



# Learning How to Learn Languages: The Teaching & Learning of African Languages

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## Abstract

The African continent is home to over a thousand languages, many of which are unwritten and most of which are underdescribed. Learners and instructors of these languages – indeed of any underdescribed language – must think and operate well beyond the methodologies and organization of the better-resourced and more-established language programs in the US.

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## 1. Introduction

The question ‘What African language should I learn?’ is a familiar one in African studies circles. The continent boasts about one third of all human languages, a total estimated to be between 1000 and 2000<sup>1</sup> unevenly distributed across the 53 African countries. Viewed from the numbers alone, Africa’s linguistic diversity is intimidating and the idea of choosing one language to study brings with it uncertainties not generally confronted by learners of many European and Asian languages. Simply stated, how does one ascertain that the African language one chooses to learn will serve one’s future needs and interests in dealings with Africa?<sup>2</sup> Consider Izola’s case:

Izola<sup>3</sup> went to Harvard planning to become a physicist. In the Spring of her freshman year her friends convinced her to join them in learning Oshikwanyama – a language spoken in the South West African nation of Namibia that in all likelihood had never been taught as a regular course anywhere in the US. In the summer, Izola went to Namibia to hone her skills in the language. In the process of learning Oshikwanyama, Izola developed an interest in refugee issues around the Great Lakes Region. Massive groups of people were forced out of Congo and Rwanda into adjoining countries of Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania after the 1994 genocide. Once back on campus Izola embarked on a year’s study of Kinyarwanda followed by a summer semester in Rwanda, the Central African Republic where the language is spoken. In her Junior year, Izola changed her major to ‘Special Concentrations’, a major requiring her to write a senior thesis. She focused on Rwandan refugees and found that one of the biggest refugee camps was in Kigoma, Tanzania, a country where Swahili is understood by the majority of people. Izola then enrolled in a Swahili class and continued learning as part of her research at the refugee camp in Kigoma. Izola even wrote portions of her thesis in Swahili. All the while, she maintained close contacts in each of the languages she had learned, adopting a nickname in each and holding conversations and exchanging emails with native speakers in Africa and African immigrants in the US. Her learning went well beyond formal instruction to residence in each of the countries where the languages were spoken. Upon graduation, she immediately embarked on learning Akan/Twi because of a great opportunity that had come her way to work in Ghana for a year. Izola has now joined the ranks of Africa’s

polyglots – a speaker of Oshikwanyama (South West Africa), Kinyarwanda (Central Africa), Kiswahili (East Africa), and Twi (West Africa). Even more, Izola is Canadian and speaks French and English as her first languages.

Izola's achievement in language learning within a short time is not unique. Sir Richard Burton (1821–1890) is representative of someone who developed an extraordinary ability of learning foreign languages.<sup>4</sup> While in France and Italy as a child, he learned modern Greek, French, Italian, Bearnais, Classical Greek, Latin, and at 21 added Gujarati, Marathi, Afghan, and Persian, when he went to work for the East India Company in Sindh, while at the same time improving his mastery of Arabic and Hindi which he had begun studying in England. As in Izola's case travel to places where the languages were spoken was critical. In addition to traveling to Asia, Latin America and Africa, Burton translated several books including *One Thousand and One Nights* from Arabic, and even wrote grammars of two Indian languages. Burton learned Somali and recorded his amazement at the Sarbeeb<sup>5</sup> – the high style of Somali literature with ardent patrons. Burton (1894) saw that the Somali took 'greatest pleasure in harmonious sounds and poetic expressions, whereas a false quantity or prosaic phrase excites their violent indignation'.<sup>6</sup>

Izola's case (and Richard Burton's) represents a character and a voice – a character that embodies an approach and a set of practices observable among the world's polyglots, and a voice that embodies a certain outlook, indeed, a philosophy, about foreign language learning. It is both that character and that voice that are the focus of our discussion in this paper. Skepticism about the existence of people who can actually learn a well resourced language, much less an obscure<sup>7</sup> one, may turn out to be a comment on the practice of teaching rather than the experience of learning. In answer to the question: 'How did Izola and Richard Burton do what they did', I respond that they *learned how to learn languages*. It is that knowledge that I seek to formalize so that whatever is intimidating about Africa's multilingualism may be seen through Izola's eyes as the opportunity for exploration and elaboration of one's cultural world.

## 2. *Learning How to Learn Languages*

A variety of affective, practical, and theoretical apparatus govern the behavior of perennial learners of languages (polyglots). Foremost is their infectious enthusiasm about languages and their uninhibited interest to learn something in every new language they encounter, be it a mere greeting – the 'teach-me-how-to-say-X' type request that native speakers often face from perfect strangers – or inquiry about the meaning of a word, phrase, or proverb. Many polyglot-inclined students will seldom take a class sitting down. Rather, they take charge, asking for new information, making suggestions on how to proceed and trying new expressions, regardless of the instructor's syllabus. For each of the three languages she learned within the Harvard African Language Program, Izola often wrote her instructor notes such as this:

Habari za Boston? I just wanted to say that I still \*really, really\* MUST take an intensive Swahili class this fall. I don't know how I could bear it without one. I got back from Tanzania about a week ago, and I miss the language very, very much.

I can prepare my own curriculum. I know what I want to learn, I have ideas for sample assignments (basically, everything I write for my thesis tutorial, I want to translate into Kiswahili.)

