

Short Project Summary (extended version beneath)

This PhD project is investigating the emergence and development of English on the remote islands of Cocos Keeling, in the South Indian Ocean. The islands' inhabitants are principally Malay in ethnicity and identify as Cocos-Malay, a result of a colonialist past and, until the last few decades, minimal subsequent migration to and away from the islands. Consistent presence of English-speaking governors and official integration into Australia in the early 1980s has created a unique language contact situation on the islands. This sociolinguistic landscape presents an opportunity to investigate the development of English in a geographically isolated post-colonial setting, expanding the current knowledge of sound and grammar systems of English dialects worldwide. A comparative analysis of the spoken English of Cocos Malay islanders, and that of the diaspora Cocos Malay communities living in Western Australia allow for a comprehensive analysis of this new variety. A speech corpus of approximately 55 hours collected during sociolinguistic interviews on the islands and in the diaspora communities in mainland Australia form the data analysed. Narrow quantitative analysis of indexical phonological features and qualitative analysis of the discourse amongst the community regarding the 'us' and 'them' sentiment they harbour towards Australia will highlight the formation of complex cultural identities at play on the island.

Project Description

Situating the project

This project is the first to investigate the English spoken on the Cocos Keeling Islands. It aims to further the work of previous explorations into remote ‘lesser-known varieties’ of English, a growing field in sociolinguistic dialectology. The study of global Englishes is an expansion of traditional English dialectology research carried out in the UK, US and other former British colonies, and within that domain, lesser-known varieties of English spoken in isolated areas of the world are increasingly becoming the subject of empirical research. This is due to the opportunity they provide to examine typologically distinctive developments in English that are a direct result of contact with another language, without the linguistic effects of prescriptive standardisation that we often find in countries like the UK and the US etc.

Observing, measuring and interpreting linguistic features in these new dynamic varieties illuminates the structural and sociolinguistic possibilities of English.

Various models such as Schneider’s Dynamic Model (Schneider 2007), Kachru’s Three Circle Model (Kachru 2009) have been put forth as potential frameworks for the development of post-colonial varieties of English, suggesting that there is a predictable pattern. The Cocos (Keeling) Islands are an opportunity to examine these theoretical approaches starting from a very early stage. Unlike other lesser-known varieties that have been investigated, English has only recently been introduced, albeit aggressively, and therefore it is possible to comprehensively examine its progression from its inception. This project’s speech corpus includes data from the first monolingual Cocos Malay speaker to learn a few English words at school, to his great grandchild, an almost monolingual English speaker, and the generations in between.

A turbulent colonial history and eventual integration with Australia in 1984 have resulted in the emergence of English as the official language on the Cocos Keeling Islands. A wide range of societal influences on the islanders’ English will be investigated e.g. the post-integration education policy, levels of interaction with mainland Australians, as well as community language attitudes towards mobility and cultural unity. How these influences manifest

themselves in the speech of the islanders will be the principal focus of the project. Through this analysis, and with substantial reference to other lesser-known varieties of English, this previously undescribed variety's stage of development in the process of acquisition and nativisation can be established. Thus, the project will broaden our understanding of how English spreads and changes under various historical, cultural and social factors.

Methodology – Data Collection and Analysis

Initial fieldwork included a 2-month stay on the islands themselves, and shorter stays of 2 weeks or less in the diaspora communities in Perth and Katanning in Western Australia, as well as on Christmas Island. During this time, 82 Cocos Malay people were interviewed for on average 45 minutes, resulting in a corpus of 55 hours of speech. The project is unique in its large sample size (more than 16% of the total population), allowing for highly representative

results. A description of the variety is currently in the works with the hopes of publication, whilst two initial small-scale studies into the vowel inventories across the generations in the community have been presented at conferences. In these papers, it was possible to show the advancement and influence of Australian English through a change from monophthong to diphthong vowel production. From here on, a focus on multi-faceted identity construction through the various realisations of certain vowels will form the primary study of the PhD thesis. This will be carried out using a combination of acoustic, auditory and discourse analysis, with the aid of transcription, statistical and phonetic analysis tools such as ELAN, Praat, R Studio and FAVE software. There will also be a reflection on the applicability of various models, predominantly Schneider's Dynamic Model, on this community in light of its unusual colonial history and ongoing language contact conditions.

The current deadline for this project's PhD thesis is May 2019.

Key Words

- Variationist Sociolinguistics
- Acoustic Phonetic Analysis
- Ethnographic Linguistics
- Lesser-Known Varieties of English
- Global/World Englishes
- Ethnic Varieties of Australian English
- Contact Linguistics
- Post-Colonial Englishes