I. INTRODUCTION

I think that it is useful to note some salient global trends in a twenty- to thirty-year perspective with regard to language policies in general and more specifically to issues of language(s) of instruction, language teaching, and language learning in formal and informal educational settings:

- Over the last twenty to thirty years, linguistics as an academic discipline has made great advances in overcoming its traditional focus on Indo-European languages (with its very often pronounced racist assumptions and conclusions).
- All of the industrialized, rich, ‘Western’ countries have considerably changed their language policy and philosophy during the last thirty years, moving away from the conception of rigid national linguistic homogeneity to a more-or-less pronounced acceptance of multi-cultural (multi-linguistic) openness and plurality, accompanied by conscious educational strategies of ‘building linguistic bridges’.
- The disintegration of the Soviet bloc has usually implied the revival of competing linguistic, religious, ethnic-cultural plurality in the countries affected, leading in some cases to disastrous attempts at culturally, linguistically, ethnically homogenized and purified ‘nation-building’.
- In the countries of the South, most of which obtained their ‘political independence’ during the last twenty to forty years, the linguistic reality was and is characterized by the co-existence of an official (mostly European) language alongside local languages. The co-existing language is often spoken as a mother-tongue by a (tiny) minority of the inhabitants and yet it is the dominant if not the sole language used in teaching. Nevertheless, important minorities if not the vast majority of the inhabitants use the widespread indigenous vehicular languages and dozens (if not hundreds) of local languages, but these languages play a limited or no role at all in (formal) education. So far, efforts to change this situation radically and fast in favour of substantially enhancing the role of (some, the most important) local and/or vehicular languages in education have been rare and usually unsuccessful.
- However, a slowly working trend towards the step-wise acceptance of the legitimacy, rationality, desirability and practicability of a strengthened use of vehicular and local languages in public life and in formal and informal education is clearly discernible. Because this trend is supported by NGOs and some multilateral and bilateral donor agencies (or at least, minority undercurrents within them), and is in line with the ideology of (individual and collective) human rights, it is likely to continue.

The Jomtien World Conference on Education for All (1990) led to a variety of efforts to boost activities and measures to improve and expand formal and informal basic/primary education. Special emphasis was placed on the improved participation and performance of previously neglected social groups (such as the (very) poor, among them girls and women), which often represent—as a national aggregate—not only a substantial minority, but sometimes the (large) majority of the populations. The linguistic characteristics of these marginalized social groups are usually neither discussed nor analysed.

This has—although mostly covertly and indirectly—affected and enhanced the analytical and political prominence of the old problems of language learning and teaching, i.e. the acquisition of comprehension and speaking, of reading and writing skills in both the African mother-tongue and in African vehicular and/or official (mostly European) languages. I am not aware of the existence of recent professional and systematic accounts and appraisals in an international comparative perspective of efforts to enhance ‘teaching in African languages’ or ‘learning language skills with the background of an African mother-tongue’.

During the last ten years, UNICEF, UNDP, WHO and—very importantly—the World Bank (as the consortial leader of bi- and multilateral efforts in the field of formal and informal ‘education sector projects’) have initiated or supported a wide variety of national African educational efforts, which directly or indirectly fostered the use of African languages (mostly, in non-formal literacy and adult education). In addition, the World Bank and a number of bilateral donors have sponsored about thirty large-scale empirical surveys of educational achievement/proficiency in formal primary education, which did not, however, study in sufficient detail the relevance of the ‘language of origin’ of the learners. The same holds true for World Bank studies on poverty. No up-to-date comprehensive comparative accounts and appraisals with an analytical focus on the relationship between African languages spoken at home and African or non-African languages used, taught and learned in educational settings seem to be available.
II. SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT AND PROFICIENCY

Ever since, some thirty years ago, the beginning of internationally comparable, large-scale, empirical surveys on school achievement and proficiency, which most of the time focus on language skills and arithmetic, the results have suggested that the average achievement level/level of proficiency of pupils in developing countries was very much lower than the average level of their peers in the respective primary or secondary grades in the school achievement and proficiency, which most of the colonial) official language'. This, however, means that have suggested that the average achievement level/level after a number of research cycles with dozens of additional third World nations joining the few cases of the earlier studies, this is a well-proven fact.

The main reason for this structural achievement gap appears to be the fact that in the northern industrialized countries—after 100 to 200 years of traditional nationalism and the extension of 'modern education'—the language of instruction is the same as the language spoken at home by a dominant proportion of the pupils. In contrast to that situation, in most countries of the 'rest of the world', the normal situation is the opposite: the co-existence of dozens, if not hundreds, of different languages together with one or more vehicular languages (indigenous and/or the language of the respective European colonial power). For practical reasons, the language(s) of instruction have to be confined to a single (or a few) vehicular language(s). These languages are often confined to, mostly including, the European (ex-colonial) 'official language'. This, however, means that the language of instruction and learning is only for a (very) small proportion of the pupils identical with their strong language, their mother-tongue, while for the majority the 'official (often European) language' (and other African vehicular languages) are foreign languages. These languages are very often not used in the natural linguistic environment of the family or local community.

