

Iris Bachmann\*

*Negertaaltje or Volkstaal:*  
**The Papiamentu Language at the Crossroads  
of Philology, Folklore and Anthropology**

**Resumen:** El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el espacio epistemológico en el que surge el interés académico en las lenguas criollas a finales del siglo XIX. Nuestro análisis del Papiamentu demuestra que las lenguas criollas entonces se situaban entre dos disciplinas ‘antropología y filología’ sin encajar perfectamente en una u otra. Los estudios folklóricos, con su enfoque en la cultura vernácula, ofrecieron entonces un espacio en el cual se investigaron las lenguas criollas junto con los dialectos europeos como variedades de sus lenguas de base léxica.

**Summary:** In this article, I analyse the epistemological space from which Creole languages emerged as an object of research at the turn of the nineteenth century. Taking the example of Papiamentu, my analysis shows that Creole languages were located at the intersection of anthropology and philology, without fitting neatly into either discipline. Folklore studies, with its focus on vernacular culture, opened up a space from which Creole languages were investigated alongside European dialects as variations of their European lexifier languages.

When we talk about African culture in Latin America, Creole languages are bound to be mentioned sooner or later. Having emerged in the context of the slave trade and plantation economy, Creole languages are a vivid reminder of the – often forced – contact between people with different languages and cultures that has taken place as a consequence of the triangular trade. While some names such as *jargon des nègres* or *negerspaans* are directly related to the African link of Creoles, other names like *baragouin*, *broken English* or *patois* refer more generally to the low social prestige these languages have endured for most of their existence. Academic studies into the devel-

---

\* Lecturer in Hispanic Linguistics at the University of Manchester. This article is based on research undertaken for Bachmann (2005): *Die Sprachwerdung des Kreolischen*, and reworks and complements my argument in chapter 5 of that book from a different angle.

INDIANA 24 (2007), 87-105



Www.indiana-ijl.org

opment and structure of Creole languages date back to the nineteenth century when pioneers such as Hugo Schuchardt or Adolpho Coelho completed their research within the framework of historical-comparative analysis. In the second half of the twentieth century the discipline of 'Pidgin and Creole Studies' emerged in universities in the United States and has since contributed to a growing body of research.

Having been invited as a linguist to contribute to a special issue of an anthropological journal, I will take this opportunity to reflect on the disciplinary boundaries that have shaped the knowledge of Creole languages. Using the example of Papiamentu, the Creole language of the ABC islands,<sup>1</sup> I will investigate how the language was perceived by both academics and local *aficionados* from the turn of the nineteenth century to the 1930s. This is precisely the time when a number of articles on Papiamentu from both academics and non-academics were published and when the use of Papiamentu on the main island Curaçao came under closer scrutiny. Taking as a point of departure the two different types of expressions for the local language *volkstaal* [vernacular] and *negertaaltje* [the Negro's idiom], I will argue that these two terms are closely related to the conceptualisation of Creoles at the intersection of different academic disciplines, namely philology, anthropology and the emerging field of folklore studies. Determining the fragile space Creole languages came to occupy in this triangle of disciplines offers insights into the history of Creole Studies as well as the conjunction of philological and anthropological knowledge at the turn of the nineteenth century.

### 1. The African Connection

The African contribution to Creole languages seems obvious, given that they emerged precisely from contact between speakers of African and European languages.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, a long-standing debate about the extent of African influence on Creole languages. Positions have ranged from the claim that Creole languages exhibit a strictly African grammar to the opposing claim that there is practically no relevant African influence beyond a few lexical items. I do not intend to assess the influence of different African substrate languages on Papiamentu, but will look instead at the discursive construction of Creole languages and the role African imagery plays here. Hofmann (2001: 167-68) shows that as early as the seventeenth century we find missionary reports on the French colonies which refer to the Black slaves' way of speaking as a 'jargon des nègres'. The *jargon des nègres* is part and parcel of the discursively constructed object of the *esclave nègre*, which suggests a 'natural' relation be-

---

1 This name is commonly used to refer to the Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, where Papiamentu is spoken. In the text I will often refer to the biggest island Curaçao as all texts from the period under discussion do.

2 In this article, I am referring to Atlantic Creoles only.

tween being a black person and being a slave, thus superseding older justifications for slavery (Hofmann 2001: 96-97). According to Hofmann, Africans are not described in terms of otherness, as are, for example, native Caribs, but are singled out through their assimilation, albeit incomplete, into the European model.

What role does the African connection play in the discourse on Creole languages of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? We do indeed find expressions such as *negerspaans* and *negertaaltje* that identify Papiamentu as the language of Afro-Curaçao people. This is despite the fact that a proper name for the language already existed, Papiamentu, that did not refer purely to its African speakers, in contrast to other Creoles such as *negerengels* or *negerhollands*.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, in the case of Papiamentu we do not find any local authors who use these terms; instead they use the proper name or call it the islands' vernacular. Jesurun refers only once to the Creole's roots in slavery:

Het is wel aan te nemen dat de Spanjaarden het woord *Papear* zullen hebben toegepast op de spreekwijze der door hen ingevoerde slaven (Jesurun 1897: 95).

[It is fair to assume that the Spanish should have used the word *Papear* for the way the slaves they had introduced spoke.]

He sees the beginnings of the language and the origin of its name in the times of the Spanish rule of the island and their slave system. He thus conveniently glosses over the Dutch contribution to the slave trade, for which Curaçao was established as a slave depot in the seventeenth century to distribute people to the South American mainland and the Caribbean. Instead he emphasises that today Papiamentu is used widely by all social classes (Jesurun 1897: 96).

The Dutch linguists who start to take notice of Papiamentu at the beginning of the twentieth century do, however, use the above mentioned terms. Ginneken ([1913] 1928: 281) refers to Papiamentu as a *negerspaansch*<sup>4</sup> [Negro Spanish] in his manual of the Dutch language *Handboek der Nederlandsche Taal* which includes a section on the use of the Dutch language in the colonies. Despite the term, he remarks that on the ABC islands even the Dutch speak Papiamentu to each other thus reducing his own statement to absurdity. Another Dutch linguist Fokker uses the term *basterd spaans* [bastard Spanish], which also refers derogatively to the African roots of Papiamentu. With his use of the terms *basterd* and *verbastering* Fokker refers to a biological dis-

3 *Negerengels* refers to the Creole language spoken in Suriname called Sranan Tongo or Sranan today. *Negerhollands* originated on the Danish West Indies (now known as the Virgin Islands). The language began to be replaced by English in the nineteenth century and is extinct today.

