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Ideophones are special.
The knowledge of ideophones in multilingual contexts:
A West African pilot study*

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Mimetics in Japanese and other languages of the world
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(1) Motivation for the study

The ubiquity of multilingualism and its somewhat uncertain characterization

The claim for linguistic repertoires vs. languages

How to evaluate and document a linguistic repertoire, economically and expeditiously

Ideophones as functionally areal but formally local, thus a control for borrowings

Testing the assumption: Is there any sharing in highly multilingual areas? Are ideophones less local than has been empirically shown?

(2) Overview of the talk

Introduction and motivation for the study
Background to the study: location, ideophones and areality
Ideophone knowledge as a metric
Evaluating multilingualism
Methodology
Findings and discussion
Conclusion

Multilingualism in Foya, Liberia, 1970-72

- At the intersection of three colonial histories: France, UK, US
- Extractive industries, neo-colonialization, "globalization"
- Kisi the historical language, the language of the farmers
- Mandingo the language of markets and trade,
- Resident pidgins: Liberian English, Krio, Guinea French
- English the language of the schools in Liberia and Sierra Leone (American vs. British), French in Guinea
- Other languages: Arabic, Fula
- NGOs: UNESCO, UNDP, Israelis, Taiwanese

(3) the role of multilingualism in a community

Tradition, tied to culture
Needed in the marketplace for trade (tied to task)
Communities of practice
A survival mechanism, defense of the powerless
At play in Foya, Liberia, in the "tri-state area",
fun, artistry, performance

(4) Mimetics and ideophones in print

Mimetics in manga:

http://www.japanpowered.com/anime-articles/manga-sound-effect-guide

Ideophones in folk tales:

badamin, badamin; *wasawusu*; and *krik, krik, krik*

Aardema 1975

(5) English ideophones, no special class

higgledy-piggledy 'in a messy way, without order'

willy-nilly? 1) whether one likes it or not. 2) without direction or planning; haphazardly.

see Thun 1963: *tick-tock, hurly-burly,* and *shillyshally*

galumphing 'walking heavily or awkwardly– function often taken over by verbs in English

(6) Why ideophones?

Their association with high levels of competency in a language, beyond the instrumental and immediately functional or simply linguistic (ACTFL guidelines)

Register local identity, "Zuluness" in southern Africa (Childs 1998)

Register local identity (Childs 1998)

Ideophones acquired early (Doctor 1992); onomatopoeic forms acquired early in Japanese (Akita 2009) Spanish and English (Perry, Perlman and Lupyan 2015); sound symbolism aids learning (Lockwood, Dingemanse and Hagoort 2015; cf. Dingemanse *et al.* 2015)

A functional category across all languages in the area (Sherbro, Mende, Krio, etc.)

A robust category across those languages

Resistance to borrowing: ideophones as lexical items are not borrowed, though their function may be (Childs 1994b)

Perceptually salient (fun?)

Ease of administration for testing ideophone knowledge

(7) Methodological desiderata for a multilingualism metric

Results that are reliable and valid; results comparable across languages

Extrapolation possible, sampling representative

Buy-in from the community, active participation

Sociolinguistically sensitive and informed, considers reigning attitudes and ideologies (including those of the researcher)

No literacy required, fun and non-intimidating, more like a game - no test!

Conducted in the volunteer's language of choice

Easy and quick to administer, easy to analyze

(8) A parallel to consider

The Rapid and Anonymous Interview pioneered in Labov 1966

i.e., the famous query requiring an answer of "the fourth floor".

Minimal intrusion, minimal equipment, minimal time

(9) A sniff test for Alzheimer's, biomarkers and UPSIT

A set of cards with scratch-and-sniff test on each. The patient scratches a little button and then smells. Like a kid's scratch-and-sniff book, there'll be different odors that are on each page.

A low score on the UPSIT was able to predict memory decline in older adults about as well as the PET scan or a spinal tap (highly intrusive and labor intensive procedures).

