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Citation

Carlin, E. B. (2009). Truth and knowledge markers in Wayana (Cariban), Suriname. In *The Linguistics of Endangered Languages: Contributions to Morphology and Morphosyntax*. Utrecht: LOT. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/14385>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Truth and knowledge markers in Wayana (Cariban), Suriname

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1. Introduction

‘Truth and knowledge markers’ is the term used to group together a seemingly disparate set of grammatical markers that is pervasive in the Cariban, and also in some Arawakan languages of the Guianas in South America. The markers in question express epistemological ideas of realities and truths. In the existing grammatical descriptions, at best, a formal description of the morphemes in question as emphatic, similative, and frustrative markers may be found scattered through various parts of the morphology, where they are dealt with in a structural manner; however, what is needed, besides a structural analysis, is a systematic look at and detailed analysis of their semantic, pragmatic and indeed philosophical import, both as separate morphological items and also collectively as a system of truth and reality markers. In this contribution, Wayana data are presented to exemplify at least parts of this system.¹ In section 2, a short typological overview of the language is given. In section 3, the elements of the putative truth and knowledge-marking system are presented. Section 4 examines the notions of truth and knowledge and that of entrenchment as an explanation of the system. Section 5 presents some conclusions.

¹ Wayana is a Cariban language spoken by some 1200 people spread out over 3 neighbouring countries, Suriname, French Guiana, and Brazil. The data presented in this paper are from the Surinamese Wayana who live in the village of Pilëoimë (a.k.a. Apetina) along the Tapanahoni River. I would like to thank the storytellers Kulepeman and Same for their myths and stories and also for their help in getting me to understand them.

2. Typological overview of Wayana

Wayana is a polysynthetic language that uses mainly suffixes (see (1)); the only prefixes found are person markers and derivational diathesis markers; to date, two infixes have been found. It is a head-marking language, as shown in (2):

- (1) wë-të-pïni-tpë ei-topo-npë
 shoot-able.to-PRIV.NOM-PST 3POSS.be-TMP.NOM-PST
 ‘Story of the person who couldn’t shoot’
- (2) a. Ronnie Ø-pakolo-n b. i-pakolo-n
 Ronnie 3POSS-house-POSS 3POSS-house-POSS
 ‘Ronnie’s house’ ‘his house’

The open word classes are: nouns, verbs, adverbs; and the closed classes are: personal and demonstrative pronouns, postpositions, interjections, ideophones, interrogatives, and particles. Tense is marked on both verbs and nominals as an obligatory category, using different markers according to word class; see examples of the nominal past in (3a,b):

- (3) a. ï-kamisa-tpï
 1POSS-cloth-PST
 ‘my old clothes’
- b. ï-n-ipanakma-tpï-lëken w-ekalë-ja-i
 1POSS-3O-hear.NOM.PST-only 1/3-give-PRES-CERT
 ‘I’m just telling what I heard (I am telling my former hearing thing)’

The verb types are intransitive, transitive, and (derived) reflexives. The clause types are: verbal, non-verbal, clauses with the verb ‘to be’, and quotative. The order of constituents depends on the construction and discourse type, and also on pragmatic considerations; important information is generally fronted. With transitive verbs the constituent order is mostly OV(A), as in (3b) and VS (4a) or SV (4b). Wayana has an evidential system based on witnessed versus non-witnessed events in the past, the form of the latter doubling as a reportative with the verb ‘to say’. In the present tense, a system which is based on certainty versus non-certainty is used.

- (4) a. moloinë t-ële-ta-i mule
 then COREF-liver-VRBLZ-NF child
 ‘then the child rested’
 b. masike mule-psik t-ële-ta-i
 so child-dim COREF-liver-VRBLZ-NF
 ‘so the little child rested’

3. Truth and knowledge markers

One of the first things one notices when studying the Cariban languages of the Guianas is the great amount of morpheme marking on the main word classes that is often not only difficult to translate into European languages, even in paraphrased translation, but also even to comprehend, mainly because our languages lack the distinctive categories that are culturally entrenched and obligatorily expressed grammatically in these languages. In missionary works of the early seventeenth century, many of the markers presented here were said to be “ornate particles” without which “the sentence is perfectly fine” (Hardman 1986: 113).

The grammatical marking in question is found in Wayana (in fact in almost all Cariban languages) as either enclitics, suffixes, infixes, or particles and includes:

- a facsimile (similative) marker *-me*; (suffix on nominals)
- several assertive or emphatic markers (clitics; infix on adverbs)
- a marker that has the meaning ‘truly’ or ‘through and through’ (clitic)
- a frustrative marker, *-lep* (clitic)
- nominal past tense markers (suffixes)
- evidential marking (witnessed vs. non-witnessed; reportative vs. everything else) (affixes)

With the exception of the evidential marking, which is not considered further in this paper, all the above elements are marked on nominals and/or adverbs and postpositions. In fact, with a few exceptions, the focus of this paper is restricted to the kind of marking given above that is found on the nominal class, where we will see indeed that Wayana (and the Cariban languages in general) allows for a very high degree of specification. Consider the examples (5) through (9), with the facsimile *-me*, emphatic *-le*, ‘truly’ *-lë*, frustrative *-lep*, and nominal past *-npë/-npi* and

-*tpi/tpë*, where the function of the relevant grammatical markers on the nominals is given in small caps on the right, after each sentence:

- (5) a. FACSIMILE
 Kulum, wëlii-me Kulum kun-eha-k,
 eagle.sp woman-FACS eagle.sp 3.PST-be-R.PST
 waluhma-me
 young.woman-FACS
 ‘Eagle was a woman, a young woman (manifestly but not inherently)’ (intrinsicly an eagle but in the outer casing of a woman)
- b. FACSIMILE
 tuwalë manai mëlë Tiliyo-me ë-w-esi-ke
 know you.are DP.INAN.MED Trio-FACS 2-1TR-be-INST
 ‘you know that because you’re a Trio’ (not biologically a Trio)
- (6) INTENSIFIER + EMPHATIC
 Wajana-h_le man inëlë
 Wayana-INTENS_EMPH he.is 3PRO.ANIM.ANA
 ‘he’s a real Wayana’ (at least he behaves totally like a Wayana)
- (7) Wajana-lë inëlë TRULY
 Wayana_TRULY 3PRO.ANIM.ANA
 ‘he’s a real (pure-blooded) Wayana’ (as opposed to the offspring of a mixed union, e.g., a combination Wayana/Wayãpí)
- (8) a. ï-pawana_lep manai FRUSTRATIVE
 1POSS-friend_FRUST you.are
 ‘you are my friend’ (you are my friend but I don’t have many advantages from that)²

² The term *pawana* ‘friend’ also has the meaning ‘trading partner’ and *-pawana eitop* ‘being someone’s friend/trading partner’ is something of an institution among the Cariban groups; it entails having obligations towards the partner in question, and is based on a high degree of reciprocity (see Carlin 2004: 22-23).

b. FRUSTRATIVE

paila tēkalēi pīlēo malē i-tē-top-kom,
 bow he.gave arrow also 3POSS-go-TMP.NOM-PL
 tēhem wē-top_lep
 meat shoot-TMP.NOM_FRUST

‘He gave him a bow and arrows for their journey, a means for shooting game animals’ (but this man didn’t use them to shoot meat: the bow and arrows were, in vain, instruments for shooting because the man couldn’t shoot)

- (9) moloinē t-ēne-i i-pakolo-tpī NOMINAL PAST
 then COREF-see-NF 3POSS-house-PST
 ‘then he saw his house (former house)’

In the examples above, the extra morphology marked on the nominals has to do with specifying whether or not the referent of a noun X is inherently so, really so, truly (through and through) so, in reality so but with at least one flaw, or formerly so. In examples (5a,b) neither referent marked with the facsimile marker *-me* is inherently what they are said to be, although for all intents and purposes they now are manifestly what is denoted by the noun ‘woman’ in (5a) and ‘Trio’ in (5b). Examples (6), with the emphatic *-le*, here preceded by the intensifying infix *-h-*, and (7), with the ‘truly’ or ‘through and through’ marker *-lē*, in many contexts, can be used as synonymous forms. However, the difference lies in the fact that the referent in (6) counts as being a Wayana, though he may be of mixed blood, which does not actually make him less Wayana if he lives as a Wayana, although his DNA may prove otherwise; on the other hand, in (7) the speaker is stating that the referent is a full-blooded, non-mixed Wayana, that is, there is a certain degree of inherency and permanence in (7) that is not included in the meaning of (6). In example (8), with the frustrative marker, the speaker is saying that that the addressee is indeed his friend but that the friend is not fulfilling all the obligations that friendship brings, such as helping his friend when in need, giving him things (reciprocally) etc.; likewise, the bow and arrows in (8b) are inherently bows and arrows but they are not being used for the purpose that bow and arrows have, namely shooting game animals, in order to provide the family with meat. Example (9), with the nominal past marker *-tpī*, shows us one of the obligatory categories in Wayana, namely that of marking a nominal as being ‘former’, when the referent of that noun no

- b. alimi-me t-anukta-i wëlii
 spider.monkey-FACS COREF-transform-NF woman
 ‘the woman changed into a spider monkey’

- (15) mule-me-hnë ïw-aptao
 child-FACS-PERSIST 1-when
 ‘When I was (still) a child’

The marker *-me* is used syntactically as a marker of secondary predication or as a depictive to express a physical or psychological state of one of the participants (16).

- (16) tolopit-me_tot t-ëhalë-i
 birds-FACS_PL COREF-disperse-NF
 ‘They dispersed as birds (no longer as Wayana)’

As in all the Cariban languages, *-me* has been grammaticalized to form adverbs, for example *tinme* ‘quiet’, *talanme* ‘maybe’. Furthermore, some discourse cohesion markers which have become lexicalized are likewise formed with *-me*, for example, *malonme* ‘then’, *mëlëme* ‘then (being in that state)’. In addition, *-me* combined with the nominalizer *-to(po)* has a purpose reading as in *apëih-toh-me* ‘in order to grab it’.

Emphatic markers

Wayana has several means for expressing intensity, emphasis, assertion, and speaker’s strong intentions. It is not always clear what the difference is between the different markers. ‘Intensity’ is expressed by the infix *-h-*, which occurs after the first vowel of an adverb or postposition. The longer the *-h-* is pronounced (17a,b), or when it is pronounced with a strong burst of air followed by an extended glottal closure, the greater the intensity. The intensity infix is often, but not obligatorily used in combination with one of the emphatic markers (18).

Intensity:

- (17) a. upak ‘long ago’
 uhhpak ‘really long ago’
 b. hemalë ‘now, today’
 hehmalë ‘right now’

Frustrative

A feature quite commonly expressed in the languages of Amazonia is the one termed ‘frustrative’. In Wayana, the frustrative is expressed by means of the clitic *_lep*: it is used in clauses to express that an action is unsuccessful or in vain, as shown in (22a), where the protagonist left to go hunting but didn’t shoot any game. The frustrative marker can also be marked on nouns to express that the referent of the noun is lacking in at least one semantic feature of the noun, or that the object expressed by the noun is not used for its inherent purpose as shown in (22b), a repetition of (8b), where the bow and arrows the man had been given were not used for the purpose of shooting and so were ‘in vain’ a means of shooting game.

- (22) a. *anumalë tītëi inëlë, koko-psik*
 tomorrow COREF-go-NF DP.ANIM.ANA night-DIM
tī-të-i_lep
 COREF-go-NF_FRUST
 ‘The next day he left, he left early in the morning (but he didn’t shoot any game)’
- b. *paila tēkalëi pīlëo malë i-të-top-kom,*
 bow he.gave arrow also 3POSS-go-TMP.NOM-PL
tēhem wë-top_lep
 meat shoot-TMP.NOM_FRUST
 ‘He gave him a bow and arrows for their journey, a means for shooting game animals’ (but this man didn’t use them to shoot meat: they were an instrument for shooting but were never shot)

The frustrative can be seen as a non-fulfillment of an expectation or belief, and as such it contrasts with negation marking which negates an affirmative statement. In addition, a combination of the emphatic markers and the frustrative is frequently found in Wayana, resulting in very precise specifications such as (16):

- (16) lome heinë i-waliktao_lë_lep³
 but this.side 3-behind.LOC_TRULY_FRUST
 ‘but not exactly behind them on this side’ (practically right behind them but not quite)

Nominal past

The final marking that is relevant for the purposes of this paper is obligatory past marking on nouns by means of the suffixes *-npë/-npï* and *-tpë/tpï*, used e.g., when the referent of that noun no longer exists or functions as such (cf. (9) above), or when its possessor has died, or when the possessive relationship has ended, see (17a,b).

- (17)a. kumakaimë-tpë ‘a former (felled) kankantri (large tree sp.)’
 b. j-etatï-npï ‘my former hammock’ (e.g. that is no longer usable; or after I have died)

While I have just given a general picture of what type of markings there are, what I want to focus on now is the ubiquity in these languages of the markers throughout the grammar, to express notions relating to intrinsic or non-intrinsic or transient values and the function thereof.

4. The meaning of the concept: real or not?

In the anthropological literature on Amazonian cultures, one often comes across references to how difficult it is to make sense of the content of myths since protagonists are now human, now spirit, now animal, in the words of one of the leading anthropologists Joanna Overing (1990: 602), one is faced with “chaos, obscurity, ambiguity, and confusion”. As another leading anthropologist, Peter Rivière (1994: 256) pointed out in his article WYSINWYG in Amazonia:⁴ “One of the lessons I learnt when trying to obtain exegesis on myths was the futility of trying to find out whether a particular character was a human, animal, or spirit”. In general, however, this confusion arises from the translations of the mythical

³ This example was collected by Karen Hough while carrying out the Nijmegen Space Games battery test in 2007; see Hough (2008).

⁴ WYSINWYG stands for ‘What you see is not what you get’.

texts. As example (5a) shows, Eagle was manifestly a woman, a ‘facsimile woman’ so to speak, but was she now an eagle or a woman? Both in fact, which may seem irrational or contradictory to the western mind, since in our view an eagle cannot be simultaneously an eagle and a human woman. In order for (5a) to be a true statement, we need a frame of reference within which this is possible. The western mind seeks to explain the double-identity of Eagle here by means of metaphor because our languages lack such a frame of reference that allows two things to be the same while being intrinsically different.⁵ But what is then the frame of reference that does allow this? In fact it was in Overing’s seminal article from 1990 that she found a means to dissipate the seeming confusion she was facing while working on myths, namely through the work of the American philosopher Nelson Goodman, in particular his 1978 book *Ways of Worldmaking* in which he asks in what sense there could be a “multiplicity of worlds” or “versions of the world”. Indeed Goodman’s work is in many ways an elaboration of the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer’s insights into symbolic forms. For Cassirer (1946: 8) “myth, art, language and science appear as symbols; not in the sense of mere figures which refer to some given reality by means of suggestion and allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own”. If this is the case then, Goodman argues, there must be a multiverse rather than a universe, several worlds as opposed to one, or at least several versions of the world. As Overing (1990:603) points out: “The scientist, artist, myth-teller or historian, and shaman-curer are ‘doing much the same thing’ in their constructions of

⁵ Whereas compounds such as ‘spiderman’ exist in the western world of films, whereby the rightmost element is the head, and as such combines the characteristics of two creatures, man and spider, basically a man but with the attributes and behavioural elements of a spider, there is a major constitutional difference between this type of compound and that expressed by the Wayana noun plus *-me* concept. The notion *N-me* highlights the sameness in appearance rather than in behaviour. If spiderman were to have only the appearance of a spider while being human then the two notions could be considered comparable, however, this is not the case. Perhaps a more suitable analogy would be that found in films about aliens who take on a human form and attributes whereby their alien essence is hidden from the naked eye, that is, on the outside they are human but in essence they are not human; they merely appear to be so.

versions of worlds. However, while the thought processes for constructing worlds are in many ways similar, the facts of which these worlds are made are very different indeed.”

It is now a generally recognized fact that the ‘world’, or rather version of the world, of Cariban (and also many other Amerindian) peoples differs in some respects from our western world in that it has as one of its canons that the *anima* or spirit can manifest itself in different forms, so it can take the form of now an anaconda, now a jaguar, and now a human, that is, the ‘outer casing’ can change; the world is a transformational one. Within the Cariban world the ambiguity and confusion that we find from our point of view does not exist because a transformation from one state to another is grammatically marked. This realization leads us to the conclusion that this world can only be described within the frame of reference for that particular world or version of the world, that is, how the symbol refers is dependent on the *system of symbolization* within which the symbol is found. Our version of the world does not allow for transformations of the Amazonian type, and our grammars do not need to account for them, which is why we end up with irrational or contradictory statements. We tend not to focus on states of being or changing states. In other words, we are confined to certain ways of describing what is being described. In describing, or referring to such an instance of transformation, the Cariban peoples have a linguistic system that makes compatible the two world versions of example ‘Eagle being at the same time an eagle and a young human woman’. As evidenced by the parenthetical translations in the examples above, our languages tend to resort to long explanations in order to reconcile the eagleness and the humanness of the referent ‘eagle’ because we have not entrenched such a mode of reference in our languages. However, the fact that we ultimately can translate such sentences adequately enough to capture the meaning shows us that there is in fact no difference in principle between the predicates we use and those we *could* use, but there is a pragmatic difference in habit, or, in Goodman’s terms, of “entrenchment” of ways in which we refer to the world. And the entrenchment “provides the required distinction” (Goodman 1984: 38). The distinction relevant here is a thread that runs through most aspects of the Cariban world, namely that rather Wittgensteinian notion of ‘states of being’ and this is duly a category that has to be expressed grammatically. So in which ways do the morphemes presented above act as markers of states of being (again we are still keeping within

the nominal domain)? And how do they represent either truth or knowledge?

In short we can characterize the markers as follows:

- (a) Facsimile *-me*: charts transformations of spirit between states; ‘being’ simultaneously
- (b) Emphatic *_le*: gives a qualitative value of a current state, generally temporary or at a given point in time
- (c) ‘Truly’ *_lë*: gives an intrinsic value, such as biological, inherent; has a non-fluctuating permanence
- (d) Frustrative *_lep*: in the nominal domain: at least one semantic feature of that denoted by noun is not fulfilled, i.e., ‘flawed’, ‘not functioning as X should’: this marker gives us insight into cultural norms and culturally pertinent modes of behaviour (cultural entrenchment); in the verbal domain: ‘knowledge’ of outcome of state of affairs, i.e. ‘in vain’
- (e) Nominal past *-npë/-npï* and *tpë/tpï*: transformations between present, former and future states; progression along a temporal line

What the above characterizations show is that there is an underlying temporal dimension with all the markers with the exception of the frustrative *_lep*. In fact, it would appear now that the frustrative, at least when marked on nominals, has nothing whatsoever to do with either truth or knowledge, and everything to do with cultural norms and other expectations. For example, the noun *eluwa* ‘man’ marked with the frustrative refers to a man who does not fulfill the conditions of his manhood, namely he is not a good hunter, he does not provide his family with meat. In the western world *eluwa_lep* ‘man_FRUST’ would likely have very different connotations. The emphatic and the ‘truly’ clitics in (b) and (c) would in one sense seem to be opposites of each other, expressing a non-permanent versus a permanent quality, that is, ‘he’s really good (right now)’ as opposed to ‘he is good through and through’. The facsimile *-me* allows the expression of two simultaneous states, namely the intrinsic and the adopted state, as we saw with the eagle being both eagle and woman above. There is no temporal progression involved here, both are co-existent ongoing states, that is, the actual state of being is foregrounded rather than the beginning or end of the state. This is in contrast with the nominal past markers which do show a temporal progression, namely a change of state that is complete, such as an ex-wife, a former house, or (my) future grandchildren *ipalinpïtom*, which is literally ‘my grandchildren (descendants) after I have passed on’.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this contribution was to look for the regularities and common semantic denominator in the contrasting markers given, namely the facsimile, the emphatic, the ‘truly’ marker, the frustrative and the nominal past. The specificity with which nominals are marked allows the speaker to give as much information as is required for the listener to get as full a picture as possible, that is, the linguistic system itself portrays an entrenched specificity that Standard Average European languages do not have. All the markers, with the exception of the frustrative, have a temporal aspect in them, namely one of permanence vs. non-permanence. There is a pervasive regularity in Wayana and other Cariban languages of encoding states of being or not being because this is what is habitually projected by the speakers and the system which has been built up is a useful and efficient one within their terms of reference, that is, version of the world. A sentence such as (5a) ‘Eagle was a woman, a young woman’ may be a contradiction of the known truth in our version of the world that an eagle is a bird and a woman is a human being, but perhaps right versions of worlds do not necessarily coincide with what is true but with what is right and fitting in that version of the world. Goodman’s proposal that the term ‘truth’ should be replaced by “rightness of symbolic function”, and ‘knowledge’ by “understanding”, notwithstanding the philosophical implications that these terms are not co-extensive, may bring us to a greater understanding of the system we are trying to unravel. The relationship between “rightness of symbolic function” (truth), entrenchment (projection), and “understanding” (knowledge) is both a decisive and determining one, because it allows us to apply a scientific rigour to the constructed system and provides us with strict rules by which we can determine what constitutes a possible world version versus a spurious one. The existing system is the result of the entrenchment of the importance of intrinsic versus non-intrinsic values of nominal denotees, extending far beyond the domain of mythology as is evidenced by the examples above that pertain to normal daily life.

External evidence for the claim that such markers form a system together comes from at least one language contact situation where the Arawakan language Mawayana (spoken in Suriname) has borrowed some of the Cariban functional categories described here, namely a facsimile category, nominal past marking, and a reportative/evidential category, without actually borrowing the morphology itself, that is,

Mawayana pressed into service old functionally defunct markers to do the job of marking fascimile etc., or it created new markers to express these categories (see Carlin 2006).

While I have only dealt with part of the system in this paper on the Wayana markers, namely some of the nominal marking, a full study would have to include the role of evidentiality and reportative marking, as well as the role of temporality through the system.

Abbreviations: A: agent; ANA: anaphoric; ANIM: animate; CERT: certainty; COREF: coreferential; DESID: desiderative; DIM: diminutive; DP: demonstrative; FACS: facsimile; FRUST: frustrative; IMP: imperative; INAN: inanimate; INST: instrumental; MED: medial; NF: non-finite; NOM: nominalizer; O: object; PERSIST: persistent; PL: plural; POSS: possessive; PRES: present; PRIV: privative; PRO: pronoun; PROX: proximal; PST: past; R.PST: remote past; S: subject; TMP.NOM: time, manner, place nominalizer; TR: transitive; VRBLZER: verbalizer

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