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Impact of Migration on Language: The Case of Curaçao

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to analyze the influence of migration on the Papiamento language in Curaçao. Methodology: The paper draws from published articles and reports on migration, data from the Bureau of Statistics, and interviews with key informants. Findings: Although the position of Papiamento has changed, the magnitude of this change and the reasons behind it are difficult to determine due to the lack of official data. Originality: The article is part of a larger body of work addressing this phenomenon. The evidence provided in Small States & Territories offers a valuable perspective on the impact of migration on language. Conclusions: Although the position of Papiamento language has experienced fluctuations in the past, it remains very strong and is value to Curaçao community is expected to remain stable. Paper type: Inventory study

Keywords - Curaçao, Migration, Papiamento

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the effect of dramatic population changes—due to rapid emigration, immigration, or both—on the language use in small states by examining the case of Curaçao. These dynamics bring their own set of challenges, including shifts in the relevance of traditional local languages, as international languages—notably English, French, and Chinese—become more prevalent. In some cases, these new languages are adopted in the formal curriculum. Moreover, use of teaching materials in non-traditional languages inevitably leads to changes in school staff composition, which can be problematic when foreigners do not speak the local language, dialect, or creole. In education, preference is given to those from Suriname as this country also has Dutch-language education, and the working conditions there are less attractive than in Curaçao. However, their departure would result in similar staff shortages in Surinam. Thus, it is important to examine this phenomenon and ascertain if it influences the traditional disposition of small state citizens towards multilingualism.

There is no doubt that, in Curaçao, latent language 'conflict' has been going on for decades, as even though most of the Curaçao population speaks Papiamento and English, were not recognized as official languages—along with Dutch—until 2007. Preceding this important change, attempts were made in 1984 to standardize the use of Papiamento, allowing its introduction in primary schools and secondary schools in 1986 and 1991, respectively. In reality, however, Dutch has remained in a strong position because it is the language of government and the rule of law. Nonetheless, Papiamento is widely spoken in everyday life, but due to lack of official data as a result of the postponement of the 2021 census, additional data collection efforts are required.

To this end, a survey was conducted in August 2022 to better understand the language use on the island, with a particular focus on education (Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2022). The findings depicted in Figure 1 indicate that Papiamento is spoken in most social contexts, including instruction and support in education. On the other hand, only 9% of the population speak Dutch at home, as its use is largely restricted to legislation. English is spoken privately by only 3% of the island residents, but it is becoming increasingly prevalent in business and is slowly emerging as a second language and language of instruction in education.

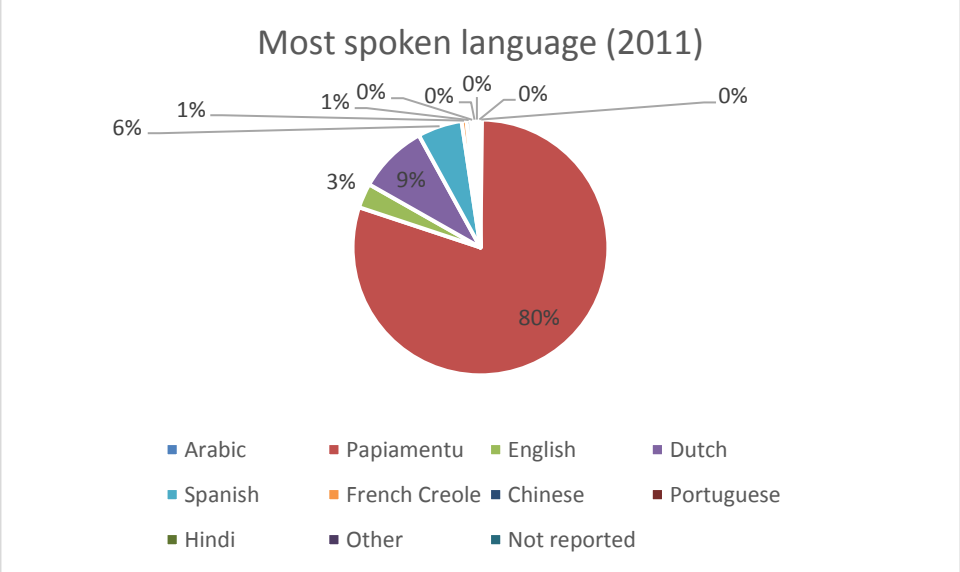


Figure 1. Most spoken language (Census, 2011).

THE ROLE OF DEMOGRAPHICS IN THE LANGUAGE USE

To put the data presented above into some context, it is worth noting that in the 1998–2002 period, Curaçao experienced a population decline due to an emigration wave motivated by the need to find work abroad. Although this trend was reversed by 2017, it was followed by another decline (Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2022). As a result of this phenomenon, the population of Curaçao has become older, and the participation in the labor market has decreased to 60%. The informal sector is estimated at 6%, not including undocumented citizens. Given that these adverse effects are caused by emigration of those that are of working age, selective migration policies are needed to offset this trend and solve labor market shortages, stimulate economic growth, and offer an alternative to the informal sector. Experts also concur that labor immigration can mitigate the increase in the deficits in the AOV fund (the general pension fund), while also benefitting the Curaçao residents economically. To this end, 2,700 undocumented migrants who legally entered the country before March 13th, 2020 have been allowed to arrange their documents and 35–40% are expected to join the formal labor market (Noodzaak inclusief migatiebeleid; Rondetafelbijeenkomst: Periodieke dialoog met alle stakeholders, 2022).

