The Routledge Companion to the Work of John R. Rickford

Renée Blake, Isabelle Buchstaller

Introduction

Publication details

John Victor Singler

Published online on: 15 Oct 2019

Accessed on: 28 May 2021

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
In its division into four sections, this volume captures four areas in which John R. Rickford has played a pivotal role in shaping and advancing linguistic scholarship. His work in contact linguistics provides the foundation for what he has done—and continues to do—in the other areas. Rickford's attention to the rights of individuals and communities, to the educational implications of linguistic discrimination, and to stylistic variation—all three of these areas of his research can be seen as having evolved out of his particular attention to language contact, that is, his attention to the properties, history, and standing of varieties stigmatized by the mainstream.

An appreciation of Rickford's contribution to contact linguistics begins with his language-specific work on Guyanese Creole and African American English (AAE). It extends from this to broader analyses of Creole languages and nonstandard varieties. Beyond that, there are three aspects of his work to which I would call attention.

The first is the way in which he has brought sociolinguistic models and sociolinguistic principles to bear on contact linguistics. This is true of variationist sociolinguistics, for example in his cross-Creole discussion of the copula, but of other aspects of the field as well, as in his discussion of the use of data from pidgin and Creole written sources from earlier eras.

The second involves his place in the ongoing debate about the origin of AAE; the Anglicist (dialectologist)/creolist debate. The Anglicist position emerged in the early and mid-twentieth century. It held that ‘AAVE’s features come primarily or entirely from regional dialects spoken by White indentured servants and other English settlers whom Africans encountered when they came to America’ (Rickford 2006f: 27). The creolist position arose in the 1960s and 1970s, a consequence in part of linguists' increased awareness of the Creole languages of the Caribbean. As articulated then, the position asserted ‘that the roots of AAVE were embedded in an expansive Creole found in the African diaspora, including the antebellum Plantation South’ (Wolfram 2003: 284). For a time, the creolist position was dominant. Then, in response to new evidence and new arguments from proponents of the Anglicist point of view, opinion among linguists shifted back to it. However, even when any form of the creolist hypothesis seemed to have fallen into disfavor, Rickford held on. He continued to present evidence in support of a modified version of the hypothesis, and also to present carefully argued rebuttals to the claims made by those who promoted an absolute version of the (Neo-)Anglicist hypothesis (Rickford 2006a, b). As Winford observes in his chapter in this section, ‘Rickford has been by far the strongest advocate of the “creolist hypothesis”, now interpreted as referring to the impact of contact with West African and Creole languages on the development of AAVE.’ Two chapters in the present volume provide support for a creolist role in the emergence of AAE. The chapter by Spears adds to the list...
of what he terms ‘creolisms’ in AAE. The chapter by Winford presents AAE features that he sees as Creole in origin, and he presents scenarios by which they would have entered AAE. Winford’s model accommodates Anglicist and Creole features alike.

The third comment regarding John R. Rickford’s work in contact linguistics pertains to his earliest publications, and it arises from reading the chapters in this section. Chronologically, Rickford’s second publication was ‘Carrying the New Wave Into Syntax: The Case of Black English BÍN’ (1975). In their chapter in this section, Green and Whitmal call it ‘innovative.’ Referring to Rickford’s 1975 article, Spears comments, ‘whenever we carry our research forward, we appreciate anew the importance of classic writings in the field.’ Central to Weldon’s chapter is a replication of the questionnaire from Rickford’s 1975 study. Edwards and Williams, and likewise Mesthrie, refer to the significance for them of Rickford’s 1976a edited volume, A Festival of Guyanese Words. Mesthrie and Winford also make reference to Rickford’s 1977b ‘The Question of Prior Creolization in Black English.’ These three works are among eight that John published while still in graduate school. Hardly preliminary, they were ahead of their time, ‘classic’ to use Spears’s phrase.

The early work that has been most important in my own case was John’s 1979 University of Pennsylvania dissertation, Variation in a Creole Continuum: Quantitative and Innovative Approaches. Because it was produced in an era where dissertations were not freely available, it is not so well known as the early works listed in his bibliography in this volume. The most important aspects of it were to appear in later works: the ethnography of Cane Walk, the socially salient aspects of the continuum model, and the use of implicational scaling were among the topics first developed in the dissertation and then put to good use subsequently. Initially, though, it was all there in one place, crammed into the dissertation, if you can speak of anything being crammed into a work of more than 500 pages. The discussion of methodology is rich—from the cautionary subsection entitled ‘Wearing Out the Interviewee’ to the strategies John employed to elicit a sufficient number of feminine pronouns, crucial for his endeavor to instantiate a continuum. As with the other early works, the dissertation is valuable on its own terms and equally a rich foretaste of what was to come.

Studies That Draw Specifically on Rickford’s Work in Contact Linguistics and Creole Studies

A theme in much of Rickford’s work has been the ways in which sociolinguistics, especially but not only variationist sociolinguistics, can inform contact linguistics. Shelome Gooden’s chapter reverses the direction, drawing on Rickford’s research to argue for the relevance of language contact for understanding the basis for sociolinguistic variation. In the second part of her chapter, Gooden follows Rickford in discussing the Caribbean linguist’s obligation to the community that they study.

