

How I “discovered” the Spanish of Equatorial Guinea

By 1981, as I was leaving Michigan State for the University of Houston, I was already researching Afro-Hispanic linguistic contacts, and in particular the traits attributed to Africans’ L2 approximations to Spanish. Since almost all of the available documentation consisted of literary texts written by white authors, I had begun my search for contemporary specimens of Afro-Hispanic speech, to separate parody from reality. I still knew little about Afro-Hispanic communities in Latin America, except for the existence of the Afro-Colombian creole language Palenquero, but somewhere along the line I became intensely aware of the only nominally Spanish-speaking nation in sub-Saharan Africa, Equatorial Guinea. I learned that the nation had just emerged from one of the worst post-colonial dictatorships, the genocidal Macías regime that had ruled Equatorial Guinea from independence in 1968 until Macías was overthrown by his nephew (the current de facto dictator Teodoro Obiang Nguema) in a 1979 military coup. During those years E. G. was *materia reservada* in the Spanish press, an effective press blackout, and the country was off-limits for visitors. Even after the coup, newspapers were confiscated from arriving passengers, photography was forbidden, and hostility towards “Europeans” (a term applied to any Caucasian individual) was still prevalent. Still, Guineans spoke several Central African Bantu languages not unlike those implicated in Golden Age literary texts by such writers as Lope de Vega, Lope de Rueda, Góngora, etc., and my curiosity as to how contemporary speakers would speak Spanish. This was long before the internet, so what little information I could obtain trickled in via inter-library loan requests.

Although at first, a visit to Equatorial Guinea seemed completely out of reach, matters changed in 1983 when I received a Fulbright research fellowship to conduct field research on the origins of Latin American Spanish in Andalusia and the Canary Islands. I started researching airline schedules (paper documents at a travel agency), and I discovered that Iberia Airlines had a weekly flight Madrid-Las Palmas-Malabo. Since the latter part of my research venture would be in the Canary Islands, I purchased a ticket from Las Palmas to Malabo, with return tickets that would allow me to make brief stops in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, where Afro-Portuguese creole languages are spoken. I knew no one in Equatorial Guinea, and when I went to the E. G. embassy in Madrid to get a visa, I overheard a couple of Guineans speaking Spanish with a curious accent, but they were long-time residents in Spain. My Spanish colleagues, some of whom had lived in Spanish Guinea during the colonial period, unanimously advised me against going, citing the usual “heart of darkness” stereotypes and assuring me that Guineans were “nothing like” Black people in the United States. Of course, this turned out to be absolute nonsense; the Guinean government was and is corrupt and unpredictably oppressive, but the people are wonderful human beings.

At the Las Palmas airport I chatted with some Guineans who were also waiting for the flight. One of them had more than the allowable carryone luggage and since I was traveling light, asked if I would carry his bag past the gate checkpoint. The bag was very heavy, full of duty-free bottles, but I made every effort to make it seem like it was a trivial hand bag. During the long

overnight flight (which made a single refueling stop in Lagos, Nigeria), I worried about what might await me in a nation whose recent history included great hostility toward outsiders.

The plane landed at the ramshackle Malabo airport. After clearing passport control I saw that there were no taxis or other public transportation, but one of the Guineans I had helped in Las Palmas invited me to ride into town with them.



I asked about accommodations; there was only one hotel, the Hotel Ureca, completely run-down with an empty weed-infested swimming pool. The city had no electricity and the hotel turned on its generator for a couple of hours in the morning and a couple of hours in the evening. I was told to fill my bathtub with water, also only available a few hours daily.



