

LOSING THE FLAVOUR? FROM ORATURE TO LITERATURE, AND ON CHOICES WHEN COMPILING DICTIONARIES FOR UNWRITTEN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

Any hitherto unwritten language, in Africa as elsewhere, as soon as it becomes the object of linguistic and philological documentation and research, automatically crosses the Rubicon from oral to written and undergoes the first steps from *orature* to *literature*. This almost natural process may be studied under at least two perspectives: that of the linguistic and cultural 'costs' of such transition, and that of the ideological burden in terms of stereotype and prejudice when researchers with a 'Western' background (by extension including researchers, also in Africa, who have been trained under the impact of 'Western' scholarship) approach the languages and cultures of 'others'. This links up with lexicographic work on languages which are predominantly or exclusively used



for oral communication, by influencing the *choices* that lexicographers face in terms of lemma identification and speech variability when compiling the – often first ever – bilingual dictionary of a hitherto unwritten language.

INTRODUCTION

After a few introductory remarks on the ecology of African linguistics approaches to oratures, this article will address two separate but related sets of questions. The first set pertains to potentially unique linguistic features of oratures that, possibly, might get lost in the process of what shall be referred to as TRANSITION from oratures to literatures. The second set addresses CHOICES facing the lexicographer when compiling a bilingual dictionary for a hitherto unwritten language. Both sets of questions relate to the central observation that unavoidably, as soon as any unwritten language is subjected to linguistic documentation, description and lexicography, it undergoes the very first steps of TRANSITION from orature to literature.

The article reflects some of the theoretical foundations of German-speaking African linguistics, which Germans call *Afrikanistik*, which was established towards the end of the 19th century in the heyday of (German) colonial imperialism, as an autonomous academic discipline in places like Berlin, Leipzig and Hamburg, but also in Vienna (Austria). Its focus is the transdisciplinary study of languages and cultures in mostly oral African societies (Wolff 2013), dealing with languages which are, or have been until quite recently, unwritten. One major task of African linguistics, therefore, is the theory-based description and documentation of unwritten African languages, and – eventually – their standardisation for writing purposes and for use in formal education. One could claim that, once a hitherto unwritten language undergoes scientific study and documentation, it automatically crosses the Rubicon from oral to written, from *orature* to *literature*. Therefore, and this may come as a surprise, the issue of ‘transition’ from oral to literal could be expected to be a central issue in African linguistics – but it is not! The question of why this should be so is an interesting one which relates to the ideological positions of *Eurocentrism* and *Orientalism* to be only touched upon further below, but which would deserve more detailed discussion in a separate paper.

African linguistics, apart from focusing on purely academic issues pertaining to theoretical linguistics and dealing with the archival documentation of endangered or dying minority languages in Africa, also has an applied dimension in terms of creating the foundations for language standardisation. This involves standard orthographies, grammars, and other standard reference tools in order to allow for literacy to emerge and develop. Orature INPUT becomes pre-processed, so-to-speak, under *applied linguistics methodology*, for literarisation and more or less standardised written OUTPUT. In practical terms: sound (descriptive) *phonologies* form the basis for good (normative) orthographies, reliable *grammars* are prerequisites for any attempts at

language standardisation, and *dictionaries* are required to serve as multifunctional reference tools for any written language and their use, for instance, in education.

For an exclusively oral mother tongue in Africa to emerge as a *standard language* used in higher domains such as literacy and education, for instance, the minimum requirements are such phonology-based *orthographies*, theoretically and methodologically sound *reference grammars*, and practical *dictionaries* – ideally to be complemented by also availing standardised post-literacy reading materials.

Modern African linguistics regularly provides such theory-based phonologies and grammars for individual languages. To a much lesser extent – and this may come as a second surprise – the provision of good and practical dictionaries is not very high up on the agenda and must be considered almost rare in terms of frequency of research output. And again we could ask why this should be so and how this relates to priorities which govern ‘Western’ type academic research and publication output. Further, and this is possibly a less surprising observation, the provision of post-literacy materials for a new reading culture to emerge is hardly ever considered to be among the tasks of mainstream African linguistics and is, therefore, neglected most of the time.

There is an ideological paradox involved, as it would appear, at least in idiomatic English language usage, that we speak about languages being ‘reduced’ to writing, while, on the other hand, we speak about languages (or even cultures or societies as a whole) being ‘upgraded’ from oral to literal. So, one question worth raising is that of the likely linguistic ‘costs’ of the transition from purely oral to occasionally, at least, literal expression. How literal should we take the English idiomatic phrase that languages are being ‘reduced to writing’ – what kind of *reduction* do we imply, what is it that will get lost on the way? A second question is that of the cultural ‘costs’ of the process of ‘upgrading’ languages from oral to written, if we are right to assume that cultural identity hinges, partly at least, on certain unique features and particular aesthetics of verbal art forms in one’s mother tongue-language which, as one could fear, might get ‘lost’ on the way up. In other words: Will and can *literary* texts share and preserve all, or at least most, salient linguistic features of their *oral* forerunners (disregarding the role of audience involvement, songs and music, in the traditional oral performance)? Or is it unavoidable, by the very nature of literarisation and the new availability across long distances (including spread via the digital media), that *oratures* lose their particular and peculiar ‘orality flavour’ – both in formal linguistic terms and regarding *topoi* and *dramatis personae*? A third question which I would like to add is: What role must or can a bilingual dictionary play in this process, if any – or would it be none at all?

