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THOMAS RUSSELL’S GRAMMAR OF
“A STUBBORN AND EXPRESSIVE CORRUPTION”

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Introduction

Thomas Russell’s *The Etymology of Jamaica Grammar By A Young Gentleman* (1868) is one of a small number of nineteenth-century works dedicated to the description of particular Creole languages within the Caribbean region. The representations of spoken language provided by these grammars contribute to knowledge about language structure as well as the historical trajectories of particular varieties. Russell’s grammar succeeds in both of these areas and also offers valuable information about the sociohistorical context in which the language that it analyzes was spoken. At the same time, however, the work is framed by the author’s negative attitudes toward his object of study, which he calls “the British West India Tongue” (hereafter referred to as Jamaican). The paragraphs below offer a general description of the grammar and comment on the significance of its sociohistorical data and Russell’s ambivalence toward Jamaican. They suggest that the grammar provides insights while perpetuating stubborn ideologies that operate in opposition to key tenets of contemporary linguistic science. Tensions between the work and current disciplinary norms evidence that creolistics has been entangled in debates about what is natural, social, and acceptable from the very beginning.

Our grammarian’s work has received attention from linguists who have made important contributions to the study of Creole languages. The Jamaican scholar Beryl Bailey, author of one of the first extensive scholarly studies of Jamaican, refers to the text as the “first [Jamaican] grammar of any value.” Bailey recognized and appreciated Russell’s position that Jamaican was not a mere “hodgepodge of incorrect grammar”, but she rejected the idea that his work qualifies as a scientific description of the language. Her position resembles that of De Camp (1968). De Camp distinguished Russell’s work from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts that amount to little more than parodies and insults of Creole languages. He saw the text as important in the history of descriptive approaches, calling it “the first reliable and extensive account of Jamaican creole”.

1 Bailey (1966: 9).
2 De Camp (1968: 45).
Overview

Etymology of Jamaica Grammar consists of eleven chapters, each dedicated to the documentation of a specific part of speech in Jamaica’s nineteenth-century English-lexifier Creole. A total of twelve parts of speech and grammatical concepts are considered: articles, nouns, number, case and gender, adjectives, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections. Some of the chapters are quite short. For example, the third and tenth chapters consist of a mere twenty-five and ten lines, respectively. While Russell includes a variety of comments about the process of constructing his grammar, he does not indicate how he selected a system for subdividing and classifying the various parts of speech. The work appears to have been influenced by one of the studies that he mentions, William Lennie’s The Principles of English Grammar (1863). Etymology of Jamaica Grammar analyzes the same number of parts of speech as Lennie’s work and presents them in the same order.

Russell’s ambivalence toward the language is evident from the beginning of the grammar. In his “Prefatory Remarks” he describes Jamaican as a “stubborn, but expressive corruption of the English tongue,” establishing that it withstands attempts at regulation represented by well-known grammars of the period. Indicative of how corrupt languages were seen as distinct from those perceived as characteristic of Europe, he explains that Jamaican did not emerge from “a previously well-planned system” (Introduction).

Throughout the 1800s linguistic varieties seen as “stubborn, expressive corruptions,” including those spoken in the overseas colonies of the British Empire, were seldom the preferred topics of scholarly inquiry. This can be seen in various seminal works. For example, The English Dialect Dictionary (1898), edited by philologist Joseph Wright at the University of Oxford, claims to represent the “complete vocabulary of all dialect words still in use, or known to have been in use” during the two hundred years preceding its release. However, as noted in the first of its six volumes, its documentation of lexical usage and variation is limited to England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. For Wright and most traditional grammarians, Jamaican and other colonial varieties were essentially “off the map.” Most of the smaller number of scholars who did acknowledge colonial varieties tended to see them as “bastard versions” of European languages. Russell’s identity and socialization as a Creole, someone born in the Caribbean, certainly contributed to the shaping of his opinion that Jamaican was an appropriate object of study.

What might Russell have meant by calling the language at the center of his grammar a corruption? As suggested by contemporary scholars, “corruption” was frequently used to describe those systems that were seen as distinct from written European languages, including colonial varieties that emerged as the result of linguistic contact among diverse groups of African and European ancestry. Commenting on the meaning behind the term, Alleyne (1994) observes that Jamaican and other Creole languages have been consistently approached as deviant deriva-

3 Wright (1898: iv-v).
tives within the Western linguistic tradition. Expanding this idea, DeGraff (2005) points out that the nineteenth-century belief that Creole languages were corrupt was largely ideological and related to non-linguistic "sorts of deviancy" that European observers "tendentiously associated with the evolution, the biology, and the behaviors of non-Europeans". Colonial Jamaica was a highly stratified society in which the notion that its Creole language was both derivative and deviant held considerable currency. Representing materially interested practices, these ideas shaped as well as contextualized the use of terminology that is highly inappropriate by today's standards. This is evident in the description of learning a "corrupt" variety as a process of becoming "infected" and references to certain words and practices in Jamaican as "the worst" and "incorrect."

