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"STUTTERS VERY MUCH" AND SPEAKS "BAD ENGLISH": DISPLAYS OF COMMUNICATIVE STRUGGLES AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AMONG ENSLAVED PEOPLE IN THE DANISH WEST INDIES, 1770–1807

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Abstract
While the young runaway Thomas spoke Dutch and English, his enslaver Bernard Watlington noted that he stuttered as well. This became public knowledge when Watlington shared all the details he thought necessary for recapturing Thomas in a short runaway slave advertisement in 1803. With this as a starting point, this article examines speech impairments and language variations among runaways on St. Croix. While often used as historical sources for various aspects of enslavement, these advertisements also provide valuable insights into the languages spoken by enslaved people, including when they deviated from the norm. Through an analysis of various runaway slave advertisements, this article establishes the contours of speech impairments and language use among enslaved individuals on St. Croix by the turn of the nineteenth century. The article aims to utilize runaway slave advertisements to explore language-related issues and, through this exploration, shed new light on linguistic aspects and the experiences of slavery in the early modern Caribbean.[*]

Keywords: Speech and language impairments; speech variations; disability; runaway slave advertisement; Danish West Indies; slavery

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1. Introduction

In early July 1803, Thomas, a young, enslaved boy, attempted to escape from his enslaver, Bernard Watlington. The attempt to escape his enslavement took place on St. Croix, a small island that was part of the Danish West Indies in the Caribbean Sea. It took three weeks before Watlington decided to place an advertisement about Thomas and his escape in the *Danish West Indies Government Newspaper*[1], a local newspaper that was printed and circulated on St. Croix (DVRA 1803-07-29: 3). Through the advertisement, Watlington intended to get help from the public to recapture Thomas by offering a reward if he was caught and returned to Watlington.

The so-called runaway slave advertisement that featured Thomas as a runaway was both ordinary and extraordinary. It was ordinary in the sense that thousands of runaways in the Caribbean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries appeared in similar ways in local newspapers, through short descriptive accounts, sharing all the information that the enslaver thought necessary to identify the individual and recapture the runaways (see e.g. Bly 2021, Corneiro 2018, Costa 2001, Franklin & Schweninger 1991, Fuentes 2016, Heuman 2003, Le Glaunec 2005, Morgan & Rushton 2005, Prude 1991, Waldstreicher 1999). Besides being ordinary in the context of slavery, similar advertisements were also used against non-enslaved workers who chose to leave their current work conditions in early modern times. In the Caribbean, there were advertisements mostly against maritime workers, but in Europe they were used against almost all parts of the working population: from masters attempting to recover servants, to officers and captains tracking down deserting recruits and sailors, to magistrates and crime victims searching for stolen goods and perpetrators (Chakraborty et al. 2019, Heinsen 2021, Morgan & Rushton 2005). Thomas was just one of these early modern runaways.

For studying aspects of enslaved life in the Danish West Indies, these short descriptive accounts offer a fragmented and biased window into enslaved people's lives, including, to an extent, their linguistic world. In this face-to-face society, the documentation of maroons in runaway slave advertisements was a means of surveillance to limit their mobility since,

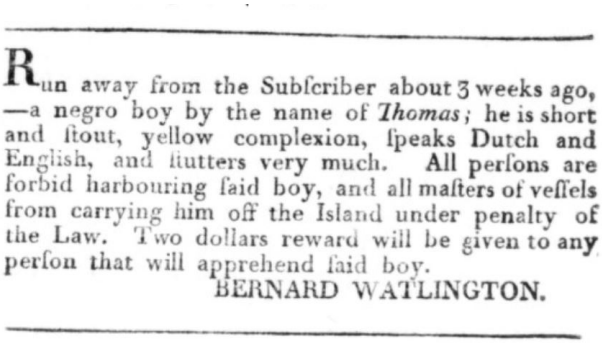
[1] In Danish: *Dansk Vestindisk Regierings Avis*, henceforth abbreviated DVRA. A full overview of the abbreviations used for referring to archival sources is presented at the end of the article. All translations from Danish to English in the article are my own unless otherwise noted.

