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Extending the use of Saramaccan in Suriname

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0. In Suriname there exists considerable pressure to use Dutch, the socially prestigious language, for education and for written communication. Vernacular languages are interesting topics for research in linguistics or anthropology, but have been largely neglected for all practical purposes involving the native speakers. Speakers of minority languages continue to repress the use of their own languages in favor of the officially accepted national language.

I advocate the use of the vernacular language, not only as a important vehicle for learning but also as a means of enhancing the native speaker's feeling of self worth. I will present several practical ways of extending the use of the vernacular as well as problems I have encountered in doing so with Saramaccan.

This paper is based on research and experimentation conducted during twelve years (1968 - 1980) of working with the Saramaccan Maroons of Suriname. It also draws heavily on the experience and experiments of my colleagues of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, most of whom are daily involved in extending the use of the vernacular around the world.

1. Establishment of an orthography

In a program that promotes a vernacular literature, the first decision that needs to be made is that of a practical orthography. When we first began to work with the Saramaccan language in 1968, we discovered that an orthography had already been proposed by Dr. Jan Voorhoeve (Voorhoeve, 1959). Very little literature had, however, been published in this orthography; for that reason we felt free to investigate its adequacy in a program geared for the Saramaccans themselves.

Aside from linguistic factors, three major considerations had to be taken into account in determining the most useful orthography for Saramaccan: the national language, social pressures, and readability. Because Dutch is the national language of Suriname, efforts were made to use Dutch orthography symbols. This was no problem as far as the consonants were concerned.

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Where the same sound existed in both languages, the Dutch symbol was used (e.g. j for y). Where a symbol used in Dutch represented a consonant sound not found in Saramaccan, the symbol was used for another consonant sound in Saramaccan which does not occur in Dutch (e.g. g).

We encountered a problem however when it came to vowels. Because all Saramaccan vowel sounds can be short, long, or very long, we decided (as had Voorhoeve) to use single symbols for all Saramaccan vowels, rather than use the double symbols which occur in Dutch orthography, and then double or triple them according to length. However, social pressure clamoured for the familiar Dutch vowel combination 'oe' to represent the sound of (u). However, if the 'oe' were used, many Saramaccan words would be unsightly; e.g. boeoeoe 'blood', koeoekoetoe 'biting gnat', foooe 'flood', etc. We continue to opt for the 'u' (buuu, kuukutu, foou) especially as we have found that a bit of orientation and explanation does much to overcome these objections.

Strangely enough, no one seems to object to the use of single symbols for the other vocoids, although they differ from the Dutch symbols!

For the (ɛ) and the (ɔ) sounds, we use the umlaut: 'ë', 'ö', rather than the grave accent which Voorhoeve used, because 1) the umlaut is found on most Dutch typewriters and 2) it does not'clutter' up the page as much as do accents.

One other change made from that of Voorhoeve is that tone marks are omitted. (In Voorhoeve's orthography the high tone is indicated by an acute accent.) There were three basic reasons for omitting tone marks:

1) on individual words they are of dubious value even for outsiders, as often the tone changes across phrase or sentence boundaries, or according to sentence word order (Rountree, 1972);

2) Saramaccans themselves found the tone marks cumbersome;

3) a native speaker of Saramaccan would not pronounce the tone incorrectly anyway except in a very few cases of minimal pairs. The orthography proposed by Voorhoeve continues to be used by some investigators (notably, Dr. Richard Price) in articles written for non-Saramaccans, while the revised orthography is the one being promoted in our own program. Official endorsement of this orthography is still pending action by the Suriname Government.

2. Transitional Primer

To help the already literate Saramaccan to make the transfer from Dutch to his own language, a 'transitional primer' has been prepared. The primer begins with sounds common to both languages and then procedes to distinctively Saramaccan sounds. The illustrated drills and explanations, and the practice reading following the explanations, have already been used effectively to help literate Saramaccans appreciate the unique features of their own language and literature.

