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## Phonetic Realization of the Verb-form "is"

(In Educated English Usage)

This is an attempt to define the elements which influence the choice between *is* and 's in educated English usage. Other verb-forms having a weak variant are mentioned only in so far as they help to explain some features in connection with *is*.

The material on which this research has been based are the recordings of some thirteen hours of the B. B. C. programme "*Any Questions*" and the examples are reproduced by the courtesy of the Corporation through the Survey of Educated English Usage.

NOTE. — The weak (sandhi) variant of "is" is marked 's; the strong (absolute) variant is marked *is*; and to indicate the form generally — regardless of its phonetic realization — "is" is used.

1. The weak variant of the verb-form "is" occurs much less frequently in educated speech than the weak variants of other verbs having a choice of a strong variant and one or more weak variants. The percentage of the variant 's (not counting the cases where a preceding sibilant, affricate or emphatic stress makes the *is* variant obligatory) is 40 per cent. of the total number of instances recorded (2136). A higher percentage of the weak variant is found with *could* (41 per cent.), *had* (43 per cent.), *will* (54 per cent.), *must* (59 per cent.), *have* (60 per cent.), *are* (65 per cent.), *would* (66 per cent.), *were* (73 per cent.), *should* (74 per cent.), *can* (79 per cent.), *has* (79 per cent.), *was* (84 per cent.), *am* (91 per cent.), and *shall* (97 per cent.). A lower percentage of the weak variant is found only with *been* (12 per cent.), *do* (20 per cent.), and *does* (12 per cent.). The verb-form "is", accordingly, belongs to the verb-forms with a compara-

tively low percentage of the weak variant. The frequency of "is", is considerably higher than of any other form listed above, the nearest form, "have", occurring 1042 times, half as frequently as "is". From this, it appears that the frequency of a verb-form has no direct bearing on the frequency of the possible weak variants of that verb-form which is obvious from the following table:

| Form     | Frequency of the Form | Percentage of the Weak Variant |
|----------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| "is"     | 2136 <sup>1</sup>     | 40                             |
| "have"   | 1042                  | 60                             |
| "are"    | 922                   | 64                             |
| "was"    | 529                   | 84                             |
| "has"    | 521                   | 79                             |
| "do"     | 404                   | 20                             |
| "would"  | 379 <sup>2</sup>      | 64                             |
| "can"    | 345                   | 79                             |
| "am"     | 358                   | 91                             |
| "been"   | 238                   | 22                             |
| "had"    | 201                   | 43                             |
| "will"   | 138 <sup>3</sup>      | 56                             |
| "were"   | 185                   | 73                             |
| "must"   | 154                   | 59                             |
| "could"  | 107                   | 43                             |
| "does"   | 88                    | 12                             |
| "shall"  | 43 <sup>3</sup>       | 96                             |
| "should" | 39 <sup>2</sup>       | 74                             |

All the forms are unemphatic.

2. The weak variant 's is the most frequent after question-words and relative pronouns where it amounts to 77 per cent. (*who's* going to come up on top; *what's* there about it; *how's* it going to be dealt with; the person *who's* going to run the club).

3. The weak variant 's reaches 50 per cent. when preceded by a subject. The relation between the relative frequency of the immediately-preceding subject (as recorded in our material) and the weak variant 's has been found to be as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Without the instances when a sibilant or affricate precedes.

<sup>2</sup> Without [d].

<sup>3</sup> Without [l].

| Frequency of Subject | Type of Subject    | Percentage of 's |
|----------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1                    | nouns              | 9                |
| 2                    | nouns              | 10               |
| 3                    | nouns              | 5                |
| 4                    | nouns              | 0                |
| 5                    | nouns              | 7                |
| 6                    | nouns              | 8                |
| 7                    | nouns              | 14               |
| 8                    | nouns              | 14               |
| 9                    | nouns              | 6                |
| 10                   | nouns              | 6                |
| 11                   | somebody           | 40               |
| 13                   | nouns              | 1                |
| 15                   | nouns              | 9                |
| 21                   | question           | 14               |
| 24                   | government         | 23               |
| 34                   | thing              | 10               |
| 45                   | one                | 36               |
| 61                   | she                | 81               |
| 101                  | that, what (real.) | 48               |
| 137                  | proper names       | 41               |
| 172                  | who (rel.)         | 42               |
| 227                  | he                 | 63               |
| 282                  | that (dem.)        | 63               |
| 442                  | there              | 62               |
| 924                  | it                 | 80               |

