CHAPTER 2

Language Practices and Linguistic Ideologies in Suriname: Results from a School Survey

Isabelle Léglise and Bettina Migge

1 Introduction

The population of the Guiana plateau is characterised by multilingualism and the Republic of Suriname is no exception to this. Apart from the country's official language, Dutch, and the national lingua franca, Sranantongo, more than twenty other languages belonging to several distinct language families are spoken by less than half a million people. Some of these languages such as Saamaka and Sarnámi have quite significant speaker communities while others like Mawayana currently have less than ten speakers.1 While many of the languages currently spoken in Suriname have been part of the Surinamese linguistic landscape for a long time, others came to Suriname as part of more recent patterns of mobility. Languages with a long history in Suriname are the Amerindian languages Lokono (Arawak), Kari'na, Trio, and Wayana, the creole languages Saamaka, Ndyuka, Matawai, Pamaka, Kwinti, and Sranantongo, and the Asian-Surinamese languages Sarnámi, Javanese, and Hakka Chinese. In recent years, languages spoken in other countries in the region such as Brazilian Portuguese, Guyanese English, Guyanese Creole, Spanish, French, Haitian Creole (see Laëthier this volume) and from further afield such as varieties of five Chinese dialect groups (Northern Chinese, Wu, Min, Yue, and Kejia, see Tjon Sie Fat this volume) have been added to Suriname's linguistic landscape due to their speakers' increasing involvement in Suriname.

Suriname's linguistic diversity is little appreciated locally. Since independence in 1975, successive governments have pursued a policy of linguistic assimilation to Dutch with the result that nowadays, “[a] large proportion of the population not only speaks Dutch, but speaks it as their first and best language” (St-Hilaire 2001: 1012). Increased urbanisation, improvements in the infrastructure and expansion of the education system prior to Suriname's

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1 Carlin (2001: 226) mentions four Amerindian languages, Akuriyo, Sikiïyana, Tunayana, and Mawayana whose speaker numbers are very low, ranging from between 5 to 10 speakers.
civil war and in the new millennium have acted as important catalysts for this policy. Yet, assimilation to Dutch is by no means complete. St-Hilaire, for instance, argues that different population groups recognised within Suriname—Afro-Surinamese Creoles, East Indians, Javanese, Maroons, but also Amerindians and Chinese—have followed different paths of adaptation. At least until the 1950s, Afro-Surinamese Creoles “had wholeheartedly accepted assimilation to Dutch as a group ideal” (St-Hilaire 2001: 1005). In the 1950s and 1960s the cultural nationalist movement Wi Eigi Sani ‘our own thing’ partially called into question this consensus and although attempts to give Sranantongo official status failed, it raised a new awareness about Creole culture and Sranantongo (Gleason Carew 1982). “Creoles today consider Sranan[tongo] an integral part of their culture […] they [like other Surinamese] continue to use Sranan[tongo], particularly for joking and expressing strong emotions” (St-Hilaire 2001: 1012). East Indians, by contrast, appear to have a high rate of ‘ethnic language’ retention even though competence in Dutch—at the expense of Sarnámi—and use of Sranantongo among young people has been on the rise since the 1950s. The high rate of language retention is possibly due to low rates of intermarriage and the importance of ethnically-based networks. While ethnicity is commonly invoked in Surinamese social discourses, other factors such as education and place of residence play at least an equally important role in determining language use patterns. Notwithstanding individual patterns of variation, residents of Paramaribo tend to have greater exposure to Dutch and thus often also use it in a wider range of settings while those living in rural areas tend to make greater use of languages other than Dutch.

Despite somewhat entrenched dominant views about language, the Surinamese linguistic landscape is by no means static. Urbanisation and expansion of the infrastructure and education system have brought new languages to the urban areas and have considerably increased the presence of hitherto underrepresented languages. Expansion of the local infrastructure and education system are also slowly improving access to Dutch in rural areas. Social and economic change is affecting both the social distribution and attitudes to languages. Sranantongo and other formerly denigrated languages are more widely used in the public domain (e.g. advertising, radio) and Dutch and Sranantongo are making inroads into the home and local community setting. However, we lack precise information on these issues because Suriname’s contemporary linguistic context has not received much attention (but see St-Hilaire 1999, 2001). To date, research has mostly focused on the emergence and early development of the country’s Afro-Surinamese languages such as Sranantongo and the Maroon languages Ndyuka, Pamaka and Saamaka (e.g. Arends 1989; Bruyn 1995; Lefebvre and Loranger 2008; Goury 2003; Migge 2003; Winford and Migge