

Words of the World

The Global Language System

Abram de Swaan

Polity

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Africa: The persistence of the colonial languages

Nowhere is a greater diversity of languages to be found than south of the Sahara desert. There may be a thousand, or more, or less – once again, the issue of which varieties must be counted as separate languages is controversial, and the controversy has strong political overtones. Colonial authorities may have exaggerated the differences between the speech of adjacent villages in order better to divide and rule.¹ More often than not, the local elders would readily confirm their singularity to bolster their own local authority. But all things considered, the multiplicity of languages in Africa remains awesome.

For more than a thousand years, Arabic has been the great vernacular and liturgical language of North Africa, from Morocco to Egypt. On the southern side of the Sahara desert and on the eastern seacoast of Africa, Arab traders had been active many centuries before the first European explorers arrived. Hence, their language and religion had spread throughout the area. In the first half of the nineteenth century, even before European colonization got under way, Muslim reform movements swept West Africa and, with the faith, spread the language.²

There were, of course, still other linking languages which the indigenous merchants brought along with their merchandise, such as Hausa, Igbo, Soninke and Swahili. And there were the languages of warrior kingdoms such as the Wolof, or the Fon, who acquired their weapons from European traders in exchange for the ivory, gold and slaves that they could now exact at gunpoint from their neighbours.

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The European exploration of the continent began early in the fifteenth century with Portuguese expeditions to the western coast.³ For four centuries the European presence was limited to 'factories' on offshore islands, or near river estuaries. Here, in 'distant contact',⁴ the first African-European pidgins developed, first in interaction with Portuguese, later also with English and French.

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the European scramble for Africa really got on its way, greatly accelerated by the Berlin Conference of 1884–5. The Western powers now began to explore and exploit the interior, making inroads into the savannah and the rain forest from their operating bases on the coast, usually staying close to the rivers on their trek inland.⁵ The workers who were recruited from the villages along the colonizers' path developed a pidgin to talk to their bosses and to the labourers from other communities, when they did not share an indigenous language.

In the Sub-Saharan region, many hundreds of local idioms exist, often spoken by no more than a few thousand people, without written texts (except the Lord's Prayer transcribed by the local missionary), without any protection from the authorities, without validity in the courts of law or the corridors of administration, hardly used at all in the schools and almost entirely unknown a day's march away. Like the deity in Maimonides' conception, these languages are always described by what they are *not*. It is very difficult to describe them in their own terms as languages of conversation, narration and memory.⁶ We have called them the languages of memory, since people record texts by memorizing them, rather than by entrusting them to paper. Most probably, memory among the peoples without writing is used more intensely and developed to greater capacity than that of people who live with writing and can always 'look up' what has been confided to paper. The structure, the keywords, the melody and the gesticulation that go with stylized narratives help people to memorize and reproduce them.

In terms of the galactic model, this is the first level: that of the peripheral languages. Many go under different names, but may be very similar indeed. On the other hand, in the absence of written texts that standardize usage over time and across distances, speech may change more rapidly from one generation to another and from one village to the next.⁷ Johannes Fabian has pointed out that the colonial authorities had an interest in stressing the differences between adjoining languages and exaggerated them accordingly, for example in the Belgian Congo.⁸ This was certainly intended to stymie the emergence of a unified nationalist movement.⁹ The Africans themselves probably did not mind this distortion too much, as it tickled

their narcissistic sense of small differences and allowed them to boast their great fluency in languages that after all may well have been, for the greater part, dialects of one and the same language.¹⁰

In each area, there was and is at least one language that serves to connect a number of different peripheral language groups, all of which included some multilingual speakers who were competent in this central language. This is the second level of the galactic model: that of the central planets, surrounded by their peripheral moons. There may be a few dozen of these central languages, together covering the entire continent. Usually, a central language gained its position because it was used at the court of a conqueror dynasty that had subjected the neighbouring peoples; for example, the Wolof in Senegal or Fon in Dahomey (presently Benin) and the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa in eastern, western and northern Nigeria. The rule of these kingdoms came to an end once the colonial powers penetrated the interior and defeated them on their own ground. Yet their languages continued to spread, as indigenous recruits, porters and labourers followed the colonial armies, helped build the new roads and railways, laboured on the plantations and settled in the sprawling capital cities from which the colonies were ruled.

In other parts of Africa, in what is now known as Congo or Zaire, and in the area of present-day Kenya and Tanzania, the colonial regime promoted the spread of indigenous vehicular languages, some of them with a long pedigree, such as Swahili, some of them, like Kikongo and Lingala, pidgins newly formed out of local languages.

And, of course, each colonial regime imposed its own language, in the missionary posts as the language of conversion, as the language of command in the army barracks, then as the language of administration in the outposts of government, somewhat later as the language of education, if not in the village schools then in the elite schools for continued education. Next to Arabic, the colonial language was the written language par excellence; it was also the only printed language, the language of newspapers and books, and still later it became the language of radio and television.

Colonial conquest brought about an increase in the scale of social life; it lengthened the chains of interdependence linking villages or regions that before had been mostly separate and self-sufficient. Hence, a number of languages expanded on a corresponding scale – some indigenous vernaculars, a few newly emerging pidgins and the language of the colonizer – each connecting a series of peripheral languages. The colonial language in its standard version was reserved for those who had gone to school and learned to read and write. But

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one could pick up a pidgin or a domestic connecting language as one went along, in the streets and from one's peers. This simple act made for a true diglossia (or triglossia and even more complex constellations): the domestic languages, spoken by the great mass of the people, for mundane, everyday functions, and, for the 'high' functions, the colonial language, written and spoken by the colonizers and those who served their regime.

When in the 1960s independence came for most of these African colonies, not surprisingly the language of the European occupiers was already ingrained in these societies as the language of politics and administration, of large enterprises, of the sciences and the national media. And, for similar reasons to those in India, the nationalist movement, uniting factions from different ethnic and geographic origins, found itself compelled to opt for the language of its colonial opponent.

6.1 A two-by-three comparison

Why has the former colonial language maintained its central position so tenaciously in most African countries? It coexists in some countries with a domestic mother tongue shared by almost the entire population, in others with a native language that is spoken by the overwhelming majority as either a first or a second language, and in still other countries it functions side by side with three or four different indigenous, vehicular languages.

In the social sciences, a question like this can only be answered by making comparisons. Here, the comparison will be between three types of language constellation, each time in a francophone country and in a country centred on English.¹¹ The first type of constellation to be compared between both language zones is one in which the colonial language has remained the official medium, while more than 75 per cent of the population speaks one and the same native tongue. This is the case in Rwanda, where almost everyone, Hutus and Tutsis alike, speaks Kinyarwanda as their mother tongue,¹² yet, until recently, French was the sole 'official' language. Its English-oriented counterpart is Botswana, where 80 per cent of the population are native speakers of the indigenous language, Tswana, while nevertheless English has remained the official language there.

The second language constellation is one in which at least three-quarters of the population speaks the same domestic language, but

either as a native or as an acquired language. In the francophone zone, Senegal is the example: Wolof is the language of some 75 per cent of the population, a good part of which speaks it as a second language. French has remained the official language in Senegal. In the English zone, Tanzania is the case in point: Swahili is the domestic language that is known to more than 90 per cent of Tanzanians, while it is a mother tongue for a small but growing minority. But Swahili is, next to English, the official language of the land.

Finally, there are countries of the third type, where several indigenous languages are current, but none of them comes anywhere near a majority position. This is the case in many African countries, but here the focus will be on Nigeria for the sphere of English and on Congo/Zaire for the francophone world. In either case, the former colonial language remains paramount, strong nationalistic qualms about its use notwithstanding.

