STUDYING VARIATION IN OLDER TEXTS: NEGERHOLLANDS*

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Negerhollands is now a dead language. It survived for over a century after losing its status as a community language on St. Thomas and St. John (at present, part of the United States Virgin Islands), but now it is gone forever. Gilbert Sprauve and Robin Sabino are still working on the recordings of the last speaker of this Dutch-lexifier creole, and hopefully some of their material will be published in the near future. For the rest, what remains is a mass of texts from earlier stages of the language. The texts span 250 years: from the early letters in Negerhollands dictated in the 1730s, to the materials collected by Ann Graves and by Sabino and Sprauve in the 1980s. There is a particularly large collection of materials from the period 1780–1800; we are talking about thousands of manuscript pages here, many of them kept in Moravian archives in places like Herrnhut (Germany) and Bethlehem (Pennsylvania) and in archives in Denmark. The missionary materials (the major portion of what survives) stem from two independent sources: the German Moravian (Herrnhut) missionaries and the Danish Lutheran missionaries. The existence of two independent sources helps us assess the reliability and quality of the surviving texts, to be sure.

Part of the problem in dealing with historical materials is determining exactly what type of speech is reflected by them. This problem is even greater in creole societies, where often dramatic linguistic differences occur within one speech community. The texts and word lists of 20th century Negerhollands appear to represent one variety: the language of descendants of the old plantation slaves. In the 18th century both slaves and White creoles, people born in the isles, spoke Negerhollands, however, although the latter

*) Some of the material in this column also appears in a much longer version in the introduction to van Rossem and van der Voort (1995), a rich source of Negerhollands materials. I am grateful to Cefas van Rossem, Hein van der Voort, Hans den Besten, and Peter Stein for earlier discussions of this issue.
was not always separated at the time from Dutch, one of the colonial languages. This problem was acute for the earlier period.

Many creolists have therefore dismissed this type of historical material, which reflected the variation of the time, as a semi-creole or indeed a pseudo-creole. Implicit in much of this is the following line of thought: there was an original "true" creole, presumably spoken by the field slaves on the plantations, and their language is only very imperfectly represented in the above-mentioned sources. Hence, they are not much good. However, the more one reads about 18th century Virgin Islands society, the more a different image comes to mind. There was a very complex language situation, including several competing colonial languages, a set of creole-like varieties serving as a lingua franca, Papiamentu, and a variety of African languages. The various historical texts are addressed to quite different audiences; they represent clearly distinguishable varieties, ranging from something near Dutch to something presumably closer to the creole speech of the field slaves (for many of whom creole was a second language).

My point here is that this historical material is a valuable source, by means of which we can attempt the historical reconstruction of the 18th century sociolinguistic setting. This reconstruction has not yet been achieved; here are some of the contours.

The Sociolinguistic Development of the Virgin Islands Speech Community and the Fate of Negerhollands

Not enough is known yet about the sociolinguistic development of the Virgin Islands, which was quite complex. What follows is a rough sketch for St. Thomas. Figure 1 gives a first approximation.

The central fact is that Negerhollands only really flourished between 1730 and 1830. In the early period, African languages and Papiamentu (spoken by slaves imported from Curaçao) were dominant in the slave population. Negerhollands was not clearly focused yet. On the one hand, it was diverse through the influence of the slaves' native languages; on the other hand, it was not yet perceived as distinct from Dutch. The latter language was important, but stood in competition with Danish, the official colonial language, and with English, which was spoken by many planters.

In the late 18th century, Negerhollands was spoken by the majority of slaves as well as by their owners, but the language situation changed rapidly. In 1833 the last text was printed in Negerhollands by the Moravian Brethren,
and in 1834 the last printed text in Negerhollands appeared in the Danish Lutheran tradition.

The year 1848 marks the abolition of slavery on the Virgin Islands, and this represented the final death-blow for Negerhollands. From 1840 onward, Negerhollands was increasingly replaced by forms of English among the slaves, particularly when after emancipation the ex-slaves went to the towns. Because Negerhollands was a plantation language and only weakly represented in a nonrural setting, the language decayed. A telling testimony is the 1842–1847 manuscript by the German missionary Wied — the first part is in Negerhollands, the second one in English. Wied reports that he changed the language of the second part because no one used used Negerhollands anymore.

