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The Javanese language in Suriname: Explorations in language contact and change

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The Javanese language established itself in Suriname during the Dutch colonial labor trade. Altogether, a total of about 30'000 labourers were brought to the South American nation between 1890 and 1939 (Berselaar, Ketelaars and Dalhuisen 1991). According to Surinamese census data (2004) Javanese is presently used by about 10% of the population.

Javanese is spoken within a complex pattern of multilingualism and codeswitching typical for all linguistic communities of Suriname. This pattern includes the dominance of Dutch, the country's official language in often more formal domains, the dominance of the English-based creole Sranan in mid-formal and informal domains, and languages like Javanese, Hakka and Sarnami (Hindustani) largely used as in-group languages by specific ethno-linguistic communities.

This talk addresses the effects that a century of extensive multilingualism in typologically highly diverse languages have had on Javanese in Suriname. The analyses rely on field data collected with a unified methodology in Suriname in 2011-12 as part of the "Traces of Contact" at the Centre for Language Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen. The corpus contains recordings of eight Surinamese languages including Surinamese Javanese. Comparative data has been gathered for Java Javanese.

Changes in Javanese Surinamese that have already been documented are the erosion of the formal, 'high' registers of speech and the corresponding abandonment of the complex system of honorificity (Wolfowitz 2002) as well as extensive lexical borrowing from Sranan and Dutch (e.g. Gobardhan-Rambocus and Sarmo 1993). The focus of our research are yet undescribed contact effects in the domains of argument realization and the expression of tense, mood and aspect. The analyses are still ongoing and this paper will present first findings.

The linguistic effects of language shift will also be addressed in this paper. Our data has also revealed that Javanese is losing ground to Sranan Tongo (in working and lower middle class families) and Dutch (in lower and upper middle class families) as the home language of first choice amongst Javanese Surinamese. As a consequence, the speech of many younger speakers (roughly below 25 years) shows signs of attrition including lexical retrieval difficulties in narrative or elicitation tasks, frequent hesitation and the use of repair strategies and morphological simplification.