


The role of youth in maintaining minority languages: The case of limonese creole in Costa Rica

El papel de los jóvenes en el mantenimiento de lenguas minoritarias:
El caso del criollo limonense, Costa Rica

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Abstract

In this article we analyze the role which the youth could play in the revitalization and strengthening of a minority language in Costa Rica, namely, Limonese Creole (LC). This minority language is a clearly debilitated language as a result of socio-political processes and, despite efforts by various sectors to guarantee its legitimacy, it is still not considered a regional nor a national language and it is not included in school curricula. This article describes the experience, with a group of 18 Afro-Limonese youngsters ages 13 to 22 who provide opinions about their LC through focus groups. By and large, they speak LC, though they admit that it is being replaced by the dominant language. They say they use LC mainly in contexts in which they wish to show a sense of belonging and identity among Afro Limonese peers, to interact with close relatives as well as with Afro friends and to exclude non-Afro peers. They speak LC inside as well as outside their communities to feel part of a group. Participants argue that their parents used to only speak to them in LC but in the last decades they do it in Spanish. Nonetheless, they believe that the youth could and should contribute to strengthening their language as it is part

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of their identity. These young adults propose a series of measures through which they can contribute to strengthening LC mainly within their families and communities.

Key words: minority languages, Limonese Creole, language revitalization, youth and language revitalization processes.

Resumen

En este artículo se analiza el papel que podría jugar la población joven en los procesos de revitalización y fortalecimiento de una lengua minoritaria en Costa Rica, a saber, el Criollo Limonense (CL). Esta lengua minoritaria es una lengua claramente debilitada debido a procesos sociopolíticos y, a pesar de esfuerzos realizados por parte de diversos sectores para garantizar su legitimidad, aún no se considera como una lengua regional o nacional ni es parte del currículo escolar. Este artículo describe la experiencia con un grupo de 18 jóvenes afro-limonenses con edades entre los 13 y los 22 años, quienes opinan sobre su lengua criolla mediante grupos focales. La gran mayoría de ellos indican que hablan criollo limonense, aunque admiten que ha sido mayormente sustituido por la lengua dominante. Revelan que utilizan el CL principalmente en contextos en los cuales desean mostrar un sentido de identidad y pertenencia entre pares afro limonenses, para relacionarse con familiares cercanos, así como también con amigos afro y para excluir a pares no-afro; utilizan el CL tanto dentro de sus comunidades como fuera de ellas a fin de sentirse parte de un mismo grupo. Alegan que sus padres acostumbraban hablarles solamente en CL, pero en las últimas décadas lo hacen en español. No obstante, creen que las personas jóvenes podrían y deberían contribuir a fortalecer su lengua por considerarla parte esencial de su identidad. Proponen una serie de maneras por medio de las cuales pueden contribuir con ello, principalmente desde dentro de sus familias y comunidades.

Palabras clave: lenguas minoritarias, criollo limonense, revitalización lingüística, juventud y procesos de revitalización lingüística.

Introduction

Languages with little political power and prestige are known as ‘minority languages’, and they are normally spoken by a small percentage of the population within a given region or country; this concept results from socio economic and political issues and therefore, language classification cannot

be separated from such contexts (Cenoz and Gorter, 2017). In Costa Rica, there are two groups of minority languages: indigenous languages and Limonese Creole. All together, the total 9 indigenous languages are spoken by no more than 60% of the indigenous population (INEC, 2011), whereas Limonese Creole (henceforth, LC) is spoken by approximately 55000 people. Whereas the indigenous languages have been officially recognized in the Costa Rican Political Constitution, LC still has not achieved that status. Additionally, efforts have been made to incorporate indigenous languages in the curricula within indigenous communities, which has resulted not only in the strengthening of those vernacular languages but also in the establishment of indigenous cultural values. In contrast, LC has never been included in school curricula, mainly because it is an orally transmitted language. However, the reasons go beyond that, as this language has been undervalued not only by non-Afro Costa Ricans but also by the Afro Costa Rican community itself; it has even been described by its own native speakers as ‘broken English’, which carries with it a negative connotation.

Limonese Creole used to be spoken in all contexts by the majority of Afro-Limonese people, but in the last decades, it has weakened severely (Spence Sharpe 2004, Purcell 1993, Herzfeld 2012) and adult speakers of LC worry that the younger generations are no longer interested in valuing nor in maintaining LC.

In this article, I analyze the role which youngsters can play in language revitalization processes by narrating the opinions and proposals posited by 18 Afro-Limonese youngsters ages 13 through 22 who participated in in-depth focus group discussions. Overall, all but one of the participating youngsters affirm that they speak LC, though they openly acknowledge that LC has mostly been substituted by the dominant language, Spanish. These youngsters, as well as their peers, reportedly resort to LC mainly in specific contexts where they want to show a sense of identity among group members of African descent and with relatives, primarily grandparents, and at family gatherings. According to these youngsters, though Afro-

Limonese parents and grandparents used to address them only in LC, nowadays they mostly use Spanish, especially to address younger family members.

Nonetheless, it is also reported that LC is conceived by these youngsters as a key part of their Afro-Limonese identity and that they genuinely want to take measures to not only vindicate their ancestral language, but to strengthen and revitalize it from within their Afro-Limonese families. In fact, these youngsters propose a series of actions which they believe would help in this revitalization process, namely: speaking only LC among themselves, with close relatives, especially the youngest, and with Afro-Limonese peers; demanding that their parents and grandparents speak to them in LC; organizing activities such as meetings and workshops whereby others can learn about the value in maintaining LC; looking for help from various academic and community organizations; relying on social media as a way to ponder upon their vernacular language and to maintain it.

In sum, despite the fact that LC has been neglected outside the Afro-Limonese community as well as within, it is still seen by participating youngsters as an essential part of their Afro-Limonese identity. They are committed to working towards the recovery and strengthening of their ancestral language and suggest specific ways in which this shall be accomplished.

