



The Heritage Languages of Trinidad & Tobago

By Dr Jo-Anne S. Ferreira



UWI STAn is pleased to introduce the “Language Matters” series for the 50th anniversary of Trinidad & Tobago. The series is provided by the Linguistics Section, currently of the Department of Liberal Arts, Faculty of Humanities & Education, UWI, St Augustine.

The insular cariBBean archipelago has been described by Trinbagonian linguist Mervyn C. Alleyne as a linguistic “graveyard”. As a result of longstanding intolerance towards multilingualism in small nation states, developed during colonial times, all of the Amerindian languages have disappeared, as well as the African languages, some creole, and most immigrant and sign languages which are all facing decline and ultimate disappearance. Even the continental (greater) Caribbean and the rest of the Americas face similar issues and challenges, especially with respect to increasingly small and threatened Amerindian communities.

Despite all of the issues faced by the users of the many languages once spoken or signed in the Caribbean, some 70 languages have survived in the region (the Caribbean islands and most in continental CARICOM and French Guiana – the rest of the coastal Caribbean would bring the count to over 245). These languages have survived to varying degrees, and in Trinidad and Tobago, at least twelve are still spoken, signed, sung or remembered today, along with some newer arrivals.

But in 1866, Rev W. H. Gamble, writing of the veritable Babel that was Trinidad then, thought that “the day is far distant ere the many tongues found in Trinidad will become as one.” In 1886, two decades later, Fr Bertrand Cothonay’s conclusion was quite different. That author advocated and predicted (in French) that “English was the language of the future for Trinidad.”

Although only two colonial powers controlled Trinidad (unlike Tobago, partially controlled by four different nations, Britain, France, Holland and Spain, and claimed by Latvia), well over 30 languages were in Trinidad around that time, and others still came later. The only Amerindian language mentioned by Gamble was Warao (called “Warahoon”, a language isolate, thought not to be related to either Carib/Kalina or Arawak/Lokono). Although unlikely, there may have been other surviving Amerindian languages in the mid to late 19th century. Gamble mentioned European languages such as Danish, English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Portuguese and Spanish; Patois (French Creole) was the lingua franca or language of wider communication with a significant number of native speakers; English Creole in both islands (referred to as Dialect); African languages such as Yoruba, Ibo, Koongo (Congo), as well as “many different dialects (sic)”, that is, languages, from Africa plus Arabic used by African Muslims, languages from all parts of India” including Bengali, Hindustani/Bhojpuri, and Tamil; and Chinese (which would have been Cantonese and Hakka). Some of the unnamed African languages included Akan (Twi or Asante), Mandingo or Maninka (Mande), Fon, and Hausa. With regard to Indian languages, the historian Tinker specifically mentions Gujarati, Nepali, Malayalam, Sanskrit, Hindi-Urdu, Telugu and many others.

Just as the many Amerindian languages (ten or more) lost ground in Spanish Trinidad, largely due to decimation, emigration or assimilation, the many languages mentioned by Gamble also found no place in multilingual British Trinidad, but because they were disallowed. Gamble wrote at the time of the Anglicisation policy, a policy that was enforced by Attorney General Charles William Warner, under Governors Henry McLeod and Robert Keate. This policy was specifically aimed at the Catholic French Creole elite and their French and French Creole/Patois languages, but threatened speakers of all other languages, particularly through the education system and judiciary. Some languages have clearly managed to continue to exist, even into the mid- 20th century. Many seemingly have undergoing waves of renewal because of ongoing input from new immigrants, but this has been unobtrusive and largely underground, and mostly only if speakers were privately bilingual or in “difficult access” areas.

In 21st century Trinidad and Tobago, only twelve of these languages have survived (including English). Most are potentially endangered (socially and economically disadvantaged, beginning to lose child users), to seriously endangered (the youngest speakers are 50 or older), to moribund (handful of good speakers left, very old) and extinct (no native speakers, linguistic remnants in fossil and ritual forms, such as songs and phrases).

Including English, our only official national language, made official only in 1823, according to Gamble, national heritage languages include those of the pre-emancipation era such as Spanish, French and French Creole (Patois or Twinidadyen), Yoruba, Tobagonian (English Creole), Trinidadian (English Creole), and post-emancipation languages such as Cantonese, Bhojpuri, Portuguese, north Levantine (Syrian and Lebanese) Arabic and Trinidad & Tobago Sign Language (TTSL). These chronological divisions give a rough idea of the main eras of arrival or development of these languages, as the post-emancipation era heralded the arrival of most of the languages

mentioned by Gamble. The divisions are in fact fairly porous, as Yoruba continued to arrive after emancipation, the Portuguese and Chinese languages arrived long before emancipation, and Spanish has had varying waves of speakers over its five centuries here. There are, of course, other languages used in smaller groups (such as Hakka and Sindhi), embassies (such as those of Italy, Suriname, and many others), places of worship (such as Telegu and Tamil), as well as American Sign Language (ASL), but this series focuses on these twelve as community, heritage and national languages.

Many of the languages have more than one name, including the name used by speakers, the name used by outsiders and the name used by linguists or language scientists. Some of the names are unfortunately apologetic, nonspecific or even pejorative, denigrating the speakers and their ancestors more than the languages themselves. Some are simply inaccurate. Bhojpuri, for example, is often referred to as “broken Hindi”; Patois is the name used by the speakers of that language, but it has been referred to as “broken French” even by some of its speakers, and Frenchlexicon Creole by linguists; Spanish has wrongly been called a Spanish “Patois” or “broken Spanish”; and speakers of the English Creoles call their languages Dialect (whether Tobagonian or Trinidadian), and Cantonese and Hakka are both generally called Chinese. Even the history of English in Trinidad and Tobago is misunderstood, with foreignaccented varieties being held up on radio and television as exnormative or foreign models, standards or reference points. The standard variety is often seen as the only “correct” or necessary variety, whereas non-standard English continues to co-exist with standard English and with the English Creoles of both our islands.

These are the languages spoken, signed and used in our national territory, with a history of over 100 to 500 years here. That these languages are all numerically and/or socio-economically minority languages is true—but each has a place in our history, contributing to more than just our vocabulary (which has contributed 12,200 words and phrases to the English language and to Caribbean English Creole, as documented by Lise Winer). The fact of their “survival” to the present attests to some speakers’ covert or overt determination to at least remember their ancestral, heritage languages, even if not to actively use them for various personal and social reasons.

This is a world where bi-/multilingualism is normal, and valued and encouraged by many countries, except perhaps in the Americas. Trinidad, especially, was a multilingual space, but is no longer so. It is worth noting that bilingualism (English and English Creole) and bidialectalism are recognised in the 2010 Language and Language Education Policy prepared by Ian Robertson, and by Lawrence Carrington and Dennis Craig and other scholars in the region.

There are those now hoping to rescue some of their ancestral past through language learning and practice of the modern varieties of these languages. Usually the new target variety is one that has a higher status in the country of origin (e.g., Lisbon Portuguese vs. Madeiran Portuguese), or that has religious value (e.g., Classical Arabic for Muslims vs. Colloquial Arabic – their ancestors may not have been Arabic speakers), or one that seems to have greater marketability and economic gain (e.g., French vs. French Creole), or one that is more accessible through online and printed materials, or for all of these reasons (e.g., Hindi vs. Bhojpuri, etc.), but not the modern varieties of those ancestral tongues.

In this our 50th year of nationhood, the aim of this series of articles, produced by current and retired members of the Faculty of Humanities and Education and our students, is to shed light on the origin, development, status, relevance and contributions of our eleven surviving national languages, in addition to English.

Our writers include Cristo Adonis on the Amerindian languages of our First Peoples, Sylvia Moodie-Kublalsingh on Trinidadian Spanish, Jo-Anne S. Ferreira on French and Trinidadian Patois (French Creole) and on Portuguese, Maureen Warner-lewis (of Trinidad & Tobago, UWI professor emerita, Mona) on Yoruba, Winford James on Tobagonian, Kathy-Ann Drayton on Trinidadian, Jennifer De Silva on Trinidadian Bhojpuri, Stefan Poon ying on Cantonese in Trinidad, Ramon Mansoor on Syrian and Lebanese (north Levantine) Arabic, and Ben Braithwaite on Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language. English, our official language, will be the subject of another series.

This is also a tribute to those linguists who have worked on our national languages, including national linguists such as Rawwida Baksh-Soodeen, Lawrence D. Carrington, Kemlin Laurence, Peggy Ramesar Mohan, Sylvia Moodie Kublalsingh, Denis Solomon, John Jacob Thomas, Donald Winford, as well as Gertrud Aub-Buscher, Barbara Lalla, Ian Robertson, Lise Winer and Valerie Youssef and many others who have been labouring in the T&T vineyard in particular, and the Caribbean in general. We welcome all feedback and are honoured to publicise the ongoing work by our scholars, aimed at thoroughly documenting and understanding our linguistic heritage, our nation, and ourselves.



Dr Jo-Anne S. Ferreira is a Lecturer in Linguistics in the present Department of Liberal Arts, a member of SIL International, and Secretary-Treasurer of the Society for Caribbean Linguistics. She is also the holder of a postgraduate diploma in Brazilian Indigenous Languages and Linguistics (MN/UFRJ).

***This article does not belong to the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish. It has been taken from the online UWI STAN resources and can be found at:- <http://sta.uwi.edu/stan/article12.asp> . STAN is a publication of UWI Marketing and Communications Office. ***