

The Linguistic Matrix of Panama with Special Focus on Anglophone Creoles

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Michael Aceto
East Carolina University

Introduction

In Central America, it is a kind of unofficial secret, often unknown even to residents of the individual countries, that there are hundreds of thousands of first language English-derived Creole speakers all along the eastern Caribbean shore. Local varieties of Spanish are the official languages of all the Central American countries except Belize, but English-derived Creole varieties as well as a host of Amerindian languages (e.g. Sumu, Rama, Guaymi, Kuna) can be heard up and down the Caribbean coast of Central America. On the Miskito Coast of Nicaragua, there are approximately 100,000 Creole speakers, with 25,000 speaking Creole English as a first language. More than 10,000 speak a creolized English along the Caribbean coast of Honduras and on that country's Bay Islands. In Costa Rica, English-derived Creole is also spoken by nearly 50,000 Afro-Caribbeans mostly around the port-city of Limon on the eastern coast. Even Guatemala has English-derived Creole speakers on its Caribbean shores, which towns with names such as Livingston suggest (though there has been no research on this variety). In Panama, the focus of this paper, there are more than 100,000 Creole speakers in three general locations: the Caribbean province of Bocas del Toro near the Costa Rican border, Panama City, and Colon. It must be pointed out that there is relatively little research documenting these communities (for two exceptions, see Holm 1983; Aceto 1995, 1996, 1998, 1999). Some of these English-derived Creole-speaking Central Americans stem from contact between Europeans, Africans, and Amerindians in the 17th and 18th centuries. Most of these Creole-speaking Central Americans might be labeled as Afro-Caribbeans of West Indian descent who relocated to the area from Anglophone islands in the Antilles more than a century ago. Others have immigrated more recently.

What is a Creole Language?

I wish that the question "What is a creole language?" could be answered in a satisfactory way with more precision. However, that just isn't possible at this moment. Creole Studies has only been recognized as a legitimate and discrete discipline worthy of linguistic inquiry since the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since then there has been an explosion of research and even a few positions at universities where creolists are encouraged to pursue this type of research. Creole languages are spoken all over the globe from the Americas and the Atlantic region to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific region. Very often they are based on European languages (e.g. French-derived, English-derived, etc.) but that arbitrary fact is most definitely not a prerequisite since non-European languages such as Arabic have also been creolized. When we speak of a language being creolized—say, an English-derived creole—that designation typically means that a substantial amount of its lexicon is derived from that major contributing language, which would be regional dialect varieties of English spoken by settlers and colonists from the British Isles. Other components of the creole may also derive from the lexifier language as well as the native languages spoken by the subordinate (i.e. in power and political terms) ethnic group who is largely responsible for creolizing the language.

When trying to define a specific language linguistically we have two general options. The most common linguistic option is to define the language typologically, that is, according to the grammatical and genetic features it shares with other languages in its 'family'. Creole languages can typologically be defined as a group in that they share many structural features with each other even when they do not share the same lexifier language. That is, many French-derived, Portuguese-derived, English-derived creoles share such features as noun + 'they' to signal the plural, pre-verbal tense and aspect markers, an unmarked past tense for non-stative verbs, etc. However, not all of the languages linguists call creoles share all of these features (which will be presented in more detail below when we examine the specific features of Panamanian Creole English). A genetic approach is unsatisfactory since a creole is not strictly speaking a daughter of its contributing lexifier language, even if some linguists/creolists are beginning to think of them in those terms (which has been resisted for decades for often complex political reasons). Though there have been some attempts to define creoles as a typological class, most notions of what constitutes a creole have been restricted to a sociohistorical/sociolinguistic interpretation.

What most creoles share is that they are born out a disproportionate power relationship found most commonly during the three-four hundred years of European colonialism and expansion around the globe from the 17th to the 20th centuries. That is, for example, when the British were attempting to claim territories around the globe, varying proportions of English dialect speakers interacted with local peoples in situ who were often less powerful militarily and economically. Out of this matrix local creoles were born in the Pacific in, for example, Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the Solomon Islands, just to name a few. In the Atlantic region, sailors from Britain or other Europeans purchased slaves from African merchants for labor in their colonies in the Americas. At each location, either in the Pacific, in Africa, in the Americas, a variety of European-language-derived creole emerged as native languages among children who were born into these new sociolinguistic environments that previously didn't exist in the same dynamic before European colonial expansion (even if earlier colonial efforts by Arabic-speaking Muslims pre-date this period). At many of these colonial locations, a power dynamic was reproduced in which the less powerful ethnic groups (that is, vis-à-vis the Europeans in question) believed their interests and/or survival required acquisition of some form of the European language. Perhaps more importantly, members of this subordinate group required some kind of lingua franca (i.e. a common language) in order to bridge the communication gap among the linguistically diverse peoples who often spoke many mutually-unintelligible languages.

