A Blast from the Past: Ritualized Afro-Hispanic Linguistic Memories (Panama and Cuba)

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Introduction

Africans taken as slaves to Spanish America and who learned Spanish in adolescence or adulthood spoke with the characteristics of second-language learners, at times exhibiting areal characteristics of specific African language families, and in other cases replicating errors found among second language speakers of Spanish worldwide. There exists a large and diverse corpus of literary imitations of the speech of *bozales* (as African-born learners of Spanish were called), beginning in Spain at the turn of the 16th century, and continuing into colonial Spanish America beginning in the early 17th century and lasting until the early 20th century. Many of the linguistic features of these imitations are typical of all learners of Spanish; others are found in Afro-Iberian creoles such as Papiamentu, Palenquero, Cape Verdean and São Tomé creole Portuguese. Finally, many of the literary imitations are simply grotesque racist parodies, devoid of any resemblance to the true results of Afro-Hispanic language contacts. Lipski (2005) summarizes the issues at stake.

Central to the debate over the reconstruction of *bozal* language, especially in Latin America, is the extent to which *bozal* speech exhibited consistent traits across time and space, and the possibility that Afro-Hispanic pidgins may have creolized across large areas of Spanish America. The abundant bibliography of studies based on corpora of literary, musical, and folkloric texts has broadened the discussion to include a wide range of hypotheses and scenarios, but ultimately the texts in question are imitations or recollections produced by non-*bozal* authors, and therefore of debatable validity. Only evidence from authentic speech communities can round out the discussion, and the search for such remnants among contemporary Afro-Latin American groups is one of the most pressing tasks in contemporary Spanish dialectology.

To complement spontaneous speech data from the remaining Afro-Hispanic speech communities data can be drawn from another—twice-removed—source of leftover *bozal* language,
namely the retention of purported ancestral Afro-Hispanic speech in religious and secular rituals. Afro-American ceremonial and ritual language has frequently been tapped for surviving African words as well as transplanted and syncretic religious expression. In addition to these relics, a subset of Afro-Hispanic rituals contain departures from contemporary regional varieties of Spanish that hark back to time periods in which non-native bozal Spanish was still a living language. The pidginized Spanish is usually recognized as such by modern practitioners, but occasional bozal-like asides have escaped notice. Most Afro-Hispanic ritualistic bozal carreos centers around two poles: the first is the Carnival tradition, and the second are religious ceremonies in which the speech of bozal ancestors is imitated, either through song or through spirit possession in which the possessed individual purportedly channels the voice of an ancestor. Both phenomena are well represented in the Caribbean, and there is a ritualistic Afro-Hispanic linguistic component found in one of the oldest Afro-Caribbean communities (Panama) as well as in the most recently formed Afro-Caribbean community (Cuba), running from some of the oldest Afro-Hispanic communities (Panama) to the most recently formed (Cuba).

The language of the negros congos of Panama

The most extensive Carnival-time reproduction of earlier bozal speech—although by no means the most trustworthy—comes in the ritualized speech of the negros congos of Panama, centered around the colonial ports of Portobelo and Nombre de Dios. The principal linguistic studies are Joly (1981, 1984) and Lipski (1985, 1986a, 1986b, 1989, 1997). Historical and anthropological studies of the congos include Béliz (1959), de la Rosa Sánchez (1988), Drolet (1980a, 1980b), Franceschi (1960), Laribe (1968, 1969), Smith (1975), Tejeira Jaén (1974). Panama was the site of one of the most prolonged Afro-Hispanic demographic contacts, since almost all slaves destined for the Pacific coast of Spanish America passed through Panamanian ports. The first Spanish port on the Caribbean side was Nombre de Dios, but this village lacks a good natural harbor, and frequent pirate attacks forced the treasure-shipping operation out of the area. The next Spanish port was established at Portobelo, on a deep bay providing an excellent natural harbor.

Stone fortifications were built, and warehouses erected to hold the treasure arriving from Peru. Once a year ships from Spain docked at Portobelo, to receive the treasure and to sell goods from Spain and other Latin American colonies. This event drew citizens from all over Panama, and grew into a festive feria, the memory of which is still preserved in local folk traditions. For a long time, the Portobelo-Panama route was the only motivation for Spanish settlement in Panama, and large numbers of African slaves were brought in to support the effort. With the decline of treasure shipments from Peru, Portobelo waned in importance, and by the end of the 18th century the Afro-Panamanian population of the costa arriba (to the east of the canal) and the costa abajo (to the west) had sunk into a marginality that continues to this day. During colonial times, slave rebellions were as common in Panama as in other Spanish American colonies, and maroon communities were formed along the rivers and trails of the interior. In these villages, African traditions were frequently maintained for several generations, and vestiges of African languages, together with Afro-Hispanic pidgin or semi-creole language, evidently survived even longer in some villages. The original village of Palenque (a few kilometers inland from the contemporary village of the same name) was typical of such maroon communities; a few hundred Blacks at most, distributed in huts scattered throughout the rain forest.

Of all the cultural manifestations of Panamanian society, which is richly endowed with a wide range of folkloric traditions, perhaps the most curious and the least understood is the phenomenon of the negros congos of the Caribbean coast. The congo ceremonies, which take place during Carnival season each year, combine a historical component (the reference to the history of Black slaves in Panama), a Hispanic component (the music and to a certain extent the dancing), and an African aspect (the drumming and the costumes). The congo ritual presupposes the existence of a cofradía or brotherhood of initiates, which finds its antecedents both in Hispanic society, where religious brotherhoods and societies abound, and in African cultures, where daily activities are circumscribed by family and tribal ties and by fraternal organizations. Congo groups are found in the Costa Arriba (to the east of Colón, up to Santa Isabel), in the Costa Abajo, and in some towns in the interior. One of the components of the congo games is the use of a special dialect mode, distinct from regional popular Spanish, the so-called hablar en congo. The congo speech 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, etc. 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. 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. The oral tradition among the congo groups maintains that the dialect is in essence a continuation of colonial bozal Spanish. 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 were rarely found in large concentrations in Panama after the middle of the 17th century, with the result that Afro-colonials in Panama gradually acquired the Spanish language as spoken around them by Spanish colonists and government officials.

Since any creole-like Spanish dialect would have disappeared from Panama probably by the end of the 18th century, it is tempting to suggest that congo dialect is a post-slavery and hence modern 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, 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 Afro-Panamanians' lack of easily obtainable information regarding Afro-Hispanic speech of earlier centuries; quasi-illiterate 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 to simply invent a speech form which serves to reinforce ethnocentric stereotypes.

Luque de Pérez (2001:54) in a recent note about the congos of the Costa Arriba, declares that:

The Congo language is an artificial jargon, but undoubtedly rooted in tradition. It is not a dialect therefore it suffers transformations from one individual to another. It is Spanish deformed. The vocabulary, the phonetics and the elocution are characterized by [...] the express deformation of the Spanish word, also with the object of making it similar to the Negro phonetics, so they will say sao for sé, pincas for piña, pucu, instead of aquí, cucañera for compañero [...] the most difficult and at once comical is the absolute inversion of the terms, that is, the use of a word of phrase with the precisely opposite sense to the grammatical. Thus they will say ta mori for estar vivo; black means white, come means go, bad is good, and so on. They do this easily and naturally, and they understand each other so well that strangers do not believe that the Congos do this only occasionally.

This example is actually a translation of the distinguished Panamanian folklorist Zárate (1962:126–7); the latter author continues (pp. 126–7):

El habla del negro de hoy no difiere en nada de la parla de los demás habitantes [...] el lenguaje congo es una jerga artificiosa pero indudablemente enraizada en la tradición, aunque tiene a veces algo de improvisada [...] es un castellano expresamente deformado, por razones de estrategia en los mismos tiempos de las luchas o postériormente para la imitación o representación de los sucesos originales. Manifiestamente este arteficio de los contrastes debe tener su origen en los trucos o estrategias de las viejas luchas, destinadas ya a confundir a los adversarios, ya a burlarse de los modos y usos blancos. [...] la rebelión y la lucha eran crímenes que acarreaban penas de palos, hambre y muerte cruel. La preparación de cualquiera de esos actos necesitaba, pues, suma astucia. Hacerse ininteligibles y al mismo tiempo dar la sensación de que los negros aceptaban "ser unos verdaderos brutos", por ni siquiera llegar a dominar la lengua eran cosas manifiestas en aquel lenguaje y en aquella mímica de "revesinas". Pero, además debía haber un gote en todas aquellas prácticas que no sólo intentaban confundir al odiado señor de hora, sino que constituían una sátira y burla contra sus costumbres y modales.

Zárate was the first to suggest that the congo dialect was from the outset a deliberate distortion of Spanish with the purpose of deceiving White slaveowners and planning acts of rebellion and insurrection. This would be done by reinforcing the Spanish colonists' racist stereotype of the Black African who was incapable of learning "proper" Spanish, hence the deviations from Spanish
grammar, and by deforming Spanish words to the point of unrecognizability, thereby creating the impression of speaking an “African” language.

The congós interviewed by me in the villages of the Costa Arriba as well as outside this region coincide in affirming that the congo dialect derives from bozal Spanish “de la tierra de Guinea,” using the latter designation as in Spanish colonial times to refer generically to all of sub-Saharan Africa. Even the most superficial comparison of congo speech from either the Costa Arriba or the Costa Abajo suffices to demonstrate that it differs significantly from all bozal attestations in Spanish, from the 16th century to the beginning of the 20th. That congo speech is used nowadays as a cryptoplect for humorous purposes during Carnival season is beyond doubt, but it is not equally clear that this speech form derives exclusively from a colonial cryptoplect used among rebellious slaves in defiance of their White masters. Such strategies as simply inverting the semantic value of words is not likely to confuse listeners for very long, while the massive substitution of vowels and consonants and other non-systematic deformation of Spanish words renders improvised congo speech all but unintelligible even to other community members, hardly an efficient way to communicate crucial details of resistance or insurrection. In the contemporary congo activities the dialect is rarely if ever used to communicate precise information, but rather to add to the festive environment through shouts of encouragement and mock derision.

