

SOCI 422: SOCIETIES AND CULTURES OF AFRICA

Session 2 – Languages of Africa

Lecturer: Dr. Kodzovi Akpabli-Honu

Contact Information: Kodzovi@ug.edu.gh



UNIVERSITY OF GHANA

College of Education

School of Continuing and Distance Education

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Session Overview

This session discusses the languages of Africa. Africa is inhabited by different peoples as we discussed in session one. Obviously, these people have different characteristics one of which is language. This session is to discuss the number of language families that exists in Africa and where these languages are dominantly spoken.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic One: Niger-Congo Language Family
- Topic Two: Afro-Asiatic Language Family
- Topic Three: Sudanic (Nilotic or Sudanic Nilotes) Language Family
- Topic Four: Khoisan Language Family

Objectives

- By the end of this session students should be able to
- list the four major language families of sub-Saharan Africa
 - identify the various smaller sub-language families from the stock of the major four families
 - determine the individual related languages that make up the sub-families
 - outline the areas where the various major languages and their sub-families are spoken in sub-Saharan Africa.

Reading List

- Greenberg, J. H. (1983), *Languages of Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University.

Introduction

- It is difficult to determine the number of languages spoken in Africa
- Paul Bohannan thought there were 800 classic number of languages
- But Joseph Greenberg, the foremost American authority was of the view that the actual number was probably considerably greater
- The study of inter-intelligibility of languages by linguists may settle the controversy surrounding the actual number of languages spoken in Africa

Introduction cont.

- Despite the lack of precision of the number of languages spoken in Africa, four major language families have been identified in sub-Saharan Africa
- Under these four major language families, all languages of Africa south of the Sahara have been classified
- These major families are the Niger- Congo, Sudanic (also the Nilotic or Sudanic Nilotes), Afro-Asiatic and Khoisan

Niger-Congo Language Family

- It is the largest of all the four major families
- It covers by far the largest geographical area of Africa
- This major language family is not only the largest in terms of the geographical area where it is spoken but also in terms of the number of speakers of its distinct languages
- Joseph Greenberg's (1955) reversed his initial decision to name this language family as Niger-Kordofanian.
- This he did in his *The Languages of Africa* (1963).

Niger-Congo Language Family

- This language family is divided into seven sub-families such as :
 - Benue-Congo
 - Kwa
 - Atlantic
 - Gur
 - Mende
 - Adamawan
 - Khordofanian

Niger-Congo Family cont.

- Among the Benue Congo sub-family is the Bantu
- The Bantu comprise the Zulu, Shona, Buganda and Kinyarwanda languages
- Bantu dominates central and southern Africa
- The Kwa sub-family involves Yoruba, Ijo, Nupe, Fon, Ga-Dangme, Akan, Ewe
- The Mende involves Mande, Bambara Kpelle
- The Atlantic subfamily also includes the Fulani and the Wolof

Niger-Congo Family Cont.

- The Gur sub-family involves Senufo and Dogon
- The Adamawan has Adamawa and Gbaya
- Khordofanian also has Katla and Rashad spoken in central Sudan around the Nuba mountains

The Khoisan sub-family

- This language is mainly spoken in Namibia and Botswana; a kind of it is also spoken in Tanzania
- There are five Khoisan families which have not been shown to be related to each other
- Mainly, the Khoisan is the language of the San, the Khoi-Khoi and the Bergdama
- The language has the most obvious identifying characteristic known as the 'klick'

The Khoisan sub-family cont.

- Some neighbouring Bantu languages such as the Xhosa and the Zulu have clicks
- It is believed they have adopted the click from the Khoisan languages
- The Khoisan is a tonal language
- Sandawe and Hattsa (Hadza) are examples of the tonal nature of the click language

The Sudanic Language Family

- It is another large language family and also known as Nilo-Saharan languages or Nilotic or Sudanic Nilotes
- it is an extremely diverse language family
- Ottenberg & Ottenberg describe this language family as the MacroSudanic
- It is spoken in the Nile-Congo divide, central Sudan, upper Nile and the northern Great Lakes region
- The Sudanic language is sub-divided into different smaller families.

The Sudanic Language Family cont.

- The sub-groupings of the Sudanic family are:
 - the Songhai
 - Saharan
 - Fur
 - Chari-Nile
- They are the smaller language families which are also sub-divided into the individual spoken languages.

The Sudanic Language Family

- The Chari-Nile has the Nubian and the Nilotic as its individual languages
- The Nilotic also has smaller divisions such as Shilluk, Dinka, Nuer, Turkana and the Masai
- All these languages share some unusual morphology although they are believably related
- This could be due to the fact that the various branches must have undergone some major restructuring since diverging from their common ancestor.

The Afro-Asiatic Family

- Although our concern is limited to the sub-Saharan, we can also discuss this language which dominates North Africa
- Some Afro-Asiatic languages fall within the sub-Saharan region as well thus buttressing our interest in it
- The Afro-Asiatic family also have sub-families

The Afro-Asiatic family cont.

- The sub-families are:
 - Semitic
 - Chadic
 - Cushitic
 - Egyptian
 - Berber
- These sub-families also have their individual languages

The Afro-Asiatic family cont.

- The Semitic has Arabic, Aramaic (Syriac & Assyrian), Akkadian also spoken in Assyria and Babylon
- The Chadic also has Hausa which is also spoken all over particularly in Nigeria an area dominated by Niger-Congo languages
- The Cushitic also has the Somali language and spoken within the Horn of Africa
- Of the world's surviving language families, the Afro-Asiatic has the longest written history, as both Ancient Egyptian and Akkadian language of Mesopotamia are members.

Summary

- Languages of sub-Saharan Africa have been divided into four main families: Niger-Congo, Sudanic, Afro-Asiatic and the Khoisan
- These language families have been subdivided into smaller language families which then have their individual spoken languages although some smaller language families are the final spoken languages.
- The Niger-Congo is the largest of the language families in Africa

Summary

- Although the Afro-Asiatic family is predominantly spoken in North Africa and beyond, its Hausa and Cushitic tributaries are spoken in parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

Sample Questions

- List the main language families in Africa.
- Name the sub-language families of the Niger-Congo and the Afro-Asiatic.
- Which of the main language families and its sub-family does your local language belong to?
- List ten (10) common languages of West Africa and the main language families and their sub-families they belong to.