

## Subject Agreement Variation: Confronting the Hypothesis Space with Novel Data

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### 1. Domain of investigation and contributions of our study

In this talk we investigate variation in subject-verb agreement in varieties of English. This domain is rich both empirically and theoretically.

(A) Examples of empirical richness: *Northern Subject Rule* (attested, e.g., in Belfast English; Henry 1995), *Southern Subject Rule* (recent work by D. Britain & L. Rupp), distribution of *was/were* in Buckie English (Adger & Smith 2005).

To the above variation we will add phenomena from Appalachian English (gleaned from both the literature and our own ongoing fieldwork in Eastern Tennessee and Southwestern Virginia), which is similar to and different from British varieties in a number of ways.



A little background on Appalachian English: a group of varieties spoken in areas of the eastern United States. The geographical area roughly coincides with the central and southern part of the Appalachian Mountain range, which includes areas of southwestern Pennsylvania and Virginia, West Virginia, eastern Tennessee and Kentucky, western North Carolina, southeastern Ohio, and northern Georgia and Alabama (Algeo 2003). The most notable studies of these varieties are Hackenberg (1972), Wolfram & Christian (1976), and Montgomery & Hall (2004).

Map from Tortora (2004), which was a modification of a reproduction with the permission of the Center for Virtual Appalachia (<http://cva.morehead-st.edu/>).

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(B) As we investigate this variation in subject-verb agreement, we will see that it bears on a number of other phenomena and issues that are relevant to current syntactic theory, including clause structure and subject positions, the structure of the DP, the syntax of negative polarity items and negative concord, case, the nature of functional heads, and how micro-parametric correlations in these domains are to be captured. These issues will be addressed as we explore 6 hypotheses to account for subject-verb agreement in different varieties of English (some of which have been explicitly pursued in the literature, and others of which we are entertaining for the first time here):

**Nominativity Hypothesis** (Henry 1995)

**DP Complexity Hypothesis**

**Multiple Subject Positions Hypothesis** (Henry 1995)

**Featural-Content-of-T Hypothesis** (Adger & Smith 2005)

**D-number hypothesis** (Adger & Smith 2005)

**“Singular Concord” as “Person Concord”**

Our work on Appalachian English gives us the opportunity to contribute to both domains. In particular, in this talk we aim to do the following:

- Discuss the range of morpho-syntactic variation in the domain of subject-verb agreement in varieties English, and the hypotheses that have been put forth to account for it;
- Determine which data can help us sort through the various hypotheses, and bring to bear some new data points from Appalachian English;
- Evaluate the various hypotheses, trying to determine which of them allows us to capture correlations between certain phenomena, and whether some might be closely related and perhaps collapsible into a single, broader hypothesis;
- Put forward a new way of looking at the micro-variation attested in the varieties under investigation;
- Explore the idea that speakers from a given community might form different hypotheses when the stimulus is vague enough to allow for this.

## 2. The Northern Subject Rule, or Singular Concord

### 2.1 A descriptive characterization

SINGULAR CONCORD: the co-occurrence of a plural subject with a verb carrying the -s suffix (see, e.g., Milroy 1981).

In Belfast English (BeE) singular concord is possible with full DPs (Henry 1995):

- |     |                                     |                               |     |
|-----|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----|
| (1) | a. The children <b>is</b> happy.    | b. The children are happy.    | BeE |
|     | c. The girls <b>likes</b> pizza.    | d. The girls like pizza.      |     |
|     | e. The children <b>has</b> arrived. | f. The children have arrived. |     |

In contrast, it is impossible with plural pronouns that are specified for Nominative case:

- |     |                              |                     |      |
|-----|------------------------------|---------------------|------|
| (2) | a. *They <b>is</b> happy.    | b. They are happy.  | BeLE |
|     | c. *We <b>is</b> happy.      | d. We are happy.    |      |
|     | e. *They <b>likes</b> pizza. | f. They like pizza. |      |
|     | g. *We <b>likes</b> pizza.   | h. We like pizza.   |      |

BeLE plural pronouns that are case-vague (i.e., which can be used either as subjects or objects) behave like full DPs:

- |     |                                |                        |      |
|-----|--------------------------------|------------------------|------|
| (3) | a. Themuns <b>is</b> happy     | b. Themuns are happy.  | BeLE |
|     | c. Themuns <b>likes</b> pizza. | d. Themuns like pizza. |      |
| (4) | a. Usuns <b>is</b> happy.      | b. Usuns are happy.    |      |
|     | c. Usuns <b>likes</b> pizza.   | d. Usuns like pizza.   |      |
| (5) | a. Yousuns <b>is</b> happy.    | b. Yousuns are happy.  |      |
|     | c. Yousuns <b>likes</b> pizza. | d. Yousuns like pizza. |      |

Appalachian English (AppE) seems to exhibit similar facts (e.g., Hackenberg 1972; Wolfram & Christian 1976; Hazen 1996):

AppE full DPs:

- |     |  |                                  |      |
|-----|--|----------------------------------|------|
| (6) | a. Those boys <b>is</b> plumb foolish. | b. Those boys are plumb foolish. | AppE |
|     | c. The potatoes <b>looks</b> awful.    | d. The potatoes look awful.      |      |

AppE Nominative plural pronouns appear to behave like those in BeLE:

- |     |   |                                  |      |
|-----|---|----------------------------------|------|
| (7) | a. *They <b>is</b> old friends.           | b. They are old friends.         | AppE |
|     | c. *We <b>is</b> old friends.             | d. We are old friends.           |      |
|     | e. *They <b>plows</b> their corn in June. | f. They plow their corn in June. |      |
|     | g. *We <b>plows</b> our corn in June.     | h. We plow our corn in June.     |      |

What are the grammatical factors relevant for singular concord?

Hypotheses:

Verbal -s = marker/morpho-syntactic instantiation of 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular

Singular concord = lack of agreement

## 2.2 What are the relevant properties of the subject?

The behavior of unambiguously Nominative and case-vague plural pronouns suggests the following hypotheses (see Henry 1995:24):

**Nominativity Hypothesis.** If the plural pronoun in subject position is unambiguously nominative, it does not allow singular concord; case-vague plural pronouns, as well as plural DP's, do allow singular concord.

- If singular concord is lack of subject-verb agreement, then we conclude that nominative marked pronouns require subject-verb agreement.

However, given that the BeLE case-vague plural pronouns are also morphologically complex, it is possible that a different hypothesis is at play.



**Note on data and acquisition:** If a variety has a pronoun such as *we'uns* (which is both Nominative AND complex), then a learner who hears this pronoun with singular concord can conclude that in this variety, it is not Nominativity that determines whether a subject agrees (but rather, DP complexity). However, if a pronoun of the type *we'uns* is missing from the stimulus, the learner might come to form either the Nominativity Hypothesis or the DP Complexity Hypothesis with equivalent probability, given that there would be nothing else in the stimulus to help him/her decide in favor of one hypothesis over the other.

- The nature of the subject (nominativity or complexity) correlates with singular concord. How might this be expressed in the syntax?

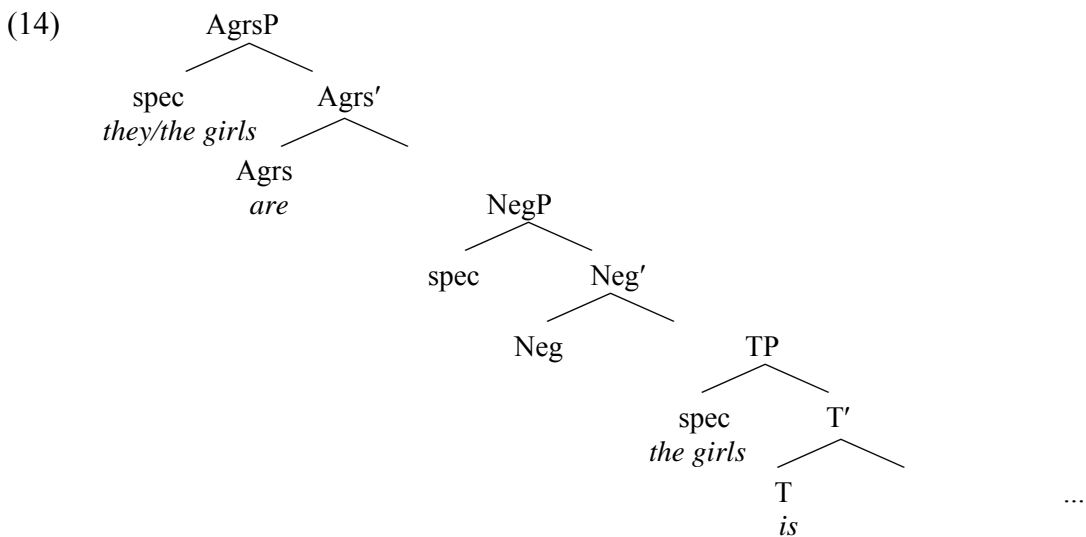
### 3. The Syntax of Subject-Verb Agreement I: Multiple positions for the subject

