EVOLVING AFRICAN APPROACHES TO THE MANAGEMENT OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

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The global context

In order to understand the significance of what we are trying to do on the African continent with respect to the management of linguistic diversity today, it is essential that we indicate briefly our general understanding of and perspectives on the global landscape in the domain of language use and language change[1]. My focus here is not on the issue of endangerment, which has been enjoying increasing attention in the light of the sometimes hotly disputed findings[2] of the ecology of language scholars, through whose fascinating work we have begun to ponder the planetary significance of biocultural diversity. Instead, I want to summarise the most relevant implications of the now generally accepted hegemonic status of English as *the* global language, at least from the angle of vision of someone who is living on the southern tip of the continent of Africa. There can be no doubt that some of our perspectives are shared by people and scholars who live on other continents.

To begin with, it is very clear to those of us in the leadership of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) – about which I shall say much more presently – that the position of previous generations of scholars and language activists, as embodied in the Language Plan of Action for Africa (the OAU manifesto on the language question adopted in June 1986) is no longer tenable. According to that document, one of the objectives of the OAU was "[…] to release the African populations from their excessive dependence on foreign languages considered as official languages in their countries by progressively *replacing* these languages with carefully selected local African languages" (Emphasis added). This objective was to be realised "as soon as possible". A decisive shift occurred in 1997 at the *Inter-governmental Conference on Language Policies in Africa*, which was held in

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[1] Keynote address delivered at the AILA Conference, 24 August 2008 in Essen, Germany. Parts of this address were first delivered at the International Conference on Everyday Multilingualism in Eisenstadt, Austria, 13-15 June 2008.
[2] A recent example is Mufwene 2008.

Harare, Zimbabwe. The language specialists gathered at that conference recommended to the Ministers of Culture and Education that

> Imported languages, particularly those that were imposed during the colonial era, have become an accepted part of the language situation in Africa. Managing this situation judiciously means that conflicting situations between indigenous national languages and the imported languages can be avoided (Unesco 2006:28).

Given the developments which have tended to make of English "the language of globalisation", ACALAN adopted this position in 2004 and recommended to the African Union, the successor regional body to the OAU, that the original Language Plan of Action for Africa be amended in order to reflect this new reality. (See Tadadjeu and Diakite 2005:46-50)

This position has many implications, some of which I shall touch upon presently. By way of example, I want to cite our strategic approach to the popularisation of L1-medium education. Instead of the fatal Aristotelian dilemma African, especially middle class or aspiring middle class, parents were, and still are, faced with of letting their children study either in the mother tongue or in English/French/ Portuguese, we have promoted in most sub-regions on the continent the notion and the practice of mother tongue based bilingual education, which formulation is a practical adaptation to our peculiar conditions of the insights deriving from additive bilingualism theory[3]. The point is, of course, that the relevant international language, in the South African context, English, is necessarily part of the equation, as is the "mother tongue" of the child.

Our position is consistent with the insights of progressive linguists with respect to the circumstances in which languages can and do coexist "peacefully", as it were. In essence, as long as the local languages and/or lingua francas are not competing with one or other world language in certain domains, the vitality of the former is hardly affected or "at risk". Because this is not the appropriate forum in which to conduct a detailed polemic, I shall simply state that as language activists, we would insist on ensuring that local or

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[3] For a detailed discussion of this terminology and the strategy from which it derives, see Alexander. 2003.

national African languages, as far as possible, expand the domains in which they function and that no loss of domain take place if this is avoidable. This polemic centres on the question of the desirability, feasibility and effectiveness of language planning, about which I shall say a few more words presently.

