

How I “discovered” the language of the *Congos* of Panama

It started around 1982 with a single footnote in the first collection of Germán de Granda's articles, *Estudios lingüísticos hispánicos, afrohispanicos y criollos* (Madrid: Gredos, 1978). In the article “Cimarronismo, palenques y hablas ‘criollas’ en Hispanoamérica,” the author states (p. 383, fn. 35) “Sería necesario, con carácter urgente [...] investigar los restos de ‘criollo’ en el Palenque de Panamá [...]”, having previously (p. 382) cited an unpublished manuscript by Keith Whinnom that stated that the Palenque of Panama “still exhibitws many of the characteristics which reveal that it was once a creole language.” Granda (who later became a close friend), was intrigued by the existence of a former maroon community named Palenque in Panama, near Portobelo (p. 381). I started reading about the importance of Portobelo during the Spanish colonial period, as merchandise arriving from Spain was exchanged for treasure arriving from across the isthmus and originating in Peru and Bolivia. Enslaved Africans provided the labor force, and also worked at the fort in Portobelo.

Having spent just a year at the University of Houston, I recalled that in my previous position, at Michigan State, I had worked with a Panamanian graduate student, Soledad Epifanio, who already held a doctorate from Spain but who needed to obtain graduate degrees from an American university in order to better her teaching position in the then Panama Canal Zone, a de facto U. S. enclave that split Panama in two. By this time she had returned to Panama, so I contacted her (in those days, by letter), and she graciously invited me to stay in her home in Panama City. Taking advantage of cheap flights to Central America from Houston (with now-defunct national airlines such as Aviateca, LACSA, TAN/SAHSA, Lacsá, I made my first visit to Panama. In a conversation with Soledad and her husband, I discussed going to Portobelo, and I learned for the first time that there were Afro-Panamanian “Congos” there. The Epifanios did not know much about the Congos, but they had heard that the Congos spoke *al revés*, a Spanish term that depending on the context can mean ‘backwards,’ ‘upside down,’ ‘inside out,’ etc. When I asked how to get to Portobelo, Víctor Epifanio, owner of a business, offered to have one of his drivers take me there. Portobelo could be reached by a more or less paved road branching off from the trans-isthmus highway at the town of Sabanitas. This would be one of the first times I went into a research venture completely cold, without knowing anything or anyone. I don't think the driver had ever been there before, so he dropped me off in the middle of the street in this tiny, sleepy village and drove away.

I had nothing but a small bag with my cassette recorder, some blank tapes, and a change of clothes, and looking around I saw nothing resembling a business (no store, lodging, government office, etc.). I walked up to one of the few people I saw outside and inquired about the Congos, and I was taken to the second floor of a small wooden building and introduced to the *corregidor*, a sort of regional authority. He kindly gave me my first interview and told me a few things about Portobelo and the Congos. During the day I met and interviewed several more people, all of whom gave me bits and pieces of information about the Congos, including that they represented the *tierra de Guinea* and the *negros bozales*. A couple of women sang me the songs (all in Spanish) used in the Congo ceremonies, and the *slcadesa* (village mayor) walked

around with me, introducing me to several people, talking about village issues such as land disputes (she paused to resolve one such issue with feuding neighbors), and telling me about the Congos. At the end of the day I asked about lodging and was taken to the bare second floor of another wooden building, where there was a small cot and nothing else. This was where I spent my first nights in Portobelo. By the end of the first day I had learned much about the Congo activities and had learned a few words such as *jurimingue* 'child' and *cocopraya* 'coconut palm,' but I had yet to hear actual Congo speech except for a few words, together with the repeated assertion that Congos spoke *enrevesado* 'backwards.'

