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# PAST MARKING IN THE GUYANESE MESOLECT: A CLOSE LOOK AT BONNETTE

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## 1. Introduction

Bickerton's *Dynamics of a Creole System* (1975) is to the study of creole continua and creole studies as a whole what Labov's *Social Stratification of English in New York City* (1966) is to the study of urban vernaculars and sociolinguistic variation more generally: a "milestone" work which demonstrated "orderliness in diversity," and provided the basis for most subsequent theoretical discussion in the field. These points were made by Gillian Sankoff in her (1977) review of *Dynamics*, and most creolists and variationists would agree.

Strikingly, however, the detailed, corpus-based and largely quantitative account of tense-modality-aspect (TMA) variation in the Guyanese Creole (GC) continuum which Bickerton provided in *Dynamics* has never really been replicated with Guyanese or Caribbean data.<sup>1</sup> Although some creolists have expressed reservations about Bickerton's TMA analyses, they have usually done so out-of-print, and on the basis of intuitions, anecdotal examples, optional rules, and other "old" ways of analyzing variation. For instance, Gibson's (1982, 1986) analyses of GC are valuable in a number of respects (in suggesting that the correct ordering is MTA, for instance; see also Shepherd 1982), but they are neither quantitative nor corpus-accountable in the way variationists consider necessary for highly variable language contexts.

The absence of accountable replications of Bickerton's work--contrasted with the numerous replications of Labov's department store and other NYC studies--is unfortunate because some of the hypotheses which have been the focus of much controversy and interest in recent years depend to a large extent on the validity of the analyses in *Dynamics*. This is true, for instance, of Bickerton's own far-reaching (1984) ideas about universals and an innate bioprogram, and it is even more true of Tagliamonte and Poplack's (1986) attempt to show that Samaná past tense marking bears no evidence of creole influence. With respect to the latter issue, note that it was precisely in relation to the *Dynamics* analysis of *-ed* and strong past acquisition, that Sankoff (1977:298) felt that "data based problems are of sufficient magnitude to advise caution in accepting the analysis." (See fn. 5, *ibid.*, for details.)

Rickford (1987) includes eight odd texts from the Guyanese creole continuum--most based on recordings of natural speech, all accompanied by an index listing the occurrence of key grammatical features by line--which should facilitate some replication and assessment of the analyses of Bickerton and others. In my introductions to the texts, I provide several such reanalyses myself, and find Bickerton's *Dynamics* analyses supported in many, but not all areas. One of the areas which I find most in need of reanalysis is precisely the one about which Sankoff (1977) raises the most questions, and on which Tagliamonte and Poplack (1986) lean most heavily: Bickerton's analysis of past marking in the mesolect. What I'll do in this paper is reproduce the car-accident narrative from Bonnette (a pseudonym) on which I base most of my



discussion of mesolectal past marking in Rickford (1987), and recapitulate most of the analytical points therein (section 2). Then I'll present a detailed analysis (section 3) of past marking in the two and a half-hour recording session with Bonnette in which the text occurs. (This analysis is original to this paper). In the conclusion (section 4), I'll suggest directions and questions for further research.

## 2. Past marking in Bonnette's car-accident narrative

The speaker in the car-accident narrative, Bonnette, lives just outside the Guyanese capital, Georgetown, where she works as a senior civil servant. Prior to this, she had worked for a year as a high school teacher. She is an upper mesolectal, near acrolectal speaker. Although her speech, like mesolectal speech more generally, shares several phonological features with basilectal creole speakers (for instance, velarization of the final nasal and monophthongization of the vowel in *clown* 'clown'), it is very different from the basilect with respect to such grammatical features as plural marking (note *afternoons* and *boys* in line 831 where a basilectal speaker would use *afternoon* and *de boy dem*) and the copula (she uses *is* in 848 where a basilectal speaker would use equative *a*). In one grammatical respect, however, Bonnette's speech in this text--which occurred near the end of an increasingly informal two and a half recording session among family and peers--approximates the basilect: its high frequency (31/43 or 72%) of unmarked past-reference verbs. <sup>2/</sup>

BONNETTE: NARRATIVE ABOUT HER HUSBAND'S CAR ACCIDENT (SI 79:377-401; B = Bonnette, D = B's mother, J = John Rickford, A = Angela Rickford; Past-reference verbs in B's speech underlined; indeterminate cases--en in 848 and *Kud(n)* in 829 (= nonpast), 855, 863, 869 (=past), excluded.)

- B: I know ... ONE time I could remember I was really scared. Is  
a day--am--B. was drinking, he had a motorcycle then. And usually  
on Friday af(ter)noons when the boys come out from school and they  
drinking, they're from ONE place to the other, you know, visiting  
all the shops. And this day they were visiting all over (laughter),  
and he came in, drunk, and he drop his bag and he say he is going  
out again, and he jump on on the bicycle. And--am--the bicycle  
wouldn't start, you know, and he keep trying and trying.  
Well that time I went--by that time I went in the bath. And I just  
hear a big impact outside there, you know, and I say, "Mummy, is  
who? Mummy, is who?" I was in the bath. She say, "Is a man, and  
the man dead!"  
A: Oh my God!  
D: Well, by you see the--the person how he lay down a' the road,  
you know, I caan' make out is he, and we--  
B: And I still ... I hustle and I come out--I hustle and I come  
out from the bath, you know, and I say, "Is who? Is who? Is who?"  
And she s--and well when I run out there now and I see they lifting  
this chap across--if you see people!--and I see they lifting  
this chap across the street, but I en know is who!  
D: Until when we neighbour over deh say, "J--is B!"  
B: Until one o' the chaps shout and tell me is B!  
D: A--and then we run down the step. Eh-hen.  
J: ... Was he in truth?

