

Displacement, language loss and identity in two villages in eastern Nicaragua

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In this chapter I consider reasons for the recession of the Ulwa (Southern Sumu) and Miskitu languages in Karawala and Kakabila, two villages on Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast.¹ In Karawala, Miskitu has all but displaced Ulwa; meanwhile, in Kakabila, Creole English is apparently displacing Miskitu. I first examine the history of language and identity in the wider region. Second, I present the communities of Karawala and Kakabila. I then consider changes in the linguistic habits of Karawala and Kakabila villagers. Finally, I claim that language change in each case can be explained to a considerable extent by single occurrences in the histories of these communities. I conclude by arguing that, often enough, relatively spectacular demographic events, rather than gradual processes, produce tipping points (Gladwell 2000; see also Wolf 1963) resulting in the abandonment of, or modifications in the social uses of, autochthonous languages.

A history of language and identities amongst the Miskitu and Sumu

The conquest and hispanicization of western Nicaragua was fast, brutal and complete. Today, no minority languages remain in this part of the country, though 'Indian' identities persist in such towns as Masaya and Nindiri. From the country's western region settlers pushed rather more tentatively eastwards into the central highlands in the nineteenth century, incorporating Matagalpan speakers and others into Nicaragua's Spanish-speaking majority, but as they continued to push the frontier of settlement further into the eastern lowlands they found both a considerably more challenging environment, characterized by poor soils, a lengthy rainy season and inhospitable flora and fauna, and hostile locals – some 'Indians', others Caribbean

English speakers – who regarded ‘Spaniards’, as they called Spanish speakers, as enemies (Newson 1987).²

The Caribbean coast of Nicaragua and eastern Honduras, known as the Mosquito Coast, lying beyond the range of early Spanish settlement, had early in its history become a refuge for English speakers: first, buccaneers; then settlers known as Shoremen, some of whom kept slaves of African and Amerindian descent; and, finally, Caribbean English-speaking Blacks who came looking for land and freedom. Members of these groups took local Indian women and by the early nineteenth century a society and culture had emerged from their descendants that came to be known as Creole. The members of this society, so-called Creoles, spoke a distinctive variety of Caribbean English, and during the late nineteenth century embraced Moravian Christianity. Many regarded themselves as ‘English’ or kin to the English, and most were antipathetic to the Spanish empire and later Spanish-speaking Nicaragua, both of which they viewed, successively, as threats to their independence and way of life.³

When the first of these European settlers (English, French and Dutch buccaneers) came to the Mosquito Coast during the course of the mid to late seventeenth century, they found groups of speakers of Misumalpan languages. Since these arrivals came not to conquer or proselytize, but rather to refit and reprovision, they were able to establish friendly relations with native people, particularly those in the area near the mouth of the Rio Coco, on the present-day Nicaragua–Honduras border (Holm 1978:29–41). This group of Indians came to be known as Mosquito (later Miskito or Miskitu) and they became active partners with their mainly English-speaking allies, giving them locally produced goods, services as provisioners, rights of access to their women, and slaves from other groups, in exchange for cloth, iron goods and, importantly, firearms. Miskitu society, which seems almost certainly to have been comparatively egalitarian, now acquired a class of entrepreneur warlords on whom their

English-speaking partners conferred such titles as general, governor, admiral, captain and, for the most important, king. During the eighteenth century these warlords controlled supplies of slaves to Anglo-Jamaican buyers and weapons to their followers, organizing (sometimes in conjunction with their English-speaking allies) raids and tribute-taking expeditions deep into the Central American interior. The Miskitu even raided Spanish settlements, sacking Granada on at least one occasion, and seem to have visited, and demanded tribute from, the Spanish cacao plantations on Costa Rica's Matina Coast on a more or less annual basis. The Miskitu also kept many of the slaves that they captured, and these were absorbed into Miskitu society as more or less ordinary members (Floyd 1967:55–69; Helms 1983; Noveck 1988).

The eighteenth century was characterized by considerable Miskitu geographical expansion, as the members of the group's growing population, troubled by weakening soils caused by overuse (and hurricane damage), sought sites for settlement away from the increasingly overpopulated Cape Gracias and Sandy Bay areas where they mainly lived. A number of these people founded communities near river mouths and around the coastal lagoons, close to the incipient Creole communities with whose members they established increasingly intimate relations of exchange. Marriages cementing trading relations between Miskitus, Creoles and visiting traders seem to have been common. Meanwhile, Indians who inhabited districts into which Miskitu and Creole settlers arrived gradually disappeared, becoming enslaved or absorbed by the new arrivals (Floyd 1967:55–69; Naylor 1989:27–53; Roberts 1965: 116–17).

As the British traders pulled out of the region in the late 1780s following formal cession of the Mosquito Coast to Spain, the two communities – Miskitu and Creole – became increasingly dependent on one another. With the absence of an export slave market, Miskitu raids ceased, but by this time many of the groups whose members had been victims of Miskitu slaving were disappearing or had retreated into the interior beyond the range of their

predatory enemies (Helms 1983, 1986; Jamieson 1998:716). Many of these groups were, like the Miskitu, speakers of Misumalpan languages, and came to be known by Miskitu and Creole alike as Sumu. Even into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, after the cession of raiding, many Sumus regarded the Miskitus with fear or apprehension, because, it was widely claimed, the latter tended to look down on and dominate them. Indeed Charles Napier Bell, a nineteenth-century British resident on the Mosquito Coast and a fluent Miskitu speaker, reports the existence of a 'silent trade' between some fearful Sumus and the Miskitu in which the two parties would not meet, instead leaving goods and miniature tokens of goods desired from the other party at a pre-arranged place (Bell 1989:266–7; see also Roberts 1965:120).

From the mid nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century (and to some extent beyond), logging, banana and mining companies, mainly North American, came to the Mosquito Coast offering employment to Creoles, Miskitus and Sumus alike (Dozier 1985; Vilas 1989). Most of these companies came and left shortly afterwards, once the exploitation and extraction of resources in the district became too expensive. Consequently the region experienced a series of extremely localized booms and busts, resulting in considerable movements of manpower, as men moved from district to district, getting laid-off in some places and seeking work in others. The North American companies favoured Creoles over Indians because they spoke English, and consequently they gave them the best jobs, resulting in the consolidation on the Mosquito Coast of an English-speaking elite that had already emerged during the course of the nineteenth century (Helms 1971:27–35). From the 1960s onwards, markets have appeared for marine resources (Nietschmann 1973) and some Creoles have been able to use their relative wealth to purchase outboard motors, skiffs, gill nets, lobster pots and diving equipment, thereby generating further wealth. Jobs offered to young men and women in the region on cruise ships by companies such as Celebrity Cruises and Royal Caribbean give Creoles another advantage over non-English speakers. While these

jobs are generally menial, they are well paid by local standards, and many young men and women are able to use their salaries to build prestigious cement homes rather than the commonplace timber houses. Demonstration of competence in English by employees is considered essential by the cruise ship companies, since the tourists on these ships usually speak at least some English.

From this history there emerged over time a hierarchy amongst the region's languages, in which English was valued more highly than Miskitu, and Miskitu more so than the Sumu languages. Miskitus found that they had to learn at least some English while Sumus learned Miskitu and sometimes English, competence in these languages affording speakers access to resources that were otherwise unobtainable (Freeland 2010:244–9).⁴

Trade also shaped Miskitu engagements with English speakers into ones characterized by affinity, as the Miskitu secured partners by offering traders their sisters and daughters, a practice that continues to this day (Jamieson 1998). Orlando Roberts, a smuggler working the Mosquito Coast in the early nineteenth century, discussed this tendency in some detail:

By this licentious and immoral conduct [sexual partnerships with local women] they [English-speaking traders] have, however, so identified themselves with the natives [the Miskitu], and with some of the principal people on the coast, as to obtain a sort of monopoly in the sale of goods, which it would be difficult for any stranger, not possessed of an intimate knowledge of the Indian character, to shake.

(Roberts 1965:109–10)

As linguist John Holm has perceptively written, 'the Englishman became the Miskito's kinsman, with all the little-dreamt-of political, cultural and linguistic consequences' (Holm 1978:37), and English speakers in Belize, the Bay Islands and the Cayman Islands came to

refer to the Miskitu as Waika, from the Miskitu word *waik* or *waikat*, meaning classificatory male cross-cousin or brother-in-law. *Waik* connotes ‘potential exchange partner’ and is still used as a form of address between Miskitu-speaking strangers hoping to establish friendly relations. Roberts indeed refers to one of his exchange partners as Whykey Tarra (Roberts 1965:55), almost certainly his orthographic rendering of *waiki tara* (‘my big brother-in-law’ in Miskitu).

Over the course of this history, hundreds of English words entered the Miskitu language, from which the extent of this intercourse can be gauged. Amongst these are items such as *rakbus*, deriving from ‘arquebus’ but now meaning ‘rifle’, which demonstrate the earliness of the English influence on Miskitu (Holm 1978:334–42). Miskitu, owing to its association with the English trade, became the lingua franca amongst all the Indians of the region, and, it seems, came to be understood by both Miskitus and Sumus alike as an important signifier for a way of life that in local imaginations was rather more ‘English’ than ‘Indian’.⁵ For Sumus wishing to insinuate themselves into the Miskitu-dominated English trade, it was important to learn the anglocentric lexicon of the trading Indians (the Miskitu), and it is very likely that these borrowings from English played quite a large part in effecting a conceptual linguistic distinction between Miskitu on the one hand, and the other Misumalpan or Sumu idioms on the other.⁶ Acquiring Miskitu identity, quite probably understood in part as a project of reinventing oneself as ‘English’, was therefore a strategy that many Sumus employed.

Bell describes this process of becoming Miskitu among the mid-nineteenth-century Toongla (or Tungla), a group of probably Prinzu Sumus from the districts around Tungla, Layasiksa and perhaps Quamwatla. The Toongla, he writes, ‘seem to be a mixed race between the Smoos [Sumus] and Mosquito Indians, and their dialect is nearly pure Mosquito with a large mixture of Smoo words’ (Bell 1862:258). Elsewhere Bell notes:

The village I am staying in is a Toongla village, and the Toonglas are a sort of non-descript people. They claim to be the same as the Mosquito Indians, but although they speak the Mosquito language, they do not quite resemble the Mosquito men. But neither do they resemble the interior and riverine tribes, such as the Smoos [Sumu], Twakas, Ramas, etc. The Mosquito men are prone to domineer over the Toonglas in much the same manner as they do over the Indians of the interior.