A Danish letter from 1816, written in St. Croix, requests more hymnals and prayer books from Denmark, and stresses that they should be in Negerhollands, even though that language is rapidly going out of use. The reason given is that Negerhollands-speaking slaves are more obedient and more attached to their owners. Furthermore, keeping Negerhollands alive will keep out ideas circulating in English tracts and newspapers about man’s original equality, the nullity of the color difference, the loathsomeness of slavery, and so on. In 1904, Bishop Greider writes to Hesseling that the younger generation speaks a strongly anglicized creole, but the text sent along contains many Negerhollands elements.
As mentioned before, in 1917 the United States buy the Virgin Islands from Denmark, and in 1987 the last speaker (as far as is known), Mrs. Alice Stevens, passes away.

**Linguistic Variables**

I will now briefly sketch some salient points where variability can be studied. The use of *bin, wees,* and zero as alternative forms of the copula was already analyzed by Sabino (1988). The use of reflexives is treated in Muysken and van der Voort (1991), and van der Voort and Muysken (1995). Bruyn, Muysken, and Verrips (1996) analyze dative constructions. Tense, mood, and aspect marking are a very promising area, but need much more work before the variation encountered can be even briefly discussed. The same holds for serial verb constructions, which occur in the material described by Josselin de Jong (1924, 1926), but are not so frequent in the 18th century materials. Other subjects that need further study are word order, absent subjects, focus constructions, and the genitive.

**Pronunciation**

Magens (1770) reports that there was a large difference in pronunciation between Black and White creoles. For example, the slaves were said to leave out the guttural sounds, presumably the /r/ at the end of the syllable, and furthermore they were said to simplify consonant clusters.

**Plurals**

In the plural forms of nouns, we find the Dutch-derived -*en* and -*s* suffixes, no marker at all, and a post-nominal 3rd person plural pronoun *sen* or *sender.* Different plurals are used at random, sometimes even in the very same sentence: *die kind sender* versus *die kinders* ‘the children’.

**Passives**

An important locus of variation is the passive. Magens (1770) suggests that the passive in Negerhollands was used only rarely. Passives marking an action in progress were avoided. Nonetheless a passive could occur, and then mostly in White speech. The passive auxiliary verbs were *wort, bin,* and *wees.* From the examples it is clear that the passive, when used at all (and one must wonder to what extent this was simply to translate a Dutch passive), was
expressed by a passive auxiliary verb, and that a Dutch perfect participle was used:

(1) a. Mie bin vervolgt.
   'I have been persecuted.'
 b. Mie wort vervolgt.
   'I am persecuted.'

There was also a passive in the general creole of both Whites and Blacks, albeit only in the perfective form. The perfective aspect marker *ka* regularly occurs in the creole instead of the passive auxiliary verb *bin*. There are both passives expressing a completed continuing action and passives expressing a state:

(2) a. Die Man ka trou.
   'The man is married.'
 b. Die Hus ka bou.
   'The house has been built.'

Personal Pronouns

Magens (1770, pp. 12-13) provides two forms for the plural pronouns in subject position:

(3) 1pl  ons  wellie
     2pl  jender  jellie
     3pl  sender  sellie

In the other positions the first form is always used: *ons, jender, sender*. A manuscript grammar of the Herrnhut missionaries assigns the use of the -lie forms, and then only for reference to persons, to one single dialect of Neger-hollands, without indicating which dialect it is. It is not impossible that these exceptional forms were used particularly by Whites. Note the following pair of examples that Magens provides (1770, pp. 9-10):

(4) Jender Blanko 'you (PL) Whites'
    Jellie Neeger 'you (PL) Blacks'

According to Hesseling, the -lie forms occur especially in the texts from the Danish sources, texts for people in town, sometimes produced by White speakers of the creole such as Magens himself. This is another indirect
indication that the -lie forms may have been used mostly by the Whites. Notice also that in the 20th century texts we do not have the -lie forms.

Prepositions

A rich area for variation studies concerns the use of complex prepositions. In one text we find the following variants:

(5) a. boven op die Berg
   above on DET mountain
b. nabovo die Berg
   LOC=above DET mountain
c. na bovo op die Berg
   LOC above on DET mountain
d. naboven op die Berg
   LOC=above on DET mountain
e. boven na die Hemel
   above LOC DET heaven

There is variation in the vowel of the locative adverb (schwa versus harmonic copying), in combinability with na, and in the subsequent use of another locative element.

Become

Intriguing is the alternation between kom (presumably more creole) and word (more Dutch) for ‘become’:

(6) Si Wief a kom swanger.
   3POS wife PA come pregnant
   ‘His wife became pregnant.’
(7) Die Saak a ka word bekent.
   DET affair PA PRF become known
   ‘The affair had become known.’

