

Chapter 8

Language endangerment in Southwestern Burkina: A tale of two Tiefos

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Most of the thirty or so small-population languages of southwestern Burkina Faso are still reasonably viable in spite of the spread of Jula as the dominant regional vernacular. An unusual case is Tiefio, which is really two distinct but closely related and geographically contiguous Gur languages. One, here dubbed Tiefio-N, was spoken in the villages of Noumoudara and Gnanfongo (Nyafogo). The other, Tiefio-D, was spoken in the nearby village cluster of Dramandougou. Several other ethnically Tiefio villages in the zone had already been completely Jula-ised by the mid-20th Century. Tiefio-N is moribund (a handful of ageing semi-speakers in Gnanfongo, none in Noumoudara), the villagers having gone over to Jula. By contrast, Tiefio-D is in a relatively comfortable bilingual relationship to Jula and is still spoken to some extent even by children, though everyone also speaks Jula. This paper clarifies the relationship between Tiefio-N and Tiefio-D and addresses the question why the two languages have had such different fates.

1 Tiefio

Tiefio (pronounced [čɛfɔ]) is an important ethnic group in southwestern Burkina Faso. There are some 20 villages that still consider themselves ethnically Tiefio. The core is constituted by the villages of Noumoudara, Gnanfongo, and Dramandougou,¹ the latter two being really clusters of several distinct physical settlements. This core is located directly on (in the case of Noumoudara) or to the east of the highway from Bobo Dioulasso to Banfora. There are other Tiefio villages scattered around, including one to the west of Bobo Dioulasso (on the road to Orodara) and others east and southeast of the core.²

Tiefio belongs to the large Gur language family, which dominates much of Burkina Faso (including the large-population Mooré language of the Mossi ethnicity) and spreads westward into parts of Ghana, Niger, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria. Manessy (1982), who

¹Alternative spellings are Numudara, Nyafogo, and Daramandougou or Daramandugu.

²The village of Tiefora, east of Banfora on the road to Sideradougou and Gaouwa, is not far from Dramandougou, but in spite of its name it is apparently not Tiefio ethnically.



worked out the genetic sub-groupings within Gur, examined unpublished Tiefó data from André Prost and concluded that Tiefó constituted its own subgroup, with no especially close relatives.

The published descriptive material on Tiefó primarily includes Kerstin Winkelmann's invaluable monograph (in German) on Tiefó-D Winkelmann 1998). It consists of a descriptive reference grammar (emphasising phonology and morphology) and a basic lexicon. Winkelmann was part of a German-staffed project on Gur languages and cultures that was active in the 1990's but has now disappeared due to retirements of senior personnel and career switches by Winkelmann and others. Her fieldwork was carried out in Dramandougou, but she also did brief survey work (core lexicon and a little morphology) on Tiefó-N.

Winkelmann commented that Tiefó-N, even during her fieldwork period (1990–94), was at a much more advanced state of decline than Tiefó-D. She was able to elicit a little data from two elderly men in Noumoudara and somewhat more from semi-speakers in Gnanfogo. The Tiefó-N lexical material was included, alongside Tiefó-D data, in her lexicon. She calculated cognate counts for the Swadesh 100-word list between Dramandougou and either Noumoudara or Gnanfogo in the 75–77 percentage range, with cognates partially disguised by sound changes and grammatical differences. She stated flatly that Tiefó-D was not understood in either of the Tiefó-N communities.³ On the other hand, there was good inter-comprehension between Noumoudara and Gnanfogo. A reasonable conclusion is that Tiefó-D and Tiefó-N are distinct languages using normal linguistic (as opposed to political) criteria.

