Abstracts

Vernacular universality, allomorphic simplification and language contact: the regularisation of hiatus avoidance strategies in English non-standard accents.

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Linguistic continuum from vernacular to standard

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The theory of Vernacular Roots begins with the obvious but hitherto unexploited observation that dialects become more complex as they become more standard or literary. The continuum from vernacular to standard has structurally definable layers of increasing structure-dependent grammatical devices and articulated phonological contrasts.

One of the fundamental tenets is that structure-dependent grammatical devices carry cognitive cost. This notion has so far been treated as if it were an axiom. For example, the principle driving conjugation regularization (“Make past tense and past participle the same”) reduces strong forms, and strong forms must be memorized rather than generated, potentially creating “cognitive overload” (Pinker and Prince’s term). Though cognitive cost appeals to common sense, it is merely an assumption. I demonstrate that it has empirical content by looking at the typological limits of one form of structure-dependent grammatical processing. For Subject-Verb agreement, I have shown that sociolects add variable number agreement hierarchically according to a universal (English) progression based on person of subjects. In standard English varieties the progression never attains categoricity because of variable Subject-Verb agreement with expletive there. Now it appears that the kind of look-back mechanism required by Subject-Verb agreement with expletives taxes the language faculty to its limits. Evidence comes from two sources. First, VSO languages, in which Subject-Verb agreement is necessarily a look-back mechanism, show a greater than chance tendency to have no Subject-Verb agreement rules (Keenan’s principle, which I illustrate from Niuean).
Second, languages that have agreement with postverbal subjects make grammatical compromises by agreeing with left conjunct only in conjoined subjects (which I illustrate from Biblical Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish, Greek and English). Variability is expected, perhaps inevitable, in look-back processes.

Another fundamental tenet is that there are layers of grammatical complexity between the basilect, that is, the most casual, colloquial, uncodified vernacular dialects, and the acrolect. There is a tendency to assume that the basilect is in some undefined sense more natural, presumably because its grammar and phonology are predominantly primitive rather than learned (in the sense of Chambers 2003: 271-2), but the layers of complexity also have a claim on naturalness in as much as many structure-dependent grammatical devices and articulated phonological contrasts evince cross-language similarities. It seems reasonable, then, that grammatical concord and phonological dissimilations and other standardizing tendencies are determined by the language faculty. One methodological approach in the search for Vernacular Roots proceeds by isolating structured layers between the vernacular and the standard. As a case in point, I compare hierarchical grammars for sentence negation in English dialects in the continuum from vernacular multiple negation to standard single-negation. Cross-dialect comparison shows that there appear to be four or perhaps five well-defined structural layers in the sociolectal hierarchy. Linguistically, the structural layers bear typological resemblances to grammars of negation in other languages. Shearing off complexities can provide insight into the Vernacular Roots that underlie all human language systems and thereby provide a window into the default forms in the language faculty.

Irish daughters of northern British relatives: internal and external constraints on the system of relativization in South Armagh English (SArE)

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The focus of this contribution will be on variability in the sociolinguistic conditioning of relative marking strategies used by speakers of a language contact English vernacular spoken in South Armagh, Northern Ireland (SArE). The quantitative evidence for variation in the system of relativization within this community is compared with substantive findings from recent research on northern British Englishes by Beal (2004), Beal & Corrigan (2002), (2005) and Tagliamonte et al. (2005). This is an important objective since South Armagh was originally settled by speakers of relic forms of these dialects. As such, while one would not necessarily predict congruity with respect to social constraints across the varieties, one might expect certain generalities regarding the linguistic constraints curtailing the variation. This is because, in very general terms, the use of a relativization strategy of any kind is an attempt to minimize potential ambiguity between root and embedded clauses (Adamson 2002, Hakes &
Cairns 1970, Jaeger 2005 and Temperley 2003). Natural languages have variously solved this problem, though I will argue in this paper that there is a universality in the types of strategy available and in the ways in which specific strategies are internally constrained.

In addition, due attention will be paid to the dynamics of relativization in Ulster Irish (Adger & Ramchand 2005, Hughes 1994, Neilson 1808/1990 and Ó Siadhail 1984, 1989). This is because it acted as the substrate during the initial bilingual phase arising from the linguistic contact induced in County Armagh by the Jacobean Plantation. Irish may, therefore, have imposed restructuring effects on the Northern British superstrates from which the modern SArE vernacular descends. Such an outcome is not without precedent, as Mesthrie (1987), (1991) and (1992: 75), for instance, has previously claimed that South African Indian English ekes out its range of relative postmodification by incorporating correlative, participial and “prenominal external” strategies inherited from the Indic and Dravidian substrates. Given that certain other Irish-English constructions have been demonstrated elsewhere to be the result of this type of language transfer (Filppula 1999 *inter alia*), the paper will outline what the Ulster Irish possibilities are and then assess the degree to which these differ from SArE and the Northern British superstrates.

