

Variation in the sources of Early Sranan – what is it evidence of?

Sranan Tongo, or Sranan, emerged as a means of interethnic communication among (the descendants of) Africans and Europeans on Suriname plantations in the late 17th and early to mid-18th century. The language is relatively well documented in its early stages of development, as there are at least ten sources of Sranan dating from the 18th century that allow the analysis of the morphosyntactic and phonological structure of Early Sranan. What is more, the sources of Early Sranan represent several types of texts, ranging from word lists, dialogues and plays to Court Records and the Sranan version of the Saramaka Peace Treaty of 1762. The texts are currently prepared for inclusion in the Suriname Creole Archive (SUCA) at the Radboud University of Nijmegen. This paper is a qualitative documentation of the variation in several morphosyntactic and semantic features from various language domains in seven of the Early Sranan sources (around 45,000 tokens in total). In particular the variation in the representation of markers of tense, mood and aspect, reduplicated forms, serial verb constructions, adpositions and prepositional phrases in the sources is assessed.

The findings are compared with their contemporary Suriname Eastern Maroon Creole equivalents based on the work of Huttar & Huttar (1994), Migge (1998, 2003) and Goury (2003). Eastern Maroon Creole, a conservative sister language of Sranan, functions as a standard of comparison, because it is assumed to have maintained many of its original features. It has been less subjected to change due to language contact than the contemporary varieties of Sranan that underwent prolonged influence from (Suriname) Dutch. The comparison of Early Sranan and contemporary Eastern Maroon Creole can confirm certain features of authentic Early Sranan in cases of agreement between the Early Sranan sources and Eastern Maroon Creole. When not all of the Early Sranan sources are consistent, the comparison with Eastern Maroon Creole can indicate authentic Early Sranan variants.

The paper further discusses the causes of the variation that is encountered. Some instances of variable forms can be accounted for in terms of different text styles and genres, while others result from varying levels of Sranan competence of the authors and interference from Dutch, often but not always the authors' native language. For example, the use of *in* as a simple preposition in (1) below illustrates interference from the native language of the author, as Sranan *ini* 'in(side)' can occur only in complex locative or temporal prepositional phrases that are headed by the general preposition *na* in Early Sranan and Eastern Maroon Creole.

- (1) *in na netti kom na mi* (VD c1765: 66)
in(side)-the night come LOC 1S
[‘kom van Nagt by myn’]
‘Come to me in (during) the night.’

Furthermore, certain variable forms are derived from different regional varieties, while others represent different social registers (see also Arends 1992). Moreover, a number of forms emerged as the result of language change (temporal variation).

To a large extent, the variation as observed in the sources can be regarded as indicative of the true variability of Early Sranan. Insight in the variability of Early Sranan is essential for our understanding of the formation of the Suriname Creoles in particular and creole formation in general.

References

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