Given Winkelmann's description of the dire language situation in Gnanfogo in the early 1990's, I was rather surprised to find some speakers in Tiefó-N in that village when I arrived in the Bobo Dioulasso area about a decade later in 2012. In retrospect, it may be that Winkelmann slightly underestimated the state of Tiefó-N in Gnanfogo during her brief stay there, in part because of a misunderstanding of nominal plural formation. She stated that Gnanfogo informants had difficulties producing such plurals, which a reader could understand as implying that the language was only imperfectly remembered by a few semi-speakers. It turns out, however, that Tiefó-N pluralises many nouns by lengthening the final vowel, i.e. singular ...Cv1 becomes ...Cv1v1. This corresponds to the productive Tiefó-D plural with -r followed by a copy of the stem-final vowel, i.e. ...Cv1 becomes ...Cv1-rv1. Evidently Gnanfogo Tiefó-N lost the *r and the remaining identical vowels coalesced into a long vowel, a phonetically subtle pluralisation process that could be missed during short-term fieldwork by a linguist who was not primed to look for it.

Given the urgency of the language situation and the lack of substantial documentation of Tiefó-N, I did some 5 months fieldwork with elderly Gnanfogo speakers between August 2013 and the following January. Subsequently, Jeffrey Heath collected flora-fauna terminology for Tiefó-N and local Jula in Gnanfogo.⁴ In order to illustrate some of the

³“Die in den beiden weiteren untersuchten Dörfern gesprochenen Cefó-Dialekte weichen ganz erheblich von dem von Dramandugu ab. Weder in Nyafogo noch in Numudara ist das Dramandugu-Cefó verstehbar” (Winkelmann 1998: 5).

⁴Aminata Ouattara, a Burkina linguistics student of ethnic Tiefó origin, was also continuing fieldwork on Tiefó-N as of early 2015.

true consequences of language contact, a greatly misunderstood phenomenon in West Africa, I show the examples of two varieties of one moribund language. I argue that our methodology is no longer data driven, and that because we have a certain set of ideals in place as to what happens when one language comes into contact with another, we are blind to the real circumstances. Instead of mourning so-called “language death” (Nettle & Romaine 2000; Price 1984), we should be celebrating the diversity of new mixed languages which are born when speakers come into contact with one another. Through an examination of different sociological, historical, and geographic paths, we see that one language has become in fact two. However, without an interdisciplinary methodology that starts from the ground up, our theoretical footing will be unsound and vice versa. In order to illustrate the differences between the presently existing Tiefo varieties, and because there has been such little attention paid to Tiefo-N, I present an overview and comparison of the major grammatical features of Tiefo-N and Tiefo-D. The main phonological features are illustrated in §2 and the morphology in §3. §3.4 discusses the differences in the pronominal (which in turn is related to the tense/aspect) systems of the two varieties, discussed in the following section, 3.5.

Then, §5 provides an exploration of the reasons thus far provided in the literature concerning the different fates of the Tiefo villages. While geographical and sociolinguistic reasons have been referenced in the past, the current discussion explores the historical causes of the divergent dialects.

2 Phonology

Tiefo-N and Tiefo-D have similar consonant inventories: stops plus palatal affricates /p b t d tʃ dʒ k g kp gb/, nasals /m n ɲ ŋm/, fricatives /f s ɣ ʕ/, glottal /ʔ/, and nonnasal sonorants /w l r j/. Note the distinction between the voiced pharyngeal /ʕ/ (cf. Arabic) and glottal /ʔ/.

Table 1: Tiefo consonantal inventory.

	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	p b	t d		k g		ʔ
Nasal	m ɲm	n	ɲ	ŋ		
Fricative	f	s	(ʃ)	ɣ	ʕ	
Affricate	kʈ gb	c j				
Approximant	w	l	y			
Trill/tap		r				

Absent from the consonantal inventory of both languages are several consonants reconstructed for Proto-Gur (Naden 1989): voiced implosives /b d ɗ/, voiced palatal stop /ɟ/, voiced affricate /dʒ/, and labiodental fricative /v/.

Tiefo-N and Tiefo-D likewise have similar vowel inventories, which are shared with other languages of the zone. There are seven vowel qualities, including high /i u/, low /a/, and two pairs of mid-height vowels, [+ATR] /e o/ and [-ATR] /ɛ ɔ/. The high and low vowels are ATR-neutral and may combine with either type of mid-height vowel. In Tiefo-D (Winkelmann 1998: 20, 23) but not Tiefo-N, phonemes /i u/ have optional [-ATR] phonetic variants in words with a following [-ATR] mid-height vowel. Proto-Gur is reconstructed with a ten-vowel system, including [±ATR] distinctions in high and low as well as mid-height vowels.

