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Morpho-phonological adaptation and the development of secret languages: The case of Chamtok in Mutengene, South-West Cameroon

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Chamtok

A secret language (argot, language game, cant, ludling) created by modifying Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE) and used by some Mutengene girls to exclude non-group members from their conversations.

- (1) a. Gibi mibi sɔbɔm mɔbɔnibi **Chamtok**
 gi mi sɔm mɔni **CPE**
 give me some money **English**
 ‘Give me some money’
- b. obokebe wubu dɔbɔn fibinibif **Chamtok**
 oke wu dɔn finif **CPE**
 ok 3PL AUX finish **English**
 ‘We have finished’

Mutengene, South-West Cameroon

- Road junction town (to Buea, Limbe, Tiko)
- Several petty businesses
- High crime wave
- Town and inhabitants nicknamed Cham, e.g., Chamboys, Chamgirls



Road map

- Secret languages/argots/language games
 - How they originate
 - Their functions
- Cameroon Pidgin English
- Chamtok
 - How it originated
 - Its functions
- Conclusion

Formation of Secret languages/argots/ language games

- Widely documented globally, e.g. Pig Latin, Verlan, Gibberish, etc.
- **Pig Latin**, English and several other languages (Cowan 1989)

Rule: (1) the initial onset of a word is moved to the end of the word and the diphthong "ay" /ei/ is added after the consonant.

(2) pig = "igpay"
latin = "atinlay"
banana = "anana**bay**"

Formation of Secret languages/argots/ language games

- **Pig Latin**, English and several other languages

Rule: (2) When a word begins with a consonant cluster both sounds are moved to the end of the word and the diphthong "ay" /ei/ is added.

(3) friends = "iendsfray"
smile = "ilesmay"
blood = "oodblay"

Formation of Secret languages/argots/ language games

- **Pig Latin**, English and several other languages

Rule: (3) When a word begins with a vowel simply add “way,
“hay”, or “yay” at the end.

- (4) eat = "eatway"
omelet = "omeletway"
are = "areway"

Formation of Secret languages/argots/ language games

- **Korakistika**, Greek (Manning 2012)

Rule: Insert "k" and the vowel of the original syllable after each syllable:

(5) Kalimera = "Ka**ka** liki me**ke** ra**ka**"

Formation of Secret languages/argots/ language games

- **Yäwof q'uanq'ua** ('bird language'), Amharic (Cohen 1939)

Rule: Duplicate each syllable, replacing the initial consonant with "z" in the duplicate:

(6) säbbärä = "sä**z**äbbä**z**ärä**z**ä"

Formation of Secret languages/argots/ language games

- **Păsărească** (birds' language), Romanian

Rule: After each syllable, add 'p' and repeat last vowel:

(7) mașină = "ma**pa**și**pi**nă**pă**"

Formation of Secret languages/argots/ language games

- **Jeringonza** or **Jeringozo** in Argentina, Spanish

Rule: Each vowel is reduplicated with a separating 'p':

(8) No sabe nada = "No**po** sa**pabepe** na**padapa**"

Functions of Secret languages/argots/ language games

- System of manipulating spoken words to render them incomprehensible to an untrained listener.
- Used primarily by groups attempting to conceal their conversations from others, e.g. children and teenagers to avoid understanding by adults.
- Some language games such as Pig Latin are so widely known that privacy is virtually impossible, because many people have some understanding of how it works and the words can sound very similar to their English counterpart.

Cameroon Pidgin English

- *Kamtok* (literally ‘Cam(eroon) talk’)
- Origin unclear but significant spread between 1850 and 1884 when coastal Cameroon was virtually under the control of the British (Todd 1982, Menang 2008)
- Influenced by English phonology and vocabulary.
- Lingua Franca in English-speaking regions of Cameroon and beyond

Cameroon Pidgin English Phonology

- 6 vowels: i, e, u, o, ɔ, a
- 4 diphthongs: ai, au, ɔi, ia (possibly a fifth, ei)
 - (9) bai 'buy' vs. ba 'bar'
 - kau 'cow' vs. ka 'car'
 - nɔis 'noise' vs. nɔs 'nurse'
 - bia 'beer' vs. bi 'bee'
- 21 consonants: p, b, t, d, k, g, m, n, ŋ, f, v, s, z, ʃ, h, tʃ, dʒ, l, w, r, j.
- Tone? bábà 'barber' vs. bàbá 'father'

Chamtok

- Data sources
 - ✓ Speaker intuitions
 - ✓ Discussions between speakers (WhatsApp)
- Recorded on Android Phone in .M4a format
- Annotation in ELAN
- Some analysis in PRAAT (Boersma & Weenink 2001)

Chamtok: Host language

Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE)

- (10) a. Gibi mibi sɔbɔm mɔbɔnibi Chamtok
gi mi sɔm mɔni CPE
give me some money English
'Give me some money'
- b. naba dʒɔbɔ tɪɲk ɔbɔf ɛbɛnibi tɔbɔpɪbɪk Chamtok
na dʒɔ tɪŋk ɔf ɛni tɔpɪk CPE
now just think of any topic English
'Now, just think of any topic.'

