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## **New Roles for African Languages with the New Electronic Media**

by

Helma PASCH\*

**KEYWORDS.** — Internet as a Research Tool; Swahili; Kongo; Oromo; Identity; Language spoken in the Diaspora.

**SUMMARY.** — Mass communication is not new in Africa. Until the mid-20th century aural surrogate languages were used to convey messages which would immediately reach many listeners and which could even be transmitted when the telephone line was interrupted, in particular in Western and Central Africa. The comprehension of these languages depended on the mastership of the spoken language and basically all speakers could understand messages transferred by drum, gong or whistle.

With the introduction of writing and printed literature a division emerged according to which certain types of written/printed information were restricted to non-African languages or available also in African languages. While basically all types of literature can be printed or imported in English or French, the production (or import) of literature in African languages is basically restricted to religious texts and to fiction, but hardly any non-fiction. Letter-writing to family members overseas was for a long time the only type of written communication carried out — if at all — in African languages.

The new media bring the chances of significant changes in the choice of languages for written information. While making books is expensive, the production of websites is fairly cheap. This offers the chance to produce written texts in African languages which formerly could not be published for economy reasons.

It appears, however, that the number of websites in African languages is quite generally relatively low. The majority are authored and hosted by religious groups, others by political or educational organizations. The rest is mostly authored by linguistic groups, which have an old well-established tradition of literature, *e.g.* Swahili, Oromo, Somali. But here mostly fiction is produced. Non-fiction texts are still difficult to find.

Fora constitute the best sources for the use of African languages in the internet, but the number of contributions is relatively small and they are usually not extensive. It is, however, important to note that contributions come from all over the world,

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\* Institut für Afrikanistik, Universität zur Köln (Germany).

irrespective of on which continent the fora are serviced. Many are serviced in the diaspora in Europe or America.

This means that African languages are becoming media of intercontinental written communication. Even though this communication is carried out mostly between members of the same cultural groups, there are time and again requests from linguistic outsiders who consult certain fora because they want to get language practice.

It is only when important and necessary online information is offered in African languages that users will consult the respective pages. They have to and will acquire at least some competence in the respective languages — not for the sake of the language itself but in order to get access to the information wanted.

### Introduction

With the introduction of the internet, the role of written language has changed. Now even minority languages have a medium by which to address a number of people who could never have been reached by traditional communication media. This means for these languages that a communicative potential which was used only to a relatively small extent through print media, will be used increasingly through the new media.

It cannot be denied, however, that currently African languages play a relatively insignificant role in the World Wide Web, and the increase of webpages in African languages, albeit steady, is rather slow. But it is also true that the existing presence of webpages in African languages and their increasing number are basically unknown to most internet users outside Africa. Webpages in African languages are hardly ever mentioned in studies on the use and development of the internet and of languages in the internet. This holds true despite the alleged existence of more than a hundred application programmes (TASSE 2002) and the fora on “language, technology and development” sponsored by the language, technology, and development initiative Bisharat [1]\*, and the Acacia ICT Grants Programme [2] to promote an active ICT research environment in Africa.

In this paper I would like to discuss evidence for the hypothesis that the new electronic media have opened better ways for the autochthonous African languages to become media of written mass communication which print media cannot offer. The focus is on the languages spoken in the Great Rift, *e.g.*, Amharic, Somali and Kinyarwanda, but also those international languages of which the area of distribution extends into the area of the Great Rift: Swahili (Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, DR Congo, Mozambique), Hausa (Niger, Nigeria,

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\* Numbers in brackets [ ] refer to the notes, p. 225.

Chad, Sudan) and Fulfulde (West Africa to Sudan). Swahili — one of the most advanced African “online languages” — is the only one which could be found listed in an online-languages ranking — but only in one single ranking (Takagi, n.d.). But we can be sure that at least some of the African languages will be established as important internet media within the next few years.

My claim is that, apart from Christian missions, NGOs and academic institutions in Africa, particular members of African language communities in the diaspora play an important role in the maintenance and reinforcement of African languages as written media.

Before investigating the chances for African languages to become successful internet media, their roles in print media and also in broadcasting will be outlined.

### The Use of African Languages in Print Media

Christian Missionaries and colonial administrators graphitized numerous African languages. Missionaries as well as linguists from Europe and the USA played a significant role in deciding on spelling conventions at national and international levels. Their religious and educational aim was to make the African peoples literate and enable them to read the Bible and instructive texts in their own languages.

Therefore, the missionaries introduced printing facilities, and until today the production of a significant part of texts in African languages depends on foreign organizations and sponsoring.

Despite all efforts, the contents of print media in African languages cover only a restricted set of genres compared with the print production in the industrialized world. They include:

- **Religious texts:** the Bible (New and/or Old Testament), catechisms, religious journals, prayer and song books and edifying booklets have been edited for numerous African languages; the Qur’an, however, has been translated only in a restricted number of African languages, *e.g.*, Hausa, Fulfulde and Swahili.
- **Schoolbooks** and other learning materials. These are available above all for primary school education, less so for secondary school education, and there is basically no material for tertiary education with the exception of linguistic studies descriptions.
- **Fiction** from local authors/writers (novels, stories, poems, riddles, plays, market literature) as well as translations of imported literature are found

- in a number of languages, *e.g.*, Swahili, Hausa, Somali, Oromo and Lingala (African Writers Index, AMADU 2002).
- **Comics** are produced in a number of languages, but many series only lived for a rather short time (LUMBALA, n.d.). Instructive comics are produced by the Catholic mission and/or NGOs, *e.g.*, in Lingala (Search for Common Ground 2004), but there is also commercial production, *e.g.*, in Swahili (Sasa Sema Publications, n.d.).
  - **Journals and newspapers** are produced in a growing number of languages for home consumption, *e.g.*, *Baraza*, a Kenyan weekly (Swahili) and *Jua*, a literary bimonthly journal (Swahili). A number of journals, newspapers and books have only their **titles** in African languages while the content is completely in English, French or Portuguese. Such titles serve to mark ethnic, linguistic and/or national identity, *e.g.*, *Azania* [3] (= ‘South Africa’ or ‘East Africa’).
  - Translations of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** into many African languages (*e.g.*, Swahili, Kirundi, Kinyarwanda, Luganda, Somali, Amharic). Copies may be found more easily in departments of African Studies in Europe and America. For the speakers of the respective languages in their home countries, however, access is usually difficult.

Religious texts and schoolbooks constitute the major part of publications. All other genres are by far outnumbered by publications in European languages.

Apart from journals and newspapers, there is only little production of non-fiction in African languages. This is true in particular for specialized books and technical reference books. The efforts by the various Christian Missions to produce technical instruction and reference books did not yield many results, only small booklets of low scholarly level. African Studies, in particular African linguistics, is basically the only discipline where non-fiction of a high academic standard in African languages is produced, *e.g.*, *Swahili Forum* and *Jalex* [4].

Christian Missions, but also NGOs and governmental organizations, which regularly or occasionally launch publications in local vernaculars, engage local authors according to their needs. There are not many private publishers where authors can go to have manuscripts in local languages released. Only few individual authors manage to produce and market their writings on their own initiative, but they do not get much benefit (GLANZ 2004). There is basically no literature production abroad to fill the gap of non-fiction literature in African languages.

From a purely economic point of view, it can be stated that there is little demand for technical literature in African languages. Most books in African

languages for sale are religious books and schoolbooks including language courses which are also bought by linguists and students of African languages from abroad.

### **African Languages in Broadcast Media**

Radio stations in all African countries broadcast programmes quite successfully in local languages, be they national, run by Christian Missions, NGOs or private enterprises. Radio Okapi [5], *e.g.*, broadcasts in French, Swahili, Lingala, Tshiluba and Kikongo. A number of overseas radio stations also have programmes in African languages, but they cover only a small range of these. The programmes of national television stations in African languages play a smaller role. But we must keep in mind that in these two media spoken language prevails.

It is primarily foreign radio stations, such as *Voice of America (VOA)*, *Deutsche Welle*, and *BBC World Service*, which provide comprehensive documentation of their programmes on their websites, including the programmes in African languages, *i.e.* they produce substantial webpages in African languages.

Most local radio stations in Africa produce their websites completely in English, French or Portuguese. Among the exceptions are *Radio Okapi* and the Zulu channel *Ukhozi FM*. The contents in African languages of both of these are, however, less complete than those in English or French.

### **The Use of African Languages as Online Media**

Given that in comparison with print media the production of websites is relatively cheap and easy, one might expect that online texts in African languages abound. But they do not abound yet — despite some institutional or private initiatives to promote the online presence of certain languages. It appears that most of these efforts are still in an initial stage and face difficulties.

What can be observed is that the use of African languages in the internet reflects their use in print media to a high degree. They include:

- **Religious texts:** extracts from the Bible more often than the entire Bible, but complete translations of the *Watchtower* (Jehova's Witnesses), the *Lord's Prayer* and the *Hail Mary* in quite many African languages.

- **Fiction:** stories and poetry. Webpages presenting fiction are fairly advanced with regard to languages where print literature is also rich: Swahili (feedingminds, n.d.), Somali and Amharic. Some authors and private initiatives create webpages in order to reinforce ethnical, cultural and linguistic identity, e.g., for Kinyarwanda (MUKARUTABANA, n.d.).
- Online versions of **journals and newspapers** exist in a restricted number of languages, e.g., *Bukedde online* (a Ugandan vernacular daily), Swahili (*an-nuur. Gazeti la Kiislamu – Tanzania, ipp-media*), Hausa (*Al mizan*), Zulu (*Isolezwe*) [6] and Somali (Puntland post.com, n.d.).
- The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in the most important African languages, e.g., Swahili, Kirundi, Luganda, Amharic, Oromo, Somali.
- **Language courses** published by universities abroad, e.g., for *Hausa* (<http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/aflang/Hausa/>) and *Swahili* (<http://www.yale.edu/swahili/>), by churches and/or NGOs, travel businesses and tour operators (*Swahili Kenya Travel Guide*), by publishing houses, e.g., for *Kikongo* (Ikuska Libros, n.d.) or by individuals, e.g., for *Lingala*, (GROUSELLE 2004) (<http://perso.orange.fr/pascal.grousselle/index.htm>). European languages serve in most cases as metalanguages. While the first two are quite comprehensive the latter consist mostly of short grammatical sketches and/or word lists.
- Numerous **fora** carry likewise names in African languages, even though discussions are carried out entirely or for by far the greater part in European languages or a mix of one of these languages and an African language. Contributions in African languages are rare in some fora, but abound in others, e.g., *Congopage*. Topics are predominantly political, national, cultural and language-related items. A considerable number of fora are foreign or diaspora products, e.g., the Germany-based *Methali za Swahili* and the *Swahili Discussion Forum - Baraza La Mazungumzo* located at Yale University.
- Several foreign radio stations, e.g., *Voice of America*, *Deutsche Welle* and *BBC World Service*, have comprehensive documentation of their programmes on their websites, i.e. they produce webpages in African languages. Most local radio stations in Africa produce their websites completely in English, French or Portuguese. Among the exceptions is *Ukhozi FM*, which also has comprehensive information in Zulu. More linguistically restricted is the website of *Radio Okapi*. The texts of the “Project of the Constitution” from April 2003 is offered for download in the four national languages of DR Congo and in French — an effort in order to reinforce linguistic, cultural, ethnic and/or national identity. In the section

*Patronymie et Typonymie*, however, specific terms from the four national Congolese languages are explained only in French.

- Numerous webpages in African languages result from remittance work by order of national and international political and scientific institutions or NGOs, *e.g.*, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *Hausa page* by UCLA and for Swahili, the *Kamusi project* by Yale University. The online presence of liberation movements is also important, *e.g.*, the Oromo Liberation Front (n.d.).

Apart from e-newspapers, radio websites and fora **non-fiction** webpages, in particular giving technical or scholarly instructions, do not or not yet exist in African languages. A start has been made to change this: Wikipedia.org has started to construct lexicons in many languages of the world, including a number of African languages. Among these, Swahili (sw.wikipedia, n.d.) was the only language for quite some time for which there were a number of entries. In July 2006 there were a number of entries in Zulu (zu.wikipedia, n.d.), and also in Lingala (ln.wikipedia, n.d.).

But it shows also that certain text genres cannot be found online or not in a similar form, while others — in particular information by broadcasting stations — and interactive communications as in fora are not easily available in print.

### Differences and Chances

The most important differences between print and online media concern the authorship and the exchange between speakers in their home territories and their communication partners in the diaspora. It is in particular with regard to linguistic descriptions (word lists and grammatical descriptions of languages) that an adoption of a publication medium for written communication can be observed. Here authorship is no longer restricted to missionaries and linguists, but there are new types of authors and editors: individual persons, travel agencies, national institutions, *e.g.*, the Tanzania Embassy in Berlin (n.d.).

The new medium is accepted and used without regard to the provenance of a given communicative field. Where foreign and diaspora activities engage in fora in order to maintain given languages and enhance their use as written media, these are accepted and used on all sides of the ocean.

The use of collaborative sites (e-learning and communication platforms) for linguistic instruction and research is only in its early stages, but we can be sure that they will become normal means of cooperation. Tutored online instruction of African languages appears to be well established, in particular

in South Africa. There are numerous commercial courses offered in the internet. Unfortunately, we have no information on numbers of participants, contents and quality of the courses and the learning results.

Fora on linguistic topics, mostly on proverbs, are actively used for intercontinental communication. Many of them are produced in the diaspora and by speakers of other first languages, but the users are speakers living in their countries of origin as well as in the diaspora.

For a long time, life in the diaspora meant for most Africans to be cut off from their linguistic background. Letter-writing was cumbersome and phonecalls not or hardly possible. Today the new media allow for cheap and easy production of all kinds of texts, which reach a large number of people and which can be shared simultaneously in Africa and the diaspora.

Transcontinental online exchange works well, which can be observed in the fora discussing the meaning of words, grammatical structures or proverbs of given languages. It is amazing to see how many people engage in these discussions and share their linguistic competence giving explanations to questions about grammatical forms or providing alternative expressions for given proverbs.

It must be noted that there are not many individuals who take the initiative and edit websites in their African mother tongue or who start up discussions in their mother tongue. But when a good chance to do so is given, it is happily accepted. In *ippmedia*, a bilingual Tanzanian journal, articles written in Swahili are commented on by readers exclusively in standard Swahili, while articles in English are commented in English with occasional code switches to Swahili.

The websites by regional and national radio stations, certain governments and certain embassies [7] provide texts in African languages of a high standard in content and linguistic quality. These websites constitute the richest sources of texts on current topics in African languages. Since a considerable part of consumers live outside Africa, it is now the diaspora which has better access to target language forms.

But even for languages without such high-quality input, such as Yoruba, initiatives develop in the diaspora, to foster the language as an item of cultural identity. Speakers of a high educational level are those who take the initiative to maintain and reinforce the use of their ethnic languages.

## Conclusion

The question arises as to whether a dichotomy has established between African languages for oral communication, including that by radio and

television, and European languages for written communication. The linguistic behaviour of some sites would confirm such an assumption giving more information in European languages than in the language in focus. The *Gakondo-site* (MUKARUTABANA, n.d.) for oral literature in Kinyarwanda contains more stories translated into English and French than in Kinyarwanda. The websites of national and regional radio stations (e.g., *Radio Okapi*, *Ukhozi FM*) show similar behaviour. The growing number of webpages (entire websites in African languages are rare) indicate, however, that internet is better accepted as a medium for written communication than print media. Websites allow for relatively easy communication at affordable costs between groups of speakers in the diaspora and in the home countries.

The lively participation in fora shows that there is a widespread interest to engage in written discussion and share one's knowledge, experiences, opinions and attitudes, an interest which print media cannot satisfy easily.

Matters of ethnic and linguistic identity play a significant role in individual webpages and for African languages. Self-portrayal of authors plays a smaller role as advice with regard to technical problems, compared to European and American webpages and fora.

The discussion of linguistic problems regarding the lexicon and morphology of the language in focus and proverbs appears to be more important than these topics are with regard to European languages.

When we observe that books have been accepted only reluctantly as media for African languages while the electronic oral media radio and TV have proved very successful in the use of African languages, this does not reflect a categorization of written European languages vs. oral African languages. The increasing use of African languages in the internet rather indicates that online publications and online fora are accepted as more attractive ways of expression in African languages than writing and printing.

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## NOTES

- [1] *Bisharat* is an evolving idea based on the importance of maternal languages in sustainable development and the enormous potential of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to benefit from efforts in the area of language and development. Anticipating the gradual introduction of computers and the internet to rural communities in Africa, the current focus of *Bisharat* is on research, advocacy, and networking relating to the use of African languages in software and web content.
- [2] The main objective of the *Acacia ICT R&D Grants Programme* is to promote an active ICT research environment in Africa for issues related to ICT-based development applications, policy research and their impacts.
- [3] *Azania*: Journal of the British Institute in Eastern Africa.
- [4] The first issue of this journal has apparently not yet been launched.
- [5] *Radio Okapi*: une radio congolaise pour les Congolais (“a Congolese radio for the people of Congo”), <http://www.radiookapi.net/page.php?page=apropos> (20.12.2005).
- [6] *Isolezwe* is South Africa’s first major online Zulu-language publication. *Isolezwe*’s editor says the website is aimed at the emerging, urban-based Zulu market and that it aims to “alter reader perceptions about online publishing”. *Isolezwe*, the print publication established in 2002, is a regional newspaper with a reported readership of about 340,000 readers per day (<http://www.poynter.org/column.asp?id=31&aid=67754>).
- [7] It is interesting to observe that official websites, e.g., website of the Embassies of Tanzania and Ethiopia in Washington DC, do not linguistically address their overseas countryfellows in their national official languages Swahili and Amharic, but completely in English. The same is also true for the website of Lesotho, even with regard to the page specifically addressing the Basotho residing in the United States, even though Sesotho is one of the official languages. The website of the Tanzanian Embassy in Germany, however, is partly edited in Swahili.
- [8] With regard to online sources the date of the last visite is indicated.
- [9] *AlltheWeb* is a search tool currently owned by Yahoo.

