

Berbice Dutch Creole¹

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Situated on a small section of the Berbice River area (Guyana, South America), Berbice Dutch Creole with its four or five remaining speakers is the only uncontroversial Dutch-related creole still spoken today (Bruyn–Veenstra in press; Robertson 1989). Notwithstanding evidence for the existence of creole stages in its history, Afrikaans is accorded the status of West-Germanic language (Den Besten 1988). Negerhollands, which at one time was the vernacular of the Danish Antilles, now the US Virgin Islands, is extinct (Graves 1977; Hall 1992). The same holds for Skepi Dutch or Essequibo Dutch, once the vernacular of the Essequibo in Guyana (Robertson 1976).ε

1. Background

At the time of this writing, November 1992, the speakers of Berbice Dutch Creole (BD) number four or five, semi-speakers perhaps ten. They grew up and for the most part still live in a particular section of the Berbice River area of Guyana. They are the last surviving speakers of a language which at one time was the vernacular of the Dutch-owned Berbice colony. This colony consisted of plantations and small settlements along the Berbice River, Canje River, and Wiruni Creek (see the relevant map). Its demise started towards the end of the eighteenth century with the move of plantations to the coastal area (see below) and the change to British ownership of the colony in 1814, and was accelerated when missionaries founded schools in BD speaking communities from the middle of the 19th century, making English the language of church and school. One such missionary was Charles D. Dance. In 1914, Hugo Schuchardt discussed and discarded the possibility that a creole lexically related to Dutch existed in the Berbice River area (Schuchardt 1914: xiii). His

discussion was prompted by Dance's *Chapters from a Guianese logbook* (1881), in which the author frequently remarks on the use of "Creole Dutch", and reports the following conversation:

I remember seeing him [i.e. Willie, the son of the proprietor of plantation Peereboom on the Berbice River — SK] at a wedding party encouraging the Arawak Indian maidens and matrons to drop their bashfulness for a time, and busily engaged in initiating them into the mysteries of knives and forks... Roars of laughter ensued when, on one Arawak patriarch, a little elated, calling out in Creole Dutch, "Ech eh habu sarapa ca" — I have no three pronged arrow (meaning a fork to take up his meat with), Willie archly advised him "Dake de wioacache ne?" — to use his one pronged arrow instead. (Dance 1881: 51)

Schuchardt comments that he is unable to interpret these words "either with the help of English or of Dutch" (translation Gilbert 1985: 47). Below, the utterances are rendered in modern BD with the source language of each item. With the exception of *habu* 'have', *εkε* 'I', and *di* 'the', all words have non-Dutch etymologies. The significance of this fact will be the subject of section 3 below.

- (1) *εkε* *habu sarapa ka(nε)* / *deki di wajaka f ni?*
 I have 3-arrow NEG / take the 1-arrow no?
 Du Du Ar EI / EI Du Ar Du
 ‘I don’t have a three pronged arrow.’ / ‘Take the one pronged arrow, no?’
 (Du = Dutch, EI = Eastern-Ijo, Ar = Arawak)

The only other published source of nineteenth century BD is Swaving (1827). His wife was a native speaker of BD and he apparently learned the language from her. In his account of his years as the owner of a plantation on the Berbice River, he remarks on its use, quotes some words, and quotes two sentences when he describes a conversation between himself and his African mother-in-law. The pertinent passage follows.

I tried once to convert my black mother-in-law to Christian faith, and naturally started out with the birth of our Saviour, because she appeared to interpret her Abadi as the same Supreme Being to which we have given the name of God, despite the contradictory properties which followed from her heathen fallacies. The conversation was held in Creole.

- (2) *Abadi habu en toko*
 God have one child
 EI Du Du EI
 ‘God has a child.’
nεnε, di grotto Abadi kanti habu toko ka
 no the great God cannot have child NEG
 Du Du Du EI Du Du EI EI
 ‘No! no! the great God cannot have children.’

