

ACROSS WATER, LAND, AND DIFFERENCE. LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL CONTACT IN SAMANÁ

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In the first half of the nineteenth century, prior to the abolition of slavery in the U.S., approximately 6,000 African Americans migrated to Haiti. The planet's first Black republic, the first country in the world to abolish slavery, and the second colony in the Americas to win its independence, Haiti was a success story and a beacon of hope for millions. Motivated by the prospect of a better future, the African Americans who migrated there, fled dispossession, racial violence, and limited economic opportunities. This article will explore aspects of social life in communities created by African American migrants and their descendants in one of the places where they settled, the Samaná Peninsula (today part of the Dominican Republic), where they maintained aspects of their cultural heritage, including African American English, for more than 150 years. It will consider the concept of an isthmus or bridge as a conceptual platform for remapping scholarly narratives about the social life of language in Samaná and other migrant communities in the region. Special attention will be given to the documentation and theorization of dynamics of contact that unfolded between different ethnic groups on the peninsula and their relationship to community formation and social memory.

Keywords: Language contact, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Historical sociolinguistics, Samaná English

Overview

In the first half of the nineteenth century, a diasporic variety of African American English (hereafter, AAE) emerged in a community of free Blacks who settled in and around Samaná, a town located on the peninsula of the same name in the northeastern part of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. This language became a marker of identity for hundreds of African American migrants and their descendants, one that connected them to several other ethnic groups, all of which spoke different languages. This two-part finding calls into question three central assumptions that have been repeated in much of the linguistic scholarship on this language: (i) dynamics of the settlement merit describing it as an enclave, (ii) monolingualism on the part of the African Americans separated the community from other groups in the area, most notably speakers of Spanish, and (iii) the features and characteristics of the language of these migrants –the variety that

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linguists have frequently referred to as Samaná English (hereafter SE)– was not impacted by language contact. Equally significant, this language’s history directs attention to linguistic practices and broader patterns of everyday life that brought together the experience of freedom and meaning-making in ways that changed the lives of the migrants, their descendants, and society at large.

This essay uses evidence from archival documents and conceptual tools from cultural studies and historical sociolinguistics to bolster knowledge about the setting and social circumstances in which multiple varieties of English were spoken natively by a substantial portion of people on Samaná Peninsula, most notably the descendants of the aforementioned African Americans and other immigrant groups with whom they interacted. Archival evidence is interwoven with ideas from linguistic scholarship on SE to develop the argument that the history of this language should be understood as a set of processes that enriched social life and changed over time, rather than as a system of static features that was exported from the U.S. to the Caribbean in the 1820s.

Samaná has stood out to linguists because a substantial number of African American migrants who made it their home maintained their native language there for more than 150 years. In addition, it is one of just a handful of settings in which their descendants passed on distinct cultural practices (e.g., music, culinary practices, folklore). Members of later generations referred to themselves as “Americans” and their language not simply as “American”. The survival of the language is a result of their active participation in social life in ways that transformed their lives as well as community dynamics.

Representing Language

Arthur Spears asserts that gaps in knowledge about diasporic varieties of AAE such as SE are relatively common. His description of general problems with the existing scholarship on AAE assists in understanding why this is the case. One problem is “shallow grammar”, which refers to the tendency for published research to describe a subset of the language’s features without considering them in social context. This approach often assumes a standard variety of English as the reference for establishing what is “missing” or absent (but, ironically, still worth centering as a topic of analysis) in the variety under study. This tendency, which can also be observed in scholarship on SE, is reflected in studies that focus on features such as t/d deletion, copula absence, preverbal *did*, and invariant *be* – sometimes at the expense of analyzing the language on its own terms. John Lipski offers sophisticated comments on SE but refers to «errors of subject-verb and noun-adjective agreement» as features (303). Most works that take a shallow approach to grammar include limited information about social life.

Additional gaps in knowledge about SE can be attributed to what I term the “time capsule problem”. This is the result of consistently defining the language as a conservative variety that has changed very little in two centuries –without identifying sufficient evidence to support this claim– and arguing that specific features documented in the twentieth century represent older, antebellum forms. The idea is that SE preserves AAE as it was spoken in the 1820s. It has been paired with the assertion that the African Americans lived in an isolated enclave.

