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The Language Ecology of Sierra Leone

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The language ecology of Sierra Leone - G. Tucker Childs, Portland State University, Portland, OR (USA)

Abstract

Many of Sierra Leone's indigenous languages are robust and enjoy some support on the national level. Mende and Temne, for example, receive government support in terms of materials having been created for developing literacy in those languages. Other Sierra Leone languages receive support in nearby countries, e.g., Mandingo (Malinké) and Kisi in Guinea. Three languages in Sierra Leone, however, receive no such support and will likely disappear in a generation, namely, the three South Atlantic languages Mani (Bullom So), Kim (Krim) and Bom (Bum). A fourth language belonging to the same group, Sherbro, the subject of an upcoming investigation, has similarly received no national support but may have enough vitality to survive longer than the others. The purpose of this paper is to characterize the present status and vitality of the languages of Sierra Leone, concentrating on the endangered ones, and to suggest some possible future directions for language management at both national and local levels.

Introduction

Some crucial facts about the world's languages are presented in an introduction to beliefs and ideologies in the documentation of the world's languages (Austin and Sallabank 2014:2-3). The authors note these trends as,

- people are switching from minority to majority languages
- governments promote a standard purportedly to achieve national unity
- computer and media technologies using world languages are rapidly spreading

They estimate that a language is lost every three months and that 50% of the world's languages will be lost in the 21st century despite the interest in dying languages and their revitalization (pp. 2-3). The general public may be aware that the world is losing languages at an alarming pace, parallel to the loss of ecological diversity and attributable to identical causes, e.g., Mühlhäusler 1995. Australia and North America present the two best-documented areas of language loss, where most of the indigenous languages have disappeared after colonization by Europeans.

Australia is the continent “experiencing the most rapid and drastic effects of language loss” ... 95% of the languages will be lost by 2088, 300 years after the colonists arrived” (Evans 2007: 343).

The vast majority of the languages in Australia have fewer than 100 speakers, a good indicator of language desuetude. In North America the situation is comparable.

Almost all of the languages still in use are endangered: fewer children are learning them every year, as is the case in Navajo, or children are no longer learning them at all. Well over a third of the languages spoken at contact [with Europeans] have already disappeared. Another quarter are now remembered by only a small number of elderly speakers. Nearly all are likely to be gone by the end of the twenty-first century (Yamamoto 2007 referencing Mithun 1999).

Likely the same losses will soon be true of other linguistically diverse areas such as Papua New Guinea and the southern Pacific.

Analysts have speculated that Africa has lost many languages in the past, particularly with the “Bantu Expansion” beginning in 1500 BCE from an area around the Nigeria-Cameroon border to East Africa and all the way down to southern Africa (Blench 2006). In its wake many languages disappeared as their speakers were assimilated. This is most obvious with the group of languages known as Khoisan (known popularly as “click languages”) in southern Africa. Present-day civil unrest, e.g., in the Nuba Hills of Southern Sudan, is leading to the demise of many more, be it the “socio-economically supported nationalist regime of language”, “armed conflicts”, or “the standard monoglot ideology of Arabicization” (Mugaddam and Abdelhay 2013).

Although the situation in Sierra Leone is not as dire as it is in other parts of the world, it is one worth considering. In the next section I provide a brief inventory of the languages of Sierra Leone. I then focus on the languages that are threatened and in the following section identify some of the causes both in the past and in the present. The last section speculates on the future and suggests some strategies for preserving Sierra Leone's disappearing languages.

An inventory of the languages of Sierra Leone

The total number of languages in Sierra Leone is roughly twenty.¹ Most of the languages belong to one of two major language families, traditionally labelled Mande and Atlantic, which at one time were thought to be part of a single macro phylum, Niger-Congo. Increasingly Mande is seen as a group independent of Niger-Congo (e.g., Dimmendaal Forthcoming), and Atlantic is no longer seen as a coherent entity. It has been split into two groups designated by the geographical terms North and South Atlantic (e.g., Blench 2006). The only North Atlantic language in Sierra Leone is Fula, the people representing relatively recently migrants from Guinea who have settled primarily in the north of Sierra Leone. Fula is not discussed below. The other languages in (1) all belong to South Atlantic.

