

Multilingualism, translanguaging, and linguistic superdiversity: An Africanist's perspective on 'language'

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1. Introduction

This presentation aspires to contribute a personal view to the current debate in post-structuralist sociolinguistics, which centres on new buzzwords like, most of all, *translanguaging* and *superdiversity*.¹ In particular, I will take issue with one viewpoint associated with the purportedly new approach, according to which received notions of '(named) language' and 'multilingualism' are considered not only obsolete, but also ideologically contaminated. Critique of the new "mantra of sociolinguistics" (Makoni 2012) hinging on this new

terminology is not new, and it has been very critically associated with sloganeering and "academic branding" (Pavlenko, To appear). In a wider theoretical context, the issue links up with so-called third-wave sociolinguistic variation studies in which "variation constitutes a robust social semiotic system", in which it "does not simply reflect, but also constructs, social meaning and hence is a force in social change" (Eckert, 2012: 87). The agency-orientation central to this approach can be illustrated by the following quote:

"The emphasis on stylistic practice in the third wave places speakers not as passive and stable carriers of dialect, but as stylistic agents, tailoring linguistic styles in ongoing and lifelong projects of self-construction and differentiation. It has become clear that patterns of variation do not simply unfold from the speaker's structural position in a system of production, but are part of the active – stylistic – production of social differentiation.

... style is at its foundation ideological, and the stylistic form of propositions is very much a part of their meaning. The third wave locates ideology in language itself, in the construction of meaning, with potentially important consequences for linguistic theory more generally."
(Eckert 2012: 98)

¹ This paper is based on a public lecture during an extended visit to Rhodes University between October 2017 and March 2018, which was supported by a 'Hugh le May Fellowship' offered by Rhodes University. I herewith express my sincere gratitude to Rhodes University and its School of Languages and Literatures within the Faculty of the Humanities. In particular, I am utterly grateful to the African Languages Section, ably headed by Mrs Bulelwa Nosilela, and the SARChI Chair for the 'Intellectualisation of African Languages, Multilingualism and Education' (Prof. Russell H. Kaschula), and to all members of staff, who once again created a warmhearted personal atmosphere that proved to be highly conducive for pursuing our common research interests. – An earlier version of this paper was discussed at the 'Sociolinguistics Forum' during the *Tagung der Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Germanistik (GiG)*, held at the *Europa Universität Flensburg*, Germany, September 9-15, 2017. I acknowledge valuable comments by anonymous reviews for NJAS, which have been duly considered in preparing this final version. All shortcomings, however, remain my own responsibility.

The nowadays widely current term *translanguaging* is most frequently related to the works of Ofelia García (e.g., García & Li Wei, 2014) and serves to describe actual *fluid language practices* of multilingual individuals, in particular in a pedagogical perspective on bilingual education. In comparison with earlier terminology related to language contact phenomena, such as borrowing, codeswitching, calques, language interference, etc., it is said to involve an epistemological shift of focus from "an external view of language" towards

"...the internal perspective of speakers whose own mental grammar has been developed in social interaction with others. For these bilingual speakers, their language features are simply their own. Translanguaging is more than going across languages; it is going beyond named languages and taking the internal view of the speaker's language use." (Grosjean, 2016).

The present paper will focus on the term *translanguaging* as the most widespread buzzword. Note, however, that a related concept has become known under the term *metrolingualism*, which by its proponents is perceived as shifting the focus from languages as systems to fluid urban language use in a sort of metrolingual playground, namely as

"...a product of modern and often urban interaction, describing the ways in which people of different and mixed backgrounds use, play with and negotiate identities through language. The focus is not so much on language systems as on languages as emergent from contexts of interaction." (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010: 240).

The often invoked term *super-diversity* was originally introduced by Steven Vertovec (2007) in the sense of "diversification of diversity" to address the changing nature of

global migration in terms of movements of people reflecting more ethnicities, languages and countries of origin. As a new buzzword, the term has been picked up since then by various social sciences including sociolinguistics, simultaneously widening its original restricted focus on the UK and Europe to a global application. Another catchy term in this context is *supervernacular*. This term is associated with recent writings of Jan Blommaert (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Blommaert 2012) and is based on the previous notion of *super-diversity* (Vertovec, 2007).

A major line of criticism, which is implicit in the present paper, targets the paradox that, in order to justify at times rather sweeping rejections of the received notion of '(named) language', it is exactly this notion that is used to state the point of argument. At the same time, the notion is considered obsolete and is rejected as ideologically contaminated because, as the argument goes, it implicitly subscribes to a supremacy of the North over the Global South. Clearly, studying everyday routines of multilingual behaviour in sub-Saharan Africa (and very likely elsewhere in the Global South) brings to light considerable differences when compared to studies on multilingualism as developed in the North, by unearthing salient perceptive and ideological differences. Therefore, reflecting on the ideological content of the notion '(named) language' is – no doubt – legitimate and particularly pertinent in postcolonial Africa, where we are dealing with continuing linguistic and cultural imperialism.² By linguistic and cultural imperialism, we refer to the hegemonic dominance of the language, and by extension: culture, of the former colonial master, which goes hand in hand with factual disempowerment of even the largest African languages, if not annihilation of so-called tribal vernaculars of (ethno-) linguistic minorities.

The rather personal view on matters in this contribution takes advantage of autobiographical facts, according to which the present

² The notion and term of 'linguistic imperialism' was popularised by Robert Phillipson (1992).

author claims

1. the privilege of overlooking a period of more than 50 years of professional activities in various subfields of linguistics and sociolinguistics, mainly with a focus on Africa;³
2. extensive experience in fieldwork-based linguistic description and comparison of languages (both typological and in historical-comparative perspective, including areal and contact-linguistic approaches), plus almost 30 years of dealing with applied linguistic and sociolinguistic issues, in Africa;
3. academic socialization outside the narrower confines of US American linguistics, i.e., in close contact with more or less traditional, including non-generativist, European approaches to the study of language(s) and linguistics.

Such academic socialization encompasses, among exposure to a variety of theoretical concepts, fundamental aspects of the language philosophy of Wilhelm von Humboldt (Wolff, 1975; 1981; Kießling, 2019), and it embraces core notions of de Saussurean structuralism (cf. below). The underlying basic theoretical position would appear to be somewhat akin to Roy Harris' *integrationism*, not the least because – due to constraints imposed by fieldwork and language documentation contexts – the author's own analytical and descriptive work on African languages starts off from idiolectal manifestations of quite often still to be identified and named languages (Wolff, To appear; 2015).