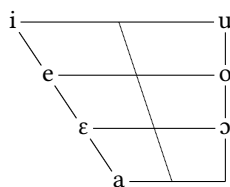


Figure 1: Tiefo vocalic inventory.

Tiefo-N and Tiefo-D also have the same three tone levels. High tones are marked by an acute accent [á], low tones by a grave accent [à]. Mid tones are written either without an accent (Winkelmann 1998) or more explicitly with a macron [ā].

In spite of the nearly identical phonemic inventories between the two languages, many actual pairs of Tiefo-N and Tiefo-D cognate words are disguised by phonological differences. Some examples are in Table 2, which pools data from Winkelmann (KW) and myself (AH). Correspondences that occur in more than one set even in this small corpus are Tiefo-D glottal stop or zero for Tiefo-N medial [g], Tiefo-D [c] for Tiefo-N [s], and Tiefo-D [d] for Tiefo-N [ʒ, j].

Table 2: Tiefo cognates.

Tiefo-D (KW)	Tiefo-N (KW)	Tiefo-N (AH)	Gloss
blaʔa ~ bla	bárágà ~ bálágà	bārāʔá	‘river’
drá ⁿ	dáragá	dará	‘home’
brà(ʔà)	bàgàle, bàràì	bàyàʔè	‘hair’
buɔ ⁿ	bɔʔɔ ⁿ , bɔɔ ⁿ	būɔ ⁿ	‘dog’
ceʔe	serege	séríí ⁿ	‘skin’
cicí	sisiu	ʃíʃíʔi	‘urine’
cùru	suru	sūsú ⁿ	‘millet cake’
dè	ʒàga, yèà	jéjāʔā	‘sun’
dɛ	ʒɔ	ndɛ	‘elder brother’

3 Morphology

Morphological features found in Tiefio-N but not in Tiefio-D are a definite prefix (§3.1), a specific set of plural suffixes (Section 3.2), and an ablaut-like system of adjective-noun agreement (§3.3).

3.1 Definite prefix

The dialect of Tiefio-N in Gnafongo has what I will call a definite prefix (but see below for qualms about this categorisation). It has three variants depending on the dominant vowel of the stem: [e-] before nouns with an [e] vowel in the stem, [o-] before nouns with a back vowel [o ɔ u], and [a-] before nouns with [a] or [ɛ] vowel in the stem. Examples are in Table 3. The stem ‘moon’ irregularly has [a-] instead of expected [e-].

Table 3: Tiefio definite.

Noun (Tiefio-N, Def-Sg)	Gloss
è-kēʔē ⁿ	‘spoon’
è-jōē ⁿ	‘neck’
ē-sāè	‘ground’
ò-ŋōŋō	‘mosquito’
ō-fláŋō	‘baobab’
ò-sīō ⁿ	‘salt’
ò-ŋū	‘water’
à-bītēʔè	‘leaf’
à-fērēé	‘moon’
ā-kérē ē	‘hand’
ā-fiyāʔā	‘field’

The definite marker is generally optional in the singular but in some cases is obligatory in the plural. However, when the noun is followed by a quantifier or by an adjective, the definite prefix is omitted. This suggests that the “definite” prefix functions in part to indicate that the noun is free of modifiers.

This is more clearly the case in Tiefio-D. (Winkelmann 1998: 132) describes the Tiefio-D prefix [e-], infrequently [o-], as obligatory in citation forms. She confirms for Tiefio-D that it vanishes in the presence of a determiner (possessor, demonstrative).

3.2 Plural suffixes

Proto-Gur has been reconstructed as having a complex system of noun class markers in the form of paired singular-plural combinations Naden (1989), along the lines of other Niger-Congo families including Bantu. Many extant Gur languages still have class suffixes, and some have prefixes as well (Miehe et al. 2012).