¹ *Ethnologue* (Lewis, Simons and Fennig 2015), a standard reference, identifies twenty-five languages splitting several languages into multiple varieties and including Sierra Leone Sign Language.

(1) The South Atlantic languages of Sierra Leone

Boom-Kim (Bom, Krim)	Limba ²	Gola
Kisi (Kissi)	Temne (Themne) ³	Mani (Bullom So, Mmani)
Sherbro		

I discuss neither Gola nor Kisi, as both languages are not deeply involved in the overall speech ecology of Sierra Leone, although they are important, respectively, in Liberia and Guinea. Gola is the more endangered language of the two, being spoken along the inland border with Sierra Leone in the Gola Forest. As is the case with speakers of other South Atlantic languages, Gola speakers are shifting to Mende, a Mande language, the most rapidly spreading language in Sierra Leone.

Other Atlantic languages I do not discuss are vital and widely spoken, especially Temne (Themne), one of the most important languages of Sierra Leone with over a million speakers concentrated in the Northern Province. Nearby Limba is also widely spoken, although many of its speakers are shifting to Temne. Both Temne and Limba have government support.

Of the Mande languages, only Mende functions importantly in the speech economy of Sierra Leone with 1,480,000 speakers in a recent count (Lewis et al. 2015). It is the most widely spoken language in the country and indeed spreading,⁴ spilling over into Liberia and expanding into non-Mende-speaking areas. Yalunka, Soso, and Vai are more widely spoken in the coterminous countries of Liberia and Guinea and closely related to Mende.⁵ Kuranko and Kono are part of the Mandeng cluster, which includes Mandingo, the group being a relic of the collapse of the Mali Empire; none of the three is widely spoken in Sierra Leone.

(2) Mande languages

Kono	Kuranko	Loko
Mandingo (Maninka, Malinké)	Mende	Soso (Susu)
Vai	Yalunka	

The final category includes the minor language Klao, whose speakers originally came from Liberia, and the important languages English and Krio. Krio is the third most widely spoken language, a creole based on English used widely in the country as a lingua franca and the first language of a sizeable and historically important group originating in a repatriated slave population. It is the first language of a sizeable population (473,000 in one count (Lewis et al. 2015)) and a second language of many more. English is the declared national language.

(3) Other languages

English	Klao (Kru)	Krio (an English-based creole)
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Most of the languages of Sierra Leone are relatively healthy, being learnt by children as one of their first languages and functioning in important regional speech economies. In the following section I describe the threatened languages of Sierra Leone, which are not so healthy.

Threatened languages of Sierra Leone

This section characterizes the vitality of several threatened languages of Sierra Leone, Mani and Bom-Kim, two languages on which I have conducted research. An additional threatened language, Sherbro, forms the target of upcoming research.

² One reviewer pointed out that the dialects of Limba have been analyzed as different enough to constitute separate languages.

³ "Mabanta" has been sometimes listed as a language of Sierra Leone (Dalby 1963) but has lately been shown to be a register of Temne (Kailie 2007).

⁴ A Mende colleague at Fourah Bay College remarked, likely somewhat facetiously, that the Mende were regarded as "the Chinese" of Sierra Leone because they were so numerous.

⁵ These languages are also a product of the Mali Empire but involve a more complicated history, e.g., Dwyer 2005.

1.1 Case study I: Bom and Kim

Treated as separate languages in the past, Bom and Kim have been recognized as a dialects of the same language, renamed “Bom-Kim” (Childs To appear-b). Bom-Kim may form a dialect continuum extending beyond the traditional Bom and Kim areas to Sherbro Island and north to Moyamba District along the coast. Bom represents a chiefdom administratively, and follows a not uncommon practice of naming a language for a locale (Lüpke Forthcoming), likely a river in the case of Bom (the “Bum River” (see, e.g., Hall 1938), the present-day Sewa.

