

GENDER AND TENSE/ASPECT IN BELIZEAN CREOLE

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

Claims relating to the role of gender in language change have been varied and often contradictory. For example, it has been argued that women favour prestige varieties as a way to compensate for their lack of power, whereas men prefer the feeling of camaraderie which results from the use of vernacular variants (Trudgill 1978). A related claim is that women initiate change, but only in the direction of the standard. On the other hand, linguistic change is assumed to go in the direction of vernacular forms (Labov 1972), which would imply that indeed men lead in the development of linguistic change. Does this also mean that men and women increasingly diverge in their language patterns? The claim has in fact been made that men and women use distinct communicative mechanisms, or even speak different ‘languages’. The U.S. mass media regularly report simplified abstracts of (largely unpublished) neurological research suggesting that men and women use different parts of the brain. For example, it is stated that “male brains are more asymmetrical than female brains”, and that “men use [when reading] a minute area in the left side of the brain while women use areas in both sides of the brain” (*New York Times*, 16 February 1995); that “women are better at verbal memory...while men consistently do better at spatial reasoning” (*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, 11 February 1996); that “men as a group excel at tasks that involve orienting objects in space;...women, on the other hand, seem to be more adept at communication, both verbal and nonverbal” (*Time*, 17 July 1995).

One problematic aspect of most gender studies is their limitation to Western societies, and primarily the middle classes, hardly a valid platform leading to gender generalisations. The few studies investigating more ethnically and socioeconomically diverse groups in Western-type societies or in developing countries have found that sex-based differentiation is much more complex than the brief description above. The putative effect of gender on linguistic change is particularly relevant in the context of a colonial past, which is likely to lead to a complex multidimensional space (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985). In a context forcing men and women into equally subjugated positions, both sexes learn similar survival mechanisms, which no doubt entail extensive lectal shifting for necessary social adjustments. It may thus

¹ My sincere thanks to Chris Corne and France Mugler for their helpful comments.

be hypothesised that postcolonial situations, and others, in which men and women share powerlessness, may involve fewer instances of sex-based language differentiation.²

The problem in many gender studies is one of methodological scope: explanations are directly dependent on the kind and range of speech data collected, and analyses based on socially restricted cross-sections of men and women can hardly provide universal explanations of gender behaviour. This study is an investigation of the putative role of gender as a social variable in the diffusion of linguistic change in a creole continuum—specifically, the English-based continuum in Belize, Central America. A previous study of copular variation in a Belizean rural community concludes that women extensively use the vernacular (creole basilects) in community activities and thus cooperate with men to preserve local identity and the traditional values rooted in the creole vernacular (Escure 1991). In addition, age appears to be a relevant factor which intersects with gender: middle-aged women exhibit especially extensive style-shifting, commonly using acrolects for certain official functions. Some age groups evidence no sex-based language differentiation, whereas others do, and differences appear to be related to local social status more than to sex, or gender. In fact, all Belizeans, men as well as women, evidence to a certain extent their ability to style-shift in various contexts, yet women exhibit a greater overall ability or willingness to shift across lects. I call this cross-lectal shifting tendency 'linguistic bipolarity'. This finding is based solely on the analysis of copular variants and must of course be further tested in the context of other linguistic features.

With this goal in mind, I investigated the functioning of certain tense/aspect categories (especially as they involve past tense reference) in the community of Placencia. If the distribution of tense-marking variants conforms to that of copular forms, then the hypothesis of women's linguistic bipolarity will be strengthened. Generally, the broad range of linguistic choices available to the members of a Creole community aptly reflects the conflicting identities common to postcolonial societies. Extensive lectal shifts may be part of the decreolisation process which is often assumed to be happening in the West Indies, as well as in other developing or postcolonial societies. If decreolisation is viewed as internal change away from an earlier grammar, systematic formal differences observed between basilects and mesolects could be viewed as indicators of ongoing historical change, and it would then be particularly interesting to observe whether one sex or the other is more actively involved in ongoing linguistic change.

Lectal shifting can be viewed as an extension of individual repertoires, that is, the addition of acquired second dialects to native vernacular basilects, rather than the substitution of more standardised varieties for non-standard lects. This interpretation is supported by the fact that most Creole speakers control a broad repertoire which keeps expanding during their lifetime.

2. LECT-SHIFTING AND METHODOLOGY

A prerequisite in the investigation of the role of gender in linguistic change is the accurate identification of the features which characterise basilects and mesolects in a typically fluctuating continuum of overlapping varieties. In addition, it is essential to ascertain the

² See Escure (1991) for a brief overview of gender and language research. A typical problem in gender research has been the confusion of such notions as 'sex' (the biological differences between men and women), and 'gender' (the construction or interpretation of the social roles assigned to men and women).

extent of individual repertoires for both sexes, since a single speech sample for each individual may lead to the fallacy that this individual always performs at a single stylistic level. Thus a variety of natural contexts should preferably be included in the survey of speech varieties.

