

ABSTRACT

Are these Students Learning English?

A Study of the Verbal Morphology of the Vernacular and of the Written English of First- and Final-Year Students at a Secondary School in Trinidad

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Against the background of largely pessimistic views of English Language learning in the Caribbean, a cross sectional study at a secondary school in Trinidad collected data on the written English of first- and final-year students. Covert recordings were also made of the same students' non-Standard (Creole-influenced) vernacular speech. Using a monosemantic approach, an Interlanguage focus and a GB/X-Bar syntactic framework, the study examined the students' grammaticalized expression of 'tense,' mood, aspect, perfect and person-number in both media. It found that the final-year cohort's expression of the verbal categories was closer to Internationally Accepted English (IAE). Further, an interlanguage could be described which employed largely IAE syntax and IAE meanings of verbal markers, but which seemed to organize these meanings along some of the same conceptual lines that meanings in the students' vernacular were organized along. That is, the student's vernacular employed relative and optional

marking; their interlanguage, while adopting largely IAE meanings, marked them optionally and with contextually established reference points (relative marking).

The conclusion was that this was the result of a type of deep-level transfer from the students' vernacular. The conclusion, also, was that learning had taken place in a discernible order and had resulted in an internally systematic output. The findings are significant as a study of language learning in these circumstances.

The study highlights a type of transfer little discussed in the literature, and argues against the notion of learning in this context as unprincipled and unsteady.

Keywords: English Language learning, Caribbean, Trinidad, Creoles, Interlanguage, Transfer, Tense, Mood, Aspect, Perfect, Person-Number, monosemantic.