The percentage of the weak variant is low after low-frequency words and comparatively, or very high after high-frequency words. Low-frequency words, in our list, are almost exclusively nouns. High-frequency words are exclusively "grammatical" words. Proper names collectively have a 137 frequency but their individual frequency is considerably lower. Still, they behave as high-frequency grammatical words. Open-set (lexical) words require a certain amount of mental effort on the part of the speaker in selecting them which slows down the rate of speech. The closed-set words come more readily and the speaker does not have to hesitate ever so slightly in selecting them.<sup>1</sup> Grammatical structures and words helping to build them are

<sup>1</sup> This facility may occasionally result in shaky structures which are then reinforced by giving emphasis to key words. The readiness with which structural words come to mind is further illustrated by the frequent being "it's" which is often repeated as "it's it's" and then altogether dropped and another structure adopted.

much fewer in number than open-set words and here synonymy or near synonymy is only exceptional. They are produced with greater ease and speed which leads to weak variants where other considerations make them possible. In a combination of an open-set word and "is", "is" tends to retain strong variant due to the necessary mental effort — with consequent slowing-down of the rate of speech — in selecting the proper open-set word. If the combination consists of a closed-set word and "is", "is" tends to take its weak variant.<sup>2</sup> Proper names, in this respect, seem to behave like closed-set words, probably because of the absence of choice among several nearly-synonymous possibilities found with characteristically open-set words.

The *-body* and *-thing* pronouns are low-frequency grammatical words. They behave as low-frequency lexical words and the percentage of the 's variant is rather low after them (The comparatively high percentage of 's after *somebody* is due to sandhi, which will be treated farther on). These pronouns differ from other pronouns in not requiring either a word or situational antecedent so that they resemble nouns rather than pronouns.

These facts seem to indicate that the percentage of the weak variant does not depend on the frequency of the immediately-preceding subject but rather on the nature of the subject although the frequency of the subject and its nature in most cases stand in a definite relation — low frequency being characteristic of lexical words and high frequency of grammatical words. Proper names are a case apart in so far as by their frequency they belong to low-frequency lexical words but by their behaviour they seem to belong to high-frequency grammatical words.

4. Another element which seems to influence the choice between *is* and 's is the grammatical function of "is". It seems necessary to distinguish "is" not followed by another verb-form and "is" followed by another verb-form. When followed by a predicative "is" is marked 2; when followed by another verb it is marked 3. The percentage of the 's variant as 2 and 3 has been found to be as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> This is true only of such forms as begin with a vowel. Otherwise — when the vowel that can be weakened is in the body of the verb-form or at the end — the nature of the subject does not seem to play any great role. In such cases the percentage of the weak variant is somewhat higher after high-frequency words but the difference here is not so marked as with "is". Thus, after subject frequency 1 the weak variant of "can" is 70 per cent., after subject frequency 442 it is 76 per cent.

| Frequency of Subject | Percentage of 's |    |
|----------------------|------------------|----|
|                      | 2                | 3  |
| 1                    | 15               | 3  |
| 2                    | 11               | 8  |
| 3                    | 6                | 0  |
| 4                    | 0                | 0  |
| 5                    | 4                | 16 |
| 6                    | 0                | 20 |
| 7                    | 10               | 25 |
| 8                    | 0                | 25 |
| 9                    | 0                | 33 |
| 10                   | 6                | 0  |
| 11                   | 0                | 30 |
| 13                   | 0                | 0  |
| 15                   | 0                | 19 |
| 21                   | 0                | 15 |
| 24                   | 0                | 33 |
| 34                   | 5                | 10 |
| 45                   | 5                | 43 |
| 61                   | 60               | 0  |
| 101                  | 36               | 42 |
| 137                  | 32               | 27 |
| 172                  | 29               | 36 |
| 227                  | 43               | 64 |
| 282                  | 63               | 50 |
| 442                  | 63               | 50 |
| 924                  | 81               | 70 |