through such public identification, the enslaved person could be recognized. Scars, impairments, dismembered limbs, and other physical anomalies, as well as distinct vocal characteristics, and languages spoken and understood, were among the identifying features recorded, together with names, professions, appearance, ages, heights, clothing, previous owners, and suspected whereabouts.[2] It was, of course, most important for the submitter of an advertisement to make it as easy as possible to spot the runaway in question, and since physical impairments and other distinguishing characteristics were hard to conceal, it was important to note these in the advertisement; therefore, unique visible bodily features of the person dominated the descriptions. It should, however, be noted that many runaway slave advertisements belonging to the Danish West Indian newspapers had no bodily or language-related descriptions at all. One explanation could be that the size of the island was relatively small and that some runaways advertised were so well known by the inhabitants of St. Croix that a description other than the name was thought unnecessary, which was emphasized in the advertisement, too (e.g. DVRA 1803-07-29: 3). In other cases, without any explanation, descriptions were simply not provided, and only a name and universal characteristics were given (e.g. DVRA 1777-12-31: 4).

However, Watlington's notice of Thomas was also extraordinary, as Watlington shared Thomas' linguistic details. Taking his young age into consideration, as well as the general context of slavery, Watlington first noted that Thomas spoke both Dutch and English. English and Dutch, including a creolized version of both, were among the dominant languages among the plantation owners in the Danish West Indies (Hall 1992: 13–15, Sebro 2010: 105–118). Naming specific languages highlighted language as a unique trait that could identify a person and, as such, highlighted the importance of language skills on St. Croix among the enslaved population as something unique and specific. The Caribbean was a multilingual world, and like commodities, language abilities were a matter of value for enslaved people as well as for free people (Waldstreicher 1999: 259). As much as different types of social networks were important in the early modern world, language knowledge and language skills were likewise vital for

[2] The following text contains passages of explicit language and content from archival material from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Reader discretion is advised.

them to work and function. The account was also extraordinary as descriptions of vocal characteristics are scarce in the existing source material about enslaved people, yet they appear explicitly and more frequently than one might expect in runaway slave advertisements. In 1803, when Thomas escaped for the first time, 69 individuals in total were featured in runaway slave advertisements, with nine of these including some sort of description of a vocal characteristic (DVRA 1803). Correspondingly, vocal characteristics were also used to identify non-enslaved workers in similar runaway advertisements. Finally, and of importance for the present article, Watlington had mentioned in the advertisement that Thomas spoke with a speech impediment. Or, in the words of Watlington (see Figure 1), "he is short and stout, [of] yellow complexion, speaks Dutch and English, and stutters very much" (DVRA 1803-07-29: 3).



Run away from the Subſcriber about 3 weeks ago, —a negro boy by the name of *Thomas;* he is short and ſtout, yellow complexion, ſpeaks Dutch and English, and ſtutters very much. All perſons are forbid harbouring ſaid boy, and all maſters of veſſels from carrying him off the Island under penalty of the Law. Two dollars reward will be given to any perſon that will apprehend ſaid boy.
BERNARD WATLINGTON.

Figure 1. The runaway slave advertisement for Thomas in 1803. Source: *Danish West Indies Government Newspaper,* Royal Danish Library.

In publishing information about this type of speech impediment, Watlington provided a rare personal detail about Thomas that is relatively uncommon in the existing source material about enslaved people. Watlington and other enslavers recorded universal characteristics, such as "short and stout", in Thomas' example, and they often emphasized the variations or distinctive traits that made the runaways more recognizable to the reader. In Thomas' case, this special trait was his speech impediment. While the descriptions served the practical purpose of recapturing the escapees, the descriptions can now be used as historical sources to study particular kinds of speaking habits and difficulties among the enslaved population in the Danish West Indies.

This article looks at the ways in which speech and language impairments and manner of speaking were displayed through newspapers published on St. Croix in the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. Runaway slave advertisements have rightly been used to emphasize various facets of slave life (see e.g. Bly 2021, Heuman 2003, Waldstreicher 1999). However, the aim of the following study is to demonstrate that runaway slave advertisements also provide insights into speaking difficulties and manners of speaking among enslaved people, which, in turn, highlight broader aspects of enslaved experiences in the Caribbean and reflect an often-neglected history of languages and language disabilities in slavery studies. Medical diseases and physical disabilities, on the other hand, have been explored more extensively in the context of slavery (see e.g. Handler 2006a, 2006b, Thode Jensen 2012). This article presents a conceptual contribution to the special language usage of enslaved people by selecting the deviation from the norm as its frame. Instead of asking what languages enslaved people spoke, the present article is more interested in asking how they spoke – particularly those who spoke deviating from the norm.

