Language documentation in Africa: Turning the tables

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1. INTRODUCTION. Over the past 20 years, language documentation activities have been increasing all over the world. Major funding initiatives in Germany (Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen (DoBeS) funded by Volkswagen Stiftung), the UK (Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) funded by Arcadia) and the US (Documentation of Endangered Languages (DEL) funded by the National Science Foundation) have enabled more and more scholars and students to conduct fieldwork and to document languages for which little or no documentation exists. Training courses are taking place worldwide, teaching theory and methods in language documentation, and building capacity not only in Western academic institutions but also in the countries and communities where many undocumented languages are spoken.

Language documentation scholars have also initiated a critical evaluation of central concepts in the endangered languages documentation discourse, including assessments of concepts such as language endangerment and language shift, the documentary practices of scholars in the field and digital archiving practices. In particular, linguists working in Sub-Saharan Africa are now challenging the discussions traditionally dominated by North American and Australian discourses. New studies reinvigorating classic Boasian concepts and methodologies challenge the applicability of these concepts to the African context (see e.g. Essegbey et al. 2015, Lüpke & Storch 2013, Mc Laughlin 2009, Vigouroux & Mufwene 2008), as many of the issues and proposed solutions of the language documentation discourse to date do not apply to many areas of the continent (nor, indeed, to the many multilingual linguistic ecologies that can be found worldwide).

Scholars are proposing a rethinking of models, theories and methods in the discourse of language documentation and language endangerment. The main line of thought presented in this volume is a broadening of the scope of linguistic investigation and documentation with an ethnographic view. A deeper contextual embedding of linguistic data in a detailed description of language use and its sociocultural context allows for a better understanding and interpretation of current language ecologies and of the documentary and descriptive data gathered within them. A broader understanding of a larger set of language use patterns, linguistic contexts and ecologies can in turn feed into our understanding of how languages evolve, shift and change, and how multilingual patterns arise and may either persevere or decline.

This volume brings together a selection of papers exemplifying research based on a range of language documentation projects in Africa. The papers address various aspects of the African context, questioning research practices and presenting new insights into multilingual repertoires and their relevance to documentary methodologies and approaches. Such approaches allow linguistics to be put on an empirical footing. However, our choices of the types of data we collect and the methods we use to collect them are already a determining factor not only in the design of a corpus but also in how we view and analyse a language as an entity, how we assess levels of endangerment and how we decide who constitutes a speaker and who does not. In short, when we make decisions about what to record, we are also deciding the limits and boundaries of what may simplistically be seen as an ideologically "discrete" language, when in fact the actual situation may be very much more complex.

The documentation discourse that has developed over the past 20 years has been dominated by North American and Australian insights and ideologies. This is because language documentation as a discipline was first established there, with Hale et al. 1992, Krauss 1992 and others setting out the urgent need for the documentation of endangered languages. However, even in the earliest stages of this discussion, Africanists such as Ladefoged (1992) were pointing out that the African context is vastly different and that viewing language loss and language shift as necessarily bad is a value judgment and may not be viewed by speakers of these languages in the same way as by the linguists whose goal is to document them.

In contexts such as Australia, where language is used as a means of establishing indigenous rights to particular territories, the ideological notion of one language, one tribe, one land (perhaps modelled on the European ideology of the nation state) may mean that a more accurate picture of complex repertoires and multilingualism is unhelpful to the groups who are the subjects of such documentations (see e.g. Henderson 2002, Boynton 2014). In contrast, as pointed out by Ladefoged (1992), an emphasis on individual languages in the African context may be seen as an inappropriate focus on tribalism, while in countries such as Tanzania, the promotion of a national language may be seen as of major importance in the striving for national unity; at the same time, the ability to speak and be educated in a national language may be a matter of pride and an economic advantage, rather than a matter of regret.

As Essegbey et al. (2015: 4) point out, when speakers of African languages do shift, it is often to related languages, and a multilingual ecology is usually maintained. Mufwene (2002), meanwhile, emphasises the importance of recognising the vastly different impacts of different colonial experiences and histories in different language ecologies across the world:

> we cannot overlook similarities, such as the fact that language loss has been the most catastrophic in settlement colonies and new language varieties have emerged additively in trade colonies (i.e. without replacing some extant languages). On the other hand, we must still note differences from one colony to another, regardless of whether the members of the relevant subset can all be identified as plantation or non-plantation settlement colonies, or as trade or exploitation colonies. Settlement colonies of North America still differ from those of Latin America, plantation col-

onies of the Atlantic and Indian oceans were not quite the same as those of the Pacific, and exploitation colonies of Africa were not quite the same as those of Asia.