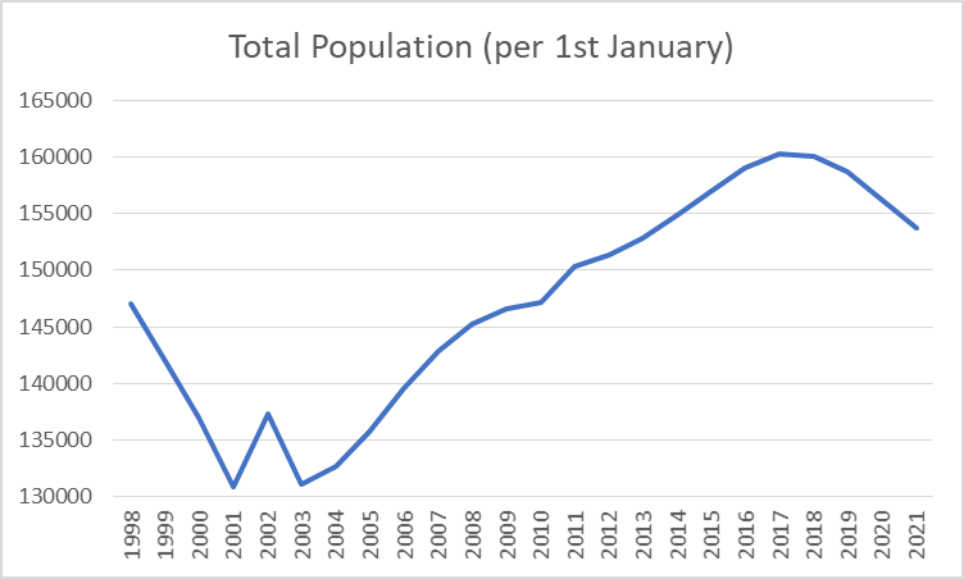


Figure 2. Total population on January 1st 1998–2021 (https://www.cbs.cw/population-tables).

Still, given the growing economic hardship at the global level, which is also acutely felt in Curaçao, further exodus is expected, comparable to that which took place in the mid and late 1990s (Figure 2). However, if we go back to 1938, as this is the first year for which the Central Bureau for Statistics of Curaçao (CBS) has published data, it is evident that the population has been growing much slower in recent decades (Figure 3).

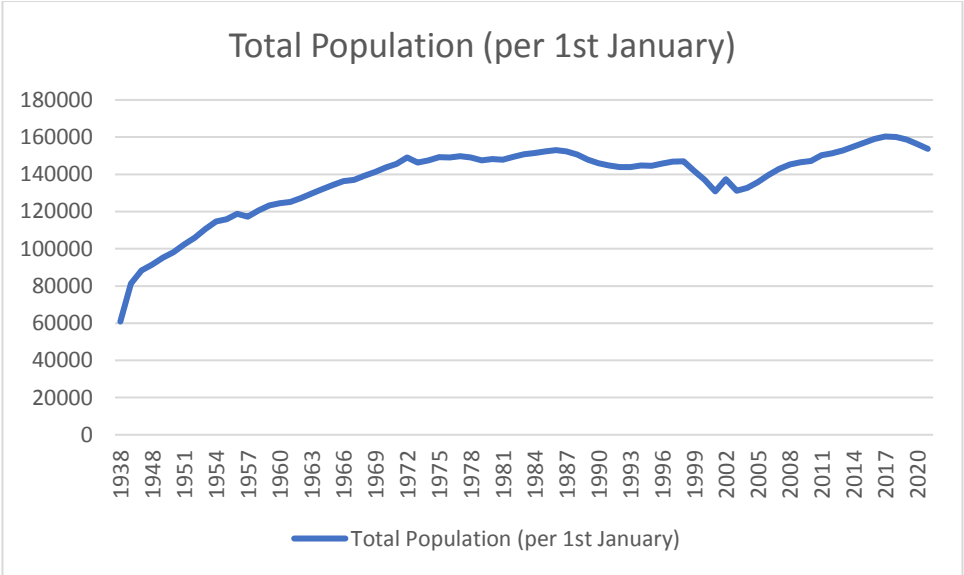


Figure 3. Total population on January 1st 1938–2021 (https://www.cbs.cw/population-tables).

For example, on January 1st, 2022, the country had a registered population of 151,066, 54.6% of whom were women. While this is lower than 153,671 reported for 2021, it is still higher than in most preceding years largely due to emigration (which tended to range from 3,500 to 5,500 individuals in most years), but also fewer births and a higher death rate. The highest number

of emigrants (6,200) was noted in 2019, 83% of whom chose The Netherlands as their destination.

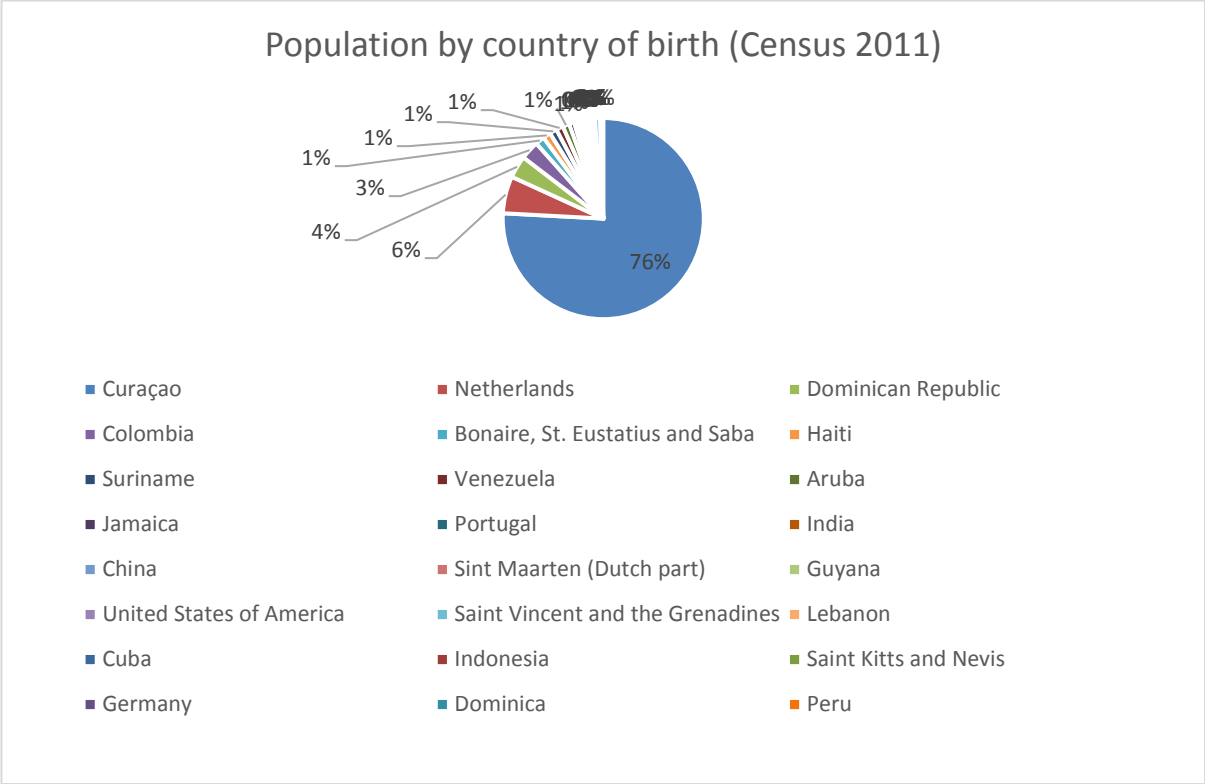


Figure 4. Population by country of birth (Census, 2011).

It is also worth noting that, according to Figure 4, 76% of the country's population was born in Curaçao, followed by The Netherlands (6%), the Dominican Republic (4%), and Colombia (3%).

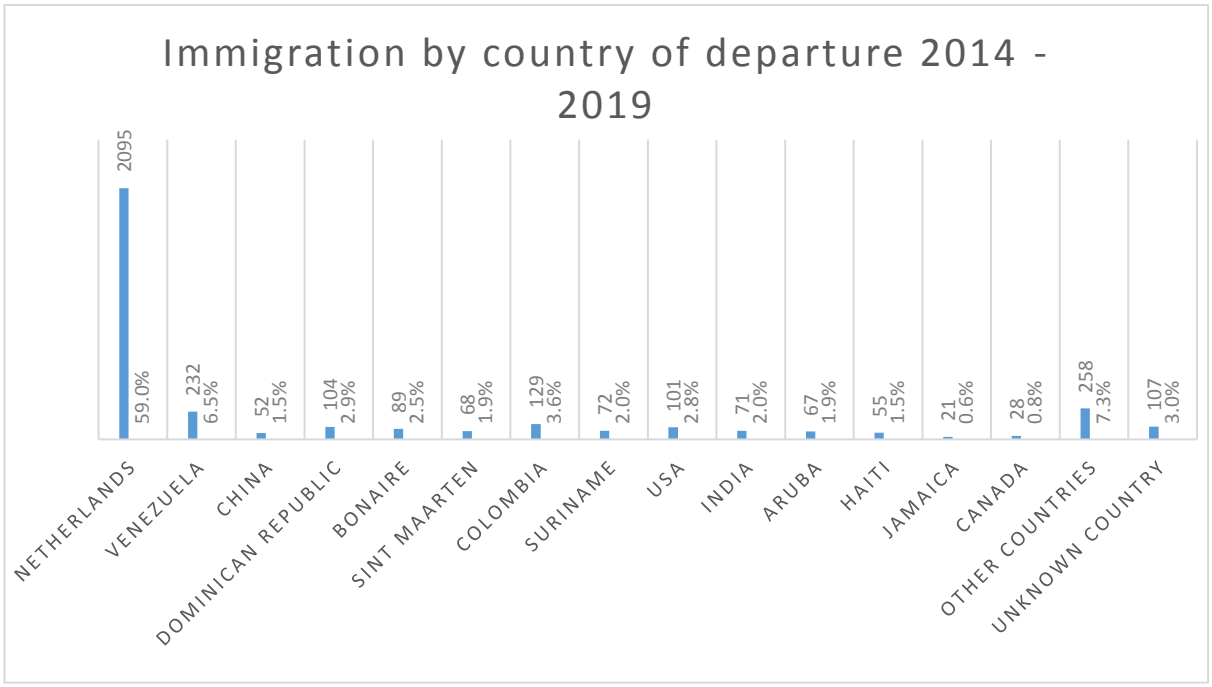


Figure 5. Immigration by country of departure 2014–2019.

These figures should also be compared with the immigration trends shown in Figure 5, indicating that 59% of those that arrived to the country in the 2014–2019 period were from The Netherlands, 6.5% were from Venezuela, and 3.6% were from Colombia.

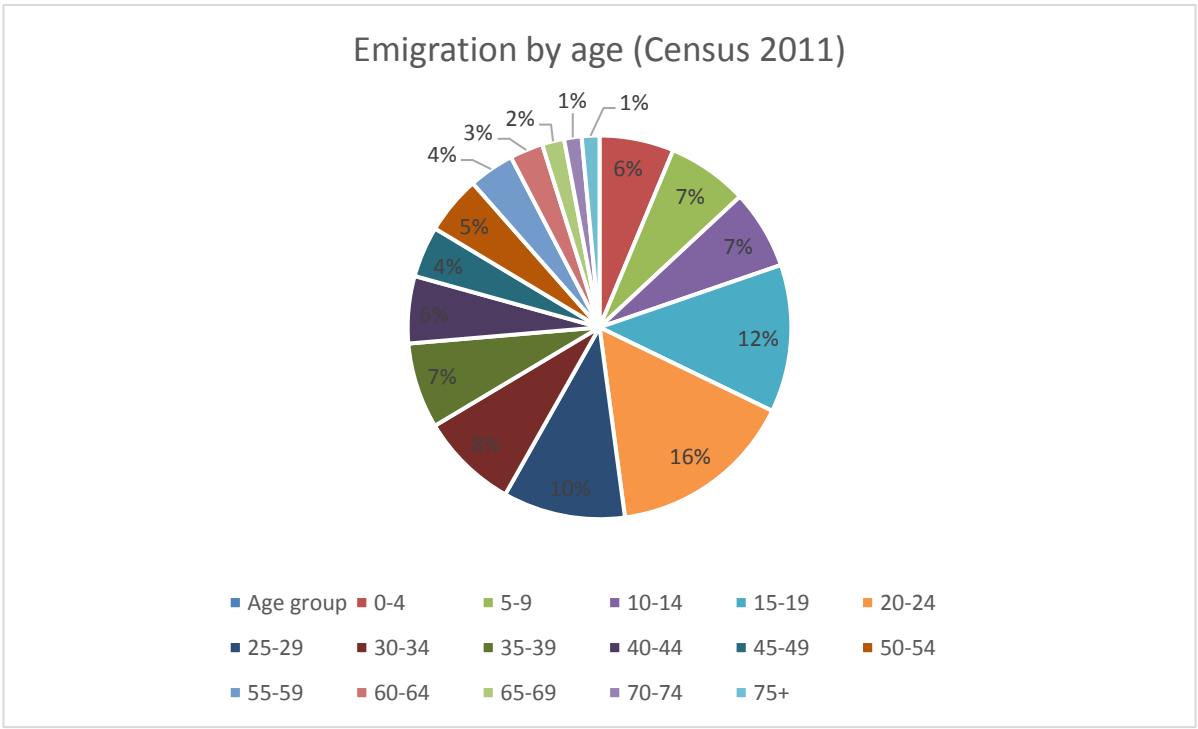


Figure 6. Emigration by age (Census, 2011).

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Figure 6 further shows that, among those that choose to leave the country, those aged 15–29 years predominate. However, the figures above do not provide the full picture, as Curaçao is a popular destination for retirees, who may spend six months or less per year on the island but are not captured in the official statistics. Still, even if this segment of population is not considered, it is evident from Figure 7 that Curaçao is aging at a rapid pace, as in 1992 only 8% of the residents were aged above 65, and this figure reached 20% by 2022. To a certain extent, that may benefit the popularity of Papiamento, which is spoken more by older residents.

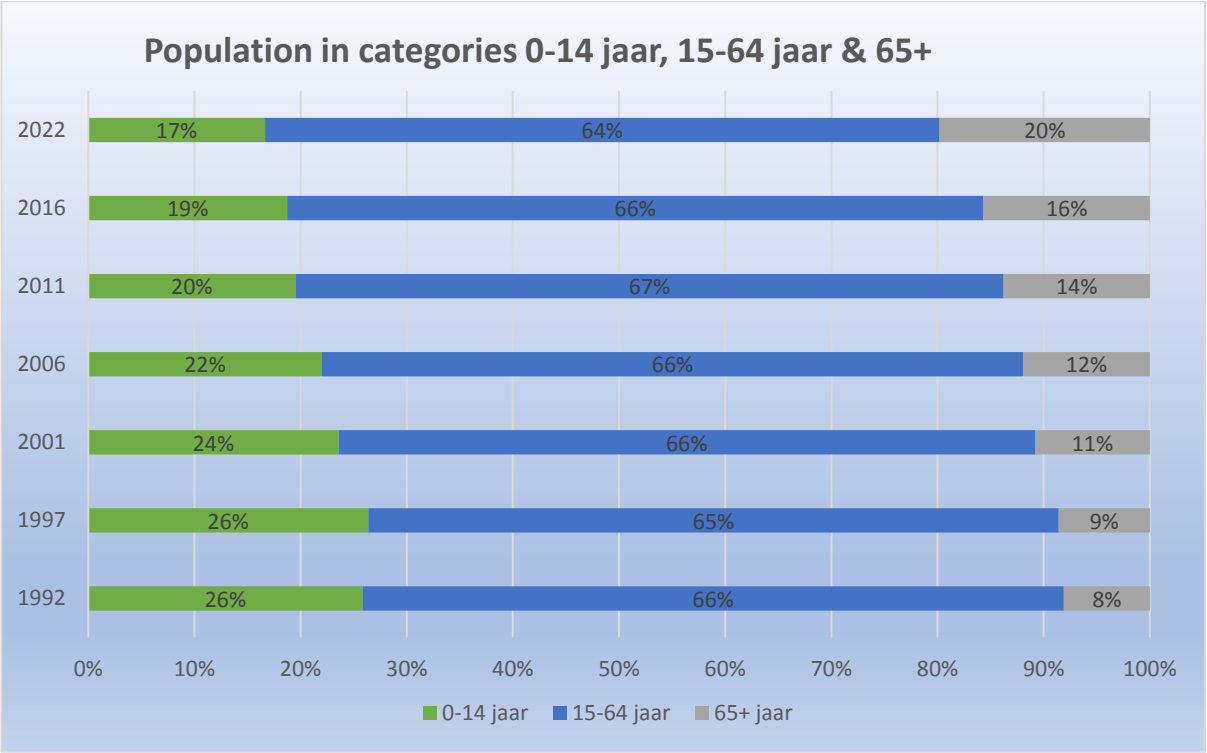


Figure 7. Population in categories 0–14 years, 15–64 years & 65+ years (https://www.cbs.cw/population-tables).

