Jamaican Creole

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Jamaican Creole is one of the major Atlantic English-lexifier creoles spoken in the Caribbean. In Jamaica, this creole is popularly labelled as 'Patwa' (Devonish & Harry 2004: 441). There is a widely-held view in Jamaica that a post-creole continuum exists. The continuum is between Jamaican English and Jamaican Creole (Meade 2001: 19). Many scholars holding this view find it necessary to distinguish among acrolectal, mesolectal and basilectal varieties (Irvine 1994, Beckford-Wassink 1999, Patrick 1999, Meade 2001, among others). Major phonological differences are found between the two extremes. However, a discussion of the phonological differences in the continuum and problems with the theoretical notion of a 'post-creole continuum' is beyond the scope of this paper. The aim of this paper is to provide an adequate description of some salient aspects of the synchronic phonetics and phonology of Jamaican Creole based on the speech forms of two native Jamaican Creole speakers, Stacy-Ann Watt, a post-graduate female student at the University of West Indies, Mona, and Racquel Sims, 22 year old female from the parish of St Catherine. Both come from the Eastern parishes of the island.

The speech form which is considered here is basilectal Jamaican Creole and radically different phonologically from the acrolectal form, Jamaican English, a regionally distinctive dialect of English. There are various regional varieties of Jamaican Creole as well, but scholars such as Wells (1973) and Devonish & Harry (2004) note that some phonological differences can be classified according two major varieties, Western and Eastern. Many of the phonological variations that occur within this context are sociologically conditioned (Irvine 1994, Beckford-Wassink 1999). For example, one phonological difference is that the Eastern variety is identified with the absence of the phoneme /h/, but allows the use of [h] in cases of [h] insertion or deletion, a situation known in the literature as hypercorrection. The Western variety has the /h/ phoneme. /h/ in the phonemic inventory is in parentheses to show this difference between the two varieties.

Consonants

Previous analyses of basilectal Jamaican Creole proposed 23 (Cassidy & Le Page 1967/1980), 22 (Akers 1981) and 20 (Devonish & Seiler 1991) phonemic consonants. More recent studies have shown that there are indeed 21 phonemic consonants (Devonish & Harry 2004: 456). These consonants are illustrated below.

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal	Labial-velar
Nasal	m		n			ŋ		
Plosive	p b		t d			k g		
Affricate				t͡ʃ d͡ʒ				
Fricative		f v	s z	ʃ			(h)	
Approximant			ɹ		j			w
Lateral approximant			l					

/maaga/ 'meagre/skinny' /nati/ 'dreadlocks' /toŋ/ 'tongue, town'
/pupa/ 'father' /tat/ 'tot (of liquor)' /kat͡ʃ/ 'lean against'
/buts/ 'condoms' /dis/ 'this/disrespect' /gɹain/ 'grind/make love'
/faas/ 'fast' /simit/ 'smith' /(h)an/ 'hand'
/vaaz/ 'vase' /ziin/ 'okay/cool'
                /t͡ʃalis/ 'pipe (for marijuana)'
                /d͡ʒinal/ 'con/trickster'
                /ʃaati/ 'short person'
/waas/ 'wasp' /ɹaas/ 'an expletive' /laas/ 'last/lost'

The consonants which are not included in the table are predictable from certain phonological processes that will be discussed in the following sections.

The status of /h/

Cassidy & Le Page (1967/1980), Akers (1981) and Devonish & Seiler (1991) assume that [h] is phonetic in both Western and Eastern varieties. By contrast, Wells (1973: 12) demonstrates that although [h] may be phonetic in Eastern varieties, it is phonemic in the Western varieties. Devonish & Harry (2004: 457) have shown that Wells is right, as [h] is phonemic only in Western varieties. They have demonstrated that Western Jamaican Creole speakers consistently make lexical contrasts between [h] – fewer items and fewer items beginning with [h]. This phonemic contrast does not exist for Eastern Jamaican Creole speakers. At the phonetic level, however, in items in which [h] is present in the Western varieties, the corresponding Eastern forms will either retain the [h], or delete the [h]. Conversely, [h] may be inserted in [h]-less items in Eastern varieties when compared with their corresponding Western forms. The insertion or deletion of the [h] in the Eastern variety is not systematic. The data below illustrate this difference.

