

Verb Problems in Students' Storywriting

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Among the major problems Caribbean students have in their learning of Standard English is inconsistency in the use of the simple past tense in written stories or narratives. They often use verbs without the past-tense endings **-d**, **-ed**, and **-ied**, and instead of irregular past-tense forms like **gave**, **held**, and **saw**, they use **give**, **hold**, and **see**, which we can call 'bare verbs'. Students, especially those in primary school and in Forms 1-3 of secondary school, mix bare verbs with verbs in the past tense, in apparent reference to past time and, in the process, they are describing situations that move the story along, from one event to another.

Why, having obviously been taught how to form the simple past tense, do they not maintain it in their stories? Why do they use bare verbs for verbs that have endings to indicate past time?

Imagine a story as a timeline on which there is a series of events with the second event succeeding the first, the third succeeding the second, and so on. The following is one such story:

So he *went* up to the room and *open* the door and seeing his fiancée kissing and hugging Jim, her ex-boyfriend. My uncle was stunned. The present *drop* to the floor like his heart. He just *turn* around and *start* walking downstairs very melancholy.

The five highlighted verbs describe a series of events on the story's timeline. The student starts off with an irregular verb in the simple past, then switches to bare verbs (that is, as explained earlier, verbs that have nothing in them to indicate past time). The English teacher will dutifully mark the bare verbs as wrong. But why didn't the student simply produce **openED**, **droppED**, **turnED**, and **startED**?

The answer is complex, involving a variety of factors such as the following:

- 1) Students are ignorant about how to form and use the Standard English past tense.
- 2) They use bare verbs in their Creole like users of Standard English use the simple-past verb.
- 3) The simple-past verb is redundant in Standard English narrative.
- 4) Standard English also uses bare verbs, which function like Creole bare verbs.
- 5) Students are transferring a Creole grammatical rule into their learning of Standard English.

We can readily dispose of the Factor #1 by accepting that if you do not know how the past tense of a verb is formed, you will get it wrong. But that explanation is hardly satisfactory since it is well known that students use bare verbs even after they have been taught both how to form the past tense and how to use it in isolated sentences. Isolated sentences! Might there be a clue here to the problem since the 'error' features far more in stories than in isolated sentences?

Factor #2 blames the similarity of function of the bare verb in Creole and the simple-past verb in Standard English. The similarity is that they both describe events that advance the story's timeline. Go back to the student story above and you will see that the highlighted verbs describe timeline-advancing events regardless of whether they are bare or simple past. If you make the bare verbs into simple-past forms, the events that they describe will advance the timeline in the same way. The verbs are able to do this because they capture the events as points of time on the timeline, and as such they move the timeline from point to successive point. Students might therefore be thinking, 'If the simple past is not necessary for the advancement of the story, why use it?'

Factor #3 blames redundant use of simple-past verbs in Standard English for our problem, and there is good reason for this. In narrative, both the narrator and the reader know that the time is typically past. If that is the case, there is no logical requirement for verbs to also indicate pastness. But, unfortunately for our students, it is a characteristic of Standard English, but not of Creole, that all verbs in a past context (except for certain subcontexts) must show past time in their form.

Just as Creole uses bare verbs, so does Standard English, and Factor #4 speaks to this. There are subcontexts in a story when a narrator will use bare verbs for the purpose of achieving psychological immediacy or greater vividness, which the simple-past verb is hard put to do. Let's assume that our student's story is one such subcontext. The verbs will then be **goES**, **openS**, **dropS**, **turnS**, and **startS**, which are present-tense forms. But the '-s' and '-es' on them could give the mistaken impression that they are not bare forms where tense is concerned. They do not indicate present time but agreement, however. It is a peculiarity of Standard English grammar that they agree the verb with a third person singular subject and this kind of subject only. Take them away and what do you get? Verbs that are bare for time!

Does this therefore mean that Creole and Standard English have the same bare verb in narrative? It certainly looks so, but don't jump to conclusions. Superficially, the bare verb may be the same in both languages, but it is used differently. For example, in Creole narrative, the bare verb is used for events that advance the timeline, but in Standard English narrative, it is used in certain subcontexts, along with the more frequently used simple-past verb. Further, the verb **come** in the present-time Standard English sentence 'I **come** here every day' is not used as in Creole, where the sentence will be 'A **does come** here every day'. We should conclude, therefore, that though the bare verb in narrative is the same in form in both Creole and Standard English, when it comes to usage, it is clearly different.

Factor #5, our last, blames Creole grammar for our problem. The Creole rule is something like: 'Use the bare verb to advance the story line; there is no need to add anything to show the time of the story.' It is an integral part of the language routine of students and an insistent signature of Creole narrative.

With the right training in, and exposure to, Standard English narrative, and with the proper motivation for learning Standard English, Creole-speaking children will mature

into mastery of the simple past tense. After all, many other Creole-speaking children have done it before!

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