

WEST INDIAN LANGUAGES: A REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

By Julian Granberry

In Douglas Taylor's *Languages of the West Indies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) we have the first, and to date only, attempt at broad coverage in a single volume of the early and extant languages of the West Indies.

The volume is appropriately divided into two sections: *Amerindian Languages* and *Creole Languages*, reflecting the two, largely discontinuous linguistic traditions of the region. Chapter 1 deals with two of the extinct Cariban languages of the area, Nepuyo and Yao, and with two extinct Arawakan languages, Shebayo and Taino, as well as with Arawak and Island Carib, the two surviving Amerindian languages. For all, wordlists are provided; in the case of Nepuyo, Shebayo, and Yao full lists of the extant data are provided, while only partial coverage is given to the lexicon of Taino. The lexicon of Island Carib is treated at length in Chapter 4. Chapters 2 and 3 present careful and rather complete statements on the phonology and grammar of Island Carib, and Chapter 5 concerns itself with the Carib (Karina) contribution to the language. The last chapter of this section on American Indian languages provides texts in Arawak, Central American Island Carib, and Karina, with wordlists for Arawak, Guajiro (Venezuela), Central American Island Carib, Karina (Guiana), and Warao (Orinoco Delta, Venezuela).

Part II, *Creole Languages*, begins, with Chapter 7, with a short discussion of Caribbean Creoles in general. Chapter 8 continues with a partial treatment of the linguistic structures of Saramacca from a comparative point of view (with Portuguese Guinea Creole, Sranan, and Papiamentu), while Chapter 9 provides a comparative grammatical survey of the Caribbean Creoles, concentrating heavily on those which are often erroneously referred to as 'French-based'. Chapter 10 is a succinct sketch of Dominican Creole, which is in the 'French-based' genre, and covers its phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures briefly but adequately. Chapter 11 provides some insight to the political and social structures in which Creole speakers must operate today, while the final chapter of the book, Chapter 12, gives text in Sranan and Dominican Creole as well as wordlists for Saramacca, Sranan, Negro Dutch (Virgin Islands), Papiamentu, Sãotomense (African Coast), Lesser Antillean, Haitian, Cayenne Creole, and, for comparative purposes Mauritius Creole (Indian Ocean). The bibliography which completes the volume is not exhaustive, but it is highly representative and up to date.

Douglas Taylor was, beyond question in the opinion of this writer, the finest linguist and ethnographer the West Indies has seen, not only since the days of

Las Casas, but including the men of that era as well. Coming to Dominica in 1938, Taylor quickly turned his attention to his newly acquired native land, developing a life-long interest in the lifeways and languages of its people and, by extension, of all the peoples of the southern part of the Caribbean basin. Whether it was his empirical training in the biological and physical sciences which contributed to the thoroughness of this work or simply his native insight and view of the world, his output of finely-honed data-based papers and monographs on West Indian languages, ethnography, and archaeology, the latter in coöperation with Irving Rouse, was prodigious from the start and remained so until his untimely death in 1980. He was a scholar of the first water, self-trained but extremely well-trained in the techniques and theory of modern linguistics, always aware of his own limitations as well as strong points. He was, above all, as those fortunate enough to have known him will enthusiastically attest, a gentleman of forthright opinion.

The caliber of the man and the precision of his work show clearly in *Languages of the West Indies*. Though written for the non-specialist, it shows the attention to completeness of detail and the ability to write well that characterized all of the author's earlier work. His descriptive statements are full, straightforward, and logical, and they will serve both as analytical statements of sharply focused, prismatic quality as well as data-sources for future workers in West Indian linguistics. The volume is an undeniable, major contribution to West Indian studies and will always hold a special place in that field.

It is, therefore, all the more regrettable that the book must receive some adverse criticism. Had the volume been titled *Sketches of Island Carib and Dominican Creole (With Notes on Other West Indian Languages)*, its true topic, it would have been received with nothing but well-deserved accolades. Its unfortunate titling, however, makes it impossible to leave the review with the bare statements given earlier, for, in truth, the volume does not effectively treat the *languages* of the West Indies. It lacks both balance and synthesis. From the title one would expect, either as a general or academic reader, a broad and in-depth survey of the languages of the West Indies, placed in at least a minimal archaeological and ethnohistoric context. One would expect approximately equal descriptive coverage of all languages spoken, with some attention given to the considerable problems of language-culture definition and interplay both within the West Indies proper and in the broader Gulf-Caribbean continuum—problems which have plagued research in the West Indies right up to the present.

These things simply do not happen in this volume. Though the section on Creole languages, for example, is by far the better of the two, even here there is significant imbalance. Dominican Creole, which Taylor knew best, is ably handled, and Saramacca is given good sketch treatment, but Jamaican, Papiamentu, and Haitian are given very short shrift, and one can not help but

gain the erroneous impression, especially if one is not a professional in Creole linguistics, that non-French-based Creoles are simply derivatives of that adequately and interestingly described (Chapter 9) generalized Caribbean Creole, ultimately Afro-Portuguese-based. While it seems increasingly true that all Creoles in the Caribbean ultimately go back to a kind of Proto-Afro-Portuguese pidgin and then *lingua franca*, Taylor's treatment implies, I think, a much greater degree of uniformity from Creole to Creole than actually exists at the present day. The considerable differentiating role played by English *vs.* French *vs.* Spanish *vs.* Dutch as languages of colonial domination is simply not discussed at any meaningful length. The reader does not acquire what, in the opinion of this writer, he should; namely, the vivid feeling of an ongoing, highly mutable, malleable social milieu, leading only ultimately to the Creoles of today.

The section on Amerindian languages is even more open to adverse criticism for the same reasons. It would have been especially here that Taylor could have made a very important contribution to West Indian ethno- and historical linguistics. Knowing the man and his good empirical sense, I suspect he felt the available data on extinct Indian languages were too scanty to admit of even speculative synthesis, and therefore they were not presented at all. Taylor never liked speculation for speculation's sake.

The gap, however, is most unfortunate, for ultimate solution to what is perhaps the most vexing of problems in West Indian anthropology — what are the interrelationships and, particularly, origins of the Lithic and Archaic traditions in the islands — hinges to a great degree on the language affiliations of just those extinct West Indian languages which Taylor by-passes: Ciboney (Cuba), Macorixe (Cuba), Maisi (Cuba), Guaccaierima (Haiti), Ciguayo (Santo Domingo), and Guaiquerí (Isla de Margarita).

Taylor states (p. 14, paragraph 2) that we have little more than the bare names of these tribal groups. This is, however, crucially not the case, for toponyms from pre-colonial times are still in everyday use in all the regions inhabited at the time of the Conquest by the non- (and presumably pre-) Arawak peoples. This is particularly the case in far western Cuba and sections of southern Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Most of them have, in fact, been well documented and described by either Zayas y Alfonso or Emiliano Tejera in their respective works on Taino lexicography. These known lists are considerably more substantive than the Nepuyo, Shebayo, or Yao lists given in full by Taylor. One wonders why the other lists were ignored.

Taylor aptly points out that both the early and extant Amerindian languages of the West Indies are members of only three language families: Arawak, Carib, and Warao (p. 13), but he makes no further mention of the Warao, other than to refer to Henry Osborn's fine work on that language (p. 15, paragraph 1), provide a short Warao wordlist (pp. 146-148), and mention that it has been suggested that the extinct Guaiquerí of Margarita may have spoken a Waroid language (p.

14, paragraph 2). The Waroid problem, however, is of extreme importance in handling the problems of cultural origins in the West Indies, for, as Johannes Wilbert has documented in the *Prólogo* to Basilio María Barral's *Diccionario Guarao-Español* (Caracas, 1957), not only do Guaiquerí toponyms seem distinctly Waroid, but so do toponyms in regions formerly occupied by the Ciboney, Macorixe, Maisi, Guaiccaerima, and Ciguayo.

Additional data, linguistic, archaeological, and ethnographic, point to a Waroid connection for at least some, if not all, of the non- and pre-Arawak peoples of the Greater Antilles. The Warao of the Orinoco Delta themselves have a tradition of origin far, far to the west of their present locale. What little work has been done on comparing Warao with other Amerindian languages seems to indicate a distant relationship with languages of the Macro-Chibchan phylum, which is centered not on the eastern coast of South America but in Central America and the northern littoral of Colombia, reinforcing the Warao ethnographic tradition and itself reinforced by the Waroid nature of Guaiquerí toponyms. The increasingly probable fact that the extinct Timucua language of north and central Florida was Waroid, that the toponyms of Ciboney regions are Waroid, and that there has long been noticed a similarity between the archaeologically defined artifacts of the cultures of the St. Johns tradition in north Florida and the Guayabo Blanco culture (probably ancestral Ciboney, at least non-Taino) in Cuba, lends further credence to a hypothesis of very early, very widespread Waroid influence in the West Indies and neighboring regions.

As José Cruxent and Irving Rouse have pointed out in their article of November 1969, 'Early Man in the West Indies' (*Scientific American*), Lithic and Archaic Age finds in the West Indies were then limited to the Greater Antilles, and, adding post-1969 data, one may still state that the earliest and greatest concentration of such archaeological finds comes from that region. The nature and technologies used to produce the tool kits of those culture do not seem to fit temporally with either a definite South American or Floridian origin. Their closest correlates, though in a Ceramic complex, are still on the Honduran and Nicaraguan coasts of Central America.

The late James Ford, in his monumental work *A Comparison of Formative Cultures in the Americas* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 1969) has convincingly postulated at least one literal population movement from the same Central American coast to the St. Johns River-St. Simons Island area of the Georgia-Florida border about 2000 B.C. If his interpretation is accurate, it would seem to render earlier migrations just that much more probable, in view of the fact that the Mid-Caribbean islands from San Andrés and Providencia in an arc to the south Jamaican coast were considerably further above sea level at that earlier time than in either 2000 B.C. or now.

Without postulating any specific interconnections between individual Lithic and Archaic Age traditions within the West Indies, such as Guayabo Blanco

and Mordán, archaeological data indicates a Central American origin for the traits involved. All linguistic data clearly points to Waroid. Since linguistic as well as ethnographic data, in turn, indicate an original north Colombian or Central American origin for Waroid linguistic traits, both linguistics and archaeology are, in effect, suggesting that the earliest inhabitants of the West Indies may have come not from mainland South America and not from Florida, but, rather, from Central America, the most likely choice being speakers of a Pre- or Proto-Waroid language. I will not, at this point, debate the sagacity of making linguistic-archaeologic links, other than to point out that, à-la-Sapir-Whorf, it seems a general rule that language does mirror other kinds of behavior, and speakers of similar languages tend to have similar material cultures. Languages and kinesic behavior (that is, motion and its by-product, artifacts) do not exist in separate vacuums.

The emerging testable hypothesis is, then, that in migrations beginning around 5000 - 3000 B.C. groups of Waroid-speaking Indians left their Honduran or Nicaraguan homeland and moved: (1) out into the Caribbean, reaching Cuba and Santo Domingo, and, ultimately, by way of the Gulf Stream, Florida, and (2) to the southeast along the Central American coast to Colombia and Venezuela, as far as their present location in the Orinoco Delta and the Atlantic coast. To judge from the lack of agreement in trait complexes of such sites as Mordán in the Dominican Republic and Guayabo Blanco in Cuba, it seems likely that more than one migration took place, probably over a prolonged period of time.

It may, as a corollary, be suggested that long familiarity with this route may have been what made possible the very sudden appearance of Machalilla-like pottery on the Georgia-Florida coast at about 2000 B.C.

This general hypothesis calls for considerable work in the field and analysis, both in archaeology and linguistics, before it can either be accepted or refuted. If verified, it will take additional work before a truly meaningful synthesis can be attempted. For this reason every bit of new data, analytical work on that data, and tentative synthesis is of great value. It is this chance, primarily, which Taylor seems not to have wanted to seize. Certainly this problem—of origins—is one which every reader, lay or professional, would expect to find at least discussed, though certainly not solved, in any volume called *Languages of the West Indies*. Taylor, with his very real gift for writing clearly, could have presented this material in a concise, non-technical manner.

It is, lastly, to be regretted that, in spite of the paucity of recorded Taino words, Taylor did not examine them more exhaustively in that section of the book (pp. 17-22). From even the meager listings in early Spanish sources, all of which are not included in these pages, there are some statements, hesitant though they would have to be, which could have been made on probable dialect divergencies, for example.

It remains the case, however, in spite of my criticisms, that the reader will find this volume of considerable interest, well-written and well-presented. It will remain a volume of durable worth. If imbalance and lack of adequate synthesis are its faults, its overall contribution to West Indian studies will nevertheless remain considerable, and the volume is, indeed, a positive must for anyone in this field.