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## Supporting vital repertoires, not revitalizing languages

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### 1. The position of African languages

All African languages, from the largest to the smallest, exist with very minor or no institutional support in self-sustained language ecologies. Only languages of colonial pedigree are recognized as official languages and used widely in formal domains. South Africa, which has recognized 11 languages as official languages and is investing in their use in formal education is the only exception to this observation. While the continent has its share of endangered and moribund languages (for a recent overview see Dimmendaal and Voeltz 2007; Sands 2009), many small African languages belong to the category of threatened languages. These languages are spoken by vital rural communities that are vulnerable to external threats resulting in their dissolution, such as (forced) migration to flee political unrest, escape the consequences of climate change or participate in the salaried labour market (Dimmendaal 2008; Mous 2003; Lüpke 2015a; Vigouroux and Mufwene 2008 *inter alia*). These movements weaken the rural communities that are the home bases for small languages and lead to the forging of new ethnolinguistic identities of their urban diaspora speakers.

All speakers of small African languages are bi- or multilingual, and in addition to their local community language often speak one or several other local languages, complemented by languages of wider communication often spanning state borders. To these repertoires are added the official languages of the postcolonial states, which are mainly formally learned in schools but also informally acquired. Apart from diglossic contexts requiring the use of the official languages, the roles of languages in the complex ecologies in which their speakers live are governed by their social needs (Lüpke and Storch 2013).

It has long been recognized that the lack of investment in African languages is a major hurdle to civic participation and inclusive education (Bamgbose 2000; Alexander 2008; Djité 2008; Prah 2002). It has equally become widely accepted that only multilingual communication and education models have the potential to overcome the linguistic exclusion that bans the majority of Africans from fully participation in their societies. Yet, no efficient language strategies have been developed, and even less so implemented to date. While this has a negative impact on the status of all African languages, it of course renders the position of vulnerable languages even more volatile.

### 2. Africanist positions on language maintenance and revitalization on the African continent

In the light of the multifaceted multilingual settings of the continent, Africanists have been hesitant actors of language revitalization. Many adopt a position epitomized by Newman (2003), who characterizes this enterprise as a "hopeless cause". Newman argues forcefully that linguists are not prepared to engage in revitalization activities, that taking part in these efforts takes some of the already scarce resources away from their central task of scientific language description and documentation, and that Westerners are ill equipped to develop efficient revitalization models. Their African colleagues, he states, have not been adequately trained and, often coming from numerically larger language groups, do not care about language endangerment. A crucial and often

overlooked point made by Newman is that Western attempts at language revitalization often assume simplistic positions on the role and scope of revitalization based on a patronizing postcolonial stance, ignoring the complex multilingual and multi-ethnic configurations of African societies. This view is shared by Ameka (2015) who warns against implicit Western language ideologies underlying linguistic documentation and revitalization resulting in practices that, rather than strengthening linguistic diversity, contribute to decrease it, emphatically rejecting standard literacy practices as particularly harmful in this regard. Dimmendaal (2015), reporting on his own experience in a revitalization project centred on orthography development in the Tima language of Sudan, comes to the conclusion that even when communities actively ask for particular language revitalization activities, a clash between instrumental functions (which are communicative and related to linguistic participation at a larger scale) and integrative functions (which relate to identity at the local scale) of languages means that speakers of minority languages will not use the minority language in instrumental functions in practice, but only claim it for the symbolic affirmation of their local identity. I have observed a similar dialectic relationship between pragmatic and adaptive multilingualism and a symbolic group identity linked to a fictional standard language through fictional codification tied to a standard orthography for the Bāinounk languages of Senegal (Lüpke 2015b). Essegbey (2015), Childs (Forthcoming (2017)) and Lüpke (Forthcoming (2017)) also stress the need to overcome Western language ideologies stemming from the colonial period and seek to develop community-based revitalization models drawing on vernacular regimes of knowledge production rather than relying on Western models based on standardization. Taking this argument a step further, Rohloff and Henderson (2015) plead for a move away from language development (including language revitalization), focussing on language-centred activities, to a model of development through language, aiming at building and strengthening social institutions that allow the use of African languages. This view is shared by Wolff (2016), who only sees the future for African languages in a radically reformed development discourse that overcomes its current "linguaphobia" and takes the full complexity of African multilingual settings on board, a position also taken by Ngué Um (2015), and by UNESCO, who vividly promote culturally embedded multilingual knowledge transmission and education for Africa (Ouane and Glanz 2010).

