Minority Languages, a Cultural Legacy

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Being professionally interested in African languages, there is no way in which we could try to hide our rather selfish motive in hoping for the survival of African languages, and as many as possible at that. The disappearance of any African language means to us scholars the final, irrecoverable loss of an important empirical resource, not only for linguistic studies, but also for studies on the history and culture of a people. Not many outside the academic circle, however, will have heartaches over such matters.*

However, in Africa many people are highly concerned with preserving their cultural heritage and identity, their language being the most vital part in this endeavor. For example, numerous letters of support from Kenyan citizens in favor of their vernaculars** are being published in the "letters to the editor" pages of the country's major newspaper *Daily Nation*. To quote just two statements from these:

> Culturalists assert that a country which does not preserve its culture quickly loses identity as a nation. . . . A nation which does not see the need to preserve its native dialects and languages can hardly preserve its culture since cultural education can only be imparted through these languages. (E. P. Wanzala, June 29, 1987)

> Language is the tap root of the tree of a people's culture which fosters, develops and transmits traditional values from one generation to another. (Njoroge Michael Kamau, May 14, 1986)

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* The following four papers, all concerned with endangered African languages, were delivered on September 21, 1992, in Harare, Zimbabwe, at the twenty-first general congress of the International Council on Philosophy and the Social Sciences.
** Traditionally, linguists have used the term "vernacular language' to designate a language used within a particular, often small, community; a "vehicular language," by contrast, is one used in order to facilitate communication *between* different groups. The term "vernacular" – from the Latin *verna*, or house slave – is currently under attack by those linguists who assert that it is a synonym for "slave language" or tribal language. However, the proposed substitute – the opposition between a "nomadic" and a "sedentary" language – applies only to certain cases and can therefore not replace the notion of a vernacular language. The controversy over the term has nevertheless drawn attention to the political character – colonial, national, or other – of many scientific terms. (Note from the editors of *Diogenes*.)

Both of these statements are referring in general to the value of speaking one's own language, one's "mother tongue," whereas in this paper we have decided to talk about those languages which are being threatened or abandoned by their speakers.

To start with, we will try to define what minority languages are.

What Are Minority Languages?

Whereas in other parts of the world – for example in the United States or Australia, with the American Indian languages and the aboriginal languages respectively – it is obvious what languages should be regarded as minority languages, this is not easy for many regions in Africa.

Minority languages are those spoken by minorities, but ethnic minorities, of course, are not congruent with ethnolinguistic minorities. As in most other parts of the world, we are confronted in Africa with many peripatetics, as Michael Bollig, in his article providing an overview of African peripatetics, calls those small groups living in patron-client relationships. By far, most of these "ethnic" minorities speak the languages of their hosts, and Bollig observes about quite a large number of them that they are using argots, elaborated on the base of the "host's languages." Some of these argots are characterized by having a substrate of an original, but abandoned language, similar to the Anglo-Romani spoken by gypsies in Britain. Other tongues have been mentioned as being more or less artificially created secret codes; important to us, however, is the fact that most of the peripatetic groups have lost their original language, provided of course that they had one before.

The term "minority" is applied quite freely and diversely, which leads some scholars, for example, Nelde (1987), to reject its use completely. The use of the term is very much situationally determined. Rebecca Agheyisi (1984), for example, who deals with the Nigerian language situation, makes the distinction between:

– *Regional major languages*, for which only nine qualify, including the three main Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba

– *Minor languages* with twenty-five members, each of them still having more than 100,000 speakers

– The remaining languages, referred to as *minority languages*. Out of about 400 languages spoken in Nigeria, she regards more than 360 as minority languages. All speakers of these roughly 360 ethnolinguistic minorities together make up only 7 percent of the total national population, which numbers approximately one hundred million.

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In contrast to that, in East Africa nobody, least of all the speakers, would label Pokomo with 40,000, or even Rendille with only 18,700 speakers as minority languages. The term is officially in use by the governments of Zimbabwe to denote the indigenous languages other than Shona and Ndebele, whereas most East African governments avoid its use entirely.

