On the Writing of Normative Grammars for Caribbean Creole Languages: The Case of Guyanese Creole

Hubert Devonish

INTRODUCTION

One result of Caribbean Creole languages’ expansion of functions in the area of writing is concern about the question of ‘correctness’. In the area of spelling, the development and popularisation of suitable orthographic conventions are sought. For ‘correctness’ in word use, dictionaries and technical word lists would provide a solution. The focus of this paper is the problem of ‘correctness’ in the area of Creole morpho-syntax, that is, what is commonly referred to as the ‘grammar’ of the language.

The writing of normative grammars for Caribbean Creole languages would provide a way for establishing ‘correctness’ in the area of their morpho-syntactic systems, but we have to be clear about the kind of sociolinguistic circumstances into which these grammars would be introduced, and the kinds of language attitudes and behaviour which such grammars would be expected to promote, and the precise nature of the ‘correctness’ which such grammars would be expected to develop within the speech community.

This paper presumes there will be no policy to impose on the population any single variety of the language as the sole standard form, but rather, to the degree that standardisation is desirable, it should be allowed to emerge naturally and by popular consensus over a period of time. The normative grammar should therefore possess a flexibility which would promote rather than hinder the development of this consensus, and allow for continued variation where consensus is either not possible or not desired by members of the speech community.

What, then, would be the morpho-syntactic norms promoted as ‘correct’ by such a normative grammar? It would have to identify as recommended those forms which are shared by the widest range of Creole language varieties in the speech community. Such a grammar would also have to list the other variant forms used, ranked according to distribution rather than simply labelled ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’.

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We have to be clear about the purpose of these recommendations. An ‘official’ language, or one granted ‘official status’ is for use within state institutions. Officially controlled or influenced educational, mass media and other institutions direct communications at the mass of the population. The very centralised nature of these sources of communication tends to require some degree of normalisation within language varieties used in official domains. Without in any way condoning the degree of centralised government control which exists in most Caribbean Creole-speaking communities, some degree of centralisation is presumably always going to be necessary. The recommendations in a normative grammar of Guyanese Creole would therefore be primarily directed at its official use, and would aim at a variety of the language which first provides the maximum degree of intelligibility for the widest cross-section of the Guyanese population, and secondly does not appear to favour any one section of the speech community at the expense of other sections.

What, however, about those Creole forms not recommended by the normative grammar? They would, of course, continue to be used by those speakers who currently employ them. The fact that they are not recommended in the normative grammar ought not to represent any attempt to suppress them. The non-recommendation of these forms in the normative grammar would be directed at the language use of a small number of persons operating in a limited range of public communication. The inclusion of non-recommended forms within the grammar would both give those forms legitimacy and allow the grammar to serve as a valid reference for all the varieties of the language. This general legitimising function is far more important than that of recommendation versus non-recommendation of particular variant forms.

A normative grammar which has as one of its goals the provision of a reference point for all the varieties of Creole in a country like Guyana, is a basic ingredient in the development of a democratic and decentralised official language policy. Such a policy would encourage the use of all varieties of Creole, in speech and writing, for official as well as non-official functions. The only exception would be those communications originating from institutional centres. Here, the forms recommended in the normative grammar would be employed. The presentation in the normative grammar of the range of possible variant forms, recommended or otherwise, allows those who use the grammar to familiarise themselves with Creole forms which they do not actively use. In circumstances where the bulk of the population has a passive or receptive competence in varieties other than those which they speak natively, it would be possible for any speaker to use any variety of Creole in a public communication situation, without worrying about whether the variety chosen is unfamiliar to any section of the audience. It is easier to encourage receptive competence in varieties which are unfamiliar, than to force a large section of the population to produce actively some set of standard Creole forms which they may not normally use actively.
LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION IN THE NORMATIVE GRAMMAR

In the case of Guyanese Creole, there is a growing body of material concerned with the linguistic description and analysis of particular aspects of the language (Bickerton 1975; Rickford 1979; Gibson 1982). These works, however, are highly specialist studies, accessible only to a handful of people with training in linguistics. Also, each of these works tends, for reasons of practicality, to focus on a particular sub-system within the overall linguistic system of the language. This creates the danger that sight may be lost of the role which the sub-system plays within the overall linguistic system. These works also tend to be carried out within quite specific theoretical frameworks. Apart from the issue of the extent to which the theoretical approaches adopted are appropriate for describing the Guyanese Creole language data, there is the problem presented by the lack of compatibility between the various approaches.

