INFORMAL ORTHOGRAPHIES, INFORMAL IDEOLOGIES
SPELLING AND CODE SWITCHING IN BRITISH CREOLE

Mark Sebba

Abstract

This paper is concemed with the written representation of British Creole (a local British variety of Jamaican Creole) which has no standard orthography. Original writing is published from time to time (and we can assume that much unpublished writing goes on as well) using modified Standard English orthographies made up by the original writers. The paper examines what writers actually do when they write Creole and links this to an implicit ideology of "subversion" of the Standard Orthography rather than subservience to it. Some proposals are made up for moving toward a norm for spelling British Creole.

1. Introduction: Creole in Britain

In the third quarter of the 20th Century, migrants from the Caribbean territories of the Commonwealth came to Britain in sufficient numbers to fonn established communities in many of England's largest cities. They brought with them a varied linguistic inheritance: on the one hand, since most of them had attended school in the Caribbean, they had some knowledge of Standard English in the form in which it is used in the Caribbean. On the other hand, the first language for most of them was a creole language, the result of language contact between English and (mainly) African languages during the period of slavery.

Since at that time in the Caribbean, the idea of a creole language as a language in its own right distinct from its lexical sources and with its own grammar, was virtually unknown in the Caribbean, most of the migrants coming to Britain viewed themselves as speakers of English - with the English-lexicon creoles being seen as simply "bad" or "broken" English, and a mark of social inferiority. The generally negative attitude towards Creole in the Caribbean was reproduced, for the most part, among Caribbeans in Britain.

By the 1970s there was a generation of young people, Caribbean by heritage but British by birth, attending schools in Britain. Researchers such as Rosen and Burgess (1980) noticed that in London schools, a vernacular had emerged among Caribbean schoolchildren which seemed to be a form of Jamaican creole -notwithstanding the fact that Jamaica was home to only about 60% of the original migrants (see Sebba, 1993 for a fuller account of "London Jamaican"; see also

Hewitt 1986 for an account of its use among *white* London youth.) More generally, the British-boni generations of Caribbeans are characterised linguistically by the use of both a local variety of British English (e.g. London English, Birmingham English) which is virtually identical to that of white speakers from the same área, *plus* a local form of Jamaican Creole. Code-switching between these two language varieties is the norm in many situations where mainly Caribbeans are present.

2. Writing in British Creole

Most creole languages have low status and the majority have no standard written form, though a few - for example the Spanish-lexicon creole Papiamentu, and the French-lexicon Haitian, St Lucian and Seychellois - now have official orthographies and some regular publications. The English-lexicon creoles have fared much more poorly than the creoles which draw their vocabulary from other European languages: *no* English-lexicon creole (apart from some in the South Pacific, which do not share any history with the Caribbean creoles) has at this stage an official orthography. The global importance of Standard English and the long British colonial shadow over the Caribbean have undoubtedly hindered the development of standardisation of the English-lexicon creoles.

The obvious similarity between the Creole and the Standard itself is one barrier to the standardisation of the creole, according to Joseph (1987): standardisation of a vernacular necessarily takes place with respect to an already existing standardised model (normally the community's current "high" language) which it will eventually equal and possibly replace. In the case of creoles, the natural candidate for this model is the lexifíer; however, independent linguistic status is a function both of *Ansbau* (development for specific "high" functions) and^Í5/owí/(linguistic distance from other languages)(Kloss (1967), (1978); Joseph (1987).) Unfortunately,

> when a creole grows in Ausbau, developing in the direction of
> its superposed model, it must simultaneously shrink in Abstand,
> since that H model is the same 'target' language from which it
> needs to establish its independent validity. (Joseph, 1987: 55)

Hence, ideological polarisation is often a feature of creole-speaking communities:

> creole avant-gardes tend toward extremist positions, either
> virulently opposed to or excessively in favor of the European H.
> The former position will deprive them of the most readily

> available model for standardization of their tongue; the latter
> risks undercutting the creole's Abstand and whatever prestige it
> may have [...] (1987: 56)

This dilemma is solved atthe levei of language attitudes among the population at large, by a general refusal to believe in the potential of a creole language being standardised. According to Le Page (1992: 125-6) "the attitude that literacy is really only possible in the language of the former colonists is still widespread".

