Language Endangerment in (West) Africa

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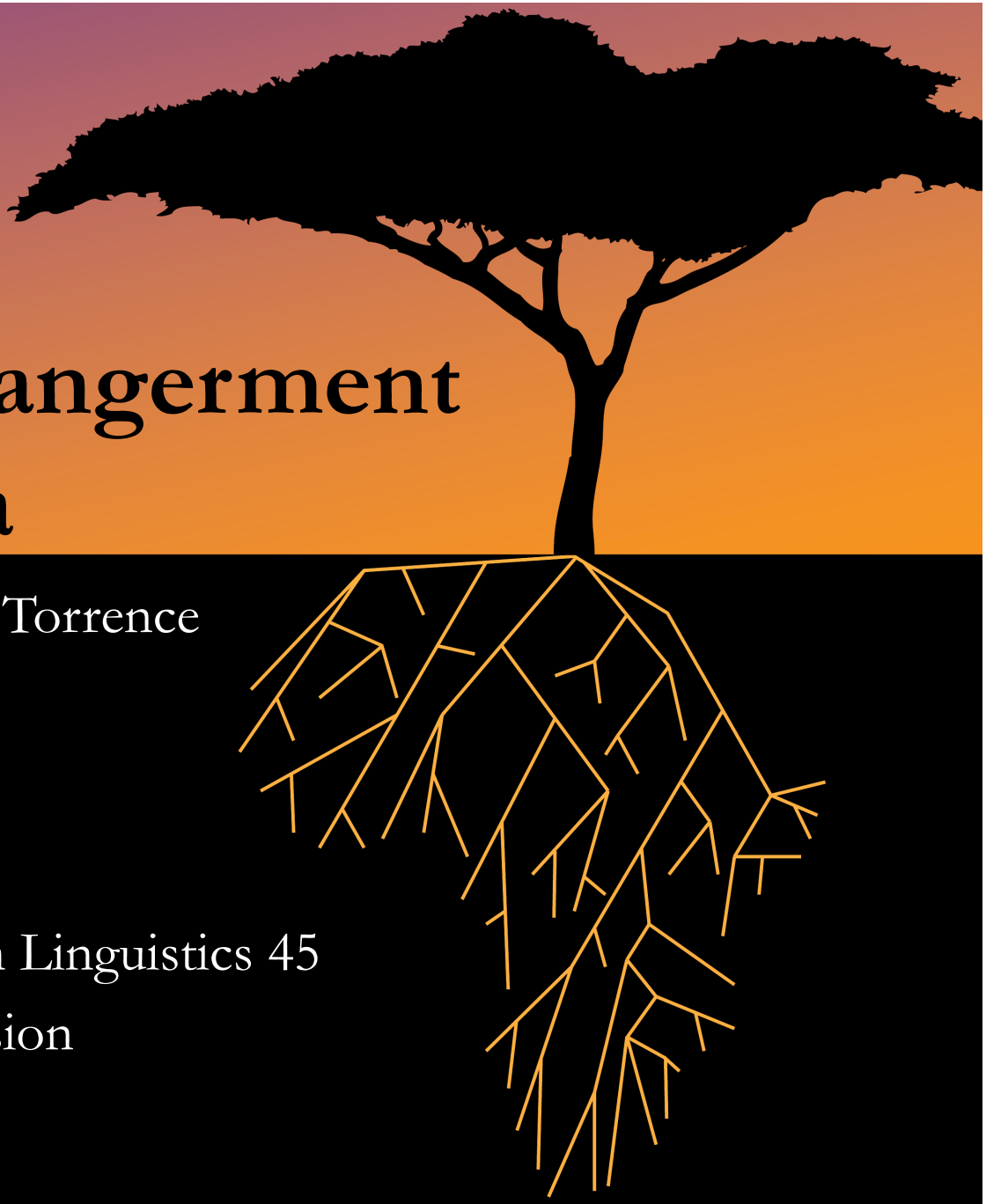
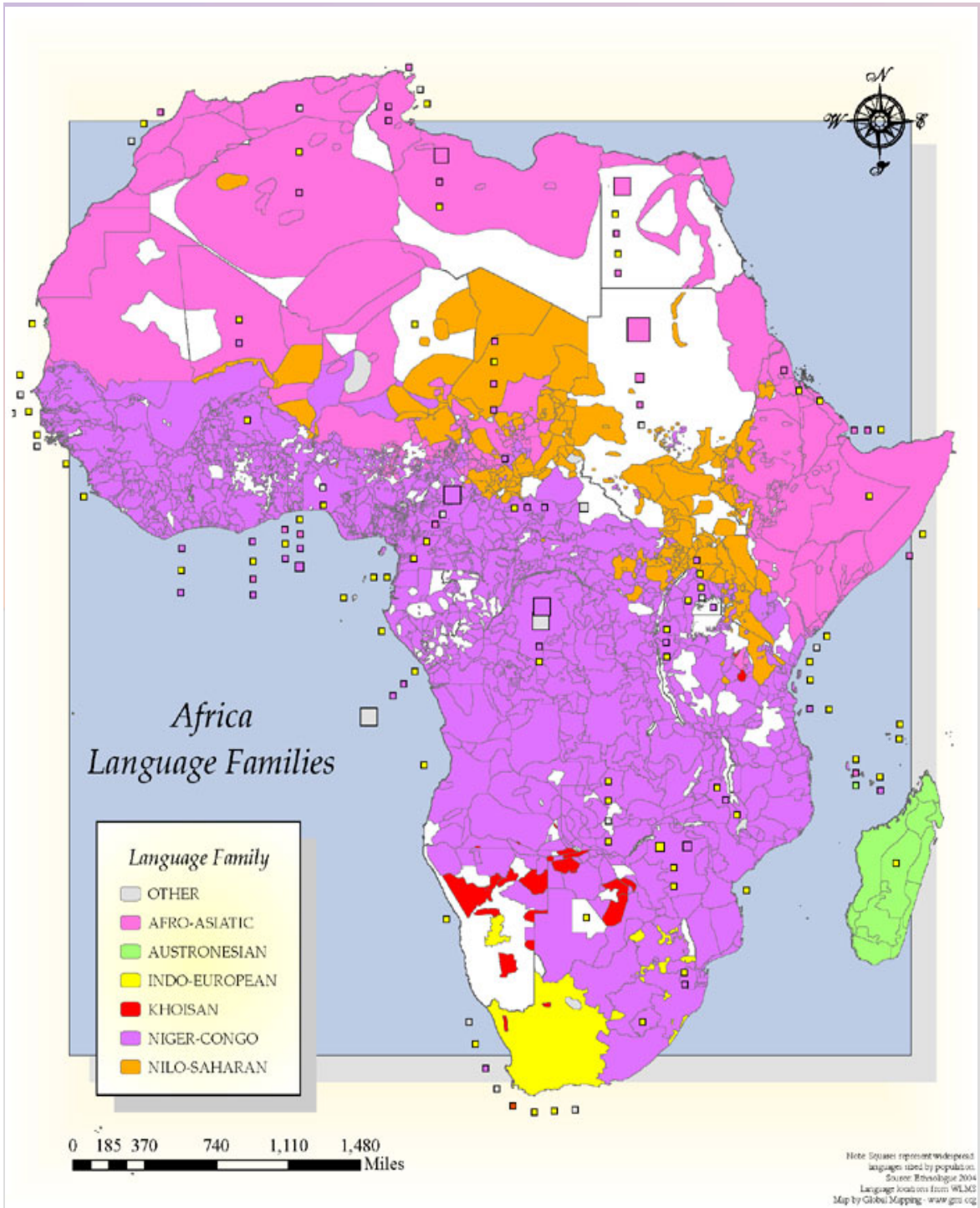