The theoretical discourse of language documentation shapes the research methodologies and practices used in the field. Documentation is usually grounded in language description and the goal of writing a grammar, supplemented by a lexicon or dictionary and text collection in the so-called Boasian triad. Woodbury's (2005, 2011) notion of the ancestral code as a major focus of documentary activities is in some senses, of course, a natural and obvious outcome of documentation activities: this is usually the domain that is most endangered, holding an iconic value for both speakers and linguists as representing the language in its "original", "traditional" or "unaltered" form - particularly where revitalisation is the goal, as is often the case in Australia or North America.

Childs et al. (2014) challenge this notion for the African context, proposing a "sociolinguistic" model as a basis for producing a fuller record of the language practices of a community. However, an ethnographic approach, ideally based on the work of interdisciplinary teams, has been promoted from the very beginnings of language documentation as a discipline. Boas himself, as an anthropologist, saw language as only one aspect of a much broader anthropological picture of human diversity (that also encompassed social and economic organisation, religion, art and a great deal more) (Moore 2009). A language documentation is defined by Himmelmann (1998: 166) as aiming "at the record of the linguistic practices and traditions of a speech community" (his emphasis), while Woodbury (2005) sets out as good documentary practice an approach that focuses "on actual language behaviour in contemporary speech communities… on linguistic creativity and adaptivity, seeing language and communication not so much as things, but as ways and strategies". A documentation of a contemporary community ecology will ideally produce "a community-oriented ethnography of speaking (Gumperz and Hymes 1964), focused not just on a single code, but revealing an overall communicative ecology where each different code and way of speaking has a place" (Woodbury 2005: 258).

The papers brought together in this volume return our attention to the need to include a detailed ethnographic approach in our research in order to facilitate understanding of the social realities of speaker populations and their language use and socialisation patterns. They make the case for greater ethnographic sensitisation on the part of the scientific community, especially in contexts like Africa where the issues around the endangerment situation do not centre around the revitalisation of an ancestral code (as is usually the case, for instance, in North America).

2. THE PAPERS. Friederike Lüpke describes the linguistic biographies and repertoires of members of two households of Agnack (Senegal). The area is characterised by small groups made up of extended families, whose survival has always depended on the utilisation of a range of social strategies for exchange and alliance, including exogamous marriage practices, child fostering and ritually, economically and religiously motivated multilingualism. She shows how an ethnographic approach, taking life histories as a basis, leads to a broader understanding of the linguistic repertoires at play, and explores how ethnic and linguistic identity in this highly dynamic environment can only be understood when such social strategies are taken into account. An understanding of all these factors is necessary

in order to be able to interpret and understand the linguistic behaviour of a community where, in addition to the Atlantic language Baïnounk Gujaher, which is "the" village language according to the localist language ideology, Joola Susaana, Balant, Manjak, Pepel, Joola Fogny and Joola Kasa, Wolof, Creole, Gugëcer, French and sometimes Pular are all spoken on a daily basis, depending on who is speaking, in what context and to whom. Lüpke's analysis, revealing the complex repertoires of speakers in Agnack, thereby challenges essentialist language ideologies.

Lüpke goes on to analyse the match between language ideologies and male linguistic practices in this patrilineal and virilocal society, contrasting these with the linguistic identities and practices of women, who usually marry out of their communities of origin. Her examination of these two extended families also exemplifies child fostering practices and shows how the socialisation of children promotes and maintains a situation of complex identities and multilingual repertoires. She concludes by calling for the recognition of multilingualism as a great social and cognitive resource, rather than as interference in a monolingual ideal, and argues that documentary research on multilingualism has the potential to be of benefit not only in sociolinguistics and related fields but also in language management and pedagogy, both in Africa and in the West.

Also investigating the Senegalese context, **Serge Sagna** and **Emmanuel Bassène** present a study on naming practices in Gújjolaay Eegimaa, a Jóola language of southern Senegal, focusing on practices surrounding child-bearing. The documentation of child bearing names for women and death prevention names for infants goes beyond the simple collection of lists of names; it requires an understanding not only of what the names mean but of the belief system behind them, the speakers' world view and the way names are used in their efforts to protect newborn babies from the supernatural forces that may affect them. Such documentation provides insights into the language contact situation of speakers as they interact with other language communities through the Gaññalen birth ritual, where a woman who has lost several children or had successive miscarriages may leave her home and settle temporarily in another village in order to hide from the forces that are tormenting her; as part of this ritual, both the mother and her child are given special names (often in the language of their host community rather than in Eegimaa) in order to conceal their identities and confuse the spirits. The meanings of such names give insights into the Eegimaa kinship system, and particularly into how speakers conceptualise the relationship between the human and the spiritual world.

