

Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

The linguistic importance of language isolates: the African case

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Despite the growing interest in the study of endangered languages, it is clear that a complete description of even the most threatened languages – which number in the hundreds – is, unfortunately, well beyond the means of the scientific community. Defining clear criteria for the choice of priorities is crucial, both for justification of the investment of research time and for funding decisions.

Drawing from our African experience, we argue that the endangered language movement should assign highest priority to the study of linguistic isolates - that is, languages with either questionable or unknown genetic affiliations. Specifically, the investigation of linguistic isolates yields invaluable information for improving the general classification of the world's languages, for enriching knowledge of specific typological traits and for elucidating early population movements (in particular, in the case of “hunter-gatherer” languages being absorbed by languages spoken by invading agriculturalists).

The African situation provides a crucial case in point. The traditional classification, first proposed by Joseph Greenberg, argues for four language families (Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Khoisan). Although recent rearrangements of these families have been introduced, language isolates have not been given sufficient attention. In our work we have identified languages whose doubtful genetic affiliation to one of these macro-phyla suggests that there are (and were) many more linguistic families in Africa than Greenberg supposed. In this presentation we will provide a survey of available knowledge of these languages (among which are Hadza (Tanzania), Sandawe (Tanzania), Kwadi (Angola), Jalaa (Nigeria), Laal (Chad), Kujarge (Chad), Ongota (Ethiopia), Shabo (Ethiopia), Gomba (Ethiopia), Bangi-me (Mali), Pre (Ivory Coast), Irimba (Gabon)), many of which also have unusual typological features, and evaluate whether or not each of them is truly an isolate.

Considering the quality of the available documentation and the strategic importance of what appears to be truly isolated languages, we propose a hierarchy of pressing needs for more in-depth documentation of some of these languages.

It will be shown that when isolated languages are taken into account, the actual number of language families in Africa increases to approximately twenty. This helps us to understand the apparent paradox of having a small number of linguistic families (the four traditional macro-phyla) in the cradle of language emergence, a situation in which we would expect maximum linguistic diversity.

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