For this presentation, occasional examples and language data will be drawn mainly from the Chadic language Lamang in North-Eastern Nigeria, spoken by some 50 000 speakers, for which I have recently finished compiling the language’s first ever bilingual dictionary (Wolff 2015). Occasionally, I will also make reference to Hausa,

the major *lingua franca* with close to 100 million speakers in the West African Sahel zone, which is also a Chadic language of the same Afroasiatic affiliation. Occasional reference will also be made to the Igala language in Southern Nigeria, and to Ciluba in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Ideology and mindset feeding into attitudes based on cliché and prejudice

Working with and on unwritten African languages, in particular as a ‘Western’ expatriate in Africa, invokes a non-trivial question: To what extent is it at all possible for linguistic and cultural *aliens* to produce reliable research results concerning somebody else’s language and culture? Any serious answer to the question would require one to address at least three aspects which, however, can only be dealt with in passing in this presentation:

- The ubiquitous *Eurocentrism* in ‘Western’ academic discourse;
- Its younger sister *Orientalism* (as described in Edward Said’s book of 1978);
- Speaker community involvement.

Both Eurocentrism and Orientalism reflect a mindset which, often subconsciously, creates condescending attitudes towards non-European languages and cultures by even highly educated members of so-called ‘Western civilisations’. Eurocentrism and Orientalism are constant intellectual threats which lurk in the darker corners of our brains when we, as ‘Westerners’, approach features of *alterity*, i.e., the linguistic and cultural ‘other’.¹

The strong anti-Islamic (and implied: anti-African) undercurrent in Eurocentrism was highlighted by Edward Said in his influential but still highly controversial book on *Orientalism* (1978). Said referred to the West’s patronising perceptions and depictions of Middle Eastern, Asian and North African societies – ‘the East’ (= *Orient*). Under such permanent intellectual challenge and threat, the least we have to do, as ‘Westerners’ and all those under the impact of this particular ‘Western’ mindset, is to remain constantly aware and avoid the most obvious ideological pitfalls connected to it.

Another issue which links up with Eurocentrism and Orientalism is what could be called the principle of optimised ‘speaker community involvement’. For too long, linguistic research priorities (and supposedly this is true also for anthropological research and folklore studies) were often geared towards the propelling of the expatriate researcher’s academic career (or that of any other outsider to the language and culture under study), reflecting his or her own at times rather whimsical theoretical interests and fancies. It still is not default code of practice that linguists, after returning from field work in some rural area of Africa, feed back the results of their research to the people who have assisted in the research, be it in terms of:

- practical suggestions for orthographies;
- readable grammars which would be useful also to speakers untrained in theoretical linguistics;
- post-literacy materials for reading pleasure in an emerging reading culture.

Here we are talking about the provision of linguistic tools to assist African mother tongues and their speakers in the transition from the *oral* to the *written* mode – if the speakers of such languages so wish (most of them do!). This relates to the new research paradigm in Applied African Linguistics and Sociolinguistics which is slowly taking root, namely that of ‘language as resource’. Present-day linguists are advised to no longer view African language data exclusively as raw materials for highly fashionable *endangered language documentation* projects, or for career-propelling publications in journals of *theoretical linguistics*, but as *resource materials* for the speaker communities themselves. The questions should no longer be ‘How can African language data advance general linguistic theory?’ or ‘How can African language data advance my professional career?’, but ‘How can African language data be turned into resources for literacy and post-literacy, poverty reduction, and the attainment of the goals of the speaker community for their own benefit?’ and ‘What can I do, as linguistic expert, with “my” African language data to assist the speakers of the language to change their – possibly precarious – conditions of life?’ The days of colonial and postcolonial one-way extraction and exploitation of African language data are definitely over – hopefully!

From ‘orature’ to ‘literature’

The title question of this presentation – *Losing the flavour?* – was inspired by the title of a popular song from the 1960s which the older members of the readership might still remember (*Does your chewing gum lose its flavour on the bedpost overnight?* It is actually a song by Lonnie Donnegan from 1961). In more serious and academic terms, the question is: Does the transformation of texts, in particular specimens of verbal art, from oral to literal, assisted by Western academic linguistic interference via translation, lexicography and feedback to the speaker community, unavoidably make languages lose their ‘orality flavour’?

Before we can turn to this question, we need to seek clarification on two issues which are implied here:

- What would constitute the particular ‘orality flavour’ in the first place, if there ever were one?
- Or, is again the notion of ‘orality flavour’ in this very question already a construct under the ideological impact of *Orientalism*?

In other words: just because a language must be associated with linguistic and cultural features different from the ones associated with my own European standard language or other European languages that I happen to know, namely by being a) exclusively used orally, with no writing traditions at hand; b) spoken by a rather small community quite remote from ‘Western’ type civilisations; and c) accompanied by a whole range of different, unique, if not to say ‘exotic’ features of material and immaterial culture and language use, does this automatically mean that there must be peculiar, if not to say again ‘exotic’, features to their verbal communication in general, and to pieces of verbal art in particular? What are my (and if only subconscious) expectations influenced by Eurocentrism and Orientalism which tend to be based on received cliché, stereotype and possibly prejudice? I am not sure whether I myself have the answers, but I have at least tried to reflect on the issue in much of my teaching and writing, and no less also in the process of dictionary making for hitherto unwritten African languages.

