Done, finished, and *started* as reflexes of the Scottish transitive *be* perfect in North America: their synchrony, diachrony, and current marginalisation

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1. Introduction

When I interviewed native speakers of English from Cape Breton, Northeastern Vermont, Montreal, Cardston (Alberta), and Saskatoon, I found the occurrence of the construction [I am {done, finished, started} NP], as exemplified below:

(1) a. I am done dinner
     b. I am finished my homework
     c. I am started this project

I also found a less productive variant of this construction, which only allows [I am {done/ finished} NP], but not [I am started NP]. This variant that occurs in many other Canadian dialects (e.g. Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver), as well as in Philadelphia. The distribution of this construction is diagrammed in Figure 1, based on my work with native speakers of Canadian and American English; this map only includes locations which have been verified by native speaker informants to be home to [be done NP].
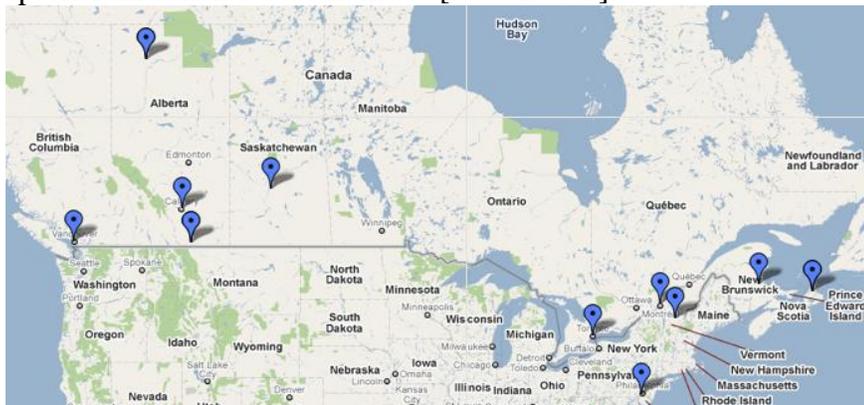

Figure 1: the distribution of [be done NP] in North America (based on interviews of native speakers).

There have been no published studies on this construction,[1] but linguists have noticed it at the informal level. Hypothesizing about the origin of [be {done, finished} NP], Zwicky (American Dialect Society mailing list 2004) proposes that it might be an extension of the present participle construction, e.g. *I am done washing the dishes > I am done the dishes.* Chambers (p.c. 2007), on the other hand, hypothesises that it originated in Scots, a hypothesis that I have previously supported elsewhere (Yerastov in print). More specifically, I argued that [be {done, finished, started} NP] in North America is a lexicalisation of the Scots transitive *be* perfect found today in Shetland and Orkney dialect.

In the present essay, following a discussion of my sources of data and theoretical assumptions, I reductively reproduce my lexicalisation hypothesis (sections 2 and 3) as a background for my subsequent discussion. Focusing on the synchrony of [be done NP], I argue, in the present essay, that, despite its lexicalisation, the construction has retained some degree of schematicity (section 4) and that it has taken a new life of its own by being re-grammaticised as a topic-marking device (section 5). I finish this essay with a discussion of sociolinguistic and sociological factors which, to date, have contributed toward the theoretical and societal marginalisation of this Scots feature in North America.

2. Sources of data and theoretical assumptions
2.1 Sources of data

In the course of my research, multiple difficulties presented themselves with data collection. To begin with, linguistic corpora did not provide a substantial number of tokens, on the basis of which one could make independent statistical generalisations; the Strathy Corpus of Canadian English yielded 6 tokens, the Bank of Canadian English – two tokens, the Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech (SCOTS) – two tokens, the Contemporary Corpus of American English – two tokens (one has a Canadian context, and the other is ambiguous), the International Corpus of English-Ireland – no tokens at all. Considering the paucity of linguistic corpus data, I sought alternative sources of data: the Internet, electronic collections of newspapers, journals, and literary texts, and interviews with native speakers. The Internet proved to be a fecund source of

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[1] Henceforth, I use [be done NP] to refer to the whole construction reductively, unless greater exactitude is needed.

data; however, online data should understandably be treated with caution because unlike in controlled corpora there is no reliable verification of users' biographical data and one cannot be always sure that their writing is typographically accurate. It is therefore essential that findings resulting from Internet research be independently confirmed. It is for this reason that I have also interviewed native speakers from Vancouver, Calgary, Cardston (Alberta), Saskatoon, Montreal, Orleans County in Vermont, and Cape Breton. Finally, I obtained modest but reliable data by searching the Canadian newspaper database Newsstand, the North American database Literature Online, and the Gutenberg Project – a free collection of literary texts. When used cumulatively, the data amassed for this research presented a coherent dialectological picture.

2.2   Theoretical assumptions

Central to my diachronic and synchronic analyses are grammaticisation and lexicalisation – theoretical frameworks I explicate in this subsection.

Grammaticisation studies have shown that grammar emerges over time from lexical material along certain paths (pathways, clines). The present essay adopts Bybee et al.'s (1994) framework, which *inter alia* distinguishes the following grams, or stages, in the grammatical evolution of perfects: stative, resultative, completive, anterior, and perfective. Statives express unchanging situations that will continue unless something happens (e.g. *know, want, be tall*). Resultatives signal that a state exists as a result of a past action and are often similar to the passive in that their patients are subjects (e.g. *The door is closed*), but they are different in that resultatives can apply to intransitive verbs (e.g. *He is gone*) without a change in subject. Resultatives are different from passives and anteriors in that the result of the action persists at reference time. Anteriors are different from resultatives in that they express relevance for the present in a much more general way. Historically, resultatives are known to develop into anteriors (as in the history of mainstream English perfect constructions). Anteriors, in their turn, are known to develop into perfectives, which are temporal grams describing 'single, unified, discrete' situations (p. 83). The perfective is a semantic notion; it is different from the formal notion of Present Perfect [have V-en]. In most dialects of English, Present Perfect has not developed into a perfective, which may be seen in its incompatibility with adverbials such as *ago, yesterday, last year*.

I follow Lehman (2002) in understanding lexicalisation as evolution from

the regular to the idiosyncratic and from analytic to holistic access to the linguistic sign (e.g. construction). I also follow van der Auwera (2002), and Brinton & Traugott (2005) in conceptualizing lexicalisation as loss in grammatical function; I adopt van der Auwera's model of the relationship between grammaticisation and lexicalisation as movement in opposite directions along a grammatical-lexical continuum. However, my approach to lexicalisation departs from the more recent literature in that I view lexicalisation as equally operative across both word and phrase levels. In that view I follow Kuryłowicz (1965), who understood loss in grammaticality productivity at the morphosyntactic level as lexicalisation; for example, he considered frozen resultative uses of the intransitive *be* perfect (e.g. *I am gone; Christ is risen*) as instances of lexicalisation. In this essay, I take the position that no principled distinction should be made between word and phrase level constructions in regard to lexicalisation.

