

WHAT HAPPENS TO CLASS WHEN A LANGUAGE DIES? LANGUAGE CHANGE VS. LANGUAGE DEATH¹

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1. Introduction

This paper presents the first documentation of the noun class system of the dying language Mani (**buy**), “Bullom So” in *Ethnologue*, a.k.a. Mmani, Mandenyi, etc.) spoken in Guinea and Sierra Leone. Mani has some few hundred speakers, all of whom speak either Soso (**sus**) or Temne (**tem**) as their everyday language. The Mani are concentrated in a restricted coastal area straddling the border between Guinea and Sierra Leone near the town of Morebaya, Kambia District, in Sierra Leone. A few other speakers are scattered in the littoral region from Conakry to Freetown (see Map 1 below).

In the speech of what should probably be considered only “semi-speakers” (Dorian 1977; see the discussion around Table 2 below), the noun class system seems in total disarray, showing extreme variation across speakers and even within speakers. Throughout this discussion I make no real distinction between “rusty” speakers or semi-speakers (see Winford 2003 for some discussion of the terminology) and speakers of a dying language, for I believe they are one and the same, a question of telling the dancer from the dance. The processes at work on their language, however, can be differentiated.

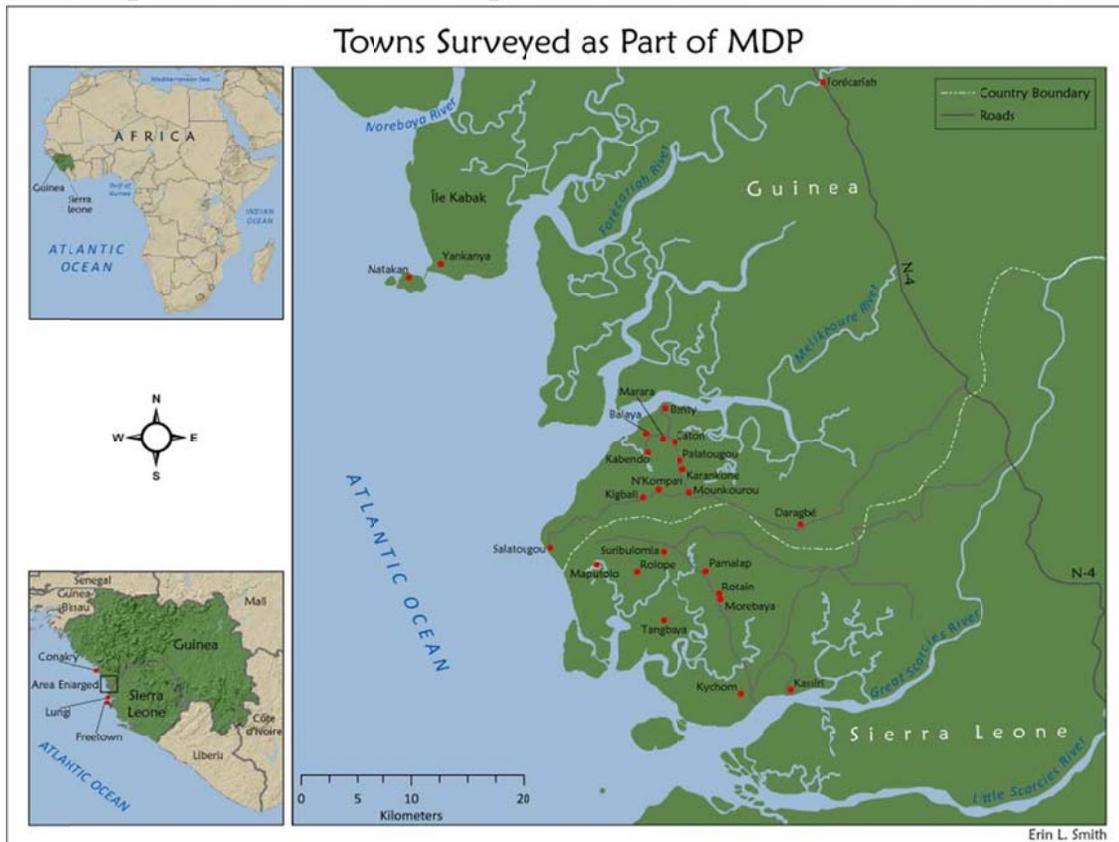
Some processes can be seen as normal or expected, given what is happening to other languages in its sub-group and more generally in Atlantic. These are the normal processes of language change. The representative comparator language for identifying these general processes of language change

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here is Kisi (**kss** and **kqs**; Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone), a well-documented, closely related language; I will also make reference to several languages more closely related to Mani but poorly documented and also dying. The second set of processes, however, are not of the same nature and represent what happens to a relatively complex or opaque morphological system when a language dies.