Hundreds of runaway slave advertisements have been analyzed by the author, with careful attention given to those revealing enslaved people with difficulties in speaking and those who spoke in atypical and deviating ways (see Flyvbjerg 2006). The article uses runaway slave advertisements from two newspapers printed on St. Croix, namely the *Royal Danish American Gazette*, printed from 1770 until 1802, and the *Danish West Indies Government Newspaper*, printed from 1802 to 1807, to examine this subject matter. It should be noted, however, that although the *Royal Danish American Gazette* and the *Danish West Indies Government Newspaper* are presented as a continuous series, gaps in their surviving issues exist due to the fact that many editions have not been preserved. This also means that an unknown number of runaways who spoke in atypical and deviating ways may have been left out. The collection, therefore, only represents a small glimpse of a much larger picture. Still, on the basis of those cases, the intention is to highlight the lived experiences of these individuals rather than bringing them forward as abstract historical individuals. In terms of period, the two selected source corpora exemplify two different periods of slavery in the Danish West Indies, that is, one before and one immediately after the ban of the slave trade in 1803. The ban of the slave trade did not discontinue

the presence of enslaved people in the Danish West Indies, but it stimulated the interest in the health of the enslaved and an increased value of the enslaved population on St. Croix (Thode Jensen 2012: 43, Simonsen 2017: 40–43).

Three methodological considerations are worth mentioning at this point. First, the runaway slave advertisements only depicted those who were advertised as runaways; many more enslaved people likely escaped without being advertised. This means that many more enslaved people probably had language-related issues than those presented in this article and that many more most likely spoke deviating from the norm. Secondly, speech impairments and manner of speaking were noted solely by their enslavers in the material. Only what the enslaver chose to include (and thought necessary to recapture a runaway) is represented in the source material. This means that the result is biased towards the enslaver's view; therefore, it only provides a limited insight into the historical linguistic struggles of enslaved people on St. Croix. Thirdly, the enslavers who submitted their advertisements to the printer on St. Croix had no deeper interest in making thick descriptions of the runaways or to share their knowledge of languages. They were mostly motivated to publicize runaways primarily by their interest in having returned what they viewed as valuable properties.

This article continues with a discussion of the importance of language in early modern St. Croix before moving on to analyzing runaways described with speech impairments in the selected material. The study concludes with an analysis of various manners of speaking among maroons as they were described in runaway slave advertisements.

2. Language in the Danish West Indies

The Danish West Indies, three islands belonging to the Leeward Islands in the Caribbean Sea, resembled their neighboring islands, in that they were characterized by their repressive power structure that helped keep together the social, economic, and political system of slavery. Reflecting a cosmopolitan collection of languages, the unfree and free inhabitants of the Danish West Indies found themselves in a diverse, multilingual environment. Indeed, in the late eighteenth century, where this article takes its point of departure, the languages spoken were as diverse as the population. While the administrative language was Danish, the everyday languages included

Spanish, French, Dutch, Danish, German, English, creole languages lexically based on Dutch and English, and more than 25 different African languages, according to recent linguistic investigations (see Simonsen 2017: 71, Bakker & Bøegh 2021: 128–133, Bøegh 2024).

