

## ANALYSIS OF JAMAICAN ENGLISH VOWELS AND CONSONANTS FROM REGGAE AND DUB MUSIC

### ANÁLISIS DE LAS VOCALES Y CONSONANTES DEL INGLÉS JAMAICUINO PROVENIENTE DE LA MÚSICA REGGAE Y DUB

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#### ABSTRACT

This article describes Jamaican English vowels and consonants through the analysis of fragments of dub and reggae music. Jamaican English is the product of a specific reality which makes it difficult for an untrained ear to understand it. The artists chosen for this article were Mutabaruka, Yellowman and Shabba Ranks. They are representatives of dub music, a style that was born out of reggae. These singers use both Jamaican English and Standard English in their songs. The most notorious fact of Jamaican pronunciation is the opening of the central reduced vowel in final position before “r”. For instance, [ɔ̃r] tends to be a clear [a] in words like “never” and “worker”. Another important feature is the closing of the diphthong [aU], thus giving rise to [ow]. It was also found that the diphthong [ow] becomes [wo]. Regarding consonants, no significant variation with Standard English was found.

**KEY WORDS:** Jamaican English, vowels, consonants, reggae, dub.

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo describe las vocales y consonantes del inglés jamaicuíno a través del análisis de fragmentos de dub y reggae. El inglés jamaicuíno es el producto de una realidad específica, la cual hace que su comprensión resulte difícil para un oído no entrenado. Los artistas escogidos para este artículo fueron Mutabaruka, Yellowman y Shabba Ranks. Ellos son representantes de la música dub, un estilo que nació del reggae. Estos cantantes utilizan tanto el inglés jamaicuíno como el inglés estándar en sus canciones. El hecho más notorio de la pronunciación jamaicuína es la abertura de la vocal central reducida en posición final antes “r”. Por ejemplo, [ɔ̃r] tiende a ser una despejada [a] en palabras como “never” y “worker”. Otro hecho importante es la interrupción del diptongo [aU], el cual se convierte en [ow]. Hemos encontrado también que el diptongo [ow] se convierte en [wo]. Con respecto a los consonantes, no se encontró alguna variación significativa con el inglés estándar.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Inglés jamaicuíno, vocales, consonantes, reggae, dub.

#### 1.- INTRODUCTION

Members of different African tribes were taken to Jamaica and all over the Caribbean to work as slaves in several plantations. From that same moment, they shared the need of a widespread language to communicate among themselves, and with their masters. In those plantations, English was the language of the masters and a pidgin of it emerged as an inevitable common tongue.

When slavery was abolished in Jamaica, English became even more necessary to get a good job; but the black population, forced to speak a language which was not their native one, had been gradually creating a creole difficult to eradicate, in favour of a Standard English (S.E.).

The creole or dialect developed by former slaves, nowadays called Jamaican English (J.E.), differs somewhat from Standard English. The purpose of this article is to examine some of these differences. More specifically, this paper analyzes vowels and consonants in reggae and dub. It thus contributes with a description of a speech register that has received little attention in mainstream language variationist literature.

#### 2.- REGGAE AND DUB

One of the means whereby Jamaicans have projected themselves with the world is through their music, and with this, they also export their language. The reggae beat, which was created in Jamaica, became one of the most important musical manifestation and means of expression

of Jamaicans. It is difficult to think of that island without invoking Bob Marley - creator of reggae- who, along with Rastafarianism, helped the Caribbean speak a more or less similar language throughout the region. With the death of Marley, reggae and Rastafarianism entered a dark period. However, a cultural phenomenon that can fill a significant gap in Caribbean culture emerged out of reggae in Jamaica: dub music.

Dub is one of the names given to a style that it is sometimes called ragga, raggamuffin and dancehall reggae. It is a musical manifestation that comes out in a pulsating beat. It sounds like a mixture of reggae, chant and rap and deals with a wide variety of topics ranging from versions of old ballads, social and political issues, insult among dub performers and sexually explicit lyrics. It is also sung most of the times in Jamaican Creole (Nation Language). Nowadays, Dub is a major industry in the Caribbean and everyday more youngsters listen to that type of music. Among the representatives of dub we can cite Mutabaruka, Yellowman, Shabba Ranks (Shabba), Tiger, Super C, Cocoa T., just to mention a few.