Map 1 Towns with Mani speakers



Very often the two processes (language change and language death) are difficult to tease apart, but on the basis of a comparison with Kisi, an analysis of the Mani noun class system reveals ways of distinguishing the two. This analysis is, of course, facilitated by the moribund state of the language, i.e., the changes are extreme and evident even to the casual observer.

The languages to be discussed are characterized in the next sections, first as to their genetic relationship, secondly as to their different states of morbidity. I then characterize the noun class system of Mani and in the following section identify and analyze the “mistakes” made by Mani speakers. The paper concludes with some discussion of the significance of those mistakes.

1.1 Language classification. The South Atlantic languages, a branch of Niger-Congo, are shown below in Figure 1, following (Blench 2006).

Figure 1 South Atlantic (Niger-Congo)

South Atlantic

A. Mel languages

1. Temne; Baga Maduri, Baga Sitemu, Baga Koba, Landoma, etc.
2. Bulom languages: **Kisi**; **Mani**, Sherbro, Kim, Bom
3. Gola

B. Limba

Although other South Atlantic languages will be mentioned, the two languages of focus are the fairly closely related languages, Kisi and Mani (in bold),² as characterized, respectively, in Childs 1995 and Childs To appear.

1.2 Endangerment. The Bullom languages are generally imperiled. Of the five languages in the group, Bom has a few hundred speakers but Kim has fewer than twenty. Mani has some few hundred as well (MDP 2004-06), and Sherbro less than 20,000 (Chris Corcoran 2010 p.c.).³ Despite these comparatively higher numbers, Sherbro has also shown sure signs of endangerment with speakers shifting to Mende (Hanson 1979), as is the case also with Kim and Bom. Kisi may be the only viable Bullom language with nearly 500,000 speakers (Childs 1995) in a geographically coherent area (cf. Childs 2002). Thus, the macro sociolinguistic conditions of Mani and Kisi, as seen in the geography and demography, contrast sharply: Mani totters on the edge of death while Kisi remains quite viable and vital (for a while).

That Mani is endangered is evident not only by its numbers but also by its status within the community. An anecdote will illustrate the low esteem in which the language is held by the local citizenry, even ethnic Mani, such as Alia Fadega, a town chief on the isle of Kabak on the southern Guinea coast (see Map 1). When questioned about the use of Mani in his town of Kakende, he told us that he had heard only “the old people” speaking Mani. Furthermore, they

² An analysis based on the Swadesh “First 100”, showed a shared lexicon of 50% between Kisi and Mani, as opposed to higher percentages among the three other Bullom languages (Sapir 1971:47, Table 1). In a slightly later study Mani and Kim were found to share some 34% of elicited vocabulary (Iverson and Cameron 1986)

³ Other earlier totals are much more generous: a range of 75,000 to 167,000 speakers identified in Hanson 1980 and 200,000 in Rogers 1967; compare this to the estimate of 135,000 in *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009).

used it in only a few domains. One place the old people used their language, he averred, was in speaking to their dogs. In addition, he said that sometimes his grandfather would go to a large kapok (cottonwood) tree behind the village and talk “*au diable et aux fétiches*” (‘to the devil and to the fetishes). His second example of Mani’s use doubtless involved communication with the ancestors, who have now been demonized by Muslim proselytizers. In addition to showing the low esteem in which the language is held, this anecdote points to the devastating effect that Islam or any religion can have on traditional cultures and languages (see, e.g., Mühlhäusler 1996).

Other incidents show the same stigmatization of Mani by both children and adults. Soso-speaking children make fun of other children who speak Mani. Furthermore, two old Mani women were not allowed to participate in a Guinean culture festival with their Mani songs. The reason given (by the Soso speakers in charge) was that, “No one will understand.” The sociolinguistic conditions, then, at both the macro and micro levels signal the end of the Mani language (and culture), a demise with significant ramifications for the noun class system as will be seen. Kisi stands at the other end of the continuum with its noun class system vital and intact. Because the two languages are closely related, it is presumed that they would be structurally close; if there are dramatic structural differences they would likely be attributable to external factors such as those precipitating language shift and language death.