WESTERN   EASTERN
/hiit/   [hiːt]   /iit/   [hiːt] ~ [iːt]   'hit'
/iit/   [iːt]   /iit/   [hiːt] ~ [iːt]   'eat'
/han/   [han]   /an/   [han] ~ [an]   'hand'
/an/   [an]   /an/   [han] ~ [an]   'and'

Labialisation

In Jamaican Creole, at the level of the syllable, back harmony exists which prevents non-low vowels with opposite values for the feature [back] from co-occurring. In addition, tri-vocalic sequences are avoided. Obstruents become labialised when they occur before a sequence

of a back vowel followed by a non-back vowel. Labialisation provides the first stage in a process which eventually leads to the deletion of the back vowel in tri-vocalic and bi-vocalic sequences. In the latter, the vowel following the deleted vowel is lengthened. Details of two relevant vowel processes will be discussed in the following section. The data below, adapted from Devonish & Harry (2004: 458), illustrates labialisation.

/buai/	→	[bʷuai]	→	[bʷai]	'boy'
/puail/	→	[pʷuail]	→	[pʷail]	'spoil'
/gu + an/	→	[gʷuan]	→	[gʷaːn]	'go on'

Palatalisation

Like labialisation, palatalisation, which is a productive process, is triggered by similar co-occurrence restriction. Obstruents are palatalised before a sequence of non-low front vowel and back vowel. Like in labialisation, palatalisation provides an intermediate stage in the constraint repair process. Three palatals, [c], [ɟ] and [ɲ], regarded as phonemic by Cassidy & Le Page (1967/1980: xxxix), are treated as phonetic by this account (see also Devonish & Seiler 1991: 7, Devonish & Harry 2004: 458). The data below, adapted from Devonish & Harry (2004: 458) illustrate palatalisation.

/kiuu/	→	[kʲiuː]	→	[kʲuː]	'a quarter quart (of rum)'
/giaad/	→	[gʲiaːd]	→	[gʲaːd]	'guard'
/piaa + piaa/	→	[pʲiãːpʲiãː]	→	[pʲãːpʲãː]	'weak'

Obstruent neutralisation

The contrast between velar and alveolar stops is neutralised before a syllabic lateral. The alveolar stops in this position become the corresponding velar consonants. In his historical account, Cassidy (1961/1971: 40) notes this as a case of consonant substitution.

| [tiɐbʊl] | 'table' | [bakl̩] | 'bottle' |
[kiɛk]	'cake'	[takl̩]	'tackle'
[diɛt]	'date'	[aigl̩]	'idle'
[giɛt]	'gate'	[daŋgl̩]	'dangle'

Obstruent weakening

Devonish & Harry (2004: 456) note for the first time that voiced stops, /b/, /d/ and /g/, are implosively articulated as [ɓ], [ɗ] and [ɠ], respectively, whenever they occur as onsets of 'prominent' syllables, particularly when in word-initial position, as can be seen by the increase in amplitude throughout the closure. The corresponding [b], [d] and [g] occur in other phonetic environments; for example:

/biit/	→	[ɓiːt]	'beat'	/tiabul/	→	[tiɐbʊl]	'table'
/dag/	→	[ɗag]	'dog'	/fiid/	→	[fiːd]	'feed'
/guud/	→	[ɠuːd]	'good'	/maaga/	→	[maga]	'slim'

