Muysken, Pieter C. Norval Smith, in collaboration with Robert D. Borges


This book is an important step forward in the research on the creoles of Surinam and their possible links with languages of West Africa. Its interest goes beyond just these language pairs. It provides important progress in the study of the extent of influence of the ancestral languages of Africans in the new world, and hence it is of interest for all students of creole languages and language contact.

The book summarizes the results of a Dutch project that considered the question whether Surinam and West Africa could be considered a trans-Atlantic Sprachbund. The question of whether creoles are relexifications of West African languages was a major source of inspiration. Apart from this book, the project resulted also in almost 100 articles by project members and associates. The main collaborators were Enoch Aboh (Amsterdam), Felix Ameka (Leiden), the late Jacques Arends (Amsterdam), Margot van den Berg (then Nijmegen, now Utrecht), Adrienne Bruyn (then Nijmegen, now Leiden), James Essegbey (then Amsterdam, now Florida), Norval Smith (then Amsterdam, now Vienna), Tonjes Veenstra (Berlin), Kofi Yakpo (then Nijmegen, now Hongkong). Thus the team combined experts on West African languages (including native speakers) and Netherlands-based creolists working on the current languages of Surinam, and older stages of them. Unfortunately there are apparently no Surinamese linguists centrally involved in the project; only Lilian Adamson and Vinije Haabo are co-authors of some project publications.

The book opens with an introduction by Van Den Berg, Muysken and Smith (1–14) in which they outline the research questions. They discuss concepts such as transfer, and a brief survey of ideas on creole formation, focusing on the number of generations involved, influence of first and second language acquisition processes and historical connections between speakers of English-lexifier creoles of the Atlantic. They also justify the reasons for investigating the Surinam–West Africa connections, and summarize the articles in the book.

The rest of the book is divided into three parts: Setting the Scene, with three articles providing historical and theoretical background information; Language structures: a Sprachbund?, with seven articles discussing different aspects of the languages in a comparative perspective. The third part is called Wrapping up, and contains a concluding chapter, a project bibliography and two lists of lexical items from Kikongo (Bantu; Central West Africa) and Gbe languages.
(Kwa; West Africa) that are used in Surinam creoles. The book ends with a list of references and (477–514) and indices listing authors, languages and geographical and terminological items.

The papers in the first part are all highly interesting. Norval Smith (17–42) discusses the early history of Surinam. Even though the colony was in British hands for less than 17 years, and after that in Dutch hands for more than 300 years, Surinam is home to some seven distinct English-lexifier creoles, but no Dutch lexifier creoles. This suggests that the genesis of the creoles must have been quite rapid. Smith discusses historical records of slave import into Surinam between 1660 and 1720: mostly from the Bight of Biafra (today Nigeria) and West Central Africa in the first decades, thereafter increasingly from the Bight of Benin. Smith also uses poll-tax records. On this basis, the Bantu languages of the Kikongo cluster and Gbe languages such as Ewe and Fon can be identified as the most important groups. To a lesser extent languages of the Akan-Twi cluster are taken into consideration. Smith also provides historical records about political events affecting Surinam in the early period, as well as a chronology, demographic figures, numbers of escaped slaves. On this basis, Smith concludes that Eastern Gbe and Kikongo are the most important African languages that could have influenced the Surinamese creoles. Not as substrates, Smith argues, but as adstrates. After 1720 the Twi/Akan languages became important, but they have left fewer traces.

Similarly well-researched is Aboh and Smith’s article (43–65) about one main African region of origin, the area where Gbe languages are spoken in and around Benin. The authors try to narrow down the region by looking at vowel-prefixes in Gbe words in Surinamese creoles, as well as Gbe function words in Saramaccan creole (which shows the most African influence in phonology, lexicon, morphology and syntax of all creoles), concluding that the regions of Allada and Whydah were the most important ones, which are Fon-speaking regions.

One of the most important discoveries by Norval Smith, and here presented for the first time in full, is the existence of Ingredient X, the subject of the next chapter (67–106). Ingredient X is a set of 29 words of African origin that recur, as a subset, in all of the English-lexifier creoles of the Atlantic, from Surinam, Jamaica, to Barbados and Krio in Africa. The strange fact is that these words are from different languages, ranging from Senegambian Wolof (nyam “eat”), Ghanaian Gâ (dopi “evil ghost”), Nigerian Efik (obia “magic”), Nigerian Ijo (fom “to strike”; but it is also Gbe, cf. the Ewe example on p. 159) to Angolan Kongo (pinda “peanut”). The existence of this set of words from languages from eight families shows that all these languages must go back to a common proto-language. Further evidence is found in grammatical material, such as the shared imperatives formed with the verb derived from English “make”, the copula...
Additional shared words can be found in Baker & Huber (2001) for some 173 words and features found in several Atlantic creoles.

The close similarities between Krio (Africa) and Surinamese/Jamaican (New World) is suggested by Smith to be the result of the influence of Jamaican maroons who were moved to Sierra Leone via Nova Scotia, a somewhat daring but well motivated hypothesis.

In the next chapter, Muysken sets out the theoretical background on relexification in order to measure substrate effects (107–122). He surveys major earlier works on substrate influence in the Caribbean creoles, with the languages and features they focused on. He also treats possible social scenarios of influence (e.g. codeswitching, pattern replication), contrasting these with relexification, the point of departure for the project.

Personally, I don’t like the term relexification. It has been used in different senses, and sometimes abused to make empirically outrageous claims that belong in the realm of science fiction. The term was originally coined in creole studies. Creoles would have preserved most of its structure but replaced the shape of almost all the morphemes, thus developing into a different creole (first meaning). For example a Portuguese creole would have relexified into a Spanish-based or English-based creole, leaving few or many traces (e.g. Voorhoeve 1973, who argued for a partial relexification of a Portuguese creole into English-lexifier creoles in Surinam, or Schwegler 1999 for a Portuguese origin of Palenquero). This was an idea that should explain observed structural similarities between creoles with different lexifiers. In the meantime, better theories have been proposed that would explain those facts. This first meaning of relexification should be repudiated. Then there is the second meaning of the term, referring to a process which led to a language like Media Lengua (first time in Muysken 1981), with a Spanish lexicon and a Quechua grammatical system (phonology, morphology, syntax, and even some lexical semantics). Here one could justifiably claim that a Quechua lexicon was replaced with Spanish. Finally, Lefebvre used the same term in a model completely different from both earlier ones: Haitian Creole would be a relexification of the African language Fongbe: each and every morpheme in Haitian would be a continuation of a Fon morpheme (third meaning). Only selected evidence is put forward, but for keen observers there are huge structural differences between Fon and Haitian.

Muysken does not clearly distinguish between the second and third meanings, but in current creole studies only the third one is in principle applicable. Which is also what Muysken concludes, calling it (more appropriately) pattern replication and bilingual convergence rather than relexification of the third kind.
Part 2 presents the seven case studies of the book. All authors compare structural features of Gbe languages (and sometimes other languages with a similar typological profile of languages with little morphology like Twi/Akan) with the Surinamese creoles. The number of slaves speaking morphologically complex languages like Kikongo and KiMbundu was indeed lower than speakers of morphological simpler languages like Gbe and other Kwa languages, but the numbers don’t justify an almost exclusive consideration of Kwa languages. Smith (p. 18) mentions 14,647 slave imports from Bantu areas (West Central Africa), and 18,462 from the Kwa-speaking area, just a quarter more than Bantu speakers. The selection of Gbe is therefore potentially circular, in that a considerable group of speakers of more deviant language typology is ignored by most authors.

Still, the results are quite interesting, as the heuristics of looking for Gbe structures in the Surinamese creoles, and the other way around proved fruitful. But the results are also disappointing, in that not much Gbe influence has been found by most authors. Yakpo and Bruyn compare locative constructions, both pre/postpositional constructions (“in X”, “X out”), nominal constructions (“at the back of X”) and verbal constructions (“go X”; “send X give Y”). They conclude that “Gbe and Kikongo provided the patterns for the majority” (165) of locative constructions. Of the 10 Sranan features, six are found in Gbe, seven in Kikongo and three in English/Dutch, and one nowhere.

Essegbey studies verb semantics for a subset of verbs, and concludes in an exemplary study that Sranan verbs are very close to their English equivalents, and quite different from Gbe.

Two papers deal with morphology. Van den Berg (207–239) studies composition and derivation, using interesting data from early Sranan (1718–1798), combining language data with historical data. Van den Berg compares Gbe and Akan with the creoles. She identifies eight derivational morphemes in Sranan, or 14 if one takes one morpheme with different bases as separate morphemes, and 24 formally distinct ones in Gbe languages, or 37 in all. She deals with some semantic groupings in detail: body part compounds, diminutives, locations, and action nouns. For derivation, “there is little evidence of transfer of the Gbe and Akan sets” (p. 238), and the same is true for locations and agent nouns. Van den Berg is more positive about West African transfer for body part compounds than I would be, and that leaves us with very limited Gbe/Akan influence in this domain, but more “linguistic creativity and innovativeness” (p. 239). Aboh and Smith (241–260) present convincing evidence for intriguing similarities between Gbe and Surinamese creoles in the non-iconic types of reduplication.

