



***“Mi no chrii ina dat!”: Language Play, Pro-Heteronormativity and
Linguistic Innovation in Jamaica Speech***

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by

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“Mi no chrii ina dat!”: Language Play, Pro-Heteronormativity and Linguistic Innovation in

Jamaican Speech

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Introduction

Language play involves the manipulation of a linguistic form to achieve a desired sociolinguistic meaning in context. Brook (2023) states that “most instances of language play are local and ephemeral, exactly as they’re meant to be... but a small fraction stick around and get out into the community as speaker innovations”. In Jamaica, language play is used by members of different social groups to achieve different goals. One of the functions of language play in Jamaica is to perform heteronormativity, specifically by straight cisgender men. Language innovations reproduce their own sexuality and condemn LGBTQIA+ identities. However, one of these innovations, the substitution of too/two ‘*tuu*’ with three ‘*chrii*’ /tʃi:/ has taken on additional functions and serves as an example of language play that does expand to use by the wider community and is re-analyzed as an adverbial intensifier.

The purpose of this research paper is to investigate along the way, the use of these innovations by Jamaicans, at least three decades since they were first attested to determine whether they are still used to perform heteronormativity, and to determine what additional discourse functions may have emerged over time. Consultation with experts on Jamaican Creole suggests usage dates from the 1990s (Peter Patrick, University of Essex, personal comment).

Previous Literature

Research into this instance of language play reveals that linguistic substitutions created to avoid sound strings with perceived homosexual connotations is limited. In discussing slang

terms, Farquharson & Jones (2014) remark that sexual activity that is deemed taboo (i.e., homosexuality in traditional Jamaican society) are often used by heterosexual men to condemn gay men. For instance, the word ‘fish’ has been used as one such label and straight men often avoid the word, especially around male friends to proclaim their heterosexuality. In some cases, they may even avoid ordering fish at a restaurant, or may order a ‘swim-around’.

In an interview-based study, Anderson & McLean, 2016 conducted an interview with working-class men between the ages of 19 and 31. These participants were asked about changes in Jamaican society, specifically the greater acceptance towards lifestyles that fall outside of traditional Jamaican heteronormativity and the use of language play that asserts a person’s heterosexuality. Some participants said that it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify whether someone is a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and such substitutions would help them to know who to avoid. One participant said that this kind of language play serves the purpose of reaffirming traditional male heteronormativity, similarly to that argued by Farquharson & Jones (2014). Anderson & McLean further suggest that attitudes that lead to this type of language play are associated with men belonging to the working class who are also the original consumers of Dancehall music. Such language use addresses working-class struggles, is identified with a “downtown” culture, and overtly opposes homosexuality. The lyrics below are an example of overt pro-heteronormative attitudes found in Dancehall music, taken from Beenie Man’s popular song *Who Am I* (1997). The artist rejects possible LGBTQIA+ relationships by asking how he as a man could be romantically involved with another man.

[Chorus]

Sim Simma, who got the keys to my Bimmer?

Who am I, the girls dem sugar

How can I, make love to a fellow?

In a rush, pass mi the keys to my truck

Retrieved from Genius.com

Anderson & McLean argue that as working-class men, they are “positioned at the bottom of Jamaica’s strict hierarchy” (p. 25) and ascribe a greater importance to aspects of Jamaican masculinity that are available to them, like performing and reaffirming their own heterosexuality. They argue that such language play is used to maintain boundaries, and to identify “who remained loyal and who had crossed over to the other side into ‘fishiness’” (p. 26). It signals masculine power, and an avoidance results in someone being labeled ‘not masculine enough’. The participants viewed the avoidance of ‘two’ as the most important element of this language play, because two was associated with homosexual sex. Table 1, taken from Anderson & McLean (2016, p. 27), includes words avoided and their substitutions.

Table 1

Original word (s)	Replacement word(s)/ phrase(s)
Two	Few, couple, second, twice, one before three, one plus one, three minus one, next, the number following one
Come	Forward
Eat	Consume
Down	Lower level, touch base, base
Men	Mans
Email	Shemail, message
Gmail	Google mail

Behind	Roun' dere suh ("around/back there")
Bottom	End
Bacchanal	Backagyal
Manual	Gyalual
Menu	Gyalu
Manchester	Gyalchester
Montego Bay	Gyaltego Bay
Mandeville	Gyaldeville

Retrieved from Anderson & McLean (2016, p. 27)

Such language play has antecedents in the culture. For example, members of the Rastafarian community use Dread Talk, a dialect of Jamaican Creole with changes to words and meanings (Christie, 2003). For example, the word 'oppress' is changed to *dounpress* because of the association between the first syllable in the word 'oppress' and its homophone the word 'up', which is the opposite of the notion of oppression. Dread Talk by Rastafarians is an overt attempt to separate themselves from oppressive Eurocentric practices and ideals.

