Expressions of futurity in British Caribbean Creole

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> *The study of Creole gives us the story of the birth of a new language. Such births are usually hidden and obscure, but this one is extraordinarily well documented. Creole has already taught linguists much about particular kinds of language contact. Historians and sociologists are also beginning to learn what it can tell us about the British and Africans and Creoles, as well as their language.*
>
> (Holm 1994: 381)

1 Aim and scope of the study

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in those areas of the Caribbean where African slaves and indentured labourers started to work on the sugar plantations established by European colonial regimes, new speech communities developed and, amidst rapid social changes such as migration and settlements, economic and political upheaval, they gradually evolved from pidgin into several quite distinct varieties. Together with Dutch, French, Spanish and Portuguese, English was one of the parent languages of these new varieties; through the centuries it was reshaped or rather, in Holm's words, 'quite easily broken (jargonised), then partly rebuilt (pidginised) and then completely reconstructed (creolised) by Africans and Britons and their descendants in the West Indies.' (Holm 1994: 355). As a result, new English-lexicon lects were forged on the Caribbean coast of Central America, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua, but also in Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St Vincent and Trinidad.

During the present century, especially in the second half, the languages spoken in those areas have been refashioned even further in Britain, where part of the Caribbean offspring have migrated, thus leading, particularly in the seventies and eighties, to the gradual development of British Caribbean (BC) Creole, based mostly on Jamaican lexicon and

structure (Sebba 1993, 1997). This new variety, given different names according to the geographical areas of origin (London-Jamaican and Bradford Jamaican, for example), although mainly spoken, has recently appeared in print as well, in the form of written songs, poems ('Dub poetry'), plays, short stories, newspapers, newsletters and novels.

No clear spelling or grammar conventions have been laid down yet, and some of the occurring orthographic, grammatical or syntactic patterns are to be qualified as personal idiosyncrasies of the writers; notwithstanding this, the written medium makes it possible to carry out a somewhat deeper and more comprehensive analysis of this variety, whose lexicon, grammar and syntax may easily testify to wider social attitudes (Sebba, forth.).

Bearing this in mind, and in order to shed more light on this lect, I have carried out a study of future forms as viewed through the only computerised corpus of Written British Creole (WBC) extant so far, compiled in 1995 by Sally Kedge and Mark Sebba at Lancaster University.[1] With its ca 27,000 words distributed in extracts from 14 books, the database is comparatively small, due to copyright restrictions; however, it has a relatively wide range of textual varieties, including poems, relevant parts of novels and other fiction, but also plays and miscellaneous texts like advertisements and graffitti. All the texts are written and/or published in Britain by authors who are either British-born or have spent many of their formative years in Britain.

It is to be highlighted, however, that in the fictional extracts the creole language is limited to the dialogical sections, since only rarely does the narrator write in creole. This leads to a further observation. Despite its label, the corpus of WBC has a wide presence of dialogues and is thus not merely representative of the written language. Rather than being a drawback, which would prevent a clear-cut distinction between spoken and written language, this peculiarity allows us to focus more faithfully on the kind of variety actually used by British Caribbeans, whose language has all too long remained confined within the borders of the purely spoken medium.

2 Quantitative distribution of future expressions

In a comparative study of the expressions of futurity in the written corpora LOB, Brown and Kolhapur, respectively, of British, American and Indian English, Berglund (1997) focuses on *will* + inf., *'ll* + inf., *shall* + inf., *be* (pres.) *going to* + inf., and *gonna* + inf.. Her results

show that the three written corpora have similar distributional features in regard to future expressions; more specifically, the full form of *will* is the most frequent, followed by *'ll* and *shall*, while *be going to* and *gonna* occur to a very low extent.

