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LANGUAGE USES VS. LANGUAGE POLICY: SOUTH SUDAN AND JUBA ARABIC IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA

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ABSTRACT

The paper summarizes the language and educational policy of the Republic of South Sudan against the backdrop of a sociolinguistic survey conducted in Juba, South Sudan, in the months of July-August 2013, and aiming at a better understanding of the role, uses and beliefs surrounding the use of Juba Arabic, an Arabic-based pidgincreole widely used in Juba and in a wide part of the newly independent country. The results highlight the fact that, although the government of the newly independent country does not recognize the very existence of Juba Arabic, this is the real lingua franca and the most widely spoken language. In a parallel way, although Arabic, the former official language, is not granted any special role and status, it still acts as the de facto “high variety.”

FOREWORD: LANGUAGE IN THE SOUTH SUDAN¹

This is very much the report of a work in progress, and for two different reasons: the first and usual one is the preliminary state of our data, collected in Juba, South Sudan, in July-August 2013. The second, and most important one, is the very undefined and unstable political situation in the South Sudan.

South Sudan is widely known in the general press as the youngest nation-state, having acquired its independence on July 2, 2011. It is formed by the three historical provinces of South Sudan, dating back from the colonial times: the southernmost one, Equatoria, and, to the northwest and northeast respectively, Bahr El Ghazal and Upper Nile. The newly independent state, following various administrative reshuffles during the Sudanese times, is formed by 10 “states:” Western, Central and Eastern Equatoria; Warrap; Jongley; Lakes; Unity; Upper Nile; Western and Upper Bahr El Ghazal.

The linguistic picture is quite complex; *Ethnologue* (<http://www.ethnologue.com>) counts 68 spoken languages and three additional extinct languages. From a classificatory linguistic point of view, most languages in the country belong to the Nilo-Saharan phylum, a minority to the Niger-Congo phylum. From a communicative point of view, it seems safe to say that no single language, local or foreign, is shared by the totality, or even a majority of the population. It is apparent, nevertheless, that some form of Arabic has enjoyed such a role since at least the late 19th century and still is the most widespread medium. Which variety of Arabic is more difficult to say: broadly speaking, one can distinguish between a “simplified” variety of Sudanese Arabic (generally referred to as *árabi al besít*), used in the northern parts of South Sudan (around Malakal) and the West (centered in Wau), and a quite distinct language, usually called Juba Arabic, or, in Juba Arabic itself, *arábi júba*. The latter is traditionally labelled a pidgin, but a better label would be a pidgincreole (as per Bakker 2008) borne out of the contact between Sudanese Arabic and the local languages in the second half of the 19th century (cf. Owens 1985 for a general overview of the genesis of Juba Arabic, as well as Owens 1996 and Tosco and Manfredi 2013 for an overview of Juba Arabic within the Arabic-based pidgins and creoles). It is the status of this variety which was the object of our fieldwork.

The Provisional Constitution of South Sudan does not list each language and ethnic groups. In its Article 6 it states:

All indigenous languages of South Sudan are national languages and shall be respected, developed and promoted.

English shall be the official working language in the Republic of South Sudan, as well as the language of instruction at all levels of education.

On the other hand, the constitution of the single states of South Sudan may flatly contradict the central government’s one; e.g., the Interim Constitution of Central Equatoria (hardly known in South Sudan itself) states inter

¹ Fieldwork in South Sudan was made possible by a grant from the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) within the FIRB project “Areas of Linguistics and Cultural Transaction in Africa (*AtRA*). The research was done in partnership with the Department of Arabic of the College of Education at the University of Juba, and in particular its Director, Prof. Siham Osman. We thank her for her assistance in acquiring the entry visa to South Sudan and in making our research possible in the first place. We also thank Claudius Waran Patrick and Sara Bojo Lokudu for their precious help; the Embassy of France and the Ambassador, M. Christian Bader, for their logistic and practical help, and countless other individuals and institutions. All errors and omissions are our exclusive intellectual property.

alia that both ‘English and Arabic shall be the official working languages at all levels of the government of the State as well as languages of Instruction for higher education,’ and that ‘Bari shall be an additional official working language or medium of instruction in Schools at the State level.’

