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The epicentre model and American influence on Bahamian Englishes

Stephanie Hackert

Department of English and American Studies, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich

Correspondence
Stephanie Hackert, Department of English and American Studies,
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich, Germany.
Email: Stephanie.Hackert@anglistik.uni-muenchen.de

Abstract

Americanization has been described as one of the major sociocultural processes of language change currently affecting varieties of English worldwide; it is generally linked to the post-World War II rise of the United States to global superpower status in political, military, economic, and cultural terms. Owing to their immediate geographical proximity, the Bahamas always had closer demographic, cultural, and institutional links with the North American mainland than other British colonies. The present paper applies the notion of epicentral influence, in the sense of a regionally dominant model influencing developments in neighboring areas, to Bahamian-American linguistic relations and attempts to disentangle global from epicentral American influence. It considers not just standard Bahamian English but also Bahamian Creole, all levels of language, diachronic and synchronic data, and corpus findings as well as attitudinal studies and discusses the theoretical and methodological implications of the Bahamian data for the epicentre idea.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Americanization has been described as one of the major sociocultural forces currently affecting varieties of English worldwide (Schneider, 2006, p. 67; Mair, 2013, pp. 260–261). It is generally linked to the post-World War II rise of the United States to superpower status in political, military, economic, and cultural terms. American English (AmE) words, spellings, and pronunciations have been distributed worldwide through advertising, broadcasting, movies, popular

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music, and computer software. American leadership may also be found in processes of grammatical change, where it interacts with general language-internal, sociolinguistic, or discourse-pragmatic trends like grammaticalization, colloquialization, and densification (Leech et al., 2009, pp. 252–259). Owing to their geographical position, Caribbean countries are exposed to AmE not just from a distance but also, and perhaps primarily, through immediate language contact. The Bahamas, in particular, have always had close links with the North American mainland, despite the archipelago's long history as a British colony. In postcolonial times, American influence has magnified, primarily in the mass media, the tourist industry, and the education system. Not surprisingly, a substantial amount of AmE features has been found in Bahamian Englishes. In newswriting, this influence clusters particularly at the lexical level but also occurs in orthography and grammar (Oenbring, 2010; Bruckmaier & Hackert, 2011). Importantly, clear Americanisms like pseudotitles occurred frequently in Bahamian newspapers even in colonial times (Hackert, 2015) and thus before linguistic Americanization qua cultural globalization could have taken place. Bahamian Creole 'is closer to American mainland varieties than to Caribbean' ones (Kraus, 2017, p. xxi), which is owed to the former's origins in the coastal American South (Hackert & Huber, 2007). And while Bahamian journalists are definitely following recent global but American-led trends like colloquialization and densification, a noticeable gap remains between Bahamian newspaper writing on the one hand and American and British journalistic usage on the other (Hackert & Deuber, 2015; Deuber et al., 2021). Finally, whereas contemporary educated English in the Bahamas is clearly undergoing rhotacization (Pluta, 2017; Ivins, 2019; Wolfe, 2019), listeners actually favor a local but non-creole accent over both British and American pronunciation patterns (Laube & Rothmund, 2021).

It is difficult to adequately account for such multifarious findings within a simple Americanization-qua-globalization framework. The notion of epicentral influence, in the sense of a regionally dominant power affecting linguistic developments in neighboring areas, fares much better in this respect, as it is, first, not tied to post-World War II developments and, second, takes into account the Bahamas' geographical interposition between North America and the Caribbean and the resulting longstanding economic and sociocultural relations with the former. That said, there are a number of challenges in applying the epicentre concept to Bahamian-American linguistic relations. In the following, I examine some evidence, considering not just educated Bahamian English (section 2.1) but also the local creole (2.2), all levels of language, synchronic and diachronic data, and corpus findings as well as attitude studies (2.3). I frame the linguistic evidence within the relevant sociohistorical facts and then discuss the applicability of the epicentre to the findings at hand as well as the implications that the Bahamian situation might hold for the concept (section 3). I conclude that the Bahamas' linguistic history and contemporary multinormative orientation require models which allow for considerable complexities in the conceptualization of postcolonial language variation and change, including but not limited to epicentral influence.

2 | THE AMERICAN IMPACT ON BAHAMIAN ENGLISHES: SOME LINGUISTIC AND SOCIOHISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Historically, all varieties of English around the world descend ultimately from forms of British English (BrE). On the one hand, British settlers provided the non-standard European linguistic input both to new dialect formation, as it took place in settler colonies such as the United States, Canada, or Australia, and to creolization in plantation colonies such as those found all over the Caribbean. More standard forms of British English were spread through teaching, administration, and missionary work. During the time of Empire, educated southern British English enjoyed uncontested prestige all over the English-speaking world. American English (AmE) was generally seen as a 'colonial substandard' or linguistic 'underdog' (Kahane, 1992, p. 212), despite prophetic statements concerning its potential for world language status by a number of 18th- and 19th-century observers (Bailey, 1991, pp. 93–121).

After World War II, the tide turned, and AmE gained prestige massively. American linguistic features traveled around the world via popular culture and the sweeping success of the personal computer, along with American-developed computer software. Such phenomena do not primarily involve direct speaker contact. Rather, 'distant'

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contact takes place, which 'typically results in lexical borrowing' (Winford, 2003, p. 26), and, in fact, numerous lexical influences have been found in studies looking into the purported Americanization of varieties of English worldwide (for an overview of such studies, see Deuber et al., 2021). Recent years have actually seen a surge of scholarly interest in the topic, driven by its relevance in the context of globalization as well as by the availability of big data sources (Gonçalves et al., 2018). As Gilquin (2018, p. 212) notes, however, there is a great deal of variation in the adoption of AmE features around the world, and a more nuanced view that can also accommodate local contextual factors is needed to complement the bird's-eye view afforded by the big data approach.

