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GERRIT DIMMENDAAL

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Capacity building in an African context

Gerrit J. Dimmendaal

> "An important aspect of doing justice to linguistic minorities… is that it is less a question of money, and more a question of tolerance and a change of consciousness. (Coulmas 1984:16)

1. Introduction[1]

Many African countries are characterized by large numbers of languages, however they differ with respect to the roles played by these languages in the educational system or administration. As shown below through a comparison of the situation in Sudan (section 2) and Ethiopia (section 3), these differences also affect the state the fields of descriptive and documentary linguistics find themselves in in these countries. And, not unexpectedly, this situation also determines the relative need for capacity building. An overview of language policies and capacity building in former British, French and Portuguese colonies in Africa, as presented in section 4, should make clear that colonial heritage is but one factor determining the current state of description and documentation. Language policies in the post-colonial period have fluctuated in many African countries; moreover, one frequently observes a discrepancy between the official language policy and the actual policy as practised in a number of countries. The presence of non-governmental organisations dealing with literacy projects, and consequently, with the study of indigenous languages, appears to have had a positive effect on the situation. For various historical reasons partly outlined below, the degree of capacity building needed clearly differs between countries on the African continent. Moreover, as argued in section 5, not all attempts to improve capacity building at the national or regional level have been successful. As further argued in the same section, one way out of this sometimes dramatic situation may be through intensive co-operation between African universities and universities in Europe and America.

2. Language policy and capacity building in Sudan

With some 180 distinct languages, many of which are poorly known, the linguistic picture for the Federal Republic of Sudan is rather typical of a variety of African countries. Today, Arabic is the most important language at the national level, in the administration and the educational system. Ever since independence on 1st of January 1956, the official role of Arabic has increased. Before independence, Sudan was under the jurisdiction of Britain as well as of Egypt — in nominal recognition to the historical claims of the khedive of Egypt. In line with a more general policy in their colonies, the

[1] I would like to express my thanks to the editor and an anonymous referee for their critical comments on an earlier draft.

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British colonial government encouraged the use of Sudanese languages in the educational system. At the important Rejaf Conference (1928), for example, six vernacular languages from southern Sudan were selected as being suitable for development and for use in schools: Dinka, Nuer, Ndogo, Zande, Shilluk, and Bari. In the south, English also played an important role in the educational system, as well as at the administrative level, during this so-called Condominium period.

Schools in southern Sudan used to be run by missionaries from Britain and other European countries such as Italy. Only in 1957, after independence, were non-governmental schools in the north and missionary schools in the south taken over by the government. In the late 1960's, Arabic became the official language of instruction in schools throughout the country, although at the National Conference for Education in Khartoum it was agreed that southern vernaculars written in the Arabic script could be used as the media of instruction in the first two years of education in the rural areas of the southern provinces; starting from the third year, Arabic should be the medium. From 1972 onwards, the final examinations in Grade 6 have been taken in Arabic throughout the country.

Because of the conflict between the north and the south ever since independence, Sudan has been in an almost permanent state of civil war, with a short period of relative peace (following the Addis Ababa Agreement) between 1972 and 1983. The role of Arabic in the educational system has increased over the past four decades, whilst the role of other Sudanese languages, or English, has clearly decreased, although the southern regions not controlled by the government in Khartoum have been less affected by the changes in language policy.

In regions such as Darfur, Arabic was an important lingua franca in pre-colonial times as well as during the Condominium period. Among several groups in the region such as the ethnic Fur or Daju, this situation has resulted in a gradual shift towards Arabic as the primary language of communication, often accompanied by a loss of the heritage language. The Sudanese language policy after independence, in which the crucial role of Arabic was emphasized, presumably had a catalyzing effect on negative attitudes towards languages other than Arabic.

As in other parts of the world, an additional catalyzing factor affecting language attitudes was, of course, urbanisation. The study by Miller and Abu-Manga (1989) clearly shows that second-generation migrants in the larger Khartoum area, for example, hardly ever acquire the first language of their parents. Although there are differences in language solidarity between the various ethnic groups, there is a clear tendency among second-generation speakers to use Arabic as their first language. In this respect, the situation in Khartoum is comparable to many other major urbanized areas in Africa; in such multilingual areas there is a strong tendency to switch either to the national language of the country or to an important regional lingua franca for daily communication purposes.

Because of the rather dramatic linguistic situation in the Darfur region in particular, I decided in 2001 to try and help document a number of poorly-studied Nilo-Saharan languages, more specifically members of the Tama group. With this aim in mind, I headed for Khartoum in September 2002, in order to make contact with the University of Khartoum and to apply for research clearance.

