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Language of instruction in education in Africa: how new questions help generate new answers
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Language of instruction in education in Africa: How new questions help generate new answers

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A B S T R A C T

This paper reviews the major arguments used over the years in favour of mother-tongue instruction in Africa. It analyses the reasons that have been given for the lack of progress made. It suggests that the current Western paradigms obstruct a view of current and expected developments in this area. It offers a new analysis, based on the evolution of enrolment rates in education. The paper argues that in the next decade or so, a transition to using African languages more at all levels of education will become unavoidable.

1. Introduction

The issue of the language of instruction used in education in Africa has featured prominently in this journal almost since its beginning, and certainly since Urevbu (1984). In this article, I hope to review the major arguments that have been outlined over the years and I will argue that these have not changed a great deal over the past 40 years or so. My argument is that this is due at least in part to a problem that was pointed out by Brock-Utne (2010: 641): the fact that often, 'western paradigms are used when researching language policy in Africa (...) which do not fit the African situation'. I will demonstrate how asking new questions, based on African realities, can lead to new answers and a new perspective on the issue of language of instruction in education in Africa. This perspective shows how in some countries, a gradual transition to using African languages at all levels of education will become unavoidable in the next decade or so.

In order to make the argument, the article first reviews the major lines of reasoning as developed in articles in this journal and then asks a key question related to what African educational systems can reasonably be expected to achieve. Trying to answer that question will lead to a number of new insights, presented towards the end of the article.

2. What does the literature tell us?

There is a well-established and long-standing scientific consensus: instruction in a language the student has been brought up with from early age (a 'mother tongue' or L1) is the most efficient way in which an

education system can teach children to as high a level as possible given a certain level of investment of time and resources. This is consensus holds, even though the concepts of first language (L1) or 'mother tongue' deserve to be questioned, as discussed for example by Carter et al. (2020: 2). In many (though not all) African countries, both in rural and in urban settings, children learn two or more languages from an early age on – therefore, they have two or more languages as L1. However, this may not be as unproblematic as it seems, because the issue of proficiency reached in any of these languages is a complicated one that remains largely under-researched (for a recent discussion, see Sagna and Hantgan, 2021). The fact that children learn to use several languages does not mean they can efficiently be taught in any language. It is relevant here to point to the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), introduced by Cummins (1979). Cummins points out that these are two relatively unrelated skill sets and that CALP only becomes fully developed in the late teens. He points out that higher proficiency in CALP in L1 makes it easier to develop the same in L2, especially if the two languages are not too different. He defines semilingualism as low CALP in any language. With these concepts, it is possible to understand that people who have basic communication skills (BICS) in a number of languages can still be unable to function at a more academic level. It is also obvious that developing CALP requires use of a language that has been intellectualised to a certain degree.

This does not change the bottom line: instruction in (one of the) language(s) a child has acquired from an early age works best. This has been demonstrated among others by Trudell (2009) and by Brock-Utne

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(2010), who has earlier shown this for Tanzania (Brock-Utne, 2007). Carter et al. (2020) have again demonstrated this for Ghana. Garrouste (2011: 231) has shown for Namibia that English-language proficiency is the most significant variable explaining differences in performance in mathematics in primary schools. It should be acknowledged that L1 instruction has expanded considerably in Africa over the years, as documented by Albaugh (2014). However, this expansion has mostly been limited to the first few years of primary education. As Heugh (1999: 303) has shown, this 'early-exit' model, that mandates a transition from the mother tongue to the former colonial language after two or three years of mother-tongue instruction is inadequate because, even if properly implemented, it does not build up sufficient language skills in the mother tongue nor does it allow for sufficient learning of the former colonial language to enable children to profit in an optimal way from their continued education using a very different medium of instruction. In a way, teachers know this, and where they can, they make use of indigenous languages to help improve their teaching, as Kasule and Mapolelo (2005) have shown for Botswana (a practice often referred to as 'translanguaging'), even if official policies do not allow this. However, this is not universal practice; also writing on Botswana, Pansiri (2008) has shown the difficulties that arise when teachers neither speak nor understand the languages of the children they teach. This especially happens in the remote areas of Botswana, contributing among others to low performance of children in school.

