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**Assessing the validity of the mid-nineteenth-century  
literary portrayal of Southern American English in  
*Fisher's River (North Carolina) Scenes and Characters by  
"Skitt, who was raised thar":  
A case of past tense *be* forms***

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ABSTRACT

The depiction of the vernacular of the Antebellum South in literature raises doubts regarding its faithfulness, and questions whether it may be used as a source of scientific data. This question stems from the fact that there is no certainty as to the extent authors wanted to replicate the actual vernacular of the time and the extent to which this replication was a result of literary creativity. This research investigates the literary dialect representation in Hardin E. Taliaferro's 1859 work *Fisher's River (North Carolina) Scenes and Characters by "Skitt, who was raised thar"*. More specifically, we examine his usage of past tense *be* forms. Instances of *was* and *were* found in the book are verified against real written records extracted from an online database *Private Voices: The Corpus of American Civil War Letters*. The research concludes that while in *Fisher's River* we might observe a pattern where the allomorph *were* dominates in the singular and most plausibly in the plural, the data from letters selected from *Private Voices* present a different picture. In the authentic correspondence, leveling to *was* is by far the dominant variant form. Based on these findings we draw cautious conclusions and call for further studies based on works of other local colorist and authentic documents from the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Keywords: literary dialect portrayal, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Southern American English, *was-were* variation.

## 1. Introduction

The vernacular style frowned upon by contemporary American language purists crept vigorously into Southern literature of the first half of the nineteenth century (Newton 1993: 7-8). More specifically, a dramatic increase of literary dialect representation of Southern speech was witnessed between the 1830s and 1860s, especially in works by authors native to the region (Ellis 1994: 13, in Dylewski 2013: 167). Some of these works have been used by students of earlier American regional dialects to glean linguistic information.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, unearthing other, more reliable sources suitable for linguistic scrutiny and, more importantly, the doubtful reliability of written simulation of regional vernacular in literature contributed to the diminishing popularity of portrayals of literary dialect amongst historical dialectologists. Indeed, a good many fundamental reasons suggest local-color fiction be rejected as a primary source for dialectal research. Writers' basic aim in employing dialect in their fiction was stylistic rather than philological (Giner – Montgomery 1997: 168) to give the characters realistic texture. Since in the majority of cases dialect writers were not linguists, they tended to be selective and pick traits "easily understood by the reader and associated with the region and social class presented in a given piece of literature" (Dylewski 2013: 83). These traits would often be vernacular shibboleths rather than region-specific characteristics. Some writers, in turn, tended to employ features simply deemed archaic in order to represent an earlier version of a speech they wanted to portray. It was also a common practice of nineteenth-century writers to borrow literary dialect from earlier works.

Taking all these issues into account, representations of local speech in literature should not be treated as sources of linguistic data *per se*. On the contrary, the faithfulness of rendering local speech by an author might be

<sup>1</sup> For example, "[t]o study the uncultivated usage of the period, Hunter (1925: xvi) examines a substantial number of literary works (sketches, realistic short narratives, and a few novels and plays) of the period which sought to record and reflect popular speech. In the analytical part of the dissertation he elaborates on grammatical patternings, vernacular pronunciation, numerous lexical features, and pragmatic concepts typical of regional speeches he took into account. Impressive though the amount of the material Hunter went through is, the dissertation is characterized by one major handicap: the data Hunter collected are not compared to any other linguistic evidence and, consequently, the forms retrieved from the analysis are taken at face value" (Dylewski 2013: 86).

studied against data gleaned from more reliable materials such as vernacular letters, church and town records, etc.. Accordingly, in this paper the faithfulness of the Southern dialect depicted in *Fisher's River (North Carolina) scenes and characters* (henceforth: *Fisher's River*) by Hardin Edwards Taliaferro is verified against existing linguistic data gathered from mid-nineteenth century vernacular letters written by members of the underprivileged strata of Southern society. For the sake of this paper, we focus on variations in past tense *be* forms, variations whose presence in earlier Southern American English has been attested in literature (for instance, Montgomery 2004; Trüb 2006; Dylewski 2013).

The choice of the vernacular material is by no means accidental. In order to assure maximum accuracy of comparison, the data recorded in Taliaferro's work, a native to North Carolina, and published shortly before the outbreak of the American Civil War are compared to the linguistic data culled from Civil War correspondence written by both less literate Confederates and the members of their families.<sup>2</sup> The counties considered go beyond the Surry County where the plot of *Fisher's River* takes place, the rationale behind this being based on the following premise: we assumed that since Taliaferro traveled during his lifetime (see the section to follow), the local usage he encountered might have influenced his depiction of earlier vernacular dialect. While compiling a corpus of letters from *Private Voices* we therefore included other counties which Taliaferro happened to visit. When faced with a lack of correspondence from a given location, we have considered a circle of adjacent counties whenever applicable.<sup>3</sup>

It is assumed that such an approach, where data drawn from literature are weighed against empirical data retrieved from ego<sup>4</sup> documents written in vernacular, might shed some new light on the usefulness of literary dialect representation for students of earlier Southern American English.

<sup>2</sup> Or letters found in the *Corpus of Civil War Letters (Private Voices)* available at <https://altchive.org> which were penned shortly before the outbreak of the war.

<sup>3</sup> For the list of counties, cf. Table 1.

<sup>4</sup> Depkat (2019: 262) writes: "The Dutch historian Jacques Presser was the first to speak of ego-documents in 1958, and he eventually defined the term as "those documents in which an ego intentionally or unintentionally discloses, or hides itself" (Dekker 2002, 7; see Presser 1958, 1969). Building on this tradition, a group of Dutch scholars around Rudolf Dekker embarked on a concerted effort to find, collect, edit, and study Dutch 'egodocuments' from 1500 to 1814, which for them were autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and personal letters".