The speech data that make up this corpus result from years of participant-observation in the Belizean village of Placencia, located on an isolated peninsula of the Caribbean coast of Central America (Escure 1983b).³ Spontaneous conversations were recorded either by a local fieldworker or by myself, and were conducted in natural settings, such as private homes, the beach, or local shops, systematically avoiding formal interviews. This data base is derived from several interactions with five men and six women, who range in age between 30 and 65.⁴ Selection of those samples was based on three criteria: (a) spontaneity; (b) reference to past events; and (c) representation of distinct styles, in particular basilects and mesolects, since acrolects are relatively rare in a natural local context. Among the samples included in this analysis, the closest to an acrolect was produced by the village Anglican priest (Flo) during a church service, and indeed church may be the only truly appropriate context for acrolectal production in Placencia, and probably the highest variety serving as a counterpart to Standard Caribbean English. Speakers in formal contexts are much more likely to produce meso-acrolects, that is, highly volatile varieties sharing various lectal features.

There is no absolute definition of lectal boundaries. Given that all speakers are able to shift at least between vernacular, traditional styles (basilects), and less casual varieties approaching Standard English in variable ways (mesolects or meso-acrolects), speakers' choices are determined by the context as well as by their own interpretation of stylistic appropriateness, and this may vary from one individual to another. I consider that a reliable measure of lectal level may be derived from comparing competing variants for the same feature: for example, in Belize, copular variants include *de* (clearly basilectal); *zero-morpheme* (which occurs at all levels depending on following grammatical environments); and inflected forms of English *be* (mesolectal and acrolectal). Relative frequencies of those variants permit an assessment of lectal level, which can independently be confirmed by other linguistic or extra linguistic features, such as phonological variation and contextual knowledge.

In the case of *past* tense/aspect marking, three variants can also help assess lectal level: *me* (exclusively basilectal); *zero-marking* (distributed across basilects and mesolects); and English standard-like *preterite* forms, which occur with strong verbs, and mostly in mesolects and acrolects. An interesting change is noted in the Placencia community, namely the apparent loss of constraints on differential markings for the anterior aspect and the stative semantic class of verbs.⁵

3. IS THERE PAST REFERENCE IN BELIZE?

Bickerton (1975) has claimed that creole verbal systems, contrary to their Indo-European superstrates, do not have tense, but rely instead on aspectual and semantic distinctions. In the case of the reflexes of Standard English past tense marking in English-based Caribbean

³ In the last few years, a road and an airstrip have been constructed, opening up the area to a fledgling industry. Escure (forthcoming) discusses the impact of this change on the region and on the language.

⁴ The women are overall older than the men, which can admittedly constitute a potentially significant difference, but the age variable will not be included in this study.

⁵ The phonological constraints on unmarked verbal past forms are not investigated here.

creoles, relevant distinctions would include [punctual versus non-punctual] and [anterior versus non-anterior] aspects; and [stative versus non-stative] as semantic verbal subcategorisation. According to Bickerton, Guyanese Creole non-stative propositions use the bare verb stem form for 'unmarked simple past', whereas stative verbs use a preverbal morpheme to refer to simple past. Non-stative verbs are marked by preverbal morphemes for 'nonpast', that is, either for 'anterior aspect', which is often referred to as 'past before past', or 'continuative or iterative' aspect. Adjectives (functioning as stative verbs) are said to take a combination of markers when a process rather than a state is indicated (Bickerton 1975:30). The system suggested by Bickerton, and endorsed by many other creolists is summarised in Table 1.

TABLE 1: CREOLE VERBAL SYSTEMS (BICKERTON 1975)

1.	0	[+stative] = nonpast
2.	0	[-stative] = simple past
3.	Anterior	[+stative] = simple past
4.	Anterior	[-stative] = past before past (said to be rare)

However, this analysis has been variously challenged for Guyanese Creole (Gibson 1986), for Jamaican Creole (Pollard 1989), and generally for Caribbean English creoles (Winford 1993:66). It is demonstrated below that the stative/non-stative distinction for anterior/non-anterior marking is not, or is perhaps no longer, represented in Belizean. Thus, the claim that English, which has marked past tense, and unmarked nonpast (in fact habitual or iterative aspect), is entirely different from its related creole, is open to question. It is not obvious that creoles are indeed so different from their lexical base or any other language in terms of their tense/aspect system, as also stated in Corne (1995), Escure (1993a), Tagliamonte and Poplack (1993), not to mention possible counterexamples in non-standard forms and casual styles of standard varieties.

