Creole Language Prosody in the 21st Century
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Research on prosody and intonation in Creole languages remains an untapped resource. However, it has import for how or if phonological systems have changed or developed under contact, and can contribute to our understanding of the scope of diversity in prosodic systems (Gooden, Drayton & Beckman 2009). Further, their hybrid histories and current linguistic ecologies present descriptive and analytical treasure troves. I review research on the prosody of several Caribbean Creoles, focusing on Jamaican Creole (JC) to highlight current challenges and opportunities in creole language prosody research.

Prosody is important to the study of the evolution of, and variation in Creole languages (Clements & Gooden 2011; Gooden 2017), and very likely played an important role in (early) creole formation (Givón 1979; Haspelmath 2011; Wichman 2011). It is well-known that Creoles defy dichotomous formulations of prosodic typology (Hyman 2006; Yapko 2009; Gooden, Drayton & Beckman 2009; Remijsen, Martis & Severing 2014), and typologically similar or historically related Creoles can show significant differences. So, prosodic hybridity in Saramaccan is attributed to lexical tone and stress (accent) contrasts associated with different lexical strata (Good 2006; McWhorter & Good 2012), while both Aruban and Curaçaoan Papiamentu have lexical tone and lexical stress, with words differentiated by syntactic category and input language (Rivera-Castillo & Pickering 2004; Remijsen & Van Hueven 2005; Rivera-Castillo 2006) and Palenquero shows Bantu-like substrate features (Hyman & Schwegler 2008).

Despite this, morphosyntactic and morpholexical properties have received the lion’s share of attention, with investigations in phonology/phonetics sorely lagging behind (Singh & Muysken 1995). Addressing this lacuna is important for sorting out the full extent of parametric variation in prosody, which current results suggest include prosodic structure, tonal alignment, pitch accent realization and stress placement (Gooden & Drayton 2017).

Turning attention to sociological variation, staunchly negative ideological stances towards JC contribute to sociophonetic differences, and dialects are said to be “sharply distinguishable by prosodic features” (LePage 1958:63). Still, studies focus broadly on social dialect differences (Irvine 2004, 2008; Wassink & Dyer 2004) or rural-urban distinctions (Patrick, 1999) and questions regarding, dialectal or sociolectal variation in prosody have not been fully explored. Analysis of field recordings from two rural conservative varieties, including a maroon settlement, shows limited dialectal differences. The maroon community (Eastern region – DeCamp 1960) has remained relatively isolated (Smith & van de Vate, 2012), such that the properties are hypothetically closer to early JC. However, we must be cautious, as common ecological contexts of rurality might have had a similar effect of minimizing differences. Comparatively, we see evidence of ethnolinguistic variation and convergence in Trinidadian Creole among Afro-Trinidadians recorded in the 1970s and 2003, due to ethnolinguistic contact between Afro and Indo-Trinidadians, largely absent in the 1970s (Gooden & Drayton 2017).

I show that observed patterns reflect crosslinguistic properties of intonation languages with similar prosodic structures. This is important because not all of these languages are contact languages or they exist in varied ecologies different from that of Creoles, facts that speaks firmly against creole exceptionalism.

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