The anglophone Caribbean constitutes a somewhat anomalous case among postcolonial English-speaking regions, in the sense that AmE entered the local linguistic ecology long before the end of the colonial period. Extending between southeastern Florida and northwestern Cuba, the Bahamas, in particular, have always had close demographic, economic, and cultural links with the North American mainland. Today, the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, as the country is officially called, has a population of approximately 350,000,[1] of which some 90 per cent are Black. The Bahamas is heavily urbanized, with roughly 80 per cent of all Bahamians living in and around the capital, Nassau. They are one of the wealthiest Caribbean countries, its economy fuelled by service-oriented industries such as tourism and offshore banking. The official language of the Bahamas is English. Monolingual speakers of English, however, are a minority. Most black Bahamians also speak Bahamian Creole (BahC), which is locally termed 'dialect.' As elsewhere in the anglophone Caribbean, the two varieties exist in a continuum of gradual but patterned structural transitions. Functionally, by contrast, there is still a fairly strict division of labor between them. Even though the 'dialect' is now generally viewed as a vital aspect of the Bahamas' cultural heritage and national identity, its use is mostly restricted to private, informal interaction or if humor, authenticity, and the like are to be conveyed. In public, formal situations or if 'serious' topics are at hand, English is the form of speech called for. The vernacular of many native white Bahamians is a high-contact L1 variety that is quite different from BahC and, in fact, constitutes a 'non-continuum' with the latter (Shilling, 1980). Finally, the Haitian migrants who have been coming to the Bahamas since the 1960s speak a French-lexifier creole.

2.1 | Educated Bahamian English: A hybrid practice

2.1.1 | Newspaper language: American influences in orthography, lexis, and grammar

The presence of AmE vocabulary had been noted in the earliest studies looking at public, formal language use in the anglophone Caribbean, such as Sand (1999) on Jamaican radio and newspaper English. Later studies on Jamaican, Bahamian, and Trinidadian Englishes (Mair, 2002, 2009; Oenbring, 2010; Bruckmaier & Hackert, 2011; Hänsel & Deuber, 2013) confirmed a trend toward the use of American forms, especially in lexis but also in spelling and, to a certain extent, grammar. This section reports on a series of recent newspaper studies which all show that contemporary educated Caribbean English, despite its BrE base, exhibits a significant amount of AmE influence, particularly in the Bahamas. Deuber et al. (2021) present a comprehensive study of journalistic writing in 10 anglophone Caribbean countries and dependent territories, comparing their results not only to BrE and AmE reference corpora but also to newspaper collections from India and Nigeria as representatives of non-Caribbean postcolonial Englishes. With regard to spelling, the conventions followed are nowhere categorical but always mix BrE and AmE orthography, albeit to varying degrees. The largest countries by population size, that is, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, the Bahamas, and Barbados, show the most homogeneity, with all of them but the Bahamas tending clearly toward BrE spellings. The Bahamian data's strong American orientation, however, may be skewed by individual newspaper preferences; together with the data assembled in Bruckmaier and Hackert (2011), they support 'the intuition that many in The Bahamas have that American and British spellings can often be used interchangeably' (Oenbring, 2010, p. 55).

Vocabulary turned out to vary more by lexical item than by country. In general, word pairs referring to institutional structures (for example, *trade union* vs. *labor union*) as well as pairs differing only minimally (for example, *afterwards* vs. *afterward*) show a BrE orientation, whereas AmE dominates in domains such as education (for example, *principal* vs.

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headmaster, *student* vs. *pupil*) or technology and the media (for example, *cell phone* vs. *mobile phone*). In grammar, a gap between postcolonial and metropolitan varieties emerged. Verb and negative contractions (as in *he's*, *she'll*, or *we're* and *don't* or *hasn't*) occur all over the Caribbean as well as in the Nigerian and Indian corpora, but they are nowhere nearly as frequent as in BrE and AmE. The occurrence of contractions in published writing has been interpreted as a sign of the ongoing, AmE-led colloquialization of English (Leech et al., 2009, pp. 240–241), together with the decline of the *be*-passive, which is also considerably less pronounced in the Caribbean, Indian, and Nigerian data than in British and American newspapers. The avoidance of *which* in favor of *that* in restrictive relative clauses and the mandative subjunctive constitute further Americanisms (Algeo, 1989, p. 156). With regard to these two features, we also see Caribbean journalists taking part in AmE-led changes, but the frequencies with which they are doing so align neither with AmE nor with BrE but often resemble those found in Indian and Nigerian newspapers. Overall, norms for public written English in the Caribbean appear to be characterized by a mix of features that combines a strongly BrE-oriented foundation with varying amounts of AmE influence while retaining a distinctly formal character apparently characteristic of postcolonial Englishes more generally. Among independent Caribbean countries, the Bahamas appear most strongly influenced by American usage.

Americanization is a process that unfolds in time, so historical evidence must be brought to bear on the issue. Hackert and Deuber (2015) look at precisely the grammatical structures just listed in Trinidadian and Bahamian newspapers from 1968 and the early 2000s, and Hackert (2015) investigates the use of so-called 'pseudotitles,' that is, determinerless structures providing descriptive information in front of name noun phrases, as in *journalist Jessica Robertson*, in samples of Bahamian news reports from the same periods. Pseudotitles definitely originated in AmE; in fact, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 276) describe them as part of what they label 'Timestyle,' that is, the American style of news reporting associated with *Time* magazine. In the post-World War II era, pseudotitles spread around the world, and even to British quality newspapers. Interestingly, Bahamian journalists did not only use them liberally even when the country was still under British colonial rule, but they have also been stretching the construction to its limits in terms of both frequency and complexity, with examples such as *Senior Education Officer in charge of Language Arts at the Ministry of Education and part of the adult reading programme, Daphne Barr* (*Freeport News*, 2005, October 27) representing only the tip of the iceberg.

Hackert and Wengler (2022) look at the recent history of genitive variation in Bahamian and Jamaican newspaper data as well as in Indian, British, and American press corpora that once more span the generational gap between the late 1960s and the early 2000s. Having been almost ousted in Middle English, the *s*-genitive has been on the rise again since the Early Modern period. In present-day English, this rise is well observable in published writing, and especially in newspapers, where it is part of a more general trend toward 'densification,' that is, information compression (Leech et al., 2009, p. 249), which has also been found to be most advanced in AmE. Hackert & Wengler (2022) employ Multifactorial Prediction and Deviation Analysis with Random Forests (MuPDAR-F; see section 3) in order to compare data sets, the research hypothesis being that if Caribbean Englishes had undergone a shift in norm orientation, from traditional British colonial to American in postcolonial times, this shift should also be visible in the underlying grammar constraining abstract, non-'surfacy' features such as genitive variation. The data, on the one hand, confirm well-known trends, such as the lead of American journalism in the general rise of the *s*-genitive and its expansion to inanimate possessors (Hinrichs & Szmrecsanyi, 2007, p. 450). They also show that production-related constraints on genitive variation such as syntactic weight have increased their effects in all varieties between the 1960s and today, albeit to different extents. On the other hand, as noted above, while the postcolonial varieties are following AmE and BrE with regard to general tendencies in grammatical change, they are not actually approximating metropolitan norms, and we see a persistent gap between the two types of variety. Bahamian English constitutes an especially interesting case, as it appears fairly American-oriented during colonial times but has seen comparatively little change since then.

