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# Language and the Process of Socialisation Amongst Bilingual Children in a Nicaraguan Village

Mark Jamieson, Durham University

[krasku@ippimail.com](mailto:krasku@ippimail.com)

## Abstract

Social scientists have in recent years devoted a good deal of attention to the role of language in the lives of children. Few, however, have focused on the relationship between language and the logic by which categorical distinctions between children and adults are reproduced. This article considers material from Kakabila, a village on Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast, where differences between adults and children, as these categories are locally imagined, find unusually clear expression in various forms of linguistic performance. Three closely linked speech registers known as respect, *bad joke* and *shame*, and Anglo-Miskitu bilingualism, are examined; first in terms of their roles in processes of social reproduction and then in terms of children's perspectives on these processes. Children's understandings of these phenomena are also considered in terms of a children's game called *Prinkel-In-De-Sasa*, and Gibberish, a collection of secret languages used exclusively by children. Both *Prinkel-In-De-Sasa* and Gibberish, it is argued, allow children, through play, to understand more comprehensively the politics of social reproduction as these are mediated through language.

*Keywords: Language, Nicaragua, Miskitu, children*

# 1. Kakabila

- 1.1. Kakabila is a small village of about 680 inhabitants and eighty houses,<sup>2</sup> situated in the Pearl Lagoon basin on Nicaragua's remote Caribbean coastline, also known as the Mosquito Coast. This coastline is populated mainly by monolingual Miskitu-speakers north of the Pearl Lagoon basin and monolingual speakers of Miskito Coast Creole English, or Creole as it is usually called, to the south. The Pearl Lagoon basin itself is thus a frontier area between an extensive Miskitu diaspora stretching away northwards into Honduras and a largely Creole zone of influence with a centre of gravity southwards in the city of Bluefields. There are twelve villages in the Pearl Lagoon basin, or Cuenca as it is locally known. Three, including Kakabila, are inhabited mainly by Miskitu-Creole bilinguals; two by Creole monolinguals with a substantial minority of Miskitu-Creole bilinguals; and seven, including most of the politically and economically important, by Creole monolinguals. In all these villages, as is the case along most of the coast, Spanish is hardly ever spoken.<sup>3</sup> Surrounded by the lagoon, swamp, and dense secondary rainforest, Kakabila is, to all intents and purposes, an island. No roads go there and the only form of transport available to most villagers wishing to visit other communities is the dory, a dugout canoe with sheet sail. Isolated from other villages by the facts of geography and, unusually, completely fluent in both Miskitu and Creole, villagers tend to identify themselves first and foremost as Kakabila people, rather than Miskitus or Creoles. It is the village, rather than 'ethnic' affiliation, which constitutes the basis of identity.
- 1.2. The village economy is organised around a number of activities, the most important of which are rotational slash-and-burn subsistence farming, turtling, fishing and catching shrimp. Villagers obtain cash principally by selling fish and shrimp to the plants and fish boats at, or near, the town of Pearl Lagoon seven miles away across the water. Lagoon, as Pearl Lagoon town is locally known, has a sizable population of approximately 3,000 principally monolingual Creole-speakers, some rather wealthy by local standards, and a sizable number of public amenities, both commercial and otherwise. These include commercial stores, wholesalers, a secondary school, a lumber business, a commercial supplier of gasoline, *hospedajes* (pensions), *ranches* (dancehalls), four churches, a police station, a Ministry of Education office, the district mayor's office and a baseball stadium.<sup>4</sup> Kakabila people therefore regard it as being both '*up-to-date*' and '*advanced*'. Lagoon also mediates between the Cuenca and the wider world insofar as freight boats and commercial *pangas* (small motorised passenger boats) from the regional capital of Bluefields, twenty-five miles to the south, itself home to the region's largest and most influential Creole-speaking population, almost always stop and usually terminate there. Traffic going on northwards to the smaller Cuenca communities, like Kakabila, generally relies on sail power.
- 1.3. People born and raised in Kakabila are fluent in both Miskitu and Creole English, though they regard these two languages in quite different terms (see Jamieson 1999, 2003). Kakabila people know that Miskitu is a language of poor and

isolated farmers and fishermen, and they are well aware that the wealth and cosmopolitanism of Bluefields and Lagoon is in part indexed by the use of English, an idiom which in spite of obvious differences is also spoken by even wealthier and more influential people who come to the region from out (the United States and Europe). When in Bluefields therefore, many Kakabila people are wary of using Miskitu. They know many Creoles refer to it pejoratively as a 'dialect' or 'parrot language', and so use Creole instead, hoping to pass themselves off in the anonymous city as Creoles. Kakabila people identify English with being *up-to-date* (modern), and consequently they value their knowledge of it. So, when in the late 1980s they were faced with the choice of whether to have their school implement the English-Spanish or Miskitu-Spanish bilingual education programme, they unanimously asked for the English programme.