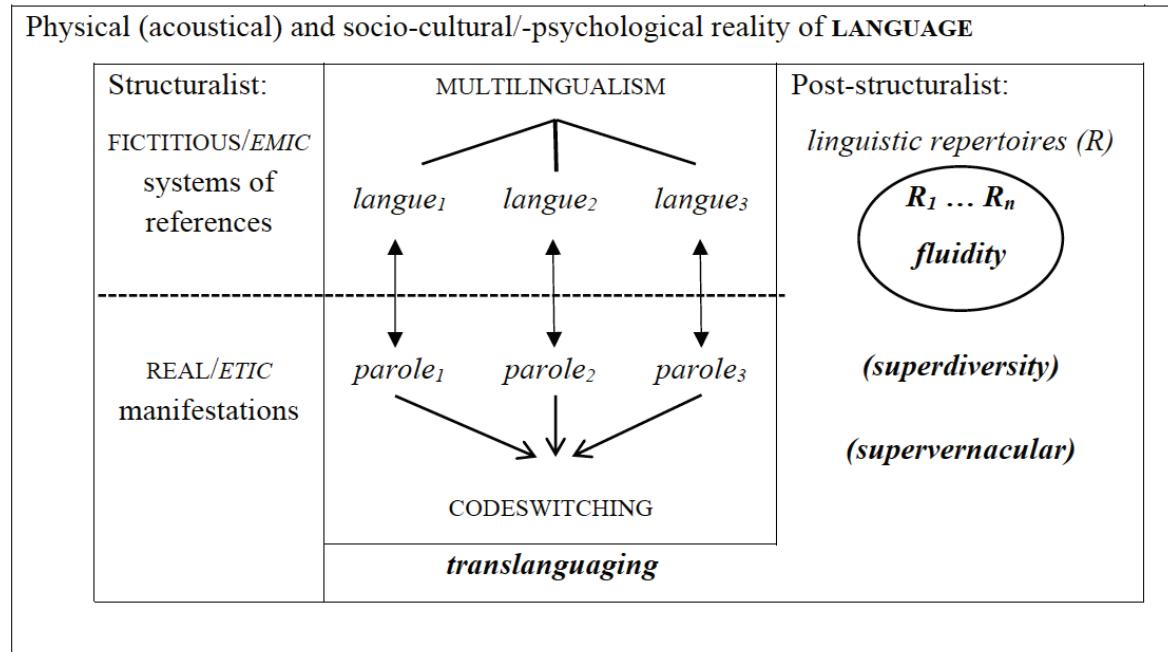
In this empirical context, 'language' emerges as an apparently paradoxical phenomenon, being *fictitious* and *real* at the same time. On the one hand and in descriptive and comparative linguistic terms, it is a highly abstract, and therefore *fictitious* (= 'unreal' in the sense of natural objects), *system of reference*

³ For details, see <http://afrikanistik.gko.uni-leipzig.de/index.php/en/home-en/30-das-institut/mitarbeiter/411-prof-dr-phil-habil-h-ekkehard-wolff-en>

for objective research purposes concerning grammatical typology and linguistic history. On the other hand, it is a *concrete* (= 'reified') *symbol of reference* (usually but not always manifest in glossonyms), which immediately relates to sociocultural and socio-psychological identities of speakers within communities of practice; as such, it allows for a considerable degree of (idio-, socio-, dia- etc.) *lectal* variability of linguistic expression. In the latter sense and in sociolinguistic and socio-psychological perspective, *LANGUAGE* is subjectively *real* for presumably all speakers of human languages. Hence the apparently paradoxical claim that language is both *fictitious* as a theoretical construct of empirical linguistics, and at the same time *real* (despite remaining a construct albeit in sociocultural and socio-psychological terms) pertaining to the identity of the speakers of such (named) language. The same paradox applies to empirically accessible language data in the form of acoustically *real* natural language utterances that can be heard, recorded, measured, and transcribed. Such empirically accessible language data can be described under the label *languaging* in fashionable, *performance* in generativist, or *parole* in de Saussurean, terminology. They are, at the same time, manifestations of an abstract language, i.e., *langue* in de Saussurean terminology. In currently more fashionable terminology, they may reflect *supervernaculars* in which linguistic *superdiversity* becomes manifest in terms of *fluidity* within and between individual *linguistic repertoires*. Irrespective of the terminology used, we are referring to the same socio-psychological entities, which are necessary for facilitating human verbal communication (*faculté de langage* in de Saussurean terminology).

In a simplifying manner, an integrated graphic representation of the at least partial semanto-pragmatic overlap of certain terms is given as follows.

Faculté de langage



In the structuralist tradition, labels tend to refer – in a somewhat positivist external perspective – to compartmentalised, often complementary, discrete *emic* units among and within abstract systems of reference. Post-structuralist approaches tend to deny exactly this by choosing an internal perspective, which is based on *fluid* transgressions of discrete units. This is reflected in approaches that link up with currently fashionable agency-driven third-wave sociolinguistics.

The question remains whether we are here dealing with an essential paradigm shift that substitutes theoretically invalid (i.e., heuristically underperforming or outdated) positions or perspectives by valid (i.e., heuristically advanced and up to date) ones. Or, are we dealing with two legitimate parallel perspectives on the same matter, one not necessarily invalidating the other, but rather complementing each other, as I tend to think? Before this question is finally answered, it may be wise not to blow up the issue to some kind of ideological academic warfare between two mutually exclusive positions, namely of either being right or being wrong.

2. Looking back

Ideology-laden divides in academic discourse tend to slow down scientific progress, no matter how innovative and far reaching (purportedly) new paradigms really are, or maintain an appearance to be. Let me shortly look back on half a century of structuralist and post-structuralist linguistics.

I am old enough to remember Noam Chomsky's terrible insult of descriptive linguistics in the 1960s, when he defamed structuralist so-called taxonomic linguistics as pre-scientific 'butterfly collecting', as opposed to the truly scientific approach of his new generative paradigm. What was so different? Comparable to early and later versions of structuralist linguistics, the new paradigm started from anecdotal or elicited utterances (in generativist terminology: PERFORMANCE). These were then discussed against the backdrop of assumptions about idealized, i.e., empirically non-accessible native speaker COMPETENCE. Structuralist descriptive linguistics on the other hand would attempt somehow to represent concrete speakers' acquired idio-, dia- or

sociolectal individual grammars, which were assumed legitimate representations of a much wider and highly abstract notion of *langue* in de Saussurean terms. Explicitly, the terminology of the new generativist approach were not meant to match the received de Saussurean terms, i.e., neither *parole* nor *langue*. The main difference was a matter of focus. With generativism, it was now mainly about universal mental capacities, i.e., somewhat close to de Saussure's *faculté de langage*. In terms of methodology, the new approach followed the often mocked-about claim and principle "Let's take any language – say: English", which, indeed, made early *Universal Grammar* look a lot like English!