Russell does make some assertions that challenge particular views of Jamaican that circulated among the masses in the second half of the nineteenth century, but these are offered alongside ideas that link it to a hierarchy characteristic of colonial-era approaches to language. The somewhat more objective approach that I wish to draw attention to comes across in statements about how language change unfolded diachronically. He alludes, for example, to change across generations of speakers and increased stability, specifically mentioning that with all corrupt languages "certain fixed rules" emerge over time (Introduction). This idea exists in tension with dominant popular attitudes of the period. As Roberts (2008) explains, most speakers altogether denied that these Creoles existed and speakers of standard languages who did recognize them frequently regarded them as slovenly speech. Russell's text does not reproduce these particular beliefs.

Also noteworthy is that Russell rather boldly presents his work as a grammar, separating the notion from issues of writing, orthography, and scholarly intervention. As his Etymology defines it, grammar is "the art of speaking correctly, according to certain rules sanctioned by old and proper usage" (Introduction). And though he presents himself as someone merely dabbling in grammar and etymology, Russell argues that the contemporary Jamaican merits more recognition and serious study. In his words, it "surely deserves some further notice, save that of an occasional pifering of its rich and expressive construction and idioms, to wring out a laugh, or to brighten social gatherings, when 'dry' English fails" (Prefatory Remarks).

As already suggested, Etymology of Jamaica Grammar is far from free of pejorative attitudes towards Jamaican. Related to his view of contact varieties as corrupt, Russell indicates that the island's Creole is impure. More to the point, his introduction alludes to "plain and distinct" rules in Jamaican that in many instances are "in direct opposition to those of the pure parent language." The "pure" language referenced here is certainly English, probably a variety he associated with London, the preferred standard adopted by most prescriptive grammarians describing the language since the second half of the eighteenth century. Thus while Rus-

6 See, e.g., Lowth (1762); Murray (1795).
sell elevates Jamaican by asserting that it has an underlying system with a logic that took shape over time, his belief that it descended from a superior language leads him to relegate it to a subordinate position. From his perspective, certain formal characteristics of Jamaican, some of which are described below, “oppose” a prestigious variety of English that he appears to have associated with writing and England. References to rules alongside alleged impurity provide some clue as to why he conceptualizes the work as an exercise in etymology and includes the word in its title. Given that he saw Jamaican as arising from a sporadic situation associated with language contact, I suggest that Russell saw etymology as providing necessary structure and facilitating grammatical analysis.

Russell offers a lighthearted critique of speakers who “pilfer” the language that he describes. He targets those who are not fluent in Jamaican but choose to use it in certain social events, indicating that they incorporated elements of the Creole into their speech for pragmatic purposes associated with humor and a desire for added style or performative flair. Apparently English speakers who usually communicated in a standard variety strategically substituted words and phrases from Jamaican for humor or “to spice up” their speech. However, he neither condemns the practice outright nor calls for it to end. Pilfering is important to Russell because it signals interest in the language on the part of outsiders and thereby assists him in arguing that Jamaican is a language worthy of grammatical analysis, historical contextualization, and study as a foreign language. The work’s overall tone suggests that its author too is likely to have engaged in pilfering.

It should be noted that Russell is a less prominent figure than William Lennie, Joseph Wright, and men who wrote multiple works on Caribbean Creoles in the period (e.g., William Greenfield, Hugo Schuchardt). In fact, *Etymology of Jamaica Grammar* appears to be Russell’s only published work. Distinct from prominent nineteenth-century grammars that were widely circulated and published in multiple editions, the text appears to have not impacted how Jamaican was subsequently spoken or written.

*Origins and Intended Audience*

The preface to the twenty-page grammar includes comments on the origins of the publication which explain that it arose out of personal interest in documenting the language and the conviction that it deserved more attention. Evidently Russell composed a manuscript because he was interested in Jamaican’s historical trajectory and the island’s broader linguistic situation and then shared it with friends. These initial readers appreciated the grammar more than he anticipated. The author explains:

This little work was never intended originally to meet the eye of the Public; the writer merely prepared it as a source of social amusement to such of his friends as are of a literary turn. They however resolved, on the perusal of it, to pitch-fork him rather uncere moniously into print, notwithstanding his serious remonstrances [. . .].

