South Mande lexicology project

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Abstract

A joint Swiss-Russian project launched in 2000 puts as its goal an integral description of the languages of the Southern group, one of the least studied in the Mande family to the date. Nine field trips have been accomplished by the Russian team in the framework of the Project. Most interesting linguistic phenomena have been discovered. Two dictionaries are published in 2008, the total number of publications of the team is more than 80. The scope of the Project is being extended to other groups of the Mande family.

1. Introduction

South Mande is a compact group of 9 to 11 languages whose speakers live mainly in Côte d'Ivoire, but also in Liberia and Guinea.
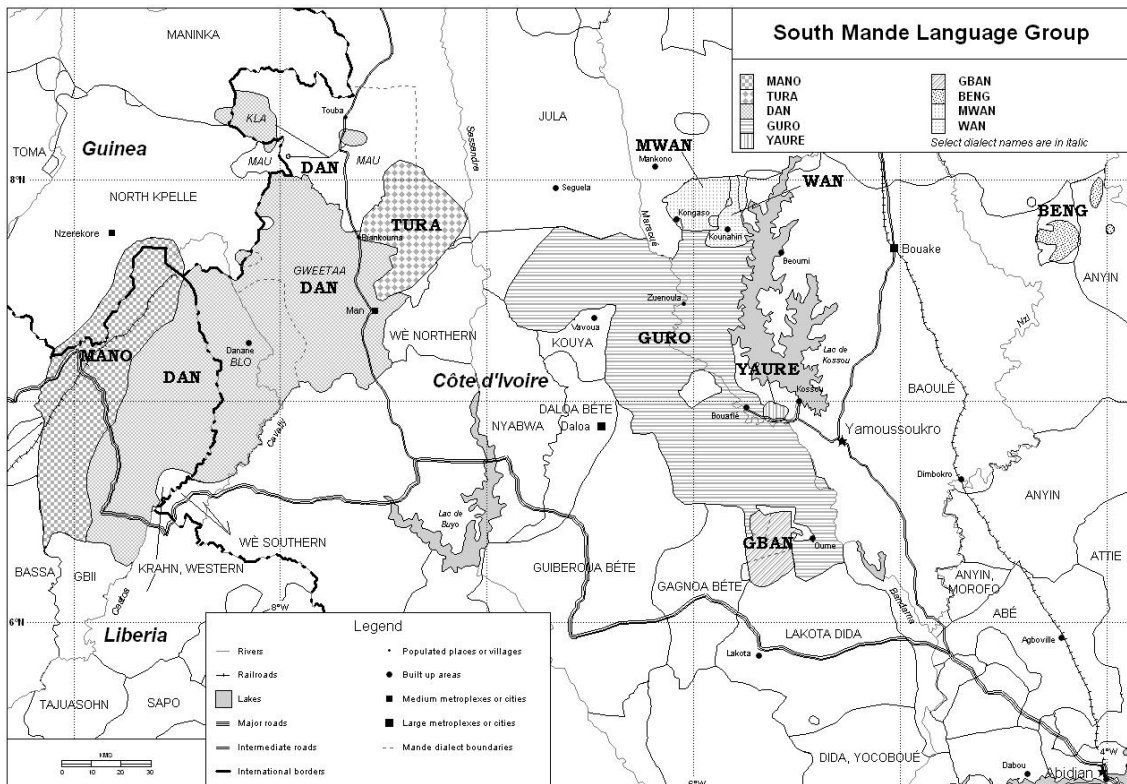
First data on those languages were published by French colonial administration (Louis Tauxier 1921, Maurice Delafosse 1904). A major step was the book of André Prost (Prost 1953) including a list of more than 400 words and a grammatical sketch of each language of the group – in spite of the lack of tonal marks and numerous phonologically meaningful oppositions.

The next stage in the study of the South Mande languages in Côte d'Ivoire began in the 1960s. It is connected with the activities of Summer Institute of Linguistics (first of all, Eva Flik, Margrit Bolli and Thomas Bearth) and of French linguists working in the *Institut de linguistique appliquée* (Université de Cocody, Abidjan), especially Joseph le Saout, but also Monique Dion/Trabi and Henrie-Claude Grégoire. It was a period of introduction of true scholarly methods into the study of those languages, of precise phonological and morphological description. The most important advancement was reached in the study the Tura language (works of Thomas Bearth), in Gban phonology (Joseph le Saout); a great amount of work was done in Dan studies (Flik, Bolli, Bearth, although a complete description of Western Dan by Eva Flik remains unpublished and inaccessible to the colleagues). Works by Brad and Elisabeth Hopkins and Frank Lautenschlager on Yaure, of Eva Flik and Margrit Bolli on Mwan, of Wolfgang Paesler on Beng should be also mentioned. There was also major progress in the study of the Guro language (a dictionary and a grammar by Jean-Paul Benoist; phonological descriptions by Joseph le Saout and by Henri-Claude Grégoire; works by Monique Dion/Trabi).[1]

2. Project implementation

To the moment of the beginning of our project in 2000, the South Mande language group was by no means a *terra incognita*. However, a great drawback was in the description of the lexicon. Only Guro had a published dictionary (Benoist 1977), however, with an insufficient phonological notation. Therefore, it was decided to put emphasis on the lexicology and the lexicography.

Our project was supported by the Swiss National Foundation of Scientific Research (at the current stage, the project keeps going thanks to a grant from the Russian Foundation for Human Studies # 08-04-00144a). Its initial goal was to describe three or four languages of the South Mande group spoken in Côte-d'Ivoire. The coordinators of the project are Thomas Bearth on the Swiss side and myself on the Russian side. It was meant at the beginning that the research team would include students and young researchers from both countries. The first trip to Côte d'Ivoire took place in January-March 2001; the team included four Russian students working on the following languages:

- ➢ Tura (Dmitry Idiatov),
- ➢ Dan-Gweetaa (Alyona Tcherdyntseva),
- ➢ Guro (Irina Jouk) and
- ➢ Wan (Tatiana Nikitina).

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[1] For a survey of the state of matter in the South Mande languages and a bibliography of earlier works, see (Vydrine 2005e).

Each of the students remained in a village or a town on the ethnic territory of his or her language community (or nearby), and I moved among them. Thomas Bearth was organizing the process and providing the students with methodological assistance. From the very beginning, the team profited very much from the help of linguists of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, especially of Margrit Bolli.

The trips of the team are taking place every year. Unfortunately, the political and military situation in Côte d'Ivoire prevented young Swiss linguists to join the research group, which remained therefore exclusively Russian. Another important modification in the process of the work was caused by the armed conflict in the country: beginning from the second half of 2002, travels within the country became very difficult because of countless road blocks, so it was decided to stay in Abidjan, where speakers of the languages were invited (or the speakers were found in Abidjan, where practically all speech communities of the country are represented).

So far, nine trips of the team took place. Some of its members abandoned the project; new people took their place: Alexander Zheltov and Ekaterina Kotchmar (Gban language), Natalia Kuznetsova and Olga Kuznetsova (Guro language), Anna Erman (Dan-Blo), Elena Perekhvalskaya (Mwan language), Denis Paperno (Beng language), Nadezda Makeeva (Kla-Dan language), Maria Tsyurupa (Yaure language). After Alyona Tcherdyntseva left the project, the Dan-Gweetaa dictionary and grammar work was taken over by myself.

Since 2008, the area of our work includes Guinean languages as well: many Mande languages in Guinea remained underdescribed, especially in what concerns their tonal systems, and some of them were completely unknown to the academic community. In 2009, the Guinean team has grown quite representative: Maria Konoshenko (Guinean Kpelle), Alexandra Vydrina (Kakabe), Daria Mischenko (Looma), Maria Khachaturyan (Mano). Little by little, all the languages of the South Mande group have been included into the scope of our work, and some South-Western and Central Mande languages have been added to the list as well.

In the course of our work, it became clear that a focus on dictionaries only was impossible. No modern dictionary can be compiled without a full-scale phonological, morphological and syntactic description of the language. In other words, instead of just dictionaries, we work on integral language descriptions, including a dictionary, a grammar, and a cultural component. At more advanced stages, glossed electronic corpora of texts are being created (in the format of the Linguist Toolbox).

3. Project results

The second stage of the Project, financed by the Swiss National Foundation, is over. We can strike a preliminary, very positive balance. The main results lie in the academic sphere. Let us survey them briefly:

1. There are dictionaries for each language of the group in various stages of advancement; the most elaborated so far are Dan-Blo, Dan-Gwèètaa, Mwan and Tura dictionaries. All dictionaries have three metalanguages: French, English and Russian (except for Tura, which has only French). My Manding Dictionary was

taken as the model of how to structure the dictionaries. Some dictionaries are available on our website http://mandelang.kunstkamera.ru/. Both Dan dictionaries have been published, in their French versions (in the current Ivorian orthography). Publication of the Mwan and Tura dictionaries (also in their French versions) is planned for 2009 or 2010; other dictionaries (Guro, Beng, Kla-Dan, etc.) will follow.

