

Intonational Phonology of Jamaican Creole

Abstract

Among the many aspects of controversy over the phonology of Jamaican Creole (JC) is its word prosodic system. In Gooden (2003, 2005) I proposed that JC has a typologically similar prosodic system to that of other stress-accent systems. I showed that JC has a weight sensitive stress system in which the leftmost heavy syllable is stressed and otherwise a penultimate light syllable. Whereas some researchers (cf. Carter 1983, Sutcliffe 1986) have pointed to ‘tone-like’ phenomena in individual areas of the lexicon, I show that the overall pattern in the wider system aligns with that of a stress system. In fact, the so called ‘tone-like’ patterns are not contributed from the lexicon as in its substrate tone languages or like has been argued for Papiamentu (for e.g. Remijsen and van Heuven 2005, Rivera-Castillo 1998 et seq), or for Saramaccan (Voorhoeve 1967, Ham 1999, Good 2005). Following arguments presented in Gooden (2003) and Gooden et al (2007), I argue that JC tones are post-lexically assigned from an inventory of discourse pragmatic tone morphemes available in the language. This characterisation puts the JC prosodic system in the same category as stress-accent languages like English, German, standard Dutch, European Portuguese among others.

Not only is the word prosodic system controversial, there has been very little done on the intonational phonology. Early descriptions (cf. Lawton, 1963; Cassidy and LePage, 1967; Wells, 1973), give only global characterizations or schematic representations of the intonation. The analysis of JC within the Autosegmental Metrical (AM) framework, thus seeks to remedy this problem. I discuss fieldwork data from a rural conservative variety of JC from 8 speakers ranging in age from 29-67 at the time of the recordings. All the speakers reported use of JC in most social contexts. All the interviews were conducted in JC and combined an elaborated interview-style elicitation and a picture-task. The data includes both YN questions and broad focus declaratives with target words in final and non-final positions.

Based on the phonological analysis of JC stress, I present a preliminary analysis of the JC intonation in the AM framework, focussing on issues having to do with prominence. In particular, I show that prominence at the lexical level is realized by stress and as such prominent syllables have no lexically specified F₀. At the postlexical level, prominence is realized cumulatively, marking the head of a trochaic foot. These postlexical pitch accents appear to be of two types, a monotonal accent (H*), and a bitonal accent (H+L*) associated with syllables with primary stress. In the case of the H+L* pitch accent, the L is typically associated with the stressed syllable, with the H preceding. There are also boundary tones (H%, L%) marking higher level prosodic constituents that are associated with the edges of phrases and utterance internally. The language also employs pitch range manipulations, such as pitch range expansion for polarity questions. The analysis of compounds and reduplicated words shows that compounds and distributive reduplications have a single pitch accent H+L* on the right member only. This pairs them with regular lexical items that are phonologically similar. In contrast, intensive reduplications have two pitch accents, one on each part of the word. Finally, in some cases only the H* pitch accent appears on stressed syllables in target words in YN questions, regardless of position of the word in the utterance.

The AM description of JC also brings a unique set of challenges since the language, unlike many languages described in the AM framework, is a contact variety. These contact languages show an array of patterns both within and across varieties, and include some languages that have been described as being “mixed” systems reflecting their hybrid ancestry (cf. Saramaccan – lexical tone and accent contrasts in differentiated strata) or (cf. Papiamentu-lexical tone and stress contrasts by syntactic category), alongside those that have been described as being stress-accent systems. Further, the variation ‘inherent’ to the Creole system is especially sensitive to sociolinguistic factors which must be taken into account in the field as these inevitably affect speakers’ production.