


Research Article

A Comparative Phonological Analysis of Guyanese Creole and Standard American English: A Guide for Speech-Language Pathologists

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Purpose: Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are responsible for differentially diagnosing a speech or language difference versus disorder. However, in the absence of data on particular cultural or linguistic groups, misdiagnosis increases. This study seeks to bridge the gap in available resources for SLPs focusing on the phonological features of Guyanese Creole (GC), a Caribbean English–lexified Creole. This study addresses the following question: What are the differences between the phonological features of GC and Standard American English (SAE), which may potentially cause SLPs to misdiagnose Guyanese speakers?

Method: A contrastive phonological analysis was conducted to identify the phonological differences of GC from SAE.

Results: The study results indicate differences in vowels, dental fricatives, voiced alveolar liquids, voiceless glottal fricatives, voiced palatal glides, consonant clusters, final consonants, and unstressed syllables.

Conclusions: The findings of this study support the literature that GC is distinct from SAE in its phonology. The results provide SLPs with data to make informed clinical and educational decisions when assessing the linguistic competencies of children from Caribbean backgrounds, specifically GC speakers.

Traditionally, resources on culturally and linguistically diverse populations in the field of speech-language pathology have grouped the Anglophone Caribbean population with the African American communities. This is not only true for the language but census data as well, which groups Caribbean populations with African Americans. While there are glaring commonalities between Anglophone Caribbean languages and African American Language, the languages are not always mutually intelligible, and significant differences exist among them. It is imperative that SLPs are aware of the distinct varieties of

cultural groups and languages that fall within the African American or Black designation, which has implications for assessment and treatment.

The Caribbean population in the United States is estimated at over 6 million (United States Census Bureau, 2015; Zong & Batalova, 2019). U.S.-based speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are therefore likely to encounter clients from the Caribbean on their caseloads including those from English-speaking Caribbean countries like Guyana. The Caribbean is composed of approximately 32 nations, which consist of islands, islets, archipelagos, and portions of the mainland of the Americas (Otieno, 2018; World Population Review, 2020). The linguistic makeup of these nations includes a variety of languages: Dutch, English, French, Spanish, and creolized variations of each (Ferreira, 2012; Simmons-McDonald & Robertson, 2006). While the official language of the 19 Anglophone Caribbean nations

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Editor-in-Chief: Patrick Finn

Editor: Carolyn Higdon

Received July 16, 2020

Revision received August 27, 2020

Accepted September 23, 2020

https://doi.org/10.1044/2020_PERSP-20-00173

Disclosures

Financial: Sulare L. Telford Rose has no relevant financial interests to disclose. Kay T. Payne has no relevant financial interests to disclose. Tamirand N. De Lisser has no relevant financial interests to disclose. Ovetta L. Harris has no relevant financial interests to disclose. Martine Elie has no relevant financial interests to disclose.

Nonfinancial: Sulare L. Telford Rose has no relevant nonfinancial interests to disclose. Kay T. Payne has no relevant nonfinancial interests to disclose. Tamirand N. De Lisser has no relevant nonfinancial interests to disclose. Ovetta L. Harris has no relevant nonfinancial interests to disclose. Martine Elie has no relevant nonfinancial interests to disclose.

is English, the de facto language (everyday language) of the people constitutes some English-lexified Creole languages. Scholars use an array of terminology to describe the de facto language of the Anglophone Caribbean including West Indian dialect, Caribbean Creole English, or Caribbean English (J. Allsopp & Rickford, 2012; Roberts, 1988). However, for the purposes of this study, the term *Caribbean English-lexified Creoles* (CEC) will be used.