Chamtok: Creation processes

Rule 1. Reduplication of CV portions of syllables, preventing monosyllabic words

- (11) a. ma**ban** /ma**man**/ **Chamtok**
 man
 ‘man’ **CPE**
- b. fu**bud** /fu**fud**/ **Chamtok**
 fud
 ‘food’ **CPE**
- c. dri**ɪŋk** /dri**dɪŋk**/ **Chamtok**
 drink
 ‘drink’ **CPE**

Chamtok: Creation processes

Rule 1. Reduplication of CV portions of syllables: Disyllabic words or longer

- (12) a. **fabadaba** /**fafadada**/ Chamtok
fada CPE
'father'
- b. **kabakubulebet** /**kakakukulelet**/ Chamtok
kakulet CPE
'calculate'
- c. **tubumoborobo** /**tutumomororo**/ Chamtok
tumoro CPE
'tomorrow'

Chamtok: Creation processes

Rule 2. Replacement of reduplicated consonant by the voiced bilabial plosive /b/, resulting in the omnipresence of /b/ in all words,

- (13) a. **fabadaba** /**fafadada**/ Chamtok
fada CPE
'father'
- b. **kabakulebet** /**kakukulelet**/ Chamtok
kakulet CPE
'calculate'
- c. **tubumorobo** /**tutumomororo**/ Chamtok
tumoro CPE
'tomorrow'

Chamtok: Creation processes

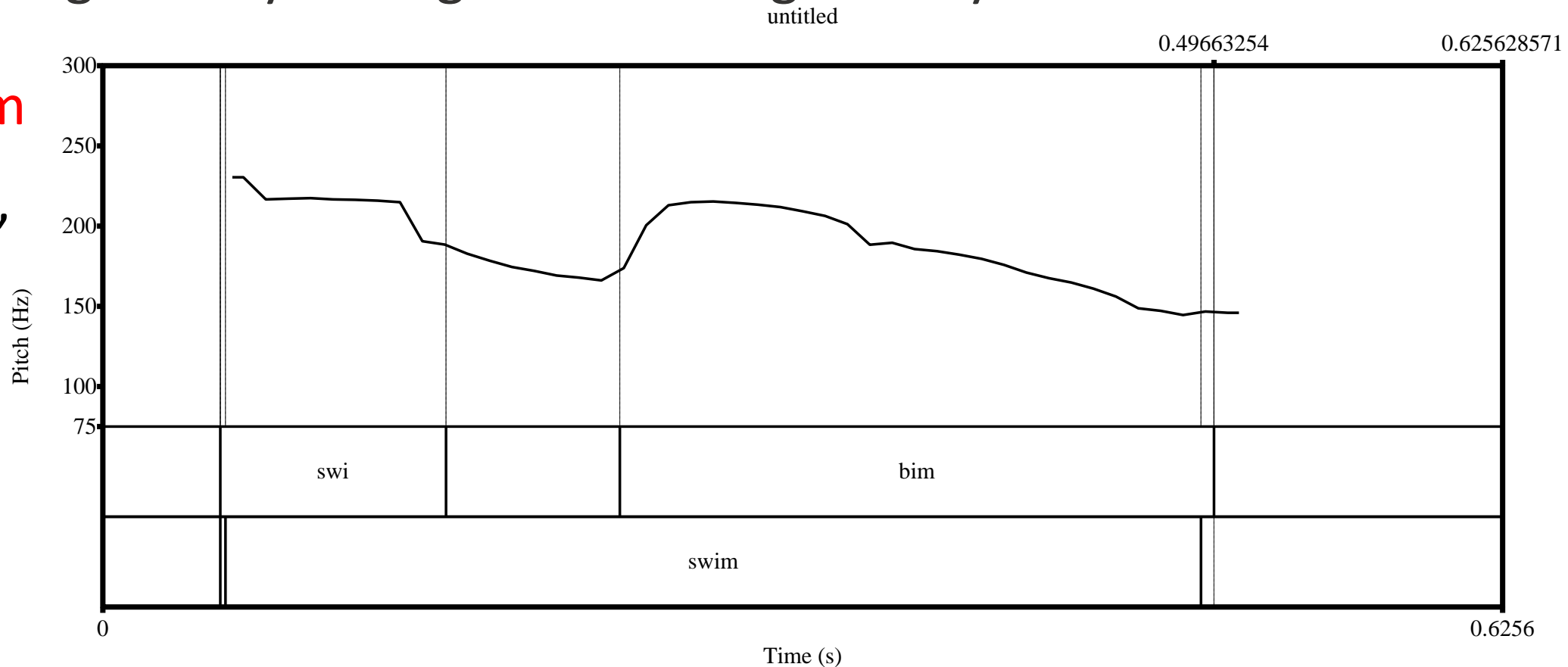
Rule 3. Codas shift rightwards

- (14) a. fibinibif dibi sɛbɛkʃɔbɔn **Chamtok**
 finish di sekʃɔn **CPE**
 ‘Finish this section!’
- b. mebe wubu dibiskɔbɔs fɔbɔ wubuf tɔbɔpibik **Chamtok**
 me wu diskɔs fɔ wuf tɔpik **CPE**
 let 3PL discuss for which topic **English**
 ‘On which topic should we discuss?’

