Gender in the Caribbean: History and Research Issues

While Caribbean Creole languages have figured rather prominently in linguistic research since the landmark Mona Conference in 1968, “gender” has generally been regarded as little more than a biological attribute roughly equivalent to the possibly extra-linguistic variable “sex of informants” that is often recorded in sociolinguistic studies. Likewise, in the more than three decades of the development of the now vibrant field of language and gender, the Caribbean region has not received substantial attention. In both cases, there are good explanations for this noticeable neglect but, as we contend, there are not very compelling reasons for it.

For much of its history, research on language and gender concentrated on groups that were largely represented as homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic class, ethnic group, and shared cultural values – in general, these were North American middle-class women. Nevertheless, linguists who established the field as a legitimate and productive site of inquiry during the second half of the twentieth century should be commended for two important accomplishments: they successfully challenged standard assumptions about how speakers use language in social situations, and they established an area of sociolinguistic research that effectively combines academic investigation and the desire for social change.

The Caribbean can probably be described as “off the map” for the majority of scholars who worked early on in this area of study. An inherently heterogeneous socio-cultural space, much of the geographical region shares historical commonalities but it differs widely across linguistic, ethnic, and racial lines, and may have seemed too complex a setting to focus on questions of gender directly. Some recent work (e.g., Escure, 2001; Migge, 2001;
Sidnell, 2005) on Creole languages has shown, however, that community-based approaches to language, gender, and gender roles can provide interesting and compelling insights about the particular without losing sight of more general, shared characteristics of the Caribbean. As this body of scholarship demonstrates, speakers and speaker identities articulate gender differentially both within and across a strikingly heterogeneous set of Caribbean speech communities and socio-historical circumstances.

A second explanation for the lack of attention to gender in linguistic studies of Caribbean Creoles concerns the question of power relations – always an implicit issue in gender studies. Due to the violence of colonization and the Atlantic Slave Trade, the power relations within the region were primarily researched in terms of hierarchies between European and African or Amerindian population groups rather than between men and women. Thus, in early sociological studies such as Patterson (1967), we find the assertion that “slavery abolished any real social distribution between males and females.” Mintz and Price (1976, pp. 76-77), on the other hand, while recognizing that “the ultimate power of the masters over the slaves – not only over their lives, but also over their sexuality and its exercise – probably conditioned every aspect of the relationships between men and women,” suggest that the codes of the masters determined the confines but not the content of the morality of slaves. However, inequality and domination have not been squarely or thoroughly addressed by specialists who investigate the socio-historical contexts in which speakers created Creoles. In their analysis of the post-Emancipation male-female labor division of African American cultural organization, Mintz and Price find “genuinely new” Caribbean elements, such as the emergence of the independent market woman and the notion that a man’s masculinity or status is not tied to his wife’s dependence or lack of it. They hold that these phenomena cannot be explained by a reversion to an African past or by the conditions of plantation work, a proposal that has been questioned by some creolists.

From the 1990s onwards, work in sociology (e.g., Senior, 1991; Ramírez et al., 2002; Lewis, 2003, Reddock, 2004), history (e.g., Shepherd, Brereton & Bailey 1995, Moitt 2001), cultural studies (e.g., Cooper 1995, Barnes 2006), literature and critical theory (e.g., Shelton 1993, Chancy 1997, Mohammed 2002) and anthropology (e.g., Safa 1995, Yelvington 1995, Freeman 2000, Kempadoo 2004) turned towards perspectives that consider the configurations and workings of sex and gender in Caribbean life. In general, these offer
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explanations of the ways in which configurations of gender are grounded in matrices of social relations and socio-cultural practices. Many approach gender as the performance of biological sex and investigate intersections between gender and other sociolinguistically relevant factors, including race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and age. Thus, their perspectives problematize the idea that gender can be accurately conceptualized as simply and/or solely marking verbal practices.

Also significant for understanding power relations, Caribbean Creoles were formed in the context of European colonialism. The recognition that science was instrumental in colonialism illuminates historical connections among beliefs about language, biological sex, and socioeconomic and racial hierarchies. At the same time, this acknowledgement allows recognition of the fuller range of mechanisms through which colonialism operates: the performance of identities, the persistence of socioeconomic hierarchies, beliefs about freedom, and the roles of discourse in establishing sustainable markets, consuming publics, labor forces, and educational institutions. The investigation of gender can challenge traditional definitions of linguistics as a science structured around empiricism and objectivity. The discussion of it as such exposes talk, ideologies, and broader symbolic systems as constitutive of truths and human experience.