- D: ... Yes. Right in front o' we a the road deh. 853  
B: Well THAT time I could remember--me whole s--yeah, it was him. 854  
We whole stomach seize up. You know, I couldn't-- 855  
J: And yuh mother done say he dead? 856  
B: Yes, she tell me, "Is a man, is a man, and the man dead," ... 857  
D: Well, yes, after the man lay down so flat by he belly, " 858  
a the road, 'cross the road, so we caan' get to know is who." 859  
B: Well my whole stomach just somersault right away, I i--y'know-- 860  
J: Mm-hm. 861  
A: Oh Lawdi! 862  
B: Well I couldn't do anything but rush out, and we scramble him, 863  
car' 'im to the hospital, this, that, tha', tha' ... And then when he 864  
was quite settled in the hospital and, and you know, and then I 865  
really catch myself-- 866  
J: Is you and he now! 867  
B: No, when I really catch myself, then I really start sobbing hard 868  
'ard, hard, 'ard, 'ard, because all the time I--you know, I could 869  
really stand 'ting, but that time I remember I was really-- 870  
me whole stomach just seize up like, just knot up. 871

Table 1 shows the relative frequencies of past marking in this text according to verb type (primarily morphological/morphophonemic), reflecting distinctions which Bickerton found significant in *-ed* acquisition.

Table 1: Past Marking in the Car-Accident Text by Verb Type

Have	100% (1/1)	Weak syllabic	0% (0/4)
Be	64% (7/11)	Weak non-syllabic / V	0% (0/7)
Strong	16% (3/18)	Weak non-syllabic / C	0% (0/1)

Bickerton's suggestion (1975:104) that had and was are the earliest positive past tense forms to be acquired in decreolization seems to be borne out, insofar as this text includes one had and no *haves*, while *be* displays more *-ed* marking than any other verb type (excluding the one had in 830 and the one wouldn't in 836, the latter not included in table 1). His postulation (pp. 143-145) of a general order--weak syllabic preceding strong preceding weak syllabic--receives less support, however. The four weak syllabic verbs (those ending in a coronal stop and adding a syllabic *-ed* form in the past) are all unmarked (shout 850, somersault 860, start 868, and knot 871), and although there are more past-marked strong verbs than weak (16% vs. 0%), the proportion of strong verbs is less than we might expect of a speaker whose general mesolectal level is as high as Bonnette's is.4/ Bickerton also finds (1975:151) that phonological factors are of some importance with weak non-syllabic past forms, that, as earlier scholars (for instance, Fasold 1972:67-72) had found to be true of Vernacular Black English, a following vowel favors *-ed* insertion more than a following consonant does. However, table 1 shows that following environment has no effect; all of Bonnette's weak verbs in this text are unmarked, including the seven that precede a vowel (e.g., jump on 835).

The kinds of distinctions we have been considering in table 1 are actually considered secondary by Bickerton to a more important distinction which we will now examine--the distinction between punctual and non-punctual predicates, the latter including (at one level of



analysis) punctual predicates in temporal (when) clauses. The acquisition of past-tense in non-punctual environments is said (p. 149) to be delayed or inhibited by the effects of other creole rules and decreolization processes, and as a result, past marking is hypothesized to be more common with punctual than with non-punctual predicates. Data from fourteen mesolectal speakers (Bickerton 1975:154) confirm the hypothesis: they have a mean of 38% past marking with punctual predicates (230/597), but only 12% (52/438) with non-punctuals. However, this constraint does not work as hypothesized in Bonnette's text: all of her unmarked pasts (beginning with drop) occur from line 834 onwards, that is, from the point at which we start getting punctual predicates, telling us what specific actions took place on the day of the accident. Overall, only 4% of Bonnette's past-reference punctuals (1/26), are past-marked, while 65% of her past-reference non-punctuals (11/17) are. This is the opposite of what Bickerton's analysis would predict.

The next possibility I examine is one Bickerton does not: that the unmarked cases might represent instead instances of the historical present. To do this, I separate the past-reference clauses in the text into narrative clauses and non-narrative clauses, following the framework for the analysis of narrative introduced by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972), and adopted by Schiffrin (1981) for the analysis of the historical present. Narrative clauses, the ones which contain the complicating actions and carry the narrative forward, are marked by a relation of temporal juncture: "a change in their order will result in a change in the temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation" (Labov 1972:360). Non-narrative clauses, which do not contain complicating actions, include several types (Labov 1972:363-370): abstract, orientation, evaluation and coda. The significance of the narrative/non-narrative distinction is that, in American English, the historical present is much commoner in narrative clauses than in non-narrative clauses; Schiffrin (1981:51) reports relative frequencies of 30% in narrative or complicating action clauses, and only 3% in orientation clauses (a non-narrative or non-complicating action type).

