Language and Identity
Theories and experiences
in lexicography
and linguistic policies
in a global world

Edited by
Ilaria Micheli,
Flavia Aiello,
Maddalena Toscano,
Amelia Pensabene

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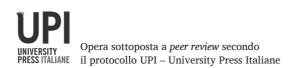Ilaria Micheli
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The natural supremacy of spoken language. Orality and writing in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This contribution aims to introduce the reader to the African socio-linguistic panorama and to the main issues bound to the often oversimplified dichotomy which sees, in abstract terms, verbal communication as opposed to written production. In the present article I will try to bring to light all different aspects which contribute to make the question a very complex and multilayered one, at least in Africa, above all because the vast majority of African languages to date do not even have a written form.

In such conditions, the issue is not whether, when or how, writing is used or allowed, but why the lack of adequate written varieties is so pervasive and whether and how things could be possibly changed for the better, in order to really value, protect and promote the use of minority and endangered African spoken languages.

In brief, I will discuss the following 5 points: 1) the number of living languages in the continent (and the difference between pluri- and multilingualism); 2) the presence of indigenous African scripts and imported alphabets from the 3rd millennium b.C. to present day; 3) the supremacy of orality over writing with specific references to traditional literature and artistic production; 4) the unfair distribution of literacy and formal education in the continent; 5) the importance of linguistic policies for the right to education and the protection of endangered minority languages and communities.

KEYWORDS

African languages; Literacy; Writing systems; Endangered languages; Language policies.

> *"Asking a community to choose which of its languages should receive institutional support is like asking a mother to choose which of her children should be given new clothes"*
> Jufferman & Abdelhay 2016.

INTRODUCTION

Far from being an exhaustive dissertation about the oral and written varieties of the more than 2000 different living African languages, which would, indeed, represent a too ambitious endeavor even for linguists much more capable than me, my simple goal in this paper is to outline at least the main features of communication and use of languages in the continent, as well as the characteristics of their appearance in verbal and/or written contexts, or the position reserved to minority, spoken languages in present day Sub-Saharan African school systems.

In the following paragraphs I will try my best to shed some light at least on five points which could help the reader to grasp the underlying complexity of the whole question of language *at large* in a continent which is everything but a monolith.

Thus, § 1 will be devoted to a brief commentary on the numbers registered for African languages and on the effective usability of data derived from a simple enumeration of languages and linguistic families in the continent.

§ 2 will offer a simple overview (with some personal reflections) on the dynamics underlying the development of scripts for local languages, considering that, far from being a continent without writing, Africa has been home of some of the most well known ancient scripts, which, in some cases (e.g. the Egyptian hieroglyph) date back even to the 3rd millennium b.C.[1]

In § 3 I will try to discuss what I mean when I speak of the supremacy of spoken over written language, making specific references to the African traditional oral literature(s) and artistic production(s).

§ 4 will be devoted to a brief discussion of the unfair distribution of literacy in the continent, while in § 5 I will focus on the importance of linguistic policies for the right to education and the protection of endangered minority languages and communities.

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[1]   This paragraph could be seen also as an introduction to the chapter by Mauro Tosco in this volume.

1. AFRICAN LANGUAGES: NOT A MERE QUESTION OF NUMBERS

Africa is home to 54 different countries, to hundreds of different cultures and to thousands of different indigenous languages. According to the most recent estimates of Ethnologue, in the world, around 7.000 languages are currently spoken, and Africa, together with South East Asia represents the region with the highest variety. The continent hosts, in fact, more than 2000 living languages. This means, in other words, that almost 1/3 of the world's languages are African.

The presence or absence of a writing system is not a *condicio sine qua non* for the identification of a variety as a language or a dialect, which is indeed a malicious belief we usually inherit from obsolete Western school memories. In order to be defined a language, a verbal variety must have a peculiar structure, with peculiar phonology, morphology, syntax as well as specific vocabulary and it must represent a *pivot* around which other slightly different but inter-comprehensible varieties (dialects) turn around.

Unfortunately, despite some noticeable exceptions (e.g. the Bantu family), we lack reliable data and complete descriptive materials on most African languages and their varieties[2].

However, it can be accepted as a given that this is a feature that Africa shares with all those areas of the world which were subjected to colonialism (Latin America and South East Asia in the first place), or that have not been so much influenced by the Western education systems or by the true passion for description and scientific classification that the Darwinian experience boosted all around the world since the era of Enlightenment.

