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Spring 2008

Language Death within the Atlantic Group of West Africa

by G. Tucker Childs

This article presents an overview of the less widely spoken languages of the Atlantic Group (Niger-Congo), as representing the most seriously threatened language group in West Africa. Study of this group indicates that language endangerment is real and widespread. The basis for this claim comes from the literature on these languages, from personal research on the Atlantic languages dating back to 1984, and from recent and ongoing fieldwork on several highly endangered languages of Sierra Leone and Guinea.

The Atlantic Group contains a few well-known languages such as Wolof and Fulfulde, but the majority of them are much less widely spoken and are threatened by such well-known and more widely spoken “predatory” languages. The threats come from within the Atlantic group itself, e.g., Wolof, and from outside, e.g., Soso and Malinké. The Atlantic Group is found in a broad discontinuous swath pressed against the Atlantic coast from Senegal to Liberia. Minority Atlantic languages are completely surrounded by speakers of languages from the Mande Group.

The general picture of the Atlantic Group is one of fragmentation and peripheralization, where languages are being pushed either to the sea (e.g., the Baga languages of Guinea), or into the mountains (e.g., along the border between Senegal and Guinea). Fragmentation is the rule in West Africa. It may be linguistic, that is, genetically related groups separated by non-related ones, or political, that is, single groups separated into different countries. The Kisi people, for example, are found in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. Fragmentation is certainly one cause of language endangerment but typically the consequence of other, more powerful, forces. The other major language group in this area is Mande. The Northern branch of the Atlantic Group contains the majority of the languages (33 of 50) and some of the most seriously threatened. For example, the five or so Tenda languages of the Northern Branch, spoken in the highland area along the border between Senegal and the two Guineas are all under considerable pressure. But the same is also true of the Southern Branch, particularly those languages spoken along the coast, where contact with Europeans, the slave

trade, Islamic jihads, and the “Mande Expansion” have all contributed to the marginalization of languages historically spoken there. Bijogo, the isolate, seems relatively secure, although there are threatening signs there as well.

Language shift and language death

Most Atlantic languages are under threat, especially when evaluated against common measures. The assessment, for example, that languages need 100,000 speakers to be safe, means that only a few Atlantic languages will survive into the next century. Many of the languages in this group have fewer than 5,000 speakers and still others have fewer than a hundred.

Traditionally, speakers of most Atlantic languages have not organized themselves into entities beyond the village or hamlet and, at the same time, have welcomed outsiders or “strangers”. Particularly among the less widely spoken languages of Atlantic (not Wolof, Fulfulde, Temne, etc.), groups of Atlantic speakers have been buffeted and assimilated by larger, better organized groups, often with devastating effect. Some languages have undoubtedly changed because of this contact and likely many have disappeared without a trace.

Table 1 shows documented cases of death and near-death in Atlantic languages. The first two languages have definitely disappeared. Banta/Banda is a highly divergent dialect of Temne and is preserved today only in certain rituals and in its influence on the local Mende dialect. The three other languages in table one have nearly disappeared. Undoubtedly there are other Atlantic languages that have disappeared without a trace.

Table 1: Documented cases of language (near-) death in Atlantic

Language	Comments
Mo-peng	Disappeared
Baga Kalum / Baga Koba	Disappeared
Banta / Banda	Preserved only in certain rituals
Bom	A few elderly speakers in a village outside Torma Bum, Sierra Leone
Krim / Kimi	Several score speakers estimated in 2005
Bullom / Mmani / Mani	Estimated several hundred speakers in 2003

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Languages may partially disappear through combination with other languages. Language mixing and intertwining have likely occurred in the Atlantic Group, although such claims, numerous as they have been in the older, non-linguistic literature have been advanced with little linguistic evidence.

The major cause of endangerment for the less widely spoken Atlantic languages, however, the advent of the Mande peoples. Table 2 is a summary of evidence for Mande predominance up through the present, manifested in their skill at imposing their social structures on their hosts and in their (former) military might. As stated above, there is some evidence for a lack of Atlantic political organization beyond the village. It is this disparity that has led to the great influence that Mande has had on the Atlantic Group.

Table 2: Factors contributing to Mande predominance

Prestige and wealth of early traders (9th century on)
Knowledge of utensil- and weapon-making; smiths believed to possess magical powers
Founding of power associations: Komo, Simo, Poro, and Sande/Bunde
Later (16th century) Mandeng warriors' success (horses & weaponry); conscription of the conquered as soldiers or slaves
Reluctance of Mande speakers to assimilate fully (especially if converted to Islam)
Mande speakers a part of town rather than country

In addition to and perhaps associated with the Mande Expansion is the devastating effect of the slave trade. For example, the coastal Krim were enslaved and subverted by Mende-led groups. The nearby Gola speakers are also completely surrounded by speakers of Mande languages with some shifting to Mende. Another example of the shift to a Mande language is the case of the Mani, a clearly moribund language in its last gasps. Although not all of the forces at work on Mani are the same as those at work on other Atlantic languages, the case of Mani will offer further insights into causality.

A case study: Mani

In 2000 several colleagues from the University of Conakry and I embarked on a mission to document the Mani language. 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, was more discouraging than originally surmised – the language, as with many of its congeners, stands no chance of survival.

Mani was once spoken in a coastal area straddling the border between the Republic of Guinea and Sierra Leone. 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.

The fate of the language was obvious in a survey of language attitudes. An anecdote illustrates the low esteem in which the language is held, even by ethnic Mani. Alia Fadega, an elder on the island of Kabak, 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. He said they used Mani in speaking to their dogs, and sometimes his grandfather would go to a large kapok tree behind the village and speak “*au diable (les fétiches)*.” It is likely the Mani conversation was directed at the ancestors, who have since been demonized by Muslim proselytizers.

One sees, then, a language substantively changed by contact with the language to which its speakers are switching and in which all its speakers are bilingual. In fact, most ethnic Mani are monolingual in Soso. There is no hope for the language itself, although there may be some for its preservation in recent documentation efforts.

Conclusion

The factors contributing to language death within the Atlantic Group are many and include economic factors such as the young seeking employment in the cities or on plantations; demographic factors — large and powerful groups, Wolof, Fulfulde, Malinké, Soso, Temne, etc overwhelming smaller language groups; religious factors such as the spread of Islam and Christianity and military incursions from the Mandeng Empire, and from Fulbe jihads and European colonizers. A cultural of openness to external influences may have hastened the process. The transatlantic slave trade also had a serious negative impact on the survival of these languages

It is hoped that this brief survey will help to promote the study of such endangered language groups. At the present time there is generous support for such undertakings. I urge the members of WARA to consider such research before these languages completely disappear

A map showing the location of languages in the Atlantic Group can be found at [\Images, pictures, maps\Segerer 2004 atl langues A3.gif](#)

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