

THE USE OF ENGLISH LEXIFIED CREOLE IN ANGLOPHONE CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

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Caribbean societies have been shaped by many factors, including slavery and the slave trade, colonization and growth after independence, and the emergence of creole languages and cultures. The debate concerning the use of creole languages in literature is rooted in the colonial era when many racist and ethnocentric European ideologies and discourses were formulated and propagated. These dominant discourses have been used to establish and perpetuate colonial and neo-colonial domination. The inequalities created by these ideologies are clearly evident in the way creole languages were stigmatized in the colonial era and are still stigmatized today even after many Caribbean territories have ostensibly achieved independence. Creoles have been labeled as broken, simplified, and uncivilized languages spoken by people who are by extension inferior and uncivilized as well. When people begin to attribute a negative value to their language, their language may be in danger of extinction. Both Mervyn Alleyne (2004) and Peter Roberts observe that the people of the Caribbean have to some extent accepted the negative names and values assigned to their creole languages by the dominant colonial and neo-colonial systems. Alleyne (1985: 160) states that:

Caribbean peoples have largely accepted Europeans' views of their language behavior as part of a more general self-depreciation and negative evaluation of their cultural behavior. The general feeling is that creole languages and dialects are defective- that they may be suitable for the expression of 'folklore' (folktales, folk music, proverbs, swearing, etc), but they are quite inadequate for the expression of complex and abstract thought.

This kind of linguistic hegemony is being challenged by modern Caribbean writers. Imperial languages are losing their power to enclose the mind, and Creole speakers are no longer blind to the potential of their creole languages. This realization of the power of one's mother tongue is what is motivating Caribbean writers to use Creole in Caribbean literature.

According to Mervyn Alleyne (1985: 155-179) the English and French speaking territories became fertile ground for the development of Creoles and other varieties that represented blends of European and West African languages. The indigenous populations of the Caribbean were destroyed not only through enslavement, but also through the denial of their identities, by forcing them to replace their names with European names, to speak European languages, and to become Christianized. In Pre-Columbian times indigenous peoples highly valorized their languages. These languages linked the physical environment with indigenous cultural knowledge; they transmitted an awareness of flora and fauna, and balanced nature and spirit.¹ This scenario started changing as soon as colonization began. The Europeans, because of their feelings of linguistic superiority and their designs for imperialistic conquest, constructed a set of discourses that brought about the devaluation of indigenous languages and cultures. As stated by Crystal a kind of “linguistic suicide” took place. Colonial governments and missionaries used their beliefs about the inferiority of indigenous languages to justify replacing them with European languages such as English or French. Jalil Sued Badillo (1978) states that the negative vision of indigenous peoples created by the conquistadors was part of a broader European discourse where influences from both indigenous and African-descended peoples were held responsible for the weaknesses and flaws in the characters of Caribbean-born people of European descent, while all the positive traits were inherited from their ‘virtuous and civilized’ European ancestors.

Those who advocate the use of English Creole (as well as other Creoles) contend that Creole differs from English in its phonetic and grammatical system. Most of the words in English Caribbean Creoles are English words filtered through a distinct phonetic system with fewer vowels and different consonant sounds.² Creole is written phonetically to approximate these differences. Thus, English “girl” becomes Creole *gyal*. For non-linguists who are unaware of the structured phonological changes that take place as part of linguistic variation forms like *gyal* may seem to be a “corruption” of English Standard forms; thus, creating a negative perception about creole languages.

While only a small portion of English-lexifier Creoles’ lexicon usually is of African origin, the greatest divergence from English is in creole grammar, which has been significantly influenced by the languages of West Africa. Because of this influence, English speakers cannot easily understand deeper basilectal or mesolectal forms of creole speech. The influence of the grammars of both West-African languages and indigenous languages of the Caribbean upon the grammatical structures of Caribbean

¹ Crystal (2000) addresses the issue of indigenous language valorization upon the arrival of Columbus.

² Some scholars who have addressed the study of the phonological variation in Anglophone lexifier Creoles are: Donald Winford, Hubert Devonish, Walter Seiler, and Walter Edwards.

Creoles partly accounts for the complexity of Creoles and the difficulty that English speakers have in understanding them. Essentially, a Creole is a natural contact language with African, European and Indigenous roots.

West African influences on creole grammar are evidenced in Jamaican Creole. To say: “Bring me some shrimp” in Jamaican Creole, I would say “*Kyai kom gimmi a janga.*” Verb serialization or the use of several verbs with the same subject in a string without a conjunction (like *kyai* ‘carry’ + *kom* ‘come’ + *gi* ‘give’ in the example above) is not only very common in the English-lexifier Creoles of the Caribbean, but it is also very common in the languages of West Africa.

