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Mixed Languages: The case of Ma'á/Mbugu

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Abstract and Keywords

Ma'á/Mbugu is a famous and classic case of a mixed language spoken in Tanzania. The mixed language is in fact a parallel lexicon to a Bantu language, one that is very close to Pare. Both are widely spoken by the community, and existence of the mixed version is a strong marker of their identity and sets them apart from the other populations in the Usambara mountains. The parallel lexicon contains words from a South Cushitic source, Maasai, an earlier East Cushitic source, and manipulated words from the regular lexicon. The language evolved out of a parallel lexicon after language shift from a Cushitic language.

Keywords: mixed language, manipulated word, parallel lexicon, language shift, Ma'á/Mbugu

65.1 Background

THE term “mixed language” is highly controversial. Mixed languages do not exist according to Greenberg (1999) and Kortlandt (2001). The term *Mischsprache* played an important role in the early scholarship on African historical linguistics. The term and the methodology were critically reviewed by, among others, Heine (1969). But Mbugu remained the worrying exception that mixed languages, however rare, do exist. Bakker and Mous (1994: 4–7) propose that a language can be called mixed if 90% or more of the lexical roots in an average text are from a different origin than the grammar. This definition is purely descriptive and does not claim anything about its history. Historical linguistics is concerned about the processes, and one can encounter ordinary processes with extraordinary results (Thomason 1995). There is not necessarily a meaningful category “mixed languages”, and for every challenging case we should reconstruct the history and draw conclusions from a comparison of histories, not from a comparison of the extraordinary end results. One intriguing example is that of Ma'á/Mbugu and I will discuss only this case in this chapter and briefly mention some other cases at the very end.

The challenge of a truly mixed language and why it should not exist is the fundamental insight of historical linguistics that languages develop from one ancestral language and not from two or more. The fundamental structures and vocabulary come from its ancestral language, no matter how strongly additional lexicon and grammar may have been taken from other languages (see Dimmendaal 1992). Against this background the “strange case of Mbugu” (Goodman 1971) has puzzled linguists from the first reports of this language with “a Bantu grammar but a Cushitic vocabulary”. When Meinhof decided to work on Mbugu in 1906 it was already known through earlier wordlists that Mbugu had Cushitic lexicon. Meinhof’s publication showed for the first time the mixed nature of the language. Thomason analyzed the previously collected material in an influential article in (1983). Mbugu took a crucial place in the even more influential publication by Thomason and Kaufman (1988) as evidence of the fact that grammar can be borrowed, and to a spectacular (p. 872) degree. I hope to have demystified the case of Ma'á/Mbugu in my book (Mous 2003a). I will repeat the main conclusions here briefly and then address the issue whether Ma'á/Mbugu underwent a shift or borrowed grammatical material to a large extent.

65.2 Normal Mbugu and inner Mbugu or Ma'á'

When I started my fieldwork on Mbugu, I could rely on an excellent overview by Brenzinger (1987) of all previous publications on and about Mbugu. The prevalent idea was that there were two languages, a (relatively) unmixed Bantu language and a mixed one. The former was called Mbugu and the latter Ma'á in the linguistic literature at the time. But to the speakers these two terms refer to the same thing, and actually the two languages proved to be the same in a way: they share the same grammar but there is a double and parallel lexicon, and the language is called Mbugu, normal Mbugu, and inner Mbugu or Ma'á, normal Ma'á, and inner Ma'á depending on whether one uses the normal vocabulary or the “deep” vocabulary. I have shown that the grammar is in detail identical and that the vocabulary is truly parallel for the most part. The origin of the “deep” vocabulary is, however, not from one source but from several sources: (1) a South Cushitic source that is close to Iraqw, (2) Maasai, (3) an East Cushitic source, and (4) some other less important sources, including Bantu languages. Interestingly, a number of lexical items in the inner Mbugu lexicon appear to be manipulated forms of the ordinary words. This has led me to the conclusion that language manipulation played a role in the development or creation of the inner Mbugu lexicon, the so-called mixed language.

65.3 Patterns of inner Mbugu usage

Why do the people have this extra vocabulary, this extra language? All Mbugu speakers know the normal vocabulary, and many but not all know the deep vocabulary. Most speakers who do not know the deep vocabulary are members of the Gonja and Nhkandu clans, and these were the last to come from the Pare Mountains into the Usambara Mountains in Tanzania near the border with Kenya and the Indian Ocean. The vast majority of the