The uses of kom and word here need to be related to their other uses, before a clear picture can emerge.

Causatives

This constitutes another complex area for research. The basic causative
verb is *laat* ‘let’, which can be used impersonally, as in (8a), or with a causee, as in (8b). In addition, it can be used with a particle, as in (8c). Normally, the causee intervenes between the causative and the embedded verb, as in (8b), but in (8d) *lat kik* ‘let see’ represents the complex meaning of ‘to show’, and the causee follows:

(8) a. Sender a lat roep Em.  
3p PA let call 3s  
‘They had him called.’

b. Vor eerst laat die Kinders krieg sender bekomst.  
for first let DET children have 3p share  
‘Let the children have their share first.’

c. Soo een groot Skuld mi a ka lat joe af.  
So a large debt 1s PA PRF let 2s off.  
‘Of such a large debt I had acquitted you.’

d. dat Em sail lat kik sender een Teiken van die Hemel  
that 3s FU let see 3p a sign of DET heaven  
‘that He will show them a sign from heaven’

The complex verb *latstaan* forms a lexicalized combination, as in (9a). However, *latstaan* has simply replaced *laat* as the basic causative verb in many instances, as illustrated in (9b), where it is combined with the embedded verb *groei* ‘grow’. The spelling in examples such as (9c) suggests that the two verbs *lat* and *staan* are still perceived as separate even when combined with another verb, such as *bewies* ‘render’ in (9c).

(9) a. Mi hab Macht vor latstaan die.  
1sg have power for let-stand DET  
‘I have the power to let them be.’

b. Latstaan all twee groei met malkander tee na die  
let-stand all two grow with each other till LO DET Crop.  
harvest  
‘Let both grow together till harvest time.’

c. Jender nolat staan em bewies een Eer of Dienst . . .  
2p NEG-let stand 3s render an honor or service . . .  
‘You do not let him render an honor or service . . .’
Placement of Particles

Particles may occur separate from the verb, as in (10); or next to it, as in (11):

(10) a. Da mi sa due mi Parik en Deegen an.
   EMP 1sg FU do 1sg wig and sword on
   ‘I will put my wig and sword on.’
   1p PRF come for pray 3sg on
   ‘We have come to adore him.’

(11) a. Loop dan due an ju klaer.
   walk then do on 2sg clothes
   ‘Go and put your clothes on.’
   b. en ha bid an die Kind
   and PA adore DET child
   ‘and adored the child’

So far, no cases of V + particle + pronoun have been encountered. It is not clear how this variable is embedded socially.

Dimensions of Variation

The variability in the texts, outlined in the above section, can be charted along a number of dimensions: social, diachronic, geographical.

The Social Dimension

Apparently, there was a great deal of variation in 18th century Negerhollands, even on St. Thomas; the newly emerged language had not yet crystallized. Even so, we find, starting in 1739, the first (dictated) letters in the creole, as well as in an African language. To make matters more complex, there emerged, next to the creole of the slaves, a type of “high creole,” spoken among the Whites. The difference between the high creole and the slave language may be comparable to the difference between bakra tongo and nengre tongo in Sranan creole in 18th century Suriname. It is clear from comments in the 18th century grammars of Negerhollands that there was much variation.

Unfortunately, we know hardly anything about linguistic variation within the main groups themselves — the slaves and White owners. Within the White group, variation may have been present among subgroups, based on
position in society, profession, and so on. For example, government officials were recruited especially from Danish families, whereas the majority of the planters were of Dutch descent. Not much is mentioned about this in the contemporary research literature, but it merits further investigation, as White varieties are abundantly documented. In his research, Hesseling (1905) observed differences between the Danish and German missionaries. Some layers of society may not have used any creole at all.

Within the slave community, variation may have been even greater. Oldendorp notes such variation in connection with the different linguistic backgrounds of the slaves (who spoke many different West African languages), and with the differences among newcomers (Bussals), slaves from other Caribbean islands, and native Virgin Islands slaves. Apart from an as yet unpublished body of Negerhollands letters written around 1750 by literate slaves, there is hardly any linguistic documentation on which research into this matter could be based. (These letters are currently being edited by Peter Stein and will soon be available in print.)

The Diachronic Dimension and the Focusing of the Language

Looking at all the available texts, there is of course a diachronic dimension. Negerhollands has undergone a number of changes in the more than two centuries of its recorded existence. These changes are of different types:

(a) grammatical expansion, in a gradual process of creolization;
(b) a gradual drift away from varieties close to the Dutch superstrate toward true slave speech, more heavily influenced by non-Dutch patterns;
(c) increasing exposure to English lexicon and grammar;
(d) natural changes, similar to those occurring in any language;
(e) processes of language decay and language death, in the long period during which Negerhollands was used less and less;
(f) decreolization, that is, shift away from the forms of the emerging creole under the influence of the (Dutch) standard in the early period.