Izola August 30, 2006

Students who feel that they are contributing something to others appear especially motivated<sup>8</sup> and successful. Learners are motivated when they see the usefulness of what they

are learning and can put it to use to impact others.<sup>9</sup> Besides enthusiasm, perennial learners of foreign languages like Izola are characteristically incremental theorists. They take linguistic regularity seriously (that is, they seek generalizations), memorize that which they cannot predict, concentrate on meaning making rather than structural accuracy, consistently engage in self-correction, monitor their learning and transfer knowledge from familiar languages to new.

Learners often display a mix of orientations between performance and learning (Dweck and Legget 1988; Dweck 1989). Performance-oriented students (and instructors) worry more about errors than about learning. They seek intense guidance and fixed approaches to learning because these are safe and familiar. They concentrate on performing well, attaining positive judgments of linguistic competence, and avoiding assessments and challenges that will reflect them in poor light.<sup>10</sup> They hold that there are ways that language ought to be taught [only use target language, drill (language lab), memorize, reproduce forms, textbook plus audio CD, etc.]. Learning-oriented students (and tutors, coaches, instructors) take language learning to be malleable and customizable. They have learning goals and believe improvement is attainable by being persistent and seeking challenges.<sup>11</sup>

Learning-oriented people are of necessity constructivists (Piaget 1970). They actively construct a foundation for future understanding, rather than being passive recipients of someone else's construct. Unlike language tutorials where someone other than the learner determines what can be learned next – what Krashen (1985) calls 'comprehensible input plus 1' – the learner bears considerable responsibility in guiding the pace of the class. As Dwyer (1999) suggests, understanding is aided by techniques such as *intertextuality* (using text/speech already known to the learner to introduce new text/speech), *authenticity* (using materials created by fluent speakers for fluent speakers), *structural simplification* (using text rich in familiar vocabulary and structures), *structural knowledge* (enriching the declarative understanding of grammar), *coherence* (using paragraphs, stories, conversations not a list of sentences) and *context* (enriching the background to make text emerge through inference and interpretation).<sup>12</sup> Polyglots appear to be masters at applying what Dwyer recommends for instructors to provide to students.

### 3. *Application to Learning an Undocumented Language*

Learning how to learn a language, then, includes the ability to take charge of one's learning in determining the sequencing and elaboration of content. While established language programs have professional people to teach and guide the learner, students learning a language with limited or no resources must be prepared to be content designers, ardent seekers of information, perennial documenters, and keen observers facilitated by native speakers, linguists and other language professionals.

Nothing beats a good plan and a road map when learning an underdescribed or undocumented language. Good learners write down a wish-list of the communication abilities they wish to acquire – talk about oneself (self-introduction, place of residence, origins, work, chores); talk about family, friends, etc.; enquire about others [names, homes, place of origin (city, suburb, county, state, country, continent)]; talk about daily life; make simple requests and give simple commands; count (cardinals/ordinals); tell time (time of day and divisions of the day); name days of the week/months/years; interrogate others using simple sentences; give reports or make speeches on something using simple sentences; apologize, make excuses; express preferences. Doing something in the language is the key element in the list of learning activities to be carried out. Learning progresses faster if what is taught has immediate application.

A basic vocabulary is essential and student needs to have a list of a hundred verbs and about twice as many nouns. Some words are learned by context; others, thematically (including semantic classification); and still others, by peculiarities such as size (very small or very big words). Thematic vocabulary includes names and titles, names of locations (physical and temporal), household items, time and its divisions, family relations, names of professions, names of chores, names of domestic animals, names of trees, parts of the body, names of foodstuffs (vegetables, fruits and grains) etc. Harvesting vocabulary (making lists and jotting down some usages) is a must for anyone who learns an un-described or under-described language.

Conscientious attention to grammar is equally fundamental. The learner should keep a simple list of grammatical elements as well as a list of what she would like to do with the grammar. Examples include: how to identify verb roots from inflected verbs; how to use independent *personal pronouns* (I/me, you, he/she/ and their plurals) as well as correlative dependent personal pronouns (if such exist); how to use possessive pronouns ('my', 'your', 'her/his' and their plurals); how to form WH-questions (questions based on the equivalents of 'when', 'who', 'what', 'which', 'where', 'how'); how to use the verbs 'be' and 'have'; how to use the major tenses; how to form the demonstratives ('this/that' and their plurals); how to construct several types of sentences (interrogatives, declarative, imperatives, passive etc); and how to negate them. In addition, the learner needs to familiarize herself with some basic linguistic notions, grammar categories and functions (what words do alone and in company of other words) and understand what each grammar category represents. These categories must be understood in terms of their basic roots and also when they are embellished with affixes. Affixes should be noted the same way linguists observe them as derivational (change meaning of base) and inflectional (add grammatical information to the base). It is important to think of language as a system in which words go together in phrases of specific types – noun phrases, verb phrases, adjectival phrases, etc. each with its own logic.

