

“You feel good knowing that you are a Bequian.” Language variation and identity on Bequia

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The paper addresses the relationship between linguistic variation and identity in the Caribbean community on Bequia Island (St. Vincent and the Grenadines). Despite its small size (7 square miles), Bequia is characterized by a high rate of linguistic variation. Quantitative analysis of linguistic variation supported by qualitative study of speakers' attitudes leads to a hypothesis that language variation is an index of communal identity on Bequia.

The study is based on the corpus of older Bequians (aged 45-100) collected by Walker, Meyerhoff and Sidnell (2005). Previous research shows that certain linguistic forms are distributed differently in three villages on Bequia. Analysis of copula presence/absence, existential constructions and negation (Walker and Meyerhoff 2006, Meyerhoff and Walker 2007, Walker and Sidnell Forthcoming) confirmed these observations and highlighted Mount Pleasant and Hamilton as two most linguistically divergent villages. This result is particularly interesting in the light of the distinctive socio-historical development of these villages. Inhabitants of Mount Pleasant are most probably descendants of the white colonizers who came to Bequia mainly from Scotland and Ireland (Price 1988). The European roots are subject to comments and commentaries of today's inhabitants of Mount Pleasant and might be considered an important marker of their local identities. Hamilton, on the other hand is a former plantation and therefore its inhabitants are of African descent (Price 1988). Interestingly, this ethnic diversification might be the reason why the two villages represent two different linguistic patterns: Hamilton grammar shows a majority of forms defined as creole (Bickerton 1975, Rickford 1988), while in Mount Pleasant the grammar resembles non-standard English.

The paper focuses on variation within the past tense system in the two villages. As a variable, the past tense is particularly interesting as it differentiates creoles most visibly from other non-creole varieties (Hackert 2004). The rate of variation was analysed using the variable rule programme Goldvarb X (Sankoff et. al 2005). The results highlight the competition in the two villages between forms which are classified as creole-like in other discussions of TMA (tense, mood, aspect) systems in the Caribbean and the (non)standard English forms (Winford 1993, Patrick 1999, Hackert 2004). The former include the preverbal markers *bin*, *did* while the latter comprise bare stem forms of the verb (“I leave up there, come back home, go sailing, you know”) or copula absence (“...and me and she \emptyset there in the road there, sit down speaking”).

The stable rate of variation between the villages might serve as an evidence for the existence of strong local identities among the Bequians. Despite the close proximity of the villages the speakers display overt loyalties towards their varieties which suggests that language on Bequia indexes local identity. The paper offers a detailed outlook on a complex relationship between linguistic practices and local identities in a small speech community. This relationship leads to a more general conclusion that a focus on speakers identities is an essential factor in examining linguistic variation.

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