Title: An Investigation of the Code Switching Behaviours of Five Dialect Speakers of Caribbean Creole English

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Abstract

This study examines the code switching behaviour of five Caribbean Creole English speakers. The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into Caribbean Creole English Speakers oral language and written language. The data obtained revealed information that suggests that Caribbean Creole English Speakers do switch code from Standard English to a non-standard dialect of English for various reasons and under different circumstances. The data also revealed the phenomena of unconscious code switching behaviour; an instance where this non-standard dialect speaker switches code and is not aware of it. The research is qualitative the information gained should help educators to better understand the Caribbean Creole English Speakers context and difficulties that they may experience in a Standard English education environment.
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE CODE SWITCHING BEHAVIOURS OF FIVE DIALECT SPEAKERS OF CARIBBEAN CREOLE ENGLISH

“How allyuh goin ah glad tuh be here.”
(How are you? I am glad to be here.)

The sentence above is the way I would greet you if we were in my hometown. It is a non-standard dialect of English. The English spoken by developed nations such as Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, and the United States is considered to be the best usage of English other English dialects are judged by comparison and contrast to the Standard English.

I am a Caribbean Creole English speaker. I am from Trinidad in the West Indies. I have been living in Canada for the past two years as a graduate education student at the University of Manitoba. Throughout my education, I have experienced a lot of difficulties in reading and writing Standard English. Also, in my teaching experience I encountered a lot of children who experienced many of the same difficulties. Even today, I often questioned why this was so. Why are so many dialect speakers in my country experiencing such difficulties in English a language which we claimed as our own? Now that I know that there are different dialects of English, I searched for the answer to a question, which dialect is my English; and how does my English affect my ability to write Standard English? In the light of this it was evident that I need to investigate how the speaking of a non-standard dialect of English affects a Caribbean Creole English speaker’s ability to write the Standard variety of English.
The purpose of this paper is to present my investigation into this matter. I will first give an overview on the purpose, research questions, and significance of the study. And also define important terms and review the literature. I will then describe the method used in this study and the results of data collected so far. Last of all I will address what the results gained at this point say to educators, and the implication of this study to further studies.

**Background of the Study**

Literacy experiences begin very early in children’s life in the home and children learn from it. In addition to this children store mental information from their experiences in their social environment. As a result of all this a child entering school already has a rich storage of literacy experiences, language knowledge, and mental information about the world. For Caribbean Creole English speakers all this occurs mainly in their non-standard English environment and with this knowledge they enter the school setting where the language of instruction is the Standard variety of English.

Pinnell and Jaggar (2003) state that; there is a strong link between oral language development and reading and writing behaviour. For non-standard dialect of English speakers in a Standard English environment a difference exists between the language they speak and the language they learn to read and write in. Vogt and Shearer (2003) indicate that this difference can cause a mismatch between what a child is able to achieve and how they perform. In addition to this because both languages are called English this could cause children to confuse one language with the other.

The purpose of the study was to provide insight into Caribbean Creole English speakers’ oral language, and written language. This study attempts to investigate the
speaking and writing behaviour of Caribbean Creole English speakers. The research is designed to answer these specific questions:

1. Is there evidence of code switching in the reading and writing behaviour of the Caribbean Creole English speaker?
2. What are the different types of code switching that occur?
3. What functions does these code-switching serve?
4. Is the non-standard dialect of English speaker aware of these switching?
5. Will there be a difference in action if the individual is fully aware that they have switched codes?

I feel that the knowledge gained from this research will contribute to the information that already exists about non-standard English speakers. This information can help educators to be more aware of some possible causes of difficulties that non-standard English speakers face and be more informed so that they can gear instruction to help them.

