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The Vanished Voices of The Caribbean: Spanish Colonialism and the Pre-Columbian languages in the first voyages

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Abstract

The Caribbean Antilles, where its islands stretch from the coast of Venezuela to Florida, has been inhabited by various societies since 4000 B.C., shaping its history alongside its inhabitants. Language is crucial to the definition of history, the most obvious facet of civilizations. While archaeology and ethnography have provided some clues about the origins of the Caribbean's indigenous peoples, linguistic work has scarcely been discussed. For this reason, this work not only aims to provide a linguistic description of pre-Columbian Antillean languages but also to present, synthesize, and attempt to add linguistic analysis to the theoretical debate on the origins of these languages.

Drawing from contemporary documentation (Granberry & Vescelius, 2004) and information from unpublished texts (Bartolomé de las Casas, Ramón Pané), this paper contributes to the discussion on the linguistic origins of the Antilles. Despite the misconception that a single language was spoken on all these islands (De las Casas, 1875:325), some chroniclers have testified otherwise. At least four indigenous languages were spoken in the Greater Antilles: Taíno, Macorís, Ciguayo, and Guanahatabey (Pané, 1875; Arrom, 1975). Taíno originates from the northern Maipura of the Arawak family. At the same time, Ciguayo is theorized to come from the Tolan languages of the Honduras-Belize coast, and Macorís originates from Waroid populations east of Venezuela. In essence, the theory proposes that the Caribbean was initially populated by speakers of the Tolan family, only to be displaced by speakers of the Waroid family through "creolization" and linguistic contact (Granberry & Vescelius, 2004, p. 156). This notion is considerably more archaeological than linguistic due to the lack of linguistic analysis. This article argues against the process of "creolization" and displacement. These findings may be attributed to linguistic contact phenomena such as loans or calques but not to displacement or "creolization."

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