

Bilingualism on the Atlantic Coast

Where did it come from and where is it going?

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Cortesia de Sunrise

Bilingual education is, above all, education for bilinguals. To understand what this is, it is first necessary to understand what it means to be bilingual, what were the roots of bilingualism in Latin America and in Nicaragua, and what its perspectives are for the future.

Special Zone II

In South Zelaya or Special Zone II (Zona Especial II-ZEII) about one-third of the population speaks a variety of English known as Creole English. Previously the children of this sector had no choice but to struggle through their lessons in a foreign language or drop out; many ended up quitting school after the first grade.

In response to their needs, a bilingual-bicultural education program begins this year. The program shares the objectives of many other bilingual education programs—to lower the drop-out rate, increase learning, and teach literacy in the national language. But it also seeks to make the students profound of their own language and culture. In addition the program may offer the possibility of learning standard English, an aspect that has

produced an interesting controversy.

The discussion of autonomy for the Atlantic Coast will surely widen the political space, not only for the implementation of bilingual-bicultural education, but for debate about how many grades to teach bilingually, the pros and cons of teaching standard English, and what the ultimate goals of the program should be.

English on the Atlantic Coast

The main areas where English predominates are Corn Island, Bluefields, and the Pearl Lagoon area, the historic and current administrative centers of the southern Atlantic Coast region. By far the largest English-speaking population on the Coast is made up of Creoles, product of more than three centuries of mixture between people of African, Amerindian and European descent. Black Caribs (or Gariphones) and Ramas also speak English; their original languages, Garifphone and Rama respectively, are now only spoken by old people.

The Africans arrived in various ways. In the 16th century some came as sailors with Columbus, others as pirates or

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linche" maki na. Hernan Cortez lalihkrika bara bila lalakrika. Is-pail nani baldiman pas yua nanira, bila wal aisanka ba bal takan miks taki banghwanka ba mita; miks takan uplika nani ba ai yapti indian ba bila pas aisi banghwi kan, bara ninkara ai aisa ispail ba. Bara ispail nani mita indian tasbaia mihta dakbi ai dinaunsa kau tara dauki brih banghwan piuara, ispail talia brih banghwi uplika bila wal aisi ba "mestizo" wi ba bal taki banghwan, apia kaka ispail bila ba baman aisi kan, bah'nan ba ispail luhpia nani "criollo" wi ba wal ai ta mangki, bara indian nani aihkika ba lika bila kum aisi. Bah'nan ispail talia brih banghwi uplika aihkika ba ispail lalah kira nani namika pawi banghwi ba tilara dimi banghwan, bamna indian nani bila kumi aisi banghwi ba lika pulitik bara lalah lainkara saitra laki swih banghwan. Bara naku sika latinoamerica indianka nani ba blasi iwanka sat wal bara kaike banghwan: pulitik wihki lalah lainka bara itwi dimi bara ai bila wihki ai iwanka satka ba tikaia, apia kaka ai daknika ba tikaia apia dukiara, pulitik wihki lalah lainka ba wina saitra taki waia.

Andat mani XIX ra sait saitra takaia wisi war bukanka ba tilara bara kan ispail talia bri uplika nani "mestizo" aihkika ba, dis ispail bila aisi banghwi kan ba baman, bara warka takaskan ninkara Latinoamerica aiskara kuntri raya nani bal takan bara, blistusa ispail bila ba pas taura mangki banghwan. Sakuna baha daukan-ka ba wal blahwanka ba kli ta mangki banghwan, naha piuara lika kuntri banira, "mestizo" ispail aisasara "tilara dingkan ba" wihki indian nani "saitra laki swin" ba aikuki. Ya ispail bila aisi ba kulki banghwan ai kuntrikara latwankira baku inglis nani baldimanka ba mapara, bara ninkara, miriki nani mapara. Ya indian bila aisi bara tankas baku kulkan, kuntri warkka naninra tabaikras baku. Bara upla kumi-



sin ispail bila aisi ba mapara buras kan, kuntri raya rispitka ba dukiara.

Lalah pawanka ba, wihki upla aihkika kuntri raya ba tilara wark pawanka bara wih dimanka ba mita, indian bila ailal tiwi luan. Tanka baku, Nicaragua pasipikka saikara indian daknika nani kan ba baha pawanka ba mita tikan. Matagalpa nani kan ba 1880 mankara Managua wina Matagalpara telegrap brisi mangkan-ka warkka bara "alki dignki banghwan", bara sim Matagalpa wina Leonra yabal paskanka bara. Bara witinka tasbaya nani kan ba lalahkira tara nanina atkan lui banghwan. Indian nani tausin tausin ba baha warkka daukaia apia dukiara blahwi prui tiwi banghwan. Indian nani tausin tausin ba baha warkka daukaia apia dukiara blahwi prui tiwi banghwan, Matagalpara lalah pawanka raya brisi dingkanka bara.

