

THE SCIENTIFIC SIGNIFICANCE AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF LINGUISTIC FIELDWORK IN THE NORTHEASTERN CARIBBEAN: THE CASE OF ST. CROIX

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The Northeastern Caribbean is a region that according to Michael Aceto (2004): “...has been virtually left untapped as a source of fieldwork data in creole studies and English dialectology” (p. 481). This is not to say that no work has been done in these areas, because Caribbean born and based scholars such as Gilbert Sprauve (*Towards a reconstruction of Virgin Islands Creole phonology*, 1974), Arnold Highfield (*Historicity and variation in Creole studies*, 1981), Alma Simounet (*The analysis of speech events in contexts of work situation on the island of St. Croix*, 1987), Peter Roberts (*West Indians and their language*, 1988), Mervyn Alleyne (‘A linguistic perspective on the Caribbean’, 1992), Vincent Cooper (‘St. Kitts: The launching pad for Leeward Islands Creoles’, 1998-1999) and Michael Aceto (‘Eastern Caribbean English-derived language varieties: Phonology’, 2004) among others, have all contributed greatly with their research and findings based on fieldwork done in this region. This list is certainly not inclusive of all of their writings, but even so, the need for further exploration and study of the languages and literatures of the Northeastern Caribbean has become a pressing issue.

Over the past decade, the U.S. Virgin Islands, especially the island of St. Croix, has become an area of research interest of the Doctoral Program of the English Department in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Puerto Rico, resulting in the creation of a fieldwork course on St. Croix. This course was actually the brainchild of the late Dr. Joan Fayer, Dr. Lowell Fiet, and Dr. Alma Simounet. Fayer and Fiet saw the need for a fieldwork course and Simounet wished that this fieldwork course be based on the island of St. Croix where she and her husband, Wilfredo Geigel, had had a residence for many years, and where she had done research, but still felt that this island was underserved in that aspect. A fieldwork course had been initially taught on the campus at the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras by Dr. Fayer, but in 2004, a new fieldwork course in St. Croix was proposed taught by Dr. Nicholas Faraclas, with the enormous help and generosity of both Dr. Simounet and her husband, who

actually let the first group of students use their house as both classroom and dormitory (Simounet Interview: October 13, 2009).

I was a participant in the sixth annual session of this fieldwork course last semester from May 17-29, 2009. There were seven students accompanied by three professors: Dr. Nicholas Faraclas (who was teaching the linguistics students), Dr. Dannabang Kuwabong (who was teaching the literature students), and their colleague Dr. Susana DeJesús, who was researching different aspects of community life on St. Croix. As part of the course, we were expected to visit many places during the day (some on our own, and others that had been previously arranged by our professors), set up appointments for interviews and actually go through with them, visit libraries archives, and other research sites, read assigned articles about doing fieldwork and produce written and oral comments based on those readings, attend evening class sessions with our professors, and as a final project, produce an acceptable conference abstract based on our fieldwork.

We already had to have a topic in mind before we arrived in St. Croix in order to be able to launch ourselves immediately into a whirlwind schedule of activities. It is also important to state that we had had to pass a web-based training course entitled 'Protecting Human Research Participants' in order to be certified by the NIH (National Institutes of Health) Office of Extramural Research and thus be allowed to begin our fieldwork.

I initially had an idea based on the language used in music on the island and how it affected the Puerto Crucians' (Crucians of Puerto Rican ancestry) preservation of language and identity as related to their ancestral island, Puerto Rico. I prepared a questionnaire and enthusiastically began searching for informants with the support of Mrs. Maria Friday, an employee at the University of the Virgin Islands' Student Housing Department and a Crucian of Puerto Rican ancestry herself. I wished to find out more about the Puerto Crucian community and so made appointments to meet with people from that group who were of different ages and from many different walks of life. My interviews were eye-opening experiences, to say the least, and actually made me rethink my whole purpose for being in St. Croix. The focus of my research on the island changed in a very dramatic fashion because I realized that I was in the midst of an ethical conundrum.