## 2. Literary dialect and real representation of dialect

Ives (1950: 137) tells us that literary dialect is “an author’s attempt to represent in writing a speech that is restricted regionally, socially or both”. Ives opposes a lax approach to dialect depiction in literature, advocating focus on real representation only. He simultaneously acknowledges, however, that literary authors employ dialect as a literary device, but have no scientific expertise to act as authorities in dialect representation (1950: 138) These authors went to great lengths, however, to paint an accurate picture of a given dialect (1950: 140).

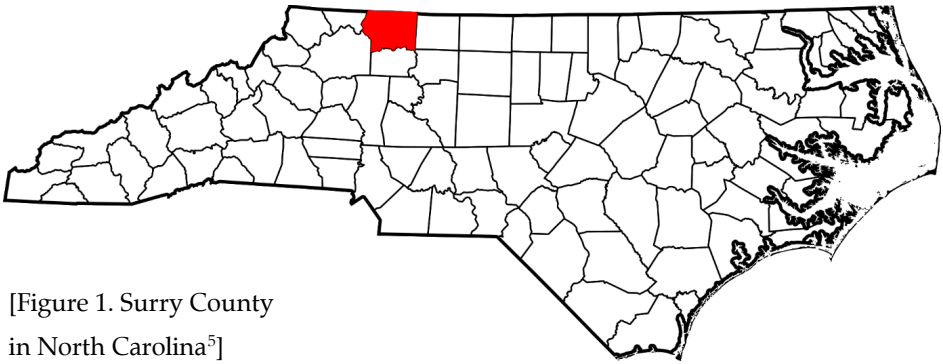
When one examines dialect in local-color fiction, Ives (1950: 150) suggests that the socio-economic and geographical background of the authors themselves is worthy of scrutiny. In such a study the subject of analysis should therefore not only be the text, but also the author’s personal history (Ives 1950: 157-158, 169). He further (1950: 173-174) points out two steps crucial to thorough research into literary dialect. Firstly, a literary dialect researcher must be well-acquainted with, for instance, the field of linguistic geography, such as data in linguistic atlases. This may allow for proper recognition of dialectal traits and characteristics and their uniqueness in comparison to one another. Secondly, the data corpus must be sufficiently large to ensure maximum validity and representativeness of the results.

Ellis (1994: 128), like Ives (1950), acknowledges that literary dialect researchers face a problem in distinguishing between a faithful representation of the dialect in literature and an author’s own literary invention, since writers may have been prone to exaggeration. Despite such difficulties, he points to the accessibility of the nineteenth-century literature and its use of variants that would otherwise have gone unmarked. What is therefore needed is an approach that acknowledges the potential strengths of such sources, but also takes into account the issue of literary creativity.

Fields (2000: 45, cited in Stockwell 2020: 362) suggests two approaches to investigating literary dialect. The first assumes the literary works are real sociolinguistic data to be analyzed as historical works. The second investigates literary dialect for its stylistic features, looking into the balance between fictional and historical linguistic characteristics. Stockwell (2020: 362-363) posits that in order to give the research the greatest possible credibility both approaches should be utilized. There is a need for both a sociolinguistic and an ethnographic approach, as well as for acknowledging the author’s creativity.

### 3. Hardin Edwards Taliaferro and *Fisher's River*

In the mid-nineteenth century, storytelling was an artform (Ginther 1953: 13). Hardin E. Taliaferro was a humorist who told tales of life in the Antebellum South in his 1859 book, *Fisher's River (North Carolina), Scenes and Characters*, a vivid example of a literary work of the kind. Craig (1988: 422) describes it as a collection of picturesque stories that accurately reflect the inhabitants of Surry County, North Carolina. Figure 1 below shows the geographical location of Surry County:



[Figure 1. Surry County in North Carolina<sup>5</sup>]

Characters in the stories are based on actual residents of Surry County, some of whom are named in *Fisher's River*. Topics touched upon in the book range from the illiterate bumpkin visiting a large city to religious conversions.

Before the discussion proper devoted to forms of past tense *be* unfolds, we should address Taliaferro's biography and the history of *Fisher's River*. Hardin E. Taliaferro was born in 1811 in Surry County, North Carolina, into a "prosperous, well-read, prominent" family,<sup>6</sup> which runs contrary to the picture of the grass root Southern society he depicted in *Fisher's River* (Walser 1978: 377). Taliaferro's accounts of his boyhood in *Fisher's River* have him spending many carefree days in the area working as a mill-boy (Taliaferro 1857: 139). At eighteen he moved to Roane County in Tennessee to join his two older brothers, where he experienced a religious revelation and was baptized at the age of 20. He became a preacher there, but eventually settled on a farm (Walser 1978: 378). In Madisonville, where he joined the academy

<sup>5</sup> Map of North Carolina highlighting Surry County in North Carolina - *Wikipedia*, accessed December 2021.

<sup>6</sup> However, there is no official information about the level of formal education that he received (Ginther 1953: 13).

to improve his education, he met Elizabeth Henderson and in 1834 they married. The same year he was ordained.

A year later<sup>7</sup> he moved to Talladega County, Alabama, with his family to continue preaching. In the mid-1840s his literary talent was discovered when he began writing for *The Virginia Baptist Preacher*. He later moved to Tuskegee to become a senior editor for *The South Western Baptist*. It is there that he published his first work: *The Grace of God Magnified: An Experimental Tract*, in which he described his experience of spiritual crisis (Walser 1978: 383). The book was a success, but his work in Tuskegee exhausted him and, as a result, in 1857 he returned to Surry County, where he found the inspiration for *Fisher's River*.

According to his preface to the book, he had not initially intended to publish the stories,<sup>8</sup> but he agreed to do so on the suggestion of his friends (Taliaferro 1859: v). The book was published in 1859, while Taliaferro was back in Alabama. In 1860 *The Southern Literary Messenger* began to publish other humorous stories by Taliaferro, written under the *nom de plume* Skitt, and its readership became acquainted with such stories as "Duck Town", "Hardshell Baptist Sermon", and "Some Chapters in the Eventful Life of Captain Robert Exquisite, by Skitt, Who Knew Him" (Walser 1978: 388-389). When the Civil War began, he was a keen secessionist who advocated for the separation of North Carolina from the United States (Walser 1978: 389). Taliaferro moved back to Roane County, Tennessee, in 1872 (Walser 1978: 390).<sup>9</sup> He died in Surry County in 1875. Five years after his death his authorship to the *Fisher's River* was publicly acknowledged (Walser 1978: 393).

