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Barbadian English idioms: Challenging linguistic norms in a diasporic context

by *Cristiano Furiassi**

Abstract

As a typical phenomenon affecting virtually all diaspora Englishes, also throughout the Anglophone Caribbean the centripetal forces leading to the recognition of a unified norm cohabit with the outward thrust of linguistic fragmentation – the latter encouraging the determination of territory-specific varieties of English, such as Barbadian. Bearing in mind the profound significance of phraseology for Caribbean and Barbadian English alike, this contribution aims to foreground the idiomatic features pertaining to the variety of English spoken in Barbados by means of a pilot study based on the *New Register of Caribbean English Usage*, from which seven culturally marked idioms are singled out and commented on. The conclusions reached by means of this metalexigraphic investigation reveal that the phraseological specificities generated by Barbadians – mostly through the interplay of British English, Irish English and various West African languages from the seventeenth century onwards – evidence lexical metamorphoses which contribute to the forging of Barbadian identity, hence challenging the superimposed linguistic norms of the colonial era.

Keywords: Barbadian English, Diaspora, Dictionaries, Identity, Idioms, Metalexicography.

I

Introduction

The unique merging of African and European cultural heritage within the Anglophone Caribbean yielded to the birth and growth of regional – and even local – identities such as Barbadian (see Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985, p. 232). Concurrently, by taking Baugh's (1992) words as a source of inspiration, "[t]hat celebrated or notorious 'Englishness' of the Bajan character cannot be understood without some understanding of what they have done with English"¹. Therefore, in light of the widely recognized importance of phraseology to Caribbean English as a whole (see R. Allsopp, 2003b, p. 1; Roberts, 2008, p. 1; J. Allsopp, 2012, p. 86; J. Allsopp & Furiassi, 2020, pp. 107-8) and, in particular, Barbadian English (Furiassi, 2022, p. 93), this contribution aims to foreground the idiomatic features pertaining to the variety of English spoken in

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Barbados – an island which constitutes a prototypically diasporic context – and show that Barbadian-specific idioms are prefabricated pieces of vocabulary in which identity and culture are condensed.

After an explanation of the main reasons that make Barbados an exemplar against the much broader background of “Anglophone diasporas” (Král, 2017, p. 95), which is founded on the early history of the country and its colonial inheritance, this article develops along the following lines.

First, Barbadian English, the variety spoken throughout the island, is defined and contrasted with Bajan, the English-based creole which is still the mother tongue of a considerable number of Barbadians (see Fenigsen, 1999, p. 66; 2011, p. 112; *Ethnologue*). Due prominence is given to the vocabulary of Barbadian English and the attendant links with regional varieties of Modern British English, Irish English and some of the languages originating in West Africa – all occupying a fundamental role in both its modelling and development.

Next, the sources on which this investigation relies, namely the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (DCEU) and the *New Register of Caribbean English Usage* (NRCEU), are described by highlighting both their pan-Caribbean essence and their emphasis on “linguistic fragmentation” (Furiassi, 2014, p. 91), namely the existence of different Englishes within the Caribbean archipelago, including Barbadian. A further section is devoted to how idiomatic phrases belonging to Barbadian English were extracted from these lexicographic tools. In fact, as for the methodology adopted, the quantitative part of the analysis is limited to the NRCEU, which, being also available in electronic form, allows for the semi-automatic extraction of relevant entries.

Finally, a pilot selection of seven idioms of noteworthy cultural weight – none of which is found in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* or the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online* – is considered: each of them is discussed in relation to their origin, their ability to act as identity markers and their connection to the diasporic components of Barbadian English itself. The paramount role played by phraseology in the speech of Barbadians, with special reference to proverbs, had already been emphasized by Cruickshank (1916, pp. 58-9) more than a century ago in possibly the first published work on the topic²:

[...] an illuminative part is played by the proverb. [...] a proverb will convey one’s meaning in half the time taken by a more literal method of narration. The saying is true. A proverb lets the hearer into the speaker’s meaning quickly.

Though limited to qualitative implications (and speculations), the ultimate goal of this piece of research is to confirm that the colonial imprint – impossible to ignore – is reflected upon the idiomatic phrases recorded herein. Furthermore, since “English [...] provides diasporans with a new set of coordinates [...]” (Král, 2019, p. 841), an additional aim is to determine whether the idioms that Barbadians employ represent a challenge to the norms initially set by British colonists.

2

Barbados as a prototypical diasporic context

Among the variegated nomenclature applied over time by different scholars to varieties of English spoken around the world³, the label “diaspora English”, devised by Král (2017, pp. 99, 100), is not only among the most recent ones but also appears to be the most overarching:

“Diaspora English” [...] brings together newcomers, those who have recently become speakers of the English language (sometimes gradually but also more brutally), and people who grew up speaking English in former colonies and for whom English is an instrument of communication but also a professional language or one in which one socialises. It may not be a home language, but it is a real language nonetheless in which one loves, mourns and feels [...].

In this respect, Barbados constitutes an exemplary locale, where the vicissitudes of both settlers and forcibly displaced peoples intertwine with the transplantation of their respective languages (see Myrick *et al.*, 2020, pp. 1469, 1482). In Leitner’s (2015, p. 163) words, “[i]slands became [...] worlds of their own or transit but worlds with an identity”. Indeed, the extent to which English changed and acquired a new identity due to the gathering of various speech communities in one island does raise the overarching question of whether the language varieties spoken by diasporic populations act as “a tool of redefinition” (Král, 2009, p. 127) or as “a tool of resistance” (Král, 2009, p. 156) – or both.

As a case in point, at the core of Barbadian English lies the legacy of the forced diaspora of both Irish indentured servants and, later, West Africans via the transatlantic slave trade, which entered the existing social vacuum anteceding the colonization of the island by the British. The early inhabitants of Barbados were in fact a succession of Taino and Kalinago, who migrated there from South America. However, Kalinago settlement disappeared at the beginning of the sixteenth century as many of them fell victim to the slave-raiding missions conducted by the Spanish throughout the Caribbean (see Beckles, 2006, p. 8).

Barbados, first reached by British ships in 1625, was officially settled in 1627 and soon became known as the “Tobacco Island” (O’Callaghan, 2000, pp. 33, 53); it was indeed between 1628 and 1629 that over 2,500 “young gentlemen” from England, devoted to tobacco farming, transferred there (O’Callaghan, 2000, pp. 66-7). These planters, who were not acquainted with manual labor and lacked both the skills and the will to work the land themselves, decided to recruit indentured manpower in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland (see O’Callaghan, 2000, pp. 70, 206; Blake, 2004, p. 502; Myrick *et al.*, 2020, p. 1482). However, in the aftermath of the “Sugar Revolution” (O’Callaghan, 2000, p. 93; Beckles, 2006, p. 27), which took place in 1644, the economic interests of the island shifted from tobacco cultivation to sugar production – and Barbados was ergo renamed the “Sugar Island” (O’Callaghan, 2000, p. 92). At this point in time, the workforce available proved insufficient and was

rapidly incremented by the importation of slaves from Africa (see Myrick *et al.*, 2020, p. 1482). This increase in free labor nonetheless turned out to be inadequate to sustain the plantation economy. Therefore, the deportation practice of Oliver Cromwell (see Hickey, 2004, p. 329) – a repercussion of the English Civil War (1642-1651) – turned Barbados into “a convenient dumping ground for prisoners of war, Gypsies, Irish rebels, prostitutes, and petty criminals” (O’Callaghan, 2000, p. 93), to which religious dissenters, mostly Catholic priests, must be added (see O’Callaghan, 2000, p. 62).

As far as demographics are concerned, historians (see Dunn, 1972, p. 87; Beckles, 2006, p. 39; Watson, 2011) demonstrate that the black population of Barbados has gradually increased since the beginning of British rule at the expense of whites. According to Watson (2011), by 1786 the white population of Barbados amounted to 16,167 units, i.e. 21%, whereas the black majority was estimated to be 62,115, i.e. 79%. It is also worth noticing that “[b]y 1817, only 7 per cent of black Barbadians were African born” (Beckles, 2006, p. 40). Present-day statistics are not too distant from the above figures, hence confirming this trend. As a matter of fact, the *2010 Population and Housing Census* records that the “estimated resident population” of Barbados consists of 277,821 individuals, ethnically distributed as follows (Browne 2013: i, 51): 92.45% black, 3.11% mixed, 2.71% white, 1.34% East Indian, 0.07 Oriental, 0.05% Middle Eastern, 0.1% other and 0.17% not stated⁴.

In greater detail, it is estimated that between 1627 and 1807, the year in which the slave trade ceased, approximately 387,000 enslaved West Africans were forcibly transplanted to Barbados (see Watson, 2011): they mostly came from the Gold Coast and the Bight of Benin, especially the contemporary states of Ghana, Togo, Benin (then Dahomey) and (western) Nigeria (see Beckles, 2006, p. 40). As regards Irish indentured servants, although consensus on the exact numbers has been hardly reached, O’Callaghan (2000, p. 85) maintains that “probably 50,000 in all were transported in the five years between 1652 and 1657”⁵.

The logical inference that can be made from the historical events described and the data presented so far is that – likely with the exception of British landowners – English laborers, Irish indentured servants and transplanted West African slaves were in close contact with each other on Barbadian plantations (see Rickford, 1986, p. 251; Winford, 2003, p. 314). Without doubt, this distinctive condition had obvious consequences on the diasporic variety of English spoken nowadays throughout the island.

3

Barbadian English and the origins of its vocabulary

The entry *Barbadian English*, only added to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* in September 2021 (Salazar, 2021), is defined as “[t]he English language as spoken or written in Barbados or by Barbadians”. On the whole, the speech community of Barbados employs a language variety which is considerably closer to British English if compared to other geographical varieties of (world and Caribbean) English (see Van

Herk, 2003, p. 261; Hickey, 2004, p. 333): the reasons for such proximity are possibly ascribable to the fact that “Barbados enjoyed (*sic*) unbroken English contact from the 1620s which was always close and intense” (Alleyne, 1971, p. 181).

Even though the official language of Barbados is English or, more precisely, Barbadian English, most residents also speak Bajan or, less appropriately, Bajan dialect, an English-based creole influenced by various West African languages (see Blake, 2004, p. 501). Although Bajan may be viewed as the closest creole to English in the Caribbean, it is not mutually intelligible by proficient or native Anglophones but should be classified as a new language creation (see Furiassi, 2022, p. 92). All in all, the border between Bajan and Barbadian English is rarely clear-cut (see Furiassi, 2022, p. 101), a fact which may be explained by the “mesolectal” (Rickford & Blake, 1990, p. 258; Gibson, 1996, p. 41) or “intermediate” (Winford, 2000, p. 215; 2003, p. 313) creole status of Bajan, in turn motivated by its closeness to its superstratum, namely English itself. However, in everyday conversations held island-wide, bilingualism is apparent: while Barbadian English is employed in formal contexts, Bajan is used in informal encounters. Barbadian English and Bajan have hitherto worked in a diglossic fashion along a creole continuum (see Fenigsen, 1999, pp. 65-6; 2003, p. 461; 2011, pp. III-2).

Alongside virtually all regional varieties of English spoken in the Caribbean, Barbadian English has also sprung from the “colonial lag” (Gramley, 2001, p. 82), that is through the isolation generated by the topographic collocation of Barbados. As a consequence, Barbadian English vocabulary is characterized by the following features – among several others (see Gramley, 2001, p. 82; R. Allsopp, 2003b, pp. L-LI; Williams, 2019): on the one hand, when referring to the superstratum, retentions from British, Scottish and Irish dialects are to be found; on the other hand, if the substratum is considered, African survivals are present.

As for the former aspect, namely the lexifier sources, the provenance of Barbadian English vocabulary can be traced chiefly to diatopic varieties of Modern English originating in the British Isles. Besides, maritime British-based jargon (see Hancock, 1980, pp. 22, 29) as well as *diastrata* proper to the lower classes in general are at play. Among the regional varieties of British English encountered in Barbados over nearly four centuries of British rule, emphasis lies on the speech of Southeast England (see Straw & Patrick, 2007, p. 387), the West Country in Southwest England (mostly Somerset and Bristol), London (see Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985, p. 39; Rickford, 1986, p. 252), Suffolk in East Anglia (see Braña-Straw, 2007, p. 6) and Nottinghamshire in the East Midlands (see Fenigsen, 2007, p. 233). Moreover, as already hinted at in the previous section, a paramount role is played by Irish English (see Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985, p. 38; Görlach & Holm, 1986, p. IX; Rickford, 1986, pp. 251-3; Hickey, 2004, p. 331; Straw & Patrick, 2007, p. 387), as confirmed by Richard Allsopp’s (2003b, p. XLIII) commentary on the matter:

Irish influence, through the early ‘barbadoesing’ (a unique place-name verb in the English language) of post-Cromwellian bond-servants and their being quartered next to slaves, played

the particular role of distinguishing Barbadian pronunciation of English; and ultimately from that base Irish English played a wider lexical role, especially in idiomatic input, in general Caribbean English.

Finally, though to a minor extent, remains of Scots dialects (see Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985, p. 38; Görlach & Holm, 1986, p. ix; Rickford, 1986, p. 252; Roy, 1986, p. 143) and Welsh (see Roy, 1986, p. 143; O’Callaghan, 2000, pp. 70, 206) are also encountered⁶.

As far as the latter characteristic is concerned, that is substrate influence, Barbadian English is affected by the Sub-Saharan languages and dialects mostly ascribable to the Niger-Congo family spoken along the west coast of Africa, mainly in the regions corresponding to present-day Ghana and Nigeria (see Beckles, 2006, p. 40; Watson, 2011). In regard to Ghanian provenance, Asante (or Ashanti, Ashante and Asante) and Fante (or Fanti, Fantse and Mfantse) – dialects of Akan collectively known as Twi – in addition to Ewe and Fon – both belonging to the Gbe languages – deserve to be mentioned. With reference to Nigerian sources, Yoruba, Efik, Igbo (or Ibo) and Ibibio must be taken into account⁷.

In light of the above considerations, there seem to be dissimilar views within the academic community on the question of language in Barbados and especially “the capacity of the English language to bear the burden of the colonial experience” (Král, 2009, p. 125). Whereas some linguists, such as Alleyne (1971, p. 181), lament the fact that certain conditions “favoured the greatest departure from African modes of life”, other scholars, such as Greene (1987, p. 244), believe quite the opposite:

Africanization of white language provided evidence of powerful cultural influences of blacks upon whites and illustrated the extent to which white Britons in Barbados were coming to terms with slavery and with the black majority among whom they lived.

4

Data sources: the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* and the *New Register of Caribbean English Usage*

In order to detect the idiomatic facets of Barbadian English, it is necessary to resort to the two most authoritative contributions to contemporary Caribbean English lexicography, namely the *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (DCEU) and the *New Register of Caribbean English Usage* (NRCEU). The former, the DCEU, originally published in 1996 by Oxford University Press and reprinted in 2003 by the University of the West Indies Press, lists over 20,000 entries; as far as their collection is concerned, “there had been a cut-off point in data-editing in 1992” (R. Allsopp, 2010, p. xi). The latter, the NRCEU, a supplement of about 700 entries concluded in 2007, was published in 2010 in order to account for “a decade and a half – some fifteen years! – of accumulated additional Caribbean lexicon” (R. Allsopp, 2010, p. xi).

As already discussed in detail by Furiassi (2014, pp. 93-4; 2022, p. 94) and J. Allsopp & Furiassi (2020, pp. 113-4), the *DCEU* and the *NRCEU* are both “descriptive” and “prescriptive” (R. Allsopp, 2003a, pp. xxv, xxvi): while laying the foundations for a pan-Caribbean English norm, they also aim to pinpoint its regional variation by providing their users with a record of the current varieties of English spoken in the Caribbean archipelago, Guyana and Belize.

On this matter, virtually all entries listed in the above-mentioned lexicographic resources are supplied with “territorial codes” (R. Allsopp, 2010, p. xix), that is “[a]bbreviated **Territorial Label(s)** identifying the place(s) in which the Entry-item is current” (R. Allsopp, 2003b, p. lxv). The “Caribbean territories” (R. Allsopp, 2003b, p. lxix) accounted for in the *DCEU* and the *NRCEU* and their respective abbreviations are the following, listed in alphabetical order: Angu (Anguilla), Antg (Antigua), Baha (Bahamas), Bdos (Barbados), Belz (Belize), Berm (Bermuda), Brbu (Barbuda), BrVi (British Virgin Islands), CayI (Cayman Islands), Crcu (Carriacou), Dmca (Dominica), Gren (Grenada), Grns (Grenadines), Guyn (Guyana), Jmca (Jamaica), Mrat (Montserrat), Nevs (Nevis), Panm (Panama), PtRi (Puerto Rico), Srmn (Suriname), StKt (St Kitts), StLu (St Lucia), StVn (St Vincent), Tbgo (Tobago), TkCa (Turks and Caicos), Trin (Trinidad), USVI (US Virgin Islands) and ViIs (Virgin Islands, i.e. both British and American).

With specific reference to the diaspora English of Barbadians, the *DCEU* and the *NRCEU* are therefore assumed to list only those entries that belong to Barbadian English, the variety of English spoken in Barbados, and disregard the ones which apply to the English-based creole widespread on the island, that is Bajan.

5

Methodology: extracting Barbadian English idioms from the *NRCEU*

The extraction of Barbadian idioms from the *DCEU* and the *NRCEU* relies on the presence of the territorial code “Bdos” (R. Allsopp, 2003b, p. lxix; 2010, p. xix), i.e. Barbados, attached to all the entries characterizing Barbadian English, and the combination of the abbreviations “id” (R. Allsopp, 2003b, p. lxxi; 2010, p. xviii), i.e. idiomatic, and “phr” (R. Allsopp, 2003b, p. lxxi; 2010, p. xix), i.e. phrase, featured in some of the lemmas listed in the dictionaries considered.

The initial intent of this study was to analyze typically Barbadian idiomatic phrases by inspecting both the *DCEU* and the *NRCEU*. However, for the sake of feasibility, it was decided to limit the scope of the present investigation to the *NRCEU*: as the *DCEU*, only available in print, accounts for approximately 20,000 entries, it did not seem realistic to manually check its entire wordlist in order to single out the entries which included both the territorial code “Bdos” and the abbreviation pair “id phr”, i.e. idiomatic phrase. On the contrary, the *NRCEU*, whose wordlist contains a more limited number of lemmas, circa 700, and which is also available in digital format, i.e. *Kindle*, made the automatic search for the desired entries easier, hence proving ideal for the intended goal of this analysis.

Initially, all the entries tagged as “Bdos” were automatically searched for and extracted from the *NRCEU*, thus totaling 334 matches. However, of these 334 hits, only 223 entries, circa 32% of the total number of lemmas in the *NRCEU*, featured the label “Bdos” as an actual indication of Barbadian territoriality and were eventually considered suitable for analysis; the remaining 111 hits were encountered only in relation to the provenance of the examples quoted inside each definition and were thus excluded. By way of explanation, in the latter cases, which had to be manually scanned, the territorial code “Bdos” accompanied at least one of the cited examples, whereas the entry proper was not marked as pertaining (exclusively or preeminently) to Barbadian English.

After this preliminary selection was completed, the investigation was narrowed down to the idiomatic phrases encountered among the selected lemmas. Consequently, out of the 223 entries marked as “Bdos”, only those which also displayed the label “id phr” were considered, hence totaling 17, about 2% of the overall *NRCEU* wordlist. This figure was actually reduced to 16 as one entry, i.e. *it don(’t) need*, was tagged as “Cr” (R. Allsopp, 2003b, p. LXX; 2010, p. XVIII), i.e. creole, implying that it is “[a] Creole or Creolized form or structure” (R. Allsopp, 2003b, p. LVII) not peculiar to Barbadian English, the variety of English spoken on the island, but pertaining to the concomitantly-spoken English-based creole, i.e. Bajan. Finally, a manual selection of entries, aimed at identifying those that were deemed to be most culturally noticeable, further decreased the count to 7.

6

Culturally salient idiomatic phrases in Barbadian English

The collection of idiomatic phrases typical of Barbadian English described in the following subsections includes seven alphabetically ordered items which are representative of the Barbadian character, namely *burn somebody’s cakes*, *hungry and tired as Zeek*, *keep the puppy tail out o(f) the ashes*, *living in the hickie*, *make s(ome) b(ody) know the ball dat shoot Nelson*, *not/never in a Chinee world* and *pick pond grass*. In line with Fenigsen’s (1999: 65) claim that “Barbadian Standard English (BSE) [...] is somewhat distinct from British and U.S. spoken standards in [...] some lexical usage [...]”, all the idioms discussed below are recorded neither in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* nor the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online*, authoritative lexicographic reference tools representing British and American English respectively⁸.

With the aim of exploring the features that mostly reflect Barbadian heritage, each subsection begins with an exact quotation of the attendant entry, as it appears in the *NRCEU*, which is then followed by an elaboration of its content and plausible speculations about the etymology of the idiom included therein.

6.1. Burn somebody’s cakes

burn *vb tr* **Phrase burn somebody’s cakes** *id phr* (Bdos) [*AF – Joc*] To expose sb’s secret behaviour. *He was one of those used to go to that house on Friday nights till a neighbour burned his cakes and his wife found out.* – (Bdos, 1963) [Prob misled ref to the well-known Br historical tale

of King Alfred's identity being revealed when he let a peasant's cakes burn. The story appears in one of the series of "The Royal Readers", popular in school use in the *CarA* in the early 20C] (*NRCEU*)

The idiomatic phrase *burn somebody's cakes* means 'to expose someone's secret behavior', as clarified by the example included in the dictionary article. In addition, the *NRCEU* traces the origin of this idiom back to a popular folktale involving King Alfred, which, according to Keynes (1999, p. 245), "probably arose during the course of the eleventh century". This popular tale, well known in virtually all English-speaking territories, has also spread to the Caribbean region since the early 20th century.