(Bell 1989:267)⁷

Thus, just as the Miskitu aspired towards an English identity, the Sumus, or at least some of them, seem to have sought Miskitu identity through abandonment of their own languages and claims to be Miskitu (Green 1999:22). Interestingly, in some districts these processes continue to this day. I present two case studies that demonstrate this. One considers the displacement of Ulwa by Miskitu identity and language in the Rio Grande community of Karawala. The other examines the inroads that Creole English language and identity have made in the traditionally Miskitu village of Kakabila in the Pearl Lagoon basin.⁸

Karawala and Kakabila

The Mosquito Coast today remains one of the most isolated parts of Central America, and there are still very few roads that connect the region to other parts of Nicaragua. Transport throughout much of the region is mainly waterborne, and the dugout canoe, known as a dory, is still the principal means of personal transport. Although some people in the region own small outboard motors, the majority still rely on the paddle and sheet sail to reach neighbouring communities and places of work. For longer journeys people buy rides in

passenger skiffs known as *pangas*, transporting larger or heavier goods in the commercial freight boats that ply their trade in the intricate waterways that characterize much of the region. Members of local communities have traditionally been hunter-horticulturalists, cultivating sweet cassava and other tubers on swidden plantations, to which plantains and bananas have been added in post-contact times. They also raise fruit trees, including mango, soursop, cashew and lime, as well as coconut and breadfruit, in yards surrounding their houses, most of which are of timber construction. Almost all families raise chickens, but those who are comparatively wealthy sometimes own cattle, horses or pigs. Men also periodically hunt, usually with dogs but sometimes with rifles, for deer, armadillo and wild peccaries, while women and children gather foodstuffs from the forest and water's edge.

Kakabila: the Miskitu village

Kakabila, a predominantly Miskitu village, is situated on a high bank on the shores of Pearl Lagoon. Surrounded by dense rainforest and swamp, for much of the year it can only be reached by waterborne transport. In the past, villagers travelled to and from Kakabila in dugouts with sheet sails. Today, about one-third of the seventy or so households own small outboard motors with which they power their canoes. Village men employ gill nets to catch snook, coppermouth, drummer and catfish, and casting nets to catch white shrimp and sea shrimp, which they sell to commercial buyers for cash. Fishing with gill nets, mainly in the waters in front of the village, is the main source of income in the village. Some men also go to sea outside the lagoon bar in order to catch turtles, the meat of which is generally sold in the village. The exploitation of marine resources mainly takes place during the rainy season between mid May and the end of December. During dry season months, January to mid May, villagers prepare and plant their swiddens. The Kakabila *centro* (the lands used for planting)

is close to the village, and consequently about 85 per cent of household units are engaged in horticultural work for subsistence.⁹

Life in Kakabila is thus comparatively similar for most households, albeit differentiated internally by age and gender. Most villagers are involved seasonally in gill-net fishing for cash and horticulture for subsistence, supplemented in a few cases by teaching work in the small primary school, raising cattle or the small-scale selling of commodities such as flour, sugar, cooking oil and coffee, and good food, often in the form of fish and cassava, is rarely scarce. In Karawala there is considerably more variation. A few households, those who have members in regular employment or who own businesses, are demonstrably wealthier than any one might find in Kakabila, and eat well, albeit mostly store-bought foodstuffs. Many others, however, are poorer than any one would find in Kakabila. In these cash is scarce and household members often eat only *rice so-so* (rice with nothing else).

Karawala: the Sumu village

Karawala, a mainly Ulwa village, is located close to the mouth of the Karawala River, which flows into the Mosquito Coast's Rio Grande about six miles from the river bar. The village is situated on a small series of connected ridges rising out of a swamp close to the river, meeting a large savannah as one travels away from the river's edge from which it is possible to walk to the Miskitu villages of Sandy Bay Sirpi and Walpa. In contrast to Kakabila, few of the Karawala men are fishermen. Although there are locations in the district that are suitable for gill-net fishing (the waters near Rio Grande Bar and Toplock Lagoon), these are not close enough to Karawala to prevent the theft of villagers' nets. Consequently, few villagers participate in this activity. The community of Karawala claims land in the savannah and swamps close to the village, along the Karawala River and at various locations further up the

Rio Grande, quite a bit of which is suitable for swidden horticulture. Few households (about 10 per cent by local estimates), however, actually cultivate land. Many villagers say that they are unable to plant crops successfully close to the village because these are all too often stolen and sold for cash by crack-cocaine addicts. They also point to the fact that upriver in places like Betania, Spanish-speaking farmers are slowly taking over land formerly farmed by Karawala people. Other villagers claim that with the arrival of logging companies the village men have become lazy and too dependent on wage labour, which at the time of fieldwork was offered by a Costa Rican logging company operating on community lands and a church-sponsored house construction project.

Karawala is now the capital of the Desembocadora de Rio Grande municipality, and the village has a police station, a magistrate's office, a health centre employing eleven people and an *alcaldía* (town hall), and large primary and secondary schools. More than half the employees of these are from Karawala or neighbouring villages, but the remainder, particularly those in senior positions, are Spanish-speaking Nicaraguans, which along with the logging company workers constitute a fairly sizeable Mestizo minority in the village. Quite a few villagers make a little income from these Mestizos by taking in laundry, cooking meals or performing one-off tasks (*chamba*), and the greater penetration of cash in the Karawala economy permits the existence of two large shops and a small *pensión*.

