

Book review: Rivera Castillo, Yolanda. 2022. A Description of Papiamentu, a Creole Language of the Caribbean Area. Leiden: Brill.

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A Description of Papiamentu, a Creole Language of the Caribbean Area, by Yolanda Rivera Castillo, deals with (aspects of) the grammar of Papiamentu, the principal language of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao (also known as the “ABC” islands), three former Dutch colonies off the coast of Venezuela. It is the first in a new book series from Brill Publishers titled Contact Languages, edited by Peter Bakker. As the name indicates, the series is dedicated to languages with a particularly rich history of contact, including so-called mixed languages, pidgins and indeed creole languages such as Papiamentu. This series, in turn, is part of Brill’s umbrella series Grammars and Sketches of the World’s languages.

For those looking for an easy-to-read introduction into the Papiamentu language, or for more discussion of its history and origins, this book is not it. It is a description of the grammar, written in a fairly theoretical style, following a formal descriptive framework. To quote the author, the book takes a “functional-typological approach” (p. 6) in order to provide “formal explanations and relations of entailment, conjunction, disjunction, or negation between features” (p. 6). In other words, the main target audience consists of trained linguists (and perhaps graduate students of linguistics), especially those with an interest in theoretical linguistics, such as the readers of *Isogloss*. It is not entirely clear to me, however, how “typological” the approach really is, since the book does not present much if any comparative data from other (creole) languages, or at least not in any systematic fashion.

The book takes the reader through the Papiamentu morphology (Chapter 2), syntax (Chapters 3 and 4), and word and syllable structure (“Segmental features”, Chapter 5), before spending a great deal of attention to prosody in Chapter 6. The

strong focus on the latter area may feel slightly disproportionate but is understandable given the author's familiarity with this domain of the grammar (e.g. Rivera Castillo 1998, Rivera Castillo & Pickering 2004, Faraclas, Rivera Castillo & Walicek 2008). A discussion of the verbal system is provided in Chapter 7 titled "Sentential Semantics".

The final chapter (Chapter 8, "Conclusions and Typology") takes up the topic of creole typology and the classification of creole languages, but the discussion offered in this chapter feels somewhat incoherent and disconnected from the rest of the book. On p. 208, for instance, the author concludes that "the features found in Papiamentu are attested in other natural languages" (p. 208) and that, as a consequence, "we reject the idea that there is a special process called "creolization"" (p. 208). These statements beg the question, first of all, how we can tell that Papiamentu is a creole language in the first place (as per the title of the book), if not on the basis of a particular set of linguistic features. And the statements come as a surprise in so far as the previous chapters do not provide much in terms of comparative data from other languages (be they creoles or non-creoles) that might have allowed for a more fine-grained typological classification of Papiamentu and its linguistic features. Even the chapter on Papiamentu prosody (Chapter 6), an area in which Rivera Castillo counts as an authority, does not attempt to provide a typological analysis. This is a missed opportunity: the fact that Papiamentu makes use of a mixed stress-tone system to distinguish between two otherwise homophonous words is considered unique amongst creoles; it would therefore have been nice to place this feature in a cross-linguistic perspective. Likewise, Rivera Castillo's otherwise excellent discussion of morphological passivization (Chapter 4, Section 4.3) would in my view have benefited from a broader comparative outlook, not least because morphological passivization, just like tone, is thought to be rare amongst creoles. Within a sample of 32 pidgins and creoles, Parkvall (2008) once placed Papiamentu at the higher end of the complexity scale. Features such as tone and passivization might just help us better understand that classification.¹

Furthermore, while I have no issue with the claim that all Papiamentu features can individually be attested in other natural languages, the claim misses the point of what makes creoles special. It is, of course, about the sum of linguistic features: while each feature can, no doubt, individually be found in other natural languages, the claim of proponents of creole 'exceptionalism' like McWhorter (2001), Parkvall (2008), Bakker et al. (2011) and Jacobs (2023) is that no other languages than creole languages display such a particular sum of features. Also, following McWhorter (2001) and Parkvall (2008), I would argue that what typologically characterizes the class of creole languages is a certain degree of grammatical reduction vis-à-vis the input languages. This grammatical economy should not come as a surprise: we are, after all, dealing with relatively young vernaculars that simply have not had the time yet to develop the same amount of grammatical complexities and irregularities seen in older 'traditional' languages. It is worth stressing, furthermore, that the fact that creole languages are not burdened by features such as ergativity or elaborate case systems has no bearing on the expressiveness or functionality of these young grammars: creoles are, indeed, equally expressive and functional as non-creoles. In fact, some have, correctly I

¹ I refer the reader to Kouwenberg (2010) and Parkvall (2012) (in reply to Kouwenberg) for an interesting discussion of the issue of creole complexity with specific regards to Papiamentu.

think, put forth the combination of grammatical economy and full expressiveness as a testimony to the intellectual achievement of those who created pidgins and creoles (cf. Parkvall & Jacobs 2023:225).

The final chapter aside, this book convincingly achieves what it set out to do: provide a formal description of the Papiamentu grammar. And the fact that the book presents new spoken Papiamentu data from Rivera Castillo's own field work (Rivera Castillo & Wagner Rodríguez 2016) adds to its significance. In sum: if you seek an easily accessible introduction into the grammar or history of the Papiamentu language, this book will not be your cup of tea, but if you have a keen interest in creole linguistics with a theoretical flavour you will find plenty to enjoy.

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