Travelling towards the Darfur region had become increasingly difficult as a result of local conflicts, so I decided to start my research with consultants residing in the greater Khartoum area. One evening, I was called by the reception desk of the hotel in Khartoum where I stayed to tell me that I had visitors waiting for me. As it turned out, some 10 speakers of Tima, a Kordofanian (Niger-Congo) language spoken in the Nuba Mountains, wanted to talk to me. After we had exchanged greetings, their spokesman told me there was a community of about 600 Tima speakers in the greater Khartoum area, in particular in Bahri, who had decided they wanted to write their language. This, they hoped, would enable them to teach their language to the younger generations living in urbanized areas like Khartoum and growing up with Arabic as a first language. Also their kin, back in the Nuba Mountains area, had expressed a strong interest in writing their language so they could use it next to Arabic in schools.

The Tima in Khartoum wanted their children to learn their parents' language, so that they did not forget their origins, and could communicate with relatives (especially their grandparents) when they visited their homelands in the Nuba Mountains. Although most Tima are devout Muslims, they also felt the need to pass on some of their traditional cultural values, preferably through the language intimately related with this domain, namely Tima. I was told the Tima community did not deny the importance of Arabic as the national language or its crucial role in the educational system. The instrumental and integrative role of Arabic in Sudan was self-evident to them, or as they put it, a good knowledge of the national language was essential for making one's way in the town or in life.

From conversations with the Tima representatives in Khartoum I also learned that their community was deeply convinced that a good knowledge of the English language was important because of its role as an international language of communication. To this end, Tima people had sent representatives to Kenya in the early 1990s to find a teacher of English who might be willing to teach this language in schools in their home area. Apparently their mission was successful, and a Kenyan teacher worked as an instructor in the Nuba Mountains for a number of years.

I have often wondered how my Tima visitors at the hotel in Khartoum came to know of my presence and of my interest in Sudanese languages, but this has remained an open question until today. I became so fascinated with this community showing pride in their culture and language that I decided to try and help them to develop a writing system for their mother tongue. Consequently, I started fieldwork not only on a number of Nilo-Saharan languages as planned, but also on this Kordofanian language spoken by a self-aware group of people from the Nuba Mountains. My primary aim was to

investigate the basic phonological and morphological structure of this language, in order to be able to develop an orthography.

During the first few fieldwork sessions, the entire group of about ten people who had visited me earlier on in the hotel was present. This turned out not to be a particularly efficient way of investigating the language, although it became clear from these group sessions which of the speakers would be the most talented consultants. I subsequently suggested that we work in a smaller group first, and that the data and analyses could be discussed with the whole group at a later stage. Although the Tima group did not like this idea – they all wanted to be involved in the development of the orthography – they did agree that my proposal would speed up this process (see Mosel, this volume, who suggests working with at most three main consultants in dictionary making).

After a series of fieldwork sessions in September 2002, and subsequent short visits in the next two years, I gradually began to understand the sound structure of the language as well as its morphosyntactic and pragmatic structure. Almost two years later, the Tima community and I managed to develop a practical orthography using Latin symbols which was in line with more general orthographic principles used for other languages in Sudan. NGOs in the country involved in the development of orthographies have established a convention whereby, for example, [+advanced] and [-advanced] tongue root vowels are distinguished from each other by using the symbols i, e, a, o, u for the latter set, and by adding a symbol "x" to each of these five vowels in order to express [+advanced] tongue root vowels (ix, ex, ax, ox, ux). A number of Tima speakers had excellent intuitions about distinctive sound units in their language. They discovered additional phonological contrasts such as between a retroflex and a lateral trill; or between a laminal and a retroflex lateral. Also, as a result of the important contributions from an already overburdened NGO representative from America, we succeeded in producing a first primer for Tima in which the orthographic conventions were explained and illustrated. Moreover, a number of Tima with good knowledge of computers have meanwhile started work on a Tima-Arabic-English wordlist as the initial step towards making a dictionary. For the non-linguist – and the Tima speakers are no exception to this – documenting a language means compiling a dictionary, writing a grammar is a more abstract and less accessible activity (cf. Mosel, this volume).

The 'Tima case' would seem to provide a perfect example of what can be done by dedicated non-professionals interested in the development of orthographies and teaching materials in their mother tongue with the support and feedback of one or more professional linguists; see also Foley and Mosel (this volume) for a discussion of such initiatives in Papua New Guinea. But the same case also makes blatantly clear what is currently lacking in a country like Sudan, namely sufficient expertise among their fellow countrymen to help groups like the Tima with the development of their language. There are a number of highly dedicated and competent scholars in the country, but it is impossible for them, given their numerous other obligations, to actively support literacy projects of this type. Consequently, in Sudan, expatriates working for NGOs play an

important role in orthography development projects. Whereas it is the official policy of the current government of Sudan to reaffirm the central role of Arabic in all public domains, the same government in fact does allow non-governmental organizations to develop orthographies for other Sudanese languages. One can only be grateful to the government for this tolerance[2]. At present there are over sixty different literacy projects for languages from southern Sudan in particular, involving the production of primers for schools to teach children reading and writing (in Latin script) in their mother tongue (see also the study by Lüpke, this volume, on the use of Latin scripts in an Arabic-based environment in West Africa).