Language change

Language attrition in Karawala

There are today perhaps 11,000 people that might be classified as Sumu living in Honduras and Nicaragua. Around 9,500 of these are Northern Sumus, now usually called Mayangna, a

category that includes speakers of the closely related Tuahka and Panamaka dialects of Mayangna in Nicaragua, and the Panamaka-speaking Tawahka in Honduras. Perhaps another 1,500 are Southern Sumus (though numbers are hard to guess), some competent in Ulwa, a language related to, but quite distinct from, Tuahka and Panamaka (see Green 1996, 1999:11–17). The great majority of Southern Sumus live in the village of Karawala situated near the mouth of the Rio Grande. Smaller numbers live in the predominantly Miskitu villages of Kara and Tumarin on the Rio Grande, in smaller hamlets and on isolated farms along the Rio Grande, Kuringwas and Wawashan rivers, and in similarly isolated communities along the upper reaches of the tributaries of the Rio Escondido to the south (Green 1999:15–17). Many of those living in Karawala, like the Mayangna to the north, have rejected the name Sumu, which they regard as having been bestowed on them pejoratively. Most, though by no means all, now refer to themselves as Ulwa, though this term seems to be unknown to other Southern Sumus nowadays, especially those living on the tributaries of the Rio Escondido. Since the majority of Southern Sumus now live in Karawala where the term Ulwa is preferred, I will henceforth refer to all the people of this group as Ulwas, including those living outside Karawala.¹⁰

I noted above that members of the Southern Sumu population are for the most part ‘competent in Ulwa’ rather than ‘Ulwa speakers’ because almost all use either Spanish or Miskitu far more often than they do Ulwa. Along the tributaries of the Rio Escondido, as well as on the Wawashan and Kuringwas rivers, waves of Spanish-speaking farmers have all but absorbed the Ulwa. In these districts only the villages of Virgen and Kahmi Tingni seem to have majorities of inhabitants who identify as Sumu or Ulwa, and even in these communities Ulwa is now heard much less often than Spanish.¹¹

In Karawala, use of the Ulwa language is also receding, though in this case it is Miskitu rather than Spanish that is displacing it. The population of Karawala is about 1,400,

most of whom identify as Ulwa, though many of these are semi-speakers or non-speakers of the Ulwa language. There is also a smaller number of villagers, probably less than fifty, who identify themselves as Tuahka, most of whom regard themselves as at least competent in Ulwa. Most of these Sumus (Ulwa and Tuahka) generally speak Miskitu nowadays, and most regard themselves as only partially competent in Ulwa. Even fluent speakers of the language hardly use Ulwa at all, though a few elderly residents still use it amongst themselves, remembering a time before the 1950s when Ulwa was the language used by almost everyone in the village (Green 1996).

There are many reasons why Karawala might be ‘losing’ the Ulwa language, and all these have, I argue, contributed towards its gradual displacement by Miskitu. One of these is the proximity and relative importance of large numbers of Miskitu speakers. The lower Rio Grande district, the so-called Desembocadura, is home to four other villages – Rio Grande Bar, Sandy Bay Sirpi, Kara and Walpa – where Miskitu is the first language or the lingua franca. Rio Grande Bar is a predominantly Creole-speaking community that came to prominence as a place where the peoples of the Rio Grande could bring goods for sale and purchase manufactured items brought up by freight boat from Bluefields, the regional capital nearly 60 miles to the south. This trade has receded and manufactured goods are now almost all brought up through the channel made in the 1950s to connect Pearl Lagoon with the river. As a centre where turtle, fish and shrimp are bought and exchanged by coastal fishermen, commercial buyers and purchasers from upriver, Rio Grande Bar retains some importance, and the inhabitants, most of whom are involved in this trade to some degree, are all fluent in Miskitu as a second language. Most use this language with the people of Karawala, many of whom speak little Creole English.

The other communities in the Desembocadura are predominantly Miskitu speaking. Of these communities, Kara has the closest ties with Karawala, and is home to a small Ulwa

minority, a few of whom (the so-called Sûtak or ‘calabash people’) arrived in Kara from Kahmi Tingni on the Kuringwas River during the Contra War and settled as refugees (Green 1996). This group has since been joined by others fleeing incursions by land-hungry Spanish-speakers on the Kuringwas, Sequia and Pilan rivers. Most people of Kara, however, consider themselves to be Miskitu and have no competence at all in Ulwa. Walpa, situated on an estuary of one of the Rio Grande’s tributaries, though relatively small, is almost entirely ethnically and linguistically Miskitu. It is said that Karawala people enjoy good relations with the inhabitants of Walpa, just as they do with those of Rio Grande Bar and Kara.