- 1.4. On the other hand, the Miskitu language is an important diacritic of Kakabila's identity. Indeed, up until seventeen or so years ago, it was the only language spoken amongst villagers. Consequently, most regard it as their 'mother tongue' (*wan yapti bila*). Villagers had all spoken more or less fluent Creole previously, enclaved as their speech community is by Creole-speaking monolinguals, but they used it only with visitors and those who married into the village. Nowadays it is quite evident that they use both idioms equally frequently.
- 1.5. Kakabila people take pride in an Anglo-Miskitu bilingualism which they feel is uniquely theirs.<sup>5</sup> This bilingualism distinguishes them from both the up-the-coast Indians who speak only Miskitu and the Cuenca Creoles and Garifunas who speak only English. It is also, villagers say, indicative of their intelligence. Kakabila people are clever because they can speak Creole and Miskitu; Creoles cannot speak Miskitu, some villagers say, because their heads are 'too tough' (*ai lal uba karna*). Up-the-coast Miskitus (referred to as 'Indians') cannot speak Creole because they are too 'wild' (wail), living as they do (according to Kakabila and other Cuenca people), in a dangerously charged world of sorcery (*obeah*) and poison (*puisin*). Kakabila people also say that their knowledge of Miskitu enables them to 'defend' (*defend munaia*) themselves against these supposedly secretive up-the-coast Indians, while at the same time providing them with a group cryptolect with which to exclude the more familiar Creoles and Garifunas.

## 2. The Cuenca's history

- 2.1. The Mosquito Coast was not, until recent decades, an area where the Spanish language had been much heard. Neither the Spanish nor their Mestizo descendants ever successfully settled the area, and for most of its history the region remained well beyond effective colonial and, later, Nicaraguan state control.<sup>6</sup> It has, however, been an area of significant anglophone influence for at least three and a half centuries. At least as far back as the mid-1600s, English-speaking buccaneers and smugglers hid from the Spanish in the the region's mazy waterways, stopping to trade with the local Indians and take on supplies. These visitors established particularly friendly relations with the Indians near The

Cape (Cape Gracias a Dios ) and Sandy Bay, employing them as guides, mercenaries and provisioners, and some established settlements along the coast in order to trade with them. The Shoremen, as they came to be known, established in time a substantial market for sarsaparilla, tortoiseshell, cacao, silver and slaves, much of it procured by their Indian allies in raids on other Indians and the Spanish in the interior. In return the trading Indians received guns, iron tools, prestige titles, cloth, rum and other manufactured goods, brought to the coast by Anglo-Jamaican smugglers. Some of the Indians, wishing to take fuller advantage of this trade, even built villages close to those of the Shoremen, thereby establishing a pattern where Indians and English-speakers came to be neighbours.<sup>7</sup> By the beginning of the eighteenth century many of these trading Indians were habitually speaking a pidgin English with both Shoremen and traders (Holm 1978: 334-333), and while the lexicon of their own language, already known as Mosquito or Mosquito (Miskitu), had become greatly modified through the extensive borrowing of English nouns.<sup>8</sup>

2.2. At some point in the middle of the eighteenth century, English-speaking Shoremen established a village at Pearl Lagoon, which became known as English Bank, later Pearl Lagoon town. Miskitu-speakers, coming south from Sandy Bay, founded a number of settlements close by around the same time.<sup>9</sup> This district had hitherto been populated by Kukra Indians, but the well-armed Miskitu newcomers, began to capture and enslave them, selling these unfortunates to the Shoremen at English Bank and the traders from Jamaica who visited them (Roberts 1965: 116-118).

2.3. Following the Anglo-Spanish Convention of 1786, the Shoremen of the region were, for the most part, left the Mosquito Coast, many settling in Belize. Some at Bluefields and English Bank, however, chose to remain, swearing loyalty to a distant Spanish Crown, and these two English-speaking communities continued to prosper (Gordon 1998: 33-40).<sup>10</sup> By the early nineteenth century English Bank, far from effective Spanish colonial control, was a de facto self-governing polity, and it became a desirable place of settlement for English-speaking 'Creoles, Mulattoes, and Samboes from Jamaica, San Andres and the Corn Islands' (Roberts 1965: 108-110), many of whom took Indian wives. The Miskitu had distanced themselves from the 'wild' Indians of the interior. Many were dressing 'true English gentleman fashion' (Roberts 1965: 134), and they fully regarded the English as classificatory brothers-in-law, a courtesy reciprocated by English-speakers from the Caymans, the Bay Islands and Belize who to this day refer to the Miskitu by their own word for brother-in-law, '*Waika*' (Jamieson 1998). Orlando Roberts (1965: 109-110), a trader who visited the coast regularly between 1816 and 1822 and knew the region well, reported that marriages between English-speaking traders and Miskitu women constituted an important means by which captains secured trading privileges in particular villages, a practice which goes on, more or less respectably, between Creole freight boat captains and Miskitu women to this day.<sup>11</sup>

2.4. From the 1860s until the 1950s, a number of North American companies worked in the region extracting rubber, mahogany, pine and minerals (Helms 1971: 27-35; Noveck 1988). These companies valorised the use of English and they brought to the region large numbers of Jamaicans, Black Caribs and Creoles from Honduras, and United States Blacks, most already English-speakers, to work as contract labourers alongside the indigenous Miskitus and Creoles (Gordon 1998: 66-67).<sup>12</sup> A number of these came to the Pearl Lagoon basin, establishing small villages, and before long Creole English-speakers began to outnumber Miskitu-speakers in this particular district. In some of the Cuenca villages Creole also began to displace Miskitu. By the time of my first fieldwork in Kakabila in the early 1990s, the inhabitants of three formerly Miskitu-speaking villages, Haulover, Tasbapauni and Set Net Point, were speaking little Miskitu and many were identifying themselves as Creoles.<sup>13</sup> Kakabila, however, like Raitipura and Awas close by, remains conservatively Miskitu-speaking, though, as I have already noted, in these villages too Creole is widely used (Jamieson 1999).<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Social reproduction in Kakabila

