

# ICE Trinidad and Tobago: Teacher Language Investigation in a University Research Class

---

Valerie Youssef<sup>1</sup> and Dagmar Deuber<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction

This paper puts a new slant on the notion of ‘learner corpora’ since it deals, not in the language of learners of English, but the data collected and analyzed by learner linguists! It reports on an experiment in teaching the skills needed for carrying out corpus linguistics’ research to a class of sixty third year undergraduate students, while simultaneously collecting and analyzing data that would contribute meaningfully to a new corpus of English in Trinidad and Tobago (T and T) and ultimately to the International Corpus of English (ICE) corpus for the Caribbean. It represents then what we would call ‘academic opportunism’ on two converging fronts: maximization of data collection in a short space of time, and maximization of practical research skills learning for a large number of students. We hope we achieved this both ethically and meaningfully and that the description of our efforts may encourage others in similar undertakings.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Trinidad and Tobago in the Caribbean: Language and Language Education

Trinidad and Tobago is the southernmost state of the Caribbean archipelago of islands. Though it is a mere eight miles from Venezuela, it is stubbornly English-speaking, though the majority variety is more accurately described as Trinidadian English-lexicon Creole (TC), the mesolectal variety spoken as a first language by the larger part of the population. Indeed, speakers resist the notion that they speak Standard, at all, and, if they do, that the variety might be their own as distinct from British or American English. There is, however, a Trinbagonian Standard, and a major part of this project was concerned to learn more about this variety. The current linguistic awareness of Trinbagonian speakers leads them to downgrade themselves in respect of language since they continue to derogate the Creole, which has been accepted officially as a language on equal parity with English since 1975. They derogate it even further since it is not quite Creole, like the basilect spoken in Jamaica, and even in Tobago, but anglicized, a mere ‘broken’ English. When outsiders speak of the Caribbean and its language, they translate ‘Caribbean’ into ‘Jamaican’. Hence we have an ICE Jamaican Corpus, which has largely

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Liberal Arts, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine  
*e-mail:* vyoussef@fhe.uwi.tt

<sup>2</sup> Department of English, University of Freiburg / Department of Liberal Arts, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine  
*e-mail:* dagmar.deuber@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de or ddeuber@fhe.uwi.tt

stood for the Caribbean! Trinidadians have to claim Brian Lara and Dwight Yorke (well no, he too is Tobagonian!) for smiles of recognition to appear on people's faces; they alone serve to put us on the world map apparently!

If you wonder about the relevance of all this, bear with us. It explains some of the motivation for the current study which sets out to examine teacher speech in Trinidad and Tobago to discover whether teachers do or do not speak Standard English (SE) and, if they do, how that variety compares to British or Jamaican Standard.

For forty years now, the Creoles of the Caribbean have been consistently in the linguistic limelight as well as the language education situation of young people within our territories. It was Dennis Craig (1971; 1999) who early drew attention to the fact that the language learning situation for young Creole speakers in school is somewhere between a first language and a second language situation since the lexicon is largely shared and they know some structures well, and know others passively, while remaining ignorant altogether of the workings of some others. He showed us that the way forward was to design teaching and learning in such a way that the structures to be taught are treated differently, some as native speaker structures and others being introduced as 'foreign'. If we do less we will find that students will withdraw because of boredom since their perception is that they know English already, albeit badly, and that perception will be reinforced by an approach which takes either the native or the foreign language route exclusively.

As noted above, although Tobago still boasts a basilectal Creole variety which is used in many homes as well as intra-community interaction, Trinidad does not have a basilect, at least at the grammatical level. Alternation is between mesolect and acrolect with speakers tending increasingly to 'code-mix' according to the demands of any particular situation. Youssef has elsewhere described the language competence of the community as varilingual embracing differential knowledge of the two varieties and the capacity to mix systematically between the two as a characteristic feature of acquisition (1991; 1996). At the present time we have observed the development of a 'paralect', close to the acrolect, which 'looks like' the Standard but involves extensive use of Standard forms with creole or other non-Standard functions.

