

Patois for beginners

Short lessons to understand how people speak in
Jamaica.



Before you start

Jamaican Patois is the language of the street, the home and the music in Jamaica. This guide brings our Instagram lessons together in one place.

Words are spelt as they sound. Pronunciation goes between slashes: /like this/.

The pronunciation we give is approximate, written for Spanish speakers.

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Patois or Jamaican?

A language still debating its own name.

Many names.

Adams (1991) writes that the language has no official name: some say creole, others patois or patwa.

She proposed "Afro-Jamaican English".

Like English and England.

The manual *Fi Wi Chatn – Fi Wi Raitn* (2011) prefers to call it "Jamaican", because that name "makes us feel proud".

Just like English and England, or Spanish and Spain.

A separate language.

In her course for the Peace Corps, Beryl Loftman Bailey wrote that its grammar is different enough to count as another language.

And that many Jamaicans called it "dialect" or "bad talk".

English was once a patois too.

Adams points out that English began as a mix of Anglo-Saxon and Norman French.

Every language, she says, started out mixed.

Patois vs. English

No. It is a language with its own grammar.

A creole language.

Most of its words come from English.



Much of its grammar comes from West African languages such as Akan, Igbo and Yoruba.

A different grammar

He is tall	Im tall · no verb "to be"
The children	Di pickney dem · plural at the end
I am eating	Mi a nyam · "a" marks the action
I didn't see	Mi neva see · its own negative

Think → tink.

The English "th" sound is said as t or d: think → tink, this → dis, thing → ting.

That is why we are called Kool Tingz.

Unu, se, obeah.

"Unu" (you, plural) comes from Igbo. "Se" (that, as in "said that") and "obeah" come from Akan.

English has none of the three.

There is a Bible in Patois.

In 2012 the New Testament was published in Patois: "Di Jamiekan Nyuu Testament".

It uses the academic spelling (Cassidy). On social media, most people write more freely.

Patois and Spanish

More than you think. Six things in common.

Unu = ustedes.

English uses "you" for one person and for several.

Patois and Spanish have a separate word for the plural.



Mi nuh hear nutten.

In Patois: "Mi nuh hear nutten." In Spanish: "No oí nada."

Both use two negatives. In standard English you say "I didn't hear anything".

Only the tone changes.

"Yuh hungry?" = "¿Tienes hambre?"

Neither Patois nor Spanish needs the English "do".

a go = voy a.

"Mi a go cook" = Voy a cocinar (I am going to cook).

The future is built the same way: go + verb.

Pickney = child.

It comes from Portuguese "pequenino" or Spanish "pequeño".

An Iberian word inside Patois.

Spanish names

Ocho Rios	Perhaps from "Las Chorreras"
Rio Bueno	Good river
Rio Cobre	Perhaps "copper river"
Spanish Town	It was Villa de la Vega (1534)

African roots of Patois

What Patois inherited from Africa, according to L. Emilie Adams (1991).

African grammar.

Adams argues that almost all the vocabulary that is not English comes from Africa, as do many of the sounds and much of the grammar.

She draws on the linguist Frederic Cassidy.



Where they come from

nyam	Fula, Wolof, Hausa: to eat.
unu	Probably from Igbo.
obeah	From Twi.
duppy	From Bube: ghost.
nana	From Twi: grandmother, grandfather.

African features

di man dem	Plural after: as in Ewe, ame-wo.
se	Like the Akan verb "se".
deh	Like Twi "de": to be in a place.
Serial verbs	"An African feature".
Doubled words	Typical of many African languages.

Not everything is African.

"Pikni" comes from Portuguese "pequenino", according to Cassidy and Le Page.

And Adams suggests that negating with "no" could date from the Spanish period: "yo no sé".



Lesson 1: pronouns

Six words and you can already build sentences.

Six pronouns

Mi	I · me · my
Yuh	you · your
Im	he · she
Wi	we
Unu	you (plural)
Dem	they

Im = he and she.

In traditional Patois, "im" is used for both men and women.

"Im hungry" can mean "he is hungry" or "she is hungry".