Returning to Bonnette's text, note that it is where she digresses from the main action to say where she was or what she was doing at the time, or how she felt, that the past is usually marked; for instance, in the embedded orientation clause, "I was in the bath" (639). Past marking in orientation and other non-narrative clauses like these is 62% (10/16), but it is only 5% (1/21) in the narrative or complicating action clauses, where, with the exception of keem at the beginning of the action sequence (834), all of the verbs are unmarked (drop 834, hustle 844, and so on).<sup>8/</sup>

From this point on in Rickford (1987:186-90), I embark on a discussion of advantages and drawbacks to the historical present analysis which is rather lengthy, and which I will summarize more briefly here in order to leave space for the new analyses to be presented in section 3. One difficulty with adopting an HP analysis for Bonnette's text is the fact that, apart from the copula forms, none of the putative "historical present" forms with third person singular subjects have the unambiguous "-s" suffix of SE. I acknowledge this difficulty, but attribute it to her low frequency of third present "-s" even outside of past reference contexts, and note that the majority of her unmarked non-copula verb

forms don't have third-singular subjects, so wouldn't take -s in SE either. (See section 3 for new data and discussion on this point.)

Finally, I note that others (Corne 1977:102 and Bollée 1977:55) had argued earlier for treating unmarked verb forms in a Creole language (French-based Seychelles Creole) in terms of the historical present, and that Bickerton (1981:83-84) had attempted to rebut these arguments by suggesting that it was merely the coincidence that narratives typically began with marked statives, followed by unmarked nonstatives, that had inspired these "historical present" analyses. It's also true in Bonnette's text that most of the unmarked predicates are non-stative, and most of the marked predicates are stative. But the possibility of arguing for an anterior rather than a historical present analysis is stymied by the fact that we would not expect a speaker as close to SE as Bonnette is to be operating an anterior system. Bickerton (1975:101, 1981:85) describes the loss of the stative/non-stative distinction and the transition from anterior to past marking as one of the earliest steps in the decreolization process.

Another reason I give for not wanting to discard a historical present analysis of Bonnette's text in favor of an anterior analysis is that the dimensions on which these alternatives depend are in fact quite similar, suggesting that they might be different formal realizations of a common underlying system. What Bickerton (1981:84) describes as the coincidental occurrence of stative verbs and past marking at the beginning of narratives, could be described in terms of--is in fact equivalent to a statement in terms of--the distribution of orientation and other non-narrative clauses at the beginning of narratives, before the introduction of the complicating actions. The temporally ordered narrative or action clauses typically employ non-stative or action verbs, and it is these in which the English historical present typically occurs. However, the temporally unordered orientation and other non-narrative clauses typically contain a higher proportion of stative verbs, (including modals and passives) and it is here that the historical present typically does NOT occur. It is therefore not a "coincidence" that stative verbs come at the beginning of narratives and that they are usually marked. And far from ruling out a historical present analysis, Bickerton's observation about where stative verbs occur in narratives only makes a historical present analysis more relevant, especially if Bickerton's description of the functions of Ø and bin in creoles is restated in discourse/pragmatic terms, along the lines suggested by Givón (1982).

I also note, in concluding my discussion, that even though basilectal speakers do mark non-anterior predicates with the stem form, it seems inappropriate to describe them as using the historical present when they have no explicit "present" marking. But, in narrative at least, basilectal and upper mesolectal speakers seem to be marking and unmarking their predicates in pragmatically similar if formally different ways. This awareness by itself reduces the conceptual gulf which Bickerton (1975:194) sees between the poles of the Guyanese Creole continuum, and brings us closer to understanding how speakers from the different levels intercommunicate despite surface differences.



### 3. Past marking in Bonnette's spontaneous interview as a whole

In order to see whether the past marking characteristics which I'd discovered in Bonnette's car-accident narrative would hold up with a larger body of data, and in order to respond to issues raised at NMAV-XV (during the question period following my presentation, and in Tagliamonte and Poplack's paper), I have recently gone back and examined all the past-reference verbs in the two-and-a-half-hour spontaneous interview which I recorded with Bonnette and her family in 1979. This session, recorded on a Nagra IV-S stereo tape-recorder with a separate track for Bonnette, occupied three reels (SI 78, 79 and 80). Excluding *ueta* and indeterminate instances, 9/ it yielded 635 past-reference verbs, of which 63% were past-marked, as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Past marking by verb type

Be	83% (163/196)
Have	86% (37/143)
Modal <i>will</i> , <i>shall</i>	100% (38/38)
Strong	56% (142/255)
Weak syllabic	17% (4/23)
Weak non-syllabic	22% (18/80)
TOTAL, ALL VERBS	63% (402/635)

In response to the question of whether Bonnette really is operating a past tense marking system (something more in doubt on the evidence of only 28% past-marking in the accident narrative), I think we are in a better position now to say "yes." Apart from the overall figure of 63%, the majority (56%) of her strong verbs are past-marked, and it is this verb-type which variationists typically consider when attempting to "establish the status of tense-marking as an underlying category" (Fasold 1972:38-39). Bonnette's strong-verb past marking is a far cry from the 98% figure reported by Fasold (*ibid.*) for Washington DC BEV speakers, but if she were operating a pure anterior/non-anterior marking system, even fewer of her strong verbs would have been marked (and then with *bin* or *did*).<sup>10/</sup> Past marking on modal *will* and *shall* is categorical, and on *be* and *have* virtually so, again supporting Bickerton's (1975:104) suggestion that these latter types acquire *-ed* early.

