Chapter 17

The concepts of discerned and designed languages and their relevance for Africa

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This paper starts by pointing out that pleas for increased use of African languages, for example as medium of instruction in education, seem to have fallen on deaf ears and attract almost no following from non-linguist circles. The paper argues that this is partly due to a linguistic focus on language as spoken, especially with regard to Africa, overlooking the importance of language in its written, formal forms. This is coupled to a lack of attention to language policy in linguistic research. A way out of this conundrum is proposed, inspired by earlier work of Kloss. The paper introduces a distinction between language as discerned and language as designed or formalized. Making this distinction makes it possible to consider using one designed (standardized) language to serve speakers of several related discerned languages (as happens in many parts of the world). In contrast to current thinking, such a designed language need not be mutually intelligible with all languages it serves – as long as it is easy to learn. For Africa, this means that rational choices for developing a limited number of languages into formalized form become possible. The paper proposes five principles that could guide such choices. The paper discusses the issue of 'ease of language learning', arguing that the limited research available points to its relevance for Africa. The paper concludes by pointing to a number of new research questions, related to the policy choices that need to be made and the planning that will be necessary in order to achieve a proper implementation of a transition to using African languages in formal domains.

1 Introduction

Over the years, various authors have argued in favor of increased use of African languages at all levels, including in higher education (for a good overview, see Wolff 2016). However, their pleas have fallen on deaf ears. To this day, authors

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can write about "decolonizing education" in Africa without mentioning language (Ndofirepi & Gwaravanda 2019); policy briefs on education can be written that do not mention language.[1] Kaschula & Nkomo (2019: 619) characterize the lack of attention to the language issue as "the 'elephant in the room' when it comes to development in Africa". The importance of increasing African language use in higher education remains a minority plea, without much influence in practice.

In part, this lack of progress is due to the prevalence of ways of looking at African languages that, in my view, are not helpful for the African situation. Based on a discussion of that, this article introduces the related concepts of discerned and designed languages (inspired by the concepts of "Abstand" and "Ausbau" languages as proposed by Kloss 1967). Using these concepts, it becomes possible to think about introducing a limited number of African languages for use in higher education. However, in order to come to rational choices in this area, sound principles will be needed. The article proposes five such principles. It ends with a discussion of the further research questions these concepts help to highlight and with some concluding remarks.

2 Ways of looking at language

There are different ways of looking at language – as production of sounds, as means of communication, as means of constructing meaning – and there are probably other ways as well. For the purpose of discussing language in Africa, this paper discusses languages as social phenomena – as instruments of power. Consider the metaphor of road building: in olden times, roads (or paths) emerged naturally, as a result of people walking from A to B along a similar route. But little by little, roads became the preserve of engineers and planners, from the army routes in Roman times to the highways of modern times. In the same way, languages originated by people talking to one another, but gradually evolved into complex social constructions, planned, maintained and extended using elaborate mechanisms. Thus, in France, the *Alliance Française* is an institution specifically set up to promote and protect the French language.[2] Internationally, the *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* serves the same purpose.[3] In the English-

[1] Thus, for example this two-pager on educational reform: https://includeplatform.net/wp-content/2019/11/Prioritising-issues-for-education-in-Africa_11_2019-2.pdf accessed 26 July 2021.

[2] https://www.fondation-alliancefr.org/?cat=536 retrieved 22 October 2019.

[3] https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Sites-thematiques/Langue-francaise-et-langues-de-France/Politiques-de-la-langue/Multilinguisme/Francophonie retrieved 26 April 2020: *les francophones peuvent s'appuyer sur un dispositif institutionnel voué à promouvoir la langue française* – 'Francophones can rely on an institutional mechanism dedicated to promoting the French language' (author's translation).

speaking world, hosts of style guides and armies of editors work tirelessly to keep English standardized and understandable for ever larger numbers of people. In Africa, this process of language formalization and extension took place as well: Africans attempted to preserve indigenous knowledges and thought for posterity through writing for example in *Ajami* script, or in the ancient *Ge'ez* language and script of Ethiopia. These social innovations took place in Africa like in other parts of the world – however, they were severely influenced and in fact all but halted during the colonial period. The process of committing knowledge and thoughts to writing in African languages became almost the sole monopoly of Western missionaries, who in this domain, as in so many others, manipulated and altered African languages to suit their own purposes (see for example Makoni & Meinhof 2006). Thus, Djité (2008) asks: "[I]sn't it the case that some languages have simply not been *allowed* to develop as others have? Isn't it the case that evidence of literacy tradition in some languages has intentionally been destroyed (…), forbidden (…) or ignored (…)?" Kaschula & Nkomo (2019: 607) also make this point:

> The arrival of foreign traders, explorers, missionaries, and colonial settlers resulted in cross-cultural encounters and the transformation of economic, cultural, religious, and political domains, which devalued indigenous knowledge and African thought systems. This not only alienated indigenous people from the socioeconomic and political organizational structures of the new societies, but also de-intellectualized their languages.

Some authors who look at language choose not to see this process of language formalization and extension: they concentrate on language as spoken and object to seeing languages as "bounded, countable objects", in line with the thinking of Pennycook (2010). These are authors who prefer to talk about "language registers" or "languoids", rather than about languages. A very well-developed example of this type of thinking and what it leads to is provided in the work of Lüpke & Storch (2013). Their starting point is a description of the linguistic situation in the Casamance region of Southern Senegal. They show that the linguistic situation in that region is very different from that in Europe or the Americas.[4] In Europe or the Americas, young people are brought up in one language (their mother tongue) and they typically learn additional languages in school. In this part of Africa, though, young people are typically brought up in several languages and

[4]Note, though, that recently they have come under criticism for over-generalizing the experience from one particular area of the Casamance to the rest of the region and indeed to Africa as a whole: see Sagna & Hantgan (2021).

they learn to use those languages (or "registers") in different social situations, depending on the circumstances. Lüpke and Storch argue that it makes little sense to introduce formal literacy training in standardized local languages under those circumstances. In day to day use, people need more than one language; linguistic variation within every "language" is considerable; people have few opportunities and little utility for using formal written forms. Instead, they favour an approach that valorises the multilingual abilities of speakers and takes that as a starting point, also in classroom situations.[5] These kinds of multilingualisms, they argue, are rare in other parts of the world, but common in Africa.

The approach advocated by Lüpke and Storch has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages operate mostly at the level of languages as spoken. It is true that the differences construed by foreign observers may not correspond to the differences perceived by speakers and it may also be true that those differences can be much more situational and much less absolute than what the terminology leads one to believe. A teaching approach that takes the actual linguistic repertoires of learners as its starting point and values them all as resources seems to make eminent sense. This is in fact the practice that has become known as "translanguaging". In an African context, it usually means making use of different languages in classroom settings, for example, both Pidgin English and British English, or Xhosa alongside English (see for example Makalela 2015). In many situations, translanguaging can be advantageous when compared to earlier forced monolingualism. However, it has limitations as well. For example: if the language of formal examination remains the former colonial language, then the net effect will be that these strategies instrumentalize a language with lower status in order to learn a language with higher status – thus in fact maintaining and even reinforcing the existing diglossic language systems in Africa. In addition, translanguaging will work only in specific settings: it requires a situation where all or most in class have some familiarity with the same set of languages or language repertoires. Furthermore, it is an open question what translanguaging will mean for intergenerational language transmission: it could be that it will in fact be a contributor to intergenerational language loss.

The disadvantages of the approach by Lüpke and Storch are mostly at the level of language policy. It leads to an exclusive focus on "what language actually is to speakers and hearers" (Lüpke & Storch 2013: 347) and blinds them to the role (implicit or explicit) of language policy and language planning. In a way, they

[5]This has given rise to the LILIEMA project, https://soascrossroads.org/2018/01/11/liliema-phase-two-bringing-language-independent-literacies-to-an-international-forum-by-friederike-lupke/ retrieved 4 October 2019.

situate Africans in a type of reserve where they live their "natural" lives, only marginally influenced or affected by governmental or institutional policies (for example in the area of language). These policies are relegated to a vague "context" that they seem to accept as unchanging and not subject to being influenced by Africans as actors at that level. Where I would see harmonized and standardized languages as a form of social innovation that has its benefits, they see them as a colonial imposition.[6] Even though Lüpke and Storch themselves unquestioningly make use of the advantages offered to them by a conventionalized use of the English language and take these for granted, they seem to deny the utility of conventionalized language to African languages. Yet conventionalized languages are the medium of instruction at the levels of secondary and higher education. Following the analytical framework of Lüpke and Storch would lead to a neglect of language policy and language planning and would lead to an unquestioning acceptance of the political choice to use French and other international languages as medium of instruction in secondary and higher education. As Bamgbose (2011: 6) remarked: "absence of a policy is indeed a policy, for whenever there is no declared policy in any domain, what happens is a continuation of the status quo." The same could be said of neglect of the policy element in linguistic research: the absence of such research is a policy choice, for neglect of this field means an unquestioning acceptance of the *status quo*.

Another line of reasoning that is sometimes followed in support of the current status quo is that it is what Africans *prefer*. Africans themselves, it is argued, demand education in the former colonial language and are against education using indigenous languages as medium of instruction. An example of this type of argument is found in Beyogle (2014) (for a somewhat different view, also from Ghana, see Yevudey & Agbozo 2019). However, this is a chicken-and-egg type problem: if parents perceive that education in a formal colonial language is a passport to economic success in life, they will seek such an education for their children and will tend to have a negative attitude to indigenous languages. If, however, the context would change, allowing for educational opportunities and economic success also by using indigenous languages, then attitudes would surely change.

My approach has no issue with the analysis of multilingual situations that Lüpke and Storch make for certain areas in Africa and with the recommendations for teaching that they draw from it. However, for a discussion of the role of policy, the approach of Lüpke and Storch is inadequate and, I would argue, dangerous.

[6]Of course, language harmonization and standardization are not European inventions: these processes were around in other parts of the world long before they became commonplace in Europe.

An example of how this type of thinking can in fact be disempowering and can confuse even the brightest minds can be seen in Heugh (2016: 253). She writes:

> From a theoretical perspective, acceptance of diversity and its inevitability requires a different trajectory from one based [on] the diminishing of variability. This last perspective dovetails with a third possibly more profound consideration, an emerging debate which questions the very foundations of nineteenth and twentieth-century colonial linguistics.

This creates a false contradiction. As Joswig (2020: 96) rightly points out: "A language standard adds a written variety to a complex dialect situation, but in itself it does not remove any diversity. Spoken language diversity has proven to be very resilient in the face of written standards."

In other words, it is perfectly possible to combine a standard form of language as used in instruction with a great diversity of speech forms (as is indeed the case for the English language). If the result of "questioning the foundations of colonial linguistics" means that language policies are rejected as irrelevant and going against "inevitable" diversity, then this leaves African languages worse off than they were before and inevitably will lead to a strengthening of the position of international languages, English first of all. A stark example of such a development is provided by Chebanne (2016: 295), who shows that the Khoisan languages are threatened because of "the lack of an adequate language development policy". In his analysis, "[i]t is important that Khoisan languages go beyond the insular and idiosyncratic developments that have been promoted under the guise of preserving ethnic and linguistic identity. Pursuing this separate, narrow, and myopic approach can only further marginalize these beleaguered languages."

In fact, the same holds true for almost all African languages. What is needed, then, is to highlight this distinction between language as spoken and language as used in formalized ways and to examine what this distinction may mean for language policy in Africa. In order to do that, I propose to use the concepts of "discerned" and "designed" languages, as outlined in the next section.

3 Discerned and designed?

The concepts suggested in this paper are inspired by proposals put forward as far back as 1952 by the German sociolinguist Heinz Kloss.[7] They were published by him in English in 1967.

[7]These proposals are inspired by Kloss, but the change of emphasis I propose and their application to Africa represents a novel development that bears no relationship to the rest of the ideas or writings of Kloss.

Kloss (1967) introduces a distinction between what he calls *Abstand* and *Ausbau* languages. These words have not been translated into English in the sociolinguistic literature; therefore, I venture to propose the terms of "discerned" versus "designed" languages as English approximations. The term "discerned" (or "Abstand") languages is, according to Kloss, a linguistic concept that refers to all languages, whether they have a developed writing system and grammar or not. He assumes that linguists have a way of determining the "intrinsic distance" between languages and to decide on the borders between languages using those criteria (Kloss 1967: 30). The concept of "designed" (or "Ausbau") languages, on the other hand, is not a linguistic concept: it is *sociological*. It refers only to those languages that have been deliberately shaped and built to become standardized vehicles of literary and scientific expression (which could include oral cultures). Many language names are used for both: these are languages for which the same name is used for their discernible form as spoken language and for their literary form. But this is not always the case. Kloss gives the example of Czech and Slovak: at the spoken level, he sees them as one language,[8] encompassing a number of different dialects. However, at the literary level, they have developed different standardized forms and here we have therefore one "Abstand" (discerned) language at the spoken level but two "Ausbau" languages at the formal, literary level. The way Kloss describes his concept of "Ausbau" languages is very similar to the concept of "intellectualisation". Prah (2017: 216) quotes the definition of Sibayan from 1999: an intellectualised language is a "language which can be used for educating a person in any field of knowledge from kindergarten to the university and beyond". This terminology is also used by Kaschula & Nkomo (2019: 604), who quote Havránek in making a distinction between "folk and standard languages" and Sibayan in making a distinction between "intellectually modernized" and "popularly modernized" languages. They see intellectualization of languages "as a counterhegemonic process that seeks to empower communities through language" (Kaschula & Nkomo 2019: 606).

Now that the concepts have been clarified, a further explanation of my shift of emphasis compared to Kloss is in order. The most straightforward translation of *Abstand* into English is distance. Kloss proposes to use this term for dialects or speech registers that are so distant from one another that it is justified to speak of different languages. The word "discerned" places a slightly different emphasis,

[8]The *ethnologue* would disagree with Kloss here, and sees these as two languages, denoted by the ISO 693-3 codes <ces> for Czech and <slk> for Slovak. However, the *ethnologue* also asserts: "All Czech and Slovak dialects [are] mutually inherently intelligible". https://www-ethnologue-com/language/ces accessed 30 March 2020.

pointing to the act of discerning – the political and social act of pronouncing a dialect to be a language. The word *Ausbau* means extension or expansion in English. Kloss thus refers to the act of extending a spoken language into a standardized language, including its written form. The word "designed" in a way reinforces this meaning, again pointing to the social process that is involved here. This reinforcement is intentional. Many languages (including French, German, Italian, but certainly also Bahasa Indonesia or Turkish) have an explicit and strong design element to them. In the Anglo-Saxon world, this design element is much less explicit and remains to a certain extent hidden below the surface. An equivalent of the Académie Française, with its strong mandate of protecting the French language, does not exist in the Anglo-Saxon world. Yet, the "Queen's English" or "BBC English" is in fact a form of standardized language developed in elite institutions in the UK and actually spoken and used in that form by only a small minority of the UK population.[9] Thus, even if there is no official body "designing" the language in the Anglo-Saxon world, English as a designed language is (re)produced just as effectively as what happens with other languages. This process can easily be mistaken for a "natural" development and can create a type of myopia, causing some linguists to overlook the fact that both American and British standard English are created, designed, through social, power-structure mediated processes using different mechanisms but with the same effects as with the majority of other designed languages of the world.

Kloss stresses that in order to master a designed language a certain amount of formalized learning is always required. This is what Lo Bianco (2008: 114) refers to as "secondary lingual socialization". It also helps to explain why in countries that use an indigenous language as medium of instruction this language is also taught as a subject in its own right, usually up to the end of secondary school. Kloss gives the example of German (Kloss 1967: 35): linguists might disagree as to whether spoken High German (*Hochdeutsch*) and Lower Saxon (*Plattdeutsch*) are in fact part of one "discerned" language or indeed two languages (the *ethnologue* is of the latter opinion). However, speakers of both forms of German use written Standard German as their common "designed" language, but this standardized version is different from both spoken languages and requires learning in order

[9] In a curious form of English idiom this is referred to as the "received pronunciation". Trudgill (2002: 171) claims that it is spoken by around 3% of the British population. Many a bright youngster who has studied English as a foreign language and who has little difficulty in watching for example the BBC World TV station will find to his or her surprise on a first visit to England that he or she has great difficulty in understanding the ordinary English person. Adichie describes a similar phenomenon for her Nigerian characters in their encounters with U.S. English. For an overview of different varieties of spoken English, see the Electronic World Atlas of Varieties of English, https://ewave-atlas.org/, accessed 19 June 2020.

to master it. However, learning standard written German is easier for speakers of high German and of lower Saxon than it would be for speakers of, for example, Polish.

The advantage of using these two concepts together is that they point to the possibility that one designed (or intellectualized) language serves the speakers of several discerned languages. In a country like Germany, this is in fact the case: the *ethnologue* discerns no fewer than fifteen living German-like languages spoken in the country[10] – yet speakers of all of these fifteen languages use the designed *Hochdeutsch* in formal domains such as law, governance and (higher) education. In Africa, it would be entirely conceivable to make similar choices. Thus, the various forms of Gbe (including Aja, Ewe and Fon), spoken in an area that stretches from Eastern Ghana to western Nigeria, are often regarded as dialects of a single language (Prah 1998). Within that dialect continuum, a standard form could probably be developed that would be easy to learn for speakers of all discerned languages in this continuum. The speakers of various Ubangian languages in the Central African Republic together make use of Sango, a *lingua franca* based on Ngbandi, one of the languages discerned in this group. Sango could be developed to serve as a designed language for use in formal domains in the area. Alexander (1998) has pointed to the large similarities between the Nguni languages spoken in South Africa (including Swazi, Xhosa and Zulu), as well as between the Sotho-Tswana languages. He has proposed developing standard varieties that could serve the speakers of these languages.

Where in Europe, the historical processes that led to the development of certain forms of language as designed languages was a historical process that has more or less come to an end,[11] such a process has never taken place in Africa. This has contributed to the persistent and disempowering trope that using African languages in higher education would be a practical impossibility, because it would involve the development of all 2,000+ languages that databases like the *ethnologue* manage to discern on the continent. Thus, the African Union has avoided the problem of choosing certain languages over others by designating "any" African language as "official".[12] However, in so doing the AU has at the same time re-

[10] https://www.ethnologue.com/country/DE/languages accessed 27 July 2021.

[11] But note for example the recent development of Catalan from a discerned into a designed language, now used at all levels of education.

[12] https://au.int/en/about/languages accessed 20 July 2019. Note, though that the AU's African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) has chosen to concentrate on 41 Vehicular Cross-Border Languages: https://acalan-au.org/viewcontent3.php?tab=10 accessed 7 April 2022. In addition, the work of CASAS in South Africa has been of great importance in developing standard and unified orthographies for a great many African languages: https://www.uwc.ac.za/study/all-areas-of-study/centres/centre-for-advanced-studies-of-african-society/publications accessed 7 April 2021.

moved any practical meaning of the term "official language": it is a case of paying lip service only. It is through the distinction between discerned and designed languages that we can see a way out of this problem; but where in Europe, the issue of language choice has largely been solved, this is not the case for Africa. This represents a problem, but also a possibility and a challenge. There is a possibility for agency here: Africans can make informed policy choices in this area. However, in order to do so, a set of sound policies and principles would be needed. What could those be? That is the topic of the next section.

4 Principles for rational language choices

What reasons could there be for choosing one language as the basis for further development into a designed language, in favour of others? Isn't just asking the question itself a recipe for trouble, contestation and (ethnic) strife? If left to the powers that be, that will inevitably be the case. Therefore, it is necessary to depoliticize choices to the extent possible. A first step would be to search for and adopt a number of sound principles, that would make choices possible based on equitable, democratic and scientifically sound bases. Based on a search in the literature, I would suggest that five such principles are necessary.

Note that language design does not necessarily mean taking one language as a template that cannot be altered. Thus, the design process itself could lead to simplification if that makes learning easier. One of the greatest successes of designed languages in the world today is Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), a designed language based on but not identical to Malay. It is currently used as first or second language by over 150 million people. In Bahasa, to give an example, the plural is not marked – to make a word plural, it is repeated. In general, Bahasa was consciously formed to make it as easy as possible to learn for as many people as possible, making it different from related but much more complex languages such as Javanese.

In line with the concepts of discerned and designed languages, the *first principle* that I would propose is that it will be necessary to develop a *limited number* of designed languages for education. This idea was suggested already by Chumbow (2005: 177) and also by Brock-Utne (2017). Not only is it not practical, it is also not necessary to aim to develop all discerned languages into designed languages.

The *second principle* that I would propose follows from the first: these designed languages should be chosen in such a way that they are *easy to learn* for as many speakers of discerned languages as possible – a principle that was already suggested by Nwoye (1978), as cited by Laitin (1992: 154).

As a complement to the second principle, the *third principle* would be to strive for *inclusivity*, in other words, to choose the various designed languages in such a way that, as much as possible, all have to exert a relatively low but relatively equal effort to learn them.[13] Thus, for speakers of Occitan, standard French might be relatively easy to learn as a designed language. For speakers of lower Saxon, standard German might serve the same purpose. Using standard German as the designed language for speakers of Occitan would place them at a disadvantage compared to the speakers of lower Saxon. Therefore, both French and German are needed in order to ensure inclusivity. Another strategy is thinkable: Mandarin Chinese could be chosen as the designed language for both groups, which would make learning extremely but equally difficult for both. Such a strategy would be very damaging to France and to Germany, because it would effectively bar large sections of the population from gaining access to meaningful education and to public discourse and would therefore stunt the possibilities of both countries for economic and social development. Of course, this is precisely the strategy that is currently presented as the only rational alternative for many African countries.

Then, a *fourth principle* seems appropriate: namely that of making use of *existing bilingualism* as a resource. Multilingualism in Africa should be seen as a resource to be mobilized to advantage. As hinted to above, this is probably useful only for a minority of cases: true bilingualism is difficult to achieve and depends on significant exposure to the two languages from a very early age. However, there may be areas where this exists. There could be situations where finding an easy to learn designed language for discerned language A is difficult or impractical, but if those children also speak language B it might be possible to find a cost-effective, inclusive solution.

Lastly, it is important to avoid fragmentation and ethnically-based enmity wherever possible. For policy, this would mean the adoption of measures to *encourage linguistic collaboration* among linguistically related communities as a *fifth principle*.

An important element in these principles is the idea that people should be able to gain access to knowledge through a designed language that is "easy to learn" for them. But is ease of language learning an important factor and is it of equal importance for all sections of the population? Unfortunately, this is an area that is very much under-researched. However, there is an indicator based on practical

[13]This principle is related to the second principle of what a multicultural state should look like, as described by Kymlicka (2003: 150). This entails the requirement that all citizens should have equal access to state institutions, without linguistic barriers imposed on some but not on others: "The state accepts an obligation to accord the history, language and culture of non-dominant groups the same recognition and accommodation that is accorded to the dominant group."

experience by the US Foreign Service Institute in teaching many different foreign languages to interested groups of adolescents or young adults. This has led them to classify languages into four categories and one lower category, for learning a closely related language (US State Department 2015).[14] These categories can be ranked from very easy to very difficult; the difference in the amount of learning required is considerable, as shown in Figure 1 below.

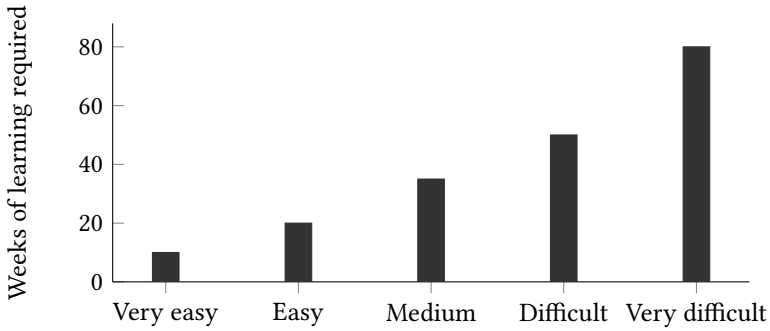

Figure 1: Ease of language learning

The graph clearly illustrates that the difference in effort required to learn an "easy" language compared to a "difficult" language is indeed substantial – although the number of weeks should be taken as an indicative value only. In addition, this is based on language learning of young US students. It could be that the differential is different for African children – this is an area that has not been researched and would deserve further work. In addition, it is highly likely that the differential varies for people with varying language aptitudes. Li (2016) has shown that language aptitude is a valid construct. This construct is related to, but independent of general intelligence. As with other kinds of aptitude, language learning abilities are not spread evenly over the population: some people are good at learning languages, others are not.

The issue of which languages are more easy or more difficult to learn and for whom has not received wide attention in the literature. Van Pinxteren (2020: 137) points out:

> the question of what ease or difficulty of language learning means for large groups of learners and for an education system has not been asked in the literature in that way. Yet, this is a question of key relevance for Africa, where

[14]The document quoted in reference is no longer current; however, a similar description is available at https://www.state.gov/foreign-language-training/.

> populations are supposed to be taught in a language that most learners do not speak from birth.
>
> Common sense suggests to start from the principle that languages that are close to one another are easier to learn and to be taught in formal education than languages that are very different from one another. In other words, the distance between any two languages can be taken as an indicative or rough measure for how easy or difficult it may be to learn another language for a speaker of a given language or to teach the new language to large groups of learners.

Van Pinxteren then goes on to propose a way of approximating ease and difficulty of language learning for speakers of specific language pairs, based on normalized edit distances between those languages.

What would the application of the principles outlined above mean for rational language choices in different African countries, given their different language ecologies? This remains to be researched; such research will require concerted efforts by African linguists and educators for years to come. An example of how this could work out for Botswana has been elaborated by Chebanne & van Pinxteren (2021). For Tanzania, Van Pinxteren has argued that Swahili is easy to learn for most Tanzanians, since the great majority of them speak a language from the "Narrow Bantu" family, a group of languages that are closely related. However, for most other African countries the situation may be much more complicated – how much more remains to be explored in individual cases.

5 Conclusions: the way forward

What this paper has shown is that language documentation as such is perhaps not the only way forward for (socio-)linguistic research. A number of questions need to be answered, questions that are highly relevant for the development of Africa-centred policy options. These include, among others:

- If a transition towards designed language use in Africa is desirable, which combinations of discerned and designed languages can work?
- What policies are needed to move towards use of designed African languages?
- How should a transition be planned? What phases would be needed?

Over the years, many authors have argued for increased use of African languages – but on the ground, very little, if any, progress has been made: if anything, in some countries there has been a retrograde movement, in favour of introducing education in international languages only at ever earlier ages. Apparently, current theory does not provide sufficient arguments to help bring about change in this area. This paper has shown, at least in principle, that the joint concepts of discerned and designed languages can help us re-focus on the importance of policy and on the possibility and need for African agency in this area. What is especially relevant is that the concepts make it possible to consider the possibility of using *one* designed (standardized) language to serve *several* discerned languages. In contrast to current thinking, such a designed language need not be *mutually intelligible* with all languages it serves – as long as it is easy to learn. In order to make further progress in this area, a set of scientifically sound and democratic principles and policies will be needed. An initial proposal was presented in this paper for five such principles, based in part on existing literature. Adopting this line of reasoning will open up the road to a vast and exciting new research agenda, highlighting the need for increased involvement in policy debates by African (socio-)linguists.

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