*INNOVATION IN JAMAICA CREOLE:*

*THE SPEECH OF RASTAFARI*

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The speech of Rastafari.


Innovation in language is by no means a new phenomenon.
It is part of the creative use of language which has
expressed itself abundantly in slang and colloquial
speech in all language at all times.  Less common is the
systematized innovation that results in a language used
by an identifiable group within a particular speech
community and described in the relevant literature by
terms like "secret language" or "argot".  So for example
Leslau (1964)        writes about the Ethiopian Merchants'
Argot, the Ethiopian Minstrels' Argot and the Argot of
people possessed by a spirit - Zar , and  Mallik (1972)
describes the language of the  Underworld of West Bengal.
(See Halliday 1978)  These languages are all the result
of certain processes applied to  the  lexicon  of
existing languages including in some cases, borrowing
from neighbouring languages!
Leslau (1964:7) commenting on the incomprehensibility of
these languages makes a general statement about the
processes involved:

> ...This  incomprehensibility  is  obtained  either
> by using the roots of the standard language and
> transforming them through various phonetic and
> morphological procedures or by keeping the roots
> of the standard language without transforming
> them but giving them special meanings, and by
> borrowings.

His statement which precedes this comment touches on
secrecy, the feature which characterizes these languages
wherever they are described.  They are "intended for the
initiated only, and are not supposed to be understood by
outsiders".  The argots he describes are used by "certain
professions or by secret societies."  Leslau's descrip-

tions avoid the pejorative overtones the term "argot" sometimes carries with it. Bryant (1982:262) for example, quoting Maurer (1955) defines an argot as "specialized language used by organized professional groups operating outside the law."(my emphasis). Halliday (1978:165) uses the term "antilanguage" where Maurer might use argot. He comments on the relationship of the language of the subculture to the language to which it is counterposed, describing the linguistic processes at work and pointing to their concentration in the areas that are "central to the activity" of the sub-group and in which it differs most sharply from the mainstream of society. In this way he allows the term "argot" to be value free reserving "antilanguage" for the phenomena which make up the language of antisocietal groups.

The following comment with regard to the features of these languages clarifies his position:

> ...Such features belong to our commonsense picture of the argot, or cant (to give it its Elizabethan name). By themselves, they are no more than the technical and semitechnical features of a special register; they amount to an antilanguage only if we admit into this category something that is simply the professional jargon associated with the activities of a criminal counterculture (my emphasis p.175)

The general point concerning secrecy and Halliday's specific point regarding the concentration of change in linguistic forms that describe certain highly valued activity run parallel to a point made by Bryant (1982) in a review of Mehrota's (1977) Sociology of secret languages.Here it is suggested that from studying the language he describes, "one sees how a secret vocabulary and its organization are related to their sociocultural

<u>matrix</u>".(My emphasis p.262). This relation to the socio-cultural matrix is the cue for the connection be-tween these languages and the speech of Rastafari.

The speech of the Rastafari of Jamaica evolved as the response of a specific group to the need to articulate in its everyday language, the religious, social and cul-tural stance it wished to take. Jamaican Creole (JC) the language of the Jamaican poor, with its lexicon of primarily English items was found to be unsatis-factory:


... that cross word speaking
        when expressing feeling
is just English language contribution to immense  confusion
        Babel-land, tower _-
delusion, name changing, word rearranging
        ringing rings of roses, pocket  full or poses:
"Sar"[2] instead of "Ras".   (Bongo Jerry 1971)


The new maker of words was a cons..ious artist requiring a specific kind of honesty from the language. Where it did not exist, he created,using the items of English/JC, as raw material.

The dogma of the religious aspect of Rastafari indi-cates that Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia (whose early title was Ras Tafari) is the representation of God in our time; socially, the Movement sees itself as represent-ing the underdog in the society, the traditionally black and poor (the term black should not be taken literally here since non-African racial groups are represented with-in the ranks.) Culturally, the identification is with Africa, specifically Ethiopia, - repatriation to that land being a part of the Rastafarian hope. The language of the Rastafari set out, in Nettleford's (1976:x) words:

"to faithfully reflect the specificities of their ex-
perience and their 'perception of self, life and the
world"; a process described by Brother W, a Rasta man as
"step(ping) up with the words."