Does normative pressure of standardisation impoverish pre-existing variability?

Trivially so, exclusively oral language use lacks normative pressure from standards of writing. Standardisation means *normative*, meaning *prescriptive*, choice from several variants which, in mutually comprehensible spoken speech are perfectly acceptable, despite the (at times) remarkable differences between language variants. Asking speakers of long-time standard languages from Europe, their uninformed answer to the question is *yes*. It is their firm belief that normative standardisation fosters an impoverishing ‘harmonising’ effect on regional variability, an effect which they consider to be a major target of standardisation itself.

But, is this really the case? Let me take my own mother tongue-language, German, for illustration. Most people in this world would consider German to be one and only one language, like English, French, and others. As a matter of fact, experts tell us that German is a so-called *macro-language* which comprises at least 16 different and mutually non-intelligible ‘languages’ which speakers and everybody else consider to be just regional ‘dialects’, by implicit reference to Standard German. Under the prestige impact of Standard German, for instance, particularly so in the northern parts of Germany, using ‘sub-standard dialect’ variants tends to be frowned upon, and children in school are discouraged from using these forms – a situation which reminds us of practices in African schools, since colonial days, where children are ridiculed and even punished when they use their own mother tongues or speech varieties! Generally, German people in more or less formal speech target what they know from the media as Standard German – with their particular regional ‘accents’, however, still clearly perceivable. On the other hand, in informal settings it is ‘anything goes’: there is a *diglossic cline* between *deep dialect* (creolists refer to this as *basilectal*) and Standard German (*acrolectal* in creolist terminology), with a

whole range of *mesolectal* intermediate variants available plus, of course, the option of *code-switching* and *nonce-borrowing* between the variants. For *basilectal* vs. *acrolectal* variation in German let us look at the following example of two lines from a poem which contrasts so-called Moselle Franconian [*Moselfränkisch*] and Standard German:

- Dialectal: *Et war esô emm d'Peischten, 't stung Alles ann der Blë, An d'Villercher di songen hir Lidder spët a frë.*
- Standard: *Es war so um die Pfingsten, es stand alles in der Blüte, und die Vögelchen die sangen ihre Lieder spät und früh.*
- English: It was (such) around (the) Pentecost, it stood all in (the) blossom, and the birdies (they) sang their songs late and early.

To the author of this presentation, who is a native speaker of Standard German (and northern German dialectal varieties), the Moselle Franconian variety from the westernmost parts of Germany are totally incomprehensible. This is so mainly because only three of the actually occurring words are written in an identical fashion (*war, alles, der*) and, thereby, are immediately recognisable. The fact that all words in both varieties are etymological cognates which just happen to be pronounced differently in the 'dialect' and written accordingly in the example above, does not help intercomprehension at all. Just by looking at the two varieties, Moselle Franconian and Standard German, one need not be fluent in German to easily recognise that these varieties would be mutually incomprehensible.

This little German example shows that after 500 years of standardisation (usually its beginning is said to coincide with Martin Luther's translation of the Bible in 1521), very divergent oral variants coexist side by side with the standardised written code. The difference between *orature* and *literature* in these languages is, first of all, one of *status* and *visibility*: only very little is actually written and published in any of the so-called dialects which, thereby, remain largely invisible and are banned from use in formal education (like most of the indigenous languages in Africa!); by far the most published texts adhere to the norms of the standard variety which, therefore, becomes visibly identified with the language as such. In more recent sociolinguistic terminology: it is the standard language varieties which, by their visibility, make up the *linguistic landscape* of a city, province or country, and thus represent the most prestigious and 'empowered' variety.

In areas where dialects are strong in oral communication, people are practically *diglossic* in their verbal communication, which means that they use both their idiolectal or regional variant of the standard language plus the local deep dialect variant – depending on context, topic, and participants in the speech act. On the other hand, in societies with formal education reaching 100 per cent, more and more people shift from such a *diglossic* to a largely *monoglossic* situation in which speakers aim to not only write, but also speak a variety which is very close to the

written code of the standard variety and, thereby, is fairly uniform. This general process of reducing *regional diglossia* to *inter-regional monoglossia*, however, is not a *sine qua non* of language standardisation, as the example from German has clearly illustrated. Yet, in Africa many speaker communities resent standardisation and/or harmonisation for one erroneous assumption: they fear having to give up speaking their own varieties and being forced to speak, not only write, like ‘the other(s)’. The harmonisation effects which are implied in language standardisation can, however, be interfered with by ‘nationalist’ or ‘ethnicist’ strategies. Cross-border languages tend to be the first to be targeted by the nationalistic attitudes of language planners, most conspicuously when it comes to devising different ‘national’ orthographies.

