Negotiating social identities on an Eastern Maroon radio show

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Pidgin and Creole languages have made significant inroads into the public domain of the countries where they are spoken. The media, and the radio broadcasting sector in particular, are the areas in which they figure most prominently. Extension of their use has brought about linguistic changes (Garrett, 2000). This paper explores such changes in relation to the Eastern Maroon radio program *Loweman Pansu* broadcasted in French Guiana. It investigates whether the program assimilates established norms and practices of programs run in European languages or introduces innovative ones based on local practices. Analysis suggests that the program's makeup and linguistic practices contribute to the emergence of an alternative social space that is distinctly Eastern Maroon in character but integrates properties that are linked to the urban context. This contributes to the construction of a modern urban Maroon identity that transcends traditional ethnic and national borders.

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1. Introduction

In most post-colonial societies the radio and television broadcasting sector continues to be dominated by European languages (Devonish, 1986:92–93). In part, this is because there was usually already a tradition of using the European language for these purposes during colonial times and because at least some of these regions are highly multilingual. In the latter cases, societies often opt for the former colonial language instead of choosing one of the local languages because it is viewed as more neutral and its continued use financially less burdensome (Migge and Léglise, 2007:307–310). However, even if the members of a society/country share one or more local languages, the European language tends to have a privileged place in this domain. This suggests that dominant attitudes around local languages may be playing an important role in maintaining and sustaining European languages as the primary media in the broadcasting sector.

In many regions, local languages are often believed to be unfit or unsuitable for use in the public formal domain, which is dominated by European Standard languages. In the minds of many, including many of their speakers, especially those who also have competence in European languages, they are linguistically deficient, lack social prestige and are frequently denied language status being negatively identified as *dialects* or *patois* (Calvet, 1974). Local languages therefore tend to be largely restricted to informal and private interactions. This language hierarchy has the negative effect that, depending on overall levels of education, major sections of the population are not able to consume radio and television broadcasts and/or lack motivation to engage with them. They are also not able to make their own voices heard on and through these media so that the broadcasting sector effectively becomes the domain of activity of the privileged sections of society.

However, this situation has been changing in recent years. On the one hand, attitudes towards local languages have, at least in part, been changing. Languages that were previously firmly excluded from the public domain, such as Kwéyòl in St.

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Lucia (Garrett, 2000:79), are increasingly becoming acceptable in at least some public settings such as election campaigns, informal education, the performing arts (Carrington, 2001) due to a greater emphasis on diversity and the assertion of local identities following political independence of post-colonial states. On the other hand, due to competition among radio stations for audiences, stations are constantly exploring new ways to make their programs attractive to new groups of listeners. Many stations have therefore integrated public-opinion type features such as call-in programs and interviews with 'the man on the street' that give members of the public the opportunity to express their views using linguistic practices that they feel comfortable with. Shields-Brodber (1992), for instance, shows how callers and hosts to Jamaican call-in shows regularly switch between English and Jamaican Creole when talking about all kinds of issues. In other settings, radio stations have integrated programs entirely carried out in a local language. Garrett (2000) informs us that all three of St. Lucia's radio stations have successively added new programs presented in Kwéyòl and that in 2000 broadcasting in Kwéyòl was available for more than eight hours a day.

One aspect that has so far received little attention in research is how instrumentalization of languages previously excluded from the public domain affects their use. Garrett (2000:78–89) argues that in the case of Kwéyòl in St. Lucia its use in radiobroadcasts has led to the emergence of a new variety, which he refers to as 'high Kwéyòl'. This variety bears much structural and stylistic influence rather than direct lexical borrowings from English and to a lesser extent from French. While it enjoys support and prestige, and is widely used in domains that were formerly exclusively associated with European languages, for instance public speeches by government officials, it is not always intelligible to speakers with little or no competence in the European Standard languages. Broadcasts using high Kwéyòl are therefore less popular than those employing everyday Kwéyòl because the latter are more closely aligned with the life-worlds of most St. Lucians (Garrett, 2007).

Local radio stations in both Suriname and French Guiana have in recent years also successively integrated new programs carried out in local languages to attract members of local communities to their radio station. In both countries, there are currently several programs that employ the Creoles of Suriname, specifically varieties of Sranan Tongo and varieties of the Eastern Maroon Creoles or Nenge(e).[1] In Suriname, the radio station *Konyeba* broadcasts all day and nearly exclusively in varieties of the Eastern Maroon Creole.

In this paper I explore the linguistic practices on one of these radio programs, the program called *Loweman Pa(a)nsu* which is broadcast in western French Guiana. Specifically, I investigate whether the program essentially assimilates European norms or goes beyond such established norms to introduce innovative practices and how these practices contribute to the construction of local social identities. The data for the analysis come from recordings and observation of the program over a number of years and a discussion with one of the broadcasters and regular listeners. Analysis suggests that the overall makeup of the program, including its linguistic practices, contribute to the emergence of an alternative social space. This space has a distinctly Eastern Maroon character, but integrates properties and practices such as code-mixing that belong to the urban context and to informal interactions. This contributes to the construction of a modern urban identity that transcends traditional ethnic boundaries.

In this paper, identity is broadly defined as a person's sense of belonging to a specific social group, society or place. It is widely recognized that people generally claim membership in multiple groups due to their involvement in different social settings and consequently performance of different social roles. While any social practice enters into the process of social identity construction, it has been widely acknowledged that people actively draw on discourse and language practices when constructing their social alignments (Fairclough, 1992; Bauman and Briggs, 1990). That is, through a process of iconization specific languages, ways of using a language or linguistic properties become indexes of social groups or identities with which they are associated (Irvine and Gal, 2000:37).

The paper is structured as follows: section 2 briefly discusses the social context. Section 3 discusses the makeup of the radio program. Section 4 looks at the linguistic and interactional practices in a discussion program. The final section summarizes the findings and discusses their implications.

2. The social context

The coastal area of western French Guiana used to be mainly populated by French Guianese Creoles and a much smaller Amerindian population (Kali'na) as well as some Maroon families (Aluku, Ndyuka, Pamaka, Saamaka) that had come to St. Laurent (du Maroni) mostly since the 1960s. Until about the middle of the last century the town of St. Laurent was also the center of a French indentured labour colony, *le bagne*. The population was engaged in subsistence farming, some small-scale gold-mining or found employment first through the *bagne* and later through the local French administration when French Guiana became a *départment d'outre-mer* in 1946. The two main towns in western French Guiana, St. Laurent and Mana, were quiet small towns. Their inhabitants also frequently visited the bustling Surinamese border-town of Albina which is only about a 10 min boat ride across the Maroni river from St. Laurent.

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[1] Naming practices for the Creoles of Suriname are quite heterogeneous. In French Guiana, non-Maroons often refer to all of them using the term *Takitaki* or a positive auto-denomination, *Businenge Tongo*, that was introduced by Aluku Maroons in French Guiana (Price and Price, 2003). Among themselves, speakers either use ethnic terms such as *Aluku*, *Ndyuka* and *Pamaka* or the generalising term *Nenge(e)* in order to refer to the Creoles traditionally spoken in eastern Suriname and western French Guiana. For more detail on the naming issue in French Guiana, see Léglise and Migge (2006).