

## PSEUDO-AFRICANISMS IN COSTA CHICA MEXICAN SPANISH

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One of the principal areas of research in Latin American dialectology within the past thirty years has been the Spanish spoken by the continent's African-derived population. Because the scourge of slavery was for so long so heavily concentrated in the circum-Caribbean, linguistic traits associated with that region have frequently also been associated with the speech of Africans and their descendants. The phonological characteristics of Caribbean Spanish varieties, which have been said to comprise the elements of a "radical" pronunciation (Guitart 1978), include such traits as the aspiration and/or deletion of word- and syllable-final /s/, velarization of word-final /n/, neutralization of the phonemic distinction between the liquids /l/ and /r/, and the realization of /d/ as [r] has also been cited as a particularly Afro-Hispanic trait.

In addition to the strictly phonological features, Caribbean Spanish shows certain syntactic and morphological idiosyncrasies. Among these are

(1) Non-inverted interrogative sentences (e.g. *¿Que tu quieres?* in lieu of standard *¿Que quieres tu?* 'What do you want?'),

(2) Obligatory use of subject pronouns that in standard Spanish are optional and typically suppressed,

(3) "Personal" infinitives, reminiscent of the Portuguese, in such constructions as *para tu hacer eso* in contrast to standard *para que hagas eso* '[in order] for you to do that',

(4) Lack of gender and number agreements required in standard Spanish,

(5) Loss of the common prepositions *a* 'to, at' and *de* 'of, from',

(6) Occasional copula deletion, and

(7) Use of the second person pronoun *vos*, particularly in areas where the standard pronoun of informal address is *tu* 'you' (Lipski 1993, Althoff 1998)

Although these features are often found individually in regional lects of both Old and New World Spanish, their confluence in the circum-Caribbean, coupled with the visible presence of African descendants, have led many researchers naturally into investigating the possible African origins of these traits.

Dialectological studies carried out in such countries as Puerto Rico (Alvarez Nazario 1974, Mauleon Benitez 1974), the Dominican Republic (Gonzalez & Benavides 1982, Meggeney 1982, 1990a), Cuba (Otheguy 1973, Perl 1984, 1985, 1988, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, Ortiz Lopez 1996), Colombia (Granda 1977, 1978, Del Castillo Mathieu 1982), Venezuela (Meggeney 1985, 1990b, 1990c, Alvarez 1991, 1992), and Panama (Lipski 1990) have suggested that these varieties share an Africanized

Portuguese pidgin substrate. Indeed, when present-day reflexes of Caribbean Spanish are compared with depictions of African speech in Portuguese and Spanish literary texts of the 16th and 17th centuries, there are some important similarities. For example, in word-final contexts, /s/ often disappears from Africanized Portuguese and Spanish, the liquids /l/ and /r/ are frequently interchanged, often to the point of neutralization (Teyssier 1959, Lipski 1986a, 1986b, 1995). Additionally, Caribbean varieties of Spanish often show, as do those same historical texts, considerable vowel instability and such prosodic phenomena as aphaeresis, prothesis, and apocope. Intriguingly for those researching the issue of African speech in Ibero-America, the Portuguese-lexified creoles of west Africa also exhibit many of these same traits (cf Ferraz 1979, Silva 1984[1957]), as do the Iberian-lexified creoles of Curaçao (Wijk 1958, Goilo 1972, Kouwenberg & Muysken 1995) and San Basilio de Palenque in Colombia (Megenney 1986, Patiño Roselli 1989, Schwegler 1996).

The many phonological, prosodic, morphological, and syntactic correspondences between African Portuguese creoles, the two surviving Ibero-American creoles, and circum-Caribbean Spanish were the motivation for a research program proposed by the influential Spanish linguist Germán de Granda (1978). Granda has hypothesized that Africans brought with them to the Americas a rudimentary knowledge of Portuguese, if not in fact a stable Portuguese pidgin. This variety would have served as a substrate or platform for the acquisition of local vernacular Spanish in the circum-Caribbean, perhaps via the development of local creoles. This Afro-Portuguese substrate would largely account for the many observed similarities between African Portuguese creoles, Ibero-American creoles, and circum-Caribbean Spanish. The best evidence of an African "sub-substrate," he notes, would be found in the lexicon.

