



# Immersion in a new language

How Africans in the Rhine-Main region  
learn German

By Axel Fanego Palat

**Living in Africa means being multilingual. People who immigrate to Europe thus have a clear advantage when it comes to learning German. This is shown by a linguistic study in the Rhine-Main region.**

In a school context, we are accustomed to learning languages systematically. It is a matter of understanding and being able to apply grammar rules, practising vocabulary in the foreign language. Students in school have a teacher at their side with appropriate training and the necessary teaching materials. Without this support, children and young people feel abandoned; the prospect of learning a language just like that – virtually autodidactically – is alien to us. But that is precisely what many people from Africa and living in Germany today are doing.

People who immigrate to Germany find themselves at a similar starting point as school students: they too want or are obliged to learn new languages (cf. Esser, 2006) – and yet lots of things are different. And although they have not spent years cramming vocabulary and learning grammatical rules off by heart, they are quick to communicate, as we have observed in the Rhine-Main region. In most cases, communication works faster than in foreign language classes at school. But how can the success of non-guided language learning be explained? To find out, we are observing the strategies of people coming to us from Africa. We want to familiarise ourselves with their previous language experiences and hear their attitudes towards and notions about language. And looking at Africa is also worthwhile here because linguistic everyday life in Africa is mostly complex.

## The project

The RMU Initiative Funding for Research financed a two-year project (2019-2020), within which Fanego Palat explored the linguistic integration of African migrants in the Rhine-Main region. The research work was conducted in close collaboration with the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. Apart from Fanego Palat, Assistant Professor Nico Nassenstein, Dr Sabine Littig and private lecturer Dr Klaudia Dombrowsky-Hahn also worked on this project.

Literature

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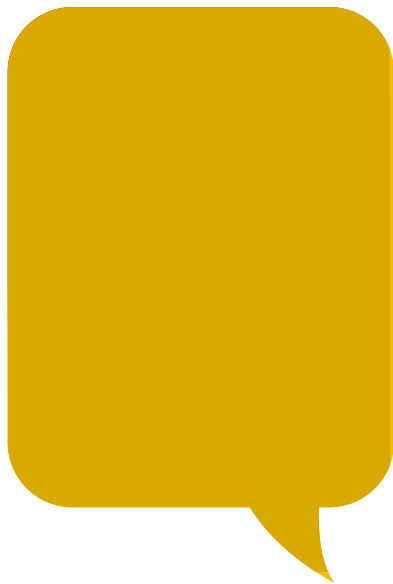
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**Sporadic visits to language classes**

Kajatu, for example, originates from Guinea in West Afrika. As a young woman, she met her German husband and moved with him a good twenty years ago to the Rhine-Main region. Up to that point, she had lived in various countries in West Africa, all of which feature great linguistic diversity. She has learnt new languages again and again: Pular, Bambara, Maninka, French, Fulfulde – and finally German. We made her acquaintance within a project aimed at shedding light on how people from Africa find their bearings in Frankfurt as far as language is concerned.

In Kajatu's case it is clear: in terms of language, she finds her way around very well – even if she herself is not entirely satisfied. She did not find the language classes she attended in her early days in Germany very helpful. She tended to follow them rather sporadically. Philipp from Ghana, who has lived in Germany since the 1980s, feels more or less the same. He emphasises that being open and plucking up a little courage were enough to learn the German necessary to hold a conversation. How did they both learn German so well? The answer to this question appears to lie in their attitude, in their experiences with languages and in a specific cultural ability geared to linguistic navigation.

To preempt the answer: Africans like Kajatu and Philipp are not inherently better at languages than people from other parts of the world. Other things come into play. In large parts of Africa, people use several languages in their daily lives. Depending on the region, these are not necessarily related and scarcely resemble each other. Notwithstanding, being multilingual is the norm, not the exception. People are also very mobile within Africa. They often move elsewhere to study, find work or for family rea-



sons. In the process, they also find themselves again and again in unfamiliar linguistic environments where they have to learn new languages. They do not attend evening classes – which are rarely available – to do this. Instead, they “immerse themselves” in the new language.

**Language learning as a cultural skill**

That this is successful is thanks to a number of contributing factors. In view of the everyday multilingualism in their various home regions in Africa, people have more experience with language learning. They master it as a cultural skill, as it were. As such, they in principle do it unconsciously. Kajatu told us that she picks up German like this, a little bit here and a little bit there. Such descriptions are characteristic of the attempt to describe non-guided language acquisition to us.

This does not, however, mean that the topic of language remains un-

discussed. Quite the contrary. Littig (2021) highlights that families with an African migration background consciously make language policy decisions at the micro level. Individuals who come to the Rhine-Main region from Africa as young adults actively endeavour to learn German. As well as they can, they pursue the communicative strategies familiar to them. However, they also stress the importance of formal language courses where they learn under guidance.

After all, it is hardly possible here in Germany to dispense with guided language courses altogether. Education and work demand German language skills that are based on normative standards and writing abilities. Here, too, experience with language reality in Africa can have a favourable effect. One's own multilingualism makes it easier to learn another language. Particularly with regard to controlled language acquisition, factors such as age, gender, level of education or social environment additionally play a role – and not least personal talent.

