



THE CONCEPTS OF DISCERNED and DESIGNED LANGUAGES and THEIR RELEVANCE FOR AFRICA

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STRUCTURE

- Intro
- Roads: a metaphor for looking at languages
- Discerned vs designed?
- Languages or Languoids?
- Relevance for Africa?
- Relevance for research?



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INTRODUCTION

- Self-funded PhD student at LUCL / ASCL
- Idea: current theoretical debate on language use in Africa is stuck
- What I will present today is a contribution towards moving the theoretical debate a step further
- Watch out for my thesis:

**Language, Education and Identity
in Africa**

A WAY OF LOOKING AT LANGUAGES: THE ROAD METAPHOR



You can think of languages as of roads, made by people as they navigate their world.

Languages as dynamic, people-owned, created and re-created in time-tried practices.

Language as 'something people do'.

THESE ARE ROADS AS WELL:

You can also think of languages this way:

Language:

- part of a country's strategic infrastructure;
- built up by a conscious government policy;
- requires investment and maintenance;
- protected by regulation;
- contested and debated.



THE STATUS OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES:

- Infrastructure is neglected;
- little investment and maintenance;
- no strong government policy;
- not protected by regulation;
- little attention in public debate.



A WAY OF LOOKING AT LANGUAGES: DISCERNED VS DESIGNED (1)

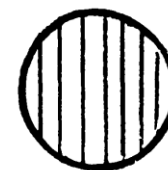
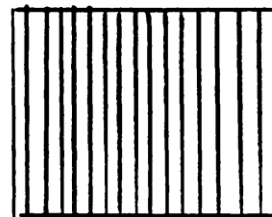
- Kloss (1967): '*Abstand*' and '*Ausbau*' languages
- '*Abstand*': *linguistic* concept: languages separated from one another on the basis of mutual intelligibility
- '*Ausbau*': *sociological* concept: languages that have been shaped and standardized as vehicles of literary and scientific expression.
 - Sibayan (1999): intellectualized languages

A WAY OF LOOKING AT LANGUAGES: DISCERNED VS DESIGNED (2)

Example given by Kloss:

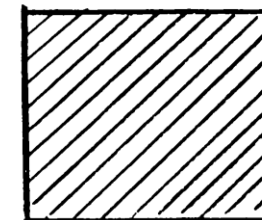
One 'Ausbau' language ->

spoken
High
German



Standard written
High German

Low Saxon



two 'Abstand' languages

Some level of *formal* learning is *always* needed to learn an 'Ausbau' language – no matter what your L1 is!

A WAY OF LOOKING AT LANGUAGES: DISCERNED VS DESIGNED (3)

- Discerned (*Abstand*): the social act of *discerning* – pronouncing a speech register to be a language
 - Criteria used by the Ethnologue for discerning:
 - Mutual intelligibility – but there is no objective way of establishing that (Gooskens, 2013) - it itself an ideological concept (Rajagopalan, 2010)
 - Common literature? Then one language, even if there is no mutual intelligibility
 - Different 'identities'? Then different languages, even with mutual intelligibility
- Designed (*Ausbau*): the process of standardizing and institutionalizing certain languages
 - Discerned is not purely linguistic: has a bit of sociology in it
 - Designed is not purely sociological: has a bit of linguistics in it

A WAY OF LOOKING AT LANGUAGES: DISCERNED VS DESIGNED (4)

- The ethnologue discerns 15 German-like languages spoken in Germany:
 - Alemannic
 - Bavarian
 - Franconian (2)
 - German
 - Limburgish
 - Luxembourgish
 - Plautdietsch
 - Ripuarian
 - Saxon (3)
 - Swabian
 - Westphalien
 - Yiddisch
- Speakers of all these 15 *discerned* languages use standard High German as their common *designed* language. All have to **learn** standard High German in school.
- Could such a thing be possible in Africa as well?

THE PROBLEM WITH LANGUOIDS

- Pennycook, Lüpke, Makoni (?) others: object to seeing languages as ‘bounded, countable objects’; they focus on languages *as spoken*
- This has value for *discerned* languages, but it **hides sight** of the (potential) role of (African) *designed* languages

THE PENNYCOOK SCHOOL...