Unu = ustedes.

English has no plural "you". Patois does.

The word "unu" comes from Igbo, a language of Nigeria.

Mi = I, me, my.

"Mi hungry" = I am hungry.

"Gi mi di patty" = Give me the patty.

"Mi patty" = My patty.

Lesson 2: the verb does not change

Patois has no conjugations. There are small words before the verb.



Nyam, always nyam.

In Spanish: como, comí, comeré, comía.

In Patois, the verb "nyam" (to eat) stays the same. What changes is the word before it.

Four tenses

Mi nyam	I ate.
Mi a nyam	I am eating.
Mi did nyam	I ate / I had eaten.
Mi a go nyam	I am going to eat.

a = be + -ing.

"Mi a cook" = I am cooking.

"Dem a dance" = They are dancing.

a go = going to.

"Mi a go cook" = I am going to cook.

Just like Spanish: "voy a" + verb.

Lesson 3: saying no and asking

With this you can already hold a short conversation.

Nuh = not.

"Mi nuh know" = I don't know.

"Im nuh like it" = He doesn't like it.

Neva = not (in the past).

"Mi neva see im" = I didn't see him.

"Dem neva come" = They didn't come.



Five words

Wah	what
Weh	where
Wen	when
How	how
Who	who

The question is in the tone.

"Yuh hungry." = You are hungry.

"Yuh hungry?" = Are you hungry?

The word order does not change. Your voice just rises at the end.

Plural with dem.

For the plural, "dem" goes after the word.

"Di patty" = the patty. "Di patty dem" = the patties.

Lesson 4: mine and yours

Possessives. Go over the pronouns from lesson 1 first.

Mi, yuh, im.

To say "my", "your" or "his/her", use the same pronoun before the noun.

"Mi patty" = my patty. "Yuh name" = your name. "Dem house" = their house.

Fi mi = mine.

When you do not name the thing, put "fi" before the pronoun.

"Fi mi" = mine. "Fi yuh" = yours. "Fi dem" = theirs.

How to use it

A fi mi!	It's mine!
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A fi yuh?	Is it yours?
A fi wi	It's ours.
A fi unu	It's yours (plural).

A = is.

Before a noun or before "fi", "a" works like "is".

"Im a di cook" = He is the cook.

Lesson 5: ordering at the stall

Five phrases to order your patty in Patois.

To order

Mi waan...	I want...
Gimme one a dem	Give me one of those.
Yuh have sorrel?	Do you have sorrel?
How much?	How much is it?
Tank yuh!	Thank you!

Mi waan = I want.

"Mi waan a patty" = I want a patty.

"Mi waa nyam" = I want to eat.

Two patty, not "two patties".

With a number, Patois does not need a plural.

"Two patty" = two patties. "Tree sorrel" = three sorrels.

Tank yuh. Respect.

"Tank yuh" = thank you.

"Respect" also works to say thanks and to say goodbye on a friendly note.



Lesson 6: hello and goodbye

How to start and end a conversation.

Hello

Gud mawnin	Good morning.
Wah gwaan?	How's it going? What's happening?
Yuh good?	Are you well?
Mi deh yah	I'm here, all calm.

Bye

Walk good	Take care. Go well.
Likkle more	See you later.
Bless up	Blessings. A warm, friendly greeting.
Respect	Thanks, with respect.

At the stall.

—Wah gwaan! —Mi deh yah. Yuh good?

—Mi good. Mi waan a patty. —Tank yuh. Walk good!

Patois • Lesson 7: ser and estar

Spanish has two verbs for "to be". Patois has three ways.

No verb.

Before an adjective, no verb is used.

"Im tall" = He is tall. "Di patty hot" = The patty is hot.

a = ser.

Before a noun, "a" is used.

"Im a di cook" = He is the cook. "Dat a mi bredda" = That is my brother.



deh = to be in.

To say where something is, "deh" is used.

"Im deh a yaad" = He is at home. "Weh di patty deh?" = Where is the patty?