The second salient insight that influences our perspectives on the management of linguistic diversity derives from the accuracy of the analyses and observations of the school of Pierre Bourdieu with respect to the dynamics of linguistic markets and the nature of the linguistic habitus. I am referring in particular to the insight associated with the notion of "the profits of distinction" which is on the same analytical plane as Carol Meyer-Scotton's concept of "elite closure". None of this is new, of course, certainly not to those of us who work in the field of the sociology of language and, more generally, in sociolinguistics. What *is* new and, therefore, significant, is the fact that these insights and their socio-economic, political and cultural implications are beginning to be understood by decision makers on the continent, not least because of the work of ACALAN, among other significant organisations. This understanding has a twofold significance, firstly, that language policy is not some irrelevant, neutral feature of state administration but an integral aspect of social policy in general and, secondly, that – within certain limits – language planning of one kind or another is essential for the alleviation or even the eradication of poverty and for the realisation of a more democratic and equitable system. These are propositions that have been advocated for the best part of 30 years by sociolinguists and sociologists of language[4].

The third insight that we have come to understand clearly is that counter-hegemonic strategies are both necessary and possible if our dependence on the former colonial metropoles is to be reduced and, eventually, replaced by a genuine interdependence. The immediate implication of this position is a call to action, i.e., intensive advocacy especially among middle class persons who are, generally speaking, the unthinking beneficiaries of the profits of distinction. Earlier, I used to use the provocative

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[4] Besides the founding views of Haugen, Fishman and Ferguson, two of the classic statements are those of Weinstein 1983 and 1990 and Tollefson 1990. Djité 2008 is the latest argument for the relevance of language planning as a tool in the war on poverty and marginalisation of the majority.

formulation of Amilcar Cabral to the effect that this class of Africans should be called upon "to commit class suicide". Such revolutionary rhetoric sounds good and is inspiring in the appropriate circumstances but today, we know that there have to be some material or social incentives for such a course of action to become thinkable for large numbers and strata of people in a given population. My view is that, among other things, we have to demonstrate to all relevant people the economic and socio-political benefits of individual and societal multilingualism if this call is to produce a positive echo. It is vital that we learn to speak to ordinary citizens not as though they are sociolinguists or sociologists but in ways that make sense to them and are consonant with the theoretical insights of applied linguistics and applied language studies. To this end, it is essential that a series of continentally coordinated research studies be undertaken to demonstrate in the most general terms the impact of language on the economy and, vice versa, of the economy on language[5]. If, as I expect, the results of these studies were to show that what is needed for the maximisation of economic efficiency and labour productivity is a carefully planned policy of functional multilingualism, it will become much easier to persuade parents about the benefits of mother tongue based schooling and, let it be said, to persuade university administrations to pay more attention to the sociolinguistics of African languages, so that more students would want to choose the related professional disciplines such as translation, interpreting, lexicography, human language technology, etc., as career options.

The African linguascape
Ultimately, the leadership of ACALAN and related associations of language professionals have to undertake a careful review of the African "linguascape"[6] and consider the sane and well-researched scenario sketched by Mufwene (2008:262):

> In former settlement colonies, European languages have endangered their indigenous counterparts because of urbanization, which has reduced the rural populations to small minorities, and because the prevailing European-style socio-economic structure has spread geographically and socially. This structure functions only in the European language, and gradual geographical and social assimilation of the relevant populations […] has let it encroach

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[5] Djité 2008 marks the beginning of this process at the continental level.
[6] See Mufwene 2008:258.

onto the domains of the traditional vernaculars. *These developments are not happening in Africa, not only because the European languages have remained sectional but also because the non-traditional economy has not spread outside the city.* [….](Emphasis added)

A related issue is the tendency on the part of language rights activists to lament language loss and language "death" because of the alleged impoverishment of humanity's cultural and intellectual heritage. As intimated earlier, this is not the occasion to canvass the contending views on this matter. What is relevant and important from the point of view of the management of linguistic diversity on the continent is the fact that in most contexts, it is not the languages of European origin but rather the urban vernaculars, i.e., specific local or national languages, which endanger the survival of the smaller local languages. Mufwene (2008:271) makes the point that the introduction of "scholastic varieties of European colonial languages as elite lingua francas, associated with non-traditional communicative functions" did not compete with "the new indigenous lingua francas and certainly not with the indigenous ethnic vernaculars". He concludes as follows:

> […] It is the urban vernaculars associated with the dominant blue-collar sector of the limited modern economy that have become a threat to the vernaculars, certainly in the city. However, only the future will tell whether the urban vernaculars will displace the rural ones and when. A significant factor in this case is whether the African economies will prosper from their present stagnation, if not disintegration, which bears heavily on whether language practice in the city will spread into the rural areas. (Mufwene 2008:271)

In this connection, I take the position that as a matter of fact and as a matter of the probable future development dynamic in Africa, a strategy of managed multilingualism in the economic domain, parallel and complementary to the policy of mother tongue based bilingual education, holds the key to success, all other things being equal[7]. Djité (2008:151), in a passionate plea to the leadership of the continent for the exercise of creative imagination and vision in the interest of development and equity, states as a matter of fact that

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[7] I add this mantra of economic scholarship only because I do not wish to give the simplistic impression that language policy alone is the cause of failure or success in African affairs.

[…] European languages do not meet the day-to-day communicative needs of the majority of the African people in the crucial domain of the economy. […] Even where individual multilingualism does not always match societal multilingualism, civilised, independent and democratic nation-states take it upon themselves and strive to strike a balance in institutionalising equality of languages and managing their multilingualism for the benefit of the majority, and do not purposely rig the stakes or tip the scales in favour of a minority to have all the communicative advantage and socio-economic benefits attached thereto.

He goes on to argue that a country's language situation has a direct bearing on the exchange of information on which economic success depends, a view that is clearly even more relevant in our technology driven era of the knowledge economy. Crucially, he suggests that

[…] communication facilitated in the local languages may be the key to removing the inefficiencies introduced by the selection and promotion of European languages. If African countries really want to increase per capita GDP, they will adopt policies that are most likely to achieve that result, such as the promotion of growth with equity, by taking the language(s) issue into account (Djité 2008:152).

Although the proposition is currently not relevant to South Africa itself, one of the central pillars of Djité's argument is that the informal sector of the economy accounts for more than 70% of employment and of the GDP of most other African countries. Because local languages are the main means of communication and trade in this sector of the economy, the argument for elevating their status and functionality is a compelling one[8].

The relevance of language planning
In a forthcoming publication[9], I have discussed at some length the reasons why in Africa at the beginning of the 21st century, language planning is not only relevant, but inescapable. I take the liberty of quoting my basic position from that text:

In my view, the question that has to be answered is not whether language policy and planning can or do "cause" social change. In reality, the question has to be formulated much more carefully: "under which conditions can language policy and planning influence decisively the direction and depth of social change?" Also, and as a corollary to this proposition, to those who explicitly or implicitly claim that language planning is a futile waste of time

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[8] See especially Djité 2008, Chapter 4. The author, incidentally, rejects the distinction between a "formal" and an "informal" economy, a notion derived from the paradigm of the "dual economy".
[9] Vigoroux, C. and Mufwene, S. 2008.

and resources, we have once again to say clearly that *laissez-faire* policy notoriously reinforces the agendas of dominant groups. To continue to believe in the 21st century that language planning is illusory at best and tantamount to evil social engineering at worst is, ultimately, to deny the possibility of social justice. As long as language planning proceeds in democratic consultation with the users of the respective languages, the "danger" of social engineering can be avoided. All states, even the most "democratic", pursue social engineering to one degree or another!

The timely intervention of Bernard Spolsky (2004 and 2006) has reminded us that naievete and hubris among language planning professionals are dangerous and potentially disillusioning qualities. If we are to succeed, our original conceptualisation of what is desirable, our planning approaches and the flexibility of our implementation strategies are essential for the feasibility of language planning projects, especially in respect of such an ambitious undertaking as the ACALAN programme. Thus, beginning with the political desideratum of the integration of the peoples and countries of the continent and while committed in principle to the development and enhancement of the status of every African language, ACALAN decided to place the focus on what are referred to as cross-border languages, especially the "vehicular cross-border languages", i.e., those cross-border languages that are spoken or used as second languages by large numbers of people in two or more countries. The obvious examples of this phenomenon are languages such as Kiswahili in East Africa and Hausa and Bambara in West Africa[10].

Before we discuss briefly the rationality of this approach, it is essential that we dispel one of the many myths that enshroud discussions about the language situation in Africa. I refer to the notion that Africa is a veritable Tower of Babel. Students of the language question in Africa have in recent years responded to this disempowering claim in different ways, ranging from supporters of the Summer Institute of Linguistics' estimate of 2092 "languages" to Professor Kwesi Prah's (1995) view that there are no more than 15 "core" languages on the continent and the extreme position taken by Makoni and Pennycook (2007) that there are no separate "languages" on the continent of Africa to Djité's (2008:39) cautious assessment to the effect that "languages have fuzzy boundaries, and […] language classification […] is speculative at best"

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[10] For examples of cross-border languages in Africa, see Djité 2008:39.

Djité (2008:47-52) reminds us that "if you fail to plan, you plan to fail". In ACALAN, we know this only too well and because we are convinced, on the basis of theoretical insight and empirical evidence, that all talk of an "African renaissance" and of a "New Partnership for Africa's Development" (NEPAD) is in the long run no more than a juggling with words, if we don't accept the truth that "[…] no country can develop, whilst leaving behind its human capital" (Djité 2008:47). In the present context, this means quite simply that language planning has to become an integral aspect of all social and national (economic) planning. Because this is not the forum in which to consider in detail the latest critique of language planning as a discipline (Makoni and Pennycook 2007), I shall rest content with the statement that the scholarly project implicit in the " disinvention and reconstitution" of language, besides the fact that it axiomatically implies language planning, is in fact unremarkable, if we bear in mind the insights of the Frankfurt School and of Critical Theory that have become commonplace in the social sciences. In an essay published in 2003, Makoni formulated the project in the following terms:

> The major objective of disinvention is to undo history, or at the very least, to contain it by disinventing languages so that when they are reconstructed they correspond more closely to actual linguistic boundaries. Ultimately, the disinvention project seeks not to do away with the concept of separate languages, but to recognize that languages are socially constructed and so can be socially deconstructed and reconstituted.

 Much of the work of language planners proceeds precisely from these insights. Their quarrel is in fact with the discipline of (Saussurean, structuralist) linguistics as we have come to know it rather than with the insights of modern social science that takes as its point of departure the constructedness of all social phenomena. They want language scholars to approach language use in terms of semiotic theory rather than in terms of the abstractions and schemata of linguistics. This is, in my view, all well and good up to a certain point. However, because they do not concede the essential duality of all such phenomena, i.e., the fact that under certain circumstances (which have to be studied in detail) they are perceived and lived as "things" (nouns), under others as "activities"

(verbs), they restrict the strategic flexibility that is required in order to bring about the kind of changes that will make it possible for most, if not all, people in most, if not all, societies, to empower themselves by means of the linguistic repertoires they command.

At the level of theory, my view is analogous to the wave-particle duality of matter postulated by Werner Heisenberg, which had such fundamental consequences in the discipline of nuclear physics. The position I take is that for certain functions, we have to treat language as a process, for others as a (temporarily) stable category. If we do not take this approach, we end up inexorably reinforcing the dominance and the hegemony of the established international and national standard varieties of language.

The African Academy of Languages
This brings us to the daunting tasks confronting the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN). On 26 January 2001, President Konare of the Republic of Mali established the Mission for an African Academy of Languages under the leadership of his Minister of Basic Education, Mr Adama Samassekou. After widespread consultation with numerous political authorities, language professionals and other relevant parties, Samassekou and his associates achieved the approval of ACALAN by the OAU Heads of State and Government meeting in Lusaka on 9-11 July 2001[11]. At the inauguration of Mr Samassekou as the President of ACALAN, President Konare called on him and his colleagues to

> … take up the challenge to put in place a pan-African institution capable of helping our States and our peoples to conceive and develop a language policy, relevant and efficient enough to quickly contribute to the Renaissance and the Unity of Africa. (ACALAN 2002:8)

Not unexpectedly, though, given the sensitivities around the language issue, it took another five years before the official institutionalisation of ACALAN as a special office

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[11] For a detailed account of the establishment of ACALAN, see ACALAN 2002.

for language policy of the African Union (AU), the successor body to the OAU, was finalised at the Khartoum Summit on 23-24 January 2006[12]

The AU decision gave official sanction to the draft statutes of ACALAN, in which its objectives are described as follows:

a) Promoting African languages;
b) Promoting cross-border languages;
c) Promoting vehicular cross-border languages;
d) Strengthening cooperation between African States in the area of African languages;
e) Promoting African languages in all educational sectors;
f) Promoting African languages at international level;
g) Analysing language policies in Africa;
h) Promoting a scientific and democratic culture based on the use of African languages;
i) Contributing to the harmonisation of the economic, social and cultural development of Member States based on African languages, and in relation with partner languages;
j) Promoting the use of African languages as factors of integration, solidarity, respect of values and mutual understanding in order to promote peace and prevent conflicts;
k) Promoting African languages organizations on the continent.

The statutes make provision for the following constitutional organs:

a) The AU Conference of Ministers of Culture, which is described as "the supreme organ of the ACALAN";

b) The Governing Board, the highest policy-making organ;

c) The Scientific and Technical Committee, an advisory body;

d) The Assembly of Academicians;

e) The Executive Secretariat.

At the time of writing, the Executive Secretariat has just completed the process of setting up of the Governing Board, the Scientific and Technical Committee and associated structures that are the logical consequence of its mandate. These include language commissions for relevant cross-border languages as well as focal language-related organisations in each region and/or country of the continent. Four of five projected

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[12] The official resolutions are posted on the ACALAN website www.acalan.org. See Assembly/AU/Dec.95 (VI) DECISION ON THE STATUTES OF THE AFRICAN ACADEMY OF LANGUAGES (ACALAN)

regional symposia, involving the relevant ministers (of culture and/or education) as well as a government nominated linguist from the relevant regional economic structures of the AU, such as ECOWAS or SADC, and invited local language professionals and language-related organisations of the host country have been discussing and deciding on the local or regional adaptations of the basic ACALAN template. The Assembly of Academicians, which will be the main forum for deliberating on the specifically linguistic issues that arise in the course of ACALAN's advocacy and planning activities has begun to take shape through a series of continental and regional meetings and conferences[13] with African linguists and other associated professionals. At the end of August 2008, the organ has yet to be established formally.

It has to be said that given the recentness of the official institutionalisation of ACALAN, much has been done, especially if one takes into account the fact that the budget for its activities is still very tentative and in the process of being negotiated.

Establishing the base

 The reader may well ask what it is that would make the ACALAN initiative of the Malian government any more promising than similar previous initiatives, all of which eventually ran into the sand[14]. The answer, I think, is very simple. There is, clearly, the passion, the commitment and the professional competence of the Malian and other West African colleagues who were, and are, driving the ACALAN process. In addition to this decisive strategic move, however, there is a different element. For, while these essentially diplomatic moves were taking place, developments in other parts of the continent were converging on one another and on ACALAN. Grassroots and quasi-government initiatives geared to the improvement of the quality of education, especially at the level of pre- and primary schooling, had been undertaken for many years in most countries on the continent. All of them were single-mindedly working towards the introduction, or re-introduction of mother tongue based education in their respective countries and/or sub-regions.

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[13] Most of these were organized in conjunction with UNESCO and other international partner organizations.
[14] A list of these initiatives is reproduced in Djité 2008:49-51.

Some of these organisations as the result of a workshop organised by the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA) at the University of Cape Town on "The Intellectualisation of African Languages" in July 2003, initiated a very important series of meetings and bilateral encounters in different parts of the continent that culminated in a meeting between their existing network and officials of ACALAN in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in February 2004. Besides PRAESA and ACALAN, decisive roles were played by the National Association of Cameroonian Language Committees (NACALCO), the Institute for Kiswahili Research (IKR) in Dar es Salaam and by individual linguists such as the doyen of language planning in Africa, Professor emeritus Ayo Bamgbose of Ibadan University, Nigeria.

At the July 2003 seminar, held at the Breakwater Lodge in Cape Town, a few significant resolutions were agreed upon by the participating scholars. Among other things, it was resolved to maintain and expand the network of scholars and institutions and to initiate, mutually support and conduct workshops on a range of practical issues such as language medium policy and practice, translation, terminology development, the development and use of human language technology and advocacy for the use of African languages at all levels of education. Most significantly, the meeting also resolved to hold

> … (a) workshop on the proposed activities and organization of ACALAN in an effort to move towards its approval and the rapid implementation of its programmes (Alexander 2005: 55).

In retrospect, it is clear that this was one of the initiatives that began the process of establishing and consolidating the social and community base of ACALAN across the continent.

Implementing the Language Plan of Action for Africa (ILPAA)

At the Yaoundé meeting in February 2004, another important step in this direction was taken. Its most important outcome was the formulation of five continent-wide core projects which, it was agreed, would constitute the heart of the substantive programme of ACALAN for the next decade or so. In order to stress the grassroots, action-oriented

approach, the core projects were given the name *Implementing the Language Plan of Action for Africa* (ILPAA). They are, in summary:

- The Year of African Languages in 2006 in order to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the formulation and adoption of the original Language Plan of Action for Africa. It was to be co-ordinated by ACALAN from Bamako, Mali. As a result of this initiative, the AU Summit of January 2006, held at Khartoum, Sudan, declared 2006 as the Year of African Languages. This was later extended to include 2007, also in order to flow into 2008, which has been declared the International Year of Languages by the General Assembly of the UNO.

- The Joint Masters' and Doctoral Programme, called Panmapal, the purpose of which is to provide financial and academic support to students who will strengthen the corps of language professionals on the continent. It was felt that without such a body of competent professionals and practitioners, it would be impossible to realise in practice the lofty aspirations of ACALAN. The central co-ordination of this programme is being undertaken from the University of Yaoundé in Cameroon. The two-year pilot was launched at the universities of Yaoundé 1 and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) in February-March 2008. It will commence in Cape Town in 2009.

- The Terminology Development Programme was to be co-ordinated centrally from the Institute of Kiswahili Research in Dar es Salaam. At the time of writing, this programme has not yet found a clear direction. Two successful workshops were held in Dar es Salaam and Pretoria during 2005, at which the beginnings of a co-ordinated effort with respect to the creation of useful databases and term banks for the languages of south-eastern Africa were discussed. Bilateral as well as some multilateral contacts have been maintained. Recent interactions among some of the key individuals will re-focus the programme.

- The Translation Programme, co-ordinated from ACALAN in Bamako. Although some preliminary research has been done to get this challenging project off the ground, other priorities have always supervened. As a result, the programme has yet to be launched officially. Its point of departure is the idea that African and world literature should be made available in African languages in order to have information and creative literature available for all citizens, to create a documentation centre where all important political and other documents would be referenced and to train as many professional translators and interpreters as possible during the next few decades.

- The Stories Across Africa Programme (StAAf), co-ordinated from PRAESA, Cape Town. It is a pan African project, working to develop a common children's literature in Africa, by creating, publishing and distributing the same anthologies of stories in a range of African languages as well as English, French and Portuguese, which can be read by children and their caregivers. The aim is to develop African languages in print, promoting multilingualism and mother tongue based bilingual education. It also wants to help to promote a sense of common identity for African children across the continent through this developing treasury of shared stories. At the same time, the project tries to facilitate writers and illustrators workshops, and mentoring processes for using books with children The project works with African publishers in all five regions to support a sustainable publishing industry and aims to develop partnerships with other organisations and donors who share a common strategy and vision. It has already produced books and other materials in numerous African languages. Currently, the attractive series of *Little Books for Little Hands* is available in the five official languages of the AU and in 20 other African languages. Grassrooots projects, donors and local publishers are initiating translation and publication of the series into a growing number of local languages under the guidance of the co-ordinating team in Cape Town. It is a process that is gaining a self-perpetuating dynamic.

Initiatives that have come immediately from the Bamako head office of ACALAN in conjunction with relevant higher education institutions and which are now integral to this core of grassroots projects are the following:

The Cyberspace project, driven with indefatigable energy by Mr Samassekou himself, is based in Addis Ababa within the framework of the World Summit on the Information Society. Its essential aims are

> *training specialized personnel in computational linguistics;
> *establishing standardized sets of characters for African languages along with corresponding keyboard layouts;
> *facilitating access to UNICODE for African languages;
> *developing original infrastructures (software and contents, hardware, sites) to meet the needs of African languages;
> *developing multilingual educational software in African languages;
> *using ICTs in mass literacy campaigns.
> (Economic Commission of Africa, Conference programme 2005)

The Lexicography project under the supervision of Professor Herman Batibo at the University of Botswana in Gaberone. Its main aim is "to deal with the practical issues related to the compilation of dictionaries and the creation of neologisms" (Batibo 2007, page 3). It will work closely with the Terminology programme.

The Linguistic Atlas project for Africa, co-ordinated by Professor Al Mtenje at the Centre for Language Studies of the University of Malawi. It is intended

> to provide Africa with the means of producing continuously useful and useable linguistic maps at national, regional and continental levels. … The information from the database is collected by a team of specialists working generally in universities and scientific research institutions which constitute a network of collaboration on the Atlas project and who are capable of feeding the database with mapable and reliable information. (ACALAN 2005, page 4)

A linguistic renaissance?

In the run-up to the conceptualisation and establishment of these core projects of ACALAN, numerous conferences, seminars, symposia, workshops and bilateral discussions took place, where African linguists and other language professionals, practitioners and activists were the main participants or interlocutors. One of the most

significant of these[15] was the World Congress of African Linguistics (WOCAL), held in the AU Conference Centre in Addis Ababa on 7-11 August 2006. As the result of the conference deliberations, it was resolved that ACALAN would in future be represented on the executive committee of WOCAL. One of the most significant outcomes of all these different levels and kinds of academic and more practical interactions has been the widespread network of linguists and related social scientists, political and cultural agencies as well as university departments, all of which, together, in some sense constitute the base of the language planning and language policy development initiatives undertaken by ACALAN.

I believe it is no exaggeration to maintain that ACALAN, through the efforts of the many scholars, activists and students who have co-operated in its establishment and growth marks the beginning of the African languages renaissance that we have always envisaged as an essential aspect of the restoration of the dignity and the equality of the peoples of the continent. The dominance and, worse, the hegemony, of the languages of the former colonial powers simply means that the continuity between our traditions and our modernity will continue to be ruptured and that only a relatively few middle class people will, via the European languages, continue to be able to experience "modernity" as not alien. The educational, economic, ecological and cultural consequences of the restoration of African languages to their rightful place in the lives and societies of African people are incalculable. Those of us who are working within the ACALAN orbit are convinced that they will become manifest sooner rather than later.

Core issues

Two important issues remain to be addressed, viz., which of the plus-minus 2000 "languages" are involved in this project and, given the putative costs of such a project, how will the political will be mobilised to realise it?

The first question can be dealt with briefly, since the ACALAN statutes, while committing the organisation to the status and corpus development of all the languages of

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[15] An extended list of these gatherings for the period 2005-2006 can be found in ACALAN 2006:45-46.

the continent, is specific about the prioritisation – for the foreseeable future – of the cross-border languages[16]. At the original launching of the activities of the then "Mission" of the African Academy of Languages on 8 September 2001, Professor Ayo Bamgbose (2002:25) stressed, among other things, that

> Widely spoken cross-border languages have the potential of serving as a model for empowerment, for they have a large population to back them and materials prepared in one country can be circulated and used in another. Hence to extend their use to a wider range of domains should not be problematic once the necessary language development work has been done.