- Portrays Africans as living their natural lives in some kind of reserve, and accepts the policy context
- leads to an exclusive focus on *documentation* of language as spoken
- is in a certain way *static*: although speech patterns change all the time, the basic language ecology doesn't
- overlooks the role of language policy and – planning, thus limiting African agency

The concepts of discerned and designed languages help to bring these issues into focus.

IF YOU ONLY LOOK AT LANGUAGES THIS WAY...



THIS IS WHAT YOU GET...

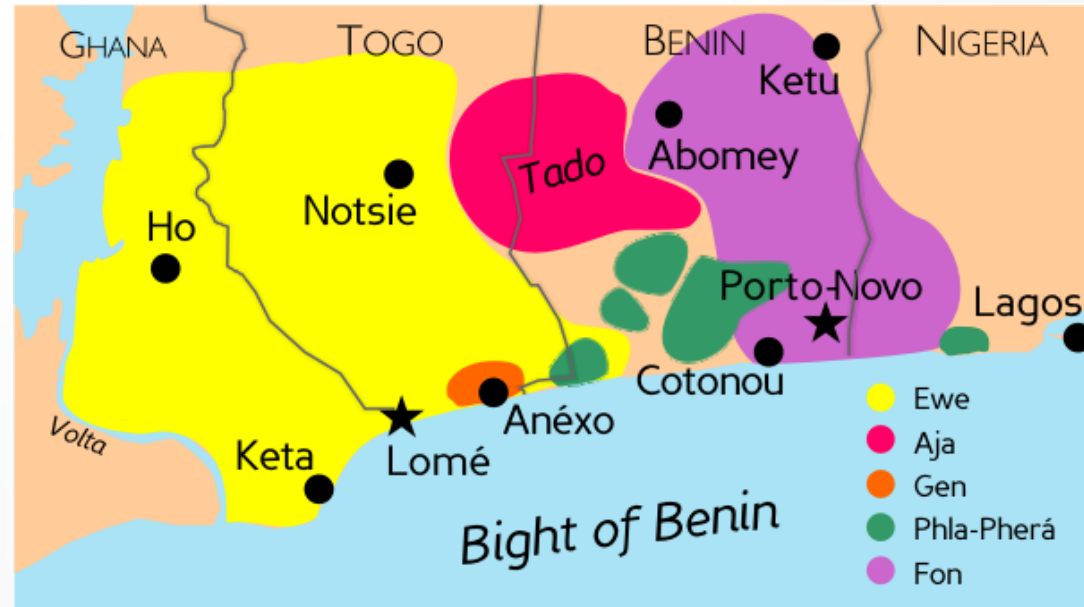


DISCERNED VS DESIGNED: WHAT WE CAN NOW SEE

- African Union: 'all' languages spoken in Africa recognized as official languages
- Effect: all African languages are disempowered
- Saying all (2000+) discerned languages should be treated the same only serves to strengthen the position of the former colonial languages (De Swaan, 2004)
- Would what is possible in Germany (15 discerned -> 1 designed) be possible in Africa as well?

