

# Language Shift and Loss in the Multilingual Context of Africa<sup>1</sup>

Jerome Baghana<sup>2</sup>, Olga N. Prokhorova<sup>3</sup>, Yuliya S. Blazhevich<sup>3</sup>, Tatiana G. Voloshina<sup>3</sup>, & Elena L. Kuksova<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

The article gives an insight into the phenomenon of language shift and death in Africa. It starts out with the discussion of the theoretical assumptions the work is based on. The sociolinguistic status of languages in the multilingual and multicultural context of Africa is also considered. The authors analyze the existing terms related to the problem of endangered languages, including ‘language shift’, ‘language loss’, ‘language death’ and ‘language decay’ as well as the UNESCO classification system used in the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. Much attention is also given to the account of models of ‘gradual death’ and to the classification of the extralinguistic factors leading to language abandonment and decay. Some comments on the existing linguistic indicators of language decay and pidginization are given.

**Keywords:** Multilingualism; Endangered Languages; Language Death; Language Shift; Minority Language.

## 1. Introduction

Africa is a hotspot of cultural and linguistic diversity, where monolingualism is quite a rare phenomenon. Apart from their mother tongues, most individuals can speak at least one more (or most often two more languages). Due to this exposure to ethnical, cultural and linguistic diversity most Africans acquire other neighbouring languages or a major language of the country or the area. In a multilingual setting the linguistic repertoire of Africans often consists of an ex-colonial European language, an indigenous language of wider communication or other major language and their mother tongue. Therefore, the language pattern in most African countries is often “triglossic”, meaning the hierarchy of the most prestigious major language on the top, a language of wider communication in the middle and an inter-ethnic language

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<sup>2</sup> Belgorod State University, Belgorod, Russia; [baghana@yandex.ru](mailto:baghana@yandex.ru)

<sup>3</sup> Belgorod State University, Belgorod, Russia.

(mother tongue) in the bottom, though the patterns can be more complex and vary from community to community. It should also be noted that African sociolinguistic situation can be described by the term “multilingualism” instead of “bilingualism” at least in sociolinguistic approach as it reflects the presence of linguistic diversity in Africa, while “bilingualism” is more adequate for use in description of communities where two languages are used. Nowadays many speakers of a minority language are shifting to a more prestigious dominant language as it gives access to social and economic resources and benefits. This tendency represents a major threat to linguistic divergency of Africa as it leads to language shift and loss. This and other reasons of ethnic language abandonment will be discussed in this work.

## **2. Methods**

This article is based on the systemic approach to the interdisciplinary analysis. Due to the cognitive cross-disciplinary approach we take into consideration the anthropocentric factor, linguistic and non-linguistic information, intercultural analysis.

## **3. Results and discussions**

The analysis of the literature on endangered languages reveals that the problem is usually considered from two different angles. Some scientists focus on socio-economic factors; others are more interested in structural phenomena of the endangered languages. No consensus exists as to the criteria of assessment of the situation of language death either. According to Campbell and Rehg (2018), the main criteria that are usually applied to find out the degree of endangerment are:

- the absolute number of speakers;
- intergenerational transmission;
- decreasing number of speakers;
- decrease in domains of use (Campbell & Rehg, 2018).

In our opinion, a relevant descriptive study of language death should be both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary.

Anyway, all scientists agree that the loss of a language (if it is not a case of genocide or a sudden death of the community due to other reasons) starts out with language shift. If a language contact results in the situation when speakers stop using their language we can speak about ‘language shift’, ‘language abandonment’, ‘language decay’ and ‘language death’.

It should be noted at the outset that, in sociolinguistic terms ‘language shift’ is applied when “the abandonment of one language for another language” does not cause the complete loss of the former but its disappearance from a certain speech community exposed to the contact situation (Pauwels, 2016; Rakhmatulloevna,

2016). A speaker's main language (L1) is gradually replaced by another language (L2) in all functional domains. The intensity and speed can vary. The terms 'language loss', 'language obsolescence' and 'language death' "are used for the more dramatic outcomes of a language being abandoned by an entire speech community so that it is no longer used or spoken anywhere in world" (Pauwels, 2016).

UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger classification system demonstrates how safe more precisely, endangered the language is:

*Safe* – language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted;

*Vulnerable* – most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains;

*Definitely endangered* – children no longer learn the language as a 'mother tongue' in the home;

*Severely endangered* – language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves;

*Critically endangered* – the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently;

*Extinct* – there are no speakers left" (UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger).

As most instances of language death are the result of language shift, study of language shift situations can give us an insight into the details of extralinguistic reasons of this process.

