The Language Situation of Jamaica
Language Education Policy in the tension between Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Patwa

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1. Introduction

This essay is an introduction to language policy for the Jamaican educational system. The widely experienced incomplete achievement of language and literacy skills by Jamaican students with regard to the official language Standard Jamaican English, leads to the concern and intervention of organisations from the political and academic field.

In order to deal with this issue, the specific nature and evolution of Jamaica as a creole society is presented in section 2. The conquest of Jamaica by the English and the massive and rapid import of African slaves beginning in the middle of the 16th century, can be seen as the most striking factors for the socio-cultural and linguistic evolution of Jamaica.

Section 3 will present the current situation, alongside with a discussion on its appropriate linguistic description. It will become clear that there is no straightforward description of Jamaica in traditional structuralist terms, e.g. as bilingual or diglossic society. Rather, the Jamaican language situation is characterised by the use of a wide range of flexible registers or varieties, depending on socio-cultural and individual factors. This is complicated by the close relationship of Jamaican Patwa and Standard Jamaican English, though they are classified as individual languages.

The theoretical and methodological difficulties are reflected by the educational system. The complexity of the explicit separation of Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Patwa is widely recognised as a crucial point for the problematic achievement of English in school (cf. section 4). Therefore, in 2001 the Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture set up a Language Education Policy, in order to cope with the state of affairs in class (section 4.1). The policy mainly promotes the basic oral use of Patwa and the improvement of teaching methods and material for English. In response to the policy, the Jamaican Language Unit (University of the West Indies, Mona) started the Bilingual Education Project, examining the applicability of bilingual education in Jamaican schools. While the project seems to be successful, certain factors emerge, above all the financial situation of the state, which are in conflict with the introduction of bilingual education. In the conclusion (section 5) this discussion will be re-considered.

2. The history of language in Jamaica

The history of Jamaica and its language(s) is to a great extent determined by the influence of outward forces. In the 8th century, the Arawak, who nowadays are regarded as the native Jamaican people, settled in Jamaica. In 1509 the Spanish started to colonise the island and not more than 100 years after the coloni-sation, nearly all of the Arawak were exterminated by imported diseases (cf. Cassidy, 1971a, p. 10).

After 150 years of Spanish dominance, in 1655 the English displaced the Spanish colonial power. Because of the relatively small remaining population, only 250-300 African slaves who later became the core of the Maroons (cf. Le Page, 1960, pp. 97ff; Patrick, 2007, p. 127), and the short-lasting Spanish rule, it was easy for the English to establish their language as the only official language of Jamaica.

The factual appearance of British English in Jamaica was mainly influenced by the different British population groups of the colonisers: English, Scottish, and Irish English (cf. Cassidy, 1971a, p. 12). Some of the specific dialectal vocabulary remained alive in Standard Jamaican English (SJE), as the dialect of English is named today, while it did not anywhere else in the world (Patrick, 2007, p. 127). But like any other language of the world SJE was influenced by various factors later on. Though, due to the fact that it stayed the official language of the country, the language of the political leaders, and official administrative and cultural situations, no overwhelming changes have taken place.

In modern times, strong influence by the language of the mass media of the USA led to an intermingling of the British English basics with American English features. Apart from this, SJE can still be seen as the prototype of the language of "the urbanized, educated, professional or upper business type" (Cassidy, 1971b, p. 204), and only a small minority of the Jamaican population has SJE as its native language (cf. MoEY&C, 2001, p. 7).

