The diversity of endangered languages

Documenting three endangered languages in Trinidad & Tobago

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Endangered Caribbean Languages

• The Insular Caribbean (the Islands)
  • The Original Linguistic Graveyard of the Americas?

• The Continental Caribbean (the “Rimlands”)
Current language situation(s)

- At least 70 languages

- Language Types/Groups
  - Pre-Columbian/Amerindian/indigenous
  - European languages
  - African languages
  - Creole languages
  - Immigrant or diasporic languages
  - Sign Languages
  - Ritual Languages
Past Work

- UWI (4 campuses) and other regional institutions
  - Society for Caribbean Linguistics (SCL)
- SIL International

- Description and documentation
  - Some description of living languages
  - Some language documentation
  - Mostly sociolinguistic and sociohistorical analyses of process of obsolescence
  - Little to no expectation of revitalisation of obsolescing languages
Work in progress

- Caribbean Indigenous and Endangered Languages (CIEL) Project (UWI/UNESCO) of the International Centre for Caribbean Language Research (ICCLR)
  [http://www.caribbeanlanguages.org.jm](http://www.caribbeanlanguages.org.jm)

- Belize (1)
- Guyana (2)
- Jamaica (1)
- Suriname (2)
- Trinidad & Tobago (and Venezuela) (1)
Welcome to the Caribbean Indigenous and Endangered Languages website

This is a website that gives authoritative and reliable information about the indigenous and endangered languages of the Caribbean.
“...the day is far distant ere the many tongues ... found in Trinidad will become as one” (Gamble 1866: 45).

- History
  - Amerindian languages (10+)
  - European colonisation, and European (3+) and African languages (7+)
  - Creole languages (3)
  - Immigrant languages (European – 4+ and Asian – 11+)
  - Sign Languages (3+) of the 20th century

- Anglicisation Policy
Anglicisation Policy

- Spanish was used officially in Trinidad even after the British takeover between 1797 and 1801/2 (Treaty of Amiens).

- French was used for all official purposes from the late 18th century until 1823.

- In 1845, Warner declared in the Legislative Council that “English rights and privileges should only be given to those who would take the trouble to learn English and to bring up their children in an English way” (Wood 1968:181).
Charles William Warner, AG from 1844 to 1870

Anglicisation Policy – 1830s to 1860s
The 3 heritage languages in focus

• 12 heritage languages today

• TFC – Trinidadian French Creole (aka Patois/Creole, a variety of Lesser Antillean French Creole) – 1783

• TBh – Trinidadian Bhojpuri (aka Hindustani and Hindi, a variety of Caribbean Hindustani) – 1845

• TTSL – Trinidad & Tobago Sign Language (sharing similar history with some other SL in the Caribbean) – 1943
Similarities among the 3 languages

- All non-indigenous and ‘non-canonical’
  (creole/immigrant, immigrant, sign)

- Similar social status and negative names, with each often described as a ‘broken’ version of some ‘proper’ or ‘real’ language
  - TFC is “broken French”;
  - TBh is “broken Hindi”;
  - TTSL is sometimes considered to be a kind of “broken English” or “bad ASL”.

Similarities

• All are endangered/threatened.

• Varying numbers of the descendants and/or users of the languages would like to see them documented and/or revitalised.
Differences

- Demographics
  - Population numbers
  - Ethno-religious base(s)
  - Age base

- Vitality

- Modalities and stages of documentation
Advantages of collaboration

- Sharing resources
  - Equipment, funding, expertise, ideas, people, good practice

- Addressing similar issues

- Shared social/physical space

- Documentation as a national project
  - not just one socio-economic group
  - not just one ethnic group
  - not “just” a “disability issue”
Differences: “Communities”

- TFC: Native speakers associated with specific areas (though geographically spread). Documentation led by second language learners (connected by family or nationality).
Differences: “Communities” (TFC)
Differences: “Communities” (TTSL)

- TTSL: Strong sense of community bound by a shared language. Documentation led by the community.

Launch of the Deaf Empowerment Organisation of Trinidad and Tobago and “A Melting Pot of Signs”
Differences: “Communities”

- TBh: Family-based. Native speakers less connected. Many people for whom it is a heritage language, but little sense of community ownership.
Differences: “Communities” (TBh)

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Differences: Attitudes

- TFC: nostalgic
- TBh: negative
- TTSL: a source of Deaf pride
Differences: Pressures on TTSL

- While all three languages suffer great negative pressure from the outside, some factors are unique to TTSL: rubella vaccination, cochlear implants, oralist educational programmes, mainstreaming (Johnston 2007).
Figure 30: Reported cases of Rubella in all CAREC Member Countries
1982 - 2005
Differences: Modality 1/2

Orthography

- TFC: one standard orthography, several historical variants
- TBh: orthography used by linguists, but almost never used outside
- TTSL: no orthography
  - Building a sign language corpus involves annotation, but not necessarily transcription

Historic data

- TFC: existing texts from 1869 and earlier, as well as descriptions, transcriptions and recordings
- TBh: Recordings and transcriptions from the 1970s
- TTSL: (Almost) no historic data
Differences: Modality 2/2

- **Music**
  - TFC: 6 or more genres and other performance genres
  - TBh: folk musical tradition

- **Filming**
  - Filming techniques must be adapted.
  - Video data for TTSL can’t be easily anonymised.
Differences: Ethical issues

- Informed consent
  - TFC: video consent
  - TBh: low literacy, limited IT interest / awareness
  - TTSL: video consent

- Other priorities
  - Success of advocacy and activism in Deaf communities often depends to a large extent on the availability of quality interpreting.
  - TTSL users have been systematically excluded from higher education. Documentation and empowerment go together, but full empowerment requires full access.
Roles of the University

- Training and (Facilitating) teaching and documenting the languages;
- Grant writing and Funding;
- Event hosting and Promotion;
- Collaborative links (Computer Engineering, Medical Sciences, Law, Film, History, Education…) and regional/international links (ICCLR);
- Archiving (UWISpace and CIEL).
Raising awareness:
Print
Television
Internet
Conclusions

- Even within one small space, there is great diversity.
- Documentation must take into account similarities and differences.
- ‘Local’ universities have a crucial role to play.
Thank You!
Mèsi!
Dhanyabaad!