Chamtok: Creation processes

Rule 4. Words generally ending in a HL falling melody

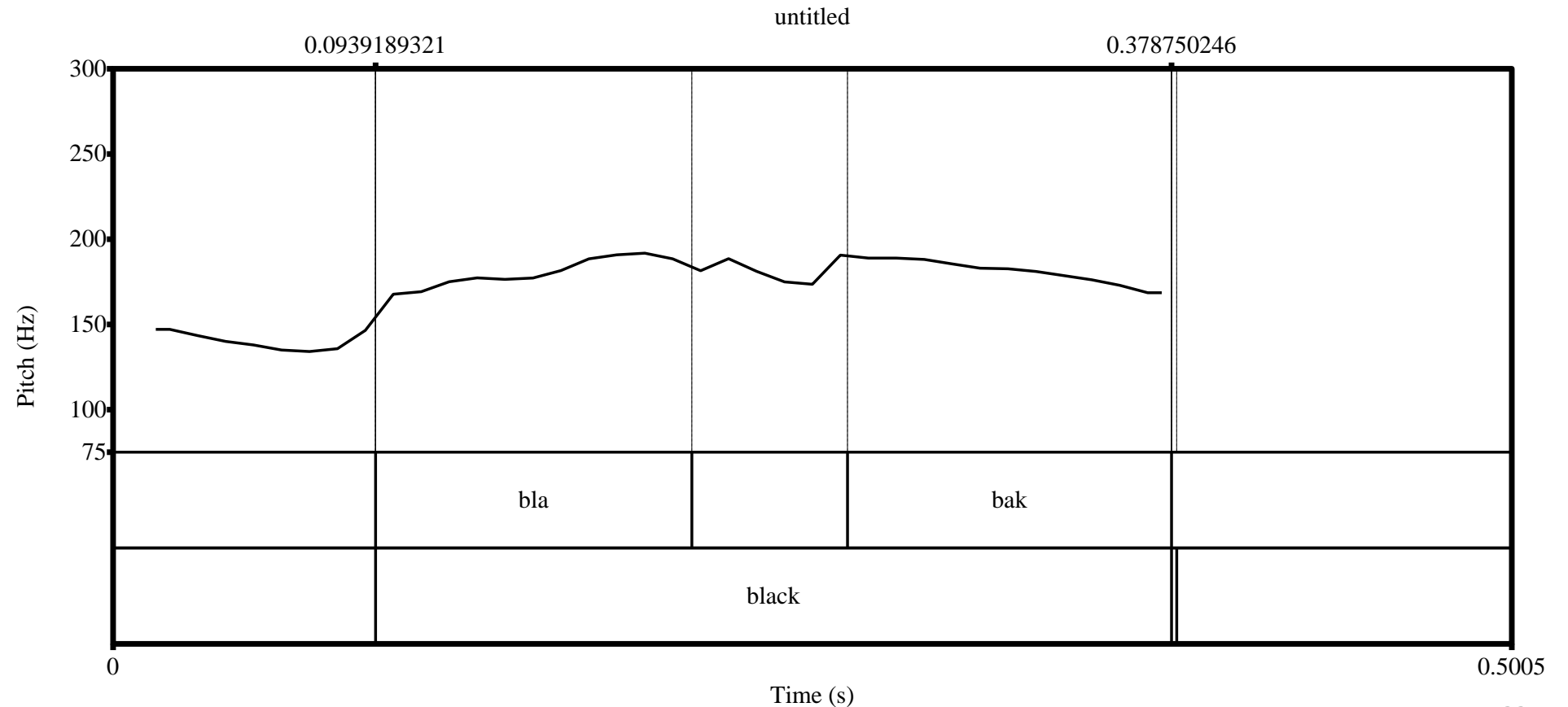
(15) swi**bim**
swim
'swim'



Chamtok: Creation processes

Rule 4. words generally ending in a HL falling melody

(16) bla**ba**k
black
'black'



Chamtok: Functions

- ✓ Restricted to girls
- ✓ Exclude non-group members (parents, friends, men) from conversations
- ✓ Making secret plans
- ✓ Extortion situations

Future of Chamtok

- ✓ Critically endangered like many other secret languages across Cameroon

(17) **wibi fɔbɔ sebekaba debe tɔbɔk sebe mebe wubu tɔbɔk naba ibinglibi Chamtok**
wi fɔ Seka de tɔk se me wu tɔk na English **CPE**
we for Saker they talk say make we talk only English **English**
'When we were in Saker, they said we should speak only English.'

Of 104 secret languages listed in Wikipedia, only 4 are hosted by African languages

- ✓ Need to document and preserve

Conclusion

- ✓ A girls secret language in Mutengene, South-West Cameroon
- ✓ Based on Cameroon Pidgin English
- ✓ Used to exclude non-group members (parents, friends, men) from conversations, making secret plans, and for extortion
- ✓ Critically endangered

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Tabaŋ kyubu
taŋ kyu
'Thank you'