- Why do certain plural subjects (simple pronouns) trigger agreement on the finite verb and others (plural DPs and complex/case-vague pronouns) fail to do so?
- What is the syntactic characterization of subject-verb agreement?

#### 3.1 Two positions for the subject

Henry's (1995) approach to the BeIE facts ties agreement to the position of the subject.

**Two Subject Positions Hypothesis.** The plural DPs that obligatorily trigger subject-verb agreement are in a higher subject position; those that do not are in a lower subject position.



Nominativity and/or complexity (recall section 2) may well bear on a subject's position.

What types of data would provide evidence for the idea that the position of the subject determines whether or not a verb agrees? We will examine:

- Negative Polarity Items (NPIs) and Negative Quantifiers
- Scope Judgments

**a. Negative Polarity Items and Negative Quantifiers**

BeE allows NPIs in subject position (Duffield 1993); an NPI in subject position requires singular concord (Henry 1995):

- (15) a. Any animals isn't coming. (= No animals are coming) BeE  
 b. \*Any animals aren't coming.

In (15a) the subject is low and thus below the scope of Negation (lower than NegP in (14)).

AppE does not allow NPIs as matrix subjects, so an example like (16) is not grammatical:

- (16) \*Anybody ain't/isn't/aren't coming. AppE

However, like some varieties of African American English (Green 2007, and references therein), AppE allows negative quantifiers in matrix subject position, as an example like (17) shows (Wolfram & Fasold 1974; Wolfram & Christian 1976). Moreover, AppE allows Negative Inversion, as in (18) (Wolfram & Christian 1976:113):

- (17) Nobody ain't coming. (= Nobody is coming.) AppE  
 (18) Didn't nobody get hurt or nothin'. AppE

Our fieldwork has shown that in such Negative Inversion contexts, at least some speakers require singular concord:

- (19) a. A guy was painting a barn that **hasn't** no farmers used in years AppE  
 b. \*A guy was painting a barn that **haven't** no farmers used in years.

The subject's appearance to the right of the verb suggests that it is in the lower subject position.

- These data suggest that independent of Nominativity or Complexity, a low subject position entails lack of agreement.

**b. Scope Judgments**

Quantifier scope facts may also provide a test for the Two Subject Positions Hypothesis.

Predictions: If a non-agreeing subject is lower in the tree than an agreeing subject, a quantified subject like *all his sons* should take scope over negation when it agrees, but not when it fails to agree, as illustrated in (20) and (21).

Singular concord = low subject = below scope of negation:

- (20) All his sons **isn't** married. N > Q  
 "It isn't the case that all his sons are married."

Agreement = high subject = above the scope of negation:

- (21) All his sons **aren't** married. Q > N  
 "All his sons are such that they are not married."

Our ongoing fieldwork is investigating this empirical domain. Because of the difficulty of obtaining the relevant judgments, we are currently developing picture prompts to facilitate judgments.

- If the predictions are borne out by the scope judgments, this suggests that agreeing (*are*) and non-agreeing (*is*) forms are grammatically determined within a single grammar (Zanuttini 2005).

### 3.2 Three positions for the subject

BeIE does not allow non-agreement in inversion contexts (Henry 1995):

- (22) a. \*Is the eggs cracked? BeIE  
 b. \*Has the children arrived?

According to Henry, the verb must move through AgrS on its way to C<sup>0</sup>.

Unlike BeIE, AppE allows non-agreement in inversion contexts (Bernstein 2006a):

- (23) Is them cars fast? AppE

Non-agreement in inversion contexts is also possible in Ulster-Scots (Montgomery 2006):

- (24) a. Is the wains (=children) awa? UlsSco  
 b. Is them boys daft?

