

Communicative sustainability:
a linguist's view on (HIV/AIDS) communication

Thomas Bearth
Universität Zürich
thomas.bearth@flashcable.ch

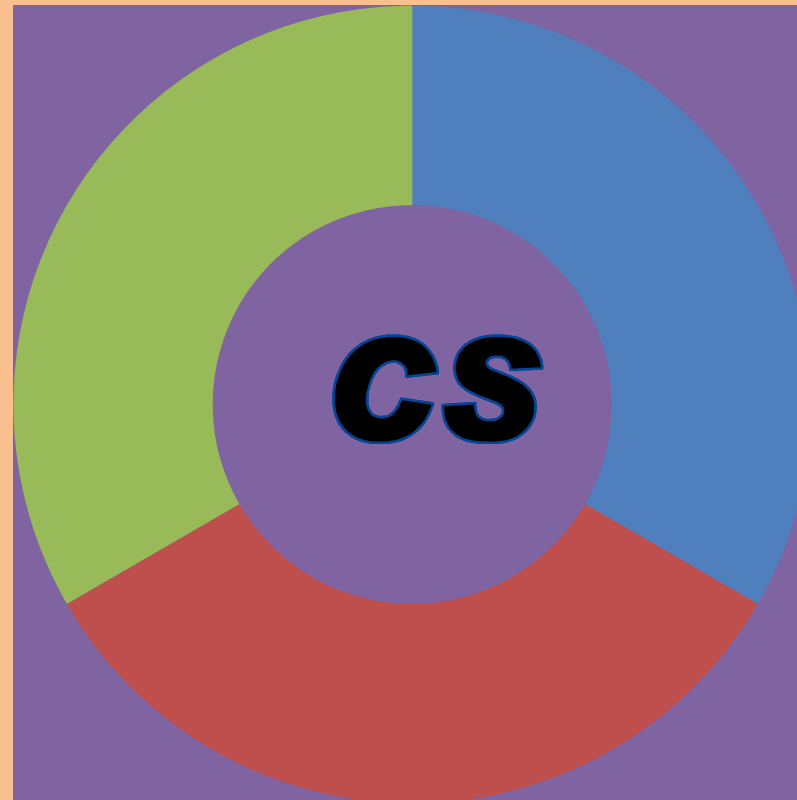
Syndromes of global change

“Syndromes of global change are problems of non-sustainable development that are closely interrelated and appear in specific combinations in different regions of the world. They can be perceived as clusters of ecological, social, economic, and other problems that occur in typical patterns.”

<http://www.nccr-north-south.unibe.ch/syndromeliste.asp>

COMMUNICATIVE SUSTAINABILITY (CS) as METARESOURCE

■ SOCIAL ■ ECONOMIC ■ ECOLOGICAL



COMMUNICATIVE

Efficient agency is based on uninterrupted « flow of information »

Already in 1992, [Agenda 21](#) identified **information, integration, and participation** as key building blocks to help countries achieve development that recognizes these inter-dependent pillars. It emphasizes that in sustainable development **everyone is a user and provider of information.** (Rio Declaration 1992, Economic sustainability.)

Sustainability as a process bridging discontinuity of human agency

The desired resulting state of an action considered to be beneficial is not only achieved as a consequence of the action itself, conducive to the fulfillment of stated hopes and intentions of the actor or actors who perform it, but crucially hinges on continuity beyond the action which has brought it about, independently of the actor(s) who originally initiated it. Sustainability transcending actors' limitations relies in a decisive manner on communicative means and strategies capable of bridging human actor discontinuity.

Communicative sustainability (CS) in the context of HIV/AIDS sensitization

A community's final state of knowledge and compliance in regard to the HIV/AIDS syndrome depends not merely on the clarity, incisiveness and cultural adaptation of the source message. Conditions of its transmission are likely to affect the audience's readiness to make the gist of the message their own in a post-delivery process of reinterpretation and reconstitution drawing on locally available resources of formulation (local language) and negotiation (locally recognized procedures of decision-making) (Bearth 2008; Bearth & Baya 2010). However, in a context counter-indexed by cultural and/or religious a priori as is generally the case of HIV/AIDS communication, this does not simply happen but must be made the focus of deliberate strategical choices.

Language diversity and communicative dependency (CD)

Major issues:

- Language diversity: hindrance or resource?
- The problem is NOT language diversity, but language INEQUALITY.
- CD as a correlate of *Dominant language bias*.
- **Dominant language bias (DLB)** – a trend to be overcome or to be mitigated? (Bearth, in press, part 2)
- Semi-directed language alternation as a practical means of alleviating consequences of CD.

The Dominant language bias syndrome-1

The historical exoglossic take-over of Africa's destiny engendered the deep-seated misconception that languages imported by the colonizer are intrinsically suited for channeling and monitoring change, modernization and innovation of African societies, while languages indigenous to Africa are singularly unsuited for these purposes.

Paradigm: African multilingualism as a cognitive obstacle to efficient information flow.

Dominant language bias syndrome-2

Unequal access to information – a mutual handicap

Communicative attrition carries a two-way negative effect in terms of excessive cost for accessing relevant information, empowerment for negotiation, action and decision. It negatively affects *all* actors involved in a process oriented towards cooperative fulfillment of a common objective. The perverse effect of language-based exclusion is that it engenders a communicative deficit on both sides.

Information asymmetry tends to be symmetric:

- ***DLB causes local actors to be limited in accessing and processing key information produced by major language sources (CS-1);***
- ***DLB keeps external actors and decision-making bodies from accessing strategic information available to local language sources and actor networks feeding on them (CS-2).***

Mitigating the DLB syndrome-1

Overcoming lop-sided language ideology

“...the richness of the linguistic diversity in Africa and its potential [is] *a resource for all types of development*;

...[and for a] a society where pluralism does not entail replacement of one language or identity by another, but instead promotes *complementarity of functions* as well as cooperation and a sense of common destiny. ”

(Harare Declaration 1997)

Emerging paradigm: African languages as resources for development and society.

Mitigation of the DLB syndrome-2
Reliance on local communicative resources



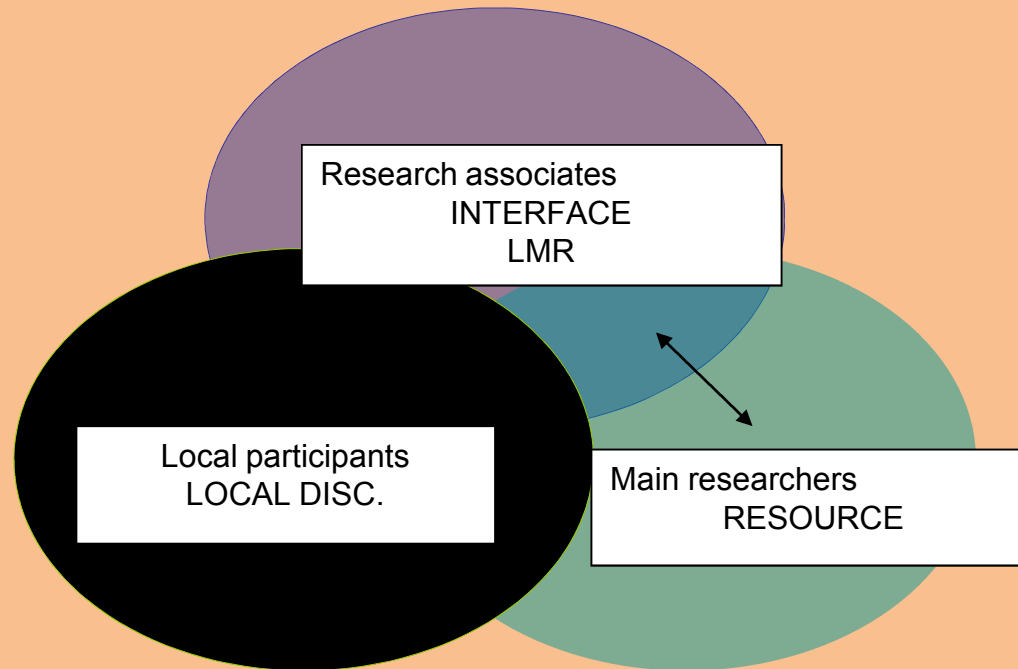
'Kono' meeting in Ditomba (Tura, Ivory Coast)

Photo J. Baya

The « Kono » optimizes communicative symmetry in negotiating issues relevant to the community.

Mitigating the DLB syndrome -3

Research valorizing local language interfaces



research setup

LMR = locally mediated research
Local DISC = local language-based
discourse and analysis

Mitigating the DLB syndrome-4

Bridging the digital gap from both ends

- The Digital World Forum (DWF),
commissioned by the European Res. Council

<http://www.digitalworldforum.eu>

Main obstacles to achieving a truly inclusive Knowledge Society characterized by equal access for all ...

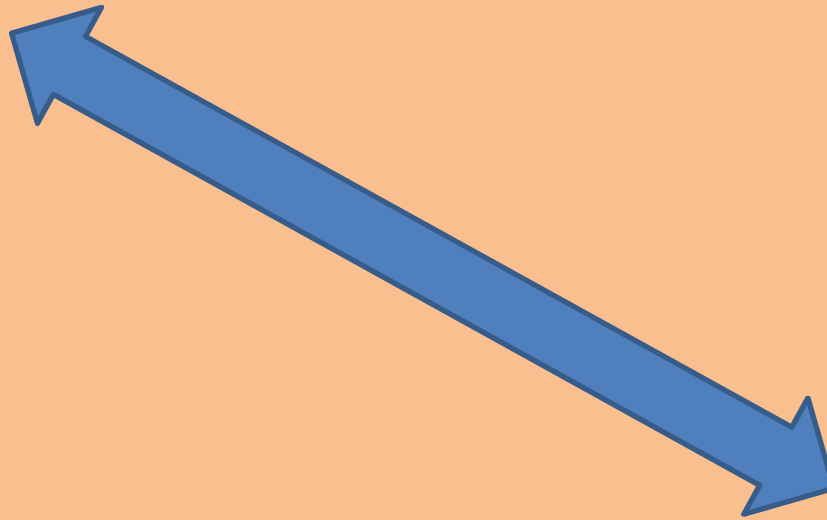
- “...**high illiteracy rate** that prevents the use of textual information, and for those who are literate, **the use of local languages is critical**”.

Mitigating the DLB syndrome-5

Asymmetric participancy as a variable cline

- A

B



- B

A

Communication as a variable cline-2

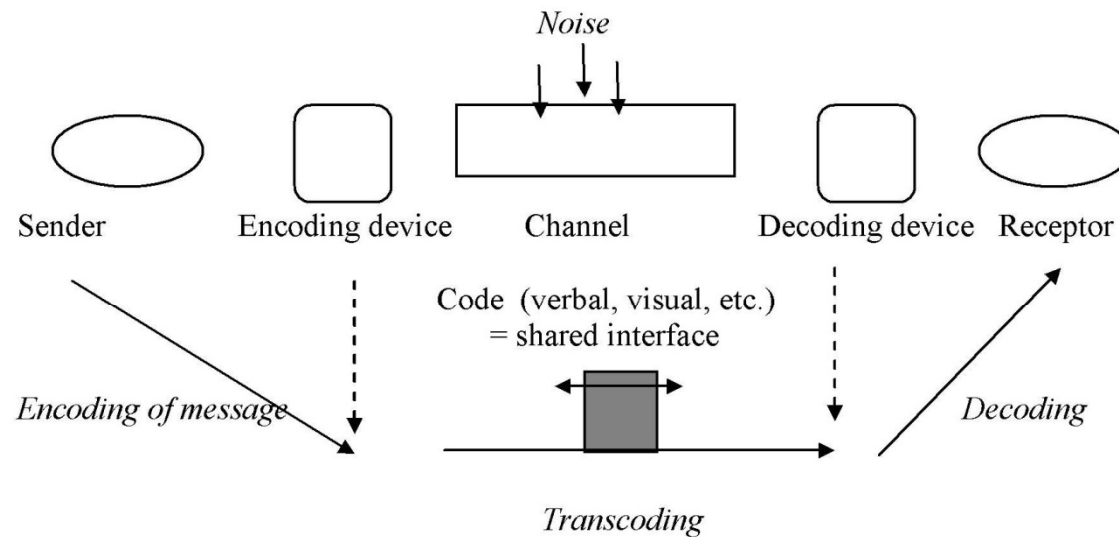
- Multilingual situations tend to be asymmetrical: $A > B$, or $A < B$.
- At macro-level, no quick change occurs. The DLB syndrome ritually and routinely puts Afr. Lg. audiences in the weaker position (B).
- At micro-level, *language dominance alternation* is a strategic and practical option: local inversion of dominant matrix setting.
- Cline effect: the weak pole (B) is strengthened in a given setting for a given purpose; correspondingly, A moves to the weak position.
- E.g., in the Kono setting, the expert maintains his/her role as an expert, but in his/her role as a participant e.g. finds himself at the receiving end of the interpreting process. (Bearth & Fan 2006:283f.)
- The overall (desired?) result: communicative empowerment of target communities, enabling them to meet the criteria of communicative sustainability.

Models of communication suited for the purpose of HIV/AIDS communication

Four criteria (non-exhaustive):

- Alternation of dominance relation between participants
- Negotiation of divergent interpretation of inferences to be drawn from message
- Feedback and ensuing repair processes
- Complexity of negotiation bearing on various components of the communicative process itself (meta-communication)

Linear model of communication = 'code' model



Linear model of communication (adapted from Shannon/Weaver 1949)

The incidence of language alternation on communication processes – an applied research agenda

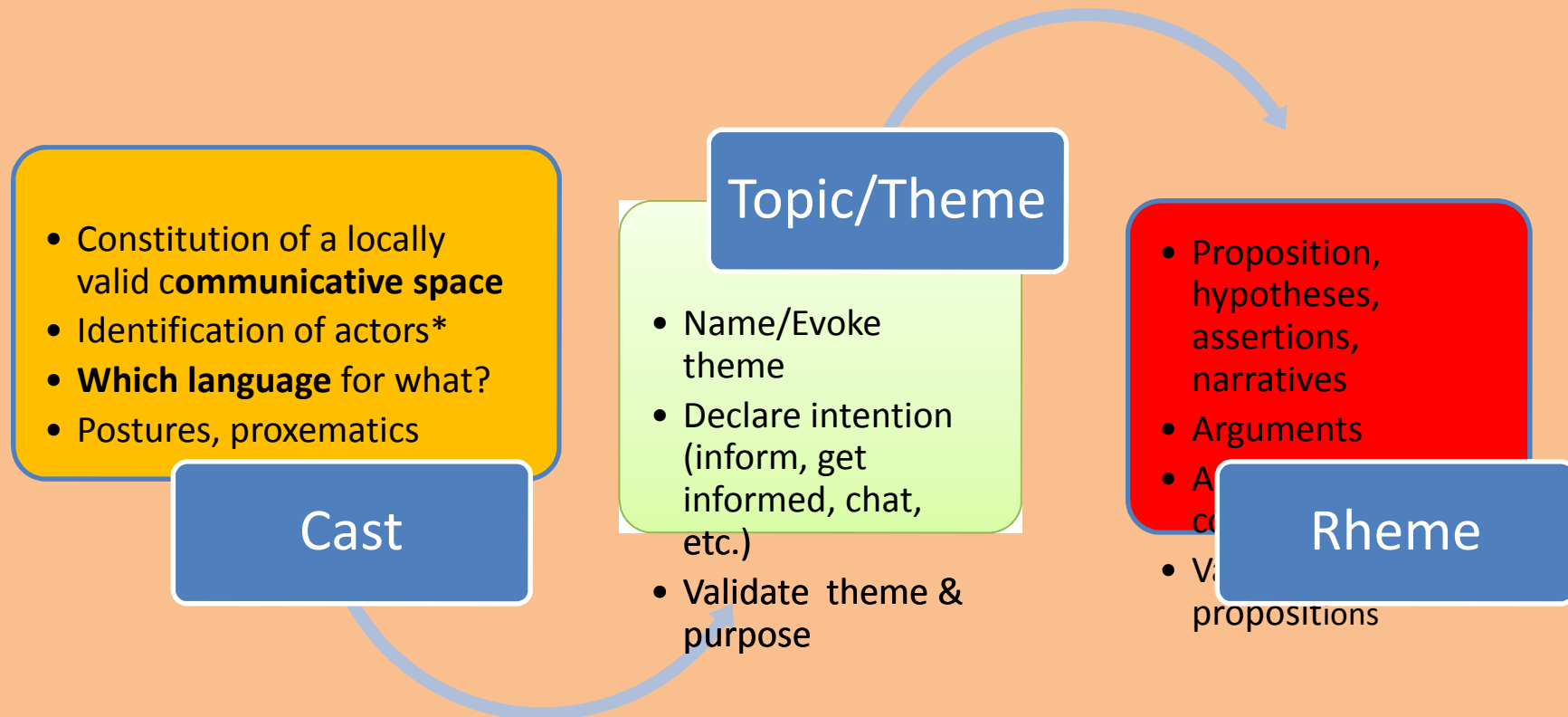
- Unequal distribution of access to communicative (in particular linguistic) resources as a factor of communicative dependency (CD);
- Reduction of CD and reduction of HIV/AIDS prevalence – what correlation if any?
- Falsification of the prevailing sender-receptor model (Shannon & Weaver 1949): “receptor” audiences use language not only to decode the message, but to re-encode, reconstitute, contextualize and retransmit it;
- Replacing the conduit metaphor by a multidimensional model of communication.

