

Introduction

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African Linguistics: Conceptions and Scope

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1.1 What Is African Linguistics?

‘African linguistics’ is a potentially misleading term. It links up with the German label *Afrikanistik* (or *Afrikalinguistik*), under which African linguistics was first established as an autonomous discipline at the turn of the 20th century in imperial Germany, and continues to be referred to also in countries that implicitly or explicitly follow the German model. In order to define ‘African linguistics’, precision is required, first, for members of academic communities like in, for instance, Africa and North America, in which African linguistics is not established as an independent scientific discipline. Second, in European and particularly in German-speaking academia, there is considerable confusion whether *Afrikanistik* today best translates into English as ‘African linguistics’ or as ‘African studies’ (see below).¹ Irrespective of certain irritations here and there, however, there exist clear conceptions of what African linguistics is in terms of a largely autonomous field of scientific research and academic teaching and learning as it is reflected, for instance and most recently, in the scope of the World Congress of African Linguistics (WOCAL) series since 1994. The present introduction defines and delimitates African linguistics in this

¹ The term *Afrikanistik* was originally coined in analogy to pre-existing *Orientalistik*, that is, the study of ‘Oriental’ languages, literatures, cultures, and history, which were accessible mainly through philological approaches to written documents. For African languages, however, *written texts* were almost ubiquitously absent. At the time, there were hardly any existent African *literatures* in the narrow sense to be studied. As for African *cultures*, their study came under the research focus of pre-existing *Völkerkunde* (ethnography). In addition, Africa had long since been considered a ‘continent without history’, not the least because of the absence of ‘historical documents’, which, if written in any African languages, would be accessible to philological and historical research. Quite naturally, therefore, the unique research focus remaining for *Afrikanistik* was the study of spoken African languages as embedded in cultures and societies that, in turn, relied predominantly on oral transmission for any content that was considered culturally and historically significant for European scholarship. Hence the synonymous usage of the labels *Afrikanistik*, *Afrikalinguistik*, and *Afrikanische Sprachwissenschaft* since the field’s beginnings in imperial Germany some 130 years ago.

sense and thereby justifies the compilation of *The Cambridge Handbook of African Linguistics*.

1.1.1 Ambiguity of the Term

Most readers are likely to agree on what ‘linguistics’ refers to, namely the scientific study of human language per se and of all human languages, whether living or extinct, in terms of formal features and conveyance of meanings, and also regarding usage in given contexts. It is less clear what ‘African’ refers to in the collocation of the terms ‘African’ and ‘linguistics’. ‘African’ can refer to at least three different qualities. A first reading (a) would assume some kind of ownership, that is, linguistics as studied and conducted by *Africans*. A second reading (b) would refer to location of activities, that is, linguistics as studied and conducted *in Africa*. A third reading (c) could refer to the quality of the object of study in terms of historical origin and geographic distribution, that is, linguistics studying languages of *African origin* and/or languages most widely, if not exclusively, *distributed in Africa*. Reading (a) would have ethnic/nationalist if not racial implications; for instance, German linguistics could indeed mean linguistics as studied by Germans. As a matter of fact, national cultural history may lead to the development of particular ways of doing science that one might wish to refer to as national, in this case German, ‘school(s) of thought’.² In this sense, African linguistics would link up with ‘black linguistics’ dealing with ‘black languages’ (cf. Makoni et al. 2003). This, however, does not mean that African (or ‘black’) languages can be studied only by Africans (or ‘black’ people), like there is no scientific reason to disallow non-Germans to study *Germanistik*, that is, German language, literature, and culture. In the 21st-century global culture of science, exclusive ownership claims of this kind would be considered unethical. ‘African linguistics’, therefore, is hardly ever construed in this vein. With reading (b), African linguistics would refer to territorial aspects in terms of location of the researchers, that is, linguistics as operating in African institutions of higher learning and research, whether by African or non-African researchers. In the same way, German linguistics could indeed mean the study of languages at academic institutions in Germany independent of the nationality or geographic origin of the researchers. This again would tie up with reading (a) in so far as it would attempt to account for the existence of idiosyncratic regional geographic cum cultural and historical variants of scientific development in Africa, as opposed to the rest of the world. This reading is not too far off reality when one considers the specific needs and conditions

