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SPA 233: Languages of the Americas

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**Linguistic Convergence in Urban Suriname: The Impacts of Social Mobility
and Power on Language Ideologies**

On a typical day, strolling through the streets of Suriname, one is bound to hear many languages from a variety of sources. Lawyers arguing cases at court proceedings are likely to use Dutch, the country's official language. In a more informal setting, one might listen in on children playing outside yelling to each other in Sranan Tongo, Suriname's lingua franca. Passing by a South Asian food market, shoppers may be heard haggling with vendors in Sarnami. Even still, a journey away from the city into the Surinamese interior would open up another trove of languages to be experienced, ranging from the indigenous varieties of Arawak and Carib to Creoles like Saramaccan crafted by communities of African slaves. This is just a modest sampling of the over 20 languages currently spoken in the country. For centuries, Suriname has been a prime example of a pluralistic society that harbors many multilingual communities. However, recent trends have troubled this image of multilingual Suriname. The 1964 census showed that Dutch was the best language of 68 percent of all Creoles, while Sranan Tongo was the preferred language of 31 percent of Creoles. Data from 1992, 28 years later, showed that the Dutch/Sranan preference divide among Creoles widened to 77 percent and 22 percent, respectively (St. Hilaire, 2001, p. 1011). This evidence of linguistic convergence in Suriname is alarming on many fronts. Along with these languages, a great portion of Suriname's cultural heritage and history is being threatened. Before we can understand the causal factors and evaluate the consequences of this dynamic, it will be useful to provide a more thorough description of Suriname's sociolinguistic background and history.

Sociolinguistic Profile of Suriname

The population of Suriname is composed of four main ethnic groups: Creoles, East Indians, Javanese, and Maroons. All of these groups show strong evidence of multilingualism, with significant proportions of each community speaking two languages (see Table 1). Each group became a part of the national community in different ways, and this history provides us with a useful context in which to understand inter-group relations. Of course, colonialism plays a large part in dictating this history, and it is critical to include it in the lens through which we view these groups. The Creole community in Suriname is comprised of the descendants of African slaves brought to the country by English and Dutch settlers starting in the 17th century. During colonial times, slaves were forbidden from learning Dutch and forced to speak Sranan Tongo, an English-based Creole, instead. After emancipation in 1877, the Dutch formalized laws mandating English as the language of education, leaving Sranan as a low-status language and many freed Creole slaves leaving to the capital city of Paramaribo for a chance at education in Dutch (St. Hilaire, 2001, p. 1004). Throughout the slavery period, groups of Africans successfully escaped bondage and formed small tribal societies in the interior of the country. These people compose the six tribes of Maroons in Suriname. Until a peace treaty signed in 1760, Maroons maintained hostile relations with colonial powers, and, even afterwards, the Maroon community shared a distrust of urban Suriname. In the late 20th century, marginal portions of the community started to move towards Paramaribo. As the poorest and least educated of the Surinamese, Maroons rarely learn Dutch and remain socially isolated from the rest of the populations, speaking their own languages like Saramaka (Yakpo et al., 2015, p. 171).

Ethnic Group	Sranan	Dutch	Sarnami	Javanese	Other	Total
Creole	21.7	76.8	0.3	0.1	1.1	35.2
East Indian	3.2	24.8	69.7	0.1	2.1	30.8
Javanese	14.6	37.8	0.8	45.2	1.6	14.0
Maroon	57.9	18.2	–	–	23.9	4.6
Mixed	8.4	88.2	0.7	0.7	1.9	9.3
Other ³	11.9	46.1	1.1	–	40.9	6.1
Total	14.9	51.8	21.8	6.5	5.0	100.0

Table 1. Principal language by ethnic group in greater Paramaribo in 1992.

The emigration of Creoles from the plantation to the city after emancipation left a demand for labor in the plantations that the ruling class filled by hiring East Indian contract workers, with 34,000 East Indians migrating to Suriname in the 43 years between 1873 and 1916 (St. Hilaire, 2001, p. 1006). While working on the plantations, many East Indians learned Sranan, which became the nation’s lingua franca. However, at home, East Indians spoke Sarnami, a dialect of the Bhojpuri language of northern India. Since East Indians worked primarily in rural settings, they missed out on exposure to Dutch and suffered a lower social status relative to urban Creoles for that reason. In the last century the proportions of East Indians both in Suriname and in Paramaribo have more than doubled (Borges, 2014, p. 26). When the British, through their occupation of India, restricted Dutch access to East Indian indentured labor, the Dutch started recruiting Javanese people from Indonesia as a replacement, bringing in 33,000 Javanese people between 1890 and 1939. Similar to the East Indians, the Javanese workers learned Sranan as the lingua franca but spoke Javanese at home (St. Hilaire, 2001, p. 1008). The Javanese by-and-large stayed in rural settings even more than the East Indian community and learned Dutch to an even lesser extent than the Creoles, and this left them at the bottom rung of the social ladder. In the last century, the Javanese population started to move to Paramaribo.

