



# A Case for Reversing Language Shift On the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua

**Barbara Jean Tasker-Mueller**

Western Washington University

*This paper examines the work done by the Linguistic Research and Revitalization Institute (IPILC) at the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (URACCAN) and the dilemmas faced in claiming and implementing the linguistic rights granted under the 1987 Law of Autonomy for the Caribbean Coast Regions. The problems discussed in this case are not unique to Nicaragua's Creoles, nor to Black diaspora cultures, but are part of larger issues affecting all minority groups who seek to assert the legitimacy of their languages and cultures within hegemonic discourses around cultural difference. The work done by the dedicated people at IPILC represents an important step forward in the struggle for equality, not only in their part of the world, but also as an example for other oppressed minorities in their quest for international justice.*

## Introduction

Reversing Language Shift (RLS), according to Fishman (1991, 2001), is concerned with the recovery, re-creation, and retention of a complete way of life, including non-linguistic as well as linguistic features. He points out (2001) that “the opponents of RLS efforts continually argue that most major reward systems (i.e., social and economic advancement) are linked to the dominant language use and its mastery” (p. 453). These opponents stress that the most useful languages yield the greatest ‘social advancement’, and that the minority language will not do this (Fishman, 2001, p. 453). But, as Fishman (2001) argues, economic reward is not the only aspect that defines the minority individual and their social identity. He says that “it is not labor-market access but economic power which is disproportionately in the hands of the dominant culture and that is a problem that will rarely be overcome on linguistic grounds alone” (Fishman, 2001, p. 453). It is his view that the maintenance of identity and cultural intactness is the most

important criteria for community problem solving, education, and cultural creativity.

There are two language ideologies in contest with one another among speakers of English Creole (a Creole language for which English is the lexifier) in Nicaragua. The first is Spanish, the hegemonic language ideology associated with the state; the second is Standard English, which is associated with a larger global discourse. Both of these ideologies view English Creole as an inferior or lower status form of language. The focus here will be on the second of these ideologies, as I discuss the counter-hegemonic language ideology promoted by those engaged in the Literacy Program on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. This program asserts the importance and value of Creole as a language and continues to work toward the RLS among the ethnic Creole people of Nicaragua.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the work being done by the Linguistic Research and Revitalization Institute (IPILC), a department of

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Author correspondence should be directed to [bjtaskermueller@gmail.com](mailto:bjtaskermueller@gmail.com) (Department of Anthropology, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA, USA)

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the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (URACCAN) in Bluefields, Nicaragua, as an example to other groups involved in similar ideological endeavors. I explore whether the identity ideology includes room for bilingualism (or diglossia), or whether the hegemonic economic ideology requires a monolingual view of language relationships.

### **Defining Language in Nicaragua**

The definition of a language or linguistic ideology employed in this paper concerns the way people conceive of links between linguistic forms and social phenomena, and relates to the way that these linguistic forms, which can include whole languages, can index the social identities and broader cultural images of people and their activities (Irvine & Gal, 2000, p. 37). In Nicaragua, as in the U.S. and elsewhere, linguistic ideologies participate in the broader semiotics of difference that includes such aspects as race, clothing, and speech habits, and helps to address such questions as the formation of national language policies and debates about what makes 'good English'.

The following are the words of Guillermo McLean, the recently retired director of the IPILC, from my interview with him in 2014:

I spoke with a group of Creoles that were shipping out (on the cruise ships) and wanted to show them that their Creole language serves them more than taking you to the wharf. They told me they were hired because they speak English. I said you have it wrong. You were hired because you speak an educated Creole. The tourists don't care whether the waiter speaks a Queen Elizabeth English, they are satisfied if they have a Jamaican accent. So regardless of what you think of your English, you are hired because of your Creole. So it serve for more than taking you to the wharf.

This very succinct statement of the sociolinguistic situation on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua describes the basis of the linguistic ideological process of RLS (Fishman, 2001).

### **Methodology**

I spent from April to June of 2014 living with a Creole family in Bluefields, Nicaragua. They welcomed me into their family circle and were comfortable enough with me to share their own opinions in informal casual conversations about language usage. As is the case with most Creoles, they are multilingual, speaking English Creole, Standard English, and Spanish.

