Cognition and Social Function in the West Indian Dialect

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This paper is the result of a study conducted in the village of Stubbs, St. Vincent, West Indies, over a six-week period during June and July, 1971. Due to the brevity of the field experience the conclusions are, in effect, preliminary statements about the cognitive content and the social conventions of the dialect. The intention is that the information provided will indicate pertinent areas for future study.

For the purposes of this paper, the term "dialect" will conform to the following two-part definition. First, a dialect is a variation within a language which manifests a departure from linguistic and cognitive processes evident in other dialects within the language. Secondly, it is a variation which demonstrates idiosyncratic (or culturally-specific) social conventions.

What we commonly refer to as "Standard English" (SE) is, of course, a dialect itself. Although it serves as a common reference point for new speakers of English, and although it is standardized in written form by grammarians, writers and mass media (or possibly in part because of these factors), Standard English has the essential ingredients of a dialect. It provokes thought along certain directions; it tends to avoid certain other directions. It highlights matters of importance which it "thinks" important; it demonstrates propensities and inclinations in which it alone is drawn. In order to be fluent in SE one must partake of the psyche of the dialect. One must be able to intuit something of the logical flow of concern that makes up the world of every other fluent member.

An understanding of the logical flow, or drift, necessitates knowing more than intonation, inflection, and the syntactic components of the dialect. It requires a knowledge of what the dialect speaker will likely choose to say, given the social context. What is important or relevant to say in a given situation is just as much a part of dialect as are the elements mentioned above; the context is part of the life-blood of semantic content as surely as these. The meaning of an utterance, then, is a derivative of social setting and the social occasion, as well as of strictly linguistic considerations.

The matter of appropriateness as an indicator of dialect difference is often overlooked in favor of such phenomena as phonetic and syntactic features, and pseudo-colloquial expressions. These often serve only to mark superficial differences. For example, the Texan drawl and the Southern United States idiom "y'all," while supposedly indicative of a true dialect difference, survive well in another environment and often are "picked up" by other speakers without undergoing any substantial semantic shift. The Texas drawl is merely a matter of accent shift and the "y'all" idiom is so pervasive in terms of appropriateness that people from other regions have no difficulty either in understanding its meaning
or in using it appropriately themselves. Neither of these obvious regional differences constitutes a significant divergence of a semantic nature, nor do they constitute a radical alteration in terms of social function. The overlap of usable lexical items from the South to the Northern United States is almost as great as is the grammatical component.

Such is not the case in a comparison of SE with much indigent Caribbean speech. Preliminary study indicates that the available lexical items are materially different between SE and Caribbean (Stubbs) dialect in terms of commonly used meanings. Words which are shared between the two cultures or dialect regions are almost identical; however, the meanings attached to those words are often materially different, and the social functions ascribed by the cultures are frequently at variance.

It is the primary intention of this paper to establish that the language as used in the village of Stubbs is a dialect variant of English, and that it varies from SE in both the cognitive and social dimensions mentioned above.

Repertoire and Cognition

Joshua Fishman, in his book Sociolinguistics (1971), concurs with earlier investigators that "... availability of verbal labels [is] an asset in learning, perception, and memory tasks." Recent studies principally involving color categories show that those colors for which a language has readily available labels are more unhesitatingly named than are colors for which no such handy labels are available... They have demonstrated that somewhat different segments of the color spectrum are highly codable in different language communities. Finally, they have shown that the learning of nonsense-syllable associations for colors is predictably easier for highly codable colors than for less codable colors that require a phrase -- often an individually formulated phrase -- in order to be named. (pp. 96-97)

If working with the color spectrum between languages offers the advantage of cross-cultural checkability, it would seem reasonable to suggest that analysis of linguistic disparity between dialects would offer a broader range of checks of cognitional differences between cultures. In many Caribbean regions the repertoire of words is almost exactly that of SE. Yet, large stocks of linguistic items are used with noticeable differences in frequency and meaning. Whether we are discussing words or larger types of utterance, two factors are operating. First, utterances that are linguistically identical across cultures are frequently different in semantic content. Secondly, meanings (or specific semantic ranges) that are common to both cultures frequently communicate through different lexical and grammatical forms.

On the basis of preliminary study, it appears that certain SE semantic ranges do not appear in villages such as Stubbs in any form.
The converse is also true: there appear to be semantic ranges in Stubbs (and other villages in the West Indies) which are absent in SE. Furthermore, there is certainly great variation in the frequency of common ranges, indicating that even those ranges that appear identical may merely overlap. It is hypothesized that frequency of usage plays a large part in determining semantic range and that a frequently-used lexical item will tend to signal a broader range. Hence, the word "vex," used with much greater frequency in St. Vincent than in most SE regions, describes a greater range of experiences. "Vex" in SE is rather specific by comparison, indicating extreme irritation. In St. Vincent it is used more frequently, describing a wider variety of irritations, from faint annoyance to totally unacceptable behavior. The range implied by its usage in the two cultures is different.

If the repertoire available to a speaker accounts in part for the cognitive experience, as Fishman indicates, and if the repertoires between dialects differ in terms of their semantic ranges, a comparison of repertoires would be extremely helpful, in fact essential, if a culture is to be understood. However, a mere catalogue of cross-referenced linguistic items and meanings would have limited explaining power. To simply list all lexical items which have dissimilar meanings, and different lexical items which share common meanings, would not completely uncover the semantic overlap and the semantic disparity inherent in the two cultures. Rather, a specific range of related lexical items that is comparable across the two cultures is necessary.

The list presented in this paper is neither structured nor necessarily precise in terms of the range covered by each lexical item. A six-week study imposes rather critical limitations on the depth and comprehensiveness of the investigation. However, an attempt has been made to illustrate that there is a variation in both lexical and range distribution between the two dialects. We shall speak of cognitional variation between the two dialects as evidencing a semantic shift.

