

A *pan*-Creole innovation?

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In January 2007 an interesting exchange took place on the *WordReference.com* language forums' website regarding the words *deh pon* in the Jamaican singer Sean Paul's song 'We'll be burning'. Someone asked 'how would you translate these lyrics of Sean Paul: *We be earnin dollars turning cau' we mind deh pon we pay?* What does "deh pon" mean please?' The exchanges that followed were of little help:

I don't know, and the suggestions from the Urban Dictionary don't seem to fit. I think you are more likely to get useful replies in the English only forum. I've moved it here from the French-English forum.

I honestly have no idea. I would guess he's trying to say 'we will be earning money ...' Other than that, I have no idea.

It seems to be Jamaican: Quote (from an online Jamaican dictionary): Depan (deh-pon) – On; on top of; upon. Although it still makes little sense to me in this context.

My guess is, 'We are earning money selling because we're careful of the portion we pay'. However, I think 'deh pon' may have some meaning I am not aware of.

Basically since none of us can figure it out, it's not something really necessary to know unless you're really into Sean Paul music. Music from him won't exactly be grammatically correct either.

Even English speakers have to translate these lyrics.

Oh! Well, then it would be '... 'cause our mind is upon our pay'. Yeah, that could make sense, but I still like it my way. The cool thing about lyrics is you can sing them as you like.

In March 2010 a similar query was sent to the *Everything Jamaican* site: 'What does "ah wah you deh pon" mean? I have a Jamaican friend who said this, but I'm not sure what it stands for. Thank you very much for your help!!' It was clarified in the anonymous response 'it means 'what are you up to'.

The *Dictionary of Jamaican English* includes the following from Jacobs (1942), though without discussion: ‘Tax man deh pan me’ (‘The tax collector has descended upon me, or is upon me’) and ‘Me deh pan!’ ‘I’m on it!’, the meaning it has in Rita Marley Anderson’s *A De Pon Dem*.

Some years ago, I sent a short note to *American Speech* about the term ‘poppy-show’ (Hancock 2007) which occurs in several Atlantic English-lexifier Creoles, and which has a meaning they share with each other, but not with metropolitan English. There are, not surprisingly, numbers of geographically widely distributed shared Creole lexical and semantic applications that are not matched in British English (*again, back, next, come out, &c.*, and of course many non-English ones, such as *una/unu*) – and *DE PAN* would seem to belong to the list.

This construction consists of the existential/locative verb *DE* with *PAN* (< *upon*) before nominals meaning something like ‘to be involved with’, and before verbs ‘to be engaged in’. It is found in Sierra Leonean and Gambian Krio (but not elsewhere in Africa):

Yu de pan ful ‘you’re acting the fool’
Na ful yu dey pan so ‘you’re acting the fool’
Di gyal de pan wok ‘the girl is busy working’
Den de pan kongosa ‘they’re busy gossiping’
Yu de pan ala ‘you’re steady shouting’
Na ala yu dey pan ‘you’re steady shouting’

Writing about its occurrence in that language, Sierra Leonean Sheikh Umarr Kamarah asked

Where does the phrase, *a de pan kam* come from and what does it exactly mean? Well, the word *pan* is a preposition in Krio meaning, ‘on/about/concerning/in etc.’ and the phrase, *de pan* means, ‘be upon’. For example, *a de pan wahala* ‘I am in trouble’. While *de* is always followed by a verb, *de pan*, in ‘Standard’ Krio is followed by a noun. Note that the *de* in *de pan* is pronounced with a high tone (2011: 2).

It does not occur in contemporary Sea Islands Gullah, but is alive and well in Texas Afro-Seminole: *hunnuh dey pan fool* ‘you’re acting the fool’, *dem dey pan quall* ‘they’re engaged in quarreling’. Since the latter is an early breakaway from the former, we might assume that like the occurrence of the relativizer *wey* (Hancock 2007) it was found in Sea Islands Gullah too at an earlier time. What is particularly interesting is that it didn’t make it to Bioko (earlier Fernando Po), where an offshoot of Krio known locally as Pichi or Pichinglis is spoken. Kofi Yakpo told me

I tested for *DE PAN* in Pichi with younger and older speakers alike. Everybody thought it was wrong. I have seen it in Jamaican though...