3. Literature in The Vernacular

Following the choice of an orthography, the next step is to begin the production of reading material to test the orthography. The first booklet in Saramaccan, consisting of five folk tales and two travel narratives, was a mimeographed collection of texts which we had used for linguistic analysis. The Christmas story followed; this was a version freely told on tape, then transcribed, illustrated, and mimeographed.

In 1973, Sarah Gudschinsky and Margaret Wendell of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, proposed a scale to measure the readibility of vernacular literature (i.e. literature produced by native speakers of the language.) (Wendell, 1973), as follows:

1) Easiest of all to read is that material which is written about one's own culture, e.g. personal experience within the culture, local history, legends, etc.
2) Next in difficulty is material written about <u>outside</u> cultures, but within the writers' experience: visits to the city, how to do new things, etc.
3) The next stage of difficulty is material outside the writer's culture <u>and</u> experience: history, geography, science, etc.
4) More difficult yet is <u>translated</u> material, which is limited in form and style.

Vernacular literature in all of these stages of difficulty is needed to make fluent readers. (Needless to say material written by a non-mother-tongue speaker of the language is usually the most difficult reading of all for speakers of the language.)

In order to build a body of literature, we began to encourage Saramaccans themselves to write. School children and young men who had learned to read and write in school were paid per page for anything written in Saramaccan. Several responded with enthusiasm. Some of their writing was almost illegible since they had not previously been exposed to writing their own language, but the Saramaccan propensity for story-telling came through as they discovered they could write just about anything they desired. Their stories were illustrated often by themselves and reproduced by mimeograph. The result was eighteen little booklets (averaging 22 pages each) with the following titles and descriptions:

Baaa ku baaa, mati ku mati 'Brother and brother, friend and friend' by Samuel Savon. Two stories of two brothers and two friends.

Bunu ku Hogi 1 & 2 'Good and evil' by Fanjen Amoida. Stories with good as well as bad endings.

Fufuu, huku ku taanga 'Stealing, fishing, and difficulty' by Fanjen Amoida. Three stories on these topics.

Hafu pasa, hafu an pasa 1 & 2 'Some happened, some didn't happen' by Kalinoo Asinei. Stories which begin in fact and end in fiction.

Mbeti u liba 'Animals of above' by Donisi Amoida. Short descriptions of different monkies and the sloth.

Mbeti u matu 1 & 2 'Animals of the jungle' by Donisi Amoida. Short descriptions of various animals in the jungle.

Politiki 'Craftiness' by Fanjen Amoida. A story about Anasi (Father Spider).

Saamaka Oto 1 & 2 'Saramaccan stories' by Samuel Savon. Personal experience of the author.

Sö mi si ku sö mi jei 'Thus I saw and thus I heard' by Fanjen Amoida. Stories which may or may not be true.

Takuhatima Oto 'Evil-hearted-men's stories' by Samuel Savon. Two stories about people who did not treat others right.

Wakama Oto 'Traveler's tale' by Donisi Amoida. A travelogue of a trip to French Guiana.

Wanlö bakaa köntu 1 & 2 'Some foreigner's tales' by Samuel Savon. Stories heard in school and re-told in Saramaccan.

Wanlö fesiten oto 'Some first-time tales' by Samo Amoida. Stories of their ancestors, similar to 'moron' jokes.

Wanlö Saamaka nöngö 'Some Saramaccan proverbs' by Samo Amoida.

Wookoma Oto 'Workingman's tale' by Donisi Amoida. How the author worked in French Guiana.

These booklets were made available at cost and a copy of each was placed in our reading room in the village. They were read with much interest mainly by school boys, many of whom had never before read a story which they could understand from beginning to end. (Reading material in the schools of Suriname is almost exclusively in Dutch.)

Since then, several more titles have been added to the list of vernacular literature in Saramaccan. The most popular title to date is Kontu Köndë Oto "Fantasy Tales' printed in 1976. This is a 76-page book containing five stories by Metsen Sane, a master storyteller. The unique illustrations were prepared by Samuel Savon, a young Saramaccan man who was then about twenty years old. The stories are printed in diglot with the Dutch on the same page, rather than in the back of the book as in the first mimeographed series; this increases its popularity with the schoolboys who try to understand the Dutch with the help of the Saramaccan.