Approaching language learning as problem solving brings the advantage of perspective. Foreign language learning in part solves the problem of ignorance of one's own language and promotes cross-cultural awareness. Many learners of foreign languages attest to the unexpected grasp of how their own language and culture works as they wrestle to learn a foreign language. On a more mundane level, when the learner is able to state what problems they can solve in the foreign language she can prioritize the exploration of content based on what she needs to do with the language. A student learning a language to work as a nurse may have a very different list of problems to solve than another student who plans to interview children soldiers or work as a minister. The nurse may be better served to learn what sorts of understanding of health related matters people have where there is no doctor, by talking to children, the social worker may need to understand how traumatized children express distress, anxiety and the like, while the preacher may be more concerned with understanding the spirituality of the people whose language he is learning. Simple things such as the ability to give or receive directions solves the problem of being lost; the ability to read/listen to simple instructions enables one to understand prescriptions, assemble things, operate machines, etc.,. Knowing numbers and counting gives one the ability to state weights and measures (such as counting victims/survivors and estimating crop yields) and also the ability to talk about the dates and times of things (expiration information, business opening and closing times etc); greetings and self-introductions make acquaintances of strangers; learning parts of the body makes it possible to speak about health issues, maladies, and care with doctors and healthcare professionals.

#### 4. Application to African languages, Especially Bantu<sup>13</sup>

Learning how to learn means developing the ear and eye of a linguist especially in field methods. A couple of examples from Swahili that are potentially of immense utility across Bantu languages can be taken from the Swahili noun class system and derivational suffixation.

The first column in Table 1 (Mugane 1999) indicates the traditional way of grouping Bantu nouns. The singular counts as one class and the plural as another for class 1 through 10. All the nouns in the language fall in one of the classes indicated. Classes 12 and 13 are missing in standard Swahili but are present in colloquial Swahili and elsewhere in Bantu. It behooves the learner to observe that all nouns beginning in a certain prefix (the underlined syllable in Table 1) have a plural beginning with a specified prefix in Bantu e.g. *mti* 'tree' / *miti* 'trees'. The second column shows the appropriate demonstrative for each of the classes. For all nouns beginning with *m-* whose plural begins with *mi-*, the demonstrative is *huu* 'this' (and the plural is *hii*). The noun demonstrative pairings have to be memorized because they are very useful in the formation of all those words in the box to the right in Table 1. Observing that the root of the question word 'which' is *-pi*, we take the second syllable (the circled part) and use it as the affix to con-

**Table 1. Swahili noun classes and concords.**

<i>Class</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>this/these</i>	
1	<u>mtu</u> 'person'	huyu	
2	<u>watu</u> 'people'	ha <b>wa</b>	
3	<u>mti</u> 'tree'	hu <b>u</b>	
4	<u>miti</u> 'trees'	hi <b>i</b>	
5	<u>tunda</u> 'fruit'	hi <b>li</b>	
6	<u>matunda</u> 'fruits'	ha <b>ya</b>	
7	<u>kiti</u> 'chair'	hi <b>ki</b>	
8	<u>viti</u> 'chairs'	hi <b>vi</b>	
9	<u>nyumba</u> 'house'	hi <b>i</b>	
10	<u>Nyumba</u> 'houses'	hi <b>zi</b>	
11	<u>ukuta</u> 'wall'	hu <b>u</b>	
12 & 13	MISSING		
14	<u>urembo</u> 'beauty'	hu <b>u</b>	
15	<u>kupika</u> 'cooking'	hu <b>ku</b>	
16	<u>mahali</u> 'location'	ha <b>pa</b>	
17	<u>mahali</u> 'location'	hu <b>ku</b>	
18	<u>mahali</u> 'location'	hu <b>mu</b>	

  

___ pi 'which' ___ ote 'all/whole' ___ o ___ ote 'any' ___ enye 'having' ___ enyewe 'itself' ___ po 'be at (specific)' ___ ko 'be at (general)' ___ mo 'be at (inside)' ___ koje? 'how is ___?' ___ a 'of'
<b>Possessive Pronouns</b> ___ angu 'my' ___ ako 'your' ___ ake 'her/his' ___ etu 'our' ___ enu 'your (plural)' ___ ao 'their'
<b>Subject &amp; object prefixes in conjugated verbs</b>



struct expressions such as mti **upi** ‘which tree’. For possessive pronouns mti **uangu** (**wangu**) ‘my tree’, and so on for all the missing prefixes in the box to the right in Table 1. The syllables with circles around them also mark the subject and object prefixes in the conjugation of Swahili verbs.

Many Bantu grammars have expansive charts with several dozen columns showing all the concords, but seldom are there any attempts made to draw descriptive generalizations underlying the entire table. Chesswas (1963) *The Essentials of Luganda* for instance represents this information in a table with 53 columns and 20 rows and most Bantu grammars provide similar charts. Impressive as they look, they are unnecessarily intimidating as many learners proceed to try to memorize the entire chart –when a descriptive generalization could suffice. Noticing large patterns makes it easier to test the generalization for applicability within the language and to adjust it when studying another language. Broadly speaking there are patterns that are clearly discernible across Bantu languages which greatly aid anyone faced by the need to learn a second Bantu language. Recognizing patterns and making descriptive generalizations allows one to check the system of another Bantu language quite easily whenever it is encountered and to note exceptions and divergences. Affixation permeates Bantu grammars. The pattern in Table 2, derived from Mugane (1999) indicates morphological alternations depending on vowel quality and whether the verb roots end with a consonant or a vowel. The table shows that when a verb root ends in a vowel we get a different suffix than when it ends in a consonant. Furthermore, the kind of vowels that appear in the root also cause variance in the morphological shape of the output suffixes. The first box says that if a verb root ends in a vowel and that vowel is **i**, **u**, or **a**, the suffix for the preposition is –li– i.e., taking *nunua* ‘buy’ the root is *nunu-* (always prune the final vowel –a and put it back after adding the affix) the output will be *nunulia* ‘buy for’. However if vowel is **o** or **e** the prepositional marking is –le– (thus *lea* ‘raise’ becomes *lelea* ‘raise for’). Note that the pattern is consistent when in fourth column for the causative forms (*zaa* ‘give birth’ becomes *zalisa* ‘cause to give birth’ *lea* ‘raise’ becomes *lelesha* ‘cause to raise’). The stative follows suit: *fua* ‘wash’ becomes *fulika* ‘washable’. The reader can check the other verb roots ending in consonants and their vowels to see that a consistent pattern holds for the rest of the table.

