ABORIGINAL ENGLISH: SOME GRAMMATICAL FEATURES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Ian G. Malcolm Edith Cowan University

Ian Malcolm began research into Aboriginal English in Western Australia in 1973. He has widely advocated two-way bidialectal education for Aboriginal English speaking students. He retains an honorary attachment as Emeritus Professor at Edith Cowan University, having retired as Professor of Applied Linguistics in 2003.

Aboriginal English has been documented in widely separated parts of Australia and, despite some stylistic and regional variation, is remarkably consistent across the continent, and provides a vehicle for the common expression of Aboriginal identity. There is, however, some indeterminacy in the way in which the term is used in much academic and public discourse. There are diverse assumptions as to its relation to pidgin, creole and interlanguage varieties, as well as to Australian English.

In an attempt to provide some clarification, this paper compares Aboriginal English with the main varieties with which it bears some relationship, either historically (as in the case of the English of Southeast England and Ireland) or geographically (as in the case of Australian English and Australian pidgins and creoles). It does this by employing the morphosyntactic database of the World Atlas of Varieties of English (Kortmann & Lunkenheimer, 2012).

The electronic database on morphosyntactic variation in varieties of spoken English (eWAVE) isolates 235 variable features and enables their relative prevalence to be compared across varieties. A comparison of Aboriginal English with six relevant varieties on this database leads to the view that it retains significant influence from the English varieties of Southeast England and of Ireland, in many ways not shared with Australian English and that it has a great deal more feature overlap with Australian creoles than with Australian English, though a significant percentage of its features is shared only with other English varieties rather than creoles. The findings support the view that Aboriginal English is an English variety of post-creole origin, though not a creole, and that it is not directly related to Australian English.

In the light of these findings, it is argued that Aboriginal English speakers will be disadvantaged in an education system which assumes that they are speakers of Australian English.

KEYWORDS: Aboriginal English, post-pidgin, post-creole, bidialectal education

INTRODUCTION

Although Aboriginal English has been attested in the linguistic literature over more than half a century (for a survey from 1961–2000, see Malcolm, 2000), there is still, as has previously been
reported (Mühlhäusler, 1991, p. 159; Sandefur, 1985), a great deal of ambiguity about the use, or non-use, of the term, as of the related terms pidgin and creole. Schneider (2010, p. 115) describes Aboriginal English, along with Maori English, as “distinctive ethnic dialects.” Butcher (2008, p. 640) says it is “a dialect of English...the status and value of [which] is still largely misunderstood in schools.” Rose, Gray and Cowey (1999, pp. 29–30) refer to Aboriginal children’s English as “fossilized,” suggesting presumably that it is a fossilised interlanguage. Harkins (1994, p. 197), perhaps with intended ambiguity, refers to it as “an important part of Australian English”; Anthea Taylor (2011, p. 4) cites Walsh and Yallop (1993) in suggesting it is a “non-standard dialect of Standard Australian English.” Hickey (as cited in Kiesling, 2004, p. 436) similarly suggests “the possibility of a general Aboriginal variety of Australian English.” Angelo (2009, p. 2) suggests that “[i]n Queensland, confusingly, Aboriginal English has been used to refer to both dialects and creoles.” The term ‘dialect’ is sometimes used ambiguously with respect to Aboriginal English, allowing for it to be seen as an Aboriginal or as an English dialectal variety. The founders of the Accelerated Literacy program seem to subsume “Aboriginal English” under “culture” as a reason for excluding it from the English classroom (Robinson et al., 2009, p. 16). Some authors, as if apologetically, put the term in inverted commas; others deliberately avoid it by using a cover term like “creole-related varieties.” It seems clear there is some degree of uncertainty as to the nature or closeness of the relationship of Aboriginal English, to Australian English or even Standard Australian English, on the one hand, and to creoles on the other.