April 17, 2014
Annual Conference on African Linguistics 45
Undergraduate Workshop Session

Sponsored by the National Science Foundation

The Languages of Africa

- Africa is home to 2,000-2,500 languages. (≈30% of all languages on Earth)
- Four major language families (Greenberg 1963):
  - **Niger Congo**
    - ≈1,436 languages/10 subfamilies (Heine & Nurse 2000)
  - **Afro Asiatic**
    - ≈371 languages/6 subfamilies (Heine & Nurse 2000)
  - **Nilo Saharan**
    - ≈196 languages/4-9 subfamilies (Heine & Nurse 2000)
  - **Khoisan**
    - ≈35 languages/5-7 subfamilies (Heine & Nurse 2000)


Africa
Language Families
Language Family
OTHER
AFRO-ASIATIC
AUSTRONESIAN
INDO-EUROPEAN
KHOISAN
NIGER-CONGO
NILO-SAHARAN
0 185 370 740 1,110 1,480
Miles

Tunisia
Mediterranean Sea
Morocco
Western Sahara
Algeria
Libya
Egypt
Mauritania
Mali
Niger
Chad
Sudan
Eritrea
Djibouti
Senegal
Gambia
Guinea-Bissau
Guinea
Burkina Faso
Benin
Nigeria
Somalia
Sierra Leone
Côte D'Ivoire
Ghana
Liberia
Togo
Ethiopia
Central African Republic
Cameroon
Equatorial Guinea
São Tomé e Príncipe
Gabon
Congo
Rwanda
Uganda
Kenya
Indian Ocean
Atlantic Ocean
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Burundi
Tanzania
Seychelles
Comoros
Mayotte (France)
Angola
Zambia
Malawi
Mozambique
Saint Helena (UK)
Zimbabwe
Namibia
Madagascar
Botswana
Swaziland
Lesotho
South Africa
20°E

The Status of Africa's Indigenous Languages

- There have been several attempts to document and catalog the endangered and extinct languages of Africa.
  - Summer Institute of Linguistics' *Ethnologue* project
  - Gabriele Sommer's (1989/1992) survey
  - SOAS's *Endangered Languages Documentation Programme*
  - Harald Haarmann's (2001) survey of world minority languages
  - Stephen Wurm's (1996) *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*
  - UNESCO website
  - Various edited volumes on African language endangerment

The Status of Africa's Indigenous Languages

- Sommer (1989): **116** highly endangered languages (4.6% of all African languages) and **54** extinct languages (2.2% of African languages)
- Batibo (2005): **308** highly endangered languages (12.32% of African languages) and **201** extinct or nearly extinct languages (8% of African languages)
- *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009): **46** endangered languages (1.8% of African languages)

Africa's Highly Endangered/Nearly Extinct Languages (Batibo 2005)

Country/Territory	# of Highly Endangered Languages	# of (Nearly) Extinct Languages
Algeria	3 (e.g. Korandje)	0
Angola	4 (e.g. Nyendo)	2 (Kwadi, Kwisi)
Benin	**5 (e.g. Basa)**	**1 (Tyanda)**
Botswana	12 (e.g. Kua)	4 (e.g Deti-khwe)
Burkina Faso	**8 (e.g. Ble)**	**2 (Noumoudara-Koumoudam)**
Burundi	0	0
Cameroon	**21 (e.g. Eman)**	**22 (e.g. Bishuo)**
Canary Islands	0	1 (Guanche)
Cape Verde	0	0
Central African Republic	2 (Ali, Geme)	2 (Bodo, Birri)
Chad	15 (e.g. Fongoro)	12 (e.g Massalat)
Comoro Islands	2 (Shindzwani, Shimaore)	0
Congo Republic	1 (Teke)	5 (e.g. Mangbele)
Cote d'Ivoire	**4 (e.g. Daho-Doo)**	**3 (e.g. Esuma)**
Dem Republic of Congo	8 (e.g. Bolondo)	6 (e.g. Ngbee)
Djibouti	0	0

Country/Territory	# of Highly Endangered Languages	# of (Nearly) Extinct Languages
Egypt	2 (Kenuzi-Dongola, Sini)	2 (Coptic, Geez)
Equatorial Guinea	**0**	**0**
Eritrea	1 (Bilen)	1 (Geez)
Ethiopia	9 (e.g. Anfillo)	19 (e.g. Argobba)
Gabon	4 (e.g. Pinji)	0
Gambia	**1 (Kalanke)**	**0**
Ghana	**8 (e.g. Krachi)**	**1 (Boro)**
Guinea	**3 (e.g. Baga Binari)**	**3 (e.g. Baga Kaloum)**
Guinea-Bissau	**3 (e.g. Kasanga)**	**1 (Buy)**
Kenya	12 (e.g. Nubi)	12 (e.g. Okiek)
Lesotho	0	1 (Seroa)
Liberia	**2 (Gbii, Dewoin)**	**0**
Libya	3 (e.g. Ghadames)	1 (Sawkrah)
Malawi	1 (Malawian Ngoni)	0
Mali	**3 (e.g. Pana)**	**3 (e.g. Jahanka)**
Mauritania	**2 (Imeraguen, Zenaga)**	**0**
Mayotte	0	0
Morocco	0	2 (Ghomara, Senhaja de Srair)
Mozambique	3 (e.g. Sunda)	0
Namibia	5 (e.g. Kung-Ekoka)	2 (=Khomani, !Ora)
Niger	0	0

