

Meet Me on Tomorrow by Your Mama's House: A sociolinguistic investigation of phrasal constructions in New Orleans English

While phonological and lexical variation in New Orleans English (NOE) has been extensively studied, much less is known about its morphosyntactic variation. Syntactic variables often remain underrepresented in sociolinguistic work due to lower frequency compared to phonological and morphological features, questionable semantic equivalences across phrasal constructions, and a general interest in sound change amongst variationist sociolinguists (Cheshire 1987; Moore 2021). This study contributes to the emerging field of socio-syntax by examining three locally salient phrasal constructions that demonstrate unusual employment of prepositions: (i) 'by [residence]' (e.g. 'I went by your mama's house yesterday' meaning 'I stopped in for a visit at your mama's house yesterday'), (ii) 'for [time]' (e.g. 'the store closes for six o'clock' meaning 'the store closes at six o'clock'), and (iii) 'on [temporal deixis]' (e.g. 'I've got a doctor's appointment on tomorrow' meaning 'I've got a doctor's appointment tomorrow'). Our data come from a self-report survey administered to 120 New Orleanians across ethnic, generational, educational, and neighborhood groups, supplemented by semi-structured sociolinguistic interview data from the 504 Voices New Orleans English Corpus and targeted social media searches. Since such constructions are characterized by a low frequency in spontaneous speech, self-report surveys allowed us to gather a broad sample across speaker groups for constructions that otherwise would be underattested (Hasty 2014; Schilling 2013). To avoid possible discomfort or lower endorsement rates due to seeing colloquial constructions in writing (Henry 2005), survey items (e.g., "The store closes for 8 o'clock", "I'll call you on tomorrow") were presented orally by the researcher, and participants provided their responses aloud, rating each sentence using a 4-point scale. We collapsed self-report responses into binary outcome variables ("I use this" vs. "I don't use this") and analyzed the data by means of binomial logistic regression models. The use of social media allowed us to collect additional examples of 'for [time]' and on '[temporal deixis]', which were not well represented in the 504 Voices New Orleans English Corpus due to their colloquial nature. The survey results demonstrate differing social patterning across the three constructions. Both 'by [residence]' and 'for [time]' are widely used across generations, neighborhoods, and ethnic groups, suggesting that they are stable features of NOE morphosyntax. In contrast, 'on [temporal deixis]' shows social stratification: Black and Creole respondents are significantly more likely to report usage than White respondents. Logistic regression modeling found statistically significant effects for ethnicity but not for education or neighborhood. These patterns suggest that 'on [temporal deixis]' may

function as an ethnic marker in NOE. We further explore the possible grammaticalization pathways that have led to these constructions. The 'by [residence]' construction likely developed through reanalysis of motion verb licensing with pass by expressions. The 'for [time]' construction can be explained as a place-to-goal extension in temporal semantics (Taylor 1993), where for six o'clock marks a target time rather than duration. Finally, 'on [temporal deixis]' likely reflects an analogical extension of on + day structures (e.g. on Monday) to bounded temporal adverbs like today and tomorrow (Bennett 1975). This pattern was also noted in some varieties of Southern US and Irish English. Our findings contribute to the limited but growing body of work on syntactic variation across American English dialects. They provide new documentation of features that have previously gone underexamined due to their low frequency in spontaneous speech. Our results also demonstrate the importance of combining self-report, corpus, and media data to document such low-frequency morphosyntactic features.

References

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