Not until the mid seventies, when Ian Robertson discovered that this language was still spoken, was BD studied. This discovery is related in Robertson (1976). Aspects of BD grammar are described in Robertson (1979, 1983, 1990). Aspects of attrition are discussed in Robertson (1982). Basic vocabulary of BD is compared to that of Skepi Dutch and Negerhollands in Robertson (1989). The significance of the substratal element is reviewed in Robertson (in press). Robertson

But hardly had I commenced my proselyting speech, hardly had the word *Abadi habe enne tobbeke* come out of my mouth, or she interrupted me: "*nenne, nenne, de grotte Abadi kante habe tobbekes ka,*" and when I intended to proceed to tell her about the Virgin Mary and what happened in Bethlehem, she angrily walked out of the house, muttering that I was fooling her. (Swaving 1827: 267–268; his italics; my translation)²

Swaving’s brief exchange follows in a modern BD rendering, with the etymological source language of each item. Had Schuchardt known of this publication, his position would undoubtedly have remained the same: this fragment, like that in Dance (1881), cannot be interpreted with the help of Dutch alone.

(forthc.) contains a previously unpublished early 19th century list of 44 BD words.

Other scholarly work on BD includes the following: in Bruyn–Veenstra (in press) aspects of BD grammar are compared to Afrikaans, Negerhollands, and 17th century Dutch, while Stolz (1987a,b) contains discussions of BD grammar compared to Negerhollands and to attrited forms of Dutch. Aspects of BD grammar are discussed in Kouwenberg (1991, 1993 a, b, in press b) and in Kouwenberg–Robertson (1988). The

significance of the substratal element in BD and its relation to theories of creole formation is addressed in Kouwenberg (in press b), Muysken–Smith (1986), Smith (1987), Smith, Robertson–Williamson (1987).

2. History and use of Berbice Dutch Creole

Creole languages typically develop when the native languages in a language-contact situation cannot serve the purpose of inter-group communication. Moreover, creole languages in the Caribbean typically developed in the context of slavery and plantation societies.

BD arose in an enforced contact situation on Dutch-owned plantations. From the time of its formation it would have served a communicative purpose between three groups: Africans, Indians (i.e. American Indians), and Europeans. Historical and linguistic evidence identify the latter two as primarily Arawak and Dutch; although historical evidence points to diverse linguistic backgrounds in later periods, linguistic evidence identifies the first as chiefly Eastern-Ijo in the early years of colonization. We will discuss the historical evidence below, while the linguistic evidence will be reviewed in section 3.

The establishment of plantations on the Berbice River was initiated by Abraham van Peere, who, in 1627, was granted permission by the Zeeland chamber of the West India Company to establish a colony. Although the number of plantations seems to have been quite small — five in 1666, eight in 1714 — Robertson (in press) points to evidence that the numbers of slaves on the plantations were relatively large, possibly 90 on average by the early eighteenth century (as opposed to around 50 Europeans in the entire colony).³

While in the early period of colonization, attempts were made to enslave Arawak Indians, these were apparently abandoned in favour of the pursuit of friendly relations with the Indian communities. It is evident from Swaving (1827) that Indians supplied colonists with food items, led hunting and fishing parties, acted as guides, captured and killed runaway slaves, acted as housekeepers on the

plantations, and that many male colonists lived with Indian women.

The change from Dutch to British ownership virtually coincided with a move of plantations to the coastal area and the abandonment of the original plantations on the Berbice, Canje and Wiruni. As a result, BD changed from the vernacular of the colony to a language on the periphery, a situation which contributed to its survival into the present century. It is obvious from sources such as Swaving (1827) and Dance (1881), as well as from general knowledge of the history of Berbice colonization, that this entailed a change in the presence of groups which employed BD for communicative purposes. The downriver move of plantations would have left the following groups in the original plantation area: Arawak-speaking Indian communities, and BD speaking free black, Indians and mixed descendants of inter-ethnic relationships; individual or even widespread bilingualism between Ar and BD is likely to have existed. The majority of Europeans and slaves moved to the coastal area.

