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How Languages Die

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1. Introduction

Over the past few years Claude Hagège, the prestigious author of, among several books, the seminal *Le souffle de la langue* (1992) and *Halte à la mort des langues* (2000), has also positioned himself in the same camp as Phillipson (2003), notably in *Français: histoire d'un combat* (1996) and *Combat pour le français* (2006). Along with the latter author, he has spread the theme of English as a “killer language” and has, in addition, advocated the Académie Française’s mission (since the foundation of the Institution by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635 — see also Vigouroux, to appear) to promote and defend the French language, only this time against English. From the perspective of Calvet’s (1987) notion of *guerre des langues* ‘language wars’, Hagège has indeed emerged as a militant calling on other French citizens and devoted Francophones to engage in resistance to English, which has increased its imperial spread by gaining more and more speakers not only in former Belgian and French colonies but also in other Francophile ones (such as in the European Union and in Brazil) and even in the native heart of la Francophonie (as group of French speakers), viz., France, Walloon Belgium, Francophone Switzerland, and Quebec.

My goal in this paper is to highlight the ways in which his positions have stimulated me to think more about the complexity of the subject matter of language death. I focus on three major questions: 1) How do languages die and why? 2) Does the endangerment of the lingua franca function of a language matter in the same way as that of its vernacular function (to all its speakers)? 3) What form of globalization is the most lethal to marginalized or minority languages (in the sense of “langues minorées” in French)?

Contributors to this volume have been encouraged to keep their essays very short. I have thus chosen to provide here an abridged version of parts of the paper I was invited to present at the 42nd Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistics Society (in April 2006), which will be published in the proceedings of the conference. However, I have adapted the present version as an indirect response to Hagège (2006), framing my discussion more as a constructive critique than as a rebuttal of his positions. Readers are encouraged to conclude, on the basis of their own sentiments, whether any language needs protection against the spread of another, under what particular conditions, and how.

2. How a language gets endangered and how language loss occurs

Linguists have typically given the impression that speakers give up their heritage language at will. The economist Abram de Swaan even dramatizes the process by speaking of some populations as “stampeding from their language” for an alternative with a higher

“Q-value” (2001; explained below), as if speakers consulted with each other and decided collectively to shift suddenly to another language. While arguing that speakers treat their language as a “common good” (therefore worth protecting), he also gives the impression that speakers actually assess which particular language is spoken by more people, as if they all had a sense of the demographic statistics associated with different languages. His discourse sounds as if the primary consideration on the speakers’ minds was to use a language that enables them to interact with the largest population possible. One must indeed wonder why Chinese has not yet prevailed as a world language.¹

Communal language shift occurs gradually and most often insidiously, being noticed only after the process is quite advanced or complete. First of all, not all speakers are engaged in the process at the same time, although communal shift is the convergence of similar behaviors by the (would-be) speakers of the relevant language. Also, for every individual speaker involved in the process, permanent shift occurs by the cumulation of occasions where they do not get to speak the relevant language. The shift is total for them when no more occasions arise in their interactions with others when they need to, or can, speak the language. Not being able to speak the language has to do with a form of “atrophy,” i.e., the loss of competence in the language due to lack of practice. When the process is experienced by all the speakers of a language and this can no longer be learned by their children, it can be characterized as dying or dead.

Speakers do not always decide consciously which language they must speak on specific occasions. In many cases, there is selection only to the extent that they can or must use a language available in their repertoire. Otherwise, the situations in which they interact often constrain their choices. In many places, one can speak only a specific language at the market, with the local administration or government, at church, at school, or even with their neighbors. The pressure grows when the population of a particular locality, such as a city, is mixed and integrated. It is retrospectively that one realizes how the socio-economic ecology has insidiously disfavored a particular language all the way to its extinction. Just as it is important to understand what particular ecological conditions cause language death, it is necessary to comprehend how language death proceeds, because the knowledge will determine what sound strategies can be deployed to prevent or counteract the process.