(Preface)
Russell makes a special appeal to the “literate portion of the public” as his preferred audience (see Preface). He justifies this statement by suggesting that this segment of the population can “appreciate and peruse” the book with real interest and, once engaged in reading, “become interested in the grammatical principles described within its pages.” These readers are likely to have been British subjects and members of the upper classes in Europe as well as the Caribbean, as the book was distributed within Britain and Jamaica by the Kingston publisher Descordova, McDougall, and Company.

Additional comments from the author reveal more about the intended readership and the grammar’s goals. First, Russell addresses overseas readers who might consider learning the Creole as a foreign language. He indicates that the grammar’s aim will be fully attained if a pupil uses it during “five years’ hard study” and then masters the language. Significantly, Russell recommends that the five years of study take place on the island, reminding readers that they can only attain fluency through local immersion. This directive underscores that the grammar is not meant to function as an independent resource for learning Jamaican. The same section, as if to encourage his readership to abandon England’s gray skies and long winters, refers to the island as a “Paradise of the West Indies,” “Home of Plenty,” and “Abode of Health.”

In other comments directed at potential learners, fluency in Jamaican is presented as a professional and economic resource. Russell substantiates this claim by noting the language’s use among those in a variety of prominent occupations, including ministers, teachers, planters, merchants, doctors, and lawyers. However, most of the individuals in these positions are likely to have seen themselves as speakers of English rather than Jamaican. The professions that Russell mentions were traditionally dominated by persons of European ancestry and free people of color, many of whom considered themselves speakers of English. In fact, in her study of mid-nineteenth-century Jamaica, Sheller (2000) suggests that competency in English was a key resource in marginalized groups’ communication of their democratic aspirations to the state, pointing to the language’s use in the formulation of petitions and political texts and its importance in the organization of voluntary associations and religious networks.

Format and Content

The grammar’s individual chapters begin with a paragraph consisting of a general definition, several as short as a single sentence. The first few lines of Chapter One, for example, inform the reader: “An article is a word put before a noun to show the extent of its meaning; and are of two kinds; Definite and Indefinite.” (p.1) Chapter Two begins: “Nouns are the names of persons, animals, places or things.” (p.2) Some of these reproduce verbatim the definition offered in other grammars. For example, Chapter Six begins, “A pronoun is a word used instead of a noun.” (p.12) This is the same format and definition found in Lennie’s *The Principles of English Grammar* (1863), one of the grammars briefly mentioned by Russell.

The definitions provided for each of the *Etymology*’s parts of speech are followed by lexical items from Jamaican, in many cases words that are orthograph-
ically and phonologically distinct from their equivalents in standard varieties of English. For example, the fourth chapter lists the personal pronouns as *A, me, ou, him, e, we, ono, and dem*. These words are presented rather matter-of-factly and without translation, but details following in Russell’s metalinguistic commentary make it clear that the definitions are directed at speakers of standard varieties of English. Consider, for example, Chapter One, which notes that “The definite article is *de* and the indefinite *a* and *one*.” It explains that the latter two articles are used indiscriminately and then goes on to state that *an* (which is not an article in Jamaican) “is only used as a conjunction.” (p.1) These statements are obviously included to guard against misunderstanding on the part of the reader, but they shift attention to other parts of speech, namely English words that are homophones of Jamaican articles. In similar fashion, the text indicates that the article *one* “by no means replaces *an*.” (p.1) Once again, the explanation is situated in terms of mistakes that are likely to occur among native speakers of English.

Also noteworthy is that some chapters include words that, due to the organization of the book and the scheme of grammatical categorization it employs, technically belong in other sections. The introduction refers to these departures as “peculiarities of construction.” In the first chapter these “peculiarities” take the form of homophones and phonologically similar words. Thus, after introducing *a* as an article, the reader is told that it is also a demonstrative adjective pronoun, a preposition, and a personal pronoun. Next, the text offers several sentences as examples, including this one: “A give him fe de good a him children.” (p.1) This “peculiarity” hints at a level of complexity that Russell was aware of but hesitant to explore in depth.

