



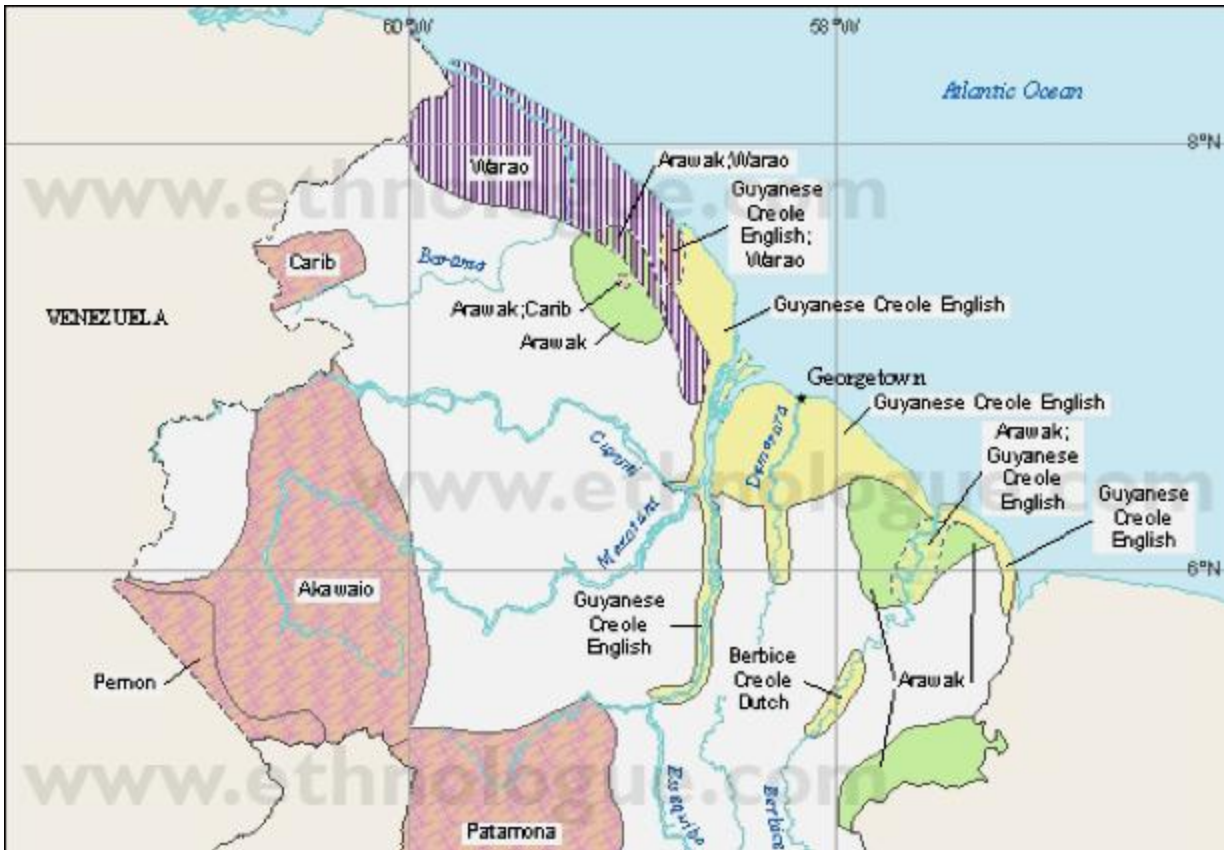
103 years old Albertha Bell, the Last Speaker of Berbice Dutch Creole, interviewed by Jamiekan Langwij Yuunit in 2004.

Echoes of Berbice Dutch Creole

By Dmitri Allicock

“Language reflects our thoughts and knowledge is lost when it becomes extinct”

Guyana is the only English-speaking country in South America, but English has been the official language for much less than the 232 years when Dutch was the main medium of communication. The actual words spoken by most Guyanese is an English base creole that is very elastic to various regions and has slight historical influences from Dutch, West African, Arawakan, and to a lesser extent Indian Languages. **Berbice Dutch Creole** was a language developed by the slaves on the plantation of Berbice that survived the passage of time and only recently was considered officially extinct by international language database [Ethnologue](#).



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)

Berbice Dutch was a [Dutch-based creole language](#) of [Guyana](#) and had a [lexicon](#) partly based on a dialect of the West African language of [Ijaw](#). In contrast to the widely known [Negerhollands](#), Dutch creole spoken in the [Virgin Islands](#), Berbice Creole Dutch and its relative **Skepi Dutch Creole** of Essequibo were more or less unknown to the outside world until Ian Robertson first reported on the two languages in 1975.

Dutch linguist **Silvia Kouwenberg** and professor, University of the West Indies, Jamaica investigated the creole language, publishing its grammar in 1993. The breakdown on the language is said to be 30% is of eastern Ijaw (Kalabari) West African origins. 60% is Dutch, and 10% is from Arawak or Guyanese English



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

Creole. Swadesh wordlist gives another breakdown: Dutch 57%, Eastern Ijo 38%, Arawak 1%, and Guyanese.

The language developed from Berbice Dutch plantation colony in areas along the Berbice River as a simple means of communication between African slaves, Dutch planters and the indigenous Arawaks. This creole began its demise with the moving of the plantation economy to the coast. The latter was further compounded with the takeover of the region by the English in 1814. The language was one of the first to be discarded with the prevalence of the English creole language in the British take over.

Professor Kouwenberg, on December 29 2011 on Berbice Dutch highlighted Arnold King and 103 year old Albertha Bell, the Last Speakers of Berbice Dutch, who was interviewed by Jamiekan Langwij Yuunit in 2004, before her death, had this to say, “Known to its speakers as *di lanshi* 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.

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

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 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."

He cont'd, "Moreover, the colony had been established on soil which could not sustain long-term farming practices; it was located on the upper reaches of a river whose mouth was made impassable for sea-worthy ships by sand banks (a serious drawback for an export-oriented economy); was run by unscrupulous individuals whose unhealthy life-style moreover meant a quick succession of owners. In all, the colony suffered much instability and long-term prospects were poor.

Its end came when, during the nineteenth century, an impressive feat of Dutch hydraulic engineering made coastal lands available for planting. The upriver plantations of the Berbice were abandoned in favor of coastal locations, taking advantage of the fertile alluvial soil and accessibility for sea-shipping of the coastal locations.

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.

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.”

Language reflects our thoughts and knowledge is lost when it becomes extinct. About 6,000 different languages are spoken around the world. But the Foundation for Endangered Languages estimates that between 500 and 1,000 of those are spoken by only a handful of people. And every year the world loses around 25 mother tongues. That equates to losing 250 languages over a decade - a sad prospect for some and lost history. Albertha Bell and Arnold King represented echoes of living history of the early people of Guyana and precious roots to preserve.