

**THE CONTRIBUTION OF LOANWORDS TO THE STUDY
OF CULTURAL HISTORY:
AN ILLUSTRATION WITH THE DAGAABA
OF NORTHWESTERN GHANA**

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ABSTRACT

In attempts to understand the cultural evolution of any groups of people, the indigenous languages spoken by these groups constitute important sources of information in this regard. This is even more true in societies that do not seem to have a long history of writing. This paper illustrates how a study of loanwords in the Dagaare language of northwestern Ghana can be used to gain insights into the cultural history of this group of people known as the Dagaaba. An analysis of a group of about 10 words borrowed into Dagaare from English, Akan, Hausa and Bambara indicates that aspects of Dagaare culture as we know them today must have been influenced over the years to various degrees by the societies that speak these languages.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most inevitable things that happens when languages come into contact with each other involves borrowing, especially of lexical items from one or the other. It can be argued plausibly that there is no language in the world that has been able to resist this phenomenon and therefore contains only indigenous words in its lexicon. The term 'loanword' has often been used to describe these foreign words in a language. Nurse (1982) defines a loanword as "a word taken from a source language into one or more other languages and thereafter used regularly in the later." However, as Knappert (1970) light-heartedly argues, it is not a satisfactory term, for as it stands it means that it has to be returned after use, but we know that obviously a word borrowed into a language cannot be returned after use by the speakers of that language. He suggests the German term 'Fremdwort' which means 'alien word' as a more appropriate way to describe this category of words in a language.

In this paper, an attempt will be made to investigate the nature and impact of a group of 'loan' or foreign words in the Dagaare language. We shall first attempt to demonstrate why we believe that these words are foreign to the language before we try to trace the sources, i.e. the 'mediators', or what we shall call the

transmitter languages. We will then end this essay with a cultural and historical appraisal of the significance of these foreign words in the Dagaare language.

Dagaare is a member of the Mabia group of the Gur branch of the Niger-Congo language family (Bendor-Samuel 1971; Bodomo 1994). It is spoken in present-day north-western Ghana and across the borders into Burkina Faso and parts of the Côte d'Ivoire.¹ Most of the loanwords in this language come from four major transmitter languages which have incidentally been the languages through which the Dagaaba have received items of trade, in particular, and Western civilisation, in general. These languages are Hausa and Djula (Bambara) from the North and Akan and English from the South. Our use of the term *transmitter language* highlights the fact that a lot of the foreign words we shall see are indeed also foreign to these languages and all that they have done is simply to transfer them into Dagaare.

In this paper, which is only meant to be an illustration of the general principles of the study, no comprehensive cataloguing and analysis of loanwords in the language is envisaged. Only a representative group is taken - three from each of the four languages, thereby giving us twelve words in all. These are *sinkāāfa* (rice), *lafie* (health, well-being), *pito* (guinea corn beer) (from Hausa); *mī* (rice), *gyil* (xylophone), *lonNo* (hour glass) (from Djula); *sakuri* (school), *sakiri* (cycle), *sikiri* (sugar) (from English); *dansie* (witness), *bɔrbɛ* (pineapple) and *bɔduwa* (towel) (from Akan).

1. CRITERIA FOR ESTABLISHING LOANWORDS

A major interest in this kind of analysis is to show what constitutes a loanword in a language. Knappert (*ibid*) sets out three criteria as follows:

...the shape of a word (its morphophonemic form), its meaning, and the extent of its distribution, i.e. the extent to which similar forms are found in neighbouring languages help us to determine whether a particular word is a loanword. Two of these criteria are linguistic, one is geographical...

In trying to consider the morphophonemic criteria for establishing a word as foreign, general statements about the phonological and morphological structure

¹ Most variants of the Dagaare language are mutually intelligible with other speech forms in the north-western corner of Ghana such as Waale and Birifor. In fact, some people regard Dagaare, Waale and Birifor as being the 'same language'. In this and other works the terms northern, central, southern and western Dagaare are used to describe the main dialects of the language. A more elaborate treatment of Dagaare dialectology is provided in Bodomo (1989).

of Dagaare words would be helpful.² Dagaare words, like most Gur languages and indeed other Ghanaian languages, end in open syllables. Even in dialects which end words in consonants, it is plausible to abstract an underlying final vowel. Besides a few cases, syllables in Dagaare have mostly a CV pattern. Again, grammatical meanings in a Dagaare word are expressed by suffixes rather than by prefixes. Further, Dagaare is obviously a tone language.