Beyond such generalizations, Bantu languages offer properties that are thought provoking for speakers of English. One is the paucity of adjectives. English has a large stock of adjectives whereas Bantu languages have very few (often numbering less than ten). Trying to say ‘my big fat Greek wedding’ in Bantu is quite challenging. The student must learn how Bantu speakers describe things attributively, i.e., discover the mechanisms that make up for the paucity of adjectives in Bantu. Letting students undertake this task on their own is much more important than supplying the answer.<sup>14</sup> Reference grammars are not a substitute for observation and thinking, they ought to represent a way of seeing and thinking about linguistic information establishing mappings between form and concept.

Let’s compare the learning approach sketched above to two others specifically targeted at African languages.<sup>15</sup>

The NASILP method requires a tutorial session in which a student and a conversation partner work with a textbook and a CD under the rigorous supervision of a coordinator. There is also an external examiner who personally administers the exam. NASILP taps into a desirable aspect of allowing students to rigorously apply themselves as long as they are sufficiently disciplined to accept responsibility for daily preparation using all the resources required for the task. For NASILP, language learning is skill building, and the watchword is ‘learning by doing’ where ‘doing’ is far more important than analyzing. The dilettante and the procrastinator won’t have the necessary ‘staying power.’ The lear-

Table 2. Information on how to predict Swahili prepositional, causative, and stative verb morphology.

		PREPOSITIONS for/at/on/by	CAUSATIVE “cause to”, “make to”	STATIVE “able”
If <u>verb root ends in</u> avowel & the vowel is...	i,u,a	Add -li- : nunua → <i>nunulia</i> (buy for/at/on) zuia → <i>zulilia</i> (stop for/at/on)	Add -lish- : zaa → <i>zalisha</i> (cause to give birth) lia → <i>liza</i> (cause to cry)	Add -lik- : fua → <i>fulika</i> (able to be washed) vaa → <i>valika</i> (able to be worn)
	o,e	Add -le- : toa → <i>tolea</i> (remove for/at/on) lea → <i>lelea</i> (raise for/at/on)	Add -lesh- or -sh- : toa → <i>toza</i> (cause to remove) lea → <i>lelesha</i> (cause to cry)	Add -lek- : oa → <i>oleka</i> (able to be married) ondoa → <i>ondoleka</i> (removable)
If <u>verb root ends in</u> aconsonant & has...	i,u,a	Add -i- : taka → <i>takaa</i> (want for/at/on) iba → <i>ibia</i> (steal for/at/on)	Add -ish- : uma → <i>unisha</i> (cause to bite) ita → <i>itisha</i> (cause to call)	Add -ik- : tuma → <i>tumika</i> (able to be sent) lima → <i>limika</i> (cultivable)
	o,e	Add -e- : oga → <i>ogea</i> (remove for/at/on) pona → <i>ponea</i> (heat for/at/on)	Add -esh- : enda → <i>endesha</i> (cause to go) ona → <i>onyesha</i> (cause to see)	Add -ek- : soma → <i>someka</i> (readable) penda → <i>pendeka</i> (likable)

\*Exceptions: causatives also appear as z, s, iz, ez, liz, lez in some verbs (Mugane (1999)).

ner must be strongly self-motivated and willing to make a serious commitment to daily study of the language. Self-instructional language programs are limited to skills-level learning, typically encompassing four-to-six semesters of study. NASILP programs do not incorporate the study of literature, linguistics, or 'culture' courses at the advanced undergraduate or graduate level.

The NASILP method is not suitable for learning how to learn African languages. NASILP offers a coordinator-controlled instructional method in which ultimately, it is the coordinator who selects the students, and everyone plus everything else for the tutorial – the quintessential methodology-centered approach. Only languages with textbooks and CDs can be taught and the native speaker enters the picture after the materials and only to the extent allowed by the methodology. In this system, there is no guarantee that what is drilled and practiced will actually be learned.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, learning how to learn languages cannot be accomplished by a menu consisting of one approach, methodology, and one kind of learner.

A less restrictive tutorial system for African language instruction was developed by Dwyer (2003) at Michigan State University. It consists of the following elements:

**Table 3. African Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education.**

Language	Undergraduate enrollments		Graduate enrollments			Total
	1998	2002	1998	2002	1998	2002
Afrikaans	72	13	0	0	72	13
Bambara	28	10	0	1	28	11
Chichewa	0	0	2	2	2	2
Fula	0	0	0	1	0	1
Hausa	36	38	7	2	43	40
Igbo	0	9	0	0	0	9
Kikuyu	0	0	0	2	0	2
Lingala	35	78	0	1	35	79
Luganda	9	13	0	0	9	13
Mandingo	0	1	0	0	0	1
Meru	1	0	0	0	1	0
Ndebele	7	0	0	0	7	0
Oromo	0	0	0	1	0	1
Setswana	19	10	0	0	19	10
Shona	7	2	0	2	7	4
Swahili	1200	1530	41	63	1241	1593
Swati	0	0	0	2	0	2
Twi	33	75	1	4	34	79
Wolof	43	73	0	1	43	74
Xhosa	0	34	0	0	0	34
Yoruba	64	76	5	0	69	76
Zulu	63	70	5	2	68	72
Total						
22	1630	2037	61	84	1691	2121
LCTL totals	138				17,771	25,716

Source: Elizabeth B. Welles. *Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2002*. *ADFL Bulletin*, Vol. 35, Nos. 2–3, Winter-Spring 2004.



