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# The Early Surinamese Creoles in the Suriname Creole Archive (SUCA)

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## 1. Introduction

In the 1993 *Linguistics in the Netherlands* volume Cefas van Rossem and Hein van der Voort reported on the construction of a database on Negerhollands. This Dutch-derived creole language of the U.S. Virgin Islands has been recorded in a considerable number of unusually early historical sources. In fact, it comprises “the greatest quantity of early sources that has been handed down of any creole language” (van Rossem & van der Voort 1993:110). From 2005 to present, several scholars at the University of Amsterdam, Leiden and Nijmegen have been collaborating to build a digital archive for the related Surinamese creoles Sranan and Saramaccan, that rivals the Negerhollands database. Upon completion, the Suriname Creole Archive (SUCA) will include some 550,000 Early Sranan and Early Saramaccan tokens.<sup>1</sup>

Within the group of languages that result from language contact, the Surinamese creole languages are special. Other creoles that emerged in similar socio-historical settings in the same period developed alongside the language from which they derived most of their lexicon. Thus, these languages form a creole continuum, with on the one side the creole and on the other the local variety of a European language. The Surinamese creoles, however, are not part of a creole continuum. The turbulent colonial history of Suriname is reflected in the language situation. Varieties of English and Portuguese were the native languages of most of the colonists that settled in the interior in the 1650s and 1660s. In 1667 these settlements were invaded and conquered by the Zealandish chapter of the Dutch Republic, after which English influence in Suriname declined. Because the ‘creators’ of the creoles, primarily imported enslaved Africans, had no access to the domains where the new colonial language, Dutch, was spoken, the influence of this language on the creoles in their earliest developmental stages is rather limited, apart from lexical borrowings. Because of this limited exposure to both English

and Dutch, the emerging creoles are assumed to provide better windows on the workings of the core human linguistic competence in language formation than other languages. The results of Pieter Muysken and Norval Smith's NWO research program 'A trans-Atlantic sprachbund? The structural relationship between the Gbe-languages of West Africa and the Surinamese creole languages' support the view that several aspects of Sranan can be traced back to the native languages of the enslaved Africans due to L1 transfer, although innovation and grammaticalisation also play an important role.<sup>2</sup>

Sranan and Saramaccan are also special in that over the years numerous historical texts in both Sranan and Saramaccan have been located, collected and thereby saved from oblivion. To name a few, Schuchardt (1914) edited a version of a Saramaccan–German dictionary that can be traced back to Schumann (1778). Van Ginneken (1928) cites several 18th-century Sranan sources. Voorhoeve and Donicie (1963) construct an important bibliography of the Surinamese creoles. Voorhoeve and Lichtveld (1975) present several excerpts from historical Sranan texts in their renowned anthology of creole literature in Suriname. Price (1976) is a valuable bibliographical introduction to the Guiana Maroons including the Saramaccans. Kramp (1983) follows in Schuchardt's footsteps, editing Schumann's (1783) Sranan–German dictionary. Bakker (1989) discusses several Saramaccan texts by the Moravian Brethren or Herrnhutters in the 1770s. Arends and Perl (1995) is dedicated exclusively to 18th-century Sranan and Saramaccan texts, i.e. Herlein (1718), Nepveu (1770) and van Dyk (c1765) on Sranan, as well as Riemer (1779) and several Saramaccan letters. Van Kempen coordinated the inclusion of several historical Sranan documents in the Suriname section of the *Digitale Bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse Letteren*. Recently, Arends and van den Berg (2004) published an annotated version of the Sranan version of the Saramaccan Peace Treaty of 1762 in the on-line journal *Creolica: Revue du Groupe Européen de Recherches en Langues Créoles* with scans of the original manuscript.

