DICTIONARY OF JAMAICAN ENGLISH
DICTIONARY OF JAMAICAN ENGLISH

EDITED BY

F. G. CASSIDY
Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin

AND

R. B. LE PAGE
Professor of Language at the University of York

SECOND EDITION

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To the
University of the West Indies
where this dictionary was made and fostered
and to
Beryl Loftman Bailey and David DeCamp
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INCEPTION OF THE DICTIONARY AND SOURCES USED

The decision to compile a dictionary of Jamaican English of the most comprehensive and scholarly kind arose out of the agreement of the two editors in 1955 to pool their collections of material for this purpose. Up to that time the work had proceeded as follows:

F. G. Cassidy (FGC), who had himself been born and had spent his early years in Jamaica, returned to the island for the academic year 1951–2 as a Fulbright Research Fellow. During that year he read the relevant literature in the Institute of Jamaica, comprehensively up to 1850 and selectively thereafter, and extracted citations of Jamaicanisms.

In 1952, using a questionnaire based on that of the Linguistic Atlas of the U.S. and Canada, but adapted by him to Jamaican conditions, he visited every parish and recorded in the International Phonetic Alphabet the responses of some thirty informants (see Jamaica Talk, pp. 418–20, for a list of these). At the same time he made tape-recordings of the free speech of some forty more informants all over the island, telling of their activities as small cultivators, fishermen, hog-hunters, boat-builders, cane-planters, cattlemen, distillers, foresters, domestics, schoolteachers, social workers, and recording tales, songs, biographies, and so on. These have been transcribed, classified with due regard to the language status and geographical distribution of the speakers, and added to the files. Citations from this field work are given as ‘1952 FGC’ followed by the short name of a parish, e.g., ‘StC’. The extensive collections which were the result of this year’s work formed the basic file for the Dictionary.

In 1952 P. M. Sherlock, then Vice-Principal of the University College of the West Indies (UCWI), passed to R. B. Le Page (LeP) the original entries for a competition held by the Daily Gleaner, of Kingston, in December 1943, in which a prize was offered for the best list of ‘dialect words and phrases’. The entries, of which there were several hundred, came from all parts of Jamaica, and ranged from a dozen or twenty words on a single sheet of paper to a hundred or more items on half-a-dozen sheets. A file was made from these, and the originals were passed on to the Dictionary by LeP. These word-lists presented special problems. They came mostly from people of limited education, and contained many spellings which were difficult to interpret, many definitions which were not easily understood. Most of the problems were cleared up by the inquiries made by those who, from 1953 on, worked on the Linguistic Survey of the West Indies, and by FGC on his return visits to the island in 1955, 1958–9, 1960, and 1961. Some puzzles, however, remained; but virtually all the items on all the lists have been entered in the Dictionary on the assumption that they constitute prima facie evidence for some linguistic feature or other which, if not explicable at present, may be explained in the future. The Gleaner competition citations are entered as ‘1943 GL’ followed by the parish from which the entry came,
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when known. The original spellings and definitions of the competitors have been retained.

In 1953 the Linguistic Survey of the West Indies was started by LeP with the aid of a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and it was under the aegis, partly or wholly, of the Survey that Mrs Beryl Loftman Bailey (BLB) spent six months on field work in the island in 1956, and two years as a Research Fellow from 1960 to 1962; that Louise McLoskey (Mc) spent fifteen months from 1955 to 1956 doing field work in a number of parishes—especially Manchester, Portland and St Andrew—and in supervising field work done by students; that FGC paid his second (1955) and fourth (1960) visits to the island to check and collate his material and prepare the first drafts of the Dictionary; and that David DeCamp (DeC) spent the years 1958–60 as a Fulbright Fellow in Jamaica collecting materials for a dialect geography of the island and teaching at the UCWI. Citations in such cases are given by the date when the item was collected, the initials of the collector and the parish if known. They are normally in a phonemic transcription, followed by a translation where necessary. With the exception of Miss McLoskey’s, each of these visits has resulted in independent publications (see the Bibliography); the Dictionary files were however placed at the disposal of all, and each, including Mc, contributed very valuable material to those files either from direct observation or from transcriptions of tape-recorded material already collected by LeP and others.