Some of the general features of English-lexified Creoles (and other Creoles as well) are the following: serialized verb constructions, the use of reduplication, lack of inflectional morphemes, drop of final consonant clusters, use of particles for tense, aspect and modality marking, no required marker for definiteness or indefiniteness, the use of one general preposition, etc. A detailed analysis of the structure of creole languages is beyond the scope of this paper; nonetheless, being able to recognize these features in the creole language spoken by the many fictional characters created by Caribbean writers can be fascinating to anyone who is interested in the study and development of creole languages and cultures. The use of Creole in Caribbean literature attests to the new vision and the new roles of creole languages in the Caribbean basin and throughout the world. Creole languages are well developed and full-fledged languages capable of expressing literary complexity.

According to Mimi Sheller, who attempts to provide non-Caribbean readers with an overview of creole languages and literatures, Creoles are “new languages, evolutionarily younger than non-creole languages, which have developed gradually and organically over centuries without any radical breaks in transmission from one generation to the next.” Similarly, Michel DeGraff (2001:54) states: “Creoles are linguistic neonates whose morphologies lack the features that characterize older more mature languages.” DeGraff contends that there is a preconception that Creoles are somehow exceptional languages because of their emergence due to catastrophic conditions or because they were born out of an attempt of “inferior” beings trying to acquire superior languages. The notion that Creoles are simplified or exceptional languages outside of the realm of “natural languages” has perpetuated the negative perception of Creoles.

Theories of creole genesis have had far-reaching effects upon the construction of Caribbean culture and literature. Caribbean literature has taken a prominent role in metropolitan literary studies since the 1980s when post-colonial and non-western literatures became more widely read (Sheller, 2003:12). The development of Caribbean literature is based on the belief that this literature embodies something

native and unique. Caribbean writer and scholar Antonio Benítez Rojo (1996: 27) characterizes Caribbean literature in this way:

The literature of the Caribbean can be read as a mestizo text, but also as a stream of texts in flight...The Caribbean poem and novel are projects that communicate their own turbulence, their own clash, and their own void, the swirling black hole of social violence produced by the encomienda and the plantation, that is, their otherness, their peripheral asymmetry with regard to the West. Thus Caribbean literature cannot free itself totally from the multiethnic society upon which it floats, and it tells us of its fragmentation and instability.

These hybrid texts are contrasted to the literary canon of the West, just as creole languages are compared to European languages. For Benítez Rojo, part of the beauty of Caribbean language and literature is that it is seen as more dynamic, chaotic, impure, less structured than the older forms. The rawness, chaos, and impurity mentioned by Benítez Rojo translates into a literature that is capable of portraying the reality, the beauty, and the life-force of the Caribbean 'criollo' not only in terms of his/her culture and identity, but in terms of his/her creole language as well.

104 The use of Creole in literature transports the narrator to the center, giving the narrator a central rather than marginal voice, and thus allowing the author to valorize discourse in its creole form of expression. Moreover, this sense of valorization of creole discourse portrays Creole as an effective tool for identity construction. There has been a significant expansion in the functions of Creole in Caribbean literature, as well as a positive adjustment in language attitudes. For example, against the background of the use of Standard English in the educational and governmental systems, the use of Creole has become increasingly common in popular dramas and lyrics for popular songs and in radio and television. The use of Creole in story telling celebrates life in the Caribbean. Through the use of Creole in Caribbean literature, the voices that had been silenced in the past come to life in the present; the burden of an imposed language is lifted; the female voice rises to a new dimension; and both sexual and social identity are defined and redefined.

The inclusion of Creole in literature has been pivotal to the development of a Caribbean literary discourse. The use of Creole in Caribbean fiction can be said to have followed a series of developmental stages. In the first stage, it was used as a distorted, broken language that interfered with the European language; it was a representation of the voice of "the other" as exemplified in the works of V.H. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon. The second stage was characterized by a certain schizophrenia. For instance, Caribbean authors such as Derek Walcott were torn between expressing

the richness of their native Creole in their writing versus using the standard written form of the lexifier language. At present we can speak of a third stage, in which Caribbean literature utilizes a creative, more open form of expression by using a dual or hybrid form of language, and by alternating or code-switching between the standard and the vernacular. This duality gains significance because it reinforces the importance of two linguistic codes in the Caribbean, each with its distinct functions, the Standard and the Creole, not in competition with each other, but complementing each other in an attempt to describe more truthfully the realities of the languages and cultures of Caribbean people.