More vexing is the relationship between Karawala villagers and the people of Sandy Bay Sirpi, a large ethnically Miskitu Karacomunity of similar size, situated on the Caribbean shore a little north of the mouth of the Rio Grande. Sandy Bay Sirpi, home to families involved in fishing, catching lobster and the finding and sale of cocaine thrown overboard by smugglers, is said to be much wealthier than Karawala. It is said in Karawala that Sandy Bay Sirpi people resent the fact that Karawala, home to the Sumus whom they allegedly despise, is now the municipal capital. Karawala villagers often depict Sandy Bay Sirpi as a dangerous place, especially after dark, where rape, violence and theft by *rakman*, men addicted to crack cocaine, are commonplace. Many Ulwas say that violence and aggression are traits that are characteristic of the Miskitu, and maintain that in this respect Sandy Bay Sirpi is typical. This view of Sandy Bay Sirpi aggression is, no doubt, partly inherited from ancestors who experienced Miskitu domination of the Sumu in previous centuries. However, it is also couched in the knowledge that the appearance from the early 1990s onwards of large amounts of cocaine has brought many problems to coastal villages like Sandy Bay Sirpi, where men’s work at sea brings them into regular contact with both the drug itself and others involved in trafficking.¹²

Josefa, a woman in her seventies, blames much of what she saw as dysfunctional in Karawala – theft, violence and drug abuse in particular – as being ‘Miskitu’ practice. One part of Karawala, the side of the village nearest the savannah known as Twi Said (literally ‘by the grass’), is the home to a number of Miskitu families from Sandy Bay Sirpi and communities to the north. One man told me that much of the trouble in Karawala emanated in this particular part of the town, adding with some venom that this was because they were ‘Miskitu’.

Mindful of supposed Miskitu aggression towards Sumus and the fact that the former are said to despise the latter, many Ulwas in recent decades have, Karawala people say, become ashamed to speak the Ulwa language (see also Green 1996). As Josefa, who still sometimes speaks Ulwa with her husband and other elders, vehemently explained, ‘*Miskitu pulisa*’ (‘they play at being Miskitu’). Sarah, a woman in her fifties, explained that although her mother was actually Miskitu, she (Sarah) learned to speak Ulwa as a child and used it as a joint first language during her childhood. She told me that her daughter Rosa, now in her thirties, refused to speak Ulwa as a child, because she thought people from other places laughed at it. Many villagers echoed Sarah’s view that children are to blame for refusing to learn it, but there is also a substantial body of opinion that blames parents for refusing to ‘teach’ (*lan munaia*) it to their offspring.

Jorge, a young man in his twenties, explained the loss of Ulwa in Karawala in rather more sociological terms. Jorge lives in the ‘Miskitu’ Twi Said part of Karawala, but both his parents are Ulwa. He understands the Ulwa language but does not use it himself since hardly anyone else does. Like the great majority of villagers, Jorge uses Miskitu exclusively. He attributes the impending loss of Ulwa to the fact that so many Karawala girls establish conjugal unions with Miskitu men from outside the village. Since Karawala Ulwas speak Miskitu but Miskitus rarely speak Ulwa, Miskitu (the district lingua franca) consequently

becomes the language of the household, and children raised in such households therefore feel more at ease using Miskitu. It is widely reported by social scientists following Conzemius (1932: 147) that the Sumu as a whole rarely allow their sons and daughters to marry people of other groups such as the Miskitu, but as Jorge pointed out this is certainly not true for people of Karawala.

The existence of ‘mixed’ Miskitu–Ulwa households and the supposed Miskitu denigration of ‘Sumu’ language and culture no doubt contributed to the displacement of Ulwa by Miskitu. However, Karawala children born into ‘mixed’ conjugal unions at one time invariably grew up speaking Ulwa, as was the case with Sarah. Indeed, as Green (1999:19) notes, until 1950 Ulwa seems to have been surprisingly resistant to displacement by Miskitu. In hindsight, as Green argues, it was a single circumstance that produced a tipping, or turning, point (ibid.:21–2) – one that set in motion the processes that, sadly, will almost certainly bring about the eventual disappearance of Ulwa.

This circumstance was the appearance of the Nolan Lumber Company, known to Karawala people simply as Nolan. As I noted above, capitalist enterprises, and in particular logging companies, have been active on the Mosquito Coast for much of the last century and a half. Between 1950 and 1957, Nolan, one of the biggest of these companies, set up an operation extracting mahogany, pine and other kinds of timber from the lands around the lower Rio Grande. Nolan’s centre of operations was Karawala, previously a rather sleepy village of (as noted above) predominantly Ulwa speakers centred on a Moravian Church mission. Until then the population of Karawala was probably less than 400. Nolan needed a large workforce of men to work both in their camps along the river (between Karawala and Makantaka) and in their headquarters in Karawala. Men seeking work came to the village from all over the region, increasing the population to at least 800 and probably more than 1,000 (4,000 by one local estimate!). Some were Creoles, a number of whom, by virtue of

their competence in English, worked in administrative and supervisory capacities; others were Mestizos, mostly unskilled Spanish-speakers from the interior; others, who came to set up stores, were Chinese. The great majority, however, were Miskitus, mostly unskilled workers who had little to offer but their labour power. This expanded population of mainly men was serviced by a number of shops (most run by the Chinese), a company airstrip, a cinema and a brothel. And so for seven years the Ulwa became more or less a linguistic minority in their own town, outnumbered by a Miskitu majority. When, in 1957, Nolan pulled out of Karawala, most of the Miskitu workers also departed, and the community shrank to its former size, but by then a death blow to the future of Ulwa had already been dealt.¹³

The Miskitu language, already spoken as a second language by the Ulwa and, thanks to the Moravian Church, the community's language of liturgy, became Karawala's lingua franca during the Nolan period. The town's children, cognizant of the despised status of the 'Sumu' language, took advantage of the opportunity to acquire Miskitu. Most, both then and subsequently, decided to abandon the Ulwa language, as did Sarah's daughter Rosa. Many adopted a Miskitu identity that had now become readily available. By the time Nolan pulled out of Karawala in 1957, the majority of children aged ten or less were primarily Miskitu speakers. Most were passively competent in Ulwa, but many refused to speak it. A linguist working in Karawala in 2006 told me of Angela, a woman in her sixties with whom he spoke Ulwa, a language that she had not otherwise spoken in nearly half a century. He also told me that only one person under the age of twenty spoke Ulwa with any fluency.

