On the Challenge of Documenting Endangered Contact Varieties – Do We Need a Postcolonial Methodology?

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Contact languages, above all pidgins and creoles, are generally known for having a rather shallow and scarcely documented history. In addition, they are often socially stigmatized and therefore marginalized by their own speakers (Garrett 2006). These conditions challenge the documentation of endangered contact varieties, not only in terms of the socio-historical contextualization, but also with regard to the elicitation and recording of representative speech samples (Bowern 2010). Interestingly enough, however, the methods of data collection in such settings are rarely described and evaluated in detail in the literature.

In this paper, I will address methodological issues that emerged in the documentation of an underdescribed and highly endangered contact variety, Afro-Yungueño Spanish, on the basis of first-hand fieldwork experience. I will show how three individual researchers collected three different sets of data by means of either sociolinguistic interviews, elicitations, or the recording and transcription of natural conversations (Perez 2015; Sessarego 2011, 2013; Lipski 2008). These three different data types appear in different positions in a 72-feature phylogenetic network analysis made on Splitstree (Huson & Bryant 2006), i.e. two datasets appear closer to the Spanish-lexifier creoles while the third one is closer to the colonial L1 dialects of Spanish. These results suggest that the methodological differences in data collection and analysis have implications for the classification of the variety as a whole, which underscores the importance of a thorough discussion of methods in order to facilitate comparative typological studies.

Therefore, I will discuss the different fieldwork approaches in this particular setting. In particular, I will focus on the data that appear to represent the basilect most appropriately and show how they allow a description that goes beyond the analysis of morphosyntactic and lexical structures while at the same time presenting a number of practical and technical challenges and limitations. My goal is to contribute to the assessment of methods in the documentation of vanishing contact varieties and to propose a new (perhaps postcolonial) approach to data collection that considers a more active participation of the speakers.
References