Review of Playing with Languages: Children and Change in a Caribbean village

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organized language revival efforts is a matter of towards Patwa accompanied by officially that the lately pronounced ideological shift postcolonial present, Paugh convincingly shows While attending to Patwa’s colonial past and slavery into a symbol of cultural heritage. from the language associated with backwardness endangered minority language and turned it government of Dominica announced Patwa an preservation. In late contribution to the process of language uncover children’s agency and their remarkable of creole origin, and makes a brilliant attempt to maintenance of Patwa, an endangered language Paugh explores the role that children play in the language socialization in rural Dominica, Amy L. In her beautifully written account of child language socialization in rural Dominica, Amy L. Paugh explores the role that children play in the maintenance of Patwa, an endangered language of creole origin, and makes a brilliant attempt to uncover children’s agency and their remarkable contribution to the process of language preservation. In late 1970s, the postcolonial government of Dominica announced Patwa an endangered minority language and turned it from the language associated with backwardness and slavery into a symbol of cultural heritage. While attending to Patwa’s colonial past and postcolonial present, Paugh convincingly shows that the lately pronounced ideological shift towards Patwa accompanied by officially organized language revival efforts is a matter of discourse rather than practice. The official efforts appear futile as they do not account for the widespread practice whereby real Patwa users remain marginalized and constrained by a political economy that enforces the use of dominant English. Paugh argues that revival activities that valorize a previously oppressed language will inevitably fail if the socio-economic status of its speakers stays the same. She documents that ‘revitalization efforts often clash with the daily experiences of those they claim to help – paradoxically strengthening existing power structures’ (p. 30). In the same vein, the attempt to create literacy supposedly aimed at language preservation ‘seems to further validate social hierarchy, which used to be more clearly dichotomous – English for elite, Patwa for lower classes’. In the midst of her masterful portrayal of complex and conflicting language context in Dominica, the author draws readers to a truly captivating ethnography of language use and child socialization in the remote village of Penville. She meticulously guides us through fine-grained case studies of six local families in order to show that all the parents, regardless of socio-economic status, education, or family background, require their children to speak English at the expense of Patwa. But the poignancy of her account lies not in the latter but in vivid ethnographic observation of the social paradox that, despite parents’, caregivers’, and teachers’ attempts to forbid use of Patwa, the children create their own space in which the language is maintained and retains its emotive and affective salience. The space that provides such an opportunity is children’s play. Paugh shows that while playing outside of the confines of the adult-dominated home space, children actively reproduce adult everyday use of Patwa; specifically, the ways the adults strategically switch between English and Patwa. Such ‘code-switching’ is characterized by Paugh as ‘a potent resource for expressing affective stance’ and ‘evoking the intimacy and solidarity of the home or community’. What follows is that the play becomes the most fruitful arena in which children can independently explore the range of linguistic repertoires in the absence of a vigilant adult. ‘As a forbidden language, Patwa takes on subversive power for children in constructing their own cultures and identities’ (p. 145). While children creatively draw from themes of adult lives and older siblings, they operationalize locally and socially available resources such as physical space, affective speech aimed at verbal control and social manipulation, and artefacts
closely associated with the use of Patwa. Paugh’s sophisticated and detailed ethnography of children’s play illustrates how children serve as agents actively engaged in the maintenance of affective and pragmatic functions of Patwa, which in its turn fosters the creation of their own peer group identities.

The space of children’s play, created and protected by their peers, functions as a critical site of language socialization and a key resource for language maintenance that is largely overlooked in official revival efforts, which focus mainly on school and formal performance. Paugh addresses core empirical issues that revolve around pragmatic constraints of language revitalization efforts, which I find relevant not only for the context of cultural/linguistic preservation in Dominica, but also for other parts of the world where similar efforts and policies are being undertaken (e.g. Siberia and Alaska). Specifically, she posits that in most approaches, language preservation is perceived as resting in the hands of community elders, educated intellectuals, and policy-makers, whereas children’s role is completely underestimated. Nationalist movements that promote an endangered language do not recognize the significance of links between ideology and practice, and it is these links that should be taken into account when developing and implementing programmes aimed at language preservation. Moreover, careful attention to children’s own language ideologies through ethnographic research of unspoken and subversive socialization practices shows that children’s peer interactions offer a critical context for language maintenance in which they can try their native language without evaluation from adults.

Olga Ulturgasheva University of Manchester