THE USE OF CREOLE AS INTERLANGUAGE BY THE BLACK CARIB OF BELIZE

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The choice of an interlanguage is particularly crucial in Belize where five ethnic groups coexist, all speaking different native languages. The West Indian official standard is learned in school by members of all groups, but is used in a restricted number of contextual situations. Native speakers of an English-based creole called Belizean Creole constitute about one third of the country's population, and most varieties used in outgroup communication are located somewhere along the continuum ranging between standard Belizean English and Belizean Creole (henceforth BC).

Among members of the Creole group, a remarkable linguistic flexibility exists at the individual level: in an investigation of a Creole community, I found that most speakers control the whole range of the creole continuum. They switch easily back and forth between basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal forms, depending on the contextual situation, setting, topic and participants involved. English does not function consistently as target language, which would seem to indicate that changes in the continuum are not unilinear, but determined by conflicting pressures. In particular, the creole vernacular is clearly subject to a "double standard", namely, it is officially stigmatized in outgroup contacts, but internally valued, and its ingroup prestige is indeed spreading to other ethnic groups, as will be discussed below.

I have been observing specifically interactions between Creoles and Black Caribs in order to assess the impact of ethnic differences on linguistic variability, and to determine the kind of interlanguage used in outgroup contacts.

THE BLACK CARIBS AND THE QUESTION OF THE INTERLANGUAGE IN A CREOLE CONTINUUM. The Black Carib is a group of Afro-Indians who, after various peregrinations in the Caribbean area, settled along the coast of Belize. They have been traditionally assigned a social status inferior to that of the Creole group, as well as of some other ethnic groups. Even though they are now upwardly mobile, as many of them become teachers or policemen, the old disparaging attitude toward Black Caribs still prevails among Creoles, and explains the ethnic distance separating the two communities, as reflected in interactional speech patterns.
The Black Caribs speak Garifuna (Arawak-based) as their native language, and they acquire later some segment of the creole continuum. They are usually exposed to some creolized variety before school age, in informal contacts with their Creole neighbors, and some version of English is typically acquired in school, as taught by teachers who are themselves second learners of English.

Before attempting to study the interlanguage which arises in group interaction, it is essential to identify the target language functioning as model for the acquisition of a second language (the interlanguage) by members of the Black Carib group. In the linguistically complex Belizean situation, any segment of the creole continuum, from basilect to acrolect, might theoretically serve as target language. Thus, an important preliminary step involves determining the range of creolized or decreolized varieties to which Black Caribs are exposed, and which, among those varieties, may be perceived as models for interlanguage acquisition. Escure (1982) addressed the issue of the varieties used by Creoles in outgroup contacts with Black Caribs:

In a number of interactional situations recorded in a Creole and in a Carib village, Creoles typically used mesolectal forms for the five morpho-syntactic features (see note 2) analyzed. In other words, they selected a variety intermediate between the official standard and the home vernacular, even though, as I had previously established by observing intragroup contacts, it was clear that they could control the whole spectrum of varieties. My analysis focused on the speech of Creole individuals, but it seemed that Black Caribs produced a similar type of mesolectal interlanguage. It is possible to interpret the results of this study as indicating that the Black Caribs' exposure to the creole continuum is limited to mesolectal varieties -- assuming that Creoles jealously preserve their vernacular for ingroup contacts. This reduced availability of codes to Black Caribs would in turn entail a similar limitation to the mesolect in interlanguage development. Two important questions remained partially unanswered, namely 1) why Creoles selected mesolectal varieties in the situations that I analyzed, and 2) whether this selection was representative of all types of Creole/Carib interactions. Could it be that Creoles avoided basilects because they knew that Black Caribs did not control those varieties, or simply to prevent them from acquiring the creole? Such questions would be preempted, of course, if it turned out that Black Caribs did in fact speak Belizean Creole. I therefore decided to investigate with special care the Black Caribs' use of the continuum, and in particular to assess their competence in creole. It would then be possible to decide whether Black Caribs choose to use mesolectal varieties in certain casual outgroup encounters, or whether their mesolects are the closest approximations of the basilect that they can produce, due either to the mesolectal model they are exposed to, or to imperfect language learning.
METHODOLOGY FOR AN ASSESSMENT OF THE BLACK CARIBS' CREOLE COMPETENCE.
The goal is to determine if BC can function as second vernacular for the Black Caribs—a vernacular being defined as the variety used when the minimum of attention is being paid to speech (Labov, 1972: 112).

Assuming the strongest hypothesis, namely, that the Black Caribs have native-like competence in the creole, I speculated that overt avoidance of the basilect by Black Caribs and Creoles alike in the interethnic contacts I had previously analyzed may have been due to the ethnic and social tensions underlying the two communities: More specifically, Creoles have a higher socioeconomic status than the Black Caribs, but their native language, BC, is typically stigmatized as communicative code, at least officially, and openly criticized by the Black Caribs. The latter are themselves proud of their distinct Garifuna language, which is not spoken by the Creoles. Such tensing components of an interaction can usually be relaxed when certain favorable circumstances are met.

As pointed out previously by Ervin-Tripp, (1972), Hymes (1972) and others, a number of important determinants must be taken into account when examining the level of speech style attained in a given interaction: physical setting, topic, age and rapport of the participants (including their degree of familiarity and feelings of ethnocentricity) all affect group interaction, and determine the potential use of the vernacular. The intimidating effect of a monitored situation is minimized when the interaction takes place outdoors or on the home turf of the targeted individuals, in this case the Carib village, and such social boosts as food and liquor effectively alleviate tensions and encourage unconstrained conversation. Certain topics are especially conducive to totally relaxed speech patterns, in particular sexual jokes, as previously observed by Labov (1972). Another requirement is that the fieldworker be well known and trusted in the community under investigation. Thus most conversations were taped with the help of a young Creole man who is liked in both villages.

I selected for analysis four spontaneous conversations recorded in outgroup situations which appeared relaxed enough to allow for the most basilectal interlingual variety available to the participants. For comparison, I added to the corpus one conversation which clearly revealed the effect of a non-relaxed speech event. My assistant, E., was the main Creole participant in four out of the five conversations examined here, which are briefly summarized below:
SPEECH EVENTS

Conversation #1
Locale: Barranco, Carib village in the south of Belize, near the Guatemala border
Setting: indoor, night, party
Participants: M., 14 and S., 15, both Carib, and P., 27, Creole, visiting from Belize-City, plus half a dozen young Caribs (age 15-20)
Topic: gossip, jokes

Conversation #2
Locale: Seine Bight, Carib village
Setting: beach, B. mending nets
Participants: B., 30, Carib, fisherman and E., 26 Creole, visiting. B. and E. are acquaintances.
Topic: fishing, economic situation

Conversation #3
Locale: Seine Bight
Setting: R's house
Participants: R., 55, Carib, former teacher, and E., 26, Creole, plus another Creole, friend of R. and E.,
Topic: good-humored bantering, and sexual jokes.

Conversation #4
Locale: Seine Bight
Setting: outdoor, in front of A's house
Participants: A., 45, Carib, fisherman, and E., Creole, plus A's wife and his niece.
Topic: light/serious. E. flirts with A.'s niece, then A. complains about the two women's intention to emigrate to the States and leave him behind.

Conversation #5
Locale: Placencia, Creole village
Setting: beach
Topic: fishing, travel in Belize, ethnic groups and racism.

LINGUISTIC VARIABLE: THE COPULA. I chose to focus on the copular variants as a means to assess the Black Caribs' control of basilectal creole varieties. This feature is a valid tool of investigation, because it has several reflexes in Belizean varieties, which separate well across the creole continuum, and thus constitute good indicators of the stylistic level achieved in a given situation. The various copula variants are illustrated below:
Creole as Interlanguage

DE: a. Preverbal marker of the progressive aspect (basilects)6

1. a ku haadli hie we ye de se, yu de taak tu iizi
   'I can hardly hear what you are saying, you are talking too low'

b. Locative verb (basilects); also occurs before other adverbials

2. da mi me de pan wach
   'That was me who was on watch'

3. da H. me de de
   'That's H. who was there'

4. wen sizan me de aan, a de mek bowt 72 pown . . . a mek
dat wen sizan de aan en de wok krefish
   'When the (fishing) season is open, I catch about 72 pounds (of lobster). . . I catch that much when the season is open for lobster'

A/DA: Possible copula before nominal predicates (basilects)7

5. H. da me di kapn
   'H. was the captain'

6. dis a tru tru ting
   'This is a true story'

7. da da we a jos me wan tel yu
   'That's just what I was going to tell you'

ZERO-COPULA: (in predicative sentences) (basilects and mesolects) and before progressive verbs (mesolects)

8. bichkumin nays, chu.
   'Beachcombing is nice, true'

9. da wan nays li haaba
   'That's a nice little harbor'

10. we i hapn layk dat
    'What happened is like that' (This is what happened)

11. pipl in San Pedro kamplenin, tu
    'People in San Pedro are complaining, too'

BE: as in English (mesolects and acrolects)8

12. i nak wan li bluo, da dat's way i las su lang
    'He struck a small blow, that's why it lasted so long'
Those copula variants have been divided into three categories as indicators of the lects spanning the continuum:

1) DE and DA/A are diagnostic of the basilects, that is, they do not occur either in mesolects or acrolects.

2) At the opposite end of the continuum, a high incidence of BE is associated with decreolization, that is, with an acrolectal variety, and is typically concomitant with the complete absence of DE and DA/A.

3) The zero-copula variant is a more ambiguous feature since it occurs both in basilects and mesolects: in creole varieties, it is quasi-complementary with DE and DA/A, but the shift from creole to mesolect is characterized by a progressive substitution of DE/DA by zero-copula, and the shift to an acrolectal variety entails the gradual insertion of BE in zero-copula contexts. Thus, the quantification of zero-copula is only significant when considered in conjunction with DE/DA and BE incidence.

### RESULTS OF THE COPULA ANALYSIS IN BLACK CARIBS' INTERLANGUAGE.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BLACK CARIBS</th>
<th>DE/DA</th>
<th>O</th>
<th>BE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 S. F</td>
<td>15 (15)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M.</td>
<td>14 (78)</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>#2 B. M</td>
<td>30 (27)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 R. M</td>
<td>55 (85)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4 A. M</td>
<td>45 (16)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5 J. M</td>
<td>50 (46)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Conv.</td>
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<td>#1,2,3,4</td>
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### CREOLES | DE/DA | O | BE |
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<tr>
<td>P. M</td>
<td>27 (87)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. M</td>
<td>26 (15)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. M</td>
<td>26 (75)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>47</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. M</td>
<td>26 (29)</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>41</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. M</td>
<td>26 (25)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>K. M</td>
<td>24 (10)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Conv.</strong></td>
<td><strong>42</strong></td>
<td><strong>47</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
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<td>CREOLES</td>
<td><strong>.52</strong></td>
<td><strong>.41</strong></td>
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**TABLE 1:** Incidence of basilectal markers (DE and A/DA), zero-copula, and BE in the speech of six Black Caribs, and their six Creole interlocutors, in five distinct conversations.

N= number of potential occurrences of the copula for each speaker, followed by the frequency of occurrence of each type of copula variant.
The frequency of occurrence of the three categories of markers outlined above has been quantified in the speech of six Black Caribs participating in the five conversations selected for analysis. For comparative purposes, the same variants have been analyzed in the speech of their Creole interlocutors. This should allow for an accurate assessment of the Black Caribs' control of at least one important linguistic feature of BC. Table 1 presents the results of the analysis. It must be noted that only cases of DA/A which occur in a truly copular position, that is between two NP's, have been included in the analysis. Other instances of DA as deictic pronoun, or emphizer which typically occur in sentence-initial position, have not been incorporated. (see also footnote 7)
DISCUSSION OF RESULTS: It can be seen from Table 1 that in each conversation except for #5 the Black Caribs' performance closely matches the Creoles' production of the same variant. The clustering of those copula variants for each ethnic group is illustrated in Figure 1. Clearly, in the first four conversations, percentages of each variant cluster together, regardless of the ethnic membership of individual speakers. Basilectal morphemes and zero-copula cluster in the mid-percentages. Creoles show a slightly more differentiated pattern between basilectal variants and zero-copula, while the acrolectal feature (BE) shows very low incidence overall, but even less with Creoles.

As indicated earlier the crucial question is now to determine whether this close match is due to the Caribs' ability to use creole varieties as well as their native speakers, or to the Creoles' production of a somewhat decreolized version of their native variety. My previous analysis of the Creoles' linguistic variability in ingroup basilectal contexts enabled me to identify the average basilectal level of the three major variants of the copula as .50 of (DE/DA), .44 of (zero-copula); and .06 of (BE). In the data analyzed here, the two Creole men speak an identical and truly basilectal variety (that is, it more or less corresponds to the basilectal behavior of other speakers in intragroup situations). It is thus possible to conclude that, at least in terms of the copula variable, the Creole speakers in the first four conversations produce a variety identical to the creole they would use in ingroup contacts. This basilectal performance is fairly accurately matched by the five Carib speakers S, M, B, R and A as represented in Table 1.

CREOLE AND THE AGE VARIABLE. The spread of BC into the Black Carib community seems to be a function of age. The younger speakers' speech patterns (i.e., S, M, and B) are closer to native Creoles' speech patterns, and this behavior can be related to the high prestige value of BC for the younger Carib generation. M's fluency in creole is justified since he lives in a small town (Punta Gorda) where Creoles and Black Caribs co-exist. It is remarkable, however, that S, and other Barranco children, who live in the fairly isolated village, accessible only by boat, should control the creole so well: they learn it during occasional visits to the town, or from older teenagers who go to school in Punta Gorda and bring it back to the village. As far as Seine Right Caribs are concerned, they learn the creole during their frequent visits to Placencia or to other Creole communities in the area. Young children also pick up the creole from teenagers, and start using it very early in the schoolyard, even though a variety based on English syntax and creole phonology is more commonly used by their Carib teachers. Thus BC is getting to be
also used as ingroup language beside Garifuna within the Carib community, although this phenomenon seems to be limited to the younger generation of Black Caribs. The reason for this restriction is that older Black Caribs generally subscribe, at least officially, to the traditional position criticizing the creole as illiterate language, and still encourage their children to learn English in school, and speak Garifuna at home, but to avoid the creole. It is easy to understand how such prescription would indeed stimulate the younger Caribs' interest in acquiring BC to strengthen peer solidarity across ethnic barriers. Due to the conflicting currents involved, the amplitude of this movement remains to be determined and is left to further study.

However, as can be observed from the speech of R, 55 and A, 45 in conversations #3 and #4, older Black Caribs are not adverse to using BC themselves in certain intergroup contexts. For example, R uses creole only when telling sexual jokes. In other contexts, he consistently uses English, regardless of his degree of familiarity with his Creole interlocutors. His speech patterns reveal this dichotomy, as he prefers English for general discussion, yet switches to creole when he starts telling a joke, correcting himself if he slips back into English at the wrong moment. English is obviously his favorite medium of communication in outgroup interaction, but he unambiguously demonstrates his Creole competence. A, in conversation #4, is less adamant about separating varieties according to topic. Indeed his repertoire of continuum lects is probably less extensive than R's, and in particular, it is likely that his acrolectal competence is limited. But his production of the basilectal copular variants is attested in a conversation which includes fairly neutral topics such as fishing and family matters, and thus differs basically from the mostly 'male camaraderie' context illustrated in conversation #3.

As already indicated, the J/E/K interaction (conversation #5) stands apart from the other conversations. First of all, performance in this context evidences massive decreolization, that is, decrease in the incidence of basilectal copular markers, and increase of BE-forms, and K's speech is even closer to an acrolect. As to J, the Carib man, his production of the copula is totally acrolectal, even though his overall speech patterns are far from conforming to Belizean English. It is of course possible that J cannot speak BC. Yet, he is probably exposed to it since he works daily in the Creole village; thus, it is more likely that he does not want to speak 'raw creole'. Indeed, J professes a profound scorn for the creole that he interprets like many other Belizeans as a corruption of English. When communicating with non-Caribs, he consistently endeavors to speak 'good English' to the best of his knowledge. But he has had
little education and even less exposure to standard English, thus his version of English is a variable mesolect, which ranks high on certain morphological features that he associates to English, like (BE), even though the syntax, lexicon and phonology are much closer to BC than to English. Furthermore, a number of negative feelings pervaded the interaction: generation gap, mutual dislike and distrust, and different lifestyles. The fact that E, the fieldworker, showed excessive zeal in exhoring him somewhat patronizingly to speak creole ('taak creole, man!') seemed to enrage him and reaffirm his efforts at speaking good English. This attitude obviously made his two Creole interlocutors uncomfortable and self-conscious about their basilects, and the conversation settled in a low mesolect.

CONCLUSION. The purpose of this study was to determine whether Black Caribs could use BC as interlanguage, and the conversations (Ø1-4) analyzed met the most favorable conditions for the production of vernacular patterns by Black Carib individuals. Indeed it appears that they control the continuum basilect, at least as far as the copular variable is concerned, but this variety is selected in interlingual situations only if its validity in a given situation is recognized. Younger Caribs are certainly the most enthusiastic in adopting BC, although this is restricted mostly to peer group contacts. Some older Carib individuals are willing to use creole patterns only for narrowly defined topics, such as joking in camaraderie situations. Thus mesolectal patterns in intergroup communication are not as exceptional as the data presented here may seem to indicate, especially where older speakers are concerned.

Another related significant finding of this study is that Creole individuals may produce basilectal speech in certain outgroup situations, but again, only if certain requirements are met. They include at least one, and preferably two of the following: age identity between Creoles/Caribs, previous familiarity between participants, and joking context. This means that under favorable circumstances, individual differences and ethnic barriers and prejudices can be temporarily erased, and that linguistic variability is extremely sensitive to external factors.

This study does not provide sufficient data to determine whether the prestige of the creole variety observed among younger Black Caribs will spread to the entire community, and lead to the death of Garifuna. It remains to be seen if younger Caribs, as they grow older, retain their predilection for BC and extend it to intragroup communication. The issue is likely to be confused by the massive emigration of young adults to American cities. What happens linguistically within Belizean communities in urban areas such as New York and Los Angeles is totally undocumented, and so is the reintegration of those individuals who eventually
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return to Belize. Obviously, a number of social and demographic factors impact heavily on the adoption of the creole by the Black Carib community. Yet this investigation disclosed two important facts: Belizean Creole is acquired at an early stage as a second language by Black Caribs, and it is an integral part of their interlanguage, which is likely to range over the whole creole continuum.

NOTES

1The five ethnic groups include Creoles (Afro-European), who represent about 31% of the population, Black Caribs (Afro-Indian) 11%, Mestizos (Spanish/Amerindian) 33%, Amerindians (Maya and Kekchi) 19%, and German Mennonites 4%. There are also some East Indians, Lebanese and Chinese, and a new Salvadoran community.

2The investigation was conducted over a period of eight months in the Creole village of Placencia, and the Black Carib village of Seine Bight, two coastal communities in the Stann Creek District, located about six miles apart.

3See also Le Page (1978), Washabaugh (1977) for evidence that decreolization is not unilinear.

4Seine Bight residents mostly include now those Caribs who did not leave the village to find social outlets.

5Labov (1972:114) lists "three content themes which have the greatest force for evoking speech from the broadest range of speakers: (1) death and danger of death (...); (2) sex and all the machinery for interaction between the sexes (...); (3) moral indignation (...)"

6DE also occurs as habitual marker but this morpheme has not been incorporated in the analysis.

7For a discussion of the ambiguous status of DA/A, indicating a possible semantactic change involving DA as deictic pronoun, emphaser and copula, see Escure (forthcoming).

8(BE) occurs in basilects only after modals, and alternates with 'zero' in this context (e.g. dat ku bi eniting 'That could be anything').

9The corpus of data on which this analysis is based includes sixteen samples (men and women), and 1042 copula tokens (Escure, ms).
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In particular, he produces a lot of hypercorrections such as: "He didn't came"; "Her friend heard it"; "maybe you can spoke to him"; "they belongs to me". All of those forms display an erroneous attempt at producing the morphological acrolectal markers (in particular the 3rd person singular marker /z/, and the irregular past marker), which are typically absent in basilectal and mesolectal varieties.

REFERENCES