1. What are ‘minority languages’?

Many languages around the world are said to be ‘minority languages’, defined by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages as “languages traditionally used within a given territory of a state by nationals of that state who form a group numerically smaller than the rest of the state’s population” (1992:1)¹. Being a ‘minority language’ has normally

¹ It is important to point out that a minority language is always defined in terms of power issues, as argued by Peddly and Viaut (2019). As a result, a language might be a minority language in one region but a majority language in another (especially in the case of migrating communities); in other words, the status of a language may be different depending on where it is being used. As for LC, which is

been “associated with shame and backwardness” (Cenoz and Gorter 2017:902), though because language classification cannot be separated from socio-economic and socio-political issues, a language can acquire a high social status depending on such factors. What is clear is that ‘minority languages’ do not hold the prestige of dominant languages and they are normally considered unworthy and ‘uncivilized’ (Yatako, n.d.). As stated by Human (2020), these languages are nothing but marginalized languages.

However, the so called ‘minority languages’ have a very special place within minority non-hegemonic social groups. For instance, Conrad Fisher, a Tribal historic preservation officer for Northern Cheyenne (a minority indigenous group in the United States), argues that indigenous languages are:

[...] a traditional, cultural view of your world that has been passed down from generation to generation. And so when you talk the language, you’re talking on behalf of your ancestors from a thousand, two thousand years ago. You’re looking at it through an Indigenous lens of generations of people [...]” (cited in McDermott 2014:2).

Similarly, Karen Whashinawatok, director of the Mnemonic Language and Culture Commission states: “knowing our language is so important, because it teaches us who we are. It’s not just a set of words. It’s about our way of life that our ancestors have fought and died for” (cited in McDermott 2014:2).

Yet, these so-called ‘minority languages’ are normally not included in the school curricula presumably because they do not have a formal written system; by and large, they are oral languages and hence are seen as not having enough worth to be incorporated in study programs (Yatako, n.d.). In fact, Czarny (2002) refers to the school as conquer. She claims that many educational systems pretend to graphisize oral languages; that is, to adapt them to the written culture, not acknowledging that “oral languages have

spoken by a portion of the Afro-Costa Rican population, though it could be referred to as a ‘regional language’ or as an ‘ethnic language’, as proposed by Extra and Gorter (2001), throughout this article we use the broader term ‘minority language’.

other ways of transmitting, creating, and storing messages and texts” (as cited in Yatako, n.d., p. 3).

However, it is a fact that we all acquire our mother tongue at home, not at school, and that writing is complementary to speech. In fact, currently more than 750 million people around the world are not able to read or write. Furthermore, according to Eberhard et al. (2000), of the currently listed 7,117 living languages, 3,995 have a developed writing system. We don't always know, however, if the existing writing systems are widely used. That is, while an alphabet may exist there may not be very many people who are literate and actually using the alphabet. The remaining 3,116 are likely unwritten (par.1).

That is, almost half of today's languages do not possess a written system. Hence, it seems to be the case that the lack of status associated with vernacular languages, which leads to the use of term 'minority language' results but from political capitalist reasons. Naturally, all languages are complex socio-cultural systems of communication and therefore are valuable whether or not they have a written system. I argue that there is no inherent natural reason to say that some languages are 'minority languages' and others are not; yet, the term 'minority language' is used in this essay to refer to languages with little political power and hence, undervalued. My use of 'minority language' is strictly to make this point. It is by no means used to undermine vernacular languages spoken by non-hegemonic social groups, all of which have been victims of some sort of colonization, especially colonization of being and colonization of knowing (Guerrero 2010).

1.1. Minority languages in Costa Rica

In Costa Rica, there are two linguistic groups which can be described as 'minority languages': indigenous languages and Limonese Creole. Though the main focus in this article is the former, it is important to point out some descriptive information about the first group, as to highlight the similarities regarding ratio of speakers and language vitality.

In Costa Rica, there are 9 indigenous groups (less than 100 thousand individuals altogether; Quesada Pacheco 2012) each with its corresponding vernacular language. Table 1 summarizes these languages as well as their location within the Costa Rican territory, the overall population for each group, and the ratio of speakers as well as the degree of vitality for these indigenous languages:

Table 1 Indigenous groups found in Costa Rica

Group	Location	Population	Language; degree of vitality	Percentage of speakers
Huetar	San Jose: Quitirrisí and Zapatón Territories	2000	Huetar; extinct	None
Malecu or Guatuso	Alajuela Province, Northern Region in the Guatuso county	500	Malecu; in decline (Margey 1993, cited in Sánchez Avendaño 2011)	71% (Solano Salazar 2008)
Bribri	On both sides of the Talamanca Mountain Range –Limon and Puntarenas Provinces in the Salitre, Cabagra/Talamanca Bribri and Kekoldi Cocles Territories	17000	Bribri; in decline (Margey 1993, Sánchez Avendaño 2011)	62% (Solano Salazar 2008)
Cabécar	Limon, Puntarenas, and Cartago Provinces within the Highlands and Lowlands of Chirripó and La Estrella Valley, as well as in Ujarrás	14000	Cabécar; in decline (Quesada Pacheco 2012, Sánchez Avendaño 2013)	86,5% of the population (INEC, 2011)
Boruca or Brunca	Puntarenas Province within the Boruca and Rey Curré Territories	1000	Boruca; obsolete or extinct (Margey 1993, Castro 2008, Quesada Pacheco 2008a)	5,7% (Boruca) and 4,2% (Rey Curré) (Solano Salazar 2008)

Guaymí or Ngöbe	Puntarenas Province within the Abrojo Montezuma, Coto Brus, Conte Burica, and Osa counties.	5000	Guaymí; resisting (Quesada Pacheco 2008, Sánchez Avendaño 2009)	67,7% of the population (INEC, 2011)
Chorotega	Matambú, Guanacaste	868	Chorotega;	None
Teribe	Térraba in the Puntarenas Province.	600	Térraba or Brorán; obsolete or extinct (Margey 1993)	4,1% in 2000 (Solano Salazar 2008)
Buglé	It migrated from Panama and lives in contact with the Gaymí population in the Limoncito and Coto Brus counties in the Puntarenas Province		Buglere; in decline (Sánchez Avendaño 2011).	Approximately 1000 people between Panama and Costa Rica.

