Trinidadian Folk Usage and Standard English: A Contrastive Study

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Trinidadian folk speech is the English creole that is spoken throughout the island of Trinidad. It is a version of English that is in many ways distinct from Standard English. Essentially, the speakers of this folk speech are those Trinidadians without a formal education and those who live in rural areas. Educated Trinidadians speak a Trinidadian version of Standard English, but they can, and at times do, use the folk speech. The majority of Trinidadians, therefore, are speakers of Trinidadian creole. In this survey, I contrast the syntactical structures of Trinidadian folk speech with those of Standard English.[1]

NOUNS

In the folk speech of Trinidad, inflectional suffixes to denote plurality have disappeared. Each noun has only one form, taken almost always from the Standard English singular: *house, car,* and *girl.* In some cases where the words from Standard English have irregular plural forms, the plural forms have come to be used both for the singular and the plural. The word *teeth,* for example, is invariable, meaning both 'tooth' and 'teeth'. The same is true for the words *lice, mice,* and *geese.* It is therefore common to hear a Trinidadian speaker of creole say *a lice, a teeth, a mice,* or *a geese.*

[1] A comparison of this survey with the following works on Jamaican creole will serve to highlight some of the similarities and differences of structure that exist between Trinidadian folk speech and Jamaican creole:

Bailey, Beryl Loftman. *Jamaican Creole Syntax: A Transformational Approach.* Cambridge, Eng., 1966.

Cassidy, Frederic G. *Jamaica Talk.* New York, 1961, pp. 49–73.

Le Page, Robert B. "General Outlines of Creole English Dialects in the British Caribbean," *Orbis,* VI (1957), 373–391, and *Orbis,* VII (1958), 54–64.

Trinidadian folk speech does show plurality, however, by the use of numerals or adjectives. In Trinidad one hears: /tri ka/ 'three cars'; /plɛnti dɔg/ 'many dogs'. Another device used to express pluralization is the tag /an dɛm/ *and them*, which, placed after the noun, serves to indicate clearly that pluralization is intended: /di kou an dɛm/ 'the cows'; /di man an dɛm/ 'the men'. Many speakers of the folk language, through contact with speakers of Standard English, have become aware of pluralization as a characteristic of educated speech and make some attempts to use it. However, even when inflectional pluralization is observed, the tag *and them* is retained: /di gɪylz an dɛm/ 'the girls'; /di bʊks an dɛm/ 'the books'. Used with proper nouns, the tag has a special shade of meaning: *John and them* means 'John and his group' or 'John and his friends'. In Trinidad it is also common in the folk speech to add the plural inflection to some singular nouns, and so, very often one hears the plural form where the singular is clearly intended: *a flowers, a shoes, that gloves,* and *that socks.*

With regard to expressing the possessive concept, inflectional suffixation is completely lost in the folk speech. Standard English marks possession in nouns by inflection and word order. To the noun is added the inflectional morpheme {s}, and the inflected noun is placed before another noun and its modifier or in the final position after a copula: *Carl's pencil; the pencil is Carl's.* Trinidadian folk speech dispenses with suffixation altogether when showing possession but follows the adjective word order: *Carl pencil, Mary book,* and so on. The inflectional morpheme {s} to denote the genitive is generally no longer used in Standard English with neuter nouns. Instead, one uses the uninflected neuter noun with adjective word order or very infrequently periphrasis: not *the car's tire,* but *the car tire,* or very rarely, *the tire of the car.* The last vestige of case inflection of the neuter noun in Standard English, the possessive, is gradually disappearing. Trinidadian folk usage, therefore, has gone a step beyond Standard English by completely dispensing with the morpheme {s} to express possession. Inflection to denote plurality, however, is by no means waning in Standard English. The plural {-(e)s} is actually in a position to gain ground, since almost every new noun or any irregular noun which becomes regular will use it. The relative lack of inflection as a signal of plurality in Trinidadian folk speech is, therefore, one instance in which the folk speech differs distinctly from Standard English. Also unique in Trinidadian speech is the development of the tag *and them* to denote plurality.

The definite and indefinite articles of Standard English, with the exception of *an,* have been retained in the folk speech of Trinidad, and they function in the same way as in Standard English.

PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Trinidadian folk speech prefers the nominative form *I* as the subject in affirmative sentences: /ə gɔɪn dɔŋtoŋ/ 'I am going downtown'. In negative sentences, however, both the nominative *I* and the objective *me* are used as subject pronouns. Thus, one may hear /ə ɛ gɔɪn dɔŋtoŋ/ or /mi ɛ gɔɪn dɔŋtoŋ/ 'I am not going downtown'. The second-person plural is *all you*, the word *all* being the signal for plurality: /ɔljə tɔkɪn əbɑut mjɛri/ 'You are talking about Mary'. In the third-person plural, *they* is preferred as the subject in affirmative sentences: /de kɔlɪn mjɛri/ 'They are calling Mary'. On the other hand, in negative sentences both /de/ *they* and /dɛm/ *them* function interchangeably as the subject: /de ɛ no/ or /dɛm ɛ no/ 'They do not know'. In the folk speech the subject pronouns *he, she, it,* and *we* function in the same way as in Standard English.

In Trinidadian folk speech, the forms of pronouns used after prepositions are the same as those used in Standard English, with the following exceptions: (1) In the third-person singular, even though the subject pronoun forms *he* and *she* are preferred after prepositions, it is still quite common to hear Standard English *him* in this construction: *They talking about she; They talking about he; They talking about him;* (2) The first-person plural form of the pronoun *we* is preferred after a preposition: *They talking about we;* (3) In the second-person plural, the form *all you* is the one used after prepositions: *They talking about all you.*

The indirect-object pronouns function in folk speech in the same way as they do in Standard English. The following changes in usage, however, are to be noted: (1) In the third-person singular the subject pronoun-form is generally preferred: *They give he the money; They give she the money.* (2) From time to time, however, Standard English *him* is heard in this construction: *They give him the money.* (3) In the first-person plural, the subject pronoun-form functions as an indirect object: *They give we the money.* (4) The Trinidadian creole second-person plural form *all you* functions as an indirect object also: *They give all you the money.*

The pronoun forms that are direct objects of verbs are the same as in Standard English, with the following exceptions: (1) In the third-person singular, the feminine subject pronoun replaces the feminine object pronoun of Standard English: *They see she.* (2) Both *he* and *him* are used as the masculine direct object: *They see him; Mary invite he?* (3) The subject pronoun-form *we* is preferred where Standard English uses the objective *us: They see we.* (4) The form *all you* is also a direct-object pronoun-form: *We see all you.*

POSSESSIVE ADJECTIVES

In the second- and third-persons singular and in the first-, second-, and third-persons plural, the possessive-adjective forms of Standard English are replaced. The subject pronoun-forms *he, she, you,* and *we* are made to function as possessive adjectives: *This is he dog; This is she dog; This is you dog; This is we dog.* The form *all you,* the second-person plural subject pronoun of the folk speech, does duty as a possessive adjective also: *This is all you dog.* The form *them,* /dɛm/, is the possessive-adjective form for the third-person plural in the folk speech: *This is them dog.* In many cases one hears Standard English *my* used in the folk speech. But also common is the use of what appears to be the Standard English *me*: /dɪs ɪz mɪ dɔg/ 'This is my dog'. Standard English possessive pronouns are not used in the folk speech which has developed its own forms. The tag *own* is added to the forms that function as possessive adjectives in folk usage: *This book is my own; This dog is he own; This dog is she own; This dog is we own; This dog is all you own; This dog is them own.* In the second-person singular, however, the possessive pronoun used is the Standard English possessive adjective *your* plus the tag *own*: *This book is your own.* Perhaps by analogy with the possessive pronouns *his, hers, theirs,* and *ours* of Standard English, one sometimes hears a speaker of Trinidadian creole use the form /maɪnz/: *This book is mines.*

DEMONSTRATIVES

Demonstratives in Trinidadian folk speech are generally used as in Standard English, but folk speech adds the tag /ɑn dɛm/ *and them* in the plural: /diz bʊk ɑn dɛm/ 'these books'. Even where formal study of Standard English causes an awareness of inflection as a signal for plurality, the tag *and them* is still used: /diz bʊks ɑn dɛm/ 'these books'. Also, /dɛm/ is used to replace the demonstrative *those*: /dɛm bʊk/ 'those books'. Apparently through the force of habit, the pluralizing tag *and them* is very often retained even when /dɛm/ is used as a demonstrative: /dɛmfɛlǝz ɑn dɛm/ 'those fellows'.

INTERROGATIVES

Who /hu/	What /wǝ/ or /wɑt/
Which /wɪč/	Why /waɪ/
When /wɛn/	Who(se) /hu/
Where /we/	How /hɑuw/

These interrogative words have all been adopted in the Trinidadian folk speech, except that *who* is uninflected, and word order of subject and verb

is not inverted. This type of interrogation is fairly close to Standard English.

