

Saramaccan, a very mixed language: Systematicity in the distribution of function words?

Norval Smith

norval.smith@gmail.com

ACLCL/University of Amsterdam (Holland)

ABSTRACT: Saramaccan is the descendant of a mixed creole language formerly spoken on Portuguese Jewish-owned plantations in Surinam, South America. Its mixed nature reveals itself in roughly equal numbers of monomorphemic English-derived and Portuguese-derived lexical items. In terms of function words, however, English-derived function words dominate to the proportion of 4:1. This still leaves us with a significant number of Portuguese function words.

Here I make a preliminary study of spatial adpositions and question words. This reveals a strong correlation between words referring to "place" and words derived from Portuguese.

I take account of the presence of Jewish-owned plantations and large-scale marronnage towards the end of the 17th century, the latter leading to formation of the Saramaccan tribe.

KEYWORDS: Saramaccan, Portuguese, function words, place, maroons, slavery.

1. Introduction

Three creole languages are spoken in Surinam, South America: Sranan, Ndyuka and Saramaccan. The first is the modern descendant of the language of the slaves who lived in the coastal plantations and in Paramaribo, whereas the last two are spoken by the present six maroon tribes, and are thus the languages of groups of escaped slaves. For convenience' sake we refer to them as Ndyuka and Saramaccan, as these are the names of the largest two tribes. Better names would be Eastern Surinam Maroon Creole (ESMC) and Western Surinam Maroon Creole (WSMC) respectively. The ESMC includes the speech of the Ndyuka, Aluku, Paramaccan and Kwinti¹ (in order of size), and the WSMC comprises the dialects of the Saramaccan and Matawai².

¹ In fact the westernmost tribe.

² Formerly part of the Saramaccan tribe.

The ESMC is directly descended from plantation Sranan. The WSMC is however descended from a mixed Portuguese/English lexifier creole, known in the 18th century as Dju-Tongo³, formerly spoken in a group of plantations owned by Portuguese-speaking Jews. For the reasoning behind this claim, Smith (1999: 277-9) can be consulted.

2. Saramaccan as a mixed creole

All the evidence we have concerning the Surinam creole language Saramaccan suggests that it is a very mixed creole. It has sometimes been regarded as a English-lexifier creole, and occasionally as a Portuguese-lexifier creole. The truth probably lies somewhere in between as far as the lexicon is concerned, a fact which was already recognized in Schuchardt (1914). Smith (1987) found the following percentages for a Swadesh 200-word basic vocabulary list, comparing clearly English-lexifier Sranan (also spoken in Surinam) with Saramaccan.

	English	Portuguese	Dutch	African
Sranan	77.1%	3.7%	18.0%	1.6%
Saramaccan	49.9%	34.9%	10.5%	4.7%

Table 1. Etymological sources of Sranan and Saramaccan basic vocabulary

These are quite different results. The main difference is that Portuguese-derived lexical items are about ten times as numerous in Saramaccan as they are in Sranan. The suggestion was that the languages were pretty thoroughly mixed.

Smith (1987) also provided a similar count of *all* function words. The Swadesh list included a few function words also but the overlap is fairly small.

	English	Portuguese	Dutch	African
Sranan	80.4%	1.5%	15.9%	2.2%
Saramaccan	62.8%	16.0%	14.5%	6.8%

Table 2. Etymological sources of Sranan and Saramaccan function words

³ I.e. 'Jewish Language'.

Here the role of English appears to be much larger. The role of Portuguese is reduced to about the same level as the role of Dutch. The Dutch vocabulary that has made its way into Saramaccan is a virtual subset of that in Sranan. And there are few English-derived items in Saramaccan that can be shown to derive different phonological forms from the corresponding Sranan word. The apparent conclusion is clear – the Portuguese element is the intrusive element, and the English element the original element.

3. Content words of English and Portuguese origin

That things are less simple than this became apparent later. Smith & Cardoso (2004) made a count of all the Portuguese words recorded in Saramaccan (of any period), and came up with a few surprising results. They counted the numbers of nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Note that these were nouns, adjectives, and verbs in the two source languages, not in Saramaccan itself.

	Nouns	Adjectives	Verbs	Total NAV
Portuguese origin	176 49.6%	27 34.6%	154 56%	357 50.4%
English origin	179 50.4%	51 65.4%	121 44%	351 49.6%
Total	355	78	275	708

Table 3. Etymological sources of English and Portuguese nouns, adjectives and verbs

The total number of non-compound lexical words of the categories NAV was 708, divided virtually equally between Portuguese-derived words and English-derived words. Donor-language nouns were also virtually equal in numbers. There were twice as many English adjectives in Saramaccan, however. Verbs were, as we stated in Smith & Cardoso (2004), a surprise. There were significantly more verb roots of Portuguese origin, than verb roots of English origin.

