ABSTRACT

Language and identity:
"I’m a Creole, so I speak English” – ”I’m an Indian, but speak Creole”.

The Construction of Creole in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua

This is a study of language and identity of the Creole speakers in the Nicaragua’s Atlantic coast. The aim of the study was to explore the Creoleness, Creole language and Creole culture, and the attitudes towards them. The study reveals the importance of a language as a significant marking of ethnicity. The Creole, or Creole English is the mother language of about 30 000 Creoles living in the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast, but also spoken as the first or second language by a large part of indigenous people, Miskitos, Garifunas, Rama Indians, and also by some of Mestizos.

The objective of the thesis was to discover how the Creole community and the Creole language is constituted historically, conceptually and concretely today. The study is divided into three parts: the construction of the Creole community of the coast, the study of the sociolinguistic situation in two communities, rural and urban areas, and the attitudes of the Creole speakers towards their own language and culture.

The study is based on literature and field data collected during the fieldwork in Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon and Halouver in autumn 2001 (3.5 months together). The methods used were participant observation, interviews and a sociolinguistic questionnaire. From 42 interviewed persons, 16 was selected as informants for a more closely analysis of the use of languages. Most of the informants were parents of children attending the Creole Intercultural Bilingual Education Program in two different schools.

Historically the identity of Creoles is based on the ”black slavery” and the ”white mastery”. For Creoles as one ethnic group, both the racist representations by outsiders of the group and Creoles’ own criteria based on family relationships and culture has been influencing concurrently to the process of identity construction. The Creole language is an important symbolic and instrumental marking of identification but boundaries between different ethnic groups of Creole speakers in the coast are moving.
The results revealed that in the coast there’s a solid ethnolinguistic hierarchy and a broad diglossia between Spanish and Creole language. Spanish is used in public events and Creole concentrates on family circles. Use of Spanish clearly widens when moving from private domains to public ones and also from countryside to urban areas.

The study demonstrates that the most significant factors in determining the attitudes, positive or negative, towards the language and culture were the social group and the education. But high educational level didn’t automatically lead to the appreciation of one’s own language, even though it did have a significant positive effect. The informants clearly consider that the bilingual intercultural education carried in the schools strengthens the local communities and forms an important part of the regions autonomy process. Dynamic aspects of the Creole language and culture were demonstrated clearly in both areas, rural and urban, even though ambiguously this creativeness were stressed through the local Miskitos’ traditions in the countryside and the global British traditions in the urban area. To conclude, in the Nicaraguan Atlantic coast the Creole language doesn’t strictly limit the ethnic identity, but for the speakers of Creole it creates a sense of community when they are using the language creatively.