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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

# Social Consideration and Contexts of Linguistic Varieties in Jamaica

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# Social Consideration and Contexts of Linguistic Varieties in Jamaica

This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

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## ABSTRACT

From the moment European colonisers set foot in Jamaica, a series of changes came along in the societies that settled in the island. These were of a varied nature from social to linguistic and developed in certain ways that marked every aspect of Jamaican people's existence, particularly their languages.

Although there were many other explorers arriving in the Caribbean territory before the British, who ruled from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they were the ones that influenced Jamaican culture and languages the most. This essay will pay special attention to the influence of English linguistic varieties in Jamaica and the latest trends taken from American English. Early in the process, English, Irish and Scottish enterprises began to "import" black slaves from central and west Africa. This imperialistic practice is key to understand the development of both, society and languages. Today's Jamaican culture and linguistic varieties are the result of these two phenomena together.

The fact that slaves did not have access to a formal way of learning the language of their masters motivated a new variety that was the result of African dialects mixed up with some structural and lexical features of English. After the independence process, these Jamaican Creole varieties were vindicated by the Black Jamaicans movement. In this paper, the three main languages spoken in the island, Jamaican Creole, Standard English and Standard Jamaican English will be analysed to determine to the extent to which they relate to each other. The social consideration of these varieties in present day Jamaica will also be explored throughout the work. To achieve a better understanding of this phenomenon a survey will be conducted.

Key Words: colonization, slaves, English varieties, Jamaican Creole, Standard English, Standard Jamaican English, African dialects, pidgin.

## RESUMEN

Desde el momento en que los colonizadores europeos llegaron a Jamaica, ocurrieron una serie de cambios en las sociedades asentadas en la isla. Estos fueron de diversa naturaleza, desde cambios sociales hasta cambios lingüísticos, y se desarrollaron de tal forma que han marcado todos los aspectos de la existencia de los habitantes de Jamaica, en particular sus lenguas.

A pesar de que hubo muchos otros exploradores que llegaron al territorio del Caribe antes de los británicos, que gobernaron desde el siglo XVII, fueron estos quienes influenciaron la cultura y las lenguas de Jamaica en mayor grado. Este ensayo prestará especial atención a la influencia de las variedades lingüísticas inglesas en Jamaica y a las últimas tendencias tomadas del inglés americano. Al principio del proceso, empresas inglesas, irlandesas y escocesas comenzaron a "importar" esclavos negros de África central y occidental. Esta práctica imperialista es clave para entender el desarrollo de ambas, tanto la sociedad como las lenguas. La cultura jamaicana de hoy y sus variedades lingüísticas son el resultado de estos dos fenómenos. El hecho de que los esclavos no tuvieran acceso a un medio formal de aprendizaje del lenguaje de sus propietarios motivó una nueva variedad que fue el resultado de la mezcla de dialectos africanos con algunas características estructurales y léxicas del inglés. Después del proceso de independencia, estas variedades de criollo jamaicano fueron reivindicadas por el Movimiento Negro Jamaicano. Las tres variedades principales habladas en la isla, Jamaican Creole, Standard English and Standard Jamaican English, serán analizadas en este trabajo para determinar hasta que punto se interrelacionan. Exploraremos también la consideración social de estas variedades en la Jamaica actual. Para alcanzar un mejor entendimiento de este fenómeno se realizará una encuesta.

Palabras Clave: colonización, esclavos, variedades del inglés, Jamaican Creole, Standard English, Standard Jamaican English, dialectos africanos, pidgin.

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## INTRODUCTION

The colonial period brought a wide range of implications and impacts in every aspect of life in colonised societies; many of which have remained influential through recent times. Jamaica is a great example of this. This essay will focus on the aftermath of imperialistic policies, which greatly influenced linguistic features of Jamaican varieties. Special attention will be paid to the history of Jamaican language varieties. Firstly, African influences will be deeply analysed, particularly the huge impact of the rapid increase of the number of African slaves, especially during the seventeenth century. This will be followed by a description of the footprint that the different English variations left on Jamaican varieties. Over time, English has been favoured over the rest of languages present in the island in formal contexts. Later, the current controversy regarding linguistic varieties in Jamaica will be mentioned. In the final section of the essay, the characteristics of Jamaican Creole, Standard Jamaican English and Standard English in Jamaica will be developed in detail. Finally, the social aspect of the three varieties will be considered taking a survey as reference.