My own experience in the Berbice River area suggests that the shift from BD to Guyanese took place first among Afro-Guyanese, followed by BD speaking Indians and ‘Bovianders’, i.e. people of mixed Indian, African and European descent. When I carried out my research, speakers of BD tended to identify Indian ancestry as the source of transmission of BD, while they specifically pointed out that black families had stopped using BD before their families did. Indian ancestry in this context does not necessarily point to a ‘pure’ Indian ethnicity, it may also refer to mixed ethnicity which shows a closer likeness to an Indian type than to an African type of person. One speaker pointed to his wavy hair and said that he had gotten both that and the language from his mother, while his father, who was black, knew no BD. It is ironic that a creole language which contains a large African element would in its last stages be identified with an Indian rather than with an African ethnicity.

In most families in which BD was spoken during the nineteenth century, the shift to Guyanese was completed by the turn of this century. That shift was delayed in a few families, in particular (1) in a small group of families living on the Wiruni Creek, (2) in a small number of presumably closely interrelated families on the Berbice River. My informants grew up in the first decades of this century in families in which BD was the first language, while their wider environment was either bilingual in BD and Guyanese, or in Ar and Guyanese, or monolingual in the latter. The youngest of them was born in 1923. They were the last to learn BD in their childhood, some of them as a first language, some as a second language. In their adult lives, BD was rejected as an ‘uncivilized’ and therefore inappropriate means of communication, and all became Guyanese-dominant. As a result, modern BD contains many Guyanese elements, in vocabulary and grammar, even where original BD expressions are available.

BD existed alongside other languages throughout its history, though of different degrees of importance:

— Arawak, which is only now moving towards extinction in Arawak communities on the Berbice River. That Arawak is still spoken in the Indian community at the Wikki Creek—a tributary of the Berbice River which formed part of the plantation area—though no longer learned by children, suggests that BD was never the first language of Indians in their communities, though it may have been for Indians who lived on the plantations and their descendants.

– African languages for at least as long as slave trade persisted, i.e. up to the end of the eighteenth century.

– Dutch, in particular the Zeeland and Amsterdam dialects of Dutch, well into the nineteenth century, though of diminishing importance from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards.

– Other European languages: French, German and British planters, clerks, etc. were a minor presence during most of the history of the Berbice as a Dutch colony, with English becoming of increasing importance from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, eventually replacing Dutch as the colonial language with the change to British ownership.

– Guyanese, the English-lexicon creole which developed in the coastal area with the change to British ownership and the increase in British-owned plantations. Guyanese came to be of increasing importance in the Berbice River area from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. This may have been due to trading relations, to immigration from the coastal area, but most importantly, to increasing awareness that English and English-related Guyanese were the languages by which one and one’s children would gain access to the state known as ‘civilization’.

3. Language-internal evidence

Historical sources give us no indication of the identity of the Africans which shaped BD, mainly due to a lack of documentation of the early period of the history of Berbice colonization. Robertson (in press) mentions the well-documented heterogeneity of the slave population by the second half of the eighteenth century, by which time half of the slave population was locally born, the other half having a variety of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. However, it is in the earlier years of colonization in which BD must have developed—or rather the precursor of the BD which has survived up to this century. This is where the linguistic evidence becomes relevant: BD is the Caribbean creole which shows the clearest evidence for significant substratal influence in its formation. Indeed, one of the central concerns of creole studies with respect to BD is the Eastern-Ijo (EI) contribution to vocabulary and grammar which was first noted by Smith, Robertson–Williamson (1987); the evidence for the seminal nature of the EI contribution

to this language has only become stronger since.