**Terminology significant to this paper**

Previous work done with non-standard dialect of English speakers revealed a peculiar group called the Caribbean Creole English Speaker and their unique variety of English. Certain terms that pertain to them and are an important part of this study are described below:

**Caribbean Creole English** is a dialect of English comprised of a combination of the phonology, morphology, and syntax of West Africa and other ethnic languages with the
largest contribution of the vocabulary coming from British English (Nero, 2000).

Caribbean Creole English is spoken by the English speaking Caribbean.

**Code switching** in linguistics describes an individual repeatedly replacing one or more dialects, languages or language registers with another as he/she speaks. The switch can occur with words, sentence structure, sound of word parts, and meaning. Code switching is different to the presence of two language feature combinations existing in one language. (Edwards 2004).

**Non-standard dialect of English** or non-standard dialect is a variety of the language that is not the Standard variety (Wolfram & Christian, 1979).

**The English speaking Caribbean** or Anglophone Caribbean includes the following islands (Nero 2000): Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, the British Virgin Islands Caricou, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Montserrat, St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, and the U. S. Virgin Islands. In addition to this there is Belize in Central America, Guyana in South America.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The dialect of the English speaking Caribbean exist along a continuum which stretches from the Creole, then an intermediate variety, then to the Standard English (Coelho 1988). The Creole is an extreme from the Standard dialect, and the intermediate is a variety which can be understood by English speakers.

Creole <-----------------Intermediate varieties ----------------> Standard English
Most people are able to switch between the different varieties of the language. Morpheme, phonological, syntax, and lexical differences are the variations that exist between the two languages. In the English speaking Caribbean language differences exist in each island. Many islands have their own distinct Creole language, as well as varieties that exist between Creole and Standard English.

Nero (1997) presents some of the most important differences that exist between Standard English and Caribbean Creole English. He also groups general characteristics of the different non-standard English languages that are spoken throughout the English speaking Caribbean. These general characteristics of the English speaking Caribbean islands will be used in the study.

Non-standard dialect speakers are normally degraded for their speech patterns. Green (1994) and Nero (1997) studies give evidence that suggest that non-standard dialect speakers try as much as possible to conform their pattern of speech to that of the Standard dialect used in their society for economic, social, and educational progress. Despite this attempt there are instances where features of the non-standard dialect still seem to exist in their speaking, reading, and writing behavior which causes difficulties in a Standard English environment. One important point that Nero (1997) puts forward is the fact that Caribbean Creole English is called and considered as English by its speakers. As a result of this these individuals feel confused when their language is considered as poor or broken English.

The ability to read seems to be determined by the similarity of patterns of reading material and the reader’s oral language (Ruddell 1965). Findings of studies suggest that there is a significant relationship between oral language skills and literacy experiences.
(Dickson & Snow 2004; Senechal, Le Fevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). Individuals who have a different variety of language to that of the educational environment may have influences of that language in their reading and writing behavior (Nero 1997).

In a non-standard dialect of English society where both the Standard English and the non-standard dialect of English exists individuals may unconsciously switch from Standard English to non-standard English. This will mean that in their literacy activities their vocabulary, sentence structure, letter/sound system, and overall meaning may have both the Standard and non-standard dialect features.

The switching from one variety of a language to another is considered as a code switching behaviour (Edwards 2004). Code switching in linguistics describes an individual repeatedly replacing one or more dialects, languages or language registers with another as he/she speaks. The switch can occur with words, sentence structure, sound of word parts, and meaning. Code switching is different to the presence of two language feature combinations existing in one language. Attitudes towards code switching are mostly negative because in many instances it is identified as a lack of knowledge and skill in one particular language.

Hammink’s (2000) research findings suggest that code switching is not a haphazard activity but it is governed by certain distinct rules and it may occur in different socio-economic background. The rules that govern this type of behaviour are not fully known (Edwards 2004). Some research findings suggest that individuals may code switch to adequately communicate ideas or feelings, to convey clearer meaning, convey clearer meaning, display affection, and to socialize. Hammink (2000) study suggests that code
switching behaviour is dependent on individuals’ skills and knowledge in the two languages.

