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# Language Policies in Colombia: The Inherited Disdain for our Native Languages

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As a contribution to enhance the discussion about the spread of the symbolic power of English in Colombia through a National Bilingual Policy, this paper aims at raising awareness about two main aspects: 1) Colombia has a variety of languages that should be seen as resources and not as problems (Ruíz, 1984) and 2) There is a pattern in our government language policies that tends to favor the elite. The conclusion of this paper is that not much has changed in the linguistic planning in Colombia since the Spanish colonization; privileged groups continue to legislate to favor privileged groups. This approach contributes to enlarge the gap between the haves and the have nots in Colombia.

*Key words:* indigenous, languages, palenquero, creoles, marginalization, language, policy

## **Resumen**

Como una forma de contribuir a la discusión acerca de la difusión del poder simbólico del inglés en Colombia a través del Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo, este artículo busca despertar la conciencia acerca de dos aspectos fundamentales: 1) Colombia tiene una variedad de idiomas que deberían ser vistos como recursos y no como problemas (Ruiz, 1984) y 2) existe un patrón en relación con las políticas lingüísticas en nuestro gobierno que tienden a favorecer las élites. La gran conclusión es que no ha cambiado mucho en la planeación lingüística en Colombia desde la colonización española donde los grupos privilegiados legislaban para favorecerse a ellos mismos. Este tipo de actitudes contribuye a agrandar la brecha entre quienes lo tienen todo y quienes no tienen nada.

*Palabras clave:* Lenguas, indígenas, Palenquero, Creole, políticas, lingüísticas

## **Introduction**

The Ministry of Education of Colombia has produced a series of guidelines to establish the national standards for the core areas of the Colombian curriculum which are Spanish, mathematics, social and natural sciences, and citizenship competences. To these series the MEN added the “Estándares básicos de

competencias en lenguas extranjeras: Inglés. Formar en lenguas extranjeras: ¡el reto!” as part of its “Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB)” (*National Bilingualism Program*). The production of these standards is inscribed within the government proposal of the current President of Colombia, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, called “La revolución educativa” (*Educational revolution*).

The goal of the educational revolution is to improve the quality of education and extend access to education in order to promote the social and economic development of the country and better the living conditions of Colombians. To reach this objective, the national government set three basic policies: 1) Extend education coverage, 2) Improve the quality of education, and 3) Improve the efficiency of education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, n/d, p. 8). Despite the fact that, initially, favoring the teaching of English was neither included in any of these policies nor in the “Plan decenal de educación 1996-2005”, a document that established the direction of education for ten years, it was added later as a national policy in the “Plan sectorial 2006-2010”.

All of these documents state a deep interest in the improvement of the quality of education in Colombia, and the need to favor less privileged groups; nevertheless, there is a lack of coherence between the sociolinguistic reality in Colombia and the projects undertaken by the Ministry of Education. In the National Constitution of 1991 Colombia is acknowledged as a multicultural and multilingual nation where there is a convergence of indigenous languages, creoles, several foreign languages, and Spanish. In this paper, I would like to bring to the surface the existence of multilingualism in Colombia and relate it to language policies. My main objective here is to raise awareness of the fact that these languages are real, have real speakers and are alive today. It is not new that multilingualism (especially the type that is related to indigenous languages and creoles) has been permanently overshadowed by monolingual ideologies and poor language policies, but the launch of the PNB has affected (and will continue to affect) negatively the value, recognition, use, study, teaching and learning of these and all the other languages different from English that share the Colombian territory.

## **Indigenous Languages**

According to the National Planning Department (DNP), the official organism in charge of tracing the directions of all national policies, the indigenous population in

Colombia is 1,378,884, which represents 3.3% of the national populace, and these citizens live in the 33 departments of Colombia. Although a small percentage of this population is monolingual in Spanish, the majority of them speak any of the sixty-six languages that are alive today (Landaburu, 2005; Pineda Camacho, 1997). This is a small number of indigenous languages compared to the large number of languages found by the Spaniards when they first arrived in America.

The multilingualism found by the Spanish conquistadors provoked a negative impression, so that they referred to the large number of languages spoken by the indigenous peoples as an “illness” that was spread along all the different groups found in the new world. There was such disregard (or ignorance) for our indigenous languages that Christopher Columbus re-named as many things as he could (he re-named the island of *Guanabani*, the name given it by the Indians, as *San Salvador*; he re-baptized two Indians he took back to Spain with the names of *Don Juan de Castilla* and *Don Fernando de Aragón*) (Patiño Rosselli, 2000; Todorov, 1984). This account of the first encounters of the colonizers with the natives gives evidence that the prevalent ideology of devaluing our indigenous peoples and everything related to them has deep roots in our historic past.

