

SHIFTING BOUNDARIES AND SHIFTING STATUS IN EDUCATION

HOW TO BEGIN HEALING A LONG FESTERING WOUND: PAPIAMENTO, COMMUNITY AND EDUCATION IN ARUBA

JOYCE L. PEREIRA
UNIVERSITY OF ARUBA

Introduction

The development of Papiamento, the language of Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire, is very strongly related to the colonial history of these islands and their inhabitants. In this article I will explain how this language could become the most prestigious language in these islands of the former Netherlands Antilles and why, despite recent improvement in its status, Papiamento is still struggling for recognition, even on the part of its own speakers.

The colonial context and the development of a language

One of the most compelling hypotheses concerning the genesis of Papiamento is the so called Proto-Afro-Portuguese Creole theory, as advanced by Dr. Frank E. Martinus in his doctoral dissertation entitled, *The Kiss of a Slave* (1996). This theory assumes that already in the 15th century an Afro-Portuguese Creole developed in Portugal, on the west coast of Africa and on the Cape Verdean Islands. This language became a lingua franca that was frequently used between Europeans – not only Portuguese – and West-Africans in their commercial contacts. It seems that in the slave trade during the 16th and 17th century this language continued to be the commercial language. According to Martinus before the transportation of the slaves to the Americas, many were ladinized, that is, they were baptized as Christians and learned elements of this Afro-Portuguese creole language. This language was then transported to the Caribbean by the slaves, where it was modified via relexification to the dominant European languages in the different colonies.

Colonial language policy

In 1499, Alonso de Ojeda, a Spanish captain, was the first European to come ashore on the island of Curaçao which at the time had its own native inhabitants. In 1527 Juan de Ampues captured the island, along with the neighboring islands Aruba and Bonaire to add them to the Spanish Empire in the so called New World.

In 1634 the Dutchman Johan van Walbeeck as a commander of the West-Indische Compagnie (W.I.C.) conquered the islands from the Spaniards and ousted the small Spanish garrison and the majority of the natives. This was the beginning of the Dutch colonization of the islands.

In August 1635 the first reformed (Calvinistic) clergyman arrived in Curaçao and he established the “Gereformeerde Gemeente” (The Dutch Reformed Church) for the Dutch settlers. In 1647 the island became a slave depot. The majority of the slaves were sold to the other islands and countries in the region. Many of the slaves who remained in Curaçao worked on the plantations that began operation there around 1650.

Although in Curaçao the conditions for agriculture were not very favorable, the Dutch colonists did very well economically, resulting in a rapidly growing slave population (Fouse, 2002).

In 1650, the first group of Sephardic Jews emigrated to Curaçao. Having fled from the Catholic inquisition in Spain and Portugal, they arrived in Curaçao mainly via Holland, or Brazil. They established a Jewish congregation, *Mikvé Israel*, which still exists today. These Sephardim spoke Portuguese, Spanish and Ladino (or Judeo-Spanish), which they had carried with them to the Cape Verde Islands, West Africa and other Portuguese colonies.

To protect the superior and elite position of the Dutch colonists, slaves were prohibited from learning Dutch and from joining the Dutch Reformed Church. Evangelization of the slaves, was therefore carried out by Catholic priests, who opted to use the language of the slaves in their work. The W.I.C. and the Dutch colonists thereby created very unfertile ground for the spread of Dutch and very fertile ground for the emergence of Papiamentu. We have already noted that the ladinized slaves who reached Curaçao already had some knowledge of the Afro-Portuguese Creole that was commonly used in the slave trade, and that the Sephardic Jews living on the island of Curaçao spoke Portuguese, Spanish and Ladino. Many of these Sephardim were also familiar with the Afro-Portuguese Creole that they had encountered along the West African coast and in Brazil. In this situation, the interlanguage that was used most commonly between the slaves, the Sephardim, and the Dutch became Papiamentu. Papiamentu can be said to be based on the Afro-Portuguese Creole spoken by both the slaves and the Sephardim, with strong influence from the lexicon of the Spanish, spoken by missionaries and the Sephardim, and incorporating some elements of Portuguese, and Ladino spoken by the Sephardim as well.

