

My work on the Palenquero language (San Basilio de Palenque, Colombia)



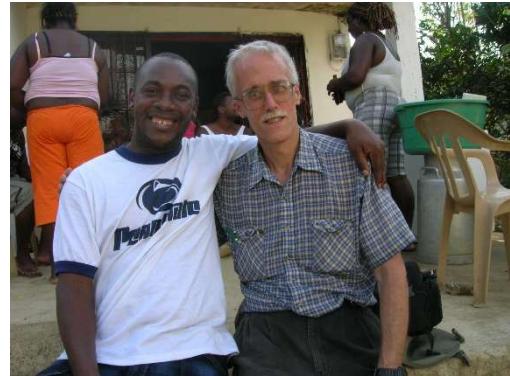
Like most creolists, I had always been aware of the existence of the Afro-Colombian creole language known to linguists as Palenquero and to its speakers as *lengua (ri Palenge)* ‘the language of Palenque,’ spoken in the village of San Basilio de Palenque. Palenque was founded in the 17th century by maroons (enslaved Africans who escaped captivity in Cartagena de Indias and successfully resisted recapture). The Palenquero creole language came to the attention of linguists in the widely-disseminated seminal article by Bickerton and Escalante (1970), in some articles by Germán de Granda, and later in the Friedemann and Patiño monograph (1983). By the mid 1980’s Armin Schwegler began his research on Palenquero, and quickly rose to prominence as a major authority on all things Palenquero. I had known Armin since his graduate student days and he steadily supplied me with his extensive publications and unpublished notes, and I was also friends with Bill Megenney, who had published another monograph on Palenquero. Although by this time I was actively researching Afro-Hispanic language past and present, I felt no urge to study Palenquero, given the excellent work by so many prominent scholars; I kept abreast of their work, especially Armin’s. Then in 1996 I was invited to a conference on Afro-Caribbean and Palenque in Cartagena, together with Schwegler, Megenney, Bickerton, Escalante, Yves Moñino, and several other creolists (Germán de Granda was hospitalized at the time, and we all sent him our greetings). The invited lectures were eventually published:

Palenque, Cartagena y Afro-Caribe: historia y lengua, ed. Yves Moñino and Armin Schwegler (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002).

The conference was opened in the Palenquero language by a political representative from Palenque and other Palenqueros participated in the event. It was here that I first met Víctor

Simarra, Armin's main collaborator and *compadre*, an important Palenquero cultural activist. On the final afternoon the organizers chartered an off-duty *chiva* (small bus) and took us to Palenque itself, on an awful dirt road that was almost impassable even on foot. The Palenqueros welcomed us with food and music, and I met the man who was to become my true soul brother, Raúl Salas. In the yard of Víctor's mother's house, I made a few recordings of Palenquero, just to have as a souvenir (still not planning to do any further work on Palenquero).

Things were to change in 2008, when I attended the biennial meeting of the Afro-Latin American Research Association, that year held in Cartagena. Víctor Simarra was one of our guests, and at my suggestions, we hired a van to drive us to Palenque (this time over a slightly improved road). We visited the high school, where I discovered that the Palenquero language was being taught (sort of) to young monolingual Spanish speakers, in an attempt to stave off the often-predicted demise of Palenquero (predicted by nearly all of the participants in the 1996 conference, among others). I met the ain Palenquero teacher, Bernardino Pérez Miranda, who would quickly become my main research collaborator.



Bernardino Pérez Miranda

Once I realized that monolingual Spanish speakers were acquiring Palenquero as an L2 in school, I immediately saw the linguistic implications, since Palenquero has no verb-subject agreement or nominal inflection for gender and number, in lexically cognate structures. Before putting any of this to the test I spent a couple of years obtaining many recordings of Palenquero and acquiring proficiency in the language. These first steps led to the study of Palenquero intonation





My next step was to trace the psycholinguistic boundaries separating Spanish from Palenquero, from the speakers' own perspective. Linguists' descriptions included only creole morphosyntactic elements that differ from Spanish, and regarded unmistakably Spanish-only fragments as code-switching or just interference. My first incursion into interactive experimental work was to present participants with a selection of extracts from previous interviews that from my perspective were (1) all Spanish; (2) all Palenquero; (3) a mixture of Spanish and Palenquero. It turns out that even the expert Palenquero speakers—including the teachers and other activists—accept as “pure” Palenquero combinations that include conjugated verbs, preverbal clitics, etc. After exploring this on several occasions I published several articles with details of the findings.

