CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The term *West Indian*

The perception by others of the *West Indian* with regard to uniformity, especially in terms of language, could be taken as justification for the use of the term in the title of this book. For just as a person from the United States when abroad is labelled (mentally) by hearers with the all-inclusive term *American* as soon as he or she begins to speak, and just as people from the British Isles are almost automatically labelled *Englishmen* (much to the distress of the Scottish, Welsh and Irish), so too people from Jamaica, Trinidad, etc. are labelled *West Indian* (or *Jamaican*). Furthermore, to many *the West Indies* is a single nebulous area in the New World and so no possibility of difficulty in definition exists.

However, there has been a tendency among former colonial and developing nations to discard names given by others and to use one's own name. In this case, there have been no serious attempts, if any at all, to reject the name *West Indian* even though originally it was the result of a mistake. The problem with the term *West Indian* is that it confers on the people of many different islands an identity or homogeneity with which not all of them want to be associated. In addition, the term *West Indies* does not always refer to the very same islands or territories whenever it is used and one is not too sure whether certain specific islands are ever included under the designation *West Indies*. Therefore the term *West Indian* is not clear and precise.

If one were to draw conclusions from the purpose of Columbus's quest and his initial belief on landing at San Salvador (Bahamas), one might say that the whole of the New World was *the Indies*. However, the term has obviously narrowed as a result of the increase in geographical knowledge and developments in political history. From a geographical point of view the term *West Indies* refers to the islands as distinct from the South, Central and North American landmasses. There is no essentially geographical reason why the term refers to islands inasmuch as *the Indies* (i.e. China, India, etc.) were not thought to be islands. The adjective *West* was, of course, added to rectify Columbus's original mistake.

Geography also makes use of the term *Antilles*, dividing the islands into the *Greater Antilles* to the north and the *Lesser Antilles* to the east. This classification, which is based on the size of the islands and their closeness to each other, excludes the Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos Islands, Aruba,

Curaçao, Bonaire and Margarita, because although they are small they are not close to the Lesser Antilles. In spite of the fact that the two terms *Greater Antilles* and *Lesser Antilles* are used, in English the term *the Antilles* (to refer to all the islands) is rare; instead the term *the West Indies* is used. Geographically the only other group distinction that is made is the subdivision of the Lesser Antilles into the *Leeward Islands* and the *Windward Islands*. This distinction, which was originally made on geographical grounds, is today more of a political one.

Politically the geographical West Indies is made up of numerous entities depending not only on present political status but also on colonial associations. European colonial policy above all else determined the entities in the Caribbean by creating great distances or close links between the islands regardless of their actual distance from each other. European rivalry and the spirit of domination were so intense during the colonial period that the British, French and Dutch not only established entities of geographically close but sometimes disparate territories, but also sought rigorously to eradicate cultural, linguistic and political influences of the previous colonial power when the territory changed hands. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Grenada, where successive British and French administrations in the period 1763–1810 decimated the free population in attempting in turn to remove influences from the previous administration. European colonial policy has been so successful that in spite of basically the same colonial experience, in spite of geographical closeness and in spite of constant migration, the former British territories, the French territories and the Dutch territories seem to be worlds apart. To aggravate this situation there is the more recent US influence, which is not only official in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands but is also attracting the Bahamas and Jamaica to such an extent that they are fast losing traces of their British orientations.

It is British colonial policy specifically which created the political 'West Indies' and this was done by subdivision of British possessions in the Caribbean for political and religious administrative purposes. This subdivision made a distinction between the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands and the West Indies with British Guiana (a part of South America) being associated with the West Indies. The political subdivision culminated in the federation of islands called the West Indies, which Guyana chose not to join.

Therefore, as a result of a combination of geographical, political, religious and historical factors, one can identify objectively a vague association of territories in the Caribbean as *the West Indies*. This association is also maximally identifiable in sport in West Indies cricket and in education in the University of the West Indies. For our purposes, however, it is more important to determine whether this association is identifiable from the point of view of language.