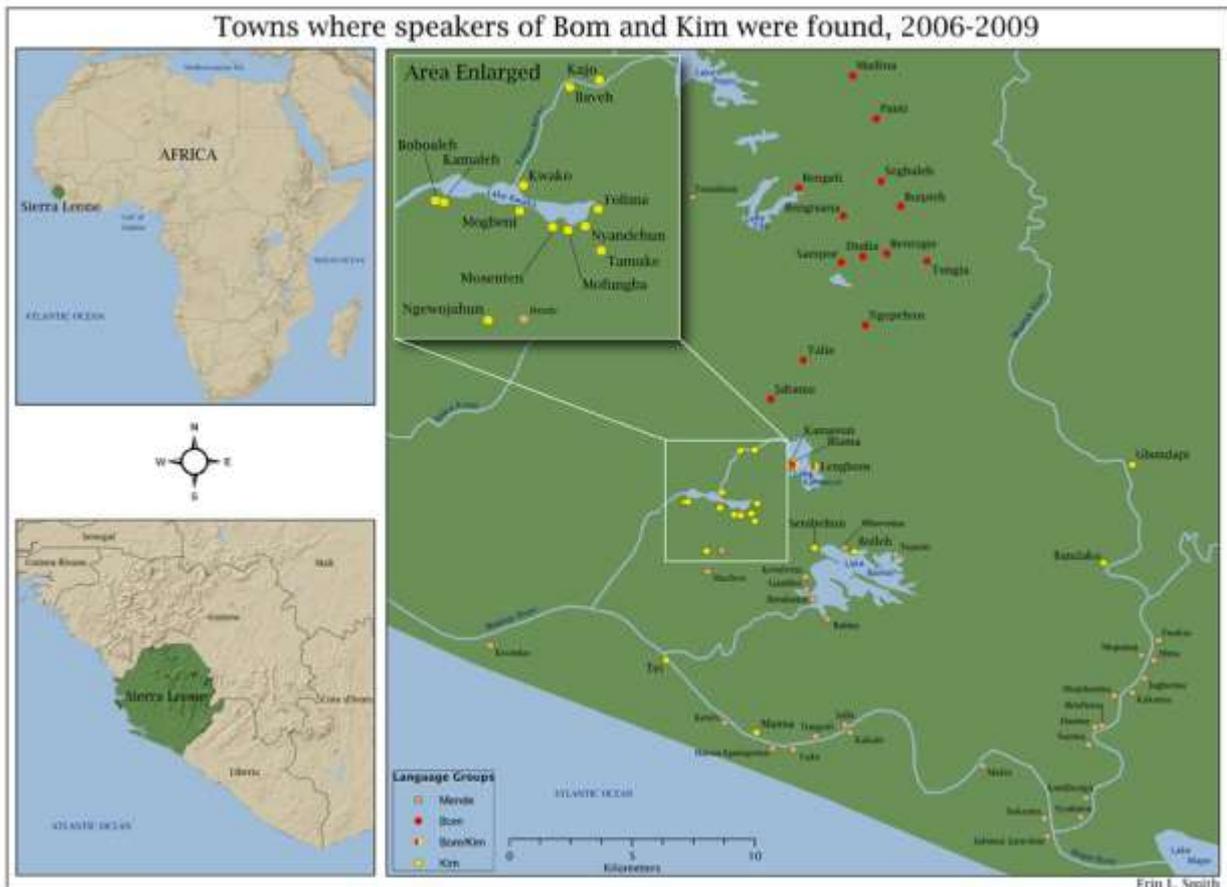
The language to which all Bom-Kim speakers are shifting is Mende, and all ethnically Bom-Kim people speak Mende, typically as their first language. No children are learning Bom-Kim; the youngest speakers we identified in our study (DKB, 2006-09) were in their fifties. The towns which were surveyed are shown in Map 1. It should be noted that no town had more than a few elderly speakers, some of whom had become only remembers (e.g., Dimmendaal 1998).

Bom and Kim were considered to be separate languages by their speakers likely because of a relatively recent land battle and a telltale difference in the definite article. Linguistically, however, the two varieties are very close insofar as could be determined on the basis of aged speakers. They admitted to having no trouble understanding each other, and several speakers self-identified as Bom in one situation and as Kim in another.

