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CROSSOVERS. LANGUAGE AND ORALITY IN ANGLOPHONE CARIBBEAN POETRY

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Indice

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Introduction

The dream of a universal language has been realized in the global emergence of English as a lingua franca. As David Crystal explains, this has been the result of a series of coincidental events from the spread of the British Empire.[1] However, as Edgar Schneider notes, even in countries where English had been imposed by the colonial power, this language has not been abandoned (or banned, as it would have been expected) after independence but, on the contrary, it has been unexpectedly appropriated, indigenized and transformed, often becoming a mother tongue itself.[2] Questioning the notion of language as something to be possessed, Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens claimed that a major shift had occurred, and that international varieties of English had to be recognized and studied:

1. D. Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997.

2. E.W. Schneider, *Postcolonial English. Varieties Around the World*, University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 1. Adopting a transnational perspective for the study of global Englishes, Schneider illustrates the common process shaping English varieties around the world.

> English is no longer the possession of the British, or even the British and the Americans, but […] exists in an increasingly large number of different varieties […]. But the most important development of all is seen in the emergence of varieties that are identified with and are specific to particular countries from among the former British colonies.[3]

The fertile contact with local languages, and the interaction of native populations and former immigrants, has enriched and modified English, producing new distinctive varieties. "Variety" has been described by Crystal as "a term used to refer to any system of linguistic expression whose use is governed by situational variables",[4] and it often conflates with terms such as dialect, accent, sociolect, register, style. Despite the seemingly neutral definitions provided for this term,[5] "varieties" seems to rely heavily on notions of natural and racial classifications drawn from evolutionism and natural science. Quite significantly, Kingsley Bolton points out that Charles Darwin's use of the term "species" in his *On the Origins of Species* (1859) is borrowed from the taxonomy of biological classification elaborated by the Swedish botanist Linnaeus in his *Systema Naturae* (1758), thus providing a system and a lexicon for the classification of plants and, subsequently, of human beings.[6]

3. M. Halliday-A. McIntosh-P. Strevens, *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*, Longman, London 1964, pp. 293-294.

4. D. Crystal, *English as a Global Language*, p. 408.

5. See P. Trudgill, A Glossary of Sociolinguistics, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2003, pp. 139-140, and L. Bauer, *An Introduction to International Varieties of English*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong 2003, p. 4.

6. K. Bolton, *Varieties of World Englishes*, in B.B. Kachru-Y. Kachru-C.L. Nelson (eds) *The Handbook of World Englishes*, Blackwell,

Although it has long been affirmed that language is the product of social interaction rather than a natural organism, Bolton notes the persistent use in linguistics of terms such as monogenesis, polygenesis or hybridization deriving from the scientific and evolutionary discourse. The classification of world Englishes still reflects a certain degree of prejudice, as it "has to do more with the racial identities of those who speak them than with how these varieties developed and the extent of their structural deviations."[7] Quite significantly, Salikoko Mufwene is careful in defining his ecology of language *evolution*. Far from implying any idea of progress, by evolution Mufwene means "no more than the long-term changes undergone by a language (variety) over a period of time. They involve a succession of restructuring processes which produce more and more deviations from an earlier stage".[8] Although he compares this process of reorganization to genetic recombination in biology he claims that languages transmission is horizontal and not necessarily based on the parent-to-offspring model.

The need to disentangle racial and linguistic classifications is also testified by the naming practice of English varieties: commonly described as "jargons", "bad", "broken" or "rotten" English, sometimes even by its very speakers, these labels reveal the internalization of hierarchical, positivists assumptions on language development and inevitably imply the linguistic superiority of the Standard language form. However, in order to study and analyze the wide

Oxford 2006, p. 302.

7. S. Mufwene, *The Ecology of Language Evolution*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 107.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

variety of englishes, the communicative situations from which New Englishes emerged as contact languages – assessing demographic factors, social relationships between speakers as well as types of communicative events – play a vital role. In other words, in the process of relocating and re-rooting English, it is crucial to consider the "ecologies" in which they emerged, the sociohistorical contexts which provided the contact setting for the productive intercultural and interlinguistic encounters.

Questions of definition

An analysis of the construction of cultural identities, the interaction of colonizing and colonized people, are particularly relevant in the complex sociolinguistic context of the anglophone Caribbean. It is in relatively recent times, in the 1960s, with the rise of decolonization movements, that scholarly attention has been devoted to the development of the local speech of particular islands. In 1961 the first Jamaican Dictionary was published, thus implicitly stating the 'legitimate' status of the Jamaican basilect. However, intertwining issues of colonial ideology have historically considered English varieties as lesser, inferior and often corrupt versions of the standard.

