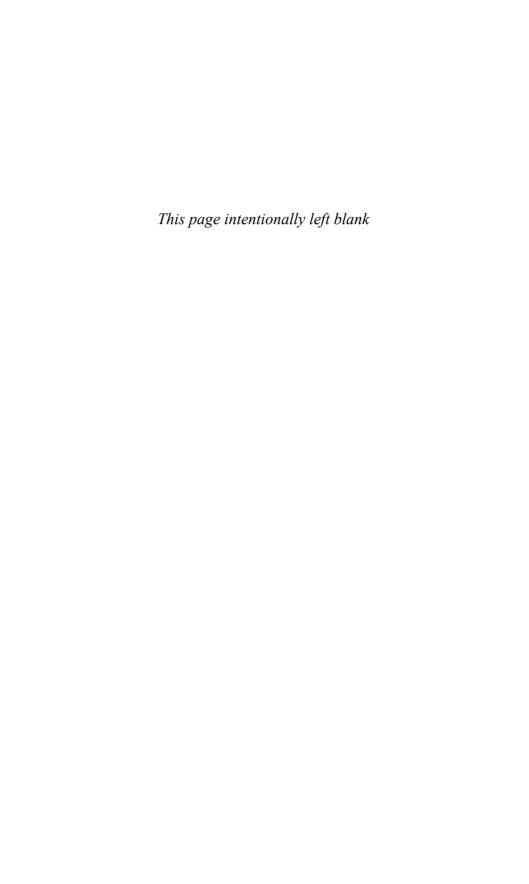


SECRET MANIPULATIONS

Language and Context in Africa

ANNE STORCH

Secret Manipulations



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LANGUAGE AND CONTEXT IN AFRICA

Anne Storch



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{ CONTENTS }

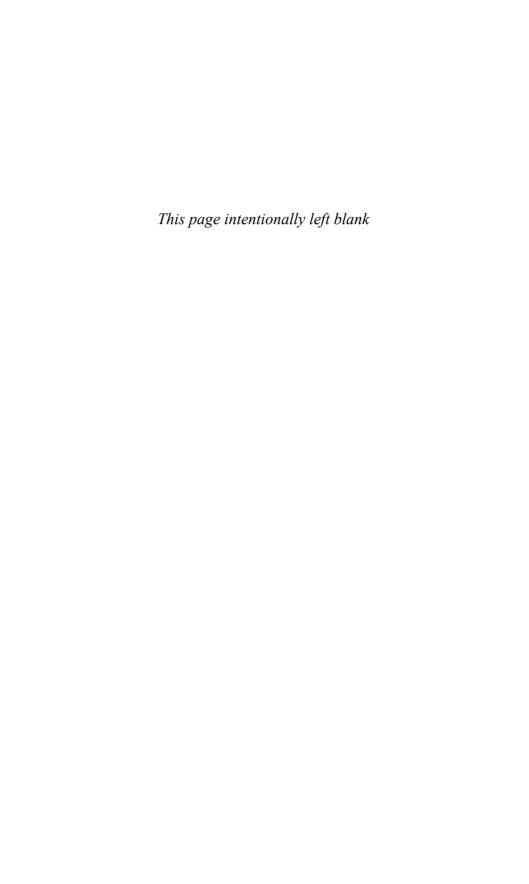
Prefac	ce		ix
Ackno	owledgr	nents	xi
List o	f Maps		xiii
List o	f Tables	S	XV
List o	f Illustr	rations	xvii
List o	f Abbre	eviations	xix
1. Ch	ange ar	nd Manipulation	3
1.1	What	This Book Is About	3
	1.1.1	Africanist Background	5
1.2	Delib	erate Language Change	7
1.3	Langu	uage, Meaning, and Cultural Forms	9
	1.3.1	Work	10
	1.3.2	Revelation	11
	1.3.3	Meaning	12
	1.3.4	Evasiveness	13
	1.3.5	Difference	14
1.4	Data	Used for This Study	14
2. So	cial Dis	tances	19
2.1	Types	of Manipulated Languages	19
	2.1.1	Play Languages: Lessons in Phonology	20
	2.1.2	Honorific Registers: Creating Better Words	23
		2.1.2.1 Paralexification	24
		2.1.2.2 Dyadic Systems	26
		2.1.2.3 Deictic Oppositions	28
	2.1.3	Special-Purpose Registers: Expressing Transition	31
	2.1.4	Avoidance Languages and Word Tabooing	34
		2.1.4.1 Avoidance of Names of Deceased Persons	34
		2.1.4.2 Cross-Generation and In-Law Avoidance Language	36
	2.1.5	Ritual Language	38
2.2		linguistic Parameters	41
		Caste-Defining Registers	42
		Ethnoregisters	43
		Urban Youth Languages	44
2.3	_	istic Ideologies	46
	2.3.1	Dynamics	46
		Interests	47
	2.3.3	Multiplicity	48

