English and Creole in Jamaica

A brief linguistic sketch

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This paper is a short introduction to the nature of English as is commonly spoken in Jamaica, with a brief analysis of phonology, vocabulary, morphology and syntax. The focus of this study is two-fold: first, on how Jamaican Creole differs from ‘Standard’ English, and second, on how Jamaican Creole comprises a rich variation in linguistic forms.

Key Words : Jamaican English, Jamaican Creole, Patois, linguistics

‘Wen bul fut bruk im nyam wid mogki’
(Jamaican Creole proverb)

The official language of Jamaica is English. This would be unremarkable were it not for a 2001 report, cited by the Linguistics Department of the University of West Indies (JLU n.d. online) which states: ‘many Jamaicans lack competence in English’. English exam results from 2007 reflect this: a failure rate of seventy-one percent among children (Irvine 2008b online). While this suggests the relevance of sociological factors, it is clear that on a simpler level a difference exists between the standard, official language and the common language of everyday use.

We are talking, of course, about ‘Jamaican Standard English’ (JSE) and ‘Jamaican Creole’ (JC).

The aim of this paper is to provide a brief linguistic sketch of SJE and JC. Two questions are addressed: What makes Jamaican English and Creole distinct from other English varieties? What variation exists among Jamaican speakers themselves? A brief look at vowel phonology can provide answers while introducing the Jamaican language situation. According to Wassink (2001:149-151) clustering in high-front, high-back and low-front vowels is more prevalent in the speech of rural Jamaicans than in speakers from the capital Kingston, while duration differences between the high-back vowel subsystems do not significantly differ between these groups. This means that while speakers from Kingston place more emphasis on vowel quality than rural Jamaicans, high-back vowel length is not a distinguishing feature for Jamaicans as a whole. This is in contrast to Standard US English where the length of high-back vowels is a necessary feature. Consider /u:/ and /ʊ/, which are not only marked by different back spaces but also by a systematic difference in length, as in boot and book (cf. Avery & Ehrlich 1992:31-32). Thus for at least one vowel subsystem, length difference is a noticeable feature of another Standard, whereas in the Jamaican varieties it is not. This shows how contrasts exist with not only other Englishes but also in Jamaican speech itself.

Besides phonology, this essay briefly examines aspects of vocabulary, morphology and syntax. Both JSE and JC offer much phonological and lexical data that is distinct from other English varieties. Regarding morphology and syntax, only aspects of JC are considered, since there is little difference here between JSE and other English Standards. This coincides with the premise that speakers of SJE have at least some passive knowledge of JC--a point I discuss next before looking at language data.

1 This is a revised paper originally submitted as course work in the Master of Arts-Applied Linguistics programme at the University of New England, Australia, in October 2008.

2 Translation: ‘When a bull’s foot is broken, he [is forced] to eat with monkeys.’ (Lawton 1984:127)
The Creole Continuum

The language situation in Jamaica has often been described as ‘a creole continuum’ (cf. Winford 1997). This means there is a linguistic spectrum comprising JC and SJE on either end with variation in between—a basilect, a mesolect, and an acrolect. As English Standards are prestige forms based on shared written norms (cf. Crystal 2006:110), the acrolect is comparable to other English standards, in particular British English, as Jamaica was once a colony. But JC is largely an oral language and ‘the home speech of country folk and lower-class townspeople’ (Wells 1973:3). As a pidgin based on English and African languages its creolisation resulted from British colonialism, African slavery, and the plantation economy (Patrick 2006:88-89).

While JC is considered an English variety, it is in fact unintelligible to non-Jamaicans. Consider this transcript of a video from Jamiekan Langwij [a], a Creole website (Example 1). The topic is the success of Jamaican sprinters at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. (See Appendix 1 for the translation.)

Example 1:
So som pipl pan di intanet se Jamiekan ron faas kaaz i de ina dem blod. Dem get i fram dem mada and dem faada. Dat a wa Janieka Glina anlain fi Julai 8 se. Dem rait bout wan stodi we di Yuunivorsiti a di West Indiz an de Yuunivorsiti a Glasgo du. Dem tok 200 atliit fram Jamieka an dem fain se av mostl we kyan dra up den jump out faas faas. (Ahkshan Tak 2008)

Jamaicans are proficient in a certain area of the continuum, and not just one discrete level (De Camp 1971:350). Notably, JC is stereotyped as inferior (Dalby 2004:286) and basilect speakers typically scorn others who attempt to speak JSE (cf. Patrick 1998:9). Nonetheless, the continuum can be illustrated by Example 2, adapted from Sebba (1997 cited in Patrick 2006 online).