In this paper we use "minority language" simply to indicate that a particular language is threatened, that is, at risk of being replaced and finally of becoming extinct. Ethnolinguistic minorities in this sense are very often communities which are economically disadvantaged and without political representation, not having any lobby in their home countries. As Suzanne Romaine (1989: 284) puts it:

> The label "minority" is simply a euphemism for the non-elite or dominated. Linguistic characteristics of minority languages such as diglossia and bilingualism are just the linguistic manifestations of unequal access to power in society.

Therefore, most of the minority languages exist in generally hostile environments – the schools, media, official meetings, etc., being dominated by other languages than their own. But whether a certain language is threatened and should therefore be called a minority language or not, is a matter of investigation and not simply one of labeling. For that reason we now proceed to the question of which languages in African are in fact minority ones.

Which African Languages are Minority Languages?

Right from the beginning, it is clear that we won't come up with a clear-cut, generally accepted definition of what a threatened language is, but we have to look for symptoms showing the state of "health" of such languages. The criteria in this sense which help to measure the degree of vitality of a language or its threatened status are (1) its number of speakers, (2) its use by them, and (3) its structural changes.

Seemingly obvious for the degree of threat of a minority language (or as other scholars formulate it positively, its "state of vitality") is the size of the entire speech community. Annette Schmidt (1990) summarizes the observations of Australian languages with regard to the number of speakers, by stating "that healthy languages ranged from 200 to 4,000 speakers." In contrast to that, Ogoni people in Nigeria regard themselves, even numbering 500,000, as being a minority and claim in their "Ogoni Bill of

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Rights" of December 1991 addressed to the international communi-
ty: ". . . the Ogoni languages . . . are undeveloped and are about to
disappear, whereas other Nigerian languages are being forced on
us." (Page 10.)

Languages with only a few speakers are threatened both from
outside and within the speech community. With regard to internal
threat, the mere fact that only a few parents may decide not to use
the minority language with their children already results in endan-
gering language transmission from one generation to the other.
Similarly, migration of a small number of people to towns results
in a rapid decline of the language. Another factor seriously affect-
ing the vitality of languages spoken by small speech communities
is intermarriage.

And from the outside, small speech communities are more sus-
ceptible to natural catastrophes, such as the present drought in
southern Africa. Amos Mkwananzi, MP from Tsholotsho, for
example, reported on 7 July 1992 that the approximately one thou-
sand Khoisan people living in Zimbabwe will die of hunger if food
is not brought to them by the government.

In addition, there is no question about the fact that languages
with a small number of speakers are more exposed to suppression
by others than bigger ones, or as Mackey (1980: 35) puts it: "If a
small fish gets in contact with a big fish, it is the smaller which is
more likely to disappear." Superficially, he is right, but his
metaphor doesn't explain anything, since contact situations are
much more complex than simple domination by virtue of numbers.
In many situations, small speech communities do maintain their
languages, whereas in similar situations others quit and abandon
them. And furthermore, the environment of minority languages, in
most cases, doesn't contain only one big fish, and the question is
then which one of them is the most threatening for the survival of
the minority language.

Therefore, just as important as the absolute number of speakers
is the ratio between the number of members of the ethnic group
and the number of speakers of the corresponding ethnic tongue.
That would mean if a certain language associated with an ethnic
minority counted let's say 50,000 members, of whom only 25,000
were speakers of the ethnic tongue, the language would be set on
the endangered list, whereas an ethnic tongue of a community
numbering only 3,000, but with 2,900 speaking the ethnic language
as a mother tongue, would not be regarded as an acutely endan-
gered language.

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Although membership of the ethnic group is very often, especially in language-shift situations, not unproblematic – shifts in ethnic self-identification are not rare at all – we leave out this topic in our reflections and concentrate instead on the question of what our figure for *number of speakers* really stands for. Dealing with minority languages we have to expect extreme variation with regard to language use and the degree of proficiency. The mere number of speakers does not take this into account.

Use of Minority Languages

Variation in the distribution of speakers occurs, among other things, with regard to gender. Heine (1990) for example, reports on Omotic speakers in Kenya, that in the early 1970s there were roughly fifty women, but only six to eight men, who remembered the old language.