How do we account for this peculiar mix of BrE and AmE usage in Bahamian journalistic prose and, more importantly, the early and persistent presence of American features, in terms of both surface features and underlying, abstract patterns of grammatical variation? First, as for market structures, newspapers in the country have traditionally been in the hands of local owners, but American papers such as the *Miami Herald* are also widely available. Second,

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regarding linguistic norms, until way after the end of formal colonialism, most local journalists were trained on the job; those 'who had some formal training had had to go abroad, primarily to England' (Storr, 2016, p. 47). That said, local training must have been based to a large extent on AmE stylistic preferences even in colonial times, if the provenance of non-locally produced material in Bahamian papers is in any way indicative. A cursory examination of 1968 editions of the *Nassau Guardian*, for example, revealed that all of the news reports dealing with international affairs came from an American news agency, United Press International, and US news often appeared in single-authored articles by journalists writing for US papers; these articles must have also been bought overseas. In sum, 'Caribbean journalism should be understood as a blend of American, British, and local values – a hybrid practice' (Storr, 2016, p. 115).

2.1.2 | American pronunciation features in educated Bahamian English: Rhoticity and *a*-vowels

The present section identifies AmE pronunciation features in educated Bahamian English. It focuses on rhoticity, which is stereotypically associated with American speech all over the world. Rhoticity is highly salient, often explicitly commented on, and may call forth strong attitudinal reactions. All native, that is, non-expatriate, varieties of English spoken in the Bahamas are traditionally non-rhotic, but rhotic pronunciations appear to be on the rise, despite the fact that they are often seen as indicative of the threat posed by American culture to 'traditional Bahamian forms of expression' (Oenbring, 2010, p. 52). This is in stark contrast to the so-called 'flat *a*' in BATH words, which, even though it is also explicitly indexed as American, does not constitute a stereotype of AmE pronunciation. In BahC, moreover, *a*-vowels are not differentiated, but since such differentiation does not constitute a 'load-bearing' variable of educated usage in the Bahamas, that is, a feature without whose 'presence in sufficient frequency, the speaker will not be interpreted by others as producing "good" English' (Irvine, 2008, p. 19), they appear as rather resistant to pressure 'from above.' If anything, acrolectal Bahamian English favors 'broad-BATH' (Wells, 1982, p. 79) pronunciations and thus shows continued alignment with BrE norms with regard to this feature.

The term 'rhoticity' refers to the occurrence of a consonantal [r] pronunciation wherever <r> is written in English, reflecting the presence of the historical rhotic sound /r/. The feature prominently distinguishes varieties into rhotic ones, where [r] is pronounced in all positions, and non-rhotic ones, where it no longer occurs in post-vocalic – or rather non-prevocalic – position, as in *fourth*, *floor*, *morning*, and so on. Traditionally, educated Bahamian English is non-rhotic, in keeping with the colonial BrE norm. BahC and white Bahamian vernacular English tend to be non-rhotic as well, which aligns them not only with most other Caribbean English-lexifier creoles but also with 'American English in the earlier Plantation South' (Childs & Wolfram, 2004, p. 251). In brief, historically, 'a pronounced "r" is as common to a Bahamian as a pinky ring to an elephant' (Glinton-Meicholas, 1994, p. 34). However, in the late 1990s, impressionistic evidence suggested that this state of affairs was changing and that younger Bahamians were beginning to perceive rhotic pronunciations as 'correct' and imitating them (Hackert, 2004, p. 59). A number of dissertations and MA theses completed at LMU Munich since then have looked into the issue.

Kraus (2017) compared BahC sociolinguistic interview data recorded in 1997/98 (Hackert, 2004) with data collected in 2014, the latter consisting of interactional speech from a map task and citation forms. In contrast to the older interviews, which featured only two rhotic tokens from a single speaker, the more recent data clearly show that rhoticity is encroaching on Bahamian pronunciation norms. These data are stratified both socially and stylistically, with higher-class speakers producing more rhotic tokens than lower-class ones and more rhoticity emerging in the citation forms than in the map task data. Interestingly, male speakers are generally more rhotic than female ones, with the exception of citation forms produced by higher-class speakers, where females lead. Importantly, however, the male speakers in Kraus's sample were on average a generation younger than the female ones, which suggests that what is at stake is not gender but age, with the comparatively non-rhotic performance of the female speakers simply reflecting older pronunciation norms.

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Following up on Kraus's (2017) findings, Pluta (2017), Ivins (2019), and Wolfe (2019) investigated rhoticity in educated Bahamian speech. Together, they analyzed over 4,500 tokens of postvocalic (r) from the Bahamian component of ICE, that is, the International Corpus of English. The data represent broadcast discussions (S1B021-040), interviews (S1B041-050), news (S2B001-020), and talks (S2B021-054) as well as face-to-face conversations (S1A001-090). With regard to language-internal constraints, the Bahamian ICE data largely align with what has been observed in other contexts of variable rhoticity. Preceding vowel is the strongest predictor, with NURSE contexts by far the most favorable to consonantal realizations of (r), showing between 45 per cent and over 90 per cent constricted [r]. Rhoticity is consistently more frequent in stressed (for example, NURSE, START) than in unstressed contexts (lettER) and in lexical than in function words (for example, *her*, *or*, existential *there*). Somewhat surprisingly, pre-consonantal tokens (for example, *fourth*) evidenced more rhoticity than word-final ones (for example, *floor*) in all data sets (Pluta, 2017, p. 60; Ivins, 2019, pp. 33–34; Wolfe, 2019, p. 22). As for external factors, female speakers are generally more rhotic than males in the ICE data, and younger speakers have higher [r] levels than older ones. Seymour's assessment (2009, p. 76) that 'many Bahamians view postvocalic [r] [...] as a marker of formal style' is only partly corroborated at first sight, with the highest overall rates of [r] use occurring precisely at the polar ends of the spectrum of text types, that is, in broadcast news (53%) and face-to-face conversations (40%). Moreover, the presumably almost equally formal text types of broadcast news and broadcast talks (1%) and discussions (6%) evidence diametrically opposed speaker behavior. At 35 per cent rhoticity, the broadcast interviews are in between. That said, text type shows not only massive internal variation by speaker role and individual speaker but also interaction with the social-biological variables of age and gender. The category of newscaster, for example, was represented by younger women only; the conversational data also involved exclusively speakers between the ages of 18 and 25, most of whom were female. The broadcast talks, by contrast, featured exclusively male speakers above 50. Extremely instructive, finally, is the micro-variation occurring in the conversational data. As noted by Ivins (2019, p. 40), whenever 'it was mentioned to the speakers that they were being observed and recorded, or when they were encouraged "to speak proper Bahamian", or when the "interviewer" was mentioned [...], a spike in rhotic utterances occurred.' In sum, contemporary educated Bahamian English is variably rhotic. Rhotic pronunciations are particularly frequent among younger, higher-class female speakers in public formal situations in which a high level of correctness is aimed at, such as when producing citation forms (Kraus, 2017, pp. 259–260), reading the news (Wolfe, 2019, p. 23), or speaking for other, potentially evaluative audiences (Ivins, 2019, pp. 39–42). Clearly, then, [r]-full pronunciations are part of a new, local norm, and even though they are superficially identical to a stereotypical feature of AmE, they need not be primarily attributable to influence from the latter.