Creole speech communities have another, related problem when it comes to standardisation. Many researchers have noted the great degree of variation present in the spoken language of communities where the creole and its lexifier are in contact. De Camp (1971: 350) writes of a "linguistic continuum, a continuous spectrum of speech varieties", and many other writers have taken up this idea of a chain of varieties linking the Standard (acrolect) with the broadest form of Creole (basilect).

The existence of such a continuum makes it ali the more difficult to define an alternative standard to the existing "high" standard language, since a large variety of nonstandard (i.e. non-Standard *Englisti)* forms are at ali times competing not only with the standard forms, but with each other as well. This variability characterises morphology, syntax and lexis; but it presents particular problems for orthography, as we shall see below.

3. Orthographic issues

Orthography, itself a *symbol* of standardisation and a highly visible representation of language norms, is likely to be one of the most contested aspects of standardisation. For many users, after ali, "the language" is the standard *written* language and that alone. If producing an orthography is a just a technical problem for trained linguists, which can be resolved by the classical techniques for establishing the inventory of phonemes, persuading governments and the general public to adopt a spelling system is a highly poiitical act. Ideology, not phonology, is the key factor in adoption of an orthography.

This emerges clearly in the discussion of competing orthographies for Haitian by Schieffelin and Doucet (1994: 176), where they note that "arguments about orthography reflect competing concerns about representations of Haitianness at the national and international levei, that is, how speakers wish to define themselves to each other, as well as to represent themselves as a nation."

In Haiti, there has been an offícial orthography for Haitian Creole since 1980, with anumber of other competing orthographies available and the subject of a national debate. In the "Anglophone" Caribbean, there is no offícial orthography to debate.

87

Proposals for a standard creole orthography come almost exclusively from academics, and discussion is confined mainly to academic circles.

The choice for the would-be writer of English-lexicon creoles is essentially between a modified English orthography and one based on strictly phonemic principies, or some combination of these. The orthography proposed by Cassidy (1978), similar to that used by Cassidy and Le Page in the *Dictionary ofJamaican English* (1967/1980), is the only serious contender in the "phonemic" category. Yet in spite of its use in a number of dictionaries and many linguistic texts, it has so far not been used in any publications for a general readership. Here too, ideological positions are important. Devonish (who argues (1986b) for Creole to be made an officiai language in the Caribbean) and Hellinger (1986) are both strongly in favour of a phonemic orthography. Hellinger summarises the benefits of the latter:

> A genuinely creole orthography will strengthen the structural and psychological identity of the creole; it may in fact initiate or support a recreolization process; it will provide a source for higher prestige and may therefore facilitate native speakers' identification with the creole language and culture. (Hellinger, 1986:67)

By contrast,

> If at this point it was decided to introduce and officially support a creole orthography based on English conventions, it is likely that the effects would include the following:

- the widespread conception of the creole as an inferior variety of English would be strengthened;
- an English-based orthography would obscure and eventually help to eradicate mucb. of the creole's linguistic (phonemic) authenticity;
- in no way would linguistic creativity (as in the field of word formation) receive momentum [...]
- the decreolisation process would accelerate. (ibid.)

4. Informal orthographies: British creole written down

Creole - which for these purposes means essentially a British variety of Jamaican Creole - can certainly be said to be a "written language" in Britain. There is by now a substantial body of written literature wholly or partly in Creole (also

known as Patois) and published in Britain. This includes a variety of written genres, especially poetry (some of it originally recited against a musical background - "dub poetry") and fictional dialogue. Some prose fíction is written partly in Creole; it is rare, however, for the Creole to extend beyond the dialogue to the narrative.

At this stage of the development of the written use of Creole in Britain, when there is no agreed standard, no contested "offícial" orthography, and not even a public language debate, writers using Creole have no option but to create their own orthographic practices, much as writers of English had to do up to the sixteenth century. Tables 1 shows the alternative spellings of some common words and morphemes found in a selection of texts published between 1980 and 1992.

TABLE 1: Variant Spellings of words in British Creole

StE spelling	Variants
I	ah, Ah, I n I (I-and-I)
you	yu, y'u, yuh
mouth	mout', mout
thing	t'ing, ting
nothing	nutten, not'n', notin'
no	nuh, noh, nu
hold	hole, hol'
say	seh, sey
do	dhu, duh
don't	doan
can't	cyan, cyaan, kaan, kean
(be)cause	caw, cau', caa
of	af, ah
ground	groun', grung
little	lickle, likkle
in	inna, ina, eena, een
for	fi, fe, ?fah
which	whe, whey, wey

While different authors (or editors) have their own style - for example, consistently preferring to use or omit apostrophes marking "missing" letters - there is no norm for the spelling of most words. Even when there is only one non-StE variant spelling, it is likely to alternate, even in the same text, with the StE spelling

of the same word or a similar word which contains the same sound.

