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The Linguistic Geography of ‘criollo’  
in Spanish America  
A Case of Enigmatic Extension and Restriction

Introduction <sup>1</sup>

THE GENERAL TOPIC OF THIS ESSAY is the Spanish word *criollo* (lit. ‘creole’) and its major meanings and usages in contemporary Latin American Spanish.<sup>2</sup> A major aim of this synchronic geolinguistic survey is to highlight several important regional differences in the application of the term. In doing so, we will note that American Spanish *criollo*, although a culturally and socially loaded concept, may differ from its cognates English *creole*, French *créole* and Portuguese *crioulo* in that it does not generally evoke particularly strong, highly charged sentiments.

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<sup>1</sup> I thank the over two hundred informants who have contributed (mostly via e-mail) data to this article. Limitations of space prevent me from listing their names here. Eva Eckkrammer and Matthias Perl made valuable comments to MS versions of this article. The usual disclaimers apply.

<sup>2</sup> This essay makes no attempt to study the meanings and uses of Latin American *criollo* in a comprehensive fashion. For a brief overview of some of the principal meanings of *criollo*, readers may consult the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* of the Academia Española (Madrid: Espas–Calpe, 20th ed. 1984): 396.

Special attention will be given to the use of *criollo* as a potential language label (as in Jamaican *creole*, French *créole haïtien*, Portuguese *crioulo sãotomense*, and so on). The reason for concentrating on the glossonym *criollo* is to drive home the point that in everyday (i.e., non-academic, non-scholastic) speech, *criollo* is never used to designate a ‘black’ dialect or a Spanish-based creole language of Latin America. As a result, nowhere in Spanish America does one hear expressions like “we speak creole” or “our creole language.” The Latin American situation just described thereby differs rather sharply from that in other parts of the Americas, where “creole” (or “creolese”) is indeed used to designate one or more indigenous vernaculars.<sup>3</sup> Witness the following examples:

Guyanese:	wii doz spiik kriiyooliiz <sup>4</sup>
Belizan:	mi taak kriol
Haitian:	mwen pale kreyòl
Guadeloupean/Martinican:	moin ka palé kréyol

The statement that *criollo* is not used as a glossonym anywhere in Spanish America is, of course, not meant to imply that the term itself is unknown to contemporary New World Spanish. As every major lexicon of modern Spanish will attest, *criollo* is widely recognized as a pan-Latin-Americanism. Its frequency of usage and meanings do, however, vary considerably from region to region. These differences of usage and meaning are typically neglected in lexica, as these make an understandable attempt at generalization.

To date, there has not been any attempt at a systematic *synchronic* study of modern Span. *criollo*, and this despite the fact that the etymology as well as the early history of the word have been the subject of numerous investiga-

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<sup>3</sup> As evidenced by the recent animated discussion at the CreoLIST-forum (January 1999), there is considerable disagreement among specialists of creole languages about the extent to which Caribbean creole speakers actually refer to their local language as ‘creole’. Whatever the actual usage of the glossonym may be, there can be no denying that French *créole* and English *creole(se)* enjoy a far wider currency in the anglo- and francophone Caribbean than does Spanish *criollo* ‘creole (language)’ in Latin America. In this context, see also André-Marcel D’Ans, “Créoles sans langue créole: les ‘Criollos’ d’Hispano-Amérique,” in *Contacts des langues-contacts de cultures-créolisation: Mélanges offerts à Robert Chaudenson à l’occasion de son soixantième anniversaire*, ed. Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux & Didier de Robillard (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997): 29–50.

<sup>4</sup> Cf also the more basilectal *aal awii a taak patwa*.

tions.<sup>5</sup> The synchronic survey of modern *criollo* presented below is thus a first step towards remedying this situation.

## Methodology

The linguistic geography of “criollo” as presented hereafter has been obtained primarily through extensive e-mail correspondence with over two hundred informants from all over Spanish America, plus my own extended *in-situ* observations in Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico, and Venezuela. This *modus operandi* requires an explanation.

Contrary to what might be expected, dictionaries and lexicons of Latin American Spanish are not particularly useful tools when attempting a comparative (synchronic) study of the term ‘creole’. There are many reasons for this, and I shall mention only a few here. First, when consulting dictionaries and lexicons it is important to keep in mind just who offers interpretations for a given term. In the case of the entry “criollo,” one discerns that the authors of such sources tend to operate with a dual bias: Being academics living mostly in a cosmopolitan setting, they tend to favour more learned meanings, and prefer urban (mostly cosmopolitan) over rural receptions. Secondly, potentially relevant *regional* lexicons or dictionaries regularly omit the entry “criollo,” presumably because the term is a “simple” pan-Americanism. This is the case, for instance with the *Nuevo Diccionario de Colombianismos*, an otherwise unusually rich and up-to-date publication on Colombian Spanish.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, the sources that do carry the term typically offer entries that are not fine-grained enough to capture regional differentiations (witness, for instance, the *Lexicón de Colombianismos*, where the entry “CRIOLLO ‘nacional, vernáculo, todo lo que nace en el suelo colombiano’” [1983: 195] altogether omits the regional interpretation ‘*costeño*’, prevalent on Colombia’s Caribbean coast). Another reason why lexicons are less than ideal research tools is that in some Latin American nations (e.g., Argentina) “criollo” is undergoing a shift in usage or meaning in the everyday language. Due to the dated nature of many potentially relevant lexicons, such shifts are not documented, or only partially so.

