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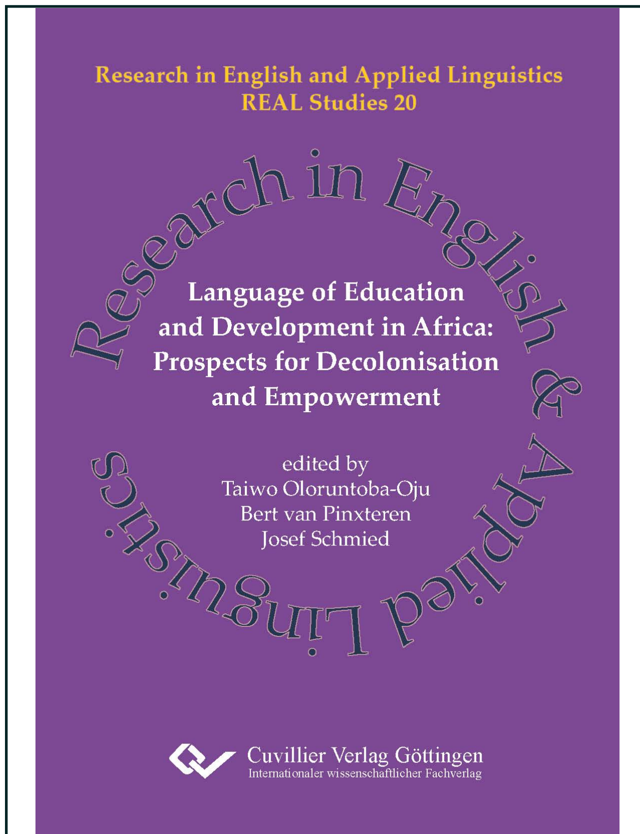
Language of Education and Development in Africa

Prospects for Decolonisation and Empowerment



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Empowering African Languages: An Introduction

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1. African languages and the narratives of power and powerlessness

The discourse on language, education and development in Africa is centred around how to make the best of a bad situation. In linguistic terms, Africa is simultaneously portrayed as astoundingly simple and incredibly complex. Simple: we have Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone Africa. North Africa is Arabophone; in addition, there are a few pockets with different language regimes, such as Amharic in Ethiopia, Somali in Somalia and Spanish in Equatorial Guinea. Complex: the often-repeated trope is that there are over 2,000 living languages spoken on the continent. Most of these languages have small to very small speaker numbers but they all duel for recognition. In addition, there are all kinds of multilingual constellations, making conversations about language policy and development difficult if not impossible. But no matter how Africa is portrayed, whether simple or complex, either way, the situation is seen as stable and unchanging. Africans speak one language at home; they use another, very different one in all formal domains outside of the home – and they simply try to manage however they can.

This dominant narrative is disempowering. The nomenclatures, 'Francophone', 'Anglophone', 'Lusophone' and 'Arabophone' themselves reveal a linguistic partitioning of Africa between colonial powers, and tell a story of perpetual linguistic and related powerlessness. However, there are more optimistic angles to the story that can be usefully pursued. Africa has always been a dynamic and changing continent. Its young population does not take anything for granted. In general terms, change has always been a feature of life in Africa and this is also happening on the linguistic front and is likely to increase. Painting a static picture of Africa, as one that is forever tethered to colonial languages is therefore not only untrue but also serves the negatively discursive purpose of limiting African agency: if change is not possible, then a discussion about policy options open to Africans is not even thinkable or useful. Things can therefore be left to run their 'natural' course, but this means that the linguistic and related fortunes of the continent become perpetually dependent on interests and policy choices based outside of the continent.

2. A paradigm for change

Changing this pessimistic narrative and empowering African languages would mean challenging these existing ways of portraying Africa, and presenting things in a new light. What is needed is a paradigm that opens up the possibilities for a

new discussion on policy choices in the language area in Africa and to give these a more central position in development discourse. This involves more than pious statements or sanctimonious injunctions: what is needed is a re-thinking of the theoretical models used so far and a re-positioning and grounding of those re-thought models in the dynamics of today's Africa. It is in line with the call by Chika Ezeanya-Esiobu at the 2020 Africa Knows! Conference: for Africans to 'become experts in the art of deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge.' Whereas the notion of empowering African languages is not new (see Bamgbose, 2011, among others), this volume presents a remarkable attempt at such a re-thinking and re-grounding, in the recognition that much more work will still need to be done.