3.   Evidence for Scottish origin

North American tokens of [be done NP] are widespread throughout Canada, Vermont, Philadelphia and North Carolina. I will exemplify this distribution with data from various sources. Tokens of this construction may be found in linguistic corpora, the news media, corpora, Internet forums, and fictional literature. It should be noted that the occurrence of this construction in print media in the U.S. is at best rare due to the sociolinguistically marginal status of that construction there.

In Canada, attestations [be done NP] may be found in news media sources across the whole country:

(2)   When *I am finished my training*, I, too, will have no choice but to leave Quebec.
>   The Gazette.
>   Montreal, QC., Jun 20, 2006.

(3)   I have always been there to read to him after *I am finished my work* or to push him outside during recess or to sit beside him at mass or during assemblies.
>   Justine Sorbara (6th grade)
>   *The Spectator.* Oct 25, 2005
>   Hamilton ON.

(4)   I am not exactly sure what this means when I first pick up the menu, and I'm not much further ahead when *I am done my meal.*
                          Liane Faulder
                          Edmonton Journal. Aug. 10, 2007
                          Edmonton AB

(5)   'When *I am finished my studies* at Mount Royal I hope to one day be in the financial position to reciprocate and help fund another student's education.'
                          The News.
                          Abbotsford, BC

(6)   '*I am done my degree*,' the sociology major said.
                          Howard Tsumara
                          The Province. Aug. 29, 2007
                          Vancouver B.C.

In Canada, the subschema [be started NP] can be found outside of traditional print; consider the following online token:

(7)   *I am started a new job* working midnights, well going to school part time and i [sic] have a part time job in the evening.
                          Female, 21 years old, Canada
                          www.justanswer.com/questions/s5nv-started-new-job-working-midnights

Independent confirmation of that subschema occurring in Canada comes from Karen Jesney of the University of Massachusetts, a native of Saskatoon, who confirms the acceptability of the following token for her, in a hypothetical teacher-student exchange:

(8)   Once you're started your project and know what you want to do, come talk to me.

In the US, occurrences in traditional print of [be done NP] are rare – perhaps due to its sociolinguistically marginal status; but based on my observations, fieldwork, and electronic sources available in the public domain, I have amassed some evidence that suggests that [be done NP] occurs in Vermont, Philadelphia, and North Carolina.
    The robust occurrence of these tokens in Vermont may be corroborated

by the author of the present essay, who at some point lived there not as a researcher but as a high school student; some of the most common tokens that I heard while attending Lake Region Union High School in Orleans, Vermont, were:

(9)   a. I am done my essay.
       b. I am finished my homework.
       c. I am started this project.

Doing fieldwork in Vermont (2007-2009), I collected a variety of tokens of [be done NP], some of which are presented below in § 5. For independent confirmation of my Vermont data, one could refer to the audio files and electronic transcripts of ethnographic narratives collected and processed by Sterling College (Craftsbury, Vermont); there one can find two tokens of [be done NP]:

(10)   My father had, had three brothers one of which went to high school, I think the whole way. But he went away and boarded away, when he went to high school he never came back. *When he was done high school* he was on his own.
                    Transcript of interview with Bradley Allen of Wolcott, Vermont
                    http://www.digitalcommunitiesproject.org

(11)   My grandfather Fisk, when I was going to high school. He used to sit out on the porch, by the road. One night I got so blue and lonesome I walked home from Craftsbury Common. He never said a word to me when I went by, but after I got in the house up there he was right there behind me. Said, what in the hell are you doing here? Is what he said to me. [laughs] I said, *I'm all done school.* Like hell you are, what's the trouble?
                    Transcript of interview with Eva Colgrove of Wolcott, Vermont
                    http://www.digitalcommunitiesproject.org

Some evidence of [be done NP] occurring in the Philadelphia region may be found online; consider, for example, a discussion of [be done NP] in Phildelphia vis-à-vis Pittsburgh in (12), as well as a spontaneous token produced by a speaker on a social networking site in (13).

(12) [Question] How many of you use this grammatical construction – '*I'm done my homework*.' It is used by virtually everyone in the Philadelphia region, where I'm from, and I had never thought anything of it until a couple months ago when it was pointed out to me that it's not used here in Pittsburgh, where I attend school. Quite a surprise to me.

   [Answer] This is a very big issue where I come from. Yes, I come from the Philadelphia Region. If '*I'm done my homework*' or '*I'm done the dishes*' is said around here, it sounds completely normal. However, it's not grammatically correct. I spend a lot of time in Utah, and if I were to say that to someone, they would give me the strangest look ever! Though when i came back to New Jersey and tried to explain […] my point to my friends, they didn't understand why that's wrong.
<div align="center">http://www.antimoon.com/forum/t1301-0.htm</div>

(13) hey baby i am done dinner but i stayed up really late last night ao do you mind if i take like an hour nap and we hang out around 8?
<div align="center">http://comment.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.view
Comments&friendID=56331396</div>

There is also some tenuous evidence of the construction occurring in the Southern United States. For example, in Liberman's (2007) Language Log, Dick Margulis cites Kyle McCaskill, who reports:

(14) Up until today I had never heard this usage from anyone but my husband: '*I am done this book*,' meaning, 'I have finished reading this book.' He's from North Carolina, so I thought it was colloquial southern phrasing.

Crucially, it is in North Carolina that the transitive *be* perfect is also documented by Wolfram (1996) and the sub-schema [be finished NP] is informally attested (Eble, p.c. 2009).

Both in Canada and the US, the construction [be done NP] has occasionally surfaced in fictional literature:

(15) Wait on him! You can wait on him, if you like; but I shan't. I never was brought up to wait on anybody but (10). I'll go down in the yard, and play the with big yaller dog, till *they're done dinner.* That's the curiousest dog I ever did see.—I can't find out whether his tail is cut off or driv in.
>Joseph Stevens Jones
>'The Green Mountain Boy' (play published in 1860)

The occurrences of the construction in Vermont, Philadelphia and North Carolina supports the hypothesis of its Scottish origin; North Carolina and Philadelphia are known to have been home to Scots and Ulster Scots (Leyburn 1962), and so are Vermont (Shields 1996), its neighbouring Quebec (Bennett 2003), and Canada in general. The case for the Scottish origin of [be done NP] may further be advanced by adducing circumstantial linguistic evidence. For example, in my work with native speaker informants in North America, I have found that the spread of the more conservative subschema [be started NP] is co-extensive with areas known for a Scottish founder effect, e.g. Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, and Collinsville, Vermont, and Cardston, Alberta. Crucially, the subschema [be done NP] has been retained by speakers of Scottish ancestry, while speakers of non-Scottish descent in the same speech communities typically accept only the subschemas [be done NP] and [be finished NP]. Such a distribution may be well accounted within a usage-based framework: all subschemas [be {done, finished, started} NP] survived in families of Scottish descent due to, perhaps, high frequency of use in family settings. When these exemplars entered larger speech communities, there were favorable pre-conditions for the subschemas [be done NP] and [be finished NP] to be reinforced with their intransitive counterparts [be done] and [be finished] ubiquitously found today in mainstream dialects of English. But [be started NP] is unlikely to have been similarly reinforced in the larger speech community because most English dialects in North America do not have the intransitive [be started] in their grammars—thus the hypothetical loss of [be started NP] in almost all urban dialects in Canada and Pennsylvania. In support of this hypothesis, I invite the reader to consider the following frequency data from the Corpus of Contemporary American English:

Token	I am done	I am finished	I am started
Frequency	56	24	0^2

Table 1: Token frequency of each subschema in the Contemporary Corpus of American English.