Towards a practicable multi-dimensional model of communication

Three criteria:

1. The communication model, though theoretical in nature, influences practice, says Meunier (1994). The current model is too static.
2. Hierarchical relation between participants, and inversion of CS-CD cline as features of the model.
3. A credible model for communication across linguistic barriers which will also take into account inequality, and dominance of the oral.

Cycle of 1st degree communication: 3 phases of negotiation and validation



From 1st to 2nd degree communication

Towards a model of meta-communication

- Communication may fail in any of three phases, any time.
- Rule of thumb: if one fails, all fail.
- An estimated 50% communication time is spent on meta-communication, i.e. repairing communication failures, and reducing insecurity about outcome of communication processes.
- Meta-communication will be the most important form of communication of the future, says Schulz van Thun (1991). Was he thinking of communication in multilingual society?
- Meta-communication, and repair in particular, presupposes participants' analysis of communicative processes.
- Participants' mental model of the communication process is an ingredient to a model of meta-communication.

Pre-inquiry/planning of communicative interaction

Phases of pre-inquiry

Who participates?

In which prerogative?

Actor, concluder, contributor, *bystander*?

Role defined by convention?

COMMUNICATIVE CONTRACT

AGREEMENT OVER TOPIC

in $T \setminus T'$ T' = taboo domain
 E = taboo word, expression

Negotiation of propositional content ' p ' $\subset \Pi$

Configurations

$\Sigma (A + B) = \text{dyad/dialogue}$

$\Sigma (A + B + C) = \text{triad/trilogue (example: sit. multilingual)}$

$\Sigma (A + B + N \rightarrow A-B, A-N)$

Preliminary inquiry : $T (a,b,c)$

« For A, topic x is important »

« For B, $y > x$ OR: $x \subset T'$ »
 [irrelevant] [taboo]

Strategy: **A addresses « x via y »** (health via economy, etc.) INDIRECTNESS

YES vs. > NO

YES, but > NO, but (Tura –le)

Partial agreement .

Implicature « Come to x! » « I am busy.

»

References

- Bearth, Thomas. 2008. Language as a key to understanding development from a local perspective. A case study from Ivory Coast. In : Henry Tourneux (dir.) *Langues, cultures et développement*, Paris : Karthala. 35-116.
- 2010. Orality, Literacy and Digital Competence – a Package Deal for Demarginalizing Remote African End Users. In: Zima, Petr & Radovan Síbrt and Vladimír Tax (eds.), *Oracy and Literacy. Their Autonomy and Complementation in Language Communication* (= LINCOM Studies in Communication vol. 7), 178-208.
 - (in press). Orality, literacy and digital competence – a package deal for demarginalizing remote African end users. In: Zima, Petr & Radovan Síbrt and Vladimír Tax (eds.), *Oracy and Literacy. Their Autonomy and Complementation in Language Communication* (= LINCOM Studies in Communication vol. 7), 178-208.
- Bearth, Thomas & Joseph Baya, 2010. Guerre civile et résilience écologique: le cas du Parc National du Mont Sangbé à l'ouest de la Côte d'Ivoire. *Cahiers d'études et de recherches francophones / Cahiers Agricultures* vol. 19/3, 220-226. DOI :10.1684/agr.2010.0400.

- Brown, Penelope & Stephen C. Levinson, 1987. *Politeness. Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Godwyll, Francis Ebenezer & Elizabeth Kaluki Ngumi, 2009. Problematic Recipe: Alternatives to Public Health Education to Reduce the HIV Pandemic. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 18(1): 73–90 .
- Meunier, Jean-Pierre, 1995 Deux modèles de la communication des savoirs. Supplément à *Recherches en communication no 4*. Louvain-la-Neuve, UCL/COMU, 1-16.
- Mutembei, Aldin K., 2009. Ukimwi katika Fasihi ya Kiswahili, 1982-2006. (= AIDS in Swahili Literature.) Dar es Salaam: TATAKI.
- Shannon, Claude & Weaver, Warren, 1949. *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Urbana. University of Illinois Press.
- Thun von Schulz, Friedemann, 1991. *Miteinander reden. Störungen und Klärungen*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.