Variation, Versatility and Change in Sociolinguistics and Creole Studies

By the award-winning former president of the Linguistic Society of America, this collection of some of John Russell Rickford's pioneering works shows how linguists in sociolinguistics and creole studies can benefit from utilizing data, theories and methods from each other, as they more frequently did in the 1960s and 1970s, when both subfields, in their modern forms at least, were getting started. The volume addresses fundamental sociolinguistic topics such as social class, style, fieldwork, speech community, sociolinguistic competence and language attitudes with data from Guyanese and other Caribbean creoles. Recurrent concepts are also considered, including language versatility, variation and change, vernacular use, school success and criminal justice in African America and the Caribbean, using models, case-studies and methodologies from sociolinguistics. Theoretical and applied scholars, students apprehensive about sociolinguistic fieldwork, and those considering dynamic methods like implicational scaling, about which little is written in linguistics textbooks, will find this volume invaluable. Includes a Foreword by Gillian Sankoff and an Afterword with a poem by Rachel Jeantel.

JOHN RUSSELL RICKFORD is J. E. Wallace Sterling Professor of Humanities and Linguistics at Stanford University. Author of over 100 articles and author/editor of fourteen books in linguistics, John won the American Book Award in 2000 for *Spoken Soul*, coauthored with his son Russell, and the "Best Paper in Language Award, 2016" for a paper (coauthored with Sharese King and included in this volume) on the 2013 trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin.

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For Angela, who has been my closest friend, intellectual companion and sounding board since 1966, and my loving wife since 1971. And for the children (Shiyama, Russell, Anakela and Luke) and grandchildren (Nyla, Lance, Anaya, Kai, Miles and Bailey) with whom God has graced us.

For my great-grandmothers of color, whose names history hid from us. I will continue to use pseudonyms for you (Aji, Cleopatra) until retirement research reveals your true identities, for us and future generations to enjoy.

And for creole and vernacular speakers everywhere, including those whose words, phones, morphemes, sentences, ideas and sentiments are represented in this book.

"Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born … Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood …" (Margaret Walker, *For My People*, 1937)

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Foreword

Gillian Sankoff

For those of us who have followed John Rickford's publications across four decades, this book contains not only remembered treasures (jewels often enhanced by new settings), but much that is new, representing cutting-edge research of the twenty-first century. Young scholars just now coming of age will find a work of breathtaking scope that merits exploring in depth, and with care.

Rickford's joint concerns with the language of the African diaspora in the New World and with issues of sociolinguistic theory and method are woven together seamlessly. An early version of the Table of Contents that I received along with the original manuscript was color-coded for chapters having to do on the one hand with "creole studies" and on the other with "sociolinguistics." However, no such dichotomy holds up, because Rickford's insights bring the two together synergistically, a case he himself makes in Chapter 5: "Connections between Sociolinguistics and Pidgin-Creole Studies." In this revision of a 1988 paper published in the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, Rickford surveys the many influences from both directions. What appears clearly in hindsight is something he is too modest to mention: that his own research across the subsequent thirty years has done more than anything else to bring about this fruitful rapprochement. To my mind, the central connecting tissue here is Rickford's extensive research on African American English. Alone among contemporary scholars, Rickford has an equally substantial research record both in the field of African diaspora Englishes and in sociolinguistics, to which he has made signal contributions.

At a time when it is easy for young researchers to be seduced by the availability of online corpora that may replace human contact with actual speakers, I was delighted to find that the book is bracketed by two chapters about fieldwork. Previously unpublished except as Chapter 3 in his 1979 dissertation, Chapter 1 sets the stage for understanding Rickford's initial research trajectory as he ventured into a community that, for an urban Afro-Guyanese young man, was uncharted territory. His field site was a rural village (the pseudonymous Cane Walk) populated mainly by the descendants of East Indian indentured laborers brought to what was then the colony of British

Guiana to replace the previous slave labor on sugar plantations. Anyone contemplating fieldwork should read this chapter for its honesty and integrity in reporting the technical, moral and social issues that Rickford faced, and solved. And anyone contemplating fieldwork should read his 2018 assessment of more than four decades of fieldwork in Chapter 15, "The Joy of Sociolinguistic Fieldwork," for inspiration.

