Language Death in Africa

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Introduction

Africa, along with Asia, is the continent with the highest number of 'living' indigenous languages. European languages, mainly English, French and Portuguese, have spread throughout all African nations during the last 200 years; however, until today, the use of these 'foreign' languages has been mostly restricted to certain domains, such as higher education, politics and business, and also to a relatively small number of people. According to Scotton (1982: 68) only 10 per cent or less of the rural African population have a considerable competence in the imported languages, even though these are in many instances the official languages of their home countries. African vernaculars are generally not in danger of being replaced by European languages. However, we observe a diminishing use of African vernaculars, not only in an increasing number of domains, but also with regard to the absolute number of indigenous languages; that means, in short, that linguistic vitality and variety on the African continent is decreasing.

As mentioned above, the languages of the former colonial powers have not yet developed into mother tongues on a wider scale. The result is that, for the most part, indigenous languages came to be the replacing languages. Minority languages on the African continent have been abandoned in favour of other, more prestigious, African languages.

Recently, the Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages of the University of Dar es Salaam discussed a proposal to start a project on a linguistic atlas of Tanzania. The authorities who were approached insisted that producing a language map was not to be considered a research priority since so many languages

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were dying out in favour of Kiswahili, the national and official language of Tanzania, and that for this reason language boundaries were changing so rapidly that such a language map might well be inapplicable within a few years. We received a similar response when discussing our project on 'Language Death in Africa' with colleagues from Tanzania. One of their comments was: 'You could start on such a project anywhere; languages are dying out in all parts of our country.'

Although in many other African nations the situation with regard to the extinction of vernaculars is not as grave as it appears to be in Tanzania, nevertheless, languages are dying out in Africa at an alarming speed, and every year several of them are lost for posterity.

The Scope of the Study

Leaving aside the processes affecting language structure in language shift situations, this article is intended as a data-oriented presentation surveying the state of language death in Africa. Furthermore, it focuses on the social settings in which languages die and also on the processes which precede their actual extinction.

The expression 'language death' may sound strange to some and inappropriate to others. It has been discussed a number of times and alternative terms, such as 'language replacement' or 'language suicide' (Denison 1977: 21), have been proposed. As these discussions have not provided any new insights into our topic, and since 'language death' appears to be fairly well established in the literature on the subject (cf. Dorian 1977a, b; Dorian ed. 1989; Dressler 1988), this term will be used here as well.

One has to note, however, that the term has been applied to both sociolinguistic processes and to processes affecting the substance of the language being replaced. With reference to the latter, it is applied, for example, when a language experiences certain types of linguistic reduction such as rule generalisation or loss, while with reference to the former it relates to distinctions such as use versus non-use or competence versus non-competence in a given language.

Although the two tend to go hand in hand (cf. Dorian 1977b), we consider it important to distinguish between them. Language shift and its 'completed' form, language death, is not a result of

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linguistic interference but merely that of a change in language behaviour of a speech community. The patterns of language use of communities experiencing language shift are modified in that the 'old' mother-tongue is abandoned and a 'new' language is used instead. A language is regarded as being dead (or extinct) when it is no longer used by any speech community.

The physical death of a speech community has frequently been referred to as one of several types of language death (cf. Kloss 1984). There are no records known to us which would describe such a case in Africa; we therefore do not know of any case in which the total body of speakers of a certain language have died out physically. Languages, of course, die by losing their speakers and this happens through language shift of entire speech communities. By the time the shift is completed, the replacing language is the new mother-tongue of the community and the abandoned language is extinct.

In the following we deal with the sociolinguistic and extra-linguistic aspects of the processes leading to the death of languages. To understand the complexities of an actual shift situation, one has to analyse the entire social background of the ethno-linguistic groups involved; in other words, one has to study the *ecology of language shift* (cf. Mackey 1980). The reasons for each language death and the language shift preceding it are to be found in the sociolinguistic history of a given speech community. It is the social processes which determine the extent of linguistic interference and, to a considerable degree, the kinds of features transferred from one language to another (Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 35). What makes the processes of decay affecting the structure of the abandoned language of only secondary importance for analysing the general patterns of language death is the fact that they are not necessarily taking place in each and every completed language shift situation. There are cases of 'sudden' or 'radical' death[1] which not only leaves nearly no traces of the abandoned language in the new mother-tongue but in which the speech community as a whole 'jumps over' the period of semi-speaker competence (cf. Dorian 1977b), that is, the period in which most of the structural changes within the languages take place.

