Discourse on linguistic diversity in Africa

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Abstract

The prevailing linguistic literature typically depicts the African linguistic landscape as the most heterogeneous in the world. Surely linguistic diversity of the African continent cannot be denied, however, it can be noted that the mere evocation of this natural manifestation of language change is on the agenda, which sounds excessive compared to actual facts. The discourse on African linguistic diversity has steadily stemmed from a biased Eurocentric ideology. Explorers first invented the ethnic group; then the colonial administration strove to partition functionally homogeneous communities into countless ethnic groups, and missionaries, using questionable linguistic methods, have encouraged linguistic distinctiveness so further emphasizing the sentiment of linguistic fragmentation.

Keywords: **Linguistic diversity, ethnic group, missionary, explorers, linguistic landscape, writing.**

Résumé

*La littérature linguistique dominante dépeint généralement le paysage linguistique Africain comme
le plus hétérogène au monde. Certes, la diversité linguistique du continent africain ne saurait être
niée, cependant, on note que l'évocation de cette manifestation du changement linguistique, du
reste naturelle, prend les allures d'un discours excessif sans commune mesure avec la réalité sur le
terrain. Le discours sur la diversité linguistique africaine a été construit sur des ressorts
idéologiques à forts relents euro-centristes. Les explorateurs auront d'abord inventé l'ethnie;
ensuite l'administration coloniale s'est évertuée à partitionner les communautés fonctionnellement
homogènes en myriades d'ethnies, et les missionnaires, usant de méthodes linguistiques
discutables, ont cultivé et encouragé la fragmentation linguistique.*

**Mots clé : Diversité linguistique, groupe ethnique, missionnaires, explorateurs, paysage
linguistique, écriture.**

Introduction

If linguistic diversity is the dispersion of languages and dialects over space and their change over time, then this phenomenon is a normal manifestation of language change. And since no known human community or nation is strictly monolingual, linguistic diversity is the norm rather than the exception.

No one would seriously deny that the African language landscape displays a fairly high linguistic heterogeneity. Yet, the extreme multiplicity of languages on the African continent sounds more like a *discourse* than actual fact. Is the African continent the most linguistically heterogeneous in the world? According to UNESCO estimates cited by Brown and Ogilve (2010: 319) the African continent has a slightly lower linguistic diversity, with 2,058 languages representing 30% of all the world languages compared to Asia which hosts 2,197 corresponding to 33% of the total languages. Unfortunately, whenever the issue of linguistic heterogeneity is on the agenda of a scientific gathering, the current (socio)linguistic literature gives the impression that linguistic diversity is more characteristic of the African continent.

The encyclopedic knowledge and research procedures accumulated over the centuries in social sciences are, to a large extent, a heritage of the "archeology of knowledge" of the West. The current academic systems of knowledge are the product of prevailing ideologies; even the meta-language to describe African languages, which includes the identification of linguistic categories, draws essentially from the terminology used long ago in the study of Greek and Latin. If the African linguistic landscape is portrayed this way could it be that western academia has a singular view on the African continent and its peoples?

This paper aims at showing that the perception of the African landscape as extremely heterogeneous has been progressively construed through the varied accounts of European "actors", from the early explorers to the colonial administrators and the Missionaries. They have, in one way or another contributed to the construction and reinforcement of the discourse on the African linguistic heterogeneity an impression which is now firmly anchored in the minds of language researchers.

The paper successively looks at how European explorers' accounts on the "mysteries" they "discovered" in Africa have impacted African linguistics, how colonial administrative practices have contributed to the fragmentation of African speech communities and thus artificially increased linguistic diversity, and the way in which the works of Missionaries on African languages have unfairly credited the erroneous sentiment of the fractionalized spectrum of the African linguistic landscape.

1. A Continent of Mysteries and Myriads of Ethnic Groups

Although language issues were not directly the top priority of the first European explorers, their exploratory activities combined with those of anthropologists and ethnologists have had a significant impact on African linguistics in general, and especially on the way the language landscape was and is portrayed.

