



For the Guyanese poet John Agard, Caribbean English is a language in its own right. Living in Britain for the last 27 years after coming here in 1977, he is able to choose between standard and Caribbean English entirely according to the needs of the poem he is writing. And as any of his readers knows, this is something he does supremely well.

Take the matter of triplication – the rapid repeating of one word – a linguistic trait brought over to the West Indies from African linguistic roots, as in ‘quick quick quick.’ This is so much more expressive when John uses it in a poem than a mere ‘quickly’. Or again, in his poem *Cousin Bobo's Bateau*,

*Down the mighty River Orinoco
Cousin Bobo in he little bateau
Paddle in hand and be row-row-row.*

The word ‘bateau’ is a reminder that Caribbean English also derives from numbers of other languages, including French. There are also traces of Irish in his poems, drawn from phrases handed down by indented labourers centuries ago, as in *Superstitious Darling*, with its refrain; ‘a-rolling over the water, a-rolling over the water.’

Then there are those typical African compounds, such as ‘eye-water’ for tears, or ‘nose-hole’ for nostril, that crop up in his poems. Everyday expressions for Guyanese children, they have their own poetic quality for a British audience. John also invents some of his own compounds in *Don't Call Alligator Long-Mouth Till You Cross The River*:

*Call alligator long-mouth
Call alligator saw-mouth
Call alligator pushy-mouth
Call alligator scissors-mouth
Call alligator raggedy mouth
Call alligator bumpy-bum
Call alligator all dem rude word
But better wait till you cross river.*

John Agard

a-rolling over the water

But when to use a Caribbean expression? When to choose between ‘my mother’ or ‘mi mudda’? John makes his decision based on what makes most poetic sense, involving a collaboration between his instinct and intelligence. In *All Seasons Nansi*, for example, he writes both in the voice of the traditional spider-trickster and in a deliberately Wordsworthian vein:

*Call me a sucker
For daffodils
But I too flutter
When they tease the ear of March
With yellow tidings.
They fill me with blood-rush
Till I am flush with Spring.*

Why ‘flush’ rather than ‘flushed’? Because it makes poetic sense, picking up ‘rush’ in the previous line and fitting in better with the poem’s rhythm. Once again, John uses his powers of choice earned by having lived in two related but, at times, very different cultures.

Some phrases are hard for a British audience, such as one of John’s favourites: ‘pork-knockers.’ This refers to 19th century gold prospectors, who used to knock on doors asking to buy the salted pork needed to sustain them in their explorations. But accompanying pictures could help here, as they did in his collection *I Din Do Nuttin* (1983), illustrated by Susanna Gretz but now out of print. The poem *Snow-Cone* is illustrated by a picture showing something quite like an ice cream, but made from crushed ice. Another poem, *Duck-Belly Bike*, is explained by a drawing of an old-fashioned Raleigh-type bicycle, whose semi-circular frame supports the handlebars – very much like a duck’s belly. And in *Micky Always*, the opening refrain ‘Bambalitty-Bambam’ comes over as an

obvious warning cry, as children are portrayed running away from a window they have just broken with their cricket ball.

Although John aims at an organic consistency in his poems, there are times when he mixes Caribbean with Standard English. In *One Finger Can't Catch Flea*, the third verse reads:

*One finger can pat a cat
One finger can stroke a dog
But I'm sure you'll agree
With my Granny
That one finger can't ketch flea.*

Why first ‘catch’ and then ‘ketch’? Simply because it sounds better that way, with the Granny’s own distinctive voice making itself heard the second time round. In *Rivulets of Melody*, taken from his collection *Man to Pan* (1982), the second verse runs:

*Man to pan
ab feel
we grow as one
from root to sky
ab feel
we flow as one
when blood meet iron
in one suncry*

Why ‘ah’ instead of ‘I’? Because the ‘ah’ in this case also hints at the gasps of exhaustion brought about by the vigorous, at times ecstatic steel drumming that this collection describes so memorably.

John is a superb reader of his own poetry. Those not from the Caribbean can never make it sound as good, but they can still try. And when they do, there are enough hints in the verse to ensure that the finished result should at least come over as interestingly different from normal poetry recitals, and all the better for that.

Nicholas Tucker

John Agard's next collection, *Half-Caste*, will be published by Hodder in September.

Nicholas Tucker's latest book is *Darkness Visible; Inside the World of Philip Pullman*, published by Icon Books £6.99 ISBN: 1 840 46482 8