Harris (1993), Finlay (1988, 1994) and Policansky (1982) give preliminary accounts of aspects of relativization in Northern Irish-English from a largely synchronic, sociolinguistic perspective. Tagliamonte et al. (2005) provide a similar treatment of two rural communities of North Eastern Ulster, although they also add a diachronic dimension. Crucially, their research recognises the importance of attending to internal constraints on the variation observed and, as such, shares the orientation of attempts to use the generative framework to account for Irish-English ‘zero relativization’ (see Corrigan 1997, Doherty 1993 and Henry 1995). The present paper differs from all of these since the relative system of SArE in its entirety is to be reviewed and consideration will be given to: (i) the origin and diachrony of particular strategies within a universalist framework and (ii) synchronic language-internal/-external variation and change.

References:


Neilson, W. 1843, An Introduction to the Irish Language in Three Parts (3rd. ed. published in 1990 in Belfast by The Ulster Trust with a foreword by Ruairí Ó Bléine).


In the course of our studies on regional varieties of English spoken in the British Isles and Ireland, we have encountered a number of morpho-syntactic features which are either unattested or rare in mainstream, supra-regional British English (Filppula 1999, 2006; Klemola 1996, 2002; Paulasto 2006; Pitkänen 2003). Some of these features are shared by all of the mentioned regional varieties, while others are mainly found in the Celtic regions. As shown in Kortmann et al. (2004), the use of these features is often not restricted to the British Isles and Ireland, but they also occur in many extra-territorial varieties of English. The question of whether these features should be ascribed to universal tendencies in vernaculars (cf. Chambers 2004), to contact effects from regional substratum languages, or to other factors, is of obvious interest in determining their status.

We suggest that vernacular universals and contact-induced patterns form a continuum: at one end are universal features where the case for contact is weak. At the other end are features where the role of language contact is uncontested. It is also possible that in vernacular Englishes with language contact backgrounds, there are morpho-syntactic patterns that exhibit characteristics of both, combining universal and language contact influences to varying extents.

In this paper, the continuum is illustrated through five vernacular features of English: 1) plural marking of nouns of measurement, 2) definite article usage, 3) stative and habitual uses of the progressive form, 4) the so-called after-perfect, and 5) failure of negative attraction with non-assertive pronouns:

(1a) That’d be between three and four mile (EngE, SED: Y24: CM);
(1b) she has to clear all of them in five year (ICE India: S1A-070);

(2a) America is a better country in that line of the labouring (IrE, Kerry: D.B.);
(2b) in Canada people don’t care about going to the church (ICE East Africa: S1A-016);

(3a) they were wanting to blast again a Friday (EngE, SED: Nb9: GS);
(3b) the school was breaking down in the summer (WE, SAWD: Clwyd 1: 5);

(4) I was after buyin’ a load of strawberries (IrE, Dublin: M.L.);

(5) Now anything is no sin (IrE, Kerry: M.C.)
We propose that the first of these features represents a case of vernacular universal influence, while the second and third features can be explained in terms of both factors. The last two are features which can confidently be ascribed to contact influences. In support of this account, the uses of these constructions will be examined in a wide variety of corpora, ranging from the traditional English dialects via the Celtic-influenced varieties of English to some extra-territorial Englishes.

References:

The case of Bungi: evidence for vernacular universals

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The Bungi dialect arose in the mid eighteenth century along trade routes south of Hudson Bay in what is now the Canadian province of Manitoba. This English vernacular resulted from contact and intermarriage between Scots English speaking Hudson Bay Company traders and the indigenous Cree. Over the years, Bungi had little, if any, contact with standard Canadian English, as the speakers were both socially and geographically isolated from mainstream Canadian culture. Bungi continued to be spoken into the twentieth century; a few of the remaining elderly speakers were interviewed in 1989 (Blain).
Because of its isolation and unique roots, Bungi is an excellent test case for the theory of vernacular universals. There are sufficient Bungi data for research of this kind: in addition to the interview transcripts (Blain 1989), there are stories collected by Walters (1993), one of which was phonetically transcribed by Blain, plus stories and quotes found in Scott and Mulligan (1951) and Stobie (1968, 1971).

