# Beyond the ancestral code:
## Towards a model for sociolinguistic language documentation

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1. Background
    a. Language documentation usually focuses on documenting a single "language" and most documentary work emphasizes the "ancestral code" (Woodbury 2011)
    b. This approach is problematic in the highly multilingual and highly fluid linguistic contexts of Sub-Saharan Africa
    c. How do we document the sociolinguistic setting in which a set of "languages" is used?
    d. Answer is far from clear and documentation is pressing in multilingual contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly as new media appear and old media expand, as languages come and go

2. What is sociolinguistic documentation?
    a. Because this is a new area, there's no clear answer
    b. Work on language documentation has tended to focus on the creation of grammars, dictionaries, and texts
    c. Sociolinguistic documentation should
        i. Support research into significant topics of sociolinguistics (e.g., variation, language ideology, multilingualism, language contact, etc.)
        ii. Support applied linguistic work, such as language planning and culturally responsive language maintenance activities
    d. It, therefore, involves (at least)
        i. Collecting linguistic data (including use of multiple languages) in a carefully considered range of contexts reflecting important social features of a community
        ii. Ensuring that the data is associated with a rich representation of the sociolinguistic configuration of the event which it documents
        iii. Collecting ancillary resources (e.g., surveys of language use, metalinguistic interviews, ethnographic sketches) that will allow the data to be situated in the wider sociolinguistic context of a community

3. Why sociolinguistic documentation?
    a. Helps us get closer to the documentary promise of capturing a full record of the language practices of a community
    b. Foregrounds the importance of context in shaping language use and language choice
    c. Better sociolinguistic data can more effectively inform applied goals such as language planning
    d. Better understanding of a language's sociolinguistic context can provide crucial input to a range of important research domains (e.g., language change, language contact, multilingualism, language variation, ethnography) that might become impossible to investigate in the future
    e. Paying attention to sociolinguistic contexts is more likely to result in reliable data and data that illustrates speakers' range of linguistic competencies
    f. Sociolinguistic contexts are more fragile than lexicogrammatical codes and, therefore, intrinsically more endangered

4. Workshop
    a. August 2012, Buea, Cameroon, more than sixty participants from Africa, the U.S., and Europe, held just before the World Conference of African Linguistics (WOCAL); funded by NSF (OISE-1160649)
    b. Key question: How can we achieve effective sociolinguistic language documentation in Sub-Saharan Africa?
    c. Understanding of *language documentation*: The creation, annotation, preservation, and dissemination of transparent records of the *linguistic practices* of a community (Woodbury 2011)
    d. Report summarizing the conclusions of workshop participants is planned for later this year (2013)

5. Working groups (and chairs)
    a. Conversation and sociolinguistic language documentation (Mark Dingemanse & Eyo Mensah)
    b. The documentation of culturally significant events (Akin Akinlabi & Daniel Ochieng Orwenjo)
    c. How languages acquire "value" in multilingual environments (Pius Tamanji & Ekkehard Wolff)
    d. Social mechanisms fostering multilingualism (Josephat Rugemalira & Mandana Seyfeddinipur)
    e. The relationship between language and culture (Doris Kemmermann & Abdelrahim Mugaddam)

6. General concerns/Instructions to groups
    a. In what crucial ways do African sociolinguistic contexts differ from Western ones?
    b. What kinds of products (e.g., recordings, videos, transcriptions) are required to document the sociolinguistics of African languages? What kind of metadata needs to be collected?
    c. How should that information be structured? How and where should it be archived?
    d. How would one go about planning a field research project to gather the necessary kinds of documentation? What special challenges are there as set against more usual kinds of fieldwork, especially in terms of training and personnel?
    e. What special ethical considerations are there in working with communities to gather data relevant to sociolinguistic documentation?
    f. What kinds of training opportunities are needed for researchers to successfully undertake documentation in this area?
    g. How can a more sociolinguistically-informed approach to language documentation result in the creation of more effective community language resources?
    h. How can such an approach positively impact decisions regarding language planning and policy?

7. Sub-Saharan contexts
    a. Multilingualism (of varying kinds) is the norm; language–"ethnicity" link comparatively weak
    b. Language layering
        i. Indigenous languages associated with comparatively small communities
        ii. Socioeconomically prominent indigenous languages (e.g., Yoruba, Wolof)
        iii. Indigenous vehicular languages
        iv. Colonial languages
        v. Potentially crosscutting classification: "official" or "national" languages
    c. Language contexts
        i. Urban environments (most work has been done on this topic)
        ii. Rural environments
        iii. Speaker communities dispersed across urban and rural environments

8. Documentary products
   a. Recordings of natural conversation
   b. Recordings of locally salient forms of conversational exchange and conventional behaviors, such as greetings, politeness, or expressions of emotions
   c. Recordings of significant cultural events
   d. Information about local language attitudes gathered via interviews and questionnaires
   e. Extensive biographical information about consultants, including assessment of multilingual competencies and contexts of acquisition
   f. Documentation of local language ideologies
   g. Historical and governmental documents relevant to understanding sociopolitical situation of speaker communities
   h. Expanded metadata for encoding a wider range of speaker social characteristics than is typically done: linguistic "life histories", social ties (e.g., membership in secret societies), family ties beyond those traditionally associated with kinship (e.g., fosterage, pawnage, and slavery)
   i. Expanded metadata for encoding key non-linguistic aspects of context, for instance, describing the materials used to build a house, how to "cook" salt
   j. Collection of "metadocumentary" metadata describing how a research project is structured, the role of members of the research team, methods for choosing consultants, etc.