Many children in today’s classrooms are learning to read and write without much difficulty. However, there are numerous children who still experience reading (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998) and writing difficulties (Persky, Danne and Jin, 2002). State and provincial mandated literacy achievement assessments are evidence of the fact that we as educators still have considerable work to do in the area of helping children to acquire basic literacy skills. This is especially true for students who do not fluently and proficiently speak a standard form of English.

The obstacles in teaching non-standard English dialect speakers come from the lack of awareness and understanding teachers may possess in assessing the language needs of the learner. Too often teachers are unaware of the community, the home environment and the dialect most spoken in that community (Christian, 1997; Goodman and Buck, 1973; Dumas, 1989). It may be unrealistic for a teacher to fully be knowledgeable of all dialects but it is possible to maintain some level of awareness.

Teachers, due to pressures from teaching the curriculum and meeting state/provincial literacy achievement standards, may neglect the specific literacy needs of the non-standard English speaker.

Non-standard English speakers are often speakers of a minority cultural group and therefore exhibit that culture’s unique characteristics. Teachers can misconceive specific cultural behaviors as signs of passive resistance, non-engagement, and non-compliance in the classroom. In many indigenous cultures children are taught to behave according to the cultural norm. Kahaney (1994) in her research in a college composition class
demonstrates that student behaviors in class were culturally based. Many students experienced problems in negotiating oral language activities. Deference to other student responses, interruption was considered impolite and offering constructive criticism was viewed as rude. Many teachers from Eurocentric backgrounds can be ignorant of such cultural contexts.

Past research indicates that teachers hold negative perceptions of non-standard English speakers which often include: low intelligence, from a low socio-economic background, low class distinction, low social prominence, see language as slang, inferior, have poor literacy skills, poor academic skills (von Trotha and Brown, 1982; Robinson, 1996; Berry, 1997). Some teachers routinely track these students for lower level academic courses (Farr and Daniels 1986). Through an attempt to eradicate the non-standard English dialect some teachers over correct student responses, this may cause the child to become mute and therefore, be viewed as non-intelligent or less than their peers (Dumas, 1989; Fay and Milner, 2004).

The Study

The subjects of the study are five Caribbean Creole English speakers. Five individuals have been approached by the researcher and a request was made for them to by participants of this study. The two adults have consented to be part of the study and the parents of the children have agreed to allow their children to be participants in the study. Of the two participants who are adults one has migrated to Canada a little over fifteen years ago the other has migrated two years ago. The three children are between the ages of eleven and fourteen. These three children are descendants of West Indian parents; the children were all born in Canada.
By doing this research I attempted to assess, describe, document, and inform people of the phenomena under investigation. The speech of the participants was taped and transcribed. These transcripts were examined for evidences of code switching. I also asked the participants to give me artifacts of their writing.

I enhance the credibility of this research by using triangulation. In the study subjects were interviewed, observations were made of their reading and writing behaviour and samples of their writing was looked at. I used a semi-structured interview because this type of interview included both structured questions and informal conversation. I also wrote field notes as I interviewed the participants. I examined the transcripts, written artifacts, and field notes for themes and evidences of dialect features in the participant’s language.

**Themes**

The information gathered seems to suggest that Caribbean Creole English Speakers do switch codes from their non-standard English dialect to Standard English for various reasons. In addition to this they seem to experience instances of code switching that they are not totally aware of.

1. **Code switching was used to establish community life**

   All the participants admitted to switching codes in order to function within a particular community. It was also felt that being part of a community required the ability to use and understand the language of that community. Their non-standard dialect was part of their community.
“Am… Oh… I think if I’m speaking with other people within my community and there are sort of cultural thing that we all understand that is better to use… my dialect…(Kavita p. 9)”

Kavita’s statement expressed what all of the participants felt concerning their dialect and their non-standard English community. Each participant also functioned within a Standard English community and they mostly felt that when they were among Standard English speakers that they should switch code to Standard English or their best version of it.

