

# 1 The History of African Linguistics

---

*H. Ekkehard Wolff*

## 1.1 African Linguistics

‘African linguistics’ can be defined by a specific triple research focus, i.e. ‘African languages’, ‘language in Africa’, and ‘the applied dimension of linguistics in Africa’. It deals primarily with the scientific study of ‘African languages’. These are in turn defined, in a purely technical sense for non-ambiguous reference, as languages that are assumed to belong to one of the four language phyla, which were originally postulated by Joseph H. Greenberg in his seminal classification *The Languages of Africa* (1963), namely NIGER-CONGO, AFROASIATIC, NILO-SAHARAN, KHOISAN. Secondly, African linguistics focuses on the role, status, functions, and use of both indigenous and imported languages in African cultures and societies, past, present, and future, and deals with the ideology-laden views and attitudes on ‘language in Africa’, as seen both from outside and from within Africa. To these two fundamentally different yet related perspectives, we can add a third and ‘applied’ focus that links up with the ‘language in Africa’ perspective. This would be the application of robust sociolinguistic research for purposes of societal transformation, socio-cultural modernization, and economic development in the independent African countries as, most of them, postcolonial polities. These three research foci lie at the core of a well-defined autonomous academic discipline that we have come to refer to under the label ‘African linguistics’. For a more detailed treatment of these research foci, the reader is directed to *The Cambridge Handbook of African Linguistics* (Wolff 2019). The present book is a complementary volume to the *Handbook*, the latter containing but short historical sketches (‘Part I: Short Regional Histories of African Linguistics’). Here in this volume, the same authors provide additional and more detailed information and references on the asymmetrical and relatively short global history of African linguistics as it emerged and grew in the various world regions.

With its first focus on ‘African languages’, African linguistics deals primarily with the more than 2,000 languages, conveniently grouped in language phyla and families, that are indigenous to Africa and which amount to almost one-third of all living languages on our planet. African linguistics, as

it emerged first in predominantly German-speaking academia at the turn of the twentieth century in Europe, sees itself as a separate and autonomous academic discipline. In this tradition, it does not represent merely a geographically focused sub-field of modern general linguistics, despite the fact that it owes much of its theoretical and methodological foundations to it and, vice versa, contributes challenging insights from the analysis of African language data. Since its early days of traditional Eurocentric and rather narrow positivist and taxonomic approaches based on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Northern scholarship, African linguistics maintains a strong focus on the four Greenbergian major language phyla, namely NIGER-CONGO, AFROASIATIC, NILO-SAHARAN, and KHOISAN. Fifty and more years after Greenberg (1963), his classification still serves as a convenient reference system for lack of a more recent and generally accepted modified classification, despite considerable criticism questioning whether some of his language families are valid genealogical units.<sup>1</sup> Traditional narrow African linguistics tended not to take into account foreign languages brought to Africa in historical times, at least not beyond their source value as donors of lexical and possibly grammatical loans. Likewise, it tended to marginalize concern with language varieties that emerged within Africa in historical times, when they were considered as based on non-African languages, like so-called Arabic-based Nubi, Dutch-based Afrikaans, English-based Krio, etc. In the course of time, the received and rather narrow view on languages in Africa has considerably broadened, particularly under the more recent ‘language as resource’ (Ruíz 1984) paradigm. This goes to the extent of even questioning the theoretical notion of ‘named language’ in the light of recent studies of multilingual language use, particularly in urban environments and among the African youth, which is currently discussed under labels such as ‘fluidity’ and ‘(trans)languageing’, linking up with a more recent and originally non-linguistic notion of ‘super-diversity’. This ties up with a position long discussed and popular, not only in African intellectual circles, that the plethora of distinct African languages parallel to the notions of ‘tribes’ or ‘ethnic groups’ (cf. the often invoked ‘Tower of Babel’ metaphor), reflects only the Eurocentric distortion and ‘invention’ by missionaries and colonialists for the purposes of effective divide-and-rule policy under the colonial project. This leads to the second research focus of African linguistics, namely the role of language in African cultures and societies, including a critical review of the received notion of ‘languages’ as discrete entities and/or ideology-laden artefactual reifications and constructs (see the relevant chapters in Wolff 2019).