Compared to North Africa (i.e. the Maghreb), the inland area and specifically Sub-Saharan Africa was basically unknown to Europeans until about the end of the 18th century. It was reported that, looking up a sketchy version of a map of the continent, the British explorer Henry M. Stanley was impressed by the many "blanks" left by map-makers. In his view, these "blanks" were areas waiting to be explored. The findings and discoveries of these explorations were intended to meet the curiosity of western scientific circles and the authorities who commissioned exploratory missions. The titles of two memorable exploration accounts by Henry M. Stanley are very telling of his perception of the continent: one such mission to East and Central Africa was supposed to take him *Through the Dark Continent,* and the second one, an alleged rescue operation, led the explorer *In Darkest Africa.* The "darkness" associated to the African continent was a direct reference to the mysteries surrounding the geographical make-up of the continent and the strange lifestyles of its peoples. Henry M. Stanley's perceptions of the continent do not contrast with the views of his contemporaries. The German philosopher, Hegel (who was theorizing on civilizations in the world) is well-known for having excluded the African continent from the history of humanity*: "*What we properly understand by Africa, is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History" (Sibree 2001: 99). The Hegelian views were shared by many other scholars, such as Trevor-Roper (1965), who was also of the opinion that "at present there is [no African history], or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness... and darkness is not a subject of history." These pseudo-scientific certainties derive from an approach that consists in regarding other cultures in contrast with European cultures, or through the prism of Euro-centrism. Being ""African" was codified in opposition to what it means to be a fully human "modern" social agent" (Mudimbe, 1988: 12) and anything that did not display the genuine European feature was treated as an "exotic and incomprehensible alterity" *(Ibid: 72).*

The initial antagonist paradigms of "civilized societies" of Europe and the "primitive societies" of non-European communities were next replaced by corresponding paradigms: "industrialized societies" in opposition to "pre-industrialized" ones. Understandably, the ideologically loaded labeling of the two societies reverberates in the no less ideological loaded reference to the people: industrialized societies were portrayed as being structured around economic production, whereby social stratification was conceived in terms of "*social groups*". By contrast, pre-industrialized societies, like African societies, in which social and economic life was structured along a different logic, were seen by ethnologists and anthropologists as social organizations based on "*ethnic groups"* (Simonet 2011). "Ethnicity" and "tribe" then became the descriptive concepts for the African society. The "ethnic group", in the hands of European social scientists (anthropologists and ethnologists), became a theoretical construct, that is to say, a product of ideology. As Gruénais (1986: 358) pointed out, "[l]es ethnies de l'anthropologie ne sont pas

dissociables des dynamiques politico-économiques". In other words, the "ethnic group" was a convenient category to construe African societies in compliance with the representations of Western social scientists. Explorers were conducting their exploratory missions at a time when scientific procedures substantially drew on structuralism, known to be keen on the identification of the components of the systems under study and their subsequent classification. Therefore, it is no surprise that African populations were viewed in terms of groups identifiable by what was then perceived as defining characteristics; and one such characteristic happened to be the "tribe" or the "ethnic group". After all, the "job" of explorers was to "disclose" the mysteries of the "dark" continent. It follows that the most deserving and zealous explorers were those who could bring back the most detailed accounts, highlighting the striking and exotic peculiarities that could help distinguish groups of populations as different from one another. The mores, manners and customs of the people explorers met would be described with maximum details, so as to establish a mapping knowledge on the communities observed. This led Simonet (2011) to conclude that "ethnology and anthropometry are affirmed", and the concept of ethnicity took off within the system of knowledge constructed.

Explorers were then be credited for having "discovered" *tribes* or *ethnic groups*. Epistemologically, such discoveries were not immune of an ideological load: to discover a place or a group of people bears the claim that the thing discovered was unknown from any previous human experience which is simply nonsensical since the places and people explorers would claim to have discovered might have been there for immemorial time... (Abbattista 2011). The ethnic group was a conventional representation of social "otherness" (Mudimbe, 1988) meant to meet the necessity to find distinctions among groups of people, so as to make them unique and distinguishable. This has led a number of researchers (Abolou, 2006; Calvet, 1992; Breton, 1997; Amselle, 1983) to say that "ethnicity" is a construct that became the foundation of a social science – ethnology and anthropology - especially carved for the African continent and its people. The term "*ethnic group*" has its own history. Lentz (1995: 304) recalls that it *"was coined in the 1970s by European anthropologists in replacement of "tribe" thought to be offensive in that it hurts the sensibility of African researchers"*.