**Language as stigma**

The Africans we talk to report about limitations they repeatedly come up against. Often, they are themselves dissatisfied with their German skills – even when these, seen objectively, are very good. Thus, in their everyday professional life, on the street, but also in their personal environment, they experience that their German stigmatises them. Bea was once a teacher in Burkina Faso, Bintu previously a lawyer at the public prosecutor's office in the Congo. In

Germany, both are now working – despite their professional qualifications – in geriatric care.

Such experiences go against the promise that a good command of German smoothens the way to successful integration in all areas (Dombrowsky-Hahn et al., 2021). This promise gives rise to high expectations both among migrants themselves as well as in society. However, this also entails the risk of becoming frustrated. Frustration undermines motivation. Yet good and lasting motivation is regarded as a prerequisite for successful learning.

### Misconception of language skills and motivation

We have to distinguish here between the *need* to learn a foreign language and *motivation*. We know this ourselves from language lessons at school. The German Abitur (A-levels) requires two foreign languages. This alone, however, does not necessarily boost motivation among school students. But what exactly do we mean by motivation? When learning languages, various things can motivate us: career prospects, personal ties to people who speak a different language, or intellectual curiosity. Unfortunately, measuring the degree of motivation is not possible, which is why it is only suitable to a limited extent as an explanatory variable for successful language acquisition. Only in retrospect can we

2018). This scientific term was originally coined in conjunction with bilingual education. It challenges a widespread assumption that children only learn languages well if they keep them strictly separate. African experience underscores that this is incorrect. African migrants, who are always multilingual, draw on all their linguistic knowledge in parallel, regardless of the language from which it originates.

They creatively piece together vocabulary and grammatical structures from the different languages they have learnt. In so doing, they do not mix them arbitrarily without knowing what they are doing. Quite the contrary: they are continually adapting to changing situations.

### IN A NUTSHELL

- Migrants from Africa face a motivational dilemma in Germany: they have a great desire to learn German well and also regard this as necessary. In everyday language situations, however, they often notice that their skills are inadequate.
- Africans in the Rhine-Main region learn German remarkably quickly. This is to be seen in the context of the linguistic situation in their home country: mobility in Africa is high, and the population is dependent on constantly learning other languages.
- Translanguaging plays a major role in Africa (in particular): this theory assumes that we do not “manage” several languages separately in our heads but instead our entire linguistic knowledge at the same time. The “mixing” of languages does not hinder language acquisition; it fosters it.
- Unguided language acquisition, that is, in many cases learning German in a migration context, is not unreflected language learning. It is a cultural ability that people by all means discuss consciously in the process.



say that motivation was evidently sufficient if someone had a good command of German as a foreign language.

Where that is not the case, we suspect a lack of motivation. Unfortunately, the blame for lack of motivation is often apportioned solely to the learners (“Pull yourself together...!”). This completely blanks out the fact that the people in the learner’s environment are of fundamental importance if communication and language learning are to function. This is an essential part of the concept of language acquisition as a sociocultural practice.

### Multilingualism raises language consciousness

In Africa, what is known as *translanguaging* is an everyday occurrence (García, 2017; Wolff,

there was no equivalent translation in German. Suddenly, her sentence structure in German took on forms that stem from Maninka: the language of her grandmother who she was telling us about. Even details of her pronunciation changed depending on the topic, who is listening and their attention. Often, however, the interviewer was also consciously asked to say something herself in a language other than German. The interviewee and the listener swapped roles during the conversation, at least for a short time. Jokes and word games, which often involve switching between languages, were woven into the conversation.

The often creative handling of language in Africa can help an individual to expand their linguistic repertoire. For example, by talking about language. Meta-linguistic discussions are

Sometimes this happens almost imperceptibly. We conducted our interview in German. But Kajatu used terms from Bambara when

common. They contain explanations and provide – perhaps this is more important – many opportunities for linguistic experimentation. Another strategy is to adjust the “amounts” of different languages in your own discourse to your counterpart, but not simply to adopt their language completely in the process. Instead, there is by all means a “challenge” as well (Nassenstein, 2017). And there are also local language teaching experts whose advice can be sought. Such “fluid” and diverse practices are hardly appreciated in Germany. Mastering a language well means coming as close as possible to a standardised High German.

This explains the discrepancy between the very good communicative skills we see in Kajatu, Bea, Philipp and Bintu and their own self-assessment, which

turns out less positive. The Africans we spoke with repeatedly expressed the feeling of reaching their limit, of not progressing in terms of language and of not satisfying requirements. At the same time, they communicate a lot in German every day.

### A task for society as a whole

It is the everyday experience of these people, who speak with an accent or deviate from grammatical norms when speaking, that puts them in this seemingly paradoxical situation. They encounter people whose German conforms to the standard. Their reaction to what they perceive as the migrants’ inadequate German can vary. Disdainful, paternalistic, unsure. Quite a few also pay tribute and offer well-meaning encouragement. But even this implies in an undertone that it is not quite enough (yet). The signal the migrants receive is: “Rectify your inadequate German!”

Where multilingual practices such as translanguaging are successful – for instance in Africa – language learning is not reduced to the cognitive task of the individual. It is a cultural practice of social communities. This is juxtaposed with a normative understanding of language that characterises the appraisal of linguistic skills in Germany. However, African immigrants have no influence on this deeply rooted cultural difference. At this point, migrant language acquisition is also a task for society as a whole in Germany, in which we should all play a part. ●



### The author

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