As in any culture, the need to describe actions and objects with a local flavor that S.E. cannot provide has forced Jamaicans to use their own words and some foreign ones. Some of them, quite normal to hear in reggae or dub, are: “duppy” for ghost; “obeah”, a word of African origin, to indicate the practice of sorcery; “irie” to indicate the state of feeling well; “wine” (wind) to describe the vulgar movement of the waist to the beat of the music; “battyman” (homosexual) “kaya” (marijuana) and “punanny” (vagina).

The lyrics used in dub or reggae show vocabulary and characteristics of J. E. In this work, we will talk about the vowels and consonants of J.E. and its similarities and differences regarding Standard English (S.E.). In the case of vowels, the differences are quite noticeable - especially some diphthongs, which tend to be inverted - whereas in the consonants and the phenomena that occur among them, the differences are not striking.

### 3.- METHODOLOGY

This work was carried out through the analysis of a collection of selected dub songs. Dub was chosen because it is a product that is the main cultural and musical manifestation in Jamaica. The main artists chosen were Yellowman, Mutabaruka and Shabba Ranks. They are considered icons in this type of music. Twenty-nine songs were selected from the first artist, thirty-four from the

second and twenty-six from the third.

The songs that constituted the samples of this study were in compact disks, and they belonged to the following albums: Yellowman: “King Yellowman” and “Twenty super hits”. Mutabaruka: “The ultimate collection”, the “Mystery unfolds”, “Melanin man” and “Any which way...” Shabba Ranks: “Caan dun: The best of Shabba” and “Get up, stand up”. The songs were all listened to on an ordinary C.D. player.

Whenever a non-standard pronunciation was heard, then, the piece was written down together with the position indicated by the C. D. counter. Later, the patterns of pronunciation were grouped to see if there was any specific context of occurrence and to what point they were common in the same artist and in another performer.

All the symbols used in this research are the ones used by IPA, but there are some exceptions. The symbol /o/ is the equivalent to the one called “open o” in IPA representing the vowels in words like “Paul, haul, walk”. The symbol /ow/ in this paper is the equivalent to /o/ in IPA, representing the vowels in “go, old, cold”. The reason for the differences is due to the difficulties we experienced trying to read these IPA sounds in several computers. We used symbols that were more computer friendly with the idea that our students could read the article at home using their computers in case they requested that possibility.

## 4.- JAMAICAN ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION IN REGGAE AND DUB

### 4.1- Vowels in Jamaican English

Once the samples were heard, some characteristics appeared. Some of them were constant in different artists, and some were common in only one of them. It is not possible to state that Jamaican English will always have a creole pronunciation because several words are sometimes pronounced the same way, both in standard and Jamaican English. However, it is evident that J.E. vowels, for instance, give special features to the English language. Taking a look at pronunciation, we can observe in dub that:

#### 4.1.1 Central vowels

1. The central unstressed vowel of S.E. /ə/ tends to be more open in J.E. when followed by the letter “r” in final position. In that sense, words like “never, power, worker, better, meagre and dollar” are all pronounced with a clear

/a/ at the end: /neva/, /powa/, /woka/, /miga/ and /dola/. This is by far the most common feature observed in all the performers and in all situations.

2. On the contrary, the central stressed vowel /ʌ/, is most of the times rounded and tends to become /o/. Words like “gun”, “come”, “under”, “run”, “must”, “sun”, can be heard with /o/ in their stressed vowel.

3. The central stressed vowel /ɜr/, present in words like “bird”, “perfect”, “burst” and “world”, might also become /o/, but this is not very common. Probably the presence of /r/, which, contrary to what could be expected, is heard frequently in J.E, does not allow a higher occurrence of [ɜr] → [o]. Nevertheless, it is possible to hear /bos/ (with elision of /t/) instead of /bɜrst/ (burst).

#### 4.1.2 Diphthongs

4. The first element of the diphthong /aw/ is rather closed. It sometimes becomes /ow/ or simply /o/. Due to that fact, instead of /aw/, it is normal to hear /ow/ or /o/ in words like: “about”, → /əbowt/; “around” → /ərownd/; “crowd” /krowd/; “fountain” → /fowntIn/; “mountain” → /mowntIn/; “now” → /now/; “confounding” → /kɒnfowndIn/; “our” → /owa/ and “how” → /how/. This phenomenon is extremely common and was heard consistently.