Strikingly, weak syllabics still do not emerge as more favorable to past marking than strong verbs. In fact, with some past marking in both categories, we can now see that Bonnette marks even fewer weak syllabics than weak non-syllabics, while the latter, on Bickerton's (1975:142ff) analysis, should be the least marked of all.<sup>11/</sup> Contrast the aggregate frequencies for past marking by verb type in his data (p. 143):<sup>12/</sup>

Weak syll. 60% (102) Strong 31% (872) Weak Non-syll. 19% (439)

However, Bonnette's strong > weak non-syllabic > weak syllabic pattern matches that of speaker 196 in Bickerton's table 4.7 (*ibid.*), and it suggests that the three speakers in that table (236, 209 and 196) who show much more past marking on strong than on weak-syllabic verbs may not be as unusual as Bickerton suggests. Note that other Guyanese (Edwards 1975:251) and Liberian English data (Singler 1984:122) show more past marking on strong than weak syllabic forms.

Although strong verbs remain more favorable to past marking than weak non-syllabic verbs, in line with Bickerton's analysis, the picture becomes more complicated and more interesting when we subdivide weak non-syllabic verbs into those which end in a vowel (past-marking: 70%, 14/20), and those which end in a consonant (past-marking 7%, 4/60). This is a more dramatic phonological (syllable structure) effect than is usually associated with mesolectal past-marking, suggesting that the weak non-syllabic verbs may be grammatically marked for tense most of the time (slightly more than for strong verbs), but that the tense marker is phonologically deleted when such verbs end in a final consonant. Bickerton's (1975:154) comparable figures of 36% (17/26) and 25% (61/241) past marking for weak non-syllabics ending in a vowel and those ending in a single consonant, respectively, are not as striking, but they still appear to be significant, suggesting that others might re-examine their data with this factor in mind.

When we separate weak non-syllabics ending in a vowel from those ending in a consonant, we also see (table 3, below) an effect of following environment which would otherwise be obscured.

Table 3: Past marking in weak non-syllabics by following environment

	Consonant	Pause	Vowel
Non-syllabic ending in C	8% (1/13)	0% (0/10)	8% (3/37)
Non-syllabic ending in V	33% (1/3)	80% (8/10)	71% (5/7)
Non-syllabic TOTAL	12% (2/16)	40% (8/20)	18% (8/44)

As table 3 indicates, for weak non-syllabics ending in a vowel, a following vowel or pause favors past marking more than a following consonant does, but weak non-syllabics ending in a consonant resist past marking everywhere. When the two categories of weak non-syllabics are combined, there appears to be little difference between a following consonant and vowel. Bickerton's tabulation of the effect of following environment on past marking in weak verbs (1975:152, table 4.11) does not provide separate data on those which end in a vowel and those which end in a consonant, but in the light of table 3, it should. Bickerton's data is included by Tagliamonte and Poplack (1986:14) in their table 5, which shows, among other things, the same relative consonant/vowel effect (20) on past marking in the Samaná and GC data sets:

Samaná (Tagliamonte & Poplack, *ibid.*): 45% Cons 65% Vowel  
Guyanese Creole (Bickerton, *ibid.*): 14% Cons 34% Vowel

But since the Samaná data are restricted to weak non-syllabics ending in a consonant, while the GC data include weak non-syllabics regardless of whether they end in a consonant or vowel, the comparison isn't appropriate, especially in a table focussing on zero marking as a putative consequence of consonant cluster simplification.

The details of Bonnette's past marking in individual strong verbs, provided in table 4, are useful for several reasons. In the first place, although the list does include many categorical cases--22 of the 36 verbs show either 0% or 100% past-marking--nineteen of these involve



cells with four tokens or less (eleven with just a single token). With five tokens or more, most verbs (14 out of 17) display variable past marking, indicating that variability in the strong verbs as a whole is not simply a function of conflating different individual verbs which show categorical marking or unmarking.

Table 4: Past marking in individual strong verbs

Become	100% (1/1)	Fly	0% (0/4)	Say	4% (1/25)
Bite	0% (0/6)	Get	40% (2/5)	See	67% (14/21)
Bring	100% (4/4)	Give	100% (2/2)	Shake	0% (0/1)
Catch	50% (3/6)	Go	78% (25/32)	Sit	0% (0/5)
Choose	0% (0/1)	Grow	0% (0/1)	Stand	0% (0/1)
Come	74% (20/27)	Hear	46% (6/13)	Stick	100% (2/2)
Do	100% (5/5)	Keep	88% (7/8)	Take	70% (7/10)
Don't	75% (12/16)	Know	0% (0/1)	Teach	100% (1/1)
Dream	67% (4/6)	Leave	100% (4/4)	Tell	37% (7/19)
Fail	62% (5/8)	Lie	0% (0/2)	Think	100% (3/3)
Feel	75% (6/8)	Meet	100% (1/1)	Throw	0% (0/1)
Find	0% (0/1)	Run	0% (0/3)	Wake	0% (0/1)

