

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 2 No. 2, August 2018

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-2-issue-2-august-2018/>

Postcolonial education and language in Africa

A Literature Review by: H. Ekkehard Wolff, Chair Emeritus, African linguistics, Leipzig University.

Introduction¹

Formal education in Africa is in a crisis which wastes financial and human resources, preventing the continent to overcome its struggle of ‘underdevelopment’. Despite considerable funding being allocated to education, the systems in place are facing collapse through under-performance. One of the major causes of educational under-performance is the misguided language policy. Most language policies are based on ‘neo-colonial’ *monolingual exoglossic* approaches, which contradict the essentially multilingual structure of African societies.

Language policies in postcolonial Africa largely reflect a detrimental legacy of colonialism, which is characterized by a widely shared and deep-rooted negative attitude toward the continent’s linguistic and cultural heritage. This results in an undue sense of high esteem of (ex-) colonial and therefore ‘foreign’ education models. These imported systems are tied to 19th century Eurocentric ‘nation state’ ideology, which is based on the assumption of ‘ethnically’ and linguistically homogenous societies; the so-called *nation* shares, among other features, one ‘national’ language (cf. Wolff 1916a). In order to progress in *decolonization*, Africa needs a *linguistic and cultural revolution* to overcome its colonial legacy. Such revolution must opt for multilingual and multicultural solutions to Africa’s so-called ‘development’ problems, which are largely communication-based. This movement would target official *vernacularization* of national communication and education through use of indigenous African languages and include legal recognition of *multilingual patterns of language use* involving non-African languages. It would acknowledge the historical fact that African postcolonial societies are ‘trans-national’ in nature, embracing plurality and diversity as essential and constituting features.

Already prior to the colonial period, Africans tended to be multilingual individuals who used several – and mostly African – languages parallel to each other or ‘mixed,’ more recently referred to as ‘translanguaging’. They do so on a daily basis for practical reasons of inter-language (‘inter-ethnic’) communication and involving African *lingua francas* in addition to their ‘home’ languages. In multilingual practice, different languages tend to be used for different ‘domains’ of communication, which leads to *diglossia/polyglossia*, i.e. patterns of usage in which some languages are associated with higher prestige, status and power, to the exclusion of others. Since colonial times, languages ‘foreign’ to Africa sit high on such scales while indigenous African languages are valued lower, reflecting an antagonistic relationship of ‘empowered’ versus ‘disempowered’.

Consequently, it became a self-fulfilling prophecy that indigenous African languages were seen as ‘unfit’ for use in higher domains and should be relegated to informal communication in the home rather than serving ‘elaborate’ purposes in the public sphere. This negative attitude towards African languages was and still is fueled by prejudice and cliché based on a pseudo-linguistic argument that the indigenous languages of colonized populations were somehow ‘primitive.’ This scientifically wrong perception implied that indigenous languages

lacked the capacity to develop adequate terminology and means of expression in terms of ‘intellectualization’ to match so-called ‘modern’ European standard languages. Further and with regard to education, widely spread informal *translanguaging* practices (formerly referred to under terms like *code-switching*, *code mixing*, *code-meshing*) remain defamed as ‘dirty’ practices in contrast to Eurocentric ‘purist’ approaches to foreign language teaching. Ill-informed stakeholders consider the use of African languages to be detrimental to the learning of, for instance, English. These perspectives enhance and cement the hegemonic dominance of (ex-colonial) ‘foreign’ languages in Africa until this day.

African languages are caught in a fatal rivalry with European languages and Arabic, for that matter, when it comes to official communication and education. Regarding ‘re-empowering’ language policies and their promotion of the African languages, there is the highly feasible option of continuously using indigenous languages alongside global languages of non-African provenance in higher domains such as formal education. This would extend from the pre-school nursery to the university level. It would foster the concomitant *intellectualization* of the African languages, the lack of which had long been used to legitimize the disempowerment of African languages in the educational systems.

The overdue linguistic revolution would finally recognize the historical fact that African societies are essentially and productively multilingual. It would make education systems efficient and effective. The targeted multilingual policies and practices would involve not only (indeed often still under-standardized) African languages, but also (standardized) non-African languages of global reach. These policies would provide the much desired ‘window to the world’ by which to escape the ‘prison of the mother tongue’ (Adama Ouane) that African intellectuals and opinion leaders long for to escape global marginalization. This linguistic revolution would allow for genuine African ways of running formal education – including the common African practice of ‘translanguaging’ – and thus achieve much desired *mental decolonization* by taking over full control over national education. The linguistic and cultural imperialism rooted in European colonialism and lingering in 21st century postcolonial Africa would be expelled.

