

## **Adding rigour to language variety continua**

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### **Abstract**

Research into language varieties such as the recent work in World Englishes has grown massively in the last two decades. While much of it, of course, is aimed at incorporating variability into linguistic description, there is a certain lack of rigour in the descriptions of the varieties in terms of how they are compared to standard English. Previous work in Pidgin and Creole languages has suggested that there is a continuum between these languages and standard English and has placed certain variations of the same clause on such a continuum. If we are looking at discourse, however, we need to be able to count the amount of similarities or differences between the variety and standard English. In this paper, we show how rigour can be added into the analysis of language varieties by using multiple continua for different language aspects such as lexis and syntax, and looking at the extent to which the frequency of features related to each aspect is manifested in the discourse. The discourse used in this study concerns Cameroon Pidgin English, but this multiple continua methodology is applicable to the comparison of any language variety to a standard.

### **1. Investigating Language Varieties**

The English language has always existed alongside other languages. However, the last two decades have shown a dramatic increase in the range, extent and context of contact between English and other languages (Eckert, 2000; Labov, 2011; Yu et al., 2013). As a consequence of this contact, we find marked variations in Englishes around the world as English is likely to become more, not less diverse, as we move further into the multilingual 21<sup>st</sup> century. Users of English vary their use of language based on certain sociolinguistic variables as age, educational background, geographical location, economic status, and other such variables. On a regular basis, if at all, most of these people do not speak Standard English (Mahboob, 2014). Their everyday dialect and variety use is reflective of their backgrounds and lifestyle choices. To an extent, therefore, while these people speak English, there is variation in the Englishes that they speak. For the majority of speakers in most English dominated communities, English is the language used alongside other languages in speakers' repertoire to construe and represent meanings and realities. The Englishes used in these multilingual settings may sometimes be unintelligible, however, there is a general impression of mutual intelligibility despite occasional difficulties. Even monolingual users of English may find themselves in situations where they are not intelligible to other monolingual users of the language (Jenkins, 2000; Trudgill, 2004; Schneider, 2007). With the Englishes they speak, whether monolingually or plurilingually (Mahboob, 2014), their English variety changes based on the context – variances in context specific Englishes. In other words, people choose what variety forms (register) to use based on the context of use.

Issues of contextual variation in language description are becoming more and more common in many areas in linguistics, especially with the recent advent of World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca (Kachru, 1997; Jenkins, 2000; Schneider, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2010), and even in more traditional dialect studies in which we may also consider languages like Pidgins and Creoles. This is a very promising and developing area of research because questions about what variety to use in what context are quite complex (Mahboob, 2014). While

the issues raised above may not be unfamiliar to many of us, at the moment, we believe that the models for describing language variation do not achieve their full potential; that we can come up with a more complex approach which will allow us to investigate new applications in the research into language varieties. In this paper, therefore, we propose a new model in analysing language varieties as multiple continua, in an attempt to add rigour to the already existing complexities in describing and explaining variation continua. We will be illustrating this with an example from Cameroon Pidgin English (henceforth CPE) against Standard English (henceforth SE), used in Cameroon, as a single continuum, and then will show this same example using multiple continua. But first, in the following section, we introduce the traditional approach used to describe Pidgin and Creole varieties.

## 2. Traditional Descriptions of Pidgin and Creole Varieties

Language variety approaches to variation investigate the consequences for linguistic code choice in interaction between speakers of distinct, but nevertheless, mutually intelligible varieties (Trudgill, 1986, cited in Britain and Hirano, 2016). For the case of variation in Pidgin and Creole languages (usually as lingua franca in contact situations), investigations have so far been based on continuum analysis. The model of the creole continuum goes back to Reinecke and Tokimasa (1934), and even to Schuchardt (1914, cited in Deuber, 2009). However, it became famous as a model of Creole variety analysis through the works of David DeCamp (1964; 1971); Le Page and DeCamp (1960); Alleyne (1963); Bailey (1966), and Bickerton (1971; 1975; 1973a; 1973b). DeCamp (1971: 350) specifically developed this model to account for Jamaican creole as a non-discrete variety from the standard in the following well-known quote:

There is no sharp cleavage between creole and standard... [but] a linguistic continuum, a continuous spectrum of speech varieties ranging from... ‘bush talk’ or ‘broken language’... to the educated standard [and showing an] extreme degree of variability.

