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West African Languages: Medium and Message

Indigenous knowledge in Africa, and the world over, is expressed in language, and usually in an "indigenous" language—in short, the mother tongue of inhabitants of the locality, or a *lingua franca* in regular usage by them. Are these languages simply a neutral medium? Are they just instrumental "vehicles" for the expression of local knowledge and daily life? Or do the languages themselves play some role, by their very structure and usage, in what is thought and known?

Language is very important in Africa. There are upwards of 2,000 languages on the continent, the number varying as a function of the way in which distinctions are drawn among neighboring or related speech traditions. African cultures have been largely oral ones for centuries though varieties of writing (Western, Arabic and a few codes of African origin) have become increasingly well known. In many areas, the status and role of "praise-singer" or "griot" is institutionalized to the point where an entire caste of people devotes its life to learning and orally declaiming the history and traditions of the locality and of its leading inhabitants. African cultures also typically place great emphasis on social relations and communication, all of which adds to the critical role played by language in the organization of community and of knowledge.

The examples in the paragraphs to follow are principally drawn from Hausa, the second most widespread tongue in Africa (after Swahili) and a member of the "Chadic" group of languages. It is principally spoken in northern Nigeria and central Niger, but is used as well in several other countries of the region. The patterns are nonetheless roughly representative of a host of western and central African language traditions.

Language as "capital"

Hausa speakers give every bit as much importance to spoken expression and language as suggested above. *Magana jari ce* a traditional saying maintains: "Language is capital." In the Hausa lexicon, the word *hausa* itself signifies not just the speech of that particular population group, but "language" in general and underlying "meaning." *Me ne ne Hausarka?* people will ask: "What language do you speak?", or, literally "What is your 'Hausa?'" *Ban gane ba*

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Hausarshi is a common way of saying that "I don't understand what he *means*."[1]

At least three levels of Hausa language may have a bearing on how thought is formulated and knowledge expressed: the grammar of the language, its lexicon and the social patterns governing its usage.

The deep structure of grammar?

One of the first things to strike a non-Hausa speaker—and a non-African in particular—in going beyond the fundamentals of the language is that the verb system is not really organized into tenses. In other words, the primary information that the grammatical form of the verb phrase conveys is less *when* something happened or will happen than it is *how* that action is viewed by the people involved and what the nature of their intentions is with respect to it. Though the divisions of the verb parallel to some degree the tenses of many non-African languages, they are better described as "aspects." Action is thus linguistically divided into the categories below*:

Once again, the primary information conveyed by this aspectual organization of the verb concerns the state of human intention and commitment with respect to the action, not the time, even if there are analogies with a tense system. Someone who is leaving a party or house will therefore say to their host *Naa*—which, translated as a temporal statement, would signify (nonsensically) "I have left." What is meant, however, is that the person has decided to leave, and therefore the act is as good as done in the intentional realm.

A focus on intention

In a similar vein, the principal concern of the Hausa speaker is often with the nature of one's resolution or commitment to perform an act and with the process of decision itself, rather than with the exact date and duration of the act's performance. Hausa speakers sometimes express frustration with Westerners' frequent use of the word "perhaps" (*watakila* in Hausa) in their conversation and planning. The habit is seen as a way of avoiding commitment. A popular saying puts the point succinctly: *Watakila abin da ya hana ma*

Verb aspect	Example Hausa phrase	Meaning in Hausa	English equivalent	
			Meaning	"Tense"
Completive	*Yaa tahi*	His leaving can be regarded as completed. (Commitment is accomplished.)	"He left"	Past tense
Continative	*Ya naa tahiya*	He is in the process of leaving or going. (The intention is being accomplished.)	"He is leaving" or "going"	Present tense
Projected	*Zay tahiya*	He plans to leave or go	"He will go"	Future tense
Potential tense)	*Yaà tahi*	"He MAY go." (His commitment is real but conditional.)	"He will very likely go if circumstances permit"	Weak future (no equiva-lent
Intentional	*Yà tahi*	He should or must go. (Others' —or his own—intentions are clear but not executed.)	«Let him go» or «that he go»	Subjunctive
Habitual	*Ya kan tahi*	He is in the habit of going	More or less «he usually goes»	No equivalent tense

* The transcription used for Hausa words and phrases throughout this article is, in general, the one currently prescribed by UNESCO. The table and paragraph to follow are one exception. Long sounds are represented by doubled vowels, as was formerly the case, because there is no other handy way to bring out differences among the verb aspects. A "grave" accent indicates a low tone, and such an accent on the second vowel in a cluster indicates a falling tone.

nasara ƙarya! "Perhaps is the word that saves [literally "prevents"] the Westerner from lying."

Such patterns of expression by no means exclude attention to schedules and timing, and temporal planning concerns have certainly become a more prominent fact of Sahelian life in the last half-century. At the same time, this perspective or "paradigm" may not be so poorly adapted to circumstances where logistics have long been highly unpredictable and lasting commitment has been essential to getting things done — and it may have relevance to the future needs of African society as well.

Using words where it counts

The notion that language does not just express thought, but also shapes or influences it to some extent, has a long history in western linguistic and cultural thought and remains hotly debated. Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir were among the first to articulate it, and the "Whorfian" or "Wharf-Sapir hypothesis" still stirs controversy. Without steering toward those particular shoals, one can at least entertain the idea that the form of a language is part and parcel of indigenous knowledge and a factor to be studied—and savored—in the attempt to preserve it.