John Holm provided (in *p.c.*) an example from Miskito Coast Creole: *ah de pan Siesar rai' now* 'I'm on Cesar's case right now (nagging him to stop drinking).'

Ian Robertson has provided the following from Guyana: *he de pon stupidity* 'he likes/enjoys nonsense; he is playing the fool', *she de pon wok* 'she works (single-mindedly)', *awee de pon am* 'we are working at it', *awee de pan struggle* 'we are struggling', *dem bin de pan strike* 'they were [being] on strike', and John Rickford (1987: 223) has *mi wash mi mout an ting, an mi de pan wash mi mout*. Also from Guyana, Cruickshank (1916, *passim*) has 'Well, *old lady, how are you? – Aow! Me dey 'pon am!*', '*dem deh 'pon a grabble*', '*de 'tory weh 'e a dey 'pon¹*'.

Allsopp (1996) has no discussion of it under DE³ or DE⁴, or under PON, nor has it been located in Barbados or the Bahamas; Aceto (*p.c.*) has not found it in Dominica, St. Eustatius or Saba, nor has Kephart found it in Carriacou or Esquire in Belize. Erva Bruno tells me that while it occurs in Tobago, it is not found in Trinidad. An unusual application of the structure is recorded from Tobago by Southers (1975: 204), viz. *ho mač yez yu de pan?* 'how old are you?'

The locative association of an action is reflected in such English constructions as 'I wonder what you're at', 'I know what you're about', while Rickford (1987: 227) finds in Traugott (1972: 143) a parallel with an Elizabethan English progressive construction with *on* + verb-*ing*, and repeats her example taken from Thomas Nashe (who lived between 1567 and about 1600), viz. 'King Henrie the eight with all his Lordes on hunting in his forrest at Windsore', though this lacks a *BE* verb. Traugott (1972: 143–144; see also McKerrow 1958) noted that

The *on* was often reduced to [ə], giving such forms as *a-hunting we will go*. While it seems likely that this construction reinforced the progressive *-ing* construction, many scholars feel it is doubtful whether it actually gave rise to it since the gerund construction is used frequently only rather later than the progressive with *-ing* ... this still remains one of the mysteries of the history of English.

Regarding *de pan* specifically, however, she notes (in *p.c.*)

I remain uncomfortable. My sense is that 'upon', being 'marked' in the sense that it is spatially complex, is unlikely to be the source of a grammaticalized form. I would be happier if there were evidence of 'into' having been used as a source for something. So maybe one should look elsewhere. It might be a preposition now, but was it originally? Prepositions often derive from verbs, so is there any conceivable source of a different kind?

The development of the *a-verbing* construction via the obsolete passival has been examined by Hundt (2004), and such prepositional phrases as *it is on fire*, *I am*

1. *a dey*, not noted elsewhere.

on time, &c., bear consideration. Abbott (1873: 94) discusses a construction with *a-* that matches more closely DE + PAN. He writes

This *a* still exists in *alive, afoot, asleep*, &c. it is a contraction of A[nglo] S[axon] *on* or the less common form *an*. We find in Early English ‘*on live*’, ‘*on foot*’, ‘*on hunting*’, ‘*on sleep*’.

However, scouring through pre-1800 texts relevant to European-African contact, and particularly those contemporary with Nashe (such as Moorhouse (1910) and Monson (1902)) and those to Sierra Leone and the Caribbean (Adanson 1814, Afzelius 1967, Atkins 1735, Beeching 1972, Bolingbroke 1813, Bosman 1814, Brown 1699, David 1981, Falconbridge 1758 and 1802, Jobson 1623, Matthews 1788, Moore 1738, Moreton 1793, Newton 1962, Owen 1930, Smith 1744, Snelgrave 1971, Strachan & Boies 1971, Thompson 1788, Thornton 1795), nothing closely matching this construction can be found in their English (e.g. *‘BE (up)on V-ing’ or even *‘BE a-V-ing’).

