Introduction: Language and Development

Rose Marie BECK

University of Leipzig

The present volume on "language and development" is a contribution to the interdisciplinary field of Development Communication, that is, "the study of social change brought about by the application of communication research, theory, and technologies to bring about development" (Rogers & Hart 2002: 9). As is symptomatic for an interdisciplinary field, both notions of "communication" as well as "development" vary broadly, depending on the "family" of theories, methodologies, strategies and approaches (Waisbord 2001) dominant in this field. Accordingly the texts collected in this volume, however varied their empirical background and argumentative orientation, share at least three fundamental commonalities that place them firmly in this field:

1. A mostly implicit but nevertheless critical distance towards diffusionist and modernist development theories which finds expression in the focus on a bottom-up, participatory perspective, setting the actors in development processes center stage.

2. A functional understanding of communication in that interventions or instances of development communication aim at improving the economic, social and political situation of people in the so-called "Global South", in this case, Africa. At the same time there is an awareness of difference and distance between the (assumed) sources of aims, messages and goals inherent in this kind of functional perspective, and of the complex interplay between and power relations amongst the actors involved in communicative actions of this kind that can result in diverse, highly context dependent interpretative processes.

3. A focus on linguistic processes which form the empirical and/or theoretical backdrop of the articles of this volume, which show that language is in non-trivial and not yet recognized ways a seriously underestimated aspect of development research and practice:

> The field of development communication has become an important branch of development research in recent years. Its primary focus has been on social and technological aspects of communication (Melkote/Steeves et al. 2001), to the almost total neglect of linguistic aspects. The relative emptyness of the vast field of potential common interest shared by linguists and development researchers is evidence of a strategic gap in interdisciplinary dialogue and cooperation (Bearth 2005).

This is still very true. And of course it takes much longer than a few years for ideas to take hold within a discipline, in this case, (socio)linguistics. The driving force with regard to establishing language as an academically valid aspect in development studies, however, does not come from linguistics, but from practical problems in the field and applied interdisciplinary research which have long recognized that there is "something" which is in need of explanation or treatment beyond obvious and/or simplistic notions of "language" or "development". Increasingly, language and its many "relatives" – communication, interaction, linguistics, sociolinguistics, etc. – receive attention in the field of development studies.

An interesting example, where language on the face of it only plays a very marginal role, but is nevertheless drawn upon to explain certain processes, can be found with Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo's remarkable and highly praised broadly inter-disciplinary volume on "Poor Economics" (Banerjee & Duflo 2011). Its index does not contain neither the entries "language" nor "communication". The latter term can-not be found at all in their book, with "language" yielding four answers on the internet-preview version.[1] It is a particular idea of language that is picked up by these authors, namely that of an abstract structure, a 'thing' to be talked about. At one point in their book, Banerjee & Duflo summarise a research project from the early 1990s which was meant to evaluate policy intervention in a developing country.[2] The researcher handed out officially approved textbook in twenty-five randomly chosen schools in Western Kenya in order to find out their input on students' performances:

> The results were disappointing. There was no difference in the average test scores of students who received textbooks and those who did not. However, […] the children who were intitially doing very well […] made marked improvement in the schools where textbooks were given out. […] Kenya's language of education is English, and the textbooks were, naturally, in English. But for most children, English is only the third language (after their local language and Swahili, Kenya's language), and they speak it very poorly. Textbooks in English were never going to be very useful for the majority of children (Banerjee & Duflo 2011: 94f.).

This example serves the authors in a line of others to argue that in the so called Global South "most school systems are both unfair and wasteful" (ibid.: 95), namely that it is the expectation of teachers, parents, pupils (and politicians) alike that chil-dren of the rich are treated better and supported more, even if they show mediocre talent, while the children of the poor go to schools where they are signalled from

---

[1]   http://www.worldcat.org/title/poor-economics-a-radical-rethinking-of-the-way-to-fight-global-poverty/oclc/317925786/viewport (consulted 17 march 2012).

[2] Cited in Banerjee & Duflo (2011: 284, fn 35) as Paul Glewwe, Michael Kremer & Sylvie Moulin, "Textbooks and Test Scores: Evidence from a Prospective Evaluation in Kenya", BREAD Work-ing Paper (2000).

very early on that they are not wanted and unless they show extraordinary talent are supposed to bear such mistreatment out in silence and forbearance.

These – and similar – findings can be extensively corrobated by sociolinguistic literature (Kioko & Muthwii 2001, Trudell 2007). Language and education has long been a topic intensively debated in Africanist linguistics with a large body of literature.[3] However, this field is sometimes perceived to be too narrowly focused on "language only". An example in case can be taken from Paulin G. Djité's introduction to his new book: "Language is at the nexus of marginalisation and vulnerability. Only through language can we hope to reduce poverty in real terms" (Djité 2011: ix).

Of course, his perspective broadens as he writes on. However, there is a tendency in (socio)linguistics to overemphasize its role while having undercomplex notions of social, cultural, political and economic processes accompanying it.[4] In fact, the wording "accompany" is already a problem: Does language accompany, for example, politics, or does politics accompany language? Intuitively the answer is easy: both and neither. It is clear that language is part of sedimented knowledge of a society and a resource for language practice as social action (Beck 2011). But in an effort to clear sociolinguistic's reputation as prone to undertheorize social, cultural, political and economic contexts of language (Cameron 1990), the debate regarding a balanced perspective on the relationship between "language" and "society" is still on (e.g. Blommaert & Rampton 2011, Blommaert & Backus 2012, Otsuji & Pennycook 2010, Makoni & Pennycook 2007, Makoni & Makoni 2010; see also the exchange between Makoni 2012 and Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 2012). The task at hand is a double one: a reflexive stance toward the disciplinary construction of knowledge and the construction of disciplinary knowledge (Gal & Irvine 1995), as well as the empirical foundation and theoretical integration of a holistic perspective about "the world".

The papers collected here, as mentioned above, can be contextualised within the field of development communication, but they were produced in the surrounds – as part of the project's output or for conferences and workshops organized by the editor of this volume – of the research project "Language, Gender, and Sustainability", Lagsus, which was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation in the program „Key Issues of the Humanities" from 2003 to 2007.[5] Lagsus set out from a diagnose of a lack of linguis-

---

[3] For more recent overviews on language and education in Africa see Phillipson 2000, Owino 2002, Brock-Utne & Hopson 2005, Brock-Utne & Skattum 2009, Djité 2008.

[4] For example in a comment in a student's paper at the Institute of African Studies, University of Leipzig: „Tendenziell scheint mir im Bereich der Soziolinguistik die Bedeutung und der Einfluss von Sprache deutlich höher eingeschätzt zu werden als im Bereich der Politikwissenschaft, was sich auch am Korpus der Literatur zu diesem Schwerpunkt abzeichnet" (Meyer 2011: 3).

[5] see www.lagsus.de for further project relevant information.

tically informed knowledge about development processes, postulating not only the existence, but also the relevance of the interaction between linguistic and social/developmental processes. After all, it is with and through language and its uses that we constitute social reality, and consequently, development as a special context can be looked at and analysed through the lense of linguistic processes. Of importance then was the identification of communication gaps (Bearth 2009) between the actors involved in development practice. These gaps can be understood to pertain to inequalities and differences of various kinds which are enacted linguistically. In a nutshell these are social inequalities that play out as linguistic inequalities, each following from the other, but also interacting. Relevantly these communicative gaps are hidden from sight for both sides of the power relations and thus tend to reproduce unnoticedly:

- unbalanced power relations which restrict access to the definition of communicative roles between the actors,

- the masking and suppression of differences for instance on the conceptual levels including the possibilities of unrecognized epistemic transfers,

- unnoticed differences in sense making routines, such as the use of presuppositions, inferencing and argumentation in interactive situations.

It is with the recognition of such processes, so Lagsus argued, that a prerequisite to sustainable development can be achieved, namely "communicative sustainability", that is "defined in the first place as auto-propagation of an exogenous innovative message in the target community, independently of external stimuli" (Bearth 2007). This volume, as part of the scientific results of the research project, addresses two aspects of Lagsus' work, namely, debates that address the topic of linguistic sustainability and its theoretical consequences on one hand (Bearth, Webb), methodological consequences and the empirical yields possible from the subsequent opening of perspective on the other (Boecker, Eck, Sieveking, Vé Kouadio, Baya).

