

“The Caribbean Community *has* endorsed”: Agreement with collective nouns in Caribbean Englishes

Guyanne Wilson (Ruhr Universität, Bochum)

In English, collective nouns such as *government* and *family* exhibit both singular and plural agreement, depending on whether the noun is interpreted as describing a single entity or a collection of several individuals. This variable has been recorded both as an example of regional variation, with American English using more singular agreement than British English, and of long term language change, with a move from plural agreement towards singular agreement being observed in British English (Levin 2006).

Hundt (2006) examines Philippines and Singaporean English, comparing them first to each other, and then to inner circle varieties. In addition to differences between the varieties, she finds that Philippines English behaves similarly to American English, its parent variety, but that Singaporean English also appears to be developing in the direction of American English, rather than its British English parent variety. She also reports differences between spoken and written registers. However, this variable has not been widely examined in other outer circle Englishes.

This study looks at grammatical and pronominal agreement with collective nouns in three Caribbean Englishes: Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica. It makes use of the Jamaican and Trinidad and Tobago components of the International Corpus of English, as well as a complementary 250,000-word corpus of Grenadian English. It compares the Caribbean varieties first with one another and then to inner circle Englishes, thereby interrogating the relationship between these peripheral varieties and central varieties by examining whether the Caribbean varieties align more with British English, which has historically been the dominant variety in the region, or American English, which has been shown to exercise increased influence on Caribbean Englishes (Hackert and Deuber 2015). It also compares Caribbean Englishes to the South East Asian Englishes in Hundt’s (2006) study. Furthermore, it examines whether there are significant stylistic differences between spoken and written registers, and the influence of specific lexical items on the use singular or plural agreement is tested.

Initial results suggest that, in terms of grammatical agreement, Caribbean Englishes use more singular agreement, but pronominal agreement is far more variable. It remains unclear, however, whether this is due to Caribbean Englishes aligning themselves with American English, or substratal effects of Caribbean Creoles.

The study has implications for the understanding of the relationship between inner and outer circle varieties, as well as among outer circle varieties themselves, particularly with regard to discussions of shared features, varioversals, and aroversals.

References

- Hackert, Stephanie, & Dagmar Deuber. 2015. American influence on written Caribbean English: A diachronic analysis of newspaper reportage in the Bahamas and in Trinidad and Tobago. In Peter Collins (ed.), *Grammatical Change in English World-Wide*, 389-410. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hundt, Marianne. 2006. The Committee Has/Have Decided...: On Concord Patterns with Collective Nouns in Inner- and Outer-Circle Varieties of English. *Journal of English Linguistics* 34(3). 206–232.

Levin, Magnus. 2006. Collective nouns and language change. *English Language & Linguistics* 10(2). 321-343.