

Carole de Féral. *Le nom des langues III. Le nom des langues en Afrique sub-saharienne : pratiques, dénominations, catégorisations/Naming languages in Sub-Saharan Africa: Practices, Names, Categorisations*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Peeters: 2009. ISBN: 978-90-429-2270-9; 978-2-7584-0086-8. Price: 30 €. 309 pp.

Let us make it clear from the very beginning: this book is not – nor it claims to be – a handbook on language naming in Africa; certain areas and languages receive much a bigger coverage than others, and the articles themselves are very different in scope and sheer number of pages. Cameroon alone takes the lion's share, with no less than five articles. East Africa gets a single overview (by Xavier Barillot, p. 271-295), and Southern Africa nothing.

There are 13 articles in this book, preceded by a meaty introduction by the editor. Despite the bilingualism in the title, only two articles (Mufwene's on Kituba and Gottschlig's on Fula) are in English, all the others in French.

A general criticism – actually the only one I have, and more a disappointment than a criticism – concerns the maps which accompany quite a few of the articles. The maps, in grey tones, are sometimes poorly printed, often too small, and in any case insufficient to grasp the complexity of the facts: we are talking about a book on the names of “peoples” and “languages” (note the scare quotes) – and many, many of them – after all! I am sure that many readers would be ready to pay a higher price (sold at 30 Euros, the book is not expensive) for having page full maps, maybe (a dream?) even glossy color ones. The map nerd who writes this review certainly would.

Carole de Féral's Introduction (p. 9-17) sets the scene for what is to come, from the plurality of denominations for one and the same linguistic object, to the use of exonyms against autonyms, to, crucially, the different uses of the very word “language:” ‘le signifié de « langue » ne peut être le même pour les linguistes et les acteurs non linguistes d'une communauté donnée : les premiers recherchent des régularités qui permettent de poser un « système ». Pour les seconds, c'est la stigmatisation d'un groupe et de quelques-uns de ses usages qui va entraîner le sentiment de l'existence d'une « langue » autre’ (p. 12).¹

The articles in the book are divided in three sections: “Ethnies et langues : des objets controversés”; “Langues européennes et africaines en contact”; “Perspectives historiques et état des lieux”.

The four articles which make up the first section of the volume are united by their focus on the discovery and naming of linguistic and ethnic entities, and three of them concern Cameroon.

The first article is the most general and theoretical in scope: Thomas K. Schippers's ‘Le fait ethnique, histoires d'une notion controversée’ (p. 19-37) takes the reader through a fascinating journey through the concept of nation (from the Middle Ages) and ethnicity (from its 18th century “invention” in Göttingen) to their uses and misuses in modern times, and to the contemporary efforts at “deconstructing ethnicity” (just while the “ethnic phenomenon” plays a more important role than ever in today's world).

¹ The meaning of “language” cannot be the same for the linguists and the non-linguist members of any given community: the former look for regularities which will enable the construction of a “system.” For the latter, it is the stigma attached to a group and some of its uses which gives rise to the sentiment of “different” language’ (translation mine).

The three articles which follow deal with Cameroon. Patrick Renaud ('L'ALCAM : une fabrique des langues du Cameroun?', p. 39-71) is a repentant: he took part in the ALCAM (the "Linguistic Atlas of Cameroon") project and explains how the ALCAM project was not at all "just" an inventory of this multilingual among the multilingual countries of Africa. The role of the government and its official ideology aiming at the "nation building" (it took five years to get the necessary authorization for the project; p. 44) is accorded adequate emphasis, but even more food for thought is given us by the author about the role of "science" and "scientists" (even those poor, self appointed scientists who are the linguists) in providing an aura of impartiality to the government's (any government's) ideological decisions. I do not fully agree when I read that 'l'intercompréhension n'est pas un critère sérieux pour affirmer que tous ceux qui, dans un groupe se comprennent, parlent la même langue. Ce serait réduire *ad absurdum* les ressources dont les membres d'un espace de communication peuvent nourrir leur activité de catégorisation' (p. 66):² I still think that mutual comprehension is, *faute de mieux*, a valid tool in assessing "language-ness".

I am instead fully convinced when the author summarizes the results of ALCAM saying that '[F]ace aux pratiques sociales camerounaises traditionnelles de catégorisation orientées vers la composante ethnique de l'espace de communication, la visée des linguistes faisait donc émerger pour l'État, avec l'usage d'une catégorie langue issue des discours de leur discipline, une catégorisation orientée vers la composante linguistique, et seulement linguistique, de cet espace.'³ Politically, the net result of this "language factory," perfectly consonant to the government's official ideology, was a certain degree of neutralization of the ethnic component.

