

## English-based copula variation in Britain: Past, present, and future

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The United Kingdom is rare in being home to speakers of dozens of languages and dialects that exhibit variation in copula forms, making it a region well-suited to new research in copula variation. With a focus on directions for future research, this talk will review current knowledge about copula variation in varieties of English and English-based creoles in the UK, and will outline some of the challenges and opportunities in planning new research.

The first part of the talk reviews descriptions of copula variation in three language groups: (i) English-based creoles, (ii) postcolonial varieties of English (L2 or bilingual varieties, termed 'New Englishes'), and (iii) traditional British dialects of English. Although the data reviewed for the first two groups were not all collected in the UK, comparable populations can be found in the UK. In the case of creoles and New Englishes, I focus on patterns of copula omission according to predicate type. Creoles show a remarkable consistency in this respect, with predicate type showing increasing rates of copula absence in the following order: NP > Locative > Adjectival > V-ing > *gonna*. Similarities in this conditioning of copula omission across creoles have been attributed to generalised second language learning processes that operated early in the development of creoles. However, a comparison to copula omission by predicate type in L2 speech, including New Englishes, shows that the creole pattern is very distinctive (Sharma & Rickford 2009). In the case of creoles as well as New Englishes, I suggest strong substrate sources for the resulting systems, while also noting some further influences, particularly in relation to tense and aspect as well as specific acquisitional constraints. The typology of copula systems in the third language group, British English dialects, does not involve omission but rather distinct types of levelling across paradigms of overt forms. In this case, I present a summary of traditional systems across England and a brief account of the typological limits of the range we find (Bresnan, Deo & Sharma 2007).

The second half of the talk turns to challenges and opportunities in conducting new empirical research on English copula variation in the UK. All of the cases outlined raise interesting theoretical questions, including the direction of structural change as systems are lost, and the typology of systems that are currently in evidence. For instance, in the case of creoles, does the Jamaican Creole system come to dominate in the UK, as more generally claimed for creole-speaking communities in the UK, or does levelling/loss follow some other path? The challenge here is data and speakers: The number of Creole speakers overall is in decline, as the peak of migration was in the 1960s and younger generations are no longer creole-speaking. However, I present demographics to show that new speakers of diverse creoles are constantly arriving, and outline the potential for studying individual creole systems as well as koineisation and attrition in cross-community interaction. A related challenge is the substantial naturalistic data required for variation analysis and the absence of British corpora for these languages. The potential as well as difficulties associated with experimental elicitation of such data will be addressed briefly. There is also plenty of scope for studying the relative influence of L1 transfer as opposed to syntactic and semantic processes within copula systems in bilingual and L2 varieties in the UK, though again requiring fairly substantial original empirical work. With respect to British English dialects, the opportunities are more robust, in that historical and contemporary dialect corpora exist, and the outlined typology can be evaluated for ongoing change. For instance, one planned project will examine levelling and loss of systems in British dialects with the aim to establish the interplay of syntactic (e.g. combinatorial variability, Adger 2006), typological (e.g. unattested systems), and social factors in driving which systems are found to be the most resilient.

### References

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