

Discourse-Based Solutions to Quantitative Problems in Sociolinguistics:
The Case of Men's and Women's Speech in an Indo-Guyanese Village

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**Discourse-based solutions to quantitative problems in sociolinguistics:
The case of men's and women's speech in an Indo-Guyanese village ***

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1. INTRODUCTION. In a recent paper, Penelope Eckert (1996) outlined the two main approaches to language variation pioneered by William Labov. On the one hand, a number of large-scale surveys have demonstrated highly regular and systematic correlations between language variation and the social parameters of age, sex, class and formality of style. Other studies have been based on sustained ethnographic research in smaller communities and have illustrated the way in which language variation and change is embedded in local social, economic and demographic processes. Eckert then goes on to remark that:

Broad demographic patterns of variation show us the general patterns of the distribution of variables and in some cases the patterns of the spread of change. They also suggest possible social interpretations of variation. But information about how variation actually functions as a communicative resource lies at the local level. If variation does serve as a symbolic resource at the local level, what are the nature and limits of its symbolic potential? What is the relation between the symbolic value of one variable and another in the same community? What is the nature of the relation between local symbolic value and the global patterns that show up in survey studies? And how are the summative correlations related to the actual use of variation in social practice (Eckert 1996:48).

In the following, I take up Eckert's suggestion that "information about how variation actually functions as a communicative resource lies at the local level." I argue that attention to variant forms as communicative resources can open up new kinds of research questions and allow for a higher level of integration between quantitative and qualitative approaches to language use. It is suggested that some variable phenomena require discourse-based explanations. This is to say that, without adequate attention to the way in which individual variants function as communicative resources in interaction, we will not be able to fully account for statistical and quantitative patterns of variability and observed correlations to social categories.

2. THE SETTING. All the speakers in this sample live in a village of just under 700 people about 45 minutes drive from Georgetown in East Coast Demerara, Guyana. Families vary in size and composition. Most common is the nuclear unit comprised of a coresident husband, wife and their children. Houses are situated on plots of land belonging to a patrilocal corporate group. The most important economic activity in the area is rice-growing and traditionally the patrilocal group was important for the organization of labor in this endeavor. Since the mid 20th

century small peasant land-holdings with adjoining rice fields have gradually given way to the large-scale, highly mechanized rice growing industry (Hanley 1979, Sidnell 1998). Thus wage-labor has generally overtaken in importance the traditional modes of domestic labor organization.

Generally, married women live with their husband's family in one fenced *yard* 'unit of land belonging to patrilineal group.' This has effects for the operations of domestic power. Living in the same yard with a father and mother-in-law as well as a number of other affines, a wife has to exercise a certain care in how she comports herself. Very little escapes the watchful eyes of her in-laws. Married women thus face serious restrictions in terms of movement and are generally expected to spend most of their time in and around the house doing domestic labor. Men are much more free to use the road not just as a thoroughfare but also as a place to socialize with other men. Men have strong commitments to their peer groups which are often instrumental for the organization of wage-labor. Often, married men will spend the majority of their time out on the road, at work or in the rumshop and, for several days, may come home only to eat and sleep. Although the village is stratified in terms of access to socio-economic resources the situation is rather less polarized than that described for former sugar plantation villages by Rickford (1979) and Jayawardena (1963). In such communities there is a well recognized boundary between those who work in the fields (Estate Class) and those who do not (Non-Estate Class). Historically, advancement into the Non-Estate Class was associated with the adoption of the values and expressive behavior (including language) of the colonialists. The village where the present research was conducted was never associated with a plantation economy. The property, rather, was bought by 13 formerly indentured East Indians in 1883 and at that time rice was probably already being farmed there. Because of the labor requirements of non-mechanized rice farming, the patrilineal corporate group took on a great deal of importance for the organization of everyday life. Authority was structured along kinship rather than class lines and those people that did succeed economically were never required to adopt the values and expressive behavior of the British colonials. According to current village inhabitants this situation persisted until the 1960's. Prestige and social power was more associated with economic and agricultural success than with formal schooling. Although this situation is now changing its effects are still quite evident. Most important for the present study is the fact that, just about everybody in the village uses a fairly basilectal to mesolectal variety in everyday conversation. Even school teachers, both men and women, use mesolectal varieties outside the classroom.