Example 2:
I am eating / I is eatin’ / I eatin’ / me eatin’ / me a eat / me a nyam

The left is JSE; the right the broad basilect. This framework shows variation in phonology (eating vs. eatin’) vocabulary (eating vs. nyam) and morphology (aspect marking). Wassink (1999 cited in Irvine 2008a:11) found evidence suggesting Jamaicans themselves consider phonology and vocabulary the main differences between JC and SJE. Let us now look at some linguistic features.

Phonology

A historical development of the phonological features of English and Creole is summarised as follows from Cassidy & Le Page (2002:xliii-xliv). British Received Pronunciation serves as the model for SJE, at least until recently. As for JC, its phonetic makeup was influenced by an early pidgin which interpreted 17th and 18th century English dialects through either a matrix of a West African language (Twi or Ewe) or a Portuguese-West African pidgin. This resultant pidgin, which underwent creolisation, was later influenced by Scots and southern British English. The ‘educated’ version of this creole acted as a model for the ‘uneducated’ version. One influence from Twi, which is a tone language, is that JC syllables tend not to have the stress-prominence of English, having instead ‘an evenness of accent’ wherein the schwa does not commonly occur.

The following differences are noted when comparing IPA charts of consonant phonemes for JC and Australian English (AE) (see Appendix 2). While labial, alveolar and velar sets are identical, AE employs voiced/unvoiced dental fricatives and the voiced post-alveolar fricative while JC does not. In contrast, JC has a nasal palatal and voiced/unvoiced palatal stops.

A system of five basic JC vowels is widely accepted; the total number varies in analyses from 9-16, depending on whether diphthongs and vowel length are considered (cf. Wassink 2001:136). One
analysis accounts for three long vowels and four dipthongs, based on two types of vowel harmony (peripheral and back) so that within a syllable only sequences of peripheral vowels (/i/, /ai/, /ai/) can occur; and where */uai/ and */iu/ are not allowed. Thus JC has *iīiīiι (tiny), buut (booth), and baaba (barber). The four dipthongs are /iə/, /aiə/, /auə/, and /au/, as in biak (bake), baik (bike), buat (boat), and taun (town) (Harry 2006:127-128).

One way to illustrate the Creole continuum is with phonological variation. Cassidy & Le Page (2002:x1) provide an example: the word ‘face’ in broad JC is pronounced with a falling /ie/ dipthong, fies, while in SJE it is féis. In between are: fiés with a rising /ie/ (low mesolect); and fes, with a short, tense monopthong (high mesolect).

Variation has been found to suggest phonological differences from other English standards while not being sociolinguistic variables themselves. For example, Irvine (2004:63) noted as ‘unremarkable’ the palatal insertion in captain [kjaptın] or gather [gjaðə]. However, she found that acrolect speakers avoid TH-stopping and H-dropping (e.g., /θınk/ for /θınk/; /θand/ for /θand/). These are two characteristics associated with JC (63). In fact, H-dropping is highly stigmatised, resulting in hypercorrection tendencies, illustrated by this common joke in Example 3.

Example 3:
A boy goes crying to his mother and complains:
His mother is shocked, not at the blow, but at her son’s language. She says:
Hemphasize your haitches you hignorant fool! (P.F. 2008, pers. comm., 23 Oct.)

Vocabulary

The Olympics video cited earlier uses words that appear to be English in origin, for example, pipl (people), faas (fast), faada (father), dem (them), atliit (athlete). This supports the classification of JC as a lexicalised variant of English. Let us consider again the Creole continuum, but for lexical variation, with examples from Jamiekan Langwij [b]. See Example 4.

Example 4:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acrolect</th>
<th>Mesolect</th>
<th>Basilect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>almost</td>
<td>aulmos</td>
<td>haalmuos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ask</td>
<td>aask</td>
<td>aks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>borrow</td>
<td>boro</td>
<td>bara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for it</td>
<td>far i</td>
<td>fiit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hers</td>
<td>erz</td>
<td>fiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>palm</td>
<td>hand-middle</td>
<td>an-migl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>what?</td>
<td>wa?</td>
<td>we?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can surmise that the structure of English words changed through the phonological matrix of creolisation. One can note the vocabulary above as gradients across the spectrum. Particularly interesting are the Creole glosses for palm. One cannot readily see its link to the basilect ang-migl without noting the high mesolect hand-middle. Likewise, the basilect fiim and low mesolect fiar are seemingly unrelated to the other mesolect glosses for hers. In fact, they are derived from ‘from her’ and ‘from him’ rising /ie/ (low mesolect); and fes, with a short, tense monopthong (high mesolect).