The second and third chapters take on the complex issue of "the stigma associated with non-standard or vernacular language varieties" (p. 31), pitting this stigma against a serious examination of the resources that non-standard languages offer their speakers. Chapter 2, "Symbol of Powerlessness and Degeneracy, or Symbol of Solidarity and Truth? Paradoxical Attitudes toward Pidgins and Creoles," coauthored with Elizabeth Closs Traugott, contrasts the disdain of the wider society and its institutions (education, media) toward non-standard varieties with the undeniable fact that speakers of these languages often exhibit great language loyalty. On this latter point, Rickford and Traugott include a mid-twentieth-century citation from Robert Hall, "For the normal, unpretentious Haitian, use of Creole is the symbol of truth and reality, and French is the language of bluff, mystification, and duplicity" (Hall 1966: 133) (p. 32). Reconciling these perspectives requires a serious examination of the relative adequacy of languages in fulfilling all of their various purposes. This question is addressed squarely in Chapter 3, "Me Tarzan, You Jane: Adequacy, Expressiveness and the Creole Speaker." Although stoutly endorsing linguists' understanding that "standard forms are not inherently more logical than non-standard ones" (p. 49), Rickford goes a step further. He writes that although "all languages are POTENTIALLY equal, many [linguists] now concede that ACTUAL equality of languages is a myth, and that the relative adequacy of different languages or linguistic repertoires for their users' communicative needs is a matter for empirical research" (emphasis in the original) (p. 49). Focusing specifically on pidgin and creole languages as those most often vilified by self-appointed language mavens, Rickford examines two complementary ways of assessing their linguistic resources. Using criteria such as the four "charges" to language proposed by Slobin (1978), macro-surveys may cull information from dictionaries, grammars and native-speaker intuitions. A second approach is to carry out micro-analyses of the expressivity of pidgins and creoles in use, a task Rickford undertakes delicately and convincingly with sample texts from Guyanese Creole.

Rickford everywhere rejoices in the richness and depth of language as produced not only by the speakers he has encountered but also in literature. Chapter 7, "Variation and the Versatility Approach to Language Arts in Schools and Societies" (coauthored with Angela Rickford) also addresses issues of education. This chapter celebrates the artistry of American poets like James Weldon Johnson and Paul Laurence Dunbar, who wrote both in what they called "Negro dialect" and standard English, along with contemporary poets

like Sonia Sanchez. Examples from the poetry of Jamaican poets Dennis Scott and Valerie Bloom are used to illustrate how diversity curricula in classroom English courses can be introduced to enrich and validate the connection between children's home language and the standard English they need for progress through the educational system. Not missing a beat, Rickford never neglects the expressive and poetic language of ordinary people. In Chapter 14, "Concord and Conflict in the Speech Community," the eloquence of Derek, a cane field ("Estate Class") worker with little formal education, is featured in the full text of a story he told in the language variety locally known as "Creolese" (along with an English translation). Rickford points not only to Derek's verbal artistry but to the contemporary importance of the "*nansi*-story" genre in representing an ideology that celebrates the moral superiority of the working class. What allies them to the West African trickster (nansi) tales is

[T]he fact that their central protagonists use wit, trickery or cunning to outwit bigger or more powerful opponents. This element is interwoven with other moral themes: the triumph of good over evil, poverty over wealth, common-sense over book-learning, and the oppressed over the oppressor. (pp. 335–6)

Rickford is no stranger to the crushing fact that people of African descent have suffered from a long history of racial injustice in the Caribbean as well as in North America. His demonstration of how language itself has been a central vehicle of oppression, however, represents a major leap forward. This is the central topic of Chapter 12, based on Rickford's 2016 Presidential Address to the Linguistic Society of America and coauthored with Sharese King. "Language and Linguistics on Trial: Hearing AAVE (and Other Vernacular Speakers) in the Courtroom and Beyond." This paper won the 2016 award as the "Best Paper in *Language*" (the flagship journal of the Linguistic Society of America). Built on an analysis of the trial of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin, the chapter expands into an exposition of linguistic injustice in the courts, in education and in housing. The burden of the paper is twofold: (1) that people speaking AAVE are not **heard**, and are thus discounted, in the most important domains of contemporary American life; and (2) that as experts on language, linguists have a responsibility to become involved in correcting these injustices. On this second point, Rickford and King endorse Saussure's 1916 statement:

[T]here is no other field [besides linguistics] in which so many absurd notions, prejudices, mirages and fictions have sprung up . . . the task of the linguist is . . . to dispel them as best he can. (p. 245)

More than endorsing this view, however, they go beyond it, proposing specific ways in which linguistics can work toward leveling the communicational playing field.