### 1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF JAMAICA.

Jamaica is considered one of the best examples of a country in which the past is still present. When analysing the historical context of Jamaicans, it is important to consider slave trade at the beginning of the colonization. The Arawaks, natives of the Jamaican island, were submitted by Spaniards when Cristopher Colombus claimed the territory for the Spanish Empire in 1494, reducing their population until they were almost exterminated. This was partly because of mistreatment but also because of the importation of European diseases. However, taking into consideration linguistic facts, Spanish language had little impact on Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Creole. Spaniard settlers imported coloured slaves from Africa as labour for their plantations. African language varieties left a much greater

mark on today's Jamaican language. Among the imperialist civilizations that set foot in Jamaica were Portuguese, French and Dutch people. Later and more importantly, British, including English, Scottish and Irish, arrived in the island in 1655, provoking the flee of Spanish colonisers who freed their slaves in the process.

“The conquest of Jamaica by the English and the massive and rapid import of African slaves beginning in the middle of the 16th century, can be seen as the most striking factors for the socio-cultural and linguistic evolution of Jamaica” (Jettka 1).

Slaves and their descendants, known as Maroons, hid from the British in remote areas of the island. They managed to preserve African traditions, including traces of the language, and became the biggest enemies of the British colonisers in Jamaica. Nevertheless, they flourished under the oppression of the imperialists.

As a consequence of the Abolishment of Slavery, due to the Abolition Bill passed in 1808, which led to the actual freedom of most slaves in Jamaica in 1838, the British enterprisers abandoned the colony. However, Jamaica was still governed by the imperialists. A prosperous period in relevant areas such as education, health care and social welfare followed these series of events. Yet, at the turn of the twentieth century, Jamaicans were still living in a system that favoured inequality. It was the great resistance of Black Jamaicans that enabled Jamaican citizens to put an end to abuse and racism.

## 2. DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW LANGUAGE.

In this section of the essay, the development of a new language in Jamaica will be explained. A new linguistic phenomenon emerged from the process of slave importation. A large number of Africans arrived and the number of people from African origin grew fast. As Craig points out: “the number of African slaves imported for work . . . was so large that it

became a subject of concern to the British government” (298). In this respect, Jettka highlights the fact that: “The ongoing import of slaves by the English led to a situation in which over 90% of the population were slaves or their descendants” (2). Patrick also provides excellent statistics showing the huge increase in slavery during the British dominance:

Year	Europeans	Africans	Ratio
1658	7,000	1,500	5:1
1677	9,000	9,000	1:1
1703	8,000	45,000	1:5
1739	10,000	99,000	1:10

Figure 1. Extracted from Patrick (“JC Jamaican Patwa” 1).

Slaves did not have any access to the Standard English language used by colonisers and no means to learn it properly. Since the seventeenth century the British government imposed English as the official language in Jamaica. According to Patrick, the process of slave importation was very fast, which caused lack of communication between masters and their slaves. He also makes reference to the fact that this lack of communication was partly due to encouragement on the part of the masters of an aggrupation policy that put together slaves from different areas who could not interact among them. This was done to avoid rebellion but caused inefficiency in the work of the slaves and thus, the profit from these activities was affected and British masters realised that they had to do something about this issue.

As a consequence, slaves and their masters searched for ways to develop an interlanguage that enabled them to understand each other. This is the beginning of pidgin in



Jamaica. Generally speaking, as Genevieve Escure suggests, pidgin is a language that “arose in the context of temporary events (e.g, trade, seafaring, and even tourism), or enduring traumatic social situations such as slavery or wars” (1). Pidgin languages fall into this category, as the first attempts of communication between different communities which did not share a common language. These do not just include words from different languages but also phonetic traits and gestures from different roots.

Traditionally, this variety has not enjoyed a good reputation. It is regarded as a low status language spoken by people from humble origins, whose backgrounds belonged to former enslaved populations.

Creole, however, is the result of a pidgin dialect used over a long period of time by a population group which embraces it as their own common way of communicating. Daniel Jettka considers that pidgin becomes Creole “with the increase of native speakers of the pidgin it could be linguistically categorised as a creole language, respectively” (2).

In the case of Jamaica, pidgin was widespread and consolidated as the native language of the lower classes, becoming in this way Creole. This was a double-edged sword: they were able to communicate and develop their identity but masters regarded it as proof that they were “simpletons unable to attain the higher abstractions of their master’s languages” (Escure 2). Over the years, this pidgin became the native language of the majority of the population. As pidgin was widely used, it became Creole in Jamaica, the common language of the lower classes and the native language of the Jamaicans. This is called a process of nativization. While a pidgin is spoken as a second language and learned for practical purposes, a Creole language is consolidated among the population; new generations learn it and embrace it as their mother tongue. According to Patrick, in 1750 Creole was the native language of thousands of people (“JC Jamaican Patwa” 1).