It is essential to educate SLPs on the phonological, grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic attributes of Guyanese Creole (GC), and other creolized languages, so clinicians may implement culturally responsive assessment and treatment protocols when working with individuals from this population. While there are quality resources that describe linguistic characteristics of GC (such as Devonish & Thompson, 2010; Rickford, 1987), there remains a need for practitioners, especially SLPs, to understand the characteristics of GC. It is crucial for professionals to understand creolized languages such as GC as well as language dialects. While dialects are varieties of language that systematically differ by age, region, social status, race, and so forth, Creole languages describe the evolution of some dialects and languages (Adger et al., 2009).

GC

Creole languages are distinct language varieties, which emerge when two groups who speak different languages need to communicate. These groups develop an “intermediary language” from the merging of the two original languages, although one language is dominant (Nero & Ahmad, 2014; Todd, 1990). This intermediary “pidgin” may then morph into a unique language variety with its own vocabulary and grammar systems (Nero & Ahmad, 2014; Todd, 1990). When the pidgin is used by a new generation as its first language, it officially becomes known as a Creole (Kouwenberg, 2008). In its most basic form, CECs are the primary result of the mixing of European and African languages. CECs borrow vocabulary mainly from English and grammatical structure from African languages, and in some cases, such as Guyana, there is also some influence of East Indian languages, but to a lesser degree (Rickford, 1987).

GC is an English-lexified Creole, spoken by persons who originate from the country of Guyana or live within the Guyanese cultural context abroad such as the United States and Canada. Guyana is a small nation on the northern tip of South America, cradled by the countries of Venezuela to its east, Suriname to its west, and Brazil to its south. Of the 12 South American nations, Guyana is the only country where English is the official language (Chang, 2019). According to Rickford (1987), “Linguistically and culturally, Guyana is closer to former British colonies in the Caribbean, e.g., Jamaica, than it is to continental neighbors like Venezuela” (p. 41; in that there are substantial similarities in the lexicon and syntax of the language as well as similarities in cultural practices). Although Standard Guyanese English (SGE) is the official language of Guyana, the de facto language is GC, which is an oral-based

language with a standard written form that is not widely known by the masses.

GC is the result of the mixture of Amerindian (natives of Guyana), African, European, and Indian languages (Rickford, 1987). It was influenced to varying extents by the variety of ethnic immigrant groups arriving in Guyana between the early 1600s to the end of the 1800s (Rickford, 1987). These groups included colonists from major European nations (Gibson, 2001). The Dutch were the first recorded European settlers to Guyana in 1581 (Gibson, 2001). The British in 1831 seized control of the three Dutch colonies, forming British Guiana until Guyana gained its independence in 1966 (Gibson, 2001; Rickford, 1987). These colonists forced people from Africa to serve as slaves, and people from East Asia, Portugal, and China migrated to work as indentured servants on coffee, cotton, and sugar plantations (Gibson, 2001). East Indians comprise the largest ethnic group (39.8%), followed by people of African descent (29.3%; Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). Amerindians constitute 10.5% of the population, with the majority living away from the general population, in Guyana’s interior and on the Brazilian and Venezuelan borders (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018).

GC native speakers may speak language varieties anywhere along a Creole continuum between SGE and GC. R. Allsopp (1958) illustrates this by contending that there are not merely two discrete ways of saying “I told him” in GC, but at least nine, ranging from the most standard, the acrolect, to the least standard, the basilect. Intermediate or mesolectal versions include “a tel im” and “a tel ii.” The most basilect or distinctly Creole version is “mi tel am” (Rickford, 1987). The term *lect* refers to any variety along the Creole continuum from acrolect to basilect. For this study, the term *GC* will be used to refer to mesolectal and basilectal varieties along the continuum. The Creole continuum is depicted in Figure 1.

While there are several reported dialects of GC, the two most prominent are the rural and urban dialects “with rural speech in the Berbice–Corentyne area being the most distant from the acrolect” (Holbrook & Holbrook, 2001, p. 19). Generally speaking, individuals who reside in Guyana’s urban areas speak a mesolectal to an acrolectal variety of GC, while those who inhabit rural regions typically speak a more mesolectal to basilectal variety. Figure 1 depicts the urban and rural dialects of GC in relation to the GC continuum.