However, the complexity of the linguistic mosaic of the continent is not only due to the huge numbers of languages currently spoken. Understanding the numbers, in fact, does not simply mean to understand their geographic distribution, fancying that each language/community of speakers occupies a specific area, which is in itself monolingual, monocultural, and mono-ethnical. On the contrary, an attentive reading of these numbers tells us that the African reality is made, also and above all, of something much more complex, and that the cohabitation of multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic groups in the very same area, often creates highly variable socio-linguistic networks and dynamics that are very hardly perceivable by outsiders (see Batibo 2005, Lüpke 2010, Jufferman & Abdelhay 2016).

Researches on plurilingualism in themselves, referring only to the numerical dimension, can tell us much on the problems that African modern States should face, if and when they seriously intend to tackle the delicate issue of language policies, since, except for a very few cases in Mediterranean Africa or in the Horn (Somalia) where the number of languages spoken is

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[2]   cf Micheli 2010.

very low, usually the density degree of linguistic diversity is uncomfortably high, above all in the equatorial sub-saharan regions, where in a country like Côte d'Ivoire, which has the same extension of Italy, more than 70 different languages belonging to 4 different families are spoken or, in a country like Nigeria, which is three times larger than Italy, there are more than 500 languages. However, numbers cannot tell us anything about how, when and by whom all these languages are really spoken.

Researches on multilingualism, on the contrary, being focused on the speakers' behaviour and attitudes rather than on numbers, tell us more about the status of the different languages that co-habit the same geographical area.

According to Batibo 2005, the more typical socio-linguistic model in the continent is represented by triglossia. An average African speaker has in fact in his/her linguistic toolbox at least three different languages, which are characterised by different statuses. The higher position is occupied by the official language of the country, generally the one inherited from the colonial period, which is used as a technical medium in official domains. The second position is generally reserved to the *lingua franca* of the macro area, typically an L2 for most of the speakers, who use it in their daily activities outside the family, at the market, when they travel to town or the like. The last position is represented by the local language, that is usually the speaker's mother tongue and is reserved to the domestic domain and to the verbal exchanges among close relatives or people living in the same village or in its neighborhoods in rural areas.

Many times, this basic triglossic model gets expanded with two or more other languages, due to different cultural traditions and marriage preferences. It is so for example in the Kulango sub-prefecture of Nassian in Côte d'Ivoire, where the Kulango (Gur) community represents a buffer group between the Akan (Kwa) speaking clans of the southern regions and the Lobi (Gur) located in the northerner areas. Kulango are traditionally open to intermarriages both with Akan and with Lobi groups and, therefore, a Kulango child can easily be exposed at the same time to his/her parents' language (Kulango), to his/her grandparents' one (possibly Lobi, Lorhon, Akan or even all of them), to Dyula (Mande), representing the *lingua franca* spoken at the market or in the shops and finally French (Romance) used in the school.

It should be self evident, but it is maybe important to underline, that in this case, the very same child is exposed not only to four (or five, or six) languages belonging to the same linguistic family, but even to four (or five, or six) languages belonging to different language families and/or linguistic phyla.

Two last points must be added (or anticipated) here in order to have a more complete idea of the whole picture:

1) of all the languages involved in the example just reported, the only one that is really used in daily written contexts is French. With the exception of Lohron, which has even not been fully described until now (at least as far as I know), the other four (Kulango, Lobi, Akan and Dyula) could actually be

written according to specific scripts based usually on the Latin alphabet with the addition of some diacritics and/or IPA symbols[3], realised mainly by missionaries for their Bible translation, but certainly not universally known and, above all, very little, if ever, used for writing, being their usefulness limited just to the need of reading the Gospel or the Bible during the Mass or in other occasions reserved to the religious domain;

2) the very threat for true minority or endangered languages in Africa is not represented by ex-colonial languages, as it is often believed; rather their endangerment is much more due to other African languages enjoying a higher status, i.e. neighboring languages with a definitely higher number of speakers (in our example Kulango is suffocating Lorhon in the region due simply to their demographic majority) or the interethnic *lingua franca* (Dyula in our example), which allows its speakers to communicate with a larger network of people.

2. AFRICAN AUTOCHTHONOUS SCRIPTS

Despite the common view according to which Africa is a continent without writing, quite the opposite is true, since "The development of literacy in Africa seen as a whole certainly predates the histories of European colonialism and Islamic conquest" (Abdelhay; Asfaha & Juffermans 2014: 5).

