

Un New Directions in Creole Studies [Preprints of papers for the 443
inaugural meeting of the Society for Caribbean Linguistics, University
of Guyana, August 11-14, 1976], compiled by George N. Cave, 443-451.
Turkeyen, Guyana: Linguistics Section, Dept. of English, U. of Guyana.

COMMUNICATING IN A CREOLE CONTINUUM

BY

John R. Rickford

University of Guyana

(SCL conference - "New Directions in Creole Studies-
University of Guyana, Georgetown. August 11-14, 76)

ABSTRACT:

The existence of widespread variation in "creole continuum" communities is now generally recognised. Up to this point, we have primarily been occupied with methods of describing such communities and reconciling the facts of heterogeneity with traditional notions of "language" and "linguistic change". However, in the midst of our well-justified concern with such issues, other fundamental and intriguing questions about such communities have largely been ignored. One of these is the question of how different speakers manage to communicate with each other across the wide diversity of surface forms, and despite the fact that few of them control the full range of "lects" or "levels" within the continuum.

In this paper, I plan to approach these kinds of questions by examining the use and interpretation of personal-pronoun forms among a number of Guyanese speakers on whom we have accumulated a considerable amount of ethnographic and linguistic data over the past two years.

OUTLINE:

In order to make the presentation easier to follow (and to allow us to elaborate or condense more easily as time permits), I will sketch here the content of the various sections of the paper:

1. Introduction

In this section I briefly recapitulate the need to ask what and how people in a creole-continuum communicate when there is such widespread variation, and present an overview of the extent and nature of variation in the Guyanese pronominal subsystem.

2. "Connotative" Meanings

In this section I hope to demonstrate that most of the variation, at both the "phonological" and "lexical" levels, affects the communication of connotative rather than denotative meanings.

At the phonological or morphophonemic level, there are no mergers, and the underlying rules governing variation on this level appear to be shared by most if not all the members of the speech community. But quantitative differences in the incidence of rule-application turn out to be more systematic than previously assumed, and carry social and stylistic significance. This will be demonstrated with a discussion of several phonological variables, but the one on which attention will be centred is Vowel-Laxing (e.g. variation between you and yuh, /mi/ and /mI/etc.).

People are much more overtly conscious of (morpho-) lexical or suppletive variation in the form of Guyanese pronouns than of phonological variation - e.g. whether a person says me, ah, or I /mi, a or ai/ for referring to himself, or whether he says "awi book", "wi book", or "our book". The set of (morpho-) lexical differences can be analysed as the result of differences in the extent to which gender, case, and plural-marking apply at different "levels" of the continuum. Leaving the treatment of gender marking for the third section of the paper, I shall demonstrate that differences in case and plural-marking have virtually no effect on the communication of referential meaning, because discourse constraints and syntactic restrictions remain constant, and render morphological marking redundant. Because of the effect of these constraints, if a person says "me know he" /mi no hi/ instead of "I know him" /ai no hIm/, there is no possibility of referential confusion.

On the other hand, choice of one lexical variant rather than another can make a world of difference to the communication of connotative if not denotative meanings. Several different kinds of evidence will be presented to support this general claim, even though a certain amount of "inherent variation" without any obvious or explicable significance must also be provided for.

3. "Denotative" or "Referential" Meaning: Communication problems with gender in third person forms.

It is with the "third person" forms ("He, she, it, etc.") - which typically involve reference to participants not physically present in the speech situation - that the greatest potential for referential communication difficulties exists. At the acrolectal or "standard English" end of the continuum, distinctions of masculine, feminine, and neuter gender are all overtly marked [he, him, his (M.); she, her, her (F.); it, it, its (N.)]. At the basilectal end of the continuum, by contrast, gender-marking appears to be absent in the use of /i/ for all three genders in subject or possessive position, and the use of am for all three genders in object position. In between these two extremes, there are a number of other possibilities. The point remains: with these kinds of differences, there would seem to be room for a great deal of confusion, as listeners try to determine whether a particular i or am referred to man, woman, or thing. In practice, however, few referential difficulties of this sort seem to occur. How is this apparently effective communication across theoretically different "systems" possible?

As it turns out, the distinction between the animate forms (He, she) and the inanimate form (it) is frequently carried by feature-marking on the verbs with which the pronouns occur. For instance, the i in "i kiss the girl" cannot refer to an inanimate subject, because "kiss" presupposes an animate (if not human) subject. Many of the actual cases in natural conversation are like this, although it is possible to think of examples like "i deh in the kitchen" in which cooccurrence restrictions do not help to disambiguate the gender of the pronoun referent.

