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Africa: Challenges of Multilingualism

Afrika: Herausforderungen der Mehrsprachigkeit

Les défis du plurilinguisme en Afrique

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Multilingualism and Language Policies in Africa, with Particular Reference to Language-in-Education Issues

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Abstract

This introduction targets "novices" to the overlapping academic fields of sociolinguistics, the sociology of language, language policies and politics, language in education, and the role of language for development in multilingual and multicultural environments. It introduces basic concepts which are needed for a professional understanding of salient issues which pertain to the "language question" in Africa. Apart from its basic introductory characteristics, the paper advocates the empowerment of indigenous "mother tongue" languages to be used as valuable resources for overcoming underdevelopment and mass poverty in Africa, alongside the received imported (ex-colonial) languages of European provenance, in a strategic concept of *mother tongue-based multilingual education* for sustainable sociocultural, political, and economic development on the African continent.

Clearing the ground

This paper is meant to serve as a first introduction to the vast field of *African Sociolinguistics* and to issues of applied linguistics, in particular educational linguistics, in Africa.[1] It is intended for "novices" to the field who share, however, an academic background in language studies and who, as a rule, work as academic teachers and researchers, or language practitioners within or outside academia, in Africa. As such, they form the core clientele of our *ganaa* network.

The title of this introduction makes programmatic reference to some of the salient issues within a vast and ever expanding field which needed to be selected, for reasons of limited time and space available for this introduction. This

1 The paper was originally prepared for the 5th International Expert Workshop for Alumni of ganaa in Dakar, 26 November – 1 December 2010. The Dakar workshop was intended to follow the model set by the 1st International Expert Workshop for Alumni held in Leipzig, 2008, insofar as it would primarily address academic "novices" to the fields of African sociolinguistics and educational linguistics, this time in particular from the West African region, both Anglophone and Francophone. In addition to a newly written introductory section, this paper contains modified sections from my talk on "Language in Education in Africa" as it was originally given in the introductory plenary session in Leipzig, 2008. An earlier version had already been delivered as Keynote Address to The First Kenyan DAAD Scholars' Association (KDSA) Regional Conference ("On the principle of sustainability – a multidisciplinary view") at the University of Nairobi in 2006, under the title "Sustainable development and human resources management through education: The language factor."

selection of issues necessarily delimits the discussion to the exclusion of a large array of further issues, questions, and problems of equal importance.[2] Let us look at and justify, the crucial issues to be dealt with in the following sections, by taking up the key words in the title of this presentation.

Multilingualism, by implication almost co-referential to *multiculturalism*, is an essential feature of African socio-cultural reality which most Africans enjoy by using several languages as enriching resources, thereby enhancing their personal cognitive and communicative skills. These language resources, in turn, tend to open the way to education, advanced professional and vocational training, upward social mobility and democratic participation in wider issues of national development. In Africa and largely due to her colonial history, multilingualism tends to come along with extreme *di-* or *polyglossia*. These terms describe assumed and perceived inequalities, and hierarchies of power and prestige, among languages which, in turn, inform prejudicial stereotypes and clichés which again play a role in fostering folkloristic language attitudes that may prevail in societies of speakers. In Africa, the ex-colonial "official languages" of European provenance have widely become associated with the highest prestige as languages of power in the hands of ruling minorities (i.e. the new postcolonial "elites"); this makes them first choice candidates for being preferred as languages of (formal) education by parents who wish their children to proficiently acquire these languages in order to gain access to the ranks of these very postcolonial elites. Associating the (often foreign) official languages with upward social mobility and advanced economic prosperity, most stakeholders (i.e. parents, students, teachers, government officials etc.) have developed negative language attitudes towards the African mother tongues which are now being associated with traditionalism and backwardness and are considered symbols of inferiority and underdevelopment, all this under the persevering impact of *mental colonization* under the prevailing regimes of post-/neocolonial political, cultural, and economic dependencies. These powerful negative attitudes have meanwhile turned into self-fulfilling prophecies which are prohibitive to the empowering usage of African languages in high and prestigious domains, such as national and international politics and development, formal – and in particular higher – education, science and technology. In multilingual contexts, the dimensions of power and language ownership foster the emergence of a postcolonial class divide in African societies through "elite closure" (a term coined by Myers-Scotton 2009) and tend to have disastrous effects on the effectiveness

2 Another short and recent introduction to some general issues of African sociolinguistics can be found in Wolff (2011a, 2012); for a more comprehensive introduction see Wolff (2000).

and efficiency of educational systems in Africa. This is due to the widely spread ignorance concerning the role of the "Language Factor" for socio-cultural modernization and economic development, including practically all targets of the UNO's *Millennium Development Goals* for 2015 which, largely unnoticed, all have a linguistic dimension to be taken into consideration in order to achieve these goals in a sustainable way.

