

*Language and colonial power: the appropriation of Swahili in the former Belgian Congo 1880-1938.* By Johannes Fabian. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. pp. viii + 206. AUS\$89.95

*Reviewed by Jakelin Troy  
Research School of Pacific Studies,  
Australian National University*

This book would appeal to a wide audience of linguists. It addresses issues particularly relevant to pidgin and creole studies, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics and comparative studies. The author is an anthropologist who has published on many aspects of Swahili and the contexts of its use. He was prompted by his researches to examine closely the "deep connections between language, linguistics and politics" (p. 2) particularly in the context of the Belgian Congo. The resulting book is about European colonial power and the manipulation of languages in establishing and maintaining that power. The work has particular relevance to the south-west Pacific context as most of the countries within that region have undergone colonisation by Europeans, in some cases several times over. As a researcher in the field of pidgin and creole languages in colonial Australia I found Fabian's analyses and comments about

pidgins and creoles in the Belgian Congo very thought provoking.

Although it is a specialist book produced as part of the Cambridge African Studies Series the work is quite digestible to a reader without specialist African knowledge. Fabian occasionally assumes, however, that the reader has a knowledge of French and/or Swahili (e.g. p. 40, 131). As a result some examples are obscure to the English-only reader - they would be more generally accessible if interlinear glosses were provided. Such glosses would also help to clarify (to those unfamiliar with Swahili) Fabian's points about the simplification of Swahili in the Belgian Ministry of Colonies' *Petit vocabulaire des mots ki-swahili les plus usités dans le Katanga* (pp. 130-31). Maps would also be useful for the general reader who is not familiar with the region about which Fabian is writing. I also found the index inadequate and diminishes the reader's ability to follow Fabian's arguments. For example, it excludes such key concepts used by the author as "communicative pidginization" (p. 112).

I also take issue with Fabian's use of the term 'pidgin' and suggest that he is really writing about jargons or interlanguage varieties. The manuals which he has examined for this study appear from Fabian's descriptions of them to contain individual responses to language contact situations in the Belgian Congo. Fabian claims that the data represent "personalization" in pidgins, that is, each account contains a different version of simplified Swahili as produced by European speakers. Pidgins are by definition languages not idiosyncratic jargons. Fabian puts the reader at a disadvantage by not providing any hard linguistic evidence for the "pidgin Swahili" which he claims to have identified. He also

avoids producing a clear definition for the differences between jargons, pidgins and creoles. The closest Fabian come to defining pidgin Swahili is a statement of its reduced and "ridiculous" nature. His definition is most applicable to the genre of literary jargons which is common to all colonial literature and which was produced to entertain a European audience:

Pidgin Swahili is ridiculous and sometimes funny. That pidgins can embarrass or entertain, often the users as much as the observers, must have reasons analogous to those that make jokes work. Exaggerations, unexpected combinations, discrepancies between form and content, and violations of something deeper than linguistic rules seem to require relief through laughter. Be that as it may, speaking a pidgin and listening to it, keeps the participants in such exchanges reminded of a ridiculous precariousness even when the dominant relation is one of ruthless abuse and exploitations. I have argued that documented Swahili pidgins in Katanga are best understood, not as languages reduced to their most general patterns, but as personalized ways of selecting linguistic means for limited purposes. (p. 135)

The book is divided into an introduction and six chapters which guide the reader through the processes whereby the Belgian government acquired knowledge about African languages and then proceeded to manipulate the complex linguistic situation to their own ends. In the introduction Fabian elucidates his central aim for the study which is "to tell the story of an emerging praxis of colonial controls as they were imposed in specific ways on a specific means of communication - a variety of Swahili [i.e. Shaba/Lubumbashi Swahili] spoken in

the southeastern part of the Belgian Congo" (p. 3). Fabian commenced his study after collecting a quantity of "circumstantial evidence" and particularly vocabularies in order to better understand the history of Shaba Swahili. The data alerted him to the uses made of linguistic information within the colonial context. By way of introduction, Fabian draws the reader's attention to the mammoth comparative lexicon of world languages instigated by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia (Pallas 1787-89). The published wordlists provided information to the State which could be used as "instruments of government inasmuch as they imposed a semblance of order on a bewildering multitude of languages and helped to create a frame for language policies" (p. 2). Fabian concluded that early comparative language studies were the product of scholarly interest supported by "absolutist sponsors" (p. 2) with pragmatic goals. He goes on to draw an analogy between early comparative wordlists and the collecting of linguistic information in the Belgian Congo. The Belgian government used the information to control communication in its colony. The tactic was a "subtle use of power" which Fabian considers contributed to colonial success at least as much as the more intensely researched and analysed use of "brutal, physical force" (p. 3).

