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On the Perception of ‘Creole’ Language and Identity in the Netherlands Antilles

Creoleness as a pan-Caribbean phenomenon

Judging from a number of recent publications, Caribbean creolization and creoleness seems to be one of the most popular topics in the field of Caribbean research and can be regarded as a reflection of a growing awareness of local cultures throughout the twentieth century. But, judging from the scholarly publications in this context, the phenomenon of creolization appears to be limited to a few cultural and linguistic entities – apparently the ‘French’ and to a certain extent the ‘English’ Caribbean. This fact is increasingly exposed to significant criticism as the necessity of a pan-Caribbean perspective to approach similar sociocultural developments performing enormous complexity is more than obvious. Consequently it is not surprising that the recently published volume on Caribbean Creolization by Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie–Agnès Sourieau (1998) commences with an urgent plea for an interconnected cross-Caribbean approach to creolization and creoleness. Hence, to investigate creolization and its underlying anthropological, social and linguistic processes on general grounds, the point of departure has to be at least pan-Caribbean if not – and I personally plead for a cognate perception – a geographically much wider belt including all territories where cultural and/or racial mixing have led or are lead-

ing to the evolution of mixed cultures and new identities, some of them including an independent linguistic output. If we base our considerations on such a broad definition we cannot avoid asking what the term creole means precisely and what role a creole language plays in the context of creolization. Once these questions are got out of the way, it will be easier to approach the essence of my topic, which is the perception of ‘creole’ language and identity within the Netherlands Antilles (henceforth N.A.) – more precisely, the Papiamento-speaking islands Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao (abbreviated in the following as “the ABC islands”) – to find out how the inhabitants of the three territories perceive their creoleness.

Interestingly enough, the society/ies of the Netherlands Antilles have previously been neglected in the field of comparative creole studies, even though the situation on these islands – which would appear to reflect a pioneer role – allows far-reaching conclusions to be drawn with regard to the development of creole-speaking communities. My general approach in this context assumes that identifying with a culture on the one hand implies a positive attitude towards the language used predominantly within the community and, on the other, requires a process of critical self-awareness within a broader cultural context: i.e. the recognition and acceptance of cultural differences. As I am a linguist, the dominant focus of the following deliberations will generally be on linguistic concerns; nevertheless, I would stress the inevitability of integrating philological aspects with interdisciplinary concerns when conducting research on questions of cultural identity.

What precisely does the term ‘creole’ denote?

Tracing the term ‘creole’ back to its etymological base has lately become very popular among researchers investigating Caribbean (language) issues but also seems to be an inexhaustible general linguistic topic. The etymological

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