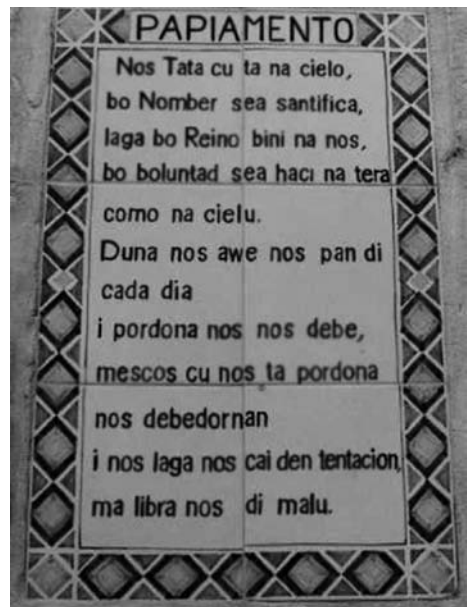


Papiamentu Stands Alone in the Caribbean; or Does It?

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Let us begin this discussion by asking how the Papiamentu language has survived on the ABC islands (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao), especially since these islands are so close to Spanish-speaking Venezuela. The answer is somewhat involved and complicated, so let us first look briefly at the history of this part of the Netherlands Antilles to see what clues can be gleaned from an historical approach.

The ABC islands were discovered in 1499 by Spaniards under the leadership of Alonso de Ojeda. Once the Dutch had entered the Atlantic slave trade by way of the West India Company (WIC), they soon became the dominant power in this lucrative activity, replacing the Portuguese. By 1640 they were well on their way to turning Curaçao into a major transshipment port for African slaves. As such, most of the Africans arriving here presumably would have been speaking their own individual sub-Saharan languages, although it is possible that some may have spoken the Portuguese-based trade language (referred to as *caçanje* or the Reconnaissance language, which was used along the West coast of Africa.¹ Yet, since most of these slaves were transferred to other parts of Latin America, there would not have been a



common sub-Saharan language, or *caçanje*, to initially stay there long enough to take hold and develop. However, by the 1650s, there were supposedly house slaves on Curaçao, who no doubt spoke something other than Dutch. Also, since Dutch was never imposed on the slave population, due to the linguistic indifference of these European peoples, any language spoken by the slaves would have prospered in its own right. But what would this language have

been? Obviously, none of the various and sundry African languages survived, otherwise we would be hearing Wolof or Fulani, or perhaps Temne, being spoken on the ABC islands today. It is doubtful that any Bantu languages (e.g., kiMbundu, kiKongo) would have survived, since their speakers all came to the Caribbean later, albeit in a relatively steady flow after the sixteenth century, by which time a proto-Papiamentu would have taken hold as the principal basilect and mesolect of the inhabitants. The acrolect would have been Dutch.

Within this scenario it is important to stress the role of the so-called *yayas* or ‘black nannies’, who, as household servants, virtually raised the children bred on the island, both those of Dutch couples and those of the (mostly) Dutch men with black or mulatto girls. These *yayas* played an extremely important part in spreading the creole language they used among these children, since the latter spent most of their time with the former in relaxed environments where linguistic diffusion works at its best.

The Papiamentu language that we hear today probably had its beginnings during the seventeenth century, when Portuguese-speaking Dutch from Brazil were arriving with their slaves after having been expelled from that country by the Portuguese in 1654 (along with many Portuguese-speaking Jews and their slaves).² This particular brand of popular Brazilian Portuguese (PBP) would have mixed with the *çaçanje* already being used on the islands to form yet a third kind of Portuguese-based creole which would subsequently mix with Spanish, modern Dutch, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), and Hebrew (from Ladino or independently?).

It is interesting to note that, according to Martinus (1997), there is a great deal of similarity between Cape Verdean Creole and

Papiamentu. Similarities may also be found with the Portuguese-based creoles of Guinea-Bissau, Mina creole and Angolan-Congolese creoles and Papiamentu.³ All this may or may not mean that Papiamentu is *directly descended* from a combination of these creoles. It may simply mean that having been originally a Portuguese-based creole it has retained many of the original features which would naturally link it to other Portuguese-based creoles.

