

Robin Sabino

Language Contact in the Danish West Indies: Giving Jack his Jacket. Leiden: Brill, 2012. xxii + 337 pp. (Cloth US\$156.00)

This book is a fine contribution to the list of publications that address the complicated population and language history of the Virgin Islands St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, also known as the Danish West Indies even though they are presently part of the United States. It presents an interesting history of language contact that is consistent with the social and economic past of these islands. Robin Sabino argues that identity formation is the main motivation behind the emergence of the (now extinct) creole language known as Virgin Islands Dutch Creole, Negerhollands, or simply *die Creooltaal*.

The book includes a discussion of the sociohistorical background of Virgin Islands Dutch Creole (Chapters 1–3), an evaluation of language documentation efforts in the past (Chapter 4), a presentation of various factors that influence creole formation (Chapters 5–6), and case studies that exemplify interlingual influence in creole formation in the linguistic subdomains of phonology and morphosyntax, in particular plural marking and serial verb constructions (Chapters 7–9). Chapter 10 summarizes the most important findings and underscores that creole genesis should be located in the emergence of the Danish colony's Afro-Caribbean community. There follow several appendices that bring the language back to life. The glossary of variable Virgin Islands Dutch Creole forms is a true asset (just don't mind that the language is mistakenly named Virgin Islands English Creole in the header of every uneven page of Appendix 3). The book is accompanied by audio files of Sabino's conversations with the last native speaker of Negerhollands, Mrs. Alice Stevens, which can be downloaded via <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004230705>. While the book is well written and generally clear, it contains a number of punctuation and spelling inconsistencies; personal names in particular are often misspelled.

The book's subtitle, "giving Jack his jacket," underscores Sabino's intention to give credit where credit is due, in particular to the Africans who built the West Indian plantation economies from the late seventeenth century onward. Chapter 1, "Hubristic Eurocentrism," discusses several examples of the impact of European-derived linguistic ideologies of inferiority and superiority on the inquiry into the origin and nature of Caribbean communities and their languages, and argues that the "legacy of Western cultural arrogance and ignorance" (p. 30) is still continuing. While the discussion is certainly thought provoking and we are largely in agreement with it, a more detailed, less argumentative treatment of this topic would have been welcome. For example, Sabino writes: "N. Hall (1992:110) points to the intellectual limitations that arise from

the assumption that European cultures and languages were a ‘terminus ad quem’ for Afro-Caribbean populations. Nevertheless, Bruyn and Veenstra published ‘The creolization of Dutch’ in 1993” (p. 28). But it is not clear to us how the Bruyn and Veenstra article illustrates the intellectual limitations that arise from the assumption that European cultures and languages were a “terminus ad quem” for Afro-Caribbean populations. An explanation would have been helpful.

Virgin Islands Dutch Creole is among the few creole languages that have been documented since the eighteenth century, which provides a substantial window on the language in various time periods. A well-known disadvantage of historical documents is that they often lack representativeness and validity. Sabino argues that in the case of Virgin Islands Dutch Creole, the earlier historical documents in particular record the language varieties (and language ideologies) of the Euro-Caribbean community, and that the language varieties of the Afro-Caribbean community are not well represented. Although we generally agree with this view, it does not mean that the older documents cannot give us any insight at all into the older, undocumented stages of the language varieties of the Afro-Caribbean community (see for example Van Sluijs 2014). Furthermore, now that the Negerhollands Database (NEHOL) is online and accessible via the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen (www.mpi.nl), the diachronic study of Virgin Islands Dutch Creole is expected to advance significantly via new digital humanities corpus technologies.

Language Contact in the Danish West Indies discusses some interesting examples of the Virgin Islands Dutch Creole varieties of the Afro-Caribbean and Euro-Caribbean communities, named Negerhollands and Hoch Kreol respectively, suggesting fundamental differences in the grammars of these varieties that can be traced back to some extent to the ancestral languages of these communities. While this may be true, a closer examination of the data presented reveals a number of inconsistencies. Table 24 (p. 195), for example, lists several serial verbs in Hoch Kreol and its modern-day equivalents in the lexifiers English, Danish, and Dutch. Leaving aside the disorienting alternation between stem forms, inflected forms, and infinitives and the choice for modern-day as opposed to eighteenth-century equivalents, we find it troublesome that half of the Dutch translations are incorrect: (a) *loop besuk* does not translate as Dutch *ga naar* ‘go to’, but rather *op bezoek gaan* ‘visit’, or *gaan bezoeken* ‘be going to visit’; (b) *loop due aan* is not *ga op* ‘go on (top of)’, but rather *ga ... aandoen* ‘go put on’; (c) *gaan zein* should be spelled *gaan zien*; (d) *maar komje*, which when spelled *maar kom je* means ‘but are you coming?’ is a mysterious translation of Dutch Creole *kom hael*, which rather translates as *kom halen* in Dutch. Finally, the alleged Dutch Creole idiom *lo(op) slaep* could be translated as *gaan slapen*

'go to sleep/go to bed' or as *liggen te slapen* 'be sleeping/be asleep', *slapen* 'be sleeping', or *naar bed gaan* 'go to bed'. In short, even though it is not clear from the original table or the text, all selected Hoch Kreol verb clusters have an exact equivalent verb cluster in Dutch.

Despite its shortcomings, the book is recommended to everybody interested in the origin and nature of Caribbean communities and their languages. It offers laymen and scholars a new perspective on the history of the Virgin Islands in which contemporary insights from the social sciences and the humanities are integrated in an innovative manner.

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Reference

- Sluijs, Robbert van, 2014. Variation and Change in Virgin Islands Dutch Creole: Tense, Aspect, and Modality. Ph.D. Dissertation, Radboud Universiteit, Nijmegen.