In this multilingual world, peculiar linguistic scenarios unfolded occasionally, and challenges in comprehension and communication were prevalent, such as translating. An excellent example of this is the case of an enslaved woman named Carolina who appeared in front of a Danish West Indian judge on the 3rd of September, 1805 (CBPJ 1805-09-03). According to the interrogation, which took place over several days, Carolina might have been the person who had assisted an enslaved woman named Juliette in escaping by opening the door of the Kings Hill plantation jail, where Juliette was imprisoned. In Juliette's words, the overseer MacLaurin had punished her with a stay in prison after she had refused to sleep with him (see CBPJ 1805-07-24, CBPJ 1805-07-30, CBPJ 1805-09-03). In the police journal, it was noted that Carolina "cannot speak any intelligible language and that none of the Negroes in the yard could understand her". The Police Chief, therefore, "dispatched the [police] officers to provide a coastal negro who could also speak English". After "several [persons] were present and several attempts were made", a young, enslaved boy named Peter, who "could talk to the negress", came, in the end, to help translate for the Police Chief to continue the interrogation. Only through Peter's translation did Carolina's testimony become intelligible to the Police Chief. This not only points towards an aspect of unilateral bilingualism, but it also indicates the extent and effort that Danish West Indian judges took to represent and include slave voices in the Danish West Indies (see Simonsen 2017: 46). Of course, the translation took place on two levels, as in actual translations by Peter of the words used by Carolina and in translating Carolina's testimony to the court book by the court scribe, in other words, making her testimony into "words on paper" (Simonsen 2017: 71–75).

Scholars have only recently begun to examine representations of languages among the enslaved people in the Danish West Indies as a critical aspect of Danish West Indian life. While English and Dutch Creole were spoken by the enslaved people on St. Croix, African languages continued to be used by both Africans who had been in the colony for a long time and Afro-Caribbeans born in the West Indies (Sebro 2010: 105–118, Simonsen 2017: 151–153). Correspondingly, as demonstrated by historian Louise

Sebro, many enslaved people also continued to see their African-based ethnicity and culture as an important part of their identity (Sebro 2010). Linguists Kristoffer Friis Bøegh, Peter Bakker, Cefas van Rossem, and historian Rasmus Christensen have recently examined newspapers to shed new light on the historical sociolinguistic situation in the Danish West Indies (Bøegh et al. 2022). Also adding to the importance of language in the colonial world, David Waldstreicher emphasizes language skills as valued competences in his examination of runaway slave advertisements and the intersection of print culture, power dynamics, and strategies of resistance (Waldstreicher 1999: 259). Yet, no studies currently exist on language-related disabilities or speech differences among enslaved people in the Danish West Indies. In a broader Caribbean context, historian Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, in particular, has made significant contributions to disability and slavery. She has likewise addressed some of the language-related challenges among enslaved people observable in runaway slave advertisements (Hunt-Kennedy 2020: 122–123). Hunt-Kennedy provides details about Jamaican and Barbadian runaways with speech impediments to signal their potential as a tactical advantage to put forward disability not only as victimization and "lack", but also as a sign of power and possibility (Hunt-Kennedy 2020: 122–124). Literary scholar Hannah Walser highlights how the descriptions of speech characteristics of enslaved individuals' are deeply influenced by the perceptions of the enslaver, who, according to Walser, often viewed stuttering or the volume and pace of speaking as reflections of the runaway's personality, rather than as complexities shaped by their experiences of slavery (Walser 2020: 71). Thus, understanding these descriptions offers critical insights into the intersection of language, identity, and power dynamics in the context of slavery.

3. Minor and major speech impairments

What effect Thomas' speech impediment had in his everyday life is difficult to determine. It was not visible to the naked eye, unlike other disabilities that were presented in the advertisements. Still, it was acknowledged, as Watlington mentioned it as a distinctive trait. But it is impossible to determine whether this knowledge was acquired from direct communication between Watlington and Thomas or whether somebody else had passed this on to Watlington. This distinctive trait followed Thomas. In 1806 he ran away again, and again his stuttering was mentioned as his recognizable trait

(DVRA 1806-05-08: 2). Furthermore, upon Thomas' second escape, Watlington suspected him of living in the eastern part of St. Croix. Speech impediments are a type of communication disorder in which normal speech is disrupted. According to the European Speech and Language Therapy Association (ESLA) Terminology Statement, stuttering is a speech disorder where rhythm and fluency are affected.[3] It is characterized by blocking stages during speech, spasmodic episodes, repetitions, and prolongations. We are, of course, not able to compare this definition directly with Watlington's definition, but in one way or the other, Watlington recognized Thomas's trouble with producing a normal flow of speech, impacting Thomas' ability to communicate optimally. Stuttering, together with muteness and lisps, are among the best known speech disorders. While stuttering often affects a person's interpersonal relationships, it is much debated within disability studies why stuttering occurs (Jezer 1997: 4–5, Pertijs et al. 2014: 30–32, Wingate 1997). Hunt-Kennedy suggests that trauma may cause stuttering in the context of slavery, and fear, stress, and anxiety may also have triggered such speech impediments; it is also known that neurological defects can cause stuttering (Hunt-Kennedy 2020: 122).

