

## SOME AFRICAN LANGUAGES AND THEIR PECULARITIES

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*Ex Africa semper aliquid novi.*  
[Always something new out of Africa.]  
—Roman proverb.

### **Introduction**

I have written before about certain interesting African languages but this article contains something new about an inexhaustible topic. It is often said that about 30 percent of all the world's languages are now alive in Africa, spoken by hundreds of millions of people but no one language uniting the whole area. The Berber languages number at least 20 but they are not 20 million Berbers, for example. There are probably some African languages now known but not likely to be in use even next year and some old West African languages still maintain a life in the US as influences upon Gullah in the American South. In turn, southern black language has had an influence much farther afield, as in Detroit American, for example. There are some African languages that go back as far as the extinct languages of the Acadians and the Phoenicians, thousands of years before Christ (Who spoke Amharic, not Hebrew), and there is new slang in (say) Johannesburg that was picked up this morning from an online blog, probably one in English.

Humanity began in Africa, human speech with it. We are still attempting to discover how languages arose and spread from Africa to India and went on to create the panoply of Indo-European languages. Ethnologists may claim 2038 languages in Africa today, but in 1997 Nurse guessed 1200-1500 and Bender gave 1200 languages as "a conservative estimate." Gunnemark (p. 102) said Africa had "over 1400" languages in use in 1991. Some countries such as Nigeria with hundreds of languages are seeing a lot of them disappear because of lingua francas of African or other origin. If the children are not receiving a language as their mother tongue it will die out. Some African languages are down to the last few speakers. Elsewhere, Iceland has only 300,000 speakers but Icelandic has lasted and will last. Numbers are important but not the whole story in language survival. Tedeo in the Nilo-Sharic group has 50,000 speakers but Arabic may wipe it away. There are many languages of the Niger-Congo group with 15,000 or fewer speakers today. Vidunda holds on in East Central Africa with maybe 10,000 speakers. There are some languages one may never have heard mentioned, such as Tamashak, though one may have heard of the Tueregs who speak it, that is used in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali and Niger, and the number of whose speakers is reported so differently in different sources that it seems safest to say that nobody knows the correct number. Some languages are increasing; some are attacked by population shifts, displaced persons, genocidal

wars and so on. Many African peoples and languages are under severe attack.

Here is a look at some African languages that are mostly hale and hearty. Some African languages have clicks, some tones, some more than one script, and there is much bilingualism and the use of trade languages of local origin and even Europeans' colonial languages. There is a language in which *kopi*= "spot" and so *kopikopi*= "spotted." We could have *moro*= "he saw you" and *momoro*= "he did not see you." In Cantonese the verb one uses for "fall" when one drops a cookie (a word with the third tone) is different from the verb used (a different tone) when one drops cookie crumbs. Harrison has pointed out that English has "a pile of sand" and "a glass of milk" and "an expanse of ocean" (immeasurable things) but while one can say "a pool of water" one is not permitted to say "a pile of water." Tabasarian (spoken in The Caucasus) possibly has 52 cases, Mandarin none. Harrison remarks that "it is impossible to translate 'nephew' or 'niece' into Arapesh [spoken in New Guinea] unless one knows who the uncle or aunt is" and in some societies in Africa, as one may know there are elaborate ways to address relatives and some relatives one is not allowed to speak to. Turning to Africa, some languages have elaborate kinship terminologies and complex counting systems that are odd to English speakers and count different things or animals or people differently or have separate vocabularies for the two sexes. Scholars try to systemize but are not always successful even when they throw in a category, as the great expert on Anglo-Saxon did, as catch-all: he called it Miscellaneous.

In the early twentieth century European scholars posited five categories of African languages: Semitic, Hamitic, Sudanic, Bantu, and Bushman, basically from the north to the south of the continent. Semitic and Hamitic, however, are hard to separate and Bushman is now grouped with Hottentot and some other languages to produce a group called Koisian. Let us look at that one for a moment. For Koisian one may encounter the name !Xu, with a tilde over the *u* so unusual my computer does not have it and sometimes one see Khosian. The language group has a record 72 phonological segments, which means one has to make many more noises than usual, including clicks found only in African languages (maybe most familiar from Zulu). But one does not need to know mathematics. The language group is famous for occasionally pointing out 1 and 2 but seldom 3 and nothing larger. Koisian is the smallest group of African languages (with perhaps 50 languages included in it and some of them with fewer than 1000 speakers, or so it is said, though it is difficult to believe that so few speakers could keep a language alive unless they are perfectly isolated). Koisian is named from the Hottentot people called Koi-Koin but confusingly can be spoken by other peoples not at all related to Koi-Koin. Koisian goes along with groups called Afro-Asian (this is a better name than Hamito-Semitic, Niger-Kordofanian (mostly the Niger group but there is a much smaller Kordofanian group in Sudan, which the British call The Sudan, the way they say The Gambia) and Nilo-Saharan. Koisian is thus said to be one of the four major language divisions of Africa but it is nowhere near that simple.

I can do no better. The matter is too complex to attempt to sort out here but

we can note in passing that the continent is vast, it contains both Negroid and non-Negroid peoples and peoples of many religions and traditions. There are many ethnographical differences from place to place so that it best to think of the continent as we think of Europe or Asia as one with many different peoples (black, brown, white and other). Note that Madagascar is African but also Madagascar people are Austronesian, related to those of Malaya and Polynesia. All over the area there is a wide variety of languages. Berbers and Boers and Nubians are all Africans and so are the pigmies and the tall Masai. In addition, there has been a great need in the mixture for multilingualism and for lingua francas and these have included Swahili (a Niger-Congo language with their millions of users) and Arabic (Koranic and in modern versions) and other languages. We must remember that Africa has the likes of Liberian English. Liberia was founded for former American slaves, back when there was a white move to export the Peculiar Institution of slavery, well before Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement, and along the coast of Liberia today fishermen have a pidgin called Kru which is based on English. There are for various colonial and commercial reasons many versions of other languages brought from Europe.

With a plethora of languages, Africa presents us with a large number of unusual ways in which cognition and communication operate. Sometimes languages acquire written form and then to some extent the past can speak to us. That is the case with Egyptian, a dead language whose origin goes back thousands of years before Christ. Its hieroglyphs were eventually translated because of the single great find of the Rosetta stone on which Egyptian and languages that scholars did know appeared together. One knows the story.

People have heard the story that all languages are pretty much the same, just different words for the same things despite the evidence of the likes of Hittite and Hungarian. One may even have been told that one does not need grammar to communicate—"just use nouns and gestures." Nonsense. Languages have structures as well as lexicons. Among those may be a number of features quite striking to those of us who speak modern English of any variety and any social dialect of that. Egyptian writing, it was finally discovered, was both phonetic and ideogrammatic, mixing symbols of sounds and pictures of things. That happens to be the case with Mayan, too. (We should have figured that out a lot earlier than we did.) But China writes in pictures and Indo-European languages write in alphabets and Africa when it does write and not hand down history through oral transmission writes in many scripts.

It also has some unusual sounds and rules. Here are just a few items. In the important language of Hausa, for example, a person says *yago* "he came" but *tago* "she came." In Shilh, a Berber tongue, *iliwi* "thorn" has the plural *ilawan*. Some other languages might double the word to create a plural. Some languages do not deal in comparative and superlative: they go, one might say, from *good* to *good good* to *good good good*. (We have tricks in English, too, of course; *goody!* is stronger than *good!* and folksy *Lordy!* is stronger than *Lord!* Then came *Lawsy me!* before OMI for

*Oh my God!* Swept across the Internet, where even atheists use it. Back to Mande. There are two versions of Mande, Mande tan and Mande fu. This is like the French dividing over whether the language has *oui* “yes” or *oc*; for in this case *tan* and *fu* are different words for the number 10. In some African languages there are initial sounds like *mb* and *mn* and *ng* and what are technically called labiovelar consonants (*gb* and *kp*). African tones are based on pitch levels and thus do not resemble those of Chinese (flat, rising, falling, rising then falling), which are more numerous. We all have 10 fingers and 10 toes. Counting differs in African languages. Consider the way that English used to count in scores (20) and how 20 works in Welsh. Recall that the British before decimalization replaced *lsd* (pounds, shillings, pence—the letters standing for the Latin rather than English words for these units) liked 12s (think of dozens) as in 12 pennies to a shilling and 12 shillings to a pound (13 to a guinea). People do count on their hands, however. Italians gesture a lot with their hands and Roman numbers have X for the 10 digits of two hands crossed, and one realizes that C for 100 was a cupped hand. English’s 51 is, though one may not have noticed, is “five 10 [plus] 1”. The French for 90 say *quatre-vingt-dix* (“four times 20 + 10”). The definite article may not occur with an African noun but if it does come it could come before the noun or after it as it does in what used to be called Serbo-Croatian before the Serbs and the Croats hit Splitsville politically and, they like to think, language-wise. Times change. English once had “the sun his beams” and “the moon her beams,” gendered nouns.

Back in Africa, in Bedauye, *dir* is “to kill” and *mdedar* is “to kill each other,” according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—which in 1971 was still saying there were “600 to 800” African languages and still referred to Dahomey, adding that “the Pygmies “may or may not have a language of their own”—not sure. In fact, in the same article the encyclopedia refers to “the language of the Efe pygmies.”

People can get very mixed up even if certain language facts are pretty obvious, such as the large movements of people over the centuries (such as the Bantu from Cameroon southwest) or the movement of some early humanity out of Africa into India, or the obvious Dutch presence in the south or the surprising survival of words from Punic up north. One may have heard of the Punic Wars (Romans *versus* Carthaginians in the third and second centuries BC), but no one speaks the language of Hannibal any more. The Romans utterly destroyed this territory and sold all the people it did not massacre into slavery and even changed its name to a province they called Africa. We can be sure that the Romans made certain that the Carthaginians were, as Cato said they had to be, *delenda* “wiped out.”

We can be sure of certain aspects of a number of African languages. We can touch on 21 here to bring up the fact that in Africa the wide variety of ethnic groups in their languages shows us that there is an amazing difference in the way human beings order their world and express themselves. Even non-verbal communication may differ from what one is familiar with. A person can encounter people whose tradition is to shake the head for “yes” the way English speakers do for “no.” Gestures are conventional, and conventions can be anything so long as people agree

on them. One may even notice that body language somewhat differs between some African-Americans and other Americans, especially when they talk (or dance). One may not know any African languages but one can be aware of this through the mention of select details. Among African-Americans there is an African way of handling the difference which regular English does not notice between “I am” and “I be.” Africans in African languages may have special ways of expressing location (“on the chest” is the way some say for “in front”), the difference between movement toward oneself or away from oneself, or of speaking at a different level of sound (or maybe not speaking at all, ever) to certain relatives because of regulations and taboos. Would you like to have to change your vocabulary just because someone particular died and thenceforward you were never to utter a word that began with the same letter as the dead person’s name? Do you think that you could always remember that there are certain persons, even close to you, that custom says you must never look at when speaking to? That may seem extreme but Africa has had kings, for instance, who were not allowed to touch the ground. They never walked; they were carried. Their throne was a human being they sat on. They slept not on a bed but on the body of another person. If their throne died, they ceased to be king. Every culture has some weird ideas, looking at things from the perspective of foreigners. The Japanese, I keep noting, keep bowing while speaking on their cell phones. The Jews keep nodding when reading their scriptures or praying.

Every language tells us not simply what a person is thinking but how a person is thinking. African languages tell us that “animal” and “meat” are the same thing, same word. Spanish tells us that *carne* “meat” is beef and that you do not drop things. They “fall from you”. German, so logical, tells us that a *Mädschen* “young woman/ virgin” is neutral. American says that “I could care less” and “I could not care less” mean exactly the same thing and, if you object to that, the response is “whatever.” Twenty-one languages. Why not more or fewer? Whatever. You know what I’m saying?

### **Twenty-One African Languages**

**Akan.** Sometimes wrongly called Twi (the name of one of its dialects) this is one of the most important languages of Ghana and it spread with the slave trade to Suriname, where it is still spoken. There is an Akan (or Djyka or Bush Negro) pidgin in Suriname, based on English and recalling the slave trade. This pidgin enables the Bush Negroes to talk with the Trio Indians; it actually has a syllabic writing system. In Africa, Akan (which some people call Aucan, such pronunciation differences creating spellings which can confuse people trying to communicate about African languages) has seven million speakers, most speakers in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. An improved Akan writing system was adopted in 1980. Changing spelling officially is hard to do but Germans and French and Americans have tried. Gunnemark, who also called Akan, Twi-Fante, claimed (1991) it had 10 million home speakers, seven million in Ghana and three million in the Ivory Coast. Twi (or Ashanti Twi) and Fante are two of the four varieties of Akan. There are also an Anyi-Baule and an Akuapem Twi.

**Amharic.** Of all the Semitic languages only Arabic (205 million speakers) has more speakers than Amharic (over 15 million in Ethiopia) and Oromo at the Horn of Africa (maybe more than in Ethiopia). There is a special Ethiopic script which combines a consonant with the following vowel in a tricky little unit. Ethiopia, with an ancient Judeo-Christian tradition and, it claims, the Ark of the Covenant, uses otherwise dead Ge'ez for rituals. Amharic is official in Ethiopia where it has 18 million home speakers and Gunnemark says (1991) that “[a]t least 25 million people in Ethiopia have some knowledge of Amharic.” This is one of the big African languages. Only about five percent of the languages of Africa have over a million speakers and the population of Africa is hundreds of millions but no accurate census has ever been taken. How could it be?

**Banda.** From the Ubangi group of the Niger-Congo family comes this mostly rural language of the Central African Republic (I have seen guesses from 350,000 to one million speakers.) One feature it has that is worth noticing is that to make the plural of a noun one uses a prefix, not a suffix. Where two-tone languages in Africa may use a two-tone drum for signaling, Banda has to use a three-tone drum because, as in Chinese, tones enable one word to mean different things. Tones multiply the possibilities of monosyllables. Gunnemark (1991) does not mention Banda at all in his “Languages from Abkhaz to Zulu” list.

**Bobo.** This comes in your choice of Bobo Fing or Bobo Wule, the latter also called Boomu or Bwamu. One hears them both in Burkina Faso and Mali. They are part of the giant Niger-Congo family. They are very minor compared to Yoruba and Igbo. Gunnemark takes no notice (1991) of Bobo. Even Crystal’s encyclopedia (1987) does not have Bobo.

**Ewe.** Sometimes called Vhe or described as Ewe-Fon, though Fon is a different language. This language has some three million speakers in Benin (where French is official and there also are Barba, Fon, Ful, Somba, Tem, and Yoruba), and in Ghana (where English is official but there also are Akan, Andagme, Dagbani, Gan, Gurenne, Gurma, and More). That last by Lüke & Jagger in Austin’s attractive encyclopedia is called Moore. Many names of African languages have variant spellings in English as well as their own different names in the languages themselves. Ghana also speaks Gurma, Kabre, Moha, and Tem but it has a kind of French as the official language. When Benjamin Boukpeti, a black man from Togo, won a bronze medal in the 2008 Olympics the *New York Times* headline was “Frenchman Navigates the Waters for Togo’s First Medal.” In Ewe to make a noun plural, one adds *-wo* (“they”). African languages give us many insights into different ways talk works. Gunnemark refers (1991) to “over 3 million” home speakers of Ewe or Éwé, 1.5 million in Ghana and 1.6 million in Togo where he also cites it as a lingua franca. In the 1980’s the US published a list of 169 so-called critical languages, languages needed for various civilian and military purposes, and since then various US departments have worried about security and other matters threatened by the lack of US knowledge of certain foreign languages. The CIA now advertises for foreign speakers, “With you we are speechless,” but it does not pay foreign-language experts enough and vetting for

security clearance takes a long time and eliminates many experts. If and when there is some kind of flare-up in Africa, the US will not be not ready with Ewe or most if not all other African languages and might not trust the comparatively few of the two or three million worldwide speakers of Ewe—or Ga or Tsongo or whatever—among US immigrants.

**Fulani.** This language is somewhat common as a member of the 40-language West Atlantic group and some of its speakers may believe, as do speakers of Xhosa and Zulu farther south, that they have individual languages rather than dialects. It is best to say there is a single language called Fulani just as we say that all the dialects of widespread Swahili add up to one language. On the other hand, around the Chari and the Nile rivers there is a group of 100 different languages, and arguments go on as to how these are related and especially what connection they have to some 20 others that experts have joined with the Chari-Nilo to make what they call the Nilo-Saharan group. Fulani was once involved in the whole of the Sahel and was used in the empires of Cameroon, Guinea, Mali, and Sokoko. Today Fulani has 15 million speakers in West Africa. Fulani is not to be confused with the significant language Ful found in Nigeria and 10 other African nations. The idea that Fulani “originated in Egypt” is flat wrong. Plurals of nouns in Fulani are completely different words than the singulars, just another one of Africa’s many language surprises, but English has *mouse* and *mice* and our plural of *deer* is *deer*. Foreign language oddities may cause us to think of strange things in our mother tongue. Gunnemark notes (1991) Ful but not Fulani. Nobody seems to have a complete list of African languages.

**Gogo.** Crystal does not have this one but Gogo is a Bantu language with one million speakers in Tanzania. Others in a long list of Bantu languages including Kikuyu, Kongo, Lingala, Luba and Luyia have far more speakers than Gogo but the name is here simply to attract attention. Gogo is in the Ruvu group (with Kagalu, Kami, Ruguru, and Zalamo, and Zalamo); it is unusual in this lot because it uses stress instead of tones. Gogo is spoken in the Dodoma District in three dialects: *ciNyaugogo* near Dodoma, *ciTumba* east, and *ciNyambwa* west. Gunnemark (1991) does not notice Gogo.

**Hausa.** This is the most widely used of all languages of West Africa (Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria) and may have a total of 30 million speakers. Gunnemark says (1991) there are 25 million in Nigeria, four million in Niger, and over 100,000 each in Chad and in Ghana. It does belong to the Chadic group of Afro-Asiatic languages. Originally written in Arabic script it is now romanized. It is the only one of the 100 Chadic languages that has a written form. It is active in Chad, Guinea, and elsewhere as a lingua franca.

**Igbo.** From the Kwa family, with major tongues such as Hausa and Yoruba, Igbo or Ibo is official, with English, Hausa and Yoruba, in southeastern Nigeria (12 million speakers, though Gunnemark guesses (1991) 15 million and other guesses range from six million to just about twice as large a number). Igbo is not to be confused with Ijo (a million speakers in Nigeria, with a considerable number of dialects). By

the way, all African languages have extensive oral traditions and many, such as the language of Biafra, become important to aid workers from time to time and western speakers are hard to find when emergencies crop up.

**Kamba.** This is an old and well-established (2,500,000 speakers, Gunnemark says three million) language in Kenya. It is a useful lingua franca for the Kikuyu and Masai but why the US regarded it as a “critical” language is hard to see. It has seven vowels and some Swahili loan words. Swahili is so spread around it lends words to many others. Some African languages have a great many more loan words than others. Loan words naturally depend on the closeness and duration of contact with others. Kamba is from the large Bantu group of the huge Benue-Congo family and bears some relationship, of course, to the rest.

**Kanuri.** Because speakers were among the earliest converts to Islam, Kanuri is written in both Arabic and Roman scripts. It is spoken in Chad (as Kanembu, with some 100,000 home speakers) and has official regional status in Nigeria (Yerwa and Manga dialects, along with Edo-Bini, Efik-Ibibio, Ful, Ijo, and Tiv). It has perhaps five million speakers but many also speak Hausa or some other language as well. Niger has 300,000 home speakers of Kanuri. Africans on the whole cannot get along with being monolingual like so many US people. If one starts early enough there is really no reason why anybody cannot learn a number of languages and not be stuck with the limiting outlooks of just one. The older one gets the harder it is to learn languages but some people do so in advanced old age. Some even say that the more languages a person knows the easier it is to acquire more. I am not at all sure that is right.

**Manding(o).** Spoken by five million in the various dialects: Bambara (Mali’s national language), Diola or Djyula or Jula (Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, with a history as an elite language), Mandinka (Gambia and Senegal), Malinké (Guinea). Manding or Mandingo is likewise employed as a lingua franca for trade. For old trade routes, one can examine the evidence in languages. Gunnemark (1991) notes Bambara (Mali, with 250,000 home speakers in the Ivory Coast) but does not mention Diola/Djyla or Jula, etc.

**Mo(o)re.** Sometimes Mõõre, not More. The speakers constitute about 40 percent of the population of Burkina Faso and so the country of over nine million has a third of the population speaking this but it also is spoken in Benin, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Mali, and Togo for a total of five million speakers. There are among the loan words some from French. Loan words always document interaction between peoples, of course. Gunnemark ignores this language.

**Somali.** Spoken along with Arabic in Somalia (where it is official) by perhaps nine million, Somali is also spoken in Ethiopia by half a million and by more in Djibouti



(maybe 400,000) and Kenya (maybe 200,000). There is so-called Common Somali and there are several major dialects. Men speaking Somali may also speak Arabic. Elsewhere one will hear that speakers of Tedo also speak Arabic. Crystal (p. 53) gives us a proverb in Somali: *Beeni marka horewaa malab, marka dambe na waa malm* ("Lies are honey at first, later they are myrrh"). One might note that proverbs are very much part of the African oral tradition and this complicates translation, just as the familiarity of Muslims with all of The Koran may baffle outsiders when Muslims repeatedly quote snatches of it. One sees the same thing in America where The Bible and Shakespeare are alluded to by the older generation when those are less familiar to many younger Americans. One can appreciate that instant translation of (say) Russian at the United Nations has to deal with the Russian expression of "seeing a bear behind every bush," which cannot be usefully translated word for word. Dealing with African languages means dealing with unfamiliar and sometimes baffling cultures.

**Songhay.** Or Songhai. This language which looks a little like an isolate but has been put by some scholars into the Nilo-Saharan group has two million speakers in Niger (including Dendi and Dyerma, among the eight million total, for there are speakers also of Arabic, Berber, Ful, Hausa, and Kanuri). Another million—or if Gunnemark is correct half a million—is in Mali (where English is official, French is used as a lingua franca, and there are eight or nine other tongues) and Burkina Faso (where French is official but roughly half the population speaks some of nine different African languages). In Burkina Faso Songhay has perhaps 100,000 home speakers and there are speakers in Benin. This is one of the languages of an old African empire and there were empires of Ghana and Mali and elsewhere. The powerful old Ghana empire was not where Ghana is now. Modern borders do not honor the old imperial ones. A single language (with dialects) may be in different countries because of politics as well, of course, as a result of trading history. Europeans drawing borders that ignored language factors and tribal identities proved to be unwise. How many African countries there would be if only countries were created according to ethnic and language identities is almost unimaginable. Perhaps some federations might have been created in which each unit was entitled to its own regional language (or related languages) and some unity achieved by adopting a unifying national language—or more than one but not too many. Even then one might need another language for external affairs.

**Tarifit.** "Language of the People of the Rif," in Morocco and Algeria. This is a Berber language spoken without official recognition by men and women but the men usually can speak Arabic also. Even simple words may be different in various Arabics. Nobody ventures to offer estimates of the current number of speakers.

**Tashelhit.** Or Tamazight or Central Shilha. A Berber language of North Africa this has several million speakers in Algeria (which also uses French and the Kabyle and Shawia dialects of Arabic but has Arabic as the sole official language since 1996) and in Morocco (French, Arabic, and the Berber, Rifian, and Shila varieties of Tamazight Berber). There once was a Judeo-Berber in Morocco as there still is a Guideo-

Romansco in Italy and a Ladino in Turkey. In 1997 the film known in English as *The Forgotten Hill* was made in Tashelhit. There has been a film in Amharic as well as one in Esperanto. There was a famous old film called *Africa Speaks* but Africa speaks little in the cinema which, when movies were silent, was an international language.

**Tigrynia.** Or Tigrinya. This has perhaps four million speakers in Ethiopia, two million in Eritrea as the Asmara dialect and three million in the Tigray dialect of the area of that name. It is not to be confused with Tigré, says Gunnemark (1991), with “600,000 in northern Ethiopia.” Both languages somewhat resemble Ethiopic. *Tigré* signifies “peasants,” “serfs,” “common people.” Coptic, which goes back to Egyptian somehow, is used by what may be the world’s first Christian church. Gunnemark calls the language Tigré and warns that it should not be confused with the word Tigray which is the name of the people who speak the language, not the name of the language itself. Tigrynia has an interesting causative: one do not say the equivalent of “he spoke” as much as “he caused to be said.”

**Yao.** This is sometimes called Chiyao. There is also a Yao spoken in China which is entirely different. The African Yao seems to have been used for terse communication to slaves by slave traders (who also were African) and it produced a lot of what are called minor sentences but those are not ordinary sentences at all but instructions (“Move!”) and cries (“Help!”) and ejaculations (brief prayers, “Holy Mother of God!”) and brief wishes expressed (“Goodbye” = “God be with ye”) and what one sees in signs like “No Smoking” and “Closed” or shout, “Hey, you!” or “Taxi!” The spread of language in Africa due to the slave trade, tribes capturing and selling slaves from other tribes and moving them on through African and Arab traders to the Americas, etc., has never been entirely worked out nor of course are there records of how if other than by gestures slavers communicated to their captives, or how slaves of different tribes spoke to each other. Upon arrival at western destinations, however, the slaves were as much as possible deprived of their African languages in order to keep them from conspiring to rebel against the slaveholders. It was forbidden by law in America to teach them to read and write. While some missionaries took down some languages of Amerindians they did not bother much if at all with the African languages of slaves in the Americas.

**Yoruba.** This useful language has spread in Africa (Nigeria, Benin and Togo) to a total of some 20 million speakers, maybe more. Because of immigration it is heard in the US and UK. It also is a lively African lingua franca. It is difficult to say how many millions use it as a first or second language in Benin, Nigeria, etc. It borrows from Arabic, because of Islam, and from English. What English would call 499, Yoruba would describe as 500 minus 1. This somewhat resembles US “ten minutes to noon” or the British saying minutes are “lacking” before a certain hour. The British might say “it has gone 7.” Americans never do.

**Zande.** Sometimes called Azande, this is one of the leading languages (with perhaps one and a half million speakers) of the 100-strong Adamwa-Ubangian family inside the 1000-language Niger-Congo group. It is spoken in the Central African Republic,

Congo, (The) Sudan, and Zaire. It belongs to the Ubangi group of Niger-Congo languages but it often looks like Bantu. It is tonal. It has these genders: masculine, feminine, animal of either sex, and inanimate. Like a great number of African languages it uses the Latin alphabet introduced by Europeans, many of them missionaries who, as in what is now the United States, created a written form for the aboriginal languages which they encountered in their religious and medical work. These missionaries were seldom trained linguists by any modern professional standards but they did compile dictionaries and in many cases wrote grammars of the native languages and gave a writing system to languages which previously used pictures, etc., and employed sign languages. Some missionaries and colonial officials in Africa also took an interest in native languages. Masters and servants or slaves developed mixtures of languages and for Africa we have pidgins based on Arabic (such as Juba in Sudan, Tekrur around Lake Chad, Gaigallya in Nigeria, etc.), English (such as Americo in Liberia, Kio in Sierra Leone, and the many mutually understandable English-based pidgins of West Africa), French (such as *Petit Nègre* along the Ivory Coast and *Petit Mauresque* in North Africa, Sango in Cameroon and Chad and elsewhere), Dutch (there are pidgins with Afrikaans such as Cape Coloured), Italian (Asmara Pidgin in Eritrea, left over from Mussolini's imperial ambitions), etc., but German West African colonialism does not seem to have left much of a mark. Portuguese explorers and traders were important in their day but did not leave as many traces as one might expect. For mining in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe there was devised an English pidgin based on Zulu and called variously Fanagaló or Mine Kaffir (the word *kaffir* was derogatory). Because of household servants using it also it was called Kitchen Kafir. (Someone should investigate Kitchen Spanish in California and Texas.) Expectably certain pidgins are based upon African languages: a mix of Swahili and European languages worked in Kenya. Town Bemba was invented so that copper miners from different tribes could work together in Zambia, just the way that a kind of throw-together language had to be created for workers on the Airbus in Europe. Kikongo produced a pidgin called Kituba. Ngala produced one called Lingala. Perhaps the most multicultural of all pidgins was heard in the linguistic bouillabaisse of the ports of Madagascar in the nineteenth century; there speakers of Arabic, Swahili, Portuguese and some other European tongues, also Malagasy, came up with something called Barracoon. That was always to be a get-by stop-gap kind of thing but some pidgins become creoles and then we must regard them as African languages. Usually they are one of the languages of a bilingual or multilingual individual African. When blacks are sequestered in towns as in South Africa they develop dialects, too.

In all those inventions of language is seen the need for human beings to communicate in society and in the communication systems are to be found quite a number of unusual features which challenge the idea that there is some basic, inborn grammar of human speech, what Chomsky called a deep structure. It turns out that there are a number of different ways of observing the world and many human ways of speaking about it, different social structures that call for kinship vocabularies which the western languages do not have, different taboos and odd rules about terms of address, etc. Putting aside all the details and strange names

that you as patient reader have been subjected to here, take away that basic idea. Don't think that all the world's people, brothers and sisters though they may be because all descended from distant ancestors, whether Cain (Abel was put out of the picture and Adam and Eve appear to have had just the two sons) or early hominids, all think alike or express themselves according to universal rules. They do not even have one kind of physical equipment with which to speak let alone similar experiences of life to shape their concepts. You have some hint about those facts in these many languages mentioned in passing and the 21 languages briefly featured.

### **Moving toward a Conclusion**

Make that 22 languages, for six million people black and white speak Afrikaans, a Dutch and local creation. Bobo and Gogo caught our attention but Africa also has speakers of Dan (800,000), Dogon (800,000), Fur (400,000), Ga (600,000), Judeo-Arabic (which is now fading away), and other languages whose very names sound as weird to English speakers as certain African naming customs such as naming a child for the day of the week on which it was born or giving an infant a repulsive (rather than a boasting name, such as Malik=King or Kemal=Perfect and so on) so as to prevent jealous gods from taking its life. Infant mortality has always been an African scourge. It has been alleged that there are African individuals who have no personal names but this seems quite as unlikely as the claim that Herodotus made that he had heard of people "with no names at all." Sometimes languages are named for ethnic groups. Zulu is one example. A single country can have a number of quite different home languages. Zambia, for instance, where English is official has two and a half million home speakers of Bemba (also used by some others as a lingua franca) and Tonga in the south (one million speakers), Nyanja in the east (800,000) and also in the east Tumbuka (nearly 300,000), Lozi in the southwest (600,000 speakers), and in the northwest Lunda (more than 200,000). Many of the countries of Africa experienced colonial oppression and now suffer postcolonial chaos in terms of drought and famine and political uprisings both tribal, and naturally in the mouths of Africans European languages take on a distinctly African quality. Despite the hatred of earlier imperialism, for convenience English or some other European language has been made official for use within a multicultural society as well as for trade and commerce internationally. Most African countries claim to be democratic republics but there is a history of dictatorships and totalitarianism in some countries and some countries have tribal kings even though those are officially not among the monarchies of Africa, of which Morocco is one.

The present king of Morocco is the fifth of that name. Some other nations have had a dazzling and depressing history of upsets and of military coups, revolutions, etc. With those may come certain language related matters such as renaming the country (where is Rhodesia now?) or even changing all the street names overnight. There has been, however, no drastic imposition of a local language along the lines of the reorganization of Turkey at the time of the fall of the Ottoman Empire. If English Only cannot be imposed on the US certainly no African

Only (which language to choose?) could ever be established. In the four corners of Africa, if one cares to think in those terms, very different peoples live and have done so for pretty much immemorial millennia.

The countries of northern Africa may be more stable because although there are a number of languages there is not the multiplicity of tribes and languages found in the sub-Saharan region. In central and southern Africa so many people speak so many different languages and have lived so long with their tribal identities that it is not surprising that there has been a great deal of conflict. The end of colonialism only exacerbated that. It is easily seen, also, how French and English and other languages left over from the exploitation of African colonies both leave a mark of colonialism on certain countries and also assist them to relate to world powers of today. The Germans and Portuguese have left less of a mark on Africa and its languages than have the exploitation by the English, the French, and the Dutch. The French have vigorously attempted to maintain a cultural *francafrique* and the British have welcomed some African nations into The Commonwealth, which is what remains of the British Empire. The Dutch at home have received more immigrants from South America (Suriname, for example) and eastern holdings (Java, for example) than from Africa but their part in the foundation of what used to be the Union of South Africa and now is the Republic of South Africa is notable.

When it comes to language, monolingual Americans who think of Darkest Africa as backward might stop and realize that huge numbers of Africans speak two or more languages. They have to. That is always worth repeating. In Nigeria there are alleged to be 533 languages in daily use. There is use in Africa of Arabic (millions of speakers), Swahili (especially in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and Zaire where it is one of the “national languages” with the pidgin or maybe now it is a creole Lingala and Luba along with French as official and 14 or 15 others as “home languages”). Other link languages are often the answer to a pressing necessity and so are widespread. Remember also that just because, for instance, Zambia or Zimbabwe has English as the official languages with each of those, as is the case elsewhere in Africa, the English goes along with a lot of local languages in separate regions.

That English and the French in former colonies you would find to be remarkably different from the French of Paris or the English of London or the American of New York. English along with Afrikaans is official in the Republic of South Africa but only a couple of millions speak English and maybe six million speak Afrikaans and the rest speak Zulu or that Fanagaló mentioned as a pidgin or something else as a lingua franca or Xhosa (seven million), Tswana (three million), Pedi (two and a half million), Sotho (two million), Ronga-Tsonga (over one million), Ndbele and Venda (700,00 each), and so on. There is a language patchwork quilt.

Be suspicious of all the statistics or comments about an imagined overall design. Any estimates from Gunnemark of the 1990's or even later authorities as to how many speakers there are of this or that are not on oath. One gets at best

informed guesses. If taking a reliable census is difficult in the US because of the homeless, illegal immigrants who do not want to be counted, and other factors that militate against accurate information, imagine how difficult it is to collect information in some nations if not all nations of Africa. Experts just theorize and speculate. Informed guesses are usually the rule as well when it comes to areal and genetic debates over the rise and spread of African languages (Zimmer). The languages of Africa are even less well understood, many will argue, than the languages living and dead of the Amerindians. With aboriginal languages we do not even know the number of those that have perished let alone the nature of those languages, and the groups into which we might fit them if we had all the information required is information we cannot ever have. We can only say that as many languages may be lost as survive today, maybe more. Those that still survive are in many cases in danger of extinction soon, paradoxically the victims of increased communication, because it was the difficulty of communicating in the past and isolated tribes that explain the rise of so many different languages