In 1905, a printer from Eona village, Virginia, some ten miles north from the Little Fisher River, published the second edition of Taliaferro's book completely omitting the author's name (Walser 1978: 393). Not only did the printer omit some of the stories, but he also changed the text *per se*. Capitalization, for instance, differed from the original and such changes as *were* becoming *war* or *ev'ry* to *uv'ry* were introduced. The third edition, published in 1958, was based on the altered version and also omitted the name of the author. The fourth edition, however, commissioned in 1977, was based on the original, 1859 version (Walser 1978: 393).

For nearly one hundred years the value of Taliaferro's work as a humorist was forgotten (Walser 1978: 394). Neither was his contribution given sufficient credit in 1925 *Selected Bibliography of Southern Humor and*

<sup>7</sup> According to Gunther (1953: 13), this happened in 1837.

<sup>8</sup> These stories had been told between 1820 and 1829.

<sup>9</sup> Where he continued to preach and work for the *South Western Baptist* (Walser 1978: 388).

*Satire*, nor in *The First Century of American Literature* (1937). Today, however, Taliaferro is considered among America's earliest realists, insofar as his writing technique is concerned. His work as a literary dialect writer and humorist is greatly valued, and Taliaferro is recognized for his anecdotes on religious subjects, which he recorded more than any other coeval frontier humorist.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding Taliaferro's rendering of dialect, Walser (1978: 385) writes: "Taliaferro's anecdotes were narrated by the Surry County storytellers in an authentic oral style". Critics maintain that his contribution to Southern humorist literature is unique due to the supposedly accurate depiction of dialect that managed to create a faithful image of not only the picturesque characters, but also the culture in which these individuals lived.

#### 4. *Was* and *were* in earlier American English

Pablé, Dylewski, and Urbańska (2009: 63-64) write the following in respect to the past tense of *be* in dialect literature of the nineteenth century:

In numerous frontier tales written by nineteenth century humorists, which depict life in such states as North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, and Arkansas, nonstandard *were(n't)* is a typical feature to mark the language of the common folk; notably, however, the writers represent the grammatical constraints determining its occurrence and its status as a variant quite differently and even a single author may vary from one text to the other: as a matter of fact, in those writings nonstandard *were* may be either a categorical form (both positive and negative), subject to the polarity factor (positive *was* vs. negative *warn't*), or variable in positive and/or negative constructions.<sup>11</sup>

Previous research on *was/were* variation in the dialect of the southern states, in turn, points to four general patterns of use (Montgomery 2004,

<sup>10</sup> See Gale (1988).

<sup>11</sup> They further go on to say that, for example, "Mark Twain uses negative *warn't* and positive *was* in all person-number combinations as part of Huck Finn's Missouri dialect. Other examples of nonstandard *were(n't)* can be attested in the following authors (text excerpts can be found in Blair and McDavid (1983): The Crockett Almanack Stories (42-47), Henry Clay Lewis (60-68), Johnson Jones Hooper (69-78), John S. Robb (83-89), William C. Hall (99-105), Harden E. Taliaferro (110-114), and George Washington Harris (115-124)" (Pablé, Dylewski, Urbańska 2009: 64, footnote 10)



pages unnumbered). In his analysis of letters written by three white Southerners born in the course of the eighteenth century, Montgomery (2004) concludes that between roughly 1750 and 1850 there might have been four distinct paradigms of past tense *be*. All of these coexisted, but the first three competed with the last and, as Montgomery (2004) suggests, most probably with each other:

Pattern 1: *was* appeared in the singular, and *were* in the plural in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> persons. The form used with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural varied: pronominal subjects attracted *were*, whereas noun phrases were followed by *was*;

Pattern 2: both *was* and *were* were in use, but this pattern favored *were* in the singular, and probably<sup>12</sup> also in the plural;

Pattern 3: the levelling to *was*, both singular and plural subjects attracted *was*;

Pattern 4: *was* in 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular, *were* in plural and 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular (the actual pattern used in mainstream English today), attested in the speech of cultivated speakers.

The hypothesis of four *was/were* distribution patterns put forth by Montgomery (2004) is tested by Dylewski (2013) in his analysis of Civil War letters from selected counties of South Carolina: Greenville, Pickens, and York. He lists 190 instances of plural past form *be*, in which the discrepancy between the use of *was* and *were* may be observed (Dylewski 2013: 237). Of 190 instances, 140 cases of *was* were found. In the case of pronominal subjects, in an overwhelming majority of cases the authors of the Civil War letters use *was* for 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular (Dylewski 2013: 238). The situation is much more diverse in the case of other pronouns, *you*, *we*, and *they*, where *was* is used extensively, but *were* is still used in between approximately 35 and 45% of the cases, with *you* showing the lowest percentage of variability (Dylewski 2013: 239-340).

As for the nominal subject-type, the authors would use *was*, again, in an overwhelming number of cases (Dylewski 2013: 341). One of the variables

<sup>12</sup> Montgomery (2004) points here to a lack of sufficient data. For more elaboration, see the discussion in the analytical part of this paper.

is the distance between the subject and the verb. The larger the distance, the more probable it is that *was* will be used. Dylewski (2013: 342) summarizes the findings by stating that the most probable linguistic environment for the occurrence of *was* for plural subjects is a plural noun phrase, followed by, in the ascending order, pleonastic *there* with plural subjects, *we*, *they*, and finally *you*. This conclusion, as he further elaborates, stands in opposition to Feagin's (1979) implicational scale, in which the most favorable context for the occurrence of *was* is pleonastic *there*, followed by, in the descending order, *you*, *we*, noun phrase, and *they*.

However, the results do coincide with the "Northern Subject Rule". The rule imposes that the indicative ending of a verb may be singular in plural subjects if they are noun phrases or an item is put between the two elements. Such a relation is visible in the data gathered by Dylewski (2013: 341-342).

