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Title:

Communicating with Victoria's Emerging African Language Communities: Issues and Responses

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Abstract

Increasingly ICTs are seen as an important and powerful means for communication with and within communities in different languages and in facilitating and broadening opportunities for communication locally and globally. However, for refugee and humanitarian immigrants, such as those who have been arriving in Australia in the past decade from Africa, there are particular challenges in the provision of equitable and accessible ICT-facilitated communication in their languages. Recent research undertaken for the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Victorian Multicultural Commission has highlighted the complexity of the sociolinguistics of language use within some African background communities where linguistic diversity and individual bilingualism/multilingualism is the norm, and the status, educational policies and nature of the use of different languages in the home country context has affected the extent that adult language users have access to literacy skills in each/any language and formal education and related skills, such as those required to easily access ICTs. In this paper we will present the findings of our research on African language usage and communication preferences in some of the major emerging African language communities and discuss implications and responses for addressing issues of information poverty and the digital divide.

Introduction

In comparison to many other countries that have accepted large numbers of CALDB migrants, Australia has been characterised as being proactive in its recognition of its legal and moral obligations to provide language services (Edwards, 2004) and to have been innovative and responsive in exploring and implementing means of providing access to information and opportunities for civic and social engagement to people in the community who are only able to or would prefer to access information in a language other than English. This commitment is evident through the Victorian Government's Languages Services Strategy and the related 2002 'Valuing Cultural Diversity' policy statement that emphasise equity in government service provision, and also in initiatives, such as the work that Vicnet and the State Library has led in promoting the use of LOTE online, including the Open Road Conferences. An impressive part of the Open Road initiatives have been the work done to develop code for orthographies for emerging community languages, such as Dinka, that can ensure that recently arrived communities, such as those from the Dinka regions in Sudan, can have the same level of access to online communications as other groups whose languages may already have font sets available and are widely used online.

We applaud such innovation and commitment. It is important that we recognise the value of proactive responses to provide access and opportunities for all in our community to engage interactively online. However, recent research that we have been engaged in highlights just how complex some of the issues of providing equitable information access are when dealing with some of Victoria's newest refugee and humanitarian migrants, such as those from Africa. In this paper we will discuss some of the impacts of multilingualism, cultural preferences in communication practices and educational disruption in contributing to particular challenges in

achieving equitable and effective ICT-facilitated communication for many African language communities.

The concept of the digital divide is often evoked in attempting to capture how technology is creating new forms of disadvantage that magnify which existing social, economic and educational disadvantage. Much of the literature on alleviating the digital divide focuses on issues of extending access to technology and providing education in ICT skills. However, beneath these strategies is an assumption of basic educational skills, such as mother tongue literacy and basic numeracy skills, on which more sophisticated ICT skills and learning can be founded. Yet as Mack's (2001) work in the US reminds us the coalescence of lack of educational and technological access with racial and/or cultural difference has the potential to create "an information deprived "virtual underclass"". From a different but complementary perspective, Hawisher and Selfe (2000; p.1) highlight the complex interrelationships between culture, literacy practices and the web/internet and problematise the 'global village' narrative and its embedded cultural assumptions of the web as a "culturally neutral literacy environment" as simplistic and idealistically naïve. Insights such as these seem particularly apt when considering ICTs and Victoria's emerging African communities and give us cause to reflect on the ways in which our communication systems and approaches are what Hawisher and Selfe would characterise as being "culturally determined, structured and ordered" and thereby exclude many who they are seeking to include.