This paper is in two parts. The first section presents evidence that four traits that have been identified as vernacular universals by Chambers (2003, 2004) are found frequently in Bungi. The four traits discussed are: alveolar substitution in final unstressed –ing, subject-verb nonconcord, final consonant cluster simplification and final obstruent devoicing. The presence of these traits in Bungi, as well as in such distant and distinct vernaculars as Newfoundland English (Clarke) and African Nova Scotian English (Poplack and Tagliamonti) provides strong support for the theory of vernacular universals.

The second section of the paper discusses ways in which the theory of vernacular universals can provide fresh insights into the Bungi dialect. Dialect characteristics that have previously been attributed to language contact or have gone unexplained, can be accounted for through this approach. For example, final devoicing has been noted as characteristic of Bungi by Stobie (1971) and Blain (1989); both authors attribute this trait to language contact. I argue, however, that the theory of vernacular universals provides a better explanation for final devoicing in Bungi than does language contact.

Two other characteristics of Bungi are analyzed from this approach. The first is the widened use of the pronoun he, used for he, she and corporate bodies. As with final devoicing, this trait has been attributed to language contact (Stobie 1971, Blain 1989). I argue that paradigm simplification, an extension of the theory of vernacular universals (Chambers 2005), provides a good analysis of the data. The other characteristic discussed is the construction I'm got, as in I'm got to get back home and I'm got no boat. No theory has been advanced to date for the origin of this construction; again, vernacular universals account well for the simplification in auxiliary usage that is observed in the Bungi data.

The Bungi dialect therefore provides an excellent case study for the existence of vernacular universals as well as for a debate of the relative merits of the theory of language contact and the theory of vernacular universals.

References:
Some offspring of Colonial English are creole

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This paper is simply a bold statement of some the implications of my position in *The ecology of language evolution* (CUP, 2001) that creoles have developed by the same restructuring processes that account for the evolution of other languages and they are reminding us of almost everything that went wrong in the traditional diachronic accounts of the other languages. One of these reminders is that contact has always been a critical factor, provided it is situated at the idiolectal level, where the forces that drive language change operate. In multilingual communities or exogenous settings where a language has been appropriated as a lingua franca by a critical mass of nonnative speakers, at least at some stage of its evolution, xenolectal idiolects are also an important part of the feature pool. I cannot think of any case in the history of Indo-European languages, or of any other language family, when language and/or dialect contact was not a catalyst for language change, including language speciation. The distinction between creoles and non-creole language varieties becomes a sociological one, entrenched in the 19th-century philosophy of language purity, a correlate of race purity, which applied even to European populations in North America. Once we cast the evolutionary trajectories of modern language varieties correctly, from the perspective of my discussion, all misguided structural arguments in support of the distinction between creole and non-creole varieties collapse. We must simply be honest enough to accept the logical conclusion that creole vernaculars (in my book, those “lexified” by European colonial languages) are among the latest Indo-European vernaculars to have emerged.

Default singulars with existentials in the normative eighteenth century

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My paper is a contribution to the history of English ‘vernacular universals’, features found in modern vernacular varieties of English throughout the world. I will focus on the ideology of grammatical prescriptivism in the 18th century and the impact it might have had on the use of default singulars – term due to Chambers (1995) – in particular the use of *is* and *was* with plural subjects in existential clauses.
My findings on periods before the prescriptive era can be summarized as follows (Nevalainen 2006). First, the use of *was* with plural subjects was a typical northern dialect feature in the 15th and 16th centuries, but not restricted to the north. In the course of the 17th century the pattern declined and levelled dialectally, but continued to be used as a minority variant by the literate social ranks throughout the country. Secondly, in the 15th and 16th centuries, the plural use of *was* was favoured by existential *there* and plain NP subjects, but the subject NP factor ceased to be effective from the late 16th century onwards. That plural existential subjects persisted with *was* is a sign of the robustness of existential *there* as a conditioning factor.

Thirdly, there are only a handful of instances of *was* being triggered by *you* until the latter half of 17th century. Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2002) and Laitinen (forthcoming) support these findings: *you was* began to gain ground towards the end of the 17th century. In combination with singular *you*, *was* gained momentum in the 18th century, picking up in the first half of the century, but receding towards the end of it, presumably under the influence of normative grammar.

My paper will trace the use of default singulars with existentials in the 18th century, known as the age of linguistic prescriptivism in the history of English. In order to establish whether existential *there* continued to be as robust a conditioning factor as in the earlier periods, I will investigate the variation in the number of the verb *be* with plural existentials throughout the 18th century in a corpus of personal letters. Judging by the comments of normative grammarians (Sundby et al. 1991), heightened awareness of this feature can be expected among literate social ranks in the late 18th century. If the history of *you* is anything to go by, this heightened awareness can be expected to have transferred to actual linguistic practices as well.

