



The volume is a collection of papers presented at the 23<sup>rd</sup> Congress of the West African Linguistics Society (WALS) held at the University of Buea, Cameroon, on August 7-9, 2002. The theme of the conference was “African Linguistics as a Tool for Development of African Communities” and the chapters in this book were intended to reflect the spirit of the conference theme. The title of the book is also a derivation from the theme and is certainly in line with current thinking among African scholars: to make linguistics research relevant to the development efforts made by communities and to define areas where linguists can contribute meaningfully in the areas of policy formulation and implementation and in advocacy.

The book is organized into four sections: **African Linguistics: A Tool for Development, Applied Linguistics, Sociolinguistics and Syntax**. The first impression one gets from this arrangement is that it is the first section, which comprises chapters one to thirteen, that is the core section, whereas the other three are mere appendages. However, reading through the twenty one chapters, I realized that the division was more for convenience rather than for strict thematic distinctions.

Chapter 2 has an attractive title, “African Development: Focus on the Nigerian Milieu”, and a few good quotations on the relationship between the native language and community development but fails miserably to provide convincing examples from Nigeria to support the argument. For example, the author argues that “A large percentage of the cashew, mango, pineapple, orange and other wild fruits produced in Nigeria rot away and are fed on by animals because the farmers lack an effective means of storing, processing them for export” (p. 17), and yet he provides no evidence linking this with language. Even

## Language as an Instrument for African Development

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### African Linguistics and the Development of African Communities.

by Emmanuel Chia, ed  
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when the author claims that farmers have no access to research findings from research institutes and universities because the reports are written in a foreign language, there is no strong argument to provide even the remotest link between the two variables, i.e foreign language and food production and/or sales. Besides, language of research is not the language of the general public, even in monolingual countries. The only arguable case here is translating it into a usable form by the persons, something that we know to have worked well in many African countries (for example, Kenya) with new varieties of maize, beans and bananas. Most of the chapter is a catalogue of unsubstantiated claims and vague statements such as: “... if widely circulated, people would learn to appreciate the rich natural sources of vitality in the African menu which are lacking in the exotic ones they crave for on the shelves of supermarkets across the country” (p. 17).

Chapter 4 contains very informative data on the cultural practices among the Mankon people of Cameroon, which encourage licentious behaviour and hence promote the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sex-related diseases. The most revealing example is the role of traditional leaders in encouraging polygamy and extramarital sex

among the Mankon people and their influence on the young people. The author refers to a book written by Mutaka and Bolimal (2003), which contains teaching about responsible sexual behaviour, using stories by AIDS sufferers as authentic material for the purpose. The indication that the government and NGOs have undertaken to translate the text into local languages is a good sign that efforts are being made to combat the disease through the languages of the people. However, the attempt to use Dell Hymes’ mnemonic-‘SPEAKING’, does not add any value to the chapter. In fact, some of the data seem to be forced to fit into the paradigm. For example, there is no clear distinction between the data in Participants (P), and the Norms and interpretation (N). Both sections have very good texts to demonstrate the dangerous language games that are played in the community, but these do not neatly fit in with what Dell Hymes meant with his contextual dimensions of the ethnography of communication. Even without any stated conceptual frame, the paper would still provide good reading.

Chapter 9 is an attempt to link adult literacy and human development but only succeeds in providing good examples of

how the efforts of the Cameroonian government to provide adult literacy have failed. The author begins by listing language problems and adult literacy needs but does not go far enough to provide any conceptual, discursive or empirical evidence to give the chapter an academic flavour paper. For example, the author makes statements like the following:

- “The consequence of a system that does not have a bridge from mother tongue to the second language is a *deterred linguistic competence*” (p.89);
- “The fact that these sounds are universal and are produced from the same articulatory organs — *means that phonology can be learned through all languages*” (p.89).

In the context of adult literacy, these statements are irrelevant, and in terms of linguistic discourse expressions like “deterred linguistic competence” and “phonology can be learnt through all languages” are meaningless. Irrelevant because adult literacy learners have no use for phonology as an area of knowledge and meaningless because “deterred linguistic competence” is a strange concept, and we do phonology of any language but it is not true that we can do so in any language. Potentially or theoretically, we can teach and learn phonology in any language, but since some languages have developed the capacity to handle phonology as a technical field, not all languages can be used to teach it. Most of the chapter is a litany of problems associated with literacy in Cameroon, ranging from gender bias to financial constraints but very little is said to show how mother-tongue literacy programme has changed or can change people’s lives.

Kay Williamson's report of the Rivers Readers Project in Chapter 10 provides quite a refreshing break, although this experiment has been reported many times over in different publications from Nigeria. It is, however, worth repeating and would have been a more suitable opening chapter for the book as a foundation statement for the efficacy of mother-tongue medium for educating African children. He makes a very strong appeal for a change in attitudes when he says:

This perception, a deep-seated prejudice stemming from attitudes instilled in the colonial era, can only be modified by an active campaign, by increasing numbers of committed people; leading to a new vision of the place of local languages in relation to English we were unable to achieve (p.102).

This is an example of an empirically tested case supporting mother-tongue education, but which was systematically ignored by the state organs and finally killed. It is something for campaigners for local languages to learn from when they face obduracy of the state bureaucracy and to remind them that what makes good sense to linguists does not necessarily make sense to laymen and particularly political opinion leaders. Language is so pervasive in our everyday life that everyone feels an expert in language matters and this makes it more difficult for those in linguistics to persuade speakers of a language that there is something about the language and how it should be used that they may not know. It is a question of working against folk theories and language stereotypes. Not an easy task at all!

Another interesting chapter is Chia's piece on "Rescuing Endangered Cameroonian Languages for National Development" in Chapter 12. As was said of Chapter 10, this one ought to have come earlier to set the context for the other chapters because it is specifically discussing an aspect of language enterprise and national development. The chapter provides a lucid conceptual frame for discussing language decline and steps to stem the trend. The author outlines excellent examples of threats to Cameroonian languages, the effects of attitude, how they can be dealt with and the revival strategies - what he calls "remedies".

He provides a good table showing the degree of endangerment of the Cameroonian languages based on the Linguistic Atlas of Cameroonian Languages (CERDOTOLA-ACCT-DGRST, 1983). The picture looks quite grim as only two of the over 200 Cameroonian languages can be said to be safe. He finally provides a good account of uses of indigenous languages to contribute to national development. He concludes by saying: "What is left now is the political will to provide resources for timely intervention. There is no time to waste if these languages must be rescued" (p.127).

This sense of urgency is what needs to be emphasized in all publications dealing with valorization of African languages in the crucial public domains (e.g in education and government administration) to make them effective tools for community development. This is the best chapter in Section I in terms of its focus on the

development and protection of local languages and their use in national development.

In Section II, Chia and Jumbam report the results of the Lamno PROPELCA project, which is similar to the River State Reading Project and the Six-Year Yoruba Project which were carried out in Nigeria. The aim of the project "was to compare the performance of children in this bilingual programme with that of children in the monolingual (English) schools at the First School Leaving Certificate examination for the period" (p.142). It is encouraging to learn that, despite the disappointment after the Nigerian projects, some African scholars are still prodding the consciences of their governments to allow true bilingual education programmes to be introduced.

The fact that the results show that children from the bilingual programme perform slightly better than those from the English-only programme should encourage more research in the continent so that politicians can be persuaded that mother tongues are not only effective as media of instruction, but that they also support the acquisition of foreign languages. This debunks the myth that local languages are not suitable for teaching some subjects and that the teaching and using of mother tongue as medium delays acquisition of a second language. As the authors aptly put it "... this tendency can be explained by the fact that once the psychological trauma of beginning education in a foreign medium is removed and the child is fully integrated into his socio-cultural and spiritual milieu, his natural scientific and technological usage is awakened and he can perform better than one who is still wrestling with the trauma" (p.151). The interdependence of first language and second language has been proven by studies elsewhere and all that remains is for governments to be persuaded to adopt rational bilingual education programmes.

The argument that more emphasis be put on "oral speech" in the education of deaf children in Chapter 15 is both intriguing and enlightening. Ogwana and Tamanji warn us against the rush to introduce sign language before what they call "linguistics-based language teaching model" is tried. To back their case, they provide categories of deafness (physiological, acoustic, developmental), each of which has peculiarities requiring specialized handling. In order to decide what approach to give deaf education, they provide "The Language Acquisition Negative index" calculated by crossing acoustic and development parameters. The index is then used to categorize children by degree of deafness and hence determining the teaching model to employ.

The main argument is that lip-reading is a more effective medium than signing and they also provide the phonetic criteria for grading consonants in order of "Ease of Identification". They however concede that not all categories of deafness can benefit from lip-reading. The strong message is that the linguistics-based model "has the potential of bringing all categories of deaf children to use speech, even if the speech in some cases is 'silent'" (p.167). The conclusion of the chapter has a list of five points which would be a very useful guide to institutions and teachers involved in the education of deaf children. The chapter provides plenty of data and the

discussions are carefully based on the data to give credibility to their thesis.

The last chapter in Section II is a study of the relationship between the ESP teacher's knowledge of the learner's subject specialization and the learner's performance in English tests. The study was supposedly of the experimental mold, the control group having a teacher without a Chemistry/Biology background whereas the experimental group had a teacher with some background of Chemistry/Biology. As one would predict, the finding was that the experimental group performed better; the author concludes: "Insight into theoretical conception of ESP would contribute to efficient practice and success of the subject" (p. 179).

I quite commend the effort made by the author in this work, but the discursive value of the paper is minimal and hence the whole study sounds simplistic and rather contrived. The display of figures to prove statistical validity without critical interpretive interrogation of data can be very misleading in social science research. A more analytical handling of the data would have done the chapter a lot of good.

The Sociolinguistics section has three very interesting chapters. Chapter 17 by Aziza discusses the role of Pidgin English in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, whereas Chapter 18 by Ayafor is about Pidgin English (Kamtok) in Cameroon. The most intriguing revelation in the two studies is the unexpected case of pidgins replacing "languages". This means, in the first place, that reference to these codes as pidgins is in itself a misnomer. For example, Ayafor claims that: "It is worth noting that children whose first language (L1) is Kamtok are found in Anglophone and Francophone towns" (p. 195). Likewise, Aziza says of pidgin and mother tongues: "Even pidgin, which is supposed to be a non-standard or inferior form, has a higher social status in the eyes of the natives than NLS" (p. 187).

If what these studies report about these communities is true, they challenge the orthodox view about pidgin as a transient code that is used only in casual contact situations; perhaps the authors should have referred to them as creoles or just languages instead of the stigmatized "pidgin".

Ayafor's argument is that Kamtok should be accorded an official status and be used in domains where standard languages are used since it has acquired the necessary critical mass of speakers and the social prestige that goes with a standard language. Aziza, on his part, mourns the declining status of the indigenous languages to the extent that they are being threatened by a "non-language". The two chapters provide very interesting reading and a challenge to the current language policy theories and practice in education.

Chapter 19 is a demonstration of the intricate processing of loan-words in different African languages. The authors cite the main strategies employed by most African languages as Diphthong/Triphthong simplification, Prosodic harmonization and Cluster simplification, and these are accompanied by phonological rules to show that borrowing is not a random and non-systematic process. The chapter uses French and English loanwords to prove the widespread occurrence of these rules. They provide

plenty of data and the presentation is exquisitely done. The main message here is that borrowing is not a bad thing and that languages use it as a natural process of language expansion and modernization. What they should have added is that we have to plan and control this so that the new lexical items do not overwhelm the indigenous lexical stock. This is certainly one of the best chapters in the collection.

The last section has two chapters, both of which deal with validation of existing grammatical theories by using data from African languages. Abangma uses data from Denya to test the universality of the "Feature-Checking in Optional Wh-phrasal movement" (p. 222). The author uses a variety of data to test the grammaticality of wh-movement possibilities in Denya and concludes that wh-movement in Denya is optional and that fronting of the wh-phrases in the language is a different process from topicalization, focusing and clefting (p.227), as it is, for example, in English. In Chapter 21, Tamanji and Ndamsali use data from Grassfields Bantu languages - Bafut and Limbum - to discuss the internal structure of associated constructions or morphemes (AMs). They describe the associated construction in these languages as subdividing "into two classes. In one, the genitive relation between the head noun and the dependent (associative) noun is marked by a segmentally realized associative morpheme (AM), while in the other the AM is not segmentally realized" (p. 230). There are very good data to illustrate all these claims and the authors used tree diagrams to show the hierarchical relations between the constituents in the constructions.

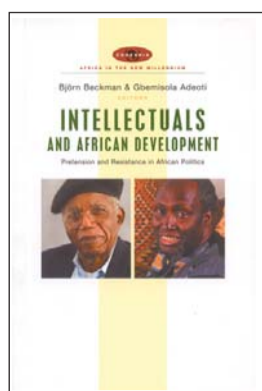
Although the two last chapters do not attempt to relate language to community development, they are a good demonstration that African languages have unique structural properties that contribute to the fund of linguistic knowledge. This is one of the reasons adduced to justify the defense of minority languages against marginalization and to campaign for more revitalization efforts to save threatened languages around the world today.

In general this is a good text, especially in terms of the rare data in some of the chapters, which would form a basis for studies by other researchers in African languages. However, the collection would have benefited immensely from more rigorous selection and editing. Knowing the outstanding quality of linguistic scholarship in West Africa, my suspicion is that some of the better papers went to the academic journals, as suggested by the editor in his introduction.





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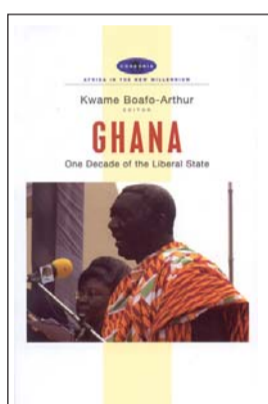
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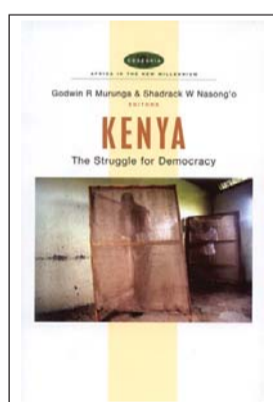
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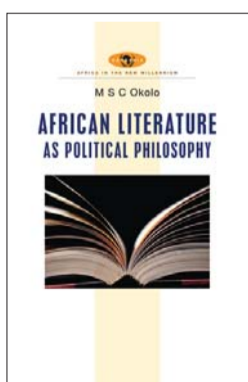


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