
REVIEW

Biewer, Carolin 2015. *South Pacific Englishes: A Sociolinguistic and Morphosyntactic Profile of Fiji English, Samoan English and Cook Islands English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

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Carolin Biewer's book *South Pacific Englishes* presents a thorough and meticulously documented examination of the morphosyntax of three understudied varieties of English, through the lens of sociolinguistics.

The first chapter lays out the rationale for the book, identifying a research gap (the study of L2 varieties of English in the Pacific), and laying out some of the frameworks that are put into practice throughout the study. Biewer reviews some of the competing models of English as a global language, and reports on previous studies of L2 varieties. In particular, she introduces the readers to *epicentre theory* (e.g., Clyne 1992; Leitner 1992), which posits a reorientation to a regionally relevant local norm. In the case of the South Pacific, she puts New Zealand English (NZE) forward as a potential candidate norm, in competition with the more (geographically) distant Standard British and Standard American Englishes.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the geography, demography, and language situations in Biewer's three target countries: Fiji, Samoa, and the Cook Islands. This includes a more in-depth discussion of the role of English in these communities, touching on a number of potentially relevant factors on

the emergence of English as a local language. These include the nature of early contact with English-speakers and the socio-cultural landscapes that emerged, as well as attitudes to English, and the role of English in education, media, and religion. This is also where we begin to look at her data, via excerpts from interviews that illustrate her participants' attitudes and orientations to English in their communities. Her discussion is structured thematically around reported differences (e.g., *young vs old, urban vs rural*) rather than regionally, making it a bit counter-intuitive to process. Rather than coming away with a clear sense of attitudes and orientations across the three countries (Biewer uses the term *ethnicity* to differentiate between Fijians, Samoans and Cook Islanders), the reader is instead left with the sense that there are very probably differences between the three groups, but precisely what those differences are is hard to recall. Nevertheless, Biewer's social snapshot of these language situations is commendably grounded in ethnographic research, and she is generous in the evidence she provides.

The third chapter, which addresses the theoretical framework underpinning the study, is perhaps the densest. Biewer discusses static models of global English, with particular focus on three approaches: Kachru's (e.g., 1992) tripartite model, the epicentre theory introduced in chapter 1, and Mufwene's (e.g., 2009) feature pool model, which dovetails nicely with several cognitive principles of second language acquisition. While all three frameworks are referred back to throughout the subsequent analyses, and therefore require a well-founded introduction, the level of detail included here can bog the reader down. The chapter culminates in the adoption of Mufwene's feature pool model, adapted for the South Pacific context (pp. 111–114) that elegantly ties together the various threads discussed in depth in the chapter: a competition-selection model involving linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors.

In chapter 4, the methodologies of the study are discussed, focusing on both data collection considerations and analytical processes. Biewer describes her strategy as “employing a variationist approach that combines corpus linguistics methodology with sociolinguistic considerations” (p.115). She comments on the particulars of conducting fieldwork in the South Pacific, and specifically the collection of the interviews that comprise her corpus, the SaFiRa-s. This collection includes 61 interviews with 72 participants in total, containing approximately 120,000 words, which she uses for “both corpus-driven and corpus-based research” (p.116). It should be pointed out that a clear definition is never provided for either *corpus-driven* or *corpus-based*, or indeed a clear distinction drawn between the two, but this observation

is hardly unique to this study, as there seems to be some discipline-internal disagreement as to what constitutes ‘corpus linguistics’. Setting that issue aside, the range of participants is nicely balanced, given the types of real-world problems that inevitably arise in fieldwork-based data collection. In response to one particular such constraint – namely, that the classical urban/rural split operationalised in many studies of Western Englishes is more complicated in Pacific cultures – Biewer adapts Britain’s (2010) idea of *attitudinal space* as a useful workaround for differences in culture, context, and experience, as it includes geography and speaker orientation to local or urban ways of life. This chapter also discusses the statistical approaches taken in the subsequent analysis, including a nicely summarised description of the variationist framework.