Overall, according to the last population census, 60% of the indigenous population in Costa Rica reportedly speak their native language (INEC, 2011), but the situation is different for each group and these languages are mainly reserved for intimate inside-community contexts such as family and religious celebrations. These languages have been or are being replaced by the majority language: Spanish. Although these languages have been reported as weakened, important efforts have recently been made on the part of government authorities, educational authorities, and community members to ensure their strengthening and survival (details provided in the next section).

On the other hand, Limonese Creole is an English-based language spoken mainly along the Caribbean coast by a yet unknown portion of the Afro-Costa Rican population (the Afro-Costa Rican population constitutes around 7% of the overall population). This vernacular minority language was brought to Costa Rica by migrants who came from the Great Caribbean region, especially from Jamaica in the late 1800s to work on the

construction of the railroad track to the Atlantic region as well as on the plantations owned by the United Fruit Company (Melendez and Duncan 1974, Herzfeld 1978, Zuñiga and Thompson 2017, Bell 2019). The migrant Jamaican community in the Limon province was diglossic, as they maintained a Standard British English in formal contexts such as at school and church services, along with their Creole language, used in informal contexts such as family and friend gatherings. During the last part of the XVIII century and most of the XIX century, this population remained in the Limon province hence being able to maintain their linguistic practices, along with other cultural and religious ones (Alpizar Alpizar 2017, Zuñiga and Thompson 2017).

A Creole language refers to a language that emerges in a context in which two intelligible languages come “into contact”: a dominant language, normally a European language, and a less dominant language. In the case of the Creole languages found in the Atlantic region, the European language provides the lexicon, whereas the phonological and morpho-syntactic features come from Western African languages such as Yoruba and Igbo.

There are specific morpho-syntactic features which characterize Limonese Creole, as pointed out by Zúñiga and Thompson (2017), Portilla (1998), and Bell (2019); some such features are:

1. LC has an SVO word order (e.g., *Di uman av moni* ‘the woman has money’).
2. LC consistently marks the plural form with the free dem morpheme (e.g., *Di profes dem taakin* ‘the teachers are talking’).
3. The pronominal system in LC has an African root; for example, the subject pronoun chart is as follows:

singular	plural
a-ay-mi	wi

yu unu-uno

shi/im/it dem

E.g., Unu waan go de ('you (pl.) want to go there?')

Dem kyaan stap it ('they cannot stop it'; Zuñiga and Thoompson 2017:36)

4. Stative verbs might be used in their simple form to refer to the simple past tense, as in Shi di av moni ('she had money') and Dem di stye rayt don de ('they stayed right there'; Zuñiga and Thoompson 2017: 42).
5. LC relies on reduplication, as in Lenki (lenki lenki) 'skinny (really skinny)' (Bell 2019: 11.).

The exact number of speakers of Limonese Creole is unknown, given that the latest population censuses have not incorporated this criterion. The last data available shows that before the year 2000, 55000 people reported speaking LC (Marin 2016); in other words, LC is the most widely spoken minority language in Costa Rica¹.

As for the level of official recognition of these minority languages, in Article 76 of the Costa Rican Constitution, it is stated that "Spanish is the official language of the nation. Nonetheless, the State will look after the maintenance and cultivation of the national indigenous languages". It is clear herein that LC is acknowledged neither as a national nor as an

1 Approximately 7% of the population in Costa Rica self-identifies as Afro-Costa Rican, though only around 40% of that total live in the Limon Province according to the last census conducted by INEC (2011); the rest have migrated mainly to the Central Valley (San Jose, Heredia, Alajuela, and Cartago). An important portion of Afro-Costa Ricans have additionally migrated to other countries, mainly the United States, given their ability to speak an English-based Creole, but this number is unknown. It is therefore difficult to establish what portion of this population still speaks LC; studies on the status of this vernacular language have been based on perceptions about the language and on in situ observations of language use (e.g., Spence Sharpe 2004, Hertzfeld 1992, 2012).

indigenous language. Despite the fact that LC is not recognized as a national nor indigenous language, there have been various motions presented before the Legislative Assembly by academics, congress members and community leaders, which has only resulted in the creation of a bill passed in September of 2018, which declares August 30 as the day to celebrate LC “as well as to promote educational and cultural activities which contribute to the recognition of the Limonese Creole as one of the languages spoken in the country” (Chinchilla 2018, par. 1).

Herzfeld (2012) argues that, in academic circles in Costa Rica the variety of indigenous languages as well as LC are well known, but the majority of the Costa Rican population “takes it for granted that its speakers [those of LC] will eventually replace their language for Spanish, as if this were a fact which does not need to be argued” (p.3). Nonetheless, she insists that “despite educational homogenizing campaigns, its speakers have shown loyalty towards their language and their culture, as can be appreciated in their foods, games, sports, and music and songs” (p.4).

Herzfeld (2012) additionally states that nowadays LC is a language used mainly at home, within small groups of friends and in informal contexts; code switching between Spanish and LC is also evident. For instance, she argues that in parent-child interactions, it is frequent that parents will code-switch, using Spanish to emphasize scolding, as Spanish is a language with more authority and credibility than LC. She describes LC as a periphery language; that is, a non-prestigious language. Herzfeld claims that even native speakers of LC perceive it as ‘broken English’ reserved for informal exchanges. It is non-surprising then, that parents resort to Spanish to impose authority, as it has more credibility than does their vernacular Creole language.