The Languages of Panama

Besides varieties of Panamanian Spanish, there are more than a half dozen other languages spoken in Panama. There are at least three Amerindian languages, several varieties of English-derived Creole Languages, and, of course, varieties of Spanish (both local and otherwise). The population of Panama is approximately three million people. The Summer Institute of Linguistics lists the number of languages spoken in Panama at 13, and some of the information here, particularly about Amerindian groups is from their website and publications. The languages of Panama are largely divided between a) varieties of Spanish; b) varieties of English Creole; and c) Amerindian languages. At the end of this section there will be a short discussion of other languages (mainly Chinese and Arabic) that are spoken in Panama.

Amerindian Languages of Panama

Speakers of Guaymí are the most numerous among the several Amerindian languages spoken

in Panama. According to the 1990 census, there were more than 100,000 speakers of this language. Speakers are mostly located in northeastern Panama in the province of Bocas del Toro. Several thousand more speakers are spread across the border with Costa Rica as well. Several dialects of Guaymí are called Valiente, Tole, and Chiriquí. Ngäbere appears to be the name preferred by many speakers.

The second most numerous Amerindian language of Panama is Kuna. They are about 70,000 speakers in the country. The area most closely associated with the Kuna is the San Blas islands along the southeastern Caribbean shore, but many Kuna are found on the mainland as well, especially in Panama City and Colón.

Some of the less numerous Panamanian Amerindian languages are Embera (about 8,000 speakers), Teribe (approximately 3,000 speakers), Waumeo (about 3,000 speakers), and Buglere (approximately 3,000 speakers). Embera speakers are located in the southeast of Panama with even high numbers of speakers (approximately 15,000) across the border in Colombia near the Darien area. Teribe speakers prefer to call their language Naso. These speakers are, like the Guaymí, located in the north of Panama, but they are mostly found in the western part of the country. Waumeo speakers are found in the southeastern part of the country, with equal numbers of speakers distributed across the Colombian border. Buglere or Sabanero speakers are found integrated among the Guaymí.

Speakers of Other Languages

There are tens of thousands of speakers of Chinese languages in Panama (mostly in Panama City and Colon). The most numerous are the languages Cantonese (or Yue) and Hakka. It is even reported that there are speakers of Creole French in San Miguel who are thought to derive historically from St. Lucia. This language is unattested in Panama, but, if true, they would share a similar history of immigration with Anglophone immigrant labors working on the Canal in the 19th and early 20th centuries (probably under earlier French attempts) and on fruit plantations.

Spanish in Panama

There are more than two million Spanish speakers in Panama. Lipski (1994) lists the following features as representative of the Panamanian variety of Spanish. Many of these features are also found in varieties of Caribbean Spanish. Phonologically: the affricate /c/ is often realized as /ʃ/; intervocalic /d/ is often elided or it is realized as /t/; word- or syllable-final /n/ is often velarized; syllable-final /l/ or /r/ is often reduced or elided; and syllable- or word-final /s/ is often reduced to /h/ or elided altogether. Syntactically: non-inverted pronoun/verb combinations as in the ¿Qué tú quieres? type, and a subject pronoun often appears before an infinitive as in *antes de yo venir aquí* 'before I came here'. Lexically, many of the following words are considered idiosyncratically Panamanian: *buchí* 'a country person'; *chichi* 'fruit juice'; *chichipate* 'worthless person or object'; *chingongo* 'chewing gum'; *chive* 'small bus'; *corotos* 'personal belongings'; *fulo* 'blond-haired, fair complexioned'; *pelado/-ito* 'a small child'; and *pipa* 'a green coconut whose milk is used as a beverage'.