Nonetheless, these works constitute a vital input into the writing of a normative grammar, but for many of them to be of any use, steps have to be taken:

1. to extract the various insights provided from within the narrow theoretical and analytical structures within which they may have been originally presented;
2. to integrate these insights into a general analysis of the linguistic system;
3. to present them in a manner which would attempt to reflect the way that a native speaker, uninfluenced by grammatical notions derived from formal instruction in English, would perceive that his language operates.

The problem which faces any attempt to take steps (i) and (ii), lies in the tendency, even in modern linguistic analyses of Caribbean Creole languages, to treat them as deviant forms of the European languages from which they derived the bulk of their vocabularies. The writers on Guyanese Creole would argue that this is precisely what they were trying not to do, but the frequently uncritical acceptance of linguistic categories such as Noun, Verb, Adjective and Preposition would tend to belie any such claim. However suitable these categories may be for describing languages like English, using them without establishing their applicability to Creole assumes that it is similar to such languages. It may be in some respects, but the existence and precise definitions of its linguistic categories must be based only on analysis of Creole language data.

In order to illustrate this, let us examine the area of grammatical morphemes in Guyanese Creole. In Caribbean English-lexicon Creole languages, there is, by comparison with English, a relatively small number of grammatical items performing a wide range of grammatical functions. Thus, Jv performs the functions of complementiser, modal verb and preposition. The item dem operates as a personal pronoun and a plural marker on nominals. And in the case of the item at the demonstrative adjective, pronominal aspect marker, evidential verb and locational preposition are among those performed. There are two possible responses to these examples. The first is to assume that the same form is used in each case to represent a range of functions purely as a result of chance. The second possibility is to hypothesise that the commonality in form might represent some commonality at the semantic level. Were this to turn out to be the case with any of the items, and the distribution of the items in each of its functions was compatible, one could conclude that there is a systematic relation between each of the functions of the item. Any treatment of such grammatical forms in the normative grammar ignoring the significance of shared forms across apparently distinct syntactic functions, runs the risk of going against the intuitions of the native speakers of the language. Only in the absence of any clear semantic link across the various functions performed by a particular language form, can one safely conclude that the formal similarity is of little significance for normative purposes.

This focus on the association of apparently disparate functions of the same form will provide the cohesion necessary for the proposed normative grammar. The major input into such a grammar will be already existing descriptions of specific aspects of the syntactic system. These descriptions, however, were often conceived without reference to other parts of the syntactic system and within widely differing theoretical perspectives. The proposed approach, therefore, with its focus on the overall syntactic system, would provide a framework within which the various descriptions can be integrated.

ON THE APPROPRIATE PRESENTATION OF THE NORMATIVE GRAMMAR

Step (ii) in the previous section refers to the necessity to present the normative grammar in a manner which reflects the way in which native speakers perceive their language operates, and uses Creole terminology for linguistic description within the grammar. The normative grammar can itself promote the use of Creole as a medium of scientific linguistic discourse, even if, to reach a public at present primarily literate in English, it is initially produced in English. In such circumstances, the Creole linguistic terms would be presented alongside their English equivalents in the grammar.

To develop appropriate linguistic terminology in Creole for use in the normative grammar it is not sufficient simply to find, by compounding, borrowing or coining, Creole equivalents of the various terms in English. Rather, a long hard look must be taken at the traditional ways in which language has been perceived by Creole speakers, and how these perceptions have been expressed via Creole. Linguists used to think that traditional perceptions would be loaded with value-judgments favouring the dominant European language and stigmatising Creole. The work of Rickford (1979, 1983), however, has indicated the presence of attitudes of linguistic solidarity and positive linguistic self-identification not previously thought to exist among Guyanese Creole speakers. Against this background it seems worthwhile to explore the kinds of popular perceptions on the linguistic structure of Creole which coexist with these language attitudes.
At the level of phonology, Creole language perceptions are indeed bedevilled by pejorative terms such as rau raw', or braa l'uncouth', which are used to describe the phonological system of the language. There are, however, certain popular notions which do have some linguistic reality. There exists, for example, popular expressions which oppose speech predicted with you mout spral apn 'one's mouth wide open', so that produced as if the speaker has bai for example, in it mout boiled egg in his mouth'. The latter expression, associated with English, or attempts at producing English, implies a popular recognition of the importance of tongue height, backness and lip-rounding in the production of certain sounds, features which are crucial if the boiled egg is to be kept in the mouth. The contrasting expression, associated with Creole, recognises the role played by height, lowness in this case, frontness and lip-spread. Even though both language varieties have high vowels as well as low, front as well as back vowels, popular perception is based on an important difference between the phonemic inventories of Creole and English. In English there is the lower-mid back rounded phoneme /ou/ which does not exist in Guyanese Creole. For words of English origin, the English phoneme /ou/ is substituted for by the low front unrounded vowel /u/ in Creole. It is this, therefore, which promotes the image of English as a language in which high back rounded vowels predominate, in contrast to Creole in which low front unrounded vowels are dominant. The English vowel /ou/ is higher, more back and more rounded that the Creole equivalent /u/.