The Olympics video makes use of the word se, glossed as ‘say’. Again, one might assume English etymology, but in the African languages Akan and Fante, se means ‘to say, to tell’ (Cassidy 1966:214). In fact, Alleyne (1993 cited in Mufwene 1996:168) considers the African language Twi as the principle substrate of JC. Example 5 shows some Creole words from Twi (Cassidy 1961:71).

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5 Some sources/translations are provided exclusively for this essay by a Jamaican-born Canadian, referred to as ‘P.F.’.
Some words in the basilect, acrolect and mesolect can be considered uniquely Jamaican, as they differ in sense from other English varieties. This can be illustrated by the following usages of *after*, *throw* and *backside*. *After* is used when other English varieties would use ‘to’. Thus, to hit something, a boy would throw a rock *after* it. (Cassidy 1961:117). *Throw* means ‘pour’ (144). Here is an anecdote by P.F. (2008, pers. comm., 24 Oct.) showing a misunderstanding by a non-Jamaican: A Jamaican student in London asked a British chemistry professor if he should ‘throw’ a beaker he was holding. The instructor was very alarmed but the student was merely confirming whether he should pour the contents into a container. *Backside* means buttocks. Because it is impolite, use of ‘back side’ is avoided, e.g., ‘The back side of the house is painted in a different colour’, unless for comic effect or to make fun of a foreigner. (P.F. 2008, pers. comm., 3 Oct.)

### Example 5:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>word</th>
<th>JC meaning</th>
<th>Twi word; meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fufu</td>
<td>mashed starch-vegetables</td>
<td>/fufuá/ ; same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mumu</td>
<td>a mute person, idiot</td>
<td>/e-múmu/ ; deaf-mute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pra-pra</td>
<td>gather up</td>
<td>/prépra/ ; same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>susu</td>
<td>whisper</td>
<td>/susúw/ ; utter a suspicion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saka-saka</td>
<td>cut roughly</td>
<td>/sákاسåka/ ; disordered, irregular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buffro-buffro</td>
<td>clumsy</td>
<td>/o-bó-furo/ ; lazy, good-for-nothing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Example 6:

**African-based:**
- *kos kos* to have a heated dispute, intens. of *kos* (to quarrel)
- *nyam nyam* foodstuff, noun derived from *nyam* (to eat)
- *pam pam* to persecute, intensification of *pam* (to spank)
- *tum tum* onomatopoeia for the mashing of yam

**English-based:**
- *cry cry* to cry continuously
- *likl likl* attenuations of *little*
- *tief tief* to steal repeatedly
- *trash trash* multiplication of *trash*

Other morphological analyses of JC require a distinction between mesolect and basilect usage. Verb inflection in the mesolect is ‘common and significant’ while inflection in the basilect largely depends on the verb—with bare uninflected verbs occurring over half the time (Patrick 2004:10). Most English stem changing verbs have been simplified into one form. For irregular verbs, words are typically derived from past forms, such as *los* (lose), *marid* (marry), *gaan* (go away) (10). Notably, *did* is used in the basilect as a tense marker, but not as an emphatic or question auxiliary as in English (8). Another feature is the morpheme *a* denoting progressive aspect (as one of its functions), illustrated in Example 7, from Adams (1991:26, 28, 44-45).

### Example 7:

- *Im naa say.* He is not saying.
- *Im nèn say.* He did not say.
- *Im nena say.* He was not saying.
- *Mi did say.* I said.
- *Mi dida say.* I was saying.
- *Mi dia a go say.* I was going to say.
- *A wa yu a say?* What are you saying?
- *Wi a gaa tung.* We are going to town.

*Dem heat done a go gaan dem way.* They finished eating and have gone their way.
Syntax

While constituent order is SVO like English, JC lacks auxiliary, negative and question inversion (Patrick 2004:15). Usually the copula is non-existent, but subject complements are introduced with a---the same morpheme mentioned earlier---which acts like the ‘be’ verb referring to a state of being, and not to place (15-16). JC also allows predicative and non-predicative clefting; however, only predicative elements are copied in their original sequence (16). In addition, absence of copula before bare adjective predicates is typical, and negation is done by no (18). Deh functions as a ‘to be’ verb referring to place (Adams 1991:36). Example 8 is adapted from Adams (35-44).

