

# Bermudian English: History, Features, Social Role

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## Abstract

Bermudian English has been long neglected in linguistic literature. After a brief introduction to the linguistic history of the Bermuda Islands, this paper examines several interesting aspects of English dialects spoken in Bermuda. First, we examine the islands' lack of an English Creole. Next, we examine phonological features of Bermudian English and their possible origins. Finally, we close with a discussion of Bermudian dialects' place in education and society at large.

## 1. Introduction

Virginia Bernhard (1999: 1) notes that, just as mariners once avoided Bermuda for fear of wrecking their ships on its coral reefs, "historians of European colonization have also bypassed Bermuda." She quotes W. F. Craven, who wrote that "the Bermudas have been largely overlooked, the significance of their history for the most part lost to sight" (xiii). Likewise, the language of the Bermudian people has been largely ignored by linguists and historians alike. Few scholars have studied Bermudian English; the last citation of any length dates to 1933.

Nevertheless, the Bermuda Islands present an interesting case study of English dialects, in many ways unique among such dialects in the world. Bermudian dialects of English lack a dominant creole, have interesting phonetic features, and command an ambiguous social status.

## 2. Background

Contrary to popular belief, Bermuda is not actually part of the Caribbean. As *Caribbean/Latin American Profile* points out, “Often, Bermuda is placed erroneously in the West Indies, but in fact is more than 1,000 miles to the north of the Caribbean” (Caribbean Publishing Company: 51). Unfortunately, the very same book shows a map of Bermuda’s location with an arrow pointing at the Caribbean! Even J. C. Wells (1982: 561) notes that while Bermuda is “well to the north of the Caribbean,” it belongs “linguistically with the English-speaking West Indies.” While it is true that Bermuda has much in common with the former British colonies of the Caribbean, it is in many ways quite unique.

Bermuda, unlike most Caribbean islands, has no aboriginal population; the first human inhabitants were British colonists bound for Virginia, led by Sir George Somers (and thus, the country is alternatively called “the Somers Islands”). It is currently the oldest British colony (now a “Dependent Territory”), although it has had self-determination since 1620, making the Bermudian Parliament the third oldest in the world, after those in Britain and Iceland, a fact that makes the islanders quite proud (Pethen 1988: 17). Geographically, it was one of the smallest British colonies, with only 22.7 square miles; its climate also differs from both the Caribbean and the mainland. This unique situation among Britain’s many colonies allowed for unique language features to develop, many of which exist to this day.

### 3. Lack of Creole

Perhaps the most unique feature of Bermudian language use is that, save a few immigrants from various Caribbean countries, there do not seem to be any English Creoles spoken on the island. Ayres' (1933) comprehensive look at the dominant dialect (which we shall refer to as "Bermudian English") makes no mention of creole-like forms, prompting Reinecke (1975: 377) to note that Bermudian English "appears...not to have a creolized dialect, but research is needed." While no extended study has been conducted since 1933, most contemporary researchers agree that "Bermudian English is not a creole variety" (Iyabo Osiapem, personal communication). Why would English either decreolize or fail to creolize on Bermuda, when nearly every other British colony in the region has a creole?

#### 3.1 Theories of Creolization

Two possibilities present themselves: Either the slaves never formed a creole on Bermuda, or they brought a creole with them, which was eventually decreolized. Which is the case? Answering this question requires us to understand how creoles develop.

One theory is that creoles developed in the Caribbean when slaves acquired English both in order to converse with white slavemasters, as well to use it as a lingua franca to communicate with slaves who spoke different African languages. This is in line with Bickerton's oft-quoted assertion that "pidginization is second-language learning with restricted input,

and...creolization is first-language learning with restricted input” (qtd in Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 163). It is possible that perhaps Bermudian slaves did not have “restricted input” and thus acquired more or less standard English.