Aboriginal English, like Australian English, is a post-colonial English variety, the origins of which can be traced to the early years of Australian settlement at the end of the 18th century. The same transported English varieties would have been present in the hearing of the governing authorities, convicts, settlers and Aboriginal people, but the pathway towards Aboriginal English was to be significantly different from that towards Australian English. There is general agreement that, while a large number of dialects from England, Scotland and Ireland would have been transported, predominant influences were those from south-eastern England, especially London and Ireland (Collins & Blair, 2000; Fritz, 2004; B. Taylor, 2000, 2003). The significance of the Irish component, perhaps previously underrated, has recently been emphasised (Lonergan, 2003). Kiesling (2004, p. 422) has suggested that features of Irish English may have carried covert prestige, in view of the “nationalistic antagonism towards the Irish”, whereas Cockney features might have carried overt prestige. Kiesling (2004, p. 419) also notes that there was a vast increase in the child population among the immigrants between 1792 and 1800 and he suggests that “it is most likely that this generation formed the first native Australian English.”

Aboriginal speakers had their own speech community and would have been unaffected by some of the social and nationalistic influences operating in the immigrant community. English came into their lives, for the most part, in the early years, by way of pidgin, a pidgin
which they soon adopted to serve purposes within their own community in which a lingua franca was increasingly needed (Troy, 1993). In the course of time, in different places, New South Wales pidgin would depidginise towards an Aboriginal form of English (Allridge, 1984). In other places and under other circumstances it would creolise (Harris, 1993) and then, under ongoing English influence, decreolise (Kaldor & Malcolm, 1982, 1985). As in the case of Australian English, the Aboriginal varieties would converge, through processes of levelling, leading to the Aboriginal English which is recognisable across the continent (Malcolm, 2003).

Of course, the boundary lines between dialects, pidgins, creoles and even languages cannot be drawn in totally unambiguous ways (see for example Burridge & Kortmann, 2008, p. 28). However, if we are going to use the term ‘Aboriginal English’ we need to find a way to make clearer how it relates to, and is differentiated from, associated varieties, both English and creole. I want here to suggest that we now have a possible way, thanks to the international project which goes under the name of eWAVE, The World Atlas of Varieties of English (Kortmann & Lunkenheimer, 2010).

THE WORLD ATLAS OF VARIETIES OF ENGLISH

The World Atlas of Varieties of English (eWAVE), accessible at http://www.ewave-atlas.org/, is an electronic database on morphosyntactic variation in varieties of spoken English which is coordinated by Bernd Kortmann and Kerstin Lunkenheimer at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies and the English Department of the University of Freiburg, in association with the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig. It developed as a follow-up to the publication by Mouton de Gruyter in 2004 of the two-volume Handbook of Varieties of English (Kortmann et al., 2004), later published as a 4-volume paperback (Burrige & Kortmann, 2008; Kortmann & Upton, 2008; Mesthrie, 2008; Schneider, 2008) which provided descriptions of the phonology and morphosyntax of over 50 varieties of English worldwide. The varieties in this handbook, described by over 70 authorities, included first language (L1) and second language (L2) varieties of English as well as English-based pidgins and creoles. In justifying this inclusiveness, Kortmann and Schneider (2008, p. 3) state: “In accepting English-oriented pidgins and creoles in the present context, we adopt a trend of recent research to consider them as contact varieties closely related to, possibly to be categorized as varieties of, their respective superstrate languages (e.g. Mufwene, 2001).”

The eWAVE database was designed by a panel of experts who, in view of the variation exhibited in the varieties described in the handbook, isolated 235 morphosyntactic features, in 13 domains of grammar, seen to be salient in enabling the distinctiveness, and interrelatedness, of the varieties to be observed. These features were sent out to informants in all the varieties surveyed to ask them to rate them on a 6-point scale:
ARTICLES

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A – feature is pervasive or obligatory
B – feature is neither pervasive nor extremely rare
C – feature exists, but is extremely rare
D – attested absence of feature
X – feature is not applicable (given the structural make-up of the variety/pidgin/creole)
? – no information on feature is available

ABORIGINAL ENGLISH AND THE EWAVE

The present study (reported more fully in Malcolm, 2013) uses the eWAVE database to explore the relationship of Aboriginal English to varieties which are related to it either historically (in the case of Southeast English and Irish English) or geographically, either as Australian English varieties (Australian English and Vernacular Australian English) or as creoles (Roper River Creole and Torres Strait Creole). It does this by identifying which of the 235 variable morphosyntactic features it shares with each variety. This will, it is hoped, give a broad-brush picture of the way in which Aboriginal English drew on the varieties most formative in the development of Australian English, and how it relates today to the varieties with which it co-exists, whether varieties of Australian English or creoles.

There are, of course, limitations in what can be claimed for this kind of a study. To begin with, only 235 features are potentially involved, and of these, only 86 were found relevant, being recorded at level A or B in Aboriginal English and any of the relevant varieties. We are getting not so much a picture of Aboriginal English as such, but of its relatedness to other varieties. Secondly, we are looking only at morphosyntax. Thirdly, we are dependent on the accuracy of the informants’ responses to the WAVE questionnaire. Fourthly, the English and Irish varieties today are not the same as those existing 200 years ago and finally, it must be recognised that the informants were already making judgements about the dividing lines between varieties in responses made to the questionnaire. That is, for example, the judgement was made as to whether the past tense marker *bin*, which appears in creole, should also be recorded as occurring in basilectal Aboriginal English. There is no way that such a feature could be rated C (attested absence), since it is common in Aboriginal English, especially in areas influenced by creole.

It should also be noted that Aboriginal English is being dealt with here as one dialect of English although, like most dialects, it exhibits a range of variation. Comparative studies of varieties which have been described in widely separated parts of Australia (e.g. Kaldor & Malcolm, 1982, pp. 103–105; Malcolm & Koscielnecki, 1997) have shown significant consistency in their distinctive features, despite some differences attributable to regional
influences. The unity of Aboriginal English across the continent is recognised by its speakers and is no less remarkable than that of Australian English.

Table 1 (see Appendix 1) provides a summary of the eWAVE features shared by Aboriginal English with the six other varieties with which it was being compared. The numbers on the table are the numbers identifying features from the eWAVE list of 235 potentially variant features. It will be observed that, in terms of the number of variant features shared, Aboriginal English has considerable overlap with all of the varieties isolated, ranging from 22, or 25% of its features being shared with Southeast English to 49, or 57% being shared with Torres Strait Creole. When we compare Aboriginal English with Australian English and Australian Vernacular English we see that the relationship with them is not nearly as strong as that with Roper River Creole or Torres Strait Creole and no stronger than that with Irish English. It seems immediately apparent that Aboriginal English cannot be simply identified with any other variety. Its profile with respect to the potentially variant features is distinctive. While it has a clear relationship to the creoles, it departs from them in many respects. While it has obvious points of convergence with Australian English and, to a lesser extent, with Australian Vernacular English, there is no basis here to identify Aboriginal English as a variety of Australian English any more than as a variety of Irish or South Eastern English.

However, our interest is not simply in the number of features shared with each of the other varieties, but in what features are shared. Table 2 (see Appendix 1), again using the feature numbers, shows, for each of the ten relevant grammatical domains, which features are shared, and the extent of the overlap with other varieties in the patterns of sharing. If we compare column 1, Southeast English, with column 4, Australian English, we find that about one third of the commonalities Aboriginal English has with Southeast English are not shared with Australian English. In particular, the features involved include:

- **F11**: regularised reflexives (e.g. hisself)
- **F68**: them in place of demonstrative those
- **F165**: invariant non-coordinating tags (e.g. eh?)
- **F175**: deletion of auxiliary be before gonna
- **F190**: relativiser what

When we make a similar comparison with Irish English, column 3, we see that ten of the features shared with Aboriginal English are not shared with Australian English:

- **F11**: regularised reflexives (e.g. hisself)
- **F43**: subject pronoun drop: referential pronouns
- **F57**: plural marking generally optional
This finding would tend to support the view that, while Irish English and Southeast English were strongly in evidence in the colonial setting where Australian English and Aboriginal English had their birth, they were drawn on differently in the different speech communities in which the two developing varieties were spoken.

When we compare Australian English (column 4) with Australian Vernacular English (column 7), the variety which Pawley (2008, p. 365) describes as typically used when “men in the countryside or working-class men in the cities meet informally to work or to socialise”, we find that Aboriginal English, in terms of its shared grammatical features, shows less overlap with the vernacular than with Australian English, strengthening the view that Aboriginal English cannot be understood as an informal stylistic variant of Australian English.

The contrast between the degrees of overlap between Australian English and Aboriginal English with Roper River Creole and Torres Strait Creole is marked. The features shared by the creoles with Australian English are, respectively 11 and 9, whereas 49 and 44 features, respectively, are shared with Aboriginal English. The influence of pidgin/creole in the Aboriginal English grammatical system is most strongly evident in the areas of agreement, pronouns, the noun phrase, verb tense and aspect and adverbs and prepositions. It is worthy of note that, although there are 28 of the features that Aboriginal English shares only with the creoles, there are 18 features which it shares only with the other English varieties. It is appropriate to see Aboriginal English as, at most, a post-pidgin (Allridge, 1984) or post-creole, rather than a form of creole.
OBSERVATIONS ON SPECIFIC GRAMMATICAL DOMAINS

Space allows only a brief consideration of the findings specific to some of the grammatical domains distinguished by the eWAVE profile.

PRONOUNS

F4 Alternative forms/phrases for dummy it  e nice country 'It's nice country'
F5 Generalised 3sg subject pronoun  'e 'he/she/it'
F6 Generalised 3sg object pronoun  'im 'him/her/it'
F44 Subj. pronoun drop: dummy pronouns  [Was it a big one or a little one?] Big one.
F10 No gender distinction in 3sg pronoun  'My mother, 'e ....'
F34 Alternative forms for 2pl pronoun  youse, youfella/s

Aboriginal English, in common with Australian creoles, shows a reduced use of pronouns to represent impersonal or dummy subjects or objects (F4, 5, 6, 44) or gender differences (F10) and an increased use of pronouns to distinguish dual number and inclusion versus exclusion (F34). The youse plural, from Irish English, is present in lighter varieties and the creole-influenced youfella/s in heavier varieties. In terms of its variables relating to pronoun use, Aboriginal English shows at least as strong a relationship with Irish English as with Australian English.

NOUN PHRASE

F50 Plural marking via pre-posed elements  Alla boy 'the boys'
F74 Periphrastic marking of possession  the bed for that girl 'that girl's bed'
F57 Optional plural marking (human referent)  two sister
F58 Optional plural marking (other referent)  two big turtle
F62 Zero definite article  We all went to [the] funeral
F63 Zero indefinite article  We was playing [a] game
F55 Different count/non count distinctions  woods 'bits of wood'

Like the creoles, Aboriginal English makes use of alternative periphrastic expressions to mark plurality (F50) or possession (F74), treats plural or possessive marking as optional (F57, 58), reduces the use of definite and indefinite articles (F62, 63) and may adopt one or a demonstrative to replace the indefinite article. Like some non-standard Englishes, it blurs the count/non-count noun distinction.
ARTICLES

TENSE AND ASPECT

F111 Past tense/anterior marker *been*  
*Kitty bin blow dat candle out*

F114 Go-based future markers  
*E gonna come with us to station*

F117 Present tense for neutral future reference  
*When Christmas come we’re leaving*

Tense and aspect show more in common with creoles than with Australian or overseas Englishes, particularly in the periphrastic marking of past anterior (F111) and future.

