

## **Producing cultural authenticity: A soap opera as a source of historical creole data?**

Stephanie Hackert (LMU Munich) and Diana Wengler (LMU Munich)

Performed language, as found in radio or TV shows, was long considered unauthentic and thus not suitable as data for the analysis of vernacular varieties. However, Coupland (2001: 374) argues that even “stylized performance, including dialect stylization, can potentially deliver forms of personal and cultural authenticity that transcend local playfulness.” In this paper, we will introduce and critically evaluate a Bahamian radio soap opera from the early 1970s in order to gain insight into its potential as a source for documenting the recent historical development of urban Bahamian Creole English.

Our corpus consists of 68,000 words from *The Fergusons of Farm Road*, a radio show broadcast entirely in dialect. Initially endowed with an educational impetus, the Fergusons became a great local success; in all, almost 200 episodes were produced between 1970 and 1975. Our selection of linguistic variables is based on previous accounts of Bahamian Creole and includes the well-researched grammatical features of past inflection and negation as well as the Bahamian pronunciations of MOUTH and NURSE and the *a* vowels in START, PALM, and TRAP. Employing the methods of comparative sociolinguistics (cf. Tagliamonte 2013), we will contrast the historical radio data with contemporary conversational data in order to determine the strength and direction of constraints operating on the linguistic variables in the two data sets. The analyses will show that the linguistic constraints work in the expected directions and that, in general, the historical data have higher rates of creole features. While assuming decreolization seems tempting, we will argue that “load-bearing variables” (cf. Irvine 2004), i.e. variables considered representative of a certain variety, are deliberately and more uniformly used in the historical data. Thus, the latter seem to lend themselves rather to comparing the indexical status of certain features than to analyzing actual changes in frequency. Ultimately, we will argue that dialect performance may be regarded as an important form of “local community practice” (Coupland 2001: 368) that can meaningfully extend the range of “authentic” dialect data available to sociolinguistic analysis.

### **References**

- Coupland, Nikolas. 2001. Dialect stylization in radio talk. *Language in Society* 30: 345-75.
- Irvine, Alison. 2004. A good command of the English language: Phonological variation in the Jamaican acrolect. *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 19: 41-76.
- Tagliamonte, Sali A. 2013. Comparative sociolinguistics. In J.K. Chambers & Natalie Schilling, eds. *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*. 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 128-56.