Tropical Tongues

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Chapter One

The Languages of Belize in Context

Belize—formerly British Honduras—gained full independence from Great Britain in 1981. While there is a strong influence of English as a result of its colonial history and the large levels of immigration to and from the United States, Belize is linguistically diverse. According to the 2010 Belizean census, there are at least ten languages spoken in Belize, including Chinese, English, Garifuna, German, Kriol, Maya Kekchi, Maya Mopan, Maya Yucatec, and Spanish. This is significant in a country the size of Belize, which has a population of only 300,000. It is only in the last thirty years, though, that Kriol has become something like the national language. As researchers have noted, Kriol is and has been important as a marker of Belizean identity, and in the face of these pressures it has developed even further as a sign of one's true Belizeanness (Le Page 1992; Ravindranath 2009). Belize is very much a country in flux, and Kriol seems more than ever to be a marker of traditional Belizean identity (Salmon and Gómez Menjívar 2014, 2016).

There are relatively few studies on the linguistic situation of Belize. The most extensive fieldwork on Kriol was conducted by Geneviève Escure (1981, 1991, 1997) in Placencia in the late 1970s and early 1980s, long before the coastal town became a booming tourist hub that today draws Hondurans, Salvadorans, Creoles, and Garifuna to its many foreign-owned businesses and hotels, including one by the famous movie director Francis Ford Coppola. More recently, Maya Ravindranath (2009) has examined language change and language shift in Hopkins, a Garifuna community. Bruce Ergood (1996), Timothy Hagerty (1996), and Osmer Balam (2015) have examined Belizean Spanish and code-switching in the Coro-
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The present study contributes to existing research by examining the current status of the minority languages spoken in coastal Belize, grounding our research in systematic field research in order to provide a fresh account of language endangerment in this dynamic area.

Prior to independence, many ethnolinguistic communities in Belize could be understood as “language islands.” As Hildo do Couto (2014: 176) explains in his study of Amerindian language islands in Brazil, this term “suggests that the territory of the relevant population (with its language) is a kind of island within another population (with its culture and language) analogized as an ocean. Further, it implies that there is a hinterland from which the ‘island’ is somehow detached and to which it remains related” (emphasis ours). Like do Couto, we believe that this image, better than the term enclave employed most often in Anglophone and Romance linguistics, illustrates the status and condition of minority language communities before waves of socioeconomic change begin to erode their shores. Over the last three decades, the Belizean economy has swiftly transitioned from a traditional maritime and agricultural economy to a global, service-based economy that ebbs and flows with the arrival of flights and cruise ships to its seaside towns. This provides advantageous economic opportunities for women and minorities in the districts closest to tourist hot spots. Along with the economic opportunities, however, there is a real impact on the minority languages spoken in the country, as young speakers turn toward the language(s) they perceive as economically favorable, which in this case is Kriol and, to a lesser extent, Belizean English.

Fieldwork on the Belizean Coast

When we first arrived in Belize in 2012, our intention was to study the conventions of language and language practice among speakers of Belizean Kriol, an English-based creole spoken in coastal Belize. Our goal was to investigate linguistic variation in Kriol between speakers from coastal villages and cays and those in the country’s urban center, Belize City, where the majority of ethnic Kriol speakers reside. The project was tied into a rapidly growing area
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of inquiry in linguistics that extends current thought in pragmat-ics and semantics to questions of discourse, presupposition, and politeness in indigenous and non-English languages. Kriol, with its Amerindian and African influences, offered a perfect vehicle for continuing this kind of work. William Salmon (2014, 2016) used directly elicited data, interviews with native speakers of Kriol, and the Kriol-Inglish Dikshineri (Herrera et al. 2010), published as a collaborative effort between the Belize Kriol Project and the Belize Ministry of Education, to respond to these linguistic questions.

Our fieldwork took an interdisciplinary turn when we deliberated on the extensive use and spread of Kriol throughout coastal Belize across ethnic groups. Traveling southward down the coast gave us insight into a hitherto undocumented linguistic context undergoing great socioeconomic and demographic changes. Escure (1991) predicted that the influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants from neighboring Central American countries would cause Belizeans to stop using Kriol as the lingua franca in their country. This belief was widespread, and even appeared as the front-page headline of Belize’s largest-circulation newspaper, Amandala, on September 11, 1992: “Belize Now Belice.” Two months later, the New York Times ran an article titled “Without Firing a Shot, Espanol [sic] Captures Belize.” Yet Kriol was very much alive in Belize City, Placencia, the Cayes, and Punta Gorda. It was the language used by newly arrived Spanish-speaking immigrants, Chinese shopkeepers, Mayan college students, U.S.-born teen missionaries speaking with locals, and Mennonites haggling with Mayan women in the market. Kriol was not only alive; its heart was racing.