vi Contents

		2.3.4	Awareness	49
		2.3.5	Terminology	50
3	Seci	ecv		53
	3.1	-	s and Birds	53
		3.1.1	Evidence	54
		3.1.2	Secret as Power and Violence	57
	3.2	The M	Tagic of the Word	60
		3.2.1	Secret Languages	62
			3.2.1.1 Manipulation of Class Markers in Jukun	62
			3.2.1.2 Morphologization in Lango	67
			3.2.1.3 Names and Shared Metaphors in Dhopadhola	68
			3.2.1.4 Accumulative Manipulation in Fulfulde	71
			3.2.1.5 Oral to Aural in Diaspora Secret Language	74
		3.2.2	Initiation Languages	75
			3.2.2.1 Reversal and Antonyms in Tenda	76
	3.3	On Bo	oundaries	80
4.	Mir	nesis		84
	4.1	Silence	e	84
	4.2	Spirit	Languages	87
		4.2.1	Language Used in Spirit Mediumship	89
		4.2.2	Language Used in Cathartic Spirit Possession	95
		4.2.3	Exploring the Self and Its Language	104
	4.3	Langu	age as Art	108
		4.3.1	Foumban	109
		4.3.2	Coimbra	113
	4.4	Mimet	tic Strategies in Expressive Language	120
		4.4.1	Ideophones and Mimetic Predication	123
		4.4.2	Sound Symbolism as Narrative Mimesis	124
5.	Sac	rilege		133
	5.1	Suicid	e, Sacrifice, and the Magic of the Secret	133
		5.1.1	Proverbs	135
		5.1.2	An Absolute Representation of Woman	144
	5.2		Sacred Grove	152
		5.2.1	Sugar and Other Resources	155
		5.2.2	More on Mimesis and Metaphors: Plants and Medicine	158
	5.3	Vulgai	rity and Obscenity	160
6.	Am	biguity		168
	6.1	Poison	1	168
		6.1.1	Poisoning as Negation of Inversion	170
		6.1.2	Ritual Poisoning	173
			6.1.2.1 Evidence for a Wider Distribution	177
			6.1.2.2 Some Metaphors for Food as Sex	179
	6.2	Consu	imptions	181

Contents vii

7. Contact	187
7.1 Ritual Pathways	187
7.1.1 Difference, Imitation, and Alterity	188
7.1.1.1 Contact along River Systems	189
7.1.1.2 Probabilities of Contact Phenomena	192
8. Conclusions	201
8.1 No Such Thing as an Unmixed Language	201
8.1.1 Time	203
8.1.2 Writing	205
8.1.3 Factors for Deliberate Change	206
8.2 Normalization and Confrontation	209
8.2.1 Linguistic Explanation	209
8.2.2 Transition and Incorporation	211
List of Languages	215
References	221
Index of Languages	
Index of Authors	
Subject Index	



{ 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

x Preface

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 biologistic 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.

{ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS }

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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xii Acknowledgments

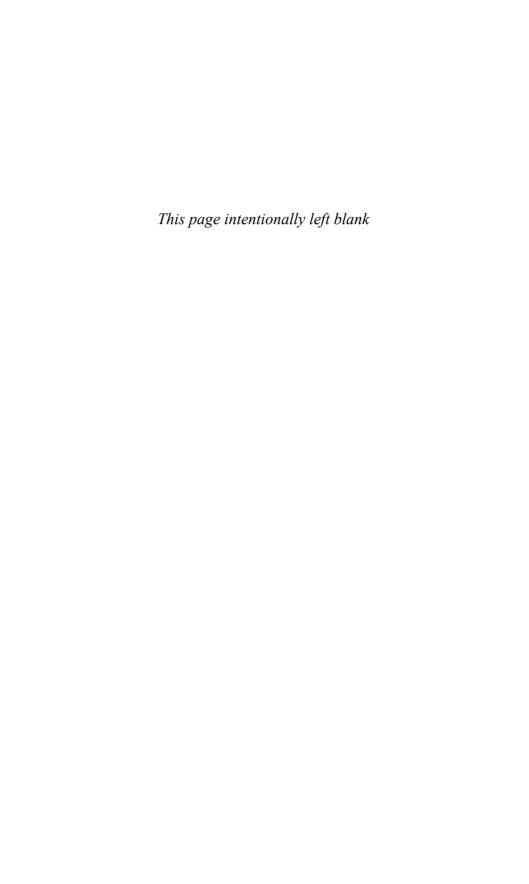
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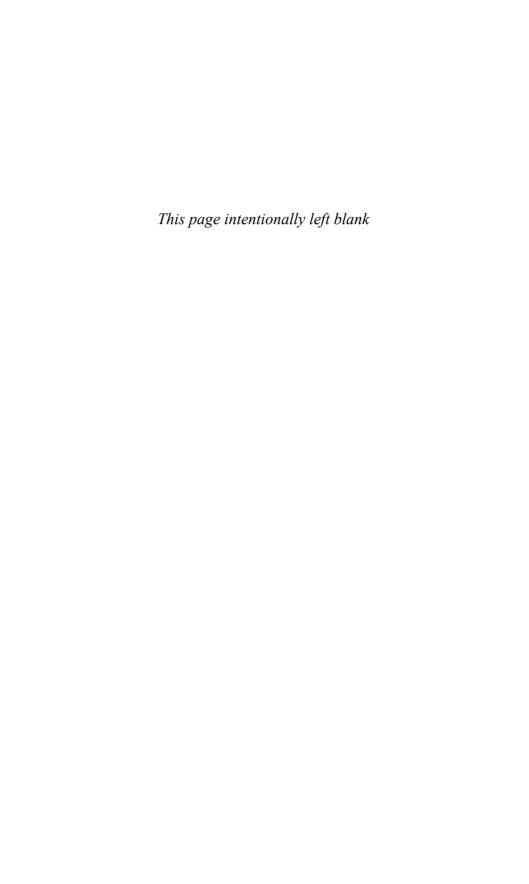
{ LIST OF MAPS }

l	Jukunoid and neighboring linguistic groups (Nigeria)	16
2	Southern Lwoo and Luganda (Uganda)	17
3	Languages with developed smell terminologies in Africa	33
4	Geographic distribution of class 20	178
5	Distribution of Jukun and allies in 2005	191
6	Distribution of manipulated liquid nouns and their	
	semantic patterns	197