Strictly speaking, translations are impossible. Between the native utterance and the final interpretation of it, some of the meaning goes undetected. This is true as much of inter-dialect translations as of inter-language translations. Due to the multitude of ways in which the term, word, phrase or larger utterance is used locally, a "true" translation would have to account for them in terms of appropriate contexts. The process of taking semantic form is a dynamic one; each appearance of an utterance means a slight alteration of its semantic qualities. One meaning is highlighted over another, or a new twist or a new dimension is added to it. Sensitive as they are to both social context and syntactic constraint, words and larger utterances are susceptible to change during usage.

The variety of usages to which utterances are put vary from culture to culture. They also vary from idiolect to idiolect. The meaning of a lexical item is dependent in a rather absolute way upon reinforcement by one's social context and upon one's own linguistic predilections and inclinations. Unless the society encourages the specific usage it will

*pp. 128 ff.
tend to be extinguished. Utterances that are not rooted in the cognitive world of the group are discouraged by apathy or negative response. Hence, the meanings affixed to utterances are socially specific. Dialects are, in part, culturally-determined. Choices are rendered regarding appropriateness of usage. And from one dialect to another the judgment of what is considered appropriate will differ. The same utterance will differ in meaning from culture to culture and from dialect to dialect. So, frequently, the utterance will undergo a semantic shift from dialect to dialect.

The dialect in Stubbs has a repertoire of words which, when compared with SE, demonstrates this semantic shift.

An interesting feature of List C (lexical items which exist in both dialects but which evidence little semantic overlap) is that some of the items in this section have what might appear to be perfect translations or equivalent expressions in SE. The idiom "No big t'ing" can be taken as an example. Its SE "equivalent" is, "It doesn't matter," or "It makes no difference" or a more contemporary and colloquial equivalent, "No sweat."

What needs to be explored in much greater detail is whether translations of this sort overlook a substantial difference in semantic content. I am hypothesizing, for example, that frequency of usage often indicates a range distribution, and that in examples like "No big t'ing" the broad range of situations in which it is considered appropriate can be measured against the narrower range of situations in which its SE "equivalents" can be appropriately used. If the range of usage is narrower in SE than it is in the West Indies, then obviously there is a semantic disparity. It seems likely, in fact, that SE "equivalents" are often misleading and gloss over semantic differences which inhere in dialect differences just as they appear in language differences.

While a certain idiolect within SE may use the "equivalent" translation with the same frequency as the dialect lexical item, it stands to reason that it is sheer chance that governs such a parity. Consider once again the "No big t'ing" idiom. Typical situations in which it may be used are relatively extensive in the West Indies. They are considerably greater in number and somewhat different in kind than in situations in SE areas where its translational "equivalents" may be typically employed. The fact that they are more frequent may indicate that they are not as restricted semantically. "No big t'ing" may be an appropriate response in situations what "It doesn't matter" (etc.) is not in SE. If that should prove to be the case, then this and similar West Indian expressions do not belong in List C but rather in List A (lexical items which seem to have a broader semantic range in Stubbs than in SE).

The idiom here certainly may be used in situations usually outside the boundaries of the SE "equivalent," however. A student who reports late to class and is confronted by a teacher demanding an explanation
for his tardiness may simply shrug and say, "No big t'ing." An athlete who doesn't conform to expectations is likely to give the same response. Certainly in most of the instances in which a speaker of SE uses, "It doesn't matter," "No big t'ing" may be used in St. Vincent. Yet it is apparent that if one said "It doesn't matter" as routinely as the Vincentians say "No big t'ing" he would be considered slovenly, surly or ill-mannered.

Similarly, the idiom "Hush yo' mout'" seems to have much broader usage than does its "equivalent," "Shut up." The latter SE idiom is generally considered a sharp rebuke. In St. Vincent it may be used as a sharp rebuke but it is often used as a request, and not an altogether impolite request.

It is apparent that a comprehensive study is needed to determine precisely how disparate the cognitive ranges of the two dialects in question are. The specific semantic ranges of comparable utterances in the two dialects must be compared and mapped. It is also apparent that such a study would represent a resurgence of the Whorfian Hypothesis in a modified form. If the dialect evidences cognitive tendencies and if it tends to employ semantic ranges that are different in either degree or kind from those normally employed in another dialect, then dialect can be seen as having an effect on the cognitive process.

Dialect and Social Convention

Transformational grammarians have described natural languages in terms of their generative power (Chomsky, Syntactic Structures, 1969). Following a finite set of rules and utilizing a finite repertoire, the possibilities for utterance are infinite. A dialect's rules are not merely syntactic; they are also social in nature. Each dialect group has regulations governing appropriateness beyond which the speaker should not freely extend himself. Further, it has propensities all its own. Each dialect group has definable areas of discourse which are socially reinforced to the relative exclusion of others. These regions of socially-reinforced discourse will differ in some respects from dialect to dialect. This suggests that a grammar of a dialect provides a necessary but not a sufficient profile of it. The generative rules governing language are as much social as they are grammatical. The laws governing sensibility of utterance are as dependent on social context as are the conventions governing grammar. Within each socially-reinforced region of discourse resides the generative power of the dialect. The speaker who has internalized the rules that govern the boundaries of accepted verbal usage has also the power to develop infinite variations within those boundaries.

In SE there seems to be a distinct social convention demanding logical consistency in verbal behavior, which convention is not present to nearly the same extent in the dialect of St. Vincent. While there are social settings which will allow departure from these criteria (informal parties, joke-telling situations, bar-room chatter and the like),
LISTS OF LEXICAL ITEMS

LIST A: Lexical items which seem to have a broader semantic range in Stubbs than in SE. Except where specifically qualified, items here seem to include all of the SE range plus additional meanings.

Insulting. Covers the range of SE meanings "deliberately abusive or scornful" plus SE meanings of "rude," "contrary," "disrespectful," "disobedient" and "bad-mannered." Can be as harsh a criticism as in SE or a bland negative assessment.

Rude. Used interchangeably with "insulting."

Vex. Used to indicate range of negative feelings from mild irritation to acute hostility ("He vex me so.")

Forward. Used in all senses of SE but with emphasis on flirtatiousness, which connotation seems to be broader than in SE. Often used in joking or semi-joking manner to indicate mere affection. Anyone demonstrating an interest in a member of the opposite sex may be labelled "forward."