4 *Spaansch* is the old spelling for *Spaans*, compare also the variants *Papiëmentsch* and *Papiamentsch* on page 8.

course of hybridisation which relates to anthropological theories of race. He puts forward a theory on the development of Papiamentu:

Dar er een zekere aanpassing moet hebben plaats gehad, is duidelijk: hoe kan 't anders, waar onontwikkelden zich een vreemde taal moeten eigen maken? En waar hoger staande volken in zo'n geval reeds als "compromis" vereenvoudigingen in de over te nemen taal aanbrengen – men denke aan de "lingua franca" (sic) in 't oostelijk bekken der Middellandse Zee, en de vele andere vormen van "volks-latijn" – daar is 't geen wonder dat negers, mulatten en andere kleurlingen nof veel werder zijn gegaan (Fokker 1914: 62).

[It is clear that a certain assimilation must have taken place: what else could we expect, where primitive people have to adopt a foreign language? And if even superior peoples "compromise" by simplifying the adopted language in these cases – just think about the case of the "lingua franca" in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea and the many other forms of "vulgar latin" – it should then not surprise us that blacks, mulattos and other people of color went even further.]

In his approach Fokker relates the characteristics of different peoples or races (he switches from the ethnic term 'volken' to racial characterisations according to skin colour) to their linguistic capacity. With respect to the affiliation of Papiamentu, he identifies black and coloured speakers as the ones who have actively brought Papiamentu into being by altering the Spanish language. This definition is reminiscent of the one given in the article on *Créole* in the French *Dictionnaire des Sciences Anthropologiques*: "adaptation d'une langue indo-européenne au génie pour ainsi dire phonétique et grammatical d'une race linguistiquement inférieure" (Baggiono 2000: 256). Both definitions blame the African speakers and their supposedly limited intellectual capacity for an adaptation process which they see as a deformation of the European language. At the centre of this analysis are two key terms that relate anthropology and linguistics at the time: language and race. The discursive connection between the emerging disciplines of linguistics and anthropology has been analysed in Poliakov's study *The Arian Myth* ([1971] 1974). In his view, both disciplines coincide in their aim to supersede the Jewish-Christian code. In the case of Hebrew this leads to a double exclusion: with the diminished importance of religion, it increasingly loses its wider cultural significance as a biblical language. Secondly, Hebrew was being cut off the Indo-European family tree and excluded from the European genealogy, and therefore from the region which was at the center of Jewish culture in the nineteenth century. Obviously, this genealogy also separated the other Semitic languages from the Indo-European branch and introduced separate language families for African, American and the other Asian languages. Poliakov ([1971] 1974) shows further how this linguistic genealogy goes hand in hand with the mapping of bodily features such as skin colour, type of hair, skull shape, etc. in physical anthropology. In the description of Papiamentu by the Dutch linguist Fokker (1914) we can observe an attempt to correlate bodily features of its speakers with the sound system of a given language:

De zeer eigenaardige lastig uit te spreken *zuiver bilabiale w*, in 't spaans door *b* of *v* weergegeven, komt in 't papiamentoe niet in die uitspraak voor: men hoort daarvoor *steeds* de *b*-klank en dus niet zo als in 't spaans, uitsluitend na een neusklank en vóór *l* of *r*. Ik waag de veronderstelling, dat zowel de portuguees-galliciese *v* (= de franse lip-tandklank) als de spaanse bilabiale *w* (*b* of *v* geschreven) voor mensen met wat dikke lippen zwaarigheid opleveren, en men dus demakshalve voor beide *b* (stemhebbende stoter) neemt (Fokker 1914: 59).

The *pure bilabial w*, very strange and tiresome to pronounce, represented by *b* or *v* in Spanish, does not occur in the pronunciation of Papiamentu: instead you *always* hear the *b*-sound differently from Spanish where that sound only occurs after a nasal sound and before *l* and *r*. I put forward the hypothesis that both the Portuguese-Galician *v* (= the French labiodental sound) and the Spanish bilabial *w* (spelled as *b* or *v*) pose difficulties for people with somewhat big lips, and that they therefore use the *b* (voiced stop).

While one is tempted to simply dismiss this citation and the preceding ones as racist, it is important in my view to show how discourse produces specific conditions in which power relations are played out. In this case, we can see how categorising human beings according to bodily features opens up the possibility of relating these features to other characteristics such as the sound pattern of a language. This link was not arbitrary and easily dismissible, but rather based on a framework of academic research accepted by fellow academics, as Hutton (1999) shows in his seminal work on linguistic research during the Third Reich. In this study, Hutton examines the relation between 'race' and 'language' in the academic discourse of the Third Reich and in the preceding period to demonstrate (1999: 277-279) that it was common academic practice to assume that both terms were closely related and that it was possible, at least for the early periods of humankind, to infer one from the other.<sup>5</sup> A logical product of this assumed correlation was the idea that certain physical characteristics associated with different races might also have an impact on speech patterns. Hutton (1999: 275-277) shows that this type of analysis was not as productive as was sometimes assumed but that the researchers who combined this idea with the advances made in physiological phonetics can not simply be discarded as racist amateurs, but did in fact work within the academic framework of their time. At the same time as Fokker was trying to relate 'African' bodily features to sound patterns of Papiamentu,<sup>6</sup> Ginneken in his *Handboek der Nederlandsche Taal* ([1913] 1928), attributed a nasal pronunciation of Dutch spo-

5 Hutton (1999: 267-272) gives examples of the well known American linguist Whitney, who discusses race and language with respect to the American immigrant society, and of Saussure, who while arguing for an ethnic approach discusses the possibility of categorising people with respect to race and language. Hutton (1999: 280) argues that all these approaches share the conviction that linguistics is the key discipline to establish the history of human groups and their cultural bonds.