There are clearly similarities between English and English-based creoles: English, like creole, marks progressive aspect, which is nonpast (*I'm singing; I de sing*); some English statives, like their creole counterparts, cannot be used in the progressive aspect, as in **I'm knowing; *I'm believing*.⁶ Most importantly, Bickerton's claim that the use of the 'anterior' aspect marker (*me* in Belize) is rare before non-stative verbs, and if it occurs means 'past-before-past', or at least is 'related to a prior state', is not consistently supported by my Belizean data, as shown below in (2), (3) and (4). Bickerton's claim that the copula/zero copula does not co-occur with the anterior marker unless it refers to a process rather than a state is contradicted as well by sentences such as (4). In conclusion, it is not obvious that *me* is semantically differentiated from the past reference involved in the unmarked verb stem. What is clear, however, is that there *is* a rich system for past reference in creoles, often independent from aspect, which is represented throughout the varieties of the Belizean continuum. Whether or not the coexisting morphemes are related to significant semantic distinctions, they no doubt have strong lectal or stylistic associations, and provide clues to the linguistic choices effected by the speaker. It is from this perspective that I will evaluate

⁶ *I'm believing* is sometimes acceptable in certain English varieties (e.g. New Zealand English, according to Chris Corne (pers. comm.)). It is possible in American English as well, but in contexts usually marked for emphasis. These options may indicate an ongoing shift in the use of the progressive aspect with statives.

the function of gender in ongoing changes affecting past tense referential mechanisms. Each of the three lectal variants is discussed below.

3.1 LECTAL VARIANT 1

Basilectal *me* ('bin/ben' in other West-Indian creoles) is a preverbal morpheme, with a negative counterpart *neva* (= *me* + NEG). It is glossed as [ANT] for [anterior] in the following examples, in spite of the fact that the semantic value of *me* seems to be evolving, and that the putative 'past-before-past' or 'prior' semantic connotation does not always apply, as illustrated below. The +/- [ANT] value indicates whether prior reference applies to the verbal unit in the context of a given interaction. The semantic interpretation is determined by pragmatic considerations, and in particular knowledge of the discourse context, and background cultural assumptions requiring of course intimate awareness of the situation.

The following sentences illustrate the changing function of the morpheme *me*. They are all derived from the narrative of a single event: the shipwreck of a Belizean oil tanker off the coast of Guatemala, told by one of the crewmen (Bli) to his friend (Rol), both Placencia natives:

- (1) *Who unu me go da trip fa?*⁷
 who you.PL [+ANT] go that trip for
 For whom had you been working (on that trip)? (Rol 20:15)

Me before the punctual (non-stative) verb 'go' refers to an event **prior** to the 'shipwreck' event, a combination which Bickerton claims is rare (combination 4 in Table 1).

- (2) *A tink da me only six thousand galan me come out.*
 I think TOP [-ANT] only six thousand gallons [-ANT] come out
 I think that only 6,000 gallons leaked out. (Bli 20:17)⁸

This sentence refers to the oil slick following the shipwreck, and begins with a presentative structure which highlights a new topic, namely the amount of oil having escaped from the tanker. In such cases, the topic particle *da* (labelled TOP in the interlinear gloss) frequently occurs, as is evidenced in (3), (4) and (8). The first *me* which occurs between the topic particle *da* and the topic *six thousand galan* is obviously not related to any anterior value, nor is the second *me* preceding the punctual 'come out' (thus violating combination 4 in Table 1). In this sentence, both instances of the putative anterior morpheme now appear to have a topic-marking value, indicating a possible grammaticalisation of *me*, to be discussed in §6.

The uncertain status of *me* is shown when comparing its use as anterior in (1), versus its non-anterior status in (2), although this morpheme co-occurs in both cases with a non-stative verb. Sentence (3) is a paraphrase of (2), which it immediately follows in the conversation: *neva*, the negative form of *me*, occurs in the same context as above, after a topic marker, and indicating also a highlighting function; *me* does not occur before the punctual verb 'come',

⁷ The transliteration representing creole data adopts standard English orthography as much as possible, with a broad phonemic representation in the case of creole (non-English) morphemes such as *me* (past); *de* (progressive); or *unu* (you-plural). Regular phonological differences are marked (the absence of interdental is represented by an orthographic [d] or [t]).