Although the Creole was recognized as a language in its own right by the Ministry of Education in 1975, the way to actually validate it while successfully teaching Standard English has always remained challenging. While the school used to be a domain for the use of Standard, and therefore a place of fear and dread for the majority, the easing of attitudes toward the Creole has made for it encroaching on the various official domains where Standard English previously held sway and has made for a new challenge of providing sufficient exposure to the Standard to allow for it to be acquired as well as the necessary motivation to do so. In former times the Standard variety was pursued as the route to educational success and its literature was valued as part of a culture of learnedness, but today, we are justifiably proud of our on culture, which the Creole represents, and the backlash of this is a disinterest and even hostility towards the Standard and those persons it is perceived to represent. Our teachers are severely challenged then on a number of fronts and have been found to hold ambivalent attitudes themselves to the languages of the territory (Winford, 1976; Mühleisen, 2001). Mühleisen's paper, however, notes that language attitudes are gradually changing. We have observed that our University students continue to acquire Standard English as they

spend time with us and that few are absolutely in control of the Standard when they come to us initially.

## **2.2 The University of the West Indies and Our Research Class**

The University of the West Indies has three main campuses: in Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad. Though the Jamaica campus is the oldest and has remained the dominant campus for administration purposes, a gradual shift has taken place in time so that St. Augustine, Trinidad, is now the largest campus numerically and is becoming an administrative hub itself. We have doubled our student numbers in five years and now stand at a little over 14,000 students. The economic prosperity we enjoy through an oil and natural gas based economy contrasts with other islands and allows us to have sustained the greatest infra-structural development among the islands. At the present time, education, including tertiary level education, is entirely free.

My (main author) challenge as Coordinator of Linguistics is to deliver the Special Project in Linguistics course in the context of which all students are required to write a 5,000–8,000 word project, reporting on their original research to increasingly large numbers of students, who are mainly participants in a BA programme in Language, Literature and Education, with an intake of 70 each year, but including also Linguistics Majors. The former group takes the equivalent of Majors in both Linguistics and Literature with a Minor in Education and, for the Linguistics ‘project,’ is asked to focus on language education and to carry out their research in the secondary schools of Trinidad and Tobago. The students are themselves mainly aiming towards teaching careers at this level.

The course description affirms:

‘This year long course introduces students to fieldwork and research methods in Linguistics, which will lead to their own research project. It is designed to equip students with research skills and to introduce them to various research paradigms’.

And the objectives:

‘At the end of the course, the student will be able to: -

1. Identify various ways of knowing
2. Define and describe research
3. Identify characteristics of academic research
4. Demonstrate an understanding of the philosophical assumptions underlying qualitative and quantitative research
5. Recognize and discuss a major project in Linguistics
6. Design and conduct a research project in Linguistics
7. Identify significant areas of potential research interest in Linguistics’

Recognizing that a corpus linguistics specialist (second author of this paper) was coming to spend a year in Trinidad expressly to collect a corpus of Trinidadian Standard English I reasoned that it would be most useful to have our students collect samples of teacher speech and also if possible gain information on teacher attitudes to their own

language and its range. This would assist Dr. Deuber, one, but would provide a means of exposing our students to the practical realities of corpus linguistics at the same time. The time she spent teaching and correcting and advising the students probably meant that our gain was her loss in terms of time in itself, but she did learn a great deal about our own language situation through the exercise. Normally students would be introduced to a range of qualitative and quantitative linguistics methods and would select their topic fairly widely. This focus on corpus linguistics was something the students resisted initially as constraining their freedom but ultimately found rewarding.

