Linguistic ideologies and the historical development of language use patterns in Jamaican music

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents Jamaica as a case study of the intersections between language practice, language ideologies, and music, using a historically grounded descriptive approach spanning a period of more than three and a half centuries. It describes secular and religious Jamaican music(s) and ideologies connected to them through different periods of the country's history characterised by different social and socio-political configurations (e.g., slavery, colonial rule, Independence). These systems and the emergent socialities to which they gave rise influenced the creation of new musical genres and determined to varying extents how linguistic codes were distributed by genre, and in the lyrics themselves.

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1. Introduction

English is the de facto official language of the Caribbean island of Jamaica, but most commentators would agree that the country's lingua franca is an English-lexified Creole, which inhabitants commonly refer to as (Jamaican) Patois/Patwa. Despite its long-term currency across all sectors of Jamaican society, the origin of the Jamaican language in the oppressive system of slavery has served as a basis for its denigration, not only by the elites, but also by working-class Jamaicans for whom Jamaican may be their main or only code. Throughout its history of more than three centuries, the language has frequently been evaluated as inadequate and inefficient (Leach, 1959:6), 'just plain laziness', and as being 'so limited in vocabulary that it can only be described as primitive jabbering' (Cargill, 2000). While similar sentiments have occurred regularly in books and newspaper articles for more than a century now, a language attitude survey conducted approximately a decade ago by the Jamaican Language Unit (2005) has revealed that they are apparently coming to represent a fringe view. Close to 80% of respondents reported that they saw Jamaican as a language, and roughly the same percentage declared themselves bilingual in English and Jamaican.

Several factors contributed to the change in prestige (cf. Jamaican Language Unit, 2005) which the Jamaican language has undergone over the past six decades. These factors include shifts in power relations and identity politics, mobility, migration, and access to and use of new technologies (Devonish, 2007:158–241; Farquharson, 2015; Hinrichs, 2011; Mair, 2003, 2013). I include Jamaican popular music under the new technologies, not as a new technology itself, but as having appropriated the new and emerging technologies from the early twentieth century onwards, for purposes of amplification (Henriques, 2011), reproduction, and dissemination (via radio, television, internet, etc.).

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Since English continues to wield hegemonic power in the area of literacy, language use in books and newspaper articles is skewed in favour of English, and therefore, against those who lack competence in English. Music, on the other hand, has always provided a more liberal space giving access to a variety of languages, styles, and voices. Therefore, the current article proposes that Jamaica's popular music potentially provides a better gauge of language ideologies. Unfortunately, Jamaican songs contain relatively few metalinguistic and metapragmatic communicative acts. This makes it difficult to conduct a thoroughgoing analysis of linguistic ideologies based solely on the explicit comments singers make with regard to language. To overcome this hurdle, the current paper explores language use patterns with the understanding that the linguistic choices that speakers make in particular situations reflect or counter specific linguistic ideologies. The approach to linguistic ideology that is taken here follows Woolard (1998:9), who proposes that '[i]deology is variously discovered in linguistic practice itself; […] and in the regimentation of language use through more explicit metapragmatics'.

Some three decades ago, Brathwaite (1984:16) pointed out that 'the very necessary connection to the understanding of nation language [i.e., Creole] is between native musical structures and the native language. That music is, in fact, the surest threshold to the language which comes out of it'. Although Brathwaite was referring mainly to rhythm and musicality, we will see presently that the connection he suggests also holds the key to understanding the connection between the genesis and development of Jamaican popular music, its relationship with the island's social history, and how those interact with linguistic ideologies over time. The current paper presents Jamaica as a case study of the intersections between language practice, language ideologies, and music, and implements this using a historically grounded descriptive approach. The data on which the conclusions are based were drawn from a random but extensive (approximately 200) selection of songs from all historical periods and genres. For the colonial period, I had access only to the text of the songs as recorded/reproduced in various works of history or analysis (Brathwaite, 1971, 1984; Jekyll, 1966; Lalla and D'Costa, 1990; Patterson, 1969; Rath, 1993). For the period starting in the 1950s, I listened to recorded versions of the songs, noting genre, code choice, and code distribution. The discography at the end of the paper contains only the songs that are mentioned in the discussion or from which portions have been quoted as illustration.

Section 2 looks at language in the music of enslaved Africans during the early plantation era and charts the transition from African languages in music to the emergence of Jamaican as the language of folk/popular music. Section 3 argues that Jamaican popular music became anglicised around the middle of the last century owing in part to the influence of American music. This is followed by a discussion in Section 4 about how top-down vs. bottom-up approaches to nationalism manifest themselves in patriotic songs. Section 5 presents a long historical view of language use patterns in religious music, and Section 6 closes the paper with a summary and discussion.

2. The twin development of folk music and folk language

It is only in the very earliest phase of the English colonisation (1655–1665) of the island of Jamaica that speakers of (standard and nonstandard dialects of) British English constituted the demographic and linguistic majority. By the fourth quarter of the seventeenth century, enslaved Africans, most of them speakers of Niger–Congo languages, had come to outnumber English speakers (Farquharson, 2012:13–23). However, the latter group would have comprised the largest homogenous ethnolinguistic group for about the first thirty years (1655–1685). Despite the numerical dominance of English speakers in that period, there is evidence from the late seventeenth century that people of English descent were using a contact language (probably Early Jamaican Creole) to communicate with people of African descent (Rath, 1993:701).

The first significant historical reference to music among the enslaved (Sloane, 1707), and incidentally to the language of that music, comes from the third quarter of the seventeenth century. The British naturalist Sir Hans Sloane, with the help of a French musician, noted down the music and words of the songs played by the Africans. Based on information obtained from the African musicians (via the overseer), the songs were identified as being of Angola, Papa, and Kromanti provenance, respectively. The music identified as Papa is an instrumental piece. In the 1970s, the Kromanti song was identified by Vincent Odamtten (speaker of Ewe and Àkán) as an old children's play song in Àkán (cf. Lalla and D'Costa, 1990:128). No (African) source language has been identified so far for the refrain of the song labelled 'Angola' (but see Rath, 1993:722–4 for a discussion). Rath (1993:720–1) suggests that 'the language of the songs contains clues to understanding the processes by which Africans reconstructed their various ethnic identities under the constraints of slavery in the Americas'. That the earliest songs on record should turn out to be in African languages is not contrary to expectation. Although one of the pieces being performed by the enslaved was in English, this should not be taken as evidence that in seventeenth-century Jamaica enslaved Africans in general, and these singers in particular, had full command of English. It is not uncommon globally for people to sing songs in a language that they neither speak nor (fully) understand. We find ample support for this conclusion in songs used during religious ritual in different cultures, as well as the recent globalisation of Jamaican (Bilby, 1977) and American pop music.

During the early to mid colonial period, there was no concerted effort in Jamaica to teach English to people of African descent. Whites and Blacks enjoyed different entertainment, although poor Whites might have partaken from time to time in Black festivities (Patterson, 1973:231, 236).

(1) *Hipsaw! my deaa! you no do like a-me!*
You no jig like a-me! you no twist like a-me!
Hipsaw my deaa! you no shake like a-me!