If all of this is well-known, why doesn't it change? Is it caused by the legacy of inadequate and diverse writing systems as introduced by early missionaries? Orthography certainly is and remains a problem, as illustrated for example by Wenske and SSentanda (2021: 9). However, in principle, the problem is not unsurmountable, as shown by the pioneering work of Prah and his associates at the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Societies (CASAS) – for an overview, see for example Owino (2002). Is it then an issue of political will, as Webb (1999) has suggested as an explanation for South Africa? That is certainly part of the issue, but there is more to it, as Altinyelken et al. (2014) analyse for Uganda. A good overview of the answers to this question is found in the overview article by Clayton (1998), because it sums up the state of the debate at that time. He asks why what he calls 'languages of wider communication' are still used so widely in developing countries. He gives five reasons: the need for national integration; the need to save cost; the need to educate children to use a language for international communication; elite closure; and the continued interference by the world capitalist system. He then goes on to argue that by themselves, each one of these explanations fail, but that taken together, they explain what is going on.

However, there is another type of reasoning that is frequently given and this is the tremendous linguistic diversity in Africa. There are many languages, a number of over 2000 is often given, and many of these have only a limited number of speakers, as Urevbu (1984) already pointed out for Nigeria. Thus, from the perspective of cost and practicality, this is seen as problematic. Yet, as Prah (1998) has already pointed out, this number may be grossly overstated; most Africans can be reached through one of the languages of wider communication spoken in Africa they are familiar with from an early age. Grin (2003: 54) has shown how in general, the cost of developing local-language materials is a worthwhile investment from an economic point of view. Vawda and Patrinos (1999) have shown this for Guatemala and Senegal: the process of developing educational materials in local languages, although time-consuming, is not prohibitively costly.

But if the current medium of instruction situation in Africa is far from optimal and if the blockages are what they are, what can be done to change the situation? Again, the literature provides several answers.

One argument that has been brought forward forcefully is the human rights argument. The most prominent proponent of this line of reasoning is Skuttnab-Kangas (2013 and many others), but the point is also made for example by Watson (2007: 252) who asserts that 'language rights should (…) be seen as fundamental'. However, Watson also asserts that in this era of globalisation, it is becoming more and more difficult to assert such rights. He calls on 'the international community' to 'make up its mind' whether it wants erosion of smaller languages to happen 'and if not, how it can help to preserve minority language and ethnic groups' (p 263). This discourse points to a number of problems. Firstly, by now it should be abundantly clear that claiming that human rights are being violated does not in and by itself lead to any action to redress the situation. Apparently, there are other human rights-related problems still persisting in this world that are accorded greater priority. Secondly, there is the issue of agency. Watson apparently has little hope of change coming from within Africa itself: it is the international community that has to make its mind up – that seems to be the only relevant actor. And lastly, there is the issue of 'ethnic groups' and the relationship with 'minority languages' that Watson points to. It points to the origins of the debate on linguistic human rights and on the protection of 'ethnic minorities'. This debate is heavily influenced by the discourse developed mainly in the United States and in other societies where basically settler communities took over and all but eliminated precolonial societies. The concern in these countries is with saving what small remnants of the original cultures, ethnicities and languages remain – saving groups that are indeed threatened with extinction in more ways than one. The assumption, underlying for example the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is that majority populations already enjoy certain rights, for example the right to education in their own language. Those rights, the reasoning goes, are currently being denied to 'indigenous groups' and this should be changed. However, this line of reasoning is not well suited to the situation in Africa. This is because in Africa, many ethnolinguistic groups are not nearly-extinct, small groups: in Nigeria, the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages are officially called 'majority languages' (Ufomata, 1999). Yet, education in these languages is only provided in for the first few years of primary education – the rights that should be accorded to 'minorities' in Nigeria (and many other African countries) are not available to the 'majority' groups in these countries.