We have also experimented further with oral texts which had been collected for language learning, transcribing, illustrating, and publishing them as books. Wanlö Kontu fu Anasi 'Some tales of Anasi' contains four folktales which were told on tape by older Saramaccan women. These stories are rich in cultural lore and imagination. One contains a song which is repeated whenever Fire, one of the main characters, appears on the scene. However, because of the heavy reliance on voice intonation, and because implications which are usually supplied in writing are often omitted in oral telling, these stories make rather difficult reading.

One recent book which should prove popular in the future is Höndima Oto 'Hunter's Tales', printed in 1978. To obtain the text for this tape I asked a successful hunter in the village to pretend to give instructions to a young man in the art of successful hunting. The result was an 88-page book with chapter divisions such as "How to hunt a tapir', 'What to do when you go hunting', 'How to hunt a wild pig', etc.

The narrator's knowledge of sound woodmanship and folklore, combined with the responder's attitude of mock ignorance, make for fascinating reading. A unique feature of this book is that it is written for two readers: one giving the instructions and the other responding, thus:

Fa fii höndi djanga futu	How to hunt the deer
Di langa töngö...	The long tongue...
Undi u de da di langa töngö?	Which one is the long tongue?
Di langa gangaa. Di weti kakahöö wan...	The long neck. The white backsided one...
Undi wë de kai sö?	Which one is that?
Ja sabi ën nö?	Don't you know?
Nönö.	No.
Di womi aki, ja sa höndi soni tuu.	Man, you really don't know about hunting!
Ma sabi ën tuu.	(You're right) I don't know about it!
Djangafutu.	The deer.
Ooo, djangafutu?	Oh, the deer, is it?
Djangafutu.	The deer.
Leti sö.	Yeah.
Hën da gbengbetai.	He's also called 'gbengbetai'.
Leti sö.	Yeah.
Djangafutu.	The deer.
Wëënö.	Umhum.
hën da gbengbetai.	that is 'gbengbetai'.
Leti sö.	Right.
Hën da dia.	He is also 'dia'.
Leti sö.	Right.

etc.

It was hoped at first that this book would be a natural follow-up to finishing a set of reading primers, since the new literates would not need to concentrate on more than one phrase at a time. However, again it has proven to be more difficult than expected, because comprehension depends on the reader's ability to vary intonation to fit the dialogue style.

Through this experimentation with oral and written literature, we have discovered that the easier material for new readers is material that is composed as it is written, rather than material given orally and then transcribed. The latter however could serve as a useful test for fluency.

4. The Indigenous Authors Workshop

One method for obtaining a large amount of vernacular literature quickly is to conduct an indigenous workshop. This has been successfully done on three different occasions in Suriname, which resulted in several booklets being published in three Indian languages and one Creole language.

The first workshop was held for the Wajana and Trio Indians in the Trio village of Tepoe. Four Wajanas, eight Trios, and one Waiwai (who wrote in Trio!) participated as writer trainees; another Trio served as the artist for the workshop. These Indians trained under the supervision of workers of the Medische Zending Suriname and the West Indies Mission. I was the instructor and coordinator of the workshop.

The objectives of the workshop were:

1. To make participants aware of the need for literature in their own languages.
2. to provide easy-reading material for the Wajanas and Trios so that they can become fluent readers of their own languages.
3. to impress trainees with these facts:
   a. They can write anything they want to in their language.
   b. No outsider can write in their language as well as they can.
   c. Literature can be educational or informative, but it may be just for pleasure as well.
4. to give trainees ample opportunity to write.
5. to give trainees confidence as they take part in many of the processes of seeing a book through to its completed form.
6. to start trainees in learning to use a typewriter effectively.
7. to provide simple material into the national language.

During the three weeks of the workshop, supervisors met with the leader for lectures on relevant topics, e.g. how to motivate the writer trainees, how to train a writer to edit his own material, how to keep a literature program going, etc. At other times training sessions were held with the Indian trainees to introduce them to the goals of the workshop and to expose them to various topics for writing.

