

# THE *NEGROS CONGOS* OF PANAMA Afro-Hispanic Creole Language and Culture

JOHN M. LIPSKI  
*University of Houston*

**African cultural** and linguistic influence in Latin America is an undeniable fact, but, particularly in Spanish America, African populations descended from slaves and laborers of past centuries have been assimilated into the national populations. The resulting transculturation, although not removing all distinctive African characteristics, has partially obscured the non-Hispanic cultural bases among Afro-American groups in Spanish-speaking nations, and consequently it is increasingly difficult to reconstruct the linguistic and social situation of black communities in colonial Latin America. In particular, the formation of creole dialects did not occur as extensively in Spanish America as among English-, French-, Dutch-, and Portuguese-speaking populations, for reasons that are only partially understood (Alleyne, 1971: 182; Mintz, 1971: 492; Otheguy, 1975; Reinecke, 1938; Alsopp, 1977).

As evidence of creole or *bozal* Spanish, spoken by slaves and servants recently arrived from Africa, existed as early as the sixteenth century, not only in Spain but also in Spanish

America, the almost complete lack of contemporary Spanish creole dialects does not necessarily imply that no widespread nonstandard Spanish dialect was spoken by African slaves and their descendants in colonial Latin America (Weber de Kurlat, 1962; Chasca, 1946; Granda, 1969; Alvarez Nazario, 1974). Many investigators, basing theories on ambiguous but suggestive historical information (Granda, 1978; Valkhoff, 1966; Whinnom, 1965; Taylor, 1971, among others) and on the existence of recently discovered pockets of Afro-Hispanic language, have postulated that in previous centuries, creole Spanish was spoken in large regions of Latin America characterized by significant African populations, and that the linguistic characteristics of this creole dialect were largely homogeneous from one region to another, much as has occurred with creole French and English in the Caribbean.

Based on the comparative evidence of Papiamentu, spoken in the Netherlands Antilles, and of *palenquero*, a creole dialect spoken in an isolated village of Colombia (Bickerton and Escalante, 1970; Escalante, 1954), as well as of recently deceased Cuban and Puerto Rican creole Spanish, several investigators have attempted to trace *all* creole Spanish dialects, attested and hypothetical, to a Portuguese-based lingua franca, which had its origins in the fifteenth century, and which also gave rise to the numerous Portuguese-based creoles in Africa and Asia (Granda, 1968, 1978; Naro, 1978; Valkhoff, 1966, Whinnom, 1965; for a contrary point of view, López Morales, 1980, Laurence, 1974).

The comparative studies cited above have represented the state of the art for almost 15 years, the general feeling being that no further Afro-Hispanic dialect pockets exist to be fitted in among currently available data, and the tacit assumption is that if such dialect pockets were to be discovered, they would exhibit characteristics similar to those that have been described in the "monogenetic" theories of Iberian-based creole formation. This attitude is surprising in view of the fact that Spanish America still contains many areas in which little or no linguistic research has been carried out, due to geographical

inaccessibility, political difficulties, or simple indifference to the possibility of discovering new linguistic manifestations in many countries. Even in such widely studied linguistic zones as the Dominican Republic (González and Benavides, 1982) and Ecuador (Lipski, 1985a), small Afro-Hispanic nuclei have been recently isolated for study that exhibit speech forms significantly different from the national patterns and that give indirect evidence of earlier periods of Afro-Hispanic creole usage.

Further areas remain to be explored, and time is running out for Afro-Hispanic linguistics because in most countries the remaining black groups that have maintained themselves culturally and linguistically isolated from the rest of the country are being rapidly assimilated, and in another generation or two, no speakers of earlier, partially creolized language will remain (Lipski, 1985b). The present article will present data on a group whose cultural significance has been recognized for some time, but whose linguistic characteristics are only now being scrutinized:<sup>1</sup> the *negros congos* of Panama's Caribbean coast.

It is well-known that Panama contains two culturally distinct Afro-American populations: the "Afro-colonials," descended from slaves held during the Spanish colonial period, and the "Afro-Antilleans," English-speaking descendants of West Indian laborers brought to Panama to aid in construction of the Canal, and also to work in banana plantations. The latter group is still only partially integrated into Panamanian society, whereas the former group, whose presence dates from the middle of the sixteenth century, enjoys a rich historical tradition that begins with the important Spanish ports of Nombre de Dios and, subsequently, Portobelo, which became the major disembarkation point for Spanish fleets headed for the Pacific coast of South America.

