Paula Prescod (Ed.)


This groundbreaking volume on language in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) clearly demonstrates the extent to which our knowledge about language contact in particular and of linguistics in general will remain both woefully incomplete and dangerously Eurocentric until each of the contact varieties of the Afro-Atlantic is given the attention it deserves by scholars who are willing to think outside the dominant theoretical discourses of Western linguistic science. Although this collection of thought provoking articles has the modest goal of laying a foundation for more comprehensive academic work on language in SVG in the future, it in fact accomplishes much more. This is largely due to the inclusive scope and penetrating depth of analysis of the contributing authors, as well as to the highly professional editorial work of linguist Paula Prescod, herself a native speaker of the varieties under study.

Following a brief but adequate overview of the contents of each article, the first article by Paula Prescod and SVG-based historian Adrian Fraser attempts to piece together the socio-historical and linguistic contexts for colonial era linguistic contact on these islands. The inclusion of data highlighting the role of indigenous peoples, maroons and renegades of African and European descent in their account of the pre-colonial and colonial contact situations in SVG is both enlightening and refreshing, given the fact that too many creolists ignore the crucial role of such socially marginalized peoples in the emergence of Afro-Atlantic contact varieties. While some of the many commonly held misconceptions among creolists about enslaved and free people of African descent and their languages are challenged in this piece, others are unfortunately left unquestioned. The copious examples, tables, diagrams and maps that accompany the text in this article will be of particular assistance to researchers in the future, although they contain some minor typographical errors. This is the only article in this otherwise meticulously edited volume, however, where such errors are in evidence.

The next two contributions focus on the island of Bequia in the Grenadines. In the first of these articles, Agata Dalezynska, a linguist who has done significant work in SVG, considers how the use of the English lexifier Creole preverbal past/anterior markers did and bin has changed over time in the communities of Hamilton and Paget Farm. Dalezynska begins with an insightful discussion of how the semantic properties of these markers have come to be levelled in Bequia in the direction of past marking in Standard English. She then puts forward very convincing explanations for the fairly predictable decline among the
younger generations in the use of *did* in both communities due to increased exposure to Standard English via the globalized media and marketplace, as well as for the less predictable increase in the usage of *bin* among young people in Paget Farm, as part of an identificational strategy on their part to reclaim a degree of local authenticity in the face of these same globalizing forces. The latter phenomenon calls into question the tendency among creolists to assume that there has always been one main target variety in the contact situation, and that this variety has always been one of those originally spoken in the colonial metropoles.

In the second Bequia-focused article, sociolinguists Miriam Meyerhof and James Walker examine the use of pronominal forms in subject and object positions in Hamilton, Paget Farm and Mount Pleasant. While speakers in all three communities conform to Standard English pronominal usage in most cases, significant individual variation also occurs. While the non-standard pronominal forms used in these communities tend to be those found in other Afro-Caribbean contact varieties, a number of speakers who often use these non-standard forms in subject position rarely use them in object position, while a number of speakers who often use these non-standard forms in object position rarely use them in subject position. These results, as well as the authors’ findings in previous research, lead Meyerhof and Walker to conclude that “it is problematic to think in terms of speakers having or not having a local, creole grammar .... what can be defined as a local grammar can be realized in multiple ways” (81–82), an important insight that too many linguists (including quite a number of sociolinguists) have yet to incorporate into their work.