See Montgomery's (1989; 1995; 1997) argument that Appalachian English developed from Ulster-Scots.

- If movement to C<sup>0</sup> triggers agreement, as Henry claims, why does AppE (and UlsSco) allow non-agreement in inversion contexts, unlike BeIE?

**Multiple Subject Positions Hypothesis.** UG provides three different subject positions: an EPP position, an AgrSP position, and a TP position (Guasti & Rizzi 2002, Cardinaletti 2004, Rizzi 2006). Only DPs in the AgrSP position trigger agreement on the verb.

(25) Three Different Subject Positions:

- |    |                                  |                       |         |
|----|----------------------------------|-----------------------|---------|
| 1. | EPP (criterial) subject position | (no verbal agreement) | HIGHEST |
| 2. | AgrSP subject position           | (verbal agreement)    |         |
| 3. | TP subject position              | (no verbal agreement) | LOWEST  |

We propose two positions for the subject in AppE, and two in BeIE: AppE has positions 1 and 2 available, and BeIE has positions 2 and 3 available:

(26a) AppE:

- |    |                              |                       |  |
|----|------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| 1. | EPP subject position (high)  | (no verbal agreement) |  |
| 2. | AgrSP subject position (low) | (verbal agreement)    |  |

(26b) BeIE:

- |    |                               |                       |  |
|----|-------------------------------|-----------------------|--|
| 2. | AgrSP subject position (high) | (verbal agreement)    |  |
| 3. | TP subject position (low)     | (no verbal agreement) |  |

Inversion in AppE: AppE subjects in the highest (EPP) subject position would not trigger agreement on the verb, which would then raise to C in its non-agreeing form.

Inversion in BeE: BeE subjects in the lowest (TP) subject position would not trigger agreement on the verb; however, when the verb raises through AgrS, agreement would be triggered and carried along to C in inversion contexts.

- Can this new “Multiple Subject Positions” hypothesis allow us to capture correlations in micro-parametric variation?

Recall that AppE, unlike BeE, does not allow NPIs as matrix subjects:

(27) \*Any animals isn't/aren't/ain't coming. AppE

(28) Any animals isn't (\*aren't) coming. BeE

NPIs in AppE: AppE subjects in either the EPP or AgrSP subject position are too high for negation to take scope over them.

NPIs in BeE: BeE subjects in the TP subject position are low and negation can take scope over them; BeE subjects in the AgrSP subject position are higher than NegP (agreement is triggered on the verb) and negation cannot take scope over them.

- Henry's version of the Two Subject Positions Hypothesis does not straightforwardly account for the AppE inversion and NPI facts. An expansion of the inventory of subject positions (to three) may allow us to capture these facts.

#### 4. The Syntax of Subject-Verb Agreement II: Variation in feature-content

Does the feature content of functional heads (i.e., T and D) play a role in determining whether or not the verb agrees?

##### 4.1 Feature-Content-of-T Hypothesis

Intra-speaker variation between *is* and *are* reduces to a choice between two T-heads available in the lexicon, which give rise to different morphological forms.

**Feature-Content-of-T Hypothesis.** A speaker has two types of T-head available, with different feature content with respect to uninterpretable features (case and number); the use of *is* vs. *are* (or *was* vs. *were*) is the result of the speaker's choice of T-head (Adger & Smith 2005).

Under this approach *is* and *are* with plural DPs instantiate two different grammars, one with T1 the other with T2. This hypothesis gives content to the notion of two different grammars.

How would the Feature-Content-of-T Hypothesis account for:

- a) microparametric correlations exhibited in the domain of subject-verb agreement?
- b) BeE inversion facts?

a) A comparison of the BeE and AppE facts suggests that inversion, negative polarity items and negative quantifiers all pattern together:

BELFAST ENGLISH		APPALACHIAN ENGLISH		
(29)	a. *Is the eggs cracked?	vs.	b. Is the eggs cracked?	<u>Inversion</u>
(30)	a. Anybody can't come.	vs.	b. *Anybody can't come.	<u>Subject NPIs</u>
(31)	a. *Nobody can't come.	vs.	b. Nobody can't come.	<u>Subject NegQ</u>

These contrasts may ultimately be linked under a Multiple Subject Positions hypothesis, but it is not obvious how to link them under the Feature-Content-of-T Hypothesis. That is, how would choice of T-head determine whether a variety allows subject NPIs and subject negative quantifiers?

b) How would this hypothesis be extended to *is / are* variation in BeE? In BeE, T1 (corresponding to *is*) could be accessed in declaratives with plural subjects, but could not be accessed in interrogatives. In this case, T2 (corresponding to *are*) would have to be accessed. What mechanism would allow this? And do we want a system that requires “switching grammars” (from Grammar 1 to Grammar 2) to form a question?

