

CONVERSATIONAL INVOLVEMENT:  
THE TEASING STRATEGY IN LIMONESE CREOLE

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Ethnographic background of Limonese Creole speakers

Located on the Atlantic lowlands of Costa Rica, the Province of Limón was originally the home of a Black minority. These people arrived mostly from Jamaica around 1870<sup>1</sup> as the workforce for the construction of the railroad that eventually joined the east coast to the Central Valley capital, San José. They later remained in Costa Rica as laborers on the banana plantations owned by the United Fruit Company in that province. By the time the Company abandoned its operations in the region in the 1940s, the new dominating element was made up of Costa Rican Whites. Gradually since then and more strikingly during the last ten years, the Afro-limonese do not make up the largest ethnic group in the province any longer. Due to a variety of socio-economic factors (Herzfeld 1993:15)<sup>2</sup>, an overwhelming majority of Whites have migrated to the region while many young Afro-limonese have left or have become partners in ethnically mixed couples.

A century ago, Jamaican Creole was the communicative medium in family and communal life for the greater part of Limón's population, while the American managers spoke English. In due time, this natively-spoken creole developed a separate course in the province--/mckaytelyuw/--which I have called Limonese Creole (from here on, LC). In spite of the threat of being overrun by Spanish, the dominant language of the White Costa Rican majority, this English-based creole, which is similar to other varieties of West Indian English Creoles, is still spoken today by about 30,000 people. They live mostly in the Province of Limón, but are also scattered around the Central Valley, especially in the capital.

2. Participants, setting, and data for the present study

This paper reports on some findings of a larger study of conversations carried out in Port Limón (the capital of the province) on several visits and extended stays during a period that stretches from 1974 to the present. On those occasions, I made recordings of various groups of youth who engaged in active oral exchanges in the hope of teaching me LC<sup>3</sup>. The participants in one of the groups--Iris, Ollie, and Martha--shared similar social, cultural, and educational backgrounds, but different personal ties<sup>4</sup>.

At the time of the recording sessions all three of them were students, quite close in age. Iris (almost 17) and Martha (16) were juniors in high school at Limón's Colegio Diurno (the most prestigious in the educational system of the port), while Ollie (18) had already graduated from there and was engaged in some substitute teaching.

The participants' life histories are not much different either. Both Ollie and Iris came from single-parent households; Ollie was an only child who lived with his mother while Iris had several sisters and brothers, but she also lived with her mother (her father had left for the U.S. many years before). Being somewhat of a loner Ollie was used to keeping very much to himself, while Iris had many friends and had presumably already been dating. Not much was known about Martha. Their personal ties differed; Ollie and Iris had not known each other formally before I introduced them, but after several meetings they struck up a friendship. In fact, by all appearances when this particular recording was made, they seemed interested in getting involved in a romantic relationship.<sup>5</sup> Martha on the other hand was Iris's friend; not having met Ollie before either she acted as something of a buffer between the couple.

Their conversation reflects the kind of humorous, playful talk which is an essential part of adolescent peer culture, particularly at the time when female-male relationships are of considerable significance to youth of both sexes. In Port Limón, where children become independent at an early age and where there is a great lack of intellectual stimulation as well as recreational opportunities, young people have to rely on each other's company for entertainment. Thus in this highly verbal culture in which life is mostly conducted on the street<sup>6</sup>, young men and women's relationships are often casual<sup>7</sup>. It comes as no surprise then, that witty teasing female-male exchanges should be common, every day occurrences. They may be used to impress the interlocutor and thus strengthen incipient friendships; or teasing may be an indirect way of expressing positive affect and through the experience of shared humor and the enjoyment of that humor, likely to increase positive feelings among group members (Eder 1993:21).

The instances of teasing analyzed in this paper appear in a two-hour long excerpt of a larger body of talk recorded in July, 1974. As mentioned above, these young people's casual conversation only aimed at exposing me to LC. It reflects a non-threatening means for building rapport which evolved as verbal play; the teasing mirrored and contributed to the growing relationship between Ollie and Iris.

The non-serious teasing occurs when the two of them are talking, while the few more serious frames take place when Martha intervenes. It is obvious that the couple take over the floor most of the time and leave little room for Martha to contribute to the conversation. As will be seen in the analysis that follows, in order for a teasing activity to remain playful, the target of the teasing needs to respond in the same non-serious manner; it will also be apparent that teasing is a highly collaborative activity, where one person's talk often builds directly on previous talk (Eder 1993:19).

### 3. Theoretical background of teasing frames

As Herbert Clark (1992:XVII) puts it,

Language use is more than people's production and understanding of a set of sentences with particular meanings. It is a class of collective activities in which speaker's meaning plays a necessary role. In these activities, speakers take actions by which they mean things, and their partners coordinate with them in trying to understand what they mean. The two of them try to reach certain goals, some joint and others not. Language use therefore takes place not in a vacuum, but in highly structured arenas of actions.

It is precisely one of these arenas that this paper will attempt to illustrate, since teasing stands out as a clearly different structure from the rest of conversation. Furthermore, besides the linguistic features that characterize this discourse type, it should be apparent that the alliances forged in the teasing relationship are not arbitrary partnerships, but rather they respond to the special bond that links the speakers.

Teasing encompasses a broad range of playful interactions. It can be defined, as Eder (1993:17) states, as

any playful remark aimed at another person, which can include mock challenges, commands, and threats, as well as imitating and exaggerating someone's behavior in a playful way.

If the content of the teasing remarks were to be taken literally, their denotation would often be offensive and insulting, and most generally negative or hostile. The cues the teaser employs, however, determine that the remarks should be taken in a non-serious manner, as a form of humor or play, often providing an outlet for conflict which might otherwise threaten social ties (Radcliffe-Brown 1952:103). What is it then, that allows to turn this peculiar behavior--antagonism disguised as friendliness--into a totally playful mode?

It seems that these cues take the form of metamesages which reveal the attitudes of participants towards one another. They have to do with Tannen's (1986:15-16, and Tannen and Wallat 1993:xx) concept of "interactive frame,"<sup>8</sup> which is defined as "a sense of what activity is being engaged in, how speakers mean what they say." Clearly, it is assumed that conversational meaning is not conveyed merely through the informational content or message of individual words. Strahle (1993:213) states that frames are labels that identify what the speaker and hearer are doing, and the metamesages are linguistic or non-linguistic cues which tell us what labels to choose. Thus in teasing, the metamesages frame the hostile move as play (Tannen 1993a:3).

The way speakers convey metamesages and frames is through what Gumperz (1982:131), in his theory of conversational inference, calls "contextualization cues." These include "prosodic phenomena," "lexical and syntactic options," and "formulaic expressions." Additionally, other features may mark teasing, joking, lecturing, praising, and other culturally



I have come out of college (colegio=high school) already, I have come out (graduated), got (my) bachillerato (bachelor's degree) and all that.

3 Iris: aaaa! ya! so yuw woz de bway dat dem yuwst tu tel miy ebowt / se dat  
4 / wan dye yuw tyek de kurso ev eeee of / moral las yer? ((high pitch and rising intonation))

Oh, so! so you were (are) the boy they used to tell me about, that, one day you took the course on mmmm ethics last year? ((high pitch and rising intonation))

5 Ollie: wa apen / im di staar fiyl nays bika im wan a stodiy priyz / bot a dwon  
6 layk /

What happened (was), it felt o.k. at the beginning, because they wanted me to study (for the) priesthood, but I didn't like (it).

7 Iris: ay down nwo se / yuw kud neva stodiy priys / bika de dye yuw stodiy fa  
8 priys / a tel yuw oliy/ dem gowin čerč in bikini!!! ((laughter))

I don't know that you could not study to become a priest, because (but) the day when you become a priest, I tell you, Ollie, they are going to (go to) church in bikinis!!! ((laughter))

9 Ollie: so / way yuw gowen.../ way... yuw miyn tu tel miy now dat / ay gowin  
10 meyk evriwan kom tu cerc in bikini an bat suwt?

So, why are you going... why... do you mean to tell me now that I am going to have everyone come to church in bikinis and bathing suits?

11 Iris: Ooooliy / bot...bikaz sins yuw gowen biy a padre / kon un padre komo  
12 usté / a se / a wud gow čerč evriy dye!! ((laughter))

Ooooliy, but...because since you are going to be a padre (priest), kon un padre como usted (with a priest like you), I say, I would go to church every day!! ((laughter))

13 Ollie: tu siy miy!? ((rising intonation))

To see me!? ((rising intonation))

14 Iris: bika if yuw stodiy fa padre / oliy / a tel yuw se/ pyur/ onliy pyur gerl  
15 dem wid gow čerč!! ((laughter))

Because if you study to become a padre (priest) Ollie, I tell you that girls, no one but girls will go to church!! ((laughter))

In the first part of the interaction (line 3), Iris teases Ollie as she exaggerates her surprise at finding out that he is, after all, someone she knew something about--someone who has obviously been talked about in her circle of female friends. One definitely has the impression that she knew all along who he is, but she appears to act coyly first, later taking advantage of the situation to tease him about his aborted efforts to become a priest. At the beginning Ollie attempts to answer the question quite seriously (line 5). For a minute, he does not seem to realize that he is in a vulnerable position and that he has become the easy subject of an even greater teasing situation. While Iris's initial comments hint at a potentially serious reply as well (line 7), she gives her remarks a teasing twist at the end when she says laughingly (if you were to become a priest) "women will be going to church in bikinis." Ollie is still not willing to play the game--maybe because he is taken somewhat aback by Iris's quick wit and innuendos--thus (line 9) he hesitatingly asks a question. Iris has been waiting for this opening to supply the next appropriate teasing example (line 11) in which, she implies that his good looks would charm all the women, adding laughter, long vowels and Spanish loans to her words. Ollie has finally caught on and teasing back he ventures (line 13) a self-aggrandizing statement, stressed in high pitch and rising intonation. Iris closes the repartee with a final teasing remark said laughingly (line 14) in which she contrasts Ollie's (unlikely) priesthood with his (likely) presumed parishioners.

Teasing typically has many of the features apparent here: the extreme surprise and exaggerated response, high pitch, long vowels, laughter, Spanish loans for emphasis, and additionally, the target of the teasing finally responding in the same non-serious manner required by a teasing activity. The overall theme of appearance and sexuality is, of course, a very common topic in which adolescents like to engage. This example also shows the transformation of traditional gender roles in so much as the female interlocutor unabashedly compliments the male on his looks thus insinuating her own feelings for him.

The next example shows many of the same frames which introduced teasing activities earlier: Iris acts "hard to get" (lines 2,4) denying Ollie a chance to be invited to dinner at her home for a non-reason (she is emphatic, applying stress to her negative statements, pretending to be an offended little girl), she plays on his jealousy (lines 6,7, the teasing frame is indicated by the long vowels), while he is patronizing (lines 8,10); finally they end up by calling each other names (in Spanish, for emphasis, and in the midst of laughter), while Martha unsuccessfully tries to intercede for Ollie on a couple of instances.

#### Example N°2

- |   |        |   |  |
|---|--------|---|--|
| 1 | Martha | yuw invayt im tu yu aws fa dina?                                | Did you invite him (Ollie) to your house for dinner?                     |
| 2 | Iris   | a not invayt im bay may 2ows fa no no no dina! ((emphatically)) | I did not invite him to my house for (any, any) dinner! ((emphatically)) |
| 3 | Ollie  | yuw not gowen invayt miy fa dina?                               |  |

You are not going to invite me for dinner?

- 4 Iris no / ay not *invaytɪn yu neva* / ((emphatically, pretending to be upset, almost like a little girl))  
 No, I won't invite you ever ((emphatically, pretending to be upset, almost like a little girl))
- 5 Ollie way?  
 Why?
- 6 Iris ka yuw kom an wyek miy op owta mi bed/ ay waz *driyyimin* wid  
 7 sambodiy/  
 Because you came and woke me up (out of my bed), (as) I was *dreaaming* of somebody.
- 8 Ollie aal rayt/ dat wazn awez tu sliyp/...de dye iz not tu sliyp! /  
 All right! That wasn't time to sleep!...The day is not to sleep!
- 9 Iris ay no! supwoz ay werk in de nait an sliyp in de dye...  
Oh, no! Suppose I work at night and sleep during the day...
- 10 Ollie sliyp in de nait...  
 Sleep at night...
- 11 Iris supwoz a duwit bakandid? ay wek in de nait an sliyp in de dye...  
 Suppose I do it backward? I work at night and sleep during the day...
- 12 Ollie dat miyn yuw duw *everitin bakandid?*  
 That means you do everything backward?
- 13 Iris onliy som tin dem/  
 Only some things.
- 14 Ollie yuw iz a vampiro!...((laughing))  
 You are a vampiro! (vampire) ((laughing))

- 15 Martha      yes! ((laughter))  
                   Yes! ((laughter))
- 16 Ollie        kaz yuw duw everitin al revés!  
                   Because you do everything al revés! (backward)
- 17 Iris         an ay nwo sombody els iz a pulpo ((smiling))  
                   And I know somebody else who is a pulpo (an octopus)
- 18 Ollie        way?  
                   Why?
- 19 Martha     way unu kaal im pulpo?  
                   Why do you call him a pulpo (an octopus)
- 20 Iris         ka im ?av tuw moch ?an... layk tu toch plenty!!!  
                   Because he has too many hands...he likes to touch a lot!!!
- 21 Martha     oh ekskywz!  
                   Oh, excuse (me)!

The rest of the conversation is filled with many more examples, but the principles illustrated are very similar to those discussed above.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

#### 1. The non-arbitrary relationship of teasers

By couching controversial ideas in the form of teasing, speakers can have it both ways. Lakoff (1990:270) reminds us that teasing is really a violation of Grice's *Maxim of Quality* since the surface communication is not true, as the teasers disclaim not only the content but also their intentions. The frames they use amount to saying "I meant no harm, you were not supposed to take it/me seriously" "Can't you take a joke?"--which would be a totally unacceptable form of behavior in society.

Teasing is always the result of a partnership. It is forged by shared sentiments of solidarity and camaraderie between the speaker and his/her interlocutor, as they both recognize the deeper truth contained in the speaker's real feelings. Not only must the two share these

deeper attitudes but the fact that the teasing is understood and celebrated also proves their having cultural affinities in common as well.

## 2. Teasing as Limonese speakers' socialization through language

The early socialization of children in Limón, as in other West Indian creole cultures, teaches them to survive in a discriminating milieu.<sup>11</sup> Since Afro-limonese are forced to communicate in Spanish in a White man's dominated world, through their own language they have devised ways of keeping their identity and of overcoming their frustrations. LC has channeled their subjective feelings of ethnic group identification into a powerful determinant of behavior. So far its presence has embodied Afro-costarican values signaling community membership and solidarity across class lines.

LC has come to represent an alternative reality, through a communication style based on teasing, ambiguity, irony, and satire. Whether or not this has demanded a conscious effort on the part of its speakers is not clear, and whether or not LC will actually survive the pressures of modernization imposed by the dominant language still remains to be seen. For the time being though, LC has turned into a meaningful intracommunication system among Black speakers while being harmless and meaningless to Whites. Only time will tell whether the in-group solidarity achieved through LC can further be used to compete and achieve political power, and to act as a symbol of resistance, representing the experiences, norms and values of the Afro-limonese cultural community.

## NOTES

1. Africans had already arrived in Costa Rica during the slave trade in the XVI century, but they gradually disappeared by intermarriage and nothing is known about their language.
2. The main socioeconomic factors (Herzfeld 1993:15) which changed the ethnic profile of the region are: 1) the construction of the first two highways between Port Limón and San José in 1975 and 1988 respectively, after a century of railroad monopoly; 2) the influx of Nicaraguan (and some Salvadoran) refugees during the 1980s wars; 3) the neoliberal policies adopted by the Costa Rican government to comply with the mandates of the International Monetary Fund--which translated into a desperate demand for work by the lower socioeconomic class who then flocked into Limón looking for jobs; and 4) the migration of the Afro-limonese in the opposite direction, i.e. away from Limón, in search of more challenging opportunities.
3. Their hope as well as mine was to make every effort possible to preserve their language against the odds of sweeping advances made by Spanish. In our tacit agreement, my collaboration was to consist of learning the language and writing about it.
4. Although I was actually present--mostly in charge of tape-recording--since we had often met informally to chat previously, the group seemed comfortable in my presence. They felt carefree and enthusiastic about their repartee, and once assured that no one would listen to the recording

but me, they talked naturally while the taperecorder was on. The names of the participants in the recordings have been changed.

5. On a personal note (and I must say, much to my delight), "Ollie" and "Iris" are now married and they are the happy parents of two children. I am very grateful to both of them for their generous help at that time and their friendship over the years.

6. Since houses are usually small, crowded, and they lack privacy, most entertainment takes place on the streets: men play dominoes there, children play with their neighbors, adolescent gangs play football, and young men and women walk up and down, while older men and women exchange the town's gossip on their porches.

7. On the other hand, sexual activity which is often also casual is regarded as natural; maternity is a desirable state--it would be unnatural not to have children. A woman who has not had a child is the object of pity, contempt, or derision and is unlikely to find a man to be responsible for her.

8. The notion of frame has occurred in the work of Bateson (1955 and 1972) and Frake (1977) in anthropology; Hymes (1974) and Goffman (1974) in sociology; Minsky (1974) in artificial intelligence; and Fillmore (1975) in linguistics. For a detailed discussion on how the concept has evolved, see Tannen 1993:18.

9. It is likely that from a strictly psychotherapeutic point of view these expressions might have a deeper meaning quite different from the surface expression.

10. Since LC is not a written language I have used a broad phonemic transcription to illustrate samples of speech. Immediately below the LC version, I have supplied a somewhat free English translation.

The following notations are used in the transcriptions:

(( ))	non-verbal behavior
/	pause during utterance
<u>      </u>	Spanish words
<b>bold face</b>	louder tone of voice

11. Most Afro-limonese children do not grow up listening to parents read bedtime stories in which "the prince married the princess and they lived happily ever after;" instead their grandparents tell them the tales of Brada Nancy (Brother Anancy), the trickster, who is always trying to outsmart his friends and ends up by being punished. In other words, they are mostly exposed to didactic fables designed to build character on the basis of ethical principles. Additionally, children are taught to be "tough"--not to cry but to laugh off minor inconveniences. Sympathy is not an easily available commodity.

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