That was to change abruptly the next day, when I was introduced to a man who was regarded as one of the main Congo personages in Portobelo. For a while he told me about the Congos, the performances, and the "backwards" aspect of Congo talk, but all in Spanish. Finally I asked him to just talk to me in Congo, and he said if I gave him ten dollars he would. I was dubious about this transaction but I agreed, and he proceeded to blow me away with rapid-fire Congo speech, complete with phonetic changes, morphological changes, and lots of *revesinas*, all of which were patiently explained along the way. I was particularly struck by the change of all /r/, /r/, and /l/ to [d], as in *carretera* > [ka-te-te-da]. I learned that *fuda* was rum, *jurimingue* was child, *negrimacha* was woman, *cudiá* was to come, *dumiá* was to eat, *jopiá* was to smoke, and *sopodín*, *sepedín* was a canoe or small boat or any other land or sea vehicle (a word whose origin would remain a mystery to me until several decades later). Despite this impromptu performance (well worth the price of admission), he told me that to really hear Congo speech I had to come during Carnival season, and that Congos really only used the language when they were *bien sudao* 'full of liquor.' Then and there I knew that I had to return during Carnival, to get the full picture of this amazing speech variety.

Upon my return to Panama City I poked around and found that Luz Graciela Joly from David in western Panama, had written a paper on the language of the Congos of the Costa Abajo (to the west of the Canal), subsequently reprinted in the journal *Lotería* published by the Panamanian national lottery. I was able to obtain the working paper from the University of Texas, and when I wrote to Joly she also sent me a tape sample of her recordings. It seemed that the Congos on the Costa Abajo didn't use the phonetic modifications I had found in the Costa Arriba, but had other interesting morphosyntactic traits.



Later I discovered a transcribed fragment of Congo speech in the 1962 book *Socavón y tambor* by the Panamanian folklorist Manuel Zárate. I also came across a pamphlet in Spanish by Patricia Drolet, extracted from her U of Illinois dissertation in anthropology. A former Peace Corps volunteer in the Costa Arriba (specifically Nombre de Dios), she had returned to study the Congo culture. Drolet (1980:9) described the difficulties of studying *Congo* dialect (in this case in the Costa Arriba) communities during fieldwork conducted in the 1970's:

[...] when I tried to elicit translations of what was said in the dialect, I was confronted with responses that I could not follow. Because this approach proved a disaster, I wrote down Congo words and phrases to ask the following day for translations. I found, however, that while men could explain other elements of the ritual, they could not repeat sentences or phrases of the dialect out of context, unless they were drinking as they did during ritual enactment. I was able to discern structural features of the dialect primarily by asking women during the performance [...]

She described the two functions of the *congo* ritual dialect (Drolet 1980:181):

It is an expressive means of separating members and nonmembers, and of separating the sacred from the secular societies. Individuals who do not participate understand much of what is being said, but they do not respond in the dialect. Congo dialect is used by male role performers as a means of trickery or bribery [...] an individual skilled in the dialect is able to speak in a fast and convoluted manner to confuse and entangle the other person into doing or saying something which is interpreted by the Congo male to his advantage [...]

Some linguistic traits of the *congo* dialect are also offered (p. 182), including replacement of /l/ and /r/ by [d]: “the letter d is used in place of l, r, or t [...]” but strictly speaking it is the occlusive [d] that replaces all instances of /d/ normally requiring a fricative, as well as /r/, /r/, and /l/ (but not /t/).

At the same time, her husband, also an anthropologist, wrote his dissertation based on archaeological work in the same region, including a determination of the original location of the village of Palenque. A couple of years later I was able to meet the Drolets in Costa Rica, and Patricia gave me a small sample of her Congo fieldwork.

I returned to Portobelo the next year during Carnival, first meeting with “Mangueda” (< *manguera* ‘hose’), the man who had given me my first sample of Congo speech. This time my lodging was to be a tiny wooden shack perched over the water, and full of outboard motors, some fishing nets, and assorted junk. No electricity or plumbing and only an old army cot as furniture. During the day and well into the night I witnessed the Congo revelry, with continuous drumming, dancing, drinking, protecting the *rancho* (a palm-thatched structure) atop which was a Congo flag, in a capture-the-flag rivalry with neighboring Congo communities. If I had had a video camera at the time I could have recorded the events, but there were no good opportunities to tape-record Congo speech in any meaningful fashion. Exhausted I finally decided to crash out on the cot. I had already drifted off, despite the racket outside, when the makeshift door flew open and Mangueda and his friend Gruya (< *grillo* ‘cricket’) burst in, dragging a fishing net with clanging metal floats and obviously *bien sudao*. I quickly fired up my cassette recorder and they regaled me with a couple hours of high-octane Congo dialog, including me as the *contrabandista* ‘smuggler’ with many phonetic modifications of this word, as well as *polaco* and *Polonia*. The next morning Mangueda, who had spent all night drinking and dancing invited me to his home, and while we sat in his yard he yelled out a monologue to a neighbor who was repairing the roof of his small house. An amazing experience.

