People like to be with others who they consider to be like themselves. If people are going to be together without conflict, they have to feel that they share some kind of common identity. And where people feel that they have a common identity, they know no limits in their efforts to be with each other.

In this world, there are many states which are already established (but whose populations do not feel themselves members of a single nation because of language differences. There are, as well, cases in which people feel themselves to constitute a single nation but have no state. Such people are usually involved in trying to establish a state for the members of their national group.

Shared speech is a very important means of creating common identity. The absence of shared speech, on the other hand, serves to exclude those who do not belong within the common identity. It is very often the case that a group of people come to regard their speech as in some way special. They then begin to transfer this feeling of specialness from their language to themselves, its speakers. As for those who are not perceived as sharing the special common speech, they come to be regarded as the very opposite of special. It is by this means that language consciousness becomes converted into national consciousness.

Often, therefore, to belong to a national group, the language of that national group has to be one’s native/vernacular language. In many countries, the populations do not speak the same language and, therefore, do not feel they belong in the same nation. In these circumstances, those who run the state apparatus often try to create a shared national consciousness. To achieve this, they try to create a consensus within the population.
Fo du dis, dem doz chrai mek evriibadii grii se wan langgwij iz di bes an dem mos lam am. Huu no taakin di langgwij no bilaangs to di neeshan, an no gat no biznis fo ivrn de ins aid di konchrii. Dem chrai-in fo push wan neeshan langgwij fo aal di piipl in di konchrii. Di set-op in di konchrii tekin fiilinz fo langgwij an yuuzin am fo mek fiilinz fo neeshan.

So, wen wii doz taak bout langgwij dis aar langgwij dat, wa wii miin? Aftaraal, noo tuu badii, ivrn wen dem tingking se dem taakin di seem langgwij, doz doon taak di egzak seem wee. Mii fiil se piipl doz get langgwij wen dem main staat gii dem se dem taak speshal. Iz main mek langgwij. Aaz dem fiil se hou dem taak speshal, dem main gun staat get aal kain a aidee bout dis ting wa dem taakin, hou it staan, hou it doz wok. Iz main doz mek wan langgwij.

Mali

In West Africa, there is a special group of ‘people of the mouth’ who are trained specially to relate stories of the past. These ‘people of the mouth’ pass on these stories from one generation to the next. Books are not used, merely brains and speech. Amongst the Mading (Maninka, Mandinka) ‘people of the mouth’, ‘people of the mouth’ tell stories of how ancient Mali came to be established. These stories are rather old since ancient Mali was established around 1217-37 A.D. Niane (1965) provides us with a version in writing of one of the many spoken versions, one which he heard from a particular ‘man of the mouth’, Mamadou Kouyate.

In the story, large numbers of warriors gathered around their leader, Sundiata, the aim being to fight a war to bring the entire region under one rule. But who were these warriors? The ‘man of the mouth’ gives us a list of the warriors. Then, he says, ‘In short, all the sons of Mali were there, all those-who say “N’ko” (“I know” in Mading), all who speak the clear language of Mali were represented there.’ (Niane 1965) The Mading people had an image of their language which was that it was clear and easy to
understand. Since their language and their only was clear, anyone who could speak clearly belonged to Mali. They linked this clarity with what they considered the clarity and brightness of their land, open savannah, by contrast with neighbouring forested areas. (Niane 1965:87 fn 12,93 fn 61)

Those who rallied round Sundiata to set up ancient Mali all saw themselves as speakers of the same language. They had decided that, given their common speech, they were a single nation. That provided the basis for a call to arms to establish a single state. The traditional story, however, is not restricted to those who spoke Mading as a native/vernacular language. Sundiata's step-mother had chased him away from the place of his birth. He had travelled far to the north-east, until he reached the towns of Wagadou and Merna. There, Soninke was the language spoken by the general population. Soninke and Mading, although related, are quite distinct languages. Sundiata was to discover that, in spite of the widespread use of Soninke in the area, the king of Wagadou and his brother were both able to speak Mading. In Merna, he found that the sister of the king of Merna, as well as many other people, were also able to speak Mading.

