
What Do Jamaican Children Speak? A Language Resource,
by Michèle M. Kennedy. Kingston, Jamaica:
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LANGUAGE, EXPRESSED THROUGH THE ABILITY TO SPEAK AND write, has been the primary feature distinguishing humans from all other species. The spoken and written word has been so powerful in forming a people that few things can take place outside of language. The literature on language within the Caribbean and the world is in no way lacking. But because language is ever fluid and evolutionary, particularly within the Caribbean and the Jamaican space, where Creole, a language in its own merits, has developed from a confluence of languages and in relation to the English language of the colonisers, it is never surprising the various voices that have emerged seeking to capture the language dynamics at a particular time. Adding to the intellectual reservoir is Michele M Kennedy's book, *What do Jamaican Children speak? A Language Resource*. Her 248-page work targets the Caribbean region, specifically Jamaica, with its diglossic reality – the Jamaican Creole and Jamaican English – and makes an important contribution to the field by looking through the language and linguistic lens of three-year-olds, with a view to determining how language is acquired by these impressionable minds, with implications for how best adult teachers of language and linguistics can employ this knowledge in the relevant pedagogical fields. By looking at the morphology and syntax in this base target group – three-year-olds – a critical time for these young ones who will start their first year of entry into the school system, this foundation book is ideal for teachers of language and literacy, intermediate and advanced tertiary level students of linguistics and education, along with language enthusiasts like Creolists, who, if they understand and appreciate how children develop in speech are better able to implement strategies and develop best practices along these lines. For these in the field of language, literacy and linguistics, Kennedy's research makes for an engaging, incisive and revelatory read.

Kennedy's book is well researched, a work that has taken much time to plot and execute, as is expected of any solid work on speech and language acquisition

in a particular field. The book is replete with tables and a litany of examples as to how Creole works in relation to English. Showing the extent of the research are these tables that break the text, creating a welcome variant in understanding the language acquisition process. These 27 tables at different junctures in the book, again, help to underscore the depth this research has taken with interviews, language codes, inventories, and other grammatical structures and tokens of parts of speech put in tabular form.

As with many fields of discipline, there is a host of vernacular specific to language and linguistic research. These are captured on page xiii in a section called “Abbreviations Used in the Presentation of Data,” which leads to CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System Symbols), explaining what certain symbols represent, even as the author has another portion called “Other Symbols”. And if those sections are not enough, she has a final section following, called “Other Abbreviations”.

The section, “Acknowledgements”, should not be overlooked since any brilliant scholarly work is indebted to many other scholars, close associates and friends and family, who become as important as the academic research process itself, given the extent of the support they show. A detailed list of references spans pages 225 to 242. One may decide to browse through the pages of the index which will give an insight to words, concepts and experts in the field and where they appear through the book. There are also notes on each chapter, which can be consulted, nestled towards the end of the book starting on page 211, after the Appendixes.

Kennedy’s book, big on content as it is in form, is divided into six chapters, each with various subheadings, almost reminiscent of a course in language acquisition that starts from the rudiments and takes one through the linguistic trial and errors and then to the end. Specifically, Chapter one, titled, “Laying the foundation”, looks with a summative eye at the language situation in Jamaica, highlighting the unique elevated position English has maintained in relation to the often-considered subsidiary dialect, Jamaican Creole. This chapter examines, too, the methodology employed and the limitations to this piece of work, as well as the objectives the book sets out to attain and its structure. Chapter 2, “Theoretical Bases of the Study”, highlights the main theories at stake in language acquisition and zeroes in on the acquisition of a first language, the acquisition of a second language, the role of input in acquisition along with code switching and minimalism. The chapter makes an important distinction between language *acquisition* which is a natural process, and *learning* which speaks to instruction given in different forms,

in essence, a sort of hidden curriculum versus a formal curriculum, both of which influence the child. Chapter 3, has as title “How Children Use and Create words”. Inventories of sound in Jamaican Creole (JC) versus Jamaican English (JE), the categorial composition of the children’s vocabulary, adjectival modification and word formation strategies constitute the main issues under discussion. Chapter 4, “What do Children Do with nouns”, examines countable and non-countable nouns, number marking in JC and JE, how indefiniteness is expressed in both languages, along with possessive noun phrases. Chapters 4 to 6 each benefit from a formal section of concluding remarks.

Moving on from chapter 4 on naming words, chapter 5 transitions into verbs, another part of speech. There, Kennedy looks deeper into tense, aspect (or the internal make-up of a situation), revisits tense, then shows how JE and JC are weaved. Chapter 6 is the final chapter, fittingly named “Bringing it All Together”. In this chapter, the author examines specific issues in the nominal and verbal domains, the relative distribution of JE and JC structures in how children use them, blurred boundaries and what she calls their “unblurring”. She appropriately looks at levels of language awareness and literacy and gives her concluding remarks.

Language and identity continue to be a troubling issue for many Jamaicans. Jamaican Creole, called Jamaican or less formally and more popularly Patwa/patois is the first language of developmental contact for most Jamaicans, being the language spoken in most homes. These young and formative minds are then thrust into a basic school system where the curriculum is one based on English. These little ones end up being taught a language (the process of learning) for the most part not spoken at home (a part of the process of acquiring), creating a tortuous situation that has lived to haunt many of these islanders who go on to tertiary level and may not have adequately mastered code switching as one language interferes with the other.

What Kennedy has done, instead of presenting a treatise on a language debate, is to ask for stakeholders to push for an approach to teaching that recognises the peculiar language situation which obtains in Jamaica, with a primary focus on how Jamaican Creole and Jamaican English both work to influence the speech on a child.

While the language situation in other Caribbean islands are not identical to Jamaica’s, there is a Creole that has developed in other islands and has started to work with the “official” language to influence speech and language of its people. In this regard, Kennedy’s book could have points of interest in not just Caribbean

English-speaking territories but even French-speaking ones such as Martinique and Guadeloupe, which have a strong French Creole heritage. There, the Creolists, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, in their vade mecum, *In Praise of Creoleness*, have long maintained that the mother tongue of Antilleans is Creole. From this narrative should not just come an antagonism between Creole and French or in our case Creole and English, but an admission of the diglossic reality of our peoples and how our little ones learn, and a subsequent push for an approach, as Kennedy has articulated, that reflects such a reality.