The next day was August 3, the anniversary of the 1979 coup that had overthrown Macías, and I got a chance to see and hear some celebrations. I had brought my small cassette recorder and an external microphone with a remote switch, so that I could leave the recorder in a small bag with only the microphone protruding. I was very paranoid about being seen with a recorder or a camera, so I made a few very discreet recordings in the hotel. Then I walked down the main street to the Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano (years later commandeered by the Guinean government), and recorded more interviews in what appeared to be a safer space. The interior had been largely trashed during the Macías regime, but the beautiful wood-paneled library had survived the destruction, although the books that could not be hidden were gone. The librarian,

Juan Nchema, showed me the library and the books that he had been able to rescue. I later learned that this was a very rare opportunity shared by few others. The library and its contents disappeared when the Guinean government took over the building.



What struck me the most about Guinean Spanish—starting with the conversations I had overheard in the E. G. embassy in Madrid and confirmed with my in-country encounters, was how little resemblance even the most limited L2 Spanish of Guineans bore to Afro-Hispanic linguistic stereotypes and Afro-Caribbean speech. Coda consonants were preserved, and while final /s/ was sometimes omitted, it was never aspirated. There was no neutralization of the liquids /r/ and /l/, despite the fact that no Guinean language (including Annobonese *fa d'ambú* Portuguese-lexified creole) contains this opposition. I realized what I should have known even before hearing this variety, based on the history of the former Spanish colony, whose administrative personnel mostly came from central and northern Spain, while the cacao planters (representing the principal economic base of the colony) came from Valencia. The first group distinguished /s/ and /θ/, while Valencian Spanish during the colonial period was *seseante* (with /s/ as the only sibilant). This would explain why Guineans unsystematically alternated between [s] and [θ], while maintaining coda sibilants unaltered. The use of *usted* + *tuteo* verb forms (e.g. *usted sabes*) reflects colonial arrogance, when Spaniards addressed Guineans as *tú* but expected *usted* in return. Confusion between *ustedes* and *vosotros* and the corresponding verb forms is probably another post-colonial artifact. But by far the most important fact about Equatorial Guinean Spanish is that it is not the product of enslavement or forced diaspora. Guineans learned Spanish voluntarily, in Spanish-administered schools and in employment, which accounts for the fairly standard lexicon and morphosyntax, and they never had to relinquish their native languages or speak to one another in pidginized L2 Spanish (in Malabo and parts of the continental Río Muni enclave Pidgin English (*pichinglis*) already fulfilled that function. In other words, the sociolinguistic matrix in which Guinean Spanish is embedded

is totally different from the environments in which enslaved Africans learned Spanish in colonial Spanish America.

When I finally left the country, I had a significant collection of recorded material, including radio programs as well as interviews. Since the return flight stopped in Lagos, Nigeria, I decided to spend a couple of days in that country before heading to NW Africa. I was the only passenger to disembark in Lagos (much to the consternation of the Spanish embassy person who was expecting other passengers). In clearing customs, the agent noticed that I lived in Houston. He told me that his brother attended Texas Southern University (an HBCU), and asked if I had ever heard of it. I told him that it was right next to the university where I worked, and that I drove through the campus every day. When I exited the airport I discovered that it was a presidential election day and the city was just about closed down; no taxis or buses were circulating, and since there were no accommodations at the airport, I was standing at the curb wondering what to do. Then I heard a voice calling out "Mr. Lipski" (in a country I had only been in for a few minutes!). It was the customs official who had come off duty. He drove me into town, passing through the checkpoints with his government plates, and took me to his home, where we spent the afternoon chatting and looking at family photo albums. Then he took me to a hotel and negotiated a good rate with the manager. Two days later he picked me up and drove me to the airport. And all of this wonderful spontaneous friendship came from the chance conversation in the airport.

