

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF JAMAICAN CREOLE
Patrick A. Henry

Introduction

Language can be perceived as a "metaphor we live by" (Lakoff, P.3). As such, it makes real for us what we think, how we think and, in turn, colors that thinking and action. It determines our worldview (whatever that worldview might be) and influences our thinking, according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1978). Language concretizes our thoughts by allowing us to write and speak them in words, and words in turn influence our behavior by virtue of what we bring to them and by virtue of what they bring to us.

Language, aside from coloring our perception and influencing our thoughts and actions, is also a cultural tool; by this I mean it is a tool of identity. It separates us from each other in fundamental ways and creates division along racial, cultural, sexual and social class lines. Language, therefore, is the soul of a people; it informs them of who they are, what group they belong to and with whom they can or cannot identify. As the saying goes, "I speak, therefore I am" (Shrodes, P. 50).

Thus, any attempt to discredit or obliterate the language of a people is tantamount to obliterating the people themselves. But what gives one group the feeling that it is better or superior to another? Many have asked this question and many more have suggested what appears, on the surface, bona fide reasons for the subjugation or enslavement of another group. These reasons includes the notion of divine rights, the 'great' tradition versus the 'little tradition' (Brathwaite, p. 311), the innate superiority of one group or race and the innate inferiority of another; and,

of course, significant in influence has been Darwin's theory of natural selection and survival of the fittest.

Also important is the position of language vis a vis the various rationales that have been employed over the years to explain why one tongue is, or should be, superior to another. I said 'should be' as opposed to 'is', since no language exists by itself or comes into existence by its own accord, but rather exists in relation to its speakers. They fashion it (usually in their own liking), build on it and polish it to the tune of their own eyes and ears. Equally troubling is what is called a "good" or "bad" language or, more specifically, a "correct" or "incorrect" way of speaking the English language. What does it mean to say that a language is not spoken properly? Who determines what is a language and what is a dialect? Who says that Black Americans cannot speak English (assuming that they are speaking it incorrectly) and that white Americans do? Often enough, it is only in regards to White America that White Americans speak proper English. This is to say that from the Black American perspective he/she speaks perfectly (assuming that they have not internalized the contempt in which the dominant white culture generally holds Black English).

Thus, it is only when these two differing ways of speaking the same one language comes at a crossroad—at school or work—that we run into conflict. Quite apart from this crossroad, Black English and White English are both genuine means of communication, since within their sphere of influence, they are mutually intelligible, have a sender, and a receiver, a message and a code, and a medium and a mode, as well as all the other ingredients of communication (Whitman, p. 8). Therefore, the condemnation of one

language and the praise of another has more to do with the society that is doing the discrediting than with anything being inherently wrong with the language that is receiving the censure. Implicit in this condemnation is the notion of a dominant culture vis a vis a subordinate one, a White society versus a Black society, a rich one versus a poor one or an African culture versus a European culture.

It is in light of this latter notion of an African culture versus a European one that we turn to the main focus of my paper—Jamaican Creole or Patois (Cassidy, 1961). What exactly is Jamaican Creole? How did it originate and who were the principal players in its creation will be examined in the historical part of this paper. The notion of it being a language of self-identity and expression, along with fact that it is a language with its own systems of rules and regulations will be discussed in the part on sociolinguistics. In addition, once the evidence of Jamaican Creole's validity had been delineated, I will suggest, or rather reiterate what has been suggested, that patois should be taught in primary schools in Jamaica; what better way of helping present and future generations of Jamaicans understand and appreciate better their language, their history and, in the end, themselves!