6 Cf. Prudent (1980: 42) for further examples in the area of Creole Studies at the turn of the twentieth century.

ken by Jews to the shape of their noses while correlating the sound pattern of the *s* and the fronted vowels to the shape of their lips (Aptroot 1991: 48). Even though Ginneken refers to Papiamentu as *negerspaansch*, thus referring to its speakers in racial terms, he does not describe the Papiamentu language in detail. He is primarily concerned with the Dutch language and refers to other languages only in so far as they are spoken in the Dutch colonies and are therefore in contact with Dutch. He denounces, however, the use of Papiamentu by Dutch families, maybe because this linguistic behaviour threatened the possibility of neatly distinguishing between the different ‘races’ which ought to be separable on linguistic terms.<sup>7</sup>

Another characteristic which is brought out more clearly in later studies such as Hesseling’s (1933a) is the prominent use of a colour division in relation to racial categorisations. Hesseling argues that Papiamentu is the product of interaction between different groups of people, the slave owners and their slaves, instead of using Fokker’s theory of the deformation of Spanish by the coloured people. He distinguishes the two groups into ‘white’ and ‘black’ and uses this distinction throughout the text. This characteristic is pushed further in Schultze’s article on ‘Sklassen- und Dienersprachen’ [slave and servant languages] (1933), in which he claims to give an overview from the perspective of the sociology of language and migration (Schultze 1933: 377). He uses the colour scheme to locate contact languages “an den Außenrändern der von den Weißen bewohnten und eroberten Welt” [at the margins of those areas inhabited and conquered by the white] (ibid.: 391) thus implying a continuous and ever expanding empire of the ‘white’. All other people are subsumed under the category of ‘coloured’, i.e. they are essentially characterised by their non-whiteness, and are relegated to the fringes of this dominant space.

Despite these references to the African heritage of Papiamentu, which uses racial categories from physical anthropology and accordingly places Papiamentu in the realm of ‘primitive’ languages, most of the articles discussed focus more on another aspect, namely Papiamentu’s relation to its supposed base language, Spanish.<sup>8</sup> All articles are written by academics working in the field of philology, many in Romance Philology. If we take Fokker’s article as an example again, the use of the word *basterd spaans* already indicates the linguistic affiliation he argues for. In fact, the article con-

7 Similarly, the linguistic assimilation of Dutch Jews would threaten the possibility of distinguishing between the two ethnic groups.

8 There has been an ongoing debate on the origins of Papiamentu. While some claim that it originated in a Spanish pidgin from the times of Spanish rule on the island, others have argued that its roots lie in a Portuguese pidgin spoken on the West coast of Africa which developed with the slave trade and was relexified and hispanised in later years. A further source for Portuguese influences on Papiamentu lies in the linguistic repertoire of the Dutch Sephardim Jews who, after the expulsion of the Dutch from Brazil, formed part of the Curaçao society from the beginning of the Dutch settlement. See Martinus (1996) for a discussion of the different theories of origin.

tains a detailed discussion of the sound pattern of Papiamentu and its systematic relation to Spanish. Departing from the Spanish sounds, Fokker (1914: 58) explains how they develop into Papiamentu sounds, such as for example the weakening of the *jota* /x/ to an unvoiced /h/. In this way, he presents a table of systematic sound changes that relate Papiamentu to Spanish. Furthermore, he includes references to American Spanish and other varieties and languages of Spain such as Andalusian and Galician to explain that deviations from standard Castilian Spanish need not necessarily be due to a specific development of Papiamentu but might be related to other Spanish varieties or related languages. While his analysis is not as sophisticated as for example Lenz's detailed study of Papiamentu (1928), it follows the methodology established for the study of Creole languages, particularly in the work of the extremely productive scholar Hugo Schuchardt.<sup>9</sup> Schuchardt, a classical philologist by training, wrote innumerable articles on a whole range of Creoles, firmly establishing the application of historical-comparative methodology with its focus on tracing the sound changes through the different historical stages of a language, to the study of Creole languages. The historical sequence thus established led from the lexifier language (the European languages which provided most of the lexical base) to the Creole language, identifying the sound changes the former had undergone on the way to its current stage. This ultimately led to the integration of Creole languages into the genealogy of Indo-European languages even if their digression from the common scheme was under constant discussion.<sup>10</sup> The interest that philologists took in these languages thus emerged from their interest in explaining the historical development of their European 'base' languages. Creoles were assimilated into the Indo-European language family as derivations of their lexifier languages whose analysis might shed light on possible directions of language change in the latter. As such they were not studied for their own sake, but in relation to their historical origins and genetic relation to another language.

## 2. The Papiamentu Language: *Volkstaal* or *Taal van een Volk*?

If we change our focus from academic texts written in the Netherlands to non-academic texts from the ABC islands we notice some striking differences, but also some underlying similarities. A common element in most of those texts is the use of the term *volkstaal* [vernacular] to refer to the Papiamentu language. Jesurun, a business man from Curaçao, even entitled one of his two articles on Papiamentu "Eenige

---

9 See Schuchardt (1922) for a list of his publications.

10 Schuchardt, for example, used his analyses of Creole languages to argue for a certain degree of substrate influence against the more hermetic view of the Neogrammarians who sought to explain all language change by purely internal mechanisms of sound change. Still, for the most part, his articles are a powerful demonstration of the effective application of the regularities of sound change (cf. Bachmann 2005: 58-64).

Beschouwingen over de volkstaal van Curaçao” [Some observations on the vernacular of Curaçao] and the following citation illustrates his use of the term vernacular:

Het Papiëmentsch<sup>11</sup> is werkelijk *une langue d'enfant*, en heeft daarom veel overeenkomst met de primitieve talen.

Het is de taal van minder ontwikkelde menschen, die geen begrip hadden van lezen noch schrijven, [...] (Jesurun 1897: 97).

[Papiamentu is in fact *une langue d'enfant*, and has therefore much in common with primitive languages. It is the language of less developed people, who do not know how to read or write, [...].]

Jesurun distinguishes between different degrees of linguistic development and places Papiamentu in the category of less developed languages akin to ‘primitive’ languages and the speech of children. This distinction rests on writing and literacy: Papiamentu, he claims, is the language of those who cannot read or write, which is precisely what sets it on a par with children’s language, which refers to the stage before mastering literacy, and ‘primitive’ languages, for which no writing system has been developed. This distinction consequently translates into a social classification which characterises Papiamentu as the language of the uneducated, common people, hence the name *volkstaal* [literally: folk language]. Accordingly, Jesurun’s (1897: 98) description points to its simplicity, lack of rules, fewer lexical terms, particularly to express abstract thoughts, its use in everyday life and in oral discourse in general, and the absence of a literature.

