# Variants of contraction: The case of *it's* and *'tis*

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## 1 Introduction[1]

This paper will discuss contractions of the neuter pronoun *it* and the verb *be,* concentrating mainly on the non-negative present tense with the interesting choice of two variant forms: one with a reduced pronoun (*'tis*) and another with a reduced verb (*it's*).

Contractions are defined by Quirk et al. (1985: 122–124) as "phonologically reduced or simplified forms which are institutionalized in both speech and writing" and thus distinguished from mere phonological reduction. They are said to be "enclitic to a preceding word", unstressed, mainly negative and operational (*-n't, 'm, 's, 're, 've, 'll, 'd*), and they tend to occur in informal contexts, with certain types of subject (Sp/*there*/*here*) and, particularly, when the verb functions as an auxiliary. Quirk et al. thus clearly use the term *contraction* to refer to the reduced second (enclitic) element in the combinations, which means the exclusion of the variant *'tis,* with a proclitic *t*.

According to histories of English (e.g. Pyles and Algeo 1982: 204–20), the current contracted forms (such as *it's*) generally appear in writing in the 17th century, having probably been used long before they were written down. Being colloquial in nature, they were considered unsuitable for writing and still are by some people. Therefore, for example, printed literary texts from earlier periods do not necessarily reflect the authors' choices but rather the editors' or printers' preferences.

In the 1989 edition of the *OED* (under IT:A.γ and 'TIS), the variant *'tis* is characterized as being used "dialectally or colloquially, and to some extent in the literary language (though less now than formerly)" and "formerly common in prose, now poet., arch., dial., or colloq.". When giving examples of *it* being "further reduced in certain positions to *'t* (e.g. *'t is, 't was, 't were, is 't, was 't, do 't, to 't, in 't, on 't*)," the *OED* does not distinguish between proclitic and enclitic combinations, nor between established contractions and mere phonological reduction of post-verbal or post-prepositional *it*. The earliest example of

contraction in the *OED* is dated 1250 and shows an enclitic *'t* in SV inversion*: Ne <u>ist</u> no₃t moyses, amrame sune* (*Gen & Ex* 3472). The earliest examples of proclitic *'t* date from a much later period: c.1450: *Alas! '<u>Tys</u> pety yt schuld be þus*. (*Mankynd* 821 in *Macro Plays* 30); 1598: *'<u>T is</u> onely thou that can'st disarme this hande.* (R. Haydocke tr. *Lomazzo* II: 47).

Since the variant *'tis* has been well institutionalized in the history of English and the term contraction has commonly been used to refer to the whole combination, rather than the reduced element alone, I prefer to reword the definition of contractions like this: Contractions are combinations of two forms in such a way that one of the elements is reduced and the combination functions like a single word. The reduction can be proclitic (*'tis*) or enclitic (*it's*). Besides contractions, there is always the possibility of using non-contractions (*it is*).

Following the key words in the above quotations, I shall discuss below the colloquial nature of contractions (2), the chronologies of the variants *'tis* and *it's* (3), a possible dialectal distribution of the variants (4), and other factors potentially affecting the choice of variants (5).

When studying linguistic phenomena today, we do not have to restrict our material to the texts of a few established writers. We have ample possibility to consult various computer corpora, representing various historical periods, different varieties of English and different text types, both written and spoken. Granting the advantages of this approach in facilitating quick quantitative study, the use of corpora involves careful consideration of the principles used in compiling the corpora and selecting their materials. It is to be admitted that the corpus method often raises more questions than it provides answers and necessitates a profound study of the materials and factors affecting the figures. This study consists of a relatively superficial numerical comparison of proportions elicited from some easily available corpora of English (listed in References under Corpora), as well as one in progress: the Helsinki Corpus of British English Dialects (HD).

## 2   *The colloquial nature of contractions*

As a colloquial feature, contractions should appear mainly in spoken language. The study of genuine spoken language has not been possible until the 20th century, when corpora of both written and spoken language became available. Non-contraction clearly predominates in 20th-century corpora of written English, where the average proportion of *it is* is 78 per cent (Brown 1961 83%; Kolhapur 1978 92%; ACE 1986 65%; FLOB 1991 71%). In contemporaneous spoken corpora the same average is nine per cent (HD 1972– 13%; LLC 1975–81 12%;

SEC 1984–85 4%; WSC 1986–90 8%; COLT 1993 8%). These proportions clearly indicate that non-contraction is typical of written texts and contraction (of whichever type) of spoken language. The slight differences between the individual corpora in each group are probably attributable to the varieties and text types represented and, maybe, to transcribing conventions rather than to chronology.

The study of spoken language in earlier periods can only be conducted through contemporary written texts. It has become customary to consider that the forms and structures of speech are best reflected in text categories that imitate speech, are addressed to a less educated readership, or are written in the less formal register and by less educated writers (e.g. Kytö and Rissanen 1993: 12). Such text types are provided, for example, by the diachronic Helsinki Corpus. Its Middle English part included no instances of the contractions under study. The proportions of the non-contracted *it is* and contractions (of whichever type and spelling) in the Early Modern English part of the corpus are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1:* it + be *in the Early Modern English part of the Helsinki Corpus (WC 570,390: E1 197,096; E2 196,300; E3 178,994)*

| Subcorpus Date | EModE1 1500–1570 | | EModE2 1570–1640 | | EModE3 1640–1710 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| *it is* | 311 | 97.42 | 319 | 87.87 | 259 | 71.74 |
| contr. | 5 | 1.58 | 44 | 12.13 | 102 | 28.26 |

The contractions in EModE1 occur in Stevenson's *Gammer Gvrtons Nedle* (d.1575), those in EModE2 are found in Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* (d. fol.1623), Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1630), Deloney's *Jack of Newbury* (1619) and a private letter (1629); in EModE3 contractions are found in the text categories of science, handbooks, educational treatises, sermons, travelogues, diaries, fiction, comedies and private letters.

Table 1 shows a gradual increase in the use of contractions from c. 1500 onwards but they do not seem to have been in more common use until the third period, i.e. after 1640. The texts represented in Table 1 corroborate the abovementioned theory of the text types with speech-like characteristics. The contrac-

tions first appear in drama and private letters, being only extended to a greater variety of text types in the third period: fiction with dialogue, diaries, sermons and educational or informative texts.

The earliest instance of contracted *it + be* in the first sample corpus of Early English letters (CEECS1 1418–1638) dates from 1627. This is also the only instance of contraction in this sample corpus (1/185). The proportion of contractions (41/310 or 13.23%) in the second sample corpus (CEECS2 1580–1680) equals that of Helsinki EModE2. The majority of these contractions (32/41) occur in the letters of one person, a nun living in Flanders (Winefrid Thimelby 1619–1690).

A comparison of the CEECS with the Newdigate Newsletters (1674–1692) and the Lampeter Tracts (1640–1740) indicates that even contemporaneous texts may vary in the proportion of contraction. While the Lampeter Tracts (with its 673/2928 or 22.98% of contraction) conform to the figures in the Helsinki Corpus after 1640, the Newdigate Newsletters appear very modern in their high proportion of contractions (2924/3358 or 87.08%) (but see below, Table 4).

In literary texts, the influence of genre is what can be expected. The LION corpus (1500–1903) shows that contracting *it* and *be* is three times as common in poetry and drama (c. 67%) as in prose texts (c. 23%). (These percentages are fair approximates for, owing to the size of this untagged material, the spelling *it's* was not checked against variant spellings to eliminate possessive *its*. When this was done in prose texts for Table 5 below, it appeared that such instances are not numerous enough to significantly affect the overall proportions.) It is natural in drama, which tries to imitate speech, and convenient in poetry for the sake of metre. Rather than the abrupt voiceless variant *it's*, traditional poetry favours in particular the sonorous variant *'tis*. Or could Tennyson have said it otherwise than *'Tis I, the Lady of Shalott!*

## 3   The chronology of the variants *'tis* and *it's*

The variant *'tis* (also spelled *tys*, *'t is, t is,* or *t' is*) is older than *it's*. As shown by the *OED* (see section 1 above), it was recorded in drama in the 15th century. The study of *it's* in the earliest texts is complicated by the fact that the spellings of the contraction and possessive *its* were not always differentiated (even the spelling *it'is* was used). This inaccuracy continued to some extent till the early 19th century and, in the case of untagged corpora, necessitates the study of the potential instances one by one.The statement of language historians as to the earliest appearance of *it's* in the 17th century is corroborated by the Helsinki Corpus:

*Table 2:* '*Tis* vs *it's* in the Early Modern English part of the Helsinki Corpus

|  | EModE1 1500–1570 | | EModE2 1570–1640 | | EModE3 1640–1710 | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| *'tis* | 5 | 100 | 41 | 93.18 | 67 | 65.68 | 113 | 74.83 |
| *it's* |  | – | 3 | 6.82 | 35 | 34.31 | 38 | 25.17 |

In EModE2, the variant *it's* appears in Middleton (1630), Deloney (1619) and a private letter (1629), however, with *'tis* prevailing in all of them (compare Table 1); in EModE3 *it's* occurs in Langford's handbook on raising fruit-trees (1699), *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes* (d.1698), Vanbrugh's comedy (1697) and a private letter (1699). Editorial intervention is, however, more than probable in this material.

*It's* thus begins to appear in the same types of text as first showed contracted forms (see Section 2), i.e. those probably reflecting spoken usage and aimed at or written by less educated people. The first occasional instances of *it's* appear in texts with *'tis* as the prevailing contraction. *It's* does not really begin to gain ground until the very end of the century. The first text in the Helsinki Corpus with *it's* as the only contraction is Langford's handbook on raising fruit trees (1699). The question arises whether the increase of the new, apparently colloquial, variant at this particular time could be another example of what sociolinguistics call 'change from below', connected to the new classes rising into prestige during and after the Commonwealth. It is to be noted that the only two instances of *it's,* as against 39 of *'tis*, in CEECS2 (1580–1680) are included in letters by Oliver Cromwell himself (1644) and one of his officers (1659).

It is to be noted that these historical corpora, the Lampeter Tracts in particular, also include occasional instances of other *'t* -proclitics, such as *'twas*, *'twere*, *'twill* and *'twould.*

The distribution of the two variants in Shakespeare's works is given according to Spevack's concordance based on the Folios printed from 1623 onwards.

*Table 3:* '*Tis* vs *it's* in Shakespeare: Spevack's concordance

|  | Shak-all texts | | Shak-Verse | | Shak-Prose | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| '*tis* | 1520 | 97.75 | 1199 | 98.52 | 321 | 94.97 |
| *it's* | 35 | 2.25 | 18 | 1.48 | 17 | 5.03 |
| n | 1555 |  | 1217 |  | 338 |  |

It is, of course, impossible to say how far the text of the folios represents Shakespeare's own English. The proportions of the two variants resemble those in the contemporary corpora given above. Though the numbers of instances are small, there seems to be some preference of *it's* in Shakespeare's prose texts. Do we here see the model for the subsequent use of '*tis* as a poetic variant? It was not possible to see any tendency in the use of either variant as to any particular period of Shakespeare's career (cf. Alexander 1961: xiv–xxi), any particular type of play (comedy, tragedy, history) or any particular type of character (noblemen, servants, supernatural beings, etc.).

That different variants may be preferred in contemporaneous texts of different types is indicated by a comparison of the Lampeter Tracts and the Newdigate newsletters (Table 4).

*Table 4:* '*Tis* vs *it's* in the Lampeter Tracts and the Newdigate newsletters

|  | Lampeter 1640–1740 | | Newdigate 1674–1692 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | N | % | N | % |
| '*tis* | 529 | 78.60 | 1605 | 54.89 |
| *it's* | 144 | 21.40 | 1314 | 45.11 |

The Newdigate newsletters, which proved rather modern in their higher proportion of contractions (see section B above), are modern also in their frequent use of the less conservative variant *it's*. And yet, they were written and circulated by the state office in a period when the purity and refinement of English were the

primary aim of writers advocating an Academy of English. In the Lampeter Tracts, again, the use of *it's* was more common in the early period (before 1673 32.80%), was reduced considerably in the period contemporaneous with the Newsletters (14.58%) and increased again in the latest period (after 1692 21.07%). An explanation of this interesting alternation would necessitate a closer scrutiny of both the society and the government in these periods and the people responsible for editing and printing the tracts.

Wider chronological coverage in the preference of either contraction is provided by the literary prose texts of the LION corpus (Table 5.).