Whereas Afro-colonials living in the larger cities of Panama have maintained almost no distinctly African cultural patterns, due largely to the relatively early decline of the slave trade in Panama (Romero, 1965, Jaén Suárez, 1979), those groups that

inhabit the small villages of the Caribbean coast continue to exhibit elaborate cultural and linguistic rituals, which are displayed yearly during Carnival season and which involve a subset of the Afro-colonial population known as the *congos*. Groups of *congos* are found primarily along the *costa arriba* (from Portobelo east to Santa Isabel), and also along the *costa abajo* (along the coast from Colon to the Bocas del Toro region), but are also found in some regions of the interior (Tejeira Jaén, 1974), and were once throughout the nation, wherever black Panamanians were concentrated.

Within any given village, membership in the congo group is voluntary, and in the smaller villages geographically isolated from the major arteries of communication, virtually the entire population actively or passively participates in the congo ceremonies. Within each village, the townspeople choose a queen, and several other personages, including Juan de Dioso (St. John), *cribaní* (the "scribe"), and various *diablitos* (demons), who are collectively responsible for staging the games and ceremonies replayed each year during nearly two months of Carnival. Considerable rivalry exists among villages, and mock raids and battles are held when a congo group from one town attacks the *rancho* (a makeshift leanto or covered area, in which the congo ceremonies take place) of another village, and attempts to steal its flag. At the same time, the congo games are an excuse for visits and invitations to drink and dance, and provide a highpoint in the year's activities for a region where daily hardships are the rule rather than the exception.

The congo rituals have been well studied from an anthropological, historical, and musicological standpoint, and most Panamanians are aware of the existence of these ceremonies, even if they are little understood (P. Drolet, 1980; R. Drolet, 1980; Smith, 1975; Zárate, 1962; Cheville and Cheville, 1977; Béliz, 1959; Franceschi, 1960). In Portobelo, the congo group regularly entertains visiting tourists who stop by on Caribbean cruise ships, and the *congos* stage "Carnival" dances at any time of year, all of which creates the impression that the congo phenomena have disappeared in their authentic form and

survive only in commercialized, artificially reconstructed representations. Although in Portobelo many residents have a jaded attitude toward the congo games, stemming from the constant invasion of curiosity-seeking tourists, this is not true of the more remote towns on the Caribbean coast, and the congo festivals command large audiences of loyal and enthusiastic residents, all of whom participate in the dancing, singing, and representations.

An important question surrounding the congo spectacles is the extent to which the dramatic representations are accurate reenactments of verifiable historical events (P. Drolet, 1980: 157ff.). The intricacy and intensity of the representations, the specific names given to all of the characters, and the similarities among representations from town to town over a considerable geographical area suggest that many of the congo representations stem from actual historical events that affected the African slave population of colonial Panama, above all in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Spanish control over the region was not consolidated and slave uprisings were not infrequent. For example, De la Guardia (1977: 104-105) believes that some of the congo personages may be traced to a slave uprising in 1768; Bastide (1969: 15) believes that the congos trace their origin to the slaves of Portobelo, more than two centuries ago.

The oral tradition among the congos themselves does not resolve this situation, for the nearly 400 years that have passed since the historical situations suggested by the dramatic representations have effectively dimmed the collective memory of the Afro-colonials, and conflicting "traditional" histories are heard as one travels from region to region. Given the considerable temporal distance separating the modern congos from the events that affected black slaves in Panama during the height of the Spanish Main, and the nonunique nature of many of the dramatic representations, it is most likely that the congo dramatic games are not direct transmissions of singular events but rather the folkloric reconstruction of the ambience that characterized an earlier epoch.

Adding to the difficulty surrounding the verification of the historical accuracy of congo representations is the lack of adequate documentation on the development of the congo ceremonies in modern times. It is possible to trace the celebration of the congo dramas with any certainty for less than a century (P. Drolet, 1980: 158); that is to say, after the abolition of slavery in Panama in 1820. Presumably, prior to this time such celebrations would not have been appropriate because the congo games themselves involve a celebration of freedom, the luxury of reenacting dramatically a situation that no longer afflicts the actors in real life. It is also unlikely that such unrestrained display of emotion and revelry would have been permitted under the slavery system. Although the origins of the congo games are shrouded in mystery, living memory is sufficient to document the fact that in the last 50 years or so, participation has fallen off drastically, especially in many villages in the interior of Panama where congo groups were once frequent, but where they are rarely to be found today.