After refueling stops in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, I arrived in Dakar, Senegal, where I spent a couple of fascinating days, and also obtained a visa at the Guinea Bissau embassy. At this time, Guinea-Bissau was governed by a pro-Soviet government, which did not welcome visitors, and I could already sense the suspicion as my visa was being processed. A little plane took me to the Bissau airport, a small portable metal building, staffed by a handful of soldiers in t-shirts. Among the few passengers, I was the only one who did not have a local person waiting to pick me up, and I soon found myself alone in the hangar-like interior, where a soldier looked through my bag. Finding the tape cassettes, he said they could contain subversive material (paranoia arising only a few minutes into my visit). I told him that the tapes were in Spanish from Equatorial Guinea, and that we could listen to them on the spot, since he should be able to understand enough Spanish to determine that there was nothing subversive. He refused and it was obvious that he wanted to keep the tapes for himself to record his own music (blank cassettes were hard to come by in this country). Not wanting to argue too strenuously while surrounded by armed soldiers and with no witnesses, I nonetheless insisted that he give me a receipt for the official confiscation, and much to my astonishment, he improvised a receipt on a slip of paper, placing the cassettes in a plastic bag. As he was putting the cassettes away I broke the small plastic tabs that prevent re-recording and I repeatedly said in a loud voice that while anyone could listen to the tapes, they could not be used to re-record music (not true of course, since simply putting a piece of tape over the aperture solves the problem). As I left the airport in search of a ride into Bissau, my heart sank, since despite my insistence, I knew that the very first recordings of Equatorial Spanish ever made (by me or anyone else) were gone forever, and my carefully planned excursion to document contemporary Afro-Hispanic contact phenomena was doomed.

Once in Bissau, I did something I had never done before and have never done since: I went to the U. S. embassy in search of some assistance. This was 1983, while the Reagan administration was openly supporting right-wing insurgencies in Lusophone Africa (Angola and Mozambique, but this was my only (very faint) hope of getting something done. In the embassy I explained what had happened to the chargé d'affaires and she immediately picked up the phone and called the country's foreign minister, reaching him at once (imagine doing that in a larger country). She asked him since when were American citizens forbidden from entering the country with tape cassettes and he told her there was no such prohibition, although offering no solution. Now I felt that I had a target on my back (and in fact I was ominously followed in the streets during my days in Bissau, and could not conduct interviews), but the embassy official told me that a driver from the embassy would be at the airport the day of my departure, and he would report back if I was mistreated. As I prepared to leave the country a few days later, completely disheartened, I presented my passport to the official sitting at the exit desk. In a purely perfunctory manner I told him that some tapes had been confiscated upon my arrival, and showed him the hand-written receipt. He reached under the table and ... **THERE WERE MY TAPES, STILL IN THE BAG!!!** Thanking my lucky stars (among other deities), I swore to myself that this would never happen again, a resolution that would be important for my return visits to Equatorial Guinea.

The data from my first visit to Equatorial Guinea enabled me to write my first article, an invited contribution to the inaugural issue of *Hispanic Linguistics*.

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE SPANISH OF MALABO, EQUATORIAL GUINEA: IMPLICATIONS FOR LATIN AMERICAN SPANISH

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This article reports on Spanish language usage in Equatorial Guinea, the only Spanish-speaking area in sub-Saharan Africa. Guinean Spanish is important to theories on the development of Latin American Spanish because it represents a situation of stable bilingualism between Spanish and western African languages and permits the separation of key sociolinguistic variables. The data show that Guinean Spanish is not creolized, and that in terms of the key consonantal variables most often associated with African influence in Latin American Spanish (/l/, /r/, /s/, /n/) Guinean Spanish does not present major reduction of these consonants. Since Guinean Spanish was more strongly influenced by Castilian and Catalan dialects of Spanish, it is suggested that these data may be used to refine hypotheses on the Andalusian and African phonetic influences on Latin American Spanish.