The variability can be illustrated by extracts from a well-known põem by Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Sonny 's lettah* reproduced in Appendix 1 (originally a dub backed by music, recorded on the *Forces of Victory* álbum (1979)).

Version A is the printed version which appears in the book of collected poems, *Inglan is a bitch* (1980). Version B appears (apparently hand-lettered) on the cover of a 12" disco version of the record (i.e. a record containing only this põem on one side, and intended for use in a disco rather than for general sales)[1].

A.   Mama,
Ah jus' could'n' stan-up deh an'
nohdhunofn':

soh mi jook one in him eye
an' him started to cry; mi
t'ump one in him mout' an'
him started to shout mi kick
one pan him shin an' him
started to spin mi t'ump him
pan him chin an' him drap
pan a bin an de'd.

Mama, more policeman come dung
an' beat mi to di grung; dem charge
Jim fi sus; dem charge mi fi murdah.

B.   Mama,
a jus couldn't stan up
an no dhu notin
so mi juk one ina im eye
an him started to cry
mi tump one ina him mouth
an him started to shout

1 Standard English translation:
Mama, I just couldn't stand there and do nothing; so I poked one in his eye and he started to cry; I hit (thumped) one in his mouth and he started to shout; I kicked one on his shin
and he started to spúi, I hit him on hi chin and he dropped on a bin and crashed and died. Mama, more policemen came down and beat me to the ground. They charged Jim for sus ("acring suspiciously"), they charged me for murder.

mi kick one pon him shin
an him started to spin mi
tump him pon him chin an
him drop pon a bin an crash
an DEAD.

Mama
more police man come down an
beat mi to di groun' dem charge
Jim fi sus dem charge mi fi
murder

In both versions, there are numerous nonstandard spellings to signal pronunciations different from (most) British varieties of English. However, Version A is much more liberal in its use of apostrophes to signal letters omitted (A: *t'ump, mout'*; B: *tump, moui*), and also uses other unconventional spellings like *grung* (B: *groun'*) and *murdah* (B: *murder*). In addition, both versions use a number of unusual spellings which do not, apparently, reflect Creole pronunciations substantially different from British English ones: for example, *dhu, tuff, y'u.* Here too, A has more apostrophes signalling omitted letters: *he 'd, le 'd, de 'd* and (from an earlier part of the põem) *hus 'le, bus 'le.*

Generalising from the selection of texts surveyed, it is possible to say that most writers pay attention to some or ali members of a set *oíphonetic* differences between British English and Creole and try to signal these in some way.

It is notable that very few writers mark any one of these phonetic differences consistently. The one most consistently marked is probabíy /d, t/ for orthographic *th,* but even within one text this may sometimes be marked and sometimes not.

With respect to words which are specifíc to Creole and have no obvious StE model, there are generally even more variant spellings. This is to be expected as in the absence of a standard, no one is really sure how these words should be spelt.

5. Informal ideologies? Towards   an understanding of "informal orthography"

To a linguist treating orthography from a point of view which strictly excludes the social, it is not immediately obviousw/jy writers are so concerned

with marking specifíc phonetic features of Creole - not merely in dialogue spoken by Caribbeans, for example, but also in poetry and, occasionally, narrative. Standard English, we know, is spoken with a large variety of accents. Many British and some North American accents share features of phonology with Jamaican Creole but do not indicate these by distinctions in orthography. The existing spelling system of StE is "broad" enough to cope with them, mainly because - in spite of what most users of English probably believe - it is not a truly alphabetic system, but has "reverted to a partially logographic state" (Joseph, 1987:66). The individual letters which make up a word do not necessarily tell the reader how that word is pronounced, in *any* accent.

What is important to the writers using Creole, however, is that the language be shown to be *different* from StE. The degree of phonetic detail to which writers pay attention can be considerable.