The likelihood of a Scottish origin for [be done NP] may also be suggested by the co-occurrence of [be done NP] with other linguistic features that are typically associated with Scots-influenced dialects of North America. One of those features is a-prefixing in progressive constructions (e.g. I'm a-fixing my truck) – a phenomenon commonly found in Scots-influenced dialects (but see Montgomery 2009 for a critical assessment of this view). Similarly coextensive with [be done NP] is the raised vowel [a] in words like *car*; I have found it occurring in three of my informants from Cape Breton, Collinsville, and Cardston, respectively, who use the construction [be {done, finished, started} NP]. While such co-extension does not definitively prove the Scottish origin of [be done NP], it strengthens the likelihood of it.

The North American data formally resembles the transitive be perfect in Shetland and Orkney dialect, of which there are abundant attestations. Millar (2007: 75) reports that 'the most striking structural feature of Shetland Scots dialect is the use of *be* as an auxiliary verb in active perfective construction with all types of verbs'. Reference works are also unanimous in recognizing the transitive *be* perfect in Shetland and Orkney. In an introduction to Shetland grammar, Robertson & Grace (1952) cite a number of instances of the transitive *be* perfect:

(16) a. Fifty voars I'm dell'd   an   set   da tatties
          Fifty spring I'm sorted and planted   the potatoes

      b. When A'm feenished yun A'll be dön a göd day's wark
         When I'm finished   that I'll be done a good day's work

      c. Ye   never did ony ill an' noo ye're   dune me muckle guid
         You   never did any ill and now you're done me much   good

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[2] The search did return one token 'I am started by his reaction' but I excluded it because it is a passive.

    d. I'm read my Bible.
          (Robertson & Graham 1952: 11)

In a grammatical overview of Orcadian, Flaws & Lamb (1995) state that the auxiliary *be* is used instead of English *have*:

(17) a. Ah'm meed the dinner
       I'm   made the dinner

      b. Wir   biggid the stack
       We're built   the stack

      c. Thoo'll be gotten a fair price for thee kye
       You'll be gotten a fair price for your cattle
          (Flaws & Lamb 1995: X)

The origin of the transitive *be* is hypothesised to lie in contact between Norn and central Scottish dialects, which were brought to the Shetland Islands by Scottish immigrants. Pavlenko (1997) proposes that one major factor conducive to that rise was the homophony of the reduced forms for the auxiliaries *hafa* 'have' and *vera* 'be' in Norn. Hypothetically, this led to a reanalysis of *have* as *be* in auxiliary function. This hypothetical reanalysis is indirectly supported by Rundhovde's research (1964: 146ff.; cited in Melchers 1992: 604), who reports on a Norwegian dialect where a similar merger of *hafa* 'have' and *vera* 'be' occurred, and speakers use the auxiliary *be* in perfect constructions (e.g. *I am eaten, I was just eaten* [glossed into English from that dialect]). Another important factor was that Scots immigrants at that time also had in their dialects a formally similar intransitive *be* perfect. Thus, the fusion of the autochthonous Norn *have* perfect, in which *have* was homophonous with *be*, and the Scottish intransitive *be* perfect led to the emergence of the transitive *be* perfect in nascent Shetland Scots dialect. Of special interest to the present essay is Pavlenko's (1997) mention of the Scots' use of the forms *be din* 'be done' and *be begood* 'be begun', which, he hypothesises, merged in with the transitive *be* perfect construction in Shetland Scots dialect. The tokens discussed by Pavlenko bear a strong formal and semantic resemblance to the tokens *I am done dinner* and *I am started this project* in North American English.

    Because some Scottish groups are known to have migrated to North America via Ireland, it is not surprising that tokens of the schemas [be done

NP] and [be finished NP] are found in the Irish Internet domain (.ie):

(18)   a. It is important that *I am finished my morning routines* by ten o'clock so I can prepare my swimming bag before the bus comes at half past ten.

b. *I am finished my studying* in the middle of May 2009 and I am interested in a nanny job.

c. I still have six more weeks to go out of the 26 weeks required for the Gaisce award, but I intend to continue acting classes well after *I am finished the bronze award.*

d.   Now *I am finished my GAA poem*!

e.   Now *I am done my song,* boys, but yet don't go away, ['The Hurlers of Mount Sion'; Waterford Songs]

f.   Yes, *she is done a great job,* you know the way she was saying, in the interview you know for mainstream education and it's such an important thing for children.

Furthermore, Hickey (2007: 178) reports that in *A Survey of Irish English Usage,* the mean acceptability rating for the token *They're finished the work now* was 85 % in varilous counties such as Derry, Kerry, Offaly, and Monaghan.

The co-occurrence of the construction [be done NP] in Irish and Scottish dialects of English might be hypothesised to be the influence of the Gaelic substratum, which has, in its morphosyntactic inventory, the *after* perfect in combination with auxiliary *be*. A reflex of that perfect is found in dialects of Irish English including those in Canada:

(19) You're after ruinin' me
       'You have ruined me'   (Filppula 1999: 90)

This *after* perfect is formally and semantically paralleled by an immediate perfect construction in Irish:

(20) Tá said tar éis teach a thógáil
       Is they after house build –VN   (Hickey 2007: 149)

The presence of the construction [be after V-ing] in Gaelic may certainly have reinforced the usage of *be* as perfect auxiliary in the construction [be V-en NP], but a direct transformation of one into the other seems to be implausible due to a wide formal gap. Besides, grammaticisation studies have shown that grammar tends to evolve over time language-internally as opposed to being borrowed; for the borrowing of grammar to happen, there generally needs to be a high degree of pre-existing structural compatibility between languages in contact, as in the case of Old English and Old Norse. It is thus more likely that the *be* perfect, which developed in a contact situation between Germanic languages—Scots and Norn, diffused to Irish English. This diffusion hypothesis is consistent with Siemund (2003), who finds superstrate accounts of perfect constructions in Irish English to be more cross-linguistically plausible.

