Languages in Contemporary Anglophone Caribbean Societies

Ancestral Whisperings;
soul of my identity,
blueprint of my history
mother tongue speaks.

By

Melva P. Davids

Language, a perceived mundane, taken for granted activity is much more than it is made out to be in many linguistic spaces. In reality, language is an active dynamic entity that is particular to the human species and affects almost every aspect of life itself. In essence, in the social sphere, language assumes the function that water or air provides in the physical world. As such, a clear infrastructural framework to govern this major tool of communication and expression is integral to social coherence, social equity and stability. In the same way that clear policies and practices are necessary to preserve and dispense water to all living organisms in order to sustain and perpetuate life, clear language policies and infrastructures should precede any attempt to organize communities for social living and in effect economic and social progress. However, the reality of many nations faced with chronic economic challenges is that the centrality of clear language infrastructure to economic development, social advancement and social unity is often sidelined in order to focus on fixing the economy or fixing crime with actions and policies that are tangible and measurable; albeit for short term results. Indeed, language as a social construct is an intangible wealth of every society and unless a systemic approach is applied to economic and social planning, language planning as the nucleus to social and economic progress will remain an oversight in many post colonial societies.

The language dynamics of many contemporary Anglophone Caribbean nations with a colonial past have evolved over time to represent a source of social divide where the legacy of the hegemonic relationship between the language of conquest and the languages of contact established on the sugar plantations and in the plantation houses is now mirrored in the social fabric of these societies. Language is still a contested field in many such nations in a linguistic landscape with Standard English the perceived language of prestige linked to wealth, power and or level of education on the one hand is being pitted against the perceived inferior Creole languages which are linked to poverty, disenfranchisement and illiteracy. Despite the impact of globalization and technology that heralded the access to tools of communication in any language upon demand; and despite a shift from monolingual focus to multilingualism on the global linguistic stage, the mindset of many in the region including Creole speakers is that English is the only language of these nations. Any utterance of the means of communication used in informal relationships is perceived as a failed attempt at speaking English.

Many contemporary Caribbean linguists have spent most of their lifetime studying these

dialects and using international standards to establish that Creole languages have distinct structures in terms of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics that make them legitimate languages in their own rights despite an English lexicon base. In the case of Jamaica, the Cassidy Le Page analysis of the Creole Language first presented in 1959 was further developed at the Jamaica Language Unit (JLU) located on the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies to establish a clear writing system for the Jamaican Creole. This system amplifies the African influence of an English based language vocabulary that allows the Creole speaker a standardized way to write the language he speaks. This achievement serves as an important step to learning other languages including English. The psychosocial benefit of understanding the history encoded in the language that has evolved into Jamaican Creole is far reaching for the average user who now has the tool to immortalize his utterances on a page or screen.

In the case of the Francophone Caribbean islands such as Haiti the situation is more reassuring. French Creole has long been legitimized alongside formal French as a national language. In the case of the Eastern Caribbean, those 'English-speaking' islands such as Dominica and St. Lucia that are close to French speaking islands do have the infrastructural policies necessary to frame an authentic cultural identity and allow easy communication and links with their neighbors. For example, Dominica and St. Lucia have established national language policies to give status to the mother language of the masses and the celebration of events such as International Creole Month and Day during October is a yearly ritual that attracts worldwide participation and impact the economy of these countries in tangible ways. Are the islands in the English speaking Caribbean who hold dearly to the monolingual vestige of their colonial identity missing out on the important lessons demonstrated in the French and Spanish speaking territories? In these territories, formal and indigenous languages thrive alongside formal European languages in clearly defined language spaces and functions, so what of the Anglophone Caribbean region especially a culturally distinct country such as Jamaica? Suppose a systemic approach to language planning was applied at the onset of political independence in Anglophone territories including Jamaica, how would these countries have benefited? Here, a systemic approach refers to the recognition that the social world is a living entity where every aspect is linked and both the physical and the social worlds are interdependent in order to effect a fully functioning whole or in this case society. Language as a core variable in this relationship is what sustains the social world and so should be fully aligned to all aspects of planning. What then is language? Language may be defined here, as all the signs, symbols, gestures, sounds, codes that serve to communicate meaning among people. Therefore, we are considering language as a natural complex human experience or construct that emerges where people exist or settle. We are not concerned with artificial language associated with technology or arbitrary meaningful sounds or gestures of some animals.