Speech impediments can vary in severity and expression. Some speakers with speech impediments may be completely unable to control their speech, while others may only be mildly limited in their speaking abilities (Burrell-Kim 2023). Like Thomas, the enslaved coppersmith Peter stuttered "very much in his speech" when he was advertised in 1806, indicating a significant speech impediment (DVRA 1806-06-19: 2). An example illustrating two different levels of speech characteristics, is found in a runaway slave advertisements for two enslaved men, Welcome and Toney, which enslaver John Coakley had printed in 1775 (RDAG 1775-12-02: 1). Welcome, or Deboney as he was also named, was a 45-year-old "Salt Water negro", meaning that he had survived the Middle Passage or that, in some versions of the meaning of the term, he was born during the Middle Passage, which refers to the stage of the Atlantic slave trade where enslaved Africans were transported across the Atlantic. As Welcome was 45 years old, we can assume he had been on St. Croix for some time, possibly decades. Welcome could speak English, but "very indifferently even for a negro". Welcome's way of speaking, which differed from the norm, was considered a trait that could identify him if encountered. Conversely, Toney

[3] https://eslaeurope.eu/practice-terminology/ (last visited 2024-10-09).

was a Creole man born on St. Croix and about 22 years old. Coakley's advertisement emphasized that Toney had "a great impediment in his speech". What type of impediment was referred to was not indicated further, and in the absence of its cause, we can only speculate. However, as mentioned, a speech impediment usually involves difficulties producing sounds, such as stuttering or lisping. The importance for Coakley was, however, not to highlight Welcome and Toney's shortcomings in language but to use these communication issues as identifiable traits.

There are also examples of physical causes that affected the ability to speak and be understood. One runaway, Sarah, who ran away in 1777, was described with a direct cause of the described speech impairment in the material (RDAG 1777-09-10: 1). Her enslaver Nathan Durant described her as snuffling in her speech due to losing her "pallot". The "pallot" must have referred to the roof of her mouth, the palate, which, under any circumstances, makes speaking difficult if physically distorted. According to ESLA, this particular condition can be associated with a cleft palate that is either developmental or acquired, but despite this physical disability, which enforced a speech impediment, Sarah was valued by his owner for her skills; her enslaver spent money on having an advertisement printed and circulated in the newspaper. As it was further noted in the advertisement, people had seen Sarah selling goods in a specific area on St. Croix, meaning that she regularly, also while she was running away, engaged in communication with other people.

In contrast, a runaway named Betty was described in such a way that one can only assume that she had some difficulties when speaking, based on the description in her first appearance in a runaway slave advertisement. She had been a runaway for five weeks before her enslaver placed a runaway slave advertisement for her. It read that she was of "a Yellow Complexion, with thick lips, speaks thro' her Nose, & lips" (RDAG 1789-11-18: 2). It remains unclear whether her way of speaking was due to a disability or was simply a habit, or was due to some other cause or reason, but we can reasonably speculate that her way of speaking referred to a condition where the resonating structures of the vocal system – such as the throat, nose, and mouth – failed to function properly, impacting the quality and clarity of speech. Later, in 1792, Betty had again run away from her enslaver, and in this runaway slave advertisement, Betty was described as

having "lisps in her speech", which confirmed her impediment (RDAG 1792-05-16: 4).

