

Trotji (Sranan: *Preface*)

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/cll.52.preface1>

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**Language and Slavery: A social and linguistic history of the
Suriname creoles**

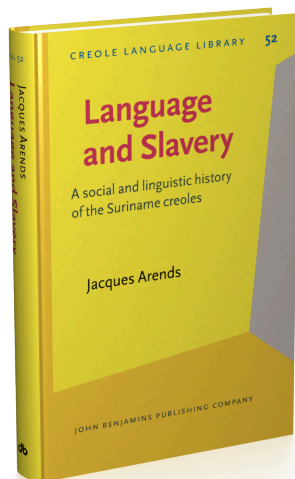
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[Creole Language Library, 52] 2017. xxix, 463 pp.

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Trotji (Sranan: *Preface*)

This book is being published on the premise that it is possible for a white, European linguist in the 21st century to write the history of a group of languages whose formation is so deeply entwined with the strange and cruel history of the people who created these languages some three hundred years ago. From a purely scientific point of view, of course, this should pose no problem whatsoever. The histories of many languages have been written before, although most often from a purely linguistic point of view, that is without taking the *external* history into account. In fact, the building of modern Western linguistics rests on the foundation of the historical linguistics of the 19th century which dealt almost exclusively with languages' *internal* history, the structural changes they underwent through time without taking into account the historical context in which these changes took place. In such cases the color of the scholar's skin or the 'strangeness' of the historical context or the time-depth involved did not play any role at all.

In the case discussed in this book, however, these things do play a role. The extraordinary nature of the history of the Blacks in Suriname made it impossible – for this author, at least – to write the history of the Suriname Creoles in purely linguistic terms, as just one more study in diachronic linguistics. This is not to say that this could not be done, or that there would be anything wrong doing it. In fact, because of the underdeveloped state of the historiography of Suriname it would be a whole lot easier. The author of any such study would have been spared the many instances where the historical record is either incomplete or contradictory or simply wrong. On the other hand, I am certain that in such an approach many phenomena would have received an incorrect explanation or no explanation at all. This is especially so because the formation of the Suriname Creoles (and of Creoles in general) is first and foremost a process of language contact, more in particular one where the coming into contact of the speakers of a number of different languages leads to the emergence of one or more new languages. Once this is recognized, it becomes clear that to write this history of the Suriname Creoles in a responsible way the historical context must taken into account, if only to determine on independent grounds which languages exactly were involved in the contact situation.

Apart from the identification of the languages involved in the contact situation, there are other reasons why it is wise or even necessary to take the historical

context into account in the study of Creole genesis and development. As has been amply demonstrated in recent studies in contact linguistics (Thomason & Kaufman 1988; Thomason 2001), the question of what will happen in a contact situation is ultimately dependent on social rather than purely linguistic factors. This does not mean that an exhaustive knowledge – if at all possible – of the historical context will yield a solution to each and every linguistic problem connected with Creole formation. But it does enable us to at least avoid the kind of erroneous explanations that are sometimes proposed simply because the historical context is not taken into account at all. To give just one example, if it can be shown on demographic grounds that children were not present in sufficient numbers to create a Creole and subsequently enforce it onto the rest of the community, any theory of Creole genesis which accords a crucial role to L1 acquisition should be abandoned.

As far as the historical context of creolization is concerned, this book even goes one step further in that it attempts to tell the history of the Suriname Creoles as an integral part of Suriname's history *per se*. In other words, rather than reverting to historical factors whenever this seems necessary, this book attempts to treat the history of these languages as part and parcel of the history of Suriname. I use the word 'attempt' on purpose here, not out of some kind of modesty, because the present state of the historiography of Suriname does not allow a fully historical treatment of the topic. Although the situation is improving (Van Stipriaan, Oostindie, Beeldsnijder, Van der Meiden), there are simply too many gaps in the historical literature, e.g. with regard to demographics (Van der Meiden 1987: 14). Compare e.g. the fact that the most recent general history of Suriname, based on primary sources, dates from 1861 (Wolbers 1861)! This means that in many cases one has to rely on partial studies, often done by amateur historians (*cf.* Van der Meiden 1987: 57, 64, 68; the history of Suriname is an amateur history). Apart from sheer lack of professionalism, another problem is that even if historical studies are based on original documents, there is the problem that these do not necessarily tell the truth (Van der Meiden 1987: 9, 42, 77). Colonialism was part of the big political game among the major European powers of the time (England, France, The Netherlands), and often, there were reasons to hide the truth.

Since this book is based on work done during the past twenty years, many people have been involved in its gestation in one way or another. While I thank all of them wholeheartedly, I will mention only a few names in particular. Pieter Seuren put me on the track of Creoles by suggesting the development of Sranan syntax as a topic for my dissertation and Jan Voorhoeve supervised it. Pieter Muysken cordially accepted me as a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam's Department of Linguistics and continuously asked me about 'the progress of my book' when I didn't even know I was writing one. My colleagues at the department, especially my fellow creolists, even more especially my fellow

Surinamists: Liliane Adamson, Margot van den Berg, Adrienne Bruyn, Norval Smith, and Tonjes Veenstra. Adrienne and Norval provide an almost continuous soundboard. Peter Bakker also deserves a special word of thanks for noting and sometimes even sending me obscure but highly relevant old references. During the actual writing of the book, my participation in the Transatlantic Sprachbund Research Project provided much inspiration. For advice and support, I am indebted to Sue Ang, Marlyse Baptista, Ruud Beldsnijder, Hans den Besten, Eithne Carlin, Silvia Kouwenberg, André Kramp, Herman Wekker and many students at the University of Amsterdam. Hein Eersel checked my interpretation and translation of the Sranan sentences which form the corpus for the analysis in Chapter 6. Frank Byrne checked the English of my translation of Van Dyk (c1765). Finally, the book would not have been written without the support of my family.

Rather than dedicating this book to anyone in particular, I prefer to dedicate it to this mysterious force which I believe is behind the wonder of creolization and for which I have no better name than ‘the Creole spirit’, the power that is ultimately – through the Creole speakers – responsible for the creation of not just Creole languages but of Creole cultures as well. It is a power that unites what has been divided, recreates what has been destroyed, heals what has been broken. It is a power which – in a sense – is present in all of life, not just in creolization but in the continuous creation and recreation of the world and which is usually taken for granted, unless, as in creolization, it is present with a force that cannot be denied. May the Creole spirit continue to renew our world and our lives.

Jacques Arends
May 2005

[*Editor's addendum.* From notes left by the author and linked to this preface, one can infer that Jacques Arends intended to gratefully acknowledge various types of support from the following institutions:

the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research NWO
the Dutch Academy of Sciences KNAW and its Institute for Advanced Studies NIAS
the University of Amsterdam and its research institutes IFOTT and ACLC
the Archives of the Moravian Church.]