A short, personal account of the ALCAM experience is also provided by the geographer Roland J.-L. Breton ("La dénomination des langues au Cameroun et le projet ALCAM : l'expérience d'un géographe," p. 73-76), while Valentin Feussi in 'Entre catégorisations objectives et subjectives : les noms de langues comme motifs de revendication socio-identitaire au Cameroun,' p. 77-107) sketches all the problems linked to our language naming practices. Feussi's contribution, disturbing and mind-provoking as this article may be to the field linguist, is certainly one of the best in the book. On the basis of a comparatively small sample, that of the *ghómala'* language as identified by the ALCAM, Feussi shows how the linguist's language and the speakers' language are not at all one and the same thing: '[S]i les linguistes construisent leur frontières sur la base de l'intercompréhension, les locuteurs mettent souvent en avant le critère identitaire [...] la langue du locuteur n'est donc pas toujours celle du linguiste et *vice versa'* (p. 91).⁴

² 'Mutual comprehension is not a valid criterium in order to affirm that all those who understand each other within a group speak the same language. This would mean to reduce *ad absurdum* the number of resources available to the members of a communicative space in their categorization activity' (translation mine).

³ 'While the Cameroonian traditional social practices of categorization are oriented towards the ethnic component of the communicative space, the linguists' aim, as well as the usage of a category of *language* drawn from the vocabulary of their discipline, gave rise for the Government to a new categorization oriented towards the linguistic – and linguistic-only – component of the same communicative space' (translation mine; emphasis in the original).

⁴ 'While the linguists draw the lines on the basis of mutual comprehension, the speakers often prefer the identity fact [...] the speaker's languages is sometimes not the linguist's language, and *vice versa'* (translation mine).

Against the formal interviews and questionnaires used in the ALCAM project, the author used informal interviews, and his conclusions are devastating: ‘les linguistes (de l’ALCAM) ont surtout effectué une analyse partielle (et peut-être partielle), en refusant de prendre en compte les comportements des locuteurs dans toute leur complexité’ (p. 90).⁵

I really enjoyed John Holm and Sandra Madeira’s article on the Portuguese restructured varieties of Africa (‘À propos des noms des variétés du portugais restructuré en Afrique,’ p. 109-118): in very few pages (the text covers just seven pages) the authors neatly explain what happened to the European language which was first exported to a large scale on the African continent.

Cameroon makes a come back with the editor’s contribution: Carole de Féral (‘Nommer et catégoriser des pratiques urbaines : *pidgin* et *francanglais* au Cameroun,’ p. 119-152) deals with the tricky issue of Francanglais, basically a form of spoken, informal French which is increasingly seen as an identity marker, a “language.” Féral convincingly demonstrates that Francanglais is entirely French in grammar and in the great majority of its lexicon. If anything, its Cameroonian “flavor” is given by the introduction of a limited number of loans from African languages, the English-based Cameroonian Pidgin, and/or just “plain” English, and by the use of many French colloquialisms (some of them by now obsolete in France). Basically, all this is sufficient for Francanglais to be perceived – by at least some of its speakers – as a separate language.

The very denomination Francanglais (or Camfranglais) – very possibly originally exogenous, but soon adopted by the speakers – transformed what had since then been called *français makro* (“roughneck French” – obviously another external denomination) into something else: a language, which moreover, by its very name, well accords with the official Cameroonian ideal of French-English bilingualism. A “kind of” French can then become an identity marker (p. 144).

From a linguistic point of view, this contribution shows once again that there is no *minimum* threshold of diversity which a linguistic “object” must cross in order to be perceived by its speakers as *different* enough: even a modicum of diversity (pre-existing or invented) suffices to mark oneself as “others.”

Urban and youth “language” (allow me the word, and the scare quotes too) are the object of the next article, Katja Ploog’s ‘La socio-indexicalité des dénominations langagières : la dynamique autour du nouchi abidjanais’ (p. 153-190). Its position within the book after Féral’s Camfranglais also shows well the differences between the two. Even if in the second part of her article the author rightly focuses on the “linguageness” of Nouchi (and even proposes the neologism “nouchicologie” – Nouchicology on p. 185), it seems at least clear that, if anything, Nouchi has more of the hallmarks of a “language” than Camfranglais: the sheer number of loanwords (mainly from Dyula, and even if loans are maybe receding; p. 159), its expanding use in communicative situations which were traditionally reserved to French, and its wider use among potentially all strata of the population, all point to an “incipient language,” taking its toll at the same time on the African languages and on French, and maybe slowly becoming the future “national urban language” of the country.

