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"Dis poem is still not written" A Study of Diamesic Variation in Jamaican Dub Poetry

David Bousquet ♦

The title of this article is borrowed from a piece by Jamaican poet Mutabaruka entitled "Dis Poem", which dramatizes the ambiguities and contradictions around the notions of orality and literacy in the context of postcolonial Jamaica. The tension between spoken and written modes of linguistic expression is addressed in a political manner through an assimilation of orality to the African tradition of orature and of the written medium to the European literary tradition. This is made evident in the following passages:

> dis poem will not be amongst great literary works
> will not be recited by poetry enthusiasts
> will not be quoted by politicians or men of religion
> dis poem is knives bombs guns blood fire
> blazin for freedom
> yes dis poem is a drum
> […]
> dis poem speak is speakin have spoken
> dis poem shall continue even when poets have stopped writin
> […]
> dis poem is still not written
> dis poem has no poet
> dis poem is just part of the story his-story her-story our-story
> the story still untold (Mutabaruka, 1992: 52)

Written with a clear Afrocentric and anticolonial focus, these lines are typical of Mutabruka's heavily militant work. In one of his first poems entitled "Call Me No Poet or Nothing Like That", the association of poetry with writing and the

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European literary tradition entails a rejection of poetry itself as not suited for the expression of Africans in the New World, which should be based on orality. The words are strongly reminiscent of the lines from "Dis Poem" quoted above:

> no recitals
> no recitin
> no poems
> no poems
> p
> l
> e
> a
> s
> e
> (Mutabaruka, 2005: 2)

Echoes of this dichotomy can be found in many other poems from the genre that came to be known as dub poetry, of which Mutabaruka is one of the most iconic representatives. In "Rapid Rappin" for instance, Benjamin Zephaniah declares:

> Long time agu before de book existed
> Poetry was oral an not playing mystic
> Poetry was something dat people understood
> Poetry was living in every neighbourhood
> Story telling was compelling listening, an entertaining
> Done without de ego trip an nu special training
> Found in many forms it was de oral tradition
> When governments said quiet, poets said no submission.
> […]
> I tink it is important fe tell dis to people
> Poetry was stolen from us an dat was evil,
> Put upon de bookshelf by de type dat likes to analyse
> Discussed in classy journals by de type wid reading eyes.
> (Zephaniah, 1992: 39-40)

Yet, while orality and literacy are constructed as being in opposition on the surface of these texts, what the poems do, in effect, is mix both codes and they do so at three levels. Dub poetry is first noticeable by its use of various publication media. Despite the poets' claims to authenticity as a return to the oral roots of poetry and the emphasis they place on live performance, they all insist on publishing their work in book form as well as in audio and/or video recordings.

In a sense, they claim to be doing "serious" (written) poetry and many dub poets have received prizes from institutions[1] that epitomise the European literary tradition. The poems under consideration are also hybrid in their composition and structure, as they mix typically oral devices such as anaphora[2] with scribal and literary codes, including visual plays with typography. Finally, the language itself borrows from oral and written modes of expression, making dub poetry a relevant corpus for the investigation of diamesic variation in the Creole context.

This article therefore studies diamesic variation in dub poems from the Caribbean, linking the discussion to the broader cultural context from which they originate. More specifically, such texts display various strategies to inscribe orality and orature in the written medium and, conversely, strategies to make use of elements of literacy and literature in live or recorded performances. Diamesic variation will be correlated to linguistic variation along the (post) Creole continuum, bearing in mind the ideological debates surrounding literacy in Creole and various – and often inconsistent – attempts at transcribing Creole through orthographical codes. Some characteristics of Jamaica's language situation and of Patwa will be discussed first, before a case study of one poem is conducted. General conclusions on the poetic use of diamesic variation in the Creole context will then be drawn.

Context

In Jamaica and in the Caribbean more generally, the social and racial hierarchies of the colonial system resulted in a strong diglossia between English and Patwa (or Patois). This is reinforced by a marked hierarchy between oral and written forms of language: Creole or Patwa is associated with orality and orature while standard English is associated with literacy and literature. In many ways, the distinction between oral and written modes of linguistic expression reflects the distinctions between Africa and Europe, black and white, and lower-class and upper-class that are at the core of Caribbean societies. But because English was the only linguistic medium available to slaves, Jamaican Creole was re/

1 Linton Kwesi Johnson, for instance, has been made an honorary fellow of Warwick University in 1985, Goldsmith College in 2003 and Middlesex University in 2004. In 2002, he was also one of the only two living poets to see an anthology of his works published by Penguin in the Modern Classics series. Benjamin Zephaniah has an even more impressive record, having been awarded honorary doctorates from no less than seven British universities. In 2008, he was included by *The Times* in the list of the fifty greatest British writers since 1945 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-50-greatest-british-writers-since-1945-ws3g69xrf90> (accessed 12 October 2019).

2 Although anaphora is present in many written texts, it can be traced back to oral cultures in which it was a useful tool for the memorisation of long pieces of linguistic material (Ong, 2002: 33-35).

created through a process of de/reconstruction of English. This in turn implied a de/reconstruction of the English cultural and literary heritage and notably a questioning of writing as the privileged mode of linguistic and literary expression. Creole languages are primarily oral, in part because West African languages themselves were based on a lively oral tradition, but also because slaves were most often forbidden to read and write. Consequently, Creoles exhibit a strong propensity towards variation, be it diachronic, diatopic, diaphasic or, of course, diastratic or diamesic. This explains, and is explained by, the lack of a commonly agreed upon spelling system for Creole, which reinforces variation, and raises issues with the very notion of Creole literacy.

The emergence, development and characteristic features of Creole languages in general, and of Jamaican Patwa in particular, have been extensively studied in academic literature, notably in the pioneering work by Cassidy (1961) or more recently by Lalla & D'Costa (1990). There is a consensus in the scientific community around the idea that Creole languages are Africanised reconstructions of European languages, employing a lexical basis from English, French or Spanish but African syntactical traits. The implications of this process of linguistic de/reconstruction on Caribbean literature are well studied in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989: 38-77), but also in Breiner (1997), Brown, Morris & Rohler (1989), Cooper (1993), and Donnell & Welsh (1996). In a postcolonial perspective, these authors emphasise the association of orality with the African tradition and the implied deconstruction of the English literary canon. Cooper (2004: 279-301) also provides interesting insights on the ideological debates around the questions of diglossia and of Creole literacy and spelling systems.

Dub poetry emerged in the mid-1970s and is based on a number of previous experiments with Creole as a medium for literary expression and poetic writing. Because of its use of oral and written media, it is often characterised as a form of oral literature or "oraliterature" and is analysed by many critics under the rubric of hybridity. Despite a strong propensity toward Afrocentrism and the glorification of everything African, especially the oral tradition, dub poets in fact use techniques and methods that belong to both literature and orature in terms of the composition and circulation of their work. As mentioned above, they perform their poems on stage but also publish them in book form. They frequently resort to audio or video recordings, hinting at the continuity between oral and written media in their work.

As a matter of fact, dub poetry is notable for being the first Caribbean genre to use Creole as its only linguistic medium, while most previous efforts featured material in standard English sometimes interspersed with passages in Creole. This was a turning point in the history of English-speaking Caribbean literature as it legitimised the use of Creole for "authentic" literary expression, at a time when the influence of various black nationalist and Afrocentric ideologies was strongly felt in the Caribbean. Dub poets were themselves influenced by these ideologies;

for instance, Johnson was a member of the British Black Panther Party. They generally acknowledge the pioneering work of Louise Bennett (also known under her stage name Miss Lou) and Edward Kamau Brathwaite as their main source of inspiration regarding the literary and poetic potential of Creole languages.

Dub poetry is often discussed as a hybrid genre that mixes the codes of orality and writing, while hybridity itself is often used to characterise Caribbean societies and cultures more generally.[3] In addition, as Ong (2002) has shown, the development of sound recording technology implies a coding of sounds into some sort of written language that is later decoded by a receiving device. In this sense, the spread of oral contents through such recordings is best described as neo-orality or secondary orality, which resorts to writing technology to make oral pieces widely accessible (Ong, 2002: 133-135).

For these reasons, Jamaican academic Carolyn Cooper (1993: 6-7) created the notion of an oral/scribal continuum to describe the work of dub poets. While the concept of a (post)Creole continuum is now widely acknowledged in sociolinguistics to describe the language situation in the Caribbean, it is here extended to encompass diamesic variation. This allows Cooper, on the one hand, to create a conceptual framework for the discussion of a wide variety of "oral texts" (dub poetry itself but also reggae lyrics, theatre plays, films, novels, etc.) going from the lower, primarily oral, to the higher, primarily scribal, end of the continuum and, on the other hand, to analyse diamesic variation in the oral texts themselves.

