Linguistic evidence and historiography:
the selection of slaves on Curaçao, 1650-1700

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Drawing on recent linguistic investigations on the origins of Papiamentu, this article aims to cast new light on an intriguing but hitherto unresolved socio-historical aspect of the initial decades of the Curaçaoan transit slave trade: the selection of slaves. In answer to the controversial question which slaves were kept on Curaçao rather than resold to third parties, we take a look at, and summarize, the body of linguistic evidence that Papiamentu is genetically related to Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole. This evidence, we believe, warrants the assumption that slaves from the Upper Guinea region were particularly sought out by Curaçaoan colonizers in the period between ca. 1650 and 1700. This assumption, in turn, allows us to hypothesize more effectively about the reasons why certain slaves were more fashionable than others in that particular period of Curaçao's history.

Keywords: Curaçao, transit slave trade, Papiamentu, Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole, skin colour, Christianization.

1. Introduction

This article provides an example of how linguistic evidence can cast light on nebulous historical issues. While historical documentation on the early decades of the Curaçaoan slave trade is scarce, the article shows how linguistic data can be used to fill in some of the blanks. Drawing on recent linguistic investigations on the origins of Papiamentu, the article aims to cast new light on an intriguing but hitherto unresolved socio-historical aspect of the initial decades of the Curaçaoan slave trade: the selection of slaves. While 17th-century Curaçao was primarily a transit slave port whose incoming slaves were subsequently resold and/or redistributed to third parties, slaves were also needed on the island itself in order for it to become self-supplying. The

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1 This article is a modified and elaborated version of arguments presented in Jacobs (2012a).
2 Papiamentu is the official language of the Leeward Dutch Antilles, which include Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, three islands situated just off the coast of Venezuela and jointly referred to as the ABC-Islands. Furthermore, an important diaspora community of speakers resides in the Netherlands. The language has an estimated 270,000 speakers.
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following bipartite question, to be addressed in this article, thus emerges: which slaves were preferred to remain on the island rather than to be resold to third parties and which criteria underlay this preference?

I first briefly sketch the development of Curaçao’s slave trade economy in the period from roughly 1650 to 1700 (§2). In §3, the socio-historical issue that is central in this article, i.e. the selection of slaves on Curacao in the second half of the 17th century, is introduced. I then summarize the results of recent historical-linguistic research into the origins of Papiamentu and explain what it tells us in terms of which slaves were preferred for Curacao (§4). Following this, §5 discusses four criteria which I assume are of particular importance in understanding why these slaves were preferred over others (§5). Section 6 provides some final considerations.

2. The development of Curaçao’s slave trade economy

Although 1499 was the year of the discovery of the ABC Islands by Spain, the islands were actively colonized and commercially exploited only after 1634, which is when the Dutch West India Company (WIC) rather effortlessly took control of the islands, forcing a small contingent of Spanish soldiers to abandon them and re-settle on the Venezuelan mainland. Some Amerindians present at the time were allowed to remain on the islands. Nonetheless, historians and linguists agree that “The demographic as well as the linguistic history of the ABC Islands starts from scratch in 1634”\(^3\) (Kramer 2004: 108).

Note that the present article is concerned exclusively with Curacao, as it was there that the WIC built its headquarters and developed the slave trade and, indeed, where Papiamentu emerged, spreading to Aruba and Bonaire only towards the latter part of the 18th century. Initially, Curacao served the WIC as a naval base only, but the slave trade increased in the 1650s. The island’s slave-trade-based economy grew exponentially in subsequent decades owing to several (overlapping) factors including:

- the loss of the Dutch holdings in Brazil in 1654, causing the migration of Sephardic Jews (often via Amsterdam) to Curacao and an increased concentration of WIC activity on Curacao;

\(^3\) Original quote: “Die Bevölkerungs- wie die Sprachgeschichte der ABC-Inseln beginnt 1634 auf dem Nullpunkt”
- the Portuguese rebellion against the Spanish Crown in 1640, enabling the Dutch WIC to become the principal slave suppliers for the Spanish American colonies;
- the commercial paralysis of Cartagena from the 1640s onwards due to the aforementioned Portuguese rebellion (Castillo Mathieu 1982; Böttcher 1995);
- the Spanish loss of Jamaica to the English (Klooster 1998:106), increasing the importance of Curaçao for the supply of slaves to Spanish America;
- acquisition of the 1662 asiento, which sealed the Dutch WIC’s role as principal provider of slaves to Spanish America (Hartog 1968:163).