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<sup>5</sup> Dieter Woll, “Esp. *criollo* y port. *crioulo*: volviendo a la cuestión del origen y la historia de las dos palabras,” in *Latinitas et romanitas: Festschrift für Hans Dieter Bork zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Annegret Bollée & Johannes Kramer (Bonn: Romanischer Verlag, 1997): 517–35, and additional relevant sources cited therein.

<sup>6</sup> *Nuevo diccionario de americanismos, Tomo 1: Nuevo diccionario de colombianismos*, ed. Günther Haensch & Reinhold Werner (Bogotá: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1993).

For these and other reasons, it seemed reasonable to favor a more direct approach: i.e, a systematic survey via electronic correspondence with a relatively large number of *in situ* informants. Recognizing the potential benefits as well as shortcomings of such an investigation, I strove to meet the following minimum requirements:

- (a) at least five *in situ* informants were to be selected for *each* Spanish-speaking country of Latin America;
- (b) whenever possible, data thus obtained would have to be shared and eventually agreed upon by the informants of a given country (in cases where the informants would disagree over certain definitions [denotations as well as connotations] of *criollo*, additional informants were to be contacted to corroborate the data);
- (c) preference was to be given to informants without a post-secondary education (teachers, academics and others with post-secondary degrees were normally excluded in order to avoid potential cross-contamination from learned language, in which *criollo* has a set of restricted historical meanings not generally found in non-learned speech; see below, “Adjectival *criollo*”).<sup>7</sup>
- (d) special attention was to be paid to generational differences in the use and interpretation of *criollo*; where generational differences proved to be significant, an attempt would be made to locate the widest age spread possible (older informants, mostly unfamiliar with e-mail, were typically contacted via younger intermediaries).

The decision to share data among informants (via a simply *copy to command*) proved to be extraordinarily fruitful for two reasons: First, it often triggered informal reactions that allowed me to calibrate and eventually confirm the accuracy of the collected data. Secondly, the ensuing discussions tended to raise the participants’ interest in the precise meaning(s) of *criollo* to such a level that they frequently invited their family and friends to join the discussion group, thereby widening considerably the circle of informants for a given region or country.

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<sup>7</sup> *Pace* Germán de Granda, *Español y lenguas indoamericanas en Hispanoamérica. Estructuras, situaciones y transferencias* (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 1999): 17, and others, I recognize that the linguistic market of Latin America cannot be subdivided profitably into convenient constructs such as three-, four- or nine-sector scalings of socioeconomic status. For this and other reasons, I make no attempt here to describe the socio-economic background of my informants.

## Main functions, usages, and denotations of *criollo*

In Spanish America, *criollo* has both an adjectival and a nominal use. In some countries, the nominal function is practically non-existent; in others, adjectival “criollo” is all but unknown.

### *Nominal criollo: its main meanings*

Used nominally, and applied in a historical context, the word can refer to ‘a person born in (Spanish) America but of European (esp. Spanish) ancestry’; less common are the historically older denotations ‘person of mixed Spanish and Negro descent born in (Spanish) America’ and ‘a black slave born in the home of his/her master’.

In vernacular (non-academic) Spanish, nominal *criollo* refers to ‘a person born or raised in a given place’: i.e. ‘a true local’ (cf Uruguayan *Mario es criollo* ‘Mario is a local [i.e., Uruguyan] from the countryside [as opposed to an Uruguayan from a metropolitan area]’).

### *Adjectival criollo: its main meanings*

Used adjectivally in combination with names of local people, animals, plants, etc., *criollo* denotes the indigenous, the truly local or national character of the person or thing mentioned. Thus *una fiesta criolla* is a ‘fiesta typical of this place, region or nation; a fiesta a hundred percent like it is normally celebrated here’; translating and interpreting somewhat freely, an expression like *pan criollo* lit ‘creole bread’ may thus be rendered as ‘local bread, i.e., “the real thing from here.”’

In the everyday vernacular, the adjectival usage above is by far the most widespread. That is, in many parts of Spanish America *criollo* most often modifies a noun, as in *gallina criolla*, *costumbres criollas*, *la gente criolla*, *caballo criollo*, and so on. As such, the word tends to revindicate “the local or regional,” “the vernacular,” “the traditional,” “the authentic,” “that which is typical of a given place,” “that which comes from or belongs to the place where the product is used or produced,” “that which has *not* been mixed, racially or otherwise” – in other words, “that which is pure, pure-blooded or purely from here.”<sup>8</sup>

Although it is true that in the aforementioned examples *criollo* generally implies “the local or regional,” the exact semantics of the term are region- or country-specific. Thus, in Panama and several other Central American nations, *una fiesta criolla* tends to be interpreted as ‘a typically *local* fiesta’,

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<sup>8</sup> German *einheimisch* would appropriately translate adjectival *criollo*.

whereas in Chile and Ecuador the same expression has a more nationalistic meaning. As a result, Chilean *una fiesta criolla* denotes ‘a fiesta characteristic of Chile’ (i.e., not one of a given place or region within Chile). In the same country *un restaurante criollo* therefore predictably offers a Chilean rather than an exclusively local menu. In Chile, Ecuador and several other countries (including Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic), adjectival *criollo* is therefore typically synonymous with ‘100 percent from this country’.