References:


Laitinen, Mikko (Forthcoming). Development of a vernacular primitive: *YOU WAS/WERE* variation in eighteenth-century English correspondence.


Although the study of substrate influence has often proved controversial, a growing body of research makes clear the existence of reliable methods to verify the reality of such influence. Some discussions of methodology have taken place within the broader field of language contact (e.g., McWhorter 1996), but there have also been a range of methods feasible to use within the narrower field of second language acquisition (SLA). This paper will look especially closely at three methods adopted by SLA researchers since the verifications obtained through these methods have important implications for the study of substrate influence in a wide range of social and historical contexts. The first of these methods, which was developed by Selinker (1969, 1991), requires data from three groups: an NL (native language) group, a TL (target language) group (both of these groups consisting of native speakers of the respective languages), and an IL (interlanguage) group of speakers of the NL acquiring the TL as a second language. Selinker and others have provided evidence of the effectiveness of this approach by showing a significant similarity between the NL and IL groups in distinction to the TL group. The second method, which has been more widely used, also requires three groups but involves two different IL groups having different native languages, where these groups differ from one another and sometimes also from a TL group. One of the most detailed investigations using this method (Ijaz 1986) has shown clear differences in the acquisition of English of spatial constructions by students whose native language is German in contrast to those whose NL is Urdu. The third method requires five groups: as in Ijaz’s approach, there are two different IL groups as well as a TL group, but there are also two NL groups. The most detailed research using this approach has been a comparison by Jarvis (1998) of learners of English in Finland, where many students have Finnish as their NL but where others have Swedish. With this approach, which in effect combines the methods used by Selinker and Ijaz, Jarvis was able to show clear correspondences in motion expressions between the particular NLs and ILs as well as differences between the ILs of the two groups in question. Each of these three methods has its particular advantages and disadvantages, and while they do not exhaust the possibilities for verifying cross-linguistic influence, all three have provided powerful evidence for the reality of such influence. My paper will focus on findings obtained from the second type of method (or variants of the method comparable to what Ijaz used). This approach has been used to verify language transfer for several grammatical structures including definite and indefinite articles, word order, subject pronoun deletion, serial verbs, causative verbs, phrasal verbs, existential constructions, relative clause patterns, inflectional morphology, spatial constructions, expressions of motion, and lexical tone. Implications of such findings for claims about creolization and other language contact situations will also be examined.
How diagnostic are English universals?
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This paper provides a comparative analysis of some selected phonological and morphosyntactic features that are omnipresent in varieties of English around the world. Features such as (ng), the velar nasal in “looking”, word-final consonant cluster reduction (as in Wes’ Coas’ “West Coast”) or multiple negation (“I didn’t go nowhere”) are referred to as “vernacular roots” by Chambers (1995: 242); they are of particular relevance for sociolinguistic theory since they make an appearance in varieties with no apparent socio-historical connections whatsoever:

“Another universal that is becoming established [in sociolinguistic theory] after more than thirty years of empirical research is that certain variables appear to be primitives of vernacular dialects in the sense that they recur ubiquitously all over the world.”

Traditional models of innovation and diffusion are inadequate to explain why these features should make an appearance all over the English-speaking world. The manifestation of “vernacular roots” is consequently of utmost importance for linguistic research; they are at the crossroads of disciplines as distinct as dialect typology, historical and contact linguistics, language acquisition and learning, or language variation and change. Moreover, their diachronic manifestation in the form of attested change mechanisms allows researchers to study historical developments that affected universal features in English and then to link and complete these with insights gained from synchronic analyses.

Generally speaking, the fact that roots are omnipresent means that they have no diagnostic value. Varieties simply cannot be distinguished as to whether they have this feature or not. Nevertheless, the point taken in this paper is that the characteristics of “roots” can be shown to differ between varieties. As a consequence, individual varieties cannot be classified as to whether they have this feature or not, but as to how universal features vary and function. As all language structures, “roots” are subject to variation and change; the question that needs to be raised is what kind of variation they display and how they are conditioned. How do universal features manifest themselves in distinct varieties, how much (and what types of) variation is there and how do variety-specific differences encourage us to rethink the validity of the concept as a whole?

Based on the analysis of two selected universals (consonant cluster reduction and the usage of preterit was in the context of standard were, as in “we was here” or “there was no cars in the garage”), this paper traces some extralinguistic and language-internal parameters of variation in several varieties of English around the world (American, British, South Atlantic, Caribbean, Indian, and New Zealand English). It argues that qualitative and quantitative
differences carry diagnostic value and that these provide insights both for externally-caused language change and for internally-patterned variation as found in English universals; moreover, they are subject to diachronic modification, and this provides important insights for disciplines like English typology, sociolinguistics, contact and cognitive linguistics. Finally, universals are also an important indicator of processes related to the spread and continuing diversification of English as a world language (i.e., reflecting its status as native, second or foreign language).