While seminal work on gender and gender hierarchy was completed in the last decade of the twentieth century, it appears to be less frequently approached in linguistics than in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and literary studies. In addition, as McElhinny and Mills (2006) observe, when the number of published studies focused on gender is compared with research in other fields of linguistics it becomes clear that language and gender is substantially under-represented in sociolinguistic scholarship.

In Creole Studies, works concerned with linguistic expressions of gender, gendered verbal behavior, and women’s roles in language change (e.g. Escure 1991, 2001, Schnepel 1992, 2003, Hellinger 1998, Sidnell 1998, Migge 2001, Neumann-Holzschuh 2006) also began to emerge around the turn of the twenty-first century. However, the predominance of structural and historical concerns in creolistics means that grammatical gender remained a rather marginal issue – after all, Creole languages are generally regarded as “gender-less” regardless of whether the lexifier utilizes it (e.g., Dutch, French, Portuguese) or not (English). Therefore, structural analyses have focused only on pronominal person and anaphoric reference – and the
possible absence of gender distinction here—nominal person reference and kinship terms. An additional explanation for the rather subdued prominence of gender issues in Caribbean linguistic studies can be attributed to yet another gap in the field: the area of linguistics in which gendered linguistic behavior is most abundantly researched, pragmatics, has also been glaringly neglected in Creole language studies. Thus, with just a few exceptions (e.g. Shields, 1992; Youssef, 1993; Shields-Brodber, 1998; Sidnell, 2004; Migge, this volume) there exists a significantly small number of discourse-based analyses on language, gender and power by linguists who specialize in Creole languages.

Of ‘i(m)’ and ‘shii’: Gendered Differentiation in Caribbean Creole Structures

Another area of discussion of Caribbean Creole structures in the literature concerns the question of gender differentiation in pronominal systems (e.g., Hellinger, 1985; Escure 1991, 2001; Neumann-Holzschuh, 2006). Typically, Caribbean Creoles have only a single third person singular pronoun in the basilectal form that contrasts with the gendered patterns in their lexifiers, for instance, English ‘he/she/it’. Hellinger (1985, 1998), one of the first to explore the interpretation of basilectal ‘i(m)’ in English-lexifier Creoles, asks how the change from basilectal (gender-less) systems to more elaborated (gendered) mesolectal systems might be explained (1998, p. 89). She investigates whether the basilectal single pronoun is used and understood generically (1998, p. 90).

While grammatical gender is generally represented as absent in Caribbean Creole languages, various forms of biological gender marking have been mentioned in the literature. Neumann-Holzschuh (2006) for instance, discusses the expression of gender by suffixation, which most French Creoles have preserved more or less systematically and also productively, to mark biological gender. Thus, we may find lexicalized forms (e.g., dansèr-dansèz ‘male dancer–female dancer’, LouCr) and also newly derived forms (e.g. kòmèsèz ‘business woman,’ HaiCr) in most varieties. Compounds consisting of gender-neutral personal nouns and a gender-marked lexical item are also a possibility for marking the sex of an animate referent in some Caribbean Creoles. In cases of human reference, it is usually the feminine form that is marked, as for instance in the Antillean French Creole example profésè-
fanm ‘a woman professor’ or in Caribbean English Creole uman/lady dakta ‘a woman doctor,’ whereas the masculine form goes mostly unmarked (but: man-child/boy-child and girl-child). In reference to the sex of an animal, both masculine and feminine gender marked lexical items are used in some French Creoles, for instance, mal bourik-femèl bourik, ‘male donkey–female donkey’ (HaiCr, in Neumann-Holzschuh 2006, p. 257), whereas in English Creole expressions masculine marking seems to be dominant, e.g. in man rat, with lady rat as a merely jocular corresponding form. In her discussion of gender in Eastern Maroon Creole, Migge (2001, p. 92) cites gendered personal noun compounds formed by adding man or uman to a general noun, verb, or adjective, e.g. koloku n. ‘luck’ kolokuman-kolokuuman ‘lucky person,’ gongosa v. ‘to gossip’ gongosaman, gongosauman ‘person who likes to gossip,’ faansi adj. ‘French’ faansiman, faansiuman ‘French citizen.’

Kinship terms are usually specified for referential gender (bra ‘brother’ –sis ‘sister,’ etc.). Migge (2001, p. 95) also cites some gender-neutral kinship terms in Eastern Maroon Creole such as (avo)tototo ‘(great) grand parents’ or swagi ‘spouse’s sibling, sibling’s spouse.’ Kinship terms may be used as well as terms of address (cf. Mühleisen, 2005), as are gendered titles of respect and name (e.g. Miss Lucy, Auntie Jan). Further forms of address include gal (gyal) ‘girl’ and bway ‘boy’ which are not necessarily restricted to young addressees (cf. Escure 2001, p. 63 on Belizean Creole) and may also be used as exclamatory terms along with man – man, i hot today, ‘man, it’s hot today.’ In this discursive function, the gender reference is seen as largely bleached. Not altogether, however: while man or bway can also be used by women, a use of gal as exclamatory term, e.g. gal, i hot today, would not be uttered among men (ibid). Concerning the use of abusive terms of address in Caribbean Creoles, there is no question that socio-cultural values have led to the development of gender-specific rules for lexical items and other elements of language. As Farquharson (2005) argues in his study on homophobic dancehall lyrics in Jamaica, “it is difficult to miss the glaring gender bias” (2005, p. 105). In his list of lexical terms denoting homosexuality in Jamaican based on lexicographic sources about twenty-five terms, among them bati-bwai, botomologist, chi-chi man or mod-push, are concerned with male homosexuality, whereas only one lexical item, lezi, denotes female homosexuality. The links between sexual identity and language in Caribbean Spanish have been addressed by La Fountain-Stokes, both in terms of bilingualism/code switching, and lexicon (2006, 2007, respectively).
Variation, Change, and Language Ideology

Gender-specific language use is one area that is intrinsically tied to questions of language socialization, access to certain language domains of language usage, as well as to questions of language attitudes and language ideology. In discussions of whether women and men use different codes, an interesting early Caribbean case of an alleged clear distinction between “male speech” and “female speech” among Carib Indians is often cited (cf. Schnepel 2003, p. 217).

In studies on Caribbean Creole usage, gender-specific features are almost always linked to questions of basilectal versus mesolectal/acrolectal variation and consequent developments of language change. In many sociolinguistic studies, women are seen as the more status conscious speakers who tend to make up for their lack of social power by using low prestige forms of language less frequently than men do (cf. Trudgill, 1998). Applied to Caribbean situations, female speakers of Caribbean Creoles would consequently function as promoters of language change in the direction towards the standard/acrolectal forms. One of the problems with such a uni-directional expectation of change is, however, that the question of language prestige in Caribbean Creoles is also more complex than a simple High/Low dichotomy can capture. Language attitude studies toward English-lexicon Caribbean Creoles have shown not only that distinctions have to be made between overt and covert prestige (Rickford, 1983), but that the overt prestige itself is also subject to change (Mühleisen, 2001). In Schnepel’s (2003) account of the interplay between language attitudes and gendered language usage in the francophone Caribbean, the connection between gendered language socialization and code-choice is described as rather clear-cut. Based on a survey conducted in the early 1980s in Guadeloupe, she observes that “among young children in creolophone households, it is not uncommon to find little boys who know no French; and in francophone households, little girls who

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1 This notion was based on observation and reports by early missionaries and chroniclers in the 17th and 18th centuries. The cause of the linguistic differentiation is attributed to a Carib conquest of Arawak men and women, in which Arawak men were killed and Arawak women married Carib men. It is subject of debate, however, to what extent both linguistic groups retained their language and passed it on to their sons and daughters respectively, or whether this is merely a case of “variation due to social and economic stratification in a culture where men and women live separately with little overlap in tasks” (Schnepel 2003, p. 217).
are unfamiliar with Creole” (Schnepel 2003, p. 210). She concludes that in order “to understand this solidarity of language-and-gender, one must grasp the particular complicity which ties Creole to the sexual […]. In a general way, Creole is connoted with being “common” (vulgaire), “dirty” (malpropre), or “badly brought up” (malélive).”

Some detailed studies on the use of particular basilectal or mesolectal/acrolectal features also focus on the sex of speakers. Sidnell (1998) shows that the distribution of the gender-less third person basilectal pronoun ‘am’ and the gendered mesolectal/acrolectal forms ‘hii/shii/it’ in Guyana is not equal between male and female speakers, with men using the basilectal form more frequently than women. Rather than attributing this discrepancy simply to the often alleged tendency of female speakers to use more prestigious forms, Sidnell demonstrates that context also matters here, as Guyanese women seem to prefer mesolectal marking for feminine referents and basilectal marking for neuter/inanimate referents.

