



## PERSPECTIVES

### **African(ist) perspectives on vitality: Fluidity, small speaker numbers, and adaptive multilingualism make vibrant ecologies (Response to Mufwene)**

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This paper addresses language vitality from an Africanist perspective. I identify central components for the paradigm Mufwene (2017) invites us to conceive: the investigation of communicative practices in language ecologies (rather than the study of a language), of fluid speech and its relation to imaginary reifications, of indexical functions of speech and language, and of language ideologies and the perspectives contained in them. I argue that the study of small-scale multilingual ecologies driven by adaptivity, rather than by fixed ethnolinguistic identities and ancestral languages, and the recognition of small languages as causally related to language vitality, not to endangerment, are crucial for a rethinking of linguistic vitality and diversity.

*Keywords:* language vitality, Africa, small-scale multilingualism, rural multilingualism, transdisciplinary perspectives, language ecologies

**1. AN INVITATION TO STUDY LANGUAGE ECOLOGIES IN AN INTER- AND TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH PROGRAM.** For this Africanist, perhaps the most important message of Mufwene's (2017) article is the one that 'language ecosystems of different polities are not identical' (p. e219), flanked by his pertinent observation that 'language activists have been more interested in correcting evolution than in seeking to understand it from a historical and comparative perspective' (p. e208). These points constitute a forceful invitation to develop the situated study of language ecologies and to approach linguistic settings not exclusively with a perspective on particular languages, nor on their endangerment or vitality. This research involves approaching ecologies as constellations where imaginary reified representations of language ('languages as systems', in Mufwene's words) coexist with fluid and adaptive language use (Mufwene's 'communication practices'). Such a necessarily inter- and transdisciplinary research program needs to rest on four pillars: the investigation of communicative practices in a meaningful geographical setting or language ecosystem (rather than the study of a language); the inquiry into how these communicative practices are named and reified, and which and whose ideologies and perspectives result in naming them differently (rather than assuming that preestablished codes or registers will directly manifest themselves or that there is only fluid languaging); the study of the indexical functions of language use and languages as ideological representations (rather than the expectation that they will correspond to polyglossic configurations and domain-specific functions described or assumed for other contexts); and, finally, research on the different power dynamics, perspectives, and ideologies of speakers and outsiders inherent in these enterprises.

**2. LETTING GO OF CORE CONCEPTS AND NOTIONS OF LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT.** Such a research program requires critical engagement with influential notions and concepts of language endangerment. For the African context, this means that many of the fundamental tenets of this paradigm need to be questioned. Here, I focus on four of these, all of which feature in Mufwene's article, and for which I propose an extension or rethinking in the light of African linguistic situations: the notion of ancestral language, the alignment of language with ethnicity, the association of multilingualism with urbanity, and the connection between small speaker numbers and language endangerment. Mufwene uses the notion of ancestral language (in the singular) of a group and investi-

gates conditions under which it is or is not maintained, stating that in some cases, individuals can have more than one heritage language (for instance, in the case of bilingual families), associating multilingual settings mostly with urban contexts. He rightly casts doubt on the validity of stances that see language as intrinsically linked to the expression of (ethnic) culture in towns and cities. As I discuss below, we must go even further and let go of the idea of ethnic group and of the alignment of ethnicity or identity with one and only one language and of a strong link between language and culture in the majority of African situations, not just in urban ones. Finally and importantly, Mufwene questions the correlation between language endangerment and small population size; in fact, I argue that it is possible and necessary to assume a stronger position that causally links small population size to a high degree of linguistic diversity and language vitality.

**3. UNLEARNING IMAGINATIONS OF ISOLATED ‘TRIBES’ AND ACKNOWLEDGING THE EXISTENCE OF RURAL MULTILINGUAL GROUPS.** Drawing on a large body of ethnographic and historical research, Lüpke and Storch (2013) challenged the Eurocentric expectation of a monolingual ethnolinguistic group sharing an ancestral language, crucially for rural as well as urban areas. Beginning systematic research on rural multilingualism in Africa is uncovering the complexity of these settings (Cobbinah et al. 2016, Di Carlo 2016, Di Carlo & Good 2014, Di Carlo et al. 2017, Lüpke 2016a, 2018, Ngué Um 2015, Storch et al. 2014). The image of sedentary ‘tribal’ groups is turned on its head by the widespread existence of African sites of high linguistic diversity, particularly in the sub-Saharan fragmentation belt, reaching from the Atlantic coast of West Africa to the Ethiopian escarpment (Dimmendaal 2008, Güldemann 2008). A high degree of linguistic diversity, as is present particularly in this area of Africa (and beyond), is associated with a high number of named languages attested there. Although detailed research on most of these settings is lacking, it is very likely that most of these languages are not spoken by the isolated tribes still inhabiting popular and linguistic imagination and endangerment catalogues, but by small-scale multilingual groups that for the most part also participate in larger-scale networks and speak larger languages, as is the case in other small-scale multilingual settings worldwide (Lüpke 2016b).

**4. DISCARDING MONOLINGUAL IDEOLOGIES THAT ALWAYS SEE MULTILINGUALISM AS A THREAT.** Understanding how and why languages thrive in these areas is linked to a shift away from seeing multilingualism as a modern, globalized, and urban phenomenon to acknowledging it as a long-standing African reality. Monolingual language ideologies continue to shape prevailing perspectives, and not just with regard to the African situation, and they result in the perception of complex language ecologies as places associated with only one ancestral language (Lüpke 2016a, 2018). But especially since Africa hosts a high proportion of the world’s languages in settings that defy these ideologies, it is of prime importance to develop multifaceted viewpoints (Gal 2016, Irvine 2016) that allow a characterization of vitality and endangerment on this continent that is not informed by just one perspective.

For many rural groups, untested assumptions that they were monolingual until very recently constitute ideologically fueled imaginings that have hindered a real assessment of their language use. Such assumptions are doubtless fueled by mainstream conceptions of multilingualism, characterizing it as a new and urban phenomenon (as found, for example, in the ‘superdiversity’ discourse (Blommaert & Rampton 2011), which exclusively associates intense multilingualism with modern, globalized contexts), and by a preponderance of studies on urban configurations in multilingualism research, both globally and in Africa. Africanist (socio)linguists are stressing the need for redressing

this picture by including other settings in their scope (Childs et al. 2014, Juillard 2005, Lüpke 2010). As noted above, the prevalent discourse of multilingualism as urban is flanked by the characterization, still dominant in the popular mind, of precolonial African groups as 'tribal', picturing them as homogeneous and sedentary groups.

It is crucial to overcome this fallacious perception. Colonial and postcolonial classifications attempting to impose essentialist identities and strict boundaries on groups that were and are heterogeneous and in which identities are multiple and relational rather than categorical (Di Carlo et al. 2017) are reductive. They mask the importance of multifaceted indices of identity, including clan membership, caste, religion, or profession, and overestimate the importance of recent concepts such as ethnicity and ethnolinguistic group, which have their origin in the colonial period, when colonial administrators took their romantic ideas of language to new territories. Our understanding of speakers' multiple networks and the indexical functions language has in them (Silverstein 2003) is still in its infancy, but it is crucial to see cultural and linguistic aspects of identity as not being expressed through a particular language, either in present-day urban settings or in rural areas. Trying to suppress the fluidity and adaptivity of these settings means locking people into a fixed identity tied to a fictional ancestral language that can only ever be endangered, as vividly argued by Woodbury (2011).

**5. RECOGNIZING SMALL SPEAKER NUMBERS AS CAUSALLY RELATED TO VITALITY, NOT TO ENDANGERMENT.** Mufwene rightly challenges the assumption, inherent in many vitality scales, that small population size plays a role in language endangerment, using evidence from Africa. He mentions in particular the existence of rural populations (presumably of small size) for which language and ethnicity are aligned as traits that render this association doubtful. From the observations made above it follows that many of these ecologies should be reconceptualized: they are not inhabited by particular ethnolinguistic groups of a small size, but in their majority host small-scale multilingual societies.

Regarding the link between small speaker numbers and endangerment, questioned by Mufwene, it is possible to strengthen his observation that small speaker numbers do not necessarily entail endangerment of a language. Rather, the high linguistic diversity on this continent is directly associated with the existence of small groups, whose members are bi- and multilingual in small languages and use languages of wider communication in their broader networks. It is not just erroneous to associate low speaker numbers with language endangerment (for instance, in the UNESCO vitality scale), though this assumption is indeed incongruous for situations of still-thriving diversity. If we accept that diversity entails the existence of small language communities, we need to acknowledge that small speaker numbers are in fact an index of linguistic vitality, rather than of endangerment. If we are ready to accept that these groups are linguistically heterogeneous because their members often engage in extensive social exchange with their neighbors, then bi- and multilingualism in these communities are not always an indicator of ongoing language shift and linguistic oppression, leading to language shift and loss. On the contrary, a language ecology that supports adaptive, small-scale multilingualism must be seen as the most supportive environment for small languages: it enables their speakers to communicate within their wider environment while providing social contexts for using those parts of the repertoire not shared with large numbers of people. It follows that interdisciplinary, sociolinguistically and anthropologically informed perspectives (Childs et al. 2014) on meaningful geographical areas and language ecologies that support complex linguistic repertoires are more apt to gain

empirically sound assessments of languages' synchronic vitality than a focus on individual languages.

6. DEVELOPING HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY. Mufwene's position paper is a welcome encouragement to develop these perspectives further, by abandoning the concepts and ontologies of ethnolinguistic group, speech community, and ancestral language, which have been dismantled by decades of anthropological and sociolinguistic research. The time has come for an imagining of new and holistic approaches to linguistic diversity.

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