The Limits of Globalization:
The Linguistic World is Not Flat

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Africa: Its Linguistic Background

• Four Indigenous Language Families
• A language family is a group of languages for which linguists have identified shared resemblances consisting of forms that have similar meanings (not just similar nouns, but similar grammatical elements and, to a lesser extent, similar sound systems)
A. Indigenous Language Families (four)

- Afro-Asiatic (four branches: Semitic, Cushitic, Gerber, Chadic)
- Nilo-Saharan (large number of branches largely in Eastern Africa, but also some in Central and West Africa)
- Niger-Kordofanian (largest group in terms of number of different languages; largest branch is the Bantu sub-group in the Niger-Congo branch, which also includes West African coastal languages)
- Khoi-San (smallest number of languages spoken mainly in Namibia, Botswana and Angola, but also two languages in Tanzania: Sandawe and Hadza)
B. Non-African Families

- Indo-European (English, etc.)
- Austronesian (Malagasy)

C. Creole languages

- Mainly in West Africa: Creole (Sierra Leone), Juba Arabic (S. Sudan), Sango (Central African Republic), (Nigerian Pidgin English (Nigeria).
1-500 or more African languages—some closely related; others very different

2-Why not an exact number? Depends on how defined

3-The terms I will be using—“language”, and “dialects” as sub-groups under the term “language”

• But also “style” as a linguistic form that is associated with particular speakers or situations
• but more often I’ll refer to “linguistic variety” (or “variety” for short because this is a neutral term that covers all of the above
4-The main points I will be making:

• **Language and symbolic power**—the notion that languages are used to communicate, yes, but also to signal power relations—equality and inequality

• They are also used to signal solidarity relations

• The **linguistic marketplace**—where linguistic varieties are assigned values
Not all linguistic varieties have the same value—either in terms of their value in the international linguistic marketplace or their value on a local level. The French sociologist Bourdieu referred to **symbolic capital** as a cover term for the features identifying a particular language.

But there is more than one kind of “value”

Linguistic varieties are means of communicating ideas.

But they also have value as “commodities”.
• In addition, linguistic varieties are **indexical of speaker intentions**. This means they carry social and psychological associations at the local level that are group-specific.

• The notion of “linguistic competence” that actually matters “on the ground”

• is the capacity to produce expressions that are appropriate for particular situations
• What does it mean to say a person is bilingual? There is no single good definition.
• A linguistic repertoire—a group of linguistic varieties
• How much proficiency a bilingual has differs across the varieties in his/her linguistic repertoire. Community repertoires are also uneven—not all varieties spoken in a given community are spoken often or equally by every community member.
- **Code switching**: the use of words or phrases or sentences from two or more varieties in the same conversation or even in the same sentence. Each variety has its own indexical associations, so code switching can be a means of projecting dual identities.
Speakers are economical in two ways:

• They typically learn varieties of languages that are going to be useful to them.

• Also, they may know several or more languages or varieties, but typically, they consistently use one same variety in situation X or with the same persons, and use another variety in situation Y. Of course code switching can count as a single variety.
When speakers say they speak language X, this does not necessarily mean that they speak what is recognized as a standard dialect of that language.

This is often the case with African speakers of supercentral languages discussed below, or the hypercentral language, English. Typically, speaking the standard variety gives the speaker a great deal of prestige in the linguistic marketplace. Other varieties of the same language do not have that same value.
- **Elite closure**—the varieties and the practices of language use that separate elite members from the rest of the population.
5-Yes, we are in the age of globalization so that opportunities to make international connections exist, largely thanks to the internet and its applications.

NY Times columnist Thomas Friedman and his book *The world is flat*
6-Yes, most Africans (and the majority of people in the world) are bilingual, but this doesn’t automatically afford them more opportunities in the globalized world.

7-Why? The linguistic varieties Africans speak do not necessarily connect them to the rest of the world.
8-Why not? Most obviously, actually few Africans speak the international languages that connect the world. This is the case even though most African nations have retained as the official language the language of the former colonial power.

• Even those that speak a variety of those languages does not mean it is a variety that is valued in the international marketplace.
9-The bottom line is that globalization does not mean that the world of languages is flat
• The languages of the world are in a global system in which all languages are not equal
• Language groups are in unequal competition in the global context
• This is not because languages are inherently unequal, but because the groups that speaks different languages are unequal in economic and political arenas.
Abram de Swann in his 2001 book *Words of the World* uses the metaphor of a solar system to refer to the languages of the world and their hierarchical relations.

- Let’s begin by speaking about the *peripheral languages*

- There may be as many as 5,000 different languages, but about 90% are peripheral languages. Most African languages fall in this category.
• Why are they called peripheral? Because they are not used by many people, or are not used by people who have socio-economic or political power.

• Also, they are not learned by many people, if any, outside their in-group.

• In many cases, the speakers of peripheral languages know another language.

