



Claudia Gordillo

Nicaraguan English

Wayne O'Neil
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Maya Honda
Harvard University

The goals of the present paper are modest: we will first present some background of how English came to be a language of Nicaragua. We then present some of the features of Nicaraguan English that distinguish it as a variety of English. Finally, we will discuss the development of this variety of English in the context of the history of the English language.

Background

Early in the seventeenth century when English-speaking people came to North America from England, they came to the islands of the Caribbean and to Central America as well. Late in the eighteenth century, as a consequence of the 1783 Treaty of Versailles, the British eventually withdrew from their settlements along the Caribbean side of Central America to British Honduras (now Belize) and to the Caribbean islands. Many Africans or descendants of Africans who had been enslaved by the British, escaped or otherwise

won their freedom and remained to form their own communities. These Afro-Americans adopted the English language as a common means of communication. Thus, along the Atlantic side of the Central American isthmus, there are English-speaking communities, from Panama to Belize, and on the nearby islands: the Corn Islands, San Andrés, and Providencia, remnants of the old British West Caribbean empire.

English has also become the second and even the first language of some of the indigenous people of the region. For example, among the Ramas of Nicaragua, the Rama language has been almost entirely replaced by English of a variety that is only slightly different from that spoken in the other English-speaking communities of Nicaragua. And for great numbers of the Miskitos of Nicaragua, English is an important second language. In addition, English has been and continues to be an important source of new words for the Miskito language.

Finally, there is the tragic account of the Garifunas, banished from their island home of St. Vincent in the late eighteenth century as a consequence of their rebellion against their British masters and forcibly relocated to the Central American coast. The Garifunas who eventually found their way to Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast have almost if not entirely lost their traditional Garifuna language (which is strongly maintained in Honduras y Belize) and adopted Nicaraguan English in the course of the past two centuries.

Features of Nicaraguan English Spelling

The spelling system used here is that of International English; that is, we simply spell a word the way it is in an ordinary English dictionary. We use the North American variety rather than the British variety when slight differences come up, such as *honor* instead of *honour*, or *center* instead of *centre*.

For each variety of English, there is a relationship between the spelling and the pronunciation of that variety. In the following section we describe the main features of the spelling-sound relationship for Nicaraguan English, insofar as this relationship differs from the more familiar varieties of English. In order to indicate the differences between pronunciation and spelling, we enclose representations of pronunciation in slant marks (/ /) and we underline spelling representations.

Consonants

In Nicaraguan English, the spelling *th* represents the pronunciations /d/ or /t/: it is /d/ if the word is pronounced with the voiced variety of *th* in International English (as in *the*, *them*, etc.). Otherwise *th* represents a /t/ (as in *throw*, *anything*, etc.).

There is another characteristic of Nicaragua English consonants. The /zh/ sound (represented in a number of different ways in International English spelling, as in *garage* and in *occasion*, for example) is pronounced with the sound /j/ (as in the word *judge*).

In addition, Nicaragua English is in part an r-less dialect. This means that in many cases where an *r* appears in spelling after a vowel there is no /r/ in the pronunciation. For example, *fisherman* is pronounced without an /r/ in this variety of English. However, in words such as *reward* and *cutboard*—where the *r* falls after a vowel but before a consonant in the same syllable—it is pronounced as /r/.

In Nicaraguan English, consonant clusters (sequences of con-

sonants) are simplified at the ends of words. Thus, in words like *land*, *servant*, *want*, etc., the final /d/, /t/, etc. will not generally be heard in informal speech.

There is also some variation in the nature of consonant clusters at the beginning of words. One example of this is revealed in the pronunciation indicated in the spelling *scrumb*s. There is evidence in other texts in Holm's books that speakers of Nicaraguan English freely vary between /skr/ and /kr/ in the pronunciation of words that are distinctly spelled in International English as *cr-* and *scr-*. Thus, the Nicaraguan English pronunciation for International English *crumb*s could be spelt *scrumb*s and *crumb*s and for International English *scratch*, *scratch* and *cratch*. More evidence is needed in order to understand this phenomenon fully.

