

ABSTRACT

A submerged facet of Trinidad's social history is retrieved from a century of neglect and from virtual obliteration by a close examination of the language spoken by second and third generation descendants of late nineteenth century Yorùbá indentured labourers.

An attempt is made to reconstruct the restricted social context in which Yorùbá functioned among the first generation immigrants in a post-slave society.

In the twentieth century, Yorùbá increasingly manifests symptoms of language death - its corpus largely mnemonic, its functionality confined to affective and symbolic purposes, and integrative only in a religious capacity. By the 1960s its isolated residual speakers are found to exhibit a wide divergence in linguistic competence. Productive discourse is minimal, and only rarely extensive; monostylism and shrinkage in syntactic range are marked, as are an impoverishment in the lexical inventory, and the absence of polysemy. On the other hand, lexical innovations and semantic shifts are evidenced, particularly in the vocabulary of the cuisine, flora and religious ritual. The incidence of multi-lingual switching is low, though French Creole and English influences have penetrated some syntactic and idiomatic structures. Tonal dislocation and levelling are apparent, but the segmental phonology representatively exhibits the interaction of certain Yorùbá homeland dialect phonologies.

The main dialects in contact correspond with the geographical provenance of the immigrants as indicated by the oral biographical data, which in turn complement the records of population dispersals within Yorubaland during the nineteenth century. These dispersals bear direct relationship to the political and economic factors which account for the Yorùbá presence in Trinidad.