

Bringing variationism to lingua francas: The case of Namibian English

Variationist data are typically drawn from native language varieties for the reason that only native language varieties are perceived to comprise a 'vernacular', that is, what Labov (2001) considers the most authentic, regular, and thus 'analyzable' variety, which one acquires in early childhood. Postcolonial second language (L2) varieties, which one acquires later, are by default considered 'unfocused' and consequently not worth quantifying. This paper proposes to test the relevance of Labovian social variables against Namibian English, an emergent postcolonial L2 variety. It asks the following questions: How does Namibian English vary across Namibia's population? Is variation simply a function of transfers from Namibia's various native languages or are social factors also at play? Dealing with these questions, the paper relies on three datasets. The first consists of natural speech data elicited across intra- and inter-ethnic interactional contexts and illustrates code-switching patterns involving English. The second dataset consists of experimentally elicited English vowel realization patterns. Finally, the third dataset involves experimentally elicited grammatical data on Namibian English aspect marking patterns. The sample involves 280 young ethnically diverse urban informants who self-identified as representative of one of the three apartheid-era Namibian racial categories, namely, 'Black', 'Coloured', and 'White'. The natural speech data reveal that women use English more often than men, an indication of how relevant Labov's gender variable is to predicting variation in Namibia. They also show that Coloured and Black English varieties converge around a range of Coloured Afrikaans discourse markers. At the phonetic level, young Black women converge with Coloured English vowel realizations (rather than with White Namibian English ones) while men's varieties are more prone to transfers from native languages. Grammatical variation offers a slightly different picture: No Black-to-Coloured convergence but mutual convergence around an ethnically neutral pattern marked by fewer transfers from native languages. Data analysis ends with an ethnographic contextualisation: Variation in Namibian English is defined by an ideology of urban authenticity that breeds pressure to simultaneously conceal ethnicity and to project urban credentials via Coloured linguistic features. The theoretical conclusions are that one can expect English as a postcolonial lingua franca to show variation along ethnic lines, likely conditioned by not only gender and social class but also length of residence in urban areas. The paper ends with a reflection on how the Labovian distinction between 'vernacular' and 'standard variety' is mirrored in postcolonial (English) varieties.

References

Labov, William. 2001. *Principles of linguistic change. Volume 2: Social factors*. London: Wiley.