⁸ [TOP] in the literal translations refers to topic markers or highlighters, especially *da*—probably derived from the English deictic 'that', as argued in Escure (1983a).

contrary to (2), yet no semantic change is involved. Thus, in this case, combination 2 is upheld:

- (3) *Da neva much oil come outa di barge.*
 TOP not[-ANT] much oil come out of the barge
 Not much oil leaked out of the tanker. (Bli 20:17)
- (4) *Da me wan propaganda ting; an i come wan*
 TOP [-ANT] a propaganda thing and it come a
time wen dis Guatemala question me kinda hot.
 time when this Guatemalan question [+ANT] kind.of hot
 That was pure propaganda, and it came at the height of the problems with
 Guatemala. (Guatemala threatened to invade and annex Belize.) (Rol 20:17)

In (4), the speaker is saying that the crew of the shipwrecked tanker was kept hostage in a Guatemalan prison because of prior political problems with Belize (Guatemala had threatened to annex Belize). Thus the first *me* has non-anterior reference (a simple past reference before [stative] zero-copula, agreeing with combination 3 in Table 1), and this simple past value is also represented in the non-marking of the verb *come*, but it is also part of a presentative phrase and is, as above, likely to carry a focusing function. As to the second *me*, it has possible anterior reference (also before a [stative] zero-copula) 'kinda hot', now violating the same combination 3.

- (5) *A me tink you me know de guy.*
 I [-ANT] think you [-ANT] know the guy
 I thought you knew the guy. (Co 21:5)

In this sentence, there are two stative verbs, with simple past reference, both agreeing with combination 3, but there is an additional emphatic or contrastive value evidenced in the context, as the sentence is uttered in response to the statement that 'the guy' was not known to the speaker's interlocutor.

In the above examples, only two out of the eight cases of the so-called anterior aspect morpheme *me/neva* can be associated with a truly prior event in (1) and (4), as indicated in the glosses. But most instances of *me* (7 out of 8), regardless of the stative/non-stative status of the following verb, consistently illustrate non-anterior topic-marking functions.

3.2 LECTAL VARIANT 2

The 'bare stem form' has typically the value of simple past, and may appear in basilects and mesolects, as well as in acrolects, as in (6). As can be seen in (3), (4) and (8), this stem freely combines with *me/neva*, and, as indicated above, there is no evidence that the marking/zero marking distinction is related to the stative or non-stative semantic verbal categorisation. The bare stem occurs as well with stative verbs referring to continuing events such as *live*, or existential events such as *baan* 'be born' and *grow* 'grow up' in (7). This is in agreement with combination 2:

- (6) *One come da Wednesday.*
 One (a baby's birth) came on Wednesday. (Til 12:10)

- (7) *All my life I live here, I baan and grow here.*
 All my life I have.lived here, I was.born and grew.up here.
 (Dor 3:3)
- (8) *When I da me wan group leader de, I know dem*
 when I TOP [+ANT] a group leader there I knew those
girl, dey like, well, steady go run go tell, run go tell pan
 girls they liked well always go run go tell run go tell on
dis girl; I try cover up fu dem all de time.
 this girl I tried cover up for them all the time
 When I was group leader, I knew that those girls (office workers) always liked
 to tell on other girls. I tried to cover for them all the time. (Rol 21:3)

In this sentence, unmarked verbs include statives ('know, like') as well as non-statives (the serial strings of punctual verbs ('go, run, tell'), but they refer to a past situation which implies an iterative context. This habitual reference is captured by the adverbial 'steady' which is commonly grammaticalised into an aspect morpheme.

3.3 LECTAL VARIANT 3

The marking of past tense (preterite) as in Standard English occurs commonly in acrolects, as in (9):

- (9) *Dis was about two years ago when I first met him.*
 I met him about two years ago. (Co 21:4)

What is striking in the case of marked preterites is that there is a high frequency at **all** lectal levels of the two verbal auxiliaries *had* and *was*. A close investigation of verbs marked for past tense in this sample, shows that most of the standard preterite forms produced consist of the two verbs *had* and *was*: they represent overall 42.7% of all standard past forms found among Placencia speakers, as represented in Table 2. Most specifically, men use *had/was* 41.8% of the time they produce English-type preterites, and women 43% of the time, that is, an insignificant difference.

TABLE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF *had* AND *was*

Gender	N	n	<i>had</i> (%)	<i>was</i> (%)	Other (%)
Men	536	194	<u>32 (16.5%)</u>	<u>49 (25.3%)</u>	113 (58.2%)
			both 41.8%		
Women	1,067	581	<u>80 (13.8%)</u>	<u>170 (29.3%)</u>	331 (57%)
			both 43%		
All	1,603	775	<u>112 (14.5%)</u>	<u>219 (28.3%)</u>	444 (57.3%)
			both 42.7%		

(N = Total number of verbs; n = Total number of standard type preterites.)