Indeed, the presence of African lexical items in American Spanish has been a subject of inquiry for many years. African contributions to the vocabulary of Spanish (and Portuguese) have been plentiful and generally non-controversial. William Megenney (1983: 1-10) has identified the sub-Saharan African etymologies of 37 words commonly found in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking America. Although some few of his etymologies may be questionable, there is no doubt that Africa has enriched American Spanish. Such words as *banana* 'id', *bongo* 'bongo drum', *cachimbo* 'smoking pipe', *chachacha* 'the chachacha dance', *chango* 'monkey', *chechere* 'any object', *malanga* 'certain type of yam', *mandinga* 'curse, witchcraft, the Devil', *marimba* 'large xylophone with resonators', *merengue* 'meringue, made with egg-white, sugar, etc., a fast-moving dance, popular in the Caribbean', *ñame* 'a variety of yam, a tuber root', and *vodu* 'black magic, voodoo' reflect African cultural practices, food items, and musical instruments widely recognized in all, or various parts, of Latin America.

It is not difficult for anyone--specialist or layperson--to recognize the African-derived populations of the Caribbean. What is less apparent is the African element of Mexico's population. As it was the largest and most important of Spain's New World colonies, hundreds of thousands of Africans were sent to Mexico as slaves over the course of nearly three centuries. What became of them? Where did they go? Did their speech have an impact on the Spanish of Mexico? Did they bring any distinctive vocabulary with them? Is there any evidence of their having learned an Africanized Portuguese? Why is Mexico never mentioned when Afro-Hispanic language issues are discussed?

Of course, the African slaves did not exactly go anywhere. Upon their arrival in the port city of Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico, Africans were sent throughout the country to work on the *ingenios* or sugar plantations (Naveda Chavez-Hita 1987), in the mines (Meyer & Sherman 1995), and in the textile

mills known as *obrajes* (Salvucci 1987) Africans were assigned to perform any and all work assignments, partially on the belief that the indigenous peoples were by nature *flaco y débil*, 'thin and weak', and generally unsuited for the excruciating work that the mines, plantations, and textile mills entailed (Aguirre Beltrán 1972) As innocuous as they may sound to modern ears, Mexican textile mills were considered notorious hellholes due to their noxious fumes, lack of ventilation, and sadistic--and often murderous--overseers The Africans dispersed throughout the subcontinent were assimilated fairly quickly into the vast indigenous and *mestizo* population

Not all Africans, however, accepted their slavery with equanimity More frequently than the colonial authorities would have preferred, Africans would flee their captivity Some of these runaway slaves, or *cimarrones*, would form free communities called *palenques* The most famous of the Mexican *palenques* was founded by a Congolese man called Yanga in the early 1600s, located near Orizaba in modern Veracruz state Unable to exterminate the *palenque* in battle, the colonial authorities granted the community amnesty and autonomous status, provided that the residents would not shelter any more escaped Africans This *palenque* simply disappeared as the residents assimilated into the greater society (Carroll 1991)

Official colonial records in Mexico make no special mention of African speech there is no indication, for example, that interpreters were ever needed to communicate with Africans, or that they spoke in a distinctive way that was hard to understand (Zimmermann 1995)