The story narrates of King Alfred hiding from the Vikings in the Somerset marshes, "where the king had taken refuge in 878" (Keynes, 1999, p. 327), and seeking shelter in the home of a peasant woman; the woman, who was baking 'cakes', namely small loaves of bread, asked him to watch them but the troubled king, distracted by more pressing matters, forgot about the cakes, hence letting them burn; the story ends with the king eventually being scolded by the woman, who did not recognize him. Apparently, the intent of the story was to depict King Alfred as a humble man, who did not reveal his royal status for the sole purpose of avoiding the woman's rage but, on the contrary, accepted her reproach. Probably, the moral lesson the tale wanted to convey was misinterpreted by the Barbadian audience, hence the "misled" reference indicated in the *NRCEU*.

All in all, contrary to the information provided therein, it is worth mentioning that there is no trace of the tale "King Alfred and the Cakes" in *The Royal Readers* (1872-1873). However, a short story with the same title is in fact found in the *Macmillan's History Readers* (1894, pp. 11-6) and is also included in the much more recent *Macmillan Children's Readers* (2013) – a sign that it is still quite popular nowadays as a teaching resource.

6.2. Hungry and tired as Zeek

Zeek Phrase hungry and tired as Zeek *id phr* (Bdos) [AF – Joc] As exhausted as you could be. *And then as I said before back home to Dalkeith and my father's uncaring grace before (before meals) while my brothers and I remained as hungry and tired as Zeek.* – AdV (2003.12.25, p.25) [A surviving catch phrase (like 'tired as hell') but of unknown origin] (*NRCEU*)

The idiom *hungry and tired as Zeek* is a variant of the phrase *tired as hell*, apparently meaning 'as exhausted as someone could be'. What seems to remain unclear is the etymology of this idiom, especially the significance of the link with the proper noun *Zeek* and its association with hunger and tiredness. As speculation seems in order, *Zeek* might be viewed as the respelling of *Zeke*, "a male given name, form of Ezekiel" (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*), and interpreted as the abbreviation of *Ezekiel*, a name of Hebrew origin meaning "God is strong" or "God strengthens" (Joyce, 2009, p. 67).

Therefore, the existence of this idiom in Barbadian English may be explained by suggesting a correlation with the hardships that Ezekiel, one of the Major Prophets from the Old Testament, had to endure while among the captives by the river Chebar in Babylon (*New Revised Standard Version*, Ezek. 1.1; 3.15). Indeed, the Bible is recognized as one of the many sources of regionalisms in Caribbean English (see R. Allsopp, 2003b, pp. L-LI) – the King James Authorized Version having been published in 1611, sixteen years prior to the British colonization of Barbados.

6.3. Keep the puppy tail out o(f) the ashes

keep *Phrase* **keep the puppy tail out o(f) the ashes** *id phr* (Bdos) To keep poverty, want at bay; to manage to feed your family in spite of hardships. *After de husband dead she still manage to go about ironin(g) and mendin(g) to feed de children an(d) keep puppy tail out o(f) de ashes.* – (Joe Tudor, Talk Show Host, 1950s) (*NRCEU*)

The idiomatic phrase *keep the puppy tail out o(f) the ashes* means ‘to make ends meet’, that is ‘to earn enough money to provide for basic (family) needs’. Even though no explanation of its origin was added to the definition, according to the *NRCEU*, the invention of the idiom is attributed to Joseph Onessimus Tudor, better known as Joe Tudor, host of the radio show *Far and Wide*, broadcast on *Rediffusion* – or *Star Radio*, as it used to be also called – a Barbadian cable radio station shut down in 1997 (see Ally, 1997; Jordan, 2018).

Although, to the author’s knowledge, this entry does not appear in any other lexicographic resource applying to the English language, it is worth considering that two entries based on the lexeme *puppy* are present in Collymore’s (2005, p. 85) *Barbadian Dialect*, i.e. *puppy-eye* and *puppy skull*. Despite the fact that they are both unrelated to the sense of the phrase taken into consideration, the seemingly recurrent use of the word *puppy* might testify – though as a rather daring hypothesis – to the tendency of Barbadians to include it in their vocabulary.

Alternatively, Richard Allsopp (2004, pp. 4-5) suggests that the idiom may have originated as an evolution of the Belizean saying *When fire out, puppy roll in de ashes* – present, though in different variant forms, also in Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, the US Virgin Islands and Jamaica – and explains the proverb as follows:

Only after there seems to be no possible risk of danger remaining, do some people turn up to see what advantage(s) may be gained in a situation where there was previously serious trouble to be faced.

6.4. Living in the hickie

hick.ie *n* (Bdos) [*AF*] An imaginary crude, rough place, far away. [Cp *EDD* **Hickey** (Nottinghamshire) ‘Name for the devil’. In *Bdos* ‘the’ is often added to place names of poor areas – ‘The Ivy, The Orleans’, etc. (hence the foll phr)] *Phrase* **living in the hickie** *id phr* [*AF*]

– *Joc*] Living in a very poor area. *They now come from livin(g) in the hickie yo(u) know – yo(u) can('t) mek them yo(ur) company.* – (Bdos) (NRCEU)

According to the NRCEU, the idiom *living in the hickie*, which includes the toponym *hickie*, means ‘to inhabit a low-income neighborhood or area’. With a somewhat different semantic nuance, the respelled toponym *Hickey*, where the initial <H> is capitalized as if referring to a proper noun, is recorded in Collymore (2005, p. 53), who provides the following definition:

Hickey, The. An imaginary country district into which good manners and genteel customs have never penetrated, as *Boy, you ain't got no manners? Where you come from? The Hickey?* C.f. country hick (U.S.)