The second chapter, which deals with substantives, is clearly one of the most compelling. Its second paragraph introduces a “regular grammatical monstrosity,” the word *wadem calle*. (p.2) Speakers used the term – said to consist of an interrogative, three personal pronouns, and a verb – to refer to something for which they cannot remember the name. With Russell’s explanation of the word comes a vision of language and society, one that establishes a sharp distinction between local culture and communicative norms and those that were cosmopolitan and purportedly universal:

It must be observed that most of things belonging to a more civilized state of society go by this dreadful appellation, as people here usually do not know or care to know the names of such things they do not use. Considering therefore the state of civilization generally, we will find a host of ‘wa-dem-call-e’ in our vocabulary. (p.3)

Russell’s “more civilized state of society” alludes not only to Great Britain, but to a broader sphere of social interaction traversing the upper classes of Western Europe’s colonizing nations, one representing the progress of humanity as a whole. He valorizes external norms as standards that are appropriate for evaluating local speech, despite his obvious awareness of disparities distinguishing the practices and rules of usage in the metropole from those of the colony. More to the point, Russell derides usage of *wadem calle* even while he recognizes that people use it
primarily to refer to objects, technologies, and ideas with which they are unfamiliar. In this manner, he effectively endorses a vision of progress in which societies mature through assimilation by the masses: the colonized masses are exposed to and come to accept and speak with precision about “things they did not formerly use,” including material object of foreign origin. Of course the text never ponders that speakers of English might use a word semantically similar to *whatchamacallit* or *thingamajig* in the process of incorporating a new lexical item of African origin into their lexicon.

The second chapter goes on to divide nouns into three “heads”: words in which -s, -d, -t, and other consonants are added or dropped, “nouns in which there is an entire change” and “nouns not belonging to the English language or derived from it.” The author associates the first category with “incorrect speaking” and implies that speakers maintain English as a model, “transferring” the initial sounds of a word to its end, thereby converting words like *stick* and *stock* to *ticks* and *tocks*, respectively. Russell links the “addition of the -s” to “cutting English,” a flowery speaking style reliant on “big words”, hypercorrectivity, and “hurdling together” adverbs. (pp. 12, 17, 19) Like earlier observers who included metalinguistic commentary in their histories of the island,⁷ he sees this phenomenon as an “attempt to improve” Jamaican.

The second category of nouns consists of Jamaican words that Russell sees as substantially different from their English counterparts. In some instances “only half” of the English equivalent is used. Fifty examples are presented, each with its English equivalent. Among these are examples of reduplication and several pairs of phonologically similar words.

The third category includes “Words from the Spanish Language” and “Those Purely African.” The Spanish list includes a few nouns and several toponyms. The list of African words consists of twenty-five lexical items and a short English-language definition for each. When considered as a whole, the list suggests some patterns across African sociocultural forms in the nineteenth century; it includes words for musical instruments (*banja* and *benta*, both defined as “a rude musical instrument”); animals and insects (*asono*, elephant; *tacooma*, spider; *bagabo*, caterpillar); and food (*rashe*, “a little hasty meal,” *muse* and *qua-qua*, thick cassava paste, and *chalata*, a light meal). Lalla and D’Costa point out that many, but not all, of the words are indeed of African origin.⁸ In addition, they note that the list includes at least two lexical items from the West African language Twi: *ducknoo* (“corn boiled in balls, and then toasted”) and *foofoo* (“vegetable food, beaten into one mass and eaten with pepper pot”). The inclusion of non-African words may reflect folk beliefs about etymology prevalent when the grammar was written.

The section on African nouns includes a chart-like list of fourteen proper nouns, personal names that were assigned at the time of birth. Russell’s representation of this naming tradition features two names for each day of the week, one

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⁷ See, e.g., Long (1774), Edwards (1819).
for males and one for females, and meanings for each. The names connote positive and negative attributes alike. On the one hand, Tuesday’s children are said to receive the names Cobena (males) and Bene (females), which are defined as inventive and handsome, respectively; on the other hand, Wednesday’s children are called Cuaco (males) and Cooba (females), names that are defined as bad luck and lazy, respectively. Because Russell includes few details about this tradition, it is unclear whether he is aware of its links to the naming practices among the Akan people of West Africa’s Gold Coast. Subsequent works describing its significance in Jamaican society state that feminine names are linked to suffixation with -ba while masculine names restrict usage of the prefixes coo- and coa-.⁹

Some chapters end with anecdotal observations that provide information about usage, social interaction, and regional variation. The first chapter remarks on the acquisition of Jamaican by Africans. In it Russell notes that Africans “retain the deep and harsh accentuation of their own language,” which he describes as “a peculiar stress on nouns following the indefinite article one”. (p.2) Providing further detail, Russell documents a scenario in which Creoles who lived on and around the island’s estates imitated the “harsh” speech of Africans. He adds that the inhabitants of mountainous regions, “most of whom have never seen an African young man or woman,” (p.2) do not accent their words this way.

