

RASTAFARIAN LANGUAGE IN ST. LUCIA

AND BARBADOS

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Half a century after its revelation among the Jamaican poor, Rastafari with its distinctive way of life, spread to various cities with large black communities and particularly to the cities of the Eastern Caribbean. Inevitably, the language which articulates the philosophy of Rasta has spread with it. This paper discusses the language of Rastafari in two Eastern Caribbean territories, Barbados and St. Lucia¹ commenting specifically on lexico-semantic change evident in the language as it moves from the environment of Jamaica Creole to interact with the creoles of these two territories. A brief comment on Rastafari and on the common history of the Caribbean is in order as a backdrop to the discussion.

Researchers have attempted to fit Rastafari into any number of preconceived frames including 'political cult' (Simpson 1955), 'escapist movement' (Lanternari 1963) and 'messianic movement' (Barret 1968). None of these however gives a complete picture of what Rastafari is though each might be, like the blind men who went to see the elephant, partly right. Benn's (1973) description of the Rastafari belief system as a 'curious ideational synthesis ... an amalgam of African cultural themes, old testament christianity and elements of Garvey's racial mystique,' recognizes the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon.

It is Robert Hill (1983:38) however whose indication comes closest to pointing investigation in a direction which might be fruitful in terms of our present interest. He identifies a need

to approach the study of the phenomenon of Rastafari awakening as an integral aspect of the larger matrix of black religious nationalism, folk religious revivalism, and Jamaican peasant resistance to the plantation economy and state ...

It is this kind of direction that best leads to an understanding of the ease with which the Rastafari way of life has penetrated the societies of Jamaica's Caribbean neighbours whose histories have not been different from the history of Jamaica in any but unimportant details. Chevannes (1980:92) reviewing Simpson's (1977) *Black Religions in the New World* points to the 'uniformity of the experiences of the Black Peoples of the New World,' and Black Stalin Trinidad calypsonian (himself a Rasta) describes the Caribbean people as 'One race/from the same place/that make the same trip/in the same ship.' Indeed Horace Campbell (1980:42) sees the growth of Rastafari in the Eastern Caribbean as an index in part, of the failure of some of the popular and democratic organizations of the 70's 'to root their movement in their own historical specificity ...' The history of the islands dictates that the majority of the inhabitants are poor black people occupying underprivileged positions in societies with stark social and economic discrepancies. Such people are predisposed to accepting an ideology which offers a reversion of the social order and a positive self image.

In the case of Rasta it offers as well a deity with whose image the black self can identify in the person of HIM Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, a form of worship that resembles in sound and movement², the afro-caribbean religions of the various territories and a way of speaking which, while embodying and defining all these, easily integrates itself into the local creoles.

THE LANGUAGE OF RASTA-JAMAICAN

The language of Rastafari is Jamaican Creole (JC), the language of the Jamaican poor 'stepped up', in the terminology of one of the bretheren, to reflect the philosophical stance of the Rasta man. Pollard (1979) identifies three categories of words reflecting three basic processes of word-formation within the rastafarian lexicon. The syntax of JC is left intact except for the substitution of the form 'I' or 'I and I' for the JC pronoun 'mi'³. The reason for this change however is not entirely to do with syntax. The sound /ai/ is important in the speech of the Rastafari. It is a sound with a positive force. So in one word-making process, the initial syllable in any number of words is replaced by the sound /ai/ ('I' as in I-laloo = calaloo) to form what Nettleford (1978:201) refers to as a 'battery of "I"-words' and what leads Birhan (1981) to label the language 'Iyaric'. The sound /ai/ is related also to the meaning 'eye'; the center of sight allowing the Rasta man to be 'far seeing' when compared to the non-Rasta whose sight is at best limited ('... eyes have they and see not, only Fari could see' (RMA 1976:3 in Pollard 1980).

