Di muor yu luk, di les yu si: Wordplay, Duplicity, and Exclusion in Dancehall Songs

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Dancehall blends rhythm and clever wordplay to tell stories of resistance, reflecting the emotions and lived experiences of minoritised and marginalised groups. Despite seemingly superseding reggae in popularity, dancehall remains mostly locally grounded, perhaps because of its raunchy lyrics and a "tradition of stylized [and] ritual verbal violence" that romanticises conflict (Cooper 1994:430). Critics of dancehall often highlight the perceived real-world impact of its violent lyrics (Bakare-Yusuf 2006), challenging assertions by defenders that the genre's use of "lyrical guns" is hyperbolic rather than literal (Cooper 1994, 2004). However, beyond the stereotypes and the clichés associated with *slackness* and *badmanism*, few studies have examined linguistic creativity in dancehall lyrics. This corpus-assisted discourse study examines the textual and discursive dimensions of wordplay involving exclusion in dancehall songs. A purposive sample of songs by prominent dancehall artistes released between 2008 and 2022 is compiled and analysed using AntConc. Patterns of wordplay, lexicosemantic ambiguities, and intertextual references are subjected to a close analysis informed by critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2013) and identity theories (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985).

Findings revealed a preponderance of lyrical content that exhibits attachment to the ideology of capitalism while offering commentary on social and political issues sometimes concealed through wordplay, including metaphors, double entendres, allusions, oxymorons, similes, and intertextual references (Hope 2006). Artistes used wordplay in songs like *Odd Ras*, *Educated Dunce*, and *Shabba Madda Pot* to compose lyrics with layered meanings that subtly challenged listeners' opinions. This use of language allowed artistes to make songs ordinarily deemed controversial by "prudes" more palatable while commenting on sensitive and taboo subjects without facing direct censorship (Hope 2006). For example, in *Shabba Madda Pot*, the artiste toasts, "*di scheme hot, today we a di weather man…*" and later, "*… black rain fall wen you see we nod, steelpan a beat like Trinidad*." The words *hot* and *rain* in these lines refer to actual weather conditions. However, they also metaphorically outline a recipe for murder, forecasting the tension and potential bloodbath in the community. Similarly, the reference to steelpan was duplicitous, simultaneously capturing the melodies of the instrument and mimicking the sound of gunfire and bullets striking galvanised sheets. While Creole-based wordplay enables artistes to position themselves as insiders within dancehall (sub)culture, it erects barriers to comprehension for outsiders, namely, listeners unfamiliar with the artistes, local dialect, or sociopolitical contexts. This renders the artistes' message(s) partially or entirely inaccessible to listeners, who are unaware they are being excluded (Bauer 2015). The study contributes to broader discussions about how social identity and exclusion in Afro-Caribbean spaces are delineated by language.

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