However, natural languages are impervious neither to the forces of gradual change nor to the dynamics of macrosocial categories (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, place of residence, age) that inform the fascinating intricacies of culture, linguistic variation, and language ideologies. Considering that SE and its social history are under-documented, the proposal that the language did not change in more than a century of dramatic social and political changes should be presented as a hypothesis rather than as a fact or conclusion. Guy Bailey recommends analyzing twentieth-century Samaná speech samples in conjunction with other sources, holding that it would be a mistake to assume that AAE as spoken by early migrants did not change.

Naming Abstraction

Various challenges make it difficult to situate the language of this community in historically accurate terms. First “SE”, obscures complexities of space, and identity that are central to the social order of Samaná. This name indexes residency in the town of Samaná, but its history shows that not all of the African American migrants in the area lived in the town. Some scholars familiar with the settlement’s history reject the classification of the language as a single town-based variety. Martha Ellen Davis, for example, identifies two distinct varieties: refined and rural. The former refers to the language of those with a formal education and was spoken mainly in town and in some outside areas (i.e., the sections Villa Clara, Bethesda, and Honduras) (15-16). The rural variety was learned completely by oral transmission and used outside town.

Second, interpretations of “SE” tend to suggest that the only valid variety of English in Samaná is that of African Americans. It leaves little space for other varieties, including Caribbean varieties, English-lexifier Creoles, and varieties spoken by native speakers of Spanish, French, and Kreyòl. In addition, it obscures phenomena such as bi-dialectalism, which would have characterized the repertoires of individuals from rural backgrounds in the US who acquired a more formal register of English in local schools where they learned to read and write. While SE has been represented as “authentic early AAE” removed from language contact and external influence, in both the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries influential teachers from other Caribbean islands, the US, and Britain spoke and taught distinct varieties of English (Vigo; Walicek).

Keeping these challenges in mind, the remainder of this work refers to the abstract language presented in scholarly literature as “SE” and to the more organic or socio-historically rooted varieties described in various archival materials and testimonies as “American”. As this alternation suggests, narrating language history entails remapping understandings of place as well as recognizing multi-faceted patterns of linguistic communication and social interaction as connective and consequential.

Beginning Again

In the 1820s, approximately 6,000 African Americans migrated to Haiti, the first republic on the planet to be governed by people of African ancestry. Haiti achieved its independence and the abolition of slavery in 1804. These were two of the accomplishments of its revolution, an event of global significance that culminated more than a decade of war. In 1822, the country’s second president, Jean-Pierre Boyer, secured the unification of the entire island of Hispaniola by annexing the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo. His government made it possible for various groups to settle in Samaná. The period of unification, which in the contemporary Dominican Republic tends to be referred to as an occupation, ended in 1844.

Haiti’s status as an inspiring symbol of a free society motivated many of the migrants to leave the US. They wanted to live in a society in which their blackness and freedom were not controversial and re-enslavement not a looming threat. The various incentives Boyer’s government provided were also substantial. Most of those who settled in Samaná were guaranteed transportation, Haitian citizenship, access to land, and initial economic support. In addition, Boyer assured them that their religious freedom would be protected and that the nation of Haiti would continue to oppose slavery. This support represented a new beginning, but it came with expectations, as some of the churches and civic organizations that assisted in coordinating migrants’ move from the US, repeatedly told them that the possibility of greater racial justice rested on their shoulders.

The message was that they had to lead moral and upright lives and that doing so would help to make it possible for others to follow in their path. Churches and influential community members in Samaná repeated variations of this discourse. Thus, it is unsurprising that some saw decisions related to their personal lives as impacting racial equality in the future. In fact, individuals I met during

fieldwork in Samaná in 2012 recalled that their grandparents proudly described American as “a sign of freedom that meant freedom”, suggesting that social semiotics may have nurtured the language that marked their history and identity.

Haiti’s opposition to slavery and the widespread degradation of the rights of Black people throughout the Americas led it to provide sanctuary to the runaway slaves that reached its shores. This policy was important to many African Americans given their experiences with racism as well as to Blacks from Anglophone Caribbean. In these colonies, slavery was legal and vehemently defended by British authorities. This British position is similar to that of Spanish colonial authorities prior to unification. They wanted to closely monitor activities in on the peninsula because of concerns about foreign incursion and *de facto* bridges that connected it, across the water, to other places.

