

# Africa's Endangered Languages

DOCUMENTARY AND THEORETICAL APPROACHES

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# Africa's Endangered Languages

## AN OVERVIEW

Jason Kandybowicz and Harold Torrence

### 1.1. Language endangerment in Africa

Perhaps one of the most disturbing trends of our time is the accelerating rate of language extinction and endangerment.\* Most of today's languages are struggling to survive, clinging to life in a world of diminishing linguistic diversity. The phenomenon is not relegated to the planet's most remote linguistic outposts. Wherever we find languages, we find language endangerment.

The African continent hosts roughly one-third of the world's approximately 7,000 living languages. We might expect, therefore, to find a rich deposit of endangered languages within its borders. But we would be wrong, according to some. Ever since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the overall threat level of language endangerment in sub-Saharan Africa has been characterized and widely accepted as "low" (Sommer 1992; Brenzinger 1992, 1998; Wurm 1996; Anderson & Harrison 2006), owing in all likelihood to misleadingly high population counts. In addition, it has been claimed that the rate of language endangerment is significantly lower in sub-Saharan Africa than in other parts of the world (Simons & Lewis 2013) owing to diverse factors such as extensive multilingualism (Childs et al. 2014), urbanization (Simons & Lewis 2013), and the effects of settlement colonization versus exploitation colonization on language ecologies (Mufwene 2002). Consequently, research on Africa's endangered languages has lagged behind endangered language research in other parts of the world.

Nonetheless, there have been some attempts to document the endangered languages of Africa, to ascertain their relative threat levels, and to catalogue the continent's extinct languages. Among them are the Summer Institute of Linguistics' (SIL)

*Ethnologue* project (Lewis et al. 2015), the School of Oriental and African Studies' (SOAS) Endangered Languages Documentation Program, Sommer's (1992) survey, the collection of articles in Brenzinger (1992, 1998), works such as Wurm (1996), Haarmann (2001), and Batibo (2005), and the collection of Africa-specific articles in Brenzinger (2007a), to name a few.<sup>1</sup> Although they vary in the details, all such projects paint a consistent picture with respect to the state of language endangerment in sub-Saharan Africa. They note that threatened languages or families are distributed across several geographically distinct regions of the continent, and that internal pressures (e.g., regionally dominant languages and large-scale population movements) rather than external factors (e.g., the influence of the languages of former colonizers) drive and unify the pattern of African language endangerment. As such, the state of language endangerment in sub-Saharan Africa is distinct from that in much of the rest of the world.

Unlike Australia, northern Asia, and the Americas, where local languages are threatened and replaced by the nationally dominant languages of colonizers, the most immediate threats to minority African languages are posed by other local or sub-national languages (Brenzinger et al. 1991), barring infrequent and exceptional cases like the threat posed by English in certain regions of Nigeria (Connell 2015) and by national languages like Swahili in Tanzania and Setswana in Botswana (Brenzinger 2007b). Scotton (1982), for instance, concludes that less than 10% of rural Africa has competence in an imported European language, and Traill (1995) notes that the only documented instance of an African speech community abandoning its heritage language for the language of its former colonizers comes from the Khoekoe shift to Dutch around 1700. Brenzinger (2007b) identifies mass migration and cyclic immigration as a second unique internal pressure driving the pattern of language endangerment in Africa, predominantly in eastern Africa. The bottom line is that external threats like colonization have not threatened African minority languages in the way they have in most parts of the world (Grenoble & Whaley 1998). Rather, internal pressures almost exclusively characterize the state of language endangerment on the continent. Thus, because its pattern of endangerment is unique, Africa represents a fertile landscape with great potential to provide fresh perspectives on and valuable new insights into the causes, consequences, and characteristics of human language endangerment.

## 1.2. Researching Africa's endangered languages

Despite their great potential to fill gaps in our understanding of the inner workings of language endangerment, Africa's endangered languages pose several unique challenges to documentation and revitalization efforts.<sup>2</sup> For instance, insufficient infrastructure, scarcity of resources, incomplete and/or inaccurate information,<sup>3</sup> and a general absence of public awareness (both locally and internationally) represent serious hurdles for the documentation and maintenance

of threatened languages and cultures in most regions (Blench 2007; Connell 2007). In addition, because the general threat level of language endangerment in Africa has been perennially characterized as low, research on and funding opportunities for endangered African languages are often perceived as less than urgent (Connell 2007). However, as Brenzinger (2007a:195) puts it, “The fact that African languages replace other African languages does not mean that language endangerment on the African continent is less severe than in other parts of the world.” According to Batibo (2005), there are approximately 308 “highly endangered” African languages (12.32% of all extant languages on the continent) and at least 201 extinct African languages, to say nothing of the countless other less threatened but nonetheless vulnerable ones. This highlights the fact that the state of language endangerment in sub-Saharan Africa is more serious than it is typically perceived to be.

As a consequence of the challenges to documentation and revitalization outlined above, as well as the perceived non-urgent threat level priority status of Africa’s endangered languages, a disproportionately low amount of research and funding is devoted to the study of these languages when compared to any other linguistically threatened region in the world (Blench 2007). More regrettably, even less has been done to create a community of Africanists and concerned linguists who might work on these issues.<sup>4</sup> This volume seeks to stimulate and enhance the visibility of endangered African language research, in the hope of reversing this trend and bringing the unique insights and perspectives afforded by African language endangerment to bear on the burgeoning fields of language documentation and endangered language research. By highlighting the contribution that Africa’s endangered languages have on our understanding of natural language, we advertise their value and increase their visibility in the scientific community.

In today’s climate of economic instability and ongoing regional conflict in many parts of Africa, stimulating and enhancing the visibility of endangered African language research is indeed a formidable task. We believe that one fruitful way to achieve this goal is to promote mutually beneficial synergistic partnerships between documentary and theoretical linguists researching endangered African languages.

### 1.3. The symbiotic nature of theory and documentation

Despite the fact that practitioners of language documentation and linguistic theory are often perceived as opposing or getting in the way of one another, the symbiotic nature of the two disciplines has been widely recognized (e.g., Everett 2001; Gil 2001; Hyman 2004, 2009; Mithun 2001; Rice 2001; Sells 2010, among others). Linguistic theory informed by marginalized or under-represented languages crucially draws on data unearthed by language documentation and could not proceed without it, while theory in turn guides the documentation process by predetermining the issues investigated, the questions asked, and the data sought (Hyman 2009).

In some cases, awareness of and sensitivity to theoretical concerns can even reveal missing gaps in the documentary record, for instance with research on logophoric pronouns following the seminal work of Clements (1975). The two disciplines, therefore, form a kind of “cycle” which drives linguistics forward. This cyclic interplay suggests that, at the very least, linguistic theory and language documentation are interdependent. Some researchers, though, take an even stronger position, claiming that the line between theory and documentation is a blurred one. Hyman (2004), for instance, argues that description and documentation are essentially indistinguishable from theory. When each is done right, they not only have the same concerns, they have the same results: each mode of inquiry is a vehicle of discovery. Matthewson's semantic fieldwork methodology (Matthewson 2004; Bochnak & Matthewson 2015) and Bruening's (2008a,b) quantifier scope materials illustrate the point nicely, demonstrating that theoretically oriented research can not only yield novel descriptive discoveries but also effectively drive the development of data-collecting techniques for both linguistic theory and language documentation. If theory and documentation are indeed interconnected and complementary, then partnerships between documentarians and theorists or projects that marry theory with documentation are destined to be synergistic affairs. And synergistic affairs are likely to be more visible and impactful than non-synergistic ones.

The keyword in the subtitle of this volume is therefore not “documentary” or “theoretical,” but rather the word “and.” Our aim in this book is to bring together both documentary and theoretical approaches to endangered African language research in order to highlight the respects in which the two methodologies are co-informing, mutually supportive, and equally essential to documentation and preservation efforts. We believe that doing so will not only encourage increased partnerships between these two types of linguists and consequently bolster the net output of research on endangered African languages, but it will also greatly improve the visibility, depth, breadth, and overall quality of that research.

#### 1.4. A brief tour through this book

Many of the themes introduced in this chapter are taken up in greater detail in chapter 2, where Sands discusses the challenges of documenting Africa's least-known languages and concludes that the level of language endangerment in Africa has been grossly underestimated.

The next four chapters deal with the documentation and theoretical analysis of Nata, an endangered Bantu language of northern Tanzania, by a team of researchers at the University of British Columbia. Existing descriptions and analyses of Nata in the literature are scarce, making the contributions in this book some of the first published materials on the language. Chapter 3 provides an overview of both the language and the Nata research project, outlining the broader issues connected to the interplay

between language documentation and linguistic theory that unify the three subsequent articles. In these three chapters, both theory and documentation converge on a robust partition between nouns and verbs in the language. In chapter 4, Gambarage and Pulleyblank treat this partition by way of an investigation into tongue root vowel harmony that depends crucially on the iterative cycle connecting language documentation, language analysis, and theory development. Anghelescu and colleagues examine nominal and verbal tone in Nata in chapter 5, while Déchaine and colleagues document and analyze deverbal nominalization in chapter 6.

The two chapters that follow are concerned with community-based approaches to African language documentation and revitalization. In chapter 7, Childs discusses two pedagogical frameworks for language revitalization and, on the basis of a case study of Mani, an endangered Atlantic language of Sierra Leone, concludes that the so-called community-centric “busy intersections” model is best suited for success in the African context. In chapter 8, Nash explores a conflict that can arise between the needs of the community and the goals of the researcher in language documentation projects that have both documentary and theoretical aims. Drawing on his experience working with the Ekegusii community of southwestern Kenya, Nash advocates for collaborative community-based documentary research, arguing that it is a pursuit in which community and academic goals are both complementary and mutually beneficial.

Chapters 9 through 13 focus on the interplay between the documentation and theoretical analysis of syntax and morphology in endangered African languages. In chapter 9, Kandybowicz and Torrence investigate intervention effects on in-situ interrogative constructions in Krachi, an endangered Kwa language of eastern Ghana. The significance of the project is that it represents an instance in which the influence of linguistic theory on descriptive fieldwork leads to the discovery (and subsequent remedy) of missing gaps in the documentary record of a language. Jenks and Rose explore a similar theme in chapter 10. Focusing on the documentation, analysis, and theoretical implications of raising and control in the endangered Kordofanian language Moro of the Republic of Sudan, they argue that fieldwork guided by linguistic theory yields insights that would be difficult to establish solely on the basis of the documentary practice of text collection and analysis. They conclude that the documentation of endangered languages is most effective when it has a solid foundation in linguistic theory. Collins echoes this sentiment in chapter 11, on the syntax of the “linker” in five critically endangered non-central Khoisan languages of southern Africa. Collins reveals a number of new and fascinating properties of linkers, particles that introduce or “link” a wide range of expressions in the verb phrase. Because it is highly unlikely that a purely documentary-based approach would have produced similar results, Collins makes a strong case for the ability of formal/theoretical linguists to produce high-quality descriptive work. Bassene and Safir’s contribution (chapter 12) makes a strong case for this as well. In their analysis of verb stem structure in Eegimaa, an endangered

Atlantic language of southern Senegal, Bassene and Safir demonstrate that a set of theoretical challenges posed by Eegimaa morphology led to a series of analytical links which allowed the researchers to go beyond mere descriptions of facts and uncover deeper underlying organizational principles. The value in such work is that this deeper level of understanding can lead future Eegimaa researchers to discover (and fill) hitherto unknown gaps in the documentation of the language's grammar. This is an excellent example of the cyclic interplay of documentation and linguistic theory previously discussed, and it is the focus of McPherson's contribution on Seenku verbal morphology in chapter 13. In her article, McPherson presents the first published description of verbal morphology in Seenku, a threatened and previously undescribed Dogon language of Burkina Faso. McPherson explains how the cyclic and symbiotic interplay of linguistic theory and documentation led to a deeper account of the puzzling nature of verb forms in the language, which surprisingly appear to have two stem forms.

The final six chapters address issues concerning the phonology and phonetics of endangered African languages. In chapter 14, Marlo discusses the symbiotic relationship between linguistic description and micro-comparative typological research. His discussion proceeds by way of two case studies on tone and reduplication in the object-marking systems of Yao and Buguumbé Kuria, two Bantu languages spoken in the Tanzania-Malawi-Mozambique region. Marlo shows that in each case, knowing about analogous patterns in other languages informs the description and analysis of the individual language. Furthermore, each case expands knowledge of the typology of object-marking patterns in Bantu languages, leading to improvements in the quality of descriptions of other languages. In this way, he argues, theoretical approaches (broadly construed) can improve grammatical description. Zsiga and Boyer's contribution in chapter 15 treads similar ground by approaching the problem of the "unnatural" alternation of post-nasal devoicing in Sebirwa, an endangered Bantu language of Botswana, from the vantage point of a similar "unnatural" alternation in the related (yet phonologically distinct) language Setswana. Once again, knowing about analogous patterns in other languages informs the description and analysis of the individual language. In chapter 16, Stirtz discusses the phonology of plosives in Caning, an endangered Nilo-Saharan language of the Republic of Sudan with a four-way plosive series. He examines three analyses of the plosive system in great detail, but concludes that additional documentation is needed to furnish the missing decisive data. This conclusion resonates strongly with the theme of this volume, for it underscores the symbiotic interplay between language documentation and linguistic theory and analysis. In this case, theoretical concerns (which were themselves a product of documentary efforts) will play a catalyzing role in the future broadening of the Caning documentary record. Chapters 17 and 18 investigate properties of the Somali Chizigula (Mushunguli) sound system. Chapter 17 deals with hiatus resolution and its exceptions in the language. Hout provides another striking example of how a project with humble and purely descriptive origins can feed theoretical/analytical inquiry, which in turn

gives way to deeper and more refined characterizations of the data. Hout's article thus embodies the cyclic interplay and symbiosis between language documentation and linguistic theory that lies at the heart of this volume. In chapter 18, Temkin Martinez and Rosenbaum examine the acoustic and aerodynamic properties of Chizigula stops in an effort to complement the description and documentation of stops in the language. Although traditional language descriptions and revitalization efforts have benefited from instrumental approaches utilized in other fields of linguistics, the techniques of instrumental phonetics are infrequently applied to the documentation and analysis of Africa's endangered languages. Temkin Martinez and Rosenbaum's work thus joins a select and highly welcome body of research that helps sharpen the description and documentation of Africa's least studied languages. Chapter 19 closes the book with a critical look at the relationship between orthography and language documentation, as informed by the endangered Bantu languages Nata and Ikoma, as well as Swahili. Gambarage argues that orthographies are "masks" that disguise and often misrepresent the true phonetic qualities of vowels. He discusses current vowel documentation methodologies and theoretical approaches in the context of Bantu, arguing that revisiting the orthographic analyses of the languages that preceded both modern linguistic theory and speech analysis is essential to the documentation and description of endangered Bantu languages. Because unmasking is ultimately a theoretical/analytical endeavor, we are once again face to face with an instance in which the interplay between linguistic theory and language documentation leads to synergistic results in the study of Africa's endangered languages.

## Notes

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1. See Sands (this volume, chap. 2) for other notable projects.

2. See Sands (this volume, chap. 2) for an in-depth discussion of these unique challenges.

3. At the time of writing, Wikipedia's list of endangered languages in Africa ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_endangered\\_languages\\_in\\_Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_endangered_languages_in_Africa)) is severely underpopulated, containing a mere 210 sub-Saharan languages, whose threat levels range from "vulnerable" to "critically endangered." By comparison, the figure reported in *Ethnologue* (Lewis et al. 2013) is 346 ("at risk" languages) and Sands (this volume) estimates that a more accurate figure is closer to 600. Many of the languages featured in this volume do not appear on Wikipedia's list, highlighting the dearth of accurate information publicly available about Africa's endangered languages.

4. Essegbey et al. (2015) represents a recent exception and, we believe, a step in the right direction.

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