

The Meaning of *Kiss-teeth*

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ABSTRACT: We examine an everyday Caribbean oral gesture, *kiss-teeth* or (KST), exploring previously-unresolved problems of meaning. Such forms are as examples of African cultural continuity across the Diaspora, often overlooked despite continuing interest in historical links between Caribbean Creoles and African communication systems. Forms such as (KST) are typically treated as lexical items: dictionary entries provide overlapping lists of emotions or affective states (eg, "scorn, impatience") for each of several entries (*suck-teeth*, *chups*, etc.). Such approaches are inadequate, as the meaning of (KST) is not a single semantic unit, while lists are incomplete, contingent and inadequate. We distinguish ideophones from metalinguistic labels; consider geographical distribution and diffusion with respect to both functions and particular forms; and analyze related signs as a set, with reference to shared pragmatic function. (KST) is an inherently evaluative and inexplicit oral gesture with a sound-symbolic component, and a remarkably stable set of functions across the Diaspora: an interactional resource with multiple possibilities for sequential organization, often used to negotiate moral positioning among speakers and referents, and closely linked to community norms and expectations of conduct and attitude. It participates in a system of indirect discourse, requiring co-construction of intention by speaker and hearers. Moreover, it functions in personal narratives to mark both internal and external evaluation, sometimes ambiguously. Each of the proposed functions is illustrated with data ranging from historical to contemporary, oral to literary, monologic to interactional.

Cut-eye and *suck-teeth* provide clear evidence that 'Africanisms' in the New World may reside not only in the exotic, but also (and perhaps more frequently) in the commonplace. (Rickford & Rickford 1999:170)

It is twenty-five years since John and Angela Rickford described these two everyday gestures of West Indian life, demonstrating their roots in (West) Africa and continuing use throughout the Caribbean; the close link with North American Blacks, most of whom proved familiar with them; and the marking of a sociolinguistic boundary with American Whites, who were almost entirely unaware of the occurrence, names or significance of these crucial signs of attitude and orientation.¹

Recently, when one of us mentioned *suck-teeth* to a new arrival in Jamaica (a White woman from the US), the woman knew instantly and without explanation just what Figueroa was talking about, commenting that it was one of the first things she had noticed. Indeed, it is so ubiquitous, so important interactionally, that we can hardly imagine a Jamaican exists – of whatever social background – who is not fully competent in its production, contextualization and interpretation.

Yet, as the Rickfords pointed out in connection with the question of origins, the very mundane character of these signs has served to hide them from deeper examination. In fact, their article is still the only in-depth examination of *suck-teeth* by linguists, to our knowledge.² We take its African origins to be uncontroversial, and find it striking that something so recognizable, so widespread, remains largely unstudied by creolists. It is much more than a mere snort or tic: it is a sign both verbal and embodied, unwritten of course, known throughout the Atlantic world, shared and passed on like a dance *riddim*. A fundamental expression, it remains outside the grammar, unremarked yet indispensable – we cannot resist using it even among the uninitiated, while outsiders to Diaspora culture who learn it, find that it instantly fills an expressive gap.

In this paper we explore *kiss-teeth* (as we call it) and associated oral signs, primarily as used among Jamaicans, as an entry point into the study of contemporary Caribbean and African Diasporic pragmatic systems. First we describe the phenomenon briefly, and discuss its names and their distribution across the Caribbean and North America. We consider the meanings attributed to it by previous writers; examples of many kinds, from written and oral sources, are provided and interpreted. We note problems of

representation, and relative infrequency, in written accounts, and examine the work done by related forms. We then problematize its meaning, looking for shared understandings among speakers to account for the rich and flexible patterns found. We investigate the evolution and use of these signs as powerful interactional resources across the English-speaking African Diaspora, including its functions in oral personal narrative. Acknowledging that this space allows only cursory attention to many important aspects, we hope not only to highlight key features of (KST), but to draw new attention to the exploration of Caribbean discourse systems.

The sounds of *kiss-teeth*

Kiss-teeth is a conventionalized set of sounds which vary considerably in form. It is produced by a velaric ingressive airstream involving closure at two points in the mouth: against the velum (using the back of the tongue), and farther forward. The forward closure is the source of most variation. It may be palatal, post-alveolar or labio-dental; it may be a single click, i.e. a stop, or more frequently an affricate; it may be a series of discrete bursts, or a continuous stream, with variations in pitch (usually dropping), lasting as long as several seconds. The tongue may be placed against, or at various points behind, the upper or lower teeth, or visibly in one side of the mouth.

Other visible aspects of the gesture include the lips, which may be closed, or slightly opened to one side; flat or compressed (e.g. with lower lip pressed against upper teeth, see Rickford & Rickford 1999, Fig. 7.2), or protruding, but always with some tension. Lip tension in the form of a pout may noticeably precede the sound, thus contextualizing it, or may simply co-occur with it; it may also continue afterwards, as part of a post-utterance physical attitude, frequently including head-movements (here see the Rickfords on *cut-eye*).

All forms are, at one level, labelled and interpreted as the same in Jamaica, and will be abbreviated here as (KST). However, the variation is meaningful in complex ways. In general, (KST) is considered rude, and has been broadly defined as expressing negative affect. Sounds of greater intensity are iconically understood as expressing stronger and/or more overt feeling, as are sounds of greater duration; however pitch variation is not so straightforward. In addition, (KST) is closely linked to – and sometimes, in

print, replaced by – interjections with morphological substance, such as *Cho!* and *Chups* (see below), which may serve identical or complementary functions, and extend possibilities for repetition, sequencing and bracketing.

The sounds of (KST) do not lend themselves to literary description, and attempts are rarely committed to paper. An exception occurs in one of Louise Bennett's 'Aunty Roachy Seh' stories (radio monologues broadcast from 1965–82, and printed in Bennett 1993:58–60), titled 'Bad Manners'. (The collection is edited by poet Mervyn Morris, who refers explicitly to linguistic works on Jamaican Creole in his introduction, and discusses the complexities of representing Bennett's performances in print.) It concerns a 'walk-an-sell [w]oman' named Shake-up who behaves in an 'outa-order' way in an urban office, where she normally sells her wares to the secretaries:

Hear Shake-up, "Weh my lickle customer Cutie deh?" So anodder lady seh, "Miss Jones can't be disturbed now. She is in the manager's office." Eh-eh! Shake-up suck her teet *tshwaah* and walk *bram-bram* through de office towards de door mark 'Private'.

The strategic contrast of Jamaican Creole and English dialogue instantly sets up a scene of class tension and conflict. Bennett vividly evokes her character's rejection of the middle-class norms of quiet and politeness (pre-figured in her name). First comes the interjection 'Eh-eh!' marking amused surprise – the narrator/onlooker's reaction – and then the two ideophones describing the higgler's determinedly noisy progress. *Suck-teeth* is both named and performed here (as with Son-son, below).

The problem of description is an old one. A century before, Thomas Russell concluded his *Etymology of Jamaica Grammar* (1868) with a puzzle:

There is still one Interjection, an exclamation of disgust, admitting of no orthography; the sound is represented by that made by a person suffering extreme pain, say tooth ache, only it is represented quickly about a dozen times. I believe I could in no better 'wind up' Jamaica Grammar than by setting forth this orthographical problem; now let him who is so clever make out this curious interjection.

(Lalla & D'Costa 1990:201)

(KST) seems the most likely candidate, but as his humorous description is less successful than the collaboration between Morris and Miss Lou, we cannot be entirely sure.

Names of *kiss-teeth* and Caribbean regional distribution

The sounds of (KST) are called by various names in the Caribbean. We here prefer *kiss-(you-)teeth*, which we learned in 1960s Jamaica; the most detailed survey of the Caribbean English lexicon to date, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (DCEU; Allsopp 1996), notes no other locations. Allsopp derives the Jamaican noun from the phrase, and further suggests that use of *kiss* is onomatopoeic. Oddly enough, *kiss-teeth* is not to be found in the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (DJE; Cassidy and LePage 1980) or *Jamaica Talk* (JT; Cassidy 1961), either. Indeed, it rarely occurs in print in Jamaica (Patrick 1995), though it is found in Sistren (1987) and newspapers such as *The Gleaner*. Presently we have no citations before 1975, but our memories place it earlier.