In addition to lengthening of the final vowel (mentioned above), a number of other singular/plural relationships occur in Tiefo-N. Examples are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Tiefo-N plural suffixes.

	Singular	Plural	Gloss
a.	nāmi	ō-nāmī-jō	‘child’
	yō nāmí	yō nāmí-jō	‘fruit’
	ɲō	ō-ɲí-jō	‘person’
	bī	bī-jō	‘baby’
	ɲmāʃa bí	ɲmāʃa bí-jō	‘star’
b.	cómī-ī	ñ -cómī	‘bird’
	ɲómī-ī	ɛ -ɲómī	‘toe’
c.	yē	yē-ʔé	‘year’
	jāá bō ⁿ	jāá bō -ō ⁿ	‘girl’
d.	gbé-ē ⁿ	gbē	‘stool’
e.	ʒówē ⁿ	é-ʒówī ⁿ	‘neck’
f.	fēreʔé	fērēʔē	‘moon’
g.	dō -jē	dō -rō	‘man’

There are also some nouns that appear to have no singular-plural difference, such as [búguŋe] ‘beans (variety)’, either because of recent morphological loss or because these nouns do not lend themselves to individuation.

Winkelman reported a Tiefo-D plural /-O/ (by which she indicates an archiphoneme representing either for [o] or [ɔ] depending on the [ATR] class of the stem), though for animates only. This corresponds to the [-jō] (always after i) in (4a), though often not in the same words across the Tiefo varieties. Some of the Tiefo-N glosses in (4a) are inanimate (‘star’, ‘fruit’), but these are compounds including ‘child’ or ‘baby’, e.g. ‘tree-child’ = ‘fruit’. The stem ‘man’, (4g) is a rare case where Tiefo-N has a plural [-rV] (with copied vowel quality), the productive plural in Tiefo-D. Other Tiefo-N singular/plural patterns (4b-f) lack known Tiefo-D matches, and are difficult to connect to reconstructed inventories of Proto-Gur noun class markers listed by Naden (1989).

3.3 Adjectival harmony

In Tiefo-N, the final vowels of certain adjectives harmonise with the vowel of the definite prefix of the modified noun. Consider the forms for harmonising ‘black’ in examples (1-2) and for nonharmonising ‘big’ (2-4). The vowel quality of the prefixes on ‘house’ and ‘man’ match that of the final-vowel of ‘black’. This may reflect an archaic suffixal

- (5) ní wɔŋɔ̀ bè kú
 1SG.IPFV PROG come today
 ‘I am coming today.’
- (6) n bàʔ jàṅā
 1SG come yesterday
 ‘I came yesterday.’
- (7) é wɔŋɔ̀ bè kú
 1PL PROG come today
 ‘We are coming today.’
- (8) é bàʔ jàṅā
 1PL come yesterday
 ‘We came yesterday.’

Unlike Tiefo-D, Tiefo-N does not currently distinguish animacy or anaphoricity (e.g. reflexives) in the 3SG pronoun. This might be due to recent grammatical simplification, and the occasional use of Jula 3SG pronouns shows that language contact has impacted the pronominal system.

3.5 Verbal aspectual inflection

Verbal aspectual morphology in Tiefo-N is more intricate than nominal or pronominal morphology. The main opposition is between imperfective and perfective (sometimes called ‘continuous’ and ‘neutral’, respectively).

In one verb class, the imperfective is unsuffixed while the perfective is marked by a low- or mid-toned suffix *-ra* ~*-la* Table 6. It can be nasalised to *-na*, see ‘arrive’ (Table 6, row (d)).

Table 6: Tiefo aspectual affixation.

	Imperfective	Perfective	Gloss
a.	jē	jé-rā	‘enter’
b.	jè	jē-rà	‘walk’
c.	bīé	bīē -rà	‘farm’
d.	dā	dā-nà	‘arrive’
e.	dīò	dīō-là	‘sell’

Several other verbs show ablaut-like vocalic mutations, in some cases along with other internal changes or affixes. Two multiply attested patterns are vowel to [a] (row (a) in Table 7) and [a] to [e/ɛ] (row (b) in Table 7). Mutation types attested once are in (row (c) in Table 7).