Now, let us see how these borrowed words reflect or do not reflect some of these structures outlined. Kraft and Kirk-Greene (1970) give the transcription of the Hausa words as follows: **shìnkááfáá** (rice), **láiáfiyàà** (health, well-being, safety) and **fitóó** (guinea corn beer). In Djula (Bambara), which is a Mande language, the words considered here are **malo** (rice), **gyil** (praise singer) (whose meaning has been changed in the course of borrowing to xylophone in Dagaare) and **dudu** (hour glass drum). These words appear in Dagaare as **míí** (Jirapa dialect)³ (**mùnè** (Nandom dialect) or **mui** (Wa dialect)), **gyíl** and **lónjò**. In Akan, the words are transcribed as **ɔdànsìní** (witness), **àbrøbø** (pineapple) and **bødubá** (towel). These respond to Dagaare morphophonemics and reappear as **dánsié**, **børbø** and **bødúwá**. In English, the words 'school', 'bicycle' and 'sugar' reappear respectively as **sákúúr(i)**, **sákír(i)** and **síkír(i)**.

A cursory look at these words shows that those in Dagaare on the one hand, and those in all the other languages on the other, show a lot of resemblances but also some differences. But Dagaare and these languages are distant. For instance, English and Hausa are Indo-European and Chadic languages respectively, which are very distant from Niger-Congo and Gur languages, respectively. The hypothesis of a protoform in one or the other is therefore remote and even not plausible. The only plausible thing to say is that one language has borrowed from the other. In the word for 'rice' in Hausa, for instance, the phoneme /ʃ/ does not exist in Dagaare. Again, syllables of the form /kaa/ often have their vowels nasalized e.g. **kää** (oil) and **sinkää** (groundnuts). Further, in Dagaare a phenomenon of downstep usually occurs where a series of high tones follow each other. All these morphophonemics are reflected in the loanword for 'rice'. We can see that while it is quite correct to say that "a loanword must retain a resemblance to its equivalent in the giver-language" it is also equally true to say that a receiver-language usually rearranges the morphophonemic structure of the original word to suit its own internal structure. This is definitely reflected in all

² An outline of the structure of the Dagaare language is presented in Bodomo (1995).

³ Unless otherwise stated all the Dagaare data in this paper come from the Jirapa area which has been termed by the Dagaare Language Committee the Central Dialect of the Dagaare language. This is the dialect in which church literature and educational material are published.

the loanwords of Dagaare. And that is why we could argue that the morphophonemic criterion runs into problems in the light of this linguistic fact because it is difficult to say that a word is foreign just by looking at its phonological and morphological structure without considering other features. We therefore suggest that a comparative analysis of the structure of these words as they appear in the transmitter- and receiver-languages is a more reliable way to handle the morphophonemic criterion. In the Akan word for witness (**ɔdànsìní**) the prefix **ɔ** is deleted when borrowed into Dagaare because, as we saw earlier on, Dagaare is not a prefix language and we could not say that **ɔdànsìní** is the protoform but that it is borrowed from a prefix exhibiting language like Akan. In the same vein 'school' and 'brøbø' have initial consonant clusters but Dagaare, like other Mabia languages, hardly exhibits consonant clusters. On this basis we could then say they do not conform to the phonological structure of Dagaare and must therefore have been borrowed. It is worthwhile to note that this point can be used not only to establish the fact that a word is foreign but also its possible language of origin. This will be discussed further later.

Other ways for establishing that a word is a loan are its meaning content and geographical distribution. We can illustrate this latter criterion, for instance, with the word 'pito'. This is a common name for guinea corn beer in virtually all Ghanaian languages, especially in Northern Ghana. This evidence is enough to show that it is a borrowed word since one would not find a similar indigenous word that runs through all these unrelated languages.

2. SOURCES OF LOANWORDS

Let us now attempt to advance arguments for asserting the sources of these borrowed words in Dagaare. We have already mentioned that a knowledge of the morphophonemic structure of a loanword can be an indication to establishing its source. It is this same point that Knappert (ibid) expresses as follows:

On purely linguistic grounds we can determine the direction of loaning, if we know the phonemic systems of the languages concerned (i.e. the transmitter- and receiver-languages).

In our examples of loanwords we realise that words like **shìnkááfáá** (rice) **ɔdànsìní** (witness) and **school** are more suited to the morphophonemics of Hausa, Akan and English respectively. It would therefore be more appropriate to say that Dagaare borrowed from these languages, and not vice versa. It should be pointed out here that we don't claim that these loanwords are ultimately indigenous to these four languages. It may well be that they are foreign to them too. That is why the term *transmitter language* is insisted upon here.

Another method of determining the source of loanwords according to Knappert (op. cit.) is historical. It is known that generally in Africa, foreign items with their accompanying foreign names were brought inland through the coast and along rivers like the Nile, the Congo, the Zambesi and the Niger. However, in West Africa, in particular, a lot of loanwords came inland and even right down the coast through the Sahara Desert through Arabic acting as the transmitter language.

From this we can conclude that manufactured items like **bicycle** and **sugar** and a concept like **school**, which were non-existent in Dagao (at least in the form in which they are known today), were brought in by English or other European languages from the coast. Equally true is the fact that words like **pineapple** (essentially a forest fruit) and **rice** neither of which is a traditional food item in Dagao (home of the Dagaaba), were respectively borrowed from a foreign language, presumably Akan, Hausa, and Djula through the trans-Saharan trade.