Collymore's suggested meaning seems to be confirmed by McClellan (1981, p. 209), who defines *hickey* as “an uncouth country district; Podunk”. It is remarkable that, contrary to the NRCEU, where the semantic core of the phrase resides in the poverty of a certain place, both Collymore's and McClellan's entries center on the degree of civilization of the inhabitants of said area.

Following Collymore's reference to the common noun *hick* as the most probable etymon of *Hickey*, it is possible to find the corresponding entries featured in both the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* and the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online*: the former states that *hick*, “[a] familiar by-form of the personal name *Richard*”, refers to “[a]n ignorant countryman; a silly fellow, booby. Now chiefly U.S.” (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*); similarly, the latter defines *hick* as “an awkward, rude, unsophisticated, or provincial person” and, accordingly, adds that it derives “from *Hick*, nickname for *Richard* (*Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online*)”. Despite respectively referring to a place, i.e. *hickie* or *Hickey*, and to a person, i.e. *hick*, these two nouns seem to be semantically correlated: *hickie* and *Hickey* both originated from the word *hick*, by respectively adding the suffixes *-ie* and *-ey*, hence shifting their denotation from the category of person to that of place.

Finally, it is also worth investigating the proposed etymology further. In fact, *The English Dialect Dictionary* (EDD), referred to in the NRCEU entry, presents the following definition of *hickey*, to which an extremely negative connotation is attached: “**HICKEY**, *sb.* Not.¹ [i.ki.] A name for the devil. Let'em go to owd hickey.” (EDD). As the abbreviation “Not.” signifies, *hickey* originated in Nottinghamshire and then spread to Barbados due to colonizers coming from that specific geographical area within the British Isles.

6.5. Make sb know the ball dat shoot Nelson

know *vb tr* **Phrase make sb know the ball dat shoot Nelson** *id phr* (Bdos) [*AF – Joc*] To speak bluntly in loud anger to sb; to give sb the length of your tongue. *She mout' en got nuh cover doh – an you know she too. ... an' girl, she en was'e nuh time to leh de Transport Board know de ball dat*

shoot Nelson after she an' nough mo' people get duh beak brek las' Sunduh in de bus-stan'. – NaT (1998.03.18, p.9A, Lickmout' Lou) [The sense is 'to knock down sb.' A ref to the fateful single shot that killed the English naval hero, Lord Nelson in battle (1805). His statue stands in central Bridgetown, *Bdos*] – This is a popular *Joc* catch-phrase in *Bdos* talk. (NRCEU)

The idiomatic phrase *make s(ome)b(ody) know the ball dat shoot Nelson* signifies 'to voice loudly someone's opinion in an aggressive manner', hence alluding to the figure of the famous British hero, Admiral Horatio Nelson, and, in this specific case, referring to the episode involving his death during the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, when he was shot and killed by a French sniper. Likely, the metaphorical meaning of the idiom is established on acoustic grounds – the loudness of the shot resembling the supposed firmness of speech.

Although the exact idiom remains unrecorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* or the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online*, it must be observed that the former does include several other phrases based on the proper noun *Nelson* – with a clear reference to Horatio Nelson. Conversely and likewise curiously, in the latter no entry involving *Nelson* seems to hint at the British Admiral. More precisely, the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* features, among others, *Nelson's blood*, *Nelson eye*, *Nelson knife* and *Nelson touch*. The frequent employment of *Nelson* in various phraseological constructions is not surprising and can be easily explained by considering the importance held by this celebrated figure, who spent much of his career under the British crown fighting the Spanish and the French in the Caribbean during the Napoleonic wars.

In particular, *Nelson's blood* may function as a synonym of *rum*, of which, according to several scholars, Barbados is commonly considered the cradle (see Davis, 1885, p. 76; Dunn, 1972, p. 197; Maingot, 2005, pp. 236-8; Liberman, 2010; Laurie, 2011, p. 1; Smith, 2017). The association between Nelson and "Barbado(e)s water" (Collymore, 2005, p. 7) or "Barbados waters" (Maingot, 2005, p. 237) originates in the story of the admiral's body being transported home in a barrel of rum in order to be preserved; some sailors, without knowing the exact content of the barrel, drilled a hole on the side, so as to drink from it: during the journey, they essentially drank the whole of Nelson's 'blood' from the barrel, which arrived empty at destination (Maier, 2012).

It must be noted that the NRCEU also asserts that Nelson's statue "stands in central Bridgetown", Barbados' capital city – a statement that is no longer true. In fact, Lord Nelson's commemorative statue in Bridgetown's Trafalgar Square – renamed National Heroes Square in 1999 – was erected in 1813, 27 years before Nelson's Column in London's Trafalgar Square, but eventually removed in 2020 and then transferred to the Barbados Museum and Historical Society. In popular culture, the statue, a reference point located at the exact geographic center of Bridgetown, had served the locals for many years by functioning as Barbados' mile zero – a fact which may justify the spread of the idiom in the everyday speech of Barbadians (see Sandiford, 2020).

