

The unusually unstable basic vocabulary of the Joola languages

Guillaume Segerer – LLACAN (CNRS, INALCO, USPC)

The Joola languages form a quite homogenous cluster in southern Senegal and Northern Guinea Bissau. However, this homogeneity is more obvious for grammatical features than for the basic lexicon. Lexical counts (Carlton & Rand 1993) show that there is considerable variation in the stability of the supposedly most stable part of the lexicon, with figures ranging from 90% or more to less than 15%. The minute examination of this puzzling situation may be regarded as a laboratory experiment that might serve to account for the long recognized fact that NC languages in general seem to share more grammatical (i.e. typological) features than lexical cognates.

In my talk, I will present lexical series pertaining to basic lexicon but showing many different forms, such as the following (in grey, lexical roots of probable NC origin):

	to eat	to drink	ear	bird	to say
Fogny	-ri	-raan	ka-wɔs	ba-sɔwa	-rɛg
Kasa	-tɛŋ	-hob, -raan	ɛ-jan	ba-sɔa	-lob
Keeraak	-ŋɔɔfɔ	-hɔɔɔ	ka-wɔs-ak	jə-lɛh-aw	-an, -tɔk
Banjai	-tɪŋ	-rɛm	ga-nnɔ	ga-ppɔ	-lob
Gusilay	-cɛrɔ	-rɛn	ga-nɔ		-lob
Kwaatay	-tɛŋ	-hɔjɔ	kaakɔndɪn	a-lɛɛ	-anɔ, -sɔk
Karon	-li	-laan	kə-nu	ɛ-sɔwa	-sɔk
Gulompay	-li	-lɛɛni	kaa-nɔ	e-lukulɛŋ	-kub
Bayot	-tɪŋ	-lumɔ	ka-nɔ	e-no	-zɪa, -lɔ
nb of diff. roots	4	4 ~ 5	4	5	5 ~ 6

I will also show how homogeneous the principal grammatical features are (with most paradigms showing very similar contents: personal pronouns, noun class markers, verb extensions, etc.).

Finally, I will show how the Joola languages tend to renew their lexical stock, more by internal means (semantic shifts, lexical derivation) than from external influence. The general message I wish to deliver is twofold:

- first, a serious lexical comparison cannot be undertaken with short wordlists only. For example, the only reflex of the NC root *DI 'to eat' in Joola Keeraak is found in the word *mɔ-ri-aay-am* 'food', whereas the regular Keeraak word for 'to eat' is now *-ŋɔɔfɔ*. Thus, a superficial comparison between Joola lects would result in considering that the NC root *DI is not represented in Keeraak.
- second, the Joola case could be a model for similar investigations in other parts of the Niger-Congo domain. In fact, phenomena like polysemy or semantic shifts have been globally overlooked in lexical comparison of African languages, probably because during decades there were so few data available. This is no more the case.