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The making of a killer (language):
Language contact and language dominance in sub-Saharan Africa
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Africa is a language-rich continent. In millions of African communities today, thousands of languages are regularly being used for learning and communication: up to 2110 of these languages have been identified by language researchers over the years (Lewis 2009).

In such language-rich environments, contact between language communities is inevitable. Where individuals and communities develop a linguistic repertoire of more than one language, they are able to choose which languages they will cultivate and for what purposes. Languages perceived as most beneficial to the speakers thrive. Some hold significance for the sense of cultural identity and continuity they embody. Some are seen as useful for economic, political, social or other instrumental purposes. For monolingual populations, cultural identity and instrumental utility characterize the same language. However in multi-language environments, different languages invariably carry different value for the speakers of those languages.

In some ways, the phenomena of language loss, language shift and multilingualism can be seen as normal social processes, flowing naturally from the contact between peoples and communities. However the patterns of these phenomena also indicate a strong link between language shift and the power relations between communities of speakers. As May (2004) has argued, language loss has a great deal to do with issues of power and prejudice. It is no coincidence that the world's vanishing languages are spoken by the politically least powerful cultures. Not only so, but the pressure that causes such communities to stop speaking their "home" language can have devastating consequences for those communities. Fishman notes that language loss implies loss of ethnocultural identity as well (Fishman 2001). This facet of language contact has given rise to a range of concerns which give the phenomena of language shift and loss a decidedly ethical slant.

The concern is expressed in several ways by language scholars. The ecological approach to language diversity and shift focuses on language diversity as analogous to, and even contiguous with, biological diversity (Nettle and Romaine 2000). Diversity is seen as essential to the overall well being of the planet and its peoples. Terms such as *language survival*, *language death* and *language endangerment* emphasize the notion that languages have life, just as most of the natural world has life. The fact that many languages under threat are spoken by people whose natural environment is also under threat enhances the perceived logic of this perspective.

The challenge of the ecological approach is that describing minority languages in terms of endangered biodiversity risks exoticizing the people who speak those languages (Makoni and Trudell 2006). It also tends to focus attention on the language rather than the speakers. Romaine (2004) acknowledges the problem:

> In discussion of language maintenance, revitalization, etc. there is a tendency to
> reify languages, when it is communities … we should be talking about. When we

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lose sight of people and the communities that sustain language, it becomes easy to argue as a number of critics have that there is no reason to preserve languages for their own sake.

Other scholars focus on the political and legal injustice implied by the conditions that bring about language shift. The *linguistic human rights* paradigm, articulated most thoroughly by the linguist Stephen May, is built on the belief in the civil rights of all individuals within a society. Individuals' right to "retain their ethnic, cultural and language affiliations" (May 1999:46) is played out in the cultural community to which those individuals belong. Related to this discourse is the contention that, for marginalized communities of the world, progress in both education and development hinge on the use of the community's language; marginalization of that language thus is to block access to both learning and quality of life by the community (Trudell 2009; Pinnock 2009).

A third approach to language loss and shift combines the discourses of ecolinguistics and linguistic human rights, radicalizing them both. This approach sees language as not only anthropomorphic, but as actually having agency; speakers of the language are seen primarily as victims (Mufwene 2005). Terms such as *language wars, killer language* and *linguistic genocide* characterize this approach, espoused by language scholars who are perhaps better described as language activists. This terminology highlights the judgment that language loss is morally wrong, regardless of the particular conditions of its social uses, and that linguistic diversity is inherently good. In many cases, proponents of this approach also identify particular languages as killer languages - primarily English (Phillipson 2009). Other international languages may be included in this deadly club, though for some concerned observers English poses a mortal threat to other world languages as well as local languages[1] – a kind of universal killer, so to speak (Phillipson 2003).