Within sociolinguistics, Rickford has long been noted for his important research on how individual grammars relate to broader community patterns, and on dealing with considerations of situational and stylistic variation. Grounding his exploration of stylistic variation in the distinction made by Blom and Gumperz (1972) between situational and metaphorical switching, Rickford highlights the value of going beyond "the one-shot sociolinguistic interview" in two chapters: Chapter 4, "The Haves and Have Nots: Sociolinguistic Surveys and the Assessment of Speaker Competence," and Chapter 11, "Situation: Stylistic Variation in Sociolinguistic Corpora and Theory." These chapters take up both theoretical and methodological issues.

In Chapter 4, Rickford first illustrates how implicational scales (based usually on data from sociolinguistic interviews) have been used to determine speakers' ranges of competence along the continuum between basilectal Creole and standard English grammar. (The reader is referred to Chapter 6, "Implicational Scales" for a full explanation of implicational scaling.) Rickford then shows how we can do better than infer speaker competence solely from spontaneous speech production. Speakers' intuitions, he argues, can be tapped by devising methods that go beyond traditional questions like "Can you say X?" or "Is X grammatical?" In an ingeniously devised "Correction Test," residents of Cane Walk demonstrated that grammatical forms they were not observed to use themselves were nevertheless part of their linguistic competence. Thus for many Estate Class speakers who avoid using Standard English, the use of the basilect is part of a larger sociopolitical statement that progress for those at the bottom does not involve adopting the behaviors and lifestyles of those at the top, but defying and resisting the dominant social order (p. 94).

In Chapter 11, Rickford further adumbrates the point that a single sociolinguistic interview, however ingeniously designed, may give only a very partial view of a particular speaker's repertoire. During his own research in Cane Walk, situational switching (speech to different interlocutors) resulted in a much more frequent use of basilectal features when individuals with whom he was talking broke off to speak with their own family members. For example, when "Mrs. P" advised her daughter about problems with a customer in the family's rum shop, she used six cases of basilectal *am* (third-person object pronoun) – a form never heard in the entire three hours of an interview that nevertheless featured her recounting of some emotionally gripping stories. The other end of the continuum occurred when residents of Cane Walk were re-interviewed by expatriate linguists long resident in Guyana, demonstrating "orchestrated situational switching" that yielded a much higher frequency of Standard English variants. Except for serendipitous interludes with other interlocutors in "one-shot" interviews, the metaphorical (topic-related) switching that is often built into sociolinguistic interviews will, Rickford

demonstrates, typically yield a much narrower range of variation between vernacular and standard variants.

Rickford is willing to go farther than many other sociolinguists have done in exploring the "social" side of sociolinguistics, venturing into the writings of a range of sociologists for inspiration and insights. Originally published in 2012, Chapter 9, "The Social AND the Linguistic in Sociolinguistic Variation" is a useful recent assessment of his thinking on these issues. Chapter 13, "The Continuing Need for New Approaches to Social Class Analysis in Sociolinguistics," is a call to arms to a new generation of sociolinguists to continue advancing in this direction, again illustrating how his research in Cane Walk led him to understand its social dynamics on its own terms.

An important strand in Rickford's work across the decades has been his emphasis on social history. One of my favorite papers (not included in this collection) is his 1986 exploration of the relationship between African slaves and Irish indentured laborers in colonial times: "Social Contact and Linguistic Diffusion: Hiberno English and New World Black English." This paper was a precursor to the current Chapter 10, coauthored with Robin Melnick: "A Variationist Approach to Subject–Aux Question Inversion in Bajan and Other Caribbean Creole Englishes, AAVE and Appalachian." The tools of mixed-effects logistic regression are here brought to bear on data from three Caribbean creoles as well as AAVE and Appalachian English, and compared with results from two other African English diaspora communities in Canada and the Dominican Republic. Readily dispelling the idea that non-inversion of subject and auxiliary is the norm in any of them, the paper is a tour de force in meticulously examining the similarities and differences in the grammatical constraints on variation across these disparate varieties.