The second reason why table 4 is useful is that it includes data on four of the six strong verbs (say, get, tell, leave, lose and break) which Bickerton (1975:146-7, 154) excludes from some crucial parts of his past-marking analysis (for instance, his discussion of punctual vs. non-punctual conditioning) on the grounds that they display lower frequencies of past marking than other verbs and might "obscure tendencies that were otherwise general" (p. 154).13/ Say, the commonest strong verb, does indeed show very low past marking (4%) in Bonnette's data, but get (40%) and tell (37%) show much more, and all four tokens of leave are past marked. Furthermore, Bickerton (p. 147) provides comparable frequencies from his data for three of the excluded verbs: say (8%), get (9%), and tell (35%), and although the first and third of these are comparable to Bonnette's, his own past marking figure for tell is equal to or higher than for three other common strong verbs in his data which are not excluded (hear 35%, bring 13% and run 20%). Finally, excluding say, get, tell and leave doesn't alter our overall strong verb count significantly: it would go up from 56% to 63% (128/202), but this is identical to the overall past marking frequency in table 2, and it doesn't alter the position of strong verbs relative to the other types. In the light of these considerations, I see no reason for excluding these or any other individual verbs from the strong verb count, and will include them in all subsequent tabulations.14/

The data in table 4 also allow us to return to the fifteen unmarked strong verb tokens in Bonnette's car-accident narrative and note that all but one of them (run) show past marking somewhere else in her recorded sample. This would qualify them for classification as overt historical presents according to Tagliamonte and Poplack's (1986:5) criteria ("show 3rd singular -s or are the present-tense form of strong verbs whose contrasting past-tense counterpart is also used by the speaker in question"--emphasis added), and not as instances of their "ambiguous" category.15/

Table 5 shows the relation between past marking and the punctuality

of the predicate in strong and weak verbs only, initially observing, as Bickerton (1975:154) does, just a two-way distinction between punctuals and non-punctuals, the former excluding punctuals in temporal (when) clauses, the latter including temporal clause verbs regardless of whether they are punctual or non-punctual.

Table 5: Past marking and the punctual/non-punctual distinction

	Punctual (-temporal)	Non-Punctual (& all +temp)
Bonnette's GC data	44% (113/258)	51% (51/100)
Bickerton's GC data (1975:154)	38% (230/597)	21% (54/428)
Samaná (Tagliamonte/Poplack 1986:20)	51% (328/638)	57% (42/74)

Once again, Bonnette's data work just the opposite of the way Bickerton's hypothesis and data suggest, showing more past marking in non-punctual than punctual clauses (the difference isn't as dramatic as in the car-accident narrative data, however), and paralleling in this respect Tagliamonte and Poplack's Samaná data.

Table 6 shows the effect of further subdividing the non-punctual category of table 5 into true non-punctuals (not in a temporal clause) and temporals (whether punctual or non-punctual), as Bickerton (1975:156) goes on to do.

Table 6: Past marking in temporals vs. true non-punctuals

	Temporal (+/- punc)	Non-Punctual (-temporal)
Bonnette's GC data	27% (9/33)	63% (42/67)
Bickerton's GC data (1975:156)	14% (10/63)	19% (43/196)

Here Bonnette's data do show the constraining effect of temporality which Bickerton predicts--in fact the relative effect is bigger (36%) than in Bickerton's aggregated data, although comparable to that of some of his individual speakers (#'s 125 and 107, for instance, who show +temporal favoring effects of 30% and 39% respectively). At the same time, separating the temporals from the non-punctuals in Bonnette's data increases the rate of past marking in the latter to 63%, further militating against the hypothesis that punctuality favors past marking, since past marking in her punctual non-temporals remains at 44%.

Although he doesn't provide any hard difference on this himself, Bickerton (1975:157) suggests that it might be fruitful to split the temporal category even further, distinguishing between punctual and non-punctual temporals. He hypothesizes that some speakers may show less past marking in the latter, in line with a creole rule for non-insertion of non-punctual aspect markers in temporal and hypothetical environments. Bonnette's 33 temporals support this hypothesis, since the 26 which are punctual show 35% past marking, but the 7 which are non-punctual show zero past marking.16/ Interestingly enough, such zeroes seem to involve the deletion or non-insertion of would and weseta, since these typically occur in neighbouring clauses:



"One of her sons, he useta go to picture every night. And he would come home late in the night, and when he Ø come home late in the night, he'd go and urline just by the post here." (SI 79, 184-186)

"You never hear--you never hear they say that long ago they useta have--in the middle of the night you'd (<would) have beautiful girls with long hair walking down the road? And when you Ø go and--and when you Ø go and you Ø touch them, and they Ø turn round, they Ø got some funny face?" (SI 79, 246-248)

There are 80 instances of useta and 34 of would in Bonnette's interview (SI 78, 79, 80). Bickerton (1975) doesn't discuss either of these non-punctual (habitual) past markers, but in the light of their frequency in Bonnette's data and their apparent relation to zero marking, their role in tense-aspect marking in the mesolect deserves further study.<sup>17/</sup>