Are the situations in which French has been considered endangered similar to those in which minority languages have been losing their vernacular functions, being often reduced to the role of symbolic language, as in the case of Breton, or to that of ritual language, as in the case of several Native American languages in North America? Is the vernacular function of French still threatened in Quebec, or is Québécois French as much endangered by

¹ I submit that a distinction should be made between, on the one hand, the notion of ‘world language’ as a lingua franca that is spoken at different places around the world (such as English, French, and Arabic at the religious level) and, on the other, that of ‘major language’ (Comrie 1990), which is spoken primarily as a vernacular by a large population but need not be spoken at many places around the world. Major languages such as Chinese varieties and Hindi are not necessarily world languages, although they are spoken by Diaspora populations around the world, indeed as in-group vernaculars. The fact that Mandarin and Hindi in this case also function as lingua francas within their national societies and their Diasporas still does not make them world languages. Other major languages such as Swahili and Hausa, which are spoken in several adjacent countries, are only regional but not world languages. This distinction bears on the debate about which particular languages are endangering which others, for instance, whether the spread of English as a world language is dangerous to all indigenous languages in its path.

vernacular English as Louisianais French is in the United States? It seems to me that the problem of French in Quebec was solved by the clever way in which the government of Quebec invested in a policy of utilitarian bilingualism that made French economically more useful, requesting all businesses to function first in French, even if they wished to continue functioning in English. The process meant revalorizing the language itself through economic usefulness. The State of Louisiana has no such linguistic policy, with English prevailing as the language of the economy and French being reduced to a mere ethnic vernacular to which the more ethnically conscious remain attached without the relevant socio-economic structure to support their loyalty. Louisiana French may thus be considered a lost case, certainly in the process of joining the fate of its colonial kin in Nova Scotia (although the reasons are not exactly the same), in Mississippi and in other parts of colonial Louisiana (i.e., before the Louisiana Purchase in 1803), and in New England and even coastal Georgia.

However, are there any similar reasons for fearing that English is threatening French in France, Belgium, and Switzerland? Are there Francophones being driven out of these countries by Anglophones? Are there children who find it more advantageous to acquire English, rather than French, as their mother tongue? Does the fact that many children in these places are learning English at school as a (preferred) foreign language endanger their native fluency in French? The answers to all these questions seem negative to me. Nor do Anglophone immigrants to these countries appear to pose any threat to the vernacular function of French, not any more than does the more massive immigration of speakers of Arabic and Black African languages. Generally, it is the immigrants' children, here as elsewhere, who have felt the pressure to become native speakers of French.

Is the fact that more and more French citizens and other Francophones increasingly learning English at school and using it as a business or professional language pose a threat to the vitality of vernacular French? Is this a threat to its vitality as a *lingua franca* or as official language in traditional Francophone countries? These questions bring to mind the situation of many Third World countries where high school and higher education are run in a colonial European language but the vitality of the indigenous vernaculars is far from being endangered. One may object that the proportion of speakers functioning academically in European languages in the latter countries is generally a minority. The question whether the situation is different in the Francophone countries of the West, where the populations using English are scholars and businessmen who otherwise continue speaking French as their vernacular. In the case of the former Belgian and French colonies, one must note that French has definitely maintained its ethnographic position as an official language, in which its L2-speakers continue to develop relatively better competence than in English learned only as a foreign language. Moreover, these are places where societal and individual multilingualism are an endemic trademark. It is not clear why competence in an additional European language would be a threat to French? If the world is indeed globalizing (in the sense that its different parts are being interconnected and interdependent economically and culturally) wouldn't it too restrictive, if not exclusive, for speakers in some parts of the world to depend only on French as their international language?

Isn't the problem really that of why French is not spreading as widely and as rapidly as English is? Then shouldn't the correct questions to ask be the following: Why is English replacing French and German as the language of scholarship, business, and diplomacy? If English is really spreading through the actions of the Voice of America, the British Council,

and the BBC (as claimed by Phillipson 2003), why aren't the Alliance Française, RFI (Radio France Internationale), and TV 5 not equally successful? Besides, is it true that the media are as successful at spreading languages as linguists claim? Face-to-face interactions among scholars and businessmen, as well as, opportunities to advance one's career in a particular language have been much more successful than non-interactive radio and TV programs in a particular language. English and French have been spread much more efficiently by non-native speakers indigenous to the relevant populations than by the media (Mufwene, to appear). Then the question is why these non-native speakers have been spreading English faster than they have French. Do previous colonization styles, current patterns of open borders to natives of Third World countries, and investments lucrative also to Natives in the same places have an important role to play in this evolutionary process? These questions deserve more attention than they have; and I hope future scholarship will address them. We can now address the question of whether languages are actually agentic and can wage wars against each other.

