The volume under review is the author’s doctoral dissertation, supervised by professor Christian Mair and defended at the University of Freiburg in 2006. The study is situated at the intersection of the fields of computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC), Creole Studies, English as a world language, the use and development of vernacular language varieties in writing, interactional sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. By consequence, it is of interest to scholars and students of all these fields – and beyond. Drawing on two corpora, a primary corpus compiled from private e-mail messages and a secondary corpus compiled from postings to two internet forums for Jamaicans, Hinrichs convincingly demonstrates that CMC allows for the expansion of Jamaican Creole English (JamC) into the written domain which would have been quite unthinkable before the advent of CMC. In passing, a number of theoretical issues ranging from the opposed characterizations of the Jamaican sociolinguistic setting as a case of diglossia and as a creole continuum situation to the functions of code-switching (CS) are addressed.

In the first chapter (‘Introduction’, 1–31), the author situates the study within the Jamaican sociolinguistic context and previous studies of the same, and introduces the reader to the point of comparison British Creole (BrC), CMC and Third Wave Variation Studies, the main framework he has chosen for...
his research. Scholars of Jamaican sociolinguistics are divided between those who insist on the diglossic character of the situation and those who maintain that we are dealing with a (post-) creole continuum situation. While the first position is often ideologically biased as it plays into the hands of mostly native Jamaican, Creole speakers’ language rights advocates who find legitimization for their claim that JamC is a language in its own right (8), Hinrichs considers that ‘[t]he creole continuum model provides the basis for a more realistic description of the reality of language use in society in Jamaica’ (10). Nonetheless, he acknowledges the fact that in the minds of JamC speakers, they have a binary system at their disposal although there are quite substantial differences as far as the location of these two codes, ‘English’ and ‘Creole’, on the creole continuum is concerned (11, 35). As in other settings, where speakers identify positively with both codes (cf. Myers-Scotton 1993: 12), CS constitutes the unmarked choice in present-day Jamaican conversations (13). Due to its reduced functions, BrC, cited as a point of comparison on numerous occasions, always constitutes a marked choice and (London) English the unmarked one (15–16). Hinrichs then examines the apparent contradiction between the informality and written and thence hybrid nature of CMC language which can also be referred to by the term ‘conceptual orality’ coined in German and Romance linguistics (17–21) and introduces the reader to his primary and secondary corpora, measuring approximately 40 000 and 60 000 words, respectively (21–28), and the methodology of the study which aims at providing ‘a detailed account of the range of discourse functions that Creole performs in the data’ (30).

In the rather short second chapter (‘The creole continuum and CMC’, 33–41), the continuum vs. diglossia debate is taken up (33–35). In order to be able to operationally distinguish between ‘English’ and JamC, Hinrichs then establishes an opposition between reductive creole features such as unmarking (e.g. of verbal and nominal inflections) and ellipsis (e.g. of the copula) and overt structural features (36–39). The former may occur in what is considered ‘English’ by speakers while the latter mark a passage as genuinely JamC. In the CMC material analyzed, Jamaican English (JamE) is ‘unquestionably the unmarked, baseline code’, JamC ‘an additional, marked code’ (41). The author attributes this to the written medium in a context where literacy is acquired in English and there is no agreed upon standard for writing JamC.

Chapter three focuses on what Gumperz (1982) termed as ‘situational code-switching’ (‘How the situation determines code choice – a ‘simple, almost one-to-one relationship’?’, 43–59), that is, the mostly unconscious switches which occur as a result of changes within the conversational setup. As Hinrichs points out (45), only changes of topic occur within single e-mails whereas changes in addressee and setting may occur across e-mails. Even if there are
certain norms of expected conduct, a speaker or writer may nevertheless choose to ignore them so that Gumperz’ (1982: 61) prediction of ‘a simple, almost one-to-one relationship between language usage and social context’ does not necessarily hold. This is why the author prefers Auer’s sequential approach to CS (e.g. Auer 1995) instead of Gumperz’ division into situational and metaphorical CS (43, 45). Even though he also draws on Myers-Scotton’s work to some extent, he considers ‘smaller changes’ such as the ‘insertion of only one Creole lexical item, or only one noun phrase, unaccompanied by any other structural adaptations in the rest of the sentence’ as mere style shifts (44) whereas Myers-Scotton (1992) emphasizes the gradual nature of the cline from loanwords to CS.

