Garífuna is the language of the Garífuna people, African descendants who live mostly on the Atlantic coast of Belize, Guatemala and Honduras (including some communities in Los Angeles and New York). Garífuna is an Arawak language which was originally spoken in South America and carried to the Caribbean. During the 16th-18th centuries, numerous Africans lived among the Arawaks of St. Vincent Island and experienced a complete assimilation to their language and culture before being exiled to Central America. Today the language exists mostly in adults; in many families, transmission of Garífuna to children is no longer a priority.

The purpose of this dissertation is to discuss the linguistic origins of the Garífuna language and give a chronological account of its history to modern times. The following questions are addressed in this dissertation: How did a large group of Africans arrive and manage to live free of slavery on St. Vincent Island in the Caribbean, when slavery was an institution on almost every island? How and why is it that the Africans completely “gave up” their own language and customs and take on those of the native Indian people? Also, how is it that their language has such a strong French influence?

Also presented in this study is the voice of the modern Garífuna people through taped interviews obtained in 2009 fieldwork in Livingston, Guatemala, as they discuss their views on the survival of their language, discrimination and cultural pride.