

The Last Generation? Intergenerational Transmission of English Creole in Urban Colón

¿La Última Generación? Transmisión intergeneracional del inglés criollo en la provincia de Colón

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Abstract

This study analyzes the sociolinguistic vitality and patterns of intergenerational transmission of Creole English in the urban setting of Colón Province, Panama. Using a qualitative approach with an ethnographic design, it examines the social relevance, linguistic ideologies, and identity values associated with this variant today. The sample was formed through purposive sampling of 120 participants from 40 multigenerational households, structured into three strata: grandparents (G1), parents (G2), and youth (G3). Data collection was conducted through the triangulation of semi-structured interviews, detailed field notes, and audio recordings in natural communicative settings; the corpus was examined using inductive thematic analysis. The results reveal a critical decline in the intergenerational transmission of Creole English: although younger generations demonstrate receptive language proficiency, their active and fluent use of the language is significantly lower compared to that of their predecessors. Despite this displacement, participants express a strong emotional and symbolic bond with the language, classifying it as a fundamental pillar of Afro-Panamanian identity. Likewise, systemic and structural pressures in the workplace and school settings, exacerbated by the hegemony of Spanish and institutional stigmatization, were identified as the main drivers of linguistic displacement. It is concluded that there is an urgent need to design and implement synergistic language revitalization programs that actively involve families, educational institutions, and cultural centers to safeguard Creole English as a living intangible community heritage.

Keywords: culture, dialect, linguistic research, language preservation

Resumen

Este estudio analiza la vitalidad sociolingüística y los patrones de transmisión intergeneracional del inglés criollo en el entorno urbano de la provincia de Colón, Panamá. A través de un enfoque cualitativo con diseño etnográfico, se examina la relevancia social, las ideologías lingüísticas y los valores identitarios asociados a esta variante en la actualidad. La muestra se conformó mediante un muestreo intencional de 120 participantes pertenecientes a 40 hogares multigeneracionales, estructurados en tres estratos: abuelos (G1), padres (G2) y jóvenes (G3). La recolección de datos se realizó mediante la triangulación de entrevistas semiestructuradas, notas de campo detalladas y grabaciones de audio en entornos comunicativos naturales; el corpus fue examinado mediante análisis temático inductivo. Los resultados revelan un declive crítico en la transmisión intergeneracional del inglés criollo: aunque las generaciones más jóvenes demuestran una competencia lingüística receptiva, su uso activo y fluido es significativamente menor en comparación con sus predecesores. Pese a este desplazamiento, los participantes manifiestan un fuerte vínculo afectivo y simbólico con la lengua, catalogándola como un pilar fundamental de la identidad afro-panameña. Asimismo, se identificaron presiones sistémicas y estructurales en los ámbitos laboral y escolar, potenciadas por la hegemonía del español y la estigmatización institucional, como los principales vectores del desplazamiento lingüístico. Se concluye que existe una necesidad imperativa de diseñar e implementar programas de revitalización lingüística sinérgicos que involucren activamente a las familias, las instituciones educativas y los centros culturales para salvaguardar el inglés criollo como patrimonio comunitario inmaterial vivo.

Palabras clave: cultura, dialecto, investigación lingüística, preservación de la lengua

Introduction

Colon's history, shaped by Afro-Caribbean migration and diverse linguistic influences, provides a critical sociolinguistic context for examining the intergenerational transmission and maintenance of Panamanian English Creole (Conniff, 2012; Putnam, 2017). This investigation takes more of a sociolinguistic look Panamanian English Creole (henceforth PEC), framing it largely as a cultural resource deeply woven into the fabric of identity, resistance, and society's ever-shifting values. Historically, PEC has served as an essential emblem of Afro-Caribbean roots in Panama, especially within Colon, even though its use by younger people seems, in most cases, to be waning, leading to inquiries about its future trajectory (Baptiste, 2020; Wade, 2017)

Referred to locally as *West Indian English*, or sometimes even just *broken English*, Panamanian English Creole is fundamentally an English-based Caribbean Creole. It is mainly spoken by the offspring of Afro-Caribbean migrants, people who came to Panama from places like Jamaica and Barbados around the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Bartens, 2003; Holm, 1989). During the Panama Canal's construction, Colon swiftly grew into a crucial port and migrant hub, becoming a vital location for PEC and Afro-Caribbean culture at large.

Creoles, such as PEC, are essentially fully developed languages that arise in the context of language contact, generally, in situations shaped by colonialism or its long-term effects (Mufwene, 2001). These languages face negative perceptions, frequently unfairly seen as being broken or lesser forms of European languages (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). This kind of stigma has pushed PEC toward the margins in Panama, especially inside educational institutions, formal work settings, and the media. Because of these negative attitudes, Creole languages tend to be at risk of disappearing.

That a language is at risk is indicated by a key sign: the disruption of its intergenerational transmission (Fishman, 1991). This mostly implies that PEC may be going through what is known as a language shift, with younger individuals increasingly favoring standard English or Spanish. Observations lean toward this (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006), but solid research is still somewhat sparse, particularly focused studies that examine families and their day-to-day experiences. Now, global frameworks talk about language shift, and language endangerment. Here, they highlight how crucial it is for families to pass down minoritized languages if they are to survive (Fishman, 1991; Grenoble & Whaley, 2006). Even so, it is rare to see these ideas applied to Panama. Studies on language views in Panama tend to zoom in on Spanish-English bilingualism (Lipski, 2005; Zentella, 1997), and the sociolinguistic truths of Afro-Caribbean communities often go unmentioned.