Historical Perspective

Columbus came upon the New World in 1492. No less significant in his discoveries were the Caribbean Islands in general, and Jamaica in particular. At the time of Columbus' discovery, the indigenous population in Jamaica were the Arawak Indians. They do not seem to have had any significant impact upon the Creole language that would subsequently develop (aside from giving Jamaica her name—Xaymaca, meaning lang of wood and water), for between 1492 and

1655, they were almost wiped out as a consequence of enslavement and European diseases against which they had no immunity(Williams, 1970). The period of decisive British rule started in 1655 when the British fought and won the Island of Jamaica(which up to this point was Spanish ruled)and ended in 1834 when African slaves brought in by the British to cultivate the sugar plantations, rebelled and subsequently won their emancipation from the British. This period is significant, for it is when contact between Europeans and Africans was made and when the Creole society of today know as Jamaica was created. Spanish influence on Jamaican Creole is minimal since the actual importation of slaves did not occur until the British seized the island from the Spaniards and set up sugar plantations.

Whatever Spanish influence there is, it is with regard to names of streets and parishes in Jamaica; for instance, St. Ann, St. Catherine, and St. Andrew(Cassidy, Pg 1.). Most of the slaves who were brought to the New World came from West Africa. Among themselves, the Africans spoke many different dialects, some mutually intelligible, others not. The tribes with whom the Europeans made contact were many and included the Arad, Bongo, Concha, Ego, Minnah, Nago and the Wakee. According to Ferderic Cassidy, a noted Jamaican linguist:

....at the time when the basis of Jamaican folk speech was laid, the largest number of slaves came from the area of the Gold Coast and Nigeria, and were therefore speakers of the Niger-Congo or West Sudanese languages(Pg. 17).

Given the evidence, we may safely assume that the African dialects greatly influenced the creation of Jamaican Creole. European influence which largely came from Britain, can be said to have originated from a number of factors. The first and most obvious is the actual fact of slavery itself, which forced European

language(s) upon the Africans who had no choice but to adopt the alien tongue if they wanted to survive. Secondly, because the Africans who were brought to Jamaica were from different tribes, ones which were, at times, in conflict with each other and spoke languages which were not mutually intelligible, there were often division between them; and this disunity weakened their ability to cast off enslavement-linguistic enslavement-thus inviting greater British control and influence. As Cassidy states:

The slaves were brought from several places in Guinea, which were different from one another in language, and consequently they could not converse freely; or, if they could, they hated one another so mortally, that some of them would rather have died by the hands of the English than to join with other Africans in an attempt to shake off their yoke(pg. 17).

Finally, further influence in the creation of patois came from absenteeism; the fact that slave masters were never on the island for ninety percent of the time played a crucial role in Jamaica's development into a Creole society. Because the landlords and plantation owners spent a great deal of their time in the mother country(partly out of their inability to adapt to the tropical climate), the delegation of responsibility to the slaves for overseeing the sugar plantations and the various estates came much sooner than it did in, for example, the United States. As a consequence of this absenteeism, the slaves had much more control over their lives to create their own world and determine(within the confines of the plantation)their own destinies, which included, in no small way, their own language. As Patterson states:

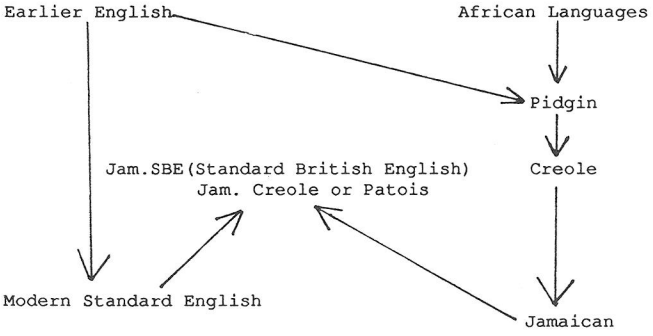
The basic and dominating element in Jamaican slave society was that of absenteeism. This element was central to the whole social order and was in some way related to almost every other aspect of the society(p. 33).