Not much is known for certain about the earliest
manifestations of the speech of Rastafari. Chevannes
(1979:189) attributes it to the Youth Black Faith, a
Rastafari camp of young men who came together about
1949.[3] It seems that the language intended to be secret.
Brother W's comment in Chevannes (1977) would suggest
this:

> ...So we the Rastas suppose to speak, that here,
> there and anywhere we find ourselves, we suppose
> to speak and no one know what we speak beside our-
> self...

This particular intention however was shortlived, - the
language of Rasta soon moved into the youth culture of
Jamaica. In fact the very systematization of the major
processes of word creation allowed Rasta and non-Rasta
alike to partake in the process.

For the purpose of our description, Jamaican Creole,
a synthesis of African and European linguistic influences;
regarded already as a subordinate language and an off-
shoot of English which is politically/officially the lan-
guage of Jamaica, must be regarded as a standard
from which the language of Rastafari departs in the way
that Amharic and Bengali serve the languages mentioned
earlier. It is from this language base that the speech
of Rasta innovates,in the ways that we shall describe.

Our earlier comments suggest that innovation in
language is usually lexical. Sornig (1981:23) rationalizes
this in fact by suggesting that "grammar, as that part of
a language system which is governed by arbitrary as op-

posed to motivated rules, is not easily accessible to
motivation...". And this is largely true. In the speech
of the Rastafari however, a major point of departure from
JC is in the pronominal system. The impetus for this
departure may not be grammatical as we shall see, but the
realization is. Pochard's (1983:8) table illustrates
differences between the speech of Rasta (his I-lect) and
JC with regard to 1st, 2nd and 3rd person pronouns. "I"
and "I and I" are seen to replace the JC "mi" while "I and I"
and "Di I" replace "you"/ and "him". His is a linguistic analysis
from outside of Rastafari.
Birhan (1983) writing from inside gives the reason, as
she sees it, for the deletion of the JC pronouns:

> In Iyaric, in order to emphasize the unity of all
> mankind who stand for truth and right, the word
> "you" is eliminated as divisive and separating
> "I" from "I". "I and I" is therefore used instead
> of "you", "me", "they", "them", "theirs" and "us".
> "He" and "She" are also eliminated as they are con-
> sidered too cold and distant. One says instead "that
> man", "that woman" or "the man" "the woman" or
> simply "that I".

Concerning the first person JC pronoun "me" (/mi/)
Owen (1976:65) writes:
> The Rastas... would seem to perceive this creole
> pronoun "me" as expressive of subservience, as re-
> presentative of the self degradation that was expected
> of the slaves by their masters. It makes persons
> into objects, not subjects.

Relevant to this point also is the phonological relation-
ship between "I" and "eye" which as the organ of sight be-
comes a very strong symbol. The relationship is exploited
in the following Rasta comment on the non-Rasta individual.
> "Eyes have they and see not only Fari
>      could see" ( RMA 1976:3 In Pollard 1980)

Within the last decade one other grammatical change has been made.    The impersonal pronoun "one" can take on a nominal function appearing with either definite or indefinite article. The following example borrowed from Barbados Rasta talk, illustrates both uses in one sentence:

"I and I nah sight why <u>a one</u> should drink a can of orange juice when <u>de one</u> could sip a natural orange"  (Rastaman 1978)
[I don't understand why a person should drink a can of orange juice when he could eat an orange (which is natural)]

The speech of Rastafari then, departs, with regard to grammar, from the norm of special registers.  Within the area of lexical innovation, however, the processes at work can be fitted into categories similar to those represented in the literature on lexical change in general.
    Hancock's (1980:67) model describing what he speaks of as "lexical progression" identifies twelve processes grouped under two main headings: "internally generated" and "externally influenced".  Descriptions of Rasta talk in St. Lucia and Barbados (Pollard '82 & '83) have drawn on his external categories in examining the ways in which Jamaican Rasta words have been integrated into the French and English creoles of the one, and the English creole of the other territory.  It is to his internal semantic category, however, that the sub-categories within Jamaican Rasta Talk are related.