*Table 5:* *'Tis* vs *it's* in the prose part of the LION corpus (all spelling variants)

| Variant | −1 600 | 1600–1650 | 1650–1700 | 1700–1750 | 1750–1800 | 1800–1850 | 1850–1900 | 1900– |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 'tis | 82 | 286 | 2302 | 1950 | 2137 | 4641 | 1964 | 3 |
| % | 100.00 | 96.30 | 98.33 | 98.19 | **81.75** | 28.78 | 15.78 | 1.67 |
| *it's* | | 11 | 39 | 36 | 479 | 11485 | 10484 | 177 |
| % | | 3.70 | 1.67 | 1.81 | 18.25 | **71.22** | 84.22 | 98.33 |

The acceptance of *it's* into literary prose seems to have been much slower than in other types of text, in which it was represented in approximately 20 to 35 per cent of contractions around 1700. In literary prose *it's* does not really begin to gain ground until the latter half of the 18th century, but then there is a drastic reversal of the proportions after c. 1800 from about four fifths of *'tis* to nearly three quarters of *it's*. The latter continues to increase throughout the 19th century until it has practically ousted the other variant at the turn of the century.

A closer scrutiny of the most prolific individual writers in the LION Corpus reveals a distinction between British and American writers. It is to be noted, however, that, since the final decision as to the variant appearing in the printed work rests with the publisher or editor, the figures below should rather be interpreted as reflecting the accepted contemporaneous and regional preferences, even if reference is made to individual writers.

If only authors with 50 or more instances of contraction are considered, most of the British 19th-century writers show 88 to100 per cent of *it's* (R. Ballantyne, Lewis Carroll, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, John Galt, George Gissing, Frederic Marryat, George Meredith, Sir Walter Scott, R.L. Stevenson and Anthony

Trollope). Two are more conservative: Benjamin Disraeli (388 instances of con-traction) uses both variants about evenly, while the predominance of *it's* is only 65 per cent in W.M. Thackeray (1,168 instances). A striking exception is made by Thomas Hardy (977 instances) with 90 per cent of *'tis*. American writers, their works in the LION Corpus dating from 1800–1850, mostly follow Thack-eray's more conservative pattern. Only one third of the American writers (7/23) clearly prefer *it's* (upwards from 80%) (Ch.F. Briggs, T.S. Fay, J.P. Kennedy, C. Matthews,W.G. Simms, S. Smith and F. Thomas). With one third the average proportion of *it's* is 63 per cent (E. Bennett, W.A. Caruthers, H.W. Herbert, C.F. Hoffman, W. Irwing, G. Lippard, J. McHenry, H. Melville). The remaining third mostly use both variants about evenly (R.M. Bird, J.F. Cooper, J. Neal, J.K. Paulding, N.P. Willis), but three prefer *'tis* (J.L.Motley, J.H. Ingraham, E.A. Poe).

The writer's date of birth, origin (whether English, Irish or Scottish) or sex do not seem to play a part in the choice of variants, but this may depend on the types of text they write. A closer study of the individual writers and their works would be necessary for any further conclusions. Prolific writers publishing over a longer period of time may change their preference. For example, Fanny Bur-ney, who published both before and after 1800, seems to have been more radical in her earlier works (74% predominance of *it's* ), with a more conservative equal distribution in her later works. J.F. Cooper, publishing between 1820 and 1850, changes from a 68 per cent predominance of *'tis* in his earlier works to a corre-sponding predominance of *it's* in his works published after 1840. J.H. Ingraham, who was very popular in his time, used *it's* in passages of dialogue with spell-ings otherwise suggesting dialectal or low-class speech (*nat'ral, pertatoes*, etc.). It is to be noted, however, that the final decision as to the variant appearing in the printed work rests with the publisher or editor.

If the variant *'tis* is found at all in 20th-century corpora (Table 6), it is in occasional quotations from poetry or songs, or in the dialogue of historical fic-tion.

*Table 6:* *'Tis* vs *it's* in 20th-century corpora

|  |  | BROWN | LLC | KOLH | FLOB | ACE | WSC | BNC |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variant |  | 1961 | 1975–81 | 1978 | 1991 | 1986 | 1986–90 | 1960– |
| *'tis* | N | 2 | 1 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 195 |
|  | % | 0.66 | 0.03 | 0.61 | 1.00 | 0.27 | 0.01 | 0.15 |
| *it's* | N | 301 | 3344 | 164 | 593 | 734 | 7524 | 126,748 |
|  | % | 99.34 | 99.97 | 99.39 | 99.00 | 99.73 | 99.99 | 99.85 |

Only the variant *it's* is found in SEC (1984–85) and COLT (1993).