The substitutions of interest in the present study are the substitution of 'man' with 'gyal' and the substitution of the number 'two' and its homophones with 'three', typically pronounced as 'chrii' /tʃii/. My research focuses on whether or not these forms are still being used and if so, in what context and by whom. As we see below, *chrii* is particularly interesting in terms of its linguistic trajectory.

Methodology

To address these questions, I constructed a Google Survey. The survey consisted of 13 questions, including questions about the demographic profile of participants, Likert Scale language-usage questions, questions asking participants about their language attitudes and attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community, and finally, their opinions on the use of these

innovations. The survey was circulated among persons identifying as Jamaican, both those living in the country and those living in its diaspora.

In addition to the survey data, I conducted discourse analysis for the variables on Twitter to determine their range and rate of usage. I noted that the variants *tuu* and *chrui* had an array of possible spellings, which required a search of all possible homophones to find as many tokens as possible. For example, too, tuu, two, 2, three, 3, chrui and tree were all found in the Twitter data. This finding probably points to the fact that this form is used more orally rather than in writing, which will be discussed in the results below.

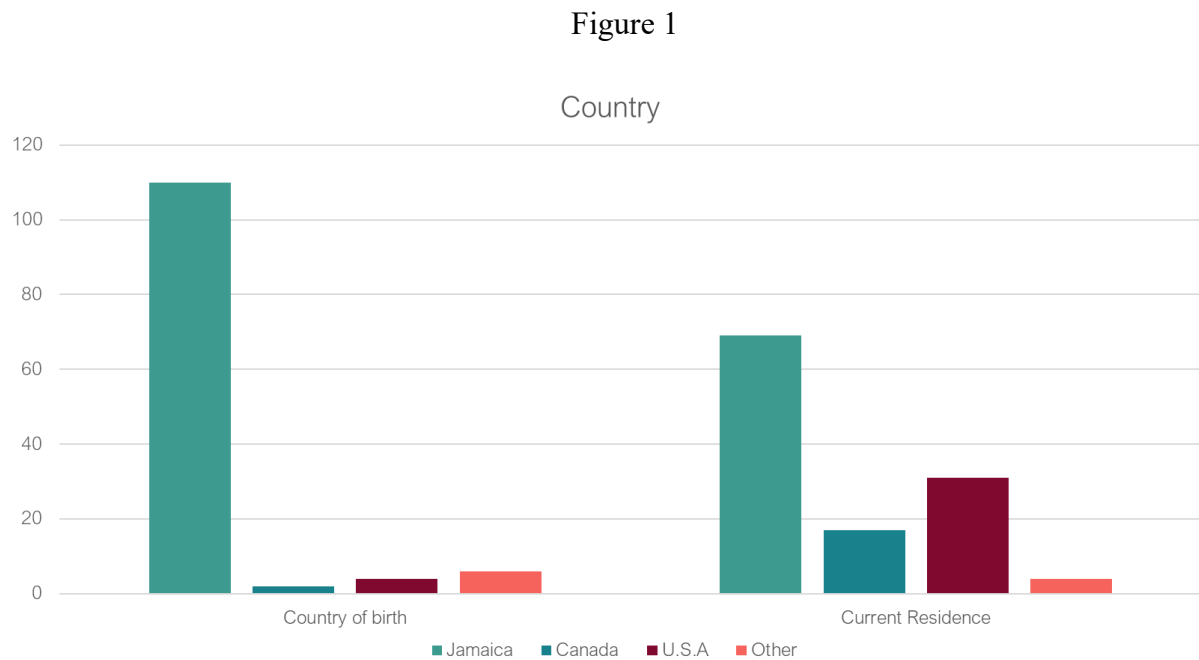
Results

Half of the survey respondents were between age 26-39. A quarter of the participants were under 25 and another quarter were over 25. This age range was desirable because as a form of slang, it is expected that the younger speakers would be using it (Labov, 1972). However, the results revealed that some respondents outside of this age group (respondents older than 40) also knew of or used these innovations.

Most respondents (n=75) identified as female, with 42 identifying as male and 3 identifying as non-binary. Historically, these substitutions are strongly associated with straight men; therefore, the results could serve as an indication into whether this is still the case. Additionally, 99 participants identified as heterosexual while 18 identified as members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

I was interested in looking at whether there might be a relationship between an individual's place of birth and residence and their use of the forms in question. Most participants were born in Jamaica and, although most still live there, several persons had migrated to North

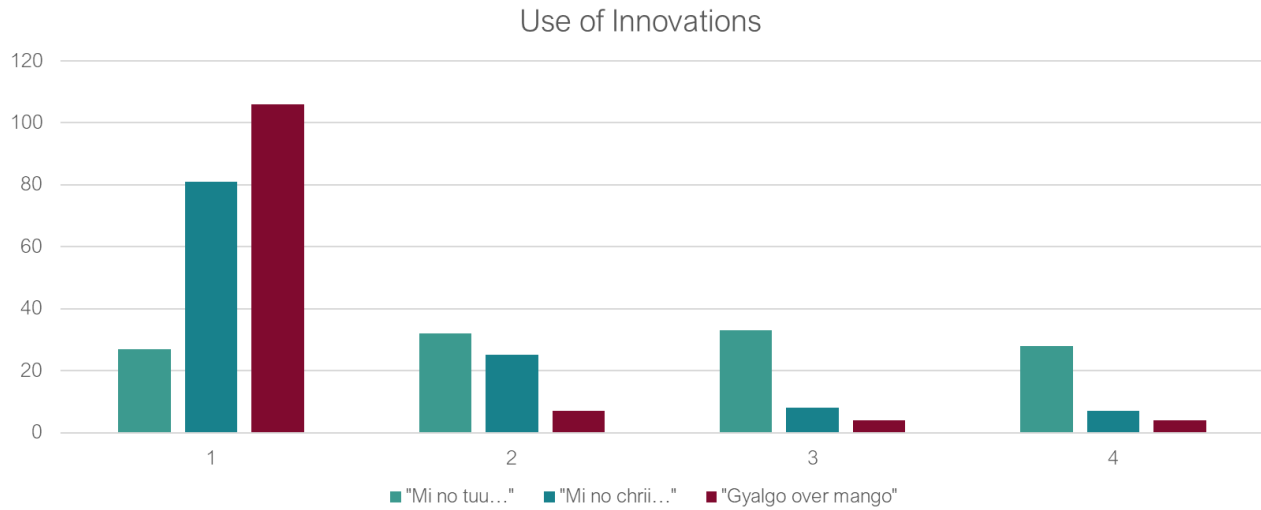
America at various points in their life, especially between childhood and early adulthood. This is shown in Figure 1.



It turned out that most of the participants with the highest scores for innovative language use were living in Jamaica. Most of these participants were also younger than 40 as shown in Figure 2.

Participants had been asked how likely they were to use each one on a four-point Likert scale, with 1 being least likely and 4 being most likely. Figure 2 shows these results. Globally it is evident that overall, most participants reported they were not likely to use these innovations. However, for those who did, *mi no tuu* was used more than *mi no chrii* which was in turn used more than *gyalgo over mango*. These survey results could indicate that an implicational scale exists between these variables, which can be investigated further in future research.

Figure 2



In addition, respondents reported these forms were more likely to be heard in face-to-face contexts such as among friends, family, at school or work than in virtual or media contexts such as social or mass media. This finding could be related to the fact that most participants with a high use of the variables were born and still residing in Jamaica. If the innovations are heard in more face-to-face interactions, and there are generally more Jamaican Creole speakers per social context in Jamaica than North America, then it stands to reason that the speakers with the more likely to use this language play live in Jamaica.

Looking at the individual speaker

Responses from individual speakers are found in Appendix 1¹. Out of 122 participants, 20 indicated that they used the ‘*tuu*’, ‘*chrii*’ and ‘*gyalgo over mango*’.

Overall, these speakers used *chrii* more than *gyalgo*. This could be explained by the fact that *gyalgo* is a more transparent form than is *chrii*. The use of *gyal* as a morpheme substitution for “man” is a more obvious attempt at performing heteronormativity than *chrii*, which is a more complex substitution.

