MULTILINGUALISM AND LANGUAGE CONTACT IN WEST AFRICA: TOWARDS A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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“[t]he study of contact-induced change of whatever kind is no longer of secondary importance. It has moved from side to center stage.”


1. West Africa as a contact area

Contemporary West Africa is characterized by extensive societal multilingualism going hand in hand with cultural hybridity. This situation type is characterized by a complex interaction between two or more languages in an individual’s brain as well as in an entire society. The historical causes of the multilingual profile of this region lie in the succession of empires emerging in the area from 300 BCE onward and culminating in the Mali empire around 1250-1450 CE (Davidson 1998; Levtzion 1973). The social, economic and religious impact of these empires on the societies in their realm was and is enormous: throughout the regions concerned, cross-cutting ethnic and linguistic borders, we find similar systems of social organization, as evidenced by identical caste systems (Tamari 1991, 1997), secret societies, and landlord-stranger relationships (Brooks 1980, 1993). Major trade routes traverse the area, also serving the spread of Islam as the dominant religion (Ajayi and Crowder 1985, Brooks 1980). Arabic and Jula as the languages of Islam and trade, and later French, English and Portuguese as the colonial languages have also left imprints on most of the languages and cultures in question. Urbanization due to massive rural exodus is the most recent factor motivating multilingualism and language contact, but is at the same time dramatically changing its dynamics (McLaughlin 2001; Vigouroux and Mufwene 2009). The resulting multilingualism makes notions like ‘mother tongue’ and ‘first’ and ‘second language’ problematic in many ways and is reflected in vague, multiple and easily changeable ethnic affiliations (Amselle 1990, 1996; Amselle and Royal 1998; Amselle and M’Bokolo 1999; Brooks 1993; Bruijn and Dijk 1997). The (ex-colonial) official languages play only a minor
role in the most common multilingual repertoires, contrarily to their visibility, status and representation in research.

2. The importance of language contact for linguistic structure

Multilingualism of the kind encountered in West Africa entails intense language contact, mainly between African languages. Contact between languages is an important contributor to language change through the transfer of linguistic material (forms, meanings, and form-meaning associations) from one language to the other (Heine and Kuteva 2005; Matras 2009; Myers-Scotton 2002; Romaine 1989; Thomason and Kaufman 1988; Thomason 2001; Weinreich 1953). The intense type of contact present in the area is generally predicted to result in pervasive lexical and structural borrowings that affect all areas of language, but the extent and limits of structural interferences, in particular, are contentious (see e.g. Thomason (2001) pace Mous (2003) on the borrowability of noun classes). However, multilingualism and in language contact between African languages is dramatically underresearched. Therefore, despite a general awareness of the area as one of great linguistic and cultural convergence and the existence of a number of important studies on sociolinguistic profiles (Dreyfus and Juillard 2007; Juillard 1995), language attitudes (e.g. Canut 1996; Dumestre 1994) and code-switching (e.g. Haust 1995), little is known about the linguistic consequences of specific contact scenarios, and even less about contrasting scenarios involving the same languages. The scarce existing studies on contact phenomena between individual languages (e.g. Beyer 2006, 2009; Dombrowsky-Hahn 1999; Drolo 2005; Nicolaï 2005; Turay 1978) point to considerable structural parallelisms permeating all areas of grammar, as is to be expected in situations of intense and extended contact, but also suggest that the direction of contact-induced influence can be the opposite of sociolinguistic factors attested elsewhere or exhibit no clear directionality or straightforward correlation with social factors altogether. Deplorably, however, these data on linguistic interferences often cannot be meaningfully interpreted, since, in general, studies on multilingualism are not directly associated with the description and documentation of the languages in question. In the absence of detailed descriptions and documentary corpora of the languages in contact, coupled with detailed sociolinguistic information, it is almost impossible to establish whether convergences between them are due to universal constraints on linguistic structure, to a shared genealogy, to parallel yet independent innovations, to chance, or to contact-induced interferences. Despite the fact that West African languages are almost exclusively spoken in multilingual speech communities, descriptive and documentary efforts generally focus on one language, regardless of the linguistic profile of the speech community, and do not systematically include variations in language use, whether the latter involve the choice of language(s), dialects, styles or registers.

3. The importance of language contact for language change

The dominant research focus within African descriptive linguistics has been on language-internal factors for change, and genetic relationships between languages (but see Heine and Kuteva 2005 for a notable exception). To date, our understanding of the internal relationships within the major subgroups of Niger-Congo, as in the case of the Atlantic languages, and their position within the phylum, as in the case of Mande, is limited. The exact genetic affiliations of Dogon and Songhay, for instance, remain a matter of dispute, (Dimmendaal 2008; Nicolaï 2005). To give only one example, for Mande languages, recent classifications based on shared lexical innovations (Kastenholz 1996) and phonological characteristics (Schreiber 2008) come to partly conflicting conclusions, but there are huge gaps in the data due to the lack or paucity of descriptions. The position of Mande as a whole within Niger-Congo is odd, given the absence of ‘prototypical’ Niger-Congo features such as noun classes (but see Vydrin (1989) for an analysis that comes up with traces of noun classes in Mande languages). Regarding Atlantic languages, only one detailed comparative study exists to date (Sapir 1971), and newer studies (Podzniakov 2007; Wilson 1989) go so far as to question the