It was very difficult for the Dutch colonists to maintain their language in Curaçao, for different reasons:

- slaves were not allowed to learn Dutch,
- planters lived a very isolated existence on their plantations,
- adult slave women called *yaya's* were in charge of the education of the planters' children,

- European descended women had very intensive contact with their house slaves,
- the lingua franca used between the Dutch colonists and the Jews was Papiamentu
- contact with Holland was very scarce, even quite impossible in those early years.

Within one or two generations the Dutch language even lost its function as the mother tongue of the descendents of the Dutch Protestant settlers. Papiamentu became their mother tongue.

The Sephardic Jews used Papiamentu in their contacts with the slaves and with the other European descended groups and even with each other. The necessity to use Dutch was absent. The first appearance of written Papiamentu is “Awa pasa harina”, a proverb that occurs as the name of a Jewish ship in 1767. The oldest known document in Papiamentu dates from 1775, a letter of a Jewish inhabitant of Willemstad to his wife in the country side, the so called “love letter” (Martinus, 1996: 9). It is most probable that already before 1747 Papiamentu was the language almost everybody used in their family circle. A document of 1747 of the *Rhode Island Vice-Admiralty Court in Newport* is the oldest known document that mentions Papiamentu – in the document written as ‘*Poppemento*’ - as the language “*they commonly talk in Curaçao*” (Frederiks, 1859: 156-158).

In the meantime the population of slaves was still growing, and by the mid 18th century, they outnumbered European descended people. Since many of these slaves had learned Afro-Portuguese Creole in West Africa, and because the Dutch and Jewish masters used Afro-Portuguese Creole in their contacts with the slaves, Afro-Portuguese Creole and its Spanish-lexified variant Papiamentu became the language of the slaves. The Dutch language did not have any chance to stop the advance of Papiamentu. In fact, Dutch seems to have just stepped aside to let Papiamentu become the mother tongue of almost everyone on the island.

The Catholic Church conducted most of its activities in Papiamentu, and as such was a very important contributor of the development of the language. Under the Dutch, Bonaire and Aruba were initially closed off to settlement, but when these islands were opened for settlers from Curaçao in 1770, it was Papiamentu which rapidly took root there. The ABC-islands are surrounded by Spanish speaking countries, so it is logical that the influence of the Spanish language was very strong: the personal, familiar, cultural and commercial contacts were and are very intense, which resulted in a Spanish relexification of the original Afro-Portugese Creole.

In 1915 Shell, a Dutch-British oil company, established the *Curaçaoese Petroleum Maatschappij* in Curaçao and many new Dutch workers migrated to Curaçao with their families. For the first time in history the contact zone between Papiamentu and Dutch grew, especially when Dutch was introduced in 1935 as the only language of instruction in education. Papiamentu was already highly developed, so that influence from Dutch has been limited to the lexicon. The influence of English has been largely limited to the lexicon as well, specifically to the technical industrial lexicon.

The sudden shift

By the 19th century, Papiamentu had emerged as the most widely spoken language on the ABC-islands without any official promotion on the part of the Dutch. During the same century the justification for the European colonial enterprise itself (including that of the Dutch) was shifting to a ‘civilizing mission’ whereby metropolitan European culture, religion, and language was supposed to be adopted by all inhabitants of the colonies and all African, Indigenous, and creole languages and cultures were to be completely eradicated and extinguished. Under these conditions, it became unacceptable to the colonial government that in a Dutch colony the Dutch language was not the most important and the most widely spoken language.

Visitors from Holland were very astonished and outraged with the language situation on the islands. G. B. Bosch complained in 1829 in his *Reizen in West-Indië en door een gedeelte van Zuid- en Noord-Amerika*: “Men wordt hier, hoe ongaarne dan ook, weder genoodzaakt de zoo dikwijls gedane klagt aan te heffen, dat onze anderszins zoo roemwaardige voorvaders zoo weinig belang in hunne eigen taal gesteld hebben.” (Smeulders, 1987: 10). Bosch was only one of the many voices raised against Papiamentu.