Just as sight is positive so blindness is negative and replaces the idea of seeing wherever a negative vibration is required. So for example 'cigarette' /siigaret/ becomes /blainjaret/ 'blindgarete'. This type of replacement forms the basis of another process in which words 'bear the weight of their phonological representation' (Pollard 1979). A word like 'oppress' as a term to describe the action of keeping a man down, is unacceptable to the man who feels the pressure. In Rasta idiom it becomes 'downpress' and 'downpression' replaces 'oppression'. The English lexicon which JC uses, is in a sense brought to book in this particular process. Alleyne (1982:27) commenting on the list of words so formed (Pollard's Category II) has this to say:

As far as category 2 is concerned the point of departure is the association which has already been established in Jamaican English (and other forms of English) between a certain sound sequence and a certain meaning. In other words once this association is accepted, the sign loses a great deal of its arbitrariness and acquires some measure of motivation, i.e. an inherent relationship with the acquired meaning, akin to onomatopoeia and sound symbolism. Wherever the particular sound sequence occurs it must then convey the same meaning.

His examples are 'overstand' replacing 'understand' and 'outformer' replacing 'informer'.

Allsopp (1980:102) describes this process as the 'phono-semantic restructuring of certain 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 or Rasta Talk).

A more straightforward process accounts for words which retain their English/JC forms but change their meanings (Pollard Category I). These,

Allsop places in a Semantic rather than a Lexical category and describes them as 'Mainly SE forms with notable functional and semantic shift sometimes plus morphological change.' A word like Chalice falls into this category. (What used to be a cup for administering the Holy Sacrament becomes a pipe for smoking the holy weed.) Allsop's examples are

/faawod/ forward: to leave, depart
 /babilan/ Babylon: any person seen as representative of Euro-centred Establishment.

Finally there are new words, innovations, words whose forms are new but whose meanings on investigation, reveal some semantic logic. This list includes /donza/ dunza or dunsa (also known as dunny) = money. For this item, Birhan (1981:38) gives the following etymology:

Dun is the Jamaica dialect for done and means finished hence dunsa and dunny for money which is always too soon finished.

REGGAE MUSIC AND THE LANGUAGE OF RASTA

The spread of the Rasta philosophy and the spread of the language owe much to Reggae music and the popularity of its lyrics on the tongues of its more charismatic exponents Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Jimmy Cliff, Burning Spear and U-Roy to name a few. For a proper interpretation of this phenomenon we need to be aware of the significance of music, of the word, and of the musician's role in the universe of Rasta. Brodber and Greene (1979:13) tell us that one of the characteristics of the Theocratic World Government which Rastas see as the next phase of social and political evolution is that 'the singers as well as the players on instruments shall be there (Psalm 87 vs.7)' and add:

The Rastafari singers accordingly view their role as a social and religious responsibility ... the singer is likely to be consciously discharging what he considers to be a socio-religious responsibility ...

It is perhaps not by chance then that Bob Marley (1980) for example speaks to people with a history of subjugation thus:

Emancipate yourself from mental slavery
 none but ourselves can free our minds ...

The transference of philosophy and language by remote control is new and could not have happened before technology advanced as far as it has today. It may be that the fact that the medium of transfer of language has been predominantly air waves not individual contact, has influenced the processes at work and the selection of lexical items that undergo change. The preoccupation of this paper is less with the bulk of items which have been borrowed unchanged into creoles of English lexicon or have been translated exactly, or accepted as loan words into the French Creole, than with the few items that have undergone lexical or semantic change with the change of environment.

LEXICAL CHANGE

Hancock (1980:67) developing a model to describe lexical change isolates

twelve processes grouped under two main headings 'internally generated' and 'externally influenced' the latter consisting of processes which 'rely on resources resulting from contact with speakers of other systems'. Predictably, most of the items we examine here are the result of processes in the 'external' category. Pollard (1982) drawing on Hancock's model, uses his sub-category 'Adoption' as a major category and places against it 'Innovation'. Our present analysis retains these categories, subdividing Adoption, by far the more well subscribed, into two processes.