An important L2 research question is the extent to which post-critical period learners can fully acquire functional categories not present in their L1. In the case of Spanish as L2, this includes gender and number concord in noun phrases (DPs) and verb-subject agreement. However, no one had explored the opposite question: whether it is possible to fully deactivate at will natively-acquired functional categories. The acquisition of Palenquero as L2 by native Spanish speakers provided a perfect test case, since most of the lexicon is highly cognate or identical, but lacking any agreement mechanisms. My first experimental work on the persistence of feminine gender agreement yielded my first publication in an indisputably psycholinguistic journal (*Language and Cognitive Processes*, which became *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience* between my initial submission and eventual acceptance). After amassing even more experimental data, I successfully obtained an NSF grant to explore in depth the implications of L2 Palenquero acquisition by Spanish speakers. At the same time, I explored the psycholinguistic reality of Palenquero-Spanish code-switching. I developed a number of experimental techniques, including detection of small differences, concurrent memory-loaded repetition, close-shadowing, rapid translation, speeded acceptability judgments with repetition, 2-alternative forced choice (2AFC), and some rudimentary eye-tracking using a high-resolution camcorder and ELAN transcriptions.

My work in Palenque was enriched when I was able to train Penn State undergraduate and graduate students (and one year, also UC-Riverside) under the auspices of two NSF PIRE grants (Partnership in International Research and Education). Helping the students develop and carry out their projects sharpened my own knowledge of all things Palenquero, and by living with a

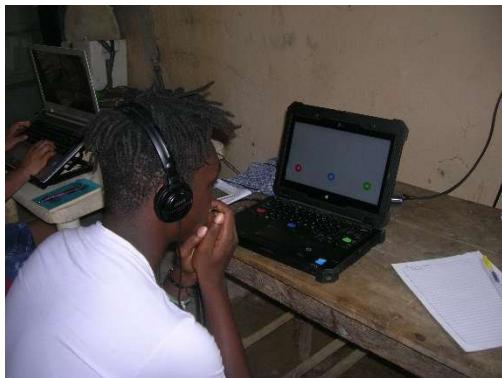
Palenquero family for weeks at a time we generated an immense amount of good will and lasting friendships.

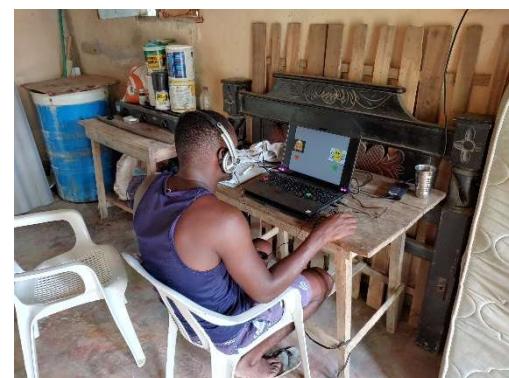


Ana Joaquina Cásseres “Joaquinita” (our amazing hostess; mi hermana del alma)



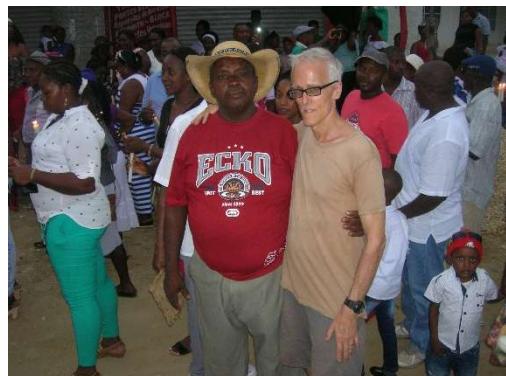
I was eventually able to acquire two Tobii portable eye-trackers, which enabled me to carry out fine-grained eyetracking and pupillometry experiments.