The choice of cases for comparison already suggests that the particular configuration of domestic languages in each country may explain at least in part the tenacity of the ex-colonial language. Thus, it should not surprise us too much if in countries with several major domestic languages, mutual rivalry prevents any one of them from becoming the national medium, thus leaving the field to the former colonial language. This occurred in both Congo/Zaire and Nigeria (and in South Africa, which will constitute the subject of chapter 7). What does seem to be an anomaly, on the other hand, is a country where well-nigh everyone understands and speaks the same native tongue and still the colonial language cannot be dislodged from its predominant position: Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Rwanda and Burundi.

The intermediate case is one in which the domestic language is the native tongue of a minority, but also the acquired language of a good part of the population, making it the idiom of at least three-quarters of the population. This is not an exceptional situation, either: it applies to Senegal and Tanzania, but also to Benin (Fon), Togo (Ewe), Central African Republic (Sango) and Mali (Bambara).¹³

The analysis will proceed in terms of the galactic model with its four levels – local, central, supercentral and hypercentral. Wherever the available data allow it, the Q-values for the languages in each constellation will be estimated. Statistics of language skills are almost non-existent for Africa. This lack of reliable data has provoked a heated debate among experts on African languages. Chaudenson, a leading scholar in the field, has rejected all 'demolinguistics' as inadequate since figures are usually based on the number of people that have achieved a certain scholastic level. These statistics are dubious in

the first place, and none of actual linguistic value. In Western languages, being compared

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But even into account access to the schools or pidginized actual group colonial language. The 'jealousy', the identified with language, the ethnic balance vis its lesser the losing language dwindling reflect, until pass on to their collective spiteful or often latent others. As that it incorporates perspective language as language (individual collective in Latin has Apparently individual

the first place, since the authorities have good reasons to embellish them, and moreover, the level of schooling means very little in terms of actual linguistic competence. In fact, people may have studied a Western language – according to the record – for many years without being competent in it at all.¹⁴

Yet such data on school attendance are not entirely worthless as indicators. First of all, time series do convey a sense of the direction in which language skills are headed. Second, for the present purposes, only a very rough impression of the distribution of language skills is required. The present analysis purports to reconstruct the choices that prospective language learners make, and they decide on the basis of quite intuitive impressions. So, for our objectives, the data need not be all that good.

But even more so than in the Asian cases, in Africa we must take into account the high degree of illiteracy which effectively prevents access to the standard version of the colonial language. It is taught in schools or private courses and cannot be picked up informally, like its pidginized versions and the indigenous languages. The result is an actual group monopoly by the educated elites of the official, ex-colonial language. This fact plays a central role in the present argument. The second theme in the explanation is that of 'language jealousy', the refusal of a domestic vehicular language that is closely identified with a large and influential ethnic group. By the spread of its language, this group might gain even greater weight in the country's ethnic balance. In the long run, the gain of an ethnic language vis-à-vis its lesser rivals might provoke a general stampede towards it: for the losing languages this evokes a grisly vision of diminishing prestige, dwindling resources, shrinking domains of usage and increasing neglect, until parents do not even bother any more to pass the language on to their children and it simply disappears. In other words, from a collective point of view, some language jealousy need not be only spiteful or irrational. After all, languages are in competition (although often latently so) and a gain for the one might entail a loss for the others. As the lesser language loses out, the collective cultural capital that it incorporates may well be lost with it. From an individual perspective, advantages may be gained by learning the predominant language and not much may seem to be lost by neglecting one's own language (in favour of one with a higher *Q*-value). Thus, rational, individual choices may bring about a situation that goes against the collective interests of those concerned. It is this course of affairs that Laitin has characterized as 'private subversion of the public good'.¹⁵ Apparently, in order to maximize individual career opportunities, individual citizens, and parents of schoolchildren especially, privately

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decide against the domestic language which for nationalist reasons they publicly support as a collective good.

6.2 Three francophone constellations south of the Sahara

The former French possessions overseas, almost without exception, have remained members of the 'Francophonie',¹⁶ the French counterpart of the Commonwealth that encompasses the erstwhile British colonies. As the name suggests, more than anything else the common denominator of this entity is the language, French. Quite apart from other political designs, the foremost objective of the French government is to protect and promote French in all those countries where it was once the colonial language.¹⁷ Although the global position of French has been steadily eroded since World War II, in many of the former colonies it maintains its functions as the official and the international language. This seems to be the result of a sustained campaign by the French government, and the theory of 'linguistic imperialism' naively suggests as much. In fact, it is much more likely that it is the particular language constellation in each of the former colonies which goes far to determine the position of French vis-à-vis the other languages there. While individuals strive to maximize their communication chances, over time their choices combine with each other to reproduce the overall constellation.

6.2.1 Rwanda

The vast majority, over 90 per cent, of the population of Rwanda speak Kinyarwanda,¹⁸ which as 'Kirundi' is also spoken by almost all inhabitants of neighbouring Burundi and widely used in eastern Zaire and Uganda. With some 15 million speakers (in 1990) Kinyarwanda is the Bantu language spoken most widely as a mother tongue (Swahili outnumbers it but is mostly acquired as a second language).¹⁹ Kinyarwanda was proclaimed the 'national language'.²⁰ Nevertheless, as in Burundi, in Rwanda the official language is French, one of the languages of the Belgians who occupied the two countries from 1918 (when the Germans were made to abandon their African possessions) until independence in 1959. The position of

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French is rather peculiar. Since all Rwandans can communicate with all others in their native tongue, another language adds nothing to their communication potential – not in the Rwandese constellation, that is. But beyond the borders, French allows them to communicate with all the member countries of the Francophonie and with French speakers elsewhere; it provides access to journals and reviews, to radio and TV broadcasts, to extended education, to science and technology, medicine, literature and the arts.

If indeed all Rwandans speak Kinyarwanda, the prevalence, p_k , of that language equals 1. Since everyone speaks it, it follows that all multilinguals must have it in their repertoire, therefore also $c_k = 1$, and $Q_k = p_k \cdot c_k = 1$. Within the Rwandese constellation, no added language can increase the Q -value of the repertoire: it does not pay to learn French or any other language for that matter. Hence, either learning French must be aimed at communication beyond the borders of Rwanda, or other considerations must have played a role.

What could be the reason for using French as the language of government and administration inside Rwanda itself? There are a number of arguments for maintaining the language of the former rulers: at independence all laws and regulations, all court verdicts, all archived correspondence, reports and minutes were in French. All higher indigenous civil servants wrote and read French, and in the lower echelons at the very least they understood and spoke it, while they were all fluent in their mother tongue, Kinyarwanda.

But this in itself was insufficient reason to hold on to French as the official language. The laws could have been translated, and the written records of government would have remained easily accessible as long as a large number of civil servants could still read them in French and if need be translate them into Kinyarwanda.

The most plausible explanation of the continuation of French as the official language of Rwanda is that the civil servants wanted it. Jobs in the administration were almost the only white-collar positions in the country and fluency in French was well-nigh indispensable for them. Moreover, under the prevailing circumstances, competence in French, that is standard French, as distinguished from patois, was not available to the large majority of the population, since written French was taught only in secondary schools and private courses. Only a small part of the population went to school at all. Less than 1 per cent of Rwandans continued their education past the elementary level and even fewer went on to learn written French. Very few Rwandans could and can afford continued education. As a result, at independence, the French-speaking administrative elite enjoyed a group monopoly on the use of the colonial language and hence on civil service

jobs. The language remained a hypercollective good, but only with respect to those who had completed secondary school. All others found themselves excluded from the written variety. In fact, the educational system has hitherto operated as a most effective mechanism of exclusion.²¹

Since it would require a major collective effort to translate the records into Kinyarwanda, there was and is little danger of individual defection, that is of civil servants individually switching to Kinyarwanda, since they will continue to consult texts in French (except when talking to the public as 'street-level bureaucrats'). On the contrary, it pays for these elite parents to make sure their children get a good education, become fluent in standard French and can join the ranks of the civil service in their turn. Thus the elites have succeeded in appropriating French exclusively for their own ranks, and this puts at their disposal a vehicular language of global scope, a truly super-central language. Since they have in fact collectively monopolized the system of continued and higher education, they have effectively excluded 99 per cent of the Rwandese population and ensured for themselves privileged access to the key positions in government and business. Fluency in French constitutes the password for admission to these positions.

