

# LOSS OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN AFRICA

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## 1 *Introduction*

The aim of this article is to provide an assessment of the linguistic diversity that is endangered in Africa. The African continent has a large number of languages, roughly 2000, or, one third of the world's linguistic heritage. At the outset we should state that the situation of the indigenous languages of Africa is in general healthy, presently and in the immediate future. Most African languages are not on the verge of extinction and many smaller languages, i.e. languages with fewer than 50,000 speakers, are quite stable and do not show reduction in number of speakers. In this respect the African situation is markedly different from that in Europe and in the Americas. The *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000) names 37 African languages that are on the verge of extinction against 161 in the Americas or in percentages: roughly 0.02% of the languages of Africa is in immediate danger against 1.15% (a percentage that is 60 times higher) of those in the Americas. When we consider every language that has under 10,000 speakers endangered – which seems to be reasonable –, the number for Africa rises to roughly 300.

In other respects, too, the African situation is different from that in the Americas and Australia, where endangered languages are associated with (indigenous) peoples who belong to the “lower” classes of society. This is not generally the case in Africa. A number of African languages are now in a stronger socio-political situation than they were twenty years ago and these languages have gained ground against the European official languages: Wolof in Senegal, Bambara in Mali, Setswana in Botswana to name a few. Their success is a force against the long term threat of loss of linguistic diversity in a world dominated by English, a perspective that is predicted by some globalists. This does not relieve us from the task of documenting the languages that are endangered. It does, however, have its consequences for the need of linguistic attention to be devoted to the growing languages as well, and in particular when

their incomplete level of description is a drawback for the use of the language in education.

Another reason why language endangerment is less dramatic in Africa is because, contrary to the situation in Latin America, in Africa former colonial languages are not a major factor in language loss. Colonisation has not led to the marginalisation of the original peoples as it has in the Americas, and peoples speaking endangered languages in Africa are often not economically worse off than their neighbours speaking healthier languages. In the majority of African states the colonial language is the official language but this has little impact on the every-day communicative situations compared to, say, Spanish in Latin America. A notable exception is Nigerian Pidgin English in Nigeria. In Nigeria English has become the language of interethnic communication and in that process the language has changed considerably under the influence of the various African mother tongues, to the extent that it is now considered a different language. Proposals have been made to propagate Nigerian Pidgin English and let it take over the role of Standard English in education and administration (Emenanjo 1985:127). In the case of Nigerian Pidgin English we see the birth of a new language as a consequence of globalisation. Other examples of language birth under globalisation in Africa are the cases of urban youth slang losing its stigma and serving the function of bridging ethnicity and taking over all communication situations in the big city, as is the case with Iscamto in Johannesburg, South Africa, (Childs 1997). Centralisation of economy and administration was not the norm in Africa until recently (that is the colonial and post-colonial era), and this differs from the history of Europe and large parts of Asia.

## **2 *Situations of Language Loss***

In order to understand how linguistic diversity is lost we have to examine the situations of linguistic loss first. Coupled with the great diversity of languages, Africa also has a diversity of situations of linguistic loss. We can distinguish at least five:

1. shift to the non-colonial official and national language
2. shift to the language of wider communication often as a consequence of settlement in the urban centres
3. shift to the dominant regional language
4. shift as a result of giving up traditional economy that is central to the identity of the group
5. vocabulary loss without shift

In addition, there is the rare case of language death as a consequence of extinction of the people due to genocide as is happening to various Kordofanian

languages in the Nuba Mountains in Sudan. Wars do have the effect of displacing and separating people with an adverse effect on language maintenance. We briefly discuss these five more common ways of linguistic loss.