In 2004, the Naivasha Peace Protocol was signed by the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement after many years of military conflict mostly in the south. This document states that Arabic is the most widely spoken national language in Sudan, but also that all indigenous languages are national languages which shall be respected, developed and promoted. Also, in addition to Arabic and English, the legislature of any sub-national level of government may adopt any national language(s) as additional official working language(s) at its level, whereas the use of either language at any level of government or education shall not be discriminated against (Mugaddam and Dimmendaal, to appear). Patterns of language use in modern Sudan nevertheless suggest that many local languages are facing imminent disappearance if nothing is done to implement the new language policy and to sustain linguistic and cultural diversity in the country. Sudan, then, is a country where there is a particularly strong need for capacity building and the training of academic staff capable of supervising and advising their fellow countrymen in literacy projects. In this respect, the situation in the country is comparable to that in the neighbouring country Ethiopia about a decade ago. But here some dramatic changes have occurred, as is shown next.

3. Ethiopia ten years after

With more than 80 different languages, Ethiopia is another country where multilingualism is the norm, but where at the same time an African language predominates at the national level. Until 1974, when the Derg regime took over from the emperor Haile Selassie after a coup d'état, Amharic had been the sole language used in education and the administration of the country. Though widespread as a lingua franca, Amharic was not and is not known as a second language by all children attending primary schools. Experiments in the 1960's with languages like Yoruba in Nigeria have shown that there are tremendous advantages to education in the mother tongue. These experiments in Nigeria and other countries have led several African

[2] Bamgbose (1991: 115-17) has pointed out that traditional concepts of language policy and language planning are rather Eurocentric. In the African context one may observe a discrepancy between the official policy of a country and the actual practice. Sudan therefore is not unique in this respect. In neighbouring Kenya, for example, there has been a declaration of intent to instate regional or local languages in the educational system, but there does not seem to have been a programme of action. Moreover, language policies also tend to fluctuate, changing with each new government or regime, as shown in the Ethiopian case.

governments to a change in attitude towards the use of African languages over the past decades.

The Ethiopian government under Mangistu Haile Mariam, installed in 1974, developed a programme whereby the various "nationalities" (as the ethnic groups were called) acquired the right to determine their political, economic and social life, and to use their own language. This initiative of the Derg regime to stimulate the use of regional or local languages in the educational system was thus in line with more widespread changes in language policy initiated by several other African countries in the 1960's, as further illustrated in section 4 below. Unlike Sudan or most other African countries, Ethiopia had never been colonized (except for a short period of occupation by the Italians between 1935 and 1936), so European languages hardly played any role in the educational system or other public services.

The government under Meles Zenawi that succeeded the Derg regime in 1991 continued the language policy of the former government. Moreover, contacts with Eastern European countries became less tight, and the country became more open to the West, as a result of which it also became easier for scholars from this part of the world to do research in Ethiopia.

I first visited the country in 1992, because I wanted to improve the documentation of poorly-known Surmic languages, a group of Nilo-Saharan languages spoken in the south-western corner of the country as well as in southern Sudan. In order to apply for research clearance and to establish contacts with Ethiopian colleagues interested in the study of language, I visited the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and the Department of Linguistics of Addis Ababa University. I met with a number of highly dedicated colleagues, including a few younger teaching assistants, all of whom had to work with very little means and poor logistical support. Obviously, there was a tremendous potential there, but the infrastructure was rather desolate.

Under the new government installed in 1991, academics in Ethiopia were allowed to establish contacts with universities in Western Europe and the United States. It also became possible for them to travel to these countries, and scholars from outside were allowed to do research in Ethiopia. With the existing language policy of the country, the conditions for the expansion of linguistic studies in Ethiopia were therefore set. Over the past ten years, several younger Ethiopian colleagues were able to study linguistics abroad, and to obtain their PhD's either abroad, or, with international support, in Ethiopia itself.

Today, there are highly qualified specialists at Addis Ababa University in virtually every sub-discipline within general linguistics as well as in the different language families represented in the country. The linguists in question are actively involved in various literacy projects, including standardisation projects for a number of languages. The Department of Linguistics is still expanding in terms of the number of staff members and students. The training of additional students will, of course, have a

tremendous spin-off effect, as several of them are supposed to become regional specialists for different languages in the country.

Through active co-operation with a number of European universities, our Ethiopian colleagues were able not only to stimulate capacity building in their country, but also to build an excellent infrastructure, involving the improvement of library facilities and the creation of a computer park with internet connections. Of course, this does not mean that there are no problems or drawbacks. As further discussed in the following section, mother tongue education, for example, does not necessarily meet with enthusiasm amongst all of those involved. Nevertheless, this is an example of what could be done – and should be done – in countries like Sudan, in order to stimulate capacity building at an official level. The most important difference, of course, is that the Sudanese government does not actively support the study of Sudanese languages other than Arabic. But the same government at least does tolerate this kind of work as carried out by Sudanese linguists as well as by NGO members interested in literacy work.