Curaçao’s booming slave trade came to a halt in the early 1700s when the Dutch lost the aforementioned asiento to supply the Spanish colonies with slaves (Hartog 1968 Ch. 7; Postma 1990:50; Klooster 1998:118).4

The present article is concerned exclusively with this initial period (i.e. the second half of the 17th century). It is clearly no coincidence that this period is generally (and correctly, I believe) considered to be the period in which Papiamentu emerged on Curaçao as a vehicle of interethnic communication (e.g. Joubert & Perl 2007: 139; Maurer 1986: 97; 1988: 2; Portilla 2008: 165; Bartens 1996: 247, Kouwenberg & Muysken 1995: 205; Munteanu 1996: 84; Fouse 2002: 83).5

The historical documentation of this early period, however, is extremely fragmentary, owing to the bankruptcy of the First Dutch WIC in 1674 and the subsequent destruction of records pertaining to the Chamber of Amsterdam, which was in charge of the ABC Islands: “Neglect and, regretfully, destruction of documents are the main reasons for our lack of knowledge today of the First West India Company’s history in New Netherlands, the Caribbean area and, in particular, of the settlements on Curaçao” (Römer, in the preface of Gehring & Schiltkamp 1987; cf. Moraes

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4 The asiento was awarded to the French according to Postma (1990:50), but to the English according to Klooster (1998:118).
5 That by the early 18th century Papiamentu had indeed established itself in Curaçao as the dominant speech variety of the slave population is suggested by a reference to a ‘broken Spanish’ spoken among the Curaçaoan slave population in the travel accounts of a certain Father Alexius Schabel who visited Curaçao in 1704. Furthermore, the first written attestation of Papiamentu, parts of a love letter written by a Sephardic Jew in 1775, shows that by that time Papiamentu had already fully stabilized and spread from the African slave population to parts of the European colonial upper class (Wood 1972; Kramer 2008).
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1995:319; Moraes 1998a:317). While scholars agree that Curaçao drew its slaves not from one particular area but from the whole of West Africa (i.e. Senegambia, the Gold Coast, the Slave Coast, the Niger Delta area, as well as present-day Congo and Angola; see, for instance, Parkvall 2000:136, 137; Postma 1990:112; van Welie 2008:55), up to now very little has been known about the origins of the first generations of Curaçaoan slaves, i.e. of those slaves that were selected to remain on the island in the early period (1650-1700) thus constituting the founder population of Curaçao’s slave society.

3. On the selection of slaves on Curaçao, 1650-1700

As noted, in the period at issue (i.e. the second half of the 17th century), the Dutch WIC had gotten hold of the highly profitable *asiento* to supply the Spanish New World colonies with slaves. However, as well as the Spanish, the French and the English colonies in the Caribbean initially relied on slave supplies from the Dutch (Parkvall 2000: 126, 127; Rawley & Behrendt 2005: 74). As a consequence, the central role of Curaçao in the second half the 17th century was that of a *transit* slave port, meaning that the vast majority of the slaves shipped to Curaçao were held in slave camps and subsequently redistributed to third parties. Except for their short ‘layover’ at Curaçao and their impact on the island economy, most of these Africans quickly disappeared from the Dutch colonial realm. And while this transit trade enhanced the historic reputation of the Dutch as slave traders, the slaves themselves ended up in Spanish, not Dutch colonies (van Welie 2008: 62).

For Curaçao to become self-supplying, the WIC officials as well as the Sephardic Jews (i.e. the two principal colonizing and thus slave holding powers on Curaçao) soon also needed slaves to remain on the island, mainly to do construction work in the urban area of Willemstad (the capital of Curaçao), to work on farms, and particularly to labor as domestic help. The fact remains, however, that, in the period that interests us (1650-1700), the fate of the vast majority of slaves was to be (re)sold to third parties in the Caribbean; only a relative minority of slaves remained on the island.

The state of affairs described above raises the following two closely related questions:

(1) Which slaves were chosen to be kept on the island rather than to be resold?

