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Creoles/pidgins as black box in language contact: '*im* in Australian Aboriginal English

The morpheme '*im*/'*it* in Australian Aboriginal English (1 below) has often been interpreted as a marker of transitivity (Koch 2011).

(1) *He make'im fire.*
    'He makes fire.'   (FT 37-2, 6:40)

While it is generally accepted that it derived from English *him*/*them*/*it*, it remains unclear how the grammars of substrate languages have affected its adoption and usage. Studies of Aboriginal English discussing this marker agree that its use is typically not obligatory, i.e. that it is not used in all transitive clauses (see, for example, Meakins & O'Shannessy 2010; Koch 2011). This paper investigates the distribution of '*im* via a quantitative corpus-based analysis, targeting the obligatoriness of overt non-subject argument realization in a variety of Aboriginal English spoken in Northwestern Arnhem Land. The hypothesis tested is that data from speakers of substrate languages in which non-subject argument (O) marking is non-obligatory would show a reduced frequency of '*im* when compared with data from speakers of languages where such marking is obligatory. This expectation with respect to increased frequency is based on Meakins & O'Shannessy's (2010) study of the argument pattern of two Australian mixed languages, Gurindji Kriol and Light Warlpiri. The argument pattern of the stronger indigenous language showed up in an increased frequency in the respective mixed language, in this case Light Warlpiri.

The data for this study come from a corpus of Aboriginal English from speakers of Iwaidja and Amurdak, which differ with respect to obligatory O-marking. The distributional pattern found in the corpus was then compared to that of a representative sample of Iwaidja and Amurdak by the same speakers as well as to distribution patterns in a Central Australian creole (Koch 2011).

Strikingly, the clearest correlation was between Aboriginal English and the sample of the Central Australian creole. Contrary to our prediction, we found no significant correlation between the contrasting patterns of non-subject argument realization in Iwaidja as opposed to Amurdak in the Aboriginal English data taken from speakers of those languages.

The results indicate that the distribution of '*im* in this sample of Aboriginal English may rather reflect influence from Northern Territory Pidgin introduced by white settlers, which has been in use as a contact language by indigenous people in the northern part of the Northern Territory since the mid-19th century (Harris 1986). This interpretation has two main ramifications: Firstly, contact-induced languages acquired early in the contact situation may remain stable enough to provide target languages for shifting and/or multilingual populations and individuals. If so, the predicted effects of grammatical structures within the substrate languages of speakers of contact varieties of English may be attenuated or modified by their acquisition of imported varieties such as Northern Territory Pidgin. Secondly, the investigation of Australian Aboriginal English and other contact-induced languages needs to pay attention to the individual language histories of speakers as well as their contemporary sociolinguistic contexts, collecting data on when and how languages were acquired, the contexts in which they are used, and the variety of the target language to which they were exposed.

References
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