Emerging indexicalities in transnational Caribbean settings

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In this talk, we want to study indexical meanings of language in two transnational Caribbean contexts. We not only consider two different diasporic settings but furthermore combine a micro and a macro approach in comparing the symbolic meaning of phonetic variation with meaning potentials of language choice in written online data. The first example examines phonetic variation in English in sociolinguistic interviews with a heterogeneous group of Haitians in Toronto, whereas the second example analyses language choices on Facebook of Belizean cultural community groups based in New York.

Findings in Toronto show that some phonetic variables produced by Haitians match those which are found in the speech of Anglophone Caribbean speakers in the Toronto area. This suggests that local linguistic targets impact on the development of sociophonetic markers, indicating solidarity with other immigrant communities. On the other hand, some phonetic variables may contribute to indexing the formation of a Haitian English variety in Toronto. This illustrates the importance of local factors in transnational settings and is an invitation to integrate discussions on ‘linguistic emergence’ in dialect research.

The online data of Belizeans in New York is very different in nature, as it is written data in semi-formal online contexts. Interestingly, Facebook pages on Belizean culture, supporting, for example, Garifuna people or organising Belizean festivals, are written in a standard variety of English only, whereas Reggae or Dub artists display some use of non-standard varieties. This suggests that language variation may here not be understood as indexing ethnicity but rather other things, and that the colonial and ethnic history of standard English may be partly erased in this transnational context.

The comparative analysis illustrates the complex discursive networks in which language use in diasporic settings is embedded and inspires to develop sociolinguistic methods that integrate micro and macro approaches to data.

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