The counterpart to the vernacular is the *cultuurtaal* [literally: language of culture],<sup>12</sup> a term used in the following citation from the Dutch teacher Walboomers based in Curaçao:

Maar als iemand zegt “Papiamentsch is geen taal” en daarmee will te kennen geven, dat ’t niet behoort tot de cultuurtalen, dat ’t niet de draagster is van een eigen cultuur en karakteristieke uiting van beschaafde en ontwikkelde mentaliteit, dan is dat ook zóó waar, dat ’t heelmaal net dom is, dat te beweren (Walboomers 1916: 2).

[But if someone says “Papiamentu is not a language” thus expressing the conviction that it does not belong to the languages of culture, that it is not the beholder of a culture of its own and characteristic expression of an educated and developed mind, then that is so obvious that it is not an unreasonable claim to make.]

According to Walboomers, a language of culture is also characterised by its relation to the development of its speakers, so that its structure reflects their intellectual capacity.

11 “Papiëmentsch” is the assimilation to the Dutch of the originally used Papiamentu. There is also a hispanised spelling of the name: “Papiamento”.

12 For a less literal translation one could use the term ‘language of civilisation’. I will keep the Germanic reference to ‘culture’ for the discussion of this quotation.

Both citations thus link language and culture. However, they do not refer to racial and thus fixed biological categories but rather to developmental categories of cultural achievement thus reflecting the Humboldtian idea that the different structural types of languages, such as analytical or synthetic, reflect different developmental stages. Walboomers goes even further by denying the Papiamentu language and its speakers any culture at all; rather they are characterised by a lack of culture, thus indicating that culture is used to refer to high culture only, which helps to explain Jesurun's remark that 'Papiamentu is not a language' quoted by Walboomers (Jesurun 1898: 102). In other words, the lack of intellectual development represented by the use of the vernacular calls into question its status as a language at all, i.e. a language that expresses the 'civilisation' of its speakers.

This bipartite distinction is exactly the one the French term *patois* indicates. Where dialect refers in technical terms to diatopic variation focusing on the linguistic specificities of each region, the term *patois* is used to broadly distinguish the uneducated speech from that of the educated.<sup>13</sup> Thomas (1953) shows that it is only from the seventeenth century, i.e. the period of intense standardisation of the French language, that the term *patois* acquires its negative connotation. His semantic analysis shows that from the thirteenth century on, when the word was first attested in documents, it was used to refer to language or speech in general. Later it was also used in the sense of natural as opposed to educated speech with an empathetic undertone thus reflecting the diglossic situation of Latin and the Romance vernaculars. Only from the seventeenth century onwards do we find it attested with the negative meaning of the vulgar and corrupted speech of the common people (Thomas 1953: 105). As such it does not refer to any specific regional dialect but rather indicates the discrepancy between the rural, uneducated speech and the ideal of the prestigious Île de France variety, which came to epitomise the French standard language. It is thus precisely at the time when the regional dialects ceased to be written, and a common French standard is adopted to replace them, that the word *patois* takes on a negative connotation as the language of those not in command of the standard language. The semantic field delineated by the term *patois* thus makes a two-fold distinction between the social characterisation of its speakers and the medium used, namely spoken language with no elaborate written code.

The terminology is reminiscent of the idea of *bon usage* of prescriptive grammar where, for pedagogical reasons, the correct usage of a language is described based on examples from canonical authors. Any deviation from this norm was seen as a corruption of the correct language forms rather than a mere variation. This seems to indicate that Creole languages with their designations as *patois* or corrupted English or Spanish

---

13 In other languages the term dialect is often used differently in linguistic and non-linguistic contexts, whereby in the latter 'dialect' is often used to refer to a language with low status.

were likened to other ‘deviations’ of the standard language as found in the speech of the uneducated. This included regional varieties, as they were no longer used by the local elites for writing. Consequently, on the ABC islands the upper classes were identified by their use of the Dutch language, as we can see from the following citation from Jesurun:

Het voortbestaan dier volkstaal, hoe betreurenswaardig het ook zijn moge, is een feit waarmede rekening dient gehouden te worden. Betreurenswaardig noemen wij het, wijl in de eerste plaats het aanleeren der moedertaal daardoor wordt tegenhouden, en in de tweede plaats gemakkelijk en correct gebruik der Nederlandsche of eenige andere taal, zelfs vor hen die zoodanige talen hebben aangeleerd, moelijk blijft (Jesurun 1897: 96).

[The continued existence of the vernacular, no matter how lamentable it may seem, is a fact that needs to be taken into account. We say it is lamentable, firstly, because it obstructs the acquisition of the mother tongue and, secondly, because the correct usage of Dutch or some other language, even for those who have learned those languages, remains difficult.]

The reference to Papiamentu as a *volkstaal* here seems to imply a widespread use of the Creole language which is made responsible for the difficulties in acquiring the mother tongue. The term mother tongue refers to the colonial language Dutch, which is primarily associated with the Dutch families who supposedly speak it as their first language. The ‘other language’ refers to Spanish as a prominent literary language due to the islands’ proximity to and existing trade relations with the South American mainland. The widespread use of Papiamentu at the expense of the Dutch language alludes to an educational linguistic debate on the ABC islands. Over the course of the nineteenth century there are constant complaints about the limited knowledge of Dutch by Curaçao schoolchildren. This mostly concerned the children of the upper classes since other classes had only limited access to school education at all. At the end of the nineteenth century the Dutch colonial officers stepped up their efforts to make Dutch the only language of schooling and to widen its usage among the islanders. This included the coloured population so that the Roman Catholic school system for the poor also came under close scrutiny.<sup>14</sup>

While Jesurun uses the term *volkstaal* precisely to indicate that Papiamentu is a vernacular with no literary tradition, interestingly Chumaceiro in an article for *Neer-*

---

14 Walboomers is a member of the Brothers of Tilburg who were sent to the ABC islands to reform the education system for the poor, which up until then had been run by priests of the Roman Catholic Church and which had been part of their program to convert former slaves to Christianity. See Smeulders (1987) for a detailed discussion of this educational debate and the role of language in it. Putte (1999) relates this politics of ‘Dutchification’ to nation building in the Netherlands during the nineteenth century.