(2) Why were these particular slaves preferred and not others?
These questions have of course been raised in the literature before, but, at least in the case of Curacao, have never been satisfactorily answered. One complicating factor is that, as Postma (1990: 106) notes, “such preferences might differ from one market area to another, and also from one time to another”. An additional and obvious disadvantage is the aforementioned lack of historical records of the relevant period as a direct result of the First Dutch WIC’s bankruptcy. Although, as noted, there is agreement that slaves traded on Curacao were drawn from all over the African West Coast, scholars have hitherto remained fully in the dark as to which of those slaves actually remained on Curacao rather than being (re)sold to other parties: “The question as to why certain enslaved people were kept on the island while others were transported is a difficult one to answer due to the lack of available historical sources” (Allen 2007:68). Hoetink (1958: 69) is more pessimistic still: “The question of positive or negative selection of the Curacaoan negro slaves cannot be answered due to a lack of data”.

Here, however, due to the lack of explicit historical sources, the input that linguistics can have to historiography becomes evident. First, though it might seem obvious, it is important to stress that Papiamentu arose on Curacao as the language of the slaves, even though it rapidly spread to all other segments of the population. This logically means that insights into the origins of Papiamentu can inform us about the origins of the first slaves brought to Curacao. Similarly obvious, and important to stress, is that Papiamentu most likely emerged not among the export slaves awaiting transhipment in the transit camps such as Zuurzak and St. Joris, but rather in the interior, i.e. among the slaves that were kept on Curacao to work in domestic and agricultural service. Put differently, the origins of Papiamentu may provide some answers to question (1).

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6 Original quote: “De vraag naar positieve of negatieve selectie der Curacaose negerslaven kan bij gebrek aan gegevens niet beantwoord worden”

7 This is suggested, first of all, by historical accounts such as Schabel’s (1704, mentioned in §2) or another from 1769 (see Hartog 1968:157) in which the creole is explicitly linked to the slaves, but it can also logically be inferred from the fact that the Europeans (i.e. the Dutch and the Sephardic Jews) could have had recourse to several more prestigious languages (Dutch, Spanish, and/or Portuguese) in order to communicate among one another. A further indication is the name of the creole: Papiamentu is derived from the Spanish/Portuguese verb papia ‘to chatter, babble, rant’ and thus means ‘the act of chattering/babbling’. If Papiamentu had emerged among the European colonizers, such a derogatory name would not be expected.

8 While there is no concrete evidence for this scenario, I assume that if the language had emerged among the slaves residing in the transit camps such as Zuurzak and St. Joris, the
4. Which slaves were preferred for Curaçao (1650-1700)?

In recent scholarship (Martinus 1996, 2003, 2007; Quint 2000, 2001; Jacobs 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a), a substantial body of linguistic evidence has been amassed suggesting that Papiamentu is a language descended from Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole (a term covering the sister varieties spoken on the Cape Verde Islands and, on the continent, in Guinea-Bissau and the Senegalese province of Casamance), which was partially ‘relexified’ towards Spanish probably almost immediately after arrival on Curaçao. The term ‘relexification’ is used to denote a process by which a considerable part of the original vocabulary of language A is replaced by the vocabulary of language B (typically a socially dominant contact language). In our case, then, the originally Portuguese-based vocabulary of an early variety of Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole was, after arrival on Curaçao, partially replaced and complemented by Spanish, the language of prestige, trade and religion along the Venezuelan coast (see Jacobs 2012b for a detailed discussion).

It is important to note that this process of relexification mainly affected content words (i.e. words that carry meaning), while leaving intact most of the original Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole (Upper Guinea PC) grammatical / function words (prepositions, pronouns, conjunctions, question words, auxiliary verbs, etc.) and morphosyntactic rules (word order, negation patterns, etc.). The smoking gun evidence that the two creoles share a common origin is thus not found in the content words for man, woman, moon, bird, tree or water (these all have Spanish roots in Papiamentu in distinction to the Portuguese-derived forms found in Upper Guinea PC), but rather in the correspondence of grammatical elements, such as the following:

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language would have disappeared from Curaçao along with the exported slaves, rather than becoming the principal vehicle for communication among the local Curaçaoan population.
Table 1. Functional items shared between Papiamentu and Upper Guinea PC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETYMON</th>
<th>Papiamentu</th>
<th>Upper Guinea PC</th>
<th>GLOSS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Port. nos (≠ Sp. nosotros)</td>
<td>nos</td>
<td>nos</td>
<td>‘we’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port. mesmo (≠ Sp. mismo)</td>
<td>mes(^9)</td>
<td>mes</td>
<td>‘self’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port. na (≠ Sp. en + la)</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>na</td>
<td>‘in’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port. até (≠ Sp. hasta)</td>
<td>te</td>
<td>te</td>
<td>‘until’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port. quem (≠ Sp. quien)</td>
<td>ken</td>
<td>ken</td>
<td>‘who?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port. onde (≠ Sp. donde)</td>
<td>unde</td>
<td>unde</td>
<td>‘where?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port. -mento (≠ Sp. -miento)</td>
<td>-mentu</td>
<td>-mentu</td>
<td>-ment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port. vai (≠ Sp. va)</td>
<td>bai</td>
<td>bai</td>
<td>‘to go’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perhaps it should be briefly explained why the corresponding function words and morphology are considered to be strong evidence of genetic relatedness. An answer is given by Muysken & Smith (1990:883), when they notice that, in cases of contact-induced language change, function words and morphology “are normally less susceptible to replacement than content words”. This, in turn, is explained by the fact that content words, designating concrete realities, can be learned relatively quickly, and thus be borrowed from one language into another more easily than grammatical items. Though the motivation behind the massive borrowing of Spanish words into Papiamentu is not yet fully understood (another option would have been to simply learn Spanish), it is plausible to assume that adopting Spanish vocabulary into their native grammatical system would have been the easiest way for slaves to demonstrate acculturation while at the same time retaining their own linguistic identity.\(^{10}\)

\(^9\) An anonymous reviewer correctly noted that /mesmo/ lived side by side with /mismo/ in Spanish up to the 18th century and that it may still exist in some American varieties. However, the claim that Papiamentu mes derives from Port. (viz. Upper Guinea PC) mesmo rather than Sp. mismo–mesmo finds support not only in the preservation of the etymological stressed /e/ but also in its use as an adverb meaning ‘really, indeed’. This use is typical of Portuguese mesmo, not of Spanish mismo. Compare, for instance, Port. (muito) velho mesmo ‘really (very) old’ / (very) old indeed’ with Papiamentu (masha) bieu mes very-old-self ‘idem’ (van Putte & van Putte-deWindt 2005:284, 290).\(^{215}\) It is not surprising to find the equivalent SCV me with the same adverbial value: SCV bedju mé old-self ‘really old’ (Lang 2002:434) (cf. Jacobs 2012a:134).

\(^{10}\) It is interesting to point out that, due to heavy relexification towards Spanish, mutual intelligibility between speakers of Papiamentu and Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole is by no means guaranteed and in fact rather unlikely. Only if a speaker of Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole has additional knowledge of Spanish, could he/she perhaps converse freely with a speaker of Papiamentu. And vice versa, only if a speaker of Papiamentu has additional knowledge of Portuguese, will he/she be able to understand Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole. Note, however, that rumours of mutual intelligibility between the two creoles do circulate among speakers of both creoles as well as among linguists. Though I remain sceptical about
The linguistic correspondences between Papiamentu and Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole – of which but a fraction is shown in Table 1 – are so numerous and of such an idiosyncratic and paradigmatic nature that chance or linguistic universals cannot plausibly account for them. Rather, they suggest that a majority of the first generation of slaves to inhabit Curaçao were in fact speakers of Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole. In Jacobs (2009a, 2012a, 2012c), a historical framework is presented which fully supports the plausibility of this claim: the Dutch WIC (in alliance with the local Sephardic Jews and converted Christians) had set up a commercial network (including trade in slaves) between Upper Guinea (particularly Gorée and the Petite Côte, but with commercial activities extending to the Cape Verde Islands and Cacheu) and Curaçao. The slave trade between the two regions reached its peak in the period between ca. 1650 and 1675. Indeed, that period coincides with the period in which Papiamentu is commonly thought to have emerged on Curaçao (1650-1700). The genetic relatedness between Papiamentu and Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole is gradually finding resonance in the literature (Baptista 2009 & 2011, Hagemeijer & Alexandre 2010, Green 2009 & 2011, Schwegler 2010, Mark & Horta 2011; Clements 2012; Rupert 2012; McWhorter 2012).

To summarize, despite the fact that during the period in question (1650-1700), the WIC purchased slaves from different areas along the West African coast, the available linguistic evidence unequivocally suggests that, of the ethnically diverse shipments of slaves brought to Curaçao, slaves from Upper Guinea – more precisely those speaking Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole – were preferred for keeping on the island rather than to be resold.