<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true for Khoisan and with regard to a number of isolates within the other three language phyla. For a nutshell account of current African languages classification, see Wolff (2016:300–304); for details see the respective chapters in ‘Part II: Comparative and Descriptive African Linguistics’ of *The Cambridge Handbook of African Linguistics* (Wolff 2019).

With its second and complementary focus on ‘language in Africa’, African linguistics deals with dimensions of language use, whether in monolingual or multilingual patterns of practice in different contexts such as rural versus urban, generational and/or educational, as much as in the various cultures and societies in Africa, both past and present. Allowing widely for interdisciplinary perspectives, African linguistics here views languages as embedded in the ever-changing cultures and societies of Africa, with which they entertain dynamic interaction. This places African linguistics (aka Africanistics) at the interface of linguistics and philology on the one hand, and various cultural and social sciences on the other, including comprehensive and fashionable ‘global studies’ and ‘development studies’; see the respective chapters in ‘Part III: African Languages in Cultures and Societies’ of *The Cambridge Handbook of African Linguistics* (Wolff 2019). Modern African linguistics embraces the ‘language as resource’ paradigm and views languages in relation to the aspirations of their speakers in their quest to master their daily routines and to meet the social, cultural, political, and economic challenges of sustainable, including mental, decolonization and development (see Wolff 2016).

Third, and in terms of applied science linking up with the research focus on ‘language in Africa’, African linguistics addresses, among others, issues of language policy and planning, in particular with regard to language(s) in education used as either medium or subject of instruction. It is concerned, occasionally joining hands with human rights activism, with language ‘empowerment’ through ‘intellectualization’ as part of comprehensive language planning. Embracing a focus on economic development, it also deals with the potential of human language technology and digital humanities in Africa. For details see the respective chapters in ‘Part IV: Applied Perspectives in African Linguistics’ of *The Cambridge Handbook of African Linguistics* (Wolff 2019).

## 1.2 Learning from History

Why read and write about the history of African linguistics? At least four answers immediately come to mind.

First, it is an essential part of human nature and curiosity to wish to explore where ‘we’ come from, where and how it all started, and what the directions of development were over periods in the past. ‘We’ would here encompass two groups of human beings, namely humankind in general, and scholars of African linguistics in particular. Humankind ultimately originated from Africa, and who among us modern language-using representatives of *homo sapiens sapiens* wouldn’t like to know since when our human ancestors spoke, and possibly what languages they spoke, and at what time in history. We would also like to know whether there was only one language from the start (*monogenesis* hypothesis) – if there ever was a point in time in the very distant past,

most likely in Africa, that would qualify to be considered the ‘start’ of human language capacity in general. Or, are there better arguments for proposing a *polygenesis* hypothesis, according to which different human languages, i.e. including the beginnings of language families as we know them today, emerged independently several times in different regions of the then inhabited globe?

Second, as Africanists, we might wish to know more specifically: How old are the language phyla of Niger-Congo and Afroasiatic, how old are established linguistic units within Nilo-Saharan and within what used to be called Khoisan? And, if we were willing to assume that linguistically reconstructed proto-languages were spoken at all at one period in the past: What would be the estimated periods when such proto-languages would have been spoken, i.e. what is the actual time depth of language families as we accept them today? Unfortunately, the history of African linguistics as such will not be able to provide conclusive answers to these far-reaching questions, nor will historical research within African linguistics. The chronological horizon of sound historical linguistic research remains limited because of constraints of methodology, and only a few professional linguists venture to allow their linguistic comparisons to reach into assumed time depths beyond 10,000 years from the present.

Third, as members of both an interested public and, in particular, also the group of researchers in African linguistics worldwide, whether living and working in Africa or elsewhere, we would definitely take a strong and possibly professional interest in the history of the study of African languages. We would be interested to learn where, when, why, and how scholars became interested in the languages, conserved in written documents or still spoken, in Africa, and whether they first met with African languages in Africa or elsewhere. What was the nature and development of concepts and ideas that dominated scientific and intellectual debate at their time, and which have, as the case may be, promoted or impaired progress of knowledge in this field of science? What was the impact of ideologies virulent at certain periods in the past (e.g. abolitionist, humanitarian, missionary, racist, Social Darwinist, colonialist)? Where and when did certain schools of thought in different (sometimes more or less ‘national’) contexts emerge? What were the prevailing degrees of distance or nearness to political agendas of governments (like the notorious apartheid in South Africa, but also membership in global postcolonial political pressure groups such as the Commonwealth of Nations, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, Países Africanos de Língua Oficial Portuguesa alongside the Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa)?

Fourth, and again particularly for researchers in the field, knowing about the history of one’s discipline helps to conceive and develop untrodden paths of investigation and research. These are guided by disregarding directions of research of the past that have proven to be less fertile or unyielding, and by identifying certain models and theories as just currently fashionable rather

than opening up promising directions for sustainable progress in the acquisition of new knowledge. Insights into the history of one's science may help to unearth forgotten or overlooked scientific treasures, so to speak, that lay covered under temporarily more fashionable approaches but now are likely to stimulate renewed interest in old questions. Possibly and in an applied dimension, this could make feasible the exploitation of such knowledge for the benefit of those who, in the past, had been excluded from the benefits of a science. This, namely, is particularly true for African linguistics. Having begun as an applied 'colonial science' in the heyday of European colonialism in Africa, African linguistics clearly was conceived to serve the needs and interests of the colonialists, not necessarily those of the colonised populations. Even or particularly in education, the choice of the language(s) of instruction in schools was governed by concerns about the efficiency of colonial administration and economic exploitation rather than by pedagogical concerns about efficiency of learning. Concern with African languages under the colonial regime was basically 'extractive', just like all other colonial activities.<sup>2</sup> African languages were considered tools for the benefit of the colonizers that could be used to run colonial exploitation more smoothly, if and to the extent that they were considered useful at all. More or less reluctantly, it was accepted that there was a spin-off benefit for those Africans who became literate and 'educated', the colonialists fearing or foreseeing that this would foster anti-colonial attitudes, which indeed later fed into movements for political independence. In the British colonial model of 'indirect rule', but also in some of the German colonies before 1918, competencies in African languages on the part of colonial officers were deemed useful, if only in order not to be drastically 'cheated' by 'native interpreters', who might have had an agenda of their own. The colonial administrations were dependent on the emergence of a small class of moderately literate and bilingual 'natives', who would function as the link between the ruling expatriate minority, who governed 'their' territories through the hegemonic official language of the colonial motherland, and the largely illiterate masses of the potential labour force, who were almost exclusively using indigenous vernaculars. Mainly Protestant Christian missions became instrumental in creating and establishing low-level literacy not only in the colonial language of power, for instance, English, but also in some of the indigenous

<sup>2</sup> Likewise, even the purely academic interest in African languages was largely, and remains until this day, extractive by serving, not least, the needs of expatriate researchers for empirical linguistic data on which to base their academic degree work and publications at home that would further their academic career. Concerns about how to 'reintroduce' their research results and potential applications, for instance, in terms of assisting in the development of orthographies, providing readable grammars and dictionaries for speakers and practitioners, creating literacy and post-literacy materials, etc. in African languages, are usually of secondary concern, if any at all. There are, however, notable exceptions.

African languages that had a wider regional distribution, like, for instance, Swahili. In the franco- and lusophone colonial territories, however, not even this was an option. Here, African languages were given no room to serve any practical purpose.