3. The myth of “killer languages”

There is certainly a sense in which languages have lives. However, as explained in Mufwene (2004), they evolve more like species than like organisms, especially in the way they are born and in the way they die. As pointed out by Chaudenson (1992) and later works regarding creoles, languages cannot be issued birth certificates because nobody can determine precisely when they were born. This is due largely to the fact that languages have no gestation period that can be observed and anticipated to lead to their births. The birth of a language (variety) can be declared only retrospectively, when its separate existence is recognized relative to its proto-variety and/or other related ones. For instance, speakers of the last stages of Old English did not see Middle English begin with the Norman Conquest in 1066, though they must have observed Norman French influence on the English of some speakers. They could not anticipate how many months or years it would take for Middle English to be born. The historic event and the date were chosen retrospectively as a convenient, though arbitrary, point in time to distinguish diachronically between varieties of English.

Likewise, languages cannot be issued death certificates either, not really the kind that can be issued for an organism, a human being for instance. Although linguists have usually claimed that a language dies when its last speaker is dead, reality also tells us that the process of death itself started long before the death of the last speaker (Thomason 2001), when the population of its speakers lost their critical mass and often also when its structures were seriously eroded by those of the prevailing language, as in the case of Sutherland Gaelic (Dorian 1981).

Dependence on the activities of speakers, highlighted in Part 2, underscores Mufwene's (2001, 2005) position that languages are like viral species in biology. They compete with each other only to the extent that they are weighted differently by their speakers. They spread or contract because more, or fewer, speakers use them, just like their structures change because their speakers modify them or prefer some variants over others, and these changes spread within the population. We learn very little about how some languages prevail or are endangered by assigning them agencies they don't have and by speaking about

them as if they could wage wars with and kill each other. Languages die because speakers shift away from them, as they would do other available tools, with the difference that the shift results from the cumulation of communicative events during which the speakers find it necessary, or more convenient, to use the advantageous language. The shift is complete when there are no situations in which it is possible to communicate in the disadvantageous languages. If languages were iron tools, we could speak of them during some stage of the shift as rusting and decaying, due to lack of usage. This is why I used the term *atrophy* above. Thus languages do not kill languages; their would-be speakers kill them, by shifting away from them to others that they find more advantageous.

From the point of view of language vitality, there are some heuristic advantages in conceiving of languages as tools for adaptation to ever-changing ecologies. They can be ranked socially in relation to other alternatives. This particular perspective sheds light on the question of who is spreading English and other European languages world languages today. It is, as noted above, the adopters, the new speakers who are the tangible evidence of advantages to be derived from speaking the non-ancestral language. English is spreading around the world because there are more and more people who hope to find better jobs, to travel to distant places with fewer communicative problems, to be read by more and more scholars, etc. Successful scholars, businessmen, and bureaucrats in non-Anglophone countries are models that inspire their countrymen to invest time and money in learning it so that they can enjoy the same benefits. Governments are promoting the teaching of English not because Americans, Britons, and Australians require this but because, among other things, they want to have citizens that can handle world trade and diplomatic matters with these powerful partners in the dominant language, at least in the domains that involve them. They don't intend English to become their domestic vernacular, except perhaps in small nation states like Singapore, where the goal is still far from being reached.

4. The role of globalization

All major publications on language endangerment around the world blame this aspect of language evolution on globalization, especially books such as Nettle & Romaine (2000), Crystal (2000, 2004), Skuttnab-Kangas (2000), Maurais & Morris (2003), and Hagège (2006), which have covered the subject matter very broadly. The aspect of globalization that has retained the most attention is that of 'world-wide network of rapid transportation and communication that has emerged around the world and the ensuing networks of economic interdependencies, as well as the world-wide diffusion of industrial and other cultural commodities'.² The fact that usage of English has also spread much wider even in countries that had not been colonized by the United Kingdom or dominated militarily by the United States (such as those of the former USSR) has also been pointed out as a correlate of globalization in the present sense.

Many things have gone wrong in this particular discourse, revealing that linguists have focused on (epi)phenomena which are mere by-products of globalization rather than on the likely causes of language endangerment. For instance, there have been frequent mentions of

² This is basically what is covered by the French term *mondialisation*, which Francophone linguists have narrowly preferred to the more accurate term *globalization*, much in usage among French economists.