Examples of African official languages that replace other African languages are Amharic, Somali, and Swahili. In Ethiopia Amharic is and has been dominant for centuries and in the regions where the influence is oldest this has led to languages disappearing. Several smaller Central Cushitic languages have died out or are on the verge of extinction. Appleyard (1998) and Zelealem (1998) provide accounts of how two Central Cushitic languages, Qwarenya and K'emant, have given way to Amharic. The dominance of Amharic was directly linked to the dominance of the Amhara rulers and strengthened by the Ethiopian Christian Church. As a consequence of the political changes in the last decade Amharic is now hindered in its further spread by its ethnic association. The present policy of the Ethiopian government is to endorse and support local initiatives for local languages. The southern part of Ethiopia is still one of the richest in linguistic diversity in Africa and many smaller languages are in need of such support. Somali is the national language of Somalia and few other languages are spoken in the country. One of these, the Swahili-related language Chimwiini has been influenced by Somali over centuries and is losing more and more ground to Somali. In the recent diaspora due to the civil war the speakers of the language are dispersed and, without a community, the future of the language looks very bleak. Swahili, an official language of Tanzania and Kenya, never had such a clear ethnic association as Amharic and Somali. The spread of Swahili in pre-colonial times into the interior was linked to trade. Nowadays ethnic Swahili are a negligible minority among mother-tongue speakers of Swahili. Swahili is replacing several local languages in Tanzania. The process of Swahili replacing other Tanzanian languages is one that involves several stages of bilingualism, which gradually topples to Swahili dominance and eventually to restricted competence in the original mother tongue (Batibo 1992). In particular, people moving to the urban centres tend to switch to Swahili and no longer use their mother tongue. Some of the larger Bantu languages near the capital Dar es Salaam, for example, Zaramo and Bondei, are under strong influence of Swahili; Legère (1992) illustrates how Swahili penetrates every aspect of Bondei, even though as a people the Bondei are demographically healthy with over 200,000 people and growing fast.

Amharic, Somali and Swahili are official languages and as such have some extra prestige. These are not the only languages of wider communication that are replacing other African languages. The larger replacing languages do not need the status of sole official language to persuade people to give up their mother tongue in their favour. Bamana (Bambara) or Jula in Mali and Burkina

Faso, Hausa in Northern Nigeria and Niger, Lingala in Congo, and Wolof in Senegal are replacing many languages, often as a consequence of settlement in the urban centres. Bamana (Bambara) is de facto the national language of Mali where it is replacing smaller languages such as Kakolo (Sommer 1992), and its vehicular form, Jula, is becoming more and more dominant in south-western Burkina Faso, threatening several smaller Mande and Gur languages, and one Kru language (Seme). Some of these Gur languages (Tyefo and Viemo) are crucial in terms of diversity since they constitute primary branches of Gur.

One of the most common threats to languages in Africa is shift to a dominant regional language. This regional language need not be numerically very strong, see for example the shift of Ongota to Ts'amakko (Savà, this volume). Other such examples are the gradual shift of Logba (Togo Mountain language) to Ewe (Kwa) in Ghana, of Bayso (Cushitic) to Wolayta (Omotic) and Oromo (Cushitic) (Brenzinger 2001), of Gweno in the Pare mountains to Chasu. This last shift has been described in some detail by Winter (1992) and Mreta (2000).

Language shift can also be the result of a change in the social situation when the language is felt to belong to a specific socio-economic role. An example is the case of the Aasáx, a Southern Cushitic language spoken by hunter-gatherers among the Maasai, who gave up their language for Maasai while giving up hunting for cattle keeping and thus becoming Maasai (Winter 1979).

Loss of linguistic diversity is not always identical to language death. A common process is that of loss of lexicon. Many Bantu languages of Tanzania, for example, gradually replace non-basic vocabulary with Swahili items, now that education has become formal and in Swahili. An example from Bowe (Bantu F 34) shows that the original Bowe words are in the process of being replaced by Swahili words, which are adapted to Bowe phonology and morphology: the Swahili class 15 prefix for infinitives is replaced by its Bowe counterpart and the *v* is changed into a stop after a nasal, as in *chumbi* from Swahili *chumvi* 'salt' in the following example taken from Mous (2001).