2. Many typologically interesting features have been discovered and/or described in detail. Among these, we can mention:

- extremely rich systems of personal pronouns. The inflection of personal pronouns encodes a whole range of grammatical meanings, e.g. TAM, pragmatic statuses, case. Split ergativity has been found in the personal pronouns of Guro (contravening the animacy hierarchy of Silverstein (1976)): Ergative/Absolutive opposition for 1 and 2 person SG, and Nominative/Accusative opposition for 3 pers. SG)[2] and in Mwan (the "Stative/Active" opposition in 3 SG). A very harmonious system of functional submorphemic indices was discovered in Gban;

- emergence of an inflection case system in the sphere of noun in Dan. In Dan-Gwèètaa, up to 6 cases can be identified;

- numerative noun classifiers, relatively regular, have been discovered in Gban;

- complex tonal paradigms of verbs were described in Mwan and Guro;

- a two-level (rather than three-level) tonal system in the northern Kpelle dialect of Gbali, an intermediary tonal system (a 3-tone level where the third tone is opposed to the others in a limited number of contexts) has been established in the "central" Guinean dialect;

- a very complicated tonal system has been discovered in the northern dialect of Looma, Woyi-Balagha: lexical (underlying) tones of words manifest themselves on those words only in some rare cases, as a rule they can be identified only from the evidence of surface tones of the subsequent words or suffixes of the subsequent words (and in very numerous contexts, the lexical tones are completely neutralized by grammatical ones);

- complex systems of inflection of adjectives, very unusual for Mande languages, in Dan and Gban. In Gban, this phenomenon is based on the interaction of initial consonant alternation and reduplication; in Dan, the formal means of the inflection are reduplication, modification of tones, transfixation, suffixation;

- existence of a "true passive", marked by a verbal suffix, in one of Kakabe dialects (a phenomenon very unusual for Mande languages), which might be a result of the Pular influence;

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[2] Cf., however, an alternative interpretation of the Guro pronominal system in a recent publication by Natalia Kuznetsova (2008).

- unusual verbal morphology – separable preverbs in Dan and separable suffixes in Tura;

- coexistence of right-side and left-side relativization (which seems to be typical of many other Mande languages as well).

Some mistakes of predecessors have been fixed up. The most important is the number of tones in Guro: According to le Saout, this language had two level tones whose allotones were distributed depending on the type of the initial consonants (the phenomenon of "tone-depressor consonants"). Our study has proved that this distribution cannot be considered as a synchronic phenomenon, and the tonal system should be interpreted as a 3-level one.

It was discovered that middle and mid-high vowels in Kla-Dan and Dan-Gweetaa languages are in complementary distribution – mid-high vowels are possible only under the extra-high tone and in some other contexts (also connected to the extra-high tone). In the same contexts, the middle vowels do not occur. Therefore, these vowels are allophones, rather than different phonemes. In addition, this finding may indicate the way of how vocalic systems with 5 degrees of aperture came into existence in some Eastern Dan dialects.

3. The South Mande Project has provided data necessary for the comparative historical study of the group. A reconstruction of the initial consonants system of Proto-South Mande was done, as well as a reconstruction of the system of personal pronouns. The exact and more abundant lexical data has allowed to carry out a new lexicostatistical study of the entire Mande family and to come up with a new classification of Mande languages (Vydrin 2009).

Analysis of the data of the South Mande languages allowed advancing a hypothesis concerning the type of the Proto-Mande phonological system (±ATR and nasal harmony; non-phonological status of nasal consonants; opposition of implosive/explosive consonants). Today, only two South Mande languages (Guro and Yaure) have those features, but there are phenomena everywhere in Mande language family (such as a scarcity or even absence of combination of nasal consonants with mid-closed vowels, e.g. *mo, ne, ɲo,* etc.) which cannot be explained otherwise than through a postulation of a proto-system of the abovementioned type.

The Project has had some important "practical" side-effects:

- Denis Paperno, in collaboration with his informant Patrice Kouadjo, advanced a proposal of a reform of the Beng orthography. In February 2007 he produced a first draft of the Beng-French "Lexique" for the practical use of the Beng speakers;

- a new Guro orthography (based on the 3-level tone system) has been elaborated by Olga Kuznetsova, Natalia Kuznetsova and myself. The previous orthographies have proved to be utterly unsatisfactory: the one used in the Bible translation is inconsistent and does not allow to represent some relevant phonological features, and an orthography (elaborated by SIL at the end of 1990s) based on Le Saout's interpretation of the phonological system of Guro has proved to be unsatisfactory as well. Our or-

thography has been tested and approved by representatives of the Guro language community and by experts of the ILA (Institut de linguistique appliquée, Université de Cocody). A Guro-French "Lexique" is submitted for the evaluation of the activists of the Association for Promotion of the Guro Culture in March 2007;

- our informants for the Dan language, inspired by the project, have launched a monthly newspaper in Dan called -*Pamεbhamε* 'One who rouses'. The first issue appeared in March 2005; after a one-year lull in 2006, it resumed in March 2007. The newspaper is published in two versions: Dan-Gweetaa (Eastern Yakuba) and Dan-Blo (Western Yakuba). It was warmly welcomed by the Dan speakers, it stirred up the alphabetization activities in the Dan area that were stagnating during the years of the Ivorian crisis. One of our informants, Kessé Mognan, wrote and published several books in his language; more books are in various stages of preparation;

- Maria Konoshenko, after a thorough study of the vocalic and tonal systems of Guinean Kpelle, has prepared proposals to the reform of the orthography of that language (which is different enough from the Liberian Kpelle).

