In search of ‘vernacular universals’ in syntax: embedded inversion in the world’s Englishes

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‘Vernacular universals’ have roused a lot of interest among dialectologists seeking to find possible universal aspects of certain kinds of features which do not appear to be restricted to any given language or regional variety of a language but occur in widely differing settings around the world (see, esp. Chambers 2004). This paper is concerned with one possible candidate for such a status, although we will here focus our attention mainly on varieties of English. The term ‘embedded inversion’ (EI) refers to the use of direct question word order in indirect (embedded) questions, whether of the Yes/No type, as in (1), or WH-type, as in (2):

(1) I wouldn't know would there be any there now. (Example from Welsh English; cited in Thomas 1994: 138)
(2) I wonder what is he like at all. The leprechaun. I don' know what is it at all. (Example from Irish English; cited in Filppula 1999: 168)

EI has long been known to be a characteristic feature of the dialects of English spoken in Wales (see Thomas 1994), Scotland (Miller 1993), Ireland (McCloskey 1992; Henry 1995; Filppula 1999), and Tyneside in north-east England (Beal 1993). In addition to these, African American Vernacular English also regularly uses EI (see Holm 1988). Some of the most recent research has added to the list New Zealand English and current American English (see McCloskey, forthcoming), which greatly adds to the interest of EI as a potential vernacular universal or at least as an ‘angloversal’.

In this paper we will discuss a number of possible explanations for the occurrence of EI in the said varieties, including the possible role of universal considerations but paying also attention to other factors such as language contacts and conservatism. The possible influence of the last-mentioned will be investigated on the basis of evidence from earlier stages of English and from conservative dialects of English spoken in the British Isles. The Survey of English Dialects (SED) materials and especially the so-called SED Tape-recordings (see Klemola, forthcoming) will be used to throw interesting new light on the question of the possible general vernacular origins of EI.

References:


