THE CASAMANCE AS AN AREA OF INTENSE LANGUAGE CONTACT: THE CASE OF BAÏNOUNK GUBAHER

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Introduction

Baïnounk is the cover term for a cluster of minority languages of Casamance, a region of Senegal with high linguistic diversity and a high concentration of small languages. Baïnounk languages belong to the Atlantic branch of Niger-Congo, specifically to the East Senegal-Guinea languages and within this subgroup to the Ñuun languages, together with the minority languages Kobiana (also: Buy) and Kasanga (also: Haaca), each spoken by a few hundred speakers in southern Senegal and Guinea-Bissau. The number of speakers for all Baïnounk languages together is estimated at around 15-20,000. Approximately 1,000 of these are speakers of the Gubaher variety, spoken in Djibonker just southwest of the provincial capital Ziguinchor, which will be the focus of this paper.

Unless indicated otherwise, the data presented has been gathered during a four month field session as part of a PhD project conducted mainly in Djibonker in October 2009 - February 2010; recorded elicitation sessions have also been made in Niamone (Baïnounk Gunyaamolo), Djibelor (Baïnounk Gubelor) and Jegui/Guinea Bissau (Baïnounk Gujaxer). The project is part of an interdisciplinary DoBeS project connecting linguistics, archaeology and ethnobotany under the leadership of Dr. Friederike Lüpke (SOAS). For more detailed data on speaker numbers and other sociolinguistically relevant information on Baïnounk see Lüpke (this volume). The term Baïnounk is and has been understood to refer to one language; however, under closer inspection it becomes questionable that the different varieties grouped under this label constitute one language (the different and conflicting criteria for identifying a language notwithstanding). Not only are the differences in vocabulary and grammar substantial, distances between the different communities are large and contact between the different language areas is rather scarce. The Baïnounk language areas are like small islands scattered across a sea of Joola and Mandinka speaking populations. There is neither a unified “Baïnounk-identity” (see Lüpke, this volume and Lespinay 1996), nor an unequivocal cover term encompassing all of the groups in all of the varieties. We are dealing with rather isolated pockets of related but most often not mutually intelligible languages, spoken by people in different cultural surroundings who adhere to three different religions (Christian, Muslim, traditional) and communicate with outsiders in different sets of *linguae francae*.

The turbulent history of this small region has profoundly affected the linguistic situation in Casamance, producing a patchworked linguistic landscape characterized by high levels of
language diversity and dialectal variation, five *linguae franae* and a very high degree of multilingualism. The importance of area factors for the evolution of language in Africa has become more and more the focus of linguists’ attention in recent years (Heine and Nurse 2008), and overall theoretical interest in this issue seems to be on the rise, yet there are still very few detailed studies of language contact at the micro-level. The conditions in Casamance are ideal for the purpose of investigating this issue, especially once more data from the so far undocumented Bainounk languages become available, for various reasons:

1. The Bainounk languages undoubtedly share a common genetic origin.
2. There is little or no contact between the different communities.
3. Each of the communities uses different contact languages from different genetic families (Mandinka (Mande), Joola languages (Atlantic), Portuguese Creole/Kriolu (Indo-European) and is characterised by different cultural influences.

In a scenario like this, which is far from unique in Africa, it quickly becomes obvious that language contact is indeed one of the driving forces of language evolution and change. The purpose of this article is to give a detailed account of the contact situation of which Bainounk Gubaher is a part, give examples of contact driven phenomena especially surrounding the gender system, and outline further avenues of research to pursue in this area. I would go so far as to say that language contact is so pervasive in this area that a description of Bainounk would not be complete without taking into account its sociolinguistic setting and areal considerations, including the historical and cultural background. In addition, the Bainounk cluster constitutes one of the largest missing pieces needed in order to solve the puzzle of the historical relationships between the languages of Casamance. As autochthonous languages of Casamance, it can safely be assumed that Bainounk languages had a substratum influence in the past on the newcomer languages, but also that they have received material from surrounding languages later in its history (see de Lespinay 1997a), after it had ceased to be a dominant language in Casamance. Influences from and possibly on other languages spoken in the region extend to all areas of grammar. Speculations on the role of contact influence in shaping the very complex noun class system of Bainounk have sparked a theoretical debate on the peculiarities of this system (Sauvageot 1967; Dobrin 1995 and 1998; Dimitriadis 1997). I will take up this issue and present some more examples of contact-related topics surrounding the noun class system.

The Bainounk language under scrutiny in this paper, Bainounk Gubaher, is spoken by approximately 1,000 people in the village of Djibonker, just south of Ziguinchor, and by several hundred people of the diaspora communities in Dakar and Ziguinchor.

I will begin with a brief introduction to the history of the region and the linguistic landscape of Casamance in general and Djibonker specifically in order to make clear how pervasive language contact is in a highly multilingual and multicultural setting. I will then concentrate on the complex noun class system of Bainounk, which has not only noun class prefixes but also plural suffixes. The core hypothesis of this section is that the complexity and hybridity of the system is not a direct result of language contact, but that language contact has nevertheless influenced the development of the system, though in a more indirect way: The high number of nouns with suffixes in the plural but without any class marking prefixes in the singular would be the result of massive borrowings, which have been per default attributed to this group of nouns. As a consequence the noun class systems of the Bainounk languages have shifted from predominantly prefixing noun class systems to mixed systems. A discussion of how the mixed system might have evolved and an account of mechanisms for the integration of loanwords into Bainounk Gubaher in section 5.2 and 6 will support this

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1 The number of migrants from Djibonker and their descendants residing in Dakar has been given as around 400. Especially the first generation, who were born and raised in the village, still speak Gubaher, whereas in the subsequent generations it is often the case that the language is neither understood nor spoken.