The total effect of the Jamaican words on the language spoken by Rastas in the Eastern Caribbean has received comment in both territories under consideration. Al Gilkes (Nation 1977) writing about the speech of Barbadian Rastas says: 'Their lingo is a mixture of certain basics borrowed from their Jamaican counterparts and some of their own concoction'. In St. Lucia, one teacher speaks of the 'infiltration of Jamaicanisms' within the speech of the Rastas.

CATEGORIES AND COMMENT

I Adoption

a) Lexical: Phono-semantic restructuring of words.

Barbados

/blainza/ blindza = money

'I would like to get a copy of "Calling Rastafari" everytime it comes out and just write and tell us how much it cost and how to send the "blinza" (Letter to the Editor, April 1979).

Jamaican Source

/donza/ dunza (dunsa, dunny)
(see explanation p.3)

Dunza in Jamaica Rasta Talk ^{falls} within Pollard's (1980) list of new words, innovations generated within the milieu of Rasta. In Barbados, it is an adopted Jamaican word submitted to the process of replacing the existing initial sound with a negative sound. So 'dun' becomes 'blind'. This is a departure from the Jamaican process where, so far 'blind' has been used to replace word sounds involving 'seeing' (e.g. siigarete). 'Blindza' indicates here, that Rasta perceives money as a negative thing.

Lotal = unclean

'Any food which is not "ital" and that accounts for most of what the normal man eats, is to the Rasta "lotal" (unclean) and not fit for human consumption ...' (Gilkes 1977).

Jamaican Source

/aital/ Ital = vital, pure, natural, organic, food cooked without salt;
Rasta food.

This word is one of the 'battery of I-Words' in Jamaican Rasta Talk. 'Vital' has been processed by replacing the initial sound with the positive /ai/ sound. It seems that in Barbados the normal Jamaica Creole penchant for omitting the aitch is taken for granted. Hence a hypothetical 'High'tal and a negative form 'Low'tal. 'Low' as a negative form of 'high' is a logical choice and follows the pattern of one kind of process to which Rasta Talk submits JC words. Two things make the item unusual however, the initial /h/ implication, and the use of 'low' instead of blind.

It will be interesting to see how many other words will use a form other than 'blind' to describe negative vibrations. I have seen 'low' in one other phrase in the Barbadian corpus, that is 'low livety' the negative opposition of 'upfull livety' ('righteous living'): "'Blindza" (money) is another agent of "low livety" and has no place in their society' (Gilkes 1977).

This process was not observed anywhere in the St. Lucia corpus. While this does not necessarily indicate non-occurrence it might certainly suggest low frequency.

Adoption

- b) Semantic Extension - 'new interpretation for an item in addition to, or in replacement of, its original one' (Hancock 1980:74)

Barbados

/haits/ heights = to understand
 aiman haits dat = I understand

Jamaican Source

/aits/ ites = a form of greeting; the colour red

Here is a shift in function as well as meaning. This item takes on the function of verb in Barbados Rasta talk. The word normally used as a verb to mean 'understand' in Jamaica is 'penetrate'. The word 'ites' however is highly symbolic in Jamaican Rasta talk. It is more than just a greeting. Birhan (1981:24) defines it at length:

Ites: Heights. A greeting wishing the person greeted to arrive at the heights of spirituality. Ites also means the red, which is the highest colour the Rastafari flag of red, gold and green as flown by the Niabinghi Theocracy contains.

Its use here does not cause any difficulty in comprehension for Bretheren from other islands not only because the context clues are likely to be clear but because of the high symbolism of the word.

sip = to eat, drink

'I sip ital (natural food) itinually (always)'
 (Rastaman 1978)

Jamaican Source

sip = to smoke (draw on) a chalice

The semantic content here is generalized in Barbados to mean imbibing and so includes eating food cooked Rasta style.

dally = to leave
(Barbados Rasta list (St. Hill (1982:35))

Jamaican Source

dally = ride; cycle; erratic movements done while riding bike.

The Jamaican meaning is highly specialized. The Rasta man riding a motorcycle weaving in and out of the city traffic (dallying) daredevil style was a commonplace on the streets of Kingston in the seventies. The Jamaican equivalent of the Barbadian meaning would be 'step' or 'forward'.