*landia*, the journal of the *Algemeen Nederlands Verbond*<sup>15</sup> does not refer to Papiamentu as the *volkstaal* of Curaçao:

Curaçao bezit in werkelijkheid geen eigen volkstaal; de inwoners maken gebruik van het Papiamentoe, dat, van het woord *papiar* (spreken) afgeleid, spraak beteekent. Men bedient zich hier van eene spraak, die geen taal is, want zij mist zelfs de eerste vereischte van eene taal, n. l. de spraakleer (grammatica) en bezit zelfs niet de noodige termen om het onderscheid tusschen het mannelijk en vrouwelijk geslacht aan te duiden (Chumaceiro 1905: 156).

[Curaçao does not really have its own language; the population uses Papiamentu, which is derived from the word *papiar* (to speak) and thus means speech. One makes use here of a way of speaking which is not a proper language, since it lacks the principal characteristics of a language, namely grammar, and it does not even have the means to mark the difference between masculine and feminine gender.]

In this citation, Chumaceiro plays with the two Dutch terms *taal* and *spraak* to indicate that Papiamentu lacks the characteristics of a proper language. Interestingly, however, even though he characterises the Papiamentu language exactly like Jesurun, as lacking in formal grammar and being restricted to oral discourse, all the typical characteristics of a language that has not undergone a process of standardisation, he refuses to use the term *volkstaal*. The reason for this becomes apparent if we go back to the beginning of Chumaceiro's article, from which it becomes clear that he uses the term *volk* in its romantic-emphatic meaning as expressed by the English word 'a people' as opposed to the common people, again a distinction that need not be made explicit in the use of the Dutch word *volk*. He writes:

Lands taal, 's Lands roem: want 's Lands taal bevat 's Lands geschiedenis en zijne wetten, waarvoor sijn burgers goed en bloed hebben opgeofferd; zij maakt ons bekend met het karakter en den vooruitgang van het Volk en leert ons voornamelijk zijne letterkunde kennen waaruit de wereld zijne voortbrengselen op het gebied van kunsten en wetenschappen ontwaart (Chumaceiro 1905: 156).

[A country's language is its glory: because a country's language contains its history and its laws, for which its citizens have paid with their belongings and their blood; it introduces us to the character and progress of the people and presents us, in particular, with its literature, through which the world becomes aware of its contributions towards the arts and science.]

The term *Volk* (with a capital V) in this sense embraces the whole nation. The close correlation of a language, its literature and the culture of its people resembles that advocated by the national philologies at the time, which enforced the inclusive meaning of the word over the socially stratifying meaning. It is interesting to note that in a

---

15 The ANV was founded in 1895 as a Dutch-Flemish initiative to promote the use of the Dutch language. In 1903 a group of the ANV for the ABC islands was set up (Smeulders 1987: 65).

subsequent debate in the 1930s between the Roman Catholic priest Latour (1935/36, 1936/37) and the colonial officer Menkman (1936/37), published in the journal *De West-Indische Gids*, this same ambiguity is played out again, this time in favor of the Papiamentu language, which according to Latour represents all people of Curaçao (“alle rangen en standen van een volk” [all social classes] Latour 1936/37: 231). It is an attempt to proclaim Papiamentu the language of the people of Curaçao and thus present it as a vital aspect of the islanders’ national identity. This view is, however, more polemic (or utopian) than a matter of fact assessment of the situation, since most other writers do explicitly distinguish between Papiamentu as the vernacular and Dutch and Spanish as the literary languages (Cohen Henriquez 1934: 31-32). Its optimism, in particular, is not shared by the Afro-Curaçao writers of the time, who were producing literature in Papiamentu, but proclaimed themselves to be striving for a merging of their language in prestigious Spanish.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Papiamentu as Folklore or the ‘Primitive’ from within

How does this local discourse from the ABC islands relate to the academic linguistic discourse? I have argued that despite the recurring references to Papiamentu’s African heritage expressed in terms of the racial difference of its Afro-Curaçao speakers, ultimately the Papiamentu language was located in the field of Romance Philology. Like other Creole languages, it was considered a derivation of its lexifier language, in this case Spanish, and could thus be traced back to the latter via the sound changes it had undergone. This academic development was paralleled by the emerging interest of philologists in dialect studies at the end of the nineteenth century (Morpurgo Davies 1998: 289). Both areas are related to the refinement in the analysis of sound changes with the advent of Neogrammarian theory and thus the microanalysis of the historical development of European languages. While dialect studies complemented the historical dimension of philology with a spatial dimension, Creole languages offered, in a way, a glimpse of possible future developments of the ‘base’ language.

The discussion of the discourse of non-academics showed that they viewed Papiamentu as a vernacular – a spoken language of the common people – as opposed to the literary language of the Dutch colonisers or the assumed cultured variety of Papiamentu, its lexifier language Spanish. In these texts, the link to Spanish was, however, not established through the phonetic laws of sound change to build up a line of succession by which Creoles could be related to their European ‘base’ language. Instead the cultural difference between the two languages was stressed: Papiamentu was seen as a corrupted form of Spanish spoken by uneducated people who had no access

---

16 See Broek (1990) for a detailed analysis of this literature and Bachmann (2002) for an analysis of the prestige attributed to Papiamentu in this context.

to the *bon usage* of literary Spanish. In their view, Papiamentu was not a possible future development of Spanish, but rather a deficient form of it which could be overcome through education.