The field was introduced, even before Dr. Deuber arrived in the island by our having, among our own UWI group, two researchers who had been using corpus linguistics techniques in their own postgraduate research. One had been examining violence in the school system through the analysis of the discourse of eight students who had been suspended from school for violent acts (Sieunarinesingh, 2006). His concern had been to discover how far they accepted responsibility for their own actions and he came to give a class to our students on his work and took them through the various stages he himself had been through. In looking at his data, he explained that context specificity had yielded the information that extensive use of such items as modal have to evidenced the way in which his speakers believed that they were compelled to act violently to save face. Habitual does he had found to occur in contexts associated with provocation. As our students started to recognize the applicability of the methodology to dealing with our real societal issues they were immediately engaged and we had begun the process of winning them over.

### **3. The Investigation**

#### **3.1 Significance**

As mentioned above, a major problem for language educators in T and T is to ensure that school students have sufficient Standard English (SE) exposure to acquire that variety given the increasing range of contexts in which a decreolized local dialect variety is acceptable. Even formal contexts for usage are becoming mixed and teachers themselves have difficulty identifying the cut-off points between SE and TC, so great is the convergence between the two. There is an impression, possibly quite erroneous, that teachers themselves do not command the Standard and that their model of Standard and their description of it may serve to confuse students. This is only one of several problems associated with Standard acquisition but it is one that merits investigation and the present study provided this opportunity. It also introduced students to the school domain in itself, from a perspective different from that in which they had known it as pupils.

#### **3.2 Approach and Methodology**

With regard to research technique, the students became immediately engaged with the practical reality of sociolinguistic investigation. We knew that we might find different levels of SE according to differences of:

- Geographical location of school: rural versus urban;
- School type ie wholly government versus government assisted;
- Race of teachers;
- Gender of teachers.

Accordingly we had to set up our study throughout the country, taking the above-mentioned variables into consideration. Students had to volunteer to go to a particular school and then gain access to it, which, in several cases, became fraught, and inevitably led to some modification of our ideal stratified sampling procedure.

We felt that students should, as far as possible work in groups of four to one school and that they would aim to record two class lessons as well as two conversation sessions among a group of teachers, controlled to a fairly formal topic, such as language use in the schools. Each student was to be responsible for the recording and transcribing of one session. In this we were constrained by our recognition that to transcribe the data according to the demands of the ICE Markup Manual (Nelson, 2002) was going to be a major undertaking for the students and very time consuming. We planned then to have them make sure of obtaining their recordings in Semester One so that they could use the semester break for the transcription exercise.

Another advantage was the imperative and motivation entailed in the project. In previous years some students had succeeded in working in the school system but many had failed due to rejection of their requests to observe classes. The imperative now outweighed rejection; they simply ploughed on and managed to find a fair fit with the requirements of their brief in most cases. Access to the schools and to classroom and teacher discourse proved illuminating in itself, not just in terms of the language varieties used, which did, in fact, vary a good deal from school to school, but also in terms of the attitudes it revealed. They observed a variety of classes including delivery of the new Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations (CAPE) syllabus in Communication Studies, which explicates and educates on the local language situation. Only two days ago a student, now working part-time on the larger project, recounted to us an interaction within which a student had declared 'But the Creole sounds so 'retarded'!' and the teacher had replied 'Yes, but we have to accept it anyway!' Clearly, despite the syllabus' best efforts, negative attitudes to the Creole still loom large!

Once they had acquired their data, the challenge was to transcribe. Dr. Deuber spent several classes explaining the transcription symbols in the Markup Manual as well as their significance. Again, practical reality stepped in for our students who had hardly understood the meaning and significance of items such as 'hedges' and 'fillers' in a real sense and now had to identify them. She would take chunks of data from the ICE Jamaica corpus originally, play them through and then have students work with a raw transcription to fill in the significant detail. Ultimately, of course, they had to shift to their own transcribed data, and she would become a real resource person, as meaningful learner autonomy clicked in and they worked through their own exercises. Dr. Deuber taught the students through practice how to access and use concordancing software; inevitably there were variable levels of success and adaptation to the tools available.