In short, printed and digital versions of several historical Sranan and Saramaccan documents are available through a number of channels. These historical texts appeal to scholars of various backgrounds, including historians, anthropologists, sociologists and literary scholars as well as linguists. From a linguistic perspective they are interesting as they provide a window on the structure of Sranan and Saramaccan in the 18th century, that is, in earlier stages of their development. However, some of the editions mentioned above are not suitable for linguistic analysis in their current form. For example, it is not always easy or even possible to detect the differences between Schuchardt (1914) and Schumann's original dictionary. Furthermore, digitised annotated versions are preferred over printed versions to accommodate for computerised processing. Moreover, the number of historical texts is far greater than previously assumed, in particular in the case of Saramaccan.

The late Jacques Arends tenaciously collected 18th and early 19th-century Surinamese creole language material in archives in Paramaribo, Utrecht, Amsterdam, Den Haag, Middelburg, Zeist and Herrnhut. At the time of his death much of this material consisted of copies of original manuscripts, while some transcriptions were in progress. His foresight is gratefully acknowledged; at least one of the documents he copied, more than a decade ago, Wietz' (1793) version of Schumann's Saramaccan–German manuscript dictionary of 1778, is now in a deplorable state and can no longer be consulted without the risk of irreparable destruction.

The Suriname Creole Archive (SUCA) aims to bring together digital versions of all of these relevant historical documents in Sranan and Saramaccan and open them up for research.

### **SUCA Objectives:**

- to collect and distribute information on Early Suriname Creole material available for computer processing and for linguistic research.
- to compile an on-line archive of Early Suriname Creole texts collected in archives in Paramaribo, Herrnhut, The Hague, Leiden, Utrecht, Middelburg, Zeist and Amsterdam.
- to make Early Suriname Creole material accessible over the internet for research institutions, scholars of various disciplines such as linguistics, literature, history and anthropology, and others interested in the history of the Suriname creoles.

In the remainder of this paper we present the Early Sranan and Early Saramaccan text material included in SUCA in Section 2 and 3 respectively, report on the construction of the archive in Section 4 and, finally, address some issues that relate to the usefulness of historical creole texts for linguistic study in Section 5.

## **2. Early Sranan**

Ten sources are included in the Sranan section of SUCA, dating from the beginning, middle and end of the 18th century, as well as one 19th-century source. While at this stage SUCA primarily focuses on 18th-century language material, Focke's 19th century Sranan–Dutch dictionary is included because it is the first dictionary by a native speaker of Sranan. An overview is presented in Table 1.

The Sranan section contains several types of documents, including (a) religious texts such as bible translations and hymns (Schumann 1781; Anonymous c1800); (b) judicial documents such transcripts of interrogations and witness reports (Court Records); (c) official documents such as a peace treaty; (d) travel

**Table 1.** An overview of the sources in the Sranan section of SUCA

Author	Year	Text type	# pages	# Sr tokens	Total # tokens
Anonymous (Court Records)	1707– 1767	dl; we	–	500	–
Herlein	1718	w; dl	3	200	400
Nepveu	1762	pt	12	1,900	1,900
van Dyk	c1765	w; dl; pl	108	14,000	28,000
Nepveu	1770	w; dl	8	700	1,800
Schumann	1781	e	90	70,000	70,000
Schumann	1783	dl; dc	205	20,000	40,000
Stedman	1790/96	we	–	300	–
Weygandt	1798	w; dl; pl	144	15,000	30,000
Anonymous	c1800	e	80	30,000	30,000
Focke	1855	dc	166	17,000	40,000
<i>Total</i>			<i>816</i>	<i>169,600</i>	<i>202,100</i>

(dc = dictionary; dl = dialogue; e = evangelical; pl = play; pt = peace treaty; w = word list; we = words and expressions)

reports and (e) documents that were created for the purpose of language instruction, such as dictionaries and language manuals. The latter were created by a Moravian missionary (Schumann) as well as others (Herlein, van Dyk, Nepveu, Weygandt). Thus, variation within and among the texts may correspond to different dimensions, ranging from diachronic to social, stylistic as well as geographical (Smith 1987; Arends 1989, 1992; Bruyn 1995; van den Berg 2007). An indication of the latter is found in the late 18th-century Sranan–German manuscript dictionary of the Moravian brother Christian Ludwig Schumann.

- (1) bringi, *gebären*. na Fotto dem no habi da mufte so menni;  
 deliver give.birth LOC fort 3PL NEG have that word so many
- da Djutongo: ma nufte plantasi habi hem. Tog wan  
 it.be Jew-language but enough plantation have 3SG still one
- reti Fotto-kriolo ben takki: isredeh mi kau bringi wan mannpikin  
 real town-creole PST say yesterday 1SG cow deliver a male-child  
 (Schumann 1783:22)
- ‘*Bringi*, deliver. In the town they do not have that word so much, it’s  
 Djutongo. But enough plantations have it. Still, a real Town black said:  
 “Yesterday my cow delivered a young bull.”’

### 3. Early Saramaccan

While most texts in the Sranan section of SUCA are secular, the texts in the Saramaccan section are more religious in nature. They include bible translations, evangelicals, gospel texts and song books with liturgical hymns and dictionaries written by Moravian missionaries as well as letters written by converted Saramaccans to other converts in Europe, the Caribbean and Greenland (Table 2).

**Table 2.** An overview of the Early Saramaccan sources in SUCA

author	year	type	# pages	# SA tokens	total # tokens
Schumann / Wietz	1778/1793	dc	108	5,000	16,000
Riemer	1779	dc	76	5,000	15,500
Schumann	1779	h	49	9,000	10,000
Randt	1779	e	111	30,000	30,000
Wietz	c1792	e	261	70,000	70,000
Wietz	c1795	e	352	96,000	96,000
Wietz	c1797	e	599	196,000	196,000
Grego, Alabi	1790–1818	l	15	3,500	3,500
various <sup>3</sup>	1835–1899	l	41	10,000	10,000
various	1789–1806	l	141	50,000	50,000
various	1789–1806	l	39	9,500	9,500
Wietz	1805	e	63	14,000	14,000
Anoniem	1810	h	131	13,000	14,000
Difliff	1803	h	202	19,000	20,000
<b>Total</b>			<b>2,188</b>	<b>530,000</b>	<b>554,500</b>

(dc = dictionary; e = evangelical; h = liturgical hymns; l = letters)

The letters are particularly interesting, since they include the earliest known documents written by blacks in any Suriname creole (Arends 1995:375). The following is taken from a letter by the Saramaccan Christian Grego, dated November 25, 1790.

- (2) mi bi fiekka na Kwama krika, mi bi Droemi na wan  
 1SG PST remain LOC Kwama creek 1SG PST sleep LOC one
- va somma dem kali hem Assari en mi ko Paullis a kom  
 of person 3PL call 3SG Assari and 1SG with Paullis 3SG come
- swutti na hem teh a sih mi, mi takki oto va Massra Jesus  
 nice LOC 3SG when 3SG see 1SG 1SG talk story of Master Jesus
- na hem mi bi findi di boene liebi, hem-we wi  
 LOC 3SG 1SG PST find the good life 3SG-EMP 1PL

lobbi Massra.

(Grego 1790)

love Master

I stayed at Kwama creek, I slept at (the place of) one of the people, called Asari, and me and Paulis, he was pleased when he saw me; I told him the story of Lord Jesus, that I found blessing, him our beloved Lord.

In addition to words that are evidently Saramaccan (*bi, fika, droemi*), the letters contain items that appear to be Sranan (*somma*). As suggested by Arends (1995), this could have been the result of linguistic accommodation towards the addressees. It may also be the case that in the 18th century more vocabulary was shared between Saramaccan and Sranan than is the case nowadays. This clearly deserves further investigation. The availability of the various sources in digital format is ideal for this kind of research.

#### 4. The Suriname Creole Archive

The preliminary stages of the construction of the archive required a hands-on approach. A first inventory of the texts showed that wholly and partially digitised documents were available for a number of Early Sranan and Early Saramaccan texts, while for others no digital version was available. In the SUCA project wholly digitised documents are manually checked with the original document. Partially digitised documents are manually checked with the original, completed and, in most cases, checked again by a different person to minimize the risk of errors in the transcription and digitisation process. Several texts were digitised by various people in the past, some using (different) adapted versions of the diplomatic symbols used in the NWO Negerhollands project carried out by Cefas van Rossem and Hein van der Voort. From these, a new editorial set-up was developed for the digitisation of the Sranan and Saramaccan texts for which no digital version was available yet. Texts that were already digitised were adapted. Every Sranan and Saramaccan text in the archive will be accompanied by a document in which the editorial conventions are explained including the text-specific ones, so that all editorial symbols in the text can be easily understood. Marleen van de Vate was responsible for the digitisation and correction of most of the Saramaccan material, Margot van den Berg and Adrienne Bruyn worked on the digitisation of the Sranan material and checked Van de Vate's digitisation work. Germanist and Herrnhutter expert Thea Olsthorn (RU Nijmegen) helped with the transcription of the German fragments (headers, titles of hymns).

All words in the texts are lemmatised and annotated for part of speech (PoS). The tag set and the guidelines for lemmatisation for Sranan have been completed;

for Saramaccan they are currently being developed. Both tag sets and lemmatisation guidelines are based on those used in major corpora (Corpus Gesproken Nederlands; British National Corpus, etc.). Several Sranan and Saramaccan texts are tagged manually for lemma and PoS in order to compile a training corpus. This training corpus is used to train an automatic lemmatizer and PoS tagger, so that the remaining texts can be lemmatised and tagged automatically, followed by a manual correction. Thus, every SUCA text will have passed several stages: transcription, check, lemmatisation and PoS tagging.

SUCA is accommodated by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen (MPI), because of its experience with the digital preservation of linguistic data and with making old data available for new research through the internet (see for example the Dutch Bilingualism Database). Furthermore, it plays a leading role in the integration of on-line data processing tools and data. It offers an impressive infrastructure to search the archive on the basis of meta-data as well as the texts themselves. For that purpose, the SUCA texts are converted into spreadsheets with information stored in several tiers (refsource, pagenummer, SR/SA text, lemma, PoS tag, original translation, original headings, commentary author, commentary transcriber, misc1, misc2, misc3). The MPI currently develops a search engine that allows on line searches over several tiers. Searches in one tier are already possible. Small texts were manually converted, larger texts were converted automatically by Eric Sanders of SPEX/CLST (RU Nijmegen). Every Sranan and Saramaccan text that is stored in SUCA at the MPI is part of a file that, in addition to a spreadsheet that feeds into a search engine, includes a .txt as well as a .pdf version of the text, a document with background information on the text, the author and a selection of relevant references, and, where possible, scans of the original manuscripts or printed documents. Researching the data has thus been maximally facilitated.

## 5. Historical sources for the Suriname Creoles: Issues of interpretation

When it comes to the assessment of the usefulness of historical texts for linguistic study, the preference would be for texts that are written by native speakers, and which are not translations. Were we to apply these factors as strict criteria, hardly any of the 18th-century Sranan and Saramaccan sources would qualify. We would rather argue, however, that the available material is very valuable, even though it has to be interpreted with care.

One aspect to be taken into consideration is representativeness. Schneider (2002:72) develops a classification of text categories that represent a continuum of increasing distance between an original speech event and its written record,



ranging from recorded, recalled, imagined, observed to invented. Recorded texts are the most reliable, whereas texts belonging to the other categories need to be assessed carefully in terms of their representativeness and validity. The Court Records and the Sranan version of the Saramaccan Peace Treaty belong to the ‘recorded’ category, since they are direct records of singular speech events, written down on location. This also applies to those instances in Schumann’s (1783) Sranan dictionary, where it is evident that he consulted with Sranan speakers. This is implied, for instance, by the phrase *wi taki* ‘we say’ in the following example:

- (3) *morse*, besudeln, dreckich machen; in Dreck wühlen; it. verschwenden;  
lüderlich mit etwas umgehen, vernachlässigen, durchbringen.

‘*morse*, to besmirch, to make dirty; to rake in muck; also: to waste; to deal with something in a sordid manner, to neglect, to squander.’

(da Bakkratongo; Ningre takki: dotti, nanga: pori )

it.be white.people-language black say dirty and spoil

‘(That’s white people’s language; blacks say *dotti* and: *pori*.)’

da somma morse alla moni en gudu va hem;

that person spill all money and goods of 3sg

‘That person lost all his money and goods.’

**wi takki:** a pori, a trueh alla hem gudu (Schumann 1783:115–116)

1PL say 3sg spoil 3sg throw.away all 3sg goods

‘We say: “He is ruined, he threw away all his goods.”’

It would in any case be clear from his works that Schumann had an extensive knowledge of Sranan. His use of language hardly ever deviates from what is attested in other sources from the same period, or from what could be expected on the basis of what we know about later stages of the language.

Another aspect which may be relevant for the interpretation of sources is the aim of a text, and the intended public. However, even sources that are quite similar in this respect, such as the language manuals by van Dyk (c1765) and Weygandt (1798), may differ in their language use. While the latter paid more attention to the form of the text — e.g. more consistent spelling, repetitive verbal paradigms — he also appears to have created his text with a higher degree of monitoring and evaluation. This may explain, for example, the absence of relative clauses without relative marker, and of copy pronouns (Bruyn 1995). Both features occur in van Dyk’s text, which appears to reflect more colloquial language use.

- (4) Da slotelen a de na mi kamere. (van Dyk c1765:43)  
the key 3sg be LOC 1sg room  
‘The key (it) is in my room.’

Taking account of internal, linguistic characteristics of individual texts and comparing features of various texts with each other may provide a basis for careful interpretation and assessment of reliability. Texts may differ along various dimensions: variety of the creole, style or register, or degree of normativeness. The identification of types of texts on the basis of internal as well as external factors may guide further interpretation of characteristics and distributional differences. By comparing various sources it becomes possible to distinguish between idiosyncrasies and systematic variation, and between differences correlating with text type and those reflecting diachronic development.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Whereas the Negerhollands database primarily includes documents by Moravian missionaries, SUCA contains both secular and religious texts. The heterogeneous contents of SUCA make it a useful tool for the study of language variation and change in the Suriname creoles. By making a range of historical materials electronically accessible SUCA aims to contribute to this research, which may ultimately shed light on the processes which led to their emergence.

A comparison between the Early Negerhollands texts and the Suriname creole texts is interesting, since it will reveal the linguistic practices of the Moravian missionaries more clearly. Moravian missionaries were very critical about using the right language variety in their writings (Muysken 1995). Such a comparison will enable us to isolate features that are associated with the liturgical register (Church Sranan) and, further, reconstruct the 'deep' creole features that were typical of the spoken languages in daily life in an empirical, data-driven manner. Thus, SUCA contributes to the increasing awareness that historical creole texts are not by definition imperfect and unreliable renditions of a fictional creole.

## Notes

1. The Suriname Creole Archive is supervised by prof. dr. Pieter Muysken and supported financially by the Netherlands Organisation for Research (NWO). Both are hereby gratefully acknowledged.
2. Participants of the NWO Trans-Atlantic Sprachbund program report their findings in a number of publications, including Essegbey and Bruyn to appear; Smith 2001; van den Berg 2007; Muysken and Smith (in prep.) as well as several contributions to *Journal of Pidgin and Creole Languages* (vol. 22 among others).
3. These documents need to be investigated in more detail, since they may be written in Sranan rather than Saramaccan.

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## Appendix I Early Sranan sources in SUCA and their original locations

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## Appendix II Early Saramaccan sources in SUCA and their original locations

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