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# The changing world in microcosm: The dying languages of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea

by Tucker Childs, Applied Linguistics, Portland State University  
CLAS Brown Bag, 28 Jan 2015

## Abstract

Observers have become increasingly aware of how the world is changing due to the forces of globalization, be it in the form of neo-colonialism, the scramble for natural resources, or the various extractive industries. The recent alarm over Ebola illustrates another pernicious fallout of increased communication and travel. The effect of globalization has also been great on indigenous peoples and their cultures, in particular on what many consider to be an integral component of culture, the local languages.

In this paper, I report on recent research devoted to the documentation of endangered languages in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia (the Ebola countries). Most of these languages stand little chance of survival as their only speakers are elderly, and no children are learning the languages. The one exception is Mani, a language spoken along the Guinean and Sierra Leone littoral on one tidal island where children actually grow up speaking the language. Unfortunately, as they grow older (adolescence), they prefer using the more widely spoken languages and soon shift to Mende, Temne, and Krio, widely spoken languages which are also favored by the government. I report on a recent (unsuccessful but instructive) effort at encouraging local literacy with the children in one Mani village on that island.

Returning to a broader focus, I turn to a general look at the future of these and related languages. After discussing the consequences of civil wars and general civil unrest in these countries, I conclude by speculating on how the Ebola epidemic may affect the future of the less widely spoken languages.

### (1) Some initial assumptions

Audience aware that languages disappearing at an alarming rate, e.g., Native American languages

Audience recognizes the need for diversity, for documenting endangered languages and indeed revitalizing them where possible

### (2) Some points to be made

“Africa” is indeed representative of what is happening generally in the world but also is not

A long history of civilization, empires, and both adaptation and assimilation

Ideological: Traditionalist and conservative, the persistence of culture allowed in a tolerance for multiculturalism

Tolerance manifested in the proliferation of languages and their persistence, multilingualism

Conclusion: Despite some new varieties arising, e.g., urban varieties, pidgins and creoles, Africa represents what is happening throughout the world

### (3) Outline of the talk

#### Introduction

Past events: Sudanic empires, Islam, Colonialism / slavery, Neo-colonialism

Recent events: Civil wars in Liberia (1989-97, 1999–2003) and Sierra Leone (1991-2002); civil unrest in Guinea (last military coup in 2008 relatively peaceful, followed by elections in 2010)

Current governance dysfunction

Overview of research

What is the predicted effect of the Ebola crisis (2013- )

### (4) Why do languages die?

“Die” as a metaphor for massive language shift

(a community decision in the Lakes Region of East Africa (Dimmendaal ??))

A result of intimate language contact, typically involving some power asymmetry

### (5) What are the forces at work causing languages to die in (West) Africa? (Childs 2006)

Colonialism and slavery (By 1914 it is estimated that Europe controlled 85% of the world (Nettle and Romaine 2000).

Spread of non-indigenous religions: Christianity and Islam, jihads

Plantation economies, e.g., the Firestone Rubber Plantation, Liberia (251 square miles), Galinhas palm oil in Sierra Leone, banana plantations in Guinea

Extractive industries: bauxite, e.g., Boké-Kamsar in Guinea (railroad, highway, and dock)

Iron ore, e.g., Wologisi Range, Mt. Nimba (once the highest point in Liberia, now topped)

Diamonds, civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, “blood diamonds”

High grading (selective timber harvesting), “blood lumber”, e.g., Charles Taylor

Foreign, especially factory fishing, e.g., by the Koreans, undermining locals

Oil, e.g., Niger Delta – prospecting off the coasts of Liberia and Sierra Leone

### (6) The loss of ecological diversity parallels and accompanies the loss of species

... in ecologically diverse areas such as the tropical rainforest a large number of languages are found, whereas in a relatively homogenous environment such as a desert or the Arctic the number of languages is much smaller ... a direct link between the decline in cultural and linguistic diversity on the one hand and biological diversity on the other (Mühlhäusler 2003:34-35)

... remarkable overlaps between global mappings of the world's areas of biological megadiversity and areas of high linguistic diversity ... converse correlation between low-diversity cultural systems and low biodiversity (Maffi 1997)

## (7) The Mande Expansion, phases 1 and 2

Phase 1: Peaceful trade and settlement, an influx of smiths and traders  
Smiths introduced and controlled secret power societies

Phase 2: Warriors invading in the 15<sup>th</sup> century

“Mandekan (horse) warriors, who achieved their control in western Africa strictly through physical force and collaboration with the Mande traders and smiths already in place. The second change brought far-reaching changes to western African peoples” (Brooks 1993:59). The conquest and subsequent social stratification had linguistic implications. “With few exceptions the warriors spoke Mandekan languages that subsequently diffused among the conquered groups” (Brooks 1993:97; cf. Murdock 1959:267ff).

## (8) Phase 1 interlopers constitute a fifth column

Childs 2002: Although in most cases the Mande smiths and traders assimilated during the first phase, there was always some sense in which they remained apart, the smiths in particular through their role as leaders in what Brooks 1993 calls “power associations” (a.k.a. “secret” or “initiation societies”, “bush school”), which were trans-tribal and exercised some control over their members (see Herbert 1993). That the smiths were not fully assimilated can be seen in the new alliances they formed with the invading Manding warriors in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Despite being well established within the host cultures, they allied themselves not with the people among whom they had settled, but rather with the invaders.