Three cases

Im hungry	He is hungry · no verb
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Im a di cook	He is the cook · a
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Im deh a yaad	He is at home · deh
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Patois · Lesson 8: the past

The easiest part of Patois: the verb on its own is already past.

The verb on its own = past.

With action verbs, the verb with nothing before it already refers to the past.

"Mi nyam" = I ate. "Mieri kuk di fuud" = Mary cooked the food.

did, ben, en.

"Did" is common in the city. "Ben", "wen" or "en" are heard more in the countryside.

"Mi did nyam" = I ate, or I had already eaten, depending on context.

With adjectives, it changes.

"Im tired" = He is tired (now).

"Im did tired" = He was tired.

One verb, every tense

Mi nyam	I ate.
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Mi did nyam	I ate / I had eaten.
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Mi a nyam	I am eating.
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Mi a go nyam	I am going to eat.
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Patois · Lesson 9: a lot and a little

Nuff, likkle and a word every Jamaican knows.

Nuff /naf/ · adjective

A lot, plenty, loads. It comes from the English "enough".

"Nuff people deh yah." = There are loads of people here.

Likkle /likol/ · adjective

Little, small. It comes from the English "little".

"Gimme likkle more." = Give me a little bit more.

Tallawah /tálaua/ · adjective

Strong, tough, someone who does not give in, even if small.

"Mi likkle but mi tallawah." = I am small, but strong.

"Lilly pepper bun hot."

Lilly is an old form of "likkle". The proverb says: the small chilli burns hot.

Martha Beckwith recorded it in 1925.

Lesson 10: fi and mek

Two small words that do a lot of work.

Should.

"Yu fi go" = You should go.

"Yu no fi gwaan so, man" = You shouldn't behave like that.

For something.

"Jien gaan a shap fi bai bred" = Jane went to the shop to buy bread.



"Mi glad fi hier hou yu a gwaan" = I am glad to hear how you are doing.

Let's go.

"Mek wi go op a ruod" = Let's go up to the road.

"Mek mi tel yu sinting" = Let me tell you something.

Asking.

"Mek yu neba kom?" = Why didn't you come?

"Mek yu tan so lang?" = Why did you take so long?

Lesson 11: se, hafi, kyaan

That, have to, and cannot.

Reporting what people say.

"Mi hier se yu sik" = I heard that you are ill.

"Im tell wi say im bex" = He told us that he is annoyed.

Obligation.

"Yu hafi go a shap fi mi" = You have to go to the shop for me.

"Yu no hafi go nowe, yaa" = You don't have to go anywhere, you hear?

Can and cannot.

"Mi kyaan bada wid dem" = I can't deal with them.

They differ by the vowel: kyan (can) is short and kyaan (cannot) is long.

Lesson 12: the "a" for emphasis

How to say "it was him who..." in Patois.

A + what matters.

"A mi breda pik di bredfruit" = It was my brother who picked the breadfruit.



Just like in Spanish: "fue mi hermano quien...".

Who? What?

"A huu put i de?" = Who put it there?

"A wa dat?" = What is that?

Doubled for emphasis.

"A run dem a run" = They are really running!

"A waak mi waak kom ya" = I came walking, on foot.

Lesson 13: doubled and serial

Repeated words and verbs that go together.

Doubled words.

"Di pikny too fraidi-fraidi" = The child is far too fearful.

"Picky-picky" = fussy. "A so-so wuk mi deh pon" = I have nothing but work.

One after another.

"Tek di biebi gwaan" = Take the baby and go on your way.

"Im run gaan lef ar" = He ran off and left her.

"Kyai go bring come".

Literally: carry, go, bring, come. It is said of a gossip who carries stories back and forth.

In Peru we would say: un correveidile (a telltale).



Patois for the trip: greetings

Good morning, how are you and what is your name, with phrases from a Patois course.

Maanin, sa. Maanin, ma.

"Maanin, sa" = Good morning, sir. "Maanin, ma" = Good morning, madam.

This is how Beryl Loftman Bailey's Jamaican Creole course begins. She writes it in Cassidy's spelling.

How are you?