	new-Bowe	Swahili	original Bowe
"be angry"	<i>okasirika</i>	<i>ku-kasirika</i>	<i>ovéna</i>
"to breathe"	<i>opumua</i>	<i>ku-pumua</i>	<i>ofwééra</i>
"to mould"	<i>ofinyánga</i>	<i>ku-finyanga</i>	<i>otulatúla</i>
"to bend"	<i>opínda</i>	<i>ku-pinda</i>	<i>uúnánya</i>
"salt"	<i>chumbi</i> (class 10)	<i>chumvi</i>	<i>tónyo</i> (class 10)

Table 1: Swahili influence on Bowe

In the light of loss of diversity it is important to realise that the overall loss of certain types of languages results in the disappearance of certain types of

contact situations and of special languages. Secret languages, initiation languages, languages of occupational “castes” and of people dependent on others in a client situation are, in general, in danger. An example is the loss of the languages of the blacksmiths and leatherworkers in the Mande domain (Kastenholtz 1998). It is to be expected that in time language death will eradicate this type of sociolinguistic situation while the mechanisms of it are not unimportant for historical and anthropological linguistics. Thus, some endangered languages are of special interest for the insight that they can provide into language contact phenomena. For example, the study of displaced Bantu languages such as Ngoni from South Africa to Tanzania and the Bantu Mushungulu from Tanzania to Somalia is of interest because they show insight into gradual language adaptation. The study of mixed Swahili varieties along the Mozambican coast is also important because of loss of a special contact situation.

### 3 *Loss of Diversity*

Language death is more often than not a social loss. It is a sign of an ethnic group’s lack of self-confidence, which in itself is a prerequisite for sustainable development. In addition, language death entails loss of cultural diversity. Loss of diversity is regrettable not only from a philosophical or aesthetic point of view, it can also deprive us from data that are crucial for increasing our insight into the human language capacity. It limits our possibilities to recover history and with the language indigenous knowledge disappears as well.

It is evident that the loss of linguistic diversity is an impediment for linguistics as an empirical discipline. Hayward (1998) shows that some of the endangered languages of Ethiopia have typologically rare phenomena. The loss of genetic diversity also adversely affects our knowledge of the early history and migrations of the speakers of the proto-languages. Obviously languages that defy classification (isolates) are of special concern in this respect as they may be evidence for a situation of more linguistic diversity millennia ago. On the African continent there are also some such language groups, which are in their totality endangered: the Kuliak languages, the Kordofanian languages and the Khoe and non-Khoe Khoi-San language families. We now present a fuller discussion of the genetic linguistic diversity in Africa and the endangerment thereof.

### 4 *Genetic Diversity of African Languages*

The standard classification of African languages that is used is that of Greenberg (1963). The invaluable merits of this work are widely recognized and unquestioned. Two issues, however, are of importance to us here. One is the question whether there is any doubt that all African languages fit into one of

the four Greenbergian African phyla: Afroasiatic, Khoisan, Niger-Congo, and Nilo-Saharan. The second issue is whether this represents a remarkable lack of linguistic diversity on the African continent. As regards the first issue, there are of course reservations about the validity of some of the genetic relationships proposed by Greenberg. As regards the Afroasiatic phylum there is consensus that all major branches are indeed related, the only discussions are on subclassification of these branches and on the position of the Omotic language family or families. The validity of the Niger-Congo phylum has been questioned, mainly by non-Africanists. Campbell (1998) has argued that the family is nothing but a hypothesis because there is no historical reconstruction of the highest level. Dixon (1997) claims that the proposals for Niger-Congo are primarily based on typological criteria, which are invalid as proof for genetic relationships. Among Africanists there is little concern about these reservations. Very few researchers are indeed working on reconstruction at a level higher than the subfamily, despite the fact that John Stewart's work shows that such an enterprise is not impossible. The fact that a language has a Niger-Congo type noun-class system or remnants thereof is considered not to be a typological criterion because the presence of a Niger-Congo type noun-class system does not make reference to just function but rather to function in connection with form and paradigmatic systematicity and hence this *is* a valid criterion to posit genetic relatedness. As a consequence there is little discussion about the membership of the Kordofanian languages in Niger-Congo given their noun-classes even if these languages are always considered the first branching off (Williamson & Blench 2000). On the other hand the inclusion of Mande in Niger-Congo is highly disputed, partly because it is difficult to find remnants of the noun-class system. Within Niger-Congo the subfamily of Ijo is not disputed on lexical grounds but the origin of the many traits that are highly atypical for Niger-Congo (word order, gender system) remains a mystery. Voeltz (1990) has argued that the evidence for inclusion of Ubangi in Niger-Congo is actually very weak, but the issue has not attracted much attention since. Nilo-Saharan was the last phylum that Greenberg proposed and many are not convinced of the higher-level genetic relationships. The genetic relationships of the major groups, Central Sudanic, Eastern Sudanic and Saharan are more or less accepted (Bender 2000), even if Saharan is considered to be very divergent, but the inclusion of Songhay is highly debated (Nicolai 1990), as is the membership of Kuliak. Common opinion is that Kuliak belongs to Nilo-Saharan. Bender (2000) has it as an independent primary branch of Nilo-Saharan, but Lamberti (1988) provides evidence for an Afroasiatic connection. The position of the remaining languages is very unclear. For example, Gumuz and Koman are in Bender's core group, while Ehret (2000) has them as a first, separate branch. There is a reason for this astonish-