3.1. Kakabila is essentially a kin-ordered society, the processes of social reproduction in the village being conducted principally through a set of institutions and practices which I gloss here as 'brideservice' coupled with 'uxorilocal postnuptial residence'. Consanguineally-related women live in clusters of houses that are grouped together conceptually and often geographically, to which men, ideally from outside the village, exogamously attach themselves as husbands and affines. Although kinship (*taya* or family) is always reckoned cognatically in principle, a marked tendency towards matrilocality effectively reproduces a distinctly matrilineal, even matrilineal, emphasis or 'cumulative matrilineality' (cf. Barnes 1962). The clusters themselves, in their physical instantiations, are effectively the consequences of particular histories of matrilocality, and their adult female members tend to imagine themselves to a greater or lesser degree, according to context, as members of sisterhoods. This notion is well captured in the commonly heard story of the founding of the village. According to most versions, two men, Cristobal Vega and Sylvester Joseph, established Kakabila. Joseph married one of Vega's five (or six) daughters, and the other daughters married 'outside men' who came to settle the village. Today's villagers, the oldest being the grandchildren of this set of sisters, are their descendants. Genealogically-focused questions during my first fieldwork of 1992-1993 revealed that older people consider each of the present-day cluster groups in the village to be, more or less, descended from one of these five or six sisters.<sup>15</sup>

3.2. Children (*tuktan*) in Kakabila are more or less socially invisible. Adults (*upla almukor* old people) never converse with them or ask them for their opinions, relating them rather through orders. Debarred from village-wide distributions, and shooed away (run) from serious discussions, they are, effectively non-persons. This, I have argued elsewhere (Jamieson 2001) is not simply a question of adults

believing that children should be seen and not heard, but an aspect of the concern, reproduced schismogenically (cf. Bateson 1980) by adults, that they themselves be taken for children. Adults, in other words, put as much social distance between themselves and those they regard as children as they can, marking the perceived distinctions both ritually and pragmatically. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to learn that children, especially boys, attempt the transition to adulthood as soon as they can.<sup>16</sup>

3.3. Kakabila children grow up in a habitus where men and women are evaluated in quite different terms. The successful adult woman (*mairin almuk*), they see, enjoys the support of her mothers and sisters, while at the same time providing support for her children and adult daughters.<sup>17</sup> Her worth is thus assessed in terms of relations with consanguineal kin (*tayaor* family). The successful adult man (*waitna almuk*), however, is usually much more concerned with soliciting the support of his affines; especially his wife (*maia*), mother-in-law (*mula yapti*), father-in-law (*dapna*) and wife's brothers (*waikat*). His status as an adult man crucially depends on his being able to demonstrate to other villagers that he has a wife and children, and he therefore needs affinal recognition and support.<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, he approaches the route to adulthood both by courting (*kut takaia*) and by insinuating himself, through performance of respect or *rispik* and small acts of brideservice, into adult-like relations of affinity.<sup>19</sup>

3.4. Theoretically, Kakabila parents have the right to grant or deny sexual access to their daughters. In practice though, daughters often choose their husbands themselves. By presenting them with *fait accomplis* in the form of pregnancies, they circumvent the vetoes imposed upon them by their parents and get to select husbands of their own choosing, though often at the cost of a ritual beating. This unexpected pregnancy is usually followed by negotiations between the girl's parents and the father of the child, resulting in his moving into their house some time after the baby's birth. Having angered his would-be wife's parents by making their daughter pregnant, he now has to mollify them through performances of both brideservice and respect.. If he succeeds in getting them to accept him, other villagers will regard him as an adult (*upla almuk*). By building a house, planting cassava, and helping and respecting his affines, he shows that he is serious; that he is a *waitna almuk* (adult man) with man's brains. If things go wrong and he loses their acceptance and support, he forfeits his adult status and becomes a boy (or *wahma*) once more; as one old man put it, 'a secondhand *wahma*'.

## 4. Respect, bad joke and shame

4.1. Collier and Rosaldo (1981) have observed that brideservice has a marked tendency to reproduce gender- and age-based asymmetries. They also note that these asymmetries are best handled through ritualised, rather public, forms of accommodation and avoidance.<sup>20</sup> In Kakabila, the performance styles through

which accommodation and avoidance are typically enacted, are classified and known as respect or *rispik*, *bad joke* or *joke saura*, and *shame* or *swira*.<sup>21</sup>

4.2. Respect and *bad joke*, both of which centre on relations of affinity, are highly conventionalised. Unlike consanguineal relations which in Kakabila develop organically in the context of child-raising and siblinghood within the cluster group, affinal relationships are for Kakabila people essentially artifacts, as Lévi-Strauss (1969) would have it, objects of culture. The most significant affinal relationships, because they are in some sense artifacts, are, therefore, necessarily organised around a performance style, respect, which is highly formulaic. Likewise, relationships which need to deny or de-emphasise affinity, most notoriously the fractious sister-in-law/sister-in-law or *lamlat* relation, are handled by another equally formulaic register, *bad joke*, a performance style considered diametrically opposite to respect.

