

The Making of a Killer (Language): Language Contact and Language Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Language contact is as old a phenomenon as language itself. Language behaviors such as code mixing, multilingualism and language shift flow from the social and communicative nature of human beings. The fundamental purpose of language is met when understanding is achieved between the speaker and the hearer, and both speaker and hearer may modify their language behaviors in order to ensure that such understanding takes place.

However in addition to the social and communicative features of language, the political aspect of language contact has its own influence. The intentionality of language choice can be a marker of power relations between individuals and between communities, and the processes which make one language dominant over others are politically shaped processes. At its extreme, the political features of language use and language choice can lead speakers to cease using one language altogether in favor of another. The term “killer language” has been coined to describe the extreme dominance of a given language over others, which causes speakers of the “victimized” languages to use them less and less – and finally not at all. The terms are clearly emotive and anthropomorphic, with an implied ethical dimension that may or may not appropriately describe the sociopolitical environment of language loss in sub-Saharan communities.

This paper examines the validity of the “killer language” concept in sub-Saharan Africa. It explores the social and political features which can create or dissipate an environment of such language dominance, drawing on illustrative data from Senegal, Tanzania, Ethiopia and Cameroon. The goal of this study is a clearer understanding of the contextual nature and outcomes of language contact and language dominance in sub-Saharan African nations today.

