



SECRET MANIPULATIONS

*Language and Context
in Africa*

ANNE STORCH

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LANGUAGE AND CONTEXT IN AFRICA

Anne Storch

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{ PREFACE }

That language use and choices made by speakers contribute to the shaping of societal structures has frequently been observed by linguists. This book wants to make a contribution to our understanding of the relationship between society and language in exploring how social structure influences language practice, and how speakers have agency that shapes societal structure through the manipulation and hence the use of language. The chapters of this book aim at discussing linguistic manipulation across the languages of Africa, also addressing topics such as register variation, language ideologies, linguistic taboo, the linguistic treatment of culturally ambiguous concepts, and the contact-induced spread of culturally specific manipulations of linguistic patterns. These forms of linguistic practice are based on the deliberate manipulation of language.

In presenting data and analyses on these phenomena, this volume also addresses a linguistic universal—namely, variation in language. Languages always exhibit a certain degree of variation, which makes them adaptive in many ways, and they are always polylectal to some extent, which makes them useful tools in creating power relations and social hierarchies, for example. Manipulation in this context contrasts with a kind of arbitrary “standard” of a language and is always considered more marked. Deviation from a norm thus also creates a need for normalization, and this has much to do with the development and use of language ideologies. This does not stand in contrast with Agha’s (2005) enregisterment hypothesis, which emphasizes that linguistic practice and the use of certain deviant forms actually create registers, but adds information on the sociohistorical and cultural contexts of such processes.

After exploring characteristic features of manipulated languages (such as their evasiveness, secrecy, etc.) and identifying the main types of manipulated languages (e.g., play language, honorifics, avoidance languages) this study focuses on secrecy, mimesis, sacrilege, and ambiguity. The central thesis of this book is that these concepts are the basis of power and construction of social norms through the manipulation of language, and that they at the same time shape the way in which language may be deliberately changed. An interesting and important aspect of this thesis is that language ideology and linguistic knowledge are expressed by the way in which speakers manipulate language and play with its grammatical properties. This is important because linguistic ideology motivates contact between languages in specific ways, which finally influence the way in which a language may change over time. It is the conscious creation of specific linguistic forms by speakers that contributes to specific forms of deliberate language change, and how language

necessarily—because of its relation to power—is polylectal and hence is characterized by the application of varying norms and normative strategies. This stands in contrast to more traditional views on language change in Africa, which often employ a biologicistic model.

In order to understand linguistic manipulation in its sociocultural context, this study spans several areas within linguistics and anthropology. Readers interested in the general background of manipulated languages and their typology may concentrate on chapters 1 and 2. Those who are interested in theoretical approaches to secrecy and the structures of secret languages are referred to chapter 3. Chapter 4 will be of interest to all those who are interested in spirit possession, the conceptualization of the Other, and European–African encounters of the past. This chapter also contains a section on ideophones and poetic or narrative style that will be of relevance for readers interested in expressive language. Linguists and anthropologists who study linguistic taboo, gender, and power relations can refer to chapter 5. Chapter 6 will be of specific interest for those who study the metaphorical use of language and indirect communication. Linguists who concentrate on language contact and linguistic ideology are referred to chapters 7 and 8.

It is hoped that this book will encourage linguists to study manipulated language, the use of speech registers, and local linguistic knowledge in the field, contributing to a deeper understanding of the meaning and practice of language in Africa and elsewhere.

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This book is the result of many years of research on the topic, starting in 1995 with fieldwork in the Nigerian Jukun-speaking areas and commencing in 2000 with research on Western Nilotic in Uganda and Sudan. After spending such a long time collecting data and developing approaches to it, I would have been unable to complete this volume without the invaluable help and inspiration of many colleagues and friends. I wish to use this opportunity to express my gratitude to all of them. My warmest thanks go to Heike Behrend, who provided comments and ideas on all topics of this study, and who not only encouraged me to explore secrecy in its many fashions, but also graciously volunteered to join in studying potentially ambiguous foods and words. I am also most grateful to Gerrit Dimmendaal for sharing his fascinating and deep insights into the cultural and social contexts of languages in Africa and elsewhere as well as for his constant encouragement. I am indebted as well to Heinz Felber and Gunter Senft for having read through the whole draft of this book and for providing invaluable corrections and comments.

