

Ethnic Isolates in Insular Dialect Situations:
The Significance of Individualized Ethnolinguistic Identity
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Sociolinguists have increasingly recognized the role of the individual in shaping community speech norms and in initiating language change (Rickford 1985; Dorian 1994; Wolfram, Hazen, and Tamburro 1997; Wolfram and Beckett 2000; Labov 2001). Careful examination of individuals within the larger context of the community may help advance our understanding of the sociopsychological dynamics of speech communities and the construction of identity, as well as the complex of factors associated with dialect accommodation and maintenance. Cases of ethnic isolates within historically insular speech communities are particularly instructive, as they may indicate how ethnic identity is negotiated apart from a group of regular, co-existing ethnic cohorts.

This study examines an Anglo-Bahamian isolate in a remote Afro-Bahamian community and compares it with other situations of individual ethnic isolation, such as those described in Rickford (1985) and Wolfram, Hazen, and Tamburro (1997). Sandy Point, an Afro-Bahamian enclave of approximately 400 residents on Abaco Island, has existed in relative isolation since its founding in the early nineteenth century. Virtually unreachable except by boat until 1994, Sandy Point maintains a unique variety of English that shows some creole patterning. Sandy Point English also exhibits markedly different ethnolinguistic patterning from the speech of Anglo populations such as Cherokee Sound, an insular Anglo-Bahamian community located approximately 35 miles from Sandy Point.

In Sandy Point, there remain two white brothers who are lifetime residents of Sandy Point. This study examines over four hours of speech of one of these brothers in the context of his isolation within the insular Afro-Bahamian community. A quantitative examination of a diagnostic set of phonological variables including prevocalic consonant cluster reduction (*mis' on* for *mist on*), word initial *h*-deletion (*my 'ouse* for *my house*), interdental fricative stopping (*dat* for *that*), and acoustic plots of the overall vowel system, as well as present tense and past tense copula absence, reveals that the isolated Anglo-Bahamian speaker demonstrates no vestiges of Anglo-Bahamian norms. He has, in effect, completely accommodated salient and non-salient phonological and morphosyntactic norms of the Afro-Bahamian speech community.

The accommodation of ethnically marked features may reflect an attempt by the speaker to assert a symbolic, co-referenced identity and establish solidarity within the community. However, in his accommodation, the speaker exhibits levels of variable frequency that exceed those found in the local Afro-Bahamian community. On one level, this finding is comparable with the data presented in Wolfram, Hazen, and Tamburro (1997), where Muzel Bryant, the last remaining African American on Ocracoke, exhibits a pattern of overuse in relation to some mainland AAVE features. In the case of Muzel Bryant, she has maintained a distinct identity apart from the dominant community whereas in the case of the Sandy Point resident, he accommodates the speech of the dominant group. Such "hyper-accommodation" may be attributable to compounded isolation as well as the sociopsychological dynamics of power relations, racial boundaries and ethnic identities. This study demonstrates how geographical and social isolation, along with prescribed and negotiated ethnic roles and ideologies, can impact individual speech accommodation in fundamental but contrastive ways.

References

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