But even when choosing only a sociolinguistic approach to this topic, we are not at present in the position to cover the whole range of relevant aspects. We therefore restrict our presentation

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to a few sociolinguistic parameters which appear to be of particular interest for the study of language death situations in Africa. In the following, we approach language death phenomena from two different angles:

1 The *environment* of language death has to be taken into consideration. Here we are dealing with the external settings of those shift situations which most probably will result, or already have resulted, in the extinction of a language. Some of the environmental factors are of central importance to the crucial question as to whether a certain language will survive or will die out entirely.
2 Within the *speech community*, strategies, attitudes and patterns of speech behaviour which may lead to the death of a language have to be studied. Attitudes towards languages and language use, and motivations for maintaining or abandoning one's language have to be dealt with here.

Aspects investigated from these two viewpoints are, of course, closely interrelated and many questions can be studied satisfactorily only by considering these interdependences. The extent to which language shift correlates with corresponding shifts in cultural and ethnic identity is one of these questions; another important link between these two perspectives is the fact that in most cases, the change of language behaviour in a given community has to be understood as a reaction to changing conditions in its environment.

But before we continue with these questions, which very often will be dealt with on the basis of our own experiences while carrying out research in Africa, we present the actual situation of language death on the African continent from a quantitative perspective.

Cases of Language Death in Africa: An Overview

Our knowledge of the extent and circumstances of language death situations in the African context is even today very limited. Indeed there are only a few sources available dealing with the topic in general (cf. Dimmendaal (1989) on language death in East Africa), and although pilot studies investigating instances of language death in Africa have already been published (for example:

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Shimizu 1982; Winter 1979), there appear to be rather few sources which describe actual language death situations. There are, however, cases of languages that have already disappeared in the past, documented or undocumented. Many Khoisan languages of Southern Africa, for example, have become extinct during the last 150 years, several of them having died out after first linguistic material had been collected (Winter 1981).

Even in cases where the death of a language has been known to the academic world for a relatively long period of time, the cultural, historical and sociolinguistic details (if known or – at least partially – reconstructable) have for the most part not been analysed with reference to reasons for language shift. Coptic, for example, the former language of the Christian minority in Egypt, is documented in grammars and ancient texts whereas demographic facts are hard to find. Because of its speakers' present minority status (approximately 10 million) in Egypt due mainly to adherence to Christianity in a Muslim country, data on the actual size of the Coptic community are not accessible even today. Political and religious dominance of Egyptian Arabs for centuries, i.e. since AD 641, has led to the gradual replacement of Coptic – formerly the language of everyday use – by Arabic until it came to be (as it still is) used in church services only (Krause 1984; Junge 1984).

In Africa, where indigenous languages on a wider scale have only recently been recorded, very few written documents exist on minority languages – be they extinct or alive. The example of the Wadai-Darfur area in Sudan where several vernacular languages have been replaced by Arabic may illustrate the rather poor data situation found in various parts of Africa:

> A few numerically important languages . . . appear to have escaped scrutiny to some extent. Other, smaller languages . . . have been classified tentatively but not studied. Information pertaining to these languages consists of hearsay and a few, sometimes contradictory word lists; . . . Finally, there are still a few languages which are either completely unknown or known only from hearsay . . . Last but not least, we have only documentary evidence of a few languages in Eastern Darfur which are (almost) extinct, notably Berti, Birgid, Mima and Beygo. (Doornbos and Bender 1983: 44)

The time-span for investigating instances of language death in Africa therefore hardly extends beyond the middle of the

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nineteenth century. We nevertheless have to assume that many communities have abandoned their mother tongue and, as a consequence, that languages have been continually dying out through history. Meroitic, for example, the 'official' language of the eponymous empire in the Sudan, has been transmitted in ancient texts and inscriptions that still have to be deciphered today. These recordings are the only survivals of a language in use as a written and spoken medium at least between the eighth century BC and the fourth century AD. A similar case is Ge'ez, an Ethio-Semitic language, formerly spoken in Ethiopia and replaced by Amharic in the south and west and by Tigrinya and Tigre in the north. This language died out as a spoken medium between the tenth and twelfth centuries and has survived only as a liturgical language in Ethiopia up to the present.

The Sources

Being aware of the rather poor data situation, a 'Survey on Language Death in Africa' (Sommer 1989) was compiled at the University of Cologne in connection with the preparations for a conference on language death in East Africa (see below). This survey contains information provided by (often outdated) handbooks on African languages on the one hand and, as far as they were accessible, other published sources on languages either extinct, in the process of extinction or threatened by extinction. Additional, and in most cases more recent, information was obtained through responses to a questionnaire sent to more than one hundred colleagues working on African languages as either linguists or anthropologists. The results were remarkable indeed: more than thirty questionnaires were completed and returned. A further source of information consisted of unpublished results of field research carried out mostly in East Africa (cf. papers presented at the Symposium on Language Death in East Africa, 8–12 January 1990, Bad Homburg).