### 3.3 Data analysis

#### 3.3.1 Features Selected

Students were instructed that they had to analyze, at the very least, their own group's data in at least two language features; we suggested a range of possible features but did not prescribe any. They used available concordancing software for their analysis. They were encouraged to add data from the entire class – to which full data set they eventually had access – and, if possible to compare their findings to those for ICE-Jamaica and/or ICE-Britain. Very few got as far as this last dimension of the study but one or two handled it well. Their motivation for the transcription exercise was heightened by the expectation that the rest of the class would be reading it.

As we indicated earlier, a major imperative of the study was to discover what teachers produced in the classroom and we encouraged students to consider features such as the following in expectation of the production of the 'paralect' close to the Standard as well as some standard and some, non-overt Creole features. For the paralect, we encouraged them to examine, amongst others, the use of:

- will and would; also would have;
- can and could;
- had;

The modals alternate as if interchangeably in the Trinidad and Tobago context, following apparently from the linked irrealis system of the Creole. Had is used as a calque on did, a remote past marker in the Creole and not on the English pattern of past perfect had.

For non-overt Creole features they would examine:

- alternation of be +-in(g) with -in(g) for present continuous;
- alternation of Ø with -ed for past marking;
- alternation of you all with allyuh and you for second person plural pronoun.

Many of them shied away from 'grammar' and chose to examine discourse features such as hedges and fillers. The use of tags such as eh and right which are peculiarly Trinidadian in their range of usage were very interesting in their own right.

#### 3.3.2 Specific Areas of Practical Learning

The reader will have recognized already that frequency counts such as are easiest facilitated by corpus methodology were not entirely as useful as they might be in some contexts, since Standard words often disguise Creole functions. However, the frequencies themselves provided cues for further investigation. If the usage of would have was greater than in the ICE-GB corpus was it in fact functioning differently from the way in which we would expect? In fact we found it to have a positive assumptive meaning which contrasted with other corpora e.g.

1. You would have completed this part of the syllabus last year. (meaning: I assume that you completed this part of the syllabus last year.)

We also found differences in frequency of features in the Standards, which exposed a critical dimension of diversity within the model. For example, we found a very high incidence of will usage within the Standard for habitual meaning as compared to ICE-GB e.g.

2. You will visit your family often but not necessarily for long periods of time.
3. You will read the newspaper daily without meeting any reports of that kind.

Then we found that you (pl.) had a lower occurrence than in other varieties. Why would this be so? Because it was often eschewed in favour of local associative plural you all, which has come to serve as a Standard variation on the Creole allyuh. This marked it off from Jamaica where the Creole second person plural pronoun, of course, is unu.

Not only are these kinds of difference interesting in their own right but they would serve to convince our students that there was indeed a local Standard that differed not just phonologically but also in the range and extent of usage of specific Standard forms. This serves to both validate their own variety and causes them to be more able to convey its local status to their future pupils who would be, in turn, far better motivated to acquire it if they could meaningfully recognize it as their own. We find ourselves at the present time in a process of discovery of this local Standard and of investigation into its unique elements, as distinct from those which draw on American or British English.

At the phonological level our students had some interesting reactions. The fact that ICE has a policy of working with Standard English orthography was a wake-up call for the students. They became angry on occasions declaring that they simply could not transcribe doh as don't or eh as ain't since they was not the same thing; indeed they might even challenge us on aspects of semantic value! Of course, we had numerous challenges of this kind to the extent that, at least for our own internal purposes, we did build some local spellings into our transcription system. We encountered a reality within which, in capturing the domains where Standard is to be expected, we had to accept at least phonological variation and, in some cases, a measure of grammatical variation as well. What really is Standard in a local sense? This became a meaningful question for students who had grappled with it only at a theoretical level before, wondering why we, their teachers, got so excited about the issue!