Whorf himself paid attention not just to the structure of languages but to their lexical properties as well: i.e., the vocabulary, and, more specifically, the differences between the areas of experience that different languages seem to emphasize by the richness of their lexicon. He was fond of remarking that Eskimo languages have multiple words for different varieties of snow, but only one for all types of motorized conveyance; whereas in English it is nearer the reverse. Critics have aptly pointed out that ski enthusiasts likewise have multiple terms in *English* for varying snow conditions. But the idea that the relative development of different areas of experience in the lexicon of a language says something about the distinctions that are important to its speakers still merits consideration.

An examination of a Hausa dictionary brings some similar ideas to mind. Once again, there are relatively few traditional words for motorized tool—though a number of introduced ones—but the terminology for varieties of relationships among people (both consanguineous and covenantal) and for shades of behavior is extremely developed. Three examples: (a) *nurƙurƙusa* — which can best be rendered as "continually putting off paying someone"; *kwakyara* for "blurting out what ought not to have been said"; and *santi* (or *fanya*)—which designates "saying something ordinary during a group meal that, due to general pleasure with the quality of the food, sends everyone into peals of laughter"!

Lexical creativity

Any African language can be used, of course, to say whatever one wants, and assimilation of new ideas and terms is no less prevalent in these languages than it is in English, French or Chinese —an example of what social scientists call "lexical creativity." Hausa is no exception to the rule. New terms have been created over the years for a host of initially foreign concepts, with sometimes poetic results. The United Nations was dubbed *majalisar ɗinkin duniya* or "the assembly to unite [literally, 'sew together'] the world."

The small French-made Solex motorbike —a simple contraption where the motor rode on top of the front wheel, driving it by friction —was baptized in Hausa *kare ya ɗauko tukunya:* "the dog carrying a cooking pot." And its slightly larger cousin, the "mobylette", was christened more onomatopoetically *ɗan bututu.* (The letter *"ɗ"* being what linguists call an "implosive" sound.) There is, in fact, a Hausa Language Board in northern Nigeria that rules —much like the Académie Française—on neologisms and appropriate ways of expressing new ideas. But what a language community has traditonally — if implicitly —*chosen* to represent by a single specialized term as opposed to a longer explanation says something about the ideas and perspectives that re-occur most often in thought patterns and expression.

Speech behaviors

If language has some influence on thought and expression, it is shaped in turn by patterns of *usage*—the roles people play in employing it and the ends to which they put it. This is, of course, the domain *par excellence* of socio-linguists. Deborah Tannen has written some works well known in the United

[1] *Northern* Hausa is use throughout all these examples and quoted expressions.

States about variations in the speech behavior of American men and women, including striking differences by gender in the meaning of interruptions and overlapping: breaking into what someone else is saying or completing it for them. Stated most simply, for men it tends to be an aggressive and competitive act, for women it can be a kind of support.

An interesting aspect of speech patterns among the Hausa is the frequency —and the role—of similar kinds of "overlapping." The author was once responsible for transcribing word for word the proceedings of a village conference on livestock conducted in Hausa. When the discussions had been recorded and transferred to paper, an interesting thing appeared, something we all knew but had never paid much attention to. A number of very pertinent suggestions about how to stable cattle in the village and provide for their fodder (something not traditionally done in that region) came out during the sessions. On close examination of the transcript and audition of the tapes, however, it was clear that nearly no one had expressed a complete or well-formed idea on the topic. Rather, one person would utter the beginnings of a sentence or thought, someone else would add to it, a third would round it out or reformulate it; and the discourse bounced around the straw enclosure with few, if any, disquisitions or even individually-completed sentences. Yet, through this medium, some useful ideas and resolutions took form.

From talking the talk to walking the walk

There are many parallels to this practice of group or interpersonal complementarity in the social life of the region as well. Another story will illustrate the point. At a similar stage in (personal) prehistory, this author was responsible for setting up the first film projector ever seen in the town of Madaoua, Niger. It required, of course, an electrical generator to boot, as there was no electricity in the town. Unfortunately, once delivered over 500 kilometers of washboard laterite road, neither piece of machinery showed any sign of life and both resisted the best ministrations. The only recourse was the garage of the local *arrondissement*, or county seat, where a crew of barefoot mechanics worked under an adobe mud shelter behind the administrative offices with few tools to repair a small fleet of battered Land Rovers.

The mechanics were glad to oblige, but as they started work our qualms grew. The group of them —five or six —proceeded to squat around the equipment and to poke and pull at it from various angles, while keeping up a rapid and sometimes raucous dialogue about what they were doing. One thought at this point that the projector was history. But within fifteen minutes they had both pieces of equipment running perfectly. Somehow they had managed to use the complementary experience and intuition of all group members —mediated through language—to solve a problem they had never encountered before. In an era when international business headlines the critical—and generally deficient—skills of teamwork and "organizational learning" within the workforce, these very habits, partly built into language form and usage, may turn out once again to be quite applicable.

Food for thought

None of these anecdotal examples should be taken too far or given too much weight. The underlying argument and experience, though, seem worthy of the attention of those interested in indigenous knowledge: part of that knowledge lies in, or is at least supported by, the medium of language itself.

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