Caribbean writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau, Oonya Kempadoo, Merle Hodge, and Jean Buffong are resisting assimilation, preferring to write in Creole or write in English with creole phrases or words woven into their work. This incorporation of creole idioms and rhythms into literature written in English changes and enriches the language so that it reflects subaltern experience. Creole language is much more effective to render Caribbean cultural experiences than English because it is used as a subtle weapon of resistance to metropolitan language and culture. Likewise, when a narrator speaks in Creole in Caribbean texts, he/she reveals to the reader the feelings and images that arise from lived experiences. Books that include Creole and push the reader away from the standard are challenging; they make the reader stop and pay attention to the language, which contributes to understanding the rhythms of life in the islands, hence forcing the reader to pay attention to his/her cultural roots as well. Because the reader is forced to notice the language; it is impossible to overlook its significance and cultural and social messages.

Caribbean writers are experimenting with the use of Creole either by using standard and non-standard registers, or by using Creole only in their dialogues while the narrator uses standard forms of language. Both strategies allow the reader to see experiences differently through the use of Creole. Roslin Kahn asserts that Creole has also been used both to mock the European language and culture evident among the Caribbean upper classes and to evoke a creole culture with non-European elements peculiar to the region.

Creole is used in various Anglophone Caribbean texts. In particular, the character of Anansi, the notorious Spider in Caribbean folktales, masters Creole to perfection. Sharlene May Poliner (1984: 20) states that “Anansi’s language mimics that of corrupt slave traders, masters and missionaries who promised food, adventure and salvation, and who delivered betrayal and death.” Language is a powerful tool for Anansi. He can use language to control or to submit; nevertheless, he has the power to reassert African culture and identity. His powerful verbal strategies function to validate creole languages providing confidence to speakers of Creole who have been constantly

looked down on, ridiculed, and punished for speaking a so called “broken or corrupt” creole language.

Anansi tales such as “How Stories Came to Earth”, “Anansi Proves He Is the Oldest”, “Anansi Plays Dead”, “Anansi Borrows Money”, and “Anansi Owns All Tales That are Told” are especially appealing due to the way the spider speaks. He uses language both metaphorically and deceptively. Anansi is indeed a brilliant linguist who is very much aware of the semiotics of language for he is a master of communication. For example, Anansi usually gets the best of his opponents by tricking them into doing what he wants. The spider is sometimes a cultural hero or one who is mythically responsible for the way certain things are (e.g. “How the Sky God Stories Became Anansi Stories”). On the other hand, the spider is sometimes a cunning trickster, a greedy person who must pay for his actions with shame and punishment (e.g. “Kwaku Ananse and the Capful of Hot Beans”). He skillfully uses all sensory modes to structure a pattern of communication that meets his physical and emotional needs. Therefore, Anansi is master of rhetoric because his word play and sweet talk usually get him what he wants. This is exemplified in the Anansi stories that deal with the problem of hunger and famine. While others starve to death, Anansi manages to keep his belly full. He has an extraordinary power to convince others to do what will satisfy his greed

Peter Patrick (2004: 2-3) provides an example of a linguistic variation in “Anansi Mek Grong”:

(1)

Mesolectal (more influenced by Standard English) variety: Let me tell you some’pn bout Bredda Anansi. Him is a very smart man you know! I goin’ tell what happen to him to the end.”

Basilectal (more influenced by West African languages) variety: “Mek mi tel yu som’n boot Breda Anansi. Im iz a veri smaata man yu noo. A gwain tel wa hapm tu him tu en.

(2)

Mesolectal variety: Now him form a law in him country once that everybody that meddles in another one business mus’ get hurt. But accordin’ to him, him supposed to get them fi eat. So him go up on a rock-top once an say, well then, ‘im goin grow crops because him know people mus’ fass with him.

Basilectal variety: Noo in a faam a laa ina in konchri wans dat evribadi dat faas in anada wan biznis mos get hort. Bot akaadin tu im him supuos tu get dem fi iit. So him go op an a rak tap wans an se wel den im gwain mek grong bika im nuo piipl mos faas wid im.

(3)

Mesolectal variety: By she reach round the corner, him forget the law. Him say, “Eh! A whe’ that-there dry-head something a go?” Him can’ go a met, too? Same time Bredda Anansi drop off o’the rock an come down. Sista Guineahen jus’ come back come pick hin up. And that was the end of Bredda Anansi. Him too smart.

Basilectal variety: Bai shi rich roon di kaana hin figet di laa. Hin se ee A we dat de drai ed sinting a go. Im kyaan ga a met tu. Siem taim Breda Anasi jrap aaf a di rak an kom dong. Sista Gini En jos kom bak kom pik im op. An dat was di hen av Breda Anansi. Him tuu smaat.