Country/Territory	# of Highly Endangered Languages	# of (Nearly) Extinct Languages
Nigeria	**71 (e.g. Dendi)**	**45 (e.g. Gwara)**
Rwanda	0	0
Sao Tome e Principe	0	0
Senegal	**3 (e.g. Samik)**	**2 (Bedik, Haal)**
Sierra Leone	**2 (Bom, Krim)**	**3 (e.g. Bullom So)**
Somalia	6 (e.g. Mushungulu)	1 (Boni)
South Africa	5 (e.g. Sebowa)	8 (N/u)
Sudan	20 (e.g. Logol)	24 (e.g. Kello)
Swaziland	0	0
Tanzania	33 (e.g. Hadza)	9 (e.g. Aasax)
Togo	**5 (e.g. Bissa)**	**0**
Tunisia	0	2 (Sened, Sabir)
Uganda	2 (Ik, Soo)	4 (e.g. Nyang'i)
Zambia	2 (Mbowe, Yauma)	1 (Kxoe)
Zimbabwe	2 (Hiechware, Dombe)	0

Africa's Endangered Languages in a Broader Context

- The state of language endangerment in Sub-Saharan Africa is distinct from much the rest of the world.
  - Threatened languages distributed across several geographically distinct regions of the continent.
  - People speaking endangered languages in Africa are not necessarily economically worse off than their neighbors speaking healthier languages.
  - Internal pressures, not external ones, drive endangerment.

Africa's Endangered Languages in a Broader Context

- In Australia, North Asia and the Americas, indigenous languages are threatened and replaced by the nationally dominant languages of colonizers.
- In Africa, local (sub-national) indigenous languages pose the biggest threat.
  - Less than 10% of rural Africa has competence in an imported European language (Scotton 1982).
  - Khoekoe shift to Dutch around 1700 = only documented case of an African speech community abandoning its heritage language for the language of its colonizers (Traill 1995).

Africa's Endangered Languages in a Broader Context

- Other internal pressures driving language endangerment:
  - Mass migration (Brenzinger 2007)
  - Cyclic immigration (Brenzinger 2007)
- The above internal pressures tend to drive the pattern of language endangerment in East Africa more than in West Africa.

Resiliency of African Languages

- At a superficial level, all the variables are in place which should lead to the widespread replacement of indigenous languages with European languages:
  - European languages are prestige speech varieties.
  - Colonial languages are used by the ruling elite and in higher education & politics.
  - In many regions, there's been a long history of suppression.
  - In most regions, few resources are employed for the maintenance of indigenous cultures or languages.

Resiliency of African Languages

- Why, then, aren't European languages an imminent threat to the survival of minority languages in Africa?

Resiliency of African Languages

- European colonizers represented a very small proportion of the overall continental population and were thus unable to numerically dominate.

- Language density in Africa is high. As such, indigenous languages are in constant contact. Thus, local factors will play a larger role than national factors in language endangerment.