The Bahamas also have the phrase *kiss your teeth at someone/-thing* (DCEU:331; not attested in Glinton-Meicholas 1994, 1995). A variant form of the phrase, *hiss your teeth*, is used in Tobago (DCEU:293); *hiss* also occurs intransitively among Nigerian English speakers (parallel to the Yoruba form *kpòšé*) for the gesture. *Suck-(you-)teeth* is more widely found, not only in Jamaica (Cassidy dates it to 1915 via childhood memories, DJE:428) but also Barbados, Belize, Guyana (Cruickshank 1916:50), Trinidad and, as *suck your mouth*, the Cayman Islands. Like *kiss-* and *hiss-teeth*, it only names the transgressive act; there is felt to be nothing improper about uttering these names.

The third metalinguistic label, *chups*, has numerous spelling variants – e.g. *cheups*, *steups*, *stupse*, *stchoops* – in Jamaica and across the Eastern Caribbean (Antigua, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Trinidad, and Tobago; also Nevis, where it appears as *stupe*; DCEU, various entries). Like the first two terms, *chups* names the sound and the action that produces it, i.e. is both noun and verb (though usually intransitive). Unlike them, however, it is also an ideophone, and may thus be uttered in place of the sound (KST) which it directly represents. The effect of doing this is to diminish the intensity and the transgression of politeness norms. Thus it is

not surprising that *chups* has other meanings, too (below). *Chups* also occurs commonly in Haitian Creole as both noun and verb, where it is *tuipe*, *tchuipe*, *tchoupe*, *kuipe*, etc. (p.c. Michel DeGraff; Fattier 1998, vol. 1:94).

Derivation is often suggested from Spanish (*DJE*, *DCEU*), but Portuguese seems more likely – both are *chupar*, ‘to suck’ – as /tʃupa/ is the form in Papiamentu and Sranan, according to Rickford & Rickford (1999).³ However, their review establishes beyond doubt that the gesture (KST) itself is widespread in West Africa, and they credit Ian Hancock with a plausible Wolof etymon /tʃipú/, adopted into Gambian Krio. (KST) is a named gesture in languages of at least the Atlantic, Mande, and Benue–Congo (Igbooid and Yoruboid) families, as well as Bantu (where in Kiyansu, the form /nswea:b/ is an ideophone; p.c. Salikoko Mufwene). Several appear to be possible sources of a calque on both “suck” and “teeth” or “mouth” (*ibid.*: 169). (KST) is used freely in all Liberian languages, whether creolized or not. The *DJE* links *cho* (see below) to similar interjections in the Kwa family (Akan and Gbe language groups). Thus the African origins of the gesture seem secure, while the name *chups* itself may well have a direct African etymon or be the result of convergence between African and Romance sources, and *suck-teeth* may be calqued.

None of these principal names for (KST) appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*, 1971), suggesting a lack of English origins. Nor, for that matter, do they occur in North America: they are absent from *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Guralnik, 1970), the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (Lighter 1994, 1997), Farmer & Henley (1809–1904), and even the *Dictionary of American Regional English* to date (*DARE* vols. 1–3, Cassidy & Hall, eds.), though Cassidy would certainly have been alert to them.⁴ They are apparently unknown to native North American speakers. The exception is *suck-teeth*, familiar to African Americans as a name for (KST) and attested in *DARE* and Dillard (1977:107), though absent from such dictionaries as Major (1994) and Smitherman (1994).

It cannot be ruled out that (KST) has some universal sound-symbolic aspect. The forms known in English as *pshaw* and *tche* express disapproval, regret, sympathy and similar emotions, though they are milder in affect and more restricted in domain. The Rickfords note (1999:169) that *tche* is only dated to 1844 by the *OED* and suggest it may derive from African sources. Indeed, it is not implausible that English usage might diminish the intensity and domesticate the range of the vibrant African forms, yet the two may well

have arisen independently, too. The *OED* dates *pshaw* to 1673, but this is still not enough to determine direction; nor even is 1529 for *tut(-tut)*, which however has Scots connections and a different sense, primarily impatience (it also connotes status difference as much as moral positioning).

While diffusion might be responsible for a connection between African and New World forms (including also Gullah, the Surinam Creoles and varieties of Spanish in the Americas) and those in England, the net stretches wider for these slight and mild interjections, which are found in Delhi, India; around the Eastern Mediterranean, in Lebanon and Jordan; even as far as Samoa, all with similar meanings. We are doubtful about a monogenetic hypothesis for them all. Before we consider the more clearly-related forms *Cho* and *Chut*, let us illustrate (KST).

Examples and their ‘meanings’

The *chupse* is not a word, it is a whole language. There is the small effortless *chupse* of indifference; the thin hard *chupse* of mere disdain; the long, liquid, vibrating *chupse* which shakes the rafters and expresses every kind of defiance. It is the universal language of the West Indies, the passport to confidence from Jamaica to British South America. How dare the compiler degrade it to a mere word!

(from *The Barbados Advocate*, quoted in Collymore 1970)

One of the most striking aspects of *kiss-teeth* is undoubtedly its ability to express a wide range of meanings, for which it is celebrated by authors, lexicographers, entertainers and newspaper writers alike. An account of Barbadian speech includes “the *chupse* self-admonitory... disgusted... sorrowful... offensive and abusive... provocative,” and more (Collymore’s list, which provoked the response above, is given in full by Rickford & Rickford 1999:167). The sheer variety of emotions and attitudes which can be perfectly expressed using (KST) has staggered even the most seasoned composers of definitions. The *DJE* entries for (KST) forms make an exemplary catalogue:

[For *Suck-teeth*:] ... annoyance, displeasure, ill-nature, or disrespect... an insult or mark of scorn...
(*DJE*:428)

[*Cho:*] An exclamation expressing scorn, impatience, annoyance, disagreement, expostulation, etc. ... (DJE:103)

[*Chups:*] ...disdain, impatience... a sense of having been wronged, when one is in a position to say so (e.g. when a servant is made to do something against his will) (DJE:103)

Resentful (KST) occurs in the life-story of 'Doreen', echoing precisely the latter situation. A working-class Jamaican girl forced into domestic service, she goes unpaid by the employer whose child she cares for:

"After you are here eating and have shelter... What pay do you want? I don't make no arrangement to pay you." To how she talk is like she save me. Me react by getting neglectful. Me kiss-kiss me teeth every minute. She notice it. "Doreen you not going to bathe Angela?" Me no say notten more dan me get up and do it, but me face swell up. (Sistren 1987:121)

Note the frequency of the gesture, its strategically public nature (performed under the employer's eye), the absence of verbal elaboration, and the facial attitude accompanying and following it.

Allsopp's general definition of *suck-teeth* (1996:538) includes:

...a sign of disgust, contempt, frustration, vexation, or... self-pity

In Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* (1997), the character Patricia Best has been obsessively writing the history of the settlement of Ruby. She is deeply frustrated by intrinsic conflicts in the telling of the history, and at the same time is in an ongoing struggle with her daughter, which causes her to feel both frustration and self-pity. Patricia recalls an incident related to her family and the settlement of Ruby:

"Dovey shushed him. Soane too. (...) But they were just women, and what they said was easily ignored by good brave men on their way to Paradise." Pat sucked her teeth and pushed aside the Best file. She selected a composition notebook and without label or introduction continued to write: "She won't listen to me. Not a word. She works in Demby at a clinic..." [Morrison; 1997:201,2]

Adams (1991:57), a popular treatise on Jamaican speech, calls *kiss-teeth*:

[a] hissing noise of disapproval, dislike, vexation or disappointment

Such lists, however accurate, are in principle incomplete, and led Patrick (1995:246) to characterize (KST) as a generalized marker of negative affect. Louise Bennett-Coverley ('Miss Lou'), Jamaican folklorist/writer/performer *par excellence*, illustrates the idea that frequent use of (KST) and related forms may signify a fundamentally negative disposition in her monologue 'Free Schoolin'. A woman reacts to the announcement of free education:

Den same time one croomojin gal who always ready fi dash dutty water pon people bleachin clothes, she gi out seh, "Cho! It cyaan happen. Is which part poor Jamaica gwine get de money fram fi do all dem wagga-wagga sinting? How we gwine get de money?" (Bennett 1993:22)

The Grenadian humorist Paul Keens-Douglas is even more explicit in his short story 'Party Nice' (1990),⁵ similarly noting that the main character Slim is a personality who is in frequent disagreement with everyone else.

If you see Slim - Slim is the ugliest fellow I ever see - not one teet in the mout. He's the only person I know could mash up a party by smiling. And top of that Slim like to stchoops. You ever see a man without teeth stchoops? Well if you see that you see Slim...

Slim is of the opinion that the narrator has no idea how to throw a proper party, and he intends to intervene:

...From the time Slim reach my house he start to stchoops. He say the place too small, the turntable bad, the needle need changing, and how he know a good fellow name DJ Nosound he going bring him.

