Sociolinguistic Survey Report of Abortive Suri

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1 Introduction

The Surma group of languages are classified within the East Sudanic, Eastern branch of the Nilo-Saharan phylum of languages. Included within this group are the following languages: Bale, Kwegu-Mugugi, Majang, Me'en (Bodi-Tishena), Murle (including Didinga), Suri (including Mursi), and Zilmamu-Olam (Bender 1983:2). Concerning Suri, it is estimated that there are about 30,000 Suri speakers in the Ethio-Sudan border area (Abbink 1992), excluding the Mursi, who number an additional 5,000 (Grimes 1988:222).

The Suri-speaking people may be placed as follows (Bender et al. 1976). In the lower Omo Valley of southwestern Ethiopia, about 100 miles north of Lake Turkana, a group called Chai lives just west of the Omo River. They have also been referred to as "Tid", most likely a place name. To the west of the Chai live a group often referred to as "Tirma", most likely another place name. The Mursi live east of the Omo River; their territory being bounded on the west and south by the Omo River, to the east by the Mako River (a tributary of the Omo) and to the north roughly at the Maro River (another tributary of the Omo). Though it is not clear if the Tirma and Chai speak different dialects, it seems certain that all three groups (Tirma, Chai, Mursi) speak the same language and are very similar culturally (Turton et al. 1976:533–536).

It seems that the Tirma and Chai groups mentioned previously represent two subgroups of the same group. They refer to themselves as "Surma", and their language as "Suri". Both the Surma and Mursi languages have been placed on the Southeast Pastoral node of the Surmic languages (Unseth 1991:91–103).

It was our hypothesis going into this survey[*] that the Tirma, Chai, and Mursi speak dialects of the same language, that these dialects are more or less "mutually" intelligible, and that there are no significant grammatical differences that would hinder the use of one standardized written form. Moreover, given the close cultural affinity (pastoralists / agriculturalists where intermarriage is neither forbidden nor uncommon) and freedom of contact between the groups (at least insofar as it concerns the Chai-Mursi), our second hypothesis was that language attitudes would not be unfavorable to the use of one standardized written form for the development of a vernacular literature based upon one "reference dialect".

2 Survey Methodology

In order to determine whether the three speech forms in question (Tirma, Chai, Mursi) are dialects of the same language, a two-pronged approach was attempted; lexical and grammatical. As for the former, a three hundred plus item word list was to be elicited from each reference point and analyzed for lexical and phonological similarity.[1] It was assumed that if there were less than seventy percent lexical similarity at the upper confidence limit, inherent intelligibility between the speech forms would not be possible

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[*]An earlier version of the report of this survey appeared as "Report of Abortive Suri Survey", In Survey of Little-Known Languages of Ethiopia (S.L.L.E.). Linguistic Report 4, February 1993. Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies and the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

[1]Word lists from other researchers were also analyzed.

and that, in fact, we are dealing with different languages (Bergman 1990:9.5.1). If there were over seventy percent lexical similarity at the upper confidence limit, it would be assumed that we are dealing with dialects of the same language and would therefore need to measure dialect intelligibility. This was to be done through the use of a recorded text test (RTT) of the Casad type (Casad 1974).

As for the grammar, a short grammar questionnaire was to be elicited at each reference point in order to evaluate similarities in morphology and syntax. If differences were found that would hinder the use of one written form, the potential for CADA (Computer Assisted Dialect Adaptation) (Weber 1988) would be evaluated at a later date.

A sociolinguistic questionnaire (SLQ) was to be elicited at each reference point in order to evaluate language attitudes, language use, and other pertinent information that might bear on the feasibility of using one body of literature based upon one dialect of reference.

2.1 Collection of Data

Two survey trips into the Suri-Mursi area were planned. The first trip was to deal exclusively with the Tirma and Chai on the western side of the Omo River, while the second was to deal primarily with the Mursi, but nonetheless involve a return trip to the Surma side of the Omo River in order to administer the Mursi RTT. Throughout the survey we were assisted by a capable team of local residents (albeit non-Surma) with ties to the Surma community.

The first survey[2] was planned for May eleventh to fifteenth, and arrangements were made with "Helimission" to use one of their helicopters. Due to a misunderstanding, however, the helicopter was only available until the thirteenth; and on top of that, due to problems arising from contaminated fuel the helicopter did not arrive until too late in the afternoon of the eleventh for use that day. Having thus but one and a half days with the helicopter, we were only able to visit the Tirma.[3] Our camp was located at an abandoned airstrip near the Kibish River. During this trip, a recorded text was taken and validated, and the word list, SLQ, and grammar questionnaire were all completed. We were fortunate to have with us on this trip the Local Education Officer, Ato Tadema, and Dr. Ernst-August Gutt, a linguist at Addis Ababa University. Thanks to these gentlemen we were able to accomplish a great deal in this short time.