1.3 Language change vs. language death. With regard to external factors, at least one way in which the language change may be distinguished from language death is by the absence of (extensive) language contact. Although Kisi speakers are in contact with speakers of other languages, there is none of the overwhelming evidence for language shift, as there is among the Mani. Nonetheless, it is likely that at the early stages of language death, the two processes are indistinguishable, but at the extreme state of Mani the linguistic signs of language death are unmistakable.

Such behaviors as (unknowingly) substituting a word from the dominant language (here Soso) into the receding one are obvious to the investigator, and at the least suggest the possibility of language shift. Other behaviors are more subtle. For example, in elicitation sessions speakers of the target language are often not able to recall words, and there will be much more variation in their speech than is normal, i.e., found in known fully competent speakers. What is important and sometimes difficult in the analysis of moribund languages is understanding the extreme variation, deciding what is part of normal variation or language change and what is part of language death.

This analysis raises the more provocative theoretical question of whether they are indeed the same, concluding that they are not. They are different primarily due to the sociocultural conditions in which language death occurs. The dying language is stigmatized, it is spoken only by a segment of the population, used only infrequently, etc. Moreover, the changes can take place very quickly, in a single generation.

These sociocultural factors are all part of the “External Setting”, a range of extralinguistic factors: cultural sociological, ethno-historical, economic, etc. (Sasse 1992b), which constitute the “trigger” for language shift. Speakers change their “Speech Behavior”, e.g., reducing the number of domains in which they use the language, which eventually leads to “Structural Consequences”, as seen in the noun class system of Mani. A number of comparable formal differences are presented in Sasse 1992a and many others in the work of Dorian, e.g., Dorian 1981, and Dressler, e.g., Dressler 1981. Campbell and Muntzel 1989 provide a typology and further examples. The variation is greater, and the process of change is quicker when extinction is near – Mani itself is long past the “tip” (Dorian 1986a) and thus would be expected to exhibit such structural effects.

2. Mani’s noun class system characterized

South Atlantic languages have a noun class system of the type found throughout Niger-Congo. In most cases there are prefixed noun class markers (NCMS)⁴ indicating a noun’s membership in a single noun class and controlling agreement on dependent elements. In at least one language of South Atlantic, Kisi, the normally prefixed NCMS are suffixed, which changeover has been analyzed as a case of renewal (Childs 1983),⁵ documented elsewhere in Niger-Congo within and outside the Atlantic Group (Greenberg 1977, 1978). In example (1), I present the suffixed NCMS of Kisi and the regular agreement patterns from four different classes. The name for each class (its pronoun) is indicated in the first column. In the second column appear nouns simple and modified and in the third column are simple glosses of the Kisi examples.

⁴ Other abbreviations used are: NCP ‘noun class pronoun’; sg ‘singular’; pl ‘plural’.

⁵ The term “renewal” here refers to Kisi having lost all prefixed NCMS and replaced them with suffixed NCMS.

(1) Suffixed NCMs in Kisi and dependent agreement patterns

<i>o</i>	wèèŋ-ó lady-NCM	‘lady’
	wèèŋ yùwéí-ó lady old-NCM	‘old lady’
<i>ma</i>	mèŋ-áŋ water-NCM	‘water’
	mèŋ-mà yùwéí-áŋ water-NCP old-NCM	‘old water’
<i>la</i>	lèèŋ-là yùwéí-áŋ	‘old cutlasses’
<i>ŋ</i>	běl-ŋ yùwéí-áŋ	‘old palm kernels’

Renewal can be seen as representing the vitality of the system to the language’s speakers: in the face of or concomitant with phonetic erosion, a language develops a new way of maintaining a grammatical contrast increasingly obscured by the loss of phonetic substance. Other languages in the group can be arranged in a cline illustrating different stages in the process of changeover from a prefixing to a suffixing system, as shown in Childs 1982.

Despite its apparent vitality in the Southern Branch, one way in which the noun class system can be seen as decaying or collapsing is in a reduction in its original or historically reconstructable number, i.e., how many classes there are. Related is the loss of semantic identity or coherence to each noun class. Suggestive evidence for collapse and semantic blurring comes from a consideration of Bantu reconstructions, a sub-group of Benue-Congo and a sister group to South Atlantic.