The sociological history of Suriname is one characterized by constant change and movement. Throughout the four centuries following its initial colonization, the nation has seen populations both assume power and be exploited. It has borne witness to a trend of urbanization among all populations to some extent. Most critically, its linguistic diversity has started to appear compromised by the threat of convergence. How do existing power structures contribute to and dictate trends of language shift and language loss in multilingual communities like Suriname? What underlying factors lead to the decline of language variety in today's increasingly globalized society? Using an analysis of linguistic ideologies and policies in the described Surinamese context, I argue that power structures use language as a tool to shape our perceptions of social mobility, and the results of this create a feedback loop that reinforces language ideologies and drives trends in language shift.

Key Concepts: Language Ideology and Power

An understanding of the concepts of language ideologies and power in the context of language will be central to this discussion. There are many perspectives through which we can view what language ideology is. However, the most useful definition to this conversation may be one presented by linguistic anthropologist Shirley Brice Heath, in which she describes language ideologies as “self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experiences of members as they contribute to the expression of the group” (Heath, 1977, p. 53). Additionally, Woolard and Schieffelin add that they are “an organization of signifying practices not in consciousness but in lived relation” (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994, p. 58). As Heath describes, language ideologies are mental connections that people in a community collectively make between languages and the social implications associated with those languages in society. They often come in the form of statements about the purity of languages or

attachment of descriptors that normally qualify people (e.g. lazy, rich, intelligent) to languages, and, critically, it is primarily only subconsciously that we convince ourselves they are true. By influencing the connotations that we implicitly have about languages, these ideologies subconsciously enforce stereotypes in the way we think about the people who speak them.

The relationship between power and language is integral to the evaluation of sociological trends in language use. In his book *Language and Symbolic Power*, French sociologist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu comments extensively on this relationship. Primarily, he argues that there is no intrinsic power in language, but instead that power dynamics between speakers is projected onto linguistic practices. These practices evolve because of sociohistorical and economic conditions (Bourdieu, 1991; Moraru, 2019, p. 4). In other words, language becomes part of a social hierarchy created by socioeconomic factors and the resulting power struggles between those affected. And those with the most power “have the necessary linguistic capital to impose their practices as the most valuable ones” (Moraru, 2019, p. 5). In addition to serving as a means of communication, linguistic practices play important roles in today’s society as indicators of wealth and authority. Taking Bourdieu’s social theory of language and power further, linguistic practices and language ideologies reciprocally influence each other primarily through the implications they have for social mobility, which I will demonstrate by analyzing educational policy, urban geopolitics, and ethnographic interviews in Suriname.

Language Ideologies in Suriname

An examination of the language ideologies present in Suriname will reveal that a connection to social mobility pervades most attitudes. Between 2008 and 2010, Leslige & Migge conducted a survey of primary school children around the country, asking questions about their language practices, such as:

Which language(s) do you use when speaking to a) your mother: b) your father c) your brother(s) and sister(s) d) your friends: e) your mother's parents/your father's parents?

(Carlin et al., 2015, p. 18)

They aimed to understand the language ideologies carried widely among children in Suriname, and their findings show that consideration of social mobility is a key determinant of ideology even in youth. Specifically, their interviews showed that children had great desire to learn other languages, indicating a positive inclination towards multilingualism. However, while many were interested in learning Dutch and other, relatively foreign, languages like English and French, “few children expressed an interest in learning so-called local languages” (Carlin et al., 2015, 46). When asked to explain these decisions, children often linked their responses to “educational achievement and access to prestigious jobs later in life” (Carlin et al., 46). Additionally, they justified their aversion to learning local languages like Sarnami, Javanese, and Saramakan by expressing their lack of identification with those ethnic groups or making statements informed by their low social status. Many children were interested in learning local languages when they were their heritage languages. Taken together, this evidence suggests that, for varieties not potentially associated with personal gain, even from a young age, we view language primarily through an ingroup/outgroup lens. When there is an opportunity for growth, however one may define it, associated with a language, that language becomes interesting and worthwhile learning. However, in the absence of perceived opportunity, language is viewed mainly as an ethnic marker.

Institutional Trends of Urbanization

The attitudes observed in Legisle & Migge's survey are not developed in a vacuum; they are borne from long-term macroscopic trends. In 1947, the fraction of the Surinamese population

living in Paramaribo was 47% (Hellings, 1955). By the 1990's, this fraction jumped to over two-thirds. Urbanization has been on the rise across the globe, and it is thought to be a major contributor to the linguistic practices observed in situations like Suriname's. Movement of people is bound to spark change, especially when they move between regions with linguistic profiles as starkly different as shown in Figure 1. (Observe differences in L1 usages of Dutch (Nederlands) and Saramakan (Saramaccan) in Brokopoondo vs. Paramaribo.) But through what mechanisms does urbanization effect these new developments?