The interpretation of vernacular data in terms of linguistic universals – problems and perspectives

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Discussing and accounting for vernacular data in terms of linguistic universals has become widespread practice over the past ten or so years and has also led to a renewed interest in linguistic, in particular morpho-syntactic variation. In the context of English varieties scholars have even used the terms ‘vernacular universal’ and ‘angloversal’ thereby suggesting that the variation observed across different varieties of English is governed by fundamentally the same principles. There is widespread agreement that the ‘universalist approach’ is a fruitful alternative to the traditional transfer/retention debate as well as analyses based on feature diffusion.

Nevertheless, the notion of linguistic universals is itself highly heterogeneous and can (at least) be used to describe properties of the so-called language faculty, cross-linguistic regularities, tendencies and connections, processes of grammaticalization, linguistic motivation, processing constraints, regularities of language contact and contact-induced language change as well as various properties of first and second language acquisition such as developmental patterns, learner errors and variability of learner language (i.e. interlanguage properties). Crucially, even while taking the wider social, cultural and historical parameters of a variety into account, a particular datum may be amenable to more than one interpretation in terms of linguistic universals.

In principle it would appear possible that a particular grammatical feature or construction is the result of just one linguistic universal, the scientific challenge being the identification of the correct one. But it is also possible that more than one linguistic universal is at work, either operating at the same time, in succession or possibly even both. To take two examples, the use of masculine and neuter pronouns in the traditional dialects of Southwest England for countable and non-countable referents respectively finds a straightforward explanation in the hierarchy of individuation – a clear case of a typological universal. In contrast, some of the well known peculiarities of Irish English – a typical shift variety of
English – could be the result of principles of (untutored) second language acquisition followed by a process of sifting out those structures that are uneconomical or simply do not fit into the architecture of English.

The above observations give rise to a number of problems and questions which will be addressed in this presentation. First of all, the different notions of linguistic universals will be discussed and explored and their value for variation research will be assessed. Secondly, there is a non-trivial relationship between the type of a variety (shift variety, native dialect, second language learner variety, creole, etc.) and likely (or unlikely) universalist interpretations, which needs to be made precise. It does not seem reasonable to assume that all varieties of English can be explained by the same principles. Thirdly, for some grammatical features of different varieties of English analyses in terms of linguistic universals will be presented. In doing so emphasis will be placed on cases where competing universalist interpretations are possible.

**Vernacular universals and angloversals in a typological perspective**

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Analytically, we can distinguish different reasons why languages, or varieties of a given language, should share one or more linguistic features. Such features may fall into one of the following categories (note that on every level, a further distinction can be made between unrestricted, statistical, and implicational versals):

(i) GENUINE UNIVERSALS (e.g., all languages have vowels);
(ii) TYPOVERSALS, i.e. features that are common to languages of a specific typological type (e.g., SOV languages tend to have postpositions);
(iii) PHYLOVERSALS, i.e. features that are shared by a family of genetically related languages (e.g., languages belonging to the Indoeuropean language family distinguish masculine and feminine gender);
(iv) RAMOVERSALS, i.e. features that are common to a specific branch of a language family (e.g., Germanic languages are V2);
(v) AREOVERSALS, i.e. features common in languages which are in geographical proximity (e.g. languages belonging to the Balkan sprachbund have analytic future markers);
(vi) VERNACULAR UNIVERSALS, i.e. features that are common to spoken vernaculars (e.g., spoken vernaculars tend to have double negation);
(vii) features that tend to recur in vernacular varieties of a specific language: ANGLOVERSALS, FRANCOVERSALS, etc. (e.g., in English vernaculars, adverbs tend to have the same morphological form as adjectives);
(viii) VARIOVERSALS, i.e. features recurrent in language varieties with a similar sociohistory, historical depth, and mode of acquisition (e.g., L2 varieties of English tend to use resumptive pronouns in relative clauses).

With AREOVERSALS constituting the level of generalization below which orthodox linguistic typology normally does not stray, the present paper will focus on (vi) – (viii) in varieties of English world-wide. Defining at the outset the status of VERNACULAR UNIVERSALS vis-à-vis language-related versals (i – v), on the one hand, and variety-related versals (vii – vii) on the other hand, the paper takes what Christian Mair has labelled ‘angloversals’ and Jack Chambers’ notion of VERNACULAR UNIVERSALS as its empirical starting point. According to Mair (2003), ‘angloversals’ are universals of New Engishes – joint tendencies observable in the course of the standardization of postcolonial varieties of English which can not be sufficiently explained either historically or genetically. Angloversals may be the result of learning strategies of non-native speakers, in other words, properties typical of L2 varieties. The paper seeks to identify the top candidates for such universals in the domain of morphosyntax and, among other things, compares these to the notion of VERNACULAR UNIVERSALS: a handful of phonological and grammatical features that are thought to occur in vernaculars, child language, pidgins, creoles and interlanguage varieties alike (Chambers 2001, 2003, 2004).