It is not unusual to find sentences in which a past-marked verb co-occurs with an unmarked verb as in (10). Furthermore, *had* and *was* frequently occur in a non-acrolectal

context, as in (11), which is part of a narrative produced in a mesolectal style by a 65-year old woman:

- (10) *I was surpris' when dey tell me de price of cemen'.*
I was surprised when they told me the price of cement.
- (11) *We had bad weda, Placencia was under water.*
We had bad weather, and Placencia was under the water.

It is also very clear that *had* and *was* do not always function as past tense markers: in (12), *had* co-occurs with *me*, with no anterior reference, thus apparently creating a redundant past context. In fact the possibility of psychiatric treatment would have to be **posterior** to the shipwreck and following imprisonment of the crew of the shipwrecked tanker, because of the stress they suffered in the Guatemalan prison (they were held as pawns in exchange for financial compensation by the U.S. company which owned the tanker). Here again *me* appears to be restructured as an emphatic marker (see §6):

- (12) *I hear i me nearly had to get apsychiatric treatment*
I hear he [-ANT] nearly had to get psychiatric treatment
a de rass.
(expletive)
I heard that he was almost forced to undergo some damned psychiatric treatment.

This emphatic function evidenced by *me..had* in (12) is also represented in the context of (13): '*we had to catch de plane*' is clearly not a modal (since the midwife and mother should already have been on the plane, if the weather had allowed), but may be more appropriately translated as 'We finally **did** get on the plane'.

4. MIXED MARKING STRATEGIES

It is interesting to note that the three past variants of verbs are commonly intermixed in the same text, as shown in the following conversation produced by Til, Placencia's midwife and *obeah* woman:

- (13) *I had one case, it was twins. Well, one come da Wednesday, and we had bad weda, Placencia was under wata, no plane can land at di airstrip, no boat come, the road block off, the bridge dey flood. Well data baby neva come. Well, di wata broke Friday morning, and we had to catch di plane and gone up. Dat baby born on di plane just when di plane pitch into Belize. But di ambulance come wid, it had oxygen, you know, come a help di baby. And di baby died on de way to hospital.*

I had a case of twins. One of them was born on a Wednesday. There was a storm that day and Placencia was flooded. Planes couldn't land at the airstrip, boats couldn't dock, the road was blocked, and the bridges flooded. Well, the other baby wouldn't come. When the water broke Friday morning, we finally got on the plane. The baby was born on the plane, just as we descended toward Belize-City. The ambulance met us with oxygen to help the baby. The baby died on the way to the hospital. (Til 12:10)

Out of 19 verbs, nine are marked for past, and among them, four are *had*, and two are *was* (amounting together to 66.6% of all preterite-marked verbs). Of the three remaining

verbs, which are apparently marked, three are in fact nonpast, that is, not truly marked for past, although the context is past: *broke*, *gone* and *born* are used in English-based creoles as the base verb forms (they are thus equivalent to 'break', 'go' and 'be born'). In other words, the English preterite has been lexicalised in creoles as the present form. There are other verbs which follow the same pattern (e.g. *lef* 'to leave', *got* 'to get', *ful* 'to fill', *las* 'to lose'). The following examples collected in spontaneous conversations highlight the nonpast value of these relexified forms:

- (14) *Bra Anansi got up pan di tree and he see Bra Tiger.*
 (15) *I had to lef dat one.*
 (16) *De dance had to brok up.*
 (17) *Dat must got cancer.*
 (18) *Everybody use to got baby easy.*

Those false preterites are more likely to function in the system as unmarked variants, and it would follow from this observation that past marking is even less common in the samples investigated than is represented in the tables. Since the relative incidence of those four or five verbs is somewhat limited, their inclusion as 'marked preterites', although inaccurate, should not change notably the overall significance of the results.

5. DISTRIBUTION OF PAST VARIANTS IN BELIZE AND GENDER

When comparing men's and women's use of the three past variants the difference in their linguistic behaviour appears to confirm claims that men use more vernacular forms than women, at least assuming that the most basilectal forms represent the vernacular. As shown in Table 3, men appear to be overall more partial to the basilectal variant *me/neva*, which occurs over 30% of the time, almost on a par with the other two variants: *unmarked verb forms* (33%), and *marked verbs* according to the standard manner (36%). On the other hand, women display an almost complementary use of *zero* and standard *past* marking (*zero* = 41.9%; and *past* = 54.5%), whereas *me/neva* occurs less than 4% of the time. But when looking at individual behaviour, another interesting pattern emerges: the six women studied display relatively homogeneous usage of variants (Table 4), whereas men contrast much more sharply in their relative use of past variants (Table 5).

