

## ABSTRACT

The Portuguese Language in Trinidad and Tobago:  
A Study of Language Shift and Language Death

Once a living language in Trinidad, Portuguese ceased to be considered by its speakers and their descendants a marker vital to their existence. The Portuguese speech community became vulnerable to language imposition from the wider society, and Portuguese itself has been fully displaced by English. The process of language death spanned two to three generations, resulting from the intertwining of psychological and social causes – particularly member core values, and the pressure of assimilation.

The Portuguese language survived in only a few Trinidadian families which are the products of twentieth century immigration, or in which each generation had at least one immigrant. An analysis of the community's history and demographics serves to show unstable levels of immigration, as well as social mixing that took place through intermarriage. Linguistic change and loss ultimately resulted from such intermixtures, and the community was left exposed to the linguistic norms and values of the outer society, which it adopted to the neglect of its own.

Lexico-semantic and phonological analyses of the language spoken by creoles show evidence of language atrophy in progress, compared to the language brought by the Madeirans. The few lexico-semantic domains that remain are now disappearing. The informants exhibit varying levels of knowledge of the language. The analysis shows systematic linguistic changes, including regular patterns of reduction, as well as isolated changes at the individual level.

Within the contact situation, English was perceived as the language of power, prestige, and possibilities for advancement, which militated against language maintenance in the Portuguese community. The low social status of the original migrants was passed on to the language which was also locally devalued. Language attitudes, in combination with socio-historical factors, are the causes of the shift to English and of the death of Portuguese in Trinidad and Tobago.

Jo-Anne Sharon Ferreira