More relevant than gender to our question, however, is language use according to generations. Although the number of speakers in a certain community might be relatively high, the language there has to be regarded as being threatened when the younger generation makes up a low percentage of speakers.

In most cases, language use within small speech communities means limited use of the mother tongue and consequently a potential threat. Very often the use of these languages is restricted to certain domains such as home, village, religion or is related to the traditional activities, for example, of hunting, beekeeping, or to social events such as initiation ceremonies, etc. But not all languages which are restricted in their use to certain domains are threatened since stable language use patterns may result in stable bilingualism among the members of the community. The frequency of the use of the language is not indicated in the number of speakers and hence not in the distribution of speakers within the speech community.

Annette Schmidt (1990: 20–21) in dealing with Australian languages talks of the interdependency of changes in language use and those in the structure of the languages. In her "downward spiral of reduced language use and loss," she demonstrates that:
– limited use of language leads to limited exposure to the language,
which results in:
– decreasing competence,
– lack of confidence in using the language,
– an increasing reliance on English,

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and then the circle repeats on a lower level by
– more limited use of the language, etc.

Structure of Minority Languages

On three levels, we include the structure of a language into our consideration of whether or not it is a minority language. These levels refer to the competence of the speakers, the structural changes of the language, and the genetic relationship between the languages involved in a language-shift situation.

In most cases, speakers of minority languages show quite different *levels of proficiency,* leading Nancy Dorian, in her work on Gaelic to distinguish speakers according to their competence in the language as:
– *Older fluent speakers,* that is, those speakers with full competence of the old language,
– *Younger fluent speakers,* speakers who deviate from the norms of older fluent speakers,
– *Semispeakers,* speakers with a "reduced" form of the old language.

Further terms are in use, such as *very weak semispeakers, passive bilinguals, rememberers,* and many more, all pointing to the fact, that in minority languages we are confronted with a continuum of proficiency. In view of these differences, the question naturally arises as to what "speaker" of the minority language in our overall ratio figure actually means. We may find ourselves talking about hundreds of speakers of a minority language, but ignoring the fact that the language may already have died out, leaving only "rememberers" behind. This leads us to the aspects of structural changes which take place in minority languages.

Languages do not die on the spot, and on their way to becoming extinct, processes of decay affect their structures. The "downward spiral of language use" affects the structure of the language shift. Dealing with contact-induced language change phenomena, Sasse (1992: 59–80) regards the distinction between "normal language contact" and "language decay" as being vital, melting the distinction between "borrowing and interference on the one hand, and irreversible loss and reduction in the system of an obsolescent language on the other" (Sasse 1991: 60).

With minority languages we therefore have to be prepared to meet languages at different stages of the process of decay. Since no written documents on these languages exist, it is only by compari-

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son to other generically related languages that this defective language status can be revealed. Sasse (1992: 77), for example, comments on Heine's publications on the Elmolo language: "The conclusion is that the last Elmolo speakers were semispeakers and Heine's Elmolo material does not represent "original Elmolo" but a pathological distorted version thereof.

Linguistic continua among related languages are the ground for linguistically rather unspectacular processes of "shift." Clear-cut language shifts, favorably involving totally unrelated languages, are relatively easy to handle with regard to questions such as the above-mentioned regarding the levels of proficiency and the processes of decay. By contrast, shifts in dialectal situations demand a much more sensitive treatment. Although these contact situations are by far the most in number – just recall all those hundreds of Bantu languages in close contact for thousands of years – they have been widely ignored by scholars.

To name just two quite diverse approaches in dealing with contact situations of closely related languages or dialects, we first refer to Heine's description of "Dialect death: The case of Terik." Heine (1992: 271) describes the following situation:

> The Terik case presents a prototypical continuum ranging from an "Elgon" type of speech at the one end to Nandi at the other. Diachronically, this continuum can be observed in the process of dialect shift from the erstwhile Terik to Nandi, while synchronically it is manifested, for example, in the differing degrees of Nandi-ization. . . .

The second is Möhlig's (1992: 157–179) attempt to detect linguistic "strata " which are "surviving features typical of a former language" (1992: 157) and to explain processes of convergence among Bantu languages in various parts of East Africa by the principle of "homogenization" (Möhlig 1983).