Sakuna Latinoamerica aiskara lalah ba yakabrira pawikan ba mita, indian bila nani kau manis tikras luan, lalah lainkara saitara banghwi kan ba mita. Kau indian tawanka nani ailal ba silp mangki pih baman banghwisa kuntri aiska laka nani bapan ba tilara. Sim

baku sa sumu indianka Kusra banghwi ba; ispail bila ba aisi banghwi kan gabamint uplika, apia kaka (main wihki tat klaklakra lal uplika nani) aikuki prawi banghuia kat.

Tawan wala nani ba lika iwanka satka wala tila bara dimi banghwan ai wina ul, apia kaka purataiak baman. Baha tanka aiska ba sika miskitu nani iwanka tihuka ba, bara yamni kabia kau tanka pain pliki kaikaia.

Miskitu nani bila wal aisanka ba

Kusra Iurup uplika pas wih diman nani ba sika inglis nani, bara miskitu nani ba bila walra aisanka pas ba sika inglisra. Sakuna, miskitu nani sut ba baha bila aisi banghwas kan; muribian nisan-ka uplika nani 1847 mankara Kusra wih dimi banghwan ba bila wisa, dis miskitu ta uplika nani ba baman inglis aisi kan. Baha ba baku kan miskitu nani ba ingis nani aikuki bisnis laka brih banghwi kan ba mita; witinka nanira tat, aksbil taia, bara diara wala nani ba atki banghwi kan, ispara nani, kwala nani, bara diara wala nani wan mihta ni paskan ba atki briaja dukiara, apia kaka sim piu klutka inglis nani tilara

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buccaneers. In 1631 England imported slaves to its new colony on the island of Providencia, off the Miskito Coast, from which these African descendants began to populate the continent. Throughout the late 18th century Africans or their descendants continued to arrive on the Coast either as slaves or as escaped or shipwrecked would-be slaves.

They arrived in the New World from different parts of Africa or different cultures, and in most cases spoke different languages. The master of a slave ship would do everything possible to combine his human cargo such that they spoke different languages and preferably were even enemies in their own territory. By reducing the possibility of communication he reduced the risk of a mutiny. Once in the new land, the Africans needed a common language.

In the Caribbean they used the languages of the dominant political force in the area at that time, plugging English vocabulary into a grammatical structure with certain common African linguistic features. Over

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time this simplified use of English, generally referred to as "pidgin", developed greater richness until it became the language of both slaves and masters throughout the Caribbean. The "Creoles", the group which spoke and speaks this language, evolved out of the genetic and cultural mixture of European descendants with Blacks and Indians.

In 1787, in accord with the Treaty of Versailles, the British Crown agreed to vacate its possessions in the Mosquitia. As a result, many colonizers left for Belize, taking their slaves with them. Other blacks stayed, creating Creole-speaking communities in Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, and Black River.

The British had already created a Miskito monarchy, with a line of kings educated in British territories who continued to defend the interests of their protectors. In the absence of direct colonial oppression, the Creoles were able to consolidate political and economic control during the 19th century. They became dominant in the hierarchy of the Moravian Church (which established itself on the Coast in 1849) as well as in the Miskito Kingdom. In fact, the last four "Miskito" kings were probably Creole.

The late 19th century saw the penetration of U.S. capital which created an enclave economy on the Atlantic Coast. To provide the labor for these lumber, banana and rubber ventures, blacks were imported or came in search of work from the southern United States and the Antilles, especially Jamaica. Immigration of blacks continued into the 20th century, and these new arrivals,

with their own Creole dialects, integrated into the Miskito Coast Creole population.

In 1894 the Miskito Coast was "reincorporated" into Nicaraguan territory, wresting control away from the British. To help consolidate Nicaraguan control over the area, President José Santos Zelaya decreed in 1900 that only Spanish was to be used in the schools. The Moravian Church, run by North Americans, Creoles and some Europeans, could not comply quickly enough with the new law and was forced to close most of its mission schools for 11 years in spite of its costly attempts to train teachers in Spanish. Mission schools of other protestant denominations such as the Anglican Church also closed, leaving the few government schools with Spanish-speaking teachers as the only alternative.