Language was – and to a great extent still is – one of the major determining factors in the subdivisions of the geographical West Indies. Although migration took place across linguistic barriers, there was much more migration within linguistic barriers as the fortunes and attractiveness of territories changed from the earliest days up to the present. This has established close and extensive family ties between Trinidad, Tobago, Guyana, Barbados, Grenada, St Lucia, St Vincent and Dominica and between Antigua, St Kitts, Nevis, Anguilla and Montserrat. Because of its distance from the other territories, Jamaica stands out in this respect, but this has become less so in the last two decades as a result of the presence of the University of the West Indies.

It is evident that in the Caribbean territories which have English as the official language the people from those territories just mentioned, even if they do not regard themselves as having the same speech, would not make a major dialectal distinction among themselves as they would on hearing a native of the Bahamas or the Virgin Islands, whom they would immediately regard as American. There is, therefore, a passive perception of sameness in language among those territories previously mentioned.

Another linguistic factor of interest is the very terms *West Indies* and *West Indian*. Only the English language has a preference for these terms. French, Spanish, Dutch and Portuguese all prefer a version of the word *Antilles* and a direct equivalent of *West + Indies* is not common.

In conclusion the terms *West Indies* and *West Indian* have a specific reference and viability as far as language is concerned in that the inhabitants of certain specific territories have had a close historical relationship with Britain, with the English language and among themselves to such an extent that while admitting to differences among themselves they perceive greater differences between themselves and others. For our present purpose, therefore, *the West Indies* coincides with the following territories of the Commonwealth Caribbean: Jamaica, Trinidad, Tobago, Guyana, Barbados, Grenada, St Lucia, St Vincent, Dominica, Antigua, St Kitts, Nevis, Anguilla and Montserrat.

The term *language*

The second half of the title of this book, 'their language', is in a way like the first: initially it seems quite clear what is meant, but under closer scrutiny it becomes increasingly controversial. A brief analysis, however, will help to reduce the controversy.

First, a distinction must be made between *language* and *a language*. This distinction corresponds basically to the distinction between the *individual* and the *society*. *Language* is an ability which every normal human being has and it allows him or her to communicate not only with other human beings but also with himself or herself. Language facilitates the transmission of ideas,

emotions and desires from individual to individual and the refinement of the same within the individual. It is therefore external in the form of sound and symbols and internal as mental activity. Accordingly, *West Indians and their language* means West Indians and their ability to communicate ideas, emotions and desires and their ability to think.

A language refers to one recognisable, identifiable or accepted entity used by one or more communities of speakers. The concept includes the *production* of language (in the first sense) by speakers in one or more communities and the *recognition* by the same communities and others that a single entity is being produced. In fact, recognition is much more important in the identification of a language than is identity or commonality in the production of speakers. In other words, it is not impossible or contrary to the definition of *a language* for a speaker of language X not to understand or produce the same speech as another speaker of the same language X. This is so in the case of the Chinese language, for example. Recognition in some cases is dependent to an extent on linguistic similarities in production, but in other cases it is dependent on cultural and historical identity, especially within one political entity or country. Therefore, when one talks of *West Indians and their language*, one is talking about production which has a measure of similarity and which is also recognised (passively or actively) by West Indians and others as the same, based on shared cultural, historical and political experience.

The distinction between *language* and *a language* can be looked at as two sides of the same coin: the two are mutually dependent and determine each other. This is best illustrated in what is called linguistic *competence*. Competence in a language (i.e. the linguistic ability every normal human being has) is a result of the fusion of an innate capacity or predisposition every normal human being is born with and the actual input from the society. In the acquisition of a language, the child, unlike a cow, horse, ape or bee, is pre-programmed to learn a language but the actual language (sounds, words, phrases, meanings, conventions) comes from the society in which the child is raised.

The two-sided nature of competence is also seen in the distinction between *active competence* and *passive competence*. Active competence is that part of the language each individual produces and controls (the *idiolect*). Passive competence is that part of the language, over and above active competence, which each individual has internalised from his or her own experience in society and makes use of to understand all the other people in society. For example, an upper-class speaker in a society does not produce the same speech as a lower-class speaker in the same society, but the passive competence of each one facilitates the understanding of the speech of the other.