Interestingly, the general appearance of SJE and its status of single official language have not changed until the present day, though the percentage of African slaves and their descendants of the total population was raised enormously already in the mid-16th century:
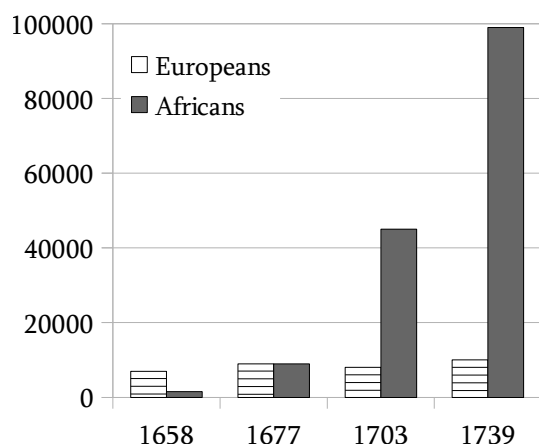

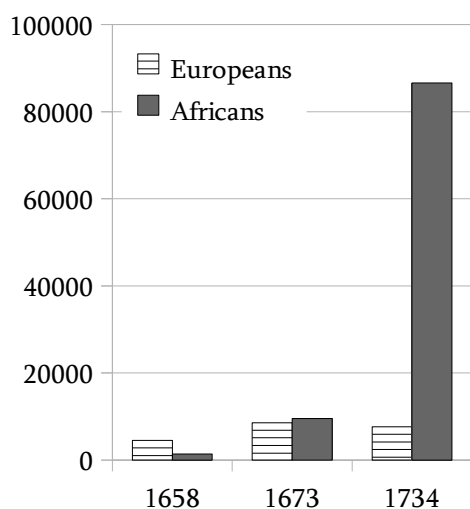Figure 1: Jamaican population

(cf. Patrick, 2007, p. 127)

Figure 2: Jamaican population
(cf. Cassidy, 1971a, p. 16)

Slightly different numbers exist for the percentage of the population originating from either Africa or Europe, but the diagrams above demonstrate that most probably the amount of people with African roots overtook the Europeans in the 1670s. The ongoing import of slaves by the English led to a situation in which over 90% of the population were slaves or their descendants, approximately since the 1730s. This percentage has not changed since then.

The policy of the colonisers to import slaves from different countries, speaking different languages (for a detailed overview see Cassidy, 1971a, p. 16f.; Le Page, 1960, pp. 21ff), successfully avoided the formation of groups or organisations which could have tried to rebel against the English (cf.

Cassidy, 1971b, p. 205). Simultaneously, the rapid and massive import of people, who "could neither preserve a functioning African language nor learn English fully" (Cassidy, 1971b, p. 204), led to the creation of a pidgin language, which was used for the communication among slaves on the one hand, and in parts for the communication between colonisers and slaves on the other hand (cf. Cassidy, 1971b). The new language must have come into existence before 1750 (cf. Patrick, 2007, p. 127), and with the increase of native speakers of the pidgin it could be linguistically categorised as a creole language, respectively.

After first efforts in emancipation of Jamaica in 1838, "movement away from plantation life into isolated, interior villages […] contributed to the maintenance and vitality of [...] Jamaican Creole" (Patrick, 2007, p. 127), so that there was no tendency towards a merging of JP and SJE, or the incorporation of one into the other.

Apparently, from its very beginning the creole language of Jamaica was connected with little social and economic status, and furthermore traditionally was not considered a real language. Thus, many of the assigned names for the communication mode have negative connotations up until today: Jamaican Patwa, or Patois from French "rough speech" (Marriott, 2008), Creole English (denoting dialect character), or Bongo Talk. A widely, especially in the academic context, accepted name for the language is Jamaican Creole (cf. Cayol, 2008). However, the name mostly in use in Jamaica is Jamaican Patwa (JP). That is why it will be used in this essay.

It is difficult to say how many people in Jamaica speak JP, because of the special situation of the competing JP and SJE and several varieties in between (cf. section 3.1), but approximately 2.7 million Jamaicans (90% of the population) are able to speak a variety which is rather to be counted as JP than as SJE (cf. Gordon, 2005).