Provided that education in South Sudan is by and large in English, and that locally either Arabic or an indigenous language is used (the latter, in the first years of the primary school), the Government of South Sudan’s educational policy remains unclear, nor did various interviews conducted at the Ministry of Higher Education shed much light: primary education in a number of local languages is planned, but neither the exact number of the involved languages (Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Bari, Zande, and possibly a few others being the most likely candidates, due to the relatively higher number of speakers) nor a timetable were available to us. Most importantly, it is not clear *which* language will be taught *where* and *to who*. Education in the local language is planned for the first three years of the primary school, with English being introduced in the fourth class. If education in the local language will then be dropped altogether, or the language will be taught as a subject, is equally unclear.²

What is clear, on the other hand, is that Arabic is generally ignored at the official level – although, being much better known than English, it is very much in use practically, and probably at any level of government. The same applies to Juba Arabic, the pidgincreole which is the everyday language in the capital, Juba, and in much of the country; things are actually worse, because Juba Arabic is itself an exclusively oral language and it is not standardized at all. What do South Sudanese think about this language? How do they rate its degree of independence vis-à-vis Arabic (its main lexifier)? Even more: how do they use it, when and with who? Our research was aimed at providing a few preliminary answers to these questions.

THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION OF JUBA

The first part of our fieldwork was spent on a qualitative evaluation of the degree of multilingualism and the linguistic uses by means of a sociolinguistic survey. In order to assess the status of Arabic in Juba, two districts were chosen: Malikiya (alternative spelling: Malakiya), the heart of “old Juba,” traditionally inhabited by ethnic Bari and mainly Muslim; and Gudele (alternative spelling: Gudelle), one of the new residential areas extending to the West of Juba town.

Map 1 - Location of the Malikiya and Gudele districts in Juba.



Within each district 50 households were investigated and their members (with the obvious exception of infants) interviewed. This resulted in a total number of 314 interviews (190 Malikiya and 124 in Gudele; 12 additional

² Actually, the present-day South Sudan language policy finds its origins in the guidelines proposed by the Navaisha Comprehensive Peace Agreement (see Abdelhay 2007 for a full discussion).

interviews in Gudele were disregarded for the purposes of the present study). The higher number of interviews in Malikiya stems from a higher ratio of individuals per household (3.79 vs. 2.48).

The data also bring to the fore the very recent and still ongoing inflow of immigration: Juba is a town inhabited by young people (31.5 years in general, and 28.6 years in Gudele), and less than a half of the interviewees were born in town (36.6 of the total), while even in the historical district of Malikiya the percentage reaches 49% only. A grand total of 46% of interviewees settled after 2005 (the year of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement which brought to a substantial stop the Sudanese civil war, and paved the way to independence). Within Gudele, the percentage of newcomers rises to 74.1% – three out of four inhabitants.

Tab. 1 - The sample.

	Gudele	Malikiya	Total
Households	50 (+12 not considered)	50	100
Individuals = Ratio	124/50 = 2.48	190/50 = 3.79	314/100 = 3.14
Age (average)	28.6	34.4	31.5
Gender	M 67 (54%) - F 57 (46%)	M 74 (39%) - F 116 (61%)	M 141 (45%) - F 173 (55%)
Length of stay in Juba			
- Born in Juba	22 (17.7%)	93 (49%)	115 (36.6%)
- Arrived after 2005	92 (74.1%)	54 (28.4%)	146 (46.4%)
- Arrived before 2005	10 (9.2%)	43 (22.6%)	53 (17%)
Education			
- university	21 (17%)	62 (32.6%)	83 (26.4%)
- secondary	43 (34.6%)	68 (35.8%)	111 (35.3%)
- primary	34 (27.4%)	42 (22.2%)	76 (24.3%)
- none	26 (21%)	18 (9.4%)	44 (14%)

Juba is also, of course, highly multiethnic and multilingual (more so in the new area of Gudelle than in Malikiya). Table 2 aims at capturing multilingualism on the basis of the interviewees'.

Half of the population of Gudele claims to speak three languages; Malikiya – home as we have seen to an older couch of the population – has a slightly but significantly lower multilingualism rate, with 45.2% of the interviewees claiming to speak two languages.