Thomas Bearth's text can be seen as the so far most concise contribution to and from Lagsus' theory building. Fundamental to his notion of "communicative sustainability" is the conviction regarding communities' internal capacities to solve the problems encountered in African contemporary societies,[6] one of the driving forces to systematically include local interpretations of language and language use. His perspective focuses on the transition process from exogeneous to indigeneous messages, not only

---

[6] Interestingly, this conviction is not to be taken for granted. Recently Elísio Macamo stated as one of the currently most interesting (research) questions why Africans do not find *themselves* the solutions to their problems (Bonn, 12 March 2012).

a prerequisite to processes of change (or development) but part of these processes altogether. Transition processes seem to be considered successful if they manage to create coherence (of action, actors, knowledge, etc.) across the inside/outside divide. The most important obstacle against this transition process, and thus detrimental to development is the success of the "dominant language bias" and its structural consequences. According to Bearth, this colonially inherited preference of dominant (and often ex-colonial) languages versus non-dominant languages defines Africa's existence in the global context. On the surface the problem seems to be that because of the low relevance of linguistic and communicative processes in creating coherence across social and cultural borders, there is little attention paid to the fact that coherence is, at best, threatened or not created at all, despite efforts around various kinds of translation. However, since language and communication are the most prominent modes of interaction in this context, the creation of coherence is closely tied to linguistic and interactional processes. It is not language or communication per se that is the problem, but the fact that in the transition the reproduction of the order of knowledge of the exogeneous (in this case internationally funded) message is not taken into account but taken for granted. What is reproduced then is an order of power(lessness), of loss of control over processes of change, which Bearth interprets in terms of control over meaning making and inference.

Vic N. Webb picks up the idea of linguistic sustainability, as suggested by Bearth, but posits that under the current condition of socio/linguistic marginalization, African languages and speech communities do not have the capacity for linguistic sustainability, the linguistic character of African languages itself being an obstacle. Language planning, therefore, is one instrument that can support African languages in their development so that they can be effectively used for social, political and economic development. In his discussion, Webb focuses on the interrelationships between power and marginalisation and what the linguistic consequences are: the devaluation of languages and negative social meanings attached to them which lead to restricted usages in modern African states – not only in the context of development, but also in everyday talk. From such functional restrictions linguistic restrictions follow, such as limitations in the lexicon, a lack of standard language including the ideology of standard and knowledge of it. Understanding language planning as a top-down as well as bottom-up process Webb suggests a number of tasks that can and must be, despite very depressing results across Africa, tackled: apart from technical corpus planning, political advocacy with all stakeholders including decision-makers as well as speakers, the most important task will be to interdisciplinarily research social and cultural processes involved in changes of language attitudes and values attached to languages, so as to understand what could turn a devalued language into,

at least, a socially broadly accepted language. In fact, we know very little about such processes as yet (but see, e.g., Hill 2010).

An important tenet of the linguistic perspective on development is a focus on local language sense making practices, local action and its consequences, in and through which control of meaning making and inferencing takes place. It entails, on the empirical level, the focalisation of the perspective of naturally occurring events, in the terms of the speakers themselves. This is exemplified in various ways in the more empirically oriented studies in this volume. *Joseph Baya*, having taken on, as part of his research assignment in Lagsus in a context from which the institutional development had vanished as a consequence of the political and military crisis, the role of a substitute agricultural extension officer, using the method of reflexive action research; presents a case study about the initiation and implementation of micro projects in the Tura region in the West of the Ivory Coast. His is a lucid example showing that the close monitoring of transition processes with regard to linguistic, epistemological and power-related aspects from the view of the recipients leads to an autonomy of knowledge and fosters ownership,as well as "true" learning processes, and can be seen, in general as an important antidote to the "other" side of communicative sustainability, namely communicative dependency.