The presence and acknowledgment of these selected speech impairments among enslaved people on St. Croix, as recorded in runaway advertisements, show that speech impairments, despite being limited in numbers, were found among the enslaved, and some can provisionally be diagnosed on the basis of the descriptions. Enslavers used these impediments as identifying traits to make the runaways reliably recognizable. This shows that language disabilities were a part of everyday life in the Danish West Indies, as elsewhere. However, in the context of slavery, and in the context of the existing source material documenting enslaved life, these rare personal details are remarkable. The examples further indicate that enslavers and colonial authorities were aware of speech and language impairments among the enslaved people, as they were both observed and acknowledged. There were, to be sure, many more examples not recorded, as already noted, and there was the possibility that the enslaved people feigned or exaggerated their speech impairments. Feigning or exaggerating speech impairments might have been used to discourage purchase, avoid specific types of work, or abandon the impairments after escaping as a countermeasure to avoid detection (Hunt-Kennedy 2020: 92–93, 123–124, Boster 2013). It was, of course, risky to feign a disability and hope to pass as a disabled person, but it also required conformity to a shared idea about disability and health among both enslaved and enslavers.

Despite the severe conditions and social prejudices that these speech impairments may have entailed, the documentation of these impairments on St. Croix offers a glimpse into the lived experiences of enslaved people, highlighting at the same time their humanity and the pervasive inhumanity of slavery. The advertisements also suggest that, despite their challenges, enslaved individuals engaged in spoken interactions with enslaved and free people: their linguistic challenges were both articulated and acknowledged. This interaction underscores a presence of social integration of individuals with speech impairments in the sociolinguistic everyday life on St. Croix. Obviously, enslaved people who worked in different functions, such as enslaved servants or enslaved craftsmen, had daily social interactions with free people. This was the case of Peter and Sarah, but Thomas, Welcome, Toney, and Betty were not labeled with any specific work function, which could indicate that the social integration between enslaved and enslavers

was more intertwined than one might imagine. Only Sarah was not labeled as "well known" on St. Croix, which suggests these particular runaways' visibility within the wider social fabric of the island. This visibility points to an integration into daily life, both socially and linguistically, and this complicates the rigid boundaries often presumed between enslaved and enslavers, even within the oppressive confines of slavery. While the institution of slavery in many ways sought to dehumanize people, the lived realities of the above-mentioned enslaved individuals with speech and language impairments defied those constraints, offering a more intricate picture of life in the Danish West Indies than one might expect.

4. Making yourself understood

Speech and language impairments are a notable feature of any spoken communication. However, for runaways, another type of description of language-based variation emerges in the runaway slave advertisements: language use that deviated from the norm. This was based on how well or how poorly a language was spoken. By deviating from a norm, the indications of how a language was spoken were meant to strengthen the descriptions of the runaway. The manner of speaking a specific language was most often emphasized by using an adjective concerning the spoken language.

To give an example, the "slender made" enslaved man named Cuffy talked "Dutch and English pretty well" (RDAG 1773-11-27). Here the "pretty well" is adding a layer to Cuffy's language ability in Dutch and English. Another example is a 30-year-old runaway named Sue, who had escaped her enslaver, Lauritz Kierulf. She was advertised as a runaway in October 1770, where she was described as speaking "bad English" (RDAG 1770-1003: 1). This meant that Sue did not meet the norm of the spoken English language as established by Lauritz and, presumably, the readership of the newspaper. Speaking "bad" would typically mean that her English language skills were not very strong, but that she had some knowledge of the language. Yet, importantly, in the Caribbean world, it could also mean that she actually spoke a perfect form of creolized English, which was not understood by the enslaver (Bøegh & Bakker this issue, Edmondson 2022: 9–10). It may also have referred to her using inappropriate language, such as lacking in grammar or fluency, or her intelligibility being problematic due to her choice of words, or that she spoke in a disrespectful tone. Either

way, Sue's "bad English" was enough to distinguish her from other runaways and provided potentially enough information for those who had the possibility of capturing her. If the label of "bad" English referred to Sue speaking a form of creolized English, it reveals how language also could serve as a tool of domination and distancing. The label allowed Sue's enslaver to assert dominance over her by dismissing or devaluing her linguistic abilities. In this way, although in a small glimpse, and well biased by Kierulf, it portrays a negative language attitude and a power dynamic between her and Kierulf that was not only physical but also linguistic. A stronger indication of an insolent tone was apparent in another example, where escapee Tuam was described as speaking "strong and rough" (RDAG 1770-11-07: 1). The way of telling a negative tone in one's manner of speaking was even more apparent in an unusual advertisement for a runaway named Dick. It was unusual as Dick was suspected of murder and had fled the scene of the crime. He was described as speaking "quick and ferrocious (sic), and bad English" (DVRA 1802-07-13: 2). Based on the circumstances of his advertisement, it is clear that language and tone were deliberately used to emphasize the perceived danger and untrustworthiness of him, adding to the societal use of language as a means of control and subjugation.