### 3. Language development: a dominant focus on languages

From the first missionary activities resulting in the development of Latin-based alphabets for African languages (Pasch 2008) to the present day, African language development has centred on the creation of written materials. This written bias is tied to the main stakeholders of language development in Africa, who are in their majority members of faith-based NGOs such as SIL, missionary organizations such as the New Tribes Mission, or Western descriptive linguistics and only marginally involve African institutions (and if so, mainly organizations that incarnate Western monolingual standard culture). Where national institutions for the development of African languages exist, they often collaborate with SIL, as is the case of the PROPELCA program and NACALCO in Cameroon. SIL and missionary organizations have a particular literacy and language development goal: that of creating populations literate in their 'heart' language so that they can access the Bible, whose translation they see as their central task, in these languages. Descriptive and applied linguists, be it in the West or at African universities, have been trained in an artefactual paradigm (Blommaert 2008a) geared towards describing and fixing languages through standard written representations that has characterized linguistics from the colonial period onwards. These actors (often combining both roles starting the first missionary-linguists that were part of the colonial enterprise until today) thus have their own stakes and as Westerners or part of the African elites exert great power in transplanting their own ideological model of language development.

Generally, this model starts with the creation of an orthography, often based on official national or regional scripts, and relies on the creation of standard spellings, although in particular in the context

of small languages, the resources to develop these are lacking. In many African countries, for instance Senegal and Ethiopia (Lüpke 2015b; Lanza and Woldemariam 2014), symbolic graphization of this type has become a prerequisite for the official recognition of a group as a national minority, and hence many language activists are actively seeking the support of linguists in order to be able to be politically represented by these means. In many cases, this model relies on prior harmonization or the elimination of variation, for instance in the models adopted by NACALCO in Cameroon, CASAS and PRAESA in South Africa and ACALAN, the newly created language organ of the African Union.

Many larger African languages have been nominally harmonized and become equipped with standard orthographies and can in principle be used in formal classroom education, the main locus of African language development to date. Three main strategies can be distinguished. In a minority of African countries (at some point in time for instance Guinea, Mali, Kenya and Tanzania) and with great fluctuation in terms of available resources, African languages were or are used as medium of instruction or taught as a subject in primary or secondary education. In the majority of African countries, some of the larger languages of wider communications are only used in experimental classes in primary schools or in adult literacy classes (see Brock-Utne and Skattum 2009 for an overview). Where efforts are taken to invest in language development for minority and endangered languages, the standard literacy model described above is generally adopted, with the following consequences:

The focus of these activities is always on one language. This outlook can have two opposite and undesirable effects: On the one hand, it results in a levelling of variation, with linguistic diversity being systematically reduced as part of the codification process. On the other hand, the quest for political representation based on demonstrating the existence of a particular ethnolinguistic entity through a standard written language (and minimal body of literature testifying to it) can lead to a proliferation of groups seeking this status, with small, often village-based groups breaking off from larger ethnic or linguistic configurations to see their independent identity confirmed. While language development in these cases serves the political goals of minority groups, it does not actually contribute to strengthening the use of their languages. For one, the materials often constitute a reification that has little similarity with spoken language use. In addition, the almost exclusive focus of language development consisting of language-based written materials (see Sands Forthcoming for an exhaustive overview of these activities and a succinct characterization of their potential and limitations) produces another side effect. These materials are unusable in most situations, given that their use would require the mobilization of resources that are not available for the largest African languages (not even for many of the official languages), let alone for small, village-based languages.