Another argument that merits closer examination is the issue of the links between language and culture, as put forward for example by Trudell and Klaas (2010). These authors show that at least for the area of adult literacy, the ability to read and write in the mother tongue is important both to help preserve cultural identity and to be accepted as worthy members of national society. For Burkina Faso, Trudell (2012) shows how the interplay between the formal education system and NGO-sponsored alternative education programmes that use indigenous languages in fact limits their effectiveness. For Kenya, Bunyi (1999: 349) argues that instruction in indigenous languages should be extended in order to help preserve Kenyan cultures. She asserts that 'cultural transmission has been identified as one of the most fundamental functions of education' and that 'language is also constitutive of the culture of those who speak it natively.' (p. 343/4). Yet, as Johnson and Stewart (2007: 248) caution: 'Teaching vernacular languages may reinforce local cultures, but may also be disempowering and dividing'. Thus, this issue is a difficult one indeed, one that largely has to remain outside the scope of this paper. A question that can be asked is whether or not the number of distinct cultural groups in Africa is equal to the number of distinct linguistic communities on the continent. According to Vansina (1992) the number of what he calls 'cultural traditions' in precolonial Africa was much lower than the number of languages. However, he feels these cultural traditions were all but destroyed during the colonial period. His prediction is that 'neo-African' traditions will emerge, based in part in African languages and that it is the emergence of these new cultural traditions that will enable Africa to develop. This ties in with the argument made by Prah (1991: 61): 'If African languages are developed, to carry modern science and technology, transformation of the African earth would be rapidly advanced.' If this is true, then on the one hand, it would be too simplistic to say that language death equals cultural death. On the other hand, it is also not possible to maintain that there is no link at all between language vitality and cultural vitality.

A related but slightly different way of looking at this issue is by

exploring the possibilities of Stroud's concept of 'linguistic citizenship', as examined for example by Rubagumya et al. (2011: 79). This is an ideological approach that assumes that a 'language community' itself should have the possibility to take charge of its development and to decide whether or not and to what extent it wants to make use of its linguistic resources. It 'is people themselves engaged in grassroots agency and struggle who can develop and use their language'. However, Rubagumya et al. show how in Tanzania at least, such a process is not happening. Therefore, they feel people should first be empowered 'to change school practice, by providing them with information about the effect on learning of using different languages in education.' (p. 82) In other words, the idea is that once the general population knows what linguists and educators know already, they will take charge and demand their rights as linguistic citizens. However, Rubagumya et al. are unclear about who should do the empowering and how this would then work. Is it the linguists? The international community? The government? None of those scenarios seem likely or practical and Rubagumya et al. keep silent about it. So this is currently not taking us any further.

What that leads to is an analysis such as the one given by Bennell (2021: 7). He points out that the continued key importance of colonial language competency continues to work against mother tongue instruction and has pushed middle-class parents to seek private education. He points out that secondary education has a 'central sorting function in reproducing the social class system' and that the 'maintenance of high stakes primary school leaving examinations enables better-off children to be filtered into top performing public secondary schools' (p 8). He argues that because this mechanism is becoming ever more pronounced, the poor may actually be losing their interest in education and that the goal of universal primary education is not likely to be attained in Sub-Saharan Africa in the foreseeable future.

Altogether, the picture that emerges from the literature is not hopeful. Even though mother-tongue education works best, it is not likely to be implemented in the near future, because of the strong reasons working against it. The argument that this violates human rights or will be solved through empowered 'linguistic citizens' has a nice moral ring to it, but is not likely to produce any meaningful results in practice. Should we then give up? That is not the point of this article. Instead, I argue that we should go further along the lines suggested by Brock-Utne (2010) and attempt to leave the lines of inquiry that are imbued by a Western gaze. Asking fundamental questions that are grounded in African reality will point the way to some new answers, not yet found in the current literature. That is what the next section is devoted to.

3. Questioning the Western gaze

In this paper, I want to deal with two issues that should be addressed when discussing language and education in Africa but that have not received much attention in the literature. The first has to do with the inadequacy of common simplifications on language learning. The second is related to thinking through the consequences of educating ever increasing parts of populations in a language that remains, in essence, foreign.

There are two common simplifications that are found in the literature on language learning that may be acceptable in a Western context, but that will not do for Africa. Both can be found in language economy studies, such as the one by Athanasiou et al. (2016). One is the simplification that people either 'speak' or 'do not speak' a language (p 214), leaving out the matter of proficiency in the language 'spoken'. The other is the simplification that the average cost of learning a foreign language is the same for everybody (p 216).[2] I will address both in turn.

