

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN WEST AFRICAN LANGUAGE STUDIES

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The nature of the research that was going on in West African languages at the time when the West African Linguistic Society was formed in 1965 can be judged by papers presented at conferences and publications in the two journals that existed at that time: *The Journal of West African Languages* and *The Journal of African Languages*. Basically, four types of articles were prevalent: comparative or historical accounts of genetic relationships and language families, morphological descriptions (mainly of noun class systems), and wordlists. Much of what was produced could be regarded as a classified display of data. The major exception of this trend were the doctoral theses and dissertations of the time, which were geared to more rigorous analytic studies and/or applications of emergent linguistic theories to language data. These dissertations and theses were, however, not generally available because they were unpublished.

The contrast between then and now is truly remarkable. A look at some of the articles published in the last five years in *The Journal of West African Languages* shows an impressive range of topics and coverage. Not only are the approaches more sophisticated, studies of phonetic data are more instrumental and measurement-oriented; there is greater attention to the neglected areas of syntax and semantics, and models such as Government and Binding and minimalist program are represented as well as the more conservative grammaticalization accounts of development of syntactic categories. Aspects of discourse analysis can also be found. Of course, the ubiquitous tonal analysis remains very much in vogue, but now more geared to the autosegmental approach. Fewer articles appear on genetic classification, the few being more elaborate and not restricted to lexical comparison only. Wordlists now feature in an appendix, where they properly belong.

While congratulating linguists working in the field of West African language studies on the giant strides so far taken in the last thirty five years, I would like to draw attention to four areas that need further attention:

- application of theory,
- integrated language description,
- language use, and
- social relevance.

The application of theory to the description of African languages should not be mechanical. The aim of such description should not only be to apply the theory, but to modify it as the need arises. To take a simple example of the theta-criterion, which says that each argument bears only one theta-role and only one theta-role can be assigned to one argument. If in applying it to the analysis of serial verbal constructions, one finds that two theta roles can be conflated on one argument, what one does in such a case is to seek to modify the theta-criterion rather than mechanically make the data fit the theory. In my view, there is hardly anything to be gained in the pursuit of crass formalism. Interesting insights can emerge even from non-formalized descriptive statements. We need to be liberated from what I have referred to elsewhere as "the tyranny of trees".

The nature of language studies is such that linguists have become specialists in a narrow area of study. You hardly meet a linguist, but rather a phonetician, a phonologist, a syntactician, a semanticist, a lexicologist, etc. One salutary effect of this specialization is that we have been able to carry out in-depth studies and advance knowledge

considerably in the areas concerned. However, a major disadvantage is that language study and language descriptions have been compartmentalized and fragmented. A broad overview of a particular language is becoming more a rarity, largely to be found in old grammars and teaching manuals. Can we return to the synthesis that characterized early language studies? If a single person can no longer produce *A Grammar of Language X*, can we not think of collaboration between several persons to achieve such a goal, which undoubtedly is now to be regarded as a feat?

Idealization of data is an accepted dogma in respectable circles in linguistics. In a way, such idealization makes theorizing more feasible, for it protects a theory from recalcitrant data, which most natural speech contains. Suppose someone gives a counterexample to fault a rule that you have formulated, a useful protective device is to say that that counterexample does not occur in the dialect, or even idiolect, that you are describing. More usually, though, the fragments we present to represent descriptions of particular languages are circumscribed in several ways, including restriction to formal speech style. Informal language use, discourse styles, and the variations that go with them are often ignored. I was powerfully struck by this in preparing my paper. In the extensive studies on the Yoruba language, including my own, I could not find a mention of the elliptical answer to a yes/no question in which the noun object is not replaced by a pronoun. I suspect that one reason for this lapse is the tendency to treat interrogative sentences in a separate category from declarative sentences, without linking questions with appropriate answers. A challenge for the future is to put emphasis on language use in discourse situations and allow the grammar to be informed by such use.

Linguists are often content to collect data, carry out analysis of the data collected and publish for the attention of their colleagues. What is missing in all this is the social relevance of what we do. For linguistics to be socially relevant, we must go beyond mere scholarly descriptions and consider the practical application of our work in terms of orthography, literacy, use of language in education, language development, and language policy. Some linguists take the view that the only linguistics worth doing is that represented by the core areas of phonology, morphology, and syntax. For instance, a professor of linguistics at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom once told me that he did not know what language planning was about and he did not care to know, since he did not consider it worthwhile linguistics. Fortunately, hardly any linguist concerned with African language studies would share such a view. Some other linguists think that sociolinguistic issues in the African context are quasi political and hence they should not get involved in them. However, the alternative to not getting involved is that those who are less knowledgeable than them are the ones who are left to pontificate on language and influence policy decisions.

Having been through the dark days of apartheid with its politicization of language, linguists in South Africa are acutely aware of the social responsibility of the linguist in society. For this reason, you will hardly find any of them who are indifferent to the language policy issues in their country. It is this model that I would like to recommend in West Africa. Every one of us must be a sociolinguist at heart (in addition to whatever else we may be by training). My vision of the future of language studies in the West African subregion is that more attention will be devoted to sociopolitical issues, so that the perennial questions associated with the challenges of multilingualism may be adequately addressed.