of the corpus constitution and sociolinguistic character of York English can be found in Tagliamonte (1998a).

For each speaker in the corpus, all occurrences of come and came with past reference were extracted, providing 1,016 tokens. Each example was coded for the external factors of individual speaker, education, and age and the internal factors of type of clause, person and number of the subject, temporal ordering, collocation patterns with temporal adverbs and conjunctions, and the effect of verbal particles.
RESULTS

The *Survey of English Dialects* (Orton and Halliday 1963) reports that in York in 1953 both *come* and *came* were elicited from a male, aged 82, in response to the question in (21).


   Afterwards Father went out, but then he remembered that he had forgotten something else, so back he ———. [Orton and Halliday 1: 1963, 96]

Figure 3 shows the distribution of past-reference *come* users across generations in the city of York in 1996. Contrary to what might be expected, the youngest speakers are the most likely to use *come* (56%), followed closely by the oldest generation (46%).

To what extent is *come/came* variation a sociolinguistic variable in this community? Table 1 provides a variable rule analysis of the external factors age, education, and sex. The table reveals that all the external factors exert statistically significant conditioning to the variation between *come* and *came.* Interestingly, however, age exerts the strongest effect with a range of 17, while education and sex contribute lesser effects with ranges of 13 and 10, respectively. The expected socially diagnostic patterning can be observed: men and less-educated speakers favor the nonstandard form. However, the constraint hierarchy for the factor of age reveals that the oldest and youngest members of the community favor the nonstandard form at .58 and .55, respectively, but the middle-aged speakers disfavor it. Why would this be so?

**Figure 3**
Distribution of York Speakers Using Past-Reference *come*, by Age
Extralinguistic factors are highly interactive, particularly in linguistic change (Labov 1990). Moreover, age, sex, and education have previously been found to interact substantially in this community (Tagliamonte 1998a). One of the best ways to uncover the precise nature and character of these interactions is to alternate multivariate analysis with judicious cross-tabulation of factors.

Therefore, I now turn to a consideration of how the different external factors intersect with each other, particularly speaker age. Figure 4 shows the distribution of past-reference *come* by age and sex. In all age groups up to age 70, men use *come* more than women, particularly those under 30. However, among those over 70, the men and women use past-reference *come* at near identical rates. This suggests that *come/came* variation is not being treated in the same way by all members of this community.

This becomes even more apparent when the effect of education is examined according to speaker age. Figure 5 shows that there is a marked education effect for the under-30-year-olds—less-educated speakers use past-reference *come* far more often than more-educated speakers. The same is true of the 51–70-year-olds. But there is no education effect among the 31–50-year-olds. And once again, the oldest generation is set apart from the others. In this age group there is no effect of education—more- and less-educated speakers use past-reference *come* equally.
Thus, despite the statistically significant results for each of the external factors when the data set was treated as an aggregate, the cross-tabulations by age reveal that the social correlation of *come/came* variation has changed fairly dramatically over the generations in this community. Moreover, another question arises: if extralinguistic factors are not influencing the use of past-reference *come* in the oldest generation, then what is?

**Internal Constraints. Temporal Disambiguation.** In studies of variation in morphological marking on verbs in general, it is often suggested that overt past-tense marking may be influenced by disambiguating information in the surrounding discourse, particularly from features such as adverbs and
conjunctions. If past-reference *come* were an unmarked variant of *came*, then such factors might be expected to influence its use.

Thus, each verb was coded for whether it occurred in a clause containing adverbial specification, as in (22), or a temporal conjunction, as in (23).

22. a. Well he *come* here in nineteen-fourteen, into that house. [YRK/Y]
    b. I *come* in later on, he’d put the plate in the water and it was still there! [YRK/z]
    c. And then I *come* down and ’cause the tables weren’t like that. [YRK/k]

23. a. I was about twenty-five *when* I *come* home. [YRK/#]
    b. Then *when* it *come* to corn-harvest time I was working nights on t’corn-drier. [YRK/m]

**Narrative Present.** Another hypothesis is that past-reference *come* is being used as a narrative present. Support for this explanation would come from a positive correlation of *come* with contexts of iconic sequencing—that is, the ordering of events as they actually occurred (Labov and Waletzky 1967)—as opposed to other types of discourse. To test for this possibility, each token of *come* was coded for one of three contexts: whether it occurred in an iconically ordered sequence, either before the following event, as in (24a), or after the preceding event, as in (24b), or not temporally ordered, as in (25):

24. Iconically ordered
   a. So, I *come* home and I sat digging worms up. [YRK/>]
   b. And a man played them you know, and the words just *come* on the screen. [YRK/a]

