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# Had Ferdinand de Saussure spoken Wolof or Basaa..., the discipline of linguistics would have fared differently

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Over the past decade and starting shortly after completion of my PhD research, I have been ruminating a feeling of dissatisfaction about a number of concepts, theoretical assumptions and methodologies which I was taught when studying linguistics at the undergraduate and graduate levels. As a linguistics student, I had been induced to take for granted that, there exist out there, even in the midst of complex verbal settings such as Africa, natural objects called “languages”. I was taught that these objects can be grouped consistently into different strata of classification based on selected structural features, e.g. lexical similarities; that each object is monolithic and has to fit into one and only one classificatory slot. For example, a typical “language” has to belong to only one family, e.g. Semitic, Chadic, Saharan, Atlantic, etc. “Languages” which structurally overlap between two or more classificatory slots are considered to result from mixture between canonical languages. In this frame of mind, each “language” is generically idiosyncratic. In short, I was taught to view languages as entities and not as edges. I was also trained to study these objects for their own sake and within the discrete boundaries set by scientific classification and language atlases, abstracted from the social context which breeds them, informed by little or no empirical data, and within the framework of Saussurian structuralism and its ramifications.

My PhD research had coincidentally acquainted me with Anthropological Linguistics and I had started to look into the linguistic reality with pronounced cultural interest, perhaps out of personal accommodation, putting myself at odds with the scholarly orthodoxy which characterizes the discipline of linguistics in Cameroon and in most countries in Africa. While the complexity of the linguistic reality which I got to explore more closely through language documentation in

two multilingual settings<sup>1</sup> over the same period has sharpened my cultural awareness of the verbal reality, it has also appeared to me that scientific agendas in linguistics in and on Africa are driving the discipline towards a different path. As is evidenced by the dominance of structuralist and generativist approaches in linguistics conferences in and on Africa, the discipline of linguistics seems to me to have become an institutional game. According to me, not only does it fail to accurately address the fluidity of the verbal reality characteristic of many social settings in the continent, but resulting pieces of research does not seem to deliver contextually meaningful knowledge. This observation may well span through a larger framework of postcolonial scholarship in Africa. For the sake of the Debate that I am invited to engage in this debate, however, I will limit my discussion on scientific and academic undertakings that fall under the broad field of linguistics, whether theoretical, empirical or applied.

My critique of the model of linguistics that is dominant in Africa and the insufficient knowledge production yield thereto, is entangled in colonialism. Put simply, I am of the opinion that, the institutionalized model of scholarship that shapes the pursue of knowledge in the field of linguistics in Africa was not instrumented for the sake of knowledge production to the benefit of the African society. Obviously, this is by no means a novel discovery. Much of the narrative of postcolonial critique evolves around “the reconsideration of the history, particularly from the perspective of those who suffered its effects, together with the defining of its contemporary social and cultural impact” (Young, 2001: 4). However, the extent to which postcolonial critique can be said to have informed the field of language studies in Africa is relatively limited.

The notion of the “linguistics of *Aryan*” in the Indian society, which is discussed by Hutton in this volume parallels in some of its historical and philosophical implications, that which I call ‘the making of languages’<sup>2</sup> in Africa. Even though both notions produce similar pernicious effects in their respective settings in constructing political identities and creating artificial divide between culturally and historically enmeshed communities, the latter almost goes unnoticed and hence, has scarcely been subject to debates. Quite reflective of Hutton’s discussion about the programmatic bias of colonialist Aryanism in India, the colonial

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1. The first project ran between 2010 and 2012; it focused on the documentation of Bakola [gyi] language. The resulting corpus can be accessed online (PID: <<https://hdl.handle.net/1839/00-0000-0000-0014-C529-A>>). The second project focused on the documentation of Bati [btc] language and oral traditions; the URL to the resulting collection is: <<https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI1032027>>.

2. In echo to Calvet (2004)’s book title: *Essaie de linguistique. La langue est-elle une invention des linguistes?*

enterprise in Africa has defined an “epistemological space” relative to indigenous speech behavior, and created a discourse model (African linguistics) that laid the ground for the rationalization of the verbal ecology of Africa from an exclusively outsider’s perspective. Even though the scholarly incentives of major influential colonialist linguists such as Meinhof (1895) appears today to have been overtly Eurocentric and therefore, the sincerity and neutrality of their undertakings is likely to be mitigated, what is even more striking is that, the blueprint of this colonial scholarship is continuously acclimated in the contemporary African academia as almost immutable and epistemologically neutral.

One of the most striking shortcomings of the linguistics endeavors in Africa is the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility for linguists to count existing “languages”. In Cameroon, for example, there are at least four competing figures about the number of existing “languages”: 239 (Dieu & Renaud, 1983), 248 (Breton & Bikia Fohntung, 1991; Binam Bikoï, 2012), 276 (Bitjaa Kody, 2003) and 310 (Hammarström et al., 2015). This mismatch may be explained by the civilizational imprint of Western scholarship which has led to the exacerbation of its applicability and feasibility. For example, whereas Saussurian representation of the notion of *langue*<sup>3</sup> and its binary demarcation from that of *parole*<sup>4</sup> are entrenched in a specific world view mediated through the linguistic behavior of a particular human group, such view is not shared by many African groups where both *langue* and *parole* refer to the same complex reality (Ngué Um, 2018).

Clearly, scholars and thinkers rely on the world view shaped by the interaction of the verbal and cultural behavior of their group to derive scientific concepts. It is not within any humanly cognitive capability to name, explain or theorize a portion of the reality which is not articulated in our linguistic experience. Even our imagination can only be deployed within the scope of the possible expressions and representations which are anchored in our cultural experience. We can only name, explain, theorize or imagine that which we have a cultural and linguistic awareness of, or a cognitive image of.

Possibly, a name, concept, or theory conceived of in one context may be valid in another context, provided the objects of naming, conceptualization, and theorization are empirically or cognitively congruent in both contexts. It is dubious that the concept of *langue* as conceived of in Saussurian terms, is congruent with the contextual naming and representation of the verbal experience in many African communities. In Bambara *kán* means “voice”, “language”, “sound”. In Bemba *sósó* means “speech”, “language”. In Chinyanja *mau/mao* means “language”, “voice”, “word”, “sound”. In Wolof *làkk* means “language”, “to speak”, In

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3. Language

4. Speech

Ewe, *gbè* means “language”, “voice”, “word”, “sound”. In *Wè*, *wlù* means “language”, “voice”. In Basaa, *hóp* means “speech”, “language”, “palaver”.

Had Saussure’s frame of mind been informed by the Wolof or the Basaa word views, for example, perhaps some of his dichotomies would not have been postulated axiomatically. For example, the binary demarcation between (1) *langue* the inherent set of rules that govern the combination of structural elements of a verbal system, and *parole* the production of casual speech by individual speakers drawing from these rules; (2) *langage*<sup>5</sup> the natural ability to speak, and *langue* the system of rules. In many African languages, the designation of the ability to speak, the system of rules (the habit of doing something) and the infinite production of instances of speech by individuals by a unique concept (*lakk* in Wolof, *hóp* in Basaa), is indicative of a cognitive representation of the verbal experience like a fluid, dynamic and complex rather than a monolithic reality. *Hóp* (“speech”, “language”) in Basaa like in many other African languages denotes a behavior and not an entity in the world.

The point I wish to make here is that, while the notion of “*langue/language*” is relevant to specific verbal behavior in the African context, it is the characteristic of the behavior that should articulate the objects “*langue/language*” and not the reverse. The most crucial question to me regarding the articulation of the verbal reality in Africa is, what properties are appropriate to characterize the verbal behavior of a human group and to what proportion? In present nomenclatures of language classifications, the only property at play is a limited set of lexical items.

There is much to the verbal behavior than is suggested in the abstract interaction of sign and meaning in wordlists. Linguistic materials (sounds, words, sentences, etc.) are resources which may be used in time and space with different functions. It takes historical or contextual motivation, meaningful social interaction and cultural adaptation for linguistic resources to circulate and stabilize in the behavioral pattern of a group. The definition of a verbal behavior characteristic of a human group cannot, consequently, ignore the group’s self-understanding of their behavior. Most of the time it is questionable whether one-dimensional methodologies that draw solely on piecemeal linguistic materials in the present model of African linguistics – as much as elsewhere –, do justice to the rhizome of interconnections that form a verbal behavior. Beyond the “what” and the “how” of the linguistic inquiry, African linguistics needs to know the “why” in order to make sense of the spatial distribution of the verbal behavior. The “why”, however, can only be reached at through inclusion of indigenous knowledge and representations. I think linguists are wrong in setting the boundaries of “language objects” along the lines of the human’s intelligibility capabilities. We could as well limit the world to what our senses can reach out to.

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## 5. Language

If linguistics in Africa had focused on understanding the verbal behavior of social groups, the initial objects of interest would have been the activity of “linguaging” rather than some abstracted, sometimes invented entities called “languages”. After all, if the notion of “language” could accommodate the verbal experience in Africa, it wouldn’t be difficult to count “languages”. Attention should be paid here to the fact that “linguaging” does not preclude order; it solely gives precedence to attested behavior. Eventually the scheme of attested behavior repeated many times, may be systematized, modeled and related to an individual, a group or a territory.

Conceptual discrepancy across cultures can lead to structural bias of the type *langue/hóp*. One possible way of overcoming this bias is by paying attention to contextual representations of the objects of knowledge, at least at an early stage of the research. If the two preceding propositions hold, then indigenous knowledge and cognitive representations should be valid assets in scientific knowledge production enterprises in low-canonical-knowledge-resourced settings such as Africa. In the present model of linguistics scholarship, indigenous knowledge and representations are discarded as irrelevant. The whole of the conceptual and theoretical apparatus in use in African linguistics has been transposed from a different verbal setting namely, the West. Under such circumstances, it may be feared that, by giving primacy to the study of the structural properties of “languages” as entities, linguists have been looking into the African verbal reality from the wrong end of the binoculars.

Examples abound in Africa where “languages” names postulated in linguistic atlases and inventories do not coincide with the groups’ claimed verbal behavior. One glaring case is with the named Basaa “language” located in Cameroon. Eberhard et al. (2019) list the following dialects for Basaa: “Bakem, Bon, Bibeng, Diboum, Log Mpoo, Mbang, Ndokama, Basso, Ndokbele, Ndokpenda, Nyamtam”. While these sub-groups share a set of cultural behaviors, beliefs and values within the rhizome of *Mbog Liaa*<sup>6</sup> (Mboui, 1967), they tend to promote separate linguistic identities, irregardless of the degree of intelligibility that may be achieved between any two respective speech groups. The driver of these linguistic reclamations is historical reification of individual lects over others to serve colonialist missionary and political agendas. Sadly enough, the colonialist model of linguistic centralization through standardization of arbitrarily chosen “dialects” is one which is promoted in current formal and informal indigenous language education in Cameroon. African linguists have fallen short to operationalize a regulatory model

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6. *Mbog Liaa* is a cultural community which comprises those whose ancestral lineage can be traced back to *Ngog-Lituba* which literally means “the pierced rock”, and which is believed to be the cradle of that community.

to socially and politically accommodate the complexity of their verbal ecology, other than attempting at all costs to simplify the reality of this ecology.

Conversely, the number of missing lects names in these atlases and inventories is appalling. The case of the ALCAM<sup>7</sup> project could be rightfully equated to cultural revisionism or linguistic reductionism. The pursue of coherence for the sake of institutional scholarship has led to the neglect of cultural diversity, which is the necessary condition for its continuity and regeneration.

When linguists produce descriptions, grammars and dictionaries of a so-called Basaa “language”,<sup>8</sup> for example, that only reflects the structural properties of one out of the many existing lects, speakers who identify with the other lects may feel politically discriminated. They may not receive such works as theirs and therefore, might want to assert their identity by promoting alternative descriptions, grammars and dictionaries of their own. Perhaps the production of linguistic works is anecdotic and constitutes recent undertakings that do not pre-date the construction of these linguistic identities. However, stock should be taken of the fact that the current administrative distribution of Cameroon owes greatly to Meinhof (1895)’s linguistic survey entitled *Die Sprachverhältnisse in Kamerun*. This pioneering work, in-as-much-as it was produced by the colonist and within a context of brutal imposition, has been superimposed onto the social reality of the named Cameroon territory until today. Subsequent linguistic works have developed under the assumption of the existence of monolithic “languages”.

The case of Basaa shows an interesting structural incoherence between the methods used in genetic language classification, and the monolithic framework of grammar elaboration and dictionary compilation. If two or more “dialects” are postulated to represent geographical realizations of the same “language” just like two or more allophones in context may represent the same phoneme, then a unified body of grammatical rules should be able to account for the structural properties of these dialects taken together. In practice, mainstream grammatical models in African linguistics are keen to advocate coherence to achieve linguistic simplification, and less so to reflect linguistic unity. As a matter of fact, no existing grammar or dictionary of Basaa no less than in other proclaimed “language unit”<sup>9</sup> has been able to capture the structural properties of all member lects.

We should therefore come to the conclusion that, what is projected under “language names” in current linguistic nomenclatures in Africa, is inherently, more of cognitive spaces than natural objects. I tend to envisage these spaces as

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7. Atlas Linguistique du Cameroun (Linguistic Atlas of Cameroon)

8. Schurle (1912)’s *Die Sprache der Basa in Kamerun*; Bitjaa Kody (2018)’s *ijkət hɔp basaa*.

9. “Language unit” is a term used in the ALCAM project (Breton & Bikia Fohitung, 1991).

network of edges bundles more than as clusters of entities. To escape the dominant language-as-entity model and come up with a framework in which verbal behaviors are projected as integrated and extensible cognitive spaces, I envisage a model of representation where each bundle stretches out around a pivotal edge and connects with other bundles at different points of intersection or nodes. The bundle corresponds to ethnographically attested lects whose speakers identify themselves with a set of verbal behaviors. By ethnographic attestation, I refer to frames of the verbal experience that are anchored in the self-representation that individual groups have of their verbal behavior (e.g. “I speak X”). The weight of a bundle from one intersecting node to another is a function of the density of the edges that it carries to the intersecting node. For example, within the *Mbog Liaa* cultural rhizome, an edge bundle “Bakem” may intersect with an edge bundle “Diboum” which in turn may intersect with an edge bundle “Mbene”, etc. The intersecting node that connects “Bakem” to “Diboum” may show more weight than the one that links “Diboum” to “Mbene”, for example if the latter bundles share more edges. Edges are patterns of the verbal behavior such as the lexicon of a specialized domain, but also patterns that are only recognizable by the speakers of the respective lects. For example, “Bankem”, “Diboum” and “Mbene” may share a high degree of lexical similarities in relation to body parts, while in addition, only “Bankem” and “Diboum (Dibobom)” may share a higher degree of similarity regarding kinship naming. Under such a model of representation of the verbal behavior, constellation of bundles of a certain weight signals a more or less congruent verbal space.

Obviously, the model raises a number of issues in relation to the complexity of the verbal behavior in Africa. For example, what is meant by “constellation” and how can it be measured? What is a “pattern of verbal behavior” and how can it be described unequivocally? What average degree of constellation is appropriate for elaborating a coherent description, a grammar or a dictionary? Which edges can be defined as pivotal and when? Without any doubt, this model which I have almost intuited in the course of this discussion as a possible alternative to the monolithic model of mainstream linguistics is sketchy. If at all acceptable, the model may need to be more theoretically elaborated. However, the model presents itself with a number of advantages: (1) it leaves to the appreciation of the linguists, what level is appropriate for elaborating a grammar or a dictionary; one-bundle-level, two, three, or more; (2) it doesn’t undermine the theoretical strength of the Saussurian notion of *langue*; it enables the notion to be empirically scalable and therefore, to escape political or ideological confinement; (3) it adds meaning to the relations that link one lect with another; (4) it permits for incremental input on the nature and the quality of the relations that one or more lects may share.

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