

Theoretical linguistics and the public good

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Goals

- Show how theoretical linguistics can have a positive impact on minority speaker communities through careful discussion of a few case studies.
- Discuss what made these cases successful, and how theoretical linguists can continue to work with minority languages in a positive way, beneficial for all those involved.

Case studies

1. Collaboration between American researchers and speakers of minority languages underrepresented in the literature:
 - a. Nobiin: An endangered Nilo-Saharan language previously spoken in Sudan and Egypt
 - b. Guébie: An endangered Kru language spoken in Côte d'Ivoire
2. Formal literature on African American English
3. Ongoing work on Nouchi, an emerging contact language of Côte d'Ivoire

Nobiin

- Nobiin, also called Mahas-Fadichcha, is a Nile-Nubian language (North Eastern Sudanic, Nilo-Saharan) (Bechhaus-Gerst 2011).
- Nobiin is spoken along the Nile in northern Sudan and southern Egypt and by thousands of refugees in Europe and the US.
 - In the 1960s, Nubians were forcibly displaced from their homeland for construction of the Aswan High Dam.
- Due to the displacement of speakers, maintaining the language in recent decades has been difficult.

Nobiin language maintenance

- There are ongoing efforts for language maintenance, that take various forms:
 - The Nubian Language Society, run by Nubantood Khalil in the DC area, gives Nubian refugees in the area an opportunity to gather together, practice speaking their native or heritage languages, and hold cultural events.
 - Lobbyists like Tanutamon Gerais work in DC to fight for Nubian human rights, as there have been many human rights violations against Nobiin speakers and other Nubian groups since Arab colonization of Sudan.
 - Ex: Nubians punished for speaking their native languages in schools or in public.

Theoretical work on Nobiin

- There has historically been very little theoretical linguistic work on the Nobiin language.
 - A descriptive grammar (Werner 1987)
 - A historical investigation of Old Nubian to Nobiin (Bechhaus-Gerst 2011)
 - A tone sketch and analysis (Dingemanse 2005)
 - Various descriptive papers by a native speaker (Khalil 2015, forthcoming)
- In Spring 2018, the Georgetown Linguistics department held a theoretically oriented Field Methods course on the Nobiin language, working with native speakers Nubantood Khalil and Tanutamón Gerais.

Field methods course with Nobiin speakers

As a class, we spent the semester recording Nobiin speech.

- Types of data:
 - Lexical items
 - Elicited words, phrases, sentences
 - Texts of various genres: proverbs, histories, personal narratives, poems
- Overarching questions:
 - What are the phonological, morphological, and syntactic properties of the Nobiin language?
 - What data collection techniques can help us to learn more about Nobiin grammar?
 - What are best practices for data collection, data management, and working with speaker communities?



Results of collaborative work with Nobiin

- Presentations at major conferences:
 - PhD student Bertille Baron and native speaker Nubantood Khalil have been working together to create an app for speakers and learners, which they talked about yesterday here at GURT!
 - PhD student Maya Barzilai and Nubantood Khalil will be presenting at this year's Annual Conference on African Linguistics.
 - PhD student Madeleine Oakley will present about the acoustic cues to tone in Nobiin and other African languages at this year's Annual Conference on African Linguistics
- Archived, available data:
 - All of the text and wordlist recordings made during the field methods course, as well as a written description of the background on and grammar of the language, are publically available online in the ALMA archive.

Results of collaborative work with Nobiin

- Speakers have described the conference presentations and archive collection as “amazing and historical work”, which they can cite as evidence that Nobiin is a distinct, legitimate, and important language.
- Researchers’ interest in Nobiin lends clout to lobbyists even when lobbying for causes outside of language rights.
- Speakers were encouraged that members of an outside community cared about their language. They have used this enthusiasm in the local speaker community to motivate holding indigenous language literacy workshops, one of which was held on the Georgetown campus in Summer 2018.

Guébie

- Guébie is an endangered Kru (Niger-Congo) language spoken in Southwest Côte d'Ivoire.
- Kru languages in general are very understudied, and underrepresented in the theoretical literature.
- There are about 7,000 speakers, all but one of whom also speak French and other Kru languages.
- French is spoken more with every generation, in more domains, and Guébie is spoken less.
- Until 2013, there was no documentation or description of the language.