For a migrant, one of the main accompaniments to urbanization is an increased exposure to institutional education. In Suriname, the increased opportunity for education has helped narrow the socioeconomic divide existing between ethnic groups. Surveys have shown that the once lagging Javanese and East Indian populations have approached the status of Creoles in terms of education and income levels (Stell, 2018, p. 40). However, it is this very likelihood for social mobility that education provides that makes it a potentially dangerous policy tool for perpetuating linguistic practices and ideologies. The Dutch colonial powers instituted this tool for social architecture early on; shortly after abolition in Suriname, the 1876 Education Act required that all language instruction take place in English (Gobardham-Rambocous, 2008, p. 8). The country's education inspector at the time viewed Sranan as a "great impediment to education" (Gobardham-Rambocous, p. 8). Additionally, the government even today still hardly provides any support for Surinamese languages other than Dutch (Borges, 2014, p. 180). In this way while there may have been a few individuals who pushed for policies and popularized attitudes like these, the institution as a whole is also responsible for the upholding of them over time. Though colonialism is over, the remnants of colonial ways of thinking remain indelible in the national consciousness. As Rosa and Flores argue, these kinds of harmful ideologies are

perpetuated “not simply by individuals but also nonhuman entities such as institutions, policies, and technologies associated with linguistic profiling” (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 628). Because of the social mobility associated with education, migrants from rural Suriname seek better lives in Paramaribo, learning Dutch because of its status and contributing to urbanization. This linguistic journey is both the result of social mobility influencing language ideology, in accordance with Bourdieu’s theory, and the cause of further entrenchment in that same ideology. Here, we see the feedback loop in action.

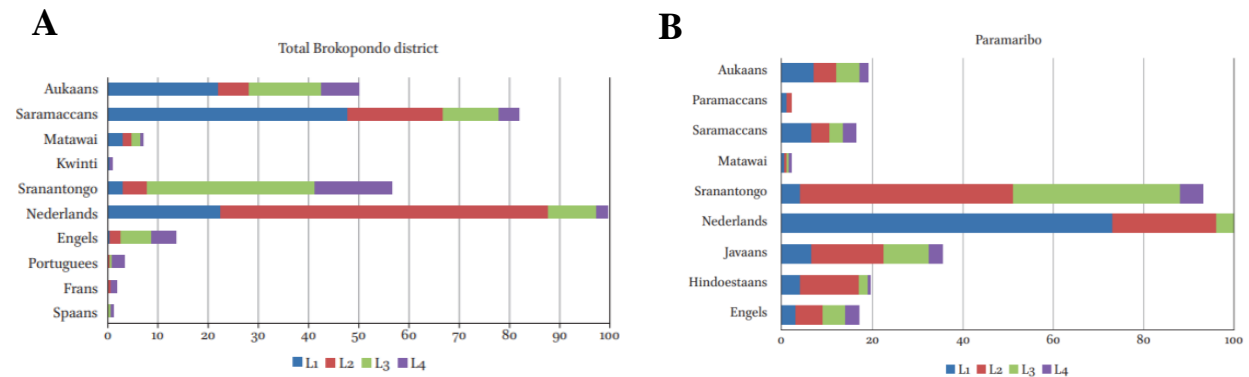


Figure 1. Comparison of linguistic profiles of (a) the Brokopondo region of Suriname, home to many Maroon communities and (b) Paramaribo, Suriname’s urban capital city. (Carlin et al., 2015, p. 35)

Another way in which urbanization connects to language-mediating institutions is through its impact on the formation of community networks in people’s lives. Community, as an institution, forms an integral part of our lives and greatly influences our identity, which, in turn, mediates the linguistic practices we choose to follow. In “Bilingualism and Multilingualism in North America”, William Mackey notes the way that urbanization affects our conceptions of community and the way that we communicate. Specifically, he acknowledges that, with technological advances in primarily urban settings, as “intercommunication has become independent of distance, speech communities have become less place-dependent” (Mackey, p.

715). In other words, urbanization and technology have changed the way our communities form, and this has drastic implications for language. As an example, Figure 2 shows the basic social networks of two children from rural Suriname. We observe a wide array of language interactions in this example, depicting what a language network map for a multilingual individual would look like. While one may think the change in network associated with urbanization would increase one's exposure to languages, this idea must be viewed in contrast with the assimilation and homogenization of languages over time that has been induced by power structures along with urbanization. It is possible that the latter force outweighs the former, and patterns of assimilation in Suriname in a time of intense globalization and technological advance suggest that this is the case. Ideologies and policies promoted by power structures in urban settings dominate the effect that large-scale alterations in the linguistic profile of community networks have.

