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THE WHITE LINGUIST IN AFRICA:¹
DYNAMICS OF INVOLVEMENT

by

Talmy Givón

At professional gatherings in the groves of academe, the discussion of strictly professional problems is rigorously excluded. The taboo placed upon it is so strong and deeply ingrained that one often finds oneself apologizing for raising non-academic issues at rarified academic gatherings. When this paper was read before such a professional gathering in Bloomington last April, I found it hard to resist the urge to apologize for making a non-professional, non-academic and largely undocumented presentation. Upon further reflection, I find that an apology was indeed in order, for having caught some members of the audience by surprise and thus violating the traditional injunction against airing vital issues in public. Since what I have to say is neither new nor particularly startling, the considerable resentment which the mere fact of presenting this paper has incurred in some quarters suggests to me that the public airing of these issues is long overdue.

1. \$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$

The financial support for Area Studies in the american university has undergone a veritable exponential boom since a time roughly coinciding with the advent of Russia's Sputnik. The timing of this boom is far from coincidental, and I shall return to it later on. Within this boom, perhaps the most vigorous boomlet has been experienced by African Studies. African Studies Centers have mushroomed overnight all over Big-U, lucrative research and travel grants became available, professional associations and academic journals have sprung forth to meet the growing challenge of committing to print a veritable avalanche of scholarly byproduct. Within this context, the study and teaching of African Languages in the american university has become academically respectable and financially rewarding. Young, aspiring linguists were quick to note where the action--and money--were. Fellowships and travel grants abounded, dissertations churned out, careers were launched. This startlingly rapid development could not have taken place in a financial vacuum. One way in which one may begin to assess its import and potential direction is to find out who foots the bill.

There are three major sources for financing the research, study and teaching of African languages in this country: the U.S. government, U.S. "non-profit" foundations, and to a much smaller extent African governments. The U.S. government money is channeled mostly through two related programs, the NDEA-FL (title VI) program, and the Fulbright-Hays program. Indirectly, the American taxpayer also finances the foundations money, since those are tax-exempt. Smaller yet portions of the government-administered money is funneled into African Studies through semi-private front organizations such as the African-American Institute and a few others. State Department funds flow through the Foreign Service Institute. Another tax-supported source of funding is the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington D.C. All these are overt and visible channels. The clandestine ones are impossible to gauge.

Of the Foundations, the main benefactor of African Linguistics until very recently was the Ford Foundation. While its board is presumably independent of the government, its real ties are easy enough to trace. The director is most often chosen from the ranks of ex-administration high officials (the current incumbent is McGeorge Bundy, past occupant of Kissinger's post at the Kennedy-Johnson Whitehouse). The Ford handling of Africa research applications is openly coordinated with the NDEA and Fulbright-Hays programs. In other words, this is another channel through which taxpayers' money flows.

Black African countries cannot afford to fund this type of research. Their contribution is made almost exclusively through making facilities available: entrance visas, research permits, affiliation facilities and favorable attitude on the part of the local bureaucracy.

Given this massive bankrolling of African Studies and African Linguistics, one must ask oneself--why are they supporting us and what are they getting in return?

2. AMERICA IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

In order to understand why such massive financial support has been pouring into the study, teaching and research of Africa from the U.S. government on its various tentacles, one must first construct an assessment of the politico-economic realities of the continent, and in particular the manner and extent of American involvement in Africa. What follows is a brief and admittedly shallow

re-capitulation of what rather obviously is at the heart of the African political situation. The few exceptions to this picture are well known and will not be mentioned, since if anything they tend to illustrate the general rule by way of contrast.

One may divide Africa into three categories:

(a) South Africa and Rhodesia

The minority regimes of the white settlers, with the bigger and richer power to the south calling the shots, need not be characterized here. The U.S. involvement there is heavy if more subtle. To begin with, the huge corporate investment in the mineral and industrial base of South Africa is an extremely important factor in determining the real--as distinct from the pronounced--American policy. A long tradition ties up the U.S. State Department to the economic interest of American-controlled companies, financial, industrial and mineral. While paying lip service to anti-apartheid sentiments in world forums, the U.S. Government has quietly but effectively undermined and subverted any meaningful economic and political isolation of The Republic, and thus of Rhodesia. The Pentagon's insatiable appetite for chrome, whetted constantly by the high level of saturation bombing of South-East Asia, has served as an excuse for breaking up the U.N. imposed sanctions on Rhodesia. While the brunt of direct military aid to The Republic has been borne by our NATO allies--France, Britain and West Germany--our massive economical and political presence in Southern Africa is an indelible fact.