Similar conclusions were reached by Levey and DeRooy (2021). In their analysis of the Civil War letters from both the South and the North, specifically Massachusetts and Alabama, found in *Private Voices*, "nonstandard *was* was found in 70% of affirmative contexts of standard *were* (excluding existential-*there*) [in the Massachusetts letters], compared to 94% in the Alabama letters" (Levey – DeRooy 2021: 309). This result shows the prevalence of the nonstandard *was* in Southern English, confirming Dylewski's (2013) findings.

When the authors combined the letters from other Southern states (North and South Carolina) and compared the data with two more Northern states (Pennsylvania and Ohio), the results were consistent – in the letters of Southern correspondents, the frequency of nonstandard *was* is significantly greater than in the Northern letters (Levey – DeRooy 2021: 318). The researchers noted that in both Carolinas nonstandard *were* was also observed. However, *was*-levelling was still notably greater (2021: 319). They conclude that the findings point to noticeable grammatical differences between Southern and Northern states in nineteenth-century United States and suggest that the variation may stem from the diverse social and geographical factors (Levey – DeRooy 2021: 322-323). This research further supports the claims put forth by Dylewski (2013) that the Southern English from the Civil War era was characterized by a significant *was*-leveling and this vernacular pattern was widespread at the time.

## 5. Corpus and methodology

For the purpose of this paper we have compiled two corpora: one consisting of narratives of Taliaferro's protagonists; the other of letters penned by soldiers or members of their families resident in counties where Hardin Edwards Taliaferro was either born and raised or moved to for an extended period prior to his writing *Fisher's River*.

The letters were taken from "Private Voices: The Corpus of American Civil War Letters", an online database of transcribed letters penned by American Union and Confederate soldiers and their families during the American Civil War (1861-65) (see Ellis and Montgomery 2011, 2012; Ellis 2016). The authors of these letters were mostly farmers or craftsmen with limited formal education,<sup>13</sup> scarce knowledge of textbook orthographic and grammatical conventions, so their epistolary efforts most likely represent a transcription of everyday spoken language which for the most part means regional dialect. The corpus may therefore be regarded as a reliable source of regional vernaculars, variant forms, and archaic vocabulary (Ellis 2016: 3).

As indicated above, in our search for relevant letters, before the publication of *Fisher's River* in 1859, Taliaferro resided mostly in three counties: Surry County, North Carolina, where he was born and spent his childhood; Roane County, Tennessee, where he moved in his youth; and Talladega County, Alabama, where he worked as a preacher and editor for 20 years.<sup>14</sup> Under the assumption that the vernacular spoken in these three areas influenced his perception and therefore his representation of the Southern dialect and its characteristics, we have compiled a sub-corpus of letters penned by soldiers and their families who hailed from those counties.<sup>15</sup> If the number of letters from a given county proved inadequate, we resorted to garnering the material from adjacent counties. We did limit, however, our search to two circles of adjacent counties, which, in the case of Roane TN, still proved inadequate (see: Table 1).

<sup>13</sup> <https://altchive.org/about/common-soldiers-plain-folks/>, accessed January 2022.

<sup>14</sup> He spent some time in Madisonville, Monroe County TN (no precise data, but probably two or three years before moving to Talladega AL), and Tuskegee, Macon County AL (two years before moving back to Surry NC, where he was inspired to write *Fisher's River*), but we assume that the language absorbed during his time in these three counties (childhood, early adulthood, and 20 years as a preacher and editor) contributed most to his ideas on Southern vernacular.

<sup>15</sup> More specifically, those counties were registered as their counties of residence in 1860 census.

Table 1. Counties from which the letters were drawn

COUNTY	ADJACENT COUNTIES	NO OF LETTERS	NO OF WORDS
Surry NC and the 1 <sup>st</sup> circle of adjacent counties	Surry NC	0	0
	Stokes NC	0	0
	Forsyth NC	4	1229
	Yadkin NC	43	17400
	Wilkes NC	9	2151
	Alleghany NC	1	396
	Patrick VA	5	1557
	Carroll VA	0	0
	Grayson VA	0	0
Talladega AL and the 1 <sup>st</sup> circle of adjacent counties	Talladega AL	13	4544
	Calhoun AL	0	0
	Cleburne AL	0	0
	Clay AL	0	0
	Coosa AL	0	0
	Shelby AL	8	3875
	St. Clair AL	0	0
the 2 <sup>nd</sup> circle of adjacent counties	Chilton AL	0	0
	Bibb AL	0	0
	Jefferson AL	4	1693
	Blount AL	0	0
	Etowah AL	0	0
	Cherokee AL	23	9357
	Haralson GA	0	0
	Carrol GA	0	0
	Randolph AL	36	17804
	Tallapoosa AL	19	10028
	Elmore AL	0	0

Roane TN and the 1 <sup>st</sup> circle of adjacent counties	Roane TN	0	0
	Morgan TN	0	0
	Anderson TN	0	0
	Knox TN	0	0
	Loudon TN	0	0
	McMinn TN	0	0
	Meigs TN	0	0
	Rhea TN	0	0
	Cumberland TN	0	0
the 2 <sup>nd</sup> circle of adjacent counties	Scott TN	0	0
	Campbell TN	0	0
	Union TN	0	0
	Grainger TN	0	0
	Jefferson TN	0	0
	Sevier TN	0	0
	Bradley TN	0	0
	Hamilton TN	0	0
	Sequatchie TN	0	0
	Bledsoe TN	0	0
	Van Buren TN	0	0
	White TN	0	0
	Putnam TN	0	0
	Fentress TN	0	0
TOTAL		165	70034

Having compiled both corpora, we searched for *was* and *were* alongside their spelling variants (*wes, wos, wase, wasent, wer, war, werent, warent, worent*) by means of LancsBox;<sup>16</sup> the results were later fed into an Excel file and tagged appropriately which allowed for data analysis.

