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December 4, 2008

**re: Guillaume Segerer**

To Whom It May Concern,

I am writing to express my enthusiasm and strong support for Guillaume Segerer, who is applying for a senior research position within the CNRS.

I have known Dr. Segerer for almost 7 years, having met him originally at the 2001 Annual Conference in African Linguistics, which I had co-organized with Dr. Ian Maddieson at the University of California, Berkeley. I was immediately struck by the quality of his presentation, his interventions, and presence at this meeting, which revealed a scholar of considerable depth and knowledge. Since that time I have crossed paths with Dr. Segerer professionally on several occasions (see below), have read his published work, heard him speak, and have been present at two meetings that he organized, most recently as a spectator at the Workshop on the Typology of African Languages which took place on September 24, 2007. On the basis of his numerous (and growing) contributions to the field, he has demonstrated that he is both an inspired and dedicated researcher, as well as person of great resourcefulness and collegiality. In short, he is one of the most gifted linguists of his generation and an inspiration and hope to myself and others who are nearing retirement.

As is well-known, Dr. Segerer is a leading scholar on the linguistics of Niger-Congo, the largest language phylum in Africa (approx. 1200 languages). Specializing in the Atlantic branch which includes such well-known languages as Wolof and Pulaar (Peul, Fula), Dr. Segerer has a vast and deep command of the linguistics of this complicated group. While most Niger-Congo scholars are not terribly familiar with Atlantic (except via the few well-studied languages), they generally assume the correctness of such a branch. Dr. Segerer, on the other hand, has pointed out on numerous occasions that the genetic unity of Atlantic has not been demonstrated. It is not that earlier scholars have not tried to do so before retiring and passing the baton on to him. They may not have had access to the information now available, and especially lacked the computational and quantitative skills which Dr. Segerer masters with his exceptional scientific background and mathematical abilities. Dr. Segerer thus proposes to do the comparative study which is long overdue. He is uniquely well-placed to evaluate its significance: As he has shown in his work on Bijogo and elsewhere, some of the Atlantic languages look suspiciously like the Bantu languages of East and South Africa, while others seem quite different indeed. How did this happen? Has the latter group been innovative in some as yet unexplained way, should these groups not be grouped together into Atlantic, or is there some other as yet undiscovered explanation? Dr. Segerer is in an ideal position to resolve this issue and make new discoveries as he—unlike anyone else—has the theoretical linguistic knowledge, the technical expertise, and the familiarity with the terrain. In short, this is an exciting project, which he should be fully supported to undertake.

While Dr. Segerer is a gifted comparativist and expert on Atlantic and its relation to Niger-Congo, his research does not stop there: he is a first rate theoretician and grammarian as well. Not content to collect word lists from his office in Paris, Dr. Segerer is a committed field worker who considers his responsibility to document and understand *all* aspects of a language. This is seen particularly clearly in his superlative grammar, *La langue bijogo de Bubaque*, which I have read cover to cover with great admiration—one of the best African grammars to be written in many years. In this book, Dr. Segerer sorts out the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic complexities of the language. He not only provides insightful synchronic analyses of the various constructions he uncovered, e.g. the causative, dative, instrumental and reciprocal extensions which are marked as suffixes on the verb, but also engages in stimulating diachronic hypotheses concerning their origin, e.g. from older verbs vs. prepositions. Of course his historical interests were already evident in his 2000 article “L’origine des Bijogo: hypothèses de linguiste” and he has been involved in considerable historical investigations with Dr. Konstantin Podzniakov, e.g. on reconstructing the pronoun systems of Proto-Atlantic.