The semantics of noun class systems can be reconstructed in Proto-Bantu to configurational notions, along with such semantic features as [ANIMACY], [NUMBER], and [COLLECTIVE] (Creider and Denny 1975, Denny and Creider 1986), a reconstruction which is probably extendable to Proto-Niger-Congo and thus to South Atlantic. Some of the configurational features are given in (2).

(2) Configurational basis to noun class systems (Creider and Denny 1975)

LENGTH OR THINNESS, e.g., sugar cane stalks, hoes, tails

SPHERICALITY, e.g., pebbles, oranges, eggs

LIQUIDITY, e.g., water, palm oil

Thus, if synchronic noun classes show combinations of these meanings in a single class, i.e., a single class contains distinct sets of nouns with these features, it is likely that the combination represents a syncretism. This combination also represents the loss of a noun class as one class has absorbed the members of another class; such facts obtain in several Atlantic languages, as demonstrated in Childs 1983.

The Bullom languages of South Atlantic possess fewer noun classes than the non-Bullom languages (exemplified by Temne and Limba, the top and bottom languages in Table 1, enclosed in parentheses), and many fewer than their North Atlantic counterparts, e.g., Manjaku (Karlik 1972), which languages likely represent an earlier state of the system.⁶

Table 1 Number of classes in South Atlantic languages

(Temne	10	Wilson 1961)
Sherbro	6	Rogers 1970
Kim	9	Pichl 1964
Mani	7	Childs To appear
Kisi	7	Childs 1982
Gola	8	Westermann 1921
(Limba	13	Berry 1958)

Thus, the total number of classes is a possible reduction of a once more extensive system, but hardly diagnostic of language death for both Kisi and Gola, two more vital languages, also have relatively small inventories.

⁶ It is also possible that the number of noun classes has been augmented, as pointed out by one reviewer, but for these languages one can see in the semantics evidence for the collapsing of several classes, as discussed below.

In terms of decay, moreover, Mani exhibits the same patterns of attrition found in Kisi with noun class merger and unclear semantics of some classes. For example, the *ma* class in Mani contains: plurals of internal body parts (liver, intestines); plurals of some fish and animals; plurals of plants; mass nouns such as grains; and liquids (see Table 3). The *ma* class in other languages typically contains liquids; in Kisi it is entirely liquids but in Mani and other dying languages other classes are combined that were likely once distinct. One can see the evidence of mergers in Mani not only in the lack of semantic coherence to the classes (detailed in Childs To appear), but also in the disproportionate sizes of one singular and one plural class (see Table 3 below). There is also phonetic erosion in Mani, e.g., the vowels of NCMS being reduced to [ə]), and NCMS being totally absent in some environments, especially the 3sg prefix (the *wɔ*-class prefixed marker *ù-*), even when produced in isolation (its citation form). This is, however, the general pattern (of language change) within the Bullom sub-group. All of this is expected on the basis of what is happening in Kisi and elsewhere. Such facts are suggestive but not diagnostic, then, in differentiating language death from language change.

Mani speakers produce other forms, which are incapable of being analyzed in the same way, i.e., as representing language change, and must be construed as “mistakes” and the result of language death. This is the topic of the next section and constitutes another way in which we see the decay of the noun class system. These mistakes represent the loss of competence and are no doubt directly attributable to the language no longer being used, signaling the death of the language. The noun class system of Mani, then, is in disarray due to the moribund state of the language, which disarray represents a significant challenge to analysis (cf. Dorian 1986b).

3. Noun class “mistakes” by rusty speakers

Before embarking on a discussion of what are here considered mistakes or errors, I should say something more about the speakers producing the data and then something about the system. The following scale has been used to rank speakers in terms of their linguistic competency. Most of the speakers discussed in this paper likely belong to the “Weak” or perhaps the “Imperfect” category. None of them was young – the only speaker under forty was the son of another one of the speakers, and he said he was thirty-two.

Table 2 Competency rankings (Campbell and Muntzel 1989: 181)

- S Strong or (nearly) fully competent
- I Imperfect, for reasonably fluent semi-speakers
- W Weak semi-speakers with more restricted speaking competence (perhaps akin to the “last speakers” of Elmendorf 1981)
- R “Rememberers” who know only few words or isolated phrases (“word inserters” may belong to this group: see Vogelin and Vogelin 1977)

Although we did find a few fully competent speakers, most of our subjects belonged to the categories representing less competent speakers.