In this paper we have adopted Dylewski's (2013) approach, which is based on the inclusion of the negative contexts in the analysis and subsequent discussion. We therefore sought *was* and *were* in negative constructions. This approach is discrepant with those of Schneider and Montgomery (2001) and

<sup>16</sup> Available at: <http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/lancsbox/>.

Trüb (2006). More specifically, “[...] Montgomery and Schneider (2001) focus only on statements because of the rarity of negations in their corpus (only one case, to be exact)” (Dylewski 2013: 235). Trüb (2006), in turn, discounts negative sentences on the following grounds: “a) their structure differs markedly from affirmative structures, and b) certain varieties of English exhibit so-called polarity constraint, where *was* appears in affirmative and *weren’t* in negative clauses” (Dylewski 2013: 235). Negative contexts in the corpora we scrutinized, although less frequent than the affirmative, ought not to be excluded, since the polarity constraint mentioned by Trüb (2006) might have been in operation in the case of Taliaferro’s dialect depiction (see the discussion below).

In the discussion to follow, we focus on both pronominal and nominal subjects, with *there* excluded since this pleonastic subject is biased toward attracting singular verb in colloquial English.

## 6. Analysis

### 6.1 Past tense *be* in *Fisher’s River*

#### 6.1.1 Affirmative contexts

A close inspection of *Fisher’s River* allowed for a retrieval of 132 cases of *was* and 120 cases of *were*, thus the rivalry between the two is clearly observable. The results split by number and person are presented in Table 2 and Figure 2

Table 2. Past-tense *was* and *were* by number and person in *Fisher’s River* (affirmative context).

subject type	singular		plural	
	was	were	was	were
1 <sup>st</sup> person	22	36	2	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	3	0	0	0
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	70	80	35	4
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_NP)	(42)	(30)	(23)	(4)
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_PP)	(28)	(50)	(12)	(0)
TOTAL	95 (45.02%)	116 (54.98%)	37 (90.24%)	4 (9.76%)

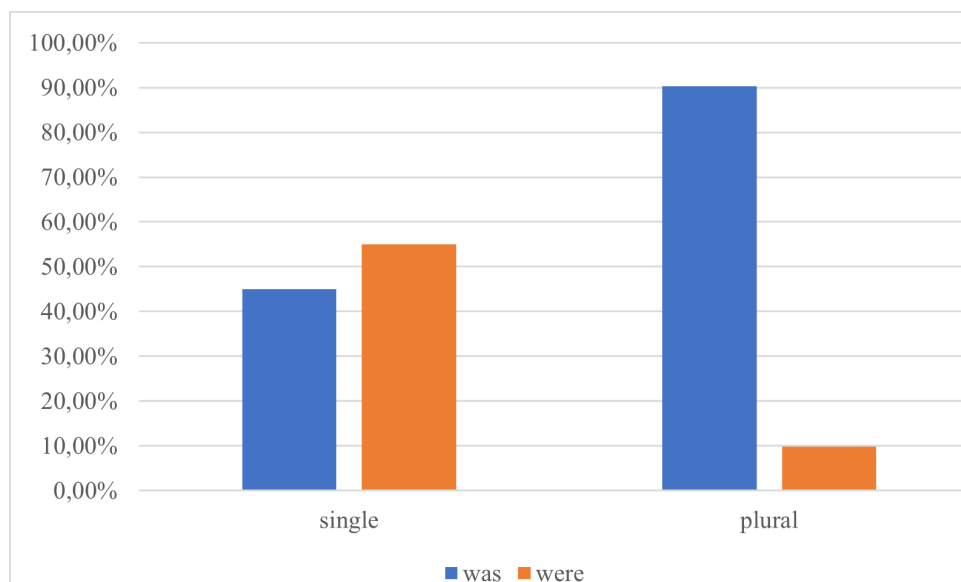


Figure 2. *Was* and *were* in *Fisher's River* (affirmative context).

This is interesting, since in the singular the *were* allomorph is the dominant variant form, but the domination is not clear-cut (approximately 55% of cases of *were* vs 45% of *was*), whereas in the plural the situation is reversed at the expense of *were*. This paradigm partly corresponds to Montgomery's (2004) Pattern 2 of the *was/were* distribution. We say that it agrees partly deliberately, since Montgomery claims that *were* was most probably also the majority form not only in the singular, but also in the plural. A closer inspection of Montgomery's 2004 data shows, however, that he based his conclusions on very scant data, to say the least. In fact, he retrieved just one isolated case for subjects in the plural, see: Table 3. He reached his conclusions having analyzed a single document from an apparently illiterate 84-year-old woman, Katherine McCormick Smith, hailing from Horry County in South Carolina. This illiterate individual relied on the help of her amanuensis, Mrs. Maklin, to whom she dictated her testament (for more details, see Montgomery – Mishoe 1999). The paradigm for the past tense of *be* attested in this source is tabulated below:

Table 3. Past-tense *was* and *were* by number and person in *Smith Testament* (Montgomery 2004).

subject type	singular		plural	
	<i>was</i>	<i>were</i>	<i>was</i>	<i>were</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> person	2	5	0	1
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	0	0	0	0
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	2	12	0	0
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_NP)	(1)	(6)	(0)	(0)
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_PP)	(1)	(6)	(0)	(0)
TOTAL	4 (18.2%)	17 (77.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (4.5%)

Table 3 shows that not much may be said about the paradigm for the past tense of *be* in the plural, hence Montgomery's cautious claim that most probably *were*, and not *was*, was the majority variant. Nonetheless, *was* might have been said to be the dominant form here, had more material been at this Montgomery's disposal.

