

Abstract

Defining Good English in Jamaica: Language Variation and Language Ideology in an Agency of the Jamaican State

Grace Alison Irvine

The acrolect, in territories like Jamaica, is described in the literature in a number of ways – as the "the local standard English" or as the theoretical upper end of the construct referred to as the continuum. These ideas of the acrolect have all been affected by analyses that use metropolitan Standard English as the yardstick for defining English and, by extension, features found along the Jamaican continuum. This approach is particularly problematic when dealing with phonological variation, and it is the phonological variation that occurs in the formal speech of educated Jamaicans that I seek to uncover in this dissertation.

Data was collected from a sample of informants employed at JAMPRO, one of the Jamaican state's agencies. In particular, the speech of the staff at JAMPRO who are moved into frontline positions is analysed as an actual example of what a Jamaican workplace considers a speaker of Standard Jamaican English, the acrolect. This data reveals that phonological variation in Jamaican English is structured in such a way to reflect the coexistence of Creole and English, in a speech community that values the speaker who can use both varieties.

In a linguistic context that is characterized by continuous variation, use of some variables is crucial in defining the boundaries between Creole and English, thus establishing the variety the

speaker is using. These I call load-bearing phonological variables. For other sociolinguistic functions, like signalling group membership, the speakers manipulate phonological variables which are less likely to be stereotyped as reflecting an inability to produce English. The architecture of phonological variation in diglossic speech communities like Jamaica, where the idealised member is one who can manipulate both Creole and English, is shown to be fundamentally different from the language variation in communities with monoglot standard ideologies.

Keywords

Standard Jamaican English, Acrolect, Phonological Variation, Ideology

Department of Language, Linguistics and Philosophy
Faculty of Humanities and Education
Monza