This project is part of a larger Master's thesis, for which more complete information regarding methodology is available elsewhere (Tasker-Mueller, 2015). Ethical clearance was granted by the Western Washington University IRB, and written consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Data collection involved participant-observation fieldwork and semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions with educators who are currently in positions of authority but have had intimate experience with the linguistic and educational history of the Atlantic Coast throughout their lives and careers. Interviewees included both the retired and current directors of IPILC, as well as their executive assistant, the director of the (prestigious and private) Moravian School in Bluefields, the Secretary of Education for Bluefields, and the director of one of the public schools in Bluefields. Interviews were conducted in Standard English (on my part) and in the local English dialect that each was comfortable using (as I point out later, there are dialectical differences). I transcribed each interview verbatim with a minimum of editing to preserve the richness and variety of language usage.

All interviews were between 25 and 30 minutes, and interviewees were very forthcoming about sharing their thoughts and experiences. All

interviewees agreed to having the interviews recorded. Educators were chosen to illustrate—as indeed, they did—the two different perspectives (i.e., the identity ideology vs. the economic ideology) on the work being done regarding Fishman's (2001) concept of RLS, as well as on the prestige value of the Creole language in Nicaragua.

## History

In order to conceptualize the ideologies connected with language, we must examine the broader context within which language ideology operates. For this reason, I begin with a brief overview of the history of Nicaragua to appreciate its language development within the context of that history and its impact on the language ideology, as well as its economic consequences that are evident on the Atlantic Coast today.

The political history of Nicaragua is a complicated and multi-phasic one, with many influences coming to bear on the nation-state and its relationship to its multi-ethnic population. Unlike other Central American countries, Nicaragua experienced simultaneous occupation by two colonial powers, Spain and England, each with their own systems of domination, exploitation, and settlement patterns, and their own reasons for colonialism (Sollis, 1989, p. 483). In this section, I briefly describe each historical phase in order to demonstrate the importance of their influences on the Creole people of the Atlantic Coast. I draw on the work of several researchers to create as complete a picture as possible. However, due to its complexity, many of the historical details are beyond the scope of this paper; I therefore direct the reader to the work of these authors.

The first Spaniards entered the region of what would become known as Nicaragua in 1523, and were primarily interested in the portion of the country nearest the Pacific Ocean. The objectives of the Spanish model of imperialism in Nicaragua

(similar to their history in Mexico, Peru, etc.) were those of total, and usually forcible, replacement of existing civilizations (e.g., the Nicaraos, the Chorotegas, and the Chontales) and the appropriation of land, labour, and resources (Baracco, 2005, p. 108; Carmack, Gasco, & Gossen, 2007). The Spanish conquest was disastrous for the indigenous population of Nicaragua's Pacific region. Within three decades an estimated Indian population of one million people plummeted to a few tens of thousands, as approximately half of indigenous individuals died of contagious Old World diseases, most of the rest were sold into slavery in other New World Spanish colonies, and many were killed in outright warfare (Carmack, Gasco, & Gossen, 2007; Gritzner, 2010, p. 39; Hale, 1987, p. 35; Merrill, 1993; Staten, 2010). As a result of this style of imperialism, a Mestizo, Spanish-speaking, Catholic culture evolved on the Pacific side of the country.

The English established footholds along the Atlantic Coast of Central America during the 17th century, beginning a long history of British imperialism which, as elsewhere, took on a mercantilist form. Its main interests focused on extractive industries facilitated by friendly relations with the local indigenous population, most notably the Miskitu Indians. Through this alliance, the Miskitu gained hegemony over other Indian groups (Freeland, 1993, p. 72). This began a period of 'indirect British rule' over the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua which lasted for over 200 years (Baracco, 2005, p. 108; Shapiro, 1987, p. 68). As a result, the Atlantic coast has had a different history; this is reflected in the language and the religious (i.e., Protestant) demography of the two regions, as well as in the prestige attitudes seen today (Freeland, 1988, p. 80; Hornberger, 1999). The nature of the rivalry that persisted between Spain and England for 200 years is at the root of much of the contemporary conflict and antagonism between the Atlantic Coast peoples and the 'Spanish', as the Spanish-speaking

Mestizos are still called by the *Costeños* (people of the coast).

During the 18th century, major changes in inter-ethnic relations between indigenous peoples and the black population, who were brought there as slaves by the British from Jamaica, began to establish themselves in the ethnic hierarchy (Sollis, 1989, p. 484). According to Gordon (1998), by the 1820s the term ‘Creole’ had come into common usage as a description for “the entire free English Creole-speaking non-white population born in the Americas and living in the *Mosquitia*” (p. 39), as that area of the Atlantic Coast came to be known. Following emancipation in 1834, this group was augmented by freed, escaped, and emancipated slaves from other parts of the Caribbean (Freeland, 1993, p. 72; Sollis, 1989, p. 484).