4. Language policies and capacity building in a comparative perspective

From the fifteenth century onwards, most regions on the African continent gradually became politically dominated by European countries, resulting in the colonialisation of most of Africa during the nineteenth century. In most African colonies, missionaries were instrumental in the propagation of African languages in the educational system. As early as 1816, the Church Missionary Society drew the attention of its West African missions to the necessity and advantages of teaching local children to read in their own language, a major motivation being "the desire to communicate a message", as Robinson (2000) put it. The first Yoruba newspaper in the former British colony of Nigeria, for example, dates back to the 1830's. In the report of the Phelps-Stokes Commission (1922) the use of "the tribal language" was recommended in the lower primary classes and the language of the European nation in control in the upper classes. Moreover, the British colonial government also encouraged its officers to be conversant with one or more local languages. Famous institutions like the International African Institute or the School of Oriental and African Languages primarily owed their existence to the political need to develop expertise in languages and cultures of the colonized areas.

Although virtually all former British colonies continued to use African languages in the educational system, there were clear differences in the role played by English as against African languages. During the British colonial period, Swahili as well as Luganda were recognized as languages of instruction in Uganda, for example. Swahili was not as widespread as a lingua franca as in neighbouring Tanzania; however, opting for Luganda as the national language in all likelihood would have caused political tensions, because other ethnic groups would not have accepted this choice.

Consequently, the first president of the independent state of Uganda, Obote, declared: "We find no alternative to English" as the national language. At the same time, a continued effort was made after independence to assign major languages like Luganda (and other languages) an important role in primary as well as secondary education in the country.

The Ford Foundation financed a major survey of the linguistic situation in eastern Africa in the 1960's, as a result of which detailed monographs became available on the sociolinguistic situation in countries like Uganda (see Ladefoged, Glick and Criper 1968, in general and Walusimbi 1968, in particular) as well as in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania. Today, there is quite an extensive body of literature (including novels, books of proverbs, poetry, oral histories etc.) in a variety of languages spoken in Uganda, although not all languages have received an equal amount of attention in this respect[3]. Uganda would seem to be a country then, where a lot has been accomplished in terms of corpus planning as well as capacity building at the national and at the regional level.

After independence, the newly established government of Tanzania under Nyerere decided to use an African language (Swahili) at the national level as part of an ideology in which self-reliance ("kujitegemea") played a central role. Knowledge of Swahili as a lingua franca was widespread in Tanzania at the time the country became independent; moreover, the language was not associated with a specific ethnic group. Rather, as the name Swahili (from the Arabic word for 'coasts') suggests, it was the contact language used by coastal people. Its association with Islam did not constitute a barrier, as Islam had already spread among groups living inland. Consequently, the choice of this language as the national language was widely accepted by the Tanzanians. As a result of this choice, however, African languages other than Swahili were banned from the educational system. Today, there are a considerable number of highly qualified and dedicated Swahili specialists in the country involved in corpus planning. Clearly, capacity building in the area of Swahili scholarship has been quite successful indeed.

In Tanzania, one finds representatives from all four major African language phyla. But for several decades in post-colonial Tanzania, it was not possible for foreign scholars to study the approximately 80 other languages spoken in the country, because officials were not willing to provide research permits. Because today Swahili is well-established as the national language, the investigation of other languages in the country is no longer perceived as a potential threat by the government. There is indeed a renewed interest among Tanzanian scholars in studying and documentating the poorly-known languages of the country, several of which are also endangered. It would seem, however, that their documentation primarily serves academic interests, as there is no sign that languages other than Swahili will be used in the educational system in the foreseeable future.

[3] In a recent joint project on multilingualism between Makerere University and the University of Hamburg, the role of African languages in Uganda (more specifically, of Nilotic languages like Acholi, Kumam and Lango) as against English in written communication has been investigated. The results of this project are still to be published.

With more than 400 distinct languages, Nigeria probably has the highest level of linguistic complexity in Africa. As mentioned above, experiments with the introduction of African languages in primary school education in the 1960's set an important trend, not only in the country itself, but also in a range of other countries on the continent. Experiments such as the Six-Year Primary Project in the Western State in Nigeria, using Yoruba for the full six years, with English being taught as a subject by specialists, showed that the initial use of the mother tongue gives a child a solid cognitive and conceptual base, also facilitating the acquisition of additional languages such as English at a later point in primary school education.

At the Nigerian National Curriculum Conference in 1969, it was decided that the Nigerian primary school child should be well-grounded in his mother tongue. During the next decades, three major languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) were strongly emphasized at the national level, and several medium size languages at the state level, with hundreds of smaller languages being introduced at the local and community levels.

Nigeria has many well-trained linguists today, several of whom are also involved in applied linguistics projects, more specifically in corpus planning for a variety of languages. At the same time, the sheer scale of the linguistic complexity of this 'fragmentation belt' and the dramatic degree of language shift as a result of the dominance of lingua francas such as Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo, also make clear that active support of linguistic research of Nigerian languages is badly needed.