These features of Nicaraguan English consonants are common to other varieties of English.

Vowels

The most striking feature of the vowel sounds in Nicaraguan English (to our ears) is the sound of several of the long vowels. For example, *out* is pronounced with the vowel of North American *boat*: *sane* is pronounced /syen/—much like the pronunciation of the Spanish word *cien*; and *goes* is pronounced /gwoz/. Moreover, the vowel of *oil* is pronounced /ail/, with the vowel of North American *aisle*.

There are also other less striking characteristics of pronunciation of the short vowels in Nicaraguan English. For example, *pat* and *pot* are both pronounced with the vowel

sound /a/ in Nicaraguan English. On the other hand, *can* is pronounced /kyan/ and *cap* /kyap/.

Stress accent

There are many interesting metrical characteristics of Nicaraguan English, but one of the most obvious is that compound words generally have the heavier stress accent, or louder pronunciation on their second part rather than on the first (as in other varieties of English). For example, *fisherman* is pronounced /fishamán/, not /físhaman/ (where the accent mark indicates the place of a heavier stress accent).

Word structure

While there are many matters to discuss here, we will limit our observations to the way in which noun phrases are marked for plural in this variety of English. Noun phrase plurality is indicated with the suffix *-them* (pronounced /dem/) in Nicaraguan English. However, the distribution of this suffix is not simply that of the *-s* plural suffix of International English. Nicaraguan English marks the plural with *-them* only when the plural information about a noun phrase is not otherwise obvious in the construction. For example, in the story "The Golden Fish" we find the following plural noun phrases:

hundred of servant
all the servant

where International English would show the plural *-s*, but Nicaraguan English does not show *-them*. In these cases it is obvious that the noun is plural because of the modifiers

hundred of and all. On the other hand, in other places *servant-them* appears because there is no indication of plurality in the text. This then is the general condition for the use of the plural suffix *-them* in Nicaraguan English: it is used only when the notion "plural" is not indicated in the noun phrase in some other way.

When a noun phrase is used to indicate all the members of a set, the noun phrase occurs without the plural suffix *-them*. Thus a speaker of Nicaraguan English would say "The dog bite", while a speaker of International English would say, "Dogs bite".

Because of this way of pluralizing noun phrases in Nicaraguan English, some words of English that generally appear only in their *-s* plural forms in International English have been reanalyzed as singular forms in Nicaraguan English. The phrase *a scrumbs* (= *a crumb* in International English) is one example; we also find *the ants-them*, *flowers-pot*, etc.

Another result of this difference between the way in which the two varieties of English show the plural is that speakers of Nicaraguan English will tend to extend their way of pluralizing to their International English. Thus we have noted such sentences as *Get some bun at the bakery* and *Defend the nation is the duty of all Nicaraguan* in Nicaraguan International English texts, where we would expect *some buns* and *all Nicaraguans*. Similarly, we might expect speakers of other varieties of English to extend their ways of pluralizing noun phrases into Nicara-

guan English; for example, they would likely say *all the servant-them* since they would be tempted to replace their *-s* plural everywhere with the *-them* plural of Nicaraguan English.

