

CHAPTER FIVE

LANGUAGE SURVIVAL AND LANGUAGE LOSS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The goal of this book has been to describe the complex linguistic profile of St. Barthélemy and to explain its many anomalies: the fact that its inhabitants are descended from the same original settlers but don't speak the same language, the fact that bilingualism in the local languages is rare to nonexistent, that English is the predominant language of the town, that there are two distinct St. Barth communities in St. Thomas, that its nearby sister colony, St. Martin, is almost entirely English speaking, and, most of all, why this linguistic fragmentation has persisted in this little island for over 250 years. To unravel these anomalies, we evoked the seventeenth century environments that the first inhabitants came from in Europe, Africa and the 'New World' colonies, hoping to discover the mindsets and expectations of these early settlers. We found that most of the early St. Barths had been indentured servants who left the France of absolute monarchy, a powerful church, famines and heavy taxes, and moved to various French islands to seek land of their own to farm.

Next, we traced the history of this dry little island and discovered that one hundred of these early settlers had been forced off the island as a result of the English wars, had settled in a plantation environment in St. Vincent and had returned to St. Barth in the 1780's speaking French Creole, establishing cotton plantations with numerous slaves. Those who returned from St. Vincent ultimately constituted a more affluent social class, leading to geographic and economic divisions in the island. Having been traded to Sweden, the island developed a commercial center at its port in the early nineteenth century and welcomed a multitude of English-speaking residents there. Thus, we were able to explain the presence of English and French Creole in the island along with its traditional Patois. But we still could not explain the persistence of these language varieties over such a long period of time. Thus, we examined the social ecology of the island from descriptions of the early French colonies, from Swedish narratives, from narratives of women's lives, from current evidence of settlement patterns, the history of education and other factors. We found

that there were a number of common elements across these linguistically fragmented social groups but not enough to neutralize the polarizing forces that kept them apart and prevented, until recently, a common language from being adopted; we discovered that the most powerful polarizing forces were the extreme poverty of the population, forcing them to compete for the same sparse resources, and the very slow development of an education system.

In chapter four, we examined the four surviving local languages to determine how distinct from each other they actually are and compared them to other languages with similar histories. We found that the three French varieties share a lexicon and much phonology but differ in significant ways. And we noted the distinctive progressive construction which organizes the St. Barth Patois verbal system. I speculated that this construction was triggered both by a general process of semantic change and by the diffusion of aspect prominent systems in the neighboring Caribbean creoles.

In this final chapter, I draw conclusions about: 1) the social context for language maintenance, and 2) St. Barth vernaculars and language change. But before doing that, we have not yet considered how the St. Barths' attitudes toward the local vernaculars affect language use in the island.

5.2 ATTITUDES AND LANGUAGE USE

When I began my research in St. Barth in 1986, there was little general awareness of linguistic differences. When asked, people responded either that everyone spoke French except for those in Gustavia, or that each little corner of the island had its own 'patois'. The term 'creole' was not widely used and there was little expressed interest in the local language varieties. The first woman I recorded said that I couldn't study her speech because it wasn't a language, it was just bad French. When I transcribed phonetically what she had said, which turned out to be French Creole, and read it back to her, she was amazed. "It is a language!" she said. The negative appraisal of French Creole was not universal but also not uncommon since, in the French Caribbean, Creole is often associated with poor uneducated black speakers. Educated St. Barths from Au Vent have more positive views and can distinguish St. Barth Creole from other French Creoles. While I was there in the late 1980's, a controversy had arisen in Guadeloupe about using Guadeloupean Creole in the elementary schools