4. A different kind of mixture: European versus African

Work by Jeff Good (e.g. Good 2004) has revealed another kind of mixing in the phonology. Words from the three main European source languages exhibit differences in their tone (and stress) behaviour, from words of African origin. So far two main sources of such words have been identified, the Gbe

languages of the former Slave Coast (Smith to appear a), and Kikongo of West Central Africa (Smith to appear b). I will give a general overview of Good's conclusions here.

Good demonstrates that Saramaccan has a split tone/accent system. Most words of European origin (English, Portuguese or Dutch) have one mora that is marked lexically as most prominent. Other morae are unspecified as to tone. On the surface the accented mora, and under certain circumstances, the next mora as well receives a high tone. In contrast, words of African origin have every mora specified for tone, either low or high.

The morae in items of European origin that do not always have a high tone on the surface are *changeable* as to tone. By default they receive a low tone. However, in certain syntactic and phonological contexts, if a neighbouring word contains a high tone, what is called *plateauing* (a.k.a. a tone-bridge phenomenon) acts to raise intervening unspecified tones in European words to high. By contrast, low tones in African words are never raised.

Another difference, discovered by Good, is that high tones differ in nature as between European and African words. The lexically marked morae in European words exhibit certain features of stressed syllables, such as extra lengthening under emphasis, and prominence vis-à-vis unmarked syllables. The unmarked syllables may also be reduced or deleted in fast speech. Words of African origin do not display these properties. There is no deletion of syllables in fast speech, and all syllables tend to lengthen under emphasis.

5. The genesis of the Saramaccan maroon tribe

The Portuguese Jews largely entered Surinam from Cayenne (French Guiana) in the years 1665 and 1667. They speedily acquired plantations in an area on the Suriname River centred on the settlement of Joden Savannah. Already on a map by C. Craandijk dated 1677, a cluster of Jewish-owned plantations is visible. Further to Price's (1983) dating of the first major escapes resulting in the creation of the Saramaccan tribe to the year 1690, we also possess population statistics indicating a very large degree of marronnage around this period.

Firstly, we possess two poll tax returns for Surinam for the years 1684 and 1695.

Year	Whites	Blacks	Blacks (adjusted) ⁴
1684	652	3332	3650
1695	379	4618	5100

Table 4: Poll-tax returns for 1684 and 1695

If we compare this with the figures on imports, we are confronted with a couple of surprising facts. We utilize here figures extracted by Arends (1995) from Postma’s (1990) work on the Atlantic slave-trade.

Year	Imported slaves	Benin-Togo	W. C. Africa
1685	2316	1136	1180
1686	1564	1010	554
1687	425		425
1688	869	419	
1689	1898		1723
1690	0		
1691	950	950	
1692	511		
1693	615		615
1694	0		
1695	620	426	
Total: 1685-1695	9768	3941	4497

Table 5: Slave imports for the years from 1685 to 1695

Of course we cannot assume that slaves had a normal life-span. Luckily we possess a study on the demography of the plantation of Vossenburg by Lamur (1987), dealing with a period slightly later than that which concerns us. He quotes an average annual birth rate of 1.9%, and an average annual death rate of 3.8%, for the period between 1706 and 1710. I will assume that such rates are relevant in our case, and round them up to a birth rate of 2% and a death rate of 4%.

⁴ I have adjusted the figures for slaves upwards by 10% in accordance with Postma’s (1990) estimate of under-reporting by slave-owners for purposes of tax-avoidance.

Arends (1995) draws attention to the unusually high level of slave imports in relation to the total slave population in the 1680s. In no other decade, according to him, do the slave imports exceed 175%. In the decade 1680-1689 the corresponding figure is a staggering 656%. Of course the planters in Surinam had no influence over the vagaries of the slave-trade. They basically had to take what they could get, but in this period they got an awful lot.

As we only possess poll-tax figures for 1684 and 1695 in the relevant period, I will compare these figures with the imports of slaves for the relevant years. Taking the adjusted figure for 1684 (3650) as our starting point, and adding 9768 imported slaves to this, we would expect to have encountered ca. 13,400 slaves in the poll-tax figures for 1695. Taking account of an annual population loss of 2% (4%-2%), we would still to have a slave population of about 11,350 in 1695, rather than our estimated population of 5100 in that year. This is a very dramatic difference. Apparently no less than 6250 slaves have gone missing.