Such characters, common in West Indian literature, are bundles of negative emotions waiting for release, and (KST) is often the weapon of choice. Keens-Douglas establishes Slim as a character who is going to be the center of some disaster because he holds the belief that others can never do anything right, and that he is the only one who is really in the know.

(KST) can be used in private or public, to oneself or with others, in monologic, dialogic, or narrative discourse. (KST) is the shortest and most complete form of monologue, often used to great effect in public display; this is common in Jamaica, where people appear to hold long conversations

with themselves in public about something that upsets them. The compact nature of the form was demonstrated by a woman waiting for a late bus, who kissed her teeth loudly and at great length. There was no doubt by anyone else at the bus stop as to the object of the woman's discontent.

The form also occurs in narration (further analyzed below), as in this Gullah *duppy* story from James Island, South Carolina (Turner 1949:281-2):

One time he come as a black snake; and he began to stand up. And when he stand up, he say "Meeow!" I say, "Oh, pshaw! /šΛ/ that's the same cat."

(KST) is stereotyped, however, as occurring in dialogic discourse, between two speakers engaged in conflict. It may be offered actively, even provocatively, as part of a turn initiating an episode of conflict; in responsive mode, (KST) may also be produced defensively, as a rejoinder to a perceived slight or injustice, or as a rejection of the other speaker's moral stance.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* contains only a single incident of *suck-teeth* (1982:144), and it is used to great effect. Nel confronts her friend Sula about Sula's betrayal of her (by having sex with her husband who then abandoned Nel). Nel asks, "How come you did it, Sula?":

There was a silence but Nel felt no obligation to fill it. Sula stirred a little under the covers. She looked bored as she sucked her teeth.

Sula does not simply dismiss Nel's question as worthy of interest, but more deeply dismisses her need to ask such a question. She fundamentally rejects the assumptions upon which the social notions governing sexual relations rest. Sula does go on to give a verbal explanation of her behaviour, but sucking her teeth before forcing herself to speak powerfully frames anything she will subsequently have to say.

Interestingly, critics have noted "the unspoken hostility, eventually overcome, between Nel and Sula" (Hirsch 1990:426; our emphasis), and seen the adult Sula as moving from a "prediscursive" position, "anterior to the acquisition of language", to her "entry into the symbolic order" (Henderson 1990:134). In our view, however, *kiss-teeth* is not pre-linguistic: rather, it reminds us that language in the African Diaspora is embodied, gestural and emotional, as well as cerebral, arbitrary and abstract.

***Kiss-teeth* in settings of institutional power: law-enforcement and the courts**

Responsive (KST) can also be found in institutional settings. There is a near-universal identification of (KST) with parent-child conflict: in discussing *kiss-teeth* with informants, the most common reaction was that a child would be sharply verbally reprimanded or punished for kissing their teeth in the presence of an adult (also true among African informants, Rickford & Rickford 1999:169). This evokes other situations of clear unequal power in which (KST) can be perceived as an act of insubordination: between servants and masters; civilians and police, military, or judges; workers and employers. A low-status person, kissing their teeth upon receiving an order from a high-status person, is understood to commit an act of defiance, disobedience or even revolt.

A newspaper report of a trial in Trinidad bore the headline, "Juror banned for hissing teeth" (*Daily Gleaner* 7/16/92; CANA, Port-of-Spain):

A juror was banned for 3 years by a Trinidad and Tobago high court judge after she was accused of constantly hissing her teeth as witnesses gave evidence during a murder trial. J.B., a juror in the case involving 34-year-old A.P., denied the hissing charge when she was brought before Justice C.D. at the Port-of-Spain third assize court. D. aborted the murder proceedings and has fixed a new date for the trial. Defence attorney I.K. said he saw the juror "steupsing" during the cross-examination of state witnesses while state prosecutor M.M. said he heard the sounds on 3 or 4 occasions. The hissing continued for several days more, the lawyers said.

Clearly this juror wished to announce to all her skepticism of the witnesses' testimony, a communicative act which the court understood as preventing a fair trial from taking place. By kissing her teeth, she violates the rules of *direct discourse* prescribed by the institutional context: she speaks out of turn, relies on hearers to co-construct the meaning, and expresses her own personal stance, thus engaging instead in *directed discourse* (Morgan 1998:262-263 contrasts these). Strikingly, although the actions must have been performed in front of dozens of people, with a court transcriber recording proceedings 'verbatim', the juror felt she could plausibly attempt to deny uttering (KST).

This may be related to the fact that the sounds of (KST), as opposed to the names for it, lack lexical content, and are not commonly represented in

print. They are thus less reportable, and perhaps more deniable – though hardly less real. Further, the dominant language in the legal domain is Standard English; the non-written nature of Creolisms, and the low status of Africanisms, in general, contribute to the possibility of their repression and/or invisibility.

In Trinidad, where (KST) is universally known and negatively sanctioned, denial fails: the juror is scolded and punished, the trial reconvened. But if this incident had taken place in a society where the powerful majority do not use (KST) – perhaps cannot name or even recognize it – would action against the juror even have been possible? How salient is this oral gesture when West Indian or African users are a minority within a dominant society, e.g. the UK or the USA?

(KST) appears to be stereotyped in England (to the extent it is known at all) as an Afro-Caribbean feature. (KST) is used by characters on the popular BBC soap opera *EastEnders* (aired since 1985) in order to signify membership in the West Indian community. This task is not necessarily accomplished by the actors' accents or appearance. There is a significant population in London with recent African origins; while claims of Afro-Caribbean identity may be mediated by age, generation of immigration, personal orientation and other factors. As a sign, (KST) is aimed at an out-group audience, since most watchers of *EastEnders* – like most of the characters – are White.

Such signification has a dangerous side, however: in a racist context, it may lead to arrest, beatings, and persecution. An English newspaper carried this report of a well-known case in London, under the headline, "Why did the police stop this man 37 times?":

Delroy Lindo is a model member of Britain's black community. He works with inner city children... He is articulate, well-dressed and charming. But over the last 15 years he has been stopped by police 37 times and charged with 18 alleged offences.

His crimes? He has sucked his teeth in an 'aggressive manner' in the presence of a police officer. He has been apprehended driving with a dirty number plate. He has been questioned for carrying a copy of *The Observer*. In the last six months, the police have carried out 26 checks to see whether he was driving a stolen vehicle. In all the 37 times he has been stopped, he has never been convicted of a single crime...

Six weeks later [*in summer 2000*] Lindo was arrested again – this time for sucking his teeth aggressively... The inquiry team studied 93 individual intelligence reports on the Lindos, involving a total of 49 officers. A number of the incidents reported involved racially derogatory comments about the family. (*The Observer*, Dec. 10, 2000)

The inference is that Lindo was arrested for being an Afro-Caribbean man, and (KST) helped to bear the weight of racial stigmatization. Moreover, this alleged speech-act – the incident itself is not described – apparently constituted ample justification for police to consider him a risk to public security. (The identity of the arresting officer was not indicated.)

Here, (KST) is not deniable, but neither is it credited with a wide range of contextually-determined meanings. Its inexplicitness, combined with racist stereotyping of Black men as ‘aggressive’, allows the constabulary to interpret the negative affect as threatening. By Afro-Caribbean speech norms, however, this constitutes an overreaction: since *kiss-teeth* expresses a stance of moral superiority it is not generally consonant with threats of physical violence.

In contrast, (KST) is not a stereotype of Caribbean speakers in the USA; indeed, whites are rarely aware of its use by African Americans, either. In a trial involving Jamaicans in the US law enforcement and judicial system, the occurrence of (KST) was initially not recognized, and its significance was entirely missed. Clandestine recordings of speech among members of a *posse* (Jamaican-based gang) were offered as evidence in a trial involving dozens of felony charges, including multiple murders. Linguists served as expert witnesses on both sides. Patrick, testifying for the US Justice Dept.’s prosecution team, analyzed transcripts created by the linguist for the defense, and offered his own (Patrick & Buell 2000).

Defense transcripts were shown to be faulty in many places; among others, they systematically omitted (KST). The example here comes from a discussion of a young gunman, which was consistently misrepresented by defense transcripts, giving the impression that the speaker (DG Brown, here on trial for murder etc.) feared and respected the gunman. Each linguist offered both transcript and translation, in facing columns, to the court:⁶

Defense transcription:

Brown: De man dem like dey afraid a him, though.
Boy, dis boy hya a dangerous boy.

See da kid an him come a man...

Defense Translation:

Brown: The men seemed like they were afraid of him.
Boy, this boy here is a dangerous boy.
See the kid and he's become a man ...

Prosecution transcription:

Brown: De man-dem [x] me wi get fraid a him, y'know.
"Bwoy dis bwoy is a dangerous bwoy."
Ksst! .. M'see wickeda an him come an man,

Prosecution translation:

Brown: The men [x] I would be afraid of him, y'know.
"Boy, this boy is a dangerous boy."
Ksst! .. I've seen wickeder than him come, man,

The (KST) restored here is one of several signals that Brown is contemptuous and scornful of the young gunman. One clear indication is the following utterance by the other speaker, who completes Brown's deprecatory remark by saying "an gone". That is, (KST) immediately precedes the jointly-constructed observation that 'tougher guys have come (and gone)'.
Brown's intonation also signals that the second line is *reported* speech, not his own opinion - reported from the men referred to in the first line, who may have *expected* Brown to be afraid of this gunman. (A few turns before, the defense transcript reported Brown as opining that the man "is a dangerous likkle bwoy from Jamaica"; Patrick's testimony restored the crucial preceding quotative "they say", again marking reported speech.)

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In other words, the omission of (KST) - alongside repeated errors in identifying other segments of speech - contributed to the defense's complete polarity-reversal of the views expressed by Brown. (KST) here clearly signals his dismissive attitude and negative evaluation. The linguist for the defense is a white American, not a native Creole speaker, having only passing familiarity with Jamaican speech; thus he is unable to identify instances of (KST) and interpret their crucial role in conveying speaker orientation to the people and events related in the recordings. (Morgan 1998:259-60 gives a similar example.)

Understanding and deploying *kiss-teeth*, and reacting appropriately to its use, require sophisticated knowledge of speech community norms and expectations – information that is not commonly available to speakers raised outside African (Diaspora) communities. In particular, (KST) is a form of indirect discourse⁷ which requires active co-construction of meaning by speaker and hearers in order to negotiate moral and interactional standing. Even in the Caribbean, it may thus be ruled ‘out of order’ where other norms of speaking apply, and power relationships are institutionally prescribed.

Thus we return to the central character in ‘Party Nice’. As foretold, various disasters occur around Slim; with most of the party, he ends up down at the police station before the judge, and the results are predictable:

Nobody spoil a party like Godfrey. Everybody doing the Tante Merle; it’s Tante dancing and Slim stchooping. Braps Godfrey turn off the music, “Repent and be saved, the end is near.” Three men pick up Godfrey and throw him out the window... Tante Merle calling for ambulance – police come... One thing I can tell you though is that Slim get charge with contempt of court because when the judge ask Slim if he have anything to say, Slim only stchoops. (Keens–Douglas 1990)

***Kiss-teeth* in literature**

In Michelle Cliff’s story ‘Transactions’, a white Jamaican travelling salesman comes across a little white baby girl (German–Jamaican) in the middle of the road. He and his brown–skin wife have no children. He decides to take the baby home. He realizes that his wife won’t be happy with this. Here is what he imagines:

As he drives he alternates between making plans and imagining his homecoming and his wife’s greeting. You must have taken leave of your senses, busha. She calls him busha when she’s angry and wants him to stand back. No busha. Is who tell you we have room fi pickney? He will say he had no choice. Was he to leave this little girl in the middle of a country road covered with dirt and sores and hungry? Tell me, busha, tell me jus’ one ting: Is how many pickney you see this way on your travels, eh? Is why you don’t bring one home sooner? Tell me that. Everybody wants a child that favors them, that’s all. She will kiss her teeth.

(Cliff 1998: 9–10)

One of the first things that struck us in researching *kiss-teeth* is how often it occurs in daily interaction, yet how rarely in many written materials. This is true for writings of all kinds – not just fiction, where dramatic necessity might explain it (comedy excepted), but also reports of early Jamaican interaction, and contemporary nonfiction observations.

One reason for (KST)'s rarity in print, in the non-lexical forms described above, is that it is often substituted by the exclamations *Cho*, *Chu*, and occasionally *Chut*. *Cho* is found among Creole speakers in Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Costa Rica (Limonese Creole) and the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, as well as Jamaica; Douglas Taylor attested it in *Island Carib* (*DJE*:103, *DCEU*:152; Holm 1978). As with the sounds of (KST), there is no morphological content here – these items cannot serve as names, nouns or verbs, and occur only in speech or direct representations of speech, i.e. not as part of a meta-linguistic label.

However, like many conventionalized interjections, they do have fixed forms and regular spellings. *Cho* is thus inherently more suitable for literary use than the sounds of (KST) which, we saw above, are difficult to represent. Note, however, that it can only occur in narration which boldly proclaims itself as speech – not in that sort of omniscient narration which pretends to be silent thought. No-one kisses their teeth in their mind.

Chut, still used in Jamaica among older speakers, is found in Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (first published 1848; cited 1865, II:182):

“Chut!” said the old woman... “what signifies!”

Dickens was the son of a naval family, and characters in *Dombey* travel to the West Indies, so the direction of borrowing is not entirely clear; but the usage is colloquial by Caribbean standards. *Chi!* is attested even earlier in an African travel account recalling the 1840s. *Trade and travels in the Gulph of Guinea, Western Africa*, describes an interview by author J. Smith with King Pepple of Bonny, Nigeria:

On his left in the open court, stood perfectly erect a fine looking, intelligent negro, opposite the door by which my friend and I had entered, with his back to a huge water cask, to which his hands were stretched out and nailed, a ten-a-penny nail being driven through the palm of each hand, and plaited on the inside of the cask. “Halloo,” we simultaneously exclaimed, “what palaver now King?” “Chi,” he said with great

nonchalance; “dat fellow be big tief.” “Well, what has he stolen?” “Better you take some chop,” (all kinds of food is called chop,) “and then I must tell a you.”
(Smith 1851:43)⁸

What we find in writing is that the principal names above (*kiss-teeth*, *suck-teeth*, *chups*) occur rarely and late, with only *suck-teeth* so far attested before the mid-20th century (and then only to 1915); while *Cho!* and related forms occur relatively early, and more often. A brief survey of various materials confirms this impression.

Summer Lightning and other stories by Olive Senior (1987, 134 pages), an author celebrated for her ability to bring to life a wide variety of characters (especially rural ones) through their speech, contains only 3 instances, all of the interjection *Cho*. Senior was chosen because she frequently uses Jamaican Creole in full-voiced narration, as well as in quoted speech. The young narrator of ‘Ballad’ relates a conversation between adults, in which Doris uses responsive *Cho!* to reject MeMa’s moral censure:

And MeMa did get so vex that she just shut her Bible and tell Big Mout Doris how she just say a wicked thing and was just a tough head nayga and would never find redemption she so blasphemous and fill up with evil thought. And Big Mout Doris say, “Cho, is because I talk truth and you don’t like it...”
(Senior 1987:123)

An obvious factor in composed speech, such as occurs in fiction and drama, is that verisimilitude is not the writer’s purpose – might indeed be counter-productive. This is especially so for authors negotiating new conventions that draw on both the Creole continuum and traditions of English literature, with literacy rooted in the latter. We expect, then, that literary tokens of (KST) should ring true – often enough, even stereotypical – but not that their frequency or range of functions be representative of any speech corpus. Infrequent use, as in Senior, Cliff or Morrison, heightens dramatic impact when it does occur; while repetition, as in Keens-Douglas, achieves comic effect.

Lionheart Gal: Life stories of Jamaican women (1987) is a collection of first-person nonfiction accounts which originated in oral tellings that were tape-recorded, then subsequently transcribed and edited. Most of the fifteen are by working-class women, and they capture Jamaican speech authentically in many ways; they also contain numerous accounts of interpersonal conflict,

likely sites for (KST). However, there are only 3 instances of *kiss-teeth*, and 2 of *Cho!* in 280 pages of text. In this extract from 'Ole Massa and Me', a policeman (Lurch) has been called by a woman who discovered her husband (Ole Massa) is sleeping with the narrator. Both women witness the interaction between the two men, which takes place in a bar, from outside:

Him go inna di bar to Ole Massa. Ole Massa say, "But what is she doing here? Yuh hungry?" She cyaan answer. "Di pickney dem hungry?" She cyaan answer. "Yuh no have no money?" She cyaan answer. Lurch just kiss him teeth and turn through di bar door. "Come out a di people-dem yard!" him say. (Sistren 1987:237)

From his masculine haven, the husband dissipates potential conflict with the policeman by addressing his wife directly. Lurch uses (KST) to salvage his own moral position and, his obligations discharged, ends the interaction and orders the wife away. Another family quarrel is recounted in 'Exodus a Run':

"Ah tell yuh grandfaada fi go up deh go warn her"... Later on Grandpa come back and a step past. Mum go out and say, "How it go?" Him kiss him teeth, "Me kick down de gal. Me go up deh and a chat to di gal. She a gwan like seh a no me a her faada..." (Sistren 1987:56)

Here the *kiss-teeth* is not uttered to an antagonist's face at all, but rather unites the narrator's grandfather and mother in expressions of negative emotion (scorn, outrage, anger) aimed at the third party from a distance. Thus (KST) need not be directed towards a partner in conflict: it can be directed away at an audience, as with Lurch above, or displaced into a later narrative of the conflict incident, as the grandfather does here. Negative affect is thus expressed, but in an attempt to create solidarity between speaker and hearer.

In Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), the character Sweetie is seen wandering down a country road heading out of town, apparently weeping. Seneca is in the back of a pickup truck, hidden, stealing a ride. The driver and his wife in the cab are concerned for Sweetie and offer her a lift:

In the cab, the driver and his wife exchanged looks. Then the driver leaned out the window, twisting his head to holler at Sweetie's back, "You need some help?" Sweetie did not turn her head or acknowledge the offer. The

couple looked at each other and sucked teeth as the husband shifted into drive... The couple could see in the rearview mirror a passenger they didn't know they had, running to join the pitiful, ill-raised creature who had not even said No, thank you. [Morrison 1997:126]

The driver and his wife suck their teeth because Sweetie has not met their expectations as to proper social discourse. The joint gesture shows the husband's and wife's mutual solidarity, and validates a shared moral code.

Historical texts from 19th-century Jamaica, compiled by Jean D'Costa and Barbara Lalla (1989, 1990) are richer in examples. These writings mostly comprise observations of vernacular speech by outsiders to the island, or by standard-speaking Jamaicans high in social status. With the exception of possible reference to (KST) by Russell (below), only *Cho* appears: 26 times in the two volumes (totalling over 210 pages of text).

The first cases we find are two observations by Cynric Williams, who visited the island for less than 3 months in 1823; they have a familiar ring to today's users. Both report dialogue between two slaves, Ebenezer (=Abby Sneezer) and Abdallah (=Dolla):

Abdallah had fallen into conversation with Abby Sneezer, about the sable nymph who had enchanted him... more than once his interrogatories had been answered with, "Cha! You know nutting"

Eben. Fait move mountains.

Dol. Hi! Move dat hill den – for my mule... wont go up him.⁹

Eben. Cho! You no hab fait, nor grace nor light... you wicked somebody.

(quoted from D'Costa & Lalla 1989:39–40)

Use of *kiss-teeth* to discourage a suitor, or put down a facetious comment, is still perfectly modern – though observations of slaves' speech by outsiders have a curiously one-dimensional nature, lacking the subtlety of interactional positioning that is a normal feature of its natural use. In particular, the impression that each participant occupies a plausible moral stance (although they may be in conflict) is conveyed by the contemporary examples, but not the caricatures by non-Jamaican Whites. These often had political purposes: Williams conveys an anti-abolitionist message (cf. D'Costa & Lalla 1989:37).

In both cases above, the exclamation accompanies an insulting remark. This common pattern pairs a non-verbal element, (KST), which fully expresses the speaker's attitude, with a verbal elaboration that embroiders

and extends it. Drawing-out the former may provide processing-time for invention of the latter; a consequence can be a series of remarks punctuated by (KST). An example published in 1862 by W.G. Hamley was set decades earlier, so the observations date to the 1830s; a slave visits an obeahman and, perhaps implausibly, teases him:

“Don’t vex, Daddy,” replied Leander, good-humouredly; “you can’t frighten me wid your nonsense. Why, I seen conjurers dat will show you for sixpence sich tings as would make you die wid spite, and yet eberybody knows dey is all a cheat.” “Chaw!” said the daddy, his wrinkled countenance puckering into a pitying smile – “Chaw! What you talk to me ‘bout sich wortless creature? What dem able for do? Chaw!” and the sage spat in contempt on the ground... He did not too readily accept Leander’s facts. He again said, “Chaw! Tuff and nonsense”...

(quoted from D’Costa & Lalla 1989:120)

Cho also occurs responsively, to parry an insult. In Henry G. Murray’s novel *Tom Kittle’s Wake* (1877), a notoriously sharp-tongued woman called Wire-waist Maria ‘puts her mouth pon’ Red Head Thomas in an act of pointed indirection (Morgan 1998). She speaks aloud, apparently not to him, but in a voice carrying enough so that:

as Tom brushed past, the words fell upon his ear... “Him head dis faber dem dry cocoanut, and it red de same like a when you boil natta wid rice.” “You yerry dat agen, sir?” cried Thomas. “Cho, don min him!” said one of his friends. “Dat gal don’t righted in a him head, sir.”

(D’Costa & Lalla 1989:101)

It would be no surprise, either, if Maria had prefaced her remark with (KST). As a signal that the next utterance (whether indirect or not) is to be derogatory, the salience of *kiss-teeth* makes an effective attention-getting device. (In her discussion of African American *loud-talking*, a very similar strategy, Mitchell-Kernan 1972 also highlights the importance of volume.)

Although in literature *Cho* may stand in for (KST), in speech they are independent and have complex possibilities of co-occurrence; while both *Cho* and *chups* may take on meanings not stereotypically associated with (KST). For example, in Jamaica *chups* may refer to a light affectionate kiss (Velma Pollard, p.c.), carrying no negative affect whatsoever. Less radically, a *chups* may be phonetically similar to (KST) but not so extreme – by varying

the parameters of duration, intensity, etc. it becomes potentially less offensive or volatile than *kiss-teeth*. It is sometimes referred to as a “little chups”, showing ironic amusement or mild annoyance (Carolyn Cooper, p.c.).¹⁰

Similarly, *Cho* may be used to show affection, though this often takes place via a display of mock irritation. In *Tom Kittle’s Wake*, the title character ‘used to belong to an old brown man named John’; here they talk:

John used to say, “I don’t know how to bex wid Tom. De boy sabe me life...” Tom used to reply, “Bex no massa!... I cant bear nobody tell tory pon me.” To this old John used to rejoin, after regarding Tom with a comical mixture of affection and displeasure, “Cho, go bout you business, man; you is a cupid boy.”
(D’Costa & Lalla 1989:91)

Such examples do not violate the characterization of (KST) as a marker of negative affect, but suggest that it may be contextualized in complex ways. However in the next speech, again in *Hamley* (1862), a ‘brown nurse’ speaks in mesolectal Creole to her white charge; the emotion expressed is regret:

“De fus’ young man I ever nus, he very much in de same way as you is, and I bring him round. Nice young man! he come court me before he sick: I used to pretty den; dat is a long time ago. He most my fus’ sweetheart. Chaw! How I lub him! Those times was different from now.”
(Lalla & D’Costa 1990:178)

This clearly positive attitude towards the former lover (and, to a lesser degree, the patient of the present) might yet be characterized as negative in a more abstract fashion. It arises in a context of absence or loss – to use a grammatical metaphor, it is modally or aspectually negative: the regretted situation is past, not having lasted, or unrealis, never having come to be.

Such an analysis, though, may not be consistent with a characterization of (KST) as expressing “negative affect”, however generalized. That definition of function was intended to replace the simple listing of emotions that constituted previous explanatory accounts, up to and including the Rickfords (who consistently refer to its “meanings” in quotes, indicating perhaps unease with such an analysis). Our literary examples thus appear to carry beyond a boundary, requiring us to search for and recognize positive or neutral uses of (KST).

***Kiss-teeth* in speech, I: Beyond the boundary**

Although traces of *kiss-teeth* have indeed surfaced in print, it is evident that (KST) is quintessentially an oral form. Indeed, it is one that not only stands for the primacy of speech over writing, but of vernacular speech over standard forms modelled on writing, and thus of Creole over English. No clearer indication of this need be given than Lorna Goodison's poem "Turn thanks to Miss Mirry":

...She could not read or write a word in English
but took every vowel and consonant of it
and rung it around, like the articulated neck
of our Sunday dinner sacrificial fowl.
In her anger she stabbed at English, walked it out,
abandoned it in favor of a long kiss-teeth... (Goodison 1999:12-13)

In literature, however, the context is carefully constructed to focus the meaning(s) conveyed by such dramatic discourse elements, while the linear nature of print dictates that the complexities of duration, intensity and simultaneity are rarely represented. In real life, the ambiguity and flexibility of (KST) require care and skill in both performance and interpretation.

