Language, education and identity in Africa

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Citation

Pinxteren, L. M. C. van. (2021, September 16). *Language, education and identity in Africa*. *LOT dissertation series*. LOT, Amsterdam. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3210293

Version:	Publisher's Version
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Language, education and identity in Africa
Issue Date: 2021-09-16

Summary

1.   Introduction

The introduction starts with a 'vignette', a short discussion of Adichie's novel Americanah. The novel has been translated into a number of languages, but is unavailable in Igbo, the mother tongue of the author. This is identified as a specific 'African absurdity'. Adichie's views on this issue are discussed; they all point to the complicated relationship between cultural identity, language and education.

The next sections of the introduction discuss various aspects of the problem. The first examines ideas on who is an 'African' and what an African perspective means in this context. The study defines a point of view that is in solidarity with African thinkers (notably Prah). The next section looks at the way languages are counted and shows that this has political and social elements that need to be taken into account. Then, the function of education in society is briefly examined, using the terminology of cultural capital developed by Bourdieu and Passeron.

The next two sections look at identity from two different angles. The first looks at identity and the nation state. It discusses the difficulty of nation-building in situations where a common cultural framework is lacking. The second looks at identity and internationalism and criticizes Marxist approaches for downplaying the role of culture.

The last section criticizes two pre-scientific myths about Africa, the 'Africa as a country' and the 'Tower of Babel' myth, that both stem from defining Africans by what they are *not*. It calls for a vision based on what Africans *are* like or what they are becoming, starting from African self-representations and exploring the possibilities for African agency.

2.   Research question and research methods

The chapter starts with quoting Vansina (1992), who attributes the problems with Africa's development to the destruction of Africa's cultural traditions during the colonial period. Vansina predicted the emergence of new cultural traditions, based in part in African languages. If true, the first indications of such an emergence should already be visible, given that the prediction was made 30 years ago. The link between culture and language and the role of education in this context is discussed, leading to three research questions:

> ➢   How can we describe current large-scale cultural differences and similarities in Africa, using the methods and terminology of cross-cultural psychology?
> ➢   Why are African languages currently not being used more in higher education as medium of instruction?
> ➢   What possibilities are there for rational language-in-education policies in Africa?

The chapter ends with a discussion on research methods and the position of the researcher.

3.   Culture

This chapter deals with the first research question. It is divided into seven sections. The first discusses various definitions of culture and related concepts such as those of nation, people, ethnic group and polity. It concludes with defining culture as a value system that serves as a common set of reference to a people.

The second section describes the approach of cross-cultural psychology. It discusses its uses and the criticisms made of it and positions the study within the field, aligning itself essentially with the work of Hofstede and Minkov.

The third section provides an exploratory look at cultural differences and similarities in a few countries of Africa (Ghana, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini and South Africa) using existing literature. It concludes that this literature offers few clues for making comparisons of this type.

Sections four, five and six present new data generated through cross-cultural psychology research, making use of the World Values and Afrobarometer surveys. Information is provided on 200 ethnolinguistic groups from 35 African countries. The study uses three lenses: hierarchical cluster analysis; scores on cultural dimensions; and a comparison of scores from Africa with those from other parts of the world. The concluding section seven shows that in most countries, the old ethnolinguistic group distinctions no longer correspond one on one to cultural differences. In some countries, a national culture seems to be developing; in others, this is not the case. There is no clear pattern that applies across Africa. Cultural differences within Africa are as large as those in other continents and there is a large degree of overlap in scores from different continents. Yet, at the continental level, the averages from Africa are different from those from other continents and in that sense, there are some African commonalities, although this should not obscure sight of the large differences that exist as well.

4.   African languages in higher education

This chapter addresses the second research question. It is divided into three sections. The first section points out how the fashionable tendency to speak about 'languoids' and about 'language as something people do' may lead to a neglect of the importance of formalized language and of language policy. It proposes a new conceptual distinction (inspired by Kloss) between *discerned* and *designed* languages. The first term, more linguistic in nature, points to the political and social act of pronouncing a (dia)lect to be a language. The second term, more sociological in nature, refers to those languages that have been built to become languages for formalized use in educational and other domains. This is similar to what others have called 'intellectualised' languages. The greatest advantage of this distinction over others is that it points to the possibility that one designed language can actually serve as the formalized language for speakers of a number of discerned languages. The section discusses arguments for education in a designed language that is close to the mother tongue and examines why attempts at introducing this in Africa have not been successful. It contends that existing explanations do not take low

enrolment levels in education into account. It points out that language abilities are not distributed evenly within populations. It asks the following theoretical question: is the number of people an education system is expected to educate up to tertiary level higher than, equal to, or lower than the number of people an education system can reasonably be expected to teach a designed language to the level needed for such education? It points out that in Africa, at present, low enrolment levels in higher education may explain why a switch to African languages has not yet been made.

