‘Is English We Speaking’: An Exploratory Study of Trinidadian Creole Dialect

Takiah Corbett

Introduction and Literature Review

This project explores selected features of Trinidadian Creole Dialect. This topic was chosen because very minimal research has been conducted regarding the characteristics of Trinidadian Creole Dialect or Trinidadian Standard English.

Although there is little research regarding the topic, Hassan Basarally wrote an article that focused on the use of pronouns in Trinidadian English. According to Basarally, “possessive pronouns are sometimes replaced by the third person masculine and feminine pronoun, he and she e.g. The bag is he (his) own” (1). Although this feature was not accounted for in my data, there were many other features found.

Even though this study is focused on Trinidadian Creole dialect, it is important to note that Creole dialects as well as a standard dialect are spoken on the island. Leung asserts that “in both Jamaica and Trinidad, and English-Lexicon creole is spoken alongside and emerging, local standard” (509). Leung attributes the use of Creole dialects to the needs of slaves to be able to communicate with one another (509). Leung also pointed out that speakers of Trinidadian Creole dialect use the vowels [a] and [ɔ]. This partially coincided with my findings since I found that many words containing the vowel “a” was pronounced with [a].

In the end, Leung found that most of the features of the dialect were phonological and grammatical. It was also noted that certain features and characteristics that are found in Trinidadian Creole Dialect are also found in African American Vernacular English.
Methodology

In order to retrieve data, two subjects of African descent from Trinidad were used. Speaker One was a 21 year old senior and Speaker Two was a 23 year old senior. Both speakers attend Claflin University. One was from Claxton Bay while the other was from Point Fortin. In order to gain a better understanding of the geographical location of these two areas, I asked how far apart they were and if the dialect of the two areas were similar. It was determined that although the areas were an hour apart, the dialect spoken by Trinidadians of African descent was the same. It was noted that Claxton Bay is equally populated by descendants of both Africa and India while the majority of Point Fortin’s population is of African descent. It was also noted that while African Trinidadians speak the same phonetically, East Indian Trinidadians speak in a higher pitch.

Data was obtained by recording the two subjects speaking to one another naturally. Before the recording began, subjects were asked to write down possible subjects that they would be interested in discussing with one another. This was done to ensure that the conversation would flow without too many pauses, however, in instances in which pauses did occur, I used prompts to allow the conversion to begin flowing again.

Phonology

During data analysis, it was noted that speakers of Trinidadian Creole tend to follow certain phonetic patterns. The following six patterns were deemed the most significant and are discussed in this section. In phonetic pattern number one, the initial [d] is used in place of [.AddRange().Split()]. In other words, words such as “the”, “that”, and “them”, become “dee”, “dat”, and “dem”. In phonetic pattern two, the initial [t] is used for [.AddRange()]. Words like thing and three become [t] and
[tri]. In phonetic pattern number three, the final [t] replaces the final [θ]. Phonetic pattern number four illustrates that the medial and final [r] is nonexistent in many words. In phonetic pattern number five, the initial [æ] replaces [a]. Words such as father, camp, and band are pronounced with a long [a]. All other vowels in Trinidadian Creole dialect are pronounced as they are in Standard American English. In the final phonetic pattern, the final [t] is nonexistent. A summary of all phonetic patterns is shown in table one below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Standard English</th>
<th>Trinidadian Creole</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Syntax

Verbs

During data analysis, it was noted that the infinitive “to be” does not exist. In other words, there is no “is”, “am”, “are”, “was”, or “were” in the Trinidadian Creole dialect. For example, the speakers would say “how you goin” and “how they goin” instead of how are you doing and how are they doing. This brings us to a second point in regards to verbs in the dialect. Speakers of Trinidadian Creole dialect have a tendency to replace the verb “do” with the verb “go.” This feature is illustrated in the two examples above. It is important to note that speakers of Trinidadian Creole dialect do not use auxiliary verbs. In the following example, speaker two was asked “How it feels to go all-girls school?” One can see that the main verb is pluralized and the auxiliary verb “do” does not exist.