One of the immediate outcomes of the survey work was the observation that the available on most of the minority languages taken into consideration are either scanty, inconsistent, or even contradictory. For many of them, hardly more is known than the fact that they are threatened by extinction. Considering the inadequate data situation on the one hand and the rather selective character of the information contained in the above-

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mentioned survey, this study has to be regarded as a very general reference source which will hopefully encourage further research. Only more detailed analyses of language-use patterns and thorough information on the extra-linguistic factors influencing language shift will provide a better understanding of the processes leading to the extinction of languages.

Evaluation of the Questionnaires

As a starting point – and being aware of the fact that minority languages whose speakers are numerically few tend to be affected by language death more easily than larger linguistic groups – it was decided to restrict the information contained in the survey to those speech communities whose number of speakers does not, or is said not to, exceed 500 speakers (if no other evidence indicates its status as a language threatened by extinction). There are, however, instances of minority languages in Africa which, in spite of the limited size of their speech communities, do not show any sign of being replaced by other languages (cf. the case of Bayso: see below). On the other hand, we also came across cases of languages which a couple of decades earlier were described as lively media of communication, but which by the time of the survey were under threat of decline or even of extinction. Bryan (1959: 123) reports, for example, that Zaramo, a Bantu language spoken in the coastal area of Tanzania between Bagamoyo and Dar es Salaam, is spoken by 173,518 people. According to more recent information, the language is reportedly being replaced at a rapid speed by Swahili, and to be spoken only by a limited number of older people.

One reason for such contradictory statements on the vitality of a certain language is that in the literature on African languages in general there is a widespread confusion relating to the nomenclature; this is particularly true for minority languages. One and the same language has been referred to by different authors under different names, or one and the same name has been applied to quite distinct languages. For example, Boni, an East Cushitic language spoken near the Indian Ocean on both sides of the border of Kenya and Somalia, has been variously called Aweera, Aweer, Boon, Sanye, or Dorobo (cf. Heine 1982b). The term Sanye, on the other hand, has been applied not only to Boni, but also to Dahalo, a South Cushitic language, or Waata, a dialect of Oromo ('Galla'),

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not only by the Bantu-speaking neighbouring groups, but also in the government census to indicate ethnic/linguistic membership.

In addition, it is very often not clear whether the authors refer to members of ethnic groups or to speakers of a certain language. In a number of cases it is possible to resolve such terminological confusion; in other cases, however, the necessary information for doing so is simply not available.

A Tentative Classification of Language Death in African Nations

In order to present a provisional description of the actual language situation in Africa with regard to language death we chose a tripartite classification between (a) extinct languages, (b) languages in the process of extinction, and (c) languages threatened by extinction.

By far the most difficult question was to define the membership of (c), and future research might reveal that a number of languages allocated to this category either belong to (b) or, more frequently, are not threatened by extinction at all. A language said to be spoken by 300 people only, may turn out to have tens of thousands of speakers after a more thorough analysis has been carried out, especially since data on linguistic demography in Africa are notoriously unreliable.

Alagwa, a Southern Cushitic language spoken in central Tanzania, for example, is said to have 13,000 speakers according to one source (Grimes 1984: 273), to be in a gradual process of extinction according to another source (Ehret 1980: 12), and to be extinct according to yet another source (Mann and Dalby 1987). A major problem here is that it is not always possible to determine whether a given figure refers to the number of speakers or to ethnic membership. Recent field research carried out by Martin Mous in 1989 revealed that there are about 10,000 Alagwa people, all of whom have a fairly good command of the language. Mous (personal communication), nevertheless, also reports that nearly all Alagwa are bilingual in Rangi and Alagwa and that Alagwa children tend to speak Rangi among themselves. Considering the fact that (1) Rangi is the dominant language and (2) that the cultural identity of the Alagwa seems to be diminishing, one might assume that the language is at least threatened by extinction.

The criteria for membership in group (a) were easier to establish than those for the remaining categories. Languages were

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included in group (a) when several sources explicitly and independently reported the extinct status of the language – at best confirmed by recent empirical data surveying the actual language use and sociocultural background of the speech community. Statements deduced from recently published sources or from personal communication were attributed a higher status than entries and comments in the general reference works. One example of a group (a) language is Ajawa, a Chadic language formerly spoken in Bauchi State, Nigeria, which is reported to have become extinct between 1920 and 1940 (Skinner 1974 and personal communication). It has been replaced by Hausa which is used as a *lingua franca* mainly in northern Nigeria. This category also comprises languages (such as Gafat or the already mentioned Ge'ez) that have become restricted in use to domains such as church services. Gafat, an Afro-Asiatic language, is reported to be extinct for all practical purposes today. It had been replaced by Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, as early as the second half of the nineteenth century.