### **3.3.3 The Challenges of Native-Speaker Competence**

We mentioned early in the paper that a charge is often laid against our teachers concerning their relative mastery of the Standard. Again there were two interesting aspects of discovery. Firstly we discovered that, for the most part, the perception was wrong. They showed a ready mastery of the Standard although they did often switch away from it to make something clearer for their students or to appeal to them at an emotional level for a variety of reasons. In other words, they are typically varilingual at the classroom level.

On the other hand, there were paralectal features in their speech, including the use of had for remote past rather than past perfect and the use of would have in positive contexts. The useful aspect of this was that our students did not recognize these features as paralectal since they were so much apart of their own competence and assumed Standard competence. Why would we say useful when this would clearly be detrimental to their own powers of analysis? Because it demonstrated for them the practical reality of the phenomenon of calquing at the Standard level and among the majority of educated speakers. They now sought with a sharpened spirit of inquiry into the precise meaning of the Standard features which again they had grasped theoretically – and clearly not grasped! – in courses such as Structure of the English Language.

### 3.3.4 Sociolinguistic Variation

The students did work with their data to attempt to observe sociolinguistic variation according to gender and ethnicity. Very few of them went beyond their own school, however, and were forced into a recognition of the relative meaninglessness of observations that are too local or too insufficient numerically to be of any significance. You may argue that we keep making positives out of negatives but we truly see them as this, since they brought so much more practical awareness to our students that they enhanced their overall learning tremendously.

Some students did also grapple with the need to achieve a balance between what was manageable time-wise and what might be considered representative. Hence from five texts of 2000 words each selected from classroom lessons from Trinidad as well as those from Jamaica and GB the top-scoring students found the following for incidence of plural you:

	Trinidad Teacher Speech	ICE-JAM	ICE-GB
you	180	349	205

**Table 1:** Frequency of second person plural pronoun you in selected corpora.

They then examined the relative ascendancy of alternates allyuh and you all through the variables of gender and ethnicity using the entire accessible Trinidad and Tobago corpus<sup>3</sup> and found the following:

<sup>3</sup> The corpus that the students worked with consisted of fifty-four texts of approximately 2000 words each. There were twenty-two texts in the category ‘class lessons’ and thirty-two in the category ‘conversations’. The class lessons were all from Trinidad while the conversations included a few from Tobago.



	Indo-Trinbagonian	Afro-Trinbagonian	Total
Male	5	8	13
Female	7	10	17
Total	12	18	

**Table 2:** Frequency of allyuh in Trinidad and Tobago Teacher Speech corpus between males vs. females and Indo-Trinbagonians vs. Afro-Trinbagonians.

	Indo-Trinbagonian	Afro-Trinbagonian	Total
Male	44	14	58
Female	34	22	56
Total	78	36	

**Table 3:** Frequency of you all in Trinidad and Tobago Teacher Speech corpus between males vs. females and Indo-Trinbagonians vs. Afro-Trinbagonians.

From this student Durgasingh deduced:

‘The data suggests the Creole form all you is used by everyone, though Afro-Trinidadians may be likelier to use it. This follows the anti-formal nature of the word’s use where a deliberate need for familiarity or convergence may cause the speaker to use the form. Also the fact that it may be used by Afro-Trinidadians in both the semi-formal class lesson and group discussion supports Winford’s (1976) data that Indo-Trinidadians may very well try to shy away from Creole in an effort to “correct” their speech.

The second table suggests that gender does not play a large role in the choice of you all as the second person plural pronoun but it does suggest that the form is most readily used by Indo-Trinidadians. It also suggests that the promotion of this creolism in the acrolect may be motivated by Indo-Trinidadian usage. The larger numbers of you all tokens is also suggestive of the fact that the form has taken its place next to you as the unmarked second person plural pronoun in the rise of the acrolect.’ (Durgasingh, 2007, 27–28).

We could not fault him on these kinds of observations.

