Variationists have exploited the distinct characteristics of Newfoundland and its English (NE) in two major ways: using the variety’s conservative nature to study earlier stages of (dialects of) English (e.g., Clarke 1997), and investigating how current rapid social changes lead to rapid linguistic change (e.g., Childs et al. 1997). To date, though, this research has not looked in quantitative detail at NE’s past temporal reference (PTR) system, despite (or perhaps because of) its richness and complexity – the data set for the current study includes 17 variants expressing at least four tense-aspect functions.

This study examines the full PTR system of a rapidly urbanizing Newfoundland fishing community through multivariate analysis of recordings stratified by the age and sex of 24 participants (10,101 tokens). Overall findings show linguistic constraints that parallel the PTR systems of vernacular Engishes elsewhere. However, we do find several clear differences in variant frequency and distribution:

• Present and past perfects are infrequent overall (under 2%), and present perfect function is often expressed with the Irish-origin after perfect (e.g., A lot of people are after dying), especially by older generations and by young traditionally oriented men.

• Across the generations, past habituality is usually expressed by would (we would dance, 9.72% of PTR) rather than used to (5.3%), as in other areas settled from the south of the British Isles (Van Herk & Hazen 2011) but distinct from northern areas (Tagliamonte & Lawrence 2000).

• There is a surprising number of (perceptually) bare verb forms (we went > we go, 2.5% of past tense contexts), either with specific lexical items (come, run, give) or in contexts where they probably represent a deleted or heavily reduced underlying would (we’d go > we go).

• Progressives (he was dancing) are very frequent (4.5% of PTR), and robust even in habitual contexts. We might speculate that this reflects the remnants of a system in which Ving forms behaved more like imperfects than progressives.

• Preverbal did (we did dance) is unexpectedly frequent (3.6% of PTR), even outside negation and question contexts.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest a complex and robust system with strong retentions from its settler varieties, both in terms of place (SW England, SE Ireland) and time (pre-1830). Non-standard variants are widespread, generally favoured by older generations and men. Some variants (e.g. would) carry no social meaning and are not undergoing change, while others (e.g., after perfects) are heavily implicated in Newfoundland identity work and are thus strongly socially conditioned.

In addition, some traits of the described system – especially its aspect prominence, reliance on preverbal markers, and apparently widespread would deletion – offer tantalizing hints toward illuminating earlier stages in the development of potential “sister” dialects, including African American English, Southern US English, Caribbean English-based Creoles.