(b) The Portuguese colonies

Here the U.S. involvement is much more direct and again at complete variance with verbal pronouncements. We are the chief military supplier of Portugal, through our NATO commitment (given, partly, in exchange of use of the Azores strategic bases). This includes arms, ammunition and training. Thus, the Liberation Movements in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau are countered with american guns, american bullets, american helicopters and american napalm. American private capital is also busy diversifying our involvement here with industrial and mineral investment.

(c) Independent black Africa

Perhaps the saddest story in recent African history involves the way in which black Africa has gained its

independence in name only. The economies of most nominally independent African countries are still controlled by outside colonial interests, either through direct investment or through the global manipulation and control of commodities and raw material prices. Either way, the international combines are dominated by U.S. financial interests. In several areas, such as the Republic of Zaire, a more direct replacement of the old (European) control by American interests has taken place. With rather few exceptions, Black African governments are controlled by the white-educated elite, trapped in a colonial conceptual world, in colonial customs, colonial beliefs and colonial values. By choice or by necessity, countries are not run for the benefit of the masses in the bush, but for the educated minorities and their sponsors--outside interests. This persistent division of the spoils in nominally independent African countries, on the general background of poverty, disease and basic need, is one of the saddest yet most obvious facts of the African reality today. To ignore it for the sake of diplomatic politeness is to ignore the enormous controlling role which the U.S., together with Britain, France, West Germany and to some extent Japan, have been playing in the shaping of African destiny.

3. THEIR MONEY'S WORTH

Given the situation outlined above, what do the major participants gain from their investment in African Studies? The answer may again be divided into parts:

(a) White minority regimes (including Portugal)

When an American scholar or teacher goes to work in these white-controlled territories, his research and work is approved, supervised and evaluated by the host government. His presence in the country is thus a tacit act of acquiescence with the local political realities. So long as he remains in the country, he will have to curb his criticism or the expression of his political beliefs--if those are in conflict with the policies of the minority government. If he wants to ever come back again to do more research, he will have to watch his open pronouncements and maintain his silence, or else his chances for a second tour of duty in the white-controlled country be jeopardized beyond repair. His tenure in Africa thus effectively neutralizes him as a potential antagonist. While inside the country, he is also systematically isolated from meaningful contact with the oppressed black African majority. The American visitor, in short, lends his academic prestige as an independent scholar to the white minority regime. He helps legitimize it, he contributes to its political respectability. While he may

not choose to view himself in these terms, his presence in the country is taken by his hosts as a *political* fact. And there is little grounds to assume that his hosts are wrong in evaluating their own political interest.

(b) Black African governments

To the extent that black African governments form an integral part of the global neo-colonial design, the presence of American scholars in their countries is, equally, a source of political prestige and a vestige of international respectability. Research projects are carefully scrutinized before approval, to make sure the visitor does not stray outside the politically-safe bounds, arouse no political controversy and make no meaningful (and thus politically-suspect) contacts with the black masses living in the bush or in the shanty-towns on the outskirts of big-city. Much like their white counterparts, black African governments make it crystal clear to the visitor that he is welcome so long as he renders the expected service, and so long as he does not overstep the carefully defined political bounds. Attempts to become a closer observer of the local political scene are naturally frowned upon, and with this one may not wish to argue. A guest is after all only a guest, and the sensitivity of African governments to political meddling by outsiders is understandable. However, within the political realities of black Africa, the presence of American scholars or "technicians" has definite political ramifications. Whether he likes it or not, the visitor must put up and shut up. Whatever goes on in the country, he must acquiesce. He is politically neutralized for the duration, and if he ever wants to come back for more research, he must remain neutralized forever, at least in his public posture. By choice or necessity, a potential activist is turned into an accomplice.

(c) The U.S. government

The profits accruing the U.S. government from its financial stakes in African Studies are difficult to assess. At the very least the following may be mentioned:

i--Basic area-study knowledge and capabilities, as compiled in published books and articles or in countless Centers' files. This knowledge is available to anyone, and there is no reason to assume that the relevant agencies of the U.S. government do not avail themselves of it.

ii--The training and training-capabilities of U.S. government operatives in Africa has been given solid foundations by the deep involvement of American academicians in the study of the continent. Needless to add, if you happen to agree with the

political-economic goals of U.S. policy in Africa, you have no reason to complain. If you profess to not agree, on the other hand, then here is the rub: By your academic involvement in Africa you are increasing their capability to wage the kind of economic, political and military war they are currently waging against the peoples of Africa. You supply them with the pertinent information and evaluation, you make it possible for them to obtain the right kind of training. Much like in the case of other area studies in Big-U, the American academician studying Africa has not escaped the larger political context in which he has been working, neither has he escaped the political goals of those who have been lavishly financing his work. And since the financial support continues to pour in, there is no reason to assume that the U.S. government is dissatisfied with the returns on its investment.

iii--In addition, another--more subtle--factor is also here at work. A satisfied, well-paid and academically-recognized intellectual is an intellectual that is politically neutralized. And a politically-neutralized academe is worth its weight in gold to any government, above and beyond the actual service which the well-fed academicians actually render. Here, it seems, the Government and its semi-official arms have scored their most spectacular coup. The fact that most American linguists dealing with Africa do not view their research and teaching work in its political context is ample testimony to the brilliance of this coup. Or is it *coup de grace*...