Yime-Yime Katesi has raised the question of why the colonial languages continue to function as official languages, languages of administration, of the law and of education in states such as Rwanda, Burundi and Lesotho where linguistic homogeneity prevails.²² And he suggests one possible answer: because the foreign language serves to consecrate the power of those who can use it. And Katesi quotes the French linguist Alexandre, who already in 1967 spoke of a social class defined by its monopoly of the use of a universal communication medium such as French or English, the acquisition of which represents a genuine form of capital accumulation.²³

This exclusionary use of French not only affects institutions, by limiting access to extended education and monopolizing the higher echelons of the labour market. It actually sets limits to the ambitions and the self-esteem of those who find themselves excluded. French being the unattainable language for the vast majority of Rwandans, by its very exclusivity justifies their exclusion, since, necessarily, they are the uninitiated, the ignorant. Thus, perversely, the exclusion produces its own legitimacy.

French not only was the language of the colonial ruler, but continues to be the language of all scientific and technological knowledge, of administrative and legal expertise, of political discourse, of wealth, power and prestige. Even today, it is the only written lan-

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guage, unintelligible and inaccessible to the common people. They may be ignorant of all the codified knowledge; they are not at all ignorant of their ignorance. They have understood very well that they do not understand it, and that is why they agree with their own disqualification.²⁴

In this manner, language is perverted from a means of communication into a means of exclusion with the complicity of the excluded themselves, who in this respect display their loyalty to the privileged. Each time that someone has proposed replacing French as the language of instruction by an indigenous language, the parents have been the first to reject the idea: they want for their children the education that provides the best chances on the labour market and therefore, if they can afford it, schooling in the hegemonic language, French in the present case.²⁵ While this seems justified in each individual case, collectively the parents maintain a system of selection that excludes the vast majority of children. Even the most progressive members of the elite hesitate when it comes to diminishing the career prospects of their children by preventing them from learning the languages in which they themselves were educated to become the progressives they have remained. Ntole Kazadi²⁶ adds that it is not enough to know French in order to have access to the privileged positions; witness the thousands of young secondary school and college graduates who nevertheless remain without a job. Indeed, French may not be a sufficient condition, but it is certainly a necessary one.

In the background, the dilemma of collective action hovers once again. Already at this point it may safely be concluded that educational reform cannot be brought about solely by private, grass-roots initiatives. It requires collective action of a scope that matches the scale of the problem, in this case at the national level. In fact, that was the promise of the 'kinyarwandization' policy proclaimed in the 1980s, but abandoned since 1989.²⁷ At present, Kinyarwanda is used as the language of instruction at the elementary level, while the new regime has introduced English-language secondary schools in addition to the French *lycées*.

In Rwanda, and for that matter in Burundi, French was superimposed upon an almost entirely monolingual society, and it seems that the colonial language – possibly for precisely that reason – is less deeply rooted there than in other African countries. Since the forces of the Rwandan Patriotic Front took power in Kigali in 1994, it seems that English, the language of the armed forces during their long exile in Uganda and also the language of friendly foreign powers, is rapidly spreading. It has even been declared a 'co-official' language.²⁸ Since there were at most a hundred thousand Rwandans who were fluent in

French, one may well envisage that in the wake of these upheavals the former administrative elite will be replaced swiftly by officials who were educated mostly in English. Under identical conditions of collective monopolization, English will turn out to be just as effective a means of exclusion, disqualification and mystification as French proved itself to be before.²⁹

6.2.2 Senegal

In Rwanda the vast majority of the inhabitants share a domestic mother tongue. This should be distinguished from a constellation in which a very large majority speak the same domestic language, but where a sizeable proportion acquired it as a second language. This is the case in Tanzania and Indonesia, but also in Senegal.³⁰

Within the world of 'Francophonie', Senegal is the exemplary case. French language and culture have played a larger role there than anywhere else in Africa south of the Sahara. The Senegalese have contributed an impressive array of scholars, writers and administrators to the francophone world and to France itself. The poet, scholar and statesman Léopold Senghor, 'membre de l'Académie', was by far the best known among them, but by no means the only one. For more than three centuries, much longer than elsewhere, French spread among the Senegalese elites, who adopted it quite readily.

Relations between the different ethnic groups that make up the population of Senegal seem less tense than in many other countries on the continent.³¹ And the fact that the language of the most numerous group, Wolof, is used as a vehicular language by a large share of the other groups suggests a modicum of ethnic harmony. The Wolof people make up about 43 per cent of the population, but almost 50 per cent name Wolof as their mother tongue. Calvet explains the disparity by pointing out that marriages between a Wolof and a partner of different ethnic background are quite frequent and that the children usually learn to speak Wolof at home rather than the other parental language.³²

Moreover, according to the 1988 census, about 22 per cent of the population have learned Wolof as a second language. All in all, some 71 per cent of respondents reported speaking Wolof.³³ If this figure is less than experts had assumed until then, there is no doubt at all that Wolof is gaining in popularity: it is expanding rapidly, much more in the cities than in the countryside, and more in Dakar than in faraway

Table 6.1 Senegal around 1988 (speakers in hundred thousands)

Native language	Sole or second language						Third language		Total
	WO	FU	SE	DI	MA	SO	FR	Other	LANG+ WO&FR

Table 6.1 Senegal around 1988 (speakers in hundred thousands)

Native language	Sole or second language								Third language		Total
	WO	FU	SE	DI	MA	SO	FR	Other	LANG+ WO&FR		
WO	18	1	0	0	1	0	7	7		33	
FU	6	4	1	0	0	0	1	2	1	15	
SE	3	0	4	0	0	0	1	0	1	9	
DI	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3	
MA	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	
SO	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	
Other	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	
Q _i :										68	
WO	0.582	0.853	0.702	0.595	0.628	0.582	0.649	0.697			
FU	0.853	0.094	0.200	0.114	0.128	0.094	0.244	0.233	0.892		
SE	0.702	0.200	0.026	0.036	0.054	0.026	0.122	0.160	0.738		
DI	0.595	0.114	0.036	0.001	0.010	0.001	0.067	0.072	0.662		
MA	0.628	0.128	0.054	0.010	0.005	0.005	0.090	0.096	0.697		
SO	0.582	0.094	0.026	0.001	0.005	0.000	0.052	0.056	0.649		
Other	0.697	0.233	0.160	0.072	0.096	0.056	0.216	0.056	0.770		
Greenberg's A	0.373										

Source: Data from the 1988 census, after Calvet, 1994.

WO = Wolof; FU = Fulani; SE = Serer; DI = Diola; MA = Mandingo; SO = Soninke; FR = French

A dash = Not applicable.

