CHARACTERISTICS OF JAMAICAN CREOLE

Grammar (Key: SJE – Standard Jamaican English; JC – Jamaican Creole)

1. Plurals: In English, a noun is made plural by simply adding ‘s’ to the end of the word in many instances. JC makes a noun plural by adding the particle ‘dem’ to the singular of the noun. For example in SJE, the speaker would refer to one dog or several dogs. In JC, the speaker would say a dawg or dawg dem.

2. Subject & Verb: In SJE, the verb changes as the subject changes to third person. In JC, the verb does not change whatever the subject is. For example:

   SJE: He/she/ It plays
   JC:  Me walk/you walk/we walk

3. Tense: In JC, there are few changes of tense. The verbs do not change form to express the tense. It is the context that is used to show time. In SJE, the verbs are always enough to show the tense (e.g. adding ‘ed’ for past tense, ‘ing’ for continuous etc.)

   Simple present tense:
   SJE: Look at how Alan walks
   JC:  Watch how Alan walk

   Simple past tense:
   SJE: He walked quickly that time
   JC:  Im walk faas da time deh

   Present continuous:
   SJE: He is walking too fast
   JC:  Im a walk too faas

   Past continuous:
   SJE: He was walking when he fell
   JC:  Im did a walk wen im drap

   "Shortwood Teachers’ College"
JC: Every day, Jane walk go a Kay yard an den di two a dem walk go a town.
SJE: Every day, Jane walks to Kay’s yard and then they walk together into town.

4. Personal pronouns: There are six personal pronouns in JC. The JC makes no distinction between male and female so ‘im’ can mean either ‘he’ or ‘she’. In JC, there is also no distinction between subject and object. In the SJE, there are eleven personal pronouns. SJE has pronouns whose job it is to show possession.

5. Inversion: One sentence type which is basic to JC but which is not common in SJE is the inverted sentence type. In JC, it is usually used for emphasis

JC: We a talk bout Mary A Mary we a talk bout
Me a go deh now A deh me a go now
Dat a dawg A dawg dat

6. Passive form: There is no distinct passive form in the JC – it is the context that tells active or passive form.

7. Auxiliary verbs: Verbs which accompany and assist main verbs are called auxiliary verbs. For example, “I am going” or “She was sleeping”. The ‘auxiliary’ verb in the JC is the word ‘deh’ which is of African origin.

JC: Dem deh bout de place

The above are only rough sketches or outlines of JC grammar. However, the main features of the language particularly those which differ from SJE, have been described. For more details, read F. G. Cassidy, Jamaica Talk, especially Chapter 4.

References: