

# Language death within the Atlantic Group of West Africa<sup>\*</sup>

G. Tucker Childs, [childst@pdx.edu](mailto:childst@pdx.edu)  
Portland State University, Portland, Oregon (USA)

## 1 Introduction

This paper evaluates the status of the less widely spoken languages of the Atlantic Group (of the Niger-Congo phylum), as representing the most seriously threatened language group in West Africa. A review of language endangerment further east in West Africa (east to the border of Cameroon) appears in Blench 2007, which contains the author's own findings from Mali, Ghana, and Nigeria. In what follows I provide counter-evidence to his optimistic conclusion, "West African languages are generally holding their own in the face of globalisation and the homogenising forces of the twenty-first century" (p. 156), yet echo his call for study of West Africa's many undocumented languages. On the basis of evidence from this group of West African languages, language endangerment is real and widespread. The basis for this claim comes from the literature and from research on the Atlantic languages dating back to 1984, from a language survey carried out as part of the Routledge Atlas (Moseley and Asher 1994), and from recent and ongoing fieldwork on several highly endangered languages of Sierra Leone and Guinea.

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 threatened by more widely spoken languages ("predatory" languages in Blench 2006). The threats come from within Atlantic itself, e.g., Wolof and *wolofisation* (D'Alton 1987), and from outside, e.g., Soso (Dalby 1962) and Malinké (Ferry 1968), as is generally the case in Africa (known as *glottophagie* in Calvet 1974; see also Brenzinger et al. 1991, Mous 2003). The Atlantic Group is found, roughly speaking, in a broad discontinuous swath along the Atlantic coast from Senegal to Liberia. Minority Atlantic languages are completely surrounded by speakers of languages from the Mande Group, the other major language group of this portion of West Africa, as shown in **Map 1** (Seeger 2004). The mustard yellow area represents the Atlantic Group as rather widespread but on closer inspection one can see that most of the area is taken up by just two languages, Wolof and Fula.

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<sup>\*</sup> This paper represents a longer and more scholarly version, i.e., with references, of a paper appearing in the journal of the *West African Research Association* (2008). Comments very welcome!

**Map 1: The Atlantic languages**



**Sénégal, Gambie, Guinée-Bissau, Guinée, Sierra Leone, Liberia**

The general picture is of fragmentation with the Atlantic languages being concomitantly being pushed to the sea, e.g., the Baga languages of Guinea, or to the mountainous areas on the border between Senegal and Guinea. Places where the map may need updating mask the full extent of the fragmentation. If I read the map correctly, the Sherbro language of Sierra Leone (number 35 in the mustard area), for example, is shown as being spoken in an area much larger than exists in reality. Speakers are found primarily on an island within that area (Bonthe Island), where the number can be seen, an area now interspersed with and surrounded by speakers of Mende.

In terms of classification, Atlantic consists of two sub-groups and an isolate. The group has recently been separated into two independent branches and an (independent) isolate (Blench

2006). Figure 1 shows the more widely known classification of Atlantic with incomplete listings of the Diola and Baga sub-groups. The Northern Branch is by far the larger of the two, containing some thirty-five languages; the Southern Branch contains some fifteen or so.

#### I. Northern Branch

- A. Senegambian languages: Fulfulde, Serer; Wolof
- B. Cangin: Lehar, Safen, Non; Ndut, Palor
- C. Bak
  1. Diola: Bayot-Essin, Diola-Fogny, etc.
  2. Manjaku, Mankanya, Papel
  3. Balanta
- D. Eastern Senegal-Guinea
  1. Tenda: Tenda Mayo, Basari; Onian, Bedik; Konyagi
  2. Biafada, Badyara
  3. Buy, Kasanga; Bainouk
- E. Nalu: Nalu, Mbulungish/Baga Sitem, Pukur

#### II. Bijogo

#### III. Southern Branch

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

#### **Figure 1 Atlantic languages classified**

Fragmentation is the rule in West Africa. It may be linguistic, i.e., genetically related groups separated by non-related ones (the “Fragmentation Belt” of Dalby 1970), or political, i.e., single groups separated into different countries: “the norm in Atlantic Africa” (Thornton 1998:03). The Kisi people, for example, are found in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. Fragmentation is certainly one cause of language endangerment.

The other major language group in this area is Mande. These languages engulf Atlantic, with only a few of the group’s sixty or so languages being threatened (Vydrine 2004 p.c., Kastenholz 2006 p.c.). The situation with regard to Atlantic is more dire. The Northern Branch 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 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” (Childs 2004) 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 (Segerer 2004 p.c.; cf. Segerer 2002).

## 2 Language shift and language death

Most Atlantic languages are under threat, especially when evaluated against some common measures. The dire assessment, for example, that languages need 100,000 speakers to be safe (Krauss 1992), means that only a few Atlantic languages will survive into the next century. Even that bar is high for Atlantic: many of the Atlantic languages have fewer than 5,000 speakers and still others have less 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” (Brooks 1993, Fairhead and Leach 1996). Particularly among the less widely spoken languages of Atlantic (not Wolof, Fulfulde, Temne, etc.), groups of Atlantic speakers have been buffeted about and assimilated by larger, better organized groups, with often devastating effect. Some languages have undoubtedly changed due to this contact and likely many have disappeared without a trace.

In (1) are shown documented cases of death and near-death. The first two languages have definitely disappeared. The last speakers of *Mo-peng* were surrounded and overcome by speakers of Bedik (Atlantic) and Mandinka (Mande) (Ferry 1975:81-82). Similarly, Ferry could find no speakers of Baga Koba in 1993; (Baga Kalum in Voeltz 1996), which used to be spoken around Conakry (Ferry 1995:1). 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 (Kaillie 2007 p.c.). The three other languages in (1) have nearly disappeared and will be discussed below. Undoubtedly there are other Atlantic languages that have disappeared without a trace.

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

Mo-peng (Ferry 1972, Ferry 1975)  
Baga Kalum / Baga Koba (Ferry 1995)  
Banta/Banda (Dalby 1963)  
Bom (one identified speaker in 2005)  
Krim/Kimi (Iverson and Cameron 1986; estimated several score speakers in 2005)  
Bullom/Mmani/Mani (estimated several hundred speakers in 2003)  
Bom (a few elderly speakers in a small village outside Torma Bum, Sierra Leone)

The story of the Tyapi is a typical one, as recounted in Ferry 1997; her question as to the language’s longevity could be asked of many other languages: “Leur langue est encore parlée aujourd’hui, mais pour combien de temps?” (Ferry 1995:11). In 1963 Ferry began looking for speakers of the language, which had been classified as Tenda since 1912. Only in 1992 did she and her co-workers find speakers in a “quartier tyapi” of Kumbia in northeastern Guinea.

Languages may also partially disappear through combination with other languages. Language mixing and intertwining (Bakker 1996) have likely occurred with Atlantic, although such claims, numerous as they have been in the older, non-linguistic literature (Thomas 1919-1920, Rodney 1970), have been advanced with little linguistic evidence.

The major cause of endangerment for the less widely spoken Atlantic languages is the advent of the Mande peoples. In (2) is a summary of evidence presented elsewhere for Mande superiority up through the present, manifested in their skill at imposing their social structures on their hosts and in their (former) military might. As seen 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 Atlantic.

(2) Summary of evidence for Mande superiority (Childs 1995)

Prestige and wealth of early traders (9<sup>th</sup> century on)

Knowledge of utensil- and weapon-making; smiths believed to possess magical powers

Founding of power associations: Komo, Simo, Poro, and Sande/Bunde (Brooks 1993:73)

Later (16<sup>th</sup> century) Mandeng warriors' horses and weapons, success; impressing 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 (3) are shown some of the effects.