(no pressure, however, was put on them to write on any particular topic). Specific hours were set apart for writing, during which the supervisors were available for guidance. Typing classes were conducted throughout the workshop; although the trainees did not become fast typists, they were able to learn the basics of finger position.

In the three weeks of the workshop, twenty-four booklets (ranging from 5 to 33 pages) were produced. The Indian trainees were able to observe or participate in all stages of book-making-writing, illustrating, translating into Dutch (all booklets were produced in diglot), mimeographing, collating, stapling, and trimming. (In this workshop the trainees were not taught to run the mimeograph machine; however this has been done successfully in other workshops.)

Some of the writers trained at this Trio-Wajana workshop have produced written material on their own following the workshop, and some have improved their typing skill.

Because it was not difficult to obtain easy-reading material in Saramaccan via other methods, an indigenous author's workshop has not yet been conducted for Saramaccans; however such workshops will be a good way to obtain reading material in the more difficult stages.

5. Reading Primers in The Vernacular

While gathering reading material for the Saramaccans, we were also preparing a set of reading primers to teach Saramaccans to read in their own language. These were based on the Gudschinsky method (Gudschinsky, 1973), which stresses building words from syllables as well as reading for fluency and meaning. During the preparation of the primers, two men were taught to read.

In 1978 the Suriname Ministry of Education sponsored a pilot project to determine the value of teaching adults to read via their mother tongue. Seven Saramaccan teachers were trained in the use of the primers and teachers manuals; three of these were then chosen to begin the first pilot project in a bauxite-mining town near Paramaribo.

Despite problems of logistics (transportation for teachers proved to be the biggest problem) about twelve Saramaccan men learned to read during this project.

Another pilot project is presently being conducted by Miss Joyce Rensch, a young Saramaccan woman who is on leave from her studies in Holland. So far several women and one man are successfully learning to read in their own language.

6. Second-Language Learning via the Vernacular

Because Saramaccan reading material will probably always be limited, and because higher education is available only in the national language, or an international language, it is of considerable importance that opportunity be given for Saramaccans to learn a second language. Teaching in the government schools of Suriname has traditionally been given only in Dutch. The prevalent opinion has been, and still is among many educators, that the quickest way for students to learn Dutch is to limit them to the national language from the first day of school. This method has proven ineffective and has resulted in the following:

1) Mother-tongue speakers of Dutch have a considerable advantage over those who do not speak Dutch, to the extent that the non-Dutch-speakers are made to appear less intelligent.

2) many schoolchildren in Suriname who are not mother-tongue speakers of Dutch fail one or more of the early grades in school.

3) There is a high drop-out rate in the schools.

4) The non-Dutch-speaking student spends most of his time memorizing material which he does not understand.

5) Few of those who are not mother-tongue speakers of Dutch learn to read for enjoyment, or to become fluent readers; reading in a language you do not speak well is too difficult to enjoy (as most of us who have learned a second language know).

6) a high rate of illiteracy exists in the country.

In some countries students are first taught to read in their own language. During this period they begin to learn to speak (but not yet read or write) the national language.

Only after they have mastered the skills of reading and writing do they begin learning to read and write in the national language. This eliminates the almost-impossible requirement of learning to read and learning a new language at the same time. I feel that such an approach is the most potentially successful approach to education for Saramaccans, or any other group of speakers of a minority language.

In a report following a five-year experiment in functional literacy, UNESCO made the following observation:

> 'Analysis of all EWLP (Experimental World Literacy Programme) projects whose socio-economic effects were judged statistically significant and positive led evaluators to the conclusion that the closer the language used to present the content and materials of the course to the workers' everyday language, the more effective the literacy programme.' (UNESCO, 1976)
> (Underlining is mine)

One frequently heard objection is that an emphasis on the vernacular will fragment Suriname society. To that we can only report that without an emphasis on the vernacular, the gap between mother-tongue speakers of the national language and those who do not speak the national language in the home will continue to exist. Until the vernaculars are incorporated into the educational system of Suriname, there will continue to be frustrated students who will drop out of school before even the basics are mastered, to become 3rd and 4th class members of society. A unified society can only be realized as the dignity and respect of each language group is recognized, and this can only be done through a nation-wide emphasis on the vernaculars.