Before leaving the issue of punctual/non-punctual past marking, a note is appropriate on the prevalence of past-marking on past participles, since Bickerton (1975) tabulates these in the same table with the punctuals and non-punctuals (table 4.14, p. 154). In his data, participles show considerably more past marking (81%, 88/108) than any other subcategory of strong and weak verbs, and this is also true in Bonnette's data, where the past participles show the same high frequency of past marking (81%, 38/47).<sup>18/</sup> However, I don't think past participles--which, in the mesolect as in SE are usually an adjectival predicate, following an auxiliary verb (had, was, should have and so on)--should really be treated as part of the same variable as the other verbs whose past marking we have been considering. Past marking on the preceding auxiliary verb (if any) should be taken into account (as it is in our table 2); but each predicate should be counted only once in the analysis of preterit or past marking, and the presence of -ed or -en marking on the participle, although equally interesting, should be investigated separately.<sup>19/</sup> as we might do with Verb-ing participles.

The last possibility for us to explore is the one discussed at length in section 2: that Bonnette's unmarked pasts might be considered instances of the historical present (HP), influenced by occurrence in complicating and non-complicating narrative clauses as the HP is elsewhere. In order to facilitate comparison with Tagliamonte and Poplack's (1986) study of Samaná, the only other one to have examined Caribbean data from this perspective, I adopt their table 1 (ibid:8) distinction between past have and be, other marked pasts, historical presents (including unmarked strong verbs, weak syllabics, have and be, none of which could be interpreted as having lost an underlying past inflection by final t, d deletion), and ambiguous cases (unmarked weak non-syllabics, which could be interpreted as having lost an underlying past inflection by final t, d deletion).<sup>20/</sup> Since their argument hinges crucially on the difference between complicating action and non-complicating action clauses, but not on the subtypes of non-complicating action clauses (orientation, evaluation, and abstract/coda), I have collapsed the latter into a single column, and distinguish in my own data between complicating action, non-complicating action, and "other genre" clauses (clauses outside of narratives, for instance in descriptions of habitual events in the past, or in conversation). Finally,

since our focus is on past marking, I omit the row data in their table 1 for Present (Present morphology in present temporal environment) and other ("progressives", past perfects, conditional, futures and habituals) and recalculate their percentages accordingly.<sup>21/</sup> The results--for Bonnette and for Samaná--are shown in table 7. The "Other Genre" data there is included for completeness. Beyond noting that it is basically similar to the non-complicating action (within narrative) data, I won't discuss it further, since there is no comparable data set in Tagliamonte and Poplack's (ibid.) paper.

Table 7: Past marking in complicating action, non-complicating action, and other genre clauses

	Complicating action	Bonnette	Samaná	Non-complicating action	Bonnette	Samaná	Other genres	Bonnette
Past (strong/weak)	42% (76)	50% (332)	20% (44)	23% (63)	22% (43)			
Past (have, be)	0% (1)	0% (0)	54% (117)	54% (149)	41% (82)			
Histor-Present	38% (68)	33% (222)	22% (47)	9% (26)	28% (56)			
Ambiguous	20% (36)	17% (117)	4% (9)	14% (37)	9% (18)			
TOTAL	100% (181)	100% (671)	100% (217)	100% (215)	100% (199)			

The distribution of past marking in the complicating and non-complicating action clauses in Bonnette's data remains significant, although not as dramatic as in the single car-accident narrative above. Combining both the strong/weak and have/be categories, past marking is only 42% in the complicating action clauses, but 74% in the non-complicating action clauses, where events do not have the temporal juncture ordering which allows them to be "understood as having occurred prior to the moment of speaking, with or without the past form" (Schiffrin 1981:51). Bonnette's data and the Samaná data are very similar with respect to the relative frequencies of past forms in complicating and non-complicating action clauses.<sup>22/</sup>

Bonnette's data and the Samaná data are also very comparable to each other (and both to Schiffrin 1981) with respect to their frequency of "Historical Present" marking in complicating action clauses (38% and 33% respectively). The major difference between them is in relation to their "historical present" marking outside the complicating action clause: in Bonnette's data the relative frequency here is 22%--lower than in the complicating action clauses, but still relatively high compared to the low 9% relative frequency in Samaná. Furthermore, Bonnette's "other genre" data confirm the trend, suggesting that there are factors other than the logic of the "historical present" and narrative clause structure which keep Bonnette from marking more past forms.

A final point to be noted is that not one of Bonnette's 194 unmarked strong and weak verbs shows a present tense -s suffix, even though more than half of them (110, or 57%) have a third person singular subject.<sup>23/</sup> Although Bonnette doesn't use much third singular -s in present-reference contexts (21%, 5/24), she does use some, and we might reasonably have expected her to use some in her "historical presents" too.