Interestingly, this divide between the cultural and the popular is also present in the discipline of philology with its combination of literary and language studies. The object of philological research is primarily high culture, originally that of the classical languages Greek and Latin.<sup>17</sup> With the advancement of historical linguistics within the field of modern philology a tension arises which is played out in an exemplary way in Gröber's *Grundriss der romanischen Philologie* [Compendium of Romance Philology]. In the first section, which defines the foundations of the discipline, Gröber (1888, I: 147) claims that the national language is at the heart of philological research. Its objective is to recover the full meaning of the outstanding works of national literature thus tracing the intellectual development of its people. While this high literature belongs to the cultural history of a nation ("Kulturgeschichte des Volkes", Gröber 1888, I: 146) he distinguishes from it the products of vernacular literature ("Erzeugnisse der Volkslitteratur" [sic], *ibid.*). Here we can observe once more the use of the term *Volk* in its two different meanings, namely as the equivalent of a people or a nation as a whole or as referring to the common people. This use overlaps with the other uses we identified for the term *volkstaal* on the ABC islands. In Gröber's manual, this distinction is formalised through the introduction of the category of folklore studies (*Volkskunde*) which he defines in its complementary, yet mutually exclusive relation to philology. Folklore studies and philology are mutually exclusive with respect to the realm of literary analysis where only a nation's literary masterpieces deserve the careful exegesis of philology because of their cultural value. The products of folklore *per se* were not considered worthy of a comparable hermeneutic effort. Yet, while tracing the historical development of the European languages, considering both high and low culture became unavoidable. Analysis of the historical development of the Romance languages depended precisely on the reconstruction of their beginnings in Vulgar Latin, i.e. the vernacular of the Roman people, as opposed to Classical Latin handed down through literature. It is therefore no coincidence that the founding figure of the discipline, Friedrich Diez, uses the exact term *Volkssprache* (the German equivalent to *volkstaal* or vernacular) to refer to the variety of Latin which formed the basis of modern Romance languages, and opposes it to Classical Latin with its evident structural differences (Diez 1836, 1: 3-4). Furthermore, the beginnings of Romance literatures were marked by the diglossic situation whereby Latin is used as the literary language and the use of the vernaculars in writing is slowly expanding. Gröber does acknowledge that much, but strives to maintain a strict distinction between philology and folklore studies by introducing the category of the 'oral sources':

---

17 I cannot discuss the philological tradition related to the languages of the monotheistic religions here.

Unter mündlichen Quellen der romanischen Philologie, die mit den Erzeugnissen der Hand, den Thätigkeiten, Gebräuchen, Unterhaltungen, der Lebensweise der romanischen Völker die Grundlage der romanischen Volkskunde bilden und die Kenntnis von der romanischen Volkskultur vermitteln, sind die im Verkehr der niederen Schichten gebrauchten Sprachen und Sprachweisen und die in litterarische Formen gekleideten Äusserungen des Geistes der Romanen zu verstehen, die nicht durch die Schrift Verbreitung finden, sondern von Mund zu Mund, von einer Generation auf die andere übergehend sich fortpflanzen und erhalten (Gröber 1888, I: 197).

[By oral sources of Romance Philology we mean the languages and ways of speaking used for communication among the lower classes, as well as those manifestations of the *Geist* of the Romance peoples dressed in literary forms, which are not disseminated through writing but proliferate and are passed on orally, from one generation to the next. Together with artifacts, practices, customs, pastimes and the way of life of the Romance peoples, they form the basis of Romance folklore and convey knowledge of Romance popular culture.]

Gröber draws a line between oral and written language where the oral language is defined by its use among the lower classes and correlates with other cultural artifacts and practices of this class that belong to the realm of folklore. We see the same distinction at work here as in non-academic texts on Papiamentu, which place this language in the realm of the popular, characteristic of the uneducated, lower classes. Gröber takes great pains to avoid the term 'literature' and instead refers to 'literary forms' in an attempt to distinguish popular from high culture. However, the citation remains ambiguous with respect to the 'character of the Romance peoples', a notion which seems to embrace the nation as a whole. This ambiguity is characteristic of Gröber's demarcation and threatens to blur the boundaries between the two fields. For the area of linguistics, we have already discussed the increasing interest in dialects as a reservoir of possible sound changes that could contribute to the understanding of the history of a given language. There is thus a network of relations being established both in the historical dimension, between the different stages of the national language, as well as in a spatial dimension where the national language is at the centre of a mosaic of regional variations. Interestingly, the margins of both dimensions – the historical and the spatial – are characterised by the popular dimension, while at the centre the focus lies in the coalescence of the ideal of the national language. With respect to literature, the popular enters by way of the interrelations between vernacular literary forms and high literature (Gröber 1888, I: 197).

It is precisely this permeation of folklore into the realm of philology that, in my view, creates a discursive space for Creole languages to be investigated within the discipline of philology. They were analysed as variations of the European national languages, thus contributing to the analysis of the historical development of the latter.

Furthermore, some linguists also used philology to defend Papiamentu against 'primitivism'. One strategy was to underline the developmental aspect of language history, which we can see at work in Hesseling's writing:

Een punt van overeenkomst in de lotgevallen van het Negerhollands en het Papiaments is dat beide talen, uit de invloed van een sklaventaal op die van hun Europese overheersers geboren, geworden zijn tot een middel van gedachtenwisseling tussen ontwikkelde en aanzienlike mensen (Hesseling 1933a: 277).

[One thing that Negerhollands and Papiamentu have in common is that both languages, having come into existence through the influence of a slave language on the language of their European masters, developed into a medium of communication between cultivated and respected people.]

This defence is, however, ambiguous since it rests upon a theory of refinement that the Creole language has undergone and which is thought to be due largely to European influence. This becomes clear in the following citation from a review of Lenz's book on Papiamentu:

In het papiaments ziet men nog duidelijk de overgang van het oudste, in zekere zin het zuiverste Kreools, tot het onder invloed van Europese talen verformde (Hesseling 1933b: 49).

[In Papiamentu we can still clearly see the transition from the older Creole, purer in a way, to the Creole which has been transformed through the influence of European languages.]

Here Hesseling distinguishes between older stages of the language, the 'zuiver' or pure Creole and the one that has undergone influence by the European languages. The civilising factor is thus attributed to the European side. Similarly, Lenz (1928) distinguishes in his monograph on *Papiamentu: la gramática más sencilla* between the pure Creole of his Afro-Curaçao informant, which he refers to as 'lenguaje natural' [natural speech], and the literary language of Dutch-Curaçao authors such as Hoyer who have used Papiamentu in poetry. Even though both Lenz and Hesseling show a greater interest in the lower and thus more natural language forms, their attempted defence of the Creole language points out its internal stratification and therefore the fact that it has developed a high culture. Papiamentu can thus be divided into a realm of culture and of folklore itself and thus escapes reduction to the purely popular realm. This defence comes, however, at the expense of associating the popular or 'primitive' within Papiamentu with the Afro-Curaçao speakers who make up the uneducated, lower classes.