TABLE 3: WOMEN'S AND MEN'S USE OF PAST VARIANTS

Gender	N	<i>me/neva</i> n (%)	<i>Zero</i> n (%)	Preterites n (%)
Men	536	165 (30.8%)	177 (33%)	194 (36.2%)
Women	1,067	39 (3.7%)	447 (41.9%)	581 (54.5%)
All	1,603	204 (12.7%)	624 (38.9%)	775 (48.3%)

TABLE 4: WOMEN'S USAGE OF THE PAST VARIABLE

Name, age	N	<i>me/neva</i> % (n)	Zero % (n)	Preterites % (n)	Lect
Dor, 65	147	4.8% (5/1)	71.4% (105)	24.4% (36)	basilect
Til, 66	229	2.1% (2/3)	55.8% (128)	41.9% (96)	basi/mesolect
Ten, 37	332	4.8% (2/14)	28.6% (95)	66.5% (221)	mesolect
Fran, 68	81	2.4% (0/2)	37% (30)	60.4% (49)	mesolect
Ag, 55	209	4.7% (2/8)	39.7% (83)	55.5% (116)	mesolect
Son, 38	24	0	25% (6)	75% (63)	meso/acrolect
All	1,603	3.6%	41.9%	54.5%	

TABLE 5: MEN'S USAGE OF THE PAST VARIABLE

Name, age	N	<i>me/neva</i> % (n)	Zero % (n)	Preterites % (n)	Lect
Rol, 28	114	66.6% (70/6)	26.3% (30)	7% (8)	basilect
Bli, 27	241	36.9% (65/24)	41.9% (101)	21.1% (51)	basilect
Hab/R, 51	35	0	40% (14)	60% (21)	mesolect
Hab/G, 51	86	0	26.4% (23)	72.4% (63)	mesolect
Flo, 36	60	0	15% (9)	85% (51)	acrolect
All	536	30.8%	33%	36.2%	

(Speaker Hab is represented twice in two different contexts)

The limited overall use of *me/neva* by women is consistent across all individuals. Their lectal differences are marked through the differential usage of unmarked and preterite-marked variants. In contrast, men differ sharply in their use of *me/neva*, which is almost exclusively used by the two young men recounting the Guatemalan shipwreck. In fact the 30.8% *me* men's average depends solely on Rol and Bli's contributions, which also constitute the longest sample in the corpus. This is not tantamount to saying that Rol and Bli, or any other speaker, always perform at the same lectal level. The range displayed in the corpus represents actual possibilities for each individual, but naturally not the complete stylistic repertoire available to each. However, the data presented in Table 5 are considered to be representative of men's linguistic behaviour in the community. On the basis of this limited sample, and a restricted linguistic feature, it would appear that men and women are equally capable of shifting between lects. The linguistic bipolarity observed earlier in women (for copular variants) is not particularly evidenced in the case of the past variable: in this case, men show even more internal variability within their gender group. They switch between lects which show almost complementary percentages of the three past variants *me/zero/preterite* (respectively, 66.6% / 26.3% / 7% versus 0 / 15% / 85%). Women mostly vary in their use of *zero* and *preterite*, ranging for those two variants between a basilectal 71.4% / 24.4% combination, and an acrolectal 25% / 75% combination. The women's

systematically restricted usage of the basilectal morpheme (only 3.6%, in Table 4) indicates even in the most vernacular variants an overall loss of the traditional creole morpheme *me*, which coincides with the apparent loss of anterior versus non-anterior aspect distinctions.

However, this development does not entail a clear movement towards the standard since women use more unmarking (*zero past*) than men, namely 41.9% for women versus only 33% for men. Furthermore, marking in the standard fashion is prominently represented in two special auxiliaries *had* and *was*—a huge 42.7% of all marked past forms—which have taken new nonpast functions. Therefore, women replace a non-standard feature by another one, a feature, however, which is less marked, less stigmatised than the creole morpheme *me/neva*.

5.1 EFFECT OF SEX AND GENDER ON LINGUISTIC CHANGE

It is possible to interpret the facts described above as an indication that women are more sensitive than men to the progression of linguistic change in the direction of the standard, and are more active in implementing it, but only if the loss of creole features is viewed as a move towards the standard or acrolectal level. According to this interpretation, women would spearhead the disappearance of *me/neva* morphemes, while losing the distinctive anteriority function, but would simultaneously assign new functions to incoming standard forms. This conclusion fits with my previous analysis of copular variation (Escure 1993b), in which women were found to be more selectively active in removing the basilectal morpheme *de*, but only in the locative context, not in the progressive context, which still seems to be well established in the basilect.