One of the most ancient and prestigious scripts in the world, the Egyptian hieroglyph, was, indeed, born in Africa. The Nile valley, together with the Horn of Africa have been home to other very important ancient scripts, some of which are now extinct since long (e.g. Meroitic, Hieratic, Coptic, Old Nubian), while others still resist and continue to be used (e.g. Amharic, Ge'ez).

In addition to these more widely known written traditions, there are different other autochthonous scripts that were spontaneously developed by local communities in various parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, e.g. Nsibidi in southeastern Nigeria and Tifinagh in the Maghreb (now standardised in the Neo-Tifinagh form, which has recently become one of the three official scripts of Morocco, alongside with the Arabic and the Latin alphabets).

Of course, the local ancient scripts were reserved, known, used and passed down among specific groups of initiated peoples, mainly religious chiefs, without reaching and impacting on the lay population, but this is no wonder,

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[3]   The case of Dyula offers indeed a nice example of a Mande language in which many *ajami* texts have been produced. We call *ajami* all those texts written with the Arabic alphabet but in local African languages. For writing Dyula, people could also use an autochthonous script, namely the N'ko alphabet, invented in 1949 by S. Kanté, which will be cited also in the next § and in Tosco's chapter in this book.

since the same is true for the western writing tradition as well, which started to spread among the lower classes only when school attendance became compulsory.

Sometimes the invention of autochthonous scripts derived from the independent initiative of enlightened political chiefs, as it happened for example in Cameroon, where King Njoya himself, around 1885, created a special script for his language, Bamun, to be used in the court[4].

Be it as it may, when the Arabic and Latin alphabets reached the continent and started to be used as mediums of "civilization", first of all as a result of the Islamic and Christian missionary activities, or as a fruit of the commercial networks derived from the contacts with Arab merchants or the colonial administrations, they certainly "made an impact on Africa's language and literary ecology" (Abdelhay, Asfaha & Juffermans 2014: 6).

In a way, indeed, these two imported, so powerful and flexible tools, worked as a time bomb for the creativity of many local leaders, who used them as a basis for the development of new peculiar scripts for writing down the local languages, mainly as an expression of cultural and ethnic identity.

As pointed out by Dalby (1967, 1968 and 1969) and Cooper (1991), dozens of scripts were created between the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries and they were usually (but not always) presented to the local population as a divine revelation accorded to religious leaders directly from God. Consequently, as it happens for the myriad of alternative religious movements which are born in the same way nowadays and which last until the charismatic leader is alive or in business, most of these scripts had a lifespan limited to that of their inventors and their public was limited only to a small group of proselytes.

Also in this case, however, some experiments had better outcomes with respect to others, and a couple of these scripts have survived till now, despite the fact that they remain limited to a small network of users. Two examples that owe being mentioned here are: 1) the Vai script of Liberia, "revealed" to Momulu Duwalu Bukele around 1830[5], which is not an alphabet, but rather a syllabary; 2) the N'ko alphabet developed by the Guinean writer and educator Solomana Kanté in 1949 on the basis of the Arabic script and thought as a tool for writing down all the languages belonging to the Manding continuum of West-Africa[6].

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[4]   The script seems to have ceased to be used a few years after Njoya's death in 1931.

[5]   On this see also Scribner & Cole 1981.

[6]   On this see also Vydrin 2017 and Micheli 2021 (forthcoming).

3. THE NATURAL SUPREMACY OF SPOKEN LANGUAGES

That spoken language is a priority with respect to its written variety is for linguists an evidence that does not even need being commented.

However, for a larger public, it is probably worth underlining that this claim is easily ascertainable when considered under different perspectives: anthropological, ontogenetic and phylogenetic.

Anthropologically, it is evident that all languages are spoken, while not all of them are written. Indeed, only few hundreds of the 7000 languages spoken in the world at present, are written.

Ontogenetically, it is under everyone's eye that every human being learns first of all to speak and then, maybe, and only under certain specific conditions, he/she can also learn to write. Learning to speak is a natural process, which spontaneously starts in babies, even without specific training in this sense from their parents, through the imitating mechanism of lallation. Parents, on their part, can only help accelerating the process, if they constantly interact verbally with their children.