In 1897 and 1907 the Colonial Council tried to pass an education ordinance which stipulated that only Dutch be used as the language of instruction in schools. These efforts failed, however, because the Catholic mission insisted on continuing to use Papiamentu in its schools, which constituted (and still constitute today) the majority of schools on the islands.

In 1936, in response to the demand for Dutch schools for the children of the newly arrived Dutch workers at the Shell refinery, the Colonial Council enacted the education law which required that Dutch be the only language of instruction in any school that wished to receive the newly instituted governmental education subsidy. Dutch was thus made the de facto official language of instruction not only on the three Papiamentu speaking islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, but also on the three English speaking islands of St. Maarten, Saba and St. Eustatius. Because everyone wanted to receive government money, overt opposition to the imposition of Dutch vanished.

Due to the official rejection of Papiamentu, the people of the ABC islands developed a “negatief linguïstisch normbeeld” (Prins-Winkel, 1973: 46) in relation to their own language, which we can still observe today. In the brainwashing that took place officials used all kind of Eurocentric myths to convince the people to reject the use of their mother tongue in education and to embrace Dutch as the key to success. The culture of education on the islands thus became one of mechanical and sheepish emulation of the Dutch metropolitan model (Prins-Winkel, 1983). In this way, the colonizers enlisted the colonized themselves in the vilification of Papiamentu.

The Aruba education and language policy

Out of these circumstances, a very dualistic and contradictory situation arose. On the one hand, Papiamentu continued to gain some status as a language of the mass media, of literature and other cultural expression. Its use continued to spread, as it became the lingua franca used among all newly arrived immigrant groups and between these groups and the 'original locals'. On the other hand Dutch acquired a preponderant status because of its position in the educational system.

But from the very beginning, there have been sharp criticisms of the governmental imposition of Dutch as language of instruction. For over 90% of students Dutch is a foreign language that they neither understand nor speak in the Caribbean. The Dutch Colonial Council "kicked away the ladder" that The Netherlands constructed some 200 years ago to educate its own people. At that time Dutch, the mother tongue of the majority, replaced French, the language of the elite, as the language of instruction in schools. Consequently the Netherlands became a very well educated, literate country, despite the fact that Dutch is a very small language, and the fact that 'you cannot use Dutch anywhere else than in the Netherlands': the same arguments that the Colonial Council used then, and the Dutch, Aruban and Antillean governments and policymakers are still using today in relation to Papiamentu to keep it out of the educational system.

Why is it so difficult to understand that what Dutch is for the Dutch people, Papiamentu is for our people? Why are all these efforts being made to withhold real education from our people? Why are we making learning so difficult and boring for our children? Every education professional knows that the mother tongue is an essential learning tool for the child and that learning in a language that you don't master leads to pseudo learning, frustration, and a high percentage of failures and drop outs.

It seems that in all the efforts to reconstruct and to renovate our educational system, learning Dutch has remained the main goal and that the development of comprehension, knowledge, thinking, and personality is of subordinate importance. Why we do have to prove, that in the proposed multilingual primary schools the students will learn Dutch better than in the present Dutch-only schools? And why are we now introducing a very rigorous test in Dutch and mathematics in the sixth grade? And why is it taboo to even consider Papiamentu as a language of instruction in general secondary schools (the officially designated MAVO, HAVO and VWO schools)?

And if Dutch is so important, why doesn't anybody seem to be concerned about the fact that our primary school teachers are not given systematic training in teaching foreign languages?

The fundamental problem is that our education system is just a copy or imitation of the Dutch system. This represents a tremendous and incredible scientific blunder

which is the product of a self-negating Eurocentric orientation. This poisonous orientation is so strong, that our policymakers and politicians systematically disregard the findings and recommendations of local and international researchers.

Conclusion

We have to be aware of our rights and claim them. We have to get rid of that imposed and cultivated humbleness (*nos pueblo humilde*) that has deformed us into timid and frightened people without initiative. Instead, we must critically analyze our own realities and be proud of what we are and what we have. We must use our own knowledges and resources to attain goals that are in the interest of our own people.

