Plenary lecture: **Keeping it and keeping it real: Constraints on language change over the lifespan**

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Recent work in sociolinguistics has begun to interrogate the potential for, and constraints on, change in an individual's linguistic system during their life (Sankoff 2006, Sankoff and Blondeau 2007, Pope et al. 2007, Labov 2007). The potential for what Sankoff calls "lifespan change" is now recognised, but the data indicates that there are clear and sociolinguistically meaningful constraints on such change. That is, lifespan change only seems to occur under quite specific sociolinguistic conditions, and may also have quite specific linguistic characteristics.

This paper will examine data that illustrates the potential for lifespan change, and the constraints that are attendant on such change. Our on-going work examining variation in the creole English spoken on Bequia (the northernmost of the Vincentian Grenadine islands) finds robust grammatical variation differentiating villages on the island. This is not surprising, given that Bequians strongly believe speakers can be reliably identified as coming from a particular village by their speech alone.

What is surprising is the performance of a small sub-set of people, who we have dubbed "urban sojourners". These speakers have spent time away from Bequia but returned to their natal village. Although they sound superficially different from the rest of the village, we find clear evidence in two grammatical variables (presence/absence of BE and existentials), indicating that there are powerful constraints restricting the modification of their underlying grammar. We might say that by keeping some aspects of the grammar, the urban sojourners are, in some sense, "keeping it real".