St. Lucia

/dob/ dub = to cook

aiman dob op a yuud = I-man cook food (Rasta style)

evriting yu duin yu dobin it/ dob iz afrikan

'Everything you are doing you are dubbing it. Dub is African'.
(Young bretheren from Castries, April 1982)

Jamaican Source

/dob/ dub = good piece of Reggae instrumental; flip side of Reggae 45; musical version of song usually with little or no lyrics. (Also: earthy dance motions with sexual suggestions; done to this music).

The meaning associated with this word in the St. Lucia context marks a movement from highly specific to general when viewed in terms of the Jamaican parent form. In the comment by the young bretheren that 'dub is African', African, I think merely means 'black'; (in other words 'dub' is a black people's word, don't expect to find it in the average dictionary).

/airashon/ Iration: cookshop; environment; dispensation (time)

A new iration Positive in vibration
Strictly Ital the man them a deal with
A place you must get to know
In Faux a Chaux gettoe
Check it out

(Advt. in 'Calling Rastafari' 1979)

Being in a Rasta iration, Soucou then asked King George to tell him about his experience as a rasta in this society over the past.

(Exclusive interview with King George
Calling Rastafari April 1979)

rasta woz strong doun hier/ bot not nou/ not in dis airashon

'Rasta was strong down here but not now, not at this time'

(Sister at Soufriere April 1982)

Jamaican Source

/airieshan/ Iration = creation; time

The first meaning given, 'cookshop' is by far the most well documented. All over Castries are movable establishments selling ital lunches from about eleven A.M. each day. Each one is an 'iration'. It is possible that this meaning might have evolved from the second meaning 'environment'. This could easily have meant any sort of meeting place, and since eating food cooked in a particular way, is a major communal activity of Rasta, the place of the meeting could have come to monopolise the use of item. The third meaning seems to come nearest to the usage in Jamaica talk where things happen 'in this iration'; creation being less the act of creation than the specific era or perhaps better, 'karma'.

I am suggesting that the items in this category illustrate a process made possible by the limited person to person contact involved in the spread of this language. The words mentioned in this list are all words which appear over and over in songs and the slots they have been asked to fill are high-frequency slots. The words are symbols of Rasta activity, cooking ital food, understanding Rasta reasoning (discussion of dogma) for example, rather than examples of borrowed words with their accompanying meanings. An interesting related study might be the lyrics of the songs most popular in the territories. Two further words in the category represent a figurative level of meaning assignment, one from the St. Lucia French Creole corpus, the other from Barbados.

St. Lucia

'sa te' = that is roots (literally 'that is earth')

'Wassin' which translates literally 'roots' does exist in the St. Lucia corpus with 'Wassin I' a common legend on walls in the patois speaking areas. 'Sa te' as an alternative then, seems to be a conscious transfer of meaning.

Jamaican

'Roots' is a common item in any list of Rasta wordology. It is used as a greeting in the same way that 'Ites', mentioned earlier is. Birhan defines it in part as

A greeting of solidarity for Afrikan roots culture as upheld by the Rastafari. Used synonymously with Afrikan culture and with Rastafari culture ... (1981:41)

Barbados

/dopi/ Duppy = meat; dead flesh

'I nah sip duppy (anything which has to be killed before consumption)'
(Gilkes 1977).

'I wont eat meat.'

Jamaican Source

/dedaz/ deadahs = meat; dead flesh

This form is used in Barbados as well. 'Duppy' however is a creole word for 'ghost' or 'spirit'. In Barbados Rasta Talk then, the spirit of the dead animal represents the flesh, as an alternative to the word representing simply 'flesh'.

II Innovation

Where a word that does not appear in Jamaica Rasta Talk is recorded in the corpus. (No item was recorded in this category in Barbados.)

