



## A Demolinguistic Profile of St. Vincent and the Grenadines or a Successful Attempt at Linguistic Disenfranchisement

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**Abstract.** – We address the demolinguistic dynamics between the Arawak and Carib Indians and succeeding settlers in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG). The language blending between indigenous varieties subsisted well beyond the arrival of the Europeans. The chance arrival of African slaves to SVG had a considerable impact on the demographic reality and the linguistic canvas. We show that the absence of a variety of Island Carib today is a direct result of the extirpation of the Garifuna population, of the linguistic rupture occasioned by their deportation, and of the colonial assimilation policies imposed with a view to fostering national development. [*Island Carib, Garifuna, Arawak, language loss, colonisation*]

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The loss of a language is like the loss of a cherished museum or library. A language bears, in its lexical and semantic features, in its ways of saying things, a significant measure of the civilisation of its speakers (Hale 2000).

### 1 Introduction

It was commonly believed and stated in the old literature on St. Vincent that the island was “dis-

covered” by Christopher Columbus on January 22, 1498. Putting aside the fact that the word “discovery,” as used here, is a loaded Eurocentric term, Christopher Columbus was actually in Spain on that date and no evidence is currently available to indicate that any of his crew had actually landed on or been near St. Vincent at that time. Furthermore, despite the name “Point Espagnol” (Spanish Point) at the northern tip of the island, there is even some doubt that the Spaniards had landed here at any time. Even the name St. Vincent is clouded in mystery as it is tied in with the issue of discovery on January 22, 1498, making reference to the patron saint celebrated on that day. Over the centuries, the early history of the islands remained scantily documented. The first mention of the name Saint Vincent as “San Vicente” appeared to have been in 1512 (Sauer 1966: 193; Gullick 1985: 43). Apart from the fact that the early Europeans decided to focus their attention further north in the Greater Antilles and in Central America, the presence of the Caribs<sup>1</sup> who fiercely defended their country and the myths,<sup>2</sup> which had surfaced about

1 Throughout this article, we will use the designation “Carib” as a cover term to refer to both the Island Caribs and the Garifuna or Black Caribs.

2 The issue of cannibalism among the Caribs is an issue that is still very much debated. Some researchers who accepted the view of cannibalism have attributed it to ritualistic rather than gastronomic reasons (cf. Petersen 1997: 129). Even Labat, writing in 1722/III: 238 f.) had raised question about this common view, stating that it was an error to believe that they were anthropophagi. Labat (238 f.) observed that as a