The linguistic diversity was a problem for evangelization purposes and for business; the Spaniards’ interest was not in learning indigenous languages but in subjugating the indigenous peoples. To achieve their goal, their policy was to teach Castilian to the children of the indigenous chiefs, as well as Catholicism and government skills (Pineda Camacho, 2000). Soon the Church realized that aborigines were reciting prayers but did not understand their meaning and started to promote the learning of indigenous languages among its missionaries so they could evangelize indigenous peoples in their native languages. The Spanish Crown, headed by Philip II, supported this initiative but only for evangelization purposes while at the same time encouraging the spread of Castilian, which was clearly a policy of transitional bilingualism (De Mejía, 2005; Patiño Rosselli, 2000; Pineda Camacho, 2000).

All of this period was characterized by a struggle within the Church; some missionaries, especially “mestizos” (children of Spaniards and Indigenous peoples), wanted to keep the indigenous languages (which they spoke) but the Spanish missionaries wanted to conduct evangelization only in Spanish. The discrepancy in the application of linguistic policies resulted in some aborigines learning Spanish and

some not, a situation which was used by the “Ordenanzas” (people in power in the new Colony) as a means for segregation (Pineda Camacho, 2000)

Years later, during the government of Charles III, this policy changed drastically; indigenous languages were prohibited, and Castilian was declared the only acceptable language (Landaburu, 2005; Mar-Molinero, 2000; Patiño Rosselli, 2000). The development of maritime commerce conducted in Spanish, and the insurgency of Tupac Amaru in 1780-1781, triggered the interest of Charles III to forbid the indigenous languages. This policy continued during the rest of the colonization period, and speaking Spanish (Castilian) was required in order to obtain citizenship in the new colonies.

The marginalization towards indigenous peoples continued during the era of the republic, when a great number of the population was “Criolla” (Creole, the name given to children of Spaniards born in America) and spoke Spanish. The “Criollos” did not want the indigenous to speak Spanish; they wanted to keep the aborigines marginalized linguistically and culturally due to three main reasons: 1) as a control mechanism; 2) the “Criollos” thought that if the indigenous peoples learned Spanish they would become lazy and corrupted; and 3) the “Criollos” wanted the linguistic difference as a way of discrimination (Pineda Camacho, 2000). Feeling left out from society, the aborigines did not see any purpose for speaking Spanish.

Some years after the independence from Spain, in 1886, the new republic, then called “La Gran Colombia”, wrote its first Constitution. In it, Spanish was designated as the official and only language. This Constitution was characterized by a strong sense of cohesion and homogeneity, evidenced by the fact that it did not acknowledge the multiculturalism or multilingualism of the country (Pineda Camacho, 2000); the natural implication for indigenous populations (and Afro-Colombians) was that they should drop their languages (that at the time, and until recently, were not recognized as languages but as “dialects”) and speak Spanish instead. This policy succeeded for more than one hundred years and was strengthened by the fact that the education of indigenous groups was in the hands of Catholic missionaries who conducted it in Spanish (De Mejía, 2005).

It has been until very recently (1962) that indigenous peoples have started to claim their linguistic rights which were taken away, first by Spanish conquistadors and later on by their own flesh: the “Criollos”. The early 70s witnessed the emergence of indigenous group organizations whose purpose of reclaiming their lands was

accompanied later by a demand for the acknowledgment of their culture and languages. In 1978, for the first time, the Ministry of Education with the issue of Decree 1142 recognized that indigenous populations had the right to be educated in their own languages and design a curriculum that addressed their contexts and needs (De Mejía, 2005; Jiménez, 1998; Landaburu, 2005). In 1991 with the issue of the new National Constitution, Colombia was acknowledged as a multicultural and multilingual nation with the recognition of indigenous communities and minority groups as legitimate Colombian citizens. Spanish was still designated as the official language of the country, but the indigenous languages were included as official in the indigenous territories, which implied that the state would guarantee bilingual education and respect for their cultural identity (Constitución Política de Colombia, 1991).

With the issuance of Law 115 in 1994, the National Government ratified the rights of indigenous groups and recognized the need for ethno-education. Ethno-education in this context means the right to foster the culture and language of the indigenous peoples. To ensure this, their education will be conducted in their mother tongue and in Spanish and teachers should be bilingual and, preferably, members of the same indigenous community.