One could cite the case of Hausa in postcolonial West Africa, where once the same language was written and printed differently in Niger and in Nigeria. Even after the official cross-border harmonisation of Hausa orthography in the 1980s, publishers on both sides of the border have continued to use elements of the former ‘national’ variants of the orthography. While the economically much more powerful Nigerian publishers, like the Gaskiya Corporation, have largely maintained norms which basically went back to the beginnings of Hausa standardisation under colonial and missionary impact in Northern Nigeria in 1911, publishers on the Niger side of the border have struggled to keep in use the agreed-upon harmonised ‘hooked symbol’ **ɣ** for the laryngealised/glottalised consonant even where the Nigerian standard maintains a digraphic symbol, namely **’y**. However, licence was given to poets and writers to continue using ‘regional’ variants of pronunciation and grammar also in writing, so that it was and still is easy to tell ‘Nigerian’ from ‘Niger’ Hausa, for instance in the substitution of **h** and **hw** for **f**, and variant forms for pre-verbal subject pronoun expression (for instance, **ya** vs. **shi** for 3rd pers. sg. masc.):

Niger	<i>shi tahi</i>	(he went (off))
Nigeria	<i>ya tafi</i>	(he went (off))

A similar situation is found in Kiswahili-speaking East Africa, where Tanzanian and Kenyan standard varieties compete. Many Kenyans reject the idea, for nationalistic reasons or for convenience only, that the Tanzanian Ki-Unguja standard (based on the speech forms at the Sultan’s Court in Zanzibar) should also apply to Kenya. And, risking unrest among a South African readership, ‘ethnic nationalism’ also prevails with regard to some South African languages: in terms of variational linguistics alone, for instance, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, and siSwati could be easily conceived as basically oral variants of one potential standard language only (which would be called something like Standard Nguni) – yet strong ethnic and ‘nationalistic’ currents based on political history create fervent reactions against such harmonising standardisation. This reflects a widespread sociolinguistic phenomenon, namely that and how regional dialects, under political and historical circumstances, become ‘national’ or ‘ethnic’ languages – in Africa as much as elsewhere in the world – and

not for any serious linguistic reason, but for plain political and cultural reasons born out of sometimes traumatic history, like that of the apartheid period in South Africa.

To sum up this section: the fact that a language receives a standardised prescriptive variant for, first of all, writing and educational purposes does not eradicate pre-existing oral variants as such, whether dialectal or sociolectal. There is no reason to assume that this would be any different anywhere in Africa – once any hitherto unwritten African language is standardised and harmonised for writing, teaching and printing purposes.

Does writing interfere with the aesthetics of oral verbal art?

Given the descriptive linguist's core competencies with regard to formal elements of language structure, i.e., phonetics, phonology and grammar, there are aesthetic devices in verbal art which can or must best be analysed by a linguist. Elsewhere (Wolff 1980) have spoken of 'creative manipulation' of language structures in order to create complex patterns of parallelisms and 'density' and 'terseness of expression', to borrow terms from Ruth Finnegan's world-famous 1970 book entitled *Oral literature in Africa*.

My favourite example comes from Ciluba poetry, with Ciluba being a good oldtone language of Bantu linguistic stock in the DRC. In a tone language, one normally does not fiddle around with tones, because doing so will result in a totally different word each time. This can be nicely illustrated with Igala, a language with three contrasting tones in Nigeria: High (H), Mid (M) and Low (L) tone.

<i>áwó</i>	H-H	(guinea fowl)
<i>áwo</i>	H-M	(increase (n.))
<i>áwò</i>	H-L	(hole in a tree)
<i>àwó</i>	L-H	(slap in the face)
<i>àwo</i>	L-M	(comb)
<i>àwò</i>	L-L	(star)

In an early account on Ciluba poetry, Stappers (1952) gives examples in which the word for 'child', *muana*, occurs with three different tonal realisations and nevertheless maintains its meaning:

<i>mwâná</i>	F-H
<i>mwàná</i>	L-H
<i>mwánà</i>	H-L

The reason for the extreme variance in tonal realisation is only too obvious: in each of these variant tonal realisations, the word for 'child' adapts to the rhyming patterns of the lines of the poem (underlined in the examples) which are organised from right

to left, starting at the end of the line, and not necessarily encompassing all syllables of the line:

<i>Làmbilà muáná</i>	<i>bà bé lá muáná á muntù</i>	<i>kwàtshilà muánà mpású</i>
L HL <u>F H</u>	- - H <u>L H H</u> L L	L HL <u>H L</u> HH
<i>nkètù kà kúdià bónsò</i>	<i>wá mífuè wátèléjá pèbè</i>	<i>pàkò làyè wàkùkwàtshilà</i>
. - - L HL <u>F H</u>	- - - H <u>L H H</u> L L	..-.-...LH L <u>H L</u> HH

Clearly, system-based tonality is ‘manipulated’ by verbal artistry in favour of phonetic aesthetics to become part of extensive instances of tonal rhyme.

Tonal rhymes are not at all uncommon in African tone languages. Often they remain unidentified (even by great researchers who piloted research into African poetry, such as Joseph H. Greenberg [1949, 1960]), or they were mistaken as somewhat ‘primitive’ mnemotechnical devices, as some authors claimed in the 1950s (Stappers 1952, 1953; Van Avermaet 1955). No wonder, then, that the seminal book *Oral literature in Africa* would not consider rhymes to be a feature of African poetry of any salience – not at that time! Here, quite obviously, conventions governing writing, by neglecting the representation of tonal structure, veils the existence of artistry. As a matter of fact, writing African tone languages without tones could be compared to writing German or English without vowels – imagine what effects that would have had on the study of Shakespeare’s sonnets and Goethe’s poetry if it was only based on writing in a system neglecting vowels!