About Jamaican Creole, as Patrick describes, it: “owes little to either the indigenous Arawaks or their Spanish conquerors” (“JC Jamaican Patwa” 1). The main African languages that contributed to Jamaican Creole were from central and west Africa, especially from the “Bantu and Kwa families”. Different varieties of English also intervened in the creation of this creole; mainly Irish and Scottish. (“JC Jamaican Patwa” 1).

2.1. African influence in Jamaican languages: Words and expressions.

The work of Joseph Tito Farquharson analyses the influence of African languages on the Jamaican Creole (JC) over the years. He emphasises the fact that African impact on JC can be observed on several linguistic levels: morphology, syntax and lexicon.

This section will highlight some of the most relevant words which have been used in JC. According to Joseph Tito Farquharson, who has explored 289 Jamaican words that have been assigned African origin, 36% of Africanisms come from the African variety Akan and 19% from Koongo. Among the less relevant influences are Gbe and Yoruba.

Africanism	Semantic Domain	LC	Lang. Group	Region	Source	YFA
aachi	Food and drink	n	Kwa	GOC	Gã,Gbè	1955
aba	People	n		GOC	Guang	1935
abeɪ	Flora	n	Tano	GOC, BEN	Àkán,	1811
					Guang,	
					Anufo	

Figure 2. Extracted from Farquharson (111).

## 2.2. English influence in Jamaican languages: Words and expressions.

As Zdeněk Nývlt explores in his major thesis, *Jamaican Creole: Its Continuity in the United Kingdom*, early Jamaican Creole was highly impacted by different varieties of English. These were mostly from Southwest, Midlands, and Northern England. Later, speakers from New England and several Caribbean islands contributed the most to the development of the language. This varied exposure brought as a result a heterogeneity in Jamaican speech (16).

Due to the wide range of word categories affected by this influence it would be impractical to offer a detailed analysis. Some clear examples can be appreciated in these sentences:

Go in yuh house go sleep, but lef people yard and lef people house - ‘Go in your own house and sleep, leave other people’s yards and other people’s houses [alone]’ (qtd. in Patrick, “JC Jamaican Patwa” 22).

Me aunty never like we to mix wid we faada family - ‘My aunt didn’t like us to mingle with our father’s family’ (qtd. in Patrick, “JC Jamaican Patwa” 22).

Some verbs and nouns belonging to daily life seem to be preserved intact. Family relationships, everyday activities, etc...

The influence of English on the varieties of Jamaican Creole is for the most part very apparent. Jamaican Creole has resulted in a language which resembles English giving it a much more phonetically transparent appearance. The use of tenses and pronouns also makes this process of simplification extensive to other areas of the language. An example of this phonetic phenomenon could be: “wa di inglish stuor did niem agen? - What was the English store called again?” (Patrick, “JC Jamaican Patwa” 4). The phonetic resemblance with

English pronunciation is significant.

A further example of linguistic simplification is: “Olrait, mi don uol aredi alright - ‘Alright, I am old already!’” (Patrick, “JC Jamaican Patwa” 8). The use of the pronoun “mi” as a substitute for the subject personal pronoun “I” can be seen in this example.

Another example of simplification affecting verbal tenses would be: “sapuoz man ben get op an kyatch yu hin de? - ‘Suppose somebody had gotten up and caught you in there?’” (Patrick, “JC Jamaican Patwa” 4). The past perfect tense becomes simplified, “had gotten” develop into “ben get”.

### 3. CONTROVERSY REGARDING STANDARD ENGLISH AND STANDARD JAMAICAN ENGLISH.

In spite of the institutional efforts to try to standardise the different varieties, the present day varieties do not benefit from a consensus, which would provide a clear definition of their features. Moreover, native speakers themselves are able to “speak or at least understand more than one type of the local speech” (Jettka 3).

