

## Overview of Sprakab telephone interviews of Bajuni refugee claimants

Between 2004 and 2013 I listened to 100+ Sprakab phone interviews of individuals claiming to be Somali Bajunis seeking refugee status in Europe (mainly the UK and the Netherlands). All follow the same format so an overview is easy.

**Purpose** The main aim is to elicit speech patterns, to determine whether the interviewee speaks Bajuni or not. A secondary aim is to elicit local knowledge, since that forms part of nearly all Sprakab analyses. There is a difference in expectation between interview and analysis: interviewers don't insist on use of Bajuni but analysts conclude that if Bajuni is not used then applicants can't be from Somalia. It also should be part of the interview to systematically determine whether the interviewee also speaks Somali, as ability to speak the national language would buttress the claim to originate in Somalia, but in most interviews the questioner doesn't ask at all or just asks if the interviewee speaks Somali, and passes on: occasionally he might ask for a Somali phrase or two. That is inadequate for forming an informed opinion.

**General format** Data for Sprakab analyses comes from a Sprakab telephone interview, between an interviewer in one place (Sweden ?) and an interviewee in another. The interviewer works from a fixed list of questions, in a fixed order, and wants answers to those questions. He does not much listen to the answers, ponder them, and then ask follow-up questions, but sticks to his list. Sometimes questions are omitted, sometimes questions are added, but not often.

**Acoustic quality** Acoustic quality of the interview and recording varies, from almost perfect to poor. In the latter, a minority, the phone first distorts the acoustic signal, particularly consonants, especially high frequency (*s*, *sh*, etc) and other consonants and to some extent the vowels: some material is followed by an echo: then there is almost continuous background noise, mostly talking but occasionally music or electronic sound. The interviewer making the recording is sometimes working in/near a public space. In such recordings, interviewer, applicant, and I had trouble with hearing questions and with understanding the answers. Questions had to be repeated, sometimes more than once. Applicant often answered the wrong question, for which there might be several reasons, of which one is that because they couldn't hear.

**Length** The length of most recordings falls between 20 and 24 minutes, 22-23 being average. In fact, interviews are shorter, because the interviewer's opening remarks about his company and the purpose of the interview, and his closing remarks, take up 2 to 4 minutes. That leaves 19-20 minutes. The applicant speaks less than half of the 19, partly because interviewer speaks more than applicant, partly because there are pauses between one person talking and the next (a few misunderstandings). I estimate applicants speak for 8-9 minutes. Some answers are short - single words ("Yes, no"), names, lists, phrases, short verbless sentences. I counted up to 30 such speech tokens in several recent interviews. So the material useful for linguistic analysis is limited in quality and quantity - perhaps the equivalent of 7 minutes of continuous speech. This is rather short for establishing linguistic facts, the main purpose of this interview.

**Language of interview** Bajuni differs from other forms of Swahili. If two old people were using the traditional form of Bajuni to talk about cultural matters such as fishing or family relationships, speakers of other forms of Swahili would have trouble understanding (imagine

someone from Mississippi going to the Gorbals in Scotland for the first time). The interviewer conducts the interview entirely in Swahili, does not speak Bajuni at any point, and at no point asks applicants to speak in Bajuni. Faced with official interviewers talking Swahili, refugees always follow along, despite instructions to speak Bajuni, because Swahili is official and prestigious while Bajuni is neither. Swahili is the language of power, Bajuni the language of an impoverished and disempowered minority. This puts applicants at a disadvantage because it virtually removes any possibility of their speaking Bajuni, giving the impression that they speak only Swahili and not Bajuni. It should be a central part of the interview to have a first language Bajuni speaker, or at least a Bajuni-speaking interviewer make a sustained effort to conduct the interview in Bajuni from the start, because that is the best way of inducing the interviewee to speak Bajuni.

The interviewer's Swahili is also different from the applicants' – theirs being coastal, his not. In many interviews, applicants use the phrase 'I don't understand' several times. Applicants don't understand because of the difference between Bajuni and the interviewer's Swahili, but this inability to understand is then seized on by the analysts as evidence for their case. In many cases, one of the analysts is also the interviewer.

**Yes/No questions and linguistically useful speech** Linguists use the term Yes/No question to refer to questions that normally expect Yes or No as the answer (eg. "Did you ever go to the mainland?"). Such questions are not useful for providing linguistic material for forensic purposes. Most Bajunis are illiterate and illiterates tend to answer such questions literally and not expand, whereas more educated people will realise that more is wanted. A second kind of not useful answer is one that expects a one-word answer ("Who is the President of Somalia?"). More than half the questions on all the interviews consist of these two types. Good interviews ask questions that elicit the phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary of the interviewee but this question-and-short-answer technique does not produce worthwhile or lengthy speech.

**Local knowledge** Since the interviewer works from a fixed general list of questions, some questions are useful. Many are not. Each Bajuni island is small (between 2 and 7.5 sq.km), consists entirely of coral, has little or no vegetation, no roads, and the population is 100% Muslim. I have heard all these questions, some on every recording, some on most recordings: are/is there mountains, rivers, thick bush, wild animals, roads, cars, lorries, electricity, police station, soldiers, football pitch, factory, church (versus mosque), hospital? Many of these questions show a complete lack of local knowledge. The interviewer has posed these questions and heard the answer ("No") many times, yet he persists, instead of finding new and useful questions. Such questions don't produce useful local knowledge nor useful languages samples.

**Attitude to interviewee** In an interview designed to elicit information from an interviewee in a strange new land and in a strange situation (no phones in the Bajuni Islands), one would think that the most productive attitude from the interviewer would be to treat the interviewee fairly kindly and gently. While he (they are always male) is often cheerful and friendly, sometimes patient and sympathetic, he often adopts an impatient, hectoring stance. He rarely shows interest in answers but passes straight on to the next question. He often abandons questions when they are not understood. In several interviews he asks interviewees (more than once) if they are really Bajunis, after they give answers he doesn't care for: that gives them and me the impression that he doesn't believe them – not an objective way to proceed. Often, after applicants profess ignorance, he immediately asks 'Have you been to school?' ("No"), followed "Oh ... only *madrassa* (religious

school)”, the implication being that as Muslim you couldn’t be expected to know that.

**Time taken for analysis** On several occasions I have heard the Sprakab interviewer tell someone in the background that he will have the result ready in “three minutes”. Result/analysis of a 20 minute interview ready in 3 minutes?

This was first written in 2010 and slightly modified in 2013.