Of course, education, the audiovisual media, and frequent travel to the United States will have contributed to the rhotacization of young, urban speech in the Bahamas. During colonial times, the former was clearly British-oriented and restricted to primary schooling for the vast majority of the population. The small, aspiring Black and 'colored' professional class obtained secondary and tertiary degrees either in Britain (or, to a lesser degree, Canada) or at the only elite grammar school of the country, Government High School. Following independence in 1973, the system was 'Bahamianized,' which involved not only the successive replacement of expatriate British teachers by locals but also its massive expansion. This expansion was not only modeled on American practices but also opened the Bahamian educational market to book publishers, testing institutions, schools, and universities from the United States. Since the early 1970s, thousands of Bahamians have studied in the United States, aided by local government scholarships or through athletics scholarships provided by American colleges and universities. In sum, the Bahamas 'has been one of the countries most exposed, and most receptive, to North American educational influences' (Urwick, 2002, p. 158).

Just like journalism and education, Bahamian broadcasting is hybrid in character:

> While European colonization gave broadcasting its structure and function, [...] American technology, and British and Canadian training and programming, changed its format and content; Caribbean and Commonwealth cooperatives gave it a regional focus; and nation building brought social, economic, political, and cultural changes. (Storr, 2016, p. 19)

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Since the advent of cable television in 1995, Bahamians have had access to over 50 American stations, in addition to – and in competition with – the national network, ZNS. Another important source of American cultural and linguistic influence emanates from evangelical channels, and Bahamian churches more generally, many of which are branches of American congregations, and, in fact, Bahamians have 'exchanged visits and values with their denominational counterparts' in the United States since Loyalist times (Collinwood, 1989, p. 16). The Bahamian music industry has also been crucially shaped by the country's geographical and sociocultural interposition between the United States and the Caribbean. Most recently, hip hop aesthetics have made their impact felt in the 'bling,' or shining visibility, with which Bahamian high school graduates stage their prom appearances. Incidentally, the Bahamas are the only Caribbean country in which this American custom took root. This happened immediately after independence and thus 'precisely when the long-dominant British colonial social and cultural values were losing their prestige, when Bahamians sought new models of modernity, modes of self-fashioning, and means of imagining the nascent nation' (Thompson, 2011, p. 35). The institution of the prom has now shifted from an all-American model to a decidedly African American one, which appears to indicate that young Bahamians' search for identity in the community today heavily draws on cultural expressions and 'representational vocabularies from the African diaspora, especially from black America' (2011, p. 27).

African American English has always been predominantly non-rhotic, so it cannot possibly constitute the source of the [r]-full accent characterizing educated Bahamian English. In fact, as suggested by precisely the distribution of rhoticity across text categories, speaker roles, and situation types outlined above, spelling pronunciations appear to at least play a role, just as they do in educated Jamaican English (Shields-Brodber, 1989, pp. 46–48; Rosenfelder, 2009, p. 75). Of course, the parallel with standardized AmE likely strengthens the feature, endows the new accent with a certain status and prestige, and affords it a cosmopolitan, international image. Nevertheless, we are dealing with an accent that is defined primarily negatively, in the sense that, in the Bahamas, rhoticity is traditionally a non-creole, non-British feature. In choosing rhotic pronunciations over non-rhotic ones, speakers distance themselves from both the local vernacular and the traditional colonial norm. The former may still underlie the performance of Kraus's (2017, pp. 254–255) lower-class female speakers; the latter can be heard in the ICE broadcast talks (Wolfe, 2019, pp. 23–24), all of which were produced by male politicians, lawyers, or bankers above 50 and educated either directly in Britain or locally but in the British colonial tradition.

That Bahamian speakers are not copying AmE accents wholesale is shown in the distribution of *a*-vowels in the TRAP, BATH, START, and PALM lexical sets. Whereas in BrE, BATH falls together with START and PALM, in AmE, it aligns with TRAP in the so-called 'flat *a*,' which, like rhoticity, constitutes an archaism that entered American speech before BATH contexts began to change to broad /ɑ:/ in BrE. For Bahamian varieties, earlier impressionistic descriptions of vowels (Kraus, 2017, p. 199) note variation between /æ/ and cardinal /a(:)/ in TRAP and BATH contexts and between /a/ and /ɑ(:)/ in START and PALM. Two recent instrumental acoustic analyses confirm and modify these broad generalizations. Both Kraus (2017) and Krug (2017), who analyzed a set of classroom lessons from ICE Bahamas (S1B 001–020), find that all *a*-vowels have a low and relatively central quality in acrolectal Bahamian speech and 'collapse quantitatively and qualitatively' (Krug, 2017, p. 60). Identity between *a*-vowels is clearly a creole feature; its pervasive occurrence in educated Bahamian English indicates that *a*-vowel differentiation is not a load-bearing feature of the variety. That said, in Kraus's citation forms, some differentiation occurred, with the vowel in START/PALM appearing relatively raised and backed in comparison to TRAP. BATH corresponded closely to START/PALM instead of to TRAP, which indicates that the norm for educated Bahamian accents remains a 'broad-BATH' one (Wells, 1982, p. 79), indicating continued alignment with BrE with regard to this feature.