And wherever Mande smiths and traders settled, ... they introduced their social and cultural practices. Smiths founded branches of Komo, Simo, and affiliated power associations to ensure the socialization of youths, encourage and enforce appropriate behavior ... , expedite commerce, and otherwise advance their people’s interests among these host societies (Brooks 1993:60).

## (9) The Mane invaders impress [pun intended!] locals

Whatever the origin of the various strands of the invasion, the importance of the overlying Mande influence must be recognized. All new soldiers who were enlisted were not only trained in the uses of Mane arms but were also inculcated with a new sense of loyalty. The recruits were chosen as young men, who, after training and indoctrination, were puffed up with pride at being among the Mane ranks. The arms and clothing were clearly Mande, and the language, too, showed pronounced Mande characteristics (Rodney 1967:235; Rodney 1970:56).

Circumstances changed with the conquests by the horse warriors for they imposed Mandekan languages in conquered areas. People constrained to adopt Mandekan languages included individuals of every status among conquered societies ruled by the Mali Empire (thirteenth-fifteenth centuries) and its satellite states, particularly the captives taken in warfare or purchased by Mandekan speakers. Captives were strongly motivated to learn their owners’ languages as a crucial

step in adapting to new social circumstances and changing their own status from non-persons to individuals attached to kin groups and protectors (Brooks 1993:98).

During the latter part of the c.1100-c.1500 dry period, Mandekan-speaking horse warriors conquered vast territories in the savanna and savanna-woodland zones of western Africa. They followed trade routes pioneered by Mande traders and smiths and seized the trading and artisanal centers, where they lived among the Atlantic- and Gur-speaking landlords. Many members of conquered societies were sold into trans-Saharan slavery via Mande trade networks, and others were held as domestic slaves (Brooks 1993:106).

Two maps of Atlantic.

(10) How Islam changes local societies

proselytizing and forced conversion from animism  
hierarchical vs. relatively flat political structures, the village or hamlet as the primary unit of political orientation  
militaristic (vs. pacifistic)  
patrilineal vs. matrilineal  
abstinence vs. not: palm wine seen as 'food' (same word)

(11) Recent crises before Ebola: civil wars and civil strife

The First Liberian Civil War (1989-97)

- Samuel Doe overthrows William Tolbert
- rebel forces fight among themselves after overcoming Doe
- Charles Taylor triumphs, elected president in 1997
- estimated toll: over 200,000

The Second Liberian Civil War (1999–2003)

- LURD invaders from Guinea and a second group from the south
- Taylor deposed (eventually imprisoned)
- estimated toll: ??

The Sierra Leone Civil War (1991–2002)

- “Rebels” supported by Charles Taylor in Liberia
- estimated toll: over 50,000

Military coup in Guinea (2008) after death of President Lansana Conté

- military stepped down, Alpha Condé elected president in 2010

(12) Did the people fight back?

Non-violent cultures, traditionally sought peace by negotiation, compromise, payments  
Intermarriage, the gift of a chief's daughter to the interloper

“Strangers” always welcome

The Mani calling in the Temne for assistance against a jihad, Temne took them over

Anecdote of Kim boatman transporting the rebels

Little resistance to the Mande Expansion and to proselytization (Islam and Christianity)

## Language documentation

Go to slides

(13) Vlogs (Video blogs) illustrating the research

#1 “Getting there” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fi8coyAqbuw&feature=related>

#2 “Song and dance” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UQ0pLIUs\\_0&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UQ0pLIUs_0&feature=related)

#3 “Palm oil”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFEodfn-WWQ&feature=related>

#4 “The children”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dp9u-HeJoCY>

(14) Patient Zero of the Ebola crisis

Patient Zero in the [Ebola](#) outbreak, researchers suspect, was a 2-year-old boy who died on Dec. 6 [2013], just a few days after falling ill in a village in Guéckédou, in southeastern [Guinea](#).

(15) Some facts and figures on Ebola

1/28: With 710 new cases confirmed in the past 21 days, this epidemic is far from over.

CIA estimated toll: 1.4 million (Sept 2014)

Ebola is one of the most deadly infectious diseases, causing death in approximately 50-90 percent of those who become infected (its estimated case-fatality rate). This is much higher than almost every other infectious disease included.

(16) The current toll

**Countries with Widespread Transmission (WHO, updated January 27, 2015)**

Country	Total Cases	Lab-Confirmed	Total Deaths	Population
Guinea	2917	2569	1906	11, 750,000
Liberia	8622	3138	3686	4,294,000
Sierra Leone	10518	7968	3199	6,092,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>22057</b>	<b>13675</b>	<b>8795</b>	<b>22,136,000</b>

(17) Is Ebola different from other calamities visited on Liberia, Guinea, Sierra Leone? (No)

Number of people who died

Disruption to society, communication and markets, e.g., locking down West Point

Cultural practices suspended: traditional burial practices, handshakes

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