## 4 Dialectal distribution of 'tis and it's

The possibility of a dialectal distribution of the variants *'tis* and *it's* was suggested to me by scattered evidence connecting the *'t* -proclisis with the South-West of England. Such was the above-mentioned predominance of *'tis* in Thomas Hardy's works, which was exceptional among contemporary writers. Further hints pointing to this area were found with other tense forms, e.g. in the FLOB corpus: *They do say, madam, that if you see a crow with a broken wing, that means* **'t will** *be a good year for raspberries, he would say* **in his fine Somerset voice**; ... *whose playing made the church windows rattle 'as if* **twere** *a thunderstorm' ;* the latter referring to Hardy's Dorset grandfather.

One of the Helsinki Devon Corpus informants emphatically confirms that the contraction *'tis* is typical of his dialect: *Here it is. Well, in the old Devonshire dialect* **yere 't is**. *Hah, not here it is,* **yere 't is**. *Hah,* **yere 't is**. (*HD*: DIDEV20).

The examples of proclitic *'t* in the *EDD* originate from Somerset and Devon, e.g. **Dev.** *'Twas weeks and weeks afore the Squire got about again, ... and when he did it was a changed man.* (1896. Chanter *Witch*: iii). This example also shows the full-form variant *it was*.

The *SED* aimed at coverage rather than quantification of phenomena and its information related to syntax is limited, but there is, nevertheless, some information. The two questions eliciting *it + be* or the respective contractions are *SED* V.7.3. (*You can burn your mouth in eating porridge, if ... too hot.*) and *SED* IX.9.2 (*You see a dog chasing your sheep, and you know it's not yours, so you wonder...*). The 'porridge' question elicited *'tis* in Gl So W Brk Co D Do Ha + IM III.10.4. Y; and the 'dog' question in Cu We Y Ch St Nf O So W Sr Co D Do Ha Sx. (Upton et al. 1994: 487 and Orton et al. 1962–71: resp. Vols of the *SED*

Basic Material). The 'porridge' question thus gives a nice south-western distri-
bution of *'tis* (Map 1), while the 'dog' question elicits additional odd instances
of *'tis* both in Nf and in more northern regions (Map 2).

*Map 1:*    The *SED* localities with *'tis* in the 'porridge' question (*SED* V.7.3)
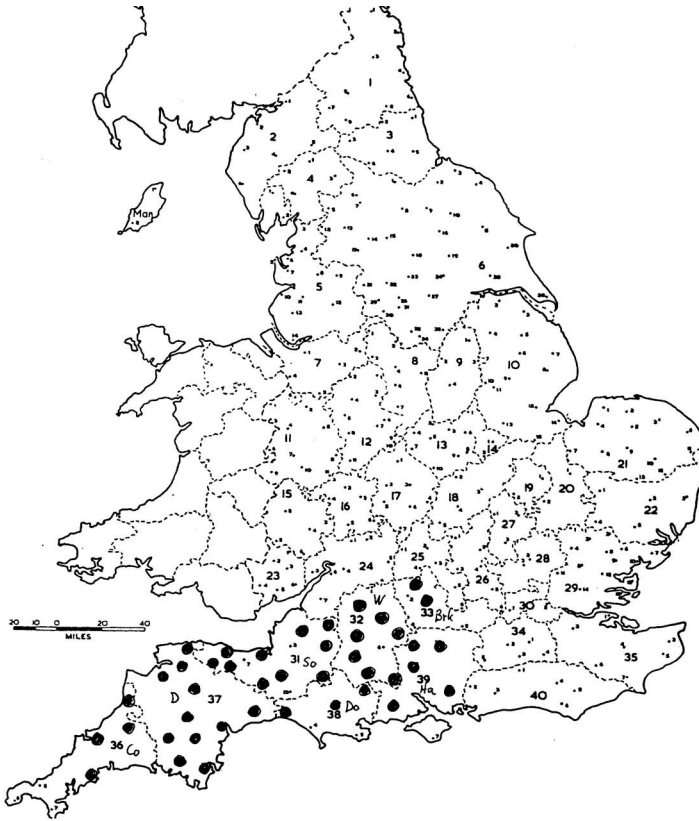


(Alternative answers elicited by the 'porridge' question include: *it's, that's, he's, 'e's, 's, it
be*).