Sentence structure

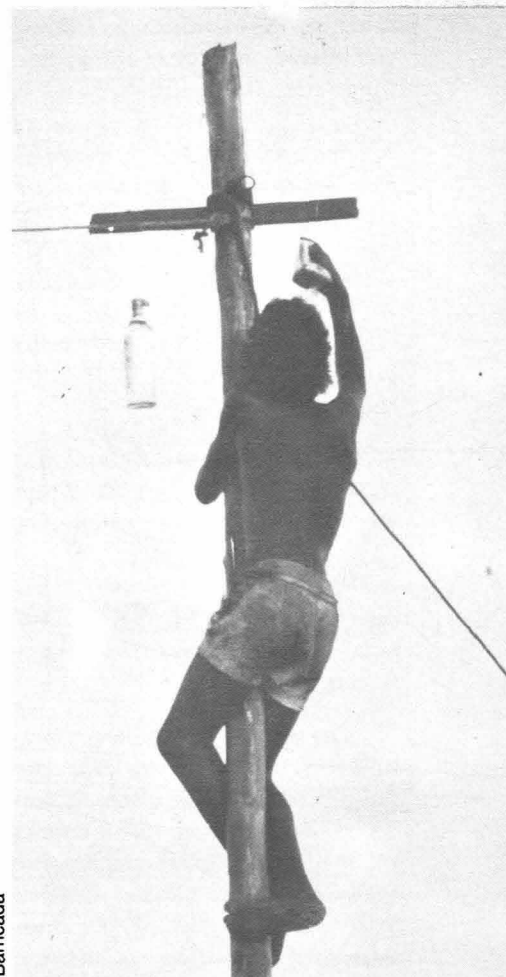
In Nicaragua English, the general structure of sentences is what we would expect in any variety of English. There are, however, some details of Nicaraguan English sentence structure that set it apart from International English. A feature of International English is that it requires sentences to have an expressed subject pronoun under all conditions. This marks it as a very different language type from, say, Spanish, because Spanish does not require that a sentence have a subject pronoun. What this means for International English—in part—is that so-called "empty" pronouns (that is, pronouns empty of any semantic content) are used when there is no meaningful pronoun possible in the construction. For example, in weather-verb constructions, International English uses the empty *it*, as in:

It rained yesterday in Bluefields, but it never snows there.

This *it* is very different from the meaningful *it*, as in *I saw it*.

And in other sorts of constructions, International English employs the expletive *there* (distinct from the locational *there* of *She saw me there*), as in:

There are buses in Bluefields now.



Such "empty" pronouns are not required in Nicaraguan English; for example:

was a beautiful palace come in.

And we also find such sentences as:

Is how Earl throw me way like that?

Is asthma he got.

In International English, these sentences would appear as:

How is it that Earl threw me away like that?

It's asthma he's got.

Although Nicaraguan English may resemble Spanish in not

using empty pronouns like *it* and *there*, it is very much like International English because it requires that personal pronouns be the subjects of sentences. For example, in Spanish it is possible to say both *Yo estoy cansado* and *Estoy cansado*, without the subject pronoun, but in English only *I am tired* is possible; *Am tired*, without the subject pronoun, is ungrammatical.

In Nicaraguan English, the copular verb *be* and its forms are not likely to appear in such constructions, as in:

But a pronoun, if there is no noun phrase subject, will generally be there.

The pronouns can be missing, however, when they can be "understood" to be there or can be recovered from the context of the story. In the following sentences from "The Golden Fish" the location of the "understood" pronoun is marked with a \emptyset :

He... catch fish and bring it and sell \emptyset = it.
 \emptyset (= they) *Set down and \emptyset = they enjoyed themselves.*
 \emptyset (= they) *Had enough food to eat. And \emptyset (= they) think they really enjoy theirself.*

Another characteristic of Nicaraguan English of this sort is that it does not require an explicit indefinite pronoun object in such constructions as the following:

Old lady... sent \emptyset call him husband again.

In International English this would be:

The old lady... sent someone to call her husband again.

This is another characteristic that Nicaraguan English shares with the Romance languages, such as Spanish and Italian.

These are some, only some, examples of the differences that exist between Nicaraguan English and other varieties of English. However, these differences are relatively minor and certainly—in our experience—do not get in the way of communication between English speakers from other countries and the English-speaking people of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast.

We stress that these are only some of the characteristics of Nicaraguan English; for this variety of English has not been sufficiently investigated. Part of the recognition of English as one of the languages of Nicaragua is that this variety of English should be investigated systematically. To do this, there is need to train speakers of the language to be the linguists and lexicographers of the language.

Linguistic History

The English language that came to Central America was, of course, the English of its time: the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since a language naturally changes as a result of its internal dynamics and because of the contacts speakers of the language make with the languages around them and with a new world, the English that arrived in Central America did not stay steady. Nor did the English that arrived in North America; nor the one that remained in England;

nor the English that went anywhere in the world. They all changed; but without close contact with one another, they changed in different ways. This differences among the Englishes of the world.