At the time European explorers and colonizers started venturing on the African continent, the West did enjoy a certain internal organization with political entities in the forms of kingdoms, empires or state-nations. All these organizations were formed on the basis of the common Judeo-Christian culture and, most importantly, around the language of the political authority, the official language. The most telling cases that contemporary history still retains are the English language, which was decreed the official language of the nation by Edward III in the 14th century and the French dialect of Tour, which was imposed as the official language of Kingdom by François I. By contrast, most African political organizations (Kingdoms and Empires) were multilingual, but the presence of several languages and dialects within the same political entity was not regarded as a factor of disharmony among the people paying loyalty to the sovereign authority.

In short, the perception of Western explorers, who were looking at African society in contrast to European nation-states contributed to the ideological a priori that there is no way to make sense of African social organizations, if not in terms of ethnic groups. And since

distinctiveness looked more exotic than cultural and linguistic homogeneity, explorers could but discover in Africa a myriad of tribes and ethnic groups.

Furthermore, the prevailing assumption was that the ethnic group had its own language, and languages were named after speech communities. Language became the fundamental feature to characterize and identify an ethnic group (Simonet 1992: 31). Therefore, postulating the existence of a countless number of ethnic groups necessarily foreshadowed extreme linguistic heterogeneity: a myriad of ethnic groups axiomatically implies a myriad of languages and dialects. Diversity and variability were seen as the defining feature of African societies, corresponding to their mysterious social fabric, while homogeneity characterized the Western world. Along the same lines, the African polytheism was generally opposed to the Western monotheism and based on the Biblical legend of the Tower of Babel, Mansour (1993: 2) notes that "monolingualism becomes equated with civilization whereas multilingualism […] is God's punishment for the wicked" Africans. In short, the discourse on an extremely high linguistic diversity in Africa is due, to a large extent, to the perception of Africa as a continent made up of a myriad of ethnic groups.

2. Colonial Practices to Increase Linguistic Diversity

Historically, explorers and anthropologists in the mid-18th century paved the way to the discourse on African linguistic diversity. The colonial administration did not take a different route. The carving of colonial borders and the administrative necessity to label artificially constituted communities also contributed to cultural and linguistic fragmentation.

2.1 Fanciful Straight borderlines

The alleged existence of a myriad of ethnic groups and the ensuing linguistic heterogeneity cannot be blamed on colonial agents directly. The job of explorers and anthropologists was to "create" ethnic groups, and this was achieved by labeling groups considered to be similar or different, according to criteria forged by those claiming to have discovered them. The information gathered by the explorers and other social scientists was used by the colonizers to implement their agenda. The place names and peoples were crucial information for the administrative delimitation of colonial territories, and more so when the Berlin Conference dismembered the African continent.

Cases of deliberate splits of cultural units which reinforced the impression of ethnic diversity abound, especially in instances where competing colonial powers settled next to one another. For example in the equatorial African region, although the Congo River appears to be a natural geographic boundary, people on either bank of the river shared the same economic practices or other cultural traits and could reasonably be said to constitute one cultural entity. Yet, the sharing of this region between the French and Belgian colonial administrations split this cultural entity. Over time, the populations so artificially divided developed competing reflexes around the exploitation of natural resources and progressively viewed themselves as completely different communities from one another. In fact, no novel ethnic group had spontaneously come into existence; and yet, the artificial restructuring of space eventually created "two new ethnic groups",

so reinforcing the impression of the multiplicity of ethnic entities, and the related impression of an unlimited number of languages.

