

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# AFRICAN LANGUAGE

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## Overview

Historical existence, the state of being born into a unique time and place, is at its hardest to analyze when it comes to the most intimate and immediate expressions of our being-here, like our language use, which morphs from the infant's cries into the imitable sounds he or she, you or me, wakes into and incorporates from his parents. The language (or languages) one becomes become at the same time one's fate and baggage, plunged as they are deeply into their own histories and thus into the past experiences of the history of one's group.

The inheritor of one of the 2000 languages spoken on the continent of Africa--almost one third of the world's languages--may, dependent on the linguistic destiny given him, inherit the vocabularies expressive of different regional terms--goats, or deserts, or grasslands, or coastal fishing--which derive from the proto-forms of the language itself. In addition to this inheritance of the material background reflected in his language, there will be the patterns of thought and expression in which these material reference points are embedded--the ways in which the individual's version of Swahili, or Kwa, or Berber--formulates itself; syntax, morphology, phonology.

**Phyla and language families** The same schools of thinking that undergird Darwinian evolutionary theory, in biology, support the notion that language development accrues by a meaningful developmental history, stages following one another by a pattern some see as constantly meliorative, goal-directed. It is a recent conviction that all human languages derive from a common mother, in Africa, and that speech emerged in such communities between 100,000 and 200,000 years ago--coeval with the first modern humans, our first Africans. (An up to the minute measure of the distance of non-African languages, from the African mother-root, is the number of phonemes in a given language, the greater the number of useable phonemes proving to be the evidence for the greatest antiquity; a yardstick by which proto-African language proves its unique antiquity.) In the course of its evolution, the system of African languages has generated four major *phyla*, language families under which numerous language groups have clustered. Those major families are: Niger-Congo, which includes the Bantu family, 1436 languages,; Afroasiatic, 371 languages; Nilo-Saharan, 196 languages; Khoisan, 35 languages. The networking relations, among the members of these large families, are multiform and of constant debate, among those linguists who believe that many of the members are dialects, not full-blown languages.

**African languages and African history** Except in cases where individual languages pin point events externally datable--through collateral written reference, through archaeology--it is difficult to date the historical origins either of African language phyla, or of individual languages. Word histories--that is back-dating from living texts-- is one arduous path to recreating partial histories of an African past which is for the most part cloaked in a pre-literate obscurity. (Two culture-reconstructive monographs--cf. entries under Vansina and Ehret, in *Readings*--are forerunners of the exciting work ahead.) Three brief examples may illustrate the problems and limits of historical language dating in Africa.

*Example 1:* The widespread use of the 'old inherited word for 'goat' --\*-bulj '-- provides evidence far back into Niger-Congo history that the proto-Bantu peoples knew goat-culture, and that the awareness of this fact was preserved into the present. *So detailed and incremental are the pieces of evidence that must be assembled, before earlier African history, say prior to 1000 C.E., can be reassembled! The minima of word history must suffice as far-reaching historical clues.*

*Example 2:* On certain occasions, the reconstruction of a word history will lead to direct evidence of a moment of cultural change. In one instance, the proto-Bantu Mashariki language, change to an area of richer soils meant change to new planting techniques, a move which was reflected in a new term, introduced around 1000 C.E. By such incremental clues, one makes forays into the historical heritage of a specific African language.

*Example 3:* Tribal migration of the Maxay people, in the Horn of Africa, meant that at a certain point camels got substituted for cattle, as the all purpose work animal. The substitution of a new term, for camels instead of cattle, kept pace with the new realities of Maxay society. For this change, we have an approximate date to work with, 1200

C.E., and can let language provide the historical evidence. But at that we are only at the outer threshold of establishing a historical sequence for this small area of the Horn.

**African language as part of the present** So much for the past as reflected in African language. How does an African language work as part of the present? A little story may help us. Imagine we find ourselves in an enclave of what is now Delta State, Nigeria. We're in the area of Warri--a small city perched on the Atlantic, at a confluence of riverine cultures whose livelihoods--trading salted fish, for inland yams and produce--are wrapped up in the market culture of the region. In the local markets around Warri and Ughelli, at the confluence of what are navigable creeks, a variety of ethnic groups, speaking closely interrelated versions of Niger-Congo, meet, trade, and socialize. All they are and do is intertwined with languages--the business of the day, the gossip of the day, the weather predictions of the day. The ethnic groups speak Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Edo--the mutually intelligible interfaces of living speech enacted in trade, and with it uniting cultures whom kinship and commercial interest have bound, in the closely interwoven communities making life into a turbulent language lab. Language is the spontaneous interface among intersecting commercial actions. The history of a half dozen languages is playing out before us, the past embedded in a present which is itself immediately replaced.

**The secret of communication** Multiply the above example sufficiently, and you abut on a continent riven by mutually intersecting, and more or less mutually intelligible language/tribal/ communities. What holds them together? Cultural DNA, the oldest known to human civilization; and intra-intelligible pidgin bridges. (Pidgin, simplified English interwoven with native languages, spoken by some 75,000,000 in West Africa.) West African commerce, thus society, turns on the axle grease of pidgin.

### Readings

Dimmendaal, Gerrit, *Historical Linguistics and the Comparative Study of African Languages*, Amsterdam, 2011.

Ehret, Christopher, *The Historical Reconstruction of Southern Cushitic Phonology and Vocabulary*, Berlin, 1980.

Greenberg, Joseph, *The Languages of Africa*, Bloomington, 1963.

Guthrie, Malcolm, *The Classification of the Bantu Languages*, Oxford, 1948.

Heine, Bernd; Nurse, Derek, *African Languages: An Introduction*, Cambridge, 2000.

Vansina, Jan, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa*, Madison, 1990.

### Discussion questions

There is a theory that all African languages derive from a single proto-language. What kind of evidence could be adduced, to support such a theory?

Does the notion of a 'language family,' as in the four major phyla into which we divide African languages, make sense to you? Or does it seem like an artificial academic construct?

Why are there so many languages in Africa (or India)? Does this proliferation serve a function? Why not a single language for Africa? Has it been proposed?

Is the reconstruction of the history of African languages feasible? Why should we try to accomplish such a feat?

Is language development on a curve of improvement? Is a language a system designed to get better, from within, at doing 'the job it is designed for'?

Has pidgin claims to being an independent language? Or is it solely a facilitator? Is there a 'literature' in pidgin?