
This volume, a selection of papers presented at the 2006 Sociolinguistics Symposium in Limerick, is a welcome addition to the current documentation of variation in English-lexifier Caribbean creoles. It will be of interest to linguists and sociolinguistics, anthropologists and literacy specialists alike, and will constitute an excellent text for an undergraduate or graduate course in World Englishes or contact languages. Several geographical areas are illustrated in the eastern Caribbean (Bequia, Barbados, Tobago, Suriname, French Guiana) and western Caribbean (Jamaica), as well as the West Indian diaspora in England. The eleven authors use a variety of sociolinguistic approaches to linguistic variation, and, as is often the case, morphological or syntactic features are predominantly studied, with the exception of Michelle Braña-Straw’s study of vowels in the Barbadian diaspora of Ipswich. Linguistic features investigated include future markers in Sranan, relative clauses in Standard Jamaican English, negation in Bequia, various morpho-syntactic features representing Jamaican creolisms, the Tobagonian repertoire, and Eastern Maroon lectal variation in French Guiana. Three chapters deal with broader issues of language attitudes toward Jamaican English, the role of orthography in Bajan writing, and the complexity of identity marking in the mixed Caribbean diaspora of inner-city Manchester. John Rickford’s last chapter stands apart as it renders homage to the legacy of Robert Le Page and the contributions of his Acts of Identity model to creole linguistics, as represented in several references throughout the book.

The Jamaican situation is given the lion’s share, as it is the subject of three of the eleven chapters in this volume, and also figures in observations of the diaspora in the United Kingdom. In my opinion, the most innovative articles are the two analyses (both based on the ICE-JA corpus) that focus on the development of Jamaican English (acrolectal) in relatively formal contexts. They refer to different features and involve different methodologies, but offer complementary findings on the state of educated Jamaican speech. Ulrike Gut’s narrow focus on relativization strategies in professionals’ speech (“Relative Markers in Spoken Standard Jamaican English”) presents a view of an acrolect that seems to draw from written English, and is
thus sometimes more formal than the Standard English norm (for example in its exclusion of the widespread ‘that’ relative pronoun). On the other hand, Dagmar Deuber’s “The Creole Continuum and Individual Agency: Approaches to Stylistic Variation in Jamaica” incorporates several features (unmarked past, pronouns, idioms, etc.) and a slightly wider range of styles (upper mesolect to high acrolect). Standard English is also the preferred choice, although occasional creolisms enter educated speech as identity and agency markers, often for special effect.

Gut’s and Deuber’s quantitative analyses of Jamaican English features find their counterpart in Andrea Sand’s investigation of language attitudes toward educated Jamaican English usage (“Language Attitudes and Linguistic Awareness in Jamaican English”). Respondents to a questionnaire on the acceptability of Jamaican English forms generally preferred international Standard English norms rather than Jamaican acrolectal forms, which seems to confirm previous claims on the strong influence of prescriptive (written) norms on careful oral varieties. However, it is well known that metalinguistic declarations do not necessarily reflect actual usage, especially in a formal questionnaire context. Nonetheless, all three articles agree in their findings that educated Jamaicans are very aware of the status of formal speech and strive toward it.

The two diaspora chapters are important given the history of extensive Caribbean migration to various British cities, now in its fifth or sixth decade. Current patterns of interethnic mixing and social mobility lead to novel types of network contacts and new linguistic combinations. Michelle Braña-Straw’s study of phonological variation (“Putting Individuals Back in Contact: Accommodation Strategies by Barbadians in Ipswich”) is a fine-grained analysis of the complex situation, taking into account multiple convergent influences from Jamaicans and from Ipswich Anglos. The phonetic distribution of the vowels of *goose, trap, bath, lot* and *thought* reveals that British Barbadians have approximated Anglo (Suffolk) vowels to various degrees, and more so naturally for those who have the most access to looser social networks with Anglos, and have attained upward mobility. The other diasporic Afro-Caribbean community documented here is located in Manchester and includes mixed-race families, with black Caribbean and white British members (“‘Creole’ and Youth Language in a British Inner-City Community” by Susan Dray and Mark Sebba). No evidence of an extended use of Creole is found in the group of adolescents studied,
although specific creole forms (phonological features or lexical items) and performance styles do occur, indicating that young people evolve in unconstrained social networks and have developed an “international hood” in which ethnicity does not play a defining role in language behavior.

Other chapters reflect more traditional, though no less interesting, approaches to linguistic variation in creole contexts. Donald Winford’s examination of future markers in Sranan (“Revisiting Variation between ‘sa’ and ‘o’ in Sranan”) incorporates a historical perspective to explain the semantic distinctions that still obtain in the two markers, at least in certain styles. It turns out that the special modal meaning associated with sa can be attributed to an old Dutch item. The variationist model informs James A. Walker and Jack Sidnell’s study of negation in Bequia (“Inherent Variability and Coexistent Systems”), demonstrating amazing linguistic variability in the three communities of the tiny island of Bequia (located right across from St. Vincent). Another example of variability is documented in Valerie Youssef’s “The Varilingual Repertoire of Tobagonian Speakers”; speakers exhibit extensive lectal variation, consistent with the existence of a creole continuum accessible to each individual. Thus Tobago exhibits the same linguistic flexibility that has been documented in many other creole communities to reflect multidimensional identity. However, Youssef states in her conclusion that she observed a trend toward a community preference for the mesolect, away both from basilects and acrolects. This trend, if verified, would signal a leveling of the continuum leading to a variety akin to African-American English in the United States, but it can be hoped that this may be an artifact of the methodology used in the data collection.

The complex ethnic and linguistic situation of the Eastern Maroon communities results in innovative varieties, as documented by Bettina Migge and Isabelle Léglise (“On the Emergence of New Language Varieties: The Case of the Eastern Maroon Creole in French Guiana”). Linguistic diversification is described as involving apparently contradictory dynamic processes—convergence and divergence—that reflect multiple types of interactions available in this multiethnic society. The stylistic innovations mentioned in this chapter seem to be more appropriately defined as code-switching, an expected phenomenon in this multilingual context, and the overall dynamic of language development is characterized as leveling, which may appear contrary to diversification. However, one sentence in this interesting discussion of the Eastern Maroon language practices is
surprising: “some Creoles are described as more or less mono-stylistic (e.g. Belize)” (p. 208). This statement is in direct contradiction with the chapters presented above—all documenting extensive stylistic variation. Furthermore, the reference to Belize as monostylistic is particularly shocking to this reviewer, who personally and extensively documented the broad stylistic variability available to practically all members of the Belizean community of Placencia, and the social and pragmatic values associated with the various lects.

Janina Fenigsen’s “‘Flying at Half-mast’? Voices, Genres, and Orthographies in Barbadian Creole” presents an ideological framework on the orthographical representations of Creole identity which is drastically different from the approaches adopted in other chapters. Considering that literacy is traditionally associated with the Standard (dominant) variety, it is not surprising that written approximations of Bajan speech be met with critical reactions, and only evoke cartoonish parody, thus reflecting negative attitudes obviously inherited from colonization. The debate about creole writing is ongoing in most Caribbean societies, and it is clear that Barbadian writers (as elsewhere) are faced with serious challenges when trying to represent local identity through language, but it is hoped that they will eventually persuade their readership.

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