St. Lucia

bashi = calabash; gourd

drot; jot; jott; jut; drought = meal of vegetables cooked in coconut milk
(ital stew)

aiman dob op a drot
I am cooking drot

ombre = to be aggressive; an aggressor

'all de time dem runnin down an shooting man for ombray dem know de real ombrayers is dem big time capitalist ... I say a minister of govament ombraying an other by holding de job as Sports Reporter for SLTV ...'

(All the time they are pursuing and shooting men for being aggressive they know that the real aggressors are those big time capitalists ... I say a minister of government is taking another man's bread by holding the job as sports reporter for SLTV.)

(Calling Rastafari 1979)

lak = saps, weak fellow

misye se a lak
da man de iz a saps
that man is a weak fellow

Of the words offered in this category 'bashi' is the most easily traced. This seems to be a form of a diminutive of affection for the calabash, useful and easily accessible article. This particular utensil can be seen at all 'irations' as large mixing and serving bowls from the section of long oval-shaped ones, and as small individual eating dishes from the section of small round ones.

'Drot' (written also as jut; jot; jutt; drought) is a culinary refinement on the more general, 'yuud/food'. It is a dish of vegetables which must include green vegetables, cooked in coconut milk after the pattern of the Jamaican 'Ital stew'. I have not been able to get any explanation of its origin: It might indeed be what St. Lucia Rasta Talk has made of 'jorts' which appears in a Trinidad list (1981) 'Wordology of Rastafari', glossed as 'food'.

'Lak' translates the Jamaican 'saps' which describes a weak individual. One informant explains that it is a shortened form of 'kakalak', the female sexual organ so that the sentence in the example implies that the man is behaving like a woman.

'Ombre' as the example shows is multifunctional. The informant cited above defines its verb function in this way 'to express your manhood in an aggressive way' and explains that there was a man called 'Ombray' (hombre?), an aggressive type of fellow who functioned on the periphery of a group of Rastas whenever he was out of trouble/jail. His name has been applied to predatory and aggressive behaviour of the type associated with him.

CONCLUSION

The language of Rastafari has been dynamic enough to move outside of Jamaica and to become creative/innovative in other environments. Allsopp (1980:103) sees this fact as defending it from being characterized as 'passing local slang'. It must be emphasized, he says, that

this 'communolect' or 'oligolect' with its many shibboleths and accompanying behaviour-patterns, has in the last ten years or so spread steadily and easily in Black communities throughout the Caribbean, whether radical (Guyana) or conservative (Barbados) almost as if these communities were linguistically pre-disposed to accommodate these unusual propensities ...

It might be thus defended as well from the claim by some that it falls within the category 'Antilanguage' as defined by Halliday (1978:164). In fact in Halliday's description it seems that one characteristic of the antilanguage is the narrowness of its constituency. In any case while Rasta may be seen as a 'mode of resistance' and so an anti-society spawning an antilanguage, it may also be seen as 'pro' a very large segment of these predominantly black communities. The following construction of 'Dread' (Rasta) by one young Caribbean writer might be instructive:

The word 'Dreads' as I understand it means purely, the power that lies within any man which enables him to do or to achieve anything he wants ... To be a 'Dread' therefore is to be conscious of that power, and to be

developing one's power-potential for achievement ... Dread becomes therefore a philosophy of life fulfilment ...

(Lee 1975 In Garrison 1979)

The language which seeks to embody all this can hardly be labelled 'anti' in its totality even if certain aspects of its application might suggest this.

NOTES

- 1 I wish to record here my thanks to all those whose cooperation made this paper possible; particularly to Soucou in St. Lucia and to Ikel and Adonijah in Barbados whose goodwill gave me safe conduct throughout.
- 2 The Niabinghi drumming and dancing resembles the ceremonies associated with Pocomania (Jamaica). Note also the existence of Kele in St. Lucia (Simpson 1977) and of Shakers in Barbados.
- 3 Recently the impersonal pronoun 'one' appears with either the definite or indefinite article as in sentence 'I and I nah sight why a one should drink a can of orange juice when de one could sip a natural orange' (Rastaman 1978).

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