The congo ceremonies, which have been briefly summarized above, constitute a unique Afro-colonial manifestation in modern Panama, where racial and ethnic diversity is being slowly but surely assimilated by the increasingly cosmopolitan, city-oriented society. However, by far the most striking feature of the congo phenomenon, and one not found among similar Afro-Hispanic groups in other countries—many of which still preserve dances and rituals—is the special language used by key congo practitioners during the games and dances: the *hablar en congo*. This is a special dialect of Spanish, which is all but unintelligible to the uninitiated, and which the congo dramatic personages use in addressing members of the community during dances and requests for “donations” of food, rum, and so on (Joly, 1981; Lipski, 1985c). In each community, only a relatively small group of residents are recognized as experts in the dialect, although most residents have at least a passive awareness of its structure, and children listen to and imitate the congo dialect as heard among adult community members. Both men and women may be proficient in the congo

dialect, although men's and women's groups normally hold separate activities, and there is no prohibition against other community members—who do not participate as actors or dancers—from employing the dialect. However, particularly in recent years, the number of truly expert practitioners of congo dialect in each village has dropped, and apprentice dialect speakers generally imitate the speech of one of the protagonists of the current festivities, Juan de Dios, *cribani*, or the congo queen.

Although this dialect is not used on a daily basis outside of Carnival season, its use is by no means limited to that period of the year, and at any moment residents of the coastal towns interject dialect phrases consciously or unconsciously into their speech, to call to friends and children and to comment on daily activities. When traveling to other cities in Panama, especially to Colón, where the Afro-Antillean population predominates, coastal Afro-colonial Panamanians at times use congo dialect when speaking to each other to distinguish themselves from Afro-Antilleans, derisively known as *chombos*, and to avoid being overheard. Thus the congo dialect is an integral part of the coastal communities, integrated with but not identical to the festivities associated with Carnival season, and it is this speech mode, more than the songs and dances, that gives the coastal Afro-colonial Panamanians a unique cultural identity.

Before turning to the linguistic particulars of the congo dialect, it is necessary to address the question of its historical significance, its origin, and its sociolinguistic function. The oral tradition among the congo groups maintains that the dialect is in essence a continuation of colonial creole or bozal Spanish, as originally spoken among black slaves recently arrived from Africa who spoke Spanish imperfectly. Objectively, however, this claim must not be taken uncritically, for the passing of nearly 400 years since the establishment of the principal coastal settlements and their Afro-colonial communities has had a considerable effect on the linguistic structures of local speech. Given the early decline of the

African slave trade in Panama, bozal slaves (arriving directly from Africa or from a Portuguese or Dutch holding station) were rarely found in large concentrations in Panama after the middle of the seventeenth century, with the result that Afro-colonials in Panama gradually acquired the Spanish language as spoken around them by Spanish colonists and government officials.

Among even the oldest residents of the Caribbean coast, 90 years old or more, there is no memory of their parents or grandparents speaking any other than local popular Panamanian Spanish, all of which indicates that during the time period when other areas of Latin America still contained distinctly Afro-Hispanic creole language, Panamanian Afro-colonials already spoke Spanish in a manner that could not be distinguished from their nonblack compatriots. This is not surprising if we consider the two conditions that have typically created Hispanic creole language in Latin America. The first is the relatively recent arrival of large numbers of slaves directly from Africa or from holding stations where they could learn creole Portuguese. This occurred in Cuba and to a lesser extent in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Ecuador in the early nineteenth century, as the sugar plantation boom resulted in an extraordinary demand for agricultural laborers. The predominance of nonnative speakers of Spanish—and the underlying currents of creole Portuguese learned on shipboard, in the holding stations, or on other Caribbean islands—caused a creole Spanish to survive among the black populations that maintained little linguistic contact with Spanish colonials (or perhaps even to be created, as Laurence, 1974, and López Morales, 1980, among others, have suggested).

The other condition that favored creole formation was the founding of *palenques* or fortified communities of escaped slaves, which in many parts of the Americas successfully resisted integration into the national societies for a century or more. Jamaican Maroon groups are the best known example, but the unique Hispanic creole dialect or Palenque de San Basilio, Colombia, was also formed after a slave revolt in



Cartagena in 1599 (Bickerton and Escalante, 1970; Escalante, 1954; Granda, 1978). Although the *palenqueros* were integrated into Colombian society by the middle of the eighteenth century, they continued to speak the creole dialect that had been formed during the founding period (Granda, 1978: 441-466; Escalante, 1954: 229-230). Even today most residents speak some version of this creole, which, however, is learned after Spanish, in a deliberate attempt by community elders to preserve cultural links with the past. Maroon communities were also formed in Panama, and one, also known as Palenque, was built in the midst of the modern day congo communities, to the east of Nombre de Dios. However, the original Palenque was abandoned, and the current settlement, located on the coast, is of more modern origin, being perhaps only 100-150 years old (R. Drolet, 1980), and its residents speak no creole Spanish, although nearly all can speak the congo dialect.

Granda (1978: 321ff.), based on remarks that had reached him, mentions the possibility that a creole Spanish dialect might be spoken in Palenque, Panama. However, after having visited this village and obtaining extensive samples of local Spanish dialects, as well as of congo speech, I can affirm that no such "creole" dialect exists, or has existed in the past century. All along the Caribbean coast of Panama, Afro-colonials were never removed from daily contact with the Spanish language as spoken by natives of Spain and their immediate descendants, with the result that early bozal creoles, spoken natively by recently arrived slaves and their offspring, disappeared much earlier than in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil (Megenney, 1978; Mendonça, 1934).

Tracing the use of the congo dialect is even more difficult than determining the origin of the modern games and dances because the dialect is a private phenomenon, used among community members and not as frequently noticed by or shared with outsiders who have observed the Carnival ceremonies along the Caribbean coast. Adding to the confusion is the linguistic stereotype, widespread in Panama, according to

which nearly all blacks speak "defective" Spanish, with varying degrees of deficiency. This stereotype, which stems from general racial prejudice, is widespread in Latin America (Lipski, 1985b), and results in creole forms being "heard" among groups that objectively do not manifest them. Panamanians expect blacks (especially in rural areas) to speak in a fashion that reflects popular stereotypes and comical portrayals, and therefore are reluctant to come to grips with social reality, which is that in Panama and nearly all other parts of Latin America, it is impossible to distinguish by linguistic means alone a black citizen from a nonblack citizen.

Another factor that has clouded the issue of the congo dialect in Panama is the presence of Afro-Antilleans, who frequently do speak Spanish with a distinctive accent (Tejeira, 1964) because their first language is West Indian English. Given the fact that true Hispanic creoles probably disappeared from Panama at an early time, it is tempting to suggest that congo dialect is a postslavery invention, coupled to the congo games in order to celebrate freedom, and to hark back to earlier periods when black slaves spoke an incomplete Spanish. This hypothesis is not likely to be supported, however, due to a number of considerations. First, the congo dialect shares remarkable similarities among a number of villages whose mutual geographical isolation would have precluded any conscious planning for restoration or invention of an imitation Afro-Hispanic language. Also significant is the noteworthy lack of easily obtainable information regarding Afro-Hispanic speech of earlier centuries; semiliterate residents of isolated coastal villages would have no access to historical materials that could suggest patterns upon which a modern imitation of bozal language might be based. Finally, given the known social prejudice against Afro-American groups in Panama, there would be no impetus simply to invent a speech form that serves to reinforce ethnocentric stereotypes; the congo dialect mode, though obviously distorted by the passing of time, is in all likelihood an indication of the prior existence of more legitimate creole Spanish.

Most Panamanians not intimately familiar with the congo groups, and even many congo members themselves, assert that the principal characteristic of the congo dialect is semantic inversion, giving words and sentences their "opposite" meaning. This is clearly an important component of the jocular aspect of congo speech, but objectively it is but one of several major facets of this dialect (Lipski, 1985c; Joly, 1981):

- (1) major phonetic distortion, both rule-governed and apparently random and improvised;
- (2) the use of a number of special words, some of which may be of African origin, and which are not used in regional Panamanian Spanish.
- (3) severe morphological reduction, consisting of substitution of conjugated verb forms, incorrect assignment of verbal tense and mood, and nominal number and gender.
- (4) severe syntactic reduction, elimination of many articles, prepositions, conjunctions, and simplification of verbal paradigms.
- (5) semantic inversion; giving words opposite meanings, or meanings that have been displaced along continuous semantic scales.