As mentioned above, these innovations, specifically *chrii* and *gyalgo* were used by individuals with positive attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community. It is possible that these participants do not associate it with language regarding heteronormativity as was suggested above. As seen in the final column of the Appendix, a number of participants did not express negative attitudes towards the use of these innovations by Jamaicans, instead calling them “creative” and “fun”. This could be the result of these innovations moving from being associated not only with heterosexual masculinity, but also Jamaican culture more generally (Anderson & McLean, 2016).

Chrii as an intensifier

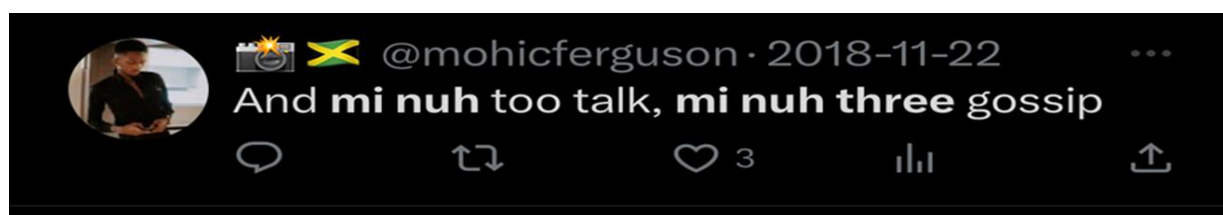
The data from Twitter revealed not only that there were many variants of *tuu* and *chrii*, but also that they weren’t necessarily being used in complementary distribution. In other words, while *chrii* was expected to be used to replace *tuu*, because the latter is perceived as homosexual, there were many tweets that included both variants, suggesting that they may have different

1. Appendix 1 shows the demographic information, usage habits, attitudes towards the queer Community and language attitudes of 20 individual participants.

functions in an utterance. It may also be that younger users are less aware of the homophobic origins of such terms. Further research should delve deeper into this hypothesis.

In addition to being a variant of *tuu*, *chrii* has arguably become an intensifier in the lexicon of at least some Jamaican speakers. Evidence in support of this hypothesis includes the fact that both variants may be used in the same utterance, which suggests that *chrii* implies that something occurs to a stronger degree than when modified by *tuu*. An example is given in Figure 3 where the author is saying that he doesn't really talk and is even less likely to gossip.

Figure 3



Retrieved from X (Formerly Twitter).

Another source of evidence that *chrii* is “more” than just a variant of *tuu* is the fact that, as mentioned above, *chrii* was used by individuals who identified as LGBTQIA+ or had positive attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community in Jamaica. This suggests that adverbial *chrii* is a relatively new addition to the set of intensifiers in Jamaican speech.

This argument is supported by literature on the addition and use of intensifiers in language. Tagliamonte (2012, p. 320) states that “in any given variety, at any point in time, the coexistence of different forms may be the result of older and newer layers in the process of change”. This general finding seems applicable to the case of *chrii* in Jamaica. Tagliamonte suggests that intensifiers go through a process of firstly being restricted to mostly specific

contexts and then gradually their usage expands to more general contexts. This process is called *delexicalization*. The relationship between an intensifier usage and specific linguistic contexts and social factors such as group membership is an indicator of degree of delexicalization, which allows researchers to observe language change in progress and its relationship to these variables in real time.

Anecdotally, respondents already known to me were informally asked if they knew about the history of *chrii* as an example of language play to perform heteronormativity (explained in lay terms), but they were unaware of this history. It is possible that in the mental lexicon of many younger Jamaicans, *chrii* is more of an intensifier than a tool for performing heteronormativity. Further research could investigate whether speakers who are dominant Jamaican Creole speakers (or not) are at the vanguard of this change.

Limitations

This study is limited by three main factors. Firstly, the gender of participants was unequally distributed, with a larger number of women than men or gender-nonconforming participants. This is a limitation because traditionally, the use of these forms was associated with heterosexual men. However, looking at the use (or lack thereof) by women could be evidence that these innovations have entered broader contexts in the Jamaican lexicon, and are used by wider social groups.