### 6.1.2 Negative contexts

As indicated earlier, negative contexts have been neglected in linguistic studies of earlier Southern American English, but they are not ignored in this discussion. The results obtained are given in Table 4:

Table 4. Past-tense *was* and *were* by number and person in *Fisher's River* (negative context)

subject type	singular		plural	
	<i>was</i>	<i>were</i>	<i>was</i>	<i>were</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> person	2	1	0	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	0	0	0	0
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	2	8	0	0
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_NP)	(1)	(1)	(0)	(0)
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_PP)	(1)	(7)	(0)	(0)
TOTAL	4 (30.8%)	9 (69.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)



Altogether 13 cases of the past tense *be* have been instanced in Taliaferro's book, out of which nine cases (69.2%) are instances of *weren't* in the singular (see exemplary sentences 1-3 below):

- (1) 1<sup>st</sup> person singular: I detarmined in less nur no time that I *warn't* a-gwine to stay thar (*Fisher's River*; Oliver Stanley, page 128);
- (2) 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular\_NP: the runnin' from the coachwhip *warn't* a primin' to it (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page 61);
- (3) 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular\_PP: So I pulled up my stakes, which it *warn't* hard to do, and piked off to a higher latitude (*Fisher's River*; Oliver Stanley, page 134).

There are also four cases of singular *was* in Table 4 (exemplified under 4-5):

- (4) 1<sup>st</sup> person singular: I *wasn't* more'n out'n my broke up (*Fisher's River*; Davy Snow, page 61);
- (5) 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular\_NP: Come, stranger, the world *wasn't* made in a day—took six, I think—come go wi' me (*Fisher's River*; Ham Rachel, page 268).

In the case of negative contexts, we have seen that one might not talk about any categorical use, but rather about an inclination toward the use of *were* in the singular. Were it not for the more or less even distribution between *was* and *were* in the affirmative, one could talk here about the paradigm leaning toward polarity constraint, where *was* is preferred in the affirmative and *were* in the negative.

### 6.1.3 Individual variation in *Fisher's River*

We have also decided to ascertain whether Taliaferro was consistent in the use of the past tense forms of *be* in his fictional characters. We have arbitrarily decided to include in the study those characters who used the forms under discussion more than ten times. This approach allowed us to select the following characters from the novel whose usage of *was/were* has

further been subject of analysis: Bob Snipes<sup>17</sup> (23<sup>18</sup> cases of *was* and *were*), Davy Lane<sup>19</sup> (101 cases), Dick Snow<sup>20</sup> (16 cases), Josh Jones<sup>21</sup> (14 cases), Larkin Snow<sup>22</sup> (24 cases), and Oliver Stanley<sup>23</sup> (34 cases). The data obtained are tabulated below:

Table 5. Past-tense *was* and *were* by characters in *Fisher's River*

character	singular		plural		N.
	<i>was</i> (expected)	<i>were</i> (unexpected)	<i>was</i> (unexpected)	<i>were</i> (expected)	
Bob Snipes	18	0	4	1	23
Davy Lane	23	61	16	1	101
Dick Snow	13	0	3	0	16
Josh Jones	5	8	1	0	14
Larkin Snow	3	15	5	1	24
Oliver Stanley	5	25	3	1	34
Total:	67 (31.6%)	109 (51.4%)	32 (15.1%)	4 (1.9%)	212

<sup>17</sup> "(...) the graphic language of Bob Snipes, who shall tell the story of their wedding. Said Bob Snipes is a plain-spoken fellow, and tells stories in his own way" (Taliaferro 1859: 175).

<sup>18</sup> The qualifier *as it were* has been disregarded from the count.

<sup>19</sup> "Uncle Davy was a gunsmith (...) He became quite a proverb in the line of big story-telling" (Taliaferro 1859: 49-50).

<sup>20</sup> He certainly came from a section where rustic literature had risen to a state of perfection; and he clung to the language of his section and of his youth with great tenacity (Taliaferro 1859: 94-95).

<sup>21</sup> "Josh had picked up a few Latin sentences and phrases, and could use them when he chose with great facility and dexterity. The people all hated "'larnin' and college lingo,'" and though Josh's vernacular was no better than his neighbors', his borrowed Latin made him quite a 'larned man'" (Taliaferro 1859: 193).

<sup>22</sup> "His ambition consisted in being the best miller in the land, and in being *number one* in big story-telling" (Taliaferro 1859: 141).

<sup>23</sup> "But I must not take up too much time in describing an indescribable man, and will hasten to give the reader two of Oliver's stories, giving them in his own language; and, by the way, he was a good hand at coining new words" (Taliaferro 1859: 125).

In the case of Bob Snipes' usage, we see a clear-cut pattern of leveling to *was*:

- (6) Hollin and his darter *was* a-fixin' away, sorter like they *was* glad, but uvry now and then John kep' flingin' out some uv his slang at 'um 'fur fixin' so much fur them crippled creeturs, that had 'bout as much business a-marryin' as two 'possums (*Fisher's River*; Bob Snipes, page 179).

Amidst cases of *was*, however, lies one exceptional usage conforming to present-day prescriptive rules (*were* with NP in plural):

- (7) The 'squire kep' axin' John questions, to try to git him to spill some words, but his jaws *were* locked, as it *were* (*Fisher's River*; Bob Snipes, page 179).

A more interesting, albeit rather inconsistent scenario emerges from Davy Lane's data, which are more numerous in comparison to other characters' from the book. When we split the results by number and person, the following picture emerges:

Table 6. Past-tense *was* and *were* by number and person in the language of Davy Lane.

subject type	singular		plural	
	<i>was</i> (expected)	<i>were</i> (unexpected)	<i>was</i> (unexpected)	<i>were</i> (expected)
1 <sup>st</sup> person	4 (21%)	15 (79%)	0	0
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	0	0	0	0
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	19 (29.2%)	46 (70.8%)	16 (94.1%)	1 (5.9%)
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_NP)	(10)	(13)	(9)	(1)
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_PP)	(9)	(35)	(7)	(0)
TOTAL	23 (22.8%)	61 (60.4%)	16 (15.8%)	1 (1%)

The rivalry between *was* and *were* in both singular and plural is illustrated by the following examples:

a) singular:

(8) 1<sup>st</sup> person singular:

But while I *was* moseyin' about, I cum right chug (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page 52);

Fur some time arter I *were* chased by that sassy coachwhip, I *were* desput 'fraid uv snakes (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page 55).