TABLE 1. Official (mostly European) language as language of instruction and dominant language(s) spoken at home of the illiterate learner

<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>L1 (or at least ‘strong L2’) = Official language(s)</td>
<td>L1 (L2 or L3) = Non-vehicular (African)</td>
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Thus, pupils naturally growing up with the ‘official language’ as their first or second language at home, which is used exclusively or dominantly in education, should have a structural advantage in comparison to the rest of their peers (no matter, whether the official language is French, English, Portuguese, Kiswaheli, Malagache, etc.). The next less-advantaged group should include all those pupils who happen to speak indigenous vehicular languages as their first language (L1) at home, as long as most teachers know and use (officially or unofficially) this language to communicate with most of their pupils socially and academically. This category would most likely be followed by all those pupils who grow up in a familiar and communal environment where they ‘naturally’ learn as L1, a small, local language, but they learn, as second or third language (L2, L3), the vehicular (African) language used (if only informally) by their teachers. And, finally, should come those learners who naturally learn one or more language as L1, L2, which are neither official, nor vehicular and thus play (virtually) no role in the educational process.

III. OFFICIAL LANGUAGE VERSUS HOME LANGUAGE

Schematically, Tables 1 to 5 illustrate the relationship between the languages of the learners spoken at home, language(s) of instruction/official language(s) and established indicators of school system performance.²

It should be noted that—so far—the differentiation of achievement/proficiency level by language of instruction and background of dominant language(s) spoken at home is not at all customary (professional) practice, neither in countries using French, Portuguese or Spanish, nor in those with an English colonial past.

What seem to be the important psycho—and didactical—linguistic reasons for the noted differences

The illiterate learner is a ‘competent speaker.’ He/she understands not only other speakers of the same language on the basis of his/her familiarity with the typical sounds and intonations of the language (‘phonemes’), the meaning of various combinations of sounds into words (‘lexemes’), and—using basic grammatical rules—the combination of words into meaningful sentences, but he/she can also actively and autonomously create comprehensible verbal utterances. In range and complexity these are always smaller than his/her listening comprehension, but still relatively large.

The illiterate learner has a high oral proficiency in the language of instruction. He has no difficulties in understanding the verbal utterances of the teacher in the language of instruction, in using and expanding his lexicon, in using grammatical rules, and in performing language drills.

The illiterate learner can initially neither ‘passively’ understand, nor ‘actively’ create verbal utterances in the language of instruction. Some phonemes of the language of instruction may be identical or similar to those of the mother tongue of the illiterate learner, but many phonemes may be different (and, perhaps, difficult to replicate).

The illiterate learner has practically no familiarity with the meaning of words (no knowledge of lexemes or of lexicon) and no knowledge of grammatical rules.

The illiterate learner has no oral proficiency in the language of instruction. He does not understand most of the verbal utterances of the teacher in the language of instruction and his lexicon of the language of instruction is extremely limited. Moreover, he does not know the grammatical rules, and he has difficulties in imitating or replicating phonemes, lexemes, and drills (without comprehension of the implies pragmatical meaning).
in learning results? In the following, I shall characterize some aspects of the stepwise teaching and learning strategies to improve language skills of illiterate learners (children aged 6 to 8 years or illiterate adults beginning primary or basic education with the aim of attaining literacy and numeracy). I shall contrast important aspects of the sequence of teaching and learning steps or phases for learners whose L₁ (or at least ‘strong L₂’) also happens to be the language of instruction (typically the official (mostly European) language) with those of learners whose languages spoken at home is neither the official language of instruction nor a vehicular African language used informally by many teachers and peers (without being a language of instruction). While the former learners enjoy a structural advantage with regard to learning results, the latter experience a pronounced disadvantage. Those learners with combinations of African languages spoken at home, including vehicular African languages, occupy intermediate positions.

IV. STEPS IN ‘LEARNING TO READ’

1. Phonemes and graphemes

The graphical signs used to represent spoken languages are, to a large extent, identical in the sense that practically the same characters of the Latin alphabet are used for the graphemes of the European language of the former colonial powers. In addition, the African languages, for which a standard transcription has been developed in recent decades, also predominately use characters of the Latin alphabet.

Sounds and intonations vary somewhat between individual European, between individual European and African, and between individual African languages. Although (most of) these languages predominately use identical characters of the Latin alphabet to construct their ‘graphemes’ (of individual characters of the alphabet or combinations thereof), the relationship of phonemes to graphemes usually differs somewhat, and sometimes quite substantially from language to language.

TABLE 2. The relationship between phonemes and graphemes

| Learning the relationship between phonemes and graphemes is facilitated by the circumstances that both (sounds and their graphic representation) are easily linked to known and familiar words (lexemes) and even sentences. Establishing, learning, and remembering the hitherto unknown links between phonemes and graphemes is thus facilitated by cognitively linking them up to a body of passively and actively mastered and remembered oral proficiency (knowledge of vocabulary and comprehension of sentences). |
| Learning the relationship between phonemes and graphemes (and lexemes) in the language of instruction is necessarily very abstract because it is unrelated to a sufficiently large body of mastered and understood vocabulary and basic grammatical rules. The learner tries to ‘memorize’ without comprehension. |

TABLE 3. Reading proficiency at a level equal to listening proficiency

| With repetition, drills and experience, the deciphering of grapheme, lexemes and sentences comes to a point where reading comprehension becomes virtually identical with the comparatively high level of listening/oral comprehension. This is possible because of the fairly extensive vocabulary known and the mastery of basic grammatical rules. |
| Reading proficiency at a level equal to listening proficiency is impossible because of a too limited knowledge of vocabulary in the language of instruction and an insufficient mastery of its grammatical rules. There is limited memorizing without comprehension. |

TABLE 4. Literacy and numeracy

| The illiterate beginning learner (but fairly competent speaker) has considerably improved and expanded his literacy and number skills. |
| The gap between the actual and the expected ‘normal’ level of proficiency in language and numeracy skills has widened from grade 1 to grade 4 to the point that the majority of the learners have dropped out. |
V. STEPS IN LEARNING TO WRITE

Some theoreticians of the stepwise development of literacy proficiency hold that the acquisition of writing skills is more complex and demanding than that of the basic skills to decode graphemes and to correctly relate them to phonemes and lexemes as parts of sentences. Others hold that the development of (hand)writing skills cannot and should not be separated from the development of reading skills; in other words, that they do and should go hand-in-hand. One thing is sure and empirically very evident: the illiterate learner (even if an adult) has to learn the requisite senso-motoric capabilities of co-ordination for handwriting, because they simply are not a function of biological age. Beyond that, once again, the level of oral language proficiency to start with seems to determine to a large extent achievement in both the domain of reading and that of writing.

VI. LANGUAGE POLICIES

Important studies have been realized during that last twenty to thirty years to overcome the traditionalist Euro-centric and colonialist premises of language policies in general and, more specifically, language teaching and learning in formal and informal education. Thus:

- Schoolbooks have been ‘Africanized’ in content and presentation.
- A fair number of teaching materials have been developed for adult literacy in African national languages.
- It is no longer common practice to punish pupils speaking African languages during breaks in the schoolyard.
- It is more and more accepted, in some countries even expected, that teachers and pupils use (vehicular) African languages to ask questions or to explain difficult issues (although the practice of ‘awarding’ a donkey’s hat to pupils not sufficiently versed in using French is not yet extinct in private Senegalese schools).

Yet there remains a lot to be done to strike a new balance between the psycho- and socio-linguistic needs to take account of the large number of dominant African languages spoken at home and the usually European language of instruction.

| TABLE 5. Pupils for whom the official language is not their L₁ or strong L₂ |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| their listening comprehension and speaking proficiency of their non-vehicular African L₁ | >  | their listening comprehension and speaking proficiency of an African vehicular as their L₁ or L₂ | ≈  | their listening comprehension and speaking proficiency of the European official language as language of instruction on the way to be mastered (or not) as their L₂, L₃, or L₄ |

Pupils for whom the official (European) language is not their L₁ or a ‘strong L₂’ spoken at home will experience—during most of their school career—what is shown in Table 5 (from about grade three to at least grade ten in secondary school, assuming, of course, that they do not drop out).

It does not matter whether the official European language is also the language of instruction from grade one on or is taught as a foreign language before becoming the language of instruction some grades later. This situation applies to the large majority of pupils in all sub-Saharan African countries.

For all of these pupils it is true that their learning success of and in the European language could be enhanced and improved if their superior listening and speaking proficiency in their strong(er) African language(s) could be tapped to support the teaching and learning of the official European language.

