

## 1 Introduction

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### 1.1 Why This Book?

Of all the Afro-Hispanic languages of the Americas (AHLAs), the one that more than any other has puzzled linguists interested in the origin and evolution of these contact varieties is definitively Chocó Spanish (CS) (McWhorter 2000; Lipski 2005). CS is the dialect spoken by the inhabitants of the Department of Chocó (Map 1.1), Colombia, a region where blacks represent more than 90 percent of today's total population (DANE 2005) and consist of the descendants of the slaves taken to this region during colonial times to work the rich gold mines of the area.

Even though CS presents certain morphological and phonological reductions, the grammatical restructuring encountered in this language is not as intense as the one found in Palenquero, a Spanish creole spoken in San Basilio de Palenque, Department of Bolívar (Colombia) or in the many other European-based creoles spoken in the Americas (Jamaican English, Haitian French, etc.). At first glance, this may appear a bit surprising, since the conditions that have generally been held to be responsible for the creolization of other European languages in the Americas appear to have also been in place in colonial Chocó, namely: (a) a high number of African-born slaves proceeding from all over the Western African coast, (b) a huge disproportion of blacks-to-whites, (c) extreme working conditions in gold mines, (d) a difficult-to-access region, isolated from the rest of Spanish-speaking Colombia (McWhorter 2000: 9).

Indeed, it is well known that colonial Chocó became an important mining center during the eighteenth century, when thousands of black slaves were introduced into the region to carry out forced labor (Sharp 1976; Colmenares 1979). Moreover, only a much-reduced number of Spaniards settled the Department, so that the ratio of blacks to whites has always been quite high. For example, in 1782 there were some 340 whites residing in this district, who represented about 2 percent of the total population (Sharp 1976: 19). For these reasons, CS has captured the attention of a number of scholars who have tried to

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Excerpt

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Map 1.1 Overhead view of the Department of Chocó, Colombia (western coast of Colombia).  
Source: Map data © 2019 Google.

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account for its nature by offering different hypotheses on its evolution and the development of other Afro-European contact varieties in the Americas.

McWhorter (2000: ch.2), for example, in line with his Afrogenesis Hypothesis of creole formation, claims that the sociohistorical conditions for a creole to emerge were well in place in colonial Chocó, but due to the fact that a Spanish pidgin was not introduced into the Americas from western Africa, the linguistic bases for the development of a full-fledged creole language would have been missing in the Colombian Pacific lowlands, and in the rest of the Spanish colonies overseas. On the other hand, Granda (1977) and Schwegler (1991a, 1991b) indicate that a creole language may have existed in colonial Chocó, as well as in several other Latin American Spanish colonies, and that it would have subsequently decreolized due to more recent contact with standard varieties of Spanish. They suggest that several of today's AHLAs probably went through the same decreolizing path, and that they would have initially derived from one Portuguese-based pidgin/creole, originally formed in Africa and subsequently taken to the Americas.

Besides providing considerable ground for hypotheses on the genesis and evolution of Afro-European languages, CS also has much to offer to linguistic theory. In fact, some common features that have repeatedly been reported for CS (Ruiz García 2009; Rodríguez Tocarruncho 2010), and that in some cases have been identified as potential indicators of a previous creole stage for other AHLAs (Granda 1968 *et seq.*; Schwegler 1991a, 2014; etc.), represent deviations from standard Spanish that are extremely fascinating from a theoretical perspective (Sessarego 2012a), and testify to the instantiation in grammar of certain universal second-language acquisition processes, which appear to be at work in all cases of language contact (Sessarego 2013a, Sessarego & Rao 2016).

This project has two main goals. The first is to provide a linguistic description of CS, while the second is to assess the origin of this language and its implications for creole studies. The questions that this project addresses may be stated as follows: What are the main linguistic differences between CS and standard Spanish and what do they have to say about the nature of this and other AHLAs? What were the sociohistorical conditions in which CS formed? Was slavery in Chocó much different from slavery in other European colonies? How can we use this information to address current debates on the origin of other black communities in the Americas and the languages they speak?

There is plenty of research that has been carried out in other fields such as history and law, to which, so far, not much attention has been paid by linguists. In recent decades, some attempts to combine historical and linguistic data to cast light on the origin of certain AHLAs have been carried out for the Caribbean and the Andean Highlands (Mintz 1971; Laurence 1974; Díaz-Campos & Clements 2008; Clements 2009; Sessarego 2011a, 2011b, 2013b,

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2013c, 2013d, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015a). Nevertheless, for the Colombian Pacific lowlands almost no research of this type has ever been done. This study explores the historical and linguistic evidence available for CS and challenges the traditional posture that would picture colonial Chocó as the perfect place for a Spanish creole to develop.

Findings indicate that the long-assumed creolizing conditions for CS might not have been in place in colonial Chocó and that the grammar of this language can be better analyzed as the result of advanced second-language acquisition processes, which do not necessarily imply any previous creole stage (Sessarego 2013a). In addition, this work provides an analysis of the evolution of CS in relation to the recently-proposed Legal Hypothesis of Creole Genesis (LHCG) (Sessarego 2015a, 2017a). In so doing, this study tests to what extent such a hypothesis makes valid predictions for a dialect like CS, which developed in a region described by many as “remote” and “on the frontier” (Whitten 1974; Sharp 1976), thus far away from legal courts and where the law was not likely to be properly enforced.

This project is meant to make a substantial advance in the frontier of knowledge of creole studies by laying down the foundations of a new, more cohesive, and interdisciplinary research program at the interface of linguistics, legal history, and colonial studies. It is primarily focused on CS and the other AHLAs, but its findings can be easily generalized, applied, and tested to other contact languages and settings. Thus, this will enable future researchers to better address current debates on the origins of other black communities in the Americas and the languages they speak.

## 1.2 Methodology

Linguistic data were collected during the winter of 2014–2015 in the capital city of Quibdó and in its surrounding areas. In particular, fieldwork was conducted in the village of Villa España, a recently built refugee camp hosting thousands of Chocoanos who escaped from guerrilla warfare taking place in both the northern and southern provinces of the Department. Given the very violent climate in Chocó at the time of my visit, it was not possible to travel across the Department to carry out fieldwork in other areas. Nevertheless, since the people interviewed in Quibdó and in Villa España came from a variety of locations (namely, Istmina, Condoto, Nóvita, Cértegui, Sipí, Opogadó, Iró, San Juan, and Río Sucio), the collected data may be taken as representative of the overall regional dialect. All of the informants were native speakers of their own CS variety and did not speak any other language spoken in the region, such as Emberá.

Sociolinguistic interviews were carried out with forty-five speakers of different ages (ranging from 19 to 95 years old) and levels of education (ranging

from illiterate people to members of the community holding a college degree). Findings indicate – as expected – that the oldest and least educated informants use a variety that is quite rich in stigmatized features, while the youngest and most educated Chocoanos use more standard forms. Nevertheless, while research on other Afro-Hispanic dialects has shown that, even in rural communities, the youngest generations shifted almost completely to their respective regional standard varieties (see, for example, Sessarego 2013b, 2014a, 2015a for Ecuador, Bolivia, and Peru), in the case of CS, it is still possible to observe young speakers proceeding from rural areas who show morphosyntactic features remarkably divergent from what would be classified as “standard” Colombian Spanish.

This book not only presents linguistic data from CS. In fact, the linguistic information collected during the aforementioned fieldwork is here compared and contrasted with data proceeding from other studies, in particular with those analyzing other Afro-Hispanic varieties. In this way, it has been made possible to offer a perspective on where CS stands with respect to similar contact vernaculars. This investigation is also based on secondary literature on colonial history and law, which helped provide a broader and more comprehensive picture of the social background in which CS developed.

### 1.3 The Book's Structure

This book consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction to this work; it describes its objectives, methodology, and structure. Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the so-called “Spanish creole debate” (Lipski 2005: ch.9), or the pull of different models that have been suggested in the literature to explain the paucity of Spanish-based creoles in the Americas. In so doing, it situates CS within such a context and illustrates the hypotheses that have been proposed to account for the development of this Afro-Hispanic dialect. Chapter 3 provides a sketch of CS grammar. Chapter 4 consists of an analysis of the linguistic features shared by CS and several other AHLAs. It shows that a number of the grammatical elements found in these contact varieties can be conceived as the traces of advanced second-language acquisition strategies, which do not necessarily imply a previous creole stage – contrary to what has been traditionally indicated in the literature. Such phenomena, in fact, impose high processing demands on the linguistic interfaces (Sessarego 2013a; Sessarego & Rao 2016; Rao & Sessarego 2016, 2018; Romero & Sessarego 2018; Sessarego & Gutiérrez-Rexach 2018); thus, they tend to result in non-target-like constructions, commonly found in advanced interlanguages. Chapter 5 is a sociohistorical analysis of slavery in Chocó. It presents a variety of legal, economic, and demographic aspects of blacks' lives in colonial Chocó to show how certain social factors shaped CS grammar. Chapter 6 provides a

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new analysis on the evolution of CS in relation to the recently-proposed LHCG, which ascribes a prime importance in the development of Afro-European languages in the Americas to the legal evolution of slavery from the Roman times to the different colonial settings implemented by the Europeans in the “New World” (Sessarego 2015a, 2017a). In so doing, the chapter tests the validity of the LHCG for an isolated region like Chocó, where legal courts have never been present during the colonial period. Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the content of the book and provides the conclusions.