The significance of the sanctuary policy is evident in numerous documents, including those in which slaveowners from Grand Turk complained to the British King that Blacks whom they owned had fled to freedom (*Fugitive Slaves* 1821). Among the latter were speakers of English-lexifier Creoles (and possibly also English) who reached Samaná Peninsula as “fugitive slaves”. Calling their language Afro-English, E.V. Smith states they arrived in small streams both before and after the first African Americans. Like the African Americans, they were a heterogeneous group:

The Afro-English immigrants consisted of both freedmen and maroons who previously were under British control either on ships or in colonies. Although the ‘New World’ point of origin for the Afro-English represented a variety of colonies, a large number of them came from the Cayman and Turk Islands. Not unexpectedly, after the Afro-American settlements were established throughout the island, the Afro-English tended to settle in those areas which had large concentrations of Afro-Americans (37).

In the early years of African American settlement, immigrants from the Anglophone islands were considered a separate ethnic group, “the English”. Some formed families with African Americans, and by the time the end of the twentieth century approached, they were frequently spoken about as one and the same. Martha Ellen Davis points out that Virgin Islanders and others from the Eastern Caribbean labored as stevedores, cane workers, and in agriculture. These groups spoke mutually intelligible languages, came from similar religious backgrounds, and many lived in relative proximity to one another. She holds that Samaná’s musical traditions preserve spirituals (anthems) from the US that were expanded by music from the English colonies of the Caribbean, including work songs (5-6).

The Boyer government also provided land to Spanish-speaking slaves it freed upon annexing eastern Hispaniola, “Spanish Haiti”. As Efrain Baldrich Beauregard points out, it distributed plots of land «to enslaved people from the

Dominican part of the country that were liberated at the start of 1822 as well as to dispossessed peasants» (my translation, 64). Some of them settled on the Samaná Peninsula. They contributed to the area's linguistic diversity, possibly speaking a variety of Spanish that had a West African substrate.

Thus, three main groups of recently emancipated people lived in the area: African Americans from the US, runaways from British colonies accepted as refugees, and emancipated Blacks from areas that today form part of the Dominican Republic. They co-existed in an environment in which multilingualism and linguistic difference were part and parcel of an emancipatory existence. I suggest that these aspects of language contributed to the broader tradition of cosmopolitanism and to the peninsula's semi-autonomy, phenomena that Ryan Mann-Hamilton describes as fundamental attributes of the region prior to the Dominican nation-state's formation.

Speakers of Kreyòl and French also lived in Samaná. Some migrated to the area shortly after 1822 when Boyer sent military officers and their families to the zone. However, movement across the border preceded annexation, as suggested by John Lipski who notes that Kreyòl maintained «a vigorous presence in rural villages» and affected regional varieties of Spanish in these settings. Numerous documents refer to “French” rather than Kreyòl in Samaná (114). Some interpret this as a reference to a European variety of French associated with the elite from St. Domingue and Haiti; but I suggest that “French” in archival documents and references to language by scholars from fields other than linguistics should be considered a term that can refer to Kreyòl given that it was infrequently named as a separate language in the nineteenth century.

African American Origins

The African Americans migrated from divergent backgrounds and circumstances. Contrary to popular discourse indicating they were “ex-slaves”, most appear to have been free. Others were people who were born as legally enslaved and then declared free and afforded rights that they had been denied prior to their departure for the Caribbean. In addition, a few appear to have been freed immediately prior to emigration on the condition that they would immediately leave the US. The number of formerly enslaved African Americans people who escaped to Samaná appears to have been small.

The early migrants were diverse in terms of geographical origins. While most left from the northeast of the US, others either left from southern states or had lived in the region (Singler 2007; Walicek 2007; Mann-Hamilton 2016). This suggests a significant degree of dialectal difference rather than uniformity.

The group was characterized not by a single variety of AAE, but by multiple varieties that attested to their distinct backgrounds and personal histories. This point is crucial to the work of documenting and theorizing language change or the lack of it in the context of social life. Because heterogeneity is central to the insights of sociolinguistics, erasing it or assuming that it is somehow irrelevant undermines a whole field of inquiry.

A group of about 300 African Americans that included several large families and children settled in Samaná in the early 1820s, and the population quickly grew. In an 1870 testimony, a Rev. James comments on the first few decades; he makes it clear that they were in contact with other groups and states that bilingualism assisted them in establishing themselves: «At first a few were dissatisfied. They had not learned the language, the place was wild, and they were ignorant of the fruits and food, and crops and work; but after they had all got well started they became satisfied» (Commission of Inquiry 231). Acquisition of Spanish diminished some of the challenges that they faced as recent immigrants, but some who acquired Spanish continued to refer to themselves as monolingual speakers of English. According to Welnel D. Félix Félix, by 1871, the population numbered between 500 and 600, about a third of the inhabitants (55). Ethnic diversity increased further thereafter, bolstered by growth of local businesses and agriculture.