25. No temporal order
   a. You *come* round, didn’t you? [YRK/+]
   b. She *come* down when she was ready for going to breakfast. [YRK/m]

**Grammatical Person and Number of the Subject.** Different morphological forms may also be linked to grammatical person and number. Indeed, in the past of some classes of strong verbs in Old English, a verb form having one vowel was used with first-person singular and third-person singular subjects, whereas verb forms having another vowel were used with second-person singular and all plural subjects (Quirk and Wrenn 1960, 47; Moore and Knott 1972, 180). Although this system had collapsed by early Middle English, there is at least some evidence that the older distinctions may have been maintained somewhat longer in variable patterns of morphology. For example, in an examination of the English strong verbs from Chaucer to Caxton, Long (1944, 129) reports that the form *come* appears three times
as frequently in the preterit singular than elsewhere. Moreover, dialectological reports from other areas of Yorkshire suggest a preference for the use of *come* in the preterit singular in particular (e.g., Morris 1911, 140; Tidholm 1979, 140).

To test for the influence of the grammatical person and number of the subject, we tabulated first- and third-person singular, as in (27), separately from second-person singular and all plural subjects, as in (28).13

27. First- and third-person singular
   a. Well I *come* home a few cuts and bruises but then I used to thing nowt to them. [YRK/>]
   b. She was like, taking the piss out of them, but she *come* back. [YRK/d]
   c. One bloke *came* over and started . . . “This black guy get served in front of me!” [YRK/®]

28. Second-person singular and all plural subjects:
   a. The sun shone as we *come* out from church. [YRK/®]
   b. They *came* back here smelling very strongly. [YRK/u]
   c. That was all cattle docks where trains *came* in. Trains *came* into there. [YRK/a]

Verbal Particles. In the process of extracting and coding these materials, I also noted that verbal particles, such as *up*, *down*, and so on, were quite frequent, occurring with 16% (N = 163) of the tokens in the data set. To test for the influence of a verbal particle, each token was coded for whether or not it had a verbal particle (e.g., *up*, *over*, *from*, *down*), as in (29).

29. a. That’s near t’river side you know and when t’river *come* up it used to flood up. [YRK/k]
   b. And he *come* out with a pushpole to tow us home. [YRK/m]
   c. We all *come* down from Somerset. [YRK/G]

In a multivariate analysis of the data, I recast the configuration shown in table 1 in two ways. First, both internal and external factors are considered, which permits assessment of which of them are statistically significant when all of them are treated simultaneously. Second, four different age groups in the community are distinguished, which permits assessment of the contribution of different factors at successive points in apparent time. Table 2 shows the results of four independent variable rule analyses of the probability of past-reference *come*.

The most obvious finding is that the vast majority of the factors considered do not approach statistical significance. Most critically, the external factors are not statistically significant in any age group, except the under-30-year-olds. Here, there is a strong effect of education. Speakers with less
education favor the use of past-reference *come* with a probability of .63, while those with more education disfavor it at .37. For the other age groups there are no statistically significant effects of either sex or education. This is most remarkable in the oldest speakers, where the factor weights hover at .50 (indicating no effect).

Neither temporal adverbs nor conjunctions exert a regular effect on the distribution of forms. Nor is there any consistent effect of narration. Moreover, none of these effects is statistically significant. Only one internal factor is statistically significant. Among the speakers over age 70, past-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Factor Weight</th>
<th>Factor %</th>
<th>Factor Weight</th>
<th>Factor %</th>
<th>Factor Weight</th>
<th>Factor %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less educated</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More educated</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Particle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb + particle</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb only</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>.58</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal adverb</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverb present</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No adverb</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal conjunction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunction present</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No conjunction</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordered</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>KO</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unordered</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Shaded areas indicate factors determined to be statistically significant.

**Table 2**

Variable Rule Analyses of Factors Contributing to the Use of Past-Reference *come* by Four Generations of York English Speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>≤ 30</th>
<th>31–50</th>
<th>51–70</th>
<th>&gt; 70</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected mean</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor Weight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less educated</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More educated</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Particle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb + particle</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb only</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical person</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal adverb</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverb present</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No adverb</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal conjunction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conjunction present</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No conjunction</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordered</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>KO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unordered</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reference *come* is favored at .54 when it occurs with a particle such as *up, out,* or *down* and disfavored at .27 when it appears alone. Moreover, further cross-tabulation not illustrated here reveals that this effect is entirely regular across both sex and education for the oldest age group.