Notwithstanding this ethically-charged discourse about particular international languages, the notion of language dominance is crucially important to language shift and language survival in Africa. In the parlance of the extreme activist, some African languages could themselves be called "killer languages": these languages, by virtue of their economic, social and political status, have taken on so many domains of use in multilingual contexts that the continued existence of other languages in the environment is in doubt. Batibo lists some 450 language of Africa which "have been responsible to varying degrees for causing language shift and death among the minority languages" (Batibo 2005:22). The sense of threat from a dominant language, as judged by the language activist or of the minority language community itself, confirms its "killer" character.

Indeed, regional or national African languages bear as much or more responsibility for language shift and death as the international languages do. Mufwene (2005:22) argues that urban African vernaculars, rather than European colonial languages, are largely responsible for the endangerment of the "ancestral, ethnic languages" – and this more so in African cities than in the rural areas. So despite the popularity of assigning "killer" status to European languages, this

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[1] For example, the official website of the Academy of the French Language states that English represents a real threat to French.http://www.academie-francaise.fr/langue/index.html. Accessed 21 March 2011.

practice does not reflect the reality of language competition and dominance in much of Africa. Displacement of one language by another in a given domain assumes that the languages are in competition in that domain. Where the array of languages available includes local languages, regional languages, national languages and international languages, international languages are not generally in competition with local languages for a given domain. Rather, the competition is between local languages, between the local and a regional or national African language, between the dominant African language and the international language, and/or between two international languages (Kamwangamalu 2010).

So although the place of English and French in African society is the subject of much debate, the likelihood of either language actually displacing local African languages is not strong. Mufwene and Vigouroux (2008:2), in their important study of language and globalization in Africa, state that it is debatable whether the colonial European languages that now function as official languages in Africa are actually threats to the continent's indigenous languages, since the rural populations and the elite urban population have experienced them so differently.

Globalization and language dominance

Globalization has also been linked with the dominance of European languages, and English in particular (Phillipson 2003). Whether or not this is the case in other continents, the impact of globalization on language use in Africa is actually much more complex. Where globalization refers to the broad-ranging interconnectedness of different parts of the world, due to extensive networks of communication and transportation (Mufwene and Vigouroux 2008:22), its impact in Africa is largely limited to the urban, middle class or wealthy elite. For this segment of society, access to the globalization mechanisms of international languages, extended formal education using a Western-based curriculum, and ICT is indeed the key to national and international mobility.

However, the reality is that this type of globalizing influence "has left most of the African population on the margins" (Mufwene and Vigouroux 2008: 5). For that population, the more powerful globalizing forces take the shape of interdependencies which are played out in a complex local socioeconomic system. Mufwene and Vigouroux note that although local economic systems are influenced by worldwide economic trends, populations actually respond and adapt primarily to the local socioeconomic pressures that affect them directly (2008: 23).

Thus for millions of people in Africa, the forces that shape language use are far more local than they are international. Globalization is indeed linked to "the expansion of particular languages at the expense of others" (Mufwene 2005:28), but these processes are played out locally, with the linguistic repertoire available to the local population.

The role of language policy

The dominance of a particular language or languages is usually traceable to official national-level language policy, what Shohamy (2006:45) describes as "the primary mechanism for

organizing, managing and manipulating language behaviors". Far from being objective or ideologically neutral, the laws and regulations that express official language policy reflect a range of social, economic and political agendas (May 2008). Such policies may target particular audiences, or the entire nation, or even other nations. (For example, see Renou 2002 on France's language policy regarding francophone Africa.)

Official language policy in African nations reflects the complex array of factors that shape national and local society: historical influences, socioeconomic aspirations, cultural identity and power relations. For a variety of reasons, the official language policies of most post-independence African nations instated the colonial language – English, French, Portuguese, Spanish – as the official language of government, business and education (Wright 2004). A few African nations did not follow this pattern, however, establishing an official or national African language either alongside or instead of the European language. Kamwangamalu (2010:13) attributes what he calls "vernacularization" (the institution of an African language as the dominant national language) in Tanzania, Ethiopia and Somalia, to the political will of the leadership of the time.

Attention to local languages can also be seen in official language policy across Africa. The Ethiopian government's enshrinement of local language rights in the current Constitution makes one of the strongest language policy statements imaginable. In Senegal, explicit recognition of local languages is allocated to the Senegalese government's Academy of National Languages. The Pan South Africa Language Board (PanSALB), established in 1995 by the South African government, aims at the development all 11 official languages of the nation and the promotion of multilingualism in the nation.[2]

However language policy is more than simply a fixed, official edict, implemented without question or negotiation. Rather the dynamic, informal, negotiated side of language policy is described by Spolsky (2004) as growing out of people's own practices, ideologies and beliefs where language is concerned. Contestation and appropriation of official language policy take place at community, family and school levels, and reflects the realities of language choice and language attitudes 'on the ground.' (REF FROM NEW BOOK) These choices and attitudes, as much as any official regulation, shape the use of local, regional and international languages in a given context. The power of local language policy choices can be readily seen where national language-in-education policies are at variance with local values and beliefs, and parents as well as local education authorities choose to resist those policies where their children's education is concerned (Trudell 2007).

Nuancing language contact, dominance and competition in Africa: Four case studies

Influences on language dominance are thus overt as well as covert, local as well as national, and contextual rather than universal. Not only so, but language dominance is also highly dynamic - a socially shaped phenomenon reflecting changing power balances and economic opportunity as well as the fluidity of personal identities. Particularly in the multi-language contexts of Africa where the cultural, pragmatic and ethical dimensions of language shift take on many different

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[2] http://www.pansalb.org.za/pansalbhistory.html. Accessed 25 April 2011.

facets, it is important to avoid a simplistic view of language contact and language shift. The four case studies below help to illustrate the political, social and cultural realities of language choice in Africa. At the end of each case study, one or two issues are highlighted which demonstrate the dynamism and unpredictability of language relations in these contexts.

Tanzania
Though the language debate in Tanzania has been portrayed as being between African languages and English, in fact the debate is actually between kiSwahili and English. The attraction of the Tanzanian case for language activists in Africa is that it is one of the few instances in which the place of an African language has been maintained in government and educational domains, often in direct competition with English. This has been primarily due to the strong support of government language policy over the years, particularly early in its nationhood. Upon Tanzania' independence, Kiswahili was promoted as both a national symbol and a regional language of Africa. Wright (2004: 77) notes:

> Swahili was promoted on several accounts: its African pedigree, its role as the medium of mobilization against colonialism, its indexical function as the language of freedom, socialism and the nation.

Kiswahili was made the national language of Tanzania, and, in a reversal of the colonial language policy of English use in primary schools, Kiswahili was made the language of instruction in primary schools in 1967 (Roy-Campbell and Qorro 1997). English remained the language of instruction in secondary school.

This policy of "Swahilisation" (Wright 2004: 79) successfully facilitated the nation-building agenda of the early government for about 20 years. Promotion of Kiswahili as a national language fostered a deep sense of nationhood that remains today. However, as Wright notes, "the situation has not remained stable", as the various initiatives with which Kiswahili was associated were not able to deliver the promised economic prosperity. Not only so, but cultural and economic influences from the West have caused English competence to take on new importance for Tanzanians.

Currently, the government website states that "the main feature of Tanzania's education system is the bilingual policy, which requires children to learn both Kiswahili and English." [3] However the debate rages over which language actually yields the most desirable academic outcomes, given the low levels of English fluency among most Tanzanian teachers and students. In December 2010 the Minister for Education and Vocational Training announced the intention to make English the medium of instruction from grade three[4], a move intended to enhance English fluency but which pro-Kiswahili educators believe will further hinder classroom learning. Two months later, a former MP made the national news with the opinion that Kiswahili should be made the medium of instruction through secondary school.[5]

However the energy of this debate, among scholars and Tanzanians themselves, masks the fact that up to 127 other languages are spoken as mother tongues by Tanzanian citizens (Lewis 2009).

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[3] http://www.tanzania.go.tz/educationf.html. Accessed 4 April 2011.
[4] http://www.dailynews.co.tz/home/?n=15468. Accessed 4 April 2011.
[5] http://www.ippmedia.com/frontend/index.php?l=26268. Accessed 4 April 2011.

Kiswahili serves Tanzania as a lingua franca (Fasold 1997); but fluency in the language is not universal, even after decades of official policy that has privileged KiSwahili tremendously over other Tanzanian languages. Linguist Casmir Rubagumya (2007) argues that those who speak *ethnic community languages* (ECL), but not Kiswahili, could number as high as 10% of the adult population – with a far higher number among young children entering school, since they have had no chance yet to learn kiSwahili as a second language.

Rubagumya argues that these non-speakers of kiSwahili are actually "semi citizens" of Tanzania:
> "Semi-citizens" are those individuals who have access to neither English nor Kiswahili. They can only function in domains where an ECL is used. For this reason, this group is excluded from domains where Kiswahili or English are used. The inability to exercise their rights as Tanzanian citizens has to be mitigated through a third party. For example, they would need somebody to help them during general elections because they are unable to read and write. (p. 3)

This marginalization of Tanzanian languages (and, by extension, their speakers) was not always a feature of language policy in Tanzania. Before independence, local languages had been used as the medium of instruction in early primary schools (Roy-Campbell 2001:21; Roy-Campbell and Qorro 1997:1). However this pro-local language policy for early primary school was embedded in an overall colonial policy imposing English, and so at independence support for kiSwahili was prioritized over either English or local languages.

So it is that the vigorous promotion of Kiswahili as the vehicle of social and political transformation resulted in marginalization of the other Tanzanian languages from development and use in educational or public domains (Rubagumya 2007: 4). The impact on primary-age children, especially rural children, has been significant. Tanzanian scholar O-saki notes that "since 80% of Tanzanians live in rural areas, most children start learning about the world around them in the mother tongue, which is the African tribal language" (O-saki 2005:50). He further observes that "in [the Tanzanian education] system, we have no first language learning, we give Kiswahili and English both a second language status, and ignore the first language completely" (ibid.) In these cases young school children are not learning in their first language, to the detriment of their academic achievement in the early primary years – and probably affecting their later learning as well.

In this context, these questions (among others) arise:
- Whether Kiswahili will be able to maintain its official, national status in an environment where English is highly esteemed but English fluency is low;
- whether Tanzanian national identity, shaped over the past decades as a Kiswahili-speaking identity, is now secure enough to allow the expression of other Tanzanian ethnic and linguistic identities.

Senegal
Since its independence, French has been the official language of Senegal. Indeed, the Francophone movement of the 1960s was spearheaded by Senegalese scholar President Leopold Senghor, among other West African leaders (Wright 2004). Until the 1980s, knowledge of French was the key to economic advancement in Senegal. McLaughlin (2008:165) notes that

"although knowledge of French during this recent period was not a guarantee for social and economic advancement, the door to such opportunities was closed to those who did not master the language." However McLaughlin observes that an important economic shift took place in the late 1980s, as many Senegalese started to explore new trade and other business opportunities both within and outside of Africa. English took on greater instrumental value in this context. At the same time, the diminished perceived value of French made way for an increase in the perceived value of Wolof, a language of wider communication in Senegal, spoken as a first language by about 1/3 of the Senegalese population (Lewis 2009). Wolof took on quasi-formal status as 'the first African language of Senegal'. LePage's view in the late 1990s (1997: 58) was that Wolof "unites people in their African culture" in Senegal.