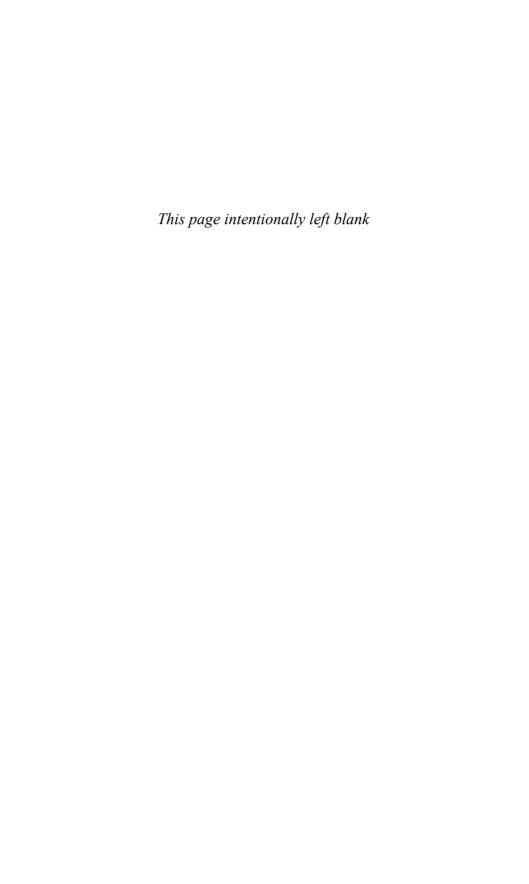
{ LIST OF TABLES }

1	Yemsa Registers	24
2	Dirayta Speech Registers	25
3	Dullay Speech Registers	25
4	Mbugu and Ma'a	44
5	Mam Gabra and Its Hone Sources	66
6	Kop Me Kwəto (Lango)	68
7	Dholuo Names	69
8	Insertion of Syllables in Ganoore (Fulfulde)	73
9	Metathesis, Insertion and Nasalization in Ganoore (Fulfulde)	73
10	The t _λ t Spelling System	75
11	Mutation Grades in Basari	77
12	Ekibandwa (Tanzania, based on Rehse 1915/16)	90
13	Rubandwa	91
14	Jengu Language	93
15	Orim Language	95
16	Zar Language	100
17	Deep Patwa and Atlantic Creoles	107
18	Terminology of Poison (Luganda)	159
19	Luganda Avoidance Terms	160
20	Luganda SMD Organ Terms and Avoidance Strategies	161
21	Ambiguous Food (Hesse, Germany)	180
22	Jukun Basic Vocabulary in Adamawa	193
23	Nám Hene and Related Forms in Chadic	195
24	Goemai Prefixed Nouns and Jukun Cognates	108



{ LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS }

1	"Shilluk tribal king (Reth) Anei Kur talking with British District	
	Commissioner Thompson"	28
2	Le Monde Illustré 1893	55
3	Adidon mask at Mavo, 1996	59
4	Phonetic and semantic antonyms in Tenda	79
5	"The king's clarinet player"	88
6	The bark-cloth curtain and the forest behind it (Wamala tomb)	154
7	Cooking beer in Kona	174
8	Making medicine or poison in Kona	176



{ 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

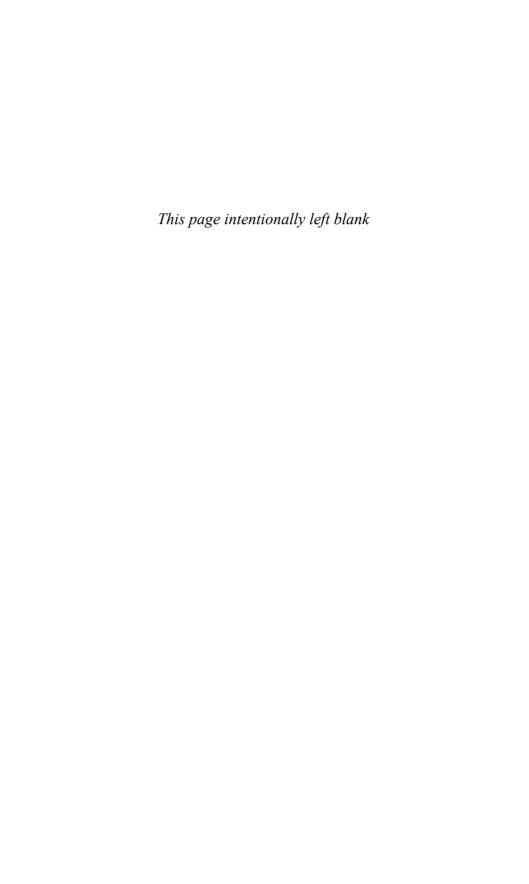
SUB subjunctive

TAM tense-aspect-mode

V verb

VN verbal noun

Secret Manipulations



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." 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:

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