Indigenous languages have gained recognition little by little now 500 years after the discovery of America, but still there is a long way towards the concretization of some of the objectives registered in the Constitution and Law 115. It is still uncertain what will happen with the indigenous languages in the years to come, considering that in the past the competition for prestige and resources was only against Spanish, but now, with the launching of the PNB, English enters as a new and powerful player. What is clear is that more decisive governmental efforts and investment are necessary in order to preserve the language and culture of our indigenous groups in Colombia. Unfortunately, as Omoniyi (2003) states: “Language policies sometimes never rise beyond the page of the document on which they are printed” (p. 16).

## **Afro-Caribbean Languages**

Besides the more than sixty-six indigenous languages that exist today in Colombia, there are two Afro-Caribbean languages that have developed since the colonial times: “Palenquero”, a Spanish-based creole spoken in San Basilio de Palenque, and an English-based creole spoken on San Andrés Island. It seems that

these creoles developed due to two main reasons: 1) The practice of slavery: Spaniards brought a large number of Africans to work in agriculture, mines, and sugar cane plantations (Holm, 1984; Patiño Rosselli, 1992) and 2) “Cimarronismo” (*maroons*) (Patiño Rosselli, 1998). Until very recently, these two languages were invisible in Colombia, and very little was known about them. The Ministry of Culture has started a project led by Jon Landaburu to revive and maintain these and the indigenous languages spoken in Colombia.

## Palenquero

During the colonial period, Spain brought over a huge number of Africans to enslave them and send them to work in agriculture and mines, particularly in the Caribbean region. Africans never accepted their condition as slaves and always sought ways to recover their freedom, which motivated them to escape and settle in isolated areas. San Basilio de Palenque is one of more than forty settlements and where “Palenquero” originated.

This small village is located about 60 km from Cartagena and 200 km from Barranquilla, on the north coast of the country. It is not clear when exactly San Basilio de Palenque was founded; Morton (2005) and Schwegler and Morton (2003) state that it must have been between 1650 and 1700, but Lipski (1987) places it around 1599 and Megenney (1986) in 1608. Despite the discrepancies in dates, they all agree that it was Domingo Bioho, an African slave who claimed to be King Benkos from an African royal family, who led a rebellion and was followed by thirty other slaves who escaped from Cartagena; together they built a fortified site and founded a community of maroons (*cimarrones*). They built these fortified settlements with sticks (“palos”), hence the name “Palenqueros”, to resist the attempts of the Spaniards to recapture them and also to keep whatever they had built in their short period of freedom (Morton, 2005; Colombia Aprende, 2008; De Mejía, 2005; Patiño Rosselli, 1992; Pineda Camacho, 2000).

By 1603, the official reports warned about the increasing number of “Palenques” near Cartagena (capital city of Bolívar), and this motivated the Governor of Bolívar to sign an agreement with the inhabitants of Palenque de San Basilio in which the former acknowledged the independence of the “Palenqueros” as long as the latter did not encourage “cimarronaje” (marronage) and did not take in more escapees. Despite this agreement, for almost a century the “Palenqueros” had to fight the colonizers to

keep their freedom and their lands until 1691, when the King of Spain agreed to confer on them the lands they had cultivated and where they had built their towns (Patiño Rosselli, 1998; Pineda Camacho, 2000). According to Morton (2005), this type of agreement took place only with Palenque de San Basilio, which in a way determined the unique “linguistic and cultural evolution of this village” (p. 34).

These communities of “Palenqueros” communicated in Spanish and their native languages or in a pidgin used on the African coast which spawned the “Palenquero” (Patiño Rosselli, 1991; 1998; Pineda Camacho, 2000; *Oceanic linguistics special publication*, 1975, p. 125-127), and it has been reported as the only Spanish-based Creole that has survived in the Caribbean (Dieck, 1998; McWhorter, 1995; Patiño Rosselli, 1991, 1992; Pineda Camacho, 2000).

Different from indigenous peoples, African slaves were kept marginalized from formal education; their only instruction was aimed towards their conversion to Catholicism. This isolation propitiated their frequent use of their own Creole and of a variety of Spanish that was very different from the norm (Pineda Camacho, 2000). The marginalizing attitude has continued until today in such a way that having black color of skin has been related to poverty, backwardness, and underdevelopment; being perceived in this negative way has granted “Palenqueros” a stigmatization that has affected the interest of new generations to speak their language (Schwegler, 1998; Schwegler & Morton, 2003).

During the Republic years, the spread of Castilian (or Spanish) became stronger, and it forced “Palenquero” to be restricted to the area of San Basilio. Since then, the inhabitants of San Basilio de Palenque have been bilingual in “Palenquero” and Spanish, using the former as their first and home language (De Mejía, 2005; Pineda Camacho, 2000), but this is an asymmetrical bilingualism because while everybody understands and speaks Spanish, young people and children understand “Palenquero” but do not speak it fluently or do not speak it at all (Lipski, 1987; Patiño Rosselli, 1992).