Potential and Constraints in African Languages Services Provision

Australian government and other agencies have lacked preparedness for the diversity and complexity of African sociolinguistics (Batibo, 2005), as no previous migrant settlement has confronted them with the same degree of linguistic complexity as the recent humanitarian

migrations from East, West and Central Sub-Saharan Africa. In examining the situation in the Republic of Congo, Woods (1994: 19) succinctly describes some characteristics of African linguistic diversity and multilingualism "residents are likely to be exposed to three layers of language: an inner, ethnic language; the outer, official language...and an intermediate, national language." Most Africans regularly use well above three languages with varying proficiencies to communicate with neighbouring ethnic groups and others nationally and internationally. However, over time languages of wider communication and areally dominant languages are growing in importance and usage accompanied by the gradual decline of minor languages that have functioned in more restricted domains within the family, village or immediate ethnic group. Batibo (2005) argues that factors responsible include expanded urbanisation and the increasing frequency of interethnic movements and interactions through trade and employment; and intermarriages, leading to a growing reliance on lingua francas. In many cases, while languages of wider communication are ex-colonial languages that are almost in all cases learned through formal education, areally dominant languages are those that have utility value in the current cash economies across many ethnic groupings.

These developments in language use patterns in migrants' former homelands are potentially useful for host nations such as Australia to consider. National lingua francas or areally dominant languages appear to be those with the best prospect for being adopted for service provision to immigrants from a particular country or region. However, the potential that dominant languages (either nationally or areally) have for language service provision needs to be carefully examined in the light of a number of sensitivities. Elevating the status and promoting the usage of specific languages raises issues of linguistic competition and language attitudes that make language planning in African communities themselves a contentious issue. Conflicts in the home regions and experiences of oppression under current and former, often colonial, regime/s have generated rejectionist attitudes towards languages that are associated

with those deemed to have played a part in domination and/or trauma (eg. Dinka speakers are often hostile to Sudanese Arabic and prefer to receive information in English, if not available in Dinka, provided someone in the immediate family has sufficient English). Furthermore, in the context of migration, those that value language as a symbol of identity have strong views about their rights to access services through their preferred language/s.

Differential levels of proficiency in different languages within communities also create a need for sensitivity in language services planning. The unavailability of formal education for many, changes in language-in-education policies under different regimes and the conflict and disruption in the immigrants' home countries have impacted on the nature and variability of individuals' competence in each of their languages and their capacity for literacy usage in one or more. Differential proficiency has gender dimensions too, as in most cases, women and female children have been most disadvantaged in accessing education in the troubled regions.

Background on Research

Commencing in 2003, the Victorian Multicultural Commission ((VMC), formerly Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs, has been engaged in initiatives to improve government capacity to respond to the language services needs of emerging communities from Africa. Since 2005 this has included supporting research to assist in gaining a more comprehensive picture of the diversity of African languages usage within Victoria. The primary focus has been communities of African background humanitarian and refugee settlers as these migrants tend to have lower levels of English proficiency as well as other disadvantages resulting from their status (eg. educational disruption, personal/family dislocation and trauma) and thus are the groups who are most likely to need access to language services to assist them in accessing government services.

At the time that we started our research in 2005 Census data from the next Census was not to be collected until mid-2006 for accessing by agencies from mid-2007 onwards, so the brief we were given was to collate available data from government and non-government agencies providing settlement and support services and ethnic associations to assist in making estimates of the African languages being recorded and the numbers of speakers of each. Data for the project was collected from available government databases and through semi-structured interviews with representatives of 35 relevant agencies providing settlement and support services and/or community coordination and leadership and was published by VOMA in 2006 (Borland and Mphande, 2006).

To follow-up on the initial phase of research a second project was designed and funded by the Victorian Multicultural Commission in 2007 to enable a start to be made in achieving a more in-depth on the ground understanding about aspects of language and literacy usage within 5 major African language communities for which it was considered that there was a lack of sufficient information for decisions to be made about aspects of language service provision, particularly the value for the communities of the translation of government informational materials. The aims of this second project were:

- To collect available information from community representatives and members about the patterns and preferences for language usage for 5 African languages emerging in Victoria: *Dinka, Somali, Amharic, Sudanese Arabic and Swahili*
- To document for each language the extent of literacy knowledge and use within its Victorian community and its relationship to factors such as the level of formal education achieved, educational context, age and gender
- To investigate for bilinguals/multilinguals in each language community which languages are spoken and written and preferences for language for communication in language services contexts.

- To investigate the ability of speakers of Sudanese Arabic to read Standard Arabic, and the attitudes of Sudanese Arabic speakers from different parts of Sudan (North vs South) towards translated materials in Standard Arabic.

