

Lingüística General



Creoles as endangered languages: the case of the two creole languages of Colombia

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Abstract

According to some observers, Creolistics or the study of pidgins and creoles is coming of age. Although no longer considered "marginal languages" (Reinecke, 1937), it seems justified to claim that pidgin and creole languages as well as the corresponding speech communities are nevertheless marginalized not only "on the terrain" but also in academia, for example by those working on endangered languages although many communities are menaced by linguicide and some even by genocide (e.g. Fa d Ambú). I would like to make a contribution to the debate by discussing the cases of the two creole languages and communities of Colombia of which I have first hand experience: Islander (San Andrés and Old Providence Creole English) and Palenquero. I will discuss the current sociolinguistic situation and language revitalization and promotion measures largely made possible by the 1991 national constitution as well as future prospects. Marked differences arise from the specific sociohistoric and sociocultural ecologies. I am also reporting on my on-going research on Islander (1999: a sociolinguistic survey of San Andrés; 2001-2002: a contrastive grammar Islander - Caribbean Standard English - Spanish).

Key words: Creoles, danger, Colombia.

Los criollos, lenguas en peligro: el caso de los dos criollos de Colombia

Resumen

Aunque los criollos y los pidgins ya no se consideran “lenguas marginales” (Reinecke, 1937), parece justificado indicar que las lenguas criollas y pidgins así como las correspondientes comunidades de sus hablantes, están sin embargo, marginalizadas no solo “en el terreno”, sino también en el mundo académico, por ejemplo por aquellos que trabajan con lenguas en peligro, aunque muchas comunidades están amenazadas por eliminación deliberada de las lenguas y algunas hasta por genocidio (Por ej.: Fa d Ambú). Quiero contribuir al debate al analizar dos criollos colombianos y sus comunidades con las cuales he tenido experiencia directa: Islander (San Andrés y el criollo inglés de Old Providence) y Palenquero. Analizaremos la actual situación sociolingüística, la revitalización lingüística y las medidas de promoción, hechas posibles en gran medida por la constitución nacional de 1991 y otros aspectos en el futuro. Diferencias marcadas surgen de las ecologías específicas sociohistóricas y socioculturales. También se presenta un reporte sobre la investigación actual de la autora sobre el Islander (1999: un estudio sociolingüístico de San Andrés; 2001-2002: Una gramática contrastiva Islander- Inglés Caribeño Standard - Español).

Palabras clave: Criollos, peligro, Colombia.

1. Introduction

According to some observers, creolistics or the study of pidgins and creoles is coming of age (cf. Lefebvre, 2000). Although no longer considered “marginal languages” as by Reinecke (1937) and many before and after him¹, it seems justified to claim that pidgin and creole languages as well as the corresponding speech communities are nevertheless marginalized not only “in the field” but also in academia, for example by those working on endangered languages.

This is certainly a shortcoming since many pidgin and creole languages are endangered. While McWhorter’s recent proposal (1998) that creole languages be defined by the cooccurrence of certain structural features only (hardly any inflection, transparent derivation, no tonemes) has caused heated debates, most

creolists continue to agree that creole languages (and, by extension, also pidgins) have to be defined by both structural and sociohistorical features. After a period of euphoria during which linguists were hoping to discover creoles in the most remote parts of the globe, creolists have returned to using the term “creole” primarily for the languages which resulted from the colonial expansion of the European nation-states starting in the 15th century. The labels “pidgin” and “creole” are sometimes used inaccurately and even interchangeably. However, defining a creole as the primary language of a speech community through which it can express all linguistic functions and a pidgin as a language used for a limited number of functions, most often trade, i.e. a language entirely dependent on the existence of those specific contexts, justifies focusing more on creoles than on pidgins in this paper².

Virtually all creole communities which have survived to the present day are characterized by some degree of stigmatization of the creole language. Using the terminology of the Occitan sociolinguistic school, Kremnitz (1983) describes this situation as *auto-odi*: in most communities, creole speakers have been inculcated to such an extent with the disdain for their mother tongue that it has actually become part of their language identity. Creole speakers of the most varied origins are convinced that what they speak is bad or broken English, French, Spanish or Portuguese³. Parents frequently stop speaking creole to school aged children because they want to contribute to their social mobility.