“Palenquero” was documented for the first time by Ochoa Franco in 1945 and recognized as Creole by Bickerton and Escalante in 1970. (De Mejía, 2005; *Oceanic Linguistics Special Publications*, 1975, p. 132-133; Schwegler, 1998). Due to its unique characteristics, it has been regarded as a linguistic relic, but it was only until the mid 1980s when the government started to take action to give “Palenquero” official status through the program ‘Education for identity’. Thanks to this initiative,



the language is being used at school, and there are projects running to produce a Palenquero-Spanish bilingual dictionary as well as other printed materials (De Mejía, 2005; Patiño Rosselli, 1992; Pineda Camacho, 2000). In 2005, San Basilio de Palenque was declared a “Masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity” by UNESCO, which has triggered more interest from the Colombian national government towards the preservation of the language.

### **San Andrés and Providence Creole English**

San Andrés and Providence make up the Caribbean archipelago which is the smallest Colombian “departamento”. Its population is approximately 62,000 and about half is of African descent (Decker & Keener, 2001; Morren, 2001).

The situation of San Andrés and Providence is the result of the negligence of the State and the role of Church in education. Spain took possession of the islands of San Andrés and Providence in 1641, but by then, a large number of Puritan colonists had arrived in the island (Morren, 2001); in addition, during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, immigrants from Jamaica and other English speaking countries settled there and Spain lost control of the island (Decker & Keener, 2001; Forbes, 2005; Holm, 1984; Patiño Rosselli, 1992; Pineda Camacho, 2000). In 1786, a treaty ceded the islands back to Spain, but English inhabitants were allowed to stay as long as they swore allegiance to the Spanish Crown, converted to Catholicism and spoke Spanish (De Mejía, 2005).

Despite these requests and due to the presence of a large population of English speaking settlers, most people on the island spoke only English, which led the governor in 1803 to ask the central government to send Irish missionaries to evangelize the inhabitants in that language, but it was never granted.

After the independence of New Granada from Spain in 1822, the inhabitants of the island adhered to the Colombian republic (Morren, 2001; Pineda Camacho, 2000). In 1845, Philip Beekman Livingston Jr., a Baptist pastor, arrived in the island and started to teach slaves reading and writing in English (this activity was rejected by the white people of the island). Two years later, he founded the Baptist church and established a school. Both the Church and the school used English as the language of instruction, which helped in the spread of both this religious group and English. By 1850, most islanders had converted to the Baptist religion and a significant number of

them could read and write in English in addition to speaking their own languages (Morren, 2001; Patiño Rosselli, 1992; Pineda Camacho, 2000).

In 1869 the President of Colombia, Santos Acosta, signed a decree in which San Andrés and Providence's English was acknowledged as a language. This decree ordered the translation of the National Constitution in effect at that time, "Constitución de Río Negro", and the appointment of translators for official events. This situation did not last because with the writing of the National Constitution of 1886, which aimed at creating a sense of national identity by homogenizing as much as possible the cultural practices of Colombians, it was declared that Catholicism was the official religion of the country and that education should follow the principles of Catholic dogma. Although Spanish was not explicitly designated as the official language, it was actualized as such in the whole Colombian territory. This Constitution was harmful to San Andrés and Providence's inhabitants because they were forced to adopt a new religion and a new language. By 1926, due to the pressure of the Catholic Church, many islanders converted to Catholicism; one year later, Law 17 of 1927 prohibited the use of English to designate public places, and some years after, in 1943, the use of the vernacular language was prohibited to designate public places, to be used in schools, or to be used in the official documents of the island (Pineda Camacho, 2000). Nevertheless, islanders continued using Standard English for school and Church and Caribbean Creole English for oral communication (Grimes, 2000).

Despite the requests made to the national government in several reports by educational inspectors (from 1912 to 1937) to implement a bilingual program in the island that responded to the sociolinguistic characteristics of the population, the response of the government was to eliminate English from schools and place it as a second language subject in high school, as in the rest of the country. The consequences of this policy were very negative because students did not master Standard English, and this put them in a disadvantageous academic situation (Dittmann, 1992).

