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Berbice Dutch

 Af [Silvia Kouwenberg](#) 29. december 2011 • I kategorien [kreolsprog](#) •

Known to its speakers as *di lanshi* (= the language), Berbice Dutch is officially extinct, after the death of its last fluent speakers, Albertha Bell and Arnold King, a few years ago.

They were cousins who had grown up together after Arnold King's parents died in the flu pandemic of 1918 which reached even the very remote tributaries of the Berbice River in Guyana, in South America; having survived that deadly flu as children, they both lived to around 90.

Berbice Dutch: language of the Berbice colony

Like other creole languages in the Caribbean region, Berbice Dutch was once the language of a plantation colony.

But Berbice was no typical colony: located on the infertile banks of the Berbice River, most plantations remained

small, and grew crops such as anatto (a natural dye) and cocoa rather than sugar. Planters relied heavily on friendly relations with the neighbouring Arawak indians, who provided them with food supplies, sexual favours, and tracking services in the bush – including the tracking of runaway slaves, a practice which has contributed to a certain level of distrust between Afro-Guyanese and Amerindian Guyanese which persists to this day.



The author interviewing Arnold King

descent. Albertha Bell and Arnold King could identify both Arawak indians and Afro-Guyanese among their forebears, and reference was also made to "white" ancestors – although this may have meant light-skinned rather than European white.

The story of Justus Gerardus Swaving

In 1806, Justus Gerardus Swaving, an adventurous Dutchman, married Wilhelmina Balk; the two had met at a dance where they fell in love at first sight. She was the daughter of a Dutch planter in Berbice, and had been sent to Holland by her father. When news came of the death of papa, the newly-weds decided to take possession of the plantation in Berbice. In his autobiography, Swaving describes his first morning in Berbice as follows:

"While sitting on the verandah at a breakfast of toasted cassava bread and boiled goat's milk, my chore consisted in the learning of several creole words, so that I would be able, on arrival at the plantation, to greet my black mother-in-law appropriately" (1827, p. 207).

Swaving's sojourn in Berbice lasted only a few years: wife and baby died the next year in child-birth, Swaving's financial affairs deteriorated steadily, and he finally left Berbice poorer than he had arrived there, having lost the plantation to his debts. What happened to his black mother-in-law is not known.



Albertha Bell, the Last Speaker of Berbice Dutch, was interviewed by Jamiekan Langwij Yuunit in 2004, a few years before her death

Although enslaved Africans constituted the majority of the colony's population, close relationships appear to have existed between all three groups present in the colony, Africans, Arawak Indians, and (mostly Dutch) Europeans. Guyanese have a special term for their mixed off-spring: "bovianders", a word which is thought to derive from Dutch "bovenlander" (= upriver dweller). In my visits to the former plantation areas of the Berbice River, I encountered many a young Berbician whose brown skin and dark curls combined with startlingly green eyes.

The last speakers of Berbice Dutch, although without green eyes, were certainly of similarly mixed



A former Dutch colony, Guyana was ceded to the UK in 1815, after the Napoleon Wars. It won its independence in 1966.

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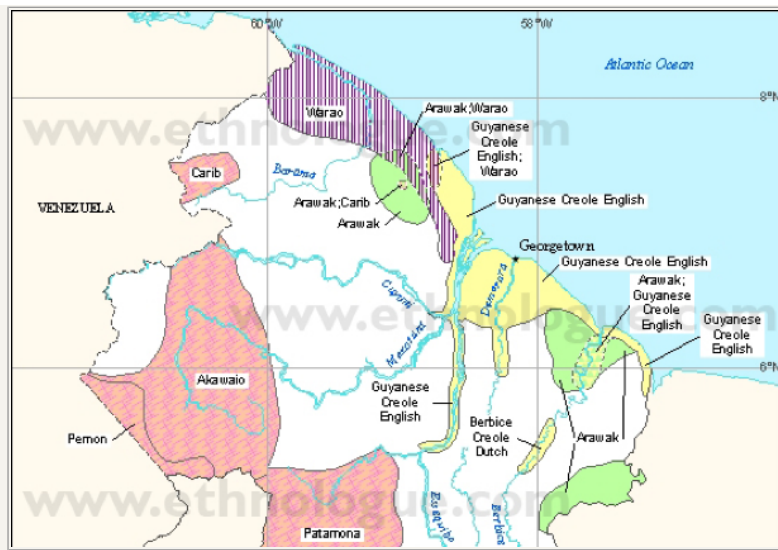
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The languages of (Northern) Guyana. Aboriginal Amerindian lgs: Arawak is in green, Carib lgs in red and Warao striped. Creole lgs are yellow, Berbice Dutch included (lower right quarter of the map). The country's official/national language is English, but the common language is Guyanese English Creole (yellow). Most of Guyana's 215,000 km² are uninhabited (white on the map) and the population is only 3/4 million, almost all living along the Atlantic coast, 44 % of East Indian, 30 % of West African, 9 % of aboriginal Amerindian and 17 % of mixed descent. A majority of the population are Hindu. (Map: www.ethnologue.com)

The African, Dutch and Arawak elements in Berbice Dutch

Albertha Bell and Arnold King, proud as they were of their predominantly Arawak ancestry, would have been shocked to learn that the language of their childhood years is of special interest to linguists because of its African linkages, with a group of languages spoken in the Southern coastal delta area of Nigeria, the Eastern Ijo languages. Thus, Berbice Dutch words such as *wari* 'house', *toko* 'child', *jefi* 'to eat', *mangi* 'to run', *kali* 'small', *bifi* 'speak', are all decidedly un-Dutch: these are words that derive from Eastern Ijo.

Essentially, Dutch and Eastern Ijo appear to have competed in the composition of the Berbice Dutch lexicon. Thus, we find Dutch-derived *man* 'man' and Eastern Ijo-derived *jerma* 'woman'; Dutch-derived *feshi* 'fish' and Eastern Ijo-derived *feni* 'bird'; Dutch-derived *grun* 'green' or 'unripe' and Eastern Ijo-derived *bjebje* 'yellow' or 'ripe'; Dutch-derived *hemdu* 'shirt' and Eastern Ijo-derived *bita* 'clothes', and so on.



About one-third of Berbice Dutch words derive from Eastern Ijo languages, Kalabari in particular, spoken along the coast of Southeastern Nigeria. The current president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, is Ijo. (Map: Wikimedia)

Arnold King tells of his younger years:

eke papa mete eke mama doto-te, an da eke grui-te mete en man,
my father and my mother died, and so it is that I grew up with a man,

pote Howard Hope, an shi jerma nam Alice Hope.
old Howard Hope, and his wife whose name was Alice Hope.

wel eke drai-te jungu man eni bara ben,
well I became a young man in their care (literally: in their hand)

an eke deki-te jerma an trou-te.
and I chose a woman and married.

Berbice Dutch mini vocabulary:

an 'and', *bara* 'hand', *ben* 'inside', *da* 'be' or 'it is', *deki* 'take', *doto* 'die', *drai* 'become', *eke* 'I' or 'my', *en* 'a', *eni* 'they' or 'their', *grui* 'grow', *jerma* 'woman' or 'wife', *jungu* 'young', *mama* 'mother', *man* 'man', *mete* 'with', *papa* 'father', *pote* 'old', *shi* 'his', *-te* (perfective), *trou* 'marry'

Of even more interest to linguists is the grammar of this language: Berbice Dutch has incorporated elements of the grammars of both Dutch and Eastern Ijo, but is nonetheless quite different from both.

The Arawak language, too, has made its contributions to the Berbice Dutch lexicon. But words such as *anwanwa* 'carrion crow', *kurheli* 'smoke', *sarapa* 'three-pronged arrow', *jaluku* 'ghost' are clearly not as essential to every-day communication as those contributed by Eastern Ijo and Dutch.

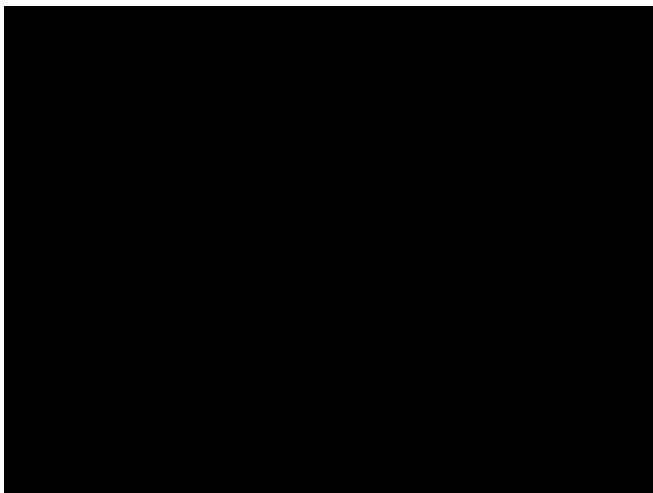
Lessons from Berbice Dutch

So this language is no more spoken. But it lives in recordings, video, and publications. Its special



Data courtesy of the World Language Mapping System
 The aboriginal language Arawak is dying, no children are learning it anymore. It is still spoken/remembered/know by some 2,000 elderlies in a handful of pockets across Guyana, Surinam, French Guiana and Venezuela. (Map: LL-Map)

combination of elements from three different source languages continues to be of interest to linguists who study language contact: it teaches us about the human capacity for resourcefulness, where people had to communicate across language barriers under very challenging circumstances. It also teaches us something about language death.



Barefooted Bertha Bell (right) with friend Hilda Adolphe (Photo: Silvia Kouwenberg)

Albertha Bell and Arnold King grew up in a changing world, one where the isolation of the deep interior bushland of Guyana was breaking down. The outside world entered in the form of pastors, school teachers, traders, and members of their community travelled to work elsewhere – and brought back money, the deadly flu which killed Arnold King’s parents, and the culture and language of coastal Guyana. The integration of communities along the Berbice River with the rest of the country of Guyana provided the motivation to speak English Creole and abandon Dutch Creole. Their children had hardly ever heard *di lanshi* until my arrival, in the late 1980s.

People have an uncanny ability to treat their language and cultural heritage as a commodity, to be discarded when it seems to be of little use to them or their children—only to regret the loss later in life. Many languages around the world are facing a similar fate. We had better hurry and record these languages before they are gone without a trace.

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 University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica*

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