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The Two Main Languages of Jamaica

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By Sarah-Claire Jordan



When we think about Jamaica, we don't tend to think about what languages are spoken there, because one of them is one that can be more or less easily understood by anyone who speaks English quite well. We tend to think more about the famous musicians who are from the island, the rastafari who live there, and a million other things before we get to the topic of languages.

The language spoken in Jamaica that English speakers can pick up easily is called Jamaican Standard English, and is considered a dialect of English, just like Irish English, Canadian English, British English, and more. It has its own flavor influenced by the mix of cultures on the island, but otherwise it has a lot in common with every other English dialect.

Jamaican Standard English is the official language of Jamaica, being used in the media, the government, education, and the legal system. Though Jamaica is very close to the United States, Jamaican Standard English is closer to British English in terms of grammar due to the fact that Jamaica was a British colony until 1962. However, due to the strong ties Jamaica has with the U.S. in terms of their economy, and the huge influence the U.S. seems to have worldwide, many American English terms have been adopted and have become part of the Jamaican Standard English lexicon.

In terms of pronunciation, Jamaican Standard English exhibits an interesting influence from Irish English. It still has a distinct Caribbean flavor, however, which can be heard in words like "father" and "how", where the "r" is dropped and the "ow" diphthong is pronounced in a more rounded and closed way. Grammar is the same as British English, which is taught in the schools in Jamaica. Jamaican Standard English, however, is a first language for very few Jamaicans. The first language of most people in Jamaica would be Jamaican Patois.

Jamaican Patois, sometimes called Patois or Jamaican Creole, is a creole based on English that is the national language of Jamaica. It is a full-fledged creole language, with its own grammar, orthography, and literature. The grammar of Patois is very different from that of Jamaican Standard English, with no verb conjugations that correspond to the "-ed" or "-t" past tense forms in English. Though it didn't used to have a standardized orthography, Patois does now and this has been used to write a Patois translation of the Bible as well as literature written directly in Patois.

Some linguists say that Jamaican Standard English and Jamaican Patois both form part of a "post-creole speech continuum", which just means that there is a scale of varieties, ranging from the variety that is the most different from the variety with the most prestige to the "prestige" variety itself. In informal situations and everyday life, Jamaicans are most likely to speak some variety of Patois, but when in a formal situation or writing, they will use Jamaican Standard English. Attitudes towards Patois are changing, however, and it is viewed now in a more positive light rather than just the common tongue of the people.

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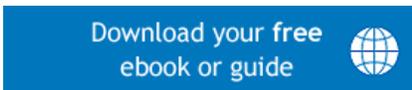
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