What does 'speaking a language' actually mean? Globally, there are

three main systems for assessing language proficiency. Two are from the US: the guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)[3] and the ILR scale. The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale has five broad levels, ranging from zero to five.[4] Then in Europe, there is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) scale, which has six levels.[5] The difference between these levels is substantial: moving from one to the next normally takes a talented person at least a month of full-time study and tuition, depending on the distance between the language studied and the language already known. Is a person who is able to 'communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters' and who is able to 'describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need' a speaker of the language (CEFR level A2)? Or is this only the case once a person is able to 'express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations' (CEFR level C2)?[6] For Africa, we do not have a standard for what is meant by 'speaking' a language. The only thing that we do have is the definition given by the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) given in Maurer (2015: 3): a francophone is: 'a person able to express him/herself in French, no matter what his/her level may be or his/her mastery of other competences such as writing or reading.' (Author translation.)'[7] The OIF does not relate this definition to the CEFR levels, but it is likely that it encompasses speakers at the A2 level and above. But is the A2 level so high that people who have it can be assumed to possess Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in that language? This has not been benchmarked. There is a different benchmark, however, and this is related to the minimum language level needed in order to be able to take tertiary education in that language: this is often taken to be at least the B2 level. It is the level used by many universities, although the University of Cape Town in South Africa uses the higher C1 level as its minimum requirement[8] - still below the highest 'C2' level. Albaugh (2014) estimates the average 'francophone' population in the 'francophone' countries of Sub-Saharan Africa at 18%. However, given the definition of who is a 'francophone', this means that a far lower percentage of people in 'francophone' Africa know French to a level good enough to take tertiary education in that language.

There is another reason why 'speaking' or 'not speaking' a language is an over-simplification that is inappropriate for Africa. This has to do with the fact that this simplification hides sight of the problem that has been called 'semilingualism' (Wolff, 2016: 227) or 'linguistic stunting' (Piller, 2016: 124). This is the issue that some people have insufficient competence in any language to clearly express their thoughts or articulate their needs (they lack CALP in that language, in the terminology of Cummins). This can happen when mother-tongue education is limited or lacking and education in the 'official' language does not manage to give the learner a sufficient level. Of course, some people make creative use of whatever meagre linguistic resources they have available, leading for example to new youth and urban slang languages. But this is not

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[2] Athanasiou et al. recognise that the distance between two languages affects the cost of language learning, but in spite of that they follow the simplification proposed elsewhere in the literature.

[3] https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012 Accessed 20 July 2019.

[4] https://www.govtilr.org/ Accessed 20 July 2019.

[5] https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/home Accessed 20 July 2019.

[6] Descriptions taken from https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale, Accessed 21 April 2021.

[7] 'Revenons donc au sens commun, qui entend par " francophone " une personne capable de s'exprimer en français, quelle queue soit son niveau ou sa maîtrise d'autres compétences comme l'écriture ou la lecture.'.

[8] http://www.students.uct.ac.za/students/applications/admission-requirements/language accessed 20 July 2019 gives the requirement as an IELTS score of at least 7.0, which corresponds to the C1 level as outlined at https://www.ielts.org/ielts-for-organisations/common-european-framework.

universal – in Africa, some people are stunted in their development due to lack of learning in any language and this is a problem too easily ignored or overlooked.

For the global North, where foreign language learning is done by a portion of the population at best and where at best only a handful of other languages will be learned these simplifications might do. For African situations, however, where the assumption is that all citizens will participate in public life in what essentially remains a foreign language, these models are inadequate.