- Participants:** Supervisor, tutor, adequate materials, Learners.  
**Learner:** Graduate student  
**Supervisor:** Linguist (African Languages)  
**Class size:** The tutorial has 1–4 learners  
**Objective:** Oral proficiency – the ability to communicate adequately in the community where the language is spoken  
**Culture:** Whatever it is that is required for successful communication besides the structure of the language.  
**Goal & Metric of evaluation:** ACTFL, procedural knowledge (knowledge how) as opposed to declarative knowledge (knowledge that).

For Dwyer (1999), language is communication in which grammar constitutes the potential to communicate (Saussure’s *Langue*) and the event is the process of communicating (Saussure’s *Parole*). In developing procedural knowledge, ‘acquisition’ rather than ‘learning’ is the term used. By ‘acquisition’ Dwyer (1999) hypothesizes that the ability to use language is built up through exposure to samples of the language and through using and reusing them. In contrast, ‘learning’ hypothesizes that language use is deductively developed by exposure to and the application of grammar rules to generate messages.<sup>17</sup> Dwyer noted acquisition as consisting of six principles: constructivism, learner centeredness, comprehensible input, the primacy of comprehension over production, the supportive role of declarative knowledge, and feedback.

Dwyer’s emphasis on learners ‘learning’, as opposed to teachers ‘teaching’ is laudable. The primacy of comprehension over production is based on the idea that comprehension precedes production at all levels of language structure. Under this model it is foolhardy to learn things outside context.<sup>18</sup> The challenge with Dwyer’s (1999) proposal is to test what constructivism, learner centeredness, comprehensible input; the primacy of comprehension over production; the supportive role of declarative knowledge and feedback mean in enabling people develop the practices of a polyglot. How does a learner keep tabs on what she knows to proceed to the next thing? Learner-centeredness, knowledge-centeredness, and assessment-centeredness can become lost when defined in terms of what programs plan for students and how instructors will act on students.

**Table 4. Total number of materials available for 8 African Languages.**

Language	Beginning– intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate/ advanced	Advanced plus	Year of earliest & latest publication	All materials
Hausa	63	43	43	40	1959 & 2006	70
Oromo	27	25	24	23	1973 & 2006	27
Swahili	190	119	120	112	1955 & 2006	218
Yoruba	59	39	41	35	1951 & 2003	88
Zulu	77	48	46	45	1950 & 2005	78
Amharic	73	58	58	56	1954 & 2006	76
Fulani	32	25	29	29	1953 & 2006	32
Twi	40	26	27	27	1945 & 2003	43

Source: <http://www.lmp.ucla.edu/index.aspx>.

### 5. *Why Learn How to Learn African Languages?*

The sheer number of languages in Africa means that no one can predict which languages students will want to learn. African language courses tend to have very limited enrollments (see the dismal numbers in Table 3) and scarce learning resources (both material and human) and are always in jeopardy. Many in the language-teaching profession (indeed most who claim to know how languages ought to be taught) judge hopeless the idea that these languages can be taught much less learned. They would suggest that we wait until we get the necessary resources – textbooks, grammars, dictionaries, qualified instructors, etc.

With a plethora of languages and dialects dotting the continent, most of which are unstudied, with no experts, no money, no reputation – why bother? Talking to Africans ought to be reason enough but many respond that Africans speak English, French, and Portuguese. (In fact, only 5–10%<sup>19</sup> actually do.) Those who harbor the hope that Africans will soon master English for instance will be discomforted by the fact that Africans are adapting European languages. For decades speakers have been Swahilizing English in Kenya, Wolofizing French in Senegal, Africanizing Portuguese in Angola, and Nigerianizing English. In other words, African urban languages are leaving standard English, French, and Portuguese to the miniscule class of elite African English, French, and Portuguese monolinguals. By the mid 1990s <4% of the people of India had any knowledge of English in spite of the massive effort to teach it in India in the preceding 200 years.<sup>20</sup> It is no different in Africa. The solution ‘let them speak English’ is delusional. True, the challenges facing learners and instructors of African languages (except perhaps Arabic) are of a radically different magnitude than those faced by learners and instructors of commonly taught languages.<sup>21</sup> But, they can be overcome by nurturing conditions which permit learners to learn how to learn languages.

#### 5.1 NUMBER OF LANGUAGES

Africa has between 1000 and 2000 languages in four distinguishable language families: Afro-Asiatic, Khoisan, Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo. Some sub-families such as the Bantu (in Niger-Congo) have a membership of several hundred languages with certain similarities.

Overwhelmed by the sheer number of languages some individuals have suggest prioritizing what languages need to be taught. Wiley and Dwyer (1980) suggest a ranking involving factors such as demographics, geographical spread, and use. Learners however do not come with such criteria in mind; they rather want to accomplish a goal, whether it be to confront Africa’s problems or to enumerate its successes. While an academic program is by necessity limited to teaching a small sample of languages, whatever language is taught ought to inculcate in the learner an approach towards learning.