Tense

Readers and listeners of Trinidadian Creole dialect must rely on context clues in sentences in order to accurately determine which tense speakers are using. For instance, both speakers used the present tense of verbs when discussing past tense actions. For example, speaker 2 stated that her parents “made sure dat we stay[ed] at home.” Speaker 1 stated that she “neva play[ed] mass…” It is understood that both speakers were referring to past tense actions by following the entire conversation. As stated before, context clues help with determining the tense of the speech.
Articles, Prepositions, and Contractions

During data analysis, it was noted that speakers tend to eliminate certain articles and prepositions in their speech. Words such as “to”, “a”, and “an” are virtually nonexistent in many sentences. This was found when Speaker 1 asked speaker 2 what church she attended. Speaker two responded by saying “I used go Pentecostal church.” What she was really saying was that she used to go to a Pentecostal Church. One who is listening to this dialect will find themselves filling in holes found in sentences where these words should be. However, the lack of these articles and prepositions does not make it the dialect any less easy to understand. It was also noted that the contractions I’ve, I’m and “don’t” do not exist in Trinidadian Creole dialect. I’ve and I’m are always replaced by “I” and don’t is replaced by “on” as in Ion (I don’t).

Semantics

When investigating Trinidadian Creole, one interesting feature to look at is semantics. There are certain words used in Trinidadian Creole and Standard American English that have different meanings. These words are lime, carnival, football, bin, and wine. The table below illustrates this fact. It is interesting to note that although the words lime, carnival, and wine seem to be slang words that older speakers do not use, they are not. I previously assumed that those words were used only by Trinidadian Creole speakers of a younger generation. However, as one of my speakers adamantly stated, these terms are universal in the dialect and are not considered slang. Speakers of the dialect of all ages use these terms. In fact, the only term that is spoken strictly by younger Trinis is “bess-ting.” However, there are words that are considered slang in Trinidadian Creole and are further discussed in the next section.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Meaning in Trinidadian Creole</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lime</td>
<td>“To hang out”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carnival</td>
<td>“Party in the streets”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Football”</td>
<td>“Soccer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bin”</td>
<td>“Trashcan”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bess-ting”</td>
<td>“Very attractive person”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Wine”</td>
<td>“To dance”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Slang**

It seems that in Trinidad, the older generation has more slang terms than the younger generation. Speaker One, discussed this with me further. The word “Tabanca” which means lovesickness is generally used by older Trinis. “Bacchanal” which means confusion and chaos is an older slang term but it is more universal than “Tabanca.” “To horn” generally refers to cheating on a lover and is universal. “Mancho” is used to refer to a “nosey” person and is also used by the older generation of Trinis. “Mauvai langue” is a term used by older Trinis and means to gossip. The general term that is used to describe all of these words is Trini Patois. According to my first speaker, Trini Patois is dying because many young people do not bother to learn it. This is mainly because older Trinis used these words when discussing “adult” business around children. It is clear that the use of slang is popular among Trinidadian Creole speakers of all ages.
Conclusion

This project was designed to explore selected features that are found in the Trinidadian Creole Dialect. In the end, it was discovered that many of the features that are found in Trinidadian Creole Dialect are also found in other dialects as well. In the future, more data should be collected. It would be interesting to compare aspects of Trinidadian Creole Dialect that occur in different regions and races in Trinidad. It would also be fascinating to record the speech of older generation Trinidadians and compare the findings with the data collected in this project. In conclusion, there are many opportunities for furthering this research and possibly extending this project.
Appendix

**Speaker 1:** What do you usually do um durin [kan'val] (carnival) season?

**Speaker 2:** Durin [kan'val] season um since I not [pʌtʃələnt] (participating) in the whole party in [di] (the) streets for [tri] (three) days, whatever umm our [kə[tʃələnt] (church) usually take us to [kamps] (camps). So we spend our week in [kamp], a whole bunch of us jus (just) come [tug'də] (together) and just have a [kamp], and really build [asəlvəs] (ourselves) up spiritually.