It seems that Urban Colon, which used to be a hub of Afro-Caribbean linguistic life, is showing signs of change in language use, especially among younger people. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate how PEC is either kept alive or fades away inside families. It will also explore how aspects of identity, marginalization, and memory influence language use. The hope is that this work will add to our knowledge of both Panamanian sociolinguistics and Creole languages in general. As a result, the current study sets out to closely examine the use of PEC in families, how younger generations see it, and the attitudes tied to it. Existing research often stresses grammatical particulars (e.g., Bartens, 2003), at times maybe not focusing on the language's social meaning, emotional associations, and symbolic value. This research sees PEC as a living, dynamic language, not simply a cultural artifact; it thereby aims to feed into broader dialogues concerning language change, Afro-Caribbean identity, and cultural strength (Garrett, 2005; Patrick, 2007; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Consequently, the study is guided by three research questions:

1. To what extent is PEC transmitted across three generations within Afro-Caribbean families in urban Colon?
2. What factors (sociolinguistic, ideological, institutional) contribute to the decline or maintenance of PEC in family language practices?
3. How do different generations within families perceive the role and value of PEC in their cultural and linguistic identity?

To this end, the article is structured as follows. First, there is a theoretical overview of the main concepts framing this study, namely, language shift theory, language ideology, and the relationship between language and identity in minoritized communities. Then, the methodological framework is outlined, followed by a report of the main results of this study. Finally, I discuss the main conclusions of this study and its implications for intergenerational language transmission, cultural continuity, and ongoing efforts toward the recognition and revitalization of Panamanian English Creole in urban Colon.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in a sociolinguistic framework that integrates language shift theory, language ideology, and the relationship between language and identity. These perspectives provide a comprehensive lens through which the intergenerational transmission of Panamanian English Creole (PEC) can be examined (Fishman, 1991; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Language shift theory

To investigate the intergenerational transmission patterns of Panamanian English Creole (PEC) in an urban area of Colon, Panama, this study is grounded on a sociolinguistic approach that incorporates language shift theory and language ideology. Language shift theory highlights intergenerational transmission, especially within the family, as the most important factor in assessing the vitality of minority languages. According to Fishman (1991), if minority languages are no longer passed on as children's first language, their continued existence is in peril. Thus, PEC is not just used as an instrument of communication; it is also an area where power relations and identity are constructed.

The language shift process is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by a myriad of factors. Among the factors is socioeconomic mobility. According to Mufwene (2020), the language shift is motivated by the desire of speakers to improve their socioeconomic status. In this case, speakers may prefer to associate themselves with language groups that they perceive to be prestigious and offer them a gateway to socioeconomic mobility. This is in conformity with the arguments presented by Fishman (1991) in his work on language maintenance and shift. In his arguments, Fishman (1991) cited the domains of education, employment, and government as the primary domains that offer prominence to the language of the dominant group. In the case of Panamanian English Creole speakers, the speakers may prefer to shift to Spanish or Standard English in formal and educational domains because of their perceived utility in enhancing their academic and professional success.

Heritage languages have a critical role to play in language shift, though younger generations have shown stronger identification with global languages than their heritage languages (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2021). This is mostly because younger generations have had more exposure to global languages, especially through their learning institutions, social networks, and online platforms, which could eventually lead to a decline in their use of their heritage language. As Fishman (1991) points out, language shift is often characterized by a decline in language use within the family domain, which is a critical area of language use. For example, younger generations of Afro-Caribbeans in Panama may have receptive language ability in Panamanian English Creole, though they may choose to use Spanish or Standard English, especially in academic settings.

This is a classic case of language shift, which Hornberger (2008) refers to as continua of biliteracy, where sociopolitical forces and learning institutions determine which language is used, developed, or shifted to.

Language attitude may also contribute to the acceleration of language shift. For instance, negative ideologies toward minoritized languages, especially when linked with stigma and low social mobility, may not be passed down to the next generation. As Labov (1972) has shown, language attitude is also linked with issues of prestige and stratification. For instance, the attitude of the parent toward the language may also affect the child. If the parent thinks that the use of the Creole language may lead the child to stigma and low educational mobility in the future, the parent may deliberately try to promote the use of Spanish or Standard English in the home. On the other hand, positive language attitude based on ethnic pride and ethnolinguistic identity may also contribute positively to the maintenance of the language. For instance, Hornberger (2008) has shown that the educational and community environment may also serve as an important site for the promotion of language revitalization. In this regard, the community and the educational environment may also promote the value of the use of Panamanian English Creole.