For Belizean Creole, Escure (2001) examines the choice of copular variants (basilectal de, intermediate zero and acrolectal be) and of past tense realizations (basilectal me, intermediate zero, acrolectal standard past). She comes to the conclusion that there is no clear movement toward the standard on the female speaker’s part, even though women used less basilectal features and more neutral zero markers. Rather, Escure (2001, pp. 78-79) holds that “both copular and past cases of unmarking suggest a diplomatic attempt at bridging the gap between two (or more) linguistic codes, two cultures, and two identities. […] What clearly emerges is the picture of women defining their gender roles in the community as mediators.”


Caribbean notions of “respect” and “respectability” are concepts that have raised anthropological interest for a number of decades now (cf. Wilson 1969, 1973; Abrahams & Baumann, 1971; Price & Price, 1972). Wilson’s (1969) focus on respect and masculinity versus femininity also includes some aspects of verbal strategies associated with assertions of and/or threats to one’s manhood, such as boasts of a man’s promiscuous behavior on the one hand and stylized insults focusing on a man’s wife’s infidelity on the other. Wilson (1973) argues that reputation is largely specific to men, while respectability
qualifies as particular to women and concerns only certain males at specific times in their lives. Williams (1996) provides a persuasive critique of these ideas and a more praxis-based perspective, asserting that both concepts are simultaneously relevant throughout the lives of both males and females. In another recent study, Yelvington (1996) looks at the construction of gendered roles in flirting in a Trinidad factory. Here, hierarchies of ethnicity, class, and gender play an important role in the (public) organization of flirting and the various goals that are achieved with it. The significance to gendered strategies and gendered evaluation of behavior is rather obvious in speech acts such as (ritual) insults (e.g. also Edwards 1979 on ‘tantalizing’ in Guyana, Farquharson 2005 on homophobic insults/threats in Jamaica) and heterosexual flirting (Yelvington, 1996). In Edwards (1979) a number of speech acts in Guyanese social life are described, most of which seem to be performed predominantly by men. ‘Suuring,’ for example, a type of flattering talk which is performed “to impress the female sufficiently to start up an amorous relationship, or, in some cases, to immediately gain intimate favors” (Edwards 1979, p. 84) is described to depend on the dyadic interaction between the sexes and the appreciation of a (male) audience: “a male who can suur well has a skill which is envied by his peers. Women do not usually suur” (ibid). It would be interesting to see whether any changes in this type of gendered interaction have taken place in the course of the last thirty years. But also acts of verbal performance which are not as overtly gendered, e.g. apologies or requests, would also deserve attention with regard to language and gender patterns in the Caribbean. Escure (2001, p. 54) summarizes the connection between gender and pragmatics as follows:

Since gender is solidly anchored in behavior, it seems to be best observed from a pragmatic perspective that will take into account the discourse patterns representing how men and women use language, through the medium of potentially genderized strategies used to accomplish goals (directives, mitigators, disclaimers, interruptions, repetitions, minimal responses, apologies, insults, inter alia, which project paralinguistic phenomena such as solidarity, competitiveness, emotion, hesitation, subservience, insecurity, or dominance.

As noted above, the gap in language and gender studies in the Caribbean may well be connected with the striking neglect of pragmatic and discourse-oriented research since “the study of language and gender has increasingly become the study of discourse and gender” (Bucholtz 2004, p. 43).
Discourse-based gender research in the Caribbean has so far concentrated on topics such as agency, power, and gender in Jamaican phone-in radio shows (Shields, 1992; Shields-Brodber, 1998), the use of discourse markers to indicate solidarity in medical discourse in Trinidad (Youssef, 1993), as well as on the construction of male exclusivity (or male gossip) in Guyanese rum shops (Sidnell 2004). Shields-Brodber’s (1998) analysis of female participation in phone-ins in Jamaica, for example, examines how women establish and maintain a “voice of authority” on air by trying to hold the performance floor. In Jamaican public discourse, interruptions can serve as a means to hold the floor for both men and women and are not evaluated negatively (1998, p. 197). Shields-Brodber’s study also establishes female speakers’ role as innovators in their pragmatic switches between standard Jamaican English and Jamaican Creole. She concludes that

As far as the sound of public/formal discussion in Jamaica is concerned, there can be no doubt that many female participants display language choices and conversational attributes regarded as typically male in much of the literature, and therefore contributing to my characterization of them as ‘crowing hens.’ Many explanations for the manifest capacity of women such as these to ‘crow’ suggest themselves – not least the possibility that, in perceiving and asserting the power and authority which they wield in their community, such women have indeed mastered what may well constitute an abomination for females in other cultures: the art of crowing. (1998, p. 203)

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Abraham’s (1983) study on the man-of-words in the West Indies has contributed significantly to our understanding of public verbal performances in the Caribbean. As seen above, in ritualized forms of talk in the areas of ‘sweet talking’ (e.g. boasting) or ‘broad talking’ (e.g. cursing, ‘tantalizing,’ etc.) the relevance of the participants’ gender is seen as important by speakers and scholars alike. Public speech, as well as public places, have been frequently marked as a male domain. However, as, for example, Shields-Brober (1998) has demonstrated in her research, this is a notion which must be reviewed very carefully in the Caribbean context.