3. PRONOMINAL VARIATION IN A CREOLE CONTINUUM. Pronouns in Guyanese Creole, as Bickerton (1973) and Rickford (1979) have illustrated, show a kind of robust variation along a number of dimensions and this makes them particularly well-suited to variation analysis. Basilectal singular pronouns contrast

morphologically with corresponding mesolectal and acrolectal ones in a number of subcategories.¹ This is illustrated in Table 1:

TABLE 1. *Contrasting Basilectal, Mesolectal and Acrolectal Pronouns.*

	SUBJECT	OBJECT	GENITIVE	
1st	mi		mi	Basilect
	ai		mai	Acrolect
2nd			yu	Basilect
			yor	Acrolect
3rd/ masc		am	ii	Basilect
		(h) ii		Mesolect
		him	hiz	Acrolect
fem		am	ii/shi	Basilect
		shii		Mesolect
		hor	hor	Acrolect
neut		am	ii	Basilect
		it	its	Acrolect

Speakers in the sample did not approach the acrolectal end of the continuum in trinomial subcategories. We are thus left with binomial variables in each category. Genitives show variation when the Guyanese population is considered as totality.² However the corpus used here is confined to relatively basilectal speakers who generally do not use the acrolectal forms in this subcategory. For this reason, I have included genitives in the analysis only at select points since variation is not robust enough to give a detailed analysis for this category. We are left with the variables isolated in table 2.

TABLE 2. *Contrasting Basilectal and Relatively Acrolectal Pronouns.*

	SUBJECT	OBJECT	
1st	mi		Basilect
	ai		Acrolect
3rd/ masc		am	Basilect
		(h) ii	Mesolectal
fem		am	Basilect
		shii	Mesolectal
neut		am	Basilect
		it	Mesolectal

The analysis that follows thus focuses on variability in two subcategories; 1st person subjects and 3rd person objects.

4. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN. In the community studied, men and women do not use these variants to the same extent. Thus if we take genitives, 3rd person objects and 1st person subjects together we find men using slightly more basilectal variants than women.

TABLE 3. *Distribution of Basilectal Subjects (1st), Objects (3rd) and Genitives by Sex of Speaker*

	% of basilectal variant	total	varbrul weighting for rule application (basilectal variant)
men	85	428	0.568
women	75	371	0.422

However, we find that, with regard to first person subjects (alternation between *ai/mi*), women appear more basilectal:

TABLE 4. *Distribution of Basilectal 1st Person Subjects by Sex of Speaker*

	% of basilectal variant	Total	varbrul weighting for rule application (basilectal variant)
men	92	442	0.379
women	97	251	0.663

This is consistent with the results reported in Rickford (1979). In the subcategory of objects, again consistent with Rickford's (1979) analysis, men appear slightly more basilectal than women.

TABLE 5. *Distribution of Basilectal 3rd Person Objects by Sex of Speaker*

	% of basilectal variant	Total	varbrul weighting for rule application (basilectal variant)
men	58	178	0.554
women	48	203	0.453

The relatively minor effect of speaker's sex is magnified if we consider only the most stigmatized forms in this group: the use of basilectal marker *am* for animate objects (cf. Rickford 1979).