4.3. In this article I am concerned specifically with the linguistic manifestations of these styles.<sup>22</sup> The respect register employs a rather high and squeaky pitch, and certain words, forms of address, and topics, especially those related to sex, are avoided. These characteristics, as well as others, therefore make it comparable with the 'mother-in-law', 'brother-in-law' and 'daughter-in-law' languages, reported by Dixon (1990), Haviland (1979) and Humphrey (1993) for the Dyirbal, Guugu Yimidhirr and Mongols respectively. *Bad Joke*, on the other hand, implies disregard and the wilful flouting of the constraints placed upon language by the respect register. Characterised by forms of language such as sexually explicit banter, loud speech and the use of nicknames generally deemed disrespectful, it is presented by villagers as the conceptual opposite of the respect register, indexing, as I have already claimed, a ritual denial or de-stressing of affinity.

4.4. Unlike respect and *bad joke* which are, according to villagers, presentational styles, *shame* is a bodily state (see also Jamieson 2000a). As one woman explained it to me, it is like 'a worm crying in your belly'. Respect and *bad joke* are both, in the final analysis, formulaic performance styles and attitudes. *Shame*, however, is something which takes hold of you in a very physical sense. I will now briefly outline three *shame*-inducing situations in ideal-typical terms. Firstly, an adolescent girl (tiara) is said to be 'ashamed to eat' or 'hold the plate'(of food) in front of a boy to whom she is attracted. This state of *shame* makes greater sense when one realises that eating is a metaphor for sexual intercourse. Secondly, a young man, made conscious of a perceived neglect of his affines, experiences *shame* in front of his mother-in-law, and consequently faces the other way in their presence, addressing her, if at all, indirectly through his wife. Finally, a woman who has recently given birth, especially if she is young and the baby is her first, is ashamed to be seen and so remains inside the house, with her babies, for nine days.



4.5. These three situations, as well as others I might have adumbrated, have quite a lot in common. In each case the ashamed individual is forced to confront his or her situational subordination. So, in the first example, the adolescent girl (*tiara*), subordinate to her parents and others present who might be responsible for the containment of her sexuality, finds herself expressing, by the act of eating publicly with a suitor, an act of independence from them. In the second, the son-in-law (*dapna*), confronted by a dissatisfied mother-in-law (*mula yapti*) who demands more support for both herself and her daughter, finds that his attempts to distance himself from his affinal obligations are unappreciated. Finally in the third case, the birth of a baby, in strengthening the conjugal union of husband and wife, offers the baby's father a further degree of independence from his wife's kin. The young mother of the new born baby consequently confronts both public knowledge of her mother's loss of influence over her, and, if she is young enough, public awareness of her sexual independence. In this way, *shame* indexes discomfort with changes to one's position as a sexual or affinal being. It works, therefore, more or less effectively within the 'politics of intimacy' (in other words those of age, sex and gender) as a 'weapon of the weak' (cf. Scott 1985).

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## 5. Prinkel-In-De-Sasa

5.1. Kakabila children grow up very much aware that adults and near adults (*tiara and wahma*), use the respect, *bad joke* and *shame* registers to stake out claims and counter-claims within the spaces where the 'politics of intimacy' are contested. They also know exactly how the linguistic elements of these registers work, and they lampoon them in a game called Prinkel-In-De-Sasa ('sprinkle in the saucer').

5.2. Prinkel-In-De-Sasa is occasionally played in the late dry season afternoons shortly before sunset. Boys and girls between seven and eleven are the usual participants. The game requires at least ten or twelve participants, about an equal number of each sex, and it consists of two parts. To begin, the players join hands and form a ring facing inwards, and one child stands inside the ring. During the first part of the game the others sing a song, made comic by the ridiculously acrolectal Creole lyrics, in which they ask the child who he or she intends to marry, addressing him or her with the respect terms used in other contexts exclusively for adults, 'Mister' or 'Miss'. When the singing stops, the player inside the ring, perhaps 'Mister William' or 'Miss Ingi', has to approach one of the other players of his or her own choosing and give him or her a kiss. Laughter, embarrassment and teasing follow, especially if a particularly young child, too young to understand the game's nuances, chooses a sibling or a child of the same sex. Then comes the second part, as the two children stand together inside the ring holding hands in the supposed manner of a courting couple. The other participants then sing a different verse to the same tune with equally comic acrolectal lyrics, informing the 'couple', addressed as 'Mister William' and 'Miss Ingi' or whoever, that they hear they are to marry. More laughter, embarrassment

and teasing follow, after which time the game is over. It is then played again, with another child having to take his or her turn, perhaps reluctantly, inside the ring.

