The definite article in Mel

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As a function word, the definite article is subject to some attrition in the course of language change, usually originating in a a form with fuller phonetic substance such as a demonstrative, e.g., Greenberg 1978. This generalization holds true for the Mel languages, spoken in the countries of Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia. These languages were formerly part of the southern branch of Atlantic but are now thought to constitute an independent, e.g., Segerer Forthcoming. The reconstructed form of the Mel definite article is likely *lɛ (tone uncertain). In some dialects of Bom-Kim and the Dema dialect of Sherbro its realization is still lɛ. In (1)

(1) The definite article in Mel, underlying forms and surface realizations

Kisi	/+alv/	[wɛ] / [+rnd], [yɛ] / [-rnd],, [l] / [l]+__, [d]/[+nas]+__
		(no TBU, but following tone on nun class marker always high)
Mani	/ʧɛ/	
	polar tone	
Bom-Kim	/ɛ/	[wɛ] / [+rnd], [yɛ] / [-rnd], [lɛ] / [l] + __, [dɛ] / [+nas]+__, [ɛ]
Bom dialect of Bom-Kim	/lɛ/	[lɛ], [dɛ] / [+nas]+__
		(tone presently unknown)
Sherbro	/ɛ/	[wɛ] / [+rnd], [yɛ] / [-rnd], [lɛ] / [l] + __, [dɛ] / [+nas]+__, [ɛ]
		(tone indeterminate)
Dema dialect of Sherbro	/lɛ/	[lɛ], [dɛ] / [+nas]+__
		(tone presently unknown)

After discussing these facts in the Bullom languages and Kisi, I turn to less closely related languages such as Temne to see how the definite article is realized there. In Temne there is no trace of a cognate form. The segments present in the reconstructed form are entirely absent. Furthermore, there is a formal DEFINITE/INDEFINITE distinction in Temne (marked by both tonal and segmental differences), which is not found anywhere else in Bullom and Kisi. The facts around the definite article are placed within the context of other changes in these languages. Significant differences in the noun class systems exist in terms of both sheer number of classes and in agreement patterns. The definite article, of course, is one of a number of dependent elements forming part of the noun phrase and showing agreement with the head noun.

The role that the definite article played in the changeover from prefixing to suffixing in Kisi has been documented, as has its role in the desuetude of the noun class systems of these languages on the whole (Childs 1983). That these facts can be put in order with some plausible explanations for the variation shows the cohesiveness of the Bullom and Kisi languages as a subgroup of Mel and the lack of cohesiveness beyond the group.

The paper concludes by discussing the possible impacts of language contact on the definite article, particularly in its local consequences in language shift and language death. With the exception of Kisi, all of the languages are endangered if not dead. Only a few speakers of the Kim dialect remain, and the Bom speakers number less a few score. All are elderly (over sixty) and no children are exposed to the language.

References

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