Despite the general assimilation of Africans into Mexican society, there are to this day a few isolated districts along the south Pacific coast whose residents are clearly of African origin One such district is the town and *municipio* 'county' of Cuajinicuilapa in Guerrero state, not far from an area where a *palenque* of runaway Africans was reported in the early 17th century Cuajinicuilapa, or Cuaji as the residents call it, was brought to the attention of the world in 1958 when the father of Afro-Mexican studies, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, published a small volume concerning this community In 13 pages of text, the anthropologist Aguirre Beltrán did a remarkably thorough job in exploring the subtleties of the local speech, and in noting some interesting divergences from other varieties of Mexican Spanish Foremost among these are many features congruent with Afro-Caribbean Spanish varieties, including aspiration and loss of syllable- and word final /s/, frequent loss of word-final /r/ in words with tonic stress on the last syllable, and some limited variability in the liquids /r/ and /l/, although this falls short of complete neutralization Also included in his description of the local language were some lexical items peculiar to the area Such words as *chague*, *cuaulote*, *guamil*, and *jicara* were identified correctly by Aguirre Beltrán as being of indigenous--Nahuatl--origin Still other very tantalizing forms were left unidentified, giving rise to the speculation that they must be of African origin

That the Costa Chica lexicon is sprinkled with numerous Africanisms is a common misconception After the publication of Aguirre Beltrán's work lifted the town out of complete obscurity, a certain reputation for Africanness began to build around the village and the area in general A 1976 book published by an American scholar further compounded the mystique with his assertion that the language of Cuajinicuilapa is "heavily laced with words better understood in Ghana or Nigeria than anywhere west of the Atlantic" (Rout 1976 281) Even state culture workers who had been living for months in the *municipio* while collecting folk tales, believed that "el componente africano es notorio" 'the African component is famous', with regard to the lexicon (Aparicio Prudente et al 1993 24)

There is no doubt that the local lexicon has provoked much speculation on its origins. Consider the following forms: *choco* 'dirty', *chuquia* 'disagreeable stale odor', and *tlinque* 'tense, drawn tight'. These three items appear in Aguirre Beltrán's work, and are also cited specifically by the state culture workers as examples of the "African component" in the local speech (Aparicio Prudente et al 1993: 24).

Other forms cited by Aguirre Beltrán are *cuyuche* 'tightly curled hair', *chambale* 'dragonfly', *chando* 'disheveled, untidy', *chimeco* 'dirty-faced child', *churundo* 'naked', *chumbio* 'a bird that lives along riverbanks', and *chundo* 'mutilated, having a stub'. What all of them have in common is the alveopalatal affricate. Most of them also have a nasal, followed either by a vowel or by a stop homorganic with the preceding nasal. These features, and the limited distribution of this vocabulary, are evidently enough for *outsiders* to consider these words to be of African origin.

The residents of the Costa Chica, however, make no such claims themselves. Local awareness of an African past is vague at best (Althoff 1998), there is no specialized language, rituals, or celebrations recalling the community's African heritage, as is the case of Panama's *negros congos* (Lipski 1990) or the inhabitants of San Basilio de Palenque in Colombia (Schwegler 1996).

Virtually all of the research on the speech of the Costa Chica has been produced by anthropologists (Aguirre Beltrán 1958, Neff 1988), with some participation by folklorists (Aparicio Prudente et al 1993), and even one ethnomusicologist (Pérez Fernández 1990). The sole linguist, apart from myself, who has written on the speech of the area, has focused his work on discourse and the social functions of the regional ballads known as *corridos*, leaving assumptions of underlying Africanness untouched and therefore intact (Gutiérrez Avila 1988). No recent investigator, regardless of discipline, has until now made the most basic research gesture of consulting dictionaries of regional Spanish. The following regional words described by Aguirre Beltrán as being of African, indigenous, or undetermined origin have been more closely identified as follows from the *Diccionario general de americanismos* (Santamania 1942, henceforth *DGA*) and the *Diccionario de la lengua española* (Real Academia Española 1984, henceforth *DRAE*):