However this increased dominance of Wolof has encountered active resistance from other Senegalese language communities. One of the best known of these has been among the Pulaar-speaking community, which has supported a Pulaar-language literacy and literature program for many years. One of the primary motivations for this program is the defense of the Pulaar language and culture against larger and more dominant languages, most obviously French (Hutchinson, 2006). But according to program director Sonia Fagerberg-Diallo, the real driving force behind the program has been the resistance of the Pulaar people to linguistic and cultural domination by the Wolof:

> As long as Wolof remained a spoken lingua franca which was chosen for practical purposes by the speakers themselves, using it never posed a problem. But in recent years there have been organized attempts to promote it as the official national language, in place of or equal to French. . . . This prospect of a ''threat'' has given the ethos of a ''cause'' to Pulaar literacy, in which becoming literate is a way of asserting cultural identity on a national scale. (Fagerberg-Diallo 2001: 160)

The shift from French-Pulaar tension to Wolof-Pulaar tension has been attributed in part to diminished white-collar employment opportunities in Senegal, a situation in which French is less instrumentally valuable than Wolof (Carrington 1997). However this shift in prestige from French to Wolof appears to have triggered a much more vigorous opposition from speakers of other Senegalese languages than was ever mounted against the French language. Among other minority language communities such as the Noon, Saafi and Mankanya, anti-Wolof sentiment is not hard to find (Trudell and Klaas 2010). Members of these language communities express fear of the imposition of Wolof language, culture and religion on their own communities. Resistance takes the form of active language committees, literacy classes in the local language, and participation in both state- and civil society-sponsored language development bodies.

In this environment, the Senegalese government has established an Academy of National Languages. Languages, mandated to officially recognize local languages which can show sufficient linguistic development to qualify as "codified;" once codified, these languages may legally be used as languages of instruction in primary schools.

> Minority languages are being recognized by the national government through a process called *codification*, in which the Ministry of Education officially attests that an unwritten language has been developed into a written language. Up to 17 Senegalese languages have been so recognized. The process requires extensive linguistic research as well as community mobilization. (Trudell 2008:339)

It should be noted that this official recognition has significant impact on a community's self-identity. An official with the Catholic Education Service for the Diocese of Thies, Senegal told the author that *"codification* dynamizes the language; we could see a stabilizing of cultures, and a valuing of people for their ethnic identity" (ibid.)

The language ecology presented here brings to mind these questions, among others:
- Given that Senegal has up to 33 languages, will the Academy of National Languages be willing to recognize that many?
- What will codification of other languages actually mean for the dominance of Wolof in future?

Cameroon
Due to its unique colonial heritage, Cameroon is the only African nation to have officialized both French and English at independence. The use of the two languages as linguae francae defines two distinct geographical regions of the country, between which significant political tension has existed over the years. In fact, as Awasom (2004) has observed, the francophone-anglophone relationship in Cameroon is primarily geographical and sociopolitical, not linguistic, in nature. The national government and the national commercial interests are predominantly francophone, and it is clear to English-speaking Cameroonians that fluency in French is necessary for national-level advancement in academics, commerce or government (Chumbow and Bobda 1996). Discontent over this perceived inequity continues to contribute to a separatist sentiment on the part of some (Wolf 1997:424; Toh 2001).

In this language environment of contact and conflict between these two high-status languages little policy space has been left for the elevation of a Cameroonian language to regional or national status. Some degree of attention has been given to the status of Cameroonian languages in the last 20 years however. In 1982, the Cameroonian government endorsed both official language bilingualism (French and English) and the promotion of minority languages as well (Tadadjeu 1990:20). In 1986, President Paul Biya wrote in his monograph entitled *Communal Liberalism*:

> I rather regard our linguistic diversity as a cultural privilege. In the face of this linguistic multiplicity, we should operate at two levels - the ethnic and the national. At the ethnic level we should encourage the development of the national languages which are the privileged mediums of ethnic cultures. . . . It is therefore necessary to allow all our linguistic values to flourish as an indispensable prelude to the enhancement of a national cultural heritage (Biya 1986:104).

The National Forum on Education endorsed the 14-year-old multilingual education program, PROPELCA (Operational Research Project for Teaching in African Languages), in May 1995; this endorsement is now part of the Law of the Orientation of Cameroonian Education, passed in 1998. In a further step, the new constitution of January 1996 "committed the Cameroonian nation to protecting and promoting national languages" (Tadadjeu 1997:23).