EXAMPLE (1): GBE LANGUAGES

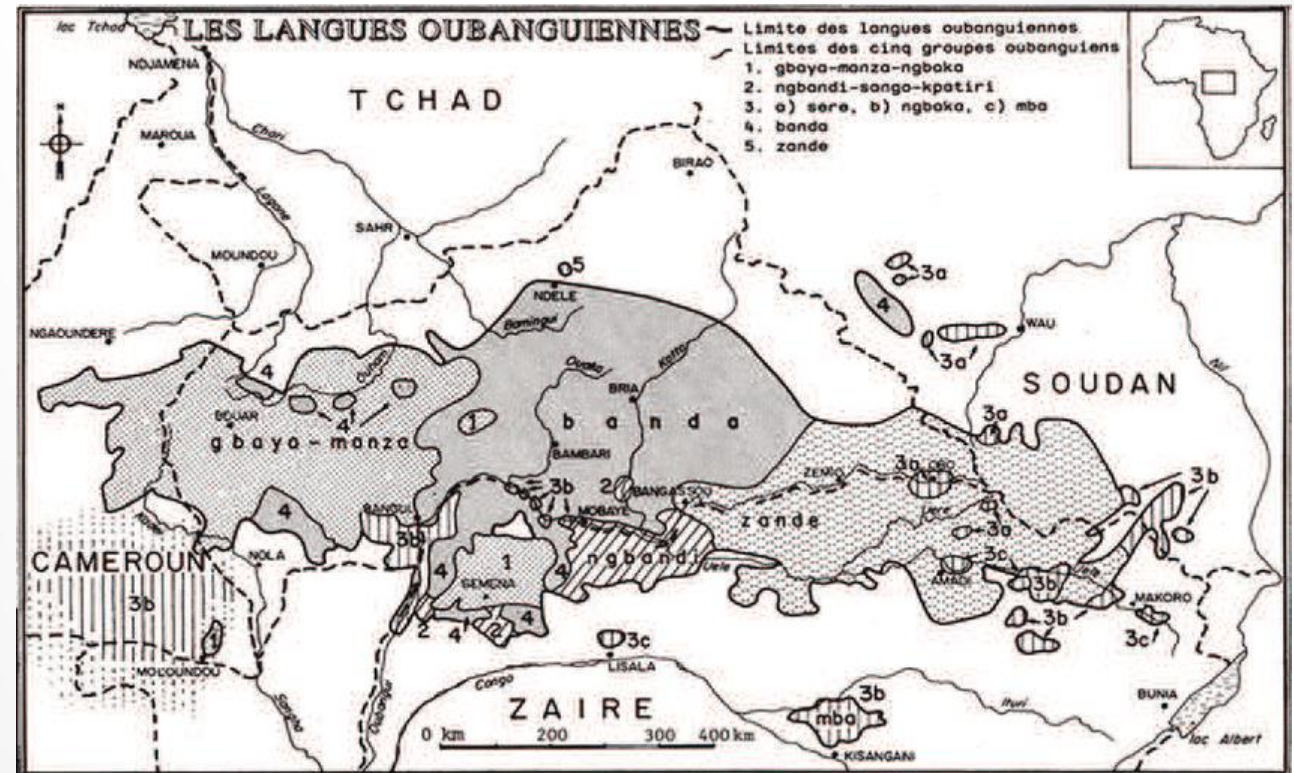
- Seen as a dialect continuum
- Close relationship
- Around 8 million speakers



Could a 'standard Gbe' be designed just like standard German?

EXAMPLE (2): UBANGIAN LANGUAGES (CAR)

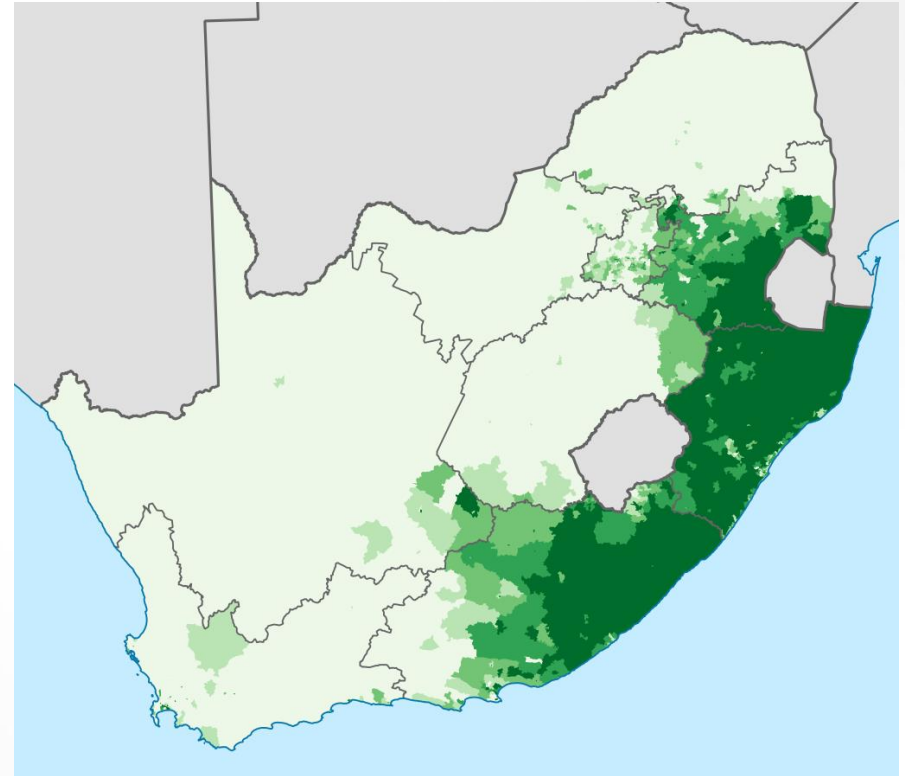
- Separate language family?
- Close relationship
- Around 3 million speakers