Ijo is spoken by approximately one million people in the Niger Delta and adjacent riverine areas of Nigeria (Jenewari 1988: 107). With Defak, it forms the Ijoid branch of the Niger-Congo language family (Williamson 1989: 21). There has been no evidence that Ijoid contributed significantly to the formation of any Caribbean creole language other than BD.

The linguistic evidence is to be found first and foremost in the lexicon. In general, we find that basic vocabulary items are largely of Du or EI etymology. For instance, an analysis of the Swadesh 100 word list of basic vocabulary shows a proportion of words of Ar:EI:Du etymology of 1:38:57.⁴ Moving out of basic vocabulary as defined by the Swadesh 100 word list, the following are two examples of the division of labour between BD words of different etymologies: some kitchen utensils used as containers for food or drink in (3), the different parts of the leg in (4).

1. *baba* 'hollowed calabash' (used as water container) < EI
karbu 'plate' < Ar
kongki 'bowl' < Du
2. *bautu* 'upper leg, thigh' < Du
bwa 'leg / foot' < EI
danfiri 'shin(bone)' < Ar
kini 'knee' < Du

We do not find equal contributions from the three source languages in all domains of the BD lexicon. The Arawak contribution is largely restricted to flora and fauna. The Du contribution to the overall BD lexicon is much larger than that of either EI or Ar: to every word of EI etymology, there are three of Du etymology, while words of Ar etymology number slightly less than those of EI etymology. Looking at some of the different domains in the lexicon, the following division may be established:

– Pronouns: first and second person pronouns < Du, third person pronouns < EI.

– Quantifiers (incl. numerals up to twelve): all < Du.

– Other function words: mostly < Du and EI, some resulting from language-internal developments, related to Guyanese, or of uncertain etymology.

– Bound morphemes: all < EI.

– Bodyparts: mostly < Du and EI, *danfiri* < Ar, some of unidentified etymology (*alala* 'tongue', *tuftuf* 'brains'), and some Guyanese. Note that terms referring to the outer parts of the body tend to be of EI etymology, those referring to inner parts of Du etymology.

– Domestic animal names and cover terms (fish, bird, etc.): < Du and EI; related words (feather, tail, etc.): all < Du.

– Agricultural products: mostly < Du, some < EI.

– Flora and fauna (non-domestic, non-agricultural): virtually all < Ar.

– Words for elements of the natural environment (earth, fire, moon, etc): equally divided between EI and Du.

– Colour terms: < EI and Du. Note that BD colour terms are partly defined in relation to the process of maturation of fruits. Thus, *bebia/biɛbiɛ* (< EI) means both 'yellow' and 'red' in addition to 'ripe, mature', and *grun* (< Du) means 'green' in addition to 'raw'. Note also that there are separate terms for skin colour.

– Descriptive/attributive items (big, cold, etc.): predominantly Du. Note also that while these words tend to be adjectives in BD, EI is believed to have no more than two adjectives (related meanings being expressed by verbs; Jenewari 1989: 117), whereas Du has an open-ended class of adjectives.

– Female, male, person, child: *jɛrma* < EI, *man* < Du, *kɛnɛ* < EI, *toko* < EI, respectively.

– Kinship terms for close family members (mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle): < Du (but cf. *toko*). Kinship terms for extended family members: < Du, EI, Ar.

– Terms relating to the spiritual world: all < EI and Ar.

– Motion verbs: mostly < EI, some < Du.

– Perception verbs: all < Du.

– Utterance verbs: two < Du, two < EI.

- Psychological verbs: two < EI, one < Du.
- Temporal adverbs: seven < Du, three < Ar.

The lexicon of BD tells a tale of contact between different peoples. It is obvious that Du and EI were more dominant in this contact-situation than was Ar, which is what we expect in the context of plantation societies where African slave labour was used. However, it is also obvious that the Arawak presence was an important one, as shown by items of Ar etymology in domains such as those of kinship terms, terms relating to the spiritual world, and temporal adverbs.