(d) The U.S. foundations

Much of what was said above about the U.S. government holds true for the foundations, since they should be rightfully considered instrumental of government policy in Africa. In addition, these tax shelters of the super-rich also gain respectability, academic prestige, justification for their non-profit status with the I.R.S. and an enormous clout in the groves of American academe. And they gain all these while managing to contribute heavily to the advancement of the policy goals of the U.S. government, the very government which opened wide the tax loopholes which make their existence possible. Thus, hand-in-glove is the name of the game, and what uncle gives with one hand, uncle gets back with the other.

(e) The american africanist

The american africanist is not a mere instrument in the wider scheme outlined above, but also a beneficiary of it. He makes his living off studying Africa, he draws his salary, research grants, sabbatical and exotic trips. His papers

and books get published, his prestige and academic standing get advanced, his ego gets boosted, his self-image gets fashioned in a way irrevocably meshed with his African involvement. The government consults with him and pays him well for his pain, the foundations put him on committees, facilitate his travel, allot *per diems*. Professional associations and journals afford him a forum(s) and seek his advice. He has never had it so good, and it is highly unlikely that he ever contemplate killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.

(f) The american university

The heavy outpour of government and foundation money into African Studies has made Big-U a happy beneficiary at an incredibly little cost. African Studies Centers draw in money, prestige and academic excellence. They keep faculties well paid and happy, they keep students in fellowship money. And while often catering to student revolutionary sentiment, they in fact serve as lightning rods to channel and preempt that very sentiment. A well-fed intellectual is a neutralized intellectual, regardless of his revolutionary rhetorics. And over the top, the University skims off fat overhead charges on all incoming grants. And the alliance of government, business and Big-U is well cemented with green.

4. THE T.E.S.L. ESTABLISHMENT IN AFRICA

Most African countries have an acute national-language problem, and one need not be a linguist to find out about it. Most of them also have an acute colonial-language problem, lingering on and on in the medium, contents and spirit of the African educational scheme.² The american linguist is often invited to study the African language situation, advise and make expert policy recommendations. More often than not he accepts, tacitly and uncritically, current assumptions concerning the need to further propagate and enlarge the role of the ex-colonial language in an African country, and with it the surrendering of the educational system (thus also, without fail, the emergent value system of the educated African elite) to old colonial ways and concepts. As an illustration to the follies of the current vogue, consider Burundi. Here is a country where only one African language is spoken by the entire populace (KiRundi). French has been long established, by the Belgian colonizer, as the administrative and educational medium--and the prevailing attitude of the Belgian-educated political elite towards their own local language, culture and traditions is disdainful in the extreme. On top of all this, a decision has been made to move massively into the teaching of English as a second language. Not unexpectedly, the

effort is aided and advised by American "experts" and financed by the U.S. government. And the American T.E.S.L. linguist goes along docilely, dispensing his "expertise" and not for a moment pausing to take stock of the obvious political context in which his expertise is dispensed. And although the case is a particularly glaring one, it is by no means unique. And as always, the colonial "national language expert" goes hand in hand with the colonial government on whose payroll he is listed.

5. ELITISM IN LINGUISTICS AND THE AFRICAN STUDENT

In recent years, Linguistics as an academic field has mushroomed, with emphasis almost exclusively placed on pure-theory research. Most reputable Linguistics departments in the U.S. frown upon the mere suggestion that they might turn some of their attention, resources and considerable ingenuity to areas which are considered "applied" or "practical." Indeed, an acute academic elitism rests at the very core of American Linguistics as an academic discipline, an elitism that cannot be obscured by the often radical political stance sported by many of its most famous practitioners.³ When an African student aspires to become trained in Linguistics, however, he often has rather practical goals in mind. To begin with, he may come from a country where real language problems rear their ugly heads (as distinct from academic language problems), such as literacy, national language choice, unification of dialect clusters, language teaching and second language acquisition. The current orientation of the top-heavy American departments is to him a cultural shock he is not likely to survive. His presence is often welcome, since he increases the language capabilities and language depth of the department, especially if that department has aspirations in African Linguistics. He is thus welcomed as an informant (paid or unpaid) or language assistant, where his considerable linguistic experience may be tapped by aspiring American linguists (he often has fluent command of two or three African languages). But teaching him Linguistics is another matter altogether. The American educational lore is foreign to him, he may have considerable deficiencies in his academic preparation, he may also experience language difficulties as well as labor under the considerable handicap of culture shock. Above and beyond all these, he is more likely to be interested in acquiring skills and knowledge of Linguistics in order to go back home and apply those to practical and often urgent situations in his own country. And--he is most likely to fail in realizing these goals, likely to grow progressively discouraged and, quite often, to also conclude that he is too stupid to pursue the highly-valued, theoretically abstract goals