Although we were not able to visit the Chai, we were helped a great deal by Jon Abbink, an anthropologist who has done extensive research in the area. He provided us with an unpublished manuscript of a seven hundred plus item word list taken mainly from Makara, which he reports is one of the largest Chai villages. Since we were not able to take a recorded text from Chai in order to complete our dialect intelligibility testing, we

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[2]Actually, the first survey sortie took place May 6th to May 9th, during which time a trip was made north of the Tirma-Chai to a small Surma village (seven settlements made up of about 750 people) at Tulgit.

There were enough questions raised as to the sociolinguistic profile of this northerly migrating group of Surma people that we thought them worth investigating. Due to the lack of language personnel, however, it was not possible to construct a valid RTT for use elsewhere. Otherwise the trip was successful, in that we took the word list, SLQ, and grammar questionnaire.

[3]Certain logistical problems and time constraints prevented us from completing the survey by foot.

decided to place on hold our trip to the Mursi area. This was felt even more advisable given the fact that we already had good word list data (Turton et al. 1976) as well as good sociolinguistic and grammatical data (Turton 1981; Turton et al. 1976). It thus seemed best to delay our trip across the Omo to the Mursi side until we could properly conduct intelligibility testing, which would include at least tapes from both the Tirma and the Chai.

2.2 Data Analysis

2.2.1 Word lists

Word lists were analyzed using the computer program Wordsurv (Wimbish 1989). For lexicostatistics, items were paired as "apparent cognates" based upon the inspection method. For phonostatistics, phonetic degrees of difference (PDD) were calculated as follows.

For consonants, one PDD was counted for differences in voicing and/or nasalization, stop/ fricative/continuant, articulator, point of articulation, air mechanism, and +/- diacritic(s). These six points of reference resulted in a maximum of six PDD for "consonant => 0 consonant" if the consonant "dropping out" was voiced, five otherwise. Consonant length was analyzed as a suprasegmental feature with one PDD.

The PDD for vowels were determined by how many "steps" it took to get from one to another on the IPA vowel chart. One PDD was given for a difference in roundedness, one PDD for voicing and/or nasalization, and one PDD for any diacritic(s). Although these combinations could result in a possible eight PDD, in order to be consistent with the consonant model there were only six PDD counted for voiced vowels "dropping out", and five PDD for voiceless vowels not occurring from one speech form to another. As with the consonants, length was analyzed as a suprasegmental feature with one PDD.[4]

[4]Stress and tonality, while most of the time written down on the elicitation form (and transferred into WORDSURV), could not be reliably ascertained in every instance, nor were all of the others' word lists marked for these features; differences in tone and stress, therefore, were given zero PDD.

The "apparent cognate" percentages may be presented as follows (table 1):

Table 1

Tulgit					
78 * 3	Tirma				* = +/-
81 * 5	80 * 5	Tirma(F)			(Bender 1971:165–288)[5]
81 * 4	79 * 4	85 * 4	Surma[6]		
83 * 3	80 * 3	83 * 4	85 * 3	Chai (Abbink n.d.)[7]	
80 * 5	77 * 5	78 * 4	77 * 5	84 * 4	Mursi (Bender 1971)[8]

These "apparent cognate" percentages are based upon the following (table 2) shared word counts:[9]

Table 2

Tulgit					
212	Tirma				
68	68	Tirma(F)			
143	142	77	Surma		
171	167	68	134	Chai	
69	67	73	71	69	Mursi

[5]Harold Fleming's word list was weighted (in WORDSURV calculations) as of a higher quality than the Tulgit, Tirma, and Surma word lists taken by the more naïve.

[6]This word list was taken somewhere on the Kibish River in 1989 by Klaus Wedekind, a linguist at Addis Ababa University. The exact location where this word list was taken is unknown, but it is believed to be from the Tirma dialect. Although the informant is reported to have lived and grown up in the dialect area, his father is not Surma (is from the Dizi people) and he has travelled more than usual. Either one of those factors would have disqualified the person as one of our informants.

[7]Based on Abbink's Chai Dictionary, this word list was weighted (in WORDSURV calculations) as of a higher quality than the Tulgit, Tirma, and Surma word lists taken by the more naïve.