1. It is noteworthy that there is no widespread Afro-Spanish creole in the Americas, comparable in status to the Portuguese-, French-, and English-based creoles which dominate the Caribbean (Alleyne 1971:182, Mintz 1971:492, Reinecke 1938, Otheguy 1975). We have little direct evidence of the African-Spanish interface in the New World, since in few areas were the Africans living in conditions which would permit the kind of linguistic separation that produced creoles, and as a result much of what is postulated about the assimilation of Spanish by African natives or their descendants must be based on interpretations of literary attempts at representing their speech, or by scrutinizing the few remaining dialectal pockets which offer vestiges of what was undoubtedly a more widespread creolization or pre-creolization process. The lack of direct evidence concerning African influence on colonial Spanish is significant, since in addition to the clearly traceable lexical influences, some phonetic, morphological and syntactic features of American Spanish have been variously attributed to African influences, at times with little or no empirical justification. Those opposing such theories usually attempt to demonstrate the existence of the same characteristics in areas far removed from African influence, but only rarely are cross-dialectal comparisons made to elucidate the common characteristics which occur when Spanish has come in contact with non-Indo-European languages.

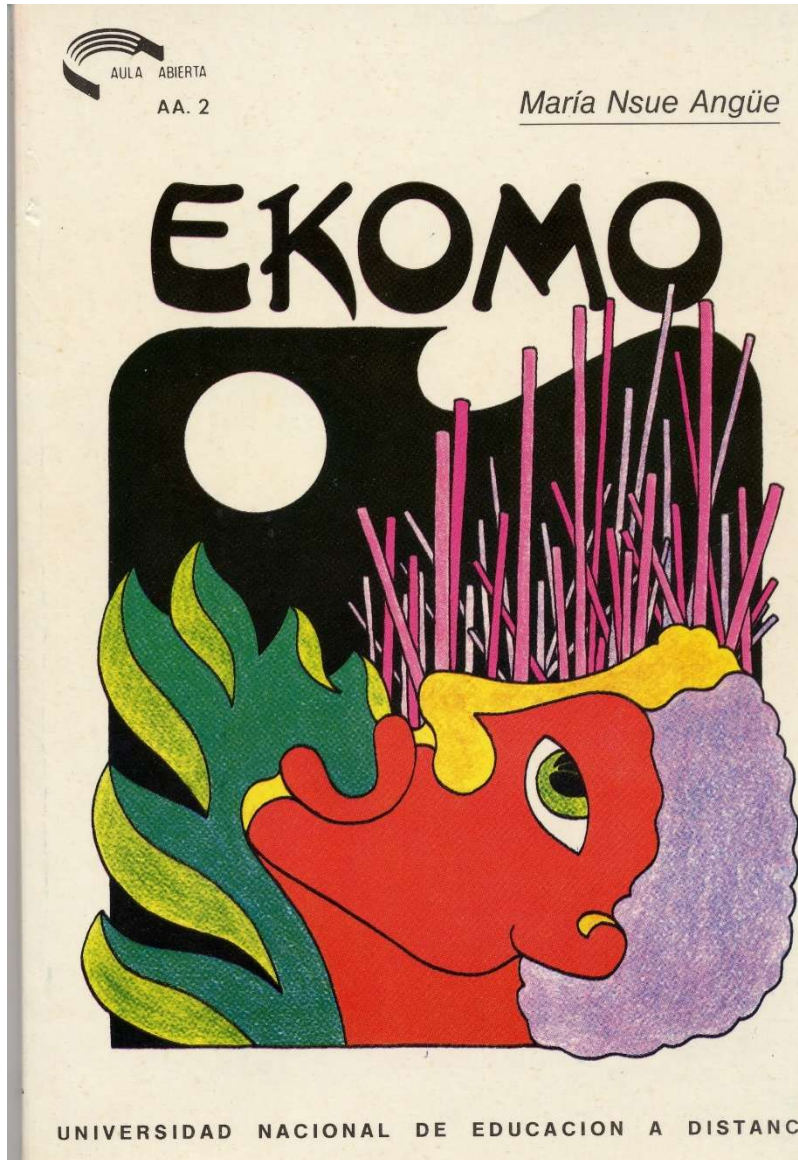
One significant Spanish-speaking area which has rarely figured in descriptive dialectological studies and never in attempts at tracing African influence on New World Spanish, is the Republic of Equatorial Guinea, formerly Spanish Guinea, the only Spanish-speaking region in sub-Saharan Africa, and the only Spanish-speaking region in which stable bilingualism