By consequence, the first obstacle creole language promotion faces are the prejudices of the community itself (cf. Calvet, 2000). As a matter of fact, no attempt should be made to work against the collective will of a speech community – at least not, after some initial conscientization has taken place (cf. Tourneux *et al.*, 2000:53). Most researchers seem to agree that community rights should have precedence over individual rights in language revitalization efforts. However, it may be very difficult to determine what constitutes a necessary percentage of speakers in favor of language revitalization in a language community (cf. Skuttnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1994; Zimmermann, 1995:82-83; May, 2000)⁴. And, last but not least, linguists have to consider not only the loss of language diversity but also the individual lives of their speakers. In the words of Calvet & Varela (2000:63): “Les langues sont faites pour servir les êtres humains, et non pas l'inverse”.

When official status, standardization, and use in the educational system and in the mass media are taken as measuring sticks of the degree to which a language is endangered, most creole communities do not fare very well. The situation is particularly difficult in those cases where there exists a continuum of intermediate lects between the most basilectal variety of the creole and the standard language. This is for example the case of Jamaican and most other English-based Caribbean creoles. It is quite clear that those creoles which have coexisted in a diglossic relationship with a European language other than their original lexifier language have fared best: Papiamentu appears to have been both Spanish- and Portuguese-based since its very crystallization (cf. first written document in 1775) and has been standardized to an extent almost unprecedented among creole languages because the official language of the colony has been Dutch. Now possibly endangered last but not least as a result of the Sri Lankan civil war, Sri Lanka Creole Portuguese was used and developed both under Dutch and British rule (1658-1796 and 1796-1948, respectively). In some cases, the comparatively late withdrawal of the prestigious lexifier language has likewise resulted in the creole becoming more of an *Abstand* language and, by extension, there is at least a possibility that it might also become an *Ausbau* language (cf. Kloss, 1967; Romaine, 1996). This is, for example, the case of Islander, the creole of San Andrés and Old Providence⁵.

Today, the revolution of computer technology has resulted in the human resources being the costly part of a language standardization project. For example, educational materials can be produced with the help of only one computer, provided, of course, that the language has been standardized and that the teachers have received the corresponding training to produce their own materials (cf. Bartens forthcoming). And yet the psychosocial factors continue to turn most creole languages into endangered languages.

But creoles are not only endangered by language death or attrition through language shift. There are cases, when the *linguicide* (Skuttnabb-Kangas, 2000) is accompanied by genocide, for example in the case of *Fa d'Ambú*, the Portuguese-based creole of Annobón, now part of Equatorial Guinea. When Equatorial Guinea became independent of Spain in 1968, a re-Africanization campaign was launched and the islanders, mistaken for Spanish speakers, have been the victims of raids by the national army,

cutting off vital communications and, since 1988, the radiation of atomic waste dumped near the island and serving a double purpose: exterminating the population of the island and earning the government foreign currency (Misser, 1994).

2. Are Islander and Palenquero endangered languages?

I will now turn to two creole speaking communities I have first hand experience of. The fact that they are spoken in the same country, Colombia, constitutes an additional motive for comparing them.

I visited Palenque de San Basilio, approximately 70 km south of Cartagena de las Indias, Colombia, for a few days in August 1996 and I have kept in touch with Palenqueros and people doing research on their language, the only (surviving) entirely Spanish-based creole language of the Americas, since then. I've done fieldwork in San Andrés, Old Providence and Saint Catherine, approx. 200 kilometers off the Nicaraguan Coast, on two different occasions so far (February–October 1999; March–April 2001). In 1999, I did fieldwork on the sociolinguistic situation of San Andrés and the Spanish spoken there by both Native, Creole English speaking, Islanders as well as immigrants from the continent. I'm currently working on a project funded by the Finnish Academy with the title *A Contrastive Grammar Islander – Caribbean Standard English-Spanish*. The project is based on a request by Native Islanders, especially English teachers.