Language policies, language ideologies, and language attitudes

Generally speaking, formal education in postcolonial Africa suffers from under-performance due to doubtful decisions with regard to language-in-education policies (for an overview, see Wolff, 2017). As a rule, formal education systems use imported languages as media of instruction, which reflect exogenous hegemonic dominance rooted in the colonial period. These languages are ‘foreign’ to African populations and are most often insufficiently mastered by students and many of their teachers. Outside Africa, particularly in the so-called developed countries in the ‘West,’ formal education makes use of the mother tongue (or ‘first language’) of the majority of the learners. This holds through all educational cycles, from primary to tertiary education. Depriving students in Africa of education through languages that they have full mastery of by imposing a ‘foreign’ language of learning on both teachers and learners puts the students at a disadvantage. This creates global academic injustice (Wolff, forthcoming).

‘Mother tongue’ (also known and referred to as ‘first language’ or ‘home language’, less accurately also as ‘ethnic’ language or simply as ‘vernacular’, etc.) here refers to any language that the child masters adequately at the age of school entry. A fair number of African children are already multilingual upon school entry, i.e. being able to use two or more African languages, before they are confronted with the ex-colonial (and current ‘official’) language of the postcolonial state. Therefore, using African languages as the medium of instruction is feasible in formal education. In fact, this has been practiced by devoted teachers since early colonial times even though examinations would still have to be passed in the foreign language which yielded a high number of dropouts and class repeaters. Thus, the issue remains that “the

models used for language in education in Africa are designed to fail students” (Kathleen Heugh, 2007).

Neocolonial language hegemony fosters controversial and contradicting language attitudes, and a major dilemma arises: a ‘clash of ideologies’ for policy-makers and stakeholders. On the one hand, there are positions favoring official monolingualism based on an ex-colonial language of European provenance. Yet, this clashes with positions favoring the empowerment of African languages to be used in formal education. Using European languages in education is seen by some as a de-marginalizing ‘window to the world’ that global (as opposed to local) languages represent. This would appear to contradict the ideology-laden desire by others for authenticity and mental decolonization, which is associated with the more extensive official use of the African languages.² This ideological clash is often paired with pedagogical ignorance when uninformed stakeholders vote for the foreign language medium of instruction against expert opinions. Both positions claim to be of superior pedagogical effect, not the least with regard to the prime target of learning the foreign/ex-colonial language.³ Solving this dilemma invokes a number of ethical problems concerning stakeholder input (Wolff, forthcoming).

The current situation in postcolonial Africa calls for combining ‘pure’ science with ‘humanitarian’ language activism based on robust pedagogical and sociolinguistic research (cf. the works of, for instance, Ayo Bamgbose, Nigeria, and the late Neville Alexander, South Africa, who rank among the most brilliant and influential voices from Africa). Enlightened sociolinguists and education professionals argue in favor of ‘mother tongue-based multilingual education’ systems, which give room to both indigenous African languages and foreign languages of global reach (cf. Ouane & Glanz 2010, 2011). This position is linked to a tested strategy of overcoming language barriers, which has proved effective in local multilingual contexts as much as for international North-South and South-South academic cooperation (cf. Wolff 2016b).

Status quo and way forward

African universities are placed at the bottom of global scales of knowledge production. No African university ranks among the top 100 of the world. This occurs, among other factors, from the fact that African universities suffer widely from academic under-qualification of students entering university whose first language does not match the medium of instruction during (higher) education. In postcolonial Africa, this language barrier is responsible for low levels of academic achievement, since it has dramatic negative effects on students’ academic performance and output. The negative effects of the language barrier do not just apply to a sector of students but rather potentially impact up to 100% of the students of a particular university.

In order to remedy the problem at hand, Africa needs a linguistic revolution as previously described. For such revolution to take place, the following sociolinguistic essentials must be considered: (1) Authorities have to recognize the essential multilingual foundations of pre- and postcolonial African societies; (2) authorities need to target academic multilingualism, which must involve both African and non-African languages; (3) authorities ought to be advised to allow ‘translanguaging’ as a pedagogical option, reflecting genuine linguistic practice of current language use in Africa. The re-establishment of adequate foundations for African educational systems must address the divisive choice of medium of instruction, systems should be ‘inclusive’ rather than ‘exclusive’ in nature. Global research has shown that education through the mother-tongue is the most effective and efficient strategy for sustainable learning also in Africa (Ouane & Glanz, 2010, 2011).

The problems described persist through all cycles of formal education in the postcolonial and multilingual contexts of most African societies (Kaschula & Wolff 2016). The linguistic deficits of pre-tertiary education have negative consequences for higher education at university

level in Africa. In order to access and transfer global knowledge, which tends to come to the Global South from the 'North', the preferred medium of instruction in postcolonial Africa is an *ex-colonial language*, like English, French, or Portuguese. However, in formal public and so-called mass education, these foreign languages are most often insufficiently acquired. In short: The continent suffers from widely spread under-education due to the inefficiency of *monolingual exoglossic* medium of instruction language policies that were originally imposed by the colonial masters and are perpetuated by post-independence African governments.

Multilingual education strategies, which would combine *exoglossic and endoglossic medium of instruction* and allow for *translanguaging* in daily educational routines, are not encouraged and are hitherto not considered legal practice. Such practice is considered 'illegal' by the educational authorities since it contradicts most current legislation on language-in-education. Furthermore, under current standings, learners still have to pass exams in the foreign language medium of instruction.

The solution lies in an 'African Renaissance' based on 'institutional multilingualism.' Such systems would produce both multilingual teachers and learners on all levels, and would allow translanguaging practices in classrooms. The targeted mother tongue-based institutional multilingualism should not completely ignore foreign languages, but should address the ones with relevant global reach like English, French, Portuguese, and Arabic. The primary responsibility for this solution lies with African universities and academics in these universities, who must be expected to take on a leading role in the processes and concern themselves with making mental decolonization and the linguistic revolution a matter of their own. The solution also regards international academic cooperation and networking as an important supporting factor in this process.

References

- Cummins, James. 1979. Cognitive/academic language proficiency, linguistic interdependence, the optimum age question and some other matters. In *Working Papers on Bilingualism*. 19: 121–129.
- Heugh, Kathleen. 2007. Implications of the stocktaking study of mother-tongue and bilingual education in sub-Saharan Africa: who calls which shots? In *Multilingualism and Exclusion. Policy, Practice and Prospects* (Eds. P. Cuvelier, Th. du Plessis, M. Meeuwis, & L. Teck). Pretoria: Von Schaik Publishers. Pp. 40-61.
- Kaschula, Russell H. & H. Ekkehard Wolff. 2016. Introduction – The multilingual context of education in Africa. In *Multilingual Education for Africa. Concepts and Practices* (Eds. Russell H. Kaschula & H. Ekkehard Wolff). Pretoria: Unisa Press. London & New York: Routledge. Pp. 2-8.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey Ltd.
- Ouane, Adama & Christine Glanz. 2010. *Why and How Africa Should Invest in African Languages and Multilingual Education: An Evidence- and Practice-Based Policy Advocacy Brief*. Hamburg: UIL and ADEA.
- Ouane, Adama & Christine Glanz. (Eds.) 2011. *Optimizing Learning and Education and Publishing in Africa: The Language Factor. A Review and analysis of Theory and Practice in Mother Tongue and Bilingual Education in sub-Saharan Africa*. Hamburg-Tunis: UIL and ADEA.
- Wolff, H. Ekkehard. 2016a. *Language and Development in Africa. Perceptions, Ideologies and Challenges*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Wolff, H. Ekkehard. 2016b. Piloting Oromo-English bilingual teaching at tertiary level. Mother tongue-based bilingual team teaching and triadic classroom communication. In *Multilingual Education for Africa. Concepts and Practices* (Eds. Russell H. Kaschula & H. Ekkehard Wolff). Pretoria: Unisa Press, London & New York: Routledge. Pp. 109-122.
- Wolff, H. Ekkehard. 2017. Language ideologies and the politics of language in post-colonial Africa. In *Multilingualism in the Southern Hemisphere: a critical approach* (Eds. Stephan Mühr & Rada Tirvassen.) *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus* 51: 1-22.
- Wolff, H. Ekkehard. (Forthcoming). On global ethics and justice in academia: The language issue in higher education in postcolonial Africa. Paper presented at the Workshop 'Academic Networking in Sub-Saharan and North Africa', Duke University Islamic Studies Center (DISC), April 2018.

¹ This review sketches out a fairly recent research focus in the emerging sub-field of *Applied African Sociolinguistics*, which links up with current *decolonization discourse* in Africa; for a rather general introduction to this sub-field and this particular topic, see Wolff (2016a). Here, a summary is given of a more detailed presentation to the Workshop on 'Academic Networking in Sub-Saharan and North Africa', which was held at Duke University Islamic Studies Center (DISC) in April, 2018 (Wolff, forthcoming).

² One of the earliest and influential African voices to call for a 'decolonization of the mind' by addressing the language issue was and still is the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986).

³ Uninformed laypersons often report their fear of a damaging effect of African mother tongues on the efficient learning of, for instance, English. This fear, however, is not supported by evidence from serious research into foreign language acquisition. On the contrary, professional expert opinion favors a robust command of the learner's mother tongue as a requisite for better learning of a foreign language.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2018 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.