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Language Endangerment in West Africa: Its Victims and Causes

George Tucker Childs

Portland State University, childst@pdx.edu

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Language endangerment in West Africa its victims and causes

G. Tucker Childs¹, Portland State University

Introduction

This paper catalogues the forces at work threatening the Atlantic languages of Guinea and Sierra Leone. Compared to Mande, the other major language group in the area, and to figures for Africa in general (Sommer 1992), the Atlantic Group is beset by ominous forces. These include what could be considered ecological features (e.g., Mufwene 2001): the Mande Expansion (Niane 1989), colonialism, the spread of Islam, and globalization. There are other forces to be sure, such as the influence of Christian missions (Welmers 1971; cf. Mühlhäusler 1990), urbanization (a sub-category, perhaps, of globalization), and climatic changes (Brooks 1993, Fairhead and Leach 1996). The forces chosen here have been selected because they are the most significant for the languages under investigation, those most threatened (see the papers in Muthwii and Kioko 2004). In no way, however, does the discussion purport to examine any of these forces in depth, an impossible task in a paper of this length.

Missing figure1: [Atlantic Wilson 1989.jpg](#)
Several of the phonetic symbols have also disappeared.

Multilingualism is widely recognized as the rule rather than the exception in West Africa. Furthermore, multilingualism has been the norm in Africa for a long time, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa above the Congo rain forest. Multilingualism results from the movement of peoples as well as from well-established routes of communication and trade. The linguistic result of this has been what has been called the “Fragmentation Belt” (Dalby 1970:167), a broad band of genetically mixed languages and linguistic diversity stretching from the Atlantic Ocean on the west to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean in the east.

The state of multilingualism forms a notable part of what has been called “African language ideology”, an acceptance or belief in two or more languages in one's repertoire being assigned to different social contexts (Grenoble and Whaley 1998: 44). These conditions suggest the continued subsistence of a wide variety of languages, yet the less widely spoken languages are not holding their ground in diglossic or multiglossic environments. There is no “stable diglossia” (e.g., Coulmas 2005) in the part of Africa discussed here. It is “leaky” diglossia (Fasold 1984) at best: the less widely spoken languages are losing domains to the more widely spoken languages. The former are disappearing faster than most estimates suggest, even as domain-reduced home languages may be hidden from outsiders (see Pichl 1966 on the Cangin languages of Senegal). The erosion and disappearance of Atlantic's less widely spoken languages will be demonstrated below, where we see several languages have died in recent times and more than a third will die very soon.

As part of the forces mentioned above, the Atlantic languages are subject to pressures (c.f. “*glottophagie*” (Calvet 1974)) from the more widely spoken languages and from the languages of the colonizers, even if the colonial languages have been “appropriated” by the urban young (Manessy and Wald 1984). The pressure from the colonial languages is indirect, mediated by appropriated versions of these languages created by the young, urban, predominantly male, and even criminal members of society (Childs 1997, Kiessling and Mous 2004). In fact the young eschew their home or traditional languages as their connection to the metropolitan life and the world grows (see Childs 1996 for the demonstration of such attitudes in South Africa).

¹ childst@pdx.edu

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This paper concentrates on the less widely spoken languages of the Atlantic Group of Niger-Congo, primarily on those languages belonging to the Southern Branch. Atlantic as a whole contains some 40+ languages, four of which have disappeared in historical times, and fifteen or so of which are highly endangered. Their atrophy contrasts dramatically with languages from the Mande Group, also of Niger-Congo, among whom they are interspersed and surrounded (see Figure 1) and by whom, in many cases, they are overcome.

The Atlantic languages

The Atlantic Group contains a number of well known languages such as Wolof and Fulfulde, but the majority of them are much less widely spoken and are seriously threatened by the more widely spoken languages, even those to which they are related. The threatening languages are found both within Atlantic, e.g., Wolof (Ngom 2003; cf. *wolofization*, e.g., McLaughlin In press (2006)), and outside Atlantic, e.g., Soso (Dalby 1962, Heine 1969:146-47). Thus it is not the provenance of threatening languages but rather the extent to which the languages are spoken (among other factors) that constitutes the threat, as is generally the case in Africa (Brenzinger, Heine and Sommer 1991).

Languages belonging to the Atlantic Group are spoken in a broad swath along the Atlantic coast from Senegal to Liberia, roughly speaking, as shown in Figure 1, interspersed with various languages belonging to Mande, another Niger-Congo group, distantly related and both typologically and culturally distinct. It is the latter characteristic that has allowed Mande languages to prosper often at the expense of Atlantic (Childs 2004).