“I would say Standard English, because based on the type of work I do and the community I live in that’s what I have to use most of the time, but perhaps if I were living in Trinidad I would be using dialect more so… (Roanne p 10).”

“…I speak proper English as much as possible in Canada because ah don know it’s jus every body else speaks, mostly Canadian… tend to speak to a certain level of English, to speak proper English I jus try to mimic that so that I fall in line, I am not the odd one out (Raj p. 7 ).”

2. **Code Switching was used to establish identity**

Each participant described the non-standard dialect that they spoke as English. However from their comments they knew it was considered as an inferior variety or a language that was not appropriate in some community setting.

“…it’s not proper English, but if you really want to speak proper English, you can (Raj p. 6).”
“…I think what it was, was actually when we came here it’s like in my mind I spoke English I didn’t realize I was speaking a non-standard variety of English when I arrived, and so kids like, would, make fun of us at school and stuff like that when we were speaking…(Kavita p. 6)”

Despite this fact each participant felt that his/her non-standard code was a very important part of who he/she was or it established their identity.

“It’s very personal its, its yours you know its yours it defines you its not something negative it’s something very positive it, it links you with a group ah people… (Erica p. 12)”

“I love it (this she says with great passion) I love it because I think it is something very special about me… (Roanne p. 7)”

“I think it’s beautiful I think it’s an expression of, of my am if I can say my people my culture, my heritage I think it’s an expression of the heritage, historical am experience of Guyana because it, it, it’s very unique…(Kavita p. 12)”

3. Code Switching was used to convey meaning

This non-standard dialect code is the participant’s first language. This language will have been the medium used to build many mental concepts. Participants indicated that they switched code at times when they explained certain ideas.

“Sometimes I use the patois, the dialect or patois or what ever you call it if it better says what I want it to say… the person don’t necessarily have to understand everything you saying… the person don’t necessarily have to
understand everything you saying but you feel it so you get what the
person is saying and so sometimes I use it even with Canadians, I do use it
and they, they never ask me what I just said they… (Erica p. 20)”

Not all the participants shared the view of Erica, some taught that a Canadian would not
understand what was being said. When Roanne was asked about using dialect words to
explain things to a Canadian she felt that things could not be successfully communicated
this way.

“…but then it always get lost because often the people that I am speaking to don’t
know… (Roanne p. 14)

Despite this feeling she admitted that according to what she was talking about she would
switch to dialect.

“Even here in the school setting… if I am telling a story about my mom or my
sister… (Roannep. 7)”

Kavita also admitted to using the dialect with a Canadian if she spoke about something
that related to her culture.

4. Code Switching when attention or effort is relaxed

Most of the participants admitted to code switching when they were relaxed. Most
of the participants spoke the dialect in the home setting where the atmosphere most likely
will be more relaxed.

“… I mostly speak it in the home, outside of the home I don’t really so… (Andrea
p. 12)”
“In my home it is mostly dialect because I live with my mother and my sister…

(Roanne p. 11)"

Kavita also added a situation where individuals usually eased up, or relaxed their
attention. She admitted to switching code to dialect in situations where she was extremely
angry.

“…there are instances when it happens and in retrospect I realize I had done it,
and it would be times when I maybe angry, very angry… (Kavita p. 11)"

Most of the participants also felt that they used the dialect when they were in a
recreational or comfortable atmosphere.

“…most ah the time when I am home, yuh know, I know definitely talk like am in
Jamaica because it is more relaxing, yuh know, yuh don’t have to think about it…

(Erica p. 12)"

For the participants code switching experiences seem to occur as long as there is an ease
in attention no matter what causes that ease.

5. Unconscious code switching

Most of the participants admitted to unconscious code switching. Evidence in the
data seems to suggest that even in an environment where Standard English was more
appropriate individuals may switch code. Roanne admitted to doing this on more than one
occasion in her school setting.