The superficial appearance of JP is mainly determined by its lexifier language English, which is regarded as the superstrate language in the creolisation process, i.e. the dominant language of the upper class leading the country (cf. Patrick, 2007, p. 127). The lexicon of JP is the most obvious factor leading to confusion about its separation from SJE. However, some lexical elements from the most important African substrate languages, above all Central and Western African language, in particular the Kwa and Bantu families (ibid.), have survived (cf. Cassidy, 1971b, p. 205). The morphology and syntax are to a great extent influenced by the structure of the involved African languages (cf. Bailey, 1966), so that there is clear evidence for two separate languages, although closely related. For an overview of JP see Cassidy (1971a) or http://www.jumieka.com/.

Because of the little status of JP, no official writing system was developed, which would have been able to be a reference frame for standardisation. The Cassidy/Le Page system is the most prominent attempt of establishing a conventionalised orthography (cf. Cassidy & Le Page, 1980).

3. The (post-)creole continuum

In 2007 a national language competence survey of the Jamaican Language Unit (JLU) examined the distribution of competence in Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Patwa. The results show that 17.1% of the 1,000 subjects were categorised as monolingual in SJE, 36.5% as monolingual in JP, and 46.4% demonstrated bilingualism (cf. JLU, 2007, p. 12). Remarkably, in a different survey from 2005, 89.3% of the 1,000 respondents said that they spoke SJE, 88.9% spoke JP, and 78.4% were able to speak both languages. Admittedly, the two surveys examine different degrees of competence, nevertheless, the results demonstrate that it could be difficult to classify the Jamaican language situation with regard to classical linguistic concepts like bilingualism or diglossia.

3.1. Linguistic categorisation

The methodological problems for the description of the modern Jamaican language situation in terms of "discrete multilingual or multidialectal descriptions such as community bilingualism, standard-plus dialects, and diglossia" (Patrick, 2008, p. 472), gave rise to the notion of a continuum model. In general, this can be "characterised by a cline of lexical, phonological, and grammatical features ranging from those closest to a standard form of the creole's lexifier language (the acrolect) to those furthest from the lexifier language, and therefore most 'creole-like' (the basilect)" (Siegel, 2008, p. 235, also cf. Bailey, 1971, p. 342). In fact, there is no general consensus in linguistics about how to describe the Jamaican language situation, neither in diachronic nor in synchronic research (cf. Winford, 2006, p. 17).

The empirical appearance of varieties in many cases does not allow for a clear classification towards acrolectal or basilectal varieties. This is the motivation for considering a class of varieties in between: the mesolect(s).
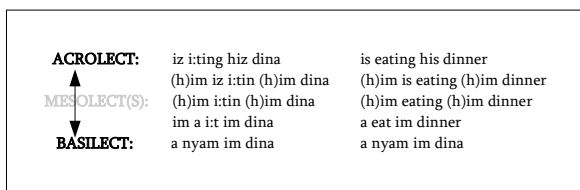

Figure 3: Range of speech in the Jamaican Creole continuum
(Alleyne, 1980, in Siegel, 2008, p. 236)

Bailey (1971) has tried to classify varieties of texts from a structural, and rather technical point of view, by measuring and weighting certain features of texts with regard to the distance from SJE and JP prototypes. However, it remains clear that socio-linguistic factors like situation, social, and individual characteristics of the speaker (cf. Siegel, 2008, p. 235), as well as the interlocutor have influence on the empirical appearance of language varieties. This causes a situation in which "almost any Jamaican can speak or at least understand more than one type of the local speech, moving

to left or right along the spectrum as occasion requires" (Cassidy, 1971b, p. 204).

The situation of a wide range of varieties is often referred to as 'creole continuum' or 'post-creole continuum'. The difference between the two terms is the involvement of a process called decreolisation in a post-creole continuum. Decreolisation is "usually defined as the gradual modification of a creole in the direction of the lexifier" (Siegel, 2008, p. 236). Indeed, this account is highly controversial, as many researchers think that creoles develop in an opposing manner, namely a process of basilectation away from the lexifier (the acrolect) (cf. Siegel, 2008, p. 237). Even the general notion of a continuum is not shared commonly. Above all, structuralists favour multilingual concepts with two or three discrete language systems (cf. ibid.). The discussion of this controversy will be resumed in the conclusion.

