



2006

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Recommended Citation

Meyerhoff, Miriam and Walker, James A. (2006) "The persistence of grammatical constraints: "Urban sojourners" from Bequia," *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.

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The persistence of grammatical constraints: "Urban sojourners" from Bequia

The Persistence of Grammatical Constraints: “Urban sojourners” from Bequia

Miriam Meyerhoff and James A. Walker

1 Introduction

In this paper, we question the degree to which patterns of structured variability found at the level of the group apply to individuals as well. Although this issue has been discussed by sociolinguists at least since Guy (1980), we believe it is timely to revisit it for at least two reasons.

First, we perceive there to be an increasing trend among sociolinguists to closely examine intra-speaker variation in wholly qualitative terms. This has the (perhaps unintended) consequence of setting up an implied contrast between the qualitative analysis of intra-speaker variation and the quantitative analysis of inter-speaker variation. A consequence of this implied disjunction is to gravely weaken the hypothesis of inherent variability in the grammar, and the fundamental connection between an individual’s linguistic grammar and the grammar of a group.

Second, recent studies examining real-time support for the apparent-time construct (also a cornerstone of variationist work) have established that change in an individual’s linguistic system is certainly possible. However, far from providing counter-evidence to the apparent-time construct, and contra some misleading attempts to paraphrase these findings, the results have uniformly validated the basic premiss of the use of age as a measure of apparent time. As Blondeau, Sankoff and Charity (2003) show, a minority of speakers may significantly alter their speech—what Sankoff (In press) calls *lifespan change*—but since this is always in the direction of the community as a whole, the relationship hypothesised to exist between individual and community grammars by the apparent-time construct remains fundamentally unchanged.

In this paper, we present an analysis of the variable absence of BE across groups and individuals in the English spoken on Bequia (one of the Windward Caribbean islands that is part of St Vincent and the Grenadines).

Following the principles established in our own previous independent work (also outlined in Tagliamonte 2002), we use a detailed quantitative analysis of the constraints on variables to illuminate:

- the coherence of a group grammar;
- the consistency of individuals subsumed within those groups; and
- the limits that individuals’ long-term contact with other linguistic

varieties apparently has to restructure a grammar.

2 Background and Locus of the Study

Bequia has a stable population of 5000, most of whom are of African descent. Many of the villages on the island are named for and lie on land formerly worked as plantations. One village in the hills is the traditional home of a small community of settlers descended from British (and perhaps Irish) migrants and deportees to the Caribbean in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Our fieldwork has gathered data from five villages summarized in Table 1—the results discussed here come from three: Hamilton, which is predominantly Black and a former plantation; Mt Pleasant, which is predominantly White, and made up of generally affluent households; and Paget Farm, the largest of the former fishing and whaling villages on the south side of the island, ethnically and socio-economically highly mixed.

<i>Community</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Total</i>
Hamilton	8	6	14
Mount Pleasant	9	9	18
Paget Farm	7	6	13
La Pompe	6	6	12
Lower Bay	1	4	5
<i>Total</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>62</i>

Table 1: Outline of the speakers recorded on Bequia (2003-2005). Villages discussed in this paper highlighted in **bold**.

Bequia is very small and there is a lot of contact between residents of different villages; nevertheless, local ideologies of difference are very strong. Paget Farm and Mt Pleasant are most often identified as having distinctive accents or ways of talking, though residents' metalinguistic resources for describing these differences are very limited. Some people identify features of pronunciation, but the biggest differences between villages may exist in the more evanescent domain of morphosyntax, a level of linguistic structure Labov (1993; Labov et al. 2005) has argued is unavailable to the "sociolinguistic monitor".

Contact between speakers of different communities on the island for about two hundred years has led to a situation today where, even if the situation was originally one of contact between wholly distinct varieties, there has been superficial convergence. Speakers in all three communities draw on the same variants for the copula: full forms, contracted forms and absence. After

exploring different ways of organizing the data for statistical analysis, we found that the most appropriate opposition in the three villages sampled was to contrast BE absence with full and contracted forms.

2.1 Constraints on the Absence of BE

The variable absence of BE is a well-known feature of English-based creoles and has figured prominently in the debate over the origins of African American English (Walker 2000). Studies of BE have been used to argue for or against a creole origin for African-American English, with most attention focussed on the effects of the following grammatical category. This follows Labov's (1969) work on African-American English, which showed the hierarchy in (1), where the leftmost following grammatical categories favor absence of BE most:

- (1) *gonna* > Verb-*ing* > adjective/locative > NP

We extracted the first two hundred consecutive copula contexts in present-tense finite clauses from interviews with 18 residents living in the three villages sampled in this study. (We also extracted negatives, questions and past tense clauses, but do not include these results here, since they do not add significant data to the analysis.)