Starting from the preliminary intent to compare the above mentioned results with the distribution of expressions of futurity occurring in the WBC corpus, I first screened my data for the same forms as those analysed by Berglund. However, I did not discriminate between the standard English (SE) pattern SUBJ + AUX (*be/am/is/are*) GOING + TO + V and *gonna* or other informal alternatives to it, since the creole nature of the corpus favours basilectal and mesolectal structures that differ to greater or lesser extents from the standard form, which, in contrast, appears only twice. Indeed, the majority of the occurrences vary among the following:[2]

(1) SUBJ + GOING + TO + V
'Hear wha'; I got lucky to come out of Jamaica. T'ings got kinda hot fe me down dere. Right now, dis is my only chance and **I not going to waste** it.
(Victor Headley, *Yardie*, 24)

(2) SUBJ + AUX + GO'N + V
Ain't you go'n say something to me, Ethel?
(Randhi McWilliams, *God, Man and Sister Geraldine*, 11)

(3) GO'N + V
I ain't go'n no place. **Go'n wait** right here till me gran'nephew gets home!
(Randhi McWilliams, *God, Man and Sister Geraldine*, 29)

(4) SUBJ + GO'N + V
You go'n be indebted to him for as long as you live!
(Randhi McWilliams, *God, Man and Sister Geraldine*, 48)

(5) SUBJ + GOIN' + V
And it look like **I goin' have** to go to me grave without settin' eyes p'on her again...
(Randhi McWilliams, *God, Man and Sister Geraldine*, 19)

(6) AUX + GOIN' + V
Ain't goin' tell you don't mentionin' me friggin' name p'on that hypocritical, mulatto frigger's Sunday mornin' radio show-off again!
(Randhi McWilliams, *God, Man and Sister Geraldine*, 9)

(7) SUBJ + GWINE + V
What is the purpose of this visit after all these years? You want to be their Aunty all of a sudden? Yuh t'ink **Clifton gwine remember** you, yuh t'ink **Zukie gwine care**?
(Karline Smith, *Moss Side Massive*, 55)

(8) SUBJ + GWA(I)N + V
Sae mi attitude wrong and **dem gwain sen** mi away.
(Carol Dodd and Mike Read, eds., *Language for Access*, 2)

(9) SUBJ + AUX + GONNA + V
'I like the things money can buy, but **I in't gonna kill** for it.
(Karline Smith, *Moss Side Massive*, 25)

As the quotations show, these forms are not spread equally throughout the corpus, since five out of nine (2, 3, 4, 5 and 6) only occur in Randhi McWilliams' play *God, Man and Sister Geraldine*, which undoubtedly appears to be the most variable as regards spelling;[3] on the other hand, this is also the longest extract of the corpus, while other texts are much shorter. Consequently, no well-grounded comparison can be drawn between the single texts, due to their difference in length. Having stated this, one cannot overlook the strong occurrence of non-standard forms employed in the corpus. Allsopp's *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (1996) itself quotes *gwine*, alongside *gine*, *goan*, *gon*, *gun*, and *gwan*, as 'Anti-Formal Creole' alternatives to *goin(g)*, thus signalling 'an absence or a wilful closing of social distance' (Allsopp 1996: lvii). However, Mufwene (1983: 176) rightly remarks that this 'anti-formality' is still limited to the mesolectal stage, since the above forms are simply morphological adaptations of the acrolectal *be going*,

and might even be interpreted as marking a movement towards SE, rather than away from it.

The analysis of BC future forms would thus lead us to hypothesize that in the written medium British Creole is currently undergoing a

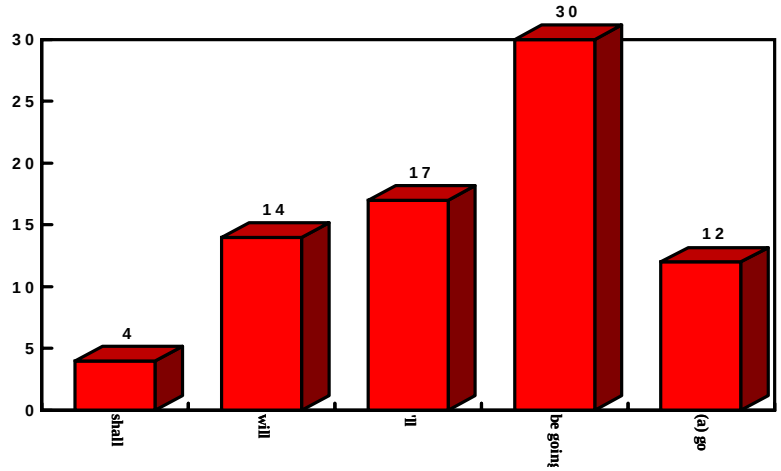

Figure 1: Quantitative distribution of future expressions in the WBC corpus

stage of decreolization. This is further confirmed by the relatively low occurrences of the basilectal futurity marker *(a) go*:

In these instances, the preverbal particle *a*/*ah* in positive sentences, or *nah*/*nuh* in negative ones, signals the progressive aspect of the verb; this 'aspect marker' (Bailey 1966: 45-46) is followed by the irrealis marker *go* (or *guh*)[4] and by the base form of another verb, as in (10):

(10) We tun de revolution teacher an wi warn all de forces of oppression dat we, de yout, **nah go stop** till it done we yout **a go fight** wah fi come wi haffi come.
(Jean Binta Breeze, *Tracks*)

Indeed, among West Indian English-lexicon creoles (Roberts 1988) and semi-creoles (Schneider 1990), *(a) go* + V is quite common to express futurity, together with other forms which are more or less close to the

SE *be going to* and *will*:

eat → a eat →	wi eat		→ will eat
	a go eat	→ go eat	→ gain eat
		→ go be eating	→ gain be eating

(adapted from Roberts 1988: 69)

However, *(a) go* + V is not only used in futurity contexts. In a detailed study of this pattern in Hawaii pidgins and creoles, for example, Sato (1978) has identified it as typical of the late pidgin and basilectal creole stadium in the following semantic environments: completed past (CP), habitual past (HP), habitual non-past (HNP), irrealis conditional (IC), irrealis future (IF). She has also noticed that creole speakers mainly use *go* + V in IC and IF contexts, while pidgin speakers are more inclined to employ this construction in habitual contexts. It is no intention of mine to apply Sato's conclusions to British Caribbean as well; however,

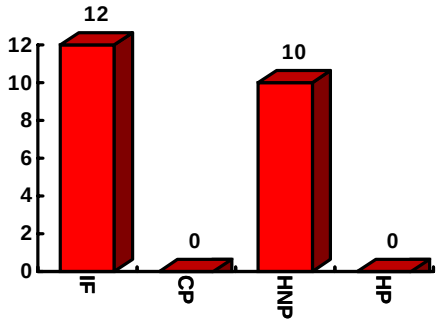

Figure 2: Distribution of go + V *forms*

a quick analysis of the above-mentioned semantic environments, with regard to *(a) go* in the WBC corpus, has elicited the following results: Interestingly enough, no IC or CP values have been detected in the corpus, while up to 12 IF instances have been recorded,[5] which in Hawaii varieties are typical of the creole stadium.

Moreover, one cannot overlook that, as shown in Figure 1, the acrolectal

will appears to be used with a high frequency, although to a much lesser extent than SE, as indicated by Berglund's (1997) results, where *will* and *'ll* together total at least 70 per cent of the future forms in all the corpora analysed, including the spoken English London-Lund corpus, which was employed in her study for a cross-comparison. In all databases the frequency of *be going to* is well below one per cent.

The high frequency of *will* might suggest that in the written medium BC is indeed undergoing a process of decreolization similar to that illustrated by Singler (1990) with regard to Kru Pidgin English, where 'the process of decreolization has operated along predictable lines: *go*, the irrealis AUX, gives way to *we* (from English *will*).' (Singler 1990: 224).

Given the co-occurrence of basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal future markers in the WBC corpus, the second step of my analysis is to examine the semantic context of such forms, particularly to identify whether the speakers' choices were made under different environmental constraints or, rather, if such forms were simply employed in free variation.

3 Semantic analysis

No valid analysis of BC future forms can be carried out if not against the background of SE forms on the one hand and of Caribbean forms, mostly Jamaican, on the other. It is no intention of mine, however, to review thoroughly all the literature available on this topic;[6] I will simply highlight the most prominent features which might lead to a worthwhile discussion of the data drawn from the WBC corpus.

I will first be concerned with *shall*, which both statistically and semantically distances itself from the other future expressions; in contrast, owing to the noteworthy similarities of *will, be going to* and *(a) go*, a joint analysis of these forms and their morphological variations will be carried out.

