

## **At the margin – African endangered languages in the context of global endangerment discourses**

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According to estimates, Africa hosts about 2,000 of the approximately 6,000 languages of the world. This number makes the continent one of the hotspots of linguistic diversity. Essential description (i.e. grammars, dictionaries) and documentation (i.e. audio and video speech data and their annotations) is only available for mainstream dialects of the largest among them, e.g. Swahili, Hausa, and a handful of other *linguae francae*. The overwhelming majority of African languages have received only very little or no linguistic attention to date, despite the fact that many of them are spoken by millions as a first or second language. In addition, a large number of African languages are spoken by small-scale rural communities and can be classified as endangered on diverse grounds, ranging from displacement due to wars or climate change to rural exodus for socioeconomic reasons. In this context it seems paradoxical that African linguistics has not assumed a leading role in establishing the research agenda for the documentation of endangered languages, that only relatively few African languages have been documented in this new framework, and that there almost no activism in favour of their maintenance by speakers.

This paper aims at highlighting and explaining the neglected status of African languages, both within linguistic description and documentation (LDD) and endangered languages research (ELR). Drawing on two case studies, it points to a number of factors that distinguish the sociolinguistic contexts of these languages from those of languages more influential in shaping global discourses on language endangerment. In addition, it discusses differences in research traditions and priorities that may contribute to hindering advances in the description and documentation of African languages. The paper concludes with some thoughts on how African languages might influence and alter some of the dominant narratives of language endangerment in order to arrive at a more rounded picture of linguistic diversity and its threats.