



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Afro-Hispanic Linguistic Remnants in Mexico: The Case of the  
Costa Chica Region* by Norma Rosas Mayén (review)

Álvaro Ramírez

Hispania, Volume 105, Number 4, December 2022, pp. 641-642 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/872993>

**José Rigoberto Guevara**  
*University of Nebraska-Lincoln*

**Rosas Mayén, Norma.** *Afro-Hispanic Linguistic Remnants in Mexico: The Case of the Costa Chica Region.* Iberoamericana-Vervuert, 2021. Pp. 189. ISBN: 978-84-9192-170-7.

The Afro-Mexican population of the Costa Chica region of southern Mexico, that unjustly remained invisible since the end of the colonial period, has lately drawn the attention of scholars, generating many ethnological and anthropological monographs. Norma Rosas Mayén's *Afro-Hispanic Linguistic Remnants in Mexico: The Case of the Costa Chica Region* is the latest study that brings to light the rich cultural landscape of this geographical area. She, however, shifts the focus to the linguistic heritage found among the Black population of Collantes and La Boquilla in the state of Oaxaca, two of the nearly thirty-seven Afro-Mexican towns of Costa Chica which straddles the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca. The book comprises six chapters and an appendix. The first three chapters center on socio-historical, theoretical, and methodological matters. While the last three take up the analysis of linguistic data the author gathered during her field work.

In the opening chapter, Rosas Mayén lays out a brief history of the presence of Afro-Mexican Spanish in Mexico, emphasizing our lack of knowledge concerning the language of the slave population due to their oral tradition and illiteracy. The few written examples that exist come from colonial legal documents and literary texts such as “villancicos” written by writers from the dominant class, perhaps as imitations that ridiculed the language of the slaves. Nonetheless, the author is interested in exploring the degree to which a creolized variety of Spanish existed and whether there are remnants in Mexico. Additionally, Rosas Mayén cites the urgency of researching and recording this Spanish dialect as globalization and migration are quickly transforming the linguistic characteristics that define “el español negro de la Costa Chica.” Like many other Indigenous languages in Mexico, she believes this Afro-Mexican Spanish is in danger of extinction.

In Chapter 2, “Creole Genesis and the Rhizomatic Linguistic Model,” the author briefly reviews seven theories of the etiology of Creole languages highlighting their theoretical advantages and disadvantages. She underscores the lack of agreement among scholars on the genesis of Creole; then, moves on to postulate theories that explicate the absence of creolized Spanish in the colonies. Next, she traces the socio-historical trajectory of Papiamentu in Curaçao concluding that it is a Creole language that emerged from a mixture of Portuguese and other languages in West Africa. From there, it migrated to Curaçao with the slaves, New Christians, and Sephardic Jews, where it was lexified toward Spanish. Rosas Mayén finishes by positing a view of language based on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's rhizome theory. She proposes that languages exist in a rhizomatic ecological system that privileges a horizontal structure of connections linking them all together. Thus, allowing for linguistic development with multiple points of connection. Rosas Mayén proposes that this model can best help appreciate the multilinguistic origins of Papiamentu and other Afro-Spanish varieties such as those found in la Costa Chica.

In the following chapter, “Methodological and Historical Remarks,” the author refers to the scarcity of studies of Afro-Mexican Spanish in the Costa Chica. Then she presents a thorough explanation of the methodology she employed in her study and a description of the subjects and geographical area where she conducted her research. She closes by giving a brief history of the Afro-Mexicans in Oaxaca. Interestingly, Rosas Mayén contrasts the folkloric version the people tell of their arrival on a ship from where they claim to descend, and the quasi-historical information known. In this point she appears to contradict herself when she asserts Blacks arrived from West Africa, yet later she posits that scholars have not been able to specify exactly from where Afro-Mexicans of this region originate.

Chapter 4, “Phonological Characteristics of Costeño Spanish,” details the sounds that distinguish this costal variety of Spanish. Rosas Mayén notes an array of aspects that scholars have connected to Sub-Saharan languages and rejects these findings since they are also present in other rural varieties of Spanish. Nevertheless, she reveals connections to West African languages in its use of an allophonic variant of /f/, a labialized sound /h/. She also notes a high frequency of the segment /ç/ in words similarly found in neighboring dialects. To Rosas Mayén, this relation to other language varieties, especially to Mexican rural dialects, vestigial Spanish, Caribbean Creole, and West African languages, confirm the rhizomatic quality of Costeño Spanish.

The morphological and syntactic elements of Afro-Mexican Spanish are presented in Chapter 5. In these aspects, the author claims to detect stronger and more frequent relations to African languages. Nonetheless, she is unable to ascertain convincingly a link given that these linguistic features are also characteristic of other Spanish dialects on both sides of the Atlantic. It is not clear whether these morphological and syntactic features are vestiges of a creolized language, evidence of a transition or the degeneration of the language. Rosas Mayén is inclined to accept the latter, declaring it is a case of “language parricide” where “standard” Spanish is slowly killing the Costeño variant. Chapter 6 closes the book with a list of words found in Costeño Spanish some of which the author considers unique to Collantes and La Boquilla. The appendix contains pictures of some Afro-Mexican subjects of this study.

All in all, in *Afro-Hispanic Linguistic Remnants in Mexico: The Case of the Costa Chica Region*, Rosas Mayén presents a clear and concise linguistic analysis of Costeño Spanish which students at all levels of university will find appealing and informative. Her rhizomatic model is very useful for understanding the plurality of linguistic elements present in Afro-Mexican Spanish and the difficulty in pinpointing precisely a link to its African roots. Her assertion that globalization, immigration and even narcotrafficking in the area are having a negative effect on this dialect is intriguing. She does not, however, present much evidence of how this is apparent in the two groups she studied. It will be interesting to see if in the future she amplifies this facet of her research and proposes ways to slow down or even avoid the demise of this Afro-Mexican Spanish dialect.

**Álvaro Ramírez**

*Saint Mary's College of California*