Given these regionally varied meanings of *criollo*, it is only logical that, when applied to foods, the referential value of the term be highly region- or country-specific. In Costa Rica, for instance, *comida criolla* lit. ‘creole food’ can denote many and rather varied types of locally prepared delicacies. When used in coastal Limón – the Costa Rican region with the heaviest concentration of Afro-American population – *comida criolla* tends to designate ‘rice and beans’; in the central meseta (San José) of the same country, the expression is far less specific, as it refers to an entire gamut of local dishes. So varied is the referential value of culinary *criollo* that a Costa Rican informant recently offered the following unusually broad definition: “*Comida criolla* is really any local dish provided it has been prepared *without* condiments” (Costa Rican cuisine is known to be rather bland, which explains the absence of condiments as a defining trait).

When applied to certain animals or plants, adjectival *criollo* tends to refer to that which has been grown or bred locally by the individual. Thus *gallinas criollas* lit. ‘creole chickens’ are typically those that roam freely in one’s backyard, as opposed to those that are raised on a chicken farm. Depending on the animal mentioned, the idea of “pure breed,” “without racial mixture” may or may not dominate. Thus in “*ese buey es criollo, aquél es mezcla*” ‘this ox is “creole,” that one is mixed’ – an example obtained from a Puerto Rican informant – the element of racial purity is clearly present. Many of my informants were, however, of the opinion that in *gallinas criollas* racial mixture (or absence thereof) matters little as long as the animals are not locked up and live freely on one’s property. From a comparative geolinguistic perspective, the application of *criollo* to animals is, however, less clear-cut than one might expect. Consider the following examples of *caballo criollo* lit. ‘creole horse’. An Argentinian informant defined it this way:

“El caballo criollo: no puedo decir que sea una raza, está en el campo, se cría en las casas, no es un caballo de carrera; es menos estilizado” [I can’t say that it is a specific breed; it lives in the country, it is raised at home, it’s not a race horse; it’s less stylized]

This definition is not unexpected, as it emphasizes the “local breed,” “the home-grown,” perhaps the “less sophisticated”: i.e. a set of implied meanings that essentially parallels those of the aforementioned *gallina criolla*. Far greater consideration to “purity of blood” is given to *caballo criollo* in Nicaragua, where the expression tends to refer to a purebred horse that has either been imported from abroad (Spain, Peru, etc.) or has been bred without the admixture of indigenous Nicaraguan horses.

In many parts of Spanish America, *criollo* is a cultural concept that one may, perhaps, best call “minimally loaded.” Its connotations are generally in the direction of the positive, though its exact underlying meanings are most often context driven. Boasting about a local delicacy, a Costa Rican recently remarked to me in an informal conversation that “todo lo que es criollo es muy de aquí, es lo nuestro, ES LO SANO” (‘all that which is creole is from right here, these our own [things], it’s the healthy [good] stuff.’) In this example, the generally patriotic tone of the preceding conversation (omitted here) clearly invited a positive interpretation of *criollo*. A less favourable connotative reading of *criollo* is, however, possible at times. Thus in the recently collected Costa Rican example “¡ah, aquí nuestra comida es muy criolla; no es nada sofisticada!” (lit. ‘ah, here our food is very creole; it is not at all sophisticated!’) the speaker – a lady from the upper stratum of society – attached a rather negative meaning to *criollo*. Her statement “*nuestra comida es muy criolla*” is, therefore, perhaps best translated as ‘our food is unsophisticated and boring’.

Adjectival *criollo* often connotes the down-to-earth, straightforward, uncomplicated, unsophisticated nature of things. For this reason, in most places *un arroz criollo* is by definition considered a rice dish of lesser culinary refinement than, say, an *arroz casimir*. By the same token, an expression like *nuestra manera criolla de pensar* lit. ‘our creole way of thinking’ denotes the local, indigenous way of rationalizing, but often also connotes the supposedly raw, unrefined, at times even naive nature of the process. It should not surprise, therefore, that in many places the adverbial expression *a lo criollo* is used to refer to ways of doing things in a basic, simple, or uncomplicated way (cf Argentinian “*aquí lo cocinamos a lo criollo, o sea, de manera sencilla, sin adorno, sin nada*” ‘here we cook it “a la criolla”: that is, in a simple way, without adornment, without anything [extra]’).

Given the meanings and connotations just examined for adjectival *criollo*, it should not surprise that, when applied to people, the word designates ‘a local person; a person of the land; a person who is from and belongs to a given place; in other words, a native’. Thus, in Nicaragua the term refers to people living on or originating from the Caribbean Coast. A similar interpre-