This second project to date has resulted in interviews and focus group discussions within each language community involving more than 30 community leaders and workers with on the ground knowledge of language and literacy use based on their experiences within their community.

Language Diversity in African Humanitarian Migrant Communities in Victoria

Our initial research in the Victorian context revealed a range of factors contributing to difficulties in determining and responding to community needs in providing access to materials in languages of preference for recently arrived language communities. First, there was a lack of systematic and universal approaches to record keeping on language knowledge and preferences and none of the databases that agencies were operating with and/or had developed had the capacity at that time to enter more than one language for each client. Second, choices about how to enter data and ensure its integrity and comparability appeared to be idiosyncratic, so different agencies were categorising varieties of 'Arabic' differently, some were using the term 'Sudanese' to refer to one or more varieties of Sudanese Arabic, and there was a lot of other confusion in the naming of languages and their data entry. These inconsistencies and differences were further exacerbated by the lack of continuity in service provision agencies resulting from the 'contracting out' practices adopted in the provision of settlement and support services (see Borland and Mphande, 2006).

Across the agencies approached 50 languages were mentioned as being recorded as the languages of African humanitarian arrivals in their databases to the end of 2005 (see Table 1). Further languages have since also been documented. In addition, since this initial work was

conducted the 2006 Australian Government Census has been held and data from it released. Whilst the large growth in African languages is evident to some extent in the Census data, African linguistic diversity continues to remain to a large extent invisible with less than 20 of the languages that we had documented in our research being separately listed and the remainder falling within the generic category/ies, African Languages, nec and African Languages, nfd. Furthermore, the data does not make it possible to gain in-depth insights into Australian African language multilingualism and language and literacy preferences.

Table 1: Summary of Languages Mentioned by Country (from Borland and Mphande, 2006)

Country	Language
Burundi (3)	French, Rundi, Swahili
D.R. Congo (5)	English, French, Lingala, Nyanga, Swahili
Eritrea (4)	Arabic, Saho, Tigre, Tigrigna
Ethiopia (4)	Amharic, Harari, Oromo, Tigrigna
Liberia (15)	Akan/Ashante, Bassa, English (Liberian and Standard), Gio/Dan, Grebo, Kissi, Kpelle, Krahn, Krio, Kru(men), Loma, Mandingo, Mano, Vai
Sierra Leone (3)	Fula/Pular, Krio, Temne
Somalia (5)	Arabic, Italian, Maay, Oromo, Somali
Sudan (18)	Acholi, Anuak, Arabic (Juba, Standard and Sudanese), Bari, Dinka, Fur, Kakwa, Lopit, Luwo, Ma'di, Moro, Murle, Nuer, Otuho (Lotuko), Shilluk, Tingal

In-depth Work with Communities on Communication and Literacy and Preferred Means of Information Access

Borland and Mphande (2006) highlight the lack of understanding about the extent to which speakers of each language were literate in that language, or in any of the other languages that they may speak, when their preferred language is not available. For the past year we have been working on gaining these more in-depth perspectives from within the language communities for the 5 African languages identified as having the highest numbers of speakers – Somali, Dinka, Amharic, Sudanese Arabic – and for the quite widely spoken East African lingua franca, Swahili, for which the numbers of requests for interpreters had been rapidly growing in the period, 2004-5. Table 2 summarises trends in practices and preferences for each language group.

In reflecting on the outcomes of the research, some key points emerge, and these are briefly summarised below:

- Even in communities where there is a relatively high level of basic adult literacy in the language (eg. Somali), the preference of many/most adults is for oral modes of communication.
- When a person's home language/mother tongue is not a language that has been used in the education system at home, then few are likely to have developed literacy in the language to a high level (eg. Dinka for adults - the main vehicle for literacy learning was in the churches, not through school education, and relatively few have strong literacy skills in the language).

Table 2: Literacy Knowledge and Preferences for Modes of Communication for 5 important African languages

Language	Adult Speakers (est. no.)	Adult Speakers with Literacy in Language (est.%)	Knowledge and Literacy in other Languages	Preferred Modes of Communication
Amharic	1,500	<p>Varied estimates were given: 20-40% good level; further 20-40% have some basic literacy</p> <p>Least likely to be able to read in Amharic are those who have one or more of the following as part of their personal and family circumstances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • from remote areas of the country where there was no/limited access to schooling, • from families who are illiterate • not mother tongue Amharic speakers • younger adults with disrupted schooling 	<p>Many know some Tigrinya or Oromo (depending on their home area) and if they can read in Amharic (Geez script) then also can read these scripts</p>	<p>Majority personally prefer to get information in oral forms, either face to face in a group or through viewing/listening to a dvd/cd/video</p> <p>maximum of 30-40% of adults in the community would access material from brochures written in Amharic – most likely to do this are males in the 30-50 age range.</p> <p>Younger generations with Australian schooling prefer to access information in English</p>
Dinka	2,500	<p>Only about 40% of adults can read or write Dinka confidently</p> <p>Most who are literate in Dinka - now 45-60 years.</p> <p>Very few between 20-45 years old have had the opportunity to develop literacy in Dinka through formal instruction, but may have acquired some literacy informally through religious observance.</p> <p>Only L1 Dinka speakers interested in Dinka literacy</p>	<p>Some have knowledge of Sudanese Arabic and other languages of their tribal lands.</p>	<p>Older people prefer to get information through face to face explanation</p> <p>Younger people are attracted by media/video. If they are to receive brochures then they would prefer them in English</p> <p>Delivering information in Dinka or English will be accepted by Dinka speakers.</p>

		Lack of commonly shared understandings about language varieties and standardisation can lead to lack of tolerance of Dinka written according to other than the speaker/reader's own variety		
Somali	3,000	<p>About 70% of Somali adults in Melbourne can read and write some Somali, including most young adults, although there was some difference in estimates (lowest 50%, highest 90%).</p> <p>Only about 30% of adult Somalis can read easily and fluently with approximately a further 40% being able to read a little and with some effort.</p> <p>Most Somalis who are literate would be strongest in their literacy in Somali.</p>	<p>Many Somalis have some knowledge of one or more other languages – languages mentioned: English, Italian, Swahili, Amharic, French, Arabic (in descending order of preference),</p> <p>Those who can read prefer to get written information in Somali than in English.</p>	<p>Somali community is an oral society and people prefer to receive information orally and in Somali.</p> <p>Women, men and older people all prefer to receive information face to face, although radio, TV and video are also acceptable for other than older people.</p> <p>Transmission from written to oral is common through a chain of communication starting with attendance at or reading notices at the mosque, with those who can read passing the information onto others.</p> <p>Young people are more likely to access information through brochures, TV or the internet, and are likely to be more confident and to prefer English.</p>
Sudanese Arabic	2,400	<p>Level of literacy knowledge and use in Sudanese Arabic affected by age and gender, but approx. 85% are not able to read Arabic very well.</p> <p>Most women are not literate, with men being more likely to be able to read.</p> <p>Most likely to read are males of 30+ years and those who have transited through North Sudan and Egypt</p>	<p>Nuer, Dinka and Juba Arabic commonly used and preferred as lingua francas than Sudanese Arabic</p> <p>Those who have some literacy knowledge are also likely to have acquired some literacy in their 'mother tongue' languages</p>	<p>Arabic, whether Classical or Sudanese, not generally well received as the language for government information. Those who fled via North, Egypt etc are more likely to accept information in Arabic.</p> <p>To receive government information: Women prefer face-to-face explanation Men: written information or face-to-face explanation Older people prefer video/DVD, face-to-face and audio-visual (graphics etc) Young: English.</p> <p>Other points that were made included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Radio is not very accessible, partly because