On the contrary, writing is a skill that can be acquired only much later and which needs already a quite complex ability on the part of the child in terms of movement coordination (learning to keep a pen in the right way in order to sketch small signs on a paper is already difficult). Thus, drastically simplifying, we can just say that learning to write is a cultural rather than a natural process and, therefore, it needs to be passed down to the younger generation by experts spending their time with this specific objective in their minds.

Phylogenetically, it is a fact that, in human history, spoken languages appeared ages before someone had the idea of writing them down. Between the moment in which *homo sapiens* evolved morphologically so to develop an articulatory apparatus suitable for the production of verbal sounds and the moment in which the first human community invented the first script, at least one million years had to pass.

Still today, the vast majority of human beings produce huge amounts of knowledge, literature, memories and cultural traditions even though they are not able to write.

Indeed, writing is not a *condicio sine qua non* culture grows and peoples have always developed and expressed themselves through poetry, theatre, music or storytelling even without writing anything down.

From this point of view, Africa is a continent extremely rich and the value of oral traditions is immense and is characterised by specific features. Every summary I could propose here would be too poor to be considered interesting, therefore, I simply refer the reader to Ruth Finnegan (2012, 2014, 2018) and the therein cited bibliography for an exhaustive description of the richest oral traditions of the continent.

4. LITERACY AND EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Another stereotype on Africa is that it is a continent with no education and with a very low literacy rate. Unfortunately, under this point of view, the stereotype is not that far from reality, since, despite the average literacy rate in sub-saharan African countries has risen very quickly in the last five years[7], it still remains attested, in general terms, at 65% and there are still cases where illiteracy represents a tragic problem.

In Chad, for example, only 22% of the population can read and write.

The best rate is 96%, registered in the Seychelles, but as a matter of fact, sub-saharan countries show a literacy rate of more or less 50%.

In addition to this already dramatic figure, there are evident disparities in the real distribution of literacy and quality education among the population. Usually, in fact, the literacy rate of women is lower than that of men, and in rural areas there are still many communities where the indicator drastically decreases.

For example it is so even in a country like Ethiopia, where the national literacy rate is attested at 52% and where in the capital city, Addis Ababa, there are high quality universities: in the Hamar and Daasanach districts of South Omo Region, in fact, the literacy rate is as low as 1 and 2% respectively (see Micheli 2019).

I will come back on the issue of education in the next §, but let me just stress here that, at present, primary education, even where it is quite well widespread, is generally carried out in the official language of the country, i. e., with very few exceptions (e.g. Somalia as the best example), in the European language inherited from the colonial administration; a language which, despite its high presence in daily use in capital cities and the big towns, at least for what concern upper class people, is instead very poorly known and understood in rural areas as well as by lower class people in towns (see for example Micheli forthcoming about the usability of French in Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso).

In addition to the low literacy rate, it is worth underlining that the access to libraries or the possibility to buy books is not at all obvious in many areas of the continent.

This fact tells us at least two things about African literature: 1) orality still represents the more widespread and most commonly used medium for literary production and expression, and 2) written literature, usually produced in the ex-colonial languages, is still reserved to a very small minority of the African population and African writers are well aware that their readers are mainly people living in other parts of the world, rather than in Africa.

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[7]   World Bank data 2019 - https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.ZS?locations=ZG

However, writing in a European language can be an asset for them, if we think that in this way African writers can at least make black voices and instances be heard in the global village.

5. LINGUISTIC POLICIES

As we have already seen in §1, Africa is a continent socio-linguistically characterised by multilingualism.

Everyone speaks usually at least three languages: his/her mother tongue, the regional dominant African language and the official language of the country.

The prestige and the contexts of use of these different languages reflect socio-economic features and relegate minority languages to the lowest status. Therefore, for the vast majority of these languages the risk of disappearing in the next few generations is not only very high, but also, unfortunately, quite probable.

Considering the possible evolution of the vitality of spoken languages all around the world, due not only to socio-economic reasons, but also to the effect of mass communication in social media and the like, Michael Krauss warned that "By the turn of the century only 600 languages will remain on the face of the earth, meaning that 90% of the world's languages will have perished"[8].

Of course, this phenomenon will have a much higher impact on the local living languages of sub-saharan Africa than the one it will have in the Western world.

In fact, in the Western world, almost all minority languages have nowadays at least been described and tools have been created for their preservation.

