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Bart Jacobs

Origins of a Creole: The History of Papiamentu and its African Ties. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012. xiv + 387 pp. (Cloth US\$140.00)

Papiamentu, the creole language of Curaçao, Bonaire, and Aruba, has always been a bit of a puzzle. In most parts of the Caribbean, the creole languages that emerged out of slavery and the plantation system have a vocabulary or lexicon that reflects that of the colonial power involved. French provided most of the lexicon for Haitian Creole, English that for Jamaican Creole, etc. There are some exceptions, but most of these can be explained through shifts in colonial possession in the history of the Caribbean, or unusual patterns of settlement. Thus in Suriname the main creole language, Sranan Tongo, has an English-derived lexicon even though it became a Dutch colony. The explanation is that the colony was founded by the English. In the Virgin Islands (St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John) a Dutch-based creole emerged, even though it was a Danish colony. The explanation is that the largest group of planters spoke a variety of Dutch.

For Papiamentu, things are a bit more complicated. Even though Curaçao, Bonaire, and Aruba were Dutch colonies for most of their recent history, the lexicon of Papiamentu is mostly based on Portuguese and Spanish (together called Ibero-Romance). There was an early period of Spanish settlement, but this was long before the arrival of the slaves, and in any case, their most “basic” vocabulary was Portuguese rather than Spanish. There were speakers of Portuguese and Spanish on the island of Curaçao (the Sephardic Jews), but they hardly constituted a majority. Bart Jacobs has tried to solve this riddle, which centers around two questions: Why did an Ibero-Romance-based creole emerge at all on Curaçao, rather than the expected Dutch-based creole? Where did the Ibero-Romance-based creole come from, and whence the relevant components Portuguese and Spanish?

The second set of questions are most conclusively answered by Jacobs. His take is that Papiamentu emerged in the period 1650–1700 when slaves speaking Upper Guinea Creole (spoken in Guinea-Bissau, Casamance, and Cape Verde) were taken to Curaçao. This hypothesis was earlier proposed by Martinus (1996) and Quint (2000). The Portuguese-based Upper Guinea Creole was then partly filled in with Spanish words in the Caribbean, leading to its current predominantly Spanish character. In Chapter 1, “Critical Review of the Literature on the Origins of Papiamentu,” a number of competing hypotheses are discarded: (a) a Spanish-based origin; (b) a “global” Portuguese Pidgin monogenetic approach, claiming a shared origin for Papiamentu, Saramaccan, and Palenquero and all African Portuguese-based Creoles; and (c) a Brazilian

origin and transfer to Curaçao through the Sephardic refugees from Brazil. I think most of this discussion is pretty solid.

In Chapters 2–5 (“Phonology,” “Selected Parts of Speech,” “Morphology,” and “Verbal System”), actually the main body of the work, Jacobs systematically presents the evidence for a link between Upper Guinea Creole and Papiamentu. I agree with his argument in Chapter 6 (“Summary and Interim Analysis of Linguistic Results”) that given the possible linguistic changes after the “split” between the putative West African creoles and Papiamentu around 1680, the resemblances are striking and call for an explanation. This explanation is given in Chapter 7, which surveys the historical ties between Upper Guinea and Curaçao, and Chapter 8, which provides a synthesis of the historical and linguistic evidence. Although the links in the slave trade between Upper Guinea and Curaçao have been claimed to be weak, Jacobs argues that the Amsterdam chapter of the first Dutch West India Company actually had a significant presence in the relevant part of West Africa, and that the Sephardic Jews, important financiers of the Company, were also established there. Although most records were destroyed, there is evidence of significant shipments of slaves from the area to Curaçao in the early period. While the historical link between Upper Guinea and Curaçao is made plausible, and the linguistic evidence for a connection between the corresponding creole languages is striking, Jacobs does not really provide a clear analysis of what happened in Curaçao, and does not really answer the question of why there was not more Dutch influence on the nascent creole. What was the demographic make-up of early Curaçao society? What was the role of the Sephardic Jews and of the Dutch? How important was trade to the South American mainland? What was the role of the remaining (partly Spanish-speaking?) Arawak population, which provided a number of Amerindian loan words to Papiamentu? The possibility of influence of Asian Portuguese Creole is hinted at (e.g., in the Papiamentu future marker *lo*), but how important was this influence? Bart Jacobs gives us a big part of the story, but not the full account.

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