*Map 2:*    The *SED* localities with *'tis* in the 'dog' question (*SED* IX.9.2)
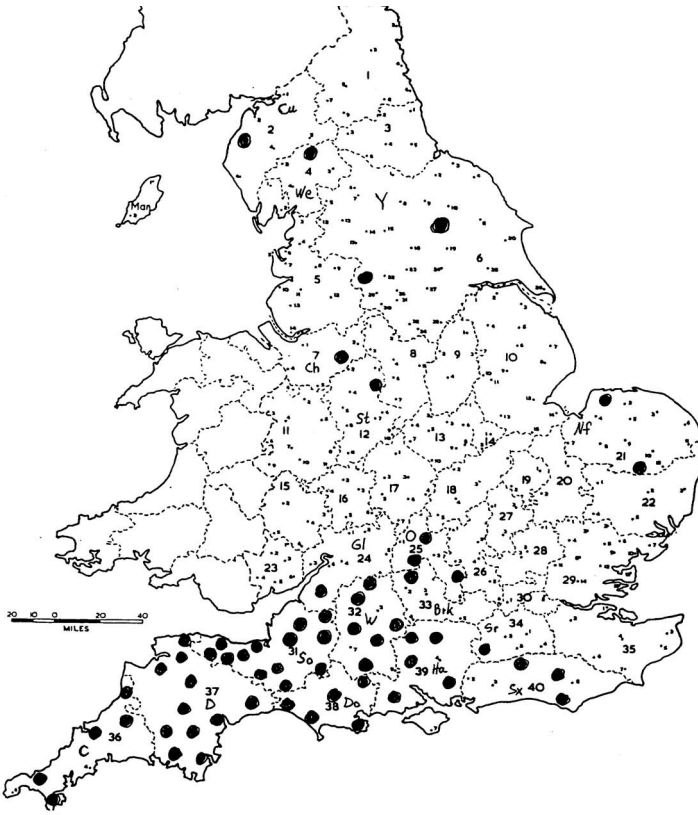


(Alternative answers elicited by the 'dog' question included e.g.: *whose, whose (dog) it/ he/that/her is/be, whose dog's he/that, whose is it/that, who it belong(s) to, whose it could be, whose be it, whosen/whoses it is, whose en be*).

The 'dog' question actually requires a vowel to bear the final stress, which means it should only allow either the full form of the verb (*it is*) or the contraction *'tis* but not *it's*. Interestingly, *'tis* is the primary choice in the south-western area, but is rarely chosen outside this area, where the informants use the non-contracted variant or a variety of alternative expressions (see under Map 2).

A statement by Claxton (1968: 77) seems to contradict the above distribution. He gives *'t* as a shortened form of *it* in the Suffolk dialect, where, according to him, 'here it is' would be expressed with *here t' be.* On the basis of Forby (1970 repr.: 340) and Poussa (1997: 1), this may actually refer to another, particularly East Anglian, form of the pronoun *te* (*te freeze* 'it freezes'), which Moor (1970 repr.: 417) chooses to spell as *ta* (*ta frize, ta snew,* etc.). Moor also interprets *t'ave* 'it has/it have' and *twool* 'it will' to contain this *ta* (*ta wool*) rather than a proclitic *'t* (ibid.: 420, 450).

The Helsinki Corpus of British English Dialects material (see References, under *HD*) indicates that the variant *'tis* is more common in the south-western subcorpora (from Somerset and Devonshire) than the East-Anglian subcorpora (from Cambridgeshire, Isle of Ely – according to the pre-1974 county division – and Suffolk), where *'tis* is heard only very occasionally.