In 1954 LeP sent out a questionnaire, to various parts of the Caribbean, modelled physically on that of the Scottish Dialect Survey but redesigned for use by local interrogators working with local informants. Some twelve of these were completed in Jamaica by school-teachers or local welfare officers, working in each case with a middle-aged local informant of limited education. This source is cited as ‘1954 LeP’ followed by the parish; the spellings used by the interrogators, who were instructed to spell words as they sounded, have been retained.

In 1955 FGC worked out the phonemic notation which is used throughout the Dictionary to represent the pronunciation of the folk dialect. This was first used in Jamaica Talk, and is given in Appendix I of that book. (See further under Format and Linguistic Introduction.)

Mr H. P. Jacobs, who had been collecting lexical items in Jamaica for many years, both from written sources and from his own observations, made available to the Survey both his advice and also that portion of his collections which had been transcribed into two manuscript books by Mr Astley Clerk. These books covered only about half the alphabet, for the period 1935 to 1948; they proved a helpful source, and are cited by the date of the observation followed by ‘HPJ’, followed by a parish when that was given. Where Mr Clerk had added his own notes, these are cited as ‘A. Clerk in HPJ’.

In 1957 the Institute of Education of UCWI (now the University of the West Indies) enlisted the aid of school-teachers and teacher-trainees all over the island, in a study designed to establish the vocabularies available to Jamaican children of different ages. The spontaneous conversation of children in school playgrounds or in their homes was written down in any spelling that appeared suitable to convey
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the pronunciation. Miss Joyce Nation (JN) collated and analysed this material for the Institute, and then made it available to LeP, who extracted from it citations for the Dictionary. These are cited as ‘1957 JN’, followed by the parish when known. The spelling of the original material has been retained.

Mrs Jean Brown, secretary to the English Department of UCWI for a number of years, gave a great deal of help in checking doubtful items and herself contributed a number of citations. These are identified as JB, preceded by the date. Smaller but valuable contributions were made by many students and staff at the University College and at the University College Hospital, as well as by individual members of the public who sent in their observations as the work on the Dictionary became known, or replied to letters of enquiry placed in the Daily Gleaner, or who were consulted on specific items. Citations from such sources are acknowledged by name, date and (where known) the parish. The staff of the University College Library were extremely long-suffering, being used as check-informants for a number of items during the editorial stages. The Botany Department placed their files at our disposal; reference is also made to articles printed in the West Indian Medical Journal (see the Bibliography, WIMJ).

EDITORIAL WORK

FGC was appointed chief editor of the Dictionary when collaboration was agreed upon in 1955. He had already by this time carried out one of the major tasks necessary—the collation of the material in the basic file with four dictionaries: The Oxford English Dictionary (OED), the Oxford English Dictionary Supplement (OEDS), the Dictionary of American English (DAE), and the Dictionary of Americanisms (DA). He had also, with the assistance of the staff of the Institute of Jamaica, made more positive identifications of many species of flora and fauna than the historical citations by themselves provided. (The Institute of Jamaica, its director, Mr C. Bernard Lewis, and several staff members—Miss P. B. Caws, Mr R. P. Bengry, Mr George Proctor, Miss Dulcie A. Powell and Mr Thomas Farr put the library, scientific collections, publications and other facilities most generously at his disposal throughout the period of compilation and editing of the Dictionary.)