Hou yu du?	How are you?
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Hou unu du?	How are you all?
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Mi haati	I am well.
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Suoso	So-so.
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No tuu bad	Not too bad.
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Your name

Wa yu niem?	What is your name?
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Mi niem Jaaj	My name is George.
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Wa im niem?	What is his or her name?
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Fact	Bailey explains that here "niem" is a verb.
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aarait /aa-RAIT/ · interjection

All right, fine. Used to close the conversation before you leave.

"Aarait den, Maas Juo. Mi a galang nou." = Well, Mr Joe, I'm off now.



Aarait, waak gud.

"Aarait, Sta Kiet, waak gud, no?" = All right, sister Kate, take care, yes?

"Waak gud" is the familiar "walk good": go well.

Patois for the trip: at the market

Asking the price, buying and asking for the yapa, with phrases from the books.

higgler /HI-gla/ · noun

Street or market seller, man or woman. The most common name, according to Cassidy.

Each higgler has their own call, which rises at the end (Beckwith, quoted by Cassidy).

Market phrases

Hou moch?	How much? Cassidy notes that it sounds like /humoch/.
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A maakit	To the market: "Mi a go a maakit".
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Fi bai	To buy: "gaan a shap fi bai bred".
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Ton han	Buying and selling: trade.
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Trus'	To sell on credit.
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So dier!

"Dier" (from the English "dear") = expensive. In an example from Bailey, someone sells their fish "so dier": so expensive.

If you haggle, do it calmly and with a smile.

A wan poun nomo mi pie.

= I only paid one pound. It is an exercise from Bailey, from when Jamaica used pounds.

"Nomo" = only, nothing more. "A trii eg nomo" = only three eggs.



JAMAICA

Mek-up

=

PERU

Yapa (a little extra)

What they give you extra

Patois for the trip: taxi and street

Asking where you are going, where something is, and asking for a bit of space.

Where to?

We yu a go?	Where are you going?
Doun a toun	To the centre: "Mi a go doun a toun".
Weh im deh?	Where is it?
Wich wie im ton?	Which way did he turn?

Where it is

Im dung deh	It is down there.
Dem ova deh so	They are right over there.
Im dung ya	It is down here.
Ku deh!	Look over there!

Mi deh pon has'e.

= I am in a hurry. It is a practice phrase from Emilie Adams.

Gone too far? "Ton bak" = turn round, go back (Bailey).



cotch /KOCH/ · verb and noun

A space on a full bus seat. Asking for “a cotch” is asking people to make room for you.

Like asking for a little space in a combi (minibus). Also: to stay for a while (Adams).

Mi a go de fi miit di bos.

= I am going there to catch the bus. Exercise from Bailey’s course.

“Fi” = to / for. You will hear it everywhere: “fi bai”, to buy.

Patois for the trip: at the restaurant

For the restaurant or the stall: being hungry, ordering, saying enough and giving praise.

To order

Mi honggri	I am hungry.
Mi waan...	I want... (“Mi waan sliip” = I want to sleep).
Nyam	To eat.
No waan nomo	Doesn’t want any more.

Sittin da ya fi nyam.

= There is something here to eat. Practice phrase from Adams.

“Sittin” or “sinting” = something. “Smadi” = somebody.

sal’ting /SAAL-ting/ · noun

What goes with the “food”: a little meat, fish, vegetables, sauce or rundown.



ital /AI-tal/ · adjective

Pure, natural, unpolluted; also without salt (Adams).

Nice can't done!

= Really good, never-ending. Cassidy records it as "extremely tasty".

Another one, from Adams: "gaan to bed" after "love" is a superlative: "I love hafu yam gaan to bed!"

Patois for the trip: numbers and money

Counting, paying and the old words for Jamaican money.

One, two, three

Wan · tuu	One, two.
Trii · fuor	Three, four.
Faiv · siks	Five, six.
Tuu eg	Two eggs: no plural "s".

One foot, two foot.

With a number, the plural is understood: "one man, nuf man" = one man, many men (Adams).

If needed, "dem" is added: "di man-dem" = the men.