Finally, a number of salient trends can be observed in the marking patterns for both internal and external factors. These are visible in the direction of effects of the factor weights as well as in the percentages. Most noteworthy is that males in the youngest age group have over twice the proportion of past-reference *come* (17%) than females (7%). This direction of effect is visible among the 31–50-year-olds, but not in the older generations. Also striking is that singular subjects appear more frequently with past-reference *come* in both the older age groups (7% vs. 3% among the 51–70-year-olds; 16% vs. 10% among those over 70). However, no such tendency is visible in the youngest two age groups.

**DISCUSSION**

Despite predictions that past-reference *come* would be scarce in English dialects by now, it does not show any evidence of imminent demise as ongoing standardization and increasing education might lead us to suspect. Instead, it is used consistently across all generations, albeit less frequently than standard *come.* But the youngest generation in York is using *come* just as much as the oldest generation, indeed more so. This, alongside the fact that the verb *come* is one of the most productive verbs in the language, leads me to suggest that *come* falls into the exceptional category of verbs which are in “most frequent and vulgar use; in which custom is apt to get the better of analogy” (Lowth 1762, 84). In other words, one of the factors contributing to the survival of *come/came* variability is the extent of the verb’s usage in the language (Strang 1970, 147).

Another factor contributing to the continuity of *come* in particular may be the canonical form of the verb, *[kam]. Recent research suggests that there is an ongoing trend for strong verbs with a vowel followed by a nasal and/or a velar consonant to gravitate toward the vowel */u/* as the preterit as well as perfect participle form (e.g., *ring/rang/rung* → *ring/rung/rung*; Bybee 1983, 1985; Hogg 1988). This development is bolstered by the fact that this phonetic shape has been found to embody the idea of ‘pastness’ in native speakers of English (Bybee 1983), in other words, that */u/* (> */s/>) is “an ideophonic marker of past forms” (Hogg 1988, 38). Experimental results reveal that under test conditions present-day speakers of English produce verbs with */u/* far more than any other strong past-tense form,
suggested that this particular form has a psychological reality for them (Bybee 1983, 254). Thus, the continuity of past-reference *come*, which has the favored phonetic form \([k\text{am}]\), is consistent with the currents of this independent and ongoing drift within the strong verb system in English.

However, the proliferation of verb forms in the strong verb system at earlier stages in the history of English has made the different variants prime linguistic candidates for “the marking of a social differentiation” (Cheshire 1994, 188). Indeed, *come/came* variation is considered one of the most socially diagnostic structures in contemporary varieties of English (Chambers 1995, 240–41; Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 1998, 77). York is no different. Overall, age, education, and sex differences are heavily implicated in the variation between *come* and *came*. Thus, another important reason for the persistence of *come/came* variation is undoubtedly the extent to which it has become a sociolinguistic marker.

However, these findings have revealed that sociolinguistic patterns must also be viewed in the context of shifting norms and practices in the community. When the variation across age groups in the community is taken into account, we find that the older speakers in York do not exhibit statistically significant sex or education effects. The same general trend has been observed in North America (e.g., Atwood 1953). I suggest therefore that the characterization of *come/came* variability as a social and stylistic feature may be a relatively recent phenomenon resulting from interaction between local dialects and Standard English over the last 200 years, as put forward by Trudgill (1996, 422).

Indeed, the conflicting patterns of sex and education in the current 31–50-year-olds, illustrated in figure 6, pinpoint the locus of the most dramatically fluctuating norms and practices to this age group. This lends support to Labov’s (1996) observations that the locus of linguistic change is among the middle generations of women in a community and involves the interaction of sex and social class (see also Labov 1990).

**Figure 6**

Interaction of Sex and Education among 31–50-Year-Olds

![Figure 6](image-url)
The role of women in linguistic and social restructuring is not unique to *come/came* variation but mirrors patterns of variation in other areas of the grammar. In a study of an unrelated feature—the use of the glottal definite article (see *t’corn drier* and *t’hed* in 5 above and also 23a and 26a)—a resurgence of this classic Yorkshire dialect feature was found among the 31–50-year-old women (Tagliamonte 1998b). Taken together, such findings hint at the broader social dimensions of shifting norms across this speech community in which the women appear to be taking on more and more of the local (nonstandard) dialect features. This may also provide empirical linguistic evidence that features of the northern dialects of British English are becoming more acceptable as a viable alternative to the southern varieties and are developing their own local prestige (see also Watt 1998). This may also explain why *come/came* variation is not going to become obsolete in York anytime soon. This hypothesis requires further investigation and will figure among the major foci of my ongoing research in York.

This study has also revealed that sociolinguistic variables, even those as common as *come/came* variation, must be scrutinized in terms of their internal distributional patterns and historical development. No evidence suggests that variation between *come* and *came* is the result of discourse context or grammatical constraints. However, there is at least one statistically significant internal factor. In the oldest generation in the community, past-reference *come* is more likely to occur with a verbal particle. As far as I am aware, this effect has not been reported elsewhere, either synchronically or diachronically. However, Brinton (1988) argues that post-verbal particles such as *up, out, and down* are important aspectualizing features of English. Indeed, the punctualizing effect of such forms is widely attested (see Brinton 1988, 243–46). Therefore, it may be the case that the distinction between *come* and *came* is a reflection of verbal aspect. The productivity and apparent importance of verbal particle suggests that this would be a fruitful area to explore.

More explicable perhaps are the trends found for the effect of grammatical person. Past-reference *come* occurs more frequently with first- and third-person singular subjects. Although this effect was not found to be statistically significant, it is still visible in the constraint hierarchy among the older generations. Moreover, the same trend can be observed across the individual speakers as well. This effect is consistent with earlier reports of patterns for *come* and *came* in the history of English dialects (Morris 1911; Long 1944). In fact, Morris (1911, 40) specifically attributes the tendency toward use of past-reference *come* in contexts such as *he come yesterday* to analogy with the preterit singular of the verb *come* in Old Norse, which was also *kom*, thereby reinforcing preterit *come* in the eastern parts of
Britain (Tidholm 1979, 140; see also Brunner 1963, 76). Yorkshire, in northeast England, had extensive contact with Norwegian and Danish at earlier times. The tendencies still visible among the older speakers in these synchronic data may well be due to the lingering effects of an older regional dialect with some Scandinavian influence.

Thus, the specific geographic location of York in northern England may have favored the use of past-reference *come* for first- and third-person subjects, at least within the vernacular norms, up until the middle of the twentieth century. However, this explanation implies that *come/came* variation may pattern according to different internal factors in other locations. If so, then it will be informative to discover how, or if, other communities embody the same or a distinct array of internal and external factors discovered here. It will be particularly informative to explore the contrast between northern versus southern varieties of British English and British versus North American dialects. As such cross-variety comparisons become available, there may be a number of ways that this linguistic variable may prove to be an interesting “litmus test” for tracking linguistic features and trends across time and space.

To return to the question I posed at the beginning of this study—why is *come/came* variation so prevalent in English dialects today? The retention of past-reference *come* not just in York but in all English dialects has surely been bolstered by a convergence of a number of factors, including the overall frequency of the verb *come* in English, the favored status of its nonstandard canonical form, and the fact that it has come to be emblematic of important social distinctions. However, the robust variability that continues between the two forms *come* and *came* must also been seen as a result of the verb’s distinctly layered history. Past-reference *come* developed from the Old English form, remaining prevalent in written documents from midland and southern England until the sixteenth century, while *came* is actually an interloper of much later pedigree. This suggests that *came* may not yet be a full participant in the past paradigm of all varieties of English. Moreover, past *came* must surely not have been entirely stabilized in some of the spoken vernaculars of Britain which were transported to North America and elsewhere during the early colonization period in the late eighteenth century. Contemporary *come/came* variation is the synchronic manifestation of this history.

In conclusion, the linguistic and extralinguistic nature of *come/came* variation reveals that even a feature as mundane and lexically restricted as the *come/came* alternation can give us insights into linguistic continuity and change and how these intersect with society along the way.
I gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC) of the United Kingdom for project R000221842 and R000238287, of which this study forms part. I heartily thank the reviewers of this article who contributed significantly to my thinking about *come* and *came*.

1. Codes in brackets refer to the data set (e.g., York English = YRK) and the individual speaker codes from the York corpus.

2. These calculations do not include the verb *be*, which exhibits the most non-standard usage of all strong verbs in these data as well as in many other varieties of English worldwide (see Tagliamonte and Smith 1999), or the verb *have* which, in contrast, is highly standard. Irregular verbs (e.g., *etate*) and other variable forms (e.g., *knowed*) are included as “marked”; however, these types represent only a very small proportion of each data set (< 5%). Of course, this view of the data obscures the behavior of individual verbs in the rest of the strong verb cohort, some of which may also be highly nonstandard in some communities (e.g., *give*, *bring*); however, these verbs are very infrequent in comparison to *come*. Another verb which exhibits highly nonstandard usage in some communities is *say* (e.g., in Samaná English; see Poplack and Tagliamonte, forthcoming for further detail). Otherwise figure 2 accurately represents the general pattern.

3. Although there was a sizable Irish laborer population associated with the development of the railway and after the Irish famine in 1847, the Irish did not assimilate with the indigenous community and moved elsewhere after a brief period (Finnegan 1982).

