

Interpreters, Interlocutors and an Intermediary Language: Chiefs, the State and Colloquial Arabic in Southern Sudan

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This paper examines the historical and contemporary importance of linguistic knowledge and skills of translation to the role of chiefs, and argues that they have often occupied a strategic position in the complex linguistic politics of English, Sudanese Arabic, colloquial Arabic and the vernaculars in Southern Sudan. It argues that throughout the history of Southern Sudanese encounters with state power, colloquial Arabic has functioned not only as a lingua franca for commercial and urban interaction, but also as an intermediary language, a tool for interpreting between the languages of the state (Turkish, ‘proper’ Sudanese Arabic and English) and the indigenous languages. It has therefore represented and mediated an expanding border zone between state and society within which particular kinds of communication can take place, rather than there being a binary interaction between government language and the vernacular, or indeed between state and society.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, chiefs frequently gained their position at least partly through their ability to speak some colloquial Arabic with the traders, soldiers and government officers who came from or through northern regions of Sudan. Despite British efforts to deter the spread of what they called ‘pidgin’ Arabic, by the end of the colonial period it was being described as the language of local government as well as of commerce. But it was also the language of the army and town, and colloquial Arabic has retained a moral ambiguity even as postcolonial military recruitment and displacement have seen its further spread. In the twenty-first century, political and moral debates over language reveal the divisive legacies of war and migration, but they also point to the enduring and emerging associations of various languages with different sources of power and wealth. Linguistic knowledge also contributes to differentiation among chiefs; the paper focuses on chiefs in the vicinity of towns who tend to speak colloquial Arabic and even some English. But the paper argues that this roots them in a particular intermediate zone of local government, court and market, where the greatest interlocution between state and society may occur, and often through the medium of colloquial Arabic.