As this research will deeply analyse later, Standard English is widely used in the professional sphere while Jamaican Creole is present in informal daily situations, among family members and friends. However, most speakers master both linguistic registers equally. What has often been known as “proper English” (Standard English) used to be a mark of good education and social status. Even today, parents living abroad tend to hinder their children from learning and using the features that define Jamaican Creole in an attempt to prevent them from being labelled as an ethnical minority. Nevertheless, Jamaican Creole (preferably referred as Patois by native speakers) has been lately claimed from a socio-cultural perspective as a perfectly acceptable variety that reflects the speaker’s identity. A distinction

of use in terms of private-public settings is not necessarily true. Jamaican Creole is commonly used in public. It is often about what image you want to convey or what your interlocutors are expecting from the interaction.

It is difficult to distinguish between Standard English and Standard Jamaican English to the extent that some Jamaican citizens feel there is not any difference. The main struggle resides in the lexicon. It is often impossible to discern which word belongs to each of the above mentioned varieties. For example, according to Jetta, there is a process of “decreolisation”, a phenomenon that makes the Creole language gradually borrow more and more terms from the “lexifier language” (English) (3).

It is clear to Patrick that the traditional way of discrimination of languages and dialects in bilingual communities is not effective in Jamaican society. As this author suggests, the varieties and complexities of Jamaican languages derive from Jamaican “intricate web of social relations” (“Jamaican Creole morphology” 2). This is the reason why DeCamp came up with a new concept: “The (post)-creole continuum model”. It consists of “a variety of forms that lie between the two extremes of StE (the acrolect) and the broadest creole (the basilect). The varieties in between are called mesolects” (Gramley 10). The acrolect enjoys the highest social regard, while the basilect is considered to be closer to slang. The term “continuum” allows linguists to understand the different varieties as a path that would embrace the closest and the broadest and consider the ones in the middle as zones of proximity. In this way, there are varieties that are more likely to act as “mesolects” and are therefore more widely spread among the Jamaican population. In this respect, Standard Jamaican English could be considered as a mesolect.

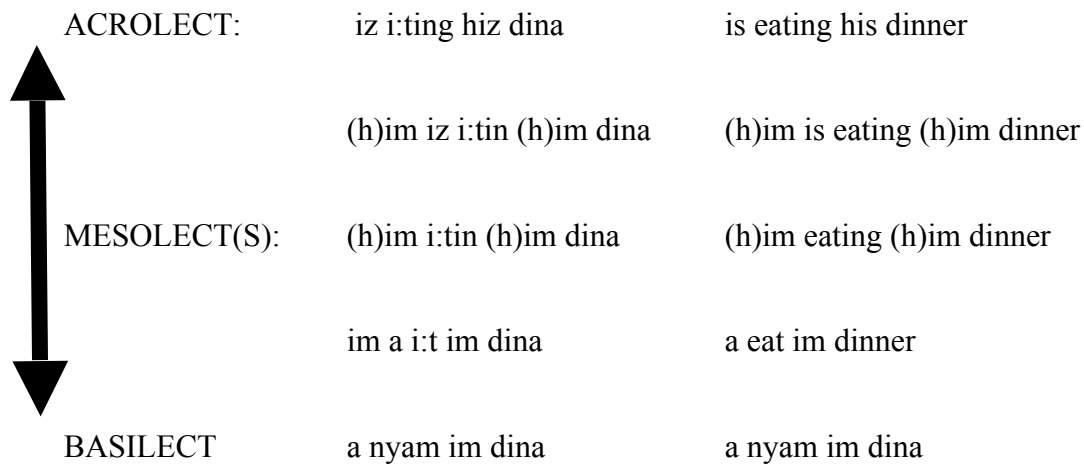


Figure 3. Extracted from Jettka (3).

A British influence can be appreciated in this example. The word “dinner” is preferred over “supper”. However, many newly borrowed words and expressions come from American English. For instance, the word “car truck” is favoured over the British version “boot”. In the same way, “movie” or “eggplant” would be picked up over “film” and “aubergine”.

#### 4. JAMAICAN CREOLE'S FEATURES.

Due to the fact that Jamaican Creole is highly influenced by African dialects, which have an oral tradition and not written evidence, it is also predominantly an oral language. This makes it more difficult for the language to develop and spread.

Among the special features of Jamaican Creole, some phonetic variations can be found. For instance, “thick” /θɪk/ became due to the fact that Jamaican speakers did not have [θ] and [ð] in their African varieties.