However the government has so far been slow to match pro-Cameroonian language rhetoric with actual resources for language development, and so the literally hundreds of Cameroonian languages are in roughly the same position as far as language policy is concerned. Interestingly, this situation is seen as helping to maintain the power balance between the various ethnic

communities; as Fasold (1997:260) remarks, "the fear that ethnic particularisms might endanger national unity remains strong among the governing class." This fear has some basis, since attempts to elevate one of the local languages over the others have historically met with quite sharp reaction from other language communities (Keller 1969).

However, Chiatoh (2006:103) also argues that the *laissez-faire* policy of the national government where the development of local languages is concerned has actually resulted in a significant degree of what he calls "private initiative" in language development: the collaboration of local communities, private education providers, universities and international NGOs to develop and use Cameroonian languages for learning and development. Advocacy on behalf of Cameroonian language development is taking place, primarily in the context of the universities and NGOs. For example, Chia (2006) makes a case for the importance of Cameroonian languages to the success of national development initiatives such as AIDS campaigns, improving agricultural output, grater political participation, and so on.

In this language environment, questions such as these arise:
- As English gains leverage over French in Africa and elsewhere (see section below), what will be the impact on the Cameroonian political environment?
- What might move the Cameroonian government to act decisively and intentionally to implement the pro-MT policy statements in its governing documents?

Ethiopia
The recent history of language policy in Ethiopia provides yet another example of a major African language that exists in competition with both international and local languages (Heugh et al 2006; Benson et al 2010). Until 1955, formal education in the country was dominated by English-language instruction. The Constitution of 1955 made Amharic the official language of the country; by 1958, Amharic was the language of instruction for primary schooling. Clearly this was good for the large Amharic-speaking population of the country; and indeed, the move could been seen as removing an international language from its position of prestige in the country, and implementing what Kamwangamalu calls "decolonization of the curriculum" with an African language as medium of instruction (2010: 3).

However, not all of Ethiopia's citizens felt empowered by this move. As Heugh et al write:
> this language policy met with opposition on the grounds that it favored the use of only one language throughout the country; among the 80 other language communities of the country, this was seen as an attempt at linguistic and cultural assimilation. (p. 44)

Opposition to Amharic-medium instruction among other language communities continued until the new coalition government came into power in 1991. The new government immediately proclaimed the right of every ethnic group in Ethiopia to use and develop its languages and cultures – including as a medium of instruction in primary school. Amharic was relegated to "third language" status, after the local language and English. (p.44)

The ignominious fall of Amharic from its position of national prestige is a reminder that the politics of language are driven by powerful motivations. In an even more dramatic demonstration

of this fact, Getachew and Derib (2006: 57) describe an ill-fated language policy decision made in 1999:

> A political decision to form a blended language called Wogagoda (from [the related languages] Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro) and introduce it into the primary school education resulted in burning of textbooks worth 40 million birr, death of seven people, transfer of hundreds of teachers, and chaos that resulted in the demolition of infrastructures and even hotels.

The four languages involved are mutually intelligible to some degree, but the speakers of the four identity themselves as quite distinct. This notion of a "blended language" offended their sense of identity and linguistic integrity. Protests and even riots ensued; and in the end, the initiative was abandoned as each of the four language communities decided to develop its own language as medium of instruction.

In this language environment, questions such as the following arise:
- Is decentralized implementation of education policy sustainable?
- Will the larger and more powerful local languages dominate the smaller ones such that education provision becomes the privilege only of those more powerful languages?

A further word on English and French in Africa

Despite the complexities of language contact and language choice described above, it is hard to overstate the impact of the French and English languages on African education, identity and governance. For more than 100 years, fluency in these language giants has been key to success in formal schooling, social status, political power, and economic gain. Both carry largely instrumental value for their speakers; neither is seen as a real carrier of African identity to any great extent. However the millions of Africans who do not speak these languages are locked out of a huge array of societal goods (Alidou 2003). As Kamwangamalu (2010:5) notes, "the social distribution of these languages remains very limited and restricted to a minority elite group." For these reason, the increasing conflict between the French and English languages, particularly visible in so-called francophone Africa, is of great interest in Africa.