A fully functioning human needs language to think, solve problems, express emotions and relate to others in a coherent and cohesive way. Therefore, it is important to cultural identity and self identity. Professor Rex Nettleford, Jamaican scholar, termed this human experience of self-worth as the feeling of "smaddiness" using the Jamaican vernacular. At the micro-level, holistic construction of one's self definition is wrapped up in how language is managed at the macro level of society. How language is managed also informs pedagogical decisions and

possibilities within the education system. The link between language, communication, education, culture and self identity is binding. Lev Vygotsky, famous Russian Psychologist identifies language as a key cultural tool that learners use to think and express learning before internalizing thoughts or ideas. Language is therefore important to sense-making in the social and physical world. Jean Piaget, Swiss biologist and cognitive theorist argues that children use language as internal thoughts in mental schemata to understand and reconstruct meaning in their world through processes of accommodation and assimilation. Clearly, the psychological value of having distinct linguistic identities to achieve high self efficacy in learning situations is as important to the individual as the need for policies to legitimize the mother language of the masses in order to concretize a wholesome cultural identity.

In the case of Jamaica, alongside political and denominational affiliations, the legitimacy of the social language of over 97% of the population is still a source of bitter discourse aligned to social and power differentials despite inroads into how the native language is portrayed in the media and popular culture. The ubiquitous natural use of Jamaican Creole in social media setting seems to have added momentum to the acceptance of the native language, especially among the youth population. As such, the furore about the poor achievements of Anglophone Caribbean students in the 2012 sitting of the English A Caribbean Examination may well be as a result of a combination of students over exposure and use of the native language in online print environment where no clear distinction is made when writing English versus Creole. Traditionally, Jamaican Creole was an oral language reflected in the music and roots theater of the masses. Poems written by cultural icon, the Honorable Louis Bennett-Coverly using the basolect or mesolect forms of Jamaican Creole as well as other literature following in similar strides were mostly performed orally or listened to, thus the written form of the language had no general visible space for active writers prior to these writings and the advent of social media. If the average Jamaican is processing English and Creole in the same mental space, could this be the needed trigger for a clear public distinction to be made between both means of communication? Should appropriate national policies and actions take precedence over economic policies so as to guide how educators and citizens meet, treat and process language?

A recent reflection activity among tertiary first year students revealed that many from Creole-speaking environments found out through traumatic experiences that the home language and school languages were different and Creole speakers were 'talking badly' when they used their first language. The delicate self efficacy of these young adults that were thwarted since Primary School still prevented them from willingly participating in formal discussions where English is used in a sustained manner. Some students stated that they only used English whenever they had to write while others stated that they 'tried' to use English if they had to. use it. Is this a healthy perception or attitude towards any language especially one that is etched in the personal history and identity of these users? Other students who were from Creole-speaking background attributed their fairly satisfactory competence in using English to their High School experiences where their peers were mainly from English-speaking backgrounds. What conclusions can be drawn from these situations. First of all, to learn a second language one has to be immersed in a speech environment where the language is used naturally. The Traditional High Schools are most likely to first and foremost attract students from middle class families whose children

had gone through private Preparatory Schools where English is the dominant language. Students from the public Primary Schools who are accepted in Traditional High Schools are most likely from lower middle class or upper lower class families who have some exposure to a mesolect form of the language. In contrast, most students who end up in Non-traditional High Schools, especially Junior High or All-age schools are from lower class Creole-speaking background and as such the school environment would replicate the home as a Creole-speaking environment. Interestingly, over the last decade many Non-traditional schools have made strides academically in some areas and are therefore becoming more attractive to local parents. This paradigm shift however can be more far reaching if a National Language Policy were to be put in place to advise the nature of the Language Program that best fits Traditional High schools where opportunities for using and hearing the second language exist naturally. This curriculum would be markedly be in contrast to a program befitting the nature of the Creole speaking culture and makeup of the Non -traditional High School environment. This inequity begs the question, should all Jamaican schools be taught voice and speech or phonetic skills using the International Phonetic System of pronunciation? Should they meet the history of English and Creole as part and parcel of language instruction? With clear language infrastructure, pedagogical soundness and vision, these would be redundant questions.

From the foregoing discussion, it clear that language has power to divide or to unify people. It can empower or disenfranchise individuals or groups. It can oppress, suppress or liberate people. It can be subversive or it can be enlightening or enabling. The extent to which language unifies, empowers, liberates, enlightens or enables is largely dependent on the social infrastructures that individual governments put in place through policies and actions that are linked to long term economic and social goals. Since Language planning is central to social and economic development; legitimizing a dominant language that is linked to power and prestige without equal recognition for the language lived by the majority of the population on a daily basis is tantamount to excluding the majority of that population from participating in decisions that immediately affect them. This act also denies them of a clear language framework necessary to learn a second or third language. As expressed earlier, the French and Spanish speaking territories have put the necessary infrastructure in place to create a healthy attitude towards learning and using language as a living entity necessary to communicate and express human experiences.

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