ing divergence of opinion in the classification of these languages, namely for many of these non-core Nilo-Saharan languages there is little documentation and even less diachronic study<sup>1</sup> The Khoisan phylum is most probably not a genetic unit Sands (1998) has shown that there is not enough positive evidence to link Hadza to Sandawe or to the South-African Khoisan languages Elderkin (1989) links Sandawe lexically to Khoe (Central Khoisan) and sees structural similarities with Northern Khoisan, but this is not accepted by Guldemann & Vossen (2000) Vossen (1997) provides ample evidence for the unity of Khoe or Central Khoisan, but questions the existence of a genetic relationship between Khoe and the rest of South-African Khoisan Other puzzles are Kwadi (see below) and Dahalo Dahalo is a Cushitic language with some clicks and it has been suggested that the origin of the lexemes with clicks lies in a former Khoisan language that they spoke before shifting to a Cushitic language (Nurse 1986)

The second question that arises from the Greenberg classification is is Africa remarkably homogeneous linguistically? Human population started in Africa and came much later to the Americas and yet the number of language families in the Americas is much higher than in Africa Is this because the language family relationships in the Americas have not yet been recognized or accepted? Is it because the African situation has been idealized due to a tendency to incorporate every language into one of the four phyla proposed by Greenberg? Was there more contact in Africa and has a prior diversity converged after millennia? Has the spread of the Niger-Congo family and in particular that of Bantu simply wiped out a former greater diversity? Obviously these questions are not easily answered but they warrant a special interest for those languages or pockets of languages that pose a challenge to classification and that are in danger of disappearance (Blench 1999)

As an assessment of the endangerment of language diversity in Africa I present an overview starting with language isolates that are endangered and (sub-)families of languages that are endangered in their entirety This in turn is followed by a list of the remaining language families in Africa For each family I give (by means of an abbreviation) the phylum to which they belong according to the Greenberg classification, information on how many languages are in the family, the geographical area of the family, and an impressionistic indication of the situation *vis-à-vis* language endangerment (that is, the number of languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers) It is not a list of endangered languages, for which the reader is referred to Sommer (1992), which contains 140 languages that are in the process of extinction or in immediate danger of ex-

<sup>1</sup> That is, those languages that are not part of Central Sudanic, Eastern Sudanic or Saharan

inction (her criterion is 500 speakers), and also to lists that will be published in the proceedings of a recent conference in Bonn (Brenzinger, forthcoming). Other important sources for the data in the following list are Grimes (2000), Crozier & Blench (1992) for Nigeria, and Dieu & Renaud (1983) for Cameroon. The number of languages is based on the *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000), which tends to make distinctions where others would group lects into one language. As a consequence the number of languages that I give for the various families is higher than what is usually cited. For example, the *Ethnologue* has 195 Chadic languages while most other sources quote much lower numbers.

