Identities and language policy in Uganda

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Language is seen as an important marker of identity in general (cf. Blot 2003). In multilingual communities, e.g. in Africa, languages are connected to different identities or different layers of identity.

That means, that people display different identities in using different languages, jargons or registers: in case, an adolescent wants to express his or her belonging to the peer group, he or she will use an ”urban language” (cf. Beck 2010) or a ”youth language” (cf. Kießling & Mous 2004) and thus displays his or her affiliation. Communicating with parents or in a formal context, he or she will switch to another conduct, etc.

The case of Uganda has shown that identity has a strong spatial aspect: People display different identities in using different languages which are attached to different spatial settings. Set concentrically, these spatial identities refer mostly to a national, a tribal or a clan-affiliation, whereby the final is the strongest.

Using original data (Becker 2013), the paper investigates the different layers of identities in Uganda, asking how language policies affect them and how the individual and collective identities interact. It will be shown that people display their identities intentionally and that there is a high interdependence of prestige of language, language policy and identity structures in Uganda which influence interethnic relations.


Keywords: language ideologies, identity, language policy.