A final shortcoming of many language development activities in Africa is their lack of sustainability, linked to the failure of institutional uptake, connected in turn to the lack of the considerable resources required to guarantee their maintenance. SIL notwithstanding, there are very few organizations with long-term resources and commitment present on the continent to create and execute long term language development goals even for its largest languages. ACALAN is struggling to mobilize support for the 12 cross-border languages it has identified as crucial for an advancement of African languages, and so do the national language institutions. Small languages are below the threshold of perception not only from ACALAN's perspective.

#### 4. An emerging concern for grassroots practices and lifelong learning

Conscious of the limitations of interventionist language development activities, a number of initiatives draw attention to the need to study existing regimes of writing. Essegbey (2015) reports on a literacy campaign in Ewe, a major language of Ghana, that departs from the notion of creating standard writers but rather enables them to write in grassroots literacy practices also observed in

other African contexts by Blommaert (2008b), Deumert and Lexander (2013), Juffermans (2015) Lanza and Woldemariam (2014) Lexander and Lopes (Forthcoming (2017)), Lüpke and Bao-Diop (2014) and Mc Laughlin (2014; 2015; Forthcoming (2017)). In Essegbey's campaign, no orthographic norms are enforced; writers are encouraged instead to use the sound-grapheme associations they have been taught in their own creative ways. In the absence of a model of language socialization enforcing literacy from early infancy, he compellingly argues, literacy based on a standard must fail, and flexible grassroots practices are the only way to strengthen the use of African languages. Childs (Forthcoming (2017)) describes language development activities within an endangered languages documentation project on the Sierra Leonian language Mani. He classifies literacy activities into program-centric and learner-centric ones, and, in an insightful critical evaluation of his own practices, arrives at the conclusion that their program-centric components, in particular classroom literacy, were a complete failure. He sees potential only for those aspects of literacy development only that are learner-centric, i.e. that respond to intrinsic literacy needs of learners, for instance the writing of text messages, or to cultural needs, for instance the writing down of folktales, songs and local history.

Inherent to Essegbey's orthography development and explicitly stated by Childs (Forthcoming (2017)) and Dimmendaal (2015) is an emphasis on the importance of local practices and the creation of locally meaningful and sustainable writing cultures. Such approaches are aware of the need to integrate ethnographic and sociolinguistic research prior to any revitalization activities.

##### 5. The development of literacy activities inspired by African regimes of writing

In many African settings, indigenous communication practices, including writing, are inherently multilingual. Many of the Arabic-based literacy and literary traditions widely attested in the sphere of influence of Islam (Mumin and Versteegh 2014), for instance, combine text in Arabic with major African languages in a fluid manner, using Arabic as the lead languages that provides the norms for sound-grapheme associations (Lüpke and Bao-Diop 2014). Studies of modern digital literacy practices (Deumert 2014; Deumert and Lexander 2013; Lexander and Lopes Forthcoming (2017); Mc Laughlin 2014) exhibit similar multilingual patterns in the Latin script, here using the language of first literacy (the language of formal schooling, in most cases the ex-colonial official language) as the lead determining which sound value is assigned to letters and letter combinations. Whereas Deumert and Lexander state that even in these grassroots digital practices small languages are dramatically underrepresented and attribute this to their status as minority languages, I ascribe the absence of small languages from digital communication to their limited geographic spread and small speaker numbers, and to the translocal nature of electronic communication. Ongoing research (Lüpke Forthcoming (2017)) has shown that where speakers can connect to their local networks in which repertoires are shared, including local languages, for instance on Facebook walls visited by close friends, they use small languages. These parts of the multilingual repertoires are suppressed where the intended interlocutors are unlikely to match them, for instance on national discussion boards.

