

Potential variables for the study of grammatical variation in Niuean English¹

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Abstract

There is relatively little known about grammatical features of the Englishes spoken in Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands and Niue. There is also a sparse literature on grammatical features of the English varieties of these Pacific communities in New Zealand. This paper considers grammatical features in the speech of first and second generation Niuean New Zealanders, ethnic Niueans from the Pacific Island of Niue who now reside in New Zealand. The findings illustrate an English variety with grammatical features of both New Englishes and vernacular varieties of New Zealand English.

1. Introduction

New Englishes are well-known for possessing grammatical features which differ from native varieties of English. While some differences may be quantitative in nature, many appear to be qualitative. Platt, Weber & Ho (1984) have referred to distinct patterns with respect to the use of the definite and indefinite articles, tense/aspect markers, invariant tags etc. Some New English features appear to be based on substrate differences while others may be due to general processes involved in the nativisation of New Englishes. In many instances, New English features are deemed unacceptable to all of the local community (Buregeya 2006), due to the perceived value of standard varieties of English.

Although there is an extensive and growing literature on New Englishes (e.g. Kasanga 2006; Kim 2004; Platt, Weber and Ho 1984; Schneider 2000), work on Polynesian varieties of English has been restricted largely to those varieties spoken in Hawaii (see Sakoda & Siegel 2008a, b; Bickerton and Oda 1976). We know relatively little about grammatical features of Englishes in Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands (Biewer 2007), or the variety in Niue. There is also a

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relatively sparse literature on grammatical aspects of these English varieties as they are spoken in New Zealand. This paper considers grammatical features in the speech of Niuean New Zealanders, ethnic Niueans from the Pacific island of Niue who now reside in New Zealand. Some of the participants are first generation, others second generation. The paper documents the use of grammatical features in this particular variety of New Zealand English.

Niue is a small independent country in the Pacific Ocean with strong political ties to New Zealand. The official languages on the island are Niuean and English, and all but a small number of its population of 1,625 (Statistics Niue 2006) are bilingual. Residents can travel and work freely in New Zealand, and many move to New Zealand for their children's education. The Niue education system is based on the New Zealand curriculum and English is the language of instruction in secondary school (Lui 1996).

The English of many Niueans is strongly influenced by New Zealand English. This is due to historic long-term associations between the two states, and the constant flow of Niuean peoples to and from New Zealand (Walrond 2005). The New Zealand Niuean population is recorded at 22,475, the largest Niuean population world-wide. The Niuean population comprises 8 per cent of the total Pacific population in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand 2008), and the majority of Niueans live in the greater Auckland region, in the city of Manukau and the suburb of West Auckland.

2. Methodology

The data for this paper is based on recorded interviews from the Pasifika Languages of Manukau Project (PLMP), a research project which evaluated the language maintenance and attitudes of Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island and Niuean peoples in Manukau. In 2001-2002, 120 interviews were recorded, 30 from each of the above communities. Participants were divided on the basis of age and gender, and both New Zealand- and Niue-born were included (see Starks 2005 for details). As the purpose of the interviews was to collect information about the Pasifika languages, recordings were completed in the language in which the participant was most comfortable. Statistics New Zealand (2008) claims that 25 per cent of the New Zealand Niuean population can hold a conversation in the Niuean language; most are older adults and Niue-born. This is reflected in the language choices of the Niuean participants in the PLMP project. There were no older speakers who completed interviews in English, and only one of the younger speakers elected to complete his

interview in the Niuean language. A total of 14 interviews were conducted in English and these serve as the basis of the present study.

As the PLMP interviews were highly structured and more formal in nature than a sociolinguistic interview, the interviews were less likely to elicit “non-standard” grammatical features amongst those speakers who have a command of more than one variety of English. The interviews took place between a Niuean interviewer and Niuean participants, and were located in a place chosen by the participants (usually their homes).

Of the 14 interviews conducted in English, nine were with speakers aged 17-25 years, the remaining five with speakers aged 40-45 years. Six of the participants were male, eight female. In our opportunistic sample, one male and three females were born in Niue. The Niue-born male travelled back and forth between the two countries, whereas the three females were well-established New Zealanders, having lived in New Zealand for at least half of their lives. Although several of the middle-aged speakers appeared “accented” to the New Zealand ear, all but one of the younger speakers were born in New Zealand and could easily pass as New Zealanders (see Starks, Christie and Thompson 2007 for details on the phonetic aspects of their speech). The interviews contained comparatively few examples of grammatical features associated with New Englishes. There were, however, New English features in the speech of both the New Zealand-born and those born in Niue. In three interviews with second generation Niueans, no occurrences of grammatical features associated with New Englishes were present in the recordings. Thus, it cannot be said that all Niuean New Zealanders make use of the grammatical features described below.