Our discussion of the analytical difference between potential candidates for ANGLOVERSALS and VERNACULAR UNIVERSALS is based on the largest comparative study (Kortmann and Szmrecsanyi 2004) to date of entire grammatical subsystems of varieties of English worldwide. A catalogue of 76 morphosyntactic features taken from the 11 core areas of English morphosyntax (pronouns, pronoun exchange, and grammatical gender; noun phrase phenomena; tense and aspect; modality; verb morphology; adverb phenomena; negation; agreement; relativization; complementation; and discourse organization and word order) will be investigated for 46 (groups of) non-standard varieties of English around the world, including 20 L1 varieties, 11 L2 varieties, and 15 Pidgins and Creoles from all seven anglophone world regions (the British Isles, the Americas, the Caribbean, the Pacific Archipelagos, Australasia, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia).

Second, we argue that regional clusterings of morphosyntactic features are more often than not an epiphenomenon of the type of variety in question (L1, L2, or Pidgin/Creole), and that there is, accordingly, a major divide between world regions with exclusively or predominantly L1 varieties (British Isles, America) and world regions with exclusively or predominantly L2 varieties and/or Pidgins and Creoles (Caribbean, Pacific, Africa, Asia), with Australia exhibiting equal proportions of L1 varieties and Creoles. This split between L1 varieties, L2 varieties, and Pidgins and Creoles is one that is statistically fairly robust and also observable in the phonological survey of the Handbook of Varieties of English, as we will additionally show. The paper is going to present an in-depth analysis of exactly which
VARIOVERSALS – more precisely, which (bundles) of the 76 morphosyntactic features – characterize these three types of varieties. Our analysis will also identify the (region-independent) properties of these three types of varieties, i.e., those properties which are not specific regional developments, and which are thus not possibly due to L1 or substrate influence on L2 varieties and Pidgins and Creoles.

Lastly, we will utilize principal component analysis to show that varieties of English can be thought as varying along two major morphosyntactic dimensions: analyticity and morphosyntactic complexity. By ‘analyticity’ we mean the tendency towards invariable, autonomous, and periphrastic grammatical elements and constructions; by ‘morphosyntactic complexity’ we understand overt signalling of various distinctions beyond communicative necessity (cf. McWhorter 2001), less dominant tendencies towards rule simplification, and fewer structures that unambiguously facilitate processing. Along these lines, we demonstrate that while English-based pidgins, for instance, score relatively high on the analyticity axis and low on the complexity axis, L1 vernaculars score relatively high on the complexity axis but low on the analyticity axis. In conclusion, we suggest that the two dimensions, morphosyntactic complexity and analyticity, need to be probed as for their explanatory power in vernacular varieties of other languages in order to establish their crosslinguistic robustness.

References:
Sometimes there’s universals; sometimes there aren’t – a comparative sociolinguistic perspective on ‘default singulars’

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The variable use of ‘default singulars’ for present and past tense *be*, whether existential as in (1), or non-existential, as in (2) and (3), is a frequent, widely-attested and extensively-studied feature of English.

(1)  
   a. I think there *was* more sort of specifically kids’ programs and then there *were* adult programs. (Canada/TOR/Q/sbrooks)  
   b. They *was* alright, but they *were* nae great big herring. (Northern Ireland/ PVG/007)

(2)  
   a. Well, that’s what mum and dad *are* for aren’t they? … That’s what mams *is* for. (Northwest England/MPT/012)  
   b. Even the nuns and dad maybe *was* nae at the kirk [church] but the weans [children] *were* all at the Sunday school. (Northwest Scotland/CMK/007)

(3)  
   a. We *was* ‘fraid, frightened what we *were*, uh. (Caribbean/SAM/002)  
   b. And we *was* the only colour family. We *were* we *were* just surrounded. (Canada/GYE/001)

This variable is perhaps the proto-typical exemplar of a “vernacular universal” since it is mentioned in virtually every discussion of this theory (Chambers, 2000; 2001; 2003; 2004). Thus, it presents the quintessential site for exploring the nature of “vernacular roots” (Chambers, 2003: 266-270).