The richness of Trinidadian Creole is brilliantly used by Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul to give life to the characters in *Miguel Street*. One of the many interesting uses of Creole in *Miguel Street* is evidenced in the Calypso verses that occur throughout the novel. These verses reflect the popular beliefs of a lower and marginalized class in Trinidad and reveal sexist ideas about women. For example, “Man centipede bad, Woman centipede more than bad,” means that women are worse than men by far (Naipaul, 1971: 98). Later in the text, Naipaul writes, “Matilda, Matilda yu tief my money and gone Venezuela” to explain the relationship between two characters in the novel, Hat and Dolly (p.162). Dolly ran away with another man taking off with all the gifts that Hat had given her. Hat finds her and beats her up so badly that he remorsefully confesses to the police, “I kill a woman.” (p. 163). Dolly does not die, but the lawyer “dis sort of lawyer who does get man hang, you know” (p.165) sees that Hat is put away in prison for four years. The interaction flows easily against the backdrop of a creole language that serves as unifying force among the men who live and struggle on Miguel Street.

Under the Silk Cotton Tree by Jean Buffong is a jewel for linguists who wish to explore the use of creole language in Anglophone Caribbean literature. Buffong masterfully blends acrolectal and basilectal forms of Grenadian English Creole by moving smoothly through the continuum and allowing the reader to accept and understand the language. Not only does Buffong utilize a huge array of creole terms and phrases (e.g. babalay, wooye, oyoye, pappy show, liming, lajabless, beat mouth, dough hair, box brains, marrieding, vex vex, rush rush, tight tight, bad john she playing, getting into bacanal, pougate in the skin, take my farseness, be passing blood, funny in the head, is we walk we walk, was making baby, catch woman malady) but she also depicts many of the typical grammatical features of Creole. For instance, she employs the use of reduplication (e.g. I get vex, vex); absence of copula (e.g. I thirteen); different usages of pronouns (e.g. was making she baby); and multifunctionality (e.g. Is wak we wak). Buffong’s work raises important questions

that need to be considered by creolists and Caribbean writers: How far can language deviate from the standard at a scholarly level?; What language should be accepted as the norm in creole societies?; Should children be taught in their native Creole before they master the standard form of European languages? Buffong portrays the constant clash between the colonial world and the creole world. The duality that one sees in the people of Grenada can be traced to the colonial ideologies that have been deeply implanted in the minds of Caribbean peoples, and which have continued even after independence.

Samuel Selvon is a pioneer in the use of Caribbean language varieties in narration. In Selvon, Trinidadian English-lexifier Creole finds itself in the hands of a great novelist who lures readers into the reality of people and cultures which had long been ignored in colonial discourse. In *A Brighter Sun*, for example, when Tiger tells Joe, “I never grow up as Indian, you know” (p. 197), he is expressing a conflictive personal reality of many Caribbean people who embark on a quest for identity torn between two (or perhaps more) languages and cultures.

Selvon brilliantly portrays the differences among ethnic groups (Creoles, East-Indians, Chinese, British) and social classes (poor, peasants, rich) in Trinidad within a specific historical context. He explores the significance of ethnicity and how it leads to tension among different groups. Because of the close relationship between language and ethnicity, Selvon masterfully utilizes Creole to highlight and explore these differences.

Oonya Kempadoo is one of the younger Caribbean writers who has become a master of poetic prose and creole language in her novels. One cannot deny that one of the most striking elements in both of her novels is the originality in the use of language. *Buxton Spice*, her first novel, is a series of semi-autobiographical vignettes, which constitute an erotic tale of the coming of age of Lula, her twelve-year-old narrator. It is a story of sexual awakening, a passage from innocence to experience. Kempadoo uses language with an openness that might shock the more conservative reader. Her prose is very sensuous and explicit when referring to female sexuality. In one part of the text, Kempadoo uses the voice of Lula to explain how a young girl experiments with sexuality through masturbation:

The flowing musn't stop...hammering on the top of the Tip while the bomb in me was growing making my heart beat faster, muscles tighter. Bomb getting bigger. Oh Shit! Somebody going to realize I running the tap so long. The flowing lolo can't stop. I should have turned on the shower too. The Tip going to blow off. Oh me Lawd! My legs shot down from the wall and I clamped my thighs together. Heart bombing

up inside me and trembles jerking running up and down my arms and body, twisting me up so... (p. 99)

When compared to her text entitled *Tide Running*, Kempadoo is more conservative with the use of Creole in *Buxton Spice* although she does use some innovative creole expressions such as “broughtupsy” meaning ‘refined’ (p. 63), “putagee” meaning ‘Portuguese’ (p. 53), “bestest” meaning ‘the best’ (p. 14) “t’iefed,” meaning ‘thieved’ or ‘stolen’ (p. 39), “taking man” meaning ‘having sexual intercourse with a man’ (p. 166), “easy snake does bite hot” meaning ‘beware of people who seem to be very kind or good; they may be the worst or most evil of all’ (p.148). The freshness and sensuality of Kempadoo’s writing results from the use of Creole with which she is able to capture the everyday reality of the Guyanese childhood of Lula and her coming of age.