Language policies refer to legislative or governmental actions which are undertaken in order to solve language problems or conflicts within institutions, nation-states, or even supra-national bodies. Language policies must decide between multi- or monolingual strategies, and face the choice between endo- or exoglossic solutions, or the combination of the two by opting for official bi- or multilingualism using both African and non-African languages. Language policies are different from *language politics* which, however, may play a negative role in the sabotage of the implementation of such official policies by various forms of counter-activities from stakeholders, with their own and often hidden agendas. Some are fostered simply by ignorance, others by poor political culture in a given country, i.e. in the absence of "good governance." In Africa, bad language politics may turn the non-implementation of existing good language policies into being the rule rather than the exception.

"Anglophone" and "Francophone" (and we could add "Lusophone", "Hispanophone", and likewise "Nederlandophone" and "Germanophone", possibly also "Italophone") are widely used apparently descriptive terms for African countries which, however, belie current reality. They are justified only when they refer to the colonial past of the continent und should, as a rule, only be used in inverted commas because they are obvious misnomers for the description of the present day situation in Africa. Yet, since African independence 50 years ago, these terms and corresponding institutions (like, for instance, the *Commonwealth of Nations* for "Anglophone" countries and the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* for "Francophone" countries; similar language-based postcolonial institutions also exist for Portuguese-, Spanish-, Dutch-speaking former colonial territories; note, also, the *Arabic League* as a political pressure group which is likewise based on the usage of a common language, namely Arabic) are being used as ideological constructs and political instruments in order to boost the waning global political prestige of the former colonial powers. As a rule, however, hardly ever more than 20 percent (usually much less) of national populations in Africa use the ex-colonial languages, despite their elevated status as "official languages", in daily routines; here we also notice drastic differences between rural areas and urban centres. African countries are, first of all, "Afrophone", i.e. the vast majority of Africans – estimated between 80 percent and 90 percent – speak African languages, and most Africans do so exclusively by us-

ing one or several African languages in all domains of verbal interaction. On the other hand, formally well-educated Africans who tend to concentrate in urban centres, mainly in the capital cities, tend to use patterns of verbal interaction dominated by the use of languages of European origin. Many African intellectuals and politicians ("opinion leaders") have factually become monolingual in a European language with little or no rhetorical competence left in their original African mother tongue(s); many of them, however, even if they would not admit this openly, feel ashamed of this fact and, subconsciously, psychologically rationalize their linguistic deprivation by becoming fervent opponents to any kind of empowerment of the African mother tongues.

Note that both "Anglophone" and "Francophone" Africa appear to be the most widely described African subregions from a sociolinguistic perspective. Note further that the so-called "Arabophone" countries in Africa constitute a special case largely due to their different histories in terms of Islamization and European colonialism (for the special case of the Maghreb states cf. Wolff 2009).

There are different sociolinguistic research perspectives under which we can analyse and describe multilingualism in Africa. We distinguish, first of all, three aspects or levels of multilingualism:

(a) *Territorial multilingualism*. Here we are dealing with the geographic distribution of languages across territories whether national, sub-national, or supra-national territories. Typically in multilingual societies with high numbers of multilingual speakers (cf. individual and social multilingualism below), areas of language use overlap and create overlying linguistic strata with several if not very many languages spoken, for instance, in the major urban agglomerations. Note that for the African situation, the notion of *multi-monolingualism* makes a lot of sense for describing the neighbouring distribution of several largely if not exclusively, monolingual areas that make up large parts of national territories. Research interests here overlap with language geography and dialectology.

(b) *Institutional multilingualism*. Here we are dealing with language policies (see above) and more or less "institutionalized" language practices in any kind of social, cultural, religious, educational, political or other institution, from the grass-root level up to state or supra-state levels. The range, therefore, is from traditionally established local market languages via patterns of language use in schools and universities, churches and mosques, courts of justice, the media, etc. to official regulations concerning language use in national parliaments and supra-national bodies like those of the *European Un-*

ion or the *African Union*. Research interests here overlap with cultural and social anthropology (ethnography), sociology, and political science, but also economics.

(c) *Individual and social multilingualism*. Here we are dealing with *language behaviour*, i.e. patterns of language use, by individuals and definable groups of speakers. *Language choice*, the *pragmatics of speech acts*, the *ethnography of communication*, *multiple language acquisition, cognitive and intellectual effects of early childhood bi- and multilingualism* etc. but also *language attitudes, language prejudices and clichés* etc. are studied here. Research interests overlap with psychology and psycholinguistics, second language acquisition studies, and sociolinguistics in a more narrow sense.

For practical reasons, I tend to group both (a) *territorial multilingualism* and (b) *institutional multilingualism* under the label "macro-perspective" and consider (c) *individual and social multilingualism* as constituting the research focus of a "micro-perspective" in sociolinguistic research. Note that some authors would equate our macro-perspective partially with what they call the "sociology of language", and refer to our micro-perspective as "sociolinguistics" (in a narrower sense). Some authors, again, relate this distinction plainly to one's "home discipline", i.e. the theoretical framework from where to start, and the methodology behind it, i.e. whether one approaches basically the same issues as a professional sociologist or as a professional linguist.

