20

The West Indies

'Indies' was a misnomer from the start. Columbus came on them on his search for a westward route to India, and after such a long open sea voyage, with some justification he thought he had arrived at his destination and christened the inhabitants 'Indians'. This is the first indication of the way in which language has to be examined with more than usual care when it comes from this string of Caribbean islands. 'Caribbean' comes from 'Carib', the local name of one of the tribes.

Professor David Crystal has written that there are six varieties of 'varying distinctiveness' for the area: 'The situation is unique within the English speaking world, because of the way the history of the region has brought together two dimensions of variation: a regional dimension, from which it is possible to establish a speaker's geographical origins, and an ethnic dimension in which the choice of language conveys social and nationalistic identity.'

The Cambridge History of the English Language is no less forbidding:

> It is difficult to gain a clear overview of how English and Creole spread in the West Indies – whether as standard or regional British, Caribbean or North American English, or as English-based pidgins and creoles. The general history of English in the region has been fragmented into dozens of histories of English in particular island territories . . . A further difficulty is that the story of the spread of English in the West Indies and surrounding

area does not always coincide with the history of the spread of British political power in the region . . .

In some former British colonies, such as St Lucia or Domenica, English is spoken largely as a second language; in some areas that were never British, such as Costa Rica, English is spoken as a first language. Then there are the varieties of pidgin and creole.

This is not altogether surprising. Though we gaily clump the islands together as 'the West Indies', we are talking about dozens of distinctive territories which can be separated by up to a thousand miles of ocean – in itself a certain recipe for variety as Darwin proved in the Galapagos Islands. We are also talking about Spanish, Portuguese, French and Dutch settlement as well as English: and most of all we are talking about the intensive enforced settlement of hundreds of thousands of Africans with scores of different African languages. And finally we are talking about the cross-fertilisation of that mix. What is surprising perhaps is that the prosody – the sound of the spoken language – is broadly homogeneous.

English arrived there late. By the sixteenth century, Spain and Portugal had established themselves in the New World, slavery had been introduced, the Portuguese were running slaves from West Africa and various European diseases had combined with Spanish intolerance to reduce immensely and in some cases to wipe out the indigenous population. The English came much later and at first stood offshore, as pirates, waiting for the treasure ships, especially the Spanish, which were looted by Drake and Hawkins and others with the tacit agreement of Queen Elizabeth. Early words which entered English from the West Indies included 'doubloons' and 'pieces of eight'.

Hakluyt's *Voyages*, a collection of sailors' tales first published in 1589, included this account by John Hawkins of his journey to Guinea and the Indies in 1564, which introduces us to a more domestic vocabulary:

. . . we came to an island of the cannibals, called Domenica, where we arrived the ninth of March, cannibals exceedingly cruel and to be avoided

. . . Near about this place [later, he is now near Santa Fé] inhabited certain Indians who . . . came down to us . . . presenting milk and cakes of bread which they had made from a kind of corn called maize . . . also they brought us down hens, potatoes and pines . . . these potatoes be the most delicate roots that may be eaten, and do far exceed our parsnips and carrots . . .

So we have maize, potatoes and cannibals from 'Indian' languages. 'Cannibals' came from the alternative version of the name for the Carib people; they were also called 'Canibales' and legendary for their ferocity and their ruthless treatment of captives. The Carib language gave English 'cayman', 'curare' and 'peccary' amongst much else. And from the other main local people, the Arawaks, English took 'hurricane' (as well as 'maize'), 'guava', 'hammock', 'iguana' and 'savannah'. 'Canoe' and 'potato' are Haitian.

But once out of the seas to the west, English looted every ship of tongues it encountered. From Nahautl, Aztec and Mexican came 'chocolate', 'chilli', 'avocado', 'cocoa', 'guacamole', 'tamal', 'tomato', 'coyote', 'ocelot', 'mescal' and 'peyote': many of these indirectly through other European languages. It was the Spanish who conquered Peru but English was soon in there, capturing 'condor', 'llama', 'puma', 'cocaine', 'quinine' and 'guano'. The languages of Brazil, like Tupi and Guarani, are the original source of 'cougar', 'jaguar', 'piranha', 'macaw', 'toucan', 'cashew' and 'tapioca'. English was a hunter-gatherer of vocabulary, a scavenger on land and sea. The English sea dog became a popular hero especially when he was annoying the Catholic King of Spain, who had put a price on the head of Elizabeth. Piracy was patriotic. 'Freebooters', they were called, 'filibusters' (sixteenth century) and 'privateers' and the 'old sea-dogs' (seventeenth century). 'Cutlass' was a century earlier, the 'Jolly Roger' a century later, but robbery with violence on the high seas had a good press back in Britain and the words – 'buccaneer' is another – had a chauvinistic swagger about them.