Checking against the English Dialect Dictionary (EDD), the Scottish National Dictionary (SND), and the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue (DOST) was necessarily less thoroughly systematic than that against the dictionaries listed earlier. For one thing, the SND and DOST were still appearing as the work on the DfE progressed; for another, lacking any consistent comparative phonology for JC and the various dialects of English, the search for cognates was bound to a certain extent to be one of trial and error, with intuitive awareness gradually sharpening as positive results were obtained. The latter qualification applies also to the extensive searches made of the African dictionaries available to us. Help in identifying Africanisms was given generously from time to time by Professor J. Berry and his colleagues at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, but the greater part of this work was done by trial and error with dictionaries of
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widely differing calibre. To check whether one single item might be an Africanism sometimes involved the inspection of all lexical items under three or four different initial letters in five or more dictionaries. Quite apart from the fact that different African dictionaries use different orthographies and different conventions of alphabetizing, the Anglicized stress-patterns of some Jamaican Africanisms led to a supposed morphemic segmentation quite different from that under which the African original was finally located (see, for example, JOHN CANOE dʒɔŋkə-nu; BUFFRO-BUFFRO ɔ-bɔ-fûrô etc.). Again, the same qualification applies to the searches made of those dictionaries of American Spanish available to us. Both editors have spent a great deal of time—possibly a disproportionate amount of time—on the etymologies of Jamaicanisms. The scepticism of each in turn has served as a useful check on the enthusiasms of the other, so that we feel no far-fetched etymologies are advanced in these pages. We also feel quite certain, however, that many puzzles remain to be solved, and we have avoided dogmatism in doubtful cases, preferring simply to suggest a number of possibilities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgement should here be made once again to the Carnegie Corporation, since it was with Linguistic Survey funds that a great many reference works and expensive dictionaries were bought, without which the editorial work would have been impossible. The librarian of the UCWI, Mr William Gocking, made all his resources available to us, including—very often on permanent loan for long periods—the rare books of the West Indies collection; his staff could not have been more helpful or patient. Grateful acknowledgement must also be made to the Graduate School of the University of Wisconsin, which, from its research funds, gave FGC the equivalent of an entire year’s support (one semester 1954–5, one semester 1963) for the preparation and editing, as well as funds for travel to Jamaica.

Once the format of the entries had been decided, FGC wrote up the entries from the files, which LeP was pre-editing. The slips were then typed on to stencils by the English department secretarial staff (Mrs Vera Read, Mrs Pauline Lyn, Miss Sonya Lyle) and eight complete sets of the seven volumes of mimeographed material were sent to interested persons for their comments. Finally, FGC made (1963) a complete revision of the MS, utilizing these often very helpful comments and the additional materials that had come into the files since the beginning of editing. The MS was sent to the Press in June 1963.

The Historical Phonology in its final form is predominantly the work of LeP. He has, however, built upon foundations laid in the first instance by FGC—who produced the original phonemicization of Jamaican Creole—and Mrs Beryl L. Bailey, and he has had the advantage of the phonological analyses made by David DeCamp, Louise McLoskey, and Alan S. C. Ross, whose help he would like to acknowledge.
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METHOD AND FORMAT

The *Dictionary of Jamaican English (DFE)* is a historical, descriptive dictionary of the English language in all the forms it has taken in Jamaica since 1655, when it was introduced with the taking of the island by the English. The method followed is, in general, that of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*New English Dictionary*), and those based on it for the United States: the *Dictionary of American English* (Craigie and Hulbert) and the *Dictionary of Americanisms* (Mathews), with dated citations, numbered senses, documentation of spelling-forms, etymologies (which *DAE* omits), usage labels, etc. This dictionary, however, faces a special problem not present for its predecessors: the fact that Jamaican English runs the gamut from standard educated usage no different in kind from other regional forms of English to dialectal folk usage, much of which has never been written down before.

The latter, customarily called ‘the dialect’ in Jamaica, is full of variations due both to geography and development. It is not ‘dialect’ in the sense in which that word applies to a local dialect in England, which latter would be largely of the same historical descent as Standard English. The better term for Jamaican dialect is ‘creole’, the term used by linguists today, which points to the origin of this folk speech as an amalgam of some features of English with others drawn from a large variety of African languages. (For a full account of the origins of Jamaican English see LePage, *Creole Language Studies I*, part 1; see also the Linguistic Introduction below.) It also contains loan features from other European languages spoken in the Caribbean. This creole speech, or dialect, is by no means homogeneous. It exists in rather archaic forms in some isolated settlements, and, being always under the influence of English as the language of prestige, adapts itself in varying degrees in the usage of communities, individuals, and social levels, to standard English usage.