Language in education, finally, is the core area of *ganaa*'s theoretical and practical concerns with multilingualism and language policies in Africa. In a very general sense, we are interested in the role of the 'Language Factor' in education for sustainable progress in Africa, i.e. for socio-cultural modernization and economic development via education for all, including poverty reduction and the abolishment of hunger, general health care, gender parity, democratic participation, political stability, etc. (cf. also the UN *Millennium Development Goals* for 2015). More specifically, we are interested in the political decisions and their implementations regarding language-in-education strategies as much as in the practical aspects of appropriate pedagogy and didactics. This means to take the 'Language Factor' seriously as a guiding parameter for models of mother tongue-based multilingual educational strategies.[3]

3 Under the auspices of ADEA [Association for the Development of Education in Africa] and UIL [UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning], a rather recent survey and critical account is provided in Alidou et al. (2006) which is accessible on the world wide web; a modified version thereof has just recently been published (Ouane/Glanz 2011).

This very general outline of some of the most salient issues in "Applied African Sociolinguistics", as I like to call it, shall be followed by some more detailed information and illustrations on the general sociolinguistic situation in Africa.

Some facts about language in Africa[4]

The African continent is the home of about one third of the worlds living languages, figures range between roughly 1,200 and 2,000 indigenous African languages of a total of about 5,000 to 7,000 languages still spoken around the globe. (Conflicting figures reflect conflicting definitions as to what is counted as a "language" and what can be assumed to be a variety of a given language, *vulgo*: a "dialect".)

Table 1: Language and population figures for selected African countries (Lewis 2009)

Country	**Population**	**Number of known languages**
Botswana	ca. 1.8 Mio	29
Congo (Brazzaville)	ca. 3.6 Mio	62
Somalia	ca. 8.2 Mio	13
Angola	ca. 16.1 Mio	41 + 1
Cameroon	ca. 17.8 Mio	281 + 5
Côte d'Ivoire	ca. 18.6 Mio	78 + 1
Ghana	ca. 22.5 Mio	79
Kenya	ca. 35.6 Mio	69
Tanzania	ca. 38.5 Mio	127 + 1
Sudan	ca. 36.9 Mio	133 + 9
Dem. Republic Congo	ca. 58.7 Mio	215 + 1
Ethiopia	ca. 79.0 Mio	85 + 5
Nigeria	ca. 141.4 Mio	516 + 11

As an average, at least about 40 different languages are spoken in each African country. The following table arranges some selected African countries according to population figures. The table shows that the number of different lan-

4 The following sections have also figured in my introduction to the 1st International Expert Workshop for Alumni conducted by ganaa in Leipzig, 2008.

guages within one country does not necessarily relate to population figures. Rather, increased linguistic diversity tends to correlate with a geographic distribution closer to the equator; this has a parallel in biodiversity and is referred to in biology as the *latitudinal gradient*. The table also indicates the figures of known languages as opposed to those which "have no known speakers" (given after the "+"); it shows that "language death" is not (yet?) a dramatic issue due to a high loyalty of speakers to their African mother tongues.

In a document compiled by UNESCO for the *Intergovernmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa*, held in Harare, 1997, we read:

> The numbers conceal facts which need to be brought to light for a better understanding of the context and the challenge of multilingualism. In Nigeria 397 languages out of 410 are 'minority' languages, but the total number of their speakers account for 60 per cent of the population. Among them are several languages with more than 1 million speakers, with a few of them having a number of speakers close to 10 million. Similar phenomena are observed elsewhere and compel a departure from a 'numerical muscle' as a decisive criterion in language planning.
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> In a survey related to the case of Nigeria, the number of languages spoken by each of the subjects of the speech communities studied ranged from two to five as follows: 60 per cent of the subjects spoke two languages; 30 per cent three; and 10 per cent over four languages. A similar observation could be made regarding many if not all the African countries, where there is a widespread tradition of handling multilingualism. Often there is a complementary distribution of this multilingualism across languages by sectors of activities. The multilingualism is not only functional or commercial; it cuts across the whole social fabric.

In terms of power and prestige, languages within a society occupy different levels on what can be conceived of as a hierarchy which we refer to as "polyglossia." The highest prestige and association with power is attributed to the official language(s) of the formally independent nation-state, the lowest with the "local" mother tongue-languages (cf. Fig. 1). This has severe implications for the sociolinguistic reality of the country.

In general and in non-formal domains, Africans know how to use their individual multilingualism as an asset. In non-formal domains people come in contact through travels, marriages, etc. and learn each others' languages spontaneously and based on needs. They allocate different functions to the languages they speak. So at home, in the street and community Africans celebrate their everyday multilingualism. But, ironically, multilingualism is viewed as a problem in administration and formal education. Multilingualism (and its twin-brother multiculturalism) is and will remain an integral feature of African reality, as in much of the rest of the world. All political, social, cultural and educational planning must take this fact into account.