This period overlaps very nicely with the above-mentioned first major escapes in 1690, and what Price (1983) sees as the formative period of the Saramaccan tribe. Apparently more than half the slaves in the colony chose marronnage in the period between 1690 and 1695. An additional loss of around 3000 imported slaves occurs between 1705 and 1710.

A contributory reason for the drastic nature of the marronnage in this period, in addition to the reasons quoted to Price from Saramaccan folk memory, may well be the strain put on the plantation infrastructure by the need to house and feed such an unusual increase in the number of slaves.

6. The distribution of Portuguese function words in Saramaccan: Random or non-random?

I will try in this section to identify a few non-random aspects of Saramaccan function words. As can be seen from Table 2 above, "Etymological sources of Sranan and Saramaccan function words", 16% of the function words of Saramaccan were calculated to be of Portuguese origin (Smith 1987). This is still a very high percentage of *function* words. One might say however, on examination of Table 2, that Dutch contributes a similar percentage of function words to both Sranan and Saramaccan.

There is one major difference between the scopes of Portuguese and Dutch influence. The period between the appearance of the main group of Portuguese Jews in Surinam in 1665, and 1695, by which time more than six thousand slaves had absconded, is only 30 years. Sranan, however, was in contact with Dutch from 1668 onwards, a period of more than 300 years. As for Saramaccan, the initial contact with “Dutch function words” was mediated via Sranan. Virtually all of the Dutch function words are shared with the latter language.

Some shared function words of Dutch origin:

Meaning	Sranan	Saramaccan	Dutch etymon	Dutch meaning
together	makandra	makándi ⁵	malkander	each other
except	boiti	ḃóṽti	buiten	outside, except
however	toku	tɔku	toch	nevertheless
but	ma	ma	maar ⁶	but
three	dri	díí	drie ⁷	three
five	feifi	féífi	vijf	five
seven	seibi	séíbi ⁸	zeven	seven
nine	neigi	néígi ⁹	negen	nine

Table 6: Some Dutch-derived function words in Saramaccan

I will now turn to function words of Portuguese origin used in the context of place expressions. Let us examine a table of the most common spatial prepositions in Sranan. In terms of their meanings, some clearly have opposites while others do not. There are two clear sets of oppositions.

- (1) 1-2 above – below;
 3-4 in front of – behind

⁵ Wietz (1805) has *makkandra*.

⁶ On the whole the Dutch etymology appears more likely than Portuguese *mas*. 19th century dictionaries of Sranan also give the longer form *mara*.

⁷ This could also be from S.W. English dialect /dʒi/ ‘three’.

⁸ Also English-derived *sébén*.

⁹ Also English-derived *néni*.

It is at least striking that these two pairs of opposites also exhibit language source unanimity. While 3/4 retain the Sranan forms *fési* and *báka*, 1/2 both have adopted Portuguese-lexifier terms *líba* and *básu*, from respectively Portuguese *(ar)riba* ‘up’ and *(de)baixo* ‘underneath’

	English	Sranan	etymon	Saramaccan	etymon
1	above/on X	tapu X ¹⁰	top	a X líba	(ar)riba (Port.)
2	under/below X	ondro X	under (onder?)	a X básu	(de)baixo (Port.)
3	in front of X	fesi X	face	a X fési	face
4	behind X	baka X	back	a X báka	back
5	opposite X	abra X abra-sey fu X	over(-side for)	a X ótó-bánda	otra-banda (Pt.)
6	inside/in X	ini X	in	a X déndu	dentro (Port.)
7	beside/past X	sey X	side (zij?)	a X bandya	bandya (Kik.)
8	among X	mindri X	middle	a X míndi	middle

Table 7: Spatial postpositions in Saramaccan

Of the other four spatial concepts in Table 7, two are expressed by Portuguese-derived words, and one by an English-derived word. The fourth is expressed by a Kikongo-derived noun *bandya*. The reason for the use of this form is probably not to be sought in any resemblance to *bánda*, which might be suspected, as both mean ‘side’. In Saramaccan, *bánda-kiiki* means ‘other side of the creek’ while *bandya-kiiki* means ‘side of the creek’. In other words, *bánda* and *ótó-bánda* both mean ‘other side’ in Saramaccan (Vinije 2009). Furthermore we can detect no patterns here as the four are all singular concepts.