TABLE 6. *Distribution of Basilectal 3rd Person Objects for Animate Referents only by Sex of Speaker*

	% of basilectal variant	Total	varbrul weighting for rule application (basilectal variant)
men	56	124	0.610
women	37	158	0.413

Now supposing that basilectal variants in each subcategory had similar pragmatic-indexical values in this community (i.e. that saying *mi* as opposed to *ai* and saying *am* as opposed to *ii/shii/it* amounted to essentially the same thing) we might agree with Rickford (1979) that there is a leveling out of differences which gives the overall impression that gender is relatively insignificant. Alternatively, if we accept that different variables within the category of pronouns may be associated with quite distinct indexical meanings we might still attempt to explain gender differences according to a single coefficient for sex along traditional Labovian lines. Thus, we might suppose that women are lagging in the use of variants that are stigmatized within the larger community (stable sociolinguistic variables) while they lead in changes that carry local, overt prestige (changes in progress). But this explanation is not appropriate either. While *am* as 3rd person object might classify as a variant stigmatized in the larger community (see below), *ai* definitely carries local overt prestige as opposed to *mi*. Women's behavior in this community thus does not conform to what has traditionally, but controversially, been labeled the "gender pattern" (cf. critique of "gender pattern hypothesis" in Eckert 1989, Haeri 1987).

5. VARIATION WITHIN AND BETWEEN CATEGORIES. So why do men and women differ in their use of these variable categories? In the following I argue that the observed distributional patterns for men and women can only be adequately explained if we attend to the particular functions of each variable category in its conversational context. Rather than attempting to analyze both variables as instances of a more general category (i.e. pronouns), I point to ways in which they are functionally differentiated and suggest that these differences have implications for the way variation is exploited by men, on the one hand, and women on the other.

6. THE PRAGMATIC VALUES OF 1ST PERSON SUBJECTS. Because first person reference is necessarily self-referential (referring, that is, to the shifting role of speaker), acrolectal variants take on special meanings in this context. Specifically, the prestige meanings associated with the acrolectal variant (*ai*) are predicated of the speaker. *Ai* usage thus involves not only an assertion of acrolectal competence,

as do other elements of the idealized acrolectal code, but simultaneously a foregrounding of the assumed identity of the speaker.

The explanation for differences here then involves the way in which men and women assume positions as authoritative speakers. For men the use of *ai* is associated with the presentation of self as respectable and removed from the rural or working-class lifestyle. Often this occurs in cases where the speaker is attempting to manipulate a hearer who might be sensitive to such forms of social distinction. The manipulation in such cases depends for its effectiveness on assuming a position of respectability. Consider the following (reported) example of a prayer to god.

NS: *if mi gu sit dong in mi alta nou. mi gu see mi noo fu taak tuu gad. mi mos kom -*
If I go and sit down in my altar, I will say I know how to talk to god. I must come,

mi mos see oo gad ai wanch yuu protek mii, ai wan yuu giv mii helt,
I most say, "Oh God, I want you to protect me. I want you to give me health

an strengt ai wan yuu protek mi hous, protek mii pikniii dem, yuu noo?
and strength, I want you to protect my house, protect my children." You know?

Women also use *ai* with manipulative predicates in request-type acts. Consider the following example in which an aunt is requesting her nephew (3 years) to talk:

SS: *ai want yuu taak. yuu mos taak le mi hiir hou i a taak.*
I want you to talk. You most talk let me hear how he talks.

Men also characteristically use *ai* when calling to women on the road. Usually the woman is someone not completely familiar with the speaker. The following is a reported example:

TS: *wel yu gu star prooch shi- yu noo?- kyeer wan- kyeer inglish langwidj tuu shi-*
Well you will start to approach her. You know? Use a-use English with her.

see heloo. ai lov yuu beebii. wats op? yu noo? ai laik di wee yuu wak-
Say, "Hello, I love you baby. What's up?" You know? "I like way you walk."

The particular effect of the acrolectal variant is, in this case, linked to its pragmatic and referential value. Because it is necessarily self-referential the assumed acrolectal, cosmopolitan identity of speaker is foregrounded. Felicitous usages of *ai* thus index authority and respectability. Women generally avoid the use of *ai* because such presentations of self are, for them, more likely to backfire. Women will often be called on their uses, and an audience may contest the assumption of such an obviously non-rural identity. In one case that I recorded in my field notes, a young women who was taking basic secretarial lessons in the village called out to a friend across the fence:

girl: *hai darling. ai goin in. ai gon sii yu leeta.*
 Hi darling. I'm going in. I will see you later.