One of the most important of these resources is our own language, Papiamentu, which is (as is every human language) a creation of powerful cognitive, social, and cultural talent and skill. Our ancestors developed this language in very difficult situations, where their original languages, their families, their cultures, their beliefs, and their histories were repudiated and targeted for extermination. Despite all of this, our language, a trophy of survival, has overcome many obstacles over the centuries to grow and thrive, even in this most hostile of environments.

We have been struggling for almost a century with an educational system that is an unmitigated disaster for our people. The problems and their causes are well known, but the decision makers don't have the courage to break with old imported ideas that don't work and are not fixable. We don't have to slavishly mimic a failed Dutch educational model. We know that this educational model was imposed on us with absolutely no consideration for our people, their languages, their cultures, and their histories, all of which were either completely negated or considered to be vastly inferior by those who made Dutch the language of instruction in our schools. We know all of this, yet we still retain that system, which is still being used as a very powerful weapon to colonize, and brainwash us in order to create generation after generation of people who don't believe in their own power and possibilities, but instead believe only in the power and possibilities of others.

We can do better, if we dare to think for ourselves and be critical and creative, essential preconditions to any form of growth or development which will serve our own interests instead of the interests of those who have taken so much from us and given so little back. We have to break with the colonial and Eurocentric patterns of thinking and acting that we, especially our intellectuals trained in Holland and the U.S.A., have been trained to reproduce and deploy against our own people. As Ramón Grosfoguel (2008) states: "The success of the modern/colonial world-system consists precisely in making subjects that are socially located on the oppressed side of the colonial difference think epistemically like the ones in dominant positions". We have to be aware of all of this and work hard, together with our colleagues of Curaçao and Bonaire, to heal this long festering wound.

REFERENCES

- Chang, Ha-Joon (2002). Kicking Away the Ladder: How the economic and intellectual histories of capitalism have been rewritten to justify neo-liberal capitalism. *Post-Autistic Economic Review*, 15. Available at: http://www.btinternet.com/~pae_news/review/issue15.htm
- Fouse, Gary C. (2002). *The Story of Papiamentu: A study in Slavery and Language*. New York: University Press of America.
- Frederiks, Bernardus Th. & Jacobus J. Putman (2004, [1859]). *Woordenlijst der in de landstaal van Curaçao meest gebruikelijke woorden met Zamenspraken*. Facsimile of an anonymous edition. Bloemendaal/Curaçao: Stichting Libri Antilliani/ Fundashon pa Planifikashon di Idioma.
- Grosfoguel, Ramón (2008, [2006]). Transmodernity, border thinking, and global coloniality: Decolonizing political economy and postcolonial studies. *Revista Crítica de Ciencias Sociais*, 80, 115-147. Available in Portuguese and in English at: <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-07-04-grosfoguel-en.html>
- Martinus, Efraim Frank (1996). *The Kiss of a Slave: Papiamentu's West-African Connections*. PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam.
- Mignolo, Walter D. & Madina V. Tlostanova (2006). Theorizing from the borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9, (2); 205-221.
- Prins-Winkel, Anna C. (1973). *Kabes Duru? Verslag van een onderzoek naar de onderwijssituatie op de Benedenwindse Eilanden van de Nederlandse Antillen, in verband met het probleem van de vreemde voertaal bij het onderwijs*. Assen: van Gorcum.
- Prins-Winkel, Nelly (1983). *Educational Myths, Ideals and Realities on the A-B-C-islands of the Netherlands Antilles: A century of educational efforts and failures in Dutch-colonial schools*. In Enrique Muller (Ed.), *Papiamentu: Problems & Possibilities* (pp. 9-22). Zutphen: De Walburg Pers.
- Sankatsing, Glenn (1998). The Caribbean: archipelago of trailer societies. *Trinidad and Tobago Review*. Available at: <http://www.crscenter.com/Trailer.html>
- Sankatsing, Glenn (2001). *Envelopment or development? Samen klimmen uit een diep dal*. Paper presented at the Seminar 'Change and Development: A new Perspective, June 1, Paramaribo.
- Smeulders, Toos F. (1987). *Papiamentu en onderwijs: Verandering in beeld en betekenis van de volkstaal op Curaçao*. PhD dissertation, University of Utrecht.