However, phonetic detail is not the whole story. Many writers use nonstandard spellings even for words where there is little or no difference in pronunciation between Creole and other relevant (i.e. mainly British) accents: for example, v *'u, yu, yuh* "you", *dhu, duh* "do", *staat* "start", *'hole* "whole", íw#""tough". Noting a similar tendency in Caribbean writing, Hellinger remarks that

> speakers' readiness for a more radical departure from the dominant model becomes evident in numerous idiosyncratic spellings. (1986: 62)

Orthography is thus for the writer an important means of signalling difference, or, we might say, *distance* from StE. "Distance" *(Abstand,* as we saw above, is one of the two concepts which helps determine whether the designation "language" is applied to a candidate linguistic system.) Establishing "distance" is thus a step on the road to linguistic independence.

This search for distance from StE can be seen as an expression of an "informal ideology" of language creation.

Spellings likej>'«, *dhu, 'hole* and *tuff-* where the Creole pronunciation is not significantly different from that used in British English - can be seen as conscious attempts by some writers to *subvert* and challenge StE spelling. This can well be seen, for example, in the following extract from *soun di abengfi nanny,* a põem by Jean Binta Breeze[2]:

---

2 Standard English translation: We say we won't turn baclc, we are bursting (cuttíng) a new track, the ground is tough, but i t ' s enough for a bite, for our fight.

> **we** sey wi nah tun back we a
> bus a new track dutty tuff
> but is enuff fí a bite fj wi
> fight

> (Breeze, 1988: 46)

Even the title of Breeze's volume, *Riddym Ravings,* suggests an intentional manipulation of the conventions: for while the orthographic *d* replaces *th* to represent the pronunciation /d/, the^ of the standard spelling of*rhythm* is retained, but displaced to the second syllable.

Writing about similar developments in Scotland, where Lowland Scots (Lallans) is unstandardised but has a written tradition distinct from that of English, Macafee (1983:40) notes the development of an *anti-standard,* as opposed to a *local* standard, in the popular usage of Glasgow. It may be that what we are witnessing is the creation of an anti-standard for British Creole.

6. Code switching: another problem for standardisation

The existing models of standardisation make no allowance for code switching. On the contrary, "purity" of language is seen as one of the key requirements for "good" use of a standard language. Among Caribbeans in Britain, a somewhat unusual situation exists where within the same community, code switching takes place between two related codes - British English and British Creole - which are nevertheless distinguished from each other by their users (Sebba, 1993).

Although the "code switching mode" is primarily manifested *mspoken* language, writers can effectively represent switching even in the absence - or perhaps because of the absence - of a standard way of writing Creole. In a story written by a student from a London secondary school, reproduced in part beiow, the narrative as well as the dialogue is written in a mixture of (London) English and Creole. Italics are used to indicate where "Creoleness" has been explicitly signalled in the individual words of the passage, whether in grammar, lexis or spelling.

BULL, BABYLON, THE WICKED[3]

1. One *manin* in January me and my *spars dem* was coming from a club in Dalston.
2. We didn't have no *donsi* so we *a walkgo* home.
3. *De* night *did* cold and *di gal dem wi did have wid we* couldn't walk fast.
4. Anyway we must have been walking for about fifteen minutes *whendis carpull* up, it was this youthman *ah* know and *him* woman.
5. We *see sey* a mini cab *him inna.*
6. *Him sey* "How far you *ah* go"?
7. *Me sey* "Not far, you *ketch we* too late man".
8. Anyway before *me* could close *me mout de* two *gal demjump inna de* car, *bout dem say dem nah* walk no more.
9. Me *an* Trevor *tell demfi gwan.*
10. *An de carpull* away.

This piece of writing offers a very close written parallel to the kind of code switching found in the speech of Caribbean Londoners of the same generation, as documented in Sebba (1993). The writer has very effectively mixed and signalled the two codes (Creole and Standard/London English) both in his first-person narrative and in the reported dialogue. Nonstandard spellings are used, though in fact there are not ali that many of them *(d, t* for *th* is the most consistent). Significantly, the writer makes full use of the fact that conventional English spellings do not represent the actual sounds of any particular variety, which allows him to mix standard and nonstandard spellings within a single sentence, creating "seamless joins" between the two codes. The result is a piece of writing which well portrays its writer's ability *inspeech* to "slide" from Creole to Standard and back again. Such "sliding" would be harder to portray (and would probably appear less realistic) if Creole and London English had separate, distinct orthographic systems which forced the writer to signal at *every* point which "code" was being represented.