To date, there is a paucity of data in the field of speech-language pathology that addresses the linguistic differences of GC speakers. Lack of access to culturally responsive resources on the speech and language differences of culturally diverse populations such as GC speakers will perpetuate the longstanding history of misdiagnosis in the field of speech-language pathology (Lippi-Green, 2012).

This study therefore aims to ameliorate the problem of misdiagnosis in the field and increase the cultural competency of SLPs and other professionals who work with people who speak GC. The study provides a resource guide

Figure 1. The Creole continuum/urban versus rural dialects.

Reproduced with permission from Banwarie, & Wilkinson (2015). *Creole continuum*

[PowerPoint slides]. Department of Language and Cultural Studies, University of Guyana.

<http://slideplayer.com/slide/10089088/>

for SLPs (and other educational and health care professionals) who will encounter on their caseloads people from the Caribbean who are from the country of Guyana.

Specifically, the goal of the study is to identify and describe the phonological characteristics of GC that differ from Standard American English (SAE; the language used in textbooks and on standardized speech and language assessments in Guyana). While there are glaring commonalities among GC, other CECs, SAE, and African American Language, the languages are not always mutually intelligible, and significant differences exist among them. This study aims to identify the phonological features of GC. The research question of the study is as follows: What are the differences between the phonological features of GC and SAE that may potentially cause SLPs to misdiagnose Guyanese speakers?

Method

Data Collection

The primary data for this study was collected from a 127-min speech sample of an adult male and a 2.27-min speech sample of an 8-year-old, who were both mesolectal speakers of GC. The adult male speech was retrieved from an Internet source from Jesus Film Project. Jesus Film Project is a website that presents animated stories of the Bible in over 1,603 languages including GC (Newell, n.d.). The specific reference utilized was gleaned from an animated recording of the Jesus Story. Other speakers with minor roles spoke an array of GC varieties from the acrolect to the basilect. Supplemental speech samples in this study were gathered from examples cited in the following: J. Allsopp and Rickford (2012); R. Allsopp, (2003); Bickerton (2009); Devonish and Thompson (2010); Edwards and Winford (1991); Gibson (2001); Grannum-Solomon (1998); Kouwenberg and Britton (2015); Rickford (1978, 1987); Rickford and Melneck (2014); Singh (2012).

Data Analysis

The data sample from the recorded Jesus Film Media production was transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The IPA orthography was used in this transcription because it is the best method of capturing/documenting each phoneme produced in a sound system.

The IPA is the coding system that SLPs in the United States are taught during their training and use in their line of work. The research question pertained to the phonological features of GC and how it differs from SAE. A contrastive phonological analysis was completed. This analysis involved (a) transcribing the speech sample into IPA, (b) reviewing differences in sounds between SAE and GC, (c) grouping differences into categories, and, lastly, (d) subdividing them into groups to explain when a particular phenomenon occurred. The speech sample categories were divided as deletions, substitutions, metathesis, and insertions of sounds in words. Additional examples of the phonological differences between GC and SAE were gleaned from books cited above on GC.

Results

The phonological system in GC differs in many respects from SAE. No matter how much it seems like SAE, there are standard phonological rules in addition to frequent irregular exceptions to the rules, and therefore, one should be careful to avoid overgeneralizing these rules. This section outlines the common phonological features prominent in GC that differ from the phonological features in SAE.

Phonological Features

Vowels

There are several vowel sounds that occur in SAE but are not in GC. GC has 12 vowels: five simple, five double, and two diphthongs (Devonish & Thompson, 2010) as detailed below.