Old Creoles remember this time of not understanding anything in class, playing hooky, and hiding out from implacable truant officers. Mr. Robert Temple of Pearl Lagoon, born in the year of the Reincorporation, recalls, "we read in Spanish and we don't understand one thing... We get to spell the words and everything in Spanish but we don't know what the words mean!" Understandably enough, he used to skip class, but "when school-time you can't go nowhere, they pick you up".

Miss Lena Slate, 85 years old, tells of classes in English that used to be held clandestinely in people's homes in Bluefields. As a girl, she went to one such illegal school where grades one through six were taught, the older students helping to teach the youn-

ger ones. When the police came around, the students would be whisked out of sight into some back room.

The decree that all classes be taught in Spanish stayed in force until 1981, but did not succeed in assimilating the Creoles into the Spanish-speaking culture, if that was its intent. In addition to language, religion and other cultural differences have kept the groups distinct.

In Bluefields from the 1940s through the mid-1960s, for example, a strong differentiation of Creoles from Spanish-speaking was maintained, in part because most education was carried out in religious schools. The Moravian and Anglican high schools served their constituency, mainly Creoles, and some of the classes were taught in English. The Catholic high schools, on the other hand, were mostly attended by Spanish-speaking Mestizos.

However, the institutionalization of these distinctions has lessened in the past two decades. With the liberalization of education in the early 1970s, the Catholic Instituto Técnico Cristóbal Colón began to admit girls. As the only public high school of Bluefields, it was considerably cheaper, and Creole parents of scarce means began to switch their children from the Colegio Moravo and the other schools to the Colón. Now the Colón is about half Creole and half Mestizo, while the student body of the Colegio Moravo remains about 90% Creole.

English-Spanish Bilingualism

As in the case of Miskito-Spanish bilingualism, English-Spanish bilingualism on the Coast is diglossic, that is, the bilingual speaker uses the two languages in

different situations. Creoles usually prefer Creole to Spanish, but to strangers or in formal situations they tend to speak Spanish. The theme of the conversation also makes a difference — Creoles often resort to Spanish to discuss concepts learned in school.

There are actually two forms of English on the Coast, Creole and "standard" (as spoken in the U.S., U.K., Canada, etc.). Creole differs from standard in certain respects such as verb conjugation and tense formation, accent, and to some extent vocabulary (see also *Wani*, Sept-Dec. 1984). But a Creole-speaker can usually understand standard, and with a week or so of practice a speaker of standard can understand Creole.

Creoles who speak the best standard English tend to be 40 or older, educated in the Colegio Moravo of Bluefields when English was taught by North Americans or U.S.-educated Nicaraguans. According to Ronald Brooks, regional delegate of the Ministry of Education (MED), many of the Colegio Moravo graduates of that generation have left the country, but a sector remains. These are teachers and pastors for the most part, who have three forms of linguistic expression to choose from in their daily conversation: Spanish, Creole and standard English. "When Colegio Moravo teachers get together in a social gathering they speak Creole", observed Ronald Brooks, "but you get them in a meeting about bilingual education in the Government House and they'll speak a good standard!"

Bilingual Education in English

In 1983 the MED estimated that 32% of the children in ZEII of kindergarten to first-grade age

did not speak Spanish. The great majority of these were English-speakers— only about 3% of the total children in this age category were Miskitos. The degree of bilingualism depends on the amount of geographic or cultural separation, of course. Bluefields students are more bilingual than those of Pearl Lagoon, Corn Island, or the other Creole communities of the zone. "Where television is prevalent, where you have lots of Mestizos living side by side with Creoles, you have a situation where children are bilingual," says Ray Hooker, who has spent years working in education in South Zelaya and now represents the region in the National Assembly.

One of the main motivations for promoting bilingual education in English and Spanish was the high drop-out rate and low academic level of the students of the zone. Even after 1979, with the impulse the government has given to education by building more schools and appointing more teachers to the area than ever before, the drop-out rate continues to be high. It is particularly high in first grade and in the communities (compared to Bluefields), leading educators to conclude that one main reason is that students are being taught in Spanish from the first day of class even when they know no Spanish.

This year the bilingual program will begin on a pilot basis in six schools, four in Bluefields, one in Pearl Lagoon/Haulover, and one in Corn Island. (Orinoco was to be included also but counterrevolutionary activities make it too difficult for advisers to attend to the teachers and the program with the required regularity). In these schools, kindergarten and first grade classes will be in English. Next year the program will be expanded to include

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