ABSTRACT

CAROLINE MARIE MYRICK. Putting Saban English on the Map: A Descriptive Analysis of English Language Variation on Saba. (Under the direction of Professor Walt Wolfram.)

Small Caribbean islands with mixed-ethnic populations offer a unique venue for examining principles of language contact and sociolinguistic variation. This paper considers English language variation on the island of Saba, a Dutch municipality located in the Eastern Caribbean and home to less than 2,000 local residents. What phonological and morphosyntactic variation exists in Saban English? How does Saban English compare with other Englishes in the Caribbean English diaspora and with other American English varieties? How have founder effects, contact effects, and innovation influenced the development of Saban English? How do these findings align with creole classification schema such as basilect, mesolect, and acrolect?

Data come from over 30 sociolinguistic interviews with long-term residents conducted on Saba in 2012. Phonological and morphosyntactic features are analyzed considering the interrelationship between effects from heritage languages, race/ethnicity, community, and generation. Acoustic analysis shows cross-community and generational stability in the overall vowel system, though differing in many ways from other Anglophone and Creole dialects of the Caribbean. Rhoticity shows similarities and differences with other Caribbean and American English r-less patterns, particularly related to phonetic constraints. Some morphosyntactic traits (e.g. copula absence) align partially with other Caribbean English varieties but lack an ethnic divide characteristically shown in Caribbean and Southern American English varieties. Other
morphosyntactic patterns (e.g. a-prefixing) parallel uses in the rural American South. Analyses of prepositional and pronomial systems suggest substrate effects from original Dutch founders. Finally, although Saban English shows alignment with some prototypical creole features (e.g. question non-inversion) it is not neatly classifiable into traditional categories such as basilect, mesolect, and acrolect, nor does it support a “creole continuum.” This paper underscores the persistence of long-term variation that can occur on small, historically isolated islands, and reinforces the complex intersection of linguistic, social, and individual variation in small, isolated island communities.