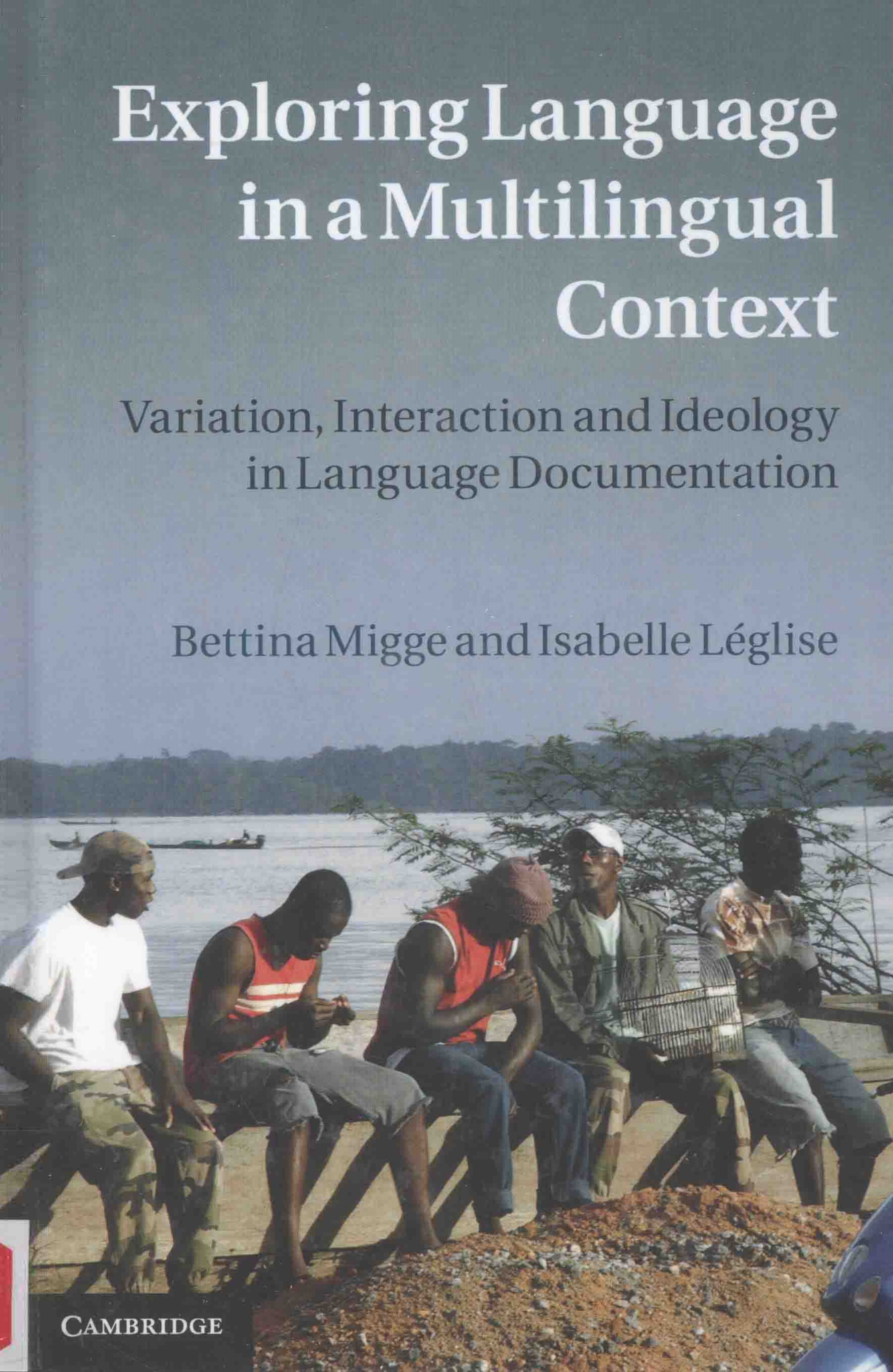
Exploring Language in a Multilingual Context

Variation, Interaction and Ideology in Language Documentation

Bettina Migge and Isabelle Léglise



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Exploring Language in a Multilingual Context: Variation, Interaction and Ideology in Language Documentation

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1 Introduction

Viewed from a distance, linguists and anthropologists experience the cultural and linguistic diversity of French Guiana (*Guyane française*) and that of its neighbour, Suriname, as exciting and enticing – they see the two countries as a little laboratory for studying human diversity. The tourist industry markets French Guiana as exotic, using catchy phrases such as *Vous n'en croirez pas vos yeux*! ['You will *not* believe it[!]']. Officials from metropolitan France who are charged with running the country do not share these positive feelings. Indeed, educational institutions and the various branches of local and national administration in French Guiana tend to experience the region's celebrated diversity as a logistical headache.

