Why is Saramaccan Different?

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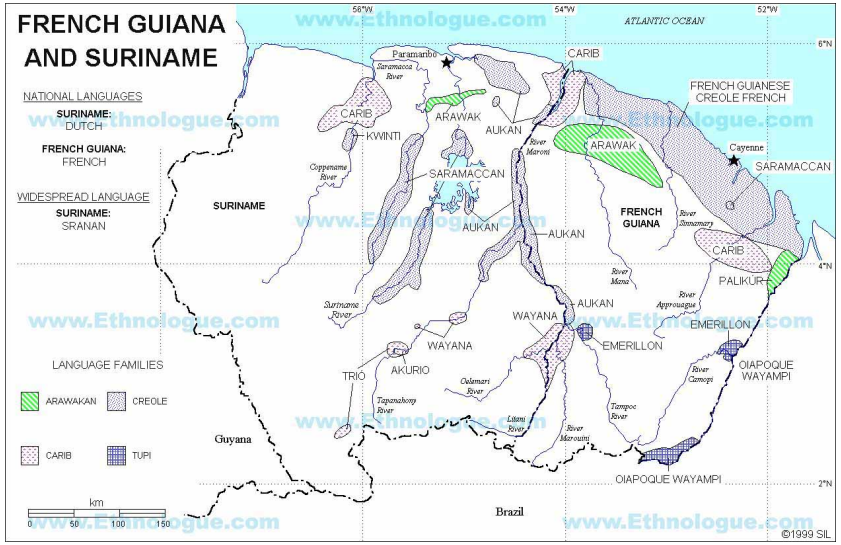
0 Introduction

[1] Saramaccan is an Atlantic creole spoken mostly in Suriname by about 26,000 people (according to the Ethnologue).

[2] The Ethnologue's language map of Suriname



[3] Good (2004a) and Good (2004b) discuss evidence for a split lexicon in Saramaccan where the majority of the words are marked for pitch accent but an important minority are marked for tone.

[4] Aspects of this analysis are anticipated by Devonish (1989:48–55) and Devonish (2002:120–134).

[5] Saramaccan would appear to be "unique" in exhibiting such a split. However, as we will see this does not mean there are not similar phenomena found elsewhere in Atlantic creoles.

[6] Tone, accent, pitch accent and stress as understood here

[a] **Tone**: The linguistic use of pitch to mark paradigmatic contrasts—that is, one toneme must contrast with other tonemes that can appear within the same domain.

[b] **Accent**: An abstract marking of linguistic prominence on a syllable distinguishing that syllable from other syllables within a word—hence, a marking of syntagmatic contrast within the word.

[c] **Pitch accent**: The realization of accent as a specific pitch contour which is placed with reference to an accented unit. (Comparable to Beckman's (1986) non-stress accent.)

1 The "split" lexicon of Saramaccan

1.1 On the origins of the split

[7] The origins of the split lexicon in Saramaccan seem fairly clear: Saramaccan is an example of a logically possible (but otherwise unattested) contact phenomenon between European accent languages and African tone languages.

[8] Below, I give some Saramaccan words of likely European origin (perhaps with Sranan as an intermediary in some cases).[1]

SARAMACCAN	GLOSS	ORIGIN	
náki	'hit'	< English	*knock*
kulé	'run'	< Portuguese	*correr*
sipéi$^{\nearrow}$	'mirror'	< Portuguese	*espelho*
sitónu	'stone'	< English	*stone*
síkísi	'six'	< English	*six*
wólúku	'cloud'	< Dutch	*wolk*
mintsíti	'minister'	< Dutch	*minister*
amɛɛkán	'American'	< Dutch	*Amerikaan*
àkí	'here'	< Portuguese	*aqui*

[9] A generalization which accounts for the "tone" pattern on most words of European origin is that the stressed syllable in the European word was transferred into Saramaccan with a surface high tone (with an additional, predictable complication that antepenultimate high tones spread to the penultimate syllable).

[1] The symbol "$^{\nearrow}$" means I have not verified the tones with a consultant but have relied on published sources, which can be problematic in identifying low tones since few sources clearly distinguish between tone bearing units specified for low tone and tone bearing units unspecified for tone.