(3) The effects of Mande contact and superiority (Childs 1997b)

Cultural effects: Hierarchical social structure with themselves at the top, installing and commanding power associations, various cultural artifacts; switch from matrilineal to patrilineal societies

Micro-linguistic effects: Specialized vocabulary in such areas as war-medicine, political divisions and positions, power societies, etc. (see (4) below).

Macro-linguistic effects: bilingualism, language maintenance with interference, language shift

Below in (4) appear some examples of micro-level effects in the lexicon, reflecting a pattern of asymmetrical power and prestige, as manifested in one non-endangered language.

(4) Evaluating Mande borrowings into Kisi (Childs 2002)

Initiation (power) society lexicon

Smithing, weapons, implements

Terms associated with religion and healing

Political terms, time units; commercial terms, numbers; legal terminology; abstractions

Elaboration of social interaction, expressions of politeness or greetings, discourse words, titles and names of family relations

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, including non-Mende warriors: "Kon [Kono?], Kisi, and Mende warriors, who were devoted to a Foreka Gambozo, a Maninka, because of his supernatural powers in warfare" (Jones 1983:76). The end linguistic result is typified in the following quote:

Those who call themselves Mende generally speak the Mende language, and most Vai can speak Vai; but by no means everyone who calls himself Krim can speak Krim ... most of the inhabitants of Kpaka and Peri-Massaquoi regard themselves as Mende [according to a 1963 Sierra Leone census], although sixty years ago both chiefdoms had somewhat stronger Vai and Krim elements (Jones 1983:8).

The nearby Gola speakers are also completely surrounded by speakers of Mande languages with some shifting to Mende.

Our journey into the Makepele Chiefdom of Sierra Leone disclosed some rather surprising facts. Where we had expected to find some 3,300 Gola speakers [according to the 1963 Sierra Leone census] in the general vicinity of a town called Zimi, we found virtually none. The very strong influence of the Mende people in the area has accounted for the assimilation of Gola speakers to Mende. At present, nearly 100% of the people who once spoke Gola there are now speaking Mende. Only the Gola people over fifty years of age can still speak their own language (Sindlinger and Seyi 1973:4)

Another example of 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 at work on other Atlantic languages, the case of Mani will offer further insights into causality.

### **3 A case study: 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. 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 glummer than originally surmised – the language, as with many of its congeners, stands no chance of survival.

I present here only one interface, that between the speakers of Mani, the original occupants of the Samu region of Guinea and Sierra Leone, and the Soso interlopers, who now completely dominate the region, at least on the Guinea side of the border. On the other side it is Soso in concert with Temne.

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 (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 Fulfulbe 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 group on jihad in the 19th century (Diallo 1974:37).

The fate of the language was obvious in survey of language attitudes. An anecdote illustrates the low esteem in which the language is held, even by ethnic Mani. Alia Fadega, an (ethnically) Mani 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. 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 “*au diable (les fétiches)*.” It is likely the Mani conversation was directed at the ancestors, who have since been demonized by Muslim proselytizers. This points to the devastating role that Islam has often had on the indigenous languages and cultures. In Childs 2004 I show 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 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.

## 4 Conclusion

In (5) I summarize the factors most important in threatening Atlantic languages.

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

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

Demographic: large and powerful groups, Wolof, Fulfulde, Malinké, Soso, Temne, etc.

Religious: the spread of Islam and Christianity

Militaristic: Fulbe jihads, Mandeng Empire, European colonizers

Cultural: Welcoming of strangers, openness to external influences

Slavery

Some might 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 1997a, Goyvaerts 1988, and sustain little of the culture tied to the disappearing languages. Finally, these languages often are simply divergent dialects and/or displace or replace other varieties.

The spread of lingua francas, e.g., Heine 1969, has also been construed as somehow not affecting the status and viability of traditional languages: “... 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, for as speakers increasingly adopt shared languages, the contexts in which their first languages are used decrease and consequently the languages fall into disuse and eventually disappear.

Only rarely are home languages retained, as can be seen in Atlantic. 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 rare, however, and is found among no other Atlantic group.

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