

## SOME AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Leonard R. N. Ashley  
 President  
 American Society of Geolinguistics

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

—Roman proverb.

### Introduction

It is often said that about 30 percent of all the world's languages are now alive in Africa. 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". 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. Many African peoples and languages are under severe attack. Here is a look at some African languages that are 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 European languages. The world's languages sometimes copy the African duplications (as for English "better" as the equivalent of "good good"). 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 you use for "fall" when you drop a cookie (a word with the third tone) is different from the verb used (sixth tone) when you drop 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 you can say "a pool of water" you are 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 you know who the uncle or aunt is" and in some societies in Africa, as you may know there are elaborate ways to address relatives and some relatives you are not allowed to speak to. Some languages have elaborate kinship terminologies and complex counting systems that are odd to English speakers (even French's *quatre-vingt dix*) and count different things or things or animals or people differently or have separate vocabularies for the two sexes. With so many languages, Africa presents a large number of unusual ways in which people think and speak.

### 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. In Africa it has seven million speakers, most speakers in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. An improved Akan orthography was adopted in 1980.

**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 Ge'ez for rituals.

**Banda.** From the Ubangi group of the Niger-Congo family comes this mostly rural language of the Central African Republic (maybe one million speakers). One feature it has that is worth noticing is that to make the plural of a noun you use 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.

**Bobo.** This comes in your choice of Bobo Fing or Bobo Wule (the later also called Boomu or Bwamu). You hear them both in Burkina Faso and Mali. They are part of the large Niger-Congo family. They are very minor compared to Yoruba and Igbo.

**Ewe.** Sometimes called Vhe, this language has some three million speakers in Benin (where French is official and there also are Barba, Fon, Ful, Somba, Tem, and Yoruba), 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 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, you add *-wo* (they). African languages give us many insights into different ways talk works.

**Fulani.** Fulani was 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 Ful (in Nigeria and 10 other African nations). The idea that Fulani "originated in Egypt" is flat wrong. Plurals of nouns are completely different words than the singulars in Fulani, one of Africa's many language tricks.

**Gogo.** This 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 your attention. Gogo is in the Ruvu group (with Kagalu, Kami, Ruguru, and Zalamo). Zalamo 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.

**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. Originally written in Arabic script it is being Romanized. It is active in Chad, Guinea, and elsewhere as a lingua franca.

**Igbo.** With Hausa and Yoruba, Igbo is official, with English, Hausa and Yoruba, in Nigeria (12 million speakers). You have heard of it because of the tribal wars and Biafra. There are 25 million speakers, mostly in the former Biafra region. 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.

**Kamba.** This is an old and well-established (2,500,000 speakers) language in Kenya. It is a useful lingua franca for the Kikuyu and Masai. It has seven vowels and some Swahili loan words. Some African languages have a great many more loan words than others. Loan words depend on the closeness and duration of contact with others.

**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) and has official regional status in Nigeria (Yerwa and Manga dialects, along with Edo-Bini, Efik-Ibibio, Ful, Ijo, and Tiv). It has at least four million speakers but many also speak Hausa or some other language as well. Africans on the whole cannot get along with being monolingual like so many US people. If you start 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 you get the harder it is to learn languages but some people do so in advanced old age. Some even say that the more languages you know 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 Dyula or Jula (Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast, with a history as an elite language), Mandinka (Gambia and Senegal), Malinké (Guinea). It is likewise employed as a lingua franca for trade. For old trade routes, you can examine the evidence in languages.

**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.

**Somali.** Spoken along with Arabic in Somalia by perhaps nine million, Somali is also spoken in Ethiopia by half a million and by more in Djibouti and Kenya. There is Common Somali and several major dialects. Men speaking Somali may also speak Arabic. Elsewhere you will hear that speakers of Tedo also speak Arabic.

**Songhay.** Or Songhai. This has two million speakers in Niger (including Dendi and Dyerma, and where among the eight million total, for this is not Nigeria with 120 million, there are speakers also of Arabic, Berber, Ful, Hausa, and Kanuri). Another total of 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) 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 others. The 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 creating borders that ignored language factors were unwise.

**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.

**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 Beraber, Rifian, and Shila varieties of Tamazight Berber). There once was a Judeo-Berber in Morocco as there still is a Guideo-Romansco in Italy. 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.

**Tigrinya.** 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, with “600,000 in northern Ethiopia”. Both languages somewhat resemble Ethiopic. *Tigré*=peasants, serfs, common people. Coptic is used by what may be the world’s first Christian church.

**Yao.** The African Yao (there is a totally unrelated Yao spoken in China) is traditionally said to come from a hill in Mozambique of that name. It has well over a million speakers in Mozambique, Malawi and Tanzania now. Some slave traders used it and it spread.

**Yoruba.** This useful language has spread in Africa 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.

**Zande.** Sometimes called Azande, this is one of the leading languages (with perhaps 1.5 million speakers) of the 100-strong Adamwa-Ubangian family inside the 1000 Niger-Congo group. It is spoken in the Central African Republic, Congo, and (The) Sudan. 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.