Apart from data from English, complemented by a few other well-researched and mainly Indo-European standard languages and occasionally Hebrew, individual languages *per se* were declared more or less negligible objects of study, in particular those from remote regions of the globe. Under a generativist perspective, they represented somewhat boring sets of parameters that were switched either on or off. This outspoken disregard of 'named languages' as manifold core objects of linguistics and challenging in terms of typological diversity, was a dramatic paradigm shift in what proselytes refer to as the Chomskyan Revolution. This resulted in a rather unhappy divide between theoretical linguistics (or linguistics proper, as some would say) on the one side and descriptive or typological linguistics on the other.⁴ This divide continues to exist and is likely, in some quarters, to have consequences for one's academic career perspectives, particularly in North American academia. Occasionally, this divide amounts to an antagonism of ideologies, sparking off emotional debates that have the makings of intellectual warfare.

Half a century later, sociolinguistic research, not to the least based on data recently

⁴ Cf. the lucid discussion concerning the debatable antagonistic positions of theoretical versus descriptive linguistics in Larry Hyman's (2004) plenary paper at the 4th World Congress of African Linguistics: 'Why describe African languages?'.

pouring in from Africa, is in danger of approaching a similar divide. Some current sociolinguistic debate turns certain features of language use, particularly as observed in urban sectors of societies or communities of linguistic practice, into a new fetish. Linguistic practices, which hitherto had been more or less comfortably described as, for instance, *multilingualism*, *diglossia* and *codeswitching*, are now fashionably and sloganeeringly discussed in terms of *trans-* or *polylanguaging*, drawing heavily on the notion of *fluidity*, and importing originally non-linguistic terminology like *superdiversity*, *pluriversity* etc. (cf. the well-founded polemic by Aneta Pavlenko, To appear). Again and comparable to the generativist paradigm change 50 years earlier, theoretical discourse shuns reference to the term and notion of code-based language in the sense of de Saussure's *langue*, but now for two different reasons, namely because it is considered (i) conceptually obsolete, and (ii) ideologically contaminated. In a *déjà-vu* manner, I see yet another danger of creating an unnecessary meta-theoretical divide within sociolinguistics: A fashionable new approach to language use tends to marginalize the received notion of language and our understanding of multilingualism. The metaphor of two or more 'languages being in contact', whether mentally in the brains and minds of individual multilingual speakers, or physically on given territories represented by discrete communities of multilingual practice, is dumped as resting on a theoretically illegitimate *artefactual reification* of language. This, I fear, again means pouring out the baby with the bath water. In my common sense understanding as a linguist and sociolinguist, usage of the term language does not imply that it is automatically perceived as real-world natural object, even though it can be named as if it were. – In order not to be misunderstood: I have no objection against new terminology to step in and replace received terms. However, I expect new scientific terminology to come along with sound new hypotheses, solid new theory

building and/or advances in methodology, i.e., to be more than just old wine in new bottles. New terminology must involve more than just being new and academically 'sexy'; it must avoid empty sloganeering and reach beyond shallow purposes of academic branding (Pavlenko, To appear).

In the light of the evidence and the pouring in of – perfectly legitimate – studies of phenomena referred to under the new terms *translanguaging*, *superdiversity*, etc., not the least from Africa, 'language' as a core theoretical concept is said to become obsolete in current sociolinguistic discourse. Unfortunately, in academic circles, the massive pushing of new buzzwords and discrimination of old terms tends, at least temporarily, to marginalize those, who do not use, or explicitly resist, the new terminology. Linguists and sociolinguists, who may have their good reasons to keep using 'language' as a handy term of reference, may feel squeezed into a niche of insignificance, being implicitly or explicitly accused of doing outdated work no longer of any theoretical or practical relevance – simply, because they keep talking about 'language' and 'multilingualism'. On top of it, they may be defamed as maintaining an ideologically contaminated Northern position, which elsewhere is critically referred to as *Eurocentrism* and *Orientalism* (Said, 1978; Wolff, 2016). This contested ideological position would now be marked by believing in and talking about named languages, by which one would testify to 'old thinking' and implicitly embrace a (post-/neo-) colonial supremacy position of the North over the Global South. This, indeed, would again be insulting for many linguists and sociolinguists. Particularly those, who devote most of their academic and sometimes activist work to research issues pertaining to, for instance, African languages and the role, functions, and ideologies of language in Africa in view of overcoming mass-poverty and underdevelopment by mother tongue-based multilingual education – which, by the way, would include the present author. In profes-

sional discourse, we should be clear about two things: Talking and writing about (named) languages does neither make any author a white supremacist, nor does it insinuate that referring to (named) languages rules out the legitimacy of perceiving and describing language as representing alternative concepts in terms of speakers' more or less fluid linguistic repertoires. However, the theoretical dispute over terminology is fully justified where it relates to the unquestioned fact that our received notion of language stems from the North, where it is closely related to largely monolingual societies and the existence and hegemonic dominance of normative standard languages. Clearly, the automatic association of 'language' with both normative *standard languages* and policies and politics favouring *official monolingualism*, does not hold on a global scale, and definitely not in Africa.

Researchers in African linguistics and sociolinguistics, who have been around for some time, may feel cornered for the third time during their academic career over the last more than 50 years. First came the Chomskyan 'butterfly collecting' insult. Then, during the period following the 1968/69 global student unrest and anti-colonial activism on university campuses worldwide, social science- and economics-dominated development discourse rigorously questioned the socio-political and economic relevance of linguistics as such in the context of global North – South relations.⁵ Along with it, descriptive and comparative linguistics dealing with languages and cultures of the Global South were defamed, at least in German academia, as 'orchid subjects' (*Orchideenfächer*): rare, beautiful, but irrelevant.

It may have become clear by now that my own, in this case indeed conservative, position harks back to the slightly dusty, yet lucid distinction between *langage* – *langue* – *parole* introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure

⁵ Until this day, development discourse as dominated by the classic social and economic sciences still awaits a *linguistic turn* in order to accept and address the central role of the *language question* for all development issues (Wolff 2016).

(1857–1913) more than a hundred years ago. I still consider his a highly useful triple distinction for sorting out major research domains concerning languages and linguistics. Let me justify this position for the current debate.