The relationship between active competence and passive competence is normally subsumed under the terms *production* and *comprehension*. These two are said to have an asymmetrical relationship; that is, the latter is bigger than

the former, because whereas production is simply active competence, comprehension is active competence plus passive competence. The significance of this relationship cannot be overstressed in an understanding of the linguistic competence of the West Indians. Comprehension in West Indians extends to varying degrees over most if not all forms of standard English (directly and through radio, television, newspapers, etc.) and many forms of non-standard English. Their production, on the other hand, is restricted and controlled by social and historical factors within the society.

Language and social history in the West Indies

The development of language in the West Indies has been completely dominated by the structure of the society, which in turn has been dominated by slavery, the plantation system and, more recently, by political independence. The plantation economy of the territories during the slavery period depended for its success on a pyramid-structured society with sharp stratification, as shown in Figure 1.1.

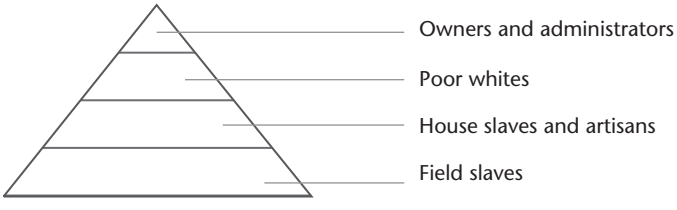

Figure 1.1 *The society of the slavery period*

The structure may be considered the only constant in a society in which the people were always changing. A high mortality rate in all sections of the population, a preference for imported replacement and increase (natural increase meant a loss of women from the labour force), changes in colonial administration in most territories and the consequent change in personnel, attempts at revolt and escape and the subsequent dislocation, post-emancipation increase in migration between territories, the post-emancipation influx of new arrivals from Asia – all these factors militated against stability and relatively homogeneous language development. Instability continues today with inter-territory migration, migration to and from metropolitan centres and general tourism. The combination of constantly changing participants within a rigid structure has resulted in societies in which there is a high degree of linguistic variation within a broadly specifiable linguistic spectrum. The rigid social structure has produced language differences between all the West Indian territories.

A comparison of Barbados and Jamaica, both of which were under British colonial rule and the influence of the English language for over 300 years,

shows that there are clear differences in language between the two countries. These differences result principally from two factors: a much greater dependence in Jamaica on the importation of new Africans, especially in the late slavery period, and a greater degree of physical remoteness from the English language in Jamaica. In effect it has meant that whereas in both countries there is a spectrum of language varieties related to the English language, in Jamaica there are not simply more varieties but more varieties more distant from English.

A comparison of the length of British rule (approximately 160 years) and the ethnic compositions of the populations in Trinidad and Guyana (a little less than half East Indian, a little less than half black and mixed, the rest white and other) would suggest a great similarity in language. It is clear, however, that whereas the East Indian presence in both countries is considerable and has influenced the language to some extent in both cases, the crystallisation of the language took place before the massive influx of East Indians. In effect it was the early nineteenth century that was the critical period of language formation in both countries and it was during the early nineteenth century that there were significant demographic differences between the two countries. Strategically and economically both Trinidad and Guyana were unimportant to the colonial powers before the nineteenth century and had small populations. In fact, Guyana did not become a single country until 1831, three years before the abolition of slavery.

A significant increase in the population of Trinidad came about as a result of turmoil in the French world and more specifically the French Caribbean (the French Revolution and the Haitian Revolution). An open-door policy in Trinidad allowed the immigration of thousands of French- and French Creole–speaking refugees so that by the middle of the nineteenth century Trinidad was linguistically and culturally more French than English, although it was a British possession and had never been officially a French colony. As the natural resources of Trinidad became economically and strategically more important, the British and American presence grew and was accompanied by many migrants from English-speaking Caribbean territories. The net result was that a French- and French Creole–speaking territory became an English- and English Creole–speaking territory.

In Guyana, on the other hand, there was no sudden and massive increase in the population before the East Indians came in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Before that the population, the majority of which lives along the coast and in towns, grew gradually by natural increase and by migration from Barbados and other Caribbean territories, principally English Creole–speaking areas. Linguistically, therefore, Guyana is English-dominated, with all the other influences being minimal. In fact, it is more difficult to differentiate a Guyanese speaker from a Barbadian speaker than from a

Trinidadian, whose language has been significantly affected in its pronunciation by French Creole.