What is here labelled as ‘dialectal’, therefore, refers to any linguistic feature characteristic of the Jamaican folk in both town and country: small cultivators, villagers, unskilled and many skilled workers, domestics, market people, and many others, for whom formal schooling has had little effect in daily life, and language is largely traditional, especially when they are speaking among themselves. The sounds, intonations, vocabulary, and syntax of these speakers differ markedly from those of educated speakers, who closely approximate or achieve standard English with Jamaican differences. It is possible to separate the vocabulary, as is done here, into dialectal and non-dialectal items, according to their being characteristic of the folk, on the one hand, or of educated speakers and writers on the other. Some dialect words are of very narrow range: they would be known only in a small community or only to individual speakers. Others are widespread among the folk but would not be generally known by the educated. Others again are well known to every Jamaican, though they might not be used normally by the educated. (And there are many words used by Jamaicans, educated or not, which would not be known to the outsider; but these are not ‘dialectal’.)

It may be wondered why two such different types, the language of the educated
GENERAL INTRODUCTION

and that of the folk, might not have been separated and treated in two dictionaries, one perhaps based on printed materials, the other on dialect sources, oral or written. The answer is that just because there is one continuous, gradual scale of usage between the extremes of these types, any sharp division made between them would have had to be arbitrary, tearing apart what is, in fact, a thoroughly interwoven fabric. It therefore seemed better to make a single dictionary, putting all together, but recognizing in a broad way the two foci of cultivated and folk usage by entering headwords in two ways, those words and phrases that follow traditional orthography (or for which no other was possible) being presented in capital letters, and those which are usually or altogether oral being put in lower-case letters and in a phonemic orthography, that is, one which represents the significant sound-units of the folk speech.

The kinds of words which have been considered ‘Jamaican’ in one sense or another for inclusion in the Dictionary are:

1. Words or senses now (or once) general in English but of which the earliest or latest record is in a book about Jamaica by one who had been there or otherwise had direct knowledge of the island. Examples: ANATTA, BANJO.

2. Words not otherwise especially associated with Jamaica, but recorded earlier or later, in a book about Jamaica, than they are known to be recorded elsewhere. Examples: ALBINO, GRAPEFRUIT.

3. Words, spellings, or senses used in Jamaica though not a part of the English language outside the Caribbean. (When these are known to be used elsewhere in the Caribbean, this fact is noted.) Examples: BARRACOUTA, OBEAH.

4. Dialect words which have been given written forms more or less in the manner of traditional orthography. Examples: BIGE, JUNJO.

5. Dialect words written down by their collectors in naïve spellings, whose spoken form is unknown. Examples: LASITA, BALEH.

6. Dialect forms known only from oral sources. Examples: nombari, talawa.

7. Dialect forms which, though sometimes printed in dialect literature, have no established spelling and are known chiefly from oral sources. Examples: singkuma, pere-pere.

It may be noted that the first five types are entered in capitals, the latter two in lower-case letters.

FORMAT IN DETAIL

1. Headword. The capital-letter and lower-case entries just referred to are listed in a single alphabetical sequence throughout the dictionary. All known variant forms are entered (in capitals or lower-case letters as appropriate) and cross-referred to the main headword for treatment. Alternative forms of relatively equal frequency are given together as headwords, the one best supported by etymology, historical priority, or contemporary usage being given first (e.g. ACKEE, AKEE). Homonymous entries, when they are the same part of
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speech, are followed by small superscript numbers to permit specific reference. When part of an entry-form is sometimes used, sometimes not used, that part is put in parentheses, e.g. CROMANTY (ANT), bikaan(g).