In a more recent study, Vasquez Carranza (2019), nonetheless, reports that LC is still widely spoken and highly valued, at least in Limon Center, Cahuita, and Puerto Viejo (the Southern region of the Limon province). Based on data obtained through a questionnaire applied to a group of 45 adult Afro-

Costa Rican parents in 2018, she reports that LC is especially used in intimate contexts involving family and close friends. Interestingly, 68,8% of the participating parents reported LC as being their dominant language. Furthermore, the great majority of participants feel proud to speak their heritage language. They highlight as main benefits in speaking and transmitting LC: the preservation of their cultural beliefs, of their Afro descendant identity, their traditions, and family ties, as well as an ease in the acquisition of Standard English, to ensure job opportunities, and even to support tourism in the Caribbean region.

In sum, though LC is not officially recognized as a national language and the number of speakers of this minority language is yet to be established for certain, Afro-Limonese adults continue to not only speak it but also teach it to the new generations out of self-motivation, regardless of the lack of efforts on the part of educational or governmental authorities.

1.2. The teaching of 'minority languages' in Costa Rica

In Costa Rica, indigenous languages have recently been incorporated in the curricula within indigenous territories. In fact, the Program of Teaching Indigenous Languages was created by the Ministry of Public Education in 1995 "to revitalize and spread indigenous languages in the country through their teaching to children and youngsters from indigenous territories" (Rojas Chaves 2006:268). The instilment of such a program was responsibility of a group of 56 teachers, all of which were members of indigenous communities, fluent speakers of the indigenous languages and possess ample knowledge about the cultural practices in these communities. The program has reached a large percentage of the indigenous student population within indigenous territories and such a percentage is growing, according to Rojas Chaves (2006).

It was possible to incorporate indigenous languages in study plans thanks to explicit requests by a large number of students, parents, and community leaders from indigenous communities, inspired by socio-educational diagnostic studies in various indigenous territories between 1994 and 1995

(Rojas Chaves 2006). This effort resulted in the creation of 4 bilingual Spanish-Cabécar pre-school centers in Chirripó, for example. From the start, children have reportedly had a positive attitude toward the learning of their ancestral languages.

According to Rojas Chaves (2006), the emergence of new programs such as the one in Coto Brus are evidence of the success in the level of acceptance of these programs; she reports a correlation between the implementation of these language programs and a decrease in the dropout rate in indigenous communities. In a questionnaire applied to 83 parents in the Tainí indigenous territory at Valle la Estrella, Rojas Chaves found clear evidence of satisfaction with the teaching of not only indigenous languages but also of their cultural values and practices, as such practices strengthen not only the minority language but children's cultural identity. Some community members state that "these children more readily learn when being taught in their dominant language" (Rojas Chaves 2006:271).

On the other hand, Rojas Chaves (2006) claims that through these indigenous language-teaching programs, "parents show more awareness about the fact that the task to teach Cabécar as mother tongue is their responsibility and they shall assume greater commitment regarding the maintenance of their indigenous language. There is also a recovery of the spaces of usage of the indigenous language within the communities at different local activities" (p. 271).

In contrast, the story about the teaching of LC is quite different and unfortunate. In 1949 when the Afro population was granted Costa Rican citizenship, what is referred to as the 'Afro-Costa Rican culture' began (Duncan and Melendez 2005). This, of course, gave way to a gradual process of acculturation, as new values, including linguistic ones, were reinforced and prioritized; LC started to be replaced by Spanish, the dominant language, presumably as a way to ensure the survival and success of the Afro-Costa Rican people within the country at large. We can clearly see, nonetheless, that this was what Guerrero would describe as a

process of colonization of being and knowledge (2010) whereby a set of values by the hegemonic class was imposed upon the Afro-Costa Rican community.

In fact, according to Duncan and Melendez (2005), the educational authorities insisted that it was counterproductive to maintain the minority language through the English church schools which existed at the time¹. Their clam was that it was of paramount importance to integrate the Afro-Costa Rican children into the public school system where Spanish was taught as the official language, along with the Costa Rican values and beliefs, of course. By and large, Afro-Costa Rican parents accepted this endorsement and removed their children from the English schools, signing them up at the local public schools (around 47 new schools were built in the Limon province between 1954 and 1958 according to Castillo Serrano, 2000, a clear sign of the importance given by the government to implant the dominant culture, religious beliefs, values, and language). This, of course, constituted the most evident way to invalidate the vernacular language; “even physical punishment was used to obtain the linguistic objectives” (Duncan and Melendez 2005:53) at these public schools.

This reality evidences, as argued by Yatako (n.d.), that the formal school system certainly plays a key role in weakening minority languages, because instead of integrating them as part of the curriculum, children are punished or made fun of for using them in the school context. Even though the value about one’s own vernacular language and culture are inculcated from within the homes and communities, if the school system only contributes to reinforcing a stigma about one’s minority language and cultural values, then it is unsurprising that vernacular languages weaken and are in danger of extinction more and more, as they are replaced by dominant ones.

¹ These schools “were known as English schools because classes were conducted in English. Various protestant church denominations, the railroad company, the United Fruit Company, and the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) supported the English schools in one way or another” (Castillo Serrano 2000:62). Furthermore, the values and cultural practices of the Afro immigrant population were maintained and praised at these schools, as teachers were part of the community.

Spence Sharpe (2004) also refers to the role played by schools, as she argues that the younger generation Afro-Costa Rican population tend to acquire Spanish as their first language, and “Spanish gains terrain *the moment children start attending school* [emphasis added]” (p. 56).