MIGRATION AND LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME

According to the available data, 80% of the Curaçao population speaks Papiamento at home and this figure has remained relatively constant in the last two decades, as shown in Figure 8.

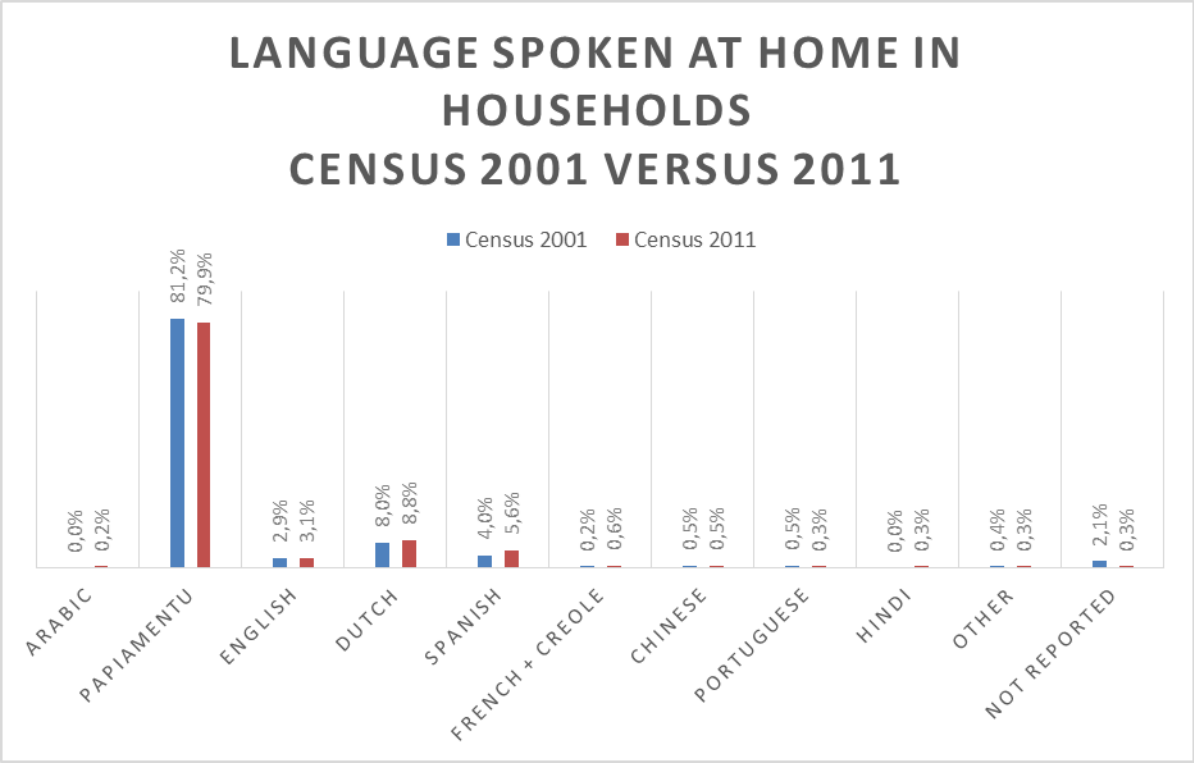


Figure 8. Language spoken at home 2001 versus 2011.

On the other hand, the percentage of individuals speaking Dutch, Spanish, French, and Creole has increased between 2001 and 2011, with Spanish as the most rapidly growing language on the island.

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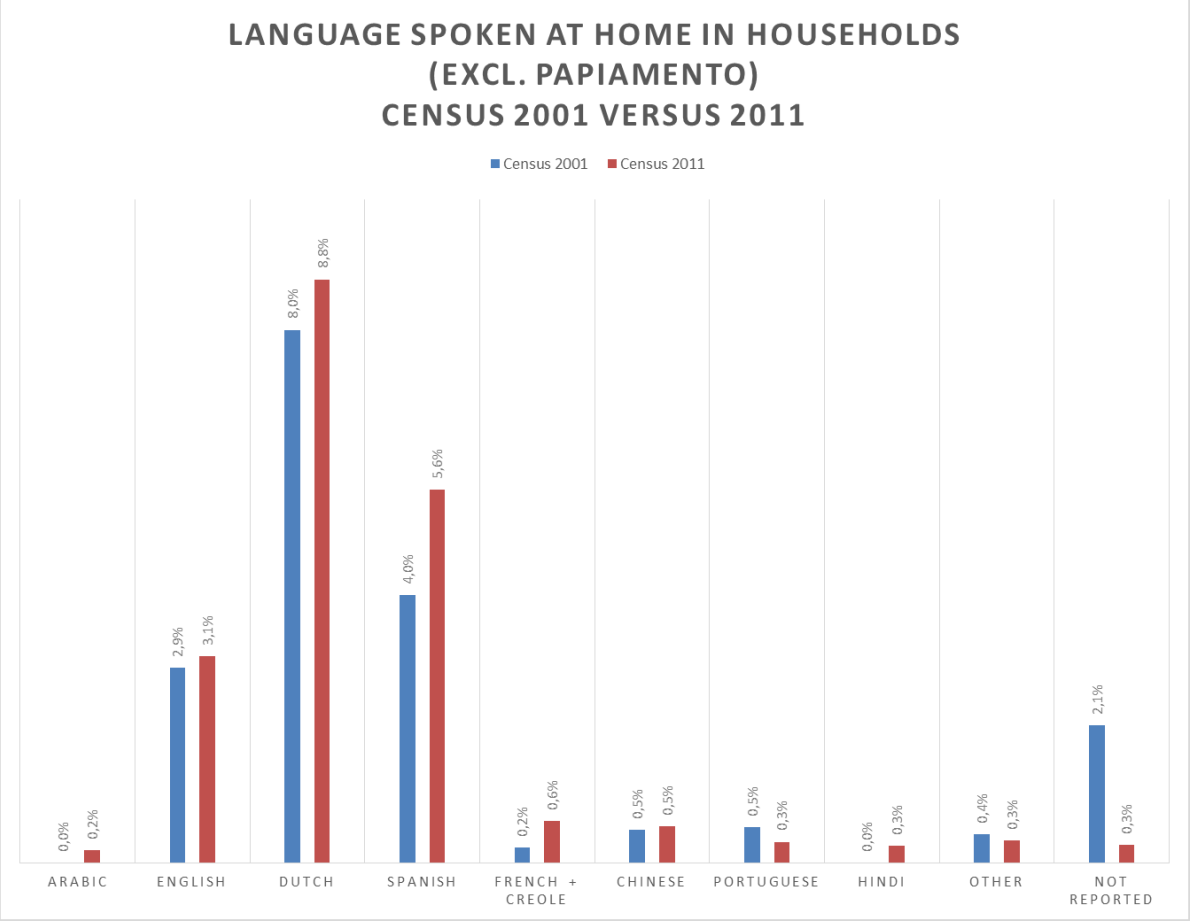


Figure 9. Language spoken at home 2001 versus 2011, excluding Papiamento.

MIGRATION BACKGROUND AND RESIDENCE STATUS

Curaçao has dozens of different nationalities, which ensures cultural diversity. Most immigrants from the region come from the Dominican Republic and Colombia, followed by Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica. Due to the political and social unrest in Venezuela, the number of Venezuelan migrants in Curaçao has increased in recent years. However, many are undocumented, making it difficult to quantify their numbers. Many people from other countries or parts of the Kingdom live in Curaçao. Still, due to the unfavorable economic conditions in Curaçao, between 1998 and 2001, the number of emigrants was significantly higher than the number of immigrants, as shown in Figure 10.

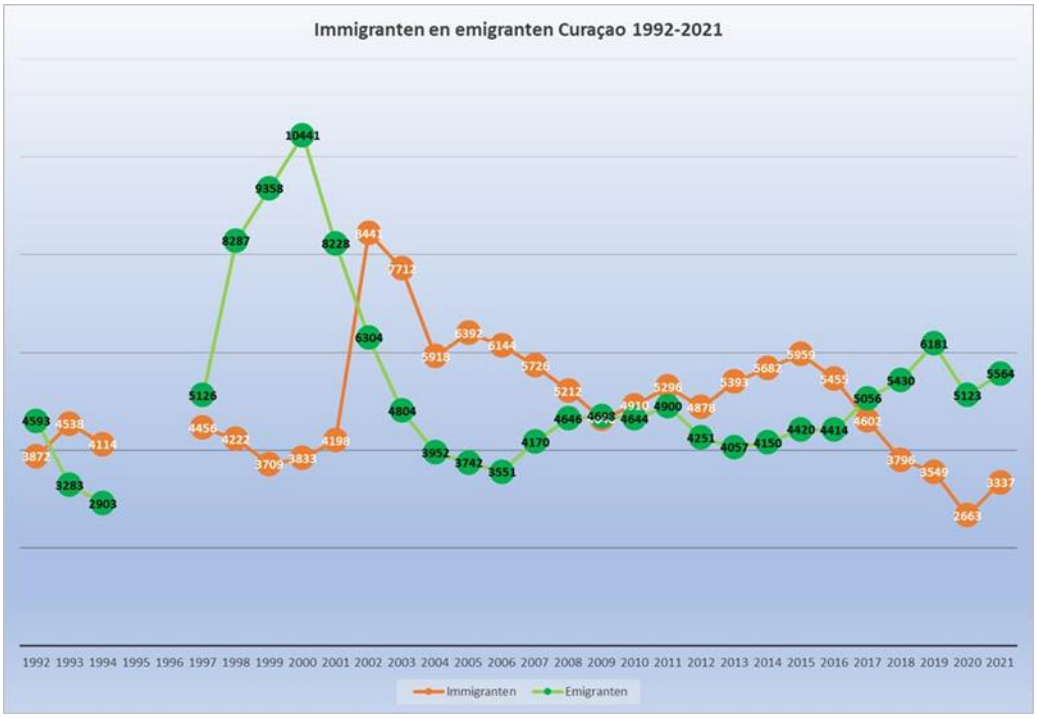


Figure 10. Immigrants and emigrants, Curaçao 1992–2021.

ILLEGAL OR UNDOCUMENTED RESIDENTS

At present, it is estimated that at least 20,000 undocumented individuals reside on the island, most of whom are believed by the experts to speak Spanish and come from Venezuela (Schaduw van Venezuela over Curacao, 2020). However, others suggest that between 9,000 and 27,000 Venezuelans have arrived to the country illegally over the years (van Dam & Hendriksen, 2021). As a result of their undocumented status, it is impossible to assess the influence of Spanish on the local community. The men mainly work in construction, while the women mainly work in the service sector, especially in the hospitality industry and some even prostitution. Thus, as their interaction with the local population is frequent and in Spanish, it is expected that this will lead to the greater acceptance of Spanish in everyday communication (Noodzaak inclusief migatiebeleid; Rondetafelbijeenkomst: Periodieke dialoog met alle stakeholders, 2022).

To estimate the impact of migration on the language use on the island, a scenario was developed in which 10,000 Venezuelans and 1,000 legal Dutch immigrants settled on the island, as this reflects the current situation. According to the findings yielded by this simulation presented in Figure 11, Papiamento's position would still remain dominant, even though the percentage of population that speak it at home would decline to 70%. On the other hand, use of Spanish would increase to 16%, suggesting that this is likely already the case, but cannot be confirmed due to the lack of data.

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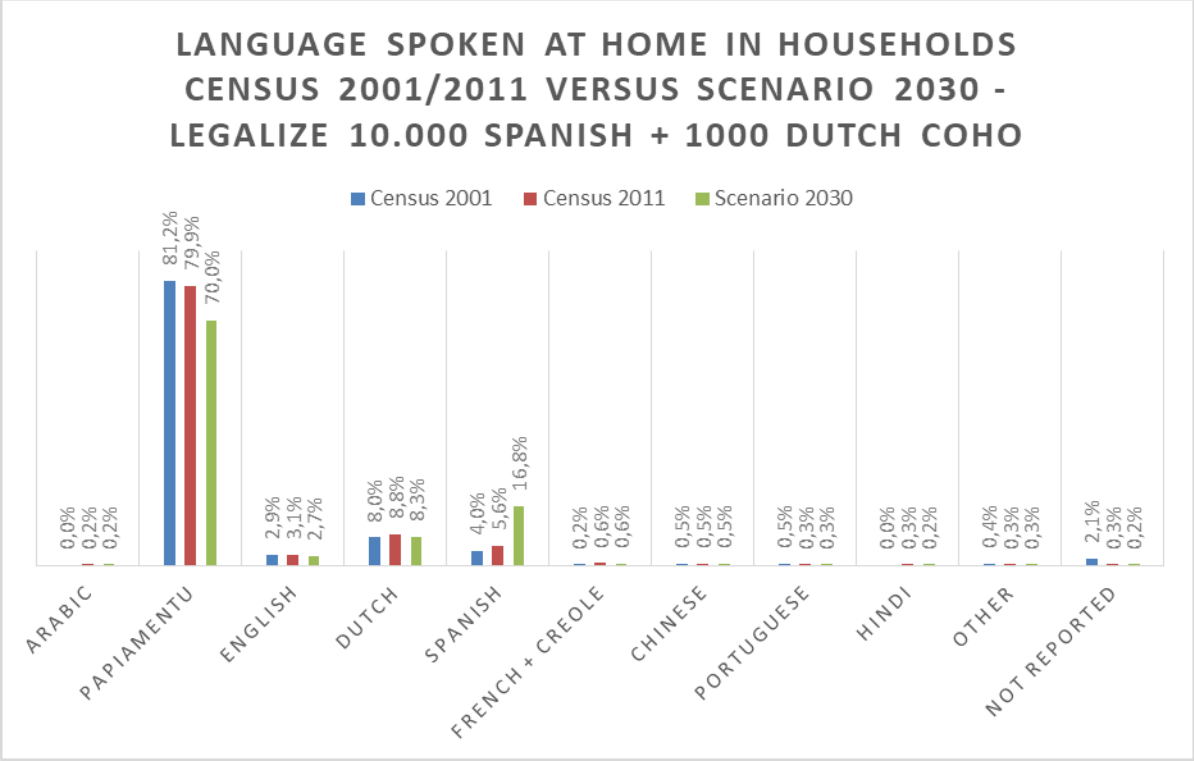


Figure 11. Scenario of the language spoken at home if 10,000 Venezuelans are legalized, and 1,000 Dutch came to live in Curaçao in 2030.

EDUCATION IN CURAÇAO

Compulsory education in Curaçao has been in force since January 1st, 1992. Under these rules, all individuals under the age of 18 are required to attend school and can pursue preparatory secondary vocational education (VSBO), practical framework-oriented learning path (PKL), or theoretical framework-oriented learning path (TKL), HAVO-VWO or an equivalent, recognized training designated by the minister. However, in the last 30 years, the number of pupils that met these criteria declined sharply. In 1992, there were 34,039 students between the ages of 4 and 18 (out of a total population of 144,097), while only 24,736 (out of a total population of 151,066) were registered in 2022.

All immigrant children, including those not included in the population register, have access to education in Curaçao. However, as unregistered pupils cannot obtain a diploma, they would struggle to continue their studies beyond compulsory schooling.

FREEDOM IN THE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION LEADS TO DIFFUSE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

The National Ordinance Fundamental Education (P.B. 2008, no. 84, art 10), the National Ordinance on Secondary Education (P.B. 1979, no 29, art 12), and the National Ordinance Secondary Vocational Education and Education (P.B. 2008, no. 37, art 13) are based on a language situation in the period prior to 2010, when Curaçao was still part of the Netherlands Antilles. For primary education, the competent authority—the school board—decides which of

the three official languages, or bilingual variants thereof, will be used as instruction languages.[1] For secondary education, the language of instruction may be one of the three official languages. Still, the same language must be adopted for all subjects in the entire curriculum or one or more pathways in the education offered by the school. For secondary vocational education, content can be taught in Dutch or English, while the competent authority can choose to use Papiamento as the language of instruction at levels 1 and 2. In practice, this freedom in language choice means that different languages are used side by side in all schools, with different starting points and roles. As a result, teachers switch from one language to another, and many students do not master the official languages at the level required by the government policy at the end of their school career. Given that Dutch is a foreign language for most students, as it is neither spoken at home nor in their immediate environment, and there is not much media in Dutch, education is their only opportunity to develop proficiency in this language.

POSITION OF PAPIAMENTO IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

In 1985, Papiamento was introduced for the first time as a school subject, and officially became the language of instruction in 2002. As a result, the 2002/2003 policy mandated the implementation of the first cycle (4 to 8-year-olds). At present, Papiamento or Dutch, or a combination of these, is the language of instruction in all schools. Given that in the 2002/2003 academic year, Papiamento was used as the instruction language in only four schools, in 2007/2008, Minister Leeflang adopted the law on official languages and language of instruction which gave the school boards (the competent authority) the power to choose the language(s) of education. This prompted some schools to start introducing English as the language of instruction.

This is not surprising, given that several languages are spoken and taught inside and outside education in Curaçao. In the National Ordinance on Official Languages (P.B. 2007, no. 20) English, Dutch, and Papiamento were officially granted equivalent position, whereas the official spelling of Papiamento and Dutch was laid down in the National Decree on spelling Papiamentu and Dutch (P.B. 2009, no. 4).

According to Article 10 of the National Ordinance of Fundamental Education, a competent authority decides whether English, Dutch, or Papiamento is used at school. In practice, the school boards have opted for the following options:

1. Dutch-speaking school
2. Papiamento language school
3. Bilingual school with literacy in Dutch
4. Bilingual school with Papiamentu literacy

It is also worth noting that in 2021/2022, of the 47 subsidized primary schools, 8 (17%) adopted option 1 (Dutch), 5 (11%) option 2 (Papiamento), 17 (36%) option 3 (Bilingual Dutch), and 17 (36%) option 4 (Bilingual Papiamento).

[1] In September 2022, the first class of primary education in a school providing only education in Dutch introduced English lessons in the pursuit of multilingual education. This illustrates shift towards English (Engelse les vanaf groep: Marnix funderend onderwijs begint er vroeg mee, 2022).

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Foundation R.K. Central School Board has indicated that it will change the language of instruction at some of its schools as of August 1st, 2023.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Curaçao has had a scholarship policy since the 1950s, mostly funding education in The Netherlands. Although, since 2000, the local universities and institutions in the region have become more attractive to local students, about 300 still leave for The Netherlands each year and most never return. Given that the best students are continuing to leave the island and choose to settle in The Netherlands, this will have detrimental effect on Papiamento. Even the graduates that do return have mastered Dutch and would struggle to function in the local context where Papiamento is dominant and English, Spanish, and other languages are also spoken. Due to the lack of data, however, it is difficult to provide more information on this topic.
Religion

Language use on the island is also influenced by the Catholic church, as 80% of the residents are of this denomination and 16 of the 27 Catholic priests on the island are Latinos (59%), while only two are natives. Others are from Poland, The Netherlands, Italy, and the Philippines. Although most services are held in Papiamento, the use of Dutch, English, and Spanish is on the rise.

HEALTHCARE

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, due to the growing demand for healthcare workers, many of the locals have left for The Netherlands (including the special municipality of Bonaire) as they are actively recruited by institutions from those countries. This strategy has left many vacancies in the care sector which were mostly filled by people from the region, including Venezuelans.

Still, Latinization of healthcare is not a new phenomenon, as doctors have been coming from Cuba or Venezuela for decades, and several of the doctors currently working on the island were trained in Costa Rica. On the other hand, when local doctors are trained in The Netherlands, they rarely return to the island, because The Netherlands is more advanced and offers greater career prospects.

MEDIA

With thirty radio stations, three television stations, and eight newspapers, there is an extensive media offering on the island besides social media. In this sector, Papiamento still predominates. However, as thousands of channels are available via cable, satellite, and the internet, residents of all ethnicities can access the media in their home country if they wish. While the Dutch and U.S. channels remain most popular, a few years ago one of the television stations reintroduced the Latin Amican Soap, the novela. In the sixties, these novelas had a significant influence and were one of the main reasons for the popularity of Spanish language.

SPORTS

In Curaçao, children from all backgrounds are involved in sports and Papiamento still remains the language spoken on the field. There are, however, clubs that are ethnicity-based and where Dutch, Spanish, or English is spoken. One noticeable development is the national soccer team

mostly comprising players from The Netherlands with at least one parent of Curaçoan descent. As this is also the case for the technical staff, the press conferences are held in Dutch.
The baseball team of the Kingdom of The Netherlands consists mainly of players from Curaçao and Aruba. Even the technical staff consists of persons of Curaçoan descent. However, Dutch is the main language.

CULTURE, MUSIC, AND FILM

In this domain, Papiamento is dominant, albeit with many international influences, especially in music and film, where Dominican influence is evident. Many artists however focus or operate on the Dutch or European market, thus popularizing Papiamento abroad.

CONCLUSIONS

There has undoubtedly been a shift in the position of the Papiamento language in Curaçao, mostly due to migration, but also growing adoption of Dutch and English in formal education in response to the recognition that speaking these languages will offer children greater future prospects.

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