Sundiata spent about seven years in Merna. He managed to raise an army with which he returned to the region of his origins. When his army had gathered at Sibi, he had with him half the army of the king of Wagadou and half that of the king of Merna, all ready to fight. Sundiata and his army prevailed on the field of battle, defeating the army that had marched against him. Then, the kings who had supported him all came together to make him emperor over them all. Sundiata came to be the emperor ruling over the kings of Wagadou and Merna as well. He ruled the entire area of West Africa. Sundiata and his successors had an empire which consisted of two kinds of people. There, were those who spoke Mading as their native/vernacular language. There were others, those in Wagadou and Merna, who learnt Mading as a second language in addition to Soninke, their native/vernacular language. (Niane 1965:34-6, 55, 73-8)

For people such as those in Wagadou and Merna, their
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native/vemacular language was being used in private interaction amongst family and friends. However, in transacting business involving the central government and the imperial state, it is Mading which would have been required. Although writing is not involved, what we see here is a form of diglossia. (Ferguson 1959)

Soninke was being used for private and informal interaction. Mading, on the other hand, was the language of interaction with outsiders, notably those transacting official imperial business.

Within the Sundiata story itself, we see evidence of this diglossia on a few occasions. When Sundiata, his mother and the rest of his family fled to Mema and Wagadou, we are told that they were unable to understand the language spoken on the streets. However, as soon as Sundiata and his family arrive before the king's brother, his sister or the king himself, to be greeted, these royal personages begin to speak to Sundiata and party in Mading. (Niane 1965:33-6)

From the time Sundiata brings together his soldiers at Sibi, he does not do anything without the presence of his 'man of the mouth'. The 'people of the mouth' had three functions. The first of these was to remind everyone of their history and how they had arrived at their present situation. Secondly, was to spread by word of mouth amongst the population, news of what was taking place, the establishment of a single Mali empire under the rule of Sundiata. The third task was to spread language consciousness among speakers of Mading, with a view to also spreading national consciousness. For as long as such consciousness remained strong within the population, the state structure of imperial Mali would also remain strong. With the help of the 'people of the mouth', the Mali empire managed to survive for a considerable period of time. (Niane 1965:41, 58, 63)

To be a 'man of the mouth' in Mali was a serious undertaking. They had to train to carry out their job. They did not simply have to know the various historical accounts but also had to learn these stories so they would not forget. Then 'people of the mouth' had to be able to relate these long stories in a manner which would bring on boredom. Milman Parry writes about 'people of the
mouth' in ancient Greece and about the stories which they told such as the Iliad. (Parry 1971) According to his analysis, when 'people of the mouth' tell stories, the story follows a particular line of development, irrespective of which story it is. In addition, words are assembled together in pre-set patterns, as oral formulae. The words have to be put together in such a way that they fit in with the background music being played, and the rhythm and rhyme being used to perform the story. Rhyme, rhythm, music, oral formulae, all these are forms of technology employed to help the 'people of the mouth' to perform their task efficiently. Without these forms of technology, such persons would tend to forget portions of their extremely long stories, or, when the stories are performed, the audience would refuse to listen.

Guyana/Jamaica

What of the countries of the modern Commonwealth Caribbean, especially Jamaica and Guyana. English is the official language of state in these countries. It is, however, not the native/vernacular language of the majority of the population. In these countries, English is for most not a language of private informal interaction. The native/vernacular language, Jamaican or Guyanese, is normally reserved for such functions. As in Wagadou and Merna in ancient Mali, diglossia exists. However, not everybody is able to function within the diglossia, switching language as appropriate. It is usually only those receiving high levels of education from the state system who would know the High language. Those without control of the official language are simply excluded when it comes to dealing with the state apparatus.