Table 7: Tiefo aspectual mutation.

	Imperfective	Perfective	Gloss
a.	sè	sá	leave/go
	bè	bāʔ	come
	bē	b-là	tire
	díʔi	díā	eat
	dōʔò	dāà	plant
	dōrōʔò	dārāʔā	buy
b.	ɲānā	ɲéné	stop/stand
	náʔā	nénē	wash (clothing)
	dārāà	dɛ rɛ̀ɛ̀	rip
	bārá	bērɛ̀	sweep
	jāʔà	jɛ̀ gɛ̀	break
c.	ɲ-à	ɲ-ū	drink
	bó	bwē	tie

An important difference between the two Tiefo varieties is that Tiefo-N has a preverbal morpheme $\text{wɔ} \text{ } \text{ʔɔ}$ that marks progressive aspect. No similar preverbal progressive or imperfective morpheme is reported for Tiefo-D. It is possible, however, that the Tiefo-N form is archaic, reflecting a proto-form *bo ‘be’ Manessy (1982).

4 Influence from Jula

The data in 6 consist of verbs which are suffixed with [-rV] or allomorphs [l]~[n] in an aspectual form known as ‘neutral’ or perfective. The suffix may be a borrowing from Jula since the perfective suffix in Jula is [-ra] with allomorph [-la]. An example illustrating the [-rV/IV] suffix in Gnanfongo Tiefo is the verb ‘hide’, borrowed directly from Jula as [dügū], ‘hidden’ [dügū-là]. Many of the verbs in this category are probable borrowings from Jula, even though a neutral suffix [-da/ra/ta] is attested in other Gur languages. However, according to Naden (1989), most verbal markers are treated as particles rather than affixes in other Gur languages. The most widely marked inflectional category in Gur languages is expressed through a contrast between the continuous (imperfective) and a form described as ‘neutral’. Therefore, the neutral suffix in Tiefo is likely related to the particle found in other Gur languages, but possibly has been reanalysed in Gnanfongo Tiefo as a perfective suffix on Jula borrowings.

According to lexical comparisons between Tiefo and other Gur languages by Manessy (1982), there is but a mere 28 out of 435 correspondence, 20 percent. With sample correspondences shown in Table 8, between the data gathered by the author from Gnanfongo Manessy’s (1982) from Dramandougou and surrounding Gur languages, we do see, however limited, some strong evidence for a related source.

Table 8: Correspondences between Tiefó and Gur languages (Manessy 1982: 146)

Tiefó (AH)	Tiefó (GM)	Viemo	Doyose	Gan	Lobi	Dyan	Kulango	Loron	Gloss
píí	pini	pinyɔ	pííse				píí	pinigu, pininyu	'excrement'
kāŋà	kaʔa	kaaso	kaase	kasa					'meat'
sáá	sāā	saasi	-sāā	-sāā			-sāā, -sāzi	-sā	'three'
ɲéréé	ɲinde	ɲeɲe	ɲeɲa	ɲeɲa	ɲeɲa		ɲugo		'breast'
fēreŋé	feregi	ferge	filiki						'moon'
náfáŋó	donu	doni	doɲko						'slave'
ɲā	ɲā						ɲā		'give'
yāá	ya						yere		'woman'
sāŋè	sari				siru			sáákò	'earth'
bēŋé	bē				bənə			bē	'wilderness'
káŋá ɲin	kaane	kanno							'tooth'
ǵbā á	bā, baa	baawɔ			bana				'sheep'

Manessy gives three hypotheses for how non-Gur roots are found in Tiefó: Tiefó should be placed within a separate branch of Gur, certain words are borrowed from an unknown Gur language, or the source of the borrowing is non-Gur, possibly Mande. If language contact from Jula were the dividing factor, one would expect there to be clear borrowings from Jula into Tiefó. If the Jula language is an influence, it would be apparent in the lexicon.