Among the existing models that serve to clarify this transition from the situation of safety to danger, Dressler's model of language endangerment can be mentioned. The researcher states that "the basic mechanism of language decay starts with social change subordinating the respective speech community to another speech community. Speakers reflect this unfavorable change sociopsychologically by a less favorable evaluation of their language. A consequence is a sociologically restricted use of their language, which results in an impoverished linguistic structure for their language. This impoverishment has a feedback on the speaker's sociopsychological evaluation, because the quality for guaranteeing the prestige function and the self-identification function (and hence the unifying/separating functions) of the language has diminished" (Dressler, 1982).

In other words, W.U. Dressler sees the situation as a 'vicious circle', where the lowering of the prestige of a minor language leads to its structural deterioration that in its turn again affects its prestige, aggravating the situation.

Another model that can be referred in this connection was proposed by Sasse (1992). His scheme seems to be an interpretation of the previous model. According to Sasse's model, 'external setting' leads to 'changes in speech behavior', the latter results in 'structural changes' in the language. The only essential difference seems to be in the non-cyclic character of his model (Sasse, 1992).

The following factors affect languages by lowering number of speakers in literal sense (death of population) or in figurative sense (interrupt intergenerational language transition, narrow functional domains of a language causing shift to other languages, etc.):

- *decline and loss of population* due to natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, etc.), epidemic diseases, conflicts, wars, genocides;
- *dispersion, relocation or migration of population* due to various reasons including conflicts or economic migration;
- *urbanization* (a major language is used as a means of communication in a multilingual urban community, as a result, children acquire the major language as L1 and intergenerational language transition fails);
- *mixed marriages* (children come from families where either the mother or father are from different ethnic groups);
- *language attitude* including language stigmatization, when a rather low value seems to be attached to the language;
- *Societal multilingualism* is often considered “a curse, as it is taken to negatively impact a country’s unity, identity and social coercion/harmony” (Batibo, 2005; 2009).

In fact, diglossic (or triglossic) situations where a minor language of lowers status experiences the pressure from the stronger more prestigious language, results in decrease in domains of minor language use. For example, a minor language is only used for cultural expression and rituals. This leads to progressive imperfection of learning, especially if it is not the language of instruction. On the linguistic level this shift manifests in reduction in stylistic variation and structural complexity, language interference and progressive language deterioration. Such ‘gradual death’ in a situation of unstable multilingualism, when a gradual shift from a minority language to a dominant one occurs, can be classified as a “shift of a minority language”. Of course, we should take into account that some minor languages are sometimes unable to perform certain functions in the society for obvious reasons, for example, inexistent written language and could be revitalized by overcoming their problems (in this case, creating a script) (Baghana et al., 2014).

According to Dressler (2018), there are 2 quite reliable linguistic indicators of language shift and decay, which can help us test if a minority language is in danger:

- *Massive and asymmetric lexical borrowing* from the dominant to the recessive language. Loans do not simply ‘enrich the lexicon of the minority language but replace indigenous words’ and have structural effects of *lexical replacement or relexification*. Loanwords cease to be integrated phonologically and morphologically;
- *Loss of productivity of word formation patterns*. Function of “lexical enrichment is not fulfilled anymore by rules or patterns of the

minority language but simply by borrowing words from the dominant majority language and then integrating them phonologically” (Dressler, 2018; Tejeda & Dominguez, 2019).

The way a community can resist borrowing is using the policy of linguistic protectionism or purism (Baghana & Porkhomovskiy, 2018). Thus, genetic purism resists to corruption of language caused by other languages through the processes of co-mixing and hybridization (Milroy & Milroy, 1985).

Language death is sometimes looked at as a sort of pidginization, because of such common features as loss of grammatical redundancy, limited vocabulary or morphological simplicity, etc. Nevertheless, scholars argue that “in contrast with pidgins, dying languages often retain morphological complexity in certain areas of their grammar”, can undergo elaboration, such as, borrowing of prepositions or “creation of a new type of relative clauses” and have other essential differences (Tsunoda, 2004).

#### 4. Conclusion

Language decay is a rather broad theme. In the context of African sociolinguistic and cultural situation it can be considered of topical interest. The main reasons of language death can be of mixed nature, namely, socio-economic, demographic, natural, psychological, structural, etc. Among them we can name decline and loss of population, migration, urbanization, mixed marriages, societal multilingualism, and others. In a multilingual setting the linguistic repertoire of Africans often consists of an ex-colonial European language, an indigenous language of wider communication or other major language and their mother tongue. The language pattern of diglossic (or better to say “triglossic”) hierarchy of the most prestigious major language on the top, a language of wider communication in the middle and an inter-ethnic language (mother tongue) in the bottom, inevitably leads to decrease in domains of minor language use, progressive imperfection of learning, language interference, reduction in stylistic variation and structural complexity and progressive language deterioration. In addition to sociolinguistic indicators of language shift and decay there are also some linguistic ones, such as massive and asymmetric lexical borrowing loss of productivity of word formation patterns. The future of the endangered minority languages in Africa greatly depends not only on the individual effort of speakers and language experts but on the collective action of the linguistic society and the respective governments.

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