3. Results

There were several lexical items in the interviews that appear atypical of the speech of the majority of the New Zealand population. While some of these differences were of a semantic nature, e.g., the use of ‘talk’ instead of ‘speak’ as in (1) and ‘live’ instead of ‘stay’ in (2), others involved word formation processes. These included the use of the derivational suffix *-ation* on the root ‘comment’ as in (3) and the addition of *-ate* on ‘converse²’ in (4). There were also a number of compounds in the dataset, as illustrated (5-6) not typical of general New Zealand English.

1. cause um, we talk in English and...parents talk in Niuean
2. cause u...I’ve been staying in New Zealand...all my life

² ‘converse’ also occurs frequently on its own as in: ‘now is English, oh ye-yeah-, and and a bit of Niuean, if I, um converse and talk to my...um brother’

3. it's a commentation
4. if I was to conversate with another Niuean [in the Niuean language] it'd either be swearing or mocking each other but most of the time we – we cannot hold a conversation properly. you know. With other Niueans an stuff
5. good Niuean leader people
6. yeah well um well they feel that it it's rude to speak in your language while there are other cultural people [people from other cultures], you know, surrounding you

Of the grammatical features present in the dataset, many are associated with the noun phrase. These include variable plural marking on the noun. Plural marking is optional in the Niuean language, especially when marked elsewhere in the noun phrase. The lack of plural marking on nouns in constructions in Niuean English, as in (7), is a likely transfer feature from the Niuean language. It is however one that may be short-lived in this community as it is not present in the interviews with any of the younger New Zealand-born Niueans.

7. in all the language_

Another New English feature in the dataset relates to the use of articles. This includes both the addition of an article where one might not expect it to occur in New Zealand English as in (8-9), and the occasional omission of an article as in (10).

8. understanding the English
9. it wasn't much of a English
10. and we are living in the age where _computer plays a major role

Our dataset also contains the occasional use of 'a' instead of 'an' when the following word begins with a vowel as in (11-12). This is characteristic of the Niue- and New Zealand-born speakers.

11. for a eighteen month period
12. cause they got two sides to it, you got a English side and you got a Niuean side

Other New English features are associated with the verb phrase. The most widespread feature in the dataset is the absence of subject-verb agreement. Some examples are listed in (13-16). The Niuean language does not mark verb agreement and this is a likely transfer feature into Niuean English. It is also a potential characteristic of other Polynesian Englishes, as noted in Biewer (to

appear). Variable agreement is present in the speech of New Zealand-born and Niue-born speakers.

13. and by the time it get down to our kids...it's gone
14. the other two is...
15. I guess..with my nephew R. who spend most of his time here...
16. it's be ...it it'll.. it's ridiculous for me to speak in Niuean when nobody understand

Certain cases which involve an apparent lack of subject-verb agreement may be due to a reclassification of some nouns in Niuean English. There are many examples of the noun 'people' with a third person singular verb, as illustrated in (17-20). There are also many examples where the noun 'people' has a verb inflected as plural, and the occasional interesting mix as in (20) where the noun phrase 'other people' serves as the subject of the main clause and the relative clause, with different verb agreement patterns in the two clauses. Given the variability within and amongst Niuean New Zealanders, this would be an interesting variable to investigate in much greater detail.

17. the people that lives here
18. the people that understands
19. the people who likes
20. other people are present who doesn't know

In the Niuean language, equational sentences are formed without the addition of a copula verb. A copula is sometimes absent in equational sentences in the English of Niuean New Zealanders, as in (21).

21. and they don't know how to speak Niuean but they still Niuean.

The auxiliary verb BE is also occasionally absent in other structures, as in the present progressive in (22-24). Jacob (1991: 56-60) has noted BE omission in progressive constructions in Maori English and it is possible that BE omission in our dataset may be the result of influences from New Zealand English³.

22. ...because where you learn lan-language also you .in learning Pacific language, you also learn the surround where that language coming from, and um and then doing that..you'll be able to understand -have a greater understanding of the people grouping that we have

³ One reviewer has noted that BE omission is a characteristic of many varieties of English and that the link between BE omission and NZE is tentative and needs to be investigated in much greater detail.

23. well they just being Niue um...just speaking and um living the culture that they grew up with
24. or just the way they trying to jumble some words around

Another notable characteristic in the dataset is the use of the progressive construction with stative verbs. It is possible for stative verbs to appear in progressive constructions in many varieties of English. Hundt (1998: 76), for example, notes the use of the progressive with the stative verbs 'think', 'hear' and 'feel' in the Wellington Corpus of New Zealand English. The list of stative verbs which can take the progressive in Niuean English might be more open in Niuean English than in general New Zealand English as examples in (25) and (26) illustrate. It would be interesting to explore more fully the range of stative verbs which can take the progressive in these varieties of English.