Language Ideology and Identity

The current study examines the intergenerational transmission of Panamanian English Creole (PEC) in the urban city of Colon, Panama, with reference to the interlocking ideologies of language and identity. Language ideologies are defined as beliefs about language and its use that are embedded in the social world and that naturalize the hierarchies and associated social meanings of languages and language varieties (Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994; Kroskrity, 2021). Language ideologies play an important role in the analysis of the intergenerational transmission of PEC. In the context of postcolonial multilingual settings such as Panama, language ideologies are often characterized by the dichotomy between standardized and non-standardized language varieties. In this context, the former are associated with institutional and socioeconomic advancement, while the latter are relegated to culturally bounded and informal settings (Irvine and Gal, 2000).

The above processes are also closely linked with the processes of identity formation. In this context, Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic framework is followed. According to this framework, identity is not an entity, but an emergent social positioning accomplished in and through practice and ideology. Within this framework, the decline of PEC among the younger generation could also be understood as an aspect of identity negotiation that is influenced by the interplay of social mobility, educational pathways, and ethnolinguistic background. As argued by Darwin and Norton (2019), such processes of linguistic positioning are also closely linked with the struggle for "symbolic capital and social recognition.

From this perspective, the decline of PEC intergenerational transmission could also be understood as an ideological process that reshapes the interplay of language and identity and belonging. The above processes make visible the role of language ideologies as a mediating factor for the intergenerational transmission of PEC.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative ethnographic research model has been used in this study to investigate the use, meaning of, and inter-generational transfer of Panamanian English Creole (PEC) in urban Colon, Panama.

The methodology is based on sociolinguistic ethnographic principles, which underscore the need for a detailed description of peoples' lives, combined with careful attention to their day-to-day social practices involving language (Hymes, 1974; Blommaert, 2010). The goal of sociolinguistic ethnography is to provide an understanding of the forms of language used by individuals, such as when they use these forms, who they use them with, and the type of social context they are used in; the sociolinguistic ethnographer thus situates language as part of individuals' relationships, histories, and identities (Heller, 2011; Snell, Shaw & Copland, 2015).

Sociolinguistic ethnography regards language as used in social contexts, as opposed to following certain regulations. It is developed from Hymes' (1974) work in ethnography in communication, and subsequently from Milroy and Gordon's (2003) study on social networks in community norms as they relate to maintenance and change in language. Others, like Rampton (2007) or Blommaert (2010), observe that day-to-day conversation takes place in broader contexts concerning power relations, inequality, and mobility.

Choice of language has social significance, offering cues to the speaker's membership and social aspirations to upgrade his/her social status in the Creole language environment. Thus, the sociolinguistic ethnographic method of research aptly applies for research on the Panamanian English Creole language variety known as Panamanian English Creole (PEC) in the city of Colon in the country of Panama. Consequently, the research incorporates data from various sources such as naturally occurring conversations, semi-structured interviews and fieldnotes resulting from extended field observations.

Participants

The participants were selected through the purposeful sampling method, a qualitative sampling method in which the participants are selected based on their ability to provide adequate and useful information about the phenomenon of interest rather than their representativeness of the population of interest (Patton, 2015). Purposeful sampling is the most suitable method of sampling in qualitative sociolinguistic studies because of

the focus on the participants who have the most useful experiences in the complex relationships between language, identity, and community (Heller, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2015).

The main aim of the participant selection was to ensure that the participants came from families with long-standing associations with the Afro-Panamanian Creole-speaking community. The selection of the participants was also guided by the following parameters. Firstly, the participants had to come from families with cultural and linguistic associations with the Panamanian English Creole community and had to have lived in neighborhoods that have long-standing associations with the Creole-speaking community in Colón. These neighborhoods included Barrio Norte, Barrio Sur, and La Feria (Bartens, 2013; Cumberbatch & Bent, 2021). Secondly, the participants had to have lived in Colón for a period of at least ten years. This was to ensure that the participants had long-standing associations with the local community. Thirdly, the selected participants had to have come from families with individuals from different generations. This ensured that the findings of the study could be used for a comparative analysis. Lastly, the participants had to have identified themselves with the Creole-speaking community in Panama, irrespective of their current usage of the language.

This recruitment strategy ensured a total of 120 participants, all of whom were selected from 40 multigenerational families. Each of these families consisted of three generations of participants: the grandparents, referred to as Generation 1, the parents, referred to as Generation 2, and the young adults, referred to as Generation 3. Although this is a fairly large number of participants, it was a strategic decision in the recruitment of participants to ensure the inclusion of sociolinguistic variations in a multilingual and contact-rich urban context. Past studies have shown that many participants in a qualitative study are advantageous, especially in a study of language maintenance and language shift, where family and community are key concepts in the study of language use and change, as noted in Blommaert and Rampton (2016), Eckert (2012), and Sharma (2011).

Instruments

The process of data generation involved a triangulation method with the help of three research tools, which enhanced the validity and reliability of the data. The process involved integrating multiple qualitative research methods, which reduced bias and increased the credibility of the results (Denzin, 2012; Flick, 2018). For this research, triangulation methodology used a combination of semi-structured interviews, field notes, and natural audio recordings of speech. A combination of these research instrumentation tools offered a two-dimensional depth of insight into English Creole usage, awareness, and intergenerational transfer in Colon's English Creole-speaking community. These are described in the following sections.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they were considered to offer a balance of structure and flexibility, in which focus could be placed on guiding an individual through a series of points, but sufficient leeway offered for personal experiences to be articulated in their own way (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a methodology with a focus on intergenerational English Creole language transmission, these interviews allowed an individual to relate in a personal way concerning English Creole and their personal associations with identity.