Sango is already the *lingua franca* in the region. Could it become a designed language?

EXAMPLE (3): NGUNI LANGUAGES

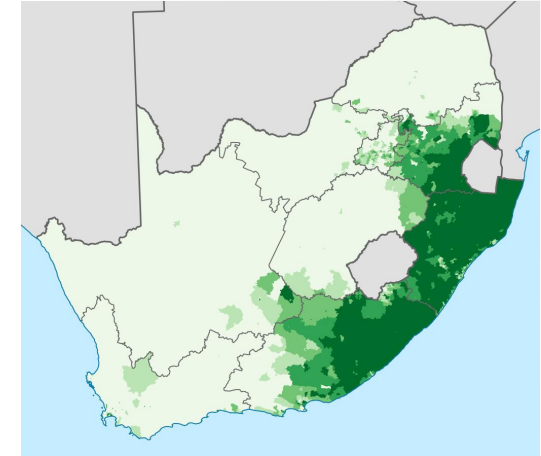
- Seen as a dialect continuum
- Close relationship
- Includes Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, Ndebele
- Over 28 million speakers



Could a 'standard Nguni' be designed just like standard German? (Alexander)

SOUTH AFRICAN LANGUAGES

- My theoretical framework shows that (for example) Afrikaans and Zulu could serve as the two official languages
- Four (Afrikaans, English, Nguni, Sotho-Tswana) (Alexander) is also thinkable
- This would be to the great advantage of the majority of South Africans: would make their languages more important and would make learning easier for more people
- Using 11 official languages only leads to English dominance



FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR RATIONAL DESIGNED LANGUAGE CHOICES:

1. Develop a **limited number** of designed languages for education.
2. Designed languages should be **easy to learn** for as many speakers of discerned languages as possible.
3. Strive for **inclusivity**: so that all have to exert a relatively low but relatively equal effort to learn them.
4. Make use of **bilingualism** as a resource.
5. Build incentives for **linguistic collaboration** among related communities.

RELEVANCE FOR RESEARCH

- Language documentation is not the only way forward for (socio-)linguistic research
- Other questions:
 - *If* a transition towards designed language use in Africa is desirable, which combinations of discerned and designed languages can work?
 - What policies are needed to move towards use of designed African languages?
 - *How* should a transition be planned? What phases would be needed?
 - Etc etc...

CONCLUSIONS (1)

- Many have argued for increased use of African languages (Alexander, Bamgbose, Brock-Utne, Chumbow, Djité, Erastus, Heugh, Ouane/Glanz, Qorro, Prah, Skattum, Skuttnab- Kangas, Wolff) – but nothing is happening
- Current theory does not help us understand current language ecologies in Africa
- Concepts of discerned and designed languages helps us re-focus on the importance of policy

CONCLUSIONS (2)

- Concepts also open our eyes to the possibility of using *one* designed (standardized) language to serve *several* discerned languages
- (Note: a designed language is not necessarily *mutually intelligible* with all languages it serves!)
- Sound principles and sound policies will be needed
- Opens the road to a vast new research agenda

DO YOU LIKE THIS?

Consider joining the Edinburg Circle on the Promotion of African Languages: <http://ecpal.home.blog>



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