Explanation: odor signals coming from the nose processed in vulnerable areas of the brain, areas of the brain that degenerate early on in Alzheimer's disease

Odor test scores also predicted which people most likely to develop dementia.

Odor detection offers a quick and inexpensive way to help spot Alzheimer's.

Other biomarkers: nerves of eyes

(10) Areality in (West) Africa

- Areality is the rule rather than the exception ([Heine and Leyew 2008](), [Heine and Nurse 2008]())
- A palimpsest of migration and conquest (e.g., [Hair 1967](), [1968](), [Ajayi and Crowder 1985]())
- Many linguistic features widely dispersed, e.g., S-Aux-O-V, labialvelars, 'meat' = 'animal'
- pan-West African: tag *nyɛ*/nye? 'Right?', *hã-ã-ã-ã* 'extensive in space or time' (Kisi, Bandi, Malinké, Mende, Bom-Kim, Sherbro, Soso; Krio, Liberian English, and even Guinea French)
- pan-West African *te-e-e* 'extensive in time (with a consequent)'
- *áwa* 'okay, right (assent)' originally Soso/General Mande (?)
- [sa ɾibe] 'I'm coming (back).' from French *J'arrive.*

(11) Maps of the area

Atlantic the Atlantic languages

Bolom / Sherbro = Greater Bolom

Sherbro = Lesser Bolom

A. Limba

B. Mel

      1. Temne-Baga

            a. Temne

            b. Baga Binari, Baga Koga, Baga Mandori, Baga Sitemu, Landoma

      2. Bolom-Kisi

            a. Bolom: Mani, Sherbro, Bom-Kim

            b. Kisi

      3. Gola

C. Mansoanka

Figure 1 The classification of South Atlantic

(12) The **monolingual perspective** sees

- second language (L2) users from point of view of the monolingual first language (L1) user
- second language added on to the speaker's first language, something extra
- L2 user's proficiency in the second language measured against the sole language of the monolingual
- research questions account for L2 users' lack of success in learning how to speak like a monolingual L1 user.

(13) The **bilingual perspective** ("multi-competence") sees

- L2 users from the point of view of the person who speaks two or more languages
- other languages as part of the L2 user's total language system, each language potentially differing from that of someone who speaks it as a monolingual.
- irrelevant whether L2 user's final ability is identical to that of a monolingual native speaker
- research questions about how L2 users use the other languages and how the languages connect in multilingual communities, not about how L2 users compare with monolingual individuals and communities.

(14) The integration continuum of possible relationships in multi-competence (Cook 2003: 9)

All points along a continuum
Languages may be totally separate, overlap, or coincide
Parts of the languages of a multilingual may have different relationships