Some areas of BD grammar also seem to reflect the linguistic contact between EI and Du, though not as straightforwardly as is the case for lexical items which can be uniquely identified with an etymological source. Thus, in Kouwenberg (in press b), I argue that properties of BD which concern constituent order can be seen as the outcome of a process of linguistic negotiation, i.e. an attempt to find a common ground between different ways of expression in the two languages.

Standard negation may serve as an illustration of this process: the BD standard negator has a full form *kanɛ* and a short form *ka*. It always appears in clause-final position, as in the examples extracted from Dance and Swaving, both of which exemplify the short form. The short form can be identified with an EI etymon, but the full form appears to constitute a case of double negation: EI **ka*, which is the standard clause-final negator, with **nɛ* modelled on the use of the Du independent negator *nee* [nej] ‘no’ as a tag-negator. Thus, standard negation of EI may have been matched with an apparently similar strategy of Du, viz. one which appeared to employ a sentence-final negator. The emphatic character of the tag-negator, the variable position and morphophonological realization of the Du sentence-internal standard negator, and the EI predisposition in favour of clause-final negation, conspired to make a marked strategy of Du seemingly unmarked in the contact situation.

4. *Historical change*

Arends (1989) points out that methodologies employed in the reconstruction of processes of creole genesis have been based on the tacit assumption that modern forms of creole languages are comparable to those of over 200 years ago, an assumption which is untenable in the light of evidence such as he uncovered for syntactic change in Sranan. Contemporary BD can be expected to differ from its ancestor in the eighteenth century due to normal language-internal change, due to change induced by continued contact with other languages, and due to the process of language death.

(1) *Language-internal change*

The earliest sources of BD do not provide much time perspective: they give us some limited insights in aspects of BD grammar of the early nineteenth century, but no earlier. Swaving’s and Dance’s sentences are encouraging in their one to one match with modern BD, but this does not allow us to make statements about earlier stages of BD, or for that matter, about aspects of its grammar which are not exemplified in either Swaving or Dance. We may note however, that both Swaving and Dance cite a negative construction, in the case of Swaving one in which a negative verb is employed, and that these match modern negatives.

Historical sources provide evidence for some changes in the segmental shape of BD words. Swaving’s *tobbeke* (< EI **toboku*) corresponds to modern *toko*. Note that the final -e on many words in Swaving’s examples as compared to the full vowels in Dance’s utterances and in modern BD words does not point to a historical development, but rather to the prejudiced ear of a native speaker of Dutch.

In a list of 44 words dated 1794 which is published in Robertson (forthcoming), another indication of a change in the segmental shape of some words may be found: BD appears to have developed a constraint on word-initial *i*-after 1800: the list contains the word *imboe* ‘navel’ (the sequence *oe* in Dutch orthography corresponds to [u]), which in modern BD is

known as *jumbu*. What is peculiar about this word is that it belongs to a class of words which have initial *i-* in their EI cognates, but initial *ju-* in their modern BD forms: *jumbu* < EI **imbu*, *juku* ‘louse’ < EI **iku*, *junggwa* ‘sugarcane’ < EI **inguo*. A similar development can be postulated for Du-derived *juru* ‘hour’, which must have had initial *i-* as the normal reflex of Du /y/ in ‘uur’ /yr/. Note that not all *i-* initial words have undergone this development, witness words such as *ingga* ‘thorn’ of EI etymology, and *idri* ‘every’ of Du etymology.

The foregoing represents the extent of our knowledge of historical change in BD. It is clear that we have to take the utmost care in evaluating the stability of aspects of its grammar.

(2) Contact-induced change

As indicated earlier, BD co-existed with a variety of other languages during its life. It is not impossible that variation existed, as it has been found to exist in other creole-speaking societies. Ethnic groups that employed BD as a second rather than a first language, would in all likelihood have spoken ethnic varieties. Thus, we may conceive of the earlier existence of different lects of BD employed by native speakers of Ar, African languages, Du, and other European languages.

