

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage by Richard Allsopp

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**RICHARD ALLSOPP (ED.). *DICTIONARY OF CARIBBEAN ENGLISH USAGE* (WITH A FRENCH AND SPANISH SUPPLEMENT EDITED BY J. E. ALLSOPP). NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1996, lxxviii, 697 pp.**

Over 25 years in the making, the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage (DCEU)* is a monumental lexicographical effort consisting of 657 pages dedicated to the explanation of over 20,000 words and phrases derived from tape recorded speech and over 1,000 written sources collected in 22 English-speaking Caribbean territories. It is destined to be a much consulted volume in the libraries of creolists, researchers of World Englishes, and most important, teachers of English in the Caribbean.

Editor Richard Allsopp, retired professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of West Indies, Barbados campus, specifies the immediate goal of the *DCEU* as the preparation of “a careful account of what is current, at least as an available basis for intra-regional intelligence... a descriptive work... that reliably itemizes the environmental data and details the current life-style agenda of the English-speaking Caribbean” (p. xxv). He accomplishes this via an intricate system in which entries are ordered as follows: first, the headword with syllabic divisions, followed by related forms, variant forms, pronunciation (given in modified IPA symbols), pitch-contour or tone-pattern, part of speech, syntactic function, territorial label (when the entry is found in six or more territories, it is given a general label of CarA, Caribbean Area), status label (level of formality), allonyms (other designations in other territories), subject label (context of gloss), gloss (often encyclopedic in form), illustrative citation (from oral or written sources), etymology (when available), usage notes, and phrases.

The *DCEU* makes interesting reading, beginning with Allsopp's thorough and informative introduction which gives a historical overview of the Caribbean territories, an account of earlier lexicographic projects in the area, and a report on the fieldwork methodology utilized in the preparation of the dictionary and the intellectual and logistical problems encountered in the same. Perhaps the most compelling part of this introduction is the section titled: "The work as cultural agent," in which Allsopp declares that: "the *DCEU* should be an inward and spiritual operator of regional integration even more powerful as a signal of unity than a national flag would be" (p. xxxi). He goes on to state that: "The weight of evidence supplied in this work should provide sufficient ground to build Caribbean pride to replace the earlier colonial shamefacedness and inhibitions bedeviling this region" (p. xxxi).

The introduction is followed by an equally fascinating section titled: "Caribbean English," in which Allsopp explores the historical development of the Caribbean varieties, probing the many linguistic stocks that contributed to the distinctive lexicon of the different territories. He introduces the term "allonym" to describe the different names or labels established in different areas for the same referent. He also describes the general phonological, morphological, syntactic, and etymological characteristics of Caribbean English. Finally, he addresses the problematic issues of standard, accepted, and formal language, and gives the following (sure to be quoted) definition of Caribbean Standard English:

The literate English of educated nationals of Caribbean territories and their spoken English such as is considered natural in formal social contexts. There being many such territories, each with its own recognizable 'standard', Caribbean Standard English would be the total body of regional lexicon and usage bound to a common core of syntax and morphology shared with Internationally Accepted

English, but aurally distinguished as a discrete type by certain phonological features such as a marked leveling of British English diphthongs and a characteristic disconnection of pitch from stress as compared with British and American sound patterns (p. lvi).

In addition to these significant essays, the *DCEU* contains very useful sections dedicated to defining linguistic terminology, explaining the layout and functioning of the volume, and glossing the abbreviations and symbols used. It closes with a listing of the citation codes for bibliographical references used in the dictionary and a useful supplement (prepared by Jeannette Allsopp) of French and Spanish equivalents for common items of flora and fauna listed in the main body of the work.

Browsing through the dictionary is like tasting a new food that is seemingly familiar yet tantalizingly exotic in its nuances. Among the terms which personally intrigued this reviewer were: *abolition payment* (severance pay), *AfroSaxon* (a black person who apes white ways), *afternoon* (buttocks), *break biche* (play hooky), *bring-and-carry* (gossip), *cut language good* (to speak a language well), *eye-water* (tears), *moo-moo* (shy or stupid person), *Nebuary morning* (never), *nowherian* (person with no religious affiliation, homeless person), *pania* (Belizean person of Spanish descent), *payol* (Trinidadian version of previous term), *raw English* (unpolished speech), *stocious* (attractive, snobbish), and *unbutton your teeth* (speak).

The *DCEU* is not without its limitations. Among these are the geographic boundaries imposed by the editor. Allsopp includes only territories that were once British colonies (with the exception of the U.S. Virgin Islands), despite the fact that English is spoken (in standard and creolized varieties) by sizeable populations in other Caribbean areas like Puerto Rico, Nicaragua, and Panama. There are also problems with the rather artificial association of lexical entries with “acrolectal,” “basilectal,” and “mesolectal” varieties. In addition, creolists seeking “deeper creole” forms will

be disappointed as the *DCEU* purposefully avoids such entries or relegates them to “Anti-formal” usage, labeled as “jocular,” “derogatory,” or “vulgar.”

However, these limitations are greatly outweighed by the overall excellence of the volume. A particularly important contribution is the substantiation of a strong sub-Saharan African origin for many compound words and idiomatic phrases in Caribbean English which have proven to be calques or folk translations of African ways of putting things. Allsopp argues that since in countless examples Caribbean Anglophone idioms are directly matched by Caribbean Francophone equivalents which could not have resulted from contact among speakers, therefore they must have had a common ancestor in the Niger-Congo family of languages. Allsopp views this discovery as sending “a strong message of genetic relationship among the sub-Saharan African languages, a message from the Caribbean of a oneness of African cultures from the Akan to the Zulu” (p. xxxiv). This is certainly a thought-provoking notion that should stimulate further international linguistic research that goes beyond the surface level of merely identifying African loanwords in the Caribbean.

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