Do common donor dialects result in similar trajectories of development?
A comparison of Newfoundland and Outer Banks Englishes

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While dialect comparisons are relatively common in sociolinguistics, many of these studies focus on dialects in contact situations or dialects that are geographically proximate to one another. There are fewer studies that compare dialects in non-contact situations (e.g. Fox 1974, Savitt 1975, Pergman 2002, Jones & Tagliamonte 2004, Howe 2006, Comeau 2008) despite the insights such an exercise might offer. Using an age-stratified sample (N=24), this paper examines one phonological and one morphosyntactic variable in two geographically distant, post-insular communities – Petty Harbour, Newfoundland, and Ocracoke, North Carolina – that have similar input varieties and histories of isolation, but differing levels of sociolinguistic vitality: Ocracoke English (OE) is endangered (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1995), Newfoundland English (NE) less so (Clarke 2006).

The phonological variable /aj/ (N=2,187) has been documented extensively in both regions; these dialects share an iconic backed, raised variant, found in words such as fight and wife (NE) and high tide (OE) (e.g. Craig 1994; Lanari 1994; Schilling-Estes 1996; Wolfram, Hazen & Schilling-Estes 1999; Newhook 2002; Clarke 2004b; Harris 2006). Multivariate analysis indicates that both Ocracoke and Petty Harbour are moving away from this socially salient variant and towards less salient but still nonstandard alternatives.

Negation, the morphosyntactic variable, has not been examined in as great detail in either area. Previous research on OE focuses on the regularization of past tense be (Schilling-Estes & Wolfram 1994; Wolfram, Hazen & Schilling-Estes 1999) while research on NE has been primarily descriptive (Noseworthy 1971, Clarke 2004a, Harris 2006). Contrary to the patterns exhibited with the phonological variable, these communities are not following the same trajectory with negation (N=1,788); instead, Petty Harbour English has retained some relic features while OE displays unexpected distribution according to the social variables considered.