9. Structuring a field project
   a. Determining/negotiating community needs—reconciling the goals of the researcher and the researched, culturally appropriate "empowerment"
   b. Interdisciplinary methods, especially ethnographic approaches; interdisciplinary team involving a linguist with an anthropologist may be ideal
   c. Socially diverse research team (e.g., male and female, young and old researchers), if possible, to facilitate access to different social contexts
   d. Focus on contexts de-emphasized in work on the "ancestral code"
      i. Linguistic socialization of children
      ii. Code-switching
      iii. Language of everyday activities (as opposed to significant cultural events)
      iv. Multilingual competence assessment
      v. Metalinguistic discussions
      vi. Close observation of a set of speakers over a fixed period to see which languages speakers use with whom, and when, and in what domains
   e. Emphasis on community contexts makes conducting a pilot phase of research essential; outside researchers cannot know much about the sociolinguistic situation and what best to document until on the ground; will take more time to design a research project than traditional documentation
   f. Developing infrastructure and sustainability
   g. Establishing a means to maintain contact with the community

10. Ethical considerations

   a. Some types of targeted data collection (e.g., biographical information) and spontaneous data collection (e.g., conversation), as well as likely increased use of video recordings, pose concerns not found in more traditional documentation

   b. Documentation of community practices may involve sensitive, secret, or controversial events; some traditional practices may only take place in certain segments of a society; some are known only to specific people; disseminating such documentation may be problematic

   c. The community, as a whole, needs to be aware of the nature of the research (but what is the relevant "community"?)

   d. Involvement of community members as part of the research team, for both practical and ethical reasons, or, barring this, appropriate members of nearby communities

   e. Lines of communication between the community and the researcher need to be developed and maintained, especially if sensitive practices are documented

   f. Sociolinguistic documentation is even less well-suited to "parachute" fieldwork than more traditional documentation and requires long-term thinking

   g. How do students—who don't lead teams or have much stability—fit into this picture?

11. Training needs

   a. Large-scale training workshops are welcome, but more hands-on training is needed

   b. More opportunities are needed for those trained in structural linguistics to be exposed to ethnographic methods and methods from other key disciplines such as applied linguistics, anthropology, and sociology

   c. Better systems for partnering Africans with Westerners would make it easier for the skills of each to complement the other

   d. Communication structures are lacking which would allow people living near each other to discover who has useful expertise (e.g., How can I find a local expert in interview methods or the use of ELAN?)

   e. Training should take into account developing opportunities both for local scholars and non-scholarly community members

   f. Can we create documentary "clusters" of researchers with varying skill sets focusing on particular regions of Africa who learn from each other over time?

   g. Take advantage of conferences like WOCAL to offer training workshops—hopefully even at the next WOCAL in Tokyo

12. Applications of sociolinguistic documentation

   a. Sociolinguistically-oriented documentation can help produce "traditional" language resources and more (assuming, of course, this is what the community wants)

   b. Colloquial, everyday language used in real-world contexts is more useful in language revitalization than narrative texts (also more entertaining and engaging)

   c. Promotes the use of video recordings, especially of culturally-significant events, which can be put to a greater range of uses than audio recordings

   d. Documentation of special cultural knowledge as expressed in language can lead to products of particular local significance, in particular ritualized language, which play a role in facilitating maintenance of the everyday language

   e. Knowledge of sociolinguistic features of a community can more directly inform language policy and planning, as well as development work more generally (e.g., in health and education)

   f. A focus on conversational—and, more broadly, interactional—data will allow the language as used to be documented, rather than an often artificially-constructed "pure" form

13. In what ways are African priorities different from Western ones?
    a. The Western focus on "endangerment" is problematic since it shifts focus away from the hundreds of "medium"-sized languages which may not be endangered but are still in need of documentation and support
    b. Since even small languages may be vital, more interest in using language documentation to support areas like health and education rather than language maintenance per se, though documentary linguistics has relatively little to say about this
    c. Western linguists are more likely to focus on the theoretical and cultural interests of African languages, while African linguists may be more concerned with matters of national language policy, especially with respect to education
    d. Language diversity that linguists celebrate may be viewed by local officials as a hindrance to national unity and development
    e. In general: African participants at the workshop, especially the junior scholars, were more focused on social applications for sociolinguistic language documentation than Westerners
    f. *What would sociolinguistics be like today if it had arisen in Africa?* (Felix Ameka)

14. Language ideologies and sociolinguistic language documentation
    a. Most documentary work has been embedded in essentialist ideologies equating language loss with culture loss and assuming an isomorphism between language and culture (originating from nineteenth century European nationalism)
    b. Sub-Saharan African contexts don't map neatly onto this model; notions like "mother tongue" or "ethnic identity" don't immediately translate
    c. A sociolinguistic approach allows us to go well beyond documenting the "ancestral code" towards the full range of speech practices of a community, including the multilingual competencies of its speakers, giving us a more representative picture of African linguistic patterns

15. Future plans
    a. Write up a final report of workshop results
    b. Follow-up workshop at WOCAL in Tokyo?
    c. The most pressing needs
        i. Training opportunities throughout Africa
        ii. More explicit methodological recommendations, especially for junior researchers
        iii. Partnering between senior and junior, Western and African, male and female, etc.
    d. How do efforts expand outside of Africa? Our impression is that similar discussions are needed for many parts of the world
    e. We'd especially like to help new collaborations form! Please feel free to contact us about this
    f. Look to (presently out of date) workshop website for future updates:
        http://buffalo.edu/~jcgood/AfricanSociolinguistics.html

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