Guide to the language of Caribbean poetry
Pauline Christie

Introduction
In order to understand Caribbean poetry, it is first necessary to understand:

1. The ways in which Caribbean language - its grammar, its pronunciation and its vocabulary - differs from Standard English (SE).
2. The extent to which, and the ways in which, these differences are exploited by poets.
3. The spellings used by the poets.

The Caribbean language situation
English is the official language of all the Caribbean territories which were colonized by Britain. However, the everyday usage of most Caribbean speakers differs from Standard English (SE) to a greater or lesser degree. There is in fact a wide range of usage stretching between Standard English and what is often referred to as Patwa (Patois) or Broad Creole. This range is sometimes described as a 'creole continuum'.

The language of the poems
Most Caribbean poets write in both Standard English and some level of Creole, but in varying proportions. On the one hand, while most of the poems by Mervyn Morris, Edward Baugh and Lorna Goodison, for example, are entirely in Standard English, a few others are in Creole. Poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah, on the other hand, most often use language relatively close to the Broad Creole end of the continuum, although they occasionally intersperse this with a few Standard English forms and/or structures.

Since Caribbean Creole has traditionally been confined to oral use, there is no generally accepted spelling system. The spelling used is therefore largely ad hoc. Thus, a given word might be written in more than one way. Its spelling might:

(a) Be identical with the spelling of its English cognate, even where the Creole pronunciation is very different, for example, this for what would very likely be pronounced dis.

(b) Represent an attempt to reproduce the Creole pronunciation as in, for example, di 'the', mi 'me', likkl 'little', waak 'walk', gawn 'gone'.

(c) Combine features of Creole pronunciation with the usual spelling of the Standard
English cognate, as in *de* ‘the’, *bwoy* ‘boy’, *cyar* ‘car’, *dyamn* ‘damn’, *eediot* ‘idiot’, *perfec* ‘perfect’.

(d) Suggest that the writer is patterning it on that of an unrelated Standard English word which is pronounced similarly, e.g. *ole* ‘old’ (cf. SE *hole*), *sum* ‘some’ (cf. SE *sum*).

(e) Follow one or more long-established conventions for representing Negro speech, for example,

The addition of ‘h’ after a vowel, as in *yuh* ‘you’, *soh* ‘so’, *fah* ‘for, *nevah* ‘never’, *letta* ‘letter’, *wahn* ‘want’

The use of an apostrophe which indicates that the Creole word in question lacks a sound that is represented in the spelling of its SE cognate. See, for example, ‘ave, ‘have’, *t*ree ‘three’.

It is the case that some sounds that regularly occur in SE words are consistently absent from their Creole cognates, though the spellings used by the poets do not always reflect this. They include, as well as the initial sounds of SE *the, thing* (replaced in the Creole by *d* and *t* respectively as in, for example, *de* ‘the’, *ting* ‘thing’) the final sound of SE *singing* (replaced in Creole by ‘n’, as in *singin*).

**Creole Grammar**

The following sketch of Creole grammar focuses on Jamaican, the most widely used of the vernaculars. Many of the features described here are shared with other Caribbean varieties.

**Parts of Speech**

**Articles**

*Definite*: *di* (often written *de*)

*Indefinite*: *wan*/
Pronouns

Personal pronouns:

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<th></th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Possessive</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Singular</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1st person</td>
<td>mi / a</td>
<td>mi</td>
<td>mi (often written me)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd person</td>
<td>yu</td>
<td>yu</td>
<td>yu (often written yuh)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd person</td>
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<td><strong>Plural</strong></td>
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<td>1st person</td>
<td>wi</td>
<td>wi</td>
<td>wi (often written we)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd person</td>
<td>yu</td>
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<td>yu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd person</td>
<td>dem</td>
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- *Dem beg him, beg him till dem sick / an tired -him wouldn sign him name.* ‘They begged him, begged him until they were sick and tired- he wouldn’t sign his name.’ (*Cabal*, Mervyn Morris)