Simple: /i/ [ɪ], /e/ [ɛ], /a/ [a], /o/ [ɔ], /u/ [ʊ]

Double: /ii/ [i:], /ee/ [e:], /aa/ [a:], /oo/ [o:], /uu/ [u:]

Diphthongs: /ai/ [aɪ], /ou/ [oʊ]

The following vowels in SAE, for example [æ] as in “bag” or [ɔ] as in “above” are represented by /a/ in GC. Similarly, where SAE employs diphthongs such as [eɪ] as in “waiter” and [oʊ] as in “boat,” GC employs double vowels such as /ee/ and /oo/, respectively. Where a speaker of SAE will produce [ɔ] as in “boy” and [aʊ] as in “cow,” a speaker of GC is likely to produce /ai/ and /ou/, respectively.

Dental Fricatives

There are two consonant sounds occurring in SAE but not in GC: the voiced dental fricative (/ð/) as in “bathe”

and the voiceless-dental fricative (/θ/) as in “bath.” A review of literature and transcription analyses reveals that in spontaneous productions of GC: (a) The voiced dental fricative /ð/ is represented as the voiced alveolar plosive (stop) /d/ (/ðen/ “then” in SAE may be produced as /den/ in GC) and (b) the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ may be represented as the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ (/θɔt/ “thought” in SAE may be produced as /tɔt/ in GC). In SAE, this phonological difference can be mistaken for the phonological process /th/-stopping, that is, when a fricative (/ð/, /θ/) is represented by a stop (/t/, /d/).

Speakers of some varieties of GC, in an attempt to produce SGE, will produce the voiced alveolar fricative (/z/) in word-initial positions, instead of the voiced dental fricative (/ð/) as in /zɪ/ instead of /ðɪ/ (“the”). In SAE, this difference can be mistaken for the phonological process “prevoicing,” that is when an unvoiced cognate sound is replaced by a voiced cognate sound before a vowel sound.

The transcription analyses also revealed that the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ in SAE is represented in GC by the voiceless palatal affricate (/tʃ/) as in “church,” for example, /tʃru:/ instead of /θru/ “through.” This is common before the voiced alveolar liquid /r/ but also occurs in other instances. In SAE, this phonological difference can be mistaken for the phonological process affrication, that is, when a fricative is replaced by an affricate.

Voiced Alveolar Liquid

In some varieties of GC, (a) the voiced alveolar liquid /l/ is added to the end of a word that typically ends in the unvoiced alveolar liquid /l/ or a vowel in SGE as in /sandəs/ instead of /sændəls/ “sandals.” Conversely, (b) the voiced alveolar liquid /l/ is often absent in the final or medial position of words in GC when present in SGE, as in, /pɔ:wə/ instead of /pəwə/ “power.” The absence of the /l/ is much more prominent compared to the addition of the /l/ at the end of words (Holbrook & Holbrook, 2001). In SAE, this phonological difference can be mistaken for the phonological process vocalization/vowelization, which is the reduction of /l/ in place of a vowel sound.

Voiced Nasals

The phonological analyses and literature review illuminate that the voiced velar nasal (/ŋ/) in SAE is often represented by the voiced alveolar nasal (/n/) in GC as in /bɪɡɪn/ instead of /bɪɡɪnŋ/ “beginning.” In GC, the velar nasal /ŋ/ is represented as the alveolar nasal /n/ in the unstressed syllable in a word (Holbrook & Holbrook, 2001). In SAE, this phonological difference can be mistaken for the phonological process alveolarization, which is the substitution of a nonalveolar sound for an alveolar sound.

Voiceless Glottal Fricative

In some varieties of GC, the voiceless glottal fricative /h/ is inserted before words beginning with vowels in SAE as in /haʊr/ instead of /aʊr/ “our” (Holbrook & Holbrook, 2001). In SAE, this phonological difference can be mistaken

for epenthesis, which is an addition of a consonant or vowel sound to a word.

Conversely, the omission of the voiceless glottal fricatives (/h/) at the beginning of words that begin with /h/ in SAE is represented in GC, for example, /ɒndʒred/ instead of /hʌndʒrəd/ “hundred.” However, Rickford (1987) argued that what is sometimes described as h-dropping (omission of the voiceless glottal fricative) is actually the substitution of /h/ for the voiceless glottal stop (/ʔ/) as in “uh-oh” in GC. This difference is observed most frequently in pronouns, auxiliary verbs, and on unstressed syllables (Holbrook & Holbrook, 2001). In SAE, this phonological difference can be mistaken as a misarticulation, which is the omission of a consonant sound in words.

Voiced Palatal Glide

One consistent phonological difference in the transcription analyses and literature is the insertion of the voiced palatal glide /j/, after a velar plosive, such as /k/ and /g/, and before a low vowel as in /ɡjɑrdm/ instead of /ɡɑrdən/ “garden” (Cassidy & Le Page, 1980; Jesus Film Project, n.d.). In SAE, this phonological difference can be mistaken as the phonological process palatalization.

Consonant Clusters

In GC, word-final consonant clusters ending in a plosive (stop) can be omitted when both members of the cluster are either voiced or voiceless as in /brekfɔs/ for /brekfɔst/ “breakfast.” This rule affects both clusters that are a part of the base word, and those clusters formed through the addition of an *-ed* suffix. In SAE, this phonological difference can be mistaken as the phonological process, final cluster reduction, that is, when parts of consonant clusters in the final word position are omitted.

Final Consonants

Final consonants in numerous SAE words are not always present in GC, which is /rɪspek/ instead of /rɪspekt/ “respect.” In SAE, this phonological difference can be mistaken for the phonological process, final consonant deletion, which is the omission of a consonant sound in word-final position.

Unstressed Syllables

In GC, the omission or deletion of syllables in the unstressed portion of words is also a common feature, and this phenomenon is referred to as unstressed syllable deletion, as in /pʌn/ for /əpʌn/ “upon” (see Table 1).

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to identify and describe GC’s phonological characteristics that differ from SAE as a guide for SLPs. This study supported previous findings that GC is a rule-governed language with phonological rules and processes distinct from SAE. For example, the results of the study demonstrate differences in SAE and GC’s phonetic inventories. Specifically, the vowel sounds /æ/ and /ə/

Table 1. Phonological features in Guyanese English Creole.

Phonological features	SAE	GC	Example SAE > GC	SAE orthography
Dental fricatives	/ð/	/d/	/ðɛm/ > /dɛm/	them
			/ðɛn/ > /dɛn/	then
			/moðə/ > /modɛr/	mother
	/θ/	/t/	/θɔt/ > /tɔt/	thought
			/θɪk/ > /tɪk/	thick
			/ɛvrɪθɪŋ/ > /ɛvrɪtɪŋ/	everything
	/θ/	/tʃ/	/θrou/ > /tʃro:/	throw
			/mæθju/ > /matʃu/	Matthew
			/θred/ > /tʃred/	thread
	/θri:/	/tʃri:/	/θri:/ > /tʃri:/	three
			/θru/ > /tʃru/	through
			/pɪpəl/ > /pɪpəə-/	people
Voiced alveolar liquid	/l/	/r/	/sændəlz/ > /sændəs-/	sandals
			/flaʊər/ > /flawa/	flower
			/paʊər/ > /pawa/	power
Voiced nasals	/ŋ/	/n/	/mʌðər/ > /moda/	mother
			/rʌnɪŋ/ > /ronɪn/	running
			/sʌfərɪŋ/ > /sofɪn/	suffering
	/ɪŋ/	/nɪŋ/	/bɪŋɪnɪŋ/ > /bɪŋɪnɪn/	beginning
			/wɔ:kɪŋ/ > /wa:kɪn/	walking
			/drɪŋkɪŋ/ > /dʒɪŋkɪn/	drinking
Voiced glottal fricative	/h/	—	/hʌni/ > /oni/	honey
			/hɑp/ > /ɑp/	harp
			/hʌndzrɛd/ > /ondʒrɛd/	hundred
	—	/h/	/hæpi:/ > /ɑpi:/	happy
			/hɪz/ > /ɪz/	his
			/eɪt/ > /heɪt/	eight
Voiced palatal glide	—	/j/	/eɪzən/ > /he:zən/	Asian
			/aʊr/ > /hʌr/	our
			/kɑrd/ > /kɪjɑrd/	card
	—	/j/	/kænt/ > /kɪjɑ:n/	can't
			/kæt/ > /kɪjɑt/	cat
			/gɑrdɪn/ > /gɪjɑrdɪn/	garden
Final clusters	—	/j/	/frɛnd/ > /frɛn/	friend
			/rɪ'spɛkt/ > /rɪspɛk/	respect
			/brɛkfɪst/ > /brɛkfɔs/	breakfast
Final consonants	—	/j/	/mʌst/ > /mos/	must
			/baʊt/ > /bo:/	boat
			/ɒv/ > /ɑ/	of
Unstressed syllables	—	/j/	/wʌt/ > /wa/	what
			/gɛt/ > /ge/	get
			/bæ'næne/ > /nɑ:nɑ/	banana
			/əpən/ > /pən/	upon
			/bɪkɔz/ > /kɑ:z/	because