We travel wider in the third section, which opens with Catherine Juillard and Mamadou Ndiaye’s contribution on Senegal (‘Nommer les langues au Sénégal : perspectives historiques et sociolinguistiques,’ p. 191-210). The authors rightly point out that linguists, politicians, and speakers have different stakes in the game of language naming – although only the first two are

⁵ ‘By refusing to take into account the speakers’ behavior in their complexity, the linguists (of the ALCAM) have mostly carried out a partial (and maybe biased) analysis’ (translation mine).

in general taken into account. The historical and classificatory overview is excellent. Their article is closed by two final sections on the impact of town (and the emergence of “Urban Wolof”) and on the different denominations of the Fula varieties (to which a full article by Gottschlig with a much wider coverage is also devoted).

Salikoko Mufwene’s ‘*Kituba, Kileta or Kikongo? What’s in a name?*’ (p. 211-222) will remain an important contribution to another very complicated issue, namely the origins, spread, and current status of the great “contact-based” variety of the lower course of the Congo river. As the author says in his conclusions, ‘names can tell a great deal about the contact history of a language and the ecology of its emergence’ (p. 220). Needless to say, Mufwene draws a picture of this ecology with his usual unsurpassable skill.

We go back to Cameroon with Edmond Biloa and George Echu’s ‘*La dénomination des langues au Cameroun : le cas de l’ewondo, du tuki et du kenyang*’ (p. 223-231). This time the focus are three African languages and their denomination on the part of the speakers: how they call themselves and their language and how they are called by others. In this short article we find here again the usual opposition between the positive attitudes towards oneself and one’s language on the one side, and the negative appellations given by others.

Catherine Miller’s article on Arabic in Sub-Saharan Africa (‘*Enjeux des dénominations de l’arabe en Afrique sub-saharienne*,’ p. 233-254) presents a clear and much needed picture of a very complex situation; the article begins with a general overview and proceeds with a discussion by country (Mauritania, Nigeria and Cameroon together, Chad, and Sudan), for each of which the different status of Arabic (and of Arabs) is detailed. Particularly rich and intriguing is the situation in Chad (a non-Arab state where Arabic has been given the status of official language), where a “national” variety of Arab is on the rise and the link and differences between the Classical and the spoken languages are overtly discussed. The article is well-written, but suffers from an insufficient proofreading: references are found missing (Prokosh 1986) or misplaced (Cheriguen 2007 is placed after the letter “E” on p. 252). But these are, after all, minor matters which do not detract from the general value of the article.

‘*Fula and the naming of changing ethnolinguistic identities*’ (p. 255-269), by Peter Gottschlig, taught me a lot: the author explains with great clarity the complexities of language, dialect, and ethnic denominations among the vast world of the Fula (Peul, Fulfulde, etc. etc.) world. If anything, I would have liked more on the history and demography of the Fula migrations, but these lie obviously out of the scope of the book.

The last article is Xavier Barillot’s ‘*Motifs étymologiques de la dénomination des langues en Afrique de l’Est*’ (p. 271-295), also the only article dealing with East Africa. It concerns more precisely the Horn of Africa, and even there only the Afroasiatic languages. As this area and these languages are also my field of specialization, I will indulge in a longer analysis of this article.

Barillot’s contribution is well-written and the accompanying maps and tables are clear, but the subject is vast, and mistakes are unavoidable. A greater problem is given by a certain naïveté and lack of detachment in the use of all sorts of data – folk etymologies and local traditions included.

First, I am not sure that the great linguistic diversity of the Horn is ‘*due au fait que la naissance de l’humanité et probablement celle du langage ont eu lieu au coeur de cette région*’ (p. 272).⁶ To say the least, this is a bold statement. Barillot is particularly concerned with the

⁶ ‘*Due of the fact that the birth of humankind, and probably of language, too, took place in this very area*’ (translation mine).

etymology of languages' and peoples' denominations in the area. He correctly identifies a few general (maybe universal) tendencies, starting with the general "exonymic" and the relative absence of "autonymes" (p. 277): it is always "the others" who call you, your group, and your language. Thence, a few general rules, such as the (originally) pejorative meaning of certain denominations, the multiplicity of denominations for the same people (p. 278), or, conversely, the use of the same label for different groups (p. 279).