In *Tide Running* Kempadoo captures the local creolized speech variety of Tobago especially through Cliff, a young and beautiful black man who is exploited by Bella and Peter to indulge their sexual fantasies, but also through the use of rich poetic prose overflowing with sensory images, innovative similes and personifications, as well as a highly sexually charged language. Kempadoo shows a glimpse of her mastery of poetry and prose when she describes the weather: “In this cold whiteness the sea come like a dead body. Dark, grey, and swoll’n . . .” (p. 150) and when Cliff says to himself,

[How] can a man do dat boy. He own wife. Me an another fella sex girl same time already, we was just ketching a ting but this is the man own woman. And is not to say he don’t love she you could see it in he eye. He ain’ shame to tell she he love she right in front’a me. I never see people so. Sexing up and down and loving each other too[.] (p. 7)

The passages about the sea are important throughout the novel since the sea becomes a major force in the development of the plot. The sea lures both Bella and Cliff as some kind of primitive instinct. When Cliff is put in jail, he says “the sea stop today” (p. 201), meaning that he can no longer enjoy the freedom and carelessness of his youth. The scenes that have strong sexual connotations are narrated with explicitness, but with great taste that is achieved through the use of powerful and sensuous Creole.

In *Tide Running*, the shift in narrative voice from Cliff to Bella, the beautiful, rich creole wife of Peter who seduces Cliff corrupting him into doing things that he does not like, is accompanied by a shift in dialectal narration. Cliff’s heavy Creole mixes with Bella’s more standardized use of the English language. For example, the following dialogue illustrates the differences between the Creole spoken by Bella and by Cliff:

Bella: “Oh shit? Cliff? What you doing?”

Cliff: “I sorry! Sorry. Oh shit.”

Bella:” So why you run? You jumped further than me. You scared me!”

Cliff: “I jump when I see allyou, I ain’ lie! I didn’ expec’ you to be sitting here with the lights turn-off. I jummo, no joke. All me blood beating. True, feel my heart.” (p. 130)

It is also through language that Bella becomes more closely identified with Cliff; whereas Peter, Bella’s rich husband who had a father/son, boy/man closeness with Cliff, becomes progressively excluded through difference in language.

Mimi Sheller states that one way in which Creole has resisted assimilation is through its ‘rawness’, “if language is raw enough, deep on the creole continuum, vulgar, rough, crude, sexual, violent, harsh on the ear, it will repel any who might potentially eat it.” (Sheller, 2003: 10). Perhaps, Kempadoo has tried to use Creole in this manner to achieve an “erotic autonomy” through the use of language in her novels.

Language and literature are carriers and conveyers of culture and are far from being static or fixed. The Caribbean has become an area of heated debate regarding the use of local languages in literature. One side, those who advocate the use of Creoles in literature, argues that English is the language of colonial domination and Western Imperialism and therefore should be shunned in favor of creole languages. The other side contends that “one must not throw the baby out with the bath water” meaning that while English might be the language of colonial conquest, it is also the global ‘lingua franca’ and as such needs to be assessed in the light of the social, economic, cultural, political, and linguistic implications that its mastery entails. English has become a cross-cultural world language, which allows dialogue between various ethno-linguistic groups - something that would have not happened if writers restricted themselves only to their local languages.

Changes in attitudes towards creole languages are evidenced in Caribbean literature. More and more Caribbean writers are using both English and Creole in their works as a way of asserting their Caribbean identity. Caribbean writers have reached a stage where their use of English is complemented by the use of creole languages. Creoles add depth and vigor to literary prose, because they reflect the culture and experiences of their speakers. This inclusive approach which embraces the language mix typical of the Caribbean is reflected in recent changes in governmental language policy in Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao, where Papiamentu, the local creole language, has become an official language alongside Dutch and English. Papiamentu is becoming the language of instruction in primary schools, where children are first taught in their

mother tongue, and later use their mastery of Papiamentu to learn to speak, read, and write fluently in Dutch, English, Spanish, and other languages as well. This plurilingual model could conceivably serve as an interesting alternative to help solve controversies over the use of creole languages on other Caribbean islands.

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