

THIS IS THE WAY WE DOES TALK! PERCEPTIONS OF CARIBBEAN ENGLISH IN ARUBAN EDUCATION AND SOCIETY ¹

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On the multilingual Caribbean island of Aruba there has been an intense language debate going on for more than a century now. The vernacular creole language Papiamentu has gained more prominence in Aruban society, taking on a more active role in the educational system. San Nicolas English, another creole language spoken on the island, has gotten significantly less attention despite its enormous historical, economic and aesthetic influence on the development of the island. This paper sheds some light on the perceptions and discussions surrounding this variety of Caribbean English.

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Introduction

It was at *Filomena College Mavo* in ‘*juffrouw*’ Moons-Sharpe’s English class where for the first time I read a novel by a Caribbean author named Samuel Selvon. This novel, entitled *The Lonely Londoners* told the tale of West Indians and their experiences as immigrants in London, England. I felt an instant connection because I automatically compared it to the same experiences Arubans encounter when going to the Netherlands. Selvon described a scene where the boys went to a *fête*² in London city in the middle of winter.

Calypso and steelpan music was playing in di party, the boys them drinking rum at the bar while Captain and he fellas chatting down some white English gials in di corner. In the middle a di dance floor Tanti Merle break away and starting wining in front a everybody to some sweet calypso music. When di police try stop di party nobody want to go home. They started shouting No No we eh going home, we eh leaving, No No we eh going home we eh leaving. (author’s interpretation of a scene from Selvon, 1989)

¹ The information that is made available in this paper came out of more than 50 interviews with speakers of San Nicolas English as well as scholars in the field. I convey a special thanks to Madonna Stephens, Merlynn Williams, Regine Croes and Endrah Gumbs Richardson for their assistance with this paper. I also convey a special thanks to Tammy Richardson who is the author of the poem; “*Dey say ah Bad.*”

² Is a French word meaning festival, celebration or party, which has passed into English as a label that may be given to certain events. It is commonly used in the Caribbean.

Besides the humor and wit of Selvon's story telling, for the first time I encountered a novel where the dialogue was in Caribbean English and the characters were recognizable to me. Tanti Merle and Tallboy were characters I grew up with on Saturdays listening to Trinidadian stand up comedian Paul Keens Douglas on the Baba Charlie Calypso Show. Thanks to Selvon and *juffrouw* Moons I no longer felt ashamed of my language and my heritage.

This paper attempts to shed some light on various aspects of Caribbean English in Aruban society and education. There has not been much research carried out in this area and it is my aspiration to discover more about the topic. Even though there are pockets of Caribbean English still spoken in Aruba such as in the constituencies of Dakota, Tarabana and Oranjestad, the focus will be primarily on the San Nicolas variety. Not that I think it to be superior! It is notable that this so called San Nicolas English has survived for over half a century. I will be looking at diverse aspects of the language such as its history, perceptions and its development in certain areas of the Aruban society such as in education.

Contemporary Language Situation

In the past decade we have seen the Papiamentu language take a more prominent role in our society. Papiamentu has become a subject in our schools and is also now the official language of government next to Dutch. Currently, the department of education has started a pilot project called "*Scol Multilingual*." This multilingual school will feature four of the main languages spoken on the island of Aruba and will primarily focus on Papiamentu as the language of instruction (Departamento di Enseñansa, 2002).

The Aruban Central Bureau for Statistics reported in 2002 that approximately 69% of the Aruban population considers Papiamentu to be the main language spoken at home. Approximately 13% of the population considers Spanish to be their home language, while 8.2% of the population speaks English at home and 6.2% speaks Dutch. The remaining residents speak other languages such as Haitian Creole, Hindi and even Filipino amongst others (CBS, 2002: 90).

The percentage of English speaking inhabitants in Aruba given by the CBS may be correct but the labeling of this group as 'English speaking' is questionable. Most of what they considered to be English speakers are actually native Caribbean English speakers. When Arubans travel to English speaking countries they quickly realize how much they depend on other languages in their daily conversations. The Aruban language situation is a product of vast migratory processes during various decades in

the 20th century. This fact makes it difficult to force Aruban languages into a one-size-fits-all model. This has been one of the foremost errors that anthropologists and historians have made in the past when they have studied Aruban society.

