

Ethnographic and corpus-based study of multilingualism: the case of Mano and Kpelle (Guinea)

In this paper¹, we report preliminary results of the project studying the dynamics of multilingual communication in the Forest Guinea region.

Forest Guinea region, and especially its capital, Nzerekore, are characterized by a high level of multilingualism. The main indigenous languages spoken around the region of Nzerekore are Kpelle (460 000 speakers in Guinea and 760 000 speakers in Liberia, according to Ethnologue) and Mano (95 000 speakers in Guinea and 305 000 in Liberia), Southwestern and Southern Mande, respectively. In addition, there is a high number of speakers of varieties of Manding, Central Mande, many of whom occupy professional niches of trade, but also are present in administration, healthcare and other government-related spheres. As a result, Manding is commonly used in these spheres. Other language speakers are also present in the region, but rather constitute linguistic minorities: in particular, Kono, Loma, Soso, or Pular. French, the former colonial language, is also used: in education, administration and some other domains. The main focus of the paper is a study of multilingual communication between the speakers of Mano and Kpelle languages.

A preliminary study showed that in bilingual villages in the contact zone and in bilingual households, and especially in those whose head is Mano, Kpelle and Mano are both spoken, and many children are raised bilingual. Interaction participants typically have a large repertoire of languages and tend to choose the language which both of them master most (with other factors playing an additional role in this choice). As a whole, the Kpelle speakers are about five times more numerous than the Mano speakers, which creates an environment where a Mano speaker (a child or an adult) is more likely to encounter a Kpelle speaker and be exposed to the language than the other way round. Thus, in major cities many Mano speak Kpelle, but not vice versa, showing asymmetric bilingualism. Therefore, the main factor for the Kpelle dominance over Mano in everyday communication is arguably the numerical advantage of Kpelle speakers over Mano speakers. On the other hand, in certain social spheres, such as Catholic religious practice, partly due to historical reasons, Kpelle has a strong hierarchical dominance over Mano. This is clearly manifested in various church materials, many of which are translations from Kpelle. Overall, there is evidence of stable contact influence of Kpelle on Mano, but not so much the other way round (Khachaturyan 2019).

In order to study Mano - Kpelle synchronic and diachronic bilingualism, we use mixed methodologies. First of all, we collect samples of spontaneous speech from individuals with different linguistic backgrounds, including native Mano and Kpelle speakers with limited exposure to Kpelle and Mano, respectively; bilingual children from mixed Mano – Kpelle families; and second language speakers of Mano and Kpelle who learned these languages as adults. This collection of texts in Mano and Kpelle spoken as L1 and L2 with various levels of proficiency allows to study variation due to different degrees of interference. This method is quite rarely applied to lesser-described languages in contact (for a study employing this method in an English and Spanish-speaking community, see Torres Cacoullos & Travis 2018). We also undertake participant observation of multilingual communication, the excerpts from which supplement our corpus. Finally, we supplement these data with interviews with speakers about their linguistic backgrounds and linguistic biographies and make limited use of experimental techniques (picture-based elicitation).

In this talk, we will present some preliminary ethnographic observations on language choice in multilingual communication. A grammatical domain which proved to be particularly interesting for the study of Mano-Kpelle bilingualism in synchrony (interference) and diachrony (stable effect of language contact) is the marking of reflexivity, which we will also briefly analyze in the talk.

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