Among plant names, we find evidence for a sustained symbiosis between Jula and even Tiefó-N. For example, Heath recently recorded flora-fauna terms in Gnanfogo, both in Tiefó-N and in the local Jula. Quite a few of these terms are phrasal, and the Tiefó-N and local Jula often share the phrasing. Some plant names are in Table 9.

These correspondences, though limited to natural species terms, are indicative of a broader pattern of calquing, the effect of which is develop a local Tiefó-ized Jula. Outside the core Tiefó area, this must have the same general sociolinguistic function of marking speakers as Tiefó, as we observe with familiar ethnically-tinged English varieties (Yinglish, Spanglish, and the like).

While we do see some evidence of borrowing from Jula in both dialects of Tiefó in the Table 10, according to comparisons between my data and Winkelmann's shown in Table 11, most are like the second table, with 87 out of 185 core lexical items do not bear any resemblance between the two dialects, nor to Jula (based on my knowledge of Jula).

The evidence presented from the lexicon shows that Jula has not influenced either variety of Tiefó to the point that one would expect if the majority language were to be blamed for the loss of the minority language. Considering the long term contact of Jula with Tiefó, one would expect more of an influence on the lexicon than what is found. Further, the lexical differences between the two dialects, for the most part, cannot be

Table 9: Tiefo plant names.

Tiefo	Jula	Identification	Literal
sòy-pûŋ	lè-bíí ⁿ	Acanthospermum hispidum	‘pig-herb’
pô:ŋ-sà: ⁿ -wi	bí:ŋ-ŋwání-tígi	Amaranthus spinosus	‘herb-thorn- owner’
bàwá ⁿ -sāní	sàmà-ŋwàní	Asparagus africanus	‘elephant-thorn’
cò:-kú: ⁿ	sùlà-ff ⁿ sá ⁿ	Cola cordifolia	‘monkey- cashew.apple’
bàwá ⁿ -dùrté	sàmá-tìsékáà-bé	Combretum nigricans	‘elephant can’t knock it down’
nàfóyó ⁿ -bákó-èllè-wí	jààtìgì-fáyá	Ficus thonningii	‘host-kill’
blákè-póróŋ	sándé ⁿ -wòròsó	Heeria insignis	‘rain-sickle’
nòyòsì-dúy	nòyòsì-kúú	Heliotropium indicum	‘chameleon-tail’
kà ⁿ kóó ⁿ -tòè	sòfàli-túló	Leptadenia hastate	‘donkey-ear’
bě y ⁿ -jùsú ⁿ	kòŋó-jèsé	Securidaca longepeduncu- lata	‘outback-wire’
só ⁿ -bà ⁿ flà-glá-yò	sò-tìgì-bà ⁿ flà-bo	Senegalia macrostachya	‘horseman-hat- take.off’
sèsèré-dúy	bàsà ⁿ -kúú	Stachytarpheta indica	‘agama-tail’
bláké-fl5	sándé ⁿ -sirà-yíri	Sterculia setigera	‘hare’s baobab fruit’
wámbíí-finàà	fárátá-débé	Uapaca togolensis	‘orphan-mat’
sìsàyà-dúrúŋ-tè-pô:ŋ	kámmélé-kóróbóo	clumpy grass sp.	‘young.man-test- grass’

attributed to influence from Jula on either end of the dialect spectrum. The cause of the divergences within Tiefo and within Gur must have been triggered by another source, but it remains unknown.

Table 10: Potential borrowings from Jula into Tiefo.

Tiefo Dramandougou	Tiefo Gnanfongo	Jula	Gloss
gūglíká	kērē kité	kɔtɛ	‘snail’
blaná(-no)	míʒ nʒ	mali	‘hippopotamus’
nāklʒ	míʒ nʒ	malo	‘rice’
po-jenʒ , poka	ō-dòsō	donso	‘hunter’
ɲā	sʒ ʒʒ	so	‘horse’
jūwéʔaé	gānāʔā	galaji	‘indigo’
dʒ	náfāʔō	jɔn	‘slave’
jʒ , jʒ -rʒ	bíkā	jo	‘fetish’
wòrò	dōʔōbíyō	wòro	‘kola nuts’

Table 11: Cross-dialectal lexical non-concordance not due to Jula influence.