Other name changing practices and phenomena of language contact and change are also explored, including name changing to avoid homonymy with the name of a deceased person, the giving of a royal name given when a new king is enthroned, and the adoption of wealth names or praise names, which reflect a person's wealth in terms of the livestock they own. The latter practice is being lost as money takes the place of cattle as a measure of wealth. The documentation of proper names therefore provides a window not only onto speakers' belief systems but also onto the sociological and economic changes that are taking place in Eegimaa society. There are excellent possibilities for collaborative research in this area with disciplines such as anthropology and philosophy.

Given the pervasive multilingual practices found in Lower Fungom (NW Cameroon), **Pierpaolo Di Carlo** argues that a documentation of a language requires us not only to focus on language but on the language ecology within which each language exists. He

also provides practical advice on how to include ethnographic work on language ecologies and ideologies in language documentation work. He illustrates his points around a case study of individual multilingualism, showing how language choices are motivated not by a language ideology based on prestige (except in the cases of English and French) but as a means of indexing a speaker's affiliation to one of any number of different groups. The gradual decline of such multilingualism is perceived as "good news" from the perspective of the ancestral code approach to language documentation, in which multilingualism is seen as endangering ancestral languages; however, Di Carlo argues that in Lower Fungom (and elsewhere in Africa), such multilingualism, expressing multiple social identities, is rather an essential part of a long-established language ecology that now seems to be endangered itself. "Going thicker", he explores how multilingualism is advantageous not only in terms of a non-hierarchically structured society, where organisation is at the level of kin-based groups, but that language choices are also closely tied into ritual authority and spiritual agency.

Discussing the importance of an ethnographic and locally grounded approach to documentation, Di Carlo's paper proposes methodological tools through which the communicative practices and language ideologies of a given community, embedded in an understanding of the local language ecology and ideology, might be recorded and analysed, and shows how language ideology might be targeted and dealt with as an archivable documentary outcome. While in many cases the ancestral code approach may be a necessary starting point in documenting a new language, and a more phenomenological approach to documentation may add layers of complexity beyond the scope of a single linguist with limited time and funding, Di Carlo provides a set of practical recommendations intended to facilitate the gathering of ethnographic data and a better understanding of the complex ecologies within which many endangered languages exist.

An often-used practice in fieldwork is to take a team approach and work with local participants to transcribe recordings. **Lutz Marten** and **Malin Petzell** present a case study of the life cycle of a Kagulu text, comparing a recorded oral story, a first transcription of it, and a further edited version, in which Swahili-influenced forms are replaced and supplemented by forms which are felt to be more authentically Kagulu, an interesting reflection of a purist ideology, and the other side of the ancestral code coin described by Woodbury (2005). While raising questions about the status of existing documents in language documentation, their study shows that all versions of the text are valid, 'authentic' representations of a particular linguistic reality.

The basic assumption underlying most transcription practices is that the native speaker just writes down what s/he hears. Conversation analysts have already discussed in detail the interpretive processes underlying transcription: cognitive perception is a fast mapping process relying on parameters like frequency of structures and lexical items, which may lead to editing in the transcription process, while local transcribers also have opinions about how things should be said and may introduce their own revisions. Marten and Petzell's study shows the importance of a detailed documentation of the transcription process, allowing for an evidence-based verification of the original recording. The dynamics of the interaction between these three texts provides a detailed picture of linguistic variation in Kagulu and of how speakers may use and exploit it. The example shows that looking at different versions of a text, and their history, enables us to develop a richer picture, not

only of the particular language under scrutiny, but also of the multilingual context and the dynamics of language contact and variation within which its speakers are embedded.

3. CONCLUSIONS. Taking the studies reported and their theoretical and methodological implications at face value, the major theme that emerges is that the way languages are used, codes are switched and words are borrowed is influenced by many factors, which may not necessarily match the assumptions made by the prevailing perspective of our linguistic discipline (such as power, prestige and personal gain). Arguing against the idea that it is appropriate to document a "language" as a single entity divorced from its broader cultural context, the authors show that approaching this picture on the basis of a careful ethnographic approach, particularly in the African context of complex language ecologies and multilingual repertoires that flourish at both a societal and an individual level, will allow us to come to a much more sophisticated understanding of language endangerment and of the reasons why shift or stability may occur in a given community.

All of the contributors to this volume are practitioners of language documentation who emphasise the richness of what can be learnt from an ethnographic approach, from understanding certain usages of a lexical item to understanding language use, change and shift in a particular context. Such an approach has been articulated as best practice from the very beginnings of language documentation, but its application to African linguistic cultures calls for a paradigm shift in how we think about the scope (and depth) of a language documentation project: their perspective has broader implications for language policies and maintenance programmes, while also affecting how we plan our research at a community level, what we record, and how we focus the scope of our research down to the achievable levels of a practical (fundable) documentation project.

There is ample evidence that similar situations of pervasive multilingualism existed (and in many cases exist) worldwide. This richness of human cultural and linguistic diversity is brought into focus by the emerging approaches represented by the Africanists writing in this volume.

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