• Examples of peripheral languages in Africa: Ibibio or Nupe Nigeria, Kisii in Kenya, Herero in Botswana.
Peripheral languages are grouped around a **central language**

- There are about 100 central languages and about 95% of human-kind use a central language.
- Their features:
  - They appear in print or are used in some sort of electronic media
  - They are used in the nation’s bureaucracy.
  - They may be national languages. Some are official languages
Speakers of central languages are multilingual; for some or even most, their L1 is a peripheral language. For example, Yoruba would be a central language in Nigeria that, for example, Nupe speaking in-migrants in Ibadan would learn. Or, Zulu is a central language in Gauteng province cities in South Africa, such as Johannesburg. Speakers of such languages as Southern Sotho who live in Johannesburg might learn some Zulu. Similarly, Amharic is a central language in Ethiopia and Wolof is a central language in Dakar.
• But central language speakers don’t learn a peripheral language as an L2.
• Rather, they learn a **supercentral language**
• DeSwann identifies a dozen languages as supercentral. Only one African language, Swahili is one of them. The others all have more than a hundred million speakers and are: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Malay, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish.
• Their features: Some speakers of peripheral languages, but especially L1 speakers of central languages, speak supercentral languages. The supercentral ones are important because they connect the speakers of other languages in a regional constellation.

• When speakers of supercentral languages meet each other, they will almost certainly make themselves understood in one and the same language—English.
So English is the hypercentral language

• It holds the entire constellation of languages together

• English achieved this position—not because it has any inherent value. Rather its position came about largely because of America’s dominance in science and technology after World War II, although of course England’s position as a colonial power was also a factor, but a less important factor
11-In general L2 learning is “upwards” in the solar system
12-Once a language is established in a certain position in the hierarchy, it has momentum and it is hard to change its position
13-How does a language become a central or supercentral language? The theory of “collective goods”, an explanation for which material goods-- which commodities-- are preferred, applies here.
• The more a particular commodity is used, the more valuable it becomes.
• This idea can be applied to languages.
Still, it is true that in some ways, languages are not like material goods:
- They are not free goods
- They are not scarce
- They are not “used up”
• But they are like material goods or commodities in these ways:
• They are not without cost—an investment of time and energy is required
• People prefer “large brands” with an established reputation when they buy refrigerators or cars—the same applies to languages
• The languages of the great world powers are like “large brands”
• Also, the notion of “external effects” applies to languages as much as it applies to material goods:
• The more additional people use a language, the more symbolic capital it gains.

• Also, a tipping point applies: Once speakers can see that they can increase their communication possibilities if they speak language X, they find the gain worth the learning effort.

• So it’s a matter of consider the cost of learning in relation to the expected benefits
• Thus, speakers compare the symbolic capital of competing varieties. And this is what is behind the spread of English in the world and its place in the linguistic marketplace.
• This is why it is unlikely that African nations will soon drop the ex-colonial languages which continue as official languages. For example, in Senegal, Wolof is the L1 of a large population and is also the L2 of much of the remaining population. Still, it is French that has the more symbolic capital in regard to socio-political status. Thus, it persists as the official language.
14-But recall that linguistic varieties also have another type of symbolic capital beyond their values as commodities in the marketplace.

- In the multilingual societies such as we find in Africa, even languages that are minor stars in the linguistic constellation are retained for many reasons, but certainly because of the socio-psychological associations that they take on in conversation.
15-Consider the indexical value of different languages in codeswitching.

- Speakers can use the change from one variety to another in at least two important ways:
  - To signal a particular identity they are trying to project in an interaction
  - To make a comment on what they think about their relationship to the other participants
In conclusion, here are some examples from my code switching corpus that show how Africans use their linguistic repertoires to their advantages.
Basic intra-sentential codeswitching:

• Ia-(two young men at a party in Nairobi)
• ..nikapata chakula nyingine iko grey ni-ka-i-taste nikaona ina taste lousy sana.
• ”..And I got some other food that was grey and I tasted it and I thought it had a very lousy taste.”
• Ib-...kul el-jobs fi hal-field so hard to get.
    “...all the jobs in this/the field [are] so hard to get.”

• Ic-kawnik el-waĥeeda hina you feel like a queen wa ma feeš competition.

• “..Being the only one, here you feel like a queen, and there [is] no competition. (Okasha (Okasha, 1999 Palestinian Arabic-English
Okon Essien (1995), writing about how codeswitching is used in the Niger delta area in Nigeria to negotiate one’s social identity, relates the following incident:

• “One day some university-educated colleagues of mine and I met a very rich local businessman at the Governor’s office in Uyo. I knew the businessman, but my colleagues did not. After everyone was introduced, informal conversation followed and we all naturally mixed Ibibio and English. Later, when the business man had left, one colleague asked me which university the businessman had attended.