The protocol for conducting interviews incorporated principles gleaned from other studies in sociolinguistics and ethnography conducted with minority language speakers (cf. Sharma, 2021; Meyerhoff & Walker, 2013). To better understand these speakers, an original set of 18 research questions was compiled covering topics such as in-home language use, intergenerational communication, education systems, social mobility, and attitudes towards Creole status (see Appendix). These draft research queries were subsequently circulated among research experts in both sociolinguistics and qualitative research methods at both University of Panama and University of West Indies. Referral

modifications were incorporated into a variety of questions, citing a final selection of 12 core research queries.

The length of each interview took approximately 45-60 minutes and was conducted in each participant's language preference, which ranged from Creole to Spanish or a combination of both. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Field notes

Field notes were an important part of this ethnography to describe and analyze situations (Emerson et al., 2011). The researcher used structured descriptive field notes. These are steeped in both observation and analysis. Notes were recorded during and after participating in community events, visiting homes, church meetings, and socializing in markets and schools.

To promote uniformity and insight in analysis, these field notes organized information in a two-column manner where one recorded objective observations (language used, context, interaction among participants) and other observations in a reflexive manner in the second column, which assisted with coding and subsequent analysis (Saldaña, 2021).

A total of 25 observation sessions were carried out over a span of four months. Of these, each of the 40 families observed was given at least two observation sessions in different contexts: one in a domestic or family setting and the other in a community or public setting. The time and setting of the observation were co-agreed with the participants, with a view to observing Creole in a setting where it occurred naturally, such as a family reunion, a church service on Sundays, or a community/municipal meeting.

Transcriptions were all conducted digitally at the end of each day and were paired with corresponding files and recorded interviews, all serving a very important function in providing a collection of information for analysis. The information not only served to complement the narrative accounts obtained in the interviews but also provided priceless information language choice in action.

Audio Recordings of Naturally Occurring Data

The third tool was audio-recorded conversations, which offered a natural source of linguistic data in a format ideal for a microscopic analysis of usage. Sociolinguistic ethnography regards this research technique as core because it indexes how speakers index and switch codes in response to micro-interactional dynamics in an authentic way (Johnstone, 2018; Tagliamonte, 2016).

Recordings were conducted in informal, natural contexts such as family dinner gatherings, community socials, church meetings, and other communal social functions where English Creole and other dialect varieties were therefore likely to arise naturally. To keep these renditions as natural as possible, before recording, research subjects were informed of a general project objective but were not constrained by any preordained research topics. The observer's paradox is thus alleviated in this way (Labov, 1972).

A total of 96 recording sessions were gathered over a period of four months. Not all 120 participants were recorded individually, but rather a representative subset of 60 participants, with 20 in each generational subset, to promote diversity in terms of age, gender, and communicative context. The selection of these participants took into consideration their willingness to be recorded and their sociologically relevant role in family or community contexts in which Creole usage was most prevalent. The recorded sessions lasted between 15 and 45 minutes, representing a total of approximately 65 hours of audio content.

A systematic processing procedure was used in working with these audio files. The files were all transcribed verbatim in the transcription tool called ELAN, using a standard set of guidelines for transcribing overlapping speech, pauses, and code-switching (see illustrations in Jefferson, 2004). The transcription files were then matched with field notes to have these moments labeled in a way meaningful to a given context, such as shifts in language choice, humor, or corrections.

To promote analytical validity, these records were coded using a set of recurrent linguistic and sociocultural variables, such as: (a) domains of Creole spoken, (b) level and form of code-switching, (c) intergenerational address forms, and (d) metalinguistic

comments on language choice. Such factors were triangulated with interview information and fieldwork observations to establish relationships among language practice, matters of identity, and intergenerational transfer.

Overall, these audio recordings allowed for a fascinating glimpse into the lived experience of language among these research subjects. They not only indicated when and in what manner English Creole was spoken but also with which connotations and overtones of meaning. Such information added greatly to other methods, which were otherwise constrained to allow an analysis to focus not simply on what subjects have to say concerning a research topic, but rather how they do so in lived experience, a factor of immense significance in tracking Creole in Colon.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Brau & Clarke, 2006), following an iterative approach in cycle one, a total of 37 initial codes were produced from all interviews and audio-transcripts. In this step, codes were organized into nine possible sub-themes, which included 'family language habits,' 'shame and pride,' 'school influence,' and 'language as inheritance' among others. In subsequent analysis phases, overlapping codes were reduced, and all redundancy was eliminated to arrive at a final four themes.