Apart from this, it can be summarised that the complex language situation in Jamaica not only poses a challenge for linguistic research, but also for the Jamaican language user. In fact, it is the speaker who has to deal with the range of language varieties, which in everyday life's oral communication (rather informal situations) may be not too hard to cope with, but in certain (more formal) situations, like the learning of SJE in school can result in extreme difficulties.

3.2. Language awareness and social stereotypes

Traditionally, creole languages are identified with little social and economic status, as mentioned above (e.g. section 2). The origin of creoles from a context of language contact between suppressed population groups (e.g. slaves) with a superior group (e.g. colonisers) and its implications for social awareness of the substrate (JP) and superstrate languages (SJE) still affect the attitudes of Jamaicans, after nearly four centuries of language contact and use. The following table depicts the attitudes of Jamaicans towards the appropriateness of JP or SJE depending on the type of situation:

Table 3: Sample Distribution of Languages Spoken (N=1,000)		
What Languages do you Speak?	**Frequency**	**(%)**
English	*109*	*(89.3%)*
Patwa	*105*	*(88.9%)*
Both	*784*	*(78.4%)*
To whom do you Speak?	**Frequency**	**(%)**
English *Friends/Family only*	*79*	*7.9%*
Strangers/Co-workers	*571*	*57.1%*
Everyone	*262*	*26.2%*
No One	*88*	*8.8%*
Patwa *Friends/Family only*	*629*	*62.9%*
Strangers/Co-workers	*32*	*3.2%*
Everyone	*285*	*28.5%*
No One	*54*	*5.4%*

Figure 4: Language Awareness (JLU, 2005, p. 8)

It becomes evident that SJE is mainly used in the interaction with people, in which personal distance dominates the situation (talking to strangers, co-workers, or everyone). JP,

in contrast, is mainly used in the interaction with friends or family, i.e. people who have a closer relationship. Despite of the clear situational distinction of language use, there are traditional prejudices, which can be identified by the following table:

Table 9: Sample Distribution of Stereotypes (N=1,000)			
Which Speaker do you think:		Frequency	(%)
Is more Intelligent	Patwa	73	7.7%
	English	550	57.8%
	Neither/Both	329	34.6%
Is more Honest	Patwa	283	31%
	English	278	30.4%
	Neither/Both	353	38.6%
Is more Educated	Patwa	59	6.2%
	English	591	61.7%
	Neither/Both	308	32.2%
Is more Friendly	Patwa	379	39.8%
	English	240	25.2%
	Neither/Both	333	35%
Has more Money	Patwa	77	8.8%
	English	390	44.7%
	Neither/Both	406	46.5%
Is more Helpful	Patwa	300	31.9%
	English	292	31.1%
	Neither/Both	348	37%

Figure 5: Language Use and Social Stereotypes
(JLU, 2005, p. 19)

This table demonstrates that SJE (English) is much more frequently attributed by positive features than JP (Patwa). Apparently, the respondents of this survey see speakers of SJE as more intelligent, more educated, and as having more money than JP speakers. On the one hand, this in parts certainly reflects the socio-structural reality, since SJE is the official language of Jamaica and is the classical language of the political leaders and institutions of higher education. On the other hand, the survey clearly shows traditional prejudices like the connection between intelligence and language use.

Irrespective of these clear impressions, it appears that since the independence of Jamaica in 1962 there has been a significant change in attitudes towards JP. Increasing linguistic research on creoles, the resulting establishment of creoles as languages, and the rise of positive attitudes towards JP, as a means of ethnic identity, socio-cultural expression, and an economic factor, considerably lifted the image of JP (cf. MoEY&C, 2001, p. 8) and contributed to a pressure on the state to accommodate the use of JP in a wider range of official contexts (cf. Devonish, 2008, p. 629), e.g. in school or court (cf. Francis, 2008a – report on the training of JP interpreters for assistance before the court). Nevertheless, this development did not lead to more definiteness in the conceptual separation of JP and SJE in society.