Guébie language documentation project

- In Fall 2013, I began working with a native speaker (who was living in the US at the time) to document and describe the language.
- In Summer 2014, I made my first trip to Gnagbdougnoa, Côte d'Ivoire, the largest Guébie-speaking village, where I established connections with the community and began working with the larger Guébie speaker community to document and describe the language.
- I have since spent four summers in the community, and in Summer 2018 was able to bring a team of students along, with the support of an NSF-DEL grant.





How theoretical linguistic work has benefited the Guébie community

- Phonological investigations can influence orthography development
 - Prior to our work with the community, there was no writing system for the Guébie language.
 - An understanding of which segments are contrastive in the language can help to develop an efficient writing system.
- Valorization and legitimization of the language
 - The Guébie are a small people group within Côte d'Ivoire, and they have been discriminated against by the government in the past.
 - Having outsiders travel to Côte d'Ivoire explicitly to study the Guébie language has served as a point of pride and 'valorization' (Armand Agodio, p.c.) for speakers.
- Positive language attitudes
 - Speakers attitudes about the Guébie language and why it should be spoken have shifted positively since our work with the community began four years ago (data forthcoming).

Interim Summary: Positive outcomes of collaborative theoretical work on underrepresented languages

Collaboration between linguists and speakers of minority languages can have benefits for both theoretical linguistics and speaker communities.

- For linguists
 - We gain insights about possible linguistic patterns in human language, which can inform our theories.
- For speaker communities
 - Archives and publications increase legitimization of the community, influencing language- and culture-related policy decisions
 - Theoretical findings can influence orthography and other language resource development
 - Speakers attitudes about their native languages change positively

African American English

- There is a long history of work from a number of linguistic subfields on African American English.
- Here we focus on the positive impact that theoretical linguistic work had on the aftermath of the 1996 Oakland School Board decision to recognize *Ebonics* as a distinct language and to incorporate it into their curriculum.

The Oakland School Board decision

- In 1996, the Oakland School Board recognized Ebonics as the primary language of African American children and incorporated it into their curriculum.
- “A solid understanding of the vernacular features schoolchildren use—and the fact that they represent rule-governed regularities, not random mistakes or ‘deviations’ from the standard or mainstream variety—is essential for any teacher attempting to build on the language skills students bring from their homes and communities” (Rickford et al. 2004)

The negative viewpoint of the media

- The Oakland decision was viewed negatively, especially by large, prestigious news outlets:
- “...the mainstream view was that Ebonics itself was a street slang, and that Oakland teachers were going to teach in it, or allow students to talk or write in it instead of in English. [...] attempts to get alternative viewpoints aired were often very difficult, especially in the most prestigious media” (Rickford 1999:270)

The linguistic community's response

- In 1997, Theoretical and Sociolinguists came together to issue a statement, through the Linguistics Society of America (originally drafted by John Rickford), in support of AAVE (the appropriate abbreviation at the time) as a distinct language:
- [Full statement here.](#)

The direct impact of theoretical linguistics

- Formal, systematic distinctions between ‘standard’ and African American English served to prove that AAE is a distinct language that should be treated as such in schools
- “Syntacticians, semanticists, sociolinguists, and linguists of other stripes and persuasions rose to speak in support of proposals, and a four point resolution was unanimously approved. Among other things, it affirmed the ‘systematic and rule governed and systematic nature of Ebonics’ and pronounced the Oakland school board’s decision to take it into account in teaching Standard English ‘linguistically and pedagogically sound’. This resolution, in turn, was used by Oakland to defend itself against its many critics, and was widely reported on in the media” (Rickford 1999:269).

Recent formal work on African American English

- Michael J. Terry's work, including his talk here at GURT
- Other talks at GURT this weekend (Fisher, Moody, others)
- Lisa Green's (2002) "African American English: A linguistic introduction"

"Although linguists have done more work on AAE than any other variety of American English, at least since the 1960s, much of this focuses on the quantitative analysis of *sociolinguistic* variation [...], the *historical* development of AAE [...], and its *educational* implications [...]. All of this is valuable, but without a detailed understanding of the structure and patternedness of this variety in the sense that has been fundamental to modern linguistics since de Saussure and Sapir, our efforts to pursue these larger questions are limited" (from John Rickford's foreword to Green (2002))

Ongoing work on Nouchi, an emerging contact language in Côte d'Ivoire

- Nouchi is a contact language spoken in Côte d'Ivoire since the late 1970's (Ayewa 2005).
- Nouchi has been treated in the literature as a slang vocabulary or an urban youth dialect of French.
- However, it is a systematic language, distinct from its source languages (Sande 2015).

