
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 Gottschligg’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 rechercident 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).  

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 ‘languageness’.

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 ghsmal’ 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 wold 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).