people in the Usambara Mountains speak the Bantu language Shambaa (Riedel 2009), and also most Mbugu speak this language, too. The non-mixed normal Mbugu is quite different from Shambaa but very close to Pare (also known as Chasu). Both Mbugu and some Pare moved from the Pare Mountains to the Usambara Mountains. The Mbugu usually live higher in the mountains, concentrate more on cattle-keeping, and leave the cultivation of bananas to the Shambaa and to the sizeable population of Pare speakers who are present in the area. Mbugu live in roughly three areas: Magamba, near Bumbuli, and near Rangwi, and there are even small linguistic differences between the three areas. But in all three they live in close contact with the Shambaa and the Pare. In my material I find surprisingly little mixing of the codes. Most conversations are in one of the (p. 873) two variants. There is no specific reason to use one or the other variety, except that one uses the normal Mbugu with those who do not speak the inner Mbugu version. I have a tape of an interview in normal Mbugu in which a clear-cut shift to inner Mbugu is made at the moment that somebody passes by and greets in inner Mbugu. Thus one cannot speak of a register because there are no functions related to one or the other variant. The important function of inner Mbugu is its existence. Through its existence (and using it) the Mbugu people have a language of their own that is definitely deviant from the Bantu languages around them. It is a strong marker of being culturally different. All Mbugu consider themselves to be member of the one ethnic identity of Mbugu/Ma'á regardless of whether they can speak inner Mbugu or not. The existence of non-speakers of inner Mbugu within the same ethnic group may explain why they still need the non-mixed normal Mbugu. The acquisition of Mbugu in both its forms is from early childhood. I noticed that small children know both varieties.

65.4 Historical scenario

The big question is: how did this situation arise? In the absence of old enough sources, all we can do is speculate on the most likely scenario. A scenario will inevitably link the linguistic history with that of the people. To this end, I collected a number of oral histories in a number of different areas. Although oral histories typically do not give an accurate account of the actual course of history, they do provide valuable input for likely scenarios. Many speak of Vudee as a place in the Pare Mountains from where they were dispersed and where they still went back to until recently for initiation. Some of the Mbugu lived among the Maasai for a long time as a kind of servant group, but the story goes that one day they stole their cattle back from the Maasai and then had to flee into the Usambara Mountains. The histories of the various Mbugu clans differ with respect to the routes through which they entered the Usambara Mountains. Several came through Mombo, where the main road now also leads into the mountains. Others went from South Pare to the nearby North Usambara near Rangwi and those latter clans are the ones who tend not to speak inner Mbugu. The high proportion of Maasai words in the inner vocabulary confirms the oral tradition of living among the Maasai. In fact, to the earliest European travelers the Mbugu looked like Maasai in dress and outfit. In general, nouns are much more commonly borrowed than verbs, but there is a high proportion of verbs among the words from Maasai, and this fact suggest to me that the transfer of Maasai words was al-

ready at a stage where the Mbugu were expanding a parallel lexicon to build it into a different “language”. It is very difficult to know when they created this extra lexicon. It is not unlikely that it already started in the Pare Mountains. The Mbugu must have lived for a long time together with the Pare in the Pare Mountains because their grammar at least is basically Pare. Assuming that they were different in culture, and in complexion, and that they spoke a different language, they shifted to Pare in that period. In the last stages of language shift the former language only existed in the new one in the form of a few lexical items that were put on a par with the corresponding ones in the new language; hence a (limited) parallel lexicon. I assume the Mbugu once spoke a Cushitic language. The oldest stratum of the inner Mbugu vocabulary comes from this original East Cushitic language. (p. 874) The tradition says that the Mbugu came from Lukipia or Likipia in Kenya. Likipia is not far from where the Cushitic language Yaaku was still spoken until recently, but it is also the place from where many Maasai dispersed (Galaty 1993). The most likely scenario is that the Mbugu left (with or without the Maasai) central Kenya, where they spoke a Cushitic language and had a cattle culture, for the Pare Mountains, where they settled and shifted to Pare. Once the shift was about complete, they expanded their emergent parallel lexicon to one which could serve as a language in an effort to have their own language as expression of their own different culture. They had enough access to non-Bantu vocabulary among the Maasai to enlarge this lexicon, and they had access to a language close to Iraqw. Some of the traditions speak of a period in Mbugwe, an area close to Gorwaa, Iraqw’s closest relative. The names Mbugwe and Mbugu are essentially the same. This may or may not suggest a historic link. Arriving in the Usambara Mountains, various Mbugu groups met and formed an ethnic unit for which the inner Mbugu lexicon served as a clear marker of their deviant ethnic and cultural identity. Possibly the long initiation in Vudee helped in the strengthening of the inner Mbugu lexicon. Nothing is known about what happened in the initiation in Vudee, but such long initiation periods commonly involve learning new (surrogate) languages. The creation of a separate and parallel lexicon for purposes of respect or identity is not uncommon, in general, and in Africa, which shows many examples of registers of respect such as Hlonipha and argots of smiths, hippo-hunters, etc. (Mous 2001, 2003b; see also Friedrich, chapter 56 of this volume).

