

**A Report on the English-Based Creole of
San Andres and Providence Islands, Colombia**

Ken Decker and Andy Keener
ken.decker@sil.org
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1. Introduction and purpose

From January 17 to 24, 1998, Ken Decker and Andy Keener made a very rapid trip to the islands of San Andres and Providence, a department of Colombia. The purpose of this study was to investigate sociolinguistic aspects of the English-based Creole language spoken on both of these islands. Sociolinguistic aspects of particular interest were factors relevant to assessing the vitality of the language, the degree of linguistic similarity with other potentially related Creole varieties, and levels of comprehension with other Creole varieties. Another goal of this report is to present a brief description of the sociolinguistic environment of language use on these islands as relevant to the Creole speakers.

During the five days we were on the islands we participated in two workshops with approximately 50 people in attendance at each. Most of these participants were teachers, but there were community leaders and members of the media present also. In addition to information collected during these sessions, we also had meetings with 6 to 10 community leaders on each island. We also conducted individual interviews with about 15 to 20 people we met informally along the streets. These people could be typified as representatives of a lower socioeconomic viewpoint. The topics of the interviews varied depending on the role the informant has in the community. Reference to “informants” in this report refers to information collected from these more than 100 encounters.

2. Geographic location of San Andres and Providence

The island of San Andres, or *San Andrés* in Spanish, is located approximately 110 miles east of the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua and 300 miles west-northwest of the Colombian mainland. Providence is about 50 miles north of San Andres. San Andres island is approximately 7 miles long and one mile wide in a north-south position. Providence is round and approximately 7 miles in its north-south orientation. There is a third small island, Santa Catalina, also called Cattina or Kettina, with less than 100 inhabitants, located about fifty yards north of Providence. The term “archipelago” is frequently used to refer to the islands as a group. In Spanish, Providence is called *Providencia* and the Native Islanders frequently refer to the island as Old Providence, apparently to differentiate it from New Providence in the Bahamas.

There are many small villages on San Andres. However, places are most commonly referred to by the name of their region. The most commonly used distinctions are North End, for the northern end of the island, The Hill (*La Loma* in Spanish), for the large hill running down the center of the island and South End, for the southern end of the island. Providence has several small villages around its perimeter: Santa Isabel on the north side, Rocky Point on the east side near the airport, Bottom House on the south side and Lazy Hill or *San Felipe* on the west side of the island. The majority of the population of both islands, as well as the center of commerce, government and the tourism industry are located at the north end of San Andres Island. Providence is more mountainous and less valuable for agriculture than San Andres. There are several coral islets around the islands that have no permanent residents.

The only reasonable way to travel to, and between, the islands is by air. There are regular flights to San Andres from San José, Costa Rica; Panama City, Panama; Bogota, Medellin, Cali and Cartagena, Colombia. There are also several daily flights between San Andres and Providence.

3. Previous scholarship

We have access to only a few works on the Creole language of San Andres and Providence (SA&P). From the bibliography, it appears that the only work that has attempted to give an overall description of the language is Edwards (1970b). Another smaller, more recent article (Dittman 1989) gives more focus to the grammar. Forbes (1998) provides a nice discussion of the culture of the islands and an introduction into some of the features of the language. Holm (1978) discusses the relevance of the early settlement of SA&P to the development of Miskito Coast Creole in Nicaragua. Washabaugh (1983) gives an introduction to the sociolinguistic environment of SA&P. He presents several texts and an annotated bibliography. Some other research has been conducted on specific features of the language: Washabaugh (1977) discusses variation of the prepositions “fi” and “tu” in Creole speech; Edwards (1974) explores the etymology of selected words with African roots; Edwards (1978) describes discourse features of a certain genre of folk tales. Most of the other works listed in Washabaugh (1983) are sociolinguistic studies analyzing such aspects as bilingualism (Caudmont 1968), “verbal dueling” (Edwards et al. 1972), various lects of speech (Friedemann 1965), decreolization (Washabaugh 1978) and “Creole genesis” (Washabaugh 1981). There are several other works listed of historical, anthropological, and sociological interest.