While there is a correlation between personal style and the relative position of the addressee to the writer in the sense of a ‘we’-code often but not obligatorily constructed by means of the use of JamC, Hinrichs concludes that ‘it seems futile to formulate rules on correlations between any topic and a code’ (59). The only exception explicitly mentioned by him is religion, felt to be the exclusive domain of Standard English even though the author makes the interesting comment that this ‘rule’ is observed with more rigour by some denominations than by others (53–54).\(^3\) If one or both of the participants of an e-mail exchange are abroad, this also increases the use of JamC in the messages (46). As the two discussion forums the secondary corpus was compiled from are mainly frequented by Jamaicans abroad, even more JamC is used in their posts, especially for typically Jamaican topoi, proverbs and sayings (47).

Chapter Four (‘Giving contextualization cues: How writers provide context information through code choice’; 61–83) deals with the second type of CS outlined in Gumperz’ binary classification, metaphorical CS, i.e. CS which serves to add contextual information and to situate the meaning in conversational loci. Typical functions of metaphorical CS in the data are hedging, linking up, the expression of negative content and using the ‘we’-code for personalization and subjectivization of message content. These functions obviously overlap: linking up, a typically Jamaican strategy of maintaining social networks, vital resources in times of hardship, by means of cell phone calls or e-mail messages which serve no other function are deliberately personalized and often contain playful expressions of negative content and hedging. A general pattern emerges where JamC stretches embedded into an otherwise JamE environment provide the principal message content while the reverse, i.e., acrolectal stretches embedded into a JamC environment, contain material of secondary importance, e.g. writers’ comments or diversions from the main theme of the passage (72). Switching for English that- and corresponding JamC se-clauses as a type of switching for quotations is unfortunately discussed only in passing (66–67).
Chapter Five, ‘Codeswitching and identity: How writers describe themselves through code choice’ (85–132) constitutes the most important part of the study. While Labovian sociolinguistics has focused on spontaneous, unmonitored speech where external sociological categories are used to explain variation, Hinrichs departs from LePage and Tabouret-Keller’s 1985 study which defines speech acts as acts of identity where identity is in a constant process of (re)creation in order to argue in the vein of Third Wave Variation Studies that speakers of JamC consciously draw on the social meanings attached to the two codes at their disposal, especially the marked code JamC, in order to create identities and personae with whose positions they either identify or do not identify (‘uni-’ and ‘vari-directional double-voicing’ in terms of Bakhtin 1984: 199).

The following identity-related functions of CS are typical of the Jamaican data: messages are framed by means of greetings and farewells expressed either in JamC, Rasta-derived or Caribbean English forms in order to signal identification with (a certain facet of) Jamaican culture. In messages in which it has only this framing function, the reduction of JamC to the symbolic function is exemplified in its most complete way (99). Another important area of identity-based CS is the performative construction of social personae for various rhetorical and communicative purposes. Such social prototypes all Jamaicans are familiar with are the rather vaguely defined ‘rural Jamaican in conversation, complaining about life and the world’ (107–109), ‘the country bumpkin abroad’ (110–115), ‘the rude bway’ (115–118), and ‘the robust and assertive, morally conservative female persona’ (118–124). Finally, CS can be employed in narratives for contrast, e.g. when more actors are involved than the narrator and her interlocutor (127–132).

In the rather short Chapter six, Hinrichs presents a ‘Summary of the analysis and discussion’ (133–137). He believes that the identity-related, highly planned use of CS in constructing discourse which heavily relies on implicature and cultural inferencing may be ‘especially at home’ in the written medium and notes that functional overlap is common across CS types (134–135).