The new 1991 Colombian constitution as well as legislation concerned with the Afro-Colombian community (1993) and with education (1994) can be termed as progressive even on Western European standards. It gives a lot of space to civic activism – actually more than has been claimed by the civic movements so far. The juridical bases of so-called ethnoeducation were laid on the national level even earlier, in 1978 (decree 1142 of 1978).

2.1. Palenquero

The new legislation conferred territorial coofficial status to Palenquero. The Palenquero community counts with a group of activists deeply committed to ethnoeducation and revitalizing the creole language, both in Palenque itself and among migrant communities in the cities of Cartagena and Barranquilla. They are responsible for introducing Palenquero as a subject first into pri-

mary and then into secondary schools from 1989 onwards. Since the early 1990es, an orthography proposal elaborated by the linguist and member of the Colombian Academy Carlos Patiño Rosselli has been used to some extent in teaching. A *cartilla*, an ABC-book, was published in 1997 (Etnoeducación-Palenque, 1997). The main obstacle that making Palenquero the medium of instruction faces is the students' insufficient language competence in Palenquero.

Excluding the relatively small group of activists, children and young people tend to have passive knowledge of Palenquero at best and even adults code-switch constantly into Spanish. The language situation cannot be defined as diglossia since there are no domains in which Palenquero is used exclusively; for example Pfliederer (1996) opts for the term "Assimilierungssituation" ('situation of assimilation'). Schwegler (1998:220) estimates that half of the 3000-4000 inhabitants of Palenque de San Basilio speak Palenquero. Primary language shift has already taken place, producing so-called "semi-speakers" whose proficiencies could be aligned on a continuum (cf. Sasse, 1992a, 1992b; Dorian, 1983, 1986). Among the high school students surveyed by Pfliederer (1996), 88,7% had Spanish as their L1, and only 15,5% were frequently exposed to Palenquero outside the school environment.

Palenquero teaching focuses mainly on oral fluency and augmenting the students' vocabulary. The students are continuously encouraged to resort to older community members for teaching vocabulary and customs. The orthography proposal which seems quite adequate as it is largely phonological and eliminates irregularities of the Spanish orthography, at least vis-à-vis the local Costeño variety, but on the other hand sides with it in accent rules, is not consequently taught. In order not to discourage the semi-speakers, teachers hardly correct grammatical or actually any mistakes. According to Pfliederer (1996:68-72), it is very likely that complex structures and pragmatic rules have been simplified as a result of language shift. My own impressionistic observations suggest that for example TMA-markers are used by the emigrant community of Barranquilla in a slightly different way from their use in Palenque.

Speakers of Palenquero seem to have always been bilingual in regional Costeño Spanish. Since the early 20th century and especially after the construction of a road linking Palenque to the

bigger Cartagena-Sincelejo road, started in 1956, contact with the outside world has intensified. When the Palenqueros leave their village, they are made fun of because of their “African speech”. This has certainly contributed to language shift. The language revitalization program which heavily relies on Palenquero instruction in the schools has led to a change in attitudes, at least and hopefully not only in the official discourse internalized for example by high school students (cf. Pfeleiderer, 1996). Considering the advanced stage of language shift and heavy interference from Spanish on any communicative act in Palenquero, it seems likely that language death can only be slowed down in the case of Palenquero.

2.2. Islander

Since the beginning of the 20th century, San Andrés, Old Providence and St. Catherine have been forcefully Colombianized. English was prohibited as the medium of instruction in 1946 in public and in 1956 in private schools. From 1926 until 1975, the Catholic church was officially in charge of education in the archipelago. Anti-Protestant campaigns with the burning of Bibles took place above all in the 1940es and 1950es. The large-scale flight of Native Islander children to the Catholic schools also occurred in the 1950es. The best students were awarded grants to finish high school and later tertiary education on the continent which usually resulted in language shift. In 1971, the Catholic faith became a prerequisite for public posts in the archipelago. The converts were appropriately called “Job Catholics”.