Rickford/3

The major potential for referential confusion remains the distinction between masculine and feminine referents. By examining a number of natural-speech samples, I hope to reveal the major ways in which sex or gender of pronoun referents is conveyed even when overt morphological marking is absent. Essentially, the strategies involve dependence on "context" - but the problem is to specify more precisely what "context" involves. One interesting hypothesis/finding is that non-basilectal speakers sometimes have difficulties with this "gender-less" basilectal system because they attend too carefully to morphological form, even to the extent of over-riding the obvious semantics of context.

4. Conclusion

The extent to which other subsystems illustrate the same kinds of communication phenomena discovered for the pronominal subsystem will briefly be considered, and the implications for our notions of "competence" and "grammar" for creole-continuum communities will be suggested.

DATA

(1) [For section 1 of paper]:

PERSON	SUBJECT "I walk"	OBJECT "Tom told me"	POSSESSIVE "my book"
1	I /ai/	me /mi/	my /mai/
2	you /ju/	you /ju/	your /jor/
3Masc	he /hi/	him /hIm/	his /hIz/
3Fem	she /shi/	her /hær/	her /hær/
3Neut	it /It/	it /It/	its /Its/
1Pl	we /wi/	us /ʌs/	our /ʌwər/
2Pl	you /ju/	you /ju/	your /jor/
3Pl	they /ðe/	them /ðEm/	their /ðær/

Table 1: Putative paradigm for standard English personal pronouns

(2)

PERSON	REFERENT
1	[+speaker]
2	[+hearer]
3	[-speaker] [-hearer] = "other"
1Pl.	[+speaker] and [+hearer] or [+ other] or both
2Pl.	[+hearer] and [+other]
3Pl.	[+other]

* (In the original, p. 446 was blank, and the material above was on p. 447)

* (In the original, the material on p. 446 was above the material below on p. 447)

Table 2: Referents in relation to discourse or speech situation
equivalent to traditional "person" categories (Conklin,

(3) [For sec. 1 of paper 1

Fought 74:LSA)

PERSON	SUBJECT	OBJECT	POSSESSIVE
1	mi a ai mI ə ɔi m ə m ə	mi mI	mi mai mI mPi m ə m
2	ju jU jə j	ju jU	ju jor jU jUr jə jər j
3M.	i hi	am i Im Am hi hIm	i Iz hi hIz
3F.	i shi (hi) shI shə sh	am i shi Δr Am (hi) shI hAr	i shi Δr. (hi) shI har shə sh
1Pl.	awi wi awI wI abi [+dis]	awi wi Δs awI wI abi [+dis]	awi wi Δwə awI wI Δwər abi [+dis]
2Pl.	ajU ju juɔl aljU jU juɔl ɔljU jə jval [+dis] j jal	ajU ju juɔl aljU jU juɔl ɔljU jə jval [+dis] j jal	ajU ju juɔl jor aljU jU juɔl jUr ljU jə jval jər [+dis] j jal
3Pl.	dEm de dEn de dEɲ dE [+dis] dI də	dEm dEn dEɲ [+dis]	dEm de der dEn de der dEɲ dE [+dis] dI də
3N.	i It I	am It Am	i It Its Ø I

Table 3: GC
Personal Pro-
nouns, showing
(morpho)-lexical
and phonological/
morpho-phonemic
variation.

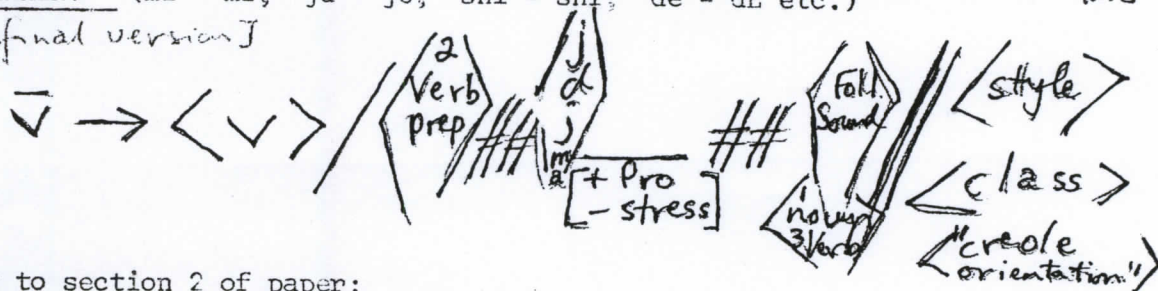
3N*

Rickford/5

(4) Relevant to section 2 of paper:

VOWEL-LAXING (mi - mI; ju - jU; shi - shI; de - dE etc.)

