

# ENGAGING LANGUAGE, IDEOLOGIES, AND LINGUISTICS IN THE CARIBBEAN AND BEYOND

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When linguists study languages that result from situations of contact—for example, Creoles, second language varieties, and mixed languages—they encounter a well-knit set of ideologies of oppression. In focusing on the Caribbean, these ideologies usually deny the presence of coherence, complexity, and creativity in these linguistic systems. The role that these language varieties play in enabling communication can be minimized as well, as specialists and non-specialists alike at times describe them as inadequate, defective, and impoverished. Moreover, some have even proposed that multi-ethnic and multi-lingual communities are “schizophrenic” and indicated that their members are alingual and without a well-defined cultural identity. However, approaches that challenge these more-than-a-century-old ideas (e.g., Lance 1969; Poplack 1980; Arends 1995; DeGraff 2005, Zentella 2016) show that these preconceptions are rooted in a colonialist ideology that interferes with understandings of the complexities inherent to linguistic systems, language contact, attitudes towards language use, and cultural networks. Like these works, this volume challenges these oppressive ideologies.

## **The Language and Discourse Research Group**

This project has its roots in the Language and Discourse Research Group, which we established in 2014 in the Institute of Caribbean Studies at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus.<sup>1</sup> The group was established to give several linguists from different colleges and departments on our campus regular opportunities to meet and discuss their research interests and their work in progress, as well as recent scholarly publications. Shortly after the group was founded, membership was extended to include linguists outside of Puerto Rico. We have had fruitful discussions via digital platforms with the group’s international

participants regarding their work and ours. The articles compiled in this special issue are the product of the scholarly research conducted by several of the group's local and international members, as well as some invited collaborators with similar research interests.

Our group's focus on variation, difference, and the juxtaposition of cultural forms is reflected in this volume's cover image, Patricia Sanabria Ibarra's mural "Cellular Big Bang," a work that celebrates the eclectic combination of colors and diverse artistic techniques. The original piece—which uses organic paint, foam, and glass to interpret the emergence of the universe—is intended to motivate passers-by to pause and contemplate their origins and identities. The mural's imposing size (48 by 28 feet), concentric circles, and expanding linear figures are reminiscent of the notion of the greater Caribbean that frames this project, as well as the patterns and tensions that repeat across this volume's contents.

## The Articles

This volume envisions the Caribbean as an expansive region that consists of multiple diasporas and differentially shifting boundaries, as suggested by its inclusion of data from speech communities in Europe and islands of the Indian Ocean, as well as San Basilio de Palenque, Colombia and Chipilo, México. San Basilio de Palenque, located in the northern part of the country, includes people of Afro-Colombian descent who speak the Creole language called Palenquero. A substantial number of the residents in the latter setting, Chipilo, speak Veneto, the language of ancestors who migrated from Italy to central Mexico in the nineteenth century. We suggest that making connections between these areas and scholarly work on the insular Caribbean enriches our platform for understanding language by providing relevant tools and useful points of comparison. In addition, extending our notion of the Caribbean's boundaries illuminates significant sociohistorical similarities (e.g., histories of mass migration, enslavement, and colonialism, as well as asymmetrical power relationships associated with economic systems and imperial expansion). These associations can bring into relief patterns that linguists see as universal and assist in rearticulating some of the assumptions about phenomena that are thought to be specific to the region.

The six articles included in this special issue of *Caribbean Studies* vary in terms of their disciplinary perspectives (e.g., sociolinguistics, variationist linguistics, bilingualism, and creolistics) and the specific language contact situations and phenomena under examination, which include bilingualism, code-switching, language contact, multiethnolects, and Creole languages. Discussing language change, language use, and linguistic perceptions, the articles focus on various aspects of linguistic

analysis, comprising phonological, lexical, and syntactic features. They employ several methodological approaches, such as corpus analysis, elicited judgments, ethnolinguistic investigation, sociolinguistic interviews, and questionnaires.

The volume's papers are organized in two main sections. The first section (papers 1-3) deals with the cohabitation of different language varieties within a speech community, which, in many cases, results in different degrees of bilingualism, while the second section (papers 4-6) centers on individual Caribbean varieties, most of which are Creole languages. The volume starts out with an article by Hilary Barnes that discusses language use and linguistic attitudes associated with Veneto-Spanish bilingualism. The research completed by Barnes highlights the positive attitudes that Veneto-Spanish bilinguals display towards both of their languages. Despite having been demeaned by Italian speakers and the Italian government, in Chipilo, Veneto is ascribed a high status, particularly by the younger bilinguals in the study, who report using the language as an identity marker in order to distinguish themselves from the surrounding Mexican culture.

The second article, written by Rosa Guzzardo Tamargo and Jessica Vélez Avilés, focuses on Spanish-English bilingualism. Their study examines code-switching, which refers to bilinguals' alternation between languages within the same discourse, and includes the insertion of morphemes, single words, short phrases, longer clauses, and whole sentences from one language into other-language discourse. The authors find a relationship between the bilinguals' code-switching frequency, their preference towards different code-switch types, and their attitudes towards these phenomena, in which stigma appears to dissipate as code-switching practices increase. Specifically, the bilinguals who code-switch more often are more accepting of this bilingual practice and display more positive attitudes towards the more complex code-switch types than those bilinguals who code-switch less.