Already in 2001, according to the UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing,* in Africa 97 languages were on the verge of dying. This means that already 20 years (or one generation) ago, one hundred African languages had only a few dozen speakers, all of whom in their old and very old age.

Today linguists usually consider a language as being severely endangered if it:

– has lesser than 5000 speakers;

– has no intergenerational transmission;

– has no social prestige;

– has mother tongue speakers who are bilingual in the regional dominant language and prefer to use the latter in their daily activities;

– does not respond in a creative way to new domains.

Looking at things under this light, it results self evident that the situation of African indigenous languages is dramatic and that the number of endangered

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[8]   Michael Krauss in Batibo 2005:VII.

languages at present easily reaches and even probably surpasses four or five hundreds.

There is no way to discuss the issue at length here, but, as Batibo (2005: 114) puts it:

> "Only if there is a strong political will associated with a chain of activities such as the sensitization of speakers, documentation of the minority languages, their introduction in school systems and promotion to wider public use will language revival succeed".

Unfortunately until now, despite the true commitment of some enlightened rulers (as a single name I mention here Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, the first and beloved President of Tanzania), linguistic policies in Sub-Saharan Africa result in many cases inefficient and in some cases even non existent.

It is true that innovative programs, developed with the best intentions, have been proposed here and there and from time to time in different countries, aimed not only at providing primary school education to every child, but also to do so including local African languages in some experimental projects for primary schools (see for example Micheli 2021 - forthcoming - Sawadogo 2004 e Sanogo 2011 about Burkina Faso).

Unfortunately most of these experiments, which imply the use of local major languages alongside the official ones in different percentages during the different years of the first cycle of primary school, remained in most cases only on paper and were actually never realised or realised only in a very small number of schools with very few pupils involved.

It must be added that these kind of programmes, despite their positive intentions, are potentially dangerous for the ecology of local linguistic dynamics, because, if on the one hand it is already difficult to choose which of the many languages of the region shall actually be used in the schools (on this topic see for example Jufferman & Abdelhay 2016), on the other hand the use of a local language in the school is usually not perceived as an asset by the majority of parents, who rather prefer their children to start learning the official language in a "proper" way from the beginning, given that, in their view, only a proficient knowledge of the official language represents a real possibility for their children to get good jobs and reach better life conditions.

6. CONCLUSIONS (ADVOCATING FOR A BETTER APPRECIATION OF SPOKEN AND MINORITY LANGUAGES OF AFRICA)

With this short contribution, I hope to have reached the goal of outlining the 5 most important features characterising the extremely varied and highly complex linguistic panorama of the African continent.

I also hope to have been able to argument why neither an accurate enumeration of living, endangered or extinct languages, nor a detailed projection of that enumeration on topographical maps are appropriate ways for discussing all the delicate questions rotating around linguistic diversity, linguistic rights and linguistic agency of the different African peoples.

As reported in § 5, by the end of this century, our world will probably lose 90% of its languages and, of course, the first languages to disappear will be those languages whose prestige in terms of number of speakers and dignity of use in formal domains are low, i.e. the quasi totality of African languages.

In this perspective, only a huge effort in terms of seriously planned linguistic and educational policies adopted by States could help to partially hinder or (at least) relent the process.

Of course, we all know that Sub-Saharan low and middle income countries face a huge quantities of problems, ranging from health, economy, civil and political tensions, the effects of climate change as well as many others in addition, but I think that the question of good quality education and the protection of minority peoples and their languages should at least appear on their agenda as a true priority.

As a matter of fact, linguists, experts in cognitive studies as well as psychologists and educators all around the world underline since long now, that pupils learn more quickly and in a better way when they are taught in their mother tongue or in a language they truly manage.

In Africa, as we have seen in §§ 4 and 5, most primary education is taught in the country official language, which is usually the one inherited from the colonial administration and which is sometimes completely obscure to young children.

In addition to this, we have seen how, even when experimental programmes have been proposed, until now they have too often failed.

Therefore, much is still to be done (and must be done) to grant all pupils the right of learning at least during the first two years of primary school in a language they are really at ease with.

Moreover, it is important to consider new pedagogic strategies, more focused on the African rich tangible and intangible heritage, oral traditions, and artistic / literary production in order to trigger a more positive attitude of the youth towards their past and their cultural / ethnic identities.

Only reinforcing their education systems will African governments help their population to become more conscious of who they are and of the possibility they have, in order to be ready to compete and cooperate on an even footing at all levels with the outside world.

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