Rather, the rising acceptance of JP, paradoxically, leads to more problems in separating the two individual languages. For instance, in the classroom situation it is not uncommon for teachers to implicitly switch between varieties of SJE and JC (code-switching) more or less frequently in order to contribute to the comprehension of students with native JC background, who might not understand the issue otherwise (cf. Morren & Morren, 2007, p. 3). This, naturally, can lead to confusion when it comes to the necessary separation of JP and SJE.

4. Language Policy and Planning

The changing language situation of the last decades led to an increasing difficulty to identify JP and SJE as two individual languages. Only a minority of the mostly JP native speaking children can be claimed competent in both standard JP and SJE forms. As a result a problematic classroom situation evolved for native JP students learning SJE. In response, the Jamaican Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture (MoEY&C) set up a Language Education Policy for the improvement of the language and literacy competencies of students. The general notion of such a policy can be seen in the definition by the MoEY&C of the language policy "[a]s a set of principles agreed on by stakeholders, enabling decision making about language and literacy issues in the formal education system at all levels: early childhood, primary, secondary, and the teacher segment of the tertiary level" (MoEY&C, 2001, p. 6).

4.1. The Language Education Policy

In 2001 the MoEY&C officially postulated the necessity for intervening in the language situation of Jamaica because of the "unsatisfactory performance of students in language and literacy at all levels of the Jamaican educational system, and its accompanying effects on language competence and on the potential for human development in the wider society" (MoEY&C, 2001, p. 4). This, however, is not a new insight, as already Miller (1981, p. 373) states that according to several studies in the 1960s about 50-60% of the students at the age of 12, and in 1972 about 40% of the population over 15 years were functionally illiterate, with regard to SJE naturally. It seems that ever since Jamaica became independent in 1962, "[t]he fact of this low achievement has been a perpetual concern of educationists, politicians and the public at large" (Miller, 1981, p. 373).

Accordingly, from 1964 until 1975 three research projects on language teaching and acquisition in the Jamaican classroom situation were conducted, with the primary aim of providing "an empirical base for improving both the learning and teaching of standard English in Jamaican schools" (ibid.). Already in 1988, the general language policy of the MoEY&C was recognised as an attempt to significantly raise students' proficiency in the reading and writing of SJE (cf. Shields, 2006, p. 8f.). The same holds for the official Language Education Policy (LEP), which was formulated in 2001 "[i]n an attempt, once again, to provide solutions while responding appropriately to developing trends in the Caribbean and beyond" (MoEY&C, 2001, p. 4), since "50% of learners consistently fail to achieve established passing levels" (ibid.).

In theory, the MoEY&C considered the following options as

imaginable for education policy in the Jamaican situation. Those are the same which Craig (1980/2008) created as general options for education policy in creole societies:

1 *Monolingualism in the standard, official language* in schools. In this option, the pidgin/creole is officially ignored.

2 *Transitional bilingualism*, in which the pidgin/creole is used in early education, only to the extent that is necessary for allowing the official language to become the medium of instruction.

3 *Monoliterate bilingualism*, in which the pidgin/creole and the official language are both developed for aural-oral skills, but literacy is aimed at only the official language.

4 *Partial bilingualism*, in which aural-oral skills and literacy are developed in both languages, but for a wider range of purposes in the official language than in the pidgin/creole.

5 *Full bilingualism*, in which all skills are developed in both languages for all purposes in all domains.

6 *Monolingualism in the pidgin/creole*. In this option, the pidgin/ creole is the only language developed for literacy, and it is used for all purposes in all domains.

Figure 6: Typology of education-policy options (Craig, 2008, p. 600, cf. Craig, 1980)

For detailed information on the choice of option and resulting socio-cultural and linguistic effects please see Craig (1980). In practice, there seem to be several factors responsible for the tendency to disfavour options 1 and 2 (Craig, 2008, p. 600f.): (1) research has shown that it is useful for the cognitive and social development of children to speak in a free and frequent manner, which implies that this initially has to take place in their native language; (2) there is growing acceptance of creoles in official contexts (e.g. political forums) and (3) there is growing acceptance beyond social class boundaries; (4) the traditional education policy of monolingualism seems to have constantly resulted in inappropriate achievement. In addition, Craig (2008, p. 602) identifies practical boundaries also in the other direction: because of the remaining need of keeping the traditional standard language in use in certain domains, like higher education and international interaction, and the lack of financial resources to develop educational material for the creole language, option 6 (monolingualism in the creole) and to some extent option 5 (full bilingualism) could be understood unsuitable for creole countries.

Hence, monoliterate bilingualism (option 3) and partial bilingualism (option 4) seem to represent the most realistic scenarios for educational language policy in creole situations in general, and in the Jamaican context in particular. While the MoEY&C identifies the options 4 and 5 as desirable, it mentions several reasons why these are unfeasible in the current situation. Firstly, there was no convention for an orthographic system for JP. Secondly, the financial situation did not allow for a widespread introduction of new material for language learning. And thirdly, it is claimed that there were problematic social and political attitudes towards JP as a language of instruction (cf. MoEY&C, 2001, p. 24). Therefore, the official LEP favours an adopted version of the third of Craig's options: "Maintain SJE as the official language and promote basic communication through the oral use of the home language in the early years (eg. K – 3) while facilitating the development of literacy in English" (MoEY&C, 2001, p. 23).

Unfortunately, there is no information on the factual impact of the LEP on the Jamaican educational system. Though, the LEP of 2001 may be a starting point for action to improve students' achievement of literacy (in SJE), it remains arguable if the programme of oral use of JP will cause a significant change in the recognition of JP and SJE as separate languages. The awareness of two distinct language systems seems to be a crucial point, but without having standardised versions of both languages, e.g. through conventional and taught orthographic systems, it seems to be a complicated enterprise. Although there always were reservations against JP as a medium of educational instruction, a majority seems to want to have a bilingual school system:

Table 16: Which school would be better for the Jamaican child (N=1,000)	
	Frequency (%)
The English Only School	*288 (28.9%)*
The English and Patwa School	*708 (71.1%)*

Figure 7: Use of Patwa in educational institutions (JLU, 2005, p. 32)

In response to the LEP of the MoEY&C, the Jamaican Language Unit (JLU, Department of Language, Linguistics and Philosophy of the University of the West Indies, Mona) started a project for the examination of the possibility and the results of bilingual education in Jamaican schools.

4.2. The Bilingual Education Project

In 2004 the Bilingual Education Project (BEP) was started under the guidance of the JLU. The four-year pilot project was established in order to analyse the effect of assigning equal status to SJE and JP in the classroom situation as well as the impact on learners' results by being taught both languages (cf. Morren & Morren, 2007, p. 3). "Teaching literacy in Jamaican and separately in English and using each of these languages separately as subject areas and medium of instruction, will give students the means to distinguish between the two. It is also fair to expect that giving equal status and time to JC and SJE in the classroom will undermine the ambivalent attitude that exists towards Jamaican and promote high self-esteem and value for their own first language experiences" (JLU, 2008).