- *Dem tump him in him belly.* ‘They thumped him in his belly.’ (*Sonny's Lettah*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

- *Yu buck yu fut* ‘You hit your foot (against something)’ (*Walk Good*, Mervyn Morris)

- *Dem can't get de Reggae out me head* ‘They can’t get the Reggae out of my head.’ (*Reggae Head*, Benjamin Zephaniah)

- *Wi sen out wi scout* ‘We sent out our scouts.’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

It should also be noted that in ‘Dread Talk’, the variety of Creole which is associated with Rastafarians, the pronoun *I* is used for the object as well as the subject of the sentence. This is illustrated in:

*Dem tings stimulate I mentally.*
‘Those things stimulate me mentally.’ (*Reggae Head*, Benjamin Zephaniah)
Relative pronouns

- **dat** ‘that’
- **w(h)e** ‘which’
- **hu** ‘who’

- … *a plan / dat only him one understand*. ‘A plan that only he understands’ (*You Ever Notice How?*, Edward Baugh)

- *like a precious / memari / whe mek yu weep*. ‘like a precious memory which makes you weep.’ (*If I woz a Tap-Natch Poet*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

**Demonstratives**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>dis (ya), dat (de)</em></td>
<td><em>dem (ya), dem (de)</em></td>
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<td><em>dis (ya), dat (de)</em></td>
<td><em>dem (ya), dem (de)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘this’</td>
<td>‘these’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘that’</td>
<td>‘those’</td>
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- *That de road no pave*. ‘That road isn’t paved.’ (*The Road of the Dread*, Lorna Goodison)

- *This yah now*. ‘This now.’ (*In-a Brixtan Market*, James Berry)

- *Each an evri wan / can recite dat-der wan*. ‘Each and every one can recite that one.’ (*If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

- *Dem time de*. ‘Those times’ (*The Road of the Dread*, Lorna Goodison)

- *We don’ have Springtime like some / who live in dem colder place*. ‘We don’t have Springtime like some who live in those colder places. (*Two Seasons*, Valerie Bloom)
Nouns
Number
In Creole, where a noun refers to a class of persons or things, as such, or where it is preceded by a number or some other expression of quantity, nothing is added to indicate plurality. However, if a noun refers to more than one specific person or thing, *dem* immediately follows it.

- *tief like puss* ‘thieving like cats’ (*Cabal*, Mervyn Morris)
- *Dem seh / wi commandeer cyar* ‘They say / said we commandeered cars’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
- *plenti police van* ‘many police vans’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
- *two year* ‘two years’ (*The Arrival of Brighteye*, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze)
- *wan an two innocent* ‘one or two innocents’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

However, if a noun refers to more than one specific person or thing, *dem* immediately follows it.

- *all de ole / man dem.* ‘All the old men’ (*The Arrival of Brighteye*, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze)
- *di rulah dem* ‘the rulers’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
- *Babylan dem* ‘the policemen’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
- *De blue mahoe leaf dem* ‘The leaves of the Blue Mahoe’ (*Two Seasons*, Valerie Bloom)
Possession
This is expressed by the simple placing of the noun/noun phrase indicating the possessor in front of the one indicating the thing possessed.

- *di wicked wan plan* ‘the wicked one’s plan’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
- *a stream dat pure / like a baby mind* ‘a stream that’s pure like a baby’s mind’ (*The Road of the Dread*, Lorna Goodison)
- *Toussaint horse* ‘Toussaint’s horse’ (*Sometimes in the Middle of the Story*, Edward Baugh)
- *Backra-massa time-piece* ‘White master’s time-piece’ (*Sometimes in the Middle of the Story*, Edward Baugh)

Verbs
Broad Creole verbs do not change their form to indicate time reference (tense), number, continuous action, or passive meaning.