Despite the enthusiasm shown for the language when project members arrived, we found very few speakers who controlled the variety enough to tell a story or play-act an interaction with another speaker (Childs 2012). The exception was the town of Sogbaleh, where we found a critical mass of speakers, mostly women, who actually used what they called Bom on a daily basis among themselves. They were a lively and entertaining group, who were quite proud of their language (and culture).⁶

Nonetheless, despite the speakers’ enthusiasm the fate of Bom-Kim is irrevocable. As a spoken entity the language will disappear as soon as its speakers die. Its only preservation will be in the products of our documentation effort housed at the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) at the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project at SOAS, University of London, and at Fourah Bay College, the University of Sierra Leone.

⁶ Just how entertaining can be understood by viewing the videos (“vlogs”) produced by a Voice of America visitor to the project, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHN6mDDITqs> (see also Parts 1-2 and 4) for further examples of video documentation.



Map 1 Documenting the Kim and Bom languages (DKB)

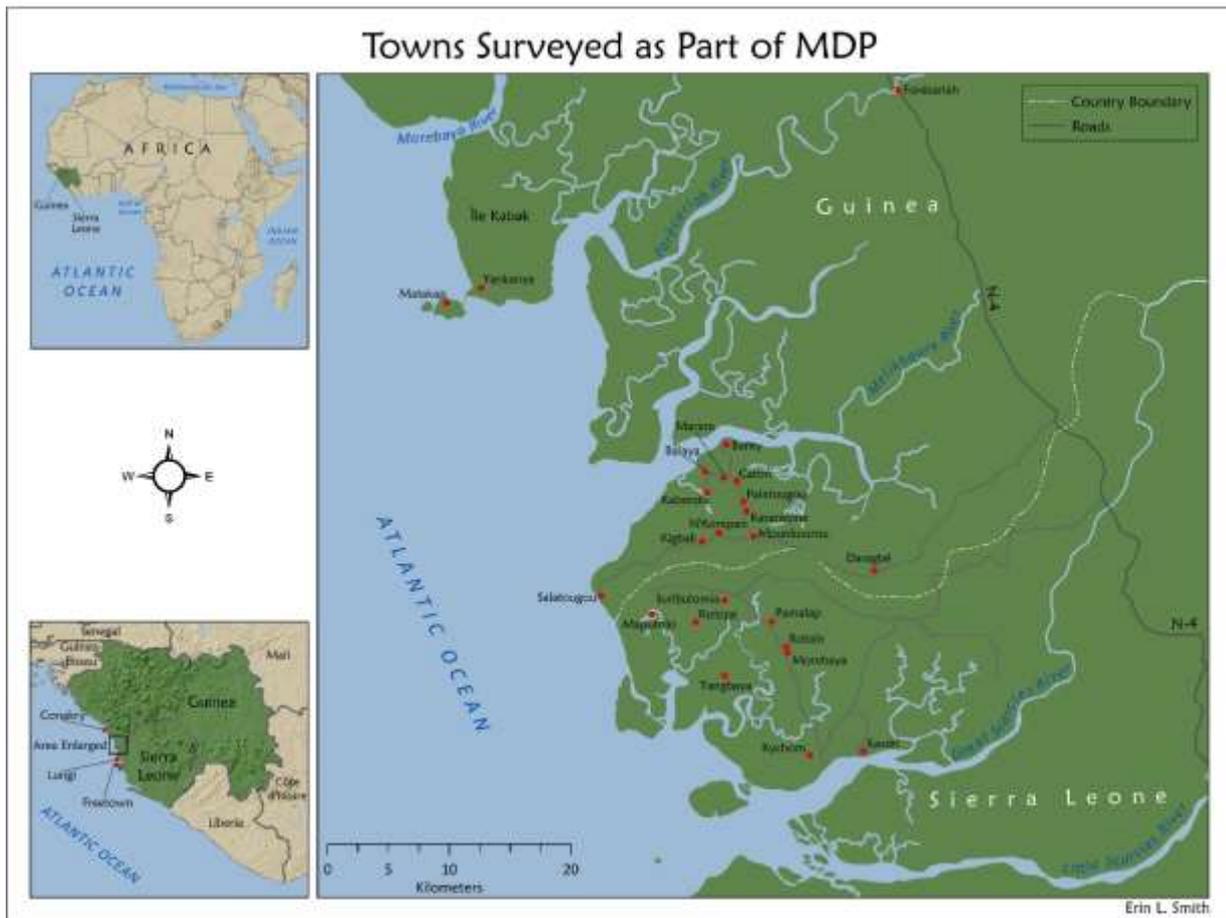
1.2 Case study II: Mani

The second study on which I report discusses a language straddling the border between Sierra Leone and Guinea, an area the colonizing French and British fought over. The eventual outcome was for the traditional Mani area to be split between two colonial entities and eventually two countries, an unhappy consequence for the Mani people and for their language, although there is much interaction along the coastal waterways even during the time of the civil war in Sierra Leone. It was originally thought that the Mani language was as defunct as Bom-Kim, but an offhand comment and a later investigation discovered an island on which children grew up actually speaking Mani.

In 2000 several colleagues from the University of Conakry and I embarked on a mission to document the Mani language, partially because Voeltz 1996 painted a rather glum picture of the language, reporting that there were few speakers under fifty. Thus there was some urgency to the enterprise. One component of the research was a pilot survey attempting to understand when and why people shifted. Another was to assess who spoke the language and in what contexts. The final picture, as added to later by more extensive work by a sizeable research team (described in Childs 2011), was glummer than originally surmised – the language, as with many of its congeners, stood no chance of survival (Childs To appear-a).