Furthermore, it seems that the dichotomy between public places as “any regions in a community freely accessible to members of that community” and private places as “soundproof regions where only members or invitees gather”
(Goffman 1963, pp. 8-9) is not as clear-cut as it appears at first sight. In her analysis of the Caribbean oral gesture ‘kiss-teeth’ (also known as ‘suck-teeth,’ ‘chups,’ see Figueroa 2005, p. 75), Esther Figueroa reflects on its functions in the light of Erving Goffman’s notion of the public sphere and concludes that “Kiss Teeth’s ambiguity in regards to the public sphere and moral social order (being both monologic and dialogic, performed both in talking to oneself and in talking to others, and performed both for social control and resistance) […] makes problematic the public-private […] divides“ (Figueroa 2005, p. 74). While there is no structured investigation of kiss-teeth as a gendered activity, it may be interesting to note that, like ‘dropping remarks’ (Fisher 1976) it provides the speaker with an indirect means of signaling his or her ideological opinion and moral positioning. It would be interesting to see whether indirectness, in other cultural environments often found to be associated with female norms of behavior, also has a gendered significance in the Caribbean.

Sidnell (2004) also problematizes researchers’ preconceived ideas of a setting or context as being gendered. He focuses on the construction of the rum shop as a gendered space in Guyana and shows how members themselves actively manage this space as a male-exclusive zone. Even though women are often present within the space of the rumshop, they are excluded from interaction:

The rule and the perceived respectability of the women involved are preserved, in such cases, through various secondary accounting practices. In particular, members work to maintain the sense in which women in such situations, while physically present, can be seen to be excluded from the framework of ongoing, exclusively male, activity. So, for example, if a woman works in the rumshop, serving rum over the counter or perhaps cooking fried fish a short distance away, she is routinely disattended by the men except in the course of those activities where she must be engaged – for example, in order to request the rum, to pay for it, etc. (Sidnell 2004, p. 335)

The disattenttion strategy is then actively used for the preservation of the exclusively male zone. Sidnell’s analyses of practices of talk-in-interaction demonstrate that the all-male domain rum shop is not „simply a physical space but rather a social setting which is the product of concerted and collaborative interactional work by both men and women“ (Sidnell 2004, p. 345).
The one space in Caribbean culture that has been explored most extensively as a site of performances of gender and sexual identity is the Jamaican Dancehall. Carolyn Cooper's (1989, 1990, 1993) study on „erotic play in the Dance Hall“ as well as on „metaphor and role play in Jamaican Dance Hall culture“ (1994) spearheads a wealth of investigations of this setting as a stage for acting out gender roles (see, for example, Hope 2006) and for displaying heterosexual identities as an affirmation of what is perceived as part of „Jamaican cultural norms.“ That this goes along with ostentatious homophobia was already established in Cooper’s early analysis of the lyrics of Dancehall performers and continues to be a topos of investigation (see Farquharson, 2005). More recently, studies which address gender, sexuality, and music have examined the popularity of the related genre reggaeton in Puerto Rico (see Rivera et al., 2009).

Outlook

In response to the question what issues related to the topic of language and gender in the Caribbean they would like to see investigated by future scholars, writers, or researchers, our interview partners (see interview this volume) came up with rather diverse ideas: while one would like to see more work on “language and gender in music, in relation to contemporary discourses on sexuality, and in relation to work” (GH), the second interviewee sees a gap in research on the discourse of ordinary narrative (LW), and the third interview partner (AS) is interested in the phonetics of sexual identity display. This wide range of perceived (and real) research lacuna shows that a lot of work remains to be done, in those areas mentioned and in many others. To date, there is not a single book-length volume that focuses exclusively on language and gender in the Caribbean. It is hoped that the present issue of Sargasso can provide a glimpse of stimulating current research in this area and encourage further investigations on discourse and gender, language and style in music, the linguistic construction of gendered domains, and many other themes in the exciting cultural spaces of the Caribbean region and its diasporas.
Works Cited


Linguistic Explorations of Gender & Sexuality