Nonetheless, Duncan and Melendez (2005) claim that it is the middle Afro-Costa Rican class which has stripped of Afro-Costa Rican youngsters of their right to maintain their linguistic patrimony. In Melendez’s words, “the incapability on the part of the Creole community to keep the Spanish language from intruding with their interlocutors within intimate encounters (grandparents, parents, spouses, children, and grandchildren), is decisive in the replacement of the vernacular language” (cited in Spence-Sharpe 2004:55). However, I am convinced that, if the society at large and the educational system, which is a system of power that imposes a set of values decided upon by the dominant social class, have never recognized the value of vernacular languages and ancestral practices, then it is not unforeseen that parents would want to protect their children from being bullied and discriminated against from within these systems. Therefore, it would be unjust to blame the weakening of vernacular languages solely on members of these communities.

On the other hand, recently, linguist Rene Zuñiga from the National University (UNA), together with Afro-Limonese community members have been working on projects designed to contribute toward the revitalization of LC by giving it a formal status. In August, 2018, Zuñiga published the first LC illustrated alphabet, together with Gloria Thompson, an Afro-Limonese native (Zuñiga and Thompson 2017). This illustrated alphabet is said to be one of “the first instruments to revitalize the Limon Kryol” (Surcos 2018:1). Currently, Zuñiga is working on the grammar of LC (Zuñiga, personal communication, March 11, 2020). Despite the relevance of this great work conducted by Zuñiga and Thompson, conversations with the Afro-Limonese population in the Limon and Cahuita districts during 2018, 2019, and the beginning of 2020 reveal that by and large, this community is unfamiliar with this material.

Overall, regardless of efforts made in recent years, there is little doubt that minority languages in Costa Rica continue to be at risk of extinction, as reported in the 2009 edition of the Atlas of Endangered Languages published by UNESCO. According to this report, Gauimí, Cabécar, Limonese Creole, Guatuso, Boruca, Teribe, and Chorotega are, in one way or another, at risk of disappearing (as reported in *La Nación*, May 27, 2009). In other words, the fact that these languages are not hegemonic makes them less valuable before the eyes of government and educational authorities and, as a result, we obtain debilitated languages whose own native speakers do not perceive them as praiseworthy, as an essential part of their identity; this is especially the case for LC.

Despite this pessimistic reality, in the next sections we analyze the potential role which youngsters might have in revitalizing their ancestral language.

2. The study with Afro-Limonense youth

This study stems from research conducted in 2018 with a group of adult Afro-Costa Rican parents in Limon Center, Cahuita, and Puerto Viejo (Vásquez Carranza 2019, 2021) regarding the meaning, status, and transmission of LC within Afro Limonese families. Through a survey as well as through focus groups, participating Afro-Limonense parents expressed concern regarding the perceptions and attitudes by the younger generations about their vernacular language, LC (Vasquez Carranza 2021). Moreover, they worried about the fact that “despite their [parents’] believing in the importance of revitalizing and maintaining the heritage language, youngsters do not want to do so.” (Vasquez Carranza 2021:46). These Afro-Limonense parents additionally argued that much of the responsibility for revitalizing LC now lies in the hands of the younger generations, as they (parents) made the mistake of undervaluing their own ancestral language and instilling it in their children.

Therefore, this qualitative report looks at the perceptions by a group of Afro-Limonense youngsters regarding the value in their ancestral language

as part of their identity, as well as their role as potential “language healers” in order to revert the weakening of LC.

Specifically, a series of focus groups were conducted in three regions of the Limon Province throughout 2019. To recruit participants, we relied on selective, judgmental, or intentional sampling wherein the key goal is not to measure but to “comprehend the phenomena and social processes thoroughly” (Martinez Salgado 2012). The questions used in this type of study relate directly to the meaning which they have for participants; therefore, the role played by these youngsters within their social, historical and cultural context was paramount. By relying on snow-sampling, we invited Afro-Limonese youth to participate in the study based on their interest in the topic. Hence, it was an individual decision to be part in the focus groups. Even though the findings reported herein might not be generalizable to the entire Afro-Costa Rican youth population because of the small sample of participants, their opinions can certainly be transferable given the rich description of the phenomenon under study.

Eighteen Afro-Limonese youngsters ages 13 to 22 participated in the 5 focus group sessions, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Afro-Limonese youth who participated in focus groups during the second semester, 2019

Location	Number of youngsters	Age	Gender
Siquirres (1 session)	4	13 (1); 14 (1); 16 (2)	3 females 1 male
Cahuita (1 sesion)	3	14 (1); 16 (2)	1 female 2 males
Limon center (3 sessions)	11	13 (1); 14 (3); 19 (2); 20 (4); 22 (1)	6 females 5 males

Of the participating youth, the great majority speak LC at home and with friends, though not consistently. LC was learned at home from interacting with parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and adult relatives.

These focus groups consisted of 1 to 2-hour meetings and no more than 4 individuals participated in each. Open questions were presented to generate an exhaustive discussion on participants' perceptions about the relevance of Limonese Creole, about their experience as users of LC, as well as on their role as potential revitalizers of their vernacular language. The questions used were of the following sort:

1. How often and in what contexts do you speak LC?
2. What does LC represent as part of your Afro-Limonese identity?
3. Do you believe it is important to maintain this vernacular language? Why or why not?
4. What challenges do you perceive in the teaching and maintenance of LC?
5. What role should the Afro-Limonese youth have in the process of strengthening LC?
6. What are some ways in which LC shall be maintained? In what contexts?

Participating youngsters provided similar opinions at the various meetings; hence, the data obtained are analyzed based on six general categories.

2.1. Ratio of speakers of LC

Of the 18 youngsters who participated in the focus groups, only 1 does not speak LC, though he is able to understand it very well and wishes he did speak it. He says that he is afraid of and embarrassed to speak LC despite spending a lot of time around adults who do speak it constantly (e.g., around a group of Afro-Limonese adults and elderly-adults who gather on

a daily basis to play dominos during the evenings); he is afraid that if he speaks it the adults will make fun of him.