At the time the grammar was written the phenomenon of “harsh accentuation” was one of many aspects of language that was attributed to the tropical environment; “corrupt” languages were usually not seen as the product of historical or social experience. Offering a different type of explanation, Russell suggests that synchronic variation across is related to differences in geography and distinct types of social interaction. Also worth underscoring is our amateur grammarian’s point that Creoles imitated Africans: in short, he does not state that Africans targeted the speech of Creoles. This observation raises questions about the often repeated assertion that Africans tended to target the speech of Creoles. Furthermore, it draws attention to the roles that issues of identity, power relations, language choice, and social meaning – all neglected themes in contemporary theories of “genesis” and origins – played in the emergence of Jamaican.

The final part of the sixth chapter, which is on pronouns, includes comments on the words backra and buckra. Russell states, “the name backra is not use [sic] exclusively in referring to the white man,” indicating that “the brown and black gentleman is also called so in acknowledgement of his gentility, or genteel appearance.” (p. 15) According to Russell, usage for non-whites was most common in greetings (i.e., good morning or good evening) and in situations in which a favor was requested of them. Russell’s observations regarding backra’s meaning and what it denotes about class, color, and perceived social status form part of seminal reference works for the Caribbean, most significantly Dictionary of Jamaican English (2002) by Cassidy and Le Page.

Language and Ideology

Thomas Russell and other Creoles with a formal education are likely to have used and been familiar with an acrolectic variety of Jamaican, but not entirely proficient in the basilectal variety spoken by the population’s severely marginalized Afro-descendant majority. As Lalla and D’Costa suggest, the author’s fragmentary representation of Jamaican indicates that he possesses limited knowledge of the language. A close reading of the text, in particular one that gives attention to the depictions of “cutting English” and Russell’s tendency to racialize certain terms and phonological variables, reminds us that language attitudes in Jamaica during the second half of the nineteenth century were culturally variable. In addition, observations made by Underhill (1862) suggest that racial difference and linguistic stratification informed disparate visions of “who belonged” in Jamaican society; a member of the Baptist Missionary Society, he pointed out that Creoles of mixed ancestry spoke of the local European population (white Creoles) as “foreigners” even though a large number of them were born in Jamaica. Limited biographical information about Russell makes it difficult to situate him in this complex picture and impossible to say whether members of certain groups would have seen him as a foreigner. However, it does seem safe to assert that his beliefs about language differed significantly from the commonsense notions about Jamaican that existed among the bulk of its native speakers.

The author of the Etymology fails to mention two momentous historical events that directly affected the social dynamics prevailing at the time of its publication: the Atlantic Slave Trade and the Morant Bay Rebellion. Significantly, the book was published approximately three decades after the abolition of slavery and just three years after the rebellion. A major peasant revolt that was violently and brutally repressed by the British, the Morant Bay Rebellion was a dramatic turning point in Jamaica’s history, one that led to the introduction of a Crown colony government. The new government gave Britain control over the island’s legislative and executive bodies and promoted European immigration. Johnson argues that white and brown elites were anxious to increase the number of Europeans in the population during this period. The upper classes saw English as an emblem of immigrants’ intellectual and moral worth. Russell’s reference to settlers and his aforementioned endorsement of five-year stays to learn Jamaican suggests that he might have shared these sentiments. In the end, the absence of any reference to African enslavement and conflicts concerning British colonial rule obscures the power relations that enable him to write the grammar at the same time that it naturalizes social inequality and linguistic hierarchy.

As suggested above, Thomas Russell’s view of Jamaican cannot be summed up as either simply positive or negative. His belief that the island’s Creole language is a corruption goes hand in hand with his interest in etymology and his fascination with certain details about the context in which it was used. The text

11 Johnson (2001:1).
includes many derogatory statements about Jamaican language and culture, yet certain insights seem ahead of their time and warrant mention. Consider, for example, the various observations indicating that speech and linguistic variation are mediated by pragmatics, interaction, and larger sociohistorical factors. These warrant mention due to the fact that they represent the language as experience-dependent and also because they demonstrate Russell’s willingness to transform knowledge about Jamaican by thinking reflexively about aspects of his personal experience. As Roberts points out, Russell and other early grammarians “praised the ‘genius’ of the creole language, [at the same time that] they maintained the notion that it was limited and a corruption of the European language [...].”

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