The notion of continuum is helpful as it de-essentialises often rigid theoretical conceptions of spoken and written language, showing that they exist only as "ideal" situations at the end of the spectrum but that most communicative speech acts and texts employ elements of both in the Creole context. This framework provides an interesting insight on diamesic variation, which in the Jamaican case coincides extensively with diastratic variation as basilectal Creole language varieties are associated with orality and orature while acrolectal standard English varieties are associated with literacy and literature. In that sense, the study of diamesic variation in the Creole context also implies considering the variation between standard and nonstandard language varieties and their respective phonological, lexical and syntactic features.

The concept of a Creole continuum was originally developed by Bickerton (1973). It describes how Creole speakers move with considerable ease between acrolectal and basilectal varieties (between standard British English and Patwa in the case of Jamaica) to express themselves. Most speakers in fact employ mesolects as individual discrete varieties that are constantly re/created and adapted to new contexts of use and social interaction. Since diastratic variation

3 For a detailed study of the emergence and development of dub poetry as a genre, see Habekost (1993). For a more general discussion on the role of dub poetry in Caribbean literature, see Breiner (1997), Cooper (1993) and Donnell & Welsh (1996).

is closely related to diamesic variation in the Creole context, Cooper (1993) extended the concept of continuum to cover oral and written forms of linguistic communication. In the same way as individual mesolects employ elements of acrolectal and basilectal varieties, most speech acts and "oral texts" employ oral and written codes of communication.

Case study

To demonstrate how diamesic variation is put to use by dub poets, the following section provides a close reading of "Sonny's Lettah" by Linton Kwesi Johnson. Johnson was born in Jamaica in 1952 and emigrated to the UK in 1963 to reunite with his mother. He is one of the pioneers of dub poetry and certainly its most revered practitioner. The poem under scrutiny has been published in written form in various collections and several recordings of studio or live performances, with or without a musical accompaniment, are in circulation.[4]

Interestingly, the poem is written in epistolary form, therefore using a typically scribal but also literary format. This is manifested notably through the use of a postal address and of polite greetings at the beginning and end of the poem. Significantly, these typically scribal elements are spoken or recited without any alterations when Johnson performs the poem live or on recordings. Yet, "Sonny's Lettah" also displays typically oral elements, notably various strategies to transcribe Creole pronunciation on the page, and the use of an anaphoric structure. Beyond these linguistic features, the poem poses the general problem of the oral delivery of poetry to music, or its performance without a musical accompaniment, and that of the relationship between the written version and the live or recorded performances. In the case of "Sonny's Lettah", as for all dub poetry, the poem actually exists in the interplay between the written text, the live oral performance and the various recordings.

Diamesic variation is mostly inscribed in the text, in a literal sense, by various strategies used to transcribe Creole in spelling. This applies mostly to pronunciation with a strategy of "obscuring" or creolising English words by providing alternative transcriptions.[5] On the phonological level, the poem

4 "Sonny's Lettah" was first published as a studio recording with a musical accompaniment on Johnson's second album, *Forces of Victory*, in 1979. An a cappella version was released in 1996 on *LKJ A Cappella Live*. The written text of the poem is taken from Johnson's *Selected Poems* (2002), although it was published earlier in various poetry anthologies. A filmed live performance to music is available on the DVD *Linton Kwesi Johnson Live in Paris* (2003).

5 In the following lines, triangular brackets refer to sets of written letters (graphemes) while slashes are used to indicate the pronunciation of sounds. No difference is made between phonemes and allophones in the notation, but differences between the two levels are mentioned when necessary. The two phonemic systems of reference used are Received

exhibits typical Creole features such as the elision of final plosives ("bes" for "best" or "arres" for "arrest", "Inglan" for "England"), the loss of friction in dental fricatives ("dat", "deze", "di", "helt"), the unrounding of /ɒ/ (transcribed as <a> in words like "salim pramis" or "sarry"), the pronunciation of the central vowels /ə/ and /ʌ/ (in words like "Brixtan", "Landan", "Inglan"), or the neutralisation of the contrast between alveolar and velar consonants before a syllabic /l/ (hence "likkle" for "little" and "miggle" for "middle").

Yet, the actual pronunciation of many of these words in Creole may not be as widely different from standard English as Johnson's spelling suggests. In a case of "eye dialect", Creole in this poem seems to be more different from standard English in the way it is spelt than in the way it sounds. This can be noticed in words whose spelling is simplified to correspond to their actual pronunciation, although they would be pronounced almost the same way by Creole and standard English speakers (for instance "deze" spelt with <z>, "wen" spelt without an <h> or "yu" for "you"). This is corroborated by an analysis of various recorded performances of the poem, which feature less variation than the orthographic transcription. The spoken versions are much easier to understand for speakers of standard English than the written text is to read, and in fact the text might be quite difficult to read for Creole native speakers as well. More than an attempt at transcribing Creole accurately from a linguistic point of view, Johnson performs a political and poetic gesture which, in typical postcolonial fashion, obscures the language on the page through a form of oralisation or creolisation of English that is, ironically, more marked in writing than in live or recorded performances.

