

Towards a writing system for Vincy - © Paula Prescod 2006

The language spoken by a wide cross-section Vincentians is often labelled uneducated speech and consequently banished from certain circles where it is believed to impede social development. Undeniably, the lexicon of Vincentian speech (VinC) draws heavily on what is commonly referred to as Standard English. Many do not recognise it as a language, distinct from its lexifier or source language and every effort is made to ensure that VinC words are spelt like their English etyma.

In all languages, there are differences of register that are conditioned by diverse social contexts. Whatever our native language may be, we hardly use the same style of speech in official administrative contexts as we do in familiar or casual social environments. The person who is able to adapt his/her speech with varying degrees of fluency to listeners or situations is said to have good language proficiency. In the Caribbean context, linguists generally think in terms of an ability to situate speakers along a continuum of a linguistic spectrum that stretches from a “lower” lect or the basilect to a “higher” lect or the acrolect, to use Derek Bickerton’s terminology. In Vincentian parlance we tend to use terms like “broad talk” to refer to the basilect as against “dicks” to designate local speech which is increasingly marked by English features.

Speakers use language to a purpose, be it to express ideas, feelings, request, or simply, to make others react. Languages therefore serve as a sort of vehicle for communication and any form of speech that allows its users to do just that is a language in its own rights. To my knowledge, no compendium or dictionary of VinC has been published but that does not strip it of its status as a language proper. What this implies however, is that like some 4 000 of the world’s 6 912 known living languages, Vincentian speech can only accurately be referred to as part of the oral tradition of a people. Efforts to make Vincentian folklore accessible to readers through publications of poetry are highly commendable. To the best of my knowledge, the most widely diffused are Esther Edward’s collections as well as the New Artists Movement’s (NAM) 1970s publications of NAM SPEAKS and those of St. Clair Jimmy Prince. One cannot forget local satirist writer, Bassy Alexander, whose weekly column in Searchlight incorporates scores of authentic examples of Vincentian parlance.

In all fairness, these works constitute a wealth of linguistic attestations in the absence of any other documentation. Nonetheless, there is at present a medley of spellings in VinC literature. This in itself is not unsettling, for there is formal evidence to show that the ancestors of our cherished Modern English, Old English and Middle English, have been the object of such

scribal influences from the 10th to the 12th Centuries. For instance, modern English *guest* was transcribed *gist*, *gyst*, *gaest*, *giest*, and *gest* before being stabilised.

VinC is a relatively young language, not more than 300 years old. On Hairoun, the Kalingas or Caribs spoke a Kalinga or Cariban language. Their wives spoke an Arawakan language. The Garifuna people, offsprings of the Caribs and the Africans, also had their own language: a mixture of Arawakan, Cariban and presumably French. Their linguistic heritage was uprooted with their expulsion from St Vincent to Balliceaux in 1796 and then to Roatán Island off Honduras in 1797. Full-scale plantation slavery influenced the use of English among the remaining population. Ebenezer Duncan declared that prior to the Apprenticeship period: “*Slaves [were] compelled to speak English. – Of course, broken English at the beginning; but it was a blessing in disguise, for St. Vincent and the rest of the West Indies could not have progressed as rapidly as has been the case, if the people spoke a number of different languages.*” (A Brief History of Saint Vincent with Studies in Citizenship, 1955: p. 35).

One can hardly attest the existence of a Vincentian language before this era and there is evidence to suggest that the language of the occupants of SVG was already far removed from 18th century English. Mrs A.C. Carmichael claimed: “*I could comprehend little or nothing of what they said; for though it was English, it was so uncouth a jargon that to one unaccustomed to hear it, it was almost unintelligent as if they had spoken in any of their native tongues.*” (Domestic Manners and Social Conditions of the White, Coloured and Negro Population of the West Indies, 1833: Vol.1: p. 5). The native tongues to which Mrs Carmichael referred were African languages, suggesting that Vincentian creole has some genetic relationship with the latter. To establish the likelihood of such a claim, one only has to reflect upon words such as *duppy*, *nyam*, *jook* (poke) and *madongo* that cannot be traced back to the lexicon of English.

In essence, the tendency to diverge from a widely accepted form of expression is not unique to the Caribbean nor is it exceptional. To take a European example, Classical Latin, now orally extinct, survives only in the form of Romance languages, viz. French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Romansh, Catalan and Romanian. As regards French, many dialects coexisted with that variety of Latin in 8th century France: Picard and Walloon in the north; Occitan in the south; Lorraine in the east; Norman in the West. These dialects still exist today albeit as regional languages while the offspring of Vulgar Latin was promoted to the status of official language in the 16th century. A number of reasons may have contributed to the ascent of that version of Latin that had undergone significant sound shifts and functional changes with

respect to the Classical Latin. Suffice it to say that it was the variety that was spoken on l'île de la Cité, region of Paris and adopted by the 10th century King, Hugues Capet.