This participant did not grow up speaking LC because it was not encouraged in his family; however, he regrets not speaking LC because as he states, *“siento que perdí algo de mí”* [I feel as though I lost a part of myself]. He additionally states being ashamed to acknowledge that some white teenagers his age do speak LC while he does not.

2.2. Contexts and reasons for speaking LC

All (except for 1) participants report using LC at home, with parents and grandparents, and with Afro-Limonese peers and friends inside or outside the Limon province. This supports what was argued in Vásquez Carranza (2019, 2021), namely, that LC is an intimate language, used in contexts which have a special meaning for its users. Yet, these youngsters condemn that adults (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles) speak mainly LC among themselves; however, most make no special effort to teach it to them nor do they encourage them to speak LC. Hence, it is common for some of these participating youngsters to speak Spanish to their parents, even if addressed in LC since, for the most part, nothing happens if they do not speak LC to their parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts (except for two girls, as reported below).

According to these participants, a few years ago it was common for most parents and grandparents to speak to children only in LC, but in recent years, parents speak to their young children exclusively or mainly in Spanish. As an illustration, one female participant stated: *“mi mamá siempre me habla en inglés criollo, pero a mis hermanitos menores a veces les habla y a veces no... De parte de mis abuelos, yo soy la única nieta que hablo inglés”* [my mom always used to speak to me in LC, but to my younger siblings, sometimes she speaks to them in LC and sometimes she does not... on my grandparents' side, I am the only one who speaks LC].

Nonetheless, except for one participant, as stated above, all these youngsters do speak LC and feel comfortable doing so. In fact, two female participants report that their mothers will not even respond to them if they dare address them in Spanish. One says, *“si la llamo por teléfono y le hablo en español, me cuelga”* [if I call her up on the phone and talk to her in Spanish, she hangs up].

These youngsters additionally point out that the role of teaching and maintaining the vernacular language is mainly a responsibility of mothers and grandmothers, not fathers or grandfathers. This is so because in their communities, it is mothers and grandmothers who are in charge of raising and taking care of children.

Participating youngsters also use LC as a way to guarantee group union. For example, one female participant says: *“entre amigos, si salimos a algún lugar aunque sea fuera de Limón vamos a hablar así”* [among friends, if we go out, even if it is outside Limon, we are going to talk this way].

Furthermore, at school and within groups of close Afro-Limonese friends they sometimes deliberately speak LC as a way to leave out other youngsters who are not Afro. Besides, reportedly some of their high school teachers speak LC in class, but *“en su mayoría los jóvenes hablan español entre ellos”* [by and large, youngsters speak Spanish among themselves].

Additionally, these youngsters mainly resort to their vernacular language to gossip or to show group belonging, identity as Afro-Limonese individuals, and to exclude non-Afro-Limonese peers from a given conversation. One of them states that more and more, however, the youth do not see a value in speaking LC.

On the other hand, two of the younger participants report that they are not allowed to speak LC at school. One female participant says: *“la maestra no nos permite que hablemos inglés criollo”* [the teacher does not allow us to speak Creole English]; this teacher is non-Afro-Limonese; it is therefore not surprising that she would take on such an attitude (most likely out of

ignorance of the vernacular language and of the relevance it has as part of the Afro-Limonese identity and culture). What should be pointed out here is that, as argued by Skutnab-Kangas (cited in Yatako, n.d.), teachers are a figure of authority and such negative attitudes toward this ancestral language only reinforces Afro-Limonese teenagers' lack of interest in speaking their vernacular language. Fortunately, this contrasts with what two of the participating 14-year-olds report, namely that some Afro-Limonese teachers at their school do often times speak LC in class, even to give academic explanations.

In sum, participants use LC in the following contexts:

1. at home, with parents and grandparents
2. around Afro-Limonese peers and friends, as a way to guarantee group union
3. with peers at school to gossip or to show group belonging
4. to exclude non-Afro-Limonese peers from a given conversation
5. to respect parents' demand to address them exclusively in LC
6. occasionally at school to learn new academic content

2.3. Relevance which Limonese Creole has as part of being Afro

All participants agree that LC is an essential part of being Afro Limonese. This can be illustrated in the following examples whereby participants state so in their own words:

Participant 12: *“el criollo es parte de nosotros, es nuestra cultura”* [LC is part of us, it's our culture].

Participant 18: *“es que esta lengua es parte de ser negro”* [well, that language is part of being black]

Participant 1: *“es la lengua de mis abuelos y de mis bisabuelos y de nuestros ancestros; negarla es negar lo que somos”* [it is the language of my grandparents and great-grandparents and that of our ancestors; to negate it is to negate what we are]

Participant 8: *“yay, es parte de lo que somos como personas afro descendientes y por eso es importante fortalecerla, para que no pierda”* [well, it is part of what we are as Afro people]

Participant 3: *“el criollo es parte de mi identidad”* [LC is part of my identity].

Participant 7: *“yo siento que a mí me robaron esa parte de ser negro porque nadie me preguntó si quería aprender y ahora desearía poder hacerlo”* [I feel as though I was stripped off from part of being black because nobody asked me if I wanted to learn it and now I wish I could].

Participant 9: *“el criollo es parte de quien somos, nos guste o no”* [LC is part of who we are whether we like it or not]

Furthermore, the fact that these youngsters participated in the focus groups after being informed of their content and objectives can be used as further evidence that to them, this topic is relevant.

Additionally, as will be described in detail below, as a result of their commitment to this topic which is part of their Afro-Limonese identity, during the focus groups they suggested several measures which could ensure the maintenance and revitalization of LC.

2.4. Challenges in maintaining LC

All participants agree that LC has weakened mainly because it has not been valued the way it should have. For instance, in their words, many adults (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles) think that it is not worth maintaining it; they would rather have youngsters learn Standard English, which they find more useful in terms of generating job opportunities and prestige.