The construction of themes considered both semantic content and latent content concerning participation statements. The participation statements include any linguistic markers in a context, including emotional markers, used in a language. To promote inter-rater reliability, two independent raters with an understanding of qualitative language analysis were used to check themes. Additionally, small discrepancies were considered in a consensus-building approach. Table 1 Summarizes the final themes, their operational definitions, and representative examples from the data

Table 1

Analysis of Panamanian English Creole Use in Urban Colon

Theme	Definition	Example (excerpt from participants)
Identity	It relates to how participants connect Creole to feelings of individual and collective affiliation, especially in relation to their Afro-Panamanian heritage	“Cuando escucho el criollo, siento que estoy oyendo a mis abuelos otra vez.” (<i>“When I hear Creole, I feel like I’m hearing my grandparents again.”</i>) (Participant G2)
Prestige	Portrays the ambivalence towards the social value of Creole culture, the struggle to acknowledge its value as cultural capital while deeming it less “proper” than Spanish and Standard English.	“Yo lo entiendo, pero casi no lo hablo. Mis hijos no van a necesitar ese ‘inglés machucado’ para la escuela.” (<i>“I understand it, but I rarely speak it. My children won’t need that ‘broken English’ at school.”</i>) (G3)
Transmission	Examines patterns in Creole language transmission—and non-transmission—to succeeding generations in families, including language usage patterns in households within their communities.	“Mi nieta se ríe cuando le hablo en criollo; dice que suena raro.” (<i>“My granddaughter laughs when I speak Creole to her; she says it sounds strange.”</i>) (G1)

After the thematic reduction, these three themes were uniformly apparent among the 120 participants with some differences according to the generation. It turned out that the themes Identity and Transmission were the most prominent among the older and middle generations (G1 and G2), while the themes Prestige and Change were more commonly found in the younger generation (G3). This outcome not only reflected the linguistic competence level but also how the participants understood the question *speaking Creole* in the light of the current situation in Colon.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed guidelines of research ethics by Universidad de Panamá. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before information gathering, ensuring they comprehended the nature of the gathering, its voluntary nature,

and their right to withdraw at any time. In terms of confidentiality, each participant in this study was given a pseudonym, and any identifying information, like neighborhood, church, or employment, was altered in the final presentation.

All audio files, transcripts, and field notes were kept under secure conditions, which means that the files were encrypted and placed on password-protected drives and available only to the main researcher. Other physical notes were placed in a locked filing cabinet in a private office in the researcher's University office. Following Creswell and Creswell (2018), this ensured that participants' data was protected from unauthorized personnel and in keeping with best research standards on data management across institutions worldwide.

As a response to the historic relegation of the Afro-Panamanians, the research was conducted from a reflexive and cultural perspective. The technique of reflexivity, in the context of qualitative and ethnography, involves the ongoing research questioning and questioning its own location in the research and the assumptions and biases involved within the interpretation and research processes (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002). In the context of the research, this conceivably involved the ongoing awareness of how characteristics like the research location in language, ethnicity, and institutional location could impact the research and the interpretational processes of the findings from the research accounts.

Being culturally competent meant being very considerate of the participants' cultural conventions and practices throughout the entire research process (Liamputtong, 2010). This meant being respectful in terms of using polite addressing modes, being cognizant of the community stratification systems, and taking care that all data gathering encounters were held in contexts very familiar to the participants. Finally, the findings were communicated in a manner that was participant-centered and did not resort to terminologies expressing lack in terms of language shift (Smith, 2012).

Results and Discussion

The findings are organized around five central points: how Creole is employed within different social domains, how it was transmitted across generations, how speakers feel about it, how society presses them with its use, and what efforts are made to keep it alive Figure 1.

Figure 1

Domains of Use: English Creole in Home, School, and Religious Life

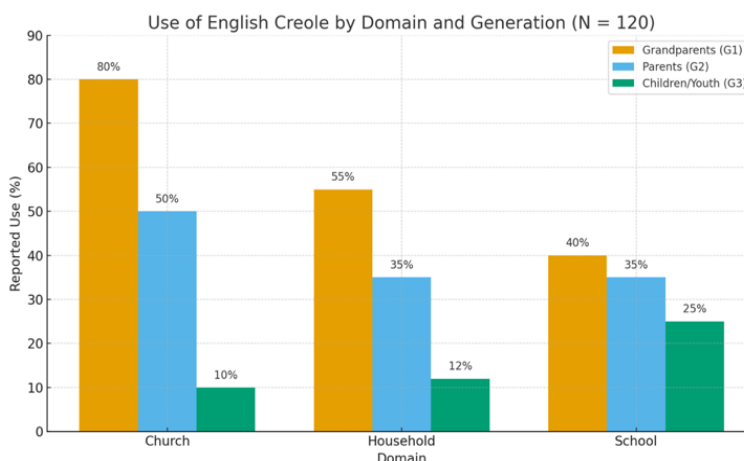


Figure 2 above shows the generational trend of English Creole use in the three fundamental settings of church, home, and school based on the self-reported answer in the interview by way of a five-point Likert-type scale. The three settings are the focus because they are the most key environments where language choice is exercised daily (Fishman, 1991; Holmes & Wilson, 2017). The church is fundamental because the language of the church is the site of continuity and the location where English Creole was traditionally used for sermon and community prayer sessions. The home is crucial because the home is the site of language socialization and the location where the fundamental language is passed down from parents to the next generation.

As illustrated in Figure 2, Generation 1 (G1) community members demonstrated the highest levels of use of Creole, where about 80% used it in a church setting, followed by 55% in a home setting, and finally 40% in a school-related situation. These results corroborate previous sociolinguistic research (Milroy & Milroy, 1992; Milroy & Gordon, 2003) in reporting community members retaining a minority language in a close, often heritage-centered community, where older members of such societies preserve a minority language due to highly developed societal networks.