A few of the etymologies listed by the author are questionable; to take just one example, the widespread word *gaal(V)*, whose most common use is in the traditional denomination of the Oromo (*galla*), is attributed (p. 282, Table 1) by the author to Somali *gaalo*, translated as 'cruel.' Actually, the Somali singular (and morphologically basic) form of the word is *gaal* (*gaalo* is its plural), and its current most common meaning is rather 'infidel, non Muslim.' This is partially corrected on p. 291, where the widespread use of this word all over the Horn is addressed at greater length. Certainly, the appellation of the Oromo as *galla* (common at least till the eighties) was rather Ethiopian, and Somali does not play a role here. In the Horn the word finds general application for the "others," and always with a pejorative meaning, from 'barbarian,' to 'infidel,' to 'enemy.' For example, in the Hamar language (South Omotic) of the lower Omo valley, *gaalo* means 'enemy,' and also, for one of the curious ironies of history... 'Amharas.'

The second part of the article (from p. 284) deals with the clanic system, the state, and the history of the peoples of the area as elements in the people and language naming process.

The account of the Oromo and Somali history is outdated: Barillot follows Heine's (1978) hypothesis, with the Somali moving from the Lake Turkana towards the coast of the Indian Ocean, leaving along the way the Rendille and the Boni, and finally following the coast in order to reach their present-day habitat. This view has been convincingly proved wrong by Schlee (1987), who has pointed out the historical role of the Oromo in breaking up an area where Somali and its sister languages are nowadays found along the edges of a big, central Oromo or Oromo-ized area.

Strangely, Schlee's work is mentioned by Barillot, but apparently not taken into account. Likewise, the view of an Oromo original homeland in modern northern Somalia is based upon Lewis (1960), and is generally abandoned nowadays.

The author explicitly draws a parallel between sociolinguistic dialects and pre-state political forms of organization, on the one hand, and full-fledged languages and the modern nation-state, on the other. In general, the exaltation of the nation state and of its progressive role (against clans, tribes, etc.) looms large, and it is therefore no wonder that the author's short account of the contemporary history of Somalia is biased – and in the wrong direction, too. Barillot claims that, as a consequence of Siyad Barre's coup in 1969, '[E]n 20 ans, les représentations de la langue et de l'appartenance ethnique ont changé: on est Somali avant d'appartenir à un clan ; on parle la langue somalie, et non plus le dialecte de son clan' (p. 290).⁷ Why to consider oneself "Somali" (or whatever else nationality, for that matter) should be better than have a clanic, tribal, or local affiliation is something I never quite understood; certainly, it is not explained. While that this was what happened in Somalia seems to be disproved by what the world witnessed immediately after Siyad Barre's fall, and which the author summarizes as follows:

⁷ 'In 20 years, the representations of language and ethnic membership changed: one is Somali before being member of a clan; and one speaks the Somali language, rather than one's clanic dialect' (translation mine).

‘Siyad Barre savait que son objectif ne pourrait être atteint que s’il limitait l’emprise des clans sur la société somalienne. Malheureusement, les grandes sécheresses et la guerre contre l’Éthiopie à la fin des années 1980 appauvrissent le pays, ce qui discrédite le gouvernement : des groupes armés, appuyés par des clans, ébranlent le régime de Siyad Barre qui est contraint à l’exil en 1991.’⁸

Noting in passing that the Somali-Ethiopian war (the so-called “Ogaden war”) was fought in 1977-1978 (not at the end of the eighties), the lines could come out of Siyaad Barre’s Ministry of Information, or the party organ *Xiddigta Oktoobar* (“The October Star”). Luckily, both have long since disappeared, together with a personal and clan instrument of power devoted to scientifically massacre its own people...

But everything is well what ends well. And a very helpful “Index des noms de langues” (p. 301-309) follows the last article and closes the book.

The sober cover and the good, solid binding will be much appreciated by any book lover. The price, I reiterate, is reasonable. This volume is a must for the anthropologist and the linguist alike, and all will find much to gain from it.

We all have to thank the authors, and most of all the editor, for a book which will probably remain a cornerstone in the anthropological linguistics of Africa.

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⁸ ‘Siyaad Barre knew that his aims could only be attained if he managed to limit the clans’ hold on the Somali society. Sadly, the great droughts and the war against Ethiopia at the end of the eighties impoverished the country – and therefore discredited the government: some armed groups, backed by certain clans, shatter Siyaad Barre’s regime, and he is forced into exile in 1991’ (translation mine).