    In an earlier paper (Pollard 1980) I identified four word-making processes at work in the creation of the lexis of Rasta talk exemplified in four categories of words. We will discuss these here beginning with Category III which offers the longest and, if a heirarchy were proposed, the most important list.

This category has two separate but related parts both de-
pending on the force of the sound of "I" (/ai/) which is a
strong and positive sound in the speech of Rasta.
[Note the descriptions of the language as Iyaric by
Birhan (cf Amharic) and I-lect by Pochard and as I-ance]
The first part has been dealt with in our discussion on
syntactic change - the use of "I" for a multiplicity of
pronominal functions.
The second is made up of those words whose initial sound
is replaced by the sound of "I". This category may be des-
cribed as an open list. Any number of JC words no matter
what their grammatical functions, are potential members.
The list of such words offered here is Owen's (1976:67)
list.[4] Note that "Y" is the alternative for "I" in certain
environments:

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I-cient = ancient
I-shence = incense, ganja
I-tal = ?vital (meaning 'pure', 'natural', organic)
I-talise = (?)vitalise
I-ssembly = assembly
I-ses = praises
I-tection =protection
I-tectorate = protector
I-man = Amen
I-nually = continually, or annually
Imes = times
I-ceive = receive
I-smit = transmit
I-quality = equality
I-vine = divine
I-hold = behold
I-sanna== hosanna
I-sire = desire
I-rous = desirous
I-ly = (?) holy, (?) Haile, (?) highly ( meaning ganja)
I-rey = derivation uncertain; used as greeting or to mean
                                            'nice'
I-nointed = anointed
I-dure = endure
I-ver = ever (cf. ʲfor I-ver and I-ver)
I-thiopia
I-ya = Nya(bingi), a Rastaman
I-bage = cabbage
I-laloo = kalaloo (green vegetable)
I-rits = spirits (?)
I-rate = create
I-ration = creation (cf 'Selassie -I, who I-rate the
                    I-ration of this university.' (Teddy)
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Yanks = thanks
Yife = life

CATEGORY II is made up of words undergoing a process which Allsopp (1980:102) describes as "phonosemantic restructuring". This involves the processing of words whose "outer form seems to need the kind of renovation that would reflect DT feelings on certain issues with which the words are related". (DT = Dread Talk) Alleyne (1982:27) sees the point of departure here as the "association which has already been established in Jamaican English (and other forms of English) between a certain sound sequence and a certain meaning." So for example "understand" might become "higherstand" or " overstand" indicating a literal relationship between sound and meaning. "Cigarette" (si_igaret) becomes blindjarete (blainjaret) where the positive idea of seeing is taken away from a product of little virtue replacing it with blindness which carries overtones of sinfulness (see Birhan 1983). Other examples are

downpress = keep one down (JC/English "oppress")
outformer = one who gives out information to police
(informer)
Jamdown = place that inhibits one's progress (Jamaica)
Jah mek ya[5] = Jah made this place (Jamaica)

CATEGORY I assigns special meanings to words without altering their sounds (Note Leslau's comment quoted on Page 1). The insight in these changes is mainly metaphorical.[6] Within this list we find those items which might be described as referring to areas "central to the activities of the sub-culture" to use Halliday's description. "Chalice", the sacred cup of the Christian office of Holy Communion, becomes the pipe in which the sacred herb "ganja" is smoked. "Bald head" is the term which describes the

individual who is not a Rastafarian;"bald head" ere mean-

ing clean shaven as opposed to"dreadlocksed", the unshorn

style in which the stereotypical Rasta wears his hair.[7].

Other examples are taken from a list used earlier(Pollard '80)

| | |
|---|---|
| weed of wisdom | ganja |
| trod | leave, walk, move away |
| version | instrumental side of reggae record |
| tribalist | troublesome |
| wooden suit | coffin |
| sufferer | poor, ghetto resident |
| control | keep, take, look after |
| daughter: queen | girlfriend |
| dub | good piece of Reggae instrumental; flip side of Reggae 45; musical version of song usually with little or no lyrics; a rhythmic and visceral beat played mainly with drums, bass guitar, and one or two percussion instruments. |
| go deh | continue; move along; phrase of approval like 'right on'. |
| give thanks | an expression of gratitude for life or some kind of gesture |

There is some relationship between this category and the
kind of metaphor Halliday (1978:174) using Mallik's
data, exemplifies in say "dabal-dekar" "plump woman"
after the English double decker.