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{ LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS }

ACT	actualizer
Ar.	Arabic
APP	absolute possessive pronoun
ASP	absolute subject pronoun
AUX	auxiliary
COMPL	completive
CONJ	conjunction
CONT	continuous
DIM	diminutive
F	feminine
FOC	focus
FUT.I	future I
GEN	genitive
HAB	habitual
Hs.	Hausa
IMIT	imitation
IMP	imperative
IMPERF	imperfective
ISP	independent subject pronoun
LOC	locative
LOG	logophoric marker
N.AG	nomen agentis, agent noun
NEG	negation
NOMZ	nominalizer
O	object

OBLIG	obligative
OP	object pronoun
PAST.REM	remote past tense
PB	Proto-Bantu
PBC	Proto-Benue-Congo
PERF	perfective
PL	plural
POSS	possessive
PP	possessive pronoun
PREP	preposition
PRES	present tense
PROG	progressive
PROH	prohibitive
S	subject
SG	singular
SP	subject pronoun
SUB	subjunctive
TAM	tense-aspect-mode
V	verb
VN	verbal noun

Secret Manipulations

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Change and Manipulation

1.1 What This Book Is About

This book addresses a specific form of language change: deliberate manipulations of a language by its speakers. These manipulations are based and depend on cultural and social contexts; they are often—if not always—considered to be secret and are at the same time expressions of difference and power. The central thesis on which the explorations of manipulated language in this book are based is that language here—deliberately diverging from the norm—is central to the construction of social norms, and that, exactly by manipulation and alteration, identity may be explored and defined. Manipulated language and deliberate linguistic change are thus seen as the creation of a medium through which speakers attempt to preserve certain structures. This bears in itself a contradiction, as manipulated language may become part of the language from which it was originally derived, inevitably changing it.

The complexity and diversity of linguistic manipulation and how it is linked to the structure of society are addressed in this book by referring to secrecy, mimesis, sacrilege, and ambiguity as leading concepts of power. This is reflected in the book's organization. After giving an overview of the history of research on African manipulated languages and the meanings attributed to the phenomenon by Africanists in § 1.1.1, the consequences that speakers' choices may actually have for language history are discussed in 1.2. In 1.3 key concepts that characterize manipulated language are introduced. These are important to address first, as manipulated languages share a number of features and are characterized by some particular principles, which are explored in the remaining chapters of this study. One such trait is the evasive nature of the word and the transitional character of derived forms of communication, from which manipulated languages themselves benefit in a very creative form by underscoring the transformational character of manipulated forms of communication and thus negating evasiveness to a certain extent. Manipulation can also be understood as an act of subversion here, constructing an opposition to

its existence as part of a whole, and thereby, in a fantastically productive contradiction, strengthening the source from which manipulated languages emanate.

Before turning to the leading concepts that I want to focus on in the present study, I will first present in chapter 2 a typological overview of types of manipulated languages, such as play languages, honorifics, youth language, and so on, and explore their use as markers of in-group identity and social distance. I claim that manipulated languages can be used in this way because they are based on or correlated to specific linguistic ideologies, which are, as a cultural concept, introduced in section 2.3.

The following chapters can be read as independent texts, as each addresses linguistic manipulation from a different perspective, namely, secrecy, mimesis, sacrilege, and ambiguity. At the same time, however, these chapters are interdependent, so that we first need to explore the role of secrecy as a means to create and maintain power (chapter 3); it is the secret's revelation that is the actual strategy of the creation and demonstration of power. This approach is based on Taussig's theory (1999), which involves a new perspective on ritual as an interplay of secrecy and unveiling. The use of secret languages and initiation languages is particularly relevant to this discussion.

Taussig's work and the discussion of secrecy in the praxis of deliberately changed language are central to understanding the mimetic character of many types of manipulated languages. In chapter 4 these languages are described and analyzed, with the focus is on spirit languages and language used in songs and as art, as well as on expressive language (e.g., ideophones). Here, the mimetic interpretation of the Other (for example, a spirit impersonated by the speaker) or of an event enables the speaker to overcome social boundaries and achieve agency, albeit by means other than using secrecy to gain power. This aspect of mimesis may also include strong exclusionist tendencies, where the Other, by mimetic interpretation, for example, is characterized as having a socially marginalized, underdog position. This can be observed in Baroque imitations of African linguistic and musical praxis.

In chapter 5, the theory on language as a means to construct social norms developed in this book is taken a step further. Here, I want to demonstrate how apparently violating social norms and taboos by using a specifically manipulated form of language may considerably help strengthen social boundaries insofar as we can equate sacrilege with unmasking, or with violating secret boundaries. Here, inversion in the form of vulgarity works as an instrument of power in a way similar to secrecy.

Inversion may be negated in forms of ambiguity, and consequently chapter 6 presents an analysis on how potentially dangerous items may be marked grammatically as ambiguous concepts, thereby directly referring to the ambiguity of linguistic and cultural praxis. In this chapter I will present examples from the language of food and poison to illustrate my point.

These issues are not only central to our understanding of how language is related to the structure of society but are also important for historical linguistics, being of relevance to current debates concerning the idea of "mixed" languages and providing

insights into the working of the social stratification of language and the social mechanisms behind its development. Furthermore, they are crucial to understanding the stimulus of deliberate language change and in this respect also the dynamics of language and knowledge systems in Africa. These aspects are addressed in chapter 7, which presents a case study on how the practices analyzed above are relevant to and organized in the frame of language contact. I will show in this section of the book that contact phenomena differ according to their context of transmission, and that the borrowing (or spreading) linguistic material from manipulated languages results in different patterns and forms of contact phenomena than other contexts of borrowing and diffusion.

This is central to the conclusion, in chapter 8, where I develop a model for the inclusion of “local” linguistic knowledge in reconstruction work, critically discussing earlier approaches and possibilities for future research on the topic. One central thesis here is that after understanding the principle types, forms, functions, and usage of manipulated languages, we have to reject the discussion of manipulated languages as creoles. It will be further discussed in this chapter that strategies found in the formation of creoles differ from those used in the formation of manipulated languages. As variation appears to be a principle element of language, manipulation contra a “standard” form needs to be understood as one of the basic features of linguistic praxis. The need for normalization arises out of a need to mark the divergence from the norm. Whatever the norm is has to be defined not by using Western linguistic or pedagogical models, but by referring to the speakers’ choices and their reasons for them.

This study is far from providing a complete overview on African manipulated languages, as it concentrates on case studies from the Jukun-speaking areas of Nigeria, in addition to those from Nilotic languages and Bantu-speaking parts of Uganda (and to a lesser extent Sudan). It also presents data on manipulated languages from many other parts and speaker communities of the continent, and examples from the African diaspora. These samples are, for the first time, put in a cultural and social context and examined comparatively in this book. Many of the linguistic strategies found in the African examples of manipulated language do not exhibit very big differences to manipulated languages from other parts of the world but are very specific in terms of their cultural and social backgrounds and meanings. The focus on African manipulated languages therefore owes to two interests, namely, to describe and display the wealth of such linguistic forms in an overview and to explore the contextually specific properties of such languages in Africa.

1.1.1 AFRICANIST BACKGROUND

The approach used in this book is embedded in a more general discussion on language change and its dynamics. Language constantly changes, as it is passed from one generation of speakers to another, or as it is appropriated by various social, political, and cultural contexts. It changes as it marks gender differences or other

forms of social difference, and it undergoes drastic modifications when speakers are exposed to other languages, as might happen in multilingual societies or in newly established contact situations. Even though many processes involved in language change and variation have been described as invisible hand processes (a concept at odds with the concept of linguistic manipulation, e.g., Evans 2003, Keller 2003), which are in principle not controllable by speakers, it has also been suggested by a large number of typologists and sociolinguists that the result of the dynamics of linguistic change (for example, contact-induced changes) in the grammar and lexicon of a language critically depend on its sociocultural history (and, for example, on the social history of the other languages that participate in the contact situation).

The importance of the social history of languages for our understanding of variation, contact-induced changes, internal dynamisms, and so on was probably first formulated in the history of modern linguistics by Schuchardt, who strongly opposed the then utterly evolutionist approach of the Neogrammarians by saying that there exists “no such thing as an unmixed language.”¹ Most of the work of the past two or three decades that refers to the dynamics of linguistic change is in one way or the other based on this insight, which has its modern counterpart in Thomason and Kaufman’s (1988: 35) famous statement:²

The starting point for our theory of linguistic interferences is this: it is the sociolinguistic history of the speakers, and not the structure of their language, that is the primary determinant of the linguistic outcome of language contact. Purely linguistic considerations are relevant but strictly secondary overall.

Consequently, the linguistic cultures, in which contact-induced and other types of linguistic change are contextualized, need to be properly explored and understood in order to substantially contribute to the construction of linguistic history. Because this study sets out at exploring the dynamics of linguistic change that are at work in deliberate manipulations of language, it is interested in exploring the social and cultural background of phenomena such as the creation of play languages through phonological modifications, mimetic interpretations of the Other in spirit languages, or the creation of ambiguities in indirect communication, but even more so seeks to explore a deeper understanding of mechanisms generally at work in any reflection on and manipulation of language by its speakers. Manipulation is understood here as a conscious and directed action that may resemble or be identical with semi-engineering strategies (Zuckermann 2006) and that is closely related to and dependent on language ideologies and linguistic awareness of speaker communities. Even though the phenomenon of linguistic manipulations has not yet been extensively studied for African languages, there are several correlations of this topic to more established fields of study in African linguistics.

The way in which grammatical meanings and structures change, and the dynamics at work in this continuing process, have been one of the most important questions researched in African languages for more than a century. There continues