5. The diphthong /ow/ frequently becomes /wo/, inverting the elements. This is more common before a plosive, but may occasionally occur in a different context. Because of this, the pronunciation of some words may sound different from Standard English. “Pope” → /pwop/; “cope” → /kwop/; “cold” → /kwold/; “postpone” → /pɒstpwon/; “know” → /nwo/; “romance” /rwomans/; “open” → /wopɒn/; “old” → /wold/; “tourist” → /tworist/; “ghost” → /gwost/; “bold” → /bwold/.

6. The sound /eI/ as in “veil” becomes /ɛ/, or /jɛ/; so we can have /mjɛk/ or /mɛk/ for “make”. Likewise, “Jamaica” → /dʒəmjɛka/ or /dʒməɔka/; veil → /vjɛl/ and great → /grjɛt/. This feature is also one of the most common and one of the easiest to observe.

7. The diphthong [aI] can become [oI] in a few words: violence → /voIlens/; violet → /voIlɔt/; twice → /toIs/. This feature, however, was only observed on Yellowman.

8. The contrary [oI] → [aI] was observed in Yellowman in two words only: “boy” → /bwaI/ and “boil” /bwaI/. The presence of the glide [w] is probably due to the influence

of the preceding bilabial [b]. Mutabaruka exposed [oI] → [aI] only one time uttering “you point your gun...” where “point” can be heard /paInt/.

9. The production of /ɛɔr/ becomes /Iɔr/ very often in words like “beware” → /bIwIɔr/; “care” → /kIɔr/; “welfare” → /wɛlfIɔr/ and “wear” → /wIɔr/.

#### 4.2- Consonants in Jamaican English

Ladefoged (1993) indicates 24 English consonants. From that total, 12 of them experience some change in J.E. However, nine of the changes observed are more due to a specific configuration of vowels and consonants and some may happen in Standard English or in other varieties. As we will see, the sounds /t/ and /d/ are present in the majority of the phenomena that occur to J.E. consonants. However, the question is whether these phenomena are exclusive Jamaican or if S.E. may present the same cases. The following is the observation regarding the consonants in J.E.

10. The stop sounds [p], [k] and sometimes [g] followed by [a] in initial stressed syllables allow the production of the glide [j] between the consonant and the vowel. We can summarise it as: /p/, /k/, /g/ + /a/ in stressed syllable → /j/. In that sense, “pan” → /pjan/; “can’t” → /kjan/; “cat” → /kjat/ and “garbage”. /gjabId3/.

11. There is a clear tendency of elision of final /d/ and /t/ preceded by consonants. We can state that /t/, /d/ → Ø in final position. That is why words like “land”, “understand”, “build”, “just”, “must” and “burst” are heard without the final /t/ or /d/. This is easily observable if the next sound is a vowel. Yellowman, for instance, sings “the best inna the east/ and the best inna the west...” and no /t/ is heard in “best”, but the linking of /s/ and /I/ is easily perceived. The same happens with Mutabaruka when he says “the world is in a mess...” and when he utters “...while you build up your mansion”. In both cases, a clear elision of /d/ was noticed in “world” and in “build”. Due to this, there is a phenomenon that occurs with “want” and “can’t”. As it was explained above, final [t] tends to be deleted. At the same time, the position of [n] has the effect of nasalization of the preceding vowel (Ladefoged, 1993). All the performers chosen for this work tend to eliminate the sound [n] and make a longer nasalized vowel. In that sense, “want” stays /wã:/ and “can’t” /k(j)ã:/.

The case of /t/ and /d/ → Ø has been detailed by authors like Brown (1996), Gimson (1980), Temperley (1987) and Ladefoged (1993). However, they mention

specific contexts, especially /t/ and /d/ between plosives and nasal consonants. This pattern is also observed in J.E. Besides that, Jamaicans tend to elide /t/ and /d/ preceded by vowels as well, as in the phrase “bes(t) inna the East”. The fact is that J.E. and S.E. have a point in common regarding /t/ and /d/ in final position.