Let me illustrate the issue further with just two verses of a poem by Muhammed Bello in Hausa, actually one that Greenberg (1949) had analysed without recognising the tonal rhymes which accompany the much more obvious segmental rhymes. As Greenberg points out, the segmental rhyme pattern is that of the likely Arabic model *tasmiiṭ mukhammas*, namely aaaax, bbbbx, ccccx, etc.

*'yan uwa mun gode Alla
mun yi imanci da salla
har jihadi don ka jalla
mun kashe dangi na Dalla
sun sani su sun yi sarki
mun kashe alkafirawa
su suwa ne Gobirawa
sun tafo don K'adirawa
su da sashin Asbinawa
sun tafo su duk da sarki*

Brethren we thank God;
We perform acts of faith and prayer

Even holy war for Thee the Exalted One:
 We slew the breed of dogs
 They know (now) that their task was beyond their strength
 We have slain the heathen;
 Who were they? The men of Gobir.
 They came (to fight) the followers of Abd-el-Kadr
 They and half the men of Asben.
 They came, all of them, together with their king.

The phonological transcription indicating both vowel length and tone reveals the additional aesthetics of suprasegmental structure in addition to metrical structure and segmental end rhymes:

'yán 'úwáa mún góodè 'állàa
mún yí 'iimáncìi dà sállàa
hár jìháadii dón kà jállà
mún káshèe dángii ná Dállà
sún sánii súu sún yí sárkii
mún káshèe 'álkáafiráawáa
súu súwáa nèè Góobiráawáa
sún táfóo dón K'áadiráawáa
súu dà sáashìn 'Ásbináawáa
sún táfóo súu dúk dà sárkii

Clearly, the first four lines show both segmental and tonal rhymes for the final two or even four syllables of the line:

First verse, last two syllables	<i>Cállà(a)</i>	H L
Second verse, last four syllables	<i>C'v(X)CiCáawáa</i>	H H H H
Fifth line, last two syllables	<i>sárkii</i>	H H

When orature is 'reduced' – in the true sense of the word – to writing, this particular flavour will be lost because it will go unnoticed by a reader (unless reproduced loudly and with awareness of what is going on in oral performance). Tone or pitch accent, being salient linguistic features of verbal art aesthetics, are likely not to survive visibly in the graphic code – unless, of course, a language board agrees to have their language written with suprasegmental diacritics. This, however, is usually resented by native-speaker language boards. Again, we may raise the question why this should be so, and the answer would indicate that it is the hegemonial (imported, ex-colonial) language which sets the model: English, for instance, does not use diacritics at all, French, on the other hand, does. No wonder, therefore, that language boards in 'anglophone' postcolonies tend to avoid diacritic tone marking even where

the functional load of tone is high, in order to make their written language look a bit like English, whereas language boards in ‘francophone’ postcolonies tend to insist on diacritics, even if the functional load of tone is low – and if not for tone, then to be used to distinguish, for instance, **e** and **ɛ** (rendered by **è**) as well as **o** and **ɔ** (rendered by **ò**), in order to make the language look a bit like French.

The ‘expressive’ sub-lexicon of language

As regards segmental phonology, oral performances may stand out in terms of ample use of items from what I call the ‘expressive sub-lexicon’ of language, in particular interjections, exclamations and descriptive lexemes known as *onomatopoeia*, *ideophones*, *phonaesthetic* particles, etc. which often involve *sound symbolism*. The existence of such an expressive sub-lexicon may entail the existence of a sub-system of phonology which allows for sounds, syllable and word structures which are unacceptable elsewhere in the language. But, there is no reason why such could not be written and, therefore, survive the transition from oral to literal production. This may simply become a matter of style and discourse genre. From the long-standing history of writing in European standard languages we know that such expressive material survives in the oral domains parallel and independent of the written code and, once genres like *comics* make it into what was long exclusively guarded as serious ‘literature’, belatedly find their way into literary texts. Even ‘unspeakable’ and/or non-verbalised purely mental expressions may now enter into a graphic form of ‘language’.

With regard to my current project of the Lamang-English bilingual dictionary, I do not consider this a particular challenge: being a corpus-based dictionary of masses of recorded oral discourse material which abounds with expressive lexemes, some 180 different ones in total, I simply include them as natural parts of speech in the dictionary, e.g.

duguzum [dúgúzúm] *expr.* (ideophone): UNTIDY;
nzùkàatànjé mǎŋváyà dúgúzúm; *they remain untidy like that, duguzum;*

haak [háak] *expr.* (ideophone): YAWNING;
háak gúná t’ éwé; *haak, she opened the mouth yawning;*

Parallelisms

One of the salient features of both oral and written epic poetry and prose is the often massive use of *parallelism*, both in terms of sounds, morphemes in grammatical structures and syntactic patterns, plus, of course, lexical choices. Most of this will easily survive the transition from oral to written, whether we are dealing with *consonantal alliteration*, *morphemic rhyme*, *vocalic assonance* or even *end rhymes*.