² In fact, *Afrikanistik*, that is, the particular German-origin approach to the study of African languages, represents such a ‘national’ school of thought in which, however, German-speaking academics from beyond the national borders of Germany, such as those from, for instance, Austria (Vienna), the Soviet Union (Leningrad), the United Kingdom (London), and South Africa (Pretoria), also were involved from the early times.

of academic work on languages in Africa, as alluded to by Nguessimo Mathe Mutaka, for instance, in Chapter 3. However, both (a) and (b), though semantically plausible, do not happen to have any wider currency in the global scientific community; this remains the privilege of reading (c). In its most established and widespread usage, ‘African linguistics’ is simply short for ‘linguistics of African languages’. This means that African linguistics refers to a well-defined object of research, of which there are again two readings. The more narrowly conceived reading of the specific object of study would be ‘African languages’, individually or in scientifically relevant groupings, such as language families, language types, or members of areal convergence zones (*sprachbund*), and so on. Alternatively, and in a wider perspective, the reading of the specific object of study would be ‘language and languages in Africa’, that is, the study of the role and functions of human language per se as much as of individual languages, African or non-African, in African cultures and societies. These readings hinge on what we define as ‘African language’ on the one hand, and as ‘non-African language in Africa’ on the other (see below).

Semantic irritation concerning the meaning of ‘African linguistics’ may further stem from comparing it with the labels ‘American linguistics’, ‘European linguistics’, and ‘Australian linguistics’ as in current usage among insiders and defined in popular encyclopaedias (such as Wikipedia). Most of the time, when we speak of African linguistics, we refer exclusively to the study of ‘the languages of Africa’ (which is another expression still to be defined). American linguistics, however, has two readings: it refers to the study of ‘the indigenous languages of the Americas’, but also to the history of linguistics particularly in the United States (cf. Tucker Childs in Chapter 6). Australian linguistics and European linguistics, on the other hand, appear to refer only to the study of linguistics on these continents and not to the linguistics of European or Australian Aboriginal languages.³ Sensitive critics may perceive persisting colonialist undertones in some of these usages and, for instance, sense some kind of belittling when representatives of the ‘North’ refer *grosso modo* to African affairs without apparently considering internal complexity, as they would do when speaking of Germanic, Romance, or Slavic linguistics rather than sweepingly referring to ‘European linguistics’. As a matter of fact, in current usage among experts, African linguistics follows the model of other complex linguistic fields like, for instance, Indo-European linguistics, which tends to be immediately subdivided into sub-fields like Balto-Slavic, Celtic, Germanic, Indo-Iranian linguistics, and so on. African linguistics, too, is commonly subdivided according to linguistic subgroupings on different levels of inclusion and partly specialized methodology, such as, for instance, Afroasiatic linguistics, Bantu linguistics, Chadic linguistics, and

³ The label ‘Asian linguistics’ does not appear to have any currency at all.

Khoisan linguistics, sometimes shortened to attributive expressions like Bantuistic, Chadistic, and Cushitistic, or allowing for specialized labels like Berberology and Egyptology.

1.1.2 Defining 'African Language'

If 'African linguistics' refers to the study of African languages, how do we define 'African language'? This question already provides a broad entry into some of the major issues that African linguistics deals with, beyond – as some might presume – simply applying theoretical approaches and methodological tools from general linguistics to natural language data stemming from Africa. Definitions would have to reflect language-related problems deriving from the social, cultural, historical, political, and economic coexistence, if not rivalry, among 'African' and 'non-African' languages on the African continent, that is, the linguistic ecology of languages.⁴ The need for definition opens up challenging questions like whether, for instance, Malagasy, Afrikaans, and Arabic are 'African languages', and whether one would want to include 'Nigerian English' and localized variants of French (like FPA: *français populaire d'Abidjan* or *français populaire de l'Afrique*) and Portuguese as spoken in Africa among 'African languages', that is, under the same label as we would subsume, for instance, Tamazight, Hausa, Kiswahili, and Khoekhoegowab. One may wonder what the scientific or practical gain, or loss, would be of such inclusions or exclusions, in terms of relevant generalizations and significant increase of knowledge. In any case, defining 'African language' may evoke ideologies, stereotype cliché, and prejudice that inform language attitudes, which are held by political, economic, cultural, and educational stakeholders both within and outside Africa. Apart from ideology and having immediate repercussions on individual speakers, speaking an 'African language', in particular when accompanied by low competencies in a particular 'non-African language', may decide on speakers' inclusion or exclusion from access to power and to national resources in postcolonial Africa. To the extent that language matters are of great ideological and political impact in the multilingual, multicultural, and multiethnic societies of postcolonial Africa, African linguistics functions as an applied science in the context of empowerment and disempowerment of languages and of the people who speak them. This entails, at times, fuzzy borders with language activism.