12. The pronunciation of /t/ followed by /l/ presents a change of place of articulation and turns into a velar sound in words like “little” and “settle”. Both words become /lɪkəl/ and /sɛkəl/ respectively. This is almost a rule that can be noticed whenever these words appear. Probably, this happens because there is no tap sound in these words, something that does happen in American English. Pronouncing these words without tap will produce what Ladefoged (1993) calls a “lateral plosion”. But we would have to add that lowering the sides of the tongue to release the air results in a change of sound for [t], which becomes velar [k]. In that context, an extra vowel is sometimes added. This seems to be proper from Jamaica.

13. Another change from alveolar to velar is the case of [n] and [l], which turn into [ŋ] and a soft [g] respectively. In this sense, the word “only” turns into /oŋgəl/. This is a lexicalized feature but it is normal in that word. It is possible that [ŋ] is much easier to pronounce than [n] in that context and at the same time, the tongue cannot accommodate rapidly for the alveolar /l/. For this reason, the normal movement of the tongue is to remain velar and get ready for another velar sound, in this case [g]. Because this is happening in an unstressed syllable, [g] remains a soft sound.

14. The sounds [t] and [d], followed by [r] allow the production of the affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ respectively, sometimes deleting the [r], most of the times preserving the same sound. We can observe examples of /tr/→ /tʃ/ and /dr/→ /dʒ/ in words like “drink”→ /dʒ(r)ɪŋk/; “drive”→ /dʒ(r)aɪv/; “poetry”→ /pwoʊtʃrɪ/; “true”→ /tʃru/; “dress”→ /dʒres/; “children”→ /tʃɪldrən/; “hundred”→ /ʔondʒɪd/; “tree”→ /tʃri/ and “tradition” / tʃədɪʃən/.

The cases of /tr/→ /tʃ/ and /dr/→ /dʒ/ seem to be common in Standard English and it is very logical: /t/ is a stop alveolar. The phoneme /r/ is also alveolar, but approximant. In the movement from /t/ to /r/, the tongue does not make full contact with the alveolar ridge because of the approximant feature of /r/. In that case, the burst produced by the release of /t/ and the slight contact of the tongue with the alveolar area makes possible the pronunciation of /tʃ/ or /dʒ/. In some cases, /r/ is elided, also due to the slight contact of the articulators. Celce-

Murcia et al. (1996) and Laver (1994) both agree that the /tr/ cluster may take on an affricate quality that could be transcribed as [tʃr]. Brown (1996) talks about elision of /r/ in unstressed syllables such as *for instance, come from o European*. The difference regarding Jamaican English is that in this variety there is elision of /r/ in stressed syllables such as *drive* /draɪv/ → /dʒ(r)aɪv/ and also in unstressed syllables *hundred* /hʌndrɪd/ → /hʌndʒ(r)ɪd/

15. The dental (interdental for others) fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ are substituted by the alveolar stops /t/ and /d/ respectively. So we can say that [+dental]→[+alveolar]. Therefore, we can hear “think”→/tɪŋk/, “them” →/ðɛm/ and “earth”.→/3rt/.

The sounds /θ/ and /ð/ are considered difficult to master for any English learner (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996). Then it may be appropriate to think that it was difficult for Africans to master these sounds since slavery times. Possibly nowadays they feel identified with that pronunciation and that is the reason they keep it. As we will see later, Mutabaruka himself sometimes alternates between /θ/ and /ð/.

16. There is absence of the glottal fricative /h/ most of the times accompanied by an emphatic glottal stop before releasing the vowel. It is common to hear “hospital” as /ʔospɪtəl/, “hero” as /ʔi:ro/ and even “Manhattan” and “behind” as /manʔatn/ and /bɪʔaɪnd/. Complete sentences might be said with elision of [h] and glottalization of the next vowel. Take the case, for instance of Mutabaruka in the song “The mystery unfolds”, when he says “Let him who have ears to hear” all [h] are pronounced with the characteristics described above: /ʔɪm/, /ʔu/, /ʔav/, /ʔɪðr/. In Standard British English, there is also a weakening of /h/ with “glottal emphatic reinforcement, especially in hiatus with a preceding vowel” (Gimson: 1980:171). Gimson (1980) also talks about a weak glottal constriction that shows the boundary of [h] in British English. In the phrase “a hill”, or “the hospital”, it is possible to hear [ð] [ʔɪl] and [ðð ʔospɪtəl]. These cases are different to those in Jamaica, where, as we could see in the examples above, they may happen between consonants, in the middle of the word (Manhattan) and with a clear glottalization