The second section examines this idea in greater depth by comparing Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) in higher education in selected countries in Africa and in other parts of the world, as well as their historic evolution. It proposes as a working hypothesis that there is a 'language barrier' approximately at the level of a GER of 40% for the highest level of secondary education and at the start of tertiary education. Below this level of enrolment, any language can be used as medium of instruction. Above this level, a switch to a designed language that is close to (one of the) discerned mother tongue(s) becomes necessary. Currently, all African countries are below this level. Given historical developments however, it is likely that some countries will breach this level in the next decade or so.

Section three concludes that an important new explanation for the lack of use of African languages in higher education lies in enrolment levels. This explanation is currently not mentioned in the literature. The analysis comes to the new conclusion that a transition to using a limited number of indigenous designed languages will become necessary in a number of African countries in the next decade or so.

5.   Rational choices for language in education

This chapter has five sections. The first outlines the importance of inclusive language policies for citizenship. The second, making use of existing literature and the distinction between discerned and designed languages outlined above proposes four principles that should underly rational language policies:

1. Develop a limited number of designed languages for education.
2. Designed languages should be chosen in such a way that they are easy to learn for as many speakers of discerned languages as possible.
3. Strive for inclusivity: choose designed languages in such a way that all have to exert a relatively low but relatively equal effort to learn them.
4. Make use of existing bilingualism as a resource.

The third and fourth sections examine the problem of which languages are easy or difficult to learn for speakers of which other languages. They propose that Levenshtein distances (Normalized Edit Distances) as calculated through the Automated Similarity Judgement Program and database (ASJP) can provide a way of approximating a categorisation of easy and difficult language pairs. In a novel application, Levenshtein distance scores are benchmarked against a US schema for ease and difficulty of language learning, leading to five categories for ease of language learning, going from very easy to very difficult.

The fifth section concludes that these four principles, together with the schema for ease or difficulty of language learning for the first time provide an instrument for starting a discussion on rational choices for language use in higher education.

6.   Five case studies

This chapter shows the power of the theoretical insights gained in the previous chapters by presenting five brief case studies on as many countries: Tanzania, Congo (Brazzaville), Ethiopia, Ghana and Botswana. The case studies show a number of things. One is that indeed, it is generally not possible to map cultural differences and linguistic differences onto one another in a one-on-one way. This also means that a switch to using African languages in and by itself does not need to pose a threat to national unity.

The case studies show that at the level of secondary education, there must already be problems in a number of countries, because enrolment levels are such that the 'language barrier' is in sight or has been breached. In all countries, it would be possible in theory to arrive at rational choices for a limited number of designed languages. Such choices would greatly increase educational efficiency. It might be possible that in some countries, such as Ghana, English could be used as medium of instruction alongside indigenous languages as well. The case study for Ghana also examines the possible use of pidgin as an alternative solution, but concludes that this would not work. The case study for Botswana points to the importance of cross-border collaboration in developing designed languages such as Sotho-Tswana. It also contains a plea for the protection of Khoisan languages, which represent a unique human heritage. The most complicated situation is that of Ethiopia, which is the country that has language policies most conducive to local languages. In order to reach solutions for Ethiopia that are both practical and equitable, the study suggests a fifth principle, in addition to the four listed earlier:

    5.   Build incentives for linguistic collaboration among related linguistic communities.

The case studies also lead to a different perspective on decolonizing education. The plea is for rethinking the educational pyramid bottom-up, instead of top-down. Where colonial education was geared to only providing quality education to a small elite, education in future will have to ensure that all receive an education appropriate to their level and profit from that education.

Lastly, this chapter revisits the relationship between identity, culture and language. It concludes that even though there is a relationship, it is not one-on-one. To a limited extent, it can be influenced by policy. However, literature suggests that large linguistic and cultural differences may be much more difficult to overcome than smaller differences. Using indigenous designed languages will prove to be key to accelerating social and technological innovation.

7.   Language, Education and Identity revisited

The concluding chapter is divided into four sections. The first of these is a summary of the main findings and a discussion of the limitations. The study gives a 'proof of concept' that will need more and more precise research and inputs from local scientists to give it more practical applicability. It points to a large research agenda (section two), in which the search for rational language policies will have to occupy a central position.

Section three, entitled 'the search for empowerment' examines the ideas developed on culture and language within a wider context of a number of ideas that are either limiting or increasing the possibilities for African agency. It points out that there is an entangled web of notions that together form a toxic cocktail of ideas, blocking a decolonial vision. Developing a decolonial and empowering perspective will involve untangling and defusing that web and cannot afford to ignore the language issue.

The concluding section looks at the concept of 'cultural autonomy' as defined through a number of UN statements. It makes the point that many groups in Africa currently do not have the cultural rights that indigenous groups should have. Yet, obtaining such rights is one precondition for reaching sustainable development.

The study contains a number of appendices that provide more detail on the hierarchical cluster analysis, on the method for obtaining cultural dimension scores and on the scores themselves.