McDonaldization (as the spread of McDonald stores around the world) and the world-wide diffusion of Hollywood movies not only as signs of the Americanization of our planet but also as evidence that it is becoming more and more uniform culturally. McDonaldization and these other aspects of *Americanization* as the world-wide diffusion of American culture (including technology and its brand of Capitalism) have thus been cited as manifestations of globalization.

What has not been interpreted adequately is the fact that it is the emergence of world-wide networks of rapid and long-distance transportation and communication (which in turn facilitate the mobility of people and goods) that has made the Americanization process possible. Also, the process has not always promoted the spread of English. McDonald stores in non-Anglophone countries are not operating in English, just like their menus have not replicated the original American menu. Nowadays, Hollywood movies are usually released concurrently in many major languages (sometimes in editions adapted to local cultures), because the industry is more interested in making money than in spreading English and/or American values. The literature accompanying American computers in non-Anglophone countries is not exclusively in English. BBC and Voice of America radio programs also broadcast in a wide range of languages other than English, which suggests that even at such an ideological outreach level, the spread of English is not the main goal.

Pace the received doctrine in linguistics, English has spread in continental Europe, and in post-colonial Africa and Asia typically as a by-product of other primary globalized ventures, which can be accomplished in any other major language. Moreover, it is functioning in these territories primarily as a lingua franca, not as a vernacular. Therefore, it does not endanger their local vernaculars, because it does not compete with them, even while it is being used as the medium of higher education for some subjects and their scholars are encouraged to publish in English. As can be learned from a longer similar experience of former British colonies in Africa and Asia, even in its capacity as an official language, the colonial or imperial language is not likely to endanger the local vernaculars as long as it remains the privilege of a particular elite happy to keep the benefits for themselves and it is not used in the popular sectors of the economy. The tourist sector of the economy has no more lethal impact on the local vernaculars than land developments for tourism have had on Gullah in coastal South Carolina and Georgia (Mufwene 1997) or the tourist industry has exerted on Caribbean creoles. Bilingualism or bidialectalism does not necessarily lead to the loss of the less prestigious varieties.

We should realize that American, British, and Australian businesses do not aim at spreading the English language but at making money. This, they do it best in the local language (variety), both in negotiating with the local political authorities and in outsourcing labor in the production of their goods. Use of English is typically limited to the top administration level, while communication in the rest of the company takes place either in the local official language or in the local vernacular, the language that the employees and customers are expected to understand. The Natives learn English because they want to move up in the management of the business and therefore improve their economic positions, not because they are required to do so by the company. American and British cultural centers have increased English course offerings in non-Anglophone countries not necessarily because they want the Natives to all become Anglophone but because they would be happy to see those who are interested in their ideologies read their propaganda and “spread the

word” in any language. At best, they want to make it easier for some ambitious ones to work with them. The people advocating that English be taught as the first foreign language in their countries are typically the Natives themselves, and they do so in order to attract Anglophone business and economic exchanges with the relevant countries, not because they want to stop speaking their local official and indigenous languages. History also shows that the real danger is minimal, unless the foreign language evolves into a vernacular. Most countries today do not provide the ecological conditions for the vernacularization of English.

In all the above cases, English is spreading as an economically powerful lingua franca, hardly ever as a vernacular or in any way that would place it in competition with the indigenous vernaculars and lingua francas, whose domains of usage do not overlap with its. In the typically polyglossic settings in which it is spreading, English is an ethnographically high variety whose domains of usage are not coextensive with those of the indigenous languages. They hardly overlap with those of the lingua francas, because the Natives who learn them hardly ever need to communicate with each other in a foreign language other than the official one, except perhaps during class practice exercises. The myth of English as a “killer language” par excellence, so much repeated in the linguistics literature on language endangerment, is certainly not supported by the facts of language practice.