The diglossic set up, of course, favours the bilinguals within the society. However, there is the issue with which we started this discussion, that of creating ~ nation out of the people living within the boundaries of a given state. Ever since Britain granted independence, those in charge of the state have claimed to be nation building. National mottoes such as 'One people, one nation, one destiny', and 'Out of many, one', are commonplace.
Efforts were made at the level of language, as well. There is a difficulty since the native/vernacular language cannot be used, given the use of English as the language of the state. English, therefore, is what had to be used. However, how does one create national consciousness manipulating as a symbol a language which is used in many other countries, Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia, etc.?

Those in charge of the state know that their brand of spoken English is distinct from that of others outside of their own countries. They there took Guyanese or Jamaican English, and attempted use it as a focus of language consciousness. If this succeeded, the people of the country would start feeling that all those who spoke Guyanese English or Jamaican English have a common identity and belong to the same nation. What, however, of the many who do not speak English? How will they develop any emotional attachment to English?

Here is where the issue of writing can be manipulated. If people can be made to believe that only the official High language can be written, and that the native/vernacular language cannot, they may come to the view that the former is better than the latter. Better yet if they can be convinced that a form of speech only becomes a language when it is written. This suggest that, if one is going to develop language consciousness, it does not make sense to do so for a language which cannot be written. People can be brought around to believing this since it is a fact that speech has important limitations. If one speaks, and there is no one to hear, the spoken word disappears, never to come back again. If the speaker and the listener do not share the same time and space, no communication can take place.

Writing acts as a means of extending the scope of speech. In alphabetic writing system, marks are put on paper, each representing a sound in the language. This operates to freeze human language in time. As a result, anyone wishing to have access to a written message simply needs to locate where it is written and read it. However, it should be noted that sounds in one language are different from those in another. As a result, it is not possibly to take a system of writing used in one language.
konchrii. Di set-op se ii chrain fo bil neeshan bot da neeshan bilin pon fiilinz fo Inglish, di hai-langgwij wa rait dong. Di ruults langgwij, bai ii no rait dong, no langgwij. So, noobadii kyaan gat langgwij fiilinz fo am.

Langgwij Paat-Aaf Geens Langgwij Sheed-Aaf


Bot wa doz mek enii wan badii pik out wan taak from mongs and apply it to another language. In addition, it takes time for people to learn to read and write their own language. They may speak the language but will have to become familiar with the technology used for representing it on paper.

Writing increases the effectiveness of language. In countries such as Guyana and Jamaica, the High language is the only one which is written. And it is writing in English, exclusively, which is taught in schools. Therefore, the state in modern Jamaica and Guyana, does not concern itself with the technologies associated with the 'people of the mouth' in ancient Mali and Greece. Written English is the main means by which the state apparatus functions. The state is attempting to build national feeling, but that feeling is being built on language consciousness linked to English. The native/vernacular language, as an exclusively oral language, is not considered a language. In theory, therefore, no one can have any language consciousness associated with it.

Diglossia Versus Continuum

I have discussed Jamaica and Guyana as if they were diglossic communities. For more than thirty years, linguists have studied the language situations of places like Guyana and Jamaica. Their conclusion is that linguistic continua exist in these places. At the top, occupying acrolectal position, is standard English. Then, bit by bit, one sees the language changing as one moves away from the acrolect. It is losing its English features bit by bit. At the mid-point in the process, one passes through the mesolect. Eventually, when one reaches the bottom of this continuum, one is at the basilect, occupied by forms of speech maximally deviant from English. (Bickerton 1975; Craig 1980; Rickford 1979, 1983)

Using the acrolect is supposed to grant status to the speaker. People assume that use of such speech indicates high levels of education or high social position. As ones use of language moves down the continuum, the respect induced by ones choice of language variety diminishes. As one moves past the mesolect, heading in the direction of the basilect, ones speech is supposed
to gain no respect and to lead to the assumption on the part of listeners that the speak is of low social rank.

The continuum functions in two way. Firstly, an individual usually has a repertoire which takes in contiguous lects on the continuum. Persons with wide social exposure would tend to control a band of lects spread over a wide span of the continuum. If ones exposure is more limited, the spread of ones repertoire will be narrower. The more education one has or the higher ones social class, the more likely one is to be able to use standard English, the acrolect or High language variety. Those without education or high social class are more likely to use varieties closer to the basilect, the Creole end of the continuum.