*Table 7:* *'Tis* vs *it's* in the Helsinki Corpus of British English Dialects (1970s)[2]

|         | Som   | Dev   | Cam   | Ely   | Suf   | SW    | EA    |
|---------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| *'tis*  | 61    | 88    | 6     | 3     | 2     |       |       |
| %       | 27.11 | 30.99 | 4.23  | 1.85  | 3.45  | **29.05** | **3.17** |
| *it's*  | 164   | 196   | 136   | 159   | 56    |       |       |
| %       | 72.89 | 69.01 | 95.77 | 98.15 | 96.56 | 70.95 | 96.83 |

In addition to showing the variant *'tis* in almost one third of the contracted instances in the present tense, the south-western corpora show a considerable number of other instances with *t'* -proclitics (Som 207, Dev 113, mainly in the past tense). These are also uncommon in the East-Anglian subcorpora (Cam 0, Ely 3, Suf 11).

## 5  Factors affecting the choice of variants

One of the factors explaining the basic difference in distribution between the south-western and East-Anglian dialects might be the predominance of *that* over *it* in the latter (Trudgill and Chambers: 1991 :8 and Peitsara forthcoming), which is evidenced by the proportions of preverbal *it* and *that* in Table 8.

*Table 8:* Preverbal *it* and *that* in the Helsinki Corpus of British English Dialects

|       | Som   | Dev   | Cam   | Ely   | Suf   | SW    | EA    |
|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| *it*  | 732   | 521   | 301   | 380   | 161   |       |       |
| %     | 51.55 | 64.96 | 20.86 | 38.15 | 16.95 | 58.26 | 25.32 |
| *that*| 688   | 281   | 1142  | 616   | 789   |       |       |
| %     | 48.45 | 35.04 | 79.14 | 61.85 | **83.05** | **41.75** | **74.68** |

While preverbal *that* is not uncommon in the south-west either, it is predominantly used as a deictic pronoun with anaphoric reference (*Six-wheeler that is. Oh, shocking that was. ... but that was the harvesting* – said after a description of the various tasks involved in harvesting, etc.). The preverbal element functioning as a formal subject in these dialects is *it* (*it's a pity*, etc.). In East Anglia, again, also the latter function is typically expressed by *that* ( *...if that was rainin'...; that's a pity...*; etc.). The East Anglian pronoun variant *te/ta* also appears in the Helsinki Suffolk corpus but very seldom:

> Fieldworker: *It was very busy time.*
> Mr M (Blythburgh): *Yeah, that **te** was.*

According to Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* (*EDD,* under IT: I.5), *it* is reduced to *'t* when it is used as an abstract pronoun. Both of the *Survey of English Dialects* (*SED*) frames, however, have it as a pronoun with concrete reference. In the south-western Helsinki Corpus material no distinct preference of the contracted form to the full form can be found whether the reference is abstract or concrete (with *'tis* the percentage of abstract reference is 49.28 and with *it is* 43.59).

According to Quirk et al. (1985: 123), contractions would be more frequent with the auxiliary than the main verb *be*, but it is to be noted that by contractions Quirk et al. only refer to the enclitics (see Section 1 above). In the Helsinki Dialect Corpus material the verb is a full verb or copula (i.e. the only verb in the sentence) in around 90 per cent of the instances. This applies to all the three variant types of expression *(it is, it's, 'tis).*

A closer scrutiny of the Ihalainen Somerset Corpus (see References, under *HD*) reveals that the instances of *'tis* are distributed among most of the infor-

mants (15/23). Only one of them prefers *'tis* to *it's*. This is JM from Fitzhead, the informant considered very typical by the fieldworker (Ihalainen 1987: 73). This informant occasionally uses *it's* with concrete reference (two instances only), *'tis*, again, also for other functions, such as identifying (*'tis thee*), existential (replacing *there's*) and weather expressions. The other informants in this corpus do not show any preferred use. Both variants are common, for example, in the construction S + BE + Ca/Cn (*it's funny, it's a pity*, etc.). The only variant expression that shows a clear distribution of use is the full form *it is*. It is naturally required in the sentence-final position (*Yes, it is; I don't know why it is.*), but in the great majority of instances it occurs in comparative clauses, typical patterns being: *... not like it is today* and *different what it is today*.

The distribution of *'tis* in the Somerset area does not show a similar division into two parts as was noticed by Ihalainen with the habitual DO or the WAS/WERE paradigm (Ihalainen 1987: 72–73).

