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The social status of Jamaican Patwa

Systematic invalidation of the language spoken by Jamaican immigrants in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Das jamaikanische Kreolisch genießt im Vereinigten Königreich wenig Prestige. In Bildungsinstitutionen sowie in den Medien werden Sprecher*innen des Jamaikanisch-Kreolischen systematisch diskriminiert. Jamaikanisches Kreolisch wird in Schulen nicht als Sprache anerkannt, sondern als fehlerhaftes Englisch wahrgenommen. Darstellungen von jamaikanischem Kreolisch in Filmen und Serien enthalten oft rassistische Stereotypen und die Sprache wird häufig mit Kriminalität assoziiert. Dieser Artikel zeigt Beispiele dieser Diskriminierung auf und erläutert die negativen Konsequenzen davon.

Schlüsselwörter: Kreolsprachen, Black British English, Jamaican Patwa, Diskriminierung, rassistische Stereotypisierung

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1 Introduction

In order to combat labour shortages in the post war period, Caribbean workers were recruited to live and work in Great Britain. Those from commonwealth member states were entitled to automatic British citizenship. Many of these immigrants came from Jamaica, where an English-based Creole is spoken. *Jamaican Patois* (henceforth referred to by its endonym *Patwa*) is the most common language in Jamaica, with the majority of citizens being native speakers. In fact, only a minority are reported to speak English.

A large proportion of the generation of Jamaican ‘guest workers’, known as *the Windrush generation*, continued to live and work in Great Britain and the community remains an integral part of the nation today. Whilst it is often the case that the speaking of immigrant languages slowly fades as descendants grow up speaking the language of their host country, the Windrush generation and their descendants did not follow this pattern. There was a high level of racial tensions in the 1950s and ‘60s, (Jones’ [2007] overview of the Notting Hill Riots is a good introduction to the topic) and black citizens lived almost entirely separately, building their own communities in a particular district of each major city. Although the children and grandchildren of the Windrush generation spoke English, their daily lives were still heavily influenced by the Jamaican culture and language – see Bousquet (2019) on the musical legacy of the Windrush generation.

This essay focuses particularly on the second and third generations’ experience in Great Britain and the problems that surround the issue of integration and maintaining cultural identity in the face of discrimination. The essay aims to provide an account of the various ways in which the languages of Patwa and Black British English or BBE (which is in many ways a descendant of Jamaican Creole, as will be expanded on below) have been invalidated, mocked and trivialised, and to demonstrate the negative effects this has on its speakers. Discrimination against Patwa and its speakers in Great Britain is not an account of governmental legislature or policy – it is implicit rather than official. It is, however, still an institutional rather than a personal issue, perpetrated on a large scale by two institutions in particular: Entertainment media and education.

2 Language and identity of Jamaican Britons

As mentioned above, the post war immigrants from the Caribbean very quickly became a close-knit community within the cities of the United Kingdom. United under discriminatory conditions, Caribbean British culture and identity nevertheless thrived.

As a result of new waves of immigration over the years from other African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, the Caribbean community grew into a larger *black* community, a process which is mirrored in the observed linguistic features of black British speech. BBE is a variety which is highly influenced by Caribbean Creoles (McArthur 2003; Patrick 2004). Although the variety in question is often generalised as *Black London English* in public discourse, this is a misnomer; the features of the ever-changing variety typically originate in London due to the high percentage of black citizens, but eventually find their way into the black communities of all major British cities, with social media accelerating this process significantly. The most prominent influence on BBE is Jamaican Patwa, which is why the two varieties will be discussed parallel to each other. They are so similar in structure and development that Patrick (2004) unites both varieties under the term *British creole*. Most forms of discrimination affect both, some problems are more specific; for example, problems faced by speakers of Patwa typically affect members of the first generation whereas discrimination against BBE is an issue for school age children, who are more likely to speak it than Patwa.

3 Discrimination in education

Statistically, black pupils are at a significant disadvantage in the British education system on every level, from performance in exams to rates of suspension and exclusion (Graham 2016; Joseph-Salisbury 2016). The reasons of this are of course manifold and mostly beyond the reach of this essay, but systemic discrimination is one of the most prominent factors. A lack of (socio)linguistic awareness interacts with racial prejudice to create hostile conditions for speakers of BBE in schools, as argued by Tomlin et al. (2014). A poor understanding of language and its mechanisms causes legitimate variance (on all levels – phonological, morphological, lexical

etc.) to be perceived as errors; in the climate of racial injustice, this means these perceived errors are taken to be a sign of unintelligence.