While there is extensive research, including inter-dialectal studies on default singulars (e.g. Britain & Sudbury, 2002; Tagliamonte & Smith, 2000), a challenge that arises is to undertake a study which has comparable analytic depth while simultaneously taking into consideration social embedding as well as internal constraints (Chambers, 2004:130). A further complication that has not yet been adequately addressed is that default singulars have also been undergoing change and reorganization in the recent history of English (Britain & Sudbury, 2002; Hay & Schreier, 2004; Tagliamonte, 1998). This means that the results from studies focusing on their “naturalness” and “primitiveness” must also take into consideration their behaviour vis-à-vis ongoing change.

In this paper, I attempt to examine each of these angles by conducting a large-scale comparative analysis of present and past tense *be* in a large archive of English dialects. The data may be differentiated on several key criteria: 1) country of origin (England, Scotland,
Northern Ireland, Canada, Caribbean); 2) geographic location (urban/rural/isolated); 2) type of ethnic background of the speakers (British, African American); as well as the speakers’ 4) education; 5) mobility and other social attributes. Moreover, in addition to stratification by male vs. female, these materials also permit a cross-generational perspective since some of the data come from different age groups within the same community. These data provide an unprecedented opportunity for consistent cross-variety research and hence for an in depth consideration of the universal status of default singulars — linguistically and sociolinguistically.

Not surprisingly, the results confirm that core aspects of the variability in (1) through (3) converge with those found in every dialect that has been subject to analysis, e.g. default singulars are favoured for 1) past tense, 2) existentials and 3) certain contextual environments (e.g. full noun phrases, ‘no’ quantifiers, etc.). Such results contribute important corroborating evidence for the universal status of this feature. However, some aspects of the variation differ. Moreover, neither, the internal grammatical constraints nor the sociolinguistic factors correlate as precisely with urban complexity, worldliness, urbanity and mobility of the speech communities as predicted (see Chambers, 2004:138). Indeed, the comparative perspective reveals considerable variation within universality. Why?

I embed my interpretation of these results within the theory of vernacular universals but I also integrate aspects of current research demonstrating that while some linguistic processes may have universal tendencies facets of their use may be linguistically and/or socially nuanced (e.g. Horvath & Horvath, 2003). Careful scrutiny and analysis can sort out which constraints are which and provide insights into the over-arching explanation. I offer the findings of this study for helping to distinguish between natural tendencies, socio-historical patterns and ongoing linguistic change.

Selected references:


This paper explores several theoretical issues that arise in the study of universals of language change, both from the perspective of processes of dialect divergence and from the perspective of language contact. A major conclusion is that drawing a dichotomy between proposed "vernacular universals" and contact-induced change is not a good idea, because many linguistic changes involve both various processes of contact-induced change and universal tendencies of various kinds.

Historical linguists traditionally appeal to three ultimate causes of language change: drift, which refers to structural tendencies inherent in a given language (called pattern pressures or structural imbalances); dialect borrowing; and foreign interference. The last two are of course not separable in any precise way, both because the spread of every language change is due to contacts among speakers and because it is impossible to draw a neat line between interference between dialects and interference between separate languages. Still, different methods have been developed for the study of dialect borrowing, i.e. interference between systems that are lexically and typologically very similar, and foreign interference, primarily the study of interference between systems that are not close lexically and/or structurally. Drift as a cause of change subsumes pattern pressures specific to a particular language as well as universal structural tendencies, especially those driven by markedness. Underlying the concept of drift is an assumption that a prominent (though by no means the only) driving force behind internally-motivated language change is ease of learning. Because ease of learning also informs most types of contact-induced change, it is hardly surprising to find that the same types of change, and often the very same changes, result from drift and interference. For this reason, anyone seeking for the best explanation for a given linguistic change should consider both internal and external motivations, and the very real possibility of multiple causation.
The relevance of this point for the study of World Englishes is that, because different causes can have similar effects, a universal feature of nonstandard English-lexicon varieties might not arise from the same source(s) in every variety. So, for instance, the typologically rare interdental fricatives might be absent in nonstandard English dialects of England as a result of drift, but their absence in an English-lexifier creole might be due instead to interference from the creole creators' original native languages (and also, perhaps, to drift). It is therefore not sufficient, in arguing for or against a contact explanation for a particular change, to show that the same change has occurred elsewhere under different circumstances; and the possibility of multiple causation, which is likely very common in developments that have led to World Englishes and English-lexifier pidgins and creoles around the globe, must not be overlooked. I will discuss ways of deciding whether or not language contact has played a role in motivating a particular change.