Note. SAE = Standard American English; GC = Guyanese Creole. Dashes indicate “omission” or “absence” of a particular phoneme.

as well as consonant sounds /ð/ and /θ/ found in SAE are not a part of the GC phonetic inventory. The findings also highlight eight specific phonological categories in which differences are found between SAE and GC, including on dental fricatives, voiced alveolar liquids, voiceless glottal fricatives, voiced palatal glides, consonant clusters, final consonants, and unstressed syllables.

The findings further highlight the ramifications for misdiagnosis when not accounting for GC speakers' phonological differences during assessment. For example, it is typical for word-final consonant clusters ending in a plosive

(stop) to be omitted when both cluster members are either voiced or voiceless in GC. Therefore, an SLP may mistake this difference as the phonological process final cluster deletion or final consonant deletion leading to a false positive misdiagnosis. Additionally, an SLP may assume lexical errors when a client produces some words differently due to phonological differences between the two languages, as such, the SAE word “town” may be misunderstood for “tongue.” While there are no normative developmental data, standardized or criterion-referenced assessments that have been published for GC speakers; the data in this study provide a preliminary

guide for speech-language practitioners working with the GC population.

Recommendations

While appropriate speech sound assessments/normatives are not available for GC speakers, SLPs should consider the following:

- Treat GC speakers living in the United States as bilinguals as they are speakers of a CEC and SAE with varying levels of competency.
- Refrain from using articulation and phonological standardized tests that have not taken into account the phonological differences of CEC or GC speakers.
- Consider using the data provided in this study to conduct a contrastive phonological analysis as an informal diagnostic procedure.
- “Give Caribbean students’ language particular support in terms of legitimacy and variation” (Winer, 2009, p. 115).
- “Use a focused contrastive approach to common errors resulting from transfer between Creole and English” (Winer, 2009, p. 116).
- When gathering case history information such as the client’s language history, SLPs should note the client’s specific geographic background. This information could provide an insight into the dialect of GC or CEC the client may speak, as rural area clients may speak a more creolized language variety.

While these recommendations are not conclusive, they are a step in the right direction, while what is needed is not yet available.

Limitations of the Study

The current research sought to provide a background on the phonological features of GC that differ from SAE. Based on the objectives of this research, there are two significant limitations to this project. The first is that, in providing background on GC, no linguistic developmental norms are available, as no such data exist. Secondly, while the study offers an extensive list of phonological differences between GC and SAE, it does not include all phonological differences between the two languages.

Acknowledgments

A special acknowledgement to John Rickford and Emily Fitzmaurice for their contributions to this article.

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