Considering that Barbados became a republic on November 30th, 2021, the renaming of Trafalgar Square alongside the more recent relocation of Nelson's statue are to be interpreted as symbolic gestures which represent a rupture with the colonial past: Nelson himself was indeed a strenuous defender of the British colonial system, which included slavery.

6.6. Not/never in a Chinee world

chi.nee [čaini] (CarA) *n*; *adj* [AF – Derog] Chinese. **Phrase not/never in a Chinee world** *id phr* (Bdos, Guyn) [AF – Joc] Impossible; wholly unacceptable. *I wun be happy wid dat 'cause de impression it gi' to de public is dat de sentence impose by a judge shun get tek serious an' dat cyahn be right – not in a Chinee worl'*. – AdV (1992.01.31, p.9) [From the popular notion that Chinese language and culture are beyond comprehension. The phr originates in Guyn. Chinese immigrants came to Br. Guiana as indentured labourers in the mid 19C] (NRCEU)

The phrase *not/never in a Chinee world*, meaning 'utterly unfeasible' or 'extremely unreasonable', is not confined to Barbados but is also used in Guyana, where it originated. Despite the absence of this idiomatic phrase from the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online*, the noun *Chinee*, a "back-formation from Chinese, plural", is recorded and marked as "substandard, often offensive". Similarly, in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, which instead does not list *Chinee*, the entry *Chinese* reads as follows:

Chinese, *adj.* and *n.* [...] **B. n. 1. a.** A native of China. [The plural *Chineses* was in regular use during 17th cent.: since it became obsolete *Chinese* has been singular and plural; in modern times a singular *Chinee* has arisen in vulgar use in U.S. (So sailors say *Maltee*, *Portuguese*.)]

It seems that what characterizes the ethnonym *Chinee* is its offensive connotation and disparaging purpose, a claim confirmed by Richard Allsopp (2004, p. 35), who asserts that "[t]he term *Chinee*, as a misformed 'singular' from 'Chinese', is derogatory". Such features appear to perpetuate the prejudices related to the stereotypically incomprehensible nature of the Chinese language and culture, especially from the perspective of Anglophone speakers.

As shown below, it is worth noticing the presence of a similar entry, namely *Chinese world*, in Collymore's (2005, p. 21) *Barbadian Dialect*:

Chinese world. The expression 'in a Chinese world' denotes something that is quite impossible, as, *That couldn't happen in a Chinese world*. But why Chinese? Is it connected in any way with 'Chinese puzzle', some very difficult problem, or does it refer perhaps to the popular conception of the way of life in old China a sort of topsy-turvydom as exemplified by the patient's ceasing to pay his doctor as soon as he fell ill, and so on? But the expression is very common.

As for the origin of the idiom, it is evident that there must be a direct reference to the arrival of Chinese immigrants to the Caribbean region, precisely in present-day

Guyana, then British Guiana until 1966, first as indentured laborers and later as voluntary migrants. In this respect, it must be mentioned that “Chinese immigrants to *Guyn* (1853-1879) [...] fled from the dread vengeance of the Tai Ping Rebellion (1851-64)” (R. Allsopp, 2004, p. 35).

Moreover, it is paramount to consider that the contact between the inhabitants of the Caribbean region and the Chinese is a direct consequence of the Slavery Abolition Act – passed in 1833 and commenced in 1834 – which was intended to provide for the gradual abolition of slavery in most territories of the British Empire and almost immediately generated a loss of free labor on the part of British colonizers. According to Green (2017, p. 211), approximately 20,000 Chinese indentured laborers migrated to the British West Indies between 1852 and 1893: 12,000 to British Guiana, 5,000 to Jamaica and 3,000 to Trinidad. As far as Barbados is concerned, at present less than 0.1% of the population, that is exactly 163 units, consists of “Oriental”, including Chinese (Browne, 2013, p. 51).

6.7. Pick pond grass

pick *vb* **Phrase pick pond grass** *id phr* (Bdos) [AF] To clear damp plantation land of creeping POND GRASS, by hand. **a.** *If Tony didn't get the C.E.O. job he could not go back to deputy 'cause somebody else had the job. Therefore he would have had to go home and cut cane or pick pond grass.* – AdV (1994.06.10, p.9 Eric Lewis) **b.** *Mr – would not want to see a young black-skinned woman with kinky hair in Parliament ... He must no doubt feel that women who look like [her] should be picking his pond grass preferably without pay and without even bus fare or lunch money.* – SuS (1996.06.23) – This was a low-paid task usu assigned to black children, esp. in the plantation era. See POND GRASS. (NRCEU)

The idiomatic meaning of *pick pond grass* apparently springs from its literal meaning, that is ‘to root out weed that grows on the side of a pond’, undoubtedly a menial task, especially if carried out by hand. When looking up the entry *pond grass* in the NRCEU, the following definition is provided:

pond grass *n phr* (Bdos) A succulent creeping grass that flourishes in damp ground, esp. around ponds (hence the name), and has to be weeded out by hand on cultivated ground; *Commelina diffusa* (*Commelinaceae*). See DCEU **water-grass** for CarA // // **a.** *If Tony didn't get the C.E.O. job he could not go back to deputy 'cause somebody else had the job. Therefore he would have had to go home and cut cane or pick pond grass.* – AdV (1994.06.10, p.9 Eric Lewis) **b.** *You had to go into the plantation at 13 and work. I stay around a little. They had gangs that was picking pond grass. First, second and third class. They had a supervisor to see after them.* – ADV (1998.05.03, p. 16)

Curiously, the first explanatory example, stressing the idiomaticity of the phrase, is repeated in both NRCEU entries. Although this item is absent from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, *pondgrass*, presented as a solid compound, appears in the

Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online and is described as “a submerged aquatic herb (*Potamogeton pectinatus*) common in Europe and North America with fine threadlike leaves, spikes of greenish flowers, and small hard bony fruits”. However, if attention is paid to the Latin nomenclature pertaining to the Linnean classification present in both definitions, respectively “*Commelina diffusa*” (*NRCEU*) and “*Potamogeton pectinatus*” (*Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online*), these formally identical entries actually refer to two different types of plants, apparently belonging to separate local floras.