5.3. Prinkel-In-De-Sasa is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, through their use of highly acrolectal forms of Creole English ('I hear you are to marry') and the honorifics 'Mister' and 'Miss', the children lampoon the respect register characteristic of proper affinal relations.<sup>24</sup> Kissing (*kia walaia*) amongst courting couples in Kakabila discourses, like eating together, is virtually equated with sex, and sexual teasing is characteristic of *bad joke*, a register that the participating children will have heard but will rarely, as non-sexual beings and non-adults, have used. So, in getting the two children in the ring to kiss, the other children demonstrate their understanding of *bad joke*. Finally, because the child in the ring is typically very embarrassed about having to make a public choice of 'spouse' and then kiss him or her, the game also foregrounds *shame*. This embarrassment is all the funnier because the children dress up their *bad joke* in the attire of respect language. In this way, children playing Prinkel-In-De-Sasa demonstrate their awareness of the role of linguistic performances and their relation to the gender-focused political processes which organise the transition from childhood to adulthood.

## 6. Miskitu-Creole diglossia

6.1. Kakabila adults regard public recognition of their belonging to the village, and the entitlements that this gives them, as being extremely important. Foreigners, those born and raised elsewhere, are rarely recognised as true villagers, and only enjoy the privileges bestowed by birth on true villagers, including the rights to plant, fish, hunt and extract resources from lands understood to belong to Kakabila, by virtue of their acceptance by the latter as affines. Marrying a village woman<sup>25</sup> or living in the village peaceably for some years may mean that true villagers tacitly allow the foreigner to build a house in the village or make a cassava plantation on village lands, but it is always understood that these privileges are, in the last instance, conditional.<sup>26</sup>

6.2. True villagers, and to a degree foreigners with the proper linguistic competence, emphasise their close relationship to the village and the rights that this entails, by using their bilingualism contextually to exclude others. In a few contexts, those where Miskitus from up the coast are salient Others, this means speaking Creole English (or a very Creole-inflected Miskitu). Much more often, though, it means contrasting oneself with the Creole-speakers from elsewhere in the Cuenca villages, and this means speaking Miskitu. In these contexts, Creole indexes foreignness and affinity, while Miskitu is represented as the village 'mother tongue' (*wan yapti bila*). And the Miskitu language in Kakabila really is a 'mother tongue'; not because its presence in Kakabila pre-dates Creole (although it does), but rather because matrilocality and village exogamy generally mean that it is transmitted, along with true village membership, from mother to child.<sup>27</sup> The Miskitu language in Kakabila, by no means an emblem of ethnic identity in that it

is spoken by Others sometimes disparagingly termed Indian, is thus a key signifier of consanguinity within the village and, therefore, true membership.<sup>28</sup>

6.3. Seventeen years ago events took place which caused the villagers to rethink their relationship with the Creole and Miskitu languages. In 1984, during the worst of the Contra War as it was fought in the region, Kakabila was the site of a fierce battle between Miskitu and Creole 'bushmen' (guerrillas) and the Sandinista army. The army won and the villagers were taken, as refugees and suspect Contra sympathisers, to Pearl Lagoon where they remained as evacuees for some two and a half years. Up to this point Kakabila people, both adults and children, had used Miskitu with one another almost exclusively, reserving their fluency or near-fluency in Creole English for interactions with Creoles and Caribs, including those who had married into the village. During the period of evacuation in Pearl Lagoon town, the younger Kakabila children began to 'lose the habit' of speaking Miskitu and, following the linguistic practice of their hosts (the people of Lagoon) began to speak Creole more or less exclusively. In 1986 and 1987 the region gradually returned to peace and the people of Kakabila began to return home. By this time most of the younger children, although passively competent in Miskitu, spoke only Creole with one another. In addition, they also used more or less exclusively Creole with their parents and other adults.<sup>29</sup> The adults for their part continued to speak Miskitu amongst themselves but, whereas previously they had spoken only Miskitu with their children, they now tended to use Creole with them, and they still speak Creole to the village children to this day, even to those born since the evacuation.<sup>30</sup>

6.4. In the meantime, the Miskitu spoken by these children has become heavily inflected with Creole borrowings, assuming the character of a 'mixed language' with 'standard' Miskitu morphosyntax and an extraordinarily high percentage of Creole contentives (or words with substantive content) (Jamieson 1998, 1999).<sup>31</sup> Consequently, according to adults, children make 'mistakes' when they speak Miskitu, using Creole borrowings instead of the 'real' Miskitu words.<sup>32</sup> Although adults often try to correct the 'bad' Miskitu spoken by village children, most acknowledge this to be a vain enterprise.<sup>33</sup> Some say, 'Well, it's our fault, really. We speak Creole to them,' but most blame the children themselves. As Jacinto said to his wife's sister's son Jimmy on another, similar occasion, 'Where did you steal that language from?'. The marginalisation of children, already rather pronounced (Jamieson 2001), is thus further compounded by the politics of diglossia.

6.5. Interestingly, the first generation of children who began to speak English in Pearl Lagoon town during the evacuation of the village, are now adolescents (*wahmaand tiara*). Many are negotiating their approach to adulthood, and in doing so they are beginning to shift to speaking Miskitu.<sup>34</sup> Kakabila is not, it seems, a village in which wholesale language shift from Miskitu to Creole is taking place, as some Nicaraguan educationalists and linguists believe, but rather a speech community in which one particular language, Creole, ironically

the prestige language in regional terms, has become in village terms a children's language. Miskitu, it seems, has become for villagers the language of adulthood.