There is also a discrepancy between the written text and Johnson's actual pronunciation on various recordings. On the one hand, Johnson's orthographic transcriptions are not all encompassing; some features of his pronunciation are not transcribed and words appear in standard English that are pronounced with a Creole accent in performance. For instance, "south west" which is spelt as such in the written text but is clearly pronounced without friction on the last sound of "south" and with an elision of the final plosive of "west". On the other hand, his transcriptions exhibit some of his individual pronunciation traits, that are to be interpreted as phonetic rather than phonological variation. To quote just one example, one can look at "Prison" or "nondiles" in which the standard spelling is (at least partly) preserved (<o> for /ə/ and /ʌ/, respectively) to reflect Johnson's actual pronunciation which is closer to RP in these two words. In "Landan", on the contrary, both sounds are transcribed as <a> which is how

Pronunciation (RP) for standard English and Jamaican Creole. Even if the analysis seems to imply that RP sounds or standard English spellings are "replaced" by other sounds and letters in Creole, the intention is not to suggest that Creole is somehow defective or that the relationship between the two language varieties goes in only one direction. Like many other Caribbean authors, Johnson uses the conventions of English spelling to transcribe Creole, at least partly, and so the focus is placed on how these conventions are altered, subverted, and abrogated, to render Creole pronunciation.

Johnson pronounces them on the recordings (/a/). Hence, there is a lack of systematicity and consistency in Johnson's transcription practices, which is in itself a representation of diamesic variation.

The poem also features nonstandard lexical and grammatical elements. For instance, there are some typically Creole words such as "lick" (hit), "jook" (punch) or "fret" (be afraid). Interestingly, these words are given equivalents in standard English in the neighbouring lines ("kick" and "t(h)ump" for "lick" and "jook", "dont get depress / an doun-hearted" for "dont fret"). There is also some non-standard syntax in lines such as "mek I tell yu whe dem dhu to Jim" or "far him noh dhu notn". Here again, the syntax would not be overly difficult to understand for speakers of standard English. The double negative[6] is also quite frequent in many nonstandard varieties of English and is not typically Creole as such. Overall, and despite the defamiliarizing spelling, the lexis and syntax used in the poem are mostly standard. One can easily identify the same pattern as what has been observed for phonetic and phonological variation: nonstandard elements coexist and fuse with standard elements. What might appear as inconsistency can in fact be interpreted as a form of linguistic obscurity and hybridity, blurring the lines between oral/written and standard/nonstandard varieties, which literally transcribes or inscribes language variation in the very fabric of the text.

Conversely, the live and recorded performances of the poem resort to written or scribal elements. This applies first to the text itself, as quite many of its linguistic features are in fact standard and "literary". This is particularly true in the case of a letter, since it displays many elements associated with literacy at the linguistic level (the composition of words and sentences) but also at the extralinguistic level (for example the address and the polite greetings). The same can be said of Johnson's performance style, which can be contrasted to that of reggae and dancehall DJs since dub poets are more often seen and heard reciting their poems, or even reading them out loud, than improvising. In the case of "Sonny's Lettah", as for many dub poems, the musical accompaniment is also far more complex than traditional reggae tunes and denotes a literary approach to musical composition in which the music is written to follow the script of the poem, rather than the contrary.

Reggae DJs (who are vocalists and the forefathers of American rappers) are praised for being able to deliver lyrics to a wide variety of pre-existing "riddims" (Jamaican for "rhythm", a term used to refer to the rhythm or instrumental track of a song). Their vocal style is often called "toasting" as their lyrics should be as close to the riddim as a slice of cheese is to bread in a sandwich. Interestingly, dub poets work the other way around and use the text of the poem as the organising principle of live performance and musical composition. In other words, the music is made to follow the script of the poem rather than the contrary, and

6 The double negative is in fact a legacy of nonstandard varieties of English on Patwa.

this often accounts for more complex musical compositions (with harmonic changes, rhythmic breaks, etc.). Similarly, dub poets are not overly musical in their delivery and diction, preferring a more sober, almost monotonous style that helps focus the audience's attention on the meaning of the lyrics rather than on pleasurable vocal sounds. Dub poets assert, more or less explicitly, the scribal, literary dimension of their work and often use it in the staging of their shows (for instance by holding a book or a sheet of paper from which they read).