7. Second-Language Learning Materials

In our program with the Saramaccans, the need for learning the national language has always been kept in mind. All of the booklets which we have produced in Saramaccan include a Dutch translation with the Saramaccan reader in mind; this appears either at the back of the book, or below the Saramaccan text on each page. So that the Saramaccan reader can be exposed to fluent Dutch, we prefer a free, rather than a literal, translation.

Another aid to second-language learning is a Dutch-Saramaccan dictionary, which is presently being completed. This is being prepared especially for Saramaccan students, as up to now they have had no source to which they can refer when they do not understand a word. It is also hoped that a Dutch-Saramaccan dictionary will do much to promote Saramaccan as a language worthy of being written and through which new information can be gained.

We have also been experimenting with a set of lessons to teach Dutch to newly literate adults. These lessons use short dialogues and drills with Saramaccan translations. Since these lessons are still in the beginning stages of experimentation, their effectiveness has not yet been ascertained.

Finally, a multi-lingual booklet following a travel-phrase book format, has been prepared for Saramaccan. It contains phrases in Saramaccan which are then translated into Dutch, English, and Sranantongo. This Wakama Buku 'Traveler's Book' is our most popular item; the first edition was sold out several years ago and a new more attractive edition has recently been published.

8. Planning a Literacy Program using the Vernacular

In a recent seminar in Paramaribo, it was decided to use the vernacular in a nation-wide literacy program in Suriname. Some of the recommendations presented to the Ministry of Education by the Work Group on Methods and Approaches at the Seminar included the following:

-- that an official orthography be established for each language spoken in Suriname.

-- that a coordinating body be established for the collecting, writing, and stimulation of literature in the vernaculars.

-- that reading primers and teachers' manuals be prepared for each language spoken in Suriname where such materials do not exist.

-- that members of each language group be trained as literacy workers for their own language group.

-- that literacy courses for each language group be established on a regular basis.

-- that a course for teaching Dutch to new literates be prepared and adapted for each language of Suriname.

-- that classes for teaching Dutch to new literates be established for each language group, using bi-lingual speakers of both languages as instructors.

If these recommendations are put into effect, we anticipate a high increase in the literacy rate of adult Saramaccans, as well as that of other minority language groups in Suriname.

9. Bible Translation into the Vernacular

One final extension of Saramaccan with which we have been involved has been the translation of the New Testament. About 50% of this project has been completed. Although the churches in general continue to reject the Saramaccan translation as being too 'un-churchy' for use in public worship, it is being used by some Saramaccans in the interior as well as in the city, and a group of school boys comes enthusiastically, though irregularly, to our house to read the Scriptures in their own language.

10. Reactions to the Extension of Saramaccan

The reactions of different Saramaccans to these extensions of their own language have been varied. How often we have heard the objection: 'I don't want to learn to read in Saramaccan; I already know the language!' (Any explanation following that remark is time wasted!)

However, some reactions have been favorable and encouraging:

-- The teachers trained for the 1978 pilot project were delighted to discover that their mother tongue was of sufficient value to be used to teach reading.

-- a village captain comes frequently to see what new book is available to buy. He had learned to read in Dutch but had never experienced the excitement of understanding what he was reading.

-- One Saramaccan man remarked after reading the Scriptures in his own language: "No wonder the preachers don't use this in church. If they did, the people would look hard to see if they were living up to what they are preaching!"

-- The village school children continue to use our reading room at all hours, and the monotone of "school intonation" is being exchanged for conversational intonation as they discover that they can "read the way they talk".

-- Visitors from other Saramaccan villages listen with fascination as they hear proverbs and folktales read aloud for the first time.

Most of all I value the comment of an old man downriver from our village who told me enthusiastically: "When Saramaccans made peace with the white man, they were told they were given their freedom. But it wasn't real freedom. We still had to learn to read and write in the foreigners' language. Now we can learn to read and write in our own language. I call that <u>real</u> freedom!"

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