The day that everything changed for me was the day I interviewed a person of Puerto Rican ancestry who holds a very influential and important political position not only in St. Croix, but in the whole U.S. Virgin Islands government arena. This woman, whom I will identify only as Informant A, very willingly complied with my request

for an interview and even graciously consented to visit me at the U.V.I. dorm where I was staying. Our interview began in a friendly enough way, but quickly degenerated into a passionate denunciation of my group's purpose and work on the island. Why was this woman so hostile? I asked myself. She was indignant about the fact that after having visited St. Croix for the past six years, the previous participants of our fieldwork course had yet to inform the Crucian communities about the results of their research. She felt that they were being used as "guinea pigs" and were being looked down upon by Puerto Ricans from the main island. Needless to say, I was dumbfounded! The interview actually concluded on a more cordial note, but the stage was set for further inquiry (Informant A Interview May 23, 2009). I realized that this was a serious issue that I needed to speak about with my professors and the rest of the group because I could understand how valid her point was concerning the need to inform people about any and all results from previous fieldwork done in their communities.

After this interview, many questions swirled through my mind: Would I feel the same way if I were the subject of research? And not only that, but how would I feel if I were never informed of the findings of that research? What social responsibilities do we have as fieldworkers? Should our work come first, no matter how people feel about both the process and subsequent outcome? Ethical considerations are extremely important although according to Newman and Ratliff, many times linguists do not give them the importance they deserve. They also surprisingly state that the LSA (the Linguistic Society of America) does not "contribute to the *Professional Ethics Report*" (p. 9) which also seems to be a major statement about the lack of interest in discussing or even promoting the topic among linguists. Furthermore, Newman and Ratliff pose another question that I was asking myself: "What recompense if any do [...] fieldworker[s] owe the community as a whole for allowing [them] to be ... uninvited guest[s]?" (p. 9).

Once I had the opportunity to discuss the matter with the group from UPR, all were very concerned. Dozens of tapes of speech collected during previous fieldwork courses and a few of the published results from past visits had actually been lodged in the University of the Virgin Islands St. Croix campus, the Public Library in Christiansted, and in the Whim Archive near Frederiksted. Dr. Faraclas acknowledged that there had been some other papers written, presented, and published since 2007 although not before, which had not yet been copied and sent to St. Croix, and that it was only then, in 2009, when the first dissertations based on previous work in the fieldwork course were being defended. Nevertheless, he suggested that I change the focus of my fieldwork on the island and instead concentrate on working on a compilation of all of the work that had been created as a direct result from our

fieldwork course and that once that was completed, I should present it to the people of St. Croix and other interested parties such as linguists and historians specializing in the Caribbean. And that is why I have written this article.

The social responsibilities of linguistic fieldwork should not be taken lightly; humans can never be treated without respect or courtesy. Once we have been welcomed into a community, the least we can do is reciprocate our findings. This can never be a one-sided enterprise; all participants should benefit from it. We should also always leave the door open for further research either by ourselves or future fieldworkers, and we can only do this if we establish from the very beginning, a friendly, respectful, and courteous rapport with the target community. Our Linguistic Fieldwork Course has a lot to give back to the people of St. Croix. This is only the beginning of what I believe will be a long and fruitful symbiotic relationship and one that I hope will inspire other researchers to focus on this region of the world.

I will now proceed with the compilation of works directly created as the result of our Linguistics Fieldwork Course. This compilation will be presented in the following order and will include a brief description when possible: Dissertations, M.A. Theses, Ideas for Dissertations and Other Works, Published and Unpublished Papers (including presentations at conferences), Conferences or Symposiums, Websites and Other.

PhD Dissertations

Mitchell, Edward S. (2009). *St. Lucian Kwéyòl in St. Croix: A study of language choice and attitudes*. Humanities, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus.