Common. In addition to the SE sense of "usual," "frequent," "widespread" and "general," the Vincentian tends to prefer the older sense of "vulgar," "coarse" and "low-class."

Love. Used primarily to indicate SE notion of sexual acts (verb); as noun, used to indicate SE "infatuation."

In. Often used in Stubbs synonymously with SE "has arrived" or "is here." ("Mango day in!" means "The mangoes are ripe and are here.")

Moles'. SE "molest" with frequent exclusion of the violent character. In Stubbs it is extended in its usual meaning to cover all types of annoyance inflicted by persons; a person who simply annoys or bothers another may be said to be "moles'ing" him.

Suggest. SE "suggest" plus simple indication of agreement with a previous utterance. John: "I wonder if Amanda went to town." Charles: "I suggest." ("I suspect so.")

Meet. SE meaning plus SE "find." ("I meet the house" means "I found the house.")

Pretty. May be used in SE sense of "handsome" but is not applied to non-human objects; not a "pretty" horse or a "pretty" tree. Hence, the term is both broader semantically ("He a pretty man") and more restricted than SE.

Dull. Often has a sexual meaning. A "dull" man is one who exhibits no sexual desire.

Carry. Can convey sense of SE "accompany." ("You carry me home.")
Rough. SE meaning plus "tough," "strenuous," "strict," "obstinate" and "difficult."

Humbug. SE meaning of "deceive," "defraud" plus the blander meaning of "bother." Anyone simply annoying another can be said to be "humbuggin' him."

Sex. Is used in both a more restrictive and a broader sense than in SE. There are meanings evident in Stubbs which are not in SE, and vice versa. The verb form is synonymous with "copulate with" ("He sex she.") The noun form appears most frequently in the specific instance, e.g., "He have sex with she." The SE abstract sense of sex as a heuristic category seems to be missing. In this connection the adjective "sexual" is not used. One neither talks of "sex" as a domain of behavior nor describes specific activities as having a "sexual" character.

LIST B: Lexical items which seem to have a more restricted semantic range in Stubbs than in SE.

Happen. Almost exclusively used in exclamations such as "Wha's happenin'!" Never heard in the sense of "chance" ("He just happened to uncover the secret.")

Man. Used in two of the SE senses: As an expletive, e.g., "Man, why you do that!" and as a noun in a concrete or specific sense, e.g., "John is a man." Never heard in the sense of "mankind."

Ripe. Used almost exclusively in a metaphorical sense; "Samuel a ripe man" (a mature or virile man).

Supernatural. Usually used as a general characterization of a particular person rather than of certain divine or mysterious phenomena. ("He a supernatural child" in the case of a child sick from birth.)

Drastic. Seems to require a human or at least an animate reference. In Stubbs, "drastic" is used in the SE sense of "annoying" ("He a drastic man"). Never used in the sense of "extreme" as in (SE) "The judge's sentence was a drastic one."

Reach. Synonymous with SE "going" or "arrive." ("How far you reachin'?" means "How far are you going?" and "When you reach?" means "When did you get here?" or "When did you arrive?")

Harass. A milder form of the SE word, connoting mild annoyance rather than the SE sense of "torment."
LIST C: Lexical items which exist in both dialects but which evidence little semantic overlap.

Flat. It seems likely that the literal meaning of "flat" as in "flat land" is used in Stubbs, although no specific examples were heard. However, in the metaphorical sense, the two dialects sharply diverge. One never hears reference to "flat beer" as lacking in zestfulness or tastiness. Rather, another negative connotation is implied, similar to the Vincentian "common," conveying notions of substandardness. Thus, a person is "flat" or "He speak flat language."

Dross. Close, but not identical, to the SE definition ("waste"); is more equivalent to SE "nonsense" or "drivel." In Stubbs, one "speaks all kind of dross" or makes frequent utterance of no value.

For. Often used as an equivalent to SE "by." "I mus' go cook for twelve" means "I must go and have the meal cooked by twelve o'clock," not "I must go and cook for twelve people."

To come back. In SE, the "to" in this phrase may be part of the infinitive or may mean "In order to." In Stubbs, however, the expression is used almost exclusively in the sense of "and then." "I goin' to town to come back" means in SE, "I am going to town and then I will come back."

Jus' now. Roughly equivalent to SE "sometime in the future." "I comin' back jus' now" means "I will return sometime in the indefinite future, most likely a matter of hours or days." The qualifier "now" is sharply at variance with the SE sense of "immediately."

Far. Most frequently used in a way that differs sharply from SE. Indicates distance in time rather than in space (geographical). "Why you look at me so far?" means "Why have you been looking at me for so long?"

No big t'ing. Superficially equivalent to "It doesn't matter," but the much broader range and frequency of usage of the West Indian idiom alter its meaning significantly from the SE "equivalent." (See discussion pp. 126-127.)
the speaker in SE is normally expected to adhere to the "rule of reason." Should he depart from this rule he can expect criticism, even censure, from friends and peers. There is usually the expectation of accountability. Normally, if a man makes a statement today he cannot radically alter his stance tomorrow unless he is prepared to rationalize the change. There is an implicit cultural rule for this; to overlook the rule is to invite unflattering epithets ("Tom is a liar" -- or "muddle-headed," "two-faced," "hypocritical," "simple-minded").

While in the above example of SE insistence on coherency and consistency a person is always subject to exposure and censure if he violates one or more of the rules, he can use language in such a way as to disguise his violations. The SE user of rhetoric is in effect offering a pretense for reason (consistency and coherency). Figurative expression in certain social settings is lauded, not on the grounds that it is good rhetoric, but rather because the speech was socially valuable or logically sound or both. The fact that it was rhetoric is obscured. If rhetoric is characterized as rhetoric, it is usually done so in the negative ("mere rhetoric").

This general rule of consistency is an attribute of the dialect, one which does not characterize the dialect in Stubbs in the way it does in SE. We will see in the following section that there is an area of discourse in Stubbs in which inconsistency and incoherency of stated ideals and intentions are not only accepted, but are actually implicit characteristics of the dialect.