I suggest that there is a feasible and probably efficient ‘didactical strategy’, which in most African countries has not yet been institutionalized on a large scale. It would consist of:

- The production of dictionaries of about 20,000 to 40,000 entries per language (African language X-Official European language/Official European language-African language X) for all major/national African languages used in a given country. These books are to be made available to all schools (if possible, classes) according to the language mix of their pupils.
- In addition (possibly alternatively), printed 'supplements' in the African national languages should be produced for the existing schoolbooks in the official European language. These 'supplements' should contain word lists of the most important lexemes used in the respective schoolbook (African language X-Official European language of the schoolbook, and vice versa) and should be distributed/sold to the pupils according to their individual affinity to the respective national language.

Such ‘supplements’ should be produced for all schoolbooks in print and in use (for all subjects and grades up to about grade ten), but priority should be given to books for language and mathematics lessons, particularly for the upper classes of the primary level (since these books are the ones most widely distributed/bought and used, and the ranks of the pupils are not yet heavily reduced by dropping out leaving only those students predominantly
belonging to socially and linguistically privileged tiny minorities).

Yet, such a didactical strategy addresses only those pupils who have already mastered basic literacy by grade three or grade four, i.e. those that have already learned how to read fairly well in the European language of instruction (perhaps 20 to 40% of the pupils in these grades). They will be able to transfer their knowledge of the characters of the alphabet and of graphemes independently to the lexemes and different phonemes of their strong African language with very little initial help. These stronger students would benefit a lot from this type of material for the rest of their school careers; for the weaker ones, it probably cannot be a late substitute for initial literacy in their strong language. (It should be noted that all the arguments presented so far with regard to the problems emerging between a European language as official language and language of instruction seem to be equally relevant for the cases where an African vehicular language is ‘official’ and serves as the language of instruction, while most pupils do not learn it as L₁ or strong L₂.)

In spite of the obvious limitations of the ‘dictionary/supplements’-strategy with regard to enhancing the learning opportunities of the majority of primary level beginning pupils and, especially, the marginalized ‘basic education target groups’, its relative advantages should be noted: it is politically and financially ‘cost-effective’ in the sense that the investment in linguistic-didactical development work would produce physically visible results with substantial medium-term achievement results for an important minority of students.

Regional co-operation between several African countries could make sure that such a strategy could, in fact, be realised in a comparatively short time (some five to ten years) for a large number or all ‘national language’-groups in the co-operating countries, thus reducing the political risk of opposition on the part of linguistic minority groups fearing to be dominated by stronger groups.

In spite of possible charges of utopian optimism, I would like to conclude by pointing out that the most promising teaching and learning strategy for literacy continues to be the idea of first and basic literacy in the strong language of the learners, to be followed by learning strategies for additional languages.

It is, however, neither possible to educate or socialize all (or even the majority) of the beginning learners into ‘competent speakers’ of the official European language before teaching them to read and write, nor is it practically feasible to make all (or even, the majority) of beginners literate in their mother-tongue, given that dozens, if not hundreds, of mother-tongues (L₁) co-exist in African countries.

Realistically, then, we will continue to muddle through with hybrid strategies (incidentally, not only in Africa, but also increasingly so in the Northern countries). Perhaps an adaptation of the ‘supplements’ strategy is feasible for all those countries, where the political resistance to a transition to the use of national languages for initial literacy is still important. For the beginning two or three grades of the primary cycle, this would imply:

- to accept the continued existence and use of official (European) language schoolbooks (and their progression of graphemes/phonemes, grammar; the same would hold for mathematics books);
- to develop and produce parallel ‘initiating schoolbooks’ in the national languages, essentially following the European-language schoolbook page-by-page;
- trying, and here is the big challenge, to introduce and explain in the national languages, what is supposed to happen in the foreign language. The working hypothesis is, of course, that the parallel ‘national language book’, in tapping the strength of the better oral comprehension and speaking proficiency in ‘national languages’, can help the majority of learners (their family members) and their teachers to better master the challenges of the European languages.

Notes

1. The Southern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) is currently analysing the achievement data of large empirical surveys of grade 6 pupils from fourteen southern African countries (in the first round, some years ago, surveys from seven countries were analysed). An analysis of the achievement level of the pupils by language background is, however, impossible because the questionnaire did not include relevant items.

2. The background of these schematic representations is my interest and involvement in education and language problems in Senegal:

- a comparative empirical analysis of language and mathematical proficiency of pupils in different basic educational settings (formal public schools, traditional Koranic schools, modern Arabic schools) and of adult participants in literacy courses: Jens Naumann & Ulrike Wiegelman, Analyse pour améliorer: nouvelles recherches sur les défis de l’édu-


- my familiarity with the Senegalese SNERS, the (World Bank initiated) evaluation of an on-going ‘literacy campaign’ in Senegalese national languages;

- my efforts to mobilize scientific and political support for the development and production of a Wolof-French/French-Wolof dictionary with some 35,000 entries for each language aid ‘Supplements for French-language Senegalese schoolbooks’.