Cf. the following three *gwadhwara* ('proverbs, idioms') from Lamang, leaving tonal rhymes aside which otherwise also play an important role in Lamang verbal art:

Consonantal alliteration:

kuksa kr t' pukghuvi
k k k k

Dog has caught himself a hyena.

Consonantal alliteration and morphemic rhyme:

ha maghuw na, mrdaghe magha
m m m
-agh(a) -agh(a) -agha

(If) you're motherless,
your stepmother (is) your mother.

Vocalic assonance:

luw talaja guv ma la-sid' nd' rvid'i
u u
a a a a a (a)
i i i

Meat (is) the dung-beetle
for some people at night.

LEXICOGRAPHERS' CHOICES

The second major topic of this presentation is about making dictionaries, and what their role is in the **TRANSITION** from orature to literature – and about some ideological pitfalls dictionary compilers should try to avoid when making choices. Irrespective of whether compiled by hand (as in the old days) or in digitalised format from the start, going for a so-called *corpus dictionary* avoids the first and fundamental choice of which lexical items to include and, possibly, which not to include. In a *corpus dictionary*, all different 'words' occurring in the recorded oral discourse must have their place – assuming we know what a 'word' is in the language, and what we mean by the expression 'different words'.

Further, we need a strategy of how to handle 'words' for which a lemma/head entry cannot be easily identified, or if they are part of highly contextualised examples whose grammatical structures still evade satisfactory linguistic analysis.

For hitherto unwritten languages, the first-ever dictionary could, following the guiding principle of 'speaker involvement' when deciding on strategies and conventions, contain guidance to the orthographic writing of at least the lemmata. For the Lamang-English dictionary, therefore, I have chosen to give the lemmata without diacritic tone marking which, however, is indicated in the broad phonetic transcription following in square brackets. (Cf. the bold-face examples for 'expressives' further above and in the examples below.) Further, under the principle of 'speaker involvement', the various contextualised examples from the corpus under each lemma contain principled use of morpheme boundaries within phonological words, and apostrophes to mark systematically deleted lexical vowels with

monoconsonantal words, in order to facilitate grammatical analysis by linguistically untrained dictionary users.

What to do with ‘segregational’ speech forms?

A particular issue, under the circumstances prevailing during my own linguistic fieldwork in the 1970s and 1980s in Northern Nigeria, was what we would today call the *gender* issue. Working in a predominantly Muslim society as a male researcher, I only had access to male speakers. However, with the help of my principal language assistant, we persuaded the female members of his own household to have some of their singing recorded – from a distance and under due observation of *purdah*, i.e., the customary segregation of women’s space and men’s space in the compound. With the women’s prior explicit consent, I recorded several of their songs. Being thrown back on my male language assistants when attempting to translate and analyse the lines of the songs, it turned out that many lines were incomprehensible to male native speakers, both in terms of linguistic structure and semantic content. When my principal language assistant went back to the singers and asked them for explanations of the lines which he himself did not understand, they just laughed at him and, with only a few exceptions, refused to betray any of their female code to a male. The dictionary maker is at a loss here: what to do with such semi-analysed or not at all analysed discourse material – does it belong into the dictionary, or not? My own decision was affirmative. All data are included; where considered necessary, notes were added for explanation, such as in the following examples:

gheghe [ghèghé] rare (female speech?) form of pronoun for 1ST PERS. SG. EXCL. as found in a girls’ song;

dzághé dzàghà ghèghé àyó; I am going home, ayo;

hulfa~hwlfá [hùlfà] *n.* TRIBE, SEED; ...

Note: Cf. the somewhat cryptic line from a girls’ song containing a reduplicated (distributive?) form:

hùlfàahùlf-àa ló-ŋ gw’ vādã Dzódz-iyò; all the seeds of the people up on Dzodzo hill am I;

ŋga² [ŋga; -ù´] *v.* LOOK AFTER, HERD (DOMESTIC ANIMALS); ...

Note: In the following line from one of the girls’ songs, the meaning of the assumed verb root ***ŋga** remains unclear:

ŋg-ù´: *kàdã ŋg-ù m-í góraa Ládè?; what am I to do with Ladi’s kolanut?;*

However, if this language was ever going to be written and develop a reading culture, and as long as the cultural regime on separate social spaces for men and women

persists, the rich orality features of female speech habits will probably not (or only very slowly, if at all) enter the literal codes – before and unless female authors and/or dictionary makers enter the scene.

What to do with cultural terminology, and how to handle the polysemy vs. homonymy problem?

Since different languages tend to encode material items and immaterial concepts of different cultures, bilingual dictionaries will face apparently ‘untranslatable’ cultural terminology, quite often related to the difficult question of how to handle the enigmatic distinction between *polysemy* vs. *homonymy*. I will here present just one example which also invokes issues of Eurocentric and Orientalist undertones.