The position is that all linguistics and sociolinguistics must take *parole*, i.e., empirically accessible *etic* utterances, as a starting point, which would ideally include all observable variability that speakers consider manifestations of what they refer to as "their own language". Under such approach, native speaker intuition is far from being irrelevant, yet has no immediate impact on theory-guided professional linguistic description. However, this is where and why the term 'language' emerges from an implied *emic* perspective, i.e., through speakers' judgements relating to the acceptability (grammaticality) of certain utterances. At the same time, language is a sociocultural construct reflecting prevailing language ideologies, which relate to speakers' assumptions about and features of, their sociocultural as much as their linguistic identity. Here again, the multi-faced nature of language emerges clearly. It is a bio-specific channel of verbal communication limited to humans, a highly abstract (*emic*) system of reference and, in a highly concrete manner, it is always *somebody's language*, i.e., of members belonging to a definable community of practice (whether living or extinct): *no speakers – no language!*⁶

I also happen to believe in the historical uniqueness of languages, which we refer to by *glossonyms*. This implies the assumption of – admittedly: at least partly idealised – lineal transmission from one generation of speakers to the next, irrespective of any periods of massive sociocultural multilingualism and of the amount of contact-induced changes in the linguistic history of such languages. This in no way excludes the emergence of likewise named languages from non-lineal and mul-

tiple lines of transmission, as is traditionally assumed for so-called creoles or other types of hybrid languages (Thomason & Kaufman 1992). In South Africa, for instance and for good reasons, *Fanakalo* and *Afrikaans* are such named languages, like *isiZulu* and *English*, for that matter, irrespective of their highly divergent transmission histories, their internal variability, and their very different typological and lexical correlations with other languages. I consider it fully legitimate to discuss whether all Englishes and all varieties of Afrikaans should be considered 'Germanic languages' by the principles of classic comparative methodology, or rather be classified as 'creoles', as long as we establish the criteria and features, on which such classifications would be based. Irrespective of either straight unilineal or broken non-lineal inter-generational transmission in individual cases, all languages have history, and their history, no matter how complex, remains scientifically accessible via established methods of comparative and creolist linguistics.

The observation of so-called *translanguaging* practices, whether or not resulting from migrational *superdiversity*, in terms of speakers' tapping into a plethora of individually accessible linguistic repertoires, does not exempt scholars of historical linguistics or sociolinguistics from doing their homework. Obviously, the varying nature of such linguistic repertoires at the disposal of individual speakers, or communities of linguistic practice, refutes a 1:1 equation with the traditional term 'language' in both its normative reading (as 'standard language') and its abstract-descriptive *emic* reading (i.e., de Saussure's *langue*), but so do pidgins and creoles. However, to refer to such manifestations of *parole* in multilingual contexts in new terms like *supervernacular* or *translanguaging*, rather than sticking to the older terminology of *codeswitching*, *code mixing*, *code meshing* etc., may well be of pedagogical value. Replacing the in pedagogical circles 'contaminated' terms *codeswitching*, *code mixing*,

⁶ Whether 'ethnolinguistic group' is the best possible, or even justified, label for historically grown communities of linguistic practice, shall not enter the discussion here.

code meshing by a neutral and new term like *translanguaging* is useful for allowing natural multilingual behaviour of learners (and teachers) to be used in classrooms for optimizing teaching and learning in Africa. Traditional educational practice in multilingual Africa, based on language ideologies obsessed with purity and normative standardisation reflecting the situation in the colonial motherland of the language, hitherto ruled out so-called *codeswitching* as 'dirty' manifestations of imperfect language acquisition. *Codeswitching* was disallowed, often penalised, and submitted to correction – to the detriment of successful teaching and learning in linguistically divers, or even *superdiverse*, environments. And if it was simply terminological window-dressing: Allowing *translanguaging* as legitimate pedagogical practice would presumably help towards higher performance of educational systems, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

As I see it, *parole* and *langue* remain theoretical core notions of both general linguistics and sociolinguistics, very much in terms of the relevant distinction between *etic* and *emic* that we owe to Kenneth L. Pike (1912–2000). Anything beyond *parole* and *langue* is, in my view, peripheral to linguistics proper, but is at the same time central to overarching scientific approaches beyond linguistics in a narrow sense, i.e., to sciences dealing with cognition and communication in more general terms, both human and non-human. Studying and generalizing on human language *per se* links up with de Saussure's *langage* – highly relevant and interesting in terms of cognitive sciences and psycholinguistics, but already outside the narrower scope of descriptive and typological linguistics and sociolinguistics.

3. Language ideologies and the Africanist perspective

I am talking and writing as an Africanist, who is involved in fieldwork-based elicitation, documentation, description, typological and his-

torical comparison, of languages that we assume to be indigenous to Africa. In an applied dimension, this involves issues of language use in terms of the empowerment through *intellectualisation* of indigenous languages against the hegemonic dominance of imported or other indigenous languages, which may reflect situations of di- and polyglossia that date back to colonial or even pre-colonial days.⁷ In this context, I often have reason to speak of colonial and postcolonial linguistic and cultural imperialism. Therefore, I am only too well aware of the colonial epistemic essence of the term 'language' against the ideological backdrop of 19th century nationalist monolingual ideologies of European provenance, which linger on in present descriptions of and debates on territorial, institutional, sociocultural and individual multilingualism in Africa (Wolff 2017). I have recently made this the topic of a book published by the prestigious Cambridge University Press (Wolff 2016). The Northern *Eurocentric* view on language tends to relate it almost automatically to the powerful notion of 'nation state', based on the monistic concept of *one state – one nation – one language*. Indeed, the term language often evokes uninformed preconceptions about language and dialect, language and identity, language and cultural heritage, and language as both instrument for and symbol of development. Regarding the latter, for instance, for Africa it goes to the point of claiming that *all countries that are developed are monolingual, and all countries that are multilingual are underdeveloped* – a popular idea from the early days of sociolinguistics but still virulent today, which is easily falsified. 'Language' here carries a heavy ideological, political and economic burden as both symbol and essential feature of developed societies and economies on the one hand, and is purportedly also an essential reason for mass poverty and underdevelopment on the other – particularly so in the context of multilingualism and polyglossia.

⁷ This implies the classic triple concern with corpus planning, status planning, and acquisition planning of languages.

Africa's linguistic landscapes are characterised by an almost fatal rivalry of indigenous and foreign languages, which originated in the colonial period, and continues into the post-colonial period under the guise of globalisation. In official propaganda, the imposition of foreign languages of European provenance is motivated by the purpose of facilitating both international and national communication, plus copy-and-paste of Northern education that follows the colonial model. On the bottom of things, it is about maintaining a postcolonial class divide to the benefit of an oligarchy in the struggle for power and control over national resources. This postcolonial class divide is based on bottleneck restrictions of access to superior quality education through the European language, often via high-fees paying private institutions. Such elite privileges operate to the detriment of mass education, which is of inferior quality for the non-privileged sections of the population. Mass education tends to involve poor-quality access to the European language of instruction, which maintains pre-existing disadvantages of the non-privileged sections of society.