The single most important date in the recent history of the archipelago is the year 1953 when General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla declared San Andrés a Free Port. It is important to note that this measure did not affect the less populous islands Old Providence and St. Catherine which by consequence have undergone less radical changes⁶.

During the 1960es and 1970es, San Andrés was flooded with immigrants from the Colombian mainland but the Islanders’ struggle for socioeconomic and sociocultural autonomy also gained momentum. In May 1988, the First Congress on Human Rights was organized on San Andrés; the final resolution denounces the ethno- and ecocide practiced by the Colombian Government on the islands (Dittmann, 1992:27). In spite of the changes brought about by the new constitution –for example, English became the second official language of the archipelago,

an immigration office and an environmental agency were created to defend Native interests, etc.– Native Islanders feel that the concessions have been too few and too late. They demand more autonomy, efficiency and above all the repatriation of several thousands of Colombian immigrants as San Andrés is now the most densely populated island in the entire world. The result is that adequate services just cannot be provided to all inhabitants (electricity, water, sewage, health care, etc.). The results of the 1999 census were qualified as manipulated by Native leaders⁷ and protest marches, blockades of major roads, the airport, the port and the power plant have renewedly taken place. Likewise, petitions to foreign countries and international organizations have been made from the 1960es until the present day⁸.

As in the case of Palenquero, the label “diglossia” can probably no longer be used for the overall sociolinguistic situation of San Andrés as Spanish has invaded all domains of language use. After several decades of forced Hispanization, only the elderly and those Native Islanders with ties to the Baptist Churches, especially the First Baptist Church, continue to speak Caribbean Standard English. Among the younger generations, language shift from Creole English to Spanish is under way.

However, there are reasons to believe that if language shift cannot be reversed, it can at least be slowed down. First, the gradual loss of competence in Standard English may have lead to the recreolization of San Andrés English Creole and it has also contributed to the fact that Islander is now less stigmatized. As noted above, becoming an *Abstand* language enhances the likelihood that the same language will also become an *Ausbau* language. Efforts to promote Islander have increased over the past few years. For example, a pilot trilingual education program was launched in the three Baptist schools of San Andrés under the supervision of the Christian University in 1999⁹.

But efforts to promote Islander cooccur with efforts to promote the knowledge of Standard English. In 1980, the Interministerial Committee for the Incorporation of the Islands into the National Integration Plan recommended the preservation of bilingualism [*sic*] in the archipelago. Since then, considerable resources (both human and financial) have been spent on setting up bilingual education programs. Most of them have suffered from discontinuity and not taking into account the creole background of many students. At least in the case of the admittedly

constantly decreasing number of Native Islander children whose L1 is still Islander, contrasting Islander and Standard English structures has to constitute a fundamental part of English instruction. Teachers frequently overestimate Native students' command of Standard English because the fact that Native students perform quite well in the oral and auditive domains camouflages their inability to differentiate between Creole and Standard English structures. This becomes apparent in the graphic medium where immigrant children outperform Islander students¹⁰. In short, Native Islander children whose L1 still is Islander need trilingual instead of bilingual programs. As noted above, this has been recognized by the Christian University and the Baptist schools which are, however, attended only by a fraction of the school aged population. - At any rate, if Standard English eventually starts regaining ground -which seems very likely given its socioeconomical importance also recognized by the Colombian immigrants- this will ultimately constitute another factor contributing to the minorization of Islander.

3. A comparison of the prospects of Palenquero and Islander

Differences between the Palenquero and the Islander communities arise from the specific sociohistoric and sociocultural ecologies. At this point, Palenquero seems more threatened than Islander. For example, using Palenquero as the medium of formal instruction could hardly be justified on pedagogical grounds as only a small minority speaks Palenquero as L1. Instead, it would constitute an affirmation of an ideology unconditionally espoused only by a small group of militant activists (cf. Pfeleiderer, 1996:84). The value of the Palenquero language is above all ideological in the struggle for the affirmation of Afro-Colombian rights.