The present spelling practices of VinC are calqued on the English phonological system. In fact, Vincentian poets and folk writers have had to resort to this system for lack of an appropriate one. Consequently, a number of spelling variations are suggested for the same word, generally motivated by speaker variation. For instance, *around* is spelt 'roun' or 'rung' in Vincentian literature.

Writing systems do not particularly take pronunciation variation into account although other types of functional and/or stylistic variations can be represented. The British have *-our* in such words as *favour*, *colour*, where the American dialect of English has *-or*. There are variants such as *fulfil* in British English and *fulfill* American English. Admittedly, these dissimilarities are not necessarily coupled with pronunciation variation. Hence, the written form of a language may convey less about present-day pronunciation than that of the past. This does not mean that transcriptions of actual individual and community speech cannot receive personalized touches. In order to show that one character uses a form of speech that stands out from the others, a writer may choose to use vowel variations, elisions of vowels or consonants and the like.

Consequently, a feasible writing or spelling system must provide for some rigorous standardisation but also for community or individual variations. This series of articles seeks to propose such a system. This is quite a tricky task because Vincentian speech can be considered phonologically unstable since pronunciations float between the basilect, the acrolect and even Standard English pronunciations quite easily. For instance, Standard English *water* is pronounced /waata/ by some Vincentians and *watuh* by others.

Many sounds are akin to those of English so that the following will be written identically in both languages: *bin*, *pen*, *pat*, *bun* although these words may not necessarily refer to the same things in both languages. In English these refer to a receptacle, a writing instrument, repetitive touch on the back and a pastry, respectively, whereas in VinC *bin* is used to render the past tense of verbs, *pen* carries the same sense, *pat* may also refer to a kitchen utensil and *bun* can be glossed 'burn'. In what follows, I shall only make mention of those letters that are differ in both languages.

Short vowels: there are six (6) of these one of which is digraphic: /uh/ replaces English ‘ir’. Examples are *buhd* (bird) and *gyuhl* (girl). In addition, /i/ is suggested instead of the syllable final ‘y’ as in *hapi* (happy)

Long vowels: there are four (4) long vowels. /ii/ replaces ‘ie’, ‘ea’ as in ‘piece’ and ‘easy’ (VinC *piis*, *iizi*). /aa/ replaces ‘ar’, ‘al’ in words like *paat* (part) and *haaf* (half), /oo/ replaces long ‘o’, ‘ure’ and ‘oa’ as in *kook* (coke), *pyoo* (pure) and *boot* (boat). /uu/ replaces some long ‘oo’ sounds as in *muuv* (move) and *skuul* (school).

Diphthongs: there are only three (3) of these sounds in VinC as against eight (8) in Received Pronunciation (RP). The term RP is used to refer to that form of English which was accepted in the “high society” of 19th century Britain. Today it is taught in British public schools and at the Oxford and Cambridge institutions. Traditionally referred to as BBC English, it is spoken only by some 3% of the UK population. VinC has therefore neutralised many diphthongs. This is not unlike some British dialects like East Anglian where words like *chair* and *cheer* are homophonous whereas RP has distinct sounds for these words. Some English diphthongs have been monophthongised in VinC so that ‘down’ can be transcribed *dung*. This brings about further homophones and homographs since VinC *dung* will be glossed both as ‘down’ and ‘dung’ in English.

Diphthongal English words that are spelt with ‘ea(r)’, ‘ai’, ‘ere’, ‘ay’, ‘a’ take /ei/ in VinC, those with ‘i’, ‘y’ ‘ie’, ‘igh(t)’ and sometimes ‘oy’, take /ai/ whereas words with ‘o’, ‘ow’ take /ou/ as in *kou*. Some examples are *hei* (hear, here, hair), *say* (say) *kein* (cane), *kain* (kind), *mai* (my), *lai* (lie), *mait* (might), *bwai* (boy) and *kou* (cow).

Nasal vowels and semivowels: There is only one nasal sound, found exclusively in the words *ein* and *kyaan*. *Ein* is the mesolectal form of ‘isn’t’/‘aren’t’, the phatic expression meaning ‘what did you say’ or the echo question ‘isn’t that so’. *Kyaan* is in fact the negative modal denoting ‘can’t’. The semivowels are identical to English ‘y’ and ‘w’ as in ‘yes’ and ‘win’. This brings me to the consonants.