The new balance of language influence can certainly be unsettling, perhaps nowhere more than in Rwanda, which after 12 years of an increasingly pro-English government stance, in 2008 replaced French with English as the medium of instruction for the entire education system (Samuelson and Freedman 2010). The politically charged language environment within which this move was made has been shaped by tension between the Rwandan and French leadership over France's role in the 1994 genocide, and a more general sense of resentment on the part of at least some segments of society at the francophone colonial heritage they have experienced. On the front page of a major Rwandan newspaper, journalist Ngango Rukara expressed the sentiment clearly in a recent article entitled *France Should Pay for the Teaching of English in African Schools:*

French is after all, nothing more than another local vernacular language on the European continent.[6]

However equally surprising, if not as dramatic or orchestrated, moves towards English and away from French can be found in other historically francophone countries such as Tunisia and Burundi. Ager (2001:119) notes that the growing choice of English is not usually the result of planned displacement of French or other languages; rather, people's motives for choosing English appear to be largely economic and pragmatic. Francophone government bodies such as the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (OIF) are attempting to fight the trend, decrying "the cultural and linguistic standardization [i.e. the spread of English] that is a consequence of globalization."[7] Nevertheless, Mufwene (2005:34) observes a certain irony here, since

> La Francophonie has been quite aggressive in developing all sorts of strategies to promote French around the world. But it also looks like the harder they try the more evident it is that French cannot keep up with English.

Given the decades of assimilationist language policy imposed by France on West African (ex-)colonies, and given the profound dysfunction which imposition of the French language has meant for formal education in West Africa (Alidou 2006; Trudell 2011), it is difficult to find much sympathy for the replacement of French by English in African government, business and education systems. And indeed, in some ways the instrumental status of both of these international languages for most Africans makes them both far more vulnerable to language shift than people's first languages would be - easily taken on, and as easily discarded with the shifting of economic, social or political winds.

Be that as it may, however, the entrenchment of these languages as languages of education or government still poses a significant threat to those African languages that are demographically in the majority but politically minoritized. Kamwangamalu warns that, in this environment where the two language giants are competing for use in domains such as education, the future of African indigenous languages could be bleak. He notes:

> Unless African languages are seen as a commodity in which language consumers have an interest to invest, that is, unless these languages become an instrument for upward social mobility, their prospects will continue to be bleak, especially in the era of globalization (Kamwangamalu 2010: 2)

In this view, the personal and local domains of use will not be sufficient to maintain or increase the long-term viability of African languages. And in this context, one high-prestige language can be as threatening as another where the long-term survival of minority African languages is concerned.

Conclusion

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[6] "France should pay for the teaching of English in African Schools." *The New Times*, Tuesday April 5, 2011. http://www.newtimes.co.rw/index.php?issue=13690&article=10101. Accessed 5 April 2011.

[7] *Taking Action Together: Francophonie 2006-2009*. http://www.francophonie.org/IMG/pdf/Agir_Anglais.pdf. Accessed 5 January 2011.

Far from being autonomous linguistic processes, language contact and competition can be accurately understood only within the broader societal context which shapes language use. The shifting nature of language relationships, including those described in this paper, are best explained in terms of local and more wide-ranging social, economic and political dynamics. .Political aims, played out at local, national and international levels, are key to the waxing or waning influence of certain languages over others. Thus the "killer" language phenomenon, where it does appear, comes about in particular contexts and is not reliably associated with any one human language.

And as Mufwene (2005:45) has argued, the reality of language shift is that languages do not "kill" other languages; language shift is the result of conscious or unconscious choices made by speakers of the languages concerned. Language attitudes are key to language choices, but these attitudes are held by communities of speakers whose values and beliefs about language are open to influence. The dynamic – and even unpredictable – trajectory of language dominance and language choice reflects the responsiveness of language attitudes to changing environments. This fact has important implications for the potential impact of language activism, including language revitalization efforts and the promotion of local language use in formal and nonformal education.

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