We are just beginning to unravel these alternatives.

While Negerhollands was probably highly variable in the 18th century, it gradually was used less and less by the upper and middle classes, and ultimately stabilized as the slave language recorded in the 20th century.
A working hypothesis that so far has been profitable is that “high” or “acrolectal” variants have disappeared, and that “low” or “basilectal” variants have survived.

To begin with, a comparison of the 18th century sources and the 20th century materials suggests:

(a) the deletion of /r/ and consonant cluster reduction is also fully documented in Josselin de Jong’s (1926) texts, as well as in Nelson (1936);
(b) with a few lexicalized exceptions, no other morphological superlatives occur in Josselin de Jong’s (1926) texts;
(c) there are no morphological diminutives any more (a possibility in some varieties of 18th century Negerhollands), except for fixed diminutive forms such as hofi 'garden’;
(d) there is no longer a passive with wort, only with ka;
(e) of the -lie forms, only sel appears in Josselin de Jong’s (1926) texts, and this is clearly an unusual form in his materials.

However, it is still a daunting task to make sense of the variation in the earlier materials. One example of research recently undertaken in this domain is the investigation of reflexive pronouns in 18th century Negerhollands. This is the first quantitative research to be undertaken on the 18th century manuscript material. In van der Voort and Muysken (1996) we looked for variation among reflexive pronouns. Until recently, it has been claimed that, following its tendency as a creole to reduce ambiguity, Negerhollands makes a more consistent distinction between reflexive and nonreflexive use of pronouns (by means of an exclusively reflexive pronoun sie and/or a reflexive disambiguating marker selv) than its putative noncreole superstrate models, like Dutch, German, and Danish. Part of the evidence for such a consistent distinction seemed to be due rather to the one-sidedness of the restricted source material that was available before the edition project started, than to the tendency toward strict transparency in Negerhollands. We now have access to several different versions of texts derived from the New Testament, the Old Testament, and others by the Moravian Brethren. It appears that within and among these texts there is considerable variation. One of the conclusions supported by the variance in the reflexives when compared to yet other sources of Negerhollands, is that Negerhollands as a whole in time became more and more exclusively creole-like.
The Geographical Dimension

Another area where very little is known so far is differences among the variants of Negerhollands of the three islands — St. John, St. Croix, and St. Thomas, as well as town/plantation differences on each island. More is known about variation in the importance of English: St. Croix, for example, is the island where Negerhollands gave way to English (creole) earliest (Hesseling, 1905).

Interpreting the 18th Century Materials

Before we dismiss the variety the manuscripts contain as artificial, it should be noted that the German Bible translators were very critical about using the “right” language variety. This can be surmised from various letters, preserved in Herrnhut, that were written around 1770 in the Danish Antilles by German missionaries. For example, some texts were called “far too Dutch-like.” Another argument for the texts not being representative is the fact that entirely independent German and Danish sources generally confirm each other. Finally, all texts share some basic creole features such as the use of TMA particles instead of verb inflections, the use of invariant die as a deictic/determiner, and many specific grammatical formatives.

A first set of problems in interpreting the materials is philological: establishing dates, authorship, intertextual relations, and deciphering the often complicated handwriting in poorly preserved manuscripts.

Then we face variation in the texts. This could be due to a number of things:

(a) Audience design: Was the material meant for a predominantly White urban population, or for the plantation slaves?
(b) Linguistic competence and procedure: How well did the translator know Negerhollands, and which variety? How were native speakers involved in the translation process?
(c) Translation practice and style: It is clear that sometimes not even an attempt was made to approach the spoken language, for example, when the Latin accusative Jesum appears in the texts. Did the missionaries attempt to create a separate liturgical register, fit for the conveyance of religious feelings and ideas?
Quantitative techniques derived from sociolinguistics and variation theory can help us study the types of variation (particularly of the morphosyntactic type) present in the texts, and to see whether it is possible to isolate the "deep" creole features of the 18th century Negerhollands materials.

**Conclusion**

What I hope to have shown here is that the archival materials for a dead language should not be treated as imperfect and unreliable renditions of a mythical "true creole," but rather that they can be profitably analyzed as a source of insight into a complex sociolinguistic setting.

**REFERENCES**