A clear case of *polysemy* can be exemplified by the Lamang word **dzidzi**. Treating this as one polysemic lemma, one can avoid problems of intercultural misinterpretation.

dzidzi [dzɪdzɪ~jɪjɪ] *n.* (1) GRANDFATHER, GRANDMOTHER; FOREFATHER, MALE ANCESTOR TWO GENERATIONS ASCENDING; (2) WORSHIP WITH REGARD TO A DECEASED GRANDFATHER; ADDRESS OF A DECEASED GRANDFATHER IN WORSHIP; (3) CLAY POT SYMBOLIZING A DECEASED GRANDFATHER IN WORSHIP (→dada, →zgfto); pl. **dzidzaha**

By making the polysemy obvious, we could clearly indicate that the people in question culturally instantiate *institutionalised remembrance of patrilinear ancestry*, in fact up to three generations, and just happen to use the same term to designate (1) a person’s living or deceased male grandparent, (2) the particular worship in remembrance of a deceased male grandparent, and (3) the particular clay pot which is used in the ceremony of remembrance. The same polysemy holds also for **dada** ‘father’ and **zgfto** ‘great-grandfather’. By not making polysemy explicit, Eurocentric and Orientalist ‘armchair’ philology might wish to detect reference to people who, somewhat ‘primitively’, engage in ‘ancestor worship’, more specifically: that they ‘worship clay pots’ and ‘sacrifice to their ancestors’. Such ‘armchair’ reasoning, however, has nothing to do with serious lexicographic work. However, no later than here is where a non-trivial question comes in which will be dealt with in the following section.

Can choices by lexicographers have discriminatory dimensions?

Examples like the one just reported indicate that there is a hidden and touchy issue of political correctness, to say the least: in a nutshell, Eurocentrism and Orientalism entail the assumption of some kind of ‘inferiority’ or even ‘primitiveness’ of languages and cultures outside the narrow world of ‘Western’ civilisations which

are automatically considered to be essentially superior. Being aware of the implied ideological dimension, even the – apparently purely theory-based – strategy for choice of lemmata is not a trivial thing for a dictionary maker.

A lot hinges already on the linguistic typology of the language for which to compile a first-ever dictionary. Talking about my experience with an unwritten Chadic language, there were some difficult choices to make. Since Chadic languages make up one of the families of the Afroasiatic phylum which includes the Semitic languages with their centuries-long tradition of linguistic, philological and lexicographic work, a so-called ‘consonantal root dictionary’ could be first choice. This means recognition of the fact that in these languages it is only the consonants which carry the basic meaning, and the vowels just add grammatical information whether a word is a verb or a noun, singular or plural, perfective or imperfective, and the like. Cf. the following examples from a pre-final stage of the Lamang–English dictionary reflecting the lemmatisation strategy of a Semitic-type ‘consonantal root dictionary’:

db *n.* DEVICE, PLAN; hàhàd dábàri dàmàgàdāatí; *there is a device I shall do for you; gúhánj mòn dábàrà dzéb dápòdò; they make a plan to go and bury (him); màwmáná dábàrúndà dàmònmwà ná; let us make a plan which we will realise;*

db *v.* FOLLOW; gú lá-sídf gùlénj dābāatá dzèdè; *then others followed (him) too;*

db *v.* SOOTHE A FALLEN ROCK; tówíy tó givólàa sládátá ngánàl tó dóbàrà; *dóbàrà is performed on a fallen rock;*

db *expr.* (IDEOPHONE); gú íná dápóghùk skwéb tà dóbórrá ndúká da η ili; *something will come out of it (i.e. the rock) towards you and, dóbórrá, enter into (your) eye*

A consonantal root dictionary would make the genealogical status of the language as belonging to the Afroasiatic phylum explicit, it would please the linguistic expert – but it would be without any use to the speaker community: abstract consonantal roots cannot be easily identified with existing words in the language which happen to be made up of consonants plus vowels plus tones or pitch accent patterns. A consonantal root dictionary would be ‘exclusive’ in terms of their usefulness for professional users, but with no ‘speaker involvement’: the dictionary would remain without any instrumental value to the speaker community. Therefore, I decided against a consonantal root dictionary which, however, would have been the easiest and a scientifically adequate thing to do.

Further, Chadic languages like, for instance, East and South African Bantu languages, have a very rich system of derivational morphology, both for nouns and verbs. Nouns take various prefixes which modify the underlying basic meaning of the root (if such was at all retrievable), and verbs take suffixes which again modify the meaning or syntax of the verb. Such highly *agglutinative* languages create a

problem for the dictionary maker in terms of choice of lemma. Most of the time, for highly agglutinative languages dictionary makers go for the abstract *simple stem* as head entry, and list all actually occurring agglutinative word forms under this abstract simple stem entry. The inventory of verb stems derived from a given verb root, like **fa** ('put' in Lamang), as far as they were found actually occurring in the corpus of recorded discourse material, can be illustrated as follows:

Table 1

Simple root	pluractional	[+nom]	Extended (derivative) stems	pluractional	[+nom]
fa	fafa	f-ò			fa-´tá
			f-áa		f-áa´-tá
					f-áa`-tá
			f-àa		f-àa´-tá
			fa-´f´	fafa-´f´	fa-´f´-tá
			fa-´η`		fa-´η`-tá
					fa-´s`-tá
					f-ú´-tá
			f-úη´		
			f-úη`		f-úη`-tá