4. A small proportion of these contexts could potentially have been rendered with either preterit or perfect morphology; however, those which were exclusively perfect in meaning were not included in the analysis.

5. The variable pronunciation of *come* between [k√m] and [kUm] in York does not, of course, affect the number of tokens (see Bailes 1998).

6. Due to the difficulties in assigning individual speakers to specific social class categories, I have chosen to use education as more objective in this study. Separate tabulations (not shown) in which the speakers were distinguished according to other social measures—“blue collar” versus “white collar,” private versus public education, and so on—did not alter the major findings.

7. Given that the target of investigation in this analysis is a single verb, total $N$s per speaker can be expected to be small. However, the size of the corpus (at least one hour of speech per individual) enabled me to obtain an average of 12 instances of past-reference *come* per speaker.

8. Numbers may not always add up to the total $N$ of 1,016 due to exclusions on some extralinguistic measures. For example, speakers whose education level was unknown were excluded from consideration for the factor education.

9. Education level was categorized according to the current minimum education age, 16. Thus, speakers who had been educated up to this point were catego-
Come/came Variation in English Dialects

rized as “less educated,” while those who had had more education were
categorized as “more educated.” Separate tabulations of different degrees of
education beyond the age of 16 revealed no significant differences.

10. For example, the preterit forms of be–odan were be–ad in the first- and third-
person singular, but bude in second-person singular and budon for all persons
of the plural (Moore and Knott 1972, 180).

11. Note that second-person subjects, whether second-person singular definite
(N = 13), second-person singular indefinite (N = 20), or second-person plural
(N = 1), were relatively rare in the data.

12. For example, increasingly heard among the youngest generation in York is
clum for past-reference climb.

REFERENCES

Armstrong, Alan. 1974. Stability and Change in an English County Town: A Social Study
of York, 1801–51. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Press.


and Post-Verbal Particles. Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 49. Cambridge: Cam-
bridge Univ. Press.

Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press.

Bybee, Joan L. 1983. “Morphological Classes as Natural Categories.” Language 59:
251–70.

———. 1985. Morphology: A Study of the Relation between Meaning and Form. Typologi-


Cheshire, Jenny. 1994. “Standardization and the English Irregular Verb.” In Stein
and Tiekken-Boon von Ostade, 115–33.

Christian, Donna, Walt Wolfram, and Nanjo Dube. 1988. Variation and Change in
Geographically Isolated Communities: Appalachian English and Ozark English. Publi-
cation of American Dialect Society, no. 74. Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press.

Dickins, Bruce, and R. M. Wilson, eds. 1951. Early Middle English Texts. 7th impres-

Edwards, Viv, and Bert Welten. 1985. “Research on Non-Standard Dialects of
British English: Progress and Prospects.” In Focus on English and Wales, ed.
Feagin, Crawford. 1979. Variation and Change in Alabama English: A Sociolinguistic
Finnegan, Frances. 1982. Poverty and Prejudice: A Study of Irish Immigrants in York,
1840–75. Cork: Cork Univ. Press.
In An Historic Tongue: Studies in English Linguistics in Memory of Barbara Strang,
M. Hogg, vol. 1 of Cambridge History of the English Language, ed. Richard M.
to Social and Regional Varieties of British English. London: Edward Arnold.
Beiträge zur englischen Sprachwissenschaft 34. Frankfurt am Main: Lang.
Coding Conventions and Lists of Source Texts. Helsinki: Dept. of English, Univ. of
Helsinki.
Labov, William. 1990. “The Intersection of Sex and Social Class in the Course of
annual meeting on New Ways of Analyzing Variation in English (NWAVE 25),
Labov, William, and Joshua Waletzky. 1967. “Narrative Analysis: Oral Versions of
Personal Experience.” In Essays on the Verbal and Visual Arts, ed. June Helm, 12–
44. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press.
Blake, vol. 2 of The Cambridge History of the English Language, ed. Richard M.
to Eighteenth Centuries.” In Stein and Tieken-Boon von Ostade, 81–113.
idence, R.I.: Brown Univ.
LAMSAS. Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States. 1980–. Ed. Raven I.
McDavid, Jr. 1 vol. to date. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
Long, Mary McDonald. 1944. The English Strong Verb from Chaucer to Caxton. Menasha,
Wis.: George Banta.
Lowth, Robert. 1762. Short Introduction to English Grammar. London: Miller and
Martin, D. 1999. “Copula Variability in a Northern British Dialect: Contraction,
Deletion and Inherent Variability.” M.A. diss., Univ. of York.


