The status of Dutch in post-colonial Suriname

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Dutch in South-America

The Republic of Suriname
The Republic of Suriname (1)
The Republic of Suriname (2)

- former Dutch colony (1667-1975)

- history of slavery (1667-1863) and contract labourers
  → multi-ethnic and multilingual society
ca. 20 languages:

- Indian, European, Asian languages and creoles
- each ethnic group has its own language for communication within the group
- code-switching, both inter- and intrasententially
Language use in Suriname (2)

Dutch:

- the only official language!
- for official and formal situations; e.g. written documents, media, education, work, government offices, court proceedings
- Dutch Language Union
- Surinamese Dutch variety
- taught in schools and MA programme
- 62% of Surinamese consider it their L1
- more and more frequent as L1 in Paramaribo area
- mostly L2 or L3 in other districts
Sranantongo:

• English-based creole ("Negro-English")
• no official recognition
• L1 for Creole population
• *lingua franca*: oral language for interethnic daily communication
• social functions: expression of emotion, jokes, rap music
• popular among youth
• strong in interior parts of Suriname
• national identification: 'Surinaams'
• social stigma (e.g. considered 'vulgar')
Central question

~ Suriname's "linguistic schizophrenia" (Carew 1982):

How to explain the strong position of Dutch (in terms of social prestige, actual language use and official recognition) in post-colonial multilingual Suriname?

→ In comparison with Sranantongo as the lingua franca

Identification of 8 explanatory factors:
  a) objective factors
  b) attitudinal factors
Explanatory factor (1)

Dutch grants access to further education and better jobs

• language of academics; main language at Anton de Kom university
• required in job vacancies
Explanatory factor (2)

Dutch constitutes a bridge to the Netherlands
1) to relatives: ca. 350,000 people of Surinamese descent live in the Netherlands (CIA World Factbook)
2) university studies
3) job opportunities
Explanatory factor (3)

Dutch is internationally/politically important

- spoken in the Netherlands, Belgium and the Dutch Caribbean
- Low Countries are experienced in the world arena and have connections in world trade (Carew 1982: 5)
- vs. Sranantongo is only spoken in Suriname
- however: English, Spanish, Portuguese are even more important, especially for Suriname's contact with its neighbours and for business
Explanatory factor (4)

Literary tradition in Dutch
  e.g. Clark Accord, Albert Helman, Cynthia McLeod, Ismene Krishnadath, ...

- vs. Sranantongo is mainly an oral language
- but: since 1960, part of the official national anthem is in Sranantongo
Explanatory factor (5)

Dutch is standardised and taught in institutions

• since 1876 compulsory school attendance, in Dutch
• people are literated in Dutch: Dutch schoolbooks, dictionaries, grammar books, newspapers
• vs. no official recognition for use of Sranantongo at school; it is not taught as a school subject
• lack of standardisation of Sranantongo, e.g. spelling regulations from 1986 are not spread (instead: variation)
Explanatory factor (6)

Maintaining Dutch is the most economical

- Suriname cannot afford the costs to introduce other official language(s)
- Since 46-57% of Surinamese are living below the national poverty line (2010, NoSpang.com), their first concern is 'survival': no interest in worrying about language policy
Explanatory factor (7)

Dutch is no longer the 'colonial language' but Suriname has its own national variety of Dutch

- no longer 'their' language, but 'our' language: 64% of young Surinamese do not consider Dutch as the colonial language; 16% do (Fierens 2006)
  → explanation: a sharper national awareness accompanied Suriname’s independence (1954/1975), which inspired a new look at Dutch (Carew 1982: 1)
- recognition and standardisation of Surinamese Dutch in Suriname (e.g. de Bies 1994, 2009)
- Dutch Language Union views Dutch as a pluricentric language with national standard realisations
Explanatory factor (8)

Dutch has a unifying effect since it is not tied to a particular ethnic group

- compare Sranantongo: used for interethnic communication and learnt by new immigrants
- however, Sranantongo may be associated with the Creole population in and near Paramaribo (cf. fear of Creole supremacy by Hindustani population around 1960)
- mind: English, proposed by some as a possible official language for Suriname, could have the same unifying effect
Conclusion

Division of labour between Dutch and Sranantongo across social domains and linguistic functions

- Rather than 'linguistic schizophrenia' (Carew 1982), Suriname's linguistic situation seems to be organised in terms of a relatively stable diglossia (in the sense of Fishman 1967) with two functionally distinct languages:

  - Dutch: High Variety
    - holds the prestige position
    - for formal functions
    - standardised
    - learnt in institutions
  - Sranantongo: Low Variety
Remaining questions (1)

1) How stable is the Surinamese situation of diglossia?

- functional changes involving the use of Dutch/Sranantongo and other languages, including English?

- attitudinal changes?
  e.g. status of Dutch is controversial: "We shook off the chains of Dutch colonialism in the 1970s, but our consciousness remains colonized by the Dutch language"
  (Surinamese writer Paul Middellijn in New York Times, 2008)

- changing language policy?
  e.g. introduction of Sranantongo or other languages as school subject, standardisation activities, official recognition of English,...?
2) Which are the structural consequences for the Dutch language?

   e.g. greater influences from Sranantongo may lead to modifications of Surinamese Dutch with additional consequences for Dutch as a pluricentric language

   ➤ further divergence from European Dutch... or even separation?

   "[...] the independence of Surinam could lead to an increasing differentiation between European and Surinamese Dutch so that at a given moment the Surinamese might want to declare the Dutch in Surinam emancipated, just as happened in South Africa."
Literature (selection)

Websites

• CIA World Factbook
• Nederlandse Taalunie (Dutch Language Union)
  http://taalunieversum.org/inhoud/feiten-en-cijfers
• Dutch++
  https://dutch-beta.ned.univie.ac.at
• Misconceptie over armoedegrens Suriname (16.02.2010). In: NoSpang.com, Suriname Network Online
• Neon – Nederlands Online
  http://neon.niederlandistik.fu-berlin.de/nl/nedling/langvar/overview
Credits (1)

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https://dutch-beta.ned.univie.ac.at

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc78_de.htm
Credits (2)

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