Tiefo Dramandougou	Tiefo Gnanfongo	Jula	Gloss
sú	dúró	ɲinan	‘mouse’
sègè	dúwí	dimi	‘hurt’
sóʔó, séʔé	dūwò	cin	‘sting’
síglòʔó -ro	fáʔlái	suruku	‘hyena’
ḡbe bà	fíyāá	lana	‘take’
pūʔó, poʔo	fíyāʔā	kungo	‘wilderness’
dè, be-tɔʔo	fíyāʔā	foro	‘field’
diè	fíyò	bugu	‘multiply’
baʔa	fíʔí	tómɔ	‘pick up’
jūwéʔaé	gānāʔā	galaji	‘indigo’
sàkḡpè	kā kʒ	fali	‘donkey’

5 Why different fates?

The preceding discussion demonstrates that Tiefo-N and Tiefo-D are two distinct, though closely related languages. Why have they suffered such different fates?

Isolation? Perhaps Dramandougou (Tiefo-D) is more isolated than Gnanfongo and Noumoudara (Tiefo-N). Well, it is true that Noumoudara is directly on the Bobo Diolasso to Banfora highway, and this may have been the coup de grace factor for Tiefo-N in that village. But Gnanfongo and Dramadougou are both located in the same lowlands area southeast of a long escarpment that cuts them off from the highway. Both are reached from the highway with some difficulty, by 4x4 or a motorcycle, either by taking a southern route that avoids the cliffs or by winding one’s way down a circuitous descent in a relatively benign part of the escarpment between Noumoudara and Gnanfongo. Gov-

ernment institutions (schools, clinics) are present in Gnanfongo and Dramandougou to about the same extent. They are equally “isolated”.

Perhaps a vigorously expanding regional language had a more direct line of sight on Gnanfongo than on Dramandougou due to some geographical quirk? The two candidates for “killer” languages (Nettle & Romaine 2000; Price 1984) would be French and Jula. Indeed it was once feared that French and English would give the same scorched earth treatment to African languages as English has given to the indigenous languages of Australia and North America. This has now been broadly debunked by Batibo (2005) and Mufwene (2009). In West Africa, even in sophisticated and heavily Gallicized coastal megalopolises like Dakar and Abidjan, French has developed symbiotic relationships with other languages rather than eliminating them, and new synthetic formations such as Nouchi and Urban Wolof are emerging. In villages far from the coast like Gnanfongo and Dramandougou, French is a minor factor in the sociolinguistic equation. Naden (1989: 141) makes the point that southwestern Burkina has historically been a “backwater” relatively unaffected by the outside world, from the late medieval Saharan trade routes to the present.

Jula is another matter. Southwestern Burkina is a linguistic mosaic of ancient Gur languages (Tiefo, Lobi, Viemo, Dogose, Turka, and others) with interspersed Mande languages like Bobo and Zuungo that date to the Mande expansion of the late Middle Ages. The Bambara-Jula-Mandinke dialect group, which is also Mande genetically, has become the linguistic juggernaut throughout southern Mali (Bamako, Segou), southwestern Burkina, and northern Cote d’Ivoire. Its spread in Burkina was spearheaded by merchants who made it into the lingua franca in markets and then in urban concentrations. The name of the biggest city southwestern Burkina, Bobo Dioulasso (i.e. Bobo-Jula-So), attests to the coexistence of Jula with other indigenous languages. If there is a killer language in the area, it is clearly Jula, not French.

However, there is no obvious geographical reason why Jula should have targeted Tiefo-N for extinction any more than Tiefo-D. Jula is the dominant interethnic vernacular in the entire region, extending deeply into neighbouring Cote d’Ivoire. If Dramandougou were more isolated than Gnanfongo, Jula might have had a more powerful foothold in the latter. But Dramandougou is no more isolated than Gnanfongo. Jula is spoken at least as second language by everyone in Dramandougou as well as Gnanfongo.