### 5 *Isolates*

An overview of remnant hunter-gatherer societies and linguistic isolates in Africa can be found in Blench (1999). The following endangered languages have been considered isolates. For some of them this may be due to a lack of material, while for others a substantial amount of deviant basic lexical material poses the puzzle of their classification.

Ongota is an unclassified language with 8 speakers in southwest Ethiopia shifting to a minority Cushitic language, Ts'amakko (Savà, this volume).

Shabo is an unclassified language of southwest Ethiopia with about 200-600 speakers. The proposals for its classification range from Nilo-Saharan to Omotic to unclassifiable. Some data are published in Anbessa (1991, 1995) and Daniel Aberra (Addis Ababa) has further material.

Hadza is a linguistic isolate (Sands 1998) of roughly 200 speakers in northern Tanzania. The published material on the Hadza language is very limited. The population seems to have been more or less stable during the last decennia, but these traditional hunter-gatherers have become more and more dependent on food aid from outside.

Jalaa is spoken by 20 elderly people among the Cham of northeast Nigeria, (Blench 1999:54, based on data from Klenewillinghöfer).

Laal is an unclassified language with roughly 300 speakers in south-central Chad.

Kwadi is an unclassified language formerly spoken by hunter-gatherers in Angola. Their language contains clicks but a relation to Khoe is not clear (Blench 1999). Güldemann & Vossen (2000) mark it as (presumably) extinct.

Pre, spoken in northern Ivory Coast, is probably Kwa, but contains substantial Mande material (Williamson & Blench 2000).

Mpre (Ghana) is most probably extinct. The reported vocabulary defies classification (Williamson & Blench 2000).



## 6 *Endangered families*

Khoe (Central KS) is the undisputed core of the hypothetical Khoisan phylum. The group contains a number of extinct languages, the largest and only viable Khoisan language, Nama, and about fifteen other languages spoken in Namibia, Botswana, Angola and South Africa that are all endangered to various degrees.

Non-Khoe Khoisan (Northern and Southern Khoisan) primarily consists of extinct languages (Southern Khoisan) and some highly endangered languages, only the Ju!'hoan dialect cluster still has a respectable number of speakers.

Kordofanian (NC): a group of 20 languages spoken in southern Sudan forming the first branch of Niger-Congo. All the languages in the group are endangered, partly by genocide.

Kuliak (classification debated): a group of 3 languages in Uganda, all of which are nearly extinct.

Togo-Mountain languages, also known as Togo-Remnant languages, are in fact two small sub-families within Kwa (NC), consisting of about seven languages each, all of which are in a state of endangerment.

Koman (NS) is a group of several languages in the Sudan-Ethiopia border area. Some of them were displaced because of the prolonged war situation and none of them have more than a few thousands of speakers (Bender 2000).

## 7 *Other families*

Adamawa (NC): a family of 86 languages spoken in Northern Nigeria, Northern Cameroon, Chad and the Central African Republic. Most of these languages are endangered. Many people are shifting to Fulfulde or the larger regional languages. The Adamawa languages in Nigeria and Chad are particularly poorly known.

Atlantic (NC): a family of 65 languages mainly along the coast from Senegal to Sierra Leone. It contains two large languages on which nearly all research has been concentrated, namely Fulfulde and Wolof. At least 13 Atlantic languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers. Wolof and Mandinka are dominant. A primary sub-branch of Atlantic consisting of one language, Bijago, is under pressure.

Bantu (NC): a family of roughly 500 languages spoken in the southern half of Africa. The group forms a unique research area because of the sheer numbers of closely related but different languages. In the area of endangerment, the special contact situations are of interest, e.g. Chimwiini (Swahili in Somalia), Chimakwe (Makonde-Swahili mixed variety predominantly spoken by women)

in Mozambique. There is substantial loss of specialised vocabulary in the Bantu languages in East Africa through the influence of Swahili.