Background on Nouchi

- Nouchi began as the lingua franca of uneducated, unemployed youth, though quickly gained status as the language of Ivoirian identity (Kouadio 2005; Kube 2004; Newell 2009).
- Due to its ethnic neutrality and daily use, Nouchi has spread rapidly (Kouadio 2005).
 - It is the language most frequently used in the Ivoirian Zouglou style of music, and it has been promoted online through dictionaries, satirical news sites, and chat rooms.
- Though Nouchi began as an urban youth language (Kiessling and Mous 2004), it is now the preferred language of 10-30 year olds in Abidjan, and is commonly spoken by Ivoirians of all ages (Ayewa 2005).
 - This statistic is particularly significant because 66 percent of Abidjan's population is under 25 years old (Kouadio 2005).
 - Though most children in Abidjan grow up speaking more than one language in the home, Kube-Barth (2009) and Kouadio (2005) call Nouchi the native language of the current generation of urban Ivoirians.

Background on Nouchi

- The Nouchi lexicon and grammar have been influenced both by Indo-European languages and by Niger-Congo languages.
 - Its Indo-European source languages include primarily French, with a handful of lexical items from each of English, Spanish, and German.
 - The Niger-Congo languages most commonly spoken in Abidjan and the surrounding areas come from the Kwa, Kru, Gur, and Mande branches. Dioula, Bété, and Baoulé, have each contributed a large number of lexical items to Nouchi. Dioula has also contributed morphological attributes to Nouchi.
- Nouchi is not mutually intelligible with French, nor with other Ivoirian languages, though the political and academic sphere in Côte d'Ivoire fail to recognize it as a legitimate or even distinct language.

The theoretical perspective

- It's rare that we get a chance to study a new language, standardizing in real time. Over the past fifty years, that is exactly what has been happening with Nouchi.
- Nouchi is an example novel type of contact language, the urban youth language. Much prior work on contact languages examine pidgins and creoles in plantation-like settings. By studying Nouchi and other urban youth languages we can determine whether they share similar linguistic properties to contact languages that came about in other contexts.
- Contact languages have been said to have relatively “simple” linguistic systems, due to first being spoken by adults in a second language context, and only later learned by children as an L1.
 - Nouchi seems to have a number of grammatical features such as grammatical tone which are not considered ‘simple’ in the contact language literature (McWhorter 2001).

(15) Lexical tone in Nouchi

	Source	<i>Borrowed Form</i>	[Nouchi]	‘Meaning’
a.	French	<i>les animeaux</i>	[zánīmó]	‘animals’
b.	Spanish	<i>madre</i>	[mādré]	‘mother/woman’
c.	English	<i>enjoy</i>	[ā3ājè]	‘to like/to be happy’
d.	Bété	<i>bàṇō</i>	[bàṇō]	‘handsome man’
e.	Baoulé	<i>bló</i>	[bló]	‘to show off’
f.	Dioula	<i>mògò</i>	[mògō]	‘man/friend/person’
g.	Dioula	<i>bábà</i>	[bābá]	‘father’
h.	Nouchi	--	[dábā]	‘to hit’
i.	Nouchi	--	[dābā]	‘to eat’
j.	Nouchi	--	[dābālí]	‘food’
k.	Nouchi	--	[gō]	‘girl’
l.	Nouchi	--	[gbò]	‘to eat’
m.	Nouchi	--	[brí]	‘to bully’

(16) Grammatical tone in Nouchi

[Present Tense]	'Meaning'	[Imperfective]	'Meaning'
a. [jé dābā]	'I eat (pres)'	b. [jé dàbà(sē)]	'I used to eat'
c. [jé dábā]	'I hit (pres)'	d. [jé dàbà(sē)]	'I used to hit'
e. [jé māga]	'I steal (pres)'	f. [jé màgà(sē)]	'I used to steal'
g. [jé gbò]	'I eat (pres)'	h. [jé gbò(sē)]	'I used to eat'
i. [jé lā brí]	'I bully s.o. (pres)'	j. [jé lā brì(sē)]	'I used to bully s.o.'