• “I told my colleagues, ‘His university is his mansion in the village’.”
The point of this story, of course, is to show how the businessman, who, in fact, spoke little English, is able to insert words he does know into an Ibibio grammatical frame, with such success that he dupes his listeners into thinking that he is on their social level (as members of the educated elite).
III. Incident in Lagos related by a young Yoruba man:

• “One evening a policeman arrested a Yoruba lady who is a co-tenant [for selling food goods which had entered Nigeria illegally, a rather common offense]. The policeman was a Hausa man who could speak no Yoruba at all. I was among the people who tried to persuade the policeman, using English, not to take the lady to the station because it was such a minor offense. But he insisted on going, and we all followed him. **At the station, the desk sergeant was a Yoruba, so there and then the matter was settled in the Yoruba language to the disgrace of the Hausa man, and the lady was therefore allowed to go home.**”
IV. Interaction between Kikuyu stallholder in Nairobi and a Luo customer (Parkin 1974 with additional comments):

Stallholder: (Luo) Omer, nadi “How are you, brother”

(note: St. Luo is *nade*, not *nadi*)

Luo Customer: (Luo) Maber. “Fine.”

Stallholder: (Kikuyu & Swahili) Ati—Nini? ”What”

Luo Customer: (Swahili): Ya nini kusema lugha ambao huelewi, mama? “Why speak a language that you don’t know, mama?” (note: Standard Swahili *ambayo* here not *ambao*)

Stallholder: (English) I know—Kijaluo—very well!
Customer: (Swahili) Wapi? “Go on”
(English) You do not know it at all.
(Swahili) Wacha haya, nipe mayai mbili. “Let’s leave this matter, give me two eggs. (note: Standard Swahili would be *mayai mawili* not *mbili*)

Stallholder: (Swahili and Luo) Unataka mayai—*ariyo, omera*, haya ni *tongolo*—tatu. “Two eggs, brother, Ok. That will be thirty cents.” (note: Standard Luo would be *otonglo* ‘three’ not *tongolo*)
Incident at the Nairobi post office regarding a savings account. Swahili is the expected language for service encounters there.

Clerk (Swahili)  Ee—sema. “What do you want?” (lit. “speak”)

Customer (Swahili) nipe fomu ya kuchukua pesa. “Give me the form for withdrawing money [from my savings account].”

Clerk (Swahili) Nipe kitabu kwanza. “Give me your savings book first.”

(Customer gives the clerk his savings book.)

Customer (Swahili): Hebu, chukua formu yangu. “Say, how about taking my form.”
Clerk (Swahili): Bwana, huwezi kutoa pesa leo kwa sababu hujamaliza siku saba. “Mister, you can’t take out money today because you haven’t finished seven days [since your last withdrawal].”

Customer (switching to Luo): Konya an marach. “Help me, I’m in trouble.”

Clerk (also switching now to Luo): Anyalo konyi, kik inuo kendo. “I can help you, but don’t repeat it/do it again.”
VI. Setting: A young, well-educated professional woman L1 is Maragoli, a Luyia variety from Western Kenya, is driving her car into an exclusive Nairobi athletic club where she is a member. The young woman has had to stop her car in front of the closed gate, which opens in the middle to make two doors:

Gatekeeper: (Swahili) Ingia wa mlango mmoja tu. “Enter by using only one gate.”
Young Woman: (Swahili) Fungua miwili. Siwezi kwenda revas! Kuna magari mengi nyuma. “Open (up) both. I can’t reverse! There are many other cars behind (me).”

Seeing the situation, the gatekeeper grudgingly opens both gates.

As the young woman drives past him, she says in Swahili to him:

Mbona wewe mbaya sana leo? “What are you so difficult today?”

She turns to her American companion in the car and says (in English): “The man is a Luyia. I can tell by his pronunciation.”
Several hours later when the two are leaving and have to go through the gate again, the young woman says to the gatekeeper-- now speaking Maragoli, a Luyia variety:

Undiniyange vutwa. “You were being unkind to me.”

The gatekeeper responds in Swahili saying “Pole”. “Sorry.” But then says in Maragoli:

Simbere ni khnumany ta. “I didn’t know it was you.”
VII. Setting: Family from Malawi living in the US while the father is a graduate student. The mother does office work in addition to her homemaker role. In this conversation, Mother steps out of her “mother role”. For her, Chichewa is the unmarked language to use at home; she wants the boys not to forget their Chichewa because they will be returning home to Malawi. Thus, her speaking English in the family calls attention to itself—it is a marked choice. For her sons (age 8 and 10), who attend public school (in English) their unmarked choice is English.
(In the kitchen. Mother is about to leave for work. She is talking to Sam about what needs doing, and then she heads for the door.)

Mother to son Sam: Upange kaye **check drink** usanathile... “You should first check the drink before you pour (it).”
Mother: ... (now on her way out the door): Ukachape uyu—and then I’m outta here. “And wash this one--and then I’m outta here.”
• In summary, a linguistic marketplace is the source of the hierarchy among linguistic varieties.

• In the resulting hierarchy, linguistic varieties compete for **symbolic capital**. This is so whether the varieties are the standard dialects of international languages or regionally-based or context-dependent dialects, or styles, which are even more context-specific.
There are two main types of symbolic capital. First, capital varies along a power continuum. In any community, varieties are not equal on a scale in regard to the degree of power they symbolize. Second, symbolic capital varies along a solidarity continuum. Local varieties, especially in Africa, tend to function to encode solidarity more than international varieties. But both types of symbolic capital matter, with inequalities exist among linguistic varieties along these dimensions.
References