One participant partially agrees with this negative view of LC as he states that it is very difficult to defend a language that does not even have a name which the majority agree upon, as LC has been given several names, mainly by academics from outside the Afro-Limonese community. In his words: *“algunos dicen que es patuá, otros que es inglés, otros que criollo; ¿cómo se puede fortalecer algo que ni siquiera se sabe cómo se llama?”* [some say that it is patois, others that it is English, others that it is Creole; how can we strengthen something whose name we do not even know?].

Nonetheless, only one participant, a 13-year-old girl, stated that she does not see much value in maintaining LC, though she was interested herself in learning more about its meaning as part of being Afro. This might be a reflection of the fact that the value of LC as part of the Afro-Limonese identity is not reinforced within or outside the home; she is quite young and hence might not see how crucial LC is as part of her being Afro-Limonese.

2.5. Their role in revitalizing LC

All of these participating youngsters agree that something should be done to maintain and revitalize their ancestral language, which is unquestionably debilitated, especially among the youth; they state wanting to be a part of any project designed to accomplish such a goal.

Participants agree that their role in the process of maintaining and revitalizing their ancestral language has to be active. In fact, when asked about options through which they could participate in a revitalization process, they propose a series of concrete actions, listed in the next section.

As stated by one of the female participants, *“ahora nos toca a nosotros mantener esta lengua y enseñársela a los más pequeños, nuestros hermanitos, sobrinos porque nuestros padres y abuelos no la valoraban como debe ser.”* [Now it is our duty to maintain this language and to teach it to the younger ones, to our brother and sisters, to our nieces and

nephews because our parents and grandparents did not value it as they should].

These youngsters expressed that it is important to come up with specific ideas on how to maintain and revitalize LC. They are convinced that this task is up to them, with support from their parents and grandparents, as well as from academics and other cultural and religious groups within the Afro Limonese community. As suggested by McDermott (2014), these teenagers might indeed be the best hope to revitalize this ancestral language.

2.6. Proposals to maintain and revitalize LC

During the focus groups, these youngsters were asked to propose ways in which LC could be strengthened. As a result, the following suggestions were compiled:

1. Asking their parents and grandparents to only speak LC to them and to the younger children.
2. Speaking only LC among themselves.
3. Speaking only LC to their younger siblings and to their younger cousins and even neighbors.
4. Organizing activities such as focus groups and workshops wherein other Afro-Limonese youngsters can learn about and ponder upon the meaning of their ancestral language.
5. Giving talks at schools throughout Limon to teach about LC as a valuable language which is part of being Afro-Limonese.
6. Creating chats and groups on social media platforms (blogs, Facebook groups, etc.) where they can read about, learn more, and talk about their heritage language.

7. Holding a major event on a yearly basis or so where topics related to LC can be discussed thoroughly; this would be a way to reinforce and position LC among the Afro-Limonese population who doubt about its validity and who refuse to feel proud of their vernacular language.
8. Asking the elderly (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles) to help in this process, as they are the ones who still truly know the language and speak it well.
9. Looking for allies among cultural and social groups within the Afro community, including the UNIA, local governments, and universities to help them raise awareness among other Afro Limonese community members, especially the youth.

3. Actions taken by participating youngsters on the revitalization of their Limonese Creole

Not only was it possible to discuss in depth these youngsters' perceptions on what LC means to them, on how debilitated it is, but also on the role of parents and grandparents in the teaching and maintenance of LC; as a result of the work with these youngsters, they suggested that a major formal event be organized on the LC language and its status and vitality. Therefore, an activity which they entitled First Regional Limonese Creole Meeting took place at the beginning of 2020. A total 26 people, youngsters and adults, participated in the event which consisted of three workshops¹ on topics proposed by these youngsters. The first workshop was on Calypso music and how it relates to maintaining LC. The second workshop was on LC as object of study, what it means to be a *creole* language, and where LC

¹ Despite the fact that this activity was widely announced with help from participating youngsters and other organizations in the Limon community, the number of participants was lower than expected. However, as stated by participants in this event, those who did participate have the conviction that LC is an essential part of being Afro-Limonese and they are willing to continue working on its revitalization and revindication.

originated, etc. The third workshop was about the value of oral traditions such as the Ananci stories¹ as a way to maintain LC.

As a result of this regional meeting, participants proposed several ideas about LC as well as specific ways to revitalize LC. These are summarized as follows:

1. Limonene Creole is a fundamental part of Afro-Limonese identity.
2. The calypso music is the only music genre which maintains LC; the songs which are written in Creole have a very different meaning from those written in Standard English or in Spanish; they voice the feelings and experiences of the Afro Limonese people.
3. Nowadays, we are at a historical moment worldwide where there is a clear claim on the part of youth and adults about their identity; a claim for the need to defend and reposition the ancestral values of the Afro descendant populations, including Creole languages.
4. There is a debate regarding the name that the language spoken in the Limon province should be; it is clear that it is not *patois*² nor *mekatelyu*³; the proposal in this regional meeting was to use the

¹ The Ananci Stories are a set of oral stories whose main character is a trickster, represented as different animals, mainly a spider, in various oral tales. It originated in West Africa and was brought to other parts of the world by the Ashanti enslaved Afro-descendants. It is an oral tradition whereby Afro-descendant parents and grandparents entertained the youngsters; the Ananci Stories tell a tale of survival, the survival of the Afro peoples who were taken away from their homeland, Africa, enslaved, and shipped to numerous places around the globe (Mata, personal communication, February 2, 2020).

² The term *patois* is French and it refers to a French-based Creole; just like the Limonese Creole, it is a language associated with informal contexts and it does not have the same socio-political value as does French; it is said to be a French dialect spoken by the lower classes. Though a very small percentage of Afro Limonese people did speak patois (those who migrated from French colonies such as Martinique), nowadays it is but a very small percentage who might still speak it. By and large, the Afro-Limonese population speaks an English-based Creole.