65.5 Language shift or not

Having demystified the strange case of Mbugu, it is no longer a challenge to the one-parent axiom of historical linguistics. A crucial question that still remains is whether the Mbugu shifted, as I suggested in section 65.1 above, or whether they incorporated the Bantu grammar into their own language, as Thomason (1983, 1997) maintains. Crucial to this debate is the presence of grammar features of the original language in the present-day language. There are a limited number of grammatical features that are not clearly Bantu. I have discussed these before (Mous 2003a: 58–63) and shown that most that are put forward in Thomason (1983) are in fact not good candidates for being grammatical features of the original language for a variety of reasons. The strongest indications for non-Bantu grammar are the causative in *-ti* and details of the noun class agreement pat-

terns. Quite a sizeable number of verbs in the inner Mbugu lexicon contain an ending *-ti* that can be identified as causative marker. That causative is not productive (Mous 2003a: 63–8): new causative verbs are formed by using the common and Bantu derivation *-ij*. This causative *-ti* appears mainly on verbs from the oldest East Cushitic lexical layer. I see the closest etymological link in a predecessor of Dahalo, which has a causative suffix *-Vd* which is in the conjugation often followed by a vowel *i*, and one of the allomorphs contains *t* rather than *d*. This causative suffix is an important argument for Thomason, because she claims that it shows that Cushitic grammar remained active for a long time in the Mbugu language. She argues that the suffix is used both on verbs that have undergone the historical truncation rule and on those that have not. To me the truncation rule is part of the form (p. 875) manipulation that was used in the expansion of the parallel lexicon and, therefore, not a historical sound rule that applied once and without exceptions but one that applied to a number of lexemes, as is common with manipulation processes (Mous 2003a, 2006/7).

The most interesting issue is the question whether the noun class system is borrowed, or how the noun class system and its agreement developed. Mbugu has a full and standard Bantu noun class system. In some details inner Mbugu and normal Mbugu deviate. This is in the agreement patterns of possessives and demonstratives. Inner Mbugu demonstratives are invariant; they never show agreement. Interestingly, possessives do show agreement when used predicatively but not when used attributively:

(1)

ki-gí yá ní chá-shaba.
NC7-thing this is 7-of.copper
'This thing is of copper.'

(2)

luhambá yá ní lu-ké.
NC11-machete this is 11-your
'This machete is yours.'

(3)

<i>ma-ginera yá ma-ké</i>	vs.	<i>ma-ginera ké</i>
NC6-root this 6-your:SG		6-roots your:SG
'these roots of yours'		'your roots'

The inner Mbugu modifiers that immediately follow the noun have non-Bantu forms and show no agreement. The bilingual speakers gave up the Cushitic gender agreement and took the most common forms of the Cushitic independent demonstrative pronouns as in-

variant demonstrative words showing a three-way distinction, as in their dominant language, Pare. The same applies to the possessives. Non-agreeing nominal modifiers are not an anomaly in a Bantu noun class system and occur in many Bantu languages for certain modifiers such as numbers; it is also what happens in Swahili/English code-switching. This initial stage of using invariant modifiers in the tightest connection to the noun survived, but at a later stage they used Pare agreement prefixes for the sentence-level agreement and within the noun phrase for the associative construction (completely Pare) and for the possessives when not immediately following the noun. At this moment they employed the core of Pare grammar also when speaking inner Mbugu. I think that qualifies as language shift. The latest stage in the development of the noun class system in inner Mbugu was the addition of noun class prefixes. Meinhof (1906: 295) reported instability in the noun class system. However, what he referred to is extremely stable and still exists: in the Bumbuli area (where Meinhof did his fieldwork) there are a number of nouns that lack the CV noun class prefix that is present in the same words in the rest of the Mbugu-speaking areas. Meinhof reported a word like *aḷa* 'fire' (from South Cushitic *aḷa* 'fire'), which is class 3 and has all the agreement properties of a class 3 word but lacks the prefix *mw* which it does have in the other Mbugu areas. This is still the case, and there are a handful of words like that, the same ones that Meinhof mentioned in his 1906 publication. This is not instability but an indication that the noun class prefix is the last element of the noun class system to develop. I discuss this process of noun class development in more detail in my book (Mous 2003a).

(p. 876) 65.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, Ma'á/Mbugu is a fascinating double language for which the inner Mbugu part is truly mixed. It originated in an attempt to recover a language after shift (Sasse 1992) or, rather, to build a language that is sufficiently different from the language that the people shifted to by expanding a parallel lexicon. The functional need for the language was and is to have a strong marker of ethnic identity and to mark the difference from the surrounding, dominant and different Bantu languages and culture.

Ma'á/Mbugu was always the famous challenging mixed language, but there are more instances of extreme language mixture in Africa. To mention just a few, in several big cities youth slangs have arisen as a consequence of the urbanization of the last century (Kießling and Mous 2004). In some cases these slangs have developed so dramatically that they have become the dominant language of the city, young and old, and of modernity; Nairobi's Sheng and Tsotsitaal in Gauteng, South Africa for example (see Hurst, chapter 63 of this volume). The Northern Songhay languages are notorious for their mixed nature (see Souag, chapter 48 of this volume). Wolff and Alidou (2001) present the mixed nature of Tasawaq and offer hypotheses of its origin. Kossmann (2010) shows how these (and Berber) languages developed high levels of mixture not only of lexicon but also of grammar by using a double morphological system depending on the etymological source of nouns and verbs. Closer to the Ma'á/Mbugu case is the Bantu language Ilwana that became rather mixed by heavy borrowing from Orma (Cushitic), including transfer of

phonological processes and noun suffixes (Nurse 2000). All these “mixed” languages are the outcome of different linguistic processes in different sociolinguistic settings that led to different but fascinating and challenging results.

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Mixed Languages: The case of Ma'á/Mbugu

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