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Songhay languages: a post-Creole language family?

This talk will present preliminary evidence from an investigation into the possibility that the Songhay languages are a family of post creole languages. The classification of Songhay languages has been point a of contention among Africanists and there have been a number of proposals for their inclusion in various families. It is apparent that contact-induced language change played a significant role in the history of the Songhay languages. One of the most extreme hypotheses involving contact in early Songhai history, proposed by Nicolaï (1985) and refined in a controversial series of subsequent works (notably Nicolaï 1987, 1990, 2003), suggests that “catastrophic” linguistic events in linguistic prehistory led to a multi-genetic pidgin language that formed the basis of the Songhay language family.

Bakker et al. (2011) suggest that a pidgin-to-creole cycle, such as that described by Nicolaï (1985) for the Songhay languages, is precisely the cause of creole distinctiveness which they argue for. Since the 2011 paper, Bakker and the members of the Cognitive Creolistics group at Aarhus University have expanded their sample of pidgins/creoles and superstrate and substrate languages. Their results are consistent: creoles cluster together under phylogenetic analyses, thus suggesting typological distinctiveness. Phylogenetic analyses will be conducted so as to uncover the genealogical affiliation of Songhay languages. Should Nicolaï’s (1985) hypothesis be correct, we expect the Songhay languages to cluster with the other creoles under these analyses.

References

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