In parallel with countries like Tanzania, the former British protectorate Botswana followed the one nation one language principle after independence (although English continued to play a much more important role there probably due to the presence of neighbouring countries like South Africa), in other words, Botswana did not pursue an active endoglossic policy[4], even though Setswana became the national language. In the 1970's, the Setswana Language Panel developed a standard orthography for the language and started producing the first books in Setswana for primary schools. Botswana is a country where there are still quite a few Khoisan languages spoken. For a number of years, it was problematic to acquire clearance for research on these typologically extremely interesting minority languages, as a result of which many of them are still poorly known. Nevertheless, NGOs were allowed to continue working on a number of Khoisan languages, and although orthographies have been developed for only a few of them, some progress has been made in this respect. Nevertheless, the number of scholars, whether from Botswana or abroad, interested in working on Khoisan languages still appears to be rather low.

In neighbouring Namibia, who became independent in 1990, English was chosen as the official language. The major aim of primary education (a cycle of seven years) is to develop enough competence in English for the pupils to be able to continue their education in the secondary cycle, where English is the sole language of education. Just

[4] Heine (1992) has called the use of one or more indigenous languages as opposed to the use of foreign languages as primary media of communication "endoglossy" versus "exoglossy".

as in numerous other African countries, whether former British, French, or Portuguese colonies, education in the home language or mother tongue, at least during the first three years (where available), is encouraged as well. Apart from Bantu languages, there are several Khoisan languages spoken in Namibia. For the Khoisan language Nama there is a body of literature available. A number of other Khoisan languages are now being investigated with the support of the DoBeS Endangered Languages Programme of the Volkswagen Foundation. An active involvement through capacity building among native speakers of Khoisan languages is a desideratum for the near future.

In French and Portuguese colonies the interest of the colonial governments in African languages was less clear-cut. Language policies in the post-colonial period nevertheless resemble those of former British colonies, because most governments of newly-created independent states decided to pursue the same language policy as governments in the former British colonies.

As pointed out in various studies, 'assimilation' was a major ideological component of the French colonial policy. The 'mission civilisatrice' involved acquiring a good knowledge of the French language as its chief instrument. Interestingly, education in the first school established in the former French colony of Senegal, opened in 1817, took place in French and in Wolof, the most important lingua franca of the area. Some twelve years later, however, the Governor-General of the region decreed that the focus should be on French in education. Although mother tongue education was not encouraged, at least officially, missionaries, who were also responsible for education, were more practical and sometimes did use African languages even in areas colonized by France. Their contributions provided an important impetus to the development of African languages outside the domain of oral communication even during colonial times.

Although French is still the official language in former French colonies like Burkina Faso, Mali or the Ivory Coast, regional languages do play an important role, particularly in primary education. Corpus planning occurred, not only for dominant lingua francas like Bambara or Moore in countries like Mali or Burkina Faso, but also for a variety of other languages, several of which are not used as languages of wider communication. Nevertheless, generally speaking, "the greater the extent of use of the lingua francas the more they are integrated into explicit policies and the greater prominence they have alongside the colonial languages", as Robinson (2000: 399) put it. Capacity building in these countries as well as additional training abroad, mainly in France, has resulted in the establishment of an academic community actively involved in language planning and corpus planning. At the same time, several languages have hardly been investigated by linguists; moreover, as pointed out by Jeffrey Heath (pers. comm.), based on his extensive field experience in Mali, there may still be several more languages in the area than are officially known.

In terms of linguistic complexity, Cameroon is somewhat comparable to neighbouring Nigeria. Cameroon emerged as an independent state through the

unification of the former French mandate of East Cameroon (which became independent in 1961) with the former British part. As pointed out in Echu (1999), French and English became the official languages of the country so as to acquire easier international access. Also, none of the 260+ Cameroonian languages was standardized at the time the country emerged as an independent state. Moreover, educational materials were insufficient for any of these languages to be introduced as a national language. What is more, none of these languages had the (neutral) status of languages like Swahili in Tanzania. Opting for one of them at the national level presumably would have triggered interethnic conflicts. Just as other African countries, however, Cameroon started mother tongue education in the 1980's. The first two primary schools introduced education in the mother tongue in 1981. Five years later, eleven primary schools followed, using languages like Ewondo, Fe'Fe', and Duala as a medium of instruction. Through the constitution of 1996, Cameroonian vernaculars were protected and their use encouraged. Meanwhile 38 Cameroonian languages apparently are being used in primary education (Pius Tamanji, pers. comm.). Mirroring the strategy in numerous other African countries, a gradual switch towards the official languages, French or English, occurs in the upper grades of primary school education.

As in many other African countries, NGOs continue to play an important role in the development of sociolinguistic surveys as well as in the creation of orthographies in former French colonies like Burkina Faso or Cameroon. Capacity building at universities in these countries through study abroad has resulted over the past decades in the creation of a group of highly qualified scholars in the area of applied linguistics.