3.1 Shall

The modal verb *shall* occurs four times in the corpus, three out of four being concentrated in a poem, entitled 'Confusion (warner)', written by the British-Jamaican Jean Binta Breeze; in the poem, the Virgin Mary (Madda) prophesies the end of the world:

(11) An de Lawd Gad / say to tell you / to hearken / hearken to de people / dem voice / fah dem rod **shall** lay open / de mountain

/ and de river / de river **shall** run dry.
(Jean Binta Breeze, *Tracks*)

The archaic, prophetic use of *shall* occurs alongside the highly formal rhetoric question which follows in the same poem:

(12) Fah if de riva mumma die / if de riva mumma die / who **shall** cure de pain?
(Jean Binta Breeze, *Tracks*)

Finally the fourth and last instance of *shall* is recorded in the song 'I come to See Janie', which G.M.Richards has edited in his book *A Fe We Ting*:

(13) Then the bowy asks 'What **shall** we bury her in?'
(G.M.Richards, ed, *A Fe We Ting*, 9)

Here *shall* is employed in an ordinary SE use, with first person plural subject, to signal that the speaker is consulting the wish of the listener.

Given the unquestionable limited occurrence of *shall* in present-day SE and bearing in mind the total absence of this modal in pidgin and creole varieties — in Allsopp's *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (1996) it is not even mentioned — these four instances of *shall* may tentatively be judged as a further confirmation of the above-mentioned apparent process of decreolization of BC in the written medium.

However, Sebba rightly remarks (personal communication 1998) that the corpus cannot provide sufficient, reliable data to support this hypothesis; indeed, we cannot rule out the possibility that most texts are basically a mixture of British English and a variety of Jamaican Creole, mesolectal or basilectal, with principled code-switching. As such, it would be quite natural to have sentences or parts of sentences which are simply British English, thus including instances of *shall*.

3.2 Will, be going to, (a) go

The strongly limited use of *shall* with its almost exclusive archaic biblical value contrasts with the predictably higher instances of *will*, occurring up to 31 times in the corpus, 14 times in its full form and 17 in the contracted form. The alternatives *wi'* and *'ll* are treated as mere morphological variations of *will*, in full agreement with Quirk et al (1985: 228), according to whom *'ll* can only be regarded as a contracted form of *will*, and not of *shall*, both semantically and historically.

Indeed, in the WBC corpus the speaker's choice appears to be governed by syntactic, rather than semantic/pragmatic constraints. More specifically, *'ll* always collocates with SE personal pronouns (*I, we, they, you, he, she*) and never with creole forms like *me* or *dem*, which, in contrast, occur with *will*. This is further confirmed by the single occurrence of *wi'*; in the text, the speaker, who favours contracted forms, chooses to use a contracted variant of *will* as well, but employs *wi'* instead of *'ll* after *mi*:

(14) Me tell 'er sey since me no 'ave no choice, **mi wi'** tek it.
(Anon., *Eating out*, 15)

When the syntactic environment allows both forms, the speaker makes his/her choice for *will* apparently on account of emphasis:

(15) I **will** never approach you on the subjec' again! Go on, Ethel, tell me that and puts mah mind at ease.
(Randhi McWilliams, *God, Man and Sister Geraldine*, 33)

Semantically, while acknowledging that no clear-cut semantic distinction can be drawn between *will* and *be going to*, it is generally agreed that the two modal forms basically differ in terms of temporal orientation, in so much as with *will* the event depends on the fulfilment of FUTURE conditions, while *be going to* has PRESENT reference. Consequently the event is to be qualified, in Leech's words, as the 'future culmination of present intention' or 'the future culmination of present cause' (Leech 1987: 59). 'This notion', Westney remarks, 'is inherent in the structure of the *be going to* form itself, which suggests movement from a present into a future state.' (Westney 1995: 192).

Similarly, against the background of the theory of utterance interpretation known as Relevance Theory, developed by Sperber & Wilson (1986), Haegeman (1989) claims that 'there is no clear line to be drawn between the meaning of *will* in contrast to that of *be going to* and that often it is the speaker's perception of the future event as being either firmly embedded in the present or more related to future events which is decisive.' (Haegeman 1989: 205). Thus, semantics and pragmatics appear to intertwine inextricably in the qualification of these two modal forms, leaving ground for thriving discussions and unconclusive definitions.

An even more nuanced situation is to be witnessed in Jamaican Creole. Christie (1991) remarks that 'the primary modals of prediction and

volition in Jamaican are *wi* and *gwain*' (Christie 1991: 233). She then adds the modal expression *(a) go* and observes that all of them may be used epistemically to express 'prediction' when 'the speaker has empirical evidence concerning the relevant circumstances'. *Wi* can also occur with the epistemic value of predictability, 'if such evidence has been offered repeatedly' (Christie 1991: 233), or, together with its negative counterpart *wuon*, with the deontic value of volition; *gwain* and *a go* also have intentional values, which are put by Christie under the more general heading of 'volition'. Consequently, there appears to be no clear-cut distinction between the various future forms in Jamiacan Creole either.