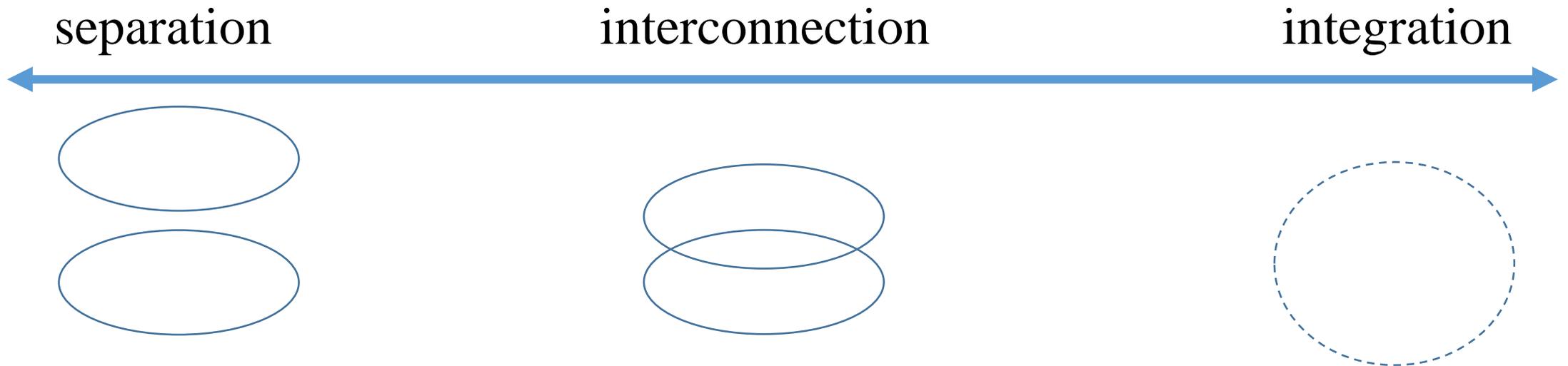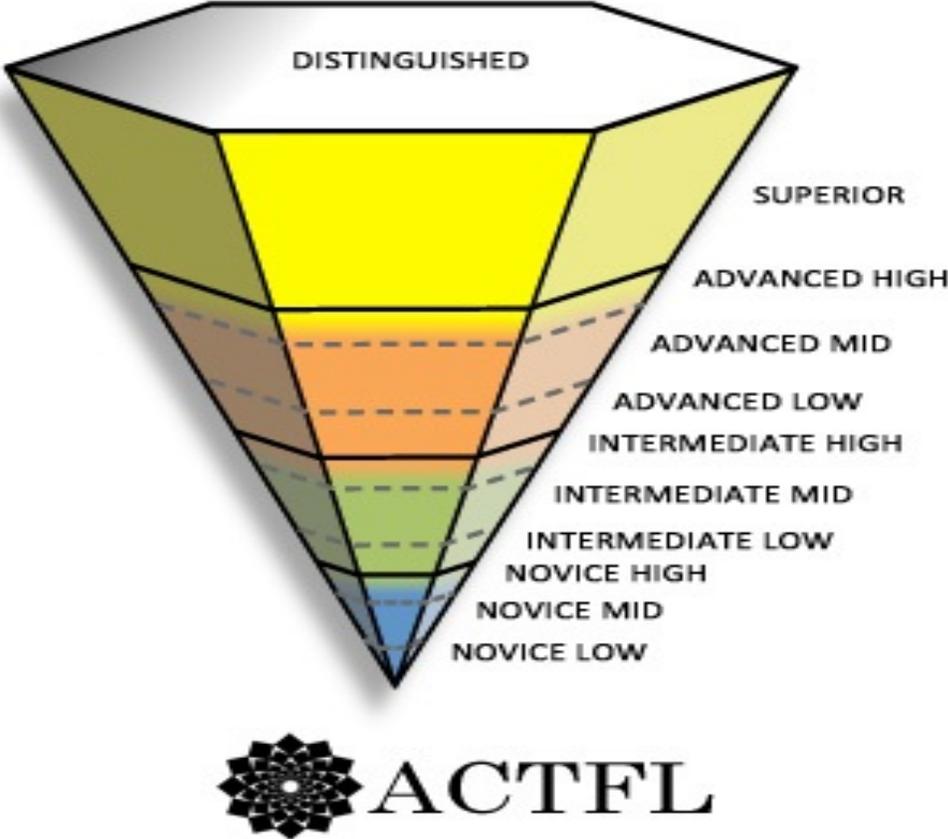separation   interconnection   integration

Figure 2 The ACTFL spike

(16) Summary of techniques used by SIL

A variety of techniques depending on the research question
- oral interviews
- self-evaluation tests
- SRT (sentence repetition test)
- SLOPE (second language oral proficiency evaluation)

Good's paradox

A problem in characterizing multilingualism / multi-competence

- "How can we describe languages if we don't know what a language is?" The problem becomes even more pronounced in multilingual settings ... Logically, "multilingualism" implies more than one language, which, in turn, presupposes discrete languages, and gets us back into the same problem, but even worse.

- How can we admit constructs of language into a characterization of what we don't want to make into a construct, i.e., either Language or a multilingual variety, and do so without admitting that such constructs exist?