“Even here in the school setting and I don’t, I am not aware of it but people would
point it out to me… if I’m telling a story say about my mom or about my sister
they would laugh at it and not at what I’m saying… (Roanne p. 7)"
Raj admitted to less unconscious code switching he said “Unconsciously I would probably use a little bit because it is natural I’ve been doing that for eighteen years it is not something you can just break like that right. (Raj p. 10)”

Kavita also added to the idea of unconscious codes switching, despite the fact that she purposely tries to be always aware of how she spoke.

“…at times where I am extremely, extremely comfortable with someone that I’m not conscious that I was using, quote unquote’ proper English because I’m always aware of how I’m speaking all the time because of my experiences when I came here so I am always conscious of trying to use the Standard English so you know there would be people that I am very, very, very comfortable with and not notice the Canadian and I would say something with the accent or what ever then I am like oh my God I just said that and they didn’t seem to react to it they understood what I was saying and it was fine with them so you know I sort of play it back in my head and it is so that is what I jus did so yeah. (Kavita p. 11)”

In most cases participants seem to be very unaware until individuals reacted to this unusual code.

The themes that I have described point to some interesting conclusions about how code switching might be helpful to teachers who will want to understand how to help Caribbean Creole Speakers that are in their classroom.

For the Caribbean Creole English Speaker possessing more than one identity seem to be quite important to their survival in a foreign society. Identity here means knowing and being able to adequately use the appropriate language in specific communities in order to successfully survive there. There seem to be the importance of
identifying with one’s own community and yet on the other hand switching identity in instances where it is necessary to adequately function in the foreign community. The switching of codes maintains adequate functioning in both communities. In the light of all this, knowledge of code switching is important information for educators to understand so that they can guide individuals to success.

Conclusion and Significance of the Study

Caribbean Creole English speakers’ language is a very significant part of who they are. This language links them with a particular group of individuals with which they have established community from birth. This helps to give them their identity. Within this community they learn language and the meaning connected to specific words in this language. It is a language that requires little effort to use and as a result it is easy to ease into the use of this language. However although it is called English it is not the language of education.

Because Caribbean Creole English speakers exist in this complex language situation they have to be constantly aware and alert of their language use. Most of the participants considered themselves to be competent Standard English users however; they still admitted to unconsciously using dialect in settings that they felt Standard English may have been more appropriate.

From the information gathered data seem to suggest that:

- The Caribbean Creole English speaker shows evidence of code switching in their language use
- Code switching take place with word parts, words, and sentences
- Code switching supports their community life, aids their identity, and helps them to construct meaning.
- There are instances when unconscious code switching occur where the individual reflects and regret.
- Caribbean Creole speakers seem to be constantly aware and alert of their language use.

Most significant to this study was the fact that this non-standard variety of English is quite significant to Caribbean Creole English speakers as an important aspect of their identity but yet it is a characteristic that discredits them as English speakers. In addition to this the unconscious nature of code switching may further humiliate them in instances when they want to perform at their best as English language speakers.

The non-standard variety of English is the code that supports Caribbean Creole English speakers’ connection to a particular community. It shows group membership and sets up the boundaries which identify non-members. However certain characteristics in this variety of English do not conform to the socially accepted use of language in an educational setting. And as a result its use sets up a mismatch between the conventions of language learned in the home and the conventions of language used in education. This mismatch can lead to children performing below their ability level.

Finally, the study demonstrates that these non-standard variety of English speakers may not be able to totally control their use of this language. This may result in their being misjudged as poor language users and being misplaced in second language or remedial classes.
I believe that the knowledge gained from this research will contribute to the information that already exists about non-standard English speakers. This information can help educators to be more aware of some possible causes of difficulties that non-standard English speakers face and be more informed so that they can gear instruction to help them.

REFERENCES