A group of young men overheard this and proceeded to mock the girl. The boys called out "hi, hi I'm going in I'm going in for my lessons, I'm coming out later." Women, as opposed to men, are much more likely to be called on such usages if people suspect that they might be assuming a role beyond their country origins. Similarly, women are more likely to be labeled *biggity* 'arrogant' in *talking-name* 'gossip' sessions both by men and other women. Although men are also subjected to this ridicule it is less likely to have damning effects for their reputation. Furthermore, young men often use *ai* in situations where the key is fairly playful. When calling to a girl on the road with *ai lov yu* "I love you," a young man cannot expect to be taken seriously. There are too many co-occurring signs (such as dress, the location of the interaction) which indicate that he is not what he is pretending to be and that his intentions are less than completely sincere. Women who use *ai* are more likely than men to be interpreted as self-elevating - hearers will often assume that these women actually believe themselves to be a member of the class who habitually use *ai*.

7. THIRD PERSON OBJECT VARIATION. As already noted, women, as compared to men, appear to be more basilectal in their use of first person subjects, whereas, in the subcategory of third person objects, they appear more mesolectal than the men. Looking carefully at the variants involved, the third person objects present us with a rather complicated problem. As the basilectal pronominal system gives way to the mesolectal system, case distinctions are lost and animacy and gender distinctions are added (Bickerton 1973, Rickford 1979). In using the mesolectal terms, then, speakers must assess the referent's relative animacy and its gender (for animates). Not surprisingly, one finds that both the gender and the relative animacy of the referent have an effect on the frequency of variant pronouns usages. *Am* is most basilectal and is most infrequent when it is used as a referring term for feminine referents (see below). There are more and less favored environments for the use of *am* and these depend crucially on characteristics of the referent. As it turns out, although we find men and women using *am* at only marginally different frequencies (Table 5), women overwhelmingly avoid using *am* in its most creole and stigmatized contexts (i.e. for animate referents, Table 6).

8. ANIMACY AND GENDER EFFECTS. Speaking of the variable use of *am*, Rickford (1979:359-360) remarks that there is

some indication that it is acquiring (or has acquired) a certain degree of specialization as an appropriate form for neuter (or non-human) objects...*am* is still a more stigmatized form than any of the corresponding subject or possessive forms in

the basilect, but speakers seem to operate with a rule that says: if you are going to use it, use it more often for neuter objects than any other.

The data here confirms such a tendency to reserve *am* for inanimate referents. This is clear from the results of a binary coding:

TABLE 7. *Effects of animacy on the variability of 3rd person Objects (% of am usage)*

	% basilectal variant	Total	varbrul weighting for rule application (basilectal variant)
animate	46	273	0.419
inanimate	75	93	0.722

However the effect of animacy of the referent is rather more complicated than this binary distinction suggests since it interacts with gender-of-referent effects. In fact, if one codes for the gender of the referent according to a tripartite scheme which distinguishes male, female and neuter entities one finds that neuter (or inanimate) and male referents overwhelmingly favor basilectal marking but female referents do not.

TABLE 8. *Effects of referent gender on the variability of 3rd person Objects*

referent	% basilectal variant	Total	varbrul weighting for rule application (basilectal variant)
female	17	147	0.155
male	80	110	0.781
neuter	75	109	0.731

It is apparent that female referents favor the use of a mesolectal variant (*shii*) while male and inanimate favor marking with basilectal *am*. Both Bickerton and Rickford have proposed somewhat tentative explanations for this phenomena, but I cannot review their arguments here (see Sidnell forthcoming). Rather, I want to suggest a solution which attends to the way in which these variants figure in terms of conversational practice. To this point we have seen that variation in the category of 3rd person objects, is affected by the animacy of the referent and that women generally avoid the use of *am* when referring to animate referents. At the same time, all speakers favor mesolectal marking in the feminine subcategory (Table 8). It appears then that women have set a community norm here. Women, more than men, tend to reserve *am* for inanimates and prefer gender-marking pronouns for animates. If women lead in this general process it is not too hard to imagine that they set a pattern in which mesolectal marking is preferred for feminine subcategories in particular.

