

On the position of South Atlantic languages

The so-called ‘Southern Atlantic languages’ are traditionally regarded as a branch of the Atlantic family. The majority of the ‘Southern Atlantic languages’ belong to the group which is referred to as Mel. According to David Sapir (1971), ‘It clearly substantiates the unity of Mel as proposed by Dalby (1964). This is particularly important, for Mel is the one subgrouping within West Atlantic that has been delineated (tentatively at least) by the use of comparative method’. By the application of the historical comparative method, Sapir means works by Westermann (1927) and Dalby (1965). David Sapir carried out a lexicostatistical study based on Maurice Swadesh’s 100-word list. This study confirmed the hypotheses by Westermann, Dalby and Greenberg and resulted in the following classification of the Southern Atlantic languages which remains generally accepted today:

West Atlantic

III. Southern branch

A. Sua

B. Mel languages

1. Temne, Baga Koba, Banta, Landuma, Tyapi, other Baga languages (excluding ‘Foré and Mboteni)
2. Sherbro, Mmani (and other Bullom dialects), Krim, Kisi
3. Gola

C. Limba.

Together with Guillaume Segerer, we have used reliable data to update the wordlists. On our request, Georges Starostin has carried down a calculated by Swadesh’s formula modified by Sergey Starostin. The results differ from Sapir’s in one important relation: the Sherbre-Bullom-Kisi nod becomes closer to Sua than to the Temne-Baga-Landuma group.

Excluding this detail the situation in the Southern Atlantic looks simple and clear. Therefore a multifactorial study of these languages leads to a radical reinterpretation of their generally accepted classification. In the communication, the following theses will be substantiated:

1) Limba, Sua and Gola languages should be excluded from the Southern Atlantic branch.

2) In the abovementioned classification of Sapir, only the languages of the groups B1 and B2 represent a **true genetic unit**.

A reconstruction of the proto-languages of this Southern Atlantic group (a phonological system, the basic lexicon, noun classes) will be displayed in the communication.

It is extremely important, from the methodological viewpoint, to comprehend why the genetic classification of the Southern Atlantic group needs a radical revision, notwithstanding the quite reliable regular correspondences between the languages remaining in this group and those languages which are to be left out. It is also meaningful to know why does lexicostatistics distort the reality and leads to wrong conclusions.

There are several reasons, and all of them are relevant for the classification of other Niger-Congo branches as well. Some of them are evident; among these, there are difficulties in identification of loans (both “inner loans”, inside a group, and parallel “external loans”, in our case from Mande, especially Southwestern Mande).

Let us consider in more detail two less evident factors.

1. Dalby and Sapir established a couple of dozens of reliable lexical correspondences among our Southern Atlantic languages, Gola, Limba, and Sua. However, a great majority of these items have reliable lexical correspondencies in Northern and Central Atlantic languages and/or other Niger-Congo branches, such as Bantu. Therefore, however reliable they may be, these

correspondences cannot be regarded as an argument for a special proximity between Sua and Temne, Gola and Kisi, etc. They are of a great interest for the reconstruction of the Proto-Niger-Congo lexicon, but they do not characterize the Proto-Southern Atlantic vocabulary in particular.

2. In Sapir's lexicostatistical data, Temne and Kisi are grouped with Sua, Gola and Limba. However, we should not forget that their genetic kinship indexes are very low: Temne-Gola 23%, Temne-Sua 19%, Temne-Limba 14%, Kisi-Limba 10%. For the sake of comparison, the kinship indexes for such languages of different Indo-European branches as Russian and French is approximately 30% which corresponds to 5000 years of separate existence.

According to the glottochronology (our data, calculation by Georges Starostin), the Sua-Temne-Kisi split dates back to 7200 years, and the Gola-Sua-Temne-Kisi split is almost 8000 years old. Let us remember that Sapir's calculations could not take account of the reconstructions of the intermediate stages: they were based on look-alikes, rather than reliable cognates. A "look-alikes" lexicostatistics, being quite reliable till certain time distance, has little sense for the long-range kinship studies. Our experience of work with Atlantic languages shows that the threshold of reliability of lexicostatistics not based on a step-by-step reconstruction is about 30% of resemblances. We should not forget that comparison of Russian and French languages is reliable, because we can fill practically 100% of the Proto-Roman and Proto-Slavonic 100-word list of Swadesh. When we compare Temne and Kisi, not even speaking of Gola and Limba, we do not have forms for the proto-languages of the subgroups.

The Proto-Atlantic reconstruction advanced in the presentation is based on a step-by-step reconstruction of both languages of this branch.

Most of data dealt with in this communication are obtained in cooperation with Guillaume Segerer. However, our position may differ in the interpretations of these data.