

### The World Congress of African Linguistics 6 (WOCAL-6) Cologne, 17–21 August 2009

This year's WOCAL, marking the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Congress' first gathering in Swaziland in 1994, seems to have brought together a pretty vast collection of both scholars and topics for discussion. For five days, speakers and contributors from all over the linguistic world have fully occupied the Hörsaalgebäude of University of Cologne, where eight conference rooms were allocated for the non-stop chain of presentations in all aspects of African linguistic studies. The number of speakers has grown considerably, and it is nice to note that the share is steadily growing of those collaborators whose native language is indigenously African.

The opening keynote presentation of the first plenary session was made by Neville Alexander (Cape Town University, S. Africa) who spoke on the necessity of bringing the African languages more into the political and economic life in the independent states of the continent. The speaker emphasised the need for paying more attention to the issues of applied linguistics which can lead to establishing a higher social status of local languages in Africa and, therefore, promote their survival and development.

In the next days, plenary presentations were devoted to sign languages in Africa, African languages in Latin America as remnants of earlier slave populations on the continent, and challenges of documentary linguistics in African studies. Without questioning the importance of various spheres of African linguistics, we, however, would like to focus this brief report on a number of issues in comparative and historical linguistics and language contact discussed at the Congress, as would suit the general scope of this Journal.

Gerrit Dimmendaal (University of Cologne) presented a talk on the external classification of the remote Sudanese language Tima; he described a number of its features, recorded and analyzed by the members of the joint field expedition in the past few years. Tima was historically thought to belong to the Kordofanian

branch of Niger-Congo [Greenberg 1963], more exactly, to its Katla subgroup. However, it was suggested by the speaker that Tima is as distant from Kordofanian as it is from the rest of Niger-Congo, and may therefore constitute a separate branch of the macrofamily, bearing interesting cognate traits with Bantu and other subfamilies of Niger-Congo.

Another important classification issue was raised by Bruce Connell (York University / University of Kent, UK) who challenged the well-known hypothesis of a close genetic relationship between Ijo and Defaka, the two languages of the Niger Delta region, within the Ijoid family of Niger-Congo [Jenewari 1989]. Since the first claims about Ijoid were made, a number of research papers on it were published, with even an attempt at reconstructing Proto-Ijoid [Williamson, unpublished]. Data gathered in recent years makes it possible to suggest that these two are actually not members of a single node but were subject to mutual influence, and Defaka is rather a language isolate.

The report by Oumarou Boukari (Côte d'Ivoire) examined the genetic position of the nearly-extinct Pre language in his country. This isolated language is poorly studied, with only a few mentions in literature, and its affiliation still seems murky. Contrary to previous scholars, however, the speaker attempts to show that Pre could be a remnant of Gur or Kru population of the area heavily influenced by Mande languages. To support this, a number of morphological and syntactic features were attracted, as well as lexical data.

The classification of Ometo, one of the groups of the Omotic language family, is revised by Hirut Woldemariam (Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia), who has studied in deep the speech communities previously treated as speakers of the Gamo language. The conclusion of the presentation, however, is unexpected: there is no Gamo language. Its varieties are in fact heterogeneous, and their speakers do not identify themselves as Gamo. So, a new subgroup of Ometo is called for, with some other members of Ometo also to

be placed under the same “umbrella” or into this new subbranch, based on their language features.

Roger Blench (Kay Williamson Educational Foundation, Cambridge, UK) presented yet another reclassification of the Bantoid family, this time tentatively including the Bendi subgroup, traditionally referred to as Cross River. Though the presentation was mostly devoted to severe criticism of all previous classifications, including those proposed by Blench himself, some appealing insights were also evident. One of the ideas that the speaker expressed overtly, and which is commonly discussed, is the need to create a solid and reliable genetic classification of Bantu to replace Guthrie’s previous one [Guthrie 1967–1971], and to come out with a stricter separation of the terms ‘Proto-Bantu’ and ‘Common Bantu’ that are still used chaotically.

Jonathan Allen Brindle (Norwegian University of Science and Technology) questioned the historical development of the numeral system in Southwestern-Grusi, a subgroup of Gur languages. By comparing data from six languages of the group, the speaker emphasises elements of three basic systems: vigesimal, decimal and quinary, all of which seem to have originated from the body part count. Still, since the lexemes for ‘20’ are not cognate among the languages, the vigesimal system could only have spread across the area as a contact feature.

An interesting phonetic process of spirantization in Amazigh (also called Tamashek or Tamazight), a Berber language of the Sahara, was described from a typological and comparative standpoint by Yamina El Kirat (Mohammed V University, Morocco). He shed some light on the diachronic process of weakening which leads to further spirantization in the very same way as it took place in many other languages of the world, including Indo-European (Spanish, Greek), Uralic (Finnish), and Semitic (Aramaic, Hebrew). This trend seems to be supported by some concrete external conditions which generate spirantization in Amazigh.

Berber comparative studies were also the subject of another report, by Cécile Lux (University of Lyon). She focused on the aspectual system of Tetseret, a minor and undescribed language in Niger, which shows comparable similarity with that of Zénaga, another Berber tongue spoken in Mauritania. By analyzing it together with the aspect systems in neighbouring Tamashek and Tachelhit, it is possible to make conclusions on the linguistic pre-history and geographical diffusion of Berber languages.

The view on folk language studies as a powerful instrument for historical linguistics was expressed in a presentation by Gumma Ibrahim Gulfan (American University in Cairo, Egypt). The author revealed a

number of common ancient traits in the folk songs of language communities belonging to the Kordofan Nubian cluster (Nilo-Saharan). Some of these traits, both morphological and lexical, observed in numerous contemporary dialects of the area, can be traced back to a common ancestor and may be used for reconstructing the proto-language of the group. Some chronological links of language features and processes can also be established by studying a number of historical facts reflected in the oral tradition.