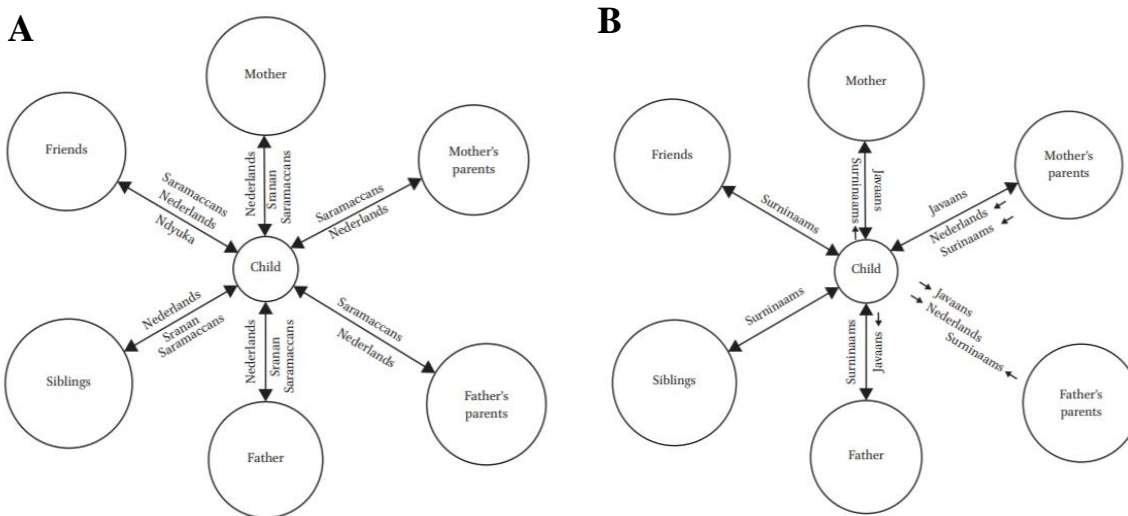


Figure 2. Network of languages used by (a) a 14-year-old boy from the Brokopondo district and (b) an 11-year-old boy from Commewijne. (Carlin et al., 2015, p. 37-39)

Approaching a Solution

In the past, Suriname has been a very pluralistic and multilingual nation. However, current trends show that, along with urbanization, Creole and South Asian communities are moving to the city and encouraging their posterity to place less focus on retaining their heritage language and instead emphasize learning Dutch, the prestige language that will allow a better future for them. This dynamic does not bode well for the future of multilingual Suriname, but at the same time every individual deserves the agency to pursue a life that will advantage their well-being. Unfortunately, in accordance with Bourdieu's social theory, the current language ideologies surrounding communities in Suriname, reinforced by urbanization and the educational institution among other things, make it difficult for historically marginalized peoples to seek empowerment in their context without leaving the status of Suriname's linguistic diversity threatened. Consequently, to counteract the effects of Dutch prestige affording opportunity for the individual, it is particularly critical to the preservation of Surinamese culture that the national conversation and attitudes towards language in Suriname are transformed during a time where the world is being increasingly urbanized.

In 2016, Richard Grounds, creator of the Yuchi Language Project that has revived Yuchi, an Amerindian language, in the past few decades, made an address to the United Nations commenting on the status of Indigenous languages in the world. There, he claimed that protection of indigenous languages, as with other endangered languages of marginalized peoples, is essential to the cultural health and sovereignty of the peoples which they represent. To accomplish this, Grounds proposed that the U.N. designate an International Year of Indigenous Languages that "highlights the beauty and challenges of Indigenous languages" (Grounds, 2016). The overall goal of this effort would be to bring awareness to the reality of extinction that so

many of the world's languages face in today's age. While some may argue that this action would have purely optical effects and be insufficient for enacting necessary concrete change, I hope that my exploration of how language ideologies, power structures, and urbanization in Suriname will help refute this notion. In this analysis, we have seen that linguistic outcomes are dictated by language ideologies, and these attitudes by no means exist in a vacuum or are inherently derived. They are constantly, actively shaped by policies and conceptions (of social mobility among other things) that institutions of power put in place. In order to change outcomes, we need to address the ideologies at their root and subvert the institutional structures that keep them in place. Grounds' efforts to do so have already seen much success.

The UN endorsement of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages is a prime example of how we can deliberately shift the national conversation and interpretations of language as a form of social capital towards a more welcoming and conducive space for Suriname. The language ideologies that cause language shift along with urbanization in multilingual nations are directly perpetuated by power structures that are the gatekeepers for social mobility. In order for us to fight the cultural loss associated with these trends by changing language ideologies, we need to institute top-down reform in which power structures redefine the conditions for social mobility.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

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