The congo language is learned by children as part of the socialization process in Afro-Panamanian coastal villages. Joly (1981:17) describes the situation for the Costa Abajo; these remarks coincide with my own field observations in the Costa Arriba region:

[...] the semantic content takes precedence over morphophonemic structure in the ritual-play language. Although certain morphophonemic changes are made, the basic canonic shape of words and the syntactic structure of Spanish remains essentially the same so that the symbolic meaning of the words and sentences prevails [...] This is the way Afro-Panamanians are socialized into the play language, without anyone explaining the “regulations of the play.” It is a sociolinguistic process similar to learning their native language: hearing, seeing, imitating, speaking with a speech community. It is plausible, therefore, that some words are memorized rather than generated by morphophonemic rules. The players, however, do not memorize verses or dialogues as in a theatrical drama but improvise their performance according to behavior expected of their roles. Good players are those who are witty in improvisation.

And again (Joly 1981:23):

The adult players interact verbally with the common folk of the settlements, including the children. Even though the play-ritual language is used only once a year during the ritual season, this verbal interaction maintains alive a pragmatic understanding of the language among all members of the community [...] Children, moreover, imitate the adult players and form play groups of their own, even though they are not officially recognized as players.

Recent conversations with congo practitioners in Panama reveal a growing concern that children in both the Costa Abajo and the Costa Arriba communities may not be appreciating and learning the congo rituals and language as effectively as in the past. This decreased transmission to younger generations may be related to the tenacious lack of metalinguistic awareness among congo speakers, as well as the commonly held belief that congo speech is simply drunken babbling. Congo males (and occasionally females) offer the excuse that unless they are drinking (estar bien sueltos in their own words) they can neither produce nor reproduce/translate congo language. Drolet (1980:9) describes the difficulties of studying congo dialect (in this case in the Costa Arriba) communities during fieldwork conducted in the 1970’s; the observations are valid three decades later:

[...] when I tried to elicit translations of what was said in the dialect, I was confronted with responses that I could not follow. Because this approach proved a disaster, I wrote down Congo words and phrases to ask the following day for translations. I found, however, that while men could explain other elements of the ritual, they could not repeat sentences or phrases of the dialect out of context, unless they were drinking as they did during ritual enactment.

Drolet’s remarks about the inability of congo participants to “translate” after the fact recorded dialogues in the ritual dialect eloquently underscore this point. Nonetheless, my field work has amply demonstrated the unimpeded ability of congós to freely use the ritual dialect both in monologues and with one another in a state of complete sobriety; indeed congós often use fragments of the language in daily life, both in the communities and when traveling to Colón, to distinguish themselves from Afro-Antilleans. A
speaker from the Costa Abajo informed me that she and her mother routinely discuss daily events in the congo dialect, and her recounting of a specific and non-trivial event entirely in the dialect demonstrates the ability of some congo practitioners to use the dialect for true communicative purposes. This usage, however, is quite rare in practice (indeed it would be of interest to determine if another congo could translate this dialog out of context, hearing only a recording). Even when deliberately using the congo dialect in public settings outside of the coastal Afro-Panamanian communities, communication is typically limited to greetings or short oblique comments about third parties, not to the transfer of significant new information. All of this suggests that the congo dialect did not originate in a deliberately contrived language used by rebellious slaves, although certainly containing such elements. In true creole dialects designed to hide sinister purposes, such as thieves' cant and jargon and various calós, including the original lunfardo and pachuco slang, the primary vehicle is lexical substitution, sometimes using words from another language (lunfardo took regional Italian words, Spanish caló takes elements from Roma), with only a few deliberate distortions of Spanish words, e.g. Pachuco sinón and striol for sí, nanes for no, Califó for Califórnia and Pachico itself, apparently derived from (El) Paso.

Due to historical separation the congo dialects of the Costa Abajo and the Costa Arriba differ in several important aspects, although containing a considerable common core. Congos from both regions assert that they have no difficulty in understanding the ritualized speech from the opposite group, but such conversations rarely occur in practice and these assertions are therefore questionable. Nowadays, speaking congo involves a high degree of verbal improvisation and prowess, based on the notion of saying things "backwards" (Spanish al revés, which also means 'upside down' and 'inside out'). Common inversions include vivi 'alive' for muerto 'dead', adíba 'up for abajo 'down', padase 'stand up' for sentarse 'sit down', etc. 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 'run,' or when cadetada 'road, highway' comes to mean 'front yard.' 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 'backwards' and 'inside out' (and sometimes even 'upside down'), 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, etc.

In the Costa Arriba congo dialect, speakers routinely realize /r/ /rr/ /l/ and /d/ as stop [d] (e.g. [ka-de-te-da] for carretera 'road'; [e-te-tda] for este lado 'this side'), which departs sharply from normal Panamanian pronunciation, in which postvocalic voiced stops do not occur. These neutralizations are found in other Afro-Hispanic dialects; in particular the three-way neutralization suggests a Bantu substratum. Also frequent is the interchange of -o and -a at the end of nouns and adjectives or their replacement by -e or -i (e.g. vivi < vivo 'alive'). Word-initial vowels may be substituted apparently at random, but when more than one vowel is replaced there is usually vowel harmony (e.g. cumpñeda < compañero 'comrade', punuente < panamero 'Panamanian'). Some speakers introduce an epenthetic [r] or semi-vocical [l] to create onset clusters (e.g. gripa < pija 'coconut'; montriento < momento 'moment'), and there are occasional shifts of /l/ to /r/ in onset clusters (diabria < diabo 'devil'; fraquito < flaguito 'skinny'); the latter change is reminiscent of Portuguese and may reflect the early presence of Portuguese slave traders arriving in Portobelo, the principal Spanish port supplying slaves to the Pacific region of South America. A sample of Costa Arriba congo speech (from Portobelo) is:

¿Y tú qué haceh ahí pado? Y si tu te poneh entedo. Te vah a poneh er cudo Mayadi, aquí pade cubuyete... y ahoda que vas a ayudla... si no hay na que llocla, y uhtede qué hacen en mi chanco, eh... qué dicen usted, ya ehtsa acuanda, e pa da ñita todavía faita prusupia, vengan todo que sacs ja ehta cuando... Approximate translation: What are you doing standing [sitting] there? You're going to get whole [break yourself up]. You're going to bust your ass, Mayadi, falling off the roof. And now what are you going to help [with], if there is nothing to cry about, and what are you all doing on my property, what do you say, what is today's date, and finally we don't have any budget [money], come and get it

A sample congo text from the Costa Abajo (Joly 1981) is:
Güene, poque ya eso mi meno sempe, cuando ya mi so la nuevecite, que mi menom último. Ya ete mi so lo ruimento delle. Y entono masoto mi siga la nurme ruimento que mi meno tora la sumana [...] Po lo meno ahora, masoto mi mere la otu sumana. Mi co Gubé, mi mere otu. Ya elle mimito como masoto; mi weyo [...] Entone mi meno con la mimo ruimento mi weye, weveande la nurme crosa. Ya eso mi so uno cunstumbe, como mi diso masoto. Uno cunstumbe que mi so. ¿Cómo mi diso oro? Translation: Bueno, porque ya eso viene de siempre; Cuando ya eran los nuevoctos (viejitos) que vinieron de último (primero). Ya este es el reglamento de ellos. Y entones nosotros seguimos el mismo reglamento, cuando venimos todas las semanas (años) [...] Por lo menos ahora, nosotros venimos la otra semana (año). Lo mismo Gobé, vendrán otra vez. Ya ellos son mismito como nosotros; ellos juegan [...] Entones venimos con el mismo reglamento del juego, jugando la misma cosa. Ya eso es una cunstumbe, como decimos nosotros. Una cunstumbe que es... ¿Cómo dijimos ahora?

From my own recording of a congo from the Costa Abajo (made in 2001) comes the following example:

buene puh, cuando elle no se mele para truwao di yo, cuando elle no se mene jorapapa di yo ... cuando elle no se mene ella no reperrara pepita era hueve arainogho que no so dera dera papa duiete. entono, elle, era papa di yo no le a diche ara moihoro ara papa dera maru duiete, que cuando ella no se mene para chakere nu kambra cora mama di elle no re a diche que elle no se mene poque no ta ma, buene entono elle no le a diche no elle se mene a cora mihi-mihi, que no ta buena tuempuco ... entono elle nombra cara curutiyi no se mene ... cuando era papa di elle se mene para chakere entono ella norra mamá corra buca, y norra diche quitera chakere anti diera puta serrá, y cuanda no ... pera ra pepitera huevotro, otro veh, era otro puta tuempuco no, no ta serrá

The speaker’s free translation of this anecdote is as follows:

Lo que sucede es que ...cuando yo me iba con mi mamá para el hospital, viene, ella va con la niña al médico, y mi mamá le dice cuando veas, cuando viera a mi hermano, cuando veas a Benítez le dices que yo me fui para el médico, que venga a visitarme más tarde, pero él llegó a la casa y no encontró a nadie y como sabía que mi mamá estaba enferma de a varios días él se dio la vuelta por la ventana y comenzó a preguntar a los vecinos si la habían visto y todo y todo el mundo le dijo que no. Se desesperó y vio el abanico prendido por la ventana y entonces, suscitó ese, ese dilema, y ahora lo mejor del caso es que ahora tenemos puerta abierta totalmente.

These texts show both similarities and differences with respect to the congo varieties of the Costa Arriba. The same replacement of vowels shows is the occasional introduction of epenthetic consonants (more common in the Costa Arriba). In the Costa Arriba dialects the four phonemes /r/, /ɾ/, /d/, and /d/ are pronounced as occlusive [d]. This rarely occurs in the Costa Abajo congo dialect, where only /d/ is routinely pronounced as [d]. The stop pronunciation occasionally extends to [r], perhaps in hypercorrect form, but never to /l/ or /ɾ/. The Costa Abajo pronunciation is similar to that of the Afro-Hispanic loango speech of Barlovento, Venezuela (Domínguez 1989, Hernández 1981, Mosonyi et al. 1983). Onset cluster reduction is more common in the Costa Abajo than in the Costa Arriba congo dialect; such combinations as ato < otro, sempre < sempere, and the pan-Caribbean ombe < ombre are an integral part of the Afro-Hispanic phonetic tradition, which begins in 16th century Spain (Lipski 2002b). Contemporary vernacular Brazilian Portuguese offers many prominent examples of onset cluster reduction, typified by nego < negro, now used as a term of endearment. A few contemporary Afro-Peruvian speakers continue this trend, although most cases of onset cluster reduction characterize only the oldest community inhabitants.