One other method which I think could be considered in trying to locate the source of a loanword (and which Knappert does not mention) is the dialectal distribution of the loanwords. I have deliberately chosen the Dagaare words for 'rice' to illustrate this phenomenon. Dagaare has two loanwords for rice; one - **mī** (**mune** or **mui**) is from Djula and the other - **sinkāāfa** - is through Hausa. One interesting fact is that not all dialects use these loanwords with the same degree of regularity. '**Mune**' is more popular with the Northern dialects while '**sinkāāfa**' is more popular with the Central and Southern dialects. Incidentally the Northern dialects are nearest to the Djula-speaking area in Burkina Faso while the Central and Southern dialects are nearest to the more serious Hausa-speaking areas in Ghana. The point made here is that each dialect borrows from the transmitter language nearest it, and this can be a clue to the sources of certain loanwords in a language.

3. THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF LOANWORDS

What then are the historical and cultural implications for the study of loanwords? By analysing the structure of loanwords and especially their source of borrowing, the linguist can help give an indication of the various types of ethnic groups and cultures a people have come into contact with in the course of their history. This could be either through wars, colonisation, conquest and subjugation or trade and any other peaceful type of co-existence. From the study of just these twelve loanwords we realise that, apart from their close relatives and neighbours, the next group of people the Dagaaba have probably come into contact with are Akan- Djula- Hausa- and English-speaking people (and, of course, French-speaking people in the case of the Burkina Faso Dagaaba). This is a pointer to the

material acquisitions and cultural influences which a people in general, and the Dagaaba in particular, have been exposed to in the past. A very vivid example is the case of the Dagaaba (and their immediate neighbours like the Sisaala) is the xylophone. One of the things that makes Dagaaba culture unique in Ghana is the presence of the xylophone. In fact, the only region in which the xylophone is a traditional musical item is the Upper-West Region and adjoining areas. A closer look at the geographical distribution of this musical instrument in West Africa shows that North-Western Ghana is one of the most easterly areas of distribution of the xylophone, which is essentially a Mande musical item. In fact the Mande word for a praise-singer is '**gyil**', who presumably used the xylophone to perform his duties. In borrowing it into Dagaare there could have been a meaning shift, for the Dagaaba now call the item itself used by the praise-singer the '**gyil**'.

An even more interesting significance in terms of cultural history in the study of loanwords is that we can assess the level of civilisation of a people before it came into contact with a transmitter language (Knappert). It means, for instance, that before contact with English- Akan- and Bambara-speaking people, items or concepts like **school**, **pineapple** or **rice** were not known to the Dagaaba. Of course, this point is not always tenable, as can be shown in the case of **pito** in Dagaare. This does not mean that the Dagaaba did not know of **pito** until they came into contact with Hausa-speaking people, since there is an indigenous word - **dāā** - for guinea corn beer which is used concurrently with **pito**. It may therefore seem that one method of testing this point is to look out for the existence of indigenous words even in the presence of borrowed words. When such words do not exist we may then conclude that the material items or the concepts were not known before contact with the transmitter language.

Another useful application of the concept of loanwords lies in the explanation of the migration history of a people. By studying the structure of loanwords and especially the languages they originate from we can gain insights into the sort of ethnic groups, cultures and their ecological environment which a people might have encountered in their migration history. This will surely complement the works of historians. Since the earlier migratory history of the Dagaaba is only very faint, the study of loanwords in this direction will prove to be both a challenging and an interesting area of research. However, as far as recent migrations are concerned, one can advance arguments to show that many of the Dagaaba have recently migrated to and from the forest regions down south by pointing to the presence of a lot of Akan lexical items for forest products and concepts in Dagaare.

Further, a study of loanwords in a language can provide insights into the cultural, economic and military superiority (or, at least, a military influence of some sort) of one group of people over another. In Ghana, for instance, most southern languages like Ga, Dangme and Ewe have Akan military terms like the '**asafø**'. This can be said to be due to some kind of military influence (probably

military conquest) by Akan-speaking people over the people who speak these languages. In the case of the Dagaaba, the influence of the Samori and Babatu wars of the late 19th century may have shown up in the presence of borrowed items referring to Mande warfare: this needs investigation. The word for warrior - *zabog* - seems to be a product of this phenomenon.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, from what we have discussed we realise that a lot of deductions can be made about the social, cultural, economic, and historical life of a people through the study of loanwords in their language. This is just one of the ways in which comparative linguistics can contribute to the reconstruction of the cultural history of the Dagaaba, in particular, and of any people, in general. We have used only a limited number of loanwords in the Dagaare language to illustrate the principles; but a more comprehensive tabulation and analysis of loanwords will provide more interesting and illuminating insights into Dagaaba history, culture and society.

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