> *To whom is he talking?*
> /hu i tɔkɪn tu?/
> *What kind of juice is that?*
> /wə kɑɪn ə jus dɑ ɪz?/
> *Which one of them is he talking about?*
> /wɪč wən ə dɛm i tɔkɪn əbɑut?/
> *When is he coming back?*
> /wɛn i kəmɪn bɑk?/
> *Whose house is that?*
> /hu hɑus dɑ ɪz?/
> *Where is he going?*
> /we i gɔɪn?/
> *How are you?*
> /hɑuw?/
> *Why are you singing so loudly?*
> /wɑɪ jə sɪŋɪn so lɑud?/

Standard English has other ways of asking questions: (1) by the use of inverted word order, (2) by the use of the function word *do* to signal the beginning of a question, and (3) by the use of the interrogative intonation pattern, that is, by turning up the pitch of the voice at the end of a sentence. In the folk speech of Trinidad, the turning up of the pitch of the voice at the end of a sentence is the common way of asking questions: /ši si mjɛri lɑs nɑɪt/ 'Did she see Mary last night?'

The expletive *there* used with the verb *be* in Standard English is completely lacking in the folk speech of Trinidad. The forms of this construction have been replaced in folk speech by the single expression *it have*. The sentence *It have more food* is declarative but is readily transformed into a question by the use of the interrogative intonation pattern. Some Trinidadians who have had extensive contact with speakers of Standard English, or have had some formal education, try to correct the expression *it have* to *it has* when the subject is singular and to reserve *it have* for use with a plural subject. At any rate, *it have* is the form that is most widely used in folk speech, whether the subject is singular or plural: *It have two dance tonight.*

Reflexive and Intensive Pronouns

Folk speech forms reflexive pronouns by adding the suffix *-self* to the subject pronoun-forms, except in the case of the first-person singular,

which seems to be the regular Standard English form: /mɪsɛlf/, *myself.*
These same forms are used intensively:

I—*myself*	we—*weself*
you—*youself*	all you—*all youself*
he—*heself*	they—*theyself*
she—*sheself*	

VERBS

In the course of its history the English verb has shown a strong tendency
toward inflectional reduction. Trinidadian folk speech, however, in the
process of inflectional reduction, has gone several steps beyond Modern
Standard English. The verb of folk speech has a single form, which is usu-
ally taken from the Standard English infinitive: *dance, run, live.* Because of
widespread inflectional reduction in Trinidadian folk speech, tense is ex-
pressed through the following devices: (1) by the use of auxiliary verbs,
(2) by adverbial expressions of time, and (3) solely by context of action.
Simple past is expressed by adverbs or adverbial expressions of time: *He
give we the money last week.*

A variation of the present-progressive tense is used to convey the pro-
gressive notion in the present. The present participle does the work of *be*
and *-ing: He running home.* When a habitual action is described, it is ex-
pressed either with the progressive form with *always,* or a similar term to
denote habit, or with the form *does* with a singular or plural subject: *He
always singing that song; He does always sing that song.* One may also hear
He does be always singing that song. The past auxiliary *done* is used with
verbs to express the completion of some action in the immediate past: *He
done write the letter.* The notion can be intensified by the use of the word
just: He just done eat. The versatility of the form *done* can be further seen in
the following example: *They bound to done with that nonsense;* here the word
done is used as an infinitive meaning 'stop'. At times when the speaker of
creole tries to produce complex verbal constructions, the result is, from the
viewpoint of a speaker of Standard English, a confusion of forms: *I had was
to go to school.*

The basic form of the verb used in Trinidadian folk speech may in many
instances be taken from the past form or past participle of the Standard
English verb: /lɛf di man/ 'Leave the man alone'; *John going to married she.*
In still other instances, a related adjective serves as the verb: not *fill* but
full: he full the bucket; not *die* but *dead: Mary mother dead yesterday.* There
is also the situation where the noun is made to function as a verb: not *lose*
but *loss: Mary loss the money;* the word *thief* functions as a verb: *John thief*

the clothes. The word *married* /mɑrɪd/ is also used as a noun: /ši lukɪn fə mɑrɪd/ 'she wants to get married'.

In Trinidadian folk speech, the future is denoted with the use of the invariable form *go* as an auxiliary: *They go do that tomorrow.* In Standard English, the progressive form of the verb *go* used as an auxiliary serves to express the concept of future action. In Trinidadian folk speech the same construction is used, but the form of the verb *be* is suppressed: *We going to tell Mary.* In all of the examples given above, the adverbial phrase is not necessary to convey the notion of futurity.

