

Buffett Undergraduate Research Fellowship Opportunity

Revitalizing Palenquero: Current Language Initiatives in San Basilio de Palenque

Faculty Mentor: Estilita Maria Cassiani Obeso, Assistant Professor, Weinberg College of Arts & Sciences

Project Synopsis: This project aims to report on the current revitalization process of the Palenquero language spoken in the community of San Basilio de Palenque, Colombia. Palenquero is a Spanish-based creole with linguistic features from the Kikongo language of Africa (Granda, 1971; Schwegler & Correa, 2018). Beginning in the 20th century, the use of Palenquero declined due to discrimination. Members of the community stopped transmitting the language to the next generation. However, attitudes have since changed. UNESCO has declared Palenque a World Heritage Site, the Colombian government has invested in tourism and infrastructure, and many tourists and scholars now visit the community. As a result, Palenquero is currently taught from preschool through secondary school.

Despite these efforts, reports indicate that pedagogical practices and frameworks have not fully met their intended goals. The language is still not frequently spoken by young people—whether at home, school or in other community contexts. Consequently, emerging grammatical innovations by younger speakers do not entirely align with fluent adult usage and are not widely accepted by fluent adult speakers (Lipski, 2014; Cassiani Obeso, 2021, 2022).

Thus, the purpose of this research is to investigate the current initiatives undertaken by community members to revitalize the language and share educational strategies with community members for the teaching of Palenquero, particularly since Palenque's designation as a municipality. We seek to explore the following questions:

1. What actions have been taken to promote the use of Palenquero at home, in school, and in other community contexts?
2. Are younger speakers involved in the language revival, and do they actively communicate in Palenquero with adult speakers?
3. How is the language currently being taught at the local school?

Project Term: Summer and Academic Year

Project Location: Hybrid with travel to Colombia

Job Description: The project will have two parts:

1. Interviewing members of the community about current initiatives for revitalizing the language. For this, we will interview community leaders, the directors and teachers at the local school, as well as parents. In addition, we will compile other documents that provide information about the revitalization process.
2. A workshop to provide educational strategies for improving the teaching of the Palenquero language. Before the trip, we will create a document with tips from professors who have taught Spanish or other languages as a second language.

Responsibilities before, during and after the trip


Before the trip, the selected student will:

1. Meet with the professor for an orientation, during which they will learn about the purpose of the trip, research goals, community history, and norms.
2. First gather a collection of strategies and best practices for teaching a second language. This will also include interactive and communicative activities for beginners to teach basic grammar.
3. Help design the questions for the sociolinguistic interviews with members of the community.

During the trip:

1. During the first two days, students will be introduced to the community, meet its members, and visit key locations in town.
2. In the first week, we will conduct sociolinguistic interviews in Spanish, each lasting 30 minutes. Our goal is to interview 50 people (25 adults and 25 young speakers).
3. We will collect written documents and archives in support of language revitalization.
4. We will conduct school observations, teaching demonstrations, and teacher training.

After the trip, the selected student will:

1. Assist with data organization and transcription.
 2. Write a report on their research goals and experiences.
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3. Give a presentation at an event hosted by the Spanish Club in the Spanish and Portuguese Department.

Special skills required: Proficiency in Spanish, a background in teaching, and strong skills in technology and transcription.

Time Commitment: This project offers flexible hours for preparing before the trip and completing the initial steps. After the trip, students will also have flexibility in finishing their tasks. While in the community, students are expected to work 22 hours per week (total= 44) to achieve the research goals, with flexibility in how those hours are distributed.

Tentative hours: 224

Before the trip: 30 hours

During the trip

- 27= hours of interview
- 10= hours of teaching observation, teaching demo and teacher training
- 7 = hours tour and get to know the community
- Total = 44 hours during the trip. 22 hours each week.

After the trip: 150 hours

Number of available positions: One