Taking into account sociohistorical issues and recognize the sociolinguistic complexity of the Caribbean region is of great relevance. As Michael Aceto states, Caribbean Englishes are "roughly synonymous" with other definitions such as English creoles, English-derived or English-

based creoles, or even dialects of English,[9] while Schneider recognizes that the relationship between local varieties of English and creoles is not always clear.[10]

Frederick Cassidy and Robert Le Page, the compilers of the *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, suggested that the best term for Jamaica dialect is "creole"; in their words, it is "the term used by linguists today, which points to the origin of this folk speech as amalgam of some features of English with others drawn from a large variety of African languages."[11]

In *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820*, the Barbadian poet and critic Edward Kamau Brathwaite defines creolization as "a cultural action – material, psychological, and spiritual – based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their environment and – as white/black, culturally discrete groups – to each other."[12] As he describes it as an intercultural two-way process, Brathwaite stresses the importance of the intermediate group of coloured people born from the encounter. However, the term creole has taken on a variety of meanings, since, either as a noun or as an adjective, it designates a language, a person, a style and a culture.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term Creole can be used as a noun or an adjective. In the first

9. M. Aceto, *Caribbean Englishes*, in B. Kachru- Y. Kachru-C. L. Nelson (eds), *The Handbook of World Englishes*, Blackwell, Oxford 2006.

10. E.W. Schneider, *Postcolonial English*, p. 11.

11. F.G. Cassidy-R.B. Le Page, *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003 [1961/1980], p. xi.

12. E. K. Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820*, Clarendon, Oxford 1971, p. 296.

case, Creole is defined as "a person born and naturalized in the [West Indies], but of European (usually Spanish or French) or of African Negro race". Its origins date from the early seventeenth century, with Edward Grimstone's translation of José D'Acosta's *History of the West Indies* in which "criollo" is used as a local term for the Spaniards born in the Indies. At first, Creole lacked any connotation connected to skin colour, and was used only as a way to distinguish those of European or African descent from the aboriginal population. It was only by the mid eighteenth century, however, that Creole had begun to take on meaning connected to colour.

As an adjective, creole signifies hybridization. The term is most commonly used in this form in relation with language. Creole languages have arisen through contact between speakers of different languages, but its genesis is a complex process and it is still object of much controversy among linguists.

The process of creolization and creole languages thus go hand in hand. Creole is an open system, flexible and subject to change and transformation, resistant to any form of standardization, while the notion of creoleness in the Caribbean has been similarly associated with interwoven notions of cultural and linguistic identity. In Édouard Glissant's words,

> [Creolization's] most obvious symbol is in the Creole language, whose genius consists in always being open, that is, perhaps, never becoming fixed except according to systems of variables that we have to imagine as much as define. Creolization carries

> along then into the adventure of multilingualism and into the incredible explosion of cultures.[13]

The Martiniquan intellectual postulates the origin of Creole languages as a set of variables where there are no rigid rules, no classifications, and no standard model of language evolution, casting unpredictability as the element shaping language contact in the Caribbean.[14]

The dissemination of English into englishes demonstrates the fragmentation of the monolithic authority of the 'normative' language imposed on colonial subjects, while "Creoleness is an annihilation of false universality, of monolingualism, and of purity".[15]

Since monolingualism implies the notion of a rooted identity, an *identitè racine*, in Glissant's words, as a consequence it homogenises a community by constructing common, shared roots, so that Creole seems to provide the structure for a language open to polysemy and interplay between different languages.[16]

An aural corpus

The Caribbean has been described in musical terms as 'fugal', as a culturally polyphonic society in which the dis-

13. É. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betty Wing, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1997, p. 34.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

15. J. Bernabé P. Chamoiseau-R. Confiant, *Éloge de la Créolité / In Praise of Creoleness: Édition bilingue français /anglais*, translated by M.B. Taleb-Khyar [1989] Gallimard, Paris 1993, p. 90.

16. É. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 15.

sonant melodies of loss and exile "are repeated over and over again in different keys and at different intervals".[17] Yet, music is obviously much more than a mere metaphor, providing on the contrary a complex methodological approach to the exploration of Caribbean literary imagination. Following Martinican thinker and writer Edouard Glissant's elaboration of a rhizomatic identity where multiple roots proliferate and intersect, the Caribbean cultural heritage appears as a continuum of languages and histories. In his conceptualization of the Caribbean as an "island which 'repeats' itself", Antonio Benítez-Rojo has associated this unpredictable movement with "the unforeseen relation between a dance movement and the baroque spiral of a colonial railing".[18] However, while the spiral movement suggested by Benítez-Rojo implies the recognition of a moment of origin, the multiple roots of Caribbean culture and identities contradict this assertion by challenging the notion of a supposed authenticity which would produce monolingual and monocultural identities.