One of the most salient aspects of colonialism in reinforcing ethnic diversity is the way borders were "carved" to create colonial states. The natural distribution of indigenous populations or their historical patterns of settlement borders were not taken into account in demarcating the boundaries. On the field, borders between communities could take all kinds of shapes. They rarely coincided with the traditional delimitations of cultural communities. According to Englebert, Tanrago and Carter (2002), up to 44% of colonial borders in Africa have arbitrarily split some 150 communities over several and distinct colonial states or zones of influence, with each and every part of the split community being generally given a different label, hence, adding to the impression of the fragmented linguistic profile of the continent.

In West Africa an Akan community located across the border of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana provides a telling illustration. On the Ghanaian side, this community is called the *Nzemas*; whilst, on the Ivorian side of the border, the same community is known as the "*Apolos*". The case of the Nzemas/Apolos, like many others across the continent, is interesting because, whilst they are labeled as different entities, the two communities have never perceived themselves as two distinct cultural entities. Both pay loyalty to a unique King and engage in the same rituals (political succession, funerals and other religious celebrations). The so-called *Apolos* always refer to themselves as *Nzemas,* when using their language, and only use the label "*Apolo"* when speaking French.

Likewise, in the southern and coastal regions of West Africa, a component of the South-Mande family that stretches across Guinea (Conakry) and Liberia is alternatively identified as the *Kpelles* in Liberia and the *Gbreses* in Guinea. On either side of the border however, this community does not claim separate identities. Similarly, in the same region, the Weh, a sub-group of the Kru family in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, is called the "*Khrans"* in English-speaking Liberia whilst in Côte d'Ivoire, they are known as the "*Weh*". Furthermore, the *Weh* of Côte d'Ivoire are split into *Guere*, Wobeh, and another fourteen different "languages", all of which only use these labels when speaking French. This, even though the lexical mutual intelligibility rate is well above 90%.

2.2 Colonial administrative organization and the labeling of languages

Linguistic diversity also originates from the territorial organization colonizers have put in place. This is particularly visible in the South-West region of Côte d'Ivoire. The French colonial administration created administrative units called the "administrative circles", which were further divided in "cantons", meant to correspond to cultural entities regarded as "tribes". Communities of the Bete region (Gagnoa, Daloa, Guiberoua), for instance, continue to identify themselves according to the denomination of these cantons. This way, any researcher undertaking linguistic research in the region is told by the local populations that there are several Betes: the Bete of the Yokoli Canton, the Bete of the Guebié Canton, the Bete of the Zabia Canton, the Bete of the Bamo Canton, in all totaling no less a dozen Bete languages! These labels suggest that the so called languages are in fact the names of the administrative units created by the French colonial

administration exactly on the model of the territorial organization in France, French-speaking Belgium and French-speaking Switzerland. One is justified to conclude that it is the naming that has actually given an existence to those speech forms which variation does not impede seriously inter-comprehension among the communities. In the late 1990s, the Centre of Advanced Studies of Afrian Societies (CASAS) based in Cape-Town, South Africa, had conducted a research on mutual intelligibility in the region; this research has come to the conclusion that the difference between those dialects is generally a matter of prosodic features if we ignore loan words that each territorial community take from neighboring Kru and Mande communities. Clearly, the colonial territorial organization, which was not a linguistic enterprise had a direct impact on the way the linguistic landscape of the Bete region was and is viewed: one of the most linguistically fragmented region in Côte d'Ivoire.

Tabouret-Keller (1997) once asked: *"Who gives names to languages?"*   Today, most linguists agree that the number of languages in Africa, and presumably in other parts in the world, is a matter of labeling (Abolou, 2006; Halaoui, 2009). Names can derive from local populations, who did not use them as identifiers of speech communities, but as place names or addresses. Progressively, the place names took a functional property whereby groups of population living in the area were named after the geographical space of their settlement. In West Africa, the Baule, a component of the Akan group, offer a good illustration of how place names turned into languages. The *Nzipli* are the Baule communities settled on the banks of the Nzi River (Center of Côte d'Ivoire), the *Wallebo*, are those Baule, who decided to live under the protection of a mystical tree (*walle*). If such names have become ethnonyms of communities, they were not meant as labels of languages in the first place, especially since the Baule, who fled from present Ghana in the 17th century, have a clear consciousness of using the same language which spreads out as far as to Togo, where its speech community is known as the *Cokosis*. Mutual intelligibility between those distant populations and those settled in Côte d'Ivoire is reportedly fairly high. Yet, in the "official" linguistic atlas of the Baule land, the Nzipli, Wallebo and many other language/ethnic labels are used to identify the allegedly different languages/ethnic communities.