17. There is metathesis in the word “ask”, which is pronounced as /aks/, pronouncing first the /k/ sound. This phenomenon was only observed in Mutabaruka. It was possible to notice this pronunciation more easily if there was a vowel after “ask” as for instance, “I have never heard anyone asking you any question...”

It is important to mention that a mixture of any of these phenomena might occur at any time. For instance, in the word “house”, not only can we hear the elision of [h], but also the change of [aw]→ [ow]. So, “house” becomes /ʔows/. at the same time, a word like “three” can become /tʃri/ because [θ]→[t] and, at the same time, [t] + [r] → [tʃ].

As it can be seen, the only aspects regarding consonants that seem to be particularly Jamaican are cases 10, 12 and 13. This is not enough to hold the view that it is a language totally different from English. There are more differences in the vowels

### 5. CO-EXISTENCE OF CREOLE AND STANDARD IN JAMAICA

In Jamaica, while some people consider Creole as a barbarous phenomenon, some intellectuals champion the use of Creole. McCrum *et al.* (1993) prefer to call it Nation Language because a term like “dialect” sounds pejorative. The truth is that Jamaicans need both S.E. and Nation Language. S.E. is the contact with the outside world, which means trade and commerce, the basis of any economy; it is also the official language in school and formal business, therefore, S.E. is necessary for better jobs. Nation Language, however, is necessary inside Jamaica, where there is a specific reality

As a result, J.E. is characterized by a linguistic continuum that goes from S.E. to a Jamaican Creole. Owens (1976) speaks rather of a semi-Creole with some inconsistencies resulting from the blend of a pure Creole and S.E. Jamaican personalities like Bob Marley is the best example of this semi-Creole advocated by Owens.

Mutabaruka, who, like Marley, also preaches the idea of black unity and rastafarianism. Mutabaruka tends to sing more in Creole than in Standard in each of his compositions. Let’s examine the song H2 worker and let’s point out some characteristics of Jamaican Creole. Part of the lyrics will be presented and the part that is considered

creole will be underlined and indicated below.

#### SONG # 1: H-2 WORKA

I am a H2 worker coming from de island of Jamaica  
/jetʃ/ /woka/ /komIn/ /dʒɔmjeka/

I am a H2 worka cutting cane inna Florida  
/jetʃ/ /woka/ /kotIn/ /kjen/

working so hard in de burning sun  
/wokIn/ /ʔad/ /bonIn/

wondering if slavery really done  
/wondɔrIn/ /sljevɪ/ /don/

i’m working working working on yuh cane field still  
/wokIn/ /wokIn/ /wokIn/ /kjen/ /fil/

workin workin workin for your meager dollar bill  
/wokIn/ /wokIn/ /wokIn/ /miga/ /dola/

so don’t bite de hands that feed you  
/dɔ/ /ʔans/ /dat/

I have dreams like u too  
/ʔav/ /dʒɪmz/

don’t treat me like I’m a slave here  
/dɔ/ /sljev/ /ʔiɔr/

just give me a wage that is fare  
/dʒos/ /wʒedʒ/ /dat/ /fɪɔr/

This composition, as any other of Mutabaruka or Yellowman will reveal identical patterns, above all, the elision of [h] and the glottalization of the following vowel, the turning of [e] into [jɛ] and [ɛɔr] → [Iɔr]. However, Mutabaruka himself sometimes sings more in standard than in Creole, as in the composition “Melanin man”, where few traces of Creole can be observed:

**SONG # 2**

**MELANIN MAN**

I am de melanin man  
 look at me an' you'll understand'  
 ah come from de melanin lan'  
 I absorb de lite  
 I am de darkness in your nite  
 de way I dance U see  
 is just de melanin in me  
 de things that I think an' feel  
 is de things they try to steal  
 but look in de sun and u will see  
 U cannot destroy de melanin in  
 Me  
 I am time and space  
 I will never be erased  
 de way I sing U see  
 is just de melanin in me  
 wen U look at me an' think  
 do I remind u of blood or ink  
 any one you perceive me to be  
 I am indelible an' its de melanin in me...