French Guiana is an eight-hour flight and 7,000 km from metropolitan France. It used to be a French colony but became French ground in Amazonian South America when it was made an overseas region (*Département d'Outre-Mer*) in 1946. Despite vast differences in the social, cultural and geographic makeup of metropolitan France and French Guiana, French Guiana's governing institutions exactly replicate those found in metropolitan France. The National Education System (*Éducation Nationale*), for example, applies much the same educational programmes in both regions, but educational failure, including school drop-out rates, are much higher in French Guiana than in metropolitan France; in fact, French Guiana consistently scores lowest on all educational achievement indicators among all French regions. Members of the national education system commonly blame the linguistic and cultural diversity of French Guiana for the region's catastrophic educational track record.

In contrast to the powers that be, over the last forty years anthropologists and linguists working in the region (see Hurault 1972; Grenand 1982; Grenand and Lescure 1990; Goury et al. 2000, 2005) have repeatedly argued that the educational problems of French Guiana are largely produced by existing educational syllabuses, approaches and practices. In their view, it is their ignorance of the social, cultural and linguistic context of the region combined with their close adherence to the social, cultural and linguistic norms of (middle-class) metropolitan France that are putting French Guianese children at a disadvantage, as children in Guiana often have little sustained access to metropolitan norms. In

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recent decades, several initiatives have tried to overhaul this situation (Puren 2007). One of the most recent initiatives was led by linguists who had previously participated in grassroots bilingual education projects in other South American countries (see Chapter 2). Its aim was to address the issues raised by the local Amerindian movement of cultural and linguistic self-determination which argued that the French Guianese education system was not only ineffective but also destructive per se (see Charles 1997).[1]

In the 1990s, in an attempt to address language-related issues in schools, the linguists of the CNRS-IRD research unit CELIA initiated a program called Languages of French Guiana: Research, Education and Training (*Langues de Guyane: recherche, éducation, formation*).[2] Its goal was to document the lesser-known languages spoken in French Guiana and to train members of these linguistic communities to teach their home language and culture to the children of these communities. Their motto was 'producing knowledge to empower local social actors'. Using traditional fieldwork methodologies (see Munro 2002; Crowley 2007; Payne 2006), they produced valuable linguistic knowledge about various local languages. This research yielded publications in scientific journals, presentations at scientific conferences, PhD theses, and the publication of grammars and dictionaries aimed at diverse audiences. An important element of this work involved political activism. Researchers set out to raise decision-makers', teachers' and lay people's awareness about local languages and about the need to implement languages other than French in local schools. Because they were descriptive linguists whose primary focus was on structural issues related to one or the other language, their efforts were hampered by their lack of knowledge about the sociolinguistic context of French Guiana. For instance, they did not know which languages and how many languages children spoke, when they used this or that language, nor children's attitudes and proficiency in various languages. In their professional work as descriptive linguists, this type of sociolinguistic information was epiphenomenal, yet it proved vital when making a solid case for integrating trained community members into the local school context. Despite the various team members' endeavours, by 1999 they had found neither a suitable researcher nor the necessary funds to carry out a detailed sociolinguistic survey of French Guiana.

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[1] When French Guiana became a French overseas department in 1946, the educational policies changed to an aggressive policy of Francization whose main objective was to assimilate the population of the so-called interior, namely Amerindians and Maroons, to (European) French culture in order to ensure their intellectual, social and political development (Puren 2007: 284). Initially, Amerindian and Maroon children were forcibly removed from their communities and placed in church-run boarding schools that were far away from their local villages. This practice had disastrous long-term effects, notably the children's alienation from their home community and culture. Few of the children who had to endure this practice became truly bicultural or intercultural. Many of them found it difficult to integrate into mainstream French Guianese culture dominated by French Guianese Creole and metropolitan French persons or to reintegrate into their local Amerindian/Maroon community, leaving them on the margins of society. This practice was largely abandoned after the 1970s when French authorities started setting up schools in the rural communities of the (relatively inaccessible) interior of the country.