An other offshoot of Lagsus' empirical orientation is the article by *Lydie Vé Kouadio*. She gives a detailed account of the history and discussions evolving around managerial difficulties of a tiny community development project in the rural Tura region of the Ivory Coast that ownes a palm oil huller. Using discourse analytical methods she shows that the gendered distribution of decision making, right to ownership of the huller, and the right to speak in public (or their denial) come under pressure under the conditions of conflicting interests between the conservative trends of "tradition" and the necessities of money-driven project managing .

A similar controversy between "tradition" and "modernity" is described by *Nadine Sieveking* in her case study about contemporary Senegalese women activists' discourses on "gender equality" and "women's rights", two global development concepts. Her focus, however, is more on the ways through which these notions are included by the activists in their discursive activities and how in doing so voice and vision are given to diverging opinions and meanings about development. The discourses of women thus are seen as indispensable for the translation of globalised concepts into the language of everyday social, cultural and religious practices.

Bernadette Boecker is concerned with the micro-analytical reconstruction of the interactional management of a communicative crisis in a small association in a Herero speaking community in rural Namibia. In its task to administer its water source, a

bore hole with a diesel pump, this association has not only to learn how to deal with technical issues (such as the calculation of fees, bookkeeping, payment morale, see Beck 2011), but also with such seemingly irrelevant tasks as resolving communicative problems evolving from various sources, from personal predilections to the distribution of resources, etc. Boecker is able to demonstrate the importance and relevance of such interactional problem solving mechanisms.

Finally, there is *Clarissa Eck*'s detailed conversation analytical treatment of the organization of talk in a Kenyan tyre factory (Sameer Africa). She analyses the organization of talk between workers in different hierarchical positions in the firm working together in the production section focusing on those parts where interactional dynamics as social dynamics become most prominent, namely openings and closings of conversations and the transitions to and from the main body of talk. In doing so she presents not only one of the very few conversation analyses that have an African language as its data base. She is also able to show that and how the participants of the conversations in and through talk manage to reconcile their own goals with those of the company.

The research presented here, with Lagsus at its core, entails a shift of perspective which moves into focus praxeological aspects of language. Taking as a starting point the routinized configurations of knowledge, action and materiality (Reckwitz 2003) as forming praxis – that is, these three aspects of a praxis are inextricably linked – linguistic aspects of praxis can be differentiated as language, talk and "vibration". This change of perspective entails a number of other shifts, especially regarding research methodology and practice (see Beck 2011, part I). Most importantly, linguistic rigour is exchanged for interdisciplinarity with the aim to rapproach, reconstruct, and understand, against a strong methodological rigour (Olivier de Sardan 2009), transition processes and the creation of coherence from the point of view of those who produce this coherence: the local population (however, in detail, "local" may have to be understood). Thomas Bearth's contribution in this volume, as well as those of Joseph Baya, Lydie Vé Kouadio and Bernadette Boecker, are apt examples of this turn of perspective. It means to share research with all researchers involved, and combine this approach with an empirically founded reconstruction that relies on local epistemologies based on the languages spoken by the communities and societies observed and their cultural-social inventories of knowledge. Consequently, scientific hypotheses must be understood to be based on particular orders of knowledge and modes of their/its production.

From the papers collected here and the theoretical and methodological background briefly described in this introduction, it follows that, as a heuristic principle, the

priorization of local analysis against scientific hypotheses is promising for a better understanding of the social and cultural processes that constitute "development". However, in order to keep that promise we need, on the one hand, more methodologically rigorous empirical studies of the role of language in development processes so as to be able to reconstruct the respective local dynamics. In additon, the exploration of a praxeological definition of language is expected to provide a conceptual integration, though admittedly in need of further elaboration, of linguistic, interactional and material components of development as praxis.

References

Banerjee, Abhijit V. & Esther Duflo 2011. *Poor Economics. A radical rethinking of the way to fight global poverty*. New York: Public Affairs.

Bearth, Thomas 2005. Language, Gender, and Sustainability. Theoretical and methodological foundations. http://www.lagsus.de/en/ProjectDescription-Foundations.htm (consulted 19 August 2012).

Bearth, Thomas 2007. Language, Gender, and Sustainability. Theoretical and methodological foundations. Key hypotheses.
http://www.lagsus.de/pdf/KeyHypotheses.pdf (consulted 12 August 2012).

