The loss of agglutinative morphology in Sãotomense Umbundu: data from Portuguese-Umbundu bilinguals

A major event in the demographic history of the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, located in the Gulf of Guinea (West Africa), was the recruitment of contracted labor from Angola, Mozambique and Cape Verde, which were all Portuguese colonies at the time. Large-scale migration lasted nearly one hundred years, from the 1870s until the early 1960s. Its population, which had reached approximately 12,000 in the 1850s, increased fivefold to 64,221 inhabitants within the fifty years or so (1906); most was due to the influx of laborers from those colonies recruited to work on cocoa and coffee plantations.

In a small country which received so many indentured workers in less than a century, one might ask what were the linguistic effects of these demographic changes? This paper will address just one linguistic consequence of large-scale migration in São Tomé and Príncipe, namely, the use of the Umbundu language by the Tongas or the descendants of the indentured laborers who were not repatriated.

Except for Rouge (1992) and Lorenzino (1994, 1998) little is known about the Tongas and their language, Umbundu. One linguistic feature is that the noun class system typical of the Bantu languages is drastically reduced, and Portuguese words are readily incorporated into this class system. Example (1) below may be explained in terms of language attrition (i.e. linguistic reduction & simplification), a process which is active even among the older generation of Umbundu speakers. Thus in *okima/akima* the class prefix *ki-* was lexicalized into the nominal stem, while the number prefixes *o/a* from Umbundu class I (human) nouns, as in *okai/akai* 'woman/women', apply to all nouns regardless of class origin.

(1) UMBUNDU: *ki-ma/e-ma* 'thing/s'
TONGA UMBUNDU: *okima/akima* idem

This rule is still productive for Portuguese words as shown in (2); here *ofolha* (Ptg. *folha* 'leaf') and *ogrão* (Ptg. *grão* 'seed') indicate the borrowing of Portuguese lexemes into Umbundu morphology. However, language convergence cannot be ruled out in view of the fact that o is also the masculine definite article in Portuguese, e.g. *o homem* 'the man'.

(2) TONGA UMBUNDU: *ofolha*, *ogrão*

The following social and linguistic factors will be considered in evaluating the loss of agglutinative morphology in Tonga Umbundu:

- the type of language situation which best explains the retention of Umbundu;
- the typological distance and language contact between Tonga Umbundu, on one side, and the Afro-Portuguese Creoles and Portuguese, on the other.

Bibliography

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