My years of research in Palenque gave me the opportunity to meet and become friends with some amazing people. Inevitably, some are no longer with us, but I will cherish their memories forever.

Raúl Salas Hernández [q.e.p.d.]



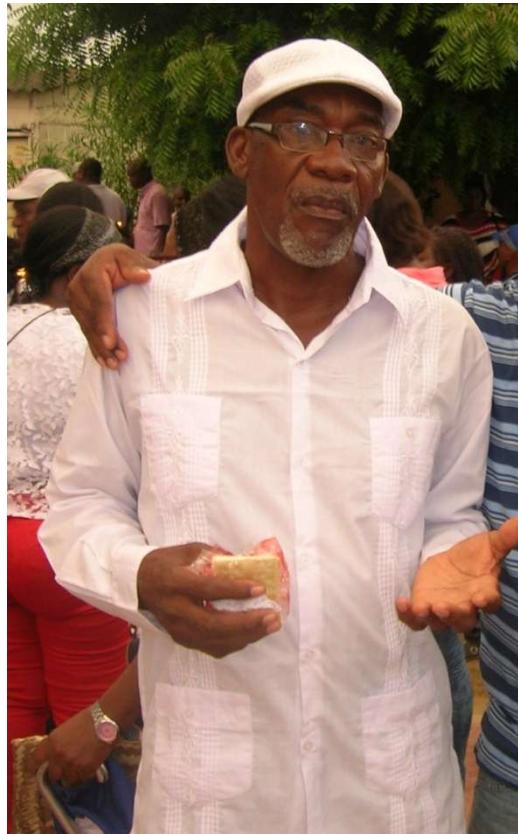
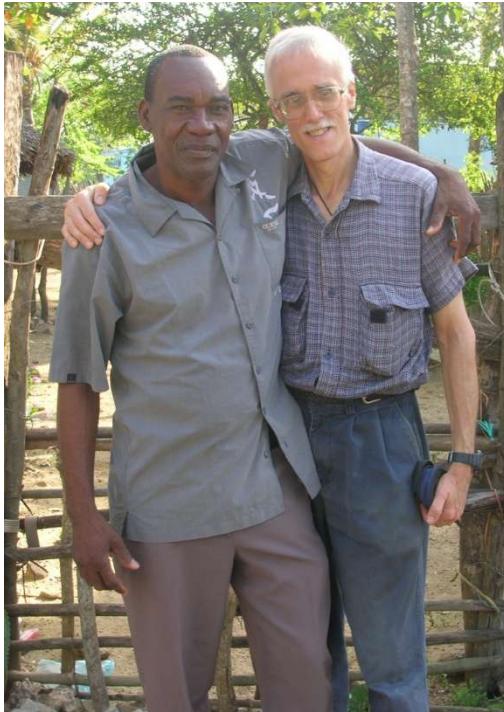




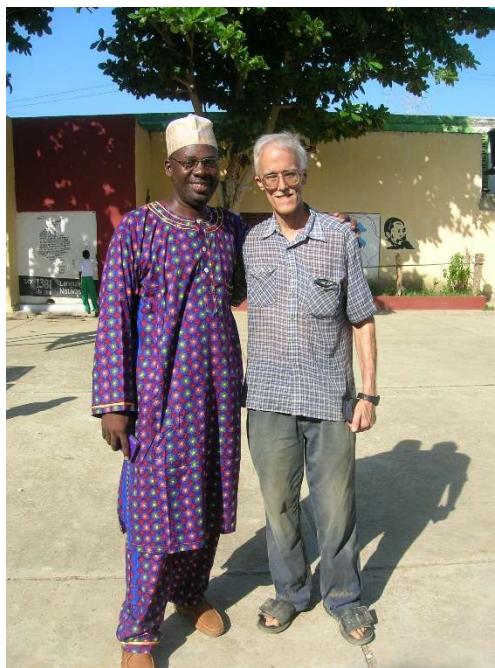
Raúl Salas Hernández [q.e.p.d.]