The application of *upon* in English has varied widely over the years, and some of those have been retained in Krio: *i veks pan mi* ‘he’s angry with me’, *a luk pan am* ‘I looked at her’, *i tɔk pan mi* ‘he scolded me (cf. *i tɔk to mi* ‘he spoke to me’), *i tɔk pan Krio* ‘he spoke in Krio’, *i ayd pan mi* ‘she hid from me’, *pan ɔl we* ‘although’, &c. And the DJE offers similar constructions: ‘*look pon we*’, ‘*dem tell lie pon tarra*’, ‘*me deh pon hase*’ (‘I’m in a hurry’). Of possible relevance here is the uncommon Jamaican construction ‘*she come a yard pon a cryin*’ ‘she came into the yard crying’, found in Bennett (1942: 38). Abbott (1873: 118 ff.) gives a number of examples of these constructions with *upon* from earlier English.

At its entry for UPON, the *English dialect dictionary* has:

prep, and adv. Var. dial. uses in Sc. Irel. And Eng. Also in forms apo’, apou Sh.I.; upo’ Sc. Cum.I; uppo s.Lan.1 [apo (n.)] ... In phr. (2) to be upon a person, to be insistent with him (Wright 1905 V.).

This second (of several) *EDD* interpretations, with an example from the Shetland Islands, viz. ‘*da lasses wis upo’ Willie ta sing dem a sang*’, comes close to the *DJE* example *tax man deh pan me*. Yet in these examples, the (*de*) *pan* does not refer to an ongoing state; ‘the lassies were upon Willie to sing’ is not the same as ‘*the lassies were upon bothering Willie to sing’, or ‘the lassies were on Willie’s case to sing’, nor is *tax man deh pan me fe pay* the same as *tax man deh pan bada me (fe pay)*. In Krio and Jamaican the Scottish sample would be *di titi dem bin de ambɔg Wili fɔ le i sing wan sing fɔ dem*, and *di gyal dem (b)en (d)a bada Wili fi im fi sing dem a sang*. In Afro-Seminole, *di gyal dem bin ə ɔɾabl Wili fə i siŋ dem ə svŋ*. Scottish varieties of English fed substantially into the emergence of the Atlantic English lexifier creoles (Hancock 2007).

Since *upon* is a preposition, it must therefore precede a nominal, gerund or otherwise, and most of the Creole examples indeed have nouns in this position: *ah de pan Siesar rai' now* (Moskito Coast Creole), *he de pon stupidity, awee de pon am* (Guyana Creolese), but some are ambiguous. Are *wok, kongosa ala, quall, struggle* and *strike* nouns or verbs? In *mi de pan wash mi mout* it is clearly a verb. This may be a case of innovative Creole nominalization similar to that found in front focussed constructions such as Krio *na ala yu de ala, na rɔn yu de rɔn*, Jamaican *a naasti lai yu a lai, a waak im a waak* and so on (a construction not found in Gullah or in Texas Afro-Seminole).

The sentence 'She's on telling stories from morning to night' occurs in Richard Jeffries' novel *Bevis* (1882: 103), which contains dialogue in the Wiltshire dialect, and seems to be a good candidate for *de pan*'s origin. One of the entries for *on* in the *English dialect dictionary* (Wright 1905, IV: 346, 18–19) has 'continually, without stopping ... busy, engaged in' and provides examples from Northumberland ('he's on plooin', *i.e.* 'he's engaged in ploughing') and from Yorkshire ('they're on lugin' yonder', *i.e.* 'they're engaged in looking yonder').

Aspectual constructions with *a-* have hardly disappeared from English, and it may have entered Creole independently, cf. Jamaican *mi a taak, mi a guo*; If copula *a* is related to this (and if it is historically independent of *da* with which it coexists with the same functions), as in *im a mi fren* we might see an (other?) example of the collapse of two underlying grammatical functions of *pan* – pre-nominal and pre-verbal – into one.

Its non-occurrence in Bioko Pichí (which also has speakers in Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon) suggests that it had not become widely used in Krio by 1827, when the large-scale migration from Freetown to Malabo took place, although it does provide a possible view of Krio itself at that date.

Since *pan* meaning 'on' does not occur anywhere else in West Africa (other than in Pichí), the construction *de pan* is likewise not anywhere found. However, some the semantic applications of *pan* are covered in Pidgin English by *fɔ* (< for), prompting a search for such possible constructions as **yu de fɔ ful*. From Nick Faraclas I received the following for Nigerian Pidgin:

The closest construction I can think of is the *dé* (high toned copula) + *fɔr* construction which is quite productive before nouns and is used with a locative/existential meaning, *a de for haws*. 'I am in/on/at/under/beside, etc. (the/a) house(s)'. but can be used in more interesting and less prototypically locative senses from *moni de mi for hand* 'I have money', to *dem de for wahala* 'they are in trouble'. From there, it's not too hard to get to *dem de for fayt* 'they are (involved) in the quarrel', and then to 'they are in the process of fighting'. But this last usage would be a relatively peripheral and uncommon extension of a different central construction, rather than a central construction in itself, as *de pan* seems to be in Krio.