Similar accounts of the colonial heritage can be made with respect to former Portuguese colonies like Mozambique and Angola. There was very little interest indeed in colonial government circles in using African languages in education. Mother tongue use clearly was discouraged in former Portuguese colonies. Moreover, there was a legal requirement that nothing should appear in an African language without a concurrent translation in Portuguese. The severe drawbacks for literacy campaigns in these countries both during colonial times and in the post-colonial era were obvious. As Prah (1995: 41) pointed out, only 1.2% of the population in Mozambique actually speaks Portuguese as a first language. Around 23.2% of the population is bilingual in Portuguese and an African language. Obviously, in a situation like this, mother tongue education is a crucial step in all orthography campaigns. Dramatic drops in illiteracy rates have been achieved through such campaigns in other African countries, though the actual number of illiterates is still relatively high compared to many other parts of the world for other reasons as well, e.g. the socio-economic situation which forces children to drop out of school at an early age (see also Lüpke, this volume).

Today, there is active interest in the study of indigenous languages for practical purposes in Mozambique. Moreover, the government supports the training of scholars in linguistics at different universities abroad. In this respect, the colonial legacy in former Portuguese, as well as French colonies, appears to have been overcome.

A number of African scholars (e.g. Bamgbose 2000) have criticized the canonical model of language policy formulation, claiming that focussing on corpus planning and government-oriented implementation is idealistic and Eurocentric. Legislation is useful only when accompanied by a detailed plan for implementation with a time frame, sanctions etc., a characteristic which is not necessarily present yet in modern African states.

As observed by the same author, language policies in African countries also tend to fluctuate. In Congo (former Zaire), a country with over 200 languages, French has been the official language ever since Independence. In 1962 a decree stated that in the interest of national unity French alone should be used, however the important role of the four major regional languages, or of the languages of the child's environment, was re-emphasized in education. Thus, the four regional languages, Ciluba, Kikongo, Lingala and Swahili continue to play an important role in education. But the role of the state in this respect is rather minimal in Congo. NGOs like the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) not only actively support Bible translations, but also the implementation of regional languages other than the four mentioned above in the educational system. Indeed, SIL is running the programme in various parts of the Congo. As Robinson (2000: 405), himself a member of this organisation, formulates it: "the grassroots can bring the multilingual realities of Africa life back into policies that were for too long based on extraneous models."

The crucial role of NGOs in the study of lesser-known languages and the stimulation of capacity building in a retreating state like Congo are obvious. Where possible, co-ordination between NGOs, the central government, and with the various official boards or organisations in the country should be aimed for in order to be maximally effective. In the former French colony of Guinea, it has to be concluded, unfortunately – as pointed out by Erhard Voeltz (pers. comm.), a linguist who has lived and worked in the country for several years – that there is very little co-operation between NGOs and school boards, or official organisations such as the Service d'Alphabétisation or Centre d'Etudes des Langues Guinéennes (CELG). One unfortunate outcome of this situation in Guinea is the involuntary continuation of the Jakobinian language policy involving the dominant role of French, further aggravated by political and economical pressure from France.

Although international lingua francas like English or French should continue to be taught as subjects in African countries, the disadvantages of using a European language in primary education are obvious. There is a (generally) positive evaluation of European languages, especially in official domains, because of their instrumental role and the socio-economic gains associated with their command, as the Tima community referred to earlier pointed to me. Rightly or wrongly, European languages, as opposed to local African languages, tend to be associated with modernity versus traditionalism; moreover, there is a widespread feeling among different communities that their languages are not suitable for education.

Exclusion, arising from lack of a shared medium, may be observed in the political history of various African countries. A strategy by which people in power maintain their privileges via language choices, i.e. elite closure, as Myers-Scotton (1990:25) has called it, no doubt played a role amongst those in power during the apartheid period in South-Africa, where black South Africans were denied access to English. But similar ideologies presumably have played and continue to play a role as part of a hidden agenda of the new elites in other African countries where English or French is the official language.

In South Africa, English was the official language during the British colonial period, and in 1925 Afrikaans acquired the same status. It was only during the post-apartheid period, more specifically with the establishment of the new constitution in 1996, that nine additional languages gained the same official status, subject to concomitant provisions. But English still is the most important language in the administrative and educational system. Moreover, local authorities are not required to use a specific language in administration. Although the constitution does not exclude this option, Khoisan languages like Nama do not have official status in South Africa. Radio and television nevertheless are multilingual these days; for example, Khoisan languages like !Xu or Khwe are now used in radio broadcasting.

The perceived socio-economic mobility associated with a language can determine the success of that language as a medium of instruction. If English continues to play a crucial role in socio-economic mobility, pupils and their parents will want this language to hold centre stage in education. Obviously, in countries where many different languages are spoken, there is also a need for a language of wider communication, be it Amharic, Hausa, or even European languages like English, French or Portuguese, when there is no regional lingua franca available. This prerequisite will necessarily restrict the scope of education in the mother tongue. Moreover, there is always a latent danger of encouraging insularity among ethnic groups and of undermining 'nationism' (not to be confused with nationalism), as Bamgbose (1991) has called the ideology aiming at the creation of a collective identity.