For each token, we noted whether BE occurred in its full, contracted or zero form, as well as coding for other factors observed to constrain absence of BE in previous studies.

We distinguished grammatical person and number between 1st person singular, 3rd person singular, and other, as shown in (2).

- (2) a. I'm seventy and odd now. (M104:41.32)
 b. Now he's twenty one. (H005:145)
 c. They \emptyset just gonna put you in the coffin. (P024:363)

The results discussed below are for 3rd singular contexts only, to maximize the comparability of our analysis with previous studies.

We also combined subject type and preceding phonological segment, as pronouns, vowel-final NPs, and consonant-final NPs, as shown in (3).

- (3) a. Where you \emptyset putting your hand over there. (M104:18.48)
 b. All games them play *is* with boyfriend. (H001:108)

- c. They say the Seven Days Church *is* the best church. (P019:280)

For the following grammatical category, we made a finer distinction than is usual in studies of BE. Specifically, we split the category of following locatives to reflect the very different syntactic forms that they may take, distinguishing following PPs, which may or may not be locatives and are structurally complex (*at (the) market; in a mess*), from other locative AdvS (*home; there*). The full range of following grammatical categories is shown in (4).

- (4) a. *gon(na)*

But I \emptyset gon tell you something, too. (M104:52.23)

- b. *V-ing*

Some *are* chopping, some *are* planting, each to their command.
(H005:596-7)

- c. Adjective Phrase

You know, he *is* more stable-minded, because he *'s* older.
(M109:5.22)

- d. Prepositional Phrase

Yeah, we \emptyset in the other one. (M102:58.11)

- e. Locative Adverb

Where you see that shop *deh* there. (H001:738)

- f. Noun Phrase

Bequia *'s* a healthy place. (P034:155)

2.2 Modelling the Absence of BE

A perennial question in the analysis of BE absence is how to model the variation (Rickford et al. 1991). Absence may be viewed as an extension of contraction (Labov Contraction and Deletion), it may be a process independent of contraction (Straight Contraction and Deletion), or it may be a state before insertion of a copula, which then feeds contraction (Insertion and

Romaine Contraction). Following Rickford et al. (1991), we acknowledge that analysts must choose the best model for use with their data, but in addition, we would argue, as we have in our previous independent work on variation (Meyerhoff 2000, Walker 2000), that this decision is most appropriately made on the basis of *empirical* and *statistical* facts, rather than *theoretical* assumptions.

Accordingly, we followed the procedure outlined by Sankoff and Rousseau (1989), and analyzed the data for each community, comparing the statistical fit for all three possible methods of calculation. As indicated in Table 3, Insertion and Romaine Contraction provide a better fit than any of the other methods for Hamilton and Paget Farm. This suggests that the varieties spoken here contain no underlying BE (in at least some contexts, a point we will clarify shortly). However, Labov Contraction and Deletion provides a better fit than the other models for the Mt Pleasant data, suggesting that here BE absence is an extension of the more general process of contraction.

In sum, the underlying grammatical system giving rise to the variation is different in the three communities.

2.3 Results of Variable Rule Analysis of BE Absence

All the factors were analysed together with the multiple regression feature of GoldVarb, and the results for the different runs are shown in Table 2. The model providing the best statistical fit to each village data set is given below its name. There are three important things to notice in this table.

First, in all three villages there is a marked difference between BE as a verbal auxiliary, and BE as a copula: tokens of BE with following predicates massively favor null realizations; copular uses of BE favor overt realization.

Second, there is a qualitative difference between the villages in how adjectives are treated. In Hamilton and Paget Farm, adjectives are treated more like verbal constituents, while in Mt Pleasant adjectives are treated like non-predicate constituents. Since English adjectives are well-known to have both [+V] and [+N] properties, this result should not surprise us. In a sense, adjectives can be treated either way (why speakers might choose to treat them one way or another is undoubtedly interesting for contact linguistics, but it is a question that takes us beyond the scope of this paper).

Third, Hamilton speakers show the clearest effect for Subject Type and Preceding Segment. As we saw for the effect of following grammatical category, there seems to be a sense in which the variety spoken in Hamilton is different from the other villages.