Time reference (Tense)

- *Mommy sen dis dress fah ma seventh birthday. / Ah wear it to church dat very Christmas Sunday* ‘Mummy sent this dress for my seventh birthday. I wore it to church that very Christmas Sunday’ (*The Arrival of Brighteye*, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze)
- *Dem se wi bun dung di George* ‘They say /said we burned down the George’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
- *Den wi faam up wi pasi* ‘Then we formed our posse’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
- *Wan time dem try fe slaughter mi* ‘Once they tried to slaughter me’ (*Reggae Head*, Benjamin Zephaniah)
Number

- *And it stay calm like sea when it sleep. / And a breeze like a laugh follow mi* ‘And it stays calm like sea when it sleeps and a breeze like a laugh follows me’ (*The Road of the Dread*, Lorna Goodison)
- *Sometimes...something move outside the house* ‘Sometimes something moves outside the house’ (*Sometimes in the Middle of the Story*, Edward Baugh)

Continuous action (Aspect)
This is expressed by *a* before the verb, or by the suffix -*in(g).*

- *But I still a dance* ‘But I’m still dancing’ (*Reggae Head*, Benjamin Zephaniah)
- *Dem a taak bout di powah an di glory* ‘They’re talking about the power and the glory’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
- *evry rebel jus a revel* ‘Every rebel was just revelling’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
- *All di ole man dem/laughing* ‘All the old men were laughing’ (*The Arrival of Brighteye*, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze)
- *unless yu watchin him* ‘Unless you’re watching him’ (*Cabal*, Mervyn Morris)

Sometimes, *did* is placed before the verb to indicate that the action which is being referred to, took place before some other action. e.g. *like dem did a wait fi mi* ‘As if they’d been waiting for me’ (*In-a Brixtan Market*, James Berry)

Passive

- *It just name day* ‘It’s just named day’ (*The Road of the Dread*, Lorna Goodison)
- *It fence two side* ‘It’s fenced on two sides’ (*The Road of the Dread*, Lorna Goodison)
- *That dey road no pave* ‘That road isn’t paved’ (*The Road of the Dread*, Lorna Goodison)
- *now dat im expose* ‘Now that he’s exposed’ (*Cabal*, Mervyn Morris)
Modal Auxiliaries

These include:

- **mos** ‘must’
- **kyan** ‘can’
- **coulda/couda** ‘could’
- **shuda/shoulda** ‘should’
- **wuda/woulda** ‘would’
- **haffi/have fe** ‘have to’
- **maita/mite a** ‘might’

• *I woulda write a poem.* ‘I’d write a poem.’ (*If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

• *Goon poet haffi step in line.* ‘Goon poets have to step in line.’ (*If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

• *An wen mi check out di ghetto grape vine / Fi fine out all I coulda fine.* ‘And when I checked out the ghetto grape vine / to find out all I could find.’ (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

• *Bootahlazy mite a get a couple touzan* ‘Buthelezi might get a few thousand’ (*If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

• *Soh wi ad woz fi bun two kyar* ‘So we had to burn two cars’ (literally: ‘had was to’) (*Di Great Insohreckshan*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

Prepositions

Commonly used prepositions include:

**In(n)a** ‘in’ e.g. *Dem put pill an potions ina me* ‘They put pills and potions in me’ (*Reggae Head*, Benjamin Zephaniah)

**out(a)** ‘out of’ e.g. *We kick di eedit out de group* ‘We kicked the idiot out of the group’ (*Cabal*, Mervyn Morris)

**pan , pon** ‘on’ e.g. *Dem lick him pan him back* ‘They hit him on his back’ (*Sonny's Lettah*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
**a, af 'of'**

- *Touzans a touzans* ‘Thousands of thousands’ (If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

- *Two piece a yam...a han a banana* ‘Two pieces of yam...a hand of bananas’ (In-a Brixton Market, James Berry)

- *Doun ina di ghetto af Brixtan.* ‘Down in the ghetto of Brixton.’ (In-a Brixton Market, James Berry)

**fah, fi / fe 'for'**

- *Fi wha?* ‘For what?’, ‘why?’ (Di Great Insohreckshan, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

- *Fi mi bag!* ‘My bag!’ (In-a Brixton Market, James Berry)