On the basis of preliminary research, the dialect in Stubbs reflects three types of language usage which are culturally-specific. They are "chat," a large region of formality, and the interabang. "Chat" is discussed below, while formality and interabang are presented briefly in Appendices I and II, respectively. It is not pretended that these are the only distinguishing social conventions of the dialect or even that they are perfectly defined in this paper. They are presented in order to emphasize the need for viewing dialect in terms of social rules as well as in terms of the more conventional linguistic indices. The descriptions and anecdotes hopefully will serve as guideposts for further research. Additionally, they should serve as a starting point from which to view the peculiar relationships between language and culture which make the West Indies English-speaking regions a distinct cultural unit.

Chat has evolved as a special convention in Stubbs and possibly in the West Indies generally. In Stubbs, there are expectations about linguistic performance which permit its use, and it is certainly condoned by overall social convention. Chat has the following characteristics. First, it departs noticeably from the SE ethic of consistency and coherency noted above (see Anecdote #1). To take the substance of one's utterance on the occasion of chat is to miss the point of it. A declaration of a "chatter" is more a simple self-assertion than a matter for consideration. For this reason an ethnographer who "takes every word at face value" in Stubbs has applied the wrong standard and will be frustrated in using informants. Frequently an informant will contradict
himself and will contradict reality. Because of a lack of censure, fanciful accounts and descriptions are common. Inconsistency of stated objectives, values and ideals, in detailing one's intentions, in labeling and characterizing certain individuals, is common in Stubbs. It becomes necessary, then, to recognize social situations in which chat is likely to be generated. It is important to note here that, while "chat" may be a cultural universal in some form or another, it is apparently much more generally used in Stubbs. It is a genre which crosses generational lines and which is certainly not as circumscribed as it is in SE.

Secondly, chat displays a flowing character (see Anecdote #2). West Indian talk, as represented in Stubbs, must be observed as a continuing, ongoing, constantly renewed process. The "chatter" tends to start a conversation slowly, even haltingly. If chat is to evolve into a display of rhetoric, it usually becomes evident when the speaker seizes on a word or phrase, a particularly pleasing insult or other graphic characterization. He is likely to reiterate words and ideas several times and then the conversation seems to take flight. It seems to matter little whether the audience is reduced to one, or necessarily whether the audience participates with its supporting remarks. The speaker frequently seems almost lost in monologue although it is clear from his rhetorical questions that he sees himself making an address of some importance.

Chat is round about, not proceeding sequentially, but circumferentially; points are made emphatically, but circuitously. Whenever the speaker arrives at a point he likes, such as at a blistering loaded question or an insult, he will likely linger over it, leave it for a time, return to it, re-utter it a few times and stay near it until the central point has been amplified beyond where its informational content has been exhausted. Yet, the speaking does not stop with the exposition of a single thought. With mixtures of evident piety, admonition, insult, deferential instruction (to the audience), emphatic self-congratulation and derisive sneers and laughter, the chat moves along. There is no logical concluding point just as there is no precise introduction. This is not to suggest that West Indians cannot be logically consistent or stick to a central point. It is, rather, to suggest that in certain kinds of chat the SE criteria are much less apparent; that, in effect, there is a social function to which language is put that differs from comparable SE speech situations.

Chat is frequently self-generative and also is responsible for generating behavior outside the specific chat situation. Chat is often provocative to the point that it creates generalized reactions. It is important to stress that, from all indications thus far, the external results are purely unintentional. That is, chat is presently cast in my mind as initially innocent of ultimate consequences. Psychological considerations certainly play a role in producing the chat in the first place, yet it would appear simplistic to reduce the whole dynamic to psychological factors alone. Chat may indeed be viewed as a psychological phenomenon in itself, but to view it as such is to threaten to strip speech of its cultural significance.
We have already mentioned the "flow" character of chat. This trait overlaps with its self-generative aspect. Chat produces more chat. A theme, once capsulized and given a graphic public rendering, repeats itself in subsequent chats. But in being repeated, it is enhanced and embellished. If a speaker who is "chatting" concludes that Samuel Smith is retarded and primitive (for he cannot read and does agricultural work), Smith is likely to reappear in subsequent chat as having these negative qualities plus a few more (He is cruel because he beats his children, and he is not a full man because someone else is "butting" him, or sleeping with his wife).

Further, the impression that is created out of chat is, quite understandably, acted upon. If someone listening in on chat has never paid much attention to Mr. Smith until now, then sees him on the following day, the changes of his reacting negatively to him are substantially increased as the result of the chat experience. While chat cannot be isolated from the social context in any final way, it seems eminently fair to cite it as a secondary source of overt behavior. Language as a symbolic activity has this tendency anyway. In chat it is fundamentally geared to overt social response.

Chat contains all the elements of rhetoric (see Anecdote #3). Exaggeration, figurative language, emotion-packed words and expressions, a particular tone (often of piousness) and almost immoderate appeals to reasonableness (to the audience) are all there. Well-controlled gestures, thundering innuendos, overt and covert insults, and a number of logical fallacies appear in chat. Ad hominem arguments, oversimplified characterizations, hasty generalizations, the lifting out of context of other people's remarks, ad populum appeals and allusions to "unquestionable" authorities such as the Bible or some favored charismatic personality quickly become familiar hallmarks of chat. The audience, which usually sits in active (audible) attention on the speaker's utterances, is flattered. Repetition of key words and phrases and ideas are commonly employed.

Not all West Indians master the ability to use rhetoric consistently and effectively. The rhetorician one hears tonight will likely appear tomorrow night. A village of 500 people may have as few as a dozen (this is very much an estimate) people who display themselves publicly and who frequently exert their rhetorical propensities in socially obvious ways. Yet it remains a dialect feature of which most people partake in a number of ways and which quite obviously influences the listener, often more overtly than it does the speaker. Presumably, in a large number of cases, the speaker "gets it off his chest" while the listener is impregnated with his notions. Interestingly, the Islander who masters SE seems likely to develop most especially those skills of SE which are rhetorical in nature. West Indians who assume leadership positions both within the dialect region of the islands and in Stateside areas frequently employ the posture of consummate orators.