Consonants: as in the case of the vowels, I shall limit my remarks only to those VinC sounds that divert from English. The VinC phonological system displays twenty (20) consonant sounds, *i.e.* four (4) consonants less than in the RP system. There are four (4) double consonants (digraphs) and one (1) triple consonant (trigraph). I shall first comment on the triple consonant.

The ‘ch’ initial sound in ‘chair’, ‘cheese’ ‘chop’ will be transcribed /ch/ to render the equivalents *chei*, *chiiz*, *chap*. The final sound in ‘edge’ is identical to the initial sound in ‘jeep’. Accordingly, English words ending with ‘dge’ will be spelt with /j/: *juhj* (judge).

In keeping with a need for consistency, ‘sh’ sounds will reflect homogeneity so that one clearly has the picture of phonological similarity between the initial sound in ‘shoes’ and ‘sure’. VinC equivalents will be spelt *shuuz* and *shoo* respectively. Still on syllable-initial sounds in English, some consideration must be given to VinC pronunciations of words like ‘measure’. The spelling *mezha* is suggested, making /zh/ a distinct phonemic combination.

The status of /h/ also requires some attention. In non-initial position, /h/ signals that there is a glottal stop *i.e.* it is as if the vocal cords are pressed together, hindering the explosion of a sound. A typical example is that of the English interjection ‘uh-oh’. This could be observed in the VinC pronunciation of the English word ‘but’ *buh*.

Lastly, the sound /ng/ must be noted as having an independent status in the VinC writing system. One would frequently observe that inflected English words like ‘eating’ are transcribed as *eatin’* in Vincentian folk literature, and throughout the Caribbean as well as wider international circles where non-standard English is used. Strangely enough, although VinC speakers hardly use Standard English /ng/ in *-ing* verbs, the words ‘sing’ or ‘thing’ are more often transcribed *sing* and *ting* in VinC rather than *sin’* and *tin’*. This in itself is proof that both types of words must be accounted for differently since VinC, and Caribbean creoles for that matter do not mark verb inflexion. Interestingly, Caribbean teachers of English painstakingly try to get their students to pronounce the English participial *-ing* inflexion. One may be tempted to think that creole speakers have an innate difficulty acquiring this /-ng/ sound when in fact we effortlessly reproduce it in words like ‘sink’ and ‘thank’, even though they do not have the same morphological components. This bears witness of the fact that we are dealing with distinct phonemes and that our spelling system must make provision for this feature. Thus, *singk* and *tangk* are suggested for ‘sink’ and ‘thank’. Word internal and non-coalesced /-ng-/ will also be transcribed /ng/ so that ‘finger’ is transcribed *finga* and ‘mango’ *mango* although, in actual pronunciation, one distinctly hears a /ng-g/ segment.

Having established this writing system, let us now examine how it applies to the transcription of some popular Caribbean sayings. The English glosses and interpretations have been provided for each example.

[1] Hu ded beri hu mashup tcho we
 Who dead bury who mash-up throw away
 =‘*There is always a possibility of finding the right action to take in any given situation.*’

[2] We ai na si haat na griiv
 What eye not see heart not grieve
 =‘*What the eye ignores the heart does not regret.*’

[3] We naa kil doz fatn
 What not kill does fatten

=*'The experiences that do not harm us strengthen us.'*

[4] Go blo yo nooz we yo ketch yo kool
Go blow your nose where you catch your cold
=*'Take your concerns to the people who caused them.'*)

[5] Mun doz run til de ketch om.
Moon does run till day catch um
=*'When all is said and done, what is to be will be.'*

[6] Foul we naa hei shu doz fiil bap
Foul what not-is hear shoo does feel bap
=*'He who will not listen will suffer the consequences thereof.'*

[7] Bluhd tika dan waata
Blood thicker than water
=*'Our loyalty to our blood-related family members is strong no matter how we may feel about them.'*

[8] Mongki neva no i saiz a i baksaid til i swalo plum siid
Monkey never know the size of his backside until it swallow plum seed
=*'One day we will regret doing something we didn't think could have serious consequences.'*

This paper sought to propose a spelling system for the Vincentian creole, based on the conviction that the mere calquing of English spellings on VinC words does not do the creole justice. After all, the English orthography was designed for English, not for creoles. Readers may find that some of the examples provided above are not instantly recognisable. This is to be expected since some words do not mirror the etymology of English. I have stressed the need for a consistent system that authentically and adequately reflects the sounds of the words we use and not be distracted by their resemblance to English. It is my hope that the proposed system will be met with approval following application and that users will acknowledge that it remedies the problem of spelling variation.