Let us now turn to the second issue, the issue of education in such a foreign language. Obviously, in order to profit from any education, students should have at least a minimum level of knowledge of the language of instruction – otherwise, they will not understand what is being taught. Nowhere can this in fact be achieved for *every* student: according to a meta-analysis by McKenzie et al. (2016), about 1% of all children are estimated to suffer from intellectual disability. Intellectual disability means that educational systems do not manage to teach these children to read or write or if so, only to a very limited level. So not all children can be taught to read and write, not even in their mother tongue. But this does not mean that all others can be taught to a high enough level to be considered 'literate' in the sense that they can no longer be considered 'functionally illiterate'. Functional illiterates, according to Schlechty (2001: 7) are those people who have reading and writing skills that are inadequate 'to manage daily living and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level'. According to the UK National Literacy Trust, the educational system there does not teach all to a high enough level: one out of six (16.4%) of all adults in England are functionally illiterate.[9] In 2019, the World Bank launched a new indicator, dubbed 'learning poverty': 'Learning poverty means being unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10' (World Bank, 2019: 6). Even in high-income countries, there is a percentage of children in this category though fewer than 10%; so even with the best mother-tongue education available, not all children can be taught to such a level that they are able to read and understand a simple text.

The inconvenient truth is that learning abilities are not equally divided over the population: some people are more intelligent than others. Tests have been calibrated so that the average IQ is 100 – 50% of all children are supposed to have 'average' intelligence. At the upper extreme, just over 2% of the population score 130 or above. So, some children learn more quickly than others. For language learning, it is important to note that this division of learning abilities is not one-dimensional: there are different, although interrelated, forms of intelligence. Li (2016) has shown that language aptitude is a valid construct. This construct is related to, but independent of general intelligence. What this means is that some children may be good at language, but hopeless in math. For others, it may be the other way around. Then also, of course, some children are good at both.

Two variables are relevant here when thinking about African educational systems: the percentage of the population that receives formal education to a specific level and the distance between the language(s) spoken and the medium of instruction. If an education system needs to reach a large *percentage of the population*, then at a given level of input, it will be most efficient if it can use a medium of instruction that is *as close as possible* to language(s) children are already familiar with. So there are two differentials here: teaching more children requires more effort because aptitudes for learning a language are not distributed equally over the population; and teaching children in a foreign language becomes more difficult as the distance between the languages involved increases. How exactly this works in general I do not know; however, below I will examine how it works in actual educational systems. Clearly, a higher level of education requires a higher level of competence in the medium of instruction. We will examine this for secondary and

especially for tertiary education. This follows the call by Prah (2012:311) and others, namely that '[t]he transition from oral to literate African language-based cultures in Africa is crucial for the scientific and technological renaissance of Africa.' Currently, Africa uniformly relies on foreign languages for its secondary and tertiary education. In order to consider whether and under what circumstances that could change the following theoretical question needs to be asked: **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 foreign language to the level needed for such education?**

In theory, given infinite resources, it might be possible to teach almost anybody almost anything. However, in practice resources are never infinite. The question what to expect of an educational system can be broken down into two questions.[10]

A) What percentage of the population can an education system educate to a reasonable level of proficiency in a 'foreign' language?
B) What percentage of the population is an education system expected to provide with tertiary education?

These questions could be asked in the same way for secondary and for technical and vocational education; however, currently available data allow an approximate answer for tertiary education and not for the other levels of education.

If percentage 'A' is greater than percentage 'B' there will be no problem in providing tertiary education in a 'foreign' language. If, on the other hand, percentage 'B' is greater than percentage 'A', foreign-language tertiary education will not be an option for all of tertiary education. In an African context, this point is so important that it merits repeating the same in different words: if an education system in Africa will educate **fewer** people than the number of people it can teach a foreign language to the required level, then it can use that foreign language as medium of instruction. However, as soon as an African education system is expected to educate **more** people than the number it can teach a foreign language, then it can no longer make exclusive use of that foreign language as medium of instruction.

This theoretical question has never been asked, in part probably because for most parts of the world, it is not relevant; most developed countries have developed tertiary education systems that offer at least parts of the curriculum in a language that is at best only different in dialect from the language(s) of most learners. Another reason why it has not been asked is probably because finding the answer to the question may not be straightforward. Yet, for Africa, a continent that uniformly relies in its tertiary education system on 'foreign' languages that are very different from the languages people speak, this is a key question. The position developed in this paper is that in Africa today, the number of people actually enrolled in tertiary education in Africa is lower than the number education systems can teach a foreign language; however, in future this is likely to change. In other words, the position of this paper is that the problem that could theoretically arise in Africa, as outlined above, does not yet occur in practice. Generally speaking, at the moment, there are not enough places in higher education to accommodate everybody who has the required language level. But in future, the situation may be reversed.