Creole English in Panama

Numbers vary regarding the numbers of creole speakers in Panama. Some say 100,000, while SIL reports the numbers may be as high as 300,000 (which is more than 10% of the population of Panama). What is important to note is that despite whatever form PCE assumes today, it was already the native language of West Indian immigrants before they arrived in Panama. Thus, any actual creolizing of language took place in respective original islands in the Anglophone West Indies. However, that doesn't mean that PCE has not changed in some interesting ways in the last century and a half (see Aceto 1996 and 1998). There are more than three million Anglophone creole speakers in the Caribbean area. In Panama, these dialects of

Panamanian Creole English are located in Bocas del Toro, Colon, and Rio Abajo in Panama City. A reported dialect in Puerto Armuelles has never been investigated linguistically.

The History of English-derived Creoles in Central America & Panama

The history of these English-derived Creole-speaking communities in Central America may be divided generally into two categories: those stemming directly from colonial expansion and slavery in the Americas-which brought speakers of regional varieties of English, African languages, and Amerindian languages into contact with each other-and the related but more recent (i.e. in the last 150 years or so) cases of West Indians who, already speaking wholly-formed Creole languages, immigrated to the area in the post-emancipation period in search of work from points in the Greater and Lesser Antilles. The history of English-derived Creole speakers in some Central American speech communities, e.g. in the Bocas del Toro province of Panama, is a mixture of the two.

What follows is a short history of Creole English in Central America, and it must be stressed again that relatively little research has been carried out on these Creole varieties. Thus the following is simply a summary of what little we know so far. The Creole English spoken along the Miskito Coast on the northeast of Honduras and Nicaragua is the result of 17th century politics and competition for Central America between English and Spanish colonial powers. The contact between escaped African slaves, Amerindians (the Miskito), and speakers of regional varieties of British English gave rise to a creolized English, which was later influenced by the British traders, loggers and planters who arrived to the area with African slaves in the 18th century. The British maintained their influence of this Caribbean area from their territories in Belize and Jamaica until the 19th century when the Spanish regained control of the entire Nicaraguan area of the Miskito Coast. To this day, Bluefields maintains a role as the center of English-derived Creole language and culture in that area. The Bay Islands of Honduras were settled by English speakers and their slaves from Belize, Jamaica, and the Cayman Islands in the 17th and 18th centuries. This variety has fewer Creole-like features than other varieties of English spoken in the area, which may be attributable to the influence of Cayman Islands English. There are communities of English Creole speakers on the mainland of Honduras as well, but no research has determined if these communities derive from an older historical relationship between Europeans, Africans, and Amerindians or the result of relatively recent immigration (i.e. in the last century) by speakers of other forms of Creole English in search of work on nearby plantations. The undocumented cases of Creole English spoken on the Caribbean coast of Guatemala between Belize and Honduras appear to be related to cases of Creole-speaking immigrants as Anglophone names such as Livingston attest.

Immigration in the last 150 years is mainly responsible for bringing Creole English to Costa Rica and Panama. That is, in the 19th century West Indians of African descent, in the post-emancipation period, immigrated to the Caribbean coast of Central America in search of work on railroad construction projects and banana plantations. It is an often forgotten fact that the construction of the Panama Canal was largely carried out, not by Central Americans or Americans, but by imported Anglophone-speaking West Indian labor. Many of these West Indians remained behind on either end of the Canal, i.e. in Panama City on the Pacific and Colon on the Caribbean, and they represent one significant source of Creole-speaking communities in this region of Panama.

In the Caribbean corner of Bocas del Toro, near the Costa Rican border, where my fieldwork was conducted, the situation is somewhat different. This pattern of Creole-speaking immigrant laborers arriving in the area looking for work on nearby fruit plantations is grafted on top of older slave-holding and Creole-speaking communities which derive historically from Providencia and San Andrés islands. Creole English emerged on San Andrés and Providencia in the 17th and 18th centuries as a result of British colonial efforts in the Western

Caribbean, and, though the islands are currently controlled politically by Colombia, Anglophone Creole varieties are still spoken there today.

Map 1. The Caribbean Sea & Surrounding Area

From within Central America, there has been almost no research on these English-derived Creole-speaking communities by local scholars or the governments of the individual nations themselves. The one exception to the previous generalization appears to be Cohen (1976), which provided a necessary but brief introduction to Panamanian Creole English (PCE). However, this publication of conference papers was presented almost exclusively within the context of trying to answer pedagogical questions related to the difficulties in teaching Spanish as a second language to native English-derived Creole speakers. Unfortunately, English-derived Creole-speaking communities are often seen as problems to be solved or eradicated rather than as a part of the rich history of Central America. In the last twenty years, there has been no further work, to my knowledge, issued from Panama on its Creole-speaking communities, though it is possible that local M.A. theses (e.g. from the University of Panama) exist. Even within the growing discipline of Creole studies in the United States and Europe, there has been relatively little work on these Central American speech communities.