Identifying the Mani noun classes was a frustrating experience for the project because of the variation/mistakes, even in the speech of what were considered accomplished speakers. Before I illustrate these phenomena, I need to give a few more details of the Mani noun class system.

In Mani every noun (stem) belongs to at least one noun class. Furthermore, all Mani nouns govern agreement on various dependent elements. It is this membership and agreement which define nouns as a word category. The system of concord and its formal manifestation constitute Mani’s noun class system. In Table 3 appears a representation of the noun class system. The “Name” of the noun class in the first column is the noun class’s pronoun; “NCM” in the second shows each class’s characteristic prefixed noun class marker.

Table 3 Sizes and semantic characterizations of noun classes

Name	NCM	Semantic characterization	No.
<i>wɔ</i>	<i>ù-</i>	Human sg; most other sg; default sg	742
<i>ŋa</i>	<i>à-</i>	Human pl (and sometimes animals)	125
<i>le</i>	<i>dì-</i>	Some sg; diminutive, abstractions	14
<i>si</i>	<i>à-</i>	Most animal plurals	49
<i>nyɛ</i>	<i>ì-</i>	Sg animals, sg everyday objects, some pl, some collectives, abstractions, time words	213
<i>ta</i>	<i>tì-</i>	Most inanimate plurals	170
<i>ma</i>	<i>ṅ-</i>	Internal body parts, pl of some animals, pl of plants, grains, liquids	222
Total			1535

N.B. The total does not represent the total number of nouns since most nouns belong to more than one class.

It is possible the system presented in Table 3 represents a somewhat idealized or earlier version of the synchronic system.

As can be seen in (3) below, nouns and their dependent elements are prefixed and replicate the “relentless rhythm” of Latin (E. Sapir, as quoted in Greenberg 1978:53). Here the replicated element is the noun class marker *a-*, prefixing every dependent element (low numbers, articles, adjectives, etc.).

(3) The noun class system of Mani: agreement patterns

à-bùlól	‘farmers’
à-bùlól à-cé	‘the farmers’
à-bùlól à-bèn à-cé	‘the old farmers’
à-bùlól à-màní à-bèn à-cé	‘the old Mani farmers’
à-bùlól à-màní à-pót à-bèn à-cé	‘the old lazy Mani farmers’
à-bùlól à-màní à-kàtól à-bèn à-cé	‘the old industrious Mani farmers’

Because speakers have shifted to other languages and Mani is slowly dying, the system has fallen into desuetude. Speakers have less control of its complexities and commit what would be regarded as errors by fully competent speakers of a vital version of the language.

“Errors”, then, were identified on several criteria. One was system regularity. If a form did not follow the patterns expected on the basis of patterns established in Mani and in other closely related languages, it was suspicious. Another criterion was best-speaker production; if a form contrasted with the produced by the better speakers (“S” speakers in Table 2), it was considered a mistake. The MDP was extremely lucky in having a language consultant, Foday J. D. Kamara, who was not only a fluent speaker of Mani and English but also possessed a great deal of linguistic sophistication and sensitivity. His intuitions were very often decisive. The final criterion was non-linguistic: if the speaker did not fit the “best-speaker” profile, e.g., was not old, was hesitant or unsure in speech, etc., productions were immediately suspect.

Considerations of regularity, however, were always overridden by the judgements of fully competent speakers. One such speaker’s comment on the absence of the *wɔ*-class marker reveals how systematic quirks or irregularities are accepted grammatical features of Mani and that regularity is not necessarily the sign of fully competent speech. The picture is more complicated and can only be successfully resolved by evaluating the production and intuitions of competent Mani speakers, as the following anecdote reveals. Bundu Sisi of Matakan on the Isle of Kabak, a fully competent speaker, offered an explanation for the absence of a (regular) feature. The prefixed *ù*-class NCM showing *wɔ*-

class agreement is used only by people who do not know the language (2000 p.c.). In other words, the prefix is not used by those who speak the language well but rather by people who are not fully competent. This suggests the regularization and simplification of the language by those without full control of the language, as found by others, e.g., Campbell and Muntzel 1989. Thus, the absence of this “irregular” feature in a speaker’s production may be a sign of the language’s decay and such facts must be taken into consideration when identifying errors.