				<p>of program schedule and timing and partly because with low literacy dealing with location of stations etc was difficult. (Most who can and do access radio are also likely to be literate and to be able to access info via other means as well)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video/TV preferred and mechanism such as VHS or DVD provided seems to be well accepted • Computer and internet access are very limited for most, so computer based delivery not likely to provide good access.
Swahili	1,000	<p>A very diverse range of East Africans have some knowledge of Swahili</p> <p>70-90% of those who speak Swahili can read it at least to some extent</p> <p>Those lingua franca speakers without formal education in Kenya or Tanzania, such as most refugees, have good oral skills but they are not strong in reading and writing.</p> <p>Most Sudanese, Burundians, Ugandans, Somalians, Ethiopians, Congolese have picked up Swahili through interacting with the local community, but not through formal schooling.</p> <p>There is a transfer of literacy between Swahili and English through shared script etc</p>	<p>Mother tongue English</p> <p>For some Swahili seen as a 'neutral' lingua franca that avoids tribal associations</p>	<p>Most prefer to get government information in English if they can read/write it as they find it easier for interacting with the wider community if in English</p> <p>Women – prefer face to face communication in Swahili with diagrams and pictures</p> <p>Men – if they can read and write, they will read printed materials in Swahili; if can't read and write, then prefer face to face discussion with diagrams and pictures</p> <p>Older people – unless educated through Swahili, prefer face to face communication</p> <p>Younger people – prefer to receive information through video, audio-visual, listening to radio, diagram and pictures</p>

- Gender, age and whether a person lived primarily in an urban or rural area in their homeland, are key factors that influence the likelihood of a person having acquired literacy in one or more of their languages. In general, older people (50+) and younger people (<20) were unlikely to be literate in one or more African language. Those whose origins were from rural areas tend to have relatively little education and therefore no or limited literacy. Women tend to have less formal education than men, especially if they are from rural areas, so tend to have comparatively lower literacy levels than men.
- Well-educated people in the various language communities often play a key **information brokering** role – regularly accessing online information about events back home and government information provided locally in one or more their languages and disseminating this to others in community settings where they gather
- Those with well-developed literacy in their own language also tended to have had quite a good level of formal education and many were also confident about their literacy skills in English and/or capacity to develop literacy in English.
- ICTs are still not particularly attractive and accessible to those with low or no literacy, although recent technological advances provide access to less print literacy dependent forms of digital communications (POD and VOD casts, pictorially and voice driven interfaces) and these may prove to be more attractive to low literacy adults.
- Amongst many South Sudanese and other East African refugees, English is preferred to other language/s associated with most recent home country colonisation (eg. Sudanese Arabic) and as proficiency develops English is gaining in currency as an interethnic lingua franca. Speakers of Sudanese Arabic from South Sudan who were not literate in Arabic prior to coming to Australia are not likely to be interested in

learning Arabic and accessing government information and internet-based resources in Arabic. They would prefer to focus their efforts on English.

- Bilingual materials (examples given were with English and another language) are viewed as being valuable as they acknowledge differential linguistic and literacy proficiency and maximise means by which information can be accessed and meanings negotiated.
- The majority of those who may be using Swahili appear to be refugees/humanitarian immigrants and others who have acquired the language informally as a lingua franca. Most of these are not highly literate in Swahili, or would have stronger literacy in English than Swahili. Only those who have grown up and been educated in countries in which Swahili is an official language (eg. Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda) are likely to have a strong level of literacy skills in Swahili.

Implications for ICT Developments Geared to African Humanitarian Communities

The findings from our research to date have a number of implications in developing ICT initiatives for African humanitarian communities, including:

- For adult education programs, a literacy focus is critical. Approaches that foster multiliteracies, supportive group learning and which encourage engagement that is not solely text-based has the potential to assist in breaking down literacy and educational barriers to use of ICTs, as well as assisting those who are able to code and decode text and navigate screens of information that include written text
- Issues around lack of language standardisation and multiple varieties means that sensitivity and community consultation is needed in the process of developing materials in the language for use in digital communications

- It is critical to assess the extent to which the speakers of a language have literacy in that language, and/or the desire to develop literacy in the language before investing in developing resources in the language – ask the community what they want and need!
- There is value in developing computer literacy and modes of access that can facilitate non-literate community members being able to access information in non-print forms – eg. info kiosks accessing DVD, audio-visual resources, VODs and PODcasts – in the language of their choice.

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