Let us examine each of these characteristics in turn, in reverse order. First, semantic inversion, which is never practiced on the entire phrase or sentence, but only on certain key elements, is chosen by the dialect speaker. Common inversions include *vivi* "alive" for *muerto* "dead," *adiba* "up" for *abajo* "down," *padase* "stand up" for *sentarse* "sit down," and so on. A less desirable alternative to semantic inversion of individual items is the negation of entire sentences, as in *do que no quedo eh . . .* "what I [don't] want is . . ." Partial semantic displacement also occurs in which, for example, *agua de sodiya*, roughly "tap water," acquires the meaning of "rum," or when *cadeteda* "road, highway" comes to mean "front yard." Speaking "backward" represents the purely parodic element of congo dialect, common to many play languages in various societies of the world, and has nothing essential to do with the

Afro-colonial history of the congos of Panama, except as a deliberate and humorous exaggeration of sociolinguistic stereotypes regarding "deficient" black Spanish.

Early creole Spanish did occasionally contain semantic displacements, but they were of a more systematic nature, involving subject pronouns and the meaning of basic verbs such as *tener* "have" and *ser/estar* "be." The use of semantic distortion and inversion in congo speech is related to the congo practice of putting old clothes on inside out as part of the Carnival activities, in imitation of the practice, common during the colonial slaveholding period in Panama, of plantation owners giving the slaves castoff and even new clothing to wear during the Carnival festivities. In Spanish, the phrase *al revés* means both "backward" and "inside out," and the congo dialect capitalizes on this play of words to combine various violations of normal social customs, including verbal distortion, putting on extravagant clothing inside out or in inappropriate fashions, shaking feet instead of hands during greeting, and so on. The sociolinguistic significance of semantic inversion is minimal, but the sociological value of this behavior is significant, in affirming the deliberate exaggeration and parody associated with Carnival games.

Syntactic reduction is the major structural feature of creole languages, and Iberian-based creole languages are no exception. Congo dialect frequently eliminates prepositions, articles, conjunctions, and relative pronouns in fashions remarkably similar to Romance- and English-based creoles throughout the world. Some examples include the following: *una caja sodiya* "a case [of] rum," *tú te ha metrió probriema* "you are really [in] trouble," *qué pemiso ta podaquí* "What permission [do you have to] be around here?" It is unlikely that such syntactic reductions were spontaneously generated following the complete disappearance of early creole Spanish in Panama for the similarity to other Iberian-based creoles and the differences between congo dialect and typical invented "foreigner talk" or "baby talk" point to a direct continuation of early creolized Spanish, tempered by more recent attempts at deliberate distortion and exaggeration.

Morphological substitution and reduction is a major feature of most creole languages, and has formed part of Romance-based creoles since the earliest periods of creole language usage. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish and Portuguese documents already give evidence of the substitution of incorrect verbal and nominal forms, in addition to the simple use of uninflected verbs and nouns. More recently described Hispanic creoles, in Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Equatorial Guinea, and elsewhere (Lipski, 1984, 1985a; Gonzáles and Benavides, 1982), evidence the same behavior, as "a feature of all contact vernaculars is their instability . . . there are few rules of contact-vernacular grammar which admit of no expectations" (Whinnom, 1956: 77). Although the congo dialect has added an exaggerated component to morphological distortion, the basis in historical pan-Hispanic reality is clear, and adds a further indication of the legitimacy of the underpinnings of congo dialect as a creole Spanish vestige.

The congo dialect contains a number of words unknown outside the area and not used in any Spanish dialect: *fuda* "rum, whisky," "*mojongo/mojobrio* "woman, wife," *jud-uminga/judumingue*<sup>2</sup> "child," *jotá* "drink," *potoñá* "leave," *mucana* "congo dialect," *bosoniya* "hand-made wooden cup for drinking *fuda*," *dumia* "eat," *sopodiñ/chopodiñ* "small boat, vehicle," and so on. These words are not found in the coastal areas of Colombia where verifiable African lexical influence is strong (Megenny, 1976; Castillo Mathieu, 1982), nor are they found elsewhere in Latin American Spanish dialects. The possibly fortuitous similarity between these words and west African lexical items is not sufficient to assign definitive etymologies (Granda, 1978: 185-215), especially because little is known about the geographical origin of the Afro-colonials from whom the congos are descended. The ethnic designation "congo" is common in Latin America, and does not always refer to groups that actually came from the Congo/Angola region of modern Africa or who spoke languages native to that region (Granda, 1978; Megenny, 1976, 1982; Castillo Mathieu, 1982). The Kikongo/Kikuyu words identified for other regions of Latin America are not current on

the Caribbean coast of Panama, and it is possible that the designation "congo" refers more to the cultural practice of forming an established subculture complete with royal family than to the geographical origins of Panama's Afro-colonials (Bastide, 1969: 64ff.; Cabrera, 1979: 78).