(17) Some questions about African multilingualism

What is African multilingualism? (Is it special?)
How is it different from multilingualism in other parts of the world?
What are the governing ideologies? Are they distinctive?
What is the role of social factors in determining the extent to which an individual is multilingual, particularly gender and age?
What is the role of local or ethnic identity? language and nationalism?
What about the orientation of an individual towards the city and the country?
Is there a non-multi-glossic multilingualism in Africa i.e., multilingualism w/o multiglossia, "monoglossic multilingualism"? Are languages not distributed as to functions, communities of practice, etc.??
Does small-scale multilingualism still exist?

Table 1 A sample of Mende ideophones from [Byrne 1993](#)

	Ideophone	Popular context	Mende sentence	Translation
154.	liiŋ	of being dark, overcast, or dull	pɛlɛi bi gbiŋdingɔ liiŋ.	Inside the house is actually dark
155.	livaa	of seeing something appear suddenly from a far distance	ngi mɔtui lɔilɔ le i gbiyanga livaa kɔvihu.	I saw the vehicle make a sudden appearance in the curve.
156.	lɛgbɛlɛgbɛ	of weakness when an object is ripe	maani kpɛlɛ yɛnga lɛgbɛlɛgbɛ.	The plantains have got weak and masticated under the sun.
157.	lɛgbulɛgbu	of being weak and feeble	mangui gbɔwuilɔ i yɛ lɛgbulɛgbu.	The mango got ripe, weak, and feeble
158.	lɛpɛlɛpɛ	of moving or lifting a heavy object slowly	ndakpoi sia ti kɔwui lɛi lɔ lɛpɛlɛpɛ kɔ a gula.	The guys mounted the box very carefully so that it does not fall.
159.	lomɛ	of walking silently or cautiously	ndopoi sia ti yɛ a njia lomɛ.	The children were walking cautiously.

(18) [MTK sample discussion.mp3](#)

46. *fio*
'of swiftly moving around an object'
li bi pɛlɛi na gala fio bi komɛ.
'Go move right around that house quickly.' ([Byrne 1993](#))

(Apologies for Krio-influenced Sierra Leone English, hopefully intelligible to non-native speakers of English.)

(19) Criteria for selecting ideophones

- Iconicity. Onomatopoeic ideophones being the most iconic: the bleating of a sheep, the ringing of a bell, movement of air (featuring labials and labiodentals, e.g., *fiyofiyo*, *fwaa*)
- Other formal features relevant? mix of Vs and Cs; vowel harmony; use of reduplication
- Specificity of semantics: narrowness vs. breadth of meaning
- Specificity of context of use, situational and linguistic
- sensual appeal across five senses (ideophones preponderantly visual)
- domains: color, physical dimensions (large-small), movement, sound
- familiarity to subjects?

(20) Structure of the stimuli

(Warm-up: Three practice ideophones; see Appendix A: Practice ideophones.)

•Ideophone produced in isolation from a written list provided to the speaker (see Table 1). Ideophone pronounced twice by itself (out of context).
•Ideophone used in one or more sentences, not necessarily the sentence provided in the thesis but sometimes another one felt to be more appropriate by Mr. Koroma.

Subjects could listen to the recording as many times as they wanted.

Table 3 Ideophones from Byrne 1993 used in study

	Idph	Popular context	Mende sentence	Translation
14	bondi-bondi	state of being thin and small	kwa lukui yale bondibondi.	The monkey's arms are very thin and small.
7	bɛe	sound of animals, esp. bleating of sheep	nbalɛi a yee gula bɛe.	The sheep is bleating.
31	dɔmi	underscoring dizzy or weak	haata nya ngahu yale dɔmi.	Today my body feels weak and dizzy.
42	fesafesa	of walking swiftly	kina wai yɛ a njia fesafesa.	The elderly man was walking swift and faster.
30	dɔɔ	sound of rain following consistently	njei yejita wa yɛle dɔɔ.	The rainfall today fell in a consistent and steady manner.