In another advertisement, the young, enslaved girl Zaben was noted to speak "French pretty well, and English badly" (RDAG 1802-14-10: 1), which indicated two different levels of speaking languages. The proportion of descriptions specifying a perception of the level of speaking a language according to formal norms, is higher than the ones mentioning some speech and language impairments in the material. Both were often paired with other types of information about the runaway to strengthen the description. For instance, the four enslaved individuals mentioned above were linked with other distinctive traits; Sue was noted to have escaped, carrying her child with her, Tuam was identified as a house carpenter, Dick was a sugar boiler, and Zaben's face was marked by smallpox and her teeth were filed, which was a cultural practice associated with Africa (Gomez 1998: 104). Of course, it could all be a coincidence, but there is a tendency in the source material that language level was not as strong a marker as language disability was for identifying runaways as speech and language impairments and, therefore, it seems that advertisements mentioning language levels needed more descriptive text.

The enslavers also emphasized when a runaway spoke a language well, as in the case of Cuffy. It was the same for another enslaved man named Bristol. Bristol had escaped one Charles Clapton in 1770 and was described as speaking "English very well" (RDAG 1770-08-22: 1). Similarly, another escapee, Mattadore, was noted to speak French "very well", and the enslaved man Primas, who was sent out by his enslaver to look for another runaway, was noted to speak "extraordinary [sic] good English" (RDAG 1776-06-05: 1, RDAG 1778-06-03: 1). Even African languages were emphasized in an apparently positive manner, such as Susanna, who was described to speak "nothing but her own country language", however, as it was noted, she was "remarkable upon that" (RDAG 1775-06-14: 1). While it is uncertain what Susanna's owner meant by the word "remarkable" (and there was unfortunately no identification of why it was remarkable), it was noted that Susanna had been bought from Richard Forster. Forster frequently advertised so-called slave auctions in Frederiksted, St. Croix, in the same newspaper with newly arrived enslaved Africans for sale, which most likely indicates that Susanna was a newcomer to the island (see e.g. RDAG 1774-12-31: 1). Therefore, the remarkable aspect of Susanna's African language had nothing to do with her only speaking her African language: it could be that her linguistic abilities of her native tongue stood out in the eyes of her enslaver.

The designations of these manners of speaking were all employed to describe how runaways spoke a specific language in order to be helpful for their recapture. However, in the multilingual world that the enslaved and enslavers lived in, it is uncertain what the perception of the quality of languages actually meant. What did speaking "extraordinarily good English" or "strong and rough" mean? It is difficult to determine, but all of these terms add specific nuances to our understanding of how languages were used on St. Croix – both as attributes, limitations, and marginalizations. Furthermore, as the runaway slave advertisements were shared in public, these designations must have relied on a shared understanding of particular language norms enforced by enslavers (Prude 1991: 141, Walser 2020: 71). Perhaps some of the descriptions were, in fact, functional equivalents, such as "good" and "pretty well", but the small changes in wording that the adverbs display in differentiating the level of proficiency as perceived by their enslavers, such as Primas' "extraordinary", says something about particular acknowledgments of the different levels among inhabitants on St. Croix.

And this perception must be seen from the enslaver's point of view, that is, a native speaker's when dealing with their own, European languages. Admittedly, we do not have a counterpart to compare it with, if, for example, Primas spoke a different language at a different level. All the small variations of the spoken languages among the runaways as given in the advertisements further emphasize the mosaic linguistic landscape on St. Croix.

