

Isleño Spanish language preservation in Louisiana: 227 years of abandonment, language contact, and invisible immigration

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Isleño Spanish is a historical, orally preserved and transmitted Spanish variety being spoken as a native language until recently in the Saint Bernard Parish area of Louisiana. This language arrived in the United States with the Spanish colonizers brought by Governor Gálvez in the 18th century. This variety which lasted until hurricane Katrina forced the community dismantling in 2005 experienced astonishing grammatical preservation amid internally and socially motivated changes. Soon after the Isleños had settled in the Louisiana swamps in 1778, the Spanish crown cut off all ties with this population and after having endured isolation, the community welcomed economic exchanges with neighboring Anglo and French Creole speakers in the 19th century (Fortier, 1894). Isleño Spanish (IS henceforth) can be described as an Atlantic or southern variety characterized by an unstable atonic vocalic system and yet a stable tonic one. IS tends to weaken final consonants and it is *seseante*, and *yeísta*. Other phonological processes proper of IS includes metathesis, aphaeresis and apocope.

Due to the arrival of the state school system and the roads in Saint Bernard, as well as to intermarriage (with subsequent loss of language transmission inter-generationally), and to the pressure toward English as the de facto official language of the United States, the Isleños' community started shifting from Spanish monolingualism, to unstable bilingualism and diglossia with Spanish being relegated to the domestic sphere and to traditional occupations (farming and fishing) with the majority of the population shifting towards English (Gayarré 1903; Kammer 1941). By the 1970s, it was evident that Isleño Spanish as a community language was approaching extinction and only a dozen of speakers over 50 spoke it fluently. In the 1980s, community awareness of their dwindling language and culture prompted a revitalization movement that encouraged numerous *décima* singing events and genealogy and duck carving workshops. The Isleño's Museum was also created. In 1990s when data collection and sociolinguistics interviews for this presentation began, only a handful of Isleños spoke the language fluently.

Due to the slow community linguistic shifting towards English, most research studies have focused on language loss and attrition (MacCurdy, 1948a, 1950, 1975; Armistead 1979, 1991; Coles 1991b, 1999; Lipski 1984, 1985e, 1990c). Lipski (1985a, 1987c, 1993; Coles 1991a) even found parallel processes in Isleño Spanish and in Creole speech varieties. Very little attention has been placed, though, on the astonishing unity and cohesion of IS grammar as it was preserved by this handful of older speakers (Alvar, M. 1998). Most linguistic studies had highlighted the English and, to some extent, French influence on IS. Some also noted the occasional Spanish immigration from Latin America, as from the Dominican Republic after the Haitian revolution, and even mentioned families which immigrated from Spain in recent times. However, this sporadic immigration does not account for the extraordinary language unity and grammar preservation as recorded in the speech of my three research subjects, Mr. Joseph Chelito Campos, Mr. Irvan Perez and, Mr. Allen Perez, 102, 78 and 75-year-old by the time they were interviewed in 1996 (Perez, I. 2004).

This poster describes IS as it was preserved by its last fluent speakers. It also compares IS in 2000 with the 18th century variety brought to the United States (Morera 2004). Likewise, this study revisits the evolution of IS at discrete points in time, and it shows the degree of language preservation evidenced in the speech of these three subjects. My poster will also highlight the need for further research on immigration patterns unaccounted for, and which might explain the surprising unity and survival of IS in its last stages without a written norm and surrounded by French and English. From a linguistic standpoint, my research calls out for future analysis given the disparity in opinions regarding the presence and absence and the uniqueness of certain consonantal features and phonological processes such as final velar [n], adherent alveo-palatal fricative [ʃ] realization, and consonantal metathesis. From a morphological perspective, future studies on gender reassignment in IS and in other Latin American Spanish varieties might shed some light on still unanswered questions (Rosenblat, 1962). Lastly, but most importantly, this paper wishes to pay homage to the last voices of the Isleño Spanish speakers of Louisiana, and to identify language and culture repositories, *décima* singers and community leaders.

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