Old coins

Mac	Shilling. From "macaroni".
Quattie	A penny and a half.
Brass	Penny, for the colour of the metal.
Coco-leaf	One-pound note.



Mash-mash and raise.

Small change was called "mash-mash" or "breeze": "One poun' an' breeze", one pound and change.

A small tip is a "raise" or a "bite" (Cassidy, 1961).

salt /sal/ · adjective

Broke, with no money. Also with no food at home.

"Tings salt" = things are tight (Adams).

Now you pay in dollars.

Jamaica switched to dollars and cents on 8 September 1969, according to the Bank of Jamaica.

Mac and quattie are old words. Next: how to use the Jamaican dollar.

Greetings and forms of address

What people are called and how they greet each other in Jamaican speech.

Ta, Ma and Mada.

In the time of slavery, elders were called "Ta" (father) and "Ma" (mother), with respect and affection.

Today "Mada" is the title for older women with a special place, such as herbal healers.

Breda, Bra and Sta.

"Breda" and "Bra" come from "brother" and are the forms used in the Anansi stories. "Sta" is sister, between equals.

"Cousin" is said to anyone, related or not.



Maas and Miss.

From "master" came "maasa" and today "maas": "Mass U, Miss Q". "Miss" before the name is used between equals.

"Me chile" or "me son" is said to anyone, whatever their age.

man /MAN/ · filler word

The most common form of address: it goes at the end, unstressed, and is used regardless of sex or age.

"Yes man!" "No man!" "Come on, no, man?"

How you do?

Cassidy calls "How you do?" a typically Jamaican greeting. A classic reply is "poco-poco", from Spanish: not too bad.

Today it is very common to say "all right!" when passing someone in the street.

Day-day and coobite.

To say goodbye: "day-day" and "coobite", from "good-bye-ye". Both already sound old-fashioned.

"Tanky" is thank you. "Good me do a tenky me get" is said with irony: I did good and only got a thank you.

Exclamations and sounds

Exclamations, calls to animals and words that imitate noises.

Cho!

It is the most common Jamaican exclamation: impatience, doubt or some contempt. It almost always opens the sentence.

Oxford records "tcha" only in 1844; in Jamaica "cha!" was already heard in 1830. Cassidy believes it is African.



JAMAICA

You like it, no?

=

PERU

Te gusta, ¿no?

From Portuguese and Spanish, Cassidy believes

The “no?” at the end asks the other person to agree. Cassidy says Portuguese and Spanish use the same form.

Wa mek?

“Wa mek?” means why?, what’s going on? Cassidy compares it with Igbo, which literally says “what makes?”.

“No mus’?” accepts the obvious: “No mus’ hot, man?”, what did you expect, if the engine was running?

Ko!

“Ko” is an exclamation and also a verb: look! “Koo Bra Rat!”: look at Brother Rat.

“Waa!” signals trouble: fear, sorrow or pain. Cassidy also heard it as the start of a burst of laughter.

Calling the animal

Kaa kaa	To drive cattle.
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Ko	To horses and mules.
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Kuuy	To donkeys.
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Shi!	To shoo away hens.
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Em-bo!	To get a bird to land.
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Bap, bram, swips.

“Bap” is a blow that lands right on target. “Bram”, a trap that springs.

“Swips” is to pass quickly or to down a drink in one go.

The noise of food frying with water is “shwuwa”; Cassidy notes that Kongo has a similar word.



How do you say it? Food

To order at the stall without hesitating.

Ackee /á-ki/ · noun

Jamaica's national fruit, red on the outside and yellow on the inside.

"Ackee and saltfish" = ackee with salt cod.

Callaloo /ka-la-lú/ · noun

The Jamaican leafy green. It comes from the Spanish "calalú".

"Callaloo patty" = callaloo patty.

Escovitch /és-ko-vich/ · noun

Fried fish with vinegar, onion and chilli. It comes from "escabeche".

"Escovitch fish" = fish in escovitch.

Gizzada /gui-sá-da/ · noun

Coconut tart with a pinched edge.