The weak variant 's is more frequent when "is" functions as an auxiliary verb (followed by another verb) than when its function is that of a linking verb (followed by a predicative). This is no fortuitous occurrence because a very similar situation obtains with the verb-form "are" and other verb-forms. This seems to indicate that "is" as a linking verb has more "weight" than as an auxiliary. The explanation is probably that "is" as a linking verb is the only verb predication there is in the sentence or clause in which it occurs which fact occasionally makes it necessary to give it phonetic prominence; whereas in verb-phrases where "is" functions only as an auxiliary to other verb-forms, other verbs carry semantic weight while "is" only indicates a certain grammatical function. It would seem that the linking "is" is not so "empty" semantically as some grammarians want us to believe. The meaning of "exist" is rare indeed, but the meaning of "be" is quite frequent, which, after all, is not surprising.

5. It has been noted that there exists a rather consistent mutual relation between the final sound of the preceding word and the initial sound of the following verb with all the verbs that have a choice of an initial consonant or vowel. It has been found that a preceding consonant will be followed by a vowel in 70 per cent. of cases (verbs beginning with [h] are equally

frequent after consonants and vowels). If the sandhi is consonant-consonant, the most frequent consonant groups are *t-s* and *d-s*.

The situation with "is" in this respect is given in the following table where only instances occurring at least ten times are recorded:

| Final Sound of the<br>Preceding Word | Percentage of 's |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|
| η                                    | 9                |
| t                                    | 68               |
| n                                    | 15               |
| m                                    | 21               |
| l                                    | 5                |
| k                                    | 9                |
| d                                    | 23               |
| u                                    | 35               |
| i                                    | 40               |

After [ʃ], [s], [tʃ], [dʒ] and [ʒ] *is* appears in all instances. The question of the final [ə] is made complicated by the appearance of the intrusive [r]. This [r] is found after final [ə] of the preceding word in about 90 per cent. of cases so that here again we have the sandhi consonant-vowel.

6. The percentage of the weak variant 's depends also on the general structure "is" finds itself in. The following structures have been thought relevant for the phonetic realization of "is":

1. *clause-"is"-clause*: the first thing we ought to be sure about *is* that ... -- 's: 0%
2. *clause-"is"-predicative*: you must criticize what *is* wrong. what you think *is* wrong -- 's: 0%
3. *clause-"is"-modifier*: this assumption that women are always better kept at home *is* a very easy one for a man to have -- 's: 0%
4. *clause-"is"-phrase*: how much responsibility for the policy on which it's spending *is* in its own hands -- 's: 16%
5. *clause-"is"-verb*: that I think 's going to take a very long while -- 's: 12%
6. *subject-"is"-end of speech*: Liberals and other people think it *is* -- 's: 0%
7. *subject-"is"-clause*: it 's as you like to say for the legislator to decide -- 's: 25%
8. *subject-"is"-predicative*: it 's familiar to many people -- 's: 59%
9. *subject-"is"-modifier*: but he 's a bit you know like all old men -- 's: 66%

10. *subject-"is"-phrase*: everyone is out of touch with the actual local conditions --'s: 52<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
11. *subject-"is"-verb*: opera 's got to be subsidized --'s: 45<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
12. ——"is"-*subject*: that isn't public money is it; why is it that this moment only . . . ; nor is there any possibility of . . . ; is the United Nations going . to . . . --'s: 0<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
13. ——"is"-*modifier*: which is going to be very unfortunate for western world but is only a forerunner of . . . --'s: 0<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
14. ——"is"-*verb*: if somebody particularly likes something and is prepared to lend their name to it --'s: 0<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
15. *predicative-"is"-subject*: we're involved in that and so is France and so is every other nation --'s: 13<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
16. *modifier-"is"-clause*: all I can say really is to refer to Burke --'s: 0<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
17. *modifier-"is"-predicative*: he probably is wrong --'s: 0<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
18. *modifier-"is"-modifier*: it really is quite wrong --'s: 0<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
19. *phrase-"is"-clause*: but that after all is what boys and young men want to do --'s: 0<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
20. *phrase-"is"-modifier*: a Member of Parliament is perfectly entitled to vote against the government --'s: 0<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
21. *phrase-"is"-phrase*: quite a big proportion of the accidents in the home is due to fire --'s: 0<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
22. *phrase-"is"-verb*: so far as the profession of medicine 's concerned --'s: 14<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
23. *question word-"is"-subject*: what 's there about it --'s: 67<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
24. *relative pronoun-"is"-predicative*: there's something much more important that is necessary --'s: 29<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
25. *relative pronoun-"is"-modifier*: (incident) that 's imperishably planted in my mind --'s: 45<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
26. *relative pronoun-"is"-phrase*: the person who 's at the receiving end of the set --'s: 77<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>
27. *relative pronoun-"is"-verb*: the moral character of the person who 's going to run the club --'s: 53<sup>0</sup>/<sub>0</sub>.

The weak variant 's has not been found in the following structures:

|                      |                      |             |
|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| clause-clause        | subject-end of spech | — -subject  |
| clause-predicative   |                      | — -modifier |
| clause-modifier      |                      | — -verb     |
| modifier-clause      | phrase-modifier      |             |
| modifier-predicative | phrase-phrase        |             |
| modifier-modifier    |                      |             |

The structures in increasing order of the percentage of 's:

- 12% clause-verb
- 13% predicative-subject
- 14% phrase-verb
- 16% clause-phrase
- 25% subject-clause
- 29% relative pronoun-predicative
- 45% subject-verb; relative pronoun-modifier
- 52% subject-phrase
- 53% relative pronoun-verb
- 59% subject-predicative
- 66% subject-modifier
- 67% question word-subject
- 77% relative pronoun-phrase

The results obtained arranged in matrix form:

| Precedes "is" | Follows "is" |       |        |       |     |      |        |
|---------------|--------------|-------|--------|-------|-----|------|--------|
|               | Clause       | Pred. | Modif. | Subj. | End | Verb | Phrase |
| Clause        | 0            | 0     | 0      |       |     | 12   | 16     |
| Predicative   |              |       |        | 13    |     |      |        |
| Modifier      | 0            | 0     | 0      |       |     |      |        |
| Subject       | 25           | 59    | 66     |       | 0   | 45   | 52     |
| Phrase        |              |       | 0      | 0     |     | 0    |        |
| Rel. Pron.    |              | 29    | 45     |       |     | 14   | 0      |
| Question-word |              |       |        | 67    |     | 53   | 77     |

The weak variant has not been found at all when the element immediately preceding "is" is a modifier or when the preceding element is not a clause, predicative, modifier, subject, phrase, relative pronoun, or question-word.

The percentage of the weak variant is low after a clause, predicative or phrase.

The percentage of the weak variant is high after subject, relative pronoun or question-word.

The weak variant has not been found when the element immediately following it is the end of speech.

The percentage of the weak variant is low when the element following it is a clause.

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A. The absolute variant is possible in any structure, in some structures it is the rule. The structures in which the absolute



variant is the rule are called closed structures. The structures allowing of the weak variant are called open structures. These structures are not all "open" to the same degree — in some the percentage of the weak variant is higher than in others (cf. 6). In open structures the weak variant is optional, there is not one structure in which the absolute variant would not be possible.

The number of closed structures is very limited. The number of open structures is very large. We have recorded forty-odd open structures but their number is probably larger (Cf. 6).

B. The percentage of the weak variant depends on the type of the immediately-preceding subject. The high-frequency grammatical words functioning as subjects in this position increase the percentage of the weak variant (Cf 3).

C. The percentage of the weak variant depends on the final sound of the preceding word. There is a tendency to follow a consonant by a vowel and *vice versa* (Cf. 5).

D. The percentage of the weak variant depends on the grammatical function of the verb-form. As a linking verb, the percentage of the weak variant will be higher than when "is" functions as an auxiliary verb followed by another verb-form (Cf. 4).