Languages have been understood as belonging to (b), i.e. as being in the process of extinction, if a restricted use of and/or competence in the abandoned language can be deduced from the sources. The indications of such a process of extinction might be summarised as follows (all these factors are, in fact, interrelated). Firstly, the advanced age and decreasing number of the remaining speakers implies the extinction of the language concerned (although this process might often be reversed at a certain stage). Another criterion was the (implied) interruption of language transmission from the older to the younger generation as reported, for example, for Kiong, a Cross River language spoken in Nigeria, which is being replaced by Efik. It would appear that children are learning Efik as a first language today. The process of extinction was in this case preceded by a bilingual situation of linguistic competence in both Kiong and Efik which lasted for at least several generations (Williamson *et al.* 1973). Some languages are said to be in the process of extinction due to the fact that the prestige of a neighbouring or national language has caused the restriction of language use; one example is Holma, spoken in the Nigerian-Cameroon border area, now being replaced by Fulfulde which, according to Blench (personal communication) has to be regarded as more prestigious than Holma.

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To form a general idea of the extent of language death in Africa, see the statistics given in Table 1.

Whereas in some cases the shift from one language to another is an ongoing process lasting hundreds of years, there are others where a language shift is completed within three generations. The figures in Table 1 reflect the present situation on the African continent as far as it is known to us.

Virtually all African nations are affected by this process, as Table 2 shows.[2] Not surprisingly, Nigeria, which has the largest number of languages,[3] is also the country with the largest number of extinct languages and languages which are in a process of extinction.

Table 2 reveals one of the major weaknesses of the presented statistics. Although the number of languages spoken in Kenya is relatively small, hardly exceeding twenty (cf. Heine and Möhlig 1980), the number of Kenyan languages contained in our language death statistics is exceptionally high. There is an obvious reason for this fact: Kenya is the only African country for which we have some reliable linguistic and sociolinguistic information with regard to our topic. Similarly, the relatively high figures for

Table 1 Language death in Africa: number of languages and/or dialects considered*

Extinct languages	47
Languages which are either extinct or in a process of extinction	66
Languages which are in a process of extinction	44
Languages which are either in a process of extinction or threatened by extinction	12
Languages threatened by extinction	53
Total	222

* There is no accurate information on the number of languages spoken in Africa. Estimates on the number of distinct languages range between 700 and up to more than 2,000; the problem is indicated in the notion 'distinct'. In many cases it is not clear whether we are dealing with a dialectal situation or with distinct languages since the criteria applied for defining languages vs. dialect vary considerably.

Source: G. Sommer, 'Survey on Language Death in Africa' (1989).

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Table 2 Number of African languages which are extinct or in a process of extinction according to nations

Country	Extinct	Extinct or in a process of extinction	In a process of extinction
Angola	1	1	
Benin			1
Botswana	1	1	1
Burkina Faso			1
Cameroon	2	2	2
Chad	1		2
Congo		1	
Egypt	1		
Ethiopia	6	1	3
Gabon		1	1
Ghana	1		1
Ivory Coast	1		2
Kenya	8		5
Lesotho (see Southern Africa)	1		
Mali		1	
Mauretania		1	
Mozambique (see also Southern Africa)	1	1	
Namibia			
Niger			1
Nigeria	10	4	13
Senegal			1
Sierra Leone	1		2
South/Southern Africa	4	48	
Sudan	3	3	3
Swaziland (see Southern Africa)	1		
Tanzania	5	1	5
Togo			1
Uganda	2	1	2
Zaire	4		2
Total	54	67	49

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Nigeria in Table 2 are probably due not only to the large number of languages spoken in this country (see above) but also to the fact that the data base for this country is comparable to that of Kenya.

External Settings of Language Death

> Relations between ethnolinguistic groups do not occur in a vacuum and they are influenced by a host of situational and structural variables which often dictate the sociopsychological climate in which such relations occur. (Giles, Bourhis and Taylor 1977: 308)

In their stimulating article towards a theory of language in ethnic group relations, Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977) compile structural variables which influence what they refer to as the 'vitality of ethnolinguistic groups'. The notion of the group vitality in their usage is of central interest to us, since the absence of group vitality, especially in the case of minorities, indicates that an ethnic group is most likely to disappear as a distinct group. Along with the group – and this is even more important to us – the vernacular will be abandoned. The three main types of structural variables selected by Giles *et al.*, labelled 'Status, Demographic and Institutional Support Factors,' as well as their specifications on these, provide an excellent base for studying the environment in which cases of language death occur. The factors mentioned are concerned with political, historical, economic and linguistic realities, all of which are relevant phenomena to be investigated in language shift situations.

The study of the processes leading to language death must take into account this wide range of phenomena. Which of those factors are relevant in any one shift situation varies considerably, not only in that certain factors are less powerful or absent but even in so far as one and the same factor may yield different linguistic outcomes. We therefore suggest that each empirical case requires a specifically adapted methodology. In addition, the role that certain factors play in a shift situation may change in the ongoing process. We therefore consider it very important that the dynamics of the processes under study should not only encompass the sociopsychological analysis, but also that the above-mentioned environmental factors have to be treated as changing over time.

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The extent to which certain factors have been instrumental, and have interacted, in the actual processes leading to the extinction of a language has to be considered of central importance to the understanding of the numerous cases of language death occurring on the African continent. A few examples should suffice to illustrate some of the factors involved in such shift situations.

One of the major factors accompanying language shift no doubt is a change in *economy*. But whereas change in economy, in other contexts, is associated mostly with 'modernisation', i.e. the changes caused by Western influences, this does not always apply in African situations. Hunter-gatherers have, for example, given up their former way of life and have turned to a food-producing economy, such as farming, animal husbandry, or both. In many cases, this transition in the economic domain was accompanied by a shift from the language associated with hunting and gathering to that of neighbouring people from whom the new economic skills were acquired. Thus, the Yaaku, Omotik or Lorkoti of Kenya have, in the recent past, given up their respective languages in favour of a 'cattle language', i.e. the language of their pastoralist neighbours, which is Maasai in the case of the former two, and Samburu in the case of the Lorkoti (see below).[4]

Change in economy in itself does not induce language shift and language death. Moreover, there are various instances in Africa which demonstrate that a change in economic activity does not necessarily lead to the language shift. The Oromo-speaking Waata people living south of Malindi on the Kenyan coast, for example, who in the past led a hunter-gatherer existence, have adapted economically to the farming culture of their Giryama neighbours; they have, however, retained their linguistic identity. Indeed, in spite of the fact that the Waata people form only a scattered minority among the more numerous Giryama,[5] they have consistently kept up their traditional language. Since they do not inhabit a compact, homogenous speech area and yet still maintain their vernacular, their behaviour is again contrary to our expectations. Demographic heterogeneity is usually associated with a weakening of the vitality of an ethnolinguistic minority group, but the Waata instead possess a strong language loyalty towards their vernacular.

A second demographic factor which certainly is relevant when language shift takes place is that of the *absolute number of speakers:* the data available clearly indicate that (as one might expect

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anyway) the smaller the size of the speech community, the more likely it is that a given language is threatened by extinction. In Africa, however, we find many cases of languages spoken by a few thousand people only and surrounded by other languages whose speakers number several hundreds of thousands without there being any indications of language replacement, the above-mentioned Waata on the Kenyan coast being only one example. Furthermore, Bayso, an Eastern Cushitic language spoken in southern Ethiopia, has resisted language replacement for at least the last 1,000 years, although the number of its speakers barely exceeds 500.

In the southern part of Africa, about 150 Khoisan languages were still spoken by small speech communities roughly 140 years ago. Less than a third have survived till today and most of the remaining languages will most probably die out in the near future (Vossen 1987). The speech communities of most of the Khoisan languages today constitute hardly more than a few hundred people and in most cases the number of speakers is diminishing rapidly. But even here we find regional exceptions: 'Although Khoisan languages are time and again considered endangered idioms, we have found no clear indication for any of those spoken in Ngamiland dying out. In fact very few Khoisan individuals have undergone, or are currently undergoing, a process of language shifting in favour of Tswana – a phenomenon which might come as a surprise.' (Vossen 1990: 19)

Urbanisation is a further factor one should be aware of. Many African capitals put immense pressure on immigrants from rural surroundings to adapt to the sociocultural patterns of the city and to take over the dominant language spoken there. It has been claimed, for example, that a few years of residence in Dar es Salaam or Dakar may suffice for people living in the vicinity of these capitals to shift from their mother tongue to Kiswahili and Wolof, respectively, as their primary language, and to retain this language even when returning to their home areas.

In the case of speech communities for whom migration to the city has become a common pattern, as with the Zaramo around Dar es Salaam (see above), language death is a likely consequence. But the importance of urbanisation with regard to language death seems to be restricted more or less to the surroundings of a few major cities. In many of the other urban centres the patterns of language use are similar in that the 'old' vernacular is maintained,

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its use being mostly restricted to the home domain and to communicating with members of the same community. In addition, it is unlikely that there are cases an entire speech community leaves its original area to migrate into towns. In most cases, it is the rural part of the speech community which retains the old vernacular.

Biri (Bviri), a Nilo-Saharan language in the Central African Republic, is, according to Raymond Boyd (personal communication), spoken by no more than 2,000 to 3,000 people in a few villages north of Zemio. Although an association for the preservation of the Biri language was recently formed, the language is nevertheless threatened in its existence by Zande, which is said to be spoken by all Biri people as a second language. In addition another factor seems to be relevant to the survival of the language: 'If young people are drained towards the towns (where the Biri are not numerous enough to form quarters), the language will not be passed on' (Boyd, personal communication).

