

## **Variation as vitality: Using variation in research on an endangered language**

Labov's (1969) work on copula absence in African American Vernacular English addressed the question of whether the community may be inclined to misconstrue systematic differences between the normative language in a community and a minority variety. By demonstrating the regularity of the AAVE system and by drawing parallels to similar regularities in General American English, Labov's work made a significant positive contribution to the valorization of AAVE as a discrete, independent and rule-governed system. However, comparatively little work in the variationist paradigm since then has addressed similar issues in language vitality for minority languages. In this paper, I outline a new study that attempts to use the results of a social dialect study of an endangered language to enhance the community's understanding, and acceptance, of synchronic variation as a natural reflex of a living, changing language.

N'kep is spoken by c.1500 speakers in Hog Harbour (NE Santo, Vanuatu). It is a dialect of Sakao – a language that is distinct from its neighboring languages based on a number of structural innovations (Lynch & Crowley 2001). Pilot fieldwork in 2008 indicated a high degree of linguistic insecurity – members of the speech community of all ages claim that N'kep is endangered by progressive language shift to Bislama (the national language). This is accompanied by the usual discourses of nostalgia ("kids/we don't speak N'kep as well as people used to"). However, while bilingualism is certainly normal, fieldwork also found that many small children were N'kep dominant, and many teenagers were as (superficially) proficient in N'kep as their parents were. We hypothesize that N'kep is continuing to undergo significant language internal change (perhaps comparable to the diachronic changes that must have occurred to make it as distinctive as it is today), and that community members, while aware of the variation in an abstract sense, are unaware of the systematic nature of this variation and change. This mismatch between objective and subjective linguistic facts may, we hypothesize, favor the sense that the local language is in direct competition with the supralocal lingua franca. We propose to investigate the extent of ongoing change in N'kep using standard sociolinguistic field methods. Trained local research assistants will record interviews and conversations and assist with transcription of a corpus of N'kep stratified by age and gender.

The project will determine what evidence there is in favor of (i) change in apparent time and (ii) obsolescence and language shift. It is hoped that a better community-based understanding of sociolinguistically constrained variation will help put into perspective any evidence of language endangerment and shift. In the same way that early work on the systematic nature of variation in AAVE helped to demonstrate to a generation of educators, community leaders and linguists that the language is not "bad English", it is hoped that a systematic study of variation in N'kep expressly designed to involve researchers of different ages in the Hog Harbour community will inform the community's understanding of the linguistic dynamics of the speech community and support elders' efforts in language documentation and the maintenance.