As we began to take the pulse of Kriol, it became necessary to examine how its rhythm altered the pace of language change in other languages with which it was in contact. As a result, the study required moving beyond standard distinctions between majority and minority languages (also known as local languages) and extending beyond standard conventions in the study of language attitudes. Our fieldwork dialogues with the existing research in linguistics and Latin American studies on language contact, language endangerment, language ideologies, and grassroots language rights movements. It nonetheless represents a significant departure in the
theorization of these matters through its focus on socioeconomic factors contributing to language change and overall language ecology (Mufwene 2001, 2003). After all, while pride and prestige are certainly factors contributing to Kriol’s vitality, they are not the only driving forces of language change across that lush coastal strip.

Methodology

Belize is divided into six districts: Corozal, Orange Walk, Cayo, Belize, Stann Creek, and Toledo (map 1). We conducted fieldwork in the major cultural centers of these latter three districts, specifically in Belize City (the former colonial capital and current Creole cultural capital), Seine Bight (one of the oldest Garifuna villages), Placencia and Ambergris Cay (the fastest-growing tourist destinations in the country and the sites with the most pull factors attracting immigrants from neighboring Central American countries), Belmopan (Belize’s national capital and the home of a sizeable Mestizo population), Punta Gorda (one of the two access points to neighboring Guatemala), and San Antonio Village (the first homeland in Belize for the Mopan Mayan community). In selecting these sites, we aimed to cover the linguistic context of the northern, southern, and central reaches of coastal Belize, the area with the least contact with Spanish.5

We followed methods that were best suited to the sociocultural conditions of the ethnic minority communities in question, relying upon experimental and ethnographic methods as well as direct surveys as was fitting in the various contexts. We are quite aware of the problems a researcher’s presence in a social situation can raise with respect to the quality of the data, and we were careful to minimize these effects as much as possible.6 We proceeded as well with the understanding of Mopan and Garifuna communities as former language islands, which are formidable sites from which to observe the effects of language contact, including the factors that lead to moribundity and language extinction (do Couto 2014: 76–77). Language islands possess unique characteristics, for they are “comunidades linguísticas em espaços delimitados, com línguas ou varie-
dades que se distinguem de modo relativamente claro da língua do entorno, e nas quais há uma consciência da própria alteridade, baseada em uma densa rede de comunicação . . ., e que se dirige mais para dentro do que para fora” (Rosenberg 2003, ctd. in do Couto 2007: 318). During the course of our fieldwork we came to understand that the parameters of these linguistic islands were experiencing erosion and that macroeconomic factors are changing the formerly inwardly focused orientation of the Mopan and Garifuna communities; it became paramount for us to work with community members during data collection.

Given the widespread use of Kriol English in Belize City, we did not expect to encounter any complications in soliciting opinions about Kriol from residents there. Many Belize City residents are accustomed to meeting tourists and sharing cultural information about Belize, its language, its most impressive sights and differences between the country and the United States, and so on. In this
context, it was clear that experimental methods such as the verbal guise test would not be intrusive or inappropriate. Accordingly, we designed a four-speaker verbal guise test and questionnaire to examine attitudes toward two varieties of Kriol. Our participants listened to two pairs of recordings—in the first pair, speakers told an Anansi story and in the second pair, speakers related a personal story. These recordings were approximately thirty seconds each and were provided by native Kriol speakers who were alike in sex, age, occupation, and in being lifelong residents of their respective hometowns. Each was recorded in natural conversation with the male researcher. The questionnaires consisted of a five-level modified Likert survey, which queried sixteen personality traits. We surveyed a total of 141 participants. At the end of the interview, participants completed qualitative questions about Kriol as well as questions on the participants’ own linguistic backgrounds. The interviews took five to thirty minutes per participant.