The most obvious mistakes, aside from lexical ones and giving different answers on different occasions (internally inconsistent productions), were those involving pluralization and agreement. With regard to the first, speakers usually had trouble producing plurals and simply used the adjective *gbér* ‘much, many’ to pluralize singular nouns, retaining the singular marker on the adjective in some cases. Some examples with discussion follow. The examples in (4) illustrate the singular in the first line and the plural in the second. “Correct” forms are bolded and underlined; these are forms that conform to the patterns of the best Mani speakers and to the patterns found in related languages.

For the singular of ‘nose’ two different forms were given, as shown in the first line of (4) a., the first with an NCM, the second without. For the plural (second line of (4) a.) the singular was given with the adjective *gbér* ‘many’, i.e., ‘many nose(s)’ but with two different NCMs. The agreement marker *tì-* belongs to a totally different class (the default plural *ta-*class marker *tì-*), as seen in the second rendering of ‘noses’. Similar facts appear in b., c., and d. The d. example shows two different plurals for ‘door’.

(4) Pluralization and other “mistakes”

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| a. ‘nose’ | <u>ì-mín</u> / mín |
| ‘noses’ | ì-mín ì-gbér / mín <i>tì-gbér</i>
NCM-nose NCM-many nose NCM-many |
| b. ‘breast’ | <u>mó</u> ì- <u>wó</u>
breast NCM-her |
| ‘breasts’ | mó gbér
breast much |
| c. ‘body hair (sg)’ | <u>ì-kùp</u> |
| ‘body hair (pl)’ | ì-kùp ì-gbér |

the word for ‘two’; fully competent speakers pronounced it [cə̀ŋ] rather than [cèŋ], as he did.

(6) Individual variation, agreement errors, pronunciation error

- | | | | | | |
|----|--------------|--------------|----------|------------|---------------|
| a. | <u>ì-hèl</u> | <u>ì-bùl</u> | | ‘one salt’ | |
| | NCM-salt | NCM-one | | | |
| b. | ì-hèl | ì-cèn | c. ñ-hèl | ì-cèn | ‘two salts’ |
| | ì-hèl | ì-rà | ñ-hèl | ì-rà | ‘three salts’ |

Thus, there were different renderings by different speakers and even by a single speaker.

The noun class system was just one place where uncertainty reigned; others were more subtle. Another relatively obvious symptom was also found in the nominal part of the grammar – a lack of lexical knowledge. Subjects had difficulty in producing forms, of the types shown in (7).

(7) Lexical problems

- Speakers substituted the word ‘cow’ for ‘elephant’; others used the Soso word
- An elderly midwife could not come up with word for ‘umbilical cord’
- The use of generic names for particular species, e.g., ‘spider’, for all species of spider

As with a particular spider, everyday birds and insects were given generic and sometimes incorrect names. People were upset that they could not remember a word in Mani, and always said that they would find out the words for us but rarely did. In recorded and transcribed discourse, many Soso words appeared, as they did in everyday conversation. The word *awa* ‘okay, all right, good, (new topic)’, for example, was ubiquitous. Thus, there were many other linguistic signs besides the decay of the noun class system signaling language death.

In summary, the Mani represents the decay of a noun class system distinct from normal language change. As Sasse found when comparing Heine’s 1980 Elmolo data [Heine 1980] to Hayward’s material on Arbore (Hayward 1984): “Elmolo [seems to be] a broken-down form of Arbore” (Sasse 1992a:76-77). Mani today is obviously a dilapidated version of what it once was.

4. Conclusion

The identifying features discussed here are special to a particular part of the grammar, but it is likely other morphosyntactic systems will exhibit similar decay as a language disappears. I have tried to show that decay in some cases is indeed distinguishable from language change but not without a consideration of related languages and socio-historical circumstances.

A fruitful comparison would be to analyze Mani speakers switching to Temne, for Temne has a small literature, e.g., Kanu and Tucker 2010, because the two languages are related and typological similar (see Figure 1). Soso, the language to which most Mani have switched, is the typological opposite of Mani and would be expected to distinctively affect Mani structures.⁷ Temne, on the other hand, is closely related to Mani, possessing a similar phonology and a similar morphosyntax. The expectation here is that the features identified as decay would not be so extreme.

Throughout this discussion I have said little about the cognitive consequences on individuals, for these are not immediately evident. The emotional and psychological consequences, however, are obvious in the laments of speakers in private and in recordings. It is probably there that the death of a language and culture takes its greatest toll.

⁷ All of the speakers featured here have switched to Soso.

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