

## Counting and Coding the Past: Circumscribing the Variable Context in Quantitative Analyses of Past Inflection

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Accurate circumscription of the variable context is crucial to any quantitative analysis of linguistic variation. Investigations of past inflection in African American English and Caribbean English creoles thus generally include a more or less detailed section concerning the inclusion or exclusion of particular forms (e.g., Blake 1997: 148-53; Patrick 1999: 223-31; Hackert 2001: 139-65; Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001: 114-6); the theoretical grounds on which these decisions are made, however, are not always spelled out. Consequently, there still does not seem to be agreement on what precisely constitutes the envelope of variation in such investigations – a fact which obviously hinders cross-variety comparisons (cf. Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001: 116).

The proposed paper summarizes and evaluates previous definitions of the scope and relevant contexts of the variable (ed), providing internal (linguistic) argumentation supporting “count” or “don’t count” decisions. It draws on a larger study of past temporal reference in the urban variety of Bahamian Creole English, an “intermediate creole” with close historical links with Gullah as well as relations with African American English, Trinidadian Creole, and Barbadian (Winford 1992: 314). The data stem from sociolinguistic interviews conducted by the author in the Bahamian capital, Nassau, in 1997; they contain more than 8,000 tokens of unmarked or inflected past-reference verbs.

The paper first looks at the temporal-aspectual dimensions of variable past inflection. It will be argued, for example, that even though some studies include “any state or action transpiring prior to speech time, so long as it admits [...] overt preterite morphology [...] and [...] zero, regardless of whether reference is to punctual past, past habitual, or present or past perfect” (Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001: 115), the inclusion of, e.g., perfect situations can result in a “categorical and semantic mismatch” (Winford 1993: 141), as such situations constitute a variable context of their own, where unmarked and past-inflected verbs are but two forms encoding some of the meanings associated with the English Present Perfect. Habitual verb situations, on the other hand, appropriately form part of the envelope of variation if they are clearly marked via a grammatical aspect factor group.

A second focus will be on the inclusion or exclusion of ‘problematic’ verbs and their assignment to morphological categories. *Get*, for example, can be used either as a non-stative verb, e.g., in passive or copula constructions, or as a stative one, e.g., in existential or possessive constructions. These uses must be clearly separated, as only the former constitutes a site for the application of past inflection. Even if stative *get* is excluded, however, its near-categorical behavior may influence the marking properties of non-stative *get*; together with the verb’s high overall frequency, this may result in skewed rates if the verb is left with its appropriate morphological category – a hypothesis which can be corroborated statistically.

### References

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