The Divisive Gate-keeping Role of Languages in Jamaica: Establishing Post Primary Schools as Centres for Immersion in the Target Language

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Language rights as an issue was brought to the forefront in the global community as far back as February 21, 1952 during a protest by Bangladeshi students in Pakistan where many died in a bid to have their native language, Bangla given national recognition alongside the sanctioned official Urdu language. In recognition of this language sacrifice, the United Nation Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has since observed the date as International Mother Language Day. Language rights as an issue is very important to the psychological well-being of any individual and nation. Director General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, in her message for International Mother Language Day, 2012, noted that 'learning in language they can understand is vital for children to enjoy their right to quality education. She further argues that, 'Mother tongue and multilingual education are key to reducing discrimination, promoting inclusion and improving learning outcomes." The importance of language planning to forge social justice as a core marker of the democratic process is therefore central to any discussion on the role of language in society.

First of all, in mature democracies, minority voices are empowered and included in issues of decision making, governance and construction of self-identity, through clear language policies. In many developing democracies, however, language rights have given way to more pressing issues. These issues include grappling crime, unemployment, poverty and other social ills. In such instances, issues of human rights are effectively put on the side table thus effecting the silencing of the masses whose language plays a *de facto* role with no act of political legitimization to bolster its prestige in the scheme of daily living. In such instances, speakers of the *de jure* or officially ordained language of the state who are mostly the elite minority in terms of the actual number of active users, often assume gate-keeping roles, thus wielding this perceived language of legitimized power or voice as a tape measure for social advancement. The important link between development and the intangible wealth or cultural assets such as indigenous languages or native tongue is often lost to economists and policy makers who barter and reason on empirical or tangible terms that can be easily translated into fiscal and statistical reports of true scientific bearings. This faulty, skewed audit or inventory of our resources has stifling effects on the creativity and productivity of the human resources and may well be a contributor to the very social maladies that are given precedence over this seemingly natural human ability. The psychological toll on the individual speaker of the native tongue is yet to be factored into the equation. Policymakers can easily connect the dots between the physical resources and the possibilities for developmental goals. Yet, liberating the heart language of the people by affording legitimacy to its voice through the necessary legal infrastructure is often a sore point or lost to the consciousness of those who can make the difference.

In the case of Jamaica, English is encased as the language of prestige and social mobility. As such, it serves a gate-keeping role to social and economic advancement in many areas of life. Discrimination against Creole users in the public domain is rife and implicitly sanctioned by an omission to declare Creole an official Language that augments important areas of national life in a pluralistic organized social space. The fact is, Creole is misunderstood and misrepresented by the very users who have little

or no inkling of the internal structure of this core determinant of their personal and cultural identities. These very users may argue that they are fully functional in its use. To what extent do we really know a language if it is merely an instinctive response in the capacity to communicate the speech sounds and semantics of the language? Until we can write a language guided by clear grammar for writing, our knowledge of the said language is partial or incomplete. In reality, many Jamaicans are stuck in a vortex between two languages without having a full grasp of the orthography and phonology of both Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Creole which are necessary to claim full or even satisfactory competence in either. From a social semiotic viewpoint, this level of competence may be enough to allow for meaning making as we use language to construct and contextualize social reality, however, grammarians may argue that the internal structures provide the framework that is necessary to bring coherence, stability and order during social discourse among diverse speakers. The fact is that for many Creole users, interference of the Jamaican Creole when they attempt to use English may go undetected by them because of the English based lexicon of Jamaican Creole. The lack of clear separation between English and Creole during early socialization does not make the communication process any easier for the Creole speaker. Comparatively, speakers whose first language is English may demonstrate competency in separating the two varieties of language although they are only passive users of Creole. Sadly, these users may be unable to explain any aspect of the internal workings of the Jamaican Creole. Both groups of speakers are in the truest sense, transitional in their bilingual journey since language is a cultural tool that should be owned and understood by its users or speech community in an in-depth manner. What are the implications of this inadequacy for language instruction?