CATEGORY IV is made up of those words which to my mind
have undergone the most extensive processing of all.  The
JC/English origin is not always immediately obvious.
Cultural information is sometimes necessary to help unlock
the meaning.  "Ataps" for example is the word for "beer"
(Red Stripe - a local brand).  Note that beer which has not been
chilled is preferred by many Jamaicans, thus "hot hops" signifies

"beer" where metonymically one ingredient used in the making describes the whole product.  JC phonology accounts for the "h" deletion and the "a" for English "o" so HOT HOPS becomes ATAPS.  "Deadahs" (/dedaz/) is the word for "meat"- which is indeed dead flesh.  Rastas, mainly vegetarians, easily so regard it. "Satta̱" -"to relax, stay where you are, sit, keep calm," responds, to my mind, to a rhythmic impulse imposed on "sat" - to sit (cf "trod" - to tread, to walk).[8]

So also does "dunny" meaning "money".  Note in this regard Bryan's /example of "money" becoming "honey" in another (1982:263). language. This explanation is not instead of, but in addition to Birhan's (1983) suggestion that "dunny" des- cribes the evanescent nature of money - it is soon finished ("done" = finish in JC).

"Freenana" for "banana" is particulatly apt since this fruit is very common in Jamaica   and more likely than most to be available free.

A few other examples in that category are

| | |
|---|---|
| Backative = | stamina, strength |
| bongoniah | Rastaman |
| spliff | ganja |


I have tried to describe the speech of Rastafari within the framework of special registers responding to special social needs.  It is clear however that this lan- guage has moved  beyond the parameters indicated in the literature for such registers.  In addition to the pro- cesses for which parallels can be found, it involves changes in one major grammatical area , the pronominal area.  Its integration into the creole of territories outside of Jamaica including those whose creoles are not English based and its use in metropolitan cities where black peole have settled, indicates as well an additional dimension.  Halliday (1980:162), writing about language and social structure concedes that language is only one of the ways in which people represent the meanings that are in- herent in the social system.  He identifies other ways in which these meanings are represented- "the way people move, the clothes

they wear, their eating habits and their other patterns of behaviour..."   For Rastafari, the language goes with these others to represent not merely a social but a religious cultural and philosophical system, a way of life articulating the deepest concerns of the "I".

## NOTES

1.  The languages of the Merchants and of the Minstrels
    described by Leslau are offshoots of Amharic.  Loan
    words for the Merchant  argot for example are
    taken from languages spoken by other merchants,
    Arabic and Harari (see p.13).  The language Mallik
    describes is "primarily Bengali in which strains of
    Hindi infiltration are discernable" (in Halliday
    1978:172)

2.  Sar is the Jamaica Creole pronunciation of Sir.
    Note that Ras is an Ethiopian title.   This example is
    a  particularly felicitous  choice.

3.  For more detailed comment on this see Pollard 1980(6ff)

4.  Alternate glosses for some of these words may be found in
    Birhan (1983)

5.  This form gives a more positive view of Jamaica,
    Jah being the Rastafarian word for God.

6.  Note that Halliday (1978:176 Table 4) would make
    all the processes metaphors albeit of different types.

7.  Note the usage in the following lines of a pop song:
         You are the bald-head
         I am the dread
         I praise the living - (Haile Selassie)
         You praise the dead  (Jesus Christ)

8.  I am not sure whether this might be added to Cassidy's
    (1961: 58) list of words like "lost" and "broke" and "left"
    where the past tense form is the single form of the verb.
    Note also the reinforcement of this form by the Amharic(?)
    phrase Satta Amassagana "give thanks and praise" -
    the title of a song made popular since the late sixties
    by "The Abyssinians", a musical group.

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