Finally, one should consider the possibility that [be {finished, done} NP] arose independently in Scottish and Irish dialects as a vernacular universal in the theoretical spirit of Chambers (2003), who argued that certain nonstandard forms in English are independent dialectal innovations. Assuming the independent emergence of [be {finished, done} NP] in Irish English would lead to a further assumption that the transitive *be* perfect should be (have been) productive in Irish English to an extent comparable to Shetland Scots dialect. However, the full productivity of the transitive *be* perfect is not, to my knowledge, attested by any reference grammars of Irish English. The lack of grammatical productivity of [be {finished, done} NP] in Irish English suggests that tokens of [be done NP], found in the Irish Internet domain, are lexicalisations comparable to those found in dialects of Scots, as well as in North American dialects.

4.   Lexicalisation hypothesis

Reflexes of the transitive *be* perfect in North American have been previously reported in the literature, but no published research, to my knowledge, has identified dialects where those reflexes are limited to two (or three) lexemes only: *do, finish,* and—in some dialects--*start*. Another limitation of extant research is that it only focuses on single isolated pockets in North America and rarely makes systematic connections between them. Nor does extant research make connections to the spread of [be {done, finished} NP] in all of Canada, Vermont, and Philadelphia.

Gold (2007) reports on the following tokens of the transitive *be* perfect in

the Bungi dialect of English in the Canadian prairies, documenting its origin in Scots.

(21) a. I am not got the horse tied upset the Hotel
      b. Aw Willie, I am just slocked ['extinguished'] it the light

But it should be noted that the tokens in (21) appear to be lexically limited; Gold does not provide much descriptive evidence of the productivity of the transitive *be* perfect schema in Bungi.

A similar situation obtains in the Lumbee dialect in Robeson county in North Carolina where Wolfram (1996) documents the occurrence of the *be* perfect in its transitive and intransitive variants. However, Wolfram reports that while the perfect auxiliary *be* is known to occur with a variety of verbs such as *seen*, *had,* and *told,* it predominantly occurs with the verbs *got* and *been as* in (22). In a personal communication Walt Wolfram (2009) notes that while the transitive *be* perfect is productive in Lumbee English, its use with verbs other than *got* is receding.

(22) a. If I'm got a dollar I'm got it.
       b. I says, I'm Indian, I says, I'm been nothing, I says, but a Indian, I says here.

While the historical sources of the Lumbee dialect are debatable, there are reports that this dialect region may have been influenced by Highland Scots settlers (Wolfram 1996).

The reports on the Bungi (Gold 2007) and Lumbee (Wolfram 1996) dialects converge on the recognition that the inventory of verbs that combine with the perfect auxiliary *be* is limited, which points to the weak schematicity of the tranisitve *be* perfect construction in Bungi and Lumbee. Both of these dialects may be treated in a theoretically uniform way by positing that they have lexicalised tokens of the transitive *be* perfect -- most notably those involving the verb *got* and *been.* The Bungi and Lumbee dialects are in principle similar to the mainstream Canadian, Vermont, and Philadelphian dialects reported on in this essay, which have lexicalised tokens of the transitive *be* perfect with the lexemes *finished, done,* and *started.* With the notable exception of one speaker, none of the native speakers of Canadian or Vermont English that I have interviewed use the transitive *be* perfect productively; the following

sentences are, for example, ungrammatical for them:

(23)   a. * I am read the book.
       b. * I am heard it.

There may very well be a connection between the construction [be done NP] and the transitive *be* perfect reported by Wolfram and Gold; further research is needed to determine whether the schemas [be {done, finished, started} NP] are co-extensive with other transitive *be* perfect tokens in North Carolina (as well as in other dialect regions). I will leave this issue unresolved here, suggesting that there is a strong likelihood of co-extension in some conservative dialectal pockets.

It appears that in North American dialects, as the transitive *be* perfect schema lost productivity, some of its exemplars (based on the lexemes *done, finished,* and *started*) became entrenched in the domains of food consumption, educational attainment and household duties, which express frequent and culturally salient activities (e.g. *I'm done dinner; I am finished homework; I am started my chores*). I view this entrenchment as loss in constructional schematicity and therefore as lexicalisation in the theoretical spirit of Kuryłowicz (1965).

The degree to which the schemas [be {done, finished, started} NP] are lexically entrenched varies cross-dialectally. Some dialects only accept the lexemes *do* and *finish*, while other dialects also accept the verb *start*. Thus, in my survey of native speaker informants, I found that [be started NP] is acceptable to native speakers from Cape Breton, Northeastern Vermont, Montreal, and Saskatoon, while it is unacceptable to informants from Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Philadelphia. Finally, some speakers of Canadian English only accept the verb *finished*, rejecting *done* and *started*. On the whole, I found that the occurrence of lexicalised tokens of the transitive *be* perfect in North American dialects of English may be explained by the implicational hierarchy schematised in (24); for example, the occurrence of [be done NP] in a dialect typically implies the occurrence of [be finished NP] and the non-occurrence of [be started NP] in the same dialect.

(24)   [be started NP] >> [be done NP] >> [be finished NP]

It is noteworthy that the lexicalisation argument seems to hold for non-insular

Scottish dialects as well. In my search of the Corpus of Scottish Texts and Speech, limited to non-insular sources, I have only found tokens of the transitive *be* perfect involving the verbal lexeme *finish.*

(25)   a. We're nearly finished this ain't we.
       b. We are finished this ones and this ones and this ones, Mammy.
       c. I'm finished something.
       d. You can get ain when we're finished our tape.

This finding is consistent with Trudgill and Hannah's (1982: 88) report that the token *I am finished it* is a feature of Scots, which contrasts it with the standard PDE tokens *I am finished* and *I have finished it.* However, outside of *finish*-based tokens, the auxiliary *have* is dominant in the perfect construction in transitive (as well as intransitive) environments in non-insular sources.

Even in Orkney and Shetland dialect, in which the transitive *be* perfect has long been documented, there is a strong tendency toward the spread of *have* across the perfect paradigm; for example, a search of Shetland sources in the Scottish Corpus of Speech and Texts yields an abundance of *have*-based perfect tokens. While a quantitative study of *have* vs. *be* tokens would be worthy of future investigation in insular Scots, one can't help but notice, on the impressionistic level, that the *have* perfect dominates the *be* perfect in Shetland Scots dialect sources in SCOTS. This seeming spread of the *have* auxiliary throughout the perfect paradigm in Shetland Scots dialect is probably attributable to the socio-linguistic influence of Standard English; Pavlenko (1996) dates the beginning of the decay of the transitive *be* perfect to the mid nineteenth century. It would not be surprising if the *be* perfect in Shetland Scots dialect started to lexicalise in high frequency environments just like it did in Canadian and Vermont English, and non-insular Scots.