Example 8:

Im no di deh?
Di time col'.
Mary a one faama.
A no een deh im deh.
Mi neva tell im no lie!
Isn't he there? (lit. He not [the] there?)
The weather is cold. (lit. The weather cold.)
Mary is a farmer.
He's not in there. (lit. Is not in there he there.)
I didn't tell him a lie.

Like English, JC word order is not consistently SVO, as in the fourth line above. Adams (1991:41) explains that yet another property of a is its appearance in sentence-initial position. There is also an ‘idiomatic and probably African use’ of the morpheme, as in Example 9 (45).

Example 9:

A run dem a run.
A no joke dem a joke.
A happy mi happy mek mi gwaan so.
They are running (emphatic).
They are not joking.
It is because I am happy that I am going so.

Regarding subordination, both se and dat are declarative complementisers but can sometimes be omitted; however, while se is restricted to following verbs of speech, thought, perception, or emotion, dat is ‘all purpose’ (Patrick 2004:20). As for nonfinite clauses, particles are not always required, but fi usually functions as an infinitival marker in the basilect, varying with tu in the high mesolect (19). Notably, imperatives are formed with pliiz tu + verb (19). The first two examples are from Adams (1991:25); the last three are from Patrick 2004:20), illustrated in Example 10.

Example 10:

Im tell wi se im bex.
Uno no ya se dem dead areddy?
I hard fi kraas di riba.
Dat mean him deh go tek set pon me.
Pliiz tu kom dis said.
He told us that he is angry.
Haven’t you heard that they are already dead?
It’s hard to cross the river.
That means (that) he is going to become malignly fixated upon me.
Come over here (lit. To come this side).

Conclusion

It is evident that Jamaica’s official language and the language variant in common use are related and yet different, with much to offer for a more exhaustive comparison along sociolinguistic lines. In this essay, brief analyses of phonology, vocabulary, morphology and syntax have shown how the two varieties can be distinguished from one another. Distinctions can also be made between them and other English varieties. Key to this sketch is the theme of variation between basilect, mesolect and acrolect speakers, who together provide a rich mosaic of language form and identity that is part African, part English, and wholly Jamaican.
Appendix 1

JC text from ‘Ahkshan Tak’ (2008):

So som pipl pan di intanet se Jamiekan ron faas kaaz it de ina dem blod. Dem get i fram dem mada and dem faada. Dat a wa Jamieka Glina anlain fi Julai 8 se. Dem rait bout wan stodi we di Yuunivorsiti a di West Indiz an de Yuunivorsiti a Glasgo du. Dem tok 200 atliit fram Jamieka an dem fain se av mostl we kyan dra up den jump out faas faas.

English translation:

So some people on the internet say that Jamaicans run fast because it is in their blood. They get it from their father and mother. That is what the Jamaica Gleaner [a Kingston newspaper] online [edition] from July 8 had to say. They wrote about one study which the University of the West Indies and the University of Glasgow did. They took 200 athletes from Jamaica and they discovered they have muscles which can draw up and jump out very quickly [from the starter's block].

(P.F. 2008, pers. comm., 22 Oct.)

Appendix 2

IPA Charts comparing consonant phonemes:

**Australian English**
(source: Cox & Palethorpe 2007:342)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Labiodental</th>
<th>Dental</th>
<th>Alveolar</th>
<th>Post-alveolar</th>
<th>Palatal</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Glottal</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plosive</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>d</td>
<td></td>
<td>k</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affricate</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>tʃ</td>
<td>dʒ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nasal</td>
<td>m</td>
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<td>n</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fricative</td>
<td>f v θ δ</td>
<td>s z</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>z</td>
<td></td>
<td>h</td>
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<td>j</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lateral approximant</td>
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<td>l</td>
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**Jamaican Creole**
(source: Harry 2006:26)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bilabial</th>
<th>Labiodental</th>
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<th>Post-alveolar</th>
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<td>n</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plosive</td>
<td>p b</td>
<td>t d</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affricate</td>
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<td>tʃ dʒ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fricative</td>
<td>f v s z</td>
<td>s z</td>
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<td>(h)</td>
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<td>j</td>
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<td>l</td>
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