2.2 | The vernacular: Bahamian Creole as a diaspora variety of Gullah

American influence is relevant not only at the level of educated usage but also with regard to the creole vernacular of the vast majority of Black Bahamians, and, in fact, BahC has been said to be closer to North American varieties than to other Caribbean creoles (Kraus, 2017, p. xxi). It is particularly similar to Gullah, the creole still spoken in the coastal

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areas of South Carolina and Georgia today. Linguistic links between BahC and varieties spoken in the coastal South had long been suggested, by both Bahamians and Americans (Parsons, 1923, p. xvii; Eneas, 1976, pp. 84–85). Building on this early evidence, Holm (1983) provided a list of almost 60 words and expressions found in both BahC and Gullah but not in other English-lexifier creoles of the Caribbean. He concluded that Gullah and Bahamian were 'sister' varieties that had both descended from a once more widespread North American plantation creole, which would have also been the ancestor of contemporary African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This creole would have been exported to the Bahamas in the 1780s by Loyalist Blacks. The 1990s, however, saw the accumulation of sociohistorical and earlier textual evidence (Bailey, Maynor, & Cukor-Avila, 1991) that suggested that AAVE was never itself a creole, which left unexplained the creole nature of contemporary BahC. The historical evidence inspected by Hackert and Huber (2007), then, suggested that port of embarkation, which for the Bahamas was often either New York or St. Augustine in Florida, must be distinguished from actual provenance, which for the majority of Black Bahamian Loyalists lay in the coastal regions of South Carolina or Georgia, where varieties of Gullah had been spoken since the 1720s (Mufwene, 2000). BahC would thus have to be regarded as a direct descendant of Gullah, not of earlier AAVE.

This is substantiated by the analysis of 253 lexical, phonological, morphological, and syntactic features found in a number of pidgins and creoles throughout the Atlantic area as well as worldwide. Employing the approach developed by Baker and Huber (2001), Hackert and Huber (2007) searched published and unpublished historical texts describing Gullah and BahC, such as dictionaries, travel accounts, memoirs, and so on, for the earliest attestations of features representing deviations from, or innovations compared to, varieties of British English. Affinities between the varieties investigated were calculated by means of a simple formula also developed by Baker and Huber (2001). BahC and Gullah turned out to have one of the highest shared-feature scores overall, together with other variety pairs with strong historical connections, such as Bajan and St. Kitts Creole. The close affinity between Gullah and Bahamian has been confirmed in large-scale quantitative surveys of English-lexifier pidgins and creoles employing more sophisticated statistical algorithms and visualization techniques, such as phylogenetic networks (Hackert, 2012a; Schneider, 2012).

An interesting phonological feature of relevance with regard to the Bahamas' North American connection is the CHOICE-NURSE merger, which is brought about by the use of an upgliding diphthong instead of a central vowel in the latter. Donnelly (1997, p. 23) describes diphthongal NURSE as a 'true marker' of basilectal Bahamian speech resulting in homophones such as *foist* (*first)* or *loin* (*learn*). It is conspicuously absent from both other Caribbean creoles and accents of the British Isles but was once common in non-rhotic varieties of the United States. In New York, for example, it constituted a prominent part of what was locally known as 'Brooklynese' and evoked in stereotypical phrases such as *toity-toid street* '33rd Street' (Labov, 2006, pp. 215–216). The feature also occurred in white accents in the American South, such as in South Carolina, where both 'cultivated' and 'uncultivated' speakers used it (Kurath & McDavid, 1961, map 25). With the increasing rhotacization of white southern speech during the second half of the 20th century (see section 2.1.2), diphthongal NURSE disappeared, but it is likely that it was imported to the Bahamas during the Loyalist settlement, where it persists in Black vernacular speech, especially among lower-class males and with substantial variation according to phonological context (Kraus, 2017, pp. 192–193, 276).

The Loyalist settlement of the Bahamas following the American Revolutionary War must be considered one of the most important forces shaping the country's sociodemographic, cultural, and linguistic makeup; it definitely constitutes the foundation phase (Schneider, 2007, p. 56) of BahC (Hackert, Laube, & Wengler, 2020, p. 255). After the indigenous population of the Bahamas had been exterminated by the Spanish in the wake of Columbus's landfall in the archipelago in 1492, the Bahamas were re-settled by Bermudians in 1648. Even though Blacks were always part of the Bahamian population, it is unlikely that a full-fledged creole developed during the early colonial period (Hackert, 2004, p. 38). The Loyalist influx (1,600 Whites and 5,700 Blacks) tripled the colony's population and increased the proportion of slaves and other Blacks from one-half to three-quarters (Craton & Saunders, 1992, p. 179). With the Loyalists came 'the concept of plantation life and a different kind of relationship between master and slave' (Saunders, 1983, p. 17), but most Loyalist plantations soon failed, on account of both economic and environmental reasons, and

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their owners abandoned them, leaving behind their slaves to fend for themselves – ideal conditions for the flourishing of the imported variety.

2.3 | Attitudes toward varieties of English in the Bahamas

In her discussion of the methodological challenges involved in investigating epicentres empirically, Hundt (2013, p. 184) maintains that 'statements about epicentric influence need to be based on language-use data (corpora, sociolinguistic interviews) as well as attitudinal data' and that the latter are of particular importance when what is at stake is the question of whether 'speakers consciously aspire to a particular variety of English and thus adopt certain features from it.' Attitude studies in the anglophone Caribbean have often focused on the opposition between the creole vernaculars and an otherwise undifferentiated 'English,' the standard pattern of evaluations being one of 'good' vs. 'bad' language, 'proper' vs. 'broken' English, or 'Queen's English' vs. 'dialect.' Even though considerable prejudice against the creoles persists, language attitudes have become much more fluid, and the creoles have undergone an emancipatory process in terms of status and prestige. That said, as in language use, 'English' is no longer self-evidently equivalent to the traditional colonial norm, BrE, but has come under competition from other varieties, including but not restricted to AmE. A number of recent attitude studies have, accordingly, discovered 'a diversity of norms and both endo- and exonormative tendencies' (Meer et al., 2019, p. 91; Belgrave, 2008; Deuber, 2013; Deuber & Leung, 2013; Westphal, 2015). Local educated accents are consistently favored over foreign ones, but at least in broadcasting, such accents must avoid features explicitly recognized as creole to be acceptable. When questioned, respondents still describe standard English as an essentially foreign phenomenon, regarding only the creoles as authentically Caribbean varieties. The existence of AmE features in local usage is acknowledged, while BrE is still upheld as the most prestigious target.

