

The Gulf of Guinea creoles from a Macro-Sudan belt perspective

(Workshop 3: Areal Phenomena in Northern Sub-Saharan Africa)

GÜLDEMANN, Tom

Humboldt University Berlin and MPI-SHH Jena (tom.gueldemann@staff.hu-berlin.de)

HAGEMEIJER, Tjerk

University of Lisbon (t.hagemeijer@clul.ul.pt)

Abstract

The investigation of large scale areal patterns in Africa has conventionally been applied to indigenous languages of the continent. This also holds for what has been identified as the Macro-Sudan belt by Güldemann (2003, 2008, 2010) and the Sudanic belt by Clements and Rialland (2008). At the same time, it has been known for a long time that some “new” languages, notably Atlantic creoles of the Circum-Caribbean and the wider West African littoral share a number of features with their so-called “substrate” languages, in particular from the Macro-Sudan belt, which has even lead some scholars to entertain the idea of large linguistic areas straddling the Atlantic ocean (cf. Muysken’s (2008: 11-20) Cross-Atlantic area and Güldemann’s (2009) Caribbean-West African area).

In this talk we will discuss the four Luso-African creoles spoken on the islands of São Tomé, Príncipe and Annobón in the Gulf of Guinea which form a small language family that is argued to go back to a founder creole that arose on São Tomé at the end of the 15th century (e.g., Hagemeyer 2011). The major scenario for the emergence of this proto-creole is incomplete language shift on the part of the first slaves coming from a geographically circumscribed area in the Niger River delta around the old Benin kingdom, in particular Edo(id) speakers, towards the target language Portuguese, whereby the socially restricted second-language acquisition caused exceptionally strong substrate interference.

We compare the modern typological profile of the Gulf of Guinea creoles with the set of features claimed to characterize the Macro-Sudan belt in order to determine whether, or better, to what extent they can be viewed as belonging to this macro-area. Since the social and contact history of these creoles can be reconstructed to a large extent from available documents, this case helps to shed light on the diachronic mechanisms which may have led to the observed geographic and genealogical distribution of the structural properties of linguistic macro-areas in general and the Macro-Sudan belt in particular.

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Keywords: Macro-Sudan, Gulf of Guinea creoles, substrate interference