The Mani were the original occupants of the Samu region of Guinea and Sierra Leone, who lost territory to Soso interlopers in the north, who now completely dominate the region, at least on the Guinea side of the border. On the southern side it is both the Soso and the Temne who have taken over traditionally Mani areas with their languages forming the target variety of young speakers.

Mani was once spoken in a coastal area straddling the border between the Republic of Guinea and Sierra Leone: Map 2 shows the towns that our research team surveyed as part of the Mani Documentation Program (MDP, 2004-06) and later a project video documenting the Mani people and culture (VDM, 2011-13).



Map 2 The Mani Documentation Project

The area where Mani was historically spoken is certainly larger than where it is spoken today. At the beginning of the 18th century a Mani kingdom stretched from Freetown north to the River Pongo (Arcin 1907, as referenced by Diallo 1974:36). Oral testimony relates how it was an invasion by the Temne, specifically the kidnapping of the Mani king and the subsequent warfare that precipitated the fall of the kingdom. Contributing to the effects of the Temne attacks on the southern flank of the Samu was the more pacific but no less linguistically devastating advent of the Soso, who were themselves pushed into the Samu by the Fula in the 18th century. The forcible conversion to Islam of all Samu inhabitants came later at the hands of the not-so-pacific "Tourelakai", a warlike Muslim Malinké (Mandingo) group on jihad in the 19th century (Diallo 1974:37).

The fate of Mani was obvious in a survey we performed of language attitudes. An anecdote illustrates the low esteem in which the language is held, even by ethnic Mani. Alia Fadega, an (ethnic) Mani elder on the island of Kabak (off the coast of southern Guinea), was questioned about the use of Mani in his town of Kakende. He told us that he had heard only the old people (*les vieux*) speaking Mani, and they did so in only a few domains. One domain was in speaking to their dogs; the second was when his grandfather would go to a large kapok tree behind the village and speak to what his grandfather called "*le diable, les fétiches*" (the devil, the fetishes), the target of condemnation by the local imam. It is likely the Mani conversation was directed at the ancestors, elders who had died and who had been demonized by Muslim proselytizers. This anecdote points to the devastating role that Islam has had on the indigenous languages and cultures of the Samu. Other practices include simply ridiculing the language in public to disallowing the traditional consumption of palm wine, the mildly intoxicating sap of the palm tree. The language was not allowed in the mosque although the majority language Soso was.