As pointed out by Baker (1992: 5), changing attitudes is often a major part of the formal or hidden agenda of language planning. But attitudes change only when there is some reward. In Ethiopia, there is resistance against the dominant role of regional languages in primary education. Parents feel that a good command of the national language Amharic is important for social mobility. The use of regional or local languages in the educational system, whether in South Africa or in Ethiopia (and elsewhere), can only be successful if it is combined with curriculum development. Developing an orthography and teaching it during the first years of primary education is clearly not enough to keep a language going. Moreover, the scope of language planning should not be confined to educational language policy alone. The significance of a language will be increased through its use in a wider range of domains, e.g. making active knowledge of a language a compulsory requirement for certain governmental

positions. Accepting that one national language is crucial in forging an identity while leaving space for cultural pluralism and multilingualism is another crucial component.

The introduction of the mother tongue into primary education presumably will be further stimulated in the coming decades in most African countries. This fact will provide a solid basis for the study of additional languages, whether endangered or not, and for capacity building in the field of descriptive and applied linguistics. It is obvious, however, that such endeavours will only be successful when the social, economic and cultural environment is supportive of minority languages and multilingualism.

5. Some drawbacks and some prospects

There are still numerous languages on the African continent that have not yet been documented. It is also quite likely that many of them will disappear before they have been documented. For countries like Sudan or Nigeria the situation is particularly dramatic in this respect. From my perspective the main focus should be on the documentation, rather than revitalisation, of these endangered languages. Where the community expresses an interest in inclusion of the language in the educational system, as with the Tima community in Sudan (see section 2), this initiative should be encouraged and actively supported by the government or by non-governmental organisations. Revitalisation, in my view, should not be given high priority. When individuals decide to give up their mother tongue, they usually have good reasons for doing so. As argued in the preceding section, a successful implementation in official domains, even for languages that are not endangered, is a complex matter.

As a result of the language policies of most modern African states, various academics have been trained in linguistics. One effect of the Nigerian language policy, for example, was that quite a few scholars were trained in language studies both in Nigeria and abroad, mainly in the United States and in several European countries. But there were and still are a number of drawbacks. Descriptive linguistics as such held very little prestige indeed during the 1960's and 1970's at European or American universities. Consequently, many scholars from Africa learned a lot about linguistic theories, in particular about the Generative Enterprise. But few of those who studied abroad were given the opportunity to acquire the techniques for describing and documenting unstudied or poorly studied languages. There is little use in decrying this now, but the negative effects of this academic ideology on descriptive linguistics should be obvious.

A second drawback, from an academic point of view, is the fact that highly qualified scholars in a number of African countries sooner or later are invited to move into government-related positions, ranging from ambassadorial posts to that of minister. Although one can, of course, understand such moves, again the negative effects on the academic scene are obvious.

A third and more recent drawback concerns the 'brain drain' issue. Because academics in many African countries are poorly paid and often lack logistical support

for their work, the incentive to return to their home base after studies abroad sometimes is rather low. The dramatic effect of this situation for medical care in African countries is immediately obvious. But the fact that freshly trained linguists do not return to their country of origin will also have negative effects, e.g. in terms of possibilities for active language and corpus planning. Of course, one can understand the motives of scholars who are not willing to return to their home universities. And it will indeed be hard to counter this loss of talent, unless the logistic situation improves dramatically. Important initiatives such as the project "Diesseits von Afrika", initiated by the Volkswagen Foundation and aiming at an active co-operation between universities in Germany and in African countries are to be applauded. Such co-operation projects should help to improve the sometimes deplorable financial conditions under which African colleagues have to work.

The need for (additional) capacity building in the area of descriptive and applied linguistics obviously varies between different African countries, as the comparison of the situations in Sudan, Ethiopia and the other countries discussed above should have made clear. There is tremendous academic potential in Sudan for example, but without additional training of some younger colleagues in the documentation of poorly studied or undescribed languages, very little can be done about the dramatic situation in this country. As the Ethiopian success story should illustrate, one promising way out of this desperate situation would be active partnership with European and American universities. Such co-operation, whether initiated by the African university or a university from the so-called first world, should also lead to joint research projects, and thereby to the education of younger colleagues within such projects.

Failure to gain access to international research funds is a frequently encountered complaint among African colleagues. One reason is their lack of experience in writing research proposals of the type many western research organisations require. Active co-operation between partners from the west and from Africa or other parts of the world could help to improve this situation.

Another frequently heard complaint from African colleagues, but also from colleagues from Asia or South-America, relates to the required conditions, e.g. in terms of logistics (video and audio documentation), that cannot be met, simply because experience and money to develop this expertise is lacking. Although modern technology allows us to document languages with in highly sophisticated ways in addition to the more traditional techniques used by linguists, less technically advanced documentation projects should also be encouraged by organisations supporting this kind of research, as these are still highly useful for future studies. Moreover, this would allow less fortunate scholars in the countries where so many highly endangered languages are spoken to make an important contribution to the field. This way, it may still be possible to document a considerable number of poorly known languages for academic purposes, and, where there is an interest among the particular speech community, to implement knowledge about the structure of these languages for practical purposes, eg. in primary education, as well.