(9) 3<sup>rd</sup> person\_NP:

When I come to the ninth, the sign *was* fresher and fresher (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page: 52);

I could hardly keep from burstin' open laughin' at the odd fix the old critter *were* in (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page 83).

(10) 3<sup>rd</sup> person\_PP:

On I moseyed tell I ondressed eight master bucks in the same way... fur it *was* tolluble hot (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page 75);

I blazed away at him, but he *were* goin' so fast round (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page 63).

b) plural:

(11) 3<sup>rd</sup> person\_NP: ten thousand Injuns *were* arter 'um andskelpin' on 'um, and me so sick I couldn't say a word (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page 61);

all the leaves *was* wilted like a fire had gone through its branches (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page 57).

As visible in Table 6, in the singular there are 23 cases of *was* versus 61 cases of *were*, which points to the domination of the *were* allomorph.

Not much can be said about negation since only two cases of negated past tense *be* were found in the analyzed source, where variation between *was* and *were* is observable:

- (12) for I know'd it *warn't* wuth while to shoot him any whar else (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page 63);
- (13) '*Twasn't* long afore I run out'n my shot-bag (*Fisher's River*; Davy Lane, page 53).

In the case of other characters in *Fisher's River*, in the idiolect of Dick Snow, as well as 13 cases of *was* in the singular there are three cases of *was* in the plural, with no instances of *were*. The idiolects of Josh Jones, Larkin Snow, and Oliver Stanley exhibit vacillation between *was* and *were*, with the domination of the latter in the singular and the former in the plural.

## 6.2 Past tense *be* in *Private Voices letters*

### 6.2.1 Affirmative contexts

A search of both *was* (together with its spelling variants *wos*, *wase*, *wasent*, etc.) and *were* (*wer*, *war*, *ware*, *werent*, *warent*, etc.) yielded the following results:

Table 7. Past-tense *was* and *were* by number and person in *Private Voices Letters* (affirmative context).

subject type	singular		plural	
	<i>was</i>	<i>were</i>	<i>was</i>	<i>were</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> person	170	0	32	2
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	0	0	72	1
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	156	2	24	2
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_NP)	(82)	(1)	(19)	(1)
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_PP)	(74)	(1)	(5)	(1)
TOTAL	326 (99.4%)	2 (0.6%)	128 (96.2%)	5 (3.8%)

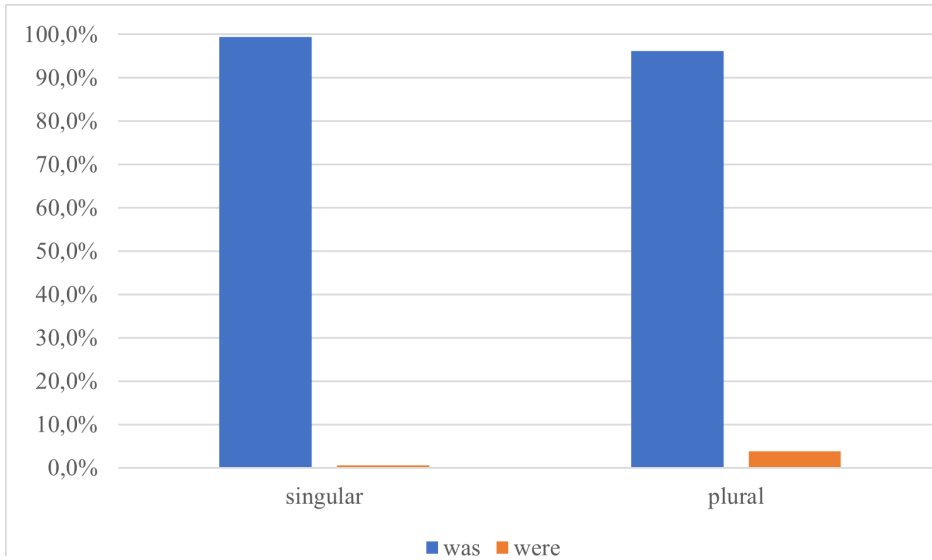


Figure 3. *Was* and *were* in the *Private Voices Letters* (affirmative contexts).

The picture revealed by scrutiny of selected letters drawn from *Private Voices* displays a clear pattern of leveling to *was* for every person in both numbers. This paradigm corresponds to Montgomery's (2004) Pattern 3 and the results obtained by both Dylewski (2013) and Levey and DeRooy (2021). There are also individual cases where nonstandard use of *were* lags behind the minority paradigm, see Examples 14 and 15:

- (14) i red a letter from brother marien afeu days ago he sed he *were* in sixteen miles ov cousi samuel hunter (April 30, 1858; Sarah A. Taylor to Martha Hunter);
- (15) brother normon *were* married last fawl to mis Sarah Farley (April 30, 1858; Sarah A. Taylor to Martha Hunter).

Much as leveling to *was* in both numbers is evident here, in the idiolect of one letter writer, Sarah A. Taylor, the wife of a farmer from Randolph County, Alabama, leveling to *were* is in evidence. The on-line corpus of Civil War Letter (= *Private Voices*), unfortunately, offers only two letters from this author, so not much may be said about her usage of *be* in the past tense. Both letters penned by her are, however, replete with idiosyncratic, pseudo-

phonetic spellings and grammatical forms today deemed erroneous. The following excerpt illustrates the fact that Sarah A. Taylor was an unskilled writer who adhered to no prescriptive norms of the time:

we hant had no rane here in most seven weekes crops is very sorry except whete is very good I have nothing inter esting to right to you you must excuse me fer not riting no sooner I rote you too letters an hav never received nary one from you yet I want you to right to me as soon as you can right all a bout the connection an the country mister talor ses he wont stay here ef he can sel his lan he intens to go south or west i wan to no how lan can be had an whether the county has impruved mutch or no aunt I wish icould see you I hav six childre fore boys an to girls hav bin maried eight year ever since the eighteenth of Jenurary

(July 17, 1857; Sarah A. Taylor to Martha Hunter)

The presence of the allomorph *were* in the singular resembles the pattern displayed in Taliaferro's novel, where *were* dominates over *was* in the singular. It is worthy of mention that Sarah Ann Taylor also had *was* in her linguistic repertoire, see Example 16:

(16) mi baby *was* bornd the 8 (July 17, 1857; Sarah A. Taylor to Martha Hunter).