English settlement began in Bermuda in 1609, and reached the

Caribbean in 1624 when Thomas Warner and twelve companions settled in Sandy Bay, St Kitts. In 1626, the first African slaves arrived in St Kitts, which was the first place where the British followed the example of the other European nations and systematically exploited slave labour. To begin with, tobacco was the crop. Sugar proved to be much more profitable – sugar needed more labour; the slave population grew and into the crushed but not wholly eradicated native tongues of the West Indies, soon to be spliced and mated with the European implants, came the invasion of African languages. Even by the end of the sixteenth century, the Africans outnumbered the Europeans and the African population grew massively in the next century.

As always, the language revealed far more than an exchange of information. An eighteenth-century plantation manager called James Grainger wrote an epic poem in praise of Sugar Cane. There were critics in Britain who thought that Grainger was the first real writer to have come out of anywhere in the Americas. One reason must be that they saw their own supremacy of English mirrored in his verse: one will stand for all:

> What soil the Cane affects, what care demands,
> Beneath what signs to plant; what ills await;
> How the hot nectar best to christallize;
> And Afric's sable progeny to treat;
> A muse, that long hath wander'd in the groves
> Of myrtle indolence, attempts to sing.

'Afric's sable progeny' had a different take on this work and different languages in which to express it. It was not made easy.

As I mentioned previously in writing about African slaves going to America, to prevent organised rebellions on board ship, the European slave traders to the West Indies also adopted the policy of splitting up tribes and this resulted in splitting up languages. One notion is that a language bonding began on these boats themselves and took the form of a sort of English picked up from the sailors.

That has been disputed. What is not in question is that these wholly different language speakers once on their plantations soon found ways to communicate, ways which, inevitably given that they were working for British owners, used English.

There were two ways in which this was done (rather as with Gullah in America): one was pidgin; the other creole.

'Pidgin is a reduced language,' according to the *Cambridge History of the English Language*, 'that results from extended contact between people with no language in common . . . Simplifications include reduction in numbers of words used and dropping complications such as inflections.' 'Two knives' becomes 'two knife'; accusative forms are used as nominatives, as in 'him' for 'he' – 'him can read'; plurals are formed from a singular noun and 'dem' – 'de dog dem' for 'the dogs'; simplification of verb forms, e.g. the passive form, is avoided – 'de grass cut' for 'the grass has been cut'; auxiliary 'do' omitted from questions – 'why you hit him?'; adjectives used in place of adverbs – 'I do it good'.

Pidgin is a brilliant instant shorthand invented for survival. Creole is a full language developed by the sons and daughters of pidgin speakers. These children would find that their parents' pidgin English was of more general use to them than their native African language. Out of this, the children would organise what was in effect a new language; they would creolise the pidgin. Words would be creolised and grammar would reassert itself. Some linguists believe that this extraordinary and miraculously rapid (a single generation) grammatical development is due to an innate human instinct, that part of the brain 'has' grammar wired in like a whistling whale has a whistle. But there are other scholars in the West Indies who believe that the creole spoken there is directly descended from the Niger-Congo language family to which all the very different West African languages ultimately belonged. The argument here is that forms were borrowed from English but used in a structure which was West African.

Dr Hubert Devenish of the University of the West Indies puts

one case. He says 'Me go run school' would be translated into English as 'I ran to school'. The West Indian version would be considered inferior, and ignorant. But he points out that 'go' is the directional marker telling you where you're running to, whereas the English form has a preposition, and the 'go' form which is a straightforward verb, like 'Me go there', would mean 'I went there'. But in 'Me run go school', 'go' would be used as a preposition, i.e. 'me run *go/to* school'. So creole simply switched verbs to prepositions when their grammatical drive needed it: just as, on many previous occasions in the progress of English, nouns had been used as verbs and vice versa. Far from being ignorant this is a wholly valid adaptation. The other case made from this same example is that West African languages like Yoruba and Edo are one of the few groups of languages which do in fact have those sort of constructions and 'run go' is a prize instance.

In the later eighteenth century on St Kitts, at about the same time that James Grainger was being elegant and pastoral about 'the Sugar Cane', a carpenter called Samuel Matthews wrote down some examples of the language he heard used by black creole speakers. He was dealing in sounds which had not been written down before but a close look at four lines can give some insights into the language:

Vos mottor Buddy Quow?
[What's matter, Brother Quow?]
Aw bree Obeshay bong you.
[I believe overseer bang you.]
You tan no sauby how
[You stand not know how]
Daw boekra mon go wrong you, buddy Quow.

[That white man go wrong you, Brother Quow.]
i.e. What's the matter, Brother Quow?
I think the overseer hit you
You don't seem to know how
That white man is going to wrong you, Brother Quow.