A special word should be said about the impact of the lexicographical activities on the respective language communities. Dictionary making is currently viewed by the speakers of the languages as very important work: a dictionary is not just a tool for translation, it is an indication of a higher status of the language. Before 2000, no "serious" dictionary of any local language was published in Côte-d'Ivoire.[3] During the first decade of the XXI century, two dictionaries of major Ivorian languages appeared in the bookstores, Baoule-French and Bete-French. Publication of two Dan dictionaries is viewed by the Dan-speaking community as a major event giving weight to its language and putting it in line with the other most important languages of the country.

For this reason, our Dan language assistants (turned into co-authors of the dictionaries) attached a great importance to the ceremonies of "dedication" of the dictionaries. It was planned to organize festivities in the respective administrative centres of the Western and Eastern Dan, Danané and Man, at the beginning of January 2009. The preparation of the events acquired such an importance that it became a subject of rivalry among local groups, and, finally, the major Eastern Dan celebration moved to the Santa village which is the center of the Gwèètaa sousprefecture (it should be reminded that the Gwèètaa dialect is taken as basic for the Eastern Dan literary norm). The festivities were accompanied by performance of masks and of numerous dancing groups; even the *"truu "tan* (the horn group) appeared, which convinced the audience that an extremely important event was taking place: everybody knows that *"truu "tan* do not show up for small-scale occasions. Many guests came to Santa from other villages of the Gwèètaa sousprefecture, from other parts of the Eastern Dan area, and even from the northernmost Dan zone, which is Kla.

The celebrations continued the same day of 3 January in Man, under the auspices of the Mayor of the city. Two days later, a more modest ceremony took place in Danané, and by the end of January, an official dedication was organized in Abidjan, with the partici-

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[3] It is true that several "lexiques" of Jula appeared, and a big (and very good) dictionary of the Odjenné Jula was compiled by Cassian Braconnier and published, in a very small print-run, in Paris (Braconnier 1999). However, these publications seem to have passed unnoticed by the Ivorian broad public.

pation of the Minister of Transport and the President of the Supreme Court of Côte-d'Ivoire. The events were covered by electronic mass media of the country, and there are good reasons to think that the publication of the Dan dictionaries may positively influence the determination of the educational authorities to introduce mother tongue teaching in the land of Dan (planned at the beginning of the 2000s and hampered by the civil war).

Such an enthusiastic response encourages us to push forward to the completion and publication of the dictionaries of the other languages dealt with in our project.

As mentioned earlier, we maintain close contacts with Ivorian linguists from the *Institut de Linguistique Appliquée* (*Université de Cocody*), and also with the Summer Institute of Linguistics. We started with meetings where we informed our Ivorian colleagues about our activities and results of our research. These meetings transformed gradually into annual conferences of ILA *Langues de Côte d'Ivoire: Théorie et pratique* with contributions of both sides.

In 2002, a workshop on bilingual lexicography was organized on the initiative of Margrit Bolli (SIL), where participants of our project (Hannes Hirzel from Zürich and myself, with the assistance of Anna Erman and Dmitry Idiatov) lectured. It can be said that, to some extent, this marked a turning point in the Ivorian linguistics: two years later, we were positively surprised by the fact that lexicography ranked much higher than before in ILA, and many Ivorian linguists began lexicographic work on their respective languages. At every visit to the Ivory Coast, we keep consulting them on practical questions of dictionary making.

Another offshoot of our project is the "Village lexicography" program developed by Thomas Bearth. When Dmitry Idiatov's Tura-French Dictionary reached a certain degree of maturity, a *Festival de lexicographie* was organized in the Kpata village. Delegates from the entire Tura area participated and worked on the enrichment of the dictionary. A team of "village lexicographers" was created who collect new words and meanings, which grows to be a powerful means of awareness of the Tura people about their own language.

Our project has an impact on linguistics in St. Petersburg as well. Since its beginning, the number of its participants has reached 18 (among them three from Moscow). Some of them dropped out, but the majority remains in the academic world. Russian linguistics has a large experience of field work which deals with the description of minority languages, but it mainly focused on the languages of the ex-USSR. It is the first case of a large-scale involvement of Russian linguists in field work in Africa.

4. Conclusions

The South Mande Lexicology project has marked a major breakthrough in the study of African languages in the post-Soviet Russia. It has brought African linguistics in Russia out of the quasi-isolation from the work in the field in Africa, typical of the Soviet time.

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Appendix

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