## Conclusion

Make that 22, for six million people black and white speak Afrikaans, a Dutch and local creation, but you know about that. Bobo and Gogo caught your attention but Africa also has speakers of Dan (800,000), Dogon (800,000), Fur (400,000), Ga (600,000), Judeo-Arabic (fading away), and other languages whose very names sound weird to

English speakers. The countries of northern Africa may be more stable because though 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 languages and have lived so long with their tribal identities that it is not surprising that there has been a great deal of conflict. 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.

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. In Nigeria there are 533 languages in daily use. The 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 Lingala and Luba along with French as official and 14 or 15 others as “home languages”) and other link languages is often a pressing necessity and widespread. Note also that just because, for instance, Zambia or Zimbabwe have English as their 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 French colonies, you would find to be remarkably different from the French of Paris or the English of London or New York. English along with Afrikaans is official in the Republic of South Africa but only a couple million speak English and maybe six million Afrikaans and the rest speak Zulu or Fanagalo (a Zulu-based pidgin) or something else as a lingua franca or Xhosa (seven million), Tswana (three million), Pedi (2.5 million), Sotho (two million), Ronga-Tsonga (over one million), Ndbele and Venda (700,000 each), and so on. Any estimates from Gunnemark or even later authorities as to how many speakers there are of this or that are not on oath. You just get informed guesses. 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.

The 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 words and ways. In modern times tribal wars have dislocated many populations and there other reasons as well for cultural and linguistic catastrophes. The number of African languages listed in Austin’s book is fast dwindling. It is said that in northern and western Africa 300 are endangered and another 200 almost extinct while in the rest of Africa 10 percent of the extant languages will soon be gone.

Allan Cameron has written *In Praise of the Garrulous* so why not a bit more on Bobo and Gogo because they may be why you are reading this. 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 it 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. Even what you 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*. Some African languages are said to count one, two, three, a whole lot.

### **What is Ahead**

This section concludes without any attempt to comment on the classification of African languages because the current scholarly groupings bring up many vexing questions 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 the 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). Now we start on some very much easier matters for you. The emphasis shifts from the macrosociolinguistic (big picture of language in society) to language and society as reflected in proper nouns, names. That could be addressed in a number of ways, from censorship to propaganda and from how reality affects fiction to how fiction shapes reality, but here we need something varied. Classical literature, business names and real estate packaging, changing names, house names, names of power in magic, Iowa placenames from the Amerindians, word games, all this adds up to a wide sampling. Then you are introduced to literary onomastics (don’t panic—it’s fun) with the techniques of trenchant naming in satire and the approaches to name study in literature and finally extended examination, because literary criticism of language in fiction is often too brief because the critics do not know enough or cannot be entertaining enough to get you to stick with it when it goes into minute detail. So we have something on classical names in literature and other matters and terminate with modern novels, each one selected stressing one thing: satire, one examined minutely, the other in passing, with our emphasis on the use of names. Both novels are rather sensational, one in subject matter and the other in style. That should grab your attention. This is a bold attempt to keep you reading the book. Then comes folk literature, too often ignored by modern literary critics who are so attracted to politics, personal agendas, the personalities of the wilder writers, and the wilder shores of literary theory (often something of a French disease spread by sex). We do not get into politics or Barthes, Baudrillard, Derrida or Foucault here and for names theory—there are only a couple of books, neither definitive—you neither can be given it nor really need it.

Before those exciting adventures of various kinds of names in literature you can have a few references here for this dab at the huge subject of African languages. You may also realize that slaves brought to the New World from various areas had trouble communicating with other slaves and in fact their masters made them give up all African languages so they could better control slaves. The blacks lost their languages, cultures and religions—but they retained scraps of all that which shaped their American tongues

here. So they told their old stories and sang their new gospel songs and enriched the American mix, producing new proverbs and new popular music.

## Note

This article was presented at the ASG's annual June luncheon in 2009.

## Works Cited

- Austin, Peter K, ed. *One Thousand Languages*. Berkley &c.: University of California Press, 2008.
- Bender, Marvin Lionel. *The Nilo-Saharan Languages*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. LINCOM Handbooks on Linguistics 6. Munich: LINCOM Europa, 1997.
- Berlin, Peter. "Frenchman Navigates the Waters for Togo's First Medal," *New York Times* August 13, 2008, D 3.
- Cameron, Allan. *In Praise of the Garrulous*. Isle of Lewis (Scotland): Vagabond Press, 2009.
- Childs, G. Tucker. *An Introduction to African Languages*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2003.
- Gunnemark, Eric Victor. *Countries, Peoples and their Languages*. Gothenburg: Geolingua, 1991.
- Heine, Bernd & Derek Nurse, eds. *African Languages: An Introduction*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Lichenstein, Heinrich. *Bermerkungen über die Sprachen der südafrikanischen wilden Völkerstämme...Dialecten der Hottentoten und Kaffern*. [...Dialects of the Hotterntots and Kaffirs.] Weimar: Allgemeines Archiv für Ethnographie und Linguistik, 1808.
- Nurse, Derek. "Contributions of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa," *Journal of African History* 38 (1997): 357–391.
- Webb, V. & Kembo Sure, eds. *An Introduction to the Languages and Linguistics of Africa*. Oxford (UK): Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Zimmer, P., ed. *Areal and Genetic Factors in Language Classification and Description: Africa South of The Sahara*. Munich: LINCOM Europa, 2000.