What this book presents is a positive story about Africa and its languages – a story whose ending we do not yet know, but which we trust will be a happy one. We argue that a gradual transition to increased use of African languages in education and in other formal domains is going to be *necessary*, *practically possible* and indeed *inevitable* over the coming decades.

We approach our story from two angles: the theoretical and the practical. Let us illustrate what we want to achieve with our story and why we think it will end well by examining each of the three elements outlined above in turn in relation to the input of scholars assembled in the book.

2.1. Change is necessary

This book starts off on a general, theoretical level, with the contribution by eminent scholar Prof. Ekkehard Wolff. In a trenchant analysis, Wolff shows how the current language regimes in Africa essentially continue to serve the interests of former colonial powers and are holding back Africa's development. Wolff's intense Africa-wide historical perspective points to the disappointing performance of Africa's current education systems and how 'the failure of current educational systems in Africa is most of all suffering from inadequate language policies' due to the continued 'coloniality of knowledge and power'. This manifests itself at the level of deeply-ingrained beliefs, but also through active intervention by agencies of the former colonial powers. In discussing 'hegemonic dominance' as well as the 'defamation' and 'disempowerment' of languages, Wolff makes a distinction between 'language vehicularization versus language attrition' and posits that the African linguistic situation continues the way it is because 'stakeholders, African and expatriate alike, just won't listen to experts.' Wolff concludes that the idea that quality education must be based on foreign languages needs to be challenged. A change from Africa's dependence on colonial linguistic structures is necessary.

The need for change is further illustrated by the contributions of Dissake, Sanon-Ouattara and Alfredo. Dissake, writing on Cameroon, documents how the language policy of the country leads to an unjust judicial system, especially because people are put on trial in a language that they do not understand. Using critical theory and analysis of actual court cases, Dissake presents a strong

argument for the introduction of national Cameroonian languages in courts. She argues that this can be done in a practical way at the regional level within Cameroon, making use of the trilingual model proposed by Tadadjeu.

Giving examples from Burkina Faso, Sanon-Ouattara shows how development in Africa is held back because of a continued and inappropriate use of former colonial languages in education, healthcare and the legal system. Her plea is to create new, Africa-centred development visions, rooted in local language and culture.

The chapter on Angola by Alfredo documents an extreme case of the difficulties that a continuation of colonial language policies leads to. He shows how in Luanda, the capital, Portuguese is taking over from other languages, especially among the student population. Meanwhile, in the countryside, people do not speak Portuguese but cannot get an education in their local languages either. Alfredo identifies this as potential stumbling block to sustainable development. He also analyses, however, that the problems could be addressed relatively easily in Angola, as the language situation in the country is less complicated than in many other African countries.

Studying indigenous African language practices as well as the linguistic trajectory of specific indigenous languages can be useful for documenting attitudes towards and proficiency in the use of the languages. One such language practice is the use of slang. The chapter by Abisoye Eleshin shows how in Lagos, in contrast to Luanda, Yoruba slang is in widespread use in this vast multilingual environment in Nigeria. This can be seen as an indication of the adaptability of indigenous languages to multiple communicative functions in a modern environment.

The fact that change is necessary does not mean it will happen. It also has to be practically possible. This is the point at which most of the literature so far stops, but where this volume makes a new contribution.

2.2. Change is practically possible

Van Pinxteren makes two related theoretical points in his contribution, which looks at ideas on culture and language. The first point contains a discussion of different ideas of culture. His plea is for a non-essentialist view of culture and for an appreciation of the considerable amount of cultural change that has occurred in Africa over the years. Following Vansina, he sees the emergence of new cultural traditions in Africa, based in part in African languages. That also means that the pre-colonial ‘tribal’ distinctions that are still used to this day as designation of ethnicity may have lost much of their meaning.

On the language issue, Van Pinxteren critiques the often-repeated trope that over 2,000 languages are spoken in Africa and the accompanying (explicit or implicit) assumption that all these languages deserve to be treated equally. He calls this assumption disempowering, and instead proposes to distinguish between *discerned* and *designed* (or intellectualized) languages. What he points out is that all

over the world, speakers of several *discerned* languages can and do use one common *designed* language in domains that require a more formalized language use. Such a designed language needs to be taught (and learned) in school; the challenge is to use designed languages that are easy to learn for as many speakers of discerned languages as possible. This strategy of using a limited number of designed languages to service speakers of a larger number of related discerned languages can, he argues, be employed in Africa as well. He suggests five principles that would make it easier to come to rational and just policy choices in this area.

In order to explore the current changes in language ecology that work in favour of African languages, this volume provides several case studies, showing both the possibilities and the limitations of the current situation.

Writing on the Nigerian situation, Oloruntoba-Oju, describes the language 'duels' for recognition and prominence amongst indigenous languages, and the parallel duel against the colonial language English over its domination of the national and sometimes local linguistic scenes. The chapter, however, challenges the disempowering narratives concerning the so-called negative attitudes of Africans towards their indigenous languages. Drawing attention to what he describes as a 'backlash' phenomenon, he documents that the dominance of English is challengeable, pointing to signs of the revalorisation and resurgence of indigenous languages in Nigeria, with cross-references to Africa in general. Backlash against the continued dominance of colonial languages in the polity is manifest in the counter-advocacy of African and some international scholars, the 'fight-back' gestures of the 'precariati', and the pressures from African diaspora mums, among others.

Examining previously unreported data of attitudes, the author also tackles what he describes as terminological inexactitude, concluding that many reported 'negative attitudes' are simply 'pragmatic attitudes' responding to socio-pragmatic realities without necessarily affecting emotive attraction to or feelings for specific languages. Oloruntoba-Oju's contention is that language attitudes are normally a product of indoctrination, skewed policies and biased perceptions, hence negative attitudes can be addressed and redressed through enlightened policies.

The chapter on Equatorial Guinea by Nguere and Smith gives an example of bottom-up work done by the institute of linguistics, SIL, in collaboration with a national partner agency to build awareness of the state of the local languages spoken in the country, allowing communities to think about their language development. However, none of this has as yet led to any movement to introduce African languages as medium of instruction or to question the use of Spanish and other international languages in the country. The struggle, as they say in other revolutionary contexts, continues.

The chapter by Djomeni gives another interesting example of bottom-up language development carried out by the country's local language committees and the PROPELCA project (Operational Research Project for the Teaching of Cameroonian Languages). This is aided by legislation that promotes the teaching of local languages and cultures. However, this chapter also shows the

shortcomings of the current policy and practice, calling for a change in mindset. The belief by the author, that ‘all’ languages spoken in the country should be developed for educational and other purposes, may lead to a dilution of effort and may therefore not bring about the desired change. This proposal needs to be read in conjunction with others who counsel a more pragmatic gradualist and purposefully selective approach.

The chapter by Bagamboula provides an exemplary case study of developments in the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville). It shows how language use evolves and how languages consolidate as a result of economic and social developments. Using an approach known as ‘glottopolitics’, she demonstrates how demographic, economic and political changes and conflicts over time have led to changes in the cultural and linguistic makeup in the country and to a consolidation in favour of a small number of indigenous languages (Kituba, Lingala and Lari). She also points to an important side effect of increased Chinese involvement in the country: French is no longer seen as the only possible ‘window on the world’, thus opening up space for imagining different language ecologies.

Ethiopia, the country in Africa that probably suffered least from colonisation, is ahead of the rest of the continent in a number of ways, as shown by the overview by Zatokolina. In Ethiopia, formally, five indigenous working languages have been adopted. We believe that such a pragmatic selectively multilingual solution will also be necessary for many other African countries. However, Zatokolina also points out that even though policies may have changed, practice remains beset with difficulties. Secondary and tertiary education in Ethiopia now use English as medium of instruction. As argued below, this model may ultimately have to be replaced by a model where several languages are taught as subjects, but where the main medium of instruction will be one that is closer to the mother tongue of most students in their various environments. The chapter by Muchativugwa Hove recaps how “the national and transnational mobilities of students in the tertiary education systems in Southern Africa is dependent on the selection, assembly and efficient assemblage of linguistic resources”, how colonialism and globalization have compromised the African potential, and some of the options available towards the transformation of the linguistic and development landscape in Africa.

Despite the evidence provided in the various interventions summarised above, that change is both necessary and practically possible in the linguistic ecology of Africa, that still does not mean that it will happen. This is because all systems suffer from inherent inertia that makes them resistant to change. Therefore, more is needed: the change needs to become, in some way, inevitable. There is reason to believe that this will soon be the case in Africa.

2.3. Change is inevitable

Arguments for the inevitability of change in the linguistic ecology of Africa have been made in the relevant literature; however, the calls for change have become more strident over time. A catalyst for this inevitability is the sheer fact that the

rest of the world is moving at a dizzying pace up the development scale and, as Awobuluyi (2013: 74) adds ominously, 'the world will not wait for Africa to catch up.' An important ingredient of this development is the liberation of the suppressed linguistic and literary potential of African languages. Changes to national policies of education, occasioned by the clamour for the inclusion of indigenous languages, have also been reported (see Akinnaso, 1991: 39).

The graph below, taken from Van Pinxteren (2021: 121), illustrates this inevitability with enrolment ratios in world educational domains.

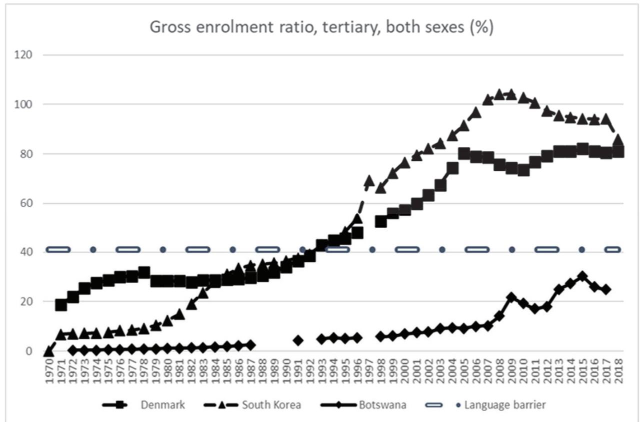

Figure 1: Enrolment in tertiary education and the language barrier

The graph shows how over the past 50 years, enrolment in tertiary education in countries of the global North has increased to levels exceeding 80%. Although enrolment in Africa has also increased, the levels do not yet exceed 30%. Van Pinxteren argues that somewhere in-between these two enrolment levels, there is a language barrier, which exists largely because language abilities are not distributed equally over any population. He argues that it will not be possible to educate an ever-increasing population using a difficult medium of instruction; it will become more and more expensive to give all students the required language level. Taking Estonia as an example, Van Pinxteren demonstrates that even though that country manages to give a higher percentage of its adolescent population a good level of English than any African country has managed to achieve, it is still forced to provide its tertiary education in Estonian. This is because, while Estonia does exceptionally well in teaching English, it does not manage to do well enough to provide tertiary education in English to all the students who are intellectually able to take such education. This is why all across the global North, the bulk of tertiary education is provided in a language that is easy to learn for most of the students.

For Africa, this means that even though change may not appear necessary now, it is going to become inevitable in future. Sticking to a foreign, difficult to learn language as medium of instruction for all at every level of education imposes a burden specifically on African educational systems that is not imposed on any other educational system. It is a burden that will, with increasing participation in education, become impossible to bear. In other words: in future, change to instruction via indigenous languages will become inevitable. Apart from the linguistic and economic difficulty involved, there are also 'affective issues' (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2015) militating against continued dominance of former colonial languages in the African learning and communicative environment.

However, this part of the story – the inevitability of change – remains to be told. Africa seems not to have reached that breaking point yet. We only argue for now why a change in Africa's language policies is necessary and why we think it is a practical possibility. We also think that it will be inevitable – but that part of the story is open-ended. It will be up to enlightened African educationalists, policymakers and activists to work towards that change, in such a manner that it takes place in an orderly and just way.

The bulk of this book is based on papers presented during two virtual conferences hosted by the University of Leiden (Netherlands) in 2021. At that Africa Knows! Conference, a panel was devoted to 'The language issue and knowledge communication in Africa.' It was initiated by the Universities of Ilorin (Nigeria) and Chemnitz (Germany). The papers by Eleshin, Oloruntoba-Oju, Sanon-Ouattara, Van Pinxteren, and Zatolokina were all first presented at this panel, before being peer-reviewed for this volume. The central theme of the conference was the decolonization of Africa's knowledge production and related processes.

The second conference was the 10th World Congress on African Languages and Linguistics (WOCAL) in June, where a workshop took place under the auspices of the Edinburgh Circle on the Promotion of African Languages, entitled 'Let's turn to policy.' The papers by Alfredo, Dissake, and Nguere and Smith were also first presented during this workshop before being peer-reviewed for this volume.

Due to their origin from international conferences, the papers in the volume still show some genre-specific features. For inclusion in this volume, the editors insisted on academic references and scholarly evidence, so that readers can follow up on the ideas and proposals presented here and use them for their own thinking and academic work. The editors, however, tried to leave space for the activist positions taken by some authors and the policy proposals flowing from these positions. We think such position taking can actually serve to animate and enrich scientific debate and stimulate further research. We did not change personal style in form, content and argumentation either – we rather consider it as enrichment and diversification in academic writing.