Ian Hancock (1986: 72), by contrast, advances the theory that the Caribbean creoles originated in Africa, not the New World. If this is correct, then even Bermudian blacks who arrived straight from Africa would have been exposed to some kind of creole (or perhaps a pidgin). Another possibility is that basic pidgins could have developed on the long “middle passage” from Africa to the colonies. Given that the first blacks brought to Bermuda were from the West Indies, mainly from Spanish and Portuguese colonies (Bernhard 1999: 18-20), even if Hancock’s theory is incorrect, it seems that at least some Bermudian slaves would have had exposure to New World creoles. It is difficult to ascertain the origins of blacks in Bermuda during these early years, but most did indeed arrive from the West Indies, although at least two Bermudian ships brought slaves back from Africa itself (Bernhard 1999: 23; Packwood 1975: 54). In this case, we must posit that Bermuda had some condition that fostered decreolization.

### 3.2 Bermudian Population

What sort of conditions would cause Bermudians of African origin to either not acquire a creole or decreolize an already acquired creole?

Thomason and Kaufman (1988: 151-2) argue that creoles formed on large plantation colonies, such as Jamaica, because plantations offered “no motivation or opportunity to learn the target language [i.e. English] as a whole.” They contrast this to the situation in Barbados, quoting Le Page’s observation that Barbados had a “far higher” proportion of whites to blacks

“in the crucial formative years,” causing Barbados’ creole to be “much closer linguistically to English than” Jamaican creole (156). Rickford (1986: 249) also discusses the situation on Barbados, “a very favorable English colonial setting for the acquisition of white dialect features by blacks, because of the high proportion of whites.” Since Bermuda also had a high proportion of whites to blacks in its early history, perhaps the situation is analogous.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that, while Barbados’ creole is closer to standard English, it is nevertheless a creole. What caused a creole to develop on Barbados but not Bermuda (or, alternatively, what caused full decreolization in Bermuda rather than partial decreolization in Barbados)? One might note that after 1640, the sugar plantations in Barbados demanded a large number of slaves, making it “the first English colony to become a slave society” (Bernhard 1999: 51). By the 1670s, while blacks outnumbered whites on Barbados two to one, in Bermuda whites outnumbered blacks three to one (Bernhard 1999: 66). While blacks overwhelmingly outnumber whites throughout the Caribbean, only by the early 19th century did blacks achieve a slight majority in Bermuda (Packwood 1975: 81). Even today, while blacks are still in the majority, Bermuda is relatively heterogeneous: 61% of the population was black in the 1991 census, with 39% “white and other” (mainly white) (Bermuda Islands Finance Department Statistical Office 1997). Thus, one might argue that racial proportions not only during “the crucial formative years,” but also afterwards, affect creolization and decreolization.

### 3.3 Social Contact

While population seems to play an important role in language development, creolization is not merely a numbers game: language develops out of social contact. Hancock (1986: 95), for

example, asserts that the amount and kind of decreolization depends upon both the numbers of “speakers of metropolitan [i.e. standard] English” as well as “the social and topographical circumstances.” What was the social situation in Bermuda?

The history of Africans in Bermuda is perhaps unique among British colonies. The very first blacks in Bermuda were brought not “not for their brawn, but for their skills” in pearl diving and agriculture (Packwood 1975:2). The small size of the colony ultimately forced Bermudians to turn to the sea—shipping, piracy, and the lucrative salt trade—rather than to agriculture. Both the climate and lack of land made slave plantations of either sugar, like the Caribbean, or tobacco and cotton, like the American South, unfeasible. As a result, black slaves served in a wide variety of occupations, from carpenters to mariners to masons to field laborers (Packwood 1975: 11).

It seems that the races mixed relatively freely in Bermuda. Blacks enjoyed “a measure of freedom and a status similar to that of white laborers” in the colony’s early days, and the high number of mulatto children suggests that blacks and whites were familiar with each other in other ways (Bernhard 1999: 27). Indeed, although many blacks worked under various forms of slavery or indentured servitude, “*slave* was not synonymous with *Negro* in early Bermuda” (Bernhard 1999: 41). At least until adolescence, many blacks and white children would play with each other (Packwood 1975: 98). In the 17th century, there were several integrated churches, serving blacks, mulattos, and Indians (Bernhard 1999: 75). While whites certainly exhibited some racial bias in Bermuda, such as that evidenced by laws passed to restrict black slaves’ freedom, even these laws lack the unfettered prejudice evidenced in other British colonies’ slave laws, where blacks were described as “heathenish, brutish...barbarous, wild” (Bernhard 1989: 564).