Figure 1 The Atlantic Languages

[Atlantic Wilson 1989.jpg](#)

The languages treated here belong to the Southern Branch of Atlantic, a sub-group found at the southern end of this range in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.

Figure 2 shows the generally accepted classification of Atlantic, consisting of an isolate and two geographical branches. Despite the lack of established relations among the subgroups of Atlantic, the membership of Atlantic (around forty-five languages) has undergone little modification (with the exception of Mukarovsky 1976-77) since its inception (“West Atlantic” was first used in Westermann 1928). The Northern Branch is by far the largest, containing some thirty-plus languages; Bijogo is the isolate; and the Southern Branch contains eleven or so languages.

The colors in Figure 2 represent the degree to which languages are threatened. Language names in green (italicized) are languages that are not threatened; blue (bold) languages are seriously threatened and doomed to extinction in the near future. Languages in black are something in between, likely also doomed to extinction but not so immediately. At the bottom of the figure are the documented cases of language death (in red).

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I. Northern Branch

- A. Senegambian languages: *Fulfulde, Serer, Wolof*
- B. Cangin: **Lehar, Safen, Non; Ndut, Palor**
- C. Bak
 - 1. Diola: **Bandial, Bayot, Ejamat, Elun**, etc.² (All but Jola-Fogny and Jola-Kasa)
 - 2. Manjaku, Mankanya, Papel
 - 3. Balanta
- D. Eastern Senegal-Guinea
 - 1. Tenda: **Tenda Mayo, Basari; Onian, Bedik; Konyagi**
 - 2. Biafada, Badiaranke
 - 3. **Buy, Kasanga**; Bainouk
- E. Nalu: **Nalu**, □□□□□□□□□□□□□□ (Mbulungish, Baga Fore), **Pukur**

II. Bijogo

III. Southern Branch

- A. **Mansoanka (Sua, Kunant)**³
- B. Mel languages
 - 1. Baga: *Temne; Landuma, Baga*, etc.
 - 2. Bullom languages: Kisi; **Mani**, Sherbro, **Krim**
 - 3. Gola
- C. Limba

Dead: **Banta, Baga Kalum (and possibly some other Baga languages), Bom, Mo-peng**
 Figure 2 Atlantic languages classified⁴

More revealing are numbers of speakers for each language, as shown in Table 1. (For the most part the numbers come from *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005), except where they are known to be inaccurate either by myself or by fieldworkers currently working with the languages, e.g., Bradley Hopkins in Senegal, Hans Fritz in Guinea-Bissau. The names given for each language correspond to those used in Figure 2, except for a few cases where *Ethnologue* differentiates more finely than the sources supplying information for Figure 2 (see Note 4), e.g., Balanta is one language above but separated into two by *Ethnologue*. Names in parentheses are *Ethnologue* names followed by their identifiers. The heavy double red line separates what have been considered viable languages (more than 100,000 speakers) from those that are not. The lighter double green line separates languages at the 500,000-speaker divide, likely a more significant separator for Atlantic.

More than a million	Fulfulde (Pulaar, fuc ; Pular, fuf), Seereer (Serer-Sine, srr), Temne (tem), Wolof (wol , wof)
500,000-million	
100,000-500,000	Balanta (Balanta-Kentohe, ble), Diola-Fogny (Jola Fonyi, dfo), Kisi (Kissi, Northern, kqs ; Kissi Southern, kss), Limba (Limba, East, lma ; Limba, West Central, lia), Manjaku (Mandjak, mfv), Papel (pbo), Safen (Saafi-Saafi, sav), Sherbro (bun)
50,000-100,000	Balanta-Ganja (bit), ⁵ Gola (gol)

² Not all Diola languages are included here because of the sub-group's uncertain constituency; the same is true for the Baga sub-group in the Southern Branch.

³ Mansoanka may be a Mande language (Segeer 2000 p.c.) and has been called a Mandinkized Balanta in *Ethnologue*.

⁴ Sources for this display include W.A.A. Wilson 1989, E. Voeltz 1996, M.-P. Ferry (2003 p.c.), B. Hopkins 2004 p.c., Gordon 2005.

⁵ *Ethnologue* considers Balanta-Ganja to be a distinct language from Balanta-Kentohe.

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25,000-50,000	Biafada (bif), Bijogo (Bidyogo, big), Diola Kasa (Jola Kasa, csk), Ejamat (eia), Mankanya (knf), Ndut (ndv), Noon (snf)
10,000-25,000	Badiaranke (Badyara, pbp), Basari (Bassari, bsc), Bayot (bda), Gusilay (gsl) ⁶ , Kerak (hhr), Mansoanka (msw), Nalu (nai), Konyagi (Wamey cou)
5,000-10,000	Bainouk (Bainouk-Gunyuño, bab), Karon (krx), Kuwaataay (cwt), Lehar (cae), Palor (fap)
1,000-5,000	Baga Koga (bgo) ⁷ , Baga Manduri (bmd), Baga Mboteneni (bgm), Pukur (Baga Binari bcg), Bandial (bqi), Bedik (Budik, trr), Ejamat (eia), Baga Sitemu (bsp)
500-1000	Kasanga (ccj), Buy (Kobiana kci)
100-500	Buy (Kobiana, kci), Mani (Bullom So, buy), Mlomp (mlo)
Less than 100	Krim (krm)
Zero	Banta, Baga Kalum (and possibly some other Baga languages), Bom, Mo-peng)

Table 1 Atlantic languages by the numbers

The numbers are probably lower than those indicated here, for in some cases *Ethnologue* gives only ethnic numbers, i.e., those who are ethnically part of a (former) linguistic group; undoubtedly the true number of speakers is lower. Furthermore, the numbers for Mani and Krim given in *Ethnologue* are high on the basis of my own recent fieldwork (2004-06), raising the suspicion that numbers for unknown others of the small groups are also high.

One noticeable feature of the display is the bulk of languages in the bottom part of the table: five languages are dead; four languages have less than 500 speakers; six languages have less than 1,000; fourteen or more have less than 5,000, and so on. Note also that heavy (red) line represents the cut-off for languages that are endangered, as stated in the literature: Languages need 100,000 speakers to be “safe” (Krauss 1992). What is further remarkable about this display is the vast gap between 500,000 and a million represented by the lighter (green) line. Likely it is only the languages above that line that will survive. What is ironic is that in many cases the doomed languages are losing speakers to the more widely spoken languages above the red line.

The rest of the paper continues by exploring the causes of the considerable attrition. I present some of the pressures at work on the less widely spoken Atlantic languages. The parallels between the loss of linguistic diversity and biological diversity (Mühlhäusler 1995, 2003) are briefly noted in predicting an acceleration of language death in the future.

Pressures on the less widely spoken languages

In this section I briefly discuss the pressures mentioned in the Introduction with exemplification drawn from developments in the modern-day states of Guinea and Sierra Leone. The first is the Mande Expansion:

There were basically two phases to what has been called the Mande expansion, the first taking place peacefully and gradually, the second being rather more warlike and concentrated (Brooks 1993). In the first phase, Mande penetration of western Africa was characterized by a long period of peaceful trade and settlement beginning in the early centuries of the Common Era. It was a gradual but steady influx of smiths and traders,

⁶ Gusilay is one of the “etc.” languages in the Diola sub-group in Figure 2. The others are Karon, Kuwaataay, Kerak, and Mlomp.

⁷ This is one of several Baga languages represented as “etc.” in Figure 2. Several others are Baga Manduri and Baga . Two languages in the Nalu sub-group are known in the literature as “Baga _” languages: Pukur and , but do not form part of the Baga sub-group.

the former of whom obtained power through their control of the secret societies, the latter due to their control of commerce and external contacts.

The second phase of the Mande expansion was an “era of conquest and state building by Mandekan [Manding] warriors that began during the [fifteenth century] ... The second featured the 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) (Childs 2004).

With regard to the Kisi people, a presently viable Southern Branch language (see Figure 2), the linguistic results were borrowing and perhaps some structural changes (Childs 2004). The Kisi adopted Mande names and affiliations with major Mande families (Paulme 1954), as well as the clan system (Massing 1982). Other cultural changes were more profound as the interlopers were offered wives and land, and were accorded a higher status as they gradually assumed positions of power in the community. Likely these changes were precipitated by the first phase; the second phase “the Mane invasion” (Rodney 1967) split the Kisi off from their coastal cousins, the other Mel-speaking groups (see Figure 2), and drove them into the rain forest and beyond (Person 1961, Fyfe 1972). Furthermore, in the towns not damaged by recent fighting one finds considerable populations of Mande peoples. Because of their more hierarchical society, the Mande have contributed to the growth of towns and political structures, changing forever the basically hamlet-sized social organization of the Kisi before their advent (Paulme 1954). Undoubtedly the development of urban centers has had environmental consequences as well, e.g., the intensification of agriculture in a subsistence economy (cf. Fairhead and Leach 1996). Thus, although Kisi remains a viable language in terms of numbers, the process of cultural change has begun.