- This suggests that Grammar 1 cannot do inversion in interrogatives. Is this a reasonable assumption? Note that we predict that a grammar that only has a Grammar 1 (i.e., in which no *are* is available at all) cannot do inversions at all in interrogatives.

Perhaps the facts of AAE indicate that this is a reasonable conclusion. Note that AAE is an *is*-only variety (Green 2002), and can have non-inversion in interrogatives ((32) from van Herk 2000, citing Dillard 1972):

(32) Why she ain' over here? (= Why isn't she over here?) AAE

What does this hypothesis mean for AppE, where *is* is possible in interrogatives? In contrast with BeE, T1 would be accessed in interrogatives. So the difference between BeE and AppE reduces to non-availability of T1 with interrogatives in the former, but availability of T1 in the latter.

- The Feature-Content-of-T Hypothesis reduces variation to the feature contents of T. How to apply this hypothesis to certain BeE, AppE, and AAE cases remains to be seen.

## 4.2 D-number Hypothesis

Another possibility is that D, rather than T, is the functional head relevant to subject-verb agreement. Under this approach, the verb agrees not with the nominal subject generally, but with the number specification of D.

**D-number Hypothesis.** The number on the D head determines verb agreement.

Buckie English (Adger & Smith 2005: 8, 21):

- (33) a. *They were* aie sort o' pickin' on me, like. plural nom. pronoun (*they*)  
       'They were always sort of picking on me.'
- b. *There were* a puckle thatched houses like that. ambiguous number (*there*)  
       'There were a couple of thatched houses like that.'
- c. Oh, *there was* a lot of coopers 'at time. ambiguous number (*there*)  
       'There were a lot of barrel markers at that time.'

Adger & Smith (p. 21) show that a D and its complement NP can differ in number:

- (34) a. But I'd pile of *that photos* of the dancing. BuckieE  
b. 'But I had piles of those photographs of the dancing.'

Their proposal might predict that a singular-looking (but non-agreeing) D like *that* will trigger a singular verb in an example like (35):

- (35) a. That photos is beautiful.  
b. That photos are beautiful

Under this approach, it is the feature content of the D head (singular or plural) that accounts for the variation in the form of the verb, rather than the feature content of the T head.

- In this section, we have reviewed two hypotheses that take the locus of syntactic variation to reside in the lexicon, in particular with the uninterpretable features of lexical items, corresponding to T or D.

## 5. A novel approach: "Singular Concord" as "Person Concord"

Working assumptions common to previous work:

- 1) *-s* is a marker of **singular number**;
- 2) occurrence of a plural DP with verbal *-s* reflects **lack of subject-verb agreement in number**.

- (36) [The girls]<sub>pl</sub> [likes]<sub>sing</sub> pizza. = lack of agreement in number

Let us question the first assumption:

- 1) What if *-s* marks number in some but not all English varieties?

New (tentative) proposal:

Verbal *-s* appears whenever the subject noun phrase lacks a person feature.

(v. Bernstein 2006b for discussion of diachronic evidence supporting this claim)

Let us consider the data from AppE., starting from subjects that are morphologically simple.

a) The pronouns *I*, *you* and *we* cannot co-occur with a verb marked with *-s*:

- (37) a. \*I **likes** winter the best. AppE  
b. \*We **is** old friends.  
c. \*You **looks** right tired.

Under this view, this is because these subjects have person marking in D.

b) The referential pronoun *they* cannot occur with a verb marked with *-s*, in contrast with the pronouns *he*, *she* and *it*, which can:

- (38) a. \*They **plows** all their corn in June. AppE  
b. She/he/it **falls**.