Many cite Bermudian slavery as being “mild.” While it seems dangerous to call any kind of slavery “mild,” certainly Bermudian slaves had much better relationships with their masters than did other slaves in the New World. Smith (1976: 297) describes an “intimate association between master and slave in Bermuda and often a large measure of mutual dependence.” In several cases, such as the Irish case described above, slaves arriving in a foreign country on a ship could remain in that country as a free man or woman; most of the slaves in these cases decided to go back to Bermuda. Packwood (1975: 167) argues that it was family, not the mildness of slavery, on Bermuda that called them back. Nevertheless, it seems that, while slavery in Bermuda was demeaning and unjust, it was not nearly as bad as elsewhere in the British empire (or the United States, for that matter). This relative mildness begat relatively harmonious racial relations after emancipation in 1833, when compared to the rest of the Americas. Even in the early 20th century, Elsie Clews Parsons (1925: 239) found it “singular to see” blacks in high-status jobs such as a carriage director and a maitre d’.

### 3.4 Lack of Creole Explained

Given that Bermuda not only had a high proportion of whites throughout its history but also a social situation that would foster close social contact between blacks and whites, it seems to be a prime spot for learning Standard English. Hancock (1986: 95) also stresses the importance of “the rate at which the emerging creole fed back into this ongoing contact situation”; as most of Bermuda’s black population arrived in the colony before the 18th century, this also points the finger towards decreolization. Whether creolization failed to take place, or whether an already-established creole was decreolized, it seems that Bermuda had all the features

such that blacks would learn a variety of English very close to the standard. Indeed, that most characteristics of Bermudian English are common to both black and white speakers suggests that, while certainly creoles and African languages had an influence, one must explain idiosyncrasies in the dialect in other ways.

#### 4. Phonetic Features of Bermudian English

What are the distinctive features of Bermudian English? The most extensive survey of the dialect was performed in the early twentieth century by Harry Morgan Ayres (1933). While he notes a handful of lexical terms unique to the islands, he primarily concerns himself with phonological features of the language. A more recent tourist publication, *Bermewjan Vurds* (Smith and Barritt 1985) contains 292 lexical, 84 phonetic (14 of which have an additional lexical component), and 12 syntactic or discourse entries. While most of the lexical items seem to have passed in and out of fashion, the phonological features of Bermudian English—many of which occur in both works—offer perhaps the most interesting analysis.

##### 4.1 A and E

One interesting phonological feature of Bermudian English regards [ɛ] and [æ]. As Ebbin (1997) says simply, “a’s are pronounced like e’s and e’s like a’s.” Ayres (1933: 6-7) elaborates, noting that “[æ] in HAT frequently becomes [ɛ]: RAT [rɛt], EXACTLY [ɛˈgzɛkli], YAPPING [jɛpn], JANUARY [ˈdʒɛnjuəri], ANXIOUS [ˈɛŋjʊəs], HAD [hɛd]...” He posits that this shift



may have been common in the 17th century, noting that the “change receives support from the spellings in the early New England records.” He also notes that this “appears to be even more general than the reverse shift of [ɛ] to [æ].”

Smith and Barritt, however, seem to show that the reverse seems to be the case: [ɛ] to [æ] may be more common today. Admittedly, their publication is designed to be humorous and practical for tourists, rather than to be a scientific description of Bermudian English, and it is also hampered by their orthography, as they rely on an ad-hoc phonological scheme rather than IPA or the Cassidy/Le Page system. Nevertheless, they provide one of the only contemporary sources of data on Bermudian English. They list 10 instances of what appears to be shifts from [ɛ] to [æ] (Table 1) while including only three shifts from [æ] to [ɛ] (Table 2).

