Salikoko Mufwene’s response to Franchetto’s “Monolinguisms Is a Disease”

It helps to start with some basic assumptions that may be questioned:

• Is *indigenous* a relative or absolute term? Are there parts of the world that have always been inhabited but have/had no indigenous populations or languages? Have the populations/languages considered indigenous today always been indigenous where they are now? What of populations such as Creoles and Afrikaners whose social and cultural identities are recent and tied to the geopolitical spaces they occupy today? Doesn’t Europe have indigenous populations/languages? Isn’t there a bias in the way the term *indigenous* has been used in the literature of the past decade or so?

• From the point of view of the distant origins of mankind in East Africa and the dispersal from there some 50-30kya, how did multilingualism emerge? Assuming that that dispersal is a protracted history of layers of colonization, doesn’t it make sense to see multilingualism as obtaining in settings where competition may be assumed to obtain among the languages brought into contact by population movements? Under what specific ecological conditions is multilingualism sustainable?

• What particular contact conditions are not conducive to monolingualism, and what kinds of contacts make it difficult to escape monolingualism? How does “monolinguisms become a disease”? Or does “monolinguisms” appear odd today because most parts of the world don’t produce the kinds of ecologies that would sustain it?

• Isn’t it time we engaged in comparative history of varying population structures emerging from specific contact situations? Isn’t it time we had a clearer picture of variation in the ethnographic functions of the languages in contact?

• How do languages die and why? Are the expanding/prevailing languages always necessarily imposed by a particular group or are they favored by particular ecological factors that *ipso facto* disfavor their competitors?

• What is the relationship of languages to populations that they are associated with? Are they first communicative tools/technology or representational systems? As a matter of fact, aren’t they representational systems as a consequence of the particular ways they work to package information? Should speakers be wedded for life to a particular technology and culture, or can they change or modify them? Do languages serve people or do people serve languages?

• Do languages have rights? How are they defined in relation to human rights, especially that of being adaptive to changing ecologies? Can language (not) make some populations maladaptive in particular geopolitical spaces?

I have many more questions I would love to ask but cannot under the present time constraints.