

NO POWERLESS WOMEN THESE: GENDER IN LIMONESE CREOLE

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INTRODUCTION

In addition to social class, ethnicity, age, education, occupation, income, and place of residence, gender plays a significant role as a variable in the complex web of social meanings expressed by individuals when they speak. It has only been in recent years that research on women's and men's language has expanded dramatically. However, because feminist scholarship has concentrated almost exclusively on middle-class white women speakers of English, we know relatively little about the language behavior of other women. This is certainly true about English-based creole-speaking females of the Americas.¹

Since women in creole-speaking communities have historically been responsible for the language development of children, a study of how their social class interacts with gender to produce a certain speech behavior is central to understanding how those communities view and express reality. This paper examines some interactional characteristics of women's and men's speaking styles in Limonese Creole, an English-based creole speech community of Costa Rica, Central America.² The purpose of this study is to show that in this society women's speech does not convey powerlessness. Overall the choice of a particular style of speaking among Limonese creole speakers is used to promote and maintain a shared identity, reinforcing culturally-valued attitudes, beliefs, and mores, regardless of how marginal a place Afro-Costaricans continue to occupy in the economic and political life of their country today

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

Limonese Creole is an English-based creole spoken by an Afro-Costarican community of 40,000 who live mainly on the eastern lowlands of Costa Rica, in the Province of Limon.³ The government's efforts to make education available to people even in the most remote corners of the province have been successful, these efforts, however, are to be understood as assimilatory, i.e. to teach Spanish to creole speakers to "acculturate" them.⁴ In spite of this fact and the high rate of mixed marriages which are taking place in Limon at present, there is still some sense of ethnic identity which distinguishes the Afro-Costarican group from the dominant Costa Rican white, Catholic, and Spanish-speaking cultural majority--it is particularly apparent among those who have maintained their Limonese Creole speech.

Nowadays, the local political system is only minimally influenced by Black representatives; the token Black elite is far removed from the center of power (Purcell, 1993: 161). In spiritual matters, although the role of religion is still altogether important, particularly for women and children, more and more church-goers have now either joined the traditionally white, Spanish-speaking Catholic Church, or the newly-established Pentecostals (where preaching is mostly conducted in Spanish) which offer them greater practical support. Thus the rescuing of the traditional creole cultural traits from an overwhelmingly non-pluralistic endeavor is left up to those who use their mother tongue.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The perspective in language and gender research I wish to follow is that of Brown (1979, 1980, 1993), Ochs (1992), and Tannen (1988, 1989, 1994). Their view of language and gender attempts to relate the existence of code-differences between the sexes to socio-structural factors about the societies in which such languages are operative

A number of research questions may be asked to show the ways in which women choose to express themselves to reveal truths about their social relationships and their social status in society (Brown, 1980:133). One such query could be directed to finding out whether or not gender is actually as relevant as the other variables which determine social constraints on Limonese Creole speech, i.e. what kind of status does gender have in Limon's social situations? How do speakers reflect their own gender perspective in social relations? And more particularly, in the study reported here, does the 'superiority' and competitiveness of white, anglo-saxon males apply to a creole culture? Are creole-speaking females as cooperative and likely to avoid conflict and confrontation as white, anglo-saxon females are supposed to be? (Tannen, 1994: 40) Do creole women effectively have an inferior position in society and is their speech therefore deemed powerless in comparison to men's? This paper will attempt to tackle these issues, comparing gender influences on language, as apparent in casual interactive conversations recorded in Limón, Costa Rica during frequent field trips (1973-present).

CASUAL CONVERSATIONAL STYLE OF MALES AND FEMALES IN LIMONESE CREOLE

In an effort to establish the value of women's speech in the Afro-Costarican community, first cultural ideas about their power must be uncovered. Power can be conceptualized in terms such as persuasion, physical force, or inherent quality of control of material resources. Each conception of power structures relations between individuals in different ways, and each can incorporate notions of speech and gender differently (Borker, 1980:40). Tannen (1994:199) remarks that power is not to be considered inherent in an individual, but "conceptualized by members of cultures who tend to regard it as a social phenomenon."

In Limon, women's speech has never been totally powerless, but lately it has gained more power for various reasons: a) as educational and occupational opportunities expand, women are more and more in control of their own finances rather than being dependent on their men, b) in interaction with other adults, women's speech is characterized by wit and smartness, a show of unadulterated strength; c) through gossip, women exercise control of society.

In the past and until quite recently, Limonese women's social experience was limited to rearing children (usually of alternate generations) and they were frequently confined to doing housework. As my sociolinguistic study of Limonese Creole shows (Herzfeld, 1978: 344, 358, 374), twenty years ago women's subordinate position in society correlated with their speech. For one thing, they used fewer acrolectal Standard English (SE) features than men. The study shows that the percentages in the use of a past tense marker (symbolized by {-ed} in Table No. 1) were significantly lower than men's, the most likely reason being that they had fewer opportunities to be exposed to formal education than their male counterparts. (Herzfeld 1978:352)

TABLE No.1

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	Frequency Percentage		
	in the use of {-ed}		
%	B	M	A
F	29	50	39
M	71	50	61

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F Female, M Male
B Basilect, M Mesolect, A Acrolect

Today this is no longer true, except for those who are older (born prior to the 1920s) or those who live in somewhat isolated rural communities, women interact with all sectors of the population through their work, be it as clerks, secretaries, civil servants, or as employees in educational institutions, industry, banking.³ Consequently, this empowerment has given more women relative financial independence; they are somewhat more in control of their life; they can afford to sound assertive in LC and are not totally in a position of vulnerability or inferiority in the Limonese society of today.

Linguistic realization of communicative competence (term coined by Hymes 1972) is usually studied by analyzing male and female strategies in turn-taking, conversational dominance, and characteristics of their conversational style as expressed by verbosity, minimal responses, hedges, tag questions, questions, commands and directives, swearing and taboo language, and compliments. Although both sexes have access to these resources, the usage men and women make of certain aspects has been said to differ systematically, both in terms of which strategies they choose and how much effort they put into politeness, i.e. face-oriented behavior, whether positive or negative. Brown (1980:111) argues that negative politeness--where the speaker apologizes for intruding, uses structures such as passives, tag questions, and hedges assertions--is found where people are in an inferior position in society. Most studies conducted in the U.S. of women's language characterize it by the use of certain features that are supposed to show their insecurity, hesitancy, and powerlessness. Of those features, the use Limonese Creole speakers make of hedges, such as "you know," "I think," "well," "maybe," "/mekasiy/" (i.e. "make I see," SE "let me see"), "/diav/" ("de ahi"), "you see", of formal and informal tag questions such as "don't it?," "you understand?" "all right?" "entiende?" "no?", and direct quotations will be analyzed in this paper. The claim made here is that Limonese Creole speakers do not use polite forms, empty adjectives, intensifiers, or special vocabulary; and while hedges, tag-questions, and direct quotations are quite common, there seems to be no great difference in the comparative usage made of them by males and females.

An example of the usage of hedges (in bold) follows (excerpted from Tape 8/5, conversation held between two speakers (A, female and L, male) both approximately forty-five years old-

A--/wat about skwɪl dyɛ?/

A--What about school days?

L--/yʊw nwo/ taakin bowt dat/ iz somtɪn fonɪy/ yʊw nwo/

L--You know, talking about that, (it) is something funny, you know,

miy did av a tɪtʃa in fers gryed/ an yʊw nwo/ yʊw nwo/
I had a teacher in first grade, and you know, you know,

miy kyaan neva faɣet ar. /
I can't (ever) forget her ..

TABLE No. 2

COMPARATIVE USAGE OF HEDGES IN LIMONESE CREOLE (out of 100 speech acts, 1000 words)			
Males	Number of hedges	Females	Number of hedges
# 1 (LW)	19	# 1 (IR)	10
# 2 (OH)	10	# 2 (HW)	11
# 3 (FJ)	5	# 3 (SS)	8
# 4 (PS)	17	# 4 (CZ)	7
# 5 (FH)	11	# 5 (MO)	5
Total	62		41

This table shows that in an average number of 100 speech acts, i.e. samples of approximately 1000 words, the difference in the amount of hedges used by both men and women Limonese Creole speakers is tipped in favor of men. Thus while women's speech is ordinarily described as "tentative" in the literature--and this assertion is linked to the claim that women use more hedges to express insecurity and doubt about the proposition under discussion--in Limonese Creole either hedges have a different function or their presence cannot be necessarily associated with women's but men's weakness. Further analysis should show whether there is a variance in the use of hedges in single sex-discourse or in mixed discourse, and whether there are different functions in the use of hedges (for example, "you know" meaning certainty vis-à-vis "you know" with a different stress pattern and intonation meaning uncertainty), and whether a variety of other variables, such as the age of the respondents, the place of rearing, education should also be considered.

A conversation between I (female, 17 years old) and O (male, the same age), excerpted from Tape 6B/15 reveals the use of question-tags (in bold).

I--/ay dwon sliyp on mondiy bika ay ?a tu kliyn/
I--I don't sleep on Monday because I have to clean.

O--/yu se yu sliyp wen yu av libre/
O--You say you sleep when you have libre (when you are free)

I--/bot mondey iyvnin/ ay down sliyp bikaz ay a tu kliyn/ nobody now bay miy ous
tu kliyn/

I--But Monday evening, I don't sleep because I have to clean; nobody is now
(then) in my house to clean.

O--/bot you dwon kliyn de wol dye/
O--But you don't clean the whole day..

I--/a no/ kom owt lesin dis marnin/ downt it?/ an dis iyvnin a av tu kliyn afta
dina .. /

I--Ah, no' (I have) come (out) for a lesson this morning, haven't I? And this
evening, I have to clean after dinner

Another example follows, excerpted from Tape K186, conversation held between P (male, 30 years old) and O (also male, twenty years old). It shows the use of another frequently used question tag (in bold)

P--/now/ yuw af tuw kolon/ yuw af ten kolon/ yuw dwon/
P--Now, you have two colones (local currency), you have ten colones, you don't,

/yuw kyaan gow nowe an bay notin/ yuw andestan?
you can't go (any) nowhere and bay (any) nothing, you understand?

/an diay/ wel/ ay grwo op dat kayna layf/
and de ahí, well, I [grew] grow up (leading) that kind of life .

The same assertion stated for hedges can be made about tag-questions. Those analyzed here are of the type of LC /dwont it?/, which stands for SLE "isn't it?" or the Spanish equivalent, entiende? or no? for LC "you understand?" The figures obtained (Table No. 3 below) show the same kind of difference between male and female usage as for hedges. This is again proof that the greater use of tag-questions usually attributed to white women speakers (i.e. the desire to decrease the strength of an assertion) is not the case among LC female speakers

TABLE No. 3

COMPARATIVE USAGE OF TAGS IN LIMONESE CREOLE (out of 100 speech acts; 1000 words)			
Males	Number of tags	Females	Number of tags
# 1 (LW)	1	# 1 (IR)	3
# 2 (OH)	4	# 2 (MW)	0
# 3 (FJ)	9	# 3 (SS)	1
# 4 (PS)	4	# 4 (CZ)	0
# 5 (FH)	6	# 5 (MO)	6
Total	24		10

As to direct quotations, the next usage illustrated here (in bold), both men and women use the strategy indistinctly. An example follows.

Excerpted from Tape 8/6 L (male, forty five years old)

L--/di tiycha alvez tel pon yuw.. "mis jwonz/ yuw nwo
L--The teacher always accused you..."Ms. Jones, do you know

wapin tu yuw son? im no gow skuwl tudye"/
what happened to your son? He no (did not) go (to) school today."

/dat taym yuw no nwo notin an yuw gow wom an
At that point you no (don't) know nothing (anything) and you go home and

/"yuw gow skuwl tudye?"/"yes man"/"an wat taym yuw kom owt?"
"(Did) you go (to) school today?" "Yes, ma'm" "And (at) what time
(did) you come out?"

"diay/ wen skuwl wova" "yuw dyam laya/ kom hiyr/"
"De ahí, when school (was) over" "You damn liar, come here!"

Finally, as to the professed politeness and powerlessness in women's language, again the Limonese situation seems to be at odds with the general claim. Far from being polite⁶, people are quite straightforward; they often confront each other with disagreements which might turn into unpleasant exchanges. Both sexes are associated with a direct style of speaking which sometimes reflects the direct expression of anger. Conflicts are brought into the open, and more often than not, they are translated into verbal feuds. An example of civilized confrontation between two men follows:

A conversation between two male friends (excerpted from Tape 6A2).

O--/wapen/ frank?/
O--What is happening (What is going on), Frank?

F--/wel/ rayt dye/
F--Well, right there!

O--/teykin it izyiy?/
O--Taking it easy?

F--/teykin it izyiy!/
F--Taking it easy!

O--/wat nyuw?/
O--What (is) new?

F--/noθin nyw/ wyt!/ a want yuw tel miy way mista salas ran
 F--Nothing new. Wait, I want you (to) tell me why Mr. Salas ran

yuw from yuw wok/
 you from your work.

O--aaaah/salas? ya/ wapen/ az yuw nwo a wez at xapdeva
 O--Ah, Salas? Ya, what happened, as you know I was at JAPDEVA

wekin at rompeolas projek/ rayt? an ay woz klasifayin
 working at rompeolas project, right? and I was clasifying

stwon dem/ wish woz big stwon an smaal stwon/ rayt?
 the stones, which (one) was (a) big stone and (which) (a) small stone,
 right?

...im yuwst kom an molesin/ siy wot ay duwin/...
 ...he used to come and bother me, see what I (was) doing.

im neva layk miy moch/...wan dye im kom tu miy an aks miy
 he didn't like me much. one day he came to me and asked me

fa de lis ev trak wot a av wi de stwon dem/ an triy
 for the tracking list that I had for the stones, and three

ev dem wozn on may pyepa/ in may buk/ en im aks miy
 of them weren't on my paper, in my book, and he asked me

wapen/ an ay iksplyen tu im...im se/ "aal rayt
 what happened, and I explained to him .he said, "all right

giy miy de buk and maak"/. .
 give me the book and mark .."

F--sertin fren dat yu ?av se dat yuw woz sliypin .
 F--Certain friend that you have said that you were sleeping

O--fowlsh/ bika/ ?uw gowen sliyp in de san/ on de stwon dem?
 O--Foolish, because who is going to sleep in the sun, on the
 stones?

F--ay gowin kontradik yuw/ bikaz yuw not taakin not'n sensibel
 F--I am going to contradict you because you are not talking
 (nothing, anything) sensibly

miy no layk dat/ yuw beks ar...
 I don't like that, you (are) vexed (upset) or.

CONCLUSION

It should be clear that the most fruitful approach to gender and language is not the result of linking behavior to an individual of one sex or another, but rather it is determined by how individuals position themselves culturally in a situation that will dictate the role of males and females, once the pattern within which they fall is apparent. From this preliminary analysis, it would seem that the ethos of Limonese Creole women, tied to their cultural and social structure, indicates that their linguistic behavioral strategies assume characteristics of strength and power in reference to men, and are therefore entirely different from those assumed by their counterparts in a white, anglo-saxon milieu. Further research should show whether the analysis of other linguistic forms confirms the tentative observations made here on the basis of the use of hedges, tag-questions, and direct quotations in LC.

NOTES

- 1 Except for some articles published by Geneviève Escure on Belizean Creole gender roles (see the References), which the author graciously made available to me, I have not found other relevant studies of gender in the English-based creole-speaking communities of Central America.
- 2 As in other matters linguistic, speakers themselves are seldom aware of their sex-class linkage (Tannen 1994:215). It follows that the analysis presented in this study is the result of observations not provided by the speakers' self-report of their speech behavior.
3. The entire Province of Limon has 226 264 inhabitants, according to the figures of the latest census (Dirección General de Estadística y Censos, 1984).
- 4 The latest census indicates that out of seven provinces, Limon holds the fourth highest rate of literacy in the country, after the central provinces of Heredia, San José, and Cartago (Dirección General de Estadística y Censos, 1984).
- 5 The prestigious position of head of JAPDEVA (Junta de Administración Portuaria de la Vertiente Atlántica) was held by an Afro-Cost Rican woman, Ms Marcelle Taylor, during the 1990s until the last national elections in 1994.
6. According to Brown (1980.114) politeness is "a special way of treating people, saying and doing things in such a way as to take into account the other person's feelings "

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