The lexicalisation hypothesis may be supported by evidence from the synchronic behavior of the construction: it behaves mostly as a resultative--but sometimes as an anterior--gram (in the sense of Bybee et al. 1994). The resultativity of [be done NP] reveals itself most clearly in contrast to the stative adjective construction [be done with NP], as shown in example (26), which was volunteered by a native speaker of Northeastern Vermont English in a metalinguistic interview:

(26) a. I am done Canada
          'I have visited Canada'

      b. I am done with Canada
          'I never want to go to Canada again'

Another syntactic test that reveals the construction's resultativity involves the possibility of a benefactive argument in [be done NP], as in (27). On the other hand, the stative adjective construction disallows the benefactive argument and the thematic role of effected medium for the direct object, as in (28). Both (26) and (27) are some of the strongest evidence demonstrating that, while [be done NP] and [be done with NP] are seemingly similar, they cannot be reduced to one common underlying structure and explained away from a strictly synchronic derivational perspective, a point I develop in § 6.

(27) I am done dinner for you
          'I have cooked dinner for you'

(28) * I am done with dinner for you
          'I have cooked dinner for you'

     The anteriority of the construction may be seen in the data in (29) through (31), which shows that the construction occurs in hodiernal contexts (29), as well as when modified by *just* (30) and *already* (31), the prototypical anterior, present relevance adverbs in English. But it is not compatible with other anterior adverbs such as *before* (32) and *never* (33).

(29) I am done dinner today
          'I have cooked/ eaten dinner today'

(30) I am just done dinner
          'I have just cooked/ eaten dinner'

(31)   I am already done dinner
           'I have already cooked/ eaten dinner'

(32) *Are you ever done homework before?
          'Have you ever done homework before?'

(33)   *I am never done homework
          'I have never done homework'

It seems that, synchronically, [be done NP] is primarily a resultative gram with some secondary anterior uses. Since resultativity and anteriority are attested semantic stages in the grammaticisation of perfects, the resultative and anterior reflexes of the construction suggest a historical reconstruction whereby [be {done, finished, started} NP] were instantiations of a productive perfect construction. Relying on the synchronic reflexes, I assume that the transitive *be* perfect schema was lexicalised by being entrenched in the resultative domain because of (possibly interdialectal) competition from the *have* perfect in a sociolinguistic situation comparable to that found today in Shetland and Orkney. Further evidence supporting the likelihood of the proposed reconstruction may be found in the development of 'standard' dialects of English where some intransitve *be* perfect tokens were retracted to the resultative domain during lexicalisation (Kuryłowicz 1965), as in *I am gone.* I model my hypothesis in Figure 2.
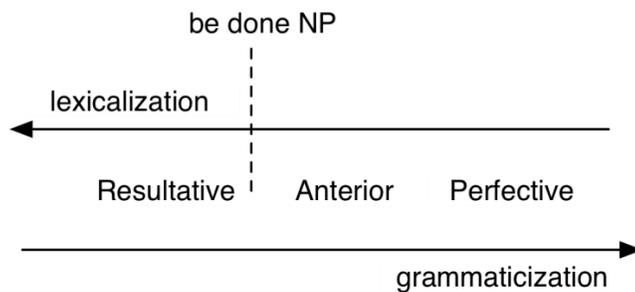

Figure 2: lexicalisation of [be done NP].

5.   Synchrony of [be done NP]

While [be done NP] has undergone lexicalisation, it has, nevertheless, retained a certain degree of morphosyntactic schematicity. This section examines the grammatical vis-à-vis the lexical within this construction.

5.1 Lexical entrenchment and constructional idiosyncrasies of [be done NP]. The construction is lexically idiosyncratic in a number of ways, summarised in (i) through (v). I address these idiosyncrasies in this subsection.

    (i) the verb (deverbal adjective) slot is limited to three lexemes only;
    (ii) the subject slot is limited to animate nouns;
    (iii) the direct object slot disfavours most bare plural nouns;
    (iv) the direct object slot disfavours most singular mass nouns;
    (v) the direct object has culturally conditioned semantic restrictions.

The productivity of the verb slot in [be done NP] in NEVE is demonstrated in Table 2, in which my Vermont informants' grammaticality judgments suggest that the verbs *done, finished,* and *started* are quite acceptable in that speech community. It is vitally important to note the moderate of acceptability of *I'm read this book* and *I'm found my glasses* for one 70-79 year old male speaker, who reports that he is of Scottish ancestry; it is noteworthy to reiterate that similar tokens are found in Scots, as well as Lumbee and Bungi English.

Stimulus	Acceptable				Ranked Mean	Response count
	not 0 pts	*barely* 1 pt	*somewhat* 2 pts	*fully* 3 pts		
	No. of judgements					
I'm finished lunch	2	1	1	4	1.88	8
I'm finished my homework	3	1	1	3	1.50	8
I'm done dishes	3	1	2	2	1.38	8
I'm done the project	2	1	3	2	1.63	8
I'm started school	4	0	2	2	1.25	8
I'm started breakfast	6	0	2	0	0.50	8
I'm read this book	7	0	1	0	0.25	8
I'm found my glasses	7	0	1	0	0.25	8

Table 2. Productivity of [be done NP] (Vermont informants).

The construction shows lexical idiosyncrasies in that it tends to prohibit

inanimate nouns in the subject NP; most of my North American informants rejected the following token:

(34)   * The computer is done the task.

The construction shows idiosyncratic behaviour in semantic restrictions on the theme argument; for example, the construction would not be compatible with the theme NP *the barn*, as in (35). When asked for commentary as to why this sentence is unacceptable, as compared to *I am done dinner*, for example, a 31 year-old male informant from Vermont remarked that 'doing the barn' is an activity that does not frequently recur in his life. He further added that due to its infrequency 'doing the barn' is an 'ambiguous' concept, as opposed to doing chores, which has a well-established social meaning.

(35)   * I am done the barn.

The construction is idiosyncratic with regard to marking definiteness on the patient argument; for example, it is compatible only with a limited set of bare plurals and some singular mass nouns, but hardly compatible with others:

(36)   a. I am done chores
       b. I am done dinner

(37)   a. ? I am done books
       b. ? I am done hay

When asked to explain the difference between (36) and (37), the same informant, again, noted that the questionable acceptability of (37) comes from the lack of significance of 'doing books' and 'doing hay' in his daily life. The consultant continued to say that, because the events of re-shelving books and collecting hay are rare in his life, he does not conceptualise these events in the same socially significant way as *doing dinner* and *doing chores*. To capture the cultural salience of nominal material unmarked for definiteness, I offer a connectionist model of the [be done NP] schema in Figure 3, which features two connected networks of theme arguments: one that does not require definiteness marking for culturally salient theme NPs, and one that does require definiteness marking for theme NPs which lack cultural saliency. The

routinisation of the [be done NP] schema in socially relevant and culturally significant contexts seems to explain the survival of [be done NP] despite its moderate degree of grammatical schematicity.
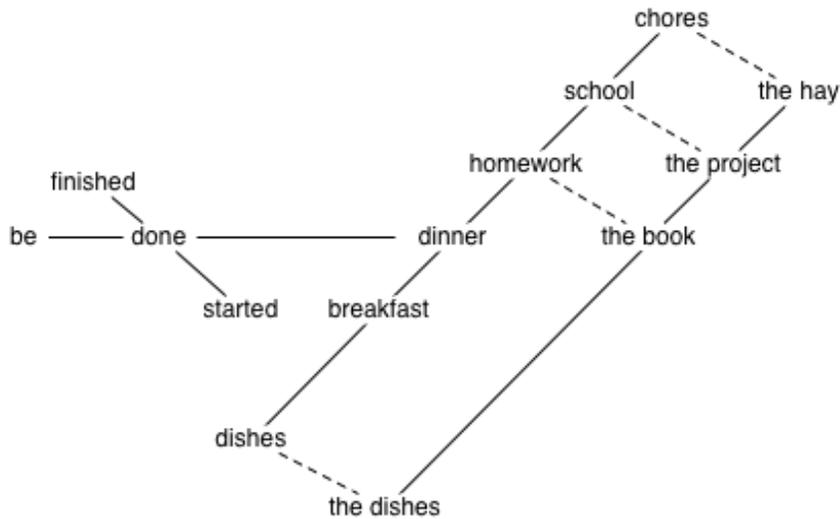

Figure 3: a connectionist model of [be done NP]

Thus, my thesis is that theme argument marking for definiteness and the constructional selectional restrictions on argument structure are functions of frequency of language use and cultural salience. My thesis leads to the larger theoretical conclusion that culture may give rise to grammatical gradience. This conclusion is philosophically consonant with Bybee's (2001, 2002) position that frequency is a major factor in the emergence and restructuring of grammar; it is further consonant with Everett's (2005) position that culture plays a role in grammatical expression.

The idiosyncratic conventionalisation of culturally salient material within this construction speaks to the effect of frequency. Once a phraseological unit is invested with socio-semantic salience, its repetition in a speech community is a recognition of that salience (Tucker 2007: 960); the construction [be done NP] is a case in point. The constructional schema is based on the verbs *do, finish,* and *start*, which are high frequency aspectual verbs. Moreover, these verbs occur in combination with high frequency nominal material such as *chores,*

homework, dinner, breakfast, supper, lunch, and *school.* The high frequency of [be done NP] is supported by my observation that children of pre-school age in Northeastern Vermont acquire this construction early on; for instance, I heard a four-year old child using it. Furthermore, children seem to prefer *I am done dinner* to *I am done with dinner* in the early stages of acquisition. In fact, an adult parent commented that, while the use of the preposition *with* is strongly encouraged by the school system, it is virtually non-existent in pre-school children. He further added that it was natural for him as a child to acquire [be done NP] because it occurred in everyday contexts related to chores, which his parents were getting him accustomed to as part of the daily routine.

The construction's idiosyncrasies in the direct object slot suggest a certain degree of its lexical specificity. One way to measure the extent to which the construction is lexically entrenched is to quantify the distribution of variable lexical material in the direct object slot. At the present moment, controlled corpus data on [be done NP] is scarce and does not easily lend itself to statistical generalisations; the Internet remains the best source of spontaneous, unsolicited data for [be done NP]. Given these considerations, I conducted a quantitative analysis of lexical material in the direct object slot using Internet data. I found that among the most frequent nouns in the direct object slot are those related to school, food, and work/ chores; the token frequency results for these nouns are summarised in Table 3. Even direct object NPs whose token frequency was low (less than 4) form similar semantic classes: education, food, household duties/ clothes-making, health and sports. Organised by semantic field and type frequency, the results are given in Table 4. In addition, there were 190 tokens which did not form a distinct semantic field within my sample, which suggests that the direct object slot, while showing distinct semantic preferences, is quite abstract.

Direct object token	Token frequency	Semantic field
school	566	education
supper	56	food
university[3]	50	education
dinner	49	food
college	47	education
breakfast	25	food
lunch	25	food
homework	19	education
chores	12	chores
my Christmas shopping	8	chores
my work	5	work
my degree	4	education
my exams	4	education
Total	870	

Table 3: token frequency for direct objects.

[3] As a side note, the high frequency token *I am done university* needs to be pointed out in Table 3; this usage is distinctly Canadian and is unlikely to occur in the United States without the definite article. This is yet another piece of evidence that demonstrates the robustness of the construction in Canada.

Semantic field	Type frequency	Direct object examples
Education	75	the course, the midterms, my classes, my undergrad, my second semester, my last undergraduate paper
Work	16	the meeting, my contract, my shift
Food	14	the meal, my curry lamb, the dishes
Chores	12	the chores, my spring cleaning, my laundry
Clothes-making	10	the alterations, the shawl, the Western shirts
Health	7	my surgery, my antibiotics, my treatment
Sports	7	my training, my workout, my cycle
Total	141	

Table 4: type frequency of semantic fields for direct objects.

The synchronic grammatical/ lexical gradience associated with the construction [be done NP] begs the question: Where does [be done NP] stand on the gradient continuum from the most specific to the most schematic? In answering this question I turn to Bybee's (2006) gradient categorisation of constructions into 1.) idioms with fixed lexical content, e.g. *go great guns*; 2.) idioms that are partially filled, e.g. *jog <someone's> memory*; 3.) constructions with some fixed material, e.g. *he made his way through the crowd*; 4.) fully abstract constructions, e.g. *they gave him an award*. This categorisation of constructions represents a continuum from the most lexical to the most schematic. On the most lexical end of it are idioms, which indisputably have a direct memory representation. The other three types are so-called prefabs with different degrees of schematisation; they are still predictable (although to a varying degree) and may have direct mental representations as well.

  Since the construction [be done NP] has variable content in the patient NP slot I propose the categorisation of this construction as a prefab. That slot allows for low-probability collocations, such as (38), which are outside the usual culturally salient contexts of food consumption, performance of household duties, and educational attainment:

(38) Are you done the [missionary] service?

The occurrence of [be done NP] in combination with the noun *service* is theoretically important in that it shows that there is a certain degree of schematicity (analyticity) to the construction – tokens such as *I am done dinner* are not simply dead lexical fossilisations. More specifically, I argue that [be done NP] should be treated as a construction with some fixed material, which stands close to a fully abstract construction. The fixed material in the construction consists of the deverbal adjectives *do, finish, start*, as well as lexical restrictions on animacy, definiteness, and number; however, the high variability of the direct object slot lends vital schematicity to it.