"One gizzada, please" = one gizzada, please.

Jerk /yérk/ · noun

Meat marinated with allspice and scotch bonnet, then smoked.

"Jerk chicken" = jerk chicken.



Bammy /bá-mi/ · noun

Flatbread made from cassava, found only in Jamaica.

"Fry fish an bammy" = fried fish with bammy.

How do you say it? Patois

Six Patois words, as they are said in Jamaica.

Wah gwaan /ua guán/ · greeting

How's it going? What's happening?

"Wah gwaan, bredren?" = How's it going, brother?

Nyam /ñam/ · verb

To eat.

"Mi a go nyam" = I am going to eat.

Irie /ái-ri/ · adjective

All good. Good vibes.

"Mi feel irie" = I feel good.

Likkle /lí-kol/ · adjective

Little, small.

"Likkle more" = See you later.

Tallawah /tá-la-ua/ · adjective

Strong, even if small.

"Mi likkle but mi tallawah."



Pickney /pík-ni/ · noun

Child, boy or girl.

"Di pickney dem" = The children.

How is Patois written?

Patois has its own alphabet. And it looks like Spanish.

Cassidy and Le Page.

Frederic Cassidy published a way of writing Patois in 1961, with Robert Le Page. It was later revised by the Jamaican Language Unit at UWI.

It is the spelling used in the Patois Bible.

Written as it sounds.

One sound, always the same letter. "What you hear is what you write."

And there are no silent letters. Like Spanish, which is read as it is written.

Short and long

a · e · i · o · u	Five short vowels.
aa · ii · uu	Long ones: written double.
ai · ie · ou · uo	Double, as in "niem" (name).

How it looks

pikni	child
uman	woman
iez	ear(s)
aki	ackee
bredfruut	breadfruit



How does Patois sound?

From English to Patois: the sound changes you should know.

English → Patois

little → likl	-ttl- becomes -kl-.
girl → gyal	A "y" appears.
boy → bwai	A "w" appears.
down → dung	-own ends in -ung.
morning → maanin	"aw" becomes "aa".

More changes

vex → bex	The v becomes b.
ask → aks	Sounds that swap places.
skin → 'kin	The first s drops.
want → waan	The final consonant drops.
name → niem	The long "a" becomes "ie".

B for V.

Saying "bex" for "vex" is like Spanish, where b and v sound the same.

And "waan" for "want": like when in Lima we say "pa" for "para".



More Patois

Five phrases to talk like they do in Jamaica.

Big up /big-op/ · phrase

Respect. A greeting to acknowledge someone.

"Big up, Lima!"

Likkle more /li-kel mor/ · goodbye

See you later. Literally: "a little more".

"Likkle more!" = See you!

Mi deh yah /mi de ya/ · reply

I'm here. The answer to "how are you?".

—Wah gwaan? —Mi deh yah.

Bredren /bré-dren/ · noun

Friend, brother. For women: sistren.

"Mi bredren dem." = My mates.

Soon come /sun com/ · phrase

I'm coming. I'll be right there.

"Soon come!" = I'll be right there!



Kitchen Patois

Six words to understand a Jamaican menu.

Food /fud/ · noun

In Jamaica, "food" is what fills you up: yam, green plantain, sweet potato, cassava. A meal without "food" hardly counts.

"Wah yuh have fi food?" = What do you have as a side?

Nyam /ñam/ · verb

To eat. It comes from a West African language (Wolof or Fula; the sources disagree).

"Nyam some, lef some fi tomorrow." = Eat some, save some for tomorrow.

Bittle /bítol/ · noun

Food, provisions. From the old English "victuals".

"Before good bittle spwile, mek belly pop." = Rather than let good food spoil, let the belly burst.

Run dung /ron dong/ · noun

Fish stew (often salted mackerel) cooked in coconut milk, with plantain and yam.

"Mackerel run dung" = mackerel stewed in coconut.

Festival /féstival/ · noun

Sweet fried dumpling made with flour and cornmeal. It was born on the beaches of Hellshire in the 1970s.