Similarly in the Gur cultural area with the Senufo, a number of sub-communities are named after the place of their historical settlement or the nature or circumstances of their migratory movement. Linguistic separateness can also be found in the case of the Cebaara variant which has been equipped with a writing system since the 1960s. As a result, a Senufo version of the Bible was produced. However, recently, another Senufo variant – the Nyarafolo – was given its own scripts with the final objective of producing another version of the Holy Book. When these scripts are used for adult literacy, the mid and long term consequences will be the progressive reinforcement among the populations that they really speak completely different languages, and the sentiment of distinctiveness will be further strengthened. This is quite likely, since there are national plans to use these scripts in formal education as part of an on-going national project. When asked why they do not use an alternative solution, whereby transversal writing systems encompassing dialectal variation are compiled for the whole cluster, the Missionaries say that their prime objective is not linguistic research, but communication effectiveness, and that their ultimate objective is to equip every single variety with its own version of the bible, provided the financial resources are available.

In the mountainous region of the West of Côte d'Ivoire, the action of Missionaries among the Dan people (from the South-Mande language family) offers another illustration of the celebration of language distinctiveness. The Dan sub-cluster acknowledges two variants: the Yakuba and the Tura. Research teams commissioned by the Protestant Missionaries have devised a parallel writing system for each variant and produced two parallel translated versions of the Bible. In the Kru language family, the Bete variants have also been allocated distinct writing systems for the varieties spoken in the major administrative regions of Daloa, Gagnoa and Guiberoua. Is it true that, in the cases quoted above, Yakuba and Tura speakers on the one hand, Bete speakers of Daloa, Gagnoa and Guiberoua on the other hand, do not understand each other?

The language labels has fossilized in the academic literature, because other researchers, be they Europeans or Africans feel compelled to keep the terminological references of the pre-existing literature. As for populations, they tend to integrate the labels used by their local or national administration as glossonyms, all things that contribute to the impression of a high linguistic diversity, when the reality on the ground indicates that this is far from being the case.

3. Missionary Linguistics

There is no exaggeration in stating that Missionaries had a significant impact on the perception of the African linguistic landscape in general, and specifically on the issue of linguistic diversity. Concerning what can be termed "missionaries' linguistics", it should be noted that the British and French missionaries developed different language policies (Prah 2000:16) that were dictated by different attitudes for African languages. Not only French catholic Missionaries showed very limited interest in local languages, they had generally adjusted their perception of the African linguistic landscape to the way the French colonial administration had identified local languages, that is, reliance on the territorial organization of the colonial space.

3.1 Celebration of distinctiveness

Most influential in African linguistics is the contribution of Protestants, from British and German clergies essentially[1]. Missionaries needed African languages to convert Africans to their religion and lifestyle, as efficiently as they could. All their actions on language were determined by pragmatism. When settled in an area the speech form they encountered would be immediately exploited to convey the religious message, regardless of how their area of settlement connects linguistically with the larger geographical territory. The "language" would then be equipped with a specific writing system and often used for educational purposes. Mufwene (2009: 2016) quotes the case of a variant of Kikongo in the DR Congo that was "coined" by the Missionaries and named *Kikongo Kisantu* ("Language of the Saints"). In the mind of Missionaries, the new "language" was "unadulterated" and morphologically "richer", so that it was perfectly appropriate to express all the required semantic subtleties specific to their religious discourse. The only problem was that this new language sounded a bit strange in the ears of local Kikongo speakers. Makoni (1998) also quotes the case of "languages" being invented by Missionaries from the Shona language spoken in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Mozambique. In the process of developing languages by equipping them with orthographies, rival religious institutions had eventually created three "languages" within the Shona cluster. The Zimbabwean case dates back to the period of colonialism; however, the