However, this trend changes in Generation 2 (G2). Only half use Creole in church, and around 35% use it at home or in school. They seem to juggle what they learned from their parents with the pull of more common languages. Spanish, as a few interviewees mentioned, often becomes the go-to for official situations, school, and getting ahead. This lines up with what other research has found in other communities where languages are shifting (Fishman, 1991; DeGraff, 2005).

Generation 3 (G3) shows the steepest drop. Just 10% use Creole in church, about 12% at home, and around 25% at school. It seemed, from watching them, that when these younger people did use Creole in school, it was more for show, a way of expressing identity rather than actually being fluent. This pattern of not fully understanding, using it for symbolic reasons, and not really being able to use it properly; is something often seen when languages are not being passed down through generations as well as they used to be (Holm, 2000; Winford, 2003).

Intergenerational language transmission

What people shared about their own lives really brings these numbers to light. A lot of grandparents said their grandchildren get confused or amused when they try to speak to them in Creole.

One grandmother even said, “Cuando yo le hablo en Ingles criollo a mi nieta, ella me dice: Abuela, ¿por qué hablas así?”¹ It is not just about not knowing the language; it is also about these younger people feeling distant from their elders' language. Another older person reported, “Mi nieto se ríe cuando uso palabras en Ingles criollo; él piensa que estoy bromeando o hablando incoherencias.”² So, Creole is going from being a normal family language to something funny or old-fashioned.

This reflects work on attitudes towards heritage languages and internalized stigma in recent years. For example, research demonstrates a correlation between young speakers of minority or heritage languages, who suffer from linguistics insecurity; a conviction of incompetence and embarrassment about using their heritage language before the standard language due to which language shift takes place (Tang, 2024; Jouitteau, 2024). Similarly, research in communities where intergenerational transmission faces challenges finds evidence supporting that negative societal assessments of language use and changes toward new values contribute toward relocating youth from their heritage language, though they have some understanding of it (Kissau et al., 2023; Alhazmi, 2024). This work lends itself to an understanding of language shift not being an exclusively structural process but, fundamentally, an emotional one, wherein linguistics values are linguistics activities toward which community members self-evaluate, and assuming meaning within those communities of place.

Linguistic attitudes towards PEC

Parents in the second generation (G2) see the same phenomena happening in their own homes now, writes Fishman (1991). Many individuals report understanding Creole.

¹ *When I speak to my granddaughter in Creole English, she says to me: ‘Grandma, why do you speak like that? (Wen mi taak Creole to mi granpikni, shi se: ‘Granma, wai yu taak so?)*

² *My grandson laughs when I use words in Creole English; he thinks I’m joking or talking nonsense. (Mi granpikni laf wen mi yuuz word dem in Creole English; hi tink mi a jok o taak nonsens.*

However, they never speak it with their own young children. These parents feel Spanish or *standard English* will give their youngsters better opportunities for success in school and in life. That parent, writes Fishman (1991), expressed succinctly what many feel, *Yo lo entiendo, pero casi no lo hablo. Mis hijos no van a necesitar ese inglés machucado para la escuela.*³ *Inglés machucado* or *bad English*, are not just choices; they describe a deeply ingrained language attitude entwined in power relations (Ultan, 2002). These are not just arbitrary choices, according to language experts (Ultan, 2002). These terms are used from old colonial days and social stratification, where standard speech reigns supreme (Schilling, 2003). This stamps out common speech, or basic, routine speech, of subordinated groups, according to linguists (Woolard, 1998; see also Irvine & Gal, 2000; García et al., 2021). Saying *inglés machucado* again points to Creole's weakness or badness in terms of *bad English*, where dominant groups choose what is good or proper speech (Lippi-Green, 2012). What is proper speech, according to linguists, is what will give them power, status, or wealth (Rosa & Flores, 2017). This happens in Colon, where parents think good speech, or standard English, will give them status in their community, too. Therefore, they promote the same linguistic systems and ideologies, which keep Creole and its speakers down, where they belong (Schilling, 2003). This emphasis on *good speech*, according to linguists (Ultan, 2002), creates what they describe in language terms, in *iconization*, where speech forms are icons for intelligence, novelties, and victories, in short, winning (Ultan, 2002). This will help explain why there's been so much reduction in Creole speech, even among families so devoted to their own cultural or linguistic heritage (Fishman,

Even the young people themselves often said they were not comfortable with Creole or that they only understood it passively. A seventeen year old mentioned: "No me sale natural... yo entiendo algunas palabras, pero prefiero español."⁴

³ *I understand it, but I hardly speak it. My children will not need that broken English for school*

⁴ *It doesn't come naturally to me... I understand some words, but I prefer Spanish.*

Another one said that "A veces mis abuelos hablan rápido en eso inglés (chombo) y yo no entiendo nada."⁵ Finally, in addition to the above points, in the multigenerational family reunions observed in the field as well as supported by the interview data, it was observed that the response from the children was often in Spanish even when they were spoken to in Panamanian English Creole. This has been observed in the naturalistic observations conducted over twelve sessions, and such observations have also been supported by the parents' and grandparents' accounts. Together, the data suggest that even if the younger participants in the study were able to listen to the Creole language, their ability to produce the language actively was considerably lower. This has also been observed in other heritage language speakers across the world, where the ability to listen to the language has either preceded or replaced the ability to produce the language actively (Montrul, 2016; Polinsky, 2018).