## 7. Secret languages

7.1. Kakabila children, marginalised by adults in any number of ways,<sup>35</sup> find themselves further excluded from the world of 'old people' by their linguistic practices, namely their propensities to speak 'bad' Miskitu and especially Creole. On the other hand native speaker competence in Creole, originally acquired by the refugee children, offers them a resource with which they have developed linguistic forms of their own. The most spectacular of these are their secret languages, known in Kakabila to adults and children alike as Gibberish. Most forms of Gibberish are essentially Creole-based 'backslangs'. These are used a great deal in day-to-day conversations, and I have discovered as many as five different types, an extraordinary number for such a small village. I will briefly discuss three of these, which I have called G1, G2, and G3.<sup>36</sup>

7.2. G1 and G2, by far the most common forms of Gibberish heard in Kakabila, are formed by the insertion of, respectively, one and two syllables into every syllable of ordinary language words. G1 involves the insertion after the onset and before the rhyme of every syllable /'p/. The familiar Creole greeting and response, 'How?' 'Right here!', therefore goes as follows:

h'pAu ("hapow")

r'pAit h'pi' ("rapight hapere")

G2 involves the insertion of the bisyllabic /Ug'r/. The same exchange goes as follows:

hUg'rAu ("hugurow")

rUg'rAit hUg'ri' (ruguright hugerere")

7.3. G3 is more complex. Unusually for Gibberish, it is based on Miskitu and involves the more or less random deletion of one or two of the initial syllables (words thus modified are emboldened in figure one). G3 is consequently difficult to process, even for its three speakers who know how it is supposed to work. Of the three boys who spoke it among themselves, two were growing up in a linguistically conservative household where the adults, unusually for Kakabila, spoke only Miskitu to them, while the third, a cousin, was slightly older and, unlike many younger children, would have vividly remembered the pre-refugee, predominantly Miskitu linguistic environment of the village. My impression is that while G1, G2 and the other secret languages used by Kakabila children, are morpho-phonologically rule-governed, G3 speakers invent the 'rules' as they go along.<sup>37</sup> Thus, while G1 and G2, based on Creole, demonstrate the linguistic virtuosity of the speaker, G3, based on Miskitu, challenges the hearer to retrieve the correct

meaning. As such, it seems to set the hearer puzzles which in some sense are analogous to the dilemmas faced by adolescents confronting adulthood who wish to speak a more 'correct', less 'mixed' (and therefore child-like), Miskitu.

7.4. The rule-governed varieties of Gibberish found in Kakabila such as G1 and G2, are similar to the cryptolects (also based on syllable insertion) known as Gypsy, were discovered by Michael Aceto (1995) on the mainly Creole English-speaking island of Bastimentos in the Bocas del Toro area on Panamá's Caribbean coast. Gypsy, used by both children and adults, is used mainly as a language of exclusion.<sup>38</sup> Kakabila Gibberish, however, emphasises inclusion as much as exclusion, and it is used only by children. Thus shared knowledge of a particular Gibberish form confers on the child temporary membership in one of the informal play packs which for Kakabila children constitute an important aspect of social life. However, Gibberish also does work as a language of exclusion. Little children, those between two and six known as pickniny, are excluded, since they rarely have the sense (*sins*) to understand it, let alone speak it. So too are older children sometimes excluded, particularly those mystified by the more esoteric forms of Gibberish, such as G3. Finally, adults, who invariably claim not to be able to understand or speak Gibberish, are also excluded, a point certainly not lost on the naughtiest children.

7.5. Personally, I find the claim by adults, that they cannot understand Gibberish, suspect, since even I, a non-native speaker of Creole, understand quite a lot of G1, by far the most common of its forms, and a little of G2. I strongly suspect that younger adults, and social adolescents (*tiraand wahma*) in particular, actually understand most of what is said in the easier Gibberish styles, but have a vested interest in claiming that they do not, since by making this claim, they further distance themselves from the younger children who actually use them.

## 8. Conclusion

8.1. Europeans and North Americans tend to see language in the first instance as a 'code' through which thoughts are translated and communicated (Sperber and Wilson 1981: 1-15). In Kakabila, however, people are very much more aware, in a day-to-day sense, of the performative aspects of language (cf. Austin 1962), and children grow up with an extraordinary awareness of the role of pragmatics in everyday speech. Furthermore, they are well aware of the relation between the various linguistic performance styles and the differences between themselves (as children) and adult Others. This metalinguistic awareness finds its way into a number of their games and rituals. So, for example, *Prinkel-In-De-Sasa* provides Kakabila children with artificial contexts in which to learn at first hand how respect, *bad joke* and *shame* are implicated within a politics of intimacy which distinguishes men from women and, more importantly, children from adults. It therefore rehearses the pragmatic and poetic sensibilities which children employ later on in their lives during courtship and marriage. Speaking Gibberish, on the other hand, allows children to explore the relation between language, secrecy and community. As I have already noted, competence in Miskitu, usually rather

passive during childhood, is activated during early adulthood in part to secure one's attachment to the village. Cryptolects like G1 and G2 do the same, allowing children who speak and understand these secret languages to form associations, albeit short-lived ones, with others. And, just as adults speak Miskitu in order to marginalise children and foreigners (including affines), children speak Gibberish to exclude both other children and, because they claim not to understand it, their parents. G1, G2, G3 and the other forms of Gibberish thus work to rehearse children's comprehension of the relationships which hold between language and the politics of inclusion and exclusion, an understanding which as Miskitu-speakers in a predominantly Creole-speaking world they will find invaluable.

