

One Hundred Years Old Language Documentation: Preliminary Notes on the Gbin Language

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Data Sources on Gbin

The now-dead language Gbin belonged to the South branch of the Mande linguistic family; as recently as one hundred years ago Gbin speakers lived in the city of Bondoukou and its surroundings. Data on this language are very fragmentary; the only substantial source is Maurice Delafosse's *Vocabulaires comparatifs*. Already Delafosse in his listing of Mande-fu languages described Gbin as endangered:

Les *Gbĩ* ou *Bĩ* (apellés *Gbĩñfo* par les Abron, *Gurungo* ou *Gorombo* par les Koulango et les Nafãna), qui occupaient la région s'étendant de Mango ou Groumãnia à Bondoukou <...>; actuellement, ils sont presque entièrement absorbés par les Nafãna dans l'est et par les Koulango dans l'ouest; né anmois leur langue est encore parlée à Bondoukou même par quelques femmes âgées <...>, à Kangaré par un vieillard, à Soko par quelques familles, à Yanango par une famille, et dans les montagnes situées à l'ouest de Bondoukou, ainsi que dans le Barabo par quelques familles ... [Del04:146].

As can be estimated from this description, by the end of the 19th century the number of ethnic Gbin did not exceed one thousand (families Delafosse mentions are clearly clans with dozens of members). Twenty years later Tauxier [Tau21] described Gbin as «répandus, ça et là, dans la partie centrale du cercle [de Bondoukou – D.P.] parmi les Koulango <...> parmi lesquels ils disparaissent de plus en plus, perdant leur individualité propre et abandonnant leur langue <...>» [Tau21: 365]. Tauxier distinguished two ethnic subgroups, Gbin and Gouro¹, attributing to them a single language (“Gbin-Gouro”). Since in Tauxier's times both groups had virtually abandoned their language, it is not possible to estimate the degree to which the cultural identity of Gbin and Gouro reflected linguistic differences. Tauxier also provides census data in an appendix; in particular, these data contain exact sizes of families (clans). An average family of Gbin-Gouro had about 42 people, with a total of 748 Gbin and Gouro, thereof 267 Gbin in the narrow sense. From the quantitative viewpoint this was still a quite noticeable group, which even dominated some villages. But culturally this group was on the verge of extinction, since their original language and culture had been practically abandoned by that time. In 1919, Tauxier managed to find just one elderly woman, from Bondoukou, from whom he was able, after considerable efforts, to elicit some data on Gbin. Even that amounted to just numerals from 1 to 10. It is unknown when exactly the last speaker of Gbin died, but currently the language must be considered dead.

The fate of Gbin and South Mande

The Mande languages and their Southern branch in particular do not form a compact geographical grouping. Thus, Gbin was in geographic proximity of just one South Mande language, Beng, separated from others by 200-300 kilometers. Such separation is

¹ Ethnonym *gouro* is distinguishable in the names of Gbin people *Gurungo* and *Gorombo* cited by Delafosse as belonging to Koulabgo and Nafana correspondingly. These Gouro of Bondoukou are not to be confused with the Gouro (Koueni) ethnicity in Central Côte d'Ivoire.

sometimes explained by migrations, and sometimes by members of a geographic continuum dying out through assimilation to neighbors (linguistic death). The death of Gbin is just one stage in the disappearing of the South Mande linguistic continuum. Its uniqueness is that it happened on the historical record, and is relatively documented for the time.

A major factor of Gbin's loss of language and cultural identity was the Akan expansion (note though that it was primarily Senoufo, not Akan, who assimilated Gbin). Assimilative tendencies related to this expansion are in progress to this day. The language of Beng, geographically isolated after Gbin's death from all other South Mande languages, is now spoken on a much smaller territory than a hundred years ago. In particular, it is no longer spoken in the village where Delafosse's Beng data come from (Kamélinsou), and no longer spoken where Tauxier collected his first Beng data (Pattakoro)². Five out of twenty villages of the central Beng area abandoned active usage of Beng language by 1980-es and prefer to speak Baoule. Gradual death that happened to Gbin is threatening Beng in foreseeable future.