The same literature has also presented English as essential to globalization. What is certainly true is that, at the upper managerial level, different branches of the multinational companies communicate in English. Natives of non-Anglophone countries who work at that level must know enough English to hold their jobs. However, as noted above about McDonald stores, the production (as opposed to the managerial) levels of these companies function in the national languages, typically the local official language and/or an indigenous lingua franca or vernacular. Such is the case for, for example, Goodyear and Firestone factories around the world or the Japanese branches of Japanese-American joint automobile and computer corporations. Marling (2006) is very informative on this topic. What has been observed about the outsourced native-like English-speaking debt-collectors in India and the Philippines (long-time Anglophone territories) is certainly not a universal trend.³ It is not representative of the way English is used in American, British, Australian businesses, and in local branches of multinational corporations, in non-Anglophone countries around the world.

This trend does not support the claim that English is facilitating economic globalization in the sense explained above. On the contrary, it suggests that globalization does not need English preferentially, a fact made more evident by the efforts that American and British business men invest in learning something about the languages and customs of their foreign partners before they engage in major negotiations, especially when the meetings are to be held in the foreign country. They also require their representatives to be competent in at least the local official language. Economic domination does not entail linguistic domination,

³ The language used by the outsourced labor cannot be construed to endanger the indigenous vernaculars either, although the economic benefits reaped by the employees motivate others to become proficient in this business language. However, recall that this is only a business language for the speakers. The phenomenon highlights the rewards of being a bi- or multilingual. As the language functions as a lingua franca, it does not necessarily affect the speakers’ competence in their vernacular(s), especially if no spatial and/or social relocation is involved.

although the language of the economically powerful is targeted by the weaker or wise partner because of the rewards it promises.

What linguists have overlooked is the more lethal form of globalization that has operated in former settlement colonies with a European-style economy in which several sectors of the economy are locally interdependent. This is something that can be observed, for instance, in the networks of industries that develop around major airports, or in the interconnections between the food, transportation, and packaging industries, as well as with the electricity industry for refrigeration, to name just a few of the parties involved, or among the different contractors in the building industry (the gas, water, and electricity services, the telephone wiring, and the masons and carpenters). They must all communicate in the same language, which makes it more compelling for everybody in the workforce, or aspiring to work, to command the language of the industry.

The pressure on the whole population is stronger when the same language has prevailed throughout the country and the interdependencies apply regionally rather than locally only. This is not the situation in many places around the world, especially in former exploitation colonies, where modern-style economy is still less developed. Except for places where the Natives were simply exterminated by the colonists (such as in the Caribbean), languages have died the most in places where this “glocal(ized)” economy has been the strongest and the language of the industry is also the vernacular of the people who are economically dominant. It is not by accident that Europe, which is one of the most densely populated places around the world, has the fewest languages spoken today, just 3% of the world’s languages (Mayor & Bindé 2001). May it be for this reason that, strangely enough, Western linguists characterize as “indigenous” only non-European languages outside Europe?

Another important factor that bears on loss but has generally been overlooked by linguists is industrialization, which has often led to urbanization. Cities are important contact settings, where the new industries that have transformed the population structures of various places around the world have developed. They have become magnets for working-age adults in rural areas in search of alternative economic opportunities. They have also produced non-traditional dynamics of competition and selection among the languages in contact, fostering the language of the industry as an urban vernacular and regional *lingua franca*, while collapsing ethnic boundaries.

The primary agents of the shift are not so much the adults, who become bilingual in their ancestral languages and the emergent urban *lingua franca*, as the children, who appropriate the latter as their dominant or exclusive vernacular. If there is a context in which Swaan’s (2001) “Q-value” applies, this is it, at the glocal level, where children quickly determine, in very practical terms, which language is the most advantageous to them. The disadvantageous languages are more endangered when the second generation of children has virtually no more exposure to their ancestral languages, especially in families where parents have different ethnolinguistic backgrounds, and therefore they (the children) are deprived of any motivation to speak it.⁴

⁴ Learning one’s ancestral language in school is already a sign that the language is endangered and is hardly functioning as a vernacular in the community. It is doubtful that the school alone will foster the ecology that will enable the learner to speak it as a vernacular. Ireland is a sad example of such an effort, despite the creation of *Gaeltachts*, which many of the youngsters have been leaving in search of better economic opportunities. Similar language maintenance investments for Breton in Bretagne, France are not more promising. Israeli Hebrew owes its

Here too one notices variation between former settlement and exploitation colonies. In the former, a European language has emerged as the community's vernacular, whereas in the latter it has evolved primarily into a lingua franca for the indigenous elite minority, whereas an indigenous language has emerged as the language of the non-bureaucratic sector of the industry and the urban vernacular. In former settlement colonies, where the majorities of the populations are urban, the blow to the indigenous languages has been swift. In former exploitation colonies, most of the populations are rural, as noted above, and some of these continue to evolve in remote, isolated places poorly connected to the city (Abley 2003). That's where we find evidence that language loss is largely correlated with economic development and patterns of communication.