#### 4. The Student Experience

At the end of the study, a student who had often slept through his Linguistics classes, or very nearly, and exhibited extreme boredom in every way imaginable came alive and announced ‘This is just what we needed, Dr. Youssef, practical experience. It was great!’ A little food for thought, that we only enlivened him at this eleventh hour! I was encouraged to put together a brief questionnaire asking students about their experience of Linguistics through corpus analysis and those who responded agreed that they had stronger positive feelings about Linguistics as a result and that they had learnt about language, particularly through their transcription process. Some examples of questions and responses are given below:

1. Did you enjoy your corpus linguistics research?

Student A. A resounding yes!

Student B. Yes I enjoyed it very much. It was so much fun and I don't mind going further in that field.

Student C. Yes I did very much as it opened me up to an entirely new and interesting area in Linguistics.

2. Did your attitude to Linguistics as a whole change during the period?

Student A. Indeed my attitude changed. This was largely due to the practical elements (field work, transcription) of the course as well as the resources that were provided by both lecturers

Student B. Yes it did. I've always loved Linguistics and this experience made me love it even more.

Student C. Well not quite since I have liked Linguistics from my first encounter with L10C

3. Did you learn more about language through the transcription process?

Student A. Certainly. Particularly about language variation.

Student B. I definitely did. The transcription process helped me to understand, to a greater extent, that varieties of English are more different than we think.

Student C. Definitely. The transcription process broke language down to its finest in ways I never looked at before.

Unfortunately, since the exercise was completed about one month after completion of the examination process we did not receive as many responses as we would have wanted and I offer the above, while apologizing for its subjectivity, emanating from the small subset who responded.

## 5. Conclusions

The exercise was, for all of us, worthwhile. Obviously if we did it again there are things we would change. We took for granted certain aspects of the research process and even formal aspects of putting the paper together more than we should have done, perhaps because the practicalities of handling the software and preparing the transcription took up so much time. One student commented on these omissions in the questionnaire. Most important was the students' recognition of the practical value of this method of linguistic analysis and what they learnt about their own language in relation to other English varieties in the process. Several of them expressed a concern to pursue Linguistics further, whereas formerly they had only thought of it as a means to other ends. They were surprised by their own level of success, particularly with the transcription, and were ultimately able to present what they had done to our own postgraduate students and to hear them ask 'How can we get access to your data?' It brought them on par and even ahead of those students in some ways, at least with respect to aspects of methodology and analysis which they had encountered. We hope the exercise may encourage others to use corpus linguistics more as a teaching and learning tool in the future.

## References

- Craig, D. (1971) Education and Creole English in the West Indies. In D. Hymes (ed.) *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Craig, D. (1999) *Teaching Language and Literacy: Policies and Procedures for Vernacular Situations*. Georgetown, Guyana: Education and Development Services Inc.
- Durgasingh, R. (2007) *Issues of Trinidadian Teacher Speech: English Usage and Gender/Ethnic Differences*. Undergraduate Project, Dept. of Liberal Arts, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.
- Mühleisen, S. (2001) Is Bad English Dying Out? A diachronic comparative study of attitudes towards Creole versus Standard English in Trinidad. [Http://web.fu-berlin.de/phn./phin 15/p15/p15t3.htm](http://web.fu-berlin.de/phn./phin%2015/p15/p15t3.htm).
- Nelson, G. (2002) Markup manual for spoken texts. [Http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/ice/manuals.htm](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/ice/manuals.htm).
- Sieunarine Singh, K. (2006) Creating and using a Mini Corpus for Discourse Analysis. LING 3099 Class Presentation, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, September, 2006.
- Winford, D. (1976) Teacher attitudes towards language varieties in a Creole Community. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 8, 45–75.
- Youssef, V. (1991) The acquisition of varilingual competence. *English World-Wide* 12, 87–102.
- Yousef, V. (1996) Varilingualism: The competence underlying code-mixing in Trinidad and Tobago. *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* 11 (1), 1–22.