There is a temptation to regard much of informal talk as "mere chat." Indeed much of the conversation in Stubbs seems to warrant this label.
Passing remarks often seem to be so completely unrealistic that a newcomer from the States is frequently at a loss to understand local customs and attitudes. There seems to be no clear distinction between fact and fantasy in most informal discussion.

The examples of "outlandish" inconsistency are legion: A young man will explain with resoluteness that he will not be around to see me any more because he will have a job starting next week, and will have to be leaving the island. Yet, next week he will still be around and feels no need to explain the discrepancy between the previous assertion and the real situation. Another tells of his travels throughout the southern United States and proudly discloses that he engaged in illegal activities and was detained on numerous occasions by southern sheriffs. He concludes by lauding southern white sheriffs as gentlemen and by "recounting" incidents in which these sheriffs bought him meals and drinks and excused him from his legal offenses.

Another young man will talk endlessly about the virtues of marriage and in the course of his chat disclose his intention to marry his current girl friend. He does this despite the fact that his audience will not likely take him seriously on the subject and will laugh (after he is gone) about the ridiculousness of his marrying the girl. Still another youth proclaims that the obviously expensive guitar he is carrying about the village (and which he cannot play) was a gift from his previous employer (an Englishman) as an expression of deep affection and gratitude for his faithful service as a mason; the guitar was subsequently accounted for in a variety of other (and contradictory) ways. Another youth (see Anecdote #1) will proclaim for weeks that he is a professional boxer, fabricating intricate details of his plans to be a successful prize fighter, and that he has an important bout coming up against a Trinidadian fighter; the whole situation turned out to be completely fraudulent.

It must be remembered that these "stories" are often public accounts, rendered not merely before a student from the States, but before local people. The audience, at least according to my observations, seldom seriously challenges the speaker. When I confidentially questioned individuals who had listened to doubtful accounts of a chatter, they either supported the person's claims or expressed an inability to answer my questions. In the case of the would-be boxer, I questioned a young man who was acting as my informant about the validity of the former's claims and intentions. He claimed a sincere belief that everything I had heard was, in his view at least, completely accurate. The one exception to this, in my experience, was that of the young man's stated intention of marriage, mentioned above; and, in this case, the local audience waited until he had departed before responding to the story with laughter.

Further, the cynical response was triggered by a middle-aged, middle-class homeowner, a woman who might be expected to react this way due to her unusual socioeconomic status in the community. Also, she had several grown children living in the United States and Canada, and at that time had an American student living in her home who was present on this occasion; her acquaintance with North American social mores and conventions may have given her cause for inciting scorn on the chatter.
In the States this sort of open support for obvious and stated inconsistencies and untruths carries with it the threat of complicity, or at least of naivety. If one continually verifies the statements of another, and the statements subsequently prove false, there is the real danger that one's opinion will not be respected. On the basis of my experience, within the culture of Stubbs, one is simply not confronted with this particular obstacle. One is apparently not held to literal account either for his statements or for supporting the claims of another. One does not face the threat of being "found out," at least when one is chatting. Chat, then, seems to have a distinctive social function and is characteristic of the dialect region. It is a characteristic in which veracity apparently is a trivial consideration.

Precisely how chat functions is open to conjecture. It may be that the sense of participation evidenced in chat situations will provide a clue. Possibly chat is comparable to the West Indian religious situation in which the congregation audibly supports the declarations of the preacher and in which the need for group cohesion seems more important than dispassionate listening. The state of total and audible agreement seems apparent in both group situations and may be joined historically. Chat conceivably may be a secular form of the church service with the content of the message being considered above scrutiny and as a generally accepted social ritual.

The would-be ethnographer often hears data where it does not exist. In a perhaps pardonable lust for data, the field worker takes utterances that come his way and often whimsically and arbitrarily selects those which seem to serve his purpose. He takes "evidence" which supports or negates a central hypothesis and "tunes out" (often without realizing it) other important evidence, evidence which serves to complicate and hence confuse the situation. One often finds himself taking as evidence, surface utterances which are either randomly dropped within earshot of the listener or are in response to the ethnographer's queries. Especially in the West Indies, this appears to be risky. For what one hears must be observed within the specific social context, and the rules governing the flow of utterance must be taken into consideration. If one takes chat literally, if one assumes, for instance, that a real dispute exists on the basis of what one hears during a chat experience, he is likely to be deluded. In chat one may find himself hearing and recording what is not meant to be interpreted as fact. Uncovering surface utterances and thoughts is one thing; uncovering real disputes, genuine attitudes and values, or the real ethos of the people is quite another.

In the service of chat, the speaker will tell his audience (of friends for the most part) whatever is suitable for the occasion. He may speak of villains and of saints; whether outside the context of chat he really regards these "villains" as villains and the "saints" as saints is unlikely to be accurately reproduced in chat. For chat seeks to provide something other than mere truth; it seeks, rather, acceptance for the speaker in a friendly environment. It is a communal experience in which entertainment and reciprocal reinforcement is more important than exposition of some "truth."
To establish the construct "chat" is to imply that it is distinguishable from other forms of linguistic expression in the region. It is certainly true that not all West Indian speech falls under this rubric. One can expect on certain occasions that what is said is literally the case. Certain people within the community tend to show greater preference for factual accuracy. Preliminary investigation seems to indicate, for example, that there is a relationship between social status and such a preference. Yet, this and other hypotheses are largely speculative at this time. A socio-linguistic analysis is needed in the West Indies to deal with a variety of questions such as this.
NOTES

1 For example, a woman in Stubbs reports, "I mus' go now. I cookin' for six." Translated into SE, she is saying "I must go now. I must have the meal prepared by six o'clock" (not, "I am cooking for six people.")

2 For example, a man exclaims, "He t'ief me watch!" The SE appropriate tense of the verb and the case of the possessive pronoun are absent. The meaning may be that he steals my watch (as a matter of course, regularly), or that he has stolen my watch, or that he will do so in the future.
While formal language usage exists in both dialects, it seems as though the area of discourse is larger in St. Vincent than it is in SE. Certainly in the United States, formal settings are more narrowly circumscribed. Terms of formal address such as "Sir," "Mr.," and "Miss" are usually reserved for settings in which there is an institutional framework and/or ones in which there is a felt disparity of status (employer-employee, professor-student, and the like). Except on such occasions as professional conventions, colleagues usually address each other by first names soon after they have met. These days it matters little whether there is an age difference; a youth in his late teens or early twenties often addresses a fellow townsman by his first name, even though the latter is middle-aged.

