

# Mainland Spanish Colonies and Creole Genesis: The Afro-Venezuelan Area Revisited

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## Introduction

The purpose of the present paper is to examine socio-historical and linguistic evidence to explain the lack of a Creole language in Venezuela. McWhorter's proposal (2000:38) challenges the validity of the limited access model for Creole genesis by noting that "the mainland Spanish colonies put in question a model which is crucial to current Creole genesis." His thesis is that in the Spanish mainland colonies the disproportion between the black and white populations was sufficient for the emergence of a Creole language. The present analysis argues that Africans in Venezuela had as much or more access to Spanish than in other areas of the Caribbean. That is, in our view McWhorter's claim does not take into account the socio-historical conditions crucial for understanding the lack of Creole language in the area. In this paper, we focus specifically on one colony, that of Venezuela, and analyze historical evidence that shows that blacks had as much or more access to Spanish there as they did in Caribbean islands such as Cuba.

From the beginning of the colonial expansion, the Spanish Crown centralized colonial affairs in urban centers because it was "intent on concentrating power as much as possible under its own authority" (Klein 1967:13); with regard to (slave) trade, the Crown maintained tight authority by strictly controlling slave importation contracts. Aimes (1967:31) indicates that, from the beginning, Spanish colonies showed a strong aversion to "any policy tending to the too rapid increase of the Negro population," a sentiment not shared by other European powers. The consequence was that, unlike in the French and English colonies, expansion in the Spanish colonies did not explode until Charles III loosened the policies on slave trade (after 1760), leading to free trade of slaves for all Spanish American colonies, including Venezuela (Klein 1986:83). In 1789, slavery in Venezuela was still an expanding institution. In the thriving cacao plantation zone, the workforce at that time was made up of predominately emancipated Africans (198,000 [46%]), with 64,000 (15%) slaves, compared to about 168,000 (39%) whites (cf. Klein 1986:220). In fact, in his estimates of the geographical distribution of slaves imported during the whole Atlantic slave trade, Curtin (1969:88-89) states that Venezuela received 121,000 slaves, about 3%, whereas Cuba received approximately 702,000 slaves (17.38%). Meggenney (1999:53,58) points out that up until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, high mortality rates and frequent interracial troubles in almost all Spanish America slowed down the growth of the African population in comparison to the white population. Even with the liberalized slave trade policy, the black-white ratio in Venezuela was not that disproportionate: 23% blacks [15% slaves and 8% freed], 25% whites, 38% mestizos (who were Spanish-speaking), and 13% Amerindians (Lombardi 1976:132). This suggests, we argue, that the likelihood of Spanish pidginization and/or creolization was low at best.

Our focus in this study, therefore, will be on two crucial aspects of the social history of Colonial Venezuela: the Spanish Crown's role in trade with its colonies and the proportion of African to non-African population. We limit the scope of the study to the area of Barlovento, located in the central coast of Venezuela, where there were a large concentration of cocoa and coffee crops and a substantial population of Africans and their descendents. In this light, we will discuss various linguistic phenomena that have been related to a possible Creole origin in that area.

The study is divided into three sections. In the first, we review some of the pertinent literature dealing with the linguistic heritage of the Spanish Caribbean and specifically Venezuela. In the second, we discuss the role of socio-historical factors such as the Spanish crown and the demographic distribution of Venezuelan population during colonial times. Then, we consider the linguistic evidence. We end with the presentation of our conclusions and ideas for future research.

## 1. Overview

The existence of English-, French-, Portuguese-, and Dutch-based Creoles in the Caribbean has opened the question of the origin of Caribbean Spanish. The literature dealing with the contributions of the African population to the language varieties spoken in territories colonized by English and French has pointed out the favorable socio-historical factors that created the conditions for the appearance of Creole languages. Given the fact that thousands of Africans were brought to Spanish America to work in different areas, including the Caribbean, one has to wonder about the possibility of the emergence of a Creole language in these territories. In fact, a great number of African descendents live in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, northern Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Pacific coast of Colombia, Peru and Ecuador. Even though it is logical to think that there must be a rich heritage that stems from African languages and cultures, not much attention has been paid to this crucial topic in the formation of Latin American Spanish. Traditional linguistic sources have only pointed out the existence of vocabulary items that have an African origin, but other than that there have not been a large number of studies examining phonological, morphological or syntactic influences from African languages in varieties of Spanish spoken in Spanish America.

In contrast, studies regarding varieties of English in the Caribbean and the USA have pointed out the role of African heritage population in the formation of the dialects spoken in those areas. Perl (1998) points out that the variety of English known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the USA is not only a social variety, but also an ethnic one. The ethnic nature of AAVE has triggered several hypotheses about its origin. Some authors (e.g. Dillard 1972, Rickford 1977) claim that a Creole variety existed on plantations throughout the southern USA, and that the roots of the vernacular features of AAVE come from this earlier variety, which has gone through an incomplete process of decreolization. Other scholars (e.g. Poplack 2000, Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001), claiming that the vernacular features of AAVE can be traced in the English varieties brought by the settlers to America, do not agree with the previous hypothesis. In the case of the dialects of Spanish spoken in the different areas of Latin America, it is not possible to identify an exclusive ethnic variety that the African heritage population speaks. Instead, one can find sociolects depending on different socioeconomic levels within the speech community.