In the WBC corpus, the occurrences with *will* maintain the general semantic values typical of SE perfectly. Let us consider, for example, the following:

(16) 'Just play your part cool and ev'ryt'ing **will** be al'right,' Skeets had advised him.
(Victor Headley, *Yardie*, 2)

(17) Sharon a gud girl. She will be awright. Yu nuh haf nutting fi wurry bout.
(Carol Dodd and Mike Read, *Language for Access*, 1)

(18) I started thinkin' it's time I made mah peace with Ethel and see if she **will** settle down with me.
(Randhi McWilliams, *God, Man and Sister Geraldine*, 14)

(19) 'I t'ink I**'ll** stay for a while.' D. leant back on the sofa, grinning confidently.
(Victor Headley, *Yardie*, 21)

As the above instances indicate, in the WBC corpus the future values of *will* are mostly interwoven with either epistemic or deontic overtones, which may be more or less overt; indeed, in regard to epistemic values, the speaker either predicts future events (16) or simply makes assumptions (17). As for the deontic meanings, mostly expressed by means of a desire, a wish, a promise or a threat, the volitional shades vary from a touch of willingness (19, 20) to strong determination. This is exemplified in (20):

(20) ‘I**’ll** get you for this! I know who you are!! I**’ll** find you, Then I**’ll** kill you!! Yuh hear me? I**’m going to** kill you!!
(Karline Smith, *Moss Side Massive*, 73)

Here the momentary decision, preliminarily expressed by *’ll*, turns into a more definite present commitment to carry out the action, thus leading the speaker to shift to the *be going to* form, clearly expressing ‘intentionality’.

In the corpus, ‘intentionality’ is one of the two core values conveyed by *be going to* and all its alternative forms, the other being roughly identifiable as ‘prediction’. More specifically, intentionality is exemplified in (1), (2), (3), (6), and (9), while predictive contexts are expressed in (4), (5) and (8). In (1), for example, the speaker states his present conviction, or rather decision, not to carry out the action; in contrast, in (5) the present evidence, expressed by ‘it look like’, allows the speaker to believe that the future event will take place.

A semantically unclear occurrence is expressed in (7), where *will*, instead of *gwine* would appear to be a more correct choice. In fact, no present situation leads to the knowledge of the future event, but rather a mere ‘thought’ (‘yuh t’ink’); nor is there any possible intentionality conveyed by the verb ‘remember’.

This and other occurrences of *be going to* in collocations with the verb *think*, in conditional sentences, and even adjacent to the obligatory *have to* signal that this form often ‘invades’ the semantic field typically conveyed by *will*. As a result, it appears that, with regard to the semantic values of *be going to* and *will*, when a speaker employs the acrolectal form *will*, he/she fully respects SE grammar rules; in contrast, when employing the mesolectal variations of *be going to*, he/she tends to be at least partially inaccurate, in the view of SE rules.

This deviance from the rule becomes even more noticeable when analysing the basilectal *(a) go*. In fact, the form almost exclusively occurs in contexts indicating intentionality, as in the poem ‘Arizing (for youths of Azania)’ by Jean Binta Breeze:

(21) We tun de revolution teacher an wi warn all de forces of oppression dat we, de yout, **nah go stop** till it done we yout a go fight.
(Jean Binta Breeze, *Tracks*)

Here the present intentionality for the future event is the only semantic interpretation of *(a) go*, which always occurs with first or second person subjects, except for (22):

(22) Wi haffi guh an stand up side a it an wait fi it. **It nuh gu stop** inna di miggle a di road.
(Carol Dodd and Mike Read, *Language for Access*, 1)

The third person subject might lead to an interpretation where the degree of intentionality is a bit weaker than in (21), since in this case we might surmise a certain degree of predictability as well; however, in no way can we suggest a pure predictive value in any of the 12 instances of *go* + V recorded in the corpus.