Vowels

Previous analyses propose between nine (9) and sixteen (16) vowels for basilectal Jamaican Creole (Cassidy & Le Page 1967/1980, Akers 1981, Devonish & Seiler 1991). Most recent analysis proposes twelve phonemic vowels: five short, three long and four diphthongs (Devonish & Harry 2004: 443f.).
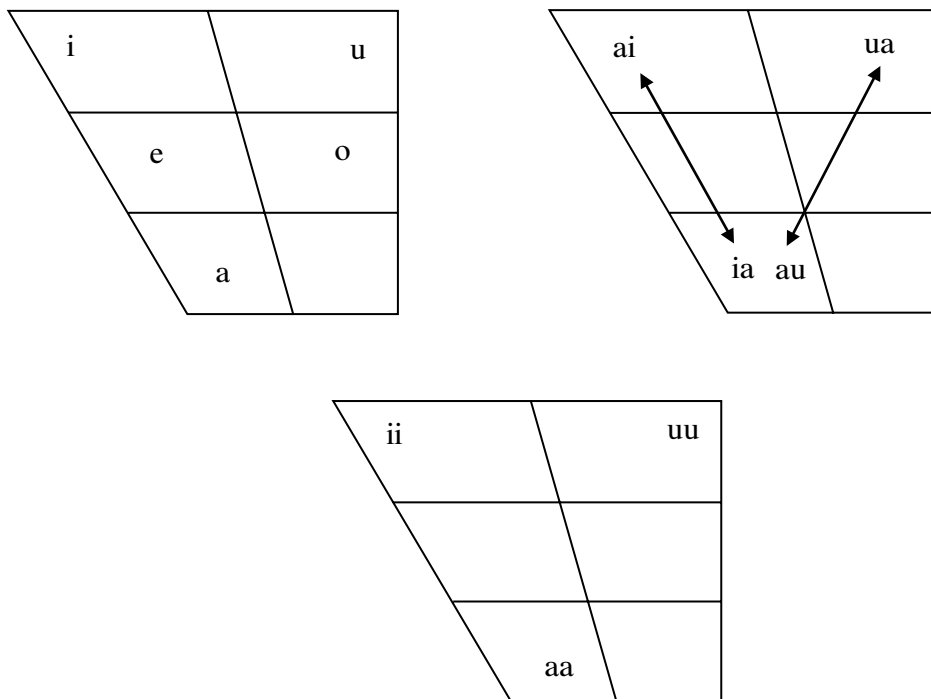
The long vowels are represented phonemically as a sequence of short vowels. The reason for this analysis is motivated by the peripheral vowel harmony discussed below. There is a phonetic range for each vowel (Cassidy & Le Page 1967/1980, Wells 1973, Beckford-Wassink 1999, Meade 2001). The examples below illustrate the vowel contrasts in Jamaican Creole.

/i/	/bita/	[ɓita]	'bitter'		/ii/	/biini/	[ɓiːni]	'small/tiny'
/e/	/breda/	[ɓrɛɗa]	'brother/friend'					
/a/	/bada/	[ɓaɗa]	'bother'		/aa/	/baaba/	[ɓaːɓa]	'barber'
/o/	/bota/	[ɓeta]	'butter'					
/u/	/butu/	[ɓʊtʊ]	'stupid person'		/uu/	/buut/	[ɓuːt]	'booth'
					/ia/	/biak/	[ɓiɛk]	'bake'
					/ai/	/baik/	[ɓaik]	'bike'
					/ua/	/buat/	[ɓʊɐt]	'boat'
					/au/	/taun/	[tɔʊn]~[tɔŋ]	'town'

The three long vowels and four diphthongs above occur as a result of two types of harmony; peripheral vowel harmony and back harmony (see Meade 1996, on back harmony in Jamaican Creole vowels).

Peripheral vowel harmony
Sequences of mid vowels cannot occur within a syllable. Only sequences of peripheral vowels /i/, /u/ and /a/ can occur. This accounts for the presence of the three phonemic long peripheral

vowels and four peripheral diphthongs, respectively. The examples given above illustrate this kind of harmony.

Back harmony

In Jamaican Creole, sequences of non-low vowels with opposite values for the feature [back] cannot occur within a syllable. Thus, /uu/ and /ii/ are allowed, but */ui/ and */iu/ cannot occur because they violate back harmony. Back harmony, as can be seen above, is restricted to high vowels only. /a/ being a [+low] vowel is neutral to back harmony. Thus, it is the only vowel which can combine with either /i/ or /u/, resulting in the four diphthongs listed in the vowel chart above.