Standard spelling	Spelling in Smith and Barritt
effort	affert
Ellen	Allan
everybody	arrybody
expect	ax-pact
election	elackshun
mess	mass
never	nawer
reception	resapshun
ten	tan
everyone	arryone

**Table 1: Shifts from [ɛ] to [æ]**

Standard spelling	Spelling in Smith and Barritt
daddy	deddy
rat cheese	ret cheese
Saturday	Sed-dee

**Table 2: Shifts from [æ] to [ɛ]**

While both of Ayres' shifts seem to persist, it seems that perhaps the popularity of [ɛ] to [æ] has grown in comparison to the reverse shift.

#### 4.2 V and W

Perhaps the most unique and striking feature of Bermudian English is “the apparent interchange of [v] and [w]” (Ayres 1933: 9). As Smith and Barritt (1985) note in their Preface, “V is pronounced W and vice versa: ‘vunderfully wiwasious vimen.’” Wells (1982: 568) calls the phenomenon “V – W Confusion,” citing its appearance in the Bahamas, Bermuda, and St. Vincent. Indeed, Jennifer M. Smith, the Premier of Bermuda, mentioned in a recent speech that “Bermudians and Bahamians have much in common. It is said that our people sound very much alike when we speak, though I would hasten to point out that this is an observation which is rarely made by either a Bermudian or a Bahamian!” Wells says that it “is not clear” whether this originates from a similar feature of 18th and 19th century London Cockney or, rather, “it arose independently in the West Indies through the influence of an African substratum lacking /v/” (568).

Is the confusion one of a language learner who cannot tell when to use /v/ or /w/, such as the Japanese confusion between /ɪ/ and /l/, crystallized over time into a dialect? Wells (1982: 589) quotes an earlier study in the Bahamas stating that “/w/ and /v/ seem interchangeable” for white speakers as well as for blacks. Similarly, native Bermudians of all races seem to mix /w/ and /v/, although Ayres observes that more blacks did so in 1933 than whites (9). This suggests that, unless white speakers imitated their black slaves' dialect, V – W Confusion arises from a different source.

Ayres reminds the reader of Dicken's London Cockney character Samuel Weller in *Pickwick Papers*, who exhibited V – W Confusion, and suggests that Bermuda preserves a feature once common in English on both sides of the Atlantic. Just as “fall” was preserved in the United States as a name for what the British now call “autumn,” perhaps Bermuda preserved a feature which later fell out of use elsewhere. One might explain the racial difference in 1933 along class lines: clearly the lower class would be more comfortable with a feature associated with lower class London dialects, and blacks were more likely (especially in 1933) to be of lower classes. In short, while it is unclear why Bermudians pronounce certain “vurds” differently, the evidence points towards Bermuda preserving a phonology that other English speakers dropped.

#### 4.2 θ and ð

Like many dialects in the Caribbean, Bermudian English seems to have alternate phonologies for the “th” sounds of [θ] and [ð]. Ayres (1933: 9) only mentions [ð], saying that “in Negro speech this sound is softly stopped.” However, perhaps due to influence from Caribbean broadcasters and immigrants, it seems that both [θ] and [ð] are replaced by different sounds in some situations.

Smith and Barritt (1985) contains four instances of a shift from [θ] to [f]: breathalyzer as “breffalizer,” deal with as “deal wif,” skin cloth as “skin cloff,” and worthless as “woffless.” Ebbin (1997) also quotes Bermudian poet Jeremy Frith as noting that words “ending in th, like Frith and with, are pronounced Frif and vifs.” There are also two instances of a shift from [θɹ] to [ʃɹ], both at the beginning of words: three is rendered “shree”, and through as “shrew.” Given

that standard Caribbean English changes [θ] into [t] (Wells 1982: 565), this transformation cannot be easily explained, and requires further study.

Smith and Barritt also show at least ten instances of [ð] to [d] shifts, with all but four being the word the rendered as “de.” The remaining words (“den” for then, “dis” for this, “dat” for that, “dere” for there) all have [ð] in the first syllable. It seems unclear from Smith and Barritt whether this feature remains divided along racial lines as Ayres suggests. Finally, they present one case of a shift from [ð] to [w]: another is written as “anower.” It is possible that this represents an alternate shift for [ð] in the middle of words, but again the data can only suggest an avenue for future study.