We can observe a similar redressing of boundaries between high and low in an article on proverbs in Papiamentu and *Negerengels* [Sranan] by Hesseling and Curaçao-born Cohen Henriquez (1940). They justify their interest in collecting and presenting Creole proverbs by making a comparison with Suñé Benages's *Refranero Clásico* from 1930, a collection of proverbs found in classical authors of Spanish literature, most prominently in Cervantes. They underline Suñé Benages's emphasis on Cervantes's reference to folk wisdom which is expressed through these proverbs and which is epitomised in the figure of Don Quixote's companion Sancho Panza (Hesse-

ling/Cohen Henriquez 1940: 162). This comparison with Cervantes obviously serves the purpose of revalorising the Creole proverbs and their philological interest. It is still necessary, however, to address the difference that, while Spanish proverbs have been given literary value through their inclusion in classical works of Spanish literature, Creole proverbs have proliferated purely in oral use. Hesseling and Cohen Henriquez are therefore playing down the boundaries between the oral and the written as we can see from the following citation:

Men zou intussen verkeerd doen als men de Spaanse spreekwoorden “littéraire” noemde en die naam ontzegde aan alle Negerengelse en Papiamentse. Bij de drie groepen horen wij wat het volk gaarne als zijn mening uitspreekt, en bij alle drie is die mening heel vaak “littéraire” van oorsprong, want in alle talen zijn zeer veel spreekwoorden oorspronkelijk citaten, en het doet aan het wezen der zaak niet af of een aanhaling uit een boek tot een geijkt gezegde wordt, dan wel of men aan nooit opgeschreven sprookjes, verhalen, raadsels of liedjes sprekende voorbeelden ontleent en die geregeld gebruikt (Cohen Henriquez/Hesseling 1940: 163).

[It would be wrong, however, to call the Spanish proverbs ‘literary’ while denying that denomination to all Sranan and Papiamentu proverbs. In the three groups of proverbs we hear the fondly expressed opinion of the common people, and for all three this opinion often has a ‘literary’ origin in so far as in all languages many proverbs originate from citations, and it is irrelevant for the nature of the matter if a citation is taken from a book to become a customary saying, or if one moves choice examples from sayings, narration, riddles, or songs into regular usage.]

The emphasis is thus not so much on the form in which the proverbs exist – written or oral – but that they escape the momentary and become customary sayings by their exemplary status. It is this that marks them out as ‘literary’, rather than their direct affiliation with high literature. The Creole proverbs, however, also signal the overlaps between anthropology and philology since they are usually taken to represent the African heritage of Creole culture thus marking the boundary between the Papiamentu language which can be assimilated into the European language family and the African cultural traits the proverbs represent and which are inherently alien to European culture. Interestingly, Hesseling and Cohen Henriquez point out the two popular influences pertaining in the Creole proverbs by dividing them into European and non-European (ibid.: 165). They relate the European proverbs to a common popular treasure that all European cultures share, while the non-European proverbs are speculatively related to Carib and African origins. The latter are shown to represent the atrocities the slaves had to suffer at the hands of their masters, as well as the grim humour with which they tried to come to terms with their dire living conditions. It is easy to imagine that these attempts to revalorise the popular culture of Papiamentu language and literature were not always met with enthusiasm. We saw this in Menkman’s and Chumaceiro’s denial that Papiamentu could be interpreted as a symbol of Curaçao

identity. While the interest in popular culture channelled into the development of the discipline of folklore studies had opened up a space beyond philology for discussing the 'primitive' within European cultures, it also meant that the strictly defined distinctions introduced by that paradigm kept the common people and their culture at a comfortable distance.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of Creole languages, in particular Papiamentu, I have shown that interest in these languages at the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, was located precisely where folklore and philology intersect. Papiamentu was assimilated into the Indo-European language family through its analysis as a derivative of Spanish. It was thus seen as an equivalent to other popular varieties such as the regional dialects, as the title of Coelho's early study *Os Dialectos Românicos ou Neolatinos na África, Ásia e América* ([1880-86] 1967) already indicated.<sup>19</sup> Analysis of discourse on the African contribution to Papiamentu has shown, however, that in the case of Creole languages their relation with the popular referred not only to the 'primitive' within European culture but that the 'primitive' of anthropology was identified as the lurking presence of their Afro-Curaçao speakers and its possible influence on the language. Interestingly, while some European linguists used the category of race and specifically colour as a descriptive tool, the Curaçao writers mostly avoided such references and emphasised instead the internal distinction between a high and low culture within their society. The disciplinary tension created by the location of Papiamentu at the crossroads of philology, folklore and anthropology is indissoluble since it created the very conditions for analysis of Creole languages at the beginning of the twentieth century.

---

18 This is precisely the objective that Bagus (2005) lays out in her analysis of early Hessian folklore society. She concludes that the engagement of teachers and local priests in folklore societies served to underline the distinction between their object of research – the common people – and their own status as belonging to the educational elite of the country, particularly in an environment where the humanities were losing ground to the natural sciences and engineering (Bagus 2005: 391-92).

19 Coelho discusses examples from Creole languages on an equal footing with other varieties such as Brazilian Portuguese.