A Creole culture therefore developed from the language and culture preserved by the slave community and close contact with the English (Sollis, 1989, p. 485). The black population spoke English, albeit with a partially African grammatical structure (Gordon, 1987, p. 137; Sollis, 1989, p. 485), forming the genesis of the linguistic ideology that still persists today. Baracco (2005, p. 113) states that Creoles’ English language and emulation of Anglo-American culture were essential to their high status within the racial hierarchy of the *Mosquitia*. Creoles believed that their Anglo culture and language made them superior to other non-white groups, entitled them to occupy a leading position in Coastal affairs, and distinguished themselves from Spanish Nicaraguans. This process became more important along with the increasing presence of the Nicaraguan nation-state.

Spain never achieved dominance on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. The legacy it left was of a different nature—that of the first of the two linguistic ideologies regarding Spanish and indigenous languages that exist there today. While the actions of the imperial powers predicated

major changes in the ethnic hierarchy, the historical picture of inter-ethnic relations helps to demonstrate how dominated peoples were able to actively shape this changing historical landscape.

### **The Creole People of Nicaragua and Their Language**

The concepts of language ideological clarification discussed by Fishman (2001, p. 17) and Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998) highlight “the need for reducing tensions within speech communities in which the heritage language is threatened and yet the community response is divided and plagued by contradiction” (Kroskrity, 2015, p. 143). The evidence of this contradiction on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua is seen, on the one hand, in the work being done at IPILC through Bilingual-Bicultural programs that are working with public school educators to teach them how to read and write Creole so that they can carry that knowledge back to their classrooms. On the other hand, the ambivalent feelings of some community members, who feel that Standard English should be a priority in schools to enable better economic and social advancement, is seen in part of my interview with Alan Budier, the Director of the Moravian School:

At school the children are encouraged, as a right, to speak out in whatever language they choose. The majority of our kids find it easier to switch from Creole to Spanish than from Creole to Standard English. Eventually I am hoping that this is a learning experience where the students realize that they are learning three languages where one of these is an important part of their identity and the rest are tools to hold onto to help one to compete. I believe that the Moravian School has the advantage over the other schools by starting Standard English teaching in the Primary School.

Where I have a problem is when the focus is only on the learning of Creole. I think that in so many of these mega-projects that are being talked about for the Atlantic

Coast, such as the Canal project, most of the communication will be in [Standard English] so we must intentionally prepare our kids to strengthen [Standard English] but also maintain our identity. If we fail to do that, then we'll be having people coming from the Pacific coast for the top office jobs and we will be doing the lower ones. If we can't aspire for higher office jobs it will be a setback. But if we can combine the three of them, we will also be in the process of strengthening our culture. This is where we need to make sure of our identity as Black and as Creole and that we don't lose it in the process. We don't want to confuse it by having prosperity, financially, but then bankrupt culturally. That is my fear. I think we need to pre-prepare our kids in such a way that they have the opportunity to maintain, to strengthen, and to seek for higher academic preparation in order to compete in the future.

Counter-hegemonic work done on behalf of the identity ideology, and the motivation for it being done now, is to legitimize English Creole and other indigenous languages spoken on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua despite the hegemonic pressure of Standard English and of the economic ideology it engenders. Since the late 1970s, educators' perceptions and treatment of Caribbean English Creole (CEC)-speaking students have undergone some positive changes, but are still hampered by a discouraging lack of progress (Winer, 2006, p. 105) due to tension between the identity and economic ideologies. Though many linguists (e.g., Cummins, 1993, 2000, 2001; Fenigsen, 2003, 2007; Managan, 2011; Migge, Léglise, & Bartens, 2010; Nero, 2006; Siegel, 1999; Winer, 2006) and policymakers have encouraged the simultaneous acceptance of CEC and improved teaching of Standard English, CEC's endorsement by teachers and support by parents has often lagged far behind. The reasons for this are to some extent linguistic, but are primarily, as in most educational situations, social and political (Winer, 2006, p. 105).

Winer (2006, p. 107) argues that educators in the Caribbean have, by and large, accepted *bidialectalism* in local English Creole and local Standard English as an important goal in the school system, rather than viewing the two as having unequal prestige values. Bidialectalism is defined as the ability to use two dialects of the same language, and is the term most often used to refer to teaching Standard English to pupils who normally use a non-standard dialect. However, it became apparent to me during my field interviews and informal conversations with educators that a dichotomy of opinion regarding this issue remains, representing evidence of the linguistic ideology that remains pervasive on the Atlantic Coast regarding the derivation of status among Creole individuals from the language they speak. Gordon (1998, p. 193) discusses Creole individuals' multifaceted identities, which I found to be reflected in my fieldwork interviews, manifested in the complex and ambivalent relationship they have with the language they use both amongst themselves and with non-Creoles. To emphasize this point, I present the statements of two of my interviewees. Trina Clair has been the executive assistant at IPILC for five years and is presently in a university level English class:

If we travel out of Nicaragua, people speak 'proper' English, they don't understand our 'bad' English. Creole is for us here in our community. It is a dialect to make it more easier for us to communicate instead of trying to use what we call here 'big words'. Maybe the words are the same as in Creole but in a short way. With Creole you can't travel out. But you keep your Creole, that you wouldn't let it go for nothing because if you travel anywhere and meet up with somebody I know who speaks your language you feel so good you talk to them. You feel like at home when you travel about.

Silvano Hodgson is the new Director of IPILC. He is a Rama Indian and grew up on Rama Cay (a small island enclave off the coast of Bluefields). He said that his first language should have been

Rama but was Rama Creole, the dialect spoken on Rama Cay:

Rama should be our first language but by history the Rama language has been disappeared for many years but by help of people how you doing now making researches to help the people them to get back their language as a right as identity. Our language is so important, our language make us to feel good, our language always make us to feel better in life. In the future, we will try to get back our Rama language. When I went to school I went speaking Rama Creole and learned Spanish in the classroom as a second language. I never knew nothin' of our original Rama language. Now after many years, I know a little Rama. Standard English is learned in secondary school. I believe that Creole helps to learn Standard English because Creole is part of English. [There are]...plenty words in English that you could understand in Creole. Creole is a very helpful language in that you can better understand English. The Creole need to work more to create a program in all the classrooms that speak Creole in the communities that speak Creole. English is an international language so Creole is helpful for people who go out of the country speaking Creole. It is helpful as a step toward Standard English.

Educational theorist Etienne Wenger (1998, p. 125-126) argues that we can become so wrapped up in our own community of practice that we fail to appreciate that other communities of practice are just as viable and important as our own, and are worth learning about whether we agree with their precepts or not. It would seem that, at the very least, learning about other languages and cultures as communities of practice (which includes the perspective of both minority and dominant world views) would contribute more toward alleviating cultural biases, antagonisms, and ethnocentrism than any other educational program we could establish. This does not mean that we need to give up or negate our own culture in the process, only to

more fully understand that the 'other' is also of value and not to be denigrated nor dismissed.

### **Work Being Done at the Linguistic Research and Revitalization Institute**

The roots of the present encouraging linguistic situation on the Atlantic Coast and ongoing work at IPILC lie in the teaching of indigenous languages spoken on the Coast, introduced as part of the process of the 1980 Literacy Campaign, as well as in the introduction of bilingual education at pre-school and primary levels (up to fourth grade) in 1983 (Arrien, 2006, p. 24). The autonomous status given to regions of the Caribbean Coast in 1987, and later decree laws such as Decree Law 571 of 1980, the Law on Education in Languages of the Atlantic Coast, encourage "teaching in native languages from pre-school to fourth grade primary inclusive" (Arrien, 2006, p. 24). This decree law was reaffirmed in 1990, and the General Law for Basic and Middle Education of 1997-98 establishes in Chapter II, Article 9, that "inter-cultural education in their mother tongue is a right of the indigenous peoples of the Atlantic Coast" (Arrien, 2006, p. 24). At the same time, indigenous mother tongue usage is included in applying justice and in other administrative processes within indigenous communities. This legal consolidation, together with the institutional development of the Status of Autonomy and regional elections to public positions, has had a very large impact on the education sector of the Caribbean Coast and its processes, which has materialized in the Regional Autonomous Education System (SEAR) and its corresponding Action Plan. The 1980 Literacy Campaign inspired the National Consultation on Education to define the purposes, objectives, and principles of new educational policies, constituting the bases of the principle articles on education laid down in the Political Constitution of 1987 which was reformed in 1995 and remains in force to this day (Arrien, 2006, p. 11).

Kroskrity (2015) discusses the importance of recipient-designed lexicons for indigenous communities and their need to view dictionaries as cultural resources in the service of language preservation. This is reflected in the work done in 2005 on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua to develop a Creole dictionary in spite of the need to acknowledge multiple dialectic pronunciations of the language.