Kiss-teeth can occur at the beginning of an utterance, at any point within it, as a back-channelled response to a simultaneous utterance or situation, or at the end of a remark or event. It brackets units of talk, and also tracks the participants' reactions to the discourse and to each other (Mary Coit, p.c.). While one can kiss one's teeth at any time during an utterance, doing so while someone else is speaking is normally taken as a hostile or provocative act, unless an alternative reading is clearly signalled by the context.¹¹

One of its more common functions in interaction is as a marker of disagreement. Kissing one's teeth as someone is speaking may show disagreement with some part, or all, of what they are saying:

First Woman: "And den di man se no fi im pickney."
[And then the man said it wasn't his child]
Second Woman: "Kst!"

The second speaker may be indicating disbelief in the man's reported claims, or in the first woman's claims; or her response may reflect distaste for the whole topic or situation. Where (KST) occurs can signal the object of disagreement: e.g., at "di man", or "no fi im pickney", or "pickney", or at the end of the utterance. The same example, however, also serves to illustrate how (KST) may function to express agreement. If the first woman scorns the man's claim that the child is not his, the second one's *kiss-teeth* may signal solidarity with her.

Despite the default negative interpretation (the only one cited in most previous literature), it may prove impossible to identify a primitive semantic unit which (KST) originally represents, and from which it diverges – or to which it adds layers – over time, in a process like grammaticalization (Hopper & Traugott 1993). Thus, as an interactive device, (KST) may differ from discourse markers like *like*, as well as *well* (English) and *bueno* (Spanish). The latter originate as semantic units and then acquire pragmatic functions related to extension, inferencing or reanalysis of the original meaning. Change appears to happen fairly rapidly, and interpretation may differ from one contemporary speech community or social group to another. *Kiss-teeth*, on the other hand, encodes a largely-shared range of meaning across the African Diaspora today, with few innovations or gaps, while the earliest examples we can find match contemporary ones; and among its users there are no secrets or disagreements as to its interpretation.

This may be because it is so closely tied to the enforcement of shared norms and the enactment of moral positioning. A striking example of this is the persistence across decades of the parent/child proscription noted above. A laborer in his mid-40s on a sugar estate, Son-son vividly recalled unjust beatings he received as a child from his mother's partner. Years afterwards, as a young man Son-son encountered him again:

Son-son: My madda was off to Englan' an.. One day he was down dere an I s- see 'im an- a nex' man seh to me seh, 'You don' see you faada-in-law, bwoy you kyaan call to 'im?' [KST] Mi suck mi teet'. Mi gwan, dat time I was workin',

Patrick: yeh

Son-son: Mi suck mi teet' an' mi go a work an come back, an' mi come back. De man 'im seh, mi mosn' treatin' my faada-in-

law so, man, not because 'im use to give floggin' an' ting. Mi

seh, "But, de man do mi bad, man."

(JC-R4b, 7/18/92, E St. Thomas)¹²

The prohibition against intergenerational (KST) is powerful. Many Jamaicans nurse childhood memories of violence at the hands of adults, and declare such treatment unfair and excessive; yet even such experiences can hardly justify an adult kissing his teeth at a man who, after all, was not his parent. Notice that Son-son both reports his speech act, and recreates it as well.

In other relationships, notably cross-gender ones, (KST) may play a less incendiary role, expressing permissible reactions that may be difficult to characterize as negative. In a recent popular Jamaican play "*What the hell is happening to us, my dear?*" (Dawkins 2000), the only instance of *kiss-teeth* occurred when Nicey, the working-class heroine, was listening to her *baby-father* explain why he had left her and why he was sorry and wanted to come back. She stood with arms folded, lips protruding in a pout, and then kissed her teeth to heighten the message that she was not happy, portraying hurt, and her need for reassurance, more than anger. (Gonzales'1922 glossary, for Gullah, also notes *suck-teeth* is "frequently indulged in by the fair sex".)

Here (KST) is wheedling for affection, forgiveness, or attention, as part of the interactive negotiation between participants. Ironically, though (KST) is usually not associated with children due to the general prohibition, the wheedling that accompanies this use of (KST) is a kind of coy, childlike behaviour. Olive Senior (p.c.) observes that even today,

Cho is much used in love-play, in attempts at persuasion, etc., even by small children... *Cho* as an involuntary expression of mild annoyance is permissible (even my mother used it, and that's saying a lot!). *Chut* is more often what I heard from old people.

In this light, the second meaning of *chups*, viz. 'kiss', cannot be dismissed as unrelated – though it may be clearly distinguished in use from (KST), it is easily derived via similarity of sound and lip attitudes. Similarly, we can now see that the *Cho* in response to Wire-waist Maria, above, involves not merely dismissal of her insult, but also the persuasion of Red Head Thomas by his friend.

In another common instance, (KST) is used by a speaker to distance himself from his own earlier actions, and affirm his present conformity with norms for adult behavior. Frank, 30 years old, regales the listeners (his girlfriend; Patrick; and a neighbor, a cane-cutter in his early 60s) with tales of his fights and stone-throwing 'wars' as a bad-boy. He concludes the account, a reformed man:

Frank: dem days deh did nice still, but—[xx] mi no look trouble [KST]
(JC-R15a, 7/29/92, Hanover)

As he kisses his teeth, Frank stretches his chin upwards and half-closes his eyes in a resolute gesture characteristic of young men, reminding us that (KST)'s embodied nature links it to other gestures besides *cut-eye*. Similarly for a 1920s example from South Carolina (Stoney & Shelby 1930:155)¹³:

Cain suck he teet'. He set eye on Abel an' say, slow an' hard,
"How you dare to put sich a name on yo' Pa an' you brudder before God?"

Examining natural speech closely will certainly expand our understanding of pragmatic elements beyond what can be derived from written records, but to ignore the physical and visual is to stop too short.

***Kiss-teeth* in speech, II: Narrative evaluation**

Son-son's example, above, points to another important use of (KST) in oral practice: it functions as an evaluative marker in personal narratives. Considering the telling of events that enter into a speaker's biography and are transformed in narration, Schifffrin notes "narratives do not just report, they also evaluate, experience" (1994:306), while Polanyi considers that evaluation is necessary and pervasive in narrative (1985). Labov defines "evaluation of a narrative event [a]s information on the consequences of the event for human needs and desires" (1997:403). Early analysis (Labov & Waletzky 1967) focused principally on explaining the occurrence of structural features including negatives, comparatives, modals or irrealis elements as manifestations of narrator evaluation. Direct quotations also play an important role, generally signalling that events are open to evaluation. As representations of actual speech uttered at the time of events, they allow the

teller to portray moral judgments or emotional reactions (subjective feelings) as objective events, thus heightening the transfer of experience from narrator to listener (Labov 1997).

Unlike the syntactic devices just mentioned, *kiss-teeth* is inherently evaluative whenever it occurs, and always directly represents speech (except when used as a meta-linguistic label). Its use in narration may thus be deliberately ambiguous between representing the narrator's own utterance at the time of the events narrated, or a later interjection at the moment of narration; in either case it is evaluative. Son-son, above, clearly intends at least the former, since the anecdote is about the propriety of kissing his teeth; but the attitude expressed is also the one he maintains and justifies in the moment of telling.

Another ambiguous instance is found in a narrative about *instigating* which culminates in a physical fight, told by 20-year-old African American woman Zinzi (Morgan 1998:273; some transcription symbols omitted). (KST) marks the moment of no return, and might be either reported speech or subsequent evaluation:

- 34 And you know .. everybody was like "Yes you DI::D say
35 that .. and I HEARD IT" and she was like "Yeah I DI::D
36 say it because it IS TRUE." And I'm just like "You
37 DON'T know NOTHING about NOTHING and
38 dahdahdahdah. And then so ((*suck teeth*)) that was
39 it .. when she just got up in my face.

James, a Jamaican preacher's son who delights in recounting childhood fights, uses both functions in quick succession. Going up a country hill to pick guineps, he meets his nemesis coming down with friends, holding a full sack:

- 1 I saw this Maaga Lion now... coming down. Him have a big 'bout 6-
2 pound bag full wit' guinep an it runnet' over, running over.
3 So I just [KST] pick off two, man.
4 [KST] Cho, who tell me fi do dat?
5 Maaga Lion jus gi' a man-dem de bag fi hold, man.
6 Cho [*laughs*], start rock me wid some decent right left an' ting!
7 Belly bottom! When mi a defen' belly bottom, face! an' so on.
8 [*laughs*] Man a gi' me some decent right hand, man, an'...
9 [KST] I seh, Cho! Mi kyaan tek dis no more.