Some—albeit scant—evidence that this is so can be found in the existence of some dialectal variation in modern BD between speakers of the two groups of families in which BD survived (see above). This variation consists of differences in the choice of pronouns and some differences in the segmental shape of a number of lexical items. Thus, for speakers who hail from the Wiruni Creek, the form of the first person plural pronoun is *i/î* or *îçi*, that of the third person plural *eni* or *ini*. For speakers who hail from the Berbice River, these are *en/î* and *eni*,

respectively. For the latter group, quite a few words seem to have undergone apocope, i.e. loss of the final vowel. For instance, *pili* vs. *pil* ‘arrow’, *birbi/î* vs. *birbi/* ‘river’, *lifû* vs. *lif* ‘body’, *hopu* vs. *hop* ‘get up’, as opposed to forms which show no such variation, such as *ri/î* ‘swell’, *stupu* ‘stay’. A last difference is in the choice of *gui* (Wiruni speakers) vs. *gwei* (Berbice speakers) ‘throw’.

Some of my informants claimed that BD as spoken by Afro-Guyanese was different from their own, but they found it hard to pinpoint the differences. One speaker said that *duei* ‘spirit (of the dead)’ (used by both Wiruni and Berbice speakers) would have been *doi* in Afro-Guyanese BD.

(3) Attrition

All modern speakers of BD grew up in bilingual environments and are Guyanese-dominant. We may safely say that at the community level, BD has been a dead language for at least fifty years. In all likelihood, my informants acquired an already attrited linguistic system, although obviously, attrition had not proceeded far enough for the language to be disfunctional. It is not always possible then, to distinguish between the effects of attrition in the individual’s competence, and attrition at the community level, since we do not have sufficient data to establish what an ideal competence at each stage would have looked like. Taking data from different speakers into account, a picture of an abstract level of competence which may have been that which predated language death emerges, but this has to be handled with a measure of caution. Thus, Kouwenberg (in press a) presents such an abstraction; this cannot simply be equated to a pre-1900 stage of BD native speaker competence.

Notes

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Berbice River community, in particular the speakers of Berbice Dutch Creole, Pieter Muysken and Norval Smith at the

University of Amsterdam, and the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO).

2. The original Dutch text is as follows:

“Ik beproefde eens om mijne zwarte schoonmoeder tot het Christelijk geloof over te halen, en begon, zoo als van zelve spreekt, met de geboorte van onzen Heiland, want zij scheen door haren Abadi hetzelfde Opperwezen te verstaan, als dat aan hetwelk wij de naam van God gegeven hebben, hoezeer die attributiën, uit hoofde harer Heidensche wanbegrippen, daar regelrecht tegen inliepen. Het gesprek was in het Kreoolsch. Dan naauwelijks had ik mijne prosylitische redevoering begonnen, naauwelijks was het woord: *Abadi habe enne tobbeke* uit mijne mond, of zij viel mij oogenblikkelijk in de rede: "*nenne, nenne, de grotte Abadi kante habe*

tobbekes ka," en toen ik wilde voortgaan met haar over de maagd Maria en het gebeurde te Bethlehem te onderhouden, liep zij driftig mijn huis uit, en mompelde dat ik den gek met haar scheerde.”

Swaving's mother-in-law's reaction would have been different had she lived today: *Abadi* refers to the Christian God in modern BD. In her day, *Abadi* would have referred to the Ocean God, as does its EI cognate.

3. Note that this runs counter to Smith et al.'s estimated average of thirteen slaves per plantation. Robertson (in press) discusses the discrepancy in light of the historical data available.
4. The remaining four words are unidentified (one), irrelevant (one, a compound, i.e. representing a language-internal development), and non-existent (two, i.e. concepts in the list for which no straightforward BD equivalent exists).

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