Some modal auxiliaries of Standard English have been adopted in the folk speech. *Must* and *can* are common, while *would* and *should* are frequently used. *Shall, may, might, dare,* and *ought* are very rarely, if ever, used. Continuous or habitual action in the past is expressed with the form *uses* and not *used,* as in Standard English: *They uses to fight every day.* The Standard English sentence, *He probably does not know,* is rendered in the following manner in Trinidadian folk speech: /hi mus bi ɛ no/. The common negative in folk speech is /ɛ/ and is similar to nonstandard English *ain't.*

Trinidadian creole has developed its own way of expressing the passive concept. Instead of hearing *It is left to Mary,* one hears *It leave to Mary.* This usage, peculiar to the folk speech, results from the absence of the inflected participle or, more specifically, from the widespread inflectional reduction of the Standard English verb that characterizes Trinidadian creole.

The form of the verb *be* heard throughout the present tense is *is.* This one form does duty for all persons in the singular and plural. Similarly, *was* functions for all persons in the singular and plural of the past tense:

I is (was)	*we is (was)*
you is (was)	*all you is (was)*
he, she, it is (was)	*them, they is (was)*

OTHER PARTS OF SPEECH

Almost any adjective can be made to function as an adverb in the folk speech. The adverbial ending *-ly* seen and heard so often in Standard English is never used in Trinidadian folk speech. The adjectives and adverbs are therefore distinguished from one another not by form but rather by function or position: *The boy does write good; The good boy does write bad.*

Trinidadians like to tag adverbial particles on to verbs. The favorites are *up, off, away, down: John cuff up the boy; He eat off the food.* In creole *butt up* means 'to run across' or 'to meet by chance': *He butt up Mary in the road.* Of course, *butt,* meaning 'to strike with the head', is also a common

word in creole speech. To convey the idea of violence, though, the tag *down* is preferred. The tag /wi/ *oui*, appearing at the end of declarative sentences, is a vestige of French and sometimes appears translated to English 'yes': *He fall off the horse, oui; He fall off the horse, yes.* These tag words serve to reinforce the validity of the statement made. *Oui* is an emphatic tag with the force of the words *indeed* or *certainly*. In the folk speech of Trinidad there appears, too, an imperative tag /nə/ that goes along with commands whether affirmative or negative: *Stop that* /nə/; *Don't do that* /nə/. These imperative tags are often reinforced by nouns of address such as *man* or *boy: Do that* nə *man; Don't do that* nə *boy*.

Another construction peculiar to folk speech is one which usually begins with an impersonal expression and then, evidently for emphasis, anticipates the verb with itself: *Is dead the man dead: Is fight he like to fight.* Standard English would simply say *He likes to fight* and *The man died.* A very similar idiom with repeated verb is *with all the bawl she bawl*, meaning 'no matter how much she shouted'. To the dialect speaker, this construction expresses a repeated action.

As we compare the folk speech of Trinidad with Standard English, it becomes apparent that one of the essential differences lies in the area of grammatical structures. In Trinidadian creole there is a widespread change in words from one part of speech to another. The folk speech, too, has a decidedly more simplified verbal system than Standard English. That the subject pronoun-forms have no influence on the verbal system is evident in the folk speech, where one form of the verb serves with all the subject pronouns regardless of temporal considerations. Verb forms are also constant without regard to the number of the noun subject. Number is irrelevant, therefore, in dealing with the verb in Trinidadian creole. Number is relevant, however, with regard to the nouns of the folk speech, even though the Standard English manner of expressing the plural has been largely eliminated. Evidence of concern with the concept of number as regards the noun in the folk speech is the fact that a tag that signals pluralization has developed, perhaps to compensate for the elimination of inflectional suffixation denoting the plural concept, a feature of Standard English. Inflectional suffixation to denote possession does not exist in the folk speech. While the pronouns of Trinidadian folk speech are essentially the same as those of Standard English, many a time they take on a new function alien to that common in Standard English. The development of the plural form *all you* in the creole is evidence that the concept of number remains significant in the pronominal forms.[2]

2 For a discussion of these aspects with regard to Pidgin English, see Louis G. Heller and James Macris, *Parametric Linguistics* (The Hague, 1967), pp. 62–64.

Although the creole spoken in Trinidad is based on English, it has developed structural patterns that are quite different from corresponding ones in Standard English. It is the study of the grammatical structures of Standard English and those of the folk speech of Trinidad that gives a good picture of one of the essential differences that exists between the two modes of speech.

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