#### 4. Conclusion

Bickerton (1975) proposed a set of constraints on past marking in the Guyanese mesolect which, as I have attempted to show in this paper, are supported in some respects by Bonnette's data (the favoring effect of *have*, *be*, past participles for instance), but not others (weak syllables aren't more favorable to past marking than strong verbs, nor does Bickerton's crucial punctual predicate constraint favor past marking as he suggests it should), cautioning us against treating them as sacrosanct or criterial when considering past marking in other creole or dialect communities. The alternative suggestion of Rickford (1987) that Bonnette's unmarked past verbs might be treated as instances of the historical present receives some support from the fact that her complicating action clauses show more past marking than her non-complicating action clauses, and that the relative frequency of her putative historical presents in complicating action clauses approaches that found by Schiffrin (1981) for American English narratives and Tagliamonte and Poplack (1986) for Samaná. At the same time, Bonnette's persistent non-use of present tense -s in any of her past-reference verbs makes it difficult to maintain that she really is using a "historical present" system, and the fact that her use of non-past marked forms in non-complicated clauses remains relatively high (22%) suggests that more is going on.

Exactly what more is going on will require further research. Phonological factors clearly play some role, more than they are usually assumed to do with mesolectal past marking, but they do not tell the whole or even the major story. One possibility, downplayed in Rickford (1987:188) because Bickerton (1975:109) had described the shift from an anterior to a past tense marking system as being one of the earliest developments in decreolization, is that Bonnette is partially using *ed* and *u* as a basilectal speaker might use *bin* and *u*--to mark anterior and non-anterior respectively. If she were, it's her non-temporal punctuals (past reference non-statives) which we'd expect to be unmarked (except for the relatively infrequent cases in which their reference was anterior to that of some other verb which occurred before them in narrative structure: see Bickerton 1975:53, Rickford 1987:141), and her non-temporal non-punctuals (including past reference statives) which we'd expect to be marked. Bonnette is clearly not following an anterior marking system perfectly, or far more of her punctuals would be unmarked and more of her non-punctuals marked. But her relative frequencies for punctual and non-punctuals (outside of temporal clauses) are in line with partial adherence to such a system, the punctuals or non-statives requiring less marking than the non-punctual or stative predicates. It should be noted that Bickerton's contrary prediction--that mesolectal punctuals would have less past marking than non-punctuals--is NOT in accord with what an anterior system would predict. It assumes that mesolectal speakers have basically cut loose from the basilectal system, and are being affected by the results of various decreolizing processes.

Directions for future research on this subject should obviously include examination of past marking in the recorded speech of other mesolectal speakers, and attention to each of the factors already considered and others not seriously explored as yet, such as the effect

of style. For instance, Bonnette's strong verb past marking on the first reel, BH78, is 77%, but on the last reel, after she and everyone else had become far more informal, only 51%. Furthermore, it should be a multivariate analysis, using the VARBRUL program or other regression programs to control for the simultaneous effects of each of several different factor groups in each environment. It should attend equally to phonological as well as grammatical/semantic factors, and rather than assuming that basilectal anterior marking and mesolectal/acrolectal past and historical present marking are poles apart, it should attempt to unravel the intricate relations (similarities as well as differences) between them.

Bonnette is neither a basilectal creole speaker nor an acrolectal Standard English (SE) speaker. If she doesn't follow the SE system exactly, neither does she follow the basilectal system. She has more unmarked past forms than we'd expect from a speaker as "high" on the continuum as her other grammatical features show her to be, and this doesn't appear to be unique to her or the Guyanese mesolect.<sup>24</sup> Accounting for this fact, as for the complex of criss-crossing constraints which is involved, is what makes mesolectal past marking a challenging and attractive research site for the variationist.

#### NOTES

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1/Winford (1972) provides interesting data on the relative frequency of *-ed*, *does* and *go* in Trinidad by social class and style. But the study is pre-Dynamics and doesn't consider Bickerton's internal constraints. Singler (1984) does, but his data are from a West African pidgin-speaking community.

2/Line numbers are the same as in Rickford (1987), but in the interest of keeping the text readable, I've used a modified English orthography here instead of the phonemic orthography used in the book.

3/Given participial predicates, as in *was ... scared*, *was ... settled*, I counted the *be* forms as the main verb, and included these (rather than the participle) in the overall past marking count. But it should be noted that both participles in this text do have *ed*, in line with Bickerton's (1975:105) analysis.

4/The frequency of past tense marking on strong verbs is given as 22% (T4/18) in Rickford (1987:185) instead of 16% (3/18), because *had* wasn't excluded as a separate category in the former count.

5/For instance, the deletion or non-generation of aspect markers in temporal clauses, or the process by which stem-forms are said to be retained after *doz*-loss "even when their reference was clearly past"



(Bickerton 1975:149).

6/These figures are marginally different from those in Rickford (1987) because I omitted to include with the "non-punctual" category one of the punctual verbs in a temporal clause. If we follow Bickerton in restricting our attention to strong and weak verbs only, and exclude say and tell, as Bickerton does (1975:154), punctual past marking would be 5% (17/20) and non-punctual marking 50% (2/4), still not supporting his hypothesis that punctuality favors past marking.

7/This analysis, including its references to earlier work by Labov, Schiffrin, Givón, Bickerton, Boliée and Corne on narrative structure, the historical present and creole tense-marking, was first done in 1983.

8/Verbs in subordinate and when clauses are excluded from the count in this section (as Labov 1972:362 notes, "It is only independent clauses which can function as narrative clauses"), but in section 2, they are considered and counted as non-narrative (or non-complicating action) clauses.