Tunisia
Mediterranean Sea
Morocco
Algeria
Libya
Egypt
Western Sahara
Cape Verde Islands
Mauritania
Mali
Niger
Chad
Sudan
Eritrea
Djibouti
Senegal
Gambia
Guinea-Bissau
Guinea
Burkina Faso
Benin
Nigeria
Somalia
Sierra Leone
Liberia
Côte D'Ivoire
Ghana
Togo
Central African Republic
Ethiopia
Cameroon
Equatorial Guinea
São Tomé e Príncipe
Gabon
Congo
Kenya
Uganda
Rwanda
Burundi
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Tanzania
Indian Ocean
Atlantic Ocean
Seychelles
Comoros
Angola
Zambia
Malawi
Mayotte (France)
Mozambique
Saint Helena (UK)
Zimbabwe
Namibia
Madagascar
Botswana
Réunion (France)
Swaziland
Lesotho
South Africa
30°N
10°N
10°S
30°S
20°W
0°
20°E
40°W
60°W

Resiliency of African Languages

- Multilingualism is the norm (itself a consequence of high language density). As such, the acquisition of a regional/national language does not pose an imminent threat to a native language.

- Though subtle, there is a pan-African spirit, which often unifies Africans in different nations in a common cause. This gives way to a conscious willingness to shift to another African language before shifting to a colonial language or Arabic.

Resiliency of African Languages

- Economic hardship has left most national governments unable to initiate educational systems that promote a single national language to the exclusion of others.

Challenges to Documentation and Revitalization Efforts

- Because its pattern of endangerment is unique, Africa has great potential to provide fresh perspectives on and new insights into the causes, consequences, and characteristics of language endangerment.

- In practice, the impact of Africa's endangered languages on the field is minimal, due to a number of difficulties.
  - Insufficient infrastructure
  - Scarcity of resources
  - Incomplete and/or inaccurate information
  - Absence of public awareness (locally AND globally)

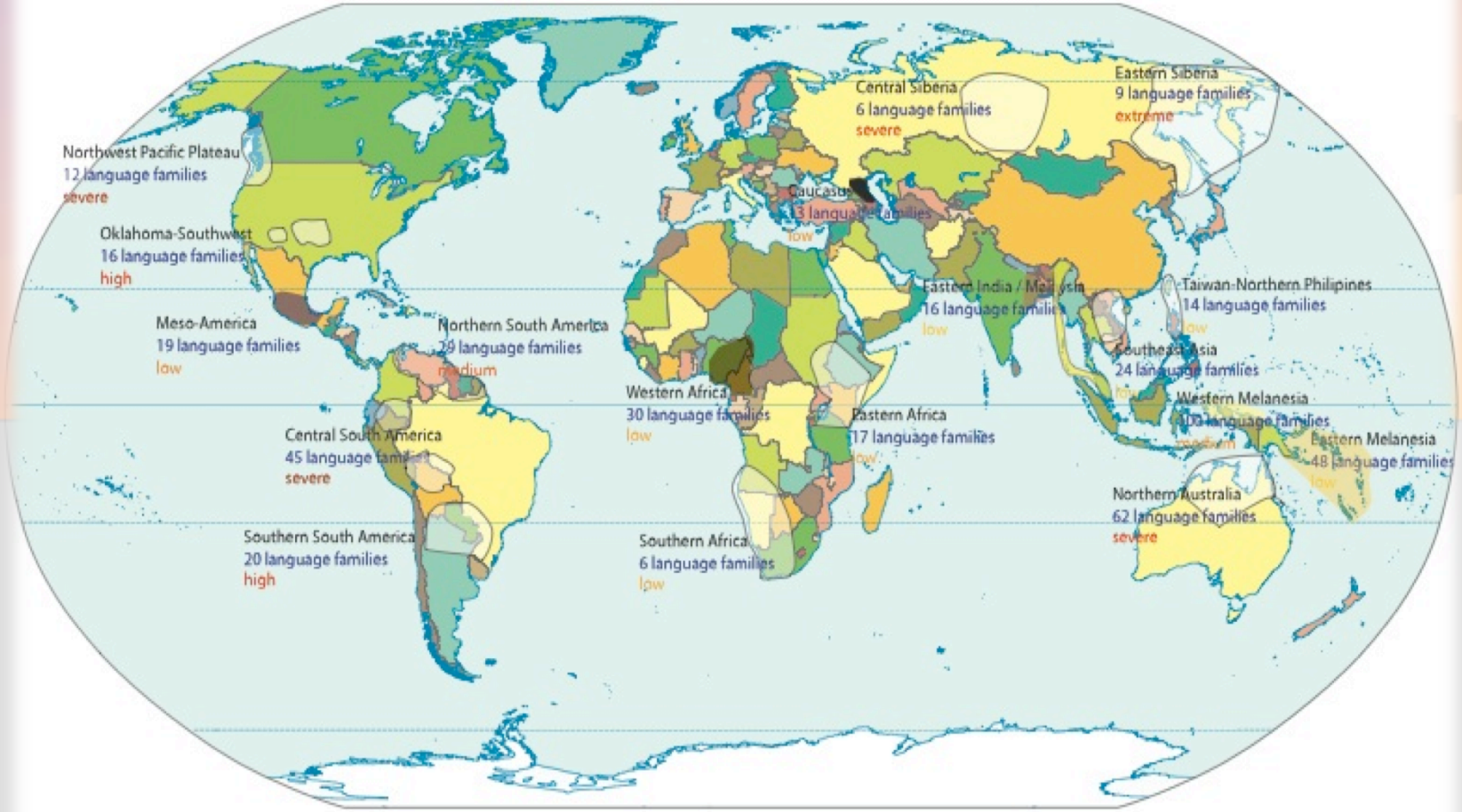
Challenges to Documentation and Revitalization Efforts