5. Why were Upper Guinean creole slaves preferred for Curaçao (1650-1700)?

The linguistic evidence thus provides vital clues as to which slaves were present on Curacao in the period between 1650 and 1700. Now, knowing which slaves remained on the island of course allows us to speculate more effectively about the reasons why certain slaves, and not others, were chosen to stay. This question is all the more intriguing if we acknowledge that the

this, whether these two varieties are presently mutually intelligible or not has no bearing on the hypothesis that they are genetically related, since, as noted, this relatedness is revealed in the function words and morphology much more than in the content lexicon.
slave shipments from Upper Guinea (Senegambia) probably constituted but a small minority (perhaps no more than 5%) of all the slaves traded on Curaçao in the second half of the 17th century (see the estimated figures in Postma 1990:112 and Parkvall 2000:136, 137).

Below, I will propose four criteria (a-d) which, I believe, helped determine the Curaçaaoan slave masters’ preference for certain slaves over others and the sum of which explains at least in part why creole slaves from Upper Guinea (even though constituting only a minority of the total sum of incoming slaves) indeed had very good chances of being kept on the island instead of being redistributed to third parties. It is relevant to note here that two main social groups on Curaçao were in the habit of keeping slaves: WIC officials (not all of whom were necessarily Dutch; see Klooster 1994:284), and Sephardic Jews.\footnote{Note, furthermore, that in 1683, no less than 75\% of all the slaves residing in Curaçao worked as domestic slaves (Hoetink 1958:58, Bartens 1996:243). The remainder were used either as field slaves or in construction work. Note also that, while sugar plantations did not exist in Curaçao, the larger agricultural farms in the interior sometimes had up to ca. 400 field slaves.}

\textit{a. Preference for ‘experienced’ slaves}

Owing to their alleged “inflammable nature and rebellious moods” (Goslinga 1985:163), slaves from Calabar (on the coast of what is now Nigeria) had become unpopular among (Dutch) slavers. Postma (1990: 107, 108) accounts for the disobedient nature of these slaves as follows: “One can speculate that Calabary slaves originated from the predominantly stateless societies of that region, people who were accustomed to a great amount of individual freedom and were thus (...) less able to adjust to the degradation and regimentation of enslavement” (cf. Klooster 1998:110 footnote 16). The same reasoning can be applied to account for the “reputed laziness and rebelliousness” (Klooster 1998:107) of slaves from Angola, who consequently were similarly unpopular on Curaçao in the period between 1658 and 1729 (Klooster 1998:107).

The island of Santiago was discovered by the Portuguese in 1456, and they turned the island into a thriving slaving centre almost immediately thereafter (e.g. Holm 1988: 273). Cape Verdean slaves who arrived on Curaçao in the 1650s thus may have come from a society with four or five generations of experience with European style chattel slavery.\footnote{On the colonial history of the Cape Verde Islands, see e.g. Carreira (1983), Holm, Lang, Rougé & Soares (eds. 2006), Lobban (2007).} Therefore, we may speculate that, owing to their own history of and experience with slavery,
slaves and natives of the Cape Verde Islands but also from the Petite Côte and Cacheu (i.e. the regions where Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole was spoken\textsuperscript{13}) were more accustomed and able to adjust to the degradation and other aspects of the slave society that Curaçao was rapidly turning into than slaves from e.g. Angola and Calabar. At least, Curaçao’s Dutch and Sephardic Jewish slave owners may have considered this to be the case and therefore, as a type of low risk investment, have preferred slaves from the Cape Verde Islands and/or Cacheu to work their plantations and perform domestic tasks.

In addition, there appears to have been a useful overlap between the Cape Verde Islands and Curaçao as far as the climate was concerned: due to the island’s particularly dry soil, Curaçao, unlike many other Caribbean colonies, never developed a (sugar) plantation economy (Klooster 1994:285) and, indeed, the same is true for the Cape Verde Islands: “due to the lack of precipitation, sugar production in the Cape Verdes never reached levels that it did in Madeira and São Tomé” (Nunes 2003:100). It is not far-fetched to assume that Curaçaoan slave holders were aware of these climatological similarities, thus deeming creole slaves from the Cape Verde Islands particularly suitable for life and work on Curaçao.\textsuperscript{14}

One may legitimately object that there is no \textit{a priori} reason to assume Cape Verdean authorities and/or slave owners would have sold their own natives to third parties such as the Dutch WIC. Indeed, \textit{under normal circumstances}, we would probably expect the Cape Verde Islanders to have favored their natives to remain on the islands while fostering the sale of non-natives to third parties. However, the circumstances on the 17th-century Cape Verde Islands were all but normal: the 17th century was one of a permanent crisis for Cape Verde (see e.g. Patterson 1988), forcing many owners to sell their own slaves in order not to be obliged to feed them to third parties such as the Dutch WIC. The linguistic data (viz. the structural similarity between

\textsuperscript{13} Cacheu was settled by Cape Verdeans towards the end of the 16th century (e.g. Brooks 1993: 237–244), whence Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole spread throughout the regions presently known as Guinea-Bissau and the Senegalese province of Casamance (see Jacobs 2010 and the references therein). As for the Petite Côte, the available documentation suggests that Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole was widely used there in the 17th century, but ceased being used there in the course of the 18th century (Ladhams 2006; Jacobs 2010).

\textsuperscript{14} Note, furthermore, that weaving, sewing and related types of craftsmanship were highly developed among slaves on the Cape Verde Islands (Andrade 1973:26) as they were also in Curaçao, at least in the 18th century (see the figures in Klooster 1994: 285). But, of course, this overlap could have simply been a consequence of the fact that Upper Guinean creole slaves were kept in Curaçao, rather than a pre-existing socio-cultural similarity.
Papiamentu and Upper Guinea PC) compel us to believe that this is indeed what happened.

b. Preference for lighter-skinned slaves

While skin color is a theme well-studied in the context of slavery and colonialism, an explicit connection between skin color and the selection of slaves on Curaçao has not yet been proposed. However, the literature on early Curaçaoan slave society warrants the assumption that Dutch and Jews in search of slaves generally preferred lighter-skinned over dark-skinned slaves.

That a person’s degree of whiteness was directly proportional to that person’s social prestige and status within the early Afro-Curaçaoan society is explicitly suggested by scholars such as Hoetink (1958), Marks (1976), Schorsch (2005) and Allen (2007). Hoetink (1958:74, 81), for instance, described the establishment on Curaçao of a social hierarchy based on skin color with a clear positive correlation between the higher social rank and lighter skin color. In other words, ‘whiteness’ was an essential part of the Curaçaoan colonizer’s ideal of beauty (cf. Hoetink 1958: 74, 75; Marks 1976: 86; Allen 2007: 73, 74; Bartens 1996: 246). This meant that in the 18th century, “On Curaçao, nonwhites were simply and consistently denied participation in the community”. 15 Allen’s (2007: 73, 74) remarks in reference to the 18th and 19th centuries on Curaçao are also pertinent:

The term ‘coloured people’, hende di kolo, meant that one had a lighter and therefore more ‘appropriate’ skin colour, thus with slightly better chances for upward mobility. Afro-Curaçaoan women especially could reach certain positions on account of their lighter complexion. They were more likely to be chosen to work within the household of the enslaved people’s owner; they would work, for example, as yayas (nannies) and as domestic servants.

Although these observations apply to the post-1700 period, it seems fair to assume that these racial attitudes trace back to the early days of colonialism and thus also played a decisive role in the selection of (particularly domestic) slaves to be kept on Curaçao in the period between 1650 and 1700. And of course Curaçao was not the only place where this type of racial hierarchy prevailed. A point in case of obvious relevance is the Upper Guinea coastal

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15 If we can believe Cuales (1998: 89, 90), a color-based hierarchy is still prevalent on the Netherlands Antilles, “with the more light skinned mixtures (...) being placed in a higher social category of the continuum”. Cf. also the comments made by Holm (2004: 62, drawing on Cohen 1980) regarding the generally positive attitude of Iberian colonizers towards light-skinned slaves.
region. For instance, Searing (1993:108) describes how Gorée (the pivotal harbor, fortress and factory belonging to the Dutch WIC from 1621 to 1677 and to the French afterwards) was characterized by a racial hierarchy in which “Color was more important than religion”. Searing’s description, in turn, reflects a broader tendency that appears to have been typical of most if not all colonial, creolized or creolizing Upper Guinean areas. In his monograph on Luso-African identity in 16th- to 19th-century Senegambia, Mark (2002:25) asserts that “complexion [served] as the primary marker of identity”, with dark skin signalling social inferiority and light skin reflecting elevated standing (cf. Ribeiro da Silva 2011:156).

Against this background, it is important to recall that the racial mixing of blacks and whites in the Cape Verde region had started as early as the 1460s, so that by the second half of the 17th century (i.e. when slaves from the region were shipped to Curaçao), significant portions of the locally born population were of mixed Afro-European descent and, hence, lighter skinned than non-creole slaves from, say, the Gold Coast, Congo or Angola. Their comparatively light skin color may very well have increased their value in the eyes of the Curaçaoan settlers, making them more likely to be kept on the island than ethnically unmixed slaves.

c. Preference for slaves with knowledge of an Iberian-based speech variety

A third reason why creole slaves from Upper Guinea may have been more in demand than slaves from other areas is likely to have been the fact that they spoke Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole. One can easily imagine that, if Dutch or Jewish settlers were to pick one slave out of ten, they would pick the one with whom mutual intelligibility was the least problematic. Note in this respect that not only the Sephardic Jews (most of whom were fluent in both Spanish and Portuguese), but also several of the (higher-ranked) Dutch WIC officials had knowledge of either Spanish or Portuguese (whether restructured or not), or both (cf. Kramer 2004: 122-137). Some of the slave masters may even have had prior knowledge of creolized forms of Portuguese, such as Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole, though this assertion remains speculative. But even if a given slave owner’s knowledge of Portuguese was only basic, Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole would at all times have been more intelligible to him than any given African language. Particularly in as far as
the selection of domestic slaves was concerned, the criterion of mutual intelligibility must have weighed heavily.\textsuperscript{16} 

Note that this argument cannot be challenged by the claim that slaves from other West African colonies spoke Portuguese. Very few actually did (see, for instance, Bender 1978:211 on the lack of diffusion of the Portuguese language among the local blacks in Angola).

d. Preference for Christianized slaves
It is well-known that slaves from Upper Guinea were quite systematically converted to Catholicism prior to, or even during, their journey across the Atlantic. Of course, one might argue that these slaves being Catholic may have put off the Dutch Protestant and Sephardic Jewish slave masters of Curaçao. However, given the obvious fact that there was no abundance of Jewish and/or Protestant slaves in the period of 1650 to 1700, it is quite plausible to assume that Curaçaoan slave masters would have viewed properly baptized and catechized Catholic slaves as a safer investment than slaves who had not enjoyed any evangelical instruction at all.

This assumption is supported by the fact that Protestant and Jewish slave owners principally did not allow their slaves to become members of their own congregations (Hartog 1968:148), suggesting they may not have been bothered at all by their slaves being Catholic. Indeed, “The Jews of Curaçao baptised their slaves in the Catholic Church [and] the majority of the Protestants did the same” (Lampe 2001:132).

Furthermore, it is important to note that, although many of the WIC officials on Curaçao were Protestant, the Company also had Portuguese and Spanish Catholics in its service (Kramer 2004: 124). This of course suggests that there must have been some tolerance towards Catholicism within the ranks of the WIC and thus among WIC slave holders. This tolerance may further have been conditioned by the commercial ties between the WIC and the Spanish Crown (cf. in this respect Klooster 1998:114, 115). Indeed, Venezuelan Catholic priests were given full freedom to operate on Curaçao, since this was included in the terms of the asiento contract with Spain obtained by the WIC (Hartog 1968:148). These priests ministered not only to

\textsuperscript{16} How knowledge of (some form of) Portuguese could raise a slave’s value is noted also by Newitt (2010:154) when he explains the Portuguese practice of sending slaves to Santiago prior to shipping them to the West Indies: “This practice kept the Spanish from trading directly with Africa, thereby undermining the lucrative Portuguese monopoly, but it also allowed the slaves to receive some instruction in the Portuguese language and in Christianity, which enhanced their value in the American markets” (Newitt 2010:154).
the transit slaves (i.e. those destined for resale), but notably also to those permanently residing on Curaçao (Hartog 1968:152).

In light of the above, it comes as no surprise that, in the first half of the 18th century, Curaçao’s slave society had become predominantly Catholic, rather than Protestant or Jewish (Klooster 1998: 291; cf. also Hartog 1968: 178), compelling the WIC to officially allow Catholicism on the islands in the 1730s (Israel & Schwartz 2007:29).

To summarize, it seems fair to assume that, if a slave master had the choice between a Catholic slave and a slave with an exotic religious background or none at all, he would have picked the first. Therefore, the fact that baptism and the catechizing of slaves were the norm in the Cape Verde region (in this regard see e.g. Carreira 1983; Benoist 2008) may have favored the selection of slaves from that region to remain on Curaçao.

Admittedly, one could also argue in the opposite direction. Analyzing a WIC letter from shortly after the seizure of Curaçao in 1634, Klooster (1998:108) mentions that “Angolan slaves had been suggested as a solution to the labour problem of Curaçao (...). Angolans were preferable to other Africans who in one way or another had been influenced by Spanish Catholicism.” Importantly, however, Klooster (1998:108) adds that “in the following decades, Curaçao’s slave trade was almost non-existent”. As soon as the Curaçao slave trade gathered momentum in the 1650s, the anti-Catholic sentiments that had previously favored the selection of Angolan slaves by the WIC no longer seem to have played such a decisive role. In a letter to the directors of the WIC in 1659, for instance, Matthias Beck – governor of Curaçao between 1657 and 1668 – explicitly demands slaves from the Cape Verde region to be brought to the island (Moraes 1998b: 42). So by that time either the Catholic background of creole slaves from Upper Guinea was no longer considered problematic, or it was simply overruled by other selection criteria.

6. Final considerations and conclusion

This article provides an example of how linguistic evidence can be used to shed light on murky historical issues. Another, quite fascinating example of the potential of linguistic data for historiography is provided by Smith (1999; 2009). It concerns the considerable linguistic contribution of the Niger Congo Ijo language to Berbice Dutch, the now-extinct Dutch-based creole formerly spoken along the Berbice river. Parkvall (2000:149) aptly summarizes the
historical conclusions that can be drawn from this linguistic fact: “It is striking that there is no [historical] proof that Ijo-speakers were ever taken to the Berbice colony but, as Smith (1999) points out, the linguistic evidence is so strong that the conclusion that a contingent of Ijos later lost to history played a crucial role in the formation of the language is inescapable.” Particularly enlightening is Parkvall’s (2006) argument for why, in any discussion on the genesis of creoles, priority should be given to linguistic data (‘the terrain’) over socio-historical data (‘the map’): “if the map and the terrain fail to match, we should first and foremost reconsider the map” (Parkvall 2006: 329-330). These and other examples underline the potential of linguistic data and, more generally, the need for interdisciplinary research, if creolists are to cast new light on historical periods which, for whatever reasons, remain only scarcely and/or fragmentarily documented by historians.

In the present work, light has been shed on an issue hitherto considered to be nearly unanswerable due to a lack of historical data: the selection of Curaçaoan slaves in the second half of the 17th century. Based on linguistic evidence provided elsewhere, (e.g. Martinus 1996, 2003, 2007; Quint 2000, 2001; Jacobs 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2010a, 2011a, 2011b, 2012a), this article has taken as a starting point the assumption that Papiamentu is descended from Upper Guinea Portuguese Creole. Clearly, this genetic lineage is explicable only if we assume that creole slaves from Upper Guinea were particularly sought out by WIC and Jewish slave masters on Curaçao, at least in the period between 1650 and 1700, which is when Papiamentu emerged on the island. The article provides several arguments, the sum of which allows us to understand why Upper Guinean creole slaves were more likely to be kept on the island than to be resold, even though they only constituted a minority of the sum total of slaves transported to Curaçao in the second half of the 17th century.

Arguably, of the four selection criteria proposed above, the slaves’ religious background (criterion d) should be attributed least importance. (Cf. Newitt’s 2010:154 observation, cited above, suggesting that skin color was a more decisive criterion than religion in structuring social hierarchies in slave societies.) Needless to say, there may have been other factors at play. Future research is warranted to identify such additional factors and to further corroborate (or falsify) the claims presented in this article.

To understand the importance of the issue discussed in this article, it need only be borne in mind that the slaves who remained on Curaçao in the early period (1650-1700) of the island’s development constitute a significant part of the island’s founder population: the issue of slave selection therefore
not only has linguistic and historical relevance, but touches upon the identities of the peoples of the ABC Islands at present.

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