Notably, in the end, the numbers and the stories all point to the same thing: English Creole in Urban Colon is fast disappearing from one generation to the next, and most especially in contexts such as home, church, and community gatherings, where it was an important means of transmitting the language. The quantitative analysis makes it clear that the transfer of the language from parent to child is being lost, but the qualitative analysis provides a better understanding of what the situation means to the people living it. As shown in the results, the loss of the language in the community is more complex than just the loss of words and grammars.

As has also been argued by previous authors, if a heritage language or minority language ceases to be used in community-focused contexts, it becomes *semioticized*, that is, preserved symbolically, rather than communicatively (Holm, 2000, Winford, 2003, DeGraff, 2019). In this regard, it is at the level of the youngest speakers in the community who have Panamanian English Creole as their heritage language that its semioticized aspect has become most evident, in that, to these speakers, this heritage language now symbolically.

⁵ *Sometimes my grandparents speak quickly in that English (Chombo), and I don't understand anything.*

Interviews showed that the elderly generation (G1) considers Creole the *language of truth* related to spirituality, humor, and solidarity. They employed Creole in their preaching, narratives, and interactions with their immediate neighbors. They were proud of the language's rhythm and expressiveness. To the elderly generation, Creole has moral and cultural meaning. A 72-year-old man claimed that *to pray properly you have got to pray in Creole*.⁶ By contrast, those in the middle generation (G2) frequently thought of Creole as *the language of emotion* that was good for reprimanding, nagging, kidding, or expressing affection but not so good in business and academia. Many parents claimed that they speak better Creole but preferred speaking Spanish with their children since according to their perceptions, they aspire a better future for their children and Creole English will not help them in that future.

This utterance is absolutely enlightening on macro ideologies in language, which represent beliefs in what *good* and *good enough* language is. Two other scholars who have addressed how such beliefs in language tend to support social hierarchy based on power, education, and status in language are Woolard in 2016 and Kroskrity in 2021. *Inglés machucado* represents linguistic discrimination, because while Creole historically started out as a language for liberation and communal strength, rather than support and recognition, it has instead remained marginalized in favor of Spanish and Standard English in mainstream discourses. These ideologies influence not just what one thinks and says, but how one gets ahead in life, and thus why one must be careful in what one says in order to get ahead.

The field observations carried out over a period of four months reveal even further how these concepts have been applied. In family gatherings, church, or simply conversations, Creole was largely employed for nostalgic, ludic, or performative purposes. Young speakers, particularly, employed it for tease purposes, such as mocking older relatives, for example, or signaling that a joke was being shared. However, once the grandparents began speaking to them in Creole, these young speakers responded back

⁶ *Fi pray propaly, yu afi pray in Creole.*

in Spanish. It was a subtle yet potent indication that language shift was under way. These phenomena have all been carefully observed over 25 field observation sessions, ranging from one to three hours, carried out in the natural settings chosen by the participants themselves. Such a phenomenon has, of course, been previously found by other ethnographers, who have found, across all instances observed, that, where a language is endangered or dying, understanding is maintained longer than speaking (King, 2020; Grenoble & Whaley, 2021).

In quantitative terms, this is supported by data from 60 hours of recorded spontaneous conversations in the community. Creole was found in 78% of the conversations by speakers in G1, in higher levels of mixed codes (around 45% Creole plus Spanish) in speakers in G2, whereas in speakers in G3, less than 10% Creole was used in total discourse, often in the form of codeswitched expressions such as *Mi fren, tú sabes* or *I tell you, man*. These are linguistically insignificant yet highly significant in terms of what they now symbolize. According to Bucholtz & Hall, these linguistic residues function as indexical anchors of identity, heritage traces which persist even as fluency fades.

Taken side by side, these sets of data provide a complex view of the links between the loss of language and the loss and gain of emotion. A family may have laughter, blushing, and a sense of pride surrounding the same thing. Speaking Creole is no longer simply a matter of communication between people but has come to be a reflection of social history that indicates the passage of some centuries of geographical movement and exclusion.

Therefore, Figure 3 below does not only illustrate the shifts taking place within the realm of language; it also illustrates how the public responds to memory and modernity in their everyday lives. The findings show that for PEC's future within Urban Colon, it does not solely rely on the teaching of vocabulary or grammar but also on challenging the ideologies that classify it as broken or archaic. More recent sociolinguistic ethnographies (Garrett, 2020; Hinrichs, 2018; Pérez, 2023) emphasize that the most effective revitalizations happen when there is a recreation of linguistic pride that falls within the

realm of larger cultural resilience. The voices within this study, whether they are sad voices, whether they are resignation-filled voices, but all importantly, whether they be voices that are wise, serve as a reminder that for all languages that are endangered, there exist feelings, beliefs, and hopes that are no less valuable for being left behind.

