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July 5, 2005

Re: Dr. Guillaume Segerer

Projet de Recherche:
"Comparaison des langues bak"

To Whom It May Concern,

I am very pleased to send my strongest expression of support for Dr. Guillaume Segerer's application to conduct research on the Bak languages, a subgroup of the Atlantic Branch of Niger-Congo. I have read Dr. Segerer's proposal with great interest. I also am familiar with much of his past work, including his Bijogo grammar and other writings. I have met him on several occasions and witnessed how he works both alone and with others. On all counts I have been especially impressed with Dr. Segerer's research capabilities, intelligence, resourcefulness, and determination to do cutting-edge work in comparative linguistics.

I believe that I first met Guillaume Segerer in Berkeley, when he attended the Annual Conference on African Linguistics held here. I was immediately impressed with his knowledge of Atlantic linguistics, an area that is not well represented in the United States (or in most countries). We began a correspondence concerning areas of mutual interest. At one point I received and read his monograph *La langue bijogo de Bubaque* (Peeters, 2002), which greatly impressed me. In this grammar of Bijogo, an understudied outlying language within Atlantic, Dr. Segerer presents a careful documentation of the most important aspects of Bijogo grammar. While this in itself would make his work one of the finest grammars to appear in recent years on any African language, I was especially impressed by his penetrating quest to determine the historical sources of the different constructions he describes. For example, he presents and evaluates different possible diachronic sources for the various verb extensions in the language, which are important in their own right, but especially in the context of grammaticalization theory and comparative Niger-Congo.

Consequently, I cited this work in several places on the handout I prepared for the Proto-Niger-Congo conference which he co-organized with Dr. Konstantin Pozdniakov on October 11-16, 2004. Since Dr. Segerer's Bijogo grammar considers both verbal and prepositional sources (e.g. he compares the instrumental extension -at with the verb -at 'atteindre' vs. the preposition ta- 'with from'), this has serious consequences both for the reconstruction of Atlantic and Niger-Congo, as well as for grammaticalization theory in general. Dr. Segerer was aware of this, and his decision to intersperse synchronic description with diachronic explanation I find quite compelling.

While I was already aware of Dr. Segerer's descriptive and historical skills, I was equally overwhelmed by his stellar presentation at the Paris Niger-Congo meeting. Dr. Segerer presented a stunning statistical result he had achieved to the assembled distinguished group of researchers, which included Dr. Sergei Starostin, who directs the Evolution of Human Language Project at the Santa Fe Institute and Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Dr. Murray Gell-Mann, whose interest in language history had provided the impetus for the aforementioned project and our meeting. In joint work with Dr. Pozdniakov, Dr. Segerer started his presentation by showing that the Atlantic group statistically underrepresents words where the first two consonants (CVCV...) share the same place of articulation. At first postulating that this might be an Atlantic feature (and hence useful for subgrouping within Niger-Congo), to test the hypothesis, they turned their attention successively to Mande, Bantu, non-Niger-Congo, and ultimately non-African languages only to discover that the