I then decided to travel to Nombre de Dios, the original port, later abandoned because it lacked a deep-water bay like Portobelo and could not be defended against pirate attacks. At the time, Nombre de Dios could be reached by land from Portobelo during the dry season (Drolet mentioned a 4-hour dugout canoe trip from Portobelo), but only over a muddy dirt road really just a trail. I was jammed in the small van with other passengers, and when the van had to cross a creek we all had to get out and wade across, keeping the bus from sinking in the mud from the passengers’ weight.

Drolet described her arrival in Nombre de Dios in 1969:

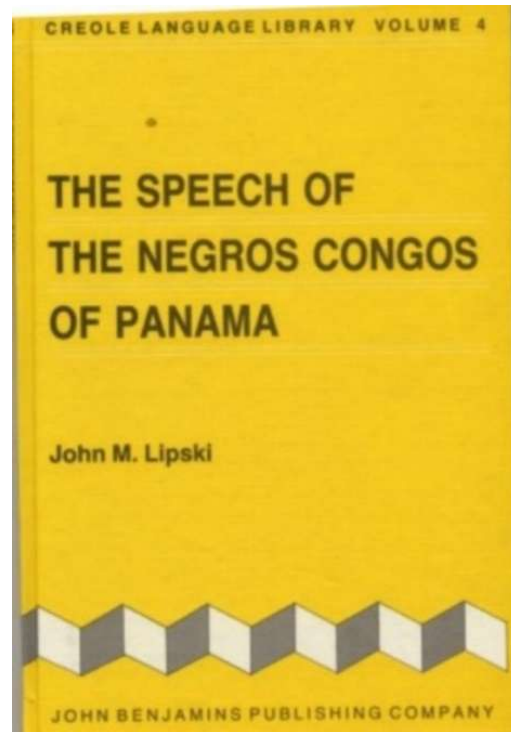
It was towards dusk when I entered the town. As I looked around I saw parallel rows of houses made of cane and thatch. Others were made of planks, unpainted and weathered from the constant breeze blowing off the ocean. Some plank houses were two stories, and most of them were boarded up, having rotted-out zinc roofs and fallen wall planks unfastened from the frame because of oxidized nails.

This same description held for my arrival in Nombre de Dios in 1982. The village was obviously poor but very clean, since the soil was pure sand. I had no references for anyone in Nombre de Dios, but I was quickly directed to a woman who provided my lodging, a little palm-thatched shack made of bamboo, with a hammock inside, and nothing else. Asking about the Congos, I met a sergeant in the National Guard (barefoot, in t-shirt and shorts), who became my guide for the remainder of the trip. First we walked around the tiny village, and just about every boy we met was introduced as *mi hijo* 'my son,' probably true. No wife, mother or other female consort was ever in the picture. With the sergeant I spent several hours that day and the next in an improvised cantina, with numerous Congo speakers and some wannabe Congos who were humorously chased away by the "real" Congos. They were constantly drinking *agua sodiya* 'soda pop,' an awful local brand of gin (paid for by me off the books, since I couldn't include such things in my expense report). Drinks were in wooden cups, and I was implicitly expected to match their drinking slug by slug. After a few sips I'd had more than enough, so I would discreetly pour the remainder into the sand (nobody noticed). The sergeant told me that the folks had taken a liking to me (including people who weren't part of the binges), and it really seemed so. It had been a long time since they had seen any white outsiders; the Peace Corps volunteers were long gone, and itinerant missionaries hadn't "discovered" N de D yet. Since I slept in hammock and ate and drank (or appeared to) with them, in their eyes I had gone native.