McLean and Hodgson both spoke about their involvement in the 2005 Creole dictionary project. McLean said that the work being done at IPILC with the Creole language is that of “helping to recover a lost identity”. The dictionary was created with the help of a linguist from Finland, Arja Koskinen, and a linguist from Belize, Silvana Woods. People from different communities who spoke slightly different dialects came together for the project (for a more detailed discussion of the two projects, please see Koskinen, 2010 and Freeland, 2004). Hodgson told me that they never discussed creating a Standard Creole, but rather developing the ability to write Creole so that teachers can learn how to write and teach the language. He said that IPILC runs workshops (I observed a teaching session while I was there) on how to use the textbooks in the classroom. There is a sense that the program needs more help—more follow up, more attention to schools, and more need to visit communities and teachers.

The biggest challenge facing educators on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, which is faced daily by those working at IPILC, is the relationship between the difference in command of the *acrolect* (the dialect or variety of speech closest to the standard prestige language) and the value given to the *basilect* (the dialect or variety of speech most remote from the standard prestige language) form of Creole. This was clearly illustrated in part of my interview with Clair:

I don't know about this Creole business.  
To give it in class I don't know, maybe  
it's good for the students them to learn it.

You know how to read and write it in case you go somewhere one of these days and you get it and you could read it and you could explain what it is about. But to say to have it as if you go anywhere and that's what you supposed to use as your language to communicate with the next people, I don't think it that proper to do it. You have it as a third language but a third language in case you go out and meet someone else from home then you could use it. But if you are in a work or in an office you need to use your proper English.

Gordon (1998) states that “the basilectal form is publicly denigrated by many Creoles but its use is recognized as the highest expression of group solidarity and is the principal way by which Creoles distinguish themselves as a group even from Standard English speakers” (p. 190).

### Discussion and Conclusions

In his developmental interdependence hypothesis, Cummins (1993, 2000) argues that literacy skills and knowledge may be transferred from an individual's first language (L1) to their second language (L2) through a common understanding proficiency (CUP). According to this hypothesis, content may profitably be studied in either language. There is transfer of knowledge and learning processes across languages, and the development of L1 literacy entails concrete benefits for students' acquisition of subsequent languages (Cummins, 1993, p. 55). Siegel (1999) cites studies showing that children who learn literacy in their home language (L1) (i.e., English Creole in Nicaragua) in the primary grades do better academically when presented with the need to learn a more standard language or dialect (L2) (i.e., Standard English) than children who are faced with learning to read and write using L2 as soon as they begin school. Attainment of fluent bilingual skills enhances aspects of children's linguistic and cognitive growth, leading to greater levels of metalinguistic awareness, an important

value in the face of rapidly increasing globalization.

Siegel (1999) has also written extensively on the inequities and obstacles faced by speakers of Creoles and 'non-standard' or minority dialects in formal education in Australia and Africa. Migge and colleagues (2010) have compiled several studies documenting work in Hawaii and other areas of the Caribbean basin. Fenigsen (2003, 2007) studied language ideologies in Barbados that are similar to those on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. These studies' arguments concerning identity vs. economic ideologies in the use of Creole language in education are similar to those in Nicaragua, agreeing that more research and materials are needed to provide a more positive outcome. This is the aim of the work being done by the Linguistic Research Institute in Bluefields, Nicaragua.

The emergence of the Atlantic Coast linguistic ideology regarding Creole as a language to be preserved, rather than a form of 'improper' English, is directly connected to the process of RLS at the IPILC. Fishman (2001) argues that "RLS promises greater self-regulation of one's home, family, neighborhood and community, on the one hand, and of one's own history and culture, on the other hand" (p. 459), and suggests that RLS is a "corner in which one's own traditionally interpreted language, customs, beliefs, holidays, stories, foods, and sanctities can continue to prevail" (p. 459). In other words, one's language is where one's heart can continue to be expressed.

McLean concluded by stating that "at this point we have not resolved the issue of using Standard English as a second language which would be the correct thing to do. I don't feel there is a contradiction in using Creole in the classroom while teaching Standard English as a second language. Personally, I think it can be done simultaneously." The question then remains: why can this not be done simultaneously when the evidence presented above would seem to indicate

that it can and should be? I believe the answer lies in the one remaining obstacle on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua: that of the ethnic and cultural antagonisms and inequities inherited as a legacy from its past that continue to be reflected in its linguistic ideology (as in many countries, including the U.S.). The work being done by the dedicated people at IPILC is an important step forward in the struggle for equality not only in their part of the world, but also as an example for other oppressed minorities in their quest for international justice. In this era of increasingly rapid globalization and global change, a society that has access to and makes full use of its multilingual and multicultural resources has the advantage in terms of its ability to play an important social and economic role on the world stage. The challenge for educators such as those at IPILC is to help shape the development of their national identity in such a way that the rights of all citizens (including school children) are respected, and that the cultural, linguistic, and economic resources of the nation are maximized.

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