4. History of people

Holm (1978) gives a description of the early settlement of Providence in 1631 by English Puritans. It was hoped that the settlement would be prosperous agriculturally, but when these attempts failed, the settlers turned to piracy. In 1641, the Spanish destroyed the settlement. By the mid-1700s, Englishmen had returned to settle San Andres. A Spanish-English treaty in 1786 ceded the islands to Spain. The Englishmen were allowed to stay and in 1787 cotton was introduced to Providence along with slaves from Jamaica and a few from the Miskito Coast (present day Nicaragua). The islands became part of Colombia in 1822. Cotton became a very successful crop on the islands. Later, cotton was replaced by coconuts, until a disease destroyed the industry in the 1920s.

Although a part of Colombia, the islands maintained most of their economic and cultural ties with Jamaica and the United States until the mid-20th century. In 1954, Colombia turned San Andres into a duty-free port. This encouraged outside investment and the island became a major point of entry into Colombia for goods from the United States and Japan. However, according to Washabaugh (1983), Providence has not benefited substantially from this development.

Another major factor that came with mainland Colombia’s renewed interest in the islands was the insistence upon Spanish as the medium of instruction in the schools. Previously, English had been the medium of instruction. A new Colombian constitution in 1991 allows minority groups to have

education conducted in their first language. Efforts are now underway to make use of this new right in education. (See §5.5.)

The English/Creole speakers generally refer to themselves as “Natives” or “Native Islanders” to distinguish themselves from mainland Colombians that have moved to the islands. Some feel that “Creole” is an acceptable term, but they don’t tend to use it. After Ken used the term “Creole” on several occasions, others also started using it. However, one woman, after Ken had used the term, asked what it meant. They don’t use the term “black” because there are Native Islanders who are not black, as well as Blacks that are not Native Islanders. In the new Colombian constitution, the Native Islanders are referred to as “raizal” (singular) or “raizales” (plural). This seems to be a completely artificial term; we heard a couple of Natives in government positions use the term, but most people seem to purposefully avoid using it. Edwards (1970b) refers to the language as Abacoan Creole, but we never heard anyone use this term. It was explained to Ken that Abacoan may have been the name for an Amerindian group that may have lived on the islands before European settlers, so it doesn’t seem to be a particularly appropriate name for the language. Another term that is used for the language is “bende” or “wende”, which possibly comes from the name of a West African tribe. While this term is widely known, it seems to be considered archaic.

5. Social factors relevant to the sociolinguistic environment

According to Washabaugh (1983), the societies of the two islands are somewhat different. During the early years of the islands, San Andres was considered better for agriculture and therefore, received more slaves and the population is darker-skinned. Providence is more mountainous, had a more diversified economy as it developed and the population is more fair-skinned. The pace of life on Providence is much slower and the island is decidedly more rural, while life on San Andres seems to be more urban and fast-paced.

A factor complicating the sociolinguistic environment is that there is a large black, Spanish-speaking population on the mainland,¹ some of which have migrated to the islands. This can be confusing for both the outside researcher and local Creoles; when one meets a black or mixed race person there is uncertainty over which language to use. The Native Islanders report that they tend to accommodate and greet an unknown person in Spanish. This tends to favor a shift to Spanish in some domains.

5.1 Economics

Washabaugh (1983) explains that the rush to develop San Andres as a duty-free port has caused rapid growth and the immigration of many Spanish speakers to the island. Providence remains more isolated and less affected by the development. (See population growth figures in § 5.2.) Tourism has increased; most of which is made up of Spanish-speaking tourists from the Colombian mainland. Development on San Andres has led to problems with water and electricity supplies, which have not kept pace with the growth.

¹It is reported that there are as many as 9 million Blacks in Colombia with Spanish as their first language.

5.2 Population distribution

The San Juan Star (1991) reports that there were about 7,000 inhabitants on the islands in 1954. Our informants reported that there were about 20,000 Creole speakers on both islands around 1960. Holm (1983) reports a 1978 population of 8,000 English speakers on the islands, 4,000 on each. Cameron and Box report a 1992 population of 41,580 for both islands. This had grown to 65,000 in 1995, with 4,500 for Providence and 60,500 for San Andres. However, the San Juan Star (1991) reports a 1991 population of 70,000 for San Andres. Our informants believe that the population on San Andres is 80,000 to possibly as many as 100,000 at the time of this survey! This number was further broken down to the following groups:

- 20,000 to 23,000 Native Islanders
- 25,000 to 30,000 Spanish-speaking Blacks, immigrants from the mainland
- about 35,000 Spanish-speaking Whites, immigrants from the mainland
- about 15,000 Lebanese, Jews, and others

There has been very rapid population growth and the dominance of these Spanish speakers is a major factor in the Native Islanders' desire to preserve their language and culture.

5.3 Religion

Our informants said that nearly all of the Native Islanders that are Christian are members of Protestant churches. The First Baptist Church is spearheading the development of a Christian university, which would be the first tertiary education available on the island. The university has several goals, including Creole language development and training for multilingual education, which would be Creole, English and Spanish.

When the government forced the schools to shift to Spanish-as-a-medium of instruction, the churches became the only place where English was promoted. For some people, it appears that the church has come to represent the last bastion of English maintenance. Therefore, it appears appropriate that the church is active in the whole language development issue on the island.

5.4 Politics

In response to concerns about the rights of minority ethnic groups, a new Colombian constitution in 1991 included protection for such groups, as the Native Islanders. It appears, from what we learned, that many of the local government positions are held by Native Islanders. However, it also sounded like the majority of members of various committees tend to be Spanish speakers from the mainland. It was reported that Native Islanders accommodate the presence of Spanish speakers in meetings by shifting to the use of Spanish, but that Spanish speakers will never accommodate the Native Islanders by shifting to English or Creole. So, while the laws and leaders may protect the rights of the Native Islanders, the "workings" of government may tend to encourage the use of Spanish.

5.5 Education

We were informed that there are 34 elementary schools on San Andres and 8 secondary schools. On Providence it was reported that there are 11 elementary schools and one secondary school. As mentioned previously, the first tertiary level institution, the Christian University, is under construction. In the predominantly Native Islander-inhabited areas, such as The Hill, San Luis and Providence, the majority of the teachers are Native Islanders. However, overall, there are more Spanish-speaking mainlander teachers. All of the teachers have been trained in Spanish-speaking institutions.

Whereas English instruction is permitted, it was our impression that due to a number of factors, most education continues to be done in Spanish. These factors include a lack of English instructional materials, teachers' training in Spanish-as-a-medium of instruction, a lack of bilingual education methodology training and the importance of Spanish for local survival and national identity.

5.5.1 The Christian University

The Christian University is located on a scenic piece of property at the south end of San Andres. At the time of this report one building is under construction, and four classrooms should be ready for occupation within a month or two.

The Christian University is not controlled by the local or national government, or by the Baptist Church. It will eventually receive accreditation from the national university system and has received some funding for construction from the national government. The Board of Directors is trying to develop relationships with American and British institutions for volunteer teaching staff, consulting and funding.

5.5.2 Bilingual Ethnocultural Education

The Christian University is promoting a program that they call "Bilingual Ethnocultural Education". This program will train teachers for teaching the first several grade levels in Creole. Later there would be a transition to English and then to Spanish. A major element of this program is the teaching of Native Islander culture, language and values. They propose to test this education system by first conducting a pilot project in three schools on San Andres beginning January, 1999. There has been significant local and national government support for this program.

While on the islands, we were invited to participate in two workshops, promoting the idea and feasibility of such a program. On Providence, there were over 50 people present, all of whom seemed quite receptive and supportive of the idea. On San Andres, the workshop attracted about 40 participants. Once again there was overwhelming support and enthusiasm for the ideas presented.

5.6 Immigration/Emigration

From the information we were able to gather, one threat to the Native Islander population is from emigration of students who go to mainland Colombia for tertiary level education. Many of those that return to the islands have been indoctrinated in mainlander values, culture and language and may no longer be considered part of the local community. This is why many Native Islanders feel

a need for a local tertiary level institution like the Christian University. There may be some young people that take jobs on Caribbean cruise ships for a season and there are probably some who emigrate to the US or even England, but we did not receive any reports that there are significant numbers of people doing this.

Another threat to the Native Islander culture, language and existence as a united ethnic group is the huge immigration of mainland Spanish speakers, especially Blacks, who by their appearance confuse the identification of who is a Native Islander. The influx of possibly as many as 80,000 people has so overwhelmed the Native Islander population that they are a minority on their own little islands.

6. Linguistics

Edwards (1970b) is the most complete linguistic description that we have found. He deals extensively with the phonology of San Andres and speech variation as correlated with social variation. Dittman, while brief, gives a better description of the grammar of San Andres speech. We will use the term Islander Creole to refer to the speech of the Native Islanders on both San Andres and Providence, except in the section 6.4 discussion of variation in speech between the islands.

6.1 Phonology

There is very little difference between Belize Kriol and the speech on the islands. The most noticeable is that the vowels /e/ and /o/ in Belize (/eⁱ/ and /o^u/ in standard American English) are /ⁱe/ and /^uo/ respectively on the islands. Investigation of the intonation would probably show some slight differences also. We did not hear any comments that suggested that there is phonological variation between the islands.

6.2 Grammar

To explore the area of grammatical similarity between Belize Kriol, Jamaican Patwa and Islander Creole, we undertook several activities. One activity was to take comparable texts, a portion of Scripture from Mark 4:35–41, from Jamaica and Belize and have one of the San Andres informants make changes necessary to make the text sound like it was from San Andres. The most notable result of the procedure was the obvious similarity between the grammars. The most obvious difference between Belize Kriol and Islander Creole was the forms of the anterior aspect marker, “mi” in Belize Kriol and “wehn” in San Andres Creole. The informant who helped us with this activity showed no problem with understanding the text and he had no problem translating it to an appropriate form in Islander Creole. Holm’s (1989:407) chart of verbal markers shows that there is some significant difference between Providence and the other varieties. (See the following chart.)

As another way to get an indication of the perceptions of grammatical differences, we played speech samples from Belize Kriol and Jamaican Patwa for 10 informants and asked them how well they could understand the speech. Nearly all the informants reported that they had no trouble understanding the speech from either location. The one exception was people in the community of Courthouse on San Andres; some of them said they had a hard time understanding either text. The

people in Courthouse felt that the Jamaican speech was more similar to theirs. On Providence, some informants thought the text from Belize might have been recorded there on their island!

Another important aspect to this line of questioning was that while the differences between Islander Creole and the other varieties were not major or frequent; they stood out as obvious differences to the informants. Some people read a book in Belize Kriol. They read it with good fluency and obvious understanding, but readily identified the few things that would be said differently in Islander Creole.

	MCC	Panama	Belize	Jamaica	Providence
Unmarked Past	∅	∅	∅	∅	∅
Anterior	mi ~ di(d)	ben ~ did	mi	(b)en	men ~ wen
Progressive	de ~ -in	de ~ -in	de	(d)a ~ de	(d)a ~ de
Anterior Progressive	mi -in	did -in	mi de	(b)ena	me de
Habitual	doz	doz	∅ ~ de	∅	∅
Habitual Anterior	yuwsta	yuwsta	yuwsta ~ doz	(b)en	yuwsta
Completive	don	don	don	don ~ -don	don
Completive Anterior	di don	di don	mi don		don
Future Irrealis	go ~ wi	go ~ wi	wã	go ~ wi	go ~ wi
Conditional Irrealis	wuda	wuda	mi wã	wuda	wuda

Chart of verbal markers adapted from Holm 1989:407

6.3 Regional differences in speech

We have not read anything that would indicate that there is a linguistic difference between the speech of the two islands. None of our informants reported significant differences in speech, except the evidence that the people in Courthouse and several other isolated communities are considered to be more cut off and different from the rest of the community. Edwards (1970b:93) reports that the communities of Bottle Alley and Sound Bay are known as socially lower-class Creoles and implies that their speech may be of a more basilectal variety.

Edwards (1970b:132) claims that he was able to identify people with certain island family groups even before discussing kinship just by certain features of their phonology. This would indicate some dialectal variation on the island. It also indicates that language development on the island should seek to sample and involve people from various social and geographic communities. His thesis may have another chapter that deals directly with this topic, but it is not available to us at this point.

6.4 *Literary development*

Several of the people that were recommended to us as good contacts on the islands were identified as writers of Creole stories and/or poetry. Juan Ramirez Dawkins, a Native Islander, has two published books of poems and stories, some of which are written in Islander Creole. We were given a photocopied collection of traditional stories collected on Providence by William Washabaugh. There is a small monthly magazine called “How Tricks?” published on Providence. All articles are in Spanish and English.

When the people at the workshops (See §5.5.2.) looked through the “Bileez Kriol Glassary”, many commented on the similarity and that they liked the spelling system used. Ken had more in-depth discussions with several of the people involved with the Christian University about the philosophy behind the orthography. They are very interested in adopting this system for their own Creole and are presently in the process of studying materials related to orthography design and planning meetings to discuss the acceptance of the Belize orthography.²

As for other media, Creole is used on some radio programs and there is a very popular television program on Sunday evenings in which Creole is frequently used.

7. Social Relations

7.1 *Interaction with immigrants from mainland Colombia*

The “pressure” of Spanish on the Creole-speaking population of the islands is greater on San Andres, due to the overwhelming majority of mainlanders. This does not necessarily imply any friction between the different ethnic groups, but it is a potential point of conflict and some Native Islanders indicated that they are losing their patience with continually accommodating linguistically to the Spanish speakers. There has not been a similar “pressure” on Providence. However, we observed Native Islanders on Providence accommodating to the Spanish-speaking shopkeepers, even though there are only a few of them.

7.2 *Interaction with Creoles from other locations*

From various comments in the literature and informant comments, it appears that there was a time when there was much more contact with Creoles from Cayman Islands, Bluefields, Limon, Bocas del Toro and Jamaica. Some people have relatives in these other communities. However, there is no longer much contact between the communities. There is only rare boat traffic to Bluefields and there are no direct flights connecting to any other Creole community.

²Postscript (Sept. 1998): Two orthography workshops were held in August 1998; one on each island. Many decisions were made on the orthography and committees were formed to further the process.

Post postscript (Feb. 2001): A further Orthography Workshop was held in Feb. 2001; and there was a radical shift to the use of IPA characters for representing vowels.

7.3 *Domains of language use*

Creole is the language of the home and some social interaction in public places. Spanish tends to be the language of business and government. English is the language used in most Protestant churches and Spanish in the Catholic churches. On San Andres, as one moves further south, there is more use of Creole and less of Spanish. In the North End, most public conversation is in Spanish, even for Native Islanders. On Providence, there is generally more use of Creole in all domains.

8. Bilingualism

With the prevalent role of Spanish in the community, we were interested in the level of proficiency gained by most Native Islanders in Spanish. We asked questions related to this topic to most of the people we met. All young people are required to learn to read and write in Spanish and to participate in the classroom in Spanish. Most people we talked with admitted that they didn't feel that they gained very good proficiency in Spanish. Many people said that their personal ability in Spanish allowed them to speak in Spanish adequately for what they needed to say, but several reported general confusion on the finer points of Spanish grammar. People seemed to express that their interest in Spanish proficiency is simply pragmatic. It is a fact that they need to be able to communicate to some degree in Spanish most days with someone. Spanish speakers we spoke with felt that the Native Islanders' control of Spanish was good.

People in the community of Courthouse on San Andres reported that they had very little proficiency in Spanish or Standard English. This also appears to be the case in a few other isolated villages on San Andres.

Bilingualism with English, or English proficiency, for the Native Islanders is a difficult quality to assess. The educated people with whom we spoke seemed to have good proficiency in Standard Caribbean English. This, while marked as different from American or British English, does constitute a regional variety of English. The Native Islanders seem to have a desire to learn English, which seems to be an indication that they feel an inadequacy with general English proficiency. Some people expressed concern that more of the people used to have greater proficiency in English, but that that was being lost.

The idea of the Christian University's "Bilingual Ethnocultural Education" is to begin with Creole, then transition to English, not Spanish. They feel that the children will be able to pick up sufficient Spanish on the streets and will only need to include Spanish as part of the curriculum at higher levels to improve their Spanish. As mentioned before, there are people in the community of Courthouse and others that feel that they do not have much proficiency in English. While we were on Providence, a group of short-term missionaries told us that when they were trying to do activities with children on one part of the island, the parents had to translate from English to Creole for the children to understand. So it would seem that there are people on the islands that should probably be considered monolingual in Creole.

9. Language attitudes

With the evidence of the commitment of the Christian University to developing Creole curriculum (See § 5.3.) and the evidence from the people we met at the workshops (See § 5.5.2.), it would seem that there are favorable attitudes towards Creole and its development. However, there are also reports that there are some people, particularly teachers, who are not so supportive of the ideas of bilingual or multilingual education.

Positive attitudes towards English may be more common among older Native Islanders. The young people may not see the value of English as much as they see the need and opportunity for greater proficiency in Spanish. We believe that, in general, there is a fairly strong defensive attitude against Spanish. There were a few people who expressed very strong negative attitudes toward Spanish and the culture of the Colombian mainlanders.

When we first arrived, there was probably more interest in Creole language development for the purposes of education and cultural maintenance.

10. Language vitality

From the evidences we have, there does not seem to be reason for concern for the vitality of the Creole of San Andres and Providence. The Creole language seems to be the most important symbol of their identity as Native Islanders. There are a few aspects that threaten vitality. For instance, the people are largely cut off from other Creole communities and the rest of the English-speaking world and there is considerable social pressure to conform to and join with the rest of the Spanish-speaking people of the country. However, the community response toward maintaining the use of Creole is strong and there is government support. There have been recent concessions on the part of the national government towards the recognition of the linguistic needs of the Creole people and there are Native Islanders that are trying to respond quickly to the opportunities that have been given.

Creole use is still very active among speakers in their own local communities. The immigration of Spanish speakers to the islands has made language use choices more of a daily concern for many Creoles. The presence of many Spanish-speaking Blacks from the mainland makes public social interactions more uncertain. However, the evidence of the commitment of the Christian University to language development is a positive sign and may be a turning point for a revival of Creole speech among the Native Islanders.

From the evidence we were able to gather, it appears that most Creole children still learn Creole as their first language. Some children in North End, who live in predominantly Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, may have more influence from Spanish. The only people we heard of who shift to the primary use of Spanish are some students who go to the Colombian mainland for higher education.

11. Conclusions

The English-based Creole speech of the Native Islanders of San Andres and Providence islands shows significant linguistic similarity with the other related varieties in Jamaica, Belize and Central American Creole communities.

Upon visiting the islands, our expectation was to find that many Creoles are still maintaining their Creole speech. This is exactly what we found. We also expected to find that there would be some people who could see a value in language development and would desire it. We were surprised at the number of people interested in Creole language development and their level of commitment to development. There is significant vitality in the use of Creole on the islands.

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