Germán de Granda was one of the reviewers, and he chastised me for failing to mention some historical works, known to him in Spain but unfamiliar for me. Long before online databases and inter-library loan Germán was always able to find the most obscure bibliographical sources. Until this time I didn't know that Germán had been posted to the Spanish diplomatic mission in Equatorial Guinea as director of the Centro Cultural Hispano-Guineano (eventually expelled as persona non grata for daring to criticize president Obiang); his first articles on Equatorial Guinea would appear at the same time as mine. Germán and I became close friends, and exchanged publications and correspondence for the remainder of his life. At the same time, Antonio Quilis began to collect data in Equatorial Guinea through his connection with the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia in Malabo. I had the good fortune to meet up with Quilis on many occasions and we swapped stories of our experiences in Equatorial Guinea and the Philippines.

The data from my first trip enable me to receive an internal grant from the University of Houston to conduct more systematic research in Equatorial Guinea in the summer of 1984. The Spanish consul in Houston was a friend of our department, and he gave me the name of his former college roommate, who was currently director of cooperation with Equatorial Guinea in his Madrid office. I met with him in Madrid, and he gave me a recommendation for the Spanish embassy in Malabo, which turned out to be pure gold. In 1984 the United States was just

constructing its first embassy in Equatorial Guinea; still lodged in the Hotel Ureca (still no electricity or water) I briefly met the new ambassador, who was supervising the digging of a swimming pool and the construction of a tennis court, but there were no personnel who could help with my project. In the Spanish embassy compound I met the Spanish cultural attaché, related to Manuel Alvar's wife and holding a doctorate in philology from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. He naturally took a keen interest in my project, and made the preliminary contact with the Guinean government to acknowledge my presence as a researcher. They in turn assigned a young journalist, María Nsué, ostensibly to escort me but in reality to keep tabs on me. María accompanied me to the police station and, leaving me outside, made the necessary arrangements for me to occasionally leave Malabo (travel outside of the capital was not routinely allowed). But rather than spying on me, María became my friend, and took me to the homes of her friends and behind the scenes in the city market, giving me access to a wide variety of speakers that I never would have met on my own. I could tell that my room was being searched in my absence and I feared for my recordings, so I took my tape cassettes to the Spanish embassy. They actually offered to put them in the diplomatic pouch for me to pick up in Spain, but ultimately I opted to place them under the bottom panel of my carry-on bag, and there were no incidents upon leaving the country.

María had recently begun her creative writing, and gave me a type script of a story, which I gave to a colleague at the University of Houston who was editor of a bilingual magazine. He had asked me to bring back any promising material from my trips, but when I later asked him if he intended to publish María's story he laughed and said of course not. A year later María published her prize-winning novel *Ekomo*, which catapulted her to world fame as the first significant Equatorial Guinean writer (there had been a few texts produced during the colonial period). I think she also eventually published her "pocket-vetoed" story in a worthy venue.



In Malabo I met and interviewed the grandson of the last Bubi king, Malabo, after whom the Spanish colonial city of Santa Isabel had been renamed by Macías. While in Malabo I also conducted interviews at the Santuario Claret (Corazón de María), and established a friendship with Padre Richard, an American priest who had been in the country for quite a while. Padre Richard had a Land Rover, and on several weekends I accompanied him to other towns such as Rebola and Baney. In the mornings we would help with development projects (building a pharmacy, repairing a water supply, etc.), after which Padre Richard would celebrate a mass and then I would interview many local people. A great experience.



When it became time to visit Bata in the continental enclave of Río Muni, the Spanish embassy offered me passage on the Spanish military Aviocar, but when I arrived at the airport at the designated time, the plane hadn't arrived, and the guys hanging around the airport told me that it would not come. On the runway was parked the single plane of the Líneas Áreas de Guinea Ecuatorial, a small jet originally belonging to Macías.