Smith (261–322) is the only study dealing with phonology, taking into account both Kikongo and Gbe, as well as older sources of the creoles and
spirit possession language and related creoles elsewhere that go back to the Proto-
Atlantic Slave Community Language. This detailed study is embedded in an opti-
mality-theoretical frame. The African influences according to him are not substrate
influences, but adstrate influences; contra “the founder principle” (Mufwene 1996),
no traces can be found of the earliest slave cohorts in Surinam. Smith believes that
the Surinamese creoles have preserved the original vowel system most faithfully,
because there was virtually no influence from English after 1667. Thus, there was
Gbe and Kikongo influence in vowel length, monophthongization, paragogic
vowels, but these date from after the formative period. Other English-lexifier
creoles have undergone different degrees of English influence since the 1600s.

Aboh’s article about the left periphery (323–367) is written within a generative
framework and thus not always semantically transparent for an outsider. He
deals with complementation, verb focus (also: verb fronting in some cases), and
yes-no question marking, all of them connected to the sentence. Yes-no ques-
tions are expressed with a sentence-final question marker in Gbe, and also in
Saramaccan this is possible (McWhorter and Good 2013: 61), beside rising intona-
tion. According to Aboh the Saramaccan element no is not a tag but a question
marker, as in Gbe. The Gbe sentence-final element is apparently “left periphery”
because the whole sentence was fronted (p. 343)! For the NP domain, Aboh
claims that both Gbe and Surinamese creole express specificity rather than defi-
niteness, as English and Dutch do, but I find his discussion unclear, as he seems
to confuse discourse functions of determiners with referring functions of specific-
ity markers. Unfortunately he gives only one non-specific examples for Gungbe
(at least in my understanding), and text examples could have clarified definite-
ness and its relations to discourse. In the NP, Sranan appears to be different from
both Gbe and English. Aboh concludes that substrate influence is not a unitary
phenomenon, and may target just a set of features.

Veenstra (369–390) deals with clause-embedding, also in a generative frame,
and found “no overwhelming evidence for the process of relexification” (389),
and he seems to believe more in second language acquisition influences.

Muysken’s conclusions in part 3 are honest and clear, in that “it became
transparent that an exclusive focus on relexification was not adequate” (394).
Too little Gbe influence could be detected. He gives a summary, and thereafter
he tries to explain the results, presenting concepts from several subfields of
language contact, such as second language learning, language creation, simpli-
fication and especially phenomena associated with attrition. It is a courageous
attempt to make sense of the intriguing and detailed results, but I am not con-
vinced by his summary in Table 3. Interestingly the phylogenetic programs
clearly distinguish the creoles, the lexifiers and the African languages, based
on the 83 features discussed throughout the book. The results replicate the out-
comes of Bakker et al. (2011/2013), which created a stir among creolists.
The book ends with an impressive bibliography (409–415) of project results (compiled by Smith in the article itself, but by Muysken according to the index; not the only editorial lapse). Smith ends the volume with impressive detailed lists of the 186 identified Kikongo words (417–462) and 138 Gbe words (463–475), both with extensive diachronic and dialectal information. References for the entire volume are found on pp. 477–514, before the indices.

This book has been long in the making. Nowhere in the book it is stated when the funding period of the project took place, but as the newest bibliography item is dated in 2010, it took at least five years. The papers are all updated after 2010, but some important studies relevant to the project are not mentioned, e.g. Bartens and Baker (2013) for the lexicon, and Szmrecsanyi and Kortmann (2009) for grammar. The book provides a wealth of information, and a clear conclusion that there may be African influence in the Surinamese creoles, but much less than expected. Essentially the same conclusion as Parkvall (2000), who used more methodological rigor in that he only accepts evidence for substrates as proven if the feature is not present in the lexifiers, is not common in the languages of the world, and is not common in other pidgins and creoles in other parts of the world.

In short, I liked this book very much. There is a wealth of information, interesting approaches and theoretical progress. The conclusions are rather devastating for substratophiles, and in line with theories claiming shared properties among the creoles of the world. The book is recommended for all creolists.

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References