The empirical focus of the paper will be twofold: first, changes that have occurred, both under well-established contact conditions and in circumstances that suggest that drift was the major factor, in standard and especially nonstandard dialects of several languages; and second, instances of pidgin and (to a lesser extent) creole genesis. Because of the frequent emphasis on simplification as a (or the) major component of processes of change in such cases, I will concentrate on changes that are implausible as simplifications.

**Isolation-induced change?**

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There is a very broad consensus in the sociolinguistics literature that language contact is a highly interesting and vitally important phenomenon. The thesis of this paper, however, is that language isolation, or at least a low level of contact, is an equally interesting and perhaps more challenging problem for students of linguistic variation and change. We can explain many changes that take place in high-contact dialects and languages in terms of imperfect learning by adults, interaction between systems, and so on. A perhaps even more interesting question, however, is: how are we to explain, in sociolinguistic terms, developments that occur in low-contact languages and dialects? Do these varieties genuinely tend to have certain linguistic characteristics in common that are not shared with high-contact varieties? Are these perhaps in some sense the reverse of characteristics that are found in high contact languages? In any case, if we want to pursue such issues and explanations further, we had better hurry, because language death means that a very large proportion of the world's isolated languages and dialects may not be with us much longer. A 1975 article by Labov is titled “On the use of the present to explain the past”. Increasingly, however, the present is going to become less like the past in terms of demography and therefore also in terms of contact and social
networks. It could be that, because of demographic and communications developments in the modern world, isolated languages may increasingly become a thing of the past. Indeed, it could therefore be that varieties with certain sorts of characteristics may increasingly also become a thing of the past, as external contacts increase and societies become more fluid. This paper suggests, for example, that we may see fewer and fewer languages with complicated inflectional morphology and large amounts of irregularity, and fewer and fewer dialects with complex and “unusual” phonetic developments.

CANCELLED:

The interplay of “universals” and contact-induced change in the emergence of New World Black Englishes.

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Given the similarities in the socio-historical circumstances in which most of the New Englishes of the world were formed, it seems desirable to account for their origins and development within a unified theoretical framework. It has long been noted that there are strong typological/structural similarities between English-lexicon creoles on the one hand, and “indiginized” varieties such as Hiberno English, Colloquial Singapore English etc., on the other. This would suggest that they were all shaped by similar processes and principles of change. It is therefore unfortunate that two quite different traditions of research - the English as a World language (EWL) paradigm versus the creolistic paradigm – have emerged for the study of these two broad groups of contact languages. This paper argues that all of these contact vernaculars are best understood as the result of “natural” or “untutored” SLA, and that the theoretical framework within which SLA has been studies is most relevant to a unified explanation of their origins. Such a framework allows us to test the differential impact on these vernaculars of three processes that are central to SLA, viz, universal language learning strategies, internal developments, and L1 transfer. To demonstrate this, I examine the emergence of TMA systems in a representative group of New Englishes, with special focus on Barbadian (Bajan) creole, Belizean creole, Hiberno English and Singapore Colloquial English.
The purpose of this paper is to discover and investigate the syntactic characteristics of Singapore and Malaysian English (SME), one of a variety of World Englishes. By examining such characteristics, this study will help those who have interest in World Englishes and who will communicate with SME speakers. Furthermore, by studying the syntactic characteristics of SME, which has been developed in a multi-ethnic and multilingual society, we can examine how “language transfer” and “language interference” occur in it, and what creative strategies have been employed to break down the language barriers among the different ethnic groups in the regions.

A colonial background and geographical situations account for the development and formations of SME. Due to the geographical situations, a multi-ethnic situation and a complex network of language usage has been formed in these countries. Before the introduction of English, pidginized Malay, called Bazaar Malay or Bahasa Malay, was a common medium for communication between the different ethnic groups. However, English continued to be recognized as a socially and economically favorable language since the British colonial period had begun. Therefore, schools began to offer English classes and it resulted in great number of English speakers in the countries.

While the schools officially teach standard British English, the use of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual students includes various dialects from background languages such as Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and Indian English. The word order in the standard British English has also been changed in a way that reflects the speakers’ own tongues. In addition, there are many other variations, including fillers, usage, omission, and so on, which are different from the standard English.

Syntactic characteristics of SME are mainly found in informal styles. These characteristics include language transfer and interference which are related to the background languages: creative strategies of human beings to break down language barriers among people, and some general characteristics of second language learners or foreign language learners such as overgeneralization, omission, reduction, substitution, reconstruction, and so on.

To study SME or other varieties of the standard English is necessary to understand why World Englishes have been formed and developed in different ways. Furthermore, those understandings will eventually lead to coexistence and co-advancement between Standard English and World Englishes.
Selected references: