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Review of Repertoires and Choices in African Languages by Friederike Lûpke and Anne Storch

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LÜPKE, FRIEDERIKE & ANNE STORCH. 2013. *Repertoires and Choices in African Languages*. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

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*Repertoires and Choices in African Languages (RCAL)*¹ will interest not only Africanists but also specialists in other geographical areas and those generally concerned with language endangerment and language documentation. In short, this is a timely book for readers of this journal. The authors, Friederike Lüpke and Anne Storch, are two of the finest scholars working on African languages today and two of the most reflective thinkers in this field. The breadth and depth of their research records (they call themselves, somewhat modestly, ‘fieldworkers’) are both exemplary, and together constitute a whole that any two other scholars would find difficult to replicate. Moreover, their ideological orientation brings to bear a critical perspective that has been largely absent from research on the continent. Importantly, they stimulate us to become reflective practitioners with regard to both language documentation and revitalization. Africanists, as well as researchers in other parts of the world, would do well to follow the lessons of the essays contained in *RCAL*.

RCAL consists of an introduction and six focused chapters, all of which are concerned with multilingualism and language choice, especially as these phenomena and their study are governed and informed by language attitudes and by (language) ideology in general. These concerns function prominently in the related subfields of language endangerment and language documentation, where the two authors have been prominent practitioners for some years. Their experience affords them considerable data on which to base their discussion and strengthens their arguments. The central chapters introduce and situate the issues in a socio-historical context with abundant exemplification, much of it from the authors’ own fieldwork. The last chapter sketches a welcome program for reinvigorating the study of African languages.

The tone of *RCAL* is serious throughout, but the overall message of the book is lightened by the presentation of entertaining anecdotes and illustrations. *RCAL* is essential and entertaining reading for anyone interested in the current sociolinguistics of African languages and in the ideologies governing the distribution and analysis of the myriad African varieties. The authors have done a great service to the field and to students of (African) multilingualism in assembling into a coherent whole a considerable amount of original work along with the work of many others.

In the preface, the authors state that the origin of the book was, not surprisingly, a workshop on language documentation. Appropriately, the book concludes with an explicit return to language documentation and the ideology of language endangerment, including revitalization. The approach they advocate for future research is proposed as an antidote to an outmoded and unenlightened structural linguistics steeped in Western nationalist ideology, perhaps with some hints of racism (Irvine 2001, Doneux 2003, Childs 2003). Certainly there has been some neglect along the way, as the authors point out. Africa deserves better—some reflection and rethinking of priorities is in order.

¹My thanks for stimulating discussion on the topics discussed here with participants at the Workshop on Sociolinguistic Language Documentation in Sub-Saharan Africa (Buea, Cameroon; 2012), especially with co-organizer Jeff Good. I have discussed in some detail a related chapter by the first author (Lüpke 2014).

Additionally, in a more theoretical domain the authors reformulate the extant view of language as a static, disembodied entity, following the lead of sociolinguistically oriented linguists and anthropologists. They suggest a change from a view of language qua object to language as process or practice. This position is stated unequivocally in the introduction,

In the African context, there is no clear notion of language that is independent of linguists or missionaries ... we cannot emphasize enough that “language” is only meaningful in geopolitical terms, lending a discrete identity, status, and power to otherwise fluctuating, hybrid, and changing linguistic practices and creating the illusion of an undifferentiated and homogeneous associated “community” (p. 3).

Generally speaking, both missionaries and earlier linguists come in for a hard time of it in *RCAL*; they are served up for criticism, sometimes as straw men, outside their own time and place from a post-colonial, deconstructed, and critical perspective. Nonetheless the authors are right in asking about “the perspectives on creating knowledge on African languages, and how they relate to the repertoires and choices of their speakers” (p. vii). The ecological situation is complex. The authors believe in a linguistic economy of flux and negotiation: “... just as there are no fixed languages or fixed linguistic identities, there is no fixed alignment of linguistic practice with ethnically or otherwise construed aspects of identity” (p. 2). Clearly some reflection on governing ideologies is needed.

Probably the most important initiative Lüpke & Storch advocate is an empowerment of language speakers, starting with a consideration of what Africans want for themselves (see Dimmendaal 2008). Not only has Africa been generally shortchanged in terms of study, but also in terms of the input allowed from Africans themselves. This same sentiment emerged from a workshop on the sociolinguistic documentation of African languages in 2012, building on much of the thinking contained in *RCAL*. In fact, this book can be very much seen as an elaboration and exemplification of the principles articulated there (summary in Childs, Good & Mitchell 2014). The following section summarizes the six main chapters of the book and provides a few critical comments in the process. The final section presents some general evaluative comments.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK AND CHAPTER SUMMARIES. The jointly authored introduction precedes three single-authored chapters (the first by Lüpke, the next two by Storch) and three jointly authored chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 are more descriptive in their orientation, Chapters 3–5 turn to ideology and epistemology, and the final chapter proposes a new approach to the study of language in Africa. A central question that may strike the reader is whether or not Africa is ‘special.’ Are the present-day conditions and the past qualitatively different from what has happened in the other major areas of the world? I will return to this question in the conclusion.

Introduction (Lüpke & Storch)

The introduction furthermore states the move away from textuality and ‘artefactual ideology’ (Bloommaert 2008) to presenting the notion of language as a complex of interacting forms and functions. The established approach of treating language as an object fixes it as a disembodied and artificial entity, objectification and commodification, belying its very nature as a changeable complex in everyday use: “a resourceful, dynamic multilingualism, entirely outside the formal sector” (p. 8). More finely grained research paradigms such as

network analysis, e.g., Milroy & Milroy 1992, and communities of practice, e.g., Meyerhoff 2002, are a start to identifying appropriate approaches for capturing this complexity.

Chapter 1: Multilingualism on the ground (Lüpke)

This chapter by Lüpke introduces the complexities of African multilingualism as they occur in Senegal. The data are indeed rich and well-presented. To illustrate what some of the complexifying factors might be, one can begin with such macro factors as ancient trade patterns, empire building of the Sudanic empires, the spread of Islam, and even the migration encouraged by climate change. This is all before the colonial period, which of course had serious repercussions on the speech ecology and before the subsequent urbanization, globalization, and civil wars—with more serious climate change. What Lüpke points out and what constitutes a major theme of the book is how Africans possess a more utilitarian or instrumental view of language (Dimmendaal 2014).

Aside from these macro factors at work impacting languages and their speakers, there are culture-specific factors as well. I mention just a few here. One is the exogynous marriage practice, entailing the movement of daughters outside their natal community. Another societal practice is fostering, i.e., when children are raised by adults other than their parents or home family. Typically there are power inequities: the family in which the child was born is likely less powerful than the one to which she is sent. One interesting and probably unfamiliar practice to non-Africanists is the so-called ‘joking relationships’ or teasing between historically unequal ethnic groups, used, roughly speaking, to soothe or patch over tensions. Lüpke sees it as “a mechanism for creating unity in the face of diversity,” and in the larger view as another linguistic resource for managing interactions (pp. 45–47). Other practices are presented, but the general import of the chapter is clear even from this brief characterization: multilingualism is a fact of life among the people of Senegal. What is shown in the next chapter is that the same sort of multilingualism can be seen on the micro level, here called ‘polylectality,’ within a single language.

Chapter 2: Doing things with words (Storch)

Chapter 2 treats the use of varieties and registers within a language, as well as non-linguistic communicative components, for creating, maintaining, and eliminating boundaries between people and groups. The examples come from Storch’s work in Nigeria and elsewhere and include play languages, youth languages (slangs), pidgins, jargons, and languages of respect (taboo forms). Storch also includes forms and varieties from the religious side: ritual languages such as Coptic and Ge’ez in churches and spirit languages. Just as distinct language varieties form part of an African’s linguistic repertoire so also do derivative or parallel varieties, or variants within a given variety.

Chapter 3: Language and ideology (Storch)

In continuing the consideration of attitudes towards, and misconceptions about, Africans and their languages, this chapter raises the issue of agency. The strong (and legitimate) claim is that speakers are not passive victims of world forces but rather make active decisions about using a language. The opening anecdote tells of a Honi speaker who consciously chose to allow his ancestral language to die with him rather than reveal its secrets to an uncaring younger generation. More powerful stories are the case studies which follow. Here both missionaries and colonists come under criticism for their lack of attention to African languages and how they are used. This neglect is particularly evident in efforts to create written, standardized forms—in Storch’s *bon mot*, “A language is a dialect with a gram-

mar and a dictionary.” The overweening importance of a written variety is examined (and questioned). An instructive point made by the chapter is that it’s not always the state whose ideology governs the form and function of languages in the speech economy, but also lesser players, including whoever establishes a written tradition.

Chapter 4: Language and knowledge (Lüpke & Storch)

Ideology is again the focus, but here ideology in the service of analysis. It is perhaps the most polemical chapter of the book, where even the redoubtable anthropologist comes under fire:

Yet it remains true that they [the perspectives of anthropologists] stem from a hostile capitalist enterprise, are situated within a nineteenth century context of national and/or romantic invented traditions, apply a Rousseau-inspired romantic idealization of the “savage”, “authentic” or “primitive”, and use a limited number of essentialist topoi to reduce the changeable complexity of African societies into a definite number of fixed notions (p.184).

Although the criticism is valid and insightful, the polemics to me seem a bit overwrought. What follows this is a passage blaming tribalism on colonialism and then an attack on tour operators. Oddly, Africans are allowed no agency here and bear no responsibility for the current state of affairs. Do Africans have no control over the removal of their lower incisors or lip plate insertion? Undoubtedly tribalism owes much to colonial initiatives, but did it not exist before the colonists? Why does it persist afterwards in so many independent states?

The authors are on much steadier ground when they return to the work of missionaries, anthropologists, and linguists, who by means of their control of literacy rewrite history. They are particularly good at analyzing early German scholarship. At times, however, the early writers are judged against modern standards as stated above, e.g., the giant Koelle is unfairly upbraided for interviewing only two women in his study of some 300 languages as spoken by Recaptives in Freetown (Koelle 1854).

Chapter 5: Language dynamics (Lüpke & Storch)

The chapter begins with the telling point that little is known about multilingualism as a type, in terms of its internal diversity and variation, although one aspect, language endangerment, has recently received some attention (p. 267). What are the different forms of multilingualism and how does it evolve? Another insightful observation is that the endangerment literature has been dominated by Americanists and Australianists, with scant input from Africanists (and Africans), “downplaying the complex interplay of languages in any given habitat” (p. 267). Ignoring the variety and uses of African languages is a dominant criticism of the chapters, one aspect of the special nature of language on the continent.

Certainly African languages have held their own against European languages, as has not been the case elsewhere. Another disservice has been the UNESCO scale for evaluating language vitality (UNESCO 2003), which they argue is inappropriate in many ways for the African context. One irony the authors note is that from a Western perspective multilingualism is seen as a threat to language preservation. In Africa, however, multilingualism is usually individual and results in multiglossic situations (polylectality); these developments may allow for a language’s preservation in a specific niche, e.g., as the “language of the village” (p. 275).

The chapter also underscores the theme of agency. A clear and telling example of the adaptivity is the Chopi, speakers of a language of the same name, a Lwoo (Luo) language of Uganda. The Chopi strove to differentiate themselves from the Acholi, a related dialect, because of Acholi's association with the Lord's Resistance Army (p. 295). Speakers of Chopi made their language more Bantu-like and claimed affiliation with the Banyoro, a Bantu group with a better reputation. Ethnic, nationalistic, clan, and even family affiliations are more flexible than in the West (Childs 2012 contains many examples of shifting allegiances), another theme of the book.

The final section (5.9) of this chapter contains some puzzling text and pictures in the discussion of 'Revitalization in the future.' In what the authors call "the inversed world of applied linguistics and caritative activities" [sic, 'caretaking'?] (p. 339) of the year 2074, all manner of circumstances have changed, including hunting and gathering. Although the first picture is hard to make it out, it seems to feature a man 'hunting' outside a European village. The following pictures show some men 'gathering,' dressed all in suits for a formal meeting. Presumably, the pages (pp. 339f) are meant to be a parody, but the humor falls a little flat.²

Chapter 6: Not languages: repertoires as lived and living experience (Lüpke & Storch)

The final chapter suggests ways in which documenters can improve their practice. The directives come not through detailed instruction or carefully circumscribed activities but rather through some general directives and prohibitions. The title of the chapter reiterates the perspective adopted throughout the book: Language is not a reified entity but rather a dynamic one,

... we have to set language free from the artificial, its existence as artefact, and acknowledge *speaking languages* as being tantamount to an artful and tangible expression of the Self, in different contexts" (p. 346).

... we linguists working in and on Africa need to participate in a paradigm shift towards a deconstruction of researchers' reasons and approaches, and a break-up of the harmful feedback of our ideologies upon the researched (p. 350).

In addition to such general guidelines, there are also some more specific ones, sounded in early chapters. For example: provide more metadata. Below is reiterated the need for collecting examples of language in use.

Corpora of actual language use would always constitute the core, and they would be supplemented by documents, photos, scholarly articles, dictionaries and grammars, documentary films, exhibitions, as following organically from the merging research focus (p. 355).

The authors provide some practical observations on the politics of securing funding and publishing in the world of language documentation, "power relations in a small field"(p. 351).³

²Here is another odd illustration: Fig. 52 (p.348) "A more fluid picture of Africa: oil on a car park's pavement," which seems to be an oil slick roughly in the shape of Africa—also with no explanation.

³There is also more puzzlement in the chapter: several impenetrable quotes from Catweazle, a 1970s British television program. A YouTube link was provided, which may be wonderfully helpful to some but did little to help this reader understand their relevance.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION. In the previous section I have made a few comments specific to the chapters but here I would like to say a few things about the book as a whole, a recommended addition to everyone's library, especially to readers of this journal.

Hopefully *RCAL* will be the clarion call awakening linguists, and especially Africanists, to the nature of their profession, leading to some introspection and reflection on field practices and theorizing. Clearly the authors advocate a move away from European and modern (American) structuralism, be it the American distributionalists or the generativists, to an approach guided more by sociolinguistics and (cultural) anthropology. The move is to a more refined and nuanced view of language in situ, as actually used by its speakers. Specific to Africa is the view of language as a set of possibilities and Africans as the active users.

One virtue of the book is its invocation of new paradigms involving Africans themselves and how language is used by Africans. Related to this call is the focus on the individual as part of an interaction, network, or community of practice. The focus on the individual in face-to-face interactions is a trend that has been followed in sociolinguistics more generally as investigators became unhappy with the untheorized and borrowed macro social categories used in the early variationist paradigm.

The one criticism⁴ that I would make of the volume is the imbalance of the coverage, a charge that is difficult to avoid when talking about Africa as a whole. There is little discussion of southern Africa, especially South Africa where there has been a wealth of scholarship and a dramatic and bald playing out of many of the sociolinguistic issues found elsewhere on the continent, e.g., Herbert 1992; 1997, Mesthrie 2002a; b. It is also remarkable that there is not more on issues of gender, but perhaps that is the topic of a future book.

One question that remains is how to fully operationalize an approach that sees language as flexible social practice: "just as there are no fixed languages or fixed linguistic identities, there is no fixed alignment of linguistic practice with ethnically or otherwise construed aspects of identity" (p. 2). This was a question raised during the sociolinguistic documentation workshop mentioned above. How does one implement such an elusive paradigm? What is the selection process with limited resources? The answer has been to focus on interactions, record life histories, etc., but many participants, especially the Africans, clamored for more specific instruction. Part of the answer will, of course, come from the community itself. The topic is the planned focus of a future workshop, and we are very glad to have the instruction provided here.

The question was raised early as to African 'exceptionalism.' Is Africa special? I think the authors would reply in the affirmative, especially with regard to multilingualism and special ideologies. Part of it may have to do with the sorts of macro factors outlined in Diamond 1997, macro ecological factors, but likely may have more to do with current issues such as the adaptive mechanisms outlined in Nettle 1996, as well as the form and impact of colonialism on the continent. The authors convincingly show how Americanist and Australianist discourse has dominated the discussion and how inappropriate the format of United Nations questionnaires is for Africa. Furthermore, they pose the provocative question of whether Africa's specialness is the norm. The utilitarian or instrumentalist approach to language indeed seems different than in other parts of the world. Certainly nationalism

⁴In the way of editing and felicity of expression, there are some minor non-idiomatic uses of English and a tendency to use a highly learned lexicon, e.g., "ophrasesthemes" and "topoi," that might strike some readers as odd. The maps and illustrations are welcome but several suffer from bad reproduction and could have been better integrated into the text. Generally speaking, however, the editing has been careful.

attached to language as found in Europe is rarely part of African ideology. As Dimmendaal has pointed out, however, the people of Africa are no different in their hopes and needs from anyone else, yet the absence of infrastructure and motivation may undercut the revitalization effort as is currently conceptualized (Dimmendaal 2014). Certainly our undertakings need some rethinking, as the authors have forced us to do.

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