However, the argument for gender- or sex-based linguistic differentiation is weak, at least in the context of the Belizean community's mechanisms for marking past. The findings presented above are too limited to validate the claim that there is sex-based differentiation in the village of Placencia. And the significance of gender as a variable representing the social construction of sex roles is even more difficult to assess. Although men and women have apparently distinct roles in a traditional sense, Placencia is not a community where there is a power imbalance (and women typically constitute the powerless sex). At the time of collection of the speech data used here (1982–87), men were fully involved in fishing activities that would take them away from home for two to four weeks at a time, whereas women were fully in charge of household chores and village administration, including important decisions regarding local economic and social issues (see Escure (1991) for a fuller discussion). The older women included in the tables (Dor, Til, Son) have particularly high social status, yet they produce distinct lects. Ten, who does not actively participate in village decisions (she has 14 children to raise, not to mention grandchildren) produces a variety similar to that of Son (who takes most decisions as the wife of a regularly absent village chairman—he is either working or 'relaxing'). On the other hand, men seem to be split according to age, although differentiation may be due to the context of the interactions. Thus, no final conclusion can be drawn here as to the effect of either age or gender as social variables, until further data are adduced.

In fact, the present data confirm my earlier hypothesis that in a creole (postcolonial) community with earlier social levelling due to the historical subjugation of both sexes, gender will not easily surface as a factor determining linguistic choices in the context of the extensive range of linguistic variability available to most creole speakers.

6. TENSE/ASPECT CHANGE THROUGH GRAMMATICALISTION

The phenomenon observed in Placencia provides an insight into the process of linguistic change in the creole continuum, which some would call decreolisation, or standardisation. The observation of past marking suggests that this change occurs in incremental steps, notably involving restructuring of lexical items, and reassignment of grammatical, semantic and pragmatic functions, a process commonly referred to as grammaticalistion.

There is some indication that both men and women implement changes in tense/aspect categories through a combination of grammaticalistion and extension. In the case of past marking, this dynamic process takes place in several quasi-synchronous or overlapping stages involving basilectal *me*, as well as the English items *had* and *was*, which show the following series of changes:

- (a) the loss of the anterior/non-anterior distinction, and of its dependence on the stative/non-stative class of verbs (in (1) *me* has anterior value, whereas *me* in (2) has non-anterior value);
- (b) the substitution of *had/was* for the anterior morpheme *me*, still preserving some anterior aspectual value, as in (12), (9), (11);
- (c) the acquisition of new topic-marking pragmatic functions associated with *me/neva* (when it still occurs, as in (2), (3), (4), (5)), and with English auxiliaries, such as *had* and *was*.

6.1 GRAMMATICALISTION

The type of relexification known as 'grammaticalistion' has been defined as "the process whereby lexical items and constructions come in certain linguistic contexts to serve grammatical functions, and once grammaticalised, continue to develop new grammatical functions" (Hopper & Traugott 1993:xv). In other words, the lexicon of language A (here creole basilect) is replaced by that of language B (English), while the grammar remains A. Thus, *me* is first replaced by *was/were/had*, which may refer to an anterior aspect of a current event as in (19):

- (19) *The cassaba were strain'; it comes into a powder.*
After the cassava **has been** strained, it becomes a powder.

It is also possible to interpret the use of *had/was*, as in (20), as referring to the setting of the story, here to events anterior to the death of the second twin (see context in (13) above):

- (20) *We had bad weather; Placencia was under water.*
We had had bad weather, Placencia was under water. (= (11))

According to this scenario, there is no longer a clear anterior aspect represented by a simple morpheme, and the semantic stative/non-stative verbal classification is no longer relevant. As *had/was* replace *me*, they first assume the latter's anterior function, then replace it, also losing all past tense reference, at least in basilects and mesolects. Considering the bleaching of past marking, the distribution of standard past variants (as represented in Table 2) could be reinterpreted with instances of *had/was* counted as cases of non-marking. This reinterpretation involves adding the *had/was* cases (an overall 331 tokens, from Table 2) to the zero category in Table 3; and subtracting those same 331 tokens from the preterite

category in Table 3. The resulting analysis modifying Table 3 is shown as Table 6, indicating a predominance of non-marking (*me* = 12.7%; *zero* = 59.6%; *preterite* = 27.7%).

TABLE 6: OVERALL USE OF PAST VARIANTS (WITH *had/was* AS UNMARKED)

Gender	N	<i>me/neva</i> n (%)	Zero n (%)	Preterites n (%)
All	1,603	204 (12.7%)	957 (59.7%)	444 (27.7%)

6.2 EXTENSION

The second process involves an innovative semantic extension. In basilects *me* can still be used, but with additional pragmatic functions, as a topic marker, or a general emphatic strategy. In such contexts, *me* no longer carries any essential tense/aspect function:

- (21) *A tink da me only six tousand galan me come out.* (= (2); also (3), (4), (5) and (12))