3 Standard English transladem:
1. One morning in January me and my fiiends were coming from a club in Dalston.
2. We didn't have any money so we were walking home.
3. The night was cold and the girls we had with us couldn't walk fast.
4. Anyway we must have been walking for about fifteen minutes when this car pulled up, it was this youth I know and his woman.
5. We saw that it was a mini cab he was in.
6. He said "How far are you going"?
7.1 said "Not far, you caught us too late man".
8. Anyway before I could close my mouth the two girts jumped into the car, they said they weren't walking any more.
9. Me and Trevor told them to go on.
10. And the car pulled away.

7. Conclusions and further research

Many people in Britain today are reading and writing Creole; for most, probably ali of these, writing Creole is a secondary competence acquired informally after learning to read and write in StE. Virtually everything that is written in Creole uses a modified StE orthography, but there are no widely agreed norms for writing the language. Hence, no one is sure how to spell what they want to write. The current relatively anarchic situation, where Creole writers assert their independence through "idiosyncratic spellings", has at least one advantage: no one isúfoadvantaged by not knowing "the correct spelling".

Whether Creole should be standardised and made an official language in the Caribbean is to some extent a separate issue from how it should be written and used by its speakers in Britain, where it is likely to remain a minority language with little or no institutional support. Only time will tell whether British Creole, perhaps under pressure from publishers, will standardise, or will continue as at present.

Ideally it is for the users of Creole themselves to decide whether or not they want a standardised orthography and if so, what form it should take. Linguists, however, have a role to play: they can provide a working phonemic orthography (as Cassidy has already done) and they can study current practice (as in the present paper). They can also look at the issue in a wider context of standardisation and alphabetisation of languages around the world. This paper must not be the last word on the subject. Writers actually using Creole should give their views now.

With a view to studying - and equally important, *documenüng* - the development of the written form of British Creole, Sally Kedge and I have set up, with the support of the British Academy[4], a "Corpus of Written British Creole" at Lancaster University. Our aim is to create a representative collection of British Creole texts in machine-readable form for researchers to use as a resource. The Corpus is now available to anyone wanting to pursue this line of research.

References

Breeze, J. B. *Riddym Ravings and other poems.* Edited by Mervyn Morris. London: Race Today Publications, 1988. Cassidy, F. G. A revised phonemic orthography for Anglophone Caribbean Creoles.

Paper presented at the Conference of the Society for Caribbean Linguistics. Cave Hill, Barbados, 1978. Cassidy, F. G. and Le Page, R. B. *Dictionary ofJamaican English.* Cambridge:

4 Small personal research grant no. 05-012-4670.

Cambridge University Press, 1967/1980. De Camp, D. Towards a generative analysis of a post-creole speech continuum. In:

Hymes, D. (ed.) *Pidginization and creolization of languages: proceedings of a conference held at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, April 1968.*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, pp. 349-370. Devonish, H. *Language and liberation: Creole language politics in the Caribbean.*

London: Karia Press, 1986b. Gõrlach, M. and Holm, J. (eds.) *Focus on the Caribbean.* Amsterdam: John

Benjamins, 1986. Hellinger, M. On writing English-related Creoles in the Caribbean. In: Gõrlach and

Holm (eds.), 1986, op. cit. Hewitt,R. *White talk black talk.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Johnson, L. K. *Inglan is a bitch.* London: Race Today Publications, 1980. Joseph, J. E. *Eloquence and power: the rise of language standards and standard*

languages. London: Francês Pinter, 1987. Kloss, H. "Abstand" languages and "Ausbau" languages. *Anthropological*

Linguistics, 9:29-41, 1967. Kloss, H. *Der Entwicklung neuer germanishcer Kultursprachen seit 1800.*2nd ed.

Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1978. Le Page, R. B. Sociolinguistic aspects of literacy. In: Bolton, K. and Kwok, H.

(eds.) *Sociolinguistics today: International perspectives.* London: Routledge, 1992. Macafee, C. *Varieties of English around the world: Glasgow.* Amsterdam: John

Benjamins, 1983. Schieffelin, B. B. and Doucet, R. C. The "real" Haitian Creole: ideology,

metalinguistics and orthographic choice. *American Ethnologist,* 21: 176-200, 1994. Sebba, M. *London Jamaican: language systems in interaction.* London: Longman,

1993.