The number of first- and second-language speakers of each language is reported by Calvet. The percentage of French speakers is estimated at 18 per cent on the basis of Daff, 1991, and Diouf, 1994; the numbers of second-language speakers of Wolof and French are assumed to be proportional to the number of first-language speakers of each language, except for Wolof: there the proportion is set higher, since the Wolof need not learn another indigenous language. It is assumed that native Wolof speakers have learned other domestic languages in proportion to the number of native speakers of these languages.

towns such as St Louis in the north, or Ziguinchor in the south (Casamance), where its status is ambiguous.³⁴

The 1989 census did not count the number of French speakers. But Daff estimates, with all due provisos, that some 12 per cent speak a 'stable' French, and another 30 per cent a 'broken' version.³⁵

The communication value (Q-value) of Wolof (0.60) is far superior to those of all other languages spoken in Senegal (table 6.1). Fulani comes second (0.09) and French in third position (0.05), before Serer (0.03). No other language obtains a significant score. As a consequence, all other language groups are best off by learning Wolof. And in fact, this is the most current second language. However, Senegalese can realize a higher communication value by adding Fulani or Serer to their repertoire than by learning French. And yet, after Wolof, French is the second language learned most frequently, and the trilingual repertoire with Wolof and French is rather current among native Fulani and Serer speakers. It is indeed unusual for Senegalese to learn a language other than these two.³⁶ In the present case, also, the fact that French still continues to function as the official language of Senegal must be explained by its role as the language of the administration, unavailable to those who have not gone to school, and therefore an instrument of elite closure. Even more than Hindi in India, Wolof in Senegal could function as a national language, if language jealousy did not prevent it and the elites were willing to abandon their monopolistic language, French.

Wolof and French, in fact, spread more or less at the same time, during the colonial and postcolonial era: French as a language of the administration, the school system and Christian missionaries, Wolof as the lingua franca of the police, railway workers, dockers, labourers, immigrants to the cities on the seacoast, and also the wandering imams that spread the Muslim faith and helped found the *confréries* that now control much of economic and social life in Senegal.

According to Louis-Jean Calvet, once again, 'as its functions slowly shifted, Wolof became almost synonymous with the language of one kind of power, economic and symbolic power, but not the language of power per se, which is still French'.³⁷ Wolof is the indispensable language for urban settlers, while French is required for government employees. The two languages are acquired in different ways which reveal their different status: through 'spontaneous' acquisition in the one case, through instruction in school in the other. Yet an informal version of French can also be learned in the streets (one finds French speakers in the informal economy, among the street pedlars who have never been to school).³⁸ Calvet wonders which language yields the most rewarding linguistic capital, in Bourdieu's terms, and what is the

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These questions are answered in an entirely different context by Leigh Swigart:³⁹ 'Asked which languages one should acquire first when settling in Dakar, my interviewees, no matter where they came from, almost unanimously mentioned Wolof. The official language, French, came second.' Clearly, his respondents, expert as they were in the theory of language constellations, picked the languages with scored the highest Q-values.

Although the 1988 census figures suggest that scholars had overestimated the prevalence of Wolof, it does seem that the language is gradually losing its ethnic markers, according to the reactions that Swigart collected: 'it is no longer an ethnic group, it is just a language', said one Diola (from the south); 'it is a mixture', according to a Fula (from the north). Or as a third, a Serer (from the south (east)), expressed it: 'Wolof has no culture at all.'⁴⁰ All these statements come down to one and the same point: Wolof is a neutral medium, and speaking Wolof by no means implies abandoning one's own ethnic identity, whatever it may be. Such ethnic transparency is the highest ace for a language in full expansion as a vehicular. Moreover, the Wolof of the streets and the markets – with a simplified grammar and a vocabulary enhanced by French and even English words – is quite removed from the ancient Wolof that is still spoken in the villages.

Nevertheless, in Senegal French is the only official language,⁴¹ the first language of instruction even in elementary school, the only language of the printed media, the dominant language of television and advertisement, and – an equally important fact – the privileged language in the labour market and in the corridors of power.⁴² Pierre Dumont contends:

There is no doubt that if one day the schools would teach in Wolof, Fulani, Serer or Diola, it would entirely transform Senegalese society. First of all, the privileges that since colonial times were the reward for fluency in the French language would come up for brutal criticism. And one may be assured that the masses that have been taught in African languages will then compete for power with the established elites, which for the time being are French educated, graduates from the 'École française'... as opposed to the traditional schools, especially the schools of the Koran.⁴³ (Author's translation)

But major efforts in that direction notwithstanding, nothing has come of such education in the national languages, for two reasons. Parents privately prefer what as citizens they publicly reject: French. This is

the first fundamental dilemma that confronts the citizens of so many former colonies. But had the parents opted for a domestic language, they would have been at odds over which one to select.⁴⁴ This is the second, equally paralysing, dilemma. Finally, had they wanted to avoid the choice, funds would have been needed to finance textbooks and courses in all six domestic languages.

Yet, even though its population has been so deeply immersed in French, there is in Senegal a widespread domestic language that has gradually been divested of most of its ethnic connotations, but not of all by far. The strength of Wolof constitutes its weakness: the dominant position of the Wolof makes the other ethnic groups wary of formally entrusting to their language all the functions of national communication. Hence, given its high *Q*-value, Wolof is very likely to continue its expansion, but it may well remain restricted to informal, low-prestige functions.⁴⁵

6.2.3 Congo/Zaire

The third case in this first series of comparisons among francophone countries is that of a country with several domestic, widespread, vehicular languages, none of them, however, encompassing a majority of the population: this is the situation in Zaire, renamed Congo (Democratic Republic of Congo) in 1997. The one official language is French, medium of the administration and the courts of law, of the media and – except for the first classes – of the school system. At least three hundred indigenous languages are spoken in the country:

divided over three subsequent levels: the first comprises the 300 or so local languages that support the essential foundations of tradition and ethnic communication. The second consists of the four languages that are called 'national' but which are in fact vehicular, inter-ethnic media and cover each a specific area – Kiswahili in the east, Lingala and Kikongo in the west and Kiluba in the centre; the third level, finally, is that of French.⁴⁶

This characterization by Nyunda ya Rubango fits the galactic model, with its peripheral, central and supercentral levels. The former colonial language remains the pivot of the constellation, even though it is estimated that no more than 4 per cent speak it with some fluency.⁴⁷ The prevalence of the great vehicular languages of Zaire is unknown. They are more current in the cities than in the villages, among the educated than among those who never went to school (they are each

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According to estimates, roughly half of all Congolese speak one of the four vehicular languages as a second language, in addition to one out of a multitude of mother tongues. But a growing number now learn one of these linking languages at a young age at home: a 'vernacularization' of the vehicular languages is on its way, albeit mostly in urban settings (very much in the same way as with Wolof).

Mwatha Musanji Ngalasso⁴⁸ has studied the prevalence of Kikongo in one river-town, Kikwit, in the southwest: it has become the language of instruction in the schools, the lingua franca of urban youngsters from the surrounding villages, where more than twenty different languages are current, all more or less similar to Kikongo. It is the mother tongue of growing numbers of children born in the city. Kikongo, Ngalasso remarks, is now the language that conveys a sense of identity, even 'complicity', and solidarity. But already another vehicular language is spreading rapidly in the Kikwit region, while Kikongo continues to grow. This rival language is Lingala, the language of the capital city Kinshasa, promoted by the former president Mobutu and his single-party regime. To speak Lingala is to show everybody that one has been in Kinshasa and is no longer just a nobody from Kikwit. Moreover, during the Mobutu period Lingala marked one as an activist in the Mobutu movement, a distinction that became dubious after Kabila took over and civil war broke out. What matters, however, is that even the choice of a vehicular language carries a range of meanings, such as 'big-city slicker', 'educated person', 'reigning party activist', and so on. These identity markers may provide an independent motive in choosing to learn and use a language; they may be highly correlated to its communication value, and even be epiphenomenal, in the sense that people choose on the basis of Q-value and value the identity markers that come with it, *because* it provides the better opportunities for communication.