	HAMILTON (Ø vs. F+C)			MT PLEASANT (Ø vs. C)			PAGET FARM (Ø vs. F+C)		
Total N:	587			469			376		
Input (p ⁰):	.287			.351			.117		
	%	N		%	N		%	N	
Following grammatical category									
<i>gonna</i>	KO	100	7	.89	82	22	KO	100	6
Verb-ing	.93	84	67	.86	77	111	.93	65	20
Adjective	.71	47	161	.51	38	121	.74	28	101
PP	.49	27	37	.64	50	34	.46	10	20
NP	.25	12	228	.13	8	147	.29	5	179
Locative adverb	.09	4	26	KO	0	3	.68	22	9
Subject type + preceding segment									
NP, Vowel	.68	47	51	.50	60	10	□	20	54
Pronoun	.56	37	219	.48	40	356	□	19	182
NP, Consonant	.42	25	283	.56	31	101	□	14	136

Table 2: Varbrul analysis of the linguistic constraints on BE absence in three villages on Bequia. Factors favoring absence of BE highlighted in bold.

The most striking finding is the point at which each community makes a cut between auxiliary and copula uses of BE. Since this represents both a quantitative and a qualitative distinction between group grammars, we would argue that it is precisely here that we are most interested in the behaviour of individuals.

The crucial question drawing together the issues we outlined at the beginning is whether the patterns of variation that collectively define a group grammar are replicated in the performance of individuals. A particular challenge for this study is whether these patterns are even replicated in the speech of individuals who sound more like speakers of Standard English than like speakers of the Bequian vernacular. These are the speakers we have dubbed the “urban sojourners”, and we outline the issues associated with them in the next section.

3 Urban Sojourners in the Bequia Corpus

As a matter of principle, all the speakers in our sample were over 40 years old and had been born and raised on Bequia. However, there is a tradition on the island, especially among men, of travelling abroad in adulthood to find work. Some of these people end up in cities in the UK or Canada before re-

turning to Bequia, and for this reason we have dubbed them “urban sojourners”. Their residence in an overseas city exposes them to more standard varieties of English, and in the recordings from our corpus, they clearly sound more “Standard” than their stay-at-home peers. Contact with urban varieties of English at the very least adds to the stylistic repertoire of these urban sojourners, enabling them to sound quite Standard English-like when undertaking a tape-recorded interview (we make no claims one way or the other about the extent to which their more Standard-like interview style carries over into other verbal interaction).

3.1 The Sociolinguistic Significance of the Urban Sojourners

This raises an important question for our study of linguistic variation in Bequia. How extensively does contact with more Standard varieties of English impact on the linguistic system of these speakers?

If urban sojourners (can) *sound* much more Standard-like than their stay-at-home peers, even several decades after returning, is it reasonable to examine them along with the people who have not left their home villages on Bequia? Has contact with another variety of English substantially restructured the grammar of these urban sojourners?

An examination of our speakers’ histories, as it emerged during their interviews, revealed that our corpus coincidentally includes at least one person from each village who falls into the category of urban sojourner. This enables us to attempt to answer these questions in a systematic way.

3.2 The Persistence of Constraints among Urban Sojourners

We undertook separate analyses of the copula for each speaker in our sample. The overall rate of BE absence varies among speakers, even within a community, from highs of as much as 50% and lows of 8% absence. Since multivariate analysis (directly comparable to the group) is not possible with individuals because of the sometimes small number of tokens in each category per speaker, in order to make inter-individual comparisons, we have to examine the distribution of the variable across different following grammatical categories in percentages.

Unfortunately, percentages with small numbers of tokens show considerable fluctuation between individuals. However, across individuals the patterns are very similar for the effect of each following grammatical category *relative to all other categories*.

Given the auditory distinctiveness of the urban sojourners, we expected to find that time spent away had led to a similarly appreciable reanalysis of their grammatical system. In particular, we expected this to be the case with

BE absence, since this variant is entirely lacking in the urban varieties of English with which they would have been in contact. However, to our surprise, the situation is not so clear. The rate of BE absence in the speech of each of the urban sojourners falls within the group norms for their stay-at-home peers. The lack of evidence for any substantial reanalysis in the urban sojourners' distribution of BE absence can be seen in the following figures. Figures 1-3 show the patterns for all three villages, with the urban sojourner in each village highlighted with a dashed line.