It was thus a single circumstance, the arrival of Nolan, that ushered in Miskitu as the community's mother tongue and initiated the processes that are leading, apparently inevitably, to the eventual loss of Ulwa in Karawala and, therefore, in Nicaragua. It was

similarly a single circumstance that has led to the abandonment by children of the Miskitu language in Kakabila, to which I now turn.

Language shift in Kakabila

There are today about 140,000 speakers of Miskitu, mostly living between Pearl Lagoon in eastern Nicaragua and Ibans Lagoon in north-eastern Honduras, as well as along the Rio Coco. Almost all consider themselves to be ‘ethnically’ Miskitu. Although there are regional dialectal variations, these are generally by no means great. In most Miskitu villages, other languages are comparatively rarely heard and those people who acquire fluency in other languages, most often Spanish, generally only do so once they reach adulthood. The Pearl Lagoon basin Miskitu villages, the southernmost of the diaspora, are, however, rather different in this respect. In these communities, children now grow up bilingual, speaking either both Miskitu and Creole (Mosquito Coast Creole English) or as apparently monolingual speakers of Creole.

Kakabila is one of the six traditionally Miskitu villages in the Pearl Lagoon basin that are experiencing a process whereby Creole has apparently been displacing Miskitu. In another of these communities, Haulover, villagers abandoned the Miskitu language about a hundred years ago and, though many still insist that they are ‘Indians’ (and therefore Miskitu), others consider themselves to be Creole. In the larger village of Tasbapauni and the neighbouring hamlet of Set Net Point, Miskitu is still spoken, but only nowadays by elders aged fifty or more. Most children growing up in these villages have no or little competence in Miskitu, and it is safe to say that the Miskitu language is likely to disappear in these villages in the next thirty or so years. In Raitipura and Awas, children still grow up speaking Miskitu but, like their parents, they are also fully fluent in Creole. Added to this, the distinctive

variety of Miskitu spoken in these two villages demonstrates a particularly strong lexical and syntactic Creole influence.

In Kakabila the situation is quite different to that in Haulover. Here adults aged twenty-five or more generally speak Miskitu to one another, and report that at one time only Miskitu was spoken in the village (though villagers were universally fluent in Creole, which they deployed when speaking to non-villagers). Today, however, children of eighteen years or less almost universally use Creole with one another as well as with adults. Between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, the language habits of villagers are less predictable, varying more widely according to context. These data suggest that Kakabila is abandoning the Miskitu language and that Creole is displacing Miskitu, as it has done in Haulover and is evidently doing in Tasbapauni and Set Net Point. Longitudinal study of bilingualism in Kakabila, however, reveals a different and more interesting picture. I return to this below.

There are a number of factors that have contributed to the loss of Miskitu and the adoption of Creole amongst Kakabila children, some of which are necessary but not sufficient conditions. Creole is much more prestigious than Miskitu since it is recognized as being a variety of English and consequently a language of international importance; in local terms the English language, and its Creole variant, represents 'advancement'. Thus Kakabila parents, though offered the Miskitu–Spanish primary school bilingual education programme by the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education, have chosen to receive the English–Spanish equivalent. They say that their children, already passive Miskitu speakers, have no need to learn how to read and write the language. Acquisition of the arcane English spelling system, however, *is* important. This is particularly the case for those boys who wish to get work on the cruise ships, since the company representatives looking at applicants insist on demonstrable competence in English. In any case, Kakabila people have regular, often close, dealings with Creole speakers in Pearl Lagoon, Bluefields and other places, but

comparatively few with Spanish-speaking Mestizos, few of whom speak Miskitu. It is therefore important that they speak Creole and this is the reason, according to some Kakabila people, why parents talk to their children in Creole and not in Miskitu. Some villagers regard this as a necessary evil. The children are very possibly 'losing their language' but they are acquiring a skill that they most definitely need, for although Kakabila people have spoken Creole for generations, they have previously done so as a second language.

Until the mid 1980s Kakabila children almost uniformly spoke Miskitu, both with one another and with adults, just as most adults in the village speak it with one another today. This all changed in 1985 during the Contra War when the people of Kakabila were evacuated following a fierce battle that took place in the village. The villagers, already traumatized by repeated incursions of government soldiers and MISURASATA insurgents during the previous months, were told that the town was no longer safe to live in. They were consequently evacuated to Pearl Lagoon town, an almost uniformly Creole-speaking community, where most remained for two years until returning to Kakabila in 1987. Some villagers subsequently spent their time as refugees in other communities, though these also were mainly Creole speaking, but most remained in Pearl Lagoon, living with friends or relatives. For two years, therefore, Kakabila children grew up and engaged with Pearl Lagoon's majority Creole English-speaking people. Kakabila people regard adults and children (defined in social terms) as being quite distinct, and members of the two groups converse remarkably infrequently.¹⁴ This being so, the Kakabila children who, comparatively speaking, socialize themselves to a considerable extent, rather easily acquired their language habits from their Creole-speaking age mates rather than from their parents. By the time they returned to Kakabila in 1987, those less than four or five years old had become, or were destined to become, Creole speakers. Children born and raised in the village since 1987 have also become Creole speakers. Other children speak Creole with them, as now do their

parents. Older children who had already acquired Miskitu as their mother tongue by 1985, however, continued to speak Miskitu with one another and adults, though not with younger children, but by the mid 1990s, these older children had become young adults; Miskitu was now the language of adults, and Creole had become, for Kakabila people, a children's language, a state of affairs that remains the case today (Jamieson 2007).