Gordon Collier has claimed the inextricable connection between any form of orality and creole expression by stating that: "[o]rality has to snatch ground back from the linearity and ocularity of print culture with its verbal fixities, its inclination to resist fluidity and improvisation, its tempting tilt upwards towards the hieratic."[19]

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17. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Fugues, Fragments and Fissures – A Work in Progress*, in «Anthurium» 3.2 (2005), <http://anthurium.miami.edu/volume_3/issue_2/philip-fugues.htm>, 23 July 2009.

18. A. Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, Duke University Press, Durham 1996, p. 4.

19. G. Collier, *Two Aspects of 'Creole' In Literary Expression,* «Matatu» 27–28 (2003), p. xlli.

Staging the resistance to be domesticated into verbal fixity, fluidity of expression marks every field of Caribbean experience, from domesticity to technical issues, picking up at any point from the continuum, at a mesolectal or basilectal level. Yet, Collier contends that these expressions are confined to 'domestic' concerns, as this creole expression "still tends not to drift too far from its moorings in communal folk experience, rural or urban".[20]

In this light, the aim of the present volume is to investigate the interconnection of poetry and Creole in the wider, public scene of the Caribbean diaspora. First of all, Creole is not meant to be treated as a mere 'decoration', as "a sprinkling of chocolate on a cappuccino", as Collier suggests. On the contrary, Creole is part and parcel of a process of increasing awareness of the explosive creative potentialities of oral culture. Creole "total expression" shapes all forms of poetry which, following Collier's formulation, is intended as 'poiesis'.

Starting from the 1940s pioneering work of Louise Bennett to the experimental poetry of Kamau Brathwaite to the hybridization of Derek Walcott, the corpus of this study includes texts at the crossroads of writing and orality, poetry and music, following its routes to the language experimentations of dub poets. The choice of authors and poets ranges from Jamaica (Una Marson, Louise Bennett; Lorna Goodison, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Jean Breeze); to Barbados (Edward Kamau Brathwaite); St. Lucia (Derek Walcott); Guyana (Fred D'Aguiar); Trinidad (Marlene NourbeSe Philip); and Grenada (Merle Collins).

Following a diachronic perspective starting from the

20. *Ibid.*

early twentieth century, the volume investigates the different linguistic choices of writers who started to disclose the literary flexibility of Creole, and of others who "made very little use" of it.[21] The starting point is Collier's idea of "broadening the conceptual scope of the term 'poetry' […] shifting towards a marriage between creole expression and a more conceptual, non-generic notion of 'poetry' as poiesis, or all verbal crafting."[22]

At the beginning of the twentieth century the class/race prejudice towards Creole as the language of the poor and illiterate was particularly evident in the gap between the quasi poetic folk forms such as mento and calypso, and the written poetry produced by the literate elites. However, crossing the prescribed boundaries between high culture and low culture, Standard English and its "broken" varieties, Caribbean poets have increasingly started to use Creole in their work, retrieving the rhythms of orality – the "conversational mode" – and experimenting the many possibilities offered by the polyphony of Creole. The volume thus examines the continuing tension between orality and literature which has led poetry to become the privileged battlefield in the debate over the use of 'dialect' in literature, exploring the different ways in which Caribbean poets give voice and literary dignity to the "the way we talk".

Given the complexity of the multilingual situation in the Caribbean, it is not possible to describe "Creole" as a monolithical and homogeneous language. The use of the plural when describing "Caribbean Englishes" is

21. G. Rohlehr, *Introduction*, in S. Brown-M. Morris-G. Rohlehr (eds), *Voiceprint*, p. 1.

22. *Ibid.*, p. xlii.

crucial to take into account the many differences shaping the creoles of the region.[23] Anglophone creoles spoken in the Caribbean differ in terms of lexicon, phonology, morphology and syntax. However, they share some common features that help identify Caribbean Creole. In this volume, the textual and linguistic analysis of the poems will highlight the specificities of some local varieties, such as the basilectal JCE, illustrating the complexity of some language situations where English-based Creoles mingle with French-based Creoles (St Lucia, Grenada) or have been influenced by the East Indian presence through calques.

23. M. Aceto, *Caribbean englishes*, p. 210.