At the same time and still in the domain of language ideologies, there is a notion of *nostalgia* related to widely current essentialist ideas about purity of the 'ancestral code' and ideology-laden notions about 'heritage languages'. This has parallels with the notion of 'traditional (African) culture'. Both re-dress non-Northern and non-standard varieties of linguistic and cultural practices to more or less exotic archival materials. It is common practice to display these in museums and cultural centres as folklore, insinuating that they have little or no value and relevance to present-day social and cultural realities of dominant mainstream language users, who consider themselves as members of privileged groups of linguistic and socio-cultural practice. In particular in the case of English, this would apply to ongoing processes of globalisation, a term which often serves as a cover-up for continued hegemonic dominance of the former colonial

master, who is now euphemistically referred to as 'member of the international donor community'. Personally, I get extremely worried when African politicians, but also some activists, speak of the need and will "to save our African languages and cultures". My answer to them is that African languages need not be *saved*. They need to be *used*, consistently, and especially in so-called higher domains. One way of preparing under-used and factually disempowered languages in di- and polyglossic sociolinguistic contexts for use in higher domains is by *intellectualisation*.

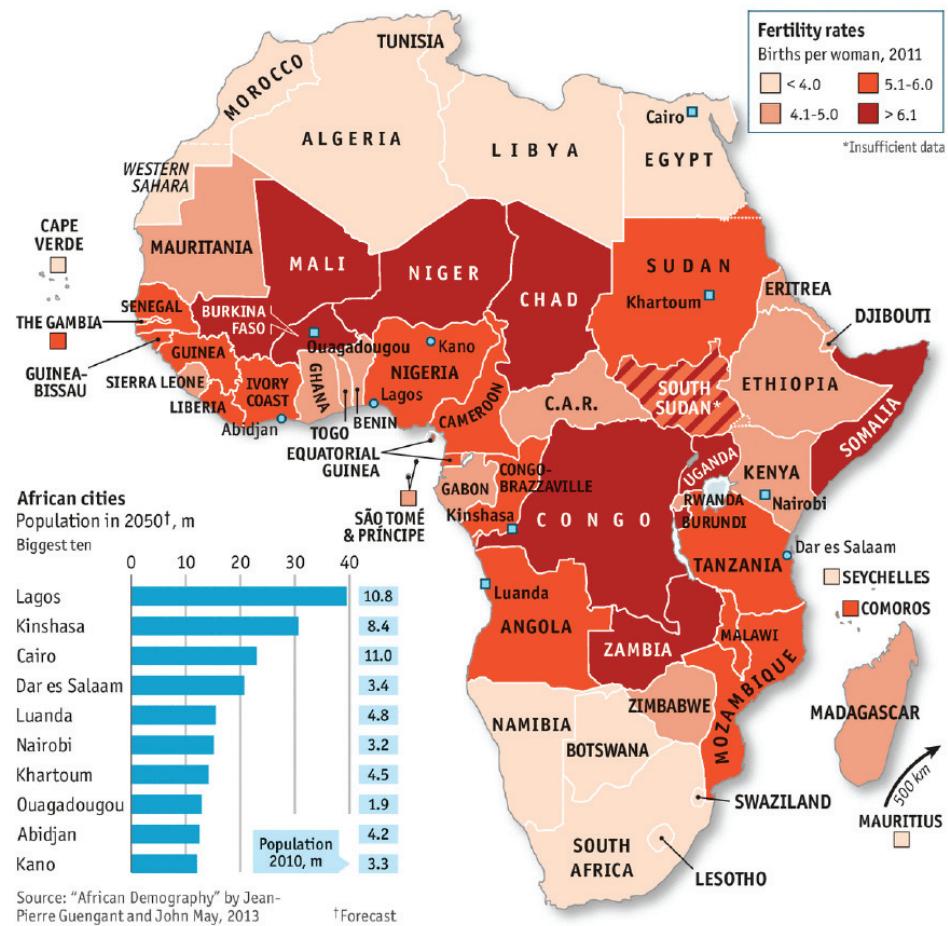
Also, the highly ideology-laden purity aspect with regard to language use, particularly in formal education in Africa, has proven to be detrimental to learning, by bedevilling *codeswitching* etc. as purportedly dirty mixing and meshing of (often indeed imperfectly acquired) languages in class that should never be allowed. Favourable discussions of *translanguaging* in classrooms, which reflects current patterns of usage of linguistic repertoires of the learners and possible teachers outside the classroom, will quite likely remedy the situation.

The *nostalgia* feeling, further, often links up with a feeling of *guilt* among enlightened cosmopolitans and activists vis-à-vis the global impoverishment of diversity, bio-diversity as much as cultural and linguistic diversity, leading to aggressive activist terminology like *linguicide*, *glottophagia*, *killer languages*, etc. It may be worth pointing out here that, contrary to widely held beliefs, indigenous African mother-tongue languages are not so much threatened or endangered by the ex-colonial languages of European provenance, but rather by extremely dynamically spreading indigenous African lingua francas. Amharic, Fulfulde, Hausa, Kiswahili etc. account for more individual cases of language shift than English, French, Portuguese etc. However, it is in the so-called higher domains of verbal communication that the imported languages have entered into fatal rivalry with African languages, leaving no room for the latter to

accommodate to the linguistic challenges of modernisation. Via Northern-type education, the monistic nation-state ideology of *one state – one nation – one language* of 19th century European provenance remains virulent in the minds of postcolonial elites in Africa. In a most general way, it attributes higher status and value to the languages of European provenance as being ‘superior’ to the indigenous languages of Africa, which are considered essentially ‘inferior’. This ideological position is detrimental to the emergence of successful postcolonial African nationalism, which would rest on the acceptance and legitimization of the multilingual, multicultural, and multi-ethnic or multinational composition of most African postcolonies. Its acceptance would likely have immediate positive impact also on more effective and efficient education.

4. Relevance of the notion of language in current African sociolinguistics

Post-structuralism and third wave sociolinguistics has not spared African linguistics, in particular regarding dynamically changing language practices in urban contexts, and the rapidly increasing use of mobile communication and digital media. Contributions to the recent project of *The Cambridge Handbook of African Linguistics* (Wolff, 2019) bear ample testimonial (Hollington & Nassenstein, 2019, Deumert, Panović, Agyepong, Barasa, 2019, Lüpke, 2019). A high degree of territorial, institutional, sociocultural and individual multilingualism in Africa, with > 2,000 indigenous languages plus a wealth of imported languages, meets with a high rate of demographic growth and urbanization (cf. Map). According to recent sociolinguistic research, Africa turns out to be the mother-continent of multilingualism in its above-mentioned manifestations, including diglossia and polyglossia. This means that, in current fashionable terminology, it is a hotbed of linguistic *superdiversity*. While it remains debatable whether ‘(new) migration’ does increase ethnolinguistic diversity in Europe (Pavlenko, To appear), rural to urban migration within Africa, combined with demographic dynamics, definitely and dramatically changes the sociolinguistic profiles of African cities and megacities. Cf. some background figures (source: *The Economist*, 8th March 2014):



Map. African demography.⁸

(a) Demographic growth:

There were 1 billion Africans in 2010. The UN reckons that Africa's population will almost triple to 2.7 billion by 2050. If that were to happen, Africans would then account for more than a quarter of the world. In 1970, they made up only a tenth.