Much later, that is towards the end of the twentieth century, a conceptual paradigmatic shift occurred from mainly ‘extractive’ to ‘inclusive’, i.e. following an agenda of increasing international cooperation and mutual benefit. To no little extent, its theoretical basis is the more recent notion of ‘language as resource’ (see Ruíz 1984). This new perspective, which is still shared by only a minority section of Africanists and members of the wider African studies community, values African languages as highly instrumental. This is true particularly in the educational systems, at the same time presupposing and fostering the ‘intellectualization’ of indigenous languages that were and are not used regularly in higher domains.<sup>3</sup> It is also argued to be true, as part of the on-going and necessary processes of societal and economic transformation in the African post-colonies, for sociocultural modernization and economic development, which would be effected by the re-empowerment of indigenous languages that had been disempowered under the colonial project (see Wolff 2016). In this context, applied African (socio-)linguistics is challenged to take on an important role as a lead science in the twenty-first century.

The individual chapters of this volume provide, in some detail, answers to questions that relate to the history of the research foci ‘African languages’ and ‘language in Africa’ in terms of academic theoretical interests. A book on the history of African linguistics would, however, be incomplete without confronting the inherent applied dimension of African linguistics of the past, i.e. under a prevalent colonial ideological and political regime, with the current and future challenges of finally ‘decolonizing the mind’. In an activist perspective, this amounts to the attempt to put African languages on a par, by so-called intellectualization, with hitherto more prestigious languages of European provenance, and Arabic, in terms of both local and global relevance. Targeted are both practical applications and political discourse, which both need underpinning by scientific arguments and a critical stance on underlying ideologies. In other words, it is about ‘bringing African linguistics home’ to Africa by changing the primary motivation from ‘extractive’ to ‘inclusive’ in terms of a global knowledge society that would, on equal terms, embrace both former colonial powers and the independent postcolonial states.

<sup>3</sup> By intellectualization, we refer to processes of language planning and language standardization that lead to the use of indigenous (or any disempowered) languages for all educational matters from kindergarten to university, i.e. vernacular languages that have hitherto not been used in these domains, and thereby make them educational competitors to international standard languages (Wolff 2016:326).

This volume would appear to be the first to attempt to do justice to African linguistics research that happens outside the long-established and globally best centres in the North, i.e. Western Europe, whose origins tend to coincide with former colonial activities in Africa (see Chapter 2, this volume), and later the United States of America (see Chapter 11, this volume). Rather, it also turns the focus on Central and Eastern European as well as the Nordic countries, which are devoid of a history of colonial activities in Africa (Chapter 3, this volume). It also addresses more or less late-comers to African language studies in Asia and Australia (Chapter 12, this volume), and – as a world region of rather specific interest in its own linguistic African heritage – in Latin America (also in Chapter 11). In particular, however, Africa herself is moved into historical focus. A number of chapters deal in some detail with the continent's major regions and the persisting linguistic impact of colonial history. African linguistics in North Africa is dealt with in Chapter 4, North-Eastern Africa in Chapter 5. Southern Africa is the topic of Chapter 6, and Eastern Africa in Chapter 7. Official English-speaking West Africa is treated in Chapter 8, official French-speaking West and Central Africa in Chapter 9, and official Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking Africa in Chapter 10. Leading figures, past and present, affiliated to the West European and US centres tend to be more widely known in informed circles, not least because of the wider distribution and availability of their research, which finds support among international publishing houses. This is, as a rule, not the case outside their own narrow circles for currently active researchers in the lesser-known locations, between Trondheim (Norway) and Beijing (China), or Rabat (Morocco) and Melbourne (Australia). This volume sets out to fill such gaps of knowledge about past and current activities in various parts of the world. Authors are concerned with established institutions as much as with individual researchers who, in various historical periods, may occasionally have shouldered the burden of almost single-handedly representing their home country in the concert of nations. For quite some time during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this was the case with Leo Simon Reinisch (1832–1919) in Austria, or with Hiob Ludolf (Leutholf, 1624–1704), Carl Meinhof (1857–1944), and Diedrich Westermann (1875–1956) in Germany, not forgetting the outstanding Danish expert on the language(s) of the Tuareg, Karl-G. Prasse (b. 1929), to name a very few. On the other hand, some countries and universities pride themselves on a comparatively long and successful history of African linguistics. Some institutions may even claim the distinction of having established this field as an autonomous discipline besides Oriental and Semitic studies at the turn of the twentieth century, such as the universities in Berlin, Leipzig, and Hamburg in Germany, and the University of Vienna in Austria. Others take particular pride in having provided dominant theoretical models, like some stemming from North American general linguistics after the Second World War, or for having