5.2   Beyond lexicalisation: regrammaticisation

While the construction [be done NP] has undergone lexicalisation as a reflex of the erstwhile productive transitive be perfect, having retained some schematicity, it has also been re-grammaticised as a morphosyntactic device for marking topic position in its direct slot. To begin with, consider the incongruity of the conversational exchange (39)a vs. (39)b:

(39)   a. * So what are you done? -- Homework.
         b. So what have you done? – Homework.

In example (39)b, *homework* occupies a natural, unmarked focus position at the end of the clause; therefore, bringing that constituent into focus does not lead to any incongruity. At the same time, focusing the same constituent in the construction leads to incongruity, which, I argue, results from the clash between the topical, background nature of the theme NP and its focalisation in discourse. Interestingly, that incongruity may be overcome by contextual priming: if the token in (39)b is introduced in a context familiar to both speakers, that improves its grammaticality. Consider the metalinguistic commentary provided by a native speaker of Vermont English in response to my question if there is any context that would make the question in (39)b acceptable:

(40)   There would need to be some pre-existing context... I could say it if I was searching to see if my son remembered some task that I had asked him to do hours ago... I would say 'So, Teaguen, what are you done?' in an

attempt to encourage him to remember on his own something he should have done...

The acceptability of *What are you done?* in a 'pre-existing' context suggests that the theme NP represents familiar information and is thus topically prominent. Pre-existence equates to strong anaphoric accessibility, an unmistakable characteristic of topicality. It is thus not surprising that an Internet search for tokens of this construction yields an abundance of examples in adverbial subordinate clauses introduced by adverbial conjunctions *once, when, as soon as, after.* The use of the construction in subordinate adverbial clauses points to the tendency of the construction to carry backgrounded, familiar, topical information. By way of illustration, consider the following stretches of discourse from online sources. In (41), the construction [be done NP] is used to express familiar, topical information (dinner), which had been previously introduced in a natural, sentence-final focus position. In (42), the speaker establishes the topic of education in the first sentence and uses the construction [be done NP] to pick up that topic at the end. In (43), the topic of schooling is introduced in the second sentence and is carried on throughout the whole discourse stretch; this topic serves as a background to the new information of plans for full time work in the final sentence. All of these illustrations have in common the anaphoric accessibility of the information introduced in the direct object slot of the construction [be done NP].

(41)   A strong place for me is after dinner. *Once I'm done dinner* (for reasons only God knows and I give Him all credit, here) I can stop eating for the night.
                    http://www.dietcoaches.com/youcan.htm

(42)   I am currently a student at the U of A. I was born in 1982 in Edmonton. I have lived here my whole life here. I havent been able to see much of the world yet but I intend on doing some major travelling *once I'm done school.*
                    http://www.justanotherepicfable.com/aaron/about.swf

(43)   It was through this game that Christie and Rebecca both sat down beside me. As we rattled off what we were doing, I found out that Christie is a science major and Rebecca an art major. I asked Rebecca what area of art she really loved and she replied Photography, I'd love to do that after

school. I was so excited I blurted out, 'That's what I do full-time right now! Well, I guess not full time right now because I'm in school full-time right now, but if there were enough hours in the day I'd still be full-time, but I was full-time in the summer and I'm going back to full-time next April *when I'm done school*!'

Poster's location: Vancouver, BC

The claim that the direct object NP is prototypically reserved for topical information may further be supported with the fact that native speakers strongly disfavour singular indefinite nouns in this slot. Topicality is prototypically associated with definiteness – this accounts for the frequent occurrence of the definite article or possessive pronoun in the determiner slot of the direct object NP. At that, bare singular mass nouns (dinner, school) and bare plural count nouns (chores, dishes), which frequently occur in the construction, carry socio-cultural significance and therefore discourse prominence, which may be interpreted as indicative of topicality as well.

6.   Marginalisation of [be done NP]: sociolinguistic and sociological factors

In this section, I discuss how sociolinguistic factors coupled with dominant theories of syntax in North America have marginalised the construction [be done NP].

Oftentimes, the marginalisation of non-standard dialects results from prescriptive pressures of language standardisers and ensuing negative social attitudes toward non-standard dialectal features. Such has always been the case with dialects of Scots and Scottish English in Scotland and elsehwere, where the peripheral Scottish features have always been perceived as inferior in relation to Standard English. The case of [be done NP] seems to suggest that such perceptions of inferiority of Scottish linguistic features have been transferred into North America. Having diffused across many speech communities in Canada and the United States, the construction [be done NP] has been reduced to the status of a non-standard feature; the construction created sociolectal distinctions in those dialect areas where it is used. Negative social attitudes toward the construction abound in the public domain on the Internet; I exemplify the social stigmatisation of [be done NP] by quoting a number of online posts. A composition instructor at Capital Community College (Hartford, Connecticut) proscribes the construction:

(44) 'I am done my work' is completely unacceptable; I can't imagine any level of discourse where it would be tolerated. 'I am done with my work' is surely acceptable in an informal setting; 'I have finished my work' would be an improvement, of course.

> http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/
> GRAMMAR/grammarlogs2/grammarlogs306.htm

A user of the Worldreference.com forum, who self-identifies as a native speaker of Canadian English from British Columbia, assigns 'slangy' status to the construction.

(45) 'Are you done your dinner' is extremely slangy and I can't say that I hear it in my area of Canada.

> http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=1228954

An anonymous user associates the construction with a lack of education, and humour:

(46) My hunch is the same as Guest's who wrote 'It [I'm done my homework – YVY] looks like a contraction of 'I'm done with my homework' and a mix-up with 'I've done my homework'. It is hard to tell however if this is an example of imperfectly learned English in a ghetto environment or whether it was largely artificially perpetrated by a few people trying to be humorous.

> http://www.antimoon.com/forum/t1301-0.htm

Some online users even show intolerance toward the construction; for example, somebody who identifies herself as an English major writes:

(47) Do you have any friends from Philadelphia who have omitted the preposition 'with' from their vocabularies altogether? I.E. instead of saying 'I'm done with dinner,' they'll just say, 'I'm done dinner?' Does it drive you crazy? Have you murdered them yet? If so, how? Can you tell that this bothers me??!

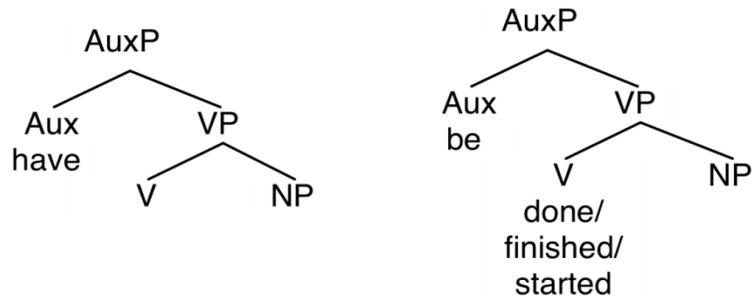> http://www.pointsincase.com/blogs/sarah-
> romeo/pruhnuhnseeeyshuhn-n

This survey of attitudes seems to suggest that the marginal, peripheral status of the construction [be done NP] has been carried over to North America.

This marginalisation of non-standard dialects may have also been

reinforced by the institutional entrenchment of the generative paradigm in North America, and especially in Canada. As a discourse of power, generative linguistics favours idealised Standard English as input to dialectal variation and promotes the principle of structural uniformity whereby one should reduce as many surface forms to one underlying form as possible. Applying the principle of structural uniformity to dialectal variation, generative linguists have often assumed one underlying form for different dialects of the same language, with surface realisations computed through a series of dialect-specific constraints. For example, working on an Eastern Massachusetts non-rhotic dialect, Selkirk (1996) assumes a common underlying prosodic structure in English in general, wherefrom the segment [r] is realised differently on the surface in rhotic vs. non-rhotic dialects (see also Kallen 2005 for a more recent dialectological study within this theoretical tradition). While it is theoretically enlightening to draw conclusions about invariance in language, it is dubious to posit that such invariance is present in the mental representations of native speakers of all dialects of a given language. Critiques of generative linguists' orientation towards normalised material have been advanced, among others, by Givon (2002) who observes that they tend to focus on idealised, well-edited language forms, and Bybee (2001) who argues that generative linguists privilege alphabetic, written representations. The unfortunate – and perhaps unintended – result of such methodological orientation is the search for underlying structures in standardised language varieties; the case of [be done NP] is a case in point.

In the mainstream generative framework, it is assumed that all syntactic structures are reducible to one universal schema. Accounting for [be done NP] within such a framework would first require one to posit a *be/have* auxiliary alternation along the lines of (48), where the auxiliary *be* would select three verbs only: *done, finished,* and *started*.

(48)

```
        AuxP                                AuxP
       /    \                              /    \
    Aux     VP                          Aux      VP
   have     / \                          be     /  \
          V    NP                             V     NP
                                          done/
                                          finished/
                                          started
```

However, such an account is empirically problematic in light of the data in (49), data that shows that, when combined with the degree adverb *all,* the [be done NP] in (a) patterns like the predicate adjective construction in (b) rather than the perfect construction in (c).

(49)   a. I am all ready for school
        b. I am all {done, finished} my homework
        c. * I have all done my homework.

This test shows *done/ finished/ started* pattern like adjectives in some morphosyntactic environments. Under the mainstream generative framework, if one were to accept the adjectival status of these lexemes, one would need to assume that these adjectives select following NPs (DPs), because lexical heads are assumed to license argument structures:

(50)

```
        VP
       /  \
      V    AP
      be   / \
          A   NP
```
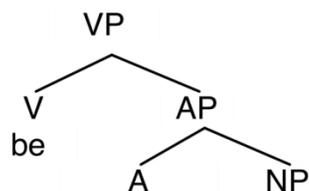
Since generative syntactic schemas are assumed to be uniform – at least within a given language, the schema in (50) would predict ungrammatical structures such as:

(51) a. * I am ready homework
      b. * I'm glad dinner

Given the ill-formedness of (51), the only analytical tool left at the disposal of the generative linguist is to outsource the whole construction [be done NP] to the lexicon as an irregularity. To some extent, such a solution might be justified because the construction is restricted to three verbs only. However, if one were to treat that construction as completely lexicalised, it would be problematic because the construction still shows robust schematicity in its direct object slot; for example, in the study of Internet tokens of this construction, I found that the lexeme *done* collocates with low probability lexical items (see also Tables 3 & 4):

(52) I started this really really late but I think I'll be done in time. I have everything cut out, and *I'm all done the bodice* except for attaching the sleeves. I'll be working pretty much non-stop in my free time all week.
                http://community.livejournal.com/moulincostumes

(53) Wow. I can't believe another month has come and gone and *I am all done the first part of my exchange*.
                http://www.jfao.on.ca

The seeming theoretical paradox may well be accounted for within alternative theoretical frameworks. Thus, adopting Croft's (2001) radical construction grammar framework, one could easily accommodate the morphological gradience of the lexemes *done, finished, started* – gradience intractable in a mainstream generative framework which applies a featural (+, -) metric to morphological categories and does not tolerate categorial indeterminacy. One could further accommodate the empirical facts of [be done NP] even within a non-mainstream, representational generative framework (Jackendoff 1997; Culicover & Jackendoff 2005), which would allow for the whole construction [be done NP]—rather than the individual lexemes *done, finished, started*—to

assign thematic roles to direct object NPs. But, as is widely known, in North America neither of these approaches, nor any other approach in between, enjoys as much institutional power as the generative one does.

The methodological orientation of mainstream generative grammar is not conducive to analyses of *I am done dinner* as a direct representational, non-derivational reflex of the transitive *be* perfect; it is more conducive to analyses that explain away *I am done dinner* as a surface realisation of 'mainstream' Standard English constructions. This generative paradigm of thinking is epistemologically consonant with Visser (1963), who theorised that the transitive *be* perfect in Middle English is not, underlyingly, a perfect construction but rather a prepositional construction where the preposition is suppressed, i.e. the preposition is not realised on the surface, in generative terms. The treatment of [be done NP] as a surface realisation continues even today; for example, Zwicky's hypothesis, referred to in the introduction, assumes that [be done NP] is an elliptical structure, without considering any attested dialectal parallels.

Gradient, non-categorical schematicity, which the construction [be {done, finished, started} NP] exemplifies, is not a convenient fact for universal syntactic blueprints and operations espoused by generative linguists. Nor is it be easy to explain, from a generative perspective, why [be done NP] allows 'wh-movement' only when it is contextually primed (as shown above), without violating the autonomy of syntax principle and acknowledging the role discourse plays in shaping syntactic structure. The empirical facts of [be done NP] thus present a major theoretical challenge to the generative framework, a challenge which, perhaps, has led to the theoretical and descriptive neglect of reflexes of the transitive *be* perfect in Canada, where this construction robustly occurs. The construction [be done NP] calls on us to re-evaluate the methodological baggage of mainstream generative grammar in our study of dialectal variation.

7. Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the North American construction [be done NP] has a Scottish origin and represents a lexicalised set of reflexes of the transitive *be* perfect found in Shetland and Orkney. This claim is based primarily on dialectal parallels, the evidence for which is at times scanty and inconclusive; the present claim should be further substantiated by research on historical

migration patterns from Scotland and Ireland to North America and by fieldwork in relevant dialectal areas. I have further argued that, despite its hypothetical lexicalisation, [be done NP] retains a certain degree of constructional schematicity – most notably in the direct object slot, but tends to be confined to contexts of educational attainment and performance of household duties. Finally, I have argued that the perceived social inferiority of the Scottish transitive *be* was transferred onto the North American construction [be done NP], and speculated that the lack of descriptive attention to [be done NP] has been conditioned by the orientation of dominant theories of syntax in North America.

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