**JAMAICAN CREOLE FEATURES**

De : the  
an' you'll understand': elision of final /d/ in "and" and "understand". Use of auxiliary "will" to mark the future and "am", to indicate the present.  
lan': elision of final /d/  
 the = de

things that I think : first 'th' = /θ/; second 'th' = /t/  
things: standard /θ/

Erased: elision of final /t/

Think = standard /θ/  
 do I remind u of blood or ink = Normal use of auxiliary

In a different style, another dub artist, Shabba Ranks exhibits an English quite similar to that of Mutabaruka or Yellowman. As an example, we can see an excerpt from one of his songs, pay down 'pon it:

**SONG # 3: Pay down 'pon it**

If a man want it make him pay down 'pon it 'pon it...  
 /Im/ /pjɛ/ /don/  
 me say if you want a house you have fe pay down 'ponit  
 /ʔows/ /av/to /pjɛ/ /don/  
 Me say if you want a car you have fe pay down ...  
 /ʔav/ to /pjɛ/ /don/  
 If you want to chook you have fe pay down...  
 To have Sex /ʔav/ to /pjɛ/ /don/  
 No money no love, no money no hug ...  
 /ʔog/  
 Jump around if yuh man no pay down  
 pjɛ/ /don/  
 Ah pay down you just wine your bottom...  
 /pjɛ/ /don/ wind

Me and me woman me say we settle down  
 /sɛkl/ /don/

We settle down just to have fun...  
 /sɛkl/ /don/ /ʔav/

As it was observed throughout the song that /eI/ → /jɛ/, down → /don/, /h/ was glottalized and settle → /sɛkl/. Characteristics like these abound in any dub song, which indicates that Jamaicans tend to prefer creole pronunciation and local Jamaican words like "wine" or "chook" rather than Standard in musical manifestations. This is not however an indication that all Jamaicans sing in creole in all circumstances. As it was shown above with the song "Melanin man". In the composition, "This Poem" Mutabaruka also shows a tendency towards the standard. In one particular song "My great shun", he repeats a whole sentence first in creole and then in standard: "You are so bold, sweating in the cold". The first time, "bold" and "cold" are said with an inverted diphthong [w ɪ]. The second time, both words are said with the standard diphthong [wo]. This shows that Jamaicans do master Standard English but they are proud to be Jamaican and prefer to speak their own variety of English.

Not only is Dub extremely popular in Jamaica, but also all over the Caribbean. Even in Latin America we



can see emerging artists trying to imitate this beat. One of the problems with dub is the lyrics, which is sometimes too vulgar or sometimes suggests a direct insult to certain groups. Shabba sings openly “love punany bad” (I love vagina so much) and “Jamaican girls can wine”. Mutabaruka, in “the people’s court”, calls “moron” the Mormons; talks about “Combosos” to refer to Columbus and even tells a priest to shut up and suggests “one thousand years in hell for the church”.

#### 6.- FINAL REMARKS

Jamaican English, in spite of some differences with S.E., is the result of a social reality in the Caribbean. Dub performers give the “Jamaican touch” to their songs when they use Jamaican words and creole pronunciation. The use of creole is sometimes unavoidable. Certain words sound better if they are Jamaican. How can we explain the repetition of /d<sub>3</sub>∂mjeka/, or /kwol/ for “cold”, by Yellowman more than six times just at the beginning of “Jamaica nice”? How can we explain that Mutabaruka pronounces the same words with the same patterns just like Yellowman in spite of the fact that their topics are different? How can we explain that an artist like Shabba, more recent than both of them, also has the same pronunciation pattern? The answer seems to be that certain creole pronunciations identify the performers with Jamaica. Dub was created in that island and this surely makes them proud because it is a product of exportation, not only of songs, but also of language. It would be interesting to observe up to what point the youth in other Caribbean countries and outside Jamaica have a pronunciation similar to that of the Jamaican performers. It might also be appealing to examine similarities and differences in male and female reggae and dub musicians concerning vowels and consonants.

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