More interesting are the grammatical modifications in the Costa Abajo congo dialect, some of which more closely approximate early boast Spanish than the congo language of the Costa Arriba.

1. The Costa Abajo dialect has a single third person pronoun elle, taking the place of él and ella. Joly (1981) notes the similarity with Palenquero ele, possibly derived from Portuguese. The use of a single genderless pronoun is common to all Afro-Romance creole languages and to many pidgins. This pronoun is still remembered and occasionally used by elderly Afro-Cubans living in isolated rural communities (Ortiz López 1998). Other Ibero-Romance-based creoles use the Portuguese-derived pronoun ele (with several variants) for masculine and feminine referents. Recently the invariant subject pronoun ele has been discovered in a unique and isolated Afro-Bolivian dialect (Lipski a, b).

2. The first person plural subject pronoun in the Costa Abajo congo dialect is masoto < nosotros. This particular combination is not
attested in other Afro-Hispanic dialects, but the component modifications do occur in other varieties of Spanish. The replacement of initial /n/ by /m/ is found in Sephardic (Judeo-Spanish in the pronoun mosotros and in the Ternate dialect of Philippine Creole Spanish (Chabacano) in the pronoun misfro. Similarly the reduction of the onset cluster /tr/ is frequent in Afro-Iberian language worldwide, and occurs elsewhere in the Costa Abajo congo dialect. The form mosstro(s) also appears in some Afro-Hispanic imitations:

(from Cirilo Villaverde 1979 Cecilia Valdés): Mosstro no son casi por le igles.

From Croto Gangá (José Crespo y Borbón Cruz 1974): Muchuo vamos a drivi, huoy mosstro se la halía, cudnapa, poque cuvinte lo debe sé a la campana como jiero [...] Ahuoy vamos ta mosstro como pecá dentro lagua [...] Ya yo lo ve que mosstro vamos a estu mudivrio.

(3) The second person plural pronoun in the Costa Abajo congo dialect is utene. This is not only similar to (contemporary) Palenquero utere but to the Afro-Bolivian Yungueño dialect form ote. The replacement of an obstruct by a nasal is not found in any non-Afro variety of Spanish.

(4) The form nengre < negro is also found in the Suriname creole languages Sranan Tonga and Saramaccan, and appears elsewhere in bozal imitations, for example from Cuba:

(5) Joly (1981) notes the many examples of an apparently intrusive particle mi before verbs in the congo speech of the Costa Abajo; this usage does not occur at all in the Costa Arriba ritual congo speech. Examples from her corpus include:

Jorojoro mi wa puri con too nengre y macha que mi teno diki 'Aeroplano se va por ahí don todos los negros y mujeres que tenemos aquí' Mupaïa quando mi so la ocha, mi mene Mutuaunga la múntua 'Mañana cuando son las ocho (cuatro), viene Muatanga de la mañana'

'Ya eso mi meno siempre 'Ya eso viene de siempre'

Pero si mi teno una Barachate rasprarsable a Nengre 'Pero si tenemos un borrachote responsable de los Negros'

This element did not occur in my own elicited examples of Costa Abajo congo speech and may be confined to particular idioms in the Costa Arriba communities. The use of mi in the congo texts is not consistent and does not correlate with specific functions normally assigned to preverbal particles, such as progressive or habitual, but rather are inserted apparently at random to give an "African" sound to the speech.

The rapid-fire distortions of patrimonial Spanish words found in Panamanian congo language sounds at first like speaking "in tongues" and some descriptions of the behavior of congos during the most frenetic part of their ritual suggest a trance-like state and accompanying glossolalia: "Hemos visto hablar sin tomar respiro por largos minutos a un congo de éstos, arengando en forma que más parecía un alienado que un ser normal, mientras el grupo de oyentes daba muestras de aprobación y reía en ciertos momentos" (Zárate 1962:126-7). Similarly Drolet (1980:9) recalls that her consultants "could not repeat sentences or phrases of the dialect out of context, unless they were drinking as they did during ritual enactment," which also could indicate an "altered state." In practice, however, congos do not have to be inebriated, and the appearance of being possessed is an entirely voluntary show of exuberance that forms part of the congo festivities. There is no known form of glossolalia that involves substituting sounds in a string of normally spoken language, thus indicating that congos are fully aware of their own language at all times. Nor is congo speech formed by predictable substitutions and syllable transformations, as in the various jerongas-type games. The reason that congos may not be able to readily interpret recordings or transcriptions of outbursts by other speakers lies in the high degree of improvisation and the fact that very few congo utterances during the rituals carry any significant communicative content. When several congos, usually men, tease one another for the purpose of extracting "fines," the general content is pre-determined: accusations of stealing one's wife or girlfriend, trespassing, etc. Responses are equally formulac, so there is no need for participants to actually parse individual utterances in congo dialect. The fact that substantive linguistic content cannot be easily extracted by other participants is clear evidence that if congo speech originated as a cryptolex designed to allow for communication among restless slaves without the knowledge of their owners and overseers, it had a much different form than is found today. A more likely hypothesis is that contemporary congo language is an amalgam of two imperfectly remembered traditions, whose specific details have been all but obliterated from the collective memory: original bozal Spanish as spoken by African-born slaves, and some kind of deliberately distorted language spoken by insurgent slaves, whether bozales, ladinos, or criollos.
disappeared centuries ago, the last African-born speakers of bozal Spanish in Cuba died around the middle of the 20th century. The extensive writings of Lydia Cabrera (born in 1900 and raised in the presence of many bozal speakers) reflect this heritage, as does the rich Cuban popular musical tradition, which continues to employ widely recognized bozal stereotypes. Several Cuban films have portrayed scenes during the slaveholding period, and have employed bozal Spanish imitations based on living memories. The most convincing is in the acclaimed film “La última cena” by Thomas Gutiérrez Alea, who consulted with linguists when preparing the highly accurate bozal language used by actors in this film, loosely based on a true historical incident. Nor are all remnants of bozal speech confined to memories of individuals long deceased. Ortiz López (1998) encountered elderly Afro-Cubans, particularly in remote regions of eastern Cuba, who continue to use bozal traits spontaneously, including the gender-invariant third person pronoun ella and the word agüe for hoy ‘today.’ It is, however, in the realm of ritual language that the largest repository of Cuban bozal language can be found.