- *Mommy sen dis dress fah me seventh birthday.* ‘Mummy sent this dress for my seventh birthday.’ (The Arrival of Brighteye, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze)

- *No look fi no milepost.* ‘Don’t look for any mile-post.’ (The Road of the Dread, Lorna Goodison)

**fi 'to' (before verb)**

- *Yu surprise fi know.* ‘You’re surprised to know.’ (The Road of the Dread, Lorna Goodison)

- *Wan time dem try fe slaughter me.* ‘Once they tried to slaughter me’ (Reggae Head, Benjamin Zephaniah)

- *An try mi bes fi luk out fi him.* ‘And tried my best to look out for him.’ (Sonny’s Lettah, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

**Conjunctions**

These include, in addition to more commonly used forms such as *an* ‘and’, *ar* ‘or’, *bot*, ‘but’ and the following:

**Cause/caw ‘because’**

- *Now dem calling me de enemy / Cause de reggae roots deep in a mi* ‘Now they’re calling me the enemy because the Reggae roots are deep in me’ (Reggae Head, Benjamin Zephaniah)
- Goon poet haffi step in line / Caw Bootalezy mite a get a couple touzan 'Goon poets have to step in line because Buthelezi might get a few thousand' ('If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet', Linton Kwesi Johnson)

**do (w)** 'although' e.g. Dow defeat yu kanseed 'Although you concede defeat' ('If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet', Linton Kwesi Johnson)

**till**, 'until' e.g. Still yuh beg an yu plead till yu win a reprieve 'Still you beg and you plead until you win a reprieve.' ('If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet', Linton Kwesi Johnson)

**Adverbs**
Some adverbs have the same form as the corresponding adjectives.

- The story-teller hesitate so slight 'The story-teller hesitates so slightly' ('Sometimes in the Middle of the Story', Edward Baugh)

- Granny seh don't walk so boasy 'Granny said, “Don't walk so self-assuredly”' ('The Arrival of Brighteye', Jean 'Binta' Breeze)

- Ah no Granny face good 'I know Granny’s face well' ('The Arrival of Brighteye', Jean 'Binta' Breeze)

NB. also:
**deh/dey/dere** 'there'
- go dey again 'go there again.' ('The Road of the Dread', Lorna Goodison)

- She gawn dere to work for some money. 'She’s gone there to work for some money.' ('The Arrival of Brighteye', Jean 'Binta' Breeze)
Sentence structure

Negation
The usual markers of negation are no, don(t), never/neva (with past reference). Double negatives are frequent.

- *That dey road no pave.* ‘That road isn’t paved.’ (*The Road of the Dread*, Lorna Goodison)
- *You see duppy, no whisper, no shout* ‘You see ghosts, don’t whisper, don’t shout.’ (*Trick a Duppy*, James Berry)
- *It dont matter what de price.* ‘It doesn’t matter what the price is.’ (*Granny is*, Valerie Bloom)
- *And no look fi no milepost.* ‘And don’t look for any mile-post.’ (*The Road of the Dread*, Lorna Goodison)
- *Some day no have no definite color.* ‘Some days have no definite colour.’ (*The Road of the Dread*, Lorna Goodison)
- *Nobody never talk to him like dat.* ‘No one (had ) ever talked to him like that.’ (*Cabal*, Mervyn Morris)

Note, also, that no may combine with a, the marker which indicates continuity, to produce naa /naw/nah.

- *An im naw teef.* ‘And he isn’t stealing.’ (*Sonny’s Lettah*, Linton Kwesi Johnson)
- *all a sudden I feel / mi head nah fi mi.* ‘All of a sudden I felt that my head wasn’t mine.’ (*In-a Brixton Market*, James Berry)

The spelling nar in the following example is unprecedented: *Dat nar stop mi.* ‘That’s not stopping me.’ (*Reggae Head*, Benjamin Zephaniah)

Questions
The subject-verb order is preserved in questions. Where there is a question word, for example, hu ‘who’, ‘whom’, w(h)a ‘what’, w(h)e ‘where’, this usually precedes the subject.