(JC-U44b, 11/13/89, Kingston)

In line 3, the word *just* combines with (KST) to convey the narrator's evaluation of his provocative gesture as a minor, understandable temptation, incommensurate with the response, setting up the ultimate accounting of praise and blame. The next line contains both (KST) and *Cho*: at least the latter is reported as part of the verbal challenge – even though the challenge is recounted in indirect speech (note the pronoun *me* where Maaga Lion would have used *you*). In line 6 James ruefully recalls getting the worst of things; *Cho* here is a contemporary comment from narrator to audience (two friends and Patrick), shifting the perspective on what was evidently not humorous when it happened. Finally, in line 9 (KST) is again ambiguous, while *Cho* and the direct quotation animate the narrator's internal resolution, casting it as an objective event (utterance), as is typical in personal narrative.

Perhaps the richest set of functions and meanings so far can be found in an extended narrative of supernatural illness and spiritual healing told by Son-son's friend and co-worker, Coppa, a cane-cutter in his mid-40s. The two men took turns relating their life-stories to Patrick one Saturday afternoon in the shady bend of a country lane, attended by a half-dozen listeners. Coppa, too, told of childhood beatings, and notably used (KST) to emphasize his personal experience of physical pain:

- Coppa Reason why mi leave Mount F now, my s- unc- step- de uncle-
 in-law dat mi had, da' was along wit' mi aunt, was a murderer to
 me!
- Son-son *[laughs]*
- Coppa yeh man! I mean, de man- [KST] man, who f- who feels it knows
 it, who feels it knows it you know... you no see

(JC-R4b, 7/18/92, E St. Thomas)

Subsequently, in response to a question by Patrick concerning true *duppy* (spirit) stories, Coppa gave a long account of his *bigfoot* illness, mistreated by doctors and only cured through a succession of traditional ethnomedical healers (Patrick and Payne-Jackson 1996, Patrick 1999, give details). This narrative diverges from Labov's ideal type in several ways: it includes interruptions from sceptical listeners, responses and negotiations by Coppa, non-iconic ordering of events in the retelling, and frequent reporting of subjective feelings.

While high subjectivity often characterizes narratives told by middle-class, educated speakers, Coppa's choice stems rather from the primary function of his public account. To reintegrate himself into the community, he must explain the serious illness which marginalized him (and for which sorcery was a possible cause) and the even more remarkable healing process, and persuade listeners that his experience of suffering has a spiritual meaning which re-establishes his moral credentials. To accomplish this he tackles the Reportability Paradox ("Reportability is inversely correlated with credibility", Labov 1997:407) head-on, engaging his critics, attempting to persuade them, testifying in religious language to his suffering, and invoking Biblical and Rastafarian authority for the status it gives him.

In the 14-minute narrative, Coppa uses the sound (KST) twenty times, and *Cho* 3 times (always with KST). Several are typical instances of negative affect, as in this scornful response to a bystander's laughter near the start, when he first introduces his injury and claims it to be of supernatural causes:

- 3 See it here, you think (is) a joke business. [KST] You think mi afraid
(to) show her.¹⁴

whereupon he does remove his boot and display the foot. Another common use is to give emphatic witness to the bodily pain he felt from it:

- 10 After it come out, [KST] (it's) three days straight mi foot burn me.
12 Is so the foot used to feel. [KST] ...
14 Oh God, man, one time you see, man? [KST] Mi could even not put it
 in a boot. So mi know, mi know say evil (is) there.

Pain is often expressed, in life as in literature, by non-linguistic vocalization, as are other basic emotions (recall the discussion of *Sula*). In 14, Coppa simultaneously seeks to evoke sympathy from listeners by expressing his own self-pity using (KST); this also occurs, complete with tears, in:

- 15 Tears drop out of mi eye... [KST] You see when... the nurse
 seh de doctor no have [=is] no use to mi foot, mi come in
 like [=become like a] man lost.

In other cases, pity is projected onto other characters via direct quotation, introduced or punctuated by *kiss-teeth*. One involves the *science-man*

(occult healer), a distant cousin of Coppa, who is not powerful enough to heal him, yet is the first to give him some relief:

- 19 You know, and mi start to cry. The man seh to me, seh,
 “[KST] Mi cousin, eh? Bwoy... you no lose a toe yet!”
20 “So if you no lose a toe, you nah go lose the foot, don’ cry.
 Don’ cry, you hear, mi cousin? ... [KST] Let me see it here.”

This healer is very supportive and comforting, emphasizing their kinship, allaying his fears and sending him to the Maroon woman who eventually cures him. She too receives a kin term (‘Mother’) in address, lays hands upon him, and cries tears for his pain, asking Coppa kindly what is wrong:

- 16 “What do (you)?” [KST] Mi seh, “Madda, mi no even know, y’know.”

Further instances of direct quotation, with stereotypical (KST) use, include dialogue with the taxi driver who takes Coppa to see the *science-man*. Coppa is suspicious when the question of money is raised – he has earlier detailed his great, and fruitless, expenses in paying doctors’ fees:

- 17 Mi seh, “Money? Is how much money?” [KST] Him seh, “Bwoy,
 a [=it’s] mi fare, you know.” Him want cigarette.

However, this is a turning point in the narrative, from being at the mercy of exploitative Western medicine to being cared for by sympathetic folk practitioners. Having established his moral position where money is concerned, Coppa then dismisses mere fairness and indulges in generosity:

- 18 Mi seh, “How much a [=is] you fare?” Him seh, “Ten dollar.”
 Mi seh, “Cho! [KST] Ten dollar.” Mi carry the man go a
 restaurant go buy him a lunch, an’ buy him ten cigarette an’...
 gi’ him a ten twenty dollar in him pocket, an’ pay him fare.

While the time of utterance of (KST) in (17) is again ambiguous, in (18) Coppa embodies his reaction to the taxi driver’s minimal request in a speech event.

These examples return us to familiar usage, with meanings easily numbered among those in the dictionary definitions. When speaking of Madda, however, Coppa relies on *kiss-teeth* to articulate the more profound

emotion of awe. He uses (KST) – in his own voice, now – in deference both to widely-respected Maroon occult powers (7), and to the evil sources (*duppy*, 1; *obeah*, 11) of his *bigfoot*, as well as the just God whom he serves, and who ordained his suffering (13):

- 7 from Madda hand gi' me lickle continued water fi drink, man—
 [KST] Man, mi seh Madda tek out one nail out o' mi foot!
 One tenpenny nail come out o' de foot yah already, man!
- 1 Well naturally! Bu- mi [KST] feel the hands of duppy, man.
- 11 Ohh. [KST] Mi feel de hands of black-man, man, so mi know seh
 obeah deh [= *is real*].
- 13 And see it, ohh? [KST] See it deh! Mi seh, mi did get de
 foot da' [= *so*] mi can give God t'anks and praise...

Expressing awe with (KST) is not just idiosyncratic to Coppa. Speaking of duppies, Mas John, an elderly cane-cutter in Hanover, uses it too:

- Mas John ee- a wan hawful somethin' dem, you know,
Patrick eh?
Mas John [KST] see all when de duppy-dem a come fo 'urt you,
 y'know spar, a so [= *that's how*] dem do you, y'know, star.

(JC-R14b, 7/29/92, Hanover)

as do other folk speakers (e.g., Dance 1985:43ff). If the communication of feelings like pain, pity and awe via (KST) cannot be easily accommodated by even a generalized notion of negative affect, their occurrence in personal narratives as reflections of the teller's evaluation of events seems natural and inevitable. Furthermore, if such narratives are at heart "accounts of conflict between human actors" (Labov 1997:409), then the classic view of *kiss-teeth* as a feature of conflict dialogue largely holds true for them.

We have seen how speakers creatively manipulate quotation and temporal ambiguity in deploying (KST). We might, too, have explored its occurrence alongside typical structural cues for evaluation (note examples of negative context above in 14, 20; unrealis in 3, 19; imperative in 13, and again 20). The linguistic study of oral narratives in the African Diaspora remains a largely unwritten chapter.

Conclusion

(KST) is shown here to be a ubiquitous and salient sign, rarely written but available as a literary device, in Black and Creole speech communities. It is rich in realizations, discourse functions, interactional contexts and possibilities for sequential organization. Its wide range of meaning, though remarkably unified across the Diaspora, cannot be restricted to negative affect. It is inherently evaluative and inexplicit, linked to direct representation of speech (but also used in metalinguistic labelling), and therefore often ambiguous in interpretation, especially in narrative functions. This makes it an interactional resource for negotiating and enacting moral standing. At the same time, it is often employed in expressing physical and emotional feeling. An essentially embodied and gestural oral sign, it belongs to a complex set located on the edge of the linguistic system. Yet its use is deeply embedded in community norms, referring to shared expectations of conduct and attitude – a feature of indirect discourse which requires active involvement of both speaker and hearers in the co-construction of intention and the assignment of praise and blame.