After an initial discussion of the Indian diaspora, Rajend Mesthrie’s chapter addresses a range of topics pertaining to language in South Africa, both in terms of the contact languages that evolved and the changes that are taking place now. The chapter is consciously discursive and discusses the application of Rickford’s work on Creoles and variation; first to diaspora Bhojpuri, and then to individual issues in South Africa.

One of Rickford’s earliest publications was his edited volume A Festival of Guyanese Words (1976a), a work that celebrates the lexicon of Guyanese Creole. Walter F. Edwards and Ongel Williams draw on the spirit of that work to investigate Guyanese Creole ideophones. Their work is fundamentally diachronic. They compare the ideophonic repertoire of Edwards’s youth to those that are in use today by younger speakers. Ideophones remain a vivid part of Guyanese speech. However, insofar as the ones that were presumptively African in origin are giving way to ones that seem more onomatopoetic, Edwards and Williams see the move away from the African source as a kind of decreolization.

Ian E. Robertson and R. Sandra Evans examine the obstacles that confront Creole speakers in Caribbean nations in their efforts to negotiate the legal system. They consider situations like St. Lucia
where the language of government is not the Creole’s lexifier language as well as ones like Jamaica where it is. Their chapter extends to Creole societies the spotlight on stigmatized language and systematized injustice expressed for AAE in the United States by Rickford and King (2016e).

André C. Sherriah, Hubert Devonish, Ewart A.C. Thomas, and Nicole Creanza combine linguistic and demographic evidence to argue that the lects from two different regions of England played a key role in shaping the English input into the Surinamese Creole Sranan. This chapter parallels Rickford’s classic article ‘Social Contact and Linguistic Diffusion: Hiberno English and New World Black English’ (1986g) in the way in which it weaves together demographic data, history, and linguistic evidence.

AAE: The Creolist Hypothesis

In their respective chapters, Don Winford and Arthur K. Spears address Rickford’s work in support of the creolist hypothesis in different ways. Winford frames the origins and development of AAE in the context of the Naturalistic Second Language Acquisition framework, thereby accounting for English dialect and Creole features alike in AAE. He acknowledges Rickford’s central place in establishing the role of Creole languages in the shaping of AAE.

Spears turns to Rickford’s (1999a) list of AA(V)E grammatical features. He elaborates on the part of the list that deals with preverbal markers of tense, mood, and aspect. In the course of doing so, he provides additional instances where AAE shares features in the verbal system with one or more Western Hemisphere English-lexifier Creoles, thereby strengthening Rickford’s arguments in support of a Creole role in AAE genesis.

Other Topics Within AAE

Other contributions pertaining to AAE include chapters by John McWhorter, Lisa Green and Ayana Whitmal, and Tracey Weldon. Although variant am has long been dismissed as a feature of caricature and minstrel shows, and not of actual AAE at any time in the variety’s history, McWhorter marshals evidence to show that it was in fact present in nineteenth-century AAE. McWhorter sees his work as inspired by Rickford’s (1975) demonstration of what can be learned about AAE by concentrating on a single feature.

Lisa Green and Ayana Whitmal explore the ex-slave narratives with special reference to two discourse phenomena, narrative done and pro-drop with forms of say. They note that in using a familiar corpus to provide utterly novel findings, they are following a pattern characteristic of much of Rickford’s work.

A crucial element of Rickford’s (1975) classic study of stressed BÍN was a questionnaire administered to White and African American speakers of American English, with White speakers not recognizing the remote past reading characteristic of stressed BÍN in AAE. Tracey L. Weldon expanded the questionnaire and then administered it anew. The results on the basis of race were essentially the same as those that Rickford had obtained. Crucially, however, among African American respondents, amount of formal education showed no bearing on the results, with respondents who were university graduates showing scores just as high as those with less education. She argues that those with a greater amount of education—members of the middle class—have emotional and attitudinal motivation for maintaining distinctively AAE features, even as they employ camouflage in doing so.

Contact, More Broadly

Robert Bayley, Ceil Lucas, Joseph Hill, and Carolyn McCaskill look to Rickford’s work on the social history of AAE to document the history of a variety of American Sign Language (ASL) spoken by African Americans. Race-based slavery gave way in the Jim Crow era to segregated schools for
the Deaf in Southern states. Thus, Black ASL arose in a setting of discrimination directly parallel to that which confronted African American hearing children.

In her chapter, Sarah Bunin Benor proposes the term ‘ethnolinguistic infusion,’ by which ‘community leaders . . . [incorporate] elements of a group’s heritage language in the context of a different primary language of communication.’ She illustrates this with the use of Ladino at a Jewish summer camp in the Pacific Northwest that is aimed at the descendants—most often the great-grandchildren—of Ladino speakers. In her work, Benor draws on Rickford’s (1985b) argument for the role of motivation and group identity in establishing and maintaining ethnic language differences.

Notes
1. For Rickford’s BÍN, Spears uses BIN (without the stress), and Weldon uses BEEN. They are referring to the same form.
2. To give the reader some idea of the value of Rickford’s dissertation to me, I offer an appropriately quantitative assessment. In preparing this introduction to the contact section of the volume, I returned to my dog-eared copy of Rickford’s dissertation and counted the number of pages on which I had underlined a passage or had written something in the margin. I am not quite sure what to make of it, but I had done so on 439 of the text’s 505 pages. That’s 86.9%, slightly more than six pages out of every seven.

Reference