One cannot read this book without recognizing the breadth and depth of Rickford's outstanding contributions to linguistics, yet he couches them in an insistence that he stands on the shoulders of giants. Not only does he honor his own teachers and mentors (Labov, Hymes, Hoenigswald, Fought), his citations of predecessors bring to life the history of the discipline and the legacy of pioneers. My own previous knowledge of the work of Robert Le Page was (sadly) limited to the 1985 book Le Page coauthored with Andrée Tabouret-Keller, *Acts of Identity*. Thus I was delighted to find an entire chapter (Chapter 8, "Le Page's Theoretical and Applied Legacy in Sociolinguistics and Creole Studies"), containing a wealth of information about Le Page's earlier work as well as that of other noted Caribbeanists (Richard and Jeannette Allsopp, Derek Bickerton, Frederic Cassidy, Lawrence Carrington, Dennis Craig, Hubert Devonish, Walter Edwards, Velma Pollard and others).

Rickford's collegiality and generosity is evident not only in his appreciation of scholars of the past but in his collaborations with colleagues in the present and mentorship of the linguists of the future. We have in this volume four

jointly authored chapters (with colleagues Elizabeth Closs Traugott and Angela Rickford, and with students Robin Melnick and Sharese King), but these represent only the tip of the iceberg. Many of Rickford's collaborations have resulted in important publications, as can be seen from the bibliography to this book, with joint authorships that in addition to his son Russell J. Rickford include Renée Blake, Penny Eckert, Faye McNair-Knox, Mackenzie Price, Peter Sells, Julie Sweetland, Tom Wasow and many others. Relating to students always as colleagues, his mentorship is legendary, and not only of his own students at Stanford. I personally know of former graduate students at several other universities who have benefited immensely from having John look out for them and foster their interests.

Not every reader of this book will have the pleasure that I had, of reading it chapter by chapter, from start to finish. Those who do will surely share my delight in new discoveries and enrichment in appreciating the impact of its entirety. But I encourage those who do not have that luxury to start by picking the chapter that most intrigues you. I guarantee that that learning experience will lead you to read more.

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Chapter 2: "Symbol of Powerlessness and Degeneracy, or Symbol of Solidarity and Truth? Paradoxical Attitudes towards Pidgins and Creoles." In *The English Language Today*, ed. by S. Greenbaum. Oxford: Pergamon, 252–61.

Chapter 3: "Me Tarzan, You Jane: Cognition, Expression and the Creole Speaker." *Journal of Linguistics* 22.2: 281–310.

Chapter 4: "The Haves and Have Nots: Sociolinguistic Surveys and the Assessment of Speaker Competence." *Language in Society* 16.2: 149–77.

Chapter 5: "Connections Between Sociolinguistics and Pidgin–Creole Studies." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 71: 51–8.

Chapter 6: "Implicational Scales." In *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, ed. by James K. Chambers, Peter Trudgill and Natalie Schilling-Estes, 142–67. Oxford: Blackwell.

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Chapter 8: "Le Page's Theoretical and Applied Legacy in Sociolinguistics and Creole Studies." In *Variation in the Caribbean*, ed. by Lars Hinrichs and Joseph Farquharson, 251–71. Creole Language Library. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Chapter 9: "The Social *and* the Linguistic in Sociolinguistic Variation: *Mii en noo* (Me ain't know)." In *Language, Culture and Caribbean Identity*, ed. by Jeannette Allsopp and John R. Rickford, 51–9. Kingston, Jamaica, and Cave Hill, Barbados: Canoe Press and the Centre for Caribbean Lexicography, University of the West Indies.

Chapter 10: "A Variationist Approach to Subject–Aux Question Inversion in Bajan and Other Caribbean Creole Englishes, AAVE and Appalachian" (with Robin Melnick). In *Linguistic Variation: Confronting Fact and Theory*, ed. by Rena Torres Cacoullos, Nathalie Dion and Andre Lapierre, 56–72. London: Routledge.
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Chapter 13: "The Need for New Approaches to Social Class Analysis in Sociolinguistics." *Language and Communication* 6.3: 215–21.
Chapter 14: "Concord and Conflict in the Speech Community" (revised from 1993 conference paper) *Sheffield Working Papers in Language and Linguistics* 3: 87–119.
Chapter 15: "The Joy of Sociolinguistic Fieldwork." In *Data Collection in Sociolinguistics*, 2nd edn, 80–3. London: Routledge.