

## **“Me nah bin got no money, man”. Analysis of past tense in Bequian**

Past tense marking is often used as an exemplar of how the creole continuum models variation in the tense mood and aspect systems (TMA) of (Atlantic) creole languages. However, data on past tense marking (PTM) from recordings of spoken discourse in Bequia (Eastern Caribbean) doesn't seem to fit neatly into the continuum model.

I sampled PTM in nine speakers (three per village: Hamilton, Southside, Mount Pleasant) on the island. Previous work on presence/absence of BE, existentials and negation has claimed that Hamilton speakers use a more “creole-like” grammar while in Mount Pleasant the grammar is more “non-standard English-like” (Walker & Meyerhoff 2006) i.e. they fall at different ends of the continuum. PTM seems to be a particularly interesting variable for investigating these claims because, unlike the variables reviewed in previous work (all of which are arguably lexical) PTM is considered a core feature of the grammar.

The corpus consists of c.3500 past tense clauses. In order to provide a quantitative analysis of the data I have coded for:

- form of the predicate: inflected verb (weak, semi-strong, strong) versus bare stem
- presence of *bin*, *did*, other auxiliary
- main verb lexeme

But whatever the linguistic differences between the villages are, they don't reduce to a tidy distribution of PTM on a continuum. The multivariate analysis (Goldvarb X, Sankoff et al. 2005) aims to examine what constrains the distribution of *bin/did* in the villages? These variants are crucial for two reasons: (i) they are classic markers in the continuum model; (ii) a description of the functions of *bin/did* in a Caribbean creole may shed light on the putative creole past for analogous features in AAVE.

According to the continuum model (Table 1) certain forms are definitional of belonging to a basilect, a mesolect or an acrolect on a continuum scale (Bickerton 1980, Winford 1993). Table 2 shows the frequency of forms in Hamilton and Mt Pleasant. They demonstrate a similar frequency of occurrence for *bin* and *did* in each village (approx. 200 tokens of *bin* and 170 of *did* in Hamilton and 58 *bin* vs. 45 *did* in Mt Pleasant). Even though the continuum model would predict a higher distribution of *bin* than *did* in more creole-like Hamilton and a preference of *did* over *bin* in supposedly mesolectal/acrolectal Mt Pleasant, the data shows a different pattern. *Bin/did* co-occur in each village with the same frequency being an alternative to an inflected verb or a bare stem.

The study is important for various reasons: it provides a baseline for work in progress on the direction of language change in Bequia and it highlights limitations of the continuum model for studying highly variable aspects of creole grammar.

basilect	mesolect	acrolect
<i>bin</i>	<i>did</i>	<i>V+ed</i>
V-Ø	V-Ø	

Table 1. Creole continuum model of PTM

Hamilton	<i>bin/did</i>		<i>V+ed; V- Ø</i>
Mt Pleasant	<i>bin/did</i>	<i>V+ed; V- Ø</i>	

Table 2. Distribution of *bin/did* vs. *V+ed; V- Ø* in Hamilton and Mt Pleasant

