Variable subject and object realisation: Formal identification and substrate semantics in an English-lexified creole.

Bislama, an English-lexified creole spoken in Vanuatu (SW Pacific), allows all arguments to be realised overtly or as null constituents. Several accounts of this have been forwarded. Some researchers argue that the semantic feature of animacy has transferred from the substrate languages of the region into the expanded pidgins/creoles spoken in Melanesia (e.g. Mühlhäusler 2003; Crowley 1990, 2002). Others have argued that more formal factors, such as the transparency of subject agreement, are primarily responsible for this variation (Meyerhoff 2000). This paper uses multivariate analysis of a corpus of spoken Bislama to explore what quantitative support exists for both positions. Instead of analysing subject and object deletion as completely separate variables, it exploits the results of the multivariate analysis to draw these together towards a more unified explanation of the two phenomena—what we might call a unified grammar of argument deletion. If time permits, the paper will also outline ways in which deletion of arguments in prepositional phrases might also fit into such a unified grammar of deletion.

References: