7th World Congress of African Linguistics (WOCAL7), University of Buea, Cameroon, 20-24 Aug. 2012

Highly Precise Colour Naming in African Languages

Arnold Groh, Technical University of Berlin, Germany

Among the attempts to test the Principle of Linguistic Relativity, some authors favoured investigations on colours, relying on a proposition by Berlin & Kay (1969), that "primitive" cultures had no names for colours, and that colour terms were gradually generated in the course of cultural progress.
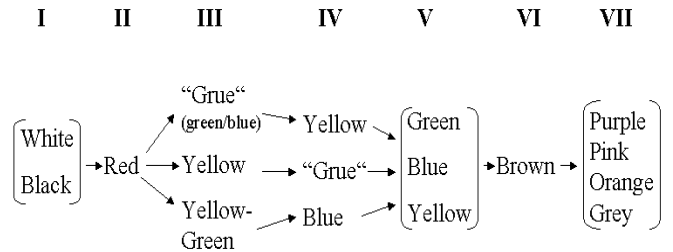
Fig. 1: The proposed "Stages" (cf. Kay, 1975).

But these assumptions are very problematic.
Both archaic and indigenous languages, i.e. those, which by a colonial concept are labelled as being "primitive", are generally very precise and grammatically much more complex that modern languages. Language change can be explained by a model of cultural synthesis: In the course of history, cultures encounter and overlap each other, which then yields a culture of synthesis.
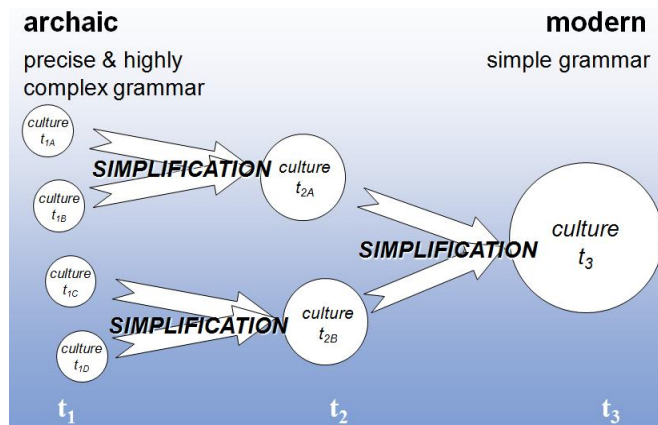
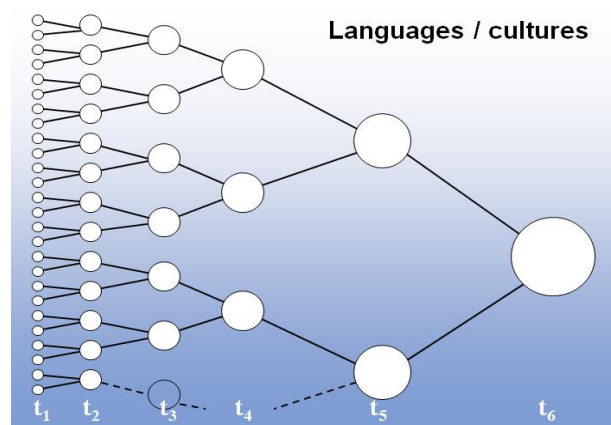Fig. 2: Cultural synthesis and language change.

Fig. 3: Globalisation, cultures and languages.

Our Study

Practical consideration:

Persons, who are able to see colours, and who live in a colourful world should be able to designate colours.

Method:

Minimally invasive field encounter with indigenous peoples.

Procedure:

1. Testing subjects for colour blindness.
2. Presenting standardised colour samples, asking subjects to name them.
3. Presenting these names to another person of the same mother tongue and have it translated into a European language.
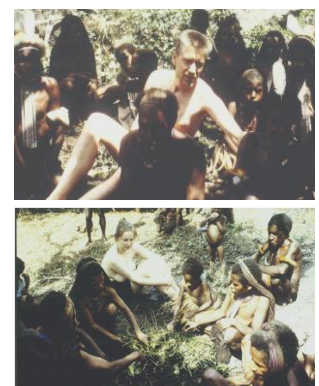
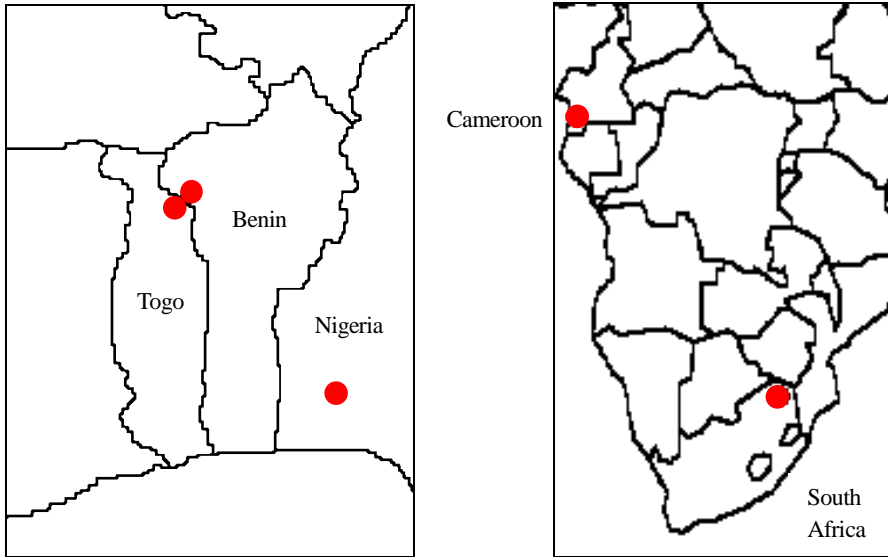Fig. 4 a, b: Minimally-invasive field encounter.

(cont.)

Fig. 5 a, b:

Places of Investigation in Africa

Nigeria: Ibadan (multicultural setting);

Benin/Togo: Somba/ Tamberma;
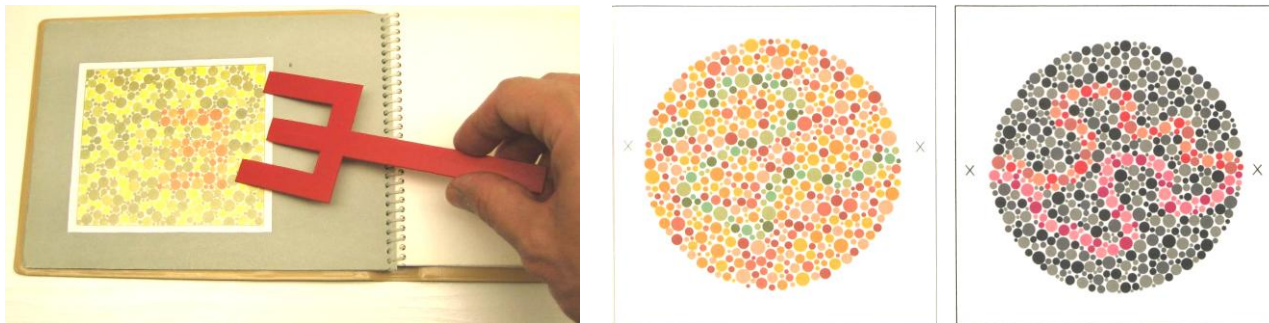
Cameroon: Bagyeli;

South Africa: Venda.

Fig. 6 a, b$_{I/II}$: Tests for colour blindness: Pflügertrident Test, Ishihara Tables.

General Results

The indigenous subjects were able to name the colours presented. Indigenous vs. globalised cultural factors were reflected in the use of reference objects for naming colours. Both metonymical and non-metonymical indigenous colour names did not follow a stage pattern as proposed by Berlin & Kay (1969) and others. The high precision of indigenous colour names corresponds both to the precision of experts' colour names in the industrial culture, and to the highly precise grammar that characterises indigenous languages.

Fig. 7 a, b: Standardised colours (HKS-K, NCS).

Structural **A**nalysis of **C**ultural **S**ystems

http://s-a-c-s.net

Author's address:
PD Dr. Arnold Groh
Technical University of Berlin
Structural Analysis of Cultural Systems
Sekr. FR 6-3
Franklinstr. 28-29
D-10587 Berlin
E-Mail: arnold.groh@tu-berlin.de

S.A.C.S. is the only academic institution offering training and education on integrative, culturally sustainable behaviour in indigenous settings, in observance of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.