Aruba did not have an immense plantation economy involving African slaves but the Afro-Caribbean Aruban populations that are presently residing on the island are mostly descendants of migrant laborers from the British Caribbean. The Afro-Caribbean immigrants originated from numerous islands such as Trinidad, St Vincent, St Kitts, Montserrat, Nevis, the British Virgin Islands, St Martin, St Lucia, Dominica, Granada and Barbados amongst others (Alofs & Merkies, 2001). Although most of the Aruban population is in some way, shape or form ethnically and racially diverse, these English-speaking immigrants have constituted a distinctive unit. They have resided in the constituency of San Nicolas, predominantly in the makeshift town known as “The Village”. As a consequence of interlinguistic communication, a distinct creole dialect emerged by way of fusion out of a *Lingua Franca* known to Arubans as Village English or San Nicolas English (Holm, 2000; Richardson, 2010). The San Nicolas based American-owned Lago Oil Refinery held English-speaking tradesmen in high regard to a certain extent thus giving the English language a superior social status on the island. San Nicolas urbanized rather distinctively and for decades marched to the beat of its own drum until the automation epoch which eventually resulted in the closing of the refinery in 1985 (Alofs & Merkies, 2001).

Bad English and Prejudice

At our yearly scouting camp held at the Santa Anna church in Noord, we camped with all the scouting groups on the island. My friend and I from the Sint Joris scouting group of San Nicolas joined some other scouts from a Tanki Leendert scouting group to look for firewood. When conversing with my friend in San Nicolas English, one of the scouts from the other group said, “Dicon bo ta papia e Ingles ey, bosnan tin cu papia Papiamento ta na Aruba nos ta”³.

My research has shown that the above experience is very common amongst speakers of San Nicolas English. Children as well as adults are ashamed of their language and prefer not to speak it publicly. When San Nicolas English speakers answer phone calls from family members at the work place, they prefer to speak to them in private where no other colleagues can hear them. They also sometimes change their accent and grammatical structure so that it might sound a bit more like Standard English.

Many families of English Caribbean descent considered it to be essential that ‘proper’ English be spoken at home. It was not Queen’s English, but even in their Caribbean

³ Translation from Papiamento: Why are you talking that type of English, We are in Aruba and you have to speak Papiamento.

English, there were rules that people adhered to. For example, you were not allowed to say *teeths*, you had to say teeth. You couldn't say *foots* you had to say feet. It was of utmost importance not to be thought of as uneducated. Receiving an education was extremely important even though many first generation immigrants could not command the Dutch language. Caribbean English speakers from the islands of Guyana, Barbados and Trinidad, commonly known as the Big Islanders, felt they spoke better English. One could argue they were even boastful about this fact! So, even within the Caribbean English speaking community, there were numerous differences in how people saw themselves. They were not a homogeneous unit.

The majority of San Nicolas English speakers perceive their language to be “Bad English.” The constant referral to their language as ‘Bad’ is a colonial inheritance. In Bob Marley’s Redemption Song he sang; “emancipate yourself from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our mind.” This was originally a quote from the Jamaican Pan Africanist Marcus Garvey who appealed to the African Diaspora to love themselves (Garvey, 1986). Calling your English or your hair Bad is a very Eurocentric manner of viewing things. As if only English from England is good or only straight European hair is beautiful! There is also a difference between how people perceive men or women speaking San Nicolas English. When women speak San Nicolas English they are often perceived as uneducated and unsophisticated. When men speak this language generally it is more acceptable. According to linguistic professor Hubert Devonish of the University of the West Indies this is also the case in Jamaica (2009).

In practice it is very difficult for non native speakers of San Nicolas English to understand the language. It is spoken at an accelerated tempo and because the syntax is different, non-speakers usually comprehend only a few words out of each sentence.

Periodic Language Acceptance

The language of communication in a multilingual society is a very complex issue. In Aruban culture, San Nicolas English has received only periodic and contextualized acceptance. During the carnival season when Calypso and Soca music is at its peak in popularity, San Nicolas English is heard regularly because these musical genres are sung in mainly San Nicolas English (Razak, 1998). Commonly, you hear young and old singing “*jump up and wave something*” and “*go to di left, go left, go left, go left, go left, go left.*” As the Lenten season begins, Calypso and Soca diminishes in popularity and the language creeps back into isolation as a result. The language can then only be heard in the homes and streets of San Nicolas.

There are survival related speech repertoires that native speakers of San Nicolas English use on a daily basis. These speakers shift their language identity depending on the motive and situation, as shown in the following examples.

- Regular ‘common folk’ San Nicolas English speakers amongst themselves converse only in San Nicolas English. For example in a bar or on the basketball court they speak the English as ‘Caribbean’ as possible.
- Highly educated San Nicolas English speakers amongst themselves speak differently depending on the situation. They will commonly speak as standard as possible to display their intelligence. If one can speak “correct English” one is perceived to have a higher status.
- When San Nicolas English speakers are outnumbered, and they are in a setting like Oranjestad where for example people predominantly speak in Papiamentu, they will speak Papiamentu as a mark of respect and also as a demonstration of their linguistic versatility.
- When Papiamentu speakers are outnumbered by San Nicolas English speakers in a San Nicolas setting and let’s say the Papiamentu speakers command San Nicolas English, they will speak San Nicolas English. Such Papiamentu speakers also want to demonstrate their integration level into San Nicolas culture.
- When San Nicolas English speakers are speaking to American tourists they will automatically adapt to American style English commonly called ‘*Yanking*’. They do this to gain respect from American tourists as well as letting themselves be understood.

Unification through Music

We can conclude by saying that there is still much to be researched regarding the San Nicolas English language. There is still a vast amount of confusion with reference to the language in the Aruban community as a whole as well as on the part of the speakers of the language themselves. San Nicolas English speaking students often think that they speak Standard English while this is not the case. Many of these students get failing grades in English in school. This paper is not a claim that San Nicolas English should be a substitute for Standard English, but it is important that students and teachers alike recognize that they are speaking another legitimate variety of English and that they should not treat it as Bad English but rather be aware of how and when to speak the language. A great deal of confusion would be avoided if all

teachers had a knowledge and appreciation of the grammar and pronunciation of San Nicolas English as well as a knowledge and appreciation for San Nicolas culture, in order to better attend to the needs of the Caribbean English speaking student population in Aruba.

It is important that we bring about an acknowledgement and valorization of the language to the whole island. This can be done for example by introducing the art of Calypso writing and performing in schools. The music is extremely popular in Aruba and the enthusiasm for the music can be used to break down cultural barriers. Primary school pupils in Santa Cruz, Oranjestad and Noord can be taught from an early age that San Nicolas English is not something foreign or strange, but instead is an integral component of Aruban culture. ‘Different’ does not mean ‘deficient’⁴. Countless San Nicolas inhabitants have been brought up thinking their language to be deficient. This is definitely not the case! Teaching creative writing through Calypso in schools would promote familiarization of the language at an early age. The pupils would even find speaking the language to be cool. Teachers also have to be educated about the language and the culture that goes along with it; the two can’t be separated. True recognition for all of the variegated facets and dimensions of Aruban culture would mean a stronger Aruban identity within which all of the inhabitants of the island would come to feel that they too belong.

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The following poem was written by Tammy Richardson.

Dey say ah Bad

*Not because I
Sound like dis
Walk like dis
Talk like dis
Means that I am bad*

*Not because you
Don't understand
Think that ah mad
Think dat ah sad
Means that I am bad*

*This is my expression
This is who I am
My identity
My comfort
My pride*

I am San Nicolas Pride

⁴ From President Obama’s ex pastor Rev. Dr. Wright’s speech to the Press Club in 2008.

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