What appears as crucial for these multilingual literacies to emerge and persist is self-sustainability in the absence of norm-enforcing institutions to support them (see also Souag 2010 on the design principles of Ajami literacies motivated by this fact). Central is also that by allowing the fluid and adaptive writing of entire repertoires according to the same principle they do not turn multilingualism into a burden. Just as multilingual speakers do not use all their languages in all contexts and domains, so do multilingual writers and readers use parts of their repertoires for different purposes and to different extents in writing. Language-independent literacies remove the cost generally attached to the writing of small languages, which is always additive to writing a large language, since larger languages are the ones that have the widest scope for being widely written and read and are more likely to benefit from some kind of supporting infrastructure. Since one and

the same principle of sound-grapheme association can be transferred to all languages an individual will be exposed to throughout their life, this type of language-independent literacy is very reminiscent of current approaches to oral multilingualism which emphasize the need to fully activate an individual's resources by allowing "translanguaging" (García and Wei 2014). These approaches are being tested in particular in the South African multilingual context, where 11 African languages, in total contrast to the rest of the continent, have the status of official languages and are being used in education (Childs 2016; Makalela 2016; Probyn 2015). A pilot study to take translanguaging into the written domain, by developing teaching activities based on language-independent literacies inspired by indigenous West African regimes of writing is under way in the Crossroads project in Southern Senegal (Lüpke Forthcoming (2017)).

## 6. Activities moving beyond literacy and language development

In addition to emerging language development activities inspired by locally embedded social practice, a new type of activities has moved its focus entirely away from language to concentrate efforts on supporting linguistic repertoires within their language ecologies, or on strengthening the ecologies themselves (also argued for by Mufwene 2016). One such project is the Pig for Pikin project stemming from collaborative linguistic and ethnographic research on rural multilingualism in Northwestern Cameroon (Di Carlo and Good 2014; Good 2012). Pig for Pikin connects villagers to the wider Cameroonian economy by investing in pig raising. The revenue from pig farming will be harnessed for improving access to schools for the local children (*pikin* in Pidgin). The long-term effect for the communities that this project hopes to reach goes beyond material benefits; it aims to provide support for the wider socioeconomic context in which speakers of small languages in rural areas can continue to exist by supporting their rural livelihood. In the Cameroonian case, the rural language ecology is not immediately threatened by external events. In other areas, ecologies have been or are being altered or destroyed, for instance through the creation of the Mole National Park in Northern Ghana (Brindle 2015), exiling the inhabitants of this area and destroying the social networks and connections to land and shrines that had nurtured the use of several small languages. In these cases, only symbolic 'postrevitalization' is possible, i.e. a collection of the memories and oral histories linked to a particular place for the representational benefit of disowned and displaced groups. In the case of the Nubian Languages and Cultures Project, working in Sudanese Nubian villages that will be resettled in the wake of the construction of new dam on the Nile, preventive measures are taking place to document an ecology that will cease to exist in its current form.

## 7. Recommendations for practice and future directions of language development in Africa

Interventionist language development activities that require high initial investment and continuous maintenance have little promise to realize the multilingual turn unanimously demanded by all actors of language development in Africa. In particular language-based and standard literacy-centred campaigns have little scope for actual use by numerically small groups and often fulfil only purposes of symbolic representation. The little uptake of these activities also points to the importance of recognizing the power of language ideologies of all stakeholders in language development, to the need to distinguish ideologies from practice, and to the urgency of realizing the power imbalance created through the prevalence of Western language ideologies.

Many African languages and language ecologies are vital without any formal and language-centred support, and the indigenous practices in these settings should serve as a model for language support activities, which, following Rohloff and Henderson (2015), should always be couched as development through and with language, i.e. as activities strengthening the existing social institutions and their communication strategies and extending them to contexts from which they are banned (formal education, health care and political institutions, etc.) Strategies aiming at opening



these domains to particular languages are doomed to fail in the heterogeneous African context with mobile populations. Rather, the existing multilingual practices at the grassroots should serve as models, since only multilingualism allows small languages to thrive. In contrast to Western institutions, which serve the propagation of monolingualism prescribed by the nation state, many African institutions are hosting and nurturing multilingualism. This multilingualism is different from the stacked-on monolingualisms that are inherent in many language development models and that make multilingualism costly for speakers of small languages, since they are expected to speak, read and write more standard languages than speakers of large languages. Most of the communicative practices of African institutions have not been studied at all from a multilingualism perspective. There is, for instance, only very little research available on the role of institutions such as Q'uranic schools for language socialization (but see Moore 2008), although these schools are widespread loci of multilingual literacy development. The role of peer groups, age classes and initiation societies is likewise unknown as regards their important contribution to nurturing complex language ecologies. Village and neighbourhood assemblies, religious congregations and courts are places where multilingualism is negotiated on a daily basis in African societies, yet we lack the most basic data on the means through which it is achieved, transmitted and adapted to changing circumstances.

The study of how individuals use multilingual repertoires in these ecologies, and the contribution of institutions to the maintenance of linguistic diversity including small languages in multilingual contexts is an absolute requirement that needs to precede and flank any language development considerations. It is expected that in many cases, a deep understanding of local language ecologies will in fact result in making many language-based and language-centred activities superfluous and instead lead to the formulation of strategies that protect existing grassroots practices from harmful interventions. As many examples of disrupted language ecologies on the African continent have shown, Western intervention, from colonization, the creation of arbitrary borders and the imposition of (post)colonial language policies to the imposition of nature reserves and destruction of the natural environment has had numerous harmful effects on African language ecologies. African languages thrive most where this intervention has been limited and suffer most where it has been vast, as the example of the dying languages in the former settlement colonies of Southern Africa forcefully shows. A radical rethinking away from Western-inspired interventionist models and towards the empowerment of local practices is in order.

## 7. Further reading

Brock-Utne, Birgit; Skattum, Ingse (Eds.) (2009): *Languages and education in Africa: A comparative and transdisciplinary analysis*. Oxford: Symposium.

Bringing together African and Western contributions, this volume offers a comprehensive account of the role of African languages in education.

Djité, Paulin G (2008): *The sociolinguistics of development in Africa*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Providing an overview enriched by lived experience as well as ample case studies, this monograph makes a strong case for integrating effective multilingual models into African language development.

Essegbey, James A.; Henderson, Brent; Mc Laughlin, Fiona (Eds.) (2015): *Language documentation and endangerment in Africa*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

This volume provides a critical overview of language endangerment, language documentation and revitalization in Africa.

Sands, Bonny (Forthcoming): Language revitalization in Africa. In Kenneth Rehg, Lyle Campbell (Eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

This chapter presents the most exhaustive overview and critical evaluation of language revitalization activities in Africa available to date.

Wolff, Ekkehard (2016): *Language and development in Africa. Perceptions, ideologies and challenges*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Based on a life time of sociolinguistic research in many African settings, this monograph cogently calls for a new, Africa-centred paradigm with a renewed focus on the role of languages and multilingualism for development.

#### 8 Institutions and projects, their abbreviations and their websites (where available)

| Abbreviation | Full name  | Website   |
|--------------|--|---|
| ACALAN       | African Academy of Language  | <a href="http://www.acalan.org/index.php/en/">http://www.acalan.org/index.php/en/</a>             |
| CASAS        | Centre for the Advanced Study of African Society                             | <a href="http://www.casas.co.za/">http://www.casas.co.za/</a>                                     |
| NACALCO      | National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees                      |   |
|              | The Nubian Languages and Cultures Project                                    | <a href="http://www.nubianlanguagesandculture.org/">http://www.nubianlanguagesandculture.org/</a> |
|              | Pig for Pikin  | <a href="http://www.pigforpikin.org/">http://www.pigforpikin.org/</a>                             |
| PRAESA?      | Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa               | <a href="http://www.praesa.org.za/">http://www.praesa.org.za/</a>                                 |
| PROPELCA     | Projet de Recherche Opérationnel pour l'Enseignement des Langues du Cameroun |   |
| SIL          | Summer Institut of Linguistics   | <a href="https://www.sil.org/">https://www.sil.org/</a>   |
| UNESCO       | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization             | <a href="http://whc.unesco.org/">http://whc.unesco.org/</a>                                       |

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