Bearth, Thomas 2009. Language, Gender, and Sustainability. Foundations. Typology of communication gaps.
http://www.lagsus.de/pdf/TypologyOfCommunicationGaps.pdf (consulted 12 August 2012).

Beck, Rose Marie 2011. *Bridging the Language Gap. Approaches to Herero verbal interaction as development practice in Namibia*. Köln: Köppe.

Blommaert, Jan & Ad Backus 2012. Superdiverse repertoires and the individual. *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies*, 24. to appear in: de Saint-Jacques, Ingrid & Jean-Jacques Weber, *Multimodality and Multilingualism: Current Challenges for Educational Studies*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Blommaert, Jan & Ben Rampton 2011. Language and superdiversity. *Diversities* 13, 2: 1-21.

Brock-Utne, Birgit & Rodney Kofi Hopson (eds.) 2005. *Languages of Instruction for African Emancipation: Focus on postcolonial contexts and considerations*. Cape Town: CASAS.

Brock-Utne, Birgit & Ingse Skattum (eds.) 2009. *Languages and Education in Africa. A comparative and transdisciplinary analysis*. Oxford: Symposium.

Cameron, Deborah 1990. Demythologizing sociolinguistics: why language does not reflect society. In: Joseph, John E. & Talbot J. Taylor (eds.), *Ideologies of Language*. London, New York: Routledge, 79-93.

Djité, Paulin G. 2008. *The Sociolinguistics of Development*. Clevedon: Mulitlingual Matters.

Djité, Paulin G. 2011. *The Language Difference. Language and development in the Greater Mekong sub-region*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Gal, Susan & Judith Irvine 1995. The boundaries of languages and disciplines: how ideologies construct difference. *Social Research* 62: 967-1001.

Hill, Lloyd 2010. Language and status: on the limits of language planning. *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics* 39: 41-58.

Kioko, Angelina N. & Margaret J. Muthwii 2001. The demands of a changing society: English in education in Kenya today. *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 14, 3: 201-213.

Makoni, Sinfree 2012. Language and human rights discourses in Africa. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 7, 1: 1-20.

Makoni, Sinfree & Busi Makoni 2010. Multilingual discourses on wheels and public English in Africa: a case for 'vague linguistique'. In: Maybin, Janet & Joan Swann (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to English Language Studies*. London: Routledge, 258-270.

Makoni, Sinfree & Alastair Pennycook (eds.) 2007. *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Meyer, Robert 2011. *Ethnizität, Hologramm der Vielfalt. Sprache als potentieller Kontrollmechanismus*. Term paper, Institut für Afrikanistik, Universität Leipzig.

Olivier de Sardan, Jean Pierre 2009. *La rigueur du qualitatif. Les contraintes empiriques de l'interprétation socio-anthropologique.* Paris: Editions Academia.

Otsuji, Emi & Alastair Pennycook 2010. Metrolingualism: fixity, fluidity and language in flux. *International Journal of Multilingualism* 7, 3: 240-254.

Owino, Francis 2002. *Speaking African. African languages for education and development*. Cape Town: CASAS.

Phillipson, Robert (ed.) 2000. *Rights to Language. Equity, power, and education*. Mahwah, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Phillipson, Robert & Tove Skutnabb-Kangas 2012. Getting language rights right: a response to Makoni. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 7, 1: 39-35.

Reckwitz, Andreas 2003. Grundelemente einer Theorie sozialer Praktiken. Eine sozialtheoretische Perspektive. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 32, 4: 282-301.

Rogers, Everett M. & William B. Hart 2002. Histories of communication. In: Gudy-kunst, William B. & Bella Moody, *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1-18.

Trudell, Barbara 2007. Local community perspectives and language of education in sub-Saharan African communities. *International Journal of Educational Development* 27: 552-563.

Waisbord, Silvio R. 2001. *Family Tree of Theories, Methodologies, and Strategies in Development Communication: Convergences and differences*. The Communication Initiative.
http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org/pdf/familytree.pdf. (consulted 13 August 2012).