Traditionally, the linguistic contribution of the African population that came to Spanish America has been left out of the discussion about the foundation of Latin American Spanish. For instance, the well-known division of Latin American Spanish between low and high lands (see Lipski 1994) is based on the origins of the settlers and their migration patterns, for example, Andalusians and Canaries tended to live in the coastal areas, while Castilians would prefer to live in mountain areas (See Wagner 1920, Henríquez Ureña 1921). The differences in climatic conditions are reasons to propose a distinction between high lands and low lands. Menéndez Pidal has explained that the high lands, where commercial interchange and social development was slow during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, demonstrate almost no influence from Andalusian Spanish; whereas coastal areas of Latin America, where commercial interchange and contact with Spain was constant, show a high linguistic impact from Andalusian Spanish. Consistent with this categorization, coastal areas in Latin America show linguistic features that are very similar to the ones found in the variety of Spanish spoken in southern Spain. Henríquez Ureña (1921) in his article *Observaciones sobre el español de América* 'Observations about American Spanish' presents another dialectal classification based on the influence of the indigenous languages. The dialectal zones proposed by Henríquez Ureña are as follows:

Zone 1: Bilingual regions in the South and Southwest of the United States, Mexico, and Central America.

Zone 2: Spanish Antilles, coastal and central Venezuela, and Northern Colombia.

Zone 3: Andean Venezuela, central and western Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Northern Chile.

Zone 4: Most of Chile.

Zone 5: Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Southeast Bolivia.

Henríquez Ureña proposals not only includes lexical usage criteria to divide dialectal zones, but he also considers the following criteria: proximity of the regions that form a zone, political and cultural interchange between regions, and contact of each region with a main indigenous language (zone 1: Nahuatl, zone 2: Lucayo, zone 3: Quechua, zone 4: Araucano, zone 5: Guaraní).

The two examples presented above are just a sample of the more traditional perspective examining the dialectal division of Latin American Spanish in which the contribution of African population is barely taken into account. However, Lorenzino (1998:30) points out that the complex socio-historical conditions in the Spanish Caribbean make it possible to explore how other members of the population contributed to the formation of the Spanish variety spoken in that area. For instance, he claims that prominent ethnic groups, such as the mulattos, could have contributed by incorporating structures resulting from learning Spanish as a second language, internalization of African language structures, dialectal leveling, and koinization. Other researchers, among whom are Otheguy 1973, Lorenzino 1998, Alvarez & Obediente 1998, Laurence 1974, McWhorter 1995, De Granda 2001, and Parodi 2001, and Lipski, 1994, 1998, forthcoming, explore the African contribution to the formation of Latin American Spanish.

In general terms, one can find three different perspectives analyzing the African contribution. On the one hand, some scholars argue the existence of a possible Creole or semi-Creole origin (see Alvarez & Obediente 1998). On this view, there was a partial restructuring process of the superstrate language under the effect of the substrate languages. The Creole hypothesis supports the idea that there was a Creole variety distinct from the standard variety. These scholars account for the lack of a Creole nowadays by appealing to the process of decreolization, which consequently eliminated a good part of the differences between the standard variety and the Creole variety. A weak version of the Creole hypothesis is presented by Lorenzino (1998), who argues for the existence at one point of a semi-Creole variety, i.e. a variety that had undergone some restructuring which then became part of the native Spanish variety. A second perspective (e.g. Laurence 1974), based on historical and demographic arguments, explores the hypothesis that Africans living in the Caribbean might have acquired Spanish as second language, a notion that will be expanded upon below. The third viewpoint (e.g., De Granda 2001, Parodi 2001) assumes a process of koinization from which a new variety emerged from the contact among different Spanish dialects and African and indigenous languages. According to this viewpoint, a new variety surfaced as the result of the contributions of the different languages in contact.

### *1.1. Barlovento region*

In this section, the previous literature dealing with Barlovento Spanish is presented. The coastal region of Barlovento, in Miranda State of north central Venezuela, is roughly 130 kilometers from Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. During colonial times, Barlovento was one of the main centers for producing cocoa and coffee, because of which thousands of Africans were transported there to work in the plantations. Nowadays, the majority of Barlovento's population is of African descent, which, given the socio-historical conditions of the region during colonial times, raises the question of whether a Creole variety ever existed in the area at some point.

Some studies examining the African population and their linguistic characterization in the Barlovento area do exist: Megenney (1985) emphasizes the lack of linguistic research observing possible Creole features in Venezuelan Spanish, and he also points out that there is no work documenting the existence of a Creole such as the ones found in Guyana and Surinam. One of the possible hypotheses explored by Megenney (1985) is that Africans speaking numerous different languages, having been thrown together in a plantation situation in America communicated with one another using a Portuguese-based pidgin. Megenney (1985:216) maintains that the proportion of Africans to inhabitants of European descent might have been sufficient to create the conditions in which the whites were obliged to learn the pidgin variety spoken by Africans:

*Si bien es cierto que el auge del tráfico esclavista en Venezuela ocurrió a fines del siglo XVII y durante el XVIII, creando así una situación que según Lawrence sería ideal para la formación de un pidgin de uso general, también es cierto que los españoles en el Caribe y los descendientes de éstos nacidos aquí hubieran aprendido a hablar el lenguaje que venían pronunciando los esclavos bozales, así como los portugueses en Europa aprendieron el reconnaissance language en los siglos XV y XVI.*

Even though it is true that the increase in slave trading in Venezuela happened at the end of 17<sup>th</sup> century and during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, creating a situation that, according to Lawrence, would be ideal for the formation of a widely used pidgin, it is also true that Spaniards living in the Spanish Caribbean and their descendents would have learned a language that slaves were using, as the Portuguese in Europe learned the reconnaissance language in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Megenney (1985, 1989, and 1999) analyzes the linguistic characteristics of the Spanish spoken by the Barlovento population. Megenney (1985, 1989) studies the African influence in Barlovento Spanish and focuses on five phonological processes. The first one is the fortition of [ð] → [d] and [ʎ] → [g] after a flap (i.e. [r]) (e.g., [tad:e] instead of [tarðe] ‘late’); [lag:o] instead of [larʎo]). In this process, the obstruents [+continuant] [ð] and [ʎ] not only become [-continuant] but undergo a process of compensatory lengthening, as well. From a phonological point of view, this process has been attested in other varieties of Spanish and an adequate characterization must take into account that the deletion of [r] triggers a process of compensatory lengthening where the C-empty slot left by [r] is filled by the specifications of the underlying [d], therefore producing a geminate. Megenney’s description of fortition assumes the fricative variants are phonemes. Nevertheless, well-known accounts of Spanish phonology reveal that the fricative variants are allophones that can be predicted by postulating a spirantization rule (see Harris 1969, Hualde 1989). According to Megenney, this type of fortition is characteristic of certain areas of the “Palenque de San Basilio” in Colombia. He suggests that fortition might have originated in a pidgin language similar to the Palenquero with strong influences from a Sub-Saharan language.

The second phonological process that Megenney points out is the lenition of [f] → [h] intervocally. In the example [pahwera] (in standard [parafwera]) ‘out’ we can see how [f] becomes [h]. According to Obediente (1991), this aspiration of [f] is found in other rural areas in Latin America, so it is not necessarily unique to varieties related to African influence. In fact, Silva-Corvalán (2001: 108) points out:

*Así pues, la variante [x]<sup>1</sup> de (f) ([xwimos] por [fwimos]), en Chile y posiblemente en todo el mundo hispanohablante, se percibe como un rasgo lingüístico categórico que define al individuo como miembro de una clase social baja y/o de origen rural.*

The variant [x] instead of (f) ([xwimos] por [fwimos]) in Chile and possibly in all the Spanish speaking world, is perceived as a categorical linguistic feature that defines the individual as a member of a rural or lower socioeconomic background.

The third phenomenon presented by Megenney is lateralization and elision of [r]. These processes occur in infinitive verb forms (e.g., [kantá] instead of [kantar] ‘to sing’). These phenomena are also attested in other Caribbean, as well as in Southern Spain. It seems that the substrate hypothesis cannot necessarily explain this phenomenon in other varieties where we find the same linguistic characterization.

Another phenomenon attributed to the possible existence of pidgin Spanish in the Caribbean is, in Megenney’s view, syllable-final /s/ aspiration and deletion. Megenney (1985: 231) recognizes that this change is well attested in other varieties of Spanish, but claims that “el impacto del lenguaje pidgin siempre tuvo su influencia para producir este cambio” ‘the impact of a pidgin language had an influence that produced this linguistic change’. However, he does not present further evidence to support his claim in this case. One could argue that this phenomenon exists in varieties of Spanish in

which African influence is not very strong such as those found in Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, so it is not clear how to differentiate syllable-final /s/ aspiration and deletion in Barlovento Spanish in order to demonstrate its African roots.

Following Megenney (1985), the nasalization of vowels adjacent to nasal segments and the velarization of syllable-final nasals are also phenomena whose origin can be explained by the pidgin hypothesis. He points out that the pidgin variety had a Portuguese base, which is a language with many nasal vowels. Furthermore, the pidgin variety also shows the influence of several sub-Saharan languages in which nasal vowels are common, a phenomenon often found in other varieties of Spanish. A more detailed discussion of the linguistic evidence presented by Megenney and other scholars (e.g., Alvarez and Obediente 1998) is further developed below.

In general terms, Megenney's work explores the linguistic evidence under the assumption that among slaves there was the development of a semi-Creole language (see Megenney 1999:261). He claims that this semi-Creole could have originated in other areas of the Caribbean including Colombia, Trinidad, Tobago, Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao, and argues that there might have been a variety of pidgin--or several--arising as a result of communities founded by runaway slaves. Megenney, however, also recognizes the difficulty of sustaining this hypothesis since these days there is not a Creole variety spoken in the region. His viewpoint is that the putative semi-Creole underwent a process of decreolization and that one also finds influence dating back to medieval and colonial times from the varieties of Spanish spoken in Andalusia, the Canary Islands, and Eastern Spain. He also adds that a great number vocabulary items can be identified at the lexical level. Other linguistic components (i.e. phonetic, morphosyntactic, semantic and prosodic) show lesser influence in his view. With this overview of Megenney's work as a basis, in the next section we review socio-historical as well as linguistic evidence to test the hypothesis that a semi-Creole or Creole language did not exist in Venezuela.