#### 5.2 STUDENT DEMAND

Students learning African languages in US institutions of higher learning do so for reasons other than fulfilling foreign language requirements. Many come self-motivated seeking to do something on the continent. Some are driven by their need to rekindle communication with their kin in Africa, others by projects such as building schools, teaching, interviewing people, and doing internships. Many students cite intellectual curiosity about a continent largely ignored in the schools they have attended. Heritage learners are interested in studying the language of their immediate ancestors in Africa. Heritage learners

elevate the teaching challenge, since they vary so widely in linguistic and cultural competence. The question of teaching students at varying levels of competence is an enduring challenge in the teaching of Igbo, Yoruba, Amharic and other languages that have significant immigrant populations in the US. In short, the demands of students are many and geographically dispersed throughout Africa's 53 countries and no one can serve them all. Language learning must focus on developing in the students the capacity to venture out on their own to learn other languages on the basis of the experience of learning the initial one.

### 5.3 ENROLLMENTS

In 2004, the commonly taught languages (CLTs) Spanish, French, and German accounted for 74% of the 1,400,000 students taking foreign language courses. All the world's languages except English, French, German, and Spanish are called LCTLs. Twelve languages – American Sign Language, Arabic, Chinese, ancient and modern Greek, ancient and modern Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Portuguese, and Russian – absorb 93% of all LCTL enrollments. According to a 2002 Modern Language Association (MLA) study, there were 159 LCTLs, 147 of which enrolled an average of 175 students. When tutorials languages are added to the tally, there are about 300 LCTL languages that can be studied in US colleges and universities, with just about half taught annually.

MLA figures from 1996 showed that of the total 920,449 students that studied a language in the US, only 1756 took African languages which increased to 2121 in 2004. In sum,

African languages account for less than two-tenths of one percent (00.2%) of the academic market. Arabic dominates the scene followed distantly by Swahili whose enrollments far outpace<sup>22</sup>

Yoruba, Hausa, and Zulu.

According to Stevick (1967), from the fall of 1961 to the summer of 1966, 28 African languages were taught at the university level in the US. Swahili, Hausa, Yoruba, Amharic, Xhosa were regularly offered beyond the first year in at least one university; Tswana, Lingala, Bambara, Tamazight were offered at least once beyond the first year while Ewe, Kpelle, Loma, Maninka, Mende, Mundang, Sotho, Zulu were taught only once; and Ga and Afrikaans were projected to be taught for the first time in 1966–1967.<sup>23</sup> Two decades later there were eight languages taught in five or more institutions: Swahili (52), Hausa (15), Yoruba (9), Amharic (6), Krio (5) Shona (5), Zulu (5), and Lingala (5).<sup>24</sup>

The number of undergraduates in African language courses far surpasses that of graduate students. Table 1, from an MLA study, indicates that of the 1199 students who took Swahili in 1998 only 41 were graduate students and in 2002 only 63 of the 1483 students enrolled in Swahili were. In market terms, the undergraduate is key.<sup>25</sup>

African language programs differ extensively across the US. Except for the eleven Title VI US. National Resource Centers<sup>26</sup> supported by the Federal Government most other institutions wishing to offer African languages rely on local funds. Bokamba (2002) attempts to provide criteria for determining the best-supported programs but with few exceptions non-Title VI institutions African language programs seldom have much financial support.<sup>27</sup> Low enrollment courses are expensive to teach.

### 5.4 SHORTAGES IN LEARNING RESOURCES

Most African languages are either undescribed or underdescribed. The UCLA Language Materials Project database provides the numbers in Table 4 for the 8 or so African lan-

guages offered in the US. There were 218 items for Swahili for all levels and all audiences, Amharic yields 76, Hausa 70, Yoruba 88, and Zulu 78. However, the totals include anything and everything that could potentially be used for language learning – picture books, video, audio cultural materials combined with authentic materials including AM provider, Audio, Book collection, Brochure, Currency or Stamps, Form or certificate, Fun & Games, Maps, Periodicals, Product labels, Schedule, Sign or, Advertisement, Software, Video, Website, other graphic material, and other text material.

The reality is that language readers, references, dictionaries, grammars, phrasebooks, and textbooks are available (often dated) for about a dozen languages and non-existent for most of the remaining (literally hundreds) sub-Saharan African languages. For most African languages, the most comprehensive grammars remain those written over a century ago by European missionaries and amateur linguists and often reflect colonial representations of Africans. Furthermore, these older textbooks are geared towards teaching native speakers their language and require supplementary materials if used in the US.

As that time only a handful of linguists have been trying to write new comprehensive grammars of African languages.<sup>28</sup> Counting paper presentations at both the Annual Conference on African Linguistics and the African Language Teachers Association (ALTA) in the last few years, it appears that there are only about 50 linguists working full time on African languages in the US.

Another option in learning an African language is to locate a native speaker of the language. According to US Census Bureau there were about 640,000 African immigrants in the US in the year 2000, concentrated in Washington DC, New York, Atlanta, Minneapolis, Greater Los Angeles, Boston, Houston, Chicago, Dallas, and Philadelphia. This population accounts for two-tenths of one percent of the total US population, so it is extremely difficult to find an educated native speaker for the vast majority of African languages outside major metropolitan areas.