ideology-driven perception of the African linguistic landscape as very fragmented has not changed over time. Although there is information on the classification of African languages that has allowed a relatively accurate identification of language clusters, Missionaries generally show little interest in a globalizing approach to African languages and do not consider variants in the same cluster as daughter speech forms. Wedded to the stereotyped view of a congenital variability of the African linguistic landscape, they insist on and reinforce the impression of linguistic fractionalization. The celebration of distinctiveness is institutionalized through the codification of languages using writing systems and subsequently the translation of clerical texts in adjacent variants of the same language cluster.

3.2 Methodological shortcomings

The distinction between dialects of the same cluster generally relies on mutual intelligibility. If the use of mutual intelligibility to delineate variants cannot be brought into question, the problem is how this index is computed and exploited. A large proportion of the writing systems in use in the religious literature are phonetic transcriptions, which can hardly be considered orthographic. From the theoretical and practical points of view, a writing system using phonetic transcription must be regarded as the representation of "*parole*" rather than "*langue*", especially when speech forms are approached only on the basis of their spoken form. Taking into account all the inherent idiosyncratic practices and negligible dialectal differences (Silué 2014), it is obvious that dissimilarities will override inner and invariant features that may suggest similarities among variants of the same cluster.

We have being arguing that the fascination for distinctiveness when dealing with African languages and which led to the overwhelming impression of linguistic diversity is based on ideology essentially. Ideology also translated into the research methodology as a by-product of the overall knowledge system. African linguistics as a research paradigm did not start before the late 18th century; and those involved in research on African languages were not professional linguists. The methodological inconsistency starts with the type of data used to sustain the contrasted views of European and African linguistic landscapes. In contrasting African languages and European languages, researchers often failed to see that the comparison was biased right from the start. Whilst almost all African languages are still unwritten, if not all, the great majority of Western languages enjoy a fairly long-standing written tradition. And since variability is inherent to oral speech whilst structural harmonized format is the a defining feature of written speech, it is no wonder that the African linguistic landscape looked much fractionalized in contrast to the Western linguistic landscape. By way of example, when listening successively to native speakers of English from Britain, the United States, Nigeria, Australia, Ghana or Jamaica, one would note crucial differences in their oral speech; however, when reading a text written by one of these speakers, it would be really hard to tell whether it was written by an American, an Australian, a Jamaican or a Nigerian.

The case of Chinese is even more telling of the methodological inconsistencies in the phantasmagoric description of the African linguistic landscape. Chinese language acknowledges no less than 400 dialects; however, this dialectal diversity is overshadowed by the unicity of the pictographic script. The Chinese writing gives the impression of homogeneity, whilst oral speech

stresses variation. This methodological bias distorts the diversity of African languages, when in actual fact, it is just a matter of different corpora: the oral corpus for African languages *versus* the written corpus for Western languages. Whilst orality gives the impression of unpredictable variability, writing gives the impression of unity. The impression of the extreme variability of African languages confined in orality against the relative homogeneity of western languages reminds us of the same methodological discrepancy that led Léopold Senghor (1988: 177) to the surprising conclusion that the French language is naturally equipped to "speak sciences", whilst African languages are genetically appropriate for artistic expression.

It sounds reasonable to hypothesize that writing has, in the long run, an impact on linguistic landscapes, say linguistic heterogeneity. Ka & Diallo (2005: 58) note that "l'écriture peut limiter la diversité idiomatique et les changements au sein d'une langue, parce qu'elle standardise cette langue à divers niveaux". Empirical observation informs that the human communities which enjoys a long-standing writing tradition are more linguistically homogeneous compared to communities that are vegetating in oralture. Second, it can also be hypothesized that, as a social practice, writings significantly impact thinking strategies on the one hand, (Ong 2000; Goody 1979, 1981; Graff 1981; Caniesa-Doronila 1996, Scribner & Cole 1981) and on the other hand, scripts influence the internal structure of languages. Further research is required to confirm this intuition but for the time being, we hypothesize that alphabetic or syllabic writing are meant to transcribe speech sounds, that is, the most intimate parts of language structure. By contrast, whilst pictographic and ideographic scripts like Chinese do have an impact on social practices and even social transformation, they have a very limited influence on the structure of the language. This, because such pictographic scripts represent concepts only and as such they are completely disconnected from the spoken word which relates to the structure of language.