## 2. The present study

This investigation focuses on aspects of the social history of colonial Venezuela in order to determine the role of the Spanish Crown and the proportion of African to non-African population. Consideration of these two factors is crucial in order to revisit the limited-access model according to which Creole varieties are the result of the African slaves having restricted access to the lexifier language. One of the main arguments of this view is the disproportion between whites and blacks that made it impossible for Africans to learn the lexifier language. The final result of such a situation would have been the development of a Creole variety since Africans came from different social groups who spoke different languages as well. On the one hand, the Spanish Crown had a very important role in controlling the slave trade in its territories, including Venezuela. On the other hand, the demographic data of the area must be reconsidered to determine whether the conditions for the emergence of a Creole language ever existed in Venezuela and, particularly, in the Barlovento area, where one would expect the demographic conditions to be the most promising. We then reexamine the linguistic phenomena attributed to a possible Creole origin, with special focus on whether such linguistic features are unique to the area or are comparable to phenomena found in other areas where Creole varieties do not exist.

The perspective adopted here is particularly important given that analyzing socio-historical conditions would help to sort out observations such as those pointed out by McWhorter (2000: 12):

*Venezuela is home to a vibrant, consciously Afro-Venezuelan culture or folklore, music and dance, heritage of the heavy importation of Africans to work in mines and plantations. Once again, black-white disproportion reigned, such as the 230 blacks on the Mocundo hacienda (Acosta Saignes 1967: 179). Megenney (1989: 53) notes that 'in this type of social situation we would have expected to see the formation of a genuine Spanish-based Creole with heavy amounts of sub-Saharan influences,' but once again, we find nothing of the sort.*

Taking this quote as a point of departure, we look at the socio-historical facts for the area in question to see if they shed light on why we find no clear traces of a Creole variety in Venezuela and, particularly, in Barlovento. The next section deals specifically with the role of the Spanish Crown in the slave trade during colonial times.

## 2.1. *The role of the Spanish Crown*

We begin our discussion of the role of the Spanish Crown by considering the general situation of the slave trade in Spanish America. According to Acosta Saignes (1967), slavery was introduced to Spanish America in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Spanish Crown controlled system of licenses (*licencias*) and contracts (*asientos*) to manage slave trade. The licenses were individual agreements, while the contracts were given to companies in the form of concessions that specified the number of slaves, taxes, and port of entry. The Crown carefully installed a restricted system in order to avoid African rebellions in their territories. The reason for such fear of rebellions is found in Troconis de Veracoechea (1969), who points to early events that took place in Venezuela in which African *Wolof* slaves escaped from a sugar refinery and killed some Spaniards. Due to these early rebellions, by 1532 the Spanish Crown had banned the trade of *Wolofs*. But incidents such as this one were not limited to Venezuela. The response of the Spanish Crown in such cases was to temporarily suspend slave trading, regardless of the economic and social consequences.

The rigid policies governing the slave trade were further enhanced by strict navigation laws enforced by the Crown. These created problems within the colonies because they obliged those in the colonies to depend on their own resources (See Aimes 1967: 18-19). Particularly, Aimes refers to the case of Cuba where the population was against medieval restrictions that limited the introduction of a labor force in order to develop the plantation system. These complaints were ignored by the Crown and the restrictions became even more severe due to the force of the Catholic Church. According to Aimes, this situation created difficult economic and social conditions in Cuba. In fact, Aimes points out that the *asiento* ‘contract’ system made the possibility of bringing slaves to the island even more difficult for local planters. Corroborating Aimes’s observations, Acosta Saignes (1967), points out that, besides the fact that the issuance of the licenses was limited, these licenses restricted the number of Africans that could be traded and dictated where they could be sold (i.e. Hispaniola, San Juan, and Cuba, etc.).

The Spaniards were not directly involved in the slave trade to their colonies. The system of licenses and *asientos* ‘contracts’ gave special privileges to Portuguese traders such as Pedro Gómez Reynel, Juan Rodríguez Coutinho, etc and the use of third parties to supply the labor force not only increased the cost of slaves, but also the possibility of introducing expensive African slaves into the plantation work force, thereby undermining the development of an economically competitive plantation system. Contrary to the circumstances found in French- and English-controlled areas of the Caribbean, whose trading practices had been far less restricted from quite early on, the monopoly on the slave trade was declared unrestricted by the Spanish Crown only in 1789, very late if we take into account that French and English colonies were very flexible in their slave trading policies.

From our brief description just presented, the main points in comparing Spanish America with other territories under French and English control are: 1) there was a very rigid slave-trading system that controlled the number of slaves introduced to different areas due to fear of possible slave rebellions within Spanish colonies; 2) the organization of the slave trade system not only restricted the flow of the labor force, but also made it impossible for some local planters to buy slaves due to economic factors since it was primarily the Portuguese, and not the Crown, who controlled the slave trade. Both the restricted slave trade system as well as economic factors made it difficult to introduce large number of Africans into the Spanish American colonies. Below, we address the question whether conditions existed in Venezuela for a Creole to emerge, looking at demographic data specific to this area.

## 2.2. *The case of Venezuela*

In order to provide the necessary socio-historical background about Venezuela, we begin by reviewing details of the slave trade. This information is very important for understanding the role of the Spanish Crown at the local level. The first authorization to introduce 100 African slaves in Venezuela was given to Gerónimo de Ortal at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (see Acosta Saignes 1967). Particularly during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Acosta Saignes (1967:25) describes that slave trading was not prevalent; in fact, he makes reference to the following communication in which local farmers beg the king to permit the introduction of more slaves to the territory:

*En 1571, Mazariegos, desde Coro, en carta a S.M. suplicaba: ‘No hay quien cultive por falta de esclavos y a esta carestía están los vecinos muy pobres...’*

‘In 1571, Mazariegos, from Coro, in a letter to the King, was imploring: There is nobody to cultivate the land due to the lack of slaves, so the inhabitants of this town are very poor...’

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, settlers in Venezuela increasingly needed more slave labor. According to Acosta Saignes (1967), 201 Africans arrived at the port of Coro in 1613. As we explained above, the Royal Crown controlled the slave trade in Venezuela very closely, demanding detailed information of the trading activities. The situation in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries did not allow for a massive importation of slaves to Venezuela. At the same time, the historical sources do not indicate any evidence that the plantation system was as well developed in Venezuela as it was in French and English colonies.

Acosta Saignes points out that slave trade at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was more regular in Venezuela. Nevertheless, the poor economic situation of the settlers did not allow for substantial importation of Africans to work the land. Acosta Saignes continues by noting that farmers in different areas in the Spanish Caribbean could not pay for a large number of slaves per year. For instance, Trinidad could only afford 5 or 6 slaves per year, Puerto Rico could barely pay for any, Caracas (Venezuela) could meet the expense for 50 to 60 slaves per year, while Maracaibo (Venezuela) could afford 40. These numbers give us an idea of the difficulties brought about by the restrictive system of the Crown, which stifled economic activity in the area. Referring to historical documents, Acosta Saignes also points out other problems related to the slave trade. In a written communication, the *Junta de Real Hacienda de Caracas* mentions the number of slaves who died after being sold due to poor health conditions, as well as the problems of adjustment for Africans who became productive after one year when they were able to learn the language and to adapt to the conditions of the country. The Crown further limited slave trade in Venezuela during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by creating the Guipuzcoana Company, which controlled commercial activity within the region and consequently undermined the possibility of introducing a large number of Africans to Venezuela.

In general terms, these details illustrate that the slave trade in Venezuela was especially sluggish and difficult during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century because of the restrictive bureaucratic system established by the Spanish Crown. This situation is similar to the one described by Acosta Saignes (1967), Aimes (1969), and Troconis de Veracochea (1969) with regard to the other Spanish colonies. For instance, the difficult economic situation of the planters made it especially hard for them to bring great numbers of African slaves to work on their crops. As expected, such socio-historical conditions partially explain why a Creole variety did not develop in Spanish America. Since slaves were introduced in small numbers, exposure to the Spanish language would have been possible under the *Société d’Habitation* system in which Africans were able to have contact with Europeans. The *Société d’Habitation* involves the integration of a few slaves working closely with European settlers on small farms. Such a notion is even more viable when one considers that the predominant agricultural system was the small farm, and not the plantation so common in French and English Colonies. From the description presented above, it also becomes clear that it was expected of the African slaves to adapt to their work place within a period of a year. This is also consistent with the predominant *Société d’Habitation* system. We now examine how this state of affairs coincides with general figures of slave importation in Spanish America and Venezuela’s demographic information during colonial times.

Curtin (1967:88-89) gives a speculative geographical distribution of slave imports during the whole period of the Atlantic slave trade in Spanish America. For all the Caribbean Islands, he estimates that around 4,040,000 slaves were imported. The breakdown for the Spanish-speaking countries is shown in Table 1. The figures proposed by Curtin indicate that Venezuela as a whole received 121,000 Africans, which represent 3% of the labor force introduced into Spanish America. In contrast, the territory receiving the highest percentage of slaves was Cuba, with 17.38%.

Country	Number	Percentage
Dominican Republic	30,000	.74
Cuba	702,000	17.38
Spanish South America	522,000	12.93
Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia	100,000	2.48
Chile	6,000	.15
Perú	95,000	2.35
Colombia, Panamá, Ecuador	200,000	4.95
Venezuela	121,000	3

Table 1. Speculative geographical distribution of slave imports during the whole period of the Atlantic slave trade in Spanish America (Curtin 1967:88-89)

This demographic information is crucial since Bozal Spanish (i.e. a variety of language spoken by Africans in Cuba (see Lipski 2000) is considered a “reduced variety of Spanish,” and not a stable Creole language. In other words, the demographics do not explain the emergence of a Creole language in Cuba, but rather the existence of an inter-language, which is the product of second-language acquisition in a contact situation. One can extrapolate that if the concentration of the slave population in Cuba, at 17%, did not produce more than a “reduced variety of Spanish” (cf. Lipski 2000), then the possibility of the pidginization of Spanish in Venezuela, at 3%, is doubtful, and the possibility of creolization is out of the question.

Lombardi (1976) presents a comprehensive characterization and distribution of Venezuelan population from 1800 to 1809 according to the Bishopric of Caracas. This information concerning the inhabitants of the central and coastal area of the country includes the population of Barlovento as well. One of the notable elements regarding ethnic groups, as defined in colonial times in Spanish America, is that we are not only able to understand their composition, but also their differences in comparison with other areas of the Caribbean. Furthermore, the demographic numbers can be better explained given an understanding of what they mean within the social context. According to the categories used by the Bishopric of Caracas, the population was divided as follows:

White: Spanish descent or non-pure white with merit and wealth.

Indian: Amerindian heritage. Not completely assimilated to the Spanish norm.

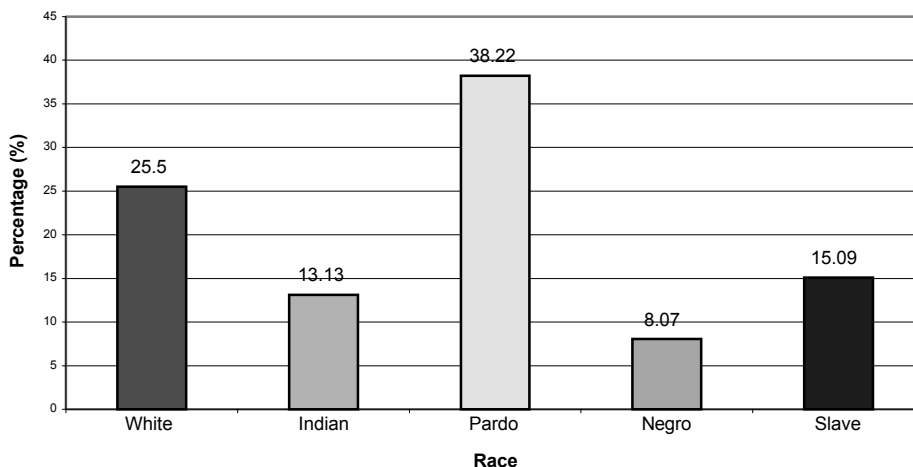
Pardos: Mixed African-European ancestry. Mixed Indian-Negro. Third or fourth generation free Venezuelans of African ancestry.

Negroes: African stereotype. Recent freed slaves.

Slaves: Determined by official documents (e.g. contracts, etc)

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the population in central and coastal Venezuela from 1800 to 1809.

Figure 1: Population by race in Coastal and Central Venezuela from 1800 to 1809 (Lombardi 1976: 132)





The predominant group is composed of *pardos* representing 38.22% of the population. The next group is that of the whites, with 25.5%, while slaves represent 15.09% of the population. From these figures, we observe that 76.85% of the population, including the heterogeneous populace of third and fourth generation Venezuelans who were native speakers of a variety of Spanish, is outside of the pure African heritage groups. The apparent disproportion between white and Africans that could have created the conditions for a Creole language to emerge found by McWhorter (2000) can be explained by considering the composition of the ethnic groups in colonial times. Although there is no doubt of the predominant African heritage of the population, at the same time, these were groups of mixed origin that were assimilated to the local culture since they were not first generation slaves. The predominant group of *pardos* fits exactly into this characterization. Furthermore, it is important to remember that these groups did not arrive in massive numbers because of the restrictions that existed until slave trade was freed in 1789.

Regarding more specific numbers for the Barlovento area, Castillo Lara (1981) reports that there were 462 slaves in the towns of Curiepe and Capaya in 1781 and he also notes the existence of 462,000 cocoa trees in these two towns. The average distribution of slaves to farmer was 15.4. This figure is highly significant because it shows that the type of predominant system in Barlovento is consistent with the concept of *Sociétés d'Habitations*: small farms where the slaves were in direct contact with Spanish settlers, a situation that suggests that slaves were exposed to Spanish and able to learn it as a second language.

The demographic figures show that during the Atlantic slave trade period 121,000 Africans arrived to Venezuela. According to Curtin, this represents 3% of the total population of Africans brought to Spanish America. The specific information concerning the distribution of people in Central Venezuela reveals that free mixed and colored inhabitants were predominant in terms of numbers. According to Lombardi's (1976) description, *pardos* were individuals assimilated to the local culture. In summary, the evidence reviewed so far reveals that socio-historical conditions for the emergence of a pidgin or Creole variety of Spanish were not favorable in Venezuela.

### 2.3. Linguistic features

#### 2.3.1 Phonetic features

As discussed above in the background literature, there are a series of phonetic phenomena present in Venezuelan Spanish that some scholars (i.e. Megenney 1985, 1989, 1999, and Alvarez & Obediente 1998) have attributed to the existence of a Creole variety during colonial times. The linguistic phenomena include the following: 1. seseo (i.e. lack of distinction between the interdental, fricative, voiceless /θ/ and the alveolar, fricative, voiceless /s/ as in /kaθa/ 'hunt' and /kasa/ 'house'), 2. aspiration and deletion of syllable-final /s/ (e.g. [kasa], [kasa] instead of [kasas] 'houses'), 3. Yeísmo (i.e. lack of distinction between the lateral, palatal, voiced /ʎ/ and the fricative, palatal, voiced /j/ as in [kaʎó] 'He/she fell' and [kaʎó] 'He/she became silent'), 4. Deletion of intervocalic /d/ (e.g. [kanta] instead of [kantaðo]), 5. Deletion of syllable-final /r/ (e.g. [kanta] instead of [kantar] 'to sing'), 6. Neutralization of syllable-final /r/ and /l/ (e.g. [tolta] instead of [torta] 'cake').

We now discuss the extent to which these phenomena are unique to dialectal areas in which there is a strong African influence. To do this, we review dialectological sources characterizing regional varieties in Latin America and Spain. If the phenomena listed above are only found in places where there was a large influence of the African population, we would have favorable evidence to pursue the hypothesis according to which there could have been a pidgin or a Creole variety in this area of the Spanish Caribbean. On the contrary, if these phenomena are found in other varieties one would have to determine if this is due to other reasons not necessarily related to the African influence.

*Seseo* is the first linguistic feature mentioned by Alvarez and Obediente (1998). This phenomenon is not exclusively found in the Spanish Caribbean. In fact, it is a common linguistic trait across Latin American dialects in which the African influence was less important than it was in the Caribbean. Lipski (1994: 36) explains:

*Many common denominators of Latin American Spanish, such as yeísmo (neutralization of the opposition /y/² - /ʎ/ in favor of the former, seseo (neutralization of /θ/ and /s/ in favor of the latter, and the use of ustedes rather than vosotros, coincide with the principal dialects of Andalusia.*

From Lipski's observation, one can conclude that the connection between *seseo* and the Creole hypothesis is not direct. The same can be said about the *yeísmo*, which is another common feature across Latin American varieties of Spanish. It is also true that *yeísmo* is found in the so-called conservative varieties of Spanish in Castilla la Nueva and Castilla la Vieja (See Alvar 1996).

Deletion and aspiration of syllable-final /s/ is also considered by Alvarez and Obediente (1998) as possibly originating from a Creole variety. However, this very well-described phenomenon is also attested in varieties spoken in countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay in which the African influence was not a determinant factor. Furthermore, fairly recent work (Alvar 1996: 217) also reports aspiration and deletion of syllable-final /s/ in Provinces of Madrid, Guadalajara, Cuenca and Albacete. Deletion of syllable-final /s/ is also found throughout southern Spain. Once again, deletion and aspiration of syllable-final /s/ is not a unique phenomenon found only in Caribbean Spanish. Therefore, since it is a phenomenon found in varieties of Spanish in which the African influence cannot be used as a determining factor, it does not completely explain the presence of these linguistic traits.

Deletion of the intervocalic /d/, deletion of syllable-final /r/, and neutralization of syllable-final /r/ and /l/ are other linguistic features considered by Alvarez and Obediente (1998). Deletion of intervocalic /d/ is not only a phenomenon found in Latin American Spanish, but also noticed in varieties of Spanish spoken in Castilla la Nueva and Castilla la Vieja (see Alvar 1996); Alvar also reports neutralization of syllable-final /r/ and /l/ in areas of Spain such as Guadalajara, Cuenca and Ciudad Real. Moreover, regarding the syllable-final consonantal weakening phenomena, Lipski (1994: 126) points out:

*More controversial, but of the utmost importance for a complete reconstruction of Latin American dialect differentiation, is the weakening of syllable-final consonants, particularly loss of word-final /l/, /r/ and /s/. These consonants are routinely weakened in southern Spain and the Canary Islands, a process which may have begun as early as the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries. In view of the widely claimed Andalusian/Canarian basis for Latin American Spanish, it is not unreasonable to attribute most or all of the consonantal reduction in Latin America to linguistic and cultural contacts with Andalusia.*

Consistent with Lipski (1994), Alvar (1996) also describes the phenomena listed by Alvarez and Obediente (1998) as linguistic traits of the Spanish of Andalusia and the Canary Islands.

In summary, the review of phonetic features attributed to a possible Creole origin reveals that these features are not only found in the Spanish of Venezuela, but also in other varieties in which the African connection is not direct and transparent. This fact makes us question whether one can use these linguistic features to support possible Creole origin and it opens the door to other possible hypotheses. We now turn our attention to a review of the syntactic features in order to complete our discussion.

### 2.3.2. Syntactic features

As we did in the case of the phonetic features above, this section discusses the syntactic features that could be considered of Creole origin in order to determine whether these phenomena can be explained by the previous existence of a Creole language in the region. Alvarez and Obediente (1998) refer to the following list of syntactic structures as evidence for a Creole origin: 1. omission of copulative verbs (e.g. *Ø un tipo de trabajo* instead of *es un tipo de trabajo* 'It is a type of work'), 2. Omission of the preposition *a* with personal direct objects and indirect objects (e.g. *va a agarrar Ø el niño* 'He/she is going to take the child'), 3. S-V-O order in interrogatives (e.g. *¿Qué tú quieres?* 'What do you want?'), 4. Unmarked use of the subject pronoun, 5. *Ta* as preverbal marker (e.g. *El palo ta duro* 'The stick is hard'), 6. Pragmatic *ahí* (e.g. *Dame un cafecito ahí* [referential] 'Give me a coffee'), 7. Redundant *ser* (e.g. *Yo vivo es en Caracas* instead of *Donde yo vivo es en Caracas* 'Where I live is in Caracas'), 8. Double negation (e.g. *No quiero no* 'I do not want no').

Lipski (1994) presents arguments against the idea that some of the syntactic structures mentioned above originated due to the influence of a Creole language. Concerning occasional omission of copulative verbs, Lipski (1994) points out that it is not common though it is found in vestigial speech. Lipski also explains that this feature might be the product of the influence of West African languages

in which verbalized adjectives are more common than the structure *Verb + predicate adjective*. Lipski argues that this phenomenon is not “a post-Creole carryover,” but rather an African areal characteristic.

The omission of the preposition *a* with direct objects and indirect objects has also been used as evidence to support the Creole origin theory, and Lipski (1994) claims that this linguistic feature is found in foreign and vestigial Spanish. Current syntactic analysis considers prepositions superficial case-markers, which makes them subject to variability and imperfect learning, as well as linguistic erosion. With regard to S-V-O order in interrogatives, Lipski (1994) claims that this phenomenon is not found in Afro-Iberian Creoles. He points out that this linguistic feature is common in Caribbean dialects and it could be explained by taking into account the Canary Island influence.

According to Lipski (1994) the unmarked use of subject pronouns is a phenomenon found in vestigial Spanish lacking a Creole basis. He explains subject pronouns and clitics are obligatory in almost all West African languages, so that in the case of Bozal Spanish one would predict the preference for overt pronouns without positing a prior Creole stage. The analysis of *ta* as a preverbal marker is also questionable as evidence of an early Creole stage because this phenomenon is clearly related to the aspiration and deletion of syllable-final /s/ in cases such as *está* ‘He/she is’ (i.e. third person singular form of *estar* ‘to be’ in present indicative).

The use of pragmatic *ahí* can be considered a fairly new phenomenon and there is no clear evidence to claim it is of Creole origin. Perhaps, pragmatic *ahí* is the product of a reanalysis of *ahí* as a discourse marker (grammaticalization). Further research will have to establish the status of this phenomenon. Alvarez and Obediente (1998) claim that redundant *ser* could be related to a Creole origin. However, this structure is found in varieties of Spanish with little influence from an African population such as in highland Colombia, and Ecuador (see Kany 1945). Sedano (1990) points out that this is a new development in Venezuela Spanish related to the large immigration of people from highland Colombia to Venezuela.

Double negation is a phenomenon clearly traceable to African languages (see Schwegler 1996). It is mentioned as a feature of Bozal Spanish, which is a variety spoken by the first-generation Africans in the Caribbean. It can be considered as a trait of untutored second language acquisition. Regarding this characterization of Bozal Spanish as an interlanguage, we are in agreement with Lipski (2000: 463), who describes it as “a reduced variety of Spanish sharing features with other learners’ modes and not likely to coalesce into a stable Creole.”

Thus, of all the linguistic features discussed above, only double negation (i.e. *no quiero no*) is clearly attributable to African influence and its presence can be accounted for by appealing to language shift: as Africans learned Spanish naturalistically, they carried into the variety they were acquiring traits from their own languages, one of which was double negation.

### 3. Conclusions

The findings of the present study reveal that the historical situation in the Caribbean and, particularly in Venezuela, strongly suggests that there was a strict control of the slave trade by the Spanish Crown that did not allow for the free flow of African slave labor into Spanish America, as was the case in French and English colonies. Slave trading was carried for the Spanish Crown by the Portuguese and later by other slave-trading countries. This way of bringing African slave labor into Spanish America limited the direct control of slave trading and increased the cost of slaves for the local planters. These factors also contributed to a slow development of the plantation structure in Spanish America, which did not take place until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This socio-historical information constitutes counterevidence to McWhorter’s claim that the appropriate conditions did exist in Venezuela for a Creole language to emerge. The findings suggest, we argue, that the number of slaves was not as large in Venezuela as in other areas of the Caribbean (e.g. Cuba). If a stable pidgin or a creole did not emerge in Cuba, then, we argue, there was even less scope of it developing in Venezuela.

With reference to the linguistic consequences of these findings, the low number of slaves imported to Venezuela would have been able to learn Spanish given that they would have been exposed to the language by working in small crops with Spanish settlers. In other words, the role of the Spanish Crown, as well as the demographic information, indicate that Africans were exposed to the lexifier language (i.e. Spanish) and were able to acquire it.

The linguistic evidence reveals that many of the linguistic traits of the Caribbean, claimed to be the consequence of pidginization and/or creolization, are abundantly found in other dialectal areas not touched by the African influence. Even in the cases where there could be doubt, as in the case of the double negative, many researchers consider these phenomena as developments of untutored L2 acquisition (e.g. Lipski 1994, 2000, forthcoming).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> [x] Represents a velar, fricative, voiceless, whereas [h] represent a glottal, fricative, voiceless. Both productions are equivalent as far as the case under discussion is concerned.

<sup>2</sup> Lipski uses the symbol /y/ to describe the palatal, fricative, voiced /j/.

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