Under this view, this is because *they* encodes person, whereas the other pronouns do not. Bernstein (in press) has independently suggested the pronoun *they* encodes person, in the morpheme *th-*; the pronouns *he*, *she* and *it* do not (they only encode gender; see Bernstein in press).

c) The expletive pronoun *they* must co-occur with verbal *-s* ((39a,c) Montgomery & Hall 2004: lxii; (39b) Wolfram & Christian 1976: 125):

- (39) a. They **is** something bad wrong with her. AppE  
 b. They's nothin' to keep 'em from turnin'.  
 c. They **is** not so many there now.

Under this view, this is because expletive *they* does not mark person. Tortora (2006) has independently suggested that AppE expletive *they* is weak, in the sense that it has an impoverished functional structure. Departing from that proposal slightly, the current view would lead us to say that expletive *they* differs from its referential counterpart in lacking a person feature.

Turning now to subjects that are morphologically complex, we find that all of them can co-occur with verbal *-s*.

a) Determiner or demonstrative followed by a noun:

- (40) a. The potatoes **looks** awful. AppE  
 b. Them boys **is** plumb silly.

b) Complex pronouns like *we'uns*:

- (41) Suppose you wanna tell me about you and your neighbor. Can you say: AppE  
 a. We'uns **is** planning a picnic.  
 b. We'uns **is** mighty good to our friends.

c) Complex noun phrases (like *us*) followed by a noun:

- (42) Us women **watches** the kids a lot. AppE

d) Coordinated noun phrases:

- (43) a. It's true that [me and him] **gets** in a fight some time AppE  
 b. It's true that [he and I] **gets** in a fight some time.

The view of *-s* as sensitive to the person specification of the subject would lead us to say one of the following:

- a) D lacks a person feature; or  
 b) the person feature(s) on D does not percolate up to the entire noun phrase and therefore does not determine agreement with the finite verb.

In these cases, agreement with the finite verb is determined by the person features of the head noun (*children*, *'uns*, *women*) or of the head of the coordinate constituent. Because these do not have a person feature, the morpheme *-s* occurs on the finite verb.

Suppose that this view is correct for AppE, and that *-s* on the finite verb occurs whenever the subject lacks a person feature. Following the Cardinaletti & Starke (1999) line of reasoning, subjects with more feature specifications occupy a higher structural position than subjects with fewer feature specifications. It could then follow that a subject that co-occurs with *-s* (i.e., a subject lacking person specification) is in a lower structural position; hence, *I*, *we*, *you* and referential *they* are predicted to be structurally higher than *he*, *she*, *it*, expletive *they* and the morphologically complex subjects.

## 6. Conclusions

In this talk, we have considered various subject-verb agreement phenomena from different varieties of English. Some of these phenomena and varieties have been discussed in the previous literature, while those that are based on our own fieldwork on Appalachian English have been discussed here for the first time. Taking these data together in this way, we have illustrated a range of the robust micro-parametric variation in this domain (although the range is even greater than what we covered here, if we consider, for example, the phenomena discussed in Pietsch (2005) and recent work on the Southern Subject Rule (D. Britain and L. Rupp)).

In examining this range of micro-parametric variation, we have also considered various accounts that have been put forth in the literature and our own novel proposals. In exploring these various hypotheses, we raised the question as to whether a single hypothesis can account for the entire set of facts that we have observed across varieties, whether different hypotheses are relevant for different points of variation, and/or whether certain hypotheses together form a class (so that more than one syntactic factor, e.g., DP complexity and different subject positions, is responsible for the intra- and inter-dialectal variation we find). In testing the viability of the different hypotheses, it is important to determine whether any of them can readily capture correlations between (or among) certain sets of phenomena, and whether the hypotheses are falsifiable. Our investigation has also shown that depending on the type of phenomena, different speakers (i.e., learners) might formulate different hypotheses, even within the same speech community, if the input is vague enough to allow for this. It is also worth considering how this possibility might yield certain trajectories of language change but not others. For example, suppose the data is vague enough to allow a speaker to arbitrarily form either the DP Complexity Hypothesis or the Nominativity Hypothesis. Then, if and when a new complex pronoun enters the lexicon, how that pronoun will behave in terms of agreement will be determined in part by the hypothesis that particular speaker formed.

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