To summarize what has been said about the relevance of the number of speakers, language use, competence, and structural change for the degree of threat of languages, we come to the conclusion, that what is ultimately important is

1) The ratio between ethnic membership and number of speakers, in addition to

• the absolute number of speakers, and with those speakers we have to survey:

  – their language behavior,
  – their distribution within the speech community,
  – their competence in the minority language.

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2) And with regard to the structure of minority languages we have to analyze contact-induced language-change processes, according to
• the stage of decay,
• the genetic relationship of the languages in contact.
Having concentrated so far on the (potential) victims, the minority languages, we now introduce the other side, the replacing languages.

Basic Settings of Language-Shift Situations

In studying the settings in which language shifts take place we found the distinction between forced and desired language shift to be crucial. Which brings us to the catch-words "ethnolinguistic suicide" and "language murder."

It is in the former that an ethnolinguistic minority desires assimilation into a dominant speech community, whereas in the latter an ethnolinguistic minority is forced into language shift by a dominant speech community.

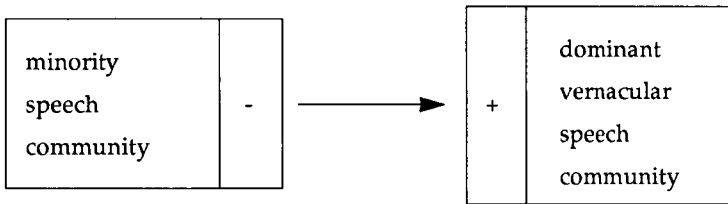| minority speech community | + | → | + | dominant vernacular |
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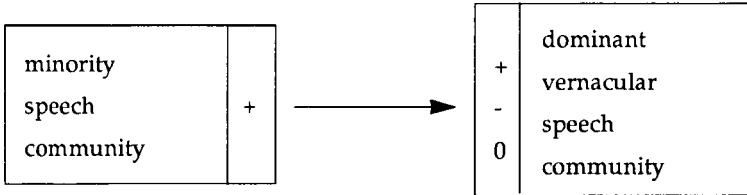
Ethnolinguistic suicide

Marckey (1987: 8) proclaimed that no speech community "willingly selects minority status from the outset, or willingly places itself on the endangered species list, or knowingly commits linguistic hara-kiri. . . ."
But with this statement he is far from being right.
Language loyalty is, of course, widespread among minority speech communities; otherwise these languages would have disappeared altogether. But since shifts in self-identification by adapting the value systems of a dominant speech community prevail there comes – as Denison (1977: 21) puts it – "a point when multilingual parents no longer consider it necessary or worthwhile for the future of their children to communicate with them in a low-prestige language variety."

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Hunter-gatherer groups (and not only these) in East Africa, for example, were attracted by the pastoralists and their way of life for a long time. But only with the Pax Britannica did it become feasible for them to acquire and (more importantly) keep cattle. Before that, hunter-gatherer groups were not in the position to defend their livestock against cattle-raiding pastoralists. By securing rights of possession, the British allowed hunter-gatherer groups to become economically pastoralist, and many of those groups decided to abandon their former language in favor of the pastoralist one. In numerous cases these have been Maasai and Samburu, the main dialects of the Maa language.

The attitudes of the minority speech community towards the shift in these settings are positive, whereas the dominant speech community may regard the attempts of the minority group as either positive, neutral, or negative.

minority speech community	-		→	+	dominant vernacular speech community

Language murder

In settings of this type, ethnolinguistic minorities coming into close contact with dominant speech communities are forced to abandon their mother tongue and speak the vernacular of the dominant group instead. Motivations for this cultural imperialism are such as to establish effective mechanisms of control, to manifest long-run dependencies, to open new communities for finding partners for marriage, etc. Minorities in these contact situations are either "occupied by" or "incorporated into" the dominant groups.