Similar to the previously discussed factors influencing language shift, there are examples of communities which maintain their language in urban situations whereas most others under similar conditions abandon their language. For example, the Nubi, forming small minorities in Nairobi and in a number of other East African towns, do not seem to be giving up their language – a creolised form of Arabic (see Heine 1982a) – in favour of Kiswahili or any other urban *lingua franca.*

Speech Communities: Some Insights into Language Shift

Vernaculars may persist in new contexts, created by changes in the above-mentioned environmental factors (such as in the mode of production), or they may resist. Responsible for these different outcomes are the different reactions from within the speech communities towards changing conditions.

Linguistic, Ethnic and Cultural Identity and Language Shift

Language shift obviously takes place under a variety of preconditions, but the actual abandoning of the mother tongue can be better dealt with by a sociopsychological approach focusing on the members of the minority groups. Crucial for our study of

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language death situations are questions concerning the relationship between language and identity. Research strategies applied to the study of 'identity' provide basic insights into the process within the communities experiencing language shift.

Schmied (1989b: 32) differentiates between *two levels of identity*, which seem to be central to our topic: 'that of individual or personal, and that of group or national identity'. Language behaviour is in principle characterised by individual decisions, but in shift situations we observe that changes in speech patterns spread throughout the community. This spreading attracts our attention especially in those cases where intermediate stages in the transition of a community from one language to another can be observed. Common to shift situations is the distribution of language competence according to generations. While the older members of the speech community still speak the former language, the younger generations have no knowledge or a semi-speaker competence in this language, being brought up with the new language as their mother tongue.

In the literature on language shift in Africa we find cases mentioned in which language-use patterns vary according to the sex of the group members. Vossen (1988) reports, for example, on the Kalanga people of Ngamiland in Botswana that whereas the entire speech community is undertaking a shift from their vernacular Kalanga to the national language of Botswana, Tswana, it is the male population which is more conservative. In the case of the Akiek of Kinare, formerly a hunter-gatherer community now residing in Kikuyu communities in central Kenya, even though language replacement by the Kikuyu language has been completed, there are still a few old men who remember some lexical items and phrases of the old language (Rottland 1982: 24–5).

Probably more common in Africa, however, are situations in which women are more conservative in their language behaviour. The Omo-Murle language, for example, formerly found in the southern parts of Ethiopia and Sudan, is remembered only by a few old women now residing among the Nyangatom people (Dimmendaal 1989: 26).

Another research strategy, developed originally by Ross (1979) to determine identities and patterns of change in identity, has been applied by Vossen (1988: 72–3) in a recent study on language behaviour and language knowledge of Ngamiland of Botswana. Selected groups were found, even within the limits of

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Ngamiland, which fit perfectly into each of the four modes of identity distinguished by Ross, i.e. *communal, minority, ethnic,* and *national identity* (Ross 1979: 4ff.). Vossen assumes, however, that although the four modes of identity are applicable for describing linguistic situations in Ngamiland, non-linguistic variables also have to be drawn into consideration 'in order to determine the real role that language plays in the shaping of ethnicity in the district' (Vossen 1988: 73).

In addition to the above-mentioned attempts to deal with the multidimensional phenomena referred to as identity, one last perspective should be considered. Ethnic identity is made up of various components; these may not be important simultaneously, but also different variables may succeed each other. The self-concept of a former hunter-gatherer group may change from an *economic* identity towards a *regional* identity. Such a shift has taken place among many of the Okiek groups in Kenya.

One problematic presumption made in the past on linguistic/ethnic identity concerned the alleged isomorphism between language on the one hand, and ethnic identity and/or culture on the other. But the literature on language contact today reflects this relation more carefully and it is generally accepted that while linguistic, ethnic and cultural boundaries tend to coincide in many cases, this is by no means a must. Dimmendaal (1983; 1989: 29) mentions a case when he met blacksmiths in Kapoeta and Torit, Southern Sudan, who identified themselves as Lopid although several of them had Tenet as their first language. Although Lopid and Tenet both belong to the same branch (Eastern Sudanic) of the Nilo-Saharan language family, they are mutually unintelligible, the former belonging to the Eastern Nilotic and the latter to the Surma (Didinga-Murle) group of Eastern Sudanic.

Closely related to this in the claim that language is employed by its speakers as the primary means of seeking, establishing and/or defending group cohesion and cultural identity. Even this statement, however, has been weakened through formulas such as 'there exists no categorial, necessary relation between language and ethnicity' (Appel and Muysken 1987: 15).

Dimmendaal (1989: 28) states that 'language may not be as important a potential symbol of ethnic identity as some are led to believe', and this corroborates some observations we made in East Africa. We also vividly recall a discussion with a group of Serer men from Senegal, who had given up their language in

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favour of Wolof as a primary language. Nevertheless, they turned out to be ardent adherents of Serer culture and ethnic identity, who described Wolof culture as being 'inferior' to their own in almost all respects, insisting that they would do everything possible in order to defend Serer culture against Wolof domination. The fact that none of them was able to speak the Serer language was for them quite irrelevant. During our fieldwork in East Africa we made a number of similar observations (see also Legère 1989). Such examples appear to contradict the statement that 'ethnic group members identify more closely with someone who shares their language than someone who shares their cultural background' (Giles, Bourhis and Taylor 1977: 326).