25. people who are not understanding the English
26. people who are more supporting of their people

Other constructions sometimes appear simplified in Niuean English. The auxiliary verb HAVE may be absent in the present perfect as in (27) and (28). This omission of HAVE in the present perfect has been noted as a feature of Maori English (Bell 2000: 235; Holmes 1997) as well as a feature of vernacular New Zealand English. It may also be a feature of other Englishes in the Pacific (Biewer 2008). Another instance of HAVE deletion pertains to the use of GOT instead of HAVE GOT as in (29). Quinn (2000) documents the use of GOT in New Zealand English. This suggests that simplified verb structures in Niuean English may have somewhat ambiguous origins.

27. I been to English communication courses where ..um teachers need to make sure that..
28. I lived here for so long now
29. but if you listen to the palagis, they just got the perfect English

New Englishes are often characterised as having optional past tense marking when tense is clear from the context. Tense may be unmarked in Niuean narratives, as in the following.

30. Int: an' then okay an' an' an' then you came to New Zealand?
Part: came to New Zealand and attend Onehunga Primary
31. Int: uh where did you go to secondary school?
Part: Niue High School
Int: okay
Part: at am
Int: //a Alofi eh?

Part: yeah Niue High School in Alofi from form three to six

Int: yeah

Part: and then seventh form I attend RHGHS

Int: yep, that'll be here in New Zealand

There are also a couple of unusual tag constructions in the dataset, such as (32) where the tag contains a modal verb absent in the main clause. Another unusual example is the use of the superlative in comparative constructions as in (33). There are too few of these constructions in the database to generalise further on their use in the Niuean community.

32. it depends on the situation, wouldn't it?

33. because we saw each other most often than anyone else

Because Niueans live in New Zealand and form part of the larger New Zealand English community, they have grammatical features of New Zealand English. In addition to "standard English" features characteristic of many varieties of English, the PLMP interviews contain a number of vernacular features associated with New Zealand English. Several of these were mentioned earlier. These include the deletion of BE and HAVE in present progressive and perfect constructions, as well as the use of GOT instead of HAVE GOT. Other features in the database include the use of 'was' rather than 'were' in conditionals, as in (34-35), the use of singular verbs in plural existential 'there' constructions as in (36), and the tag particle eh as in (37). The former two constructions are typical of many varieties of English. The latter is described as a feature of Maori English but detailed analysis of the PLMP interview data has revealed that eh has similar, but not identical, functions (see Starks, Thompson and Christie 2007 for details).

34. if I was supposed to-if I was gonna speak to you know, express my ideas in Niuean, then you know they'll probably just just what the heck's this fella going' on about, you know?

35. cause if you was to do it..

36. there's...cause there's heaps of Niueans that are born in here

37. yeh, like using the right language eh?

4. Conclusion

This review of grammatical features in the Niuean interviews from the Pasifika Languages of Manukau Project reveals that Niuean New Zealand speakers have many features typical of New Zealand English, including those associated with the vernacular features of New Zealand English. Niuean New Zealanders also make use of New English features; however such use is

relatively infrequent, and not characteristic of the entire community. Three of our New Zealand-born participants had no New English features in their recordings.

The majority of our Niuean New Zealanders do, however, make selective use of New English features. These include broadening of specific lexical items, use of alternative derivational forms and distinctive compound formation processes. Other features include the omission of plural marking on nouns, especially in contexts where the plural is marked by means of a quantifier elsewhere in the noun phrase. Other notable characteristics include the sporadic absence of articles, and the use of 'a' instead of 'an' before a word beginning with a vowel. With the exception of the last feature, the preceding features are typical of the PLMP recordings of the Niue-born participants.

As for the verb phrase, there is the occasional apparent lack of subject-verb agreement. In some cases, this may be due to a recategorisation of group nouns such as 'people'. The database also records the occasional loss of the copula in equational sentences and other complex verbal constructions, and the use of the present progressive with a wider selection of stative verbs than in general New Zealand English. New English features associated with the verb phrase are present in the speech of New Zealand- and Niue-born. The use of New English verbal features by both groups suggest that features associated with the verb phrase may be more likely to serve as ethnic identity markers in this diasporic community than those features associated with other aspects of the grammar. This may be due to the fact that many of the features noted about the verb phrase are found in the speech of the wider NZE community.

Since the above findings are based on interview data, which is not known to be conducive to the widespread use of vernacular features, it is likely that sociolinguistic interviews would provide richer sources of data for future studies of Niuean English. The dataset is also quite limited with interviews from only 14 speakers and thus all findings must be viewed as tentative. It is hoped that the findings will provide avenues of research for future studies.

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