- In addition, the overall "threat level" of language endangerment in Africa has been characterized as "low" (Sommer 1989/1992, Brenzinger 1992, 1998, Wurm 1996, Anderson & Harrison 2006).

Language Hotspots

- Geographic regions with high levels of linguistic diversity, high levels of endangerment and low levels of documentation (Anderson & Harrison 2006)

Global Language Hotspots



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Rating by Genetic Index

1. Taiwan, Northern Philippines (.700)
2. Southern South America (.417)
3. Northern & Central Australia (.405)
4. Central South America (.398)
5. Eastern Siberia (.391)
6. Oklahoma-Southwest (.372)
7. Caucasus (.250)
8. Central Siberia (.24)
9. Northern South America (.228)
10. Northwest Pacific Plateau (.226)
11. Southeast Asia (.138)
12. Southern Africa (.092)
13. Eastern Africa (.080)
14. Meso-America (in progress)
15. Western Africa (in progress)
16. Western Melanesia (in progress)
17. Eastern Melanesia (in progress)
18. East India, Malaysia (in progress)

Rating by Threat Level

1. Northern & Central Australia
2. Central South America
3. Eastern Siberia
4. Northwest Pacific Plateau
5. Southern South America
6. Central South America
7. Oklahoma-Southwest
8. Northern South America
9. Western Melanesia
10. Caucasus
11. Taiwan, Northern Philippines
12. Southeast Asia
13. Eastern Africa
14. Meso-America
15. Southern Africa
16. Western Africa
17. Eastern Melanesia
18. East India, Malaysia

threat level key:

severe
high
medium
low

Challenges to Documentation and Revitalization Efforts (Cont.)

- The overall "threat level" of language endangerment in Africa is characterized as "low".
- Due to this, research on and funding opportunities for Africa's endangered languages are often perceived to be "non urgent" (Connell 2007).
- Thus, a disproportionate amount of funding and research is devoted to the study of endangered African languages as compared to any other linguistically threatened region in the world (Blench 2007).

Stimulating Efforts to Research & Repair Africa's Endangered Languages

- How can we stimulate efforts to improve this situation?
- This workshop seeks to stimulate and enhance the visibility of endangered African language research, in the hopes of reversing this trend and bringing the unique insights and perspectives afforded by African language endangerment to bear on the fields of language documentation and endangered language research.

Stimulating Efforts to Research & Repair Africa's Endangered Languages

- In today's climate of economic instability/uncertainty and ongoing regional conflict both in Africa and abroad, stimulating and enhancing the visibility of endangered African language research is a rather formidable task.

- We believe that one fruitful way to achieve this goal is to encourage and facilitate mutually beneficial synergistic partnerships between documentary and theoretical linguists researching endangered African languages.

Stimulating Efforts to Research & Repair Africa's Endangered Languages

- Our workshop brings together both documentary and theoretical approaches to endangered African language research in order to highlight the respects in which the two methodologies are mutually informing and essential to documentation and preservation efforts.

- We believe that doing so will not only increase the net output of research on endangered African languages, but that it will also greatly improve the depth, breadth, and overall quality of that research.

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