At roughly the same time, during the mid-1990s, Lingala was reported to be gaining speakers in the eastern region of Congo/Zaire also, in the town of Bukavu, very near the Rwandan border, an area that traditionally used Swahili as its vehicular language, next to French and a local 'hybrid' of Swahili, 'indoubil'.⁴⁹ Hence, if Lingala, from the western side of Congo/Zaire, could make converts in this remote area, it was certainly not for lack of alternative means of vehicular communication. Clearly, in Kikwit as in Bukavu, Lingala represents the language of the political centre, Kinshasa. The military and the civil servants all speak it. It is the language of the lower ranks of central government, and hence of radio and television, and

therefore of popular music and entertainment. Thus it can make one sound important and 'cool' at the same time. On the basis of his observations of the competition between French, Swahili and Lingala in Bukavu, Goyvaerts even speculates that in the end 'Lingala may well become the exception, an African language that succeeds in conquering its country'.⁵⁰

This might indeed happen, if the language remains free of any association with a strong ethnic group. In fact, Kikongo, Lingala and Swahili seem to be relatively free of ethnic or regional connections. Lingala, moreover, has its base in the capital, another advantage. So far it lacks the support of a strong nationalist movement that might help it conquer the schools, the media, parliament and the courts, as happened with Malay in Indonesia or Swahili in Tanzania.

The observations by Goyvaerts and Ngalasso signal a grass-roots process of national integration, against all the odds of political fragmentation: an increasing orientation of provincial town dwellers towards the national centre of politics and culture, military power and economic clout. This undercurrent may well be reversed by civil war, foreign intervention and separatist strivings, but it did manifest itself unmistakably in the language choices of Zairese in the outer regions.

Lingala, like Kikongo (also known as Kituba or Monokituba in neighbouring Congo Brazzaville) and for that matter Sango (the lingua franca of the Central African Republic),⁵¹ is a rather young language that emerged during colonial times. Whereas Wolof and Mandingo are ancient court languages that spread by conquest and trade, and were described in detail by European travellers more than three centuries ago, these recent Congolese languages have their origin among the Africans who were recruited by the explorers, conquerors and traders who travelled inland along the river Congo and its tributaries during the later part of the nineteenth century. William Samarin has shown that the Belgian colonizers did not speak the indigenous languages and used local translators (usually very young children) in their contacts with the locals.⁵² Workers were recruited along the way, and as they made up a very mixed lot they had to make themselves understood in an improvised pidgin. In a fairly short period of some ten years new languages emerged to meet the needs of the workers and later on the traders, soliders, sutlers and missionaries that traversed the newly conquered areas. Before the Europeans came, no vehicular languages existed in this region, and the villagers learned the rather similar languages spoken in adjacent settlements.⁵³ Swahili, on the other hand, has an old pedigree on the eastern sea-

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shore and it also has a long history in eastern Congo/Zaire as the vehicular language of Arab traders and Katangese miners. As Johannes Fabian has shown, Swahili was promoted by the Belgian authorities to stop the progress of both English and Kabanga, a regional language that might carry with it influences from South Africa.⁵⁴

Congo/Zaire thus has four major vehicular languages, all of them quite widespread in their region, three of them, moreover, largely devoid of ethnic ties. That is why they are quite easily adopted throughout the country according to the actual needs for communication and the prevailing lines of ethnic identifications. Acceptance and acquisition are much facilitated since the languages are of African, even Congolese, origin and all belong to the Niger-Congo language family, which comprises the local languages that most Congolese have grown up with. However, as usual, the problem is which one to select among the several available options. It appears that Lingala, as the language of the capital, may hold the trump card. But recent upheavals may yet entirely change the game.

There is of course another language that occupies a central, even a supercentral, position in all of Congo/Zaire: French. It is the only official language (the constitution does not even mention other languages). Hence, it is the language of the law, of national government and administration, of the courts and even of local government. Until 1974 only French was used throughout the school system, but since then, domestic languages have been adopted for teaching in the first years of elementary school, without, however, so much as touching the complete monopoly of French in secondary and higher education. In Congo/Zaire, too, parents have shown themselves quite unwilling to have their children taught in Congolese languages, fearing it may harm their chances of landing prestigious and rewarding jobs, but also because they consider other domestic languages as a threat to the survival of their own group language, and do not expect that any of these vehicular languages will be understood beyond the borders of the region, let alone outside of Congo/Zaire (with the exception of Swahili). French, on the other hand, is a world language that promises attractive careers and is too 'remote' to present much of a threat to local idioms. Once again, in the final years of the Mobutu regime, at most 10-15 per cent of children in the relevant age cohort attended daytime secondary education, and most of those left school without a diploma. It is unlikely that matters have much improved since then. In this case, too, the Congolese, as citizens,

denounced French in public, but as parents coveted it in private for their children, who nevertheless rarely learned it well enough to qualify for the better jobs.⁵⁵

An earlier publication presented estimates for the *Q*-values of the vehicular languages of Congo/Zaire, including French.⁵⁶ For lack of reliable data it was necessary to make very rough estimates. In this most fragmented language constellation, all languages obtained rather low scores. The *Q*-values obtained with these guesstimates for the Congo/Zaire constellation were: Lingala 0.036; French 0.02; Swahili 0.012; Kiluba and Kikongo both 0.006. French scored higher in Congo/Zaire than in Rwanda, and lower than in Senegal, a result that agrees with the ranks for 'corpus' that Chaudenson assigned to French in these countries.⁵⁷ The rather feeble position of French in Congo/Zaire as compared to its score in Senegal may well be the result of the difference between Belgian and French colonial policies: Belgium, like Britain and Germany, facilitated above all the acquisition of domestic languages, whereas France always propagated French. The fact that French obtained a higher score in Congo/Zaire than in Rwanda (both formerly Belgian colonies) may be explained by the language constellation in those countries: French might be more prevalent in Congo/Zaire, where the coexistence of four different domestic vernaculars makes the ex-colonial language indispensable, whereas in Rwanda (and Burundi) almost all citizens speak the same domestic language and French is rather superfluous for domestic communication.

One language has entirely disappeared from Congo/Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi: Dutch, which in its Flemish version was nevertheless used in colonial times and was accorded equal status with French in the Colonial Charter of 1908. In Belgium at the time, Flemish was relegated to a position much inferior to French. In the Belgian Congo of those days, Flemish was used only in the mission settlements and in small trade. According to Nyunda ya Rubango: 'Although it was the poor cousin during the colonial epoch, Dutch ever since has borne the negative image of colonization. That the very expression *Flemish*, referring to individuals, the people, the language, is maligned in the popular speech of Zaire until this very day, is not at all coincidental.'⁵⁸ And yet the great majority of the Flemish were opposed to the colonial enterprise. Even Nyunda did not succeed in coming up with an explanation for the Congolese contempt for Netherlandish.⁵⁹ As a result, it was French alone that usurped all the functions of the official language in Congo/Zaire, while Dutch has completely disappeared from Central Africa after decolonization. It is now spoken in an indigenized version, Afrikaans, in South Africa, where, as the lan-