Secondly, the study did not take factors such as an individual's social network or whether they lived in rural or urban communities into account. It could be the case that since these innovations are transmitted in face-to-face settings that an individual's social network would impact their familiarity and comfort using these forms, and the social meanings that they

associate with them. Follow-up research could benefit from a social network analysis component. If these innovations were traditionally associated with working-class Jamaican men, the social network (and sense of place) of these participants may affect their use of these innovations.

Finally, the study did not explicitly ask about the possible relationship between participants' use of forms and their social media use, specifically whether they learned about these forms from social media. Although a few participants indicated that they did, it is possible that more participants might have indicated that they were exposed to these innovations through social media if they were given that option, along 'school', 'family', 'friends' and 'work'.

Conclusion

In closing, language play is the deliberate manipulation of linguistic forms to perform a specific sociolinguistic function. Language play is used in Jamaica by different social groups, including heterosexual men who practice the avoidance of words perceived as homosexual, and the substitution of these phonetic strings with other morphemes.

This paper looked at the use of two of these substitutions: the substitution of two and its homonyms with three '*chrii*' and the substitution of words containing the morpheme 'man' with the morpheme '*gyal*'. A survey circulated among Jamaicans both living in and outside of Jamaica revealed that most participants reported that they were not likely to use these substitutions regularly. However, many participants who reported that they were likely to use them also claimed positive or neutral attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community in Jamaica. This suggests that performing heteronormativity might have been the initial function of the innovations but that their scope has widened.

This finding as well as the use of both *tuu* and *chrii* in the same sentences on Twitter suggests that *chrii* may have become more integrated in the language of people who fall outside of the ‘cisgender heterosexual male’ category, paving the way for the emergence of an additional function as an intensifier. This is a plausible finding given how common it is for new intensifiers to enter a language, as supported by previous literature. As mentioned above, this adds to our understanding of linguistic change in progress, since the meaning of the linguistic form *chrii* has expanded in less than three decades.

Further studies should include both an ethnographic and an expanded quantitative component as we trace the path of this linguistic change.

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Appendix

Age	Gender	Sexuality	C.O.R	L.O.R	Mi no tuu	Mi no chrii	Gyalgo	Source	A #1	A#2
28	F	H	JA	Life	2	4	1	F	Neutral	Funny
35	F	H	JA	Life	2	1	3	F	Neutral	Fun
24	F	N/A	US	6 yrs	2	2	3	F, H, S	Positive	Fun/ jest
26	F	H	JA	Life	3	3	1	F	N/A	Creative, fun
24	F	H	CA	5 yrs	3	3	1	F, H, S	Neutral	N/A
25	M	H	JA	23 yrs	3	2	3	F, H, S	"Don't come near, but no problem"	Unnecessary
27	F	H	JA & US	27 yrs	3	4	1	F, H, S, W	Positive	Neutral
56	M	H	JA	Life	3	3	1	Social life	N/A	Related to insecurity
59	M	H	JA	Life	3	1	4	W	"what is that?"	Creative
21	F	H	JA	Life	4	4	4	F,H,S,W	Positive	N/A
23	M	Q	JA	3 yrs	4	4	4	F	Positive	L2 issues
19	M	H	JA	Life	4	3	2	F, H	Negative	N/A
30	M	H	JA	Life	4	3	3	F, H, S	"what is that?"	Just another way of expression
24	F	H	JA	Life	4	3	1	F, H, S, W	Neutral	"They're doing too much..."
29	M	H	JA	Life	4	3	1	F, H, S, W	N/A	N/A
31	F	H	JA	Life	4	4	1	F, H, S, W	Neutral	"Immature"
26	F	H	CA	> 1 yr	4	4	2	F, H, S, W	Positive	Silly
28	M	H	CA	15 yrs	4	2	4	F, H, S, W	Neutral	N/A
29	F	H	CA	13 yrs	4	4	1	F, S	Positive	Depends on context
58	M	H	US	32 yrs	4	3	1	Jamaicans	N/A	Crazy

The table above illustrates the responses of participants who indicated that they used the forms *mi no tuu*, *mi no chrii*, and the substitution of words beginning with *man* with *gyal*. C.O.R. indicates the participants' current country of residence while L.O.R. indicates length of residence in their country. *Source* indicates the places where participants have heard these phrases. F=Friends, H=Home, S=School and W=Work. A#1 illustrates responses to a question asking participants about their social attitudes towards members of the LGBTQIA+ community while A#2 illustrates responses to a question asking participants about their attitudes towards the use of these innovations by Jamaicans.