The contact situation between Africans and Europeans had not only produced a new language, in the form of a pidgin tongue but this very pidgin language had begun to take root in Jamaica and was fast becoming a Creole, meaning that it had developed into an elaborate system that was neither African nor English but a combination of both. Each new interaction between slave and master produced opportunity for both the development and reinforcement of the Creole language, which by now had left its pidgin stage in Africa and was becoming very much a part of the newly transplanted society known as Jamaica. This is what Patterson calls "The Period of Adaptation" which occurred around 1730-80. This period is called such, since it's when both the British and the Africans began to adapt to their new island surroundings, where the system of slavery had taken hold--both master's and slave's place in the social, economic, and political order was mapped out and adhered to (Ibid, p. 35). According to Paterson:

...master and slave were no longer strangers to each other. The white masters no longer saw their slaves as exotic brutes, with violent, unpredictable passions which had to be kept in check by the constant exercise of harsh, inhuman discipline. By now they had developed certain stereotypes...personality and intellectual capacities which acted both as a system of rationalization for whatever moral problems slavery presented, and as a base from which to interact...the slave, in turn, had also come to learn a great deal about the master; he now spoke his language, understood his role within the society and had begun to develop patterns of behavior by which he could best adjust.... (Ibid, p. 38).

Therefore, we can deduce from the evidence that British colonialism primarily was responsible for the creation and subsequent development of Jamaican Creole, since it brought about a situation where Africans came into contact with Europeans. To facilitate this contact, a lingua franca was created in the form of a pidgin tongue. This, in turn, produced a Creole where both Europeans and Africans came to settle on the island of Jamaica.

Over a period of time this Creole, too, would become modified to fit the new culture that had been created as a result of slavery; and out of this comes what Cassidy calls "Jamaicanism"—words or phrases that are distinctly Jamaican in taste and origin. For example, the word scallion is generally known in Jamaica as skellion or puss for cat or macca for a piece of thorn or prickle bush (Cassidy, pg. 7). If we had to draw a diagram of the development of Jamaican Creole, it would look something like the following:



Asides from being responsible for the creation of Jamaican Creole, British colonialism was also responsible for Jamaican Creole's status; and by this I mean that it was usually regarded negatively by both master and slave alike. This negative status had such an impact upon Jamaican Creole that it is still struggling to rid itself of this nasty and deep-seated grip. It is this negative status which originated in slavery, that renders Jamaican Creole a "broken tongue" and questions its authenticity as a living language. It also justifies attempts that have been

made by the elite to expunge Jamaican Creole. One reason for the low opinion of Jamaican Creole is precisely in how it came about—under conquest and humiliation. It is perhaps a consequence of being oppressed that one's cultural trappings generally are suspected by those who may feel that they are the only group with culture and with the "right" and "proper" language. Because the Africans who spoke Jamaican Creole were slaves, what they spoke was not a language but a broken tongue; and this, in turn was due to their "inability" to speak "pure" English. It may have been the case that the Africans did speak a broken English, but this was to be expected. As Cassidy puts it:

That the slave should have learned English incompletely was only to be expected under the circumstances; that a large influence from their native African languages should be felt in such English as they learned goes almost without saying (Pg. 21).

That this stigma has continued down through the years, reveals more the ethnocentricity of the remaining British systems than it serves as evidence of there being an inherent weakness in Jamaican Creole. Contributing, as well, to the low status of Jamaican Creole was the fact that most of the Europeans who came to Jamaica were uneducated, lower in social class and did not speak with RP (received pronunciation) or the "pure" Queen's English. Thus, when the African slaves were forced to learn the language they internalized a version of English that was, itself, without status or prestige. According to Cassidy, recording the sentiments of a plantation aristocrat:

The Creole language is not confined to the Negroes. Many of the ladies who have not been educated in England, speak a sort of broken English, with an indolent drawling out of their words, that is very tiresome if not disgusting (Pg. 22).