Childs 2004 shows some of the linguistic effects on Mani due to contact with the Mande language Soso. One sees, then, a language substantively changed by contact with the language and culture to which its speakers are switching. All speakers of Mani are bilingual, and most ethnic Mani are monolingual in Soso. We originally believed there was no hope for the language itself but we later discovered an island (literally) of Mani speakers on a remote tidal island (see Map 2), accessible only by dugout canoe.

Not all of the people on the island of Tangbaya, however, spoke Mani. There were both Mani and Soso towns on the island. Even in Tangbaya, the largest town on the island, containing the greatest number of Mani speakers, there were many monolingual speakers of Soso. The only monolingual speakers of Mani were very young and by the time they reached puberty, they all spoke Soso as well. For this reason we pressed ahead with a revitalization program that may have been misguided and doomed at the onset (Childs 2013, Childs To appear-a).

In this brief look at two languages of Sierra Leone, we see essentially the same consequent. One language (Bom-Kim) is further along than the other (Mani) on a path to disappearance, but both will be only historical artefacts in a generation as their speakers pass away. The question arises as to why this is so, the topic of the next section.

The causes of language death

Very generally one can say that the reason people stop speaking one language and start speaking another is socio-economic in its basis. People see no advantage to using a language they know or were born with and begin learning and using another. In Africa this is a relatively common process with fluid identities and few nationalist ideologies of the sort found in Europe (Lüpke and Storch 2013). A specific cause could be the pressure of a larger group, e.g., the Soso, the Temne, or the Mende; it could be the promise of a job in another area, e.g., diamond mining in Kono; it could simply be the draw of the city (Freetown).

In (4) I summarize the factors most important in threatening the less widely spoken Atlantic languages from Senegal down to Liberia, most of which are relevant to the Sierra Leone context. Notice that no one factor is criterial – it is rather the accumulated pressure of a constellation of factors in determining language shift and eventually language death. Because many of the small Atlantic groups, like the Bom-Kim and Mani, once lacked and may still lack sociopolitical organization beyond the hamlet or village,⁷ they were less able to resist external pressures and in fact have a tradition of welcoming “strangers” (outsiders) into their midst (Brooks 1993).

(4) Factors contributing to language death within the Atlantic Group

Economic: the young seeking employment in the cities, on plantations, or in the mines

Demographic: the incursion of large and powerful groups, the Mande Expansion (e.g., Niane 1989), Wolof, Fulfulde, Malinké, Soso, Temne, Mende, etc.

Religious proselytizing: the spread of Islam (Fulbe and Soso jihads) and Christianity

Militaristic: the Mandeng Empire, European colonization

Cultural: the welcoming of “strangers” by traditional societies, openness to external influences

Slavery (and pawning): trafficking and the abduction of young men and women from villages, the destruction of traditional practices and alliances

Neo-colonialization, especially in terms of extractive industries: gold, diamonds, iron ore, rutile, bauxite; “blood lumber”⁸; factory fishing within Sierra Leone’s territorial waters

Globalization: involvement in the world’s economy

Environmental (see the papers in De Busser and LaPolla 2015, especially the introduction De Busser 2015; Maffi 2005)

Each of the factors listed above has a Sierra Leone instantiation, as has been suggested in the case studies. Others can be mentioned. For example, during the DKB we could hear and see the Korean trawlers off the Sierra Leone coast. There was even an instance when a Korean fisherman came ashore and told the village fishermen that they should not be fishing in their own waters! A particular example of globalization is the sale of large plots of land to the Chinese, who established the Sierra Leone China Agricultural Development Company (SLeCHAD), a US \$1.3 billion project for growing rice and rubber, thus taking away the local livelihood of small-time farmers. Because of the flood of cheap products from China, part of a deal made involving the construction of football stadiums and roads (all by Chinese workers), there is no chance for the development of local industries. Guinea-Bissau is the most striking example of the spread of the international drug trade, serving as an entrepôt for cocaine shipments to Europe since the 2000s (Earnshaw 2013), but also Guinea-Conakry as well (witness a drug bust (cocaine) in Boke in 2008). Such developments do not augur well for the future of threatened languages.