Further support for the notion that there exists among the mass of Guyanese Creole speakers some very clear ideas about vowel articulation can be seen in the well known expression shi luh faik shi baam se pruun, but she baam se gwaane 'she looks as if she can't say 'prunes', but she can say 'gwaana'. This is used to refer to a deceptively quiet and peaceful individual who is able to react loudly and aggressively when the occasion arises. A speaker who appears so prim and proper that she seems not even able to purse her lips and lower her tongue to the minimal degree necessary to produce the bilabial stop /p/ and the high back rounded vowel /u/, ends up being able to spread her lips and lower the front of her tongue far enough to produce the back velar stop /g/ and the low front vowels /au/ and /u/.

The proposed normative grammar would require an introduction to the phonology of the language and to the orthography. The traditional native speaker perceptions in the area of phonology should be employed in such an introduction. In the main body of the normative grammar, involving the presentation of syntactic analysis, the exploitation of native speaker perceptions may not be quite such a straightforward proposition. Syntax is a far more abstract area of language than is phonology, particularly for the non-specialist. As a result, there is a preponderance of terms such as gud 'good', and bai 'bad', rait 'right' and rang 'wrong', which are applied to syntactic structures based on the degree to which such structures approximate to those of English. One syntactic notion which does, however, seem quite widespread among speakers of Guyanese Creole is that of word order. Thus, when confronted with the speech of Jamaican Creole speakers, one of the common responses of Guyanese Creole speakers is that Jamaican Creole is back-to-front 'back to front'.

Beyond the question of word order there seems little explicit reference to syntactic features within the Guyanese Creole-speaking community. One option which exists, however, is to examine popular expressions which do not make direct reference to language, but exploit particular syntactic features for their idiomatic effect. It could be argued that in fact these expressions become popular because of their skillful exploitation of linguistic features perceived as significant by members of the speech community. There is, for example, a traditional story told in Guyana about a new sugar boiler employed in a factory on a sugar estate. When, during his first day at work, he is asked by the factory manager how he is getting on with the job, he answers, 'Wa don bai don spal. Wa baiin spaln. An wa goon bai goon spal.' 'What has already been boiled has been spoiled. What is being boiled is being spoiled and what will be boiled will be spoiled.' The effect of the sugar boiler's response relies on the sequencing of the complements, progressive and irreals versions of the same sentence, each version containing a pair of verbs marked for the same aspect/mood and intended to signal that the two actions involved occurred simultaneously. Examples such as this give an indication of what native speakers perceive can possibly be done with the syntactic structure of their language. In addition they provide potential examples for the normative grammar which native speakers would find both relevant and entertaining.

On Implementing the Use of the Normative Grammar

Devonish (1978) attempted to identify variants with the highest powers of occurrence across the Guyanese Creole continuum, which could constitute the core of the recommended variants within the normative grammar. As stated previously, such variants would be listed alongside other variants of a more restricted usage. Ideally, the normative grammar should list all the variants currently in use. In the interests of practicality, however, and of the urgency with which such a grammar is needed, it may well stop short of satisfying such an ideal. No matter how comprehensive the listing of variants, there are bound be omissions. Such omissions could be due either to a failure to identify forms which are in use, or to language change which has bound to make obsolete particular aspects of the normative grammar from the moment they are written down.

The problem for the community at large is to ensure that they are aware of how it is intended that the grammar be used. They need to be conscious, or course, that the recommended forms are suggested as being appropriate for only a specific group of people operating in a restricted set of circumstances, and that all forms listed are of equal validity. There is, however, another problem: users may assume that forms not present in the normative grammar
do not exist in the language and are therefore incorrect. The danger here is that the normative grammar of Guyanese would be introduced into a community used to the prescriptivism of English school grammars. In such circumstances, the Creole normative grammar could be transformed into a dangerous weapon in the hands of new linguistic tyrants wishing to impose a new type of linguistic uniformity in the name of nationalism. In order to counter this, users need to be encouraged to view the normative grammar purely as an aid to their intuitions and as an imperfect point of reference. In circumstances where the normative grammar clashes consistently with native speaker intuitions and day-to-day language usage, it is the latter that must take precedence.

REFERENCES