St Lucia, Dominica and Grenada in their political history have a lot in common: they all changed hands between the French and the British before finally becoming British around the beginning of the nineteenth century. But whereas St Lucia and Dominica are and always have been in a chain of French influence (the four islands Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique and St Lucia are next to each other and for a significant part of their history were French), Grenada is a little removed from these and historically has stronger ties with Trinidad. In fact, there is more similarity in linguistic development between Trinidad and Grenada than between Grenada and the other two. The decline in French Creole with the corresponding increase in English was similar in Trinidad and Grenada. This situation, together with other dominant cultural factors such as Roman Catholicism and Carnival, as well as the constant traffic between the two islands, has produced more similarities in language between these two than between either one and any other territory.

St Lucia and Dominica are similar in their language situation today in that French Creole has remained strong in both countries and is the native[1] language of a great proportion of the population. It has been partially recognised by the parliament of St Lucia as an official language although it is not recorded in the Hansard of that country. The strength of French Creole in these islands is remarkable when one takes into consideration that (1) the same French Creole declined sharply in Trinidad and Grenada, where it was once the native language of the majority of the people; (2) concerted attempts were made by administrative and educational policymakers and by foreign schoolteachers (a lot of them Barbadians) to eradicate French Creole; and (3) English as a world language has had so much power that it has invaded even those countries not under direct British or American control. The strong presence of French Creole in St Lucia and Dominica is reflected in all facets of the English produced by natives of these countries. However, in spite of the distinguishing speech characteristics of St Lucians and Dominicans, the generally common features of Caribbean Creole languages and the constant and widespread communication in English in and between these islands make for general similarity in English and Creole English between St Lucia and Dominica and the other West Indian territories.

The political history of Dominica runs parallel with that of St Vincent, yet the two countries have different language situations today. Officially both islands were supposed to be under the control of the Caribs up to as late as

1. The term *native* used here and elsewhere has no pejorative connotations. It simply refers to the first language learnt as a child.

1763, with both becoming British around the beginning of the nineteenth century and staying so until the late 1970s. In actual fact, however, St Vincent was under British influence from very early times. This was facilitated by the closeness of Barbados, the early radiator of English influence in the region, whereas Dominica, bounded on one side by Guadeloupe and on the other by Martinique, was under French influence. However, Dominica was part of the Leeward Islands group between 1871 and 1939 and had been politically administered from as early as 1833 from Antigua. This, however, seems to have had little effect on the strong French influence on the language.

The island of St Kitts in its early history (1623–1712) was divided into three parts with French colonists controlling the two ends and British the middle. Today French influence in the language of St Kitts is practically non-existent principally because, like Barbados, St Kitts was under constant British rule and was used by the British as a stepping stone for colonising neighbouring territories. It was from St Kitts that Nevis was colonised and also Antigua. In fact, St Kitts, Nevis, Antigua and Montserrat could be said to have had the same kind of linguistic development, creating a linguistic situation today which is part way between that of Jamaica and that of Barbados.

The social stratification of the plantation system created in each territory a spectrum of language varieties. The European language was the target language, and acquisition and mastery of the target was in direct relation to social position and degree of social contact with speakers of the target. The pyramid structure of the society was therefore the same as the linguistic structure of the society, with those at the top socially speaking the European language, those at the bottom furthest away from it and those in between gradually approximating it. Significant differences between territories are related not only to differences in method of increase of population – that is, dependence on importation as was the case in Jamaica as well as in St Kitts, Nevis and Antigua as opposed to Barbados – but also to ratios and social relationships between the component groups in the society. For example, in Barbados the percentage of whites was always significant and a comparison of domestic slaves to field slaves at the time of emancipation is also significant.

Another factor which affected all the West Indian territories except Barbados was the wave of Indian, Chinese and Portuguese immigration between 1838 and 1924. The languages of these migrants did not have as great a structural effect on the languages in the territories as those of the Africans before them had done, because there were enough speakers in each territory to absorb the newcomers into the already existing language. The real effect was that since these newcomers came to act as a racial and cultural zone between the blacks and the whites and since the newcomers themselves had to learn the language of the territory, progress of the blacks and general progress towards mastery of the European language slowed appreciably. The

result of this is that today there are fewer Creole features in the most non-standard speech of Barbadians than in most non-standard speech of other West Indians.