There is a lot which is characteristic of creole in those few words. Most of them are English – an example, as in Gullah, of the deep flexibility of English, rising to the challenge of as it were binding a new language out of a variety of languages from a different language group entirely. Spoken in a St Kitts accent, and even on the page, the second striking fact is that the sounds have shifted. And some words have been put through the prism of West Africa: 'brother' has become 'buddy' – later a very widely used word but this is the first record we have of it. 'Overseer' has become 'Obeshay' and by repeating these words up against each other a few times we can easily comprehend how that happened. The 'wh' of 'what' becomes a 'v' (Sam Weller would have approved), the 'i' in 'believe' becomes an 'r' in 'bree'; the 'th' of 'that' becomes a 'd' in 'daw' or 'dat'. Many African languages have a rule that a syllable can only have one consonant and one vowel, so when English combines consonants, creoles often reduce it to a single letter: here the 'st' and 'nd' of 'stand' become a 't' and an 'n' – 'tan'. English vocabulary plus African grammar equals a new word: stand – tan.

There are non-English words here too. 'Boekra' comes from the African word for 'white man'; 'sauby' from 'saber', the Portuguese word 'to know'; and as the verses go on there is the word 'morrogou' which is derived from French.

Some other words first recorded in the texts of Samuel Matthews and others on St Kitts include 'How come?'; 'kackar' or 'caca' for 'excrement' (though there is the Old English 'cachus', meaning latrine); 'bong', 'bang' meaning to hit, 'ugly' meaning evil, 'pikni' for 'child', 'grande' for 'big', and 'palaver' for 'trouble' or 'argument'.

There are also French creoles. Derek Walcott, who won the Nobel Prize for his epic poem *Omeros* which is set among the fishermen on the island, was brought up with formal English as his first language and French creole as his 'kitchen and street tongue'. In some of his work they rub together. It is the rubbing together of words as well as the new grammar and the multiple springs they draw on which make creole a rich source for historians and sociologists as well as linguists.

It seems to be agreed that the creole spoken in Jamaica is the deepest in the Caribbean, partly because of the sheer numbers of Africans transported there and partly because a good number of them escaped to the hills and established language groups of their own early on. And although English is very prominent, there are still traces of Spanish. The escaped slaves, for instance, were known as 'maroons', a corruption of the Spanish word 'cimmarón' meaning wild or untamed.

Jamaican English vocabulary followed the by now traditional English pattern and took from everyone and everywhere. From sailors it took 'berth' – later a position of employment, and 'cot' – a portable bed. From Spanish, for instance, it took 'parasol'; 'savvy' from Spanish in St Kitts becomes 'sabi' in Jamaica; 'sabi-so' is 'wisdom'. 'Yard' was used for the Negro yard, the area on the plantation where the slaves lived. By extension it became a house, especially in Kingston. Jamaicans informally refer to the whole island as Yard, hence 'Yardie'.

Sometimes a word seems to be a straight translation of an African tongue. 'Big-eye' for 'greedy' corresponds to words in Ibo and Twi. And also as in Africa you get 'boy-child', 'girl-child'. 'Big-big' for 'huge' is the sort of repetition found in Yoruba. It's catching: 'poto-poto' – very slimy; 'fluky-fluky' – very fussy; 'batta-batta' – to hit repeatedly.

Carnabel Day for Carnival Day (Ash Wednesday); 'catspraddle' in Trinidad is a very undignified fall; 'dumb-bread' is a heavy, flat bread. These are what are called 'loan translations' from West African languages as is 'sweet mouth' – to flatter; from Yoruba, 'eye-water' and 'cry-water' for 'tears'; 'door-mouth' for 'the entrance to a building'.

Rasta is derived from Jamaican creole with elements of the Old Testament and the influence of the black consciousness movement. Rasta uses 'I' to replace the creole 'mi': 'me' is taken as a mark of black subservience. 'I' is respect and solidarity and has extended its domain widely: 'I-lect' is Rasta 'di-alect'; 'I-cient' is 'ancient'; 'I-men' is 'A-men'; 'I-nointed' is 'anointed'; 'I-quality' is 'equality'. The vocabulary has a life of its own, some of which has leaped across the

youth culture – 'dreadlocks', 'dub', 'queen' (girlfriend), 'Rasta man', 'sufferer' (ghetto-dweller), 'weed of wisdom' (marijuana). There's also some good word-play: 'Jah-mek-ya' (God made here – Jamaica); 'blindjaret' or 'see-garet' for 'cigarette'; 'higherstand' – understand.

Creole grows. One of the newer words is 'chi-chi man', meaning a male homosexual. The old words still strike deeply, as in the use of 'trouble' meaning disturb – as in 'don't trouble the woman's children'; 'don't trouble my car' – bringing to mind Elizabethan language as in 'the wind troubled the waters' and old dialects such as the Cumbrian: the presence of English dialects in West Indian and black American is strong. I would assume that even more work will be done with creole languages, showing as they do that new lamps can be made from old and borrowed lamps.