Nombre de Dios was the end of the road for overland motorized travel, but still chasing Whinnom and Granda's will-o-the-wisp I was determined to visit Palenque, a considerable distance to the east along the coast. The sergeant asked around and told me that he could rent a small canoe with outboard motor, and that for around fifty dollars he would get the canoe and take me to Palenque and back. I asked him if he had done such things before, and he assured me that he had. So the next morning I wrapped my cassette recorder and blank tapes in an old piece of plastic, and we got into the canoe, which held only an old empty can; no life vests or other safety devices. It was the dry season, which meant a constant breeze, and as the locals told me, *el mar está picado*, meaning that the ocean was covered with whitecaps. I thought nothing of this until the sergeant pulled us so far from land that the coast could barely be seen, this to avoid rocks. At this point I became acutely aware of the peril; the sea was rough and the tiny craft was tossing up and down, with waves constantly splashing us (I was glad to have wrapped up the recorder). The canoe was filling with water and the sergeant pointed to the empty can and told me to start bailing (the original meaning of *botar*). After what seemed like an eternity I saw some small houses on the coast and thought that we had reached Palenque; alas it was only Viento Frío, about halfway between Nombre de Dios and Palenque. The concept of eternity shouldn't be pluralizable but another eternity passed before we started toward the

shore, seeing nothing but palm trees. We finally pulled into a small lagoon, still seeing nothing but vegetation, but the sergeant assured me that we had reached Palenque. We were thoroughly soaked in salt water and the strong breeze made me feel like I was in an icebox rather than on a tropical beach. The sergeant took me aside and asked me if I had been frightened during the trip, and when I freely admitted to being terrified he said “me too, that’s why I drank a lot before we left.” So a rough sea, no life vests, and a well-oiled pilot. We started walking through the trees and when the sergeant called out, people began to appear, first a few then, as my presence and purpose were announced, lots of curious onlookers. The novelty was such that people put down their machetes and shovels and crowded into a small bamboo hut that was the local cantina, where we were offered rum to warm us up. Then just about everybody started speaking Congo, and swept me up into the ritual, mock accusations of seducing the women, with the fine being rounds of drinks. They tried to draw the sergeant into the revelry, but he refused, and just watched as the Congos danced around me like dervishes and provided me with chaotic but valuable recordings.

I was thrilled to have reached Palenque and obtain much recorded material, but the thought of the return trip made me realize that I might not live to share the results. I told the sergeant that I would walk all day and all night along the beach to Nombre de Dios rather than risk another roller-coaster ride in the canoe, but he assured me that we would have wind at our backs and it would be smooth sailing. I finally acquiesced (perhaps the combination of alcohol and fatigue were factors), but in fact the return voyage was uneventful. I left Panama after that visit with a treasure trove of data, which was incorporated into several articles and a book. All of my data came from the Costa Arriba; my only knowledge of the Congos of the Costa Abajo was the Joly article, and several decades were to pass before I was able to piece together the entire Congo linguistic map.



In 1984 I took a group of students and community members to Panama over the winter break, and the trip included a visit to Portobelo and an introduction to my Congo acquaintances.



After my work with the Congos I moved on to other projects, in Ecuador's Chota Valley, in Equatorial Guinea, and in the Philippines, then settled down to raise a family and later assume administrative duties at the University of New Mexico and Penn State. Being a member of the Afro-Latin American Research Association, in 2002 I attended the annual meeting in Panama (the association always met in a venue associated with the African diaspora in Latin America). I organized a side trip to Portobelo, but more importantly, in the hotel patio I met Marica Rodríguez Lan, then *Princesa* of the Congos, from Escobal in the Costa Abajo. I recorded a lengthy monologue in her eloquent Congo dialect, and Marcia described the vitality of Congo language and culture in that region. I knew I had to check out these communities, but I had to wait until I had finished my term as department head. In 2007 and 2008, taking advantage of a sabbatical and a Guggenheim fellowship, I made several trips to the Costa Abajo and the Costa Arriba, usually accompanied by Marcia, and obtained recordings of Congo speech from each community, in the Costa Abajo from Escobal to Miguel de la Borda, along the Costa Arriba from Pílon and María Chiquita to Santa Isabel, and in Chilibre, along the trans-isthmus highway.



I also became acquainted with Marcia's mother Alejandrina Lan, then the *reina* 'queen' of the Congos, a remarkable woman with the deepest knowledge of Congo culture and history of anyone I have known.



