The Misinterpretations of *Brer Anancy*

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It is quite remarkable that the etymology of *Brer Anancy* has remained uncontested up to today, in spite of clear evidence which clarifies in one case and contradicts in the other the very early etymologies given.

Wake (1883) commenting on Andrews’ ‘Ananci Stories’ says the following: ‘Probably many negro stories of a similar character are to be met with in the works of travellers and others. I have heard them spoken of by a lady who was born in Jamaica as *Nancy Stories, and such would seem to have been the name generally given to them by Europeans.* The asterisk is explained in the following footnote ‘*This is really ‘Ananci’ with the initial vowel dropped.*’ He goes on to say ‘The term ‘Ananci’ is, however, the proper one.*

Trowbridge, however, says the following: ‘Of all the folk-stories to be met with on the island (Jamaica), those most characteristic and most easily collected and understood are the “Ananci Stories,” or “Nancy Stories,” as they are usually called by the natives,’ which contradicts Wake’s idea that *Nancy* is a European misinterpretation. Trowbridge is supported by Lewis, a proprietor who lived in Jamaica, who writing in 1816 says: ‘The negroes are also very fond of what they call Nancy Stories...’ Current usage in Jamaica and throughout the West Indies today has both terms *Nancy* and *Anancy*, but this in itself is not significant, as I will explain later.

*Ananse* is a West African word for ‘spider,’ and this is recognized by commentators from the earliest years, but what is also recognized is that not all the stories have Anansi as a character. Wake, realizing the dilemma and in order to ‘understand why the spider should be credited with the stories in question,’ claims that the negroes on the Gold Coast believed that Anansi created man. He thus implies that Ananse has total influence in the minds of these Gold Coast negroes. It is important to note that in the earliest text of full stories, Lewis calls them ‘Nancy stories,’ gives Jamaican Nancy stories and an African Nancy story, neither of which contain the animal or character *Ananse*, and in his comments about the stories says nothing about a spider, as a characteristic of these stories.

The two Anancy stories presented by Andrews in 1880 have the familiar Anancy as the main character, and Trowbridge in 1896 says ‘In some of the so-called “Nancy stories,” Anansi does not figure.’ Such contrasts indicate quite clearly that variation in name and substance existed right from the beginning. In other words, the idea that ‘the term Ananci is the proper one’ and that the stories started as spider stories and were subsequently generalized is quite misleading. Turner gives as an example of an African survival in Gullah (South Carolina) *nanse (ananse)* with the explanation ‘spider;’ ‘a red and black insect, resembling the hornet but not having wings, that lives in the ground.’ He also gives the following West African equivalents—Twi (Gold Coast) *ananse* ‘spider;’ Ewe (Togo and Dahomey) *ananse* ‘spider;’ Bambara (French West Africa) *nansi* ‘chameleon.’

The basic idea associated with ‘chameleon’—change in physical form—characterizes almost all the stories, whether or not they contain a spider character and is consistent with Lewis’s 1814 view that the Nancy story had to contain ‘a witch, or a duppy, or
some other marvellous personage.' Trowbridge says: ‘When my childish curiosity would make me push this point with my negro narrator and inquire: “But was it Anansi the man or Anansi the spider?” She would give me this reasonable and convincing reply: “Chuh, chil’! Yo’ too poppesha [foolish, stupid]! It was Nancy, jus Nancy, yo’ see.”\(^\text{16}\) The answer given clearly indicates that ‘Nancy’ is essentially chameleon in nature.

Anancy is ‘spider’ and Nansi ‘chameleon,’ but in the West Indies they are inseparable in Anancy stories, and as Dance says, ‘In Jamaica the term Anancy story is often applied...to any storytelling, riddling, and singing.’\(^\text{17}\) (Singing here obviously applies to singing within folklore). Anancy therefore is and always was a composite and variable term in the West Indies. It is simply another example of variation and syncretism which characterize many aspects of the development of Afro-American language and culture.

\textit{Brer} does not occur (except as a variable of \textit{briar}) in the major etymological dictionary of English, \textit{The Oxford English Dictionary}, but it does occur in the \textit{Supplement 1972}, which says that \textit{brer} is an American Negro or Southern U.S. pronunciation of \textit{brother}. This is quite a remarkable claim, in that it has almost no evidence to support it. Cassidy’s \textit{Dictionary of Jamaican English} (1967) gives the word \textit{bra} for Jamaican English with written attestations from 1907 \textit{Bro’er}, 1943 \textit{Bra}, and says it is a reduced form of \textit{brother}.

In the case of both the \textit{Oxford Dictionary Supplement} and the Cassidy \textit{Dictionary} the information given represents what authors (including the dictionary authors) interpreted the word to mean in and according to written texts. In order to understand the true etymology of the words, three points have to be determined: i) the actual sound of the word, ii) how it was and is used, iii) what it means.

i) There is little doubt that (allowing for geographical variation) the basic, normal and most commonly occurring pronunciations are \([\text{b}\text{r}]\) and \([\text{b}\text{r}\text{e}r]\). This can be supported by the literature and by reference to Afro-American phonology. Owens (1877), dealing with the U.S., says the following: ‘The dramatis personae are honoured with the title \textit{Buh}...\(^\text{18}\)

Andrews (1880), dealing with Jamaica/Antigua, has \textit{bra}.\(^\text{9}\) JAFL (1925) dealing with Gullah (South Carolina Sea Islands), gives \textit{brer}, \textit{bro’}; \textit{bu}, \textit{bur}.\(^\text{10}\)

Parsons (1925), dealing with Barbados, gives \textit{her} consistently.\(^\text{11}\)