Firstly, in Jamaica, a clear framework for understanding the inner workings of both languages should be taught. One's first language is often learned intuitively by what Naom Chomsky, language acquisition theorist refers to as an internal language acquisition device (LAD) that is triggered during early childhood stage of maturation. However, the written aspect of language is not accounted for by intuition. The grammar and pragmatics of writing must be explicitly taught by a knowledgeable user through interactive instruction, then internalized by the active language user to become automatized.

A second or third language is also acquired through a process of either formal learning or immersion into the social world of a community of speakers of such language. A Jamaican student from an inner-city Creole-speaking community whose first language was initially Creole told tales of being pinched in Preparatory School whenever she spoke using Jamaican Creole and further explained that she had no choice but to speak Standard Jamaican English in the Traditional High School she attended because her peers spoke English as part of the culture and expectation at that school. Another male student who traveled the same inner-city journey to a Traditional High school found his daily language use evolving from Creole to a close approximation to English which was heightened during the preparation period to sit the Caribbean Examination Council English examination. During and since this preparation period, he has made a conscious effort to hone his skills in English in order to cement his self-defined linguistic status of being a competent speaker of Standard Jamaican English. He has proudly claimed English to be his 'new first language.' Krashen (1985) 'affective filter' theory can be used to understand the positive feelings and attitudes towards the learning of English by this student. As Krashen puts it: the *affective filter* must be lowered for learners to become opened to the *comprehensible input* of the second language. The positive attitudes both learners have developed towards acquiring English have put them at an advantage above other habitual Creole speakers even when speak or write the target language. Clearly, Chomsky's language acquisition device by itself does not account for the way the second language is acquired even in older learners.

However, what is evident from these two cases is that immersion can only occur if opportunities to use the target language in a sustained manner exist as a natural part of the language environment of school

or home or in both environments. A healthy attitude towards English can be developed even among Creole-speaking male students who tend to see use of Standard English as an indictment or reflection on their claim to masculinity as many studies on the gender identity or masculinity of Caribbean males have found. How can this knowledge inform the nature of the language curriculum for non-traditional high school students and how students meet and learn both the official and unofficial language? From the forgoing examples, it is indeed clear that for the Creole user, motivation to learn English and a recognition that Jamaican Creole and Standard Jamaican English are distinct languages are key factors in successfully acquiring the second language. The effects of the community and media or even popular culture seem to be insignificant in the linguistic equation when the home language is in congruence with the language of school; Standard Jamaican English. For the Creole speaker on the other hand, the popular culture may reinforce use of Jamaican Creole rather than provide immersion experiences for such monolingual Creole speakers. Likewise, some non-traditional high schools may by their social class representation operate in congruence with the Creole speaking home environment of the majority of their student population thus lacking an ethos for full immersion in the target second language, Standard English.

What is clear is that there is the pressing need to re-frame the gate-keeping role of English and repackage it as the language that completes our linguistic heritage and linguistic identity. It equips us to interact with a global audience in a digitized space. Schools that do not lend themselves to a natural modicum for full immersion in Standard English, should develop authentic links and functional activities to provide needed opportunities for students to experience English as a living language in natural contexts. With easy access to technological resources such as video links, virtual language classrooms and resources, the possibilities for formulating needs-driven language curriculum for Jamaican Post Primary Schools are endless. Post Primary institutions as incubators or centres for immersion in the Second Language should be a necessary priority in planning the national Language curriculum. The key to successful transition across both languages is linked to a wholesome introduction to languages in general, as well as an introduction to the history of both languages as they relate to the identity formation of each language user. Despite its historical roots, English should operate as a language of liberation; not one that represents domination. Jamaican Creole, the language of the heart for many, should represent the first point of liberation as we forge towards an elevated expression of true democracy and human empowerment.

References

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