What we define as African language(s) has immediate repercussions on the triple definition alluded to here of what African linguistics is about, namely (a) about 'African languages', (b) about 'language in Africa', and

⁴ Linguistic ecology, following its early conceptions as suggested by Voegelin et al. (1967) and in particular Haugen (1972), would appear to describe quite well the broad focus of African linguistics following the German *Afrikanistik* model, even though, to the best of my knowledge, this term has never been used in early German discourse.

(c) about 'languages in Africa'.⁵ In fact, there is no unanimous agreement on what to refer to as 'African language'. Probably, most experts would claim that African languages, in a rather narrow sense of the term, are those that, to the best of our current knowledge, have originated – and are most widely, if not exclusively, spoken – in Africa. Under a slightly wider definition, the languages of African slaves deported across the Atlantic and the Indian oceans, and whose languages, like in the Americas, have somehow survived the traumatic excision from the continental African context, fall under this definition, like the pidgins and creole languages for which sources in African languages can be assumed. This definition locates African linguistics indeed in the neighbourhood of 'black linguistics' by closely connecting languages with the ultimate origins of their speakers.⁶ This definition would pose problems with Afrikaans, which most experts would classify as an Indo-European language (i.e., a variety of Nederlands/Dutch) even though its origins and its speakers are located almost exclusively in Southern Africa. It is often overlooked not only that Afrikaans is the mother tongue of a section of 'whites' in Southern Africa, but that the majority of its speakers were labelled 'non-white' ('coloured') in racist terminology under the apartheid regime in South Africa. Clearly, the notion of 'black' linguistics would face its limits. A similar problem arises with Malagasy, which experts classify as an Austronesian language, but which is widely if not exclusively spoken on Madagascar and adjacent islands that most people would consider to be part of Africa, and by people who today would be considered Africans. It would also pose a problem with Arabic, which was brought into Africa in historical times following the expansion of the Rashidun and Umayyad Caliphate in the 7th century CE and is now spoken in 15 or more African countries by people of very diverse origins and appearances.

⁵ Note that, for practical and systematic reasons, the notion of 'African language' shall be restricted to living or extinct *spoken* human languages, that is, to the exclusion of *sign languages*. This is based on the independence of sign languages from spoken languages. African sign languages are most profitably treated scientifically in the context of sign languages worldwide, even though they are also given room under the umbrella of the World Congress of African Linguistics.

⁶ This, however, raises the – in some quarters controversial – question whether reference should be only to sub-Saharan ('black') Africa or whether Northern and North-Eastern Africa should be included. The position taken in this handbook is that, from a linguistic point of view based on the distribution of language families across the African continent as a whole, there is no reason to separate sub-Saharan Africa from the rest of the continent. This position challenges the traditional practice to consider the languages of Northern and North-Eastern Africa, particularly (Ancient) Egyptian, Arabic, and the Semitic languages, and often Berber (Tamazight) languages as well, to be the domain of 'Oriental studies' rather than of African linguistics. Three historical facts have motivated traditional practice to include them in Oriental studies rather than African linguistics: First, as a result of geographic proximity to Europe, the study of (Ancient) Egyptian, Semitic, and Berber languages predates that of (sub-Saharan) African languages. Second, the formerly so-called Hamitic languages in Northern and North-Eastern Africa were considered to be 'naturally' within its domain because of their genetic affiliation with the Semitic languages (cf. Greenberg's Afroasiatic), which lie at the core of 'Oriental studies'. Third, the study of these languages rests largely on written documents, often from languages that are no longer spoken. Modern African linguistics has challenged the Orientalists' monopoly, yet accepts overlapping research interests and the academic autonomy of both Egyptology and Semitic studies.