As clarified in the second example recorded under the entry *pond grass*, the practice of clearing damp plantation land of unwanted wild plants – a task usually assigned to children – dates back to the plantation period and is obviously connected with slavery in Barbados.

7

Conclusions

As evidenced by the comments made on the entries considered, the semi-automatic metalexigraphic exploration carried out revealed the following sources of Barbadian English idiomatic phrases:

- tales pertaining to the British tradition, i.e. *burn somebody's cakes*;
- the Holy Scripture, precisely the Old Testament, i.e. *hungry and tired as Zeek*;
- Barbadian popular culture, i.e. *keep the puppy tail out o(f) the ashes*;
- dialects of English transplanted to Barbados, i.e. *living in the hickie*;
- historical landmarks of the British colonial past, i.e. *make s(ome)b(od)y know the ball dat shoot Nelson*;
- events following the abolition of slavery throughout the Caribbean, i.e. *not/never in a Chinee world*;
- the plantation era in Barbados, i.e. *pick pond grass*.

The conclusions which may be drawn from the results obtained imply that myths belonging to the British literary tradition, episodes drawn from the Bible, local folklore, residues of transplanted varieties of English, milestones in British history, the emancipation of West African slaves and remains of the plantation era all play a role in the coinage of Barbadian idioms, hence contributing to forging “Barbadianness” (Fenigsen, 2003, p. 461), at least at the lexical level.

In addition, it is interesting to observe that five of the seven entries analyzed, i.e. *burn somebody's cakes*, *hungry and tired as Zeek*, *living in the hickie*, *make s(ome)b(od)y know the ball dat shoot Nelson* and *not/never in a Chinee world*, are characterized by the label “Joc”, i.e. jocular, thus showing that idioms are often endowed with a humorous effect.

What emerges is a typically Barbadian *modus operandi* in assembling phrases, a practice which shapes and reinforces the construction and conceptualization of the unique identity of Barbadian English and, at the same time, detaches this variety

from other Caribbean regional Englishes and, in general, all varieties of English spoken worldwide. Furthermore, the presence of such phraseological innovations in the linguistic repertoire of Barbadians might trigger a connection to the overarching concept of “translanguaging” (García & Wei, 2014, p. 137): indeed, the idioms characterizing Barbadian English bear witness to the societal, historical and ideological composite to which its speakers belong.

As an outcome of language change due to contact, the exploitation and the concomitant reinterpretation of English lexical material beyond conventional standards is *de facto* a testament to the increasing permeability of pre-existing geographical barriers and a challenge to British and American norms. Their absence from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* and the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Online* and their consequent distance from the English spoken in the UK and the USA demonstrate that the idiomatic peculiarities found in the speech of Barbadians testify to a dynamic, diversified and innovative sociolinguistic reality.

On a final note, the transgressing of territorial borders by crossing the Atlantic Ocean makes the diasporic English of Barbados only partially subject to traditional paradigms and, serving as an act of resistance, enables its speakers to remake English by creatively redefining its vocabulary.

Notes

1. “*Bajan*, the respelled medial clipping of *Barbadian*, is originally an ethnonym referring to the natives of Barbados, namely Barbadians” (Furiassi, 2022, p. 91).

2. An alternative definition of *proverb*, which highlights its intrinsically pragmatic essence, is provided by Richard Allsopp (2004, p. XVI): “[...] a proverb is a gem of utterance sparkling with a message that the hearer would like to remember, and therefore probably retains, in that form [...]”.

3. See, respectively, Furiassi (2014, p. 90; 2017, p. 362) and Mesthrie & Bhatt (2008, pp. 3-6) for an overview and an attendant discussion of the several labels attached to the Englishes spoken outside the British Isles and North America.

4. Due to an 18% “undercount”, the reported data are actually based on a “tabulable population” of 209,109 units (Browne, 2013, p. 1). Although the most recent census was conducted throughout Barbados on August 1st, 2021, the processing of the elicited responses is still underway and, unfortunately, no updated statistics are yet available.

5. It is reported that today there are about 400 white people, believed to be the descendants of Irish and Scottish indentured servants, living within an isolated community in the parish of St Andrew; they are derogatorily named “Red Legs” because, being characterized by an extremely fair complexion and wearing kilts as the only means of protection, their legs would easily get sunburned when working the fields (see O’Callaghan, 2000, p. 207).

6. The remarks made above undoubtedly justify the nicknames of *Little Bristol* for Speightstown, the second largest city on the island and Barbados’ busiest port in the heyday of British colonialism (see Furiassi, 2022, p. 100), and *Little England* for Barbados – the latter possibly due to the flourishing state of the country and perhaps because it used to supply immigrants to other Caribbean colonies (see Greene, 1987, p. 244; Richardson, 1989, p. 206).

7. See J. Allsopp & Furiassi (2021, p. 209) for further African languages affecting the vocabulary of other Anglophone Caribbean territories such as Fulani, Hausa, Kikongo, Mende and Wolof.

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