This socio- and ethnolinguistic research project examines language choice, language attitudes, ethnolinguistic identity, and bilingualism among diaspora speakers of Saint Lucian French-lexifier Creole (Kwéyòl) on the Caribbean island of Saint Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands.

Torres Santiago, Geissa R. (2009). *Attitudes of Crucian students and educators toward Crucian Creole as a language of learning*. Humanities, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus.

This study examines attitudes toward Crucian Creole among students and educators at the University of the Virgin Islands in St. Croix.

Villanueva Feliciano, Orville O. (2009). *A contrastive analysis of English influences on the lexicon of Puerto Rican Spanish in Puerto Rico and St. Croix*. Humanities, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus.

Although Puerto Rico and St. Croix are U.S. territories and are only a few miles apart from each other, English plays a different role in each one. In Puerto Rico, Spanish is used as the official and majority language, with English as a second language. In contrast, English is used as the official and majority language in St. Croix and Spanish is a second language. Nonetheless, both Spanish varieties have been tremendously influenced by English, especially in the lexicon, and aspects of the borrowing and use of English-derived words within the Spanish spoken on both islands deserve further study.

Dissertation with some indirect input from the Fieldwork Course

Plata Monllor, Miriam R. (2008). *Phonological features of Crucian Creole*. Humanities, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus.

According to different studies, Rickford (1993), Sabino (1993), and Plag (2003) among others, the study of Creole phonology has been neglected. The main target of this study is Crucian Creole phonology. It also aims at studying the phonological changes that Crucian Creole has undergone in the last 35 years, after Sprauve's (1974) study of this language. It examines the question as to whether Crucian is being decreolized or not.

PhD Dissertations in Process

Ursulin, Diana. *The Language Attitudes of European descended speakers of Afro-Caribbean Creoles in St. Croix and Martinique*.

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González-Cotto, Lourdes. Untitled.

González's work involves research on the topic of maroons and marronage, specifically looking

into the manner in which they have been traditionally defined in science, linguistics, and literature, and how these definitions and concepts clash with reality. Her work focuses on various

Maroon communities, in particular St. Croix.

Vergne, Aida. *A comparative study of the West African languages and the grammatical structures of Crucian Creole*.

A comparison of grammatical features commonly found in the Benue-Kwa languages of West Africa and those found in Crucian English lexifier Creole.

M.A. Theses in Process

Hernández Durán, Melissa. *The Puerto Rican Diaspora in St. Croix*

Published and Unpublished Papers (including Conference Presentations)

DeJesús, Susana (2008). Students from the Dominican Republic in the public schools of St. Croix: Preliminary observations. Paper presented at *11th Eastern Caribbean Island Cultures Conference: The Islands in Between*, Willemstad, Curaçao. Published in the proceedings of said conference: Nicholas Faraclas, Ronald Severing, Christa Weijer & Liesbeth Ehteld (Eds.) (2009), *Re-centering the 'Islands in Between': Re-thinking the langages, literatures and cultures of the Eastern Caribbean and the African diaspora*. Curaçao: Fundashon pa Planifikashon di Idioma/University of the Netherlands Antilles.

DeJesús, Susana (2009). St. Croix: A pluri-lingual, pluri-cultural island. Paper presented at *12th Eastern Caribbean Island Cultures Conference: The Islands in Between*, 6 Nov. 2009. Roseau, Dominica.

Domínguez-Rosado, Brenda L. The scientific significance and social responsibilities of linguistic fieldwork in the Northeastern Caribbean: The case of St. Croix. Paper presented at *12th Eastern Caribbean Island Cultures Conference: The Islands in Between*, 6 Nov. 2009. Roseau, Dominica.

This paper explores the importance of fieldwork in the advancement of our knowledge about the languages of the Northeastern Caribbean and also the issue of responsibility of linguistic fieldworkers to describe and explain the results of the studies that they undertake to the communities in which they do their work.

