A Variationist Approach to Bajan Question Inversion

The present study employs quantitative multivariate analysis of question formation in conversational Bajan (Barbadian) data to provide a view of the structural constraints influencing variability of Bajan subject-auxiliary inversion and explores their theoretical implications.

While corpus studies of spontaneous speech suggest that grammaticality is in general gradient (Wasow 2008), the presumption of invariant non-inversion in creole questions is a key component in Van Herk’s (2000) argument against the hypothesis that African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is descended from a prior creole. However, as Rickford (2006) notes in reviewing Van Herk’s claims, there have been no quantitative, data-based studies of question formation in Caribbean Creoles. The present work undertakes such study, focusing on Bajan, but also drawing on data from Guyanese and Jamaican as well as Appalachian English and African American English.

The Bajan data come from a series of sociolinguistic, oral-history interviews and conversations between adult native Bajan speakers. Question forms were extracted to build a database of nearly 1,000 tokens. Collectively, the speakers used non-inverted forms at a rate of 92%, illustrating a substantial—but not categorical—preference against inversion. Further, several factors also revealed systematic structural influences on variation within the data.

**Negation:** While affirmatively formed questions exhibit 90% non-inversion, negative forms are 99% likely to non-invert, a significant difference ($z=2.28$, $p=0.026$).

**Question Type:** Among affirmative forms, Yes/No questions are significantly ($z= 4.38$, $p<0.0001$) more likely to non-invert (98%) than Wh forms (80%), while among negatively formed questions, the type of question (Yes/No vs. Wh) has almost no effect on variation ($z=0.003$, $p=0.998$).

**Subject Length:** Length in words of the sentential subject has a highly significant effect ($z=7.12$, $p<0.0001$), with shorter subjects tending towards non-inversion.

**Subject Type:** Pronominal subjects are significantly more likely ($z=7.42$, $p<0.0001$) to non-invert than other subject types.

**Auxiliary Type:** Questions with forms of 'be' are significantly ($z=4.47$, $p<0.0001$) less likely to non-invert than those with forms of ‘do’ or modals.

When further analyzed via a multivariate logistic regression model, the pronominal subject and subject length effects retain their significance ($p=0.0068$ and $p=0.017$, respectively), while auxiliary type is reduced to a marginal effect ($p=0.067$), and negation is no longer significant ($p=0.52$). The initially observed effect of negation on non-inversion is mediated by—i.e., partially an indirect effect via—subject length.

**In conclusion,** while Bajan interrogatives do exhibit substantial preference for non-inversion, such inversion is governed by a gradient grammar with systematic variable constraints. This counters a prior claim (by Bickerton 1981) that creole questions non-invert categorically and without systematic constraints. But since Bajan is subject to some of the same constraints that Van Herk (2008) associates with the development of auxiliary inversion in English, this also challenges his contention that the operation of similar constraints in Early African American English indicates that EAAE was influenced by English and not Caribbean creoles. We will also compare the constraints on question formation in Guyanese, Jamaican, Appalachian and modern AAVE to see how these compare with our results for Bajan, and discuss their sociohistorical implications.