⁷ In Sierra Leone political positions above the village are controlled by the state rather than determined by vote of the people. For example, among the peoples of the coast the paramount chief or king could come only from one of the royal families (Reed and Robinson 2013). In a recent election I observed, a history was fabricated for the government candidate, creating such an ancestry.

⁸ “Blood lumber” makes reference to the selected harvesting of high-value hardwoods from the rain forest, destroying much of the forest in the process. The term arises by analogy with the term “blood diamonds”, the term used to describe the mining practices that financed Charles Taylor and others.

Conclusion, the future

The prediction is that speakers will continue shifting to the more widely spoken languages, as has been found elsewhere in the world. Two apparent exceptions can be discarded as somewhat negligible to the inexorable process.

Some say that language diversity is maintained in the birth of new, mostly urban languages, such as those described in Kiessling and Mous 2004. These languages appear at nowhere near a rate sufficient to replace the loss of languages elsewhere. Furthermore, these new languages are symbolic of a western orientation, the high life of fast-paced urban culture, e.g., Childs 1997, Goyvaerts 1988, and sustain little of the culture tied to the disappearing languages. Finally, these languages often are simply divergent dialects or slang (Mfusi 1990), and/or displace or replace other varieties.

The spread of lingua francas in Africa, e.g., Heine 1969, has also been construed as somehow not affecting the status and viability of traditional languages. For example, it has been stated that “there have been surprisingly few reports of languages actually dying out; rather, the dramatic reports are of growth in lingua francas” (Mann 1990:1). Such statements fly in the face of reason and empirical facts, for as speakers increasingly adopt shared languages due to new communities of practice, the contexts in which their first languages are used decrease and consequently the languages fall into disuse and eventually disappear from their repertoires. In a few places a stable sort of multiglossia may obtain, i.e., with languages apportioned as to function. For example, a language learned as a child will be used within the home or in one’s natal village (Mani/Bullom, Temne, Mende, etc.), a lingua franca in the market or on the job (Krio), and an exoglossic variety in school (English). The general pattern, however, in the communities with which I am familiar is for the village language to be forgotten in the city and not learned by the next urbanized generation.

Only rarely are home languages retained, as is the case with the less widely spoken Atlantic languages of Sierra Leone. The one possibility of survival is through stable bilingualism, as found in Senegal with the Cangin languages, e.g., Drolc 2003. Here all speakers are bilingual in Wolof and their mother tongue Cangin language, preserving the latter for use in the home and related contexts. Such a development is unusual, however, and is found with a few other North Atlantic languages (see Lüpke Forthcoming for an example in the Casamance region of Senegal).

A direction for future research is to assess the impact of the Ebola crisis on the peoples and the languages of Sierra Leone. Because traditional practices were so heavily disparaged by international and national authorities, it seems likely that the culture with which the practices are associated would have undergone some damage, just as pernicious as the mocking of local languages in the villages. Integrating treatment with local practices would likely have been more effective (Peters 2015).

The question arises as to whether any of the languages can be preserved. There are two levels at which action can be taken, national and local. The Sierra Leone Government has already taken some action in supporting indigenous languages. Indigenous languages that have already received support at the national level in Sierra Leone are Krio,⁹ Limba, Mende, and Temne. With the help of external funding, schoolbooks for the elementary schools have been developed and teachers have been trained in these four languages. English remains the national language de jure but has been replaced in many spheres by Krio, e.g., at Fourah Bay College, for example, a national university.¹⁰

The second is at the local level, where the speakers and perhaps would-be speakers keen on preserving the language would spearhead revitalization efforts. If a language is to be revived, the ultimate source of energy for such projects is the community itself.

The form that revival or preservation would take is the same in both cases. Authorities or the community must guarantee the reservation of a domain for the threatened language, a (local) multiglossia (Romaine 2002, 2007). Thus, for example, Mani could be reserved for cultural events or for use in the home. Such domains seem a natural place for the language to be maintained. Otherwise the language and the culture of which it forms a part will be lost forever.

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⁹ Note that Krio is here considered an indigenous language.

¹⁰ This fact was brought forward when I served as an occasional guest lecturer in linguistics at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, from 2005-13. Some students were unable to understand my lectures in English.

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