This process appears to be widespread in current basilects and mesolects: there is an overwhelming presence of adverbials relexified into topic highlighters, often concomitant with the complete loss of their initial semantic value. This is the case for the adverb *just* illustrated in (22). The speaker does not refer to a punctual event in the immediate past, but to a repeated event (the visit of a cruise ship) which no longer applies (the cruise ship ceased making a stop in the village):

- (22) *We **just** have dat ship comin in here; dat **was** good because it only **spend** couple hours; de touris' it **just** stay couple hours.*
What happened, we had that ship visiting; it was good because it would only spend a couple hours here; the tourists just stayed a couple hours.⁹

The second *just* is more ambiguous, since it seems to combine emphasis and restrictive meaning. However, other contexts indicate that *only* (as well as other items, such as *still* in the following sentence) has taken a contrastive value not contained in the English gloss, as shown in (23) recently collected in Placencia. The same grammaticalisation appears to affect the adverbial *again* (24);

- (23) *We **still** speak creole, a like my creole language **only** because G. say dat we take it and mess it up.*
We speak creole **regardless** (of the fact that tourism is developing), I like my creole language, **even though** G. says that we mess up English.
- (24) *Dat not cool **again**, it's hot now, it isn't cool **again**, dat isn't cool **again**, it hot, it isn't nice **again**, don't do it, don't.*
That's no longer cool, don't do it. (woman admonishing a child not to drink what's left in a glass)

The above examples indicate that a complex process is taking place, simultaneously relexifying the creole anterior morpheme *me* with English past auxiliaries (*had/was*), and extending the use of *me* to pragmatic contexts by analogy with similar topic-marking functions assigned to a variety of preverbal adverbials.

⁹ This approximate translation attempts to capture the topicalisation (non-restrictive) of 'ship comin'.

7. CONCLUSION

This analysis of past reference in the Belizean Creole continuum indicates that there is clearly an ongoing restructuring which provides insights into the pattern of linguistic change in a creole continuum. The conservative *me* past variant is eliminated and replaced by *zero* (unmarked verb), or by an English preterite. This process is accompanied by complex adjustments, removing certain aspectual distinctions (anterior), semantic differentiation (stative), and adding pragmatic mechanisms: more specifically, the 'anterior' value of *me* is no longer clearly distinguished from simple past, assuming it ever was exclusively used with an anterior value; it is relexified through English auxiliaries, and becomes part of a general topic-marking process affecting preverbal adverbials. The English forms *had* and *was* spread to the creole end of the spectrum, and appear to hold an especially significant intermediary position in this overall grammaticalising of past.

As far as gender is concerned, women appear at first to be actively involved in linguistic diffusion in the sense that they accentuate innovations, especially with the intensive loss of the basilectal morpheme *me/neva*. Those innovations could be interpreted as a move towards more standardised speech, thus supporting the traditional claim that women favour prestige varieties. Yet, this loss is not necessarily indicative of standardisation, since it is concomitant with an increase of other non-standard (though perhaps less stigmatised) forms, such as the *zero-past* variant, and non-standard use of preterites.

There is another crucial factor in interpreting the Belizean results as indicators of the directionality of linguistic change: this involves defining what constitutes the prestige variety in Belize. In most creole (and other) societies, there is a conflict between official norms (usually assigned 'overt' prestige), and local norms (assigned 'covert' prestige). Although Standard English is the overt prestigious variety, as official and educational medium, it cannot be considered to be the only 'prestige' variety in Placencia: basilects and mesolects have strong values of identity, and are more commonly used than the external standard. In fact, vernacular values are not really covert, they are indeed overtly expressed and recognised, as the Placencia community is well aware of the diglossic value of language. Women may be more particularly conscious of the complementary functions of creole and the standard, and of the necessity of the function of local identity in maintaining community ties.¹⁰

Although there is overall little indication that sex, or gender, has a strong effect on linguistic choices in a postcolonial Caribbean/Central American society like Placencia, there is some support for the hypothesis that women initiate, or at least, are highly sensitive to linguistic change, as indicated in their restricted use of the basilectal past variant, relative to that of men. This is not tantamount to saying that women no longer control basilects, but it may mean that men and women somewhat differ in their definitions of basilects and mesolects.

Given the importance of topic marking and focus constructions in Belizean (and generally in all creoles), the innovative assignment of pragmatic functions to past morphemes appears to be a typical example of superstrate items moulded to fit concepts essential to the basilectal vernacular. This type of linguistic change may occur in various types of contact situations: for example, it is well illustrated in the development of Tayo, a 'vernacularised', relatively

¹⁰ Escure (1991) discusses the possible function of women as mediators in Placencia.

young creole spoken in New Caledonia, which “uses French lexical items to convey Melanesian conceptualisations” (Come 1995:23).

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