Because of the poor state the documentation of several language groups on the African continent, the same stereotypical views on the kinds of grammatical structures one finds or does not find in Africa tend to be reproduced again and again in the general linguistics literature. It seems hard to get beyond this, unless Africanists can be given an opportunity to gather more data and to present these to a wider linguistically-interested public.

The current view of several Africanists is that there is more genetic and typological diversity on the continent than scholars were led to believe about three or four decades ago. Following in the footsteps of earlier investigators interested in genetic classification, Joseph Greenberg's proposals of the 1950's and 1960's were indeed brilliant, and accordingly have received wide acceptance. But new data have since become available. For example, in the West African area there are a number of languages which seem to constitute early split-offs from Niger-Congo. This appears to apply to isolated languages such as Mbre (Pre) in the Ivory Coast, and Mpre, a language once spoken in Ghana which appears to be extinct. More problematic in terms of genetic classification is a language in Chad known as Laal. Williamson and Blench (2000: 36) have argued that it contains "substantial Chadic (i.e. Afro-asiatic) and Adamawa (i.e. Niger-Congo) elements as well as a core vocabulary of unknown provenance". In addition, the former language of the Jalabe in north-eastern Nigeria may constitute a linguistic isolate. There are other highly endangered languages whose genetic sub-grouping is unclear such as Biraile (Ongota) and Shabo (Mekeyir) of south-western Ethiopia. Possibly, these languages are the last members of otherwise extinct African language families.

As pointed out above, most Khoisan specialists appear to treat this proposed phylum as an areal, rather than a genetic, grouping. The dominant view today is that there are at least three Khoisan families, Northern, Central and Southern Khoisan. The Tanzanian language Sandawe may be genetically related to Central Khoisan; languages such as Hadza (also in Tanzania) possibly constitute additional linguistic isolates. The genetic classification of these African languages cannot be clarified until in-depth studies become available of their grammatical structure, and of their morphological features in particular. The latter tend to be more resilient to change; consequently, these morphological properties potentially constitute important diagnostic properties for genetic relationships.

There are thus a number of problematic issues for classification with respect to:

- Biraila, Jalabe, Laal, Shabo
- the Kadu language group in the Nuba Mountains, Sudan
- the Koman languages in the border area between Ethiopia and Sudan
- the Songai cluster along the Niger River
- the Ubanguian language group in Central Africa

- possibly the Mande languages in West Africa

These all seem to tell us is that there is more genetic variation on the African continent than we may have been lead to believe by earlier investigations.

Similar observations can be made with respect to typological variation. As Güldemann (1998), for example, has shown, there are tremendous typological differences in the Khoisan region (which, as noted above, probably consists of at least three families), e.g. in terms of head marking versus dependent marking in the sense of Nichols (1986). But similar observations can be made for other regions. Not only do we know now that there are languages with ergative properties spoken in the border area between Sudan and Ethiopia, or languages with numeral classifiers, eg. in southern Nigeria – features assumed to be absent from Africa until recently – there is still a lot more to be discovered. To give one more example here, an interesting typological property of the Jukunoid (Niger-Congo) language Hone, an endangered language spoken in north-central Nigeria, may be mentioned. Traditionally, it has been assumed – also by Africanists – that categorical distinctions between nouns and verbs are clear in African languages, in other words that problems of syntactic categorisation as attested in Amerindian or Austronesian languages, do not arise in the analyses of African languages. However, as shown by Storch (to appear) in Hone, the distinction between nouns and verbs is indeed partly blurred or non-distinct in terms of conjugation [5]. In all likelihood, there are several more languages in the area where Hone is spoken with typologically similar phenomena. However, many languages in the area have not been documented; moreover, several of them are in danger of becoming extinct.

A similarly dramatic situation is found in Sudan, where, for example, several Nilo-Saharan groups are highly endangered, e.g. the Daju group or the Jebel group; as are languages belonging to the Kordofanian group within Niger-Congo. There is not a single monograph on any of these languages, each representing genetic branches parallel to Germanic, Slavic or Albanian within the Indo-European family. In fact, the annual number of publications on my first language, Dutch, is higher than on the entire Nilo-Saharan family, a group of over 140 distinct languages, as shown by the Linguistic Bibliography. This demonstrates where the linguistic community at large puts its academic priorities. Breaking through this barrier will be hard, if not impossible. Although there is indeed a general awareness among the linguistic community that it is important to document endangered languages, one also has to conclude that there is quite a bit of rhetoric involved, because the actual number of scholars, especially in Western countries, actually interested in doing fieldwork on these languages is rather limited. It would seem that the greatest academic potential is indeed to be found in those parts of the world where most of the poorly documented languages, whether endangered or not, are spoken, namely in Africa, Asia and South-America. Active academic support of and co-operation with these scholars to improve capacity building in their home countries should thus be given the highest priority in the immediate future.

[5] The study by Storch appears in a volume (Dimmendaal, to appear) whose main aim is to present new data on poorly-known African languages with typologically interesting phenomena.

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