Tab. 2 - Degree of Multilingualism.

	Gudele	Malikiya	Total
<i>More than 4</i>	8 (6.5%)	6 (2.1%)	14 (4.5%)
<i>4 languages</i>	31 (25%)	16 (9.5%)	47 (15 %)
<i>3 languages</i>	63 (50.8%)	69 (36.4%)	132 (42%)
<i>2 languages</i>	21 (16.9%)	86 (45.2%)	107 (34%)
<i>1 language</i>	1 (0.8%)	13 (6.8%)	14 (4.5%)

Against the backdrop of multilingualism, Juba Arabic is by large the first language for almost a half of the respondents (47%, but as many as 60% in Malikiya).

Flying in the face of an official policy of utter disregard (if not overt hostility) for Arabic and its speakers, Arabic ranks second in the list in Table 3., with almost 10% of the interviewees declaring it their first language.

Most importantly, Juba Arabic is the only medium shared by a very high portion of the inhabitants (6.37% only claim *not* to speak it, the majority of which located in Malikiya).

Tab. 3 - 1st language.

	Gudele	Malikiya	Total
Juba Arabic	33 (26.6%)	114 (60%)	147 (47%)
Arabic	5	26	31 (9.8%)
Bari	6	22	28 (9%)
Moru	11	8	19 (6%)
Zande	13	0	13 (4.1%)
Pojulu	6	6	12 (3.8%)
Dinka	5	4	9 (2.9%)
Madi	6	0	6 (2.0%)
Mundari	6	0	6 (2.0%)
Baka	5	0	5 (1.6%)
Kakwa	3	2	5 (1.6%)

Acholi	3	1	4 (1.3%)
Kuku	4	0	4 (1.3%)
Nyangbara	4	0	4 (1.3%)
Nuer	3	0	3 (1.0%)
Balanda	3	0	3 (1.0%)
other	2	0	2 (0.7%)
Juba Arabic unknown	7 (5.65%)	13 (6.84%)	20 (6.37%)

The use of the different languages is also revealing: Juba Arabic is present in all of the four investigated domains (even, partially, “in the public offices,” where English, the official language, and Arabic, the other de-facto high variety – which are also written media – clearly predominate). On the other hand, Juba Arabic is not the preferred medium at home, within the family: here, as expected, the ethnic language wins out. Juba Arabic is instead the preferred medium to talk with neighbours and, to a lower extent, in the market. Juba Arabic is therefore, first and foremost, the language of socialization.

Tab. 4 - Language uses.

<i>a. at home</i>			
	Gudele	Malikiya	Total
Juba Arabic only	34 (27.5%)	85 (44.7%)	119 (37.8%)
x + Juba Arabic	40 (32.3%)	54 (28.5%)	94 (30%)
x only	21 (16.9%)	30 (15.8%)	51 (16.3%)
Juba Arabic + x	24 (19.3%)	14 (7.4%)	38 (12.1%)
x + y + Juba Arabic	5 (4%)	7 (3.6%)	12 (3.8%)

<i>b. the neighbours</i>			
	Gudele	Malikiya	Total
Juba Arabic only	83 (66.9%)	155 (81.6%)	238 (75.8%)
x only	8 (6.5%)	25 (13.2%)	33 (10.5%)
Juba Arabic + x	20 (16.1%)	8 (4.2%)	28 (8.9%)
x + Juba Arabic	8 (6.5%)	0	8 (2.5%)
Juba Arabic + x + y	3 (2.4%)	1 (0.5%)	4 (1.4%)
x + y	1 (0.8%)	0	1 (0.3%)
x + y + Juba	1 (0.8%)	0	1 (0.3%)
x + y + z	0	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)

<i>c. the marketplace</i>			
	Gudele	Malikiya	Total
Juba Arabic only	79 (63.7%)	115 (60.6%)	194 (61.7%)
Juba Arabic + x	31 (25%)	21 (11.1%)	52 (16.6%)
x only	8 (6.5%)	25 (13.2%)	33 (10.6%)
x + Juba Arabic	2 (1.6%)	18 (9.4%)	20 (6.3%)
x + y + Juba Arabic	0	7 (3.6%)	7 (2.2%)
Juba Arabic + x + y	2 (1.6%)	4 (2.1%)	6 (1.9%)
x + y	2 (1.6%)	0	2 (0.6%)