2. Pronunciation. Pronunciation is not shown when it agrees with Received Standard English; only variants are shown. Pronunciations of dialect forms are placed between diagonals, and are in the phonemic spelling used for all lowercase entries. They are only given, therefore, for capital-letter entries. If the latter, however, are illustrated by a single quotation in phonemic writing, the pronunciation is not repeated in the entry. No dialect pronunciation is given when the form corresponds regularly to the Standard English form (see the Linguistic Introduction), but variants are given when known. Accentuation is not shown (1) for monosyllables, unless to indicate a rising or falling diphthong; (2) when it is the same for all syllables of a word; (3) when primary and secondary stress vary freely. When shown, acute accent (’) placed over the vowel is used for primary, grave (’) for secondary, and no mark for weak stress. (Note: In etymologies from Twi and some other African languages these accents indicate variations of pitch. The practice of the source dictionary is followed.) Occasional sub-phonemic (phonetic) pronunciation variants are shown within square brackets.

3. Part of speech. In general the abbreviations used in OED are adopted, but not italicized and without following punctuation: sb adv pron conj prep int phr, etc. Exceptions are the OED’s vb and a, for which vb and adj are used here to avoid confusion with vide, ante, etc. (See Abbreviations 2 below.) The part-of-speech categories of Standard English are not always applicable to the Jamaican folk grammar, where functions are often syncretized, or syntactic groups are susceptible of more than one analysis. In such cases, alternative labels are used, e.g. ‘sb or vb’. Labels are applied in accordance with the function performed by the word in the illustrative quotation.

4. Usage label. OED labels are generally adopted, but not italicized and without following punctuation: obs rare dial, etc. A few, however, are given special senses: bot ornith, etc. indicate that the word is found chiefly or only in books—these are therefore not used for information or lore derived from dialect speakers. The label ‘dial’ refers here to Jamaican folk speech in any of its forms, as explained above. (See Abbreviations.) Labels are used only when necessary. Further details concerning usage are sometimes given in notes preceding the definitions.

5. Spelling-variants. Spelling-variants, when numerous, are given in chronological order preceded by the dates of appearance. A single date indicates one occurrence; inclusive dates (e.g. 1678–1805) show earliest and latest occurrences known; date followed by arrow (e.g. 1890–) shows earliest known occurrence of a word that is still in use; date preceded by arrow (e.g. →1760) shows use of the word up to that date (the latest known occurrence). Spelling variants are not listed when they are few, since they appear in the dated citations; nor are they shown when the OED treatment of the word is unaltered by Jamaican evidence.

6. Etymology. For English words no etymology is given except to correct or supplement existing ones. Simple etymologies (e.g. those going back to a current Spanish or French word) are carried back only one step. Complex etymologies,
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especially those inadequately treated elsewhere, are carried back as far as possible. When single source-forms cannot be determined, as often is the case with African loan-words, related forms may be referred to. Etyma are given in lower-case italic type whether or not they are in some standard orthography. If necessary, Jamaican dialectal etyma in phonemic spelling are indicated as such.

7. Dictionary reference. When the present treatment antedates or post-dates that of one of the other historical dictionaries this fact is indicated by means of a date, an arrow, and reference to the other dictionary; thus ‘ODS 1829—’ for ARALIA means that the earliest citation in the Oxford Dictionary Supplement is from 1829, but DJE has an earlier citation (in this case from 1756); similarly, ‘OED →1865’ for BEKNOWN means that the latest citation in the Oxford English Dictionary is 1865, but DJE has later citations (1935, 1957). Inclusive dates from another dictionary are given when DJE has both pre- and post-dating citations. Entries that refer to no other historical dictionary are not treated in them and are therefore additions to existing lexicography. (Non-historical dictionaries and other sources are also referred to when appropriate.)

8. Cross-reference. Cross-references are made in capital or lower-case letters according to the entry form of the word referred to. They may be made at whatever point in the treatment is deemed appropriate. Reference is made primarily to words treated in DJE, secondarily to treatments elsewhere. When necessary for clarity, cross-references are preceded by ‘Cf’ or ‘See’, but any word given in capital letters, other than an actual entry-form, is a cross-reference to its treatment in its alphabetical position in DJE and should be looked up for additional information.