Table 2

Field data and participant interviews

Domain of Use		Generation 1 (G1)	Generation 2 (G2)	Generation 3 (G3)	Observational & Interpretive Notes
Church Religious Gatherings	/	80%	52%	18%	G1 involves regular usage in preaching, songs, and church gatherings. G2 involves a combination of Creole and Spanish. G3 involves comprehension without frequently using it; they consider it to be old-fashioned.
Home Family Interaction	/	55%	35%	12%	Creole was previously a family language. Use of Spanish increased by G2 to ensure success at school. G3 responds in Spanish when spoken in Creole, indicating a partial understanding.
School Educational Settings	/	40%	22%	5%	G1 says he spoke this Creole dialect casually with friends during youth. G2 & G3 do not use this dialect while at school as it is stigmatized for being associated with improper English.

Conclusion

The findings here paint a rather stark picture of what is happening with English Creole in Urban Colon. Looking at both the numbers and the stories, there is a clear decline across generations in how much the language is used and how it is viewed, particularly among the younger generations. The oldest generation (G1) still uses Creole regularly and feels a strong connection to it. Generation 2 (G2), however, shows a marked decrease in using it actively, mostly due to the push for Spanish and English in schools and jobs. And then there is Generation 3 (G3), where many young people only have a partial understanding of Creole, using it more for show than for actual communication.

These trends are not exactly new; they echo what Fishman (1991) described as typical stages of language shift. They also highlight how vulnerable smaller, less-supported languages can be when up against more dominant ones (Holm, 2000; DeGraff, 2005). The big issue seems to be that Creole is not being passed down through families like it used to; especially at home and in religious settings. Dorian (1981) argued that language loss is not just about changes to the language itself, but about changes in the social environment, and that seems to be the case here.

The real-life stories I collected drive this point home. Grandparents often find themselves lost in translation when their grandkids do not understand or prefer to speak Spanish. Parents, on the other hand, often feel torn, knowing Creole but choosing Spanish because they think it will help their kids get ahead in school and work. These feelings and beliefs about language and identity are key, as Irvine and Gal (2000) discuss, in how languages gain or lose value in a community.

So, what does this mean for English Creole in Urban Colon? If things continue this way, the language might become more of a symbol than a living, breathing means of communication. But it does not have to be this way. Community efforts involving all generations could make a real difference. Initiatives such as school programs, church activities, and family literacy projects could help reinforce the importance and usefulness of Creole for younger people. I have seen similar efforts work in other Creole-speaking communities (Winford, 2003; Migge & Léglise, 2013), showing that it is possible to turn things around when people are proud of their language, when institutions support it, and when older and younger generations connect over it.

Ultimately, this research adds to the bigger conversations about language diversity, cultural heritage, and the fragile situation of Creole languages in a world where many languages exist side-by-side. The situation in Urban Colon is a good example of the pressures that smaller languages face worldwide, but it also shows us ways to protect them. Whether English Creole thrives in Colon will depend on whether the community and those in charge see it as something valuable worth preserving for cultural expression, identity, and connection between generations.

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Appendix

Preguntas para la entrevista

Objetivo Especifico: Analizar las experiencias, percepciones y actitudes de los hablantes de diferentes generaciones en el contexto urbano de Colón sobre el uso, la transmisión, el valor sociocultural y el papel en la sociedad del inglés criollo, con el fin de comprender los factores que

	Preguntas de calentamiento ¿Puedes contarme un poco sobre ti y tu niñez en Colón? ¿Qué recuerdos tienes de tu infancia sobre cómo pasabas el tiempo, a qué jugabas o cómo celebraban las fiestas y tradiciones familiares?
1	¿Podrías detallar cuándo y dónde habitualmente utilizas el inglés criollo?
2	¿Con qué personas hablas en inglés criollo más frecuentemente (familia, amigos, vecinos)?
3	¿En qué lengua te comunicas generalmente con tus hijos o nietos? ¿Por qué?
4	¿Qué cambios percibes en el uso del inglés criollo desde 1980 hasta la actualidad, especialmente a partir de la reversión del Canal de Panamá en 1999?
Tema 2: Actitudes lingüísticas e identidad	
5	¿Qué valor le das tú al uso del inglés criollo y cómo percibes que la sociedad en general lo valora hoy en día?
6	¿Qué opinas o qué piensas cuando escuchas a los jóvenes hablar en inglés criollo?
7	¿Consideras relevante la preservación del inglés criollo? ¿por qué?
8	¿Has experimentado alguna vez presión para adoptar un inglés "estándar" en lugar del criollo? ¿En qué circunstancias?
Tema 3 Transmisión intergeneracional	
9	¿Recuerdas si tus padres o abuelos solían hablarte en inglés criollo en casa u otros espacios familiares? Si es así, describe el tipo de conversaciones, palabras, expresiones o situaciones especiales que recuerdes.
10	¿Por qué crees que es importante o no transmitir el inglés criollo a las nuevas generaciones, y qué consecuencias podría tener no hacerlo?
11	¿Qué acciones crees que podrían ayudar a que el inglés criollo vuelva a transmitirse con mayor frecuencia dentro de las familias?
12	¿Qué más podrías compartir sobre tu experiencia personal con el inglés criollo o sobre tu opinión acerca de su futuro en la comunidad de Colón?

inciden en su continuidad o desaparición