[10] Compare with the following Saramaccan words of likely African origin. (Kongo lexemes taken from Daeleman (1972); Gbe lexemes taken from Smith (1987).)

SARAMACCAN	GLOSS	ORIGIN	
pùkùsù	'bat'	< Kongo	*lu-mpukusu* 'bat'
bàndjà	'side'	< Kongo	*mbaansya* 'side'
mbàlù↓	'(wood) chips'	< Kongo	*mbalu* '(wood) chips'
màtùtù↓	'small rat'	< Kongo	*ma-tutu* 'small rat (pl.)'
tɔ̀ɔ̀n↓	'type of rodent'	< Fon	*tɔ̀̃* 'rat'
lògòsò∼lògòzò	'turtle'	< Fon	*logozò* 'tortoise'
ahún	'grass'	< Ewe	*axɔ́* 'sp. grass'
adjindjá↓	'porcupine'	< Fon	*àdžidžá* 'hedgehog'
agása↓	'crab'	< Fon	*agàsá* 'land crab'

[11] While there are exceptions, there is a strong correlation between the tones of African words transferred into Saramaccan and the Saramaccan tones for those words.

[12] As we will see, what is striking about the language is that it appears to not just have transferred the prosodic patterns of words of African and European origin. It also appears to have transferred whole prosodic systems.

1.2 The distribution of tonal patterns

[13] Underlyingly, there is an apparent three-way tonal contrast in Saramaccan between *tone bearing units* (TBU's) which are marked for high tone, low tone, and those which are lexically unspecified for tone.

[14] This will be represented here notationally as a distinction between H, L, and ∅ (where the "∅" symbol is used for TBU's unspecified for tone).

[15] By default, TBU's lexically unspecified for tone surface with a low tone.

[16] Evidence for the three-way contrast, as opposed to a two-way one, comes mainly from phonosyntactic high-tone plateauing, which only affects TBU's unspecified for tone.

[a] *taánga* → *tàángà* 'strong'

[b] *dí taánga wómi* → *dí tàáng**á** wómì*
the strong man
"the strong man"

[c] *Dí káìmà kulé àlá.* → *Dí káì**mà** k**ù**lé àlá.*
the man run there
"The alligator runs there." (Rountree 1972:316)

[d] *Dí wómi kulé àlá.* → *Dí wóm**í** k**ú**lé àlá.*
the man run there
"The man runs there."

[17] Rough characterization of syntactic environment for plateauing: It occurs between a syntactic head and a word in its phrase directly preceding it.

[18] So, for example, plateauing will occur between a noun and a preceding adjective but not between an adjective and preceding determiner.

[19] For detailed discussion on the syntactic environments in which plateauing occurs, see Good (2004b:597–615).

[20] Further evidence for the phonological distinction between low tone TBU's and TBU's unspecified for tone: tonal "dissimilation" in the agentive suffix *-ma*

WORD	TONE	GLOSS	ROOT	GLOSS
lúkumà	H∅L	'spectator'	*lúku*	'look'
koósumà	∅H∅L	'woman'	*koósu*	'skirt'
paímà	∅HL	'mother of many children'	*paí*	'give birth'
lɛ̀gɛ̀dɛ̀má	LLLH	'liar'	*lɛ̀gɛ̀dɛ̀*	'lie'
káìmàmá	HLLH	'alligator man'	*káìmà*	'alligator'

[21] The table in below gives examples of words fully marked for tone.

TONE TYPE	WORD	TONES	GLOSS
High	*dón*	H	'dumb, stupid'
	kódó	HH	'continually, forever'
	búúú	HHH	'ideophone for covering'
Low	*bà*	L	'carry (liquid)'
	bɔ̀sɔ̀	LL	'loose'
	lɛ̀gɛ̀dɛ̀	LLL	'lie'
	pɛ̀tɛ̀pɛ̀tɛ̀	LLLL	'ideophone for salve-like'
Mixed	*àkí*	LH	'here'
	káìmà	HLL	'alligator'
	séségùùsé	HHLLH	'type of fish'
	tótómbòtí	HHLH	'woodpecker'

[22] The table below shows the common patterns for tone marking for words which have unspecified tones.

	WORD	TONES	GLOSS
One or more adjacent high tones, rest unspecified	*foló*	∅H	'flower'
	náki	H∅	'hit'
	sikɪ́fi	∅H∅	'write'
	mɔkisá	∅∅H	'screen,sift'
	hákísi	HH∅	'ask'
	afokáti	∅∅H∅	'lawyer'
	minísíti	∅HH∅	'minister'
	alukutú	∅∅∅H	'soursop'

[23] The words of the type exemplified in the table above comprise the majority of the Saramaccan lexicon (Rountree 1972:316).

[24] There are various gaps in the table above with respect to logical combinations of tones. Two notable ones:

- [a] The lack of any words with unspecified tones which are also marked with low tones.[2]
- [b] The lack of words with tonal patterns H∅∅ or ∅H∅∅.

1.3 Words with unspecified TBU's as being part of an accentual system

[25] Minimal pairs exist solely on the basis of the surface high tone for words with TBU's unspecified for tone, for example *bígi* 'big' versus *bigí* 'begin'.

[26] However, the location of the high tone on these words, with a few exceptions, is highly restricted.

[27] Patterns for words with short vowels

2-σ words:	CV́CV	CVCV́	
3-σ words:	CV́CV́CV	CVCV́CV	CVCVCV́
4-σ words:	CVCV́CV́CV	CVCVCV́CV	CVCVCVCV́

[2] I have identified at least one monomorphemic word which is an exception to this generalization: *anákìtá* 'biting ant' which has the tonal form ∅HLH. Voorhoeve (1961:154) identifies about ten words (out of a sample of 1500 words) which seem to follow this same pattern. All but one of the words he gives begin with *a* like *anákìtá*, and the one exception to this, *obílògbén* 'a type of snake', also begins with a vowel.

[28] "One-mark-per-word" analysis to account for the placement of high tones on these words

2-σ words:	C$\overset{*}{\text{V}}$CV	CVC$\overset{*}{\text{V}}$	
3-σ words:	C$\overset{*}{\text{V}}$CVCV	CVC$\overset{*}{\text{V}}$CV	CVCVC$\overset{*}{\text{V}}$
4-σ words:	CVC$\overset{*}{\text{V}}$CVCV	CVCVC$\overset{*}{\text{V}}$CV	CVCVCVC$\overset{*}{\text{V}}$

[29] Pitch-accent placement

- [i] The tonal melody associated with pitch accent is a high tone
- [ii] The high tone is associated with the accented TBU
- [iii] If the accented TBU is antepenultimate, the high tone spreads to the penultimate TBU

[30] Summary of properties of words with TBU's unspecified for tone

- [a] They are only associated with one lexical tone contour.
- [b] They show no evidence for an H/L contrast. Instead, there is a contrast of H/∅.
- [c] Tone placement can be analyzed with "one mark per word".
- [d] **Conclusion:** These words are marked for accent, specifically pitch accent not tone.

1.4 Words fully marked for tone

[31] Words fully marked for tone appear to show true lexical specification for high and low tones based on the range of contours observed for them and the fact that their low tones are not affected by phrasal plateauing processes.

[32] In addition, they enter into paradigmatic tonal contrasts.

[33] One example: *tù* 'also' and *tú* 'two'

[34] Non-emphatic versus emphatic pronouns

	NON-EMPHATIC		EMPHATIC	
PER	SG	PL	SG	PL
1st	*mì*	*ù*	*mí*	*ú*
2nd	*ì*	*ùn*	*í*	*ún*
3rd	*à*	*dè*	*hɛ́n*	*dé*

[35] Summary of properties of words fully specified for tone

- [a] They exhibit a fairly clear H/L opposition.
- [b] There are examples of paradigmatic tonal contrast.
- [c] There is evidence that their low tones are phonologically "active".
- [d] **Conclusion:** These words are marked for tone, not accent.

[36] Saramaccan seems to be unique in the particular way its lexicon is split.

[37] However, recent research, e.g., Gooden (2003), James (2003), Remijsen and van Heuven (2005) has shown that the prosodic systems of Jamaican Creole, Tobagonian, and Papiamentu respectively are also interestingly "complex".

[38] Papiamentu, for example, is apparently the only known language with a hybrid system of stress and word accent.

2 Lexical splits, lexical strata, and language contact

[39] The Saramaccan split lexicon bears some interesting similarities to stratified lexicons of languages like English and Japanese.

[40] In both Japanese and English, the existence of lexical strata is due to language contact, English with French/Latin and Japanese with Chinese.

[41] Lexical strata are qualitatively less drastic than lexical splits, but, like lexical splits, they involve the partitioning of a language's lexicon into apparently arbitrary phonological classes.

[42] Japanese offers a relatively close comparison to the Saramaccan case because it is an instance where a pitch-accent language was in contact with a tone language (albeit a tone language of a radically different type than the West African languages which contributed to Saramaccan's development).

[43] Chinese words in Japanese, however, are not "tonal". Rather, Chinese words borrowed into Japanese were integrated into the existing prosodic system.

[44] Chinese borrowings differ from native Japanese words, for example, in the fact they must be underlying monosyllabic and they permit sequences of a nasal followed by a voiceless stop (Itô and Mester 1995:819).

[45] Two other cases of phonological lexical splits that I am aware of:

- [a] Michif: There is an apparent split between nouns and verbs where nouns tend to be borrowed from French and verbs from Cree, with corresponding phonological differences (Bakker 1994:16).
- [b] Mednyj Aleut: Like Saramaccan, it has a morphosyntactically arbitrary split, but in the segmental phonology. Words transferred from Russian have a different segment inventory than words transferred from Aleut (Thomason 1997b:455–7).

[46] Other than Papiamentu, there is one other well-documented hybrid system, that of the Austronesian language Ma'ya, which has contrastive stress and tone. Remijsen (2001:43) attributes the existence of this hybrid system to Ma'ya's contact with tonal Papuan languages.

3 Why is Saramaccan different?

3.1 How different is Saramaccan?

[47] The title of this talk is, "Why is Saramaccan different?"—presupposing that it is, in fact, different.

[48] It is not actually clear that Saramaccan is all that "different" from other creoles. Rather, it may represent the extreme end of a cline of tonality/accentuality (see Sutcliffe (2003:149–151) and Devonish (2002)).

[49] The description of the tone/stress system of (closely related) Ndyuka in Huttar and Huttar (1994:564–579), for example, doesn't clearly indicate a Saramaccan-like "split" but does describe a system with a fair degree of complexity

[50] Consider, for example, the following words from Ndyuka (Huttar and Huttar 1994:568–571)

WORD	CITATION TONES	GLOSS
koo	LL	'turtle'
kóo	HL	'cold'
kálú	HH	'corn'
tóko	HL	'war'
kulú	LH	'category, group'
kina	LL	'taboo'
ákisi	HLL	'ask'
akísi	LHL	'axe'

[51] Notable gap in Ndyuka (in the description in Huttar and Huttar (1994:586–573)): A pattern like HLH

[52] An ultimate understanding of just how different Saramaccan is will have to await further research on the presence/absence of prosodic stratification in the lexicons of other creoles.

[53] It would also be useful to see more work like James (2003) discussing where distinctive "tone" appears to be found in other Atlantic creoles.

3.2 The history of Saramaccan

[54] Arends (2002) and Smith (2002) provide overviews of the history of the Suriname creoles, including Saramaccan.

[55] The following aspects of Saramaccan history are relevant here:

- [a] Saramaccan is a maroon creole—that is, it is spoken by descendents of slaves who escaped from plantations (see Price (1976) for a general overview). Therefore, it has had less contact with its superstrate languages than many other creoles.
- [b] Important substrates of Saramaccan were Kikongo (Daeleman 1972) and Gbe languages (e.g., Ewe and Fon) (Smith (1987), Migge (2003:34), Kramer (2002:12–19)).
- [c] Of these two important substrates, the Gbe influence on Saramaccan was much greater (see Kramer (2002)).
- [d] The period of 1690–1700 is considered to represent the beginning of the Saramaccan maroon community.
- [e] It is generally accepted that "pre-Saramaccan" (my term) developed before marronage (as discussed by Kramer (2002:12–19) exactly what this pre-Saramaccan was is controversial).
- [f] New maroons are believed to have entered the community until peace treaties were signed with the Dutch in the 1760's.
- [g] "The rate of nativization among Suriname's black population was very slow: more than one hundred years after colonization still more than 70% of the black population was African born (Arends 1995:268)."

[56] Conclusion (not new): During the first phase of the development of Saramaccan (approximately 1690–1760) a significant number of African-born second-language learners were present in the community.

[57] But what do we do with this?

3.3 The split lexicon as a post-Creolization development

[58] How might a split lexicon develop?

- [a] Unlikely (especially in the Saramaccan case): Purely internal sound change
- [b] A product of "creolization"
- [c] Mixed language (i.e., a mixture of some pre-Saramaccan and Gbe)
- [d] Heavy borrowing

[59] Problems with it being a product of "creolization"

- [a] Unlike, say, loss of inflectional morphology, without more cases like Saramaccan, we cannot categorize split prosody as a "typical" result of creolization
- [b] Sranan shows no sign of tonal features (but, of course, Ndyuka, does)
- [c] Comparable split phenomena are described for mixed languages (Michif, Mednyj Aleut), but not creoles

[60] Problems with mixed language account

- [a] First, I should make it clear that the relevant mixing hypothesis would be Gbe and pre-Saramaccan—not the typical mixing hypothesis for Saramaccan of English and Portuguese, which, as far as I can tell, the facts discussed here have nothing to say about.
- [b] If we accept that terms like "creole" and "mixed language" refer to prototypes (Thomason 1997a:3-4), then it might be reasonable to say that Saramaccan is more like a mixed language than, say, Sranan.
- [c] But, I take it as uncontroversial that Saramaccan is much closer to the creole prototype (interpreted either sociohistorically or synchronically, as in McWhorter (1998)) than the mixed language prototype (for example, the one proposed by Bakker (1994:25–6)).

[61] The heavy borrowing account

[a] **The scenario:** The earliest maroons spoke some pre-Saramaccan (some as a first and some as a second language). The presence of large numbers of native-born Africans in the early Saramaccan community resulted in heavy borrowing of African vocabulary into the language with the tonal properties of that vocabulary fairly well preserved.

[b] The sociolinguistic situation makes this seem to be a reasonable scenario.

[c] Good (2004b) argues that the phrasal phonology of Saramaccan resembles that of an accentual language much more than that of a tonal language, making it look, say, more like Sranan with lots of Gbe words than a mix of Sranan and Gbe (but see Kramer (2002:586–600) and Kramer (2004)).

[d] Plenty examples of heavy borrowing in the world's languages—we even know this produces strata, of which a split is the extreme case.

[e] While we differ in our interpretations of some of the tonal features of Saramaccan, such an account is consistent with the conclusions of Kramer (2002), with respect to a number of documented changes in Saramaccan since the late 18th century:

> These changes may be attributed to the presence of Kwa speakers... These changes are not considered to be part of creole genesis in this study, since when they occurred the creole was a native language for a substantial portion of the maroon population... (Kramer 2002:622)

[62] Accepting this scenario for the development of the split lexicon requires:

[63] Assuming something comparable happened in Ndyuka to explain how tone got into that language (not unreasonable assuming the historical account given in Price (1976:31)).

[64] That borrowing can create a split along these lines (not unreasonable given an assumption that native speakers of tone languages are responsible for the introduction of the tonal strata—presumably an important area of contrast with the Japanese case).

[65] Needed future research

[a] Thorough cataloging of tone patterns in words of Kikongo and Gbe origin in Saramaccan noting: (i) which words are tonal and which accentual and (ii) which words show tonal patterns which closely match the substrate language and which do not.

[b] Better descriptions of West African English-based pidgins/creoles to see the behavior of tonal African "borrowings" into those varieties.

[c] Better descriptions of other languages with prosodically-definable strata—I've heard rumors of similar splits to Saramaccan in the Sino-Tibetan family but haven't seen the data yet.

4 Conclusion

[66] Saramaccan shows an otherwise unattested prosodic lexical split.

[67] At present, I think the best explanation for its origins is that it was introduced as a result of heavy borrowing after creole formation.

[68] Implications for theories of creole formation

[a] Short answer: None.

[b] Long answer: At least for Saramaccan, a lot might have happened to the language in the last 300 years that obscures what the shape of its "original" grammar might have been.

[c] Therefore, at least in terms of its phonology, it would seem ill-advised to come to any strong conclusions about "creole" phonology on the basis of contemporary Saramaccan phonology.

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