[Non-final version]



(5) Relevant to section 2 of paper:

Pronoun	Syntac. Position	Follow. Sound	Style	Social Status	Indivs.
ju .86	Poss .79	Vl.Cn .72	Casual.66	Low .52	1 .71
de .78	Obj .40	Vd.Cn .56	Careful.34	Mid .48	14 .57
shi .73	Sub. .29	Pause .46			17 .42
mi .33		Tns V .43			15 .29
awi .04		Lax V .33			

* (in the original, p. 448 was blank, and the material above was on p. 449)

*(In the original, one material on page 448 was above the material below on p. 449)

Table 4: Probabilities associated with variable constraints on Vowel-Laxing rule for four Guyanese speakers (Calculated by Cedergren/Sankoff Varbrul-2 program, August 1976).

6) Relevant to section 2 of paper:

Sentences in the Creolese to English "test" in which informants shifted in the direction of more "English" phonological variants (asked to imagine speaking to President on "Meet the People" tour):

1. i tif mi brk (h-absence)
3. di tɛl mi aɪ ɔbʌt ju trɒblɪz (Vowel laxing)
4. de Iz gu tɔ si shi Evride. (Vowel laxing)
2. wa rɒŋ wɪd juəl? (Vowel laxing)

7) Relevant to section 2 of paper:

Person	Subject	Object	Possessive
1	mi - a - ai	mi	mi - mai
2	ju	ju	ju - jor
3M	i	am - i - Em	i - Iz
3F	i - shi	am - i - shi - hɔr	i - shi - hɔr
3N	i - It	am - It	i - It - Its - Ø
1Pl	awi - wi	awi -wi - ʌs	awi - wi - ʌwɔr
2Pl.	aljU - jUal - ju	aljU - jUal - ju	aljU -jUal -ju -jor
3Pl.	dEm - de	dEm	dEm - de - der

Table 5: Major (morpho-) lexical variants of Guyanese personal pronouns after phonological variation removed.

to
(8) Relevant to all sections, but partic. 2:

Three references involving treatment of GC pronouns:

(1) Allsopp, Richard (1957): MA thesis, London University.

(2) Bickerton, Derek (1973) "The nature of a creole continuum". Language

(3) Edwards, Walter (1975): Ph.D. dissertation, U. of York.

450 *

Rickford 6

Relevant to section 2 of paper:

Speaker	3F. Obj			1 Sub.		
	am	shi	Ar	mi	a	ai
4	80	20		100		
11	19	81		100		
1	41	59		80	09	11
2	16	84		85	07	08
7	42	58		100		
8	66	09	25	99	007	007
12	33	24	43	98	014	005
9	09	89	02	97	03	
6	100			85	08	07
5	14	86		56	24	20
10	20	80		89	08	
3		100		54	29	17
14		94	06	07	38	55
13		100		30	28	42
20		90	10	11	33	56
16		83	17	03	35	62
17		80	20	13	35	52
24		100		58	26	16
19		75	25	15	11	74
23	13	07	80	04	42	54
22		28	72	17	12	71
18		16	84		19	81
15			100		12	88
2			100	01	16	83

* (In the original, p. 450 was blank, and the material above was on p. 451)

*(In the original, the material on p. 450 was above the material below on p. 451)

Table 6: Relative frequency of lexical variants in two pronoun categories for 24 Guyanese speakers (speakers 1-12 = "low-class"; speakers 13-24 = "middle" class. But there are many other relevant social/cultural/psychological factors which are involved and not adequately represented by the notion of "class".

(10) Relevant to section 3 of paper:

Question 7 from formal linguistic interview:

"I'm looking for my wife, man. She has my bicycle key, but I don't know where she is. Her brother said i bin to the sho just now, but i wouldna spen no particular time deh. If i don' come back soon, uh gun got to walk! "

Who went to the shop: (1) The wife _____ (2) Her brother _____
How you know? _____

(11) Relevant to section 3 of paper: Q's from "Creole-English Correction test" in formal linguistic interview:

(6) i deh in the kitchen

(8) meri husban' beat am just because i laas i money

(9) i tek knife cut am

(10) dem bin tek stik beat am