kept practical applications in mind most of the time, as could be said in respect of important contributions by British scholarship.

In the chapters of this book, insiders whose origins lie or who work in the various corners of the globe, sketch out historical developments, leading institutions and personalities, research priorities and underlying political motivations, and enumerate relevant contributions by individual researchers in their world region. The authors are active researchers in various sub-fields of African linguistics rather than professional historians or archivists. The absence of established traditions of research into the history of African linguistics in the various parts of the world, together with the fact that relevant archives may remain unidentified and/or inaccessible, makes the task a challenging one. Sometime, it is very difficult to do much more than scratch at the surface of things. The editor and authors, however, remain convinced that the pioneering efforts in this volume unearth valuable facts, which will stimulate other researchers to delve more deeply into the subject and, eventually, provide more comprehensive and critical studies on the emergence and development of African linguistics on this planet.

### 1.3 Origins: Language Learning for Practical Purposes

Bluntly speaking, African linguistics – theoretically and methodologically located at the interface of the humanities and social sciences – owes its present existence as a globally accepted scientific discipline to the darker days of Christian missionary activities in, and colonial exploitation of, African territories by European powers before and after the turn of the twentieth century.

There were notable precolonial forerunners, who were seeking information and knowledge about African peoples and their cultures, some also taking interest in their languages. They were travellers and explorers driven mainly by individual intellectual curiosity, or they were sponsored by members of the European aristocracy, who developed some kind of whimsical interest in ‘exotic’ artefacts in order to boast with treasures to be displayed in their fashionable ‘cabinets of curiosity’ (see Chapters 2 and 3, this volume). To some extent, too, the language philosophy of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), to be discussed later in terms of linguistic relativism and determinism, provided an additional impetus to study ‘exotic’ languages in the attempt to uncover how they linguistically encode their culture cum language-specific ‘world-views’ (see Wolff 1975, 1981).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This line of research eventually became dominated by American linguistics, mainly with data from Amerindian languages, and is linked above all to the names of the Pomerania-born immigrant to the USA Edward Sapir (1884–1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897–1941), laying the foundations of modern ethnolinguistics.

