Muysken, Pieter C. Norval Smith, in collaboration with Robert D. Borges
Surviving the Middle Passage. The West Africa-Surinam Sprachbund. 2015. x + 532

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-Atlan-
tic 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 speak-
ers) 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 con-
cepts such as transfer, and a brief survey of ideas on creole formation, focus-
ing 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 arti-
cles 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 Gã (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