Probably the most widespread definition of the term ‘African language’ among experts makes very convenient implicit reference to the seminal classification of *The Languages of Africa* by Joseph H. Greenberg (1963), who had identified four major language phyla in Africa: Niger-Congo (formerly also Niger-Kordofanian, Congo-Kordofanian), Afroasiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Khoisan. The more recent research-based criticism of Greenberg’s classification notwithstanding, one could consider, by way of convenience, all languages subsumable under any of the four Greenbergian language phyla to be ‘African languages’. This would immediately exclude Malagasy as an Austronesian language. Afrikaans either would be excluded as an Indo-European (Germanic) language or would be treated along with other creole languages that can be found on the African continent and adjacent islands, and which show non-unique genetic affiliation to both African and non-African language families. Arabic, on the one hand, could be included as being an Afroasiatic language; it could also be excluded, on the other, for the reason that we know exactly when in historical times this language entered the African continent as corollary to the military and cultural expansion of Islam.⁷

Some linguistic experts would take issue with this somewhat narrow definition of ‘African language’. They would claim that many languages of undisputed non-African origin, stemming from Europe or Asia, even if only of recent vintage in Africa, deserve to be included. They would argue that their inclusion would be justified by their considerable political and cultural impact, despite the fact that there are hardly any relevant communities of native speakers on the continent for some of these languages (see Chapters 13 and 14).⁸ This would mean that not only English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish but also Dutch, German, Italian, and even a plethora of Indian languages like Marathi, Bhojpuri/Bihari, Awadhi, Rajasthani, Tamil, Gujarati, Hindustani, and Telugu should be considered ‘African languages’ by now. Clearly, there is little scientific gain in such an over-inclusive

⁷ The question becomes more intricate in view of the fact that Arabic belongs to the Semitic language family within the Afroasiatic phylum, which as such may have originated ultimately in Africa. (This scenario assumes that speakers of pre-Semitic languages quite early migrated out of Africa, and much later re-migrated as speakers of Semitic languages into Ethiopia, forming the modern Ethiosemitic languages, or spread, as speakers of Arabic, across larger parts of Northern and Eastern Africa.) Since other authors, however, assume the origin (*Urheimat*) of Afroasiatic as a whole to have been outside Africa, the status of all Afroasiatic languages as African languages by origin could be considered unsettled. If, however, we strictly adhere to the Greenbergian system of reference, then all Afroasiatic languages should be considered ‘African languages’, including the Semitic languages like Arabic, Akkadian, Ugaritic, and others, which, however, would be counterintuitive. An intermediate position to take would be to consider as ‘African languages’ only those Afroasiatic languages that are/were spoken almost exclusively on the African continent. This would include the vast majority of them anyway, and also the so-called Ethiosemitic languages, but would exclude the Semitic languages that are/were exclusively spoken in the present countries of the Middle East including the Arabian Peninsula and adjacent islands. Still, Arabic would be part of both.

⁸ As a rule, European languages have only small, if any, native speaker communities in Africa. An exception to this rule would be Southern Africa with regard to English and Afrikaans mother tongue speakers and possibly larger groups of speakers of Indian languages. Mother tongue speakers of Arabic and Malagasy, however, have a prolonged presence in Africa and count in the millions.

definition of ‘African language’, so I have long since suggested working with the more useful distinction of ‘African languages’ in the narrow sense as defined above on the one hand, and with the complementary notion of ‘languages in Africa’ on the other. We can study the latter group of languages rewardingly in terms of diaspora linguistics, as we study African languages in the Caribbean and South and North American diaspora. The research focus would then be on the changes that non-African languages have undergone in Africa (such as speaking about Nigerian or East African Englishes, or earlier Cape Dutch changing into modern Afrikaans, etc.). Much of this discussion links up with the central question of whether at all, or in which way and to what extent, Africa as such represents a ‘linguistic area’ characterized by common, if not exclusive, linguistic features (see Chapter 8).