Remote languages of another region, on the borderline between Nigeria and Cameroon, were analyzed by Roland Kießling (University of Hamburg) in his plenary presentation. He worked with the languages of the Grassfields subgroup of Bantoid, where a lot of evidence has been revealed in the recent years, shedding light on various aspects of Bantu historical morphology. The speaker pays much attention to the development of noun class marking systems in Grassfields, especially the transition from an old prefix-based system to a suffixal one, and the rise of nominal classificatory systems. These are indeed issues which contemporary Bantoid linguistics needs to study in more detail.

Another report shows how less-studied tongues of Sub-Saharan Africa can change our ideas of proto-language reconstruction. Ulrich Kleinewillinghöfer (University of Hamburg) has studied the specific *re* noun class in Longto (Adamaua family). Examining its functional scope in the language and making exciting comparative references to similar class marking in Gur, the speaker suggests that Longto has preserved an ancient noun class from Proto-North Volta-Congo, lost in other families of the stock.

Helma Pasch (University of Cologne) has built her report around the description and historical analysis of negation in Ubangian languages of Central Africa. It seems quite exciting that a link between the well known final negative particles of the Bantu sentence and Ubangian negation syntax can be established. The speaker suggested that the placement of the negative particle in the final position may be an areal feature, borrowed by Bantu languages of zones C and H. If so, this is yet another piece of evidence of close language contact between the two families which led to a considerable amount of Ubangian features in Bantu, including even personal pronouns in some languages, e. g. in Doko [Babaev 2008: 145].

Issues of convergence were further discussed in the report made by Henning Schreiber (Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt), devoted to similar sound changes taking place in neighbouring Gur and Mande languages of West Africa. It is claimed that the regular shift  $\eta > h$  in Gurunsi languages (Gur) is not limited to that

group, but is also observed in Bissa (East Mande), being most probably an areal phonological feature. This example is definitely worth studying in more detail in order to understand the technology of phonetic change diffusion both in Africa and beyond.

A reclassification of Bantu itself, a subject widely discussed ever since Guthrie's referential classification, is the subject of Malin Petzell's (SOAS, London) report on the poorly explored languages of the Morogoro region in Tanzania. Speaking about common morphological traits of eight tongues of the area, the author concludes that there is evidence for regrouping the languages of zone G and, probably, beyond.

A notable comparative analysis was made by Dmitry Idiatov (University of Antwerp, Belgium) on the origins of the quotative verb *kó* in Western Mande languages. This syntactic element, more a copula than a full verb, is widespread in Mande with the function of citing indirect speech. It is typologically reasonable to suggest its origins in roots denoting speech, as in many other languages of the world (cf. English 'say'). The speaker shows that the feature can be traced back to the lexeme \**gúv* 'sound, speech; say', reliably reconstructed for Proto-Mande.

Claude Rilly (CNRS, Paris) made a valuable contribution to the studies of the proto-language homeland for the Nubian family (part of Nilo-Saharan). Contrary to the traditional view that the cradle for the Nubian languages lay in the Middle Nile valley, the speaker presented both historical and linguistic data demonstrating his hypothesis of a Kordofan homeland for Nubians. The lexicon of these languages shows that some biological species, characteristic of the Nile valley, were not known to Proto-Nubians, and that words denoting them were only borrowed or innovated later. Moreover, there are some archaic features in Western Nubian that were lost in Nile Nubian prior to the most ancient Nubian texts of the 8th century. The author concludes that Proto-Nubian was in use in a rather restricted area of Kordofan for quite a long time before it started to disseminate. As for the traditional view on the Nubian homeland, it may have appeared due to legends of the medieval kingdom of Dongola, quite widespread among the ethnic groups of Sudan who claim themselves its descendants.

Quite an interesting observation on the typology of nominal classification in Africa was made by Viktor Vinogradov (Russian Academy of Science, Moscow) who devoted his presentation to two varieties of this morphological system, rather unusual for Africa. Though the majority of African languages either have a gender system of nominal classification or use noun classes, the system of 'classificative verbs' is used in Dogon, where

a covert class of a noun object is expressed by the form of the transitive verb of action, by modifying its stem. This structure is in use in some American Indian idioms. Another peculiar system is that of Ngyemboon, a Bantoid language of Cameroon which uses two systems simultaneously: usual noun classes and classifiers used with numerals. This latter one resembles amazingly the systems that we all know in East and South East Asian languages. Such independent development of similar morphologies on different continents should be interesting from a historical linguistics standpoint.

We would like to close this brief survey by mentioning a report by Tucker Childs (Portland State University), named "How to Pretend You Speak a Dying Language When You Don't Really Know How To". The speaker focused on methodological difficulties of recording dying and endangered languages of native communities, based on examples of fieldwork on three South Atlantic tongues of coastal Guinea and Sierra Leone. Keeping in mind all the hardships of getting through both unintentional and deliberate deception that informants may force on the researcher, those linguists who only have access to documented forms of languages should be extremely careful with the data, refraining from making long-range comparative conclusions based on just a single gloss or phonetic feature from a language that has not been properly studied. To raise fieldwork quality and, at the same time, to invoke more responsibility in making linguistic conclusions — those are the issues that were constantly discussed, with great concern, among the participants of WOCAL-6.

The Congress is now preparing a volume of Proceedings from WOCAL-6, to be ready in 2010, with a free accessible online version, hosted at the website of the Institute for African Studies (University of Cologne).

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