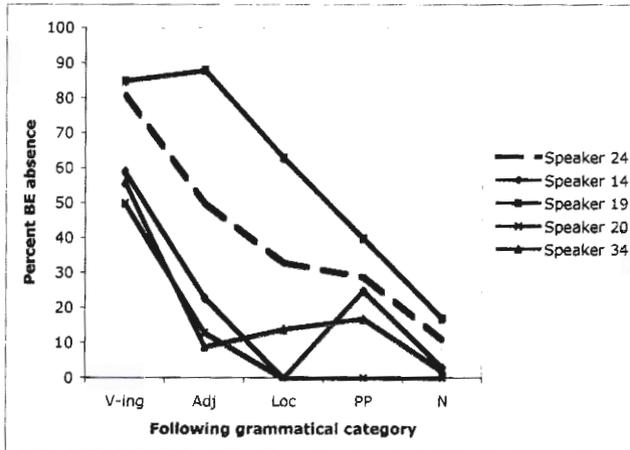


Figure 1. Paget Farm speakers, percentage absence of BE according to following grammatical category. Urban sojourner shown with dashed line.

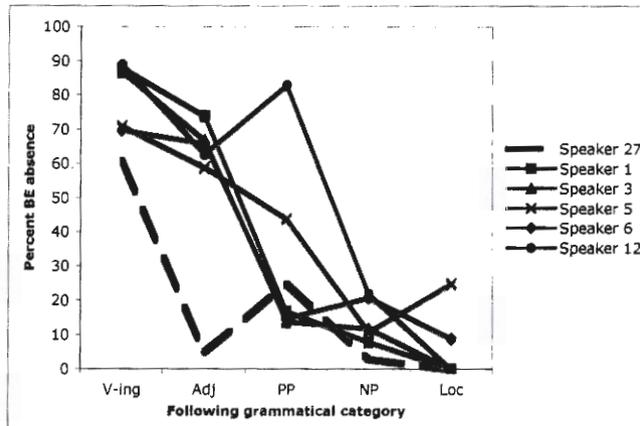


Figure 2: Hamilton speakers, percentage absence of BE according to following grammatical category. Urban sojourner shown with dashed line.

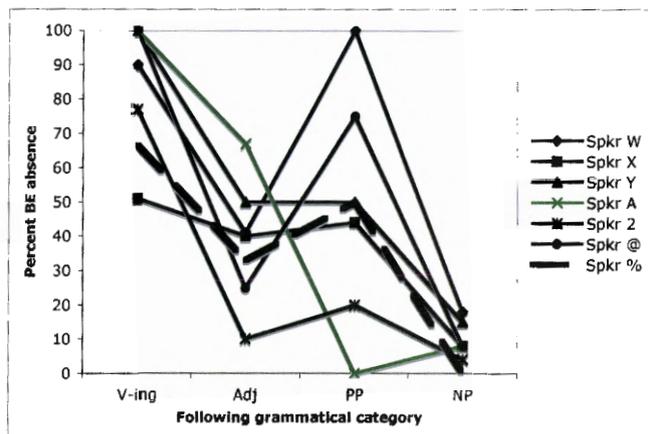


Figure 3: Mt Pleasant speakers, percentage absence of BE according to following grammatical category. Urban sojourner shown with dashed line.

However, we can remedy some of the confusion introduced by comparing percentage frequencies. Figures 4-6 plot the same data in Figures 1-3, but here we have plotted the mean of the percentages for all the stay-at-home peers and shown it as a polynomial trend. We have then transformed the urban sojourner's scores in the same way. This smooths out and abstracts away from some of the extremes of the inter-and intra-individual variability. It enables us us to focus more closely on the relative patterns of BE absence in the speech of each urban sojourner and their stay-at-home peers in the three villages. Most importantly, it allows us to see how the urban sojourners are treating following adjectives, which we have argued are criterial in defining each community's grammar.

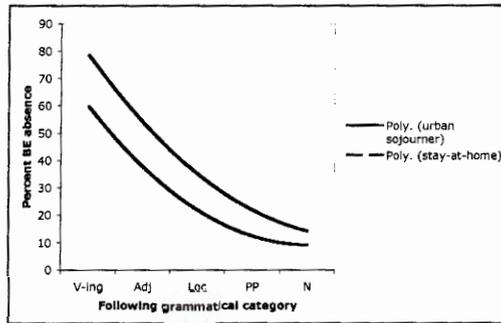


Figure 4: Paget Farm speakers, percent BE absence as polynomial trend lines. Urban sojourner (dashed) compared with stay-at-home peers (solid).

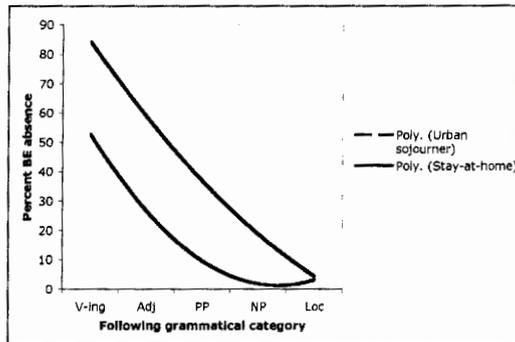


Figure 5: Hamilton speakers, percent BE absence as polynomial trend lines. Urban sojourner (dashed) compared with stay-at-home peers (solid).