It appears, then, that in British Creole this practice is followed:

1) the acrolectal *will* maintains its ordinary SE semantic value;
2) the mesolectal forms mostly show instability, since they also cover the meanings usually conveyed by *will*;
3) the basilectal *(a) go* is mainly employed to indicate intentional future, diversely from the usual expressions typical of creole varieties where it may commonly express epistemic meanings as well.

Consequently, the results of this analysis lead me to hypothesize an ongoing process of decreolization in the written texts of BC, spreading along a *continuum*: since the Caribbeans are a minority in a SE speaking country, they tend to be influenced by the prestige variety. Consequently, the basilectal forms that they use are more limited both semantically and from the quantitative point of view; the mesolectal ones are more widespread and semantically undefined, while the acrolectal ones are used perfectly in line with SE patterns. This process might be similar to that outlined by Bickerton (1975) for broad Guyanese Creole, which appears to be moving gradually in the direction of the SE official language of the country.

Indeed, this is not the only interpretation of the data elicited from the corpus; in fact, while acknowledging the important role played by code-switching, one might even surmise that the language under scrutiny is a decreolised creole which is recreolising, focussing on a basilectal norm. So, the partially decreolised variety which is the norm in Jamaica is becoming recreolised in Britain, with the most prototypical creole

features being recreolised. On a continuum model, this would still leave room for a lot of non-basilectal features. (Sebba, personal communication 1998)

Unfortunately, no definite conclusion can be reached on the basis of an analysis of the relatively small WBC corpus, especially because ethnographic information should also be taken into account when studying linguistic features, particularly of the creole varieties.

4 Conclusion

When the first African slaves were shipped to the West Indies, 'the policy of the slave traders was to bring people of different language backgrounds together in the ships, to make it difficult for groups to plot rebellion' (Crystal 1997: 33). This policy speeded up the process of development of a brand new language variety, Caribbean English. Far from being a makeshift language, an undefined patchwork of unrelated idioms, this lect has lived through the centuries with its own steadily growing identity.

Ironically, Caribbean Creole has now landed in the country of its parent language and has spread all over England, not only among the black people of Caribbean origin, but also among the whites, particularly those who are socially close to them. This is to be considered as a double-edged weapon. Indeed, on the one hand, the widespread use of Caribbean British in specific social contexts marks and emphasizes the existing distance between Standard English and creole, thus strengthening the cohesive ties and psychological identity of creole speakers; on the other hand, however, the inevitably close contact with SE might be a pending threat for this lect, whose traits are still undefined. As Sebba remarks:

> creole languages like Jamaican and Guyanese are trapped in a kind of vicious circle. They can only establish independence by becoming less like Standard English. Yet they can only elaborate themselves as Standard languages by becoming more like Standard English. The result is a kind of stalemate in which the respective H and L languages maintain their distance but also remain sharply distinguished in terms of status and functions. (Sebba forth.)

The present analysis of future forms in the WBC corpus has unveiled a still unstable situation, from the morphological, syntactic and semantic

points of view, where personal variability intermingles with wider social choices and where the creole lect must always come to terms with its more prestigious lexifier.

In such linguistic coexistence, both varieties are bound to be affected by each other. The extent to which British English is influenced by Caribbean Creole is beyond the scope of the present analysis, but will definitely be an interesting subject of further study.

Notes

1 I wish to express my warm gratitude to Prof. Mark Sebba for kindly accepting to let me use the corpus and for the most precious help he gave me while writing this paper.

2 Boldface characters have been employed in all the instances quoted in the paper to highlight the linguistic features under discussion. In regard to the morphological variants of *be going to*, the word *givine* has also been recorded in the miscellaneous book *A Fe We Ting* edited by G.M. Richard. It appears in a mere list of creole words. For each of them a SE translation is provided. *Givine* is translated with *I am going to*. However, since the word is totally out of context, it has been excluded from the current analysis.

3 As remarked by Sebba (personal communication 1998), this variability might also be due to the fact that some of McWilliams's characters are meant to be Guyanese by upbringing. Consequently they might have different speech patterns.

4 An exhaustive overview of irrealis markers in pidgin and creole varieties, together with useful bibliographic references, is to be found in Holm (1988).

5 Three more occurrences are present in the corpus, which are instances of future in the past, identifiable as such only through contextual features.

6 The extensive literature produced in this field is competently reviewed and discussed by Westney (1995).

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