The main goals, increase of literacy in participating schools, improved results in the content subject areas (Math, Science

and Social Studies), and fluency in the use of JP and SJE, should be reached by fulfilling the single basic tasks of the project (cf. JLU, 2008):

(1) follow the MoEY&C guidelines for education in SJE
(2) translate present education materials for grades one to six into JP
(3) implement bilingual education in 3 experimental primary schools
(4) qualify and constantly support 48 teachers in oral/literal production/perception of JP
(5) evaluate and reinforce the existent methodologies and curriculum for English
(6) evaluate results for Grades One and Four in contrast to 3 comparable schools using MoEY&C achievement tests

After a period of 1 ½ years, i.e. the state of the BEP in November 2005, Morren & Morren (2007) presented first trends for the evaluation of the project. Generally, they experience, for a vast majority of teachers, students, and parents involved, very positive attitudes towards the project and the reached changes (cf. Morren & Morren, 2007, p. 4, see also Francis, 2008b).

In detail, the above-named tasks of the project either are found to be mostly accomplished (1-3), or are experiencing some delay, or are still in progress (4-6). However, the main focus for a successful completion of the project seems to have to be on the training and motivation of teachers (cf. Morren & Morren, 2007, p. 7f.), since there are some deficiencies in the clear separation of SJE and JP in the classroom and in the attendance of teachers in the supporting workshops.

Unfortunately, an evaluation of the results of the BEP, especially with regard to the achievement of literacy in SJE and JP, is not available yet. Nevertheless, the BEP seems to be on a good way to prove that bilingual education in Jamaica could be a way to reach the overall goal of improvement of language skills under certain circumstances: "The BEP should experience success in spite of some of the difficulties it encounters if it translates, reproduces, and delivers the JC language material for classroom use in a timely manner, adequately trains teachers, and encourages them through supervisory visits" (Morren & Morren, 2007, p. 9f.).

All in all, it appears that the comprehensive consideration of JP in school, together with SJE in a bilingual classroom would be able to improve the desired achievement of literacy in SJE. In this context, it would be interesting to consider psycholinguistic research, and in how far it would contribute to the above assumption. This, however, is not in the scope of this essay.

5. Conclusion

The essay initially gives an introduction to the history of the Jamaican language situation (section 2). On this basis, and in the context of the present situation, problems of the creole continuum model are stated, whose empirical instantiations lead to a complicated and harming situation in Jamaican classrooms (section 3).

This circumstance is mainly determined by the inability to explicitly and methodologically separate the involved languages, Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Patwa. Even in linguistic research there is no widespread agreement on the adequate description of the Jamaican language situation. However, it might be imaginable that the disagreement on the appropriate model is caused by differing perspectives on the situation. From a structuralist's point of view, while concentrating on the description of certain linguistic features of language, a continuum model would lead to complications which could hardly be handled (e.g. in the creation of teaching material). From the socio-linguist's point of view, an account stating discrete language systems could simplify the situation insofar as important aspects of the context might get lost. Anyway, what has to be kept in mind, is the purpose of the linguistic description. When it comes to teaching issues or literacy achievement in Jamaica it is not possible to disregard one of the perspectives, if one is not to lose the connection between educational material and socio-linguistic reality for students.

Governmental organisations (like the MoEY&C) and academic groups (JLU) seem to be highly interested and engaged in improving the educational situation in Jamaica, but the governmental interventions since the 1960s did not lead to the desired results of improving language and literacy skills of Jamaican students (cf. section 4.1).

The Language Education Policy of 2001 is another attempt to intervene in the constantly changing language situation, consisting of a flexible and complex continuum of language varieties somewhere between the prototypical extremes, Standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Patwa (cf. section 3.1). It seems arguable if the LEP incorporates crucial changes of the traditional strategy of the MoEY&C and in how far this can lead to a change in the educational situation.

The Bilingual Education Project of the Jamaican Language Unit examines the applicability of bilingual education in Jamaican schools and it seems to be proving successful (cf. section 4.2). Although it formulates and demonstrates desirable goals, due to a lack of financial resources, it will not be possible to adapt the project for the entire Jamaican school system in the nearer future. However, as demonstrated in the essay there is action and intervention in the Jamaican language situation, and it will be interesting to see how the situation evolves.

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