The kind of awareness people have about their own language competence and their modes of language use is also to be considered in questioning the relation between language and identity. While doing linguistic research in Laisamis, Northern Kenya, we were looking for a language consultant of the Rendille language. Tests carried out with an elderly man who claimed to be Rendille showed that he was a Samburu speaker who had no command of Rendille. Subsequently, the approximately twenty people present pointed to an old man who was described as a 'pure Rendille'. This man also turned out to speak Samburu as his primary language, although he remembered a few Rendille words. His surprise was at least as great as ours to discover that, contrary to his belief, the language he used was not the one he thought it was, although Laisamis is considered by some to be a Rendille-speaking centre, and it does in fact form one of the most important shopping centres for the Rendille camel nomads, many of whom are monolingual in Rendille.

The above evidence suggests, with regard to our topic, 'that the preservation or change of identity does not automatically correlate to language maintenance or language shift, respectively' (Vossen 1988: 70). This statement could be seen in a wider context as summarised by Schmied: 'A change in bahaviour . . . need not necessarily indicate a change in identity' (1989a: 3). Nevertheless, we agree with Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977: 328) that the 'ethnic speech style' – regardless of whether it is realised as a distinct language, or a dialect, or whether it is distinguished through an accent only – may be an important component of ethnic identity. Its specific weight within the multidimensional concept of ethnicity in a given speech community makes

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it a relevant topic for the investigation of any case of language shift.

In contact situations, languages are always relevant in defining group membership. Speech communities in contact are the common situation in Africa, where the vernaculars of the communities very often are not even genetically related. One example, outstanding even on the African continent, is found in Kondoa, central Tanzania: four languages, Sandawe (Khoisan), Datoga (Southern Nilotic), Rangi (Bantu) and Burungi (Southern Cushitic), each of which belongs to one of the four major language families of Africa, exist side by side. Members of these speech communities identify themselves through their respective mother tongues.

Whereas in Kondoa no language shift occurs, in many other parts speech communities in contact situations abandon their mother tongues. A few empirical cases may illustrate the socio-psychological processes concerned.

The trigger for shifting from one's own language to another very often comes from outside: for example, a change in the environment. The change within the community follows thereafter. Groups can be found that have been in contact for a long time communicating on the basis of stable multilingual speech patterns, and then all of a sudden one group loses its language loyalty. Of course, a fundamental change within the community must have taken place before that.

The decision to abandon one's own language always derives from a change in the self-esteem of the speech community. In cases of language shift one could observe that members, very often the younger generation of minorities, regard their own community as being inferior. Those members frequently try to change their 'negative' social identity by adopting the language (and social identity) of the dominant group. But before this desire of being like members of the other group arises, the value system of the dominant group has to have been acquired by them. The external orientation of the young Yaaku in north-central Kenya towards the Maasai way of life, for example, was but the first prerequisite for the language shift of this community to Maasai. The Yaaku elders had been preservers of hunter-gatherer values to some extent, but the dynamic parts of the community, the young generation, were the mobilisers of the ethnic group for abandoning the old language. Language shift thus has to be

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understood as one possible strategy for members of minority groups who have developed a 'negative' social identity to change their inferior position. In cases where this strategy is chosen by all members of a minority speech community we could expect the extinction of the old vernacular.

Minorities and Language Status

Minority groups in shift situations regard the languages they are acquiring as being more prestigious than their own; thus the *prestige* of a language is one of the important variables in studying language death. Less prestigious languages tend to be replaced by more prestigious ones. In Table 3, some criteria commonly mentioned in connection with 'prestige' are listed indicating the direction of language shift. At the present stage of research we do not wish to evaluate these criteria in detail, but even now a bipartite division appears obvious.

Table 3 'Prestige' as a motivating factor of language shift in Africa

	Characteristics of languages having:	
	low prestige	high prestige
1	Spoken in rural areas	Spoken in urban areas
2	Minority status	Majority status
3	Associated with an 'inferior' mode of economy	Associated with a 'superior' mode of economy
4	Associated with a subordinate political status	Associated with political domination
5	Associated with traditional religions	Associated with a world religion
6	Associated with more traditional modes of life	Associated with modern modes of life
7	Not used, or little used as media of formal education	Important media of education
8	Associated with outdated economic activities	Associated with new 'modern' economic activities

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Subsumed under (1) to (4) are situations where communities are in a situation of competition: one inferior and one dominant group are in contact. Numbers (5) to (8) reflect another conflicting dichotomy, namely that of *tradition* and *modernisation*. We do have minorities resisting dominant groups by expressing the cultural pride in maintaining their own identity and language. Further, we find more conservative and progressive communities within which individuals or subgroups may act differently on a personal level.