Perhaps modelled upon *de pan* is the Krio *dɔn pan* (a *dɔn pan bruk* ‘I’ve finished washing clothes’) which, while retaining the function of *pan* does not match *dɔn* with the high-tone non-aspectual locative *de* in *de pan*. Also possible is the likelier *a dɔn dɔn pan bruk*.

A (recent?) extended application of the construction in non-native Krio was noted by Alex Johnson (1992: 29) in an article on varieties of Krio, in which he contrasted non-native *a lef am pan bruk* (‘I left her washing clothes’) with the first-language speaker’s *a lef am de bruk*. Similar observations have been made by Sengova, a Mende speaker (2006) and Kamarah, a Temne speaker (2011). Fyle (1998: 63), herself a native Krio speaker, says

Some of the expressions and phrases coming from ‘*ɔplayn*’ Krio and entering the Freetown Krio have become a source of worry to Krio first language speakers. For instance, where in Freetown Krio one would say *a de kam* (I am coming), in *ɔplayn*-Krio the same expression would be *a de pan kam*.

While acknowledging that the original use of the *de pan* construction is not itself new, Sheikh Umarr Kamarah asked whether the extended grammatical application he discusses constitutes a *corruption* or an *enrichment* of the Krio language. He reports (2011: 2) that

In recent times, especially during and after the rebel war, distinct syntactic influences from indigenous Sierra Leonean languages have made themselves noticeable. One of such syntactic constructions is, *A de pan kam* ‘I am coming’ or ‘I am in the process of coming’. The phrase is itself is not new. It has been around for quite some time even before the war. But it was popularized in Freetown during and after the war. But the native speaker of Krio uses a different construction to express the meaning, ‘I am coming’: *A de kam*.

Explaining that

native speakers do not use *de pan* to talk about actions in the progressive or continuous. The phrase is generally used to talk about being involved or engaged in something. The syntactic structure, *de pan kam* must have therefore come from the indigenous languages. But why should the indigenous languages use *de pan kam* instead of *de kam* to talk about actions that are in progression or that are ongoing?

The model for *de pan* may indeed be African; Migeod (1911, I: 217) has Susu *n fa* ‘I come’ but *n fa-ma* ‘I will come’, where *ma* means ‘on, upon’ (see also Kemp, 1802: 71). Kamarah finds a parallel in his own Temne:

Other Sierra Leonean languages have a way of speaking about an act that is happening at the moment of speaking, separate from that which may occur at some point after the moment of speaking. In KA-Themne, for example, the sentence, *i bek* ‘I am coming’, is equivalent in meaning to the Krio sentence, *a de kam*. But

K Λ -Themne uses the sentence, *i yi rə kə der* ‘I am in the process of/on my way, coming’ to talk about the event as it happens at the same time the speaker is uttering the sentence. Because K Λ Themne employs two different expressions to talk about these two different events in time, native speakers of K Λ Themne find the Krio sentence, *a de kam* inadequate to serve the purpose of *i yi rə kə der*. Thus, *a de pan kam* is recruited to serve this purpose. The introduction of this structure in Krio enriches, rather than ‘corrupts’ the language. It now allows Krio to express the idea of an event going on at the moment of speaking in a precise way. Borrowing, syntactic and otherwise, is one way a language grows and expands. In this case, it is a syntactic borrowing. It is a legitimate form of one of the dialects of Krio.