Third World countries also make it obvious that the form of interethnic communication that can be dangerous to minority languages is face-to-face interaction, not the dominant languages used on radio and/or TV programs. All over the world (including Europe and North America), many people follow radio broadcasts and watch TV programs in language varieties other than their own without speaking the varieties of these programs while perhaps developing a passive competence in them. That basically explains why, as lingua francas that dominate the media, European colonial languages have still not evolved into mass vernaculars in former exploitation colonies. Where they have, albeit partially, such as in Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, and Mozambique, it is not because of the media or of the school system, but because of the idiosyncratic dynamics of their local market places during the colonial rule and the particular way vernacular varieties of the European languages emerged as trade or militia languages.

That the role of the school systems and the media in driving language loss has not been as significant as linguists have claimed can also be noted in the particular ways stigmatized (nonstandard) varieties have resisted change all over the world. In North America, for instance, stigmatization has had less effect than locality and/or class migration on Gullah, African American Vernacular English, American White Southern English, Appalachian English, Old Amish English, and the like. It is the progressive termination of socio-economic marginalization that has endangered Native American and Aboriginal languages in North America and Australia, not the boarding schools. It is the resistance of the Amazon to European colonial penetration that has retarded the endangerment of the indigenous languages of Brazil. It is ethnic segregation that has helped maintain Asian languages in Hawaii, unlike on the plantations of the New World and the Indian Ocean, although, as pointed out in Mufwene (2004, 2005), the differing ways in which the colonies evolved have played a very important role.

All in all, globalization has not exerted on language vitality the kinds of negative effects linguists have associated with it, at least if it is understood as 'the world-wide condition of economic interconnectedness and interdependencies which has made human traffic across long distances more common and enabled the world-wide diffusion of industrial products', giving the illusion of a world becoming more and more integrated and uniform. It has certainly helped some languages spread faster but not in the same way as settlement colonization did in spreading some languages as vernaculars. Globalization has spread some

uncommon success to a strong ideological and political commitment behind it and the involvement of the economic machinery, aside from the misfortune of a history of antagonisms in which the need to define one's ethnic identity is very strong.

dominant languages, notably English, as trade lingua francas with functions that hardly affect the vitality of local vernaculars. The threat to these has come from other vernaculars that have become more important and, in this case, it is the dynamics of the “glocal” socio-economic systems that have played a decisive role.

5. Conclusions

The subject matter of language loss is obviously much more complex than the relevant ever-growing literature in linguistics has revealed. There have been many proposals for solutions to what is considered disastrous for the mankind: the loss of linguistic diversity. Curiously, this has been correlated with loss of cultural diversity. However, it can be argued that there has been replacement of an older form of diversity by a new kind, because globalization qua *mondialisation* has not really made the world more uniform, although it has enabled more exchanges between older, distant cultures. The solutions have also revealed very little understanding of how a language dies, what the real immediate causes are, independent of the fact the socio-economic ecologies of the relevant populations have been changed by contacts with other populations. The question of whether languages as entities strangely separated from their speakers have rights that prevail over those of their speakers has hardly been addressed from the perspective that languages are tools which should enable their speakers to adapt to ever-changing ecologies rather than from the perspective now dominant in linguistics, viz., that speakers should serve their languages and preserve their integrity. It is as if social evolution precluded linguistic and other aspects of cultural evolution. This position does not entail accepting the unfair exploitation of one population by another, but it certainly addresses the following question: What must a subjugated population do to adapt to the changes which their traditional socioeconomic ecologies have experienced, especially when the clock cannot be turned back? Space limitations have unfortunately prevented me from addressing these controversial questions and a host others in this essay. More interested readers are referred to my chapter in the CLS 42 proceedings, where a much more elaborate discussion is provided, and to Mufwene (to appear), in which various evidence is adduced from the African experience to propose more varied rethinking of the complex subject matter.

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