The crew told me tht for a symbolic amount of cash I could travel to Bata with them, and rather recklessly, I agreed. On board the plane, I watched three rowdy and possibly inebriated Russian pilots cram into the tiny cockpit and off we went (naturally, the Spanish Aviocar did make its scheduled flight shortly after our departure, but I got to be one of the few survivors of an early LAGE flight).

In Bata I stayed at the Spanish compound on the beach outside of town, in portable metal *caracolas*, where I conducted numerous interviews, also hitching rides into Bata whenever possible.



In addition to the island of Bioko (formerly Fernando Poo) where Malabo is located, and the continental enclave of Río Muni and nearby islands (Corisco, Elobey Grande, Elobey Chico), the territory of Equatorial Guinea includes the remote island of Annobón, in the southern hemisphere at the latitude of Gabon. Originally uninhabited, this tiny (less than 7 sq. miles; ~ 4 mi. X ~2 mi.) Island was used by the Portuguese as a holding station for enslaved Africans, and the resident population speaks a Portuguese-lexified creole known as *fa d'ambú*. In 1984

Annobón was all but inaccessible; occasional freighters passed by, but many of the residents of the island which could be traversed in an hour or two had never left, and the Annobonese living in Malabo had arrived opportunistically over the years. I hadn't even considered the possibility of visiting Annobón, but the Spanish embassy offered me passage on the military plane that made a trip every six weeks to supply the resident doctor, nurse, and priest. Wow, too good to be true, but it was.

I was the only passenger on the flight, hanging on to straps on the sides of the cargo plane, which was loaded with supplies. Annobón is an extinct volcanic island with almost no flat spaces, and the plane had to make a very risky landing, slamming the brakes so as not to crash into a mountain.



Today Annobón is more developed and there is quasi-regular transportation (usually by boat) to Malabo, but in 1984 it was still quite rustic, with only shortwave radio contact with Malabo.





The mid-afternoon departure was noteworthy, since in order for the plane to reach enough speed to clear the mountain top on takeoff, numerous villagers pushed the plane as it was gathering speed.



The plane had to refuel in São Tomé. When we arrived, there was some kind of national holiday and the fueling station at the airport were closed. Not given permission to enter the country, I waited in the one-room airport while the crew sought out the one man who could refuel the

open in the U. S> for them to doo the background check. In 1985 Madrid there was no such thing as digital photos or even instant photos, so I went to a photo studio and had to wait for the photos to bge developed (in the photo I look like a panicked speed freak). I also ran to the office of Iberia airlines and they issued me a new ticket. Back at the consulate they took the photos and cranked out a new passport in record time (I continue to bless them for this kindness), and with no time to spare, I finally arrived at the Barajas airport. The gate agent refused to let me pass since I didn't have a visa (I did present the proof that I couldn't exit the country with the same passport I had used upon arrival). Airlines get fined if they board passengers without the proper documents, and E. G. was already known for arbitrary hostilities. I showed the gate agent my receipt from the visa (fortunately not left in my shoulder bag), and after much back and forth he finally shrugged and told me to go ahead and take my chances (said in such a way as to imply that I would never be seen alive again). All during the sleepless overnight flight, as the adrenaline rush began to fade, the full realization of my foolhardiness came over me, and by the time we arrived I fully expected to spend what might be my final days in a Guinean jail. Much to my surprise (and relief), a delegation was waiting for us, treating us as VIPs; they swooped our passports and returned them stamped, obviously without checking for visa.



After this miraculous rescue, we had a great conference, first in Malabo then flown to Bata and taken to several villages in the interior of Rio Muni. I took advantage of the experience to make many recordings, of Guineans and other Spanish-speaking African delegates.