(b) Such an increase in population would be associated with enormous rises in urbanization:

In 2010, Africa had three cities with over 5 million inhabitants: Cairo,

Kinshasa, and Lagos. By 2050, it could have 35, with Kinshasa and Lagos each exceeding 30 million. Other burgeoning mega-cities are Tanzania's Dar es Salaam, Kenya's Nairobi and Angola's Luanda.

(c) The number of children and young people in the process of *multiple language acquisition* and in need of *appropriate multilingual education* would explode in a similar fashion:

In 2010, there were 411 million African children, aged 14 years or below. By 2050, there will be 839 million, according to the UN.

In 2010, there were roughly 200 million

⁸ Source: Guengant and May (2014).

Africans between 15 and 24 years of age; this number could rise to over 450 million by 2050.

These figures currently meet with a situation in the more than 50 countries in Africa, in which participation in national communication and formal education rests largely on proficiency in one foreign language, usually that of the former colonial master. Only adequate command of this one foreign language allows individuals to benefit from quality education, to access jobs that would allow upward social mobility, and thereby to overcome poverty and other features of underdevelopment. On the other hand, this foreign language creates a language barrier that reflects colonial and postcolonial linguistic imperialism, which tends to restrict quality education to members of postcolonial elites in power mainly through the bottleneck educational systems that are currently in place. By "elite closure" (term introduced by C. Myers-Scotton) via language and education, the oligarchic elite is able to monopolize national and international communication as much as access to national resources, and control the replenishment of their ranks. In the special and exceptional case of South Africa, and by reference to still virulent racist classification of groups of people, the situation is aggravated by two facts. There is a strong white minority of native speakers of the 'language of power', i.e., English, plus white and coloured mother-tongue speakers of Afrikaans. This second group, in particular its white members, continue to profit from established dual-media quality education in both Afrikaans and English, which gives them a considerable head start over the majority of black South Africans. These facts amount to a situation, which the late Neville Alexander (1936–2012) has referred to as "neo-apartheid".

The systems in place for mass education must be viewed as underperforming in terms of both low degrees of proficiency in the official language of foreign origin, and low if any

competencies in using indigenous African languages, in particularly so in higher domains of communication including writing. Fashionable terminology describes this situation as representing a wide range of *fluid* linguistic practices that characterize much of the sociolinguistic situation in postcolonial Africa, mainly in urban contexts. (About half of Africa's population already live in urban situations.) One question remains open. Do, and if so, how do, practices of observed *polylanguaging* in contexts of *superdiversity* correlate with particular *education deficits* that we refer to as (*multiple*) *semilingualism*? Multiple semilingualism here describes the incomplete command of any of two or more languages used, viewed from a traditional normative perspective that has its roots in Northern concepts of nation-state monolingualism, which is exactly what the new term *translanguaging* wants to avoid. What exactly, may we ask, would then be the targeted goals of education with regard to verbal communication, i.e., in terms of existing and necessary multiple language competencies? This question arises against the backdrop of the normality of bi- and trilingual communication landscapes across Africa, in which there tends to exist a complementary functional relationship among L1 mother-tongue languages, L2 regional or national lingua francas, and L3 official languages of, as a rule, foreign origin. For instance, with regard to education in so-called Anglophone Africa: Do we target the (unattainable) goal of (near) native speaker competence (ESL/L2, to compete with MT/L1 speakers in UK, USA, Australia, South Africa etc.)? Or should we go for regionally coloured and somewhat reduced 'global English' L3 competence to serve as international working language whenever such is needed? Or, would 'local English' of sorts be sufficient (and how would we define this), or are we happy with simply any kind of linguistic repertoire that somehow relates to English, among other languages of the particular world region? The answer would dramatically affect the competitiveness of African school leavers

and university graduates on a global scale, if not even at home. The complexity of the issue, by under-informed simplification, could easily play into the hands of propagators of monolingual solutions (such as *Straight for English*), who see neither need nor room for bothering with African languages in the first place, and know little or nothing about the benefits of mother-tongue competencies for learning a foreign language like English.

Therefore, in terms of development and educational linguistics and related language activism, 'language' is real – in terms of an educational, political and economic yardstick for development as much as for purposes of successful individual competition of African school leavers and university graduates in a global job market. In formal education, irrespective of *translanguaging* practices in the classroom, students will still have to pass exams in clearly identified (standard) languages, like *English* or *French*, *Portuguese*, *Spanish*, possibly *Afrikaans* and *Arabic*. It is hardly perceivable, how - from a sociolinguistic or activist perspective - we could discuss problems of overcoming underdevelopment and securing quality education, without recurrence to the traditional notion of named language. We will have to continue to refer to English, French, Kiswahili, isiZulu, Fanakalo, Afrikaans, or any other, as single and named languages, or use exclusive and discriminating terms such as LOTE (language/s other than English).

Against this backdrop, and harking back to de Saussurean early structuralist terminology of *langage* – *langue* – *parole*, both *langue* and *parole* would appear to be objects of study high on the priority list for descriptive-typological and sociolinguistic research. One could leave *langage* largely to Chomskyan type theoretical linguistics, which have little if any immediate bearing on linguistic practice, human resource development, and related language activism on the ground.⁹

The currently fashionable research priorities in African sociolinguistics favour indi-

⁹ This in no way belittles Chomsky's personal important role as critical political theoretician and activist.

vidual or sociocultural multilingual practices, i.e., *parole*. This applies to both oral communication and (mobile) digital media usage, as well as to restricted written communication in public space, i.e., the mostly urban linguistic landscape.¹⁰ The point that I would like to make is that – in addition to theoretical linguistic concerns about *langage* and third-wave agency-concerned sociolinguistics' focus on *parole* – there is need for maintaining a research focus on *langue* outside narrow and traditional taxonomic linguistics, normative grammar, and variationist sociolinguistics. It is language in this sense that happens to be the central issue in activist discourse, most particularly so against the backdrop of continuing disempowerment, endangerment and attrition of indigenous languages and non-standard varieties of standard languages. In Africa, continuing linguistic imperialism and globalization under the hegemonic dominance of foreign languages, plus the increasing impact of the big African lingua francas, aggravates the situation for many un- or disempowered mother-tongue languages (also known as 'L1', 'ancestral', 'heritage', 'home' etc. languages). Nonetheless, currently the term language would appear to become blacklisted, so to speak, even in publications dealing with situations in Africa, and particularly so when research is concerned with urban environment. Let us, therefore, look at some recent publications and discussions of the issue and start with a focus on urban contexts, for which Mc Laughlin gives some relevant background information:

"All African countries are multilingual, and in some of them hundreds of different languages are spoken. Profound multilingualism is, then, a fact of life on the continent, and is intensified in the city, which attracts a substantial number

¹⁰ *Linguistic landscape* is yet another 'branding' for a fashionable subfield of sociolinguistic research that used to be called 'language visibility' in earlier studies also in Africa; cf., for instance, Wolff, Berhanu & Fulea 2013.

of people from rural areas who speak minority languages.

...although there are some generalizations that can be made about the languages of urban Africa such as the fact that they are almost never the official language, each city is unique, and the particular linguistic outcome is the result of a complex variety of factors, including the ethnic and linguistic make-up of the city, the history and patterns of urbanization, the legacy of colonial policies, and numerous other factors.” (Mc Laughlin 2009: 2)

In recent academic discourse in African socio-linguistics, one notes increased questioning of the value of the more or less traditional notion of language. Cf. Beck in a discussion of urban varieties of Swahili in Kenya:

“Language in this sense is primarily understood not as a stable object consisting of a fixed set of rules (grammar) and an open inventory of items (lexicon), but rather as a fluid knowledge sediment with particular routines attached to it that is incrementally operationalized, invoked and put to use in a particular situation.” (Beck, 2015: 56; emphasis mine.)

Lüpke & Storch (2013) follow a deconstructionist approach to language as social practice, and provide two observations, which testify to syncretistic linguistic behaviour and apparent contradictions to Northern concepts of most intimate links between language and identity:

“The first is that speakers' profiles can be better described and understood in terms of registers and repertoires than in terms of discrete languages. The second observation is that just as there are no fixed languages or fixed linguistic identities, there is no fixed alignment

of linguistic practice with ethnically or otherwise construed aspects of identity. Rather, choices depending on domains, contexts, addressees and many other factors have a large role to play in determining which register and repertoire will be used.” (Lüpke & Storch, 2013: 2; emphasis mine.)

Lüpke, in subsequent work (2019), takes the criticism of the language construct and its epistemic reification further by saying that “named languages come into existence as *imaginary objects* through socio-political motivations” (emphasis mine), and that “descriptive linguists often treat these constructs as if they were objects of the real world.” Following Blommaert (2008), she relates this to “Northern *artefactual* language epistemes”, which are based on “*nationalist monolingual ideologies* that had their heyday in the late 19th century, which marks the beginning of descriptive research on African languages as part of the colonial enterprise” (all emphasis mine). On the other hand, Lüpke needs to acknowledge the fact that

“... glossonyms are not just an invention of linguists: languages and ways of speaking can be named by speakers and outsiders, so this process of reification must have psychological salience and social relevance. What is important is a recognition of the multiple ways in which individuals can maintain multiple identities associated with language names, which do not refer to mutually co-extensive representations, but each pick out different traits of identity. This needs to be flanked with an awareness that we need to distinguish at least two levels at which representations of language are created: a level of social identity and a level of linguistic representation.” (Lüpke, 2018; emphasis mine.)

This is where the good old term 'language' comes in unavoidably; as Lüpke goes on to say that

"[r]ecent research has drawn attention to the importance of practices that transcend language boundaries in multilingual speech, moving away from ontologies that see its constituent parts as unambiguously consisting of different languages. Rather than committing to a language-based view on code interaction as testified by established terms such as 'code switching' and 'code mixing', recent work describes it in terms of 'languaging' (...), or 'translanguaging' (...). It is not clear how this research handles the contradiction created by the fact that in its works, languages are still named, and languaging is described through naming the languages participating in it, although they have been dismissed as invalid. A more promising approach lies in a theoretical reflection on the nature and scope of reification, and an interaction of language and languaging... Research on African multilingualism can contribute to a nuanced investigation of language boundaries and their transgression." (Lüpke 2019 all emphasis mine.)

The notions behind the new terms *translanguaging*, *fluidity* and *linguistic superdiversity* evoke the imagery of speakers floating between linguistic registers and repertoires, which are not co-extensive with our traditional notion of different languages. Such registers and repertoires could reflect quite different degrees of competencies regarding grammar and lexicon in terms of, for instance, the normative standard language that is associated with the same glossonym. This alone, however, does not make received terms like language obsolete for sociolinguistic theory: language registers have long since been recognized in sociolinguistic research, and multilingual repertoires

have been discussed at length in research on intercultural communication. On the other hand, it remains a fact that the term language, in particular in Global Southern contexts, as far as it harks back to 19th century Eurocentric nationalist and monistic ideology (*one state – one nation – one language*), carries a colonial 'smack'. This is more or less obvious in discourse on (under) development in postcolonial Africa, where there often is a tendency to regard standard languages of European provenance as being somehow 'superior', so they are discussed under the more prestigious label 'language'. In the same context, non- or semi-standardised (indigenous, tribal, ethnic etc.) African languages tend to be regarded as somehow 'inferior', and are discussed under more or less discriminating labels like 'vernacular', 'dialect', or 'patois'. This discriminating practice is clearly an ideological import from the North, which, unfortunately, has been internalised by many members of the postcolonial African elite, who copy such uninformed and insensitive paternalistic Eurocentric attitudes and continuously tend to disassociate themselves from anything 'African' in their own linguistic and cultural heritage.

5. Why do we need named languages?

5.1 Taxonomic convenience and fictitious ideal-type frame of reference

Named languages not only serve old-fashioned but still necessary taxonomic classifications for general references purposes, but also serve as useful heuristic labels for *fictitious ideal-type frames of reference*. These serve as formulaic shorthand storages of all currently available information on complex objects of linguistic study that, *in toto*, can be conveniently associated with a glossonym. The salient attributes of the heuristic definition of language are *fictitious*, *ideal-type*, and *frame of reference*. Used in this sense, the term language can refer to

- a likewise fictitious ideal-type *normative* notion of standard language, which is highly relevant in activist contexts, for educational purposes, and the creation of literacy and post-literacy cultures in Africa, i.e., for emerging national literatures;
- a likewise fictitious ideal-type *nostalgic-identitarian* notion of 'ancestral code' or 'heritage language', which is highly charged with ideological notions of current and/or past identity of members of communities of practice;¹¹
- a set of linguistic data for *documentary-descriptive* purposes in terms of linguistic descriptions or historical-comparative research and language classification;
- a bullet point on the agenda for research in the case of non- or under-described (endangered, un-/disempowered) languages.