I followed exactly this strategy for the Lamang-English dictionary. However, under the self-inflicted awareness regarding Eurocentrism and Orientalism, the dictionary maker feels a bit uneasy. Going for this strategy which makes a lot of sense for both the expert and the lay user, this type of dictionary gives the impression that, by just counting the head entries in the dictionary (in our example: the simple stem **fa**), such languages appear to have a much lower number of words than other languages. This may again fuel cliché and prejudice against African languages which – since colonial days – have been frowned upon as being somewhat more 'primitive' by their much smaller inventory of words and their purported lack of sophisticated terminology. So, the dictionary maker wonders whether he or she should not choose a different strategy and list all actually occurring different derivational word forms as separate entries, like it is done in most European language dictionaries – and thereby boost the number to 15 or 20 times the number of simple roots! Instead of, let's say, 250 simple verb roots in Lamang which were identified in the corpus, one could boost the number to something like 3 000 or more actually occurring verb stems, each with

its own meaning! – This, of course, is more a political than a linguistic issue, but still worthy of being pointed out in this context.

Similarly, information on transparent etymology or grammaticalisation paths could give rise to invoking the regime of Eurocentric and Orientalist discrimination. European standard languages with a rich tradition of lexicography are usually afforded the luxury of specialised etymological dictionaries for expert users which contain historical linguistic information on etymology and grammaticalisation. For African languages there is no such luxury: etymological information finds its place, if at all, in the few available descriptive grammars and dictionaries. Transparent grammaticalisation or etymology, however, tends to have a smack of ‘primitiveness’ by testifying to ongoing processes of dynamic language change, often from a rather ‘concrete’ term to a more ‘abstract’ notion. When, for instance, we include the perfectly scientific information that in a given African language certain *prepositions* have developed out of ‘body part’ expressions (like in many languages of the world), unintendedly Eurocentrism and Orientalism may foster ignorant and stereotype non-expert interpretations of the kind that ‘this language is so primitive, it doesn’t even have proper prepositions’. We need to be aware of this pitfall.

And finally, in the same vein, the analysis of imagery and metaphor may easily fall victim of those two ugly sisters: Eurocentrism and Orientalism.

SUMMING UP

I started with the question: Is traditional African oral verbal art, in particular, losing a certain flavour in the process of transition from oratures to literatures? My answer is Solomonic: YES and NO.

Much depends on the model which the emerging literatures are targeting, whether one follows a *copy-and-paste* strategy regarding an exoglossic literary culture (mostly that of the former colonial master), or allows for *authenticity* based on patterns from endoglossic traditional oratures. The stronger the impact of the European standard language model (and the particular Western civilisation behind it), the more African orature flavour will be lost, in terms of variant traditional codes and registers, linguistic structure, discourse genres, parallelisms of all kinds, playing with tonal structures, use of ideophones, etc. The weaker the pressure from the exoglossic literary culture, the stronger the continuing impact of traditional features of endoglossic story telling, poetry, use of proverbs and riddles, imagery, ideophones, parallelisms, etc. which will safeguard much of the spoken language’s original flavour. Most of these features can be easily transmitted from spoken to written – with the possible exception of tones (depending on the orthographic conventions established by an authorised language board or academy).

Thus, by way of conclusion: *writing* as such is not a threat to genuine locally produced artful literacy and post-literacy materials which would maintain culture-

specific ‘orality flavours’. The threat is the impact, or even substitution, of a target model imported from a foreign culture. Here we could quote a mindful saying attributed to Mahatma Ghandi:

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.

For as long as a language remains vital and is used as mother tongue in its spoken mode, it will continue to serve as unlimited reservoir for creative writing in this language. Since this must be encouraged throughout a maximal period of mother-tongue impact during schooling, it provides another strong argument in favour of additive bi- or trilingual education in Africa which makes maximal use of mother tongues and indigenous *linguae francae* through all educational cycles. In sociolinguistic terminology: writers in newly written mother tongues are called upon to manage the newly emerging *diglossia* situation by constantly and creatively bridging the gap between the oral and the written codes. They should not be unduly influenced by conventions in a foreign language, even though it has the prestige and seemingly superior function of being the official language and the almost exclusive medium of instruction in schools and universities in the country. In this task, however, Westerners like me will have to leave the speaker community to itself, after assisting in the creation of useful tools like orthographies, grammars and bilingual dictionaries. Languages, whether unwritten or written, only survive if and when the speaker community wants them to survive, and acts proactively.

To conclude with a final observation: languages continuously change, at times considerably and very fast, from one generation of speakers to the next. Who cares and will ask, one day in the future, whether there were any ‘flavours’ in pre-literate periods that got lost on the way? William Shakespeare and Johann Wolfgang Goethe are long dead, and so are their respective English and German with their particular flavours (which, however, we can – partly at least – recover from the written records of their times). The languages, English and German, nevertheless thrive and continuously create new flavours both in the spoken variants and in their written literatures. There is no reason to assume that African languages will suffer a different fate – as long as they remain alive and in constant use in all domains of life!

NOTE

1. None of us, ‘Westerner’ or not, is free from *ethnocentrism* which comes in different shapes and would appear to be part of the universal human condition. Formal ‘Western’ type education and prevailing academic preconceptions may, however, aggravate the distorting ideological impact – also and even among African leaders and intellectuals.

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