English-derived Creole-speaking Communities in the Bocas del Toro Province

The history of the Bocas del Toro region has always been somewhat isolated from the rest of Panama (see Map 2). Even today, the province can be reached from the capital only by plane or boat, and Bastimentos, the specific island on which I conducted my work, is only accessible by boat. The first Afro-Antilleans in Bocas del Toro were the slaves of English-speaking colonists who arrived from San Andrés and Providencia in the early nineteenth century (Westerman 1980, p. 21; Herzfeld 1983a, p. 36, fn 12). The largest number of subsequent West Indian immigrants came to the area from Jamaica near the end of the last century and early this century to work on Banana plantations on the mainland (Herzfeld 1983a, pp. 34-35, fn. 8; Bourgois 1985, p. 110).

Demographics regarding the specific settlement of Bastimentos are unfortunately unavailable. However, Herzfeld (1983a, pp. 34-35, fn. 8) provides the following census figures from 1950 and 1960 regarding the Antillean-born population registered in the entire province of Bocas del Toro:

TABLE 1: THE ORIGIN OF WEST INDIAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE PROVINCE OF BOCAS DEL TORO

	1950	1960
Bahamas, Bermuda, and Nassau	0	2
Barbados	24	13
Curaçao	1	5
Martinique and Guadeloupe	29	13
Jamaica	1.272	665
Trinidad and Tobago	7	4
Other British Antilles	64	32
Other French Antilles	0	1
Totals	1.397	735

The Bastimentos Speech Community

Afro-Panamanians in Bastimentos speak a variety of PCE as their first language, and they often call this variety Guari-Guari /gwari gwari/ as well as raw, flat or di bad English. The population of Bastimentos proper, i.e. the town center, is approximately 600 persons, mostly (approximately 97 percent) Afro-Panamanians of West Indian descent, with an admixture of Guaymi ancestry as well. A few Guaymi families also live in the town. Scattered throughout the island are more Guaymi families living in the bush, and they are thought to comprise another 300-400 persons more or less. Thus the entire population of the island is about 1000 people.

In Bastimentos, all Afro-Panamanians speak Creole English as a first language. Yet even the youngest residents of the island are able to hear Panamanian Spanish spoken between residents and outsiders, in the media, and, less frequently, among residents themselves. The public educational system does not recognize Creole as the first language of the island's residents, and thus Spanish is the only medium of instruction. This unwillingness or inability to recognize Creole as the native language of the island contributes greatly to the difficulties many students experience at school. Even when Spanish language lessons are presented within the educational system, they are taught from a native language perspective and not as second language acquisition.

Map 2. The Province of Bocas del Toro

Nearly all media, education, and public services are conducted in Spanish. There is electricity in the island's town center, and many though not all people have televisions which receive programs broadcast in Spanish. There were no satellite dishes in 1994-1995 and thus, to my knowledge, residents were unable to receive television broadcasts in any English language variety either from North America, the West Indies, or Panama City.

Nearly all residents living in the town center (except for a minority of the oldest residents of the island) are bilingual in Creole and, to varying degrees, in Spanish. However, Bastimentos Creole is purely an oral language. There is a limited familiarity with metropolitan English on the part of a few residents who have been educated outside of the Bocas del Toro region.

Some Basic Features of Bastimentos Creole English

Most varieties of English Creole spoken in the Western Caribbean are viewed within creole studies as a dialect of Western Caribbean English Creole (WCEC). However, WCEC is not a spoken language nor a proto-language but more of a geographical grouping. These creole languages do not derive directly from Jamaican, even if Jamaican immigrants have fed into the historical matrix of creole developing earlier in the 20th century or even in the 19th century. Jamaican is one of the most numerous Anglophone creole-speaking countries and that variety has received most of the linguistic attention from creolists.

Possession

1. /mi fada hous/ 'My father's house'

Note absence of inflectional morphology. Grammatical relation established by word order only.

Copula

2. Attributive: /Shi de gud/shi aarait/ 'She is doing fine/she is alright'
With /de/ as verb or no copula at all.

3. Locative: /a cac de ina di striit/ 'Is there a church in this street?'
/we im de/ 'Where is he/she/it?'
Locative form is often /de/.