Against this backdrop, Laube & Rothmund (2021) conducted an accent attitude survey among Bahamian university students. They employed five contextually controlled free speech samples representing BahC, educated Bahamian English, African American English, standardized AmE, and standardized BrE. The educated Bahamian sample displayed a 'a discernable Bahamian accent (with some American influence, that is rhoticity)' (Laube & Rothmund, 2021) and thus the new, emergent educated variety described above. Respondents were asked to rate speakers according to eight personality traits, such as competence, friendliness, humility, or education, which were later clustered into the two common dimensions of status and solidarity. The results revealed, first, that the classic pattern of covert language attitudes whereby the creole enjoys covert prestige, while that of the standard is overt. Second, the comparison between Bahamian English, BrE, and AmE suggests that, while Bahamians, just like speakers elsewhere in the anglophone Caribbean, still avow the prestige of BrE, local educated usage actually scores higher than both metropolitan varieties on the status dimension. Apparently, Bahamian English has acquired substantial overt prestige, which, in turn, clearly indicates a shift in norm orientation away from foreign models. Of the two metropolitan varieties, BrE still outranks AmE on the status dimension, but AmE scores slightly higher than BrE for solidarity. For young educated Bahamians today, thus, BrE appears to have been transformed into a distant source of prestige, authority, and standardness, while AmE has acquired some appeal at the personal level. African American English, interestingly, scores higher than standardized AmE on both dimensions. Apparently, thus, for young Bahamians today, the variety possesses not just the covert prestige that has long been attested among non-African American young men affiliating with hip hop culture but also a certain status-associated prestige. The fact that this prestige does not derive from high scores in the education and intelligence dimensions but in those of success and competence, however, tempers this finding and ties it back, perhaps, to stereotypical perceptions of material wealth and street savviness among African American men.

Oenbring and Fielding (2014) were primarily interested in the use of and attitudes toward the creole among young, educated Bahamians, but they also asked their respondents whether particular nationalities and social groups speak 'standard English.' An overwhelming majority of 86 per cent chose 'yes' for British, as opposed to only 50 per cent for White, and 19 per cent for Black Americans. Interestingly, Bahamian news anchors were classified as standard speakers by 64 per cent of respondents, but Bahamian politicians by only 39 per cent. While this result once more

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indicates the shift since independence toward AmE as the 'most socially important variety of *foreign English*' (Oenbring & Fielding, 2014, p. 46; emphasis in the original), it also testifies to the persistent overt prestige of BrE among even young Bahamians. At the same time, the perception of local varieties of educated English in this group clearly indicates that what has traditionally been accepted as the norm and still dominates British-modeled institutions and the speech of their representatives, as in national politics, is no longer the sole model of public, formal English but complemented by an emergent variety constituting a 'de facto model' and 'new standard of English' (Shields-Brodber, 1989, p. 42). This variety is regularly heard on newscasts; it corresponds to the accent that the respondents in Laube and Rothmund's (2021) survey evaluated as 'Bahamian English' and what the participants in the ICE conversations recognized as the target of 'proper Bahamian' speech. This accent has integrated a salient feature of AmE pronunciation, that is, rhoticity, but not the so-called 'flat *a*' in BATH.

3 | AMERICAN FEATURES IN BAHAMIAN ENLISHES: APPLICATIONS OF AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EPICENTRE MODEL

The Bahamas have always occupied an interposition between the United States and the rest of the Caribbean. Despite their status as a British colony for over 300 years, their economic, demographic, and cultural links with the North American mainland have always been exceptionally close. Postcolonial global developments regarding mass travel, the media, and education have added new layers to the country's dependency on the United States. Accordingly, American influences on Bahamian Englishes have long been noted, and while for the majority of postcolonial countries such influences are ascribable to the post-World War II period, and thus to Americanization qua globalization, it is clear that the Bahamas must have been exposed to forms of US English much earlier and by way of direct, immediate influence through personal and institutional contacts. The epicentre model, then, appears to provide the obvious framework to discuss the results of the case studies outlined in sections 2.1 to 2.3 and their sociohistorical embeddedness. At the same time, the Bahamian situation throws into sharp relief a number of theoretical and methodological issues surrounding the model.

For one thing, as noted by Hundt (2013, p. 185), epicentres are generally defined in terms of the standard language. This is because the notion of the epicentre is rooted in the study of the so-called 'New Englishes,' that is, institutionalized second-language varieties of English used in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific region. By the early 1990s, it had become clear that English had developed into a truly pluricentric language with different national standards. Apart from the traditional 'norm-providing' centers BrE and AmE, various 'norm-developing' varieties (Kachru, 1985) had emerged, some of which, such as Indian English, had even begun to influence Englishes in their immediate surroundings (Leitner, 1992, p. 225). From this context, the two main defining criteria of linguistic epicentres follow: they must (1) show endonormative stabilization and (2) have 'the potential to serve as a model of English for neighbouring countries' (Hoffmann, Hundt, & Mukherjee, 2011, p. 259). Both criteria appear entirely unproblematic in their application to US-Bahamian linguistic relations at first sight. Thus, the model character of standardized AmE for Bahamian journalistic practice clearly emerges in the various newspaper studies discussed in section 2.1.1. Importantly, other than globalization, which is most often defined in terms of the post-World War II export of Western science, technology, products, and culture, the notion of epicentral influence is not conceptually tied to any particular period in history and thus easily accounts for the fact that clear Americanisms such as pseudotitles and AmE-like patterns of genitive variation surface in Bahamian papers during the colonial era and thus before the onset of modern globalization.