Some support for this suggestion comes from the way in which men and women differ in their use of *am* and the mesolectal variants. Although basilectal variants are strongly dispreferred by both men and women in the feminine subcategories, men are more likely than women to use *ii* for male referents while women are more likely than men to use *shii* for female referents. Such patterns indicate an area of contestation between men and women. *When men talk about other men they use the term marked for gender and animacy more often than women do. When women talk about other women they use a term marked for gender and animacy more often than men do.*

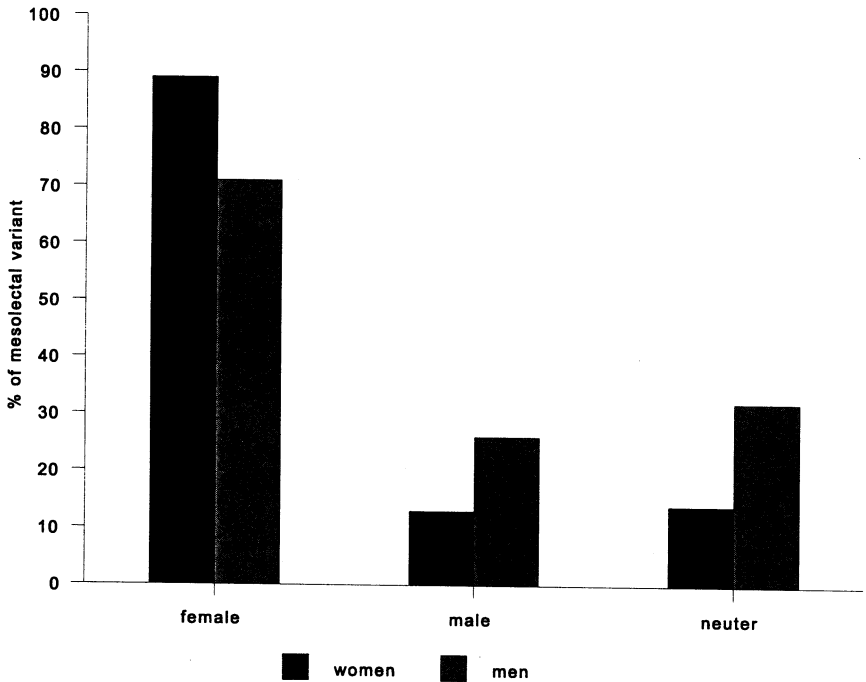


FIGURE 1. *Gender and animacy effects for men and women.*

Figure 1 shows that the influence of gender and animacy-of-referent effects is partially collapsed for men as opposed to women with differences between categories being relatively contracted for the male group. For men, the variation seems to be between more and less creole (or basilectal) ways of saying the same thing. This is to say that, *for men, the alternation between *am* and its mesolectal variants is determined more by the social, than the referential, significance attached to each variant. *Am* is in fact strongly implicated in the expression of*

working class solidarity and local values. Social and stylistic factors no doubt affect women's usage of the variants too. However, for women another, referential, dimension becomes particularly salient. In avoiding the most stigmatized uses of *am* in reference to animates women are establishing a firm association between this form and inanimates. Furthermore, women show a strong preference for mesolectal marking for members of their own sex-based category. This acts to highlight and foreground the animacy of the referent in discourse. It appears then that women and men are using the variability of the pronominal system quite differently. For women, more than men, characteristics of the referent, in addition to social and stylistic factors, play a major role in determining patterns of variability.³