Coming back to the setting described above, we can look at hunter-gatherer groups in contact with pastoralists in East Africa. Periodical droughts and epidemics in this region forced pastoral nomads to repeatedly live with – sometimes even as – hunter-gatherers, despite the fact that pastoralists regarded hunter-gatherers as inferior. In normal times, the relations between pastoralists and these small ethnic groups were restricted to economic exchange on a generally symbiotic basis. But when times got bad, relations

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became stricter. Relying for their survival on the "inferior" hunter-gatherers, the pressure on those groups by the pastoralists grew, and living together could mean total control in all spheres of daily life. In cases where these situations didn't last for long, the minorities could recover later, but often, after long-lasting occupations, the minorities had lost their language.

Winter (1979: 183) describes a contact situation of the mentioned type, between the Aasáx, hunter-gatherers (which spoke a Southern Cushitic language), and the pastoral Maasai:

> But while the agricultural tribes, in virtue of their relatively larger population volumes, managed to keep their Maasai refugees well under control throughout the time of their sojourn, the Aasáx failed in this task due to their much smaller number. . . .

> Thus, as time went on, the contingents of Maasai lodgers in the latter's local groups soon took on the character of occupation troops. This meant, among other things, that in their settlements, huts, and council meetings, that is, wherever their occupants were within hearing, the Aasáx were no longer permitted to speak their own language.

The language was still used by men on their hunting parties, but in the end adapting the language of their "hosts" led to the extinction of the Aasáx language. And this happened, according to Winter, in 1976, when Kimindet ole Kiyanú, the last speaker of the Aasáx language, died.

The distinction between ethnolinguistic suicide and language murder, that is, between an intended language shift and a forced one, bears problems of at least two kinds. Not only in most cases are minority languages not the prototypical murder or suicide victims, but also in the ongoing processes of language shift, language loyalty ceases mostly before the completion of the replacement. And even then the murder victims finally have to accept death and abandon their language, as we have seen with the Aasáx.

We now turn to the replacing languages, the usurpers.

A good many languages in Africa are expanding by replacing minority languages, and in the following we group these languages either as institutionally supported or nonsupported ones. Within both groups, vernaculars and linguae francae are found operating on a local, a regional, or a national level. Apart from that, we shall discuss the "threat from abroad," that is, the "world languages."

Herman Batibo (1992: 86), in describing the Tanzanian situation, builds up a hierarchy of languages – national, regional, local, and those without special prestige.

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For the local level, Batibo (1992: 97) makes the following distinction: "Languages of local prestige were those languages which had no regional status, but because of their speakers' dynamism, had tended to dominate their immediate neighbours."

Language shifts on a local level are characterized by direct contact. Speech communities of medium or small size suppress minority language speech communities, and Batibo (1992:87) regards Matumbi and also Luo in Tanzania as those local replacing languages.

On the "regional level" dominant vernaculars expand at the expense of minority languages. Cases of that type are plentiful, examples like Swahili in Kenya, Maa(sai) in Kenya and Tanzania, could be regarded as such replacing languages on that level.

On the "national level," we do find several languages which could potentially serve for national communication but nevertheless do not receive support by the local governments.

Ronald Wardhaugh writes in his book *Languages in Competition* (1988: 191):

> In Senegal . . . Wolof is spreading much faster than French even though it remains largely unwritten and French is the official language. Wolof is just too useful a language to be ignored by those who have another mother tongue. . . . So Wolof . . . is spreading at the expense of both French and other indigenous languages, e.g., Peul, Bambara, and Diola, which are increasingly confined to the peripheries of the state and then to the rural parts of these as Wolof takes over the towns there.

In contrast to the above-mentioned replacing languages, there are others which spread by being institutionally supported by the governments. This type of setting can occur only on a national level in those countries which practice an endoglossic language policy but are not monolingual nations.

Support for language on a national level is found in countries such as

Botswana, with Setwsana – very often regarded as monolingual, neglecting the Khoisan speech communities

Somalia – which is mostly classified with Somali as being monolingual, but findings of Marcello Lamberti (1986) reveal that some of the "Somali dialects" have to be regarded as distinct languages

Malawi, with Chichewa

Ethiopia, with Amharic

Tanzania, with Swahili

On a regional level, languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo

in Nigeria are institutionally supported, and on the local level, it is only Guinea, as far as we know, which provides institutional support for indigenous languages.

All these countries allow for settings in which vernaculars are being replaced by institutionally supported national languages.