That said, the issue of grammatical variation illustrates methodological challenges in the study of epicentral influence. As has long been noted in comparative sociolinguistics (Tagliamonte, 2013), sheer frequencies do not tell us much about structural similarities between varieties. What is needed is information about the underlying grammar of variable features, which only emerges in the statistical patterning of constraints operating on such features. In other words, whether we are actually (1) looking at exactly the same features and (2) dealing with epicentral influence or merely observing independent parallel development is impossible to ascertain by means of a focus on surface

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structures alone (Hundt, 2013, p. 184). What is more, the notion of the epicentre has directional implications, in the sense that it presupposes a reference variety that users of another variety potentially orient toward. Such directional relationships cannot be inferred from simple comparisons of statistical analyses, sophisticated as they may be. However, recent advances in learner corpus research have seen the emergence of a method providing a principled way of comparing data sets by establishing a yardstick against which all others are measured. This method, Multifactorial Prediction and Deviation Analysis with Regressions (MuPDAR), has also been tested in varieties research, to model potential epicentral configurations in general (Gries & Bernaisch, 2016) and with regard to genitive variation more specifically (Heller et al., 2017; Hackert & Wengler, 2022). As noted in section 2.1.1, Hackert and Wengler's research hypothesis was that if genitive variation in Bahamian journalistic writing had seen a shift in norm orientation from British to American in postcolonial times, the 1968 data should statistically align with 1960s BrE, while the contemporary data should be more similar to AmE from the 2000s. This hypothesis was not borne out. Rather, BrE fared better than AmE with regard to predicting genitive variation in Bahamian English in both time periods, which runs counter to the Americanization-qua-globalization hypothesis but does not contradict the idea of epicentral influence. To sum up, establishing epicentral influence empirically presents methodological challenges, which revolve around the (non)significance of identity in surface structures and the idea of directional influence.

To return to the theoretical underpinnings of epicentral research in the study of the New Englishes, it is particularly the connection with standard and standardizing varieties which makes the notion problematic in the Bahamian context. There are two reasons for this. First, American linguistic influence in the Bahamas has not been restricted to educated usage. Rather, the importation of earlier Gullah by Loyalist Blacks in the 1780s (see section 2.2) must be considered the single most significant individual event impacting the development of Bahamian Englishes. One might wonder, however, whether this event can really be framed in terms of 'influence,' as it subjected the Bahamas to a massive demographic and linguistic upheaval, with the Black population suddenly increasing by a factor of 3.5 (Craton & Saunders, 1992, p. 179). Given the fact that a creole is unlikely to have developed locally, the variety of Gullah that was imported by the Loyalist Blacks must have quickly replaced the White settlers' dialects and early slaves' approximations to those dialects as the dominant community language in the Bahamas; it must have also functioned as the target of acquisition to later arrivals. It appears more plausible, then, to ascribe to the Loyalist period and the forms of Gullah imported to the Bahamas at the time a 'founder effect' (Mufwene, 2001) rather than merely an influential one. This, of course, does not invalidate the epicentre model as such and deny other instances of epicentral influence on Bahamian Englishes, such as is evident in newspaper language. What it does suggest, however, is that we attempt to properly define the idea of linguistic influence, both theoretically and methodologically.

Second, the epicentre notion is closely tied to that of endonormative stabilization, that is, the replacement of outside norms by local ones following postcolonial political emancipation. This process presupposes both linguistic nativization and the forging of an indigenous national identity (Schneider, 2007). Endonormative stabilization is envisaged as a linear, teleological development, an evolutionary trajectory leading postcolonial varieties away from conservative (exocentric British) norms on to progressive (endocentric local) ones and applying equally at the levels of structure, functions, and attitudes. While it is certainly true that a re-orientation toward local practices has taken place in the anglophone Caribbean, with the creoles encroaching on educated usage in terms of not just features and use but also attitudes, it has become sufficiently clear by now that the development of Englishes in the region has always been more diverse and multifaceted, with a variety of norms of different directionalities, including standardized and non-standard and local, regional, and global ones, exerting different effects on different varieties at different times, while 'an overall multinormative orientation stays in place' (Meer & Deuber, 2020, p. 290). Such a multinormative orientation clearly emerges in attitude studies such as reported on in section 2.3, where varieties, nationalities, and speaker groups are evaluated differently and in sometimes conflicting ways depending on explanatory dimension (status vs. solidarity), social domain (education vs. media), and speaker role (newscaster vs. politician). At the structural level, features are mixed according to text type, formality, or audience. Language policies, such as set down in national language arts curricula, also often leave room for variation, as they make no prescriptions in terms of usage and correctness of particular forms of English (Oenbring, 2010, p. 60; Deuber, 2013, pp. 123–124). Hence, in the anglophone

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Caribbean, normativity may have to be conceptualized in multidimensional terms rather than in linear, teleological ones. In this setup, different American Englishes play an important role, but a monolithic view of AmE as the epicentre for Caribbean Englishes hides more of the linguistic realities in the region than it reveals.

We also need to question the metaphorical foundations of the epicentre and how these affect our perceptions of language variation and change in postcolonial speech communities. It has been pointed out in recent world Englishes theorizing (Hackert, 2012b, 2014; Saraceni, 2015; Mair, 2016) that images such as center vs. periphery, the notion of evolution, and the focus on homogeneous, national standards, which all emerged during the 19th century, may not do full justice to the complexity and dynamics of Englishes in the 21st century. As a matter of fact, based as it is in seismic geology, the epicentre concept immediately calls up another important 19th-century linguistic conception, which is the wave model of language change, whereby a linguistic innovation diffuses through space, expanding from center to periphery and affecting all intermediate areas inevitably and predictably. In an earthquake, moreover, the waves radiating outward from the center are always damaging. The peripheral regions have a passive role in the spread of seismic waves. They can guard against them, but they will not be able to prevent or influence them.

This is not, however, how linguistic innovations spread in space. Just like borrowing, epicentral influence is not a situation in which a receiving speech community passively endures the impact of outside forces, but one which it shapes actively and in line with its communicative needs. Accordingly, linguistic innovations do not remain invariant as they travel through space. They 'mutate' (Hundt, 2013, p. 190), undergoing changes in terms of structure, conditions of use, or perceptual evaluation. Pseudotitles in Bahamian newspapers (see section 2.1.1) provide an excellent example of structural and use-conditional modifications, being not only proportionately more frequent in Bahamian papers than in contemporaneous American ones but also on average longer and often more complex. Perceptual changes are attested by the re-valuation of rhoticity in educated Bahamian English (2.1.2), which is not or no longer viewed by speakers as something 'foreign,' indexing American usage, but has been appropriated into the local repertoire as a mark of formal, 'correct' speech. Even though [r]-full pronunciations are certainly associated by young, educated Bahamians with metropolitan, urbane voices, it appears unlikely that these speakers employ them to sound American. Both pseudotitles and rhoticity in Bahamian English thus appear less illustrative of Americanization than of what Meyerhoff and Niedzielski (2003, p. 538) have described in the context of globalization as 'multinational' phenomena, that is, 'something that has spread across many locations but which has adapted or changed according to the new contexts it finds itself in.'

