



DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS
1203 DWINELLE
Tel: (510) 643-7619
Fax: (510) 643-5688

BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA 94720-2650

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. 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

same statistical biases are present in other human languages. They had discovered a universal of human language: the tendency which Dr. Janet Pierrehumbert and her associates have dubbed "similarity avoidance", based on their research on Arabic. This is very exciting work indeed. I have since read a draft of the paper which will be submitted to a major linguistics journal.

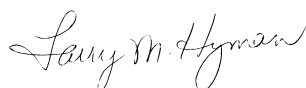
While we were all excited to meet in Paris, and while there were many good discussions, I consider the Segerer-Pozdniakov paper to have been the highlight of that meeting. The paper shows how Dr. Segerer's considerable computational skills can and have benefitted the comparative study of language. Dr. Segerer's linguistic knowledge, skills, and determination are rare, particularly in a younger scholar. There is thus no question that he has much more to give and would produce even greater results if he had the support to devote himself full time to his proposed project. The proposal is a very important one, as he intends both to consult materials presently available and to conduct field trips to make discoveries in those areas in need of attention. I predict that Dr. Segerer would not only accomplish the goals he sets out, but much more. Given his track record to date, we can be sure that he would make other discoveries, open new paths, and provide the kind of stimulating challenges to other scholars such as myself that he has already accomplished. In short, I have rarely felt as enthusiastic about a project or the person who will conduct it.

Let me say a bit more about the person. I have already indicated that Guillaume Segerer is a very gifted researcher with unusual expertise both in linguistics and in computation. I suspect that his laboratory can further validate these judgments, as well as his generosity as a scholar. Since meeting him in 2001, I have also been impressed by his willingness to help others, including those younger than he. In Spring 2004, I assigned Dr. Segerer's Bijogo grammar to a new student of ours, Rebecca Cover, who, as a Peace Corps volunteer became interested in understudied Atlantic languages in the Sénégal area. As the two most exciting Atlanticists I knew, I put Rebecca in touch with Guillaume Segerer and Konstantin Pozdniakov, and they began a communication which, I believe, continues to this day. At that point Rebecca had gotten interested in the vowel harmony system of Bijogo. In response to questions she asked of Segerer, the latter sent back detailed statistical calculations that proved to be very telling and useful to her. The two Atlanticists then recommended that Rebecca Cover focus her attention on the Badiaranke language, for which she recently received a National Endowment for the Humanities research fellowship that will take her to Sénégal and Guinée. In so doing, Dr. Segerer had, in effect, become a mentor of Rebecca Cover, someone who I expect to become a leading future Atlanticist herself.

To summarize, this project is highly worthy of support. Dr. Guillaume Segerer is one of the finest Africanist linguists of his generation and is determined to contribute more. He has all the tools to do so. He has the intelligence and commitment, controls both linguistics and computation, and can work communally in what ultimately has to be a joint enterprise between scholars. I expect more great things from Guillaume Segerer and thus hope that those considering his dossier will grant him the "accueil pour activité de recherche" which he seeks. The LLACAN laboratory—and the field—will be all the better for it.

Thank you for your consideration. If I can provide further information, feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,



Larry M. Hyman
Professor
Chancellor's Professor (1996-1999)
Chairman (1991-2002)
hyman@berkeley.edu