<i>d. the public office</i>			
	Gudele	Malikiya	Total
English	39 (31.5%)	34 (18%)	73 (23.3%)
Arabic	5 (4%)	54 (28.7%)	59 (18.8%)
Juba Arabic	21 (17%)	23 (12.2%)	44 (14%)
English + Arabic	6 (4.9%)	14 (7.5%)	20 (6.4%)
English + Juba Arabic	10 (8%)	4 (2.1%)	14 (4.5%)
Arabic + English	3 (2.4%)	7 (3.8%)	10 (3.2%)
Juba Arabic + English	8 (6.4%)	2 (1%)	10 (3.2%)
English + Arabic + Juba Arabic	0	6 (3.1%)	6 (1.8%)
Arabic + Juba Arabic	0	4 (2.1%)	4 (1.3%)
Arabic + English + Juba Arabic	0	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)

English + Arabic + Juba Arabic	0	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)
English + Juba Arabic + Arabic	0	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)
Kakwa	0	1 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)
English + Juba Arabic + Bari	1 (0.8%)	0	1 (0.3%)
not applicable (: elders and young people)	31 (25%)	38 (20%)	69 (22%)

CONCLUSIONS: THE SPEAKERS VS. THE GOVERNMENT ON JUBA ARABIC

A second part of our fieldwork concerned the attitudes towards Juba Arabic vis-à-vis Sudanese (or “High”) Arabic, but also English on the one side and the ethnic South Sudanese languages on the other.

The answers to these questions were elicited through a number of interviews in Juba Arabic with a limited number of the interviewees of the first questionnaire. In total, 35 interviews for a total number of around 40 hours of recording were obtained.

In general, the interviewees agreed on the following:

- Juba Arabic is an independent language of South Sudan and *not* a “part” of Arabic;
- Juba Arabic is the main first and vehicular language in “greater” Juba (possibly in Greater Equatoria);
- although the lexicon of Juba Arabic is by and large Arabic-derived, Juba Arabic speakers in general have a very clear metalinguistic consciousness of its distinctiveness and show a positive attitude toward it (this nicely correlates to the results of a previous survey conducted by SIL South Sudan (SIL, n.d.)
- such a positive attitude towards Juba Arabic does not contrast in the speakers’ minds with a general appreciation of the other indigenous languages and of English.

It was also apparent that, by and large, Juba Arabic speakers would like to have this language taught at school and more widely used (either in Latin or Arabic script). We investigated their attitude towards the national educational policies, and in particular towards the hypothetical adoption of Juba Arabic as a teaching or subject language. In this regard, it is interesting to note that, in contrast to the state’s ideological understanding of language, according to which Juba Arabic is a form of Arabic (i.e. the only official language of the previously unified Sudan) and it therefore has no official status within South Sudan, the majority of our informants showed a positive attitude towards the adoption of what they consider their first and foremost language. In particular, they adopt a pragmatic perspective in arguing that Juba Arabic is the only means that can facilitate interethnic communication in South Sudan.

Although ideology is not absent in the speakers’ attitudes toward language(s), and it is apparent for example in a frequently heard statement about Juba Arabic being “the language which unites South Sudanese,” pragmatic considerations play a much bigger role: the speakers stress the usefulness of an already existing local lingua franca in order to surmount the communicative problems of their communicative settings.

The relative role of ideology and practical considerations is reversed in the case of the government’s attitude toward the language problem: on the one hand, the choice of English as the language of education may be supported by economic and practical considerations, while the recognition of the indigenous languages may be seen as a tactic move to prevent possible criticisms of a scarce attention to the diversity of the country. But ideological considerations are rampant in the choice of English as the sole official language of the country, although it is barely if at all known by the majority of the South Sudanese. Conversely, Arabic, which, in one form or another, is widely used as an interethnic medium, is utterly disregarded. Indigenous languages are paid lip-service in the Constitution, but Juba Arabic, as a “non-ethnic” language, is not even acknowledged.

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