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What past tense marking on Croker Island can tell us about variation and change in English more generally

This talk investigates past tense marking in English on Croker Island, Northern Territory, Australia. We show that despite a high degree of individual variability, the occurrence or non-occurrence of a past-marked verb there is subject to conditioning factors that are known from other varieties of English – and, in some cases, other languages. This suggests that the specifics of contact influence may be less relevant to explaining the workings of variable linguistic processes such as past tense marking in postcolonial Englishes than more general cognitive and pragmatic principles of language variation and change. It also has implications for the debate about the uniqueness of creole languages, which have often been considered a language type like no other.

English on Croker Island, Northern Territory, Australia, is interesting for at least two reasons. First, it shows extreme variability so that it cannot be seen as a homogenous variety. This situation raises significant questions about functioning communication in the community and the acquisition of English. It also sheds further light on the process of indigenisation. Although English is acquired as an L1 by all speakers on Croker Island, it has not undergone other steps that are usually associated with indigenisation (see e.g. Schneider 2007), especially the reduction of variation and the adoption of English as the main language of community communication and as a means to express Indigenous identity. Second, English on Croker Island has been shaped by language contact but in a highly complex way due to the multilingual ecology and a longstanding and variable contact situation. Consequently, it is not always the case that expected linguistic outcomes of language contact can be diagnosed with sufficient certainty. Nonetheless, there are demonstrable cases in which the local Indigenous languages have left traces in English on Croker Island.

The data for this talk were collected over a period of six years, sampling over 10% of the island population (age range 7–78, mean: 36.2, standard deviation: 23.7). They comprise 40 semi-structured interviews (total of 40,710 words), experimental data, as well as elicitation (see Mailhammer 2021: 14 for further details). We coded and analysed ca. 1,400 tokens of past tense marking using a

multivariate approach. Apart from stylistic and social factors such as years of schooling in English and the random variables of individual speaker and lexical item, the following linguistic constraints were found to influence the occurrence or non-occurrence of a past-marked verb: lexical aspect, grammatical aspect, morphological verb type, marker persistence, presence or absence of a temporal adverbial, and, for consonant-final regular verbs, preceding and following phonological environment. The effects of these constraints are entirely in line with what has been found in other studies of variable past marking in varieties of English, including Caribbean English-lexifier creoles (see e.g. Hackert 2004; Hackert 2008), New Englishes (see e.g. Gut 2005; Biewer 2015), and L1 varieties of English in North America and elsewhere (see e.g. Tagliamonte and Temple 2005; Jankowski and Tagliamonte 2022). This has significant ramifications for our understanding of language contact and language variation, especially in the context of postcolonial Englishes and creole studies.

References

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