The many languages of Africa are notably unstable. Commerce and the use of European languages for education are but two of the forces militating against the weaker local languages. In ancient times populations were separated and developed their own mindsets, their own ways and words. Some peoples and their languages vanished so completely that all we know of them is a reference or two in classical Greek and Roman texts. In modern times natural catastrophes and tribal and national wars have dislocated many populations and there are other reasons as well for cultural and linguistic deaths. The number of African languages listed in Austin's book or Crystal's encyclopedia is fast dwindling. It has been said that in northern and western Africa 300 languages are endangered right now and another 200 are almost extinct while in the rest of Africa 10 percent of the extant languages will soon be gone. Time and chance, which as *Ecclesiastes* says "happeneth to us all," happen to languages as well. In the Darwinian contest, the fittest survive, along with a few languages with special circumstances such as religious use for ritual or a literature which can be translated although no living person actually speaks the language.

The end of some African languages may be near. The end of this limited and brief survey is also near. Allan Cameron has written, however, *In Praise of the Garrulous* so why not a bit more on Bobo and Gogo because they may be names whose unusual nature make them memorable when so much more will be water under the bridge. More could of course be said about any of these languages. Bobo is one language in a group of 100 in the family called Gur. Half a million people speak Bobo in Burkina Faso and Mali. Gogo was missed by Gunnemark but Austin caught it. Gogo has a million speakers in Tanzania and Anglican missionaries use it there. Its million speakers have at least three dialects. Those look something like Kagulu, Kihehe, Nilamba, and Sangu, and Nilamba is a little like Nyamwezi, Sumbwa, and Sukuma. Some languages look a little like others, some do not. Some have clicks in Africa and some do not. I want to move from the specific to the general to make the important point that what one might consider basic might not be a feature of

some languages. For instance, in some African languages there is a name for each and every kind of tree but no concept of *trees*. One knows that some African languages are said to count one, two, three, a whole lot.

### **What is Ahead**

A whole lot, but we cannot be certain of the details. This study concludes without any attempt to comment on creating a family tree of African languages because the current scholarly groupings bring up many a vexing question about how these groupings (or maybe we should say “lumpings”) could ever stand up to the established scientific standards. The comparative method of classification of African languages goes back only about as far as the Abbé Lieven Bonaventure Proyart’s *Histoire de Loango, Kakongo, et autres royaumes d’Afrique* in 1776 and Johann Christoph Adelung’s *Bau der Wörter* of 1781 and *Mithridates* (mostly in that scholar’s collected works completed by Johann Severin Vater, 1806–1817) and perhaps Lichtenstein’s division of southern Africans into Hottentots (who were thought to “stutter”) and Kaffirs (who spoke what was called Bantu).

Please note that my 21 or 22 languages here are only a small sample of the African languages one might want to know about. Just two more paragraphs, not a whole lot.

In the north and west of Africa there are also major languages such as Oromo (22 million home speakers in the Horn of Africa) which came out from under a ban that was imposed by Haile Selassie (“Power of The Trinity”) when he was emperor of Ethiopia and which has both male and female words for the number 1. There is Wolof (four million home speakers) in Senegal where it is the basic language of 40 percent of the population and twice that number uses it as a lingua franca. A Nigerian/English pidgin is rapidly becoming a creole (three million home speakers). Readers of *Geolinguistics* know of Cameroonian pidgin but this one is also interesting; Soninke, the language of the people of that name who were the founders of that old Ghanan Empire I mentioned (one million speakers spread over more than half a dozen countries). There is Baule, said traditionally to mean “the child is dead.” About 20 percent of the inhabitants of the Ivory Coast speak Baule as a home language and say their people descend from those for whom the queen (one Pokou) sacrificed her infant to distract pursuers so that her people could escape. There is Krio (“Creole”) spoken in Sierra Leone when slaves from the US were repatriated there (now with at least half a million speakers); and there is Tedo, dying out (only some 50,000 speakers left) but the language of a people who once controlled trade across the Sahara Desert (*sahara* actually means “desert,” so this is a clumsy name, like Mount Fujiyama in which *yama* is Japanese for “mountain”). In the rest of Africa there are major languages I have not gone into such as Malagasy (about 10.5 million home speakers, mostly in Madagascar); Kinyaywanda of Rwanda (nine million home speakers); Xhosa (7.2 million speakers, one of 11 official languages of the Republic of South Africa), a tonal language; and there are minor languages such as Wambo (or Oshiwambo, 1.4 million speakers in Namibia and Angola, etc., with a number of

dialects) and Sena (maybe one million speakers on both sides of a border between Malawi and Mozambique). In Malawi English shapes Sena and in Mozambique a foreign influence is Portuguese.

Talk about language identity, bilingualism, language in action and other matters that fascinate geolinguists! I could conclude with a long list of African languages, even with estimates of the number of people speaking each, but Crystal and others try that and here it seems best to tackle the advice of Coco Chanel on how to present oneself to the world: before going out: remove the last thing you put on.

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