4. Nominal: /if yu stil iz di baas/if yã stil woz di baas/ 'If you still were the boss'

5. /him iz mi fren/ 'He is my friend'

Invariant /iz/ or /woz/ used with all pronouns.

Past Tense/Perfective Aspect

6. /mi trai it/mi di tai it/ 'I tried it/have tried it'

7. /si fait wid si/si de fait wid si/ 'She quarreled with her'

8. /si si÷/si woz si÷/si si÷ awredi/si woz si÷ aaredi/si dãn si÷/ si di(d) si÷/
'She sang/she has (already) sung'

Note that the past tense marker /bin/ is not documented for any variety of Panamanian Creole English.

9. /him di stil gat a haas/him hav a neks haas/him di hav a neks haas/
'He had another horse'

10. /ai woz jos taakin/ai woz jos cãnvrsin/ 'I was merely chatting'

11. /im sii ar/im sii si/im woz sii si/ 'He saw her'

Past tense is often unmarked (especially with non-stative verbs), but is marked (with both stative and non-stative verbs) by preverbal /di(d)/ or /woz/.

Questions

12. /we im de/wepaat im de/wicpaat im de/ 'Where is he/she?'

Three question words for where: /we/wepaat/wicpaat/ (where/which + PART)

13. /wai yu kyaan du it/wa mek yu kyaan du it/ 'Why can't you do it?'

Why can be indicated by two-part what + make, i.e. /wamek/

14. /mi rait/ 'Am I right?'

Note no subject verb inversion since there is no copula to invert.

Relativization

15. /dat man wat liv ina dat hous im dag niem ki÷/

'The dog of the man who lives in that house is named King'

Relativization is marked by what /wat/ (rather than by who) as it is in many dialects of English.

Progressive Aspect

16. /im mada de kaal im/im mada kaalin im/ 'His/her mother is calling him/her'

Progressive aspect is indicated by /de/ + Verb or by Verb-in.

Future Tense

17. /si goin sin/ 'She will not sing'

The future tense marker /goin/ can be replaced by a number of variants, e.g. /gowain/, /gwain/, /gwan/, /wan/, /wain/, /an/.

Note that /go/ is not documented as a future tense marker in any variety of Panamanian Creole English.

PRONOUNS, SUBJECT, OBJECT & POSSESSIVE

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1 ST	mi, a, ai	wi
2 nd	yu	yaal, unu
3 rd	(h)i(m), sɔ̃i, ar, I(t)	dEm

Table 2: Pronouns in Bastimentos Creole English

The following examples illustrate that the subject and object pronouns are nearly identical in Bastimentos Creole English. Only the limited /ar/ is marked as an object pronoun for females.

18. /mi gat a sa÷ fu unu si÷/ 'I have a song for you to sing'

19. /a suun go/ 'I will soon go'

20. /dem no stie laik dem/ 'They're not like them'

21. /it jÃs laik wen i no komin hier/ 'It's as though he's not coming here'

22. /dem no so/ 'They're not like them'

23. /si doz sii si sista evri en da wiik/ 'She sees her sister every weekend'

Infinitival Marker

24. /unu ha fu du it/ 'You (pl.) have to do it'

The infinitival marker is often /fu/.

Pluralization

25. /hau di pipl dem trai fi liv/ hau di pipl dem du fi liv/

'How do the people manage to live?'

Pluralization is marked by a post-nominal /dem/.

Negation

26. /si no/na(t)/neva si÷/ 'She didn't sing'

Verb phrases are negated by either /no/, /na(t)/ or /neva/.

Several of the above features seem idiosyncratic to Bastimentos Creole English. The preverbal past tense marker /woz/ has a limited distribution in other varieties of Caribbean English. Bajan English seems to have this marker only occurring before the verb have, as in /si woz hav a neks sÃn/ 'she had another son.' However, the development of /woz/ as a preverbal past tense marker appears to be a local innovation (see Aceto 1996). The extensive

range of preverbal future tense markers also appears unique to Bastimentos Creole English. Several of the individual forms are found in other Caribbean Creoles (e.g. /wan/ is found in Belizean), and of course /gwain/ is common throughout the Anglophone Americas. Nonetheless, it is the extensive range of future tense markers that is remarkable for the Bastimentos speech community (see Aceto 1998). Individual linguistic features heard in Bastimentos Creole have been documented in other Anglophone Creoles of the Atlantic region, but the list of features above, though not exhaustive, is the bundle of specific features that make Bastimentos Creole English distinctive.

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