(21) The subjects characterized

1. Speakers of Sherbro (and no Mende)   5
2. Speakers of Sherbro and some Mende   4
3. Speakers of Mende (and no Sherbro)   5
4. Speakers of Mende and some Sherbro   1
(All subjects spoke Krio and some spoke English.)   (15)

All of the speakers were well educated and ranged in age from 13 to 73. Nine females, six males

(22) Instructions to subjects (Consent form – see Appendix .)

You will be asked to provide the meanings of this set of twenty Mende words, some of which you may not know, depending on your language background. Please, however, even if you don't know, make the best guess you can at what the word means. There are no right or wrong answers. The words all come from Mende but may also be found in other languages you know. Again, in many cases you will just be guessing, but we are interested in what your guesses are

The words can refer to almost anything but usually say something the manner or the way in which something was done. It can be the way something sounds or smells or tastes, the way it looks or feels, or even the way you feel about it. For example, the first practice word, *bafubafu*, describes the way a pipe is being smoked, the second, *bau*, describes the way someone bows insolently, and the third practice word, *beleŋ*, describes how disappointed or crestfallen someone is after making a bad deal. Some of the words may refer to sound you're familiar with like the barking of a dog or rain falling, but most of them are not based on sound.

Listen to them now. Let's start with the practice ones first. [Show subjects how the device works.] As you see they are numbered Practice 01, Practice 02, and Practice 03 (located in "AM files" on the E drive). Start with Practice 01. Press the center part of the button once to hear the word pronounced by itself, then used in a sentence. You may listen to each recording as many times as you like. Simply press the button again. [Discuss.] Now let's try the other two practice words. [Discuss.]

Ready to begin? Remember that your responses will be recorded. After you play the ideophones on the recording device, you will explain what each one means.

(23) Some findings related to multilingualism

Patterns of knowledge generally coincided with reported levels of linguistic competence
Bipolar distribution of scores
Mende speakers, especially older ones, got most if not all of them right
Sherbro speakers who speak some Mende did better than those who did not
Missing cell: Performance of speakers of Mende who spoke some Bolom (language shift)
Ideophone knowledge seems to correlate with expected competence
Useful in rural contexts such as Casamance and Lower Fungom, where ideophony robust

(24) Some findings related to ideophony

Young people don't know ideophones as well as adults
Sound of a goat or sheep (*bɛe*) correctly identified by all (100%)
Falling object ideophones (*biŋ* and *gbai*) (over 90%)
Heavy rain falling (*dɔɔ*) (80%)
Rushing air (*fiyo-fiyo* birds in flight) (73%)
Areal patterns elusive but hinted at in shared knowledge across
language boundaries
Universality? Areality?

(25) Some improvements

Better independent variable for knowledge of ideophones / multilingual competency
Use ideophones from other languages in a multilingual area
Combine and compare ideophone findings with language surveys and ethnographies
Exploit the passive or absent researcher
Automatic speech recognition (ASR) – 20 hours of carefully transcribed speech
Include non-educated speakers in sample

(26) What methodology is best?

A combination of qualitative and quantitative
A combination of survey and ethnography
Draw on both monolingual and multilingual models of competence
(though how to do the latter unclear)
Train and involve native speakers

(27) Further directions and research questions

- Need to develop similar measures for Krio and Sherbro and ask, Do the same facts obtain with an extended pidgin (Krio, a second language for many) and an endangered language being shifted from?
- Research socioeconomic asymmetries and see how they affect measures of multicultural competence
- Develop an additional correlative for evaluating the validating ideophone knowledge as a measure of (socio-)linguistic competence
- Discover how ideophones behave diachronically – likely exceptional there as well. Do ideophones resist change the same way sound symbolic forms do, e.g., Mithun 1982, Nuckolls 1999?
- How can we represent multilingualism graphically? How can we map it?

References

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