

## Abstract

**Title:** Morphosyntactic variation in an endangered creole language: A study of past tense marking in Unserdeutsch

This paper investigates the variation in past tense marking in an endangered creole language. While variation in larger English-based creole languages has been well-researched, less investigated are minority creole languages with other lexifiers (Sippola 2018). Moreover, it is often the minority languages that are affected by language endangerment, which can lead to more and different patterns of variation (Campbell/Palosaari 2011).

I consider these issues in the only known German-based creole language Unserdeutsch (also known as Rabaul Creole German). It developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in an orphanage of a Catholic Mission in Papua New Guinea during German colonisation. While it was a close-knit community in the beginning, most speakers migrated to Australia in the 70s. Today, there are only less than a hundred older speakers left, scattered across Australia and Papua New Guinea. Therefore, Unserdeutsch is considered “critically endangered” in the UNESCO classification. Potentially due to its impending death, Unserdeutsch is characterized by a great deal of intra- and inter-individual variation.

Data to study this variation are drawn from a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews with 28 speakers of Unserdeutsch, varying in gender and age. I examine the variation between marking the past tense with different morphosyntactic forms and no grammatical marking of the past tense (see glossed examples). A variety of linguistic and social constraints are tested to determine which factors condition the variation.

Results of the quantitative multivariate analysis show that most of the variation can be explained by linguistic constraints such as lexical aspect. As in many other creole languages, my analysis shows that atelic verbs are grammatically marked more often compared to telic verbs (Hackert 2008). Looking at the social factors my results indicate that the variation in Unserdeutsch is not constrained by age, gender, or social class.

These findings support Stanford and Preston’s (2009) suggestion that variation in non-western minority languages could be constrained by different social factors. Therefore, I also examine other factors like language contact and variation patterns within families that could be important in explaining the variation in Unserdeutsch. However, these findings could also indicate social neutral variation, meaning that in Unserdeutsch, as in some other endangered languages, there is no stigmatised variant to mark the past tense (Dorian 2010). In my talk I will discuss both possibilities while also shining a light on variation in small creole communities living in an endangered language situation.

## References:

- Campbell, Lyle/Palosaari, Naomi (2011): Structural Aspects of Language Endangerment. In: Austin, Peter/Sallabank, Julia (eds.): *The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. S. 100–119.
- Dorian, Nancy C. (2010): *Investigating variation: The effects of social organization and social setting* (= Oxford studies in sociolinguistics). Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hackert, Stephanie (2008): Counting and coding the past: Circumscribing the variable context in quantitative analyses of past inflection. In: *Language Variation and Change* 20 (1), S. 127–153.
- Sippola, Eeva (2018): Collecting and analysing creole data. In: Ayres-Bennett, Wendy/Carruthers, Janice (eds.): *Manual of Romance Sociolinguistics* (= Manuals of Romance Linguistics 18). Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter. S. 91–113.
- Stanford, James N./Preston, Dennis R. (2009): The lure of a distant horizon: Variation in indigenous minority languages. In: Stanford, James N./Preston, Dennis R. (eds.): *Variation in indigenous minority languages* (= IMPACT: Studies in Language and Society 25). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. S. 1–20.

## Glossed Examples:

*i hat ge-lern-t deutsch wann i war eine klein-e medhen*  
1SG AUX PTCP-learn German when 1SG AUX.PST ART.INDF small-ATTR girl  
I learned German when I was a small girl.

*die alle spreh-en deutsch in flanzung*  
3PL all speak-V German in plantation  
They all spoke German on the plantation.