VERB MORPHOLOGY

F128 Past tense/participle regularisation  
*catch-catch-catched*

F129 Past tense/participle unmarked forms  
*give* [gave]

F130 Past tense for past participle  
*when e’d came*

F131 Past participle for past tense  
*I seen that big one*

F132 Zero past tense for regular verbs  
*We pick* [picked] *the bucket up*

F139 Distinctive forms for aux vs. full verb  
*[Has anybody eaten a goanna?] We bin.*

F147 *Was* for conditional *were*  
*If I was in the bush an’ had no food…*

F149 Serial verbs with *go*  
*They was goin singing*

Most of the 25 items in this section of the eWAVE list relate to morphological features not relevant to creoles. In common with other English varieties, Aboriginal English regularises irregular past tense and past participle endings (F128) and uses past participle forms of verbs or auxiliaries for past tense (F131). Like creoles, it frequently does not mark verbs for past (F132). The *bin* auxiliary, which normally forms the past tense (F111), may, as in F139, be generalised as in *We bin*, to stand for the auxiliary *have*, which is not commonly used in Aboriginal English, in responding to a speaker using standard English.

NEGATION

F154 Multiple negation/negative concord  
*They not give us nothing*

F158 Invariant *don’t* for all persons  
*E don’t work no more*

F159 *Never* as preverbal past tense negator  
*I never got no pay*

F165 Invariant non-concord tags, incl *eh*?  
*He can walk, eh?*

*Tha’s Bernie Moore, ini?*
Most of the non-standard features of negation found in Aboriginal English are shared with other related English varieties, both Australian and overseas, e.g. multiple negation (F154), don’t (F158), never (F159). Invariant non-concord tags such as innit, (F165), though strongly present in the creoles, and absent from Australian non-standard Englishes, are also found in Southeast English. Note that no as pre-verbal negator (F160) has not been substantiated from my data sources (see Appendix 2) as present in Aboriginal English.

**AGREEMENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Feature Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F170</td>
<td>Zero marking of 3sg verb</td>
<td>He live in that house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F172</td>
<td>Existential there’s with plural subjects</td>
<td>There’s hospital dere and hostel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F173</td>
<td>Variant forms of dummy subject there</td>
<td>E got [there is] some sand there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F174</td>
<td>Deletion of aux be before progressive</td>
<td>I goin shame for her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F175</td>
<td>Deletion of aux be before gonna</td>
<td>He gonna eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F176</td>
<td>Deletion of copula be before NP</td>
<td>E nomo my fadda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F177</td>
<td>Deletion of copula be before AdjP</td>
<td>‘ou mudder crook, eh?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F178</td>
<td>Deletion of copula be before locatives</td>
<td>She home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this grammatical domain, Aboriginal English is more comparable with creoles than with related varieties of English, sharing with them the zero marking of 3rd person singular present tense (F170), the deletion of the copula be before noun and adjective phrases and locatives (F176, 177, 178) and the deletion of the be auxiliary before the progressive (F174) and before the future marker gonna (F175), these last two features being shared also with Irish English.

**RELATIVISATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Feature Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F185</td>
<td>Relativiser that/what in non-restrictive contexts</td>
<td>I got one mate what goes to a Catholic school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F190</td>
<td>Relativiser what</td>
<td>I do all the things what I want to do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F193</td>
<td>Zero relativisation in subject position</td>
<td>That fella ‘im got one eye, that my brudda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The variant relativisation features of Aboriginal English, such as using that or what rather than who or which in non-restrictive clauses (F185), using what rather than who in restrictive clauses (F190) and having no relative following a subject (F193) are shared mainly by other Englishes, though the latter is also found in creoles.
ARTICLES

COMPLEMENTATION

F204  
As what/than what in comparative clauses  ...it took us about- longer than what the canteen mob...

F205  
Existentials with forms of get  An’ e got plen’y banana tree dere

F208  
Deletion of to before infinitives  We ’ad [to] go back

Aboriginal English follows other related English varieties in inserting what in comparative clauses (F204), but it also follows creoles in using E got in place of ‘there is/are’ (F205) and in deleting to before infinitives (F208), a feature also present in Irish English.