[8]This word list was weighted (in WORDSURV calculations) as of a higher quality than the Tulgit, Tirma, and Surma word lists taken by the more naïve.

[9]See appendix A for the entire list of lexical items elicited with each word list. ^ * = significant difference (at the .10 level) from the average.

The results of the phonostatistical analysis are presented in the following averages (Bender et al. 1976). Number of phoneme correspondences per lexical item:

Table 3

Tulgit				mean = 5.4	
5.4	Tirma			std = .29	
5.0	5.4	Tirma(F)			
5.9	6.0*	5.5	Surma		
5.2	5.5	5.1	5.8	Chai	
5.1	5.5	5.4	5.6	5.1	Mursi

Number of phoneme correspondences per lexical item that are different:

Table 4

Tulgit				mean = 2.6	
2.3	Tirma			std = .34	
2.1	2.8	Tirma(F)			
3.1	3.1	2.6	Surma		
2.1	2.4	2.3	2.8	Chai	
2.3	3.0	2.6	2.9	2.2	Mursi

Number of PDDs per phoneme noncorrespondence:

Table 5

Tulgit				mean = 2.1	
2.0	Tirma			std = .36	
2.6	2.4	Tirma(F)			
2.2	2.2	2.5	Surma		
1.9	1.8	2.6	1.9	Chai	
1.7	1.9	2.6	2.0	1.4*	Mursi

Number of PDDs per lexical item:

Table 6

Tulgit				mu = 7.1	
6.3	Tirma			sigma = 1.1	
5.9	7.4	Tirma(F)			
8.9*	8.7	7.0	Surma		
6.1	6.4	6.3	8.2	Chai	
6.1	8.1	7.4	7.9	5.2*	Mursi

* = significantly different @ .10 level

2.2.2 Sociolinguistic questionnaire and grammar questionnaire

Due to the lack of language assistants and the time constraints alluded to previously, very few sociolinguistic and grammatical data were gathered (to be presented in appendices to separate reports); too little, in fact, to enable us draw any conclusions from it here.

The SLQ information that was gathered may just be treated as reports of group interviews. As for the grammar data, there were not enough of them to adequately document any differences that turned up; possibly they were just ideolectical differences and/or poor elicitation technique. The most we could do was to identify those things which seemed to be the same between the Surma and Mursi.

3 Discussion

As can be seen from the above, the speech forms represented in the matrices differ very little from each other (actually no statistical difference at the .10 level of confidence). Lexically, they cluster around eighty-one percent +/- four percent. Phonostatistically, although the ratio of the number of different phoneme correspondences per lexical item may seem high (forty-eight percent), it is only a function of the more or less phonetic transcription used by the investigators. When one looks at the number of PDDs per phoneme noncorrespondence as well as the number of PDDs per lexical item, the various speech forms look more homogenous.

I think the fact that Wedekind's Surma informant was not “pure” Surma shows up in the high number of phoneme correspondences per lexical item and corresponding higher number of PDDs per lexical item. This would indicate to me that even though he was an integral part of the Surma community, and thus “knew all their words”, his outside contacts obviously “corrupted” his speech. Another interesting “anomaly” is that of Abbink and Turton's data. When their Chai and Mursi data are compared, their low numbers of PDDs per phoneme *non*-correspondence and per lexical item is, I believe, telling. Both Abbink and (especially) Turton have spent a great deal of time in their respective communities, and thus, having a better understanding of the sound system, have probably come to ignore minor phonetic variation in their transcriptions. That would lead to a more phonemic transcription than one from the more naïve, and therefore account for the low numbers.

Given the above lexico/phonostatistical analysis, I feel that our first hypothesis, that these speech forms are dialects of the same language, thus seems to be born out. How this bears on intelligibility will have to await further testing, but these numbers would lead one to suspect an inherent intelligibility among the various speech forms. This would certainly be consistent with the very little sociolinguistic information that we were able to gather, as well as that of Turton. But the question here seems to be not *if* intelligibility exists, but *for what reason*. Given the intermingling that to a greater or lesser extent exists among the Tirma, Chai, and Mursi, any future intelligibility testing will have to be on guard for an overlay of bilingualism. But for the moment, whether the intelligibility that likely does exist is *learned* or *inherent* due to the closeness of their speech forms, remains to be seen. And finally, our hypothesis as to the noninterference of language attitudes was not examined due to a lack of language personnel necessary for gathering this type of data. But again, given the sparse sociolinguistic information that is available—that presented here as well as from informal contacts with those working in the area—negative language attitudes would not seem to pose any problem, given adequate "adjustments" lexically (and grammatically?) where necessary.

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