The south-western dialects of England are often characterized as conservative.The preference in them for the proclitic contraction *'tis* to the enclitic variant *it's* is paralleled by the proclisis in the first person singular, which is considered typical of the area: *cham* for earlier *ic am* 'I am'. The general development in the English language seems to have been from proclisis to enclisis. This has also happened to OE and ME proclitic negation (*nam, nis, neren*, etc.), which has been replaced with the ModE enclitic contractions (*isn't, ain't, weren't*, etc.). Since contractions were part of spoken language, the exact origins of *'tis* and *it's* are difficult to date. The proclitic *'tis* was probably supported in the ME period by the corresponding French construction (cf. *c'est moi*: *'tis me*) and later by the conservative conventions of the written standard. In spoken language, however, with a general tendency to more uniform paradigms (cf. the dialectal reflexive pronoun and verbal paradigms, etc.) the proclisis was doomed to give way to the analogical pattern of personal pronouns with *be* (*I'm, he's, she's, we're,* etc.), supported by other enclitic contractions (*we'll, he'd*, etc.).

## 6 Conclusions

Contractions of *it* and *be* begin to appear in written prose in the early 17th century, first in texts assumed to reflect spoken language. The earlier variant *'tis* holds its ground until around 1800 as the established form, though *it's* is occasionally found, probably as part of a change from a lower social stratum. Texts of different types may show considerable variation in the proportions of the variants. There is a radical change in preference for *it's* around 1800. This is probably due rather to a change in what is considered acceptable according to

the writing conventions of the time than any major change in spoken usage. In speech, *it's* had found its place earlier as an analogical variant fitting the general pattern of enclisis which had become established in English. *'Tis* survives in the south-western varieties of British English and also in Newfoundland English, which has been influenced by these varieties in other aspects, too (e.g. its gender system, Paddock 1991).[3]

## *Notes*

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2. I am indebted to Anna-Liisa Vasko and Irmeli Tammivaara-Balaam for permission to use their Cambridgeshire and Isle of Ely materials.
3. For the information on *'tis* in Newfoundland English, I am indebted to a discussion with Professor Sandra Clarke during the Methods XI conference in Joensuu.

## *References*

### *Corpora*

The total number of words in each corpus is given in brackets with the year of compilation.

ACE (1986; 1m), written (printed) Australian English.

BNC (fiction 1960–, other 1975–; 900,000). Spoken (10m) and written (90m) British English.

BROWN (1961 1m), written (printed) American English.

CEECS = *Corpus of Early English Correspondence Sampler.* (1418–1680; 450,000), British English.

COLT (1993; 500,000), spontaneous spoken London teenager English.

FLOB (Freiburg-LOB) (1991; 1m), written British English.

HC = *The Helsinki Corpus of English Texts:* Early Modern English (1500–1710; 570,390).

HD = *The Helsinki Corpus of British English Dialects* (collected in the 1970s; over 800,000, unpublished, transcription and edition in progress), spoken

rural British English. The informants were chosen mainly following the principles used in the *SED*.

Sub-corpora:

– the Ihalainen Somerset Corpus (c. 165,000 words, 23 informants, 15 localities);

– the Stigell Devon Corpus (c. 85,000 words, 32 inf., 9 loc.);

– the Ojanen-Vasko Cambridgeshire Corpus (c. 224,000 words, 30 inf., 26 loc.);

– the Tammivaara-Balaam Isle of Ely Corpus (c. 82,000 words, 30 inf., 17 loc.);

– the Pasanen Suffolk Corpus (c. 211,000 words, 38 inf., 14 loc.).

– the Kerman Corpora, collected in the 1980s in Essex (c. 43,000 words, 5 inf., 3 loc.) and Lancashire (c. 51,000 words, 6 inf., 3 loc.) were not used in the present study.

For more information on the *HD*, see

http://www.eng.helsinki.fi/hes/Corpora/helsinki_dialect_corpus.htm

KOLHAPUR (1978; 1m), written (printed) Indian English.

LAMPETER (1640–1740; 1,1m), written (printed) Early Modern Tracts.

LION = *Literature Online*: prose texts 1500–1903 (British and American).

LLC (1975–81 + 1985–88; 500,000), spoken British English.

NEWDIGAT (1674–1692; 2,100 letters), written (unprinted) *Newdigate Newsletters* (British).

SEC (1984–1985; 52637), spoken British English.

WSC (1988. 1994), spoken New Zealand English.

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