The Politics of Language Use in a West Indian Society 1.

Susan Makiesky Barrow

Biometrics Research
New York State Department of Mental Hygiene


The language of the "English-speaking" West Indies contains both English and creolized forms. Their coexistence parallels the dualism that characterizes cultural values in that part of the world. Abrahams, writing of St. Vincent, has demonstrated the association of different forms and styles of speech with contradictory values and behavioral norms which he terms decorum and rudeness, or sense and nonsense (1970). Reisman found similar dualities in Antigua in the patterning of both English and Creole language and English and "African" culture (1970). These approaches recognize that what is distinctive about Afro-Caribbean language and culture is the re-modeling of dominant cultural forms to carry multiple meanings derived from the association of the two traditions and reflecting their structural interrelations.

But West Indian language and speech has another aspect which makes it particularly significant for understanding politics. This is the preoccupation of West Indians themselves with forms and styles of speech. As Abrahams suggests, "One reason for this focus on talk is the retention of the attitude that control of words and speaking events provides the key to community status and personal power" (1970:292). In this paper I examine the relationship of linguistic and cultural dualism to status and power in one West Indian society -- Barbados. 2. I focus on a particularly thorny problem of West Indian politics: the leadership dilemma of authority and solidarity.
The problem of leadership takes a special form in the West Indies, where plantation history has produced an association of authority with the power and control of the white plantocracy. Solidarity and unity of the black masses was virtually their only defense, and they achieved this by deemphasizing social differentiation within their ranks. Because they controlled few of the societies' basic resources, non-whites were only able to achieve positions of authority through white patronage, but the hierarchical differentiation this entailed conflicted with black solidarity and unity. The dilemma of contemporary West Indian leadership is to demonstrate authority without appearing to violate solidarity.

This structural conflict between hierarchical and egalitarian forms of organization is expressed in cultural evaluations of language and language use. After a brief discussion of the background of language and politics in Barbados, I describe the attitudes of rural Barbadian villagers toward speech performance, and their implications for the leadership dilemma as it has confronted three types of political leaders: white elites, black and brown middle class politicians, and village-based Black Power advocates.

Though no intensive description or analysis of Barbadian speech has yet been done, the language situation clearly parallels that described for other West Indian societies, and involves the coexistence of Standard Barbadian English, the official language of government and administration, with a creolized form of English locally referred to as Bajan. These forms are mutually intelligible and can best be described as two poles of a continuum that includes many intermediate varieties. In fact, it is probable that most of the speech of most Barbadians falls in this intermediate range, but islanders view it as assignable to one or the other category. Most
Barbadians understand nearly the whole range of forms. Though their actual usage is more limited, it covers a sizeable span of the continuum, and they shift to more or less creolized forms as context demands. Rules for the contextual appropriateness of speech forms are well formulated and are based on such factors as topic, social setting, and the relative and categorical social positions of speaker and hearer. Despite this linguistic versatility, however, my observations of verbal behavior suggest that control of Standard Barbadian English is a goal achieved by few.

West Indian creoles developed in the context of the slave plantation society as the language of communication between European masters and African slaves and among the culturally and linguistically diverse Africans themselves. In the early history of the British colonies, the coexistence of Creole with the local form of Standard English spoken by the elites reflected the rigid structuring of power relations.⁵

The racially and socially intermediate "colored middle class" which subsequently developed allied itself culturally with the English colonizers but could not penetrate the racially-exclusive plantocracy. To differentiate themselves from the black majority, members of this group emphasized their sophistication in the use of anglicized cultural forms -- particularly language. But in Barbados, where the plantocracy remained locally resident, they were only able to challenge white dominance and achieve political prominence by turning toward working class blacks and using their linguistic and cultural skills to become their spokesmen during the labor disturbances of the 1930's. Subsequent social reforms increased the avenues of social mobility and modified the close association of color and class, and today a black and brown political elite drawn from the ranks of a slightly enlarged,
but still culturally anglophile, middle class governs the island.

These historical relationships between culture, class, and power have produced a complex set of attitudes toward language in Barbados. The power of the white planters permitted them to impose their definitions and codifications of social reality on all groups in the society. As a result, Barbadians of all social classes have tended to "accept" a ranking of whiteness and colonial cultural behaviors and language as superior to blackness and the cultural and language forms that developed among the black majority. They take pride in the alleged Englishness of Barbados and in the island's nickname, "Little England," despite the ridicule it evokes from other West Indians. Thus Standard Barbadian English is "good" speech, while Bajan is referred to as "broken English," "bad talk," or "rough language."

The overt acceptance of colonial cultural and language values, however, masks the presence of another set of attitudes. Although Standard Barbadian English evokes "respect" because it represents power and authority, it also signifies to working class blacks unnaturalness and pretense. Furthermore, their acceptance of elite definitions of Bajan and black cultural forms as "low" and "bad" involves redefining "lowness" to include such positively evaluated qualities as genuineness, sincerity, and naturalness. Thus true feelings, intimacy, and solidarity find their most appropriate expression in Bajan.

Standard Barbadian English, then, is not only the language of the elites but is associated with a complex of cultural values involving authority, hierarchy, respect, and pretense. Bajan is associated not just with different values, but with opposed ones: lowness and disrespect, genuineness
and solidarity. While the dominant cultural norms enjoin decorous behavior, Bajan is the language of argument and confrontation, of opposition to those norms.

Because of their association with authority and solidarity, the use of more or less creolized variants of speech has important political implications. The formal and informal speech of aspiring leaders is evaluated not only in terms of the content of messages but also in terms of their form and style. Cultural style is certainly not the only basis on which Barbadians evaluate their political leaders, but the similarities of the two major parties in ideology and program preclude the emergence of significant policy differences as issues around which elections are contested. As a result, the personal social and cultural characteristics of political aspirants assume importance as cues to their social and political allegiances and hence their ability to represent working class interests.

The same speech form may take on different political meanings depending on whether the speaker is a member of the white elite, a middle class politician, or a working class leader. Thus evaluation is not based only on relative social positions of speaker and audience, but is tied to the more permanent association of race and power in Barbados. Consequently, members of these categories use different linguistic strategies in the process of mobilizing support.

White political control was virtually unchallenged until the 1940's, when black politicians entered the political arena as active contestants for the first time. Because the white politicians' claims to respect and authority were backed by real power, they did not have to be established in the course of an election campaign. Rather, white political aspirants had to convince the voters of their sincerity and concern -- no small feat after centuries of oppression and exploitation. The
use of Bajan (which continues to be used by planters in their dealings with their workers) in their political speeches of the 1950's was a gesture of sympathy and intimacy, geared to indicate that "they knew their workers...and what was good for them." In fact, they were less constrained in their use of Bajan than their black competitors, for white competence in Standard Barbadian English was taken for granted and did not have to be demonstrated. However, just as skills in English language and culture were insufficient in the past to procure upper class status for colored and black men and women, liberal and skillful use of Bajan on the part of white elites could not establish the solidarity and trust that the newly-enfranchised electorate demanded of its leaders.  

The coming to power of colored and black politicians marked the beginning of a different pattern of relationships between leaders and followers. However, the new political cooperation of the middle and working classes has not been without tensions. Not only the centuries of inequalities of status and power, but the involvement of the two groups in different cultural traditions, makes their relationship problematic. As participants in a hierarchically organized, colonial-derived system of culture and values, the new political elites are viewed with suspicion by working class blacks, who distrust their sincerity and doubt their willingness or ability to oppose the interests of the powerful white groups. They resemble culturally. The very achievement of middle class status by black and brown men and women constitutes a violation of the solidarity associated with blackness, while their blackness signals lowness and tempers the respect and legitimacy granted as a matter of course to the white politicians of earlier days. To gain working class support, they must simultaneously generate respect and authority, on the one hand, and trust and solidarity on the other. These are associated with different and opposed cultural styles.
Like the white politicians who preceded them, black political aspirants use language to locate themselves socially and culturally vis-a-vis the people whose support they are seeking. Politicians must first demonstrate the ability to perform creditably in dominant styles of language and culture. Voters favor candidates with formal academic or professional credentials which are signs of possessing such abilities, but even highly educated politicians must frequently demonstrate their language skills in the course of an election campaign. Several contexts arise for doing this. Both political parties hold public meetings in districts throughout a constituency at frequent intervals prior to an election. On these occasions, villagers gather at a crossroads or other central place where a platform and microphones have been set up to listen to five or six hours of speeches by the candidate and other party members exhorting them to give their support. The audience vocally makes known its appreciation of virtuosity in speechmaking, and though the skillful use of Standard Barbadian English is not the only requirement for a "sweet" speech, those unable to demonstrate it are heckled by the crowd and satirized by their political opponents. Even supporters may admit to being "shamed" by a poor performance.

Although candidates' performances must display appropriate use of the full range of dominant cultural forms, linguistic performances are particularly important. Barbadians have a highly-developed sense of the power of words and see the ability to manipulate Standard Barbadian English forms as essential if leaders are to adequately represent their interests in national and international arenas.