In the article that follows, Elizabeth Fortenbery, an anthropologist who has devoted much of her work to linguistic research in SVG, shifts our attention to the island of Saint Vincent itself. This study, which is based on participant research integrating the author’s long established social networks there, brilliantly succeeds in unraveling the complex social and linguistic dynamics behind the particular ways in which economically marginalized African descended Vincentian women utilize their verbal artistry to reframe both the internal and external contexts of communication in their communities by deploying such prototypical Afro-Atlantic speech genres as *cussin’*, *commess*, *melee*, *noise*, and *botheration* in order to establish and maintain control over language. Fortenbery convincingly demonstrates how the Anansi-esque use of wit, play and art in overturning language mediated power relations is not the sole province of men in the Afro-Atlantic, as the academic literature published to date on the subject might suggest, but is also fully mastered, refined and elaborated upon by women. Thus, just as Anansi and other Afro-Atlantic tricksters are sometimes portrayed as male and at other times as female in West Africa itself, so
must the long and multifaceted tradition of subaltern individual and collective control over language by the peoples of the Afro-Atlantic be traced and attributed to peoples of all sexes, sexual orientations, and gendered identities. This outstanding article would have been even more effective if its strong critique of the male-centered bias in academic studies of verbal artistry in the Caribbean were matched by an equally forceful critique of the erasure of Africa and the social and linguistic practices of its peoples in these same scholarly works.

Building upon research previously done by creolists on the historical attestations of a large inventory of lexical items and features in English lexifier Creoles (ELCs) worldwide, the next article by linguist Andrei Avram represents a qualitative step forward in our understanding of the linguistic history of the contact varieties found in SVG. By including new SVG sources in his data base, the author makes important updates and revisions to current lists of lexical items/features shared by the ELCs of the Atlantic (Atlantic ELC Features), the Pacific (Pacific ELC Features) and both the Atlantic and Pacific (Worldwide ELC Features), both in terms of content as well as in terms of the dates at which various forms are first attested. Some of Avram’s most significant findings in this work suggest that the feature-based distinctions between Eastern and Western Caribbean ELCs as well as between Atlantic and Pacific ELCs which many creolists (including, at times, Avram himself) take for granted are proving to be less and less valid as we gain access to more and more data.

In the following article by Paula Prescod on the tense, modality and aspect (TMA) properties of reflexes of English do in varieties of ELC spoken in SVG, we find an outstanding example of how a multi-causal and multiplex model for creole emergence and development accounts for the facts in a much more satisfying way than do the grammatical analyses of most creolists, who are still operating within a framework that does not give sufficient weight either to the influence of the linguistic patterns and practices that people of African descent and other socially marginalized peoples have brought to the colonial and neo-colonial contact situations, or to the linguistic creativity, innovation and transgression that those speakers have deployed there. Prescod courageously makes reference to influence from Benue-Kwa grammars when discussing the many features of West African TMA systems which are also found in the contact varieties of SVG and the rest of the ELCs of the Afro-Atlantic, but she does not do so in order to exclude or trivialize influences from other sources. Instead, she nimbly demonstrates how the emergence of a set of very complex grammatical phenomena can only be meaningfully understood by weaving together a matrix of mutual interaction among African, European, universal, and other factors, including creative innovation. In her theoretically heterodox handling of the data, Prescod is able to include the fine details of usage and the
nuances of meaning that she as a native speaker knows must be part of any comprehensive analysis, but that are usually missed, ignored or discarded by too many other linguists, who all too often attempt to force their data to fit into the artificial confines of a single theoretical box.

The final article in the book is a fairly complete and extremely useful annotated bibliography of works related to language in SVG by recently deceased linguist and librarian Donna Cromer. This list of sources, together with bibliographic notes on the contributing authors and a user friendly index section, will ensure that this volume will become a fundamental reference work for anyone interested in the language varieties spoken in SVG. That said, the multi-causal scenarios envisioned in this volume in relation to the emergence of contact varieties, the heteroglossic stand taken regarding the pluri-lingual creativity and resistance of the peoples of the Afro-Caribbean, together with the inclusive attitude adopted concerning the agency of socially marginalized peoples in Afro-Atlantic creolization, extend the importance of this volume far beyond SVG, making this book essential reading for any researcher who has experienced the inadequacies of the dominant paradigms of linguistic science and who is searching for new ways to study language that are more accountable to the linguistic facts as well as being more accountable to the speech communities who create those facts.

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