What causes speakers to select one lect from the range available their repertoires? One factor is who is being addressed. If one wants to express solidarity with the listener, the speaker tries to use the variety used or expected by that listener. If one wishes to express distance, one shifts ones choice of lect in the opposite direction. Another issue is that of subject. One might be dealing with a topic which, in ones mind, is linked to either English or Creole. If one wishes to express a positive attitude to ones subject, then one will select a lect closer to that with which the topic is linked. A negative attitude would have the opposite effect.

The situation in which speech is taking place, whether public or private, formal or informal, all influence the choice of variety or lect from within the speakers repertoire. Private and informal type situations tend to favour the choice of more acrolect varieties, public and informal ones more basilectal ones.

The whole issue of selection from within ones repertoire is psychological. Linguistics has barely started to arrive at an understanding of how the mind works in such situations. As it is, people change their minds constantly in the course of a single interaction. As a result, code-switching is common. Speakers are constantly choosing one variety, switching to another, then shifting back to the original, even within the same sentence.

The general view among linguists is that the English/Creole continuum in Guyana and Jamaica is distinct from diglossia. They view the continuum as being in some sense quite special.


The first part of their argument is that all the varieties on the continuum use more or less the same vocabulary. Most of the items are of English origin. When a speaker shifts from one variety on the continuum to an adjacent one, it is a case of a slide rather than a jump. Movement is almost imperceptible.

Most linguists concerned with the Caribbean take the view that the Creole/English continuum establishes that Guayanesian and Jamaican have no existence separate from English. They, therefore, cannot receive treatment as a separate language. These forms of speech can never be converted in languages of state and school in the countries where they are spoken. They argue that in countries such as Aruba, Bnaire and Curacao, the native/vernacular language derives most of its vocabulary from Spanish and Portuguese, while coexisting with the High language, Dutch. It is clear that when Papiamentu is being used and when Dutch is being spoken. The two languages have functioned in diglossia and the difference in vocabulary serves to keep them distinct. Therefore, in the event that a decision is taken to destroy the diglossia, elevating the native/vernacular language to official status, this is an easy enough task. The same is true of Surinam. The vocabulary of English origin in ~ranan, the native/vernacular language, serves to mark it off from Dutch, the official and High language. St Lucia provides another example where the vocabulary of the native/vernacular variety, Kweyol, of mainly French origin, distinguishes it from English, the official High language.

Even a language situation like that of Haiti is considered distinct from that of Jamaica or Guyana. The Low language variety, Haitian, derives most of its vocabulary from French. It coexists alongside French, the High language. Valdman (1978, 1982) does refer to the existence of a continuum with regard to the phonological systems of the two languages. In basilectal Haitian, there are no front rounded vowels. French, on the other hand, has two sets of front vowels, one set unrounded, the other set rounded. There is, as well, mesolectal forms w.hich are Haitian in their syntax but which distinguish between rounded and unrounded front vowels. However, Valdman feels that, in relation to the syntax of the two languages, there is a structural gap which


Nyuu Sapii, Nyuu Langgwij, Nyuu Neeshan?


serves to distinguish quite clearly between the two languages. The established position on Guyana and Jamaica is that no demarcation exists in the syntax. It is this which makes these situation. continua rather than diglossic. Therefore, whereas a law can be passed in Haiti elevating Haitian to official functions in Haiti, no such law would be possible in Guyana or Jamaica.

Let us examine properly the argument being made against Guyanese and Jamaican. The continuum prevents these varieties from ever being elevate to the position of High language. These native/vernacular varieties cannot be treated as distinct when they are part of a continuum with English. How is it possible, however, that English exists, when il also exists on a continuum with Creole. Basilectal Creole is supposed not to have an autonomous existence because speakers are constantly mixing it with English. By that same token, however, no one in these societies speaks standard English either. Speakers are constantly sliding across the different varieties within their repertoires spanning portions of the continuum. If the continuum blocks the existence of Creole as an autonomous linguistic system in these communities, it must have the same effect on English.