The spellings \textit{brer} and \textit{bro’} and others such as \textit{bro’er} can be regarded as attempts to relate the folktales word to a known English word, a practice which was a general one in the presentation of non-standard dialects. Such spellings contrast with early Afro-American phonology which showed a distinct preference for consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel word structure, thus reducing many initial consonant clusters. In addition, \textit{brer Rabbit}, with post-consonant \textit{r}, a final \textit{r} and an initial \textit{r} in sequence, is clearly contrary to Afro-American phonology. \textit{(br\text{a})} most likely came about in the following way:- \textit{b\text{a}ranansi\textdagger branansi}, and was generalized before other names.

ii) The word is used exclusively as a term of address. Note Owens’ full statement on the subject: ‘The dramatis personae are honoured with the title \textit{Buh}, which is generally supposed to be an abbreviation of the word “brother,” but it probably is a title of respect equal to our “Mr.”\(^\text{12}\) This notion of ‘respect’ is brought into question by Werner: ‘...the reader will notice how often the animals in the stories before us are distinguished as “Mr.” or “Bro’er”... though the Jamaican people seem to be less uniformly polite in this respect than Uncle Remus.\(^\text{13}\) It is the association of the word with English titles and especially with a written format that causes the misinterpretation, for there is little question that the word is an address of familiarity.
iii) The word does not mean *brother* (i.e. ‘blood relative’). An examination of Black English and West Indian English gives the following non-standard pronunciations of *brother*: 1) [baθə], 2) [brævə], 3) [bævə], 4) [bæbə] (The vowel position in each case may vary.), 5) [bro]. The last of these [bro] with the vowel o is a recent slang type US usage. I have never heard or seen any credible attestation of [br r], [b r] as variant pronunciations of the common noun *brother* in the speech of Black Americans or West Indians, as would occur in *he is my --- or my ----- left yesterday.*

- In addition, in the West Indies the word *brother* is clearly differentiated with two articulations of varying stress/pitch to correspond to different meanings. [brædə] with high pitch and primary stress on the first syllable means ‘blood relative;’ [brædə] with primary stress on the first syllable but higher pitch on the second means ‘a male member of a religious body.’ This distinction is generic in the West Indies and clear to West Indians. Such a contrast militates against the reduction of the word.

As is clear from the Owens’ remark quoted above, the link between [bə] and *brother* was tenuous at first, but it was no doubt strengthened by Werner’s comment (in 1907) on Owens’ remark (‘...is supposed to be an abbreviation of the word “brother,” but it is probably...’) which says:- ‘The “but” seems hardly called for, since both assertions are seemingly true.’ From this point on there is total acceptance of this link. However, for the single word *brother* to have developed in the U.S. and the West Indies in two clearly separate ways is untenable, because it has no actual evidence to support it and such clear bifurcations in development are not characteristic of Afro-American English generally.

Cassidy claims that *bra* in Anancy stories is applied to any male animal.14 Werner had earlier suggested a contradiction of this by saying that, because Twi, Ewe and Yoruba are ‘genderless,’ speakers confuse masculine and feminine, thus producing ’Brother Cow.’15 The obvious explanation of *Brother Cow* is that *cow* in English is used generically to represent all cows. Cassidy’s claim however is not significant because the characters in the tales are either generic or male, or when female are presented as wives, sisters, etc. of the male characters. Therefore [bə] is not meant essentially to refer to a male character.

The *English Dialect Dictionary* (1898) says the following (adapted slightly in form):

BOR, sb. Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex. Also written bo’ Cmb.; boa Ess.; Borh e. An. Nrf.; bour Cmb. (bo(r)) A term of familiar address, applied to persons of either sex and all ages:
1. One old woman may say to another, ‘Co’, bor, let’s go a-sticking in the squire’s plantations.’ And the other may answer, ‘Aye, bor, so we will.’
2. ‘I should jest about think yow du, Roger, bor.’
3. ‘Well, bor,’ I says.
4. We address our friends as Smith bor! Jones bor!
5. Hullo bor! Where be you a going?*
6. She’s waitin’ for yer, roun’ the corner, bor.

Andrews (1880) contains the following examples of *bra*:

When he heard Ananci’s song he said ‘Eh bra! you goin’ to marry king’s dart?’ ‘Oh yes, bra,’ answered Ananci...

‘Eh, bra ‘Nanci,’ said they, ‘you come back from under the sea?’ ‘Oh yes, bra,’ said Ananci...

The connection between English dialect *bor* (with its phonetic variants) and *bə̚bər* is incontestable—there is little phonetic difference between the two, historical connections are realistic, and the meaning and function of the two are the same.
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As supporting evidence, it should be noted that \textit{bo} is used in Barbados up to today quite normally and naturally with the same meaning and function as described for \textit{bor} above. It even has an endearing diminutive \textit{bosie} [bozi]. The importance of the island of Barbados as the major dispersal point for early slaves and their language to South Carolina and the rest of the Caribbean has been put forward by Cassidy,\textsuperscript{16} but it is not really necessary to appeal to this argument for support because the linguistic evidence in itself is quite clear.

It may be said in the case of the etymology given here for \textit{Anancy} that one is merely refining the understanding of a folk name/character which is important only in the West Indies, but in the case of \textit{brer} the misinterpretation has had greater consequences because its application is more widespread. There is not only a general belief in an etymology that is false, but the effect is now practically irreversible, because children have been seeing in print \textit{brer} and \textit{brother} for a few generations now and have come to reinterpret and pronounce the word according to the initial misinterpretation. Of course, such ‘linguistic’ folk etymology is not isolated in the development of the English language, but it is unusual to the extent that the pronunciation suggested by the spelling \textit{brer} is so inconsistent with the phonology of Black English or West Indian non-standard English.

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NOTES

12. As in n.8, p.751.
13. As in n.8, p. xiv.
15. As in n.8, p.xi.