This vacillation between *were* and *was*, the former dominating by a slender margin, corresponds more precisely to Taliaferro's use. As mentioned earlier, however, with such scant data to hand one needs to be cautious with any far-reaching conclusions.

Finally, isolated cases of *were* used in present-day standard contexts have also been attested;

(17) we hav mooved on the othe place that his brother An him *were* in snuks (April 30, 1858; Sarah A. Taylor to Martha Hunter);

- (18) We received your kind letter to day the 18 and was more than glad to hear from you and to hear that you *were* well dose us a heape of good (February 18, 1864; Molly Mock Tesh to William Addison Tesh).

### 6.2.2 Negative contexts

In order to (a) ascertain parallelism with the discussion of *was* and *were* in *Fisher's River* and (b) check whether *was* and *were* succumbed to polarity constraint in the case of letters drawn from *Private Voices*, we have included the negative contexts and we have treated them separately here. Similarly to the representation of the literary dialect, *was* and *were* in negative contexts are less frequent than those in the affirmative. Again, the data found in the letters are given in tabulated from:

Table 8. Past-tense *was* and *were* by number and person in *Private Voices Letters* (negative context).

subject type	singular		plural	
	<i>was</i>	<i>were</i>	<i>was</i>	<i>were</i>
1 <sup>st</sup> person	10	0	0	1
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	0	0	3	0
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	8	0	0	0
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_NP)	(3)	(0)	(0)	(0)
(3 <sup>rd</sup> person_PP)	(5)	(0)	(0)	(0)
TOTAL	18 (81.8%)	0 (0%)	3 (13.6%)	1 (4.5%)

Again, leveling to *was* is in operation here, although little may be inferred on the basis of 4 cases of *be* in the past tense plural; clearly *you* attracted *was not*.



## 7. Conclusions

As was mentioned above, Montgomery (2004) maintains that at the beginning of the nineteenth century in spoken Southern American English three paradigms most frequently competed with each other, setting aside a fourth, that is deemed “standard” by present-day normative grammars. In the course of the nineteenth century the situation changed, which is shown by data drawn from ego documents, be they letters written prior to or during the American Civil War or by plantation overseers.<sup>24</sup> When it comes to scrutiny of the latter, Montgomery (2004: pages unnumbered) concludes that Pattern 2 quickly receded and gave way to Pattern 3, i.e. leveling to *was* in both numbers. As for the former, the data culled for this paper also point to leveling to *was*, which was additionally attested by earlier studies of the Civil War material penned by the semiliterate strata of American society. Isolated cases of *were* in the singular used by Sarah A. Taylor might, however, be vestiges of Montgomery’s Pattern 3, which apparently fell into obsolescence in the mid-nineteenth century.

The focus of the paper, nonetheless, was a verification of the reliability of Southern dialect depiction in Taliaferro’s local-color fiction. The results obtained from this source are disparate from those retrieved from private correspondence. Hardin E. Taliaferro’s records of the past tense *be* in *Fisher’s River* partially lean toward Montgomery’s (2004) Pattern 2, where *was* and *were* are in use, but the latter is favored in the singular and probably in the plural contexts. Disappointingly, however, as indicated above, the scarcity of Montgomery’s data hinders an equivocal confirmation of an inclination toward *were* in the plural.

This pattern<sup>25</sup> may be traced in idiolects of selected *Fisher’s River* characters: Davy Lane, Josh Jones, Larkin Snow, and Oliver Stanley, but not Davy Snow, whose usage displays leveling to *was*. Two plausible explanations may be offered here. On the one hand, it is tempting to acknowledge the reliability of local dialect depiction in *Fishers’ River*. Assuming that Montgomery’s three vernacular paradigms were in competition between 1750 and 1850 and Taliaferro’s childhood years fell in the second and third

<sup>24</sup> “What happened to them in ensuing decades is reasonably clear from evidence in the *Southern Plantation Overseer Corpus (SPOC)*, a compilation of 536 letters from 50 white plantation overseers, documents written mainly from the 1830s to the 1850s from various parts of the South, but mainly North Carolina (Schneider – Montgomery 2001)” (Montgomery 2004, pages unnumbered).

<sup>25</sup> With *was* dominating in the plural.

decades of the nineteenth century, he might have codified the use of *were* in the singular as a trait typical of natives to Surry Country. Leveling to *was* must also have been present in the linguistic repertoires of residents of North Carolina, hence Davy Snow's paradigm.

On the other hand, even if in the idiolects of the four characters we have studied *were* in the singular is the prevalent form, there are many inconsistencies, or a vacillation in usage, in exactly the same environment. One might venture a claim here that to assure regional dialect credibility of stories told by the Surry Country residents, Taliaferro equipped them with grammatical traits disparate from the cultivated use of the time, in the case of past tense of *be* Montgomery's Pattern 4. The usage of *were* in the singular in the stories might have been a literary device put in the mouths of the characters to emphasize their belonging to lower stations of Surry Country of the time.

Both above claims, however, require further verification against data retrieved from (a) other local colorists from the South and (b) authentic sources representing the first decades of the nineteenth century. It ought to be mentioned at this point that Civil War correspondence displays a certain bias. Dylewski (2013: 167) writes the following: "[w]hen the Civil War commenced, the majority of soldiers were relatively young. As Hess (1997: 3) posits, the war was mainly the business of the young; the young who were born in the last decades of the first half of the nineteenth century and whose linguistic formative years fell during the said time frame". Nelson and Sheriff (2007: 74-75) do confirm that assumption and maintain that both armies engaged in the war were composed typically of rural white men, of whom nearly 40 % "serving between 1861 and 1865 were twenty-one years old or younger". Bearing in mind that Taliaferro was born some thirty years earlier (in 1811), this time gap might have played a vital role in his choice of variant forms, especially with the presupposed dynamics of change described by Montgomery (2004).

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