"Fry fish an festival" = fried fish with festival.



Belly full /béli ful/ · phrase

Full belly. Satisfied.

"Mi belly full!" = I'm full!

Family in Patois

Mum, dad, brothers, sisters and more, in Patois.

The household

muma · mada	mum · mother
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pupa · faada	dad · father
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breda	brother
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sista	sister
-------	--------

grani	grandmother
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The extended family

pikni · biebi	child · baby
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Kozn	cousin
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Anti · Ongkl	aunt · uncle
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daata · son	daughter · son
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Tata	father, older man
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How to use it.

"Disya buk a fi mi breda" = This book is my brother's.

"A mi breda pik di bredfruit" = It was my brother who picked the breadfruit.



A conversation in Patois

Two people pass each other on the road. This is how they talk.

The greeting.

A: "Maanin, bra." = Good morning, brother.

B: "Hou yu du?" = How are you?

How are you?

A: "Mi haati, bra." = I am well.

B: "No tuu bad." = Not too bad.

Where are you going?

A: "Den a we yu a go nou?" = So where are you going now?

B: "Mi a go doun a toun." = I am going to the centre.

The goodbye.

A: "Aarait den; mi gaan, yaa." = Right then, I'm off, you hear?

B: "Aarait, waak gud." = All right, go well.

Words for the body

Eyes, hands and feet with names of their own in Jamaican speech.

Head skull and peel-head.

"Head skull" is the top of the head. A "peel-head" is a bald person, like the turkey vulture.

"Baby" is the pupil of the eye and, by extension, the centre of a shooting target.

Make four eyes.

"Make four eyes" is when two people look at each other: "Is long time sence you an' me meek four eyes."



"Eye-water" is tears and "mouth-water" is saliva. Cassidy notes that Igbo and Mandinka combine words the same way.

cut-eye /KOT-ai/ · noun

Looking someone in the eye and turning your gaze away on purpose, as an insult.

It goes hand in hand with "suck-teeth": sucking your teeth in contempt.

Hand-middle.

The palm is "hand-middle". People say: "If you han'-middle cratch, you get money": if your palm itches, money is coming.

The thumb is "big-finger"; the little finger, "chi-chi-mus", little mouse; the fingertip, "finger-head".

Neck-back and kimbo.

"Neck-back" is the nape of the neck. People believe the little hollow at the nape, the "cubbitch hole", shows how greedy you are.

"Kimbo" is the hip: it comes from "akimbo", with hands on hips.

It is all "foot".

In popular speech "leg" is hardly used: "foot" covers the whole leg. The sole of the foot is "foot-bottom".

Thin is "maaga", from the English "maugre", recorded in Jamaica since 1826.

People and character

Words for the greedy, the stingy, the gossip and the one who rose too fast.



smadi /SMA-di/ · noun

Person, human being. It comes from "somebody" and has been used this way since at least 1826.

"S'mady can eat it": it can be eaten.

Licky-licky and picky-picky.

"Licky-licky" is someone who tastes everything just for the pleasure of it.

"Picky-picky", someone who eats in small bites.

"Nyami-nyami", from "nyam" (to eat), is a glutton or gluttony.

Sweet-mouth.

"Sweet-mouth" is talking nicely to persuade or flatter. Russell already recorded it in 1868.

Uncle Newton tells of a newspaper boy who flattered a lady until she bought the paper from him.

Cubbitch and geechy.

"Cubbitch", from "covetous", is greedy or stingy. "Geechy" is also stingy:

"Him han' tight."

If someone looks after their money out of good sense and not greed, they are "cave-headed".

Faas and fiesty.

"Faas" is nosy, cheeky: it comes from "fast". "Fiesty" is just as bold.

Cassidy believes "fiesty" comes from "feisty", 17th-century English, and not from "face", as others write.

Mout-a-massy.

A big talker is "mouty-mouty" or "mout-a-massy": mouth, have mercy.

Someone who spreads false news is a "mout-a-gram".

Someone who rose fast in life is called "hurry-come-up" or "since-when": since when so posh?



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