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In all three cases presented here, French continues to function as the language of government and administration, of continued education, of the media, of science and technology, of literature and high culture in general. In brief, it still is the language of high prestige, of individual linguistic capital à la Bourdieu. At the same time, as this 'stable' version of French can only be acquired in written courses, it is also the collective monopoly of the educated classes who have appropriated the civil service, excluding the vast majority of the illiterate and poorly educated. But French in Rwanda, Senegal and Congo/Zaire is not without competition. In terms of its communication value, its linking functions, the Rwandese can do without it, and well they may in the near future, switching to Kinyarwanda for domestic purposes and English for navigating the global system. The Senegalese are caught in the paralysing dilemma that has by now become a familiar feature of former colonial societies. They could indeed switch to Wolof, and for many purposes they already have, but the native speakers of the other languages cannot bring themselves to raise the status of Wolof above that of their own tongues. In Congo/Zaire finally, four domestic languages compete as vehicles of regional and possibly even national communication. Given this fourfold division, one might expect French to be in a quite strong position vis-à-vis its competitors, and indeed it is so when it comes to its formal status. But as education remains so scarce, its speakers are few indeed. Lingala, on the other hand, has progressed and is by now the language with the highest Q-value. In many respects this reflects the widening presence of the state at the grass-roots level. In Congolese society, at least during the Mobutu era, Lingala may have been 'slick' and 'cool', and it may still be, but it is a safe guess that it is still not nearly as 'chic' as French. *Lingala at best gets you a job driving a car for someone else, French at best gets you a car with someone else to drive it for you. Much the same still applies to Wolof or Kinyarwanda versus French.*

In the literature much is made of language as a marker of ethnic and class identity in these countries. But a great deal can be explained in terms of optimizing communication opportunities, wherever the choice presents itself: for immigrants, or job seekers. They tend to prefer the domestic language with the highest Q-value. If it is accessible to them, they will opt for learning the standard, written version of French. Those who speak French do not stand to gain from others learning it, since they can already communicate with them in a

regional vehicular language, or even in the domestic language that has spread nationally. Moreover, they would rather not see too many people learn French, as it would dilute their privileges in the upper, francophone levels of the labour market, where they operate. In many respects, therefore, the expansion of extended education is not in the elite interest in countries where the better jobs are almost exclusively in the civil service, the military, the customs service and the police, or in a few import and export firms and large mining companies, and where there is not much other employment for middle and high cadres. It is the exclusive nature of the educational system, the restricted currency of the colonial language, and the group monopoly on the upper echelons of the labour market which determine the dynamics of these constellations.

6.3 Three English-centred constellations south of the Sahara

In this section, the two-by-three comparison will be continued: here, three 'anglophone' countries are compared with one another and with their French counterparts. In the three language constellations centred on French, the configuration of domestic languages to a large extent determines the position of French as the official language. Thus Rwanda, where everyone speaks Kinyarwanda, could – at least in theory – do without French in almost all domains. Congo/Zaire, on the other hand, where hundreds of languages are spoken, and which has no fewer than four vehicular languages, will continue to need French for national, official communication, unless it can develop the most widespread of the domestic vehiculars, Lingala, into a medium of national communication. But this is unlikely to happen any time soon. Senegal, where one domestic language has become the mother tongue or the linking language for three-quarters of the population, could in principle replace French with Wolof in many of the domains where the former functions at present. The major obstacle, however, is the reluctance of the other ethnic groups to confirm explicitly the position that Wolof already occupies in fact, to recognize it formally and grant it official status next to or even instead of French.

In this section three similar constellations, this time with English as the colonial inheritance, will be compared with one another and with the francophone constellations presented above: Botswana, Tanzania

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and Nigeria. Here too, the question is how the configuration of domestic languages, homogeneous or fragmented, shapes the position of the former colonial language, English.

6.3.1 *Botswana*

The first case in this second series, Botswana, represents the English-centred counterpart to francophone Rwanda. In Botswana, at least 80 per cent of the Batswana speak Tswana as their mother tongue and practically all others have learned it at a later age (about 100,000 people are native speakers of a rather different Bantu language, Ikalanga).⁶⁰ In this respect, the country resembles Lesotho and Swaziland, two former 'homelands' created by the South African Apartheid regime where respectively Sotho (or Sutu) and Swazi are the predominant languages. Tswana and Sotho are very similar, and often grouped together in the Sutu language group.⁶¹ Both belong to the wider Bantu family of languages, as does the language of Swaziland, which is usually assigned to the Nguni group of South African languages with Xhosa, Ndebele and Zulu.

The predominance of a single language in Swaziland and Lesotho owes much to design on the part of the Apartheid regime, which wanted to promote separate, homogeneous 'homelands', where urban blacks were forced to have their domicile and which were meant to solidify the lines of ethnic division. Botswana, however, was a British protectorate which achieved independence in 1966. Its large territory (as big as France) borders on the Kalahari desert. In past centuries the area had been gradually colonized by Bantu pastoralists who drove out the hunting and gathering Khoisan peoples, better known in Europe as the legendary 'Bushmen' and 'Hottentots'.

The Khoi and San languages have well-nigh disappeared; only a few pockets remain. In northern Botswana some hunting and gathering peoples survive to this day.⁶² In the first half of the nineteenth century Boers began to settle in the area, during a period of great upheaval, invasion and migration. The British tried to halt the influx of Afrikaners and established a protectorate. British civil servants ruled the country and English became the language of administration. After independence, it was designated as the 'official language', next to Tswana as the 'national language'. In fact, for a long time, even in parliament only English was used (although almost all members speak Setswana as their first language).⁶³

As an independent country Botswana has steered its own course in politics, with some support from Western powers. All the while, the country remained economically dependent on South Africa, if only because it is landlocked and needs South African transport routes. Shortly after independence, diamonds were discovered and as a result the new capital, Gaborone, became something of a 'boomtown', home to more than 10 per cent of the total population.

Given the 'unimodal'⁶⁴ character of these countries, in theory, they could do without any foreign language for purposes of domestic communication. But in Botswana, as in Lesotho and Swaziland, English prevailed as the official language. In the case of the homelands this is adequately explained by their artificial and contrived character, as creations of Apartheid. They were stunted from the outset, never meant to function as viable and autonomous political entities. Botswana, however, did develop into a rather vivid democracy. In fact, politicians increasingly find it expedient to speak Tswana in parliament and in the House of Chiefs. Yet practically all printed matter is in English (except for some Bible tracts, booklets on traffic regulations and textbooks for the first classes of elementary school).

As in Rwanda, the domestic language, Tswana in this case, is spoken in adjacent territories, neighbouring Bophuthatswana (another South African artefact) and Lesotho. Yet this does not seem to add to the momentum of language planning. Apparently, the political systems are too separate to combine forces in this respect. In Botswana, too, the political and entrepreneurial elites were schooled from early on in the former colonial language. They exploited their skills to maintain an effective monopoly on jobs in the civil service and international business. The 'mystique' and 'chic' of English in these English-centred societies is no less than that of French in francophone constellations. But when it comes to the communication potential, the Q-value for Tswana approaches one, while English scores much less.⁶⁵ Hence, the predominance of English is an anomaly that can only be explained by the low level of formal education, which has kept English exclusive. It is a fair but paradoxical guess that as education spreads and English skills become more common, its monopolistic advantages will be eroded and Tswana will be used more frequently and in more domains of society, while English may increasingly be reserved for international communication, popular entertainment, advanced science and technology.

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6.3.2 Tanzania

Tanzania is one of the few countries in Africa that have adopted an African language as their national medium, and that have spread the language among the vast majority of their citizens.⁶⁶ Today Swahili is spoken by 95 per cent of Tanzanians,⁶⁷ is also common in Kenya, and is widely spoken as a trade language in eastern Congo/Zaire, Rwanda, Burundi and northern Uganda.

More than one hundred languages are spoken in Tanzania, but none of them by more than a tiny minority. The language with the greatest share of mother-tongue speakers, Sukuma, is spoken by a mere 20 per cent of the population. On the coast, Arabic is widely spoken. About one in six Tanzanians speaks English, a proportion that has remained constant for some time.