In any event, being a Portuguese-based language has placed Papiamentu apart from other languages spoken in the Caribbean and given it a degree of isolationism, even more than that of the French-based creoles, which, after all, are spoken in various places within the Caribbean, as are English-based creoles, albeit with sociolinguistic continua that differ from one to another. Even though Spanish has been creeping into Papiamentu over the centuries, it has not, by any means, “gone Spanish,” so to say, but rather has kept many of its distinguishing characteristics, including its unique pronunciation and grammatical constructions (with differences here even between the Papiamentu of Curaçao and Bonaire on the one hand, and Aruba, on the other!). Even though Spanish-speaking Catholic priests came in from the northern coast of South America, “the historical record on the ABC islands shows that the Catholic Church took an active interest in ministering to the spiritual needs of the slaves and bettering their conditions. . .,” and they did this in Papiamentu.⁴ Fouse writes, “It is interesting to note that in 1769, the Jesuit priest Rodier sent a letter to the Dutch Parliament in which he mentioned the need for priests to know Papiamentu (*de papiament taal*).”⁵

It was the Dominican Order of the Catholic Church that began printing materials in Papiamentu for schools and so helped to maintain the use of what had been up to that point in time only an oral language.⁶ There is

no doubt that today's Papiamentu owes the slowing of its grammatical changes, in part, to the fact that native Papiamentu speakers, who are predominantly Catholic, have continued to worship in Papiamentu with the aid of printed materials in their own language. We can contrast this to the use of Dutch as the official language in the schools and in government, which, of course, snubbed Papiamentu as an officially recognized language.

But what about the other elements present in Papiamentu? This language, the name of which stems from the Portuguese verb *papiar* 'to chatter,' has always been considered the language of the slaves and as such has been a sort of "catch-all" linguistic stew. If we follow the school of thought that situates the bulk of the formation of Papiamentu in the seventeenth century, we may notice several things: 1) that there may be elements of seventeenth-century Castilian, Catalan, Galician, and other Peninsular dialects present in this creole, as well as seventeenth-century Portuguese, the above-mentioned Portuguese-based West African creole, and the PBP spoken by the Jews who migrated to the Netherlands Antilles.⁷ As Anderson has stated, "[Antoine J.] Maduro implies that Galician, Catalan or various peninsular Spanish dialect forms were borrowed intact into Papiamentu."⁸ This would decrease the influence of Portuguese coming from the Peninsula, since forms now attributed to Portuguese would ultimately be from some other dialect. This may be true, given the fact that many of the sailors on board the slave ships came from all over the Iberian Peninsula. Be all this as it may, the fact is that from early on (16th century), Papiamentu, in some form, was being spoken by slaves, colonists, slave traders, and even priests, as a language with multiple uses (e.g., basic communication between slaves, slaves and masters, slaves and shippers, and religious purposes), yet within a very restricted

geographical area, thus contributing to the growing micro-divisions of the Caribbean, in this instance linguistically and socially.

Today's Papiamentu exists along a continuum of what is referred to as "nativization and de-nativization," depending on how far from or close to Spanish a particular kind of Papiamentu happens to be. Listening to the radio or TV in Papiamentu gives the impression that one is perhaps hearing some form of older Spanish rather than a language which is genetically related to but different from its Caribbean counterpart. Thus, we may safely say that when speaking of "standing alone" in the Caribbean, we are referring to the basilectal end of this continuum which, when observed, gives the impression of a language quite far removed from even the most "eroded" versions of Spanish. This is undoubtedly due to the historical intervention of children in the development of Papiamentu who, after learning the language from the *yayas*, were slow to change it, "thus helping its features become more and more entrenched."⁹ Children, then, must have slowed down any restructuring process that would have taken place through contact with other vernaculars. The closest thing we may have today to the original form of this children's version of Papiamentu is a smattering of examples of what is known as *Guene*, a "secret" dialect of Papiamentu that was originally a group of Afro-Portuguese dialects.¹⁰

This conservative aspect of Papiamentu would have transpired during a so-called "post-homestead" phase that, according to Mufwene, entailed the following:

- relatively isolating work conditions, i.e., lack of contact even with European indentured servants
- newly arrived Africans learned the colonial vernacular mainly from the creole and the seasoned slaves.

- varieties of continually restructured creole became the models for newcomers, out of which a restructuring process led to the basilectalization of the colonial vernacular.

- the resultant basilectal sociolects then changed very slowly after the initial critical phase of drastic restructuring.

- at one point in time, probably early on (16th century), there was dominant influence of Sudanic speakers (probably mostly Kwa).

