

Cultural models of religious belief systems in L2 varieties of English

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My paper introduces a cognitive sociolinguistic approach to the study of religious belief systems in L2 varieties of English. “Religious belief systems” are to be understood here as conceptual networks, i.e., cultural models, of a cosmology and their socio-cultural and linguistic realizations. Following an earlier analysis of religion and traditional belief in West African English (Wolf 2006) and other works in which such an approach was successfully applied in research on L2 varieties of English (e.g., Wolf & Polzenhagen 2006, 2007, 2008fc), I investigate conceptualizations of FAMILY expressed in varieties of African English and in Hong Kong English. In both the African and the Hong Kong Chinese culture, the domain of FAMILY includes a realm that would, in a Western context, be considered part of the supernatural. In sub-Saharan Africa as well as in Hong Kong, deceased ancestors are considered to be an important part of the community or family, and are treated with religious respect. As a “side-effect,” the results of my analysis show that elements of the native culture are transferred and hence not lost when speakers speak their second language.

Cognitive Sociolinguistics, as a new strand within Cognitive Linguistics (cf., e.g., Geeraerts 2003) provides the methodological tools to linguistically and systematically study cultural variation. My findings are based on data generated by corpus linguistic methods, in combination with metaphor research in the tradition of Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The analysis primarily makes use of the Corpus of Cameroon English and the Hong Kong component of the International Corpus of English (ICE) but also draws from various other sources.

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