Dr. Segerer’s theoretical interests include a serious commitment to typology, the study of what linguistic structures have in common, and how they can vary. This is very much in evidence in the work on pronoun systems as well as his earlier work on “focalisation”, which is informed by general linguistic principles, in terms both of structure and communication. A very major piece of work that Dr. Segerer co-authored is his “Similar place avoidance: a statistical universal”, which appeared in the important international journal *Linguistic Typology* in 2007. While the great typologist Joseph Greenberg and others after him had pointed out the consonant restrictions on Semitic roots, Drs. Segerer and Podzniakov show that the phenomenon of similar place avoidance (SPA) is in fact a language *universal*: Starting in Atlantic, and then branching out to the rest of Niger-Congo, Africa, and other continents, they show that language after language avoids successions of consonants made in the same place of articulation (e.g. a labial consonant + vowel + another labial consonant). The article ends by considering different kinds of explanation for the statistical bias, for example, whether it has to do with production or cognition, and whether there are historical pathways for eliminating successions of consonants of similar place of articulation. This is a major article: They not only show that the phenomenon is universal, but establish a research agenda for others to emulate. It again shows how indispensable Dr. Segerer’s multi-talents are in conducting sophisticated statistical and theoretical work of this calibre.

I have already mentioned Dr. Segerer’s giftedness as a linguist and polymath. Anyone who meets him immediately observes that he is an extremely intelligent person. If there is any shortcoming or other way to interpret your results, he will be the one in the audience who will point it out (as he did to me during a presentation I made at the Institut de Linguistique et de Phonétique Générales et Appliquées last year). Both in my own case, as well as some others I have witnessed, Dr. Segerer’s interactive skills and penetrating insights have been extremely helpful. This can be also seen in the impressive number of projects in which he has been implicated both in LLACAN and elsewhere (note his co-edited book with the Chadic scholar, Dmitri Ibrisimow, who holds an appointment at the University of Bayreuth). He also has been active in organizing workshops, of which I’ll mention two:

(i) The Proto-Niger-Congo Conference, Paris, Oct. 11-14, 2004: This conference was partly funded by the Santa Fe Institute, as part of a Proto-Language project directed by Dr. Sergei Starostin (who unexpectedly passed away shortly after the conference). Leading Niger-Congo specialists were invited from several countries (France, Germany, Britain, Nigeria, the US) to what I consider to be one of the best workshops I have ever attended. Also present was the head of the Santa Fe Institute, Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Dr. Murray Gell-Mann.

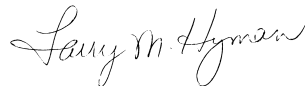
(ii) The Workshop on the Typology of African Languages, Paris, September 24, 2007. This workshop took place on the day before the 7th Biennial Meeting of the Association for Linguistic Typology (ALT7) which took place on September 25-28 at the Ministère de la Recherche. Having been in the audience, I can tell you that it was an excellent meeting: Dr. Segerer had identified four themes and four invited speakers. Abstracts could be submitted to fill the other slots, one for each theme.

Besides his visible organizational skills, Dr. Segerer has also been responsible for numerous databases, which deal not only with comparative lexical material, but also pronoun systems, and specific constructions. He is the best linguist to consult if one is contemplating the establishment of a new database. The picture that emerges is that Dr. Segerer is an energetic, indefatigable, scholar whose efforts have greatly enriched his own immediate environment, but also many of us who are considerably further away.

To summarize, I consider Dr. Segerer to be an extraordinary scholar—I concur with others whom I have heard use the adjective “brilliant”. He has not only made significant contributions to the field, but shows every sign of increasing the impact that he has already had. Everyone in African linguistics knows him as a substantive and accomplished scholar, a person of integrity and of great intelligence. We are very fortunate to have him in the field not only because of his own excellence, but because of the demographics. If I can be permitted to say, I have been concerned at the loss of senior scholars in area studies, especially comparative African linguistics. There have been major retirements in the past few years (e.g. France Cloarec [France], Bernd Heine [Germany], Paul Newman [U.S.], Derek Nurse [Canada], Thilo Schadeberg [Netherlands]) and recent deaths (John Stewart, Kay Williamson). Since few have his qualifications and determination, it is reassuring to know that there is someone of Dr. Segerer’s calibre to replace them. He is a powerhouse, as good at it gets, and has so much more to give. With a research position in the CNRS, which he strongly deserves, Guillaume Segerer will not only assure the continuation, but revitalize and expand African and comparative linguistics in France, and beyond.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Larry M. Hyman

Professor

Chancellor’s Professor 1996-9

Department Chair 1991-2002

Fellow, Linguistic Society of America