*choco* 'dirty', Nahuatl *xocotl* 'bitter' (*DGA* 1: 527),

*cuya* 'small lizard', Nahuatl *cuxa* 'id.' (*DGA* 1: 432),

*cuje* in Costa Chica, variant of *cuya* above (*DGA* 1: 432),

*cuyuche* (also variant *cuyuchi*) in the Costa Chica, refers to 'wiry, tightly curled hair', in Chiapas and southern Tabasco, 'gray', Zoque *culluchi* 'gray' (*DGA* 1: 448),

*tlinque* (also variant *tlinqui*) 'tense, drawn tight', Nahuatl *tlinqui* 'id.' (*DGA* 3: 171)

There are, in fact, numerous items whose etymology is still doubtful, they appear in dictionaries of regional Spanish, but no origins are offered. In light of the numerous attested indigenous etyma (see Althoff 1998: 233-8), however, I believe the working assumption of an American source is justified for the following words:

*chambale* 'dragonfly' (*DGA* 1 459),

*chando* 'disheveled, untidy', (but cf *chanda* 'mange', *chandos* 'mangy', Quechua origin [*DRAE* 424]),

*chimeco* 'dirty-faced child' (*DGA* 1 519),

*chirundo* 'naked' (*DGA* 1 519),

*chumbio* 'bird that lives on riverbanks' (*DGA* 1 546),

*chundo* 'mutilated, missing a body part, having a stub' (*DGA* 1 548),

*chuquia* 'stale, disagreeable odor', (cf *chuqui* 'a bromeliad plant [*karatas plumieri*]' of Chiapas state, Zoque origin [*DGA* 1 550]),

*cuculuste* 'wiry, tightly curled hair', synonym of *cuyuche* above (*DGA* 1 424),

*guanco* 'mountain man, hillbilly', identified as indigenous, but original language not given (*DGA* 2 54),

*nejo* 'dirty, unwashed', (but cf *neja* 'tortilla made of boiled corn' and *nejayote* 'yellowish water remaining after corn has been boiled with lime', Nahuatl *nexthi* 'ash' and *ayotl* 'broth' [*DGA* 2 328, *DRAE* 950]),

*neque* 'hare-lipped' (*DGA* 2 329),

*tecomte* 'bowl made of a dried fruit' (*DGA* 3 148)

Among Aguirre Beltrán's brief lexicon (1958 202-3), there is an item that neither appears in a regional dictionary, nor does he suggest an etymon

*chilolo* 'tadpole', still widely used, I assume an indigenous origin

There is, in fact, only one word of clear African origin in the regional lexicon *congo*. This item refers to a wild, native coffee bean, and not, as one might suppose, to either Africa or to an African, as is usually the case with this particular form in the circum-Caribbean.

The lexical items presented here have previously been regarded as African because there appeared to be no better explanation—their sound, their strictly regional use, and the fact that they are used by Afro-Mexicans—one might even say their aesthetics—all strongly suggested such an origin, particularly to the non-specialist. Considering that only one true Africanism (i.e. *congo* above) has persisted in the regional speech, and in light of the widespread local adoption of indigenous terms, it appears that the original African settlers in the region—and actually, throughout Mexico—moved rapidly to intermarry

with the indigenous population. Further, the utter lack of any syntactic devices, morphological simplifications, or vestiges of a tense-mood-aspect system calls into question Granda's widely accepted hypothesis that Africans brought an Africanized Portuguese pidgin to the shores of the Caribbean (Althoff 1998: 246). My research indicates that the Caribbean was almost certainly the point of entry for the ancestors of today's Afro-Mexicans, even of those living today on the Pacific. Moreover, the Costa Chica--virtually inaccessible until the 1940s, the historic site of a *palenque*, and sparsely settled by Europeans--would have favored the emergence of a local creole. That a creole language did not arise leaves room to wonder whether Granda's model is equally applicable to all areas of the circum-Caribbean. There is no question that Granda's contributions to Afro-Hispanic dialectology are vast, irreplaceable, enduring, and classic, but revisiting and testing the assumptions can only improve our appreciation of the African contributions to Latin American Spanish.

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