

Doubly marked plurals in Vernacular Liberian English

Variationist methodology has been profitably applied to the study of plural marking vis-à-vis the creole continuum for several Caribbean English-lexifier creoles (CEC's) (Patrick *et al.* 1993, Patrick 1994; Rickford 2006; Seymour 2004). Singler (1997) makes the case for the applicability of the continuum model to an expanded pidgin, Vernacular Liberian English (VLE), the variety spoken by Liberia's non-Settler population. Plural marking in VLE parallels that found in the CEC's. In VLE the basilectal system has a postposed plural element *den* ([dẽ]); overt marking is variable and is sensitive to a set of semantico-syntactic factors, especially humanness and definiteness. The acrolectal system uses English *-z*. VLE strongly disprefers coda consonants, most especially coda clusters. Consequently, the presence or absence of *-z* in VLE output is sensitive to syllable structure.

While basilect and acrolect have discrete systems for plural marking, individual speakers along the continuum tend to display extensive overlap between the two systems. Most speakers tend to use all three options—*den*, *-z*, and zero—as well as a fourth option, double marking, as in (1).

- 1a. What I like, *my children-den* don't like.
- 1b. It made *those girls-den* to leave the team.

The present study starts from the hypothesis that doubly marked plurals (DMP's) themselves form a fundamental element of the mesolectal VLE plural marking system (rather than being quasi-random spillage from the competition between basilectal and acrolectal systems). DMP's also show up in Caribbean creoles, but I confine my focus here to VLE. The data for the present analysis come from the urban mesolect, from a pre-war 1988-89 neighborhood study of 24 lifelong Monroviaans. Speaker selection was based on sex (12 F, 12 M), age (born in the 1930's vs. 1960's), ethnolinguistic affiliation, and level of education. Of the 24 speakers, 20 used DMP's a total of 255 times. The four who did not are men, three of whom hardly used *den* either. Among DMP users, speaker's age proved crucial in distribution. The older speakers largely confined their use to two nouns, *people* and *child*, with the two forms accounting for 93% of all DMP's in their speech in the corpus (114/123). In contrast, younger speakers—regardless of level of education—used DMP's with a large number of types. Even with the expanded usage, however, most of the DMP-marked forms for these younger speakers were definite and human, reflecting the perseveration of the basilectal system.

I carry out three separate Goldvarb analyses for this corpus: one for *people*, a second for *man*, *woman*, and *child* (the only irregular verbs in the

corpus displaying DMP's), and a third for regular nouns. In accounting for the DMP distribution, in particular in positioning DMP's vis-à-vis *den* and *-z*, I present further evidence that the creole continuum model need not be yoked to decreolization and argue that, in their expanded use of DMP's, the younger speakers provide yet another illustration of the way in which the urban mesolect is a prime locus for innovation in VLE (Singler 1987).

References

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