

Non-English orthography in written Jamaican Creole: a variationist approach to spelling choices and social practice

Linguists are frequently fascinated by nonstandard orthography on the grounds of its potential to convey subversive identity statements. Even in the case of written Jamaican Creole (JamC), a lexically English-based, but orthographically non-standardized language, deviations from the standard English spellings of cognate items have attracted such interpretations (cf. e.g. Sebba 1998). However, any view of orthography as 'social practice' (Sebba 2007) has to encompass more than only subversion as a motivation for nonstandard spelling.

JamC words relate to English words in one of four basic ways (Hinrichs 2004: 102; Sebba 2007: 122-123): A) Words that have an English cognate and do not differ significantly from it in either form or meaning, e.g. *say*, *you*, *tough*; B) words that have an English cognate, but acquired a different phonological form in Creole, e.g. *yai* 'eye', *kyaan* 'can't', *likl* 'little'; C) words that derive from an English source but have acquired a distinct meaning or function, e.g. *yaad* 'home', *neva* 'did not', *mi* 'I'; D) words that are not historically derived from English, e.g. *unu* 'you (pl.)', *pikni* 'child, children', *talawa* 'tall, sturdy'.

While StE orthography may serve as a model in any of these four cases, it is only for words in the first category that a non-English spelling choice can clearly be attested as such, as well as interpreted as motivated by something other than the need to disambiguate between the Creole and English meanings of a lexeme, or to reflect non-English phonology. For example, the spellings <se, yuh, tuff> for *say*, *you*, *tough* (or rather: their JamC counterparts) are frequent, even though the spellings supplied by the StE model would work as well. For the purpose of this paper, then, 'social practice' is analyzed only in the context of nonstandard spellings of type A) words.

One of the most important factors determining nonstandard orthographic usage in written JamC is audience: the more public an act of writing, the more likely it is to involve consciously constructed forms of Creole; the more likely is it, in fact, to employ orthography as 'social practice'.

This paper shows that the use of nonstandard spellings as social practice is constrained by several factors relating to the physical writing situation, the relationship between writer and audience, and the writer's personal strategies in the use of written creole. I demonstrate the impact of these factors, operationalized in terms of quantifiable independent variables, on writer's choices between standard and nonstandard cognate spellings in a corpus of approximately 40,000 words of written JamC (extracted from bicodal online interactions in English and Creole). With a corpus of JamC online writing that comprises private e-mail, internet discussion posts, and blog posts, I will discuss the different factors that guide the use of orthography as social practice – which turns out to be less disorderly than we often assume.

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Sebba, M. (1998). "Phonology meets ideology: The meaning of orthographic practices in British Creole." *Language Problems and Language Planning* 22(1): 19-47.

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