[2] CNRS: French National Centre for Scientific Research (*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*); IRD: French National Institute of Research for Development (*Institut de Recherche pour le Développement*); CELIA: Center for the research of Amerindian languages which is part of CNRS (*Centre d'Etude des Langues Indigènes d'Amérique*). Since 2010 CELIA has been part of the research unit SeDyL (*Structure et Dynamique des Langues* (UMR 8202)), a joint research unit whose activities focus on the investigation of the structure and dynamics of languages (www.sedyl.cnrs.fr).

Isabelle came to French Guiana for the first time in 1999 to visit a friend who was then part of the initial team of researchers of the program Languages of French Guiana: Research, Education and Training. At the time, Isabelle was teaching linguistics at the University of Paris III and had just finished her PhD thesis on discourse analysis. Although she had only dealt with 'non-exotic' field sites, namely language variation and change in urban settings and language at work, her previous training in linguistics, anthropology and French as a Foreign Language predestined her for research in French Guiana. She was immediately taken with the place and the people she met there. An older Creole woman, who was her friend's neighbour, made her try her delicious *bouillon d'awara* – and the prophecy was readily fulfilled[3] . . . for the CELIA linguists were still looking for someone to carry out a sociolinguistic survey of French Guiana's multilingual context.

The goal of the sociolinguistic survey was to document and answer the following:

a. What are the linguistic practices of the school population? That is, what is the distribution, function and status of the different languages in French Guianese society in general and in specific contexts such as the home environment, the school context, at work, at the marketplace etc.?
b. Which of the languages used in French Guiana function as a lingua franca? (See also Chapter 2.)

Isabelle was immediately enticed. A few months later, the French Ministry for Culture was inviting proposals for research on linguistic practices as part of the project Observatory of Linguistic Practices in France (*Observatoire des pratiques linguistiques*). These funds allowed her fieldwork to go ahead. Even during the very initial stages of the sociolinguistic survey, when she mostly collected data from primary-school children (see Chapter 2), an unexpectedly high degree of multilingualism became quickly apparent.

The survey challenged existing scientific views about French Guiana. First, contrary to the widespread assumption that urban areas are multilingual while rural areas remain mono-ethnic and monolingual, the survey revealed that both kinds of geographical settings are linguistically heterogeneous. Her work also showed that mono-ethnic communities are not automatically monolingual (in the community's ancestral language) but are in fact also multilingual and, just like urban areas, also constitute heterogeneous linguistic spaces. Second, the survey also demonstrated that besides the traditional language names commonly used by linguists, children in western French Guiana were also spontaneously using other terms, especially to refer to the various locally used English-based Creoles spoken in French Guiana. These terms challenged linguists' perceptions of the English-based Creole linguistic space. The most striking case was the term *Takitaki*.

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[3] Indeed, according to a well-known French Guianese Creole proverb, 'once you've had *bouillon d'awara*, [a local orange dish eaten for Easter] you will always return to French Guiana' (*Si tu manges du Bouillon d'Awara, en Guyane tu reviendras*).

Even before Isabelle started her survey, fellow linguists working in French Guiana had told her about the term *Takitaki* which, according to them, was used by ignorant people to refer to the English-based Creoles associated with local Maroon populations.[4] When interviewing children about the languages they spoke at home, with their parents, before they went to school etc., Isabelle was, of course, trying to avoid using the term. In order to signal to the children that she was not ignorant about the makeup of the English-based Creoles, she generally tried to respond with further questions such as 'which one?' when children told her that they spoke *Takitaki* to their parents, for instance. This strategy generally worked well. In most cases, children supplied known ethnically based names in response to her second question (such as Aluku, Ndyuka, Pamaka or Saamaka),[5] and in some instances children even expressed their surprise about her knowledge – they would ask her 'but, Madam, you are white how come you know this?' In other cases, however, children never used the terms commonly employed by linguists, suggesting to her that they were using the term *Takitaki* in order to signal something. As the school survey progressed,

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[4] We will provide more detail in Chapter 3. Suffice it to say here that the term *Maroons* refers to the descendants of persons of African origin who fled slavery and established semi-independent communities in the interior of the rain forest.

[5] The term the English-based Creoles (*Créoles à base anglaise*) is commonly used in French Guiana as a cover term to refer to the varieties spoken natively by Maroons and by people of Afro-Surinamese descent. The former are also known individually as Aluku, Ndyuka or Okanisi, Pamaka and Saamaka – the terms are also used to designate distinct ethnic entities (see Chapter 3). The language associated with the non-Maroon Afro-Surinamese population of Suriname (and with Suriname in general) is referred to as Sranan Tongo. Existing linguistic descriptions make reference to these individual varieties. In this book, when referring to one or the other of these varieties (or rather descriptions thereof), we use the ethnically based auto-denominations. In the case of Aluku, Ndyuka and Pamaka, we also use the cover term *Eastern Maroon varieties / Eastern Maroon Creoles*, which is used in the academic literature, or the cover term *Nenge(e)*, which is spontaneously used by the speakers of these varieties (see Chapter 4 for more information on naming conventions). Note also that instead of using the rather lengthy expression 'the English-based Creoles of French Guiana', we will throughout this book refer to them as the English-based Creoles.

Isabelle became literally overwhelmed by the high frequency and ease with which children were using the term *Takitaki* to respond to her questions. She was convinced that something was going on that merited closer attention. It seemed to her that children's use of the term *Takitaki* was clearly linked to categorization processes, naming practices and attitudes towards languages and peoples. Isabelle was also wondering if its usage was somehow linked to newly emerging linguistic practices. She therefore went in search of someone who would have a good knowledge of the English-based Creoles in order to join forces to solve this puzzle.

Descriptive linguists were not very receptive to the idea, but things were about to change in October 2001 when Isabelle met Bettina for the first time at a common friend's house in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni while doing fieldwork in western French Guiana. At the time, Isabelle was recording spontaneous interactions (commercial encounters at the market, within families, etc.) and was doing interviews with adults – of the 'your life with languages stories' type (Linde 1993; Schüpbach 2008) in order to complement her school survey data. Bettina initially helped her to carry out some recordings at the market and gave her ideas about where to meet Maroons. Eventually, Isabelle spoke to Bettina about *Takitaki* and in 2003 a long collaboration began.

Bettina first came to the region in 1994. Set to write a PhD thesis on the role of African languages in creole formation, she was exploring the possibility of carrying out fieldwork on one of the lesser-known varieties of English-based Creoles called Pamaka, which is associated with a Maroon community by the same name. Needing relatively conservative language data for her historically oriented project, she decided to collect the necessary language data in the traditional rural, largely mono-ethnic village communities. With the kind assistance of SIL Suriname, she went on a bumpy but thoroughly intriguing week-long trip up the Maroni River to the village of Langa Tabiki, which at the time was still recovering from the effects of the Surinamese civil war (see Chapter 3). A Ndyuka contact introduced her to the paramount chief of the Pamaka and the officers of his government and obtained their permission for her return the following year to do fieldwork for her PhD thesis in the village.

When Bettina returned to Langa Tabiki in September 1995, she assumed, based on her readings on creole communities and the Maroons, that the village and the Pamaka community would be linguistically relatively homogeneous. To her surprise, however, even during her first days in the village when her competence in Pamaka was still very low, she noticed different speech forms that seemed at least in part to correlate with distinct social behaviours, different groups of people and different spaces within the village. What was initially most salient to her was the variation between Pamaka, Sranan Tongo and Dutch. Her cultural and linguistic mentor Gaanman Levi and the other elders, who were never short of advice, repeatedly warned her about Sranan Tongo and its users as well as about the Pamaka who frequently employed it – mostly young men who worked in small-scale gold exploitation or who came to visit from the coastal urban centres for longer or shorter periods of time. They described these men as unpredictable, and their language use as rude and ignorant. Having her hands full with coming to grips with life in a remote Amazonian village, with language learning – a basic prerequisite for survival – and identifying language consultants for her PhD project, she initially did not pursue this issue further and focused on what was presented to her as 'true' Pamaka language and culture. But even what was presented to her as 'true' Pamaka culture did not seem all that homogeneous. For months she kept putting off making recordings because it was unclear to her which type of speech would be most appropriate for her project. Moreover, Labovian sociolinguistic fieldwork methods – her main training at the time – which rely heavily on single or group interviews appeared entirely inappropriate for this community, as people do not appreciate direct questions and even semi-formal elicitation of information. Their standard response was: look around, come along and find out. Finally, more out of frustration than anything else, she decided to make the best use of this approach. She tagged along with community members and recorded different kinds of social interactions that she participated in as a bystander or as an active participant if people allowed her to turn on the recorder. People thought that she was in the village to learn the language, and she spent part of her energy on mastering various socio-cultural and language practices.

Still intrigued by the linguistic diversity in a mono-ethnic community and by the stark difference between her experiences in Suriname and common sociolinguistic accounts of creole communities, following the completion of her PhD, Bettina decided to take a closer look at the sociolinguistics of the Maroon community. Initially, she returned to the village setting and tried to get a handle on traditional village-type speech forms. But she quickly shifted her focus to the urban context because the village community she had known in 1995 was rapidly urbanizing due to migration to the French Guianese town of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni and the French Guianese village of Apatou (see Map 2.1 in Chapter 2).[6] Both were undergoing rapid change due to efforts by the French government to 'develop' the region. The population had been rapidly increasing since the late 1980s (due to migration from the interior and from Suriname in the context of the Surinamese civil war). This forced French authorities to build a significant number of houses and schools and to increase local infrastructure significantly. Spending increasingly more time in the urban context among both Pamakas that she had known since 1995 and meeting new people of different backgrounds, Bettina noticed that what the elders of the Pamaka and Ndyuka villages she had visited in 1995, 1996 and 1997 had termed 'bad speech' was rapidly gaining in importance in the urban context. It was also losing its negative connotations in the early twenty-first century. Equally surprising was the fact that the language that she had learned in 1995 was increasingly rated as non-contemporary; especially in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, members of its large Maroon community were now starting to describe her language use as very polite and youngsters at times made jokes about its village character, something which had not happened in 1995 and 1996. Moreover, starting around 2000, Maroons in French Guiana who did not know her were suddenly using the term *Takitaki* rather than the traditional terms Ndyuka or Nengee when asking where she had learned to speak it.

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[6] Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni and Apatou are both located on the lower reaches of the river that nowadays functions as the border between French Guiana and Suriname. It is called *Maroni* in French, *Marowijne* in Dutch and *Maawina* in the Eastern Maroon varieties. Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni is about a two-hour boat ride from Apatou. Apatou used to be the settlement of an Aluku family, but is now the centre of the French multilingual administrative unit *commune d'Apatou* (see Léglise 2007a and Chapter 2 for more detail).

Having compared notes, we decided that the issue of *Takitaki* merited much more serious attention because it squarely challenged traditional scientific views about the linguistic setting of French Guiana and received knowledge about the English-based Creoles. In order to explore *Takitaki*, we initially set out to look for answers to the following questions:

- What linguistic facts and practices does the term *Takitaki* relate to?
- What are the meanings and uses of the term *Takitaki*?
- What are the factors that determine the use of this term and the practices associated with it?
- Is the term *Takitaki* linked to a 'real' linguistic community or is it used to refer to different types of practices?
- How does the term *Takitaki* relate to other terms used to refer to varieties pertaining to English-based Creoles?
- How does *Takitaki* relate to the currently observable linguistic practices involving the English-based Creoles?
- What are the linguistic, social and interactional properties of the linguistic practices identified by the term *Takitaki*?

Having identified some of the questions, we had to face yet another issue:

- How could such a phenomenon be studied most effectively?

We first decided to explore ideologies, attitudes and naming conventions both to get acquainted with the cultural context and to establish how discourses on *Takitaki* shape the social and linguistic realities. Reviewing our existing data, we decided that additional data was needed and began new field research on the topic. Extensive observation showed that the term *Takitaki* was much more widely used among people living in French Guiana than we had initially thought. Whenever and wherever possible, we carried out interviews and discussions using different languages, such as French, Sranan Tongo, Eastern Maroon varieties, English, in order to access the linguistic ideology and

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