In the same way, the plural ending of nouns is generally suppressed. Jamaican speakers felt that the context was enough to understand the difference in meaning. This is clear in regular plurals (“mi bredda”). Sometimes, to clarify a plural use, the word “dem” (which

comes from “them”) is added at the end: “mi bredda dem” (my brothers), “di cat dem” (the cats) and “pickeny dem” (children). Nevertheless, this is not always necessary. Some speakers would not feel the need to use “dawgs dem” (dogs) and instead they would simply use “dawgs”. Similarly, they would apply the pronoun “dem” as a substitute of people and not unanimated objects.

Due to the oral status of Jamaican Creole, two very clear trends can be emphasized. Firstly, the final suffix “-er” becomes “a” which denotes that the writing channel is more phonetic than Standard English is. For example: “wata” (water), “daughta” (daughter) and “sista” (sister), “fadda” (father), “madda” (mother). It is a common believe among native speakers that there is only a version of Patois, with slight variations in the spelling of certain words. For instance: “pickney” or “pickeny” (child).

As Patrick points out, the regular past form marker (-ed) is often omitted “in past-reference contexts”. (“JC Jamaican Patwa” 2) As this example taken from Patrick’s research shows: “ai hav twelv chiljren wit him, tuu dayd”, which in English would be “I had twelve children with him, two died” (“JC Jamaican Patwa” 3).

## 5. SOCIAL CONSIDERATION OF JAMAICAN CREOLE.

In spite of the establishment of Standard Jamaican English (SJE) as an official language in the country, it is the varieties of Jamaican Creole (Patois, JP) which are most widely spoken in Jamaica. As Jettka highlights “approximately 2.7 million Jamaicans (90% of the population) are able to speak a variety which is rather to be counted as JP than as SJE” (qtd. in Jettka 2).

Jettka also points out that English, as well as Standard Jamaican English, was highly considered, typical of the upper social stratus, appropriate for politics, business,

administration and the education system. Therefore, it had a strong impact on the “creolisation process” of Jamaican Creole. However, JC was regarded as a mere “ungrammatical speech derived from English employed by lower classes” (Jettka, 2). Moreover, it is remarkable that many Jamaican Speakers today are not aware of any differences between Standard English and Standard Jamaican English.

As a result, it can be said that Jamaican Creole in any of its varieties is the native language of most of the population while English is learnt as a second language.

## 6. SURVEY RESULTS.

The survey is based on ten participants of Jamaican background aged between 21 and 65; five women and five men. The questionnaire consisted of five questions related to the use of the three identified varieties in Jamaica (Jamaican Creole, Standard Jamaican English and Standard English). The participants were able to give their answers through [survio.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com).

In relation to the question “With what variety of English do you feel more comfortable?” Four participants chose Jamaican Creole, while six opted for Standard English. None of them picked Standard Jamaican English.

“Can you identify the difference between Jamaican Creole and Standard Jamaican English?” Nine said yes and one was not sure.

“In which of these contexts do you use Jamaican Creole?” Nine said that they would use JC among family and friends, while only one selected school and work.

“In which of these contexts do you use Standard Jamaican English?” Seven stated that they would speak SJE at school/work. Meanwhile, two chose family and friends as the appropriate setting for SJE and one selected it for public life (offices, transport).



“Which of the three varieties is best regarded socially?” Three chose Jamaican Creole. Three opted for Standard Jamaican English and four chose Standard English as the best possible variety to be used in Jamaican society.

As it can be seen from these results, Jamaican native speakers do not distinguish clearly the different mesolects (varieties of Jamaican Creole). The same thing happens with Standard English and Standard Jamaican English. Regarding the use of the three varieties, Standard English is the most widespread. However, in informal contexts (family and friends) Jamaican Creole prevails, while Standard Jamaican English is broadly present in public life (working and academic environments). Moreover, Standard Jamaican English appears to be half way between Standard English and Jamaican Creole, serving as a neutral means of communication that holds features of both.

## CONCLUSION

As a result of the outcomes of this research, it is clear that the colonial period had a strong impact on Jamaica's social network and its linguistic sphere. Jamaica portrays quite accurately the influence of slaves' tribe languages in conjunction with the colonisers' languages. Taking the present varieties as reference, it is safe to say that English has had the heaviest effect on Jamaican Creole, together with many features from Central and West African tribal dialects (Bantu and Kwa). This variety is commonly used in informal situations. Meanwhile, Standard Jamaican English is expected in work and academic settings. It is worth mentioning that British and American English have contributed to the development of Jamaican varieties to present day. Considering the use and distinctive characteristics of Jamaican Creole, Standard Jamaican English and Standard English, there is controversy among speakers in regard to the use and prevalence of the different varieties.

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