Book Reviews

Anna Rosen

Grammatical Variation and Change in Jersey English, 2014. xii + 237 pages.

The Channel Islands of Jersey and Guernsey once seemed like prototypical settings for dialect enclaves. They have long and relatively stable settlement histories in the insular Bay of St. Malo between France and England. Their nearest neighbours are much smaller islands called Sark and Alderney. France is the most proximate nation, and the islands were once celebrated among Romance scholars for the variety of Norman French spoken there. They have long been British dependencies in a tangled history that goes back to the Middle Ages; the reigning English monarch is constitutionally Sovereign of the Bailiwick of Jersey <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crown_dependencies>. French-English bilingualism was a linguistic factor on the islands for centuries.

Twenty-first century social forces have eroded their insularity as they have almost every other enclave. Anna Rosen, in her admirable study of grammatical variation and change in the English of Jersey, seems to have arrived there in the nick of time. One of her themes is the “standardization and leveling” that is sweeping through the bailiwick (190, et passim). Rosen sensibly biased her research design to capture what remains of the distinctiveness of Jersey English (JersE) even as it is fading. Her judgment sample deliberately over-represents bilinguals, with ten of them, one quarter of her sample; all of them are necessarily over 60, because, as she says, “the shift towards English is almost complete ... with only 2–3” percent of the population still capable of speaking French (40). Older subjects make up half of her sample altogether, with ten monolinguals over the age of 60 as well as the ten bilinguals. Her other subjects are clustered into age groups of 40–59 and 20–39, with ten of each. All are strictly native, “islanders who were born and grew up in Jersey and never left
the island for more than a few years" (45), and all have family ties on the island (62). Each age group is evenly split by sex, and they represent all 12 parishes (62). In other respects Rosen took them as they came, and she was gratified to find that they fell into very functional ranges for education (62) and social class (49–50, 62). She focused her linguistic variables “primarily on distinct or stereotypical features of JersE” (5) but, as we shall see, she provides analysis of an impressive range of morphosyntactic features.

Rosen’s methodological choices are easily justified under the circumstances, and she keeps them clearly in view in the discussion. A generation from now there might be no bilinguals and no stereotypical features for linguists to find. Her book is comprehensive and highly readable, and it catches JersE in transition linguistically and socially.

Rosen’s book originated as a Ph.D. dissertation at University of Bamberg. That makes her one more link in the distinctive tradition that ties the Bamberg English department to the Channel Islands. Thirty years before her, Wolfgang Viereck (1983) was, according to Rosen (29), “the first linguist to write... exclusively” about Channel Islands English. Heinrich Ramisch (1989) followed with his thesis/monograph on Guernsey. Since Rosen completed her fieldwork in 2008, Theresa Schmid (2010) has completed a thesis on Jersey verb-and-verb constructions (summarized by Rosen 110–11).

After introductory chapters on the Channel Islands setting and her sociolinguistic methods, Rosen devotes two chapters to the most distinctive features: the discourse marker *eh* (Chapter 5, 69–102) and two verbal constructions (Chapter 6, 103–146). She then goes on to a very inclusive grammatical description (Chapter 7, 147–180) based on Kortmann and Lunkenheimer’s morphosyntax catalogue for world Englishes (2011). After that, she presents an overview (“a bird's eye perspective,” in her terms, Chapter 8, 181–204) on “Standardization, leveling and identity in Jersey,” a summation of the various changes that are “moving [JersE] towards a more standardized and leveled British variety” (3).

Two unobtrusive appendixes attach the written questionnaire that Rosen used at the end of her interviews to elicit usage judgments (“This sentence could be said in Jersey by everyone/most/many/some/few/no one,” 229–31), and a two-page excerpt from an interview (233–34).

The discourse marker *eh* gets a chapter to itself because it is a stereotype of JersE. It is also a stereotype of Canadian English and New Zealand English, and Rosen shows that it occurs in Jersey with the same broad range of pragmatic functions as in other dialects, among them a declarative tag (as in 1), exclamatory emphasis (2), and a narrative turn-holder (3, examples from Rosen 76):
Discourse marker *eh* is difficult to elicit because interview style is somewhat removed from its typically informal context, but Rosen managed to elicit enough instances for her to infer some fairly secure correlates. She finds that it is class-correlated and age-correlated: “All speakers who do use *eh* more than once during their interview,” she says (85), “belong to the intermediate or lower social class and have a middle or low level of education,” except in the youngest age group where it is rare in all classes. She also finds that “bilingual speakers use *eh* more often than monolingual speakers” (88), corroborating a link between French *hein* and English *eh* also posited in Canada as “part of the answer” on its origins (Gold and Tremblay 2006, discussed by Rosen 88, 101). The French connection does not work, of course, for New Zealand, and that gap sounds a cautionary note, it seems to me, about its validity. The fact is that *eh* occurs in nearly all English varieties, and it has the same set of pragmatic functions in all of them. Discourse *eh* is a feature of English globally, and it has become stereotyped in these three varieties not because it is unique to them but because it is markedly frequent in them. French-English bilingualism might be a plausible contact source in Jersey and Canada, but not elsewhere. Rosen’s correlation of *eh* usage with her bilinguals is enticing, but her bilinguals are also her most rooted subjects, mostly rural and socially conservative. In any event, speculation about the origins of *eh* might be fruitless in the long run. Both in Canada and in JersE it seems to have worn out its welcome, as discourse particles often do. For JersE, Rosen (101) points out that “its decline ... among younger speakers strongly suggests a change in progress.”