So, taking a point of view centred in African realities leads us to question two common simplifications in discourse on language learning (that one either 'speaks' or 'does not speak' a language and that the cost

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[9] https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/ retrieved 8 October 2019.

[10] This discussion has been published in a slightly different format in: Pinxteren, Bert van (2020). Is Iraqw an easy language to learn? In: Wal, Jenneke van der; Smits, Heleen; Petrollino, Sara.; Nyst, Victoria; Kossmann, Maarten (eds): *Essays on African languages and linguistics: in honour of Maarten Mous* 133-155. Leiden (Netherlands): African Studies Centre.

of language learning is equal for all) and to ask a new question – the question what educational systems are able to achieve in terms of foreign language teaching. But does that lead to any new insights or perspectives? That will be the topic of the next section.

4. What can we expect educational systems to achieve and what does that mean for the future of African higher education?

Unfortunately, there is little research giving comparable information on what educational systems are able to achieve in terms of foreign-language teaching to large groups of students. However, there is one data set that can be used for benchmarking what might be possible in practice. This is provided through research commissioned by the European Commission in 2011. Researchers investigated second-language proficiency of secondary students in the last year before their final exams, in reading, writing and listening (European Commission, 2012).[11] They found tremendous differences in performance within Europe, ranging from Malta (60% of students at B2 level) to France (5% of students at this level). One of the best-performing countries was Estonia, with 41% of the secondary school students at the B2 level. Note that Estonian[12] is the language used as medium of instruction in secondary education in the country – English is taught as a subject. Note also that over four-fifth of all children in Estonia complete the second (upper) stage of secondary education: the completion rate in 2013 was 82.7%. This means the Estonian education system is able to educate almost 34% of its youngsters to a B2 level of proficiency in English, high enough to take tertiary education in that language. Estonian and English are very different from each other as languages - and yet Estonia manages to be among the top performers in Europe. Let us therefore take the Estonian educational system as a benchmark for what an educational system is able to achieve in terms of teaching a portion of the population a 'foreign' language to a level high enough to allow students to be taught in that language at tertiary level. As we have seen, this level is 41% of secondary school students and 34% of all Estonian 18-year olds. However, the tertiary enrolment rate in Estonia is just over 73%.[13] This means that Estonia cannot provide tertiary education in English to all students it is able to give such education; it has to use Estonian as a medium of instruction.

Where do African education systems stand in comparison? Let us take the example of the country in Sub-Saharan Africa with the highest enrolment rates: Botswana. What is the percentage of the population that Botswana's education system is able to educate to the B2 level of proficiency in English at the end of secondary and the start of tertiary education? That percentage can be estimated by multiplying the Completion rate for senior secondary education by the percentage of students that obtain a 'C' or higher in English at the BGCSE: for Botswana, the BGCSE 'C' pass in English seems to roughly correspond to the B2 level. UNESCO gives the 2011 Completion rate for senior secondary education (the latest available data) as 53.9%. According to the 2016 report from the Botswana Examinations Council (2016 Provisional Summary of Results, Botswana Examinations Council) (p 6), a 'C' or better in English was obtained by 24.42% of those who sat for the BGCSE. That means that currently, Botswana's education system is able to educate not more than just over 13% of its youngsters to a B2 level of proficiency in English. So, Estonia manages to give more than two and a half times as many of its children a B2-level in English as Botswana manages. Note that Estonia manages to do this by teaching English as a subject; it is not the medium of instruction.

