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On Typological Approach to Sociolinguistic  
Problems in West Africa

Antonina I. Koval, Victor Ja. Porkhomovsky,  
and Victor V. Vinogradov  
Institute of Linguistics  
Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R.  
Mowcow, U.S.S.R.

0. Abstract

Typological studies in sociolinguistics have been extensively developing during the last decade (W. A. Stewart, C. A. Ferguson, J. A. Fishman, H. Kloss, J. D. Desheriev and others). These typologies have been oriented mainly to either functional differentiation of a language or to person-to-person verbal communication. This approach has proved rather effective when dealing with linguistic situations based on comparatively stabilized patterns of language use.

However, the study of the linguistic situation peculiar to the newly established West African states presents a number of specific problems due to its extremely complicated and unstable nature. In this respect, one can refer to the great ethnic and linguistic diversity of the region with predominantly artificial boundaries between states drawn without any account for ethnic or language differences. In fact, every West African country appears to be a chaotic conglomerate of cultures and languages, with the European languages superimposed on them. There is rather an intrinsic net of interrelations between the native and European languages, on the one side, and major and minor native languages (including various *lingua francas* in the wide sense of the term), on the other. One should not deal with sociolinguistic problems in the region while disregarding heterogeneous factors which affect the linguistic situation in this very specific part of the world.

The basic notion in the typology outlined here is that of communicative milieu--CM (Russian *kommunikativnaja sreda*) which is thought of as a community characterized by relatively stable communicative bonds. Each CM has its own linguistic situation; its structure can be described and typologized through application of a set of parameters. There are three groups of parameters: (1) qualitative, (2) quantitative, and (3) estimative. *Qualitative* parameters include ethno-social factors such as political, cultural, religious, ethno-economic (with a special reference to the profession-and-cast relation), urban, and educational. *Quantitative* parameters include ethno-demographic factors such as the relative number of speakers for each of the languages presented in a given

CM, the degree of ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of a CM, the relative stability of populations (migrating vs. settled inhabitants). *Estimative*, or *value* parameters include the socio-psychological estimation of a language by the speakers themselves, i.e., approving, disapproving, and neutral.

Application of the parameters listed above permits us to distinguish three typologically homogeneous sociolinguistic areas (zones): (a) intracontinental, (b) coastal, (c) medial. These areas (and the CMs proper to them) do not necessarily coincide with the states in question. On the contrary, the linguistic situation of a given West African state depends on the extent to which the state boundaries coincide with the sociolinguistic areas. It is of great importance whether a state belongs to one area or two or three areas simultaneously, as is the case of Upper Volta (areas A and C), Senegal (areas A, B), Nigeria, Cameroun (areas A, B, C). The whole situation of a state is thus stratified according to the generally defined sociolinguistic areas which stand in certain correlation with each other within the state.

The theoretical benefit of the approach outlined above is that it allows to describe in the same terms both the linguistic situation of West Africa as a whole and the linguistic situation of every particular state, the heterogeneity of the latter being viewed as a combination of typologically different sociolinguistic areas within one country. The approach is also believed to be useful when dealing with practical issues such as national languages, language planning, etc.