**Speaker 1:** Cool. Yeah I had [dɪs] (this) friend even when um we [wʊd] (would) celebrate [kan'val] in school and stuff, like she would go into a sound proof room and stuff so she wouldn’t have to hear.

**Speaker 2:** A sound proof room, are you serious?

**Speaker 1:** Yeah, she was [hædər] (hardcore). Yeah

**Speaker 2:** Oh wow, no [ɪts] (its) not as serious to me. [ɪts] not that I can’t, I choose not to [pɔtʃələnt] (participate) in [mas] (mass). Oh what I do like to see is the [Mædlə] (Mardi) Gras and I love to hear the [Cələpsəs] (Calypsos) and stuff like [dæt] (that) and I still like to know who win [di] (the) [tən'mənt] (tournament) [tən] (thing) uh [Sɔkə Monək]? And [gruvi] [Sɔkə Monək] and [dəm] (them) type of [tən].

**Speaker 1:** [Dæs] (that’s) cool. Well uh I went to couple…what was the children [tən] [de] (they) had with [ənti] (Aunty) Nikki?

**Speaker 2:** [ən] (I don’t) Know.

**Speaker 1:** It was on tv [advətəzə] (advertising) all [di] time [də] (though).
**Speaker 2:** You play at [kanˈvæl]? 

**Speaker 1:** Nooo I [nˈva] (never) play [dat] [ida] (either). 

**Speaker 2:** No no no no, I [nˈva] [wˈn] (went) to party and ummm the closest [tʰn] (thing) to Poin’ (Point) Fortin is umm [de] (they) [cənsˈdɛ] ([ə] (a) burrow a second [kanˈvæl]. 

**Speaker 1:** Yeah, burrow. 

**Speaker 2:** So umm yeah, no I [nˈva] [pʰtsˈpetd]. 

**Speaker 1:** You [jʰs] stay inside, how you avoid it [do]? 

**Speaker 2:** Where I live was ten minutes from [siti] (city) area so I was [nˈva] involved and my parents made sure [dət] we stay at home. 

**Speaker 1:** I would usually [jʰs] jump in a [band] or [səmtˈn] . [nˈva] play [mas] and plus I [wˈn] out of age to play [mas] anybody when I was in [Mˈrˈkə] (America) so… 

**Speaker 2:** You serious? 

**Speaker 1:** Yeah I mean like ok when I was like 16 or 17 I was studyin’ for Cape and I wasn’t really outside like [dat] so when I got here now like when [kanˈvæl] going on we have [midthˈms] and [tʰn] so… 

**Speaker 2:** Right 

**Speaker 1:** So I [nˈva] get to do [dət]. 

**Speaker 2:** I [jʰs] enjoy [di] break [das] (that’s) lookin’ forward to [di] break. 

**Speaker 1:** Yeah so how your [brədˈs] (brothers) goin (doing)?
Speaker 2: Um, [d'm] goin good, [de] is, [de] goin good. I recently spoke to [d'm]. All is well with [d'm]. One of my [br'd's] [b'ont] (about) to [gradiet] (graduate) soon. Lookin forward to [dat].

Speaker 1: He [gradiet'n] (graduating) soon sometime?

Speaker 2: No actually he [gradiet'n] [Dis'mb'] (December) and walking in [Jani'ri] (January). Hopefully he here for my [gradies'n] (graduation). How [b'ont] [j'] (your) [sist']?

Speaker 1: Yeah she [gradiet'n]. Well one of [d'm] doin’ [gradiet'n], hey we all [gradiet'n] this year so she [gradiet'n] from high school and [ma] (my) [d'] (other) [sist'] she doin’ well goin straight to UTT where she doin navigation pilot.

Speaker 2: I know what you talkin [b'ont], I did the prerequisites to [d'st] course.

Speaker 1: Aww yeah yeah

Speaker 2: At UTT, ok [d's] nice.

Speaker 1: So she gonna, not [gradiet] but she gonna [stat] (start) goin UTT which is a big deal and I [gradiet'n] and Marisa [gradiet'n].
Works Cited

