

## The proverbial word in Sranan.

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One etymological puzzle in the continuing quest for the origins of the lexicon of the Surinamese English-lexifier creole language *Sranan* concerns the source of the word *ódo* ‘proverb’. Semantically speaking, the concept of ‘proverb’ is not unrelated to the concept of ‘word’. The German *Spruchwort*, and the Dutch *spreekwoord* are an indication of that. So we may have to consider a source in the English word *word*.

There are two questions involved here, one phonological and one semantic. I will deal with the phonological problem first. What are conceivable phonological sources of the word *ódo*? We can, I think, disregard an African language as the source in this case. There are two important African substrate languages for the Surinam creoles, Fon (the most important), and Kikongo (less important). *ódo* is clearly not a Kikongo word for reasons which I’ll not dwell on here. The Fon/Gun word for ‘proverb’ is *(o)ló*, which while it bears a superficial similarity to *ódo* is not similar enough. If it had survived into Sranan we can be fairly certain that it would have appeared as *\*lo*. So we have to consider English and Dutch. If we stick with lexical items with the meaning ‘word’, then each language has one form that is potentially a source, *word* for English, and *woord* for Dutch.

Two phonological factors allow us to make a choice in these cases. The clearest is the fact that the final devoicing of Dutch voiced obstruents is normally reflected in words taken over into Sranan, and this is what we see in the actual Sranan word for ‘word’ *wórtu*. Secondly, English words with /r/ preceding a coronal consonant frequently omit the /r/ in their phonological form. This is for various reasons probably not to be attributed to any modern *r*-less variety of English, but to an older dissimilatory loss of /r/. This gave rise to the familiar “cowboy” sub-standard forms *cuss*, *hoss*, *bust*, etc. In English such forms can be identified because the compensatory lengthening/diphthongization of short vowels caused by the loss of /r/ is not present. In the Surinam creoles the lengthening is not visible because length distinctions in English vowels are neutralized, but the above-mentioned loss of /r/ does not place before labials and dorsals.

Starting from an English basis two outcomes would be available: *\*wródo* and *\*wódo*, the first with no *r*-loss, and the second with *r*-loss. Clearly *\*wódo* is closer to the form we find in Sranan. We do find loss of #w in the Surinam creoles, as in *úma* ‘woman’ and *údu* ‘wood’, but this probably reflects a widespread substandard feature in Southern England. The insertion of optional non-etymological #w is frequently found however before #o in Saramaccan, and this may be evidence of a more general uncertainty about sequences #(w)o in the Surinam creoles.

Let us leave the realm of phonology and turn briefly to semantics. The connection between the concepts ‘proverb’ and ‘word’ is clear. So a more normal way of referring to the concept of ‘proverb’ in English would be *saying*. And one of the meanings of *word* is ‘something said’. In fact we almost certainly find a solution in the Oxford English Dictionary, where one meaning given for *word* is ‘proverb/saying’. This is given the qualification “now rare”.

All in all, I think we can take it that Sranan *ódo* ‘proverb’ does derive from *word* ‘word’. How about the Dutch-derived word for ‘word’ *wórtu*? What we cannot know is whether *ódo* originally also represented the concept ‘word’, but was replaced in this function by *wórtu*, or whether this concept was not present at all in the earliest Sranan.