In tracing African influences among New World languages, linguists typically restrict their attention to lexical evidence and structural features of grammar and phonology, with rare exceptions (e.g. Morgan 1993). Recent sophisticated surveys by creolists (Baker 1999, Baker & Huber *fc.*, Parkvall 2000) still ignore pragmatic phenomena, even on the lexical level (e.g. meta-linguistic labels). The clear African origins and Diaspora-wide distribution of *kiss-teeth* and similar expressive signs call for attention, from Creole studies and beyond.

Notes

This article is lovingly dedicated by Esther Figueroa to her father, John Figueroa, who would have greatly enjoyed the topic, and to her mother, Dorothy Figueroa, whose duty it was to instruct Esther as a child not to kiss her teeth; and by Peter

Patrick to the late Fred Cassidy, first scholar of (KST), and to Miss Lou, possibly its greatest living exponent.

1. Many people contributed to this article by pointing us to examples, tracking down references, and collecting data or testing ideas on informants; most also improved or corrected our ideas by sharing their thoughts on *kiss-teeth*. We are especially grateful to: Enam Al-Wer (Mediterranean Arabic); Jennes Anderson and Mark Figueroa, also Peetra, Jo and Nara Anderson-Figueroa (Jamaican; bus-stop ex.); Junior Bailey (Jamaican); Edward Baugh (Collymore quote); Ken Bilby (Caribbean, South American and African data and references); Sue Blackwell (help with Delroy Lindo ex.); Sam Buell (Jamaican *posse* data); Richard Cameron (Puerto Rican Spanish); Randi Christensen (African American); Mary Coit (Trinidadian and Guyanese); Carolyn Cooper (Jamaican); Michel Degraff (Haitian); Monica Ghosh (Toni Morrison exs.); Samuel Grant (Jamaican); Joan Houston Hall (*DARE* data); Anita Herzfeld (Argentinian Spanish, Limón Creole); Magnus Huber (Nigerian historical data); Pamela Knight (London Jamaican); Manyu Malhotra (Indian English); Bettina Migge (Surinam Creoles); Thomas Minott (Jamaican); Mervyn Morris (Jamaican); Salikoko Mufwene (Bantu); Abolaji Samuel Mustapha (modern Nigerian English); Ken Patrick (Jamaican); Michelle Paul (midwestern American English); Velma Pollard (Jamaican; Goodison poem); Suzanne Romaine (on ideophones); Olive Senior (Jamaican); Caroline Sinavaiana (Samoan); John Singler (Liberian); Michelle Straw (British English, London Jamaican); Lise Winer (Trinidadian); and Leonard Zwilling (*DARE* data). Michelle Paul's careful editing of various drafts was invaluable. Tucker Childs, William Labov and Arthur Spears among others made helpful comments on the January 4 2002 presentation to the Society for Pidgin and Creole Linguistics in San Francisco. Patrick thanks the British Academy for travel funds to present a version of this paper to the Society for Caribbean Linguistics XIV meeting, 16 August 2002 at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago.
2. Readers are referred to the Rickfords' classic study, which this is intended to complement (though we draw on their account in the next section).
3. Papiamentu has direct influences from both Romance languages in its history, but Sranan may have had tenuous contact with Portuguese only, via Jewish refugees from Brazil who influenced Saramaccan. Several articles in Huber & Parkvall (1999) address this issue. Haitian Creole is even more remote from Iberian influences.
4. For data from the not-yet-published Vol. 4, which contains *suck-teeth*, we thank Joan Houston Hall and Leonard Zwilling.
5. The Keens-Douglas text is transcribed from this audiotape reference.
6. Presentation has been rearranged but the spoken text is identical to that offered in court. In the prosecution text, [x] represents a syllable that has not been satisfactorily identified.
7. Not to be confused with indirect (i.e. reported) speech: the forms of (KST) which cannot serve as meta-linguistic labels always directly represent speech, as noted below.

8. Thanks to Magnus Huber for this example.
9. *Hi!*, though clearly a different form, has similar connotations to (KST) in older Jamaican usage; today, although still censorious, it nearly always occurs only as a summons.
10. In Bermuda the term *chopsin* is given to mean ‘chattering idly’ by Smith & Barrit (1984); see also ‘chop’ *n*₂, in *DARE*1:649, which may well be related.
11. Though it is hardly a signal of impending violence – see the Delroy Lindo case above.
12. All recordings by Patrick unless otherwise noted. Reference number, date and location are given; pseudonyms are used for all (other) speakers.
13. Thanks to Leonard Zwilling for this example.
14. All numbered examples are from Coppa’s narrative; numbers refer to the order in which he uttered the 20 tokens of KST. Parentheses indicate text supplied for English equivalency; italic text in brackets indicates translations.

Table 1: Distribution of principal forms of (KST) in the Americas

		<i>Meta-linguistic Labels</i>		<i>Onomatopoeic Terms</i>		
				<i>Ideophones</i>		
		<i>kiss-teeth</i>	<i>suck-teeth</i>	<i>chups</i>	<i>cho</i>	<i>other</i>
N America	<i>Gullah</i>	-x-	s-(y-)t	-x-	<i>pshaw /šʌ/</i>	
	<i>AAE, Afro-Seminole</i>		s-(y-)t		-x-	
W Caribbean						
	<i>Bahamas</i>	k-y-t at sb, hiss	s-(y-)t		pchuh	
	<i>Belize</i>		s-(y-)t			
	<i>Jamaica</i>	k-t, k-y-t at sb, k(-k)-y-t, hiss-y-t	s-t, s-y-t, s-y-t at s.o.	chups & sp.v.	cho, chu, chaw, chut	
	<i>Caymans</i>		s-y-mouth			
	<i>Haiti</i>	-x-	-x-	poss.= <i>tuipe</i>		<i>tchoupe, kuipe</i>
E Caribbean						
	<i>Barbados</i>		s-(y-)t	chups & sp.v.	cho	
	<i>Antig/Dominica/Gren</i>			chups & sp.v.	cho (inc Carib)	
	<i>Nevis</i>			stupe(-y-mouth)		
	<i>Tobago</i>	hiss-y-t		chups & sp.v., chip- y-t, steups-y-t		
	<i>Trinidad</i>	hiss-y-t	s-(y-)t	chups & sp.v., stupe, steups-y-t	choo	
S Caribbean						
	<i>ABC islands</i>			chupa		
	<i>C. Rica/ Nicaragua</i>				cho	
S America						
	<i>Brazil</i>					<i>muxoxo</i>
	<i>Guyana</i>		s-(y-)t	chups & sp.v.	cho	
	Surinam: <i>Aluku</i>				<i>(meki) tjuu</i>	
	<i>Saramaccan</i>					<i>kòòn</i>
	<i>Sranan</i>			chupa		

“sp.v.” =spelling variants “-x-“ =attested as absent

“s-(y-)t” =suck (your) teeth

List of Forms

The spellings given are those found in the sources.

The Americas (Principal forms first, alphabetically, then variants):

cho

- *chaw, pchuh, chu, chut*
- *chi* (Bonny, W Africa)
- *choo dat, choo pool* (Trinidad)
- *pshaw /ʃʌ/* (Gullah)
- *(meki) tjuu* (Aluku)

chups(e)

- *cheups(e), choops, stchoops steups(e), stewps(e), stroops, stupe (-your-mouth),*

stupse

- *chip-you-teeth*
- *tuipe, tchuipe, tchipe, tchywipe, tchoupe, kuipe, kwipe, kipe* (all Haitian Creole)
- *chupa* (Papiamentu, Sranan)

hiss your teeth (at someone)

kiss-(kiss-) (you-) teeth (at someone)

kòòn (Saramaccan)

muxoxo (Brazilian Portuguese)

suck- (you-) teeth (at someone)

suck your mouth

African (Bilby p.c., DCEU, DJE; alphabetised by source language):

Efik *asiama*

Ewe *tsóò*

Fongbe *céÂj*

Gambian Krio & Wolof *tšipú*

Guinée-Bissau/Casamance (Kriol) *cia*

Hausa *tsaki*

Ibibio *siɔɔp*

Kikongo *tsiona*

Kiyansu *nswea:b*

Kumbundu *mushoshu*

Twi *twéaa, twô*

Wolof *tšipú*

Yoruba *kpòšé*

English (by date attested):

- *tut(-tut)* (OED 1529)
- *pshaw* (OED 1673)
- *tchick* (OED 1823)
- *tcha, tche* (OED 1844)

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