No doubt, this must have given the British elite even more reason to condemn Jamaican Creole, for after all, even their own kind were being polluted by it! Far more damaging, though, than even the low opinion in which the plantation elite held Jamaican Creole, was the view the Creole slaves themselves had of it; they too had internalized the contempt the British had towards Jamaican Creole. This is not terribly surprising, however, since the slaves were placed in a dilemma: they had to learn English, if only for the sake of utility. But learning English would necessarily have to come at the expense of their native African language(s). In the end English was given preference, since the African dialects in the New World had become dispensable and since there was no prestige or indeed rewards, attached to speaking one's native tongue. Cassidy puts it this way:

It has always been to a slave's advantage to learn English. Without it, he could not hope to improve his condition or get the more desirable employment. Prestige was attached to English by the Jamaican-born Negroes who naturally spoke it (Pg. 18)

Jamaican Creole's Validity Examined

Before we begin to examine the validity of Jamaican Creole, we must first discuss what a language is and how we define it. A language can be said to be any tool or method of communication that is used and/or understood by a substantial group or community. It can also be the form or style of verbal communication or expression (Merriam-Webster, 1974). What should be emphasized here is the purpose of any language, that of communication. So long as the particular language is serving this purpose, then it is as valid and as correct as any other that does the same. To say that Jamaican Creole is "backward", "sounds horrible to the ear", is "broken English" or that it's not a "pure" English are all value judgements that, in the final

analysis, are superfluous, since the basic purpose for the speaking any language—that of communication—is being met by its speakers. Furthermore, there is no such thing as a pure language—that English is only English alone—since we know that the English language is made up of many different words from varying cultures; these in turn, are partly responsible for different dialects, which in turn, produces different accent (Whitman, 1981). Thus, the assumption that Jamaican Creole is "corrupted" is true only to the extent that British English and indeed all English, is also "corrupted".

The argument would be more accurate if it were stated that Jamaican Creole lacks prestige, while British English has it. And the main reason why Jamaican Creole has been relegated to a lower status and British English a higher one has everything to do with the fact that the British were the conquerors while the Africans, the conquered. And because of their conquering position vis a vis the African's subjugated one, they were able to force their values, attitudes and perceptions which their language embodied upon whomever they conquered. It was from this historical position of advantage that the British were able to bequeath their language from one generation to the next, with each succeeding generation contributing to it, thereby perpetuating its reign and prestige. Consequently, the notion that the British had in Jamaica (and indeed, elsewhere) that their language is the only one, is as ethnocentric as the notion that English is a "pure" language. In a statement in his book on Pidgin and Creole Languages, Hall makes this point:

A language is not an organism, but a set of habits, handed down from one generation of speakers to another, so that the customary expressions 'mother language' and 'daughter language' are at best, nothing but metaphors (Hall, 1966).

Not only is Jamaican Creole a language from a cultural, philosophical perspective but also from a structural one; it has its own phonology, morphology and syntactical structures. In fact, much time and effort has been spent to demonstrate that these structures do exist and that they are just as valid as those of English, French, Spanish or any other language (Bailey, 1966). Instrumental among those who have tried to demonstrate that Jamaican Creole is a language, rather than a mere broken dialect, and to elevate it to its rightful status as the language of the people has been Jamaican born poet and novelist, Claude McKay. With poetry he demonstrated not only that Jamaican Creole is not "gibberish", but also showed how dynamic it was and continues to be. To McKay, SBE spoke to the intellect while Jamaican Creole spoke to the soul (McKay, 1973). To demonstrate the essence of what McKay meant when he said Jamaican Creole spoke to the soul of the people as well as to give a visual picture of the "infamous" Jamaican Creole, the following poem written by McKay should suffice:

Cudjoe Fresh From De Lecture

Top one minute, cous' jarge, an' sit do'n 'pon de gress,
an' mek a tell you 'about de news I hear at las',
How de buccra te-day tel time an' begin teach all of us dat was
deh' in a clear open speech.

You miss some'ting fe true, but a wi'mek you know, as much
as how a can, how de business a go. Him tell us 'bout we self,
an' mek we fresh again, an' talk about de wul' from commencement
to en'.