The following is an example showing the general preference for mesolectal marking for feminine referents and basilectal marking for neuter/inanimate referents. S is complaining to her sister-in-law (Sh) that a young girl who lives next door was climbing on her fowl pen to pick plums and subsequently broke it but would not tell her mother (Miss):

S.: *shi a pik plom. wen mi aks shi yestodee see shi na tel mii se shii*
 She was picking plums. When I asked her yesterday why she didn't tell me that she

brook am dong shi na ansa -- shi klaim pon di fowl pen an brook am dong (...)
 broke it she didn't answer. She climbed on the fowl pen and brook it down. (...)

den mi se shi na big inof fu tel Mis da shi klaim pon-
 Then I asked if she wasn't big enough to tell Miss that she had climbed on

Sh: *-oo yea*
 -Oh yeah

S.: *- am brook am. mi na gu tel shii koz shi gu kos.*
 - uhm broke it. I'm not going to tell her because she will curse.

The next example illustrates the alternation between the mesolectal term for feminine referents (*shii*) and basilectal term for masculine ones (*am*). Kavita is telling me how she, her mother, and her aunt had been playing with a little girl Mando (3 years) who was also present at the time this report was given. During the course of the telling, Kavita's brother Kumar asks Mando to repeat her performance from the day before. Kavita tells Mando to curse Kumar, her brother, switching to the basilectal pronoun (*am*) in doing so:

Kavita: *yestodee Mamii tel antii Beebii fu tel shii toch mii an shi toch shi so*
 Yesterday Mama told Auntie Baby to tell her "touch me" and she touched her like this

an mi tel shi toch mi so an shi toch mi. abii tel tel shi don noo
 and I told her "touch me" like this, and she touched me. We said "tell her 'right-on.'"

hiir shii mii don noo. <laughs>
This is what she said "right-on."

Kumar: *toch mi de Mandoo.*
Touch me there Mando.

Kavita: *sok yu teet pon am. kos am. tel i le i gu beed i doti skin.*
Suck your teeth on him. Curse him. Tell him to go and wash his dirty skin!

9. CONCLUSIONS. To summarize the argument, I have demonstrated that the two variables discussed show significant but seemingly inconsistent effects for the sex of the speaker, and have argued that in order to account for these inconsistencies it is necessary to look at the internal structure of each variable, particularly their pragmatic and referential qualities. In the case of *ai/mi* alternation, I have argued that differences between men and women are a result of different interactional strategies. Specifically, because these are deictic forms, indexing speech act variables, they have rather specific indexical entailments: *ai* usage foregrounds an assumed identity for the speaker - one that is relatively more difficult for women, as opposed to men, to sustain. In the case of alternation between *am* and its mesolectal variants, I have suggested that women show a rather different kind of sensitivity to the referential or semantic distinctions involved, in addition to social and stylistic factors. Patterns of use with feminine, masculine and neuter referents (figure 1.) indicate that men and women employ rather different strategies in marking animacy through the use of pronominal variants.

To conclude, let me reiterate that the argument here is meant as a first step toward a discourse-based approach to language variation. Ultimately the goal is to integrate quantitative approaches to language variation with qualitative approaches to language-use, discourse and conversation. In cases where statistical analysis reveals seemingly inconsistent distributional patterns, researchers may find explanations in the fabric of actual stretches of talk-in-interaction.

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NOTES

¹ I have purposefully excluded variants which differ at a phonological level since such cases require levels of explanation which are beyond the scope of this paper.

Rickford (1979) gives comprehensive accounts of vowel laxing, h deletion, and t deletion in pronoun forms. Vowel laxing produces the alternation between forms such as *mi* and *mii*, *shi* and *shii*.

² There were a few exceptions to this rule. Genitives are included only in the calculations which assess overall variability for all pronoun subcategories (Table 3) in part to make the results comparable to those reported in Rickford 1979.

³ In accounting for such a situation we might suppose that either men are not attending to the relative animacy of the referent or that they are purposefully characterizing all referents unremarkable with regard to animacy.

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