It is interesting to note that in Kakabila there is a more or less readily discernable cut-off point in terms of age. Almost all villagers older than 24 or 25 habitually use Miskitu with one another (though not with those who are younger), while those younger than about 23 tend to speak Creole with others. In other words, the switch from Miskitu to Creole was neither gradual nor staggered. This supports the assertion of many villagers that it was during their period of exile in Pearl Lagoon that Kakabila children 'stole' (*implikan*) the Creole language from their Pearl Lagoon hosts, bringing new language habits back to the town during the re-occupation of Kakabila in 1987. Evidently, children exiled to Pearl Lagoon when more than about two years old retained Miskitu as their mother tongue, while those who were younger became primarily speakers of Creole.

With few children or young adults apparently speaking Miskitu, visitors to Kakabila often speculate that the Miskitu language will eventually disappear in the town. Many villagers, however, do not agree. The village's children are almost all clearly passively competent in Miskitu, they say, and will speak it when they get older. It is easy to argue that this is wishful thinking, that Kakabila adults voicing this opinion do not want to believe that the community's 'proper' language, Miskitu, is being abandoned. Closer examination, however, reveals that there is, in fact, evidence that supports this view. As Kakabila adolescents younger than 23 approach social adulthood, defined by villagers to some extent in terms of the attainment of parental responsibility, many acquire new linguistic habits, and begin to use Miskitu with other socially defined adults. The distinction that Kakabila make

between those socially defined in terms that may be glossed as ‘children’ (*tuktan*) and ‘adults’ (*upla almuk*) is so absolute that adolescents engaged in the process of attaining social adulthood find they are usefully served by speaking Miskitu, the language of adults, with their would-be peers, rather than Creole, which in intergenerational contexts is perceived as the language of childhood. Kakabila adults often make the point that they do not ‘talk’ (*aisaia* or *laka paskaia*) with children, and chase them from locations where they are talking with other adults. Children thus reinvent themselves as adults by turning from Creole to Miskitu, perpetuating a situation in which Creole has become a children’s language and Miskitu an adults’ language.

Sociolinguists often find that ‘adults’ and ‘children’ use different sociolects or registers of the language of a speech community. Rarely, however, do they find that completely different languages represent generationally distinct registers as they do in Kakabila. Of course, it may be the case that analogous forms of inter-generational diglossia exist in similar contexts of language shift, and indeed instances of this do turn up in the sociolinguistic literature. However, I have been unable to find any instances of such radical distinctions between adults’ and children’s languages persisting over time, the assumption being that reports of these are time-bound snapshots of particular moments during the process of language loss. This lacuna in the literature may be due to the fact that anthropologists and sociolinguists rarely do fieldwork for more than two years and therefore are unable to get much sense of how speech communities change over time. I have now been working in Kakabila for twenty-one years and have been impressed by the durability of the linguistic distinction between adults and children, as Creole-speaking children in significant numbers over the years consistently switch to Miskitu while they negotiate their passage to adulthood. Whether this peculiar diglossia will persist far into the future, however, is a question that is impossible to answer, and there are already some indications that in the part of the village

close to the wharf, Creole immigration may bring about the eventual loss of Miskitu. Adult-child diglossia may thus be said to be fairly stable for the intermediate future as village endogamy remains statistically significant, but it is quite likely to disappear within a matter of decades.

A number of factors may therefore have encouraged the emergence of Miskitu-Creole bilingualism and diglossia in Kakabila. Among these, one may point to the sense that Creole is a variety of English and therefore an internationally important language that children should be encouraged to master. One might also consider the fact that Creole is the dominant language in the Pearl Lagoon basin, in terms of both the number of speakers and its relationship with economic and political power. One might also consider the role of the English bilingual education programme in Kakabila's primary school, and also the general disapproval in the community of children conversing with adults. These factors, however, while perhaps necessary conditions for the appearance of distinct intra-generational sociolects, were not sufficient. Rather it took a two-year period of exile in Creole-speaking Pearl Lagoon to bring these into existence, a single historical interlude that, like the arrival of Nolan in Karawala, produced a tipping point that changed the linguistic landscape of the community forever.¹⁵

Conclusion

The evidence from Karawala and Kakabila suggests that relatively marginalized languages in many speech communities are often surprisingly resistant to change if left to themselves. Karawala, for example, was primarily Ulwa speaking for generations in spite of the fact that it was essentially an enclave, isolated from other Ulwa communities, in a district of predominantly Miskitu-speaking villages. Kakabila, similarly, was Miskitu speaking for

centuries despite the economic and political dependence of the community on neighbouring Pearl Lagoon, a larger Creole-speaking town. In Karawala, Ulwa persisted until the arrival of the Nolan Lumber Company, while in Kakabila Miskitu continues to persist despite its abandonment by children because the use of these languages index(-ed) community, as opposed to individual, values (Jamieson 2003, 2008, 2010). What eventually initiated the changes described above in both cases were extraordinary events that produced tipping points after which local language landscapes were forever altered.