The use of bozal language in Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies takes two forms. The first—and most useful as a source of data on early forms of the language—comes in memorized songs and chants associated with the Palo Monte rituals. The second manifestation takes place during “spirit possession” associated with a variety of Afro-Cuban cults, in which individuals appear to speak in a trance with the voice and linguistic traits of deceased ancestors, some of whom were African-born bozales. When combined with living memories and bozal remnants in contemporary Cuba these ritual fragments provide complementary evidence on the nature of bozal language of centuries past.

The Palo Monte cult derives principally from the Kikongo-speaking region of Central Africa, home of the Bakongo and related ethnic groups. In Cuba the Palo Monte religion is divided into several Reglas, of which the Regla Mayombe (named after a Central African ethnic group) offers the greatest amount of linguistic data. The Mayombe rituals contain large numbers of Kikongo words and expressions, as well as fragments of bozal language embedded in chants that also contain Kikongo and contemporary Spanish elements. Kikongo survivals and Palo Mayombe rituals have been the subject of several earlier studies (e.g. Cabrera 1979, 1984; Díaz Fabelo 1998; García González and Valdés Acosta 1978; Granda 1973a, 1973b), all of which converge on
the conclusion that Kikongo forms the principal African substratum for the Palo Mayombe practices. Schwegler and Fuentes (2005) is the definitive linguistic study of the Palo Mayombe ceremonies (also the Kikongo basis Schwegler 2005), providing conclusive proof of the Kikongo basis for the rituals and providing numerous samples of *bozal* language intertwined with Kikongo and modern Cuban Spanish fragments. The *bozal* elements, while relatively few, are important confirmations of conclusions arrived at independently as to the nature of earlier *bozal* Spanish in Cuba. Some examples include:

(a) Yo te llama con mi maña
(b) Riba mondo sort bacheche [saludable]
(c) y ese mimo tata ta pedir licencia

Example (a) demonstrates the use of the third person singular as invariant verb, a phenomenon common to pidginized Spanish worldwide, and frequent in *bozal* Spanish from many areas. In Spanish the third person singular is the maximally unmarked verb form and serves as quasi-invariant verb in early child language as well as in most second-language approximations to Spanish. Its use in Cuban *bozal* language is also confirmed in the correspondence between the Cuban scholar José de la Luz Caballero and the American encyclopedist Francis Lieber. I am grateful to Clancy Clements for providing copies of this fascinating and as yet unpublished correspondence. Lieber queried whether Afro-Cubans spoke a creole language and whether a creolized Spanish was used in religious teachings (as suggested by the recently published catechism in *bozal* Spanish written by the Spanish priest Nicolás Duque de Estrada in Cuba and designed to train priests in the use of *bozal* speech when preaching to African slaves (Laviña 1989). Luz Caballero's responses confirm other observations, that *bozales* spoke imperfect Spanish but without the consistent restructuring and transmission to successive generations found in creole languages. He also confirmed that Spanish priests at times spoke deliberately reduced Spanish when confessing the slaves, as suggested by Duque de Estrada's catechism. In other notes Luz Caballero offers an extensive critique of Duque de Estrada's pseudo-*bozal* imitations, indicating a high degree of awareness of Afro-Cuban language, a feature also well documented in folk literature and living memories, and also found in Duque de Estrada's catechism (Lipski 1999a, 2002a). Example (c) contains an isolated example of what may be the preverbal particle *ta*, found in nearly all Ibero-Romance derived creoles as well as in some earlier imitations of Afro-Cuban *bozal* speech (Lipski 1987c, 1987, 1992a). In the entire *bozal* corpus from Spain and Spanish America, from the 15th century to the beginning of the 20th, *ta* as preverbal particle only occurs in some 19th century Cuban texts (and one Puerto Rican text), a fact difficult to reconcile with theories that attribute this particle to a pan-Hispanic creole, derived in turn from an early Afro-Portuguese "reconnaissance language" (Naro 1978). One possible explanation is the presence of Papiamentu-speaking laborers imported massively into Cuba and Puerto Rico in the mid 19th century, and whose language is documented in songs and folk texts (Lipski 1996, 1998, 1999b). Another possibility is the reduction of progressive constructions based on *estar* + GERUND in the rapid speech of highly non-standard varieties, such as occurs in the traditional Afro-Bolivian dialect, in which constructions of the sort *ta* + INFINITIVE (lacking the final /r/) alternate with normal progressive constructions (Lipski a, b), for example: *¿dónde estás vals compa ta viniendo? Ta verí di a mi casa; yo ta verí di tal parte; ¿andé p (ue) compa ta inindo?* The Palo Monte Mayombe example (c) however appears to contain an unambiguous infinitive, reflecting the construction found in (European) Portuguese and which some have postulated as the source of *ta* constructions in Portuguese-derived creoles. The use of *estar* + INFINITIVE entered standard European Portuguese well into the 19th century, several centuries after the creole languages were formed. However there is considerable evidence that this construction existed in non-standard vernacular varieties of Portuguese as early as the 16th century, and in some 17th century texts these constructions are attributed to Black *bozal* speakers (Hatherly 1990): *"os fia sempre está a fazer..."*; "pois toro *estamos amor te pedro..."* The single Palo Monte Mayombe example is not sufficient to verify the source of *ta* constructions in Afro-Cuban speech, but it does demonstrate that the debate is far from closed, and that additional fieldwork may uncover still more missing pieces of an unusually complex puzzle.