9. Senses. Senses are given in the presumed order of development and are preceded by digits; sub-senses are preceded by alphabetic letters. When citations illustrate more than one sense simultaneously (e.g. plant, fruit, derivative product), all senses are given together before the citations. When two or more etymologically related parts of speech are treated collectively, the treatment of each is preceded by a capital letter, as: A sb.; B adj.; C vb.; preceding the numbered senses. In such treatments the numbering of senses begins anew for each part of speech. Treatment is separate or collective according to convenience, depending on the number of senses, etymology, and other considerations.

10. Definitions. When the citation is a definition, or gives all the pertinent information, ‘See quot’ is used instead of a formal definition. When only a single citation has come to hand for any word, definition may be omitted. The citation then immediately follows the entry line.

11. Variant names. When there are or have been two or more names for the same thing, the chief treatment comes under the commonest name, and all others are referred to in alphabetical order following the definition: ‘Also (called)—e.g. ANATTA… once also called ACHIOTE, ROUCOU. This reference may come after the definition or at the end of the entry-line.

12. Quotations. Each sense is normally illustrated with one or more citations, giving, in order: (1) the date, (2) the author or informant (using short references—see Abbreviations and Bibliography), (3) the short title (only when date and author
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do not sufficiently identify the source) or the parish or other place which an informant represents, (4) the words of the author in the exact spelling of the source; or, if that was oral, the phonemically spelled pronunciation between diagonals, followed, when necessary for clarity, by a paraphrase or 'translation' in standard English. (Such translations, when they were part of the source, are given as they appeared there. Those furnished by Linguistic Survey staff are italicized. Those added by the editors of DJE are italicized within square brackets.) If the treatment of a word in OED or other historical dictionaries is otherwise adequate, only earlier and later citations may be given.

13. Acknowledgements and additional information for the second edition.

(i) For this revised edition help has been generously given by a number of people. Professor James Sledd (University of Texas) read the text very closely for forgotten cross-references, typographical errors, and similar lapses, now repaired. Staff members of the University of the West Indies who were consulted or who volunteered items of information were Gertrude Buscher, Dennis Craig, Jean Small, and Rex Nettleton. Others who sent us additional material over the years, or who answered our 1976 appeal in the Gleaner, were: L. E. Duffey (St Ann), Mrs H. T. Landale (Kgn), C. Bernard Lewis (Kgn) and Miss L. G. Perkins (Munro College). All these are hereby thanked, with special gratitude for repeated valuable contributions from Jamaica's devoted scholar-citizen, Mr H. P. Jacobs.

(ii) The symbol s in the main dictionary indicates that further information is to be found in the revised Supplement. Where this symbol occurs before a cross-reference, it is to the Supplement entry.

(iii) Information about usage in other parts of the Caribbean has been generously supplied, as far as they were able to check in the time available, by Dr Walter Edwards (Guyana), Dr Donald Winford (Trinidad), Dr Richard Allsopp and staff of the Caribbean Lexicography Project (Barbados), Barbara Assadi and John Holme (Nicaragua) and Dr Colville Young (Belize). Items known to be used with closely similar form and meaning in these territories have been marked G, T, BA, N, BL respectively. When placed against a cross-reference the letters indicate that a particular form or spelling is known in that territory. We wish to express our thanks to all these contributors. The incidence of items in Sranan (marked SC) has been checked by FGC himself. Occasional evidence from other territories is shown by the name spelt in full e.g. Tobago.

(iv) We are indebted also to the editors of the Scottish National Dictionary for completing their work in time for us to reflect adequately the wealth of Scotticisms in use in Jamaica.

(v) After the revised text had gone to press Dr Hazel Carter, of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, made a number of suggestions for Bantu etymologies for which we are grateful and which we have done our best to incorporate.

University of Wisconsin

November 1977

University of York
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