Faraclas, Nicholas (2009). Suprasegmentals and the myth of the simplicity continuum from 'pidgin,' to 'creole,' to 'natural languages.' In Nicholas Faraclas & Thomas B. Klein (Eds.), *Simplicity and complexity in Creoles and Pidgins*. London: Battlebridge Publications.

Faraclas, Nicholas & Jesús Ramírez Morales (2006). Intonation in Crucian Afro-Caribbean English-lexifier Creole. *La Torre*, 9, (41-42), 477-496.

Faraclas, Nicholas & Pier Angeli Le Compte, Lourdes González, Diana Ursulin, Micah Corum, Aida Vergne, Cándida González, Susana DeJesús, Brenda Domínguez, Kofi Yakpo (2009). African Agency in the emergence of the Atlantic Creoles: Evidence from Benue-Kwa. Paper presented at *The Society for Pidgin and Creole Languages Conference*, 11-15 Aug. 2009, Cologne, Germany.

In this paper, the researchers use the most recent consensus among Africanists as to the classification of the languages spoken along the West African coast as well as evidence from the grammars of a broad sample of the Benue-Kwa languages that comprise the majority of Atlantic Creole substrates to demonstrate how these

assumptions often lead creolists to underestimate or deny agency on the part of African descended peoples in the emergence of the Atlantic Creoles.

González, Mirerza & Nadjah Ríos Villarini (2009). Oral histories of bilingual education teachers from the Puerto Rican diaspora in St. Croix: exploring ideological tensions inside and outside the classroom. Paper presented at *PRSA*, San Juan, Puerto Rico and accepted for publication.

This paper provides preliminary insights to twelve oral histories of teachers from Puerto Rico or from Puerto Rican descent who live in St. Croix, USVI and who teach or have taught English as a Second Language. The paper argues that these teachers are part of the Puerto Rican Diaspora in St. Croix and that their narratives can be used to explore how issues of identity are framed through the interplay of ethnic, race, and language discourses that mediate their everyday experiences, inside and outside their classrooms. Finally, the paper explores this intertextuality and the dialectical tensions that these accounts provide as a teacher's cultural capital becomes a teaching tool in their bilingual education classrooms.

Kuwabong, Dannabang (2009). Poetics of intimate voices: Exploring identity politics in US Virgin Islands poetry. Paper presented at *12th Annual Eastern Island Cultures Conference: Islands in Between*, 6 Nov. 2009. Roseau, Dominica.

In this paper, there is an exploration of how the politics of identity are presented in works by various poets from the US Virgin Islands that have appeared in *Seasoning for the Mortar: Virgin Islanders Writing in The Caribbean Writer*, Volumes 1-15.

Le Compte, Pier Angeli (2009). Other Englishes: Sociolinguistic standpoint of Porto Crucians in St. Croix. Paper presented at *Southern PR TESOL Convention*, September 2009, Catholic University, Ponce, Puerto Rico

This paper is a description and evaluation of the sociolinguistic situation of Porto Crucians in St. Croix, USVI.

Miranda, Katherine (2009). Pan-Caribbean crossing: Edgar Lake's *The Devil's Bridge*. Paper presented at *12th Annual Eastern Island Cultures Conference: Islands in Between*, 6 Nov. 2009. Roseau, Dominica.

This paper explores how Lake's universal thematic of existential interrogation is contextualized within a matrix of pan-Caribbean creolization through metaphoric crossings of cultural, historic, geographic, and stylistic boundaries.

Mitchell, Edward, Cándida González López & Jean Ourdy Pierre. French-lexifier Creoles in St. Croix: Language choice and attitudes toward St. Lucian Creole, Dominican Creole and Haitian Creole. Paper initially presented at *The 16th Biennial*

Meeting of the Society of Caribbean Linguistics, 2-6 August 2006, Dominica. Published: (2007) *La Torre*, 12, (46).

Mitchell, Edward & Diana Ursulin (2009). Saint Lucian Kwéyòl in Saint Croix: A study of language choice and attitudes. Paper presented at *Prescriptivism and Patriotism: Language Norms and Identities from Nationalism to Globalization*. 17-19 August 2009, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.