The Swahili as an ethnic group inhabit the coastal area and some islands in the Indian Ocean. Swahili is hardly associated with *the* Swahili. Notwithstanding this dissociation, or rather precisely because of it, Swahili could become the well-nigh universal language of Tanzania. It has replaced English in elementary schools and in part at the secondary level; it has driven out all native tongues that were once current in the urban areas. After independence (in 1961) and the merger of Tanganyika and Zanzibar (in 1964), Swahili was the mother tongue of only 10 per cent of Tanzanians. Since then, it has expanded to 95 per cent. At present, it is used by almost all Tanzanians in practically every domain outside the home. All other domestic languages have remained strictly local and ethnic in scope. Swahili prevails in all domains of public communication, in parliament and in business, in churches and mosques, and even in the major part of radio and television broadcasts. English remains reserved for high science and technology, for the high courts of justice and for all international contacts.⁶⁸ In some domains the two languages continue to be used side by side, in a somewhat precarious coexistence. English and Swahili remain rivals and the vicissitudes of national politics have their impact on the chances of one or the other as the medium of national communication.

Tanzania is a three-tiered language constellation. First of all, there are the domestic vernacular languages, in a peripheral position, used almost exclusively in oral communication at the local or regional level. Second, there is Swahili, the lingua franca that links the speakers of all these mother tongues, like a planet surrounded by so many moons. Finally, there is a world language, *the* world language:

hypercentral English, which connects Tanzania with the continental and global language constellations and fulfils a number of 'high' functions that are mostly complementary to and quite often in competition with those of Swahili. It is especially in the domain of education that Swahili has rivals on both flanks: English in the more advanced reaches and the vernaculars in the lower sections of the educational system.

The number of Swahili mother-tongue speakers has also been on the increase for some time, partly due to urban immigration. Where the grandparents still spoke only the local vernacular, the parents learned Swahili as a second language, and the children acquired Swahili only, as their mother tongue. Ngonyani reports a dramatic rise in native speakers of Swahili: among people older than forty-five years only 6 per cent had learned it as their mother tongue, as against 47 per cent of those younger than 18.⁶⁹

For almost two thousand years, some form of Swahili has been the language of trade between the East African interior, the coastal market towns and the harbours on the Arabian and Indian shores. The traders from the Middle East brought Islam and Swahili became the language of conversion (another parallel with Malay). Once the Christian missionaries arrived, they too used the language to spread their faith.

Once the area came under German colonial rule in 1885, the regime recruited its clerks mostly from the coastal zone, that is among Swahili speakers. The German officials, on their part, prepared for their mission by learning Swahili. After World War I, the British took over the German possessions in East Africa, known as Tanganyika; they adopted the dialect of Zanzibar as the standard version of Swahili.⁷⁰ The British administration continued the German policy of favouring Swahili as the lingua franca of the colony. Only after 1945 did the colonial regime begin to promote English and the other vernaculars, most probably, one suspects, in order to stymie the nationalist movement, which from the start had relied on Swahili.

On the rebound, Swahili gained speakers in all ranks and corners of society. After independence, it was Swahili, indigenous and widely shared, that became the very symbol of National Unity, Self-sufficiency and *Ujamaa*⁷¹ – the ubiquitous slogans proclaimed by the great leader of the struggle for independence, Julius Nyerere.⁷² And indeed, Swahili incorporated all these ideals at once. Moreover, during the first years of independence an egalitarian policy greatly broadened the opportunities for education and employment, reaching masses of Africans who until then had been completely excluded from access to schools and skilled jobs. It was no longer English but Swahili

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that opened these doors of opportunity. Of course, this contributed much to the popularity of the language.⁷³ The political leaders, on their part, Nyerere in the first place, insisted on the 'non-ethnicity' of Swahili and played down its origins in the coastal region or its traditional links to Arabic and Islam. Academic linguists obligingly attributed virtues to Swahili that were mostly ideological fabrications, meant to stress the profound African roots of the language. Swahili is indeed deeply rooted in Tanzania and beyond. It is the language of the streets, of everyday speech and casual conversation, constantly renewed and enriched by the inventions of its informal users: thus a street pedlar is grandly called a 'businessman', who risks ending the day as one of the 'walalahoi' – who go to bed on an empty stomach.⁷⁴

As matters stand, Swahili must still compete with English when it comes to prestigious registers and long-distance connections. That is why English is still very much in demand.⁷⁵ In fact, sometimes English, at other times Swahili, is the language of choice for the intermediate domains according to the 'movements of the pendulum'.⁷⁶

A brief excursion to Tanzania's northern neighbours, Kenya and Uganda, will help explain why in Tanzania Swahili could become the language of almost everyone in almost all domains, while it occupies only a secondary position in the adjacent countries, where it is nevertheless well dispersed.⁷⁷

In Kenya, from the outset, large ethnic groups resisted the spread of Swahili. It is true that among the most numerous ethnic group, the Kikuyu, forceful voices did speak up in defence of Swahili as the national language, among them the president, Jomo Kenyatta himself, and the famous author Ngugi wa Thiong'o. But the majority of Kikuyus resisted the introduction of Swahili, just as the other large language groups did, for fear that it would reduce their own language to second-class status. In this respect they resembled the Hindus more than the Javanese. English continued to occupy the central position, remained the official language and usurped all high-prestige functions, while the domestic languages of Kenya remained in an inferior position. Something similar occurred in Uganda, where the Baganda in the south opposed the introduction of Swahili as the lingua franca or official language.⁷⁸ Of old, Swahili had been the language of the army and the colonial police, recruited in large part in the north. As a consequence, it was despised as the language of the colonial oppressors, strongly identified with the northern peoples. The tyrannical regime of Idi Amin did much to strengthen these negative associations.

Even this quick look at Tanzania's neighbours helps to identify two aspects of the constellation that favour the adoption of a domestic

national language: the language should not be identified too closely with any particular group in the country, and there should be no large, influential language groups, jealous of the privileges that another language might obtain. And, it should be added, a powerful and determined nationalist movement must put its full weight behind the promotion of the new national language. The Tanzanian situation satisfied all three conditions.

In Senegal, the other country in the comparison where a large majority speaks a domestic language (Wolof), the Fulani and the Serer were numerous enough to block the adoption of Wolof, which, moreover, was closely identified with the Wolof people. Maybe also for that reason, the nationalist movement never flaunted Wolof as the language of a new, independent Senegal.

The other comparison is, of course, with Indonesia, where the nationalist movement at independence equally succeeded in transforming a popular bazaar language of relatively low prestige, only loosely associated with an ethnic group and spoken by a small minority, into the official, national language of the country, spoken by almost everyone in almost every situation. Between Tanzania and Indonesia there is, however, one major difference: in Indonesia the largest language group, the Javanese, had to abandon any claims to linguistic hegemony. Malay became for Indonesia (and South-East Asia) what Swahili became for Tanzania (and East Africa).

The rise of an indigenous national language requires the presence of a low-prestige, non-ethnic vernacular, the absence of a major language group that might oppose it, and a strong nationalist movement. Indonesia and Tanzania differ in the second respect (although the Javanese never put up much resistance), but both adopted a domestic language as their national medium. In Kenya major ethnic groups did resist the adoption of Swahili and it never gained the currency it acquired in Tanzania. A strong nationalist movement and weak opposition from ethnic groups thus greatly facilitate the rise of a domestic national language.

6.3.3 Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous country of Africa, fragmented into hundreds of ethnic groups who speak some four hundred languages, distinct but for the most part rather closely related.⁷⁹ As in the Congo/Zaire, this constellation is dominated by a small number of very large language groups: the north is dominated by Hausa, a language that

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has spread quite widely beyond Nigeria as a lingua franca. Igbo (or Ibo) is the language most frequently spoken in the southeast. Yoruba predominates in the southwest. But in contrast to the Congolese constellation, the great languages of Nigeria are associated very closely with ethnic groups, whereas except for Kiluba, the widespread vehiculars of Congo/Zaire have no such ties. Hence, English holds its ground in Nigeria, not only as a language of administration and higher education, but also as a medium that is 'neutral' with respect to ethnic groups and therefore acceptable to all as a vehicular language. Nevertheless, there exists in Nigeria another vehicular language, spoken almost everywhere, nowhere held in much esteem, but yet one that could very well serve as the national lingua franca one day: Nigerian pidgin.