The response might be that English has a separate existence because we have normative descriptions of English, notably in the form of grammar books and dictionaries. However, if what it takes to produce a distinct language is normative grammars and dictionaries, it would be sufficient to provide these for Jamaican and Guyanese, for them to become autonomous languages as well. It would then be an easy proposition to destroy the existing diglossias in Jamaica and Guyana, inserting these language varieties into the High functions previously reserved for English. The existence of continua is not the reason for Jamaican and Guyanese not being granted official status. It is a question of power. Those who have power within the state like things the way they are. They will do their best to maintain the existing diglossia. They will manipulate the High language to try and develop national feeling but what kind of national feeling? One which encourages people to feel part of a state system which suppresses their native/vernacular language.
In Jamaica, it goes by many names, Dub music, DJ music, Dance Hall music. It is being referred to as music for want of a better description. This is all really a form of speech, speech with rhyme, with rhythm, with musical backing, just like that produced by ‘people of the mouth’ in ancient Mali. New technologies, however, now exist to record and play back rhythm tracks. The modern Jamaican ‘people of the mouth’, the DJs, can now simply improvise lyrics, chanting them over a recorded rhythm track. They can also employ electronic sound systems to amplify the sound, allowing them to perform before large crowds. They can also make recordings in studios, copies of which can be sold for people to play at home, in dances or on the radio.

Many DJs use old rhythm tracks, chanting new lyrics over them. On other occasions, original rhythm tracks are used. However, new or old, when a track becomes popular DJs will take it and make a hundred different versions, each of which is struggling with the other to gain popularity amongst the fans. The crowds who support the DJs are clearly not looking for musical originality. It is, after all, the same rhythm track hitting them is different versions. What, then, are they searching for? I would suggest that it is the lyrics, what they say, how they are constructed, and how they are delivered by the DJ. The DJ has captured all of the fancy sound recording technology and is using it to promote the native/vernacular language of Jamaica.

They exist within a state that operates with writing and a diglossic situation in which only the High language is established. Simultaneously, the native/vernacular language has no established writing system. But the DJ has access to all of this new high technology, and it is becoming cheaper to acquire by the day. Anyone with an electronic sound system can amplify sounds so that even thousands of people can hear. At the same time,
New Technology, New Language, New Nation?

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They exist within a state that operates with writing and a diglossic situation in which only the High language is written. Simultaneously, the native/vernacular language has no established writing system. But the DJ has access to all of this new high technology, and it is becoming cheaper to acquire by the day. Anyone with an electronic sound system can amplify sounds so that even thousands of people can hear. At the same time, many people are alienated from the kind of nation being constructed by the state apparatus. Feelings for that nation 'require an attachment to the High language, English. Those who do not speak English or have a limited command of it, have difficulty feeling
commitment to it. With the new technology has served to help
make the private use of the native/vernacular language very
public. Those who attend dances or who follow the DJs have
rediscovered something which many people have forgotten. One
does not have to have writing in order to have a language. If a
group of people consider that they share a common form of
speech, they can constitute themselves into a nation, continuum
or no continuum, writing or no writing.

The DJs are the 'people of the mouth' for those Jamaicans
who are attempting to create an alternative national identity
from the one being promoted by the state. Particularly if it is
possible to lay ones hands on the host of modem sound
reproduction technology, speech can in the modem world,
perhaps, be the basis for the creation of national identity and a
state to go with it. This was possible in ancient Mali and ancient
Greece. Perhaps history can be made to repeat itself. It is my view
that it is precisely this which some sections of the Jamaican population
are attempting to find out, and they are doing so with their
native/vernacular language, Jamaican.

Aaftaraal, laang-taim Mali, laang-taim Griis du am, an dem no
bin gat song mashiin an aal da sapii. 001 taim stoorii mosii
kyan kom bak ageen. Ada mii tingk se som adem Jameekan a
chrai fain out, an dem a chrai am out wid dem oon routs
langgwij, Jameekan.