For example, at the time when English arrived in Central America, the long vowels of the language were undergoing a rather dramatic shift in pronunciation, referred to in the historical linguistic literature as the Great Vowel Shift. For example, the pronunciation of the vowel of *bite* had changed from being much like that of present-day *beet* to something very close to that of the present-day pronunciation of *bait*. Meanwhile the vowel of *beet* itself had shifted from something close to that of present-day *bait* to its present-day pronunciation. In North America, and in some British dialects, the pronunciation of the long vowels continued to shift in a certain way: thus the vowel of *bite* continued on its way to its present-day pronunciation, as it did in Nicaraguan English. It was, however in the vowels of words like *sane* and *goes* that Nicaraguan English and North American English went their different ways. Thus we find these words and others like them pronounced with long *a* and long *o* in North American English; but in Nicaraguan English these words are pronounced with vowel sounds that we can best represent /ye/ and /wo/, respectively. Moreover, although the long /u/ of earlier English words such as *house* ended up sounding much like the *au* of Spanish *pausa* in North American English, it ended up with the pronunciation /ou/ in Nicaraguan English. There

exist, therefore, the following correspondences:

raguan English by its native speakers matures, and when a

of Its Lexicon and Syntax. London University: unpublished Ph.D. dissertation.

Nicaraguan English	North American English
/ai/	
/ai/ in five, soil	/ai/ in five
	/oi/ in soil
/ou/ in house	/au/ in house
/ii/ in beet	same
/uu/ in boot	same
/ye/ in sane	/ei/ in sane
/wo/ in goes	/ou/ in goes

In fact, many of the characteristic differences between Nicaraguan English and, say, North American English can be accounted for by the fact that these two varieties of English have simply followed different paths of development—even though they began from the same point historically, we believe. This is not only true of the differences in pronunciation, but also of differences in sentence structure and word structure. For example, in earlier, pre-colonial English the past-tenseness of a verb was generally indicated with the helping verb *did*. This way of marking the past tense of a verb was maintained in Nicaraguan English. For example:^{1/}

The girl, she did feel like she was breeding...

In North American English this would be:

The girl, she felt like she was pregnant.

There is much more to be said about the history of Nicaraguan English. For example, we have made no mention of the distinctly Nicaraguan character of some of the words of this variety of English. There is need for research into this matter and into many others as well. As the study of Nica-

grammar and dictionaries become available, it will become much more possible to piece together some understanding of how the language got to be what it is today.

NOTES

1/: From a text quoted in John Holm, ed., *Central American English*, page 103, lines 101-102. (See the Bibliography for further references).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following books and articles are available in the libraries of CIDCA in Bluefields, Managua, and Puerto Cabezas. We encourage people who wish to learn more about Nicaraguan English to consult these works.

Holm, John, 1978. *The Creole English of Nicaragua's Miskito Coast: Its Socio-linguistic History and a Comparative Study*

Holm, John, ed. 1983. *Central American English*. Heidelberg: Julius Groos Verlag. (See especially Chapter 1, "Central American English: An Introduction", and Chapter 4, "Nicaragua's Miskito Coast Creole English".)

McLean, Guillermo and R. Past. 1976. "Some Characteristics of Bluefields English" in R. Di Pietro and E. Blansitt, Jr., eds., *The Third LACUS Forum*. Columbia, South Carolina: Hornbeam Press, Inc., pages 87-94.

O'Neil, Wayne. 1987. "Preface" to S. Flynn, *A Parameter-Setting Model of L2 Acquisition*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Reidel.

O'Neil, Wayne. 1987. "Null Expletives in Nicaraguan English", Paper presented at the session on Creole languages of the 18th Conference on African Linguistics, 23-26 April 1987, University of Québec at Montréal. (To be published in the Proceedings of the conference.)

O'Neil, Wayne, with Dora Joiner and Shirley Taylor. 1987. "Noun Phrase Pluralization in Nicaraguan English". In Toshio Nakao, ed., *Historical Studies in Honour of Taizo Hirose*. Tokyo, Japan: Kenkyusha Printing Co., Ltd., pages 82-91.



Barricada