

## The Persistence of Grammatical Constraints: “Urban sojourners” from Bequia

Recent work on phonological variation largely supports the apparent-time construct, though we also know some change across the individual’s lifespan is possible (Labov 1994; Harrington et al. 2000; Nakhola & Saanilahti 2004; Sankoff in press; Blondeau et al. in press). We ask: how much change is possible in an individual’s *grammar*? How much is grammar affected by extended absence in a new, urban speech community?

Social dialect surveys traditionally exclude individuals who have left their community for an extended period of time, under the assumption that dialect contact causes leveling or restructuring of the linguistic system (cf. Trudgill & Britain in press). However, our ongoing work in the eastern Caribbean suggests that changes affecting grammatical variables, like phonological variables, are more constrained than we might think. Raw frequencies of vernacular variants may fluctuate, but language-internal constraints persist.

Our data come from interviews recorded on the island of Bequia, where people have a tradition of employment-related migration. Many have spent part of their adult life working in cities in the UK or North America, returning to Bequia upon retirement. While such “urban sojourners” may sound very different from their stay-at-home peers, closer examination reveals that the extent to which their grammar has been restructured is largely superficial. In the case of the copula, the overall frequency of the zero variant is dramatically reduced; nevertheless, these urban sojourners continue to share the ranking of language-internal constraints with the rest of their home community.

For example, stay-at-home speakers from Hamilton village have an average of 49% zero copula, but one speaker, who spent several decades in the UK, has a rate of only 8%. However, a cross-tabulation of the distribution of zero forms for all Hamilton speakers and the strongest linguistic constraint—following grammatical category—shows no differences in the distribution of zero and overt forms of the copula for stay-at-home Hamilton speakers and the speaker who had extended UK residence. All speakers, including the urban sojourner, strongly favor zero copula before *gon(na)*, *V-ing* and *Adjectives* and disfavor it before *NPs*, *PPs*, *Locative adverbs*.

These results complement the constraints found to operate with phonological variables: just as an individual’s change over the lifespan is consistent with the direction of change in the community, urban sojourners don’t fundamentally restructure their underlying grammar. More importantly, these results reaffirm the model of variable rules in a community grammar, rather than an aggregation of idiosyncratic norms.

## References

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