tation prevails on the northern coast of Colombia, where *una persona criolla* or simply *un criollo* implicitly refers to ‘a native of the CARIBBEAN (not the Pacific) COAST’, that is, ‘a Costeño’.<sup>9</sup> Panamanian *un criollo* (or *una criolla*) differs from the previous Nicaraguan and Colombian examples in that it is less restrictive geographically, as it designates ‘a person indigenous to ANY given place in Panama’. A similarly broad geographic interpretation obtains for *criollo* in Cuba, but there the term usually carries with itself additional implied meanings that are connected to virtuous personality traits (a valid definition for the term would be ‘a genuine Cuban whose personality traits make him stand out as a particularly jovial, friendly, and congenial person who takes pride in his Cuban heritage’). In Argentina the situation is more complex: there *criollos* (archaic) are by definition countryfolk: i.e. individuals not born and raised in the city.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in Argentina the application of the people term *criollo* stands in an implied direct opposition to *gringo* ‘Italian (not American) immigrant’. Consequently, in that country “un criollo” has the complex meaning of ‘an Argentinian individual not born and raised in the city, but who at the same time is of Spanish rather than Italian (or possibly other European) descent’. A similar meaning for nominal *criollo* is found in Uruguay, but there the question of national descent (Italian or not) no longer seems to matter. For this reason, *paisano* ‘countryman’ and *criollo* exhibit greater synonymy in Uruguay than in neighbouring Argentina. Finally, in Ecuador, where *criollo* seems to be applied to people with ever-decreasing frequency, the term has a distinct ethnic reading: namely, ‘authentic Ecuadorian Indian [from the Highlands]’ (e.g., ‘an *indígena* from Otavalo’). In the Ecuadorian Highlands the word appears to be socially loaded in the direction of the negative, in that ideas of lack of sophistication, simple-mindedness, uncivilized behaviour and the like form part of the prototypical image of the *criollo*. Stock expressions like *criollo bruto* meaning ‘a dumb or stupid person with indigenous features’ exemplify the kind of negative social stereotyping to which *criollos* have been subjected in that region.

An important geolinguistic observation needs to be made here: As mentioned above, adjectival *criollo* meaning ‘local, typical, etc’. is found in many parts of Spanish-speaking America. The same cannot, however, be said of

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<sup>9</sup> In highland Bogotá, *criollo* tends to have the more restrictive meaning of ‘person from Bogotá’. Clearly, the term is geocentric, with context and other elements often driving its ultimate interpretation.

<sup>10</sup> Thus an expression like Arg. *¡el criollo éste qué se cree!* is (nearly) synonymous with the more common *¡el paisano éste qué se cree!* ‘this man from the country is so conceited!’

nominal *criollo* meaning 'indigenous or local person, etc'. The latter usage is unknown in the majority of Latin American countries, including Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, Paraguay, and Puerto Rico. In others (e.g., Argentina), nominal *criollo* does exist, but seems to occur predominantly in the speech of older generations. In Spanish America, the usage of *criollo* meaning 'person from ...' can thus be considered the exception rather than the rule.

In countries like Costa Rica, Nicaragua, northern Colombia (Atlantic Coast), or Panama the people term *criollo* appears to operate irrespective of race, color, or ethnicity. That is, the label *criollo* or *persona criolla* fits whites, Indians, and Afro-Americans alike. It is interesting to note, however, that when applied to people, *criollo* often evokes an underlying meaning of 'common folk'. While it is true that in many areas *un criollo* is a racially neutral expression, there is no denying that in socio-economic terms such neutrality does not obtain: Less affluent people are prototypically *gente criolla*, while the wealthy are not. The subtle consequences of this class-related implication are as complex as they are interesting. In practical terms this means, for instance, that in Colombia a world-class boxer may be called *un boxeador criollo* if he is of humble origins; a beauty queen with an *aristocratic* background is, however, far less likely to receive the label *reina criolla*. Similarly, in Colombia the designation *un/a escritor/a criollo/a* will fit an internationally known local writer only if he or she is known to have been of humble roots.

Let me briefly summarize the main points made so far, and add a few more pertinent observations. As noted previously, throughout Spanish America, nominal *criollo* does have the historical meaning 'person born in America but of Spanish ancestry' (and also 'slave born in the house of his/her master'), but this definition is not commonly known outside of academic or scholastic (learned) parlance. In popular speech, adjectival *criollo* is far more widespread, and, depending on the country, generally means 'indigenous, local, "the thing from here"' or 'indigenous, i.e., from THIS COUNTRY'. In this adjectival function, *criollo* is limited geolinguistically in that it is *not* a pan-Latin-Americanism. Mexican and Paraguayan Spanish, for instance, ignore this usage (as a result, expressions like *pan criollo* 'home-made bread, etc' are not found in Mexico and Paraguay).

Although an ethnic or racial meaning may, at times be implied (as in Costa Rican *la comida criolla de Limón* '[BLACK] creole dishes from Limón'), in many instances adjectival *criollo* has neither racial nor ethnic referential value. Often, the core meaning of the word is rather non-specific, in that speakers feel quite uncertain about its precise signification. Illustrative of this semantic vagueness is the following definition a middle-aged Costa Rican informant offered upon being queried about the precise meaning of *criollo*:

“Para decirle la verdad, yo no sé exactamente lo que quiere decir criollo, pero para mí significa simplemente algo como ‘lo nuestro’” (‘to tell you the truth, I don’t know exactly what *criollo* means; but to me it simply means something like “that which is ours”’). This noted non-specificity stands in sharp contrast to the precise and narrowly demarcated denotation “creole” generally has in non-Spanish-speaking regions of the Americas. This is made clear, for instance, by the following definition recently offered to me by a specialist on Afro-American Vernacular English: “In the general consciousness of Americans [= people in the USA] *creole* means this: ‘Certain people in Louisiana mixed between black and white with maybe some Spanish and French thrown in who cast spells on people and eat spicy food’.”

The fact that the meaning ‘local, from here, born and raised here’ (whence ‘indigenous’) predominates in many parts of Spanish America is merely a logical consequence of the early denotation of *criollo*. First attested in the sixteenth century,<sup>11</sup> *criollo* is a derivative of Span./Port. *criar* ‘to raise, to rear, to bring up’ (< Lat. CREARE), and as such the primitive literal meaning of *criollo* was simply “‘a thing or person raised, brought up’ + EXPRESSED DEIXIS” (note that this primitive meaning did not imply any ethnogeographic or a social meaning).<sup>12</sup> A series of semantic shifts towards the *implied* rather than expressed deixis then transformed the semantic core of the word, so much so that in many parts of Spanish America the deictic element ‘(from) here’ (that is, ‘born / raised HERE’) eventually came to predominate.<sup>13</sup> Appreciating this diachronic trajectory of *criollo* turns out to be quite helpful in ex-

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<sup>11</sup> Woll, “Esp. *criollo* y port. *crioulo*,” 518, 524.

<sup>12</sup> As Eckkammer (this volume) notes, the precise etymology of *creole* is still in doubt: While it is certain that it is derived from Latin *creare*, its affixation as well as its chronological path into the different languages remains unclear. It has generally been held that Span. *criollo* is a borrowing from Portuguese – for relevant sources, see Woll, “Esp. *criollo* y port. *crioulo*,” 517–18 n2 and Peter Stein, “Romanische Kreolsprachen I.b) Begriffsbestimmung und Bezeichnungen,” in *Lexikon der Romanistischen Linguistik*, vol. 7, ed. Günter Holtus, Michael Metzelin & Christian Schmitt (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1998): 610–18; two studies not mentioned by Woll should be added: Peter Stein, “Quelques dates nouvelles de l’histoire du mot *créole*,” *Études Créoles* 5 (1982): 162–65, and Matthias Perl, “Los dos significados de la voz ‘crioulo / criollo’: Consideraciones lingüísticas e históricas,” *Islas* 73 (1982): 169–78. But, as Woll shows, the traditional etymological explanations are not airtight. Volker Noll, “El origen de esp. *criollo*, port. *crioulo*,” *Estudios sobre la historia del léxico español*, ed. Jens Lüdtke & Christian Schmitt (in press) constitutes the most recent etymological study of *criollo / crioulo*.

<sup>13</sup> The early evolution of *criollo* included a semantic ellipsis, studied in Woll, “Esp. *criollo* y port. *crioulo*,” 522–23.

plaining modern synchronic peculiarities of Am. Span. *criollo*. For instance, in coastal Colombian Spanish, *un cartagenero criollo* can denote 'any person ORIGINALLY from Cartagena', even if that person moved away from that city shortly after being born there. Here the partial semantic retention of primitive Portuguese/Spanish *criar* 'to raise, to rear, to bring up', is still plainly evident.

*On the absence of criollo as a dialect and language label*

It was mentioned in the Introduction that, except in academic speech, American Spanish *criollo* never refers to a 'black' dialect or a Spanish-based creole language. I also noted that this situation differs rather sharply from that of other parts of the Americas where "creole" (or "creolese") is indeed the name given to several creole speech varieties.

In the light of the aforementioned wide geolinguistic spread within Spanish America of adjectival *criollo*, we naturally must wonder why the word is not commonly applied as a dialect or language label. Surely, the core meaning of *criollo* (i.e., 'that which is [ours] from here') could have combined readily with *dialecto* 'dialect' or *lengua* 'language' to form referential expressions like *nuestro dialecto criollo* or *nuestra lengua criolla* lit. 'the speech from here': i.e., 'our dialect or language' (from there, it would have been but a small step to *nuestro criollo* 'our [creole] language'). The reasons for the absence of such terminology in everyday speech are no doubt complex, and a multiplicity of factors are likely to have contributed to the situation. Due to limitations of space, only the most important ones can be addressed here.

*The term criollo as a language label*

From a creolist's perspective, Latin America is an oddity of sorts. With Portugal and Spain being the initiators and long-time practitioners of colonialization in the New World, it is anomalous indeed that only two Spanish-based creoles – Palenquero and Papiamentu – survive today anywhere in the Americas (for the location of these two creoles, see Map 2, end of essay).<sup>14</sup> As I

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<sup>14</sup> There still are no clear-cut, widely accepted typological criteria for differentiating between full-fledged creoles, semi-creoles, and normal languages; for a recent attempt at remedying this situation, see John McWhorter, "Identifying the Creole Prototype: Vindicating a Typological Class," *Language* 74 (1998): 788–818. The exact number of English and French creoles in the Americas therefore depends partly on definition. However, it is generally agreed upon that there are approximately twenty English-based and six French-based creoles in the Caribbean alone; see Map 2 in John Holm,

have argued elsewhere,<sup>15</sup> the scarcity of Ibero-Romance creoles in the New World is truly baffling if one considers a number of converging sociohistorical factors that, in other circumstances, have led to the formation of creoles (one of these factors is that Africans and their mulatto offspring once outnumbered whites by a considerable margin in several parts of the Caribbean and South America).

The near-absence of Spanish creoles in the New World naturally raises the question whether Spanish-based creoles were perhaps once widespread (particularly in the Caribbean), but were simply eliminated due to superstratal pressures from Spanish. This has been, and continues to be, a hotly debated issue, the details of which cannot be discussed here.<sup>16</sup> Scholars participating in the controversy would agree, however, that to date no historical records or other external evidence have come to light that demonstrate *unambiguously* the former existence of other Spanish-based creoles in the Americas.

Returning to the question of why *criollo* has not evolved into a language label, one must surely evoke the SCARCITY and LIMITED GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION of the existing Spanish-based creoles in Latin America as one of the primary determining factors. Spoken by a mere 2,000–3,000 people, Palenquero (Colombia) has historically been the creole tongue of a single, socially and geographically isolated community.<sup>17</sup> Since its formation in the late-seventeenth century, Palenquero has always been an in-group language, rarely spoken in the presence of outsiders. This is especially so when Palenqueros interact with each other while away from their village (in such instances they resort to Spanish, which they all command natively). Residents of Cartagena and its surrounding villages have generally held the opinion that Palenquero is essentially “un dialecto español mal hablado” (lit. ‘a poorly spoken Spanish dialect’) – in their view hardly something worthy of a separate, autonomous label (e.g., “*lengua criolla*”). For these behavioural reasons,

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*Pidgins and Creoles*, vol. 2, *Reference Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989): 256–57.

<sup>15</sup> Schwegler, “Creolistics in Latin America: Past, Present, and Future,” in *Pidgin and Creole Linguistics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Glenn Gilbert (Studies in Ethnolinguistics 9; Frankfurt & New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> See references in Armin Schwegler, “Lenguas criollas en Hispanoamérica y la contribución africana al español de América,” in *Contactos y transferencias lingüísticas en Hispanoamérica* (special issue of *Signo y Señal* 6; Instituto de Lingüística, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1996): 295–346.

<sup>17</sup> See Armin Schwegler, “Palenquero,” in *América negra: panorámica actual de los estudios lingüísticos sobre variedades criollas y afrohispanas*, ed. Matthias Perl & Armin Schwegler (Frankfurt & Madrid: Vervuert / Iberoamericana, 1998): 220–91.

the true nature of the Palenquero creole has remained concealed to all but a handful of Colombians (mostly academics). This reality, plus the fact that the Palenqueros have traditionally had an insignificant impact on the social, economic and cultural life of nearby Cartagena – once the centre of Latin America's slave trade – has had the effect that, outside of the former maroon village, the Palenquero creole simply has not attracted enough attention to warrant the creation of a separate language label.

But what about the Palenqueros themselves? Do they themselves call their language “*criollo*”? And are they aware that their local speech indeed constitutes a separate code from Spanish? Or is it the case that they too, much like the surrounding population, consider their local creole simply as some kind of non-autonomous, malformed Spanish that does not warrant the use of a separate language label? Let me address the last question first.

As Friedemann and Patiño's writings plus my own extended observations in Palenque have made clear,<sup>18</sup> Palenqueros are acutely aware that their local speech constitutes a separate language, something that cannot possibly be confused with superstrate Spanish. Both codes are neatly kept separate, so that conspicuous marks of creole speech are maintained almost entirely free of Spanish admixture.<sup>19</sup> The Palenqueros always know when they are speaking creole and when Spanish. Not surprisingly, they differentiate between their two languages with separate labels: “*Lengua*” (lit. ‘tongue, language’) refers to their creole, and “*kateryano*” (< *castellano* ‘Castilian’) to their Spanish. In recent times, the arrival in Palenque of academics (and with them academic vocabulary) has prompted the introduction of fancy new labels for the creole. Among these is the term “*Bantú*” (cp. *suto asé ablá* BANTÚ ‘we speak

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<sup>18</sup> Nina S. de Friedemann & Carlos Patiño Rosselli, *Lengua y sociedad en El Palenque de San Basilio* (Bogotá: Instituto Caro y Cuervo, 1983); Schwegler, “*Chi ma n kongo*”: *Lengua y rito ancestrales en El Palenque de San Basilio (Colombia)*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main & Madrid: Vervuert / Iberoamericana, 1996), and “Palenquero,” in *América negra*, ed. Perl & Schwegler.

<sup>19</sup> See Schwegler, “The Myth of Decreolization: The Anomalous Case of Palenquero,” in *Degrees of Restructuring in Creole Languages*, ed. Edgar Schneider & Ingrid Neumann-Holzschuh (Creole Language Library 22; Amsterdam & Philadelphia PA: John Benjamins, 2000). Particularly interesting in this respect is how Palenqueros neatly reserve certain Spanish and Palenquero pronouns for the appropriate code, and this despite often very rapid code-switching and a considerable overlap (homophony of certain forms) between the two systems; see Schwegler, “On the (African) origins of Palenquero subject pronouns” (MS, 1993).

Bantu’).<sup>20</sup> The conscious adaptation of this Africanism by some Palenqueros aims at counteracting the cultural invisibility of their community by identifying, strengthening and especially celebrating what is (in their view) African in their heritage.

Of recent vintage is the introduction in the Palenquero community of the learned language label “*criollo*.” The term is, however, employed almost exclusively by younger Palenqueros, and shows no signs of displacing the traditional “*lengua*.” The late arrival of the glossonym “*criollo*” in Palenque naturally raises the question why the community did not adopt it already during the early, formative period (late seventeenth century) of the maroon community. Given the virtual absence of documentary evidence on early Palenquero, a definitive answer cannot be given. However, a possible reason for not extending the meanings of *criollo* to that of ‘local vernacular’ may perhaps be found in the fact that in and around Cartagena the word *criollo* has, as mentioned earlier, a semantic core that stresses the regional rather than the strictly local. That is, in and around Cartagena, *criollo* designates ‘that which is within the sphere of the coastal area’: i.e., not just that which lies in the immediate vicinity. As such, *criollo* would have been an insufficiently descriptive label for Palenquero, as it would have included Cartagenero and other coastal Spanish dialects as well.

As we have seen, the limited geolinguistic spread and small number of Palenquero speakers explain in part why the language label *criollo* did not enter everyday Spanish in northern Colombia. Being the only Spanish creole on the American mainland, Palenque was simply too insignificant a community to trigger the widespread adaptation of *criollo* ‘creole language’ in Colombia or the rest of Latin America.

The fact that another Spanish-based creole – Papiamentu – with a much wider population basis (over 200,000 speakers on the ABC islands) does exist in the Americas turns out to have been equally inconsequential. As is well known, Curacao and its sister islands Aruba and Bonaire were originally under Spanish control (from 1499 to 1634), but subsequent Dutch influence on these islands has been and continues to be so powerful that the Antillean islanders have been oriented far more towards Europe than the nearby South American continent. For this reason, the creole on the ABC islands (much like that of Palenque) has been of minimal import at best to Latin American language and culture, which in turn has preempted the possible creation of the

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<sup>20</sup> Palenqueros acquired this learned term from Aquiles Escalante, the pioneer of Afro-Colombian and Palenquero studies; see Escalante, *El Palenque de San Basilio* (1954; Barranquilla: Editorial Mejoras, 1979).

referential label *criollo* 'Papiamento'. Furthermore, the fact that Papiamento speakers themselves do not generally name their vernacular *criollo* has undoubtedly contributed to a situation in which their language is known and referred to as Papiamento rather than "creole."<sup>21</sup>

*The term criollo as a dialect label*

Contrary to Afro-Hispanic creoles, Afro-Hispanic DIALECTS in the Americas are neither scarce nor limited in terms of their areal distribution. As shown in Map 2, Afro-Hispanic areas are found in widely scattered, mostly coastal areas of northern and northwestern continental South America, as well as in insular Caribbean territories (Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico). Yet nowhere in these regions do we find a dialect known locally as *criollo*.

The combined effect of essentially three factors has led to the noted state of affairs. First, in the light of the heavy African presence in many areas of Latin America, one would logically expect that there exists today an ethnolinguistically identifiable "black Spanish." However, as Lipski has correctly noted, such a "black Spanish" (cf Black English in the USA) is not found anywhere in Latin America.<sup>22</sup> This does not mean, of course, that Afro-American Spanish dialects do not share important, sometimes rather exotic features; it simply means that there is no one feature used exclusively by Afro-Americans. Blacks or mulattoes in Latin America have, therefore, not had a self-evident reason for giving their speech a separate name.

Second, in Afro-Hispanic areas of Spanish America, dialect boundaries tend to be gradual rather than abrupt (isoglosses do not bundle neatly), and whatever dialect differences do exist are relatively minor when compared to those found in dialectally highly diversified languages (e.g., German or Italian). This is not to say, of course, that speakers in these Afro-Hispanic speech areas are unaware of regional dialect differences. But at the same time it does imply that the linguistic division between adjacent areas is most often not significant enough to invite the creation of a dialect label such as *criollo*.

The third reason is perhaps less obvious, but may have played the most crucial role in inhibiting the rise of *criollo* as a dialect label: Throughout Afro-Hispanic America, pressure to conform to certain linguistic models (standard Spanish or regionally accepted standards) has been enormous. As a result, especially non-urban dialectal speech is rarely held in high esteem, and

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<sup>21</sup> On this point, see also Eckkrammer, this volume. On the ABC islands, *mi ta papia papiamentu* rather than \**mi ta papia krioyo* is used to express 'I speak Papiamento'.

<sup>22</sup> John M. Lipski, *Latin American Spanish* (New York: Longman, 1994): 129–30.

local features are routinely denigrated. Giving a low-prestige Spanish dialect a name (e.g., *criollo*) would be tantamount to confirming and self-asserting the very existence of such ‘deviant’ linguistic habits. And this, one may presume, has always been anything but desirable within Latin America’s sociocultural context.

## Summary and conclusion

As we have seen, *criollo* circulates widely in almost all of Spanish America, with Mexico and Paraguay being noticeable exceptions in that there it is generally only used in its historical sense: i.e., ‘person born in America who is of Spanish descent’. In Mexico and Paraguay, *criollo* belongs almost exclusively to the academic or scholastic parlance, which explains why uneducated speakers in these countries may know the word without recognizing its meaning. Contrary to expectations, *criollo* is not normally employed as a glossonym or dialect label. I have offered several reasons for why this is so. Among these are the scarcity of Hispanic creoles in Latin America, and the absence of an ethnolinguistically identifiable ‘black Spanish’.

In less than half of Latin America, the term is used to designate certain groups of people, but just exactly who is designated by *criollo* varies from country to country. In Panama, *un criollo* can be an individual from any part of the country. In Nicaragua and Colombia it may refer to a *costeño* living on the Caribbean (not the Pacific) Coast of the respective countries; elsewhere (for instance, in Argentina), its principal meaning is that of ‘countryfolk’: i.e., people born and raised in the non-urban hinterland. Further to the northwest, in Highland Ecuador *criollo* (archaic) designates the prototypical Indian.

Most prevalent and widespread is the *adjectival* use of *criollo* meaning ‘local, regional or national’, ‘vernacular’, ‘traditional’, ‘authentic’, etc. As we have discovered in scanning the Latin American continent for the various usages of *criollo*, the precise semantics of the word are, however, often quite unpredictable, as they have been conditioned by local or regional linguistic practices. As the American experience has been so varied because of diverse historical, cultural, economic and other influences, certain stock expressions involving *criollo* have been reinterpreted in some areas but not in others, thereby leading to puzzling semantic asymmetries. This, we have seen, is the case, for instance, with *caballo criollo*, which, as expected, signifies ‘a certain kind of common, local horse’ in most places, but which in Nicaragua refers to a purebred horse whose most prominent characteristic is precisely its non-local, i.e., foreign roots.

The linguistic geography of American Spanish *criollo* presents several puzzling facts which future diachronic investigations of the term should seek

to explain. Restricting ourselves to Middle America, we note, for instance, that adjectival and nominal *criollo* exhibit a geolinguistic distribution that is rather surprising (see Maps 3a and 3b below). Situated squarely in the middle of Central America, Honduras for instance, stands out as a country that ignores the use of *criollo*, thereby differentiating itself from neighbouring Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (Map 3a). “Honduras does not properly contain any major dialect zone; regional features of Honduran Spanish spill over into Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua,” and Salvadoran Spanish “is very similar to neighbouring dialects in Guatemala and Honduras.”<sup>23</sup> For these and other reasons, one would expect adjectival *criollo* to form a Central American linguistic continuum from Panama to Guatemala. Similarly enigmatic is the non-existence of nominal *criollo* as a people term in Honduras and Costa Rica (Map 3b and Panama, respectively) where nominal *criollo* is commonly employed, Honduras and Costa Rica share many sociolinguistic and ethnic characteristics (including black coastal populations) with their neighbouring countries. The reasons for the absence of nominal *criollo* in Honduras and Costa Rica are, therefore, anything but self-evident.

Clearly, there is more to *criollo* than dictionaries and lexicons lead one to believe in their understandable attempt at generalization. The true meanings and usages of the word are, in the end, themselves very much ‘criollos’ – they tend to be one hundred percent local, regional, or national in character.

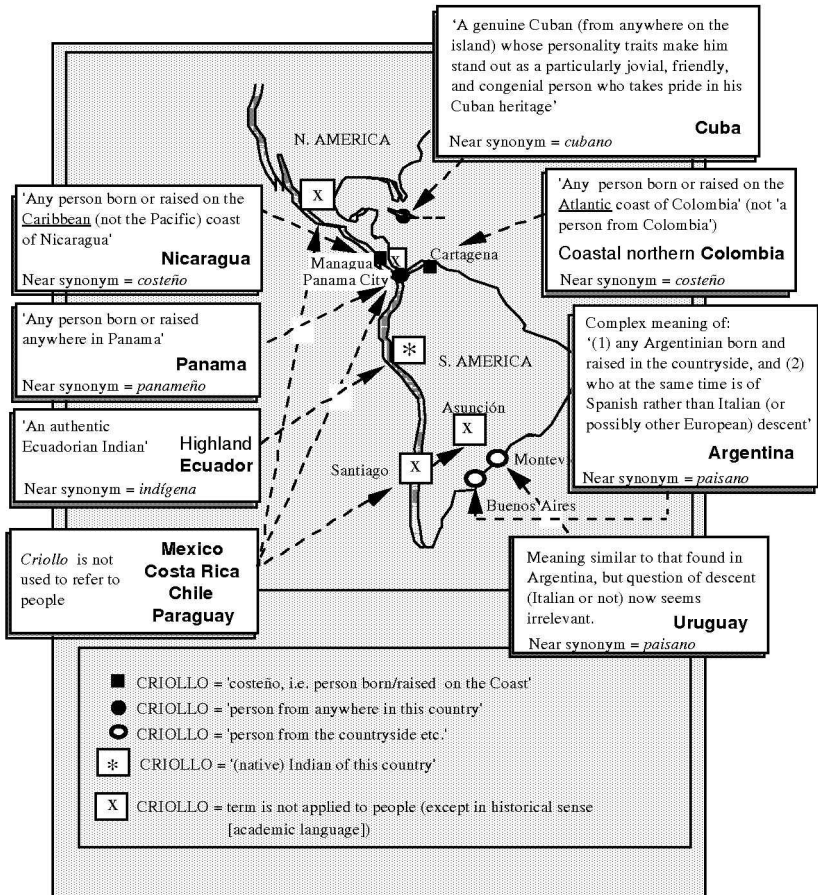
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<sup>23</sup> Lipski, *Latin American Spanish*, 225.

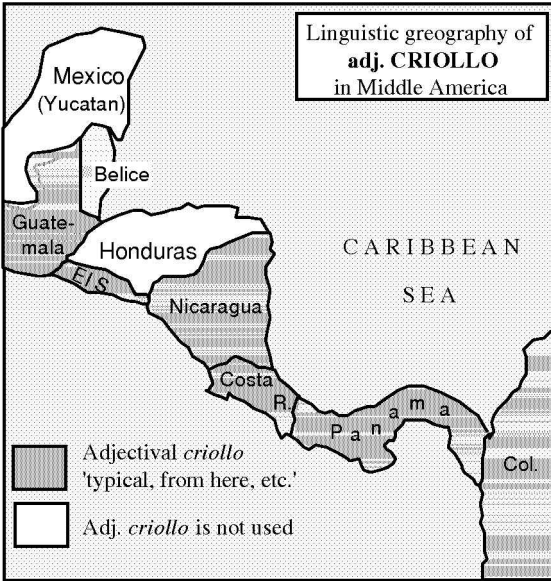
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MAP 1: Meaning of 'un criollo' when applied to people in eleven countries of Latin America



MAP 2: Survival of Palenquero and Papiamentu



MAPS 3a–3b: “Criollo” in Middle America