Delafosse's Notes as a Historical Linguistic Source

Delafosse's materials on Gbin demonstrate how valuable even the most basic language documentation is. Delafosse was the first and the last linguist who had an opportunity to collect reliable data from Gbin. Since this project was not Delafosse's main focus, his Gbin dataset is rather scarce. It consists mostly of a wordlist and few sentences; the number of words in his data is just about 100. The data is of course too fragmentary for many purposes. For example, syntactic information is virtually absent, and all nouns and pronouns in the data are singular. Despite all this, comparing Gbin with living languages allows us to observe many important properties of the language in Delafosse's scarce notes. Let me now illustrate just those pertaining to historical phonetics; I assume correspondence sets and phonetic reconstruction from [Vyd09, Vyd07], adding Gbin data. As should be expected based on Gbin's geographic position, it shows a number of features shared by some or other languages of the eastern area of South Mande: Beng, Mwan, Wan, Gban, and Yaoure.

Like in Beng, Mano, Mwan, and Wan, Gbin shows spirantization of stops before labialized vowels (additional restrictions apply, varying across languages; the process seems to be fully regular only in Mano:

*k>w: 'hand': Gbin *wo*, Beng *wɔ̄*, Wan *ɔ̄* (< *wɔ̄ < *kɔ̄), Mwan *kóó*, Dan-Gwetaa *kɔ̄*.

*d>z: 'ox': Gbin *zo*, Beng *zɔ̄*, Wan *dī*, Mwan *drī*, Dan-Gwetaa *dū*.

*t>z: 'chest': Gbin *zu*, Beng *zū*, Wan *tj*, Dan-Gwetaa *tòj*.

Like in Beng and Mwan, Proto-South-Mande *c>d, cf. 'kill': Gbin *dè* [dɛ], Beng *dē*, Wan *té*, Mwan *dē*, Dan-Gwetaa *zā*.

It is likely that in Gbin, like in Beng, Gouro, Mwan, and Yaoure, the velar stop *k* palatalized before front vowels, but the result was a fricative, not a palatal stop as in other languages, cf.: 'hair' Gbin (*üi-*)*sia*, Beng *céj*, Mwan *cíē*, Gouro *cēē*, Dan-Gwetaa *kɔ̄*.

Although Beng is geographically the closest to Gbin among South Mande languages, historical phonetics does not support the hypothesis of their closer genetic relationship.

² Delafosse lists numerals 1 through 10 in the dialect of Kamélinsou. Identifying it with a modern village is problematic.

The only phonetic change shared by just Gbin and Beng is *w>ŋ before a nasalized vowel, attested only in the numeral ‘three’:

*w>ŋ: ‘three’: Gbin *ñga*, *ña* [ŋa] (Delafosse), *n’ga* [ŋa], *n’da* [na] (Tauxier), Beng *ŋāñ*, Wan *ǵ* (< *wǵ < *yǵ), Mwan *yāgā*, Dan-Gwetaa *yäägā*.

The alternate transcription *n’da* in Tauxier’s notes may indicate a dialectal reflex [n] of the original *w, but more probably it is simply erroneous: remember that Tauxier used a single informant whose fluency in the language was next to none. Interestingly, the Beng dialect of Kamélinou, as reported by Delafosse, preserved the original consonant [w] in the numeral ‘three’ *ya*; otherwise that dialect is closer to modern Beng than Gbin is.

But even the last process *w>ŋ can not possibly present a serious argument for especially close relation of Beng and Gbin because this change is highly phonologically natural. Indeed, in South Mande in general the sounds [w] and [ŋ] are allophones whose distribution depends on the nasalization of the following vowel, and the phonetic change *w>ŋ* in a nasal context fits this phonotactic rule. And the characteristic phonetic features of Beng were not relevant for Gbin at all. For example, Gbin lacks the Beng palatalization *l>y* before front vowels, cf. ‘mouth’: Gbin *li*, Beng *yé*, Mwan *lì*, Gouro *lēé*, Dan-Gwetaa *dī*.

We can now recall that Beng is estimated to have separated from the rest of South Mande practically immediately after it diverged [Vyd09]. As my preliminary analysis shows, Gbin shares more features with Beng than with any other South Mande, but the two languages have no substantial exclusive common traits (at least in the realm of historical phonetics). This suggests that Gbin, like Beng, forms a separate branch of South Mande, and any isoglosses it shares with other South Mande languages must be explained through ‘horizontal’ language contacts rather than through innovations in a common ancestor language.

References

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