Fabian's first chapter "Prelude: expeditions and campaigns" introduces the period immediately before and during the earliest period of Belgian colonisation. Swahili was first spread as a "vehicular language" by "Swahili and Nyamwezi traders and conquistadors" and its value was recognised by the earliest European colonisers who attempted to "domesticate Swahili for Western purposes" (p. 13). The period was characterised by religious and secular expeditions to explore and claim the country. It

became policy that all missionaries and colonists should gain fluency in Swahili in order to obtain social control over its speakers (p. 14), which policy led to the production of language guides (p. 16, 19). Fabian makes the interesting point that the guides were usually called "vocabularies" even when they included grammatical information and that they created an orientation towards "using words rather than speaking" (p. 19). He extrapolates that "the pidgin character which Swahili exhibited so often during the history of its descriptive appropriation has quite likely been an artifact of these normative constraints" (p. 19).

In 1908, the Congo Independent State became a Belgian colony. Fabian devotes chapters two to four to the Belgian government's manipulation of language in its colony in the service of its economic aims. The government planned to exploit the mineral wealth of the country which was concentrated in Katanga. Therefore it needed a "large stable labor force" and it was envisaged that the rural African population would supply that need (p. 42). The government believed that Africans could become a controllable European-like working class if a process of "civilisation" was followed. "The (monogamous) nuclear family, a certain degree of literacy, a modicum of private property, good health and a work ethic of Christian inspiration were the aims (and symptoms) of such transformation; education, 'hygiene,' control of physical and social mobility and of political and religious association, and 'order' in the linguistic situation were regarded as the proper means to carry out the *oeuvre civilisatrice*" (p. 42). Linguistic diversity was seen by the government as a threat to its aims. Fabian sorts through the maze-like history of official enquiries and resulting policies and the labour history of the Belgian Congo which ended

in Swahili gaining ascendancy as the African vehicular language of the colony.

Chapters five and six most interested me as a researcher in the field of pidgin and creole studies— "Talking tough and bad: pidginization in Katanga" and "Illusions of colonial power." Fabian claims that "colonial language descriptions" (p. 112) contain features also observable in pidgin languages. For most of chapter five he examines two manuals of the kind produced for use by European employers of Africans (p. 115). He explains that the reduced versions of Swahili produced by authors of such manuals reinforced the use of simplified Swahili by European speakers. His evidence does not support a claim that a stabilised or stabilising pidgin form of Swahili existed in the early colonial context. Rather the data provide evidence for idiosyncratic reduced forms of Swahili used by European speakers. Fabian admits in conclusion that neither manual "can be taken as documentary proof for a pidgin stage of Katanga Swahili" (p. 134). His exercise demonstrates that while historical documents can provide evidence for reduction of languages by non-native speakers, some of the features of which are also found in pidgins, they do not constitute evidence for the development of a pidgin language. Fabian regrets that the individualised accounts in manuals were replaced after 1938 by manuals such as the one produced by Verbeke (1938) which attempted to normalise the jargon Swahili spoken by Europeans. He concluded that "language appropriation here ran its course...from task-specific, modest description, based on actual experience and some research, however, defective, these manuals move to generalized, normative prescription (p. 156).

The anthropological perspective of this

book will provide readers from a linguistic background with thought-provoking fresh insights into many aspects of language contact in a colonial context. It is a complex and dense work which provides challenging though very rewarding reading. It is unfortunate that the price of the book is so high because it is one which many linguists would find well worth acquiring. The book is nicely produced and almost free from typos and the tables and notes are clear. I highly recommend this book.

## References

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*Voices in exile: Jamaican texts of the 18th and 19th centuries*. Ed. by Barbara Lalla and Jean D'Costa. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989. xiv + 157 pp. US\$24.50;

*Language in exile: three hundred years of Jamaican Creole*. By Barbara Lalla and Jean D'Coste. 1990. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1990. xvii + 253 pp. US\$39.95.

*Reviewed by Jakelin Troy*  
*Research School of Pacific Studies,*  
*Australian National University*

Lalla and D'Costa's books are an ambitious and very successful pair that set out to provide linguists with a documentary background to and an analysis of the history of language contact in Jamaica which produced modern Jamaican Creole. The first volume (Lalla and D'Costa 1989) contains a fascinating, annotated selection of texts illustrative of Jamaica's colonial linguistic history. The companion publication (Lalla and D'Costa 1990) draws upon the sources in the earlier book and additional material to illustrate an analysis of the development of Jamaican Creole. The books are an excellent resource for pidgin-creolists and a model for similar historical research projects. However, their interest and relevance is not confined to specialists nor only to