Phonological modifications in the congo dialect may be subdivided into two categories: neutralization of fundamental oppositions and deliberately introduced distortions. In the congo dialects of the *costa abajo*, neutralization of specific oppositions is rare (Joly, 1981). This may be due to the dilution of the dialect forms in this region by the incursion of large numbers of Afro-Antillean speakers, by Colombian laborers, including some from the Palenque region, and by the greater contact with noncongo life brought through contact with railroad and fruit companies (De la Guardia, 1977; Diez Castillo, 1975; Rout, 1976). In the congo dialects of the *costa arriba*, neutralization of phonological oppositions is frequent, and most commonly the phonemes /r/, /d/, /l/, and /r/ (the trilled r) are neutralized, in a variety of positions, to the realization [d]. Thus *arriba* "up" becomes *adiba*, *palo* "stick, tree" becomes *pado*, *cara* "face" becomes *cada*, and so on. Among Romance-based creoles, loss of the multiple trill /r/ is very frequent, and in some regions, intervocalic /r/ and /d/ are neutralized, although the phonetic realization of the pair is almost always [r], and not [d] (Lipski, 1984; Granda, 1977, 1978). Neutralization of /l/ and /r/ in syllable-final position is common to many (noncreole) dialects of Spanish, and in some creole dialects neutralization may involve other positions. However, only in the congo dialect does the neutralization embrace four phonemes, and the resulting systemic disintegration is considerable.

These phonological neutralizations are among the most telling signs that the congo dialect is not a mere parody of racist stereotypes of black Spanish but rather a descendant of an earlier period of partially creolized language. Given the total lack of suitable models in regional Panamanian Spanish upon which to base the massive neutralizations found in the congo

dialect, it is extremely unlikely that the latter dialect merely invented these neutralizations with no prior knowledge of their existence. Traditional stereotypes of black Spanish pronunciation involve loss of /r/ and sometimes /l/ in word-final position, and neutralization of these phonemes in syllable-final position, phenomena common to colloquial Spanish in many parts of the world (Lipski, 1985b). But massive neutralizations in word-initial and intervocalic positions are not part of any normal imitation of contemporary black Spanish, although such characteristics occurred in bozal Spanish of earlier centuries.

Sporadic phonetic deformations in the congo dialect often manifest themselves as vocalic substitutions, which is connected with the morphological instability mentioned above because it is frequently vocalic timbre that distinguishes verbal and nominal forms. Also found in the congo dialects, both in the costa arriba and the costa abajo, is the insertion of epenthetic consonants, the sole function of which is phonetic distortion for humorous purposes. Most frequently introduced is [r], sometimes in combination with semivocalic [i]: *pripa* (*pipa*) "coconut," *priagá* (*pagar*) "pay," *chocotrira* (*chiquitito*) "small," *momriento* (*momento*) "moment," and so on. Found occasionally is the conversion of consonantal groups of the form C + /l/ to C + /r/, a change that is rare among Spanish dialects but frequent in Portuguese, and in Portuguese-based creoles: *cravo* (*clavo*) "nail," *diabria* (*diablo*) "devil," *fraquito* (*flaquito*) "skinny," *jubriá* (*hablar*) "talk." It should be noted that such modifications are variable and sporadic, with considerable intersubjective variation, and even a single speaker introduces such distortions at will. At the same time, many commonly occurring combinations have become fixed, and new words introduced for the first time will generally give predictable results if the words themselves conform to general patterns of Spanish phonetics.