## 5.5 PRIORITIZING THE TEACHING OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES

As noted above, Wiley and Dwyer (1980) propose prioritizing African languages into groups of four based on number of speakers, media, archives, medium of instruction, strategic importance. According to one of the latest version (Wiley 2004), there are 32 in Group A (highest priority), 27 in Group B (second priority), 31 in Group C (third priority) and all the rest in Group D (lowest priority). The placement of a language is determined by the following criteria:

1. How many people speak the language?
2. What is the national status of a language? Is the language a 'national language' or multinational, i.e., the primary language or *lingua franca* for a nation or a region?
3. What is the current usage of the language in each particular society? Is the language used widely in educational institutions, broadcast and/or print media, markets and neighborhoods, government agencies, and literatures of the peoples?
4. What is the importance of the language for scholars working in archives? Are large amounts of archival materials in that language important for various disciplines and other users?
5. How important is the language in politics, society, and culture of the country? Is the language important because of its usage or significance politically, culturally, and socially?

6. How important is the language for broad US national interests? Is the language important for US national interests such as for scholarly research and use by business, media, and government programs of economic assistance, security affairs, and foreign policy? Wiley (2004:11–12)

The four groups (A,B,C,D) not only recommend what new African language programs universities should consider but also ‘suggest the relative significance of these languages in so far as language teaching and materials development are concerned’ (Wiley and Dwyer 1980:6).

The assumptions behind such prioritizing run counter to how Americans have studied languages in the last century. First, the approach is top-down and based on the assumption that students will dutifully learn whatever African language is offered. If this is true, why have Americans not warmed up to the idea of learning Hausa, a West African language taught at various NRCs since the very beginning? One is also hard pressed to explain why Pulaar (also known as Ffulde, Fula, Fulani), the most widely distributed language on the continent is unavailable except at a very small number of places.<sup>29</sup> Egalitarian as the criteria sound they only capture a small group of language learners and appear unconcerned with the specific needs of individuals interested in studying African languages. Moreover, the African languages offered by Title VI US National Resource Centers have the singular aim of supporting the research needs of graduate students, faculty, the government and other users from the US.<sup>30</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Izola’s experience tells us that learning is, in part, acquiring for oneself an understanding of principles that enable one to venture out of the learning environment, to sustain and expand the knowledge acquired there.<sup>31</sup> Once taught Oshikwanyama, Izola went on to learn Kinyarwanda and Swahili transferring insights and practices acquired from one language to the next.

Returning to the question which inspired this paper, ‘what African language should I learn?’ my answer is that it doesn’t matter; any will do. The critical consideration is developing the ability to take charge of learning, as Izola did. Izola learned three Bantu languages, but wound up in Ghana, as far away in Africa as one can get from Bantu languages. Yet she rose to the challenge, because she had mastered a way to approach language learning. African Language Programs must seek to free students to be Izolas, to learn beyond specific languages and courses of instruction. Students must be trained in disciplinary ways rather merely imitating methods and organization of the better-resourced and more-established language programs.

Current proposals about language teaching and learning do not rise to the challenges presented by sub-Saharan African languages (and indeed many non-western languages) nor the accomplishments of students. No amount of planning and prioritizing will work without accounting for the variability of student demands. The complex combination of student interests, needs, and background can neither be anticipated nor controlled. Despite miniscule offerings and a virtual lack of institutional support nationwide (except at a handful of places), African languages have had an impact on the disciplines and inspired whole areas of study. In these days of internationalizing the curriculum, the Izolas and Richard Burtons of the world compel us to take a fresh look at the polyglot.

### Short Biography

Professor John M. Mugane, a linguist specializing in African languages. He works mainly in Bantu languages and linguistics and has authored several papers on Bantu morphology and syntax, language teaching and learning, Computer Assisted language learning, Instructional technology, African languages in the diaspora, and linguistic human rights. His books include *A Paradigmatic Grammar of Gikuyu*, *Tujifunze Kiswahili 'Let's Learn Swahili'*, *Linguistic Typology and Representation of African Languages*, and *African Languages and Linguistics in Broad Perspective*. Current work includes writing a book entitled *The Story of Swahili* by the Ohio University Press, research on linguistics and psychiatry, and editing the W.E.B. Du Bois *Series of African Language Grammars*. Mugane is a former President of the African Language Teachers Association. He earned his Ph.D in Linguistics at the University of Arizona. Before joining Harvard, Mugane was an Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics at Ohio University, Athens, Ohio.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Gunnemark (1991:102) for instance says there are at least 1200 and probably more than 1500 languages in Africa. Krauss (1992:5) claims there are 1900 and *Ethnologue* puts the number at 2111 or 30% of the world's languages.

<sup>2</sup> According to Wiley and Dwyer (1980:5) '[t]he typical African pattern is one of numerous languages per nation, with no one language clearly dominant either in numbers of speakers or in the sociopolitical power of its speakers'.

<sup>3</sup> A nickname meaning 'calmness' in Nguni languages.