In the 1940s English became the official language of Nigeria. After 1947 it shared this status in the north with Hausa. Only in 1979 were Igbo and Yoruba, each in its region, also elevated to 'co-official' status, and duly admitted in the national assembly. However, for lack of interpreters, a large part of the representatives still find themselves excluded from parliamentary debate, which continues to be held in English only: 'Sadly, the initiative remained a dead letter.' (The very constitution that formally established the equal status of the four languages of Nigeria was itself never translated into the co-official languages.⁸⁰) Yet there were some legislative attempts to curb English: schoolchildren were increasingly taught in Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba, according to the region, and a second co-official language was made a compulsory subject, while English could only be taught from the fourth year on. Nevertheless, English continued to monopolize the more prestigious domains, in the administration and the courts of law, in the universities, in commerce and in industry.

The constitution of 1989 contained roughly the same language regulations as that of 1979. Yet, when it came up for the vote, the representatives of groups whose languages had not gained formal recognition now demonstrated by staging a walkout.⁸¹ In the preceding two decades, the number of constituent states had been increased so as to form more homogeneous ethnic entities. In each state the language of the most numerous group was recognized as the official language. Actually, about a dozen of these 'network' languages were 'certified', as the expression went.⁸² Nigeria followed a programme quite similar to that of India, bestowing official status upon a dozen or more languages and designating three indigenous languages (rather than just one, Hindi) as 'co-official' with English. But once again,

these lofty linguistic intentions were never realized. The language groups that found themselves excluded insisted on also being listed among the 'co-official' languages, and in so doing precipitated the fiasco of the new policy. Every attempt to strengthen the position of the three large languages mentioned in the constitution only provoked new claims in favour of the languages that so far had been excluded. As the paralysis continued, English remained in fact the only functioning official language. If, on the other hand, a great number or even all of the languages of Nigeria had been accepted as co-official languages, English, as the one common denominator for the vast majority of representatives and officials, would have remained the only working language just the same. The more languages are accepted, the more English will be used. Very much as in India, the representatives of the smaller language groups in daily practice tacitly favoured English, just to prevent the three co-official languages from gaining any further ground.⁸³ The Nigerian parliamentarians played their game as accomplished rational-choice theorists.

In its entirety the constellation displays an apparently insuperable paralysis, brought about by the mutual jealousies between the large language groups, made even worse by the fears and ambitions of the smaller groups. Once again, also, it turns out that even when the authorities are finally converted to mother-tongue instruction, the parents oppose it because they want their children to be taught in English. In Nigeria, too, mixed couples often use English at home. Even when they do share a native language, they tend to teach their children English from the start, since that is considered 'chic' and helpful in improving the child's achievements in school. While the rate of school attendance increased seventeenfold between 1947 and 1987, the number of premature school leavers undid most of these gains. As a result, the percentage of Nigerians competent in English grew from 10 per cent to 20 per cent at most during the same forty years.

English may be held in great esteem in Nigeria, but its use remains mostly limited to written communications and formal encounters, and to contacts between people speaking different native languages. If the parties do share a domestic language, they will quickly resort to it in their more personal exchanges, where English would be considered aloof and presumptuous. Or, as the saying goes, with only slight variations, in so many tropical countries: 'English is the language for the airco, the native tongue is for the verandah.'

Hence, in Nigeria also, English remains the language of the elite. The laws that were adopted to promote the national languages embody –

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in the words of Ayo Bamgbose – ‘a policy conceived by the elite to benefit the masses’. And Bamgbose explains its failure as a consequence of the colonial past and the prohibitive costs of educational reform. But, he argues, the real reason for the fiasco is that the elites have an interest in announcing a policy that might benefit the great majority of Nigerians, but do not stand to gain from implementing it also.⁸⁴

More than ten years ago, Ike Ndolo proposed introducing Nigerian Pidgin as the national language.⁸⁵ From his survey of local observers, Ndolo concluded that across the entire territory some 60 per cent of the population spoke Pidgin. It is used in popular radio programmes and in the most widely watched soap series on TV, and it is entirely void of specific ethnic connotations and would therefore not provoke the resistance that the national languages are bound to arouse. English, argues Ndolo, may well be the language of the law, but the laws are applied in Pidgin, in the street by the police, at the desk by the officials, in prisons by the guards and even in court by lawyers and bailiffs. What counts even more is that Pidgin does not provoke the shy hesitations in uneducated Nigerians that English does. On the contrary, the language is spoken everywhere, spontaneously, without embarrassment, with ease and confidence, also by educated Nigerians who prefer it to English in informal and homely encounters. F. Niyi Akinnaso, for his part, concludes: ‘While English continues to perform “high” functions, pidgin has almost taken over the role of *lingua franca* in non-formal domains. Thus, it has become the most popular medium of intergroup communication in various heterogeneous communities throughout the country.’⁸⁶

Apparently unaware of Ndolo’s position, James Oladejo has proposed keeping English as the language of higher education and international communication and introducing Pidgin in all other domains of communication across Nigeria.⁸⁷ According to a survey he quotes, three-quarters of all respondents in 1989 opposed the replacement of English by a domestic language as the official medium. As to Pidgin, his data confirm that regional varieties are still mutually intelligible, that the language is not associated with specific ethnic groups or religions and that it is widely known (by at least 30 per cent, according to his sources).⁸⁸

But the great weakness in all this strength is precisely the lack of prestige and pedigree: ‘While everybody likes to use it to his own advantage, no one wants to be associated with its humble state.’⁸⁹ In fact, one may detect a certain sentimentalism – which I share – in this advocacy of Pidgin, a predilection for the folksy, the earthy, the

spontaneous, and also a rather illusory expectation that social barriers and impediments will disappear once the language of the people is elevated to national and official status: the proponents argue as if differences now considered irrelevant would not then fuel disputes, as if a social embarrassment presently absent would not make itself felt as soon as more formal encounters had to be managed in the popular language. And yet there are the contemporary examples of Swahili and Malay and, in a much longer time perspective, the precedents of the vulgates such as Italian, French or Hindi which became folk languages and means of long-distance communication, then developed into vernaculars, and finally were elevated to official and national status. Such transformations, it appears, are brought about in the course of a few generations by writers first and rulers next, and above all, by the legions of talkative and creative users of the language.

This survey of six countries in Sub-Saharan Africa has first of all revealed how great are the impediments to the introduction of a domestic language for national communication in these societies. In fact, in all six of them a domestic vehicular language that could serve on a country-wide basis is available, current sometimes among a sizeable minority, such as the Congolese *lingua francas* or Nigerian pidgin, sometimes spoken by a large majority as in the case of Wolof in Senegal, or even by the entire population, as in Botswana or Rwanda. Yet only in Tanzania does a domestic language, Swahili, effectively function as the national language. The different language policies of the former colonizers do not make much difference. Most important is the opposition of an important language group to the introduction of another idiom as the national medium: 'language jealousy'. In the meantime the status quo continues and the former colonial language prevails, because it serves the interests of the administrative elites. The language is not freely accessible, since it requires formal schooling to master the written version. Education is not available for an important part of the population for lack of funds. The resulting group monopoly on the ex-colonial language safeguards the elite's exclusive hold on the better positions in the labour market. New cohorts of students prefer to learn the ex-colonial language, since they expect it to provide them with access to the most attractive jobs. This again strengthens the hegemony of the former colonial language.

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