In Portobelo I found a few Congo speakers, but nothing like what I had experienced in 1982. I did obtain some pamphlets with poetry written in Congo, and I saw how Portobelo had been transformed into a major tourist attraction, with small hotels, restaurants, and modern infrastructure. The paved road now stretched all the way to Miramar in the east, so I was able to easily visit all the communities along the way. Nombre de Dios now looked more up to date, with a small hospital and other modern buildings, but almost no one still spoke Congo, although older folks remembered the days when Congo ceremonies involved the entire village. We met some young Congos whose attempts to speak in the language were highly questionable and bore little resemblance to Marcia's natively acquired Congo speech.



Equally disappointing was Palenque, now graced with a colorful sign at the entrance to the village, but where in the 25 years since my first visit, spontaneous Congo speech had essentially disappeared. Gone were the thatched-roof shacks, being replaced by houses made of wood and cement blocks.



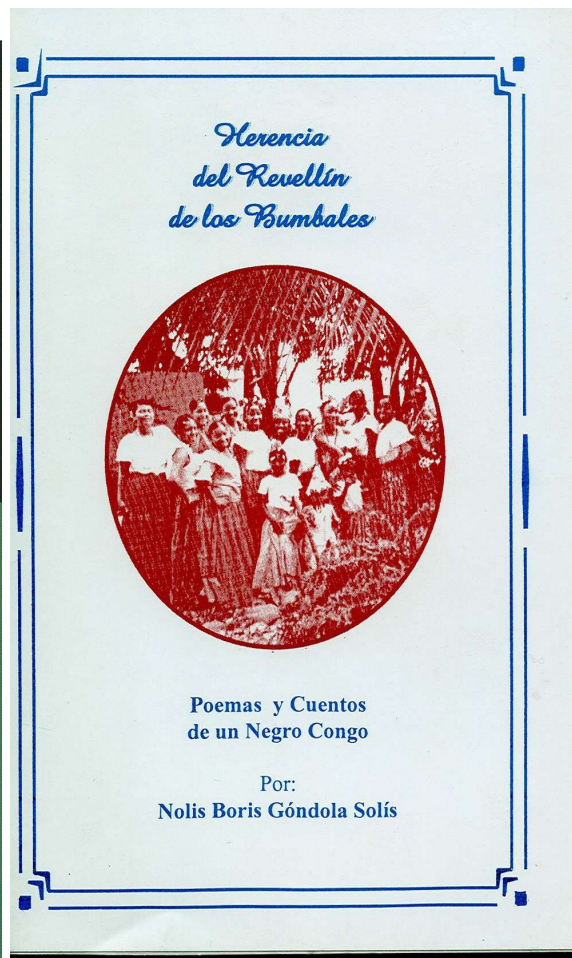
The easternmost village, Santa Isabel, could only be reached by small motor launch from Miramar. Marcia and I spent the night there, and I interviewed several Congos, whose language had retained a bit more vitality in this rather isolated community. It was here, after more than

a quarter century, that I learned the true etymology of *sepedín*, *sopodín* etc., which in my first visit to Portobelo in 1982 I heard it used to refer to any motorized vehicle, especially canoes and small launches. An old Congo in Santa Isabel described the first airships to be seen, the Zeppelin, which by the usual Congo phonological transformation became *sepedín*, then with the many phoneme substitutions, could become *sopodín*, *chopodín*, etc.

I still haven't figured out the etymology of *mojongo* 'woman, wife.'

During some of our excursions along the Costa Abajo, we were accompanied by Gustavo Lawson, of Afro-Antillean origin, and who was an enthusiastic fellow traveler who helped establish quick relationships in communities that we visited for the first time. Marcia in turn engaged the Congos in the language, determining similarities and differences with her own speech. When I returned solo to the communities, I did lexical surveys, which eventually enabled me to pinpoint the area of Chagres/Escobal as the probable geographical locus from which Congo speech had spread during colonial times.

I also met and worked with the activist and writer Nolis Boris Góndola, author of several books of poems, and a teacher at the university extension in Colón.