Finally, the semantics of *center* call forth abstract entities, and, as noted at the outset of this section, the commonly accepted definition of a linguistic epicentre is that of a (standard) variety exerting influence over other (standardizing) varieties. Language contact, however, takes place between speakers or groups of speakers. Speakers always orient toward the norms associated with perceived sources of authority, in addition to those emanating from their immediate addressees (Blommaert, 2010, p. 39), and these norm orientations may vary, crosscut, or collide, in actual interaction as well as in the community at large. Clearly, though, they are not restricted to 'abstract entities or ideals such as [...] "nation state" (and thus also national varieties)' but include individuals functioning as role models (for example, politicians or media personalities) as well as collectives or communities of practices (for example, hip hoppers) (Hundt, 2013, p. 191). Even though it builds primarily on visual symbols, the staging of high school proms in the Bahamas (see section 2.1.2), which has shifted from a mainstream American model to one based on hip hop aesthetics, nicely illustrates such conflicting norm orientations. Conservative forces have brandished the new prom spectacles as going against 'national "priorities" and principles of "discipline" [...] as reflections of nothing short of a moral crisis' (Thompson, 2011, p. 36), but apparently this reaction has only served to politicize the movement as antiauthoritarian and turned it into a response to and rejection of Bahamian postcolonial politics (2011, p. 35). The linguistic repercussions of this remain to be seen, but we might eventually want to describe African American Vernacular English, or hip hop, for that matter, as new epicentres for Bahamian Englishes. This, in turn, would be aided by a re-definition of the concept to simply denote an 'additional' center of linguistic influence (Hundt, 2013, p. 189), without the connections with norm-providing entities at the national level and the standard language that restricts the concept in its present use. On the one hand, this would permit the modeling of relations of linguistic influence on a more concrete, speaker-group specific basis and

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also take into account conflicting norm orientations. On the other hand, such a loosening of the requirements on the use of *epicentre* would render the term much less precise. Whether this is something that is desirable in the context of the modeling of linguistic relationships between 21st century forms of English and their users is beyond the scope of this paper.

4 | CONCLUSION

The post-World War II ascent of AmE to 'hyper-central' status (Mair, 2013, p. 261), concomitant with globalization-related phenomena such as consumer culture, media exposure, and mass travel, raises the possibility of a change in norm orientation from British to American in Englishes around the world and particularly in former British colonies. Owing to its geographical closeness to North America and longstanding personal and sociocultural links, the anglophone Caribbean has been assumed to be especially prone to postcolonial linguistic Americanization, and newspaper studies have, in fact, detected a substantial presence of AmE features in the region, particularly at the lexical level but also in grammar, with the Bahamas appearing as the most Americanized of all Caribbean countries. While this is not surprising as such, the fact that clear Americanisms surface frequently in Bahamian newspapers before independence represents a problem for an Americanization-qua-globalization account of Bahamian English. At first sight, assuming epicentral instead of globalizing influences solves this problem, since, in fact, we are dealing with a prototypical epicentral constellation, that is, a politically and economically powerful player possessing a long-established, firmly institutionalized national standard variety and a neighboring small island state looking back to a history of domination and dependency. However, a closer inspection of the available linguistic and sociohistorical evidence reveals that the application of the epicentre concept to Bahamian-American linguistic relations is not entirely straightforward, either.

First, there is the concept's association with standardized and standardizing varieties. If this association is maintained and influence by or on vernacular forms of speech is seen as falling outside the purview of epicentral relations, neither the importation of Gullah to the Bahamas in the late 18th century nor the current aesthetics of Bahamian youth culture, which draws heavily on African American ways of self-representation, would constitute cases of epicentral influence. Second, even apparently clear Americanisms such as rhoticity may not actually be ascribable primarily to the conscious or unselfconscious adoption of American linguistic patterns but result from forces operating at the local level, such as the wish to distance oneself from creole usage on the one hand and from the former colonial norm on the other. As such, epicentral influence may constitute a contributing factor to, or possibly even trigger of, particular sociolinguistic changes but need not be solely responsible for them. Third, as evident in post-independence Bahamian newspaper writing, it may not actually be possible to draw a clear dividing line between regional, that is, epicentral, influence and AmE's globalizing impact, as institutional structures, personal contacts, and information flows all come together to shape a hybrid practice in which causality and directionality are very difficult to determine.

However, none of these caveats necessarily invalidates the idea of the linguistic epicentre; neither do they necessitate a loosening of its definitional criteria. For one, at least some aspects of Bahamian-American linguistic relations, such as pre-independence journalistic writing, are well describable in epicentral terms, and there are alternative scenarios, such as the founder effect, which fully account for other situations, such as the Gullah-Bahamas connection. Another recent world Englishes theorizing has seen the emergence of super-comprehensive proposals, such as Buschfeld and Kautzsch's 'Extra- and Intra-territorial Forces' Model (2017), which is based on the idea that all Englishes have been shaped by a set of 'forces' that can be divided into external ('extraterritorial') and internal ('intraterritorial') ones. These forces are viewed as 'general mechanisms' affecting the development of any specific variety, the difference lying in the 'concrete form' that they assume (2017, p. 116). Epicentral influence may easily be viewed as a special instantiation of extraterritorial influence in the Bahamas, as may be founder effects or the forces of globalization. Even if they are not always clearly separable in any concrete situation, such specific concepts help to refine and sharpen more comprehensive models, and we would be well advised not to water them down in a one-size-fits-all approach. In sum, epicentral influence is clearly a force to be reckoned with in the development of Bahamian

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Englishes, but not all linguistic influence from the United States is best described in epicentral terms. The case of the Bahamas forces us to think about the phenomenon of Americanization on different levels, within different theoretical frameworks, which are traditionally located across different domains, the global and the regional, and to examine the connections between frameworks.

NOTE

[1] https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/bahamas-the/

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