The Colombian government, led by General Rojas Pinilla, then President, in 1953 declared San Andrés and Providence a free port and promised the construction of an airport, roads, and the arrival of progress. This caused a tremendous change in the economy and demographics of the islands because it attracted the interest of a lot of mainland Colombians. Due to their superior knowledge of Spanish, Colombian laws, and business expertise, they soon owned most businesses on the island. Their

presence also produced a change in language use, and Spanish replaced English and Creole in official events, mass media, business transactions and, of course, Church and education. Since 1954, as part of the national program to “Colombianize” the islanders, Spanish became the official language. However, Baptist churches still prefer English for their services and schools and use both English and Spanish as the medium of instruction (MOI); at home most native islanders use Creole English as well for interaction with friends (Dittman, 1992; Forbes, 2005; Morren, 2001; Patiño Rosselli, 1992).

Today in San Andrés and Providence three languages converge: Creole, English and Spanish. At the same time, conflict emerges as each of these languages is perceived and valued differently by various groups. Most religious leaders (who have a strong influence in the island due to their historical presence there) think that Islander English (or Creole) is a legitimate language while Spanish is an imposition that threatens islanders’ native language, culture, and identity. Political leaders have a different opinion and consider that Islander English is broken English or inferior English and should be eradicated (Morren, 2001; Pineda Camacho, 2000). And in a different group, some teachers think that there is a lack of articulation between school and the community and demand the inclusion of English as a MOI probably based on the continuum that exists between Creole English and English (Dittman, 1992; Morren, 2001; Holm, 1984; Patiño Rosselli, 1992).

In 1980, the national government issued Decree 2347 whose purpose was to mandate the professionalization of high school bilingual graduates of the island to incorporate them as teachers in an experimental bilingual program that was running in some elementary schools in the archipelago. The project was coordinated by the “Centro Experimental Piloto de las Islas” with the advice of the “Centro Electrónico de Idiomas”, an annex of the Ministry of Education in charge of English teaching in the country at the time, and the British Council (Dittmann, 1992). The project was adopted officially by the Secretary of Education in 1988; seven primary and three secondary schools have been recognized as bilingual schools where Standard Caribbean English and Spanish are used as the MOI; Creole English is, however, marginalized from school and used only for informal interaction (De Mejía, 2005).

Although the National Constitution of 1991 acknowledges the right of ethnic groups to conduct education in their own languages, it refers more to indigenous peoples; Afro-Colombians are mentioned only in Article 55 which states that in two

years from 1991, the government will create a special commission to study the situation of black communities who have lived on the Pacific coast and in other areas of the national territory in order to grant them the rights to land, protection of their cultural identity, and support for their economic and social development. In 1993, the national government issued Law 70 to officially acknowledge black communities of the country and establish measures to grant them the rights to land, identity, culture, and social development. Specifically, Chapter VI of this law refers to protection of cultural identity and sets the bases of the autonomy of Afro-Colombian communities to design a curriculum that responds to their particular needs. Despite this, there is no explicit mention of San Andrés Creole English, and Standard Caribbean English.

As a consequence of the convergence of different historical events and national policies, today bilingual education is permitted on the island but is not observed completely due to several factors such as lack of instructional materials, lack of teachers' training in bilingual education, the large number of Spanish monolingual teachers, and the importance of Spanish for the economy of the island (Decker & Keener, 2001).

With the National Bilingualism Project, there has been a renewed interest in San Andrés as a potential site for immersion courses (Grimaldo, 2007); the results are still to be seen because the language attitudes of mainland Spanish speakers in Colombia still think of San Andres' English as broken English, hence a variety of very low prestige.

## **Conclusion**

Since the Spanish colonization, language policies in Colombia have been marked by a constant asymmetry that values the language of the powerful and disregards the languages of the powerless. More than 500 years after the so-called discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, the situation is not very different. While during the colonial years Spanish was favored and perceived as the language of modernization and progress, English is the language associated with those characteristics today. And yesterday, as today, indigenous languages and creoles are treated as second class languages.

Also relevant is the way in which the official discourse, no matter the epoch, has constructed attitudes towards minority languages to the point that mainstream

Colombians do not consider learning one of our languages as a second language. The State has a crucial responsibility in this lack of interest because not only does it not promote the study of our languages but discourages people who speak them from converting them into cultural or linguistic capital. Anecdotal evidence shows that in graduate programs where people need to demonstrate proficiency in a second language, people who speak an indigenous language have had to struggle to get their languages accepted to fulfill that requirement.

It is too early to predict the outcomes of the national bilingualism program set by the MEN, but it is worrisome to see how this project is repeating the same patterns of inequality, discrimination, marginalization, and segregation that were used to impose Spanish more than five hundred years ago. It is easy today to associate indigenous peoples and most Afro-Colombians with poverty and backwardness and to blame them for that, but if we look closer and carefully, we can see that the causes of their disadvantaged situation have profound roots embedded in our history and in an ideology of superiority vs. inferiority.

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