5.2 Maintaining equal significance of *langage*, *langue*, and *parole* in linguistic theory

While the dominant Chomskyan generativist linguistics has concentrated on *langage*, i.e., following a mentalist and universalist approach to the human capacity of having and using language (*faculté de langage*), sociolinguistics has increasingly targeted the dimension of *parole*, in particular in urban and multilingual settings. Here, currently fashionable notions like *superdiversity*, *pluriversity*, *fluidity*, *trans-* and *polylanguaging* etc. have their heuristic values when and if received terms like *multilingualism*, *di-* and *polyglossia*, *codeswitching* etc. should no longer serve theirs. Quite independently, this debate on terminology leaves the dimension of *langue* unaccounted for, which targets the abstract

(underlying) organisation of language-specific phonologies and grammars, including lexicon, for descriptive and comparative purposes, both typological and historical. In this sense, language is much more than merely a set of parameter switches (as in generativist linguistics). It is more than an item in "pseudo-scientific standardized catalogues such as the Ethnologue (Simons & Fenning 2018), which lists languages and identifies each of them with an ISO code, a process that sanctions the prevailing positivistic view of languages' (Lüpke, 2019).

Insisting on maintaining named languages may indeed amount to empirically unjustified artefactual reification of linguistic behaviour that in reality is characterized by variation and ideological contestation (Lüpke, 2018). Yet, it serves heuristic purposes as highly useful label in terms of *fictitious ideal-type frame of reference*, i.e. formulaic shorthand storage of all currently available information that we can conveniently associate with a glossonym.

Note that the suggested definition of language as *fictitious ideal-type frame of reference* in synchronic linguistics would match the highly useful heuristic notion of 'proto-language' (*Ursprache*) for diachronic, i.e., historical-comparative linguistics. Proto-languages are also nothing but *fictitious systems of etymological and grammatical reference*, namely formulaic shorthand storages of currently available information on postulated hypothetical sound inventories, series of regular bilateral sound correspondences between pairs of languages, assumptions about word structure and basic grammatical categories, and on localizable grammatical innovations. Many, if not most, linguists would reject the assumption that hypothetical ('[re]constructed') proto-languages were indeed matching varieties of natural human languages that were spoken by groups of speakers at some distant point in time in the history of humankind.

¹¹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that 'speakers' may hold such feelings even in relation to languages they have not mastered and do not speak, like members of the Acholi youth in Kampala, Uganda, who no longer speak the language, but strongly identify with it, listen to Acholi music etc.

5.3 Psychological and socio-cultural reality of language

A named language, always understood as *fictitious ideal-type frame of reference*, has *psychological reality* for members of communities of practice, both in individual psychological as in socio-cultural terms, because it relates to notions of identity and belonging. Speakers, for whom as a rule the fact that they share 'their language' with others is socio-psychologically and socio-culturally meaningful, are able to pass relevant sociolinguistic judgments on a cline between statements of the type 'this is (definitely) my language' via 'this is (still) my language' to 'this is not (no longer) my language'. This, however, does not invalidate observations that speakers are able and willing, according to circumstances, to de-link linguistic and/or sociocultural identity from their mother-tongue language and re-link with another language, or a set of languages, instead or in addition. De-linking from one's mother tongue identity does not automatically imply language 'shift', such as from one type of monolingualism to another. Such circumstances may be described as reflecting linguistic *superdiversity*, characterised by syncretistic or *fluid* linguistic behaviour against the backdrop of abstract notions of different languages, becoming manifest in empirically accessible *supervernacular* speech forms – to use the fashionable terminology.

Accepting *language* as a theoretically valid term implies accepting the notion of *multilingualism* as likewise valid, as opposed to *monolingualism*. No doubt, these terms transport ideological preconceptions, which indeed link up with Northern and Eurocentric perspectives, in which language tends to be imply notions of *standard language* and/or *national language*, with everything else ideologically downgraded as *dialect* or *patois*. For sociolinguistic approaches to multilingualism, we need analytical and terminological tools to define where – socio-psychologically – monolingualism ends and

bi- or multilingualism begins. To match up with empirical reality, this presupposes a perspective on monolingualism that allows for massive language-internal variation, which sociolinguistics and dialectology have taught us to exist since the origin of natural human language and linking up with the received notion of diglossia.

In activist terms and looking at current scenarios from multilingual Africa, the socio-psychological reality of language (relating to another interesting notion, namely that of 'language ownership'), links up immediately with issues of political and economic, sometimes religious and even military, power. As a consequence, this implies everyday struggles of attaining successful formal education as prerequisite for upward social mobility, socio-cultural modernization, and economic development, which *in toto* hinges to no little extent on the choice and command of the particular (named) language that is used as medium of instruction. This makes language very real in Africa.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, I wish to point out that a main issue is not to confound two concepts:

- (a) The empirical realities of *language use* as accessible through genuine linguistic fieldwork with speakers in natural environments, or through databases via corpus-linguistic approaches;
- (b) The artefactual reified concept of *named language* representing a *fictitious ideal-type frame of reference*.

In this sense, any named language may be hard to grasp: Quite counter-intuitively, it may not have a well-defined number of speakers, it may *in toto* not be accessible to empirical sociolinguistic observation, analysis and description, and it is definitely not isomorph

with any descriptive or normative encoding in grammars and dictionaries.

However, for private, public, even professional discourse, 'language' is both a *convenience* and a *heuristic* term serving taxonomic purposes that we as professional linguists can and must use in order to inform and teach the public on matters for which we claim expertise. For the professional linguistic community, on the other hand, we need to keep distinct all three dimensions of language, which de Saussure taught us to distinguish, namely *langage*, *langue*, and *parole*, in order to know what we are actually talking about when we discuss language among ourselves. Having named languages also saves us the embarrassment to admit to the public that, as professional linguists, we are neither able nor willing to unequivocally define, identify and count human languages. Everybody else ex-

pects us – and rightly so – to be able to define the core subject of our studies, no matter how abstract and/or complex, for which we are the professional experts; this core subject is human 'language'.

In short: I remain convinced that a named language is (a) a theoretically useful concept for heuristic and taxonomic purposes, (b) a socio-psychological and sociocultural reality, (c) a very convenient concept for public discourse, and (d) an unavoidable notion for legitimate and necessary language activism and critical assessment of the essential ideological dimension located in language itself.

To sum up: There is nothing wrong in naming languages and continuing to speak about multilingualism, all translanguaging, fluidity and superdiversity in observable language use notwithstanding.

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