Mansour (1933: 15) argues that the exaggeration of linguistic diversity in Africa is also due to the lack of sound sociolinguistic data. It may also originate from poor data collection methodology, ranging from the selection of appropriate respondents, to the accuracy of the questions. Missionaries have often resorted to their catechists or untrained domestic staff, who generally lack theoretical or technical metalinguistic consciousness about the nature of language. On relying on these respondents, the researcher runs the risk of collecting the wrong information. Irvine (2006) quotes the case of large proportions of Igbo populations which had been deported in the process of the slavery trade from their home region (present day Nigeria) to the south-west coastal region of Sierra Leone. Not knowing that these Igbo originate a very from far-distant region (Nigeria), Missionaries used them as first-hand respondents for the identification and seminal description of the languages and dialects found in this coastal region. As can be seen, not only they had compiled very inaccurate information, but they would then claim having "discovered" a language which, understandably, would be unknown to local people in the area.

The research methodology of Missionaries and other non-professional language researchers raises concern over frequent communication gaps between respondents and field researchers, who come in with questionable preconceptions. The ordinary African is so driven by communication pragmatism, that he is generally polyglot and appreciates multilingualism as a normal phenomenon.

In African markets, a seller and his client may even bargain in parallel dialects, each of them using their own speech form and the interaction would still unfold without failure. In such circumstances, they do not think of their respective languages as strictly dichotomic speech forms, but as different speech styles. A European researcher, ideologically conditioned by rather questionable differences among languages will view these speech forms as discrete entities that can be analyzed independently of the speakers. The researcher and the respondent having such diverging appreciations of the linguistic profile of communities, the intents of the researcher, when formulating his/her questions, and the spontaneous response of the respondent, about the same linguistic situation are likely to bring about ambiguities. If the respondent is asked whether s/he **understands** the language of fellow countrymen, s/he is likely to assert mutual intelligibility, which in his/her mind, means functional inter-comprehension. As such, the response does not fit the ideological frame of the Western researcher. By contrast, if the same respondent is asked whether his/her speech form is **different** from that of his/her neighbors and s/he acknowledges the s/he and his/her neighbors speak differently, the researcher may conclude in this instance that this is evidence of different languages, an evidence that could not be less scientific since it comes as, (Van Den Avenne, 2012) ironically put it "*de la bouche même des indigènes*".

Conclusion

Linguistic diversity is a natural manifestation of language change. The fact that the current sociolinguistic literature portrays the African continent as the most linguistically heterogeneous region in the world originates from preconceived Eurocentric ideas. Glossonyms often coincide with ethnonyms; and since a great number of tribes and ethnic groups are colonial inventions, accounts on linguistic diversity in Africa are significantly overstressed.

Beyond the ideological factor, the perception of extreme diversity has also been reinforced by questionable research methodologies, since the Missionaries or colonial administration officers, who inaugurated African linguistics in the late 18th century, were not qualified for this kind of task. Therefore, whilst linguistic diversity on the continent cannot be denied, it is, by far, less a reality than a myth entertained by an ideologically loaded discourse and as Djité (2008:46) once notes, "language classification [in Africa] is more telling about the classifiers than the [languages] classified".

Languages do not exist out of speech communities and African societies are changing rapidly through contacts contracted with other regions of the world in the context of fast-going urbanization which is even accelerated by globalization. Whilst urbanization seems to have a relatively low impact on the African language landscape, especially in rural areas, globalization which might presumably accelerate urbanization on the continent during the next coming decades, is much likely to modify the language ecosystem of the continent. In other words, the internally evolving linguistic ecosystem suggests that some African (Trans)-national lingua francas (Silué 2013) will progressively erode the current African linguistic diversity.

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