1.1.3 Giving ‘History’ to Africa

There is one important aspect of African linguistics that is often overlooked in academic and public discourse. At the time of the emergence of African linguistics in academic circles in Europe at the turn of the 20th century, Africa and her peoples were widely considered, in a characteristic Eurocentric perspective, to be without ‘history’. Such harsh judgement was based on the apparent lack of written records and documents from most parts of Africa, particularly in local or other languages, on which all historical science was supposed to be based. Part of the Eurocentric worldview at the time was that nothing in the humanities was really worth scientific study unless it had (written) ‘history’. It was therefore nothing less than a revolutionary contribution to world historiography when Carl Meinhof (1857–1944), for instance, succeeded in applying ‘historical methods’ of language comparison and reconstruction to African languages. This ‘proved’ beyond doubt that African languages had history in the same way that Indo-European languages had history, that is, that ‘Proto-Bantu’ in Africa essentially compared to, for instance, ‘Proto-Germanic’ in Eurasia. By extension, the peoples who spoke such languages together with their cultures and societies also must have ‘history’. Scientifically, this put Africa on equal footing with the Old World – thanks to African linguistics research!

Language history in the early days of African linguistics, like in historical Indo-European linguistics, which provided the model, was concerned almost exclusively with language ‘genealogy’. Proto- or ‘parent’ languages were seen to have branched into ‘daughter’ languages that later sub-branched into ‘granddaughter’ languages and so on. The common model was the ‘family tree’, which provided apparently clear illustrations of language history in terms of families, sub-families, branches, sub-branches, and so forth. Alternative models, like the ‘wave model’, were less current but challenged the exclusivity if not validity of the family tree model

from the beginning. The predominance of the genealogical approach is still witnessed today for Africa, namely in the impact of Greenberg's classification presented in *The Languages of Africa* as the pervasive system of reference. Historical African linguistics of the 21st century, however, has meanwhile turned its perspective towards 'areal' and 'contact' linguistics, that is, approaches more akin to the old wave model. Assumptions about language history in Africa that were long based, and almost exclusively so, on genealogical relationships thus come under closer scrutiny and criticism. This is now based on insights gained from discovering unexpected (and partly massive) reciprocal influence of languages on each other that are not genealogically related but are spoken in the vicinity of each other, allowing for considerable degrees of individual or societal multilingualism over considerable periods of time. This makes historical African linguistics as burning and important a research issue now as some 130 years ago (see Chapters 7 and 8) when 'history' was discovered to pertain to African peoples and their languages too.

1.1.4 'Critical' African Linguistics

From its beginnings, African linguistics has carried a critical impetus geared towards pre-existing notions and preconceptions. It would take issue, more or less successfully, with Eurocentric approaches virulent at their times. Apart from the inherent deconstruction of fundamentally racist stereotype notions about (black) Africans representing 'primitive' peoples if not 'savages' or 'beasts', living in 'pagan' darkness, devoid of sophisticated 'civilization' and without 'history', speaking 'tribal gibberish', African linguistics gave not only history (see above) but also 'proper languages' to Africa. In the first half of the 20th century, it boosted descriptive, first of all pre- and early structuralist approaches to language, which increasingly became free of automatic adherence to grammatical models that were current in (Neogrammarian) Latin-based Indo-European historical linguistics, playing a role comparable to the study of American Indian languages in the Boas and Bloomfield traditions in North America. This continued into more recent generativist and poststructuralist periods in the second half of the last century, when African linguistics, on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, challenged mainstream 'universalist' linguistic approaches that were commonly ridiculed elsewhere as 'let's take any language, say English'. African linguistics, as much as it was profiting from advances in general and theoretical linguistics, always traded in its share towards reshaping and developing theories and methods to the benefit of general or theoretical linguistics (see further below). Far from rejecting traditional comparative linguistic methodology, current African linguistics is the driving engine of a revived interest in issues concerning geographic linguistics and language contact scenarios. These are likely to