Endangered Languages
in Africa

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"People who are not the language they speak": On Language Shift without Language Decay in East Africa*

1 Introduction

Aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between language and ethnicity among certain pastoral and hunter-gathering groups of East Africa. It will be argued that in many cases social identity is characterized by a split among general (tribal/national) and clan affiliation, with a number of attributes (but NOT language) allocated to clanship. A scenario will emerge in which language and ethnic identity are as much linked in East Africa as possibly everywhere, but where ethnic bonds are weak, and so is language loyalty.

A special effect of the split is the facility with which ethnicity AND language are subject to rapid, abrupt ("catastrophic" in the technical sense elaborated below) shift, while clanship is maintained more or less intact.

As the main focus of this paper is on language shift, attention and the burden of proof will be on attested or inferred cases of abrupt language shift (presented in Section 3).

Ideally, a model predicting which contact situations are more likely to give rise to an abrupt language shift could be used historically as a diagnostic tool for the investigation of the past linguistic history of East Africa. A formalization of different kinds of language/ethnic shift will be attempted in Section 5 making use of *Catastrophe Theory*.

2 On language shift

Most recent work on language death – in Africa and beyond – has stressed the role of skewed bilingualism, codeswitching, and language decay (roughly in this order) as symptoms and forerunners of language

death (cf., e.g., various studies in Dorian 1989). It seems that it is often forgotten that many cases of language change occur without any of these concomitant factors. Of course, it is trivial to note that language shift and language-death are not automatically associated with language decay and obsolescence; still, little is known of the linguistic and, above all, social correlates of such a phenomenon.

Language shift not accompanied by language decay seems particularly frequent in East Africa. A few years ago Dimmendaal (1989:23) remarked on the 'abrupt cessation of home language transmission' with reference to a number of East African contact situations, such as the Kore of Kenya (who shifted to Maa), the Kwegu of Southwestern Ethiopia (who have almost completed their shift to Mursi or Bodi), the Aasáx of Tanzania, and, finally, the Elmolo – who will be a major topic of this paper.

First of all, I propose to make a sharp differentiation between the language relations involving pastoralists and between pastoralists and hunter-gatherers on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the language relations involving at least one sedentary people. An example of the latter is given by Dahalo, spoken on the Lamu coast in Kenya. Here borrowing from Amu Swahili is abundant but, apparently, going on since a long time (although the rate of borrowing is increasing nowadays), and covering not only the terminology of agriculture and other cultural fields, but even basic numerals, syntax, and phraseology (for examples and a discussion of the on-going language shift among the Dahalo, cf. Tosco 1992). Another case is possibly provided by the Suba of South-West Kenya. From Rottland and Ogoth Okombo (1986) one gets the impression of a very "normal" picture: there has been progressive language use decay but no ethnic identity decay, and today one sees even a very "modern" (and, it seems, effective) revivalist movement. This supports the view that the Suba language (or, rather: the Suba cluster of dialects) and the Suba ethnicity are linked very much as in Western cultures, with language as a strong ideological marker of ethnicity.

Things apparently go differently when the target language is spoken by a pastoral group. This is not only the case when the shifting group is a hunter-gathering one – whose language, after all, may well survive the contact (a case in point is provided by the Sandawe of Tanzania, who changed their economic mode of life without giving up their Khoisan language; cf. Raa (1986)). A great number of abrupt language shifts – very few of which, unfortunately, are still recoverable with any degree of historical and linguistic precision – did not involve hunter-gatherers and pastoralists, but pastoralists among themselves.

At this point, a terminological clarification is in order: following Sasse (1992a), three levels of analysis need to be distinguished: the External Setting (ES), the Speech Behavior (SB), and the Structural Consequences (SC). Roughly speaking, the External Setting is the object of investigation of sociologists, economists, historians, etc., the Speech Behavior is bread and butter for the sociologists of language, while the Structural Consequences only are strictly of linguists' competence. *Furthermore, as its name implies, the linguistic side of the coin is the consequence of what happens at an external level*, and "reasons [for the languge shift; MT] are found exclusively in the External Setting area" (Sasse 1992a:11). Sasse notes that it is most likely that differences in ES induce differences in SB, *which include the relationship of language with ethnicity and other variables*; differences in ES may include the "various conditions under which an uneven distribution of languages in a multi-cultural setting comes about, e.g., migration, conquest, intrusion, gradual gain of importance of one language over another, conscious integration, and so forth" (Sasse 1992a:25, fn.5). Summarizing the data of well-known studies of language death (such as East Sutherland Gaelic and Greek Albanian), Sasse concludes that: "External Setting phenomena induce a certain kind of Speech Behaviour, which in turn results in certain Structural Consequences in the dying language" (Sasse 1992a:12).

A first observation about Speech Behavior in this part of East Africa is that there are no established lingua francas; even the major languages (Borana, Turkana, Somali) do not function as lingua francas *stricto sensu*

(i.e., as at least partially deculturalized interethnic media), and are "major" languages in a demographic sense only. Instead of a true proficient bilingualism, the impression is that in most cases the norm is rather a certain amount of rudimentary multilingualism. E.g., among the Dhaasanac of Southwest Ethiopia[1] many borrowings from Samburu are found, and the Turkana culture is so deeply rooted that, for example, singing is normally done in Turkana (even the most common genre, i.e. songs about war against the Turkana!). In spite of this, there is very little bilingualism, nor is bilingualism likely to spread in the future, given the traditional state of war between the two peoples.

The picture is somewhat different for Maa, which is or was a lingua franca for many groups, especially of hunter-gatherers; indeed, certain aspects of language shift among the Yaaku may be explained as being the results of a longer and more intimate familiarity with Maa than was the case, e.g., among the Elmolo.

This is not to say, of course, that there are no or only few contacts among pastoralists or between pastoralists and hunter-gatherers; quite the contrary: trading relations, friendship bonds, etc. are the norm.

In short, I argue that the kind of rapid language shift so common in East Africa is always found with a pastoral community and way of life as target, and that a weak degree of bilingualism (found, if any, only as a very transient stage in the behavior of the community) is among its sociolinguistic correlates. A purely linguistic effect of rapid language shift will be that both massive borrowing from the dominating, target language into the original language of the community before language replacement, as well as substratum influence in the new language of the community after shift will be unlikely. This means that language decay phenomena, as most typically associated with the last stages of language replacement, will not be found. Dimmendaal (1989:22p.) aptly writes that "one striking aspect of the phenomenon of language replacement [...] is the speed with which this process takes place", and, about the Elmolo, that "only eighty years after the contacts started, the Elmolo language is on the brink of extinction".

3 Case studies

3.1 The Elmolo: why the shift?

Among recent East African cases of language shift, Elmolo is particularly interesting. The Elmolo are a tiny population (possibly 400 people) living along the southeastern shores of Lake Turkana, where they traditionally practised and still practise fishing. They are therefore part of those hunting-gathering world interspersed among the pastoral peoples all across East Africa. Until recently they spoke an East Cushitic language closely akin to Dhaasanac and Arbore of Southwest Ethiopia, but are nowadays Maa-speakers (more precisely, they adopted the Northern Maa dialect of the neighboring pastoral Samburu). Data on the original language of the Elmolo were gathered from the last speakers by Heine in the seventies (Heine 1977, 1980).[2] The Elmolo case is interesting because the process of language replacement did not go hand in hand with the adoption of a different economic mode of existence and was, at least at the beginning, only very imperfectly and partially linked to the adoption of other ethnic identification tracts of the Samburu. Economic change, if any, is occurring now, well after language shift is over, but even the final adoption of a cattle-based economy has been put in question by Heine (1980:178), who stresses that "Elmolo society has not experienced any major economic or other changes which could be made responsible for this language replacement" (Heine 1980:177).[3]

Turning to the Structural Consequences, we find that the linguistic correlate of this situation is the little diversity of today's Elmolo (i.e., the Samburu dialect of Maa as spoken by the Elmolo) from "normal" Samburu. Substratum vocabulary is mainly restricted to fishing terminology, and names of fish body-parts (in which Elmolo has specialized for fish some common East Cushitic terms, such as 'faeces', 'liver', etc.; e.g., the word for 'fin' comes from an East Cushitic word for 'back'). Two Elmolo phonemes have been retained in Samburu-Elmolo, but younger speakers tend to adapt them to the Samburu phonological system. Deviations from "normal" Samburu in morphology and other retentions of

Elmolo material in the lexicon are likewise reported by Brenzinger (1992b) and by Heine (1982) – who goes on noting that for some of them the corresponding Samburu words are much more common and are likely to replace the original Elmolo words.[4]

Now, a glance at the vocabulary of the (original) language of the Elmolo (Heine 1980) reveals that less loanwords, if any, from Samburu were present in Elmolo than, e.g., in the linguistically closely-related (but "healthy") language of the Dhaasanac[5]: Turkana, Samburu, Dhaasanac and other pastoral peoples of the Lake Turkana basin and the surrounding areas, while speaking very divergent languages, share the same economic and social values based on the cattle complex. Therefore it is only obvious that the Elmolo, with the radical diversity of their traditional life style, had less loanwords from the languages of their pastoral neighbors.[6]

Turning to the External Setting, it appears that until the end of the 19th century the Elmolo "formed a largely closed society: no language other than Elmolo was understood and communication with people from other ethnic groups was confined to trade" (Heine 1982:19). And even as far as trade is concerned, the Samburu – who were then inhabiting an area more to the south than nowadays – were not all that important: according to Sobania (1980:180) "the principal pairs of trading partners were the Dhasenec-Samburu and the Elmolo-Rendille." Most of what the Elmolo had to offer the Samburu crafted themselves, possibly with the exception of hide-shoes, which were exchanged for spears.

In any case, trading relations did not bring about bilingualism, neither precipitated language shift. The impact of Samburu began in the two last decades of the 19th century and is linked to a period called **Imutai** by the Samburu, and which included drought, famine, and outbreaks of bovine pleuro-pneumonia and rinderpest all across the Lake Turkana area. It is well-known that in similar situations one of the strategies employed by the impoverished and starving pastoralists is to seek refuge among the local hunting-gathering-fishing communities, who therefore act as a sanctuary for pastoralists in times of hardships, with the perspective either of turning back to pastoralism or remain forever hunter-gatherers. In the terrible last

decades of the 19th century this role was obviously emphasized. The Samburu who went among the Elmolo had already begun to return to their previous pastoral way of life at the beginning of the century – especially after their relations with the Elmolo were strained by the raiding activities of the Samburu, which threatened to bring upon their hosts the wrath of the raided peoples.

But, even if the limited impact of the Samburu culture and language was reversed in the following years, language shift was incipient, and after 1920 Samburu became the "primary language" of the people born from that period onwards (Heine 1980:127).

This means that there was probably one and only one generation of Elmolo bilingual in Elmolo and Samburu, and who, after having been raised in Elmolo, adopted Samburu as the primary language. Of course, at least one of the parents must be bilingual if s/he is going to teach only the new target language to the new generation. We do not have documents on the Samburu spoken by this people, but it is unlikely that the first generation of bilingual Elmolo had a good command of Samburu – and yet the new generations speak "normal Samburu"; we are reminded here of cases such as the first native generation of immigrants in the U.S.: it is well known that "even children of heavily accented immigrant parents perpetuate few non-standard aspects of their parents' speech" (Lightfoot 1991: 14).[7] Acquisition of Samburu was probably facilitated by socialization in later years: in other words, to hear "bad" Samburu at home is enough in order to learn "good" Samburu later – provided, of course, that this is available on the market.

In short, it is clear that economic influence *per se* played no role – in the period of closest physical contact, it was the Samburu who adopted the Elmolo way of life. Other East African cases pointing to the relative unimportance of the economic factor are of course the various "Dorobo" (hunters) groups who adopted Maa or Turkana, but at least partially preserved their way of life. Another case could be that of the out-caste groups among the Oromo and the Somali; people who, e.g., are Somali only linguistically and as citizens of a so-called "modern" state (which, of

course, relies on language as a decisive element of "nationality") – but certainly not agnatically (the only important point to a Somali) nor "culturally" in a broad sense.

Still another case is constituted by the Boranized groups of Northern Kenya (see 3.4).

3.2 Language shift among the Yaaku

The Yaaku are another people that in recent times abandoned their former East Cushitic language in favor of Maa.[8] Contrary to the Elmolo, the Yaaku did definitely shift their economy from hunting-gathering to a cattle-based one. In particular, just as the main focus of the Elmolo mode of life was fishing, for the Yaaku it was beehive-keeping. Chronologically the similarities are striking: just as Elmolo, Yaaku was replaced during the first decades of this century.

The linguistic consequences, too, look rather similar to those found for the Elmolo: their new language has again very few traces of the old Cushitic language. The list of the Yaaku words used even by younger speakers (against the more conservative language of the elders) is limited to six (!) items, with a general term for 'honey' as one of them (a lot of more specific, honey-associated terms have simply fallen into disuse).

But differently from Elmolo, the Yaaku language contains a huge amount of non-Cushitic words.[9] In particular, we find many Maa words, although the Yaaku had little if any contact with the Maasai before the second half of the 19th century. Before language shift influence of Maa upon Yaaku had already changed the basic word order, and, in vocabulary, had affected many names of animals – domestic as well as wild (although the Yaaku themselves were hunter-gatherers!) – animal body-parts (tail, tail-hair), plants, names of relationship (aunt, husband, to marry), names of body-parts (buttock, nape of neck, vein, etc.).

In short, comparing Yaaku with Elmolo, we have an apparently very similar External Setting which caused very different Structural Conse-

quences – although, at the end, both languages were abandoned. All seems to indicate that the influence of Maa on Yaaku was stronger than the influence of Samburu on Elmolo.

Possibly the key lies in a different Speech Behavior. We know that Maa, although relatively a newcomer in the area, managed to become a sort of lingua franca in the contacts between Maa-speakers and different groups of hunter-gatherers. All travellers in this area report that the hunter-gatherers (five different groups are reported by Brenzinger 1992b) spoke Maa in addition to their language. Originally, Maa was imported by a group of impoverished Maasai who acted as donors of the new language. Later on, the Maasai were deported by the British, and their role was taken by Samburu – whose Northern-Maa dialect is nowadays re-lexicalizing the Southern-Maa dialect of the Yaaku.[10]

If we compare the similarities and differences between the Yaaku and the Elmolo cases we see that:

(1) the size of the shifting community was not a factor – a few hundreds in both cases;

(2) neither was time a factor – Elmolo was in contact with Samburu for a longer time, and cultural assimilation, if any, began earlier for Elmolo than for Yaaku (the end of the last century vs. the First World War);

(3) also the sociological position of the groups involved was not different;

(4) in both cases the pastoralists (Maasai and Samburu) were compelled to adopt at least temporarily a hunter-gathering existence, and in both cases they caused their hosts to give up their language.

Instead, two factors which can have played a role are:

(1) density/concentration of population: many Yaaku speakers could not converse in Yaaku because of living among non-Yaaku-speakers over a large area. The Elmolo on the contrary live all together in a couple of settlements.

(2) another factor is exogamy vs. endogamy: While the Elmolo did not give up endogamy until around 1973, the Yaaku gave up endogamy quite early, and many Yaaku failed to learn Yaaku because their mother was not a Yaaku-speaker. The collapse of the Yaaku society is well portrayed in Brenzinger (1992b); in short, it all began when the Yaaku were given cattle as bridewealth by the Maasai.[11] The traditional payment in beehives declined drastically, and from then on even Yaaku men wishing to marry Yaaku girls had to pay for them in cattle; on the other hand, the availability of "hard currency" – cattle – enabled the Yaaku to buy also non-Yaaku wives. It all boils down to a matter of bridewealth inflation, but precipitated by the willingness of other people – especially Maasai (evidently with a scarcity of women) – to marry Yaaku girls. This did not happen among the Elmolo.

I think that there was at least one generation of Yaaku-speakers involved in codeswitching and in active Yaaku/Maa bilingualism. Many girls were married outside the community; in order to marry, many males went outside, serving as cattle-keepers for a certain time and getting cattle as payment – and thus becoming bilinguals. At the same time, many foreign wives came in, and many young Yaaku could not acquire Yaaku because their mothers were not Yaaku-speakers; in short, when the decision to abandon the language was taken (at the beginning of the 1930s), it was the formalization of a *fait accompli*. When Southern-Maa ceased to be a major target of bilingualism, it had already taken the place of the former Yaaku language. The result was a deeper "Maa–ization" of the Yaaku language than in the case of Elmolo.
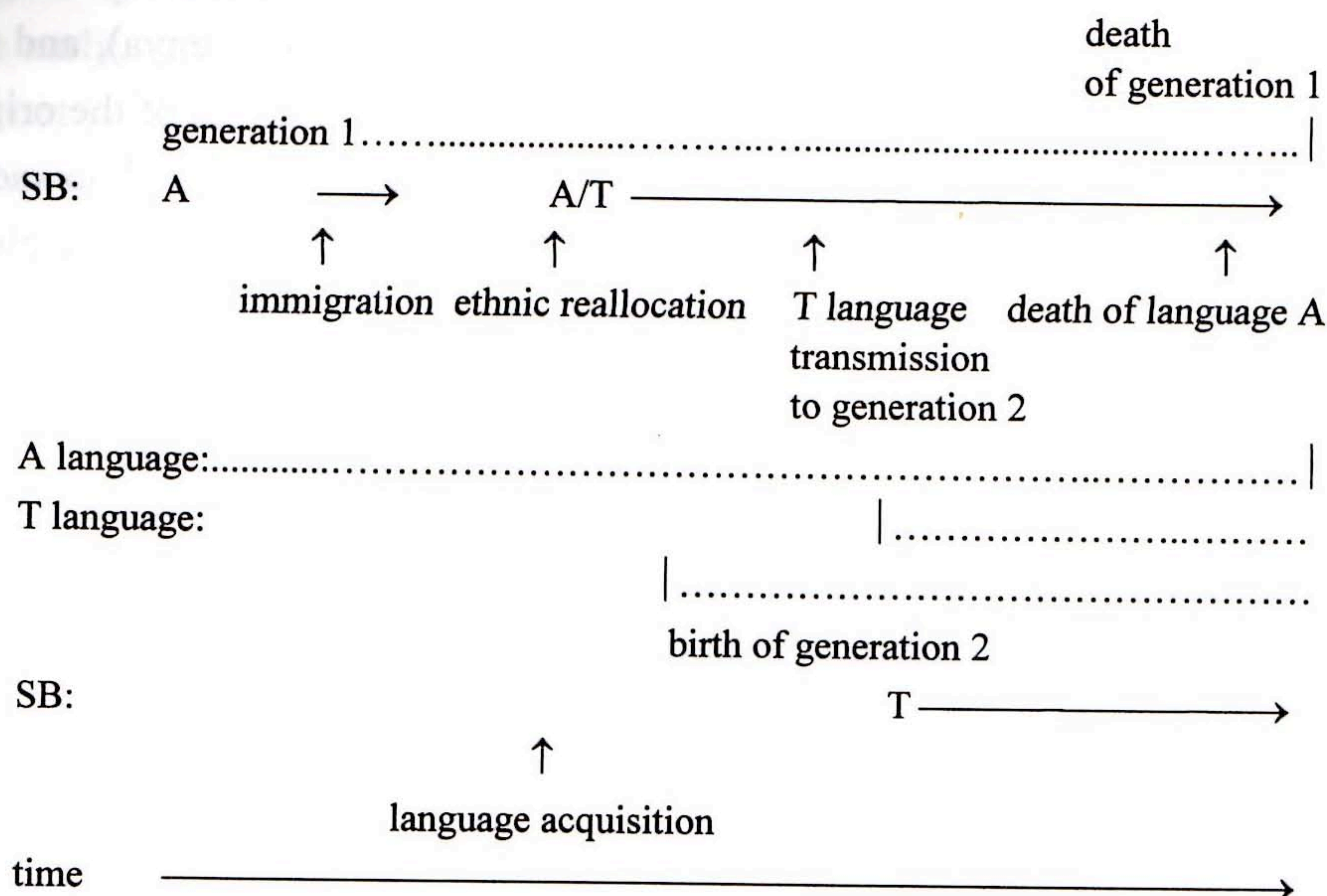
3.3 Language shift among pastoralists: the Dhaasanac

Turning to language relations among pastoralists, two cases of pastoralists who shifted ethnic affiliation and language in favor of another pastoral group will be briefly analyzed: immigrants among the Dhaasanac, and the "Boranized" groups of Northern Kenya.

The Dhaasanac plainly admit that they do not have a common origin; they have no unitary myths of origins and say that even the first Dhaasanac were immigrants (from the land of the Pokot in Western Kenya), and that in their new habitat they met groups of fishers (for the myths of the origins of the Dhaasanac, cf. Sobania 1980). The Dhaasanac are divided nowadays into eight sections, very roughly territorially divided. It is possible to change one's own section simply moving in and applying for a new affiliation, while it is not possible to change one's own clan. Now, two new sections were added around the turn of the century, made of immigrant Samburu and Rendille (the Dhaasanac area, having a good command of both pastoral and agricultural resources, was an ideal haven for refugees in that time of hardships). Thanks to the Samburu living among the Dhaasanac, several travellers entering the area from the South, from von Höhnel in 1888 (Höhnel 1894) until Stigand in 1909 (Stigand 1910), had no problem using Maa-speaking interpreters in order to communicate, and another traveller, Wellby (who visited the area in 1899) remarked on the strangeness of people who were from the same society and yet spoke different languages (Wellby 1901). A Dhaasanac tradition recorded by Sobania (1980:217) is particularly significant in assessing the time span involved in language assimilation: the Dhaasanac claim that the grandfathers of today's Kuro (i.e., the Samburu in Dhaasanac) – and the Randal (i.e., the Rendille) came among the Dhaasanac speaking "their language"; furthermore, that at the time of their fathers they became Dhaasanac, and that by then only a few of their elders still spoke their original language. It seems clear that who "became Dhasanac" are the Kuro and Randal as a whole – the grandfathers too, and not only the new generation.

Again, as in the case of the Elmolo, the speakers of the foreign language taught their children the new language only. This is very similar to what happened with the Elmolo – with the only difference that the Elmolo did not migrate; but to be a hunter-gatherer or a fellow pastoralist makes no difference. The process of ethnic reallocation and language change may be graphically represented as follows:

Figure 1 Language change and ethnic reallocation

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                                                                    death
                                                                    of generation 1
            generation 1..............................................................................|
  SB:    A      ⟶              A/T ─────────────────────────────⟶
            ↑              ↑                    ↑                    ↑
        immigration  ethnic reallocation   T language     death of language A
                                           transmission
                                           to generation 2

  A language:............................................................................................|
  T language:                              |...................................
                                  |...............................................
                                   birth of generation 2
  SB:                                              T ──────────────⟶

                                      ↑
                          language acquisition
  time    ─────────────────────────────────────────────────⟶
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Key:
SB: speech behavior
T: target language (i.e., Dhaasanac);
A: abandoned language (i.e., Samburu, Rendille);
T/A is excluded, i.e., there was no generation with dominating Target language
and regressive Abandoned language

3.4 The "Boranization" of Northern Kenya

Another case of language shift among pastoralists – in which migration was not a factor – is provided by the northern Kenya peoples of Somaloid culture (cf. Schlee 1987) who became linguistically Oromo-speaking some time in the last centuries: a Borana political umbrella was accepted, in the form of taking over and elaboration of the famous **gadaa** system; linguistic assimilation was complete, but, as in the case of the Elmolo, economic assimilation did not take place: the Borana preserved their cattle-based economy, while the Garre, the Sakuye, the Gabbra, the

Ajuraan became Borana-speakers but remained camel-herders. Only the Rendille preserved their language. I deduce from all this that the "Boranized" groups lost their former Somaloid langauge through exactly the kind of abrupt language shift – probably quite early after the arrival of the Borana in the 16th century.

4 Language and ethnicity

4.1 Ethnicity and clanship

Turning to the relationships between language, ethnicity, and clanship, my central claim is that the facility with which both language and ethnicity are shifted derives from the fact that both are deprived from many elements traditionally associated with it, and which are instead allocated to clanship. We know from Schlee's work in Northern Kenya that the boranized groups preserved their clan affiliation. Contrary to ethnicity, clanship has remained remarkably strong and "groups can [...] preserve their clan identity after an ethnic reaffiliation" (Schlee 1989:234). In this area there are therefore many clans split among different ethnic groups, retaining their common links – but speaking different languages.

It is difficult to assess what actually ties together the ethnic groups of this area. Ethnicity is visible, e.g., at the level of "dress, custom and attitudes" (Schlee 1989:5), and may be associated with the common performance of certain rituals. A more crucial role is played by economic rights – common pastures, wells, etc. – and, above all, by economic and social values – most of them common to other groups, but conceived as ethnic links (adherence to pastoralism, to cattle or camel breeding, despise of other activities and of the social groups associated with them, etc.). No political rights and duties seem to consistently follow from ethnic membership. War, although theoretically an ethnic thing, may be linked to different sections of a people, with sections having traditional enemies of their own: among the Dhaasanac, there are traditional enemies of the Turkana and traditional enemies of the Hamar and the Borana.

Also ethic codes and obligations are linked to clanship. As illustrated by Schlee (1989:177) with reference to the "Boranized" peoples, to kill a member of the same clan, even of a different ethnic group, does not entail compensation nor vengeance: the explanation is that the killer and the victim are the same blood, and reduction of the strength of one's own tribe is a sufficient punishment.

There is a widespread belief among anthropologists that language and ethnicity are much more apart in East Africa then elsewhere. Sobania, for instance, writes: "Ethnicity is concerned with assimilation while the economic sphere, *like language*, ritual and adornment, is an aspect of acculturation" and that "both assimilation and acculturation require continuous contact, but while acculturation can occur without assimilation, assimilation is dependent on a significant degree of acculturation taking place" (Sobania 1980:174; emphasis ours). This is not supported by the data: ethnic/linguistic assimilation did often occur without acculturation (or at least without a significant degree of it).

In my opinion, on the contrary, language is linked to ethnicity in East Africa as possibly everywhere. The point is that ethnic bonds are weak, and so is language loyalty.

When one looks at bilingualism and codeswitching from a social point of view, they appear as symptoms of multiple loyalty – it may be a case of struggle between old and new ethnic loyalties in a recently formed state or among immigrant communities (as very often the case in our culture), or, more interestingly, a matter of competing loyalties – ethnicity vs. economic opportunities, religious affiliation, cultural values, etc. Multiplicity of loyalties is a normal fact of life, relating to the question of identity and affiliation.

Paradoxically, then, the presence of bilingualism becomes an indicator of potentially good language and ethnicity loyalty. It presumes that language transmission is preserved; codeswitching is then a further possibility, with in its turn interference.

But in our case multiplicity of social loyalty is already preempted by clanship, and clanship is insensitive by definition to language. Clanship

loyalties are gradual – they are gradually established, they gradually grow or decay, and may end up with fusion between the bond partners or may die out as new bonds are established and the old ones forgotten. Loyalty changes are gradual in nature – and language change is just a particular case of shifting loyalty – gradual, too. But if ethnicity is weak and deprived of its gradual elements ethnic change cannot be gradual, and becomes abrupt – bringing to a likewise sudden language shift: ethnicity and language change will then admit no graduality – and will be apt to catastrophic change. We may assume that, just as the acquisition of a new ethnicity wipes out (almost) any traces of the former, the language shift also will operate across the board, leaving but a few traces of the former language of the community.

4.2 Ethnic downgrading

Language and ethnicity are therefore maintained and shifted parallely. The ethnic correlate of abrupt language shift will be ethnicity reallocation, made possible by a process which I propose to call *downgrading*. Downgrading means that a higher level is added to the segmentary system of the group. Downgrading is in a way a virtual phenomenon, because it does not involve any concrete change in the structure of the involved assimilating group: the Samburu and the Rendille who became Dhaasanac simply made up two new sections of the Dhaasanac people, preserving their internal segmentation. Apart from the moiety structure – which does not seem to play a role – the rest is comparable: e.g., when the immigrated Rendille became the Randal section of the Dhaasanac their Nahagan clan became the Nagan clan of the Randal Dhaasanac, etc. The same happened with the Samburu, who, apparently, belonged to three phratries of the White Cattle moiety;[12] these phratries are now clans within the Kuoro Dhaasanac section.

The Samburu and the Rendille who emigrated among the Dhaasanac had already become Dhaasanac well before actually being Dhaasanac-

speakers. "To become Dhaasanac" simply means "to see oneself and be considered a Dhaasanac".[13] At the same time, certain aspects of the spiritual culture, e.g., for the Dhaasanac, participation in ritual ceremonies and presence of judges in controversy, as well as aspects of material culture (e.g., disposition of implements in the hut) have been retained.

Downgrading is the formal equivalent of the acquisition of citizenship rights in a new country within our culture – it is not gradual. While in our system double citizenship or nationality is possible (at least in many countries), in this system a sort of double citizenship is made possible by the presence of clanship.

With ethnic downgrading language loses its support, and shifts "automatically" to the one of the new ethnic group.

The existence of a clan system as typically found in the pastoralist societies of East Africa – characterized, above all, by the fact that it cuts across ethnic boundaries – is therefore conducive to the abrupt language shift described in Section 3 above.

Coming back to the question of the lingua francas in this area, one may say that, in a way, the "ethnic languages" are lingua francas between the clans and sections composing the ethnic groups themselves – not in the sense that they are second languages, but only insofar as they have no attached status of ethnic symbol: they are deculturalized.

5 Catastrophes

In this final section I shall try and formalize the abrupt language shift discussed so far. I shall make use of *Catastrophe Theory*, a mathematical model elaborated by René Thom (1975) and variously (and with hotly debated results) applied to social sciences (cf. Zeeman 1977).[14]

A Catastrophe is "any discontinuous transition that occurs when a system can have more than one stable state, or can follow more than one stable pathway of change" (Woodcock & Davis 1978:42). Although the factors controlling the process change continuously, under certain

conditions the system "jumps" suddenly from one state to another. According to Thom's Classification Theorem, there are only seven "elementary catastrophes" – i.e., structurally stable possible ways in which a system can change discontinuously. The simplest catastrophe – the "cusp catastrophe" – occurs in systems whose pathway of change (its "behavior") depends on two conditions only ("control factors"). It may be represented on a three-dimensional graph as a curved surface with a pleat: there are two axes (one for each control factor) and an additional axis for the behavior itself.

In our case, the behavior is obviously the ethnic/language loyalty – causing the system to preserve a certain state or to change it, either in a smooth (continuous, non-catastrophic) or in an abrupt (catastrophic) way. As always in the social sciences, the difficult point is to decide which are the relevant control factors responsible for the change. One factor is obviously the external pressure: a low level of pressure in itself will not encourage language shift. As for the other factors, the discussion of the previous sections suggests that demography, social status, etc. are not decisive elements, while the ethnic/linguistic cohesion (as shown, e.g., in endogamy, dispersal, etc.) is a valid candidate.

The possible changes brought about in the system behavior by different values of the two control factors are shortly discussed below and represented in the Graph in the Appendix.

As anticipated, a low level of external pressure in itself is not conducive to language shift. But the pathway changes according to the ethnic/language cohesiveness of the involved groups:

(1) If language/ethnic cohesion is high, any increase in pressure brings about a smooth, non-catastrophic transition, leading to acculturation on the ethnic plan and to interference on the linguistic plan (a. → b.); if pressure further increases, the end result may be ethnic assimilation and language decay, followed by language death (b. → c.).

(2) If language/ethnic cohesion is low (d.), a possible result of pressure may be again a process of acculturation accompanied, linguistically, by bilingualism – together with, once again, interference

(d. → e.). It is possibly the situation of, e.g., Dahalo, gradually moving toward assimilation and language shift, but without catastrophic demise of language/ethnicity (e. → e¹).

(3) Yaaku did not pass through d. → e., because a sudden pressure was accompanied by a weakening of control factor 1 – cohesion (by dispersion on the territory, end of endogamy, etc.): this is graphically represented by the path d. → h. The system is now at what is technically called a *semi-stable point of inflection* – a point along the fold line: from here the system can only "jump" to the lower surface beneath the pleat (h. → g.); the ethnic/linguistic shift is as quick as possible through the non-equilibrium state: the transition is a catastrophe, leading the system to a new equilibrium state.

(4) Among the pastoralist groups ethnic/language cohesion is very low; any significant and sudden amount of external pressure brings the system to the lip of the pleat (f. → h.). Pressure my be brought about either by political factors (such as the abrupt and violent Borana invasion of the lands of the Gabbra, Sakuye, Garre, etc. in what is today Northern Kenya) or by natural disasters (such as the epidemics which befell the Lake Turkana basin toward the end of the 19th century, and caused many Samburu and Rendille to move among the Dhaasanac). From h. any further, however slight, increase of pressure leads to a catastrophe, with ethnic downgrading and abrupt language shift (h.→ g.).

(5) The case of Elmolo is the most difficult. Possibly, acculturation was really not needed – there are ethnographic elements suggesting that the Elmolo are former pastoralists who had resorted to fishing out of necessity in not too remote times, and were ready to turn back to pastoralism as soon as possible. If this is indeed the case, then the pathway followed by Elmolo is similar to the one of the pastoralists (f.→ h.→ g.), without acculturation period.

(6) To escape the catastrophe and avoid assimilation and language shift is possible at point e., but not at point f. – i.e., only before reaching the semi-stable points of inflection on the lip of the pleat. This is possibly what happened to the Sandawe, who experienced strong pressure (with

"acculturation" brought about by the acquisition of cattle), but "survived" both ethnically and linguistically.

NOTES

*   I would like to thank Gerrit J. Dimmendaal for his comments and suggestions on an earlier version of this paper. The title is an ideal rejoinder to Sobania's (1978) rhetorical question: "Are we the language we speak?"

1   The Dhaasanac (ɗáásanac), usually called **galab** by their neighbors, are a pastoral people numbering at least 35,000 and living in the southwestern corner of Ethiopia along the lower course of the Omo River, immediately northwards of Lake Turkana; a minority of the Dhaasanac live in adjoining areas of Kenya, along the northeastern shores of the Lake. The Dhaasanac speak an East Cushitic language of the Omo-Tana subgroup whose closest linguistic kins are Arbore and the extinct Elmolo language (with which Dhaasanac forms, according to standard classification, the Eastern Branch of Omo-Tana), and, in second degree, Bayso, Rendille, and the Somali dialects.
"Pastoral" means that the Dhaasanac fully and whole-heartedly adhere to the "cattle-complex" of neighboring (mainly Nilotic-speaking) peoples, such as their traditional enemies – the Turkana, as well as the Maasai, the Samburu, etc. In practice, the Dhaasanac do a lot of farming and even fishing.
I have been involved in linguistic field work among the Dhaasanac since 1996, thanks to a grant of the *Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche* (the Italian National Research Council). I am grateful to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of the Addis Ababa University for the permission to carry out research among the Dhaasanac, and to the provincial authorities in Jinka (South-Omo Zone) for their help and collaboration.

2   The language shift of the Elmolo is described with richness of particulars in Brenzinger (1992b), from which all the following data have been taken.

3   Of course, economic influence may also be taken to imply "economic values and aspirations", such as pastoralism, and this could well have been adopted long ago – or even have been there from the very beginning. On the other hand, as Gerrit J. Dimmendaal (p.c.) points out, the pastoralists – worried about potential competitors on the already limited grazing grounds – often did not provide the Elmolo and other similar groups with an opportunity to own cattle.

4   The Elmolo fricatives /f/ and /h/ have been retained in the speech of the elders, but are normally shifted to /p/ and to Ø, respectively, by younger speakers. Morphologically, Elmolo-Samburu has merged the locative gender of "proper" Samburu with the feminine gender, and has also many nouns (of Elmolo origin) without gender marking (Brenzinger 1992b:244). Retentions from original Elmolo in the field of the

body parts are reported by Heine (1982) for such words as, e.g., 'knee', 'belly', 'elbow', etc., as well as for cultural items not linked to fishing (such as 'apron', 'pot', 'mat', etc.).

[5] To take just one example, the Elmolo word for 'raft' **árte**, pl. **árgi** has been replaced by Samburu **lkádic**, pl. **lkadicí** (Heine 1982:21); the only word found in Dhaasanac is just **kadíc**.

[6] Sasse (1992a, b) has claimed that the Elmolo language as recorded by Heine (1977, 1980) is the product of semi-speakers who only imperfectly remembered the language. He pointed to numerous irregularities in the data (e.g., in the verbal paradigms), as well as to decay in many subsystems of the grammar (e.g., in the pronominal system). Decay (defined as "downright loss leading to a heavy expression deficit"; Sasse 1992a:16) was identified by Sasse through comparison with the sister language Arbore, spoken in the Lake Stephanie (nowadays Lake Arbore) area of Southwest Ethiopia. I do not believe that we have clear and irrefutable examples of language decay in Elmolo. I think that the problem with Sasse's claim lies in selecting Arbore as a standard of comparison, and not Dhaasanac. It may well be that, as argued by Hayward (1984), Elmolo is a direct offspring of Arbore. Still, historically the Elmolo are much more connected to the Dhaasanac than to the Arbore. In short, I argue that many changes and developments of Elmolo may be found in Dhaasanac. E.g., Elmolo still has, although "rarely employed" (Heine 1980:187), the opaque pronouns of 3rd person **isé** (Sg) and **isú** (Pl), cognate with similar forms in other Omo-Tana languages; generally, a less opaque form meaning 'this person' is used. 'This person' is the only possibility in Dhaasanac. Also many of the numerous idiosyncrasies and downright irregularities of the Elmolo verbal system find good parallels in Dhaasanac (e.g., the assimilation of the person markers to the stem and the harmonization of the paradigmatic vowels to the stem vowel). Of course, one has to take into account the very likely possibility that Dhaasanac itself has been deply moulded by the substratal action of the original language of the communities who shifted to Dhaasanac. Also, an investigation of the (certainly existing) dialectal differences among Dhaasanac would be needed in order to provide a definite answer here. My informants have occasionally maintained that the language spoken by the Inkabelo section (the "pure" Dhaasanac) is slightly different from the language as spoken by the Inkoria (mostly living in Kenya) and the Naaric (of Nyangatom descent), but were not able to elaborate on this point.

[7] Incidentally one may note, with Lightfoot, that this is a good point against the influence of any motherese in triggering children's acquisition.

[8] The language shift of the Yaaku has been magistrally described by Brenzinger (1992b), from which I have taken all the data which follow.

[9] Identification of the sources of the Yaaku lexicon is made all the more difficult by the isolated status of Yaaku within East Cushitic, but Maa material is generally easily identifiable.

[10] This is true to the point that "Maasai terms are often associated with the old words and therefore confused with Yaaku terms, i.e. the real old language" (Brenzinger 1992b: 227).

[11] For an account of the traumatic effects of the acquisition of cattle on a hunter-gathering people, the Sandawe, cf. Raa (1986).

[12] As most peoples of the area, the Samburu are divided into two moieties: the White Cattle and the Black Cattle. The moieties are in their turn divided into a number of phratries. For the social structure of the Samburu cf. Spencer (1973).

[13] "To see oneself as X" is, in the end, a very modern definition of a nation (vs. a mere ethnic group): according to Connor (1978), while an ethnic group can be objectively defined from the outside by an external observer, a nation is nothing more than an ethnic group which "has discovered itself" and defines as such.

[14] For a good introduction to Catastrophe Theory, with examples of its application to the social sciences, cf. Woodcock & Davis (1978).

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A catastrophic Model of Language Shift

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KEY:

a → b	acculturation/lg. interference	
b → c	assimilation/lg. decay + death	
d → e	acculturation/bilingualism (Dahalo)	
e → e¹	possible "smooth" outcome: assimilation, lg. death	
d → h	acculturation/bilingualism + weakening of cohesion (Yaaku)	
h → g	CATASTROPHE: ethnic/lg. shift (Without decay but with interference from d → h; Yaaku)	
f → h	a. acculturation (e.g., "Boranization");	
	b. emigration (e.g., Samburu, Rendille among the Dhaasanac)	
	c. return to pastoralism (?, Elmolo → Samburu)	
h → g	CATASTROPHE: 1. ethnic downgrading; 2. lg. shift without language	