which seem in this academic discipline, to be so much in vogue. The materials discussed in his basic syntax courses--the meat of the theory--are likely to be derived almost exclusively from English, a language in which his intuition is no match with that of native american students with whom he must compete. Many of his instructors will find it impossible to give him special attention, to understand his specific linguistic and cultural difficulties whatever their source may be. They often gloss over papers he writes about non-English data taken from his own language, since often they cannot sift through the data deep enough to discover the significance of his insights. As a result, it has become as difficult to squeeze an African student through an american Linguistics department as it was for the proverbial camel to go through the needle's eye.

6. A BALANCE SHEET FOR AFRICAN LINGUISTICS

For a field of considerable academic standing and a phenomenal success in generating financial support, the following balance sheet is perhaps in order. It summarizes the preceding discussion as to who benefits and how and to what end.

<u>Who Benefits</u>	<u>How</u>	<u>To What End</u>
The U.S. Government	African Area know-how	Stronger U.S. imperial presence in Africa
	Satisfied academicians	Compliant academicians
U.S. Foundations	Tax-shelter, prestige	Stronger U.S. imperial presence in Africa
		More industry control of American foreign policy
		More industry control of the American Big-U
White minority regimes in Africa	Legitimization	More oppression of African masses

<u>Who Benefits</u>	<u>How</u>	<u>To What End</u>
Black African governments	Legitimization	More oppression of African masses
U.S. Area Studies Centers	Prestige, information, money <i>raison d'etre</i>	Stronger U.S. imperial presence in Africa Compliant academicians & students
American universities	Prestige, money, satisfied faculties & students <i>raison d'etre</i>	Perpetuation of an elitist educational system Compliant faculties & students
The American linguist	Degrees, money, status, publications, trips, jobs, intellectual excitement, <i>raison d'etre</i>	Enhanced academic & personal egos, perpetuation of academic elitism at home, support of U.S. policy goals at home and abroad

The debit line of this balance sheet is rather short, though in the complex transaction the number of those who do not benefit is probably the largest: the African student, African masses, Africa.

7. WHAT CAN BE DONE?

In order to find out where you wish to go, you must first find out where you are. I have attempted to sketch above how I see the position of African Linguistics in this country, and it is not surprising that to quite an extent the same may apply to African Studies in general. It seems to me that the entire enterprise of academic study of Africa is suspect from top to bottom. Whenever it is not directly enmeshed in governmental politics of various types, it is at best part and parcel of the academic elitism pervading Big-U. Often honest attempts are made to become politically relevant and encourage critical study, but these efforts more often than not result in mere preemption, where the potentially radical and anti-elitist sentiment of both faculties and students are

channeled "constructively" and ultimately harnessed back to the same socio-political complex which controls the action wherever it be: Big Government, Big Industry and Big-U. This is in no way to impinge upon the motivation of people who are honestly trying to do good within the framework of this complex, but only to suggest that the ultimate realities and goals of this complex are likely to defeat or subvert these attempts, however well intended. It seems to me, then, that for whoever is still concerned about Africa, a simple guideline may prove of help: Where you can do more harm than good, quit and go somewhere else where you may do more good than harm.

Footnotes

1. A version of this paper was read to the Third Conference on African Linguistics, Indiana University, Bloomington, April 1972.
2. For further discussion of this, see Givón, T. "Linguistic colonialism and de-colonialization: The school system as a tool of oppression," *Ufahamu*, 1.3 (1971).
3. The rapid expansion of academic Linguistics in this country has been massively supported by U.S. government research grants, most of them emanating from the various branches of the Defense Department. For an illuminating discussion of this, see F. Newmeyer and J. Emonds (1971) "The Linguist in American Society," in *Papers from the Seventh Regional Meeting*, Chicago Linguistic Society, University of Chicago, pp. 285-303. For further discussion of the theoretical orientation of American Linguistics, see J. S. Thompson (1969) "The reactionary idealist foundations of Noam Chomsky's Linguistics," in *Literature and Ideology*, vol. 4, pp. 1-20.



"If the number of members of the UPC at that time (May, 1955) is estimated at 80,000, the number under its influence, carrying its ideas, repeating its slogans and following its directives must be counted in the hundreds of thousands"

-Mouvement nationaux d'indépendance et classes populaires aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles en occident, Vol. II, 1971, p. 480.