Publishing theoretical work on Nouchi

- It is difficult to publish formal analyses of tone and other aspects of the Nouchi language.
 - Journal editors rightly send papers on Nouchi to at least one Ivoirian reviewer.
 - However, the political and academic spheres in Côte d'Ivoire are against calling Nouchi a distinct language. Academic elites in Côte d'Ivoire view Nouchi as “bad French” or “slang”, and do not want formal work on Nouchi to be published, for fear that it will legitimize the language.
 - My own papers on Nouchi, as well as those by Ivoirians working on the language, have been repeatedly rejected from journals, or stuck in permanent revision loops.
 - I see this situation as similar to the opinion from the media after the Oakland School Board decision on African American English: the elite do not want to legitimize the language of a minority population.

Potential benefits of theoretical work on Nouchi for the speaker community

- There is only one theoretical paper published on Nouchi, that I know of:
 - My paper “Nouchi as a distinct language: The morphological evidence”, presented at the GURT+ACAL meeting at Georgetown in 2013, and published in the proceedings in 2015.
- Since then, Jean-Claude Dodo, a speaker of Nouchi who grew up in Abidjan, has written a doctoral dissertation about Nouchi.
 - He writes that he was able to convince his committee to allow him to write about Nouchi in part because of the Sande (2015) paper in the GURT+ACAL volume.
 - His dissertation focuses on the sociolinguistic status of Nouchi, but contains chapters on theoretically informed descriptions of the phonology of the language, as compared to its contact languages.
 - This is a positive step forward for the Nouchi-speaking community in visibility of the language in the academic world, both inside and outside of Côte d'Ivoire.

Other Examples

- Reclamation of native languages
 - [Wôpanâak](#) (Algonquian, Massachusetts)
 - [Myaamia](#) (Algonquian, Ohio)
- Archived resources useful in language maintenance and revitalization
 - Ex: [The Native American collections at UC Berkeley](#), in particular the recent successful revitalization of Chochenyo
- [Maya Health Alliance](#)
 - Community-driven healthcare and advocacy for speakers of Mayan languages in Guatemala
 - (Henderson et al.)
- Theoretical linguistics in the legal arena
 - Analysis of Rachel Jeantel testimony (Rickford & King, 2016)
 - Similar work done on Aboriginal English in courtrooms (Diana Eades)
 - Raising awareness of housing discrimination (John Baugh and others)

How to continue the positive relationship between theoretical linguistics and speaker populations

- There are certainly wrong ways for theoretical linguistics to interact with minority language communities.
- However, as we have seen, there are also a number of positives that can come from theoretical linguistic work on minority languages:
 - Engagement of underrepresented populations (native speakers of minority languages) in theoretical discussions
 - Legitimization and valorization of minority languages
 - Visibility of minority languages at a global level
 - Support for policy decisions that include minority languages
 - Theoretical insights that can only be gained from studying a wide range of typologically and historically distinct languages

Features of the successful cases

- Collaboration between linguists and native speakers
- The speaker community has a voice in the literature
- Engagement with the literature across linguistic subfields
- Publication of descriptive and theoretical results so as to have the highest possible impact
- Accessibility of linguistic findings to non-linguists

We recommend that the above steps be taken in future theoretical work on minority communities, to ensure continued benefit for the public good.

Suggestions for future work

- There is a large literature in the language documentation and conservation literature on ethical concerns of working with minority languages and in minority language communities.
 - Rice (2006), Holton (2009), Hinton (2010), Leonard and Haynes (2010), Crippen and Robinson (2013), Van Driem (2016)
- We recommend that the theoretical linguistics community engage with this literature and discuss how, from a formal perspective, to continue working with minority language communities in the most ethical way.
 - Good examples of overt discussion of these issues in the theoretical literature include Labov (1982) and Rickford (1997).
- As we have seen, when done right, theoretical linguistic work on minority and underrepresented languages can have numerous positive outcomes!

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