8.2. Anthropologists and linguists have given little attention to children's expressions of pragmatic knowledge of language, possibly because it has been assumed that within any given speech community children and adults, however these two categories of person are differentiated, share a similar knowledge of culturally appropriate performance styles. This assumption fails to take account of the fact that the emphases placed on various aspects of performance by adults and children are likely to differ considerably. These differences, I have argued here, can be investigated empirically and made intelligible in terms of a sociology of the processes of social reproduction coupled with analysis of the linguistic and metalinguistic forms by which children express their relation to those processes.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The work of linguistic anthropologists concerned with studies of socialization (e.g. Ochs 1988 and Schieffelin 1990) constitutes an important exception. See Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) and Ochs (2001) for, respectively, lengthy and brief discussions of this approach, and further references to other treatments of this topic.

<sup>2</sup>This was the approximate size of the village during my last period of fieldwork there in 2005-2006.

<sup>3</sup>Many people in these areas speak Spanish as a 'second language'. In this article I use the terms 'monolingual' and 'bilingual' to refer to individuals with strictly native-speaker competence in one or two languages respectively. Spanish is heard more in the western districts of the Caribbean coast departments where it is the majority language (Hale and Gordon 1987 24-27), as well as the larger towns of Bluefields and Puerto Cabezas.

<sup>4</sup>Lagoon is also the only Cuenca 'community' with regular and reliable electricity. In Kakabila at present a few individuals own small generators.

<sup>5</sup>Miskitu is also universally spoken in the Cuenca villages of Raitipura and Awas. Kakabila regard the variety of the language spoken in these villages as quite different and inferior to their own.

<sup>6</sup>Both were put off by the region's poor soils, relentless rainfall, lack of deepwater ports and hostile Indians (Floyd 1967, Dozier 1985, Naylor 1989).

<sup>7</sup>See Floyd (1967: 55-69), Dozier (1985: 6-29), Helms (1983) and Naylor (1989: 27-53) for accounts of this process. Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that prior to the arrival of European traders, the local Indians visited the shore itself only seasonally. The establishment of permanent coastal Indian villages depended on the trade in goods and services brought to the region by these visitors (Magnus 1978, Helms 1978).

<sup>8</sup>Miskitu or Miskito are the preferred modern spellings.

<sup>9</sup>The first account of these Miskitu villages was written by Spanish engineer Porta Costas (1990), based on a visit to the region in 1790.

<sup>10</sup>Porta Costas, visiting the region in 1790, reports small numbers of Englishmen also living at Bragmans Bluff, Sandy Bay and Walpasiksa, as well as on the Río Grande (see Gordon 1998: 35).

<sup>11</sup>One Kakabila woman was, during my periods of fieldwork, one of six wives 'belonging' to one such captain.

<sup>12</sup>See Davidson (1980) for an account of Black Carib immigration to Pearl Lagoon from Honduras at the end of the nineteenth century.

<sup>13</sup>Though surprisingly many continued to identify as Miskitu. See Jamieson (2003) for reasons why this might have been the case.

<sup>14</sup>See also Gordon (1998: 66, 272 note 29).

<sup>15</sup>Today's cluster groups, therefore, might be said to represent a history of segmentary fission of the Vega cluster group. Published evidence indicates that village is, in fact, much older than the story give above suggests. Roberts' (1965: 108) account of the coast, published in 1827, gives us the earliest mention I have found of Kakabila (spelled as Kirkaville).

<sup>16</sup>See a much fuller discussion of this issue in Jamieson (2001).

<sup>17</sup>Males or females who fail in these respects remain in some sense children (*tuktan*). One woman, Loina, in her early sixties had never had children and was assumed to be infertile (*biarapara*). She was usually referred to as Tita Lo, *tita* (sister) usually being used as a diminutive term of address for little girls.

<sup>18</sup>See Seymour-Smith (1991) for a similar analysis of the relation between gender and kinship/affinity among one Jivaro group.

<sup>19</sup>E.B. Tylor (1937[1881]: 132) notes "among the wild-hunting tribes of Nicaragua, the lad who wishes a girl for a wife kills a deer and lays it with a heap of firewood at the door of her parents' hut, which symbolical act is his offer to hunt and do men's work'. Nowadays, the suitor is likelier to bring fish than deer meat.

<sup>20</sup>The 'don't fool with me' stance, for example (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 298).

<sup>21</sup>For greater readability I will use the Creole English terms (*respect*, *bad jokea* and *shame*) rather than the equivalent Miskitu terms.

22 They are also indexed by bodily posture, presence or absence of eye contact (*pretty eye*), and other aspects of behaviour.