"Threat from Abroad"

"It will be a sad day when a section of our African population cannot express themselves except in a European language." On 28 July 1974 this statement made by Professor Abdulaziz was published in the *Sunday Nation*. Even today, English and French are mother tongues to only very few Africans, most of them living in urban centers and belonging to the intellectual elite. Language shift by such individuals, however, is very far from resulting in any loss of African languages.

Whereas the British, right from the beginning, supported the dominant vernaculars (*divide et impera*), the French suppressed and still tend to suppress indigenous languages abroad and in their home country. The Portuguese did likewise to their African colonies by glorifying their own language and deriding the indigenous ones. Portuguese differs, however, insofar as it did spread to some extent as a mother tongue among the so-called *assimilados*, who were not only members of the elite but also came from all classes of the urban population. Nevertheless, figures for the distribution of Portuguese within the rural population of their former colonies (Bender 1978: 221 suggests about 1 percent for Angola) account for the situation which Matthias Perl describes in 1989: 75 thus: "In a period of almost 500 years of rule, the Portuguese colonial power didn't succeed in imposing the Portuguese language on the masses of the Angolan population; nor did it succeed in eliminating indigenous languages."

Up to now we haven't heard of even a single case in Africa in which a European language has replaced an African one. Professor Abdulaziz, being knowledgeable about the situation of African languages, is forced therefore to refer to "sections" of these elites, and not to entire speech communities abandoning their languages.

Obviously we haven't come up with discrete types in the sense that a given shift situation can always be put into one of the previously described settings without any argument, but we hope to have demonstrated where the usurpers come from. To summarize the settings of contact situations with regard to those replacing lan-

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guages, we end up on the non–officially supported side with usurpers on the local level – that is, vernaculars with only local prestige and influence – with regional dominant vernaculars expanding at the expense of other vernaculars, and finally with linguae francae on a national level. Institutionally supported languages replace languages on the regional level and on the national level.

To get a first idea of which usurpers are the most active in Africa, let us look at the frequency of shifts, in which not the number of the potential replacing languages is indicated, but the number of languages replaced by them. With our limited data we get the following picture of the scene of the occurrence of language replacement by the usurpers:

	Number of languages replaced by non-supported languages	Number of languages replaced by institutionally supported languages
At the local level	Few	Nearly none
At the regional level	Most	Many
At the national level	Some	Some, but increasing

Whereas on the nonsupported side, local and national usurpers are rare, by far most of the replacing languages are dominant vernaculars with a regional prestige. Similarly, institutionally supported languages on the national level up to now seldom replace mother tongues, Swahili being an exception to this, and on the local level there is no official support, with the exception of Guinea. Therefore we find even in these cases that the threat comes from the meso-level, from the regional dominant vernacular.

Impact of Language Policies on Minority Languages

Keeping this in mind, we now look briefly at two fundamentally different positions taken by African nations in language policies and planning with regard to the treatment of vernaculars.

We do not need to make here the otherwise very important distinction between language policies distinguished as endoglossic, that is, the use of an indigenous language as a national language, and exoglossic, that is, the use of a European language as a nation-

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al language. If applied to implement one national language in multilingual countries, both of these policies – and that is what counts for us – treat vernaculars as opponents.

Ruth Mukama (1986: 49–50), a Ugandan colleague, in her paper on "The Viability of the Indigenous Languages in the Ugandan Context," paraphrases this widespread misconcept as follows:

> Unfortunately, the many indigenous languages are generally seen as divisive forces and inimical to the nation-building process since they are responsible for the perpetuation of tribalism. The obvious assumption here is that monolingual societies are necessarily assured of sociocultural unity, and consequently, political unity, and that if we threw all indigenous languages overboard, tribal differences would cease forthwith.

We don't really need to argue with those prejudices against multilingualism: we just have to look at the few monolingual, or near to that, nations in Africa – Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi – in order to see that language doesn't necessarily unite people. Vernaculars are held responsible for manifesting tribalism and encouraging separatism, but one can also take the position published in a letter to the editor in Kenya's *Daily Nation* of 19 June 1982 (Anthony Njoroge Gikonyo): "I feel that if indigenous languages were taught in our national schools, this would foster more tolerance, unity, cooperation and act as a source of understanding of our culture more effectively."