Native Islanders also fight for the recognition of their rights as Afro-Colombians. Although the present vitality of the creole language seems higher than in the case of Palenquero, there are, as a matter of fact, no reliable statistics on language proficiency and L1 vs. L2 distribution among Islander children who at least on San Andrés constitute a minority among all school aged children anyway. When discussing different curricula for Sanandresan schools, such a survey is badly needed. From my observations of language use in and outside the classroom it seems to me

that at least among the Islander community of San Andrés, language shift to Spanish is still progressing although the valorization and promotion of the creole language over approximately a decade now has had an impact on the sociolinguistic situation. On Old Providence and St. Catherine Native Islanders still constitute the majority. On the other hand, prejudice against Creole English also seems harder to combat than on San Andrés because Providence Islanders continue to insist on their English legacy. For example, Old Providence school teachers refuse to incorporate any writing of Islander into their teaching. On both San Andrés and Old Providence and St. Catherine, the promotion of Islander cooccurs with the promotion of Standard English which in the long run will certainly emerge as a factor renewedly contributing to the endangerment of the creole.

While Palenquero may resist language shift for some more time because of its ideological value, the fact that a very similar English-based creole is spoken in various parts of the Western Caribbean may contribute to the maintenance of Islander now that political obstacles to keeping the Caribbean connection alive are being dismantled. After a long period of forced centralization which included obligatory travel to any destination outside the archipelago through the Colombian capital Bogotá, new routes for direct travel to adjacent islands and territories are now being opened. It may be too late to resuscitate family ties but Native Islanders may regain a consciousness of being part of the Western Caribbean cultural area where Creole English may still not have attained high prestige (but cf. the change in attitudes towards Jamaican Creole, previously perhaps the Western Caribbean creole most heavily stigmatized; Beckford Wassink, 1999) but it certainly has a high currency value¹¹.

On the other hand, as Faraclas (2001:17) convincingly demonstrates, the spread of corporate globalization will eventually lead to a state of affairs where “pidginization and creolization may become the norm rather than the exception for most of the peoples of the world”¹². My hunch is that while Palenquero may indeed acquire museal character in the long run, Western Caribbean Creole English will make it. Unless, of course, a completely new MIC (Means of Interethnic Communication; Baker, 1990) takes its place.

Notas

1. Cf., e.g., DeGraff (2001) on the view still widely spread even among creolists that creoles are abnormal languages.
2. A recent (April 2001) workshop at the University of Westminster suggests pidginistics should be established as its own field. I think that abandoning the traditional lumping together of pidgins and creoles would be a most welcome change.
3. As a matter of fact, while most creoles constitute autonomous languages on structural grounds, the border between creole and some lexifier prestige language may be blurred to the extent that it is not possible to speak of autonomous languages – on sociolinguistic grounds, that is.
4. A recent approach proposes “group-differentiated rights” as a compromise between individual vs. community rights (Kymlicka, 1995).
5. Islander is the glossonym Sanandresan and Providence language promoters have adopted over the past few years in order to distinguish this creole from other English-based creoles.
6. It also seems that Providence Islanders have learnt from the mistakes made in San Andrés. Instead of promoting mass tourism, only sustainable ecotourism is permitted.
7. According to the official results released almost 6 months after the census the archipelago had 57324 inhabitants out of whom approximately 20000 Native Islanders (El Tiempo, Bogotá, 30.11.1999).
8. The most recent petition to the Human Rights Commission of the UN and the most recent general strike and blockage both occurred in June 2001 (El Tiempo, Bogotá, 19.6.2001).
9. At present, the pilot project is being continued at two of the schools.
10. Islander students also very frequently believe they do not need to study English since they speak a bad variety of it, anyway.
11. In a certain way, the Sanandresan Orthography Committee’s decision not to adopt the Belizean orthography has to be deplored as teaching materials developed in Belize cannot be used in San Andrés. On the other hand, the current or-

thography proposal (version 2001) seems more consistent than the etymologizing orthography of Belize.

12. In this context it is important to understand that bi- and, by extension, multilingualism, can operate as a means of wielding power ("elite bilingualism") as well as a means of resisting it, as a tool for both inclusion and exclusion (cf. Heller, 2000; Rassool, 2000).

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