What is said to make up a 'prestigious language' may vary considerably depending on the context in which a language is used.

Some comments on the African situation seem in order, to understand the rather general statements made in Table 3.

1. While the distinction between rural and urban languages, for example, may be crucial in some areas, it appears to be of secondary importance in Africa, where 'purely' urban languages, that is, languages spoken by urban speech communities only, are rare. With regard to the higher prestige of urban varieties of languages one has to notice that the sociolinguistic horizon of rural communities very often does not include communities of urban centres.
2. Minority and majority status in most cases refers to the absolute number of speakers of the languages concerned. Also certain economic activities are associated in many African regions with minorities, e.g. blacksmiths.
3. The actual evaluation of which economy is regarded as being superior or inferior depends greatly on the economy the informant is practising. A pastoralist in most cases will regard herding as the best of all modes of production (and ways of life), whereas farmers might appreciate having more cattle as well. Hunter-gatherers almost invariably are regarded as inferior by the others, and many of these people themselves have accepted a 'negative' attitude towards their own economy.
4. Association with political domination is relevant in cases where a political elite speaks a different language. Usually this is a modern statal elite, and not the traditional elite which usually belongs to the same speech community.
5. In Africa it is mainly Islam which is associated with certain languages. This applies, for example, to Hausa in Nigeria and Swahili in East Africa, at least until recently.

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6. Swahili in East Africa is used, for example, in shops (*dukas*) to buy modern goods such as washing powder, cigarettes, batteries, etc., all being associated with modern life.
7. The impression gained by the members of speech communities through the experience of being taught in a foreign language is their own language is not as valuable, well structured, etc. Their self-esteem suffers through this experience.
8. Hunting and beekeeping, for example, are very often regarded as being old-fashioned and as reflecting low prestige.

Minority Languages in Africa: Considerations for the Future

Linguists, historians and other scholars dealing with African languages tend to experience the disappearance of languages (professionally) as a great loss. The members of the communities concerned very often are, as minorities, not in a position to fight successfully for their basic rights, which includes that of maintaining and developing their own culture and language. The duty of politicians and scientists is to provide responsible assistance for minority communities: practical support is needed to ensure self-determination of those minorities with regard to their own future.

The dichotomy so far found in the literature on language planning on a national level has been that of *European versus African languages*. Some aspects which seem to be relevant for the future of African vernaculars will be briefly discussed here.

European languages are very often labelled as being the primary danger to African languages and cultural heritage. A closer look at the reality in most African nations today reveals, however, that it is African *linguae francae* and African languages with a national status which spread to the detriment of vernaculars. Minority languages are still more likely to be replaced by those relatively few 'highly valued' African languages, than by imported ones. However, modern attempts reflected by, for example, the 'efforts towards indigenisation' of English in East Africa (Okoth Okombo 1986), are suitable to clear the way for English becoming more commonly accepted and used in more domains. This is how English finally may spread, even as a mother tongue.

In many contributions on language planning and language policies linguistic heterogeneity tends to be associated primarily

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with separatism and should therefore, it is urged, be eliminated for the sake of (national) unity. This is one of the main assumptions on which many African nations have based and justified their exoglossic language policies in the past, that is, their choice of a non-African language to serve as the official language. However, the choice of European languages actually retains linguistic heterogeneity, as mentioned above, and the unity which is created on the basis of these imported languages is the exclusive unity of the privileged elite (cf. Mateene 1985). But even the proposed function of uniting communities with different cultural backgrounds could not be fulfilled by the use of European languages: 'It has sometimes been assumed that European languages can serve as catalysts for unity in African countries. This can only be so if unity is limited to the superficial level of practical communication. Beyond this level, language cannot, of itself, unite people of disparate and varying backgrounds' (Okonkwo 1975: 40).

The fundamental right of self-determination, and the free choice of abandoning one's own language or of maintaining it, should be guaranteed even for minority groups. This seems to be possible only when the attitudes of governing elites towards linguistic diversity change fundamentally in that positive aspects of that diversity, such as richness of cultural heritage, are valued by them as being important for future developments in African nations.

Notes

1. For a discussion of these terms. cf. Campbell and Muntzel (1989).
2. Since some languages are spoken in more than one country, the figures presented in Table 2 exceed those presented in Table 1.
3. Estimates on the number of languages spoken in Nigeria range from 150 to 500.
4. Both Maasai and Samburu are dialects of the Eastern Nilotic Maa language spoken in Kenya and Uganda. Note that the Lorkoti spoke a 'hunter-gatherer variety' of Maasai before they turned to the pastoralist Samburu dialect of Maa.
5. Giryama is a dialect of the Mijikenda cluster, which is closely related to Kiswahili, the language of Kenya and *lingua franca* of East Africa.

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