Processing Constraints and Socio-Variation Interact in Creole Question Formation
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It has been commonly asserted that questions do not invert in the vernacular or creole Englishes of the Caribbean, forming interrogatives purely through the use of rising intonation (Holm 1988; Bickerton 1981), as in examples (1a) and (1b). [See Examples and References.]

Detailed quantitative studies of this variable have been lacking, however. We examine both syntactic and psycholinguistic processing constraints on question formation and also offer a comparison of such factors in a multi-variety study of unusually broad scope, looking at five English-lexical varieties: the deep basilectal creoles of Jamaica and Guyana, mesolectal Bajan, and vernacular American forms in African-American and Appalachian Englishes.

The data come from conversations between pairs of adult native speakers within each of the five varieties, yielding nearly 3,000 interrogative tokens. On the surface, we do see a dramatic difference among the overall rates of non-inversion, more or less in line with the traditional cultural characterizations, from a low of 15% in Appalachian (85% inverted) to over 96% non-inversion (less than 4% inverted) in Guyanese. However, even the deeper creoles resist a strict categorical view, with examples such as (2).

Further, several factors reveal systematic structural influences on inversion / non-inversion, even within the narrower window of variation found in the Caribbean varieties.

Across all varieties, negative forms favor non-inversion, as do Yes/No questions (vs. Wh).

This is consonant with Kroch’s (1989) suggestion that cognitively, Yes/No forms may resist word reordering since the entire proposition is considered as a whole.

Both shorter and pronominal subjects (highly correlated) favor non-inversion, while increasing sentential subject length significantly favors inversion, suggestive of potential prosodic difficulty involved in both production and comprehension of longer non-inverted questions, where rising intonation is infelicitously delayed.

At the same time, distinctive socio-variation still reveals itself among the effects on inversion of differing auxiliaries, with copulas, modals, and lexical main verbs showing substantially different trends across varieties. The most characteristically creole auxiliary forms—such as Bajan habitual does—appear to categorically non-invert.

Methodologically, the present work takes two steps not generally employed in previous sociolinguistic variation studies in considering the commonality of processing constraints across varieties. Existing cross-dialectal studies typically identify common constraints by comparing separate regressions side by side, looking for like polarity of factor effects and similarity among coefficient weights. Given the present study’s opportunity to compare uniformly collected and encoded data across varieties, greater statistical formality— and thus confidence in comparisons—is offered by bringing the data together in a single regression with common controls and formally testing for interactions of constraints by variety.

This approach statistically confirms the commonality across varieties of the negation, question type (Yes/No vs. Wh) and subject-length effects, while also formally confirming—by way of a significant interaction between auxiliary type and language variety—that Caribbean creole and American vernacular Englishes do still reflect their unique characteristics.
Examples:

(1) a.  *A we Jaan de?*  
[with Jamaican focus marker pre-*Wh*, cf. Winford 2008]

b.  *So you don’t like it stir up?*  
[present study, Bajan (Barbadian) English]

(2) *Iz it dat dem laik unu av waar wid di ada komyuuniti dem?* [Jamaican]  
“Is it that they like you all to have war with other communities?”

References: