

PERCEPTUAL DIALECTOLOGY IN THE SSS ISLANDS OF THE NORTHEASTERN CARIBBEAN: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

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Introduction

In this article, I discuss the results of a speaker-focused study on perceptual dialectology conducted in the SSS Islands of the Northeastern Caribbean, namely St. Eustatius (also known and hereafter referred to as Statia), Saba and St. Martin. The fieldwork took place during three individual trips (May 2015, May 2016 and July 2016) to each of the SSS Islands. Based on the methods developed by Dennis Preston, the participants filled out a survey and some of them were interviewed to learn about their perceptions, attitudes and judgments regarding language, taking into account geographical as well as mental maps. The survey was designed to gather the participants' views on their own language use and the use of language in the different geographical zones of each island. The participants also gave input regarding their neighbors' use of language on the other SSS Islands. This is, to my knowledge, the first study of its kind in this geographical area. It aims to promote sociolinguistic research in this region as well as to help understand the linguistic complexities present in these islands through the perspective of their inhabitants.

The sample

Originally, the purpose of asking participants to complete the sociological profile section at the end of the three-page survey was to collect data that would provide an idea of who was participating in the study in terms of gender, age, years living on the island, place of residence, level of education that they had obtained, ethnicity, occupation and languages spoken regularly. The responses to those questions were quite varied, which, on the one hand, suggests that people from diverse sociological groups were represented in the sample. On the other hand, the sample from the three islands – 87 participants in total – was relatively small and, thus, in each sociological category just a small number of participants was to be found. I tried to analyze the data by the sociological variables (using cross tabulation on Excel's pivot tables) to see if there were tendencies or patterns

indicating that these variables could have influenced the participants' answers or lack thereof. However, no tendencies nor patterns were found. Statistically, it cannot be demonstrated that the sociological variables influenced the results of the study. Perhaps such trends or patterns could have been discerned in a larger sample, with larger numbers of participants in each sociological group.

The diversity of participants from the three islands notwithstanding, not all adult groups in the community were represented in the sample. None of the participants said that they were unemployed at the moment of completing the survey. All participants, except for two participants from Saba (who had reached middle school level only), had earned a secondary school diploma (or its equivalent) or a higher level of education. Thus, unemployed members of the community as well as those with lower levels of education were not represented in the sample.

The question regarding languages spoken regularly was answered by 85 out of the 87 participants. There were participants who self-reported that they were monolinguals (most of them in English, a couple in Dutch and one in St Martin English), whereas others self-reported that they were bilinguals or multilinguals. Very few participants included the vernaculars (Statia English, Saban English or St. Martin English) in their answers while completing the survey. However, this does not mean that the participants do not use the vernacular varieties to communicate on a regular basis.¹ It probably means that they do not recognize those varieties as languages, hence, the vast majority of participants did not include them. Therefore, this sociological variable was difficult to use to analyze tendencies and patterns in the answers of the participants, and was also difficult to use to gain a clearer image of them as speakers.

Discussion of the results: Statia

The first part of the map task

Seven Statian participants did not complete the first part of the map task, six of whom wrote comments next to the map of Statia explaining why they did not do the task. The reasons provided for not doing so ranged from not perceiving any linguistic differences on the island to explaining that the differences perceived were not related to the geographical location but to the age group or the ethnic background of the inhabitants of the island. These perceptions are understandable, taking into consideration the small size of Statia, and the fact that, typically, young people have their own linguistic styles and codes for communication, particularly with one another. As shown below, ethnic

¹ In the case of Statia, for instance, during my fieldwork trip I heard people around me speaking Statia English, but never to me. This included someone who eventually became a participant and who did not include it as a language spoken regularly in the sociological profile section.

background also proved relevant in identifying linguistic differences. In any case, it would have been interesting to show these six participants the geo-linguistic differences pointed out on the map of Statia by other participants who had perceived them, and see their opinions and reactions. This might be done in a future study.

In terms of the participants who did this first part of the map task, the Quill was the most circled and labeled area. Many Statian participants perceived that people who live in that area speak differently. The participants used labels that, for the most part, identified the demonym of what appeared to be the majority of the inhabitants of that area: Dutch, Americans and Europeans. Only participant STA008 labeled this area with something related to language. He said that he had perceived a “strong Dutch accent when speaking English”. In question 1, 7% of the participants from Statia identified this as the same area where people sound nicer or more pleasant on the island because, according to participant STA014, “they articulate and pronounce more clearly”. In question 2, 19% of the participants chose the Quill area as the place in Statia where people sound more correct because, “the houses are expensive” (STA017) and there “we have more Americans and Dutch” (STA023). Thus, there appears to be a correlation between living in an area such as the Quill, where many of the inhabitants are Dutch or American and of a higher socio-economic class and being perceived as sounding more pleasant and more correct.

This correlation, however, seems to have an additional dimension. Those participants who circled and labeled the Quill on the map also established a sort of “inverse othering” since the groups “othered” here are not typically seen as marginalized or politically powerless groups. Still these Statian participants distanced themselves from the Dutch and Americans who live in the Quill area and labeled them as “different”. Even when it was to point to their overt prestige (linguistically and in terms of lifestyle), their judgments were, nonetheless, based on a perceived “us vs them” relationship.

The second most circled and labeled area on the map of Statia was Oranjestad. Unlike the Quill area, the labels used for Oranjestad were too varied to easily establish a pattern. For example, some participants used names of languages as their labels. Participant STA024 used “Statia English” as one of her labels, alongside “English” and “Dutch”, which confirms that the vernacular is regarded as a separate and identifiable linguistic variety, although for most participants it might not be considered as a language on its own right.² Other participants used “Spanish”, “Mix of English and Spanish”, and “Dutch”. All of these labels enumerated the languages that the participants had heard in the area. Using language names to label the difference perceived was a practice commonly used by

² Since no other varieties of English were included in the Statistics Netherland’s report, it could be argued that for those researchers, the vernaculars spoken in Statia and Saba are not languages in their own right either. Thus, this notion may be being disseminated, promoted and perpetuated by government agencies, and many members of the community have accepted it as true.

participants from the three islands on both map tasks. In the Caribbean, where people who speak many different languages have been living side-by-side for so long, and where pluri-linguality is common, it should come as no surprise that participants mentioned different languages instead of different dialects of the same language in their responses. Perhaps this indicates an area where the instruments typically used in perceptual dialectology need to be further adapted and refined.

As noted before, the only label for Oranjestad that was not the name of a language was participant STA008's label: "The North-rougher pronunciation". This label goes somewhat beyond just pointing out the presence of languages other than English in Oranjestad as the perceived difference in the area. That label demonstrates that the participant had perceived a difference in the way people from the "North" sound, which he attributes to pronunciation. However, it remains unknown which phonological features this participant was referring to by characterizing them as "rougher" and what he used as his basis of comparison. Perhaps, for this participant, the closer to what is considered acceptable pronunciation, according to the "standard" variety, the less "rough" it is, and the farther away from the "standard", the "rougher" it is.

The fact that most Statian participants limited themselves to circle and write labels or comments to the three areas already labeled on the map (the Quill, Oranjestad and the airport areas) leads me to wonder whether or not the results of this first part of the map task would have been different if the participants would have received a more detailed map. This could be considered for a future round of fieldwork in the research project reported on in the present paper.

The fact that five participants only circled areas on the map but did not write any labels or comments represents another issue to ponder. Perhaps they had perceived differences in the areas they circled but were not sure what those differences were, or how to name them. Yet the circles drawn do imply that the participants believed differences to exist in the circled areas.

The second part of the map task

Of the nine participants who both circled and labeled the map of the SSS Islands and surrounding areas, only two (STA025 and STA017) circled and labeled St. Martin. Both of those participants used language names to label the neighboring island. None of the participants who only drew circles on this map circled or marked St. Martin in any way. The fact that few Statian participants singled out St. Martin might indicate that they feel St. Martiners to be similar to Statians in the way that they speak. It is true that when they need to go off-island for needs that cannot be met locally, many Statians travel to St. Martin. Most Statian participants wrote labels for and drew circles around St. Kitts and

Nevis, and Saba. This may suggest that St. Kitts participants found these islands “different” when compared to St. Martin.

While some participants referred to Sabana Grande as speaking “more Standard English”, “more sing-songy English”, and said that Sabana Grande “eat the words”, St. Kitts and Nevis were described rather negatively (“articulation lacking” and “broken English”, for example). In what appeared as a more neutral perception, St. Kitts and Nevis were also labeled as an area where “they speak with a different accent” (STA020). Yet, what did this participant mean and imply by “accent?” Just the way people from St. Kitts and Nevis “sound” to her?

The participants from the three islands constantly used the word “accent”. Sometimes, as in the case of participant STA020, it appeared as though the term was employed to identify differences in how a group of people “sound”, in contrast with either the participant’s own “sound” or the way in which the “standard” is perceived to sound. In other responses, the word “accent” seems to have been used for more than just phonological phenomena such as word stress and intonation. As Lippi-Green (2012) points out, an accent “is not what comes out of one person’s mouth, but what the listeners hear and understand” (p. 45). Some participants (“listeners”) labelled geographical areas as “having an accent”, with the apparent intention of indicating that the varieties spoken there were further away from some idealized “standard” form of English, and thus that they were linguistically and socially less desirable.

“Pleasantness” in Statia

According to the St. Kitts participants who answered question 1 (“Where in Statia do you think people sound nicer or more pleasant? Why?”) and who provided reasons for their answers, Oranjestad is where people sound nicer or more pleasant. The participants’ reasons included that the government offices are located there (STA010), people with presumably higher levels of education are there (in contrast to people from the North – STA019), and that there are “Dutch people living there” (STA017, about Rosemary Lane in Oranjestad). Thus, there seems to be a correlation between sounding “nice or more pleasant” and working for the government, having completed a higher education and being a Dutch resident of the island. It is worth noting that such factors appear to be more related to what people do, what they have achieved, and where they are from rather than the geospatial area of Oranjestad.

Those who did not answer the question but included reasons for not doing so explained that sounding nicer or more pleasant has more to do with people’s social group (“it is more who they hang out with” – STA018) or the audience being addressed. Some responses referred here to the employment of a more “standard” variety of English in the

presence of foreigners and visitors (“people speak local creole English, but it can be placed in a tune of ‘nice’ to help others understand what you are saying” – STA024). According to those comments, sounding nicer or more pleasant is determined by the nature of any given social exchange rather than a geographical location. This can be corroborated by the responses “at work”, “in schools”, “at home”, and “church” provided by 24% of the participants to question 1. This may indicate another area where perceptual dialectological theory and practice need to be modified in order to account for regions such as the Caribbean, where speakers typically have a very wide range of varieties at their disposal to address their audience in the way that they see fit at any given moment. Question 6 (“Where in Statia do people sound more like home? Why?”) was one of the most unanswered questions in the present study. Perhaps the meaning of the phrase “like home” was not clear or did not fully communicate its implications, which might have created doubts or confusion among the participants. Yet, there were participants from the three islands who answered the question and who appeared to have an idea as to what was being asked. Fifteen percent of the Statian participants answered question 6 with “Oranjestad” or places in Oranjestad such as Jeems, “where most native Stadians live” (STA026), “The North”, where “people sound more open” (STA020 and STA023) or “on the street” where “most people speak English to their comfort” (STA015). Such notions of openness, comfort and native Statian status were associated with sounding “like home”. Even though it was not explicitly stated, Statia English is the variety being referred to here, since this is the variety that is normally used by native Stadians to express themselves openly and comfortably, when they feel “at home”.

“Correctness” in Statia

The largest percentage of participants (33%) who answered question 2 (“Where in Statia do you think people sound more correct? Why?”) mentioned public settings (such as offices that provide services, businesses, banks, hospitals, restaurants, churches, the TV station and radio, and the Island Council meetings) and schools as where people sound more correct, rather than geographical areas on the island. The general idea was that in such public settings people sound more “correct” because, as participant STA009 pointed out, “they must be pleasant with people”, and in schools “they speak proper English” (STA012). The notion of “correctness” appeared to be linked to being closer to a more “standard” and “proper” variety of English that seemed to be commonly used in public settings. In fact, for participant STA027, sounding “correct” meant having enough command of Standard English to be able to avoid using Statia English in certain situations. This respondent related this lack of command of the Standard to not being educated: “people with college or university degree use Standard Caribbean English,

[but] persons with little education are only able to express themselves in Statia English.” In this case, the vernacular was seen in opposition to sounding “correct” in Statia. Those who did not answer question 2 (26%), provided reasons for not doing so that were, again, related to not perceiving differences in geographical areas of the island but depending more on phenomena at “the individual level” (STA025). Others found the question and its implications unclear (“What do you mean by sound more correct?” – STA024).

The reasons provided for singling out the Quill area (the presence of Dutch and American residents and the expensive houses) to answer question 2 were discussed above.

Interestingly, participant STA001 chose the North Eastern area of the island as where she had perceived people sound more correct because “the majority of Americans live in this area”. This confirms the correlation found in the discussion above between being American (or Dutch in the case of the Quill) and being perceived as sounding “correct”. Therefore, such judgments might not only be based on geographical location, but also on ethnicity, education level and socio-economic class.

The results of question 8, in which the participants rated a number of situations where people speak best (4) or worst (1), showed that most participants who did this task perceived that in schools and at government offices people speak best. This is corroborated by the answers to the previous question. Most participants who rated the situations provided also perceived that in the streets is where people speak worst.

The results for “at home” were rather split since ten participants rated it with a 3, one participant rated it with a 4, whereas six participants rated it with a 2 and three participants rated it with a 1. Perhaps while in some houses people speak “openly” and “to their comfort”, in some other houses parents may insist that children speak more “correctly”, hence, the split numbers. The participants who added other situations or places in the “Other-specify” category mentioned “church”. “media” and “businesses”, all of which were highly rated. These were some of the public settings mentioned in answers to question 2.

Such situations or places were also included as answers to question 9 (“Who in Statia speaks best and who speaks worst? Why?”) The results for this question showed that professionals, educated and self-taught people, the employed and the older members of the community were regarded as those who speak best in Statia. Also, those who use “normal tempo” (as opposed to those who speak “fast”) and “US/British persons” (as opposed to “most people”) were perceived as those who speak best on the island. Again, there appears to be a correlation between being educated and having a career and being perceived as well-spoken, as well as between being from the United States or England and being perceived as someone who speaks well. It is interesting to notice that Dutch

residents were not included among the answers to this question provided by Statian participants. This may point toward the notion that, for those participants, the ideal way of speaking is exemplified by American and British people.

Alongside “most people” and those who speak “fast”, as pointed out above, those regarded as the ones who speak worst in Statia included the unemployed, construction workers, those with limited education, the younger generation and some people “speaking to peers on the street”. As will be discussed below, such answers are similar to the answers provided by Saban and St. Martin participants to the same question.

Statia: “Pleasantness” in the SSS Islands

Some of the results for question 4 (“Where in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas do you think people sound nicer or more pleasant? Why?”) were rather unexpected, since some of the participants from Statia chose St Martin and St. Kitts and Nevis. As discussed above, in the results of the second map task St. Martin was barely distinguished from Statia by the Statian participants. Yet 14% of them answered “St. Martin” as where people sound nicer or more pleasant in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas because “that is a big island” (STA017). Perhaps the idea of a larger geographical space contributes to the construction of an image of a place where people sound nicer or more pleasant.

As stated earlier, the labels used for St. Kitts and Nevis on the map task were rather negative. However, 11% of the participants answered “St. Kitts and Nevis” to question 4 as the place in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas where people sound nicer or more pleasant. The reason that participant STA026 preferred to choose St. Martin and St. Kitts and Nevis appeared to be more related to the islands’ international relations than to the natives or residents of those islands. For this participant, “people sound closest to the standard. St. Martin and St. Kitts have direct daily flights from the US and UK, respectively. They both trade with these ‘superpowers’ directly.” Thus, there appears to be a correlation between sounding nicer or more pleasant and being in direct contact with what she calls the “superpowers”.

For participant STA004, in St. Kitts and Nevis “they speak more proper English”. It is important to mention that neither participant STA026 nor participant STA004 did the second part of the map task. Still they had something to say about St. Martin and St. Kitts and Nevis. Perhaps they did not find these islands to be areas where people speak “differently” because for those participants that would be the opposite of sounding more “standard” or being in closer contact with the linguistic ideals represented by the United States and the United Kingdom. Similarly, 11% of the Statia participants felt that people from Anguilla sound nicer or more pleasant “because of the British influence” (STA014),

and thus, “their pronunciation is nice (English accent)” (STA005). What these participants perceived as “British influence” is linked to using a prestigious linguistic variety, which is regarded as nicer or more pleasant.

The 14% of the participants who answered “Statia” did so either because that is the geographical area they are more acquainted with or because they see themselves as “the most friendly” (STA023). Of the 14% who answered “Saba”, some mentioned their clarity of speech, while others admitted to enjoying how Sabans “sing their phrases” (STA002). Some others perceived Saba, along with Anguilla, as where careful articulation, clarity and “standard English is predominantly used.” The more “standard” a geographical area was perceived to be seems to be proportional to how highly rated it was in terms of sounding nicer or more pleasant.

Question 7 (Where in the SSS Islands or surrounding areas do people sound more like home? Why?) was the most unanswered question by participants from Statia. Just as happened with question 6 discussed above, perhaps the meaning of the phrase “like home” was not clear or did not fully communicate its intention, and thus might have created doubts among the participants. Yet of those who answered the question, 21% answered “St. Martin” which confirms some of the observations made above about a perceived similarity between speech on Statia and St. Martin. Some of the participants chose St. Martin because “they speak more like us” (STA023), “although very different” (STA021). “Statia” was the answer of 14%, which could be explained by the fact that it is the place that these participants know best: “it is my home” (STA027).

Statia: “Correctness” in the SSS Islands

The results for question 5 (“Where in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas do people sound more correct? Why?”) were very similar to the results obtained for question 4, discussed above, except for the fact that fewer participants chose Statia and St. Martin. Saba, Anguilla and St. Kitts and Nevis were the answer given by the largest number of participants who perceived them as where people sound more correct. While Saba was regarded as sounding more “proper” (STA020), and “more like Americans” (STA023), Anguilla was chosen because “of their connections with British English” (STA005). Once again, perceived “correctness” appears to be linked to the associations some participants made between the islands and their relationships with either American or British English varieties.

A couple of participants chose places such as hotels, airports and tourists offices rather than actual geospatial areas as where they had perceived people sounding more correct. For these participants this answer seemed to apply regardless of the island, but it might be related to the answer “public settings” given to answer question 2 above.

Of the 31% who did not answer this question, it is important to notice that participant STA024 admitted to have spent very little time in Saba or St. Kitts, so for her, and probably for many other participants, it is difficult to assess how correct people in those other islands may sound. One of the possible reasons why many participants in the present study did not answer questions related to the SSS Islands, or answered “I don’t know”, could have been that, despite their geographical proximity, they have not spent time on the other islands and might not know them as well as it was assumed by the fieldworker. I will return to this point in the following sections, when I propose answers to the research questions, as well as in the concluding remarks below.

Statia: Difference among the SSS Islands

Question 3 (“Do you think people in Statia, Saba and St. Martin speak differently?”) was the only question that all participants from Statia answered. An overwhelming 92% of the participants answered “yes” and most reasons provided to answer affirmatively coincided. Most participants focused on “different accents”, “different dialects”, “different intonation” and even “different grammar and vocabulary”. Interestingly, participant STA025 also included “different education levels, foreign influences, culture, experience, economy” among the reasons why she perceived people from the three islands speak differently. Such statements shatter the assumption of homogeneity that one might have received about the SSS Islands.

The participant who answered “no” stated that “they speak the same” (STA007), while, once again, participant STA024 admitted that she had not had “much interaction with Saba and St. Martin.” Therefore, she has not been exposed to their linguistic varieties.

Discussion of the results: Saba

The first part of the map task

Seven Saban participants did not do the first part of the map task. Only one of those participants wrote a comment on the margin of the paper stating “no noticeable difference” (SAB015). However, this participant had been living on the island for only two years, which could have influenced his judgment. Interestingly, in the sociological profile section, he wrote that his place of residence in Saba was Hell’s Gate, which was the most circled and labeled area on the first part of the map task as where people in Saba speak differently. The labels and comments for Hell’s Gate dealt with the “accent” typical of this area. It seems this “lyrical/musical accent”, reportedly of Scottish/Dutch heritage, is particular to the village of Hell’s Gate, not the whole island of Saba. Yet, as we saw in the previous section, the perception that some Statian participants had of Sabans was that they all share the same “lyrical/musical accent”, which appeared to be

the most distinguishable feature of their variety of English. St. Martin participants shared this same perception about Sabans, as I will discuss below.

Hell's Gate was the answer of the majority of the participants from Saba (27%) who answered question 6 ("Where in Saba people sound more like home? Why?"). The reason given by participant SAB014 to choose Hell's Gate may support the fact that some participants from Statian and St. Martin generalized Hell's Gate's way of speaking to all of Saba: "[I] think of it as a more Saban accent." Other participants related Hell's Gate speech to the "original" Saban accent or to the way people used to speak in the past. Eleven percent of the participants chose Hell's Gate to answer question 1 ("Where in Saba do you think people sound nicer or more pleasant? Why?"). One participant (SAB002) described it as "more authentic and not influenced from the outside". There appears to be a correlation between this association with authenticity and perceiving it as pleasant and sounding "like home".

However, Hell's Gate was not the answer of any of the participants to question 2 ("Where in Saba do you think people sound more correct? Why?"). These results are similar to those obtained from the study by Fridland & Bartlett (2006), where people from Memphis, Tennessee in the U.S. rated their own speech as highly pleasant, but low in terms of correctness. The authors concluded that these perceptions had to do with the stereotypical image of the uneducated yet endearing Southerner. Similarly, Saban participants rated Hell's Gate speech high in terms of "pleasantness" and did not associate it at all with any notion of "correctness". In the case of Saba, these perceptions appear to respond to the image of the old-fashioned Saban from Hell's Gate who sounds more "relaxed" with a "twangy way of speech which is usually not rough, similar to country talk" (as participant SAB005 pointed out), and even representative of the island's past, but whose speech is not perceived as modern, educated or "correct".

"Windwardside" was the answer given by most participants (33%) to answer question 1 (on "pleasantness"), and it also was the preferred choice by most participants (42%) to answer question 2 (on "correctness"). Yet, Windwardside was not circled or labeled as "different" by the participants who completed all or part of the first part of the map task. On the one hand, it is important to remember that 10 out of the 25 participants reported that their place of residence was Windwardside, which could have influenced these answers, even though it cannot be statistically proven. On the other hand, for both question 1 and question 2, Saban participants who chose Windwardside justified their answer with similar arguments. Some said that the English spoken in this village "sounds more like 'proper' English" (SAB013) because "there isn't such a heavy accent/slang" (SAB005), thus people sound nicer or more pleasant. These reasons appear to be the consequence of the fact that "most visitors gather there [and] the residents have more

opportunities to mingle with outsiders and hereby improve their vocabulary, enunciation” (SAB023). In fact, many of the participants who chose Windwardside as where people sound more correct, did so for the same reasons that they did in question 1, while the only additional reason would be that there were “more foreigners” (SAB021) living there. Obviously, there seems to be a correlation between sounding nicer or more pleasant, sounding correct and speaking a more “standard” variety of English. This is similar to what was discussed above about St. John participants’ linguistic perceptions of the Dutch and American residents on their island.

The Bottom was in distant second place as the most circled and labeled area by Saban participants on the first part of the map task. The labels included by the participants did not establish a clear pattern as did the ones provided for Hell’s Gate.

The fact that Saban participants limited their circles and labels to the four traditional villages clearly included on the map they received leads me to wonder whether or not the results of this first part of the map task would have been different had the participants received a less detailed map or one where the names of the four villages were not included. Map design will clearly be a topic of much concern in any efforts to expand upon the present study in the future.

The second part of the map task

The nine participants who did the second part of the map task focused on St. John, St. Martin and St. Kitts and Nevis. St. John was perceived as not pronouncing all the sounds when speaking (SAB007), and having “a different mindset” not “up to modern standards” (SAB012). It would have been interesting to see an example of what exactly this participant meant by such statements and whether or not they were related to the way St. John is perceived linguistically. Another participant (SAB014) said that St. John spoke differently, but admitted that she had been there only once. In some cases, it appears as though the idea that the neighboring islands are different may be learned more from hearsay than from actual experience.

St. Martin was perceived by Saban participants as influenced by American English (SAB007), as sounding non-rhotic (SAB017), as having a wider range of linguistic varieties (SAB014), and as having a “distinct accent, different from Saba” (SAB021), yet similar to St. Kitts and Nevis (SAB021). About St. Kitts and Nevis, participants SAB022 and SAB015 highlighted their “British accent” as something positive, which is not uncommon among the results discussed here.

“Pleasantness” in Saba

The reasons to choose “Windwardside” as the most common answer to question 1 were discussed above. The second most common answer was “The Bottom.” The predominant reasons were that people in The Bottom, which is the capital of Saba, are easier to understand because they “speak clearer” (SAB004 and SAB020). Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why The Bottom was also the second most common answer to question 2 as the place in Saba where people were perceived as sounding more correct.

The reasons why Hell’ Gate was in third place as the answer to this question were discussed above. “St. John’s” also was the answer of 7% of the participants. Only one of them, SAB018, provided a reason for choosing this area as where people sound nicer or more pleasant: “Due to our accent being neutral.” The participant reported in the sociological profile section that he lived in St. John’s and had been living there his whole life. Those elements could have influenced his answer, but there is also a correlation between sounding nicer or more pleasant and sounding “neutral” or as other participants called it, with a “less heavy accent.” It is difficult to pinpoint with precision what might be perceived as “neutral”, but I suspect it might be determined by which variety has overt prestige for being considered “standard.”

The reasons why Hell’s Gate was chosen as where people speak most “like home” by most of the participants as the answer to question 6 were discussed above. Twenty-three percent of the participants did not answer this question, but other than the wording “like home” being potentially confusing, the reasons not to do so remained largely unexpressed. Participant SAB022 was one of the participants who answered “Everywhere” as where in Saba people sound more like home. According to him, “when speaking amongst ourselves, we use our local accent but when speaking to strangers we tend to change our speech.” Thus, for this participant it was not a matter of geographical location, but a matter of choosing which linguistic variety to use with a particular audience. On the one hand, the vernacular appeared to be a marker of identity reserved for use only with other fellow Sabans. On the other hand, since it is not regarded as “correct”, Sabans do not use it with outsiders. This situation is similar to the one in Statia discussed above.

“Correctness” in Saba

The reasons why 42% of the participants chose Windwardside as the answer to question 2 (on correctness) were discussed above. The Bottom was in second place as where in Saba people sound more correct. The reasons for this answer included the perceived resemblance of pronunciation of certain sounds there with British English (SAB006), the influence of having studied abroad on non-specified features of pronunciation (SAB011) exhibited by people who lived in The Bottom, and the presence of the medical school

(SAB015) where many members of the teaching staff and students are not natives from Saba. Once again, there seems to be a correlation between sounding correct and completing higher levels of education, being of British or American origin, and/or sounding closer to the varieties that have overt prestige.

Just as in Statia, in Saba the results for question 8, where the participants rated a number of situations where people speak best (4) or worst (1), showed that most participants who did this task perceived that people speak best in public spaces such as schools and at government offices and that people speak worst on the street.

Just as in the case of Statia, in the case of Saba the results for “at home” were rather split since seven participants rated it with a 3 and three participants rated it with a 4, whereas nine participants rated it with a 1 and two participants rated it with a 2. Possibly, while in some houses people speak “at ease with family and friends and no need to articulate” (SAB022), in some other houses parents may insist that children speak more “correctly”, hence, the split numbers. In the “Other-specify” category, three participants added their own situations related to traveling and the hospitality industry. Both of these situations were highly rated.

Such situations were also included as answers to question 9 (“Who in Statia speaks best and who speaks worst? Why?”). The results for this question showed that people who had studied abroad, people at the medical school, government employees and people from Windwardside and The Bottom are regarded as those who speak best in Saba. Also, educators, older people and the Dutch were perceived as among those who speak best. There appears to be a correlation between studying abroad, being related to the medical school or having a career and being perceived as well-spoken. Unlike the results from Statia, Dutch residents were included among the answers to this question by Saban participants.

Those regarded as the ones who speak worst in Saba were those who had never left the island, those with limited education, younger people and people from Hell’s Gate. One participant added The Bottom to the list of people who speak worst as opposed to Windwardside. Surprisingly, several participants included “locals”, “most people in Saba” and “Sabans” as those who speak worst. This appears to suggest that being a local or having lived on the island all one’s life is seen negatively among the participants who answered this question, in favor of having lived abroad. There seems to be a preference for the speech of foreigners and the ones who had returned to the island after living overseas over the speech of locals.

Saba: “Pleasantness” in the SSS Islands

Even though some participants added “Sabans” to their list of who speak worst on the island³, 42% of Saban participants overwhelmingly chose Saba as the answer to answer question 4 (“Where in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas do you think people sound nicer or more pleasant? Why?”). Compared to their neighbors, these participants perceived their own speech as “clearer” (SAB004) since “our accent is not that heavy” (SAB018). This may imply that these Saban participants perceived their varieties of English as closer to the “standard” compared to other varieties used by their neighbors, which probably leaves out the variety spoken in Hell’s Gate or the vernacular used by Sabans “amongst ourselves”, as participant SAB022 put it.

St. Martin was chosen by 15% of participants; this was the second most common answer to this question. St. Martin’s thriving commercial activity, and its international exposure, particularly with the United States and Europe were the main reasons stated to justify this answer. The latter reason establishes a correlation between being in contact with the “superpowers”, as a participant from Statia put it, and being perceived as sounding nicer or more pleasant. This also applies to the 8% of the participants who answered “English islands/countries” to the same question. Even though participant SAB005 has “not visited those areas”, in her opinion, “English islands speak more properly.” Again, this is another case in which the participant’s perception is informed by certain images and ideas of what is “ideal” and “desirable”.

Question 7 (“Where in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas do people sound more like home? Why?”) was the question that the highest percentage of Saban participants (41%) did not answer. Since none of those participants provided reasons for leaving it unanswered, it could be hypothesized that possibly they had not spent much time in the neighboring islands, or they truly felt that none of those islands sounded “like home”, not to mention the possible confusion caused by the phrase “like home”. Any of these two possibilities may explain why the second largest percentage of Saban participants who actually did provide an answer (22%) responded “Saba”. Ultimately, Saba “is home” (SAB005) and “we are just like family” (SAB010).

In a similar pattern noted for question 1 above, St. Martin followed Saba since 19% of the participants chose it as the place in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas where people sound more like home. The island’s familiar “standard US accent” made participant SAB014 choose it, while knowing it better for having spent time there swayed SAB017, while its similar political relation to the Netherlands and its geographical closeness were the reasons given by SAB020.

³ The participants who included Sabans on their list of “who speaks worst” on question 9 are not part of the 42% who answered “Saba” for question 4.

Saba: "Correctness" in the SSS Islands

The results for question 5 ("Where in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas do people sound more correct? Why?") proved to be strikingly similar to the results for question 4. The highest percentage of participants (28%) did not answer the question and most of their reluctance to respond was based on the fact that they felt that geography was less an influence on "correctness" than social group, formal education or lack thereof, and "upbringing" (SAB002 and SAB020). As discussed above, such reluctance was also high among Statia participants for many of the same reasons. This was remarkable, because up to this point, Sabans seemed fairly comfortable using geographic criteria as the basis for their answers.

"Saba" was the answer of 20% of participants to question 5. The perception of Sabans having "a less heavy accent" (SAB018), which figured in the justifications for the choice of Saba to answer other questions discussed above, also contributed to perceptions of "correctness" in responses to question 5. "St. Martin" was the answer of 16% of the participants to question 5 for many of the same reasons it was provided as a response to question 4. Thus, some participants appear to equate pleasantness and correctness when it comes to St. Martin. St. Kitts and Nevis were the answer of 8% of the participants due to their use of "the British English" (SAB020). St. Martin and St. Kitts/Nevis were perceived as where people sound more correct due to the connections participants made between these islands and varieties of American and British English.

Saba: Difference among the SSS Islands

Question 3 ("Do you think people speak differently in Statia, Saba and St. Martin? If so, what differences could you mention?") was answered by all Saban participants. All participants minus one (96%) answered "yes" to this question. The reasons given by the participants to explain this answer are very similar to the reasons provided by the participants from Statia (discussed above) who also answered "yes" to the same question. In general, the idea of each island having its own "distinct accent", "different slang", "different dialect", "different pronunciation" and even "different cultures" predominated among the reasons given by Saban participants. Once again, such observations dismantle the often assumed notion of the homogeneity of the SSS Islands. Neither Statian nor Saban participants perceived the three islands to be homogenous linguistically or even culturally.

Discussion of the results: St. Martin

The first part of the map task

The results of the first part of the map task revealed that the most obvious linguistic difference perceived by St. Martin participants was related to the island's political division. Most of the participants who did all or part of the first map task circled areas within the French-controlled side of the island, and most of the labels included had to do with the use and influence of French or French Creole in that area. This result underscores the observation made above that the theory, methods and instruments used in perceptual dialectology need to be modified significantly to be maximally useful in the Caribbean and other areas of the world of similar linguistic diversity, such as West Africa.

The most intriguing labels were the ones included for Colombier ("More deep, isolated villages – authentic St. Martin culture" by SMT032) and Grand Case ("Fishermen – years ago" by SMT024). Colombier (often referred to in the responses alongside Rambaud) was the answer of 11% of the participants who replied to question 1 ("Where in St. Martin do you think people sound nicer or more pleasant? Why?"), and of 6% of the participants who answered question 6 ("Where in St. Martin people do sound more like home? Why?"). According to participant SMT029, people from Colombier are "the original unmixed St. Martiners", therefore, in this area of the island "more traditional speech" (SMT027) is to be heard, probably because it is "a traditional village", according to participant SMT024. Such comments explaining why those participants chose this area as where people sound nicer or more pleasant suggest that Colombier and Hell's Gate were perceived in a similar way in St. Martin and Saba, respectively. In fact, the results for the Colombier area showed that, similar to Hell's Gate, it was rated high in terms of "pleasantness" but none of the participants associated it with "correctness" since it was not offered as a response to question 2 ("Where in St. Martin do you think people sound more correct? Why?"). Yet this area seemed to appeal to some St. Martin participants because it was perceived as their link with their linguistic and, perhaps, cultural past, just as Hell's Gate was perceived by some Saban participants.

The Simpson Bay/Lowlands area was the answer provided by most participants (29%) to question 1 (on "pleasantness") and it also was the preferred choice by most participants (17%) who answered question 2 (on "correctness"). Unlike Saban participants, who did not circle or label Windwardside as "different" on the first part of the map task, some St. Martin participants did circle the Simpson Bay/Lowlands area. However, this area was assigned only one label, "Fishermen (years ago)" (SMT024). The reasons offered by participants who chose the Simpson Bay/Lowlands area to answer question 1 and question 2 included that the area is very frequented by tourists, particularly, American tourists, thus "less accent" or "less dialect is used", so tourists can understand and "people tend to sound nicer." Just as in Saba, there appears to be a correlation between

modifying one's native "accent" for tourists and being perceived as sounding nicer or more pleasant.

Similar reasons were provided for choosing the Simpson Bay/Lowlands area to answer question 2. Additionally, some participants characterized this area as sounding more correct because many Americans live there and there are American schools there as well. Similar to their counterparts in Statia and Saba, St. Martin participants seem to consider American varieties of English as "pleasant" and "correct". Therefore, they classified the geographical areas where those varieties are most commonly used accordingly. Only one participant from St. Martin reported that his place of residence on the island was Simpson Bay.

Phillipsburg, which was the most circled and labeled area of the Dutch-controlled side, was perceived by participants as an area where American English is commonly used as well. Therefore, Phillipsburg was the answer of 11% of the participants who answered question 1, and of 9% of the participants who answered question 2, rating the area relatively high in terms of "pleasantness" and "correctness".

The second part of the map task

A total of 17 participants did not do the second part of the map task, which is almost 50% of all participants from St. Martin. Compared to Statian and Saban participants, St. Martin participants were the group that most frequently omitted this part of the map task. Yet, seven out of those 17 participants wrote comments on the margin of the paper acknowledging that there are differences that they had perceived, but not being specific about them. In summary, those seven participants agreed that each island sounds differently and has its linguistic particularities, but such particularities were not mentioned or assigned to a specific geographical area on the map.

Similar to some Statian participants, several St. Martin participants used language names not only to label St. Martin itself, but also to label Saba and Statia. This practice makes it difficult to interpret the linguistic difference the participants might be indicating. In any case, it points toward the fact that the participants are aware of the languages spoken on those islands. Some participants also mentioned "accent differences" in Saba and Statia, but none perceived that Sabans "sing their phrases" as some Statian and Saban participants did.

Some of the St. Martin participants who did the second part of the map task perceived differences to exist in Anguilla and St. Kitts and Nevis. Most of those differences mentioned regarding St. Kitts and Nevis were related to how "strange", "melody like" and "dragged out" their "accent" is perceived to be. Just as did the Statian and Saban

participants, the St. Martin participants indicated that Anguillians have a “different accent”, and attributed it at least in part to “British influence”.

“Pleasantness” in St. Martin

Simpson Bay/Lowlands, Colombier/Rambaud and Philipsburg were the three most common answers to question 1. Some participants answered in more general terms, like the “French side” and the “Dutch side.” The former was the choice of 8% of the participants, among them participant SMT002, who perceived that side of the island to be where “individuals speak more pleasant because they speak proper English or French.” This comment suggests that for this participant there is a correlation between sounding more pleasant and speaking what she considers to be proper English or French.

Another 8% of participants from St. Martin answered question 1 with “Dutch side.” Participant STA031 explained that on that side of the island, “we speak English. French side they want to force you speak French.” On the one hand, this leads me to wonder if by “they” this participant meant the French government which, according to him, appears to be “strict” or even “oppressive.” On the other hand, the first part of the comment “we speak English” might imply that on the Dutch-controlled side of the island, in contrast to the French-controlled side, “we” don’t allow “them” to force “us” to speak Dutch. Thus, this participant’s perception establishes a correlation between sounding nicer or more pleasant with speaking what “we” choose to speak, not what “they” want to impose upon “us”. There might even be some pride in his comment as well.

Question 6 (“Where in St. Martin people do sound more like home? Why?”) was one of the most unanswered questions of the three–page survey across the three islands, since 47% of St. Martin participants did not answer it. Of those, several wrote comments underneath the question, querying the meaning of “like home.” As I will discuss below, in the “Assessment of the data-gathering instruments” section, this was, apparently, the question that caused the most confusion among participants. It probably needed to be more explicit in terms of what the question was intended to reveal.

Most of the participants who answered this question and provided reasons for their answers explained that the place they chose was where they grew up, or where their family and relatives still live, or even as participant STM003 stated: “For me home is Aruba and there are many Arubans in St. Martin-Dutch side.” It is important to notice that no participants answered this question with “Simpson Bay and Lowlands area”, even though this area was highly rated in terms of “correctness” and “pleasantness” for its close association with Standard American English and American tourists. Nevertheless, that area was not considered as sounding “like home” by any of the participants from St. Martin.

“Correctness” in St. Martin

As discussed above, Simpson Bay/Lowlands was the answer most often given by the St. Martin participants who answered question 2. The second most common answer (14%) was the “Dutch side.” Interestingly, the reasons provided by the participants to justify this answer followed what participant SMT003 pointed out on question 1 (discussed above) in terms of finding the Dutch-controlled side of the island as nicer or more pleasant because there “we speak English”. The participants perceived the Dutch-controlled side to be the place where people sound more correct in St. Martin because they have “stronger English”, it is their L1 and it is the language of instruction in most schools. Such comments suggest that these participants were comparing the English spoken on the Dutch-controlled side and the English spoken on the French-controlled side, with the former being considered to be “stronger” than the latter.

Phillipsburg was the third most common answer (9%) to this question. Only one participant (SMT029) said that the reason for choosing Phillipsburg was because it is the main area of commercial activity on the island and because it is where the government offices are located. Therefore, this participant appears to be establishing a correlation between commercial activity/government offices and language “correctness.” We have seen the correlation between government offices and language “correctness” before, particularly among some St. Martin participants. This correlation between businesses and other formal public spaces and perceptions of correctness was evident in the responses from all three islands, especially among St. Martin participants.

Notice that the next two answers to this same question are “Everywhere” (9%) and “Casinos and hotels” (6%). Participant SMT017, who chose the former, did so because “everyone speaks clearly and the local accent [is] only used amongst each other”, implying that the “local accent” is the opposite of “correctness” and is not “clear” or easy to understand by outsiders, but also implying that people in St. Martin shift, effortlessly, from one variety to the other and vice-versa. Participant SMT010 stated that “Casinos and hotels” are where people sound more correct because it is where St. Martiners interact more with tourists. Once again, there seems to be a correlation between Standard American English and language “correctness”.

The results for question 8, where the participants rated a number of situations where people speak best (4) or worst (1), showed that most participants who did this task perceived that in schools and at government offices people speak best. Most participants who rated the situations provided also perceived that in the streets people speak worst. These results were consistent among the three islands. Perhaps, in the case of the participants from St. Martin, the numbers appeared to be even more definitive when

rating schools and government offices as “best”, and when rating “in the street” as “worst”.

Also, just as in the case of Statia and Saba, in the case of St. Martin, the results for “at home” were rather split since five participants rated it with a 4 and six participants rated it with a 3, whereas seven participants rated it with a 2 and another seven participants rated it with a 1. Once again, the reason for those split numbers may be related to the fact that in some houses parents are perceived as being stricter in terms of enforcing the use of what is considered more “standard” English, while in other houses parents are perceived as less strict in that regard. In fact, in the “Other-specify” category for this question, participant SMT011 advanced another possible explanation for the split numbers for “at home”: “If you are at home, it depends, if someone is angry, it is a 1, and normal speaking, it is a 4.” This is, probably, another dimension to consider in order to explain the split numbers in the same category in Statia and Saba.

The results for question 9 showed that, according to the St. Martin participants who did this task, people who have attained higher levels of education, people who have studied abroad, and those with careers in law, business, politics and education are regarded as those who speak best in St. Martin. Also, foreigners from the United States, France and the British islands, and those who “articulate” (and understand this as a need) for tourists and visitors were perceived as among those who speak best. One participant answered the “Dutch side” as who speaks best and opposed it to the “French side” as who speaks worst in St. Martin. This, and some similar perceptions discussed above, leads me to wonder if there might be some sort of rivalry between some residents of the two sides of the island. In future perceptual dialectology studies, the French-controlled side of the island should be included to help elucidate this dynamic.

Those who speak worst, according to the St. Martin participants who completed this task, included people in the street, people without employment and not attending school, foreigners and new immigrants. The first three answers coincided with the answers offered by Statian and Saban participants. The last two cannot be assessed without further elaboration by the participants in terms of which specific ethnic group or groups were being referred to.

St. Martin: “Pleasantness” in the SSS Islands

Question 4 (“Where in the SSS and surrounding areas do you think people sound nicer or more pleasant? Why?”) was left unanswered by 44% of the participants from St. Martin. Participant SMT008 said that it was a “subjective question.” In future perceptual dialectology projects conducted by the present author, it will be imperative to reassure participants – even more than I did during the fieldwork trips conducted in the SSS

Islands – that the questions seek to gather, precisely, their subjective answers because of the nature of this kind of research. It is understandable that participants find the questions “subjective”, because they are. These kinds of questions might also make some participants feel apprehensive that they might be judged by their answers, even though they have been advised about the anonymity and confidentiality of the study, and about the fact that no answer would be judged to be right or wrong.

Participant SMT023 admitted that his reason for not answering this question was that he was unacquainted with “speakers outside of St. Martin (North and South).” Perhaps many of the participants who did not answer this question had similar reasons not to do so. One of the assumptions of the present study was that the participants from the three islands were familiar with the language varieties used by people from the other SSS Islands, due to their geographical proximity and their history and political status in common. Such an assumption was, at least to some extent, mistaken, and in future extensions of the present study it will need to be discarded, or at least carefully revised. It should be taken into consideration, for example, that while many Sabans and Statians have reasons to go to St. Martin from time to time to shop, for medical care, for educational opportunities, etc, few St. Martiners ever have the need to go to either Statia or Saba.

Eighteen percent of the participants answered that “St. Martin” was where people sounded “nicer or more pleasant” just as 42% of the Saban participants answered that “Saba” was where people sounded “nicer or more pleasant.” The reasons to choose St. Martin were largely similar to the reasons offered by participants who answered that the “Dutch side” was the area on the island where people sound more correct. In fact, the answer “St. Martin” here must be understood as the “Dutch side”, not the whole island. Just as in Saba and Statia, St. Martin participants associated “nicer or more pleasant” speech with both a “strong command of English”, and an ability to change varieties in order to communicate with tourists.

The second most common answer to this question was “Saba”, just as Saban participants chose St. Martin as their second most common answer. The St. Martin participants who answered “Saba” did so because they seemed to enjoy the musicality of what is perceived as “sounding Saban.” Again, as pointed out above, the results from the fieldwork in Saba revealed that this musicality is attributed to people from Hell’s Gate only, not the whole population. Yet both Statian and St. Martin participants perceived that all Sabans’ speech sounded musical. This musicality was perceived as “friendlier”, “easier to understand” and related to how people from the past used to sound.

Some of the other answers to this question included St. Kitts and Nevis, Statia and “Everywhere” as where people sound nicer or more pleasant in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas. Some of the St. Martin participants who chose St. Kitts and Nevis and

Statia appeared to equate being a friendly person and sounding friendly or more pleasant. These participants perceived that their positive personal experience with persons from those islands could be extended to characterize their way of speaking.

Just as did participants from the other islands, participant SMT015, who answered “Everywhere”, associated nicer or more pleasant speech not so much with geography as with audience noting that “persons switch to dialect or proper speech according to the company, environment or setting they are in”. For this participant, knowing how to handle the dichotomy of “dialect” vs. “proper” and knowing when it is appropriate to use one or the other is what appeared to be perceived as being nicer or more pleasant.

Forty-seven percent of St. Martin participants did not answer question 7 (“Where in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas do people sound more like home? Why?”). Only one participant (SMT015) indicated that the reason for not answering was “I don’t understand the question”. As discussed above, this question (along with question 6) caused confusion among participants from all three islands. Even though other participants understood what was being asked, in the future, those questions will need to be rephrased.

The two most common answers to question 7 were the “Dutch side” (21%) and the “French side” (11%). The question sought to include St. Martin as part of the SSS Islands, assuming that the participants had an array of life experiences in the other islands as well. The fact that the “Dutch side” and the “French side” were the most common answers to this question may suggest that St. Martin participants are not acquainted with the other SSS Islands and surrounding areas, as discussed above.

In fact, the two participants who answered “Anguilla” to this question did so not because they had spent time on that island, but because the participants had perceived that Anguillans who live in St. Martin sound like St. Martiners and there is a “sense” that the geographical proximity between the two islands should make them similar.

St. Martin: “Correctness” in the SSS Islands

Fifty-six percent of the participants from St. Martin did not answer question 5 (“Where in the SSS Islands and surrounding areas do people sound more correct? Why?”), making this the most unanswered question of the study across the three islands since more than half of the participants did not answer the question. Among those who did not answer it, some participants wrote statements affirming that all islands are different or that all are correct. Others avoided answering the question indicating that correctness had to do with the level of education of each person regardless of the geographical location, a reason given by other participants for leaving other questions unanswered. Participant SMT003 did not answer the question and wrote: “When necessary, people do speak correctly. If we are talking to, let’s say an American citizen, we might speak so they can understand,

but if we are in conversation with a local person we will be speaking our native dialect.” Once again, the variety that is perceived as closer to the “standard”, and that is used with Americans, is seen as “correct”, while the vernacular, used amongst locals, is seen as “incorrect”. The dichotomy “dialect” vs. “proper” appears to operate here. The same applies to participant SMT009, who answered “Everywhere” and wrote that “more educated persons (can) sound more correct, definitively, when they speak to non-islanders/visitors. However, among friends they speak St. Martin English, Papiamentu, Dutch, Patois, Creole, etc.” This was one of the very few instances in which a participant mentioned St. Martin English. Unlike Statia and Saba, where I never heard people calling their vernaculars by name in my presence, while conversing with some St. Martiners, they mentioned their vernacular and appeared to distinguish between it and a more “standard” (either Caribbean or American) English.

Twenty-five percent of the participants answered question 5 with “Dutch side” and 5% with “French side.” These were the two most offered answers, which indicates that most participants avoided talking about the other SSS Islands. The reasons for answering “Dutch side” (e.g. “stronger English”, “school curriculums are in English”) were largely already given to justify similar answers to other questions. Perhaps since the majority of the participants lived on the Dutch-controlled side, they may have perceived this area as the one with which they are more acquainted. By the same token, the only participant who provided a reason to answer “French side” (SMT034) had perceived that there people “pronounce more clear”. This participant reported to live on the French-controlled side of the island in the sociological profile section.

St. Martin: Difference among the SSS Islands

Sixty-nine percent of the participants from St. Martin answered “yes” to question 3 (“Do you think people speak differently in Statia, Saba and St. Martin? If so, what differences could you mention?”). Most of the reasons provided to justify this answer included, statements that the three islands were perceived as different, with “different accents” and “different cultures”. Such statements coincide with the ones provided by participants from Statia and Saba to the same question. Most St. Martin participants, therefore, agreed that the SSS Islands are not a homogenous trio of islands.

Other reasons provided for answering “yes” to this question revealed some intriguing perceptions that St. Martin participants had of their Statian and Saban neighbors. For instance, that the European descended population and the African descended population in Saba were perceived as sounding different from each other, that the presence of the American university on the island had had an influence on the way people sound in Saba, and that people from Saba were perceived to sound like American southerners. The

statements regarding the presence of the medical school in Saba and the perceived similarities between Sabans and people from the southern area of the United States were evident in the discussion of the results from Saba above. The perception that there is a linguistic variation determined by race in Saba constitutes an interesting line of investigation in future research on Saba, and would add yet another factor influencing linguistic variation on the island, beside the traditional divisions among the four main villages. This, of course, brings up the question as to whether or not Sabans themselves share such a perception.

Even though the majority of the St. Martin participants answered “yes” to question 3, they did not do so with the unanimity in evidence in Saba and Statia. The minority that answered ‘no’ indicating that they did not perceive that people speak differently in the SSS Islands, provided the following reasons to justify this answer: that they had never been on Saba or Statia, that they had never heard Sabans or Statians talk, and even that they did not know what language they speak. This indicates that in fact these responses were less a denial that differences exist among the SSS Islands and more an admission of lack of sufficient exposure to make a judgment. Again, such statements question the assumption that the people from any one of the SSS Islands (especially St. Martin) have extensive knowledge or experience related to the other SSS islands.

Concluding remarks

Much like the results from the data from Statia and Saba, the results from the data from St. Martin suggest that metropolitan varieties of English have overt prestige among the participants. Unlike Statia and Saba, which appeared to perceive varieties of both American and British English as “correct” or “nice or more pleasant”, for St. Martin participants American English was the only variety designated as “correct” or “nicer or more pleasant”. None of the participants from the three islands made reference to any particular characteristics of their own local varieties of English, apart from some very vague descriptors. At the most, they differentiated it from what was considered a “proper” way of speaking, typically identified with a standard British, Caribbean, or, especially, American variety. Something that appeared to be common among the participants from the three islands was that their vernaculars appeared to be considered as markers of identity reserved for use with fellow islanders on their own particular island. Nevertheless, since such varieties were not regarded as “correct”, the participants from the SSS Islands did not appear to use them or to promote their use in the presence of outsiders. The idea that those varieties are not languages in their own right seems to have been internalized by most participants.

The assumptions that were taken for granted in the design of this particular study that were challenged by the results include: 1) that the SSS Islands constitute a homogenous

linguistic and cultural area; 2) that the inhabitants of any one of the SSS Islands are generally well acquainted with the people of the other SSS Islands and their speech practices; and 3) that it would be possible to ascertain the general perceptions of people on any one of these islands by surveying only those who were born there, given the enormous rate of in- and out-migration that typifies the SSS Islands and much of the rest of the Caribbean.

The assumptions that have been taken for granted in the area of perceptual dialectology that were challenged by the results obtained in the present study include: 1) that theoretical models, methods and instruments developed for regions which are less plurilingual than the Caribbean can be applied universally to regions where geographic divisions are just as likely to correspond to differences between separate languages than to differences between dialects; 2) that theoretical models, methods and instruments developed for regions which are less impacted by the phenomenon of creolization than the Caribbean can be applied universally to regions where the distinction between separate language and dialect of the same language are often blurred; and 3) that theoretical models, methods and instruments developed for regions where individual repertoires for audience design are less varied and complex than those which are typically encountered in the Caribbean can be applied universally to regions where audience design involves the multiplex interplay of a wide range of different languages, dialects of languages, and creolized varieties.

I believe that these challenges have served to generate new knowledge about my object of study, and constitute not only a contribution to the field of perceptual dialectology, but also a very significant learning experience for me as a Caribbean scholar and researcher.

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