Bernardino and Raúl in San Cayetano



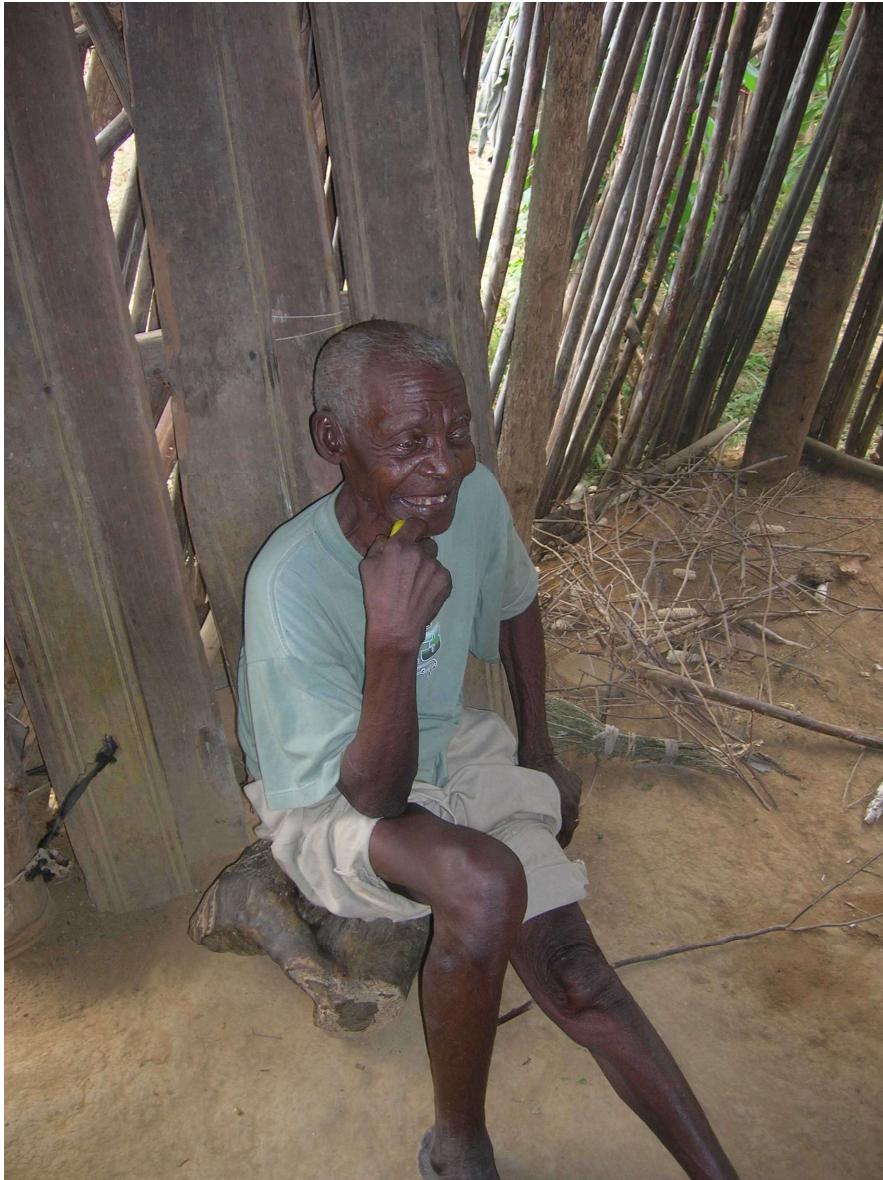
Víctor Simarra Reyes



Sebastián Salgado (w/ Basilia Pérez)



Rafael Cassiani Cassiani [q.e.p.d.] - Sexteto Tabalá



Francisco Cañate "Siquito" [q.e.p.d.] - medicinal plant expert



Evaristo Márquez [q.e.p.d.]-acted in 4 movies, including “Burn” with Marlon Brando



María Reyes [q.e.p.d.], Víctor's mother

SOME MORE GLIMPSES







Palenqueros in Barranquilla