Sugar was the most active stimulant in the trade in human beings which led to the pidgins and the creoles and sugar can provide an ending to a chapter which has sidestepped the suffering, looking only for the best that came of it, the sweetest, perhaps.

'Molasses' came from the Portuguese. 'Syrup' was already in use as a word for sugar solutions but also started to be used for the raw liquid in the manufacturing process. 'Treacle' had been a medieval term for a medicinal compound. It too was commandeered.

In the West Indies, sugar yielded alcohol which went through various intoxicating names – 'kill-devil', 'rumbullion', 'rumbustion' – before hitting the buffers of 'rum'. Rum became the naval drink. Admiral Vernon in 1740 ordered that it should be mixed with water before being given to the crew. The admiral used to wear a cloak made of a coarse fabric called 'grogram': his nickname was Old Grog. 'Grog' became rum and water. 'Groggy' began as drunk and moved on to generally shaky.

And still there, but buried deep, are archaic English expressions such as the English seventeenth-century 'from' for 'since', as in 'from I was a child I could do that', and 'aks' for 'ask' ('ax' in Old English), 'cripsy' for 'crispy' – all stewed in with Yoruba, Ibo, Spanish, French, Portuguese and mixed to a language as plaited as any on the planet.

I can think of no better way to end this chapter than to print at some length a poem by Miss Lou called 'Bans a Killin'. Miss Lou, famous as a poet and an inspiration to women and writers in Jamaica, wrote this protest poem to defend Jamaican dialect from the usual charge of that time that it was not proper or correct English and therefore had to be put down. Miss Lou knew her English literature well and used English dialects as her ammunition. Here, she plants her own dialect in the heartland of the English language.

So yuh a de man me hear bout!
Ah yuh dem seh dah teck
Whole heap a English oat seh dat
yuh gwine kill dialec!
Meck me get it straight, mas Charlie,
For me no quite understan
Yuh gwine kill all English dialec
Or jus Jamaica one?
Ef yuh dah equal up wid English
Language, den wha meck
Yuh gwine go feel inferior when
It come to dialec?
Ef yuh cyaan sing 'Linstead Market'
An 'Water come a me yeye'
Yuh wi haffi tap sing 'Auld lang syne'
An 'Comin through de rye'.
Dah language weh yuh proud a,
Weh yuh honour an respec –
Po Mas Charlie, yuh no know se
Dat it spring from dialec!
Dat dem start fi try tun language
From de fourteen century –
Five hundred years gawn an dem got
More dialec dan we!
Yuh wi haffi kill de Lancashire,

De Yorkshire, de Cockney,
De broad Scotch and de Irish brogue
Before yuh start kill me!
Yuh wi haffi get de Oxford Book
A English Verse, an tear
Out Chaucer, Burns, Lady Grizelle
An plenty a Shakespeare!
When yuh done kill 'wit' an 'humour',
When yuh kill 'variety',
Yuh wi haffi fine a way fi kill
Originality!
An mine how yuh dah read dem English
Book deh pon yuh shelf,
For ef yuh drop a 'h' yuh mighta
Haffi kill yuhself!

Robert Burns, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence and dialect speakers the length of Britain would surely have approved.

'Melvyn Bragg strides confidently through the origins and growth of English . . . concise as well as learned . . . an impressive and sage view of the big picture.' Robert Winder, NEW STATESMAN

'Always readable, often thought-provoking, and consistently entertaining.' Andrew Rosenheim, INDEPENDENT

'Bragg's approachable account . . . gleams with little gems. It has power and clarity.' James Smart, SUNDAY HERALD

'Intriguing . . . I share Bragg's linguistic egalitarianism, his respect for dialects, his sense of the expressive richness that borrowed words bring.' David Crystal, THE SUNDAY TIMES

'This breathless tale of the English language is one of struggle, resilience and triumph.' Michael Cronin, IRISH TIMES

'Informative, entertaining, sensible and good-humoured' Allan Massie, DAILY TELEGRAPH

'Told as an adventure story, and rightly so . . . There is much splendid intellectual firepower in this book.' Andrew Roberts, SPECTATOR

www.madaboutbooks.com
ISBN 978-0-340-82993-6
00899
9 780340 829936
UK £8.99

SCEPTRE

Non-Fiction/History

Cover photographs © Jasper James/Millennium Images

The Adventure of English

MELVYN BRAGG

SCEPTRE

'A SUPERB NEW HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE.' Andrew Roberts, *Spectator*

The Adventure of English

THE BIOGRAPHY of a LANGUAGE

MELVYN BRAGG