Word prosody

There is a major disagreement on the exact nature of Jamaican Creole prosodic system. The known prosodic studies of Jamaican Creole are Lawton (1963), Wells (1973), Alderete (1993), Gooden (2003) and Devonish & Harry (2004) among others. Gooden (2003: 86–94) classifies previous prosodic studies of Jamaican Creole (basilectal or not) into four categories, namely tonal, pitch-accent, stress-accent and mixed system. Gooden (2003: 88) notes that for Lawton the most significant prosodic feature for distinguishing lexical items is tone. Carter (1980, 1983, 1987), as quoted in Gooden (2003: 89), 'oscillated between a characterization of Jamaican Creole as tonal . . . as pitch-accent or stress-accent'. Further, Gooden (2003: 94) notes that Devonish (1989) characterises 'Jamaican Creole prosody as a mixed system', one in which lexically assigned tone melody interacts with stress/segmental prominence. Gooden (2003: 100), following Wells (1973) and Alderete (1993), characterises Jamaican Creole as a stress-based system. In contrast, Devonish & Harry (2004) consider Jamaican Creole prosody as a mixed system in which stress and tone interact. A detailed review of these studies is beyond the scope of this paper. Readers are referred to Gooden (2003) for problems associated with these studies.

Although, there is no overall agreement among these analyses, there is an underlying assumption in Lawton (1963), Gooden (2003) and Devonish & Harry (2004) that pitch or F0 plays some role in signalling lexical differences through differences in the alignment of F0 contours with prominent and non-prominent syllables within the word. For Gooden (2003: 116), however, this F0 alignment does not signal lexical tone contrast. The examples taken from Devonish & Harry (2004: 469) illustrate the alignment of F0 in the form of high (H) tone in some items:

H-TONED PROMINENT SYLLABLE			H-TONE NON-PROMINENT SYLLABLE		
/mada/	[máda]	'mother'	/mada/	[madá]	'spiritualist'
/faada/	[fáːda]	'father'	/faada/	[faːdá]	'priest'
/iati/	[iɛ́ti]	'eighty'	/waata/	[waːtá]	'water'

Intonation

Intonation is another area of Jamaican Creole prosody about which very little is known. Gooden (2003: 102) proposes that 'Jamaican Creole has a typologically similar intonation system to other stress-accent languages like Russian, German and English' but she provides very little evidence to support this claim.

Note that the works cited in this and the preceding section provide only preliminary findings on Jamaican Creole word prosody and intonation, calling for further investigation of the phonology of this language variety. In the broad transcription of the passage, accentual marks are not included, since there is no consensus on the nature of the prosodic/intonational patterns in Jamaican Creole.

Transcription

The transcribed passage is 'The North Wind and the Sun'.

Broad transcription

di naat win an di son wen a kuaɹil baut wit͡ʃ wan a dem mua t͡ʃɹaŋga. siam taim, wan man ena kom daun di ɹuad. im ɹap op ina wan d͡ʒakit fi kiip aut di kual. di win an di son agɹii se dat di wan we mek di man tek aaf im d͡ʒakit fos, a im a di t͡ʃɹaŋa wan. so, di naat win blua aad aad, bot di mua im blua, a di mua di man ɹap di d͡ʒakit ɹaun im. di naat win a fi tap t͡ʃɹai. den di son taat ʃain at. di man tek aaf im d͡ʒakit siam taim. wen im tek i aaf, di naat win luk pan di son an se, buai, ju t͡ʃɹaŋga dan mi fi t͡ʃɹuu.

Orthographic version

Di naat win an di son wen a kwaril bout wich wan a dem muo chrangga. Siem taim, wan man ena kom dong di ruod. im rap op ina wan jakit fi kiip aut di kuol. Di win an di son agrii se dat di wan we mek di man tek aaf im jakit fos, a im a di chrangga wan. So, di naat win bluo aad aad, bot di muo im bluo, a di muo di man rap di jakit rong im. Di naat win a fi tap chrai. Den di son taat shain at. Di man tek aaf im jackit siem taim. Wen im tek i aaf, di naat win luk pan di son an se, bwai, yu chrangga dan me fi chruu.

Acknowledgements

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