The linguistic spectrum which exists in all the territories narrows (has fewer varieties) moving from Jamaica to Guyana to Antigua, Montserrat, St Kitts, Nevis to Barbados. In the case of Trinidad, Grenada, St Lucia, Dominica and to a small extent St Vincent, the spectrum in each case has an additional element of complexity – that is, the historical effect of French Creole.

Current influences and trends

The models of language, oral and written, which children in the West Indies experience today are more varied than in the past and some of them are very attractive. Where once the extended family were all to be found in the same house or location, today relatives live in various parts of the world, but mostly in North America, and communication between them is constant, via telephone and the computer. In addition, many children travel to the big cities of North America, especially during the summer holidays, and their (peer-group) relatives come home with their parents for their normal vacations or for major cultural events (e.g. reggae festivals, Carnival, Crop Over). As a result, West Indian children interact with speakers of other varieties of English from very early on in their lives. In the case of British relatives, whose accents are often very localised, the influence does not necessarily move them closer to standard English.

In addition to the models of speech of the people in their own household, many children are brought up on a steady diet of television cartoons, which are generally North American with a little Spanish added in announcements and advertisements. As the children grow older, they become attracted to music videos and video games, most of which also are dominated by varieties of North American speech. For many children throughout the West Indies, the language in the popular shows featured on Black Entertainment Television (BET) is very familiar and a powerful model. Indeed, in many cases there is direct confrontation between parents and children about watching programmes on this channel, because many West Indian parents see them as worthless, socially dangerous and exhibiting the lowest forms of social behaviour. Young people, on the contrary, see them as the direct opposite, as entertaining, funny and giving them their own sense of identity.

For those who favour religious programmes on radio and television, the influence of the United States is also very strong. The style of preaching and the turns of phrase of charismatic preachers are widely copied throughout the West Indies. Gospel singing has become very popular, and there are several local and regional events which attract groups from throughout the

Caribbean and North America. North American styles of singing, especially those of African Americans, have become so fashionable that it is not easy to know the identity of a person or group from the way they sing.

BET is one of the major sources of language through the medium of entertainment, but there are many more on local radio programmes in which the disc jockey is the dominant figure. On the local radio programmes the disc jockey devises his or her own variety of on-radio speech, but in most cases it is some perceived variety of American or Jamaican, tempered for local tastes. Whatever variety it is, it must be fashionable in its word choice, pronunciations and slang expressions, because the disc jockey's ratings will determine his or her success.

Within recent times the authorities in North America and Britain have been sending back to the land of their birth persons who have broken the law and are seen as menaces to the society. Some of these people have only tenuous connections with the speech of the language of their birthplace. Many of them, whose speech reflects the preoccupations of their peer groups in the metropolitan centres, become influential in the neighbourhoods which they now frequent and are imitated in speech and behaviour by their local admirers and rivals. They thus spread the jargon and communicative behaviour of criminal activity to the local communities which they infect.

Another major medium that is affecting language is the cell phone. The sheer volume of phone talking has increased astronomically in the opening years of the twenty-first century. Much of this talking is a kind of 'buddy' speech in which the talkers are for the most part expressing solidarity with each other. In other words, it is the format of the interchanges which is important rather than any significant exchanges of new information. Part of the cell phone culture involves indulging in private conversations in public for bystanders to hear. The important feature of this kind of conversation, for many, is a display of speech, which could be informal or intended to impress the overhearer in some way in its structure or content. Freedom to talk freely is in this case also a dominant feature. In other words, the traditional rules which distinguished between private and public talk and between intimate and formal talk have changed to a kind of interaction which blurs these distinctions as well as who the intended hearer really is. This development is common in the West Indies but is not necessarily copied from elsewhere, for it seems to be prevalent worldwide, or at least wherever cell phones are part of normal, everyday dress.

The cell phone may in a sense be a counterbalance to the increasingly depersonalised world. Where once, if you had a problem with your water or electricity, for example, you had to go to an office and explain your problem to a person face-to-face, nowadays complaints are made by phone in a depersonalised manner with the intervention of voices and music and pushing buttons