A majority of the forerunners, however, had a missionary agenda, appropriating and using indigenous languages in overseas territories for the proselytization of ‘pagans’ and aiming at the civilization of ‘savages’. An additional motivation came from attempts to make contact with potential representatives of a mysterious Christian empire linked to the mythical Prester John, which was identified by some, among others, with the early Christian empires in Ethiopia (Aksum, Lalibela). This is true for the earliest known texts, vocabularies, and grammatical descriptions of African languages, such as for liturgical Geez in Ethiopia, first published in 1513 by the monk Johan Potken from Cologne (*Psalterium et Canticum Canticorum et Alia Cantica Biblica Aethiopice et Syllabarium Seu de Legendi Ratione*) to be later followed by the first European grammar of Geez (*Chaldea seu Aethiopicae Linguae Institutiones*) by Fr. Marianus Victorius (1518–1572), published in Rome in 1552 (see Chapter 5, this volume). A vocabulary of a precursor to present-day Akan in Ghana was contained in a Portuguese source of 1523. Often mentioned is Fr. Giacinto Bruciotto di Vetralla’s early grammar of Kongo (*Regulae quaedam pro difficilimi Congensium idiomati faciliiori captu ad grammaticae normam redactae*), published in Rome in 1659. Much less known is the first grammar of Kimbundu (*Arte da lingua de Angola oeferecida a Virgem Senhora N. do Rosario, Mãe & Senhora dos mesmos Pretos*), written by the priest Pedro Dias of the Company of Jesus in Brazil (published in Lisbon in 1697). Early Catechisms were published in Kongo (1624), Kimbundu (1643), and Ge (1658). A Coptic-Arabic dictionary was translated into Latin by the Jesuit Athanasius Kirchner in 1636; the Franciscan Arcangelo Carradori collected more than 7,000 words of the Nubian language (1638). A first Kongo vocabulary is mentioned for the year 1652, likely produced by the Belgian Capucin Georges de Gheel (Joris van Gheel). In the early and mid-seventeenth century, continuous focused work on Geez and Amharic began, and we must here mention the name of Hiob Leutholf alias Job Ludolf from Erfurt in Germany.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, and soon after the first travellers and explorers came back with their first-hand information, the initial interest in African languages, long before the scientific, i.e. linguistic study of African languages entered the agenda, was a practical one. Language learning for missionaries and colonial agents and the military was deemed useful and so was basic literacy for the speakers of these languages, both for proselytization and the creation of a low-skilled labour force, and for recruiting members of low military rank into the services of the colonial powers (see Chapter 2, this volume). This applied and largely extractive dimension of African language studies prevails in part up to the present day; Chapter 12 (this volume) describes this as also being at the bottom of the more recent initiatives to

<sup>5</sup> For the early period, see Wolff 1981, Connell and Akinlabi (Chapter 8, this volume), and Petter (Chapter 11, this volume).

establish and expand research on African languages in Asia (see Chapter 12, this volume).

In the end, the extractive strategy of dealing with African languages for missionary and colonial benefits contributed to the development of both African languages and African linguistics. The outright extractive strategy, however, had an ‘exclusive’ corollary. The idea of colonial administrations, later to be continued by postcolonial African elites, was to keep the masses of the African populations down by no or only limited access to quality education, which was managed through a European language in mostly private institutions of learning. The characteristic feature of this type of education was exclusiveness via highly restricted access, often accompanied by fee paying, and thus accessible only for a chosen few. Exclusiveness was the explicit idea also behind ‘Bantu Education’ under the apartheid regime in South Africa (see Chapter 6, this volume). Until this day, it remains the implicit motivation for ‘elite closure’ and the ‘status maintenance syndrome’, which characterizes the postcolonial African elites who are currently in power. Hence, the strongly expressed will and strategy by many stakeholders to establish and maintain bottle-neck systems which would allow children only restricted access to education based on English (or any other foreign, usually ex-colonial, language). European languages-based education is implicitly assumed to be superior to education through African languages, which in turn are implicitly assumed to be inferior.

Therefore, it is widely assumed generally that there is little intrinsic value in African languages, particularly not in African countries and in the eyes of their governments and influential intellectual circles. Outside Africa and outside rarefied academic circles, public and political interest in African languages, and thus in the research-based teaching and learning of these languages, was and still is widely based on their perceived instrumental value primarily for non-African powers and economies in order to more easily access African commodities in negotiations with postcolonial African governments. As long as training colonial officers and postcolonial diplomats or agents of North–South development or military cooperation (from American Peace Corps in the 1960s to Development Aid Programmes run by present-day parastatal organizations or NGOs) in African lingua francas served the purpose, African linguistics found support ‘at home’. This included capacity building, initially by expatriates, for Africans to teach (and to do research into) their own languages. This was supported by grants and scholarships for this purpose, or by employing African students of any subject matter as ‘teaching assistants’ for lessons in their mother tongues or in the lingua francas they happened to speak well (see also Chapters 3 and 11, this volume). Again, this strategy was mainly extractive. The prime interest was not, for a very long time, to strategically invest in a generation of emerging African scholars for purely academic purposes, even though this eventually came about, with African professors and lecturers finally taking over from