The primary question-words (*who, what, which, how*) involve no Portuguese-derived etyma, although Saramaccan interestingly enough has Fongbe-derived items for “who” and “what”. This once again indicates the lesser role which can be assigned to Portuguese. Consider Table 8.

¹⁰ The X marks the most common position for the object of the adposition.

English	Sranan	etymon	Saramaccan	etymon
who	suma	(Q-) someone	ambe'	mɛ' (Fongbe 'who')
what	san	(Q-) something	andí	àní (Fongbe 'what')
which	sortu	(Q-) soort (Dutch)	ún-di (sg.) ún-sóóti (sg.) ún-lo (pl.) ún-N	Q-this Q-soort (Dutch 'sort') Q-row Q-N ('which N?')
what kind	sortu	(Q-) soort (Dutch)	ún-pei	Q-pair (?)
how	(o-)fa o-"A"	(Q-) fashion Q-"A" ('how Adj?')	un-fá un-"A"	Q-fashion Q-"A" ('how Adj?')

Table 8: The major question words in Sranan and Saramaccan

The only language other than English to play any role here is Dutch. However if we examine the question words for time and place, we see that *place* once again plays a role. Compare Table 9.

English	Sranan	etymon	Saramaccan	etymon
where	(o-)pe	(Q-) place	ún-kamia	Q-caminho (Port.)
which side, where to	sortu sei	soort (Dutch 'sort') side	(na) ún-sɛ or na-á-sɛ	(LOC) Q-side
when	o-ten	Q-time	(na) ún-te(n) (na) ún- báka	(LOC) Q-time (LOC) Q-dag (Du. 'day')
what time	o-lati	Q-laot (Dutch 'late')	(na) ún-yúu	Q-uur (Dutch 'hour')

Table 9: The question words for time and place

It seems that a provisional conclusion might be that *place* is a particularly fruitful semantic field for the occurrence of Portuguese function words. And the following table seems to confirm this.

In Table 10 I have collected a number of expressions falling into the field of spatial function words.

	Gloss	Saramaccan	etymon	etymon meaning
1	above/on X	a X líbã	(ar)riba (Port.)	up
2	under/below X	a X b́ásu	(de)baixo (Port.)	underneath
3	opposite X	a X ótó-b́ánda	otra-banda (Port.)	other side
4	inside/in X	a X déndu	dentro (Port.)	inside
5	here	akí	aqui (Port.)	here
6	close by	zúntu	junto (Port.)	close
7	there	(de) a(l)a	(there) alá (Port.)	there
8	where? (Interrogative)	(na-)un-se/ na-a-se un-kamía	(to-) Q-side Q-caminho (Port.)	way, road
9	where (Relative)	ka ¹¹	cá (Port.) (caminho)	here (poss. way, road)
10	be (place)	(de) saí	(there) sair (Port.)	come out, appear, etc.

Table 10: Portuguese-derived function words referring to the spatial semantic field

Quite why there should be such a cluster of Portuguese-derived function words referring to things spatial is not clear. The use of Portuguese terms does not result in any real increase in the number of distinctions made.

The examination of further function-word types of Dutch and Portuguese derivation may well reveal more order in the chaos that seems to exist at the moment.

Can we say anything further about the two types of mixing seen in Saramaccan: the phonological mixing described by Good (2004), and the lexical mixing, well-known since Schuchardt (1914)? Not much other than that the number of African words preserved, I assume, at a single point in the

¹¹ It can't be completely ruled out that ka is actually an abbreviated form of kamía.

history of Saramaccan, was large enough to make its mark on the prosodic structure of the language. The Portuguese and English lexical components, involving also significant numbers of function words, point rather to a case of a mixture between Sranan and a form of Portuguese. What form this took was is not clear, but to judge by the several double phonological reflexes involved, there may have been two forms of Portuguese involved, a more standard-like Portuguese of the Jewish plantation-owners, and a form of creole Portuguese. This also requires further study.

Saramaccan is, as I have just said, notable for the large number of African-derived lexical items (Smith, to appear a; to appear b). Within these African-derived lexical items, there are also two major groups, Gbe and Kikongo. These also differ substantially in their segmental phonological make-up, a point I will not further discuss here. The two main African linguistic sources also differ significantly in their tonal structure. Much work remains to be done on the relationships between Saramaccan (and Ndyuka) tones and the tones of their donor languages.

But this whole mixtie-maxtie mess is one of the most fascinating aspects about the Saramaccan language.

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