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The Knowledge of Ideophones and Multilingualism: A West African Pilot Study

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Expressive language such as ideophones and mimetics have provided an important index of social and cultural features. On the continent of Africa, where the word category is generally known as ideophones, such words appear in every major phylum and in most families. They even appear in the continent's pidgins and creoles, thus representing a language function of some considerable areality. The one place they do not appear, however, is in the colonizing languages when they have <u>not</u> been appropriated by local communities. When the European languages become every day varieties, however, ideophones are regularly used just as they would in the substrate. Thus, ideophones form a crucial component of most African languages.

This characterization is true of Mende, the language reported on in this paper, which has some hundreds of ideophones. Mende is a widely spoken and growing (shifted-to) language in Sierra Leone spilling over into Liberia (West Africa). Mende has supplanted a number of less widely spoken languages in historical times and has become the regional language of choice in most of southern Sierra Leone (the Southern Province). Moreover, because the Mende are the most highly educated group in Sierra Leone (excluding the Krio, descendants of repatriated slaves), the language is also widely used in the major cities of Bo (a traditionally Mende-speaking area) and Freetown, the capital city. Thus, Mende forms part of many multilingual repertoires in much of Sierra Leone, both rural and urban, including the Kagboro Chiefdom, where this study was based.

Multilingualism has now been recognized as the common case, if not the norm, rather than as the exception around the world. With individual multilingualism of the sort found in Africa, languages can be expected to permeate each other. Words, structures, and functions are shared across language boundaries. In highly multilingual situations languages may not be the relevant unit but rather repertoires consisting of several languages. With the recent strife and consequent refugee populations, e.g., the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002), the multilingualism of turmoil can be expected to continue, but multilingualism is more basic and more long-standing, and thus worthy of study.

How to measure and evaluate multilingualism, however, especially in a quantitative manner, poses a significant problem. The challenges are considerable, particularly in Africa, e.g., the analyst having to know all the relevant languages. Often relying on impressionistic or self-report data, previous descriptions are of questionable validity. Missionary efforts at characterizing multilingualism have confronted the difficulties but have achieved no satisfactory measure. This paper proposes one way of overcoming these difficulties, namely, by measuring a speaker's knowledge of ideophones. This paper reports on the findings of such a pilot test in the town of Shenge (Kagboro Chiefdom), where the population is shifting from Bolom to Mende with several other languages at play. Pre-recorded ideophones, pronounced in isolation and in sentences, were presented to subjects. They were then asked to explain what the ideophone meant in whatever language they felt comfortable using. Subjects ranged across: non-speakers of Mende, multilinguals with Mende as a secondary or primary language, and monolingual Mende speakers.