The ways and the manners of speaking of enslaved people, as described in the runaway slave advertisements, point towards the complex sociolinguistic landscape in the Danish West Indies, at least in the examined material. These characterizations do not only describe the different languages that were spoken, but they also indicate how a particular language was spoken. This may be rarely surprising, and it might be the same case in various places in early modern times; however, it still nuances our understanding of the languages spoken by enslaved people. While research has collected information about which languages were spoken from various source materials, runaway slave advertisements provide an opportunity to examine how enslaved people spoke the languages they knew and had learned. It also reveals the enslavers' conscious attitudes towards languages, offering clues about the possible differences between these attitudes, the value of the spoken language, and the actual language practices of the enslaved. This invites further exploration into whether these consciously expressed attitudes, reflected in the hierarchical judgments by the enslavers, were also present elsewhere, in order to serve as tools of domination over the enslaved.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, speech and language impairments and manner of speaking that deviated from the norm were widely displayed in runaway slave advertisements in newspapers on St. Croix during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These advertisements reveal a complex and variable language landscape on St. Croix, highlighting the multilingual environment with different levels of speaking specific languages and speech-related difficulties enslaved people faced. Through the analysis of the selected material, this article has demonstrated the importance of language abilities as markers of identity, and it shows how enslavers utilized these traits for surveillance and recapture. It is clear that the issue of gender has not played a major role in this case study, but the selected material does not

appear to take gender into account when the enslaver described language that deviated from the norm as a recognizable trait of the runaways. With his noted speech impediment, Thomas' case exemplifies how enslavers documented unique features to facilitate the identification of runaways. While these advertisements primarily served as tools for recapturing runaways, they inadvertently document different speech and language impairments and linguistic peculiarities, offering a glimpse into an often neglected part of enslavement. The detailed descriptions and the acknowledgment of speech impairments, as well as descriptions of how languages were spoken, underscore the presence and importance of language in the multilingual society in everyday life in the Danish West Indies.

The findings contribute to the field of the study of language use and patholinguistics in slave societies, while also adding a nuance to the history of slavery. They emphasize that language in the Danish West Indies was not only diverse, but the languages also varied in expression. This study shifts the focus from cataloging which languages were spoken to understanding how they were spoken, particularly by those whose speech deviated from the norm. In doing so, it highlights broader aspects of enslaved experiences, and it reflects new dimensions of language in slavery studies. On the one hand, it may be hardly surprising that speech disorders and variations were (and still are) used to characterize individuals and that these existed in early modern times among enslaved people as well as today. On the other hand, the analysis of concrete examples allows us a closer, albeit still incomplete and biased, non-abstract understanding of slavery and of the enslaved people who chose to run away from their enslavers. These examples also reflect that there was no linguistic homogeneity among the runaways on St. Croix during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, these examples provide an important lens through which to view slavery, revealing more than just repression as a part of the story. Inclusion, recognition, disability, language norms and linguistic adaptation were also a part of the story of slavery embedded within the harsh realities of slavery. Although runaway slave advertisements and the information about languages in them are fragmented and created for one specific purpose, they provide linguistic nuances of the enslaved people on St. Croix during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In conclusion, future research could further explore runaway slave advertisements from the Caribbean in order to understand the linguistic

landscape and the communicative practices of the enslaved more deeply. Such research should also reflect upon how the specificities of the languages and the language disabilities described, correlate or dissociate with other information provided in the advertisements.

Archival sources

The following abbreviations are used for referring to archival sources:

- CBPJ – Christiansted Byfoged, Politijournaler – Office of Christiansted's Judge, Police Journal;
- RDAG – *The Royal Danish American Gazette* (1770–1801) and *The Royal Danish American Gazette* (1802);
- DVRA – *Dansk Vestindisk Regierings Avis* (1802–1807) – Danish West Indies Government Newspaper.

The same runaway slave advertisement was usually printed in three continuous newspaper issues. When I refer to a runaway slave advertisement, I refer to the first time it appeared in print. When I refer to a court proceeding, I refer to the date when the proceeding or interrogation took place.

The sources for this article are retrieved from Mediestream, the Royal Danish Library's digital collection of Danish cultural heritage, including newspapers, and the Danish National Archives database, which contains sources from the local and central administration of the Danish West Indies. The websites are http://www2.statsbiblioteket.dk/mediestream/avis and https://www.virgin-islands-history.org/ (last visited on 2024-09-25).

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