Marking the Past and the Present in Bequia

Miriam Meyerhoff (University of Edinburgh), James Walker (York University) & Agata Daleszynska (University of Edinburgh)

Creole studies have used correlations between forms as diagnostic of a speaker’s position in the creole continuum (Bickerton 1975, Sebba 1997), with co-occurring forms treated as implying relationships between disparate components of the grammar (Rickford 2002). Correlational statements are less common in variationist studies, presumably because they oversimplify the speaker’s repertoire and the nature of the speech community. However, we argue that correlational statements can be enlightening when constrained to a specific area of the grammar.

This paper focuses on tense marking in Bequia (St Vincent and the Grenadines), considering the relationship between two domains. PAST forms, which mark perfective or imperfective events in the past, include bin, done, BE + V-ing, -ed and bare verbs. PRESENT forms, which mark events relevant to speech time, include -s, BE + V-ing and bare verbs. We examine the speech of 62 Bequians from three communities identified in previous research (Daleszynska 2008; Meyerhoff & Walker 2007; Walker & Sidnell in press) as characterised by different linguistic norms: Hamilton, Mt Pleasant and Southside.

Bare verb forms predominate in both PAST and PRESENT in all communities, but the distribution of other forms demonstrates the existence of clearly different grammatical systems. As in other studies, Hamilton features a system reminiscent of mesolectal Caribbean creoles (Winford 1993), while Mt Pleasant features a system similar to nonstandard (and noncreole) varieties of English (Kortmann & Szmrecsanyi 2004). Although Southside might be generalized as ‘in-between’ Hamilton and Mt Pleasant, this study supports recent work finding systematic differences between speakers from the Southside villages of La Pompe and Paget Farm (Meyerhoff & Walker 2008). The linguistic performance of ‘in-betweens’ is often minimized (cf. Eckert 2000, Patrick 1999), but a close examination of tense marking in speakers from Southside goes some way to recuperating the status of such speakers.

References