#### 4.3 Canadian raising

One final interesting feature of Bermudian English seems to be a tendency to change the initial vowel in /aɪ/ and /aʊ/ diphthongs when followed by a voiceless consonant, often to /ɛɪ/ and /ɛʊ/. This phenomenon, known as CANADIAN RAISING (because of it was first noticed in Canada), is noticed in passing by Ayres (1933: 8), but described in great detail by Trudgill (1986: 160). Trudgill claims that similar raising occurs in “*nearly every* form of non-creolized, mixed, colonial English outside Australasia and South Africa.” While this seems to be a somewhat ambiguous and narrow definition, he does cite examples in “the Bahamas, Saba, St. Helena, Tristan de Cunha, and the Falkland Islands” in addition to Bermuda. Trudgill argues, therefore, that Canadian raising is a natural shift that emerged independently in each (former) British colony.

Nevertheless, there is an alternate explanation for Canadian raising in Bermudian English: contact with Canadian English. Canada has a long association with Bermuda, from Canadian exiles sent to Bermuda in 1838 to the multitude of preachers sent to the island throughout its history (Mackaness 1964, Bérard 1986, Mount 1984, Hubbard 1987). Manning (1977: 61) notes that, through both religious and educational ties, Canada's influence has been "more cultural than commercial" on Bermuda, especially compared to other Caribbean islands; as both church and school are very important seeds for language use, it would not be surprising if one such cultural influence was Canadian raising.

#### 5. Bermudian English in the Schools and Society

How does Bermudian English fare in society at large? Both within Bermuda and elsewhere, how are different Bermudian dialects treated? As noted above, church and school are seeds for language use—perhaps linguistic battlegrounds—and thus especially schools become the center of linguistic attention. Even in Ayres' (1933: 6, 9) early study, he noted that "a schoolmaster would object" to certain phrases, and that "'Bite your lip, my dear, when you say VERY,' is a continual admonition to children" (to counter V – W Confusion).

A recent editorial in the *Bermuda Sun*'s Forum (Bermuda Sun 1996) frets that there should be a linguistics or phonology course in the new Cederbridge high school (previously, there were several Bermudian public high schools scattered around the island), worried that the children would lack "verbal communication skills necessary to market themselves." The writer clearly shows ignorance about Bermudian dialects, as he claims that "within the last decade, our youth have created their own version of 'English' as means of communicating amongst

themselves”; however, he draws a distinction between “slang” (mainly lexical items) and “accent” (or phonology): “An educated individual does not have to speak with a British accent. We can maintain our Bermudian accent without compromising ourselves or losing our self-identity.” While this writer’s objections betray some bias against nonstandard dialects, certainly it falls far short of the vituperation over African American Vernacular English in the United States. Indeed, perhaps because the dialects are largely not confined to particular racial groups, racial prejudice does not color people’s judgments. Also, since most teachers are native Bermudians (or “onions,” in the local dialect) themselves, there is not a comprehension problem between students and teachers as there is in many Caribbean countries (Trudgill 1975: 86).

Nevertheless, dialects are not a non-issue in Bermuda. Bermuda College Professor Lynette Woods notes that dialect “comes across clearly in the writing” (Ebbin 1997); students at Stanford working on the Bermuda Project, developing a computer science curriculum for the Bermuda public schools, also noted that students write in a very phonetic, nonstandard style (Caitlin Martin, Michael Ross, personal communication). While it is important that teachers not demean the way that students talk, perhaps a heightened awareness of dialects will help students to read and write in Standard English.

## 6. Conclusion

Bermudian English has a unique history, leading to unique features. Each of these fascinating facets of the language call out for further study. What other kinds of dialects exist in Bermuda? What are the primary features of these dialects, and how has the dominant dialect changed since 1933? Which populations speak which dialects? What is the best way to (or

should one) attend to such dialects in schools? These questions deserve—in some cases demand—answers. With luck, the linguistic community will turn its attention to these neglected islands, for the good of the Bermudian people, their history, and the study of dialects at large.

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