- *My granny said, ”My husband, you come back?”* ‘My granny said: “My husband, have you come back?”’ (*My Arrival*, James Berry)
• Yu never know him tief? ‘Didn’t you know he stole?’ (‘Cabal’, Mervyn Morris)

• An wha dem si in deh? ‘And what did they see in there?’ (‘In-a Brixtan Market’, James Berry)

Adjectival predicates
Adjectives, as well as verbs, may be used as predicates in cases where SE would require a form of the verb ‘to be’ linking subject and predicate:

• Yu redi fi rack stedi ‘You are ready to do the Rock Steady’ (‘If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet’, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

• Granny nice ‘Granny is nice’ (‘Granny is’, Valerie Bloom)

• Yuh too tired fe do anything much ‘You’re too tired to do anything much’ (‘Two Seasons’, Valerie Bloom)

• the man find a stream dat pure ‘The man finds/found a stream that is pure’ (‘The Road of the Dread’, Lorna Goodison)

• Yu pretty fi true ‘You’re really pretty’ (‘The Arrival of Brighteye’, Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze)

Serial verbs
A succession of two or more verbs, at least one of which most usually expresses motion, sometimes occurs:

• Dem run gaan go plan countah-ackshan ‘They’ve run off to plan counter-action’ (‘Di Great Insohrecksan’, Linton Kwesi Johnson)

• Poverty is the price we pay / for the sun girl / run come ‘Poverty is the price we pay for the sun girl to run to us’ (‘Praise Song for my Mother’, Grace Nichols)

• Police / Come search mi bag ‘Police came and searched my bag’ (‘In-a Brixtan Market’, James Berry)

Note also sey following certain verbs and adjectives:

• Yu find sey that many yu meet / who sey dem understand / is only from dem mouth dem talk. ‘You find that many you meet who say they understand, are only talking from their mouths.’ (‘The Road of the Dread’, Lorna Goodison)
• You sure sey least dat no pisin. 'You're sure that at least that's not poisonous.' (The Road of the Dread', Lorna Goodison)

Repetition for emphasis
• One after the other straight straight ‘One after the other, very straight’ ('Trick a Duppy', James Berry)

• When smart smart it slipped in your pocket / But duppy search search for third match stick. 'When very smartly it slipped in your pocket / But Duppy searched hard for (a) third match stick.' ('Trick a Duppy', James Berry)

Sentence-initial
‘Is’/'No’
• Is like the crowd don’t need him now. ‘It’s as if the crowd doesn’t need him now.’ ('You Ever Notice How?', Edward Baugh)

• Is always the same. ‘It’s always the same.’ ('You Ever Notice How?', Edward Baugh)

• Is a dead man tek / him possession tease you. 'It’s a dead man who has taken his possessions to tease you.' (The Road of the Dread', Lorna Goodison)

• No soh it goh sometime inna war? 'Isn’t that how it goes sometimes in wars?' ('Di Great Insohreckshan', Linton Kwesi Johnson)

Causative ‘mek’
The verb mek (make or cause) is used as in the following:
• It mek di goon poet tun white wid envy. ‘It made the goon poet turn white with envy.’ ('If I Woz a Tap-Natch Poet', Linton Kwesi Johnson)

• mek I tell yu ‘Let me tell you.’ (The Road of the Dread', Lorna Goodison)
Selected vocabulary

The following are a few possibly unfamiliar words and phrases that occur in the poems:

1. *Babylan* - Babylon (a nickname given to the Police by the Rastafarians of Jamaica.)
2. *backra* - white man
3. *duppy* - ghost
4. *ketch* - catch
5. *ketch a fire* - catch fire
6. *mash-up* - smash
7. *massa* - master
8. *peenie wallie* - a kind of beetle
9. *rack stedi* - Rock Steady (a Jamaican dance)
10. *Rastafarian* - member of a Jamaican cult
11. *run-dung* - a Jamaican dish
12. *Walk good* - Go safely