European colonialism and the slave trade, the second major pressure to be considered here, cannot be over exaggerated in its importance. Despite even the slave trade being gradually assimilated into local culture (Shaw 2002), it still determines a fearful psychological state among its victims, e.g., Paulme 1949: 969. Slave raiding along with the fighting and violence it engendered disrupted all traditional societies in its wake, e.g., Alie 1990. After the many Atlantic peoples fled to highland areas and were pressed outward towards the Atlantic coast away from the Mande core, later invaded by the residue of the Mali Empire after its fall, the Europeans came from the sea to kidnap them and take them to foreign shores. Legitimate trade eventually replaced the lucrative slave trade (Jones 1983) and finally colonization as the Europeans established themselves in the interior as well as on the coast.

The disruption of the many coastal societies of the Atlantic Group was the main result of colonization, but there were less subtle effects. For example, the Europeans preferred to deal with the more powerful groups with whom they could form alliances or whose political systems they could dominate. Smaller groups were ignored and became further subjected to control by the larger (generally) Mande groups.

One specific example of this occurred among the Krim people of southeastern Sierra Leone. During slaving times they retreated they first fought the slavers, assimilated, and/or retreated into more inaccessible areas. Later after the British established themselves in Sierra Leone, the Krim resisted their authority, culminating in a refusal to pay the Hut Tax imposed by the British at the end of the nineteenth century (Alie 1990:140). The British responded by murdering the Krim chiefs, whose

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identity they uncovered through the agency of the Fulbe, one of the better-organized outside groups infiltrating the region (Taziff Koroma 2006 p.c.). The British then amalgamated the numerous Krim chiefdoms into just five, which exist to this day. The Kwamebai Chiefdom represents the amalgamation of three other chiefdoms, even in its name – each syllable of its name (Kwa-me-bai) is the first syllable of an earlier chiefdom.

After this buffeting and reorganization, today Krim speakers number only a few score, living in isolated hamlets along the tidal estuary of the Waanje, well protected from imposition, at least by land. No roads reach these villages. The resistance of these few is still fierce. During the civil war in Sierra Leone, the “rebels” tried unsuccessfully to gain their assistance. Villagers tell stories of how they tricked the rebels by luring them into their boats with flattery and then, as soon as they were out of sight, they tipped the boats over and the rebels drowned (Taziff Koroma 2006 p.c.). These stories are few – the more prosaic story is that the Krim have assimilated completely to the Mende by whom they are surrounded – Krim-speaking mothers even speak to their infants in Mende. One mother commented that they speak Mende to their children so that they can suck it down with their milk (Bete Masale 2006 p.c.).

The third major pressure on the less widely spoken languages is the spread of Islam. Although it was part of the later stages of the Mande Expansion, it can be considered separately because of the involvement of the Fulbe, speakers of an Atlantic language belonging to the Northern Branch, and because it forms only a later component of the cultural changes effected by the Mande. Furthermore, its effects were more focused and there was no effort to assimilate or join the target culture, particularly during a jihad.

As the third major pressure on the less widely spoken languages, the spread of Islam has had more of a cultural effect than a linguistic one, although there are many words borrowed from Arabic. Islamicization is much more widespread in the north, although a few groups hang on to their traditional practices in isolated islands, e.g., the various Tenda groups along the Senegal-Guinea border (Ferry 1967, 1981) and the Baga □□□□□□□□ (Baga Sitem in Ganong 1998; see note 7) of northwestern Guinea, literally on an island (Lamp 1992, 1996). The preaching of the imams disdains traditional cultural practices, and the mosque leaders have exhorted their worshippers to abandon idolatry and ancestor worship.

Numerous examples of Islamicization can be observed among the Mani, one of the southernmost peoples to be affected.⁸ One town chief on the Isle of Kabak even called speaking to the ancestors in Mani ‘speaking to the devil’ (Childs 2006). Although there has been some adaptation and even some syncretism, e.g., burial rites among the Mani (Camara 2006), the pressure is relentless and has become tied to world movements (another consequence of globalization): “*les islamistes*” have been seen recruiting at the major mosques of Conakry (Mamadou Camara 2005 p.c.).

Among the coastal groups of the Southern Branch, particularly in Guinea, Childs (to appear) explains how the Mani have eschewed the drinking of palm wine, despite its centrality to almost all (traditional) social occasions and celebrations. This is particularly true of the Mani who still refer to palm wine as ‘food’. But on the Guinea side of the border with Sierra Leone, little consumption takes place. In fact, the village tapster was actually a Baga from the north (see p. 6)! The process of

⁸ All of the following examples come from work among the Mani as part of the Mani Documentation Project (2004-06) supported by a grant from the Hans Rausing Endangered Language Program at the University of London, and the Fulbright Commission for a 2000 pilot study, for which support I am thankful and hereby acknowledge.

islamicization has not reached as far as the Atlantic groups of southern Sierra Leone, where the Krim and possibly the Bom still celebrate with palm wine and newer alcoholic beverages.