Furthermore, the use of nicknames, which further subverts social distance, is a very common feature of the SE dialect. In Stubbs, there is an apparent reluctance to use nicknames in the typical SE fashion. Some nicknames are used by close friends, but, interestingly, they are usually not shortened versions of their real names but fabrications. Usually, however, one's full given (first) name is used in informal situations as well as in those which are expressly formal.

Similarly, "proper" greetings are often ignored in incidental SE settings. Passing an acquaintance on the street usually requires some sort of acknowledgment, but it is as likely to be a nod of the head, a "hi" or "hey Joe" as the more formal "good morning." The same convention applies to afternoon and evening situations.

To behave "properly" in St. Vincent, one must give evidence of his sense of propriety. It is "proper" to greet another with "good morning," "good afternoon," "good evening" or "good night" before continuing past him on the street. To fail to give this sort of greeting is to invite a rebuke. If one neglects to "hail" another properly it can easily be construed as a deliberate slight. If a girl fails to heed such a greeting by a young man "on the make" she may be confronted with her impropriety and be legitimately criticized for having failed in an obligation. If a seven-year-old child going to Mr. Jones' shop for a half-pound of flour simply steps up to the counter and places the order, he may be refused service until he says, "Good evening, Mr. Jones."

Knowing one's place is important. If one is addressing an older person, or if there is any social distance implied by the situation, one must begin with the salutation of "Mr.," "Mrs.," "Miss," "Sir" or "Ma'am." To neglect to do so is to fail in an important social obligation. There is an implied social consciousness; status is reinforced by the salutation ceremony, and it is a social imperative that is rather strictly adhered to. Teachers who have been colleagues for years and who are of the same age will address each other in informal settings as "Mr. Jones," "Miss Rogers," etc.
In the United States, when one finds oneself jostled about in a crowd while trying to get to a particular location, he is likely either to elbow his way through wordlessly or to pardon himself with "excuse me's." In the Caribbean one does the same thing while saying, "excuse me please." The word "please" holds imperial powers and usually creates recognition and compliance on the part of the crowd that hears it. To omit the word "please" is tantamount to encouraging the impersonal resistance and solidifying it.

Words, in Stubbs, have status value. To fail to utter appropriate terms of respect is to run against the clearly defined conventions and to invite the condemnation of being "common," "low class," "primitive," "ignorant" or "backward." These designations are important and carry the same weight as do stereotypic labels such as "Fascist" or "Racist" in the States."

*Note: My fellow student in Stubbs, Mr. John Hourihan, takes exception to the inferences in this section. He feels that the formality was generated by our presence in the village and does not necessarily apply within the society itself. There is the question here of my credibility due to the fact that the inferences were initially drawn not in Stubbs but in the Virgin Islands. However, I do not believe I have drawn an unfitting and arbitrary characterization of formality here.*
In a community such as Stubbs there was less concern with privacy in many matters than is evident in the United States. Individual behavior is routinely turned into public knowledge. One's sexual exploits are publicized, one's house is often considered a convenient place to spend idle time (unless there is some explicit prohibition against it), and it is nor nor normally considered an impropriety to borrow personal articles or to rummage through someone else's personal effects. If a party is being held it behooves the host to prepare for a larger gathering than is invited; it is considered bad form to refuse food and drink to those who just "happen by."

There is a general informality implied in this trait. In addition to the behavioral reactions this sets up in each individual, there is a linguistic consequent: West Indian interabang.* Interabang is an expression that mixes exclamatory and interrogative qualities. On the basis of my experience, it exists exclusively in the context of the informal situation and is a frequently employed category of utterance.

As a stranger walking to the beach, I passed several dwellings. I was frequently addressed by people I did not know (and often could not see, as frequently they remained coyly hidden behind doors, or in or behind bushes). They would generally employ an interabang as a device to initiate a verbal exchange. Seeing me attired in bathing suit and with a towel draped over my shoulder and headed for the beach they might say, "Good morning sir. Goin' for a soak" (or, "takin' bath," "goin' for a stroll," "takin' a little walk" or "goin' down ee road.") It was at once an observation and an inquiry. However rhetorical it was an utterance which demanded some sort of response.

Interabang appeared almost ubiquitously. A youngster passing a shopkeeper may be assailed by the latter for not saying "good morning" and then held momentarily captive with "Marvin, you goin' school now." To which Marvin would feel obliged to supply either "Yes, Mr. Daniel," or "No sir, me ain' goin' school today," or some other token verbal gesture. A young lady is waiting at the bus stop and a friend passes by and says, "Amelda, you goin' town today." A youth emerges from a movie theater and hears from a friend who happens to be passing by, "Felix, you enjoy dee movie." A man enters a local shop and confronts the shopowner, who says, "You feel better today, Mr. James. You want a bread and a rum." (The specific quantity needn't be stated when, as a regular customer, one has established one's habits with consistent purchases.)