- “Basilectalization must have halted near the end of the plantation economic system, during the second half of the nineteenth century, and with the stabilization and growth of populations of African descent by birth.”

- even though there were increased post-formative cross-plantation contacts throughout the Caribbean, this was probably not the case in the Netherlands Antilles, thus preventing any wide-spread cross fertilization except that which might have happened among the three islands, themselves.¹¹

Thus, although it is true that the basilectal Papiamentu we have today is not the same as the result of the initial mixing that may have taken place between the Spanish *conquistadores* and the Caiquetío Indians, beginning in 1499, there is probably not as much mixing of creole structures as would have happened if the ABC islands had not remained so isolated from other colonial settlements.¹²

One important aspect of Papiamentu that keeps it apart and different from other Caribbean creole languages is the amount of Hebrew that has become an integral part of its lexicon. The Jews who were originally from the Iberian Peninsula (*Sephardim* in Hebrew) spoke Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), which was a mixture of old Castilian Spanish, old Portuguese, Hebrew and some Arabic. The Sephardic Jews who wound up in Brazil, later in the Netherlands, and then the Netherlands Antilles (mostly Curaçao), spoke some form of

PBP (popular Brazilian Portuguese), probably mixed with their own Ladino language, indeed a true potpourri. Although it is true that this Sephardic “brand” of Papiamentu is somewhat different from other sociolects spoken on Curaçao, some of the words and expressions of Hebrew origin have filtered into these sociolects and contributed to the separateness of Papiamentu as a whole.

May Henríquez has published a dictionary of speech, usages and customs found in Curaçaoan Sephardí, called *Ta Asina o Ta Asana? abla, uzu i kustumber sefardí*. Even though not all of the words included in this dictionary are, in fact, of Hebrew origin, many are, and the book is very useful for gaining a clear insight into how much Hebrew has been incorporated into this particular dialect of Papiamentu. Toward the end of the dictionary there is a short list of words comparing *papiamentu sefardí* with *papiamentu komun*, some examples of which are *afora* (pap. sef.)—*afó* (pap. kom.), *bizjítá*—*bishitá di repente—di ripiente*, *festehá*—*selebrá, mata di roza—mata di rosa*, *Saba*—*djabra* [dia sábado], *tur kiko*—*tur loke*. At the same time, Henríquez informs us that present participial forms which end in *-o* in standard Papiamentu, end in the older *-u* in Sephardic Papiamentu, which is also closer to Portuguese than to Spanish. Some examples are given of other present participial forms which show no hispanization: e.g., *komendu* (not *komiendo*), *bebendu* (not *bebiendo*), *kerendu* (not *kreyendo*), *hasindu* (not *hasiando*), *pidindu* (not *pidiendo*), *baindu* (not *bayendo*).¹³ A couple of examples of Hebrew vocabulary are *Nevé Shalom* (‘hogar di Pas’) and *Ner tamid* (‘lus eterno’).

Two other components at the lexical level set Papiamentu apart from other creole languages spoken in the Caribbean and widen the gap between it and what one hears in this tropical basin are: 1) the Dutch and 2) the

Portuguese, neither of which exists to the extent found in Papiamentu in any other Caribbean language or dialect.¹⁴ We have some examples of Dutch which appear in italics in the following utterances:

Mi tin *nèt* basta ‘I have just enough’ < Dutch *net*.

Un *snechi* pan ‘A slice of bread’ < Dutch *sneetje*.

Mi ta bai na *pakus* ‘I am going to the store’ < Dutch *pakhuis*.

Spar bo placa ‘Save your money’ < Dutch *sparen*.

The Portuguese words also appear in italics in the following examples:

Podisé ‘perhaps’ < Port. *pode ser*.

chumbu ‘lead’ < Port. *chumbo*.

zjilea ‘jam’ < Port. *geléia*.

anochi ‘night’ < Port. *à noite* ‘at night’.

tin ‘there is, there are’ < Port. *tem*.

There are also some words of French origin in Papiamentu, which add to the complexity of the language, even though they may not help to set it apart from other creoles since there are many varieties of French-based creoles in the Caribbean. Some examples from French in Papiamentu are a) *zjur* ‘an appropriate moment’ < Fr. *jour*, b) *zjena* ‘to bother, molest’ < Fr. *gêner* ‘to constrict, cramp’, c) *zjanblan* ‘extremely white people’ < Fr. *gens blancs*, d) *vante* ‘to boast, brag’ < Fr. (*se*) *vanter*.

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