All but the Forest Region of Guinea is strongly islamicized, a result of numerous jihads, as well as Saudi and Libyan generosity during the time of Sékou Touré. Thus, quite obviously, domains for the use of Mani have disappeared, but the battering of the language is even more intense as children mock their playmates if they speak Mani, even on the Sierra Leone side of the border.

The final pressure to be discussed, globalization, is also part of many of the forces mentioned above, as directly noted with regard to Islam. Coming into contact with world economies is certainly part of colonialization and even the Mande Expansion. Globalization is here construed not as the simple contact with a world culture but more in an economic sense as the loss of control over local economies by local peoples as they are brought in to the global economy. The sum of effects are too numerous to be mentioned here but can all be seen as deleterious to the health of traditional cultures and languages.

The macro effects include fluctuating prices tied to world prices, foreign investment with little interest in local health, and politicians held to the sway of multinationals. All of these phenomena reach down to the village level and force changes in culture. Single-crop farms take the place of more diverse subsistence farming, as agricultural practices are tied to world economies. The large banana plantations in the Forécariah District of Guinea, a residue of French colonialization, are now being replaced with date palms and even cashews, more appealing products on the world markets. New agricultural practices are adapted, but because of high fuel costs, transportation cannot be afforded and products cannot reach markets. People flee to the cities for secure employment and become further subject to world influences adopted the ways and language of the city.

The environmental effects of globalization are also obvious, in addition to the transformation of the landscape by plantations and monocultures. Throughout Guinea the small plastic bags in which affordable quantities of everything from water to salt to *petits galettes* are sold cover village grounds not subject to sweeping. Plastic containers have also replaced calabash gourds as containers for liquids; even the Baga palm wine tapster mentioned above uses plastic containers to collect the sap from the palm.

As mentioned in the introduction, the loss of ecological diversity parallels and accompanies the loss of species.⁹

... 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)

⁹ Much of the following comes from a talk I delivered to the Nature Conservancy in Boston in July of 2006; I thank Charles Ferree and the other attendees for their welcome and comments.

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The factors involved in West African ecological changes are most often due to human beings: the introduction of non-native foods (change from hunting and gathering and pastoralism to agriculture); the slave trade; the changeover to cash crops to when slavery trade abolished, e.g., Galinhas palm oil; and both French and British colonization. By 1914 it is estimated that Europe controlled 85% of the world (Nettle and Romaine 2000). There have been accompanying changes in patterns of subsistence with the introduction of new foods, e.g., rice (Asian rice (*Oryza sativa*), not African rice (*Oryza glaberrima*) from the Niger Delta) and cassava from South America (*Manihot esculenta*). Finally there are the effects of neo-colonization, e.g., the extractive industries.

(1) Neo-colonialization: Extractive industries

- Bauxite, e.g., Boké-Kamsar in Guinea (railroad, highway, and dock)
- Iron ore, e.g., Wologisi Range, Mt. Nimba (the highest point in Liberia and Guinea no longer)
- Diamonds, civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, “blood diamonds”
- High grading, “blood lumber”, e.g., Charles Taylor
- Foreign, especially factory fishing, undermining locals
- Oil, e.g., Niger Delta

This brief survey of globalization’s effects on the environment parallel and accompany the effect on native cultures and languages.

Conclusion

What this paper has tried to do is isolate a single linguistic group that seems particularly threatened by external forces. The particular forces are, of course, a product of history but today share a commonality with forces at work elsewhere on smaller cultures. In many cases they are identical, globalization probably being the most disastrous dragging many other concomitant forces in its broad wake.

Parallel effects on the environment and biological diversity have been drawn, and it is now a race to see which will reduce more quickly, species or linguistic diversity. In a statistical comparison, Sutherland 2003) claims it is languages.

The prediction, then, is that the process of language death will continue and even accelerate in the future, particularly with regard to the Atlantic Group but also elsewhere, particularly for the smaller, more vulnerable groups, e.g., Mous 2003. Within Atlantic, the situation is dire and recent political unrest (Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Casamance in Senegal) has probably added to the process. Current figures underestimate the extent and rapidity of language death, as demonstrated in section 0. That so many languages are threatened and that so many have so few speakers does not bode well for the group. The future is bleak.

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