In contrast to the policy of "one nation, one language," the well-known UNESCO report of 1953 promotes the concept that every child should begin its formal education in its mother tongue, since "the mother tongue is a person's natural means of self-expression, and one of his needs is to develop his power of self-expression to the full."

The only multilingual country in Africa which did follow this advice politically has been Guinea, promoting the use alongside of French of eight indigenous languages, even giving them the status of national languages. These are the country's three major languages, Ful, Manding (Malinke), and Soso (Susu); the smaller languages Kisi, Kpelle, and Loma; and even two minority languages, Konyagi (Wame, Wammey) and Basari (Oneyan). All pupils since 1973 use a national language for the first seven years; French is being taught as a subject and is the official language of the country (Adamolekun 1976: 105; cf. Reh/Heine 1982: 135–142). The case of Guinea is apparently different, since 89 percent of the pupils have access to schooling in their mother tongue.

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Many other African countries support vernaculars by using them as the medium of instruction, but unlike Guinea, which covers the country with only 8 languages quite effectively, Kenya would have to deal with more than 30, Uganda with at least a similar number, Cameron with about 100, Tanzania with approximately 120, and Nigeria, as mentioned before, with 400 languages.

Obviously it would be quite an unrealistic proposal to make for most African nations to support the total of their vernaculars. All minority languages are vernaculars, but no one can expect African countries to train teachers, to print books, etc., for language teaching in languages spoken only by a few hundred people, or even a few thousand. Supporting vernaculars in general therefore means that the African countries have to select and in this way support the dominant vernaculars. Strengthening these, for example, by introducing them in primary education, means strengthening the main usurpers, which consequently leads to the more rapid decline of the minority languages of today, even more than teaching in European languages does.

However, being aware of the dilemma we are caught in, and the fatal side effects created by this situation, we should support initiatives of ethnolinguistic communities in maintaining their vernaculars, by helping them to produce teaching materials, to enter the media, to write down literature, etc. The pressure on the African languages will increase in the future, and many languages out of the now still healthy large mass of vernaculars will decrease to minority language status.

Outlook

Minority languages are by definition the ones most likely to disappear through language shift. We have restricted ourselves to dealing with questions of threatened languages and the languages replacing them in Africa in, we hope, a sufficiently systematic way. With African countries being confronted with the rather pessimistic analysis of the situation of minority languages, the question remains, what can and should be done? For good reasons we haven't elaborated on language planning and policies, since much more competent scholars on these issues are present here.

We would like, however, to quote Okot p'Bitek, one of the greatest writers in East Africa, who as early as 1964 postulated at a Conference on East African Heritage in his paper "The Future of Vernacular Literature":

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The [oral] literature of smaller languages is doomed to death! English and Swahili and other vernaculars will strangle these groups. If the best that can be done is to record as much as possible of the beautiful literature of these people, to be preserved in a museum, then that must be done.

And this is at least what could be done and needs to be done urgently with regard to the minority languages since they are dying rapidly in large numbers on the African continent.

For various reasons, most African nations would need support in this from abroad, both financially and with regard to manpower. Professor Kashoki requests that in order not to perpetuate the academic imperialism of the Western countries imposed on African nations, foreign researchers have "to produce scholarly pieces of work which seek to meet simultaneously the specialized needs of academics and the more practical concerns of the host country" (1978: 292).

One concrete suggestion in this sense with regard to minority languages would be the example given by the Cultural and Language Survey of Tanzania, originally known as the Language Atlas of Tanzania Project. Herman Batibo from the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics at the University of Dar-es-Salaam designed in cooperation with other scholars a questionnaire covering the fundamentals of specific languages. Any foreign researcher engaged in research projects concerning Tanzanian languages is obliged to complete these questionnaires no matter what his own interests are. In this way, documentation on the Tanzanian languages can progress, which would otherwise be impossible due to financial reasons and lack of staff.

Regardless of what language policy has been decided on by the governments, the minority languages should be documented as a first priority. They should receive special attention since minority languages are a fast-disappearing heritage, a widely neglected cultural legacy.

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References

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