Benue-Congo (excluding Bantu) (NC): a family of over 200 languages mainly spoken in Nigeria. The group contains some of the larger languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Tiv, and Nupe. But for the rest it contains large groups of smaller and for the most part poorly described languages, many of them endangered, especially in Northern Nigeria, due to the expansion of Hausa. Large sub-groups are Kainji (55), Plateau (63), Cross-River (63). Some languages that are of special concern due to their unique position within the family and their endangered status are Ukaan, an isolate within Eastern Benue Congo, and Akpes and Ayere-Ahan, which are isolates within West Benue-Congo (Williamson & Blench 2000).

Berber (AA): a family of 29 varieties. In terms of number of speakers, the languages of oases in Algeria and further east are endangered. The languages are threatened because of lack of prestige. Recently the status of Berber in Morocco has started to improve and an institute of Berber studies has been set up in Rabat. Variation among the Berber languages is played down for political reasons by Berber activists.

Central-Sudanic (NS): a family of 64 languages spoken mainly in Chad, Central African Republic, Eastern Congo (DRC) and Southern Sudan. Most languages are small in numbers.

Chadic (AA): a family of 195 languages (according to the *Ethnologue*) spoken in Northern Nigeria, Northern Cameroon, Chad and Niger. In Northern Nigeria the smaller languages are threatened by Hausa.

Cushitic (AA): a family of 47 languages spoken in the Horn of Africa extending to Kenya and Tanzania. Several died out in recent years or are on the verge of extinction (Aasáx, Qwadza, Yaaku, Elmolo, Weyto, K'emant).<sup>2</sup> Endangered are Arbore, Bayso, Dahalo and Ts'amakko.<sup>3</sup>

Dogon (NC): Dogon is a family of closely related languages spoken in Mali and Burkina Faso, which proves very difficult to classify within Niger-Congo. The languages are not in immediate danger except for the very intriguing secret languages that have been reported for Dogon.

Gur (NC): a family of 100 languages spoken in northern Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Mali and Burkina Faso. It contains many smaller endangered languages.

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<sup>2</sup> Most likely Aasáx is not dead as I met some speakers in 1995 north of Orkessumet in the Maasai plains of Tanzania.

<sup>3</sup> The Ongota shifting to Ts'amakko are not numerous enough to stop Ts'amakko itself from being endangered.

Ijo (NC): a group of 11 languages spoken in southeast Nigeria. The languages are highly divergent typologically from a Niger-Congo perspective. Defaka is the first branch within the group but also endangered.

Kru (NC): a group of 41 languages spoken in Liberia and the Ivory Coast. Roughly 8 of these have speaker numbers under 10,000. One Kru language, Seme, a primary branch, is spoken in Burkina Faso and is under pressure from Jula. Other endangered single language primary branches are Kuwaa in Liberia and Aizi in the Ivory Coast.

Kwa (NC): a family of 78 languages in the southern half of the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Benin. A lot of research is going on, especially on syntax, and particularly on the Gbe and Akan clusters. The cluster of some 15 languages previously classified as Togo-Remnant are endangered. Ega (spoken in Ivory Coast) occupies a special position within Kwa in being highly divergent, and furthermore surrounded by Kru speakers. The language is endangered and has been studied in a project within the endangered languages programme of the Volkswagenstiftung.

Mande (classification debated): a family of 58 languages spoken in all West African countries. Some ten languages are endangered.

Nilotic (NS): a large family of 60 lects. Several languages are endangered: Ongamo, Okiek, Akiek, Omotik and others.

Omotik (AA): a family of 28 languages, half of which have fewer than 10,000 speakers.

Saharan (NS): a group of 6 languages (Kanuri, Kanembu, Teda, Daza, Zaghawa, Berti) spoken in the border area of Niger-Chad-Niger.

Songhay (NS, debated): a group of closely related languages (not endangered). Some mixed Songhay-Touareg varieties are of special interest for contact linguistics.

Semitic (AA): Arabic and its variants, Southern Semitic (Amharic, Tigre, Tigrinya, Gurage) in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The African Semitic languages are not in a situation of language endangerment, with the exception of Gafat.

Ubangi (NC): a group of 71 languages spoken in the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Congo (DRC) and Sudan. The larger ones are Sango, Gbaya, Ngbandi, Banda, and Zande. More than 20 with fewer than 10,000 speakers.

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