He goes on to cite the example of the as yet unrealised potential of Kiswahili in East Africa and states that

> … (one) of the major objectives of ACALAN is to empower some of the more dominant vehicular languages in Africa to the extent that they can serve as working languages in the African Union and its institutions (Bamgbose 2002:25).

It remains to be said that, in practice, the presence and commitment of groups of scholars and activists who are focused on the development of specific African languages for reasons of local dynamics in fact are determining which languages are actually being promoted most vigorously. ACALAN has, however, initiated a process for determining which of the vehicular languages should be given priority, for example, for the purposes of translating the major documents of the African Union into the languages of the continent. The Stories Across Africa project has prepared, and is publishing, materials in 13 African languages from across the continent, including Kiswahili, English, French, Arabic and Portuguese as official languages of the AU. Not all of these are cross-border languages for the reason mentioned here.

Concluding remarks

There is, today, a programme of action and a very clear set of time frames the overall effect of which is to create a frame of reference from which all language-related activities on the continent can get perspective and within which each such project, no matter how

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[16] Professor Kwesi Prah, renowned for his promotion of and work on the standardization and harmonization of the languages of the continent, prefers to use the term "core languages" (personal communication).

big or small, whether it is driven by government or by civil society, can become meaningful. The sense of isolation and desperation that has often characterised such projects, especially at the local level, can be, and is being, dispelled as those involved begin to realise that they are part of a larger, continental cultural movement. I maintain this in spite of the fact that even as I write these words, in South Africa in particular we are faced with falling enrolments in departments of African languages and ever fewer candidates for teacher training that involves African languages as majors. This is a situation that will change rapidly as more and more African governments take the decision to go back to basics in respect of language policy in education, especially as regards languages of teaching and learning. Indeed, the South African government has already begun offering attractive bursaries to students who intend teaching African languages or in these languages.

In a nutshell, we are proposing a comprehensive, large-scale, long-term, and systematic intervention on the part of NGOs, CBOs, language professionals' associations (especially in the domain of education) with government support at the national, sub-regional, and continental levels, to create the conditions and the capacity which will enable the realisation of the common goal of using as many African languages as possible in all the controlling domains (e.g.,government administration, lawmaking, big business, education, etc.) within the next two to three generations. ACALAN itself is in the process of collating all the relevant data and the many different proposals and outlines of plans that are being tabled or executed by individual and clusters of projects. The official status accorded it by the Khartoum Summit of the Heads of State and of Government at the end of January 2006 means that it has the necessary authority and, possibly, the leverage to accelerate the tempo of change in this fundamental area.

What all of us, who are involved in this exhilarating exploration hope is that the many obvious gaps that are there will be filled by independent existing or new initiatives. Our ultimate goal must be the situation where the linguistic diversity that characterises the continent can be harnessed as the invaluable resource it actually is because of the corps of competent and dedicated language professionals that will be available to serve as the

links between the different systems of communication. Proficiency in one or other combination of lingua francas, vehicular languages, cross-border vehicular languages as well as other important international languages will eventually turn the so-called tower of Babel into the power of Babel that our multilingual societies actually are.

The ACALAN project is possibly one of the most ambitious language planning projects in modern history. It represents a vision that places the continent in a perspective that confers on all its people the dignity that is rightfully theirs. Linguistic human rights, political democracy, economic development, successful educational systems, national and continental cohesion, all of these are matters that are integrally related to the language question. For this reason, the two main challenges that we face, i.e., the ideologically determined notion that paralyses many African people in the belief that their languages cannot be languages of power and the lack of will on the part of many political and cultural leaders to promote the languages of the people, will have to be faced head-on. It is my view that the 21st century will become "the African century" because, among other reasons, the ACALAN project will become a reality.

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