³ *Mekatelyuw* (Mekatelyu) is a derogatory term which has been used to refer to the Creole spoken in Limon. Yet, most Afro-Limonese people do not agree with this term, and they perceive it as disrespectful; it derives from the expression 'let me tell you', often used by Limonese Creole speakers and it simply highlights the stigma about the Limonese Creole not being acknowledged as a true

term “Criollo Limonense” (Limonese Creole) in order to avoid the devaluation of this language and to position it as a natural language, just like any other.

5. The fact that LC is an oral language shall not be seen as a negative trait which makes it less worthwhile than other languages.
6. It is paramount to ponder upon the activities through which ancestral values such as LC are maintained and reinforced, namely, the Ananci Stories and the Calypso music, both oral traditions naturally held in LC throughout the Limon province.
7. It is essential to hold concrete activities to foster the strengthening of LC.

In addition, at this first regional meeting, the following activities through which LC can be revitalized were suggested by participants:

1. To create a committee to strengthen LC; this committee would be in charge of analyzing the materials which have already been designed/worked on, and to determine the work route (e.g., future meetings/summits, population to work with, methodology, etc.) to revitalize LC.
2. To systematize the efforts which have already been made in recent years to strengthen and revitalize LC from various organizations, academic and non-academic. This would shed light as to what attempts have already been done, which efforts have worked or have not and why, and to contemplate the relevance which they might still have. This would be a way to join efforts made by various individuals and organizations as to ease the revitalization process of LC.

language (this is what many Afro-Limonese individuals have stated to me during my research in the Limon province).

3. To coordinate with various educational and local governmental entities, including the University of Costa Rica's Caribbean Campus, the National University (UNA), the National Technological Institute (TEC)'s Caribbean Branch, the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA); the local branch of the National Distance Learning University (UNED), local governments and municipalities from Limon, culture centers, the local office of the Ministry of Culture, women groups such as the National Afro Women Forum and the Association of Afro Women from the Caribbean in Costa Rica, AMACCR, youth organized groups, among others, in an effort to put together a group of people who can help in the revitalization process.
4. To compile and examine declarations and bills, public policies and other official documents which might be useful in putting forth a proposal to revitalize LC.
5. To contact schools and high schools in the Limon province in order to assess the importance of carrying out meetings with the youth to talk about LC, as a way to inform the student and faculty population, especially the Afro population, about the relevance of maintaining this vernacular language and finding out their willingness to be part of a revitalization project.

As has been shown, the work conducted with a group of Afro-Limonese youngsters was clearly exciting and revealing. Despite the fact that they acknowledge that LC has weakened in recent years, they, too, agree that it is an essential part of their Afro-Limonese identity and hence, it deserves to be revitalized. As nicely stated by McDermott (2014), we could say that even though this study included a small portion of the Afro-Limonese youth community, "sometimes the stories about language revitalization revolve around education, and other times they are about small, yet profound moments of human interconnectedness occurring through language" (p. 5);

I am convinced that this work has been one of such moments, especially the Regional Meeting on Limonese Creole.

4. Concluding Remarks

The experience through the focus groups with young Afro Limonese individuals makes us ponder upon several issues around the transmittal and preservation of minority languages.

Firstly, if a minority language is perceived and described by individuals outside the minority community as non-worthy, that idea will eventually be adopted by community members themselves who end up undervaluing their own ancestral language. However, as stated by Richard Grounds, our original languages are probably the most critical markers of the health of our communities in terms of our cultural well-being. And that relates to understanding what our place in the world is [...] the fullness of that understanding comes with the language, and the health of the language is probably the most critical marker of how our communities are doing” (cited in McDarmott 2014:5).

As ancestral languages decline, youngsters lose a fundamental part of their identity; as a result, a feeling of rejection of their own roots takes over. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to see a small though strongly committed group of Afro-Limonese youngsters who still believe in their ancestral legacy and are eager to maintain it for generations to come.

Secondly, it is clear that from the time the Afro descendant population in Limon were given Costa Rican citizenship, their ancestral practices started to be replaced by those provided by the dominant society. Afro-Costa Rican families were convinced at that point in history that their language was unworthy and hence decided to not teach it to the younger generations, since teaching them Standard English and Spanish would bring more benefits to their descendants. As a result, many parents stopped speaking LC to their children, which youngsters now see as reprehensible. Of course, as a result of the lack of status in these vernacular languages, parents do

not see any value in maintaining them and consequently, contribute to worsening the perception which youngsters might have about their ancestral languages. As an obvious result, minority languages decline and sadly, “as children lose their mother tongue, they also lose an essential part of their identity, they assimilate feelings of self-reject of their mother tongue and therefore, of their own culture” (Yakato, n.d., p. 7).

On the other hand, schoolteachers have contributed to the weakening of this ancestral language by punishing or reprimanding those who spoke it at school. As argued by Yatako (n.d.), as schools emphasize the lack of worth in students’ ancestral languages, youngsters from non-hegemonic social groups feel ashamed of their ancestral mother tongues and hence, of their past, of their own history and their families’. This unfortunately creates a gap between the older and the newer generations within these socio-cultural groups.

As also pointed out by Yatako (n.d.), “if the message is that students shall adopt the hegemonic language and the identity of the hegemonic culture at the expense of subtracting their mother tongue and cultural practices, then the end result is complex and unjust” (p. 7).

Finally, despite the harsh reality about LC, a language which is clearly debilitated and undervalued, this experience with young Afro-Limonese gives us hope, as they appear to be potential language healers, as proposed by McDarmott (2014). If only we could get more youngsters interested in projects such as the one registered herein, we would be very likely to see a reversal of the debilitated status of this minority language.

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