Further linguistic aspects of congo dialect may be shown to represent direct links with earlier partially creolized language behavior, with the possibility of their being spontaneous

inventions or mistaken imitations of general stereotypes standing at nearly zero. Congo speech is therefore important as a test case in Afro-Hispanic dialectology, for the traits it evinces are not those commonly found in other Hispanic and Portuguese creole dialects, but rather a unique blend of features that have been attested variously for creoles, pidgins, and learners' interlanguages throughout the Spanish-speaking world. The youngest generation of congo speakers is tending to employ more pure distortion and stereotyping, as the oral transmission of the original characteristics of congo speech is gradually replaced by the emphasis on purely verbal ingenuity, and as links with, and respect for, past traditions are broken through increasing contact with urban centers in Panama.

Because the Carnival games are accompanied by the consumption of large quantities of alcoholic beverages, many congo speakers affirm that they cannot speak the dialect unless they themselves are *bien sudao* "completely loaded" (P. Drolet, 1980: 9), but in fact the best dialect performances are given by speakers who are totally sober. Alcohol loosens the social inhibitions against behavior that would in other circumstances be considered ludicrous, and provides a context in which games and dramatic representations may flourish, but to equate congo dialect with the drunken distortion of popular Spanish is a serious error. Bickerton (1975: 172) notes that under the influence of alcohol, some individuals actually speak more precisely, and this occasionally occurs with the congos. On the other hand, it is true that in recent years, concern for historical authenticity is dropping among congo speakers, and given the current tendencies it is possible that if the dialect survives another generation or two, it will be reduced to a purely improvisational strategy, largely fueled by alcohol and the spirit of hilarity, rather than representing the results of a careful apprenticeship and a window into the past.

The *negros congos* of Panama are a marginalized group, and as in so many other countries, the only popular concern for their existence comes during Carnival season when outsiders arrive to witness colorful ceremonies and dances. In their daily



existence, however, the congos receive almost no support or assistance, and it is inevitable that younger community members aspire to a better life, leave the area to receive a higher education, and rarely return to establish themselves permanently. The congo ceremonies are in danger of extinction, or perhaps what is worse, of massive transculturation and commercialization at the hands of outsiders and urbanized *costeños*. A deeper appreciation of the cultural and historical significance of the congos and of their dialect, and a refusal to reduce a complex social phenomenon to a minstrel-show form of public spectacle, are required in order to undertake the reevaluation of Panama's Afro-American cultural heritage.

## NOTES

1. The research for this study was carried out in late 1983 and early 1984, in the following villages of the costa arriba: Portobelo, Nombre de Dios, Viento Frío, María Chiquita, Cacique, and Palenque. Partial funding for the research was provided by a limited grant-in-aid by the University of Houston. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Aminta Nuñez, of the Instituto Nacional de Cultura, to Blasina Molinar, *corregidora* of Nombre de Dios, to Angelina Aguilar, mayor of Portobelo, and to Dra. Soledad F. de Epifanio, of the University of Panama. Naturally, the greatest debt is owed to the many informants, who graciously shared their homes, their time, and their language with me. Dr. Luz Graciela Joly kindly supplied me with materials involving congo speech of the costa abajo, whose linguistic characteristics are considerably different from those of the villages of the costa arriba for reasons too complex to be discussed here. Dr. Patricia Drolet, currently teaching in Costa Rica, also furnished me with corroborative data on some of the most distant towns of the costa arriba.

2. Joly (1981) traces this word to *hormiga* "ant," although the latter word does occur in unmodified form in congo dialect. Similar words, or onomatopoeic forms, are found in Venezuela (Aretz, 1977: 260; Sojo, 1943: 29-30) and Puerto Rico (Algería, 1954: 74), but not with this meaning. In Cuban congo speech of the early twentieth century, which Granda (1978: 463) has traced to the Kikongo language of modern-day Congo/Zaire and Angola, *juruminga* also means "ant"; see Cabrera (1970: passim). However, despite this apparently significant coincidence, none of the other Panamanian congo words are found in Cuban congo texts, and were not recognized by speakers of Kikongo and other west and central African languages that I have occasionally used as informants. The Panamanian congo words are also not directly traceable to words found in a large variety of dictionaries and glossaries that were consulted, although of course possibly fortuitous similarities may also be found for any given congo word by searching among a wide enough collection of African language data.

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*John M. Lipski is Associate Professor of Spanish Linguistics at the University of Houston. His areas of specialization include Hispanic dialectology and the African influence on the formation of Latin American Spanish. He has done fieldwork in many areas of Latin America and Africa, and his book on the Spanish of Equatorial Guinea will be published shortly by Max Niemeyer of Germany.*