

Introduction to Papiamentu

Papiamentu is spoken on the Dutch Leeward Islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, situated in the Caribbean Sea just north of Venezuela.

The islands were discovered in 1499 by the Spanish, who considered them 'useless' islands because of their aridity and relatively infertile soil. In 1634, they were conquered by the Dutch, who expelled the Spanish and most of the native Amerindians. Apart from two short periods of English domination in the early nineteenth century, the islands have remained in Dutch hands.

The Dutch used Curaçao as a slave-trading center from about 1650 until 1778. Most of the slaves were sold to Spanish colonies; a small number of the slaves remained on Curaçao to work as servants or on the plantations that produced food to feed other slaves in transit.

The Leeward Islands, or 'ABC islands', together with the Windward Islands of St Maarten, St Eustatius and Saba, were made a protectorate of the Netherlands in 1954. In 1986, Aruba was granted *status aparte*, making it independent from the other islands but still part of Holland.

The population of the largest of the three islands, Curaçao, is approximately 160,000; that of Bonaire, 10,000; and that of Aruba, geographically the smallest of the islands, 68,000.

What is Papiamentu?

Papiamentu is a member of the class of languages known to linguists as 'creoles'. Creole languages are frequently designated 'French creole', 'Spanish creole', 'English creole', and so forth, according to the 'lexifier' language that gave them the majority of their vocabulary, or lexical items. Papiamentu is called an Iberian creole, as most of its lexical items came from the languages of the Iberian peninsula – Portuguese, Spanish (Castillian), Galician, Catalan, and Aragonese. Because these Iberian languages are so similar, it is often not possible to pinpoint which particular language a given word came from. According to some estimates, Papiamentu words of Dutch origin comprise as much as 25% of the language, depending on subject and geographic area. A small percentage of words come from English, West African languages and Arawak (an Amerindian language group).

Words often change their meaning, their function, or their form when they become part of a creole language. An example in Papiamentu is the preverbal marker **ta**, which is assumed to derive from the Iberian **esta**, the third-person singular present tense of the verb *to be*. The form has changed, its meaning has been reduced to basically 'present', and its function has shifted from that of copula *be* to that of tense marker.

Although there is still some disagreement about the exact definition of creole languages, most linguists agree that they are the result of linguistically heterogeneous peoples coming together, having been cut off from their respective linguistic communities. The new creole is a fully autonomous, communicatively viable language, with its own grammar rules and restrictions.

Genesis Theories

Creole languages throughout the world bear a striking structural and semantic resemblance to one another no matter what their lexifier language, and no matter what the original language of the peoples who create this new language. This phenomenon has led linguists to pay particular attention to theories of creole genesis in an attempt to explain the resemblance.

While linguists have different theories, Papiamentu presents certain problems. Most theories, for example, require that there be a relatively stable population, but during the period of formation of Papiamentu, the population of Curaçao, where the language originated, was largely made up of slaves who were in transit, waiting to be sold to other Caribbean colonies. The theories are outlined below.

Monogenesis

This theory holds that creole languages around the world originated from an Afro-Portuguese 'pidgin', a structurally reduced language spoken by sailors of many nationalities as a means of basic communication. This language was supposedly learned by African slaves who were being held in West Africa while awaiting shipment to the different European colonies. Once the slaves arrived in the colonies, their pidgin was 'relexified' by the language of the colonial masters: words from French, Spanish, or English were substituted for the original, mainly Portuguese, vocabulary, while the structure was kept.

In the case of Papiamentu, this theory has been shown to have some plausibility, as the Portuguese creoles of Guinea, Annobon and Cabo Verde bear remarkable similarities to Papiamentu, to the point of considerable mutual intelligibility. As a theory explaining the genesis of other creoles, however, it has some serious flaws.

Substratum theory

This theory supposes that creoles are a mixture of European lexical items, with a fusion of syntax from the various West African languages spoken by the slaves. It is, however, implausible as a complete explanation for both historical and linguistic reasons, and, again, does not shed light on the genesis of creoles with no West African languages in the original linguistic input. It is also problematic as far as Papiamentu is concerned, as there is little reliable data available on the origin of the slaves imported to Curaçao.

A further problem with the substratum theory is that while linguists have considerable information regarding the European languages of the seventeenth century, nothing is known about the many West African languages of that period that are supposed to have been the input for the structure of the creoles.

Polygenesis

This theory posits that each creole language was created independently. To explain their similarity, linguists invoke either Universal Grammar (as exemplified in Chomskyan theory) or the Language Bioprogram Hypothesis (proposed by Bickerton). Although the details differ, both theories hold that the language faculty is innate, and that all languages are structurally and semantically the same at an abstract level. As creoles are the 'youngest' languages (most did not exist before European trade and colonial expansion), they are the closest reflection of this innate faculty that is available to linguists to study.

In the case of Papiamentu, some believe that the language came into being as a result of contact between the Spanish and the Amerindian inhabitants they found on the islands. However, studies of languages in contact would indicate that this is unlikely because, when only two languages are involved in a contact situation, the usual outcome is that one linguistic group learns the language of the other. The language that survives tends to be the language of the dominant group (dominant for whatever reason) — in this case Spanish. Furthermore, as mentioned above, creole languages come into existence when the speakers have a variety of native languages and are no longer in contact with their respective language communities. This was not the case of either the Spanish or the Amerindians in the ABC Islands.

Current language situation in the ABC Islands

Along with Dutch, Papiamentu is now the official language of the ABC Islands. It is used in education, the media (most newspapers are in Papiamentu), public debate, administration, business, and daily personal contact. As a result, it enjoys an unusually high status among creole languages, which are often (at best) viewed as dialects that are incapable of or unsuitable for any kind of intellectual or formal social intercourse. At worst, creoles are not considered 'languages' at all.

Papiamentu is spoken by all natives of the ABC Islands, but today there are virtually no monolingual speakers. Although Papiamentu is now a medium of instruction, most natives speak, read, and write Dutch fluently. As a result of the proximity of Venezuela and a considerable Spanish-speaking immigrant population, most natives also speak good Spanish. English is also widely spoken. Many inhabitants speak all four languages comfortably.

Standardization of Papiamentu

With the surge of interest on the part of linguists in creole languages, and with the movement, particularly in Curaçao, to make Papiamentu equal *de facto* with Dutch in education, native Papiamentu linguists are currently working to standardize their language in every respect. Efforts are currently being made to standardize the grammar, and a vast project has been started to compile a dictionary that will include the dialectal differences among the three islands.

The most controversial aspect of standardization is that of the orthography, or spelling. In Curaçao, a system based on the actual pronunciation has been devised and adopted as the (provisional) official system. In Aruba, there is a preference for an etymological system, which is based on the origin of the words. In this system, a word of Spanish origin is spelled as in Spanish: for example, the ending **-ción**, pronounced '-shon' (and spelled that way in the Curaçao system). Although neither system is inherently superior to the other, the question of which system to adopt is hotly debated.

The ABC Islanders are proud of their native Papiamentu, which is the vehicle of their culture and folk traditions. With the standardization process now under way, and a growing national pride in and awareness of the language, Papiamentu enjoys a higher status than ever before.

Howe, Kate, and Roland deCuba. 1993. Papiamentu Reader. Kensington: Dunwoody Press.