The JersE verb phrase traditionally included a couple of noteworthy constructions. Most distinctive is “verb-and-verb” in which the second conjoined verb occurs in nonfinite form as in these examples (Rosen 104, 112, 114):

(4) I went and buy some pansy plants.
(5) And he came up yesterday...and give us a cheque like.
(6) And then I went and marry a farmer

Rosen’s discussion seeks possible dialectal similarities elsewhere and discusses grammatical analyses. In her elicited data, the most striking variable constraint is that the first verb in the compound is almost exclusively *go* (71 percent) or *come* (26 percent), suggesting a semi-lexicalized compound or
fossilized lexeme. As was the case with discourse *eh*, occurrences in Rosen’s interviews are sparse compared to earlier studies and demographically restricted. About 90 percent come from the oldest speakers, mainly bilinguals, which probably has less to do with their bilingualism than with their clinging to more traditional Jersey values, of which bilingualism is one. The age correlation inevitably invokes the familiar refrain: “this feature of JersE is declining and maybe even on its way to extinction” (Rosen 115).

The other verbal construction is existential *there’s* plus a time reference followed directly by a clause unmarked for subordination, that is, without a complementizer. The construction was first noticed by Ramisch in Guernsey (7, cited by Rosen 127). Ramisch found nine occurrences in his Guernsey interviews, all from bilinguals, and explained it as a calque on Norman French, which has the same construction. It occasionally shows up in Rosen’s JersE interviews as well (8,9 from Rosen 138):

(7) There’s four years I don’t smoke.
(8) There’s sixty years we’re married
(9) Is there long you started in this business?

Rosen embeds the discussion of these exotic-sounding constructions with much more common existential mismatches of concord as in these examples (Rosen 128):

(10) …there was— there were stacks of vraic …along the Five Mile Road
(11) There’s seventeen years between us.

The more exotic sentences (7–9), as I understand it, come from Rosen’s bilingual subjects almost exclusively and “without exception, from [those with] a farming background” (138). It too is a recessive feature in JersE.

Beyond these highly distinctive features, Rosen describes numerous other morphosyntactic features of JersE, and she describes them extensively and clearly, with ample illustrations from her interview data. For all her attention to distinctive features, she does not ignore the less distinctive ones. Her book thus provides useful comparative data for bringing JersE into the conversation on any number of issues. She explicitly invokes vernacular universals in her discussion of invariant *is* (124–25, citing Chambers 2004), and at various points she discusses other vernacular universals as they are realized in JersE, such as conjugation regularization (e.g., *I seen some Russians there*, 144) and multiple negation (168). Rosen discovers Quotative *be like* in JersE (e.g., *...my mum was like, ‘No, you’re too young’*, 174), showing that its well-documented global spread
has reached the Channel Islands, in case there was any doubt. True to form the world over for this construction that started spreading a few decades ago, Rosen (174) finds it “only used by younger speakers in the JersE data.” All in all, her study is rich enough that linguists can now add JersE to the roster of dialects that show evidence for vernacular universals and for the global spread of discourse features, and for any number of other contemporary issues.

Rich as it is, the abiding impression that Rosen’s book will leave on sociolinguists and dialectologists is the erosion of enclave features in Jersey English specifically and in the Channel Islands generally. The transition forms a consistent refrain throughout the book — emphatic pronouns (e.g., *We were lucky, us*), once a stereotype, are “not much in use today” (157); “the overall frequency of non-standard preposition use is much lower … than… in the data collected some twenty years earlier” (164); “there is a drastic decline in the use of” formerly robust definite articles (as in *We would have the roast on Sundays*, 165), and so on. Rosen summarizes the many changes in progress in a tidy checklist of morphosyntactic features (Table 7.9, 176–77) that shows, among other useful information, which ones are obsolescent, that is, which ones are “(nearly) exclusively used by … speakers above the age of 60.” The changes are many, but the situation is by no means unique in JersE. Obsolescence of enclave features is pervasive almost everywhere in the world. Modern social forces such as geographic mobility, mass literacy, urbanization, immigration and social mobility inevitably bring with them the homogenization of speech patterns and other cultural norms. Face-to-face communication among peers, the main consequence of those modern social forces, makes dialect leveling inevitable. Lamenting the demise of enclave dialects is a romantic indulgence. Instead, we should be thankful when linguists like Anna Rosen get to the enclaves at the transitional time and manage to leave a solid record of what it once was like as well as what it is becoming.

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**References**