Diamesic variation is thus strongly correlated to diastratic variation, since written and oral linguistic features largely coincide with standard and nonstandard varieties, but also somehow to diatopic variation in a broad sense, since acrolectal varieties are associated with a European language while basilectal Creole varieties are an Africanised re/creation of this language. Orality is quite literally inscribed or transcribed in the written text by the inclusion of alternative Creole pronunciation, lexis and syntax. But oral texts of this kind do not simply juxtapose distinct varieties, they fuse, combine or hybridise them into a coherent whole, which is provided by the linguistic, semantic and structural unity of the poem. As is common in the Creole context, "Sonny's Lettah" displays strategies that are closer to code-mixing than to code-switching, in terms of both diamesic and diastratic variation. The different varieties become ultimately impossible to distinguish, especially in the performance process since Johnson uses a very similar diction in all his performances, adding even more unity to the poem. What may appear as inconsistency in Johnson's transcription is the condition for the hybridity and creativity of the language used as it provides a unique upper mesolect mixing oral and scribal, but also nonstandard/Creole and standard/English, features.

Conclusion

Many of the points discussed above can be attributed to the creative, expressive or artistic dimensions of Johnson's work. He is not a linguist and his primary aim is neither to provide a coherent system for the transcription of Creole, nor to discuss diamesic variation as such. As a poet, he is more concerned with creating a truly poetic language, that is a language in the making, and thus makes use of inconsistency in a creative way. The spelling strategies used here to represent spoken language are a tool to form the basis of a Creole poetics that uses diamesic variation as a resource to achieve an aesthetic and political effect, illustrating the ideological and poetic dimensions involved in writing (in) Creole.

Yet, "Sonny's Lettah" is not an isolated case and cannot simply be analysed as a self-contained piece of linguistic creation. First, the poem can be deemed representative of Johnson's work more generally but also of dub poetry as a genre. As Cooper (1993) has shown, this also relates to a wide variety of oral and written

texts from the Caribbean, and to much wider phenomena pertaining to Creole languages. For instance, the study of "Sonny's Lettah" illustrates the importance of discrete mesolectal varieties in the continuum and the ability for speakers to create unique individual lects. This applies to the specific upper mesolect that Johnson employs in the poem, as in most of his work, but also to his specific use of hybrid formats that mix oral and written codes. The poem also demonstrates the creative potential of Creole languages that is conspicuous in everyday speech acts but also, obviously, in poetic works. As Creole is essentially a re/creation of English, it involves a creative element which has been a major resource for poets and writers to draw on. Given their hybrid cultural heritage, Afro-Caribbean poets can use diamesic and diastratic variation to produce linguistic and literary objects that employ elements from the oral and from the literary traditions, just as much as they play with language varieties from various points on the Creole continuum.[7]

Johnson's work also needs to be situated within broader debates relating to Creole spelling systems and orthographic transcriptions. Several attempts have been made at developing unified and consistent models that could be used on a national and international basis for Creole native speakers. These have all been notoriously inconsistent and none of them has yet been universally accepted. Some might see this as a curse, and legitimately so, as it impedes the spread of literacy in Creole and thus the development of Jamaican society as a whole. One might wonder, though, if the absence of such a system does not simply reflect the creative element of variation that has always been central to Creole languages in their historical development. Creoles are languages that are constantly in the making as they are being reinvented on a daily basis through new situations of social and linguistic interaction, and this constant variation is not easy to pin down with abstract, fixed codes and systems.[8]

What is certain, in the end, is that the study of diamesic (and diastratic) variation in the Creole context helps build a de-essentialised view of spoken and written language, which emphasises the hybridity and fluidity between the two modes of linguistic expression. In this sense, Creole languages but also Creole linguistics might be useful tools to think or rethink diamesic variation in the age of neo-orality or secondary orality in which the Internet has completely transformed the dialectic relationship between spoken and written language by making audio and video recordings, and thus oral language varieties, widely and easily accessible on a global scale.

7 One striking example of the creative potential of Creole languages is "Rasta talk" or "dread talk", which is a language variety deliberately created by Rastafarians to reflect their philosophy and worldview. It notably includes practices of oralisation of biblical texts, highlighting once again the hybridity between orality and literacy in the Creole context. See Pollard (2000) for more information.

8 See Cooper (1993: 12-13) for an overview of debates around Creole spelling systems and literacy.

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