What does this mean for tertiary education? According to UNESCO data, the Gross Enrolment Ratio in tertiary education in Botswana has increased significantly over the years; over the period between 2016 and 2019 it was consistently around 25%.[14] This means, in principle, that the choice that Estonia made (to use Estonian as medium of instruction for most of its tertiary education) should also be made by Botswana: many of the youngsters that enter tertiary education in Botswana now have a level of English that is insufficient to fully understand the instruction in that language, even though they do have the required intellectual capabilities. On the one hand, this problem will be partly mitigated by the fact that students continue to improve their language level in the first years; on the other hand, it is sure to lead to high dropout levels and to high levels of frustration with students and their families. From a financial point of view, it means that scarce resources are squandered, both because students to not get the education that they might be able to get with a different medium of instruction (leading to lost economic opportunities for the country) and because teaching time and materials are spent on preparing students for failure. However, even though the education system of Botswana is likely to suffer because of all of this, it obviously is still able to somehow cope with the problems. However, if Botswana would have the ambition of approaching the levels of development attained by the global North,[15] then it would have to expand its tertiary education to approach the levels reached in the global North. Doing that whilst at the same time keeping English as medium of instruction is clearly going to be an increasingly hopeless, even impossible task. As argued by Chebanne and Van Pinxteren (2021), Botswana will have to make a transition to increased use of one or more indigenous African languages as medium of instruction in its secondary and tertiary education.

The situation as outlined for Botswana in fact holds true for all countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, although the urgency of the problem is very different in the different countries, due to great differences in the participation in education between the various countries. For North Africa, the transition from French to Arabic is already underway. Thus, Tunisia, where the Gross Enrolment Ratio in tertiary education is around 35%, has embarked on a phased (and not uncontested) Arabization exercise. Most studies in Tunisian universities are currently entirely taught in Arabic, instead of the French that was used in the colonial period (Akkari, 2008). In this context, it is useful to point out that a database like the Ethnologue actually distinguishes 35 related 'Arabic' languages.[16] Speakers of these 35 languages use Modern Standard Arabic as the language used in educational and other formalised domains. This makes sense, because for those who already speak an Arabic language, Modern Standard Arabic is much easier to learn than, for example, French. It is entirely conceivable that in the rest of Africa, it would likewise be possible to develop a limited set of languages that could serve as formalized or intellectualized languages for a group of other, related languages. In a way, this is what has already happened with Kiswahili in East Africa, though not (yet) at the level of higher education. It is also consistent with the proposal of Alexander (1998), who has argued that in South Africa, only two Bantu languages (Nguni, encompassing Ndebele, Xhosa, Swazi, Tsonga and Zulu) and Sotho (encompassing the others) could be developed for formal use in education and other domains.

5. Conclusion: new questions, new answers

In this paper, I have shown how the debate on medium of instruction in Africa has not moved on much over the last decades. There has been and still is a strong consensus in the literature that mother-tongue

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[11] The survey material is still available online via http://www.surveylang.org/ , accessed 6 June 2020. The survey has not been repeated.
[12] The Ethnologue puts the number of L1 speakers of the two Estonian-like languages at approximately 1.25 million. https://www-ethnologue-com/language/est accessed 29 March 2020.
[13] http://data.uis.unesco.org/#.

[14] http://data.uis.unesco.org/ Accessed 23 February 2021.
[15] Botswana has that ambition: https://vision2036.org.bw/about-botswana-vision-2036 accessed 22 February 2021.
[16] https://www-ethnologue-com/subgroups/arabic Accessed 28 April 2021.

education works best. Pleas for using African languages more are based on human rights arguments, on the importance of language for preserving culture and on the need for developing 'linguistic citizenship'. Yet, none of these pleas are likely to lead to the required changes and the literature does not give any hope for such changes to occur. I argue that this is in part due to the fact that researchers are still too closely tied to Western paradigms. Therefore, they tend to stick to the two common simplifications found in the literature related to when one can be said to 'speak' a language and to the cost of learning a language. I have asked a new question, based on the assumption widely held in Africa that education for all should essentially take place in what for most Africans is a foreign language. Using the example of Botswana and benchmarking this against Estonia, I have shown that increasing enrolment rates will make it more and more difficult (and ultimately: impossible) to stick to the idea that foreign languages can be used in all of higher education. This dynamic, currently not yet discussed in the literature, will eventually lead to the changes educationalists and Africanists have been clamouring for decades. However, in order to effect such a change, sound policies and sound planning will be needed. Putting the problem in this new, Africa-centred way thus opens up the road to a vast new research agenda.

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Declarations of interest

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