

ABSTRACT

Language is dynamic in nature and whether it exists in spoken form only or has a standard written form one can note numerous variations on several levels. One varies according to topic, education, audience, context, intention and other sociolinguistic variables.

In this paper I will examine the poetry of Louise Bennett as published in Jamaica Labrish (1983) in light of the above statements. I intend to show as far as possible the correlation between the language variation of the poems and some sociolinguistic variable and to illustrate her success in communicating in Jamaican Creole though primarily on a cultural level.

I have chosen a representative 35 of her poems to study in depth, grouping them according to the years of her writing from 1943-1955. From 1950-1954 however there are no recorded poems as Bennett was working abroad at that time.

Professor Nettleford in his introduction to her book 'Jamaica Labrish' (1966, 1983) notes that she "makes the authenticity of her dialect verses speak for itself" (p. 9) but he later comments on the intricacies of the tonal structure of Jamaican Creole and remarks that the 'rhythms and sounds are obscured by problems of orthography', a problem which this paper will address. Bennett's rendition, he claims, is imperative in some cases for a full appreciation of her poetry. As well as examining the veracity of this claim, I have also examined:

- (i) Bennett's use of the copula
- (ii) the creole past tense marker ben/wen

- (iii) her orthographical treatment of the complementizer /se/ and the verb say
- (iv) final consonant cluster deletion and
- (v) fricative replacement

Results found: Bennett shows faithfulness to Creole forms and in most instances where variation occurs it is more idiosyncratic than sociolinguistic in nature. Irregular spelling changes also point out the need for a standardized creole orthography.