Chapter 5 is where the actual data analysis begins. Using a restricted subset of the SaFiRa-s corpus (four speakers from each of the three ethnicities, controlled group-internally for gender and age and evenly divided between urban and rural identities), Biewer explores a number of morphosyntactic variables across the three varieties. This descriptive analysis includes: determiners and articles; count, non-count, and collective nouns; zero and irregular plurals; the progressive aspect; copula and auxiliary *be*; resumptive pronouns and pronoun omissions; and subject-verb disagreement. Each variant is illustrated with examples from the corpus, and is accompanied by a thorough discussion of possible substrate influences on the production of the observed forms. A larger sample of speakers in this analysis would have made the claims of representativeness more robust (with so few participants, it is difficult to identify what is systematic and what is idiosyncratic), but such an increase would presumably have been too large an undertaking for this study. As it is, the discussion – for what it is – is well-presented and thorough.

The analysis continues in chapter 6, which provides a multivariate examination of verbal past-tense non-marking across the three varieties. This includes a more detailed description of the methodology of analysis, and a concise review of relevant literature, including t/d deletion, from a number of non-native varieties of English and English-based creoles. Across all three varieties, Biewer reports that zero marking of past tense is a consistent indicator of the habitual aspect, and remarks that “the strong effect of this conditioning factor is not restricted to creole languages” (p.242). The social factors show a less consistent pattern across the varieties, with a slightly clearer picture emerging in the case of Fiji English. Biewer attributes this to Fiji having had a different historical relationship with English as a colonial

language than either Samoa or the Cook Islands. These localised instabilities are perhaps to be expected, however, as all three are still emerging varieties, and local norms have yet to become firmly entrenched.

Given these observations, chapter 7 turns its attention back to the question of epicentre theory: can NZE be shown to be acting as a norm for South Pacific Englishes? Biewer discusses the relative positioning of New Zealand as a power in the region, with particular emphasis on social and linguistic sources of possible influence, such as education, media, and migration. She then conducts a multivariate analysis of verbal singular concord across Fiji, Samoan, and Cook Islands Englishes, with British and New Zealand Englishes (both Pākehā and Māori varieties) as potential sources for norm orientation within the Pacific varieties. She concludes that, despite the wealth of external and internal evidence that NZE “constitutes an important external model competing with others in the South Pacific” (p.360), its role as an epicentre cannot be confirmed using structural evidence. However, as this study uses only one variable to test this hypothesis, the conclusion seems strongly worded: it could either be the case that (as Biewer argues) other linguistic processes are masking any systematic effect of norm orientation, or it could be that this particular variable is not a good candidate for observing an epicentre effect. More evidence of the unsuitability of this approach would make her claims considerably stronger.

Chapter 8 provides a short summary of the aims and main findings of the study, and makes some recommendations for directions of future study.

Overall, the research behind this book is well-motivated and thorough. As well as documenting linguistic variation in the Englishes of Fiji, Samoa and the Cook Islands, Biewer’s study also provides some interesting theoretical implications for studies of emerging L2 varieties of English. First, she argues that Kachru’s tripartite model (of English as a native language, as a second language, and as a foreign language) would perhaps better be replaced by a simple distinction between contact and non-contact varieties. Kachru’s model excludes pidgins and creoles, but Biewer reports many structural parallels with South Pacific Englishes that make this *a priori* exclusion questionable. Second, she shows that Mufwene’s feature pool model is a particularly useful framework for analysing emerging varieties of English, as it concentrates on the “internal and external ecology of a language” (p.307) without prioritising any one perspective. And finally, Biewer remarks that although “norm reorientation cannot become visible on the structural level if other factors such as substrate influence and SLA have a stronger influence” (p.303), the

evidence of epicentric influence can be found in external (e.g., participant commentary) and potentially in non-structural (e.g., phonological) sources.

The book has a slightly disjointed feel to it, not least because of the level of detail that is maintained throughout. Although it is always nice to get a glimpse of the nuts and bolts that underlie any study, the readability of the text can sometimes suffer. Such is the case here: by going into the depth that she does for theoretical frameworks and methodologies, the first half of the book can be unfortunately dense and seemingly disconnected in places. However, occasional readability issues aside, the book is a solid piece of research that provides an excellent overview of the morphosyntax and sociolinguistic landscape of South Pacific Englishes.

References

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