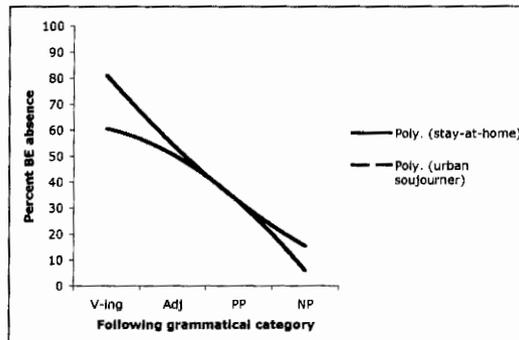


Figure 6: Mt Pleasant speakers, percent BE absence as polynomial trend lines. Urban sojourner (dashed) compared with stay-at-home peers (solid).

In Paget Farm (Figure 4) the parallel between the urban sojourner and her stay-at-home peers is astonishing, and in Mt Pleasant (Figure 6) the urban sojourner also tracks the rest of the community quite closely. In Hamilton (Figure 5), the comparison between the urban sojourner and the rest of the community is complicated by the very small number of tokens we have for the urban sojourner with some following grammatical categories. Unfortunately, this is particularly acute with following adjectives (where we would like to have the most detail). Given these problems with the distribution of tokens in this particular person's interview, the smoothing associated with the transformation to a polynomial trend becomes particularly helpful. In Figure 5 we can see clearly that the urban sojourner's rate of BE absence is much lower than that of the rest of the Hamilton speakers, but even so, the slope of the line tracking the trend across different following grammatical categories seems to us to be comparatively similar to the slope for his stay-at-home peers.

3.3 Theoretical Importance of Data from Urban Sojourners

Although these results do not provide the kind of real-time evidence that contributes directly to questions about the validity or appropriateness of the apparent time construct in sociolinguistics, they nevertheless indicate the persistence of fundamental features of the linguistic system over time and despite sometimes extensive contact with varieties that are radically different from the speaker's own vernacular. To this extent, we suggest that it complements work directly investigating the potential for lifespan change (Blondeau et al. 2003, Sankoff and Wagner 2005). Research on real-time change in phonological variation suggests that the extent to which lifespan change may or may not be possible depends on the level of awareness of the variable in the speech community at large (i.e. whether it passes through the sociolinguistic monitor).

As we have noted, the variable examined here is not available to speakers on Bequia for metalinguistic comment (though we have found that Bequians readily acknowledge the stylistic salience of BE absence when this variable is made explicit to them).

Consequently, the Bequia data on BE absence and the persistence of community constraints in the speech of urban sojourners seem to provide additional support for the emerging notion that lifespan change is most likely only with variables that are associated with relatively robust social indices or quite high levels of social awareness.

4 Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

We have examined the distribution of one variant across three village communities in Bequia, considering the extent to which individual patterns of variation are similar to the patterns for the community at large.

We have seen that this morphosyntactic variable does not seem to be an aspect of the grammar that fundamentally distinguishes the villages on Bequia—even the perceptually salient villages of Paget Farm and Mt Pleasant. All villages draw to a greater or lesser extent on BE absence.

We have found the use of multivariate analysis to be helpful in:

- establishing differences between systems; and
- establishing shared grammars across individuals.

We have also demonstrated with the latter that urban sojourners, who may sound very different from their stay-at-home peers in the village, have not radically restructured their grammars. This may be because the variation associated with BE lies below the sociolinguistic monitor.

Our close analysis of the urban sojourners raises a further set of interesting questions. These include the impact of an individual's social networks on their long-term speech patterns. For example, is the impact of an urban sojourn likely to be different if the individual is able to tap into relatively dense social networks of speakers of Caribbean English while s/he is overseas? Is a relatively dense social network before leaving home an important precondition for speakers' structural stability over time? Does a low level of speaker awareness of a variable matter predict minimal restructuring of a variable? Are all morphosyntactic variables equally resistant to (contact-induced) restructuring regardless of levels of speaker awareness?

Our study was not designed to probe these issues directly. Indeed, we are fortunate that our corpus happened to include urban sojourners from all three of the more (socio)linguistically salient villages on Bequia, and that we were able to undertake this level of analysis at all. However, it is clear that these types of speakers provide descriptive challenges for sociolinguists and that they also have the potential to contribute meaningfully to the expansion of sociolinguistic theory.

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