The notion of an English that is good, standard, and correct is a prevalent one within the British education system. Although it is no longer acceptable in public discourse to say as much, the colonial remnant of associating Standard English with professionalism and superior education is still ingrained in the attitudes of many Britons today. This fact alone creates an automatic disadvantage for those speaking varieties other than Standard English. In schools, students who are recognised as having a native language that is not English are typically given leniency and extra support. Unfortunately, this support is not extended to pupils whose first language is Patwa or BBE because they are often not perceived as separate languages, but as ‘broken’ English.

Bilingualism has become increasingly common for students in Britain who are children of immigrants – most often from Poland, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Rienzo & Vargas-Silva 2020). Primary and secondary schools offer particular care and attention to the needs of pupils who either grew up bilingual or are learning English as a foreign language. This kind of pastoral care is extremely beneficial for school children with an immigrant background. However, because English based creoles and patois languages are not conceptualised as separate languages, students of Afro-Caribbean heritage are not perceived as bilingual. This means that the below average performance of black students, rather than being recognised as arising from the difficulties of learning in one’s second language which has a different morphosyntax than one’s mother tongue is taken as a sign of reduced academic capability, a lack of effort or a combination of both.

Patwa distinguishes itself from English under the laws of sound change and analogy. For example, the English verb *ask* underwent metathesis to become *aks* in Patwa (Zorrilla & Beria 2006). The same process can be observed diachronically in Standard English; Middle English *bryd* and *thridd* became *bird* and *third* respectively (Czaplicki 2013). This phonological feature of Patwa was one of the many which influenced BBE. However, the lack of linguistic awareness combined with the ideological tendency to view modern day Standard English as correct whilst considering other related varieties as nothing but an error-studded English meant that students who for example made use of BBE *aks* rather than *ask* in their speech can be not only reprimanded by teachers, but also openly mocked by standard English speaking classmates (i.e. ‘please don’t ‘axe’ people!’).

The incident of variance being construed as error also occurs on the lexical level. *Vexation, to be vexed*, meaning ‘anger’, ‘to be angered’, is commonly used vocabulary in Patwa and has also found its way into BBE. The same terminology, whilst used in Shakespearean times, is not only archaic in present day English – it is virtually unheard of. It is for this reason that, when speakers of BBE use this vocabulary, they are met with accusations of ‘making up words’ by their peers. Even extralinguistic aspects of communication have been the target of discrimination. The act of ‘kissing your teeth’ is a type of mouth movement which expresses frustration or anger. It is of Caribbean origin and in the UK, it is used almost exclusively by members of the Black community (Patrick & Figueroa 2002). Given that the abbreviation *kmt* (‘kiss[ing] my teeth’) is frequently used in black British internet speech, the act of communication *kissing one’s teeth* can also be considered a feature of BBE. Pupils who use this act to show frustration are often punished harshly.

Aside from the teachers who overtly condemn or discriminate the use of BBE pronunciation, its speakers are left disadvantaged in more subtle ways. The perception that black pupils have failed to master English is one of the factors that leads to teachers having lower academic expectations of them. Describing the issue as a *self-fulfilling prophecy*, Joseph-Salisbury (2016: 146) argues that these inherently lowered expectations are one of the main contributors to the below average academic performance of black pupils. This issue is part of the wider problem of structural racism in education.

4 Patwa and BBE in British entertainment media

Discrimination against speakers of Patwa and BBE in entertainment media occurs on two levels. On one hand, ‘black speech’ is used as comedic relief in stereotypical characters. On the other hand, the association of BBE with inner city criminality and gang activity is a recurring theme in British television.

It is not only an invalidation that Patwa has undergone for generations. The manufacture of stereotypical, mocking imagery of Patwa speakers – sometimes subtle, other times less so – is a wide-reaching phenomenon. Actors have even used blackface as recently as 2010;

comedian Matt Lucas played ‘Precious’, an imitation of a Patwa-speaking Jamaican woman, in the BBC comedy *Come Fly With Me*¹.

One particular feature of Patwa morphosyntax that is highly subjected to racialised stereotyping is the use of *mi* (pronounced the same as Standard English *me*) as a first-person subject pronoun. Patwa *mi na kno* is the equivalent of Standard English *I don’t know*. This syntactic aspect is one of the heaviest signifiers of Patwa in stereotypical portrayals, and indeed, ‘Precious’s’ dialogue features it frequently.

One method of media mockery is to exaggerate aspects of Patwa, most typically phonology. The result of this is that Patwa, the first language of an entire community of Britons, is reduced to a joke, which in the climate of racial tensions and discrimination causes significant harm to Jamaican Britons. This is just one example of a trope that has been seen in British television for decades. Even genuine black British dialogue written by native speakers typically only receives airtime when it is exaggerated and contrasted for comedic effect. When it comes to genuine representation of Patwa and BBE by native speakers, it is found almost exclusively in the crime genre as well as series depicting inner city poverty. Typical examples include the drama *Top Boy* and the films *Kidulthood* and *Adulthood*.

Aside from the obviously problematic nature of white characters in blackface, some readers might see a flaw in the argument that current representation of black British speech, by actual black actors, is problematic. After all, these characters and often the sitcom themselves have black British writers, directors, and production teams. So, as one might ask, why should these portrayals be considered problematic and discriminatory?

To clarify, the problem does not lie in the portrayals in and of themselves. It is perfectly valid for characters in a show about black community issues in inner London to be speaking BBE, just as it is valid for a community to use exaggerated forms of its own language/variety for comic relief, such as in ‘Posh Kenneth’ in *Skins*². The problem is the fact that

¹ See clip from the series ‘Come Fly With Me’ for an example of blackface and mockery of Jamaican Patwa on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gIfhA9r9Yk> (accessed 13 January 2021).

² See clip from the series ‘Skins’ for an example of authentic Black British speech, exaggerated for comedic effect on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIN7Az7bhZO> (accessed 13 January 2021).

these are the *only* kinds of representation of BBE found in movies and television shows. This kind of disproportionate representation highlights the general reaction to and treatment of BBE speech in British society; either as a threatening, violent, criminal variety or as an error-ridden mockery of the ‘true’ English language that is not to be taken seriously. Unless the character’s storyline relates to their blackness, it is very untypical for their speech to show any hints of the black British variety.

Representation of black people in the media has overall favourably improved; whilst there are still struggles to be faced, black Britons are being increasingly cast in a wide variety of roles in British television (Marin-Lamellet 2019). The representation of black *language* is, however, a different story. As mentioned above, the vast majority of television series or movies where the main cast are speakers of BBE are inner city crime dramas. The specific linguistic features are again often heavily emphasised in the dialogue of a criminal character. BBE is very rarely heard from characters in shows or movies that do not have black community issues and topics as their theme – that is to say, black main or side characters in shows unrelated to blackness are not heard using BBE among themselves. Whether this is a cause or symptom of unconscious bias is a question with no definite answer, but the result is the same either way: The coding of BBE as aggressive, unacademic and something spoken in the context of criminality and delinquency, a coding that narrows the view of BBE speakers can be linked to the prejudices against black students mentioned above.

It is of course true that many of black Britons speak only the standard English variety, and so simply increasing the amount of BBE speaking characters is neither a meaningful nor a sufficient solution. But for a diverse range of black characters (e.g., criminals, doctors, average citizens), to be featured in a diverse range of programmes from comedies to serious legal dramas, would be a more accurate and less stereotypical representation of black British speech.

5 Summary

Whilst many communities with an L1 other than English face challenges in the UK, the lack of recognition of Creoles as languages creates unique problems for its speakers. Patwa speakers do not benefit from the same institutional aid that is granted to bilingual immigrants, such as the right

to an interpreter in legal or medical contexts. Older Patwa speakers with little to no mastery of English would benefit from an interpreter in contexts such as medical consultations. Because no such support is available, any misunderstandings could be perceived as cultural differences or failure of the patient to comprehend the medical content of the conversation.

Even research on the experience of the members of Afro-Caribbean communities is hindered by the misconception that Patwa is not a language, as Higginbottom & Serrant-Green (2005: 668) discuss. The linguistic colonialism that came with British expansion is mirrored today within its own institutions and this has demonstrable impacts on minority communities. An improved linguistic awareness would be one of the first steps toward tackling the problems discussed here, but until the wider issue of racism in the UK is dealt with, discrimination against speakers of Jamaican Patois and black British speech will continue to exist, and as a result the dialects and varieties common in black communities will enjoy little prestige. The negative association of black Britons and criminality is reinforced by the limited portrayal of black British speech.

The interaction of institutional linguistic and racial prejudice is often difficult to tackle because it is a result of a lack of awareness about language and unconscious stereotyping. There is not always an explicit motivation of discrimination. In the context of education, it remains the responsibility of educators to account for linguistic diversity and not make assumptions about academic capability based on a student's ability to use Standard English. Likewise, in the context of public entertainment broadcasting, portraying speakers of Patwa and BBE in a more diverse set of roles would be the appropriate action for entertainment professionals to take. Discrimination as the result of unconscious bias is hard to identify and therefore often goes unaddressed for a long time, especially in the context of structural injustice.

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