Minority languages are often surprisingly resistant to displacement by the languages with greater socio-political or economic power that beleaguer them, particularly if the former remain the languages of community. In this way Karawala and Kakabila successfully resisted, respectively, linguistic displacement by Miskitu and Creole English for many generations. In instances of this kind it is instead demographic displacements in which populations of such communities find themselves as minorities within their places of residence, whether in exile as with the people of Kakabila between 1985 and 1987 or at home as in Karawala during the mass immigration of labourers during the Nolan period between 1950 and 1957, that result in dramatic changes to language habits.

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¹ I use the term Sumu as a term of reference to encompass both Mayangna (Northern Sumu) and Ulwa (Southern Sumu). Some, though by no means all, Mayangna regard the term 'Sumu' as an ethnonym with insulting connotations that has been imposed on them by others. Others, however, regard the term 'Mayangna' as 'inauthentic' and have reclaimed the term 'Sumu'. I do not use the term 'Mayangna' as an all-inclusive substitute for 'Sumu' since this term (meaning the inclusive 'we' in the Panamahka, Tuahka and Tawahka languages of the north) does not exist in Ulwa (inclusive 'we', according to Green, being 'mining'). Green suggests that the term 'Muih' would be a better ethnonym for the Sumu in general since this word means 'person' in both Panamahka-Tuahka and Ulwa (Green 1999:11). See Hale and Benedicto (2004) for discussion of these issues.

² Jamieson (n.d.) contains some of my reservations with the term 'frontier' as it has been applied to the Nicaraguan context and more generally. See Hale (1994) for discussion of 'Anglo-affinity' and hostility towards 'Spaniards' among the Miskitu in the late twentieth century.

³ British governments meanwhile vacillated between recognizing the Mosquito Coast as sovereign Spanish or Nicaraguan territory and regarding it as an unofficial protectorate of Britain (Floyd 1967:26–38; Gordon 1998:30–50). See Dozier (1985) and Naylor (1989) for discussions of this history.

⁴ As early as the late seventeenth century, Miskitus had used English to facilitate access to the trade with buccaneers, Shoremen and traders, as well as jobs with English-speaking employers (Jamieson 1998:714).

⁵ The Miskitu habit of dressing ‘right English gentleman fashion’ must have also distinguished them from the Paya and Sumu groups in the interior to a considerable extent (Naylor 19895:36). For a detailed account of the Miskitu adaptation to culture contact, see Helms (1971).

⁶ Distinctions between Miskitu on the one hand and the closest Sumu groups like the Bawihka on the other were quite possibly anything but clear-cut during the pre-contact and early post-contact period, particularly in view of the fact that the Sumu languages are almost identical in syntactic structure to Miskitu (Hale 1991:40–1).

⁷ See also Anon. (1929:319) and Heath (1950:28).

⁸ Much of what I describe for Kakabila and Karawala is based on first-hand knowledge obtained through intensive fieldwork and remains therefore unreferenced. I have conducted fieldwork in Kakabila during 1992/3, 1997, 1998, 1999/2000, 2002 (twice), 2004, 2005/6, and 2009/10; fieldwork in Karawala was conducted during 2006. Green’s contextualizations of his accounts of the Ulwa language has also been exceptionally valuable (Green 1996, 1999:xx–xx: 0-28).

⁹ I do not have space in this chapter to consider issues to do with the use of the ethnographic present. I remain in continual contact with Kakabila people by telephone and feel that my current knowledge of the state of affairs in that village justifies my use of the present tense. I am less comfortable using the present in the case of Karawala, as I am less up to date with developments there since my fieldwork in 2006. I beg the reader’s indulgence in allowing me to use the present for stylistic reasons, while asking him or her to remain aware of the distinct possibility that much of what I write for this community (and indeed Kakabila) may have changed, even as this book is published.

¹⁰ The most informative and thoughtful discussion of the history and distribution of the Ulwa, I have found, is Green (1999: 10-22). The most authoritative account of the Sumu peoples in

general, as far as I am aware, is Houwald (2003). See Hale and Benedicto (2004) for issues surrounding the ethnonyms ‘Mayangna’, ‘Sumu’, ‘Tuahka’, ‘Panamahka’ and ‘Ulwa’.

¹¹ Because of its age, the rapid advancement of the *campesino* frontier into eastern Nicaragua and the disruptions occasioned by the Contra War during the 1980s, the survey by Houwald and Jenkins (1975) of the distribution of the Sumu peoples, including the Ulwa, must now be regarded more as a fascinating historical document than as an accurate account of the present-day locations of the Ulwa and other Sumu groups. Whether the mysterious and partly Ulwa-speaking community of Santa Isabel on Mahogany Creek described by Palombieri (1967) is the same community as Virgen is unclear.

¹² See Dennis (2003, 2004:260–70) for discussion of the role of cocaine in the transformation of Miskitu communities to the north.

¹³ See Green and Hale (1998) for speculation on the future of the Ulwa language.

¹⁴ I have explored the significance of the stark distinction made by Kakabila people between adults (*upla almuk*) and children (*tuktan*) in Jamieson (2001).

¹⁵ For the complexities of Miskitu–English–Spanish multilingualism on Corn Island, see Minks (2013).