In Chapter seven (‘Conclusions’, 139–156), Hinrichs finally draws the threads of the discussion together. (It is not quite clear to me why chapters six and seven could not have been merged.) He notes that ‘in informal CMC, Jamaicans use the resources of Creole and English in a functional mixture that is different from oral communication in Jamaica’ (141) – in the former, JamE is the unmarked choice, in the latter, it is CS – and that the variety of functions in which CS practices employ JamC in the data is considerable, ranging from direct, single-voiced discourse to (uni- and vari-directional) double-voiced discourse. The functions of BrC have been found to be much narrower, essentially clustering around the black racial identity it conveys on the symbolic level.
In this chapter, Hinrichs also considers the relevance of studies like his own for the research on English as a world language, recalling that several recent studies have highlighted the importance of the internet in revitalizing the practice of lesser-used languages, and for CMC studies. He links the linguistic informality of CMC to a larger informality drift throughout Western society, resulting in the creation of new types of informal networks, and argues that especially in CMC, ‘analytical practice of CS can benefit from an interdisciplinary viewpoint that builds on the ideas and findings of linguistics and other disciplines from the humanities and social sciences, such as sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and literary studies’. 

The volume also contains a Table of contents, Acknowledgements, a list of abbreviations, a list of references, an Appendix which contains the entire primary corpus compiled from private e-mail messages and which constitutes a unique database for further research on a text type which is usually hard to come by, as well as the notes to the text and an Index.

The main, unquestionable asset of this study is that it is an innovative contribution to all the fields it draws upon. At least as far as my own primary field Creole Studies is concerned, I am sure it will inspire other, similar studies as the possibilities the internet has to offer for both spontaneous and planned language development are tremendous, at least as far as some Creole languages and a subset of their speakers are concerned. As Hinrichs observes on several occasions for JamC, access to the internet is still the privilege of a minority of Creole speakers which may be one of the reasons why he states that even though the advent of CMC has ‘nurtured the development of some tendencies of grassroots standardization in the area of Creole orthography […] it will not lead to the Creole establishing itself as a written language independent from English’, at first sight a somewhat paradoxical statement.

In an ‘eclectic mixture’, the study elegantly draws on the theoretical frameworks of several approaches to CS and convincingly interweaves qualitative and quantitative data. In a next step, the ethnographic analysis of the studied community could perhaps still be deepened and include informants from other groups than the fairly homogeneous sample mainly consisting of students of the University of the West Indies at Mona in order to further validate the findings. The study is entertaining to read and generally carefully edited although there are some cases of repetition which seem superfluous. For example, the medium-relatedness of the shift from CS to JamE due to the cognitive cost of writing JamC is mentioned on pages 139 and 144 of the concluding chapter and the contribution of CMC to grassroots tendencies of...
the orthographic standardization on both page 41 and 43. At the same time, the author could have elaborated more in some instances, for example when stating that he is using ‘personae’, ‘types’ and ‘roles’ interchangeably (103; in fact he appears to prefer ‘(social) personae’). Rather by chance I also discovered that the reference Nazaire (2003) mentioned on page 96 is missing from the references.

In spite of these very minor shortcomings due to a probably relatively speedy process of editing (few people manage to publish their doctoral dissertation during the year of its defence with a major publishing company) and the fact that some aspects of the study could have been approached at an even deeper level, the volume under review is an outstanding dissertation and highly recommendable reading for anyone interested in any one or several of the fields of study involved.

Notes

1 This must be due to the fact that English is the standard language until now used almost exclusively in all spheres of public life. On San Andrés, where Standard English was marginalized throughout the twentieth century, a relatively neat division into two separate systems exists on the structural level but definitely not in the consciousness of speakers unless they have been linguistically trained or conscientized. Consider Hinrichs’ pertinent comment in the concluding chapter to the volume: ‘[…] this seeming paradox between linguistic, structural descriptions and speakers’ perceptions of the sociolinguistic situation is productively resolved by analyzing the discourse functions, rather than the form, of varieties, with a focus on the communicative effects of variation’ (146).

2 For the hybrid nature of CMC, cf. also for example Eckkrammer and Eder (2000: 269–275).

3 This state of affairs is replicated in the English Creole-speaking community of San Andrés where the most standardized English is used in the Baptist churches, especially in the socio-politically important First Baptist Church on The Hill.

References