Joko Sengova had already raised a similar question, providing a parallel construction from his first language, Mende. Under the heading ‘Emergent dialects and varieties of Krio speech’ (2006: 179–180) he refers to the interest that this particular construction has raised amongst Krio speakers overseas:²

Among Sierra Leone immigrants in the United States, especially ethnic Krio, the favorite topic of conversation can sometimes be linguistic change in Krio reflecting numerous lexical and syntactic phenomena. I recently spoke with some compatriots, for instance, about the common expression now widely used in diaspora Krio repertoire, which I think emerged in Krio conversations throughout Freetown in the 20th century ... My guess is that this use of the complementizer *de pan* in Krio, is an African language derivative, or perhaps a calque originating from languages such as Temne, Mende, Mandinka, etc., transferred into Krio with their agreement rules kept intact. To further illustrate my point, compare the first sentence [‘she is cooking’] as it would be constructed in Mende:

2. Kamarah (*op. cit.*) includes some of those attitudes, posted on Facebook and on the Krio Descendants’ Union site. Most, though not all, of them were negative; other concerns were for the lack of substance evident in the ‘new’ Krio, here referred to as *wata wata Krio*. He himself regarded the innovative applications of *de pan* as an enrichment of the language, observing – rightly – that ‘negative reactions to change in any language by its native speakers, is natural ... Borrowing, syntactic and otherwise, is one way a language grows and expands. In this case, it is a syntactic borrowing. It is a legitimate form of one of the dialects of Krio.’ Some responses were:

‘Wen posin se den sabi fo tok krio den yu yeri e de ansa di mami wen e kol Gladys ‘mama a de pan cam’. Eeesh! wen a yeri dat mi fukfuk ol kin grap! Mi fambul den say dat noto Krio ya. Leh unu lef fo bastardise wi language. Unu tenki!’

‘A de fred se, in 20 to 30 iya tem, dem wata wata Krio ya go tek ova. Di wata wata Krio don so borku na Salone, dat di Krio pekin dem sef de falamakata. Wen yu tek fo egzampul, di music dem we di pikin dem de listin to, most of dem get wata wata Krio pan dem.’

‘Often these days, more so in Freetown, you hear the expression ‘e de pan kam’. It means, or it’s intended to mean, s/he is on the way/coming. I think it is an interesting deviation from ‘e de kam’ or ‘e de na road’. ‘E de pan kam emphasizes a present continuous process. Sounds like post rebel war Krio? Who says language is not dynamic?’

taa'a mehei yi'i ma

(literally, 'she/he is on cooking-doing').

In the Mende sentence above, the final morpheme *ma* bears the grammatical function of locative postpositional marker meaning 'on' and is commonly used in dynamic or progressive type syntactic constructions. Or upon further reflection, one might even conjecture that the phrase 'de pan' may be related to or synonymous with the slow speech form 'de pantap' 'be located on top (of)' an English lexical derivative adapted to Krio African grammatical usage. Here lies, for instance, Wyse's [1989] point about African linguistic impact on Krio and Krio's impact on other languages, especially those with which it habitually interacts.

The extended progressive aspect discussed here by Kamarah and Sengova is a usage characteristic of L2 speakers rather than of the Krios themselves, who rail against it; and just as the thousands of Yoruba speakers in 19th century Freetown extensively modified an earlier Krio, it is likely that this is happening again with grammatical calquing upon Mende and Temne, just as those languages are also enriching Krio's lexicon. Non-native speakers of the language vastly outnumber its native speakers, and this extended grammatical use is not found where *de pan* is found outside of Sierra Leone.

The fact that *DE PAN* in the main sense discussed here is found in such widely-separated places (Sierra Leone, Guyana, Jamaica, Texas) can only be accounted for by either (a) coincidence, (b) diffusion of an already-existing innovated creole form (Jamaicans or Gullah speakers to Sierra Leone, Sierra Leoneans to Carolina/Georgia, Jamaica and Guyana) or (c) an underlying British dialect construction. The fact that it occurs in Texas Afro-Seminole (via an earlier Gullah) adds weight to the argument for the Africa-to-America origin of that language rather than the reverse. This is supported by the fact that its presence in Afro-Seminole Creole is likely not attributable to an American origin, since it is not found in the *Dictionary of American regional English* (Cassidy & Hall, 1885ff.) and evidently didn't make it across the Atlantic.

Since coincidence is quite unlikely, this argues forcefully against the polygenetic hypothesis. While the syntax may reflect a universal process (outlined in Bickerton 1983; 1984), perhaps supported by the Nigerian Pidgin evidence, the lexical selection (*de plus pan*) points more convincingly to the diffusion of an early, African-calqued form reinforced by a similar construction in regional British dialects, emerging on the Rice Coast, presenting the necessity of a closer examination of the movement of Creole speakers from location to location within the Central Atlantic arena.

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