Bickerton (1973b) was the first to take up DeCamp’s suggestion by attempting an analysis of Guyanese creole through newly redefined concept of polylectal grammar continuum. Bickerton claimed that no variation should be pictured simply in binary terms, as for example, the presence or absence in the variety, but that several variants are possible. As a result, if there is a large number of clausal variances, any continuum that takes into account all the variation can be highly complex. From this perspective, he opined, lects must be organised on a scale, with one end labelled the *acrolect* and the other labelled the *basilect* while the whole intermediate zone is called the *mesolect*. Here is an example from Singh (2000: 74) of a clause from Bickerton’s Guyanese continuum data to elucidate how the clause varies across the continuum.

*mi a nyam      me a eat      me eatin’      I eatin’      I is eatin’      I am eating*

**basilect** ————— | **mesolects** | ————— **acrolect**

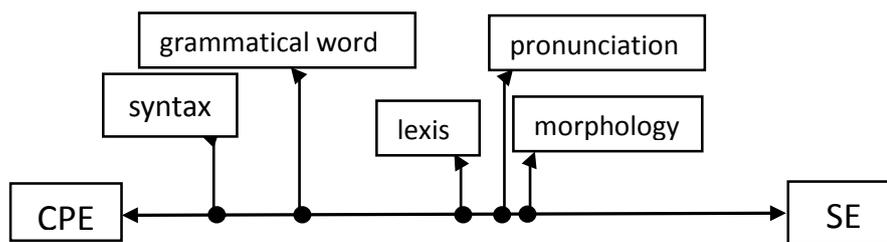
The continuum described by Bickerton and the majority of authors after him is a continuum with two diglossic languages or dialectal varieties as its poles. In Bickerton’s study, ‘deep Guyanese Creole’ was the basilect and ‘Standard Guyanese English’ was the acrolect. Bickerton demonstrated that variation is central to the theory, and therefore, it is the role of the linguist to make clear judgement about speaker’s speech varieties with the relative probability of different variants to be realised in any given context. It is this outline that was taken up by Carayol and Chaudenson (1984, as cited in Migge and Winford, 2009) who were conscious of the existence not just of a simple diglossia but of a continuum running from the basilect to the acrolect through a series of intermediate degrees which constitutes the mesolect. Their



variations which offer the speaker a choice of which register to use. And these choices may be best examined separately and independently in the whole discourse to ascertain language variation patterns. Todd (1974) affirms that “it is true that certain lexical items clearly mark the form of language being used.” They can be understood as independent continua that influence language choices and can then be brought together as five-dimension continua that allows us to situate various features of language variation. Such a methodology will clearly and systematically depict the intricacies and complexities of the kind of on-going variation existing in any variety. These five language aspects continua are first described below (showing their applications to utterances in Section 4) and then brought together (in Section 5, showing their applications to discourse) to form a coherent approach to variation continua.

#### 4. Generating Multiple Language Variety Continua

Following Bickerton’s traditional approach of a single continuum for a single utterance, taking an example from our data (*shidon fo down*), begs the question of where to assign this single utterance on a single continuum. If we prioritise syntax, it is certainly close to CPE. But if we prioritise lexis, one word is CPE (*shidon*), one word SE (*down*) and one word CPE variation (*fo*) of SE (*for*), so it will probably be in the middle. The grammar is shifted towards CPE. Morphology and pronunciation are only partially SE, if prioritised too, as shown in the Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1.** Single utterance continuum positioning based on prioritising language aspects

The choice of which language aspect we prioritise will change the placement of the utterance on the continuum. This suggests that we should not be looking at single continuum but several continua for different language aspects. Therefore, we need five separate continua. Bickerton’s method used an intuitive decision on where to place an utterance on a continuum. So, to add rigour to our continua, we need guidelines which will help us understand where to place utterances for each of the continua.

##### 2.1 Morphology

Looking at morphology, we can focus especially on affixes, which in the case of CPE against SE, are mostly suffixes. Key suffixes where CPE and SE differ are tense suffixes and plural suffixes. So, we need to create a set of guidelines for how we would measure where an utterance falls on a continuum from CPE to SE based on morphology. Here are the guidelines:

1. Instances where speaker has a choice of either using a CPE/SE suffix at final ending of content words were counted.
2. The morphological variable considered in this discourse is plural number-marking and verb-tense-marking.
3. For example, in contexts where SE requires a plural noun to be categorically marked with the {-s} morpheme, CPE variably allows zero-suffixation {*gel*}, while in some contexts allows both zero and post-nominal suffix *-dem* {*footballer dem*}.

4. Also, marking by verb inflection of past-reference verbs – morphemes occurring at final cluster ending – obligatory in General English but highly variable in CPE, {-ed}.
5. The frequency variance is counted by the number of interactions and converted to percentages.

## **2.2 Lexis**

CPE has several common words for which it has its own lexis which contrast with that of SE, especially in the case of content words. Examples of content words differing in CPE and SE are nouns, main verbs, adjectives and adverbs. In order to measure the proportion of lexical occurrence for CPE and SE, the following guidelines are considered:

1. Focus is on content words used in the discourse.
2. Identify and count all content words for speaker A and B in both parts of the discourse.
3. Categorise lexis into four groups according to: (1) word with only CPE version; (2) word with choice, CPE version; (3) word with choice, SE version; (4) word with only SE version.
4. Consider only category 2 and 3 for analysis since they have variances wherein speakers can choose from.
5. The frequency variance is counted by the number of interactions and converted to percentages.

## **2.3 Syntax**

If we consider the clause as the unit of analysis, the syntactic structure for CPE and SE differs in many ways. One obvious way is the omission of main verbs in CPE against SE. The guidelines that ensue aid the frequency measurement of CPE and SE syntactic structure occurrence.

1. Split the discourse into clauses.
2. Every clause should have a main verb (the verb as the centre of the clause).
3. Clauses with elipted verbs were not counted as following SE structure since verbs cannot be elipted in General English.
4. Clauses starting with a main verb that is not SE was counted as CPE.
5. Single word utterances were not considered for syntactic analysis since the focus is on clauses.
6. Where clause has a choice of word order: is the choice following the CPE order or SE order.
7. The frequency variance is counted by the number of interactions and converted to percentages.

## **2.4 Grammatical word**

CPE and SE differ in grammatical word choice. Salient grammatical features where variation is noticeable are pronouns, articles, and prepositions. To measure the placement of an utterance on the continuum for this aspect, we set up the following guidelines:

1. Salient grammatical features (such as pronouns, articles, prepositions) are considered.
2. The features are counted based on their realisation variances (either as CPE or SE).
3. The frequency variance is counted by the number of interactions and converted to percentages.

## **2.5 Pronunciation**

Pronunciation is one major aspect in English as a lingua franca (ELF) where variation features have been highly noticeable and accounted for (Jenkins, 2000). The guidelines below

directed our measurement of the frequency of occurrence for different pronunciation features in CPE and SE in order to know where to place it on the continuum.

1. Variance of sounds with phonemic choices are considered.
2. The realised phoneme was checked to see whether it matches CPE or SE realisations.
3. Some noticeable pronunciation descriptions for CPE were observed in the conversation

\* shortening of long vowel eg girl {gel} → /gɜ:l/

\*sounds in free variation - /ə/ and /ei/ are both pronounced /ə/ eg [De know] → They - {Də}  
[Na de name that] → The - {də}

\*produce schwa sound /ə/ as full vowel  
/a/ at word final position } eg whether {wada}

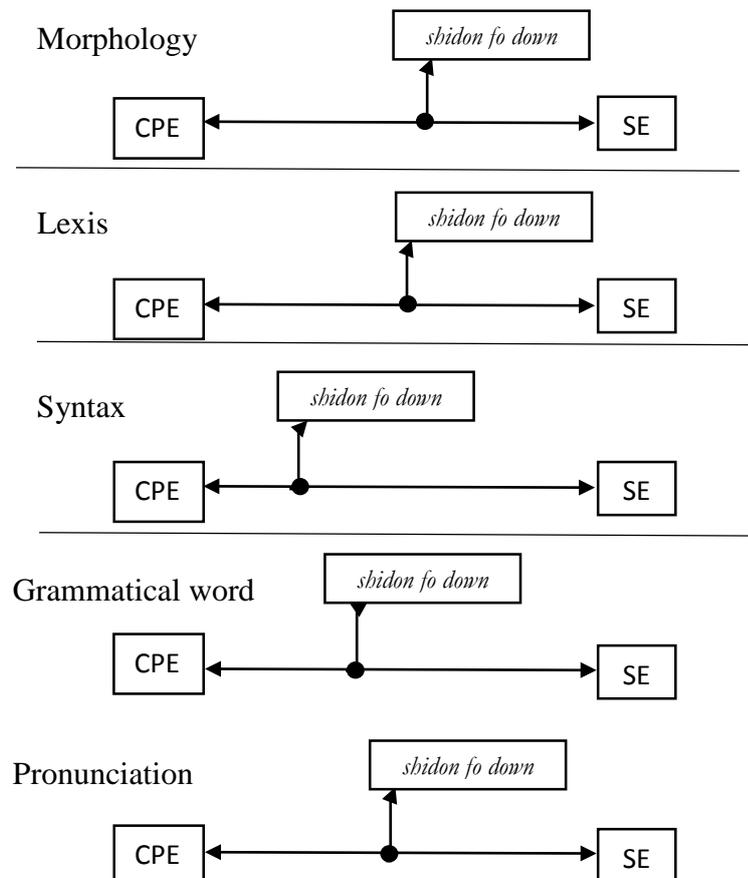
\*deletion of word final consonant eg put → {pu}

\*substitution of dental fricatives: /ð/ & /θ/ with /t/ & /d/ eg Dis → This /ðiz/

\* Monophthongisation of diphthongs eg They - {De} → /ðei/

4. The frequency is counted by the number of interactions and converted to percentages.

Given the apparent impossibility of observing any reliable variation for single utterances in a single continuum, if we consider placing the single utterance from our data (*shidon fo down*) on multiple continua following the guidelines above, it will show variation at different points for each aspect. We plotted the utterance onto multiple continua for the five language aspects independently so as to show a clear variation between aspects.



**Figure 2.** Overall variation for single utterance on multiple continua

### 5. Applying the Continua to Discourse

Within Interactional Linguistics and Conversation Analysis there are assumptions that conversations are sequentially organised and incremental. An utterance is always produced in relation to previous turns (Nilsson, 2009), that is, language happens in discourse - succeeding units of utterances occurring together in the whole discourse. For example, if we look at two succeeding utterances in addition to the one above, focusing on the five language aspects, we will notice some far more complex variances on the continua. The three utterances shown below are a representative selection from a collection of examples from the data.

Utterances:

“*Shidon fo down*” [SE: Sit down]

“*So you say*” [SE: So you said]

“*Na weti happen*” [SE: What happened]

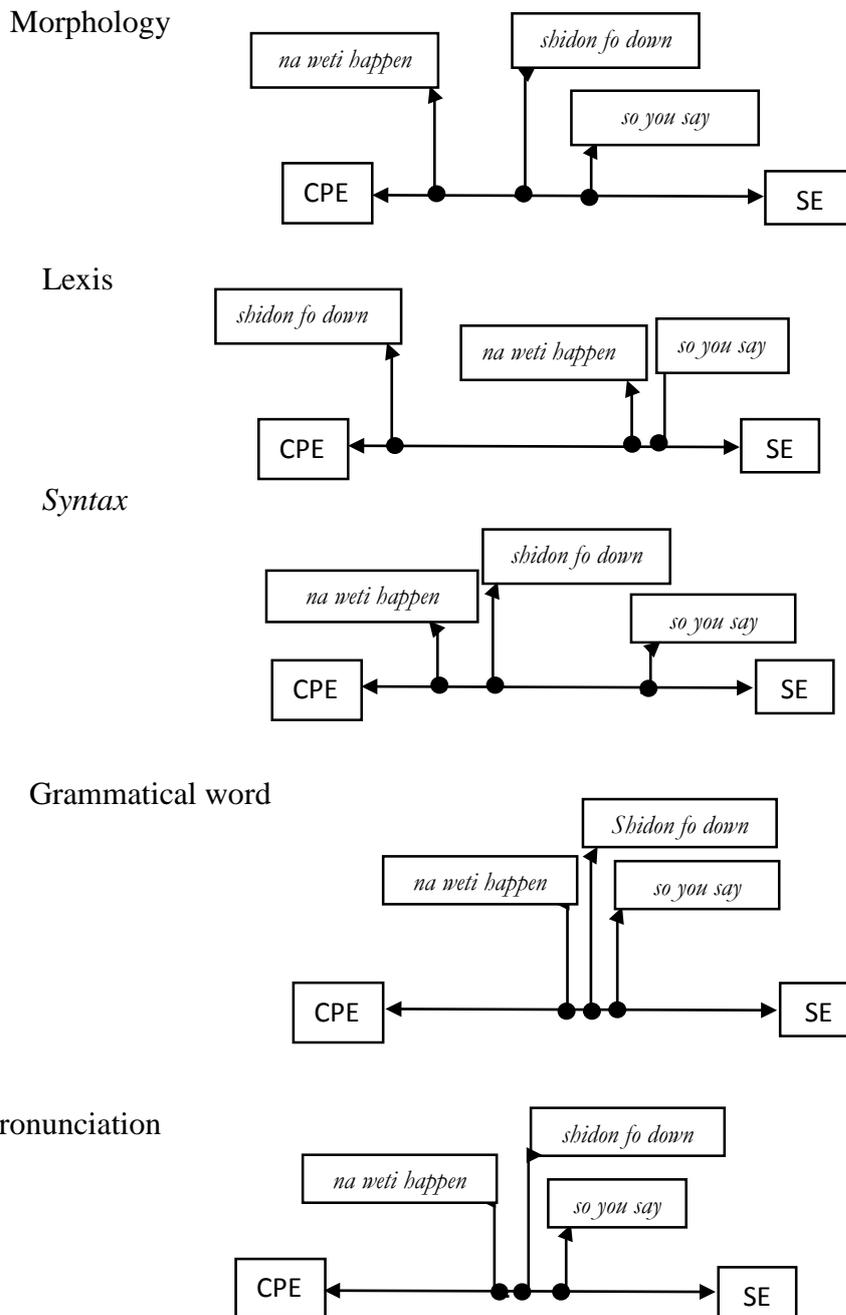
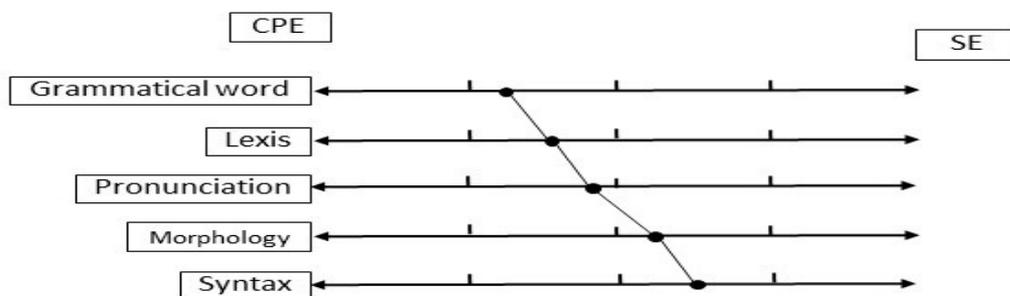


Figure 3. Sequential clausal variation on multiple continua

Turning our attention now to the analysis of multiple utterances in a dialogue, we will be analysing a single conversation between two adult Cameroonian speakers of unequal educational status, both of whom can speak acrolectal SE and basilectal CPE to different levels of competence. The full conversation is 24 turns long (12 turns each for speakers A and B respectively). A frequency count by number of interactions, considering all five language aspects, give a total number of occurrences of CPE variety choices in the data 265 times while that of SE variety choices occurs 235 times. We look at the conversation, not as single utterances mapped onto a single continuum, but, as multiple continua throughout discourse, with convergence and divergence variances at different points in the discourse continua. That is, we illustrate the applicability of multiple language continua based on the five language aspects in the analysis of the conversation as a whole discourse. Below is a table summarising the percentage count result for the five language aspects for the whole discourse.

<i>Morphology</i>		<i>Lexis</i>		<i>Syntax</i>		<i>Grammatical word</i>		<i>Pronunciation</i>	
CPE choices	SE choices	CPE choices	SE choices	CPE choices	SE choices	CPE choices	SE choices	CPE choices	SE choices
45%	<b>55%</b>	<b>60%</b>	40%	36%	<b>64%</b>	<b>71%</b>	29%	<b>53%</b>	47%

As can be seen, the different language aspects are clearly distinguished by the frequency with which speakers use CPE as opposed to SE in discourse. Overall, speakers chose more CPE speech variance (265 times) compared to SE variance (235 times) when we look at the total frequency count in the whole discourse. This reveals a continuous speech variation throughout the discourse as seen in Figure 4, representing only the highest count for each aspect on the continua, sequenced from the most CPE to the most SE.



**Figure 4.** Frequency count showing multiple continua variation for whole discourse

So far, we have been able to show that it is possible to apply the five multiple continua to a whole discourse, however, we should also consider the variation changes in a dialogue and why a speaker might make these changes. One possible argument to this is the Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973). The theory was developed to investigate shift in style and accent. Nevertheless, the development of this theory over the years has increased its complexity, in that, it now aims to explain how and why speakers adjust their communicative behaviour in social encounters, as well as the consequences of such adjustments (Giles et al., 1991; Jenkins, 2000; Soliz and Giles, 2014; Nilsson, 2015). This theory will help us to understand why the discourse speakers converge (the act of adjusting one’s speech pattern to be more similar to that of one’s interlocutor) and/or diverge (the act of one’s speech pattern moving further apart from one’s interlocutor) in their use of CPE and SE variants. We will give an example using our data to show how accommodation theory influences the interaction for

each of the five aspects. We divided the discourse into two parts, turns 1-12 for both speakers first part of the discourse (as A1 and B1), and turns 13-24 (as A2 and B2) for the second part of the discourse in order to systematically observe the patterns of change or stability for both speakers in the whole discourse.

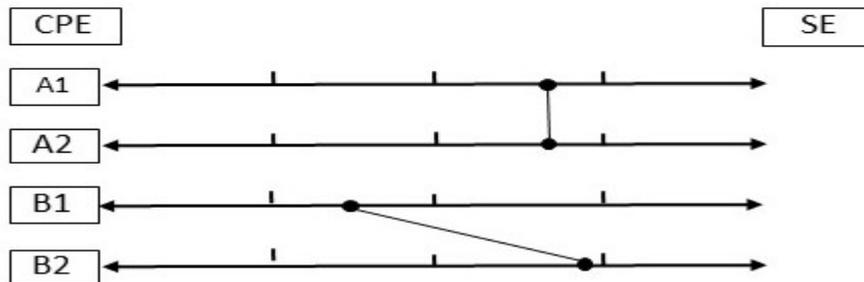
The analysis places each individual speaker's idiolect idiosyncratically on the discourse continua. The interpretation will provide insight into the overall coexisting patterns of speaker's choices in the whole discourse. It will also add credibility to comparing the variation frequency of any variety, comparable to a standard, and trace the course of mesolectal variety changes in real time.

#### 4.1 Morphology

First, we look at the aspect of morphology. Here, the proportion of CPE and SE variants in the discourse for the two interlocutors, for the two parts of the discourse for morphology are shown in Table 1, and as continua, in Figure 5.

**Table 1.** % choice distribution of morphological variants in CPE and SE

Speakers/ Discourse	Suffix with choice CPE version	Suffix with choice SE version
A1	33%	<b>67%</b>
A2	56%	<b>67%</b>
B1	<b>64%</b>	36%
B2	27%	<b>73%</b>



**Figure 5.** Morphological divergence and convergence for speakers in discourse

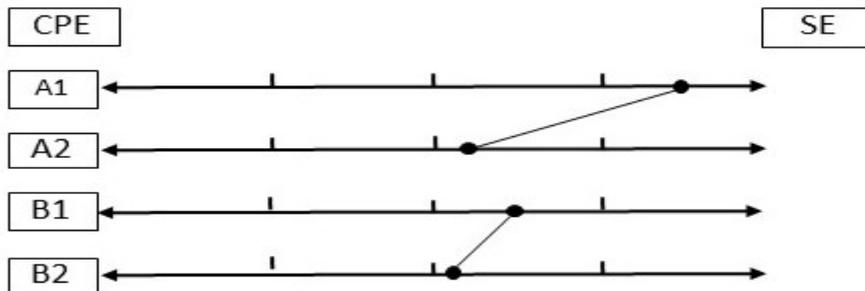
The shifts in proportions from the first half to the second half of the discourse suggest an accommodation in morphology on the part of speaker B towards speaker A. Speaker A is the more educated of the two speakers, and we see that A's morphology remains stable on the SE side of the continuum but B's talk shifts towards the position on the continuum of A.

#### 4.2 Lexis

CPE and SE variants differ in proportions for both speakers in their lexical choices in the first and second parts of the discourse. This is presented in Table 2, and represented as continua in Figure 6.

**Table 2.** % choice distribution of lexical variants in CPE and SE

Speakers/ Discourse	Word with choice CPE version	Word with choice SE version
A1	14%	<b>86%</b>
A2	45%	<b>55%</b>
B1	37%	<b>63%</b>
B2	47%	<b>53%</b>



**Figure 6.** Lexical convergence for speakers in discourse

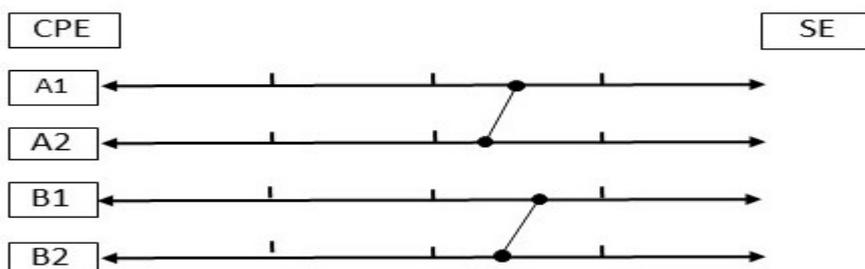
Although the change in lexis is in opposite direction to morphology, the actual basis is similar to what is seen in Section 4.1. They are both moving towards CPE which may represent some sort of accommodation convergence from A’s part this time (more on A’s part than on B). However, it is not clear whether this is an accommodation convergence or possibly an indication of a shared Cameroonian identity (Anchimbe, 2014).

### 4.3 Syntax

The syntax shows variation in the speakers choices in different proportions. Table 3 portrays the CPE and SE measurement of syntactioc variants, and Figure 7 shows the discourse continua pattern.

**Table 3.** % choice distribution of syntactic variants in CPE and SE

Speakers/ Discourse	Word with choice CPE version	Word with choice SE version
A1	36%	<b>64%</b>
A2	40%	<b>60%</b>
B1	32%	<b>68%</b>
B2	38%	<b>62%</b>



**Figure 7.** Syntactic convergence for speakers in discourse

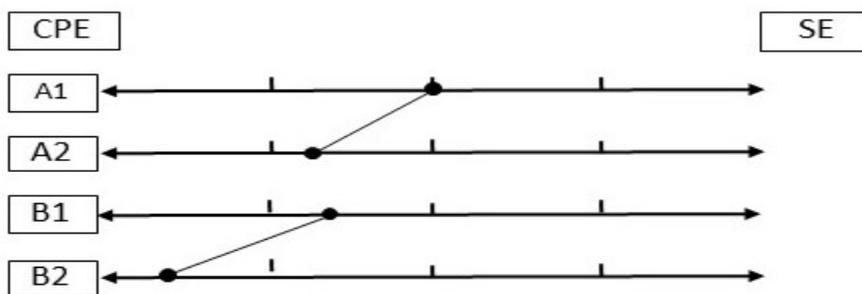
In this case, there is not much change through the discourse. Perhaps this may be because they both started similarly with SE variants, so there was no need for any change to accommodate or show an identity.

**4.4 Grammatical Word**

Table 4 shows the variation proportions of grammatical word choice by both interlocutors in the first and second parts of the discourse. The continua pattern is represented in Figure 8.

**Table 4.** % choice distribution of grammatical variants in CPE and SE

Speakers/ Discourse	Word with choice CPE version	Word with choice SE version
A1	<b>50%</b>	<b>50%</b>
A2	<b>70%</b>	30%
B1	<b>66%</b>	34%
B2	<b>85%</b>	15%



**Figure 8.** Grammatical convergence for speakers in discourse

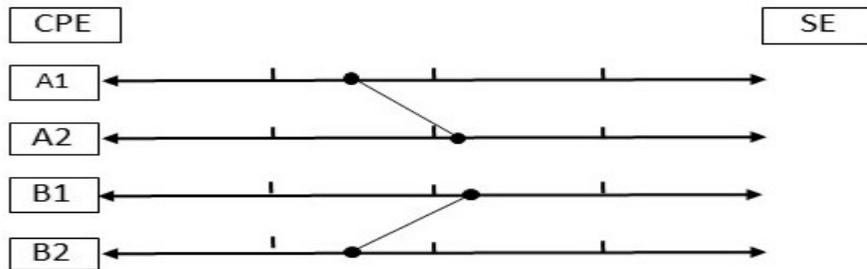
In this case the changes seem to appear like those for lexis (Section 4.2). Both speakers shift their talk towards CPE, which may be an indicator of accommodation, or may simply be an indicator of showing a Cameroonian identity.

**4.5 Pronunciation**

Here, the proportion of CPE and SE variants in the discourse for the two interlocutors, for the two parts of the discourse for pronunciation are shown in Table 5, and as continua, in Figure 9.

**Table 5.** % choice distribution of pronunciation variants in CPE and SE

Speakers/ Discourse	Phonemic pronunciation Matching CPE	Phonemic pronunciation Matching SE
A1	<b>62%</b>	38%
A2	48%	<b>52%</b>
B1	46%	<b>54%</b>
B2	<b>61%</b>	39%



**Figure 9.** Pronunciation divergence for speakers in discourse

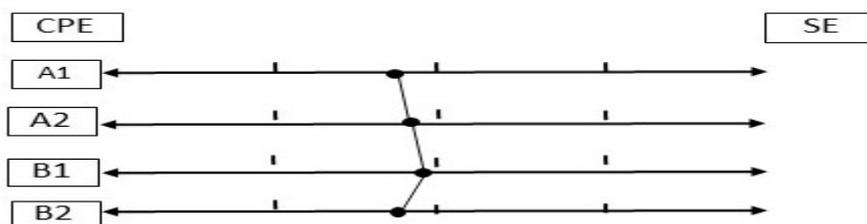
There is not much change here. Speaker A’s pronunciation moves towards SE, but speaker’s B’s pronunciation becomes more like CPE. It is uncertain why this would happen and it thus raises questions about the validity of accommodation theory in this case.

### 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have shown that it is possible to produce multiple continua representing different language aspects to describe varieties, and that these continua can be applied to discourse. If we contrast our approach with that of Bickerton’s, then we are showing certain aspects of the interaction which are not possible under Bickerton. Even if we apply Bickerton to the whole discourse to look at accommodation theory, there is still no clear change pattern. Taking the case of combining all continua for a single set of A1, A2 and B1, B2 for the whole discourse (the two discourse parts), the pattern is just similar all way through, showing no great change, as shown in Table 6, and as continua in Figure 10.

**Table 6.** Overall % count for all features combined

Language aspects/ Discourse	CPE % count	SE % count
A1	<b>54%</b>	47%
A2	<b>52%</b>	48%
B1	<b>51%</b>	49%
B2	<b>57%</b>	44%



**Figure 10.** Overall pattern for all features combined

We can see that there is no clear variation through the discourse, a reason for our proposed use of multiple continua. This is a further justification for using continua associated with specific language aspects because they highlight certain issues that would not be highlighted when we take the broad approach suggested by Bickerton’s single continuum which combines all aspects. So therefore, it is potentially beneficial applying the multiple continua because they show patterns of change in discourse which are hidden when combined.

It is also worth applying it to discourse because then we can identify issues relating to accommodation and identity creation as it progresses through the discourse. Consequently, we believe that the approach we are suggesting here has benefits and applications which the previous traditional continuum approach to variations do not have.

The benefits and potential applications of this methodology can be categorised into three broad areas: (1) application to Pidgins and Creoles in other contexts, (2) application to other language varieties (such as, World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca), and (3) application to research into variations in general, irrespective of the kind of variation. First, given Creolists' intrinsic curiosity about issues of variations, this methodology has great potential for intriguing researcher's interest about the complexities in Creole variation in a complex multilingual context. Moreover, the inner working of Pidgins and Creoles is just as readily observed in examining variation and their patterning as they are through the exclusive study of a single variety (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 2006). Second, the advent of English as an International Language (EIL) has led to the wide spread of other Englishes (Jenkins, 2000). This has shaped new dimensions in the study of varieties of English in areas like World Englishes (WEs) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). Its spread has increased variations in how non-native speakers use Englishes. Even though this paper studied the variances within CPE to SE as a case, as McKay (2003) posits that the development of local Englishes as lingua franca has altered the very nature of standard English in terms of how it is used by its speakers and how it relates to culture. A careful application this methodology can provide richer insight in understanding the complex variation changes in different Englishes around the world. Just as an example, let us suppose that we want to apply it to ELF against SE, Jenkins (2000) gives a long list of phonological and grammatical features which are associated with ELF. So therefore, we could use these as an ELF contrast with SE and apply a similar comparison to this for the phonology and grammar of ELF against SE in interactions between participants in ELF contexts. Lastly, this proposed methodology can afford researchers into language variations in general, irrespective of the kind of variation, a fascinating window through which they can gain insight into how the variation phenomenon works in a mono/bi/multilingual context. This robust methodology should serve as a novel framework for future researches into the study of variations in languages. Through this, researchers can grasp the intricacies involved in human interaction and understand how (and why) people use certain registers the way they do in their local contexts of discourse.

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