The third paper, by Eva-María Suárez Büdenbender, expands the discussion of linguistic perceptions by analyzing the self-reported strategies used by individuals to identify speakers of a different variety of the same language. Her work describes Puerto Rican Spanish as well as Dominican Spanish, both of which are varieties lacking sufficient documentation in contemporary linguistic scholarship. The speakers in Suárez Büdenbender's study exhibit more awareness of segmental, prosodic, and lexical differences than morphosyntactic differences between the language varieties. They also use non-linguistic cues, such as socioeconomic and educational status, in their identification process, and to be familiar with the linguistic stereotypes and prejudices towards the speakers of each language variety.

The fourth paper, written by Philipp Krämer, links the section on bilingualism and contact between language varieties with the section on Creole languages by discussing attitudes towards Creoles and multiethnolects—youth languages that emerge in the aftermath of migration to urban multicultural settings—as displayed in online media from different contact situations around the world. The structural similarities between these communication systems as well as the public’s devaluation of them are addressed in Krämer’s examination of the delegitimizing strategies in readers’ reactions to online news articles on language issues.

Next, Rutsely Simarra Obeso offers the perspective of a native-speaker linguist. Her work describes Colombia’s Palenquero, a language that has figured prominently in discussions of language change in the Spanish Empire, including debates about the “missing Spanish Creoles” (McWhorter 2000) and the identification of macro-level patterns that track language change across colonial regimes. Lipski (2008:547) states that Palenquero is “the sole survivor of a once broader gamut of Spanish-related creole languages” that has some of the same features as the Gulf of Guinea Creoles as well as similarities with contact varieties that emerged in the Caribbean. Simarra Obeso’s paper evidences the complexity of categorizing Palenquero’s lexical features, analyzing their morphosyntactic characteristics, meanings, communicative functions, and their place in the culture of the community. Enriching existing descriptions of this lesser-studied Creole language, her incorporation of functionalist and anthropological frameworks demonstrates the tangible fruits of scholarship that assumes an anti-exceptionalist platform.

In the final article of this issue, Celia Brown-Blake provides an overview of the language situation in Jamaica, concentrating on language communication across various discourse situations in the legal arena. Sharing insights from her professional training in both law and linguistics, she provides a detailed examination of the tensions that arise between Jamaican Creole, the first language of many speakers in the country, and English, the official language of the courts. Brown-Blake’s analysis of extracts from pre-trial depositions and statements as well as dialogues from trials identifies how language communication difficulties are managed, showing that they can actually affect the administration of justice.

As a whole, the papers reveal what may seem like a contradictory picture. On the one hand, contact varieties are often held in low esteem, according to public opinion, metalinguistic narratives, and prescriptive discourse. On the other hand, speakers of contact varieties use particular linguistic forms and linguistic resources as markers of their bilingual abilities, oppositional identities, aesthetic and stylistic preferences, and sociocultural heritage. As a result, these contact varieties, although

stigmatized by specific groups, are regarded with certain prestige among their speakers, leading to their maintenance and validation.

### **Goals and Significance**

One of the strengths of this volume is that its articles analyze original data and at the same time make connections with relevant secondary sources. The documentation and use of primary sources of data is significant because it helps to ensure reliability and also because it has enhanced the authors' insights and their ability to comment on the relevance of context. The authors encourage critical reflection on standard approaches to describing language and social life in linguistics.

This volume's articles share an underlying concern for critical issues such as linguistic identity, linguistic prejudice, and the use of vernacular language in public domains, including the judicial and educational systems. Taken together, they constitute a collective plea to eradicate negative opinions and institutional practices which perpetuate the idea that some varieties are inferior and insignificant. Among the authors' recommended strategies for elevating these languages and their speakers are: official recognition of these varieties, taking steps towards institutionalized bilingualism, the maintenance or revitalization of community programs offering instruction in these languages, and the modification of language policies within the justice system.

Another way in which this volume sets out to shift conventional linguistic ideologies is by discussing linguistic attitudes and the linguistic characteristics of different types of contact varieties. Several of its contributions do this by taking a nod from the ideologies and practices of speakers, pointing out ways that contact varieties make use of creative and innovative linguistic resources, which often differ from a normative view of language. This does not mean, however, that these contact varieties should be considered any less systematic or "pure" than well-established standard languages; nor does it suggest that the languages in question somehow depart from sociolinguistic principles or the patterns and rules of general linguistics. Instead, as suggested in several articles, they should be seen as natural languages and the speakers who create and use them, as resilient, but not exceptional.

This volume also contributes to understanding lesser-studied varieties by drawing attention to their central place in broader currents and cycles of human history. Scholarship and innovative academic projects that link these processes with language documentation and applied linguistics must continue. Such work can, of course, shape the debates about language contact, language change, and related phenomena among linguists and other researchers and thereby make positive contributions

to emerging thought. As suggested above, one way it can do so is by debunking the preconceptions, myths, and scholarly traditions that impede the objective description and discussion of language structure, sociolinguistic phenomena, and the social histories of those who have been most marginalized historically, among whom are indigenous groups and communities of Afro-Caribbean ancestry. Scholarship that addresses these concerns and problematizes the stigmatization of specific varieties can also contribute to long-term social and economic sustainability by providing evidence and arguments that prompt educators, students, journalists, policymakers, public servants, and others to reformulate their understandings of marginalization and stigma. The discussions in the pages ahead set the stage for this type of work. Suggesting that the similarities shared across communities are greater than the differences that separate them, they underscore the potentially transformative power of fresh narratives about language, knowledge, and social history in the Caribbean and beyond.

### Note

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