Book Reviews

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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):