<sup>4</sup> Appiah (2006:2–5)

<sup>5</sup> See *Sarbeeb: The Art of Oblique Communication in Somali Culture* by Samatar (1997)

<sup>6</sup> Burton (1894:82)

<sup>7</sup> Obscure because they have no orthography, little or nothing available in written or recorded form and very few speakers available in the US

<sup>8</sup> Schwartz et al. 1999

<sup>9</sup> McCombs 1996

<sup>10</sup> How People Learn, p.102

<sup>11</sup> How People Learn, p.102

<sup>12</sup> Dwyer (1999:120–122)

<sup>13</sup> Bantu speaking people are indigenous to 27 African countries: Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mayotte, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. About 240 million people (of Africa's 750 million people) speak Bantu languages as their mother tongue meaning that one out of every three Africans is Bantu speaking. ((Nurse and Philipson 2003:1)

<sup>14</sup> In a general comment to the Series Editor and for the authors of the *Learners Reference Grammar Series* produced by the National African Language Resource Center, John Hutchison a veteran African language professor and leading practitioner at Boston University sent strong reservations about a *Bamanankan Learners' Reference Grammar* about to be published. He offered that:.....the priority should be on showing the richness and the wealth of resources that an African language has. In reviewing the English language-driven template of the first draft of the *Bamanankan Learners' Reference Grammar*, I had the feeling throughout the volume that the English grammar points were dictating the content of the *Bamanankan* (BK) grammar points – so that the authors were describing something like the literal BK equivalents of the English structures in question at times, rather than tapping into the richness of BK and revealing its resources. In my opinion this is a betrayal of the African language in question. *Hutchison (Boston University, unpublished ms). Bamanankan 'Learners' Reference Grammar: General comment for the Series Editor and for the authors.'* According to Hutchison his comments were ignored. These English-centric grammars do little of use in helping the learner learn how to learn languages and are a kind of linguistic malpractice. They subvert the process by which a student comes to appreciate the beauty of English/French/Portuguese as they discover the workings of the target language.

<sup>15</sup> <http://clp.arizona.edu/nasilp/compon.htm>. See also Alexander Dunkel, Scott Brill, & Bryan Kohl the impact of self-instructional technology on language learning: a view of NASILP in ....*Impact of Self-Instructional Technology*.

<sup>16</sup> Leaver and Willis (2004:7)



<sup>17</sup> Dwyer (1999:118)

<sup>18</sup> Moshi (1994) views content and context as interdependent.

<sup>19</sup> For most places the figures seem indicate that 90% of African speak only African languages (Bernd 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:232–233)

<sup>20</sup> Skutnabb-Kangas 2000:232; See also Pattenayak 1970:7.

<sup>21</sup> Commonly taught languages CTL refers to the elite languages of the American Academy – English, Spanish, French, German and a few others which have traditionally been a substantially integrated into the Humanities and the Social Sciences. The acronym Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTL) puts all other languages in one class but it should be noted that since the label LCTL is based on frequency, the term is hardly informative or useful. There must be at least three kinds of LCTL: frequently offered LCTL; less-frequently taught LCTL; to rare/hardly, –ever/seldom taught LCTL. Even within each kind of LCTLs there are questions that remain – what category would a language that has been taught only once or twice for a semester fall under? Most languages of Africa and other continents fall under the never-taught languages – NTL.

<sup>22</sup> Dwyer (1999:1) Interestingly, though African languages enrollments constitute of two-tenths of one percent of all students taking a foreign language in the US, there were at least 238 US PhD theses on African languages in the half century between 1933 and 1987. About one third (79) of the theses were on 6 major indigenous languages: Swahili (26), Hausa (19), Yoruba (11), Amharic (9), Igbo (7), and Mandingo (7). (Clements 1989, p. 12–14) Added to these are the large number of Africa-related theses and dissertations in disciplines from accountancy to zoology. The University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign) counts 143 entries for the period 1921–1974 which more than doubled to a total of 307 between 1974 and 1988. (<http://www.afist.uiuc.edu/Library/Diss1921-88.html>)

<sup>23</sup> Stevick (1967:18)

<sup>24</sup> Clements (1989:12–14). From the 1960s to the present Indiana University, Michigan State, Ohio University, UCLA, Stanford, and Wisconsin have been among the universities teaching African languages with Swahili remaining the most widely taught African language in the US.

<sup>25</sup> In spite of this reality, graduate students are the main beneficiaries of the Federally funded African National Resource Centers (NRCs). Furthermore, the Federal Government offers the Foreign Language and Area Studies fellowships to graduate students interested in learning an African language for research purposes.

<sup>26</sup> These include: Boston University, Indiana University – Bloomington, Michigan State University, Ohio University, U.C. – Berkeley and Stanford, U.C.L.A., University of Florida, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, University of Pennsylvania, University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Yale. <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/iegps/nrcflas-africamideast.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Harvard University is a notable exception. The Harvard African Language Program offers more than a dozen African language courses every semester, all fully funded locally; furthermore, all African languages offered fulfill all university foreign language requirements.

<sup>28</sup> At Harvard, there is the recently established *W.E.B. Du Bois Series of African Language Grammars*, edited by John M. Mugane; at Stanford, there is the *Monographs in African Languages* series edited by Will Leben & Larry Hyman.

<sup>29</sup> According to Wiley (2004:1), in 2004, the CARLA LCTL database indicates that 106 higher education institutions offer Kiswahili (54 of them annually the rest on demand, through study abroad, in tutorials etc.) while 32 institutions claim to be offering Yoruba, (17 of them annually), 16 offer Wolof (nine annually), 16 Hausa (eight annually), and 15 teach Zulu (eight of them annually).

<sup>30</sup> Wiley (2004:7)

<sup>31</sup> National Research Council (2000:136) refers to this as an understanding of the disciplines.

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