With respect to the Mopan language, we had determined based on earlier trips to Toledo District that the community we wished to survey would require a very different set of instruments than those used in the Kriol contexts of Belize City and Punta Gorda. Mayan communities are located in less frequented areas where foreign visitors tend to be missionaries, or academics conducting research on language, environment, or farming. Language issues are important to this group, but many Mayas are reluctant to share their views with outsiders. As such, we believed the experimental methods described above with the verbal guise test would be less effective—and possibly distracting—in this context. We instead constructed direct surveys to gather the attitudinal data we needed. With the assistance of a fluent speaker of Mopan recommended by elders in the community, we queried thirty-eight participants about Mopan and English, with another forty participants responding to questions about Mopan and Kriol. The surveys consisted of two parts: the first covered demographic information, such as sex, age, ethnic identification, parents’ occupations, and the participant’s degree of fluency in any languages they indicated they knew. Participants then responded to language-attitude and language-use
questions on a five-level modified Likert scale. The questions specifically asked participants to consider the use of Mopan in educational settings, language and ethnic identity, language and context, and language and the participant’s future.

The final phase of our research focused on the Garifuna language of Seine Bight village in Stann Creek District. We had arranged to stay with a Garifuna family while in Seine Bight, but the family notified us upon our arrival in town that they could not host us because the room was still under construction. Nonetheless, they invited us to visit their home and warmly introduced us to their friends and family around the village. It soon became apparent that the Garifuna language was not frequently used in the village, and with the help of the family and friends we revised our surveys in wording and target content. In addition, inspired by anthropologist Richard Wilk’s (1999) work in Belize City, we included a door-to-door approach to our survey distribution method. We collected approximately fifty in-depth surveys in this manner, though the “door-to-door” nature of the process was frequently quite different from what the term suggests. Often, for example, one participant would introduce us to another, or take us to visit another house across the village where we could talk to more residents. In another situation, we were invited to hang out with a participant in his workshop while he constructed maracas out of calabash gourd and weinwein seeds. This particular participant never did fill out the survey, but he talked for the better part of the morning about the language and village history. Chapter 4 is thus based on a pairing of quantitative survey data and qualitative observations made throughout Seine Bight and neighboring Placencia.

Belizean Minority Languages in Contact

Language contact can have implications for the structure of the languages in question: that is, innovations in a recipient language can be influenced by features of a source language. Another common result of language contact, however, is bi- or multilingualism. In this case, the communities in contact have political, cultural, eco-
nomic, or other reasons for maintaining their native language at the same time as learning the language of their neighbors in contact. In some situations, what can result is a state frequently referred to as “stable bilingualism.” In such instances, bilingual speakers might use one language for certain topics and the other language for other topics. For example, Utta von Gleich and Wolfgang Wölck (1994, 2001) and Wölck (2008) describe the Quechua-Spanish relation in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, in which Quechua is used for some topics and Spanish for others. As long as this state of linguistic “compartmentalism” persists, both languages can continue to survive, as there are domains of need and use for both. However, as Joshua Fishman (1970: 78, qtd. in Wölck 2008) warns, “were the roles not compartmentalized, i.e., were they not kept separate by dint of association with quite separate (though complementary) values, domains of activity, and everyday situations, one language (or variety) would displace the other as role and value distinctions merged and became blurred.” The situation Fishman describes is more likely to occur in instances where the social status (along various dimensions) of one language group declines in relation to the other. What follows is a reduction in the number of domains of use in which that language is accepted. As Wölck (2008) writes, “Unless the social status of the minority population improves, the (few) domains appropriate to their language will . . . gradually and successfully be invaded by the majority language.” This state is often referred to as “transitional bilingualism,” in which a community gradually moves from speaking two languages to using only the language of the majority or dominant population, a process that can result in near or complete language loss in as soon as two or three generations.

This transitional situation is what we see in Belize with the Mopan and Garifuna languages.

European languages enjoy relatively parallel prestige in Latin America for obvious geopolitical reasons. Conversely, the lush tongues of the Americas suffer a status more akin to stigmatization and very few cases exist where macro- and microeconomic forces have converged to promote their ascendance in linguistic hierarchies. This is one. Our research, based on fieldwork conducted from 2012 to 2016, indicates that as the Kriol language gains acceptance
and is spoken in an ever-larger number of situations and contexts, Mopan and Garifuna linguistic islands contract in terms of size of territory and number of speakers whose socioeconomic futures can sustain the linguistic compartmentalism previous generations were able to maintain.