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The local, the global, and the authentic: Language change and the construction of authenticity in Bequia

Abstract: This paper examines processes of authentication in Paget Farm, one of the communities in creole-speaking Bequia (St Vincent and the Grenadines). The study is based on sociolinguistic interviews with two generations of Bequia speakers, adolescents and their grandparents, recorded in the course of semi-ethnographic fieldwork. Several variants of past temporal reference were analysed: bare verbs (I go yesterday) vs. inflected verbs (I went yesterday), and pre-verbal been (I been go yesterday) – a stigmatised, “old-fashioned”, basilectal form (Patrick 1999). This paper not only shows that authenticity, rather than being a constant quality of a speech community, is linguistically and socially constructed, but also considers speakers’ motivations behind this process. Crucial to authentication are the social meanings of linguistic variables, local ideologies, as well as the larger socio-economic context. Moreover, I demonstrate that creole speaking communities, where the relationship between the global and the local is particularly strong, provide an especially fruitful area for research on authenticity.

1. Introduction

The concept of authenticity has recently received considerable attention from sociolinguists interested in language variation. Research on stylistic variation has emphasised that speakers’ identity, rather than being a fixed and a constant property of an individual, is negotiated across specific interactional and sociocultural contexts, and the deployment of variable linguistic forms is crucial in this process (Eckert 2008). It has been argued that authenticity too is not an established quality of communities and varieties but an outcome of a process of identity formation (Bucholtz 2003, Coupland 2010). This stand on authenticity differs from the earlier applications of the concept in the field where speech communities were labelled as authentic or not based on how vernacular or “natural” a researcher classified them to be in relation to some imagined inauthentic qualities. According to Bucholtz, authenticity is negotiated by individuals and communities through the process of authentication, understood as a set of tactics which speakers engage in (cf. Bucholtz 2003, Bucholtz and Hall 2004). In this process, authenticity is negotiated through a range of resources which carry symbolic value relevant to a particular group in relation to some larger socio-cultural context.