## References

- Aptroot, Marion (1991): "Northwestern Yiddish: The State of Research". In: Kerler, Dov-Ber (ed.): *Winter Studies in Yiddish*, 3 (Papers from the Third Annual Oxford Winter Symposium in Yiddish Language and Literature, 13-15 December 1987). Chur: Harwood, pp. 41-59.
- Bachmann, Iris (2002): "Übersetzen in Kreolsprachen: Predigten, Preziosen, Prestige". In: Scharlau, Birgit (ed.): *Übersetzen in Lateinamerika*. Tübingen: Narr, pp. 203-225.
- (2005): *Die Sprachwerdung des Kreolischen: eine diskursanalytische Untersuchung am Beispiel des Papiamentu*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Baggiono, Daniel (2000): "La naissance de la créolistique". In: Auroux, Sylvain (ed.): *Histoire des idées linguistiques*. Tome 3: *L'hégémonie du comparatisme*. Liège: Mardaga, pp. 253-261.
- Bagus, Anita (2005): *Volkskultur in der bildungsbürgerlichen Welt: Zum Institutionalisierungsprozeß wissenschaftlicher Volkskunde im wilhelminischen Kaiserreich am Beispiel der Hessischen Vereinigung für Volkskunde*. Giessen: Universitätsbibliothek Giessen.
- Broek, Aart Gideon (1990): *The Rise of a Caribbean Island's Literature: The Case of Curaçao and Its Writing in Papiamentu*. Dissertation Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam.
- Chumaceiro, J. H. M. (1905): "De Nederlandsche taal op Curaçao". In: *Neerlandia* (Den Haag) Curaçao-Nummer, Juli-Aug. 1905, pp. 156-158.
- Coelho, F. Adolpho ([1880-86] 1967): "Os dialectos rômnicos ou neolatinos na Africa, Asia e América". In: Morais-Barbosa, Jorge (ed.): *Estudos Linguísticos Crioulos*. [Reprint of articles from the *Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*, edited and introduced by Jorge Morais-Barbosa.] Lisboa: Academia Internacional da Cultura Portuguesa, pp. 1-108.
- Cohen Henriquez, Percy (1934): "De taal van Curaçao". In: *Natuur en Mensch* (Utrecht), 54.4-5: 31-34.
- Cohen Henriquez, Percy/Hesseling, Dirk Christiaan (1940): "Papiamentse en Negerengelse Spreekwoorden". In: *West-Indische Gids* (Amsterdam), 22: 161-172.
- Diez, Friedrich (1836): *Grammatik der Romanischen Sprachen*, Theil 1. Bonn: Weber.
- Fokker, A. A. (1914): "Het Papiamentoe of Basterd-Spaans der West-Indiese Eilanden". In: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde* (Leiden), 33: 54-79.
- Ginneken, Jac. van ([1913] 1928): *Handboek der Nederlandsche Taal*. Deel I: *De sociologische Structuur der Nederlandsche Taal*, I, 2nd edition; 's Hertogenbosch: Malmberg.
- Gröber, Gustav (1888): *Grundriss der romanischen Philologie*, Band 1. Straßburg: Trübner.
- Hesseling, Dirk Christiaan (1933a): "Papiaments en Negerhollands". In: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde* (Leiden), 52: 265-288.
- (1933b): "Een Spaans boek over het Papiaments". In: *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde* 52: 40-69. Leiden.
- (1979): *On the Origin and Formation of Creoles: a Miscellany of Articles*. Roberge, Paul T./Markey, T. L., eds. and transls. Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers.
- Hofmann, Sabine (2001): *Die Konstruktion kolonialer Wirklichkeit. Eine diskursanalytische Untersuchung französischer Karibiktexte des frühen 17. Jahrhunderts*. Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus.
- Hutton, Christopher M. (1999): *Linguistics and the Third Reich. Mother-tongue Fascism, Race and the Science of Language*. London/New York: Routledge.

- Jesurun, A. (1897): "Eenige Beschouwingen over de volkstaal van Curaçao". In: *Jaarlijksch Verslag van het Geschied-, Taal-, Land- en Volkenkundig Genootschap* (Willemstad), 1: 95-110.
- (1898): "Het Papiëmentsch". In: *Jaarlijksch Verslag van het Geschied-, Taal-, Land- en Volkenkundig Genootschap* (Willemstad), 2: 75-102.
- Latour, M. D. (1935/36): "Vreemde invloeden in het Papiamentu". In: *West-Indische Gids* (Amsterdam), 17: 387-396.
- (1936/37): "De taal van Curaçao". In: *West-Indische Gids* (Amsterdam), 18: 231-239.
- Lenz, Rodolfo (1928): *El Papiamento, la lengua criolla de Curazao. La gramática más sencilla*. Santiago de Chile: Establecimientos Gráficos Balcells y Co. Orig. in: *Anales de la Universidad de Chile* (Santiago), 2<sup>a</sup> serie, año 4 (1926); año 5 (1927).
- Martinus, Efraim Frank (1996): *The Kiss of a Slave: Papiamentu's West-African Connections*. Dissertation. Curaçao: Universiteit van Amsterdam.
- Menkman, Willem R. (1936/37): "Curaçao, zijn naam en zijn taal". In: *West-Indische Gids* (Amsterdam), 18: 38-50.
- Morpurgo Davies, Anna (1998): *Nineteenth-Century Linguistics*. [Lepschy, Giulio (ed.): *History of Linguistics*, vol. 4.] London/New York: Longman.
- Poliakov, Léon ([1971] 1974): *The Aryan Myth: a History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*. Translated from the French by Edmund Howard. London: Chatto & Windus Heinemann for Sussex University Press.
- Putte, Florimon van (1999): *Dede pikiña ku su bisña: Papiament-Nederlands en de onverwerkt verleden tijd*. Zutphen: Walburg.
- Prudent, Lambert-Félix (1980): *Des baragouins à la langue antillaise. Analyse historique et sociolinguistique du discours sur le créole*. Paris: Éditions Caribéennes.
- Thomas, Jacques (1953): "Dialecte et Patois. Esquisse d'une étude sémantique". In: *Romanica Gandensia* (Gent), 1: 93-117.
- Schuchardt, Hugo (1922): *Schuchardt-Brevier. Ein Vademecum der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*. Hrsg. von Leo Spitzer. Halle: Niemeyer.
- Schultze, Ernst (1933): "Sklaven- und Dienersprachen (sogen. Handelssprachen): Ein Beitrag zur Sprach- und Wanderungs-Soziologie". In: *Sociologus* (Berlin), 9.4: 377-418.
- Smeulders, Toos Filomeen (1987): *Papiamentu en onderwijs: Veranderingen in beeld en betekenis van de volkstaal op Curaçao*. Dissertation, Univ. Utrecht.
- Suñé Benages, Juan (1930): *Refranero clásico. Colección de más de 2.200 refranes*. Barcelona: Gil.
- Walboomers, W. J. (1916): "Enkele opmerkingen naar aanleiding van 't artikel van D<sup>s</sup>. G. J. Eybers over 't Papiamentsch, Amigoe di Curaçao, 2 October". In: *Amigoe di Curaçao* (Willemstad), 16.10.1915, pp. 2-3.