**"Interabang" used here to denote a special type of speech is technically a punctuation mark adopted by the American Type Founders Co. in 1967. According to Time magazine (May 31, 1971, p. 26), it "is intended to express a simultaneous quality of exclamation and of questioning."
It appears that, in Stubbs at least, the interabang serves essentially the same social function as does the rhetorical question in the United States, where the question is not really a question, but rather an assertion searching for agreement. When the agreement is not possible, an explanation is necessary. ("Isn't it a beautiful day" demands at least token assent unless one has some sort of contrary information and is willing, under the circumstances, to supply it.) Yet the interabang is more forcefully presented here than is the rhetorical question, which usually demands no more than a glint of the eye, a nod of the head or the most elementary verbal response ("Yeah!") The interabang demands a more complete response, usually accompanied by an explanation. Take the last example, "You feel better today, Mr. James. You want a bread and a rum." Mr. James is, on this occasion, accountable to the addressee. He is obliged to either give a token dismissal of the seriousness of his ailment or to talk at some length of its specific attributes. But he must address himself directly to the interabang.
Anecdote *1 (inconsistent aspect of chat)

Shortly after my arrival in Stubbs, Samuel, one of my principal informants, was discussing boxing. Long after the discussion had gotten under way, a friend of his (and another of our informants) mentioned to me that Samuel was himself a boxer. I asked Samuel rather rhetorically if it were true and, without delay, he launched into a speech on his exploits as a boxer. He informed me that he was, in fact, to be featured in an upcoming boxing match in Kingstown and that he would probably be fighting a Trinididian. He invited Mr. Hourihan (another graduate student) and myself to come and watch him fight, and with characteristic confidence predicted that he would make a good showing.

The day following this news, we saw Samuel tacking up posters in the village announcing the upcoming boxing series in town. There were three matches included and upon examining the announcement we noticed that Samuel’s name was not included among the principals. When at one point I brought this to his attention he said that he was fighting under the name "Kid Bull." The other student was not present when he told me this. However, he chanced to mention the matter to Samuel on another occasion when I was not present. To the same question I had asked, Mr. Hourihan received the answer that Samuel was fighting under the name of "Slugger Man."

We noticed as the days went by that Samuel was smoking quite heavily and given to drinking rum. In addition he frequently stayed up late evenings and during the day evidenced no training regimen that might have been considered routine for one who had athletic aspirations of this sort. When we mentioned this to him he indicated his full intention of curtailing his smoking and drinking, and that he worked out regularly at the gym in town under his trainer's supervision. On this occasion I happened to ask him what his height and weight were. His answer: six feet, six inches, 190 pounds. Mr. Hourihan’s and my estimate: six feet, two or three inches, 160-165 pounds. He said that he was in the heavyweight class.

During the week before the scheduled bout, Samuel appeared wearing a bandage around his wrist. He said he had fallen on it. He reassured us that he was in good condition for the fight, however, and said he hoped we would be at the fight to cheer him on. We assured him that as long as he was going to fight, we would be there.

Our suspicions had, by now, been aroused to the point that we simply did not believe that he would be fighting. He had evidenced inconsistency in his stories to such an extent that there was little doubt in our minds that he was fabricating the entire situation. Not only was there confusion as to what his pseudonym was, but he had on numerous occasions told us things with conviction which had proven to be false. One of the interesting facts of this chat phenomenon is that the stories created out of fancy were frequently corroborated by other members of the social unit. The other young men of the village who congregated outside my house, when questioned about Samuel's stories, usually supported them. When I questioned several members of the group (when Samuel was not present) they claimed to
believe that he would be fighting in Kingstown on the occasion in question. On the day preceding the match, Mr. Hourihan was in town with Alfredo, a close friend of Samuel's and another informant. They noticed a poster advertising the event and went to examine it. There were photographs of the entrants on the poster, but Samuel's picture was not among them. Alfredo's response consisted simply of an acknowledgement that Samuel apparently was not fighting.

On the night on which the fight was scheduled to take place, Mr. Hourihan and I were in town, not to see the fight but to see a play. When we returned to Stubbs the following day we did so with knowledge that the fight had been postponed and would take place 24 hours after it was originally scheduled. We approached Samuel and said that we had learned that he did not fight, whereupon he informed us that he didn't fight because his manager had been involved in an automobile accident on his way out to pick him up and was thus unable to appear as scheduled.

The following evening the bout took place, with both men claiming the pseudonyms above participating. Samuel was in Stubbs with us and the subject of the fight did not come up. It is perhaps unfortunate that we did not raise the issue but our American sense of shame for Samuel prevailed. Had we brought it up I suspect he would have used the inconsistency as a point of departure for more chat, instead of evincing the typical American response of defensiveness for some wrongdoing.
Anecdote #2 (self-generative and "flow" aspect of chat)

When I moved into the community, a group of youths, mostly in their late teens and early twenties, congregated outside my house, day and night. They were, for the most part, unemployed. The group numbered up to 25 to 30 individuals during the day and up to 40 at night. It seems that they had used the outside area around my house as a gathering spot for some time. The house had been more or less unoccupied for a long period of time and was situated strategically on a bend in the road and by a bridge. The bridge railing and the porch area afforded them comfortable places to sit and a good vantage point from which to view any human or vehicular traffic proceeding up or down the road. It was, in effect, the primary hangout for the young men of the village.

Mr. Hourihan, who had preceded my arrival in Stubbs by several days, had been warned by Mr. Thomas, a shopkeeper, that the boys were undesirable and should not be trusted. While not singling out anyone in particular, and not citing them for any specific crime (other than being "common" and "untrustworthy") he evidently sought to implant his grave suspicions in us. Mr. Hourihan notified me of this warning just prior to my moving in.

Mrs. George was hired by the owner of my house to keep the area around the house clean. She had worked for him for a number of years (nine, according to her). Shortly after arriving there I was informed by her that I should watch the boys outside my house and be careful of them. Again, no specific charge was made and no particular youth was cited as being an offender.

Mr. Hourihan, in the days immediately following our arrival in Stubbs, was interested in tracing the roots of dispute in the community and happened to mention to one of the youths that an older person in the community had warned us that we should be careful. He was careful to couch the terms of the warning in as vague terms as they had been given, and was careful to use the information merely to get a discussion started about some obvious differences of opinion that existed in the community between some of the shopowners.

In the meantime, we had rather successfully cultivated friendships with most of the young men. They were coming by my house and presenting gifts of food, and shortly after my arrival they set up an evening session of calypso outside my house. They said it was to welcome us, and kept us entertained all evening long with singing. We made ourselves as accommodating as possible during those days, providing them with the use of my tape recorder, occasional cigarettes and beer. Both Mr. Hourihan and I began to use key people, including Alfredo and Samuel, as informants. We explained as clearly as possible our mission in the community and they seemed more than willing to cooperate. Both Alfredo and Samuel were frequent visitors, both day and night, at my house.
One afternoon, Alfredo came to pay a call and told me that Samuel would no longer be coming to visit. I expressed mild consternation and questioned further. He explained that he had learned that Mr. Thomas and Mrs. George had accused Samuel of being a tief. I countered that I had entrusted my belongings to Samuel on numerous occasions and trusted him completely. I asked Alfredo to tell Samuel that I wanted no idle gossip to come between us and that, so far as I was concerned, Samuel was welcome to visit me whenever he wished.