In general, our position is that using indigenous languages in education can make an important contribution to national development as well as to personal empowerment. Africa is characterised in part by its continued use of former

colonial languages in education. However, sixty years after independence, it seems high time to question this colonial heritage. In the context of global and digital communication today, old African values of multilingualism and culture-specific communicative strategies should not be neglected, but revalued and revived in new ways. We do not deny the importance of a good command of international languages. However, this should not be at the expense of indigenous languages. As we have argued above, we believe that a transition towards increased use of African languages in formal domains will not only be necessary and practically possible, it will become inevitable. If more scholars feel called to contribute to the developments described and changes proposed in this volume, we all would be happy to have contributed to opening up new possibilities in this challenging and fascinating field of research and practice.

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Decolonizing the Politics of Language in African Education Systems

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Abstract

Educational systems in Africa are under-performing, as a manifestation of the 'coloniality of knowledge and power'. In academia, there is a lack of attention to language in the economic and social sciences, and a Eurocentric approach to nation state philosophy. This chapter proposes that policies should be based on African sociolinguistic profiles, characterized by multilingualism, multigraphism and polyglossia. The chapter distinguishes three negative postcolonial language scenarios: hegemonic dominance; vehicularization; and defamation. An alternative positive scenario would be based on the application of mother-tongue based multilingualism at all levels of education. Such a policy change is essential to serve the interests of learners and of postcolonial societies, rather than those of the former colonial masters.

Keywords: Africa, education, mother-tongue, multilingualism, decolonisation

1. Introduction

Experts in applied linguistic and sociolinguistic research on the situation of formal education in postcolonial Africa, whose views are supported also by enlightened educationists, are likely to agree on the following statements:

> Despite considerable financial efforts by African governments and continuous and intensive consultancy from NGOs, formal education in post-independence Africa must be considered underperforming, if not failing completely.
>
> This assessment rests on ubiquitous high numbers of class-repeaters and drop-outs, low examination results across all content subjects including acquisition of the 'official' foreign language, unsatisfactory overall academic performance of school leavers, and low transfer numbers from lower to higher cycles of education – from primary via secondary to tertiary institutions.
>
> This also explains why African universities sit low in citation indices and global rankings of relevant research output, as well as regarding patent registrations.

Sociolinguistic research dealing with language-in-education issues has amply shown that the failure of current educational systems in Africa is most of all suffering from inadequate language policies, namely exoglossic monolingualism and subtractive bilingual models (for comprehensive reference works, see Ouane & Glanz, 2010, 2011).

Selected quotes from eminent language-in-education experts illustrate the gist of countless studies in Africa.

> (I)n the case of Africa, the retention of colonial language policies in education contributes significantly to ineffective communication and lack of student participation in classroom activities. Moreover, it explains to a large extent the low academic achievement of African students at every level of the educational system. (Alidou, 2003: 95)

> Most language models used in African education are designed to fail students. (Heugh 2007: 52)

> An idiotic situation exists that in many, if not most, instances the teacher and the class share the same home language, but the tuition has to be in a language in which none of the two parties is proficient. (Kotze & Hibbert, 2010: 12)

Such devastating descriptions and analyses all point in one direction, namely, that:

> Clearly, therefore, the hitherto minoritized and disempowered African languages must become the default media of instruction for all educational cycles in Africa, with at least one 'global' language being professionally taught in order to enable learners to become competent multilingual individuals using both African and non-African languages. (Wolff, 2019: 94)

In order to remedy the situation and to design and advocate more effective and efficient multilingual educational systems in Africa, we first need to understand why such a deplorable situation ca me about in the first place, and why it has not been repaired or replaced by better performing models since the independence of most African countries. This time span of more than 60 years indicates that we have already lost the full potential of at least two post-independence generations of learners in Africa due to underperforming education systems. Members of these generations of African learners could have helped to promote sociocultural transformation and economic development.

The major issue behind this unsatisfactory situation is ideological and attitudinal. We are dealing with the persistence of what recent currents of modern sociology in the Global South have referred to as the 'coloniality of knowledge and power.' Following the lead of earlier writers like Frantz Fanon, among the first African thinkers who explicitly linked coloniality of knowledge and power to language, ranks the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, in the title of his famous book, *Decolonizing the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature.* What I set out to do in this paper, and have done in many publications over the past 30 years (see, in particular, Wolff, 2016), is to write about *Decolonizing the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Education*. Since the partly violent events on the campuses of South African universities in 2015 (in which I happened to be caught) and after, there is a dynamically spreading movement that – in the social media and public press in Africa – links to the hashtag *#RhodesMustFall*. Against this background, I highlight here three major issues that deserve attention.