9/These included verbs like put and cut which show no stem change in Standard English either, and so could not be coded as past-marked or not, and cases in which a weak non-syllabic was followed by a d (as in touch dem).

10/Bonnette doesn't use preverbal bin, although she does have one example of a prelocative bin ("Oh, she bin here this morning?" S179:114), one of a preadjectival did ("When you did small ...? S178, 217) and one of a preverbal did ("We di say ... S179, 044).

11/This is true even though Bonnette's 23 weak syllabics include 13 cases of start, the syllabic verb which shows the most past-marking in Bickerton's data (1975:108). Only one of Bonnette's start tokens is past-marked, but all three occurrences of want (another syllabic verb) in her interview are past-marked.

12/Tagliamonte and Poplack's table 9 (ibid., p. 19) includes these Samaná figures: Strong: 26.2%, Weak syllabic: 55.2%, Weak non-syllabic, 54.2%. But since the strong verbs here are only those which involve stem change and the addition of a final t or d, it's difficult to compare them meaningfully with Bickerton's data or mine.

13/The claim is made (Bickerton 1975:154) that these verbs follow minor rules of their own, but the essential rule they follow is their low frequency of past marking.

14A case could conceivably be made for excluding say in future work because of its exceptionally low frequency over a relatively large sample, but it will be retained for this paper to facilitate comparison with Tagliamonte and Poplack (1986).

15/Their observation (1986:11) that Bonnette's complicating action clauses contain only "ambiguous" verbs is no longer valid in the light of table 4.

16/For comparable data on Samaná, see Tagliamonte and Poplack's figure 1 (1986:21). It's difficult to figure out the exact frequencies from the height of the relevant bars in that figure, so I can't report those data here. Note too that both my analysis and theirs differ from Bickerton in including tell, say and the other verbs he excludes (see discussion under table 4 above).

17/Bonnette has some clear examples of doz deletion elsewhere too, and more doz use than we might have predicted of a speaker this high in the continuum (17 doz V, 11 dozn V, and 5 don V), reminding us to be wary of taking the notion of "toss" in the continuum too seriously.

18/This figure would go to 83% (45/54) if married predicates are included in the count (cf. Bickerton 1975:28).

19/The presence of clearly past-marked forms in the auxiliary (was, had) may be what favors past marking in the participle as well.

20/Strictly speaking, an "ambiguous" category of the type which Tagliamonte and Poplack set up might include some strong verbs, ones (like run in Bonnette's corpus) which haven't yet turned up in past-marked forms. But Tagliamonte and Poplack observe (p.16): "the ambiguous cases are of course all weak verbs."

21/Schiffrin's (1981:47) 30% figure is a measure of historical present tense marking in past-reference clauses only.

22/Note, though, that if we further exclude be and have, the proportion of past marked non-complicating action clauses would rise to 40% in Bonnette's data, 50% in the Samaná data--in both cases becoming virtually identical in the process to past marking in the complicating action clause.

23/It would be nice to know exactly how many -s marked forms there are among Tagliamonte and Poplack's "historical presents."

24/Data which I've recently seen from Barbados appear similar, speakers there producing some past-reference unmarked punctual verbs although "Bajan" is usually considered to be less distinctly creole and more English-like than most other Caribbean varieties.

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# TENSE-MOOD-ASPECT ACROSS THE SPANISH-ENGLISH

## BILINGUAL CONTINUUM\*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine processes of simplification and loss of tense-mood-aspect morphology in the Spanish spoken by Spanish-English bilinguals living in the eastern section of Los Angeles, and the effect that these processes may have on the expression of meaning complexes (Klein & Stutterheim n.d.).<sup>1</sup> In two types of texts. This study is part of a larger project which investigates the speech of 50 Mexican-American bilinguals who represent three different immigrant groups according to length of stay in the US. Group 1 (also referred to as first generation immigrants) includes speakers born in Mexico, who immigrated to the US after the age of eleven.<sup>2</sup> Group 2 encompasses speakers either born in the US or who have immigrated from Mexico before the age of six. Those included in this study were all born in Los Angeles. Group 3 also comprises speakers born in Los Angeles; in addition, at least one parent must respond to the definition of those in group 2. A subset sample of 14 speakers is included in the study of tense-mood-aspect: six from group 1, and four each from groups 2 and 3. The data were obtained through recordings of conversations between the author<sup>3</sup> and these speakers.

The demographic complexity of the Mexican-American community accounts for the existence of what I call a bilingual continuum, similar to a creole continuum in that one may identify a series of lects ranging from full-fledged to emblematic Spanish and, vice-versa, from full-fledged to emblematic English.<sup>4</sup>

### 2. THE DATA

The goals of our study required the use of careful sociolinguistic methodology in order to succeed in obtaining comparable data across speakers, while at the same time maintaining an atmosphere of 'social conversation' during the recordings. Crucial to a study of the impact of language contact on both form and function of verb morphology is spoken data ranging along a wide variety of topics and discourse genres which ensure the creation of contexts for the use of every form of the verb system hypothesized to be available in the language of first generation immigrants. The data obtained from every speaker represent the variety of topics/discourse genres expected.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It was expected that intensive and prolonged contact with a superordinate language, and consequent reduction of domains of use, would have consequences on the Spanish verb system of bilinguals such that it would evidence processes of