In 2006 I was invited to the second international conference of Spanish in Africa, in Malabo. The conference had to be rescheduled several times because the E. G. government kept refusing to issue visas to the delegates from Spain. Now that Exxon-Mobil was pumping oil in E. G., U. S. citizens were the only ones to no longer require a visa. Our plane landed in Malabo in the evening, and the conference was supposed to start the next morning, in the new Spanish cultural center at the edge of town (having been previously ejected from the former Centro

Cultural Hispano-Guineano in the middle of Malabo). This time our group included some colleague friends, including Marvin Lewis, Mbaré Ngom, Michael Ugarte, Angela Bartens, Hiroto Ueda, Benita Sampedro, among others. When we were picked up at the airport, our guide told us that we had the next day free “to rest up.” This immediately aroused my suspicion, although no one else in the group found it strange. The next morning after breakfast I walked across town to the Spanish cultural center, where employees were frantically putting up posters announcing the conference. The director told me that the day before, while our flight was in the air, they had received a call from the president’s office ordering them (with no reason) to cancel the conference, and warned against trying to surreptitiously hold the conference in the center or our hotel. I learned that an earlier conference on anthropology had been similarly impeded, and the delegates were not even allowed to exit the plane, despite the fact that none had tickets for the turn-around flight. Then just shortly before my arrival at the center, they had received another call telling them to go ahead with the conference, beginning that evening, and that several government ministers would attend. The director told me that after the required protocols there would be time for only one talk: MINE. Given the arbitrary and capricious actions I had just heard about, I experienced a sense of dread, since I knew that if anything I said were to be taken the wrong way, the remainder of the conference would be trashed, and with unpredictable consequences for us delegates. To make matters worse, my PowerPoint presentation included mention of at least one Guinean writer in political exile. I offered to cut out those slides, but the organizers told me to leave them in. When the evening arrived, the front row of the auditorium was filled with black-suited government officials, which to me looked more like a firing squad. I’ve had butterflies before public talks before, but nothing like this. Much to my relief, the gov’t folks were there to be seen and paid little attention to my linguistic analysis, applauding appropriately and congratulating me at the end of the talk. The rest of the conference went off smoothly, and I was also able to make many more recordings, of Spanish, Pichinglis, Fa d’Ambú, and São Tomé creole.



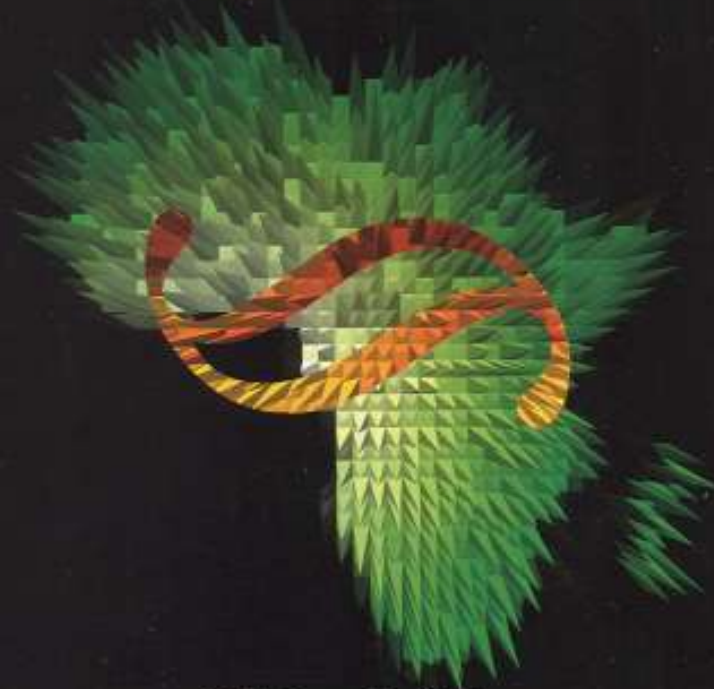




My defense of Guinean Spanish as a coherent dialectal variety and not just a pastiche of L2 approximations appears in the volume that resulted from the congress.

Gloria Nistal Rosique y Guillermo Pié Jahn (dirs.)

La situación actual del español en África



Sial/ Casa de África

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