ADVERBIAL SUBORDINATION

F213  
No subordination  No rain they don’t camp in the cave

Like the creoles, Aboriginal English does not assume a copula in either clause and may link two main verbs without adverbial subordination, as in: Me and Jody bin go and getting grapes.

ADVERBS AND PREPOSITIONS

F216  
Omission of StE prepositions  ’E stayed mission

F217  
Use of postpositions  cold weather time

F219  
Adverb-forming suffixes -way, -time  longway, northway, darktime

F220  
Degree modifier adverbs have same form as adjectives  They’re playing real happily

F221  
Other adverbs have same form as adjectives  I can easy do that

F222  
Too, too much, very, very much as qualifier  Mum she put too much rugs on us

In common with all the varieties studied, Aboriginal English may use the adjective form to perform adverbial function, e.g. Talk proper (F220, 221). It comes closer to creoles in using postposed elements to express prepositional or adverbial meaning, e.g. night time, long-way (F219) and in deleting the preposition (F216).

DISCOURSE ORGANISATION AND WORD ORDER

F227  
Inverted word order in indirect questions  ’E aksed dem for deir children, give ’im two children...

F228  
No inversion/no auxiliaries in wh- questions  Where you go yesterday?

What I’m gonna do now, Aunt?
Aboriginal English shares with Irish English and one or both creoles the non-inversion of the word-order of indirect (F227) and *wh* (F228) questions, leading to the possibility that this feature originated with influence from Irish English. In the non-use of the auxiliary in *yes/no* main clause questions (F229) and in the use of quotative *like* (F235) it would seem to be influenced by Australian English.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STATUS OF ABORIGINAL ENGLISH**

We observed at the beginning that there is, among some who use or avoid the term ‘Aboriginal English’, an uncertainty as to whether or not the variety so called actually exists independently of Australian English on the one hand or Australian creoles on the other. The morphosyntactic evidence from the comparison of Aboriginal English with related varieties on the eWAVE profile would suggest that:

1. We cannot do justice to Aboriginal English to identify it either as a variety of Australian English, or as a creole, though it has overlap with both;
2. It is likely that Aboriginal English, during its formative stages, was influenced by Southeast English and, particularly, Irish English, and that it drew on these directly rather than by way of Australian English;
3. The pervasive shared features of Australian creoles with Aboriginal English would tend to support the view that, at least in part, its development may be seen as that of a post-pidgin/post-creole English;
4. The relative independence of Aboriginal English from both Australian English and Australian Vernacular English supports the view that Aboriginal English and the Australian transported English varieties have been generated and maintained in different speech communities.

**CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS**

It is common practice for minority dialects to be kept out of the classroom, either by being assumed not to exist, or by being assumed to be inferior varieties (Nero, 2006; Siegel, 2010). While there is indeterminacy about the status of Aboriginal English there will be indeterminacy about what educational provision to make for its speakers. The examination of the morphosyntactic evidence presented here would provide a basis for arguing that it would be educationally invalid to assume Australian English, without significant bidialectal
support, as an appropriate medium of instruction or learning for speakers of Aboriginal English. It would also disadvantage Aboriginal English speaking students to assume that when they are using their dialect they are speaking creole. The validity of Aboriginal English as a dialect of English, but of different provenance from Australian English, needs to be given due recognition and supported educationally through appropriate bidialectal provisions (Eagleson, Kaldor & Malcolm, 1982; Siegel, 2010).

REFERENCES


### APPENDIX 1

Table 1. eWAVE features shared with Aboriginal English

<table>
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<th>Southeast English</th>
<th>Irish English</th>
<th>Australian Vernacular English</th>
<th>Roper River Creole</th>
<th>Torres Strait Creole</th>
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**Total features**

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<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
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APPENDIX 2: ABORIGINAL ENGLISH DATA SOURCES


Centre for Applied Language and Literacy Research (CALLR) database. Edith Cowan University.


Western Australian Aboriginal Children’s English (WAACE) database. Anthropological Museum, University of Western Australia.