

JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY
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Korandje: Between Linguistic Areas

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Lameen Souag explores language change and linguistic history, especially in northern Africa. His fieldwork focuses mainly on Korandje (Songhay, Algeria) and Siwi (Berber, Egypt), two endangered languages whose long isolation from their nearest relatives has helped induce multiple layers of exceptionally intense contact effects.

About 800 years ago, some Songhay speakers moved across 1500 km of desert to the small oasis of Tabelbala in modern-day Algeria and thereby created a new language: Korandje. They left the multilingual Sahel and entered a very different linguistic ecology—a ‘spread zone’—dominated first by various Berber languages and then by Arabic. The resulting typological changes affected everything from phonology to morphology to syntax to lexical structure, and continue to this day as speakers increasingly shift toward Arabic. The earliest written attestation of Korandje dates to 1908, but comparative data allows changes to be placed in historical perspective, while synchronic variation reveals the trajectory of changes in progress. As the only non-Afroasiatic language established in the area, Korandje provides a unique opportunity to separate the role of common inheritance from the role of area-internal contact. Korandje also makes it easier to differentiate multilingual areal effects from those associated with the dominance of a single lingua franca. Unravelling the history of Korandje thus helps us understand not just how contact makes languages more similar within a linguistic area, but how it helps keep them similar.

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