Rethinking Isolation

Numerous scholars suggest that the African Americans who settled in Samaná formed an isolated community. John Holm, for example, indicates that the entire Samaná Peninsula «remained geographically isolated from the rest of the country until the 1930s» (504). Walt Wolfram refers to «relative isolation» and states that the population has «maintained a relic variety of English up to the present day» (340). Manfred Gorchach identifies the language as a fossilized variety and states that the migrants «were invited to settle in the isolated area, which is totally enclosed by Spanish-speaking territory—an isolation that lasted well into the 1930s» (28). Shana Poplack and Sali Tagliamonte assert that SE had «minimal if any contact with other dialects of English since settlement» (209).

These assessments situate language as a reflection of geography; ironically, they fail to recognize the extent to which diverse groups connected across the terrain. Samaná Peninsula enjoyed a degree of semi-autonomy, but its people were not completely disconnected from dominant groups. Its “enclave settlement” appears to have always been situated in terms of a local

network of speakers of Dominican Spanish, Kreyòl, English-lexifier Creoles, and other varieties of English. Moreover, the realm in which the English of African Americans was used was not conterminous with the town. Instead, its use facilitated the exchange of news, ideas, people, goods, and capital – locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. Like a bridge making possible a passage that would otherwise be impossible, it connected minds, nurtured cooperation, and extended the boundaries of local community. In addition, as anticipated by Spanish engineers who planned the town, waterways facilitated movement in and out of the area, in particular its port and the Yuna River.

Some studies (e.g., Smith, Walicek, Valdez) show that community members interacted with speakers from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but they have not yet shifted dominant discourse about SE in linguistics. These works respond to the shallow grammar problem by taking a more holistic approach to language and by exploring language use in social life (e.g., practices, norms, ideologies, patterns of interaction). Information they present is interpreted alongside comparable data from fieldwork to describe specific periods in the past. The resulting synchronic branches undermine the time capsule metaphor by showing how contact, politics, and understandings of belonging impacted linguistic and cultural change.

Various processes influenced the selection of SE's features. One is koineization, the process by which some features of the sociolects and regional varieties of AAE would have become less frequent or obsolete while others were retained and gradually incorporated into one or more of the varieties of English learned by youth. The concept of accommodation, which links individual acts to macro-level change, has been used to understand related aspects of change. Edgar Schneider explains: «In a process of accommodation, individuals approach each other's speech behavior by adopting select forms heard in their environment, thus increasing the set of shared features. It is a process of linguistic approximation with the social goal of signaling solidarity by diminishing symbolic distance; it contributes to group formation and group cohesiveness» (264).

Group cohesiveness was certainly important to the various groups discussed above. African Americans, for example, came from different parts of the US and from different social backgrounds and found themselves in a new community upon migrating. However, as refined vs. rural and American vs. English distinctions suggest, acculturation does not appear to have resulted in shared features within or across groups; moreover, it seems that a certain respect for difference of self and other nurtured solidarity and the preservation (rather than diminishing) of language features and symbolic distance in

everyday communication. Commenting on insights gained through fieldwork, Valdez explains that people he interviewed have tried to preserve not just the language of one group but «a variety of linguistic practices together with a repertoire of multiple identities» (my translation, 30). He suggests that their ancestors approached linguistic difference the same way.

Transculturation and Difference

The concept of transculturation that was developed by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz assists in exploring theoretical alternatives to acculturation. As explained by Jossiana Arroyo, transculturation entails a «more heterogeneous subject formation» based on «re-conciled difference» and the subversion of Hegelian forms of recognition (134). The latter posit a scenario that includes accommodation: a person's obligation to speak or treat someone in a certain way after their behavior defines a normative status and a dominant identity. In contrast, transculturation facilitates the close consideration of multiple types of social interaction, including processes of meaning-making that were important to various ethnic groups but not necessarily for their members. Transculturation facilitates interpreting language against the articulation of dominant social norms, “universals” that are actually relevant to only some communities. The voices and experiences of brave people who migrated across borders and rebuilt their lives precisely to escape these universals reverberate in Samaná's archives of memory, calling for a new narrative about language, contact, and difference.

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