Me look 'pon me black 'kin, an' so me head grow big, although me
heaby han' dem hab fe plug an' dig; for ebery single man, no car'
about dem rank, him bring us ebery one an' put 'pon de same plank.

Say, parson do de same! Yes, in a diff'ren' way, for parson tell
us how de whole o'we are clay; an' lookin' close at t'ings, we hab to pray
quite hard fe swaller wha' him say an' don't t'ink bad o' Gahd.

It goes without saying that, given the evidence, Jamaican Creole should be taught in conjunction with British English. Certainly Mckay would agree with the assertion that one of the best ways to raise Jamaican Creole's status and to make it an official language on a par with SBE is to employ a policy to teach it in the primary schools in Jamaica. The approach taken in the past has been to force everyone to speak SBE and pretend that Jamaican Creole did not exist, despite the overwhelming evidence that it did. Many scholars have tried to show that SBE is foreign and to teach it to youngsters who only speak Jamaican Creole leads to alienation and makes the learning process particularly difficult. As Cassidy puts it:

In learning Standard English, Jamaican Creole speakers have to acquire a foreign morphology. Thus, it would seem advisable to teach Standard English as a foreign language and treat the similarities as happy accidents (p.626).

Cassidy feels that bilingualism or bidialectalism should be suggested as a solution to teaching patois; by this he means that SBE should not come at the expense or exclusion of Jamaican Creole. He's so emphatic in this assertion that he states:

What must be avoided is that Creole speech should be condemned or that any attempt should be made to uproot it. Indeed, teachers who do not realize that it is a language in its own right, with a system of its own, should learn exactly that. It is neither deficient nor degraded and there is no warrant for assuming that its speakers are mentally deficient or degraded (Ibid, p. 628).

Concluding Remarks

The struggle for cultural identity is principally between the speakers of Jamaican Creole, who represent ninety percent of the population and the speakers of Standard British English who comprises the other ten percent. This ten percent, in turn, is made up of the small White community in Jamaica, the elite and

other foreign elements(at least foreign from the perspective of the masses). This situation has produced what Hall calls "linguistic schizophrenia"-being torn between two languages(Pg. 131). Had Jamaican Creole the status of British English, a bilingualism would have developed with both languages enjoying similar prestige, and where there would be an additional value-economic-in learning Jamaican Creole just as there is in learning British English. Because this bilingual atmosphere does not exist(at least in an officially recognized way)a dualistic problem develops where Jamaican Creole is in conflict with SBE.

To overcome this conflict, it is necessary that Jamaican Creole be officially recognized; such a recognition would provide identifiable status for Jamaican Creole and encourage schools to teach it simultaneously with British English. This is the only way that Jamaican Creole will have a chance to successfully compete with the official British English. And this is not an unreasonable request, since Jamaican Creole is spoken by ninety percent of the population. Furthermore, making it an official language would also have a liberating effect on those who have suffered from the language schizophrenia that Hall refers and free those who are ashamed of speaking Jamaican Creole, because they have internalized the contempt in which the ruling elite holds Jamaican Creole. The solution to the dualism that exists between Jamaican Creole and SBE is not to try to assimilate everyone into British culture, but to recognize also Jamaican Creole's right to exist and particularly so, since it is the language that carries the most meaning for the population and the one with which they can truly identify. The nature of Jamaican Creole's origin should not give anyone a justification for condemning it, particularly sine

this origin, in some ways, is also shared by many other languages; English being no exception. Although Jamaican Creole might have resulted from a relationship of conquest and conflict, it has since then grown into a dynamic language and has become an intricate part of a vibrant culture, one that has given us Marcus Garvey, Claude Mckay and Bob Marley to name only a few. As Jamaica struggles for her cultural, ethnic and racial identity and to rid herself(along with other former colonies)of British cultural trappings, we can rest assured that Jamaican Creole will play a crucial role in and be intrinsic to Jamaica's continual struggle to mold herself into a culture distinctively hers, with her own unique cultural trappings.

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