While the display of skill in Standard Barbadian English establishes politicians' claims to respect and authority, it
also serves to separate them from their constituency. To overcome the mistrust this generates, they must achieve the somewhat contradictory goal of demonstrating their trustworthiness and solidarity with the working class electorate. Proclamations of sympathy from political platforms and a liberal sprinkling of Bajan phrases and expressions combine to convey this impression, but politicians can more convincingly establish solidarity in the course of another major electioneering activity -- rumshop canvassing. Voters expect male political contestants to make tours of the local rum shops, favorite gathering places for men, where they buy drinks for the crowd that gathers around them and joke and talk informally as "one of the boys." Here they must modify the more formal Standard Barbadian English and make extensive and expressive use of Bajan.

In using language to convey the contradictory messages of authority and solidarity, politicians perform an intricate balancing act. Too much emphasis on one or the other evokes charges of aloofness or lowness. The emphasis of individual politicians depends, however, on the credentials they have already established. The light skinned upper middle class lawyer must make special efforts to emphasize solidarity with the voters, while the uneducated black shopkeeper must establish formal credentials in order to achieve authority and legitimacy.

The requirement of Standard Barbadian English skill has been an important factor inhibiting the emergence of working class political leaders. In the general election of 1971, however, there were indications that a reevaluation of language and cultural standards was underway. This was most evident in the positive responses of working class Barbadians to a candidate who built his campaign around his working class
life style and unseated the upper middle class leader of the opposition. But even in this case, the double bind of political leadership was not fully resolved, for the same qualities that made him popular with the voters were put in another light when he was sent abroad to represent Barbados at an international conference. Then, even his supporters expressed concern about his adequacy as a spokesman and his ability to command respect from representatives of more powerful governments.

The shifting attitudes which responses to this working class candidacy reflect are part of a new interest in black language and culture which has surfaced not only among university students but in rural villages as well. It is expressed most clearly by young villagers who have organized around the issue of Black Power. Though they have diverse goals and have borrowed many symbolic forms from U. S. blacks, their movement has focused primarily on the cultural dominance of the local white elites and their black imitators. By flagrantly defying deference and respect norms, they have tried to give public expression to the hidden positive evaluations of blackness, as natural and genuine, that have existed in the folk culture.

The use by Black Power advocates of Bajan forms of speech and their emphasis on working class cultural styles as important markers of blackness have met with predictably ambivalent responses in the rural plantation areas. On the one hand, their attempts to confront and unmask the pretences of local and island "greats" have struck responsive chords among many villagers. However, by "gettin' on natural" they have forfeited claims to respect and authority, and they have found themselves trapped by a variant of the double bind faced by middle class politicians: to demonstrate that they mean business and to get a serious hearing, they must use the very forms of speech and
culture they have been attacking.

The problems of leadership faced by all three groups in Barbados derive from the structural contradictions between hierarchy and equality, authority and solidarity. Linguistic and cultural dualism not only constitutes an expression of this conflict, but also influences the nature of leadership and politics in Barbados in critical ways. A slight but perceptible modification of attitudes in the direction of granting greater legitimacy to black forms of speech and behavior has come at a time when economic forces are operating to loosen the grip of local whites on the island's economy, and Barbados is moving more fully into the North American sphere of influence. The ultimate impact on language and culture of the power shifts these changes imply remains to be seen.
NOTES

1. I wish to thank Dr. Constance Sutton for her helpful discussion of many points in this paper. Thanks also are due to Ms. Linda Gutwirth and Dr. Muriel Hammer for their useful comments, and especially to Mr. Tony Barrow whose insight clarified for me many aspects of Bajan culture and politics.

2. The fieldwork on which this paper is based was undertaken in a plantation district in Barbados from 1970 to 1972. It was supported by a grant from the Foreign Area Fellowship Program.

3. That this is a structural problem generated by the plantation system and not confined to Afro-Americans alone is confirmed by Jayawardena's discussion (1963) of conflict and solidarity among East Indian plantation workers in Guyana.

4. For a comprehensive treatment of current issues in creole linguistics, see Hymes (1971).

5. See Mintz (1971) for a discussion of the effects of different structurings of power relations in the Caribbean area on the development of creole languages.

6. Most white Barbadians retired from active participation in politics when universal suffrage was introduced in 1951. A few, however, continued to contest elections until 1956. My discussion of their performances is based on the recollections of villagers and the comments of others who observed their campaigns.

7. Though the sources of working class mistrust of political elites go far back in history, there are also contemporary reasons for it. The political programs of both parties are proclaimed to serve the interests of the working people of Barbados, but working class definitions of those interests often do not coincide with those of middle class politicians, many of whose policies and actions they interpret as self-serving.

REFERENCES