23 Furthermore, because it is presented as an involuntary bodily state, it is made acceptable to the 'strong'. As such *shame* in Kakabila, I suggest, bears theoretical comparison with possession in North Africa (e.g. Boddy 1995). See also Jamieson (2001) on *grisi siknis* and spirit molestation of Miskitu adolescent girls (*tiara*).

24 Even inclusion of the word 'sasa' (in standard English orthography 'saucer') suggests this, providing, as Austin (1962) would have it, a 'perlocutionary effect'. Very few families in Kakabila can either afford or indeed make use of saucers

25 Women who marry into Kakabila are classificatory sisters-in-law (*lamlat*) or daughters-in-law (*mula yapti*) to village women. As such they are often regarded with ambivalence.

26 Though in fact they are never expelled from the village, no matter how unpopular they may have become. *Foreigners* are rarely allowed to hold office and they are, by and large, discouraged from participating in public affairs. When quantities are insufficient, they are also usually the first to be excluded from shares in donations to the village from NGOs and government bodies.

27 See also Helms (1968, 1971: 24) and Jamieson (1998).

28 This last point was brought home to me during a regional inter-municipality baseball tournament in 1993, when many of the Kakabila women, though not significantly the men, announced that they would not be cheering for the local Pearl Lagoon team, because it was mainly supported by, and composed entirely of, Creoles. They would, they said, be supporting the *up-the-coast Indian* teams from Puerto Cabezas, Waspam and the Río Grande. In saying this, the Kakabila women were less concerned with identifying themselves with the up-the-coast people, than in distancing themselves from their Creole neighbours.

29 Having lived in Pearl Lagoon, or having visited it, Kakabila children also know that Miskitu is a 'poor man language'. They realise that Creole is the language of the more influential Cuenca and Bluefields communities and they are now confident and fully competent enough to use it. Some of the more boisterous ones even say disparagingly, in common with Creoles from elsewhere, that Miskitu is 'parrot language', and they refuse to speak it at all even when adults ask them to do so. Bonner (2001) reports a similar situation in Belize where Garifuna children in the speech community in which she worked in Dangriga are ashamed to speak the Garifuna language and prefer to speak the more prestigious Belizean Creole English.

30 Some conservative villagers resisted this trend and continue to speak to children in Miskitu.

31 In rather crude terms, 'mixed languages' are characterised by the morphosyntax of one language and the vocabulary of another. They differ from pidgins and creoles in that these languages have very different syntaxes to their lexifier languages. Media Lengua, a variety of Quechua with a 90% Spanish lexicon, is perhaps the best studied 'mixed language' (Muysken 1981). The Pearl Lagoon basin variety of Miskitu (PLM) has always featured more borrowings from English and Creole than other varieties of Miskitu, but since the evacuation years these have become, amongst children, significantly greater in number (Jamieson 1999). One old man in Kakabila once told me that the village had no proper language. The inhabitants, he said, spoke neither proper Miskitu (because they 'mix' in too much English) nor correct Creole (compared to the prestige varieties spoken by Creoles in Lagoon and Bluefields).

32 One example, which illustrates both this and a typical adult reaction will, I hope, suffice, Marlyn's youngest child of eight or nine, Peelie, asked me, '*You could reach this?*'. Beulah snapped at him in mock anger: '*Miskitu aisas!*' ('Speak Miskitu!'). He then said, '*Reach munma?*', using the the inflected Miskitu auxiliary *munaia* with a Creole borrowing *reach*, instead of a 'proper' unmixed Miskitu equivalent, for example: '*Sip alki brisma?*'). Marlyn's reaction was typical of many adults confronted by improper 'mixing' (*miks munaia*) of the two languages. 'You see!', she said in mock despair, 'He can't speak it! (*Kaikram! Sip aisras!*)'.

[33](#)I have heard adults swear that they speak only Miskitu to their offspring, only minutes later to hear them scream orders at them in Creole.

[34](#)Some villagers predicted this would be case eight years ago.

[35](#)See also Jamieson (2001).

[36](#)None of these cryptolects seem to have an individual name.

[37](#)Kenstowicz and Kisseberth (1979: 162-168) demonstrate that language games are often very interesting for phonologists seeking underlying representations of sound patterns in language. Initial investigations of G3 point up some interesting problems in standard accounts of Miskitu syntax that deserve further investigation. For example, *waisna* in the example given in this article, usually presented as 1st person future tense/modality is analysed by the speaker as 1st person present tense of *kaia* (to be) + infinitive in G3, suggesting that the person future tense/modality, as it is usually presented, is nothing more than a contraction of a periphrastic construction.

[38](#)Interestingly, this area, like Kakabila, is populated by Creole English-speakers and speakers of an Amerindian language, in this case Guaymí, though on Bastimentos the Creoles and Guaymí tend to speak Spanish with one another. Similar cryptolects also known as Gypsy are also spoken in the Puerto Limón area on Costa Rica's anglophone Caribbean coast, as well as in Jamaica where four varieties are found, including one apparently formally identical to G1. Another secret language of this kind, also known as Gibberish, is found in Guyana. See Aceto (1995: 544) for discussion of these. Sherzer (1970) contains discussion of language games among the Cuna of Panama's San Blas region, also on the Caribbean coast.

[39](#)Bastimentos has many more non-Creole-speaking visitors than Kakabila.