John M. Lipski

John M. Lipski es catedrático titular de lingüística hispánica de la Universidad del Estado de Pennsylvania (Penn State), Estados Unidos. Recibió su licenciatura en matemática de Rice University (Houston, Texas, EE. UU.) y el magister y el doctorado en lingüística románica de la Universidad de Alberta (Canadá). Ha desempeñado la docencia en las universidades de Nuevo México, Florida, Houston, y el estado de Michigan. Es especialista en dialectología, contacto de lenguas, los aspectos formales del bilingüismo, lenguas criollas y el aporte a la lengua española. Ha realizado investigaciones en España, África, Filipinas en casi toda Hispanoamérica, y en las varias comunidades hispanoparlantes dentro de los Estados Unidos. El doctor Lipski ha publicado más de doscientos artículos en revistas y antologías profesionales, además de los siguientes libros: *Linguistic aspects of Spanish-English language switching*; *The Spanish of Equatorial Guinea*; *Fonética y fonología del español de Honduras*; *El español de Malabo*; *Latin American Spanish*; *The language of the Isleños of Louisiana*; *The speech of the Negros Congos of Panama*; *El español de América*; *El español en síntesis* [con Eduardo Neale-Silva]; *A history of Afro-Hispanic language*; *Varieties of Spanish in the United States*; *Afro-Bolivian Spanish*.

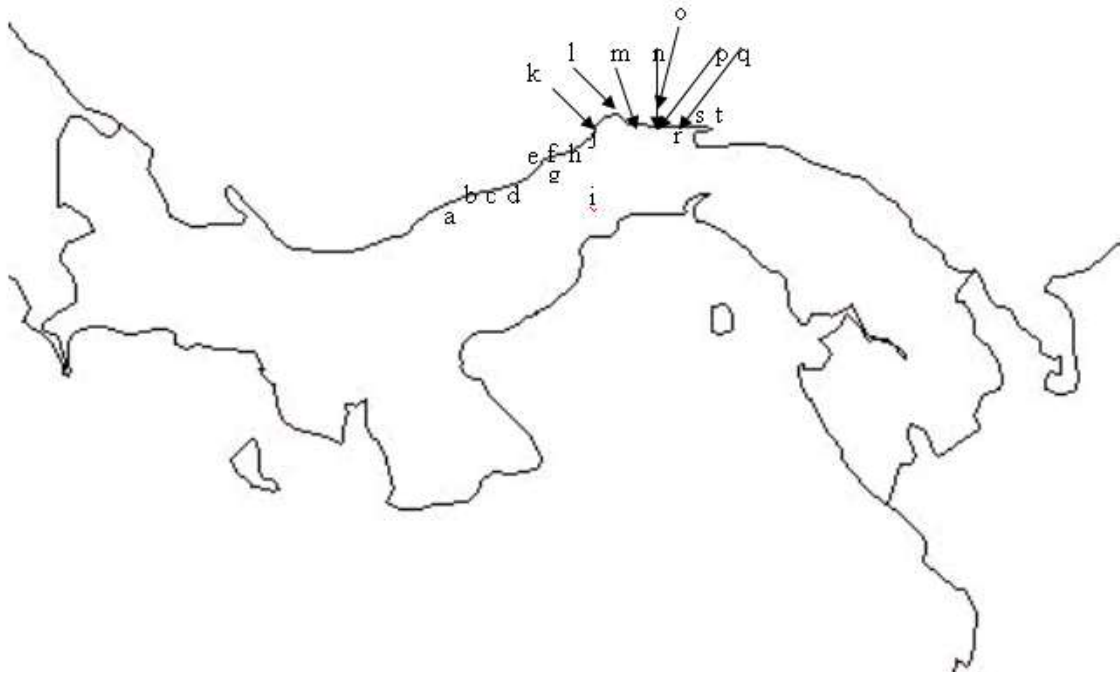


Figure 1: approximate location of *Congo* communities

- a: Miguel de la Borda
- b: Gobeá
- c: Río Indio
- d: Palmas Bellas
- e: Chagres
- f: Piña
- g: Escobal
- h: Colón
- i: Chilibre
- j: Pílon
- k: María Chiquita
- l: Portobelo
- m: Cacique/José del Mar
- n: Isla Grande
- o: Puerto Lindo
- p: Nombre de Dios
- q: Viento Frío
- r: Palenque
- s: Miramar
- t: Santa Isabel

