In this paper the researchers report on the findings from a study in which they interviewed speakers of St. Lucian Kwéyòl in St. Croix, USVI, on their use of and attitudes towards both Kwéyòl and English.

Ríos Villarini, Nadjah (2009). De Puertorriqueño a Papa Them: Video-entrevista con el fotógrafo Diego Conde. Paper presented at *Congreso Inter-acciones*, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras. This paper was also accepted for publication.

Sanjurjo, Zenaida (2009). Biographical fiction: Patricia Gill's *Buddhoe* and Gloria Joseph's *On time and in step: Reunion on the Glory Road*. Paper presented at *12th Annual Eastern Caribbean Island Cultures Conference: Islands in Between*. 6 Nov. 2009. Roseau, Dominica.

This paper focuses on how these two authors incorporate historical figures from St. Croix into their novels and how its protagonists are treated within their racial and social context.

Vergne, Aida (2008). Reflections on ethical issues in fieldwork. Paper presented at *11th Annual Eastern Caribbean Island Cultures Conference-The Islands in Between*. October 2008, Willemstad, Curaçao.

Vergne, Aida (2007). TMA Preverbal systems and tense system in Caribbean Crucian Creole English. Paper written for INGL 8015, a doctoral linguistics course at the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus.

Villanueva, Orville O. (2006). Language use among Puerto Ricans in St. Croix. *Focus*, 5 (1), 61-70.

Villanueva, Orville O. (2006). Puerto Rican Spanglish. *Alborada*, 4, (1), 35-41.

Conferences and Symposia

All of the following Conferences and Symposia were organized by Drs. Nadjah Ríos Villarini and Mirerza González:

“Seminario para Maestros: Las migraciones de puertorriqueños a la isla de Sta. Cruz, Islas Vírgenes Americanas.” 18 Oct. 2008. College of Education, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras.

Conversatorio: “De la imagen a la palabra: La fotografía como documento histórico.” 10 March 2009. Sala del Decanato, College of General Studies, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras.

Exposición: “The Papa Them: Puertorriqueños en Islas Vírgenes: Fotografías de Diego Conde.” 11 March 2009. Galería Francisco Oller, College of Humanities, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras.

Website

A website, www.thediasporaproject.org, was created by Drs. Mirerza González and Nadjah Ríos Villarini with the sponsorship of Hunter College of CUNY in New York City.

This website is dedicated to creating awareness about the Puerto Rican diaspora that lives on the island of St. Croix, USVI. It also focuses on a special research project concerning what Drs. González and Ríos call “Funds of Knowledge.” This project is aimed at studying the interplay of schooling, communication competence, and language socialization in teachers of bilingual education in St. Croix, USVI, who are Puerto Rican or of Puerto Rican descent.

Other

Vergne, Aida. *Independent Study Course INGL 8045: Creole Languages in Legal Settings*. Approved on November 14, 2007 by English Dept. of College of Humanities, University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras.

Corum, Micah. *Corpus of Crucian English*. (Research in process). A corpus is a “collection of texts which have been selected and brought together so that language can be studied on the computer” (Wynne, 2005).

This compilation is only the start of a whole new wave of scholarly interest in the islands of the Northeastern region of the Caribbean. We not only need to acknowledge previous researchers who were able to see the diamond in the rough that this region represents, but we also need to encourage more investigation, fieldwork, and interest in discovering the hidden treasures of this area that are still waiting to be presented to the world at large. The scientific significance of this is enormous because the once under-appreciated cultures, languages, and literatures of this region are now being allowed to come to the forefront and proudly take their place on the world stage.

Linguistic and other types of fieldwork are the first step in this process, but they need to be done in a socially responsible way, a way that will bring satisfaction not only to the researchers, but most importantly, to the people and communities being focused on.

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PLURI-LINGUALISM, LANGUAGE CONTACT AND EDUCATION