What about strategic self-interest as an explanation? An SIL-sponsored survey of the local situation does state that “Most Tiefo have abandoned their language in favour of Jula ... presumably as a result of a perceived social advantage to be gained by using Jula” (Berthelette & Berthelette 2001: 5). But self-interest should be just as pertinent to Tiefo-D as to Tiefo-N. As Showalter (2008) states in his survey of the languages of Burkina Faso, only two communities in the entire country replaced their languages with Jula, one being Tiefo-N and Lüpke & Storch counter such simplistic reasoning: “there is no evidence of which we are aware where the shift to another language (as opposed to maintaining it as a language in a multilingual repertoire) has yielded real socio-economic advantages” (Lüpke & Storch 2013: 286).

What about differential “prestige” as an explanation? Aside from the elusiveness of this concept,⁵ the fact is that Tiefo ethnic pride is if anything stronger in the Tiefo-N than Tiefo-D area, and perhaps stronger there than in the other small-population ethnicities in the area between the proud, larger-population Bobo and Lobi. The background to this is that the Tiefo tribe was a feared military power until the turn of the 20th Century. To this day there is a Tiefo “chef de guerre” in Noumoudara, distinct from the regular political chief. He commands no battalions, but he does supervise a small military museum dedicated to the memory of an early chief named Amoro Ouattara. In this museum, visitors get guided tours recounting the great battles of the past and demonstrating (gently) the uses of the traditional weapons, shields, and torture equipment that are on display. It is not large, but it is more than the other small-population ethnicities in the area have.

In Africa and elsewhere, language coexistence (multilingualism) is the norm, not the exception. There is no zero-sum fight to the death among languages. Again (Mufwene 2009: 76): “Such a practice of language alternation is traditional to Africa and has sustained multilingualism, so much so that it takes a natural disaster to force whole villages to move and find themselves in situations where they have to shift to the host population’s language.”

The cataclysmic event that accelerated the decline of Tiefo was the military victory of the Jula leader Samori Touré over the Tiefo, followed by the slaughter of many Tiefo people in 1897. This is cited as the key event in the demise of the language by Hébert (1958), Le Moal (1980: 31), and Winkelmann (1998: 2). It is likely that the Tiefo-N villages who commanded the Tiefo forces were the principal victims.

Dramandougou, on the periphery and not centrally involved in military activity, appears to have already reached an accommodation with the Jula, resulting in a less confrontational relation, at the time of those hostilities. For that reason it was spared the brunt of the reprisals.

6 Conclusion

Despite the fact that there are only five speakers in the village of Gnanfongo, all in their 70’s and 80’s, the dialect of Tiefo differs from the neighbouring village, particularly in the lexicon. The differences between the two dialects of Tiefo cannot be due to Jula alone. In fact then, language contact, in addition to not “killing” a language, may not have as much influence as we think.

Languages, differing from the metaphors we like to invoke of species, rarely simply die out without a trace, rather, they converge into and diverge from one another. Speakers do not suddenly one day wake up and decide it will be advantageous to being speaking another language. The history of many countries in Africa and the world is volatile, with environmental and political factors influencing language to a greater degree than we may account for. The example of the Tiefo serves not only to illustrate that we are

⁵In the early days of American sociolinguistics, the core idea was that lower middle-class individuals sought to emulate the speech of the highest local socioeconomic class. But the data eventually forced recognition of, first, a kind of prestige in the lower echelons, and then another kind of prestige in the middle.

missing pieces in the history of the people, but also that we are ill equipped to gather those pieces given the framework we have been using.

Although the cause of the loss of the Tiefio language can with a fair amount of certainty be attributed to Samori Toure and his army of invaders, beyond that, the discrepancies between the existing Tiefio dialects which cannot be attributed to Jula remains a mystery. In summary, Tiefio shares some features of geographically neighbouring Gur languages but does not fit into any known branch of Gur. Further, the variety of Tiefio that remains in the lives of the five elderly speakers in Gnanfongo differs significantly from the more robust version of the language spoken in neighbouring Dramandougou.

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