In addition to *bozal* grammatical constructions, the Palo Mayombe chants employ the Afro-Hispanic lexical item *agüe* (hoy) 'today,' also found in Palenquero and Papiamentu and possibly forming a link among these creole languages (Lipski 1999c). There are also examples of prenasalized consonants: *ncuarto < cuarto,*
ndinga < digo (Fuentes Guerra and Schwegler 2005:62–3 postulate a Kikongo etymology meaning ‘word, language’). Finally, the documented presence of a strong Kikongo substratum in Cuba suggests a reexamination of negation patterns in 19th century Cuban bozal speech. Kikongo stands out among the Bantu languages for having a combination of preverbal and postverbal negative particles, similar to the French ne ... pas construction, and Kikongo influence has been postulated for negation patterns in São Tomé, Príncipe, and Anuábó Portuguese-derived creoles, as well as the double negation (of the type yo no sé no) found in the Afro-Hispanic dialects of the Dominican Republic and the Colombian Chocó, as well as in vernacular Brazilian Portuguese (Schwegler 1996a, 1996b). Double negation is not found in contemporary Cuban Spanish, but there are several 19th century examples attributed to bozales, including the catechism of Duque de Estrada: “alma mio no va a juntar no, con cuerpo de otra gente ...” (Laviña 1989:89). In his correspondence with Líber, Luz Caballero also noted the use of double negation in 19th century Cuban bozal speech: “10’ Repiten los negros casi siempre la negativa asi dicen vg. “no va á juntar no” “no va á salir no.” In the case of the Dominican Republic a collateral influence of Haitian Creole may be at work (Lipski 1996, 1999b); Examples of double negation have also been recorded among elderly Haitians living in rural eastern Cuba, by Ortiz López (1999). However Luz Caballero, who lived in Havana, probably did not have contact with Haitian learners of Spanish; the documented presence of both large numbers of Kikongo speakers and double negation in bozal speech in 19th century Cuba suggests a causal link that warrants further inquiry.

**Bozal language in Afro-Cuban spiritual possession**

By far the strangest possible source of Afro-Cuban bozal language comes about as the result of the most intense phase of santería, palo monte mayombe, and other rituals. It can be called the “language of spiritual possession”; the practitioners believe this language to be of supernatural origin (in logical positivist terms; within these ceremonies there is a firm belief that speaking with the voices of one’s ancestors is not supernatural but fully “natural”). As such any data gleaned from spiritualist sources cannot be fitted uncritically among authentic texts produced by living fully conscious speakers nor even with the often questionable historical and literary documents. Linguistics does not normally deal with supernatural voices, and under most circumstances would do so only at the peril of losing its status as a serious scientific discipline. In the case of Afro-Cuban religious trances, however, the use of what is claimed to be bozal language is both an integral component of Afro-Cuban culture and strongly correlates with objectively obtained data on the pidginized Spanish spoken by African-born bozales. As such this special case of ritualized language provides a fascinating window into the collective unconscious and the survival of an originally reduced second language as an alternative means of expression.

The deliberate use of bozal language by Afro-Cuban native speakers of Spanish appears to date from colonial times, and represents a concession to African-born ancestors. Lydia Cabrera (1979:121) in her study of the palo monte ceremonies noted that:

Es curioso que los Padres Nganga [...] que hablaban y sabían largos rezos en “lenguaje de congos”, al entonar sus “membrés”y dirigirse en sus ritos a su Mpungo, Nkisi o Nkita, al fúnti, fumbi, fua o fúndi (muerto) mezclan con las bantu palabras castellanas pronunciadas como bozales, lo que no ocurría ni ocurría aún en el presente, con los Olorichas, que conocen bien su lengua y se dirigen a sus dioses en anágo (yoruba).

A palero priest explained the reason (Cabrera 1979:121): “eso lo hicieron los congos y los criollos para los rellotlos en un tiempo en que ya todos hablaban español, por si algún munangüey (hermano) o los entendía y porque así les gustaba hablar a los muertos, que eran bozales.” Castellanos (1990:76), a close confidant of Lydia Cabrera in her final years, explains further: “This language [bozal Spanish] is also the preferred means of addressing the spirits of the dead during congo ceremonies [...] members of the very pragmatic Congo Reglas, devoted primarily to the cult of the dead and to their manipulation through magical means, use bozal or Spanish in addressing the spirits, since the African tongue may not have been their native language. On the other hand, members of Regla de Ocha trust in the linguistic competence of their orishas (deities), who may understand Spanish, but prefer their native Yoruba.” Strictly speaking, of course, any ancestor who could understand bozal Spanish would by definition be a native speaker of one or more African languages. Among contemporary palero priests it is more reasonable to assume that the latter have lost fluency in the ancestors’ African languages, and that bozal language, being a reduced form of Spanish mutually intelligible to both native speakers of Spanish and Africans who learned the Spanish-based
pidgin upon arriving in Cuba, serves as a linguistic compromise.

Castellanos (1990) observed the speech of Afro-Cuban religious practitioners during their spiritual trances, when they purportedly speak with the voices of bozal ancestors. Although it is not permitted to record these ceremonies, Castellanos' reflections include typical bozal features including non-agreeing verbs and use of disjunctive object pronouns:

\[ \text{ta mini kun yo} \ '\text{he/she is coming with me}' \]
\[ \text{akōddi ri yo} \ '\text{(he) remembered me}' \]

The issue of language produced during an apparent trance state deserves further comment. First of all, the “depth” of the trance experienced by practitioners of palo monte, santería, and other Afro-Cuban rituals cannot be judged, since psychological examination in situ is obviously out of the question. Visual impressions suggest that the individuals involved are in some form of altered state of consciousness, but the extent to which they are able to exercise conscious control over their language and other behavior will probably never be determined. All documented forms of ritualized language used by Afro-Cuban religious practitioners, whether or not “possessed” by ancestral spirits, falls into two categories: vestigial words from African languages (typically Kikongo or Yoruba), or imitations of the pidginized or bozal language once spoken by African-born slaves in Cuba. These manifestations are definitely not examples of glossolalia or “talking in tongues,” that is the utterance of apparently meaningless streams of sounds and syllables while in an ecstatic state, that resemble a human language but do not belong to any known natural language. Glossolalia is usually associated with particular charismatic religious sects, including a number of Christian groups throughout the world, who take their cure from the Biblical account of Pentecost. In glossolalia there is no claim to be speaking with the voice of another entity, whether departed from this world or otherwise disembodied. Glossolalic utterances tend to be highly repetitious, with simple syllables sequenced together in a perseverative fashion that bears little resemblance to actual human speech. Linguistic studies of these manifestations reveal that the phonotactics of the speakers’ native language(s) are almost always observed; some phones not present in the individuals’ native languages may appear but this is not common. Another interesting feature of glossolalic speech as studied by linguists is the extent to which regional or social dialect traits do not emerge when talking “in tongues.” Samarin (1972:87) hypothesizes that “perhaps there is a kind of leveling of speech that produces a common denominator of sounds. This would result, for example, from filtering out pronunciations characteristic of one’s native variety of language, especially if it were considered nonstandard or of low prestige.” In Afro-Cuban ritual trances the use of bozal Spanish is both a sociolect and an ethnically marked variety of Spanish, intimately identified with the non-native use of Spanish by African-born slaves. This language was subject to scorn and ridicule at the time it was in use naturally and even today it is recalled with little affection, even by Cubans of African descent. Whether bozal language is used in religious rituals in deference to the memory of bozal Spanish-speaking ancestors or as an affirmation of the participants’ own African heritage, it has to stem from language heard and internalized in everyday life and not simply an amalgam of phonotactic patterns stored in the speakers’ unconscious linguistic competence. Given the manifestation of glossolalia in many cultures and religions throughout the world, there are occasionally exceptions to these observations, but Afro-Cuban trance speech does not fit in with espiritista, Pentecostal, and other forms of entwined language that can be heard in Cuba and neighboring countries. There is in fact a somewhat closer resemblance between true glossolalia and the rapid-fire jargon of the negros congos of Panama, although in the latter group real Spanish words lie at the root of the often considerably distorted utterances.

Conclusions

Given that the last African-born bozales disappeared from the Caribbean nearly a century ago—before the age of recordings and detailed linguistic studies—all reconstruction of bozal Spanish must be based on sources twice-removed from the original speech patterns. Ritualized language provides important data to complement the analysis of living memories and stereotypes embedded in popular culture. The preceding remarks have suggested some possible avenues of approach to the study of Afro-Hispanic ritual language. The results tentatively suggest that bozal language consisted of a series of approximations to Spanish by succeeding generations of second-language learners, rather than a consistent code that survived across generations to become a true creole language. However the data from ritual language contain enough points of ambiguity to preclude a definitive conclusion.
Considerable work remains to be done with the groups mentioned in the present study, as well as with other Afro-Hispanic communities throughout the Americas.

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