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Linguistics of a Continent

Africa is home to over 1.2 billion people and, by far, one of the most culturally diverse continents. However, some people are still ignorant to the fact that Africa has many linguistic qualities and not just one or two languages. The continent of Africa has around 50 countries and over 1,500 different languages. Among the languages spoken, the most used are Swahili, Arabic, and even English. Each of these languages has a unique beginning, millions of fluent speakers, and many modern day qualities that make them stand out over the thousands of other languages spoken in the continent.

The language that I was most aware of in Africa is Arabic. Arabic originated near the middle of the Arabian Peninsula around 7th century C.E, which is now mostly Saudi Arabia. With Arabic originating in this inaccessible region, the language preserved most of its traditional quality. The language is much preferred in habitual Muslim prayer and the Qur'an uses it as its original script for religious practices. "Arab" in Arabic translates to "nomad" that describes the early tribes of the language, leading Arabic to the tip of Africa. Today, over 100 million people speak Arabic in the continent of Africa and are the official language in countries such as Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia in North Africa. The dialect of Arabic that is mostly used is in the northern region is North African dialect, which is one of many sub-dialects. Some of these dialects even turned into other languages such as Swahili.

Swahili, also known as Kiswahili is another popular language in Africa. Fifty to eighty million people in Africa today speak Swahili as a native or second language. Do you know “*Hakuna Matata*” from *Lion King*? Do you remember Kady from *Mean Girls* saying, “Jambo” to her class? Well, these phrases both derive from the Swahili language, which has been around since 2nd century A.D. The origin of Swahili is Bantu but most of the language developed through Arabic with minor Portuguese. The reason for the Arab influence is from the Swahili people, who were the original speakers, using the Qur’an as a spiritual guide, which is why you may find most Swahili speakers to be Muslim. With Swahili literally meaning “the coast” in Arabic, the language most popular in east African countries that are close to the pacific coast like Congo, Rwanda, Kenya, and Tanzania. In Uganda, Swahili has been an official subject for primary schools since 1992. Because of the demanding role for it in education over hundreds of years, Swahili has spread all over the world and has become a popular language offered at many prestigious universities such as Yale, Harvard, and Princeton.

Alongside Swahili is another surprisingly popular language, which is actually English. In Modern day Africa, there are over 700 million speakers of English, making close to the top language. English is the official language in the countries of Zimbabwe, Uganda, South Africa, and Zambia. English, as most would know, is a Germanic language originating from the European continent. That is why many English speaking African countries in history are often referred to as Anglophone countries. It made an impact in Africa around March of 1820 when the first British settlers arrived near the coast of South Africa close to the Xhosa people. From April to June of 1820, the British had their largest settlements in Africa and boosted the English speaking population tremendously.

Even after many of these countries gained independence from colonial takeover, English still plays a major key role in African education today. An example would be in the education system for Rwanda. According to *Books for Africa*, Rwanda has had an English curriculum in their primary schools since 2008. With increasing interest for English education, Rwanda received over 132,000 from *Books for Africa* in 2012. The increased marketing in countries often supports the reason for the education of English in schools. “To make Rwanda to be equal, English is now a world language, especially in trade and commerce. Rwanda is trying to attract foreign investors — most of these people are speaking English” (McGreal, 2009). Since foreign investment is becoming more prevalent in Rwanda, many believe English is the key to more economic success.

It is often hard to believe some people still think of Africa as a less developed continent. Africa is more than just a vastly diverse continent, but region of many intertwined cultures and linguistic qualities. The linguistics of Africa can be as broad as thousands of languages beginning locally and tribal to international and well-appreciated. Arabic, Swahili, and English are just one small part of the language characteristics and can go back to ancient civilizations. Africa should be given more credit for its unique and vast education into broadening its languages over the past centuries.