Later that afternoon I happened to encounter Samuel on the street, and faced him with the situation. I reiterated my sense of absolute trust and told him that, since I was the one renting the house, I would decide who would and would not be welcome there. I told him that while there were a couple of individuals who had warned us when we first arrived, those people did not single him out as a culprit, and further, that there was no specific charge leveled. As best I knew how, I tried to discourage his withdrawal from my house area and to impress upon him that such a withdrawal might appear to others like an admission of guilt or as though I had personally engineered his removal. His response was to say that he knew his decision would embarrass me and that was the last thing he wanted. But he insisted that he knew his community better than I did and that he wanted his removal from my premises to serve as a dramatic denial of his guilt. He informed me quite seriously that he would not, under any circumstances, return to the area around my house until after I had left the village.

Several days after my encounter with Samuel, Mr. Hourihan and I walked past Mr. Thomas' shop and he called us over. He informed us that Samuel had entered his shop recently and had "cussed him out," telling him that we (Mr. Hourihan and I) had told him (Mr. Thomas) that he had told us that he (Samuel) was a tief. Samuel apparently had caused quite a stir in the shop and had humiliated Mr. Thomas with a harangue. We were completely alone with him at this point, and he reminded us that he had never said anything in any way disparaging about the "boys." The puzzling thing to us was that he interspersed his declarations of innocence with vehement denunciations of the youths. Whereas he had initially warned us of the youths in general terms, he now spoke of them in most disparaging terms while at the same time denying that he had ever said anything at all of a critical nature against them. Whereas before he had simply given a general warning, he now made direct accusations; they were tiefs. His point was unequivocal. I must have nothing to do with them. I must not allow them near my house. We must treat them as the "commoners" they were.

I left Mr. Thomas with as many assurances as I could without giving in totally. I did not promise to rid myself totally of the youth but promised to keep a ready eye. I wanted desperately to neutralize the situation. I was angry at Samuel for unnecessarily firing up what appeared to me to be covert factional disputes, and using us an excuse to do so. But I was also upset with Mr. Thomas for so vehemently denying that he had warned us of the youths' untrustworthiness in the first place. I could understand his denying it to Samuel or another member of the group, but, after all, he had made the remark to Mr. Hourihan originally. And now he was denying it to us.
Mrs. George approached me later that same afternoon; her routine was almost a carbon copy of Mr. Thomas'. She said that Samuel had "molested" her. He apparently had cursed her interminably, then accused her of telling me that he was a tief. She stated that she had never said anything harsh against him and then proceeded to do so now in even harsher terms than previously. She accused him of stealing and of being untrustworthy as well as "common." She warned me that he was the worst of a very bad lot and that I should immediately ban him from my premises. I asked her to try to forget the incident as best she could, while sympathizing with her. I reminded her that I was there for a short time only and would soon be gone, and that Samuel was probably just trying to get attention.

Meanwhile, Samuel had been showing up sporadically at my house. His self-imposed exile lasted for just 48 hours. At first, after his declaration of self-removal, he would sit across the street and send various other youths to my house for cigarettes or with requests to borrow my tape recorder. Shortly thereafter, he resumed his former presence and began spending the usual large amounts of time, both day and night, with me; he seemed to have no self-consciousness whatever about this. His return was accompanied by a swelling desire to denigrate Mr. Thomas and Mrs. George to me. He talked about them with unconcealed contempt, endlessly, almost as though he wished to continue this dispute indefinitely. He filled his chat with unflattering allusions to Mr. Thomas and Mrs. George, and the inanity or logical absurdity of his remarks never served to inhibit him. It rolled ceaselessly on until I left the village.

On the basis of a cursory glance of chat in Stubbs, it seems evident that pure chat evokes other forms of social behavior, and in so doing generates more chat. It seems to capitalize on surface attitudes prevalent in the community and to turn them into genuine sore points. It may be that open disputes often arise out of spontaneous utterances that are not initially intended as objective comment, but merely as a form of momentary verbal entertainment.
Anecdote #3 (rhetoric in chat)

Mr. Anselm has been listening to a radio evangelist in the rum shop, and is using the message as a point of departure for a diatribe. The diatribe has no specific focal point. It starts with the issue of evolution raised in the radio message, but quickly departs from that. He rises with some difficulty from his seat and jabs a finger into the air, saying aggressively, "We descend from monkey? That mean you Samuel, and you Gordon and I. Descend from monkey? I goin' tell you gentle-ment if we come from monkey God is a fool and a liar. The Bible is a liar. For it is the very word of God." Then intoning piously and turning to a man seated next to him he asks, "Are you prepared to call God a liar, brother?" "No sir," comes the indulgent response.

He continues, "It is my conviction that this world is full of people who think God is a liar and a fool. It is my conviction that the disgraceful behavior of our young people and the disgusting practices of our government is a result of people living in the shadow of the devil. He speaking to them and they are listening. What other reason for their rude manners?"

The subject shifts then from evolution to social and political problems. The religious tone may remain and references to God and the Bible may linger throughout. Or they may be forgotten and the speaker may simply indulge in imprecations and allusions to a more general morality.

Rhetoric it is, with clear distinctions between good and evil drawn out or implied, with saints and devils incarnate, rhetorical and loaded questions, flattery of the audience, many types of fallacious arguments, literary allusions and a prevailing tone of moral superiority. The audience will usually behave as though in a church service, adding "amen" and "tha's right brother!" It is not an occasion for dispassionate reason, nor is open debate likely to evolve out of it. Instead, the people gathered are likely to throw in supporting comments even as the dominating speaker continues. It is a communal experience primarily, with the dominant speaker holding court and the jury vocal in its partisan support.